

HEART ^{OF} THE WEST

By EDNA DUSENBERY



*With all her might,
Mollie slashed
Brad with her
quirt.*

Was Mollie Baird's love strong enough to save from a blood-hungry lynch mob the man upon whom all her future happiness depended?

OLD NED LESLIE raised his shaggy, white head and his piercing, ice-blue eyes shot from one to the other of the two girls standing near his desk.

"I appeal to you, father. Silvermane isn't a safe horse for Mollie to ride. He's killed one man. And Mollie—"

"Oh scat!" Mollie flung impatiently at the girl confronting her. "Silvermane is not a killer. It was purely accident that he killed that man. I'm not afraid of Silvermane."

"But father—" Old Ned's mirthless laugh interrupted his daughter's appeal.

"Don't ask me to settle your disputes," he growled. "Tho I don't think Mollie is in any danger from Silvermane, Jessie."

Jessica Leslie swished the air impatiently with her riding crop. Old Ned's eyes glowed with pride as they ran over her tall, slender form, immaculate in a snow-white riding costume of some soft material with a black sombrero set precisely on her small, yellow crowned head. Her eyes were the same ice-blue of his but her skin was fair and delicate.

"Queen o' the range," she was called. And she was every inch a queen, old Ned was thinking.

But—"a chip off the old block," a few whispered when she had failed to get her way about something and her soft, rosy lips thinned and hardened.

Mollie Baird, Ned's ward and the daughter of his boyhood friend, was as tall and willowy as

Jessica. She stood now with her small feet planted far apart. Small bare hands were thrust deep into the pockets of her blue-denim pants belted over a gray turtleneck sweater. And the usually gay, irrepressible Mollie was belligerent from the top of her mahogany red head to the tips of her half boots. Her eyes, the exact shade of her hair, blazed defiance.

"If Uncle Ned says I mustn't ride Silvermane, then I won't. But until he does say it, I'll ride Silvermane when I choose." Her soft voice was cool and crisp.

Jessica shrugged her slim shoulders. "As you please," she murmured. "I only spoke for your good. Perhaps you don't know that people—some people—are making remarks about your riding."

"Who is?" Mollie demanded hotly.

"Brad Steele."

"What did he say?"

"That you can't ride a horse without making a spectacle of yourself."

"I don't believe it."

Again Jessica shrugged. "It was in Ed Lowry's store yesterday afternoon. He was talking to a man I didn't know. And, after all, Mollie, you are well past twenty. You could be a little more dignified, you know."

Mollie's smooth little chin tilted saucily. "You be the lady, Jessie. I guess I'm just not the type. And I don't care what Brad Steele thinks of me."

She turned and went with free, easy strides from the room. But she was seeing things through a shimmering film of tears. She had lied when she said she didn't care what Brad Steele thought about her.

Cool, immobile, Jessica watched her go. Old Ned's eyes were on Jessica.

"That wuz downright mean o' Brad Steele," he muttered. "Didn't think he'd be that ornery."

Bright color sprang into Jessica's cheeks but she didn't answer.

"Humph!" was Ned's comment to her silence. But his keen old eyes shone with a flick of anger. There were times when he didn't in the least understand this regal, strong-willed child of his. And no one knew better than Ned Leslie to what lengths Jessica would go to have her will.

SLASHING at her boot-tops with her riding crop, she turned to him. "Father, have you renewed your offer to buy Brad Steele's spread lately?"

He shook his head. "No. Shan't make 'im another offer. Ain't necessary."

"Not necessary? Have you bought his note from the bank?"

"I can git it. The bank is allus needin' money."

"You'll never get Brad's spread that way," Jessica snapped. "He'll sell every head of stock he owns before he'll let you take his land."

"Be a fool if he does. I'll give 'im a bang-up good price for his herd. What could he do with a ranch an' no cattle?"

"He'd find something to do. You can't roughshod Brad Steele, father. You may as well quit trying."

"Thot yuh wanted his ranch throwed in with ours. It'd square it up an' make it way yonder the biggest ranch in Wyoming."

"I know it. I do want it. But—"

"Mebbe yuh got a plan for gettin' it, daughter?"

"I have. With Brad as your son-in-law the two spreads can be thrown together, Brad can take over the management and you can take a rest, father."

"Me rest? Humph! Has that young fool axed yuh to marry 'im?"

Jessica smiled coolly. "He will."

"An' yuh'd take 'im after what he said 'bout Mollie?"

"Mollie doesn't have to always be galloping about the country on a wild horse."

"Mollie loves tuh ride. I love tuh see her ride. Sometimes I wish, Jessica, yuh wuz more like Mollie. An' yuh just leave me handle this ranch business. An' when that ornery rascal axes yuh to marry 'im just—"

"When he does, you'll like it, father," was Jessica's cool rejoinder as she went from the room.

BRAD STEELE settled the heavy guns against his thighs and rowelled his horse's flanks lightly. His wind-burned face was set in hard lines, his level, gray eyes were peculiarly dark.

He had taken over the Flying B spread a year ago, just after his brother's death and the first few months there had been the most satisfying of his life. But for three months now not a single person had crossed his threshold. Men he had thought his friends passed him with a curt nod or a crisp word. They were making it quite clear that they didn't want him in the Big Horn country.

Now he was on his way to the Leaning L outfit. There were a few things he was going to make plain to old Ned Leslie, owner of the spread and

after that his neighbors could go hang for all he cared.

A mile away on the sloping mesa he saw the low, rambling ranch house of the Leaning L and a frown brought his heavy, black brows together.

Along the trail a streak of silver flashed and rippled in the sunlight. Long, silvery legs were reaching out, taking the trail at a mile-eating pace. That would be Silvermane, Leslie's magnificent stallion. And now he could see the rider, could see the glow of the sun on the rich, deep red of her hair. Mollie! Brad pushed faster along the trail. He had forgotten Mollie, old Ned Leslie's ward.

She was one of the two whose friendship had not failed him. The other was Jessica, Leslie's daughter.

But it was thoughts of Mollie that drove the bitterness from him now. Gay, sparkling Mollie with whom he had taken so many long rides during the past months. His lips twisted into a smile as he thought of the day they had taken sandwiches and had a picnic over on Goose Creek.

The great, proud stallion was walking slower now, held in he could see by Mollie's firm little hands. Brad spurred his horse up the slope to meet her. Gee! It would be pleasant to chat with Mollie before barging into her surly, taciturn old guardian.

His horse's hoof rang on a rock and Mollie's head came up with a jerk. One arm brushed quickly across her face. She was crying! Tears clung to her lashes and smudges showed on her richly tanned cheeks.

Brad reined to her side. "Mollie!" he cried. "What's happened?"

Her hand on the rein swerved Silvermane aside. "Good morning, Mr. Steele." Her voice was husky from crying.

Brad's hand fell on Silvermane's rein. He drew his own mount nearer. "Is that any way to greet a friend?" he wanted to know. "Tell me what's troublin' you, Mollie."

She raised stormy, angry eyes to his. "Nothing that is of any interest to you, Brad Steele. Take your hand off Silvermane's rein you—you—"

A FLAME of anger shot through Brad. His eyes narrowed and the muscles stood out along his lean jaws. He leaned over 'til his shoulder brushed Mollie's and his half-panting breath touched her cheek.

"Go on, Mollie! Finish what you started to say. Then maybe I'll know why people are treating me

like something old tom has dragged in."

Mollie's eyes widened. So Brad was sensing the situation. She hadn't believed any of the rumors she had heard about him. But then, neither had she thought him the kind of man to make slanderous remarks about a girl.

A leather quirt hung from its loop about the pommel of her saddle. She caught it loose and with all her might slashed it about Brad's shoulders. Her spurred heels dug sharply into Silvermane's flanks. He reared and plunged, breaking Brad's hold on the rein.

Searing, torturous pain whitened Brad's face. He sat, numb, watching the silvery streak that was Silvermane tearing down the trail.

A bitterness like nothing he had known before laid hold of him. He checked the impulse to race after Mollie and compel her to finish what she had started to say. What had she been going to call him? A name that was perhaps the key to his growing unpopularity?

Smothering an oath he turned to the trail to the Leaning L. There was nothing he could do but go doggedly on as he had started.

Dark brooding settled over him. A sense of some impending event hung like a fog over him.

The clatter of hoofs on the trail brought him up with a start. Cantering toward him was Jessica Leslie on her jet-black mare, Starlight. What a picture she made in her white habit on the mare whose coat gleamed like black satin in the sun. Sunrays tangled in the gold of her hair. His heart quickened at her loveliness.

But he was acutely aware of Ned Leslie's antagonism and the reason for it. It was only natural that his daughter should come to share it with him. Remembering his encounter with Mollie, he approached warily. Perhaps Jessica's friendship was no longer his.

"Brad!" Jessica cried and reined her horse to his side. "I've been hoping I'd see you. Were you going to my home?"

"I've a little business with your father," he told her. He couldn't keep a touch of stiffness from his voice, though her friendliness was a balm to the hurt Mollie had given him.

Jessica slipped from Starlight's back to the ground. Her laugh was soft and musical. She hadn't changed toward him in the least! His heart warmed toward her.

"I want to talk to you," she smiled up at him.

"Then you're about the only person in the country who does," he exclaimed as he got down.

A little frown puckered Jessica's brow.

"That is what is bothering me," she said. "I do hope you and father can get together on things. I was telling him only a few minutes ago that he needs a man like you to take things over and let him ease up a little."

Brad smiled. "But what about Anson Walters? He seems to be a very capable foreman. I admire his ability."

"That is what father said. But he says he'd rather turn things over to a son. I'm only a woman. And father is always wanting me to marry so he won't have to worry about me and the ranch."

She laughed again, a soft tinkle of sound. Not her words, but the strange light in her eyes, the way she leaned toward him, made the blood pour into Brad's face.

Impulsively she moved a step nearer, raised her hands to his shoulders.

"Brad," her voice trembled a little. "I told father that if any trouble came up between you and him I would stand with you."

Brad stood staring at her. He felt embarrassed and helpless and foolish. He wished he could think of something to say. Wished that the vision of Mollie in Jessica's place had not come before his eyes. If it were Mollie standing so near him with her hands on his shoulders—

He struggled for words and muttered: "That's fine, Jessica. I'll certainly need someone to stand by me. Thanks a lot."

Her eyes widened and her lovely face paled. Her fingers bit into his shoulders and shook him impatiently. Her voice was low and strained.

"But Brad, don't you understand why I told father that?"

Brad gulped. "I understand that you certainly are a friend. Wish I had a few more like you, Jessica."

He saw her eyes narrow and grow icy-hard, heard the sharp intake of her breath, felt her hands jerked from his shoulders.

Before he had finished speaking she had strode to Starlight and leaped into the saddle. Brad stood staring stupidly while she whirled Starlight savagely and went pounding down the trail.

Burning with anger and chagrin he mounted his own horse and struck out along the trail. The smarting welt across his shoulders made his lips

twist and his anger mounted when he remembered visioning Mollie in Jessica's place before him.

He galloped up the slope to the Leaning L ranch house. A Chinese house servant admitted him and led him to Ned Leslie's office. The white headed rancher nodded curtly when he entered.

"Mornin', Steele. Wasn't expectin' yuh."

"I didn't expect to be here, Leslie. But—"

"Come to take up my offer tuh buy yore spread? Now that's the sensible—"

Brad stiffened and his voice went flat. "I did not come to take up your offer, Leslie. Nothing is farther from my mind than that. I came to tell you that I drove a hundred head of your cattle out of my south pasture yesterday afternoon. The fence had been cut and—"

"Don't know a thing about it. An' none of my men mentioned it."

"There's no doubt a reason for that."

"That'll bear explainin', Steele."

"So will a lot of other things. That's three times that particular fence has been cut. Always near my south pasture waterhole. You have good grazin' on your side of the fence. But no water. Who but your men—?"

"Get this, Steele. I trust every man I've got. Knowed 'em all a lot longer'n I've knowed yuh. An' more favorably, too. They'll be here long after you're gone."

"Meanin' what?" Brad snapped.

"Thet offer I made yuh is still open."

"You're pretty thickheaded, Leslie. You can't seem to understand that I've no intention of giving up my spread. All I want of you is for your men to keep your cattle off my range. And this is the last time I'll speak to you about it."

NED LESLIE'S ice-blue eyes bored into Brad's a minute before he turned away with a gesture of dismissal.

Brad started to speak again, then stopped. He swung around and strode from the room. At the door he paused: "If it's war yuh want, I'm ready any time."

He swung out of the house and vaulted into his saddle. Anger and hate seethed through him. Every hand was against him, every door closed to him.

He rode past the trail that turned to his own range and turned into the trail leading to town. Six months before he had borrowed five thousand dollars from the Bank of Milroy with his spread as security. To pay it now would take every hoof on

his range. But there had been an understanding that he could renew the note. It was due in one more week and he wanted to be sure about that renewal.

He strode through the door of the bank. Sam Keene, the cashier, was at the window. "What can I do for yuh, Steele?" he grunted.

Brad eyed him closely. Was Keene shrinking under his gaze?

"Want to see yuh about thet note of mine. It's due next week and I'll want to renew it. That was the understanding when I made it."

"Sure! An' I gotta 'pologize for that, Steele. But yuh see, some things have changed since then. The truth is we ain't got yore note no more."

"You sold it? Who to?"

"Yes. We got kinda hard up for money an' sold it to Ned Leslie. Yuh'll have tuh do business with him."

Blind rage gripped Brad. He remembered that someone had told him months ago that old Ned Leslie's money was behind the bank, that he had built his ranch by buying up notes the bank was holding.

Well, there was no chance that Ned Leslie would give him more time. That meant he'd have to sell all his stock to meet the note. He'd do it! He'd see old Ned Leslie in blazes before he'd sell to him! Without another word he swung out of the bank. Across the street was a saloon. Brad made for it. He felt the need of a bracer.

Lined up along the bar were several of the town loafers, men whom Brad scorned. But just now he felt that a friendly advance from a cur would be welcome.

He hailed the men and pretended to not notice that their replies were muffled and reluctant.

"The drinks are on me," he told the barkeeper. The man's lips curled a little and he looked askance at the other men.

They muttered something and one said: "Guess we're not drinkin' any tuh-day."

Brad knew they never missed a chance for a free drink. He whirled on them. "Not drinking? Or not drinking with me?" he demanded.

"I guess that's it, feller," retorted one.

"Why?"

"Never hankered none tuh drink with a rustler."

"Say that again! Mebby I didn't understand yuh!" Brad's face went black with passion. Cords stood out along his neck. His hands twisted into huge fists.

"Yuh understood me, alright, hombre!"

Brad's fist shot against the fellow's chin, sending him crashing across the room. The next minute Brad went down with three men on top of him. His arms and legs flailed out. A heel came in contact with soft flesh. He heard a grunt and a thud on the floor, knew he had one man less to deal with. Then a hand found his throat. His breath was shut off. Everything began to blur. He twisted sidewise and the hand tightened. His lungs seemed bursting. Tiny pinpricks tortured his whole body. His struggles weakened.

"That's enough! Let him up, men!" a distant voice commanded.

Reluctantly the men drew away.

"He nearly killed Dick," one growled.

Brad lay still a moment letting the tightness get out of his throat and fresh air into his lungs.

Then, conscious of painful bruises, he pulled himself to his feet and turned to the man standing in the doorway. Phil Byson! Smug, a little fat, and always immaculately dressed, he was repulsive to Brad. Brad hated being under obligations to him but he had to admit that Phil's interference had been most timely.

"Thanks, Byson," he said.

"Not at all, Steele. I really don't know why I did it."

"What!"

"Can't say I blame the men for feeling as they do about rustlers."

A GAIN Brad's fists knotted. He made a quick step toward Byson.

"Don't do it, Steele!" Byson's voice was metallic and flat. And Brad found himself looking into the bore of a Colt.

"All right! But there'll be another time, Byson, when you won't have the drop."

He pushed past Byson through the door. Pulling slowly, like an old man, into the saddle he turned toward the Flying B. So that was what they were thinking! That he'd turned rustler! Why, some of his own best beeves had been rustled lately!

What did a man do when the whole world turned against him, he was wondering. Then throwing back his shoulders he rode out of town whistling a rollicking tune.

He was going home to round up his herd to drive to the railroad. He'd sell every hoof, clean out completely, pay the note Leslie was holding and ride. There were a number of ranches back down in

the Panhandle where he'd come from that'd give him work. He'd go back and work 'til he'd saved enough for a new start. Then he'd come back here and show this blankety-blank range the kind of stuff he was made of. And he didn't care if none of them never spoke to him again.

AS MOLLIE tore down the trail leaving Brad behind, she was terrified at what she had done. His face with that hurt, surprised look floated before her eyes through a shimmer of tears.

She pushed Silvermane faster and faster, trying to leave her humiliation behind. Silvermane stretched out with his barrel close to the ground, his long legs flashing. On and on they raced, putting mile after mile behind them. At last they dipped into a little valley cradled by gently sloping hills. Near its head was a spring.

Mollie guided Silvermane to the spring and leaped from the saddle. She loosened Silvermane's bridle so he could graze on the lush grass and flung herself face down on the ground beside the spring.

All restraint thrown off, her little fists pounded the ground as she cried out her hurt and bitterness. Jabbing through her mind was memories of the many rides she had taken with Brad and the way she had looked forward to them.

A quiver swept her slender body as she remembered the day when Brad's arm had come unexpected about her shoulders. He had pulled her against his tense, muscular body and looked into her eyes. "Sweet," he had whispered. "You know what I am going to ask you when I get a little steadier on my feet, don't you, Mollie? Be thinking up a nice answer for me, will you?" Then his clean, hard lips had come against hers and she had felt the pound of his heart against her shoulder.

She had pulled away from him then and raced up the trail ahead of him. But she had not forgotten.

Perhaps even then he was laughing at her. Had been all along. Oh, she couldn't believe that! But Jessica had heard him. She had to believe Jessica. They had been too close for too long for her to not know that Jessica didn't lie!

"How could he?" she cried. "After I've liked him so? After I've loved him?"

She sat up with a start. Yes, it was true! She did love him. If she didn't, what he had said would not hurt so. She would laugh and forget it.

It was well past noon when she rode back to the Leaning L. As she neared the corral two wranglers from a neighboring ranch hurried past her. They

mounted and rode swiftly away. But in the yard other men stood in a group at the porch. Jessica was talking to them. As Mollie went into the house she heard angry murmurs go up from the men. A nameless terror shook her.

She hurried toward old Ned's office. At the door she met two men coming out. They were hard-faced and grim. She hurried on in.

"What has happened, Uncle Ned?" she asked. "Why are those men here?"

She almost shrank from the furious blaze in his eyes. She had never seen him so stirred. Nor so deadly calm.

"Plenty has happened, child. A hundred head of Wade Nelson's best beeves wuz drove off last night an' two o' his waddies killed!"

"How terrible! Do they know who did it?"

"Yes."

"Who, Uncle Ned?"

"Brad Steele."

A queer tightness closed about Mollie's heart. She stood a moment while the room whirled around her.

"I—I don't believe it," she finally gasped. She clutched old Ned's arm. "Uncle Ned, do you think Brad would steal? Would kill a man?"

"Two men!" he snapped. Then seeing the look in her eyes his gruff voice softened. "I don't like to think that of him, Mollie. But the evidence is quite strong. This rustlin' has been goin' on for some time. Not on such a big scale. But folks hev been suspicionin' young Steele right along."

"But he has been losing cattle, too. He told me so."

"A man might haze some of his own stock tuh throw off suspicion. I reckon this can't be overlooked. A hundred head is a lot of stock. An' Nelson won't overlook the killin' o' his riders."

"But why are those men here? Have they notified the sheriff?"

"Reckon in this case 'twon't be necessary tuh notify the sheriff."

"You mean a mob? Won't Brad be allowed a trial? Maybe he didn't do it after all."

"He'll have a chance tuh prove he didn't do it."

"A chance with a mob? You know he won't! Can't you do something? Talk to them?"

"Talkin' won't do much good now. They're too stirred up about the men that wuz killed. It's the code o' the range, girl, an' I don't reckon there is anything we can do about it."

JESSICA came into the room. Her face was tight and drawn. There was a pinched look about her mouth.

"Well, it's all fixed." Her voice was flat and cold. "The men will ride in after dark. Part of them will go after Brad if he runs while the others stay behind to destroy his corrals and buildings. They have agreed that it will be best to leave nothing standing in case he does get away." There was something of deadly satisfaction in her tone. And something that told of a goading anger.

Mollie stiffened. She couldn't understand Jessica's attitude. She had always thought Jessica liked Brad.

"Jessie," she asked, "do you really think Brad is guilty?"

"Think it?" snapped Jessica. "They have conclusive proof that he did. The cattle were driven from Nelson's range straight to Brad's south pasture waterhole and from there on to that rocky flat leading to the mountains. There are men riding the foothills now looking for them. He can't have taken them far."

"But because they were driven over his range doesn't mean he did it."

"One of his gloves was found on the trail from Nelson's, the other at the waterhole."

"Maybe he lost them some other time."

"And a hundred head of cattle walked over them without tromping them? And one of Nelson's prize bulls is with Brad's herd this morning. Oh, I hope he doesn't get away from that mob alive!"

She swung violently from the room. Mollie was shocked that Jessica could be so bitter and venomous. Old Ned shook his head. He was finding it harder than usual to understand Jessica. A few hours ago he had been sure she was in love with Brad Steele. His eyes turned to Mollie. Again he shook his head. If Mollie were in love with Steele, she would stay that way in the face of everything. He hoped she wasn't.

"I don't care what they say, I don't believe Brad did that!"

Ten minutes later she was on Silvermane skimming over the trail to the Flying B. Her anger at him was forgotten. It was of such little importance now.

She galloped up to the door of Brad's little ranch house. Brad heard her coming and hurried to the door. It must be something of importance to bring anyone to his door at that breakneck speed.

A deep flush came into his cheeks when he saw Mollie. But Mollie didn't notice. "Brad!" she cried. "You must leave at once. Saddle your horse and ride fast. They'll feel different when they've had time to think things over."

"Who will feel different about what?" he wanted to know.

"The mob!" she cried. "They're coming after you! Everybody on the range!"

"Well they can come," he declared stubbornly. "I haven't done anything to run from. And I'm not running from a bunch of cowards. That's all a mob is."

"Not this one!" Mollie exclaimed. "They're furious! They'll hang you and ask questions after you quit kicking!"

"What will they ask questions about?"

"Those cattle that were driven off Wade Nelson's range last night and his two waddies who were killed. They're saying you did it!"

Brad's eyes narrowed. "That's the first I'd heard about it. Mebbe yuh'd better tell me."

Briefly she told him what had happened and all that was being planned.

"And they're crazy for revenge. If you'll just go away 'til they've had time to think. You know how mobs are."

"Yes, I know. But I've not done anything to bring a mob down on me and I'm not going to run. Someone deserves a mobbing sure enough. Only I'm not the guy. But I don't understand about my gloves. I lost a pair that had my name stamped on 'em a few days ago. But I haven't been over Nelson's way in more than a month."

"Brad!" Mollie cried. "I believe you! Promise me you'll go away. For just a little while."

"I can't run, Mollie. You know that. But I'll be ready for them."

Looking at the stubborn set of his jaws, she knew he would not run. She hesitated a moment, then whirled Silvermane about. Over her shoulder she said humbly: "I'm so sorry, Brad, for what I did this morning." Then Silvermane was clattering away from his door.

Brad stood watching her go. His heart was singing. For the first time in weeks he was happy, despite the danger that hung over him. Sweet, precious Mollie! Tomorrow he would see her, would find out what had caused her anger toward him. Things just had to be fixed so he could have Mollie with him always. He knew now that nothing

else mattered at all.

AS FOR the threatened mob, he recalled the different men he knew. Cool, level-headed, clear-brained they had seemed to him. He couldn't believe they would be so violent.

He looked at the sun. It would soon be down. He wouldn't have to wait long to see what they would do. Slowly he turned into the house, crossed to where his belt with its two holsters hung upon the wall. He lifted it from the nail and buckled it about his thighs. He spun the chambers of the Colts to see that they were working smoothly and checked the belt to see that it was full. Then he sat down to wait for darkness.

When twilight had deepened until he could move about without being seen by any possible watcher, he went to the corral, caught and saddled his pony. Then, leading him into a near grove of small pines, he settled down to wait.

He was almost ready to take his pony back to the corral and go to bed when he heard the hurried clip-clop of hoofs. The moon, just showing over the hills, gave only enough light for him to see the mass of the men when they stopped a little distance away. He could hear the angry hum of their voices. And presently they parted. One group rode toward the house. Others scattered to the corral and sheds. Brad waited, hardly daring to breathe.

The group that had gone to the house rode up to the door. One of them dismounted and knocked loudly. At that moment came the ring of axes, hewing at the corral fence. And a little later a blaze shot up in the sheds.

Fury, hot and seething, gripped Brad. His jaws clamped together like vises. He had thought these men reasonable and fair. But now they were ruled by mob passion. They would listen to nothing but their lust to kill and destroy. It would be suicide to face them now. And he couldn't stay and watch them lay waste to his property.

He swung upon his pony. Taking his Colts from their holsters, he fired at the group about his door. Then he dug his spurs into his pony's flanks and raced down the trail, firing back over his shoulders.

These men wouldn't let him be their friend. Now he would be an enemy they would long remember.

He could hear their shouts and the pound of hoofs as they came after him. Presently he was aware of someone riding beside him, calling his name. He whirled.

"Mollie! For God's sake get out of this! That mob is crazy!"

"Then stop long enough to trade horses with me. My horse is fresh. They'll never catch you on him."

"No! Get out or I'll stop and wait for them!"

"You're crazy! And stubborn!" Mollie flung at him as she turned into a side trail.

Brad pounded around a bend. He didn't see Mollie stop and wait 'til the crowd was in sight nor hear her shout that brought them after her as she spurred her horse into the shadows of a grove of trees.

"Don't shoot!" someone shouted. "We want him alive. He can't get away now!"

Through the stretch of timber Mollie flew. The men were gaining. They would catch her soon. But Brad was gone! He had a chance now.

Mollie was not surprised when a rope swished past her ears and was jerked tight about her shoulders. She kicked her feet free of the stirrups and tensed her body for the fall.

The crowd was milling madly about her when she could breathe again. Rough hands jerked her to her feet. An angry voice shouted: "Jest slip the rope up around his neck. They's a limb handy jest over his head." Mollie almost groaned. She would have to stop them soon. How far away was Brad?

Someone jerked the rope upward. Her sombrero was knocked from her head. Her dark red curls tumbled, gleaming about her shoulders.

"Mollie Baird! Tricked! By Gad—" Furious exclamations roared from all sides. Wade Nelson stepped to her side. "Listen, Miss Mollie, yuh better explain this."

"I didn't want you to hang Brad," she said simply. Astonishment showed on the faces about her. "Oh!" she cried choking. "I did it as much for you as for him. The law can catch him and if he is guilty the law will hang him. You don't want to kill him. You don't want his blood on your hands!"

"Lady, about all we want is tuh tear him limb from limb!" called a voice from the background.

"Git on yore hosses an' ride," another yelled. "Reckon he ain't gone far!"

"Stay away from your horses and get your hands up!" the sharp command came from the shadows. Brad rode forward. "I guessed what had happened when you turned this way. Sorry to disappoint you but there'll be no lynchin' tonight!"

"Nor any other night!" rang across from Brad. The crowd whirled. Jessica on Starlight had two

guns trained steadily on them. Beside her sat Anson Walters and his hands were filled. An angry murmur buzzed up from the crowd.

"Be quiet!" Jessica's coolly crisp voice commanded. "Anson has something to say to you."

ANSON reined forward. His horse was dust-caked and weary. He sat a moment looking from one to another of the crowd before he spoke.

"Cripes!" he exclaimed. "I was afraid I couldn't get here in time. You know, men, I didn't like the setup of this affair. A cow thief don't leave that plain a trail. I'd been watchin' Steele. All of us had. And to my way o' thinkin' he just don't stack up that way. It seemed everybody thot o' searchin' the hills for them cattle. But no one thot of the railroads. I did. I had the sheriff post a deputy at every shipping point within a day's drive. He caught the herd bein' loaded outa Kegville at six o'clock this evenin'. All of Nelson's stuff, an' some from other ranches, includin' Steele's. Phil Byson was loadin' 'em out.

"He was right glad tuh talk when the sheriff told him a mob was bein' organized. He'd been throwin' suspicion on Steele all along. Picked him because he was new here. That's all, men."

A silence like the grave fell on them. Wade Nelson recovered first. His voice, unnaturally husky, boomed: "Men, this ought tuh be a lesson fer us. All I gotta say is if Brad Steele will shake hands with me, I'll be a mighty proud man!"

Others shamefacedly shuffled forward.

But Brad stood stiff, hands at his sides.

"Men," he began. "I've honestly tried to be your friend. I haven't known why you turned against me. It took a bunch of town drunks and Phil Byson to put me wise when I was in town this morning. I'll not take your hands tonight. But tomorrow I'll be at my ranch. And I'll be glad to start all over with any and all who care to come over for a neighborly call."

"Don't blame yuh, Steele," rumbled Nelson. "Reckon yuh'll have plenty o' company tomorrow. And men," he called louder. "Bring yore tools. Reckon if we start early enough we can repair the damage we done."

Hurriedly the shamed men mounted and rode away.

Jessica pushed Starlight to Brad's side and

slipped from the saddle. She was once more her old gracious self, though humble now. "Brad! I want you to know that we were honest in our belief. I don't know how we could have been so crazy and unfair. But you know what mob talk can do. Father is distracted. He wanted me to tell you that if you will come over in the morning he wants to renew your note for as long as you want."

She turned to Mollie. "I'm ashamed to say it, Mollie, but I deliberately twisted what Brad said about you. You know how father wanted Brad's spread. I thought he could get it easier if your and Brad's friendship was broken up."

She looked defiantly at Brad.

"Father and I know when we're licked. And this time we're proud to take it."

She sprang upon Starlight and with Anson Walters rode away.

Brad turned to Mollie. She had loosened the rope from about her shoulders and let it drop to the ground.

And because her nerves were ready to snap, her voice was sharp. "Well, I suppose you're thinking that I've made a spectacle of my riding again!"

"Why, I never thought that, Mollie."

"You said I couldn't ride a horse without making a spectacle of myself."

"I did not. I did say that your riding is spectacular. It is. It's magnificent."

"But you said—"

"I deliberately twisted what Brad said," Jessica had just told her.

And suddenly Brad's vision on the morning was a reality. Mollie was standing very close to him, her little tanned hands trembling on his shoulders.

LATER, riding stirrup to stirrup, on the trail to the Leaning L, Mollie exclaimed: "Brad! This afternoon I went to Uncle Ned and asked him to try to stop the mob. He said if you proved innocent he would not only renew your note. But he will give it to me next month; then I am twenty-one and his guardianship ends."

She was lifted from her saddle to Brad's. "I guess," he whispered into the curls that blew against his face, "we'd better set our weddin' day for along about then, hadn't we, honey? I'll sure enjoy getting that little slip of paper in the family."