



For a Woman

By H. A. Woodbury

It's doggone queer the way a girl, who's never been in love before, will fall with a crash for a man and believe in him even when the cards are stacked against him, and never even ask for the proof of his innocence.

WHEN Ginger Marston was sixteen, her father had shaken his head over her and sighed. "It's high time, you young roughneck, that you was growin' up an' bein' a lady. Do you know what I heard, to-day?"

Ginger had cocked her head on one

side and had observed him studiously. She was an exceedingly trim young creature, lithe and slender as a young boy, in blue jeans and boots. Her brown eyes twinkled in mischief. And her sunburned nose wrinkled as she twisted her very charming features into a

grimace.

"I reckon," she drawled, meeting his gaze stoutly, "that them danged English sparrows has been tellin' you how I was throwin' rocks at Spud Eastland."

Her father nodded. "An' they went on to say that you knocked his brand new Sunday Stetson off in the dirt."

"It was an accident," said Ginger.

"Accident!"

"Yeah. I meant to get him in the jaw."

Her father blinked. Spud was something of a local potentate. People might accuse him of sharp practice, sometimes, but still he was better off than most neighboring ranchers.

"He tried to kiss me at the dance the other Saturday night," Ginger went on, "and I slapped his face for him. Told him if he came near me again, he'd better watch out. Well, he thought I was kiddin', that's all. An' I wasn't. Why, the old grasshopper's old enough to be my father."

"There's worse men in Hopi county, though," suggested her father. For the cowman couldn't forget his ambitions for the girl.

"I dare say," smiled Ginger, "but, I haven't any use for any of 'em. Men—gosh, they give me a pain in the neck. They go gettin' that fool love light in their eyes, an' then they're plumb useless."

"Reg'lar man-hater, ain't you?"

"I am," said Ginger determinedly.

Her father sighed rather softly. And for a moment, he regarded the gaudy sweep of desert and sky.

"Well," he said finally, "I only hope when you do fall, you'll fall for the right one. Your kind loves jest as unreasonably as it hates, Ginger. A man'll come along some day, an' you'll worship him without askin' no questions. I—well, girls like you need a guardian angel."

"Applesauce," said Ginger. "I've got

too much sense to fall in love."

But her father was right, and Ginger was wrong. Of course! Although for a time it looked the other way round. That is, Ginger broke hearts all over Hopi county, and gave no sign of being affected, herself, until she met Steve Cheyne.

She had just passed eighteen, and she was riding very slowly out of Mesquite Gulch, one morning, wearing the new red inlaid boots and the fringed leather skirt her father had given her for her birthday, when the stranger, coming in the opposite direction, hailed her.

He sat a chunky little blue roan very erectly, and she noticed especially the lean alertness of his bronzed face and the broad expanse of his well built shoulders.

"How much farther to town?" he asked her.

She set up her buckskin beside him, and noted in addition the bulges of muscle under his frayed blue shirt.

"Bout an hour," she told him. Then she added. "You lookin' for a job?"

He nodded.

She was never able, afterward, to decide what had made her so impulsive, that morning. Fate, no doubt. At any rate, she had smiled at him warmly.

"Then why don't you come on back with me? Dad'll give you a job."

The stranger did not answer her for what seemed an age. She felt his keen blue eyes taking her in minutely, but in a way she couldn't possibly resent. They were rather sad eyes for a man so young. He couldn't have been more than twenty-two. There was a shade of wistfulness in his glance. He looked at her as if he had beheld beauty which he could admire in reverence, but which he dared not touch.

"Thanks," he said finally. "I—I reckon I'd better not. I'll look around in town."

Again there was no offence in his manner.

After he pushed on, Ginger held her own pony still, and watched him as he jogged through the yellow dust. He did not look back. He kept on until he finally disappeared in the green featheriness of a mesquite clump.

Ginger frowned. It was the first time in her life that a man had refused to be utterly enthralled upon mere sight of her. In a measure she was justifiably annoyed. In a measure, also, she was intrigued. This was something a little new in masculine behavior.

Could Ginger have had, at that moment, some sort of magic X-ray instrument to see into the young man's breast, she would have discovered that it was nothing new, after all. Steve Cheyne's heart was palpitating just as wildly as any other man's.

If he managed to conceal it, that was his own affair. More secrets than one were hidden in that breast.

In the next two weeks, she saw him at neither of the Saturday night dances. This implies, of course, that she looked for him. She thought possibly that he had drifted straight through Mesquite Gulch. But he hadn't, as she was to discover.

On the third Saturday, she had gone out to the Bar Diamond soda springs, fifteen miles the other side of town in the blue foothills to the North with a group of her high school friends.

It was a hot, lazy, Southwestern afternoon, and the sun's rays curled up visibly from the rocky, yucca-covered hillside. Most of the group decided to sit around the springs and chin. Not Ginger. She was more adventurous.

They had come out by automobile, so that she had no horse, but she determined, nevertheless, to climb the steep slope at whose base they were.

She set out, alone, picking her way up the rocky incline with the nimbleness of a mountain goat. She arrived presently at the top, sat down for a brief moment to thrill in

ecstasy at the view of the far-flung desert valley behind her, and then continued on down the other side toward the cool trickle of Cedar Creek.

The brush was thicker, here—the descent more precipitous. She stumbled onto the sheer edge of a sharp drop into the canyon before she quite realized where she was. Then, while she was still laboring with her footing, she saw the men down below, and the men caught sight of her.

There was a shout. Then a burst of obscenity, and she saw a man fling himself into a saddle. She struggled to climb back up the steep slope, away from this camp of desert rats, but she realized in a flash that the man was going to cut her off. Through the brush up above, a rider came loping toward her. She looked up to see Steve.

The next few moments were a revelation in riding and roping and battle. The broad-shouldered cowboy whose name she did not even know was everywhere at once. He let fly with his rope and yanked the advancing ruffian out of his saddle. Then he charged on down the trail into the camp of the others. He shot an automatic out of the hands of one man. The rest put up their hands.

In a moment he had the whole group rounded up. Ginger scrambled down to join him in a second.

"Brady fired these punchers a week ago," he explained, "an' since then they've been stickin' round, raisin' hell all over the ranch. Smashin' water troughs, runnin' cattle, an' otherwise ventin' poison. I asked Brady if I could round 'em up, an' I been hot on their trail fer two days."

He spoke of it all modestly—as if it were nothing but sheer routine in a puncher's life! Ginger stared at him with eyes wide with admiration.

"Well, I'm sure glad you happened along," she sighed.

The two of them exchanged significant

glances.

Ginger added in a second, "You'd better let me help you into the sheriff's office with them."

It seemed only natural; after that, that she should at last persuade him to attend a Saturday night dance. But it took a little pleading, even so.

"You know," said Ginger, "you act plumb scairt of me."

"Maybe I am," he suggested.

"Why? I won't bite you."

"Well—" He met her glance frankly, "it ain't quite safe fer an' unbranded cowpoke like me to be exposed to such attractiveness. I'm danged impressionable."

Ginger saw no sin in that.

Neither did Steve, apparently, by the time-the evening got under way. They danced on the torch-lit, open-air pavilion, out under the stars, and they sat out the long intermissions in the little cottonwood grove, beyond.

Ginger introduced him to her father. The old cowman liked Steve. Brady, Steve's employer, was there, too, and this rancher was in a genial mood over the afternoon's exploit.

"Steve, here, come a-driftin' in outa nowhere," grinned Brady. "Couldn't git it outa him where he'd been er what he'd done. Mighta thought he'd been a road agent he was so danged secretive. But blamed if he ain't won his right to stay here. Them rats he cleaned out this afternoon weren't jest sneakin' bums. They was desperate killers."

Ginger was standing at Steve's side when the man uttered his words of praise, and she gave her cowboy's hand a tiny, very pleased squeeze. Steve returned it, and glanced down into her admiring eyes.

"You know," he said, "it means a lot to me if that there's true. I've come a long ways to find a home."

After that, he was even more at ease, more natural, the rest of the evening. When he

and Ginger laughed, out under the stars, it was as if the two of them, just he and she, had been laughing together all their lives.

Just before the evening was over, though, a man on the edge of the crowd called to Steve as he was standing alone for a moment. Only—he didn't use the name, Steve.

"Hey, there, Gyp." The tone was imperious. Steve tried to ignore it, but the man was insistent.

Steve came over slowly, "Well, what do you want? Trying to shake me down?"

The man shook his head. He was a considerably older man, about forty, probably. "Nope," he said, "you've got me wrong, Gyp. This ain't blackmail. I jest want to talk to you after the dance. I've got a little proposition."

Steve's face flushed angrily.

"I'm through with jobs like that," he said.

The man smiled. "Going straight?"

Steve nodded. "Going straight. And I mean it."

"Well—" The man's smile became a shade warmer, "this here's on the level. It won't hurt you to talk it over, anyway."

Steve did not answer. As he left the man to walk back to Ginger, cold beads of perspiration were crowding to his forehead.

The dance was just breaking up. Ginger asked him as tactfully as she could, whether he was seeing her home or whether she had better go back with her father.

"You'd better go with your dad," he said. Then, suddenly, impulsively, he took her hand in a brief squeeze. "I'm sayin' good-by, Ginger, good-by for good."

"Good-by?" the girl gasped. "But I thought you jest said—"

"That I'd found a home?" He shook his head sadly. "Nope. Reckon I was jest kiddin' myself. I got to be driftin' along."

"Where?"

He pointed vaguely off toward the

shadowy horizon. "Somewhere in them blue hills. I dunno—"

They stood there very close together in the pale starlight. Their eyes probed each other deeply. Ginger thought for a moment that Steve was going to kiss her. He seemed to waver unsteadily. He wanted to, but he didn't.

Steve Cheyne left the dance alone, that night, his mind made up. Any sort of proposition this stranger was offering him was not to his liking. He was off that stuff—for good.

He had walked out of San Quentin three months before, not only a free man, but a changed man. He had had three long years to think and to think deeply. Father O'Hara had been a constant inspiration to him during those dark days behind gray walls. All the old, vacillating weakness had been seared out of his soul.

For his fault in the old days had never been more than weakness. He had been mixed up in a couple of jobs of the Black Mountain Gang, but only as a sort of tagger-along. The others had planned; the others had struck. He had accompanied them simply because he had lacked the gumption to say no.

That side of him was gone, now—definitely and forever. He knew it as positively as he knew he was alive. His present actions bore it out, the more.

He was leaving Mesquite Gulch and the temporary hospitality it had granted him, not so much because he feared this stranger would expose him as a one-time outlaw and ex-convict, as for another more powerful reason. Exposure would doubtless soon come, wherever he went. He would be man enough to live it down. He was fleeing out of strength, and not weakness, for he had read Ginger's eyes, and he had read his own heart.

He must drift before the spark in each was kindled into an unruly flame. He and the girl were in love. It was impossible, considering her loveliness. He must vanish

before it made a difference.

He strode over to the hitching-rail and flung himself heavily into the saddle. He would stop by the Bar Diamond and pick up his duffle. Then the long, dusty trail again.

The stranger who had called his old monicker, there at the dance, had followed him, and now the man hailed him again.

"Won't you listen—jest for a second?" the man begged.

Steve frowned. "Make it snappy."

"It's for a woman," the man said. "Come on, we'll slip into this all-night lunch, where we can talk."

Steve followed. The man ordered cigars and coffee for the two of them, and they put their heads together.

"I didn't spot you, myself," the man went on. "I'm a lawyer. Jones is my name. I was over at the sheriff's office to see about bail for some of those fellows you ran in this afternoon. One of 'em recognized you from San Quentin, and I don't mind saying he gave me your name hoping to do you dirt. But that isn't the reason I called you."

Steve frowned nervously. He was impatient to be on his way. It was only this talk of helping a woman which had led him thus far. He was chivalrous, Steve.

"It's a matter of some letters," the man went on. "My daughter'd like to get 'em back before she gets married. And this guy that has 'em threatens to get nasty with 'em."

"He's blackmailing you, in other words?"

"Holding the letters for ten thousand dollars," said Jones. "Now I'll pay you a thousand if you can get 'em. You see I've got to go to a man like you. I can't put the sheriff onto the job without telling him why. If I tell him—well, that's no help to Alice."

Steve studied his man carefully.

"Why don't you pull the robbery, yourself?"

Jones laughed nervously. "Suppose I

were recognized? I'm pretty well known around here. Also—well, to tell you the truth, I'm scared to death of the job. It's so outside my line."

Steve thanked him for the implied tribute to his own courage. Abruptly, he stiffened. "It doesn't interest me," he said.

"Two thousand, then?"

"It's not the price," said Steve, "it's the principle of the thing. I'm through. Understand?"

Jones did not at once press him further. He smoked thoughtfully and stared at the table. Then he lifted a saddened face.

"If you want to talk principles," he said, "listen to me. You don't know what it is to be a father. But maybe you've loved a girl at some time or other in your life."

Steve felt a sharp stab at his heart.

"If you have," Jones went on, "then maybe you'll realize what it would mean to have that girl suffer. Don't you see it?"

It was Steve's turn, now, to stare at the table top.

"You know the hang of this robbery business," the man went on; "Heaven itself, must have sent you over here." Steve looked up. Yes, he knew what it was to love, and what it would mean if the loved one were to suffer.

"I'll do it," he said grimly, "but I won't touch a cent for it. Understand? Not a cent. Now tell me about it."

Jones at once explained.

"The letters are in a desk drawer, out at this man's ranch. Sealed up in two large Manila envelopes. I know, because I saw him put them there, yesterday. I'd gone out there with five thousand dollars but we couldn't come to terms, and he put them away again."

"And the ranch is where?"

"South of town a piece. I'll take you out there, to-morrow night. Things oughta be quiet, Sunday. I'll wait at the gate while you go in."

Steve agreed, silently. Jones arose and wrung his hand in gratitude. Steve felt a warm little shiver go through his body. If his knowledge of evil could at last be turned to good—he smiled—then he didn't mind the risk he ran.

Jones advised him to pack a gun, but he shook his head.

"That's one thing I won't do." Yet in spite of the risk, it was a calm enough Steve Cheyne who left his pony in the shadow of a saddle shed, late the following night. And an equally calm Steve who crossed the patch of pale moonlight to the house.

Windows and doors were all locked as Jones had said they would be. Natural enough if the man were suspecting such an attempt.

Steve worked quietly. He chose a door, preferring to jimmy wood than to shatter glass. The latch yielded, but a loose chain still held. He could not reach far enough inside to slip it, but he had come prepared. A few minutes with a hack saw, and he was in the room. He knew his layout, because Jones had drawn him a floor plan. He walked straight to the desk, and repeated under his breath: "Second drawer—right." This, too, was locked, but the lock yielded in its turn.

Steve smiled a little grimly. It was the first job he had ever really pulled. In the dead days of the outgrown past, he would have been simply a nervous prowler. Now, his nerves were calm. Three years' time to think and the kindness of Father O'Hara had done that. He was a man, now—a man for good. The surety of it overwhelmed him.

He paused, however, as he put his hands on the Manila envelopes. Some sixth sense told him that he was no longer alone!

Trapped—without a rod!

As he stood there absolutely still for a long, long moment, nothing happened. He was more or less in the moonlight which streaked in the window. He would have been seen had his sixth sense told him correctly. So

therefore, when all remained calm, he took it for granted that this premonition had been a false alarm.

He slipped the two envelopes into his shirt and tiptoed out. He waited another long moment in the shadows, before he went to his pony. Still no movement from the house. He did not know, that the door on the other side had opened noiselessly. He was in his saddle in a second, but it became evident, almost immediately, that he was being pursued. He heard the tattoo of hoofs hard upon him, and without looking back, he hunched lower over the horse's neck.

Then came the shot. Hot fire seared his leg. Convulsive pain shot up to the groin. He felt himself falling—fainting.

Steve Cheyne came to, a few minutes later, with his head in a girl's lap. Soft fingers were stroking his forehead. Ginger's voice was saying, "Steve, why did you do it?" Before he could answer, she was going on, half sobbing. "We—we all knew you'd been an outlaw, of course. Brady told us, to-day. He'd been suspicious of you, you see. Afraid you were a recruit for the tough gang on his ranch. He'd started to look you up before you distinguished yourself, and the answer to his letter arrived to-day, sent by special delivery.

"But—but we'd all decided, Dad and Brady and I, that it didn't matter. Father O'Hara wrote so glowingly of you. And you'd been so wonderful, here. We—we thought you were a man, now."

Weakly, he struggled for words which failed to come.

"If you need some money," Ginger's soft voice went on, "why didn't you tell me? Dad would have lent you some."

"Money?" he managed to stammer.

Ginger ripped open one of the Manila envelopes. "Here," she said, presenting him a couple of large bills, "take what you need. And—and if you're not hurt too badly, maybe I can hide you till you can get away.

I'll tell Dad the other fellow was working alone."

For a second, Steve felt giddy. Love like this was not given to every man—that she should feel for him and try to-help him even when she thought he was an outlaw, was too much.

He managed to push the bills aside.

"Where—where is the other fellow?" he demanded, suddenly trying to rise. His mind surged wildly with the desire to get into the saddle, to ride, to bring the smooth-spoken Jones back to justice.

"He's over there," said Ginger. She pointed to a prone figure, face down in the sand: "I got him," she said, "just as he shot you. A second too late to save you altogether, but in time to spoil his aim a little."

Intelligences were coming almost too fast for Steve to comprehend them all.

"You got him," he repeated, dully, "jest as he shot me."

"Got him with a rock," said Ginger. "You see when I trailed you put of the house, I didn't stop for a gun. I—I didn't want to have to use one on you."

He began to understand it all, now.

He understood it better when Ginger rolled his double-crossing partner over, and took a look at his face.

"Spud Eastland," the girl gasped. "I—I see now why he paid Dad in cash instead of a check for those cows he bought. And why he waited till after the bank had closed, Saturday noon, to give him his money. He was planning all the time to rob it back."

Steve saw it, too—saw that the man had doubtless made arrangements, first, with the gang in Cedar Creek Canyon, and that when they had been run in, he had used their information to tackle Steve.

He realized then, also, why the man had shot. He had recognized Ginger in pursuit, and had striven to save his own face, to appear a rescuer in the nick of time.

Ginger was studying him intently.

“Steve,” she challenged, “there’s something queer about this. You didn’t set out deliberately to rob us, I know.”

Her faith thrilled him, but it frightened him, also. He struggled to get to his feet.

“I—I reckon I’d better be driftin’,” he said.

As he said it, he fell back. The leg was useless. Ginger gathered him into her arms.

“By the looks o’ that wound,” she said, gently, “you won’t be driftin’ anywhere for a

long time. If-if you don’t feel strong enough to tell me about it, now, you can wait.”

He opened his mouth to say something before it was too late, before her loveliness rendered him completely helpless, but Ginger cautioned him to silence.

“Not now,” she said, “I can trust you. Don’t you know, Steve, your eyes are all the proof I need?”

Then as those eyes of his still worshiped and wondered at love so great, she bent her face to his, and kissed him.