



Sun in the Sky

By Wayne D. Overholser

GRANT couldn't decide whether it was love or pity that moved Donna and he had to know

THE THREE years Grant Ord had spent in the Cañon City pen had not been hell. They had simply been oblivion, three wasted years of burial behind the high grey walls. Even a day was wasted for Grant when he missed the sight of the aspens on the ridges above Bearhead turn to orange, missed the feel of a horse between his legs and the wind on his cheeks, missed the blasts of a summer sun, missed the chill of nights with their black, star-lighted skies. These were the things he had long treasured, these and Donna Gault.

He bought an old grey mare and a beaten-up saddle and a sack of grub. They had given his gun back along with the usual advice to stay out of trouble. He had shaken the warden's hand with neither affection nor bitterness, for the warden was just another man doing his job the same as the sheriff who had arrested him and the judge who had sentenced him to the pen. There was no room for hatred in Grant Ord's heart, not even for Johnny

Allen or Bert Connor.

It was early in the summer when Grant rode out of Cañon City, up the Arkansas and across Marshal Pass. He rode slowly because he had written to Donna that he would be in Bearhead Saturday afternoon. Besides, he wanted the sun to wipe some of the grey pallor from his face. He wanted to feel the wind again, to hear the rushing clatter of a creek, to be entirely alone with the empty miles, and most of all he wanted to think.

So he rode down the western side of the divide and turned north on Deer Creek, treasuring each minute with its smells and sights and sounds that he had been deprived of for so long, and with all of it was the throbbing anticipation of seeing Donna again.

After supper, with his campfire dying beside him, Grant lay with his head on his saddle, staring upward through the dancing leaves of an aspen and thinking of the course he must take.

He was not sure what the other three would think or do.

Except for Donna he didn't care, for these lost years had made him certain of one thing.

The outlaw trail was not for him.

For a time he considered the changes he would find, tried to picture them after a three-year absence. They had all been kids, the four of them who had planned to hold up the Bearhead stage, kids who had little in the way of fun. So they had sought excitement in planning a robbery. They were not kids now.

They weren't bad, any of them. The holdup had been another of Bert Connor's crazy schemes, and Donna and Johnny Allen and Grant had agreed, as they always had. Crazy kids in for anything that promised excitement. Like the time the four of them had ridden down the canyon in a wild run, yelling that there had been a cloudburst and Deer Creek would wipe the town out in five minutes. Then they'd climbed up on the hotel roof and watched the fun. Or the Hallowe'en they'd stolen the pulpit out of the church where Johnny's father preached and hung it from the sign of the Miners' Rest Saloon.

GRANT thinking about the things that had made them laugh until their stomachs hurt, could not even find a smile for them now. These three years had made that much change in him. Whatever happened, he must return the ten thousand that had been taken from the stage. That was where the shoe pinched. It would be what Donna wanted, but he had no way of knowing what Bert and Johnny would say, for he did not know what the three years had done to them.

Donna was the only one who had written regularly. Still, letters were a poor way to determine how much a person had grown up. He found himself wondering more about Donna than the other two. She had been more boy than girl. Dances had not interested her. A fight had, and she could ride and handle a gun like a man, and she had usually worn men's clothes.

Every adult in Bearhead had considered Donna bad. Bert Connor's banker father said she should be driven out of camp. Johnny's preacher father prayed for her. Grant's mother, the camp's washerwoman, asked Grant to quit running around with her. Even Donna's father threw up his hands, saying her mother had been too much for him when she was alive, and now the daughter was too much. Then he would depart forthwith to the bar where he could forget his paternal responsibilities.

Each night camp brought Grant a few miles

closer to Bearhead, and as the distance became less, the uncertainty in Grant grew. He'd wanted to go back to Bearhead. Now he asked himself why. His mother had died three months before, so he had no family. He had no desire to pick up with Bert Connor and Johnny again. Everybody else except Donna would call him an ex-con and want to run him out of camp.

Logic forced Grant to admit what he had known all the time. His desire to see Donna was the only thing bringing him back. He'd ride on, get a job, save a little money. Then, if he was lucky, Donna would come to him and they'd get married. Not that he had any real hope it would happen. It was simply a dream. Fortunately for his sanity, the years behind the high wall had not taken from him his capacity for dreaming.

Of all the memories that the wild antics of the four had given him, only one was something to cherish. It was the evening they were to hold up the stage. He was with Donna behind a nest of boulders some distance above the road. Bert and Johnny were on the other side. He did not know, even after all this time, what had changed his resolve. Once Bert had tried to kiss Donna and she'd hit him with her fist the way a boy would, and she'd almost knocked him out. Another time Johnny had showed up with a black eye he couldn't explain. Donna had wanted to be treated like another boy, so Grant had treated her that way.

NOW, AFTER three years of thinking about it, Grant had decided it ended when it should have, for three boys, physically matured, couldn't have kept on tearing around with a seventeen-year-old girl and acting as if she were a boy. He couldn't. He remembered exactly how it had been. She'd heard something and turned to him quickly. It was almost dark, and she must have been closer than she realized, for he felt the sweep of her breasts. Her face was touching his when she'd whispered, "What's that, Grant?"

Something had exploded in him. Donna Gault could take care of herself when she wanted to, but this time she hadn't wanted to. He had kissed her, and she had answered his kiss with a fervency that had swept him into a new whirling world. They forgot about Johnny and Bert. They forgot about the stage. They forgot everything except themselves until Johnny and Bert galloped around the boulders, Bert swearing bitterly. They had

jumped apart, and it had been almost dark, but Grant had a feeling the other two knew.

"You asleep?" Bert had raged. "We plan this out, and it winds up with me and Johnny doing the work. But I'll bet the pile you'll want your share of the split."

"You get it?" Donna had asked.

"You're damned right." Bert had stopped as if he'd heard something. Then he'd swung to Grant. "You take the *dinero* and vamoose. I think the driver recognized my voice."

So Grant had taken the money, made a long swing up the side of the mountain and had ridden into Bearhead just before dawn. He'd put his horse up and buried the stolen money in a corner of the stable and had gone to bed. He'd barely dropped off to sleep, thinking of the kiss and not the money, when the sheriff had knocked on the door. They'd found a sack of currency in front of the stable. Grant still did not know how it had got there, but it must have been a frame because he was sure he hadn't dropped it.

He had pleaded guilty, for he could not account for his actions that night. He would not tell who had been with him, and he refused to tell where he had hidden the money. Donna said he should have told the whole story, but Johnny and Bert had visited him in jail and asked him not to. Now, looking back over it, he knew that only a perverse sense of loyalty had made him keep his mouth closed.

There was one more memory deeply etched upon his mind, the morning he had walked out of the jail to the stage, handcuffed. His mother crying, kissing him, and walking rapidly away. Old Eli Connor, the banker, shouting that this was his last chance to tell where the money was. The preacher, Johnny's father, offering a prayer for his eternal soul. Jim Gault, smelling of his own cheap whiskey, calling out that he wished he'd brought a rope. Johnny and Bert patting him on the back. Donna jerking free from her father and rushing to Grant and throwing her arms around him. Jim Gault had yanked her away and told Grant that if he came back he'd get his rope and drop it over Grant's neck.

WITHIN a few miles of Bearhead, these memories glowed in his mind like sunlight breaking through a crack in the clouds. Memories, both sweet and bitter. All that

was good and bad for him in Bearhead had been there to see him go, but no one would be watching to welcome him back. So, with his hackles raised like a defensive dog, Grant Ord rode into Bearhead that Saturday afternoon, racked his grey mare in front of the hotel, and went in.

All day Grant had seen things that looked familiar, even the boulder nest above the road where he had kissed Donna. Main Street showed no change. Deer Creek rushed downstream in the same shifting pattern. The great uplift of rock above the camp looked just as much like a giant bear head. No change at all until he stepped into the lobby of Jim Gault's hotel. That was entirely changed.

Gault stood behind the desk, a grey, gaunt man who now had his hair combed and lacked the stench of cheap whiskey. The lobby was clean. It had been freshly painted. A geranium in the corner was almost ready to bloom. Even the pile of dead flies on the window-sill was gone.

"Why, it's Grant," Gault said, and strode quickly around the desk and came to him. "Donna said you'd be in today."

Grant shook his hand, finding this welcome beyond belief, and said he was glad to be back. He saw his face in a mirror above the desk, and shame hit him like a club against his stomach. The freckles were still there, the same pug nose and blunt chin, the dark streak of stubble, but the sun had done little to erase the prison pallor.

But if Jim Gault noticed anything different in Grant, he gave no indication of it. He said, "I'm sorry about your mother. She died here, you know. Donna brought her down from your cabin and nursed her through the last month."

Grant was unable to mask his surprise, for Donna had not mentioned that in her letters. "I . . . didn't know. Donna wrote Ma had been sick, but she didn't say anything about that."

"Donna's that way." Gault looked down at the floor, eyes moist. "Grant, I want to tell you something. There have been changes here, some good and some bad. I guess one of the best is right here. Donna's the one that pulled it off. I had a purty damned tough year after you left. Donna never let me forget what I said about getting my rope." He lifted his head and looked directly at Grant. "Now I'm apologizing for saying it. I'm sorry, Grant. That's all I can say."

"Why, I guess—"

"Grant! You old ornery son, why didn't you tell

us you were getting in today?"

GRANT wheeled toward the door. It was Bert Connor, no bigger than he had ever been, with the same dark eyes and black hair, the same flashy smile, the same smooth voice and charm that had made him the accepted leader three years ago. But now he was dressed like a drummer with a black derby hat and polished boots that reflected a man's face like a mirror, an expensive black suit, and a flowered vest. A pearl-handled Colt was holstered on his hip. A diamond stickpin glittered in his tie.

Grant shook hands with Bert. He said, "How are you, boy?" but it was a mechanical reaction. He didn't want to see Bert Connor. Grant turned back to Jim Gault. "Is Donna around?"

"No, she ain't. She's up to your cabin. We boarded the windows up when your mother came down here, figuring you'd be back soon and want to live there. Now she's cleaning it up for you. You know a vacant house gets mighty dusty."

Bert slapped him on the back. "Come on, Grant. I'll ride up there with you. It'll be like old times. We'll plan something that'll put some life back into this camp. Been deader'n hell since you left."

Grant looked at Bert, sensing a greater difference than the veneer the expensive clothes put upon him. Three years in prison had taught him to judge men. There had been good ones there, and bad ones, and others in between, the handsome, smooth men who overrated their own intelligence and underrated everybody else's. Most of them had been bunco artists of one sort or another, and all swore that they had made their one mistake and they'd never be back again.

Grant had learned not to trust them, for their glib tongues and great charm were like layers of bark covering a rotten tree trunk. Now, staring at Bert Connor, he judged him to be the same kind. But whether Bert had changed or whether Grant had not been sharp enough three years ago to see through the smooth exterior was a question in his mind.

Grant said, "No."

Bert's brows lifted. "What's happened to you, Grant? Don't tell me you've lost your talent for laughing?"

"Just about." Grant nodded at Gault. "I'll ride on up to the cabin."

"I'll go along," Bert said.

They stepped out into the sunshine, Gault calling, "Wait, Grant."

Both swung back. Bert said, "You wanted something, Jim?"

His tone shocked Grant. There was nothing at all smooth about it; it was raw and wicked.

Gault's eyes looked away as he mumbled, "I just wanted to tell you to come back with Donna for supper."

"Thanks," Grant said and swung into the saddle.

Bert had a fine horse, a black with a star on his forehead and white stockings, and his gear was shiny with silver decorations. Something withered in Grant Ord. He was the camp washerwoman's son, the ex-con who had been convicted of holding up a stage, back with a broken-down old grey mare and a beaten-up saddle and cheap clothes. He wanted to turn and run, but pride held him there and made him ride up the middle of the street beside Bert Connor.

They threaded their way through the traffic, heavy ore wagons and burro trains and buggies, Bert speaking to someone all the time. Other memories crowded back into his mind, memories of gathering people's dirty clothes and bringing them up Main Street in his cart and later taking the spotless laundry back. He remembered, too, the time there had been a rain and the street had been spotted with puddles of dirty water and Eli Connor had driven past at a fast clip and the wheels of his buggy had splashed the clothes with mud. Grant had taken the laundry back to his mother, and he had cried, for he had been young then.

AMOMENT later they were out of the business block, and the Silver Girl stamp mill loomed ahead, its rumble shaking the earth. There was the great pile of yellow tailings and across the road was the cabin where Grant had lived most of his life in Bearhead.

"Two horses," Bert said as if it didn't surprise him. "Funny thing, Grant. Donna's a damned pretty woman. Nothing like the wild Indian who used to ride with us, but Johnny's got her tied up tight. Sure took advantage of your being gone."

Grant didn't look at Bert. He kept silent, knowing that his face and his voice would show how he felt. If there had been any one thing that had brought him through these three years with a sane mind, that had kept the corrosive acid of hatred from his heart, it had been his love for

Donna Gault and his certainty of her love for him.

“Three years can change a hell of a lot of things,” Bert was going on in his pleasant voice. “We used to like Johnny, all of us, but he’s no good even if he has got a preacher dad. I can’t prove it, but I’ve got a hunch he framed you by dropping that sack in front of your stable and then hightailing to tell the sheriff.”

Still Grant didn’t look at Bert, and he didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. Three years of thinking and wondering had brought him to one inevitable conclusion. Either Bert or Johnny had framed him, and it might have been because of Donna. Now if Johnny had Donna tied up, as Bert had said, it was reasonable to guess that Johnny had been the one.

It was Johnny who saw Grant first. He let out a squall that brought Donna from the cabin, and they ran down the hill together. Grant reined up and looked. It was Donna all right, but as Bert had said, she was nothing like the wild Indian who had ridden with them. She was still slender, but she had lost her boyish slimness. Hers was the strong shape of a mature woman, and when Grant stepped down from the saddle, she cried out, “Grant, Grant, it’s been so long.” She was in his arms, her hands back of his neck, her mouth hungry for his.

It was here for him, everything he had dreamed, a woman waiting, ready to love him, wanting to love him, a woman who would hold nothing back. For a time there was only the two of them. Then Bert Connor’s voice came to Grant above the rumble of the stamp mill: “He looks fine, doesn’t he, Johnny?”

“Sure,” Johnny said and held out a hand. “Come on. You don’t need more than one arm to hug her with.”

Donna laughed and swung away from Grant. “He needs both of them, Johnny. Always.”

But Grant had a hand to shake Johnny’s, and it seemed to him, as he met the other’s gaze, that Bert must have lied because there was nothing about Johnny that hinted of jealousy. Grant thought, *If I loved a woman and I saw her kiss another man like Donna kissed me, I’d kill him.*

“Let’s go inside,” Donna said. “We’ve been cleaning house for you, Grant.”

“That’s what your dad said,” Grant told her. “Thanks.”

She gave him a quick look. She said softly, “Dad’s changed, Grant.”

“I saw that. He told me what you’ve done for

Ma. Thanks for that, too.”

HE took his arm, and they walked back up the hill together and on across the bare dirt yard. It lay bleak and crusted under the sun, Grant remembering how he had helped his mother empty her wash water here and how the yard had always been smelly and white. She had asked him repeatedly to build her a trough or put in a pipe, but he remembered with shame that he never had. He had started to work in the mill as soon as he was old enough. When he wasn’t working, he had been riding around with Donna and Bert and Johnny, doing things that had better have been left undone.

They went inside. He paused, Donna still close beside him. He looked around at the bare walls, the simple, handmade furniture, the range that had kept him busy cutting wood to heat his mother’s wash water.

“We didn’t know what you’d want to do,” Donna was saying. “We’d like to have you come down to the hotel to live if you want to.”

“I don’t know,” he said, and dropped into a chair.

Bert and Johnny came in. Donna walked across the room, picked up a chair and brought it back to sit beside Grant. He watched her quick, graceful movements, the sway of her round hips, noticed that her black hair was carefully combed and pinned back of her head. She was wearing a blue dress that had a tight-fitting bodice. A new dress, he decided. Then he thought, *She’s worn it for me!* He looked at Johnny Allen, who had crossed the room to drop down on the bed, and he wasn’t sure. Johnny wasn’t worried. Johnny was big and good-looking with none of the cultivated charm that was so obvious in Bert.

Donna smiled, dropping a hand on Grant’s. “It’s awfully nice to have you back.”

“I was telling him we’d cook up something that would liven the town up,” Bert said. He lounged in the doorway, fingers busy making a cigarette. “They used to say some pretty rough things about us, but they all had to admit we kept things alive.”

No one said anything for a time. Donna and Johnny looked at each other, and Johnny said, “Lot of changes, Grant. You’ll laugh at this, I guess, remembering how I used to be and how I used to talk, but I’m going to be a preacher.”

Bert laughed contemptuously. “Still joshing, isn’t he, Grant?”

Johnny looked embarrassed. "I'm not joshing, Bert, and you know it." He swept a rebellious lock of hair into place, gaze dropping to the floor. "I might as well tell you, Grant. You know how it was with us. Me, anyhow. Dad was always strict, and the other kids figured I was a sissy because he was a preacher. I just had to show them I wasn't."

Grant hadn't thought of it that way, but it was probably true. He glanced at Donna. She was leaning forward, her hand still on his, but her eyes were on Johnny. She said, "Tell him the rest of it, Johnny."

"I've been working in the mill, and I've saved some money." Johnny scraped a toe across the rough board floor. Grant saw frustration on Johnny's face. This wasn't what Donna had wanted Johnny to say. But Johnny went on: "If I ever have a family, I won't raise my kids like I've been raised, and I won't preach all the hellfire and brimstone Dad has. He'll disown me, I guess, but that's the way I've got to live."

"Wouldn't believe it, would you, Grant?" Bert said, his tone faintly mocking. "I can see Johnny holding a gun on the stage driver while I told him to throw down the box. Then I think of him in the pulpit. Doesn't add up, does it, Grant?"

NOBODY said anything for a moment. Johnny had his head lowered, staring at the floor. Grant thought, *They're trying to tell me something.*

Donna said, "Tell him the rest."

Johnny shook his head. "I can't."

"Then I will. It's easy enough to tell, Grant. Everybody in town knows the four of us were in on that holdup, but we sacrificed you. Now that's all behind us, like when a night is gone and the sun's in the sky again."

Something froze in Grant Ord. Bert had been right. She was just being nice because he was home. She had written to him because she was sorry for him. Well, that was behind them, as she had said. He rose, his face bone hard. "Don't make any difference."

Bert laughed softly. "What are we trying to fool ourselves about? Grant may not be very bright, but he sees through this. You were crazy about Donna before it happened, weren't you, Johnny? Only you didn't get anywhere. It was Grant then, so you framed him. Tell him why, Johnny."

Grant looked from Bert to Johnny and then at

Donna, and he didn't understand. Donna said softly, "It's always been Grant, Bert. It still is."

Again Bert laughed. "You've only got one way to go, Grant. You'll keep on robbing stages. If you're smart, you'll come my way." He touched the diamond stickpin. "It pays. See? Before we're done, we'll be back where we were. Johnny'll get over his notions about saving the world, and Donna will take that pretty dress off and get back on a horse."

"For the first time in my life, Bert," Donna said clearly, "I've heard you say something honest. You want Grant to join your outfit, don't you, so you're telling him that you're a thief."

Bert shrugged. "Why not? We're all thieves in one way or another. I'm just a little more direct than you and Johnny. It was a bad day for you, Grant, when we held up that stage, but a good day for me. It was what I wanted to do. Come along and I'll make you rich. Or stay and see what Bearhead thinks of an ex-con."

"I guess I'll stay awhile," Grant said. "I've just come from a place that's got a lot of boys like you. I'm not going back."

"You don't have to go back if you're smart. Trouble is you're not smart. Ask Johnny why you were sacrificed, as Donna put it."

"I'll tell you," Donna cried. "You're like me, Grant. We didn't come from the right families. I told the sheriff and the judge and the rest of them we were together. They wouldn't believe it. They said a preacher's boy and a banker's boy wouldn't do such a thing."

"But they'd believe I did it," Grant breathed, "because I was the washerwoman's son."

"Three years in stony lonesome sharpened up that brain of yours," Bert said easily. "I think it's sharp enough for you to see that they'll hang the first thing on you that happens, and you'll go back. If you've got savvy, you'll play my way."

Part of what Bert Connor said was right. *They'd hang the first thing on him that happened.* He couldn't stay here. He had only wanted to see Donna, so it was time to ride. Bert wasn't being smooth now. He was being brutally honest. Whatever happened, Grant Ord, ex-con, had no right to ask Donna to marry him.

"I'm interested in one thing," Grant said. "I never told anybody where I buried that money. I aim to return it to the express company."

He knew Bert Connor would not agree. Grant

looked at him, waiting for Bert to go for his gun, waiting for him to throw hot words back at him. He heard Donna's long sigh, heard Johnny say, "Good boy, Grant." Suddenly Grant understood. Of the four of them, only Bert Connor had turned bad.

But Bert didn't go for his gun. He lowered his head, black eyes probing Grant's face. Donna said, "Go get the money, Grant. Johnny and I have talked about it before. We want to return it."

"I'll take my part of it," Bert said. "We're not kids now. Remember that, Grant, and I doubt like hell that you've had much practice with your iron when you were in the pen. Go get that money. I'll take mine. The rest of you can do what you want to with yours."

JOHNNY ALLEN did not have a gun, and what Bert said about not having time to practice was right. They had waited three years for different things, and Bert Connor didn't aim to miss what he'd waited for, even if it meant killing a man.

"Looks like we've got it in the open now," Grant said. "Maybe you've got a notion to take all of it, Bert."

"Yeah," Bert said. "That's exactly what I've got my mind on. Ten thousand is worth some killing. I've been hanging around this damned dead hole in the ground waiting for you to come back. Now get it, or I'll blow . . ."

Johnny Allen didn't have a gun, but he did the only thing he could. He had been standing at the end of the bed. Now he rushed at Bert, trying to grab his arm before he could pull gun from holster, but he had too far to go. Bert's shot brought him to a stop as suddenly as if he'd hit an invisible wall. Johnny fell headlong, but Grant had the extra second he needed.

He pulled his gun slowly, pathetically slowly it seemed to him as he drove his hand downward and lifted the Colt. Still, it took some time for Bert to swing his gun to him. It was long enough. Bert did not fire a second time. Grant's bullet caught him in the stomach and knocked him off his feet. Bert

tried to lift his gun for a shot, but Grant was on him, foot pinning his wrist to the floor. Grant stooped and picked up the gun as Donna ran by him, calling, "Watch him. I'll get help."

Bert Connor died that day. Johnny Allen was hard hit, but he would live. Still there were things Grant did not understand, nor did he until Donna was able to get away from Johnny's bedside.

"Johnny couldn't make himself tell you," she said. "You see, he watched you hide the money, and he dug it up after you'd gone to bed. He dropped that sack in front of the stable and told the sheriff you'd robbed the stage."

"Then Johnny's got the money?"

"No. He gave it back, but he kept it for a long time, fighting it out with himself. Bert never knew about that part of it, never knew the express company got the money back. Johnny was jealous of you. That was why he wanted to frame you. He'd seen us kissing that night they held up the stage, but deep inside him was something he didn't know he had. Grant, would you like to know why he's decided to be a preacher and why Dad straightened up?"

He nodded, and she went on, "Your example. You never thought of that, did you? You went to prison without bringing the rest of us into it. What you did was because of love or loyalty. Nobody talked about it, but everybody knew how it was."

"How did they know?"

She smiled. "I told them. They claimed they didn't believe me, but I know they did. If you want to stay in Bearhead, you won't have any trouble because you'll be one of the most respected men in camp."

He thought about that moment, knowing he wanted to stay, wanted to make his own mark in the town that had sent him to prison. But there was something more important, something he had to hear her say. "It depends on you," he said. "I haven't got anything to offer you, and if it's Johnny . . ."

"Grant," she said simply in a tone he could not doubt, "it's always been you."