

It didn't make for domestic bliss when banker Phil Thornton's wife started to refer to Thornton's ex-lawman father as the town loafer . . .

# SIT IN THE SHADE

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**A**LTHOUGH they had been married two years, it remained a source of wonder to Phil Thornton that his career seemed of more concern to his intense young wife than to himself. He recognized the protective symptoms. Her voice rose in pitch and her words became more clipped as befitted an eastern educated girl in the Texas cow country. But even as the banker steeled himself against his wife's anger, he could not help noting that the added color in her cheeks made her downright lovely.

Heatedly, Sarah was saying, "People are already referring to him as the town loafer. It's bound to reflect on the bank."

"Now, honey," Phil soothed. "Surely an old man who has served as long and honorably in the Texas Rangers as dad has is entitled to loaf after his retirement."

"At home, yes; not sitting across the street from his son's bank. I know how hard you worked to bring a financial institution into Del Grande. The reflection of a father who is a town loafer could be ruinous."

Phil Thornton sighed. He would not tell Sarah, but there was a far more serious problem the bank might face. "There's a gang of outlaws in this part of Texas," Marshal Lance Randolph had warned him. "They've held up banks before; might be advisable to keep a loaded sawed-off shotgun behind the counter."

Sarah was saying, "People are already setting their watches by the way he moves that old straight-back chair of his to stay in the shade."

Phil Thornton looked through the window. Old Tom Thornton was placing his chair in the shade of



the adobe building housing the saddlery across the dusty street. Sitting down, he carefully adjusted his wide-brimmed Stetson over his eyes, smoothed down his greying handlebar moustache, and hooked his thumbs in his cartridge belt.

"Look at your watch," Sarah prompted.

Phil lifted his silver pocket watch. It was exactly ten minutes before the bank's opening. It was the same time every morning when Tom took his position against that adobe.

"You see." Sarah came to Phil, lifting her pretty but earnest face. "He's your father. You have got to do something about this. Talk to him."

When Phil let her out the door, Sarah added quietly: "If you don't, I will." She lifted her parasol against the brilliant morning sun and moved gracefully down the board walk.

**A**T NOON, Phil pulled the shades and locked the bank. He waited for a buckboard and several mounted men to pass in a disturbance of acrid alkali dust, then walked diagonally across the street. To escape the direct rays of the sun, his father moved from the adobe wall onto the covered board walk of the general store on the opposite

corner at exactly 11:30 each morning. The way his hat concealed his eyes, Tom Thornton appeared to be asleep. But when his son stepped up on the walk, his father drawled, "Quittin' early."

Phil felt surprisingly like he had as a small boy when Tom caught him skipping chores. It had always been that way. Phil had often wondered at the quiet regard of his father which seemed to convey disappointment. In some way, Phil guessed, he had let Tom down. Whatever the reason, it was clear the admiration he had always felt for his father was not sufficient to overcome the wall between them.

He told Tom, "I thought you might like to share the dinner Sarah fixed for me."

"Not one to eat at nooning, but help yourself."

Phil sat on a nearby box. He studied Tom between bites. The old man's weather-beaten hands hung loosely over his six-guns. Their handles were worn slick from years of handling. Tom's cool use of them in dispatching of many bad men without firing a shot had earned him the respectful nickname of "Buffalo" among the Rangers, Phil knew.

That thought was unsettling. How could he possibly tell this courageous old lawman that he was becoming the town loafer in his retirement years?

Carefully, Phil said, "Sarah has been worrying about you."

"That so?"

"She's afraid you don't like staying at home, you're there so seldom."

"Like the town."

"I'll tell Sarah to stop worrying," Phil decided.

"Do that."

The barrier was unyielding between them. Phil finished eating, said, "Back to work," and left his father. The relief he felt was tempered by what he must tell Sarah about the conversation.

**S**ARAH CAME in that afternoon. Glancing through the window opposite the teller's cage, Phil could see that his father had taken his 2:30 position in the lengthening shadow of the Gold Bullion Saloon across the street from the bank's entrance.

When he finished with the depositors who were there, Sarah stepped up to the cage. "If you spoke to your father, it didn't do much good."

"Honey, I can't tell that fine old man what you

want me to."

"Then I will," Sarah said. Her lips tightened determinedly. It was obvious she liked the idea no more than he did. But for the good of the bank, it was obvious she would have her say. Phil watched the bounce of her bustle with a helpless feeling.

Before she reached the door, three men came in, spurs jingling. They carried saddlebags over their arms. One of them seized Sarah. He spun her around.

Startled by his wife's outraged expression, Phil grabbed for the shotgun under the counter. Then he realized the men had side-arms trained on him. "I wouldn't," advised the bearded gunman holding Sarah. "Unless you want this pretty gal hurt."

Another bandit took the shotgun. "Now open that vault."

There was nothing else to do, Phil saw. He was glad Sarah accepted the situation and was not struggling, though her fearless dark eyes fairly blazed her anger.

Phil opened the vault. Two of them began looting the contents, filling the saddlebags. The bearded man kept hold of Sarah.

"You can let go of the girl," Phil suggested sharply.

The bandit leader grinned. "She's get-away insurance, pardner; smells good, too. So just stand steady."

Saddlebags bulging, the robbers emerged from the vault. One said, "Let's go. Sam'll be gettin' restless, holdin' them hosses so long." The bearded man waited with Sarah as the other bandits started out the door. Quick shots shattered the drowsy afternoon quiet of Del Grande. The pair with the saddlebags jerked back into the bank, cursing.

"Some old geezer's buffaloed Sam!" one yelled; "he's over there by the water trough, throwin' lead!"

A thrill tingled through Phil. Dad! The old Texas Ranger had the robbers pinned down. The shots would bring Marshal Lance Randolph hurrying to the scene.

"The hosses still there?" snapped the leader.

"Standin' in a bunch."

"Then we'll use the gal for a shield." A feeling of unreality possessed Phil. Sarah was in danger of her life. Whipsawed as they were by Buffalo Thornton, these bank robbers were determined to escape at any cost. Phil looked desperately around. The bank's big inkwell in the teller's cage was the

only weapon he saw. The outlaw boss was half-carrying a suddenly struggling Sarah toward the door, his back to the banker. The others were peeking out the door. Phil grabbed up the inkwell, ducked out of the cage, and slammed the leader on the head with all his strength.

**I**NK SPLATTERED in every direction. The outlaw crumpled. Sarah fell with him. The other bandits whirled, lifting their weapons. Tom Thornton stepped quickly through the door. His six-shooter roared. One badman spun completely around and fell. The remaining man dropped his gun, throwing his hands high.

The pungent odor of cordite filled his nostrils as Phil lifted Sarah to her feet. Her bonnet was askew, her face splat with ink, but she had never looked more beautiful. Phil held her tight, fully aware of the clean woman warmth of her as she clung against him. Across his wife's shoulder, he met Buffalo Thornton's gaze. His father was smiling at him, Phil realized.

"Good work, son," Buffalo said. A surge of pride ran through Phil.

Marshal Randolph entered, townspeople crowding excitedly outside. The marshal looked around. "So that's how they do it in the Rangers!"

"Credit Phil," Buffalo drawled. "If he hadn't dropped that hombre yonder with an inkwell, I'd had to let this gang ride out of town with Sarah as

their hostage."

"Now I understand why you kept checking with me about the movements of this outfit and suggested that I warn Phil here," Randolph said.

Phil stared at his father. Sarah turned to regard the old man. "Do you mean you expected the bank to be held up?" she asked.

"That's the reason I was riding herd on it from across the street," Buffalo admitted. "This gang started operations just before I was retired. They hit all around here, so I figured this was about the only plum left for picking."

Sarah met Phil's eyes and flushed.

Buffalo was saying, "I've got to own up; I didn't think Phil was man enough to cope with badmen. Always had a hankering for him to be a Ranger when he grew up. Didn't cotton to him turning to banking instead. Then he married an eastern gal; reckon I was just trying to convince myself I was still needed."

Phil watched Sarah march over to the old man. She touched her hands against his chest. Looking up at him, she said, "You are. Del Grande needs you. And I need you. But you've got to do one thing."

Alarmed, Phil called, "Sarah!" then heard her finish: "You've got to get rid of that horrible old straight-back chair and do your public loafing in something more comfortable—as befits the banker's father!"