

Announcements of Intended Robbery Weren't Usually as Raw as This!

LAST FLING

AT

RIVER BEND

By
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TRACY



BRICK LOWE was serious about quitting his drifting around. His chief reason for a decision so drastic was that he had reached the advanced age of twenty-four. It was time to settle down.

Since Brick had been sixteen, he had ridden the range, high, wide and fancy free as a tophand. He had looked the country over carefully and had picked out a couple of likely spots to establish a spread. If this new place toward which he was headed, River Bend, didn't measure up, he knew right where he was going.

Unlike a lot of roving cowpokes, Brick had gathered and saved his moss. He had a well-filled money-belt that should be sufficient to give him a proper launching in a small way.

He refused to admit, even to himself, that this visit to River Bend was really one last fling at adventure in a world open in all directions. Yet his big, six-foot frame was filled with an eagerness which was reflected in the expression on his freckled,

rugged face and in the penetrating gray of his eyes, as he rode across the Arizona desert and up the barren mountain slope into Apache Pass.

When he was through the rims and pulled up on the other side, he forgot his empty canteen and the thickness of his dry tongue. Below him was a great valley that seemed to have dropped from another world.

A sparkling stream split the green grasslands for three-quarters of their length. The stream then made a right angle turn and vanished in a deep mountain canyon that lay close to the border. In the angle of the stream were the scattered houses of the cow town of River Bend.

Brick followed the switch-backed highway to the valley floor and then into town. In the hot afternoon sun, the one dusty business street with its sun-blistered buildings and drowsing horses at the hitchrails, seemed asleep. Brick was not lulled to security thereby. Some of the most violent and unchristian characters he

had ever met had exploded right out of a Sabbath-like peace.

He took his tired horse to the livery stable. After seeing to its care, he threw his trail roll over his shoulder and went up to the hotel. Cutting across a vacant lot, he didn't go around to the front steps leading to the hotel porch. Cowboylike, he took the shortest course. As he came to the end of the porch, he placed his hands on the waist-high floor to leap up, when voices came to him and he paused.

A line of trees at the side of the hotel had concealed his approach across the vacant lot. As he glanced around, he saw there was a screened window close to him and the sash inside it was raised. Evidently the hotel parlor was in there and it was from the parlor the voices were issuing.

"You listen to me, Nell," said a voice, while not exactly harsh, held tones that grated on Brick's nerves. "We can't run the Box-B like your old man run it forty years ago. We've got to bring it up to date or quit."

"You think the way to bring it up to date is to fire all the boys who've worked on the Box-B for years, and put a lot of tough gunmen in their places?" came an angry inquiry in a young, deep contralto with a timbre that made little shivers run up Brick's spine. "That don't make sense to me, Mr. Lapine."

"We have to get rid of the deadwood," argued Lapine. "And don't call me *Mister* Lapine. Call me Jim."

"I own two-thirds of the Box-B, *Mister* Lapine," said Nell. "My father built it up from nothing with the boys you are trying to fire."

"Have fired," corrected Lapine with maddening complacency.

"When you included Jenny and George Shelton, my cook and her husband, who've been on the Box-B since I can remember, you went too far."

"I'm foreman of the Box-B as well as a one-third owner," reminded Lapine. "I just didn't like skinny George's nose ways."

"You were foreman," Nell did some correcting of her own. "You're fired!"

Lapine laughed with vast amusement.

"You're going to hire a foreman to rod my bunch of hand-picked boys?" he inquired.

"You think I'm going to stand around and do nothing while you shove me to one side and run the Box-B to suit yourself?"

"It's out of your hands already," said Lapine with an assurance that carried conviction.

Brick couldn't have moved to save him. This was about the rawest announcement of an intended robbery he had ever heard. Lapine must be pretty sure of himself to talk this way.

"There's no sense in us wasting time arguing," Lapine went on. "Why don't we get married? That would settle everything."

"I wouldn't marry you to save my own life," said Nell with deliberate scorn. The depth of it made Brick want to pat her on the back. "More than that, I'm taking Jenny and George back to the ranch."

"Go ahead and try," invited Lapine. "I doubt if they'd go back for double wages and a bonus."

"You're threatened them!" accused Nell.

"No, indeed. I just promised them certain things would happen if they were fools enough to come back. And, by the way, I had a new man come in on the stage today. I let him have your horse to ride out to the Box-B. You can ride back with me in the buckboard."

"You're not very bright, *Mister* Lapine!" The contralto was trembling with fury. "You're just contemptible. I'm going to have sheriff Ben Cross go after my

horse. I wouldn't be seen riding down the street in your company."

"Maybe I'm brighter than I look," suggested Lapine. His tone hinted that Nell had pierced his armor of conceit. "You see I planned it this way. Ben Cross is fixed up with an errand that will keep him out of town all day, although I don't think he'd have the guts to interfere anyway. We'll be starting home in an hour. You be ready then and save yourself trouble." It was an unmistakable order from a man who was riding high. Brick heard him walk across the floor and open a door which probably led into the hotel lobby.

THE big cowboy hadn't intended to eavesdrop. He hardly realized he was doing so until it was over. Although it was none of his business, he had an urge to smash a man who had so little regard for the rights of others.

The deeply imbedded American trait in the cowboy, to help the weak fight off aggressors, urged him to do something. Anyhow he didn't want to be caught listening.

Instead of leaping up on the end of the porch, he quietly hurried around front and was leisurely mounting the porch steps when a man who must be Lapine came out of the front door.

Lapine was not as tall as Brick, but he was wider and fully as heavy. He was ten years older and looked more than that. His face was long and his jaw narrow. A pair of pale, chalk-like eyes under sandy brows looked Brick over with no expression whatever. If he was interested in a stranger in River Bend, he gave no indication of it. He went across the street and pushed in the swinging doors of the Crystal Palace Saloon.

Quick interest knifed through Brick: He took care not to appear to be watching

the man, but he was sure that somewhere in his travels he had bumped into Lapine. There was something familiar about him. Yet a hurried check of possibilities left Brick without a clue. Maybe he just resembled someone he knew. Slowly the cowboy went into the hotel.

Naturally he was curious about the other voice. As he stepped into the lobby, he glanced toward the parlor and saw that Lapine had left the door open. A girl was standing just inside the parlor and facing him.

Brick came to an abrupt halt. He wasn't expecting to see anything so lovely. Rich toned, coppery hair clung in natural waves to a proud head. Her wide white hat she held by the strings in her right hand. She was gripping the strings so tightly, the knuckles showed white. A light gun was belted about her slender waist.

Her tailored shirt and riding breeches set off glamorous curves, and the arched little boots gave a dainty finishing touch. She appeared to be staring straight at Brick out of long-lashed eyes of smoky blue, but was contemplating some inner vision that had turned her soft red lips bitter.

As they stood facing each other, the cowboy lost in admiration and the girl sunk in tragic thoughts, she suddenly became aware that she was not alone. Warm color swam into her smooth cheeks.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I'm sorry. I really didn't see you." That was true, but sounded so inane, even to her own ears, that another warm wave of color deepened the tones of the first.

Brick swept off his hat and a disarming grin quirked the corners of his wide mouth.

"I know you warn't seeing me," he acknowledged. "And I know it must have been a terrible shock when you discovered what was obstructin' the view. On the other hand, it give me an excuse to stare

back at you; and am I pleased with what I see.”

Nell tried to recover her dignity and put him in his place. In spite of her, the bitterness faded from the sweetness of her mouth and a white gleam showed in a shy smile.

“I must have looked silly standing there staring into space,” she said.

“I wouldn’t alter a thing,” said Brick with so much enthusiasm, she hastily changed the subject.

“You’re a stranger here,” she stated, slowly coming out into the lobby as though drawn by something out of her power.

“Not any more, I ain’t. I’ve met you. My name is Brick Lowe. Brick because of my high color and freckles and not because of my dun-colored hair. I’ve come to River Bend to look for a job and a location.”

“I’m Nell Travers, of the Box-B,” Nell introduced herself. Reminded, her smile faded and the bitter expression came back to her lips.

HIS mind on Lapine and the things he had overheard, common sense urged Brick to keep away from this girl and a mess of trouble. But something deep within him rose up and fought common sense back into the shadows and celebrated the victory by loudly announcing that this was the one girl for Brick Lowe.

“You’re in trouble, Miss Travers,” he said, firmly planting his feet on a trail from which there would be no turning back.

“What makes you say that?”

Brick was not a good liar. Anyhow, he never intended to deceive this girl about anything. So he told her the simple truth about his eavesdropping. “I like to help you,” he ended.

The mixture of humiliation and rage that blazed up in the smoky eyes faded as she looked up at the big cowboy and read his sober earnestness.

“There’s nothing you can do,” she said. “Even the law can’t or won’t help me. I’ll tell you the rest of the story and you’ll see I’m right.” She led the way back into the parlor and they sat on the horsehair sofa.

“My father, William Travers, built up the Box-B,” Nell began. “It’s one of the biggest outfits in the valley. After my mother died my father married a widow with one son, Don Wright. We all got along very well. Don was a little wild and used to take trips and be gone several months sometimes. Finally he settled down and become foreman.

“My father passed on last year and my stepmother was only a month behind him. Don inherited his mother’s widow’s third of the property and I inherited the rest of it. Everything went on about as before until three months ago. Then Don got a letter that seemed to frighten him. He said he had to take a trip to Mexico; and left.

“Three weeks later I got a letter from Don saying he wasn’t coming back. He had sold his interest in the Box-B to a James Lapine who was coming to take possession. That was the man you heard in here with me. He had all the papers properly signed and moved out to the ranch. He fired all the old hands and replaced them with gunmen of his own choosing. You heard the rest.”

Mention of Mexico had set something in motion in Brick’s memory. He was now positive of where he had seen James Lapine, if that was his name. It was one night on the border, when he was with the border patrol. The patrol was making a raid on an attempt to run wet cattle across the line. Brick hadn’t got a real good look, but he did see light fall on the face of one

of the outlaws. The narrow build of it and the shape of the man all pointed to Lapine. That, connected with the absence of the deputy sheriff, gave Brick the germ of an idea.

"This don't look hopeless to me," he encouraged Nell. "I heard you fire Lapine from his job as foreman. As the majority owner you were within your rights. There must be some way to make it stick and replace him with a man of your own."

"Who would go into that nest of gunmen Lapine has imported?" asked Nell. "No man of River Bend would do it."

"How about one of the men Lapine fired? What became of them anyhow?"

"They're all here in town at Mrs. McCarty's boarding house. They're waiting to see what is going to happen. However, there isn't one among them that could take the lead in a thing like this."

"How would I do as foreman?" questioned Brick. "You don't know me, but I know my trade."

"You!" Nell's exclamation was one of astonishment.

"I said I wanted a job, didn't I?"

"But why this job?"

"You want the truth?"

"I never want anything else."

"Until a few minutes ago I had only one reason for wanting to settle here. I liked the country. Now I have another reason. I fell in love with you at first sight. Nothing could drive me out of here until we're married."

Again fire glowed in Nell's eyes. She took a backward step and seemed to grow taller than her slender height. For a moment, Brick thought she was going to slap him.

"You are going too far and too fast," she said coldly. "Besides, you don't know me at all, nor I you."

"Our hearts know all about each

other," he said seriously. "Mine has known you always. It told me that the second I laid eyes on you. Just listen to what your heart says about me."

Nell's heart had picked up a beat and it disturbed her. Her anger refused to hold its edge. This cowboy couldn't be right. Things like this didn't happen outside of stories—at least not to her.

"This is ridiculous," she frowned, trying to be calm.

"Yes'm, it sure is, looking at it like a problem in arithmetic. Looking at it from my angle, it's plumb wonderful! And if that suspicious light I see flickering up in them beautiful eyes means what I think it does, forget it. Don't confuse me with Lapine. I probably ain't as well heeled as two-thirds of the Box-B, but I ain't broke either, and I didn't steal it."

No one likes to have their secret thoughts plucked like waiting flowers, no matter how intriguing and attractive the pickee.

"You don't know what I was thinking at all!" Nell said, but couldn't meet his eye.

"I'm sure I hope not, grinned Brick. "Now about that job. We can forget the personal angle till our other troubles are camped and bedded down. Judging by the looks and talk of that jasper, Lapine, romance must be at least two looks and a couple of hollers in the future."

"It's more distant than that," said Nell, fighting back the warm glow that was stealing over her. She knew she ought to send this big cowboy away for his affrontery. But there was strength in him and honesty; and how she did need both.

While she hesitated, someone came in the lobby and then a square built, cowpoke with gray in his dark hair, stuck an anxious and inquiring face in the door. The whole ensemble lighted as his gaze fell on Nell.

"So here you are," he said. "We was

up to the boarding house and saw you ride into town a spell back. A little while ago, Si Fagan swore he saw what looked like one of Lapine's owlhoot hands riding your Nibs' horse back toward the Box-B. We figgered he must be mistaken, but thought we'd better find out."

"Yes, it was Nibs Si saw," admitted Nell. "Lapine, without even asking me, let his new man have my horse to ride to the ranch. I fired Lapine as foreman, and he refused to be fired."

"Doggone him! Why did Don let a crook like that have his share of the ranch?" growled the cowpoke helplessly.

"Mr. Lowe, this is Tom Rex, one of the boys Lapine fired from the Box-B," introduced Nell. "Mr. Lowe has offered to take on the job of our foreman."

Tom studied Brick with intense interest and then nodded.

"I wouldn't wonder if you could take Lapine's measure and have plenty left over," he approved in a tone that made the pulse in Nell's throat prominent with its beating. "But how about the others?"

"How many of the old Box-B hands can we count on?" asked Brick.

"All five of us," replied Tom solidly. "We're right back of Nell."

"I suppose Lapine has plenty gunhawks," suggested Brick.

"Seven, counting the man who rode Nibs out," answered Tom. "Lapine makes eight. There's only four out at the ranch now. Squint Miller, Scar Dixie and Shorty Fuller followed the buckboard into town. They're all across the street in the Crystal Palace Saloon."

"So that's why Lapine was so sure I'd ride out to the ranch with him in the buckboard. He had strength enough to force me," Nell said.

"The thing to do is to act now while we've got the gang split in half," said Brick.

"The Box-B boys are not gunmen," worried Nell.

"Neither am I, even if it would be hard to convince certain parties who got numerous right in my face," said Brick with a modesty that robbed his words of any hint of boasting, but did have the effect of assuring Nell and Tom that he had no fear of Lapine or any of his ilk. "What we've got to do is use strategy."

Both Nell and Tom waited expectantly.

"Where's the sheriff's office?" asked Brick.

"Ben Cross is no good. Anyway, he's out of town. Don't you remember?" reminded Nell.

"I don't want the deputy, I want to burglarize his office," said Brick.

"How's that again?" inquired Tom, suspicion in his eyes.

"I've got more than a hunch that Lapine under other names is a wanted man," explained Brick. "That being so, there will be other wanted men associated with him. I figger to use that idea to get rid of the whole pack. Here's my plan. He dropped his voice till no one could possibly overhear and outlined what he had in mind.

"It might work," agreed Tom doubtfully.

"Sure it will work," said Nell. "The only part I don't like is it leaves me twirling my thumbs."

"Don't let that worry you," grinned Brick. "If Lapine and his crew come out on top, you'll be right out of the frying pan into the fire. Now, Tom, you come with me to the sheriff's office. I need a lookout. Then you can go round up your boys and drill what they're to do into 'em till they can't miss."

"Leave it to me," said Tom. "Come on." He led Brick out the back door of the hotel.

LEFT alone, Nell went to the front window and cautiously peered across the street to the Crystal Palace Saloon. Her face grew stiff with anger. Squint Miller was out front watching the hotel. Lapine had put a shadow on her trail to see that she didn't slip one over on him. She had an urge to leave the hotel to see what would happen, only it would jeopardize Brick's plan.

After an agonizing wait, Tom came in through the back of the hotel. He was worried.

"We're all set up to a certain point," he said. "Trouble is, that damn Squint Miller is out front of the Crystal Palace watching the hotel. Someway we've got to get rid of him, and quick."

"Why, of course," Nell said. "Lapine must have seen you come in here and is waiting to see what we're going to do. We'll both go out on the porch and I'll tell you loud enough so Squint can hear that you boys can't help me."

They went out on the porch together and put on the act. Nell turned back into the hotel with bowed head while Tom walked away. Quick as she was back in the lobby she rushed to the parlor window. Squint was just going into the saloon and he didn't come back. It had worked.

In a few minutes she saw Tom and the other Box-B boys wandering down the street. Then, suddenly, not a one of them was in sight. A moment later she saw Brick Lowe coming leisurely from the other direction. Once Nell's heart told her that his eyes were trying to penetrate the drapes of the parlor hotel window. Otherwise, no one would have suspected the tall cowboy had a thing on his mind.

Brick came in front of the Crystal Palace Saloon and stopped. He seemed to debate with himself about going in and finally did so. As the doors flapped behind him, Nell found she was biting her lips. If

anything happened to him! That was a silly way to feel! He was just a strange cowboy! But she knew she was kidding herself, even if she refused to admit it.

When Brick entered the Crystal Palace, aside from the fat bartender with his little eyes almost out of sight behind puffy lids, there were five men in the saloon. Lapine was one of them. Three of the others were easily identified by the descriptions Nell and Tom had furnished during the planning.

The fifth man was of a different breed. He was small, skinny and elderly with iron gray hair. Backed against the bar by the man Brick identified as Squint Miller, the old fellow was gazing up at him unafraid.

They all paused in what they were doing long enough to give Brick a hard stare as he went to the bar and ordered a beer. Noting that he didn't seem interested in what they were doing, they all turned back to the old man. Squint shoved him hard against the bar.

"So you was hittin' out of the country to tell some nosey ranger a bunch of lies about what was going on at the Box-B? Eh, George?" inquired Squint harshly.

"I warn't goin' to tell no lies," denied George.

"Jest what was you aimin' to tell, George?" asked Squint, his bleak eyes shining with cruel hardness. He struck the old man across the mouth, cutting his lip until it bled.

"Jest the truth," said George steadily.

The answer infuriated Squint. He smashed his fist into the old man's face, knocking him sagging against the bar.

"You was fixin' to lie us into trouble!" he snarled.

"All I was goin' to say," said the old man, "was that a bunch of thugs took me and my wife off the Box-B by force so they could git Nell Travers out there alone and helpless."

“You see?” Squint turned and looked at Lapine. “Good thing we sighted him sneaking up the road on a livery hoss.”

“We’ll take him back to the ranch,” said Lapine. “By treating him kindly, maybe he’ll learn to tell the truth by the time he leaves again.”

“I ain’t goin’ out to the ranch!” refused the old man. “You want to git me out there and murder me!”

“Tched in the head,” Squint said sorrowfully and glanced toward the bartender and Brick to see how it was going over. “Well,” he ended, “le’s go.”

BRICK couldn’t afford to have Lapine or any of his crew leave the Crystal Palace. And he was pretty sure that Tom hadn’t had time to get the Box-B boys set. Always something arose to make life difficult.

“If this man you call George is tched in the head, he needs treatment he can’t get at a ranch. He ought to be taken to a hospital,” Brick sparred for time.

Lapine whirled around. Squint fell back a step. “Just what business is it of yours?” purred Lapine with a note of deadly warning.

“None. I’m just curious,” said Brick. “I was wondering who figgered out the way to treat a case of tched head was to bust the patient in the teeth and accuse him of lyin’.” He shifted his position slightly so his hand was only inches away from the polished butt of his gun.

“Keep your long nose out of this, or I’ll knock it out!” blared Lapine arrogantly. He stood on widely planted feet, his hands ready to dart for his weapons. There was a sureness about him that labeled him as one with top rating in his profession.

Brick saw his time had run out. Stalling was past. An ironic smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Just as he had

found a real reason for living he was going to lose his life. He was good with a gun, but the odds were too great.

“It’s my business if that man is George Shelton,” he accepted the challenge, and hoping to upset them with a surprise. “I’m the new foreman of the Box-B, and I’m hiring George and his wife to go back there to work. The rest of you are fired!”

Brick raised his voice to a shout on the last word. It was the signal for the Box-B boys to come in front and back. Nothing of the sort happened, but all of the Lapine crew went for their guns. Squint, his reflexes fast, had seen this coming quick enough to get a two seconds lead over everyone, including Lapine and Brick.

Feeling this was the end, Brick ignored the man who was going to cut him down. All he prayed for was the strength to cling to his feet long enough to finish Lapine. Then the forgotten man went into action.

George Shelton catapulted himself at Squint’s knees. He swept the gunman’s feet from under him just as his gun was coming in line. The bullet went into the bar and Squint hit the floor in a fighting tangle with the old man.

Feet pounded outside and Tom’s welcome voice yelled: “Hold it! You’re all covered!”

Lapine’s pale eyes filmed over and his gunhand slowly dropped to his side. The others followed his lead, including Squint who now scrambled to his feet. Brick wiped sudden sweat from his forehead. He had been saved by a split second.

Tom and two others were already through the swinging doors. Two more were coming in the back way. Each man wore a deputy star Brick had dug out of the deputy sheriff’s office.

Lapine and his gang eyed the stars with wary apprehension and astonishment. The effect was not lost on Brick.

Lapine’s pale eyes came back to the

man waiting at the bar.

"So you're the new foreman of the Box-B!" he sneered. "Think I can't spot a sneaking lawman far as I can see him? Suppose you cut the clowning and tell us what the hell you think you're doing!"

Brick flipped up one corner of his shirt collar. Underneath was pinned a gold shield he had rifled from the deputy sheriff's effects. It was a convention badge of some kind. At a distance of ten feet it looked plenty legal and important.

"My department," said Brick, "got word of peculiar doings in River Bend. I'm here to have a look. Practically the first glimpse showed me a wet cattle contractor. It give me an idea there might be some nice reward money close around. This is just a little checkup along with other business. Tom, unload the boys and remove temptation."

Tom gathered the guns from the stunned Lapine gang.

"You ain't got a thing on us, you damn, sneaking lawman!" grated Lapine.

"No? I've got what happened just now and Miss Travers has already added plenty more. However, as I said, this here is a private checkup of my own." He reached into his shirt front and pulled out a flat pack of *wanted men* reward posters he had taken from the deputy sheriff's desk. He laid the pack flat on the bar and studied the top poster, glancing at the Lapine gang, critically, from time to time.

Sweat started out on Squint and Shorty. Lapine and Scar carried it off better, but showed a distinct unease.

Just the way they acted was a giveaway that they had things to hide. Brick went ahead with his act with increasing confidence. Wetting his thumb he lifted the top poster, turned it face down on the bar and consulted the next one.

This time he turned and smiled thinly at Shorty Fuller.

"Listen to this one, Shorty," he invited. "About six-feet-five, weight around 180 pounds, prominent nose slightly canted to the left, big ears and sandy hair, thin on top. Known as Shorty or Slim. Suspected of murder and wanted for handling wet cattle." He stopped and raised his brows. "Well, well," he went on, "it looks like this little trip will pay expenses."

"It ain't me!" roared Shorty.

"Keep your shirt on," advised Brick coolly. "All you've got to do is prove it ain't you, and you're free." He folded the poster and put it in his pocket. Then he went on to the next.

"Have you got one on Jim Lapine?" inquired Tom.

"Not under that name, but I've got one I figger fits him farther down in the pile. Here's a description of one of these bad boys. See if you can tell which one as I read it off." He glanced at Squint.

"Description of Squint?" asked Tom.

"Listen and see what you make of it. Funny how a few little things like a squint eye, yellow teeth and a jaw setting at an off angle like it had been kicked that way by a disgusted hoss, can mark a man so he can't take no comfort committin' murder a-tall."

"I ain't on no poster!" denied Squint furiously. "I ain't the only *hombre* with a squint eye!"

"Maybe this ain't you, after all, Squint," admitted Brick. "As I read on, I find something that don't fit you. It says here that this bird is popular with the ladies." Brick had noticed the man's vanity and the way he dressed. "Now I ask you, what woman in her right senses would take a second look at such?"

Squint reddened with outrage.

"I can get any woman I—" he started.

"Shut up!" broke in Lapine, more to draw attention than to interrupt Squint's outburst.

At last he had become cool enough to notice something Brick had planned for him to notice and was already wondering if he was going to have to point it out to him.

The Box-B boys were so interested in the poster business they seemed to have forgotten they were guarding dangerous prisoners.

They had even drawn together in a knot, leaving a clear way to the swinging doors only a few paces from the Lapine gang. Lapine's eyes made a flick that informed and alerted his men.

"Lawman, that's all rot!" Lapine shouted. Then he leaped for the door with his gang right behind him.

"After 'em!" yelled Brick.

The Box-B boys hit the doorway together and hung awkwardly, giving the escaping outlaws time to reach their horses and head for the pass.

Brick had told Nell to be sure and stay in the hotel parlor where she would be safe.

But when Squint's gun roared in the saloon and she could see the Box-B boys were late, it was too much for her to stand. She ran out on the porch, her gun in her hand. She stood there hesitating, almost ready to defy all precedents and rush into the saloon.

There was nothing but ominous silence from across the way. It seemed to her that she just had to know what had happened. She acknowledged to herself that she loved Brick Lowe and had from the minute he had said such shocking things to her.

Plenty of noise came from the saloon now. A rush of feet and the doors flapped open. Out rushed Lapine and his men. The men flung themselves on their horses at the hitchrail and spurred down the street toward the river bridge and Apache Pass.

Lapine had come to town in the buckboard. However, there were several horses at the hotel hitchrail. The outlaw made for the best one. Then he saw Nell on the porch with a gun dangling in her hand.

Moving with amazing speed for a man his size, he bounded to the porch and had his hands on Nell before she realized what he was about to do. He snatched at her gun. Armed, he could down the lawman. Without a leader, he didn't fear the others. All was not lost, and the stakes were high.

"Soon's I kill that damned law sneak, I'm going to take you to Mexico where that fool stepbrother of yours is," he boasted. "He thought he killed a man I shot and bribed me to keep quiet with a third of the Box-B. I'll marry you and we can sell the Box-B and live below the border like a king and queen. Gimme that gun!"

Nell was fighting him with all her lithe, young strength. He couldn't get his hands on the weapon she held and the dangerous seconds were fleeing. He crushed her against the wall of the building, caught her hand and twisted the gun away just as Brick hit the porch steps.

Lapine whirled like a great cat. The gun flashed around in a swift arc. Brick had the advantage, but lost it when he was forced to bound to one side to get Nell out of his line of fire. Both guns flamed at once.

Brick thought he had been hit on the head with a hammer. The next thing he knew he was stretched out and his head was pillowed in a soft lap. His eyes opened and he looked up into the lovely, frightened face of Nell Travers. He managed a grin.

"Did I let that mangy coyote take a bite of me?" he asked. "And did he get away?"

“Lapine’s bullet cut a groove right into the bone of your skull. For a minute I thought you were dead.” Nell was weak with relief. “You got Lapine right through the heart. The boys just carried him across the street.”

There was a tingling sensation in the region of Brick’s mouth. He had a growing conviction that as he was coming out from under the effects of the blow, that warm lips had been pressed on his.

“Does your kissing me just now mean that you agree to marry me?” he asked.

“You were playing possum and peeked!” Nell accused.

“Before I get bandaged up and us Box-B boys ride out to the ranch and finish the cleanup, I want to peek again,” he said and reached up his arms.

“Go ahead and peek,” smiled Nell and once again pressed her soft lips against his.