



The tenor was riding down the face of the cliff

## TENOR ON HORSEBACK

By MATT SPRAGUE

*An operatic singer proves he can reach a high note  
in action as well as music when things go haywire!*

**R**EX BANNON, half owner of the Diamond-C, let out a howl of anguish as the piece of scenery came down full on his left toe. It was Rex' third season as volunteer scene shifter for the New World Opera Company at the Mountain City Opera House. Rex was opera struck. He would ride many miles to hear a coloratura warble, preferably from

back stage.

"Sons of screeching cougars!" he yelled as he pulled his foot clear.

The eight-by-six piece of scenery nearly plummeted down on his head, almost framing it prettily. Had he not regained control of it in the nick of time, his leathery mustachioed face would have been peering out at the world in place of

an ornate sundial painted on a fluted pillar.

“Curly!” he cried bitterly. “Where in tarnation are you?”

A gurgle was his reply, faintly audible amid the confusion that attended the setting of the stage for the first act of *Manon Lescaut* about to suffer its premiere west of the Mississippi. Rex swore with fervor.

“Seems like this stage dust gets in my throat,” said Curly, unabashed, as he returned a pint bottle to his hip pocket. He looked at his partner reproachfully. “Seems like you said this was fun. What’s the fun about workin’ like a mule skinner on a trip to town?”

“What’s the use?” said Rex sadly. “You just don’t appreciate culture, you old lobo.” He shook his head, for it was true. It had taken Rex a couple of years to get Curly to come to Mountain City while the opera company was there. Curly might be a fine rancher and a true partner, but he certainly had no feeling nor desire for the finer things.

“My sentiments exactly,” said the young partner with a so-what swagger.

Curly cared as much about the opera as he did about the newly launched impressionistic movement in French art. His opinion of anyone who sang—except maybe around a campfire to the plunk of a banjo—was on a par with his views of male ballet dancers. Talking him into coming along to shift scenery had been the selling achievement of a lifetime.

“I’m quittin’, Rex,” said Curly, after tossing a few more pieces of scenery around and another slug of redevye down his dusty gullet. “I’m goin’ around front and buy a ticket and see this thing in style like a white man—if I got to see it at all. And if it’s in French, what’s the use of listenin’ to it, anyway?”

“Meester Bannon,” said a rotund, sweating man with hair that grew down in

front of his ears like President Arthur’s, “Meester Bannon, I am in great trouble. A member of the company has been taken eel.”

“Taken eel?” said Curly with a glint in his eye that his partner knew well and rightly feared. “If I et an eel, I’d be taken eel too.”

“Shut up, you wall-eyed catamount,” said Rex under his breath. He turned to the fat man, who was stage manager for the troupe. “Don’t mind him, Mr. Tullio, but if you need a singer, I don’t know where you’ll corral one.”

“But eet eesn’t a seenger I need,” said the stage manager, opening his plump hands wide. “I must have a man to drive zee coach een act one.”

**E**MBARRASSED by this development, Rex scratched his unkempt hair, then tugged at the end of a mustache. He could handle the chore, all right. But as a veteran of three years backstage, he had a pretty fair idea of the kind of getup an opera coach driver might be required to don. Stagestruck or not, he had no desire to become the laughing stock of half the territory.

“I’ll drive your coach, mister,” said Curly unexpectedly. “I reckon I can handle any team of horses between Mountain City and Denver. How about it, Rex? It’ll be more sport than throwing canvas around back here.”

“Reckon he can at that,” said Rex, staring at his partner with round eyes. This didn’t make sense. Then, following a covert glance across the stage by young Curly, it did make sense with a bang.

Standing there, swathed in ostrich feathers and furs and a long lavender satin dress was a vision to pop the eyes of a mountain-dwelling hermit. Red lips curved charmingly in a perfectly oval white face from which a pair of huge, liquid black

eyes glowed with interest at Curly.

They obviously took in his lean, virile, six feet two inches, his craggily handsome face, his blond hair bleached yellow by years in the sun to make the ruddy bronze of his skin even darker, the blue of his eyes brighter still. Rex Bannon gulped and swallowed half his chew.

He had seen the likeness of this dazzling creature on the billboard and three-sheets that had plastered the City for ten days. It could be none other than the ravishing Olivieri, toast of Rome, Milan, Paris and New York, who was making her first trip across the North American continent, en route for the West Coast and the season in Sidney and Melbourne.

Even as far west as Mountain City, she was known to opera-smitten folk like Rex Bannon. There were rumors that a crowned king in Europe, enchanted by her voice, had cheerfully given up his throne without a struggle rather than miss her season in Paris. She was said to have been courted by princes, politicians and millionaires of two worlds.

Now Curly, the danged young idiot—but even as he swung on his partner, Rex saw he was too late. Tullio, the stage manager, wearing an expression of vast relief on his rotund face, was already leading the young rancher back toward the dressing rooms, talking a blue streak.

Curly was just nodding, his eyes on the diva with the ostrich feather boa. The cross-eyed cougar just didn't know enough to be bashful, Rex thought sadly and a little jealously. The younger man's lips parted in a grin that was answered by la Olivieri in at least equal style.

It was then that the tall man in the long black cape appeared from the shadows behind her. He had a long, rather sad but not unhandsome face, alert eyes that took in the scene at a glance. Rex spotted him from other years—it was Di Massini, the

tenor, and he looked far from pleased.

He said something to her in Italian, something which she replied to without moving or taking her eyes from the tall figure of Curly Webster as he approached her on his way to the dressing rooms downstairs. Then, firmly, he took her arm and led her away despite an obvious protest, but not without her casting one melting glance over her shoulder at Curly.

"Allo there," cried an angry voice. "Get doze flat een place." Rex snapped out of it as he realized the order was addressed to him, got busy wrestling the other pieces of first act scenery where they belonged for the performance that was due to begin in less than two hours. Then there was the scenery to be put in place for the five acts of the new French opera. .

It was not new scenery, of course. . The sundial on the painted flat that had so nearly beaned Rex had served in previous seasons as a back-ground for parts of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Fra Diavolo* as well as for the soft shoe efforts of the O'Haras or the bustled strut of the eight dancing *Socialettes*. Anything that stopped at Mountain City got quick billing in that entertainment-hungry community of the raw new West.

What with one thing and another, it was almost curtain time when the job was done and Rex could mop a sweating brow and relax on the old rain barrel in the wings and listen to the rustle and clamor of the early crowd assembling in the red plush seats on the other side of the curtain.

He caught just a glimpse of Curly before the curtain lifted its somewhat threadbare paid advertisements of Mountain City's leading merchants out of sight behind the proscenium top. Curly was really something to look at, standing beside the coach and pair needed for Act One.

The younger partner of the Diamond-C

Ranch wore a blue and silver livery of the peruke and satin-coat era, complete with cocked hat and pigtail. His legs were encased in satin breeches that failed to hide the bow in them as well as did the long skirts of his coat. Rex opened his mouth to guffaw, then stifled it as Olivieri swept up to the young man with a smile.

Rex edged over to hear what went on, but the curtain rose then, and he had to duck back out of sight and be caught on stage with the assembly of supers who filled it with music and song. From then on until the end of the act, he was a spectator forced to look on and endure.

No one could say Curly Webster didn't enter into the spirit of the piece. He took the coach and team onto the stage on cue and brought the horses to a stop with a professional flourish more than worthy of the sad-eyed pair of livery hacks who had been rented for the occasion.

**F**OR once, Rex didn't put his whole attention on the opera, pretty as it sounded to his rather protuberant ears. The minute Curly leaped down from the box to usurp the footman's role and help la Olivieri, who was playing the title role, to the ground. Rex knew that Curly must have built an upper story on the edifice of alcoholic amiability he was already living in. Oh, well, he thought, the overgrown prairie dog didn't come to town very often.

Curly was no seven-day toper—just an occasional loader but sometimes it gave him ideas. Also the kind of smiles he had been getting from la Olivieri were enough to give any man ideas without the added stimulus of bottled good fellowship. Curly was really in there, tossing a long loop for himself.

It was not easy, under these conditions, for Rex Bannon to make much sense out of this opera in a foreign tongue. But it was a evident that all the men in the first act

were paying court to la Olivieri, who moved coyly in and out of the coach after her escort had gone into the inn.

“Think he'd have more sense than to leave her around loose, like an old corset,” Rex muttered to himself. He didn't get the point until tenor Di Massini appeared, truly magnificent in a scarlet and gray and gold hussar uniform. Despite his ringing voice and stage presence, it seemed to Rex that the tenor was having a difficult time keeping his knees together.

Finally the anguish was over, or so Rex thought. Olivieri—or Manon—decided to elope with Di Massini in the other man's coach. Once again Curly, seizing on rare opportunity to be of service to the goddess Olivieri, leaped forward to assist her in, taking the play right away from Di Massini in the middle of a high-riding cadenza.

At the end of the aria, the tenor added a “Merci” to Curly, who bowed low in reply. At that point, Di Massini pulled a bag about half the size of a beanbag out of the extra jacket slung over one shoulder and tossed it to or at the young rancher—Rex was never quite sure which.

It caught Curly smack on the forehead and fell to the stage floor with a clink of metal. This turned the tables, and Di Massini was helping Curly up into the box and climbing into the coach after the diva. Curly swayed a little, perhaps from excitement, and gave forth with the whip.

Only then did Rex see what was going on. His partner was out quite cold. Whatever it was the tenor had thrown in the bag, it must have been heavy. Smack between the cowboy's eyes was a large and growing lump. The horses, already excited by the clamor of singing around them, felt the whip on their rumps and the loose rein and bolted.

It probably looked like a dashing and spirited exit from out front. It failed to end in disaster only because Rex, moving with

the speed and assurance of a man born and raised amid horses, managed to catch their bridles as they reached the wings and drag them to a stop short of the wall.

He also was just in time to catch Curly as he fell forward from the box and to lower him to the stage. A moment later, both la Olivieri and a most apologetic Di Massini were at his side, helping to bring Curly out of it.

It was the tenor who explained what had happened, looking most distressed.

"I was merely throwing him money," he said in accents that sounded like those of the English earl who had put up at Mountain City's best hotel two years before and cleaned half the territory out of poker dough before decamping with the mayor's daughter than like the legitimate accents of any stage Italian Rex Bannon had ever managed to hear.

It was quickly evident, however, that if Di Massini's throw had been purposeful, he had scored a bullseye on himself. La Olivieri flashed him a glance that would have crisped a side of bacon on a cold January day at ten thousand feet. Falling to her knees beside Curly, she cradled him in her arms, stroking his injured forehead and cooing soft Italian words.

Thus shoved out of the first-aid picture, Rex walked over to stage center, found the bag the tenor had thrown, picked it up and hefted it. By its weight, it held metal all right. He undid the string at one end of it and examined the packed cluster of lead washer rings inside. No wonder his partner had gone groggy. He might as well have been hit with a brick. Still hefting it, Rex walked back to where the injured Curly lay.

He was just in time to see a couple of supers, dressed as soldiers of Louis Fourteenth's France, pick up Curly and carry him offstage while the diva directed them with a rapid-fire burst of Italian. He

was also in time to catch a tell-tale glint of light between his partner's supposedly closed eyelids. Curly was certainly making the best of things.

"The horned toad!" Rex muttered admiringly under his breath. "He's faking it now!"

"How's that?" said Di Massini sharply. Rex glanced at the tenor, felt himself turning red, managed to mumble it was nothing, nothing at all. Di Massini then lifted his frogged shoulders in a shrug. He stared after la Olivieri, then turned on a booted heel and stalked angrily off.

For the next few minutes, Rex was busy again, shifting scenery. He wasn't worried so much about his partner's injury as he was about his tearing the entire performance to shreds with his backstage antics. Curly, full of redevye and gunpowder, didn't give a hoot in Hades for anything that walked, much less anything that sang on boards for a living.

**H**E NEEDN'T have worried. Never before and possibly never since were the half ardent, half inimical duets between Des Grieux and Manon sung with such fervor. Unlettered as he was, despite his fondness for opera, Rex Bannon knew he was hearing something in the way of singing he had never heard before. Under its spell, he forgot all about Curly, and his clever pretense.

The latter's active part in the show had ended with his dramatic exit in Act One. Rex didn't see him again until near the end of the fifth act when he appeared, still wearing the bump between his eyes and still loaded with plenty of impulse for mischief. He had come, he told his older partner, to take the coach and horses back to the livery stable.

"You gopher," Rex told him. "Think you can handle them all right?"

"That is an insult to a man who was

brung up with hosses,” said Curly, rubbing a broad thumb across the tip of his nose. “Like my new girl, Rex?”

“You’re up to your top button in quicksand. You don’t even talk her lingo.” Rex told him frankly.

“For the palaver we’re makin’ there’s only one lingo,” said Curly as he went after the horses. Setting up the trees for the forest finale, Rex could hear him leading the team out of the theatre. That Curly—he needed to have his feathers plucked and proper!

It was almost an hour after the final encore had been answered that the last wood and canvas flat was safely stowed away for the night and a physically and nervously spent Rex made his way slowly to the stage door and pulled tobacco from his pouch to roll himself a cigarette.

“Are you the friend of the man who got hurt?” an Anglicized voice asked him. He glanced around to see the tall form of Di Massini, still clad in his hussar’s uniform with its wide belt, tight pants and gold frogged jacket, standing in the shadows alongside of the opera house.

“He’s my partner,” said Rex. He felt a certain sympathy with this man as a man, even if he was a tenor. “Reckon I’m sorry if he made trouble.”

“It’s not any trouble he’s made that bothers me,” said the tenor. “It’s trouble he may be making now. La Olivieri seems to have vanished.”

“Vanished, eh?” Rex Bannon said mildly. Then he jumped a foot, spilling a nice even row of tobacco from the folded bit of paper he was holding in his left hand. “You mean she’s skipped out with Curly?”

“I don’t know.” The tenor paused. “It’s a bit embarrassing, but she has refused to speak to me since I—er, was responsible for your friend Curly’s injuries.”

“It looked to me like you was doin’ all

right with her there in the opera,” said Rex, refilling his cigarette. Di Massini indulged in another shrug.

“That,” he said, “was merely part of the show. You haven’t seen your friend around here since, have you, old man?”

“Don’t reckon I have since he went to return the coach to the livery stable,” he said. “If you’re worried, come along with me and we’ll go and check there.”

“I hope you’re right, old man. Well, let’s get along with it and see.” He strode off down the street with Rex Bannon, apparently undisturbed by the fact that he was in costume. On thinking it over for an embarrassed moment, Rex decided it was no time to worry about clothes.

If Curly had been danged fool enough to run off with la Olivieri, it meant curtains for the Diamond-T. A woman like the sort this opera singer was supposed to be would go through even a big ranch like theirs as easily and quickly as she would go through a meal at the Mountain City Grand Hotel. Worse, Curly wouldn’t be able to keep his mind on the job.

For all his wild bull-headedness when he got off on a tear, the younger partner was an able rancher. Rex had raised him practically from a pup to take over his place on the Diamond-T. Rex, for all of his wiry stamina, would never see fifty again. He was fast getting to the age where he’d have a time doing half the chores of running the ranch, much less all of them. With tight lips, he led the way to the livery stable.

“Sorry, Mr. Bannon,” said the stableman, shaking his long white mane. “Don’t like to tell you no lies. We ain’t seen hair nor hide of him. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bannon, I was worryin’ about them horses.”

“As long as that’s all you’ve got to worry about, you’re okay,” said Bannon, turning away. Di Massini scowled and

rubbed his chin hard.

“Do you suppose he took her for a coach ride?” he said. “I mean—all that business of riding off in the first act might have given him an idea or two. If he has, where do you suppose he’d have taken her?”

Rex’s mouth fell open. He knew Curly, remembered the last time he had gotten ideas while the partners were in Mountain City. That time he had made a hit with one of the girls at the Mountain Dance Palace and carried her off on a horse with him. Like a fool, Rex had been reading him Lochinvar the night before in a vain effort to give him culture.

Adams City and the marrying parson there had been his destination. Rex had been barely in time to head him off and had had to pat him over the head with the barrel of his pistol at that to stop him. Next morning, when he came too, Curly had been as innocent as a baby. He hadn’t even remembered meeting the young lady he had so nearly espoused.

“One thing you can count on,” said Rex slowly, all but chewing the ends of his long mustache. “If he’s taken her to Adams City, he’s done so with honorable intentions. He always wants to marry ‘em when he gets ‘em there. Consarn it! I’m quitting as of here and now trying to give him culture.”

**D**I MASSINI gave Rex a quick look which the rancher bore unflinchingly.

“Did you say his intentions are honorable?” the tenor asked sharply. At Rex’s nod, he clapped a dramatic hand to his forehead, let loose with a string of profanity in three languages that caused even Rex to look on with admiration. Finally, he said, “Do you think we can get there in time?”

“I might,” said Rex, “I know the road. It’s about ten miles, almost straight down

the mountains. Reckon you’ve got an idea there, mister.”

“I’m going with you,” said the tenor, and something in his tone caused Rex to shrug in his turn and ask the liveryman for a pair of fast horses. If Di Massini wanted to break his neck for romance, that was no skin off his, Rex’ nose. He got busy tightening up the cinch strap.

Finished, he was surprised to see the tenor already in the saddle. He mounted his own horse. Di Massini examined the pony with a gleam of interest before they started, turned to ask Rex Bannon a question.

“Don’t you think, old man, he looks a bit unspirited for a chase like this,” he said, shaking his head. “Why, he’s about as fiery as a feather bed.”

“Make sure he don’t feather-bed you,” snapped Rex, a trifle sore at the remark. He gave spurs to his nag and was off down the street in a shower of sparks from the beast’s hoofs. As he flashed past the opulent Mountain Street buildings, he was surprised to hear yells and cheers from the crowds that lined the unpaved street on either side along the duckboard sidewalks.

Then he glanced back to see how Di Massini was faring, realized the onlookers were cheering the tenor. He was a picturesque figure in the saddle all right. Right then, Rex realized that while the hussar outfit might look fussy and awkward on the stage, it had been designed for riding. To his surprise, Di Massini rode at an easy canter, free and fluid in the saddle as any veteran he had ever watched. The tenor looked at home on a horse.

“Wonder how he’ll go when we hit the rugged country out of town?” Rex mused to himself, adding an extra lick of speed. At the end of Mountain Street, the road really took off, looping and zigzagging down the jagged face of the huge hill

toward the smaller town of Adams City a good six thousand feet below. Every year a number of people got killed on it.

The horseflesh between Rex' knees turned out to be spirited. This was all to the good so far as catching up with the errant Curly and the diva were concerned, but it meant the ranch owner had his hands full as he raced the beast around hairpin curves on the lip of sheer cliffs.

Mile after mile went by. When he could do so with some degree of safety, Rex looked back over his shoulder to see if Di Massini was still riding hard on his tail. The tenor was always right there, usually less than thirty feet to the rear, handling his horse like an expert.

His close pursuit egged Rex on. He knew he was giving out with the ride of his life himself. The idea of having an opera singer show him how to handle a horse galled him. So he put on still more speed. Another couple of miles went by and still the tenor hung close on his heels.

"Yippee—there's the varmint!" shouted the tenor in his ear. Rex started, almost losing a stirrup, turned to see the singer, resplendent in his frogged gold jacket with the extra furred jacket streaming straight out behind him from the gold chain that fastened it to his collar. The tenor was pointing far down below to where a coach was taking a turn.

"That's them," said Rex as he made out in a stretch of moonlight the familiar big figure of Curly sitting on the box with a full-skirted but willowy feminine form clinging to him. He pulled a pistol from his holster and fired three times into the air to tell them to stop.

"Oh, oh," said Di Massini. "You should've gluted him. Now he'll vamoose."

He was right. Curly heard the shots. They could see the white circle of his face under the wide brim of his hat as he looked

up and spotted them. Then the long whip snaked out over the backs of the pair of horses he was driving, and the coach began to pick up speed. From far beneath echoed the cry of a frightened feminine scream.

Rex gave spurs to his horse again, but he might as well have been standing still on the mountain trail so easily did the tenor race past him in his pursuit of the runaways. He went galloping down the rocky trail at racetrack speed, handling his steed as if he were part of it. After a few hundred yards, Rex had to slow down in his pursuit. He was afraid—outridden, and he knew it. Tenor or not, Di Massini was a riding fool.

But he wasn't the only one. On the trail below them, Curly was acting the fool on his own hook whipping up the team in front of him until the coach was swaying and skidding and rocketing around the sharp and perilous corners on two wheels at a time. If the danged fool didn't slow up, he was going to wreck the whole shebang by going over the edge.

"Slow down, you sidewinder!" Rex yelled, but he might as well have whispered the words for all the good they did. The worst curve on the whole trail, a sharp double hairpin that sloped the wrong way, lay just ahead of his young partner and the girl he had with him on the coach. Rex ran a hand across his face to wipe away the cold sweat that was beading there.

Then he yelled again, this time without words. It was a yell of sheer horror. Di Massini, just ahead of him, had suddenly vanished from sight over the rim of the road. Pulling his foaming beast to a halt, Rex slid from the saddle and peered over after him, looking for the remains.

**W**HAT he saw caused his eyes nearly to pop from their sockets. Instead of the mangled remnants of horse and man he

was looking at the most magnificent piece of riding he had ever seen in his life. The tenor was riding his steed down the face of the cliff to intercept the coach and its crazy driver before it could reach the bad curve:

Twice, on the way down, the half-sliding horse stumbled, but both times, by delicate body balance and powerful use of the reins and bit, the tenor was able to regain control.

Then, unbelievably, he was on the lower stretch of road, was swinging in alongside of the coach's team.

A leap worthy of a circus rider put him astride of one of the horses, and he went to work with the reins while a startled Curly was unable to make a move, smothered as he was by the diva's encircling arms. Rex got aboard his horse in a hurry and took the regular way down.

When he reached the lower road, the coach was halted, and Di Massini was lifting a fainting la Olivieri down in his arms as tenderly as if she were a bit of down. An apparently stupefied Curly Webster was just blinking down on the scene, out of the picture at last. .

"Better say you're sorry to Mr. Di Massini," said Rex when he had taken in the situation, with all its implications. "Looks like he saved your worthless hide for you. The tough curve lies right ahead of you there."

"My gosh!" said Curly Webster whose sunburn seemed to fade right out of his face there in the moonlight. "I thought it was three turns ahead."

He gulped, then slid to the ground and approached the tenor.

"I'm sorry, mister," he said. He was sober now, scared sober by the danger he had so narrowly escaped. "But the filly sure is beautiful."

"You're telling me!" said the tenor. "That's why we got spliced."

"You got spliced!" said Curly, gulping again. "Why I thought—"

"It's not exactly your fault," said the tenor. "We've kind of had to keep it under cover for business reasons. And she speaks no English. She's very young—she probably thought you were just taking her for a buggy ride. From here on in, I'm going to tighten the reins."

"Just a minute, partner," said Rex, stifling a desire to remove his hat in the presence of this master rider. "How come you're so handy with a horse? I never seen anything like it. And how come you talk like us when you get excited?" There was a shrewd question in his eyes. .

"Waal," said Massini, a faint but knowing smile playing across his handsome features, "I reckon you've called my number, pardner. I used to be called Dee Mason up Montana way. Reckon that's where I learned to fork a bronc. But you can't get away with a handle like Dee Mason at La Scala. They just won't believe an American can sing. So—"

At that moment, la Olivieri came out of her faint. She looked up at her husband, murmured something gentle, kissed him warmly. Then, looking around, her dark eyes lighted on Curly's repentant figure. Without a word, she struggled from her husband's arms, went up to the cowboy and, swinging a handbag that hung from her wrist, smote him again, squarely between the eyes.

Curly grunted and then keeled over, unconscious.

"OOOoh!" sighed the diva, keeling over herself into her husband's arms. He picked her up again, looked down at her worshipfully.

"So young," he murmured, "and so sensitive."