



# Alias John Alden

By John Keith Bassett

Two Men And A Girl Form a Western Love Triangle in this Fascinating Story of a Proposal by Proxy

THE soft wind of early May blew gently on Nita Martin's tanned cheeks and rippled her rough tweed skirt and white blouse as she stood pensively in the doorway of the district schoolhouse. Down the road to Prairie Dog and south over brown rangeland, little knots of her pupils wended their

homeward way. But Nita scarcely saw them.

She was thinking of Cliff Graham of the Bar T Ranch, and Fred Beckly, owner of the prosperous Slash Circle.

Nita thought she knew how Cliff felt toward her, and she was surer every day of her fondness for him. But the tall, habitually

smiling Graham was diffident and shy. Soon Fred Beckly would press her with a definite proposal of marriage which she would be unable to side-step as she had overlooked his increasing ardor of the last several months.

If only Cliff spoke first, so that she would not have to refuse Beckly!

She had not noticed a wide-shouldered rider coming from the west, and was startled when he turned into the schoolyard. With a woman's impulsive concern for her appearance, she patted the glossy brown hair, combed smoothly back from her forehead, glanced hastily over her costume, and felt tell-tale warmth in her cheeks as Graham swung to earth and strode grinning toward her.

"How are you, Nita?" He doffed his sombrero. "I—er—just happened to be headin' for Prairie Dog, so I thought if you were ready to go home—"

He left off, bashful as ever. "Why, yes, Cliff. I expected you for the dance tonight, but of course I like company riding home. Will you please get my mare while I lock up?"

SHE fastened the doors and dropped the key into her pocket. Her heart seemed to speed, and a flush deepened in her cheeks. She could not help wondering what had brought Cliff—unless it was that he had summoned courage—Nita resolved to help. At the dance tonight Beckly might propose, unless word got around beforehand that she and Cliff—

"I—er—came on a sort of errand," he said hesitatingly, while their horses trudged down the dusty road. "Fred Beckly asked me to speak to you about something."

"Fred asked you to? What is it?"

"Well," he said, staring at his saddle horn, "I didn't want to ask you, but he insisted. In fact, Nita," Cliff blurted out, "Fred wants me to find out if you'll marry him. He's a mighty fine—"

Her startled look stopped him. Amazement crossed her face, and for an

instant she could not speak. "You mean that—that he sent you here to—to ask if I would marry him? That you are a sort of, well, ambassador, supposed to arrange everything? Propose to me in his name?"

He nodded. Then as her stunned look faded and she laughed aloud, Graham jerked worriedly erect. He stared hard at her as his face slowly colored, Nita laughed again, as though she found it extremely amusing. "It's like the poem I'm reading to my pupils," she gasped finally.

"You know, Cliff—the Courtship of Miles Standish, by Longfellow. In which Standish sent John Alden to ask Priscilla's hand. He didn't dare go himself—he, who had fought Indians without knowing fear! But Alden was more of a ladies' man."

"Reckon I never read that one," the Bar T owner broke in hastily. "Don't reckon Fred ever read it, either."

"Then I must tell you, Cliff. It was back in early New England, in the first Pilgrims settlement. Priscilla was the girl John Alden loved. But Miles Standish asked John to arrange for her to become Mrs. Standish. How could he refuse his best friend? So he did ask Priscilla, though John wanted her himself! Then—"

"But Nita, what's this got to do with Beckly and me? Gosh, Fred's well fixed. He's a mighty good cattleman, and I reckon—"

"Please, let me tell you the rest of the story. Priscilla listened while John Alden told what a wonderful man Miles Standish was, what a great fighter, a great leader—and a bachelor. When at last he finished, there was a long silence. Priscilla knew with a woman's intuition that Alden loved her. So she asked: 'Why don't you speak for yourself, John?'"

"Sure, but Alden had promised to fix things for this other chap. Wouldn't have been right for him to go throwin' his own rope when prob'ly Standish was pacin' the floor of his ranch house, dog-eager to learn how John

made out with the gal!”

Cliff stopped abruptly. His eyes met Nita's, then each glanced away. Cold fear swept over her that perhaps she had said too much, shown herself immodest in thus speaking out.

They rode on in silence save for the clop-clop of hoofbeats. Finally Graham heaved a long sigh. “I don't hardly reckon Fred ever read that poem, Nita. Anyhow, he asked me to speak to you about him. Of course, I had to say I would, although most times a man ought to do his own proposin'. Er—don't you think so, Nita?”

SHE nodded, smiling bravely. “Yes, he certainly should. A man ought to speak out what is in his heart.” Graham turned and looked at her. “There's no doubt about him bein' crazy about you. He can support a wife, too, give her just about everything. Got one of the finest spreads around here.”

“You have a good ranch too, Cliff.” The words escaped her almost before she realized she was going to speak. His swift alarm made her afraid to face him, and she waited with blood pounding hard at her temples. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Graham re-seat his curl-brimmed sombrero.

“Oh, my place is all right. Fred's got a few enemies around the county, but I reckon in general he's pretty, well liked. Reckon Mrs. Beckly would sort of be somebody.”

NITA could not know her mare would shy at that bit of paper lying in the road. One instant the animal trudged with drooping head, and the next it lurched violently to the right. The jerk came with such breathless speed that for thought of Cliff's loyal efforts to praise his friend, the schoolmistress was wholly unprepared.

The shoulders of the two horses smacked together and Cliff's roan reared frightenedly. That increased the mare's panic

and of a sudden she bolted, the bit between her teeth, eyes dilated and nostrils distended' as she burst into a headlong run.

One of Nita's small booted feet loosed from its stirrup. She would have toppled off had not Graham, acting with the instant decision of a trained horseman, spurred close beside and snatched her bridle. Thrusting an arm around her waist, he lifted her completely free while the startled animal tugged at the reins Cliff had instantly dropped over his saddle horn.

She clung to him, her cheek against his checkered shirt, her chestnut hair touching Cliff's chin. There was an intimate, worried pressure which with a sudden pang of conscience he relaxed. He lowered her gently to the road, swung from his own mount, and set about quieting the mare.

When he turned it was to find Nita's eyes soft and glowing, while two spots of color burned in her cheeks. “Thank you,” she said coolly. “At the very least you saved me a sprained shoulder.”

“Shucks, that wasn't anything. Reckon Fred would've been handier'n I was. Fred would have—”

“Oh, please!” she burst out. “Don't talk Fred, Fred, Fred to me! You know very well, Cliff Graham, or you certainly ought to know, that I never could marry him. I half believe Fred Beckly would never look at me if Uncle Bob's share of the Ace Mine mightn't be worth a great deal!

“But I'd rather drive one of Uncle's stages from Prairie Dog to Sundance every day of my life, or be a schoolmarm till I'm seventy, than to marry a man I don't love. No matter how important a citizen he is, nor how fine a spread he owns! I—”

HER face flushed hotly as Graham's jaw slacked in astonishment. Suddenly she felt ashamed of her outburst, ashamed of making him feel badly. “I'm sorry,” she said in a low

tone. "I'm afraid you'll have to report that your mission wasn't successful. Cliff, a person should speak what is in his own heart, and not just be content to run errands for others!"

Nita Martin climbed astride her mare. Clicking bootheels to its ribs, she started at a brisk trot for Prairie Dog, lying just over a low swell. Graham, she knew without looking back, followed close behind. He was so—so awfully helpful to others that he sacrificed his own interests merely because someone more cunning asked a favor.

She had never before said that about Beckly having an eye on Uncle Bob's mine stock; nevertheless she meant it. Just the other day he had offered to buy the stock, and had become angry when told it was not for sale. Nita, whose only relative was the elderly stage driver, would some day inherit that stock. The Ace Mine was booming with two new veins of gold that promised untold wealth. Uncle Bob Martin's small interest might conceivably amount to a tidy fortune, and it was not beyond Beckly to consider that in asking Nita's hand.

They drew rein before a neat white cottage at one end of Prairie Dog's single street. Fred emerged from a pool hall half a block away and, spying them, hurried nearer. His round, ruddy face wore a confident smile as, ducking under the hitching rail, he took Nita's reins and tied them himself.

Then Beckly doffed his Stetson in an awkward imitation of the cavalier. "S'pose Cliff's been kind of discussin' things with you, Nita?" he said in his booming, vibrant tones. "You know, it sort of makes a man uneasy to brag about his own virtues and how he'd be willing to hitch up with some gal that's young and purty.

"In fact, someone like yourself," he hazarded with increased confidence. Fred chuckled. "I might as well come out with it! Cliff proposed, didn't he?"

SHE nodded. "Yes, he proposed for you, Fred."

"Darned nice of you, Cliff. Say," he hinted, and jerked his head. "I'll meet you later, eh? Now, Nita," the Slash Circle owner went on as he took both her shapely hands in his stubby palms, "what say we tell your uncle? And how soon do you reckon we'll get hitched?"

She eyed him with cool disdain while very firmly she withdrew her hands. "Fred, I'm not a horse that you speak of my being hitched. If you mean married, the answer is never."

A scowl followed the initial blank look of the man. He stepped back with incredulity, drooping the corners of his mouth. "You—turned the proposition down?"

Nita Martin could scarcely hide the thrill of triumph that surged warmly through her at putting Mr. Fred Beckly in his place. For from the astonishment on his round countenance, he had not even regarded it as a remote possibility that she would refuse!

Cliff hesitated a few yards away, watching them. Of a sudden Beckly came to life. Lunging under the hitch rail, he strode to his ambassador. "You double-crossed me, Cliff Graham—dead-set on purpose!" Nita heard his teeth grind for the rage that possessed him. His hand sought the Colt that rode on his thigh. "I got a good mind to drill you for it! I'll—"

"Stop!" With bootheels clicking on the board sidewalk, she darted between them. "Don't you dare to draw!" Nita cried in withering scorn. "Oh, I—you think I'm a horse, talking about being hitched. You send another to ask your question, just to prevent him from speaking for himself!

"It's all very plain," she hurried on before he could speak. "Yet you seem to think I'm so stupid I can't see. Why didn't you ask me yourself? Because you wanted to trap Cliff. You knew he—I—we both—"

NITA'S eyes had encountered the thunderstruck Graham. She choked back hot words that pelted to her lips, and simply gazed at Fred with such contempt that of a sudden he released the butt of his gun. With a sullen, vengeful look back, he strode off down the sidewalk.

Cliff stood twisting the tongue of his cartridge belt. "Gosh!" he breathed. "I sort of wish you hadn't flown off the handle, Nita. It isn't that I'm scared of Fred. There's nothin' I'd like better than to knock that wooden block of his into the dust." He frowned downward. "But if I know Beckly, there'll be plenty o' trouble now!"

He stepped to his roan, mounted, and headed at a fast gallop down the street and out of Prairie Dog, toward his Bar T Ranch.

During dinner with her Uncle Bob, the girl kept wondering whether Cliff would forget their engagement to attend the dance at the Town Hall. She was too well known to be absent from such an affair without causing comment, especially in view of her presence at every dance during the last six months with either Graham or Fred Beckly.

BUT Cliff did come, driving a buckboard and stopping before the cottage, a little after eight. There was something strange in his manner, an invisible wall between them as though he bore a great weight on his mind.

Nita kissed Uncle Bob, who was staying behind to guard the Ace Mine shipment of gold his stage had brought, and which he would take to the railroad tomorrow. She tripped down the sidewalk with her hand on Cliff's arm, chatting in masked gaiety.

But his answers were brief, as though his thoughts were far away. "You don't seem very cheerful tonight, Cliff," she said as they approached the entrance to the hall where laughing, chatting couples waited in line for tickets. From within floated gay music, and

Nita knew that already the affair was in full sway, with a large attendance of townsfolk, cowgirls, punchers, and ranchers and their wives from all parts of the country.

"Well, I don't feel so awful coltish," Cliff said.

"Why not?"

Before he could reply, Jack Hallman, who operated a weekly newspaper and job printing establishment, worked closer through the throng. "I got proofs to them posters, Cliff; want to see 'em?"

He handed over several printed sheets which Nita could not help but see. Her eyes widened startledly at a single word in large type across the top. It was "AUCTION."

"Why!" she whispered. "Are you selling out?"

HE returned the posters. "Guess they'll do all right, Jack." Surrendering his tickets to the doorman, he steered Nita inside the hall. But as they started over the waxed floor in a waltz, her worried eyes held on his face and she demanded why he planned to auction his Bar T holdings.

"Got a note," was the brief answer. "Can't meet it or extend it."

"But surely you could get someone to loan you the money?"

"No, reckon not."

She watched him anxiously. "Who holds your note?"

"Oh—Fred Beckly."

The girl caught her breath. "And because of this afternoon, he won't renew?"

"Well, it's a pretty big note. Fred thinks I deliberately spoiled his chances with you. The Sundance bank won't reopen for awhile, and no rancher'll loan me the money unless Fred says my Bar T is sound. He's kind of an authority, you know. Only thing to do is to liquidate, and I sure won't get much that way."

She fell silent, conscious of a deep

sense of guilt. Yet how could she have acted differently? “Cliff,” she pleaded on impulse, “you wouldn’t have me say I love Fred when I don’t?”

The music stopped and couples applauded for an encore. Graham gave her a curious look. “Seems like you’ve gone with him quite a few places lately. I mean, it looks funny for a girl to go out with a man she doesn’t like.”

Nita bit her lip and looked away. She longed to say that by accepting Beckly’s attentions she had hoped to make Cliff realize his own need for her. So that he would become more aggressive and forceful—

But while she hesitated, Harry Bain claimed her as partner. Nita tried to forget her worries in the gay chatter and verve of the next several dances. She had only two more with Cliff before he unaccountably disappeared. Excusing herself, she sought him outside, but he seemed nowhere around.

That was strange. Presently Sue McDonald, a piquant blonde, asked in the presence of several young folk where Graham had gone. “I haven’t seen you dancing with him,” Sue observed slyly.

NITA forced a smile. “It’s some business or other Cliff has on hand. He’ll be back after a while.” She left the group, striving to hide the anxiety that troubled her breast. Such a masquerade would be difficult to maintain, especially if Cliff did not return very soon.

“Howdy, Nita. Let’s have this dance.”

With a start she recognized Beckly, and swallowing her dismay, sought some excuse. “I—don’t feel like dancing this time, Fred.” And she turned to sit in one of the wall seats.

He slumped down at her side. “Don’t feel like it myself,” he returned promptly. Staring at him, Nita realized the man had been drinking.

But no escape offered until Hal Berry,

the freckled foreman of Cliff’s Bar T, asked her to dance. Nita rose quickly but felt Fred’s hand on her arm. He too lumbered to his feet. “She don’t feel like it, Hal, so we’re sittin’ out.”

“Oh, I—I do feel like it now. Thanks, Hal. Shall we dance?” With coolness she by no means felt, she put her arm around the waddie’s neck and almost before he knew it, they were gliding away. For an instant it seemed Fred would make a scene; then muttering, he turned and left the hall.

“Hal,” the girl asked breathlessly, “where did Cliff go?”

BERRY laughed, unaware of her apprehension. “If you don’t know, I guess nobody would, Nita!”

She did not pursue the subject, and had the next dance with Harry Bain, his second of the evening. “Say,” he said slowly as they wandered outside in quest of cooler air, “I reckon I ought to tell you that folks are kind of goin’ like magpies tonight. You know I’d only mention it for your own good, don’t you?” he added.

Nita’s heartbeat seemed to double. “Why, yes, Harry. You mean people are gossiping?”

Bain was honest and sincere, a true friend. “Course lots of times these things don’t amount to anything. But Fred’s over in the saloon talkin’ and takin’ on quite some load of red-eye. He’s tellin’ everybody you’ll come down off your high hoss when Cliff gets nabbed. Found out for the crook he is.”

“Crook! Why Cliff Graham is honest as—” Nita paused. “What does he mean?”

“Search me. Kind of makes out Cliff did something and’ll get caught up for it mighty soon. But you know Beckly: the fuller he gets of Dutch courage, the more he raves on. Says Cliff is sure one double-crossin’ crook.” She turned away, frowning. “Let’s go inside again, Harry.”

Bain, who had the next dance with Miriam Smart, was loathe to leave her alone at the side of the hall. Nita was not accustomed to playing wallflower, and the fixed smile on her oval countenance was more and more difficult to maintain as thoughts rushed through her mind, revolving around the single question: why had Cliff deserted her? Suddenly a chubby hand touched her wrist and she felt herself lifted. It was Beckly again, wearing a thin sneer on his red face flushed with liquor. "Reckon there's no good way outa this dance, eh, Nita?"

"Please, I—"

"Aw, I don't bite. Look here," the rancher went on, his eyes glinting into hers from but a few inches away, "I don't harbor no grudge; we'll let bygones be bygones and stay pals, eh?"

OF A sudden she was in his arms, and Beckly began clumsily to move his feet. But his heavy riding boots only trod hers; she was not dancing with him, not if he made her writhe in pain! Several couples paused to watch, uncertain whether this was a mock-quarrel or quite genuine.

"Fred! Stop this at once!"

Bain and Hal Berry started to her rescue, their faces grim. But they were too late. "Let her go, Beckly—you hear me?"

It was Graham who shoved roughly between them, his face pale, his breath coming in quick gasps as though he had run a considerable distance. Fred's jaw clicked ominously. "Keep oughta this unless you're lookin' for trouble!"

"That's just what I am. Get back, you common stick-up, or I'll—"

"Cliff!"

He had not missed Beckly diving for his gun. Cliff could have whipped out his own weapon, but the proximity of wide-eyed dancers told him that some innocent person was certain to get hurt. So, gathering his

muscular frame, he sprang, on sinews of steel. They collided and fell crashing to the floor. A gunshot split the room.

NITA uttered a cry. Graham's right sleeve was crimsoning near the shoulder. As she watched, the battlers scrambled erect, separated, and clashed again. Each was slugging with all his might, taking and giving hard blows. Beckly jerked his knee up to end the fight, but Cliff landed a terrific thrust of knuckles to the man's drooling mouth. He followed with another blow to the jaw—and the Slash Circle owner sprawled heavily, slid a few feet on the waxed floor, and lay panting. Cliff mopped perspiration from his forehead with a movement of his arm. "Harry—Hal—bring him to the sheriff's office. Now!"

Then he seized Nita's arm and steered her from the hall. "You're shot!" she exclaimed anxiously.

He stopped. "I'm—all right. But Nita, there's something—Your Uncle Bob—"

"Oh! He isn't dead!"

Graham shook his head. "Just shot up some, but he'll recover. I'm sure sorry I left you alone, Nita, but after our dance I'd just stepped outside when three hombres jumped on me. In the tussle I got this crease in my side before some men came along. I didn't want to worry you, so I started for Doc Tracy's. But when I got to your Uncle Bob's, I felt dizzy."

"Yes?" She waited, her brown eyes wide with alarm.

"He patched me up and we sat talkin'. I told Bob what happened this afternoon, and about my ranch, and all of a sudden those same toughs broke in. Bob killed one, and we grabbed the other. Couple of breeds."

"They didn't get the mine gold?"

He grunted. "The scheme was to slug me, plant me in your uncle's house, kill Bob if necessary, and steal the dust. So it would look like I was one of the thieves but got knocked

out before Bob died. And Nita, who do you think put 'em to all that? We made those gents talk! It was our old friend, Beckly."

She stepped back. "Fred! He-yes," she interrupted herself swiftly, "Harry Bain said he was bragging that you would soon be found out for a crook. Oh, Cliff!"

HE took both her hands and drew her closer. "You thought it was plumb queer that I'd ride out to ask you to marry him? But Fred said if I put it over he'd extend that note on my spread." Her eyes blazed, and all color drained from her cheeks as the girl tore herself free. "You mean you would do a thing like that for money? Cliff Graham, I'll never, never—"

"Listen, Nita—wait! I had to know if

you loved Beckly or me. Didn't I? If you'd accepted Fred I'd have been just about done. I mean, heartbroken. I'd have—well—"

His face changed slowly as he watched her, to a wan, pleading grin. "You love me, don't you?"

The brown eyes searched his a long moment before they wavered. "I never knew you to be so bold; why, you've been holding my hands for hours. And you talked right out!" She added musingly: "In Longfellow's poem, there was—"

He interrupted with an eager, fervent kiss. "Priscilla married John, didn't she? Ought to have, anyhow. Just like me. Graham of the Bar T spread—alias John Alden!"