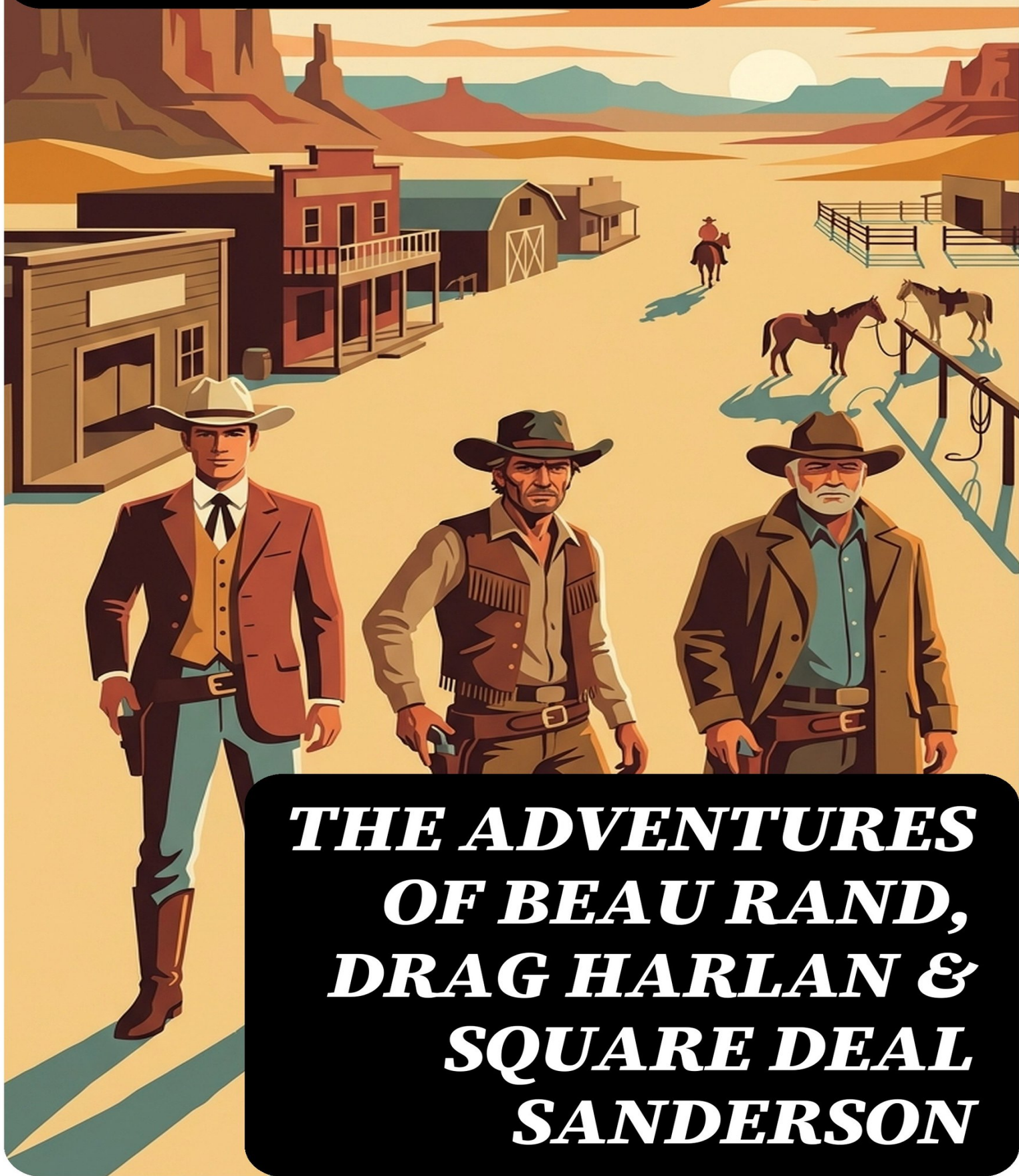


**CHARLES ALDEN
SELTZER**



**THE ADVENTURES
OF BEAU RAND,
DRAG HARLAN &
SQUARE DEAL
SANDERSON**

Charles Alden Seltzer

The Adventures of Beau Rand, Drag Harlan & Square Deal Sanderson

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Gabriel Fox

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Table of Contents

[The Adventures of Beau Rand, Drag Harlan & Square Deal Sanderson](#)

[Memorable Quotes](#)

The Adventures of Beau Rand, Drag Harlan & Square Deal Sanderson

[Main Table of Contents](#)

“Beau” Rand

“Drag” Harlan

Square Deal Sanderson

“Beau” Rand

Table of Contents

- Chapter I. A Man Spreads Poison
- Chapter II. A Timber Wolf
- Chapter III. The Man Himself
- Chapter IV. A Woman's Perversness
- Chapter V. The Conspirators
- Chapter VI. The Watcher
- Chapter VII. Waiting
- Chapter VIII. A Shattered Pipe
- Chapter IX. Time to Clean Up
- Chapter X. Kinney Makes Ready
- Chapter XI. Fire and Ice
- Chapter XII. Victory — and Defeat
- Chapter XIII. Seddon Explains
- Chapter XIV. A Matter of Nerve
- Chapter XV. Swearing to a Lie
- Chapter XVI. An Interlude with Cupid
- Chapter XVII. A Fresh Deal
- Chapter XVIII. The Riddle of Rand
- Chapter XIX. Compton Plots
- Chapter XX. "Liars — and Liars"
- Chapter XXI. Striking Deep
- Chapter XXII. Compton Smiles
- Chapter XXIII. A New Riding Companion
- Chapter XXIV. Picking a Leader
- Chapter XXV. Rand's Blazing Wrath
- Chapter XXVI. The Yearning for Vengeance
- Chapter XXVII. The Markings of Midnight

Chapter XXVIII. Unmasked

Chapter XXIX. The Trap

Chapter XXX. Carrying the News

Chapter XXXI. A New Foe

Chapter XXXII. Lucia's Revenge

Chapter XXXIII. Faithful Unto Death

Chapter XXXIV. A Man in a Doorway

Chapter XXXV. The Grim Accounting

Chapter XXXVI. In Paths of Peace

Chapter I. A Man Spreads Poison

Table of Contents

STANDING, though resting one shoulder against a door-jamb of the bunkhouse, Amos Seddon watched his daughter. The shoulder that rested against the door-jamb was slightly drooped, the left arm hanging limply: the thumb of the right hand was hooked in the cartridge belt that encircled Seddon's waist. That hand, too, was limp, and there was a glum pout on the man's lips.

His thoughts were not pleasant, for they ran to Beaudry Rand, his neighbor, with a virulent savagery that made him ache to use the gun, whose stock lay so near to his limp fingers. Some day, he told himself, he would use the gun on Beaudry Rand[1q].

It was not that Rand had done anything to him, particularly; he hated Rand for the things that Rand had not done. That paradox was vague and mysterious to those who did not know; but the torture of it was that Seddon feared some persons — besides Rand — did know. And there was not a time when Seddon rode into Ocate that he did not seem to feel there were many of the town's citizens who were secretly laughing at him. And he suspected that those citizens in possession of the secret were wondering why he did not take the boy from Rand.

To be sure, he had kept his affair with the dance-hall girl a secret — so far as any affair of that character may be kept a secret — and he knew he should not have deserted the girl when he did. But the dread and fear of discovery had seized him, and he had taken the stage to Lazette, and from Lazette he had been whisked westward to San Francisco by

rail, where he had spent two weeks trying to convince himself that the girl alone was to blame.

On his return to Ocate he found that the girl had died and that the boy had been adopted by Beaudry Rand.

For a while after returning to Ocate Seddon had wondered if the girl had talked. But if she had talked, the citizens of the town were not eager to disseminate the burden of her last words; and as the days passed Seddon began to believe the girl had said nothing. And then one day, meeting Beaudry Rand on the river trail, Seddon discovered that the girl had talked — to Rand.

For Rand's words and manner had been most convincing. The picture Rand made that day was still vivid in Seddon's mind; even now the reviewing of the scene bloated Seddon's face poisonously.

"Seddon, I want a straight talk with you!" had been Rand's greeting. The mirthless smile on the man's lips, and the glittering contempt in his eyes warned Seddon that the other knew of his guilt.

Seddon's bluster had no effect. "She's a liar if she's mixed me up in that deal!" he sneered. "Why, hell's fire! If a man was to be blamed —"

Rand's smile grew saturnine.

"Not that it makes any difference," he interrupted. "I just want you to know — that I know. An' I want you to know this! I'm takin' the boy—understand? He's mine because I adopted him — no one else wantin' to take the responsibility. He ain't to blame because he's here; an' I'm goin' to keep him from knowin' that his daddy is a sneak an' a coyote! I reckon that's all. You can travel when you're ready!"

But that conversation did not end the incident — for Seddon. For so long as Beaudry Rand was alive — if Rand was the only person the dance-hall girl had taken into her confidence — just so long would Seddon be in danger of

discovery. For Rand, despite his declared intention of keeping the incident a secret, might talk.

And, though Seddon's wife had died some years before and he had no concern for public opinion in Ocate, he did not want his daughter to know — the girl he was now watching — who stood in the knee-high sagebrush that swept away from the front of the ranchhouse; her tall, lissom figure clear-cut in the white light of the morning, its gracefully rounded lines revealed by the pressure of the slight breeze that whipped her skirts; her hair in a tangle of ravishing disorder; her cheeks suffused with the bloom of health; her eyes drinking in the beauty of the vast, green world that stretched from her feet across the interminable miles to a raggedly picturesque horizon.

His daughter!

Seddon did not want her to know. This was the beginning of her fourth day at home—at the Bar S — which she had not seen in as many years — and during those four days Seddon had delicately and subtly probed her character—to discover traits that had both pleased and awed him.

First, he had found a sturdy, uncompromising moral structure with no flexibility toward error. He knew she had inherited that attitude from her mother. And he had found her with an astonishingly clear vision of life and a conception of the meaning of life that had rather startled him, so greatly was it at variance with his own ideas.

"I know, Daddy," she had said when he had attempted to impart some of the wisdom of his experience to her, "if a person has clean thoughts there will be little danger of error."

Seddon had not gone very far in that direction; the girl's clear eyes and straight gaze disconcerted him — made him think of the dance-hall girl and the boy — his boy!

After that conversation with his daughter, Seddon became convinced that if she should learn of his escapade

with the dance-hall girl she could never give him that affection and respect for which he yearned.

And this morning as he stood watching the girl, he considered Beaudry Rand and the paradox. The things Rand had not done were glaringly apparent. Rand had not treated him fairly. Rand had no business to interfere, for it was not Rand's affair. And even if Rand had interfered he should have consulted Seddon before he had done anything. No matter what he had done, the boy was his, and he should have had a word to say about his future.

Rand had not consulted him; Rand had neglected to consider him at all. And Rand would hold the threat of exposure over him, he knew; and if Rand should meet his daughter, and become acquainted with her; if a contrary fate should throw them together upon terms of intimacy — Seddon's brain rioted with passion, and his thoughts became abysmal.

That could happen. A man and a girl — neighbors!

But it must not happen. Seddon paled as he left the bunkhouse door and walked to where his daughter stood.

He stood for a time behind her, looking at her, watching her in silence as, unconscious of his presence, she looked far out over the rolling sweep of country at the dim and ragged horizon.

"Ellie!" he said softly.

The girl turned, and flashed a smile at him.

"It's great to be home, Daddy!" Elation and a sheer joy of living were in her eyes, in her swelling breast, and in the glow of her cheeks as she stood erect, with head thrown back, her body rigid, inhaling the sage-scented breeze.

"You like it, eh?" he said with a smile, though with no enthusiasm.

"Like it? I love it! I feel that I have been cheated out of four years of my life!"

"No one cheats himself by goin' to school. It's made a woman of you, Ellie."

"I feel older, Daddy," she laughed. And then she laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "Do you think I am a woman now?"

"Certain."

"And 'Ellie,'" she smiled deprecatingly, "is a girl's name — the name of a young — a very young — girl. And nickname—" She paused and met Seddon's gaze.

"Eleanor," surrendered Seddon. "I reckon I'll have to get used to it." He grinned at her. "This is different — after Denver?" he suggested.

"Different? Oh, yes. But it hasn't changed, Daddy!" She gripped his shoulder hard and wheeled him around so that he faced the river trail. Both could see it, winding around low hills, up rises, disappearing into depressions, reappearing again, narrowing as it receded, and finally vanishing altogether into the haze of distance.

"It's miles to that point — where you can't see the trail any more," she said. "How many miles? I have forgotten."

"Twelve." His face hardened, for the trail ran through Beaudry Rand's ranch, the Three Bar.

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes glowed. "I always loved that trail! That big wide stretch there"—indicating a broad, black expanse of timberland that seemed to swallow the trail near the point about which they had been talking— "is the wood you always warned me against, isn't it? Where you said the timber wolves prowled? Are there really wolves in there, or did you just tell me that to keep me from going there — when you wanted me to stay at home?"

"There's wolves in there all right," he said. "There always was. I've lost a good many calves there." His eyes became savage, his face reddened with passion. "There's worse than wolves around there now," he said gruffly; "there's Beau Rand!"

"'Beau' Rand?" she said, looking sharply at him, and noting the passion in his eyes. "Is that the name of a man or — or a monster?"

"He claims to be a man, I reckon." Seddon's glance toward the timber was baleful. "He owns the Three Bar now — Halsey sold out to him four years ago. Just after your mother died — an' just before you left to go to school at Denver."

"Beau Rand!" The girl repeated the name, her brows furrowing thoughtfully. "Yes, it must have been — but I don't seem to remember. But what an odd name! Beau!" A twinkle of amusement was in her eyes as she looked at her father; and her lips curved with mockery.

"Beau!" she repeated. "Why, that name suggests a man who is popular with women, doesn't it? A fop; a fashion-plate male; a Beau Brummel who wears spats and a high hat, displays enormous expanses of linen; wears lace cuffs and a wig, and is saturated with perfume. A beau, Father! Oh, it can't be that the Three Bar has descended to that!"

"The Three Bar has descended — if that's the way to say it," declared Seddon, with a malignant grin. It pleased him to discover that Eleanor was already prejudiced against Rand — her attitude would make the task of poisoning her against the man much easier.

"Eleanor," he continued, "the Three Bar ain't what it used to be. Not since this man, Rand, bought it. An' the country ain't what it used to be — so far as that goes. There never was no trouble — you know that. Me an' Halsey an' Link Compton always got along. But lately things is different. The river's taken to goin' dry in the middle of the season. For the last three years there's never been water enough. Last year she was plumb dry durin' the whole summer. The Two Link—that's Link Compton's ranch — an' the Bar S suffered a heap. There wasn't any water except in that big natural basin in the river just opposite the Three Bar ranchhouse. There's always plenty there, for that's a deep basin, an' it gets the last trickle of water that runs down the upper gorge."

"And this Beau—this Rand — wouldn't permit you and Compton to water your stock there?" The girl's eyes flashed with indignation.

"As for that," admitted Seddon, grudgingly, "Rand let us water our stock there. But he was mighty sullen about it." He told the lie so glibly that the girl, watching him closely, had no doubt of the truth of the statement.

"But that ain't neither here nor there," went on Seddon. "Rand don't raise near the number of cattle we raise; an' me an' Compton offered to buy him out at a figure that would have paid him. He grinned like a hyena an' told us he'd sell out when he got damn good an' ready. Them's his very words."

"Well," said the girl hesitatingly, "I don't know that you could blame him for not selling. But he shouldn't have been so stingy about the water. He must be a grouch!"

"He's worse," said Seddon eagerly. He saw that he had not made a strong case against Rand. "He's worse. Rand hadn't been at the Three Bar very long when someone took to robbin' the stage. An' about that time cattle thieves began to rustle stock around there. Cattle an' horses. There's been hell to pay! The worst of it is nobody can get a line on who's doin' it. Compton an' some more of the ranchers has organized a vigilance committee, which is nosin' around quite considerable. But that ain't helped none — the stealin' of cattle an' horses, an' the robbin' of the stage is still goin' on."

"Compton suspects Rand?" asked the girl.

"Who else is there to suspect!" demanded Seddon. "Stealin' didn't start until Rand bought the Three Bar an' brought a lot of low-down guys there to work for him. They're a hell-raisin' bunch, Eleanor; an' if I was you I'd steer clear of Rand — an' I'd stay away from that timber. For there's worse than wolves prowlin' around there!"

Seddon had aroused the girl's interest; and he could plainly see that she believed him, for her eyes were glowing

with indignation and resentment—and there was a flush on her cheeks and a glint in her eyes which told Seddon that the spirit of resistance to Rand's supposed outlawry was strong within her.

"If they can prove that he is doing those things they should run him out of the country!" she said.

Seddon grinned coldly. "There'll be worse happen to him when they prove up on him!" he declared.

The girl relaxed, and a little shiver ran over her. Tales of violence in which rustlers and other thieves had suffered had not failed to reach her ears.

But Seddon's recital had aroused in her a certain interest in Rand; while his warning about there being "worse than wolves" in the timber near the Three Bar had not affected her in the least. She would go to the timber whenever she took a notion to go — fear of Rand and his men would not deter her.

She spoke a thought that was uppermost in her mind:

"I should like to see that man, Rand. Don't you think that a man who gives so much attention to his personal appearance would hesitate to do the things he is suspected of doing? Beau! Why, Father; it doesn't seem possible!"

"I reckon it ain't his clothes so much," said Seddon. "There ain't nothin' remarkable about them. It's the way he wears them, most likely; an' his name. His real name's Beaudry Rand. Beaudry's too heavy a name to go carryin' around in this country, an' so the boys begun shortenin' it to Beau.

"An' he don't like it none, at that. Call him Beau to his face an' you can see his eyes sort of chill. He'll stand for it all right, but there'll be a grin on his face that'll make you think of a tiger that's got you into a corner. He's a mean, ornery cuss, an' no mistake!"

She laughed, entirely unimpressed by her father's deprecatory words. Never in her life had she formed an opinion of another upon the basis of a verbal description.

And despite Seddon's excellent counterfeit of sincerity, she had detected in his manner a bitter vindictiveness that did not seem to be warranted by the declaration that Rand was merely suspected of being a thief.

She knew her father as a man of strong character, of strong passions that boiled, unrestrained, in him; that he was ruled by his prejudices; and that in this case Rand had undoubtedly aroused his enmity because of his attitude over the question of the precious water.

"What is the man — Rand — like, Father?" she asked.

He saw the gleam of mischief in her eyes — the tolerant, half-incredulous smile on her lips. These signs told him though he had made the case against Rand as strong as he could, she was still in doubt. More — he could see that she had not been at all impressed with Rand's vicious-ness — or that if she was impressed, she did not intend to permit her impressions to rule her. She neither believed nor disbelieved her father; she had formed no opinion — Seddon's recital had made no impression upon her, except to arouse her curiosity.

Seddon betrayed a flash of the malignance that seized him whenever he thought of Rand.

"He's a skinny, ugly gawk with pink hair an' an eye like a fish!" he declared. "He's tall an' awkward, with a pigeon chest an' a woman's waist. He's got a nose like an eagle's beak an' a grin like a sneakin' tomcat! That's Rand — Beau Rand!"

"Why, Daddy!" she said, reprovngly, frankly mocking him.

"Look here, Ellie!" said Seddon, earnestly. "He's done me dirt, an' I don't like him. Mebbe he ain't just the buzzard I've described him; but I don't want you to get thick with him — he's poison, sure enough!"

"Thick!" she said. "Why, Father!"

"That's all right, Ellie; I didn't mean that," he said as he placed an arm about her waist and led her toward the

house.

Chapter II. A Timber Wolf

Table of Contents

AMOS SEDDON said no more to his daughter about Beaudry Rand. Seddon had caught certain expressions in the girl's eyes during his first talk about the man, and those expressions had warned him that he might talk too much, and thus arouse the girl's suspicions.

Already, he divined from the way she had looked at him several times, she was wondering why he exhibited so much feeling toward Rand. He didn't want her to ask questions, for some of them might have embarrassed him. And so for two days following the talk about the Three Bar owner, he did not again refer to him.

Besides, various activities engaged Seddon's attention. It was the time of the late spring round-up, and Seddon was compelled to spend much of his time with the Bar S outfit. He wanted Eleanor to accompany him on some of his rides, to watch the men at work, but range work was no novelty to the girl, and she smilingly refused.

However, she spent little of her time at the ranchhouse. Her favorite horse — which she had ridden much before leaving the ranch for Denver, four years before — she found had been pasturing during most of the interval of her absence, and when one morning she went down to the far pasture and looked at him through the rails of the fence, she saw that he had grown fat and slow and old.

She called to him — the old, familiar and peculiar whistle with which she had summoned him years before. He answered, whinnying, approaching the fence haltingly ; and when he stuck his muzzle between the rails she patted it and talked to him, renewing their friendship.

But she did not ride him. From the horse corral near the stable she selected a gray, rangy beast, which her father

had pointed out to her, recommending him as "reliable." "Silver," Seddon had named him.

Silver was reliable. It did not take the girl long to discover that. She knew horses, and during her rides she tested the gray animal in various ways; and at last patted him admiringly and confided into his ears that he would "do."

The four-year interval of her absence had not made the far timber less alluring; nor had she taken her father's warning seriously. She had never taken the wolf story literally—it had been a childhood bogey by which both her father and mother had tried to keep her from exploring the timber.

For, despite their warnings, she had gone there many times, impressed by its vastness, awed by the solemn silence that reigned there; a religious reverence stealing over her whenever she traversed its majestic aisles, with the towering, tapering trees, like cathedral spires, thrusting into the azure blue above.

On this morning—three days after Seddon had talked to her about Beaudry Rand, she watched her father mount his horse and ride away. Shortly after he vanished westward to join the outfit she saddled Silver and headed him toward the river trail.

Familiar landmarks came into view as she rode. She did not travel fast, for there were some things she wished to see—a shady nook at the edge of a sheer butte that fringed the river, where she had spent many hours; a "hole" in the river, far down in a shallow canon—where she had bathed, with no danger of discovery; and other well-remembered places with which were connected incidents that were still vivid in her recollection.

This tour of memory-exploration took time. It was nearly noon when she reached the edge of the timber, and she smilingly reflected that she had consumed several hours in riding about twelve miles.

Memories thrilled her as she entered the timber— following a faint trail that she remembered well — for she had not seen the timber in four years. Those four years, she saw, had not brought much change in the aspect of the forest. Over here, as she entered a narrow aisle and sent Silver loping along it, descended the atmosphere of mystery that had always encompassed her — the lingering, whispering, sighing voices of the trees, bearing a threat or a promise — she had never been able to decide which.

She spent some hours in the forest; though she penetrated no farther than she had gone many times in the past. For she rode only those trails she remembered — cattle paths, made by refractory steers that insisted upon betraying yearnings to revert to type.

She reflected that some of the most marvelous profanity she had ever heard had been provoked among the Bar S men by the predilection of some range steers for the mazes and tangle of timber. When they went in — as some of them would — the men had to get them out.

It was a vast forest. Eleanor had never ridden far enough eastward to reach its edge in that direction; though she had almost attained its northern radius — and she always entered the timber from the south.

And she did not attempt today to reach the eastern limits; she rode as far as she had ridden other times, and twice almost lost herself— for most of the trails she had known were overgrown with wild brush and carpeted with the fallen leaves of past seasons, and she had some trouble to find them.

She was in no hurry. Her father, she knew, would not return until late in the evening—probably not until late tomorrow, for she had heard him tell the straw-boss that the distance to where the outfit was going was "pretty far." So she had no fear that he would discover where she had gone.

As for that she was nearly twenty, and the spirit of independence in her had grown and flourished during her

four years' absence. She had always been self-reliant[2q]. Not aggressively self-reliant—she disliked a mannish woman. She preferred to feel that she was merely confident — confident of her ability to take care of herself. Certainly she had spirit enough to demonstrate that trait — her trip to the timber despite her father's warning proved that!

She smiled, remembering her father's gravity.

"Worse than wolves," he had said; "there's Beau Rand!"

Her smile grew. Beau Rand, according to her father, might be some prehistoric monster roaming the timber, seeking to devour pygmy humans — herself especially! She laughed aloud.

Later, reaching a small clearing where some wild flowers grew, delicately tinted, their stems frail and transparent, she dismounted and began to gather them.

Engrossed in the task, the bunch of tinted beauties in her hand growing larger and larger, she spent much time in the clearing — more time than she realized. For when, after a while, she stood erect, satisfied with the size of the fragrant bunch in her hands, she discovered that Silver was nowhere to be seen!

She gasped, astonishment confounding her, until she remembered that she had forgotten to trail the reins over Silver's head!

Every range horse expected that; no range horse would stand if the reins were not trailed, unless he had been carefully trained otherwise. They were taught, during their training days, to fear the rope, and no range horse would walk far with the reins at his hoofs. She had forgotten that; her four years' absence from the Bar S had robbed her of that most essential, and very common, knowledge.

She dropped the flowers — for the stern business of getting out of the timber would fully occupy her mind and energy for some time, if Silver had strayed far—and ran to the western edge of the clearing, leaping to the trunk of a fallen tree.

From this vantage point she looked southward — toward the Bar S — which direction the horse would naturally take had he decided to desert her. Far down a narrow aisle, fully a quarter of a mile away, she saw a gray shape moving among the trees.

It was Silver, idly browsing—she could see his neck slanting downward, and his tail swishing back and forth.

She gulped with thankfulness, leaped down from the fallen tree trunk, and began to run toward Silver, her face a trifle pale and her eyes filled with a wistful expression.

But she had not taken more than three or four steps toward the horse when she halted and stood rigid, catching her breath with a shrill gasp; her face whitening, her eyes filled with horror. For not more than a dozen paces from her, and directly in the narrow aisle through which she must go to reach Silver, stood a huge, gray timber wolf, his mouth open, his jaws agape, slavering; his eyes flaming with a fire which, she knew, was a sign of the malignant ferocity that had set him across her path.

She did not know how long she stood there, watching the great gray beast. She knew that the wolf did not move, but stood there returning her gaze, its sides heaving with its rapid breaths, its tongue hanging far out of its mouth — the fangs bared a little in a hideous, grinning smirk. It seemed to her that the animal knew of her helplessness and was mocking her, content to wait, certain that she could not escape.

She did not move—she was convinced that if she made the slightest motion the beast would leap. Nor did she permit her gaze to wander for the slightest fraction of a second from the beast's eyes. She stood that way for, it seemed, many minutes; her breath catching in her throat, her heart pounding, and her nerves tingling with the horror of it.

And then she heard a sharp sound near—the crackling of a twig or a branch, it seemed. She saw the wolf raise its

head, snap its ears erect and look past her — a little to her right. The fur on its neck bristled, as though it saw something that aroused it to a fighting resentment, or a craven, gripping fear. Then it snarled, wheeled, and leaped — away from her.

While its body was in the air the solemn silence of the forest was rent by a splitting, crashing report. The girl saw the wolf collapse in mid-air and come down limply, landing on its head and shoulders; its legs asprawl and jerking spasmodically.

She wheeled, aware that the wolf had received a death wound, to see a man on a big black horse directly behind her. He was lounging in the saddle, a smoking pistol in his right hand. There was a slight smile on his lips, and his eyes were agleam with interest and curiosity.

"You're scared, ma'am, eh?" he said in a low but distinct voice. "Well, you don't need to be — now. I reckon Mr. Lobo won't ever be any deader than he is right this minute."

Eleanor walked totteringly to the fallen tree trunk and sank to it, holding tightly to some barkless branches that projected from it to keep herself from slipping off — for she knew that she had never been nearer to fainting than at this minute.

Her rescuer watched her with grave concern, the smile having departed. The pistol was still in his hand, and noting that she looked at it wonderingly—as though not quite certain what he intended to do next — he sheathed it — first ejecting the empty shell and replacing it with a loaded one. The pistol in the holster, he looked at her with a straight, level gaze.

"What's happened, ma'am? You sure didn't walk into this timber!"

She stood erect now, for she had conquered the faintness that had stolen over her, and smiled at him — though her voice quavered a little when she spoke:

"I stopped to pick some flowers and my horse strayed," she told him.

His eyes gleamed with humor. "You ain't Eastern, ma'am — I can see that. Then how —"

"I forgot. You see, I haven't been home in four years — and I left the reins on Silver's saddle."

"Then he would slope," said the man; "there bein' nothin' to stop him, an' him thinkin' that mebbe you didn't need him any more. An' then — when he'd gone — old Lobo thought he'd devil you. It's likely — if you've been in the timber any time—he's been followin' you. Well, he died hungry."

"So he did," she laughed. And then seriously: "I want to thank you. I'm afraid if you hadn't come when you did—" She shivered.

He laughed lowly. "Why, I've been watchin' you for hours, ma'am," he said gravely. "Hangin' around — quite a piece away."

She flushed angrily and stood rigid, facing him. Ready to tell him what she thought of him for spying upon her, she saw a big Bar S brand on the hip of the black horse — her father's brand. And then she knew that her father had distrusted her — had been convinced that she would ride to the timber — and that he had set this man to watch her, to see that no harm befell her.

The man saw the resentment shining in her eyes, and his expression became apologetic — so obviously apologetic that her anger vanished and a fugitive smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. The man grinned with her — sensing her forgiveness. But instantly she frowned, determined that though the man had saved her from the wolf he should not be permitted to presume upon his service — for he had been employed to do what he had done.

She wondered, though, even while she looked straight at him with a slightly belligerent gaze — how it happened that

her father had selected so striking a cowboy to stand guard over her.

He was not handsome — men were never that, she was convinced—for that would make them seem effeminate. But he was undeniably good-looking. And his steel-gray eyes, now watching her with a glint of humor in them, were also aglimmer with the light of an intelligence that was rare in cowboys she had known—those who had worked for her father, for instance.

He was tall, lithe, and muscular; he looked capable — that was the word that thoroughly described him, she thought — until she began to be affected by the atmosphere of grave and grim deliberation that seemed to envelop him.

The humor which seemed to glint his eyes was, she became convinced as she studied him, oddly mingled with malice, not vicious, but cynical — as though he was continually alert for deceit and trickery.

His gaze was highly disconcerting — she felt that were she a man she would not care to trifle with him. For in his eyes, in the way he moved, and in his attitude, was a lingering threat of cold preparedness — a readiness for anything that might happen.

However, she was indignant because he had admitted he had been watching her, and was not so deeply impressed by him as she might have been had she met him under different circumstances. She raised her chin defiantly.

"So you were watching me. Then, when you asked me if I had walked here, you were merely trying to be humorous, is that it?"

His eyes twinkled. "I wasn't intendin' to tell you." His lips twitched into a smile. "But when you shivered that way, gettin' ready to faint, I just had to let you know that you wasn't in any great danger. You see, women ain't got much nerve, ma'am."

"Well," she said scornfully, "so long as there are men in the world I suppose women do not need nerve. I suppose

you mean to infer that it was a good thing for me that a man happened to be near?"

"Men are sort of handy—sometimes," he grinned.

"Well," she ordered, looking coldly at him, "catch my horse, and don't stand there trying to be amusing. That is not what Father employs you for, is it?"

He bowed, smiled, kicked the black horse in the ribs, and rode down the aisle toward the point where Silver had disappeared.

The girl watched him until he could no longer be seen, and then she again seated herself on the fallen tree trunk and gazed reflectively at the dead body of the wolf.

And now that he had gone, and she was left with the memory of her experience, she realized that, even though he had been employed to watch her, he had rendered valuable service; and that he had been as delicate in his espionage as had been possible.

And he certainly was gentlemanly— for a cowboy; and — hadn't she been a little too severe? He had done what he had been ordered to do — and had done it well; and she had censured him when he deserved commendation.

So her thoughts ran, with the result that when the man reappeared a little later, leading the recreant Silver, her manner toward her rescuer was slightly more gracious. She even smiled at him when he offered to help her mount the horse. And then, when she was in the saddle, and he was lounging in his own, watching her gravely, she said:

"As long as I know you are watching me, I suppose you might as well ride with me. Have you any special orders regarding me?"

At his slow negative she resumed:

"Father warned me against going to the Three Bar. But there is still time, and I am going there. I want you to go with me. That will take the edge off Father's displeasure when he discovers I disregarded his warning. Do you know Beaudry Rand?"

"An' you let me go on, not tellin' me. An' he didn't do a heap of talkin'. I ain't mentioned it until now, but I've wondered why? Barney knew from the first day that I wasn't what I pretended to be. Why didn't you tell me, Barney?"

Mary was blushing, and Barney's face was red. His eyes met Mary's and both pairs were lowered, guiltily.

Barney turned to Sanderson.

"Look at me!" he said. "Do I look like a man who could fight Dale, Silverthorn, and Maison—and the gang they had—with any hope of victory? When I got here—after escaping Gary Miller and the others—I was all in—sick and weak. It didn't take me long to see how things were. But I knew I couldn't do anything.

"I was waiting, though, for Gary Miller and his friends to come, to claim the Double A. I would have killed them. But they didn't come. You came.

"At first I was not sure what to think of you. But I saw sympathy in your eyes when you looked at Mary, and when you told Dale that you were Will Bransford, I decided to keep silent. You looked capable, and when I saw that you were willing to fight for Mary, why—why—I just let you go. I—I was afraid that if I'd tell you who I was you'd throw up the whole deal. And so I didn't say anything."

Sanderson grinned. "That's the reason you was so willin' to sign all the papers that wanted Will Bransford's signature. I sure was a boxhead for not tumblin' to that."

He laughed, meeting Mary's gaze and holding it.

"Talkin' of throwin' up the deal," he said. "That couldn't be. Dale an' Silverthorn an' Maison an' their gang of cutthroats couldn't make me give it up. There's only one person could make me do that. She'd only have to say that she don't think as much of me as I think she ought to. And, then——"

"She'll keep pretty silent about that, I think," interrupted Owen, grinning at the girl's crimson face.

"I wouldn't be takin' your word for it," grinned Sanderson, "it wouldn't be reliable."

"Why—" began Mary, and looked at Owen.

"Sure," he laughed, "I'll go and take a walk. There are times when three can't explain a thing as well as two."

There was a silence following Owen's departure.

Then Mary looked shyly at Sanderson, who was watching her with a smile.

"Does it need any explaining?" she began. "Can't you see that—"

"Shucks, little girl," he said gently, as he leaned toward her, "words ain't—well, words ain't so awful important, are they?"

Apparently words were not important. For within the next few minutes there were few spoken. And progress was made without them. And then:

"I believe I never was so happy as when I saw you, that morning, coming in to Okar with Dale's body, and you said you had not killed him. And if Barney—Will, had killed him that day—if he had really hanged him, and Dale had died from it—I should have kept seeing Dale as he was hanging there all my life."

"It was Dale's day," said Sanderson.

"And Okar's!" declared the girl. "The town has taken on a new spirit since those men have left. And the whole basin has changed. Men are more interested and eager. There is an atmosphere of fellowship that was absent before. And, oh, Deal, how happy I am!"

"You ain't got anything on me!" grinned Sanderson.

And presently, looking toward the rim of the mesa, they saw Williams and his men coming toward them from Lazette, with many wagons, loaded with supplies and material for the new dam, forecasting a new day and a new prosperity for the Double A—and themselves.

"That's for a new deal," said Sanderson, watching the wagons and men.

"Wrong," she laughed, happily, "it is all for a 'Square' Deal!"

"All?" he returned, grinning at her.

"All," she repeated, snuggling close to him.

Memorable Quotes

[Table of Contents](#)

1q "Some day, he told himself, he would use the gun on Beaudry Rand."

2q "She had always been self-reliant."

3q "Rand ain't no outlaw."

4q "In my opinion there is nothing so vicious as lying."

5q "The splendid isolation of the place had always enthralled her."

6q "For he meant to tell her, to confess his misdeeds, and ask her forgiveness."

7q "'Mostly all of us get reputations we don't deserve,'" said Harlan lowly."

8q "When I down a man I do it fair an' square—givin' him his chance."

9q "It seemed to the girl that in both horse and rider were a steadfastness of purpose that nothing could change."

10q "The valley was mighty, magnificent; it deserved all the praise Barbara Morgan had heaped upon it."

11q "And he had vindicated their faith by keeping silent regarding them."