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WOLF MOON

A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT
SOUTHWEST

BY JOSEPH J. QUINN

CHAPTER XIV.
THE GYPSY'S CURSE

The whiny of Thunderbird at the corral sent a wave of consternation through the riders. Mrs. Trichell sank back into a chair while her husband shouted orders to the men.

"John, I believe that Tulane has done something desperate. I've asked you to get rid of him a hundred times. I never liked his sneaky actions, and his friendship for Louise."

"Tulane was with the boys all morning. He rounded up some strays."

"Well, then, where can Louise be?"

John Trichell had no answer. Her disappearance puzzled him completely. Yet he did not connect Tulane with her detention. The riders had seen him on the edge all morning; he had never gone out of their sight. After a few minutes of deep thought he decided to send his men to search for her in every direction. Bill Hawkins was ordered to the village, and Seth Hopkins sent over the Gulch.

"Tulane, go up past Roundtop and cross down into the flats. There's no reason for her to get lost. Maybe Thunderbird stumbled and threw her. Search every spot of the range and do it pronto. There's a storm coming."

Hawkins discovered that Louise had gotten the mail. Hunter declared he had watched her loping back on the road toward the ranch. No one could be found who had seen her after that.

Tulane Baisan rode North toward Roundtop and when a mile from the ranch turned his pony toward the Gulch. He crossed the cap and headed down the slope. After reaching the mouth of the gulch he gazed up and down the valley, but Pemella was not in sight. Drawing under a clump of blackjacks he listened for sounds or signs that would apprise him of Pemella's whereabouts. But only the lone, sad whisperings of the brush came to his ear. A wind, heavy and oppressive, shook dust from leaves and then was still. A rider skirting the Eastern mesa met his gaze but there was no other sign of life, no bird in the brown sky. The pre-storm oppression was stifling the voice of nature, hushing the insects on the mesa. An intimation of the proximity of Pemella engendered fear in Tulane's heart yet he could not localize it, reduce it to certainty of direction. Something was occurring that demanded his attention, yet the inner voice was powerless to warn him which way to turn. A low mumble, as a bee in a bottle, caused his pony to stiffen his ears in attention. Without touch of spur, or command, the horse started to walk from under the foliage and out the trail to the valley below. Tulane did not arrest him. A puff of wind from the South laden with moisture felt cooling on his brow, heated with disappointment and concern. He had expected to come upon Pemella and Louise somewhere in the valley or the hills. The bitter conviction that stirred the fires within him was that he had been double-crossed by his brother. Instead of waiting for their plans to mature and lure Louise to the Gulch he had devised a scheme himself, put it into effect, kidnapped her, broken camp, and was now moving across the plains to the north. It would be maddening to let Pemella thus swoop the prize out of his arms. After he had lived near her for years, watching her from day to day as she grew from a gypsy urchin into a delicate, refined woman, it would be shameful, supine imprudence on his part to let her be snatched away by his infamous brother who would bend and break her to his mad desires. He rebelled at the surmise as if analyzing a reality.

Satisfied that Pemella had not hidden Louise in the many pockets

of the Gulch Tulane dug his rowel vigorously into Nep's side and mounted the shelving slope. Near the top he shouted to Seth Hopkins who was skirting the trees on the western side, and lashing his pony with the end of the rope spurred on toward Roundtop.

There lay the camp, to his surprise. He had avoided it in the past because Nava hated him with a bitterness that sprang from revengeful blood. Some day he would go back to the band, he thought, but only as its leader. This would not be until Pemella died.

Tulane dismounted and tied his pony, taking no chance on simply throwing the reins over his head. Nava's tent stood out like the main show of a circus. He walked through a pack of urchins who turned on him in the tongue he knew. From the entrance he could see Nava lying on her cot half asleep, a small troupe of flies crawling over her coppery skin. To his eyes she seemed to have grown fatter, uglier, a network of wrinkles had crisscrossed the sagging flesh of her face and neck. The violent red of her head dress emphasized her age.

Nava turned quickly as the shadow fell across her.

"Aha! the pig is back." Hissing she arose and turned toward him, speaking their native tongue.

Tulane stood for a moment his eye lids battling like an animal's under a high light and gazed frowningly above her head.

"Where's Pemella?"

"You come stealing like a snake to my tent. How do I know where Pemella is? He's chief. He does not tell all. But you're not chief. You—"

"I say where's Pemella?" His voice heightened and struck a tense note.

"Pemella runs with the sun. His shadow is swifter than the eagle's. He comes, he goes, but I never know, you never know."

"Pemella is after that woman." He knew her weakness and lanced it unsparringly.

Nava's eyes spit fire. "What woman?" she demanded.

"You know what woman. Bluebonnet, the one who was wiser than you, who ran through your fingers. Pemella has told you."

"Bluebonnet," she repeated, rising to a stiffer posture.

"Yes, she's here in camp."

"Nava's curse will fall on your fool mouth. I know nothing of Bluebonnet here. You spider where is she?"

"She's here in camp," he exploded with venom.

"Blatting fool! She's not here," she returned with fire. "I have not seen her for two years. But if I get my fingers down her neck I will shake her like this."

Now I see why Pemella has come back to this country—to find her. Pemella talks night and day, he mutters like the wind in the trees. He must see her, must find her—the little devil. He has found her—I see. But if she comes to camp, I'll kill, kill—"

"You'll not kill her," Tulane's eyes flamed.

"That Indian will die between my hands," she added with an impetuous shake of her arms.

"Indian? She's white. They call her Louise Trichell." There was spite and exultant boast in his voice.

"Hah! Louise Trichell. The devil with a name like that! And you called her little fool," she laughed sardonically.

Tulane fell back in surprise.

"Yes, you. You beat her around camp ten years ago. You called her Lunatic, fool brain."

"Is she Lunatic?"

"Ox, your memory is like a toadstool, gone in the night."

"Then she belongs to—"

up and down the streets, looking right and left into faces. The same in El Reno, Chickasha, Pawhuska. He even watched the trains come and go in Oklahoma City in hopes of seeing her. He comes back, raving, swearing that he will find her. Then we move again, again, from North to South, in towns and cities. We crossed the desert twice, back and forth, went as far as Needles and San Diego, then up to Goldfield, to Pocatello, to Denver, to Topeka and down to Tulsa. But it was always the same. In Shreveport he thought he saw, but he was mistaken. And off we go again through swamps and bayous till we come to the plains. And here we are where Guadalupe camped years ago. But I see now why we wait here. He's found the wretch. Hah! In love with that tarantula. But when she comes back I'll be ready." The red skin of the woman bulged like a gorged snake, her teeth ground, her lips were compressed together.

"Ready for what?"

"To kill her."

Tulane bristled. His hand reached for his gun. "If you try to kill the twitching fingers on the bone handle were significant."

A loud forced laugh rang out amid a clap of thunder.

"Another fool in love. Two heads and hearts turned by the snake. If I had only killed her when she was in my hands. Bah! You like white girl but gypsy girl no good. Gypsy marry gypsy, never. You keep white girl in fine silk, but gypsy girl goes naked. You're not one of your band; you're a traitor."

The word blistered his feelings. He gnashed under the insult, felt a sudden rush of passion to tear the woman to pieces, yet the block of truth on which the assertion rested rendered vindication impossible. It was best to ignore her tirade, to capitulate silently.

Watching her stealthily from the corner of his eye he advanced to the tent flap and glanced out at the driving rain. He felt her presence and it made him ill at ease. In reality he preferred the drenching gale, the uproarious elements, to being cooped within the tent with the queen. The strange power ascribed to her, yet which he had never seen displayed, bound him in a spell of nervous fear. Her glowing eyes moved back and forth as he moved and never left him. Like a pagan statue instilled with life she sat immobile while the storm fitfully tore past the tent. Moved and wailing with infinite grief the wind whirled its death song with the bass notes of the thunder. It flayed his conscience, made sensitive by the accusation of "traitor."

Perhaps he should return to the band and bow his head to the decrees of the chief. But mounting above his contrition came the vision of Louise, appealing in its perfection, goading him to a new flight of fury that would bridge thousands of years or miles, it would force him to the ends of the earth to claim her as his own. The ebbing tide of possession left him with a feeling of empty hands. She had been snatched from his arms. A wall of water swept in by the wind dashed in Tulane's face. A narrow gash of fire ran its irregular length from horizon to zenith ripping the clouds into cheery detonations. From afar off he thought he perceived a cry for help. His wonderment increased with the blackness of the storm, the intensity of the lightning, and the torrents of rain whipped with hurricane force. Tulane paced up and down near the opening, looking out from time to time at his horse backing up against the storm. Overhead the heavens went with cracks of gold that lighted the tent as if by some monstrous firefly.

Nava watched him with curious intent as he nervously walked back and forth. Later she spoke in a voice quivering with sream.

"When do you come back to the band, today, tomorrow, never? Guadalupe sleeps but he would rise if he knew you wander, His Song."

"Guadalupe was the biggest thief of all. He was never with the band. But I'll come back, I'll come back when—"

He looked toward Roundtop. Its head was shut in by the murky blackness; wisps of light clouds passed under the heavy laden sky like a veil of incense before a heathen god. As he looked he saw a bundle of fire in the black sky bowl plunge down. It broke into a shower of molten gold as it struck the crest of the hill. No sooner had it touched the peak than Tulane's ears seemed to split, the whole world turned inside out, the tent shook wildly, the universe was splintered into atoms of fire. Nava sprang from her cot as Tulane dropped to the ground. She was glaring at him like a demon. He felt his arm—it had not withered. A fear grasped his heart, fear of the woman and her curse.

With eyes set on her he cautiously backed out into the wild raging storm.

TO BE CONTINUED

Politeness has been defined as love in trifles; courtesy is also called love in little things. The secret of politeness, therefore, is affection.

There is nothing more dangerous in the spiritual life, than to wish to rule ourselves after our own way of thinking.

IT ISN'T THE STEAK

The train took a curve at high speed. Father Casey could not remove his charmed eyes from the colored waiter who held aloft an overloaded tray without spilling so much as a drop of the savory chicken broth while all around him was tumbling in disorder.

"Just one check," said Bruce, and the courteous steward deftly punched the intricate meal ticket designed to remove temptation from the path of dining car temptations.

Andrew Bruce, rich and corpulent, was racing from the frost to Sunny California. Dropping into casual conversation with Father Casey, he soon became, so much interested in the priest that he would not let him go, but insisted on having him as his guest for dinner in the dining car.

With glasses on nose and pencil poised in mid air, Bruce set himself to study the bill of fare. He was rather proud of his skill in ordering an appetizing and well balanced meal.

"Hm-m-m. Ahem-m-m Ah!" and the pencil came down on the paper with a thud. "Steak—tenderloin steak with mushrooms and—"

"No steak for me, Mr. Bruce," said Father Casey. "This is Friday—meatless day for Catholics."

Bruce eyed the priest quizzically over his glasses for a moment, then silently turned his attention to the fish entrees. That item arranged to his comparative satisfaction, he said:

"The chicken broth looks good. Suppose we begin with a tureen of chicken broth."

"Meat soup, as well as meat, is taboo for me on Friday."

Mine host frowned disapproval at such restrictions on the pleasures of taste, but succeeded, however, with an effort in holding his peace.

But when the order was brought and the rich odor of steak smothered in onions rose to greet his discerning nose, he glared angrily at Father Casey's poor insipid slice of fish and burst out:

"It's a shame to call that a dinner—a shame! Come, Father Casey, it won't hurt you to eat a piece of meat, even if it is Friday."

"I know it won't hurt me to eat a piece of meat, but it will hurt me to break a law and commit a sin."

"What law? Christ never made any such law."

"Christ's Church made the law. You know Christ founded a Church, a society, an organization to help men to get to heaven. He promised and swore that He would make this organization last until the end of the world. You know quite well that no society could last even for a year unless it had power to make laws and regulations for its members. The Society Christ established, the Catholic Church, had lasted nineteen hundred years, and it will continue to last as long as there are human beings on this earth. Therefore Christ must have given to it the power of making laws for its members."

"That is clear enough," admitted Bruce, "but why do you say it is a sin to break one of the laws of the Church?"

"Because Christ Himself said so. It would have been foolish for Him to give His Church the power of making laws without giving to these laws binding force. Hence He expressly declared that whoever obeys the Church, obeys Him; and whoever disobeys the Church, disobeys Him. To obey Christ is to perform an act of virtue, to disobey Him is to commit a sin."

"I see your viewpoint," said Bruce, removing the onions from a corner of the steak and deftly amputating a juicy morsel, "the Church, being a society, must have power to make laws for her members; and these laws, to have effect, must be binding under sin. But why, and putting the meat in his mouth, he munched it with evident satisfaction, "why should she make a law which prevents you from enjoying one of God's best gifts to hungry mortals—a bit of hot and savory tenderloin steak?"

"She commands us to accept a little cheerful voluntary suffering by abstaining from meat on Friday out of love for Jesus Christ who died for us on Friday."

The steak must have been poorly prepared for the corpulent gentleman suddenly stopped chewing and gulped it down with the wry face of a small boy swallowing a spoonful of castor oil. He lost interest in the dinner and turned his attention to the clearing up of the table, to his agreeable problem.

"Voluntary suffering!" he growled. "Making ourselves miserable when we don't have to! It's not natural. It's not rational."

"Not for a heathen—but it is for a follower of the crucified Christ."

"I believe in eating what I like and when I like—provided I can get it."

"So, too, does my Airdale, Mr. Bruce," laughed the priest, "but my Christian mother taught me that there are times when I should restrain my likes for the sake of Christian mortification."

"The Christian religion is a religion of joy, not of gloom," said Bruce.

"It is a salutary blending of both," corrected the priest. "We can't be always joyful in a valley of tears, a land of exile—we who are born in sin, who commit so many sins, who are doomed to sickness and labor and death on account of sin."

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