

WOLF MOON  
A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT SOUTHWEST

BY JOSEPH J. QUINN

CHAPTER X.  
THE STRANGER AND THE STORM

Came weeks and weeks of blistering suns sending heat waves rippling giddily from the earth. Long before the dog days and July noons men welcomed shade. Jack soon realized why the wide-brimmed sombrero is necessary in the Southwest. The hard baked earth swept free of sand sent back its agonizing rays to bite and burn. And the wind ever blew from the South. It raised puffs of sand into spinning baby cyclones that whipped the fiery grains against face and saddle. It burnt the pastures dry, stunted the buffalo grass and seared cotton-wood leaves. Sweeping up the mesa from some distant desert it swayed the sage and cracked the high weeds until they bent over in the dust. Earth ground finer than powder drifted into dunes along the roadside, under fences, changed a green world into a red, wan realm. Its constant drive against trees twisted their branches and made them swing to the North. The sun held sway through weary, heat-filled hours stirring the bottle flies into swarms that irritated cattle. Night came bringing relief and a breeze that seemed to spring from a mythical sea at the end of the horizon.

Days spent out in the open brought back strength to Jack's body. His hand became steady, his eye clear, his whole being pulsated with a new and greater life. Sometimes he rode the range alone; at others the slender figure of a girl could be seen on a pony beside him. He hoped from Roundtop to the Gulch and then down into the flat country beyond where the chaparral only broke the sweep of the wind. The blazing sun streamed down upon his back and upon his horse's mane and returned from the red earth quivering with intense fire. Each day at noon Jack rode over to the Christians and at each visit was forced to deny their assertion that he would not come back to their ranch to live. Yes, he would go back when Mrs. Trichell declared that he had fully recuperated. But down in his heart Jack hoped she never would admit it. He preferred the Trichell ranch and, one did not have to go far for the reason. Buster was the ring leader of the teasers. He wanted Jack at home for friendship's sake.

"Huh! when they say so," ejaculated Buster. "You know John Trichell thinks the sun rises and sets on you. He swears he couldn't repay you in a lifetime. Look at Satellite, his wonder horse. You know you stand as high with him or he would never have given you that pony. Jack, when are you going to build a little nest, way out in the West and let the rest of the world go by?"

Twilight always found Jack at the rim of Navajo Gulch. He could enjoy the sunset here more fully, could see the sky flowers bloom and fade and change their colors in the garden of the West. Some evenings were serene, that was when the color riot was most profound. Jack took great sport in shooting at the coyotes that came up from the underbrush at dusk and darted in and out among the blackjacks. He laughed at their frisky ways but especially at their quick getaway when a bullet splashed the dust beside them.

Jack was turning away from the Gulch one evening when a loud halloo fell upon his ears. He stopped and looked back. A stranger on foot emerged from the trees. Jack then recalled that he had failed to reload his gun. It was something unusual for him yet he turned and faced the man, a tall, splendidly built chap, wearing a large black hat in Mexican fashion. He was hooked and spurred though his horse was not in view. His hands were on his belt and he fingered its smooth surface. His shirt thrown open exposed a huge chest.

"Come mighty close to nipping me stranger. A friend and me was just talking down there when one of your bullets whizzed pretty close to my head." "Reckon I'll beg your pardon. Hadn't the faintest idea that you or anybody else was down there," answered Jack, surprised at the news.

"Wal, it pays to be careful, especially when I came mighty close to answering you with my .45. I don't welcome pot shots from nobody." "Reckon, I'll beg your pardon. Hadn't the faintest idea that you or anybody else was down there," answered Jack, surprised at the news.

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find out. But I reckon I know her a little better than you do. Jes reckon I could surprise you with what I do know about her. Maybe I could tell you some things that you would like to know." "Is that so?" Jack drawled out the question purposely.

"Wal, I reckon so. I know her father and mother and that's saying a little more than you. Sort of called me a fren' of the family." The man glanced back towards the blackjacks as if expecting someone to show himself. Jack thought his eyes shifted as if telling a lie.

"Well, if you know her so well why don't you go over and state your business?" "That's a purty smart answer from a young 'un like you. But I guess I have my own reason. Suppose I tell you that if she knew I was here she'd come running over here to see me." The stranger's eyes twinkled as if suppressing humor.

"Well, what's the idea of keeping the good news back. If you want me to I'll be glad to tell her," offered Jack with feigned seriousness.

"Don't work so fast. I'll do all the telling if there's to be any done. I just wish to shine up a bit before I state my case to her. Gotten purty busy from the desert and the hills out thar." He followed his words with a wide sweep of the arm to the west.

"Been prospecting?" "That and more. I ain't a-stating my business nor profession to strangers, I just want to make sure the girl's over there. That's all." His words carried a note of finality and emphasis.

"Well, why don't you visit the ranch and ask for her?" "Huh, with you so handy to supply the information? Son, you talk as if you'd been draining some Oklahoma choc. I'm going to visit her when I get good and ready, I just want news to convey to her. I reckon you're just itching to find it out. Wal, I'm just good-natured enough to tell you. Her people want to see her out in Nevada and they a-knowin' I was comin' here to Oklahoma asked me to deliver a personal message to her."

"Are her parents in Nevada?" Jack was tempted to ask.

"Hah, I see you don't know much about the girl. Guess she's wrapped up a purty sweet story and handed it to you. Them blue eyes has you guessing, too. Wal, you ain't the first she's fooled." He chuckled for a moment and then added with a show of fire. "But she ain't putting nothing over on me. She knows I'm wise. What's she been telling you?"

"Why do you want to know?" "Just to see how her story hooks up with the truth. You let me know what she's been tellin' you and I'll let you in on the real thing."

Jack's taunting smile was his answer.

"Ain't a saying much, huh? Well Hell take it I reckon you and I are about finished. Just remember this, stranger, I know the girl from a time these heah parts never knew you. Adios! But just watch your bullets. There's a liable to come back sometime in good measure. I'm none too bashful with my own gun."

Without another word the man strode back into the night, leaving Jack bewildered. He returned swiftly to the bunk house and inquired for Tulane. The latter had left for town after supper. It was just as he had surmised.

Jack had a premonition that this brooding stranger had come for no good purpose. The mystery of Louise's past seemed to deepen. Was this man related to her? Why was he waiting over in the Gulch spying on Louise? How did he ever come to know Louise, or discover that she was living here? Back to the original question Jack came. Who was Louise? Why did she refuse to tell him her name? Hiding her identity would have bren a storm of suspicion in a man lacking faith in his love but Jack divined that back of it there must be some great reason for withholding her name and family. Time would lead the story out from the cavern of darkness.

Jack felt that he should tell Louise of the meeting with the stranger. But perhaps it would only be a source of worry for her. He would just warn her to keep close to home. In the meantime he would try to discover who the stranger was.

Goaded by strange thoughts and surmises Jack sat at the window of his room until late that night. He was looking out toward the Gulch. Occasionally a light flickered over on the Western slope and sparks sprang upward through the trees. But when Jack gazed more intently it proved only a will o' the wisp. It had disappeared. Only when the ranch was as quiet as a sanctuary did he stretch across the bed to sleep fitfully and in snatches.

Morning broke upon a world of swirling sand. During the night the wind had started to moan and the sand to sift. Pouring steadily from the South and Southwest, the increasing wind lifted high into the air particles of red dust and brown dirt. It bent against the windows in a soft silken rustle. The sun, only a circle in the sky, threw a pale saffron light over everything. Overhead clouds of dust raced through the air freighted with hot, dry bits of earth. Underfoot a soft covering of velvet sand crunched like snow. The air smelled of the

desert. Trees bent under the dusty wind as specters moving back and forth in a wan world. It was weird, ghostlike as if the earth had opened and the uncanny creatures of the world beneath raced from their dusty abode.

John Trichell gave orders to the boys to herd the cattle closer to the house. A minute later she was feeling the thrill of riding fast through a sandstorm, skin to wild gallop at nightfall. But Louise paid little attention to the brown world that was born during the night. She was accustomed to the dust storms that come with the hot dry weather of the west.

"Good mawning, Miss Louise," Hunter, the postmaster broke out cheerfully. "Haven't seen you for a long time," and as he passed the mail out under the little brass grating he added, "Rather surprised to see you this mawning with the wind blowing and the sand drifting. Thought only those gypsies would be out today."

"What gypsies?" queried Louise, startled.

"Just gypsies, I suppose. Why? Ain't you a-seen them? Been on the north side of Roundtop for weeks. Tulane knows they're over thar cause I saw him talking to one yesterday as I looked through this heah window. Reckon the greaser don't do much herding for ole' man Trichell."

Louise turned away in alarm. Gypsies! The thought sent a thrill through her. Perhaps they were only a passing tribe. Could it be possible that it was Pemella's band? It was almost two years since she had escaped. They would hardly return to Oklahoma so early in the summer. But the innate curiosity of woman was aroused in her. She experienced a strong desire to discover who the gypsies were. If she could only spare a moment and ride over to Roundtop. The storm would act as a protecting cover and facilitate her spying on them. It would be possible to slip up to the camp unawares and in a moment she could satisfy her curiosity. She knew the children of Pemella's band.

TO BE CONTINUED

AS ST. PAUL CAME

We were three and we sat before the little open fireplace at Father Robert's study, watching the flames that flickered and purred so merrily before us. There was no light other than the dancing, flickering fire-flames, and it was pleasant to watch them as they fitfully illumined the different objects in the room. Now a sepia engraving of Hoffman's Gethsemane flashed into bold relief, tinged a deeper red as the firelight mounted up the wall, to our right; then a black crucifix, the figure in white, or a steel engraving of the Madonna and Child, would stand out vividly.

Outside the wind sighed and moaned through the leafless trees, blew the dry, powdery snow about the cold marble monuments in the cemetery, and whistled in through a keyhole.

It was Sunday evening, and old Father Robert was enjoying a social hour after the rather fatiguing duties of the day.

For some time no one spoke. The wind whistled and swished without, but our fire flashed its signals of warmth and comfort.

The clock struck nine. Old Father Robert moved slightly in his chair, passed his fingers through his snow-white hair, in a pre-occupied manner, then, speaking from a knowledge of humanity begotten during thirty years' faithful service in his little scattered mission, he said slowly, and as if addressing himself, "I shouldn't be surprised to have a sick call tonight."

I shuddered at the thought of going out at night; but I said nothing.

Then the third member of our little party began to speak. He was a young philosopher, fresh from school. I did not follow very well his little dissertation, but I remember such expressions as fortuitous concurrence of atoms, "nebular hypothesis," etc., and there was a little speculative theory as to the future condition of the world. Father Robert did not seem to catch the glow of the young student's enthusiasm, and once or twice I thought I noticed a look of pitying superiority flit across the youthful countenance. The deeper the young fellow plunged into the depths of his speculative theories the less attentive the old priest seemed to become.

I wondered at his lack of interest, knowing that all priests make a thorough course in philosophy before commencing their divinity course; but, finally, when the young fellow slightly hinted that it might be to their advantage if the clergy would keep posted in the philosophical questions of the day, the old man raised his eyes from the fire, and, looking at the alert young philosopher in a kindly way, quoted very slowly from St. Paul, but he seemed to take a deeper mystical meaning from the words than we could: "And I, brethren,

when I came to you, came not in loftiness of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the wisdom of God in a mystery, a wisdom which is hidden."

Before retiring that night the young fellow came to my room to say a few words, and I sat on my bed and listened to his excited utterances, not knowing whether to smile or to be angry. "Now," he continued, standing before me, his hands in his pockets and a frown puckering his youthful brow, "there's Father Robert—a good priest in his way, but his knowledge of speculative thought is sadly inadequate. Our priests must keep 'au courant.' I can't say that I have a very clear idea of what the priest was driving at downstairs, but I do know St. Paul said 'I am all things to all men,' and as there are many who wish to speculate a little in the realms of thought, therefore, if the priest thought of the sublime egoism of youth. Somehow I felt, Father Robert was not so ignorant of these things philosophical as the young man had inferred from his reticence. I had felt that there was a mystical significance in the words of St. Paul, which the priest seemed to understand when he quoted them. While you were wondering what they meant, I fell asleep."

The night-bell rang; I moved quickly, and went out into the hall. I could hear Father Robert moving quickly about his room. Presently he came into the hall below carrying a lighted lamp in his hand. As he opened the door, the flame of the lamp leaped up the chimney, belching black smoke. A snow-covered figure squeezed itself through the partly open door.

"Davie M'Govern!" exclaimed the priest, "what brings you out in such a storm?" The lad shook his snowy cap against his long overcoat two or three times. "Father," he said, and he trembled with cold and emotion, "Kate is dying, and she's asking for you." He began to sob.

The old man patted the snow-covered shoulder. There now, lad! There now, Davie!" he said kindly.

I stepped back into my room and finished dressing. I knew Father Robert's man had gone away for a few days, and Davie was asking the priest if he would take his own horse. The lad was going to drive on to the doctor's.

When Father Robert turned, after closing the door, I was dressed and standing in the hall beside him. He started slightly at seeing me; but the lamp did not fall. "Father," I said, "I'm going to accompany you."

He looked at me keenly as he spoke. "It's twelve miles, and it is a terrible night."

I looked at the kindly-faced man, at his snow-white hair; then I peered over his shoulder into the darkened study, where only a few bright embers still glowed in the fireplace. Then a great gust of wind blew against the house and the floor trembled beneath my feet.

"You need someone, Father," I murmured courageously to say, "God bless you!" said the priest.

It was cold and dark, and in many places the snow had drifted across the road in deep banks, which at times made progress very difficult, but our horse was strong.

Old Father Robert held his right mitten over his left side, where beneath his coat, in the little golden pyx over his heart, rested the Holy Viaticum. In his left hand he held a large smoky lantern which cast a faint yellow shadow into the snow-flecked night. The fine dry snow-specks beat against my face smartingly, making it almost impossible for me to keep my eyes open for any length of time. Clouds of steam rose from the warm horse into the cold air. In the faint light of our lantern only a few of the evergreens which fringed the road could be seen. The branches of these hung low, weighted with the thick white snow patches.

From time to time I glanced at Father Robert who with head bent was trying to protect his face from the fury of the storm. Always his right hand rested over the pyx. He spoke no audible word, but sat in reverential silence, in presence of his King.

My hands, holding the reins, were very cold; my face pained from contact with the snow-pellets. At times our large black horse dashed into the teeth of the storm, while the sleigh bells jingled sharply. Once or twice an overweighted branch lost its balance and upset its soft white burden, which fell with a thud to the snow beneath. And on we plunged through the stormy night to a little girl who was dying.

Twelve long, cold miles we went; then the priest touched my arm and pointed to the right, where I could just distinguish a small square of light in the darkness. I turned the horse and we swung into a yard. An old man was standing in the shelter of the house, a lighted lantern in one hand, the other shaded his straining eyes, which peered into the storm towards us. Suddenly the empty hand dropped to his side; he fell to his knees,



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