

"Ha!" said Moxley, through his set teeth, "and who went next?"

"Mr. Beauvillier," the rose hue deepening in her cheeks. "He came immediately after Mr. Valcarde left, but thought it advisable to take a different route, and she had insisted that he would ride her father's horse, which, with her own, had been stabled the previous night, as Mr. Beauvillier had slightly lamed his own. Then," she further explained, "Owen, the head man at the ranch, with such of the neighbors as he could muster, had followed."

Moxley led his own horse to the stable, and ten minutes later came out leading Beauvillier's horse.

Judith Carew looked, bit her lip, then smiled as she saw him mount and ride off, for Moxley was a privileged character on the Rio Madre Dolorosa.

Meeting Johnson and Tibbs on his way, he questioned them closely and then struck boldly off.

That he did not proceed very far was certain, for at high noon he was at Carew ranch again. In the stable Judith's milk-white mare stood saddled, and Johnson and Tibbs, with flushed faces, were equipping two mules.

"Well!" was Moxley's sharp greeting.

"It's Miss Judith," answered one of the men; "nothing will do but we must go on the trail, too, and she is to go along to see it well done. Will you go to the house, Major Moxley?" Moxley went to the house and, softening as he always did in Judith's presence, cheered her somewhat. He had no news from the stolen horses, but considerable hope of their recovery.

He had seen Owen and believed him to be on the true trail. He now proposed to follow Beauvillier, who was a bit reckless and would certainly run some risk if he should fall in with a gang of the desperadoes alone.

"If Miss Judith was willing, however," he added, "he would ride with her as far as she cared to go."

Riding with Moxley was no child's play, and well was it for Judith that there was no better horse-woman in all Texas.

The sun was dropping westward when Moxley drew rein near a ford of the Rio Madre. On the opposite bank a wooded creek emptied its waters into the river. They rode to the water's edge and Moxley eagerly scanned the soft mud for fresh hoofprints. A confused trampling of hoofs and murmur of many voices broke from the forest growth on the opposite bank and Judith's eager cry, "It is Owen and the horses!" caused Moxley to turn his head. Owen crossed the ford in triumph and made his report to Moxley.

"We found the horses and mules corralled in the ravine, as you judged we would, with those two 'greasers' guarding them, and we just brought them along for fear——" he paused.

Moxley nodded. "Have you seen anything of Valcarde?" he asked.

"Nothing but this," and Owen held up a Mexican blanket of fine texture and rich hues, which had hung from the shoulders of José Valcarde; "this was strapped to Pompey's saddle."

A deep oath rose to Moxley's lips.

"Bring those greasers here!" he commanded, as he rode out of earshot of the others, and when Owen led before him the horses, to which these transgressors of border law were bound, he drew his revolvers and covered a man with each. When he had finished his examination he rode back to Miss Carew.

"Your horses are found; you can ride back with them if you wish. I must find Beauvillier before I draw rein."

And Judith, looking in his face, saw an expression there she had never seen before—uneasiness and apprehension combined. "If you do not make me go back," she said, "I will go with you; Johnson and Tibbs, who are freshly mounted, can come with us."

Beauvillier, with the impatience of youth and the rashness of inexperience, had on leaving Miss Carew struck boldly out with the nearest ford of the Rio Grande as an objective point, but long ere the day was over he regretted his precipitancy. He thought of Moxley, his astute judgment and un-failing instinct, and with a sigh of disappointment turned back from a fruitless search, convinced that no number of horses could have recently passed over the route he had taken.

Sunset was near, and it was with a sensation of pleasure that he heard through the woods the tramp of bit, the tramp of hoofs and the merry laugh which indicated the approach of a party, probably one of the sections sent out on the quest in which he had been himself fruitlessly occupied. It was Valcarde. He had seen Beauvillier in the open some little time, as he could do from within the shadow of the woods, when suddenly he noted that he was riding one of the colonel's horses. Quick as thought he saw the opportunity to rid himself of the one man whose silent influence he felt stood betwixt him and Judith Carew; for, by the unwritten law of the border land, a horse thief, found red-handed with the fruits of his plunder, was strung up to the nearest tree. Here was a man whom he could so accuse almost within sight of the scene of his depredations, at the mercy of followers who would not hesitate a moment to put in force the border law. Valcarde's plans were swiftly made and rapidly executed. With a loud shout and a familiar execration he thrilled his band with the exclamation:

"Look! Yonder is one of the stolen horses. Follow me. A capture! A capture!" and putting spurs to his horse he galloped toward Beauvillier, followed by his eager and excited band, who swept round Beauvillier on every side.

Valcarde halted in front of Beauvillier, while a lasso thrown quickly over his head from behind and tightened by dextrous hands around his arms, effectually prevented resistance.

"What do you mean?" haughtily demanded Beauvillier. "Cut this rope!"

"The señor does not know, of course," said Valcarde, with smooth irony, "that Colonel Carew's ranch was stripped of all its horses last night and that he himself is mounted on the best—Colonel Carew's own. The señor will come with us," said Valcarde. He had already disarmed his prisoner and with great show of fairness given the revolvers to one of his rancemen.

The sun had dropped from sight when they reached a small grove, with a great oak standing in the foreground. Here preparations were made for one of those informal executions too frequent along the border to call forth comment or opposition.

From a limb which projected from the old oak a rope was dangled—one end run backward, grasped by five or six pairs of willing hands, the other forming a noose, hung loosely down Beauvillier's neck, ready to be tightened with deadly certainty at the word of command.

Beauvillier, with every nerve strung to its uttermost tension and senses preternaturally quickened, thought he heard from the far distance a faint but familiar sound. Could he secure even a momentary delay? He determined to try.

"Men," he said, in the same fearless tones as before, "the United States Government will claim heavy reckoning at your hands for this night's work; all I crave of you for myself is a single hour—give me time to write one short letter."

A sudden suspicion that the letter would be addressed to Judith Carew, and that he might use it at some future time to his own advantage, flashed through Valcarde's brain.

