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WOLF MOON

A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT SOUTHWEST

BY JOSEPH J. QUINN

CHAPTER V.—CONTINUED

Leeches, they are, who come with the spurring oil, following the herds of men as of old the wolves followed the prairie schooners. Yet every oil town has these problems. They shrug their shoulders haughtily and mutter between roved lips when men laugh at their advances and pass by. From town to town, from boom to boom, they come and go. Here today, tomorrow they may be revelling in the gayety of a village sprung up during the night. At times the town seems to revolve around them, that is in the evening when, spider-like, they come out at dusk. Again they sink into obscurity, not drawing a thought from those whom they have won over, that is in the day time when the workers are busy near the black mud of the wells. They disappear suddenly. Whither? No one knows, nor cares. The interest they awaken is ephemeral. Solicitation at night gives way to repudiation at dawn. The one with the small scar, half covered by a strand of blond hair, or the dark Italian appearing girl with the twisted smile have flitted away, singing butterflies, gone to fields more fertile for their designs.

Jack watched their maneuverings from his open window. He pitied them, a pity that sprang from the almost remote possibility of their redemption. He observed one particularly from his eye. She was small with a blue to her eyes that seemed to mirror all the innocence of the world. Yet she possessed a bold recklessness that lacked indulgence in such a petite body. Each evening she came in from the side street near the drug store, passed through the group of lounging men, never bantering, but with eyes straight ahead. Slowly she walked down the street until opposite Jack's window. From out of the shadows of a stairway would come a man, dressed as if lifted from a race-track paddock. For a moment only she would pause, hand him something and pass on. Not once did she look at him directly. When he flashed out of the dusk, her smile dropped from her face as quickly as lightning recedes from the sky and the muscles of her small jaws trembled. But that was all. She moved on. He disappeared. Then would return her assumed smile, sweet, appealing. She was always alone. The others strutted in pairs and figured in the brawls on side streets and dives down near the river bottoms. The daily sheet that came into print sometime during the early morning hours gave but faint delineations of the gun play of the night before. The old frontier life was re-enacted time and again. The law seemed ineffective. There was talk in the Oklahoma capitol of making a drive against gambling dens. The officers who were sent brandished their arms but the blow hung suspended. It had been said that money was passed and the gambling and wild life went on. Oklahoma papers wrote stirring editorials and declared that the Burbank field was not beyond the law. The lawlessness should be stopped. But it went no farther. Paper talk was not relished by the element holding sway in the overnight towns. Men acted suddenly, spontaneously here. They drew their guns and thought later, followed their own course and asked for no advice. This was augmented by the fact of moonshine whiskey sold across bars. To the men "corn" supplied hope when hope was about extinct. It aroused them from stupors to which low prices and ill luck had dragged them. It fired them to lie, to scheme, to plot, to shoot, to grapple in death frays. There was law but the law lacked teeth.

From the watchtower somewhere back in the big cities one day flashed a wire that oil production must cease. The news fell like a plummet casting a pall over the town. One by one the engines stopped pumping. The merriment of the workers ceased; the coffee shop owners featured grouches; men sulked in side streets and whispered together in alleys. Fast cars were commandeered and oil men frisked away to other towns. The usual crowds that gathered before the large wall maps and watched the shifting of varicolored pins, showing findings and locations, melted away. The irrepressible lease salesman lost none of his insistence nor eloquence in his endeavor to sell land near "blow ins" that were in reality only "dusters" or dry holes. But he faced an immovable wall for the tide had turned. Men held on to their money with a vice's grip.

With the news of the shut down Jack Corcoran felt a way of satisfaction come over him that he could not quite fathom. He was sickened with the oil fields and their people. He had become a first class tool dresser now but he was disheartened with his work. Even the atmosphere of the fields disgusted him. He despised the sight of black pools of oil, the greasy tools and machinery, the splashes of rainbowed oil on the hillsides, the dirty town with its flea-bitten dogs and its men sitting on the pavements. It was

oil, oil, oil, from morning till night. The air was charged with it. The crude familiarity of tobacco-smearing men bored him, their subjects of conversation were filthy, as low as their mental horizons. There was a lack of religion, of a knowledge of God that was appalling. It was customary to see men with religion strike oil and then turn from God entirely. It was the way of the oil fields. When needy they turned to any and every source—even to prayer. In prosperity they were self-sufficient.

Three days after the news broke the exodus had taken place, the town was practically deserted. Jack walked up and down main street and felt a smug satisfaction that he could do so without being ogled by women. He was not slapped on the back at every corner by booted men. No boisterous shout went up upon his appearance on the streets. Jack was well-liked everywhere although he was not a spender. In fact he had deposited \$300 at the Commercial Bank. The only real friend that he had made was the bank teller, named Buster Christian. The latter had been lured from his father's ranch in western Oklahoma by the boom.

His father's recommendation to the bank president lay unused in his pocket until Buster, disgusted with oil work desired a change. His name had not been on file a day before he was notified that a position was open as "handy man." As the town grew so did the bank's business and before long Buster was appointed teller. Upon Jack's first visit to the teller's window Buster observed that this youth was far different in appearance from the rank and file of the workers. As the weeks passed by he noted, too, that he differed because of his habit of banking part of his wages. Friendship sprang up between them.

Just before the bank closed one afternoon Jack casually dropped in to see Buster. The latter had some news for him: "Jack, I'm going to pull out for home tomorrow. I'm not needed here now. Reckon I could stay if I wanted to but I feel I'm in the way. I'm going back to the ranch and you're coming along. You've got to punch cattle and ride the range. You can't tell me that you ever liked this oil work. You're not fitted for it. But I'll bet you a sack of gold you'll like it home." Buster was gesticulating through the iron window frame.

"No, I can't say that I ever liked oil work," Jack admitted slowly, rather crestfallen, "but I suppose it could be worse." "If anything is worse I would like to know what it is," Buster exclaimed vehemently. "A booming oil town is one of the most infernal places on earth and a deserted one is a fright. I guess it will pick up again but I won't be here when it does. I want to get back to the ranch and ride Night-mare in the evening and feel the old wind cut against my face. Just think! I have been here almost two years. Can't see how I stayed away from the old ranch this long. When we get back we'll let you ride Cordovan. He's a big brute that pitches and rears and bites. He throws a fit every now and then and, boy, if you're in the saddle, watch out. Are you game?" "Game? Why, I'm just yearning to throw my leg over that nag." A smile broke across Jack's face.

"Out our way we call 'em critters, but a rose by any old name will smell as sweet. But I'm glad you'll go. We'll leave tomorrow if it's suitable for you." Buster turned to a bank patron while Jack sauntered off.

Jack walked slowly back to his room. He sat in the same old chair by the window and gazed out at the deserted town. In his six months here he had not spent one happy day. His acquaintances had seemed so different from the gracious, polite people of the East. His only joy had been the daily letters from Janet, but of late Janet had not written so frequently. Her letters seemed colder, less newswy, as if written through sheer force of habit. They did not show the tender concern of the first ones, nor an appreciation of his position, a loneliness some one far from his Eastern friends. Was she forgetting? Did she believe that he was not succeeding as he should? Had someone come between them? He banished the thought through a cloud of blue smoke and set to packing his trunk. But the thoughts recurred. All that afternoon he was obsessed with a wondering fear that he was losing out somewhere, that his western trip was proving a failure. The oil venture had turned to dust. Now he was casting about for some place to go. Were it not for Buster Christian's offer he would be without destination.

After supper Jack again mounted the shaking stairs and sat by the open window as he had done a hundred times before. Thoughts seemed to roll up to him from out there in the oil fields that lay quiet as a forest. In his six months in Oklahoma he had accomplished little or nothing. Fall and winter had come and gone. Spring was pipping the brown trees from the rocky ridges into green leaves. Butterflies danced giddily in the sunshine and in a few yards petunias bloomed through the sheen of oil and grime.

For the first time since he had come west Jack tapped into a spirit of discouragement. Some inner urge was telling him to give up the

western life and go back home. Janet would be glad, he felt. He would have to admit that the oil game had proven unprofitable in his case. But after all there was no shame in this confession. He was asking himself why he should remain longer in Oklahoma. Why go farther west? Perhaps, he would like the ranch life no better than the oil fields. Cowboys, as a rule, were not of a higher stamp than oil men. They, too, used guns and split infinitives and the like.

It would be Springtime home and the world would be verdant and beautiful. The brown clods of earth had greened and become dotted with red and purple flowers. The hillslopes were covered with frail anemones and nodding heads of buttercups; the blue waters of the Delaware were washing against the banks, warming under April suns. But here in Oklahoma the red earth only looked redder under the glaring heat. At noon the active rays, burned as if through lens, blistering the ground as seashore suns do to cover and brought on that sickening buzz of overgrown flies in store windows.

A sudden decision startled him. Instinctively he found himself throwing his belongings into his trunk. He picked up a blue envelope on the corner of which was embossed "The Savage Oil Company." "That's where they stuck me for one hundred berries. Two thousand feet of dust. Never again." He threw the oil lease into a corner of the trunk. "I'll take it home and show Dad the business head of his young son." Jack forced a laugh from himself with effort.

His trunk packed Jack strolled down to the edge of the town. There was quietness that was in strange contrast to the noise and bustle of the week before. A large group of derricks stood like stigmatisms dropped from the skies by a provident God. There was no creaking of pumps, no bright flare of gas, no figures darting here and there. The moon rose over the field of wooden ghosts throwing shadows on the cart. It looked like a battle ground with its engine of warfare deserted. An automobile in the distance was casting its light high into the sky and then down upon the road. It made the only sound save discordant singing that broke out spasmodically. Jack wandered over her cake. "That burglar walked right to the table and picked up the bowl of buttermilk I'd set out to make cakes this morning, and he drained every drop of it."

"The nerve of him! What'd you do, Sara?" "I saw he was hungry and you know my weakness, Daniel. I just can't bear to have any hungry thing, human or animal about me. I set him right down to the table and gave him bread and butter and jam and cold meat and milk." "He might have killed you, Sara. Tramps are dangerous. Why didn't you mind?" "And then, seeing as he was so tired, I told him he could sleep on the couch in the living room," and then Sara paused to look at her brother with an odd expression half defiant and half pleading. The fork that had been raised to his lips purposely passed under Buster Christian's window, who observed a light. In answer to Jack's whistle Buster appeared. Jack was about to break the news to him of his decision to return home.

"What are you doing wandering around this hour of the night? I'm watch out. Are you ready to go? Remember the train leaves at 6:45." "Say, Buster—" Jack began hesitatingly. "Say nothing. I know what you're going to say. That girl of yours has changed your mind. Well you're coming with me and I'll get her for a little while. You're going out home and tone up a little before you hop back East." "That's fine Buster, but you know—" "No, I don't know. All I know that you're coming with me tomorrow and I'm not going to take no for an answer. So trot along and pack up. The very idea of judging Oklahoma by its oil towns. Boy! wait until you get out under the stars back there on the plains. You'll fall on my neck for bringing you home."

Buster disappeared and left Jack amazed, his mind swimming. What should he do? Buster had shattered his decision in a moment. After all, he really wasn't intensely eager to return home empty-handed. Jack paused for a moment under the window and there floated to him Buster's merry whistle. It sounded cheery out there in the moonlight. Jack surmised that there must be something worth while out there in the plains country, the anticipation of which made Buster so happy. Perhaps, too, it would clear away his depression. Jack swung across the street, passed a low building where a click of chips told him a game was in progress and then up under the overhanging wooden awnings. In the doorway of a pawnshop he observed the town sheriff talking with a tall, dark mustached man who drew out a stiff "Hell, No!" It was characteristic oil town language. Jack turned toward the stairway of his room and watched how the moonlight flooded the vestibule, the steps, the worn oil flume. With a leap he sprang up the stairs. He had decided. He would go west with Buster to find the secret of his happiness.

TO BE CONTINUED

I would rather be great by the will of God than a seraph by my own.

THE THANKSGIVING BURGLAR

"Daniel, there was a burglar here last night!" With the utmost precision, Sara Tully turned the golden-brown pancake as she made the surprising announcement which caused her brother, who had just come in to breakfast after doing the morning's milking, to stand still and gasp: "A burglar, Sara?" "Yes, Daniel." She placed the pancake upon a heaped-up mound of lemping, steaming cakes, carried the plate to the table and poured the coffee. "Breakfast ready, Daniel." "But Sara, what about the burglar," he demanded as he sat down. "Did he take anything—your silver or diamond?" The silver consisted of six teaspoons, which had belonged to her grandmother and were never used. They were kept in a state of high polish in a tall glass on the center of the mantel as a decoration. Sara's diamond was a single small stone in an old-fashioned setting, her engagement ring, a relic of her one romance. It was thirty years since her grandmother had been killed by a fall from a horse and her rosy dream of wifehood, motherhood and a little home in which, no matter how humble it might be, she would reign as queen, was utterly blasted.

"My ring and the silver are safe. He didn't take a thing," except, with aggravating calm she paused to pass him the bacon and eggs. "Except what, Sara?" Daniel demanded impatiently. "Did you see the burglar?" "Yes, I saw him, Daniel. I had just finished settin' my yeast and he didn't take a thing," except, with aggravating calm she paused to pass him the bacon and eggs. "Except what, Sara?" Daniel demanded impatiently. "Did you see the burglar?" "Yes, I saw him, Daniel. I had just finished settin' my yeast and he didn't take a thing," except, with aggravating calm she paused to pass him the bacon and eggs. "Except what, Sara?" Daniel demanded impatiently. "Did you see the burglar?"

"Scream for you? Why should I do that?" she demanded as she poured the syrup over her cake. "That burglar walked right to the table and picked up the bowl of buttermilk I'd set out to make cakes this morning, and he drained every drop of it."

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