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The Fighting Ranger

BY F. J. McCONNELL and GEORGE W. PYPER.

CHAPTER XV. (Cont'd.)

The elegant arc, and the flashily dressed woman skilfully painted to still look pretty, at the driver's wheel, attracted considerable attention from the rough natives of Pico when it stopped at the Hotel Rio Grande. A group of them were still curiously inspecting the car when Stella Montrose, after arranging for a room, returned to it from inside the hotel. "Can you direct me to John Marshall's attorney?" she asked.

"Oh, that'll be Mr. Taggart, lady," replied one of the men, and pointed the way.

Stella sped off in the direction indicated. Taggart was at his desk when she knocked on the office door.

"Come in."

As Stella entered with an easy air of assurance, Taggart rose to greet her, and indicated a chair.

"I understand you're acting for John Marshall, Mr. Taggart?" Stella asked.

"Yes, I'm his attorney," he replied. "And what can I do for you?"

Stella eyed him keenly, and said slowly:

"I have certain evidence that might be worth—well, you know what I mean—"

She shrugged and smiled. Taggart regarded her suspiciously, and asked:

"Just what is the evidence you say you have?"

Stella, with her skill as an actress acquired during her life as a shrewd adventuress, took her time, lighted a cigarette, smiled blandly and worked to produce an effect before replying.

Finally she said, with her eyes full on Taggart's, and a curious smile on her lips:

"Black Benway did not die from Marshall's bullet. I can prove it if Marshall makes it worth my while—"

She puffed at her cigarette, and

Taggart, on his guard, stared at her intently.

With another worldly-wise glance, Stella added:

"You're a lawyer—you know what I mean."

Taggart gripped his desk, and asked savagely:

"Is this straight?"

Retaining her own calm, easy manner, she looked amused at his agitation, and simply nodded "Yes."

Taggart quickly pulled himself together, tried to conceal his nervousness, and with affected calm:

"I'd just as soon this evidence did not come out."

"Aren't you his friend, and attorney?" Stella asked.

"Friends and attorneys sometimes have interests which conflict with those of their clients," Taggart answered.

"In this case it happens that my jury would convict Marshall on the evidence against him. His conviction would give me ownership of the Bar M Ranch—and I have certain very good reasons of my own for wanting the obtain that property."

"I think I understand," said Stella, looking at him shrewdly. "I'm buying an apartment house myself—in Bismarck. I could use \$25,000 awfully well."

Their eyes met understandingly. After a moment's thought Taggart said:

"If you will forget all about Black Benway, I'll raise the cash before night. Agreed?"

Stella nodded approval, and said:

"I'm stopping at the Hotel Rio Grande."

Then she glided out of the office, Taggart staring after her, his face crossed by bewildering anxieties and mistrust.

CHAPTER XVI.

TOPAZ TAGGART'S LOVE.

When Mary came to Taggart's office that afternoon he greeted her with an air of kindness.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "But the judge refused absolutely to give bail. It's hard to get on a murder charge, you know, and especially since your father has been a fugitive for so long."

Mary's face clouded with disappointment.

"Still, don't worry," Taggart hastened to add. "Trial has been set for one week from to-day—and then we'll get him free." He smiled reassuringly.

"You can count on me to do everything—everything possible, to win this case—for my old friend."

Mary's face still betrayed her anxiety.

"But—but if the case should go against us—if they find him guilty?" she cried, and broke down in tears.

Taggart came over to her and patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there," he said, "we'll get him off." He paused, then added, "Of course, in these matters, you never can tell what a jury may do—and there is always the chance, however remote, that the verdict will go against us."

Mary shuddered, and a renewed flood of tears burst from her eyes.

Taggart's huge, uncouth hand continued to pat her, and he said:

"Even then—if that should happen—I don't think it will, but if it should—you, Mary—you can count on your father's old friend, Topaz Taggart."

Becoming aware of the meaning behind Taggart's advances, Mary stopped crying, wiped her eyes, and looking at Taggart, asked:

"Has Terence returned from Latigo yet?"

Taggart frowned.

"No, I can't think what is detaining him," he answered. Then, after a pause, he added, "Mary, I don't quite trust that O'Rourke. We shouldn't have trusted him with that money. I should not be surprised if the fellow shows up in his true colors now. He may have absconded with the money."

Mary arose, angrily.

"Why, Mr. Taggart," she exclaimed. "How can you say that? Mr. O'Rourke is absolutely trustworthy. And he's—he's my fiancé."

Taggart looked at her with affected sympathy.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I had observed—with sorrow—that you cared for him. That's why I have said nothing about my suspicions of him before. But I cannot help but feel that you are being deceived in him. Perhaps this day will prove I am right."

After a pause, Taggart, looking at Mary tenderly, said in a soft voice:

"Mary, haven't you seen that I—I your father's old friend, who has been protecting your interests all these years—I, who now am putting every force at my command into my effort to save your father's life—don't you see that I, too, love you, Mary? Why don't you put your trust in me, tried and true friend of your father's—instead of this stranger, of whom we know nothing, this man who even now may be fleeing across the border with the last of your money?"

He seized her hand. Mary resisted him.

Taggart went on:

"Mary, from the moment you arrived here, I adored you—"

Mary interrupted him:

"Please, Mr. Taggart," she said, "don't talk like this. I appreciate all you have done and are doing for father and me, but this—well, you have surprised me so, and don't you see it is impossible—my heart is already taken. And I wish you would not cast reflections on Mr. O'Rourke. Oh, don't think me ungrateful to you—but you must see how it is. And now with father in this terrible trouble, and all these worries, I can't think, I can't—"

Taggart looked hurt, and said with tender resignation:

"There, there, Mary, I understand how you feel. I shall wait until after the trial—and by then you will know that old friend of mine is the one to trust, for whatever way the verdict goes, you will find me the friend who can depend upon, and the one who loves you."

"I must go back to father," said Mary, preparing to leave.

"I will let you know as soon as O'Rourke comes back—if he does," Taggart assured her, escorting her to the door.

"And remember, Mary—whatever happens—Topaz Taggart is the one friend in all the world that you can count upon absolutely."

Half an hour later another visitor came to Taggart's office. It was Buck McLeod. He grinned triumphantly.

"It's done," he told Taggart.

"Good work," said Taggart, rubbing his hands enthusiastically. "And did you see the end of the corridor?"

"Here it is," Buck interrupted him, handing him an envelope.

THE TRIAL OF JOHN MARSHALL.

It had been a terrible week for Mary. Terence had not returned.

Her faith in him was unshattered, but her heart was heavy with fears that he had been killed in an accident, or by bandits. Taggart had obtained a warrant for his arrest, but the sheriff's men had been unable to find any trace of Terence.

Wounded down with worries over the crisis, and by having his sick and broken-spirited father, whom she visited each day in prison, in addition to fears for her missing lover, she was in a frantic state. Taggart continued to pursue her with his advances, and while she managed to put him off, she had to try not to offend him, for so much would depend upon the defence he would put up as her father's lawyer.

Taggart strove to raise himself in her favor, by having his men bring the cattle back to the ranch from the pothole where they had been dry gulched, telling her he had led a terrific battle with the cattle rustlers.

Finally, on the crucial day arrived—the day of the trial.

It was a day of torture for Mary. The courtroom was crowded. All eyes were fixed on John Marshall, the prisoner, looking weak, weary and hopeless, sitting under guard of a deputy sheriff.

Taggart, dressed in a dark suit, tried to look confident, and to cheer him up. She studied the stern face of the judge, and then expressionless faces of the jury, tensely listening to her. Even the spectators, it seemed, sided with the prosecution.

The weary hours passed—the wranglings of the lawyers, the drone of arguments, the examining of witnesses, and heated cross-questioning, the wrapping of the judge's gavel for order—all the dreary routine of Justice in operation.

Taggart concluded his defence of Marshall, after a weak fight, and sat down beside Mary and her father.

"I have done all I could," he told Mary. "We can only wait hopefully now."

She sobbed, and said nothing.

The prosecutor, a sharp-featured man with a quick and convincing tongue, was addressing the jury. Perpetually he assailed every argument of the frail defence Taggart had put up. His words fell like hammer blows upon Mary, and her hope kept sinking.

Her father's face was pale and haggard as he listened to the prosecutor's denunciation.

The end was near. The prosecutor was shouting in a high shrill voice. The jurors hung on his words.

"The defence has told you that John Marshall shot in self-defence to protect his own life," the prosecutor was saying. "Now, in conclusion, gentlemen, let me ask you just one question. In the answer to that question, which you will form in your own minds, you should find the basis for your verdict."

"The question is this—If the story told by the defence were true—if the killing of Black Benway was justified, as they have it to prove—then why, gentlemen, did this man—"

and he pointed an accusing finger at Marshall, a picture of despair where he sat beside Mary, her own eyes fearful, but flashing defiance at the prosecutor, and trying vainly to comfort her father.

"Why did John Marshall," the prosecutor's voice shrilled on, his finger shaking at the prisoner, "flee into hiding from the law for fifteen years?"

He halted, to allow the full effect of his master stroke to fall upon the courtroom. The spectators stirred with hushed excitement—the jury looked more tense than ever. Confident he had scored, the prosecutor resumed:

"The State rests its case in your hands, gentlemen, with the demand that the defendant expiate his crime by the death penalty!"

The tense excitement in the room subsided in a degree as the prosecutor took his seat, and the gray-headed judge arose and droned out his charge to the jury, summing up the points on both sides in a dispassionate, drawing-out voice.

The deputy touched Taggart on the elbow.

"You're wanted outside a minute, Mr. Taggart."

Taggart went out in the hall. It was Stella Montrose who was waiting for him. He whispered with her in a corner at the end of the corridor.

"I've waited long enough," Stella told him. "Come across with the rest of that money—or I'll stop the show now."

Her expression was determined. Taggart was alarmed.

"Sh-h-h-h! I've already told you the bank gave O'Rourke a cashier's cheque for \$20,000," he said. "That, with the \$5,000 cash I already slipped you, will make the total we agreed on."

"Well, but give it to me," Stella insisted.

"Wait," whispered Taggart. "The cheque's no good until Marshall's girl endorses it. I've told them O'Rourke beat it over the border. We've got to play this right. Just bide your time. Marshall is doomed. When I get his ranch I'll let you in on the game. Don't worry—I'll treat you right."

"Well, you better," Stella said, and they parted.

The judge finished his charge to the jury as Taggart re-entered the courtroom. The jurors filed out, and the judge dismounted from the bench. A buzz of conversation filled the courtroom as the recess began.

Mary's arm rested comfortingly on her father's shoulder. He stared before him, silent. Taggart approached.

"We have done our best," he said. "I am hopeful, very hopeful."

After an hour of dreadful suspense for Mary and her father, word was sent from the jury room that a verdict had been reached. The judge mounted to the bench, rapped for order, and remained standing as the jurors filed in to their box in the courtroom.

"Mr. Foreman, will you announce the finding of the jury?" the judge droned.

Awful hush fell upon the courtroom. The spectators all leaned forward in their seats breathlessly. John Marshall gripped his chair and waited, rigid and livid. Mary, pale, pressed against him, and stroked his hand.

The foreman of the jury arose and spoke, slowly chopping out his words:

"Your Honor, the jury finds the defendant, John Marshall, guilty—"

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The muttered awe that thrilled through the courtroom at the word "Guilty" almost drowned out his last words. The judge beat his gavel upon the rostrum. Marshall had sunk back in his chair in utter despair. Mary arose, her hands clenched, her face filled with wild terror.

"Of the murder of Black Benway," the foreman's voice concluded. Whispering voices buzzed through the room. Mary, her head at first swimming with defiance, in her overwrought state about to fly into the faces of the judge and jury screaming, suddenly subsided, and fell swooning into Taggart's arms.

The judge was rapping for order, and silence once more filled the room.

"You have heard the verdict of the jury," he was droning. "The court will pronounce sentence upon the prisoner two weeks from to-day, and until that time the case is adjourned. (To be continued.)"

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