

The Fighting Tenderfoot

CHAPTER XI—Continued

He smiled ruefully. His modesty would not let him believe that he had in him the qualities to win the woman he wanted to such joy. What had he to offer her so compelling that she would find in the house of their life together doors opening to dear delights and windows looking upon dawns rosy with the promise of new happiness?

The young man carried away with him a good deal to think about. He had found out that he was still sunk fathoms deep in love. It would be this woman or none with him. But what about her? Was there a chance that after many days her heart would answer the deep silent call of his? Had she meant to encourage him? He did not think so. He was almost sure she had not.

Public indignation is usually not sustained. It evaporates with the passage of time. When the rumor spread, about a year after the disappearance of Bob Quantrell, that he had returned to his old haunts the residents of Jefferson county did not bestir themselves to comb the mountains and the chaparral for him. This was strictly the business of Sheriff O'Hara and such indiscreet youths as he could induce to serve with him as deputies.

Bob had been seen one night at Concho. Deever was with him. They made a fleeting visit to Agua Caliente to buy supplies. It was known they had been on Horse creek.

O'Hara recognized that this was to be a campaign. It was essential that he have deputies upon whom he could depend at a pinch. Quietly he set about making preparations.

He dropped in at the Longhorn corral.

Steve Worrall greeted him. "What's new, old-timer?"

"The latest news is that Steve Worrall has been appointed deputy sheriff of Jefferson county," O'Hara said, smiling at him. "He may not know it yet, but he's practically all ready to be sworn in."

"How come? I know quite several jobs I like better than that—safer an' more comfortable an' better pay with less hard work."

"Less hard work. Hmp!" O'Hara's eyes traveled down the long, lean body. "Getting soft. Too much time wasted at playing cards."

"Also," continued Steve, paying no attention to this gratuitous criticism, "I haven't lost Bob Quantrell any to speak of, if that's the notion that's stickin' in yore coconut. He's a slick fellow to leave live when he's huntin' for nature's sweet solitude. Bob Quantrell ain't interferin' with me any. Why should I get all het up about him? 'Live an' let live' is my motto."

"My idea is to make haste slowly," O'Hara said, passing over the other's objections as negligible. "We'll not go ramping all over the country looking for him. Until we get a straight steer we'll sit tight and wait. No use chasing down every rascal we hear. When I follow a trail I want it to be a hot one."

"Are you aimin' to capture Quantrell's gang? Or to run 'em down an' wipe 'em out?"

"To capture them if I can. We want men with us who will do to take along. What do you think of Buckskin Joe?"

"Don't know him very well, but he's got a good rep. Fought Apaches, I've heard army officers speak well of him."

"I've thought of Amen Owen, too." "Good man. He used to be right friendly with Bob, though."

"So did you and I, for that matter. If Owen throws in with us he'll go through."

"I reckon."

They discussed others as possibilities for any posse that might be required, though both of them realized that the personnel of any posse would be a measure to be determined by the men available at the time.

Quantrell did not keep them waiting long. A buckboard driver brought in word three days later that a bunch of horses had been stolen from a rancher named Ferril, who lived close to the Mal Pais in the western part of the county. Hastily O'Hara gathered a posse and rode to Ferril's place. With him he had Worrall, Owen, and two brothers named Brown.

It was a long ride and the weather was bitter. The snow was five or six inches deep, and the wind swept it from the ground in swirling gusts that drove it into their faces with the sting of sleet. All day they rode, and it was after dark when they reached the ranch which was their destination. Icicles hung from the eyebrows of the men, matted the beards of the two Browns, and depended from the manes of the horses. A dozen times the riders had been forced to dismount in order to get circulation into their legs by walking alongside the animals.

"We'd be nice easy marks if Bob an' his crowd happen to have come back to spend the night," grumbled Amen as they drew up outside the house.

The sheriff slipped from the saddle and knocked on the door.

The rancher called "Who's there?" then after a moment opened without waiting for an answer.

He invited the half-frozen men into the house, and they thawed out in front of the fireplace while Ferril and his son stabled the horses and fed them.

Mrs. Ferril was a bouncing, round-breasted young woman with snapping

black eyes. She was twenty years younger than her husband and was the stepmother of the lad. At once she set about making supper for the self-invited guests. While she worked she flashed smiles at them and talked.

The sheriff asked questions enough to direct her conversation. It appeared that Phil, her stepson, had ridden out of an arroyo in time to see the rustlers round up the horses. They had caught sight of him and one of the men had fired at him before he realized that this was a raid. Phil was almost sure that the man who had fired at him was Deever. He had not been near enough to recognize any of the others.

"Which way did they go after leaving the ranch?" Owen asked.

"Toward the Mal Pais," she said. "Hank followed them for several miles. He couldn't miss their trail in the snow. They have a hangout there in a cave. The story is that they have a bunch of cattle rounded up in a valley two-three miles from there."

The men of the posse slept on the floor in their own blankets, which they first dried out before the fire.

In a few minutes they were all dead to the world. It had been an exhausting day and the sturdiest of them was tired. None of them awakened until Phil renewed the fire which had been banked for the night.

"Roll out an' roll up, boys," O'Hara shouted, and he fitted action to word by doing so himself.

They stamped out to the washpan, made themselves clean, and combed their hair. By the time they had fed the horses, breakfast was almost ready.

It had been agreed that Hank Ferril was to ride with them. He did not want to go, but he could not very well object. The stolen horses were his, and he knew the Mal Pais country better than any of the others.

"They're a tough layout, an' I hate to get them sore at me," he said while he was saddling.

"Why, of course, if you're raisin' stock for Bob Quantrell's benefit, Hank," said Owen with obvious sarcasm.

"Not a chance in the world of gettin' my stock back, Amen. Like huntin' a needle in a haystack. If Bob wants us to find him we will; if not, we won't see hide or hair of him. An' you can bet that if we do it'll be because he's got the dead wood on us."

Ferril's prediction was a true one. Forty-eight hours later the posse, a group of weary and saddle-worn men, dismounted at his ranch and bowed-legged stiffly to the house from the corral. For a day and a night it had been snowing steadily.

"No luck?" asked Mrs. Ferril of the sheriff.

"No luck," replied O'Hara. "Bob wasn't at home when we reached the cave, but he left a note for us. Thoughtful of him."

He handed a torn fragment of a newspaper to her. On it was scrawled: "Make yourself comfortable, Sheriff. Flour under the ledge. Quarter of beef hanging from the cottonwood by the spring. Cards on the shelf. Sorry can't stay and say howdy, but I've got a hen on at the Circle S O ranch. Meet up with you and chew over old times later. Adios."

The penciled note was signed "Bob Quantrell."

Mrs. Ferril showed strong white teeth in gay laughter. "He's sure enough a case, that boy. Never saw the beat of him for impudence."

"He's certainly got the laugh on us this time," the sheriff admitted. "Bob must have had a scout out, for he hadn't been gone half an hour when we reached the cave. The fire hadn't died down at all."

"What will you do now?"

"Get back to the Circle S O fast as a horse will carry me. Then I'll probably be too late."

"You may be lucky if you get there too late," she warned.

He agreed that there was something to that.

It was late when O'Hara dropped wearily from the saddle at the Diamond Tail and halted the house. He wanted to see Jack Phillips, who had since Ingram's death been foreman of the young widow's ranch.

Barbara answered his call. "Who is it?" she asked.

"Garrett. Is Jack here?"

"No, he isn't. He went over to see Dad and said he wouldn't be back till late. What is it, Garrett?"

He hesitated. No use worrying her. "Nothing much, Barbara. I'm on my way to the Circle S O and I stopped to have a word with him. But if he isn't here—"

"Wait just a minute and I'll be out," she said, and drew back from the window.

Presently a lamp was lit. After a minute he saw the light pass from her room to the hall. She opened the front door.

"Come in," she said, holding the lamp high to light the way.

Still he hesitated.

By Willam MacLeod Raine

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dered her husband. Even the mention of his name might stab her.

"I just wanted to tell him to keep an eye out for rustlers. I've reason to think some are heading this way."

"You mean the Quantrell gang?" she asked quickly.

"Yes. Probably they'll not show up on your range. More likely the Circle S O country."

"How do you know? Tell me about it." Again her gaze swept up from his muddy boots and leathers to his unshaven face and sunken eyes. She interrupted herself to fling at him a question. "How far have you ridden today?"

"From the Mal Pais."

"When did you eat last?"

"This morning. I was in a hurry to get through. Don't bother about it."



O'Hara, on a Fresh Horse, Plowed Through the Drifts on the Divide.

me. I'm all right—get food at the ranch when I get there."

"You'll eat here," she told him firmly. "Lie down on that sofa while I make supper for you."

"No. You're not strong enough. You mustn't—"

"I'm perfectly strong. David is three months old today. How long do you want me to be an invalid?" She tossed some newspapers from the lounge and ordered him to lie down.

Reluctantly, still protesting, he did as he was told. Barbara threw a Navajo rug over him and left the room, taking the lamp with her. Moving about the kitchen with the light gave that characterized her. His lids drooped. He fought against fatigue.

She was a woman to dream about, deep-bosomed and supple-limbed, incomparably alive . . . trusty as steel. . . . Was it any wonder that every fiber of his being had for a year longed for her as Abelard had yearned for Heloise? God must have meant love to fulfill her life. If so. . . .

When she returned, shading the flame of the lamp with her hand, he was sound asleep. Barbara looked down at him, a smile in her eyes. A glow warm and tender pervaded her, a diffused happiness. Never had she known anyone at all like him. Sensitive as a girl, quick with the shyness and the generosity of youth, he was none the less as self-reliant and competent as Dave Ingram himself had been. Gentleness was an essential quality of him, but no more so than the gay courage that emergencies seemed to set bubbling in his veins. He was a bookman—liked to read classics that till lately had been only names to her—but he had flung him-

self into the frontier life with boyish zest and had met, often buoyantly, always unflinchingly, the stark tests that had been imposed on him.

She let the light shine on him. His eyelids flickered open and he smiled at her.

"Your supper is ready," she told him.

"May I wash my hands?"

She found warm water in a basin and a clean towel at hand.

While he ate she sat across the table from him, elbow on table and chin on fist, listening to the story of his hunt in the Mal Pais country for the outlaws. He made light of it, but she could muster only a very faint smile even when he read aloud Quantrell's note. The man was more dead-ly than a rattlesnake, for he struck without warning. She had lived over fifty times that dreadful hour when she had come upon her husband's dead body lying in the road.

From her throat there leaped involuntarily the thought in her mind: "Oh, I wish you weren't sheriff, Garrett!"

A wave of emotion flooded him. He dared not let himself hope that her spontaneous cry meant more than friendship. He passed quickly over it lest she explain it away.

"I'd rather Quantrell felt that way than you," he said, trying for an effect of carelessness.

"There's something—inhuman about him."

He could see that fear had risen to her throat and choked her. Therefore he spoke evenly, almost negligently. "Not at all. He's just a boy gone bad, as they say. And don't forget, Barbara, that he's at the wrong end of this hunt, not I. He's the one that has to double and twist to escape, the one who has to suspect every man he meets of wanting to betray him. We on the side of the law have a tremendous advantage, a moral force that makes a lot of difference."

"What difference would it make if he ever—ever—?"

"Don't worry about me, Barbara. He's not trying to get me but to get away from me." His hand moved a few inches across the table toward her. "I understand how you must feel about him—how you fear for your friends. But it really isn't necessary. I'm taking no unnecessary risks. He may dodge me for a while, but we'll round him up in the end—and I'll not be hurt doing it."

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"If you ever get a chance you ought to—to put an end to him as you would a wolf," she cried with a little flare of savagery.

The brown eyes looking into hers were grim. "Listen, Barbara," he said. "I haven't undertaken to fight a duel with Quantrell. He's a killer, an outlaw wanted because of the crimes he has committed. If I can I'll get him at advantage, and if necessary I'll do just what you've said. Our lives aren't of the same value to society. I've been chosen to put an end to his lawless career. That's what I mean to do, one way or another, if I can. I don't intend to be a chivalrous fool about this, if that's what you are afraid of."

She gathered from this what reassurance she could. "But you will be careful, won't you?" she pleaded.

"You'll not take any chances you don't have to?"

"Not a chance," he promised. "As the boys say, I'll not throw off on myself."

Garrett O'Hara had talked to Barbara with quiet confidence of the prospects. There was, he felt, no need to alarm her unduly. But the arguments he had used did not wholly convince himself. It is true, in one sense, that the advantage in such a campaign as this lay with the officers. In another way the odds entirely favored the hunted rather than the hunters, because the former could at one time or another choose the setting for battle. During the two days that O'Hara's posse had combed the Mal Pais for the outlaws there had not been an hour when the searchers had

not been in terrain where it was possible for Quantrell to ambush them. That he had not done so was either because the young desperado had other fish to fry or because of the criminal's instinct to keep on the dodge as long as he could and avoid an open conflict with the forces of law.

It was all very well to talk about being cautious, but it was an intrinsic part of the game he played that he had to take chances even when he did not know he was taking them.

As O'Hara, on a fresh horse, plowed through the drifts on the divide between the Diamond Tail and the Circle S O, he knew that there never had been a time when he wanted less to fall a victim to Quantrell's marksmanship than now. For his heart was lifted within him. He had seen her concern for him, and he had not dared to trade upon it lest she qualify her words till they meant nothing. Instead of putting her on the defensive he had edged away from the subject in order that she would not take away the hope that had leaped up in him. It was sheer cowardice. He knew that, while he excused himself on the plea that of all things he must not be precipitate.

Riding through the night, he rebuilt the scene, her words and manner, the inflections of her voice. Had she meant more than friendliness? He would not let himself think so. Yet there blazed in him a new and glorious hope.

CHAPTER XII

The Sheriff Makes a Capture

When O'Hara reached the Circle S O he found that Bob Quantrell had made his threat good. In the darkness he and one other companion had slipped up to the stable and taken two blooded horses that belonged to Smith-Beresford. In place of them they left two leg-weary geldings branded with the sprawling H F used by Hank Ferril.

Quantrell left also one of his characteristic notes. He had nailed it to the top of the feed bin.

"Only a short visit this time, Mr. Tenderfoot Sheriff. Business in Concho, so I can't stay. Much obliged for the horses. They say an even swap is no robbery. Tell Wes not to feel slighted. I'll drop in on him soon. See you later."

"BOB QUANTRELL."

Tired though he was, O'Hara stayed at the ranch only long enough to have another mount run up and saddled for him. He did not doubt that Quantrell would keep his word and go to Concho. What devilry he had in mind to do there, if any, the sheriff could not guess. In any case it was his duty to follow the young outlaw to town.

He was disturbed at the loss of the horses. His partner had imported them from Kentucky with a view to raising fine stock or at least improving the native breed. Lyulph would not be pleased, when he returned from England with his bride, to learn that Quantrell had appropriated them, though he would take the loss with characteristic good sportsmanship.

The ride to Concho was a long, cold one and O'Hara was drooping with fatigue. His hands clung to the horn of the saddle. His head nodded. More than once the jolting of the horse's motion awakened him with a start. It was nearly four o'clock when he slipped into town by way of the pasture back of Concho house. Here he dismounted and hobbled the horse, hiding the saddle in a clump of scrub-oak bushes. The pasture was a large one and the odds were that the animal would not be noticed. As it chanced, the brand on it was a P D Bar. Smith-Beresford had bought it from a Buck creek nester and the Circle S O riders had not yet re-branded it. Even if anyone observed the horse he would not associate it with the sheriff. This was important, because O'Hara did not want advertised the fact that he was in town. That was why he had not gone direct to the Longhorn corral.

O'Hara left the pasture, crossed the road, climbed an adobe fence, and passed down a slope to the creek. He followed this for two hundred yards, then moved up through the brush to a little log cabin set well back from the street.

He tapped on the only window and called in a low voice, "Grogan—you there?"

At first there was no answer, but after he had spoken the name again he heard a stir inside, followed by a husky demand, "Who's wantin' me?"

"You alone?"

A momentary pause followed, then a curt reply. "Yep. Now you tell me what I asked."

"Garrett O'Hara. Let me in."

The man in the house could be heard moving about the room. He did not light a lamp, but presently he came to the door and opened it. The sheriff stepped inside and Grogan at once closed and bolted the door.

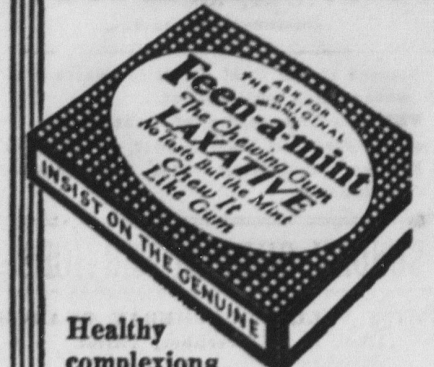
"Kinda early, or late, one or the other, to be drappin' in on a fellow, ain't it, O'Hara?" the owner of the cabin suggested, yawning.

"Do you know whether Bob Quantrell is in town?" the sheriff asked.

Grogan dropped his arms, still stretched in the yawn. He was a man of medium height, bow-legged and muscular. His hair was a yellowish red, and his face and wrinkled neck were sprinkled with freckles. At the mention of Quantrell's name his lax figure starched to rigidity.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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