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"One of the Princess Pats" A War Story By Llewellyn Hughes

The Shepherd of Guadalupe

By Zane Grey

The Story Thus Far:

THE Forrests and Lundeens have always been enemies. The Lundeens, formerly very poor, are now very rich, Mr. Lundeen having, by various crooked methods, succeeded in acquiring Mr. Forrest's wealth and home, Cottonwoods.

Young Clifton Forrest, back very ill from the war, and Virginia Lundeen, not at all in sympathy with her father, are fast falling in love with each other though Cliff will not admit it. Virginia's father is determined to have her marry Malpass, a half-breed, who seems to have control over Mr. Lundeen's property.

Virginia tells Cliff of her father's plans and he suggests that marrying someone else immediately would be a way out. She then tells him that he is the only man she would be willing to marry. He is horrified at the idea of her throwing herself away on a shell of a man like him, though he is slowly recovering.

One day Virginia, Ethel Wayne and Helen Andrews and a party of Virginia's guests visit Cliff's store and Virginia provokes Malpass into buying the entire stock for \$1,000. Then, because Malpass is annoyed at Virginia's friendliness with Cliff, he knocks Cliff down. Virginia is enraged.

By this time Virginia is madly in love with Cliff. Ethel and Helen both realize it but Cliff has no idea. The day of the general departure of the guests it is discovered that Cliff's store, containing a new stock worth about \$2,000, has been burned to the ground.

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VIRGINIA'S father came home drunk the day after the departure of her guests, and Malpass showed a dark sullenness that boded no good.

She felt like an animal at bay, and she paced her room waiting for the approach that she sensed. Nevertheless it did not come, and she ate her dinner as silent as her mother, a prey to growing apprehension. She regretted that Ethel had been called back home to Denver. A fugitive desire to see Clifton became a real and persistent one.

The night seemed far removed from the peaceful and restful ones she had enjoyed up in the mountains. Morning, however, brought defiance if not courage.

Malpass presented himself at the breakfast table more than usually self-contained. He inquired about the camping trip, the departure of her guests, and even expressed regret not to have seen the beautiful Miss Andrews again. The Mexican servant informed her that her father was having breakfast in his room, where he awaited her convenience.

"Before you see him you may as well listen to me," said Malpass.

"Very well, the sooner the better."

"Have you reconsidered my proposal?"

"No. I gave it no further thought."

"Then I regret to say I must split with your father."

"That will be most acceptable to me."

"It may not be so when you hear the conditions."

"Mr. Malpass, pray save yourself the trouble of more talk," replied Virginia. "I am weary of the whole business. I don't care anything about conditions."

"But I can take this property away from him as he took it from Forrest!"

"Do it and welcome," retorted Virginia. "Ill-gotten wealth never made any man happy. My father was wicked, but I consider you mostly to blame. I

will be glad when he is free of you." "He's not going to be free of me unless—"

"Unless I become your wife?" put in Virginia, as he hesitated, and her derision broke his studied calm.

"Unless you do, he will go to jail."

"I think you are a liar and a bluffer."

"MY DEALINGS with Lundeen do not and never did include this Forrest property," went on Malpass, ignoring her words. "Nor did I have any share in the silver mine he stole. We used money from that to gain possession of extensive phosphate mines in the South. The controlling interest was mine. I increased my holdings, raising equal capital for him to do the same. We are now deeply involved, and he owes me a sum greater than this ranch could bring. If we settle it out of court, well and good, for all of you. But if I take it to court, I will prove he deliberately stole Forrest's land, fully cognizant of the value of the silver mine. I can prove it because I discovered the mineral."

"Yes, and you were the brains of the dishonest deal," rejoined Virginia hotly.

"To be sure. But at Lundeen's instigation. Never on paper. There's not a word to that effect. If you will pardon my saying it, your father is a sap-headed, greedy old cattleman with a

"Señorita, you have—invited violence," he panted, making her an elaborate bow. "I prefer it. Let us be natural. I love a she-cat"



tremendous weakness—his hatred of Clay Forrest. Now, if you know your West, you will certainly realize what would happen to your father if I betrayed him in court—which would mean betraying him to Clay Forrest."

"What would happen?" queried Virginia, unable to repress alarm.

"Forrest would kill him!"

"Oh, you are trying to work on my feelings," cried Virginia. "I don't believe it. You've made this all up to frighten me. . . . Even if it were true, Forrest would kill you too."

"That would not be so easy. And the motive would not be so great."

Virginia veiled her eyes and her own barbed shaft: "Suppose I told Clifton Forrest you burned down his store?"

No guilty man's effrontery and flinty nerve could mask the truth from a woman's love and intuition. The instant Virginia's swift query had passed her lips she divined Malpass had been responsible for the latest misfortune to the Forrests.

"Burned down! I have been away, you know, and had not heard. . . . Your ridiculous accusation requires no answer."

Virginia laughed in his face.

"If Clifton Forrest found out what I know, he would kill you."

Malpass arose to push back his chair.

"You drift away from the main issue. I warn you to leave young Forrest out of this. I am aware of your interest in him. It has not enhanced his fortunes."

Virginia sprang up so passionately that her chair fell backward.

"August Malpass, those words betray you, though I never needed words to find out what you are. Do your evil-est, señor! This is not old Mexico."

THE hard immobility of Malpass' olive face changed swiftly to passion. His eyes became flames. With the spring of a panther he was on her, clasp- ing her in his arms. Crushing her to him, he kissed her naked throat, then her face, failing of her lips only when Virginia, overcoming the paralysis of horror, tore clear of him with a strength born of fury.

"Señorita, you have—invited violence," he panted, making her an elaborate bow which he had not learned on that range. "I prefer it. Let us be natural. I love a she-cat from hell. . . . Spit! Scratch! Bite! You will be all the sweeter!"

"If you ever touch me again, I'll kill you."

Virginia ran to her room and, locking the door, fell on her bed in an excess of rage and hate—and fear. When

these had at last passed away she rose with a stupendous surprise and shame the like of which she had never known. Her limbs tottered under her, and the window seat appeared none too close. Could she ever erase the burn and blot of this half-breed's kisses? That she had kept her lips inviolate helped her but little.

In the ensuing hour she learned the appalling gravity of her predicament.

Her father came to her, a changed and broken man, at first neither commanding nor supplicating. He had always been in Malpass' power, though ignorant of it till now. With what fiendish dexterity the weaver had enmeshed him!

Malpass had the proofs to convict, the money to ease his own irregularities, the baseness to betray unless he gained the object so passionately sought.

"Father, I can't—I can't," sobbed Virginia. "How can you ask? . . . I'd sooner kill myself."

"It means prison for me—disgrace for you an' Mother—poverty. . . . Virginia, marry him to save us. You can divorce him later. Give me time to retrieve. Then with money I can fight. Find some way to beat him."

"Not to save even our lives!" flamed Virginia.

"But wait, Daughter. You're riled now. Take time. Think. You're not in love with any man. It'd not be so

hard. You can leave him—an' soon. You can be free."

"What of my soul? . . . I'd feel myself debauched. No! No!"

"Virginia, he'll make you give in sooner or later. He has the very devil's power. It'll be better to have it over. Then we can plan. I swear to God I've realized my crime an' seek now only to save you an' Mother. Daughter, we've gained standin' as a family these last years. We are somebody. If this comes out, I'm done—an' you an' Mother will hang your heads in shame."

"YOU beg what is worse than shame," retorted Virginia. "My blood boils and revolts. Not an hour ago Malpass insulted me vilely—beyond forgiveness. He taunted me with the power you think he has."

"I know he has it. You resisted him. Like as not you scorned him. He'll make you suffer more. Daughter, shore the best way—the only way—is to give in—fool him. Fool him! If he has to make you marry him, God help you! For he's vain, an' I tell you a half-breed—"

"He can't force me. This is not old Mexico. I'll find a way—not only to escape him, but to—"

"Drive him to ruin me or stain my hands with blood," harshly interrupted her father. "Daughter, you've a duty to me an' your mother. An' I've sinned to give you comforts, luxuries. Horses! I've spent thousands on your horses. . . . Think before it's too late. I can

hold Malpass off. Once he thinks there's a hope of your love he'll melt. Cheat him! Cheat him! Make him the poor weak fool he's made me!"

After her father had tottered out, spent with passion, Virginia saw the abyss that yawned at her feet. For had she not listened to him? Poor man, he was lost indeed! Yet she too was weak, uncertain, torn by love one way, and by self-preservation in another.

At length, out of the chaos of her mind, lumbered the realization of a first and imperative necessity—to insure at least her legal freedom from Malpass. So far as physical freedom was concerned, was she not in peril every hour she

lived in that house? In her present state of mind she feared it.

If she married some other man, it would not be possible for her father and Malpass to persuade or drive or hypnotize her into a marriage that would mean moral and spiritual death. And the world might as well have contained only one man—Clifton Forrest.

She might—she must induce him to marry her. But how? Once before she had broached the subject, only to be repulsed. Still, his reason had been sound, generous, plausible. She could only respect him for it. Why not formulate a plan on the strength of the very reason he gave—that he was a mere shell of a man, probably doomed to a brief and inactive life? Virginia scouted that idea, though it made her shudder inwardly. Clifton would get well and strong again. She was sure of it. But she must pretend she believed him, and that under such circumstances he would be rendering her the great service of giving her his name secretly, so she would have that moral anchor when the storm broke.

At her desk, then, she wrote a note urgently requesting Clifton to meet her that evening by the broken corner of the wall in his garden. She did not ask for an answer. Sallying forth singularly strengthened, she strolled down to the barns to get someone to deliver the note.

It would not do to trust one of the Mexicans. Con, the Irish cowboy, would be absolutely reliable.

She found Con and Jake together. In fact, they were always together—a sort of union to combat the hordes of Mexicans on the ranch. Jake was a lean, dark, bow-legged cowboy who had been born on the range. Con had been only several years in the West. He was a strong fellow, sandy-haired and freckled. He had big, wide-open astonished eyes, a light gray in color.

"Mawnnin', boys," she drawled. "How are you-all?"

"Tolerable, Miss Lundeen," replied Jake, doffing his sombrero.

"I'm foine, miss, but when I'm out of worrk, I'm out of sorts," said Con, standing bare-headed and respectful.

"There ought to be loads of work," returned Virginia in surprise.

"Shure was, but the horses are gone."

"Gone! Where?" ejaculated Virginia, with a pang of dismay.

"Back to Watrous."

"Who ordered my horses there?"

"Malpass," replied Jake shortly. "An' he said we'd not be wanted."

"Well! Are all my horses gone?"

"Every last hoof, Miss Virginia."

"I was not consulted. Wait till I speak to my father. Meanwhile remember that I hire you and I pay you."

"Shore, we know that. But we're afeared Malpass is gettin' high-handed round here," returned Jake in worried tones.

"I quite agree with you," laughed Virginia without mirth. "Jake, if my car is still here, see that it's all right for me to run into town this afternoon. And, Con, I've an errand for you."

WHEN Jake slouched away with jingling spurs Virginia asked Con if he had heard about the fire at San Luis which had burned the Forrest store during their trip up in the mountains.

"Yes, miss, I've been down an' seen it. Shure tough on young Forrest. He had his all in that store."

"It was too bad. Did you hear any gossip about it?"

"Nuthin'. Mexicans shure ain't sayin' a word. Looks funny to me."

"Well, you take this note down to Mr. Clifton Forrest. Be sure you deliver it today. . . . I'll see you boys tomorrow, and we'll talk things over—after I see Father."

Upon Virginia's return to the house she encountered her father moodily pacing the porch. After greeting him she asked him why her horses had been ordered away.

"Daughter, it's news to me," he replied, spreading his palms.

"What I'd like to know is this: Are those horses my property?"

"Reckon they are. You're of age. I gave them to you."

"I shall go to Watrous and fetch them back."

"Waal, no one could prevent you. But it'll only make Malpass sorer. An' it's a fact the horses are better off over there. More feed. It costs like sixty heah. An', Daughter, money is scarce."

"But my allowance, Father?"

"I'll have to cut that off, for the present."

"Oh! Well, I can go to work at something."

"Nonsense. . . . Reckon you ought to have some money in the bank. Hope you haven't overdrawn your account?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, and don't care in the (Continued on page 48)



Pointers on Patents



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THAT'S what inventors most often ask of me—or of any Patent Attorney. They want our opinion of the value, the "sale-ability" of their ideas. Often what they really want is encouragement. They long to have someone support their own belief—secret or otherwise—that "there's millions in it."

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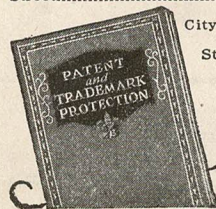
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The Shepherd of Guadalupe

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least. You informed me, upon my return from the East, there was ten thousand left out of my—well, what I thought was mine. I paid my New York bills, which were pretty heavy. And it surely cost enough to entertain my friends. I suppose I'm as—as poor as Clifton Forrest."

"Then you're a beggar."

"What a fall for Virginia Lundeen! The humiliation of it has not increased my respect and—affection for you, Father mine. . . . Where is Mother? I haven't seen her."

"She's sick in bed."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know. What ails her?"

"Reckon it's this damned mess that's knockin' me," he growled.

"I'll go to Mother," said Virginia, soberly, entering the house.

SHE found Mrs. Lundeen sitting up, quite pale and sick, but evidently not so badly off as her husband had intimated. Nevertheless Virginia suffered remorse for her neglect of her mother since that first quarrel following her arrival home. It pleased Virginia to grasp that her mother seemed no longer unapproachable.

"Father told me you'd worried yourself sick over this mess here," said Virginia presently.

"Perhaps. But I wasn't so well before it came to a head," replied Mrs. Lundeen. "I'd like to go to California, if I don't feel better before winter sets in. Your father laughed. Said by that time we couldn't afford to go even to Las Vegas. I can't understand it at all."

"I do, Mother. The nigger in the woodpile is Malpass. He has worked Father into some kind of a trap. He absolutely runs the place. Father can't call his soul his own. I haven't the least doubt that we'll lose Cottonwoods."

"For my part, I'd not care," returned her mother wearily. "I'd exchange with the Forrests any day. Down there I had work to do. This is no home. If I were you, Virginia, I'd go away."

"Mother!" exclaimed Virginia. "Only a little while ago you were urging me to marry Malpass."

"Yes, I know. Then I thought you might like the man. And it seemed a solution to our troubles. But I'm convinced now you couldn't save us even if you married Malpass."

"I'm of the same opinion," returned Virginia, in grateful gladness at this unexpected attitude of her mother. "Have you told Father that?"

"I have, and got called an old fool for my pains. It's made me think, Virginia, that both Jed and Malpass have gone too far. They think they're a law unto themselves. I do not count. You are only a means to an end, for your father. Malpass seems to want you the more, the more you deny him. Some men are built that way. Usually they are the kind who tire after they get what they want."

"Mother, I'm awfully glad to hear you say these things. It helps a good deal, believe me," responded Virginia warmly. "I can take care of myself. So don't worry about me—or anything, for that matter. We'll get along. And we must think of your health. I'm going in to town today and will ask the doctor about you. . . . I'm happy, Mother, that this trouble has brought us closer together."

"So am I, dear. But don't make too much of it before your father."

Virginia drove to Las Vegas and reached the bank, her first objective, after closing hours, but upon being recognized she was admitted. To her relief she found there was a little money left

to her credit, and she cashed a check for this balance. Then she sought audience with Mr. Halstead, who had been connected with the church she used to attend. Once he had been a cattleman, as was evinced by his rugged, weathered countenance. Virginia asked him point-blank about the condition of her father's finances.

"He is overdrawn here," replied the banker. "That has occurred before, though never to this present extent. I'm sorry to inform you we refused his last request for a loan. Of course his credit is good here, to a reasonable extent. But we couldn't see our way to a loan of a hundred thousand. His southern holdings are worth a million. But they appear to be involved rather deeply with his partner's."

"Has Mr. Malpass any dealings with your bank?"

"No. He has not even a checking account."

"Where does he bank?"

"Albuquerque, so I've been informed, but only in small amounts. He must have extensive bank dealings elsewhere."

"Who pays my father's Mexican help?"

"No checks have been presented here since Malpass' connection with your father. The presumption is that they are paid in cash."

"Will you tell me frankly, Mr. Halstead, what you think of Malpass' connection with my father?"

"Well, the connection has not inspired greater confidence in your father," replied Halstead evasively. "May I ask, Miss Lundeen, if there is any truth in the rumor that you are to marry Malpass?"

"None whatever," returned Virginia decisively. "My father wished it, but I refused absolutely."

"No doubt your many Las Vegas friends will be glad to hear that."

"You are at liberty to tell them. . . . Thank you, Mr. Halstead, and good afternoon."

From the bank she went to the family physician, whom she had known as a little girl. He had been called to attend her mother during Virginia's absence in the mountains. Like most doctors, he would not speak openly. Virginia left

his office convinced that her mother had some organic ailment which, though not serious at present, might eventually become so.

Virginia invented excuses to call at the county clerk's office, and upon the new minister, a Western man with a charming wife. In both cases she extended herself to be gracious.

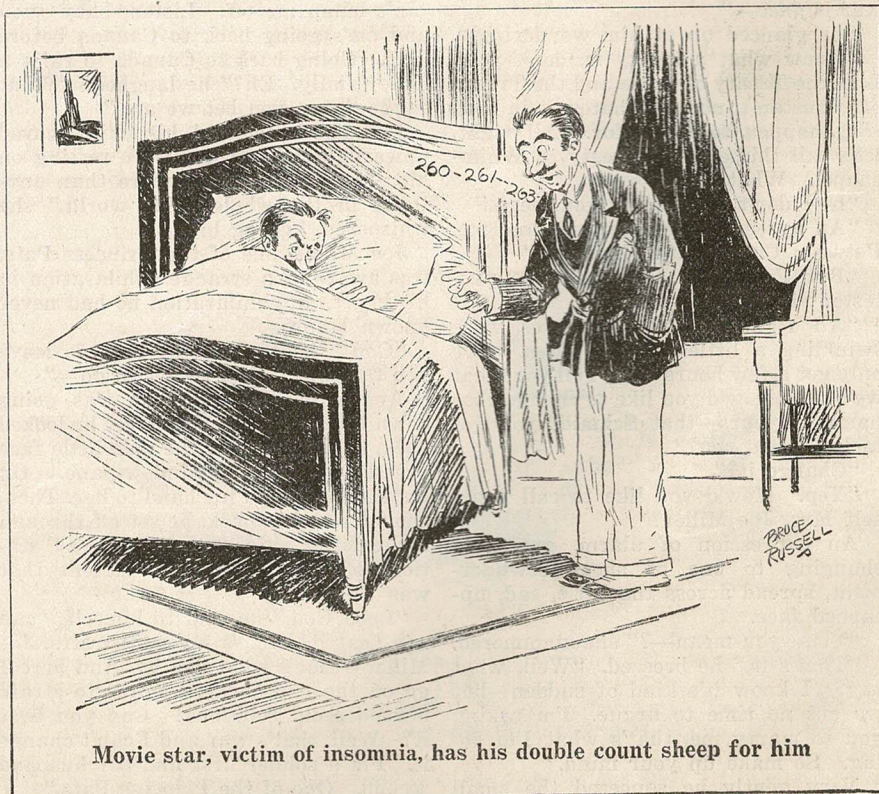
Dusk was gathering when she drove out of Las Vegas, taking a road that skirted the lower spread of Cottonwood Valley, and then turned north under the bank to San Luis. A few pin points of light flickered out of the lonesome darkness of the little town. From this point she drove slowly, and in due time arrived at a level spot near the Forrest garden. How much more familiar were these surroundings than those where she lived! Driving off the road against a thicket of young cottonwoods, she extinguished the car lights and got out.

The night was warm and sultry, with a slow wind off the desert. Frogs trilled, and out of the deep, low hum of insects came the chirping of crickets. Thousands of bright stars seemed to watch her, winking out of a deep blue sky. A thin crescent moon shone weirdly, low down through the cottonwoods.

SHE glided silently along the trail knowing her way in the gloom under the trees. A small animal rustled away into the brush. Coming to a fallen tree, she sat down, conscious of suspense and dammed emotion. Whatever her motive or deceit, she knew in her heart that the truth which made this tryst unutterably sweet and fearful was her love for Clifton Forrest. And, listening to the merciless voice that was her conscience, she confessed her motive was not merely the desire to save herself from Malpass.

Presently she moved on, though reluctantly. The little wait had only accelerated her thrills and starts. She gained the break in the old wall. Again she paused, and leaned against the corner, to peer into the vague shadows. She quivered as if she had expected to meet a lover and leap into his arms. Who could tell? In making her his wife, Clifton might be getting back the fortunes of the Forrests.

She went on, feeling her way. How black the garden corner! She peered



Movie star, victim of insomnia, has his double count sheep for him

on all sides. Nothing moved except the gentle leaves. The section of wall where she had talked with Clifton was vacant. She whispered his name. No answer! Suddenly she sank down on the wall. He had not come.

"CLIFF, I'm damn good an' glad they burned you out," Clay Forrest averred to his son as they sat in the shade of the cottonwoods.

"Dad, you make me tired," returned Clifton, with good-humored patience. "Why do you always say that? I think the store just caught on fire. Spontaneous combustion, or something."

"Huh! Somethin'. You bet. An' that somethin' was a greaser in the pay of Jed Lundeen."

"Oh, no, Dad; you're hip on the Lundeen stuff. You lay everything to the Lundeens. If it were anyone, it might have been Malpass. I didn't tell you before. He was in my store the day that Eastern crowd of young folks bought me out. And—well, we had some sharp words."

"What'd it lead to?"

"Nothing on my part. He struck me. Knocked me over. . . . It was just as well I didn't have a gun handy. I've got sort of used to one."

"Cliff Forrest! You never told me. . . . I'll beat that Malpass half to death."

"Dad, I'd rather you waited till I get strong enough to do it myself," replied Clifton grimly.

"Humph! An' how soon will that be?"

"Not so very long. I'm gaining pretty fast now. Mother says I'll eat her out of house and home. Besides, it wouldn't take much of a man to lick Malpass."

"That greaser will have a knife about him somewhere. Waal, I'll tell you, son: You an' Ma have kept my hands off that Lundeen outfit too long. An' the longer I wait the harder it'll go with them."

"Revenge is natural, Dad. But is it anything to give in to here? Suppose you went to horsewhip Lundeen and Malpass? You know how hate works if you give in to it. You might end in killing one or both of them. You'd go to prison. Then what of Mother?"

"YES, son, your arguments are unanswerable. Long ago I seen that. . . . A fight would end in blood spillin'. All the same, I don't believe any court in New Mexico would convict me."

"Don't you fool yourself," retorted Clifton. "What did that Las Vegas court do to you? It was fixed, no doubt. Well, Lundeen could fix it again."

"He couldn't hang any jury if he was dead. An' neither could Malpass," returned Forrest thoughtfully.

"On the level, now, Dad, you've had it in your mind to kill these two men?"

"Why, son, I was brought up in the West," replied his father, as if apologizing for Clifton.

"You've been brooding over this wrong for years. That's why you've quit. You could have begun life all over again. You're only fifty-odd. But you putter around the garden. You idle and feed that hate in your heart. You're breaking Mother's heart. She never minded the loss of Cottonwoods. That's all you think of. You are making yourself old. Worse, you're not helping me very much to take care of Mother."

Forrest dropped his head a moment. "Waal, it does seem that way, son," he replied resignedly. "An' that's the devil of it. I know just as well as you if I keep on mullin' over this trouble much longer I'm done for."

"Dad, if you do keep it up, I'm done for too."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean a lot. . . . I've had more of a fight here than I had in France. To fight the hate you've given in to! And to fight my tired, tortured body into carrying on! I've got an even break

now. If I can keep it up, I'll get well. But I'd just as lief chuck the chance and beat you to Lundeen and Malpass."

"You'd forestall me! Kill that outfit!" burst out Forrest dreadfully.

"If you don't give up that idea right now, for good and all, I'll go after them," declared Clifton, in cold ruthlessness. This was not a bluff, though he actually hoped he could intimidate his father. In his dark hours that ghastly desire had often abided with him.

"But, my Gawd, son, think of your mother!" ejaculated Forrest, appealing with his huge, outstretched hands. "It nearly killed her when you were over there. An' now that she's got you back . . . aw, Cliff, it's not to be thought of for you!"

"Sure, it isn't," rejoined Clifton, eagerly seizing upon victory. "That's why I say you can't think of it either. One or the other of us—it's all the same to Mother."

"All right, son, I crawl," said Forrest huskily, and covered his face with his hands.

A STEP on the leaves and a clink of spurs arrested Clifton's thankful response to his father's surrender. It was a victorious, happy moment. Clifton turned to see the red-faced cowboy from Cottonwoods.

"Howdy," he said genially, and handed Clifton a note. It was a square white envelope upon which was inscribed his name in a clear handwriting Clifton had never seen. But instantly he recognized the faint fragrance that came with the missive. Clifton felt the hot blood leap to his face. He did not want to open the letter, but as the cowboy stood expectantly he had to do so. And he read:

Dear Cliff:

I am in great trouble. Only you can help me. Meet me tonight just after dark at the break in the wall where we talked last. Don't fail me.

VIRGINIA.

Clifton's head seemed to swim. He tried to appear unconcerned, but if his confusion showed outwardly he must be making a sorry mess of it.

"All right. No answer," he said to the cowboy. "How are things up on the hill?"

"Shure slow now with the hosses gone an' no work."

"Gone?"

"Shure. Malpass was after sindin' them over to Wathrous."

Whereupon Clifton's father evinced signs not wholly lost upon the cowboy.

"I sympathize with you," said Clifton, with an understanding laugh. "I'm looking for a job myself."

"Shure, they're scarce. Good day, sor," replied the other, and strode away.

"Cliff, who was that?" queried Forrest, a peculiar glint coming to his big eyes.

"Con something or other. He used to come into the store for cigarettes."

"But he's employed by Malpass!" exclaimed the father.

"I think not, Dad. It runs in my mind the young lady up there is his boss."

"Lundeen's girl! Was that letter from her?" asked Forrest, in a tragic voice.

"Yes, Dad."

"Hand it over. Let me read it."

"See here, Dad; it's not polite to ask. And sure I wouldn't let anyone read a private note. At that it doesn't amount to much."

"Cliff, you're carryin' on with Lundeen's girl."

"I am not."

"You're a liar! I can see it in your face. You got red as a beet. You acted queer. Now you're white. . . . By Gawd, if this ain't the last straw."

"Father! . . . I'm not a liar," re-

(Continued on page 50)



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You will recognize it by this sign

The Shepherd of Guadalupe

Continued from page 49

torted Clifton, both hurt and angered. "There's nothing between Virginia Lundeen and me. I can't help it if she asks me to do something for her. Believe me, that girl has her troubles."

Forrest lumbered to his feet, his face blotched, his eyes like burned holes in a blanket.

"Waal, if all you come back home for was to get sweet on Lundeen's girl—I wish you'd never come."

HE STALKED away under the cottonwoods. Clifton was so stricken with mortification and fury that he could not call his father back. Little good that would have done! What a bull-headed old fool he was, anyhow! The mere mention of the name Lundeen made him see red.

Clifton reread the note, and that was sufficient to relegate his father and everybody else, except Virginia, to oblivion. He guessed her trouble. But what could she want of him? Clifton felt suddenly weak. If she broached again the persecution to which Malpass and her father had subjected her, Clifton would ask her to marry him. Never could he resist that insidious, beautiful, terrible temptation again. To know that Virginia Lundeen was his wife! Even the conviction that she would only be using him as a checkmate against an unscrupulous wooer could not deprive the idea of its allurements.

The afternoon passed with Clifton in a trance. Every now and then, when a practical flash illuminated his dreamy mind, he was amused at the romantic trend of his thoughts. He built a little drama in which he was the central figure. But he soon discovered that Virginia Lundeen played no small part in his imagined destiny. What a foolish dreamer he was!

When darkness came he went to his room, apparently to go to bed. He did not trust his father's surly observance. Then he had to climb out of his window, no slight task for him, as the casement was narrow and the distance to the ground considerable. But with the aid of a vine, and by careful, labored work, he accomplished it.

The hum of a motor car down the road had ceased. It had not occurred to Clifton that Virginia would come any other way than on horseback. He had forgotten about her horses being taken away. Another of Malpass' scurvy tricks! Clifton hurried noiselessly under the cottonwoods. It was some distance to the corner of the wall.

Clifton did not want to be discovered by his father for Virginia's sake as well as his own. So he stopped to listen and look back. All was dark and still in the direction of the house. But he waited a moment longer to insure safety. What a wonderful summer night! The stars blazed, the breeze sighed, the insects hummed, the frogs sent high trills tremulously out into the drowsy air.

Hurrying on again, Clifton soon began to draw close to the corner. His footsteps made no sound. Under the cottonwoods the shadow was impenetrable, but in the open a new moon and the starlight painted a pale silver against the black background. When he reached the spot he was out of breath, but his exertion was not responsible for the throbbing of his heart in his throat.

"Virginia," he called, very low, trying to pierce the strange shadows.

"Oh . . . Cliff!" came the answer, in almost a gasp. "I was afraid—you weren't coming."

He could almost have touched her,

and in two more steps his groping hand found her.

"Sorry I'm late," he whispered. "But I was afraid of Dad. He was with me when the cowboy brought your note. I had to climb out of my window like a girl sneaking to meet her lover."

"You did? How funny! Yet it's great," she replied thrillingly, and she squeezed his hand. "Which room is yours? Oh, maybe I don't remember that old house."

"I sleep in the little room you used to have."

"Oh, Cliff, how strange!" she murmured after a pause. "But how did you ever get out of that little window and down?"

"I managed somehow, but it was a squeeze."

"You might have hurt yourself!"

"Well, I didn't."

"How many, many times I stole out of that little room!"

"Not to meet boys, I hope?"

"No, never that. But just to get out—to be free and wild in the moonlight under the cottonwoods."

"Virginia, let's get away from this trail," he said. "I can't imagine anything worse than to have my dad catch us."

"Except to have my dad do it," she returned. Her laugh was rich and deep, with a note of defiance.

Clifton led her away from the corner, under the giant hollow cottonwood, to the wall, where he had to feel his way to a seat he well knew.

"Here we're safe, at least from our dads," he said, responding to her mood. "Sit down, Virginia. It's dry and soft. You can lean against the wall!"

SHE complied, but she was significantly slow about letting go of his hand; and after that she was silent so long that he wondered. But he had no desire to break the silence.

"Cliff, how would it be if our fathers did not hate each other?"

"How would what be?"

"You are surely unromantic, Cliff Forrest," she retorted.

"I daresay. I had it knocked out of me. But if you mean our queer friendship—I'd say it wouldn't have any kick."

"Has this a kick for you?" she asked challengingly.

"It will have, darn' pronto, if Dad catches us," he laughed.

"No! Would that great hulking brute dare kick you?"

"I should smile. . . . Virginia, would your nice, loving, angel dad dare—well, let us say, spank you?"

"He would not," she retorted, and there the levity ended.

Clifton's eyes had become used to the darkness, and he could see her clearly, though mystically softened and paled by the moonlight. She removed her hat. "Were you surprised to get my note?" she asked presently.

"I'd have been surprised in any case, but with Dad there watching me read it I was sure flabbergasted."

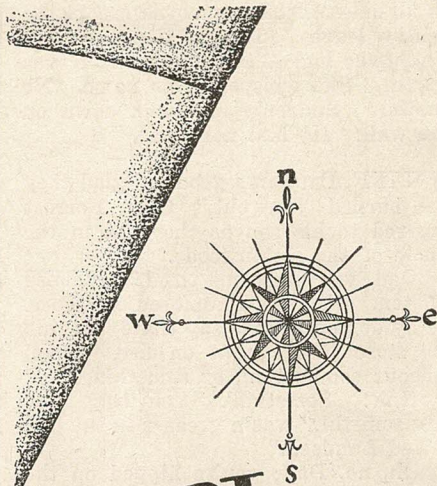
"First, Cliff, I want to tell you that I know Malpass burned your store, or had it done."

"How do you know?"

"I accused him—sprung it on him by surprise. And he might just as well have confessed it."

"You don't say? Virginia, you don't lack nerve. . . . Well, I had a hunch myself that Malpass put some greaser at that job."

"Was your loss considerable?" asked Virginia sympathetically.



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"For me it surely was. Do you know, Virginia, I'd have made good in that store. Of course the big sale I made to your friends and Malpass would have been responsible. I invested all the money in new stock; filled the store, and had a lot of grub left over, which fortunately I stored here in the house. I'll bet it'll come in handy this winter."

"Cliff, I'm broke, except for a few dollars, and at the end of my rope," announced Virginia.

"Good Lord! You broke? Why, I heard in town that you spent barrels of money."

"I did, and now I wish I'd hid some of it in a barrel. Cliff, Father and Malpass together have made away with my fortune. They've taken my horses back to Watrous. I only learned recently that the ranch over there belongs to Malpass. It wouldn't surprise me to find I couldn't recover my horses."

"Well, the dirty crooks," replied Clifton coolly. "I reckon they're trying to break you to Malpass' harness."

"Indeed, they are. Father is desperate. Swears he'll have to kill Malpass unless I give in. And Malpass—well, he has insulted me outrageously."

"How?" queried Clifton, feeling the hot blood rush to his head.

"We were alone at breakfast. This was after his return with Dad from town. Malpass must have put on the screws. Anyway, when I cut him short he showed the cloven hoof. He could throw Dad in jail and would do it. I think, among other things, I called him a greaser. . . . It ended in his seizing me. Oh, he was a beast! I was paralyzed with disgust and surprise. He kissed me a number of times before I could break loose."

"My God! Virginia, that's terrible. Somebody ought to kill him. Your father should—"

"Father has lost every semblance of manhood."

"Virginia, what are you going to do?" queried Clifton anxiously.

"I don't know. I told you I'd reached the end of my rope."

"Well, suppose you marry me?" broke out Cliff almost involuntarily. "If he touches you again, I'll horsewhip him. And if that doesn't stop his greaser tricks I'll kill him."

AFTER a few moments of silence, Virginia asked, in a changed tone, "Cliff, do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do, Virginia. Reckon I'd have done it before if I'd known you were in such straits. . . . That'll give me the right to protect you. . . . If you can keep it secret from your father, the marriage need not be anything but a safeguard. Knowing it—that you can block their schemes any minute—will help you through it. At least you won't

be in such fear of being dragged into a hateful marriage. . . . Something will happen sooner or later. All you need is time. Malpass will hang himself, sure. He's not the kind of man who can play a game long. Then you have only to get your freedom. As to that, Virginia, I may not last very long—"

"Hush!" she whispered, putting a soft palm to his lips.

"Virginia, I daresay there are weak spots in my argument. But I make the offer."

"You are my dearest—my only friend," she said. "I accept—Clifton."

"You will marry me?"

"Yes."

Clifton tried to fill aching lungs that appeared empty. "Very well. How can we arrange it?"

SHE seemed buried in deep thought for a time.

"I have it," she cried suddenly, with an exultant note in her excited voice. "I'll drive to town tomorrow. I'll get the marriage license from the county clerk. I know I can persuade him to keep our secret. Then I'll go to the new minister. I can persuade him too. You meet me here tomorrow night about this time. Perhaps a little earlier. And perhaps you'd better walk down the road from the corner. I'll drive back to town with you. . . . We'll be married. And I'll get you home without anyone being the wiser. . . . What do you think of that plan?"

"Fine, if you can pull it off," he replied, trying in vain to speak lightly.

"Then it's settled." She rose rather hurriedly. "I'd better go now. . . . Tomorrow night it won't matter if I am late. Nothing will matter."

"Virginia," he replied gravely as he stood up, "I'm bound to advise you that if we're caught it will matter."

"We won't be caught—and if we were I'd laugh."

"I wouldn't. . . . How far is your car?"

"Just a step. I'll go alone."

"No, I'd rather you didn't."

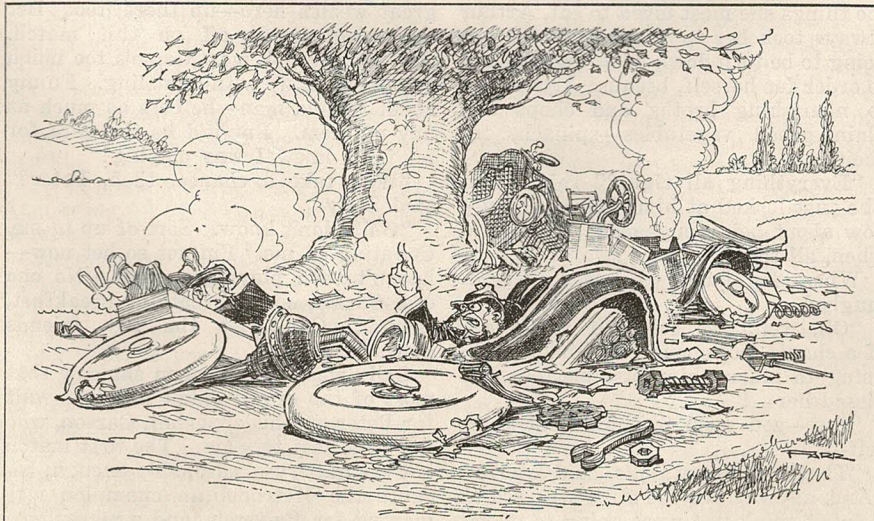
He followed her out through the break in the wall and up the dark trail, until she halted in the gloom of a thicket along the road. Then he saw the car. Virginia looked up and down the road, listened a moment, then stepped into the automobile.

"Good night, Cliff. Tomorrow!" she said, turning on the lights.

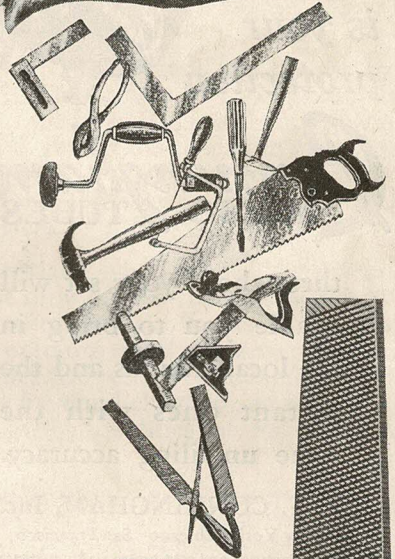
"Yes, tomorrow," he replied thickly.

How abruptly she had ended the interview! It seemed to him she avoided his outstretched hand. Then the engine whizzed, the car lurched; and he stood alone, watching a swiftly vanishing red light. He faced about to enter the trail and plod homeward through the melancholy Western night.

(To be continued next week)



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