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Shreveport, Louisiana

LAHOMA

By JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS

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SYNOPSIS.

Lahoma sends a warning to Willock that Red Kimball, one of the outlaws with whom Willock formerly operated, has sworn to kill him and has started on his way to do so. She adds that Gledware is in dread of something the Indian, Red Feather, may do to him.

Red Feather attacks Gledware and almost kills him. Lahoma learns that Gledware has married the Indian's daughter and deserted her. Wilfred Compton joins Lahoma and escorts her in a stagecoach to Willock's home.

Red Kimball and the remnant of the old outlaw gang are seen by Lahoma and Wilfred on their way to kill Willock. A terrific storm, a Texas norther, overtakes Lahoma and Wilfred.

Kimball and two other men are killed. Willock is under suspicion and a warrant is issued. Gledware will testify against Willock on an old charge.

The citizens are enraged at Willock, believing him to be a murderer. A mob gathers. Lahoma makes a speech in a desperate effort to save him from arrest. She describes his worthy deeds.

CHAPTER XVII.

Facing the Mob.

Mizzoo started up, too excited to notice Wilfred's suddenly distorted face. It was no time to display a sense of the ludicrous. The young man hotly burst into passionate argument and reasonable hypothesis.

Waving aside Mizzoo's protest, Wilfred elaborated his theory of an Indian attack, described Brick's peaceable disposition, his gentleness to Lahoma, then dwelt on the friendship between himself and Brick and the relations between himself and Brick's ward.

"It all comes to this," Mizzoo declared, "if you could make me think Willock a harmless lamb, and as innocent, it wouldn't change conditions. This neighborhood calls for his life and I'd take it if in reach, and my warrant calls for his arrest. All I can promise is to get him, if possible, behind the bars before the mob gets him in a rope."

Wilfred permitted himself the pleasure of taunting Mizzoo with the very evident truth that before Willock was hanged or imprisoned he must first be caught.

Mizzoo grinned good naturedly. "Yap,

we've got a clew locked up in jail right now that could tell us something, I judge, and will tell us something before set free. It's name is Bill Atkins. He's a wise old con, but as sour as a hotted owl—nothing as yet to be negotiated with him than if he was a bobcat caught in a trap. We're hoping time'll mellow him—time and the prospect of being took out and swung from the nearest limb."

Wilfred insisted on an immediate visit to Bill. "Brick declared he wouldn't tell Bill his hiding place," he said, "for he didn't want to get him into trouble. He'll tell me if he knows anything, and if he doesn't it's an outrage to shut him up, old as he is and as rheumatic as he's old."

On the way to the rudely improvised prison Mizzoo defended himself. "He wasn't too old and rheumatic to fight like a wildcat. Why, he had to be lifted up bodily and carried into his cell. Not a word can we get out of him or a bite of grub into him. I believe that old coddler's just too obstinate to die."

When they reached the prison door the crowd gathered about them, eager for news, watching Mizzoo unfasten the door as if he were unlocking the secret to Willock's whereabouts. There were loud imprecations on the head of the murderer and three prophecies as to what would happen to Bill if he preserved his incriminating silence. It seemed but a moment before hurrying forms from many directions packed themselves into a mass before the jail.

The cells were in the basement. The only entrance to the building was by means of a flight of six steps leading to an unroofed platform before the door of the story proper. Mizzoo and Wilfred, standing on this platform, were lifted above the heads of perhaps a hundred men, who watched eagerly the dangling bunch of keys. Mizzoo had stationed three deputies at the foot of the steps to keep back the mob, for if the excited men once rushed into the jail nothing could check their course.

Mizzoo whispered to Wilfred, "We'd better get in as quick as possible."

The words were lost in the increasing roar of voices. He spoke again: "When I swing open the door that bunch will try to make a run for it. You'll jump inside and I'll be after you like a shot. We'll look ourselves in"—

"Hey, Mizzoo!" shouted a voice from the crowd, "bring out that old cuss. Drag him to the platform, we want to hear what he's got to say."

"Say, Mr. Sheriff! Tell him if he won't come to us, we'll go to him. We've got to know where Brick Willock's hiding, and that's all about it."

"Sure!" growled a third. "What kind of a town is this anyway? A refuge for highwaymen and murderers?"

A struggle took place at the foot of the stairs, not so good naturedly as heretofore. A reasoning voice was heard: "Just let me say a word to the boys."

"Yes!" called others, "let's hear him!"

There was a surging forward, and a man was lifted literally over the heads of the three deputies. He reached the

platform breathless, disheveled, but triumphant. It was the survivor of Red Kimball's band.

Mizzoo, mistaking his coming for a general rush, had hastily reloaded the door, and he and Wilfred defended themselves with drawn revolvers.

"I ain't up here to do no harm," called the ex-highwayman. "I ain't got the spirit for warfare. My chief is killed, my pard is dead. Even that innocent stage driver what knew nothing of us is killed in the attack that Brick Willock made on us in the dark and behind our backs. How're you going to grow when the whole world knows you ain't nothing but a den of snakes? You may claim it's all Brick Willock. I say if he's bigger than the town, if he murders and stabs and you can't help it, then the town ain't as good as him. My life is in danger. I don't know if I'll draw another breath. What kind of a reputation is that for you to send ahead? There's a man in this jail can tell you where Willock's hiding. Good day!"

The speaker was down the steps in two leaps, and the deputies drew aside to let him pass out. Civic pride, above all, civic ambition, had been touched to the quick. A hoarse roar followed the speech, and cries for Bill grew frantic. Mizzoo, afraid to unlock the door, stared at Wilfred in perplexity.

"I told you they had civilization on the brain," he muttered. "The old times are past. I doesn't make a move toward that lock."

"Drop the keys behind you—I'll get 'em," Wilfred murmured. "Step a little forward. Say something to 'em."

"Ain't got nothing to say," growled Mizzoo, glaring at the mob. "These boys are in the right of it; that's how I feel—cuss that obstinate old bobcat! It's his own fault if they string him up."

"Here they come!" Wilfred exclaimed. "Steady now, old Mizzoo—we've whipped packs of wolves before today—coyotes crazy with hunger—big gray loners in the rocks—eh, Mizzoo?" He shouted to the deputies who had been pushed against the railing. "Give it to 'em, boys!"

But the deputies did not fire, and the mob, though chafing with mad impatience, did not advance. It was a single figure that swept up the steps, unobstructed, aided, indeed, by the mass of packed men in the street—a figure slight and erect, tingling with the necessity of action to which every vein and muscle responded, tingling so vitally, so electrically, that the crowd also tingled, not understanding, but none the less thrilled.

"Lahoma!" Wilfred was at her side. "You here?"

"Yes, I'm here," she returned breathlessly, her face flaming with excitement.

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"One evening Brick came on a deserted mover's wagon. He'd traveled all day with nothing to eat or drink, and he got into the wagon to escape the blistering sun. In there he found a dead woman, stretched on her pallet. He had a great curiosity to see her face, so he began lifting the cloth that covered her. He saw a pearl and onyx pin at her throat. It looked like one his mother used to wear. So he dropped the cloth and never looked at her face. She had died the evening before, and he knew she wouldn't have wanted any one to see her there. And he dug a grave in the sand, though she was nothing to him, and buried her—never seeing her face—and covered the spot with a great pyramid of stones and prayed for her little girl—I was her little girl. The Indians had carried me away. You'll say that was a little thing; that anybody would have buried the poor, helpless body. Maybe so. But about not looking at her face—well, I don't know. It was a little thing, of course, but somehow it just seems to show that Brick Willock wasn't little—had something great in his soul, you know. Seems to show that he couldn't have been a common murderer. It's something you'll have to feel for yourselves. Nobody can explain it so good as see if you don't understand already."

The men stared at her, somewhat bewildered, saying nothing. In some breasts a sense of something delicate, not to be defied, was stirred.

"How're you going to grow when the whole world knows you ain't nothing but a den of snakes?"

"I'm going to talk to these people. Let me have that!" She took the revolver from the unresisting hand, uncocked it and slipped it into her bosom. Then she faced the mob and held up her empty hand.

"It was the first time Lahoma had ever faced an audience larger than that composed of Brick and Bill and Wilfred. After her uplifted hand had brought tense silence she stood at a loss, her eyes big with the appeal her tongue refused to utter.

The mob was awed by that light in her eyes, by the crimson in her cheeks, by her beauty, freshness and grace. They would not proceed to violence while she stood there facing them. Her power she recognized, but she understood it was that of physical presence. When she was gone her influence would depart. They knew Brick and Bill had sheltered her from her tenderest years; they admired her fidelity. Whatever she might say to try to move their hearts would come from a sense of gratitude and would be received in tolerant silence. The more guilty the highwayman the more commendable her loyalty. But it would not change their purpose. As if waiting for a storm to pass they stood stolid and close mouthed, slightly bent forward, unresisting, but unmoved.

"I'm a western girl," Lahoma said at last, "and ever since Brick Willock gave me a home when I had none I've lived right over yonder at the foot of the mountains. I was there when the

platform came, before the Indians had given up this country, and I was there when the first settlers moved in and when the soldiers drove them out. I was living in the cave with Brick Willock when people came up from Texas and planted miles and miles of wheat, and I used to play with the rusty plows and machinery they left scattered about after the three years' drought had starved them back to their homes. Then Old Man Walker came to Red River, sent his cowboys to drive us out of the cave, and your sheriff led the bunch. And it was Brick and myself that stood them off with our guns, our backs to the wall and our powder dry, and we never saw Mizzoo in our rage again. So you see I ought to be able to talk to western men in a way they can appreciate, and if there's anybody here that's not a western man—he couldn't understand our style anyhow—he'd better go where he's needed, for out west you need only western men—like Brick Willock, for instance."

At reference to the well known incident of Mizzoo's attempt to drive Willock from the cave there was a sudden wave of laughter, none the less hearty because Mizzoo's face had flushed and his mouth had opened sheepishly. But at the recurrence of Willock's name the crowd grew serious. They felt the justice of her claim that out west only western men were needed; they excused her for thinking Brick a model type. But let any one else hold him up before them as a model!

Lahoma's manner changed. It grew deeper and more forceful.

"Men, I want to talk to you about this case. Will you be the jury? Consider what kind of man swore out that warrant against Brick—the leader of a band of highwaymen! And who's his chief witness? You don't know Mr. Gledware, I do. You've heard he's a rich and influential citizen in the east. That's true. But I'm going to tell you something to show what he is, and what Brick Willock is—just one thing, that's all I'll say about the character of either. As to Red Kimball, you don't have to be told. I'm not going to talk about the general features of the case—as to whether Brick was ever a highwayman or not, as to whether he killed Red's brother to save me and my stepfather, or did it in cold blood; as to whether he held up the stage or not. These things you've discussed. You've formed opinions about them. I want to tell you something you haven't heard. Will you listen?"

At first no one spoke. Then from the crowd came a measured impartial voice: "We got lots of time."

She was not discouraged by the intonation in the tone that all her speaking was in vain and plunged into the midst of her narrative.

"One evening Brick came on a deserted mover's wagon. He'd traveled all day with nothing to eat or drink, and he got into the wagon to escape the blistering sun. In there he found a dead woman, stretched on her pallet. He had a great curiosity to see her face, so he began lifting the cloth that covered her. He saw a pearl and onyx pin at her throat. It looked like one his mother used to wear. So he dropped the cloth and never looked at her face. She had died the evening before, and he knew she wouldn't have wanted any one to see her there. And he dug a grave in the sand, though she was nothing to him, and buried her—never seeing her face—and covered the spot with a great pyramid of stones and prayed for her little girl—I was her little girl. The Indians had carried me away. You'll say that was a little thing; that anybody would have buried the poor, helpless body. Maybe so. But about not looking at her face—well, I don't know. It was a little thing, of course, but somehow it just seems to show that Brick Willock wasn't little—had something great in his soul, you know. Seems to show that he couldn't have been a common murderer. It's something you'll have to feel for yourselves. Nobody can explain it so good as see if you don't understand already."

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platform came, before the Indians had given up this country, and I was there when the first settlers moved in and when the soldiers drove them out. I was living in the cave with Brick Willock when people came up from Texas and planted miles and miles of wheat, and I used to play with the rusty plows and machinery they left scattered about after the three years' drought had starved them back to their homes. Then Old Man Walker came to Red River, sent his cowboys to drive us out of the cave, and your sheriff led the bunch. And it was Brick and myself that stood them off with our guns, our backs to the wall and our powder dry, and we never saw Mizzoo in our rage again. So you see I ought to be able to talk to western men in a way they can appreciate, and if there's anybody here that's not a western man—he couldn't understand our style anyhow—he'd better go where he's needed, for out west you need only western men—like Brick Willock, for instance."

At reference to the well known incident of Mizzoo's attempt to drive Willock from the cave there was a sudden wave of laughter, none the less hearty because Mizzoo's face had flushed and his mouth had opened sheepishly. But at the recurrence of Willock's name the crowd grew serious. They felt the justice of her claim that out west only western men were needed; they excused her for thinking Brick a model type. But let any one else hold him up before them as a model!

Lahoma's manner changed. It grew deeper and more forceful.

"Men, I want to talk to you about this case. Will you be the jury? Consider what kind of man swore out that warrant against Brick—the leader of a band of highwaymen! And who's his chief witness? You don't know Mr. Gledware, I do. You've heard he's a rich and influential citizen in the east. That's true. But I'm going to tell you something to show what he is, and what Brick Willock is—just one thing, that's all I'll say about the character of either. As to Red Kimball, you don't have to be told. I'm not going to talk about the general features of the case—as to whether Brick was ever a highwayman or not, as to whether he killed Red's brother to save me and my stepfather, or did it in cold blood; as to whether he held up the stage or not. These things you've discussed. You've formed opinions about them. I want to tell you something you haven't heard. Will you listen?"

At first no one spoke. Then from the crowd came a measured impartial voice: "We got lots of time."

She was not discouraged by the intonation in the tone that all her speaking was in vain and plunged into the midst of her narrative.

"One evening Brick came on a deserted mover's wagon. He'd traveled all day with nothing to eat or drink, and he got into the wagon to escape the blistering sun. In there he found a dead woman, stretched on her pallet. He had a great curiosity to see her face, so he began lifting the cloth that covered her. He saw a pearl and onyx pin at her throat. It looked like one his mother used to wear. So he dropped the cloth and never looked at her face. She had died the evening before, and he knew she wouldn't have wanted any one to see her there. And he dug a grave in the sand, though she was nothing to him, and buried her—never seeing her face—and covered the spot with a great pyramid of stones and prayed for her little girl—I was her little girl. The Indians had carried me away. You'll say that was a little thing; that anybody would have buried the poor, helpless body. Maybe so. But about not looking at her face—well, I don't know. It was a little thing, of course, but somehow it just seems to show that Brick Willock wasn't little—had something great in his soul, you know. Seems to show that he couldn't have been a common murderer. It's something you'll have to feel for yourselves. Nobody can explain it so good as see if you don't understand already."

"I'm going to talk to these people. Let me have that!" She took the revolver from the unresisting hand, uncocked it and slipped it into her bosom. Then she faced the mob and held up her empty hand.

"It was the first time Lahoma had ever faced an audience larger than that composed of Brick and Bill and Wilfred. After her uplifted hand had brought tense silence she stood at a loss, her eyes big with the appeal her tongue refused to utter.

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