

Overland Red

By
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CHAPTER XV. The Led Horse.

SAUNDERS, hiding in the brush, cursed Tenlow's stupidity. To have let Collie go on and have followed him under cover would have been the only sensible plan. Rapidly approximating the outcome of the muddle, Saunders untied his pony and rode back toward the ranch, taking an unused and densely covered bridle trail.

From up in the canyon came the thunder of the racing car. Far above them Tenlow and Collie could see it creeping round a turn in the road. It disappeared in a dip, to reappear almost instantly, gliding swiftly down the long slant toward the valley. The staccato drumming of the exhaust echoed along the hillside. Overland's silk hat shone bravely in the sun. Beside the outlaw was the figure of a woman, Tenlow foresaw complications and muttered profanely.

Down the next ditch rolled the car, rocking to the unevenness of the mountain road. Overland opened the



Collie's Reply Was a Flail-like Blow Between Tenlow's Eyes.

throttle, the machine shot forward and in a few seconds drew up abreast of the deputy.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Summers," said Louise, stepping from the car. "How are you, Mr. Tenlow?"

"Goodbye, Mr. Summers. I enjoyed the ride very much."

"Just a minute," began the deputy. "Where's my pony, Collie? He didn't get away, did he?"

"No, ma'am. Mr. Tenlow requisitioned him. Thought I'd wait till you came along so I could explain."

"Requisitioned my pony? What do you mean?"

"It's this way, Miss Lacharme. That man there in the machine is wanted. He—"

"What has that to do with my pony, please?"

"I guess you know who he is. I figured he was layin' to get away on that pony."

"You want to go back to school, pardner, and learn to figure correct," said Overland, his foot on the accelerator pedal of the throbbing car. "One minus one is nothin'."

"Hold on there!" cried Tenlow, striding forward. Louise stood between the deputy and the car.

"My horse, please," she said quietly. As she spoke the car roared, jumped forward and shot down the smooth grade of the valley road.

"Now, Mr. Tenlow, I wish you would explain this to me and then to Uncle Walter. I sent one of our men with a horse. He was to wait for me here. What right have you to interfere with him?"

"I guess I got as much right as you have to interfere with me," said Tenlow sullenly.

"Hold on there!" cried Collie, jumping forward.

"Collie, I'll talk with him."

"Take my horse, Miss Louise," said Collie, flushing.

"No, indeed; I'll ride Sarko."

"I'll get him," said Collie.

"No. Mr. Tenlow will get him, I am sure."

"A woman can make any deal look smooth—if she is interested," said Tenlow, turning toward the brush. He came out leading the pony. "Thank you, Collie, you may get the mail, please."

Collie stood watching her as she rode away. Then, with much deliberation, he tied his own pony Apache to a clump of greasewood. He unbuckled his belt and flung it, with gun and holster, to the ground.

"Now," he said, his face blazing white with suppressed anger. "I'm going to make you eat that speech about any woman making things look smooth—if she's interested."

"You go on home or I'll break you in two," said Tenlow.

Collie's reply was a flail-like blow between Tenlow's eyes. The deputy stag-

gered, gritted his teeth and flung himself at the younger man. The fight was unequal from the beginning. Apache snorted and circled as the bushes crashed and crackled.

A few minutes later Tenlow strode from the brush leading his pony. He wiped the blood and sweat from his face and spat viciously.

Louise, riding homeward slowly, heard a horse coming behind her. She reined Sarko and waited. Collie saw no way out of it, so he rode up, grinning from a bruised and battered face. "Why, Collie!"

The young man grinned again. His lips were swollen, and one eye was nearly closed.

Dismounting, Louise stepped to the ford. "Oh I'm sorry," she cried. "Your face is terribly bruised. And your eye—"

"She could not help smiling at Collie's ludicrous appearance."

"I took a fall," he mumbled, blandly. "Apache here is tricky at times."

Louise's gaze was direct and reproachful. "Here, let me bathe your face. Stoop down, like that. You don't look so badly, now that the dirt is off. Surely you didn't fall on your eye?"

Collie tried to laugh, but the effort was not very successful.

Tenderly she bathed his bruised face. Her nearness, her touch, made him forget the pain. Suddenly he seized her hand and kissed it, leaving a stain of blood where his lips had touched. She was thrilled with a mingled feeling of pride and shame—pride in that he had fought because of her, as she knew well enough, and shame at the brutality of the affair, which she understood as clearly as though she had witnessed it. She was too honest to make herself believe she was not flattered in a way, but she made Collie think otherwise.

He evaded her direct questioning stubbornly. Finally she asked whether Mr. Tenlow "had taken a fall" or not. "Sure he did!" replied Collie. "A couple or three years ago—tryin' to out-ride Overland Red. Don't you remember?"

"Collie you're a regular hypocrite."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you look—frightful."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're not a bit ashamed."

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Don't say 'Yes, ma'am,' all the time. You don't seem to be ashamed. Why should you be, though? Because you were fighting?"

"No, Miss Louise. Because I got licked."

Louise mounted Sarko and rode beside Collie silently. Presently she touched his arm. "But did you?" she asked, her eyes grave and her tone conveying a subtle question above the mere letter.

"No! By thunder!" he exclaimed. "Not in a hundred years!"

"Well, give some raw meat from the cook. I'll give you explanation to Dr. and Mrs. Marshall, for you will have to be ready for the trip tomorrow. You will have to think of a better explanation for the boys."

While riding homeward, Louise dropped her glove. Collie was about instantly and picked it up. "Can I keep it?" he said.

"The girl looked curiously at him for a moment. "No, I think not, Collie," she said gently.

Collie rode up to the corral that afternoon whistling as blithely as he could, considering his injuries. He continued to whistle as he unsaddled Apache.

At the bunk house Brand Williams looked at him once and bent double with silent laughter. The boys badgered him unmercifully. "Fell off a horse!—Go tell that to a chinik!—Who stepped on your face, kid?—Been ridin' on your map, eh?—Where was the wreck?—Who seved up your eye?"

"S-h-h, fellas," said Miguel, grinning. "If you make all that noise how you going to hear the tune he is whistling, hey?"

Collie glanced at Saunders, who had said nothing. "Got anything to offer on the subject, Silent?" he asked.

"Nope. I take mine out in thinkin'."

"You're going to have a chance to do a whole lot more of it before long," said Collie, and he said it with a suggestiveness that did not escape the taciturn foreman, Brand Williams.

A letter from Overland informed Collie that his share in the mine to date was \$5,000, and he began planning to buy a ranch.

Hearing that the Oro foreman had offered a Yuma "outlaw" horse to any Moonstoner who could ride her, Collie determined to win the prize.

"I hear that you intend to ride the outlaw Yuma. Is it so?" Louise inquired.

Collie nodded.

"I had rather you didn't," said Louise.

"Why?" asked Collie tactlessly.

Louise did not answer, and Collie strode off feeling angry with himself and more than ever determined to risk breaking his neck to win the outlaw.

Collie, miffed because Louise selected Miguel to ride her pony Boyar in the races, placed bets against Boyar and on a buckskin pony backed by the Oro Mexicans.

Boyar, the Moonstone pony, ran second in the finals. The buckskin of the Mexicans won first place. Collie collected his winnings indifferently. He strolled over to the crowd, finding a place for himself on the corral bars.

Mat Gleason, superintendent of the Oro ranch, loafed, his back against a post. Two men, with ropes, were following the roan pony round the corral. Presently a riata flipped out and fell. In a flash the outlaw was worked to the snubbing post. One of the Oro riders seized the pony's ear in his teeth and, flinging his legs round her neck, hung, weighing her head down. There was the flash of teeth, a grunting tug at the cinchas, a cloud of dust, and Jasper Lane, foreman of the Oro outfit,

was in the saddle. The cloud of dust following the roan pony grew denser. Above the dun cloud a sombrero swung and from fanning the outlaw's ears. Jasper Lane had essayed to ride the Yuma colt once before. His broken shoulder had set nicely—in fact, better than Bull O'Toole's leg which had been broken when the outlaw fell on him. Billy Squires, a young Montana puncher working for the Oro people, still carried his arm in a sling. All in all, the assembled company, as Brand Williams put it, "were beginning to take notice of that copper colored she-son of a cyclone."

Jasper Lane pried spurs and quirt. The visiting cowmen shrilled their delight. The pony was broncho from the end of her long, switching tail to the tip of her pink muzzle.

Following a quick tattoo of hoofs on the baked earth came a flash like the trout's leap for the fly—a curving plunge—the sound as of a breaking willow branch, and then palpitating silence.

The dun cloud of dust settled, disclosing the foam flecked, sweat blackened colt, oddly beautiful in her poised immobility. Near her lay Jasper Lane face downward. The pony snuffed at his crumpled sombrero.

"That horse is plumb-gentle," said Collie. "Look at her!"

"Crazy with the heat," commented Billy Dime, jerking his thumb toward Collie.

Tall, slim, slow of movement, Collie slipped from the corral bars and secured the dangling reins. The cowmen carried Jasper Lane toward the ranch house. Some one laughed.

Gleason, the superintendent, gazed at the outlaw pony and fingered his belt. "That's the fourth," he said slowly and distinctly. "She ain't worth it."

"The fourth Oro rider," said a voice. "You ain't countin' any Moonstone riders."

"Ain't seen any to count," retorted Gleason, and there was a general laugh.

Strangely enough the outlaw pony followed Collie quietly as he led her



And Still Collie Held His Seat.

toward Gleason. "The boys anythere's a bet up that nobody can stick on her two minutes. She's the bet. Is that right?" said Collie.

"What you goin' to do?" queried Gleason, and some of the Oro boys laughed.

"I don't know yet," said Collie. "Maybe I'll take her back to the Moonstone with me."

Miguel of the Moonstone removed his sombrero and gravely passed it. "Flowers for the Collie kid," he said solemnly.

Collie, grave, alert, a little white beneath his tan, called for Williams to hold the pony. Then the younger man, talking to her meanwhile, slipped off the bridle and adjusted a hackamore in its place. He tightened the cinchas. The men had ceased joking. Evidently the kid meant business. Next he removed his spurs and flung them, with his quirt, in a corner.

"Just defending yourself, eh, Yuma girl?" he said. "They cut all the sense out of you with a horse killin' bit and rip you with the spurs and expect you to behave."

"He'll be teachin' her to say her prayers next," observed Bud Light. "He's gettin' a spell on her now."

"He'll need all his for himself," said Pars Long.

The pony flinched and sidled away as Collie tried to mount. Her glossy ears were flattened and the rims of her eyes showed white.

"Jump!" whispered Williams. "And don't rough her. Mebbe you'll win out."

With a leap the Moonstone rider was in the saddle. The pony shook her head as he reined her round toward the corral gate. The men stared. Gleason swore.

"Here's where she goes to it," said Williams.

"Whoop! Let 'er buck!" shouted the crowd.

Rebellion swelled in the pony's rippling muscles. She waited, fore feet braced, for the first sting of the quirt, the first rip of the spurs, to turn herself into a hellish thing of plunging destruction.

Collie, leaning forward, patted her neck. "Come on, sis. Come on, Yuma girl. You're just a little hummin'bird."

"You ain't a real horse."

With a leap the pony reared. Still there came no sting of spur or quirt. She dropped to her feet. Collie had cleverly consumed a minute of the allotted time.

"One minute!" called Williams, holding the watch.

"Why, that ain't ridin'!" grumbled an Oro man.

"See you later," said Williams, and several of his companions looked at him strangely. The foreman's eyes were fixed on the watch.

Collie had also heard, and he dug his unspurred heels into the pony's sides. She leaped straight for the corral gate and freedom. With a patter of hoofs, stiff legged, she jolted toward the plain.

A few short jumps, a fishlike swirl sideways, and still Collie held his seat. He eased the hackamore a little. He was breathing hard. The horse took up the slack with a vicious plunge, head downward. The boy's face grew white. He felt something warm trickling down his mouth and chin. He threw back his head and gripped with his knees.

"They're off!" halloed a puncher.

"Only one of 'em—so far," said Williams. "One minute and thirty seconds."

Then, like a bolt of copper light, the pony shot forward at a run.

On the ranch house veranda sat Walter Stone conversing with his host, where several girls, bright faced and gowned in cool white, were talking and laughing.

The pony headed straight for the veranda. The laughing group jumped to their feet. Collie, using both hands, swung the hackamore across the outlaw's neck and tugged.

His head was snapped back and then forward at every plunge. Still he gripped the saddle with rigid knees. The outlaw bucked again and flung herself viciously sideways, turning completely round. Collie pitched drunkly as the horse came down again and again. His eyes were blurred and his brain grew numb. Faintly he heard Brand Williams cry: "Two minutes! Moonstone wins!" Then came a cheer. His gripping knees relaxed. He reeled and all around him the air grew streaked with silvers of piercing fire. He pitched headforemost at the feet of the group on the veranda.

In a flash Louise Lacharme was beside him kneeling and supporting his head. "Water!" she cried, wiping his face with her handkerchief.

The pony, with hackamore dangling, raced across the plain toward the hills.

"This'll do just as well," said Williams, pouring a mouthful of whisky between Collie's lips. Then the taciturn foreman lifted the youth to his feet. Collie dragged along, stepping shakily. "Dern little fool!" said Williams affectionately. "You ain't satisfied to get killed where you belong, but you got to go and splatter yourself all over the front yard in front of the ladies. You with your bloody nose and your face shot plumb full of gravel. If you knowed how you looked when she plied you!"

"I know how she looked," said Collie. "That's good enough for me. Did I make it?"

"The bronk' is yours," said Williams. "Bud and Miguel just rode out after her."

Then Williams did an unaccountable thing. He hunted among the crowd till he found the man who had said, "Why, that ain't ridin'." He asked the man quietly if he had made such a remark. The other replied that he had. Then Williams promptly knocked him down with all the wiry strength of his six feet of bone and muscle. "Take that home and look at it," he remarked, walking away.

CHAPTER XVI. Collie to the Rescue.

MEANWHILE Collie kept a vigilant eye on Silent Saunders. The other, somewhat sullenly, but efficiently, attended to his work. Collie's vigilance was rewarded unexpectedly and rather disagreeably.

One day, as he stood stroking Black Boyar's neck, he happened to glance across the yard. Saunders was saddling one of the horses in the corral. Louise, astride Boyar, spoke to Collie of some detail of the ranch work, purposely prolonging the conversation. Something of the Collie of the Oro barbecue had vanished. In its stead was an inexplicable but positive quality of masterfulness, apparent in poise and manner. His grave dark eyes, upturned to her face as he caressed Boyar, were disconcertingly straightforward. He seemed to be drinking his fill of her beauty. His quick smile, still boyish and altogether irresistible, flashed as she spoke humorously of his conquest of the outlaw colt Yuma.

"I learned more—ridin' that cayuse at the barbecue for two minutes—than I ever expect to learn again in this time."

Remembering that she had been first to reach him when he was thrown, the fresh bloom of her cheeks deepened. Her eyelids drooped for an instant. "One can learn a good deal quickly, sometimes," she said. Then added, for he had smiled again—"About horses."

"And folks," he spoke quietly and lifted her gauntleted hand, touching it lightly with his lips. So swift, so unexpected had been his homage that she did not realize it until it was irrevocably paid.

"Why, Collie?"

"Because you wasn't ashamed to help a guy in front of the others."

"Please don't say 'guy.' And why should I be ashamed to help any of our boys?" she said, laughing. She had quite recovered herself.

"Course you wouldn't be. But this is a kind of a 'goodby' too. I was going to ask you to mail this letter to Overland Red. I told him in it that I was coming."

"We are sorry that you are leaving," said Louise. "Uncle Walter said you had spoken to him."

"It isn't the money. I could wait. But I don't feel like taking all that money and not doing anything for it. I guess Red needs me too. Brand says I'm a fool to quit here now. Mebbe I am. I like it here; the work and everything."

Saunders, watching them, saw Collie give Louise a letter. He saw her tuck it in her waist and rein Boyar round toward the gate.

As Collie came toward the corral he noticed that Saunders had saddled the pinto Rally. He was a little surprised. Rally was Walter Stone's favorite saddle horse and used by none but him. He knew his employer was absent. Perhaps Saunders had instructions to bring Rally to the station.

Collie paid no further attention to Saunders until the latter came from his quarters with a coat and a blanket roll which he tied to the saddle. Then Collie became interested. He left the road and climbed the hill back of the corral. He watched Saunders astride the pinto as he opened the gate and spurred through without closing it. That was a little unusual.

On a rise far below was Black Boyar loping along easily. Collie saw him stop and turn into the Old Meadow trail. He watched for Saunders to appear on the road below the ranch. Presently out from the shoulder of a hill leaped Rally. Saunders was plying quirt and spur. The pinto was doing his best.

"Something's wrong. I'll just take a chance." And Collie ran to the corral and roped the Yuma colt, for he had seen Saunders disappear on the Old Meadow trail.

Collie whirled the pony round and down the hill. Through the gateway he thundered. The steel sinewed flanks stiffened and relaxed rhythmically as the hillside flew past. The Yuma colt, half wild, ran with great leaps that ate into space. They swept through the first ford. A thin sheet of water spread on either side of them. The outlaw fought the curb all the way up the hill beyond. Pebbles clattered from her hoofs and spun skyward as she raced along the level of the hilltop.

Down the next grade the pony swung, taking the turns with short leaps. On the crest Collie checked her. The road beyond, clear to the valley, was empty.

He examined the tracks entering the Old Meadow trail. He had not been mistaken. Saunders had ridden in. Mounting, Collie spurred through the greasewood, trusting to the pony's natural activity and sure footedness.

Louise, sitting on the dream rock in the old meadow, gazed out across the valley. Black Boyar stood near, with trailing bridle reins.

Despite herself the girl kept recalling Collie's face as he had talked with her at the ranch. Admiration she had known before and many times, adoration never until that morning.

For a long time she dreamed. The shadows of the greasewood lengthened. The air grew cooler. Louise ended her soliloquy by saying aloud: "He's a nice boy, though. I do hope he will keep as he is."

Boyar, lifting his head, nickered and was answered by Rally, entering the meadow. Silent Saunders rode up hurriedly.

"Why, Saunders—what is it? That's Rally! Were you going to meet Uncle Walter?"

"No, miss. I'm in a hurry. Just hand over that letter that young Collie gave you at the ranch. I want it mean business."

"You want the letter? What do you mean? What right have you?"

"No right. Only I want it. I don't want to make trouble."

"You! A western man and speak that way to a woman! Saunders, I'm ashamed to think you ever worked for us."

"Oh, I know you got nerve. But I'm in a hurry. Hand it over. Then you can call me anything you like."

"I shall not hand it over."

"All right. I got to have it."

The girl, her gray eyes blazing with indignation, backed away as he strode toward her. "You'd dare, would you?"



She Cut Him Across the Face With Her Quirt.

And as Saunders laughed she cut him across the face with her quirt.

His face, streaked with the red welt of the rawhide, grew white as he controlled his anger. He leaped at her and had his hands on her when she struck him again with all her strength. He staggered back, his hand to his eyes.

A wild rush of hoofs, a shock, a crash, and he was beneath the plunging feet of the Yuma colt. The pony flashed past, her head jerking up. Louise saw Collie leap to the ground and come running back.

Saunders, rolling to his side, reached for his holster, when he saw that in Collie's hand which precluded further argument.

"Don't get up!" said Collie quietly. "I never killed a man, but I'm going to, quick. If you lift a finger."

Saunders kept still. Collie stepped round behind him. "Now, get up, slow," he commanded.

When Saunders was on his feet Collie reached forward and secured his gun.

"I'll send your check to the store," said Louise, addressing Saunders. "I shall tell Mr. Stone that I discharged you. I don't believe I had better tell the men about this."

"Beat it Saunders," said Collie, laughing. "You are leaving here afout, which suits me fine. Red would be plumb happy to know it."

"Red's got to walk into my lead some of these days."

"That's some day. This is today," said Collie.

Saunders, turning, gazed covetously at the pinto Rally. Collie saw and smiled. "I missed twice. The third trick is goin' to be mine. Don't you forget that, Mr. Kid," said Saunders.

"Oh, you here yet?" said Collie, and he was not a little gratified to notice that Saunders limped as he struck off down the trail.

Louise drew off her gauntlets and tossed them on the rock. Collie saw the print of Saunders' fingers on her wrist and forearm. "I ought to 'a' made him kneel down and ask you to let him live!" he said.

"I was afraid—at first. Then I was just angry. I was sickening to see the marks grow red and swell on his face. I hit him as hard as I could, but I'm not sorry."

"Sorry?" growled Collie. "He takes your brand with him. He didn't get the letter. I got to thank you a whole lot for that."

"But how did he know I had it? What did he want with the letter?"

"He saw me give it to you. He's one of the bunch, the Mojave bunch that's been trailing Red all over the country. When Red disappeared up in those desert hills, I reckon Saunders must have got hold of a paper and read about the get-away here at the Moonstone. He just naturally came over here and got a job to see if he couldn't trace Red."

"You are thinking of joining Mr. Summers at the claim?"

"Yes. The eastern folks are gone now. I hate to go. But I got to get busy and make some money. A fellow hasn't much of a show without money these days."

Louise was silent. She sat gazing across the valley.

Collie approached her hesitatingly. "I just got to say it—after all that's happened. Seems that I could, now."

Louise paled and flushed. "Oh Collie," she cried entreatingly. "We have been such good friends. Please don't spoil it all!"

"I know I am a fool," he said, "or I was going to be. But please to take Boyar and go. I'll bring Rally. I was wrong to think you would listen a little."

But Louise remained sitting upon the rock as though she had not heard him. Slowly she stepped toward her, his spurs jingling musically. He caught up one of her gloves and turned it over and over in his fingers with a kind of clumsy reverence. "It's mighty little—and there's the shape of your hand in it, just like it bends when you hold the reins. It seems like a thing almost too good for me to touch, because it means you. I know you won't laugh at me, either."

Louise turned toward him. "No. I understand," she said.

"Here was where Red and I first saw you to know who you was. I used to hate folks that wore good clothes. I thought they was all the same, you and all that kind. But, no, it ain't so. You looked back once, when you were riding away from the jail that time. I was going to look for Red and not go to work at the Moonstone. I saw you look back. That settled it. I was proud to think you cared even anything for a tramp. I was mighty lonesome then. Since I got to thinking I'd be somebody some day. But I can see where I stand. I'm a puncher, working for the Moonstone. You kind of liked me because I had hard luck when I was a kid. But that made me love you. It ain't wrong, I guess, to love something you can't ever reach up to. It ain't wrong to keep on loving, only it's awful lonesome not to ever tell you about it."

"I'm sorry, Collie," said Louise gently.

"Please don't be sorry. Why, I'm glad! Maybe you don't think it is the best thing in the world to love a girl. I ain't asking anything but to just go on loving you. Seems like a man wants the girl he loves to know it, even if that is just all. You said I love horses. I do. But loving you started me loving horses. Red said once that I was just living like what I thought you wanted me to be. Red's wise when he takes his time to it. But now I'm living the way I think I want to. I won't ask you to say you care. I guess you don't—that way. But if I ever get rich—then—"

"Collie, you must not think I am different from any other girl. I'm just as selfish and stubborn as I can be. I almost feel ashamed to have you think of me as you do. Let's be sensible about it. You know I like you. I'm glad you care—for what you think I am."

"That's it. You are always so kind to a fellow that it makes me feel mean to speak like I have. You listened—"

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