

BULLDOGGER

"You can ride on," said Vannie.
"I've found a man who will fight."

By JAMES STEVENS

THE round-up camp was in an old burn crossed by a creek. A pitchpine fire popped high against the wagons. Scud Gilroy, riding for the horse corral, squinted through windy shadows at the sprawled and squatting shapes silhouetted against the smoky light. He was hoping to see both Neal Colter and Curly Moslander there. Scud failed to make out Curly, but he did see Neal.

Neal Colter was back from the fire, sitting cross-legged in the shadows of his own wagon. Scud spotted him as he struck a match to a cigarette. Neal's lean face was cast in a quick glow, its features in that glimpse seemed stonily set, then only the cigarette end shone in the wagon shadows.

Scud rode on to the corral. He unsaddled and hobbled the roan, rubbed off the saddle and turned the horse loose. A sharp nicker sounded from the piney darkness. Scud Gilroy prowled for the sound. He closed up on Neal Colter's blaze-faced black.

The horse still carried his saddle and bridle. Scud caught up the dragging reins, led the black to the corral, hitched him there and then made swift tracks for the camp.

A stud game was already started on a blanket by the fire. The late comer drew little attention as he dished up a plate of grub at the chuck wagon. Scud drifted over to the Colter wagon and sat down by Neal. Neither spoke until Scud had cleaned up his plate. Then Neal said:

"Curly Moslander and me shot it out."

SCUD GILROY was rolling a cigarette. He crimped both ends and struck a light before he spoke. His voice was a burry, easy drawl.

"Is Curly dead?" Scud said.

"I'd like to know," Neal spoke painfully, biting each word through clenched teeth. "We swapped considerable lead. I was hit, same time Curly pitched off his sorrel. My black lit out, and I somehow pulled leather and held on. Managed to pile off, but never unsaddled. Walked straight to here, said I was sick."

Colter was silent, his jaws set hard.

"Was you hit bad?" Scud said.

"No," slipped his boss. "A cracked left rib and a slug still under it. Never bled hardly. All right, only feel like I'd woke from a nightmare. Got to help me, Scud."

Neal Colter had the eyes of an Indian. His gaze smoldered through the shadows.

"You trail up after Curly," he went on. "This side of Mawl Creek ridge we had it. Take the black. Not a hint to nobody, on account of Vannie. I'm sick, sick, understand?"

"Yep," said Scud Gilroy. "All right, Neal."

He stood up, tramping out his cigarette. Without more parleying, Scud hooked up a stick of pitchpine from the rick and eased out between two wagons for the horse corral. Nobody noticed him any.

Scud Gilroy was a dry-lander who ranged and rode for the Colters most months of each year. Like that for seven years, since he'd quit school. That time his dad had been sent up for a killing. The other Gilroys pulled out. The kid stuck to the dry-land ranch.

Seven years, and he was still hanging on. Grim-eyed, short-spoken, seeming a long way older than his years. His silence hid an unyielding hope for Vannie Colter, Neal's kid sister, but not even Vannie dreamed that. Vannie never seemed to have a thought for anybody but Curly Moslander, a young roving rider who had come to the valley this last Summer.

Scud rode Neal Colter's black up through the pines for the timberline trail, until the pines thinned away and the black bulge of a ridge loomed ahead in the shadows. The rider pulled up, his gaze caught by a trampled patch of thick buckbrush below the trail.

He swung down from the saddle and prowled in the broken brush. In one spot he plucked a twist of horse hairs from a big thorny branch. Scud then led the black on up the trail. A hundred feet on he came to a second break in the trailside brush.

AFTER a look around Scud fired the stick of pitchpine he had brought along. It soon blew into a hot torch, and in this light he carefully combed every inch of the break and the ground about it, pawing the bush and kicking up earth. At last his boot struck something hard.

It was a revolver, a pearl-handled .32. Five of the six cartridge chambers held shells, and three of the shells were empty. Scud set the hammer on an empty, with a loaded chamber just at the left, then he shoved the baby gun into the big inner pocket of his sheepskin coat.

That done, Scud led the black on up the trail. He kept the torch down, its smoky flare skimming tracks in the dust. At the hump of the ridge he doused the torch, mounted the black and rode fast back to camp.

The stud game was going ahead full blast now, with all the valley ranchers and riders but Neal Colter gathered about the blanket. Scud crouched down by Neal and spoke in a tone near a whisper.

"Curly was pitched all right," he said, "but his sorrel stopped in the brush before running far. Curly caught him and rode back up the trail. At the ridge he turned left. Seems he headed down Mawl Creek."

"You ride on home," muttered Neal Colter



Illustrated by
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A quick flush of anger swept the pallor from the girl's face. "I'm 21," she said scornfully. "I'll do as I please . . . What will you do, Mr. Gilroy?"

fiercely. "Curly is going for Vannie. You stop them. Hear me, Scud?"

"Yep," said Scud dully. "All right." It was a habit. He could not break loose, seemed like, from the habit of being bossed by Neal, by all the Colters. He wanted to know about this gun he had found. It was mighty queer about the pearl-handled .32. But Scud just said, "All right, Neal. What about you, though?"

"Morning I'll have the team hitched and me hauled down to Doc Taylor." Neal Colter twisted out the words. "Doc won't let it out I was shot. Only way to head off scandal. Moslander clears out, there'll be some talk, but no worse—less Vannie trails with him. Depend on you to stop that. You ramble now, Scud."

"All right."

"I'll stop at nothing to keep this mess from being smeared all over the valley. I know you're with me."

"Sure. All right, Neal. I'll be going."

TWO hours down, a huge black cloud slid over the moon and a heavy shower pelted the rider and the blaze-face. Maybe 40 minutes later moonlight splashed the road again. Pretty soon Scud began to notice certain tracks in the wetted dust. They became more and more plain, until at last each track was distinct, a gray blur in the blackness of the road. They were horse tracks, going in the same direction he was going.

Scud Gilroy knew now that Curly Moslander had been running dead ahead of him all this time.

It was a jolt. For a minute Scud Gilroy had the feeling of a horse kick under his ribs. Curly, he slowly realized, must have doubled back through the buckbrush and woods from the Mawl Creek trail. It would have been plenty easy for him to have avoided Scud on the trail, in the pouring rain and darkness.

Scud Gilroy heeled the black on and rode hard.

Rain was on the moon when he pulled into the Colter ranch. Sometime back the weather had thickened into a cloudy drizzle, and now a black curtain was over all the sky. Scud had unrolled his slicker from the saddle thongs and its long skirt flapped about his legs as he swung from the saddle at the ranch house yard. He shouldered through a side gate and tramped swiftly for the kitchen L of the house, from which a dim light shone.

Scud cat-footed over the porch and took an easy turn on the door knob. The gentle pressure of his hand opened the door noiselessly. A slowly widening oblong of light struck the porch floor.

Glancing down in that light, Scud saw that mud had been freshly tracked here. But right now Curly Moslander was not in the big kitchen room. There was only Vannie Colter.

She was in riding boots and a belted camel's hair coat. It was dark blue and her hat was that color. Her back was toward the door, and she stooped toward the faint glow of a lamp that was turned down to a raveling of flame. It shone through a fluff of dark hair that waved out above the broad collar of the coat. In Scud's sidewise view her face, so shadowed about, seemed white and strained.

She was stooped at the table, writing jerkily with a pencil.

Scud Gilroy stepped quietly inside the door. He said, "Vannie," in a low tone, then closed the door and stood against it.

Vannie Colter breathed in a sharp gasp and whipped around from the table. The pencil dropped from her hand, clicking dully on the floor. She groped for a gun that was propped against the base of the lamp. It was a pearl-handled revolver, a mate for the one in Scud's pocket. She let it lie as her gaze struck the quiet figure at the door.

"Oh, it's only you, Scud," Vannie said, with a nervous laugh. "I thought—what's happened to Neal?" she demanded sharply.

"Curly and him had a row," Scud spoke in a low, wooden tone, choosing his words. "Curly run out and Neal sent me to see that he keeps going." Scud paused, then drawled, "by himself."

A QUICK flush of anger swept the pallor from the girl's face. "I'm 21," she said scornfully. "I'll do as I please. If Neal was here himself, he couldn't stop me. What will you do, Mr. Gilroy?"

"I allow you won't go nowhere with Curly Moslander," said Scud doggedly. "You might as well give in, Vannie, and save trouble."

"What trouble?" The girl's voice was a lash of contempt. "Trouble you would make?"

Scud ignored the questions. He moved in some from the door.

"Is that your gun, Vannie?" he said casually, with a nod toward the lamp.

"Why, of course—" Her voice faded there. Plainly his query had been entirely unexpected. She was suddenly tense again. "Scud, just what happened up in the woods?" she said feverishly.

"Didn't Curly tell you?" Scud countered. "If you're ridin' out with Curly Moslander, you sure must trust him, Vannie," he drawled on. "And he sure must have told you all the trouble up yonder."

"You're making a game," she said, angrily impatient. "Why did you ask if this is my gun?"

"Just curious," said Scud evenly. "I only know of two like 'em in the valley. One is yours, the other your mom's. Seem to remember they was presents from your dad. Fancy. Names all engraved, and the like."

"This is mine. Curly just left it. Look if you want to."

Her hands caught the table edge in a nervous grip. She said chokingly, "What are you doing, Scud Gilroy? What do you mean?"

"Listen, Vannie," said Scud Gilroy, grimaced but in a queerly gentle voice. "All along it's seemed I'd be such a fool to tell you, for it could never be any use. Here's how it is."

"It's account of you, Vannie, I've bull-dogged through these seven years," said Scud Gilroy, his eyes burning through the smoky shadows.

"I've made it on a dream about you, and it was fine even when I knew in my heart it could never be more. That's all to say. That's why I allow to see to it that Curly Moslander pull out alone."

There was a mighty quiet between them. Neither seemed to breathe. At last she spoke, just breathing the words so that he leaned toward her to hear.

"You've said plenty, Scud," said Vannie Colter. "Sometimes I've thought—I've dreamed, too. It's home here for me—"

She paused, seeming to grope for the words that would express her emotion.

"Sure, Vannie," said Scud quietly. "You belong to the valley, more than Neal, more than anybody else I know. If Curly was a man to marry you and settle down here, I'd never put in."

She shook her head. "He won't do that," she breathed, still in that dazed way.

"Is he scared of Neal?"

Scud Gilroy rasped out the question.

"No one can stand against Neal Colter," Vannie answered tonelessly. "His wife hates me, too. Seemed my only hope was to run away. I won't live on to be an old maid in this house. That's how Neal and his wife want to keep me now. I didn't know—about—"

"Even Neal Colter can be bull-dogged for a fall," Scud interrupted again. "And I have him right where I can put on the pressure. If Curly will stick and fight, do you want him?"

Under his grim gaze she flushed, then her gaze fell. Her shoulders shook. Scud's

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expression softened. Then, after listening intently, he took up the revolver and went out into the rain.

The girl followed. Outside she heard Curly Moslander's voice:

"Me ride back to the round-up camp with Vannie? You're crazy, you must be a sheep-herder. Neal Colter laid to murder me. I outfoxed him, and this is how I pay him back. Now you get out of this, or I'll bend my rod over your skull. Savvy?"

"Yep," said Scud, in his ranch hand drawl. "I allow you'll have to start bendin' then, Curly, for I've got a gun pokin' through the front of my slicker. It don't bend good, but it shoots."

The soulful voice of Curly Moslander rasped out an oath. Vannie drew yet closer. She heard Curly mutter a hoarse question.

"Neal knew you had Vannie's baby revolver hid on you," Scud was saying. "So he took its mate along under his 45. He figured to finish you off. Tonight he had his chance to lay for you off lonesome at timberline. His shots went wild when the black threwed his fit."

"The last shot hit him, the saddle horn or something, knocking the gun back. Neal figured to kill you with one .32, then fire as many shots from the one you packed, and leave it in your hand."

"You don't know," the other protested. "I shoo-flied you on the trail. Neal wouldn't have confessed all that. You made it up."

"I picked it up," drawled Scud. "From trail signs, but it does piece together. Well, are you makin' a fight for Vannie?"

"What kind of fight?" It was the snarl of a cornered wolf.

"Ought to be plain. I'll back you against Neal Colter. He gives Vannie and you a free chance, or we bring the law on him for attempted murder. He ambushed you. Neal has a jolt comin'."

Vannie was at the gate. Curly saw her. He snarled again:

"Get out! Here's Vannie now. She's coming with me."

Scud Gilroy snapped around. Vannie could feel his eyes burning into her own. Still in that unshaken drawl, he said:

"Did you hear all we talked, Vannie?"

Vannie Colter swayed in the blowing rain and darkness. For a moment the hot choke in her throat would not let her speak. The two men waited, looking at her, two such different men. But Vannie Colter knew now what her heart truly wanted.

"I know what I want," she said at last. "I'll have that or nothing."

She pushed on through the gate and stopped at the horse Curly had brought for her. He gripped her arm and helped her to mount.

"Would you try to stop us now?" Vannie spoke down to Scud Gilroy.

"Not now," he said grimly. "Not when you know what he is."

"Would you buck Neal for me, in Curly's place?"

"I allow I would. Any man would—"

"You can ride on," Vannie Colter's voice cut in like a whip as she turned on Curly Moslander. "I've found what I want—a man, a man who will hang on and fight, through thick and thin, for years and years. . ."