

# Judith of Blue Lake Ranch

By JACKSON GREGORY

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## JUDITH TAKES POSSESSION OF BLUE LAKE RANCH

"You wildcat!" he cried. And his two big hands flew out, seeking her shoulders.

"Stand back!" called Judith. "Just because you are bigger than I am, don't make any mistake! Stand back, I tell you!"

Bud Lee marveled at the swiftness with which her hand had gone into her blouse and out again, a small-caliber revolver in the steady fingers now. He had never known a man—himself possibly excepted—quicker at the draw.

But Bayne Trevors, from whose makeup cowardice had been omitted, laughed sneeringly at her and did not stand back. His two hands out before him, his face crimson, he came on.

"Fool!" cried the girl. "Fool!"

Still he came on. Lee gathered himself to spring.

Judith fired. Once, and Trevors' right arm fell to his side. A second time, and Trevors' left arm hung limp like the other. The crimson was gone from his face now. It was dead white. Little beads of sweat began to form on his brow.

Lee turned astonished eyes to Judith.

"Now you know who's running this outfit, don't you?" she said coolly. "Lee, have a team hitched up to carry Trevors wherever he wants to go. He's not hurt much; I just winged him. And go tell the cook about my breakfast."

But Lee stood and looked at her. He had no remark to offer. Then he turned to go upon her bidding. As he went down to the bunkhouse he said softly under his breaths "Well, I'm d—d. I most certainly am!"

Meet hero, heroine and villain—Bud Lee, Judith Sanford and Bayne Trevors! Rather an energetic and efficient young woman is Judith, isn't she? But, just the same, she is what we Americans call "a nice girl," to say nothing of being a beauty when dressed up for a ball.

You see, Judith has to get busy. Part owner of the big ranch, she comes to the realization that she is being robbed by her foreman, Bayne Trevors. She suddenly appears at the ranch, discharges him and takes the management into her own hands. Judith wins the favor of the men's leaders by taming an outlaw horse. Bud Lee, daring element of the horse department, about whom there is a considerable element of mystery, is Judith's principal aid in ferreting out and checkmating the schemes of Trevors. Finally Lee realizes that he is in love with Judith. The girl surprises similar feeling in herself toward him, but keeps him at a distance until their mutual trials and dangers force a showdown and a declaration of affections.

Jackson Gregory, the author, was born in Salinas, Cal., in 1882, and makes his home at East Auburn in that state. He once served as a principal of schools in California and has worked as a newspaper reporter in the larger cities of the United States and Canada. He writes from an intimate knowledge of the West and his books are deservedly popular. He is the author of "Under Handicap," "The Outlaw," "The Short Cut," "Wolf Breed," "The Joyous Trouble Maker," "Six Feet Four," "The Bells of San Juan," "Ladyfingers," "Man to Man," "Desert Valley," "The Everlasting Whisper," and many short stories and stories for feature photoplays.

## CHAPTER I

### Bud Lee Wants to Know

Bud Lee, horse foreman of the Blue Lake ranch, sat upon the gate of the home corral, bulled a cigarette with slow brown fingers, and stared across the broken fields of the upper valley to the rosy glow above the pine-timbered ridge where the sun was coming up. His customary gravity was unusually pronounced.

"If a man's got the hunch an egg is bad," he mused, "is that a good and sufficient reason why he should go poking his fingers inside the shell? I want to know!"

Tommy Burkitt, the youngest wage-earner of the outfit and a profound admirer of all that factuality, good humor and quick capability which went into the makeup of Bud Lee, approached from the ranch-house on the knoll. "Hi, Bud!" he called. "Trevors wants you. On the jump."

Burkitt stopped at the gate, looking up at Lee. "On the jump, Trevors said," he repeated.

For a moment Lee sat still, his cigarette unlighted, his broad black hat far back upon his close-cropped hair, his eyes serenely contemplative upon the pink of the sky above the pines. Then he slipped from his place and, though each single movement gave an impression of great leasurlessness, it was but a flash of time until he stood beside Burkitt.

"Stick around a wee bit, laddie," he said gently, a lean brown hand resting lightly on the boy's square shoulder. "A man can't see what is on the cards until they're tipped, but it's always a fair gamble that between dawn and dusk I'll gather up my string of colts and crowd on. If I do, you'll want to come along?"

He smiled at young Burkitt's eagerness and turned away toward the ranch-house and Bayne Trevors, thus putting an early end to an enthusiastic acquiescence.

"They ain't no more men ever foaled like him," meditated Tommy, in an approval so profound as to be little less than out-and-out devotion.

And, indeed, one might ride up and down the world for many a day and not find a man who was Bud Lee's superior in "the things that count." As tall as most, with sufficient shoulders, a slender body, narrow-hipped, he carried himself as perhaps his forebear walked in the days when open forests or sheltered caverns housed them, with a little gracefulness born of the perfect play of superb physical development. His muscles, even in the slight movement, flowed liquidly; he had slipped from his place on the corral gate less like a man than like some great, splendid cat. The skin of hands, face, throat,

was very dark, whether by inheritance or because of long exposure to sun and wind, it would have been difficult to say. The eyes were dark, very keen, and yet reminiscently grave. From under their black brows they had the habit of appearing to be reluctantly withdrawn from some great distance to come to rest, steady and calm, upon the man with whom he chanced to be speaking.

The gaunt, sure-footed form was lost to Tommy's eyes; Lee had passed beyond the clump of wild-lilies whose glistening, heart-shaped leaves screened the open court about which the ranch-house was built. A strangely elaborate ranch-house, this one, set here so far apart from the world of rich residences. There was a score of rooms in the great, one-story, rambling edifice of rudely squared timbers set in field-stone and cement, rooms now closed and locked; there were flower-gardens still cultivated daily by Jose, the half-breed; a pretty court with a fountain and many roses, out upon which a dozen doorways looked; wide verandas with glimpses beyond of fireplaces and long expanses of polished floors. For, until recently, this had been not only the headquarters of Blue Lake ranch, but the home as well of the chief of its several owners, Luke Sanford, whose own efforts alone had made him at forty-five a man to be reckoned with, had followed his fancy here extensively and expensively, allowing himself this one luxury of his many lean, hard years. Then, six months ago, just as his ambitions were stepping to fresh heights, just as his hands were filling with newer, greater endeavor, there had come the mishap in the mountains and Sanford's tragic death.

Lee passed silently through the courtyard and came to the door at the far end. The door stood open; within was the office of Bayne Trevors, general manager. Lee entered, his hat still far back upon his head. The sound of his boots upon the bare floor caused Trevors to look up quickly.

"Hello, Lee," he said quietly. "Wait a minute, will you?"

Quite a different type from Lee, Bayne Trevors was heavy and square and hard. His eyes were the glinting gray eyes of a man who is forceful, dynamic, the sort of man who is a better captain than lieutenant, whose hands are strong to grasp life by the throat and demand that she stand and deliver. Only because of his wide and successful experience of his initiative, of his way of quick, decisive action mated to a marked executive ability, had Luke Sanford chosen Bayne Trevors as his right-hand man in so colossal a venture as the Blue Lake ranch. Only because of the same pushing, vigorous personality was he this morning general manager, with

the unlimited authority of a dictator over a petty principality.

In a moment Trevors lifted his frowning eyes from the table, turning in his chair to confront Lee, who stood lounging in leisurely manner against the door-jamb.

"That young idiot wants money again," he growled, his voice as sharp and quick as his eyes. "As if I didn't have enough to contend with already."

"Meaning young Hampton, I take it?" said Lee quietly.

Trevors nodded savagely.

"Telegram. Caught it over the line the last thing last night. We'll have to sell some horses this time, Lee."

Lee's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. "I didn't plan to do any selling for six months yet," he said, not in expostulation but merely in explanation. "They're not ready."

"How many three-year-olds have you got in your string down in the Big meadow?" asked Trevors crisply.

"Counting those eleven Red Duke colts?"

"Counting everything. How many?"

"Seventy-three."

The general manager's pencil wrote upon the pad in front of him "73," then swiftly multiplied it by 50. Lee saw the result, 3,650 set down with the dollar sign in front of it. He said nothing.

"What would you say to fifty dollars a head for them?" asked Trevors, whirling again in his swivel chair.

"Three thousand six fifty for the bunch?"

"I'd say the same," answered Lee deliberately, "that I'd say to a man that offered me two bits for Daylight or Ladybird. I just naturally wouldn't say nothing at all."

Trevors smiled cynically. "What are the seventy-three colts worth, then?"

"Right now, when I'm just ready to break 'em in," said Bud Lee thoughtfully, "the worst of that string is worth fifty dollars. I'd say twenty of the herd ought to bring fifty dollars a head; twenty more ought to



"What Would You Say to Fifty Dollars a Head?"

bring sixty; ten are worth seventy-five; ten are worth an even hundred; seven of the Red Duke stock are good for a hundred and a quarter; the other four Red Dukes and the three Robert the Devils are worth a hundred and fifty a head. The whole bunch, an easy fifty-seven hundred little iron men."

He stared hard at Trevors a moment. And then, partially voicing the thought with which he had grappled upon the corral gate, he added meditatively: "There's something almighty peculiar about an outfit that will listen to a man offer fifty bucks on a string like that."

His eyes, cool and steady, met Trevors' in a long look which was little short of a challenge.

"Just how far does that go, Lee?" asked the manager curtly.

"As far as you like," replied the horse foreman coolly. "Are you going to sell those three-year-olds for thirty-six hundred?"

"Yes," answered Trevors bluntly. "I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"Ask for my time, I guess," and although his voice was gentle and even pleasant, his eyes were hard. "I'll take my own little string and move on."

"Curse it!" cried Trevors heatedly. "What difference does it make to you? What business is it of yours how I sell? You draw down your monthly pay, don't you? I raised you a notch last month without your asking for it, didn't I?"

"That's so," agreed the foreman equably. "It's a cinch none of the wages have any kick coming at the wages."

For a moment Trevors sat frowning up at Lee's inscrutable face. Then he laughed shortly. "Look here,

Bud," he said good-humoredly, an obvious seriousness of purpose under the light tone. "I want to talk with you before you do anything rash. Sit down." But Lee remained standing, merely saying, "Shoot."

"I wonder," explained Trevors, "if the boys understand just the size of the job I've got in my hands? You know that the ranch is a million-dollar outfit; you know that you can ride fifteen miles without getting off the home-range; you know that we are doing a dozen different kinds of farming and stock-raising. But you don't know just how short the money is! There's that young idiot now, Hampton. He holds a third interest and I've got to consider what he says, even if he is a weak-minded, inbred pup that can't do anything but spend an inheritance like the born fool he is. His share is mortgaged; I've tried to pay the mortgage off. I've got to keep the interest up. Interest alone amounts to three thousand dollars a year. Think of that! Then there's Luke Sanford dead and his one-third interest left to another young fool, a girl! Every two weeks she's writing for a report, eternally butting in, making suggestions, hampering me until I'm sick of the job."

"That would be Luke's girl, Judith?"

"Yes. Two of the three owners' kids, writing me at every turn. And the third owner, Timothy Gray, the only sensible one of the lot, has just up and sold out his share, and I suppose I'll be hearing next that some superannuated female in an old lady's home has inherited a fortune and bought him out. And now you, the best man I've got, throw me down!"

"I don't see," said Lee slowly, after a brief pause, "just what good it does to sell a good string of horses like they were sheep. Half of that herd is real horse-flesh. I tell you."

"Well," snapped Trevors, "suppose you are right. I've got to raise three thousand dollars in a hurry. Where will I get it?"

"Who is offering fifty dollars a head for those horses?" asked Lee abruptly.

"It might be the Big Western Lumber company?"

"Yes."

"Uh-huh. Well, you can kill the rats in your own barn, Trevors. I'll go look for a job somewhere else."

Bayne Trevors, his lips tightly compressed, his eyes steady, a faint, angry flush in his cheeks, checked what words were flowing to his tongue and looked keenly at his foreman. Lee met his regard with cool unconcern. Then, just as Trevors was about to speak, there came an interruption.

The quiet of the morning was broken by the quick thud of a horse's shod hoofs on the hard ground of the courtyard. Bud Lee in the doorway, turned to see a strange horse drawn up so that upon its four bunched hoofs it sild to a standstill; saw a slender figure, which in the early light he mistook for a boy, slip out of a saddle. And then, suddenly, a girl, the spurs of her little riding-boots making jingling music on the veranda, her riding-quirt swinging from her wrist, had stepped by him and was looking with bright, snapping eyes from him to Trevors.

"I am Judith Sanford," she announced briefly, and there was a note in her young voice which went ringing, bell-like, through the still air. "Is one of you men Bayne Trevors?"

A quick, shadowy smile came and went upon the lips of Bud Lee. It struck him that she might have said in just that way: "I am the queen of England and I am running my own kingdom." He looked at her with eyes filled with open interest and curiosity, making swift appraisal of the flush in the sun-browned cheeks, the confusion of dark, curling hair disturbed by her furious riding, the vivid, red-blooded beauty of her. Mouth and eyes and the very carriage of the dark head upon her superb white throat announced boldly and triumphantly that here was no wax-petted lily of a lady but rather a maid whose blood, like the blood of the father before her, was turbulent and hot and must boil like a wild mountain-stream at opposition. Her eyes, a little darker than Trevors', were the eyes of fighting stock.

Trevors, irritated already, turned hard eyes up at her from under corrugated brows. He did not move in his chair. Nor did Lee stir except that now he removed his hat.

"I am Trevors," said the general manager curtly. "And, whether you are Judith Sanford or the queen of Siam, I am busy right now."

"You talk soft with me, Trevors!" cried the girl passionately. "If you want to hold your job five minutes! I'll tolerate none of your high and mighty airs!"

Trevors laughed at her, a sneer in his laugh. "I talk the way I talk," he answered roughly. "If people don't like the sound of it they don't have to listen! You round up those seventy-three horses and crowd them over the ridge to the lumber camp. Or, if you want to quit, quit now and I'll send a sane man."

The hot color mounted higher in the girl's face, a new anger leaped up in her eyes.

"Take no orders this morning that

I don't give," she said, for a moment turning her eyes upon Lee. And to Trevors: "Busy or not busy, you take time right now to answer my questions. I've got your reports and all they tell me is that you are going in the hole as fast as you can. What business have you got selling off my young steers at a sacrifice?"

"Go, get those horses, Lee," said Trevors, ignoring her.

Again she spoke to Lee, saying crisply: "What horses is he talking about?"

With his deep gravity at its deepest, Bud Lee answered: "All L-S stock. The eleven Red Duke three-year-olds; the two Robert the Devil colts; Brown Babe's filly, Comet—"

"All mine, every running hoof of 'em," she said, cutting in. "What does Trevors want you to do with them? Give them away for ten dollars a head or cut their throats?"

"Look here—" cried Trevors angrily, on his feet now.

"You shut up!" commanded the girl sharply. "Lee, you answer me."

"He's selling them fifty dollars a head," he said with a secret joy in his heart as he glanced at Trevors' flushed face.

"Fifty dollars!" Judith gasped. "Fifty dollars for a Red Duke colt like Comet!"

She stared at Lee as though she could not believe it. He merely stared back at her, wondering just how much she knew about horseflesh.

Then, suddenly, she whirled again upon Trevors.

"I came out to see if you were a crook or just a fool," she told him, her words like a slap in his face. "No man could be so big a fool as that! You—you crook!"

The muscles under Bayne Trevors' jaws corded. "You've said about enough," he shot back at her. "And even if you do own a third of this outfit, I'll have you understand that I am the manager here and that I do what I like."

From her bosom she snatched a big envelope, tossing it to the table. "Look at that," she ordered him. "You big thief! I've mortgaged my holding for fifty thousand dollars and I've bought in Timothy Gray's share. I swing two votes out of three now, Bayne Trevors. And the first thing I do is run you out, you great big grafting fat-head! You would chuck Luke Sanford's outfit to the dogs, would you? Get off the ranch. You're fired!"

"You can't do a thing like this!" snapped Trevors, after one swift glance at the papers he had whisked out of their covering.

"I can't, can't I?" she jeered at him. "Don't you fool yourself for one little minute! Pack your little trunk and hammer the trail!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind. Why, I don't know even who you are! You say that you are Judith Sanford." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "How do I know what game you are up to?"

"You can't bluff me for two seconds, Bayne Trevors," she blazed at him. "You know who I am, all right. Send for Sunny Harper," she ended sharply.

"Discharged three months ago," Trevors told her with a show of teeth.

"Johnny Hodge, then," she commanded. "Or Tod Bruce or Bing Kelley. They all know me."

"Fired long ago, all of them," laughed Trevors, "to make room for competent men."

"To make room for more crooks!" she cried, her own brown hands balled into fists scarcely less hard than Trevors' had been. Then for the third time she turned upon Lee. "You are one of his new thieves, I suppose?"

"Thank you, ma'am," said Bud Lee gravely.

"Well, answer me. Are you?"

"No, ma'am," he told her, with no hint of a twinkle in his calm eyes. "Leastwise, not his exactly. You see, I do all my killing and highway robbing on my own books. It's just a way I have."

Yes, Judith has fired Trevors, but will he go? What if he says, "No"?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

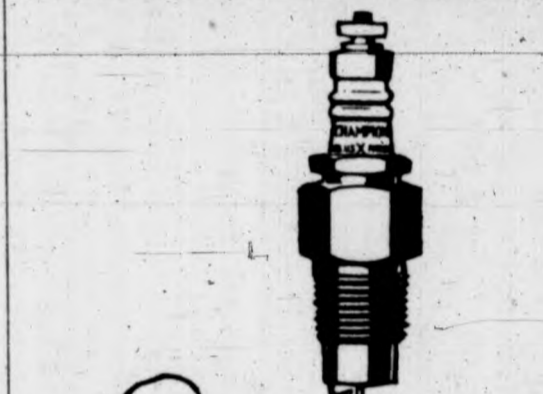
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