

Judith of Blue Lake Ranch

By JACKSON GREGORY

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"CAN SHE RIDE?"

SYNOPSIS.—Bud Lee, horse foreman of the Blue Lake ranch, convinced Bayne Trevors, manager, is deliberately wrecking the property owned by Judith Sanford, a young woman, her cousin, Pollock Hampton, and Timothy Gray, decides to throw up his job. Judith arrives and announces she has bought a share in the ranch and will run it. She discharges Trevors.

CHAPTER I—Continued

"Well," Judith sniffed, "I don't know. It will be a job to me if there's a square man left on the ranch! Go down to the bunk-house and tell the cook I'm here and I'm hungry as a wildcat. Tell him and any of the boys that are down there that I've come to stay and that Trevors is fired. They take orders from me and no one else. And hurry, if you know how. Goodness knows, you look as though it would take you half an hour to turn around."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Bud Lee. "But you see I had just told Trevors here he could count me out. I'm not working for the Blue Lake any more. As I go down to the corral, shall I send up one of the boys to take your orders?"

There was a little smile under the last words, just as there was a little smile in Bud Lee's heart at the thought of the boys taking orders from a little slip of a girl. Inside he was chuckling, vastly delighted with the comedy of the morning.

"She's a sure-enough little wonder-bird, all right," he mused. "But, say, what does she want to butt in on a man's job for. I want to know?"

"Lee," called Trevors, "you take orders from me or no one on this ranch. You can go now. And just keep your mouth shut."

Bud Lee was turning to go out and down to his horse when he saw the look in Trevors' eyes, a look of consuming rage. The general manager's voice had been hoarse.

"Don't you," shouted Trevors, "get out!"

"Cut out the swear-words, Trevors," said Lee with quiet sternness. "There's a lady here."

"Lady!" scoffed Trevors. He laughed contemptuously. "Where's your lady? That?" and he leveled a scornful finger at the girl. "A ranting tough of a female who brings a breath of the stables with her and scolds like a fish-wife."

"Shut up!" said Lee, crossing the room with quick strides, his face thrust forward a little.

"You shut up!" It was Judith's voice as Judith's hand fell upon Bud Lee's shoulder, pushing him aside. "If I couldn't take care of myself do you think I'd be fool enough to take over a little job like running the Blue Lake? Now—" and with blazing eyes she confronted Trevors—"if you've got any more nice little things to say, suppose you say them to me!"

Trevors' temper had had ample provocation and now stood naked and hot in his bare eyes. In a blind instant he laid his tongue to a word which would have sent Bud Lee at his throat. But Judith stood between them and, like an echo to the word, came the resounding slap as Judith's open palm smote Trevors' cheek.

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

But Bayne Trevors, from whose make-up 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 bunk-house he said softly under his breath: "Well, I'm d—d. I most certainly am!"

CHAPTER II

Judith Puts It Straight

Wrinkled, grizzled old half-breed Jose, his hands trembling with eagerness, stood in the smaller rose-garden culling the perfect buds, a joyous tear running its zigzag way down each cheek.

"La senorita ees come home!" he announced as Lee drew near on his way to the bunk-house. "Jesu Maria!

Even my heart it is like the singing of leetle birdies. Mire, senor. My flowers bloom in the brighter, already—no?"

"You've known her a long time, Joe?"

"Seence she ees born!" and Jose, unashamed, wiped a tear upon the back of a leathery hand. "Senor Sanford and me, senor, we teach her when she ees so leetle!" Jose's shaking hand was lowered until it marked the stature of a twelve-inch pigmy. "Never at all until one year ago does she leave us and the rancho. We, us two who love her, senor, learn her to walk and to ride and to shoot and to talk. You shall hear her say, 'Buenos dias, Jose, mi amigo!' You shall see her kiss the cheek of old Jose, Madre de Dios! I would go down to—h—l for her to bring back fire to warm her leetle feet een woenster!"

Lee went thoughtfully on his way to the bunk-house. "I've got orders for you fellows," he said from the doorway. "The boss of the outfit, the real owner, you know, just blew in. Up at the house. Says you boys are to stick around to take orders straight from headquarters. You, Benny," to the cook, "are to have a man's size breakfast ready in a jiffy."

Naturally Benny led the clamor with a string of oaths. What in blazes did the owner of the ranch have to show up for anyway?—he wanted to know. He accepted the fact as a personal affront. Who was this owner?—demanded Ward Hannon, the foreman of the lower ranch, where the alfalfa fields were.

Lee explained gravely that the newcomer was some sort of relative of old Luke Sanford, who had recently acquired a controlling interest in the ranch. Ward Hannon grunted contemptuously. "The Lord deliver us!" he moaned. "Eastern Jasper! One of the know-all-about-it brand, huh, Bud? I'll bet he combs his hair in the middle and smokes cigarets out'n a box! The putty-headed loons can't even roll their own smokes."

"Don't believe," hazarded Lee indifferently, "from the looks of our visitor that—the owner smokes anything!"

"Listen to that!" grunted Ward Hannon. "Softy, huh?"

"Well," Bud admitted slowly, "looks sort of like a girl, you know?"

"Wouldn't that choke you?" demanded Carson, the cow foreman, a thin, awkward little man, gray in the service of "real men." "Taking orders off'n a fool entersther's bad enough. But old man or young, Bud?"

"Just a kid," was Lee's further dampening news. And as he nonchalantly buttered his hot cakes he added carelessly: "Something of a scrapper, though. Just put two thirty-two calibers into Trevors."

They stared at him incredulously. Then Carson's dry cackle led the laughter.

"You're the biggest liar, Bud Lee," said the old man good-naturedly, "I ever focused my two eyes on. I'll lay an even bet there ain't nobody showed a-tall up this morning."

"You, Tommy," said Lee to the boy at his side, "shovel your grub down lively and go hitch M-dilly and old Pie-

the men outside naturally grouped about the general manager. His angry voice, lifted clearly, reached the two in the room.

"I'm fired," said Trevors harshly. "As soon as I can get going I am leaving for the Western Lumber camp. Every one of you boys holds his job here because I gave it to him. Do you want to hold it now, with a fool girl telling you what to do? Do you want men up and down the state to laugh at you and jeer at you for a pack of softies and imbeciles? Or do you want to roll your blankets and quit? To every man that jumps the job here and follows me today I promise a job with the Western. You fellows know the sort of boss I've been to you. You can guess the sort of boss that chicken in there would be. Now I'm going. It's up to you. Stick to a white man or fuss around for a woman?"

He had said what he had to say and, cursing when his shoulder struck a form near him, made his way down to the stables. Eureka! was ahead of him, going for the team.

"Well, Lee," said Judith sharply, "where do you get off? Do you want to stick? Or shall I count you out?"

"I guess," said Bud very gently, "you'd better count me out."

"You're going with that crook?"

"No. I'm going on my own."

"Why? You're getting good money here. If you're square I'll keep you at the same figure."

But Bud shook his head.

"I'm game to play square," he said slowly. "I'll stick a week, giving you a chance to get a man in my place. That's all."

"What's the matter with you?" she cried hotly. "Why won't you stay with your job? Is it because you don't want to take orders from me?"

Then Lee lifted his grave eyes to hers and answered simply: "That's it. I'm not saying you're not all right. But I got it figured out, there's just two kinds of ladies. If you want to know, I don't see that you've got any call to tie into a man's job."

"Oh, scent!" cried the girl angrily. "You men make me tired. Two kinds of ladies. And ten thousand kinds of men! You want me to dress like a doll, I suppose, and keep my hands soft and white and go around like a brainless, slithering fool! There are

two kinds of ladies, my fine friend: the kind that can and the kind that can't! Thank God I'm none of your precious, sighing, hothouse little fools!"

Gulping down a last mouthful of coffee, she was on her feet and passed swiftly out among the men.

"You men!" she cried, and they turned sober eyes upon her, "listen to me! You've heard that big stiff rant; now hear me! I'm here because I belong here. My dad was Luke Sanford and he made this ranch. I was raised here. It's two-thirds mine right now. Trevors there is a crook and I told him so. He's been trying to sell me out, to make such a failure of the outfit that I'd have to let it go for a comic song. He got gay and I fired him. He tried to manhandle me and I plugged him. And now I'm going to run my own outfit! What have you got to say about it, you grumbling old crouch with the crooked face! Put up or shut up! I'm calling you!"

The men turned from her to Ward Hannon, the field foreman, who had been Trevors' right-hand man and who now was sneering openly.

"I'm saying it's no work for a kid of a girl," grumbled Hannon. "You run an outfit like this?" He laughed derisively. "It can't be did."

"It can't, can't it?" cried Judith. "Tell me why, old smarty. Spit it out lively!"

Jake Carson's shrill cackle cut through a low rumble of laughter. "That's passing it to him straight," said the old cattleman. "What's the word, Ward?"

Ward Hannon shrugged his shoulders and spat impudently. "I ain't saying nothing," he growled, "only this: I got a right to quit, ain't I? Well, I'm quitting. Any time you ketch me working for a female girl that can't ride a horse 'bout fallin' off, that can't see a pig stuck 'bout gettin' laid up, that can't—"

the swift approach of Bayne Trevors. The general manager's face was black with rage and a dull that dark wrath showed a dull red flush of shame. He walked with his two arms lax at his sides.

"Give me a cup of coffee, Ben," he commanded curtly, slumping into a chair. "Hurry!"

Benny, looking at him curiously, brought a steaming cup and offered it. Trevors moved to lift a hand; then sank back a little farther in his chair, his face twisting in his pain.

"Put some milk in it," he snarled. "Then hold it to my mouth. For the love of heaven, hurry, man!"

Then no man there doubted longer the mad tale Bud Lee had brought them. Down from Trevors' sleeves, staining each hand, there had come a broadening trickle of blood. Trevors drank swiftly, draining the cup.

"Get this coat off me," he commanded. "Curse you, don't tear my arms off! Silt the sleeves!"

It was Lee who, pushing the clumsy cook aside, silently made the two bandages from strips of Trevors' shirt. It was Lee who brought a flask of brandy from which Trevors drank deep.

And then came Judith.

They stared at her as they might have done had the heavens opened and an angel come down, or the earth split and a devil sprung up. She looked in upon them with quick, keen eyes which sought to take every man's measure. They returned her regard with a variety of amazed expressions. Never since these men had come to work for Bayne Trevors had a woman so much as ridden by the door. And to have her stand there, composed, utterly at her ease, her air vaguely authoritative, a vitally vivid being who might, suddenly, have taken tangible form from the dawn, bewildered them.

"I am Judith Sanford," she said in her abrupt fashion, quite as she had made the announcement to Lee and Trevors. "This outfit belongs to me. I have fired Trevors. You take your orders straight from me from now on. Cookie, give me some coffee."

She came in without ceremony and sat down at the head of the table. Benny hastily brought the coffee. From some emotion certainly not clear to him he went a violent red. Perhaps the emotion was just sheer embarrassment. He brought hot cakes with one hand while with the other he buttoned his gaping shirt-collar over a bulging, hairy chest.

Men who had finished their breakfast rose hastily with a marked awkwardness and ill-concealed haste and went outside, whence their low voices came back in a confused consultation. Men who had not finished followed them. In an amazingly short time there were but the girl, Lee, Trevors and the cook in the room. Bud Lee, moving with his usual leisureliness, was following when Judith's cool voice said quietly:

"You, Lee, wait a moment. I want to talk with you."

Lee hesitated. Then he came back and waited.

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"Slow up there!" called Judith. "Didn't I stick a pig already this morning, and have I keeled over yet? Didn't I ride the forty miles from Rocky Bend last night and get here before sunup? Listen to me, chief klicker: If you've got a horse on the ranch I can't ride I'll quit right now and give you my job! How's that strike you? I tell you the word on this ranch is going to be 'Put up or shut up!' Which is it, Growly?"

Again the men laughed and Hannon's face showed his anger.

"Mean that, lady?" he demanded briefly.

"You can just bet your eyes! I mean it!"

Hannon turned toward the stable. "All right. We'll see who's going to put up or shut up!" he jeered over his shoulder. "You ride the Prince just two little minutes and I'll stay and work for you!"

Bud Lee from the doorway loved fair play and he knew the Prince. "None of that, Ward," he called sternly. "Not the Prince!"

But Judith, her eyes aflame, whirled upon Lee, her voice like a whip as she said: "Lee, you keep out of this. The sooner you learn who's running things here the better for you."

"Maybe so," said Lee quietly. "But don't you fool yourself you can ride the Prince. There's not a man on the job except me that can ride him." It was not boastfully said, but with calm assurance. "He's an outlaw, Miss Judith. He's the horse that killed Jimmy Carpenter last spring, and Jimmy—"

"Go ahead, Ward," Judith repeated. "I've got something to do today besides play pussy-wants-a-corner with you boys."

Ward went, his eyes filled with malice. Two or three of the other men joined their voices to Bud's and Carson's, expostulating, telling of that fearful thing, an outlaw horse, Judith maintained a scornful silence.

In due time Ward came back. He was leading a saddled horse, a great, wild-eyed roan that snapped viciously as he came on, walking with the wide, spreading stride of a horse little used to the saddle. Judith measured him with her eyes as she had measured the men in the bunkhouse.

"He's an ugly devil," she said, and Lee, at her side, smiled again. But the girl had not altered her intention. She stepped closer, looking to cinch, bit and reins. She commanded Ward to draw the latigo tighter, and Ward did so, dodging back as the big brute snapped at him.

Judith laughed. "Look out, Ward," she taunted him. "He's after your hair!"

Two men held the Prince. At Judith's command they shortened the stirrups and then blinded him with a bandanna handkerchief. Then, moving with incredible swiftness, she was in the saddle, the reins firmly gripped. The Prince, a sudden trembling thrilling through him, stood with his four feet planted. The girl leaned forward and whipped the blind from his red-rimmed eyes.

"There's a good boy!" said Judith coolly. "Buck a little for the lady, Prince!"

Slowly the great muscles of Prince's leg and shoulder and flank corded. The trembling passed; he was like a horse carved in bluish granite. He shook his head a little. Judith, her hand tightening upon the reins, held his head well up, the severe bit thwarting the attempt to get his nose down between his forelegs.

Then suddenly, without warning, the horse whirled, leaping far to the left, striking with hard hoofs bunched,

gathering himself as he landed, swerving with the quickness of light, plunging again to the right. And again he stood still. Judith, sitting securely on his rebellious back, laughed. Her laughter, cool and unafraid, sent a strange little thrill through Bud Lee—who, with fear in his heart, was watching her.

"Look out for him now!" he called warningly.

In truth the Prince had not yet begun. He plunged toward the corral, his purpose plain, the one desire in his heart to crush his rider against the high fence. But Judith's spurs answered him, and the bit, savage in his jaws, brought him about, whirling, sidling, striking, bucking as only a strong, fearless, devil-hearted horse knows how to buck. He doubled up under her; he rose and fell in a quick series of short jumps which tore and jerked at her body, which strove to tear her knees away from his sides and break the grip of her hand on the

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