

# Judith of Blue Lake Ranch

By JACKSON GREGORY

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## POKER FACE

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 Gray's share in the ranch and will run it. She discharges Trevors, after shooting him twice in self-defense. The men on the ranch dislike taking orders from a girl, but by subduing a vicious horse and proving her thorough knowledge of ranch life, Judith wins the best of them over. Lee decides to stay, for a while at least. Judith becomes convinced that her veterinarian, Bill Crowley, is treacherous. She discharges him and gets back Doc Tripp, her dead father's man. Pollock Hampton, part owner, comes to stay for good. Trevors accepts Hampton's invitation to visit the ranch. Judith's messenger is held up and robbed of the monthly pay roll. Bud Lee goes to the city for more money, getting back safely with it, though his horse is killed under him. Both he and Judith see Trevors' hand in the crime. Hog cholera, hard to account for, breaks out on the ranch. Judith and Lee investigate the scene of the holdup. A cabin in a flower-planted clearing excites Judith's admiration. It is Lee's, though he does not say so. They are fired on from ambush, and Lee wounded. Answering the fire, they make for the cabin. Here they find Bill Crowley wounded. Dragging him into the building, they find he has the money taken from Judith's messenger. They are besieged in the cabin all night. Hampton arrives in time to drive the attackers off and captures "Shorty," who later escapes from the ranch. Judith tells Bud Lee her financial troubles and he says he'll stick.

## CHAPTER VIII—Continued

Again she paused. Then, her eyes suddenly darkening, she told him what, after all, lay topmost in her mind.

"I have said that if I am given the chance, I can make a go of this. It's up to you, Bud Lee, to help see that I get that chance. An attempt was made to spread the lung-worm through my calves. Now it's the hogs. Do you know what the latest news is from the pens? There's cholera among them."

"Where did it come from?" he demanded. "Tripp's been keeping the health of our stock up right along."

"Where did it come from?" Judith repeated after him. "That's what I don't know. We've been so careful. But where did the calf sickness come from? Bayne Trevors imported it."

The inference was clear. He stared at her with frowning eyes.

"I don't see how he could have done it without Tripp's getting on to it. He hasn't bought any new hogs."

"But you understand now why I wanted to talk to you? If I win out in the thing I have taken on my shoulders, it is going to be by a close margin. I've thought it all out. We can't slip up in a single deal! But, it's up to you to give me a hand. To find out for yourself such things as where did the cholera come from? To see that nothing happens to your horses. To keep your two eyes wide open. To help me find the man, working with us right now, who is double-crossing us, who turned Shorty loose, who is watching a chance to do his knife act again somewhere else. Do you get me, Bud Lee?"

"I get you," replied Lee.

From without, gay voices, calling merrily, interrupted them. Lee went swiftly to the door while Judith finished her coffee and pulled her broad hat a little lower to throw its shadow in her eyes.

"Aho, there!" It was Pollock Hampton's voice. "We saw your horses and thought we'd catch you picnicking. Get a fire going, too! Say, that's bully. Come ahead, Marcia."

Marcia, a long riding-habit gathered in one hand, her cheeks flushed with her ride, her eyes bright as they rested upon the tall form in the doorway, came on behind Hampton. As the eyes of the two girls met, a sudden hot flush flooded Judith's cheeks. She hated herself for it; she wondered just how red her eyes were.

"Say, Judith," called Hampton, "I'm glad as the dickens we found you. Sawyer, the sheriff, telephoned just now. Said to tell you he'd located Quinlon. The funny part of it is that we made a mistake. It wasn't Quinlon at all that tried to shoot you and Bud up the other night."

"How's that?" demanded Lee. "Who says it wasn't?"

"Sawyer. Found Quinlon at a sheepman's place thirty or forty miles north of here. The sheepman swore Quinlon had been with him two weeks, was with him that night."

"A sheepman can lie," grumbled Lee. Judith's brief moment of confusion passed, she ushered Marcia into the cabin.

"I've been a'plying to see this place!" cried Marcia impetuously. "I told Pollock that it was a sure sign he didn't love me any more if he

wouldn't bring me. And you and one of the men," her eyes on Judith's, "actually were in here, being shot at! Judith, dear, you are just the bravest girl in the world. If I'd been here I'd have simply died. I know I would."

Perhaps she would. At any rate she shuddered delightfully. She found a bullet-hole in the door and put a pink forefinger into it, giving a second little shiver.

"And now," she cried, going to a chair near the table, "do tell me all about that terrible, terrible night. But do you think we are quite safe here now, Mr. Lee?"

To herself Judith was saying: "Just the type to be Bud Lee's ideal lady!"

When they left the cabin, an hour later, Judith challenged Hampton to a ride and so left Marcia and Bud Lee to follow leisurely.

## CHAPTER IX

### Poker Face and a White Pigeon.

Mrs. Simpson had made a discovery. It was epoch-making. It was tremendous. Nothing short of that! So, at the very least, Mrs. Simpson was prepared to maintain stoutly in the face of possible ridicule.

One morning, very early, Mrs. Simpson, from the thick curtains of the living room, saw Jose "prowling around suspicious-like in the courtyard." She had sensed Jose's dislike, and thrilled at the sight. The half-breed had gone silently, "sneaking-like," by Judith's outer door. He had paused there, listening. He had gone back to the courtyard, hesitating, pretending that he was looking at the roses! Such a ruse on the part of so black-hearted a villain inspired in the scarcely breathing Mrs. Simpson a vast disgust. As if he could fool her like that, pottering around among the roses.

She, too, sought to move silently in his wake, though under her ample weight the veranda creaked audibly. Still, making less noise than usual, she peered through the lilies. She saw Jose at the base of the knoll, going swiftly toward the stables. She saw another man who, evidently, was a third of the "gang," and who, of course, had risen early to creep out of the men's bunkhouse before the others were awake, to meet Jose.

Screening herself behind the lilies, her heart throbbing as it had not done for many a long year, she watched.

Jose and the other man did not meet. Jose stopped. The two exchanged a few words too low for Mrs. Simpson to hear at that distance. But she made out that the other man had something in his hand, something white. A pigeon! For, suddenly released, it fluttered out of the man's hands and, circling high above Mrs. Simpson's head, flew to join the other birds cooing on the house-top!

"A carrier-pigeon!" gasped Mrs. Simpson. "Taking a message to the other cutthroats!"

From that instant there was no doubt in her mind. This fitted in too

man cutting their throats," she muttered to herself, "before they'll believe it. It is a carrier-pigeon and I know it. And that Black Spanish—ugh! He makes my blood curdle, just to look at him!"

"Carrier-pigeons!" laughed Judith, as she began a hurried dressing. "The dear old goose! And poor old Jose. She'll get something on him yet. I wonder why she—"

Suddenly Judith broke off. She was standing in front of a tall mirror, still only half-dressed. As she looked into the bright face of the smiling girl in the glass, a sudden change came. Pigeons! Doc Tripp had said that Trevors had got them; had remarked on the incongruity of a man like Trevors caring for little cooing birds. It was rather odd. Carrier-pigeons—carrier—

Judith whipped on her dressing gown again and, slipperless, her warm, bare feet pat-patting upon the cold surfaces of the polished floors, she ran to the office.

"Send Jose to me," she called to Mrs. Simpson. "In the office. I want him immediately."

A warm glow came into Mrs. Simpson's breast. With a big kitchen poker behind her broad back, she hastened out to call Jose, Judith, at the telephone, called Doc Tripp.

"Come up immediately," she commanded, "prepared to make a test for hog-cholera germs. Doc. No, I am not sure of anything, but I think I begin to see where it came from and how. Hurry, will you?"

To Jose she said abruptly:

"Go down to the men's quarters, Jose. Tell Carson and Lee to come right up." And as Jose turned to go, she added carelessly: "Seen any of the men yet?"

"Si, senorita," answered Jose. "Poky Face is up."

"Poker Face? All right, Jose. The others will be about, then."

Jose took little more time for his errand than for his elaborate bow. Carson and Lee came promptly, Carson a score of steps in advance, for Lee had tarried just long enough to wash his face and brush his hair; Carson had not.

"Tell me," demanded Judith, looking at her cattleman with intent eagerness, "what do you know about Poker Face?"

"One of the best men I've got," answered Carson heartily.

"Square, you think?"

"Yes, if I didn't think so he'd have been on his way a long time ago."

"How long has he been here? Who took him on?"

"Trevors hired him. About the same time he hired me."

Bud Lee, entering then, wondered what new thing was afoot. He glanced down and saw a bare foot peeping out from the hem of Judith's heavy red robe; he saw the hair tumbled in a glorious brown confusion over her shoulders. She was amazingly pretty this way.

"I want you two men to just stick around until I send for you again," said Judith, her eyes upon Carson alone, a little pink, naked foot suddenly withdrawn and tucked somewhere under her in her chair. "And keep your eyes on Poker Face. Keep him here, too, Carson. By the way, did any of you boys come in late last night? Or early this morning?"

"Why, no," answered Carson slowly. "An' yes. None of the regular boys, but a man from down the river, looking for a job. Heard we was short-handed. Blew in early. Just got in a few moments ago, Poker Face said."

Quick new interest flew into Judith's eyes.

"Keep him here, too," she cried. "And I'll give you something to do while you wait; bring me all the pigeons you can get your hands on—white ones. Shoot them if you have to. And be careful you don't rub the dust off their feet."

Carson's eyes went swiftly to Bud Lee's. In Carson's mind there was a quick suspicion: The strain of life on the ranch was proving too much for the girl, after all.

Judith, reading his thought, turned up her nose at him and, seeking to keep her feet hidden as she walked by sagging a little at the knees, went to the door. Turning there, she saw in Lee's eyes the hint of a smile, a very approving, admiring smile.

"Impudent!" she cried within herself. Looking very tiny, her knees bent so that her robe might sweep the floor, she continued with all possible dignity to the hallway. Once there, she ran for her room, her gown fluttering wildly about her. In her room, though she dressed hurriedly, she still took time for a long and critical examination of two rows of little pink toes. "Just the same," she said to the flushed Judith in the mirror, "they are very nice feet—Bud Lee, I'd just like to make you squirm one of these days. You're altogether too—too—oh, scut, Judy. What's the matter with you?"

In less than half an hour Doc Tripp, showing every sign of a hurried toilet, rode into the courtyard. He came swiftly into the office, bag in hand, Judith, waiting impatiently for him, lost no words in telling him her suspicions. And Doc Tripp, hearing her out, swore softly and fluently, briefly

asking her pardon when he had done.

"I'm a jackass," he said fervently. "I always knew I was a fool, but I didn't know that I was an idiot! Why, Judy, those d-d pigeons have been sailing all over the ranch, billing and cooing and picking up and toting cholera germs. Any fool can see it now. I might have known something was up when Trevors bought the infernal things. It's as simple as one, two, three. Now this other jasper, pretending to look for a job, brings on some more of them, so that the disease will spread the faster. Let me get my two hands on him, Judith. For the love of God, lead me to him."

But, instead, she led him to the dozen white pigeons which Carson brought in.

Tripp, all business again, improvised his laboratory, washed the pigeons' feet, made his test, with never another curse to tell of his progress. Judith left him and went into the courtyard, where, in a moment, Carson came to her.

"You better tell me what's up," he said sharply. "I know something is. That new guy that come in is darned hard to keep. Just as quick as I grab a shotgun an' go to shooting pigeons he moseys out to the corral an' starts sadding his horse."

"Don't let him go!"

Carson smiled a dry, mirthless smile. "Bud is looking out for him right now," he explained. "Don't worry none about his going before we say so. But I want to know what the play is."

Judith told him. Carson shook his head.

"Think of that?" he muttered. "Why, a man that would do a trick like that oughtn't to be let live two seconds. Only," and he wrinkled his brows at her, "where does Poker Face come in? We ain't got no call to suspicion he's in on it."

"You watch him, just the same, Carson. We know that somebody here has been working against us. Some one who turned Shorty loose. Maybe it isn't Poker Face, and maybe it is."

"He plays a crib game like a sport an' a gentleman," muttered Carson. "He beat me seven games out'n nine last night!" And, still with that puzzled frown in his eyes, he went to watch Poker Face and the new man. To have one of the men for whom he was responsible suspected hurt old Carson sorely. And Poker Face, the man with whom he delighted to play a game of cards—it was almost as though Carson himself had come under suspicion.

"You're going to stick around just a little while, stranger," Bud Lee was saying quietly to a shifty-eyed man in the corral. "Just why, I don't know. Orders, you know."

"Orders be d-d," snarled the newcomer. "I go where I please and when I please."

He set a foot to his stirrups. A lean, muscular hand fell lightly upon his shoulder and he was jerked back promptly. Lee smiled at him. And the shifty-eyed man, though he protested sharply, remained where he was.

A thin, saturnine man whose lips never seemed to move, a man with dead-looking eyes into which no light of emotion ever came, watched them expressionlessly from where he stood with Carson. It was Poker Face.

"No," Poker Face answered, to a sharp question from the persistent Carson.

"Sure, are you?"

"Yes."

"At last word came from Judith. Carson and Lee were to bring both of the suspected men to the house. Doc Tripp, wiping his hands on a towel, his sleeves up, bestowed upon the two of them a look of unutterable contempt and hatred.

"You low-lived skunks!" was his greeting to them.

"Easy, Doc," continued Judith from her desk. "That won't get us anywhere. Who are you?" she demanded of the man standing at Lee's side.

"Me?" demanded the man with an assumption of jauntness. "I'm Donley, Dick Donley, that's who I am!"

"When did you get here?"

"'Bout an hour ago."

"What did you come for?"

"Lookin' for a job."

"Did Carson say he hadn't anything for you?"

"No, he didn't. You're askin' a lot of questions, if you want to know," he added with new surtness.

"Then why are you going in such a hurry? Don't you like to see anyone shoot pigeons?"

Donley stared back at her insolently.

"Because I didn't fall for the crowd," he retorted bluntly. "An', if you want to know, because I didn't hanker for the job when I found out who was runnin' it."

"Meaning me? A girl? That it?"

"You guessed it."

"Who told you I was running the outfit?" she demanded suddenly, her eyes hard on his. "You must have found that out pretty soon! Who told you?"

Donley hesitated; his eyes running from her to the other faces about him, resting longest upon the expressionless, dead-looking eyes of Poker Face.

"What difference does it make who told me?" he snapped.

"Answer me," she commanded.

"Who told you?"

"Well," said Donley, "he did. Poker Face told me."

"Who told you that his name was Poker Face?" Judith shot the question at him.

Donley moved a scuffling foot back and forth, stirring uneasily. That he was lying, no one there doubted; that he was but a poor liar after all was equally evident.

"You ain't got no call to keep me here," he said at last. "I ain't goin' to answer questions all day."

"You'll answer my questions if you don't want me to turn you over to Emmet Sawyer in Rocky Bend!" she told him coolly. "How did you know this man was called Poker Face? Did you know him before?"

Donley's eyes went again, furtive and swift, to Poker Face. But so did all other eyes. Poker Face gave no sign.

"Yes," answered Donley, taking refuge at last upon the solid basis of truth.

"Did you know this man?" Judith asked then of Poker Face, turning suddenly on him.

"No," said Poker Face.

Donley, having guessed wrong, flushed and dropped his head. Then he looked up defiantly and with a short, forced laugh.

"Suppose I know him or don't know him," he asked with his old insolence, "whose business is it?"

But Judith was giving her attention to Poker Face now.

"Where did you get that white

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pigeon you turned loose this morning?" she asked crisply.

"Caught it," was the quiet answer.

"How?"

"With my han's."

"Why?"

"Jus' for fun."

"Did you know that pigeons could carry hog cholera on their feet?"

"No. But I wouldn't have been afraid, not bein' a hawg."

Donley tittered. Poker Face looked unconcerned.

"Take that man Donley into the hall," Judith said to Lee. "See if he has got any pigeon feathers sticking to him anywhere, inside his shirt, probably. If you need any help, say so."

Very gravely Bud Lee put a hand on Donley's shoulder.

"Come ahead, stranger," he said quietly.

"You go to h—!" cried Donley, springing away.

Bud Lee's hand was on him, and though he struggled and cursed and threatened he went with Lee into the hallway. Tripp, watching through the open door, smiled. Donley was on his back, Lee's knees on his chest.

"I'll tell you one thing, stranger," Bud Lee was saying to him softly, as his hand tore open Donley's shirt, "you open your dirty mouth to cuss just once more in Miss Sanford's presence and I'll ruin the looks of your face for you. Now lie still, will you?"

"Connect me with the Bagley ranch," Judith directed the Rocky Mountain operator. "That's right, isn't it, Doc?"

"Yes," answered Tripp. "That's the nearest case of cholera."

"Hello," said Judith when the connection had been established. "Mr. Bagley? This is Judith Sanford, Blue Lake ranch. I've got a case of hog cholera here, too. I want some information."

It looks as if Poker Face might know something about the hog cholera. Is he the traitor at the ranch?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

## Lost Talent

A great deal of talent is lost in the world for the want of a little courage. Every day sends to their graves a number of obscure men who have only remained in obscurity because their timidity has prevented them from making a first effort; and who, if they could have been induced to begin would in all probability have gone great lengths in the career of fame. The fact is that, to do anything in this world worth doing, we must not stand back shrinking and thinking of the cold and danger, but jump in and scramble through as well as we can.—Rev. Sydney Smith.



Bud Lee's Ideal Lady, Thought Judith.

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