

HUNTED BY MEN WHO KNEW NO MERCY, THE OUTLAW DARED
SEEK REFUGE IN THE SHERIFF'S HOUSE.



The Sheriff's Daughter

By William MacLeod Raine

HE stood on the threshold of the open door, breathing deeply but quietly, muscles tense, and hard eyes alert. That he was a hunted man was clear. The haggard face, the cactus-shredded and adobe-spattered clothing, the wary glitter under the narrowed eyelids, all contributed to this assurance. But there was some dynamic quality of force in him that forbade any impression of helplessness. In desperate plight he might be, but he was still quite cool and master of himself.

Silently he had entered the kitchen, and silently he watched the slim girl at the table, as she kneaded a mass of dough and sang softly to herself. Her voice was untrained, without range or compass, unusual only for a certain fine feeling that is a thing apart from musical technique. Yet it held him strangely, perhaps, in part, because of the particular ineptness of the song she sang to his present situation. He was given to moments of sentiment, and it fitted the ironic humor of him that now, of all times, he should be listening to one of Burns' love ballads:

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run."

Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbows of her firm, well-molded arms, and, as she came to the end of the stanza, her forearm brushed back a rebellious lock of golden hair that tickled her forehead. Then, warned by some subtle instinct of another presence, she turned and faced him with lips slightly parted and a startled question in her blue eyes. By her shy dignity and fine coloring he would have guessed her to be of Scotch descent even without the corroborating song.

"It will be my father you are wanting. He is not home," she said, and, while she was speaking, became aware of something arresting in his gaze, something sinister rather than casual in his manner.

"I'm not looking for Sheriff Macdonald," he told her, and the ghost of a sardonic smile touched his lips.

She waited, a fluttering pulse of growing

excitement abeat in her throat.

Over his shoulder his keen gaze swept the plain and halted at a little swirl of dust miles away. He stepped in, closed the door behind him, and put his back to it.

"I reckon we better come to an understanding, Miss Macdonald. I'm hunting a place to hide."

"To hide?" Her eyes grew big with alarm. "Then you are Philip Brand?"

"Rung the bell at the first shot, ma'am." His steady surveillance did not release her for an instant. Under his black eyebrows, he was judging her hardly, and she knew that if need were he would do more than threaten.

"But—but don't you know this is the sheriff's house?" She was groping for a reason to explain his presence.

"They've got me penned in. It was here or nowhere—and then, it isn't the first place they would expect to find me." Again that thin, mirthless smile hovered at the corners of his mouth. "Point is, what are you going to do about it? Will you give me up to be hanged?" His voice had roughened to a sudden threat.

"The law—" she was beginning to murmur, when he took the words from her.

"Don't talk to me about law. They'll hang me to the nearest pole."

"But why? My father—"

"You don't suppose it is Sheriff Macdonald I'm worrying about? I'd give myself up to him quick enough, but Dave Briscoe's gang won't wait for any judge and jury to have their little say-so about whether I'm guilty or not. Of course I'm guilty. Don't I run sheep and spoil the range for their cows? Isn't it logic, then, that I steal horses and shoot deputies? Sure, it is." His voice had an edge of bitterness foreign to her experience of years so boyishly few.

Young he undoubtedly was, but the outstanding note of his lean, lithe figure and thin, tanned face was competence. He had been brought up in that rough school of the frontier West which holds session twelve months in the year, and he had weathered its curriculum with the varied assortment of attainments common to its graduates. Nor had anybody ever made good his contention that Phil Brand had not passed his finals with honor. For Arizona held no more reckless dare-devil than this quiet, black-haired sheepman. In a country where it was held almost a crime to own sheep he had paid

for the right to do as he pleased with his own blood in plenty, and not a little that belonged to the vaqueros of his enemies. Through turbulent years of battle he had won his way to a precarious peace when this charge of horse thieving was flung broadcast against him. To rustle horses was a crime black enough in all faith, but this particular rustler had made his offense worse by killing a deputy who had intruded between him and his getaway.

Yet the girl was loath to believe. There was that essence of manhood in him that compelled respect, that did not accord with robbery and murder. Phil Brand's name had been for years the synonym for outlawry, but this straight, clean-limbed youth did not fit her conception of the role assigned him.

She leaned forward in a sweet impulse to befriend him. "But you are not guilty, sir?"

Surprised he certainly was, but his swift retort was brutal enough: "How do you know?"

"I mean, are you?" She flushed.

"If I told you I wasn't, would you believe me?"

"Yes," she breathed, in a little glow of hope that ought to have stirred whatever of good was in the scamp.

"And, if I don't tell you that, will you still hide me?" His voice seemed to scorn her.

"I shall hide you in either case."

"Then I reckon—" The sentence died on his lips. She saw his face harden and his figure stiffen. A revolver seemed miraculously to leap from its holster to his hand. "Here they come. I guess it's too late, Miss Macdonald. You better leave while there is time," he told her quietly.

"No, no." She stooped and lifted a door that led from the kitchen to the cellar. "Quick. Down you go."

THERE was need of haste, but it was his whim to kiss her hand with debonair politeness before he descended. She lowered the door softly, even as the expected knock came. Noiselessly she ran to her work and sang out an innocent "Come in."

She took her hands from the batter only when Dave Briscoe, followed by four or five others, came into the room.

"My father isn't at home," she explained.

Briscoe smiled. He was a married man with a family, but he was of the type that takes all any attractive woman will give. "We didn't come to see the sheriff today, Miss Jean." His tone implied that



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he had come to see the sheriff's daughter.

She looked a questioning surprise she did not feel.

"Nor even the sheriff's family," he added with a smirk. "Fact is, Miss Jean, we're after that murderer, Brand. We trailed him into a gulch about a mile west of here. It ce'tainly looks as if he must have cut acrost country this way. You didn't happen to see him?"

"I haven't been out of this kitchen all afternoon," she explained. "He might easily have passed without my seeing him."

"I reckon he might. I 'low he wouldn't stop at Sheriff Macdonald's to say dow-d'ye-do this mawnin', being as he was some pressed for time." The man grinned round at his fellows and accepted their laughter as his due need of applause.

"Left his hawss over in the canyon," explained another of the party to the girl. "Course, he may be hidden in the chaparral, but I reckon he's on the hike."

"My father is out looking for him in the De l'Oro country. A man came here early this morning and roused him. I expect he had important news, for father didn't even bother to wait for breakfast."

"I reckon your father's burning the wind for nothin', then, Miss Jean, because we ce'tainly did swap shots with Mr. Brand, over in the canyon. He's sure a slick one, and give us the go-by right smart, but we'll meet up with him before night and

save your paw a heap of trouble," explained Briscoe, with suave cruelty.

The girl's face blanched. "You wouldn't—"

Briscoe completed her faltering sentence. "Do a thing to hurt his feelings? No, we'd remember poor Luke Rogers he shot yesterday and hang him real gentle to a cottonwood." The man's heartless drawl broke into brisk commonplace. "Say, Miss Jean, our throats are baked drier'n Mesa Spring in September. You got any real wet water or cool buttermilk?"

"Plenty of it in the cellar." Her throat caught with a sudden, appalling remembrance of what else was in the cellar, but she knew there could be no retreat now without at least the chance of arousing suspicion. "I'll go down and get a crock of buttermilk for you."

"I'll go carry it up for you. Boys, you wait here." Briscoe's mind rushed at the chance of a minute alone with her in the cellar. "Come along, Miss Jean."

"I'll get it myself," she cried, something deadly clutching at her heart.

"We'll get it together." The man had the cellar door open before she could protest. "Come along and show me where it is," he called, winking at one of his posse.

"I tell you I don't need your help," she protested, trying to bar the way.

"And I tell you I aim to give it whether you

need it or not," he laughed. "Why don't you want me to go there?"

"You may go down if you like."

His hand fell on her shoulder as they descended and slipped down to her waist. She whirled from his embrace, turning like a panther on him.

"Don't you dare touch me, sir. Leave me alone this instant. Go right back up those steps."

"You don't need to get so almighty mad."

She stamped her foot. "Do you hear? Leave me this instant, you—snake!"

Her voice was angry and raised. There was nothing for him to do but retreat to the ridicule of his vigilante posse. And, as his sullen eyes wavered before her indignation, he caught sight of something crouching in the darkness behind a trunk. The sight lent wings to his reluctant feet, for he carried with him an uncertain impression of glittering eyes, menacing him, from the gloom, with death.

He was still hesitating whether to subject himself to the chance of further ridicule by making public this impression when the girl appeared with the buttermilk. Her manner was so matter of fact that he decided it was a cat he had seen. Five minutes later the vigilantes were mounted and disappearing down a draw.

IT had been a hunted man the girl had let down into the cellar, an accused murderer; but the one she let out was a lover. One glance into his ardent, possessive eyes told her that he would not do without her. And so penetrating, so instantly, does love reach the heart that she forgot what he was, while the joy of it washed her cheeks with a wave of color.

"You saved my life," he cried.

We have all heard speech that was almost a song of joy. "I know it," her voice rang out.

His gaze, too, was bold, but it did not insult a woman as did that of Briscoe. Never eyes yielded themselves more completely than hers, and never eager ones flamed out joy more certainly than his.

"And you did not know that I was innocent," he said in a wonder.

"But I know it now," she cried.

"That is because you love me."

"Do I love you?" she asked, in a great surprise. Then: "I think I do," she added simply.

Each was so content with the fact that demonstrations were as yet unnecessary. She

leaned against the table, and he watched her with radiant content. Each was so absorbed in the other, and in this newfound Eden they had reached, that neither was aware of the face, level with a lower corner of the window, that peered in malignantly on their happiness.

"It seems so strange," she mused aloud. "This morning neither of us dreamed this." She turned on him with sweet question. "Are you sure that you will always love me?"

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will love thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run."

he quoted, smiling warmly at her.

The door crashed open, and before he could move, an inrush of men had flung itself upon him. The first impact drove him to the wall by its sheer weight, but, once there, he fought back mightily, desperately. He went down and dragged himself to his feet again twice before they at last secured him and roped his hands behind him.

PANTING with the struggle, but maliciously triumphant, Briscoe taunted his captive meanly as he strutted up and down. He was in a glow of good humor at his own perspicacity in doubling back to the house to verify his suspicion. But his good humor manifested itself in a malice that boded no good for the captured man.

"Where's that rope, Jim?" he demanded at last, and with his own hands he flung the loop over Brand's head.

The young sheepman heard him with a quiet contempt. He was very pale, but the cold scorn in his eyes asked no mercy. He had fought as long as there was a chance, but he yielded now to the inevitable with a simple dignity born of a fine self-respect.

Jean Macdonald was across the room like a panther to snatch away the rope, but they held her back. The young man shook his head. "No use," he told her, and, even in that moment he could smile at her.

"What's a' this feery-farry aboot?" demanded a stern, composed voice from the doorway.

The man that stood quietly watching them was a grizzled Canadian Highlander, heavy set, deep chested, and extremely muscular. At sound of his

voice Briscoe's jaw fell, but he answered doggedly:

"We caught Brand in your cellar and we're going to hang him."

"Tak' off that rope," commanded the Highlander.

Briscoe glanced uneasily at his allies. "There ain't any use making a fuss, sheriff. The boys have made up their minds to get rid of him."

The sheriff strode forward, brushed Briscoe aside with one arm, and loosened the rope. "There will be no lynching today whatever, nor so long as Donald Macdonald is sheriff. Smoke that, my mannie."

Briscoe fell back, grumbling something about wanton murder, but the sheriff cut him short, frowning at him with heavy gray eyebrows.

"David Briscoe, you'll be pleased to ken that this lad had naething to do with the murder of Luke Rogers. This morning I captured and took the confession of the Mexicans that did that bloody

deed. Get oot of my hoose before I fling you and your lawless clan through the window."

He waited with folded arms till the last of them had left, then swiftly released the captive. He put a heavy hand on the young man's shoulder and looked him straight in the eye.

"My lad, let this be a lesson to you. Had I been a half hour later you would have gone to meet your God. Give over your wild ways and let it be a blessed experience to lead you to a change of heart."

Philip Brand met the Highlander's gaze steadily. "I'm not a religious man like you, sheriff, and I dare say you won't understand me when I say that I've had a change of heart. But it's true, just the same."

The young man glanced smilingly at Jean, but for the first time since they had become acquainted her eyes refused to join with his in a meeting. But he observed that she was blushing divinely.