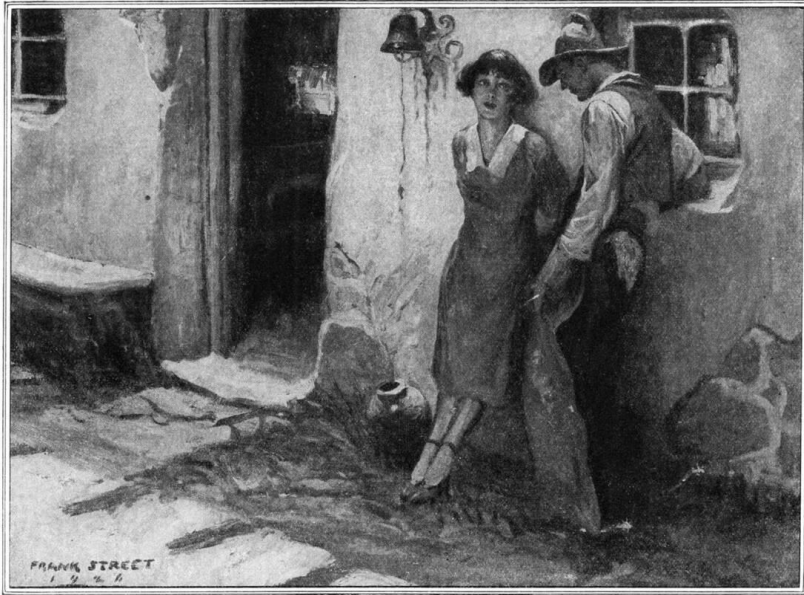


From Missouri

*A Compelling Novelette of Far Western
Life Complete in this Issue*

by Zane Grey

From Missouri



"The fact is, this heah ranch is a different place since you came," went on Texas.

With jingling spurs a tall cowboy stalked out of the post-office to confront his three comrades crossing the wide street from the saloon opposite. "Look heah," he said, shoving a letter under their noses. "Which one of you long-horns has wrote her again?"

From a gay, careless trio his listeners suddenly grew blank, then intensely curious. They stared at the handwriting on the letter. "Tex, I'm a son-of-a-gun if it ain't from Missouri!" ejaculated Andy Smith, his lean, red face bursting into a smile.

"It shore is," declared Nevada.

"From Missouri!" echoed Panhandle Ames.

"Wal?" queried Tex, almost with a snort.

The three cowboys jerked up to look from Tex to one another, and then back at Tex.

"It's from *her*," went on Tex, his voice hushing on the pronoun. "You all know thet handwritin'. Now how about this deal? We swore none of us would write again to this heah schoolmarm. Some one of you has double-crossed the outfit." Loud and unified protestations of innocence emanated from his comrades. But it was evident Tex did not trust them, and that they did not trust him or each other. "Say, boys," said Panhandle, suddenly. "I see Beady in there lookin' darn sharp at us. Let's get off in the woods somewhere."

"Back to the bar," replied Nevada. "I reckon we'll all need stimulants."

"Beady!" ejaculated Tex, as they turned across the street. "He could be to blame as much as any of us."

"Shore. It'd be more like Beady," replied Nevada. "But Tex, yore mind ain't workin'. Our lady friend from Missouri has wrote before without gettin' any letter from us."

"How do we know thet?" demanded Tex, suspiciously. "Shore the boss' typewriter is a puzzle, but it could hide tracks. Savvy, pards?"

"Gee, Tex, you need a drink," returned Panhandle, peevishly.

They entered the saloon and strode to the bar, where from all appearances Tex was not the only one to seek artificial strength. Then they repaired to a corner, where they took seats and stared at the letter Tex threw down before them. "From Missouri, all right," averred Panhandle, studying the postmark. "Kansas City, Missouri."

"It's her writin'," added Nevada, in awe. "Shore I'd know thet out of a million letters."

"Ain't you goin' to read it to us?" queried Andy Smith.

"Mister Frank Owens," replied Tex, reading from the address on the letter. "Springer's Ranch. Beacon, Arizona.... Boys, this heah Frank Owens is all of us."

"Huh! Mebbe he's a darn sight more," added Andy.

"Looks like a low-down trick we're to blame for," resumed Tex, seriously shaking his hawk-like head. "Heah we reads in a Kansas City paper about a school teacher wantin' a job out in dry Arizonie. An' we ups an' writes her an' gets her ararin' to come. Then when she writes and tells us she's *not over forty*—then we quits like yellow coyotes. An' we four anyhow shook hands on never writin' her again. Wal, somebody did, an' I reckon you-all think me as big a liar as I think you. But thet ain't the point. Heah's another letter to Mister Owens an' I'll bet my saddle it means trouble. Shore I'm plumb afraid to read it."

"Say, give it to me," demanded Andy. "I ain't afraid of any woman."

Tex snatched the letter out of Andy's hand. "Cowboy, you're too poor educated to read letters from ladies," observed Tex. "Gimme a knife, somebody ... Say, it's all perfumed."

Tex impressively spread out the letter and read laboriously:

Kansas City, Mo.,
June 15.

Dear Mr. Owens:

Your last letter has explained away much that was vague and perplexing in your other letters. It has inspired me with hope and anticipation. I shall not take time now to express my thanks, but hasten to get ready to go West. I shall leave tomorrow and arrive at Beacon on June 19, at 4:30 P. M. You see I have studied the time-table.

Yours very truly,
Jane Stacey.

Profound silence followed Tex's perusal of the letter. The cowboys were struck dumb. But suddenly Nevada exploded: "My Gawd, fellars, today's the nineteenth!"

"Wal, Springer needs a schoolmarm at the ranch," finally spoke up the practical Andy. "There's half a dozen kids growin' up without any schoolin', not to talk about other ranches. I heard the boss say this hisself."

"Who the mischief did it?" demanded Tex, in a rage with himself and his accomplices.

“What’s the sense in hollerin’ about that now?” returned Nevada. “It’s done. She’s comin’. She’ll be on the Limited. Reckon we’ve got five hours. It ain’t enough. What’ll we *do*?”

“I can get awful drunk in that time,” contributed Panhandle, nonchalantly.

“Ahuh! An’ leave it all to us,” retorted Tex, scornfully. “But we got to stand pat on this heah deal. Don’t you know this is Saturday an’ that Springer will be in town?”

“Aw, confound it! We’re all goin’ to get fired,” declared Panhandle. “Serves us right for listenin’ to you, Tex. We can all gamble this trick hatched in your head.”

“Not my haid more’n yours or anybody,” returned Tex, hotly.

“Say, you locoed cow-punchers,” interposed Nevada. “What’ll we do?”

“We’ll have to tell Springer.”

“But Tex, the boss’d never believe us about not follerin’ the letters up. He’ll fire the whole outfit.”

“But he’ll have to be told somethin’,” returned Panhandle stoutly.

“Shore he will,” went on Tex. “I’ve an idea. It’s too late now to turn this poor schoolmarm back. An’ somebody’ll have to meet her. Somebody’s got to borrow a buckboard an’ drive her out to the ranch.”

“Excuse me!” replied Andy. And Panhandle and Nevada echoed him.

"I'll ride over on my hoss, an' see you all meet the lady," added Andy.

Tex had lost his scowl, but he did not look as if he favorably regarded Andy's idea. "Hang it all!" he burst out, hotly. "Can't some of you gents look at it from her side of the fence? Nice fix for any woman, I say. Somebody ought to get it good for this mess. If I ever find out—"

"Go on with your grand idea," interposed Nevada.

"You all come with me. I'll get a buckboard. I'll meet the lady an' do the talkin'. I'll let her down easy. An' if I cain't head her back to Missouri we'll fetch her out to the ranch an' then leave it up to Springer. Only we won't tell her or him or anybody who's the real Frank Owens."

"Tex, that ain't so plumb bad," declared Andy, admiringly. "What *I* want to know is who's goin' to do the talkin' to the boss?" queried Panhandle. "It mightn't be so hard to explain now. But after drivin' up to the ranch with a woman! You all know Springer's shy. Young an' rich, like he is, an' a bachelor—he's been fussed over so he's plumb afraid of girls. An' here you're fetchin' a middle-aged schoolmarm who's romantic an' mushy! Shucks! I say send her home on the next train."

"Pan, you're wise on hosses an' cattle, but you don't know human nature, an' you're daid wrong about the boss," rejoined Tex. "We're in a bad fix, I'll admit. But I lean more to fetchin' the lady up than sendin' her back. Somebody down Beacon way would get wise. Mebbe the schoolmarm might talk. She'd shore have cause. An' suppose Springer hears aboot it—that some of

us or all of us played a low-down trick on a woman. He'd be madder at that than if we fetched her up. Likely he'll try to make amends. The boss may be shy on girls but he's the squarest man in Arizonie. My idea is we'll deny any of us is Frank Owens, an' we'll meet Miss—Miss—what was that there name? ... Miss Jane Stacey and fetch her up to the ranch, an' let *her* do the talkin' to Springer."

During the next several hours, while Tex searched the town for a buckboard and team he could borrow, the other cowboys wandered from the saloon to the post-office and back again, and then to the store, the restaurant and all around. The town had gradually filled up with Saturday visitors. "Boys, there's the boss," suddenly broke out Andy, pointing; and he ducked into the nearest doorway, which happened to be that of another saloon. It was half full of cowboys, ranchers, Mexicans, tobacco smoke and noise. Andy's companions had rushed pell-mell after him; and not until they all got inside did they realize that this saloon was a rendezvous for cowboys decidedly not on friendly terms with Springer's outfit. Nevada was the only one of the trio who took the situation nonchalantly.

"Wal, we're in, an' what the mischief do we care for Beady Jones, an' his outfit?" remarked Nevada, quite loud enough to be heard by others beside his friends.

Naturally they lined up at the bar, and this was not a good thing for young men who had an important engagement and who must preserve sobriety.

After several rounds of drinks they began to whisper and snicker over the possibility of Tex meeting the boss.

"If only it doesn't come off until Tex gets our forty-year-old schoolmarm from Missouri with him in the buckboard!" exclaimed Panhandle, in huge glee.

"Shore. Tex, the handsome galoot, is most to blame for this mess," added Nevada. "Thet cowboy won't be above makin' love to Jane, if he thinks we're not around. But, fellars, we want to be there."

"Wouldn't miss seein' the boss meet Tex for a million!" said Andy.

Presently a tall, striking-looking cowboy, with dark face and small bright eyes like black beads, detached himself from a group of noisy companions, and confronted the trio, more particularly Nevada. "Howdy, men," he greeted them, "what you-all doin' in here?"

He was coolly impertinent, and his action and query noticeably stilled the room. Andy and Panhandle leaned back against the bar. They had been in such situations before and knew who would do the talking for them. "Howdy, Jones," replied Nevada, coolly and carelessly. "We happened to bust in here by accident. Reckon we're usually more particular what kind of company we mix with."

"Ahuh! Springer's outfit is shore a stuck-up one," sneered Jones, in a loud tone. "So stuck-up they won't even ride around drift-fences."

Nevada slightly changed his position. "Beady, I've had a couple of drinks an' ain't very clear-headed," drawled Nevada. "Would you mind talkin' so I can understand you?"

“Bah! You savvy all right,” declared Jones, sarcastically. “I’m tellin’ you straight what I’ve been layin’ to tell your yaller-headed Texas pard.”

“Now you’re speakin’ English, Beady. Tex an’ me are pards, shore. An’ I’ll take it kind of you to get this talk out of your system. You seem to be chock full.”

“You bet I’m full an’ I’m goin’ to bust,” shouted Jones, whose temper evidently could not abide the slow, cool speech with which he had been answered.

“Wal, before you bust, explain what you mean by Springer’s outfit not ridin’ around drift-fences.”

“Easy. You just cut through wire-fences,” retorted Jones.

“Beady, I hate to call you a low-down liar, but that’s what you are.”

“You’re another,” yelled Jones. “I seen your Texas Jack cut our drift-fence.” Nevada struck out with remarkable swiftness and force. He knocked Jones over upon a card-table, with which he crashed to the floor. Jones was so stunned that he did not recover before some of his comrades rushed to him, and helped him up. Then, black in the face and cursing savagely, he jerked for his gun. He got it out, but before he could level it, two of his friends seized him, and wrestled with him, talking in earnest alarm. But Jones fought them.

“You blame fool,” finally yelled one of them. “He’s not packin’ a gun. It’d be murder.”

That brought Jones to his senses, though certainly not to calmness. "Mister Nevada—next time you hit town you'd better come heeled," he hissed between his teeth.

"Shore. An' thet'll be bad for you, Beady," replied Nevada, curtly. Panhandle and Andy drew Nevada out to the street, where they burst into mingled excitement and anger. Their swift strides gravitated toward the saloon across from the post-office. When they emerged sometime later they were arm in arm, and far from steady on their feet. They paraded up the one main street of Beacon, not in the least conspicuous on a Saturday afternoon. As they were neither hilarious nor dangerous, nobody paid any particular attention to them. Springer, their boss, met them, gazed at them casually, and passed without sign of recognition. If he had studied the boys closely he might have received an impression that they were hugging a secret, as well as each other. In due time the trio presented themselves at the railroad station. Tex was there, nervously striding up and down the platform, now and then looking at his watch. The afternoon train was nearly due. At the hitching-rail below the platform stood a new buckboard and a rather spirited team of horses.

The boys, coming across the wide square, encountered this evidence of Tex's extremity, and struck a posture before it. "Livery shable outfit, by gosh," said Andy.

"Thish here Tex spendin' his money royal," agreed Nevada.

Then Tex espied them. He stared. Suddenly he jumped straight up. Striding to the edge of the platform, with face as red as a

beet, he began to curse them. “Whash masher, ole pard?” asked Andy, who appeared a little less stable than his comrades.

Tex’s reply was another volley of expressive profanity. And he ended with: “—you—all yellow quitters to get drunk an’ leave me in the lurch. But you gotta get away from heah. I shore won’t have you about when the train comes.”

“Tex, yore boss is in town lookin’ for you,” said Nevada.

“Tex, he jest ambled past us like we wasn’t gennelmen,” added Panhandle. “Never sheen us atall.”

“No wonder, you drunken cow-punchers,” declared Tex, in disgust. “Now I tell you to clear out of heah.”

“But pard, we just want shee you meet our Jane from Missouri,” replied Andy.

Just then a shrill whistle announced the train. “You can sneak off now,” he went on, “an’ leave me to face the music. I always knew I was the only gentleman in Springer’s outfit.”

The three cowboys did not act upon Tex’s sarcastic suggestion, but they hung back, looking at once excited and sheepish and hugely delighted. The long gray dusty train pulled into the station and stopped. There was only one passenger for Springer—a woman—and she alighted from the coach near where the cowboys stood waiting. She wore a long linen coat and a brown veil that completely hid her face. She was not tall and she was much too slight for the heavy valise the porter handed to her.

Tex strode grandly toward her. “Miss—Miss Stacey, ma’am?” he asked, removing his sombrero.

“Yes,” she replied. “Are you Mr. Owens?”

Evidently the voice was not what Tex had expected and it disconcerted him. “No ma’am I—I’m not Mister Owens,” he said. “Please let me take your bag ... I’m Tex Dillon, one of Springer’s cowboys. An’ I’ve come to meet you—an’ fetch you out to the ranch.”

“Thank you, but I—I expected to be met by Mr. Owens,” she replied.

“Ma’am, there’s been a mistake—I’ve got to tell you—there ain’t any Mister Owens,” blurted out Tex, manfully.

“Oh!” she said, with a little start.

“You see, it was this way,” went on the confused cowboy. “One of Springer’s cowboys—not *me*—wrote them letters to you, signin’ his name Owens. There ain’t no such named cowboy in this county. Your last letter—an’ here it is—fell into my hands—all by accident. Ma’am, it sure was. I took my three friends heah—I took them into my confidence. An’ we all came down to meet you.” She moved her head and evidently looked at the strange trio of cowboys Tex had pointed out as his friends. They came forward then, but not eagerly, and they still held to each other. Their condition, not to consider their immense excitement, could not have been lost even upon a tenderfoot from Missouri.

“Please return my—my letter,” she said, turning again to Tex, and she put out a small gloved hand to take it from him. “Then—there is no Mr. Frank Owens?”

“No Ma’am, there isn’t,” replied Tex miserably, and waited for her to speak.

“Is there—no—no truth in his—is there no school teacher wanted here?” she faltered.

“I think so, Ma’am,” he replied. “Springer said he needed one. That’s what started the advertisement an’ the letters to you. You can see the boss an’—an’ explain. I’m sure it will be all right. He’s the grandest fellow. He won’t stand for no joke on a poor old schoolmarm.” In his bewilderment Tex had spoken his thoughts, and that last slip made him look more miserable than ever, and made the boys appear ready to burst.

“Poor old schoolmarm!” echoed Miss Stacey. “Perhaps the deceit has not been wholly on one side.” Whereupon she swept aside the enveloping veil to reveal a pale and pretty face. She was young. She had clear gray eyes and a sweet, sensitive mouth. Little curls of chestnut hair straggled from under her veil. And she had tiny freckles.

Tex stared at this apparition. “But you—you—the letter says she wasn’t over forty,” he ejaculated.

“She’s not,” rejoined Miss Stacey, curtly.

Then there were visible and remarkable indications of a transformation in the attitude of the cowboy. But the approach of a stranger suddenly seemed to paralyze him. This fellow was

very tall. He strolled up to them. He was booted and spurred. He had halted before the group and looked expectantly from the boys to the young woman and back again. But on the moment the four cowboys appeared dumb. "Are—are you Mr. Springer?" asked Miss Stacey.

"Yes," he replied, and he took off his sombrero. He had a dark, frank face and keen eyes.

"I am Jane Stacey," she explained hurriedly. "I'm a school teacher. I answered an advertisement. And I've come from Missouri because of letters I received from a Mr. Frank Owens, of Springer's Ranch. This young man met me. He has not been very—explicit. I gather that there is no Mr. Owens—that I'm the victim of a cowboy joke ... But he said that Mr. Springer won't stand for a joke on a poor old schoolmarm."

"I sure am glad to meet you, Miss Stacey," responded the rancher, with the easy western courtesy that must have been comforting to her. "Please let me see the letters." She opened a hand-bag, and searching in it presently held out several letters. Springer never even glanced at his stricken cowboys. He took the letters.

"No, not that one," said Miss Stacey, blushing scarlet. "That's one I wrote to Mr. Owens, but didn't mail. It's—hardly necessary to read that." While Springer read the others she looked at him. Presently he asked for the letter she had taken back. Miss Stacey hesitated, then refused. He looked cool, serious, business-like. Then his keen eyes swept over the four cowboys.

“Tex, are you Mister Frank Owens?” he queried sharply.

“I—shore—ain’t,” gasped Tex.

Springer asked each of the other boys the same question and received decidedly maudlin but negative answers. Then he turned again to the girl. “Miss Stacey, I regret to say that you are indeed the victim of a low-down cowboy trick,” he said. “I’d apologize for such heathen if I knew how. All I can say is I’m sorry.”

“Then—then there isn’t any school to teach—any place for me—out here?” she asked, and there were tears in her eyes.

“That’s another matter,” he replied, with a winning smile. “Of course there’s a place for you. I’ve wanted a school teacher for a long time. Some of the men out at the ranch have kids an’ they sure need a teacher.”

“Oh, I’m—so glad,” she murmured, in great relief. “I was afraid I’d have to go—all the way back. You see I’m not so strong as I used to be—and my doctor advised a change of climate—dry western air. I can’t go back now.”

“You don’t look sick,” he said, with the keen eyes on her. “You look very well to me.”

“Oh, indeed, I’m not very strong,” she returned, quickly. “But I must confess I wasn’t altogether truthful about my age.”

“I was wondering about that,” he said, gravely. There seemed just a glint of a twinkle in his eye. “Not over forty.”

Again she blushed and this time with confusion. "It wasn't altogether a lie. I was afraid to mention I was only—young. And I wanted to get the position so much ... I'm a good—a competent teacher, unless the scholars are too grown-up."

"The scholars you'll have at my ranch are children," he replied. "Well, we'd better be starting if we are to get there before dark. It's a long ride. Is this all your baggage?"

Springer led her over to the buckboard and helped her in, then stowed the valise under the back seat. "Here, let me put this robe over you," he said. "It'll be dusty. And when we get up on the ridge it's cold." At this juncture Tex came to life and he started forward. But Andy and Nevada and Panhandle stood motionless, staring at the fresh and now flushed face of the young school teacher. Tex untied the halter of the spirited team and they began to prance. He gathered up the reins as if about to mount the buckboard.

"I've got all the supplies an' the mail, Mr. Springer," he said, cheerfully, "an' I can be startin' at once."

"I'll drive Miss Stacey," replied Springer, dryly.

Tex looked blank for a moment. Then Miss Stacey's clear gray eyes seemed to embarrass him. A tinge of red came into his tanned cheek. "Tex, you can ride my horse home," said the rancher.

"That wild stallion of yours!" expostulated the cowboy. "Now Mr. Springer. I shore am afraid of him." This from the best horseman on the whole range!

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