

Rustlers Beware

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CHAPTER I

SEALED ORDERS.

I'm glad you've decided to throw in with us, Milt. It'll beat punchin' cows for a crusty uncle. You'll have a change of scenery from Texas to Wyomin', and all kinds of excitement, includin', mebbe, a little shootin', which ought to appeal to a young feller like you."

Two men sat conversing in the railroad station. One was middle-aged, with grizzled hair and mustache, tall and big-limbed, but with no extra flesh on his massive frame. His face was long-jowled and determined looking, and his keen gray eyes were overhung with bushy brows, which were often drawn together in a scowl. Asa Swingley had awed many an opponent into submission. Others, whom his aggressive appearance could not impress, he had beaten or shot, for "Two-bar Ace" was equally at home in a rough-and-tumble or a gun fight.

"Well, I've said I'd come, and you can count me in," said Swingley's companion. "But I reserve the right to drop out if I think things aren't on the level."

Swingley's brows drew together quickly, and he shot a stabbing glance into the eyes that looked into his. But there was no quailing under the look. The big cattleman gazed into the face of a youth whose determination equaled, if it did not exceed, his own.

Milton Bertram was only slightly smaller of build than the giant cattleman. Both men had laid aside their coats, owing to the heat of the station. In their flannel shirts, with cartridge belts and guns sagging at their waists, trousers tucked into high-heeled, spurred boots, they typified perfectly the man's country from which they had come. Bertram had laid aside his sombrero, showing a luxuriant crop of black hair with a distinct tendency to curl. His forehead was broad, its whiteness in strong contrast with his deeply tanned features. His smoothly shaven face was regular in outline, and his dark eyes, for all their straightforward and fearless expression, had a half-humorous twinkle in them which mystified Swingley.

"It's too late for you to quit now," declared the latter finally, discovering that he could not "look down" the youth at his side.

"I didn't say anything about quitting," answered Bertram easily. "I've thrown in with you, though it is at the last minute. But, to tell you the truth, I haven't exactly liked the looks of this scheme very much from the start. You've shown too much secrecy about it—getting all these men together under sealed orders."

"You'll find it's got the right brand run on it."

"All right, but you've got to admit I've had some grounds for suspicion. The gang you've picked up is the worst in this section. You've headed the bunch with Tom Hoog, a notorious killer, and the others aren't much behind him."

"I like men who can take care of themselves," replied Swingley.

"Well, you've got 'em over there," went on Bertram, looking into the adjoining waiting room, where, in a haze of blue smoke, many cow-punchers could be seen, lolling about on bed rolls, waiting for the calling of their train.

They were, as Bertram said, a formidable-looking outfit. Nearly every man had a record as a killer. With big pistols slapping at their hips, as they walked, and with rifles in leather scabbards, stacked in the corners of the room, or leaning against the rolls of bedding, the outfit took on the appearance of an armed camp, during a moment of ease.

Tom Hoog, who had been mentioned by Bertram as the leader of this daredevil lot, sat apart from the others, gloomily smoking. He was of medium height, spare but sinewy, with an aquiline nose, which tended to curve downward over a thin-lipped mouth, in which a cigarette was always crimped as in a vise. Hoog's hands evidently were his pride. They were long and slim, and they had always been kept so well gauntleted that they were as white as a gambler's. A wonderful shot with rifle or revolver and gifted with uncanny quickness on the "draw," Hoog had a reputation as a killer that had made his name feared throughout the district.

"Those fellows are all right," went on Swingley, "but, outside of Hoog, they ain't oversupplied with brains. That's the big reason why I wanted to get you. With you and Hoog as my lieutenants I'm goin' to be sure that things will go right, and my orders will be carried out."

"Much obliged," replied Bertram dryly.

"I had you in mind right from the first," continued Swingley, with a keen glance at the young cattleman's ingenuous face. "I knowed you had a row with your uncle, old Bill Bertram. Old Bill's a hard one for any one to get along with, and the more land he gits control of the harder he is on them around him. I'm glad you've come in, even if it is at the last minute. Our special train'll go inside of an hour, right behind the regular train for the north. You'll have to look after your own beddin' and guns and other stuff, but the wranglers'll see to gettin' your saddle aboard the baggage car, after they've loaded the horses, which they're doin' now. I'll look for you around here in about an hour."

The big cattleman rose and, with a growled "good-by" to Bertram, made his way to the adjoining room, where he took a hasty survey of the scene and spoke a few words to Hoog. After satisfying himself that none of the cow-punchers had succumbed to the lure of the town and drifted away from the station, Swingley strode out on the platform and was lost to sight along the tracks, where he had gone to superintend the last of the loading of the horses.

Left alone, Bertram smoked a moment, with his elbow on the arm of the bench. He knew that he had engaged in a desperate enterprise of some sort, but the thought of withdrawing was prompted not by the danger, but by the suspicion, that perhaps the expedition was of a shady character.

"If we were heading the other way, I'd swear it was a Mexican revolutionary project of some sort," thought Bertram. "But there's no doubt that we're going north. I can't think what it is, unless it has something to do with the cattle trouble that's been

going on in Wyoming. Anyway we'll find out soon enough. Gee, but I hate the job of having to tie up with Tom Hoog and that gang in there!"

As he rose and put on his coat and stepped out of the station into the darkness at the poorly lighted entrance, Bertram's attention was attracted by a young woman. He had noticed her a few minutes before in the station. She had come in alone, and, when the northbound train was called, had arisen and started for the door leading to the gate. But apparently she had lost her ticket, as, after a hurried search, she stood irresolute. Then, as if at a loss what to do, she had turned, and walked out of the station.

"You seem to be having trouble, ma'am," said Bertram, raising his hat. "Is there anything I can do?"

The girl, for she seemed to be hardly more than eighteen, drew back in alarm at first, but something in Bertram's voice apparently reassured her, as she answered: "I've lost my railroad ticket."

"Where are you going?"

"To Denver. I must go on this train, and I'm ashamed to confess that I haven't enough money to buy another ticket."

The girl's voice was as appealing as her face, the beauty of which had attracted Bertram's attention in the waiting room. She was of medium height and of slender proportions, but life and determination were reflected in her quick, graceful movements and in her speech, which just now seemed to have lost some of the certainty which was a natural part of it. Her

level brows were drawn together in a frown, and, in the light from the station window, Bertram could see something like tears glistening in the brown eyes.

"Have you inquired in the station?" asked Bertram.

"No, because I know that would be of no use. The ticket was stolen by somebody who wanted me to miss this train."

The cowboy's eyebrows were raised slightly, and he whistled. "Who'd want to stop you?"

"I can't tell you, but I have known that an attempt would be made to prevent me from going to Denver—and beyond. I noticed a rough-looking man next to me at the ticket window, an hour or so ago, when I bought my transportation. Then he was beside me again when I was checking my baggage. It must have been at the baggage window that he took the ticket from this bag."

"Well, your train goes in five minutes," answered Bertram. "There's only one thing to do, and that's to get another ticket pronto. Or, if there is any one watching you, maybe it'd be better if I bought the transportation. You wait here, and I'll see what I can do."

Before the girl could reply the young cowboy, who was used to acting on impulse, reentered the station and sauntered over to the ticket window. In a voice loud enough to be heard in the adjoining room he asked the ticket seller if the clock in the waiting room was right. Then, in a lower voice, he asked for a Denver ticket, accomplishing the exchange of money and transportation without calling any undue attention to the

transaction. Then he sauntered to the door and stepped outside again.

“Come on,” he said, thrusting the ticket into the girl’s hand and keeping tight hold of the little fist. “There’s no use of your going through the ticket office. We’ll hurry around the end of the building, and you can dodge past all those trunks and get to the gate, just as easy as a colt slipping through a corral.”

“Where can I send the money for the ticket?” asked the girl, as they hurried through the darkness.

“Oh, just send it to Milton Bertram, care of William Bertram, of the Box Ranch, Bertramville,” replied the cowpuncher. “If you don’t write me a long letter, telling me how you enjoyed the trip, I’m going to be sure peevish.”

The girl laughed, and the note of her laughter was as clear as a meadow lark’s trill. Bertram stood in the darkness near the baggage room and watched her disappear through the gate. He saw the train depart and then turned regretfully away, his hand still thrilling to the touch of the girl’s hand, which had given his own a quick clasp of thankfulness.

CHAPTER II

WESTERN SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE.

On the way to Denver, Bertram began to find out something concerning the nature of the enterprise with which he had become identified.

The train was divided into two sections, the first consisting of three passenger and two baggage cars. A hundred men rode in the coaches, and the baggage cars were filled with a miscellaneous assortment of tents, saddles and general camp equipment.

"There's a train follerin' right behind," said Archie Beam, a cowpuncher, into whose seat Bertram had dropped. "It's a stock train, and it's got enough hosses for all us and more. I hear that every other train along the line has to give our two trains the right of way. You might think we was goin' for the doctor, or somethin' instid of bein' on a stunt that prob'ly will make a lot of other fellers call for the doctor."

"Think we're in for a scrap, do you, Arch?" asked Bertram, looking out of the window at the sagebrush that flitted by in a never-ending stream, as the train whirled through the desolate plateau country, where many an emigrant train had met a sad fate.

"Boy, I know it!" said the cowpuncher, delighted to air his superior knowledge. "We're goin' to be jumped right in the middle of that northern Wyomin' cattle trouble, and we're goin' to be jumped."

to be told to begin shootin' right and left, and never to let up till there ain't a native hombre, left alive."

"Where'd you get your information, Arch?"

"Don't josh me, Milt. You know as well as I do that there's been a heap of trouble in Wyomin', for the last few years, don't you?"

Bertram signified assent. Along the great cattle trails, stretching from Texas to the Canadian line, there had come news of serious and long-standing troubles in northern Wyoming. Rustlers and big cattle interests were almost at a point of open war. The cattle interests claimed that the rustlers had been carrying on wholesale operations. Every small rancher was under suspicion. The great herds were being depleted, it was claimed, and numerous small herds were being built up at the expense of the heavily capitalized interests. Men who had counted themselves millionaires were faced with ruin, owing to the melting away of their herds.

"These single cinchers all tell the same story when they come down to this part of the country," said Archie, alluding to the single rig of the northern cattlemen, as opposed to the double cinch of that district. "They say there's been much trouble all over the northern part of the State. The thing has got so bad that the little cattlemen have took to pottin' the big ones. A cowman, who don't belong with the rustlin' majority, is takin' chances every time he throws his leg over a saddle and starts out to git a little fresh air."

"Which side is right?"

“What’s the difference which side is right?” said Archie, asking a question in answering one. “We’re out to play the game for the side with the most money, which is the big cattlemen, of course. I ain’t constitutionally opposed to rustlin’ cattle. I’ve packed a runnin’ iron in my boot so long that it’s made me a little stiff-legged, but a man in that game’s got to take his own chances. I took mine, and these Wyomin’ rustlers have got to take theirs. I guess they’ll think somethin’ popped when this gang cuts loose on ’em. There ain’t a hombre in this crowd that ain’t got his man, I guess, all but you, Milt. Old Two-bar Ace must have thought you had gone far enough lately to be part and passel with us. You sure have been hittin’ it up, boy, to be classed in with a fightin’ gang like this. Well, so long, and a short war and a merry one.”

Bertram’s grip on the seat in front of him tightened, as the cowboy departed, called by some riotous members of the gang.

The young Texan knew that the cowboy had spoken the truth. Bertram had been traveling a fast pace, even for the great outdoor land, where restrictions were few. He had been brought up on a ranch on the Brazos, where he had spent as much of his time as he could induce his devoted mother to let him subtract from school. He had even attended college at Austin, but his mother’s death, before he had graduated, had brought to light the fact that the ranch had been mortgaged to pay for Bertram’s education.

Before Bertram realized what had happened, the ranch had passed from his control. He sought to drown in wild companionship his sorrow at his mother’s death and the poverty he had unwittingly brought upon her. At last he had

been offered a job as cowpuncher on the big ranch of his uncle, one of the large landowners in the southern part of the State. He had accepted, but he had found no consolation in the change, as his uncle was an utterly uncompanionable man. Bertram tried to put up with the old fellow's caprices for a while, but soon they became unbearable. There were open disagreements between the men. Bertram did his work well, as there were few who could equal him in the saddle, but nothing could stop the old man's harsh complaining. Finally the old attractions began to summon the youth. There were wild excursions to near-by frontier towns. Bertram became a leading spirit among the daredevils who frequented the bar and the gambling tables. His name became known along the trail for its owner's wild exploits.

One day there came an open break with his uncle. Laughing at the old man's senile anger and turning his back upon the reproaches which his uncle hurled at him, Bertram rode to the big town, where, in just the right mood for any adventure, he had been picked up by Asa Swingley and had been enlisted in the adventure which Archie Beam had foreshadowed as something desperate in character.

"He's right. I'd gone farther than I ever imagined," declared Bertram, as he glanced about him and made a mental note of those in the car.

There was Tom Hoog, who killed for the love of killing. Hoog had been a figure in much range warfare. He had played a part in a cattle war in that country, which had assumed such proportions, that the governor of the State had intervened. It had been said that Hoog had fought on both sides in that war,

putting his services at the disposal of whichever side happened to bid the higher at the moment. He had fought men single-handed and in groups. He had been captured and had escaped, generally leaving a trail of death behind him. Yet his killings had always gone unpunished, because the fear of the man even extended to officers of the law.

Others in the party were the possessors of reputations only a shade less evil than Hoog's. A few, like Archie Beam, were merely wild and irresponsible, and they had joined the expedition for a lark.

Swingley passed among the men, loudly solicitous of their welfare. Food was brought in, and there was some drinking. Several of the men were maudlin before Denver was reached. Others were at the quarrelsome stage. Swingley stopped several incipient gun fights, but otherwise let the men behave as they pleased. Bertram took no part in the drinking, though he joined an occasional game of cards. He was not inclined to depart from the letter of his bargain with Swingley, but he was thinking hard, as the train pounced over the desert, beside the long, blue chain of the Rockies.

Noticing his abstraction Swingley rallied Bertram about it. "Things'll be more lively, soon after we leave Denver," he said, pausing at the young Texan's seat. "We've got some more people to meet there, and we'll be tied up several hours. I want you to help me keep an eye on some of these drunken punchers, to see that they don't wander away where we can't get 'em."

At Denver the motley crew piled off the special and swooped down upon the station. Swingley's orders against "seeing the town" were strict, but some of the cow-punchers attempted to slip away and were turned back. It was evening, and, in the half-light on the station platform, Bertram thought he recognized a woman's figure, as it flitted around the corner of the building. A few hasty steps brought him to the side of the young lady whose ticket he had purchased.

"I see that the ticket we got wasn't counterfeit, and you arrived here, all right," observed Bertram delightedly. He saw that she had smiled, as she greeted him, and she seemed genuinely pleased, in spite of the evident perturbation under which she was laboring.

"Yes," she said, "but I'm afraid all your generosity has been in vain."

"What's the trouble? Is there any way I can help you further?"

Bertram was looking at her, as he spoke. Her face was pale, but evidently owing to the mental strain. Her eyes just now were clouded with sadness, and her voice trembled with agitation.

"You've done enough as it is," she answered—"more than any other stranger has ever done for me. I've met friends here, and now I can pay you the money for my ticket."

"I didn't want you to bother about that," said Bertram, as she opened her pocketbook and counted out the bills into his reluctant hand. "Settling this thing deprives me of a chance of meeting you again, unless you're going to be kind enough to let me meet you, anyway."

Even in the semidarkness Bertram could see the girl's quick blush, as he went on speaking. "I'm going to be honest enough to say that I admire you a whole lot. I've been counting on hearing from you later on. Won't you tell me your name?"

"It would do no good," said the girl. Then, with an earnestness that startled Bertram, she added: "but, if you want to please me and do the right thing by yourself, you will go no further on this expedition."

"I can't do that, because it would be going back on my word," replied Bertram. "But why should I leave the expedition?"

"If you don't, there will be the death of honest men on your hands," said the girl. "Why did you promise to go with a man like Swingley, anyway?"

"Just plain foolishness, I guess, the same as any other soldier of fortune shows."

"Those men are not soldiers of fortune—they are soldiers of murder," exclaimed the girl. "If you go on with them you'll be one with them."

"Then it means something to you?" asked Bertram triumphantly.

"Yes," said the girl, with another quick flush. "It means just what it would if I saw any young man on the wrong road."

"Well, even if you put it that impersonally, still I'm glad," replied the young Texan. "I've got to go on with the outfit, but I promise you one thing—that, if there's any murder done, my hands won't be red."

Just then, from around the corner of the station, came the sound of men's voices, in a cowboy song.

"They're coming," said the girl. "I don't want them to see me. I'm going to be on the northbound train that goes just ahead of yours."

"But your name, and where can I see you?" persisted the cowboy, clinging to the soft little hand which he found in his big fist.

"If you'll let go my hand, I'll give you a card," said the girl, with a nervous laugh. Bertram reluctantly released her hand. He felt a card thrust into his fingers, and an instant later the girl had disappeared around the end of the station. He followed her swiftly moving form with his glance, as she passed along the dimly-lighted platform and vanished through the gate leading to the tracks. Then he stepped to a light and read the card eagerly.

"Alma Caldwell!" he exclaimed, repeating the name several times. "Pretty name for a prettier girl! I wonder why a girl like her knows about Swingley's little expedition, and why she's so anxious to keep ahead of us."

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