

The Free Press Short Story

The Terror of Tawquitz

By DENNIS H. STOVALL

WHEN the horse made a quick, frightened jump, almost throwing Cleve Meldon, his little pack mule gave a snort and lurched into the bushes at the side of the trail.

Meldon recalled a remark the land agent had made back at San Bernardino: "You may need a few desert Indians to help you eject that squatter from your claim, but they have all fled Tawquitz. Scared away by some strange terror." He dismissed the matter with a smile.

He was returning to his horse when brought to a listening halt by a tremulous, musical note that wafted down the canyon. For a full minute or longer he stood listening to the echoing melody.

A short distance up the canyon both animals made another abrupt halt. Cleve stared and once again wondered if he were dreaming.

"Any luck?" he casually inquired. "Not much! I got just enough gold to grubstake Bruce and me. We've been on the claim for the past three months. Hard work, but honest, and exciting at times."

"Cleve Meldon in no way betrayed his inward agitation. He had prepared himself to combat a husky and formidable squatter. Quite likely, 'Bruce,' whoever he was, would prove to be just such an adversary, but this pretty girl, who could twirl a gold pan like an old-timer, and had the voice of a nightingale, placed him in a dilemma.

"My brother Bruce will be glad to have you stay a while," she declared. "Bruce? Bruce who, missy I ask?" he said. "My name is Cleve Meldon and I had from Los Angeles. And I am Ellen Wallace, the girl."

"This is my brother, Bruce Wallace," the girl introduced. "Meet Cleve Meldon, Bruce. I've invited him to remain with us over night—and to take supper in our tent."

"I'm glad to know you!" said the gaunt, featured brother in a hollow tone. "And likewise pleased to hear you are to stay with us. It isn't often that a visitor from the outside reaches this forsaken spot. Now and then some old desert rat wanders in, or an Indian caravan passes. Lately, even these have kept away from Tawquitz. As he made the last declaration, he turned on Meldon his slow, deep-set eyes which glowed like burning coals.

"Wandered away?" asked Meldon. "Burros are that sort. You never can trust the little brutes."

"Our didn't wander off. They disappeared—mysteriously, but I have let Ellen think they merely quit our camp and went back to the desert. Something gobbled them—bodily—one at a time, and about two weeks apart, each on a dark night."

"Please don't mention a word of this to my sister," the invalid begged, as they proceeded toward the lighted tent.

"Of course not," the visitor assured. "It was very kind of her to ask me to supper."

"Ellen is pure gold!" declared Bruce. "Always cheerful and happy. Sings like a lark. Perhaps you heard her to-night as you came up the canyon. It's a shame to keep her out in this lonely, ghost-ridden hole."

"You better sleep inside my tent to-night," Bruce proposed. "It's waterproof and roomy. Also, it's a safe distance from the canyon floor."

"At the conclusion of the entertainment, Cleve started with Bruce toward the other tent. Faint puffs of warm wind were now blowing down the gorge. The thunder beats ceased to hammer over the range.

"We're in for a soaking," Bruce exclaimed. "I wish you were with me. Ellen he warned his sister. "You might get drowned! And don't worry about me. I'll be safe! He already had told her that the visitor was to share his tent."

"Please take good care of him," she quietly begged, laying her hand on Cleve's arm. For the first time he observed the hidden fear that lurked in her eyes and noted the deep concern of her subdued tone.

When he discovered a section of twisted steel rails and three boxes lying half buried in the blustering sands, of an arroyo many miles from the railroad.

"Just feel him!" Bruce yelled again, rubbing his hand over the dead mule's rain-soaked flank. "Every rib is broken! He's crushed into a pulp!"

"I don't know as it matters much, as neither of us may sleep very soundly. You mean the storm will keep us awake?" answered Cleve.

"No," I heard nothing but the wind. The storm will soon break. Lie down and get some sleep."

"I know what I heard! I've heard it before—several times before. Heard it the night it made off with our last burro. And heard it again to-day. It's around here. I tell you, I'm not crazy! And I might as well tell you more."

"A blinding flash and a repeated thunder peal made him reel unsteadily. Cleve jumped up and took his arm, steadying him to the cot. "Lie down, old man, and be quiet!" he admonished. When he attempted to take the rifle, Bruce clutched it in a fierce grip and refused to give it up.

"Cleve watched him constantly from his own blankets. His pit's was aroused, mainly on Ellen's account. He kept thinking of her and of her brave, cheerful spirit. No doubt she realized her brother was suffering in mind, as well as in body. He had not known the whole truth."

"Cleve and Bruce raised and leveled their rifles together. At the same instant, both weapons fired. The ugly lead dropped into the muddy water. "So ends the mysterious terror of Tawquitz!" spoke Cleve Meldon, after a tense silence.

"It was the terrible creature that took our burros!" Bruce repeated. "I tell you! It's hiding in the chicket. He would have readily plunged into the storm-torn, jungle had not Cleve seized and pulled him to the tent."

"We can't do anything now!" he said despairingly. "We must wait till daylight." For the rest of the night they remained huddled in the tent. Several times Bruce attempted to run out, but Cleve drew him back.

"A new day had dawned. Cleve went out, closely followed by Bruce, whose expression now was changed to a look of grim, determined purpose. They heard the saddle pony whinny from the upper shelf. Cleve was thankful his horse had been spared. With his rifle ready for instant use, he strode toward the thicket.

"Lightning did it!" he exclaimed, a choking sob. "No! It wasn't lightning!" shouted Bruce. "Look at this track. I've seen it before. Made by the same thing that took our burros!" He held the lantern near the sodden ground.

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Britain Controls Its Apple Prices

Food Ministry Fixes Maximum for Best Grades of Pippins

London, February 5th (C.P.) Under a Food Ministry control order, maximum price for the best grade of home-grown apples in England and Wales has been set at one shilling (22 cents) a pound. In Scotland the price is a halfpenny a pound greater. Apples included in the best grade are Cox's Orange pippin and other first-class dessert varieties. Prices before the control order was issued were 1s 2d (26 cents) to 1s 6d (33 cents) a pound for grade one.



Don't forget to let our cook get a couple of easy ones.

Is YOUR Home Pledged?

For every man in uniform there must be a battalion of war workers and war savers at home. Your family... your whole family... old and young... will want to enroll in this home army, pledged to work and save and LEND to provide the war funds so urgently needed.

Have every member of your household pledge to invest a definite part of his or her income in War Savings Certificates. Have the amount you pledge to lend deducted regularly—every week—every month—either from your pay envelope or your savings account. Your employer or bank manager will arrange for War Savings Certificates to be sent direct to you from Ottawa.

Every Canadian should enrol to send fighting dollars into our defense line.

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