The Free Bress Short Story

The Terror of Towquitz

By DENNIS H. STOVALI

ly pear. A burro, dragging a pack, camp and beat it back to the desert

take supper in our tent."

can trust the little brutes.'

of desert sun and air.

mysterious terror.

lighted tent.

to supper."

"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

reaches this forsaken spot. Now and

HEN the horse made a quick, remain, with us over hight-and to frightened jump, almost throwing Cleve Meldon, his little pack mule gave a snort and lurched into the bushes at the side of He scanned the sandy ground for a buzzing side-winder. It was too early in the year for the reptiles to be out inevertheless he then some old desert rat wanders in. searched the rocks and brush thic- or an Indian caravan passes. Lately, awake?" answered Cleve. kets, but saw ho moving creature, oven these have kept, away from Tawquitz Canyon seemed, utterly Tawquitz." As he made the last that other thing I'm worried about, lifeless and abandoned:

Meldon recalled a remark the land scent-had-made-back-at-San-Bura pardino: "You ma yneed a few desert Indians to help you eject that squat- jungle beyond the plam trees. ter from your claim, but they have all fled Tawquitz, Scared away by the matter with a smile. Now ne "Your animals will have good crop- or offered no objections. When He dismounted and tied his cently nimals to a greasewood. Walking over near the canyon stream, he bent to examine a peculiar mark on the sand. It was a smooth and quite deeply made trail which took a wind- appeared -- mysteriously, but I have rifle. "Didn't you hear it?"

thought -- yet-it-puzzled htm. apart, each on a dark night-" He was returning to his horse when brought to a listening halt by tremulous, musical note that wafted down the canyon. For a full minute or longer he stood listening to the echoing melody. He could scarcely believe his ears. A girl was singing! Of course he felt certain. Why would a girl be singing in this isolated desert canyon? More deeply mysti fied, he remounted his saddle pony and leading his mule, rode on.

could have made the queer mark, he

A short distance up the canyon both animals made another abrupt half Cleve stared and once again wondered if he were dreaming. He saw a hareheaded, barefooted rir! standing in the stream, deftly twirling and manipulating a gold-miner pan. She was so engrossed with her work that she did not look up until the rider and his outfit came nearer Except for a mild start and a sight flushing of her healthily tanned features, she showed little surprise. Her dark eyes were held on Cleve. Finally she smiled. . .

"Any luck?" he casually inquired. "Not much! I get just enough gold to grubstake Bruce and me. We've been on the claim for the past three months. Hard work- but health

ves, 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 twill a gold pan like an old-timer, and had - the voice of a nightingale, placed him in a dilemma

"Which was are you headed " she asked him, while she made a critical Hoor" inspection of his animals

"Oh, just up the canyon a cotance." he answered. "It's time now | large enough to spread his blankets -lenting hold on his weaponthat I was making camp for the beneath. He felt, too, that he should. Cleve watched him constantly from might .

from the pun, and scraping the yel, of ownership. low residue of fine stuff into a wide necked bottle Meldon noted the "rich colors" on the bottom of the fron vessel and knew that gold was in this forgotten canyon claim, gold which he rightly owned, and had made this long hard trek across the desert to acquire' He must be wary and cautious, he told hunself, yet the girl's invitation seemed genuinel, they were through eating .

"My brother Bruce will be glad to have your stay a while," she feelated "Bruce Bruce who, may I ask" he said. "My name is aftere Melden, the gorge. The thander heats coons, thing on bluffs and palms and louds and Libart from Los, Angeles ad logater over the tange "And I am Ellen Wallis, she is

plied: "We came from Payadena M. schamed. "Don't come out into it. the let noises derivate reaches Principe brother Bruce is quite a foyer Spends most of his, time on extended might get drowned! And don't worr, hing running everywhere. Ferfunout to delp him. Now I'm having a share his tent support wiffi us, she cordially sug concern of her subdust tone

Dicket your animals. Here we are" dense was the gloom. Not a star was from the muley They emerged from a denser jungle visible on the strip of sky that lay. Cleve and Brace dashed from the of canyon growth upon an open clear. above the canyon's towering walls tent together, the latter carrying the ing at whose upper border liftest two The sheer bluffs of the chasm were lantern. Into the blinding rain they majestic palms. A clean white-tent, but vague black shapes on the deeper ran, stumbling through the gloom to with an awning in front and a palm | blackness of the night Refore going the thicket | Here they found the thatched leah-to on one, side stood in to the tent, Cleve picketed his horse mule lying in a crumpled heap the darkening shadows. Some dis- and the mule higher up-the shelf, dead' tance below and nearer the creek staking the latter under the palms. Cleve bent over the prostrate form was another lent of brown canvas. A and near the thicket. He knew how "Lightning did it" he exclaimed, To tall young man in a sleeteless cotion quickly a cloudburst, on the upper a choking voice.

the girl' introduced. "Meet Cleve was given a grim reminder of the thing that took our burros!" He held

sands of an arroyo many miles from the day before. the railroad.

Bruce Wallis had a lighted lantern, again, rubbing his hand over the dead roomy tent when Cleve came in, burdened with blanket roll and pack. He also brought his rifle. Straightway. the invalid's glowing eves were held on the gun. A grim smile overspread his sallow face. His own weapon lay bed, rising up. on a folding table within convenient

sold nothing. He immediately began to the tent. making his own bed in an opposite corner, spreading his blankets on the ground. "I'm sorry I haven't another camp cot." he heard Bruce say. that a visitor from the outside I don't know as it matters much, as neither of us may sleep very sound.

"You mean the storm will keep us "The storm won't bother me.

declaration, he turned on Meldon his It's getting on my nerves." Bruce slow, deep-set eyes which glowed like and his peculiar fear, or his burning coals. With a sudden shift, ried Cleve. Only for Ellen. he turned to the gloom-shrouded; promise to be with her brother The girl scurried on to the white preferred the scant shelter of his own tent while Bruce directed the visitor little tent. When Bruce proposed some strange terror." He dismissed to the greensward near the creek leaving the lantern burning, the visit found himself wondering if the scare ping here," he remarked. "We had lay down, he made certain his ribe might be more than Indian supersti- two burros but lost them both re- was close to his hand, for somehow he could not shake off a growing

"Wandered away?" asked Meldon, sense of uneasiness. Cleve's pounding heart skipped "Burros are that sort. You never bent when Bruce suddenly raised to "Our didn't wander off. They dis- a sitting posture and reached for ms ing course toward a thicket of prick- let Ellen think they merely quit our hearsely muttered.

> "No! I heard nothing Something gobbled them-bodily-wind! The storm will soon bre one at a time, and about two weeks Lie down and get some sleep!"

"I can't sleep! I'm certain I heard Again he bored Cleve with his something." Bruce got up from the burning orbs. A strange note of fear cot, carrying his rifle and strode to was in his low voice. The story the tent door, opening the flap to seemed so utterly incredible that peer out. Just then a blinding light-Meldon began to doubt his sanity or ning tlash smote the inky darkness his seriousness. He had reasons to to be quickly followed by a detonaing he both suspicious and doubtful thunder cap. He jerked back and Bruce Wallis-might be playing - a returned to his bunk, sitting on its clever ruse, perpetrating a score for edge again with his gun across his the purpose of keeping Indians and knees. "An awful night," he munminers out of the lonely canyon so | bled, "and I know that thing is that he could hold the rich claim, around: I heard it creeping -"

That he was in ill health could not | "Put down your gun, Bruck and be questioned. He was out here, ap- get some sleep" Cleve sharply comparently, to gain the healing benefit manded.

"I know what I heard!" I've heard The puzzling part to Cleve was it before - several times before. Ellen's apparent ignorance of the Heard-it the night it made off with our last burro. And heard it again "Please don't mention a word of to-day. It's around-here, I tell you." this-to my sister," the invalid beg- I'm not crazy! And I might as well ged, as they proceeded toward the tell you more." He got to his feet and stood directly over Cleve's bed "Of course not," the visitor assured. "I know who you are, and why you "It was very kind of her to ask me are here. You've come to throw me off the claim! Ellen doesn't know "Ellen is pure gold!" declared that the property belongs to the Bruce, "Always cheerfu land happy, nephew of a deceased, World War Sings like a lark. Perhaps you heard veteran - and that you are the her 'to-night as you came up the nephew. I haven't told her because canyon. It's a shame to keep her out didn't believe you would get out here this longly, ghost-ridden hole; before summer. By that time I hop-

She's doing it for me. " He broke ed to regain my health. Alkali water, off suddenly and pointed to the rag- has poisoned me. Sunshine and rest ged skyline above the canyon rim. - pure water and Ellen's protecting "Look! There's a thunder-storm care, would get me going again, but brewing! My guess is there'll be a I can't test of sleep and I can't tell

cloudburst before morning. And this herethe truth trickling gorge stream will become a . A Blinding flash and a repeated thunder peal made him reel unsteadi-"You better sleep inside my tent by Cleve jumped up and took his to-night," Bruce proposed. "It's arm, steadying him to the cot. Thie saterproof and roomy. Also, it's a down, old-man, and be quiet" he adsafe distance from the canyon monished. When he attempted to take the rifle, Bruce clutched it in a Cleve accepted the offer. He car- herce grip and refused to give it up tried only a small shelter tent, barely He did he down but kept an unre-

keep near Bruce, as long as he was his own blankets. His pity was arous-"You'll camp with us!" she said on the claim. He wanted to be alone ed, mainly on Ellen's account. He quickly, tossing the remaining water with him when he settled the matter kept thinking of her and of her brave, cheerful spirit. No doubt she Ellen, Wallis, prepared an excellent realized her brother was suffering in a meal over a tiny camp stove, and mind, as well as in body. He hopeded served it under the palm-thatched she did not know the whole truto: lean-to. A lantern, suspended from a that Bruce was seriously ill ... and cross pole, gave light for the table A should be taken away from Tawquitz tadio, turned on a Los' Angeles canyon. His condition and especiallystation, provided music while they this strange mental abberation, put

ate. Cleve preferred to hear, her Cleve Meldon in a nilemma sing. At his urging she did sing after. A tremendous burst of the elements, turned his thoughts in a new direc-At the conclusion of the entertions from Again and again came the ment, Cleve started with Bruce to vivid white glare with thunder at the ward the other tent. Fittul patts of same instant : Down poured the rain warm wind were now blowing gover in a mighty detage, crashing and ratto an array no on the convers tent. Prom-"We te in for a soaker" Broke ex- the wakness soon took a strange mix-

Ellen the warmed tast sister "You health's and water splashing gard jaints into the deself or mountaine, about me, I'll be aken. He already agely, the tent was bigliked at the Her found this spot and brought me had told her that the visitor was to walls outside, and brought stated ... Cleve Setame anxious? about the lot of -difficulty holding time took is "Please take good care of time" notes and multi- life cose and hastog faitely, he has been very test'ess she quietly begged laying her and dressed. Bruse lay quiet, but appar and uneasy about something. She hand on Cleve's arm . For the first entirelistening intently, He leap of strule along about of the a but her time beobserved the hidden tear that to his feet, uttering a shoatse or talking as she walked. "You'll take furked in her eyes and noted the desix which something crashed through the thicket. At the same moment, the gested "We haven't eaten yet I'll | They had to almost grope their borse was heard to give a terrified get it ready while you unpack and way down across the clearning, so snort, and a piercing scream came

-shirt and faded overalls that were cut gorge, could swell the creek to 4 "No! It wasn't the lightning!" off at the knees, stood waiting. A mighty avalanche of muddy water, shouted Bruce "Look at this thack "This is my brother, Bruce Wallis." On his way to Tawquitz canyon he I've seen it before Made by the same Meldon, Bruce. I've invited him to power and might of a desert flood; the lantern near the sodden ground.

when he discovered a section of The flickering ylow revealed the twisted steel rails and three boxcars same smooth, deeply indented, crooklying half buried in the blistering ed mark Cleve had seen on the sand "Just - feel him!" Bruce

mule's rain-soaked flank. "Every rib is broken! He's crushed into a pulp!" Meldon touched bis shaking hand to the lifeless body, shuddering when be found it soft and limb. "What could have done it?" he almost son- thing around here, a great python. I

"It was the terrible creature the took our burros!" Bruce reported. "I is here-- I tell you! It's hiding in the remarked. "You may need it before thicket-". He would have rashly plunged into the storm-torn .; jungle Cleve gave him a quizzical look but had not Cleve seized and pulled him

> "We can't do anything now!" said despairingly." "We must wait till daylight." . For the rest of the night hey remained huddled in the tent Several times Bruce attempted to run out; but Cleve drew him back. storm raced on until the tangen became a roaring black torrent, whose

strenks of dawn

A new day had dawned. . · Cleve whose expression now was changed to a look-of grim, determined pur was thankful his horse had been spar- "Not a word!" Cleve willingly With his rifle ready for instant Bruce swung down nearer the tor- yours while he pointed over the thundering from on and work it out together! flood. "Look! Look! There comes

Cleve Meldon gasped when he saw it. An up-rooted palm tree rolled and tossell on the flood. As it swept vellow and black

Cleve and Bruce raised and leveled their rifles together. 'At the same in stant both weapons fired. The ugly head dropped into the muddy water "So ends the mysterious terror of "Inwquitz!" spoke Cleve Meldon, after Food a tense silence. He looked into Bruce's gratefully glowing oyds and smiled. He put his hand on the other's shoulder. "You were right,

Bruce. There has been h dreadful did get away with your burros, and must have been crushing the life ou of my poor mule when a terrifle lightning finsh caused it to let go and allther away. It wrapped itself around n toppling palm, and was swept away on the flood, Now we know what made the strange mark on the

"From a wrecked train that broke through a railroad trestle during an other flood; several months ago," anabout it, and yesterday I saw three tumbling waters were at length of the cars half buried in the sand vaguely revealed by the first gray down-on-the desert."

> was gone. Bruce was smiling now as ward the white tent on the bench.

The haunted fear-lurking gleam

use, he strode toward the thicket. This claim will keep right on being rent brink. Soon he began yelling, here. We'll divide grubstakes from

URGE NATIVE ARMY

CAPE TOWN (C.P.) Pointing downstream, a big. flattened head up-out-there are itt negro, brown or yelreared from the black trunk, swaying low subjects for every white in the from side to side on an arched, mot- British Empire 'n South African ortled neck. Coiled around the palm ganization, is promoting idea of . trunk was a long, gleaming body, of huge army of natives for use in the

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