

Title

RIMROCK TRAIL

By

J. Allan Dunn

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Rimrock Trail



The girl drooped, tired from the long climb

About this eBook

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RIMROCK TRAIL



I. GRIT

"Mormon" Peters carefully shifted his weighty bulk in the chair that he dared not tilt, gazing dreamily at the saw-toothed mountains shimmering in the distance, sniffing luxuriously the scent of sage.

"They oughter spell Arizona with three 'C's,'" he said.

"Why?" asked Sandy Bourke, wiping the superfluous oil from the revolver he was meticulously cleaning.

"'Count of Climate, Cactus, Cattle - an' Coyotes."

"Makin' four, 'stead of three," said the managing partner of the Three Star Ranch.

Came a grunt from "Soda-Water" Sam as he put down his harmonica on which he had been playing The Cowboy's Lament, with variations.

"Huh! You got no more eddication than a horn-toad, an' less common sense. You don't spell Arizony with a 'C.' You can't. 'Cordin' to yore argymint you should spell Africa with a 'Z' 'cause they raise zebras there, 'stead of mustangs. Might make it two 'R's,' 'count of rim-rock an' - an' revolvers."

Mormon snorted.

"That's a hell of a name for a man born in Maricopa County to call a gun. Revolver! You 'mind me of the Boston perfesser who come to Arizona tryin' to prove the Cliff Dwellers was one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. He blows in with an introduction to the Double U, where I was workin'. Colonel Pawlin's wife has a cold snack ready, it bein' middlin' warm. The perfesser makes a pretty speech, after he'd eaten two men's share of victuals tryin', I reckon, to put some flesh on to his bones. An' he calls the lunch a col-lay-shun! Later, he asks the waitress down to the Rodeo Eatin' House, while he's waitin' for his train, for a serve-yet. A serve-yet! That's what he calls a napkin. You must have been eddicated in Boston, Sam, though it's the first time I ever suspected you of book learnin'."

It was Sunday afternoon on the Three Star rancheria. The riders, all the hands - with the exception of Pedro, the Mexican cocinero, indifferent to most things, including his cooking; and Joe, his half-breed helper, - had departed, clad in their best shirts, vests, trousers, Stetsons and bandannas of silk, some seeking a poker game on a neighboring rancho, some bent on

courting. Pedro and Joe lay, faces down, under the shade of the trees about the tenaya, the stone cistern into which water was pumped by the windmills that worked in the fitful breezes.

The three partners, saddle-chums for years, ever seeking mutual employ, known through Texas and Arizona as the "Three Musketeers of the Range," sat on the porch of the ranch-house, discussing business and lighter matters. One year before they had pooled their savings and Sandy Bourke, youngest of the three and the most aggressive, coolest and swiftest of action, had gloriously bucked the faro tiger and won enough to buy the Three Star Ranch and certain rights of free range. The purchase had not included the brand of the late owner. Originally the holding had been called the Two-Bar-P. As certain cattlemen were not wanting who had a knack of appropriating calves and changing the brands of steers, Sandy had been glad enough, in his capacity of business manager, to change the name of the ranch and brand. Two-Bar-P was too easily altered to H-B, U-P, U-B, O-P, or B; a score of combinations hard to prove as forgeries.

There had been lengthy argument concerning the new name. Three Star, so Soda-Water Sam - whose nickname was satirical - opined, smacked of the saloon rather than the ranch, but it was finally decided on and the branding-irons duly made.

Sandy Bourke had dark brown hair, inclined to be curly, a tendency he offset by frequent clipping of his thatch. The sobriquet of "Sandy" referred to his grit. He was broad-shouldered, tall and lean, weighing a hundred and seventy pounds of well-strung frame. His eyes were gray and the lids sun-puckered; his deeply tanned skin showed the freckles on face and hands as faint inlays; his long limber legs were slightly bowed.

Not so the curve of Soda-Water Sam's legs. You could pass a small keg between the latter's knees without interference. Otherwise, Sam, whose last name was Manning, was mainly distinguished by his enormous drooping mustache, suggesting the horns of a Texas steer, inverted.

As for Mormon, disillusioned hero of three matrimonial adventures, woman-soft where Sandy was woman-shy, he was high-stomached, too stout for saddle-ease to himself or mount, sun-rouged where his partners were burned brown. His pate was bald save for a tonsure-fringe of grizzle-red.

All three were first-rate cattlemen, their enterprise bade fair for success, hampered only by the lack of capital, occasioned by Sandy's preference for modern methods as evidenced by thoroughbred bulls, high-grading of his steers, the steadily growing patches of alfalfa and the spreading network of irrigation ditches.

Business exhausted, ending with an often expressed desire for a woman cook who could also perform a few household chores, tagged with a last attempt to persuade Mormon to marry some comfortable person who would act in that capacity, they had reverted to the good-humored chaff that always marked their talks together.

Mormon, with stubby fingers wonderfully deft, was plaiting horsehair about a stick of hardwood to form the handle of a quirt, Sandy overhauling his two Colts and Sam furnishing orchestra on his harmonica. Now he put it to his lips, unable to find a sufficiently crushing retort to Mormon's diatribe against words of more than one syllable, breathing out the burden of "My Bonnie lies over the Ocean."

Mormon, in a husky, yet musical bass, supplied the cowboy's version of the words.

*"Last night, as I lay in the per-rair-ree.
And gazed at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy,
Could drift to that sweet by-an'-by.*

*"Roll on, roll on,
Roll on, li'l' dogies, roll -"*

He broke off suddenly, staring at the fringe of the waving mesquite.

"Look at that ornery coyote!" he said. "Got his nerve with him, the mangy calf-eater, comin' up to the ranch thataway."

Sam put down his harmonica.

"My Winchester's jest inside the door," he said. "But he'd scoot if I moved. Slip in a shell, Sandy, mebbe you kin git him in a minute."

"Yo're sheddin' yore skin, Sam. Got horn over yore eyes. Mormon, you need glasses fo' yore old age. That ain't a coyote, it's a dawg," pronounced Sandy.

The creature left the cover of the mesquite and came slowly but determinedly toward the ranch-house, past the corral and cook shack; its daring proclaiming it anything but a cowardly, foot-hill coyote. Its coat was whitish gray. Its brush was down, almost trailing, its muzzle drooped, it went lamely on all four legs and occasionally limped on three.

"Collie!" proclaimed Sandy. "Pore devil's plumb tuckered out."

"Sheepdawg!" affirmed Sam, disgust in his voice. "Hell of a gall to come round a cattle ranch."

The gray-white dog came on, dry tongue lolling, observant of the men, glancing toward the tenaya where it smelled the slumbering Pedro and Joe. It halted twenty feet from the porch, one paw up, as Sandy bent forward and called to it.

"Come on, you dawg. Come in, ol' feller. Mormon, take that hair out of that pan of water an' set it where he can see it."

Mormon shifted the pan in which he had been soaking the horsehair for easier plaiting and the dog sniffed at it, watching Sandy closely with eyes that were dim from thirst and weariness. Sandy patted his knee encouragingly, and the tired animal seemed suddenly to make up its mind. Ignoring the water, it came straight to Sandy, uttered a harsh whine, catching at the leather tassel on the cowman's worn leather chaparejos, tugging feebly. As Sandy stooped to pat its head, powdered with the alkali dust that covered its coat, the collie released its hold and collapsed on one side, panting, utterly exhausted, with glazing eyes that held appeal.

Sandy reached for the pan, squatting down, and chucked some water from the palm of his hand into the open jaws, upon the swollen tongue. The dog licked his hand, whined again, tried to stand up, failed, succeeded with the aid of friendly fingers in its ruff and eagerly lapped a few mouthfuls.

Again it seized the tassel and pulled, looking up into Sandy's face imploringly.

"Somethin' wrong," said the manager of the Three Star. "Tryin' to tell us about it. All right, ol' feller, you drink some more wateh. Let me look at that paw." He gently took the foot that clawed at his chaps and examined it. The pad was worn to the quick, bleeding. "Come out of the Bad Lands," he said, looking toward the range. "Through Pyramid Pass, likely."

"Some derved sheepman gone crazy an' shot his-self," grumbled Sam. "Somethin' bound to spile a quiet afternoon."

"Not many sheep over that way," said Mormon. "No range."

Sandy rolled the dog on his side and found the other pads in the same condition. Running his fingers beneath the ruff, scratching gently in sign of friendship, he discovered a leather collar with a brass tag, rudely engraved, the lettering worn but legible.

GRIT. Prop. P. Casey.

"They sure named you right, son," he said. "We'll 'tend to P. Casey, soon's we've 'tended to you. You need fixin' if you're goin' to take us to him. You'll have to hoof it till we cut fair trail. Sam, fetch me some adhesive, will you? An' then saddle up; Pronto fo' me, a hawss fo' yoreself an' rope a spare mount."

"What for? The spare?"

"Don't know for sure. May have to bring him back."

"A sheepman to Three Star! I'd as soon have a sick rattler around. Mormon, yo're elected to nurse him."

Sam went into the house for the medical tape, then to the corral. Sandy bathed the raw pads softly, cut patches of the tape with his knife, put them on the abrasions, held them there for the warmth of his palm to set them. Grit licked at his hands whenever they were in reach, his brightening eyes full of understanding, shifting to watch Sam striding to the corral.

"One thing about a sheepman is allus good," said Mormon. "His dawg. Reckon you aim on me tendin' the ranch, Sandy?"

"Come if you want to."

"Two's plenty, I reckon. I do more ridin' through the week than I care for nowadays. I'll stick to the chair."