

The Aztec Mystery

A Thrilling Story of the Old West

By MURRAY LEINSTER

SYNOPSIS. Because the courts have refused to recognize his claim to the Aztec mine, Sonny Holman takes to holding his company's payroll. He is divided in his opinion about the coming of Janet Laurier, owner of the mine. The story has been in Sonny's mind of one theft and the two try to capture Garcia. A group of desperadoes they be- lieve is secretly working to take the mine. Sonny stole back into the mine at night to reconnoitre.

CHAPTER VI. Sonny reconnoitred carefully, so that a little travelling clock was just striking the half hour when Janet Laurier, staring miserably before her with an unread book in her hand, heard a noise and looked up with a gasp to see him gazing down at her with his hat in his hand.

"Ma'am," he said soberly, "I am sheriff here, and I am here to see you. The next most likely person to be interested, I thought I'd like to come and talk over this here ore stealing business with you."

Janet's hands had clenched in in- stantary terror. Now, though, they continued to tremble in spite of all her will power, she managed to keep nearly all trace of fear out of her voice. "I suppose," she said cold- ly, "that you have not mentioned it, yet, you'll shoot me if I call for help?"

Sonny frowned thoughtfully at her. He suddenly tossed his gun at her feet. "Does that look like it, ma'am?" A drawl crept into his voice as he regarded him with an unvarying ho- tidity. "I come here, ma'am, to talk about ore stealing. Unless you play me, ma'am, I'm going to tell you some mighty disconcertin' facts."

She picked up the revolver and her courage returned. "If this is your only weapon," she demanded, "you tell me any reason why I shouldn't hold you here and call for help?"

"Some folks," drawled Sonny, would admire you for it, ma'am. Go ahead." He regarded her grimly. Her eyes wavered. "You may tell me what you wish," she said evenly, after an instant. "Of course I believe it."

"No, ma'am, you needn't," Sonny's drawl was pronounced, a sure sign that he was not altogether calm. "But after all, there ain't any reason for you an' me to hate each other. We kinda disagree about who owns the Aztec. I believe we're going to keep on disagreein'. But we might as well fight fair."

The girl clenched her fists. "I'm going to fight you with any weapon I can find!" she cried fiercely. "I offered a reward of a thousand dol- lars for you yesterday, dead or alive!"

"An' I'm here, ma'am," drawled Sonny, "an' yuh got my gun, an' I can get up an' walk out this house any time I like, because yuh can't pull the trigger on me, ma'am."

She stared at him with flaming eyes. Her hand closed about the re- volver. She tried to lift it—and could not. Then she cried passionately, "I hate you! I hate you!"

"You would, ma'am," agreed Sonny gleefully. "I don't know why 'tis you feel like you got to hol' on to this mine like you know belongs to me by honesty."

She bit her lip. "You're calling me a thief!"

"Lorndy, no, ma'am!" protested Sonny. "You're a lady, ma'am, an' in your own mind yuh got some reason for it."

"You're a thief!" she cried. "You're a thief!"

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