

# The BRANDING IRON

by Katharine Newlin Burt



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**SYNOPSIS**

Joan Larda, eighteen years old, wife of Pierre, is the daughter of John Carver, who murdered her mother for adultery. Her lonely life, with her father, in a Wyoming cabin, unbearable, Joan leaves him to work in a hotel in a nearby town. Joan meets Pierre, and the two, mutually attracted, are married. Carver tells Pierre story of Joan's mother. Pierre forges a cattle brand. Frank Hollivell, young minister, presents books to Joan. Pierre forbids her to read them. Maddened by jealousy, Pierre ties Joan and burns the Two-Bar brand into her shoulder. Hearing her screams, a stranger bursts into the house and shoots Pierre.

**CHAPTER IX**

**Dried Rose-Leaves.**

The house that Prosper Gael had built for himself and for the woman whom Joan came to think of as the "tall child," stood in a canyon, a deep, crevice fold of the hills, where a cliff stood behind it, and where the pine-needled ground descended before its door, under the far-dung, greenish-brown shade of fir boughs, to the lip of a green lake. In January, the lake was a glare of snow, in which the big firs stood deep, their branches heavily weighted. Prosper had dug a tunnel from his door through a big drift which touched his eaves. It was curious to see Wen Ho come pattering out of this northern cave, his yellow, Oriental face and slant eyes peering past the staccato ledges as though they felt their own incongruity almost with a sort of terror. The interior of the five-room house gave just such an effect of bizarre and extravagant contrast; an effect, too, of luxury, though in truth it was furnished for the most part with stuffs and objects picked up at no very great expense in San Francisco shops. Nevertheless, there was nothing tawdry and, here and there, something really precious. Draperies on the walls, furniture made by Wen Ho and Prosper, inlaid in black and red, brass and copper, bright pewter, gay china, some fur rugs, a gorgeous oriental lamp, bookcases with volumes of a sober richness, in fact the costliest and most laborious of imports to this wilderness, small-paneled, horizontal windows curtained in song heavy green-gold stuff which slipped along the black lacquered pole on rings of jade; all these and a hundred other points of softly brilliant color gave to the living room a rare and striking look, while the bedrooms were matted, daintily furnished, carefully appointed as for a bride. Much thought and trouble, much detailed labor, had gone to the making of this odd nest in a Wyoming canyon. What, ever one must think of Prosper Gael, it is difficult to shirk heartache on his account. A man of his temperament does not lightly undertake even a companioned isolation in a winter land. To picture what place of torment this well-appointed cabin was to him before he brought it to Joan, as a lonely man, brings in a wounded bird to nurse and cherish, stretches the fancy on a rack of varied painfulness.

On that night, snow was pouring itself down the narrow canyon in a crowded whirl of dry, clean flakes. Wen Ho, watchful, for his master was already a day or so beyond the promised date of his return, stopped rubbing his hands. He had heard the packing of snow under webs and runners. After listening a moment, he nodded to himself, like a figure in a pantomime, ran into the kitchen, and something to the stove, then lit a lantern and pattered out along the tunnel, dodging the lelele staccatoes. Between the firs he stopped and held the lantern high so that it touched a moving radius of flakes to silver stars. Back of him through the open door streamed the glow of lamp and fire filling the ledges with blood and flushing the walls and the roof of the cave.

Down the canyon Prosper shouted, "Wen Ho! Wen Ho!" The Chinaman plunged down the trail, packed below the new-fallen snow by frequent passage, and presently met the lean figure of his master pulling and breathing hard. Without speaking, Wen Ho laid hold of the sled rope and together the two huddled together under the last steep bit of the hill.

"Velly heavy load," said Wen Ho. Prosper's eyes, gleaming below the shadow of his cap, smiled half-maliciously upon him. "It's a deer killed out of season," he said, "and other catties—no maverick, either—fairly marked by its owner. Lend me a hand and we'll unload."

Wen showed no astonishment. He removed the covering and peeped startled at the strange woman who stared at him unseeing with bright, bright eyes. She closed them, frowning faintly as though she protested against the intrusion of a Chinese face into her disturbed mental world.

The men took her up and carried her into the house, where they dressed her wound and laid her with all possible gentleness in one of the two beds of stripped and lacquered pine that stood in the bedroom facing the lake. Afterward they moved the other bed and Prosper went in to his meal.

He was too tired to eat. Soon he pushed his plate away, turned his chair to face the fire, and, slipping down to the middle of his spine, stuck out his lean, long legs, locked his hands back of his head, let his chin fall, and stared into the flames.

Wen Ho removed the dishes, glancing often at his master. "You velly tired?" he questioned softly.

"It was something of a pull in the storm."

"Velly small deer," babbled the Chinaman, "velly big lady."

Prosper smiled a queer smile that sucked in and down the corners of his mouth.

"She come after all?" asked Wen Ho.

Prosper's smile disappeared; he opened his eyes and turned a wicked, gleaming look upon his man. What with the white face and drawn mouth the look was rather terrible. Wen Ho vanished with an increase of speed and silence.

Alone, Prosper twisted himself in his chair till his head rested on his arms. There was no relaxation of weariness or grief, but an attitude of cramped pain. His face, too, was cramped when, a motionless hour later, he lifted it again. He got up then, broken with weariness, and went softly across the matted hall into the room where Joan slept, and he stood beside her bed.

A glow from the stove, and the light shining through the door, dimly illumined her. She was sleeping very quietly now; the flush of fever had left her face and it was clear of pain, quite simple and sad. Prosper looked at her and looked about the room as though he felt what he saw to be a dream. He put his hand on one long strand of Joan's black hair.

"Poor child!" he said. "Good child!" And went out softly, shutting the door.

In the bedroom where Joan came again to altered consciousness of life, there stood a blue china jar of potpourri, rose-leaves dried and speed till

they stored all the richness of a southern summer. Joan's first question, strangely enough, was drawn from her by the persistence of this vague and pungent sweetness.

She was lying quietly with closed eyes. Prosper looking down at her, his finger on her eye to guide, when, without opening her long lids, she asked, "What smells so good?"

Prosper started, drew away his fingers, then answered, smiling, "It's a jar of dried rose-leaves. Wait a moment, I'll let you hold it."

"Yes," said Joan; "I've thought a great deal about you." She wrinkled her wide brows. "You must have been out after game, though 'twas out of season. And you must have heard me cryin' out an' come in. That was right, comin' in. Stranger, I would surely like you to know why I come away with you." She went on, wistful and weak, "but I don't know as how I can make it plain to you." She paused, turning the blue jar in her hand. "You're very strange to me," she said, "an' yet, someways, you takin' care of me so well an' so—so awful kind—" her voice gave forth its tremolo of feeling—"seems like I knowed you better than any other person in the world."

A flush came into his face. "I wouldn't like you to be thinkin'—" She stopped, a little breathless. He took the jar, sat down on the bed, and laid a hand firmly over both of hers. "I won't be thinkin' anything," he said, "only what you would like me to think. Listen—when a man finds a wounded bird out in the winter woods, he'll bring it home to care for it. And he won't be thinkin' the worse of its helplessness and tameness. Of course I know—but tell me your name, please?"

"Joan Larda."

At the name, given painfully, Joan drew a weighted breath, another, then, pushing herself up as though oppressed beyond endurance, she caught at Prosper's arm, clenched her fingers upon it, and bent her black head in a terrible paroxysm of grief. It was like a tempest. Prosper thought of storm-driven, rain-wet trees wild in a wind of music, the prelude to "Fliegende Holländer."

Prosper's face was pale as he said, "What hev I to do with you?"

It was not the last time that bitter exclamation was to rise between them; more and more fiercely it came to wring his peace and hers. "This time he bore it with a certain philosophy, calmed her patiently.

"How could I help it, Joan?" he pleaded. "You saw how it was?" As she grew quieter, he talked. "I heard you scream like a person being tortured to death—twice—a gressome enough sound, let me tell you, to hear in the dead of a white, still night. I didn't altogether want to break into your house, I've heard some ugly stories about men venturing to disturb the work of murderers. But, you see, Joan, I've a fear of myself. I've a cruel brain. I can use it on my own failures. I've been through some self-punishment—no! of course, you don't understand all that. . . . Anyway, I came in, in great fear of my life, and saw what I saw—a woman tied up and devilishly tortured, a man gloating over her helplessness. Naturally, before I spoke my mind, as a man was bound to speak it, under the pain and fury of such a spectacle. I got ready to defend myself. You—Pierre—there was a biting contempt in his tone—"saw my gesture, whipped out his gun, and fired. My shot was half a second later than his. I might more readily have lost my life than taken his. If he had lived, Joan, could you have forgiven him?"

"No," sobbed Joan; "I think not." She trembled. "He said terrible hard words to me. He didn't love me like I loved him. He planned to put a brand on me so's I'd be his own like as if I was a beast belongin' to him. Mr. Hollivell said right, I don't belong to no man. I belong to my own self."

The storm had passed into this troubled after-tossing of thought. "Can you tell me about it all?" asked Prosper. "Would it help?"

"I couldn't," she moaned; "no, I couldn't. Only—if I hadn't 'a' left Pierre a-lyin' there alone. A dog that had once loved him wouldn't 'a' done that." She sat up again, white and wild. "That's why I must go back. I must surely go. I must! Oh, I must!"

"Go back thirty miles through wet snow when you can't walk across the room, Joan?" He smiled pityingly.

"Can't you go back?" She turned desolate, haunted eyes upon him. "Oh, can't you?—do some kindness to him? Can you ever stop thinkin' of him lyin' there?"

Prosper's face was hard through its gentleness. "I've seen too many dead men, less deserving of death. But hush—let us down and go to sleep. I'll try to manage it. I'll try to get back and show him some kindness, as you say. There! Will you be a good girl now?"

She fell back and her eyes shone their gratitude upon him. "Oh, you are good!" she said. "When I'm well—I'll work for you!"

# THE AMERICAN LEGION

(Copy for This Department Supplied by the American Legion News Service.)

## LEGION TO FATHER ORPHANS

Problem, One of Biggest Facing Organization, Regarded as Continued Service to Nation.

Caring for orphaned children of World War veterans is regarded as one of the principal problems in the American Legion's plan of continued service to the nation. Estimates show that within eleven years after the close of the war, there will be at least 35,000 of such children, and the number is expected to increase so rapidly that it will entail as much expenditure as does the relief of disabled soldiers.

George A. Withers of Clay Center, Kansas, is chairman of the Legion's national committee on children's homes. Mr. Withers has given unsparingly of his time during the past year in research and study of the conditions and methods used in the upbringing of veterans' dependents. The committee is composed of Mark T. McKee of Michigan, Charles French of New Hampshire, William B. Healey of Pennsylvania, G. A. Warlick of North Carolina, E. E. Hallenbeck of Pennsylvania, Ralph K. Robertson of New York, and A. H. McKnow of California. They have prepared an outline for the Legion's part in such a program, to be submitted to the fifth annual convention of the organization at San Francisco.



George A. Withers.

Exact procedure of the Legion is uncertain, and may not be determined until after the convention takes action. No approval has been given to any plans outlined because of the variance of opinions of child welfare workers on the feasibility of certain methods. Suggestions of placement of dependent children with near relatives, with financial aid in education; location with foster parents; grouping of the wards in small colonies under direction of matrons; and institutional care in orphanages will be included in the report of the committee. Further plans for education and vocational training will be outlined in the report.

Work of preparation has been assisted by responses to a questionnaire sent to heads of all Legion departments. It has been determined from these that at least six states already have provided specific care for those bereft of parents by the World War, and in other states plans looking to Legion co-operation as partial solution have been prepared. A project in Washington calls for establishment of an institution on public lands of the state, to be financed through efforts of the Legion. Michigan now has an orphanage, known as the American Legion Children's Billet, under direction of the organization. Kansas is at work on a plan for acceptance of a gift from Daniel Dabney, who offered the Legion a large tract of land, and an endowment of \$25,000 if the Legion would raise \$100,000 for a home for dependent children of former service men.

Members of the committee believe that the care of such children is a responsibility for the Legion. In a recent letter, Chairman Withers has summed up the duty of the Legion men in these words:

"These youngsters belong to the buddies who stood with us in the trenches, and who were called upon to make the supreme sacrifice. Can we, who were spared, do less than to see to it that those nearest and dearest to these wonderful boys who gave their all, shall have the chance that we would desire for ours, had we been called on as were they?"

**Color Blind?**  
"You will have trouble with a dark lady," predicted the fortune teller.

"Think hard, sister, and be sure you are right," replied the wise vision seer.

"I'm married to a blonde!"—American Legion Weekly.

**Even So.**  
"Then you have met my wife before?"

"Yes, indeed. I know her quite well before you married her."

"The divorce you say. You certainly had the advantage over me!"—American Legion Weekly.

## AIR DISARMAMENT BIG TOPIC

Question of International Importance to Be Discussed at Legion National Convention.

The question of an international air disarmament conference will be one of the principal topics for discussion at the American Legion's national convention in San Francisco, according to Legion national officials.

When the Legion started its poll of prominent citizens to ascertain public sentiment in regard to the advisability of holding a conference to limit military air forces in Washington, the question claimed the serious attention of Legionnaires in all departments and a number of state organizations have recommended that the national convention consider the issue.

The Legion believes that world peace is threatened by the unusual air programs sponsored by France, England, Italy and Russia. Led by France, the nations of Europe are involved in a race for air supremacy which the Legion feels may result in a necessity for appropriations of billions of dollars on the part of this country unless an international agreement is reached to reduce air forces.

Public sentiment favors the proposed conference, according to results obtained to date from the poll which elicited replies from members of congress, governors, editors, college presidents and many prominent citizens. Of the letters received, approximately 90 per cent express approval of the gathering.

Through the views of commentators runs a definite current of opinion that the conference should be held as soon as possible and that if it is not held, the United States should take steps at once to obtain thorough protection in air armament. Writers admit the difficulties of obtaining representation at the gathering because of the situation in Europe, but express the belief that the attempt should be made, thereby revealing to the world the nations refusing to cooperate in a movement for world peace.

Included in the list of commentators are a number of Americans whose words on questions of an international character always are sure of a respectful hearing. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, chairman of the senate committee on foreign relations, who was one of the members of the American delegation to the Washington arms limitation conference of 1921, has expressed approval of the Legion's campaign in principle. He wrote that he favored limitations in aircraft similar to those made in naval strength, provided that the agreement for limitation is international.

Newton D. Baker, former secretary of war, believes that the conference should be held at once because "the limitation of air armaments is the most important and vital possible limitation." However, he adds the thought that international protection must be afforded to the security of certain nations which, because of their inferior man-power, have been forced to rely upon their superior ingenuity in developing and producing the most modern and scientific agencies of war.

That the Legion's suggestion would have the support of the farm bloc is indicated in the enthusiastic letter received from Senator Arthur Capper of Kansas who has written that it has won his hearty endorsement. "It seems to me that an international conference would be very helpful toward bringing about an agreement which would end competition between nations for supremacy in the air—a policy which unquestionably is not only useless but a menace to the peace of the world," his letter reads. "You are correct when you say that now is the time to consider this matter. Delay will undoubtedly complicate the situation and make it more difficult to remove the menace."

Legion leaders have expressed gratification that President Coolidge favors the aims of the proposed conference, but disagree with his belief that the time is not ripe for convening the gathering and that this government should set an example by refraining from engaging in competitive building of aircraft.

"Our stand should be to find out for certain whether nations are ready to discuss limitation of air armament, and if they are not, begin immediately to strengthen our air forces, which are now not those of a first class power," Lemuel Bolles, Legion national adjutant, has stated. "The worst thing that could happen to the country today would be a move to disregard preparedness in the face of the European contest and for the Legion to permit such an interpretation to grow from its suggestion of limitation would be to repudiate our four-year record for preparedness."

The Legion's campaign has aroused much public comment and has been the subject of editorials in newspapers all over the country. It has become one of the leading measures in that organization's campaign for the advancement of world peace.

**The Very First Kiss.**  
She was so innocent, Jack had taken her riding in his car and just as he kissed her a fire broke out.

"Oh, Jack," she murmured, "How lucky we didn't stay at home! Father is such a light sleeper!"—American Legion Weekly.

**Mysterious Indeed.**  
"Seen any suspicious strangers around here lately?" casually asked the detective from the city.

"Ward," answered Uncle Eben, "there was a fellow went to town with the elvish last week, who took a pair of pants on my whiskers!"—American Legion Weekly.

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