

Crazy Gal

By Roark Bradford

If the paddle had broken Zillah's head, Conge might have forgiven it. But when Zillah's head broke the paddle—well, Conge was pretty nearly furious

LITTLE JOE WHEELER hit Conge with a razor one Saturday afternoon at Hatch's Landing, and Zillah began "keeping steady company" with Little Joe as the result.

Little Joe had been after Zillah ever since he came into the Bœuf River country and Zillah steadfastly had spurned him.

"You too little and runty, Little Joe," she told him. "I likes a big man. I'm a big gal and what'd you look like standin' 'round wid me? Like my little boy, hunh?"

"I might be little but I sho' am loud," argued Little Joe.

A rather complicated situation—a situation that Zillah herself sensed but did not know about—brought Little Joe into the peaceful quiet of Bœuf River and attracted him to Zillah.

Twenty years ago, the upper Bœuf country was one of the richest sections of Louisiana. Cotton grew long and strong and sold at a premium in the New Orleans market. Small packet steamboats made regular trips up the narrow, winding channel, hauling down the staple and hauling up luxuries and necessities from the city. In those days money could be exchanged directly on the steamboats for hell-raising whisky, long strings of beads and fancy dress goods that made the men fight about the women and the women about nothing.

Then the boll weevil struck the cotton and made these long tedious packet trips from New Orleans up the Mississippi and four tributary rivers to the Bœuf unprofitable. The planters had to haul their cotton—or what cotton the boll weevils left them—across land to the railroads, and take a cut in price to counteract the difference in rates.

THERE still was a good living in the land. The boll weevils simply could not eat up all the cotton that the black soil produced. But the people had to work harder for their money, and then not get as much.

A new generation grew up, a generation unaccustomed to the plenty brought in by the steamboats. There was pleasure for them, but of a different sort. A five-pound catfish on the end of a trot-line contained as much potential fun for the new generation as a five-gallon jug of Morrissey's Straight in the chimney corner had contained for the old ones.

Zillah was of the new generation, all right, in matter of years. She was just twenty and she couldn't ever remember having seen a steamboat. But in her heart there was not much fun in a fish fry or a yard dance. The nearest to a good time she had ever had was the time she rode eighteen miles on a cotton wagon to Rayville and sat around eating cheese and crackers and sardine fish out of cans and listening to the dull talk of the little railroad town.

Then one fall a white man came riding in and had a long talk with the Boss Man. They rode about the big woods for days and the white man went away. Not long after that a dozen or more strange Negroes, among them Little Joe, came with axes and saws

and sledges and wedges and started splitting long pipe-stave bolts from the tall white oaks that abounded.

Up until the time Little Joe came to Bœuf River, Zillah had supposed that she would marry Conge. Not that she was particularly enthusiastic about marrying. But after all a girl had to marry somebody, and Conge encouraged her. He was a big, healthy, heavy worker and good-natured. She had nothing against him. And a girl ought to marry somebody.

But when Little Joe came she realized that Conge lacked that swagger and fire which thrilled her.

"Zillah, gal," Conge told her, "I'm makin' me fourteen bales er cotton dis fall. Ha'f er dat's de Boss Man's and two bales for de commissary for my credik, and dat leaves five bales for we to git married on. And efn I don't buy you de biggest cookin' stove old Mister Sears and Roebuck got, well, hit's because he ain't got no big'n in his catalogue."

"You gonter do dat for me, hunh, Conge?" Zillah was politely enthusiastic.

"Yeah, and dat ain't all," he added. "I'm gonter buy you a sewin' machine and a heap er yuther stuff, too, maybe."

Zillah heard and appreciated the announcement. But some way or other the talk did not make her heart go pit-a-pat in her bosom like Little Joe's talk did:

"Looky hyar, gal, efn you gonter step out wid me you got to put some shoes on, and git dat stockin' top offn yo' haid. I ain't used to runnin' wid country niggers, nohow. Hyar, take dis money and go to de store and buy you some shoes and stockin's. S'posin' somebody'd see me runnin' wid you, and you lookin' like dat?"

"Aw, Little Joe," protested Zillah. "You sho' do tawk mannish, don't you? You tawks like you's a sho'-nuff big man! Humph!"

Illustrated by
Harry Burne



"I might be little," he retorted, giving his hat a vicious tilt over one eye, "but I'm sho' is loud! Even de white fo'ks knows how good I'm is. I'm gittin' two and a quarter a day and dese yuther niggers ain't gittin' but two. Dey sont plum' all de way up in Arkansas to hire me to split dese staves! Dat's how good I'm is!"

Zillah was impressed. When Little Joe talked like that Zillah's eyes had a way of tricking her into believing he was six feet tall. But the minute he stopped talking, he settled down to his normal five feet two, and he was so runty-looking when big Conge was around!

But she took the money and bought the shoes and stockings, and she quit wearing the top of a stocking turban-wise over her head, as was the style among other young women around Hatch's Landing.

AND of course it didn't take long for the news to get spread abroad. Conge came hot-footing up to see her about it. "Zillah, gal," he said, "I hyared a lie-tale on you. I hyared dat one er dem stave-bolitin' niggers buyed you some shoes."

He stood in the early evening light at Zillah's front gate, and Zillah was sitting on her porch. She never had seen him look so huge and magnificent as he struggled visibly to contain his wrath. His big hands opened and closed and his shoulders bulged and fell with

his excited breathing. She almost fainted at the blissful thought of being slapped by that huge, crazy-mad man! Or maybe he would choke her!

"You ain't too mad, Conge, darlin', is you?" she asked sweetly. If he hit her with his fist, she knew she'd be knocked crazy for a week!

But Conge made no move to hit her. He just stood and stared. She decided to goad him further.

"Yeah," she taunted, "he buyed me dese shoes and stockin's"—she lifted her skirt so he could see the very tops of the pink silk hose—"and he say he gonter whup you do he ketch you hangin' around me."

She closed her eyes, waiting for this big, furious man to strike! But he didn't strike. He just said, "Aw," and then, crestfallen, he turned and wandered sadly away without as much as hitting her one single lick for her infidelity!

Zillah was more than disappointed. She was chagrined. So that was the kind of man she had been wasting her time on, was it? Wouldn't hit her once! Didn't care enough about her to beat her for cutting up! Allowed another man to buy her such intimate things as shoes and stockings, and then just said, "Aw!" and walked away!

"Humph!" she snorted with contempt. And then she broke into a shrill, wild laugh that pierced the very soul of the retreating Conge.

Talk went around. The word was



Zillah was the only one to take the song as personal. "I ain't yo' mama," she giggled. "I ain't de mama er nothin' as black and ugly as you is, you crow-colored baboon"

that the big field hand was "laying" for Little Joe, and Little Joe stayed closely to himself for a while. But as nothing came of the talk, he grew bolder and ventured out. Still nothing happened and he grew bold enough to go around publicly with Zillah. The talk about Conge "laying" for him ceased, and then the talk was that Conge was too good a man for a fool like Zillah and

had realized it. "Turned her down 'cause she a fool," the people said. "And den Little Joe tuck up wid her."

That last bit of talk grated upon the enormous pride of Little Joe. He wasn't the kind of man to pick up something that someone else had discarded, and he wanted everybody to understand that. But the people had their talk, just the same. "Conge, he too good and stiddy

for fool Zillah," they said. "He quit her 'cause she a fool."

Little Joe sulked and became irritable. He looked viciously at people when he passed them and short-talked them when they tried to be pleasant. Then, one day a co-worker in the stave-cutting enterprise came into the store at the Landing with a gash in his head that Little Joe had put there. "I didn't done him nothin'," the man told the storekeeper, "and he up and hit me wid a cull stave. I didn't done him a thing. He jest up and hit me." The storekeeper, not interested in the intimate affairs of the Negroes, merely rendered first aid and sent the man back to work.

But the incident caused new talk. "Little Joe, he a bad'n! He might be little but he sho' is loud! Better mind out for Little Joe!"

The women confidentially advised Zillah to be careful, too. "He a bad'n, aw-right!" they pointed out. "He whupped a big man in de woods, jest for nothin'! You better mind out and not rile him! He little but loud!"

"HUMPH!" snorted Zillah. "He jest tawk loud!"

"He whupped de man—"

"I didn't seed him whup nobody." Except when he was talking big talk to her, Little Joe still looked like a runt to Zillah. Yet, he did talk big, and Conge didn't even do that. She decided to bring things to an issue.

The next Saturday afternoon she dressed in her Sunday best, including the shoes and stockings Little Joe had bought for her, put her mail-order catalogue under her arm and went to the store. It was pay day for the stave workers, and the field hands had sold cotton. She knew there would be an interested crowd on hand.

She walked coldly past Little Joe, who was sitting off to himself, scowling at mankind in general, and went straight to Conge, who was sitting on the head of a sugar barrel, eating cheese and crackers and talking idly with another field hand. She opened the catalogue at a place marked by her finger, and pointed.

"See dat, Conge, darlin'?" she said, sweetly. "Dat de stove you gonter buy me, hunh? See, hit's already got de kittle on, b'ilin'!"

Conge grunted his surprise, and then

looked at the picture of the stove. The air suddenly became chilled and a hush fell over the gabbling Negroes. He cut one eye sidewise at Little Joe and then said in a loud voice: "You like dat stove, hunh? I buy you dat. Now find somethin' else for me to buy you, baby."

Zillah began turning the pages of the catalogue, but she kept her eyes raised to watch both Conge and Little Joe. Little Joe was not long in grasping the situation, and he got up, casually, and swaggered toward Conge. He stopped suddenly and glowered.

"What you fixin' to buy my woman?" he demanded.

Conge said not a word; he pushed out his big hand and shoved the little man well back to where he had been sitting.

"Now, le's find dat sewin' machine, honey," he said to Zillah, as though Little Joe did not exist.

BUT Little Joe had a reputation to uphold. He was a bad one. And everybody that didn't know it would soon find it out. He unpocketed a razor, opened the blade clear back so it would not close on his hand, and advanced, swinging it with exaggerated sweeps.

"I'm gonter see what you looks like on de insides," he told Conge noisily, feinting and slashing as he advanced.

Conge had not expected a razor. "Take away wid dat thing, man!" he exclaimed. "Mind out, now!"

But Little Joe kept advancing, slashing and feinting as he came.

Whether he really intended to cut Conge, no one knew. Conge rather suspected that he was bluffing and was reluctant to give ground. Yet, a razor was a dangerous thing, swinging like that, and he could not resist throwing up his arm to protect himself when Little Joe kept getting closer and closer. And when he raised his arm unexpectedly, the razor ripped through his sleeve and laid open a long, shallow gash in his arm.

It was scarcely more than a scratch but it was too much for Conge. He fell backward over the barrel and raced for the woods.

Some of the other men caught Little Joe, who offered nothing but verbal resistance, and the razor was taken from him.

Then, as soon as he was freed, Little Joe walked up to Zillah and without a word of preliminary warning, he hit her a resounding smack in the eye with his fist. "Dat," he announced, "will keep you more hotter dan a cookin' stove! Now git on back to de house before I gives you dat sewin' machine in de yuther eye!"

Zillah whimpered. "Aw, Little Joe," she begged. "I was jest—"

Another smack from Little Joe, and Zillah knew that she loved the little stave-splitting man because he was so bad!

"Dat jest what dat fool Zillah gal need, too," the women said. "She need a good whuppin' ev'y now and den, and Little Joe, he sho' kin whup her good!"

CONGE faded out of the romance, entirely. He sold his cotton and banked nearly four hundred dollars from his five unencumbered bales. And, with nothing definite to do until time to plant the next year's crop, he decided to indulge in a little plain fishing. Most of the other field hands sought work with the stave cutters, sawing and splitting. But Conge had money in the bank and he didn't need the two dollars a day.

Conge was not a great fisherman, nor was he particularly interested in catching fish. What he liked to do was get into a little bateau and paddle well out of hearing of Zillah's shrill, crazy laugh, and of the gossip and talk-talk of the others. If he caught a fish he ate what he (Continued on page 71)

The Spider



His face was that of a homicidal maniac. There was a spit of fire, but Stimpson remained upright. "Quite useless!" he snapped out

IF EVER the conversation in later life turned upon coincidences, Jasper Slane's thoughts traveled back to that night when a suddenly canceled dinner engagement left him free, and he strolled into the box office of the Globe Theater to see if by any chance there was a vacant seat for the famous crook play to which everyone in London was streaming. He found one near the end of the third row, and it was not until the finish of the first act that he was even conscious of his neighbor—a neatly dressed, spruce-looking man of early middle age, a little heavy in the cheek and jaw, perhaps, but with clear, bright eyes, an intelligent forehead and a straight, hard mouth. At the fall of the curtain on the first act he leaned back in his place with a murmur of disappointment. Slane glanced toward him questioning, and caught his eye. "Rather thrilling!" he remarked. The other agreed readily.

"**I**T WAS quite all right until the end of the act," he pronounced. "That third-degree stuff, though, was punk. An American detective who's on the job doesn't act like that."

"Overdid the bullying, eh?" Slane asked. "I rather thought that was what they went in for."

The other smiled. The interval was only a very short one, and few people were leaving their places.

"It was the start of the gruelling that was so bad," he explained. "I tell you there's no honey bee in this world with a sweeter hum than the American detective when he opens up with his victim. He isn't going to bully or frighten him—not he. He'd like to be friendly—like to help him and get him out of any scrape he might get into. He pretends to be the kindest fellow that ever carried a hip flask. That's how he kids the other along, until he feels at ease, and begins to open up a little, maybe. They crack a few jokes. They're good fellows together. The detective pats his friend on the shoulder. The poor devil feels he's found a pal who'll help him—and a pal in the Force too! What luck! And so they go on, and all of a sudden the victim, talking now as easily as though he were chatting to his sister, says just the one thing the other's waiting for, and then, like a pistol shot, comes the change. The fellow's dazed beneath a fire of questions.

He doesn't know where he is, whether he's on his head or his heels. Before he can collect himself, he's given himself away. A few seconds later, he's given somebody else away. Before the detective's finished with him, he's told the whole story. That's the way they do it in New York. They don't commence by shouting and bullying like that fellow on the stage did."

"**H**OW do you happen to know so much about it?" Slane asked with interest. The man picked up his program. The bells were ringing through the house, and the lights were lowered. "Ah!" he murmured meditatively, as the curtain went up. . . .

After the next act, his neighbor reached for a hat under the seat, and turned to Slane.

"If you care for a whisky and soda," he said, "I'll tell you how I happen to know."

Slane accepted with a certain amount of alacrity. The two men made their

way along the crowded passage to the saloon. Conversation was impossible, and Slane found himself taking the opportunity of trying to place his prospective host. He was a broad-shouldered, well set-up man, a trifle under medium height, and he had the air of having passed much of his life in cruder places. Nevertheless, he wore his well-cut clothes with the air of a man accustomed to them, and seemed perfectly at his ease. He did not attempt the long coat mostly affected by men at fashionable theaters, and his collar, notwithstanding its long points, was that of the variety grudgingly accepted for use in the home dining-room by the arbiters of fashion. Everything about him, however, was very clean and neat. Slane put him down as a successful American business man who had learned enough by travel to conceal the evidences of a possibly indigent youth. His eyes were perhaps his most unusual feature. They were almost as dark as sloes, and they seemed to appear unexpectedly in his head without definite setting like floating pools from which came flashing sudden lights. His voice was never obtrusively transatlantic.

"Guess we'll have to stand up," he said. "No, there's a corner—and a waiter. Two Scotch and soda, waiter."

They were fortunate enough to find two just vacated chairs. Slane offered his cigarette case.

"Now tell me how you happen to know so much about American detectives," he begged.

There was only a second's hesitation, but in that second the other had ascertained exactly who was and who was not within earshot.

"I'm one myself," he confided.

He drew from his waistcoat pocket a small case, and passed a card to his companion. Upon it was engraved in plain block letters:

DETECTIVE EDWARD CROSS
POLICE HEADQUARTERS, CHICAGO

"Well, you ought to know all about it," Slane remarked, as he pocketed the card. "Slane, my name is—Jasper Slane."

"I've had twenty years' experience," the other continued. "I guess I ought to know a good deal about it. Chicago's as good a school as any, these days."

"Are conditions there exaggerated?" Slane asked. "Some of the newspaper stories are hard to believe."

The American laughed—not an effort of mirth at all—a hard and bitter laugh.

"Well," he answered, "you can't believe everything you read. Still! Mr. Slane—I think you said your name was Slane?"

"That's right."

"There's a lot that happens in Chicago that doesn't get into the papers. It's