

THE VINDICATION OF THE DUDE

A Tale of the Ranching Days in the Foot-Hills of Alberta



WITH a final whoop the welcoming cowmen of the neighbouring ranch thundered down upon the little station, dismounted, and stormed the diminutive platform. Muskoka Jones, the bottle of hospitality in his hand, was first to reach the open window of the telegraph room, and diving within to the waist, brought it down on the instrument table with a thump.

"Pardner, welcome to our city!"

The response, of etiquette and precedent, should have been instantaneous, hearty, and convivial. Instead was a strange quiet.

The following Bar-O's faltered, and exchanged startled glances of misgiving. Surely the C. P. had not at last fallen down on its first obligation at Bonepile! For since the coming of the rails the station operator had been an acknowledged social adjunct to the Bar-O ranch; the ever-ready evening's host, the faro bank, the magician interpreter of the wire-sputtered doings of the world beyond the plains—and if this latest change of operators had brought them—

Muskoka spoke again, and the worst was realised.

"Well, you glass-eyed little dude!"

The cowmen crowded forward, and peering over Muskoka's broad shoulders, beheld within, huddled in the chair, a flaxen-haired, pink-complexioned, spectacled youth, in high, spotless collar, faultlessly tailored in grey. As one man they swore.

Muskoka settled forward on his elbows.

"Are you a real operator?" he asked.

Mr. Wilson Jennings, late of Toronto, west on discovery, gulped his terror sufficiently to reply in the affirmative, and in a voice that sounded foolish even to himself.

"Actoal, reel; male operator?"

The cluster of bronzed faces guffawed loudly. "But y' don't play kards, do you?" inquired Muskoka incredulously. "Now I bet you don't. Or smoke? Or chew? Or any of them wicked—" "I smoke. Here, try one." Hopefully the boy extended a package of cigarettes—to have it snatched from his hand, scramblingly emptied, and the box flipped ceilingward.

In falling the package added calamity. It struck something on the wall which emitted a hollow thud, and glancing up the cowmen espied a brand new blue-and-yellow banded straw hat. In a moment Muskoka's long arm had secured it, with the common inspiration the cluster of faces withdrew; the hat sailed high in the air, there was an ear-splitting rattle of shots, and the shattered result was returned to its owner with ceremony.

"There—all proper millinaried dee la Alberta," said Muskoka. "An' don't mention it." Then the Bar-O's withdrew, and the youngster, frantically calling the despatcher at Redstone, resigned on the spot, and recovering himself, and having in his blood the makings of a man, retracted, and declared he would stick it out if they lynched him.

It was early Wednesday evening of a week later that the monthly gold shipment came down from the Red Hill mines. The consignment was an unusually large one, and in view of the youth of the new operator the superintendent wired a request that Big Bill Smith, the driver of the mines express, remain at the station until the treasure was safely aboard train.

Ordinarily Big Bill would not have cared. "Ordinarily!" But this was the night of Red Haggerty's hop! Didn't the superintendent know that? Wrath rose with words, and finally the outraged muleskinner condemned himself to the place of the lost, did he do such a thing, and stormed off to the Bar-O ranch for succour. Half an hour later Muskoka Jones appeared.

"Good evening, Mr. Jones, Im sorry it was necessary to trouble you," said Jennings.

"Good evening, Willie. Don't mention it," responded Muskoka punctiliously. Then having momentarily paused to cast a witheringly reaffirming eye over the lad's neat attire, the big cowman threw himself on the floor in the farthest corner of the room, and promptly fell fast asleep.

Some time after darkness had fallen the young telegrapher, dozing in his chair at the instrument table, was startled into consciousness by the sound of approaching hoofbeats. With visions of Indians or robbers he sprang to the window, to discover

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a dim, tall figure dismounting on the platform. In alarm he turned to call the sleeping guard, but momentarily hesitating, looked again, the figure came into the light of the window, and with a gasp of relief he recognised Iowa Davis, another of the Bar-O cowmen.

"Hello, kid," said the newcomer, entering. "Where's Old Muskoka?"

"Good evening. Over there, asleep, sir. I suppose you knew he was taking Mr. Smith's place, guarding the gold until the train came in?"

"Sure, yes. I was there when Bill come up." He crossed to the side of the snoring Jones, and kicked him sharply on the sole of his boots. "M'skoke! Git up!" he shouted. "Here's something to keep out the chills."

Again, and more sharply, he kicked the sleeping man, while the boy looked on, smiling.

Suddenly the smile disappeared, and the lad's heart leaped into his throat. He was gazing into the black, round muzzle of a pistol, and beyond it was a face set with a deadly purpose. Instinctively his staring eyes flickered towards the box of bullion.

"Yep, that's it. But wink an eye agin, an' y' git it!" said Davis coldly, advancing. "Now, git back there up agin the corner of the table, an' stand, so 'f any butt-in comes along you'll appear to be leanin' there, conversin'. Go on, quick!"

Dazed, cold with fear, the boy obeyed, and Iowa, producing a sheaf of hide thongs, proceeded to bind his arms to his side.

As the renegade tightened a knot securing the boy's left leg to the leg of the table, Muskoka's snoring abruptly ceased, and the sleeper moved uneasily. In a flash Iowa was over him, colt in hand. But the snoring presently resumed, and after watching him sharply for a moment, Iowa returned to the boy.

"Now move, remember, an' you'll git daylight blowed out of you," he repeated threateningly. "To make sure, I'm going to fix up that snoring fool over there before I finish you. An' don't you as much as shuffle your hoof!" Recovering the bundle of thongs, he strode back to the sleeper.

As previously the man's back had been turned the boy had shot a frantic glance about him. In their sweep his eyes had fallen on the partly open drawer in the end of the table, immediately below his left hand, and in the drawer had noted the bowl of a pipe. At the moment nothing had resulted, but as the renegade's back was again turned his eyes again dropped to the drawer, and a sudden wild possibility occurred to him.

His heart seemed literally to stand still at the audacity, the danger of it. But might it not be possible? The light from the single lamp, on the wall opposite, was poor, and his left side thus in deep shadow. And his left hand—he tried it—yes, though tightly bound at the wrist, the hand itself was free.

His first day at the station, the visit of the men from the ranch, Muskoka's contemptuous greeting, recurred to him. Here was his opportunity of vindication.

With a desperate clenching of the teeth the boy decided, and at once began cautiously straining at the thongs about his wrist, to obtain the reach necessary. Finally they slipped, slightly, but enough. Carefully he leaned sideways, his fingers extended. He reached the pipe, fumbled a moment, and secured it.

Davis was on his knees beside the unconscious guard, splicing a thong. An instant Jennings hesitated, then springing erect, pointed the pipe steam, and in a voice he scarcely knew, a voice sharp as the crack of a whip, cried:

"Hands up, Davis! I got you!"

"Quick! I'll shoot!"

The renegade cowman, taken completely by surprise, leaped to his feet with a cry, without turning, his hands instinctively half-raised.

"Quick! Up! Up!" cried the boy. A breathlessly critical instant the hands wavered, then slowly, reluctantly they ascended.

For a moment the young operator stood panting, but half believing the witness of his own eyes to the success of the stratagem. Then at the top of his voice he cried: "Mr. Jones! Mr. Jones! Muskoka! Wake up! Wake up!"

Iowa, cursing beneath his breath, paused anxiously to watch results.

"Muskoka! Muskoka!" shouted the lad. The snoring continued evenly, unbrokenly.

Iowa indulged in a dry laugh. "Save your wind, kid," he said. "I doped his whiskey before he came down."

At this news the boy's heart sank.

"But look here, kid," Iowa turned carefully, hands still in the air. "Look here, can't we square this thing up? You got the drop on me, O.K.—and with a damn little pea-shooter," he added, catching a glimpse, as he thought, of the end of a small black barrel, but nevertheless continuing his attitude of surrender. "You got the drop—and you're a smart kid, you are—but can't we fix this thing up? You take half, say? I'd be glad to let you in. Honest! An' noone 'd ever think you was in the game. Come, what d' y' say?"

Though apparently listening, the youngster had been urgently casting about in his mind for other expedients. Obviously it would be too dangerous to attempt to reach with the fingers of one of his bound hands the thongs holding his left leg to the leg of the table. He might reveal the pipe, or drop it. And neither could he reach the telegraph key, to get in touch with someone on the wire. And in any case, how could that help him, for the next train was not due for two hours; and it did not seem possible he could carry on his bluff that length of time.

But think as he would, the wire seemed the only hope. Could he not reach the key in some way?

The solution came as Iowa ventured a short step nearer, and repeated his suggestion. At first sight it seemed as ridiculously impossible as the bluff with the pipe, but quickly Jennings weighed the chances, and determined to take the risk.

"Now, Mr. Iowa," he said, "you are to do just exactly what I tell you, step by step, so much and no more. If you make any other move, if I only think you are going to, I shall shoot. My finger is pressing the trigger constantly. And I guess you can see that at this range, though my hold on the gun is a bit cramped, I could not miss you if I wanted to."

"Listen, now. You will come forward until you can reach the chair here by sticking out your foot. Then you will push it back along the table to the wall, and turn it face to me. Then you will sit down in it. After that I'll tell you some more."

"Go ahead! And remember—my finger always pressing the trigger!"

As Davis came forward, infinitely puzzled, the boy turned slowly, so that the "muzzle" of the pipe continued to cover the would-be bullion thief. Gingerly Iowa reached out with his foot and shoved the chair back to the wall, and turning, backed into it and sat down. With the shadow of a grin on his face, he demanded, "Wot next?"

"Now, slowly let your left arm down at full length on the table. There—hand's on the key, isn't it?"

"Now," continued the boy, who never for an instant allowed his eyes to wander from the man's face, "now feel with your fingers at the back of the key, and find a screw head, standing up."

"Which one? There are two or three," said Iowa craftily.

"No, there are not. There's just one. And I give you 'three' to find it," said the young operator sharply. "One, two—"

"Oh, damn it, I got it! Go ahead!" said Iowa angrily.

"Below the screw head is a binding nut. Loosen it, and turn it leftwise. Got it? Now take hold of the screw head again, and turn it to the left. It turns free, doesn't it?"

"Sure."

"Turn it about four times completely around. Now the binding nut again, down, the other way, till it's tight. Got it?"

"Now, hold your finger tips over the black button at the inner end of the key, and hit down on it smartly."

There was a click.

"That's it. It has plenty of play, hasn't it?"

"Works up and down about an inch, if that's wot you mean," growled Iowa, still puzzled. "But wot in—"

"I'm going to give you a lesson in telegraphy and you are going to—"

Iowa saw, and exploded. "Well, of all the — Say, wot do you think—"

"All right!" Sharply, bravely, though inwardly

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