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**The Fitting of Johnny**

(Continued from other side)

voice was shrill and high and cracked oddly on the last word. Johnny was immensely relieved. His big hands shot skyward apparently without his volition. Other emotions swept over the boy. Real fear pierced him. This spin over his head, anger succeeded the fear. The idea! A little scrap of a city weasel ordering him round.

He shifted his position and a branch snapped. The nervous youth at the right end of the gun leaped squaking into the air. Stark fright showed on his face; then he got control of himself. Vast contempt replaced the start. "Ela-al!" he remarked shrilly. "Just a farm hick! What you mean buttin' in like this? Ain't you got no sense?"

"Why—I—!" muttered Johnny. The epithet and his position and the power of all power to make a facile rejoinder. A farm hick, growing facetious almost hilariously.

"Yeh," mocked the wielder of the gun, stepping forward and swiftly appropriating Johnny's treasured six-shooter. "Mammy's lil' pckaninny runnin' loose with a real he-gun too. Naughty, naughty!"

An inspiration seemed to come to the youthful holdup man. After all this new complication in his already hectic situation might be turned to his advantage. "Got a horse?" he demanded.

"Yes," admitted Johnny reluctantly. "Well, lead on then, Brüderr Bill," said his captor, growing facetious almost hilariously.

Things, he thought, were beginning to look better for him. A good horse would carry him across the Canadian border. Riding pained him, but walking was an unmitigated torment.

Seething with passion, Johnny led on. An outrage! This spinning sneak that was going to take his horse! And he would have to walk five miles to the nearest ranch, the esteemed Z. Z., and tell about the affair. And wouldn't those cowmen hoot! He lowered his arms six inches.

"Keep 'em up, my brave he-gun!" jeered the voice.

Johnny complied, raising ten feet from his horse the other end of the rope. "Now, young feller-me-lad! You savvy that beast's motor better'n I do. You just bolt up his steerin' gear an' undo that rope you got him chained with an' give it to me."

The bandit nudged Johnny's ribs with his pistol. Somewhere there then came to the boy a sudden coolness, a quick, new understanding of the palpitating swaggle of the man. Even a slight pity for the bandit stirred him. The whole event was as much of a mystery as ever. Here was just a young fellow, a little older than himself; what had the chap done to be sunk so deep in outlawry? He worked as hard as he could, undoing the rope and handing it to the haggard man. The bandit's heavy gun dropped; sometimes with one weak hand he sought support by clutching the low boughs of the trees. Johnny meditated. If he could get past the gun and grab that slender frame! But he dared not try.

Suddenly he had an inspiration. The bandit admitted he knew of horses! Johnny took the bridle and instead of putting it on from the correct side the left-started clumsily to bridle old Buck from the right. Buck snorted, tossed his head and spit the bit out. Johnny let the bridle drop to the ground by the horse's right forefoot. The gun holder's suspicions were not aroused. Beyond ordering Johnny to "get a wiggle on" he waited calmly, desiring to mount the horse.

When Johnny got behind Buck's shoulder just before picking up the bridle he made a lightning lunge at the right-side latigo—the strap that connects the cinch to the saddle. He had remembered that it was looped only once and was dangerously short. It gave to the strong, silent jerk of his fingers, leaving the cinch to an untrained eye apparently firm and taut.

He finished the bridling. Now if he could get the fellow to go without trying him up! He ventured a suggestion. "You're shorter'n me," said Johnny. "Don't you want to try the saddle an' have me fix the stirrups for you?"

The weasel-faced youth darted a searching glance at him. But the conquered boy wore such a woebegone, hunched expression and appeared to be such a "fittin'" that his confidence returned. "Good idea!"

He swaggered up, feeling far from brave, for he had no love for horses. Another terror entered his heart. "Does this here hay buggy stand still while you climb aboard?"

"Sure," said Johnny listlessly. Buck skin was trained to start off on an easylope.

Doubtfully the crook gathered the reins—too loosely for a sudden check—placed himself along his new conveyance and laboriously inserted his foot in the stirrup. Johnny stood patiently with hands high, as the desperado had ordered. Mounting was a real adventure to the crook. It was hard for him to grasp the

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saddle with both hands and hang to the gun at the same time. Buck waited uneasily the ring of the leg over the cantle. How queerly this man was mounting him!

To Johnny that was the most intense moment he had ever lived through. At last, satisfied, the man heaved himself upward. Now the peculiarity of assemblage girth is that, especially with a sharp-backed horse such as Buck, the saddle remains firm for about as long as it takes the rider to get clear of the ground. Then the saddle nestles and traitorously jerks loose from the horse, and rider and saddle meet the ground with a violent thump.

Johnny's plan worked to perfection. Buck jumped, shocked into panic. The thief gave a wild yell as the saddle slipped. As he fell backward, clutching instinctively with all ten fingers, the automatic went off with a roar. Another scream from the bandit followed; a bullet had pierced his right foot. Johnny's ferocious pounce upon him as he hit the earth was scarcely needed. The big ranch boy found himself shaking a limp, blubbery little shell of a man with no

more fight to him than a blind puppy. Slightly ashamed of himself, Johnny rose, wondering how he could ever have feared the writhing, pitiful figure in front of him. For a few moments the ranch boy did nothing. Then he collected the two guns, removed the shells from the automatic and stuck his own revolver back into his belt. The cries of the wounded youth subsided. "No faint noises!" Johnny was puzzled what to do with him, so obviously no longer dangerous.

By the time the ranch boy had re-saddled his horse, which had stepped on his bridle reins and halted, the would-be hold-up man was recovering and begging for help to stop the bleeding. Johnny bound up his foot and brought him a drink of water in his hat.

"You ain't such a bad kid after all," said the man, growling feebly. "Right as well be you that catches me as one of them hard-boiled sheriffs. They'd have plugged me first an' talked later." He licked his white lips. "Well, what you gonna do now kid?"

"Take you over to the Z. Z. ranch," answered Johnny with an odd pang in his heart. But there was nothing else to do. Wounded, the man needed attention, and he was assuredly a person who should be locked up.

The fellow sighed. "Well—" he began. The desire to talk was strong upon him, and the tale Johnny heard was more exciting than any detective story he had ever read—the story of the criminal life of a boy whose career of petty thieving had culminated in his taking part with his partner, so clever, so brave—and so false in a big mail robbery.

"Don't you ever hear nothing?" almost screamed the injured man. "Why me an' that sidekick of mine pulled off yesterday night the biggest train robbery this woolly state's ever had."

His voice whined in. Recollections of revengeful hatred permeated his tale. After the robbery they had stolen an automobile and, cramming into it the hurriedly selected loot, had raced for the border. The car had broken down and they had unfolded the only man present at a ranch and stolen two saddle horses. On they had fled recklessly. Then his horse stumbled, and he, the unaccustomed, had fallen only to see the animal scamper out of sight. His speech grew sibilant and furious as he told how his admired partner had ridden on, deserting him to the mercies of an unfriendly land, lost, alone and "singed!"

He rambled for a while. He would see that the guy got caught! He'd shah all right! And then they'd probably have his sentence lighter.

Absorbed, Johnny's mind reverted to the odd spectacle that had begun his adventure. "But how'd those money orders come floating down the creek?" he inquired.

"Oh," lamented the fellow, "I hadn't never tackled no mail train before. I—I guess when we was sortin' over the stuff I have put some of it in my pockets without knowin' what I was doin'. An' then this mornin' when I woke I was sick an' hungry an' got to thinkin' s'pose some one comes along — some suspicious guy. An' s'pose I got caught an' searched. Any could connect me up with that party. So I get busy an' stuck 'em down that hole by the creek, an' didn't notice 'twas some water bunny's back parlor an' led right on to the water. I come to all right when I saw the papers floatin' downstream! Adver'sis' ain't in it."

The sun was dipping toward the west when Johnny, supporting in front of him the half-conscious bandit, rode into the Z. Z. ranch. He could not have chosen a more dramatic moment. Drunk, however, was far from his mind, for the first persons to greet him were his father and mother, who after sixteen years' association with their son had a fairly accurate knowledge of their son's mental process. Questions, tears, indignation, affectionate forgiveness were showered upon him, and enough admiration from the eager cowmen to addle the head of any normal boy.

"Why kid?" one of them exclaimed. "There's five thousand berries reward out fer each one of them hold-up fellows. Five thousand berries!"

Johnny felt a momentary joy that now he could pay back his father for all the damage that he had caused. Then a real worry assailed his mind. "I was awful sorry 'bout killin' that gray horse, father. I—I won't ever do anything against again!"

He choked; grief for the beautiful animal he had killed brought an ache to his throat.

"Killin' a horse! Mother," inquired Mr. Engle despairingly. "Is he crazy, or an if there's no dead gray horse at our ranch?"

"No dead horse?" Johnny repeated. "Why I left him dead as a door nail—stretched out in the round corral!" He poured forth his story.

"Forget it, son!" roared his father. "Didn't you ever hear of stamin' a horse? If you hadn't been in such a hurry to leave your old home, you'd a-seen that cayuse get up an' beat it for the high places! Why, I seen him myself comin' down fer water just before we left."

What joy and immeasurable relief. "Well, father, if that's the case," said Johnny happily, "let's be getting home Buck an' I've got twenty miles to do. 'Fraid you'll get there ahead of me. You'll probably have to do the chores by yourself tonight!"

**ON THE MERRY-GO ROUND**

One of last year's law class took his case a few weeks ago. His client was suddenly called out of town on business, and left instructions with his lawyer that the results of the case be wired to him as soon as possible.

The case, queer as it may seem, was won and the lawyer wired: "Right triumphs over wrong." Some minutes later a message came over the hot wire "Appeal to the higher courts."

Somewhat or other, opines C. F. Fisher, the circus doesn't seem the same since stakes are driven by machinery and water is brought to elephants in tanks instead of by boy relay.

Money can't buy happiness—but money will buy an automobile in which a fellow can go searching for happiness.

Some fellows who get in on the ground floor finish in the basement.

Monkeys tire of playthings quickly, and divorce statistics indicate that there may be something in the Darwinian theory.

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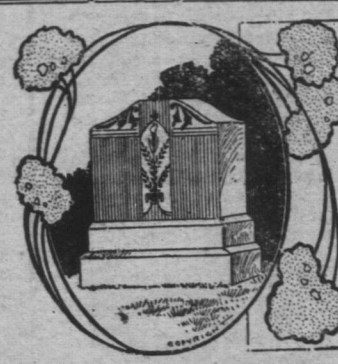
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