

The Two-Gun Man

BY STEWART EDWARD WHITE

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Stewart Edward White.

I.—The Cattle-Rustlers.

Buck Johnson was American born, but with a black beard and a dignity of manner that had earned him the title of Senor. He had drifted into southeastern Arizona in the days of Cochise and Victoria and Geronimo. He had persisted, and so in time had come to control the water—and hence the grazing—of nearly all the Soda Spring Valley. His troubles were many and his difficulties great. There were the ordinary problems of lean and dry years. There were also the extraordinary problems of devastating Apaches, rivals for early and ill-defined range rights—and cattle-rustlers.

For Senor Buck Johnson lived just north of that terra incognita filled with the mystery of a double chance of death from man or the flaming desert known as the Mexican border. There by natural gravitation gathered all the desperate characters of three states and two republics. He who rode into it took good care that no one should get behind him, lived warily, slept light, and breathed deep when he again sighted the familiar peaks of Cochise's Stronghold.

Of cattle-rustling there are various forms. The boldest consists quite simply of running off a bunch of stock, hustling it over the Mexican line, and there selling it to some of the big Sonora ranch owners. Generally this sort means war. Also are there subtler means, grading in skill from the rebranding through a wet blanket, through the crafty re-fashioning of a brand, to the various methods of separating the cow from her unbranded calf. In the course of his task Senor Buck Johnson would have to do with them all, but at present he existed in a state of warfare, fighting an enemy who stole as the Indians used to steal.

Buck Johnson did his best, but it was like stopping with sand the innumerable little leaks of a dam. Did his riders watch toward the Chiracahuas, then a score of beef steers disappeared from Grant's Pass, forty miles away. Pursuit here meant leaving cattle unguarded there. It was useless, and the Senor soon perceived that sooner or later he must strike in offense.

For this purpose he began slowly to strengthen the forces of his riders. Men were coming in from Texas. They were good men, addicted to the grass-roping, the double cinch, and the ox-bow stirrup. Senor Johnson wanted men who could shoot, and he got them.

"Jed," said Senor Johnson to his foreman, "the next son of a gun that rustles any of our cows is sure loading himself full of trouble. We'll hit his trail and we'll stay with it, and we'll reach his cattle-rustling conscience with a rope."

So it came about that a little army crossed the drift fences and entered the border country. Two days later it came out, and mighty pleased to be able to do so. The rope had not been used.

"No use, Buck," said Jed, "we'd any of us come in on a gun play, but we can't buck the desert. We'll have to get some one who knows the country."

"That's all right—but where?" queried Johnson.

"There's Perez," suggested Parker; "it's the only town down near that country."

"Might get some one there," agreed the Senor. Next day he rode away in search of a guide.

The third evening he was back again, much discouraged.

"The country's no good," he explained. "The regular inhabitant's a set of Mexican bums and old soaks. The cowmen's all from north and don't know nothing more than we do. I found lots who claimed to know that country, but when I told 'em what I wanted they shied like a colt. I couldn't hire 'em for no money to go down in that country. They ain't got the nerve."

That night a bunch of steers was stotlen from the very corrals of the home ranch.

For the first time Buck Johnson lost his head and his dignity. He ordered the horses.

"I'm going to follow that — into Sonora," he shouted to Jed Parker. "This thing's got to stop!"

"You can't make her, Buck," objected the foreman. "You'll get held up by the desert; and if that don't finish you, they'll tangle you up in all those mountains down there, and ambush you and massacre you."

"I don't give a —," exploded Senor Johnson, "if they do. No man can slap my face and not get a run for it."

Jed Parker communed with himself. "Senor," said he at last, "it's no good; you can't do it. You got to have a guide. You wait three days and I'll get one."

Johnson pulled loose his latigo. His first anger had cooled.

"All right," he agreed, "and you can say for me that I'll pay five thousand dollars in gold and give all the men and horses he needs to the man who has the nerve to get back that bunch of cattle and bring down the man who rustled them."

Lamplight Stories for Winter Saturday Nights

So Jed Parker set out to discover his man with nerve.

II.—The Man With Nerve.

At about ten o'clock on the Fourth of July a rider topped the summit of the last swell of land and loped his animal down into the single street of Perez. The buildings on either side were flat-roofed and coated with plaster. Over the sidewalks extended wooden awnings, beneath which opened very wide doors into the coolness of saloons. Each of these places ran a bar, and also games of roulette, fero, craps and stud poker.

The day was already hot with the dry, breathless, but exhilarating heat of the desert. A throng of men idling at the edge of the sidewalks, jostling up and down their center, or eddying into the places of amusement, acknowledging the power of summer by loosening their collars and carrying their coats on their arms. They were as yet busily engaged in recognizing acquaintances. Later they would drink freely and gamble and perhaps fight.

As the rider entered one street, however, a more definite cause of excitement drew the loose population toward the center of the road. Immediately their mass blotted out what had interested them.

The stranger had pushed his horse resolutely to the outer edge of the crowd, where, from his point of vantage, he could easily overlook their heads. He was a quiet-appearing young fellow, rather neatly dressed in the border costume, rode a "center-fire" or single cinch saddle, and wore no chaps. He was what is known as a "two-gun man;" that is to say, he wore a heavy Colt's revolver on either hip. The fact that the lower ends of his holsters were tied down in order to facilitate the easy withdrawal of the revolvers seemed to indicate that he expected to use them. He had, furthermore, a quiet gray eye with the hint of steel that bore out the inference of the tied holsters.

He saw over the heads of the bystanders a tall, muscular, wild-eyed man, hatless, his hair rumped into staring confusion, his right sleeve rolled to his shoulder, a wicked-looking nine-inch knife in his hand, and a red bandana handkerchief hanging by one corner from his teeth. "What's biting the locoed stranger?" the young man inquired of his neighbor.

The other frowned at him darkly. "Dares any one to take the other end of that handkerchief in his teeth and fight it out without letting go."

"Why don't you take him up?" inquired the young man after a moment.

"Not me!" negatived the other vigorously. "I'll go your little old gun fight to a finish, but I don't want any cold steel in mine. Ugh! it gives me the shivers. It's a reg'lar Mexican trick! With a gun it's down and out; but this knife work is too slow and searchin'."

The newcomer said nothing, but fixed his eye again on the raging man with the knife. "Don't you reckon he's bluffing?" he inquired.

"Not any!" denied the other with emphasis. "He's jest drunk enough to be crazy mad and reckless."

The newcomer shrugged his shoulders and cast his glance searchingly over the fringe of the crowd. It rested on a Mexican.

"Hi, Tony! come here," he called.

The Mexican approached, flashing his white teeth. "Here," said the stranger, "lend me your knife a minute."

He hung his coat on his saddle, shouldered his way through the press, which parted for him readily, and picked up the other corner of the handkerchief. "Now you mangy son of a gun!" he said.

III.—The Agreement

Jed Parker straightened his back, rolled up the bandanna handkerchief and thrust it into his pocket, hit flat with his hand the tousled mass of his hair, and thrust the long hunting knife into its sheath. "You're the man I want," said he.

Instantly the two-gun man had jerked loose his weapons and was covering the foreman.

"Am I!" he snarled.

"Not just that way," explained Parker. "My gun is on my hoss, and you can have this old toad sticker if you want it. I been looking for you and took this way of finding you. Now let's go and talk."

The stranger looked him in the eye for nearly a half-minute without lowering his revolvers.

"I go you," said he briefly at last.

"I'm looking for a man with nerve," explained Parker with equal succinctness. "You're the man."

"Well?"

"Do you know the country south of here?"

The stranger's eyes narrowed.

"Proceed," said he.

"I'm foreman of the Lazy Y of Soda Springs valley range," explained Parker. "I'm looking for a man with sand enough and sabb of the country enough to lead a posse after cattle-rustlers into the border country."

"I live in this country," admitted the stranger.

"So do plenty of others, but their eyes stick out like two raw oysters when you mention the border country. Will you tackle it?"

"What's the proposition?"



"I'LL TROUBLE YOU FOR THAT FIVE THOUSAND."

"Come out and see the old man. He'll put it to you." They mounted their horses and rode the rest of the day. The desert compassed them about, marvelously changing shape and color and every character with all the noiselessness of phantasmagoria. At evening the desert stars shone steadily unwinking, like the flames of candles. By moonrise they came to the home ranch. The two men unsaddled their horses and turned them loose in the wire-fenced "pasture," the necessary noises of their movements sounding sharp and clear against the velvet hush of the night. After a moment they walked stiffly past the sheds and cook shanty, past the men's bunk houses and the tall windmill silhouetted against the sky, to the main building of the home ranch under its cottonwoods.

There a light still burned, for this was the third day, and Buck Johnson awaited his foreman.

Jed Parker pushed in without ceremony.

"Here's your man, Buck," said he.

The stranger had stepped inside and carefully closed the door behind him. The lamplight threw into relief the bold free lines of his face, the details of his costume powdered thick with alkali, the shiny butts of the two guns in their open holsters tied at the bottom. Equally it defined the resolute countenance of Buck Johnson turned up in inquiry. The two men examined each other—and liked each other at once.

"How are you?" greeted the cattleman.

"Good evening," responded the stranger.

"Sit down," invited Buck Johnson.

The stranger perched gingerly on the edge of a chair, with an appearance less of embarrassment than of habitual alertness.

"You'll take the job?" inquired the Senor.

"I haven't heard what it is," replied the stranger.

"Parker here—?"

"Said you'd explain."

"Very well," said Buck Johnson; he paused a moment, collecting his thoughts. "There's too much cattle rustling here. I'm going to stop it. I've got good men here ready to take the job, but no one knows the country south. Three days ago I had a bunch of cattle stolen right here from the home ranch of corrals and by one man, at that. It wasn't much of a bunch—about twenty head—but I'm going to make a starter right here and now. I'm going to get that bunch back and the man who stole them if I have to go to hell to do it, and I'm going to do the same with every case of rustling that comes up from now on. I don't care if it's only one cow, I'm going to get it back—every trip. Now I want to know if you'll lead a posse down into the south country and bring out that last bunch and the man who rustled them."

"I don't know—" hesitated the stranger.

"I offer you five thousand dollars in gold if you'll bring back those cows and the man who stole 'em," repeated Buck Johnson, "and I'll give you all the horses and men you think you need."

"I'll do it," replied the two-gun man promptly.

"Good!" cried Buck Johnson, "and you better start tomorrow."

"I shall start tonight—right now."

"Better yet. How many men do you want, and grub for how long?"

"I'll play her a lone hand."

"Alone!" exclaimed Johnson, his confidence visibly cooling. "Alone! Do you think you can make her?"

"I'll be back with those cattle in not more than ten

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days." "And the man," supplemented the Senor. "And the man," argued the stranger. "What's more, I want that money here when I come in. I don't aim to stay in this country over night."

A grin overspread Buck Johnson's countenance. He understood.

"Climate not healthy for you?" he hazarded. "I guess you'd be safe enough all right with us. But suit yourself. The money will be here."

"That's agreed?" insisted the two-gun man.

"Sure."

"I want a fresh horse—I'll leave mine—he's a good one. I want a little grub."

"All right. Parker's fit you out."

"I'll see you in about ten days."

"Good luck," Senor Buck Johnson wished him.

IV.—The Accomplishment.

The next morning Buck Johnson took a trip down into the "pasture" of five hundred wire-fenced acres.

"He means business," he confided to Jed Parker in his return. "That cavalo of his is a heap sight better than the Shorty horse we let him take."

In the meantime the regular life of the ranch went on. Each morning Sang, the Chinese cook, rang the great bell summoning the men. They ate, and then caught up the saddle horses for the day, turning those not wanted from the corral into the pasture. Shortly they jingled away in defferent directions, two by two, on the slow Spanish trot of the cow-puncher. All day long thus they would ride, without food or water for man or beast, looking over the range, identifying the stock, branding the young calves, examining generally into the state of affairs, looking always with grave eyes on the magnificent flaming, changing, beautiful dreadful desert of the Arizona plains. At evening, when the colored atmosphere, catching last glow, threw across the Chiracahuas its veil of mystery, they jingled in again, two by two, untired, unshaking, the glory of the desert in their deep-set steady eyes.

So the days went by, wonderful, fashioning the ways and the character of men. Seven passed! Buck Johnson and his foreman began to look for the stranger. Eight; they began to speculate. Nine; they doubted. On the tenth they gave him up, and he came.

They knew him first by the soft lowing of the cattle. Jed Parker, dazzled by the lamp, peered from the door and made him out dimly, turning the animals into the corrals. A moment later his pony's hoofs impacted softly on the baked earth, he dropped from the saddle and entered the room.

"I'm late," said he, briefly glancing at the clock which indicated ten. "But I'm here."

His manner was quick and sharp, almost breathless, as though he had been running.

"Your cattle are in the corral, all of them. Have you the money?"

"I have the money here," replied Buck Johnson, laying his hand against a drawer, "and it's ready for you when you've earned it. I don't care so much for the cattle. What I wanted was the man who stole them. Did you bring him?"

"Yes, I brought him," said the stranger. "Let's see that money."

Buck Johnson threw open the drawer and drew out the heavy canvas sack.

"It's here. Now bring in your prisoner."

The two-gun man seemed suddenly to loom large in the doorway. The muzzles of his revolvers covered the two before him. His speech came short and sharp.

"I told you I'd bring back the cows and the one who rustled them," he snapped. "I've never lied to a man yet. Your stock is in the corral. I'll trouble you for that five thousand. I'm the man who stole your cattle!"

(THE END.)

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