

WHEN-JOHN-NY-SLOPED

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JOHN NELSON hastened to the corner of the bunk house and then changed his pace until he seemed to ooze from there to the cook shack door, where he lazily leaned against the door jamb and ostentatiously picked his teeth with the negative end of a comb. The cook looked up calmly, and calmly went on with his work; but if there was anything rasping enough to cause his soul to quiver it was the aforesaid calisthenics executed by Johnny and the match; for Cookie's soul hated hints. If Johnny had demanded, even profanely and with large personal animus, why meals were not ahead of time, it would be a simple matter to heave something of an encharge upon his short-cut speech. But the subtleties left the cook floundering in a mire of rage—which he was careful to conceal from Johnny. The nuisance had been evincing undue interest in early suppers for nearly a month; it couldn't be tapeworms, because supper was the only meal involved, and furthermore, Johnny ate very little. So Cookie strangled the biscuit in his hand, but smiled at his tormentor.

"Well, all through?" he asked, glancing at Johnny's clothes.

"I'm hopin' to begin," and the mouth pick moved rapidly.

"How long?"

"Till supper's ready."

"Nix, but you can wear it twenty minutes if you'll get my grub quick," he replied. "Got to meet Lucas at half-past five." He cautiously dropped the match he had thoughtlessly produced.

The cook tried to look his belief and accepted the offer. Johnny's remarkably clean face, plastered hair and general gallantry suggested that Lucas was a woman—which Lucas profanely would have denied. Also, Johnny had been seen washing Ginger, and when a puncher washes a cayuse it's a sign of insanity. Besides, Ginger belonged to Red, who also had owned that lone dollar, Red's clothes did not fit Johnny.

"Goin' to surprise Lucas?" inquired the cook.

"What you mean?"

Cookie glanced meaningfully at the attire: "Er—you ain't in th' habit of puttin' on your point for to see Lucas, are you?"

Johnny's mental faculties produced: "Oh, we're goin' to a dance."

"Where 'bout?" exploded the cook.

"Way up north!" One's mind needs to be active as a flea to lie properly to a man like the cook. He had made a ghastly mistake.

"By golly! I'll give th' boys cold grub and go with you," and the cook began to tuck time.

Johnny gulped and shook his head: "Got a invite?"

Cookie caught the pan on his foot before he struck the floor and gasped: "Invite? Ain't it free-fer-all?"

"No; this is a high-toned thing-a-bob. Costs a dollar a head, too."

"High-toned?" snorted the cook, deviously. "Don't they know you? An' I thought Red was broke. Show me that permit!"

"Lucas got it—that's why I've got to catch him."

"Oh! An' is he goin' all feathered up, too?"

"Shore, he's got to."

"Huh! He wouldn't dress like that to see a fight. Has she got any sisters?"

Cookie finished, hopefully.

"Now what you talkin' about?"

"Why, Lucas," answered the cook, "Lemme tell you something. When you want to lose me have an invite to a water-drinkin' contest. An' before you go, be shore to rub Hoppy's boots some more; that's such a pesty shine it'll look like sand-paper before you get to th' dance. You want to make it hard an' Hoppy. An' I've read som'ers that only a woman ought to smell like a drug-store. You better let her do th' fumigatin'."

Johnny surrendered and dolefully whiffed the crushed violets he had paid two bits a piece for at El Paso—it was not necessary to sniff them, but he did so.

"You ought to hone yore razor, too," continued the cook, critically.

"I told Buck it was dull, I ain't goin' to sharpen it for him. But, say, are you shore about th' permitery?"

"Why, of course."

"But how'll I get it off?"

"Bury th' clothes," suggested Cookie, grimacing.

"I like yore gall! Which clothes are best, Pete's or Billy's?"

"Pete's would fit you like th' wide, wide world. You don't want blankets on when you go courtin'. Try Billy's. An' I got a pair of socks, though one's green—but th' blue'll hide it."

"I didn't put none on my socks, you chump!"

"How'd I know? But, say! Has she got any sisters?"

"No!" yelled Johnny, half-way through the gallery in search of Billy's clothes. When he emerged Cookie looked him over. "Ain't it funny, Kid, how a pipe'll stink up clothes?" he smiled. Johnny's retort was made over several yards of ground and when he had mounted Cookie yelled and waved him to return. When Johnny had obeyed and impatiently demanded the reason, Cookie pleasantly remarked: "Now, be shore an' give her my love, Kid."

Johnny's reply covered half a mile of trail.

II

The sheriff was standing before the Palace saloon when Johnny rode past, and he could not keep quiet. His comment was so judiciously chosen as to bring white spots on Johnny's flushed cheeks. The Bar-20 puncher was not famed for his self-control, and, wheeling in the saddle, he pointed a quivering forefinger at Mr. Nolan's badge of office, so conspicuously displayed: "Better men than you have lied behind a badge. Come down an' see me to-morrow without it," he invited.

Mr. Nolan flushed, hesitated, and walked away. To fight in defense of the law was his duty; but no sane man warred on the Bar-20 unless he must. One might censure Mr. Cassidy or Mr. Connors, or pick a fight with any of the rest of the outfit, except Johnny, and not get killed; but he must not harm their protégé. Mr. Nolan not only walked away but he sought the shadows and held communion with himself. If he could only get the pugnacious and very much spoiled Mr. Nelson to fracture some law!

Meanwhile Johnny had reached the Joyce cottage, and was admitted by Miss Joyce herself.

"Good evening. You are late!" she chided, dimpling attractively.

He critically regarded the dimples, while he replied that he had paused to slay the sheriff but, knowing that it would cause him to lose more time, had postponed the event.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "You must not do that!"

"Well, of course, not if yo're agin it."

"But what did he do?"

"Mustn't tell. But do you really want him to live?"

"Why, of course! What a foolish question!"

"But why do you? Do you—like him?"

"I like everybody."

"Yes, an' everybody likes you, too," and his smile faded. "Do you like—him very much?"

"I wish you wouldn't ask foolish questions."

"Yes, I know. But do you?"

"I'll not say."

"Then you do."

"I don't think you're nice to-night," she pouted. "You're awfully jealous."

"Gee! I should think you'd want me to be jealous. I only wish you was jealous of me. Norah, I've just got to say it now, an'—"

"Yes, what did he do?" she cried eagerly.

"Who? Nolan?"

"Yes, yes; tell me."

"I don't mean him. I was going to tell you something that—"

"That you've done and now regret? Have you ever—ever killed a man?" she breathed.

"No; yes; lots of 'em," he confessed, remembering that she once had expressed admiration for brave and daring men. "Most half as many as Hopalong; an' I ain't near as old as him, neither."

"Oh, Mr. Cassidy! Won't you bring him up some evening?"

"Not me. I brought one friend up onct an' had to lick him to keep him away."

"Why, the idea! But Mr. Greener's like Mr. Cassidy. He's so brave, and a wonderful shot. He told me so."

"Huh! Told you Well, well. Why, he's a child; an' blinks when he shoots. Here—can he show a gun like mine?" and he held out his Colt, butt foremost so she could see the notches he had cut that afternoon. A fleeting doubt went through his mind at what his outfit would say when it discovered said notches; the Bar-20 cut no notches: it liked to forget.

"Oh! Are they—are they?" she whispered, drawing back.

"They are. There is room for Nolan, an' his owner," he suggested.

"Norah! Can't you see! Don't you know how much I—"

"Yes, indeed! It must be awful to feel such remorse!" she quickly interposed.

"Remorse nothin'! Them fellers deserved what they got!"

"And you a murderer! I never thought that of you," she rejoined.

"Why, Norah!" he cried in amazement. "To think that you have human blood on—"

"Norah! Norah, listen; won't you?"

"—On your hands! How dare you call here!"

"But I tell you they were trying to get me! I had to."

"Is that true? You had to?"

"Shore! Think I kill men for fun, like Greener does?"

"Why, he doesn't do anything of the kind!" she retorted. "Didn't you just say he was a child, and blinked?"

"Yes, I did. But I didn't want you to than he had ever been; but he did not realize it and opportunity died when he failed to press his advantage."

"I am to blame," she said, so low he could hardly catch the words. When she continued it was with a rush: "I am not free—I haven't been for a week. I'm not free any more—and I've been leading you on! What are you thinking? Tell me!"

"Where's Johnny?" repeated Hopalong, with a rising inflection. "Only wish I knowed!"

A murmur of wistful desire arose and Lanky Smith restlessly explained it: "He rampages in 'bout midnight an' wakes us up with his racket. When we asks what he's doin' with our possessions he suggests we go to—l. He takes his rifle, Pete's rifle, Buck's brand new canteen, 'bout eighty pounds of ca'tridges an' other useful duffie, all th' tobacco, an' blows away quick."

"On my cayuse," murmured Red.

"Wearin' my good clothes," added Billy, sorrowfully.

"An' my boots," sighed Hopalong.

"I ain't got no field glasses no more," grumbled Lanky.

"But he only got one laig of my new pants," chuckled Skinny. "I was too strong for him."

"He yanked my blanket off'n me, which makes me steal Red's," grinned Pete.

"Which you didn't keep very long!" retorted Red, with derision.

"Which makes us all peevish," plaintively muttered Buck.

"Now ain't it a h— of a note?" laughed Cookie, loudly, forthwith getting scarce. He had nothing good enough to be taken.

"An' whichecker was it run agin yore face, Sheriff?" sympathetically inquired Hopalong. "Mighty good thing it stopped," he added thoughtfully.

"Never mind my face!" snorted the peace officer hotly as his deputies smoothed out their grins. "I want to know where Nelson is, an' d—d quick! We'll search the house first."

"Hold on," responded Buck. "North of Salt Spring Creek yo're a sheriff; down here yo're nothin'. Don't search no house. He ain't here."

"How do I know he ain't?" snapped Nolan.

"My word's good; or there'll be another election stolen up in yore county," rejoined Buck ominously. "An' I wouldn't hunt him too hard, neither. We'll punish him."

Nolan wheeled and rode towards the hills without another word, his posse pressing close behind. When they entered Apache Pass one of them accidentally exploded his rifle, calling forth an angry tirade from the sheriff. Johnny heard it, and cared little for the warning from his friend Lucas; he waited and then rode down the rocky slope of the pass on the trail of the posse, squinting wickedly at the distant group as he caught glimpses of them now and again, and with no anxiety regarding backward glances. "Lot's wife'll have nothing on them if they look back," he muttered, fingering his rifle lovingly. At nightfall he watched them depart and grinned at the chase he would lead them when they returned.

Four weeks passed, weeks of hunger and nervous strain, and he was getting desperate. He had learned that Greener and his fiancée were going down to Linnville soon, since Perry's bend had no parson; and his cup of bitterness, overflowing, drove him to risk an attempt to leave that part of the country. He had seen none of Pete's "cordon" although he had looked for them, and he believed he could get away. So he rode cautiously down Apache Pass one noon, planning his route. The sand, washed down from the rock walls by the last rain, deadened all sounds of his progress, and as he turned a sharp bend he ran into Greener and Norah Joyce, not fifty feet away. They were laughing at how they had eluded and escaped the crowd of friends eager to accompany them—but the laughter froze when Johnny's gun swung up.

"Nds up, Greener!" he snapped, viciously, remembering his promise to Nolan.

"Miss Joyce, if you make trouble it'll cost him his life."

"Turned highwayman, eh?" sneered Greener, keenly alert for the necessary fraction of a second's carelessness on the part of the other.

"Miss Joyce, you will please ride along; I want to talk to him alone," Johnny requested.

"Yes, dear, that's best. I'll join you soon," urged Greener, flashing her a look she understood instinctively.

But Johnny was too wise to fall into the trap: "Don't get out of my sight, an' don't make no noise or signs; if you do he'll have to pay for it."

"You coward!" she cried angrily. "Coward!" and delivered an impromptu lecture that sent the blood surging into the fugitive's wan cheeks. But she obeyed, slowly, and when she was out of hearing Johnny spoke.

"Greener, yo're not going to marry her. You know what you are, you know how yore first wife died—an' I don't intend that Norah shall be abused as the other was. I'm a fugitive, hard pressed; I'm weak from want of food, and from hardships; all I have left is a slim chance of gettin' away. I've reached the point where I can't harm myself by shooting you, an' I'm goin' to do it rather than let any trouble come to her. But you'll get an even break, because I ain't

never going to shoot a man when he's helpless. Got anything to say?"

"Yes, yo're th' biggest fool I ever saw," replied Greener. "Yo're locoed through an' through; an' I'm goin' to take great pleasure in putting you away. But I want to thank you for one thing you did. You were drunk at the time an' may not remember it. When you hit Nolan for talking like he did I liked you for it, an' I'm goin' to tell you so. Now we'll get at th' matter before us so I can move along."

Neither had paid any attention to Norah in the earnestness and keen-eyed scrutiny of each other and the first sign they had of her actions was when she threw her arms around Greener's neck and shielded him. He was too much of a man to fire from cover and Johnny realized it while the other tried to get her to leave the scene.

"I won't leave you to be murdered—I know what it means, I know it," Norah cried. "My place is here, and you can't deny your wife's first request! What will I do without you! Oh, dear, let me stay! I will stay! What woman ever had such a wedding day before! Dear, dear, what can I do? Tell me what to do!"

Johnny sniffed and wished the posse had taken him. This was a side he had never thought of. His wife! Greener's wife! Then he was too late, and to go on would be a greater evil than the one he wished to eliminate. When she turned on him like a tigress and tore him to pieces word by word, tears rolling down her pallid cheeks and untold misery in her eyes, he shook his head and held up his hand.

"Greener, you win; I can't stop what's happened," he said, slowly. "But I'll tell you this, an' I mean every word: If you don't treat her like she deserves, I'll come back some of these days and kill you shore. Nolan got his because he talked ill of her; an' you'll get yours if I die the next minute, if you ain't square with her."

"I don't need no instructions on how to treat my wife," retorted the other. "An' I'm beginnin' to see th' cause of yore insanity, and it pardons you as nothing else will. Put up yore gun an' get back to th' ranch, where you belong—an' keep away from me. Savvy?"

"Not much danger of me gettin' in yore way," growled Johnny, "when I'm hunted like a dog for doing what any man would a' done. When th' sheriff gets well, if he ever does, mebbe I'll come back an' take my medicine. How was he, anyhow, when you left?"

"Dead tired, an' some under th' influence of liquor," replied Greener, a smile breaking over his frown. He knew the whole story well, as did the whole range, and he had laughed over it with the Bar-20 outfit.

"What's that? Ain't he near dead?" cried Johnny, amazed.

"Well, purty nigh dead of fatigue dancin' at our weddin' last night; but I reckon he'll be drifitin' home purty soon, all recovered." Greener suddenly gave way and roared with laughter. There was a large amount of humor in his makeup and it took possession of him, shaking him from head to foot. He had always liked Johnny, not because he ever wanted to, but because no one could know the Bar-20 protégé and keep from it. This climax was too much for him, and his wife, gradually recovering herself, caught the infection and joined in.

Johnny's eyes were staring and his mouth wide open, but Greener's next words closed the eyes to a squint and snapped shut the open mouth.

"That there paralysis of th' cure-a-friend nerve didn't last; an' when I heard why you licked him I said a few words that made him a wiser man. He didn't hunt you after th' first day. Now you go up an' shake han's with him. He knows he got what was coming to him and so does everybody else know it. Go home an' quit playin' th' fool for th' whole range to laugh at."

Johnny stirred and came back to the scene before him. His face was livid with rage and he could not speak at first. Finally, however, he mastered himself and looked up: "I'm cured, all right, but they ain't! Wait till my turn comes! What a fool I was to believe 'em; but they usually tell th' truth. 'Cure-a-friend nerve!' They'll pay me dollar for cent before I'm finished!" He caught the sparkle of his diamond pin, the pin he had won, when drunk, at El Paso, and a sickly grin flickered over the black frown. "I'm a little late, I reckon; but I'd like to give th' bride a present to show there ain't no hard feelin's on my part, an' to bring her luck. This here pin ain't no fit ornament for a fool like me, so if it's all right, I'll be plumb tickled to see her have it. How 'bout it, Greener?"

The happy pair exchanged glances and Mrs. Greener, hesitating and blushing, accepted the gift: "You can bend it into a ring easy," Johnny hastily remarked, to cut off her thanks.

Greener extended his hand: "I reckon we can be friends, at that, Nelson. You squared up with me when you licked Nolan. Come up an' see us when you can."



"BETTER MEN THAN YOU HAVE LIED BEHIND A BADGE. COME DOWN AN' SEE ME TO-MORROW WITHOUT IT."

III

WHEN the sheriff and his posse called at the Bar-20, before breakfast the following morning, they found a grouchy outfit and learned some facts.