

The Woman in the Case.

THE STORY OF REDDY McGUIRE AND THE SHERIFF WHO WOULD NOT WAIT FOR HIM

BY FRANK N. STRATTON.

I.

REDDY McGUIRE swung wearily from his saddle, leaned his gun against one of the cottonwood trees, hung a brace of plump birds across its muzzle, and stretched his lean, lank length in the thick grass at the river's brink.

"They'll be along in an hour," he soliloquized, watching the gray mustang graze.

He rested his long chin in his tanned hands and beat a slow tattoo on the soft prairie soil with the toes of his cowhide boots as he meditated. The gleam in his gray eyes, the smile on his freckled face, indicated that Reddy was happy; the prolonged drooping of his eyelids, the steady gravitation of his red head toward the earth, indicated that he was also drowsy.

When the head finally rested on the folded arms, the two men who had been watching him from the cover of the thicket down the river rode swiftly forth, and Reddy, rudely awakened, struggled to his feet to tug impotently at the steel manacles on his wrists; to glare furiously into the smiling faces of his captors.

"Dan!" he cried. "Dan Rowe!"

"That's me, Reddy," responded the shorter man pleasantly. "And this is Ike Fenn, my deputy. Mebbe you remember Ike, too. Sorry to spile your nap, Reddy, but we're in a desprit hurry to get away before your friends come up. They might put up a kick, and there's only two of us."

Reddy's head had dropped on his breast; the freckled face had grown pale; the thin lips were tightly set.

"I suppose it's for the—shooting," he said, not looking up.

"Sure. Been follerin' the wagons for a week waitin' for you to straggle."

"But he pulled first," the captive protested firmly. "Dan, I had to shoot!"

"How'll you prove it?" asked the sheriff. "I don't say that it wasn't a good riddance, but he was a big duck in the puddle, and besides——"

The sheriff winked complacently at Ike, who grinned knowingly.

"There's the reward," said Reddy cynically, finishing the sentence.

"That's our business; eh, Ike? Ain't holdin' down this office for our health, are we? If a man s'posed to be dead takes chances on comin' through the State, and we, bein' out after smaller game, accidently catch a glimpse——"

"Look here, Dan; you know my record was good till this was forced on me. Why can't you——"

"Come, Reddy; climb that mustang; there's a long ride before us. If you're reasonable you can ride in the saddle like a man; if not, you'll ride across it, like a log. Take your choice."

With a look of despair on his face, the captive slowly clambered into his saddle. For one moment he gazed eastward, where a long train of white-topped wagons, dimly seen through the gathering twilight, writhed sinuously across the rolling plain like some gigantic serpent of the sea; then he struck the gray mustang with his heels and galloped madly down the river. Almost a mile the three rode silently, side by side, concealed within the fringe of trees.

At intervals came the faint squeaking of the distant train, the lugubrious howls of prowling coyotes, the melancholy hooting of owls. Suddenly the captive raised his head and moistened his dry lips with his tongue.

"Dan," he said sullenly. "I want to see your papers. How do I know this is regular?"

"Don't worry 'bout the papers, sonny," the sheriff chuckled, tapping his breast pocket. "I've got 'em all right. Had 'em for three years. You'll see 'em—what's the matter, Ike?"

The deputy, with a sharp pull, had thrown his horse upon his haunches. With one long arm he was pointing to the hill far ahead that ran to the river's edge, intersecting the fringe of trees.

Upon the summit of the hill, in bold relief against the evening sky, a plumed and half-nude horseman rode in rapid circles, waving a fluttering blanket high above his head. The sheriff caught the bridle of Reddy's mustang and wheeled toward the river at their right. Then he halted quickly, with an oath. From the crest of the bluff across the stream great rings and curling wreaths of drifting smoke, the wireless telegraphy of a savage foe, rose lazily in the still and sultry air.

"We're up against it, Ike," the sheriff growled. "The red buzzards have scented that train—they'll be swarmin' through these trees in five minutes!"

The deputy shifted his revolver further to the front and peered about him anxiously.

"Dassen't leave th' trees; they'd spot us in the moonlight," he muttered. "Jest one thing to do—sneak back to the train. Mebbe it's strong enuff to fight 'em off."

"We'd lose Reddy," the sheriff whispered. "His friends would never let us take him."

"Mebbe we kin dodge past the wagons an' git away on t'other——"

The sheriff lifted his hand warningly. Up the river, from a point they had just passed, arose the sounds of splashing water, the snort of a pony, and low, guttural words of command.

"They'll cut us off!" exclaimed the sheriff, whirling his horse up-stream. "Come, quick!"

Reddy, clutching his bridle-reins with manacled hands, held the mustang back. In the shadows his eyes blazed like those of a wounded grizzly.

"To the wagons?" he hissed. "Never—with these things on my wrists. She don't know; she mustn't know. It would kill her—now. Take

these cursed things off first; before I'll go back this way, I'll give the alarm, and we'll all die right here!"

A gleam of cunning triumph shone in the sheriff's eyes. He leaned toward Reddy, unlocked the handcuffs and dropped them into his pocket.

"Have to risk it, Ike," he whispered, "but I reckon we hold trumps; there's a woman in the case."

II.

BACK up the river the three trotted stealthily, with every sense alert.

"Hope your friends has seen them signals, too, and rounded up the wagons," the sheriff muttered to Reddy. "If they're caught hands down, the jig's up!"

Reddy did not reply. He was leaning over the mustang's neck, peering eagerly in the direction of the train.

A perilous quarter of a mile was safely passed.

"Looks like we'd slip through," said the deputy.

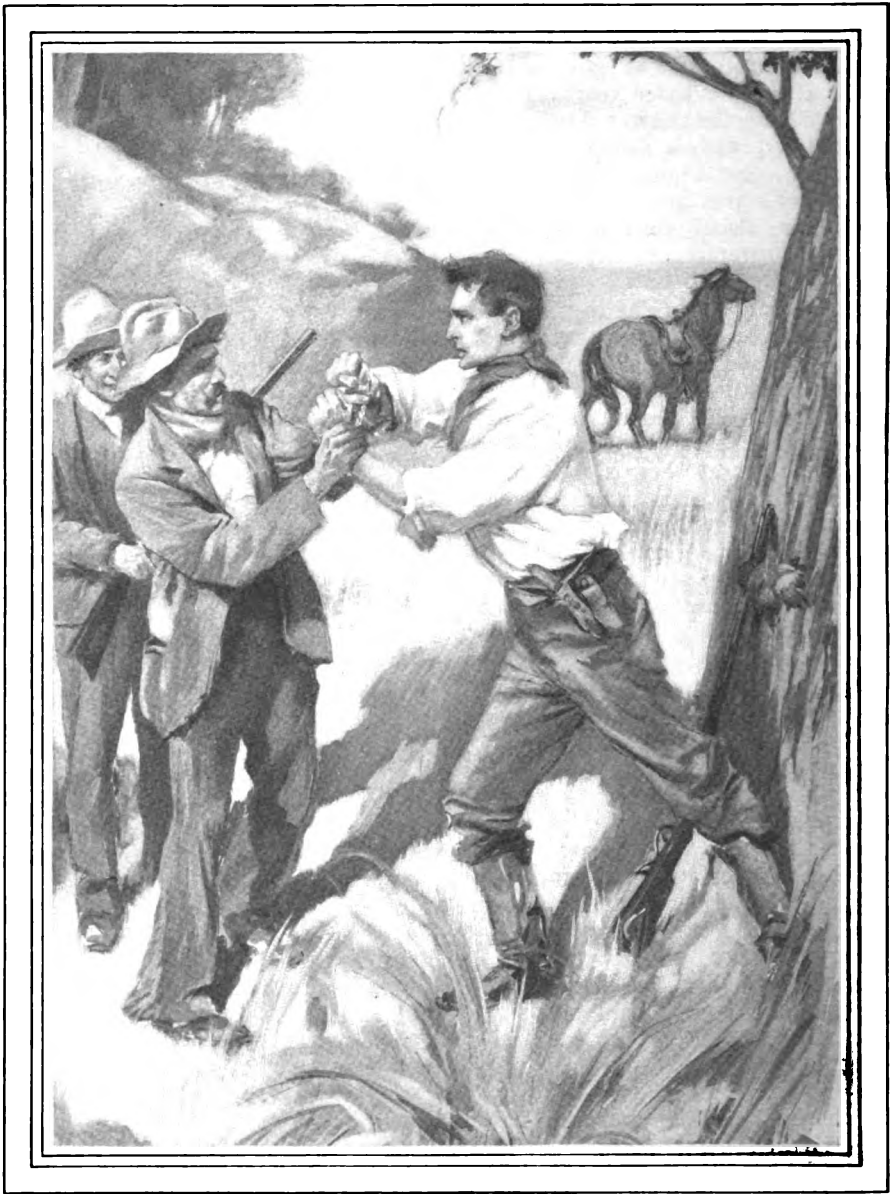
As he spoke, from the river-bank at their left came a flutter of feathers, a rising cluster of hideous faces, yells of wild surprise, and a mob of human vipers crashed like a hurricane toward the three.

"Straight for the wagons!" the sheriff yelled. "The devil gets the hindmost now!"

Out from the trees, over the rolling prairie, burst the desperate chase. For a time the three raced neck and neck, then the gray mustang forged ahead. A scattering volley of shots rang out, and Reddy, glancing backward, saw the deputy, far in the rear, throw up his hands and fall from his saddle; saw the whole mad mob sweep over him, save two who leaped eagerly from their ponies to complete their work.

Shuddering, he galloped to the summit of the next swell and gave a low cry of joy. At the foot of the slope, far below him, their white tops gleaming in the moonlight, lay the wagons, drawn in one great, protecting circle, ready for the attack.

Half way down the slope another volley rattled in his ears, and he turned his head to see the sheriff's horse, fifty



"THAT'S ME, REDDY. AND THIS IS IKE FENN, MY DEPTY."

yards back, pitch headlong, roll over, and lie still; to see the rider struggle to his feet, cast one glance toward the train, then grimly turn, his weapons in his hands, to die amid the foe.

Then did young Reddy McGuire, his wrists still smarting from the handcuffs, wheel the gray mustang right about and charge straight up the slope. High above the exultant yells his boyish voice rang clear and shrill:

"Ready, Dan! I'm coming to pick you up!"

Quickly the sheriff turned and crouched to grasp the outstretched hand, to make the upward leap; then, with the double burden, the gallant mustang wheeled again and dashed panting down the slope, a scanty bow-shot from the furious foe.

A desperate hundred yards they raced, and then the great, white-backed

tarantula down in the valley bristled with shining steel and stung with flashing fire. Before it, snorting ponies galloped riderless. The red mob wavered, wheeled, and whirled away, beyond range of the avenging rifles, and hearty Anglo-Saxon cheers went up as the gray mustang galloped safely home.

A tall, gaunt, hook-nosed man, with eyes like beads of burnished steel, grasped Reddy's hand.

"Mighty close call, stranger," he said to the sheriff, scanning him searchingly as Reddy hurried to one of the wagons. The sheriff glanced, scowling, toward the spot where his deputy had gone down.

"Lend me a rifle," he growled savagely. "I'll get even before this fight's over!"

The hook-nosed man grinned and waved his hand to the north.

"Guess it's over now—fer us," he said.

Following the gesture with his eyes, the sheriff saw, far northward, a shimmering line of blue and brass moving rapidly toward the bluffs across the river, up whose sides scurried squads of retreating marauders.

"Cavalry," observed the hook-nosed one. "Reckon they seen the signals, too. Them wards of the gov'ment'll have to jump lively or there'll be some more good Injuns afore mornin'."

III.

AN hour later, when the camp-fires were blazing cheerily, Reddy, coming from his wagon, was confronted by the sheriff leading Ike's horse.

"The coast's clear," said the sheriff in a low tone, watching the young fellow furtively. "We'd better be goin'."

"Goin'?" I thought—maybe—you'd given that up."

The sheriff shook his head.

"You've got another think comin', Reddy."

Reddy's face turned pallid; the cords of his neck swelled and writhed; he drew back, and his hand dropped to the revolver at his belt. The sheriff drew a paper from his pocket and took a step toward the wagon from which Reddy had just emerged.

"Want to hear what this says? I'll read it—aloud."

"Stop!" cried Reddy, choking. "I'll go. I'll take the chances of a trial. Give me a little time—to say good-by."

"Ten minutes is long enough to fix up some kind of a story. I'll wait here," replied the sheriff gruffly.

He watched his retreating victim curiously; then he walked stealthily around the outer side of the corral and peeped through the flaps of Reddy's wagon. At the further end, on a rude pallet, lay a young girl whose dark, disheveled hair spread like a cloud about her pale, wan face. One wasted arm was around Reddy's neck, and the great, deep-sunken eyes stared questioningly up at him as he bent over her, whispering, clasping her hand.

Suddenly the coarse blanket that covered the girl was stirred and lifted at her side by something unseen. A muffled wail rose from beneath, and the girl, with a smile of pride and joy, turned feebly toward the sound.

The sheriff walked slowly away.

"Well, I'll be cussed!" he growled. "A kid—a wife and a kid! And him always too bashful to look a gal in th' face! What d'ye think of that?"

He halted at a deserted fire, drew a paper from his pocket, and gazed at it abstractedly.

"A kid," he repeated softly. "A blamed little red-faced, helpless kid—with its mammy fightin' death, and its daddy fightin' this!"

He stirred the smoldering fire with his boot, dropped the paper on the coals, and watched it as it blazed and turned to a little heap of ashes that a puff of wind lifted and whirled away far over the prairie. Then he strode to his horse, swung into the saddle, and trotted up the slope. At its summit he turned and looked down into the camp. In the shadow of the wagons he saw the dim form of Reddy hastily saddling the gray mustang, and he laughed aloud.

"Sorry to disappoint you, sonny, but you're too slow—I can't wait," he chuckled. "Good-by, Reddy, and good luck to you—and the kid—and the little woman!"

He leaned forward, struck his horse with the spurs, and galloped off.