

THE WHISKY BURRO

by
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The bronc buster, grinning, let half the contents of the bottle gurgle down the animal's throat

That old reprobate of a donkey becomes a deputy for Johnny Slade on a killer hunt

JOHNNY SLADE was always happy when the end of the month came around, so he could start for the Blue Water Mountains, a half day's ride away, to see his foster father, Goldy Smith.

Leathery-faced Goldy had found him wandering on the desert, years ago, when an Indian raid killed his mother and father. After that, Goldy, a prospector, took Johnny on his wanderings through the vast

stretches of the desert country, as he searched for the yellow riches.

Johnny, however, developed a way with horses, so at the age of eighteen started out to be a bronc buster. He made good, but never worked so far away that he couldn't come back each month to the cabin, at the edge of the desert, where Goldy made his headquarters.

This noon Johnny Slade's red mare topped a ridge and came onto a wide plateau covered with heavy brush and trees. Squinting his eyes, Johnny could see far off the start of the desert that Goldy loved and had traveled for most of his seventy years.

Then the mare turned a rise of ground and a weathered barn and two cedar corrals came into view; also the big low cabin resting its chinked corrugated bulk, some twenty yards apart from the corrals.

Looking at that cabin, Slade's blue eyes for seconds took on a frosty gleam and his lean face was shadowed with a scowl. Even from this distance he could see the open side window and the barrel of a shotgun sticking from it. It meant that Moose Gerber was still there.

Slade never liked Gerber since that day, three months ago, when Goldy Smith had toted him in from the desert, half dead of thirst.

"Found him layin' in the hollow of two sand dunes," Goldy told Johnny on his arrival, "and toted him in here."

Moose Gerber was a thick-shouldered, squat fellow with a mass of black hair that hung to his shoulders and heavy brows that half-covered his black eyes. His face was one of the unemotional blunt kind and, to Johnny's or Goldy's questioning as to his desert experience, he always replied that a partner one night had stolen their prospecting equipment with some nuggets they found, and left him to die in the desert.

Johnny never believed this, because Moose wasn't the prospecting type. A hired gunman or an owl-hooter was more to his calling. The man always said he was going to leave, but when Goldy and Johnny came to the cabin for their monthly get-together, Moose was still there.

Now he was still a tenant, and greeting Johnny as he always did with the eye of a scattergun pointing at him, until Moose made out who he was. Johnny now saw the gun disappear, as he swung down from the mare's back and stretched; then turned his attention to the eight burros that were laying down or standing with lowered heads in the corral nearby.

It was strange that Goldy's pack animals should be here so soon, for usually the old white-haired prospector came in a day or so after Johnny. Well, Slade thought, he might have come in earlier than his usual arrival time for one reason or another. Then he saw the mouse-colored burro named Whisky laying in the corral dust at its further end, with his head facing away from Slade, as the animal dozed.

Grinning, the bronc man went to his saddle-bag reached inside and brought out a pint bottle of whisky. He tested the breeze that was blowing, found it right, opened the bottle and tossed some of the smelly stuff into the air and spilled a bit on the ground.

The burro's head suddenly raised and his nostrils quivered. Whisky came to his feet and faced around; then trotted toward Slade, who swung the gate and let him out. The burro's mouth opened and the bronc buster, grinning, let half the contents of the bottle gurgle down the animal's throat.

Slade had more than a casual interest in the mouse-colored animal, for once Whisky had led Goldy and him out of a sandstorm and saved their lives. At another time, the whisky burro led them to

water when it was badly needed. Slade also had an obligation to bring on each visit a quota of four pints of whisky that Goldy took with him and doled out on his month-long wanderings. Long ago the burro had been taken sick and nothing seemed to help him except whisky, which Goldy in desperation forced down his throat. Since then he had developed a scent and taste for the stuff, like a hunting-dog for game, and drank the liquor whenever offered. Goldy had named the animal "Whisky" because of this weakness.

Now Johnny returned the bottle to the saddle-bag. He saw Moose Gerber come out of the cabin and heard him call a "Hello."

"Got bad news for you about Goldy," added the man.

Slade, about to put the mare in a nearby barn, left her ground-tied instead and walked up to Moose.

"Bad news," he asked. "What kind?"

The other man gestured around him with a big hand. "Come on inside," he said. "It's too danged hot out here."

They went into the cabin, where Moose let his squat body slump into a chair, while Slade stood, spread-legged, waiting for the man to talk. Moose took a big swallow of beer from a bottle, returned it to a table, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then looked at the bronc buster.

"Early this mornin,' near dawn," he said, "Goldy came in with his burros and said he had to leave again right pronto. He was goin' to go down to the town and take the early stage out for the Thunder Mountains, fifty miles from here. He was all excited about going and when I asked him why, he said a gent he met in the desert told him about a big gold find in the Thunder country. He wanted to go right along with him, but Goldy thought he

could get there faster comin' this way and takin' the stage. So he left the burros and said to tell you to go back to the ranch and you would hear from him. I told Goldy I was goin' to pack and move on, so he also figured you could sell the burros before you left this district."

Moose stood up, stretched, then went on:

"I'm headin' out this afternoon toward the Rio. I'll find a job down that way. What you intend doin'?"

"Why, Moose," replied Slade, reflectively, "I might as well sell Goldy's burros, like he wants me to, then head for my ranch. As far as the cabin goes, I can lock it up, because there ain't nothing here that's worth stealing and the few things Goldy has I can fetch back to my outfit with a buckboard in a couple of days. Meanwhile, I'll hang around till you shove off, then close the place up. Right now I'll go put up the mare and give her a feed."

Moose nodded, saying: "I'm just about finished gettin' together the few things I'm takin', so I'll put 'em in a carpet bag I got ready. Guess I kin get a late afternoon stage out of Blue Water." Moose strode into a small nearby room, while Slade went to do his chore.

When Slade got outside he noticed that he had left the corral gate open. However, none of the burros had strayed away, except Whisky. Slade, when Moose called him, had left the little burro outside the gate, but now he was gone. He saw his tracks leading off into the nearby trees and heavy brush. It had rained the night before and the ground was quite soft, which showed the burro's hoofprints quite clearly.

SLADE started after him. A bit later he came back leading Whisky by his halter and put him back in the corral. Then the bronc buster went into the cabin. He

leaned his big shoulders against the door jamb leading into the room where Moose Gerber was busily engaged in packing a carpet-bag that was resting on a blanket covered bunk against the wall.

"Too bad about Goldy," said Slade.

"He always dreamed about finding the pot of gold, you might say, but never had no luck getting much of it. Or did he, Moose?"

Gerber jerked erect and turned. "What do you mean?" asked Moose, with a scowl.

Slade's body straightened and his right thumb hooked into his gunbelt near the forty-five that was holstered low on his right thigh.

"Could be," went on Slade, his words coming from behind set teeth, "that he did come back with some specimens of a gold vein he discovered. What he brought back might be enough to make a gent want it and so he smashes Goldy's head in with a gun-butt or something, kills him and tries to get away with the gold. You wouldn't do that, would you, Moose?"

Gerber was licking his lips, his eyes glaring at Slade. Then Moose's jaw began to set and suddenly, with the speed of a wildcat, he reached an arm across to the end of the bunk where a scattergun rested. He whipped it up, the barrel starting to cover Slade, who dropped to one knee as he snatched out his holstered Colt.

It spurted flame a second before the shotgun went off. Gerber cursed wildly and was knocked backward on the bunk, where he lay, holding his left shoulder as a scarlet wetness began to show on his gray faded shirt. The buckshot had gone harmlessly over Slade's head.

Slade leaped up and over to the man, his Colt pointing at Moose's head.

"Did you kill him, Moose?" asked Slade. "I'll give you one second to tell the truth or I'm goin' to put a window in your

skull."

Gerber, shaking from shock and fear, his words coming between gasps, muttered:

"Yeah! Yeah! I did it! And I made up that story about him leavin' for a gold rush. He brought in a saddlebag full of nuggets and I killed him to get 'em. He thought he had a big vein, but it petered out after he had worked on it a while; but what he found would have put me on easy street. Now get a doc, Slade, I'm bleedin' to death and I'm sick. Get a doc, Slade. I don't want to die! Jail me, but don't kill me! I'm afraid to die!"

"There's a piece of paper and a pencil on that table there, Gerber. Write down what you did and sign your name to it."

Moose readily complied and Slade stuck the confession in a pocket of his jeans. Then reaching down, he ripped Moose's shirt half off and saw that there was a purple hole just below the collarbone. The wound didn't seem to be bleeding too much, and Slade figured he could get Moose the half mile to town without any trouble.

"Get up!" he ordered. Shakily Moose stood up and from a nearby wall-peg Slade took a lariat and managed to truss the man's hands behind him securely. He paid no attention to Moose's whining and groaning, and complaints that he was going to die. Watching him carefully, Slade emptied the big carpetbag and on the bottom found a small heavy canvas sack. Opening the tie-string at the top, he saw inside the gleam of rough gold nuggets the size of peas. Slade took the bag and slid it under the bunk.

"I'm goin' to take you down to the Blue Water hoosegow, Moose," he said, "then I'll come back here and give old Goldy a decent burial. Get moving outside!"

At the corrals Slade got the grumbling

and groaning Moose into the mare's saddle, then climbed on behind. With the reins in one hand and a six-gun in the other bracing Moose's back, Slade started off.

It was then that Gerber's inquisitiveness got the better of him, as he asked, between gasping breaths:

"I had Goldy's body hid back in that gulch, Slade, with stones piled over him. It was a place covered with bushes and everything else. It wasn't possible for you to find him, even though he wasn't so far away. How did you get onto where he was?"

"I didn't, Moose," answered Slade. "It was Whisky, the burro, that found him for me. You see, I let the whisky burro out of the corral and forgot to put him back. When you told me the news about Goldy, and after I left you in the cabin, I noticed that the burro had strayed away and the ground being soft from the rain, I followed

him. His tracks led into the woods to Goldy.

"You see, Moose, that burro was brought up on whisky. He can smell it a long way off if the wind is right, and when you put Goldy into that narrow gully, you must have let him fall kind of hard before you covered him with the rocks. What you didn't know was that he carried a pint of whisky in his pocket and it broke. The burro got a whiff of it, but couldn't trace it until I let him out of the corral. The burro was digging at the rocks with his hoofs when I found him and it made me curious to know what was under them."

Moose Gerber swore under his breath, then murmured:

"I get throwed from my horse in the, desert, makin' a getaway after a robbery, and Goldy saves me from dyin' of thirst. But a flop-eared rat of a burro socks me in jail for a murder!"