



As quick as dynamite Music's left leg shot out and caught the bushwhacker on the chin

THIEVES OF BLACK ROCK DESERT

By BILL ANSON

Music Stevens faces bushwhack guns and plenty of fight
against odds when he refuses to part with his mustangs!

THE freckled wagon yard boy gave "Music" Stevens first warning that two guntoting hombres were looking longingly at his four buckskin cayuses, which were the last of a string of eight ponies brought to Saltville for sale.

"Them two gents were down at the corral examin'in' the buckskins and talkin' low and sneaky-like," said the snub-nosed boy in patched overalls. "Mebbe yuh remember 'm. One is tall and skinny, with checked pants and red silk shirt. The other is wearin' a black

shirt, chaps and hat. He's bald as an egg. They're both wearin' two guns and are tough."

"They called theirselves Stick Wiley and Keno Strudder in the town cook shack last night," Music said. "Thanks for lookin' after me, Stubby. Here's four-bits for yore trouble."

"I shore don't want yore slick buckskins to fall into bad hands," "Stubby" remarked sourly. "I'm powerful glad yuh sold them other horses to the XYZ Ranch."

"I only sell to men who know how to treat hossflesh," Music remarked. "If Stick Wiley and Keno Strudder have got any strange ideas, they'll have to ride fast and shoot straight. I'm leavin' here right soon."

"Wish I could go with yuh," Stubby called as the horse raiser walked away.

For a year now Stubby had been hinting that he'd like to quit gathering wood and tending animals in the Saltville wagon yard. The boy's mind was set on becoming a wild horse hunter and cutting bronc trainer like Music Stevens, who owned a valley back in the mountains. The kid was attending school in winter and keeping house for his uncle, who had charge of the Saltville stage-coaches and stock. Stubby was better off where he was, Music figured.

Crossing the busy wagon yard, where ranchers, drummers and emigrants slept, ate and gossiped while in town, Music unfastened the padlock on a small shed and went in to check his saddle and equipment. From his warbag he drew an oiled .45 and thumbed fresh loads into the six-gun's cylinder from a new box of cartridges. He was taking no chances with those two hard-eyed strangers in the neighborhood.

Music was a stocky individual, with sky-blue eyes and an easy smile. He favored the color of tan in his frontier pants, shirt and skin vest—just as he favored buckskin coloring in brood mares and stallions. His light tan cayuses brought top money. He had just sold four quarter horses for a thousand dollars, which stake he had deposited in the Saltville Bank. He expected to get as much for the remaining four buckskins in War Cry, a prosperous mesa town some two hundred miles across the Black Rock Desert.

BEFORE leaving Saltville, however, Music wanted to say good-by to a taffy-haired emigrant girl he had met about the campfire last night. He brushed his hair and donned a new tan neckerchief before going

out of the shed.

As he started across the wagon yard, heading for the big Conestoga wagons in the far corner, Music was hailed by a gruff voice. Turning, he saw "Stick" Wiley and "Keno" Strudder coming out of their bunk quarters. As Stubby had told him, both were wearing tied-down guns. There was a swagger to their gait as they came up.

"What yuh want for them buckskins, Music?" asked the black-shirted gunman, Keno Strudder.

"I'm not sellin'," Music replied stiffly.

"Meanin' what?" the tall, thin Stick Wiley asked quickly. "Don't yuh think we got enough cash?"

Music's eyes chilled. "Mebbe yuh've got enough dinero to buy good bosses, but I ain't got any to sell right now."

Keno Strudder chuckled harshly. "Yuh mean some rancher has ordered them four hammerheads already? We could raise the ante. Then yuh won't have to herd 'em through the desert."

"Never said I was takin' 'em anywheres," Music replied, studying the pair shrewdly. "They're not for sale."

"Yuh takin' 'em back to yore outfit?" Stick Wiley asked.

"Excuse me," Music said, turning away. "I've got an engagement."

He felt their hard eyes upon his back as he rounded the first big canvas-topped wagon. Then the sight of Marian Ellis sitting in the shade of her father's Conestoga made him forget the gunmen. Her sunbonnet was beside her and her lemon-colored hair was in two long plaits down her back. She was as pretty as a calendar as she sewed on a pink calico dress.

Her blue eyes lifted at Music's approach.

"I was thinking about you," she said. "We all enjoyed your playing last night."

Music flushed deeply. His name had come from his skill with a violin, which instrument he had learned as a child from his mother.

Wherever he went, somebody was always cracking out a fiddle for him. Men said that Music Stevens could make even the devil weep or dance when the bow was scraped across the strings.

"Thanks heaps," Music said. He squatted down on his heels in front of this girl for whom he'd outdone himself last night. "Reckon I've got to say good-by for a spell. But if yuh'll tell me where yuh're headin', then I might be passin' there sometime. If yuh'd like to see me again—I mean, listen to some more fiddlin'—then I'll stop off."

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "I'll be so glad—I mean, it would be wonderful to hear you play again. Father is dickering for some land down in the mesa country. I think it's near a town called War Cry."

A frown stole across Music's brow. "That's a long hard trek across the Black Rock Desert," he said. "Tell him I said to take plenty of water."

She laughed at his warning. "We have a man to guide us," she said.

"Who?"

"Mr. Strudder. The bald gentleman who wears a black hat and black shirt."

Music bit his lips.

"When are yuh leavin'?" he asked quietly.

"Tomorrow morning," she said. "Couldn't you delay your trip until after tonight?"

"Reckon not." Music got up from his heels. "But don't tell anybody—I might see yuh sooner'n expected."

He left her blushing prettily.

Music was plenty worried, for he knew that Keno Strudder was not a professional wagon guide nor a scout. Nor was the man a puncher. Both Keno and Stick Wiley were men who either hired out their guns or dealt in shady jobs that meant big profits. They certainly wouldn't waste their time guiding a couple of emigrant wagons across the Black Rock Desert for a few dollars. They were up to something that augured ill.

At the corral, Music saddled his own

buckskin bronc, a deep-chested animal with a cream mane and tale, then he herded his other four buckskin horses out of the wagon yard and into the rutted main street of Saltville. He had no difficulty with the broncs, for they were well-trained to the drive. Music could swing them right or left with a wave of his arm and by spurring his own bronc up the flank of the four.

Turning into a side alley, Music sent his cavvy scampering out of town through a back pasture. This he crossed to reach a trail that led off toward the mountains, where his valley ranch lay. He was consciously avoiding the direction of the Black Rock Desert, for he didn't doubt but that Stick and Keno were watching him from some hidden point.

Five miles from town, he halted on the bank of a stream and broke out several canvas waterbags, which he filled and tied one to the back of each buckskin. This drink would have to last them until the next morning. The first water-hole in the desert was sixty miles away. It was better to travel in the moonlight, when it was cool and a man could check his pocket compass by the North Star. There were magnetic lodes here and there that swerved the needle.

JUST at dusk, Music Stevens slipped into the volcanic wasteland, letting his bronc trot easily, with the other buckskins trailing. He rode with his compass in band, ever westward.

The desert had obtained its name from the great piles of black lava rock that reared out of the sand and gravel. There was a dearth of cacti. Prickly pear and mesquite grew only in the bottom of deep cuts, which had to be constantly skirted.

It was hard travel. Music changed from trot to walk every mile. He had no fear of the two men who had questioned him in Saltville, for he was following no trail. Now and then he whistled a range tune, and once he broke into song. His buckskin cavvy came up, two on

either side of his mount, when the going was easier.

At midnight, he halted to cook some beans and bacon, and to water the horses. He built his fire in the bottom of a sink hola. Watching the coffee boil, he got to thinking about Marian Ellis, wondering if she would leave her folks and settle down with him on his valley ranch. It was a lonely life, but he was saving money. The country was settling up. With a couple of kids, he could branch out through the valley, put in grain and increase his herd. Some day he might be one of the biggest breeders in the West. Music was going places—if something didn't happen!

After the rest, the night grew chill and the trip harder. The buckskins didn't like their footing. They began to lag behind and had to be whistled up constantly. In addition, the compass needle acted up, which meant that Music was nearing a magnetic ridge. He took his bearing by the North Star and pushed on until dawn.

Then, with the pinkening of the sky, he spotted a great black butte landmark that lay back of the first spring.

"Go find it!" he shouted at the buckskins, waving his tan hat at them.

The four broncs raced ahead, following the scent of water from a grove of palms. Music drew his six-gun, his eyes hardening. He circled the spring slowly, studying the grove carefully. Finally he rode up to the spring, halted, and sat his saddle tensely. There was no indication that riders had been here before him or that men lay in wait.

"Reckon Stick and Keno got fooled," Music decided, bolstering his six-gun and dismounting.

Crash! The answer to his belief was the thunder of a hidden rifle and at the same time Music's right leg was plucked out from under him. He fell whirling, with the thought of jerking his six-gun from its holster. But the nerves of his right side had been shocked and he didn't seem to be able to get a grip on the

gun butt. As in the case of a hard driven wound, he was stupefied for several seconds—and that was just enough time for the bushwhacker to come out of hiding in a nest of black rock across the spring and race toward him.

"Pull that six and yuhr'e dead!" growled the man who stared down at Music.

"Stick Wiley!" Music groaned, looking up to the gunman's bitter eyes.

"Unbuckle yore hogleg and roll away from it," Stick snapped. "I could just as easy have killed yuh, but I want a bill of sale for yore four buckskins. That's my dicker for yore life."

A burning pain chased the numbness out of Music's right leg. He didn't know if the rifle slug had shattered bone. He did know that he wouldn't be able to get up. His only hope was in obeying orders, so he unbuckled his cartridge belt and rolled away, faint with agony. But his right leg was not shattered. It moved with his body.

"Let me put a tourniquet on it, Stick," Music said. "I don't want to pass out."

"Go ahead," the gunman said, picking up the horse trainer's gun and belt.

Music propped himself to a sitting position against a rock. Grasping the rent made by the rifle bullet in his frontier pants, he tore the seam and laid bare his crimson thigh. The slug had driven a neat hole in the flesh half-way from hip to knee. Nerves and minor muscles had been clipped, but Music knew he would walk again—if Stick Wiley left him his life!

There was no need of a tourniquet. Music plugged the wound with his wadded neckerchief, then tore the tail of his shirt for a bandage. At last he lay back, wiping perspiration from his brow. The bushwhacker was grinning at him. Near the spring, the buckskins had moved over to a patch of grass to graze, and his own mount had joined them.

"If yuh play straight," Stick finally said, "I'll give yuh a canteen to nurse. Yuh also get pencil and paper to make a bill of sale. Yuh'll

write that some hoss thieves shot at yuh. I come along and saved yore life, so yuh sold me the cavvy for one thousand bucks, which is the same yuh got from the XYZ Ranch. Also, I want that extra cash yuh picked up.”

“I deposited it in the bank in Saltville,” Music said.

“I don’t believe it!” Stick shouted.

“Search me,” Music replied, shutting his eyes. “I’d be a fool to carry money into the desert.”

“They say in Saltville that yuh’re in love with that nester gal,” Stick Wiley sneered. “Yuh aim to go on to War Cry and meet her family there. Yuh plan to buy farm machinery and set her pap up in a farm in yore valley. I got the whole story. Where’s yore dinero?”

MUSIC didn’t open his eyes. “All a lot of talk,” he muttered. “Stories like that start out of nothin’ and grow tall. I no more than played the fiddle for her.” His face contorted with pain, and his breath came in gasps. “I don’t know nothin’ about—”

A tremor took him from head to toe, and with an agonized sigh, he lay limp.

“He might be fakin’,” Stick growled, walking over and sighting the rifle down at Music’s chest. “Get up!” the gunman shouted. “I’ll shoot first, then search yuh!”

Music didn’t move.

Stick nudged him with the toe of a boot. Then the gunman stepped back and set aside his rifle and the horse trainer’s gun-belt. He removed his own guns, came back and kneeled beside the seemingly unconscious Music Stevens.

Stick’s bony hands slid under Music’s shirt and unfastened a money-belt.

“Only twenty-three bucks!” the bushwhacker exclaimed angrily. “Must have that thousand dollars hid somewheres else.”

After going through Music’s pockets, Stick Wiley turned to the horse trainer’s high-heeled boots. There was no caution in the outlaw. He evidently believed he could cope

with an unarmed and wounded man easily in a rough-and-tumble fight. Stick jerked off Music’s right boot. The puncher didn’t move or cry out.

Settling back on his haunches, Stick peered into the boot with greedy eyes. And that was the bushwhacker’s one big mistake. For Music’s eyes opened, and as quick as dynamite, the horse trainer’s left leg flexed backward, then shot straight out. The heel of Music’s left boot caught Stick on the point of the chin and sent him floundering backwards.

Instantly Music was rolling over and over toward the six-guns that the outlaw had left not far away on the ground. Before Music got there, Stick Wiley was springing to his feet, dazed but alarmed. Music got a hand on his own bolstered weapon. He was jerking it free of the leather when Stick’s mind snapped into action. The bushwhacker’s hand darted into his red silk shirt.

Before Music could thumb back the hammer of his Colt, the outlaw’s hand reappeared with a deadly derringer. Flame blossomed from the derringer’s muzzle even as Music let his thumb go on the hammer of his own six-gun.

Stick’s bullet whistled past Music’s ear. The outlaw’s aim must have been thrown out by the kick on the chin. But Music’s bullet smashed the bushwhacker in the middle of the chest and hurled him backward with a death scream. The man fell hard, eyes never closing, boot toes curled. Music lay back to rest, a dark frown on his brow.

“It was his life or mine,” the horse trainer told himself. “He would have murdered me in the end. No doubt about it. First, he wanted the cash I put in the Saltville bank. Mebbe he figured I hid it on the trail. He shore had all the information about me except that bank account. But why did he want a bill of sale for the four buckskins? Did he plan to sell ‘em in War Cry?”

Then Music remembered the dead man’s partner, Keno Strudder. A shiver of alarm

went through the horse trainer. Where was Keno? What was he up to? Surely Stick and Keno had not parted company for good. They were the kind who worked hand-and-glove in crime.

“Is Keno guidin’ the nester wagons?” Music asked himself. “If he is, he’ll be along in a couple of days.”

As he lay resting, he tried to figure it all out. He put himself in the place of the outlaws and imagined what would be the best procedure to steal the buckskins and rob the Conestoga wagons. It was his sudden thirst for water that solved the puzzle. The emigrants would soon need water. Keno might send the men searching for nonexistent springs. That would leave the outlaw alone with the women. It would be an easy matter for him to loot the strong-boxes.

Music didn’t want to put his weight on his wounded leg, nor was it advisable to ride a bronc. He inched his way to his buckskin mount and, with the aid of a stirrup, pulled himself upward to stand on his good left leg. Unsaddling the mount, he spread his equipment in the shade of a cottonwood.

Slowly and painfully, Music worked all afternoon, fashioning an Indian travois out of saplings growing near the spring. The rig was nothing more than two long poles, the ends of which were to be attached to a saddle on his mount’s back, while the other ends dragged over the earth. Crosspieces were thonged to the saplings behind the bronc, so that Music would have a place to ride.

It was not until the next morning, however, that he was able to put the travois to good use. Then he transported Stick’s body to a crevice on the rocky butte behind the spring and buried the killer. Returning to camp, Music cleansed his wound and let the sun treat it as he took a nap. In addition to his own grub, he had acquired a large allotment from Stick Wiley, who had apparently made provision for two—Stick and Keno.

THAT night, Music slept without fear of danger. All the next day he rested for his trip. He was figuring that the emigrants would travel about twenty-five miles per day, which now would put them about ten miles from the spring.

As the sun began to set, Music tried his weight on his wounded leg and found it not too painful. But walking any distance was out of the question. So was riding in the saddle.

Hiding his gear, he left his four buckskins and Stick’s mount to graze about the oasis. He took to the travois, dragged by his saddle cayuse. It was not difficult to guide his pony by lariat reins. Compass in hand, he started slowly eastward in the direction of Saltville. Soon the North Star gave him guidance from the magnetic section.

After five miles of travel, he sought a ridge of rock, and there he halted, peering into the eastern night. He was searching for firelight and found it. Not many miles distance there was the reflection of a campfire against a cone of land. Music watched it for long, making certain. Then he started toward the fire in his dragging rig.

It was getting on toward midnight when he halted and unfastened the poles of the *travois*. Laboriously he climbed into the saddle. Walking the bronc up a knoll, he looked across a half-mile of desert to the light of a campfire shining against the canvas of three Conestoga wagons.

“All right, Keno,” Music muttered. “I’m callin’ yore gun hand.”

As Music drew close to the emigrant camp, a hound bayed in the night. Then other dogs took up the alarm. His bronc halted, and Music drew a six-gun.

He could see several women climbing out of the wagons. Their calls echoed. There were no men. Most likely, as he had figured, the men of the train had gone off searching for water. Now the women were expecting their return. The men would have been guided by the firelight.

The women quieted the dogs.

Slowly, gun in hand, Music came through the shadows to the edge of the camp.

"It's a rider!" a girl called out, and Music recognized the voice of Marian Ellis.

Music halted, worried. He had expected to see Keno, but there was no sign of the man. But he didn't doubt that the gunman was somewhere about. He might be waiting for Stick Wiley.

Keno certainly would not have gone off with the wagon men.

A cold grin flitted across Music's lips, and he dismounted from his bronc.

"Who is it?" Marian's voice called again.

Music pursed his lips and began to whistle in a low sweet tone. It was his favorite violin piece—"Suwanee River."

He saw Marian throw up her head like a wild colt. She hesitated, listening, then suddenly started running toward the shadow of a lone mesquite where he stood.

"Music!" she called.

"Marian!" he whispered. "Where's Keno Strudder?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come, Music?" she exclaimed. "We've lost all our water and the men have gone looking for a spring. Keno is sick in the main wagon. Our compass is broken. We don't know where we are!"

"Sh-h-h!" Music cautioned, earing back the hammer of his six-gun to cock. "Keno is not sick. He's plannin' to loot the strongbox."

Then suddenly through the night came the yell of a small boy. Stubby's voice:

"Music! Watch out! Behind you!"

Quick as a flash, Music's left arm knocked Marian to the ground. He whirled at the same time, ducking. He was just in time to see a dark shape rear up from behind a black boulder. Music's six-gun blazed in the darkness. The man behind the boulder screamed and fired a weapon skyward.

Suddenly there was a thump of boots over the sand, and Stubby arrived.

"It's Keno, Music!" the boy cried.

Music bolstered his weapon and leaned down to help Marian Ellis to her feet.

"I'm powerful sorry, ma'am," he apologized. "I never meant to hurt yuh. I just had to push yuh away. I'll never do it ever again."

Stubby ran on to the boulder.

"Hit him right between the eyes, Music!" the boy called back. "I saw him sneak out of the wagon when you come up. I knew it was you when I heard you whistling Suwanee River. I sneaked off from Uncle Joe and joined the train because I knew that Keno and Stick were plannin' something bad. . . Do yuh hear me, Music?"

Music was paying no attention. Marian was in his arms. And he was telling her that he loved her and that he wanted her more than anything else in the world.

"Everybody in Saltville knows more about it than we do ourselves," Music was saying. "I even heard it from Stick Wiley before he died. Yore father must know."

"I told him myself," she said. "I knew you'd come to help us."