



# Left for the Buzzards

A "Shorty Masters" Story

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**T**HE young mule driver trudged painfully along at the side of the long-eared wheel animals. Suddenly he stubbed a boot toe and pitched headlong into the dirt. The mules halted, breathing hard. Up in the brassy bowl of the breathless sky, a gaunt buzzard swooped lower, watching, waiting for the end.

A tall, dark-faced waddy who walked and led a weary sorrel cayuse staggered up to the little freighter's side and reached out his hand. "Shorty" waved it away.

"I'm all right, Willie!" he muttered thickly, fighting his way to his feet. "We're *all* all right! We'll make it, yet! It's jest a little farther. I think I can see the windmill."

Willie Wetherbee, also known as the "Sonora Kid," swayed a little as he shaded bloodshot eyes for a look toward the point of the hill that reared itself over there in a crazy shimmer of heat waves. Either those were the blades of a windmill wheel

standing idle in the sun, or they were another mirage—a phantom of heat and thirst such as had haunted the partners since their water ran out, two days before.

The tall cowboy's swollen lips cracked as he attempted to smile. "Yeah!" he croaked. "It's there! I reckon mebbe we've beat them buzzards that have been trailin' us. We'll git there!"

Shorty licked his lips with a tongue that felt like sandpaper. "Shore we will!" he said grimly. "Then to-morrer we can go on to the Waggin Tongue Ranch fer another load o' hides. Mules, yuh been two days without water, and yonder it is. Giddap!"

The freight outfit crawled forward, jerkily, uncertainly, toward the heat-shimmered hill. Six mules, their red-rimmed eyes caked white with alkali dust, stumbled and dragged their hoofs.

The steel tires, grown loose from the shrinkage of dry wheels, wobbled in slow revolutions to the accompaniment of creaking spokes. The staves of

the empty water keg on the side of the first wagon rattled mockingly.

Two days without water, in a country dry as the sun-bleached ribs of a steer's skeleton! The drought was on Texas. It was only mid-morning, but the sun glared unmercifully on the drooping, shriveled mesquites, and was reflected blindingly from alkali flats and the garish limestone patches on the distant hills.

Panting jackrabbits crouched in the scanty shade of cat's-claw and *sacaguista* clumps and did not move as the freight wagons rolled by. Even the lizards had forsaken the sun-scorched stretches for what dim coolness they could find far down in the crevices of rocks. Here and there lay the stark bones of cattle, grisly evidence of the importance of rain.

Suddenly the mules' ears pointed forward. The bells on the leaders' hame straps jingled in quickened tempo, and the very sound was liquid and cool. They had smelled the water in the dirt tank that was over there by the windmill, still hidden by the hill.

The partners could have left their wagons back down the thirsty trail, but Shorty had contracted to haul more hides for the Wagon Tongue spread, and he always kept his word.

He could have left all the mules but Chopin, saddling the big right-hand leader to ride him to water. But neither he nor Willie would have suggested such a thing.

The Sonora Kid knew that Shorty would have as soon thought of abandoning his own brothers. There were no other mules like these six offspring of a range mare named Lucy—the outfit which the music-loving Shorty had christened the "Sextet from Lucia."

As for Wetherbee, he could have gone ahead on Tumbleweed, the sorrel cow pony, making it across the waterless range in a third the time it had taken the slow freight wagons. But rustlers and skinning thieves were at work on the Wagon Tongue, and he stuck by his sawed-off pard for fear there might be trouble before he returned with filled canteens.

"Jest a little farther!" Shorty rasped encouragement to the mules. "Water—jest over the hill! Half a mile, and then—"

*Braang!* A single shot, distance-dulled but startling, came floating over the point of the hill.

Shorty clapped his hand to his hip from instinct, then remembered that he had left his gun on the

floor of the wagon so he would have that much less weight to carry.

"Trouble—mebbe!" drawled the Sonora Kid, his right thumb hooked in his cartridge belt. Weight or no, Willie Wetherbee was seldom without that black-butted .45 strapped around his lean waist.

The partners trudged on, saving their breath, tortured by every step of that last half-mile. Perhaps some waddy of the far-flung Wagon Tongue range had ridden down to inspect this windmill that was the last outpost for eighty miles when drought sucked the final moisture from the scattered water holes. Perhaps he had shot a coyote or a sidewinder. There was no use getting alarmed until danger was actually at hand.

The freight outfit dipped into a draw where willows and walnuts should have afforded cool shade, and the wagon tires slipped and rattled over the smooth stones that sometimes were covered with rushing water, twisting toward the Pecos, miles away. Now the trees were all but leafless, and the mules did not linger.

The long-eared team dragged its burden slowly and laboriously up the farther slope and passed into the final stretch of mesquite flat. There were no birds in the trees that stood like listless, green-gray phantoms in the shimmer of heat waves, and not even a locust shrilled.

*Braang!* Another shot. Clearer, sharper now.

The partners looked at each other. Shorty licked his swollen, cracked lips again. Those two shots had been too far apart to signify a gun battle, and yet—

"My gun's in the waggin!" the little teamster said with difficulty. "D'yuh suppose the mules would notice the difference in weight if I clumb up there and rode fer this quarter of a mile?"

"Shucks, they would have been glad to haul yuh right along," answered the Sonora Kid. "Yuh think them mules ain't got no gratitude?"

Shorty reached for the sideboards and pulled himself painfully to the driver's seat. He reached for his .45 and found that it had jolted underneath the tarp that was folded on the floor. Then he forgot the gun, because from his elevated position, he could see the dirt tank and the long, low water trough that stood down slope from the tank dam. Strands of barbed wire glistened in the sun.

"Say!" exclaimed Shorty hoarsely. "That there big wire gate is shut! Somebody's plumb loco, leavin' that gate shut when the cattle in this north

pasture have got to have water. And I can see what looks like a couple o' steers' carcasses on the ground now! Pore critters, shut off from water!"

"Well, we'll open it!" Willie replied. "We'll open it pronto and git these mules and this hoss into the waterin' pen. Listen! Tumbleweed is so dog-gone dry yuh can hear his ribs rattle!"

The Sextet from Lucia sniffed the air and broke into a shuffling semblance of a trot. Wetherbee quickened his pace with the last reserve of range-hardened endurance in his wiry body. Water—after two days of maddening thirst!

The next five minutes seemed an eternity. The freight outfit swung up along the edge of a ditch where the old wagon road once had run. Willie moved in front of the eager mules, to open the gate.

"Hands up, both of yuh! *Reach!*"

The shout came from the tank dam. Startled, Shorty jerked his gaze from the cool length of the water trough, with the valve float that looked like a canteen riding on the liquid surface.

Four men straightened from where they crouched behind the tank dam. They faced the partners with drawn .45s!

## II.

The little mule skinner sucked in a surprised breath. Willie Wetherbee was going for his gun, and even the weakness left by two days' thirst failed to slow this draw.

*Braang! Braang!* Two guns roaring shattered the hot stillness. The Sonora Kid's weapon was first, seeming to belch flame the instant it cleared the holster.

"Owww!" The tall, angular man who had ordered the partners to put up their hands screamed and pitched forward over the sloping tank dam, clawing at his right arm, his face twisted with pain and rage.

*Braang!* Another gun blazed from the tank dam.

Lead clanged on steel, and Shorty saw the shock in his pard's eyes as the gun flew from Willie's hand. Now the tall waddy was standing there, unarmed, as helpless as the mule driver himself, wringing his numbed wrist.

It was a stocky, red-faced man who had fired. He swaggered forward.

"Now mebbe you'll put 'em up!" he shouted. "Look at Harker, Joe! See where the coyote plugged him!"

Harker sat up on the slope of the dam, swearing in a voice high-pitched with pain. "Shot me through the arm!" he moaned. "I'll kill yuh fer this! Tie it up, Joe! Oh! It hurts—it hurts!"

Shorty Masters took in the swiftly moving scene with wide eyes. The mules were pressing against the closed wire barrier, mad with desire for the water that was just beyond. Any minute, now, they might get tangled in the barbed strands.

The freighter swung his gaze back to the four men. They were not punchers of the Wagon Tongue. He had never seen them before. Harker, the tall and skinny hombre who was shot, apparently was the leader.

Then there were the others—the squat, heavy man who had shot Wetherbee's gun out of his hand; Joe, the burly, swarthy-faced ruffian who was examining Harker's wound; and a short, bowlegged man of the freighter's own size. The latter had a tobacco-stained beard that partly concealed an ugly scar.

The burly Joe straightened from Harker's side. "Busted the bone in his shootin' arm!" he reported. "Busted it bad. He'll be laid up a long time. Frame!"

The heavy, red-faced man grunted. "We'll fix these waddies!" he declared without taking his eyes off the partners, without letting his gun waver an inch. "Never had no use fer mule skimmers, nohow. What yuh want done to 'em, Harker?"

"Kill 'em!" howled the prostrate leader, rocking to and fro with the agony of his splintered arm. "Kill 'em both! They know too much, anyhow. They seen the steers we jest skinned, and I reckon they heard the shots before we heard the freight bells comin'!"

Shorty drew a sharp, whistling breath. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the Sonora Kid, proud and defiant, unafraid. This might be the end of the trail for them, but—

"Leave 'em fer the buzzards, along with them skinned steers!" Harker went on. "Oh—my arm! Pete, give me another drink out o' that bottle. I cain't stand this!"

The short, whiskered man shambled down the tank dam and pulled a flask from his chaps. Harker drank greedily, coughing over the fiery liquor. Shorty could see he was more than half-drunk and crazed with pain. The freighter's gun was underneath the tarp, with no way of getting to it.

"Kill 'em!" shrieked Harker, waving the flask

with his good hand. "What are yuh waitin' fer? They got it comin'! Shootin' is too good fer 'em!"

The other three men hesitated. Bad as they were, they could hardly shoot down unarmed men. Frame, the red-faced lieutenant, came cautiously down the tank dam to confer with his chief.

Shorty understood everything now. These were skinning thieves, the lowest form of range rustlers. It was they who closed the gate to the watering pen. Daily they came from their hideout in the hills to drive thirsty cattle into the flat, shoot them and take their hides.

It was less profitable than rustling steers on the hoof, but it was also less trouble. By the time the Wagon Tongue riders found the steers there might be nothing but bones, with scant chance of the tell-tale bullet holes if the shots were placed right.

"Say!" the little freighter pleaded hoarsely. "Will yuh open the gate so my mules can git to the water trough? Two days, now, since they had a drink, and they'll be cuttin' theirselves on th' bob wire purty soon! And me and my pard—we ain't had a drink in two days, neither!"

Harker climbed to his feet, grimacing as he jarred his arm, roaring in a drunken, pain-ridden frenzy.

"That ain't all! Yuh won't touch water this side of the Great Divide, if I have my say. And I reckon I'm the boss here! I'm runnin' this shebang! Tie 'em up, Frame! The sawed-off runt of a mule prodder ain't got no gun. Yuh can tie him right on the waggin seat. But as fer th' gun-slingin' skunk—heave *him* into the ditch!"

"Yuh wouldn't keep us from gittin' a dr—" the Sonora Kid began. He was cut short by another roar from Harker.

"Hog-tie 'em, I said!"

"That's about what yuh would expect from a passel o' hide thieves!" flared Shorty. "Killin' other people's cows fer six-bits or a dollar a head!"

"Shet up, you!" gritted Harker. "I'll—I'll plug yuh!"

The wounded man stooped for his gun in the dirt of the tank dam, but the move pained his arm, and he straightened. Frame kept the partners covered. Pete and Joe climbed through the fence against which the lead mules and Tumbleweed were crowding, unable to understand why they could not get at the water that was so near.

The two hide thieves climbed the wagon with a piece of rope. They tied Shorty's hands and feet

and bent him nearly double on the wagon seat.

"That'll hold yuh!" grunted Frame. "Git some more rope, Pete. We got to tie the tall hombre good!"

"Ain't no more rope without usin' my reata," the whiskered man answered. "Wait—mebbe there's one on th' sorrel's saddle!"

He stepped toward Tumbleweed, but the horse shied toward the mesquites, whirling around to face them after he was a safe distance away. Harker broke into a new torrent of oaths. He took another pull at the bottle.

"Cut some rawhide strips!" he ordered. "Cut some strips off them fresh hides—that's the idea! Tie him tight—all around him! When it dries, it'll cut the mangy skunk in two!"

He laughed wildly at the thought. Shorty gasped with horror. The skinners were carrying out Harker's orders, cutting long thongs from the hides. Under the hot sun, this would shrink quickly. In a short time, Willie would be strangled.

The Sonora Kid stood without flinching, his blackened lips standing out against his pale face. This was what the partners had found at the end of two days of torture—more torture and a terrible death for them and Tumbleweed and the Sextet! The mules would die in their harness and the barbed wire, unless they were allowed to drink soon.

"Pull that tight!"

Frame's gun was jammed into Wetherbee's ribs. The little mule driver, lying on the hot wagon seat like a turkey trussed up for market, saw the hide thieves bind his partner's hands, his legs, and then pull the long thong tight around his body. Harker was looking on, his teeth bared in a twisted snarl. He took another drink as they dropped Willie on his side in the ditch.

The burly Joe took a turn of the green rawhide around Wetherbee's neck. Perhaps he considered it more merciful that way, to end it more quickly; perhaps there was a streak of cruelty in his nature the same as Harker's. Shorty closed his eyes.

"Let's go!" Harker ordered. "We've about worked this range out, anyhow! Fill them canteens and dust toward the Pecos! Don't fergit th' last bunch o' hides we took!"

Shorty heard the canteens being splashed in the cool horse trough, and his whole being cried out for water. He struggled against his bonds and found it was no use. There was a yell from Harker. Spurs

jingled and saddle leather creaked.

“Adios, yuh skunks!” shouted the half-crazed hide thief. “We’re leavin’ yuh fer the buzzards!”

### III.

Hoofs jogged on the dry ground. The band of skimmers rode out from the far side of the tank, where their horses had been concealed. They swung into Shorty’s line of vision, then dropped down into the willows of the draw and were out of sight.

“Willie!”

“Yeah?”

The tall waddy’s answer was a half-choked gasp. Shorty strained against his bonds again. Already the shrinking rawhide was clutching at his partner’s throat.

“Can yuh move any?”

“Nope, not a bit. I—I reckon this here is th’ last camp fer us, Shorty. They shore got me tight. It’ll be shuttin’ off my wind—purty soon. Say, I wish Tumbleweed could git to th’ water!”

“Yeah, so do I. And the mules.”

A strained silence, intense and horrible, fell. It was broken after a time by fresh stamping of the thirsty Sextet. There was a rasping noise as the right-hand trace chain caught in the barbed wire during the team’s struggles. Then Shorty heard labored, half-strangled breathing.

“Willie!” Shorty yelled frantically. “Take it as easy as yuh can! Don’t give up! Mebbe I can do somethin’!”

He had to try—had to do *something!* Struggling, he rolled his body forward and fell with a crash to the bed of the wagon. His hands had a play of a few inches, and he fumbled at the tarp until he managed to roll it back.

There was the gun. Not that it would do them any good, now. Shorty wished he had rolled off the seat while Harker’s gang was still there. Maybe he could have killed one or two of them before they got him.

Well, perhaps the shots would bring help, but the chance was slim. The Wagon Tongue waddies had their hands full at the ranch, twenty-five miles away. They didn’t know the gate was closed at the north pasture windmill. They thought cattle there would have water, as long as the tank was filled and the float valve in the trough didn’t get stuck.

An idea, faint and hopeless at first, began to

take shape in Shorty’s mind. He edged his compact body back, under the seat and upon a roll of bedding. This enabled him to see over the sideboards again. He lay there and looked at the water trough.

The valve float, made of galvanized tin, round and the size of a two-gallon canteen, was still on the surface of the trough. It would not move until some of the water was taken from the trough, then it would drop, always staying on the level of the water. When it dropped, it would open the valve in the gravity pipe that led from the big dirt tank. More water would flow in the trough until it reached the previous level and shut off the valve.

“If I could jest have some way of pushin’ that float down!” Shorty muttered. “The water would run over the side of the trough and down the ditch to where Willie is!”

That was it. Some way to sink the float and keep it sunk, opening the valve! Suddenly Shorty let out a hoarse yell.

“I’ve got it, Willie! Set tight fer a minnit!”

“I’m settin—tight! The rawhide—is cuttin’—me plumb in two!”

*Braang!* Shorty’s gun roared.

He was gripping it in both hands, shooting from the most awkward position he had ever tried in his life, lying on his side with his hands drawn down between his knees.

Water splashed in the trough. He had missed, and there were but four more shots in the gun. Shorty never carried a cartridge in the chamber that was under the hammer, for fear of accident.

The Sonora Kid tried to raise his head. His face was turning purple, his voice was a choked, dry whisper.

“What yuh—shootin’ at?”

“The valve float. If I can only sink it—”

*Bang-bang!* Two more shots.

One chipped splinters from the thick side of the trough. The other missed. Shorty’s cartridge belt was down under the tarp. He doubted if he could reload the gun, at least in time to save his partner. Slowly, agonizingly, he made ready for the next shot.

*Braang!*

A tinny clatter mingled with a splash from the trough. Shorty yelled with triumph. He cocked the gun and cracked down again.

*Braang!* That bullet also plowed into the float, ripping a jagged hole through its circular side just

at the water line.

Bubbles shot up from the surface of the trough as it filled and went under.

"Now!" Shorty exclaimed, and his voice was half a prayer. "The water will be comin' over, Willie, and it'll run down the ditch. Try and keep yore head on the high ground! Let it git to yore hands if you can!"

He saw it, a cool, liquid sheen streaming over the side of the big trough. The ground nearby was packed hard by countless hoofs, ground that had been dampened by water that dripped from the noses of steers. The overflow did not sink in here, but trickled down the slant, into the old wagon road, into the ditch where Willie Wetherbee lay.

Under the fence, the earth was dry and sucked at the precious moisture greedily, but there was other water coming behind. It flowed on. It trickled over the rain-worn gravel in the ditch and formed a little pool. Tumbleweed came up and sank a grateful muzzle into it.

"Willie! Yore hoss is gittin' hisself a drink!" Shorty called. He laughed, almost hysterically, wishing he could roll himself off the wagon and into the water.

"That's fine!" gasped Wetherbee.

Then the first water reached where he lay crosswise in the ditch. It began to back up, with his long body acting as a dam, it reached his hands and soaked the thongs on his wrists. The mules tried to turn, stamping, fighting, and squealing as the leaders managed to reach the water.

"They cain't git enough to founder theirselves!" Shorty muttered. "It won't be long now, Willie! Try yore hands!"

Wetherbee exerted all his strength against the bonds. The deepening water was refreshing his thirst-tortured body. He gave a jerk, and the thongs stretched and slipped off his wrists!

#### IV.

In another minute, the Sonora Kid was on his feet, slipping off the last of the rawhide that stretched easily again, now that it was wet. He did not wait to drink, but tottered toward the wagon, fumbling for his pocketknife. Then he reached up and cut Shorty's bonds.

The teamster was on the ground in an instant. He sprang to the traces and unhooked them. Then he opened the wire gate and led the mules, a span at

a time, to water. He knelt by the trough and cupped his hands to moisten his lips, to swallow a few drops of the precious liquid at a time. Had to go easy—had to pull the mules away before they overdid themselves.

The partners spent an hour resting, drinking sparingly. They let the mules and Tumbleweed drink again. Shorty found a mesquite branch to thrust under the valve float and keep it at the top of the trough so the water would not be wasted until it could be repaired.

"The Wagon Tongue outfit has probably got some more floats up at the ranch," Shorty remarked. "How d'yuh feel now, Willie?"

"Like a new hombre entirely!" said the Sonora Kid.

"Are yuh ready?"

"Shore! Let's go!"

Shorty walked over on the tank dam. Half-buried in the loose dirt, he found the .45 Harker had dropped. From the wagon, he produced his cartridge belt. Willie cleaned the hide thief's gun and both the partners reloaded. Shorty handed the tall cowboy a handful of ammunition to carry in his pocket, then drew a saddle from the wagon and threw it over Chopin's sleek back.

"Reckon yuh also feel like a new mule!" he told the black animal. "Anyway, they won't travel very fast with Harker's busted arm. Reckon I better shut the gate ag'in fer a little while, so the rest of the Sextet will leave the water alone. Let's dust, Willie!"

The Sonora Kid thrust the .45 into his waistband, and forked Tumbleweed. The partners rode down the flat to where Harker's gang had vanished in the draw.

It was an easy trail to follow. They found where the horses had scrambled out on the steep bank beyond, and the hoofprints were plain in the cracked, sun-baked soil. The trail wound through the mesquites and turned east toward the Pecos.

"Reckon I didn't thank yuh, Shorty, fer—"

"Aw, what's eatin' yuh?" growled the little freighter. "It was jest a hunch. Anybody could have done that!"

"Yeah—if they could shoot as straight," Willie went on. "That was shore some fine shootin'."

They fell into silence. It didn't seem as hot, now that their thirst had been slaked. They rode at an easy trot, and the powerful black mule was able to keep abreast of the sorrel. The trail took them

across the flat and around the point of a hill. For a few minutes, they lost it as it climbed the rocky stretches to a divide, then they picked it up again by skirting the rim of the higher ground.

Two hours passed, and the sun was swinging into the middle of the western sky. Willie rose in his stirrups with a low exclamation.

“There they are—jest goin’ down off the divide!”

Shorty was not tall enough to see. He leaned forward and pressed his knees against the mule’s sides. Chopin broke into a gallop, and Tumbleweed swung into an easy lope beside him.

At the rim of the divide, the partners drew rein and peered down a slope that was studded with cedars. Willie Wetherbee saw the skinning thieves first—four men who led an equal number of pack horses. He gave Tumbleweed the spurs and went down the rocky slant at breakneck speed.

“Yip-eee! Let ‘em have it!”

Frame whirled his horse with a startled oath. A wild-eyed pair of riders were sweeping down upon them. The Sonora Kid’s hand flashed up, and the sunlight glinted on chill blue steel.

Frame went for his gun. He sent one shot roaring across the stubby cedars, then a bullet tore into his thick body and he toppled from his horse.

“I knowed it!” Harker shrieked. “I said we ought ter have killed ‘em!”

*Braang!* The skinning thief jerked a gun from the holster at his left side and fired.

A bullet cut through the flap of Shorty’s jumper. Pete and Joe were pulling their horses behind the doubtful shelter of a clump of cedars, blazing away as they went.

*Braang! Braang!* Shorty and Willie lay low on the necks of their mounts and fired together.

Either shot would have killed Harker. The skinny man coughed. He fell forward, the saddle horn bumped him in the chest, and his horse shied in sudden terror of the death that rode the saddle. Harker slipped slowly off, his broken arm dangling limply.

More shots roared. Shorty reined the mule to the

right. The Sonora Kid headed left around the cedar clump. Bullets whizzed angrily past them as they closed in behind thundering guns.

“Left fer the buzzards, eh?” snarled the little freighter, as he ducked under a branch and came face to face with the scarred, whiskered Pete.

The hide-stealer’s gun blazed almost in Shorty’s eyes, and the Stetson whipped off the freighter’s head. He jerked the trigger of his own .45, and there was an empty click.

Pete’s gun came up again. Pete’s tobacco-stained teeth were bared in a twisted snarl.

Shorty flung himself over the side of the mule and threw muscular arms around the outlaw’s neck. Both men crashed to the ground. In falling, Shorty had a fleeting glimpse of the swarthy-faced Joe toppling from his saddle, under the hoofs of his horse, and then the mule driver had his hands full.

*Crash!* He let go with his right arm and swung a choppy blow flush against Pete’s bearded chin. The hide thief’s gun cracked harmlessly in the air and clipped off a cedar branch. He went limp.

Shorty grabbed the .45 and climbed to his feet. He thrust his own gun back into its holster and stood panting hard, his tow-colored hair disheveled. Willie Wetherbee swung from Tumbleweed’s back and examined the fallen Joe.

“Dead,” he said shortly. “What yuh goin’ to do with that hombre?”

“Take him back to the Waggin Tongue with us,” Shorty panted. “We’ll make him drive them four pack hosses with the hides. I ain’t intendin’ to load another ounce onto my waggins after what them mules has been through—not until they’ve got a good rest. Look at Chopin—he craves more water!”

“Me, too,” chuckled the Sonora Kid.

Leave it tuh Shorty an’ Willie tuh make sure thet no hide-stealin’ skunks like Harker an’ his pards git away with any such murderin’ business as thet. The pardners shoot square, an’ they expect other hombres tuh do the same. If they don’t—waal, watch fer the next Shorty Masters story. It’ll be in Street & Smith’s *Wild West Weekly* soon.