

Substitute For Six-Gun Magic

By
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He was a skinny button. The range outfit he wore was all new and very cheap. His horse was bony, his saddle worthless. He did carry a good light gun, though—a Colt double-action .32 special . . .



"Put your hands up, young fellow, and step to the ground!"

HE WAS young, slim, and pale. The clothing he wore, clothing of the range, was all new and very cheap. His horse wouldn't have brought ten dollars on any market; his saddle would have gone begging at two. But he did have a good light gun. A Colt double-action .32 special, it was, and he carried it hidden inside his shirt.

He dismounted and grounded rein in a big cow camp on the lower Santos River, and eyed with no great show of interest the punchers who lolled around supper fires and chuck wagon. A tall old cowboy nicknamed Long Distance winked openly at the cowboy nearest him. The newcomer saw that. In cool deliberation he bent and picked up a clod, tossed it high, flicked his little six-shooter out and fired. The clod drifted away in the form of dust.

"Howdy, gents," he said then, slipping the .32 back inside his big-checked cheap shirt. "Hell of a place for a cow outfit's headquarters, looks to me."

Sowbelly Sims, the cook, swapped glances

with Jim Brand, owner of the outfit. "Yeah," muttered Sims, "mebbe so, young'un. Dry weather has cut ord'nary range grass so short that all ranchers in this section is havin' to leave their happy homes and take their herds to bottoms like these here along the Rio Santos, sorta campin' out, y'-know."

Again old Long Distance winked. "Young'un," he drawled, "y' didn't see no whangdoodles or whiffits as you rode along, did you?"

"No, but I saw a willopus and a wampus or so."

Cowboy Nip Lellman said to his brother Tuck: "Long'll make nothin' offa that kid." Jim Brand then made blunt inquiry of the slim stranger:

"How come you so pale, anyhow?"

There was no answer. Brand said: "A year in jail would pale a man up that way. Well, young'un, I guess you aim to spend the night with us, and maybe you'd like to give us a name to know you by during your sojourn in our midst; eh?"

"A name to know me by, you say, pardner? Ever hear tell of the Blood Mountain Kid?"

Brand motioned the Blood Mountain Kid to supper. The kid ate hungrily. His appetite satisfied, he said: "Thanks, pardner," to Brand, and hastened on: "I'd sure like to work for you, pardner. I'm rusty on things, and would rather be roustabout for awhile, but you won't need to pay me anything 'cept grub until I've polished up on riding and so forth. Huh, pardner?"

"I notice you're not so rusty on shooting," answered the cattleman. "I'll take you on. There's times, close to the Border like we are here, when a puncher who can shoot is the best kind to have. I can see you're pretty well tuckered, Blood Mountain. Sowbelly will give you a blanket, and you can bunk up under a cottonwood any time."

The Kid was asleep when night fell.

He woke with the full moon shining aslant in his face. But it wasn't this that woke him. Jim Brand's hand was on his arm, shaking it, and Brand's voice was in his ear: "All right, Blood Mountain. The chance to show what you can do has come sooner than any of us expected. Border Juniper cow thieves. Did you tell me you had a whole box of .32 cartridges in your hip pocket?"

"Sure." The Kid sprang to his feet. "But I want a bigger gun, pardner."

"No, son. You'd miss with a bigger gun. The fast little fella you busted clods in the air with, that's your best bet."

Then Brand's new man was in a good saddle on a good horse and riding hell-for-leather southward in the bright moonlight. With him were Long Distance, Nip and Tuck Lellman. Brand and six others of his range crew had taken a short cut southwestward.

"Aimin' to head the thieves off," explained Long Distance to Blood Mountain. "The danged rustlers will hafta drive through a valley which is almost narrer enough to be a canyon, and we hope to bottle 'em up in there. The boss thief is a killer, knowed as Black Pedro, and is s'posed to be a Mexie, but he ain't—the Mexies is too decent to claim him. He talks United States like a schoolteacher, and can shoot as fast and as straight as you, Kid, but with a bigger gun. You sure don't want to take chances with Black Pedro, son. Don't you forgit that."

The Blood Mountain Kid said nothing.

The river curved sharply eastward. The four men veered out of the grassy bottoms and headed for a notch in a hill range scarcely two miles away.

Shots came from that direction. The Kid's companions drove spur steel to rib bone, and lost him in a maze of chaparral thickets. But the new man kept going. There were more shots, and many of them. Some were not so far off.

Then he met cattle coming back, running wildly. Here on higher, rougher terrain there was dust, and he had difficulty keeping himself oriented. He heard shouts, oaths, mixed in with more shooting, and there was a *zip!* at his ear. A riderless horse passed him, empty stirrups flying; further crashing of guns; another *zip!* at his ear. Occasionally he had a glimpse of a man, or men. He didn't know whether they were Brand's or Black Pedro's.

"Long Distance!" he yelled.

HIS horse stopped suddenly. A few yards ahead an abyss yawned.

"Don't move a hair, young fellow. I had the misfortune to have my horse shot from under me, and must take yours. Now put your hands up, young fellow, and step to the ground. Hustle!"

Memory served Blood Mountain. Long Distance had said that the boss cow thief talked like a schoolteacher. So this was Black Pedro. Rotten luck. Out to show his stuff, he'd lose the horse that Brand had furnished him, and would have to walk back. Laugh at him? No. They'd be too mad. "Blood Mountain Kid, eh? Shoots clods in the air, never misses—bah!"

These thoughts broke in the Kid's mind in the time of a second. Black Pedro, not a big man but wiry and quick, took one step and stood very close there in the moonlight. His dark eyes were biasing.

"Anything wrong with your hearing, young fellow?"

Blood Mountain dropped the rein and jerked both arms high. He rose in his left stirrup, swung his right leg over the saddle-front. Then with his left hand he grabbed the long gun-barrel and shoved it upward, and sent his right fist crashing into the boss cow thief's face!

It was foolhardy. He knew that. Still, he did it. The heavy six-shooter barked, scoring the Kid's shoulder. Again he struck at the dark face, and again. He slipped to the ground on his feet, clinging doggedly to the slender tube of steel. With his free hand clenched into a bony knot, Pedro also was striking, fighting like a Satan gone mad.

"Let go, you fool!" he kept snarling. "Let go my gun!"

But Blood Mountain wouldn't let go.

Then they were locked together and struggling desperately. The Kid felt his strength going. He breathed in gasps. Above in the sky the moon was reeling. He managed to get a leg in between Black Pedro's, and they tripped, fell, rolled to the brink of the chasm.

"You crazy fool!" rapped the cow thief. "Cliff here—we'll fall over—both be killed as sure as hell!"

They fell together, turned in mid air, struck with a *thud* that would have been sickening had there been ears to hear it...

"We found you at daybreak, Kid," Jim Brand told him at noon. He lay on an old couch in a doctor's office, in town, and he was just out of the ether. "You've only got a busted wing and a few bruises, and will soon be all right. We buried Pedro out there. I reckon you knew it was him. Seems he fell underneath and cushioned your fall.

"Well, Blood Mountain," Brand pursued, "I owe you a heap, and part of it is apologies. We'd rigged up a wild goose chase for you, to have some fun; had no idea the Pedro gang was anywhere

near until we ran into 'em! Thanks to you, we saved all the cattle. And so, as long as you want it, Kid, you've got a range job with my outfit. Eh?"

"I'll want it a long time, pardner," the Kid said. Then he blinked. "Say, didn't—didn't my shootin' go over with the boys?"

Jim Brand laughed. "Well, not quite. It's an old Wild West show trick, putting extra-fine birdshot in cartridges instead of bullets and hitting things in the air that way; we noticed you threw up clods, not rocks!" There was a twinkle in the cattleman's eye now. "I sorta wish though, Kid, you hadn't ever been in jail. I sorta wish you was just a young jigger out trying to make a dream come true. Eh?"

The young jigger grinned. "Jail, nothin'. Pardner, you was honest with me, and I'll be honest with you. I've been in no jail. I named myself Blood Mountain Kid; thought it sounded big. I just couldn't stand it any longer, pardner, where I was. You see, I was a dime store clerk in Denver, and what I sold mostly was safetypins!"