

HIS WONDERS TO PERFORM

By
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*The Piegan Kid had a
price on his head—and
gold in his heart!*

THE Piegan Kid sprawled on an old cot in the little attic of the ranch house at the Rocking R. Moonlight filtered through the branches of an ancient sycamore close to the window, drawing queer patterns on the floor and rough wall. One limb of the sycamore grew almost against the window.

The Kid was not there through choice. Two weeks before, traveling over a rough trail in strange country, the Kid's horse whirled away from a rattlesnake, throwing the Kid, and for a few moments his left foot hung in the stirrup. With the foot badly twisted and racked with pain, the kid crawled and hobbled for miles through this land of cactus until he reached the Rocking R owned by Jim Rawlins, known to every-one as "Uncle Jim."

There was "Ma" Rawlins too, a little gnarled sort of woman, well past middle-age, with a heart too big for her frail body, who was well versed in the treatment of sprains, bruises and lacerations. In her time she had treated a lot of them. They carried the Kid into the house and went to work on him, asking no questions. As soon as he was able to move around, Uncle Jim



The Kid's forty-five crashed down on Slick's head

made him some rough crutches and he began exercising the ankle.

Discovering the attic, with a bed already there, the Kid insisted on sleeping up there. They didn't ask him why. There was a window and that old sycamore outside.

The Kid didn't have any name. He had never known a mother or father. His only recollection of a relative was the person he believed to be his grand-mother and she was Indian, possibly a Sioux, because of the nickname bestowed upon him at an early age. There was a strong hint of Indian blood in his eyes, cheek-bones and hair. The Kid was only five feet seven inches tall and would weigh about a hundred and twenty pounds.

As a matter of record, the Piegan Kid was wanted in practically all of the Southwest, and the rewards for him, dead or alive, were beginning to be fabulous. The Kid was a will o' the wisp outlaw, of whom there had never been a photograph, and whose descriptions were not only vague, but very misleading. The Kid couldn't read, but he had heard himself discussed many times as the perpetrator of crimes he had never heard about before. No peace officer ever gave this scrawny young man a second look.

WHILE the Rawlins family did not talk about their own troubles, when the Kid moved upstairs he discovered a wide crack and a knothole under a bear-skin rug, where he could not only listen to conversation in the main room, but could also see the talkers.

It wasn't long before he realized that the Rawlins family had a son, Johnny, who was in serious trouble. In fact, he was in

jail at Smoke Tree and had been sentenced to hang for murder. The Kid figured that was why the old folks prayed so long every night. Johnny was convicted of shooting a man named Buck Frawley. Johnny's only alibi was that he was drunk, and didn't know he had fired the shot.

Twice a lawyer came in the evening and talked with them. The Kid didn't understand much of this talk, but one night they talked about Johnny only having two days more to live. He had been refused a new trial. That was awful tough luck for Ma and Uncle Jim, decided the Kid. But what could he do about it? Somehow he wanted to help them out of this situation, but couldn't figure any angle. They had been kind to him. Why, Ma even called him son! That was quite a sensation for the Kid.

As he sprawled there on the cot, flexing the ankle, he decided that in the morning he would ride away. Someone knocked heavily on the door downstairs, and he heard voices. Sliding out of bed, he shoved the rug aside. There was a strange man down there, a man who wore a big black sombrero, with lamp-light flickering from the silver on his hat-band. The Kid loved silver trimmings, and he loved big hats. He had an instant desire to possess this one.

Ma and Uncle Jim sat down, but the stranger paced up and down the floor,

"Slick, what do you want of us?" Uncle Jim asked.

The man stopped pacing and faced them.

"My testimony convicted your son," replied Slick slowly. "I'm the only witness."

"We know that Mr. Haynes," said Ma quietly.

"All right," said the man, "I want ten thousand dollars."

For several moments no one spoke. Finally Uncle Jim said:

"Ten thousand dollars? Are you crazy, Slick?"

"Just like a fox," snarled Haynes. "Here's the deal. A month ago you sold that old Cross-of-Gold mine for ten thousand dollars. It ain't in the bank—it's right here—all in cash. I'm pullin' out for Mexico tonight, Rawlings—and here's the deal:

"For ten thousand dollars—cash—I'll write and sign a confession that I killed Buck Frawley. I need money—you need to save the neck of your son. Do we trade?"

"You'd trade a confession of murder for money, Haynes?"

"I've made the offer, take it or leave it. If you leave it, I'll shoot the both of you and tear the house down to find that money. And you won't save your kid, Rawlings. Now, do we trade?"

"You don't leave much alternative, Haynes," said Uncle Jim.

"I'm no fool. Go get that money!"

"No—not yet," replied the old rancher. "First, you write that confession. Ma, get him a piece of paper and the pen and ink."

Slick Haynes laughed shortly but didn't argue. The Kid, with one eye glued to the knot-hole, watched the big man closely. He saw Haynes sit down, gun at hand, and write for a long time. Finally he signed his name, laid the pen Jim Rawlings glanced at it and passed it to Ma.

"Jim, you know I haven't found my glasses for a week," she said.

"You read it—out loud," said Uncle Jim, handing it back to Haynes. Haynes

read it carefully. It exonerated Johnny Rawlings of any part in the murder of Buck Frawley and put the whole blame on the writer. The two old folks nodded when Haynes asked them if it was all right. Haynes watched Uncle Jim go over and remove a loose stone from the old fireplace. Ma was watching Uncle Jim too, but the Piegan Kid was watching Slick Haynes.

Uncle Jim came back from the fireplace with the money, and as he began counting it, Slick Haynes handed the folded confession to Ma. The Piegan Kid slid the rug back and limping a little, went to the window where he slid outside, grasped the sycamore limb and went down the tree.

He crouched at the gate as Slick Haynes came from the house and hurried down the path. Haynes was whistling quietly when a forty-five crashed down on his head and he went to the ground without a murmur. There was not a sound except the soft calling of a mockingbird, saying, "Peter, Peter, Peter," over and over again.

"Peter," breathed the Kid. "That's what I told them my name was. I had to tell 'em a name." Then he laughed quietly, standing beside the gate, looking down at the black mass of Slick Haynes.

The Kid awoke early next morning. He could hear Ma rattling dishes at the stove. He heard her call to Uncle Jim.

"Look, I've found my glasses! They were in the cupboard."

The Kid was unable to hear his reply, but in a few moments he heard her exclaim:

"Jim! Jim, this ain't no confession—it's only blank paper!"

The Kid shoved the rug aside and peered down. The old folks were standing

there, looking at each other, and Ma was crying.

Uncle Jim said huskily, "He knew I couldn't read—and you couldn't either—without your glasses. That dirty coyote!"

He walked slowly over to a window. From outside came the beat of hoofs, stopping at the porch. The Kid heard Uncle Jim gasp. "No! It can't be! Ma, it's—Johnny!"

THE door banged open, and both figures were out of the Kid's vision, but he could guess what wasn't being said just then. After a while he heard Johnny's hoarse voice.

"No, Ma I didn't break jail. Don't you understand—I'm free—exonerated! Ma, will you listen? This morning, at daylight, the sheriff found a confession, shoved under his office door, and tied to a porch post was Slick Haynes. It was his confession to the murder of Buck Frawley! I didn't do it."

The Kid shoved the rug back and reached for his boots. He could hear the muffled voices downstairs, as they held their jubilation. It choked the Kid a little, and he wondered just why. He limped a little, as he came down the narrow stairs. The air was redolent of breakfast.

Johnny didn't want for any introduction, but came and shook hands. "Ma told me about you, Pete—when you first came," he said.

"She's wonderful, Johnny," said the Kid. "I never knowed anybody like her, Her and Uncle Jim saved my life—and I can't do a thing to pay her for it."

"I've been paid a million times over," declared Ma tearfully. "Pete, you didn't know it—but—or did you?"

"I couldn't help hearing something, Ma," replied the Kid. "I'm shore glad he got loose."

"It was a miracle," declared Uncle Jim. "Set down and eat, boys."

After breakfast, the Kid said, "I'm drifting along, folks. The ankle is all right. Some day maybe I can pay you back for what you've done for me."

"Gratitude is the best pay on earth, Pete," said Ma. "You are welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Thank you, Ma. Well, I'll be drifting."

HE shook hands with each of them and turned to the door.

"I'll ride from the stable, folks," he said quietly, and walked out. Uncle Jim walked over to a window and watched the Kid limp down to the stable. Ma was standing at the table, her arm around Johnny, when the Piegan Kid rode away from the stable, heading for the hills. He turned and waved toward the house. Uncle Jim lifted his arm, but realized that the Kid couldn't see him.

"Johnny, we never know," Ma said. "The Lord has many a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. Isn't that true, Jim?"

Uncle Jim was looking through the window. He said, "Eh? Oh, yes, I reckon he does, Ma, Yeah, awful mysterious."

He shook his head and glanced down at the broad window-sill. Staring up at him was a thick envelope—an envelope he had seen many times. With a trembling hand he reached down and picked it up, hardly willing to believe his eyes. It was the ten thousand dollars in cash, still in the same

envelope that Slick Haynes had taken from them last night.

Slowly he turned and walked over to the table, placing it there in front of Ma Rawlins and Johnny.

"I found it on the window sill," he said simply.

"Our money!" breathed Ma. "I can't believe . . ."

"We've got to," said Uncle Jim.

"But Slick Haynes never went near that window, Jim."

"I know he didn't, Ma."

Uncle Jim went back to the window, staring out across the desert hills, but the Piegan Kid was gone.

"Jim, how on earth could this have happened?" Ma asked.

"Ma, the older I get, the less I'm inclined to question the Lord's mysterious ways. We've got Johnny and we've got our money.

"It may have satisfied Ma and Johnny, but Uncle Jim had seen what they hadn't—and that was the Piegan Kid, riding away from the stable, wearing Slick Haynes' black sombrero, with the silver trimmings.