

*There Was Something About
Tough Tuck Mangum That
Got a Good Many Fellers*



BUSCADERO CROSSING

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JOHNNY DRUMM rode with his slicker spread wide back of the cantle to cover his saddlebags. Maybe it wouldn't hurt paper money to get wet, but this was the first time Johnny had ever possessed any to speak of, and he aimed to take care of it. Five thousand dollars would be right smart of a stake to set himself up with—in Mexico. The fact that it was stolen didn't bother Johnny Drumm at the moment.

Neither did the rain, though he thought it was about the wettest rain he'd ever been out in. It drove down with steady monotony out of low, dark clouds that seemed to drag sodden, misty feet upon a half-moon of barren mountains beyond the desert valley across whose unaccustomed mud his pony now plodded. Drumming ceaselessly upon his hat, it poured off fore and aft as if from a two-spouted pitcher. It rivered every wrinkle of his slicker. It wasn't pleasant to ride in, but Johnny Drumm had bent his course from south to westward a-purpose to ride in it. As he had surmised, this was no mere shower, but a six-day soaker that washed out horse tracks

completely.

For that reason Johnny liked it, and whether the law was on his trail or not he didn't know. But even with his hands in the air, the scared, white faced bookkeeper of the Barranca Mercantile Company had promised him that it would be.

"Maybe you don't realize whose county you're in," the bookkeeper had said, as he obeyed Johnny's order to shell out the cash.

"Nope," Johnny had admitted. "I'm a stranger in these parts."

"You mean you never heard of Sheriff Tuck Mangum?"

The name had stirred up a vague uneasiness in Johnny Drumm. Or maybe it was the confidence with which this bespectacled indoor man spoke it.

"You don't get away from Tuck Mangum," said the clerk, like a man would aver that water runs downhill.

That was what Johnny had heard about the sheriff of Barranca county, even on his home range up in Colorado. Drifting southward, young, restless and out of a job, Johnny had stopped in at this one store in a

three-house "town" he didn't even know the name of, aiming to buy a little bait of sardines and crackers. The notion to rob the place instead had blossomed suddenly when he found the bookkeeper alone in the store, counting money. The blond, cheerful young cowboy had never pulled a holdup before, but this had looked too easy.

So it had been. Leaving the middle-aged bookkeeper locked in the store, bound and gagged but unhurt, Johnny Drumm had ridden away unmolested, his shirt front bulging with money which he later transferred, along with a few cans of sardines, to his saddlebags. In the whole transaction he had seen nobody but the bookkeeper, and apparently nobody had seen him. So far it had been pretty much of a lark.

AT FIRST the bookkeeper's warning that Sheriff Tuck Mangum would be right on his trail had worried him some; but the next morning he could still see no rider dust behind him, and he began to feel more secure. He saw that this was a big, lonesome country where a man might ride for days with little danger of being sighted by anyone not actually on his track. Now that he had swung westward into this soaker, Johnny Drumm simply wasn't leaving any tracks. The sardines in his saddlebags would last several days, so that he would not have to risk stopping at any ranchhouse for grub. Might even last him all the way to the Border, which shouldn't be so awful far now. Despite the gray gloominess of sodden sky and desert, the pulse pumping warm, reckless blood all the way to the far ends of Johnny's long, boyish frame was vigorous with the exhilaration of success.

"Jig-Foot," he told his drip-eared pony, "we been missin' somethin'! Something easy!"

Then suddenly, rounding the foot of a

small, rain-rutted butte, there was a little adobe shack, with a black-whiskered man standing in its door, a rifle in his hands. Johnny's first impulse was to travel away from there—fast. Yet new though he was to the outlaw trail, he realized that would be foolish. A bullet in the back from that rifle could cut him down mighty easy, even while whirling back around the corner of the butte. Reaching the gun holster under his slicker ahead of the man with a rifle was out of the question.

Anyway the tone of the black whiskered man's greeting was reassuring.

"Sorter dampish out there, ain't it?" he grinned. "Come in an' I'll bile you some Arbuckle's!"

Blackwhiskers set the rifle back inside the door, and came out with a slicker caped over his broad shoulders.

"You must of been talkin' to yourself," he chuckled. "I stepped out with the Winchester thinkin' it mought be a coyote botherin' my chickens. Here, lemme crowd your hoss under this shed. I reckon my ol' hens can spare him a little barley. You like hen-fruit? It's about all I got to offer. Kick your kak inside."

Johnny Drumm hesitated. There was no sign that this limber tongued, hospitable hombre suspected him of anything more serious than being a fool to travel in such a rain, yet he felt uneasy about stopping.

"I sure don't want to put you to no trouble, Mister," said Johnny.

But Blackwhiskers was already knotting a tie rope around the pony's neck and shucking his bridle. Johnny swung down, uncinched his saddle and dragged it inside.

Blackwhiskers' hot biscuits and fried eggs tasted mighty good, the hot coffee even better. It was over the third cup that Blackwhiskers gave his guest a start of surprise.

"Say, I hear some feller stuck his neck

in the loop by robbin' the Barranca Mercantile yestiddy," he said. "You don't happen to be him, do yuh?"

Johnny managed to make his laugh sound amused and undisturbed.

"Supposin' I was?" he challenged, in a tone of good humored banter. "What would you do about it? Take me in an' collect a reward?"

Blackwhiskers shook his head.

"Ever'body helps the sheriff for free in this county!" he chuckled. "Besides, ol' Tuck Mangum claims that as long as he's drawin' sheriff's wages, it's cheaper on the county to ketch 'em hisownself. Which he most always does. You know ol' Tuck?"

"Seems like I've heard of him," said Johnny Drumm cautiously. "Tall, rawboned feller with sandy hair an' a sorter reddish mustache?"

Actually Johnny Drumm had no more idea what Sheriff Tuck Mangum looked like than the man in the moon. But he had noticed that lots of sheriffs were rawboned and sandy. It was as good a way as any to make talk—and maybe pump Blackwhiskers for information that might turn out useful.

"Well, maybe he ain't quite as tall as I am," Blackwhiskers shrugged. "But I'd shore hate to have him on my trail jest the same. Specially with all this rain."

Johnny Drumm looked frankly puzzled.

"Of course I ain't never had no experience dodgin' sheriffs, but it looks to me like this rain would wash out tracks to where even the famous Tuck Mangum couldn't foller 'em!"

"Tracks?" Blackwhiskers chuckled again as if at some privately understood joke. "Ol' Tuck don't need no tracks!"

"He must be a wolf, sure 'nuff," said Johnny Drumm dryly. "But I still don't see What this rain's got to do with it."

"It's the Rio Aguaje," explained Blackwhiskers, drawing a big blunt finger

across the rough table. "It runs thisaway—southeast. Supposin' this feller that helt up the Mercantile wanted to git south to the Border—or on west toward Arizona. Time o' drouth he could jog acrost the Aguaje most anywheres an' never even smell water. But today she'll be a ragin' torrent with a quicksand bottom that would bog a duck. An' as long as you're this side the Aguaje you're still in Tuck Mangum's county. Which is the same as bein' in jail, only worse, for once you're jailed, ol' Tuck at least quits shootin' at yuh! You better be glad it ain't you he's after, young feller!"

"Yeah," grunted Johnny Drumm noncommittally. "Hey! What you up to?"

Getting up to replace the coffee pot, Blackwhiskers had sidled over to a battered old bureau, pulled out a drawer and turned with a huge six-gun in his hand. At sight of it Johnny Drumm's hand dropped to the holt of his own—a motion the other man pretended not to notice. He shoved the big six-gun across the table to Johnny.

"Know anything about fixin' guns? This 'un misfires about ever' three outa four."

Johnny emptied the cylinder, tried out trigger and hammer and examined the firing pin.

"I don't see nothin' wrong with it, Mister."

"Ain't the firin' pin a mite short? Say, lemme compare it with yours."

"Sure," said Johnny Drumm. He broke open his .45 and showed Blackwhiskers the mechanism. But he held onto the gun himself.

"Didn't work, did it?" he observed dryly.

"You'll do," chuckled Blackwhiskers. "That there's a trick I seen ol' Tuck pull on a feller once to git his gun. 'Course I was only foolin'. But it's a good thing you done told me you ain't no outlaw, or you might of suspected me. If you still think I was

aimin' to trick yuh, jest try shootin' that hawgleg once an' see if it don't misfire—jest like I said."

Johnny Drumm was thinking now that there was nothing like a shot to fetch a sheriff if he happened to be within hearing, as Tuck Mangum might be if he measured up to his reputation.

"Never mind," he grinned. "Looks like the rain has let up some. I'll jest thank you for havin' me in to tea—an' be travelin'."

"Whichaway?"

"Ain't much choice is there, if this Rio Aguaje can't be crossed?"

To that Blackwhiskers said nothing, but when Johnny had saddled he stood in the door.

"I jest been thinkin'," he offered. "If a feller sure nuff wanted to git acrost the Rio Aguaje, he might head for Luciano Coca's place. Southwest about four mile an' down the second draw. 'Dobe house an' goat pens right by the Rio. They claim ol' Lucy knows a place he can always cross the Aguaje, no matter how high it is. In case you run into that hold-up gent, maybe you might tell him."

Blackwhiskers winked. Johnny tried not to look as puzzled as he felt.

"What's your dog in this fight?" he inquired swinging into the saddle. "Ain't you a friend of the sheriff?"

"Oh, shore! Ever'body is!" Blackwhiskers shrugged. "That's jest the reason."

"The reason what?"

"Well," drawled Blackwhiskers and winked again, "I'd ruther see this robber git away than for ol' Tuck to run into him with his powder wet—an' maybe git hisself shot! So long—an' good luck!"

BEFORE Johnny Drumm could say anything more, Blackwhiskers stepped back inside and closed the door. With an uneasy feeling that made him keep his hand

on his gun and a watchful eye over his shoulder, Johnny Drumm rode away—not southwest, but the same way he had come. As he rounded the butte out of sight the downpour started again. Johnny gave a grunt of uneasy relief. At least Blackwhiskers hadn't tried to shoot him in the back as he rode away.

Half a mile east of Blackwhiskers' cabin, Johnny turned sharply southward. Since he had hit this rain it was only by remembering every turn that he could keep track of his directions. Presently he began slanting more westward, aiming to hit the *ranchito* of this Luciano Coca whom Blackwhiskers had mentioned and see if the Mexican could really direct him how to cross the Rio Aguaje. Somehow the hunch stuck with him that Blackwhiskers knew he was a wanted man and had been trying without committing himself to help him get away. Just why, he couldn't figure out.

It was while following this southwestward course that he crossed a horse track so fresh even this downpour had not wiped it out. It was headed southeastward at a mud-slinging lope. He must have missed meeting the rider by no more than a few minutes. For the first time Johnny Drumm felt a flash of something like panic. Who but the law would riding on a day like this? Who else but Sheriff Tuck Mangum—who always got his man?

Nervously, Johnny Drumm began using the spurs, hoping to reach the *ranchito* of Luciano Coca and get across the Rio Aguaje before dark. But his pony was pretty well fagged.

Breaking clouds over the western mountains showed the sun already down when Johnny reached the east bank of the flooded Aguaje. The usually dry Rio was something to look at. Created by a swift, booming current zigzagging a snaky course from one bank to the other, the mud-ugly water was spread out half a mile wide.

Over beyond the main current Johnny saw a huddle of goats stranded on a small island. Nearer, bobbing about in the backwash of a rocky curve was the bloated body of a drowned buck deer, while out in the middle, his great forearms grotesquely hugged around it, a forlorn looking cinnamon bear rode the flood on an uprooted tree.

FOR a moment Johnny sat watching the littered sweep of the flood with a sort of fearsome awe. Then, turning his gaze upstream, he saw a woman and child lugging what looked like bedding up the rocky slope away from a low adobe house, the undermined west wall of which at that very moment cracked away from the rest and tumbled into the flood. A bedraggled hen flew squawking out of the crash and managed to light on a floating window frame that bobbed to the surface as sodden adobes melted away from it. Suddenly the woman with the child dropped her burden and ran back down the slope screaming something in Spanish.

Socking the spurs hard to his worn-out horse, Johnny Drumm ran to head her off, only to see the water-softened bank cave in under her feet and dump her headlong into the flood before he could get there. Yanking his rain stiffened lariat loose from its strap, Johnny quit his horse, shucked his slicker and ran toward the spot where she had disappeared. Then he saw what it was that had brought her back to the floodbank. Downstream a few yards three black-haired heads instead of one were bogging around in the twist of an eddy.

Hurrying down the bank, Johnny tried to throw his rope to the nearest one. When it would not reach, swiftly he tugged off his wet boots, shucked his gunbelt and went in after them. The two he dragged out were a black-mustached, hawk-faced man and the woman he had seen fall in. The other head

by now had vanished. The woman managed to tell him in sobbing, broken English that it was their *chico*—Lucianito—who had run back in the house to save his pet hen just when the wall had tumbled. It was to save the boy that the man himself had leaped into the flood. It was only when she stopped to wait for them up on the hill that the woman had seen that her husband and the boy were not close behind her.

Johnny Drumm wasted no words trying to comfort her. Instead he dragged the unconscious Luciano Coca up the slope, laid him over a barrel-shaped boulder and started pumping water out of him.

As soon as he thought the man was breathing safely again, Johnny Drumm ran to his horse and rode swiftly away downstream, his eyes searching the gray-gravy surface of the flood for sign of the boy. But he searched in vain.

The rain had stopped and stars had begun to glimmer through wide breaks in the clouds when he rode back. The Mexican was still lying where he had left him. Señora Coca had covered him with damp sougans and blankets, and his breathing no longer gurgled. But he was still unconscious.

“*Vuelves solo?* (You return alone?)” the woman asked quietly as Johnny approached. Johnny did not understand the Spanish words, but he knew what she meant. Soberly he shook his head.

“*Pobrecito mio!*” said the Mexican woman in a tone of sad resignation that got under Johnny’s skin. “‘Nother wan—Jose—got twalf years—heem weeth that goats!’” She pointed, and Johnny understood that another son was stranded out there in the growing darkness on that little island with the huddled goats. But when he started again toward the Rio she held him back.

“*No posible, Señor!*” she said, and

Johnny knew she was right. To try to reach that island would be worse than impossible, it would be suicide.

With the Señora's help, Johnny carried Luciano Coca up onto a flat little bench, made him as comfortable as possible. Then, with dry whittlings off a box shelf in what still remained of the house, he got a fire started, heated water and doctored the gash on the unconscious Mexican's head the best he could. From what scanty supplies the Cocas had saved from their kitchen before it caved off into the flood, he cooked a supper of coffee and cornmeal mush, then held the shy little Mexican girl in the crook of his arm while he fed her. When he had unsaddled and hobbled his horse, he went to work carrying whatever belongings he could out of the house to the safety of higher ground.

In the night the flood ceased to rise, and when the sun rose in a sky now mockingly innocent of clouds, what remained of the house still stood firm. Under the stimulus of hot coffee forced between his thin brown lips, Luciano Coca regained consciousness enough to listen to his wife's account of what the *gringo* stranger had done for them.

"Our *Tata Dios* sent you, *Señor!*" said the Mexican weakly. "But now, if you got some beezness for hurry—"

"Just lay still an' hold your clabber," broke in Johnny Drumm. "My hurryin' can wait."

BY DAYLIGHT they could see Jose still stranded on the island, but the main current was still too strong for any chance to get to him. Instead Johnny spent the morning downstream searching mud-bank and drift. Drowned bodies he found in plenty: deer, badgers, rabbits, a bear and even rattlesnakes. But not the body of Lucianito.

When Johnny rode back at mid-

afternoon, he found Luciano Coca able to sit up, but now the woman was shaking with chills and fever. The cowboy took a good look at the waterline of the lowering flood, examined the adobe's remaining walls and began moving the furniture back inside.

"If that crick starts risin' again," he said, "I'll be here to git you out."

By sundown he had both his patients comfortably bedded inside. He found a battered guitar that had escaped wetting, and while supper cooked he sat in the doorway and sang "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight" to the shy little big-eyed girl.

"*Ah, que bondadoso!*" sighed Señora Coca from her bed.

"Mañana," said Johnny Drumm, using about the only Spanish word he knew. "Tomorrow the crick'll be down so I can cross over an' git that boy, 'fore he makes hisself sick on goat milk."

In the bright sun of the next morning he saw that he had been too optimistic. During the night the flood water had lowered unbelievably, but in so doing had left between them and the island a wide stretch of mucky silt that would bog man or horse to the eyes at the first step. Not only that, but a drift of logs had turned the main current toward the island. Though not more than a fourth as much water was flowing now as at the crest of the flood, it was still an ugly swath with power in its bite. Already, Johnny saw, its new course had gnawed a considerable chunk off the island. In a matter of hours it might take it all, boy and goats included.

"If I could get across an' come at him from the other side," thought Johnny—then suddenly remembered why he had happened to come here in the first place. He went quickly inside. There he found Don Luciano trying to get out of bed.

"Those dam' leg!" he complained.

“She’s got a paralyze an’ he can’t raise it.”

“Never mind,” said Johnny, lifting him back in bed. “Quick as we get that Robinson Crusoe of yours off’n his island, I’m goin’ to hunt you folks a doctor. Look! I figger I could git to that boy from the other side. Ain’t you the man that knows where there’s an all weather crossin’?”

“*Caramba!* How you know thees?”

“Never mind that! If there is such a crossin’, you better tell me—*quick*—how to find it!”

“*Si! Si, Senor!*” quavered the hurt man eagerly. “Half a mile up the Rio she got rock bottom solid, but no much wide, and no easy for find. If I can come along show you—”

“But you cain’t—there ain’t time to tote you!”

Carefully, in his broken English, Luciano Coca described landmarks by which Johnny might locate the crossing. Yet the Mexican still looked doubtful.

“But spozzin’ too much mud? Spozzin’ you fall off in the queeckem-sands? Spozzin’—”

But already Johnny Drumm was gone. Upstream he located the ridge directly west of which the rock-bottom crossing was supposed to lie. But all the smaller, closer landmarks of rocks and trees that Don Luciano had described were missing, ripped away by the flood. Fifty yards out where the channel now ran, Johnny could see riffles in the current that seemed to mark a submerged dike which might well be the underwater causeway. Nearer shore, drifted debris and a quicksandy silt covered all signs of it.

It took Johnny Drumm half an hour slogging up and down the muddy bank, probing with a pole, to locate a narrow strip of bottom that seemed hard enough to support his horse under knee-deep, slushy silt. Then he mounted and rode in. For a dozen feet his horse found solid footing,

then suddenly lunged saddle-horn deep into a pool of soupy mud.

“We’re gone goslin’s now!” thought Johnny. Then, as Jig-Foot floundered, trying frantically to swim shorewards in the sticky, sucking ooze, two horsemen appeared suddenly on the bank. Almost before Johnny knew they were there, one of them, a short, fat-middled man in a white shirt and small brown hat, had tossed out his rope.

“Hook it on your horn,” he advised cheerfully, as Johnny grabbed the rope end. “We’ll give you a tow!”

The other man threw out his rope, too, and Johnny quickly looped them both over his saddle horn. With the help of their two horses’ tugging, Jig-Foot managed to flounder out. Batting mud from his eyes Johnny saw now that one of the men was Blackwhiskers.

“Howdy,” grinned the whiskery one. “Headin’ west again, eh?”

“Look,” said Johnny. “There’s supposed to be a crossin’ here. There’s a Mexkin kid stranded on an island downstream an’—”

But already the short-barreled rider was heading firmly into the slush.

“Don Luciano told us the whole situation,” he said. “So we came right on. Follow me!”

PLAINLY this red-faced fat man in store clothes knew this crossing’s every turn. In five minutes he led them safely across the Rio Aguaje. In less than an hour Johnny Drumm, with his two companions on the shore end of three spliced lariats for an anchor, had plowed his way through sand and silt out to the crumbling island and brought the twelve-year-old Jose safely to the west bank of the Rio Aguaje. Most of the goats, following his lead, managed also to swim ashore. Over across on the east bank Senora Coca, ill though she was,

had somehow dragged her half-paralyzed husband outside to watch them. Even at that distance, and through mud-blinkered eyes, Johnny Drumm could sense the joy of a mother's relief in the way she waved to them, her other hand meanwhile lifting her skirt to wipe her eyes. It made him feel good, somehow.

Then he saw that the stocky man was looking at him with a peculiar, inquiring, steady-eyed gaze.

"I hear you were heading west, young man," the short man said. "Looking for a job?"

Johnny Drumm thought of the \$5,000 stuffed in a pair of saddlebags that he had dumped in a corner of Luciano Coca's bedroom and almost forgotten.

"Why sure," he gulped. "I reckon I am, but—"

"The Diamond L's needin' men—thirty miles west. You better head right out."

"Just hold your clabber, mister," said Johnny Drumm. "First I got to go back to the other side an'—"

"That side's Tuck Mangum's county," broke in the fat man dryly. "I hear he's a plumb tough sheriff!"

"But, look here, I tell you I—"

"If it's your saddlebags you want to go back after—why don't we just swap—and you take mine?"

For a full half minute Johnny Drumm stood silent, wiping mud from his clothes and trying to think it out.

"I ain't worryin' about no saddlebags," he said finally. "Them folks got to be looked after. They had a kid drowned. I was aimin' to hunt the body."

"We done found it this mornin' on the way out," volunteered Blackwhiskers.

Already the short man was lacing his own saddlebags on Johnny Drumm's saddle.

"Reuben, here--" he nodded toward Blackwhiskers, "figgered some feller who robbed the Barranca Mercantile might be caught floodbound here at old Luciano's for the sheriff to pick up handy. But it looks like he must have got across. In case you run into him, you might tell him you heard the money was going to be returned—and the matter dropped."

"I'll tell him," said Johnny Drumm soberly.

"That poor Mexican family are friends of mine," said the short, fat man. "Young man, I want to shake your hand!"

In the cowboy's lean grip the pudgy-looking hand was as hard as iron.

"I didn't ketch the name, mister," said Johnny.

Something like a twinkle shone in the short hombre's birdlike brown eyes as he turned to Blackwhiskers, ignoring the question:

"Reuben, you ride with this boy a piece till you're sure he's on the right road."

Johnny Drumm rode now with the mud on his clothes drying swiftly in the sun, his new saddlebags empty, his heart somehow full.

"Reuben," he grinned, "that old barrelbelly back yonder—there's somethin' about him that sorter gits me!"

"Yeah—I wouldn't wonder!" chuckled Blackwhiskers dryly, slapping his thigh. "One way or another he gits a good many fellers!"