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The Toughest Ranger

GALAXY
PRESENTS

Chapter One

THE Arizona sun beat pitilessly down upon the dun plain and warped and baked the tired trees which drooped about the 'dobe ranch house.

The road, little more than two wagon tracks, started in a joined point on one horizon and ended in another point at the western limit of the plain. It was endless, that road, endless and dry and hot. And down it came Petey McGuire, leading his horse, the little sorrel named Pat.

Petey McGuire's high heels were run over; his Stetson was shapeless; his jeans were worn through at the knees. About his waist hung suspended from scraped leather an old Peacemaker. His young face was haggard and coated with a pasty mixture of dust and sweat. His eyes were hopeless.

Pat, with lowered head, limped after him. The little sorrel's flanks were white with dried lather, his coat was roughened and spotted with cackleburs. It was all he could do to keep going, but keep going he did as long as his nose was close against Petey McGuire's back.

Pat had thrown a shoe and Pat had spent himself on a journey of a thousand miles and Pat, oatless these many weeks, was a dead horse unless he got rest and care.

Shuffling with weariness, slogging through the dust, they came to the ranch house gate just as a thickset fellow rode out.



*It was endless, that road, endless and dry and hot.
And down it came Petey McGuire, leading his horse,
the little sorrel named Pat.*

The stranger would have ridden straight by if Petey had not stopped him. But Petey did with a pleading gesture.

“Mister,” said Petey looking wistfully up, “I got to have a job. I got to get Pat shoed and get some oats into him before . . .”

“Not hiring anybody—like you,” said the stranger.

Petey blinked and felt anger redden his face. “We need some rest, that’s all. I can punch cows. I thought this newer country would be better than Kansas. . . .”

“It ain’t a question of punchin’ cows,” said the stranger curtly. “It’s a question of punchin’ rustlers. What I need is fightin’ men.” With a flick of his quirt the ranch owner sent his mount forward and the abruptness of his departure was an insult.

“Saddle tramp,” Petey told Pat. “That’s all I am. A saddle tramp.” With a surge of rage, he said, “Damn him. How the hell does he know I can’t fight? How . . .”

Pat was standing with his left ear forward, listening though he could not hold up his tired head.

“He’s right,” said Petey. “Yeah. He’s right. What do I know about fightin’? Yeah. Just a kid, just nobody. No jobs for kids, Pat. No jobs for a guy that can’t spit smoke.”

He led onward at a slower, more hopeless gait than before. He walked for a mile or more and then stopped again.

“Hell,” said Petey McGuire.

It was a doleful word, a substitute for a woman’s tears.

He started on again with Pat slogging after him.

Mile after mile, mile after mile, and above, the scorching sun hammered molten arrows into Petey’s back, made the

brass saddle horn too hot to touch. But he would not ride. He would not further abuse the only friend he had.

The world could find no use for Petey McGuire. He was too young. He was not tough enough. He had soft blue eyes and red cheeks and though he was of medium height he did not give the impression of being tall.

On the run from Kansas. On the run for a thousand miles. In Kansas a foreman had thrashed him thoroughly, had pushed his face into the mud just because Petey had spoken up to say . . .

But, hell, what did it matter? What did anything matter? Wasn't he always running away? Wasn't he always slogging over leagues of the West, from starvation to starvation interspersed with jobs he never kept?

On the run from a father who had been something less than kind. On the run from a beating he still winced to remember. And now at twenty-four he was still on the run. Job to job, beating to beating.

"Yeah," said Petey McGuire with bitter inflection. "Yeah. Saddle tramp."

He'd like to kill them. All of them. The foreman who had thrashed him, the endless others who had plagued him. The punchers who had jeered at him for silky blond hair and soft blue eyes.

And always the reason had been the same. Always he had been too soft. He had roped a calf and his Pat had slipped upon the muddy plain, and before he could loosen up the rope, the calf had died. And he had not been able to keep back tears.

The foreman had been about to shoot a horse and Petey, yelling in sudden rage, although the broken leg . . .

“Yeah, saddle tramp,” muttered Petey McGuire.

He had taught Pat tricks, clever tricks and when punchers had laughed at him because he talked to Pat and told him dreams . . . Yes. Sure. He had cried.

“Saddle tramp,” muttered Petey McGuire.

He was too softhearted, that was all. He couldn’t stand to see men and beasts suffer. He couldn’t stand jeers.

But now it was strange the way the sun affected him. His mouth was curled down in a bitter grimace. He’d like to kill them, every one. Just because they thought a man was less a man because he felt things more deeply, he was on the run. Over leagues of the West. From Kansas to Arizona.

They didn’t call him Petey. They called him “Sweetheart” and “Mary.”

This feeling within him was strange. Before he had tried to excuse them but now . . . Now he wanted to kill them for what they had done to him for twenty-four years. And now poor Pat was getting the backslap of it. Pat needed oats and bright shoes and a cool stall.

That stranger’s remark had done an odd thing to him. He had wanted to whip up the Peacemaker and shoot—shoot with cold and awful accuracy and bring that heavy fool down into the dirt with blood pouring from his head.

Petey felt the surprise of feeling such a thing. It was foreign to him. He was no fighting man and the stranger knew it well by the slightest glance.

But never before had Petey felt this helpless, blind rage against the world which wouldn't have him in it, the world which drove him on, the world which was now trying to kill Pat.

He did not know how far he went as his legs were numb and walking, mechanical. But when he looked up he was on the outskirts of a small pueblo. The biggest building in it was a fort-like 'dobe structure which presented an arched gate to the road. There was a sign about that gate: "THE ARIZONA RANGERS."

Petey stopped, hardly seeing the sign at all. In this town, he knew, he could swab out a bar for food. He could clean up a stable. . . .

But Pat had to have shoes and oats and a few weeks' rest.

He turned and looked at the weary little cow pony who didn't even raise his head. Pat pushed ahead a staggering step and shoved his muzzle into Petey's chest.

"Yeah," said Petey. "Yeah. I know. I'm hungry too."

He went toward a saloon and wrapped Pat's reins about the hitchrack. Petey stepped through the doors and into the dim interior.

The bartender was a thick-jowled fellow, shining up glasses. He took one look at Petey and marked him for what he was—saddle tramp.

"Beat it," said the bartender before Petey had spoken. "We got a swamper. There ain't no room in Cristobal for saddle tramps."

"Look," pleaded Petey.

"Yeah, but you better do the lookin'. Captain Shannon

locks up every man that can't pay his way. He's cleanin' up the country, see? He's tough, the toughest Ranger in the state and you better take my tip. Beat it."

"You mean . . . you mean just because I'm broke he'd lock me up?" said Petey.

"Well? Why not?"

A chill of terror shook Petey. He turned around and went out into the street. He stopped with Pat's reins in his hand and stared at the big 'dobe building which was marked with the sign: "THE ARIZONA RANGERS."

He knew what he faced. If they locked him up, Pat . . . He hadn't realized until now how shabby Pat looked after a thousand miles. They wouldn't take care of Pat.

But he couldn't go on. No, he couldn't take to the desert again. That way lay death. And here was death for Pat.

His hand was shaking as he pulled his hat brim down. He had no solution for this. Captain Shannon was tough, toughest Ranger in the state. . . .

Petey swallowed hard.

If Pat . . .

Suddenly he wanted to hit somebody, anybody. He wanted to lash out and slay these ghosts which had stalked him for twenty-four years. His rage began to mount.

They had no right to do this to him. No right to kill Pat by loosing him on the waterless desert. Pat needed care!

Suddenly Petey McGuire felt cold. His wits felt like crystal in his head. He was not shaking. He had felt himself grow taller and the experience did not even surprise him. His young face was set and his blue eyes were suddenly hard.

They couldn't kill Pat.

And he knew what he could do.

It was an amazingly brazen idea.

Without any volition of his own he found himself leading Pat across the road and to the 'dobe fort's gate.

Petey was without any fear of anything. He was five times bigger than the sentry.

Maybe it was the sun. Maybe it was starvation. Maybe it was the thought of losing his only friend.

But Petey snapped at the leather-faced sentry, "Where's Shannon?"

He did not recognize his own voice.

The sentry jerked his thumb toward another archway within. Petey, leading Pat, went toward it.

He could see a man beyond. That must be Shannon. A granite boulder behind a desk.

Half of Petey was suddenly scared to death. But the other half of him would not stop walking. He dropped Pat's reins and stalked into the office with a careless, impudent swagger.

Captain Shannon looked up, annoyed, starting to stamp the caller by his dusty, torn clothing.

But Petey was without fear now. Nothing could stop Petey. Not even himself.

"M'name's McGuire," said Petey in a challenging tone. "Petey McGuire. You've heard of me."

Shannon started to make a biting remark, but Petey rushed on without any help from Petey.

"Petey McGuire. From Kansas City to N'Orleans, what I say goes. I'm so tough I'd give a rattler nightmares. You're

Shannon and I hear you need tough guys. Well, you ain't got anybody around here that'd stand up to me."

"I don't think . . ." began Shannon sarcastically.

"Hell! You trying to tell me you never heard of Petey McGuire? G'wan, I ain't in no mood for telling funny stories. Where's my badge and where's my bunk? And don't take all day about it!"

Petey was scared down. He was so scared he expected Shannon to leap at him across that battered desk.

But Shannon looked at a dusty, hard-faced, reckless fellow with a twisted grin on his mouth and a swagger in the way he stood.

Shannon was taken not a little aback. He knew his own reputation and now that he was getting old he was guarding it. He had reasons. He had made enemies in his day. And this tough-talking kid had more brass than anybody Shannon had seen for many a year. Shannon's reputation was such as to demand respect. And here was a young whippersnapper . . .

Shannon got up and came around the desk. He was taller than Petey by half a foot and heavier by fifty pounds.

With malice, Shannon said, "So you're tough, are you, sonny?"

Petey startled himself by bristling, "The name's McGuire. Petey McGuire, and if you ain't heard of me you don't know nothin'. Where's the badge and the bunk?"

Shannon scratched his jaw and squinted up a cold, gray eye. He was amused. But now was not the time. Oh, no. He could read this kid like a book. Youngster putting on a front and nothing more and when the guns began to go . . .

Shannon had a sense of humor.

“Hunter will show you the bunk. We’ll see about you later.”

Petey found that he was going out of the door. He went up to Pat and blindly bumped into something white beside the pony. Petey discovered it was a girl.

But the role which had dropped over him like a coat of mail would not desert him now. Some evil devil had slid down out of the blue, had leaped into mild Petey McGuire and was now bent upon his destruction.

“Look where you’re goin’!” said Petey.

The girl was astonished. She was a little thing, perhaps twenty, and she was fragilely beautiful. Her lovely gray eyes were wide as she backed up.

“I . . . I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I was looking at the pony. He’s been ridden very hard.”

“Yeah,” snapped Petey.

And she did something she had never done before in her life. She flashed, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, killing a horse that way!”

“Blah!” said the devil inside Petey McGuire.

She backed up again and he surlily led Pat toward her so that she had to step out of the way again.

She was tight-lipped with fury at such insolence but he gave her not another glance.

Hunter came out of the barracks and saw him and fell in to show him to the stables.

And back in the office doorway, Captain Shannon looked bleakly at the departing rider and mount and then back at his daughter Bette.



*She flashed, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself,
killing a horse that way!"*

Shannon's reputation was great. He had one thing in this world which was worth having, one thing which he protected so fiercely that the object itself was stricken with awe of him.

He looked at his daughter Bette and then back at the vanishing McGuire.

Bette walked toward the office, slowly, not seeing.

"Well?" said Shannon.

She gave a start.

"Never mind," said Shannon. "I'll get him for that."

"Oh no!" said Bette swiftly. "No. He was tired. I told him . . ."

She was stopped by the searching stare which her father gave her.

Guiltily she turned and walked down the veranda and when she turned a little to see if McGuire was still in sight, Shannon was still staring at her.