

**L. RON
HUBBARD**



**The
Magic
Quirt**

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

The Magic Quirt

GIT up, there, you, Mac! Gieup, Bessie! Carnsarn ye for a pair of busted-down, walleyed, spavined ignorantipedes! Gettin' so a man can't even git ten winks on his own chuck wagon without you buzzard baits clownin' up!"

Old Laramie curled twenty feet of whip into a powerful pop about their ears and the pair of swaybacks began to pull once more. The chuck wagon clattered and rolled over the last small hump and started down the curving, treacherous trail which led into and through Daly Canyon.

A horse is often wiser than a preoccupied man and Bessie or Mac might have had something to say if they could talk. For two wagons wouldn't pass on this narrow, precipitous trail. They let the whip pop away their caution and downward they shuffled.

Old Laramie had not liked being disturbed. It was just about dusk and shortly he would be elbow deep in the onerous duties of the cook of the *Lazy G*.

When the horses had shied and stopped he had been halfway through a little book titled: *THE SECRET OF POWER, A Twenty-Five Lesson Course in the Occult Sciences, Giving the Student Positive Control of His FELLOW MEN.*

That was for Old Laramie. By gad, if he didn't get some control over somethin' pretty soon he was going to turn Digger

Injun complete with breechclout and let 'em all go to the devil. For ever since Lee Jacoby had come as foreman to the Lazy G the life of Old Laramie had been worth less than a secondhand chaw of Old Mule.

“Hey, you cookie!” Lee Jacoby would howl. “Do you call this chuck, or did you make it to shoe horses with?” Or, “My Gawd, cookie, I didn’t know you was a expert on mixin’ poisons. Boys, we ain’t got a cook, we got a apothecary! Throw it out and get me some ham and eggs.”

It was the quality of the wit which injured. For as an old-time chef of the cow camps, Laramie was not unused to joshing. But ye gods, it ought at least to be funny. And it never, never, never ought to be followed up with dumping perfectly edible chuck on the ground.

The punchers of the Lazy G followed the leader. They weren’t the old crowd. Ever since the Kid’s pa got killed in Laredo, old hands had been drifting. First came Lee Jacoby with his cock-o’-the-walk brutality and then followed rannies who better suited the foreman’s taste. They never consulted the Kid.

Young Tom Gregory had lost his mother when he was born and his old man when he was thirteen. And now at fourteen he was owner in title only, the Crawford County Bank—meaning old man Williamson—actually running the spread. It was all legal enough but things were happening. One of these days the Kid would have to drift, penniless. And Old Laramie was trying hard to stand by.

“By cracky,” sighed Old Laramie, thumb in the book and

eyes vacant, "if I could do just one-sixteenth the things this Hindu feller says I can, I could run that Lee Jacoby plumb off'n the range. And Williamson to boot." He looked back into the book, read a moment and then growled with determination, "And the Bolger twins likewise!"

Rapt in this glorious dream, he didn't even begin to hear what was happening ahead. He drew an imaginary gun from an imaginary holster and said to the imaginary Gus Bolger, the same that had shot the Kid's pa, "Ye're powerless! With the magic wave of my left paw I creates you a statue! With a quick thumbin' of my right, I creates you a corpse!"

BANG! BLOWIE!

But it wasn't Old Laramie's imaginary gun. It was a real, honest-to-gosh shootin' iron. And Bessie and Mac recognized it as such, reared against the remorseless weight of the unbraked wagon, got shoved ahead, reared again and then, bronc fashion, scared to death, lit out like the Cannonball Stage straight down the curving road.

Whoever it was that had shot was not in sight. The road's curve hid him. But the speed with which Old Laramie was traveling would very shortly remedy that.

His old slouch hat whipped back in the hurricane and the chin thong nearly strangled him. He tried to grind home the brake shoe but he missed and had to use both hands and both feet to hold on. The reins were loosely tied to the brake and to reach them was impossible. He couldn't reach his rabbit's foot and his Little Jim Dandy Guaranteed Lucky Ring was carelessly left in camp!

Old Laramie once upon a time had been as tough as the next one, but three bullet holes, a sense of defeat and old age had ended that. He screamed like a wounded mountain lion and the scenery blurred by.

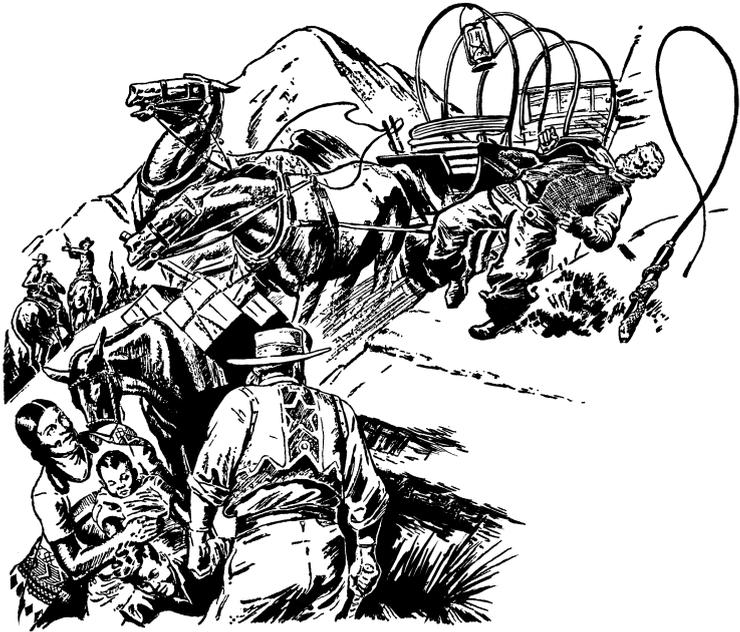
The chuck wagon finished the curve on two wheels, swapped to the other two, came back and tried to lean over the hundred-foot drop into the dry arroyo.

Straight ahead were six pack animals, clinging to the cliff beside the road as only burros can do. Directly in the track of the plunging wagon were two mounted men, holding guns on somebody or something out of Old Laramie's view.

But the horsemen weren't there long. They gave a white-eyed look at the coming wagon and dug spur. Their outraged mounts reared and fought, to break away down the road in an uncontrolled run. The riders were out of sight and still going an instant later when Mac, tangling with a sideswiped burro, upset the chuck wagon entire, flat and loud in the middle of the road.

Old Laramie floated to an easy landing in sand and sagebrush. The sound of breaking crockery gradually ceased to echo in the surrounding arroyos. The dust dropped slowly down in the dusk.

Old Laramie spat, sat up, felt of his bones and then swore luridly and long. That seemed to relieve him somewhat and he looked at his horses. They were bruised but had struggled to their feet with no bones broken. The chuck wagon, however, had spilled everything from frying pans to cockroaches.



*Old Laramie floated to an easy landing in sand
and sagebrush. The sound of breaking crockery gradually
ceased to echo in the surrounding arroyos.*

“*¡Ah, gracias, gracias!*” wailed somebody. “*¡Gracias, amigo! ¡Gracias infinitas para todos mandados!*”

Old Laramie understood very little Spanish but he knew he was being thanked and he turned to find a small, fat Indian from over the line waddling up, bowing and advancing.

Three small children now rose wide-eyed from the sage and a woman, as fat as her man, came off a rock above the trail carrying a fourth child.

It was a very strange thing, thought Old Laramie. Sure these Mexican Indians didn't seem to be good bait for the owl-hoots.

The flood of Spanish went on with much flinging of the arms, and when it seemed that he was about to get kissed by the woman, Laramie got gruff.

“Hell, wasn't nothin'! Gimme a hand with this yere wagon.”

They gave him a hand. The three kids picked up groceries and pans while the man and his wife aided to rig a block and tackle to right the wagon.

It was quite dark when the task was done and Laramie, less breakage, was ready to proceed on his way. He was getting mighty anxious when he thought of how Lee Jacoby would take this. For he should have been at Camp Seven something before supper time.

The little Indian was jabbering with more thanks.

“Quit it,” said Laramie. “I would've done it for anybody. But just now I got to go.”

“*¡Señor, su pago!*”

“Pago yourself,” said Old Laramie genially. “But I got to go. I'm goin' to be roasted, clothes, hoofs and hide, as it is!”

The Indian was pulling forth a fat sack. From it he poured a small torrent of silver and gold coins. Laramie's eyes popped. So that was the bait! But he found that he was about to be paid. This unsettled him.

"Dang it, you ornery little cactus-eater. I didn't do you no favor on purpose. My horses run away and . . ."

The Indian tried to push the money at him but he finally succeeded in pushing it back. There was an immediate conference between the Mexican and his wife and finally the man went to the sad little burros and dug into a pack.

The thing which he now extended to Laramie glittered in the starlight. And the man made a valiant attempt at English.

"See! Thees theeng. *Látigo*. Make beeg man. *Muy fuerte* man, *látigo* he take. Beeg man make. *Muy fuerte*. Me not Indian. Me Aztec. You savvy? You keep. You beeg, beeg man. *Mucho* lucky. *Mucho!*"

Puzzled, Laramie took the object and found it to be a silver-mounted quirt. He was too anxious to get to Camp Seven to delay and so, saluting with the quirt, hastily got started before the thanks began again.

Mac and Bessie picked their way amongst the rocks of the canyon and soon came out on the flat where, in the distance, a fire marked the whereabouts of Camp Seven.

Laramie drew up beside the blaze and found Lee Jacoby standing there, eyeing him with his usual evil glare and perhaps something more.

Without palaver, Laramie got down, threw the back of the

wagon open and hurriedly began to throw cold beans and sowbelly in the direction of the blaze. Working so fast he was nearly a blur, he had supper ready for tin plates in less than fifteen minutes.

With an occasional grin and gibe the punchers jostled each other past and carrying their handouts and coffee mugs to nearby stones, soon ended the meal.

All this time Lee Jacoby had said nothing. The silence was worse than a tongue-lashing and when Laramie had handed the big black-eyed devil his chuck, the old cook shuddered. But still Lee Jacoby said nothing.

Later, when he was cleaning up, Laramie ruminated upon it uncomfortably and the Kid, coming up, had to speak twice before Laramie heard him.

“Oh, hello, Kid.” He stopped and looked closely at the youngster. It was plain, even by the fitful firelight, that the Kid had been crying. “What’s up, Kid?”

“Nothin’, Laramie.”

“Workin’ too hard, mebbe?”

“Naw. Hell, it’d be a relief to work. I just rode out to see how things was doin’ here.”

“Somebody dress you down mebbe?”

“Naw. What do I care for these big stiffs?”

“Well, mebbe the bank, huh?”

The Kid was silent and quickly changed the subject. “That grub shore was welcome, Laramie. Ever since Sing Lee quit at the main ranch, I just about starve to death.”

“Sing Lee? Come on, now, Kid. Why would he quit? By jumpin’ sassafras, somebody . . .”