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**Love of a Saddle by Frank Shortt**

He loped into camp one rainy evening looking like something the cats had drug in. If we had ever seen a ragamuffin, this surely had to be the worst. His old beat-up Stetson had been passed down from generation to generation until there was not much left except the brim and part of the crown. His faded blue chambray shirt had patches on the elbows. His blue-jeans, if you could call them blue, were covered with about a half-inch of grease. There was nothing left of his Juan Fernandez boots, made in San Antoino. His horse was the best part of his outfit, a sorrel with white stockings, and the beat-up old army saddle did not do the steed justice. He did not look to be more than twenty-five years old, so why he came to such poverty at an early age was anybody’s guess. His old Navy Colt hung down in a quick-draw holster.

Bill Sanchez, ramrod of the outfit, stepped forward as the stranger rode into our midst. The day before, Hamp Griffith our point, had taken sick and was unable to perform his duties. Bill was looking for someone to take Hamp’s place.

“Howdy pilgrim, what brings you out in this God-awful weather?”

“I’m a’lookin’ for work, humbly replied the man. I was let go up on the Oklahoma border about a week ago. They used the excuse that they had too many punchers, so if you have anything I can do, I’d be mighty grateful to you for a chance.”

After further inquiry, we found out that the young man was let go because he was sweet on the ranch owner’s daughter. Under all his grime, he was a fine looking chap. We did not find this out until we reached Dodge.

“Ever rode point?” Bill asked.

“Shore have, and besides, I can break most any nag you can seat me on. I don’t mean to brag, but up north I have a pretty good reputation.”

“Light with us, Bill urged, tomorrow we’ll just test your mettle. I have a couple of broncs that need tamin’ and we’ll shore give you a chance at ‘em!”

The Leaning R was trail-herding five-hundred loco longhorns from Midland up to Dodge City and, as it was, our outfit was sparse for the size of the herd. Ole man Rangle had told us beforehand that he could not afford any extra help for this particular drive. I was the youngest hand and went by the handle, Frank Sharp. Wally Sims was the cook, and the rest of the crew was made up of vaqueros, roustabouts from Fort Worth, and whoever else Bill could round up in a short time. The reason for the hurry on this drive was that the old man had heard that a shipment of beef was needed for markets eastward in very short order. If we could make it by August fifteenth our outfit would be sitting pretty for a couple of years. This would give us time to put together a better and more manageable herd.

The stranger ate as if he had missed many meals. He wasted not a crumb and actually licked the tin plate that Wally Sims scooted to him.

“Beans and salt pork never tasted so good. The biscuits were the cat’s meow! Boy, was I starving. Do you fellows eat this good all the time? If so, I think I’m gonna like this outfit.”

Wally beamed like a pleased housewife. He even offered the man more food, something he had never done to any of the other waddies. “What’s yore handle, young man,” Wally inquired.

“You can call me Slim” he replied. This fit him to a tee.

Next morning Bill Sanchez rousted us out before the sun had gotten past the eastern horizon. He was in a hurry to see if this young man’s brag had any essence to it. He led ‘The Killer” out of the hobbled circle. This particular horse was a large black that not many of the outfit had ridden, and most could not even mount the beast.

“Well, Slim, whattaya think you can do with this wild cayuse?” Bill asked.

“Piece of cake,” replied Slim.

Wally, the gambler was already taking bets on the young man. For some reason he took a real liking to the stranger. Most of the waddies did not have any money, but most had an ample supply of tobacco, papers, extra little things that comprise a trail drive.

Slim walked up to the black and the first thing he did was to fasten his teeth onto the ear of the killer. He slid the bridle on, and finally, after securing the horse to the cook’s wagon, he commenced to saddling the bronc. This was done in record time as the killer was fidgety and moving constantly. We saw right away that this was no ordinary puncher.

Slim rode the black! Before he was done the black would have eaten out of his hand. We stood there wide eyed and our mouths agape. This is something we had not seen in a long time, even from the vaqueros that rode with us, and they knew horses better than anyone else. It came out later that Slim had once had a sojourn into Mexico and had stayed with one of the old time vaqueros who could break a horse, without violence, and with only a braided rawhide hackamore. What Slim whispered to the killer, we never knew, and Slim was not about to tell.

There was no doubt in Bill’s mind that Slim was a good point man. He hired him without further ado and, turns out, he was glad he did. In fact, we got that herd to Dodge without loss of very few head and in record time. Bonuses were given to all of us as had been prearranged by the boss beforehand if we made it on time. Hamp Griffith had succumbed to his illness, so Bill assured Slim that he would be welcome on the Leaning R.

Slim’s first purchase was a forty-dollar saddle, bought cheap because the maker, Ricotti, was going out of business. This saddle had beaten silver accoutrements, inlaid with red gems, and the stirrups had carved leather tapederos, inlaid with sterling silver.

Slim returned to camp that night with a look of pride upon his face. He confided to me that he had never owned a decent saddle and had just been watching for the opportunity provided by Ricotti. He was the butt of the camp’s jokes for several days afterward because of his extravagance. Most of the outfit was not privy to the fact that Slim had made a very shrewd bargain. Slim guarded that saddle with his very life.

The ride back to Midland was uneventful. Slim took every precaution to keep his saddle clean and dry. His new duds, purchased in Dodge, included a silk neckerchief, that soon became the envy of every other waddie in the bunch.

Soon, because of Slim’s prowess as an all-around cowboy, he became the favorite son of Ole Man Rangle. He was allowed free run of the range about the Leaning R. One afternoon, as Slim and I trailed a bunch of mavericks, he happened upon a steer known for being extra stubborn. When the steer would not turn at Slim’s urging, he roped it to turn it back toward the home ranch. The rope tugged at the saddlehorn, threatening to undo it. Instead of allowing this to happen, Slim slackened the rope allowing the critter to run free. The maverick turned on Slim and chased him almost all the way back to the bunkhouse. Needless to say, he was the brunt of many a joke for several days. Slim was not about to allow one old mossback to ruin his precious saddle.

During one of the rides Slim and I made around the Leaning R range, I asked,

“Do you have any family anywhere, Slim?

“Naw, I grew up in abject poverty in orphanages and what farmers would take me in used me for a slave. I was just an unbranded maverick. My maw was a woman of the night in St. Louis. I never saw her again after I was about seven years old!”

Slim never mentioned his past again, and I did not care to question him further.

Autumn waned into winter. Soon activity was at a minimum because of the icy mornings and the freezing night temperatures famous on the Texas plains. One afternoon, the old man approached the bunkhouse with a request of urgency. He needed a couple of young, energetic cowmen to pursue some ranging steers that had broken through the barb wire and would surely freeze to death because of an Arctic Norther approaching. The rain was already becoming sleet and would produce and ice storm before midnight. Slim and I were the chosen ones.

Slim and I rode pell-mell to the site of the steers thinking to turn them without any trouble. The steers had other ideas. As freezing rain turned to icy sheets, I wrapped my slicker tighter around me. Piling up of sleet on the slicker became insulation to further onslaughts. I noticed that Slim had taken his slicker off and had wrapped it around his precious saddle.

“What are you thinking?” I cried above the din.

“No crazy Norther is gonna ruin my saddle,” Slim averred.

We finally turned the small herd, heading them into a ravine not far from the bunkhouse. By the time we reached the safety of the bunkhouse, Slim was frozen from head to foot. We had to almost peel his stiff clothing off, and Wally Sims took such motherly care of Slim that we thought afterwards that he must have had a great love for the crazy galoot who cared more for a saddle than he did his own life.

Pneumonia set in after a day or two. Slim fought a good fight, but finally succumbed to the dread disease, as so many young, careless waddies have done in the past. Wally Sims tried every trick he knew to allay Slim’s demise. He made his famous chicken broth, every kind of herbal tea he had on hand, and even made poultices of onions placing them on Slims heaving chest. At the end, all he could do was pray that the Master would have mercy on Slim’s soul.

The whole outfit wondered what would become of Slim’s precious saddle which sat in a corner, safe and dry. Wally Sims solved the issue. When we finally laid Slim to rest, Wally buried the beloved saddle with him, using it for his final pillow.

**Love of a Saddle**

He’d spent the last of his money

And some he hadn’t earned

For a forty dollar saddle

Some said, “He got burned”.

“This saddle “was his pride and joy”

So the other cowboy’s sigh,

He’d go to any length of miles

To keep it clean and dry.”

One day he roped an ornery steer

That most unseated him

The rope was taut and tugging

The situation looked mighty grim.

Instead of ruining his saddle

He let the critter loose

There was many a laugh that evening

As to camp he did vamoose.

Then one cold and dreary night

He played the final goal

To prevent his saddle getting wet

He sacrificed his soul.

‘Stead of wrapping on his slicker

To allay the freezing rain

He placed it on his saddle

[Which surely felt no pain].

This story’s told until this day

Where cowboys congregate

About the crazy cowboy

Whose devotion was so great,

That he let pneumonia kill him

And was buried in the ground

Because he loved his saddle

More than anything around.