

Pecos the Peeler

BY B. M. BOWER

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THE prairies were brown and drenched; the sky a slaty sieve through which dripped water without a break. A west wind drove the rain-lines slantwise to the east, and the wild range cattle humped their backs to it miserably and sought scant shelter in the deepest coulees. The hilltops and high levels were but sodden, desolate wastes whereon no living thing moved.

Of the Four-Eleven riders, all were dry and content save the horse-wrangler; and he huddled in his yellow slicker and with his hat-brim dripping like the eaves of a house, was sitting humped in his saddle, out on a pinnacle, unhappily counting the hours till the misery of the nighthawk.

In the bed tent men were sprawled comfortably and ungracefully, "telling it scarey"—which, being interpreted, means the relation of fearsome adventures in the wild, and of neck-threatening rides on untamed steeds; of mishaps dire and triumphs sweet.

"Up at the Happy Heart," Delaney began, "there was a bronco-peeler named Pecos Smith working for the outfit; a big-mouthed son-of-a-gun, but he could sure ride. I seen him get let down on his face good and plenty, one time, though—and it sure done me a heap uh good."

Noisy Jim, sitting cross-legged on the ground, a hand-glass propped against his knees and his face belathered till his own grandmother couldn't have thought him pretty, wiped his razor carefully upon a two-weeks-old newspaper.

"Our friend of the Happy Heart has an incident to relate," he remarked. "If any among you has any objection to the telling, let him speak now, or forever after hold his peace. You won't have a chance when he gets fairly started." Then he added as an afterthought, "You needn't believe him, unless you choose."

Delaney pulled his tobacco sack shut with his teeth and grinned. "I call your bluff," he said cheerfully. "I wasn't

hurting t' tell it—but now yuh got to 'come listen to my song.' "

"An' I won't detain yuh long," murmured Spider from the roll of bedding where he lay unbeautifully coiled.

"You shut up," Delaney told him bluntly, with the unceremoniousness of a close friend. "This here tale uh woe that I'm about t' punish yuh with is straight goods and all romancing barred."

"Same as ghost stories," Spider cut in rashly.

Noisy Jim raised his eyes from his own reflection, and his razor hand poised six inches from his jaw. "Did somebody mention ghosts?" he queried mildly, and Spider's face turned red.

"As I was about to say," Delaney went on, "this Pecos could sure enough drag it out of 'em, but he was too darn well aware of the fact, and he was dead anxious t' have everyone else wise to it—which would spoil the best rider living, t' my notion.

"I guess you've heard me speak uh Dolly Bridgeman, the old man's cousin, that was stopping at the ranch. She belonged over in the Graburn Basin country, where her dad had a horse ranch, and she was over at the Happy Heart on account uh being stuck on a fellow her folks was down on. They thought, I guess, girls is like calves; yuh can wean 'em in about a week uh separation from the man they want."

"Say, is this a love tale?" Spider wanted to know.

Delaney gave no heed. " Well, she'd quit bawling and gone t' eating hay, so t' speak, and I guess every puncher on the ranch was cherishing some hopes, on the quiet, uh making her forget she ever felt bad about any fellow but him. She was a mighty nice little girl, all right—the kind any man on God's green earth ud be proud t' get his loop on. An' I guess Pecos had a bigger dose uh loco than any of us—at any rate, he acted the fool a heap worse.

"So the way it began, we was riding past the house one day, and Dolly was standing out on the porch, and she give us all the glad smile, same as she was in the habit uh doing when she met any of us; she was that kind, yuh see— always nice and pleasant to a fellow, whether she thought anything uh him or not.

"Well, Pecos was for absorbing the hull smile for himself, individual; he takes his hat clean off his head and swipes it down along past his knee, and like t' knocked his brains out on the saddle-horn, bowing so emphatic.

"He was riding a little paint—a high-strung, nervous - dispositioned horse named Spotted Dog—but gentle, if he was treated halfways white. But he hadn't been brought up in no dancing-school, so he kind o' mistook Pecos's intentions. He thought, I guess, that Pecos was handing out insults to him, instead uh politeness t' Miss Dolly. Anyway, he side-stepped a little, same as any high-tempered horse would— but nothing t' speak of; just snorted and danced off sideways a few steps. But Pecos, he was thinking t' make a pretty ride for Dolly t' see, and like a fool he jabbed his spurs into Spotted Dog, and swiped him over the head kind o' savage, and old Spotted Dog turned it on sudden. Next Pecos was aware of he was spread-eagling toward Miss Dolly, and her standing there, serious and sympathetic on the outside of her face, and laughing fit t' kill down deep in her eyes. A girl that's raised on a horse ranch can pretty near tell when there's any call for a man t' fight his horse." Delaney had let his cigarette grow cold, and stopped to light up again.

"That was a mighty long prelude for such a brief warble," Spider sighed. "I come blame near growing interested."

"I'll thank yuh t' stand back till I get through," Delaney retorted. "Pecos, he picks himself up, oozing anger out of his pores, he was so mad. Spotted Dog was standing there, looking at Pecos over his shoulder, kind o' surprised and reproachful, like my old dad used to look just when he was about t' cut loose with a strap. But Pecos, I guess, never was interviewed out in the woodshed by his dad—anyway, he couldn't seem t' recognize the signs. He walked up and got holt uh the reins, and stepped up on him again, with blood in his eye—and

considerable around in the vicinity of his nose, if I remember correctly.

"To my knowledge, Spotted Dog had never dropped a man before, and after that one 'it-hurts-me-worse-than-it-does-you' look, he made me think of a kid when he first finds out he can whistle a tune. It like t' tickled him t' death, just t' know he could. Pecos limbered up with his quirt and raked him along the ribs, and Spotted Dog got busy without any preliminaries. Glory to goodness, how he did pitch! It took him just about forty-nine seconds t' make Pecos eat dirt again— and he couldn't say that time was a fluke, either; he just naturally got thrown down, and no umpire on earth could holler 'foul.'

"Us boys led Spotted Dog back t' the corral and turned him loose, and Pecos limped off to the bunk-house and laid up for repairs, thinking, I reckon, 'Vanity, vanity—' What's the rest uh that, Noisy?"

"All is vanity," supplied Noisy in fragments, on account of shaving his chin at the moment.

"Oh! all right. Well, we had our little fun about it that day, when he wasn't present, and we concluded we wouldn't throw it into him much about it, seeing he'd got all that was coming to him. But, glory to goodness! We hadn't more than hit the bunk-house, that night, before Pecos rolled over and commenced belly-aching about it, and saying Spotted Dog couldn't be rode by no mortal man, and he was a sure-enough outlaw, and all that kind uh foolishness.

"Some uh the boys was for sanctioning all those remarks, for Spotted Dog sure had some unchristian specialties in his—for a beginner. But Pecos made me so darn tired I rose up in meeting and offered to bet him ten dollars Cypress Kid could top him off straight up, and with quirt a-swinging.

"Well, say, you'd ought to 'a' seen Pecos! He sure took himself serious, and he wasn't for having no rivals in the bronco-peeling business. His article uh faith was what *he* couldn't ride was no use wasting leather on. His eyes fair got glassy, and he lifted up on his elbow and raised my ante forty dollars!

"Well, say, I swallowed air fast, for a minute! I hadn't started in with no fifty dollars' worth of enthusiasm for Cypress

Kid, for I hadn't never so much as laid eyes on him; all I knowed about him was hearsay, and a man's rep generally gets plenty uh trimming up, amongst his loyal admirers, and it ain't the safest thing in the world t' gamble on.

"But I said it was a go—and then Pecos was about as unhappy as me, I reckon. We was both of us running whizzers, and we was both too darn ornery t' let go.

"So we talked big medicine a while, and I seen I was sure in for it. So we frames up a letter— What d'yuh call them kind everybody has a whack at, and then makes a wheel out uh their names, Noisy?"

"A round robin?" Noisy Jim suggested.

"That there's the bird. Pecos states his case pretty war-like—for a man with the peeling off half his anatomy, t' say nothing of other disablements— and Curly Landers butts in with a few remarks, and the rest all takes a whirl. And, by the time they'd relieved their minds, they'd filled both sides of an eight-by-ten sheet—all but a couple inches square for the wheel uh names—and I hadn't got a word in edgeways, mind yuh! And me with fifty dollars in the air. So I glommed some red ink that the cook had swiped out of an empty shack once, and I wrote across their letter endways, ' For the Lord's sake, come a-running. I've got fifty up on your rep'—and I felt some better, though it did hurt my feelings to put up good money like that, sight-unseen.

"Well, next day the cook rode out and held up the stage for us, and put robin redbreast aboard her, and then we had a wait coming. Cypress was over beyond the Graburn Basin, somewheres—he was riding for the big Ace uh Clubs Company, and the stage only made one trip a week—going up on Monday and coming back on Thursday. And if Cypress happened to be away from the home ranch, the Lord only knew when our suspense would be over.

"But, as luck would have it, next day along rides a sheep-wrangler direct from the lamb pens, and struck old Tom for a job riding; and old Tom kind uh took pity on the poor devil and hired him, so we had him to amuse ourselves with whilst we waited for an answer t' our round robin. He was a meek-faced, blue-eyed,

yellow-haired kind uh slim-jim—looked some like Spider, here."

Delaney dodged Spider's hat, and continued:

"He rode a mangy little cayuse that I counted fifty-one ribs on, and he had an old saddle that must 'a' cost him as much as seven dollars, I guess—and a pair uh chaps that was so far gone there was nothing whole but the fringe. And—oh, he fair blatted, he did. Curly said he'd seen him herding for Thompson—and that would 'a' queered him with the boys, even if they hadn't hated him on general principles, just for being a sheep-wrangler. We'd had a lot uh trouble with Thompson and his herders over range and water.

"Pecos, being on the lift, and sore on the world anyway, took this here Pilgrim's arrival—we dubbed him the Pilgrim soon as we seen the way he dragged his saddle off—he sure took him t' heart, and mourned around the bunk-house like an old cow in weaning time. And Pecos being so savage with him, I had t' take his part a lot—but it did grind me some, he was so damn mild mannered. I like t' see a man show fight, once in a while, when the occasion seems t' demand it.

"Well, come Thursday evening, we got an answer t' our challenge, all right. It said that Cypress Kid would ride over and gentle our bad little pony some day, when he could get a layoff. The general tone Pecos took as kind uh insulting—seeing there was a real bronco-peeler at the Happy Heart— and him and the boys got their heads t'gether and 'lowed they'd proceed t' educate Spotted Dog some. That didn't please me none too well, and I could fair see my fifty dollars fade away t' slow music, but I wouldn't squeal. I figured that I was due t' lose any way yuh was a mind t' fix it. Spotted Dog was sure a bad actor, once he piled his man and found out he could. Some horses seem t' have a natural gift that way, yuh know—and Pecos wasn't easy t' throw. I'd saw him make some wild old rides, and it looked t' me he ought t' know his business. Yuh sec, the way he raised my bet kind o' jarred my nerve. But I kept my face closed and looked wise, which was some comfort, seeing it kept Pecos feeling anxious; he didn't know what a

lot I was ignorant —about Cypress Kid, that is.

"A couple uh days after we got the letter I was talking t' Curly Landers about it, out in the barn, and the Pilgrim ambled in and caught a word or two about Cypress Kid. He kind o' hung around till Curly rode off, and then he come up t' me and says, kind o' deprecating:

"Is it so, that Cypress Kid is going t' come over and ride a contest against that Pecos Smith?"

"I told him maybe so, and he stood a minute and then he asked me if I thought he could ride better than Pecos Smith, and did I know him very well.

"I said no, I didn't, and he looked around to see if anybody was in hearing—which they wasn't—and then he says, 'Cypress Kid is kind of a hard man t' get along with, I guess. He run a band uh sheep about ten miles off from Coulee Creek, and the lambs got mixed up and lost from their mothers during the excitement, and the herder was scared so bad he left the bunch and drawed his time. He was afraid Cypress Kid was going t' kill him.' And then he shook his head mournful—thinking about them mixed lambs, I guess.

"I asked him if Cypress Kid could ride any, and he looked up at me kind uh earnest and said: ' I guess he can ride pretty good. I seen him ride a bucking horse once, and he stayed right with him, and never fell off once. I know I couldn't 'a' done that—I'd 'a' fell off, I guess, if a horse bucked with me like that. I guess he's a pretty good rider, anyway.'

"That made me kind o' hostile, and I told him t' chase himself off, which he done. I was sure disgusted t' think I'd asked a lamb-lickin' pilgrim like him for an expert opinion of a man's riding qualities.

"Well, things went along for a week or ten days, and no Cypress Kid showed up, and my fifty kept growing dimmer and dimmer t' my view, the way Pecos and the boys was training Spotted Dog. Lord knows he was bad enough when he piled Pecos, but that was nothin t' the fight he could put up after they'd let him shake off a dummy every' day. They'd watch till the ranch was quiet, and then take him out in the big corral and saddle him up, and tie a dummy onto him and

turn him loose. He sure got wicked, after a few times uh that, and it was as much as a man's life was worth t' try and top him off. Money couldn't 'a' hired Pecos t' try it, for all he was such a swell rider and buster.

"Now, I want t' tell yuh what that Pecos done t' the Pilgrim, just for pure spite. Pilgrim was coming home from town with a bunch of us one day, and his horse stirred up a rattler and crow-hopped a little. Pilgrim he stayed with him, by glomming the horn and pulling leather a lot. But he lost both stirrups, and was all over the saddle. Say, he was proud, though. Soon as old Joe settled down he hunted up his stirrups and got his toes in 'em, and looked around at us fellows, and says, kind o' triumphant. 'I guess you boys was expecting t' see me fall off!' And glory t' goodness, how the boys did guy him! They told him Pecos wasn't in it no more, and he was sure a rider—and it wasn't ten minutes till he was riding with a haughty backbone and looking down at us condescending.

"Dolly, she happened t' see it, and smiled awful sweet on him, I noticed—and so did Pecos, and that made him hot under the collar some more. He was doing his little best t' make some impression on Dolly, and he wasn't a bit pleased when she smiled on somebody else, which she had a habit uh doing. That evening Pilgrim slicked up some and went up t' the house t' call on Dolly, and Pecos was fighting his head something awful over it. Curly, he offered to slip up and find out what Pilgrim was doing, and he come back saying over some po'try that he said Pilgrim was reading out of a book. Maybe you know the piece, Noisy—I little thought, when first thy reins I stacked upon the banks uh Seine, That I and Deegle here should feed on thy sweet limbs, my matches steed'—which, as he said, there wasn't much sense to, and was sure sickening t' read to a lady.

"But Dolly liked it, all right, for the Pilgrim was up t' the house every evening, and even took t' riding around with her, till Pecos was fair wild. Well, we was all of us kind o' sore on the Pilgrim, for that matter. Dolly did tell me she only done it t' git him away from the boys' teasing, but it looked to me like she was making too thorough a job of it.

"Well. Pecos was rank murderous, and got the boys t' help him put up a job on Pilgrim about his riding—which he was sure swell-headed about after that pretty ride on Joe. So next Sunday we was all going t' town for refreshments, and Pilgrim messed around with his rope, like he always done, and got old Joe, and then found out he was dead lame—which any fool could tell a mile off. I suspicioned Pecos was up t' something, and I would bet money he'd lamed Joe deliberate. Pilgrim, he slipped his rope off and said he guessed he'd stay t' home; he said he didn't care much about town, nohow.

"Pecos wasn't agreeable t' that, and he kind o' sneered and asked Pilgrim why he didn't throw his rope on some other horse—or was he afraid he couldn't ride nothing but Joe? Pilgrim threw back his shoulders and said he guessed he wasn't much afraid, but he guessed he didn't have t' go. He was getting kind o' nifty and sassy, after Dolly'd took up with him.

"Well, Pecos kept throwing it into him, and Curly Landers and Slim butted in and begun to devil Pilgrim about his riding till they got him kind o' hostile, and he swung round t' Pecos and says, 'Well, pick me out a horse, gosh darn yuh, and I'll ride him.'

"Pecos was waiting for that, and he winked at us and pointed t' Spotted Dog. I wouldn't stand for that, it looked so low-down mean, and so I spoke up and told Pilgrim he better let that horse alone. He'd been mostly riding fence, and wasn't wise t' Spotted Dog's talents. But he wouldn't hear a word, and he was near crying, he was so worked up. And the boys was about t' pie into me for interfering, so I let up and stood back.

"Pilgrim walked over and made a pass or two at Spotted Dog with his rope, but he couldn't do business, so finally Pecos went in and roped him and led him out. Pilgrim got his saddle on, all right, and Spotted Dog was meek as a pet lamb; he wasn't for quarreling about the saddling process, ever.

"Then I got sorry again, and went up and tried t' reason with the Pilgrim—and told him Spotted Dog's record, even thereby getting Pecos agin me for life. But Pilgrim had his neck bowed, and nothing would stop him.

He led him out and gathered up the reins, and shook the saddle a little, and Spotted Dog went up in the air a few times. Well, I had t' laugh at the Pilgrim. He backed off as far as the reins 'ud let him, and you could 'a' knocked his eyes off with a club. He gulped once or twice and says, 'Gosh!'

"Pecos commenced t' roast him again about losing his nerve, and the rest stood around guying him, till pretty soon Pilgrim nerved up and said he didn't see as it was a question uh nerve, exactly. He turned around t' Pecos and says: 'Gosh darn yuh, I ain't afraid neither! If I can get into the saddle and get settled once, I guess I can stay there; I did the other time. But,' he says, 'it ain't any fun t' get shook up like that for nothing, and I won't do it, neither, without yuh make it worth my while.'

"Pecos grinned and says: 'If that's what's hurting yuh, I can make it worth your while, I reckon. I'll bet yuh a hundred dollars, two t' one, yuh can't whip him.'

¹¹ Pilgrim, he looked at him a minute, and then he reached down in his jeans and glommed a little beaded wallet, and poured out some shiners. 'Well,' he says, 'I'll just take yuh up on that. Here's my fifty—where's your hundred?'

"Pecos looked kind o' blue a minute, for he couldn't produce the goods. But he managed t' rake it up, by borrowing from all the boys but me—as he said, it was just a mere matter uh ceremony, and he'd hand it right back in a minute. So he got the amount, and handed it over t' Curly t' hold.

"I got onto my horse, so's t' be ready t' see Pilgrim through if Spotted Dog took a notion t' run. I couldn't help feeling sorry for the darn fool. He kind uh seemed t' feel that I was on his side, too, for he come over t' me and says, 'Is they any way uh fixin' things, Mr. Delaney, so's it'll be safer?'

"Well,' I says, 'yuh might wire your rowels, so they can't slip.' I showed him how t' go t' work, and he set down on the ground and took a little ball uh wire, that he used t' sew up the rips in his chaps, out uh his pocket, and wired up his spurs, with me setting on my horse bossing the job. Then he asks, 'Is there anything else?' and I says, 'Nothing but say Now I lay me,' and pray for an easy death.' It was mean, maybe, but I was

feeling kind uh sarcastic at the whole business. I looked on it as a kind o' murder.

"Well, he got up and felt uh the cinch, and took the horn and went up into the saddle in pretty good shape. He got one foot in the stirrup, and then old Spotted Dog commenced turning it on, and the ball was opened up.

"Well, that horse done all he knew and then invented some brand-new motions. He done the sunfish, and the whirl, and the high buck-jump, and do-si-do, lady-in-the-centre-and-seven run-around. I was setting on my horse, and I declare t' goodness I could see sky under him every pass he made."

"Aw, come easy!" Spider interjected.

"It's a fact. I never in my life saw the like—and I've seen bad horses some. And the Pilgrim riding him like a little man, and his chaps a-slapping the saddle like wet sheets on a clothes-line in a high wind, and his quirt swinging regular, like the pend'lum on grandfather's clock. Pecos's jaw kept a-dropping down till he near stepped on it. Pretty soon old Spotted Dog headed up the trail t' the house, pitching t' beat the band, and us after him in a bunch of amazement.

"Dolly, she come a-running out on the porch, and the old man and his wife, and the kids—Pilgrim sure had an audience for the finale. Time we all got there Spotted Dog was willing t' be good, and the Pilgrim stopped him right by the steps.

"What'll yuh take for this pony?" he asks the old man. 'I'm kind o' stuck on him, myself—and he sure seemed t' be, in more ways than one. Then he looked at Dolly and grinned a little, and says t' her, ' I got another hundred toward housekeeping, Dolly' —and she got kind uh pinky all over her face and broke back into the house.

"Pilgrim started on, then, toward town, whistling kind uh under his breath, like he was thinking uh something pleasant—which I guess he was. Pecos rode up alongside and give him the bad-eye for a minute, and then he says, ' Who in blazes *are* you, anyhow?' And the Pilgrim finished up his tune artistic, and turned around and looked at Pecos and said, 'My name is Bob Sanderson, and happy t' make your acquaintance."

"Pecos says, 'Oh!' like it hurt him somewheres. He hadn't never heard uh Bob Sanderson, and neither had any of us. Then the Pilgrim looked over to me and tips me a wink, and says, 'Over in the Graburn Basin folks call me Cypress Kid. But I'm going t' drop that cognomen, now I'm married.'

"Well, I rose up in my stirrups and give a whoop you could 'a' heard ten mile—fifty dollars' worth uh yell, and I sure enjoyed it.' Then I rode up on t'other side uh him and says, ' Meaning Dolly ?'

"Meaning Dolly,' he says, easy-like. 'Her folks tried t' queer me, and we had t' do it on the quiet. I'd packed a license around till it was most wore out, and so the other day I glommed a sky-pilot that happened t' overtake us on the road, and we went over t' town and I cashed in my license before the time-limit run out. And I'm sure grateful t' you boys for giving me an invite over here. It come in mighty handy.'

"Well, Pecos lagged 'way behind after that, nursing several distinct and separate sorrows, but not any for me. I sure felt good over my fifty dollars, and I congratulated Cypress Kid a heap on winning out with the girl, and 'most convinced myself I hadn't ever wanted her, I was so tickled t' see Pecos get let down."

Spider sat up and reached for Delaney's tobacco sack. "Cross your heart, Delaney, is that straight?"

"That there story's on the square. A lot uh funny things happen in this world. If yuh don't believe me, go over in the Graburn Basin and ride t' Bridgeman's ranch, and ask for the foreman—that's Cypress Kid. He'll tell yuh the same story—only from his point uh view, maybe."

Spider settled back against the roll of bedding, and had never a word to say.

"Another instance," Noisy remarked, "where 'Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.'"