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With Hoops of Steel

Florence Finch Kelly

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WITH
HOOPS OF STEEL

BY

FLORENCE FINCH KELLY

ILLUSTRATED BY

DAN SMITH

*"The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel."*



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"ON AND ON THROUGH THE NIGHT THEY GALLOPED, NECK
TO NECK AND HEEL TO HEEL."

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Florence Finch Kelly's *With Hoops of Steel* were the first of the modern cow-boy novels. Twenty-five years have passed since Mrs. Kelly's enthralling story first appeared—September, 1900. Most of the novels published then and since, are dead and forgotten. Not so *With Hoops of Steel*. It was in continuous demand from its first friendly welcome by the critics until the World War turned public attention to Europe. Even so its vitality persisted, justified this new edition, and seems to warrant the belief that the present generation will find its story interest as vivid and as exciting as did the past, and its value even greater, for it presents an authentic portrait of the old southwestern cattlemen and a fascinating picture of a phase of national development now passed into history.

The Publishers.

[Pg 1]

WITH HOOPS OF STEEL

CHAPTER I

The soft, muffling dusk settled slowly downward from the darkening blue sky and little by little smothered the weird gleam that rose from the gray-white plain. Away toward the east a range of mountains gloomed faintly, rimming the distance. Another towered against the western horizon. Cactus clumps and bunches of mesquite and greasewood blotted the whitely gleaming earth. In and out among these dark spots a man was slowly riding. Now and then he leaned forward and looked keenly through the growing darkness as though searching for some familiar landmark. The horse lagged across the heavy sand, with drooping head and ears. The rider patted its neck with a buckskin gloved hand and spoke cheerily to the tired animal:

“Hot and tired, ain’t you, old fellow? You want your supper and a big drink of water. Well, you oughtn’t to have wandered off the road while I was asleep. Now, I sure reckon we’ve got to bunk on a sand heap to-night and wait till daylight to find out where we are.”

[Pg 2]

Again he peered through the dusk, and a little ray of light came glimmering from far away toward the right. He knew that it must come from either a ranch house or a camp-fire.

“I don’t remember any ranch as far up toward the White Sands as that seems to be,” he thought. “It must be a camp-fire. We don’t know whose it is, old pard, but we’re goin’ to take chances on it.”

He rode on in silence, the bridle lying loosely on the horse’s neck. All the senses of the plainsman were on the alert, his ears were strained to catch the faintest sound that might come from the direction of the fire, while his eyes alternately swept the darkened plain and fastened themselves on the light. His horse pricked up its ears and gave a loud whinny, which was answered in kind from the direction of the fire. Presently the man shouted a loud “hello,” but

there was no reply. "That's queer!" he thought. "My voice ought to carry that far, sure!" He waited a few moments, listening intently, then, drawing in a deep breath, he sent out another long, loud call that bellowed across the plain and sank into the far darkness. Still there was no reply, but when his horse neighed again there was instant response. The animal had quickened its pace and with head up and ears bent forward was rapidly lessening the distance between them and the light. The rider could see that it was a campfire, and soon could distinguish the flickering of the flames, but, in the illuminated circle [Pg 3] around it there was no sign of human beings nor shadow of moving life. He drew rein and again sent a full lunged, far-reaching "hello-o-o" across the distance. The moon, just showing a silver edge above the mountain tops, threw a faint glimmer of light across the plain, making visible the nearest clumps of bushes.

"I guess that would mighty near wake a dead man. If there's anybody alive around that camp they sure heard me this time," he thought, as he looked and listened with straining eyes and ears. But there was no movement about the fire, and another whinny was the only sound that came from its direction. "Mighty queer!" was his inward comment, as his hand sought the revolver which hung by his side, while a light pressure of spurs started his horse forward again. Suddenly there was a swift rustle of the bushes beside him.

"Stop! Throw up your hands!"

A man had sprung from a tall clump of mesquite, and the traveler saw the faint light reflected from a gun barrel pointed straight at his breast. He stopped his horse, but did not respond to the other summons; instead, his fingers closed quickly over the butt of his revolver.

"Throw up your hands, or I'll blow a hole through you!"

"Well, the drop's yours, stranger, so here goes," and the traveler's hands went straight above his head.

[Pg 4]

"That's better! Now, what do you want here?"

"I saw your camp-fire and I reckoned I might get some water for my horse and some supper for myself."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Thomson Tuttle."

"What are you doing here?"

"Attendin' to my own affairs and lettin' other people's alone."

"You allowed just now it was my drop." There was a note of warning in the man's voice. The traveler hesitated a moment. The click of a trigger quickened his discretion.

"I am on my way from Muletown to Las Plumas, but I lost the road this afternoon and I've no idea where I am now. As soon as I saw your camp-fire I came straight for it, for my horse needs water mighty bad."

There was a moment of silence. The moon was well above the mountains, and in its brightening light the form of the traveler stood out in ridiculous silhouette, his hands held high above his head. He could see plainly the figure of the man and the gun leveled at his breast.

"How long had you been in Muletown?"

"I got in this forenoon, and I guess I stopped an hour. I left about noon."

"Where from?"

"I started yesterday morning from Millbank. I had been there two days. I went there from Santa [Pg 5] Fe. I've been in New Mexico about ten years, and I was born—"

"Never mind about that. You can have some supper. Unfasten your belt with your left hand, and be sure to keep your right hand where it is." Tuttle's left hand fumbled a moment with his cartridge belt, and revolver and belt dropped to the ground.

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Put up your hands again until I fix these things."

Again the traveler lifted his hands above his head, while the other buckled the belt around his own body, which it circled above another already heavy with cartridges and revolver. This latter weapon he drew from his holster, and, coming close beside Tuttle, held it at cock while he passed his hand lightly over the rider's person.

"I guess you spoke the truth," he said, returning the pistol to his belt, and again leveling the shot-gun. "Now, Mr. Thomson Tuttle, you've been a gentleman so far, and as long as you keep up that play you'll be all right. You won't be hurt if you don't make any breaks. Take down your hands and we'll go into camp and have some supper."

Tuttle held his hands motionless in the air a moment longer as he said:

"Any objection to my askin' who you are?"

[Pg 6]

"You said yourself that the drop's mine."

"All right, pard."

As they neared the camp, the man called to him to dismount, walk forward and sit down in a wagon seat near the fire. Tuttle could see the wagon from which the seat had been taken, a small, light affair, standing back in the shadow, and near it two horses feeding. Another man stood a little way off with leveled gun, apparently relieving guard for the first. He was in the shade of a tall mesquite bush, but Tuttle could see that he was of medium height and build and was dressed in a Mexican suit of closely fitting, braided trousers and jacket. The wide brim of his Mexican sombrero was pulled low over his eyes, so that only the lower part of his face could be seen, and that dimly. But it was evidently dark-skinned, and the mouth was shaded by a black mustache. "Some Greaser scalawag," was Tuttle's immediate decision. The other unsaddled, watered and fed the horse, and then returned to the fire and began making coffee.

"We haven't much to eat," he said apologetically, "but you're welcome to a share of whatever we've got."

Soon he put beside Tuttle a supper of hot coffee, fried bacon, canned baked beans, and a loaf of bread. Then he sat on the ground near by and talked cheerfully while Tuttle ate, now and then urging him, in hospitable fashion, to eat heartily. [Pg 7] But all the time he held his revolver in his hand, and the other man stood in the shadow with his Winchester ready to fire at a second's notice. Tuttle and his captor talked on in a friendly way for half an hour after supper, while the other still kept guard from the shadow of the mesquite bush. At last the first man got up leisurely, took a flask from his pocket and handed it to Tuttle with the request, "Drink hearty, pard." With a little flourish and a kindly "Here's luck," he took a long pull himself, then, telling Tuttle he could use his saddle for a pillow and lie down near the fire, he picked up his shot-gun and sat down on the wagon seat and the man who had stood beside the mesquite walked away into the bushes.

"Now," said the man with the shot-gun, "you can sleep just as sound as a baby in its cradle, for I'm going to watch here and see that the coyotes don't bite you. You'll be safe," and the note of warning filled his voice again, "as long as you don't make any breaks."

"I'm not a fool," responded Tuttle, stretching out on the ground and resting his head against the saddle. Whenever he awoke during the night he saw his guard keeping alert watch, gun in hand and revolver by his side. Just before daybreak the other man returned and held guard while the first watered and saddled Tuttle's horse and prepared breakfast. The captive was dimly conscious of the [Pg 8] change, and then slept again until he was awakened at sunrise.

"I had a mind to wake you by shooting a button off your coat, just to see if that would do the business," said his host, smiling pleasantly, as he handed Tuttle the flask which had done duty the night before. "I reckon you're about the soundest sleeper I ever saw."

By daylight Tuttle saw that the man was well along in middle life and that his face was smoothly shaven. Tuttle himself looked to be less than thirty years old. He was tall, broad of shoulder and big of girth, with large hands and great, round, well-muscled wrists that told of arms like limbs of oak and of legs like iron pillars.

The young man ate his breakfast alone, his captor standing near by and talking pleasantly with him, but holding alertly a shot-gun at half cock, while crouching behind a bunch of greasewood was the Mexican with a drawn pistol in his hands. As Tuttle mounted, the tall man called out sternly:

“Hold up your hands!”

Tuttle hesitated for a moment, looking at him in surprise.

“I mean it!” and the trigger of his shot-gun clicked to full cock. Tuttle’s hands went up quickly. The man came beside him and buckled on his cartridge belt, with the revolver in its holster. Then he backed to his own horse, mounted it, and leveled his shot-gun at Tuttle’s breast.

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“Now you can take down your hands and go,” he said. “But remember that I’m ridin’ behind you, ready to bang a hole through your head if you make the first motion toward your gun, or anything happens that ain’t straight. I’ll put you on the road to Plumas, and then I want you to make tracks, for we’ve got no time to waste.”

As they rode away, Tuttle could hear the hoof beats of two horses and knew that both men were following. After a few miles the tall man called to Tuttle to halt and said, pointing to a road that wound a white line across the distance:

“That’s your road over there, and you can go on, now alone. But I want you to remember that I’m here watchin’ you, with two loads of buckshot and six of lead, and every one of them is goin’ plumb through you if you ain’t square. You’ve been a gentleman so far, and dead game, and I’m proud to ’ve met you, Mr. Thomson Tuttle. If it ever comes my way to treat you whiter than I have this time, I’ll be glad to do it. Good-bye, sir.”

As Tuttle rode away, he saw, from the corner of his eye, the tall man, shot-gun in hand, sitting motionless on his horse, and the other, watchful, holding a rifle, a little distance behind him. The young man put spurs to his horse and rode several miles with his eyes steadily in front of him, discreetly holding curiosity in check.

He did not look back until he reached the highroad, and then he saw his two captors galloping across the plain toward their [Pg 10] camp. He took out his pistol and examined it carefully. It was just as he had left it the night before.

"They might have put every bullet into my head," was his mental comment, "but they didn't, and they might have emptied 'em all out and left me in a box. But they didn't do that, either. I guess they played as square as they could."

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CHAPTER II

"

Me, Tom Tuttle, holding up my hands while a fellow takes my gun! What will Emerson Mead say to that! Well, I reckon he wouldn't have done different, for Emerson's got good judgment."

Such was Tuttle's soliloquy as he mounted the gradual ascent of the range that bounded the plain on the west. Alternately he chuckled and slapped his thigh in appreciation of the joke on himself, and exploded an indignant oath as mortified pride asserted itself.

After a time he espied a black dot in a halo of dust coming down the mountain side. He considered it a moment and then decided, "It's a man on horseback." He took out his revolver and, holding it in his hand, made another scrutiny of the approaching figure.

"Je-e-mima! If he don't ride like Nick Ellhorn! I shouldn't wonder if it's Nick!"

Presently the figure flourished a black sombrero and down the dusty road came a yell which began full-lunged and ended in a screeching "whee-ee-e." Tuttle answered with a loud "hello," and both men put spurs to their horses and were soon shaking hands.

[Pg 12]

"What's the news at Plumas and out at Emerson's?" asked Tuttle.

"Oh, things are fairly quiet at Plumas just now, but you never know when hell is going to break loose there. You're just in time, though, for Emerson's up to his ears in fight. Goin' to stay?"

"I will if Emerson needs me. I've been with Marshal Black over to Millbank after some counterfeiterers from Colorado. He took 'em back, and, as he didn't need me, I thought I'd just ride over here and see if you-all mightn't be in trouble and need some help."

"Ain't after anybody, then?"

"No. But, say, Nick! I struck the darndest outfit last night! I got regularly held up!"

"What! You! Held up?"

"Yes, I did. Sat with my hands in the air like a fool tenderfoot while a man took my gun and cross-questioned me like a lawyer."

Ellhorn rolled and rocked on his horse with laughter. When he could speak he demanded the whole story, which Tuttle told him in detail.

"What was their lay?" he asked.

"I'll give it up. I've thought of everything I could, and there ain't a blamed thing that'll explain it."

"Tommy, I reckon they need to be arrested about as bad as two men ever needed anything. Come along and we'll corral 'em."

"We've got no warrants, Nick!"

[Pg 13]

"Haven't you got any in your pockets?"

"Yes, but not for them."

"Tommy, you're a deputy marshal, and that outfit took you at a disadvantage and misused you shameful. You're an officer of the law, Tommy, and it was as bad as contempt of court! It's our duty to arrest 'em for it and bring 'em in."

"But we can't do it without warrants, Nick."

Ellhorn took some papers from his pocket and looked them over. "I'm lookin' for a Mexican named Antonio Diaz," he said. "Here's

the warrant for his arrest. Violation of the Edmunds act. You say one of these men was a Mexican. I think likely he's Antonio. We'll go and find out. Never mind tellin' me how he looked," he went on hastily, as Tuttle began to speak. "It's likely he's Antonio, and it's my duty to go and find out. Of course, they'll resist arrest, and then they'll get their punishment for the way they treated you."

Tuttle looked disapproving. "Nick, what do you think would be Emerson's judgment?"

"Emerson ain't here, and I'm acting on my own judgment, which is to go after this outfit and pepper 'em full of holes if they're sassy."

Tuttle shook his head. "I don't like the scheme."

"Well, it ain't your scheme, and you don't have to like it. I think we ought to go after these men right now. They've done something they ought to be arrested for. And, anyway, they ought to be punished for holdin' you up."

[Pg 14]

"Nick, I'd go with you in a minute, you know I would, if we had a warrant for 'em, or if I had any reason to think that the Mexican is the man you want. You don't think so yourself. They might have blowed my brains out any minute, and nobody would ever have known a thing about it. But they didn't and I reckon they treated me as white as they could and look after their own interests. It's my judgment, and I think it would be Emerson's, too, that it would be a mean trick for me to come up behind 'em and begin shootin', just for holdin' me up, when they might have treated me a whole heap worse. I won't go with you, Nick."

"Sure, then, and I'll go alone," Ellhorn responded cheerfully.

"They'll be two to one."

"Not very long, I reckon."

"Better wait a few days, Nick, till you can go after 'em legally."

"They'll be out of the country by that time. I'm under no obligations to be kind to 'em, and I don't mean to be. I'm goin' to camp on

their trail right now." He dismounted and cinched up his saddle and inspected his revolver.

Tuttle regarded him dubiously and in silence until he remounted. Then he said, slowly: "Well, my judgment's against it, Nick, but I won't see you go off alone into any such scrape as this is [Pg 15] bound to be. I'll go with you, but I won't do any shootin' – unless you need me mighty bad."

They galloped back to the scene of Tuttle's captivity the night before. They found the trail of the wagon, and followed it rapidly toward the north. Soon they saw a glaring white line against the horizon. "There's the White Sands," said Ellhorn. "We ought to catch 'em before they get there." A few moments later they came within sight of the wagon. Tuttle and Ellhorn spurred their horses to a quicker pace and when they were within hailing distance Ellhorn shouted to its two occupants to surrender. Their only response was to put whip to their horses, and Ellhorn sent a pistol ball whizzing past them. They replied in kind and a quick fusillade began. Tuttle rode silently beside his companion, not even drawing his six-shooter from its holster. A bullet bit into the rim of his sombrero, and he grumbled a big oath under his breath. Another nicked the ear of Ellhorn's horse. In the wagon, the Mexican was crouched in the bottom, shooting from behind the seat, apparently taking careful aim. The tall man stood up, lashing the horses furiously. He turned, holding the reins in one hand, and with the other discharged another volley, necessarily somewhat at random. But it came near doing good execution, for one bullet went through Tuttle's sleeve and another singed the shoulder of Ellhorn's coat.

[Pg 16]

"Whee-ee-e!" shouted Ellhorn. "Sure, and I've winged him! I've hit the big one in the leg!"

The next moment his pistol dropped to the ground. A bullet from the Mexican's Winchester had plowed through his right arm. Tuttle, who had not even put hand to his revolver, drew rein beside him while the other men stopped shooting and devoted all their energies to getting away as quickly as possible. Tuttle tore strips from his shirt with which to bind Ellhorn's wound, and persuaded him to

return to Las Plumas, where he could have the services of a physician.

"I guess I'll have to, Tom," he said regretfully. "I'd like to go after 'em and finish this job up right now. I got one into the big one, but that's nothin' to what they deserve. Lord! but they need to be peppered full of holes! But I can't fight now, and you won't, so it's no use."

As they rode back Tuttle said: "You say that Emerson's up to his ears in fight? What's it about? That cattle business?"

"Yes, that's it. You know he's been havin' trouble for some time with Colonel Whittaker and the Fillmore Cattle Company, and I reckon hell's a-popping over there by this time. Colonel Whittaker—he's manager of the company now, and one of the stockholders—wants to corral the whole blamed country for his range. Well, there's Emerson Mead has had his range for the last five years, and Willet still longer, and McAlvin and Brewer, [Pg 17] they've been there a long time, too, and they all say they've got more right to the range than the company has, because they own the water holes, and they don't propose to be crowded out by no corporation. But I reckon they'll have to fight for their rights if they get 'em."

"How's Whittaker off for men? Got anybody that can shoot?"

"You bet he has. Young Will Whittaker is mighty near as good a shot as Emerson is. He does most of the managing at their ranch headquarters, while the old man works politics over in Plumas."

"Have they had any fights yet?"

"I haven't seen Emerson for a month. He was over in Plumas then and he said he expected to have trouble and wanted me to come out."

"You don't mean to say that the Fillmore outfit is really tryin' to drive Emerson and the rest of them out of the Fernandez mountains?"

"Well, they want to get control of the whole range for about a hundred miles, if they can. And there's some politics mixed up in it, of course. Old Whittaker is a Republican, you know, with a lot of political schemes he wants to put through. Of course Emerson and

the others are Democrats and stand in with the party, and the Colonel thinks he'll be doing the Republicans a big service if he can break them up. Emerson expected the trouble to come to a head over the spring round-up, for [Pg 18] Colonel Whittaker said that Emerson and McAlvin and the rest of them shouldn't round-up with him."

"Well, Emerson won't stand any such nonsense as that!"

"I guess Whittaker and his cow-boys will have to flirt gravel mighty fast if they keep him from it!"

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CHAPTER III

Unkempt, dusty and dirty, straggling its narrow length for a mile along the irrigating ditch, the village of Las Plumas lay sleepily quiet under the hot, white, brooding spring sunshine. A few trim-looking places cuddled their yards and gardens close against the life-giving channel, whose green banks, covered with vegetation and shaded by trees, bisected the town. Elsewhere, naked adobe walls flanked the dusty streets and from their stark surfaces gave back the sunshine in a blinding glare. Here and there an umbrella tree, or a locust, made a welcome splotch of green and shade down the length of the barren, dusty streets, or the tiny yard of a house set back a little from the adobe sidewalk held a few clumps of shrubs and flowers. A half dozen cross streets sprang up among the scattered adobe houses that dotted the edge of the plain rising to the Hermosa mountains on the east, crossed the bridges of the irrigating ditch, and ended in the one business street, which trailed a few closely built blocks along the western edge of the town, near the railroad and its depot. On one of these cross streets a yard and orchard of goodly size extended from the ditch a block or more to the [Pg 20] east and surrounded a flat-roofed, square adobe house. A wide veranda, its white pillars covered with rose and honeysuckle vines, ran around the house, and a square of lawn, with shrubs and flowers and trees, filled the yard. A little boy, perhaps four years