

Tucholsky Wagner Zola Scott
Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen
Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London
Mendelssohn Balzac Shakespeare Rathenau Dostojewski Ganghofer
Trackl Stevenson Lichtenberg Doyle Gjellerup
Mommsen Thoma Tolstoi Lenz Hambruch Droste-Hülshoff
Dach Thoma von Arnim Hägele Hanrieder Hauptmann Humboldt
Karrillon Reuter Verne Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier
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Wolfram von Eschenbach Darwin Dickens Grimm Jerome Rilke George
Bronner Campe Horváth Aristoteles Voltaire Federer Herodot
Bismarck Vigny Gengenbach Barlach Heine Grillparzer Georgy
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Chamberlain Schiller Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates
Brentano Strachwitz Claudius Schilling Kralik Katharina II. von Rußland Bellamy Gerstäcker Raabe Gibbon Tschechow
Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Wilde Gleim Vulpius
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Morgenstern Goedicke
Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Kleist Mörike Musil
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Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus
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Jack of the Pony Express

Frank V. Webster

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JACK OF THE PONY EXPRESS

Or

The Young Rider of the Mountain Trails

By

FRANK V. WEBSTER

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CHAPTER I

JACK IN THE SADDLE

"Your father is a little late to-night, isn't he Jack?"

"Yes, Mrs. Watson, he should have been here a half-hour ago, and he would, too, if he had ridden Sunger instead of his own horse."

"You think a lot of that pony of yours, don't you, Jack?" and a motherly-looking woman came to the doorway of a small cottage and peered up the mountain trail, which ran in front of the building. Out on the trail itself stood a tall, bronzed lad, who was, in fact, about seventeen years of age, but whose robust frame and athletic build made him appear several years older.

"Yes, Mrs. Watson," the boy answered with a smile, "I do think a lot of Sunger, and he's worth it, too."

"Yes, I guess he is. And he can travel swiftly, too. My goodness! The way you sometimes clatter past my house makes me think you'll sure have an accident. Sometimes I'm so nervous I can't look at you."

"Sunger is pretty sure-footed, even on worse mountain trails than the one from Rainbow Ridge to Golden Crossing," answered Jack with a laugh, that showed his white, even teeth, which formed a strange contrast to his tanned face.

"Sunger," repeated Mrs. Watson, musingly. "What an odd name. I often wonder how you came to call him that."

"It isn't his real name," explained Jack, as he gave another look up the trail over which the rays of the declining sun were shining, and then walked up to the porch, where he sat down. "The pony was once owned by a Mexican miner, and he named him something in Spanish which meant that the little horse could go so fast that he

dodged the sun. Sundodger was what the name would be in English, I suppose, and after I bought him that's what I called him.

"But Sundodger is too much of a mouthful when one's in a hurry," and Jack laughed at his idea, "so," he went on, "I shortened it to Sunger, which does just as well."

"Yes, as long as he knows it," agreed Mrs. Watson. "But I guess, Jack, I had better be going, I did think I'd wait until your father came, and put the supper on for you both, but he's so late now —"

"Yes, Mrs. Watson, don't wait," interrupted Jack. "I don't know what to make of dad's being so late. But we're used to getting our own meals, so you needn't worry. We'll get along all right."

"Oh, I know you will. For two men—for you are getting so big I shall have to call you a man," and she smiled at him. "For two men you really get along very well indeed."

"Yes, I'm getting to be something of a cook myself," admitted the lad. "But I can't quite equal your biscuits yet, and there's no use saying I can. However, you baked a pretty good batch this afternoon, and dad sure will be pleased when he sees 'em. I wish he'd come while they're hot though," and once more Jack Bailey arose and went out to peer up the trail. He listened intently, but his sharp senses caught no sound of clattering hoofs, nor sight of a horseman coming down the slope, a good view of which could be had from in front of the house that stood on a bend in the road.

"Well, then, I'll be getting along," Mrs. Watson resumed, as she threw a shawl over her shoulders, for, though the day had been warm, there was a coolness in the mountain air with the coming of night. "Everything is all ready to dish-up" went on the motherly-looking woman, as she went out of the front gate, "The chicken is hot on the back of the stove."

"Oh, we'll make out all right, thank you," called Jack after her, as she started down the trail. Mrs. Watson lived about a quarter of a mile away. Her husband was a miner, and she had a grown daughter, so it was quite convenient for Mrs. Watson to come over twice a week, or oftener on occasions, and do the housework in the cottage where Mr. Peter Bailey and his son Jack lived. Mrs. Watson would

do the sweeping, dusting and as much cooking as she had time for, and then go back to her own home.

Jack's mother was dead, and he and his father had managed for some years without the services of a housekeeper. Mr. Bailey was a pony express rider, carrying the mail and small express packages between the settlements of Rainbow Ridge and Golden Crossing. Mr. Bailey and Jack lived on the outskirts of Rainbow Ridge.

This was in the Rocky Mountain country of one of our western states, and the trails were so wild and winding, and, for that matter, so unsafe, that it was out of the question to use a mail or stage coach between the two places.

From Rainbow Ridge, however, there was a stage route going east, which took the mail and express matter as it was brought in by Mr. Bailey. And from Golden Crossing going west the same arrangement was made. Golden Crossing was a settlement on the banks of the Ponto River, a small enough stream in ordinary times, but which was wild and dangerous during heavy rains or freshets.

So the pony express, as run by Mr. Bailey, was the only regular means of communication between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge. It was of importance, too, for often valuable mail and packages went through, the route being shorter and quicker than by a roundabout stage line.

When Mrs. Watson was out of sight around a bend in the trail, Jack went into the cottage. It really was a cottage, though when Mr. Bailey first brought his family to the West it had been but a cabin, or shack. But Mr. Bailey and his wife had labored hard to make it more of a "home," and they had succeeded very well. Then came the sad occasion of Mrs. Bailey's illness and death, and for a time life had seemed very hard to Jack and his father.

The latter had been interested in mines, but found the work too difficult with his failing health, so he had secured the pony express contract, which he had carried on now for several years.

"It certainly is a shame to have this fine supper spoil," mused Jack, as he lifted the cover from a pot of chicken, and glanced at the pile of browned biscuit in the warming oven.

"I can't understand what makes dad so late," he went on. "Of course, the mail from the Golden Crossing office might not have been ready for him to take. It's been pretty heavy of late, and is almost more than Aunt Matilda can handle. Though I suppose Jennie gives her a hand now and then," and as he said that Jack looked at the photograph on the mantel of an attractive girl, who seemed to smile at him. Jack looked cautiously around the room, and then raised a hand to his lips and threw a kiss from the tips of his fingers at the picture.

This done he blushed – but you would not have known it, he was so bronzed by the sun and the wind. Mrs. Matilda Blake was a distant relative of Mr. Bailey's, and Jack called her "Aunt Matilda," though she really did not bear that relationship to him. She was a widow, and she and her only daughter, Jennie, a girl of about sixteen, lived in Golden Crossing, where Mrs. Blake was postmistress. Jack and Jennie were the best of friends.

"Well, if dad doesn't come pretty soon, I'm going to eat," decided Jack. "He won't mind, I'm sure. But I would like to know what's keeping him. I hope he hasn't had any accident. His pony is sure-footed, I know, but I'd feel better if he had Sunger."

Jack was plainly nervous – that is as nervous as a young, healthy lad can be. He went outside again, and walked a little way back along the trail over which his father would come. But the trail seemed deserted. The Bailey cottage was in a rather lonely location, there being no other habitation in sight.

There were other houses not far away, and a number in the town, but because of the winding nature of the trail, and the ruggedness of the mountains, they could not be seen from where Jack stood.

As the lad was about to turn back and again enter the cottage with the determination to eat his supper, he heard something which caused him to start.

"Here he comes!" he exclaimed. "But he's walking his horse! That's queer!
Something must have happened!"

Speed was one of the prime requisites of the pony express. The men who rode the routes over plains and mountain trails secured the speediest horses or ponies possible. Their life, when in the saddle, was a continual rush, for the mail and express matter must go through as quickly as possible, and where no steam and railroads were available recourse was had to horseflesh. And knowing the value of speed Jack wondered when he heard the approach of a horse at a walking pace.

Mr. Bailey was supposed to arrive at Rainbow Ridge in time to deliver his express and mail matter to the night stage coach going east, and the hour for its leaving had passed some time since. Of course, the stage would wait for the pony express, but this meant a delay all along the rest of the route.

"Something sure must have happened!" said Jack to himself. "I'll go to meet dad."

He set off on foot, but came running back.

"I'll get Sunger," he told himself, speaking aloud, a habit engendered by the loneliness of the mountains. "He's quite a way off yet, but Sunger will make short work of the distance."

Though the sound of the approaching footsteps of the horse of the pony express rider could be plainly heard by Jack, so clear and resonant was the mountain air, he realized that his father had yet nearly half a mile to travel.

Leaping to the saddle of his pony, and patting the animal lovingly on the neck, Jack set off once more. He went quickly, for Sunger was fresh and eager.

In a few minutes Jack turned at a place where the trail followed a great rocky ledge, and in front of him, almost collapsed in the saddle was a man. He seemed to sit on his horse only by a great effort, and on his face was a drawn look of pain.

"Why, Dad!" cried Jack. "What's the matter? Has anything happened? Did they hold up the mail?"

"No, the mail and other stuff is all right," was the answer, broken by an exclamation of pain. "But I'm all in, Jack. I'm afraid I'm going

to be quite ill. It was all I could do to ride the last few miles, but I wouldn't give in."

Jack was at his father's side in an instant.

"Get on Sunger," he urged. "He's easier for you to ride. Let me help you.

What is the trouble? How did it happen?"

"I don't know, Jack, my boy. But I won't change horses. I can keep on until I get to the cabin. Here, you take the mail and express and ride on with it to the stage. I'll keep on toward home. Come back as soon as you can, and you—you'd better bring the doctor with you!" he faltered.

CHAPTER II

POSTMISTRESS JENNIE

For a moment Jack Bailey did not know what to do. He looked at his father, who was evidently quite ill and suffering much pain. Then the lad glanced at the bags of mail and small express matter which lay over the saddle in front of Mr. Bailey.

"Take the mail, Jack, my boy!" the pony express rider exclaimed, with an effort. "Take the mail, so the stage can get off. I'm late now, but I couldn't make the trail any faster. Get the mail through, and then stop and bring a doctor back with you if he'll come."

"But I can't go away and leave you like this, Dad!"

"You must, Jack!"

"But you're too ill!"

"That can't be helped. The mail and express must go through on time if I'm to keep the contract. And I certainly don't want to lose it. I'll manage to get to the cottage. Once there, I can sit down, and if I get a cup of hot tea I may feel better. It seems to be acute indigestion, though I don't remember eating anything that didn't agree with me. But ride on, Jack. And don't worry. I'll get to the cottage all right and be there when you come back."

"All right, Dad! I'll do it. But I sure do hate to leave you like this!"

"It's better than having the mail delayed. Ride on. Explain to Jed Monty how it is. I think Jed takes the stage out to-night."

"Yes, he does. I'll tell him."

Jack quickly transferred to his own saddle the bags of mail and express matter. Mr. Bailey seemed easier now, though there was still that look of pain on his face.

"Come on, Sunger," called the lad to his pony. "We've got to make time!"

The intelligent and beautiful animal whinnied as if he understood. Then, with a fond and anxious look at his father, Jack wheeled about and set off down the trail at a gallop, Mr. Bailey going on more slowly, for every motion of his horse gave him pain.

Jack was soon out of sight around a bend of the trail. He flashed past his cottage, and thought with satisfaction that there was hot water on the range, so his father could make himself a cup of tea.

Jack paused long enough at Mrs. Watson's cabin to tell her what was the matter, and to inform her that he was taking the mail over the last mile of the route into town.

"Your father ill!" exclaimed Mrs. Watson. "I'll go right over there, Jack, and look after him."

"I wish you would. It will be awful good of you."

"Of course I'll go. Mary can look after things here," and she hurried into the house to get ready for her second trip that day to the Bailey cottage.

Jack galloped on, trusting to the sure-footedness of his pony to avoid the dangers of the rough mountain trail. And Sunger justified the confidence reposed in him.

"Hello! We've been wondering what kept you! Why, it's Jack!" exclaimed Jed

Monty, the grizzled stage driver, as the lad galloped up to the Mansion

Hotel, whence the start for the east was made.

"Sorry to be late, but dad's taken sick!" cried Jack, as he flung the bags to the driver.

"Sick, eh? That's too bad. Well, I guess I can make up the lost time. Haven't much of a load on to-night."

The stage was all ready to start, the few passengers having been impatiently waiting.

"Pile in!" cried Jed, and with a crack of his long whip he sent the four horses off at a gallop.

Jack did not linger, but, wheeling his pony, set off for the doctor's office, hoping he would find the physician in. He was fortunate in this respect, and Dr. Brown promised to come at once. Jack did not wait for him, however, but hastened back to the cottage.

There he found that Mrs. Watson had made his father some hot tea, which had relieved him somewhat. The look of pain was not so apparent now.

"The doctor will be here right away," Jack reported. "Now tell me how it happened, Dad. We were quite worried about you."

"Indeed we were, when you didn't come in on time, as you nearly always do," said Mrs. Watson.

"I can't tell just how it did happen," said the pony express rider, "but I was taken with a sharp and sudden pain soon after leaving Golden Crossing. I'd have turned back then, and gotten some one else to ride the route for me, but I knew there were important letters in the mail, and it had to come through. So I kept on, hoping I would get better. But I grew worse, and I had to slow up. I thought I'd never get here! But I did." And he shut his lips grimly.

Pony express riders have to be made of stern stuff and they have to keep on their routes in rain or shine, calm or storm; and often when it is torture to sit in the saddle on a galloping horse.

"You'd better get your supper, Jack," advised Mrs. Watson.

"No, I don't feel like eating," the lad objected.

"Yes, you'd better, son," said his father. "There's no telling what you may have to do tonight, and it is possible you will have to ride for me to-morrow, though I hope I'll be able. But eat, and keep up your strength."

This was good advice, and Jack realized it. So he sat down to the meal which Mrs. Watson had prepared as a finish to her housekeeping work earlier that day. Jack had scarcely finished when Dr. Brown came in, and spent some time ministering to Mr. Bailey.

The pony express rider felt much relieved after he had been given some quieting medicine, and as Dr. Brown was about to leave Mr. Bailey asked:

"Shall I be able to ride the route to-morrow?"

The physician shook his head.

"No, indeed!" he exclaimed. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that you have a severe illness. I'm afraid you're going to be laid up for several weeks, if not longer. You have been neglecting yourself too long, and you've been worrying haven't you?"

"Well, yes, I have," admitted Mr. Bailey.

"Oh, Dad! worrying?" cried Jack. "Is it about that old Harrington matter?"

"Yes, Jack, it is. I can't get that off my mind."

"Why, every one knows that wasn't your fault!" exclaimed Dr. Brown.

"Of course," chimed in Mrs. Watson.

"Well I can't help thinking that the Harrington crowd believes I was to blame," went on the pony express rider. "But I never let that letter get away from me. It never left my bag from the time it was put in until I delivered it. But I can't prove that, and I can't help worrying over what people think of me."

"You're foolish to let a thing like that annoy you," said Dr. Brown.

"That's what has helped to make you ill. Now you must take a good rest.

I'll be in to see you to-morrow."

"But what about the trail, Doctor? Some one will have to carry the mail."

"You can't!" exclaimed the physician, with decision. "That's certain!"

"I will, Dad, of course!" cried Jack. "Who has a better right than I?"

"Well, I'd like to see you do it, Jack, for I'd be sure the mail and express would be safe with you and Sunger," said the man. "But I don't know that the company will consent. You're not of age—"

"I couldn't ride any better if I were twenty-one than I can now," interrupted Jack. "I'll go to see Mr. Perkfeld the first thing in the

morning. I'll meet the early stage and make the trip to Golden Crossing. Are they all well there?" he asked, trying to make his voice sound indifferent.

"Pretty well," answered his father. "Aunt Matilda is ailing a little, but Jennie is a big help. She handles all the mail alone now. Well, Jack, I guess it's the only thing to do. You see Perkfeld in the morning, and explain things. The only thing I'm afraid of is that he may make the Harrington matter an excuse to take the contract away from me. There are several who want to ride the trail in my place. But do the best you can."

Amos Perkfeld was the president, as well as general manager of several stage and pony express lines. He controlled the one between Golden Crossing and Rainbow Ridge, and it was he who had engaged Mr. Bailey.

The "Harrington matter" had taken place some time before. Tyler Harrington was an influential mine owner, and an important letter had been sent to him by one of his agents. This letter was carried by Mr. Bailey, and, in some manner, the contents of it became known to interests opposed to Mr. Harrington and his associates. In this way they lost in a mining deal.

While there were no open accusations, there had been hints on the part of the Harrington interests that the pony express rider might have been bribed to let some one open and read the letter on the journey over the mountains. Of course, Mr. Bailey had done nothing of the kind, and he had no idea how the contents of the letter became known. He felt distressed because he was suspected, and worried greatly over the matter. But he could not disprove the unfounded suspicion against him.

As he had admitted, he had been worrying more than usual lately over the affair, and this, with a general run-down condition, and the hardships of his calling, had made him ill.

Mrs. Watson offered to stay all night and help look after Mr. Bailey, and Jack was glad to have her do so. The sick man was a little better in the morning, but far from being able to ride the mail route.

So Jack saddled Sunger and went into town to meet the early morning stage which arrived every other day with mail and express

matter to be taken to Golden Crossing and points beyond. The pony express was a connecting line between the two settlements.

To Jack's relief Mr. Perkfeld made no objection to the young man's taking his father's place.

"I can't say just how long it will last," went on the manager, "but we'll make it a temporary arrangement, anyhow. You've ridden the route before, you say?"

"Yes, twice, when father was laid up with slight ailments."

"Well, do the best you can. And another matter. There are some valuable letters—But never mind. I'll speak about them later," and Mr. Perkfeld turned away. Jack wondered what he had been about to say.

"If there are any valuable letters to be carried," mused the young rider, "I hope none of them gets lost, or that the contents become known. I'll have to be careful."

He was given the bags of mail and light express matter from the stage as soon as it rumbled in, and then Jack set off over the mountain trail to go to Golden Crossing. The trip would take about four hours, and if the other mail matter was ready he would come back with it, making the round trip in about eight or nine hours.

But sometimes there were delays at one end or the other, for accidents happened to the stages once in a while. There had been hold-ups, too, but not since Mr. Bailey had taken charge.

If the stage at Golden Crossing was not on time the pony express rider had to wait for it, sometimes all night. On such occasions Mr. Bailey had stayed with his relative, Mrs. Blake, and Jack reasoned that he could do the same thing. He caught himself almost wishing that the stage might be late this time, as it would give him a chance for a long visit with his "cousin" Jennie.

On his way past his cottage Jack stopped to see how his father was, and also to report that he had been commissioned, at least temporarily, to carry the mail.

Jack found his father better. Mrs. Watson said she thought it would be best if he could be moved down to her house, and both