

Two Fares East

by W. C. Tuttle

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CHAPTER I WEDDING NIGHT

The ranch-house of Uncle Hozie Wheeler's Flying H outfit was ablaze with light. Two lanterns were suspended on the wide veranda which almost encircled the rambling old house; lanterns were hanging from the corral fence, where already many saddle-horses and buggy teams were tied. Lanterns hung within the big stable, and there was a lantern suspended to the crosstree of the big estate.

It was a big night at the Flying H. One of the stalls in the stable was piled full of a miscellaneous collection of empty five-gallon cans, cow-bells, shotguns; in fact, every kind of a noise-maker common to the cattle country was ready for the final words of the minister. For this was to be the biggest shivaree ever pulled off on the Tumbling River range.

Inside the living-room was the assembled company, sitting stiffly around the room, more than conscious of the fact that they were all dressed up. Old gray-bearded cattlemen, munching away at their tobacco; old ladies, dressed in all the finery at their limited command; cowboys, uncomfortable in celluloid collars and store clothes; old Uncle Hozie, red of face, grinning at everybody and swearing under his breath at Aunt Emma, who had shamed him into wearing an old Prince Albert coat which had fitted him fifty pounds ago.

"Look like you was the groom, Hozie," chuckled one of the old cattlemen. "Gosh, yo're shore duded-up!"

“Glad I ain’t,” said Uncle Hozie quickly. “All them wimmin upstairs, blubberin’ over the bride. Haw, haw, haw, haw! She’d ort to have on a swimmin’ suit. Haw, haw, haw, haw!”

He winked one eye expressively and jerked his head toward the kitchen. His actions were full of meaning.

Curt Bellew got to his feet, stretched his six-foot frame, smoothed his beard and tramped down heavily on one foot.

“Settin’ makes me stiff,” he said apologetically. “Got t’ move around a little.”

He half limped toward the kitchen door.

“Does kinda cramp yuh, Curt,” agreed old Buck West.

His wife reached for him, but too late. He didn’t look toward her, but followed Curt Bellew.

One by one they complained of inaction and sauntered out.

“I never seen so many men cravin’ exercise,” declared Mrs. West. “Ordinarily Buck’s a great setter.”

The women grinned knowingly at each other. They all knew Uncle Hozie had opened the liquor. Aunt Emma came down the stairs, looking quickly around the room.

“Oh, they’re all out in the kitchen, Emmy,” said Mrs. Bellew. “Said they was gettin’ cramped from settin’ around.”

“Oh, I s’pose Hozie couldn’t wait any longer. He swore he’d get drunk. Said he had to get drunk in order to forget that coat he’s got

on. But he's been pretty temp'rance for the last year or so, and a little mite of liquor won't hurt him."

"I s'pose it's all right," said Mrs. West dubiously. "How is Peggy?"

"Standin' it right good," said Aunt Emma. "Never seen a prettier bride in my life. Laura Hatton dressed her, and that girl does show good taste, even if she is from the East."

"I never set no great store by Easterners," said Mrs. Bellew. "But Laura's nice. And she's pretty, too. She's sure put the Injun sign on 'Honey' Bee. That boy ain't worth the powder it would take t' blow him to Halifax. This may sound like an exaggeration, but it's as true as I'm settin' here; Honey Bee cut L.H. on the side of my organ."

"No!" exclaimed the chorus.

"Yessir! With his pocket-knife. Carved 'em right into that polished wood. I said, 'My ——, Honey—what'r yuh doin'?"

"He jist kinda jerked back and looked at his knife, like he didn't know. And then he says:

"Mrs. Bellew, I begs yore pardon—I thought it was a tree."

"He thought it was a tree?" exclaimed Mrs. West.

"Uh-huh. Dreamin', I tell yuh. Thought he was out in the woods."

"Good thing yuh caught him," said Mrs. Selby, a little old lady. "He'd prob'ly put his own initials in it, too."

“Crazier ’n a bedbug!” declared Grandma Owens, whose ninety years allowed her to speak definitely.

“Love, Grandma,” said Mrs. Bellew.

“Same thing, Annie. I’ve watched ‘em for ninety year, and they ain’t no difference—love and lunacy. Has the preacher come yet?”

“Not yet. Listen!”

From the kitchen came the sound of voices raised in song.

“Wa-a-a-ay do-o-o-on yon-n-n-n-der in the co-o-orn-field.”

“Drunk!” said Grandma flatly.

“Drinking,” corrected Aunt Emma. “Most of ‘em can stand more than Hozie can, and he ain’t drunk until he insists on soloin’ ‘Silver Threads Among the Gold’. Up to that time he can undress himself and hang up his shirt, but when he starts on ‘Silver Threads’ he can’t even take off his own boots.”

“I wish they’d quit before Reverend Lake comes,” said Mrs. West. “He might not be in accord with such doings.”

“Won’t he?” Aunt Emma laughed softly. “Henry Lake may be pious, but he ain’t Puritanical. If he hears ‘em, he’ll probably come in through the kitchen. Henry Lake has been givin’ us the gospel for twenty-five years, and no man can do that in this country, if he goes too strong against liquor.”

“Honey and Joe ought to be showin’ up,” said Mrs. Bellew.

“Oh, they’ll be here in time,” laughed Aunt Emma. “This is the first time Joe ever got married, and don’t you ever think Honey

Bee is goin' to be absent when there's a chance to stand up at a weddin' with Laura Hatton."

Jim Wheeler came in from the kitchen and halted just inside the room. He was a big, gnarled sort of man, with mild blue eyes and an unruly mop of gray hair. His new boots creaked painfully and he seemed ill at ease in his new black suit and rumpled tie. Jim and Uncle Hozie were brothers, and Jim was the father of the bride-to-be.

"Preacher ain't here yet?" asked Jim, drawing out a huge silver watch. "It's almost eight o'clock."

"Oh, he'll be here," assured Aunt Emma. "Peggy looks beautiful, Jim."

"Uh-huh." The big man seemed a trifle sad.

"You don't seem to mind losin' yore daughter, Jim," said Mrs. West. "I remember when Sally got married; Buck cried."

"Prob'ly drunk," said Jim unfeelingly.

"Well, I like that, Jim Wheeler!"

A vision in white came down the stairs and halted near the bottom. It was Laura Hatton, the Easterner, who had come to Pinnacle City to attend the wedding of her old school chum. Laura was a tiny little blonde with big blue eyes and a laughing mouth which dismayed every cowboy in the Tumbling River country—except Honey Bee, who had been christened James Edward Bee.

"Wouldn't you ladies like to come up and see the bride?" she asked. "She's just simply a dream. Why, if I looked as pretty in wedding clothes as Peggy does, I'd turn Mormon."

Jim Wheeler watched them go up the stairs and heard their exclamations of astonishment. Out in the kitchen an improvised quartet was singing “Wait till the clouds roll by, Jennie.” Jim Wheeler shook his head sadly.

“Don’t seem to mind losing your daughter,” he muttered.

Oh, but he did mind it. She would live in her own home. Her mother had been dead ten years. After her death it seemed to Jim Wheeler that nothing could ever fill that void. But Peggy had grown to womanhood, filling the old ranch-house with her joyful presence, and Jim Wheeler had thanked God for a daughter like her. Now she would go away to a home of her own.

“Nobody but me and Wong Lee left,” said Wheeler sadly. “And he’s only a —— Chinaman.”

Some one was knocking on the door, breaking in on Wheeler’s thoughts. He opened the door for the minister of the Tumbling River country. Henry Lake was a tall, lean-faced man, near-sighted, dressed in a rusty suit of black. Weddings, funerals or Sunday sermons, he had worn that suit as long as any of them could remember.

He peered closely at Jim Wheeler, shoving out a bony hand.

“Howdy, Jim,” he said pleasantly.

“Hello, Henry. Got here at last, eh?”

The minister nodded slowly.

“My old horse isn’t as fast as she used to be, Jim. We’re both getting old, it seems. But——” he looked at his watch—“I’m near enough on time. Where’s everybody?”

“Wimmin are upstairs with the bride, and the men—” Jim hesitated and glanced toward the kitchen door.

“Carry me-e-e-e ba-a-ack to ol’ Virginny,” wailed a tenor, while a baritone roared, “While the old mill wheel turns ’round, I’ll love you, Ma-a-a-a-ary; when the bee-e-e-e-es—”

And then came the reedy falsetto of Hozie Wheeler—

“Da-a-a-arlins, I am growing o-o-o-old.”

The minister nodded slowly.

“The perfectly natural reaction, Jim. The sentiment contained in corn and rye.”

“Like a little shot, Henry?”

“Not now, Jim; later, perhaps. Is the groom here yet?”

“Not yet. Him and Honey ought to be here any minute now.”

The women were coming back down the stairs, and the minister went to shake hands with them. Aunt Emma cocked one ear toward the kitchen, and a look of consternation crossed her face. She grasped Jim by the arm and whispered in his ear:

“Shake Hozie loose, Jim! He’s silverthreadin’ already.”

Jim nodded and went to the kitchen.

And while the Flying H resounded with good cheer, while more guests arrived and while Peggy Wheeler waited—Honey Bee buzzed angrily about Pinnacle City. Honey had just arrayed himself in a blue made-to-order suit, patent-leather shoes and a

brown derby hat. Everything had come with the suit, and Honey cursed the tailor for having acute astigmatism.

The pants were a full six inches too short and at least that much too big around the waist. Honey managed to squeeze a number eight foot into the number six shoe. And the hat should have been a seven and one-quarter, instead of a six and seven-eighths.

Honey Bee was a medium-sized youth of twenty-five, with tow-colored hair, shading to a roan at the ends, blue eyes, tilted nose and a large mouth. The blue eyes were large and inquiring and the mouth grinned at everything. Honey was a top-hand cowboy, even if he was somewhat of a dreamer.

But just now there was no smile on Honey's mouth. He had hired a horse and buggy from the livery-stable and had tied the horse in front of the sheriff's office. It just happened that Joe Rich, the sheriff, was going to marry Peggy Wheeler, and had promised Honey to meet him at the office at half-past seven.

Every cowboy in the Tumbling River range envied Joe. Never had there been a lovelier girl than Peggy Wheeler, and none of the boys would admit that Joe was worthy of her.

"It's a love match, pure and simple," Honey had declared. "Peggy's pure and Joe's simple."

But just now Honey was calling Joe stronger things than simpleton. It was nearing eight o'clock, and no Joe in sight. The office was closed. Len Kelsey, Joe's deputy, was out at the Flying H, probably drinking more than was good for him.

Honey didn't like Len. Possibly it was because Honey thought that Joe should have appointed him as deputy. And it is barely possible

that Joe would have appointed Honey, except that, in order to swing a certain element, he had made a pre-election promise to appoint Len.

Joe was barely twenty-three years of age. Too young, many of the old-timers said, to be a sheriff of Tumbling River. But Joe won the election. He was a slender young man, slightly above the average in height, with a thin, handsome face, keen gray eyes and a firm mouth. He had been foreman of the Flying H, and Uncle Hozie had mourned the passing of a capable cowhand.

“Plumb ruined,” declared the old man. “Never be worth a —— for anythin’ agin’. County offices has ruined more men than liquor and cards.”

Honey Bee sat in the buggy, resting his shining feet across the dashboard in order to lessen the pain. The coat was a little tight across the shoulders, and Honey wondered whether the tucks would show where he had gathered in the waistband of the trousers. His cartridge-belt made a decided bulge under his tight vest, but he had no other belt; and no cowboy would ever lower himself to wear suspenders. They were the insignia of a farmer.

“I wish I knowed what kind of a figure that —— tailor had in mind when he built this here suit,” said Honey to himself.

“I know —— well I measured myself accurately. I might ’a’ slipped a little on some of it, bein’ as I had to do a little stoopin’; but never as much as this shows. Now, where in —— is Joe Rich?”

It was eight o’clock by Honey’s watch. He got out of the buggy and almost fell down. His feet had gone to sleep. And when he

made a sudden grab for the buggy wheel he heard a slight rip in the shoulder-seam of his coat.

“My ——, I’m comin’ apart!” he grunted.

Honey had not seen Joe since about five o’clock, and something seemed to tell him that everything was not right. Joe slept in the office. He and Len Kelsey were together the last time Honey had seen them, and Joe said he was going to get a shave. But the barber shop was closed now.

Honey limped around to Joe’s stable and found Joe’s horse there. Then he went back to the buggy. It was after eight now, and the wedding was scheduled for eight-thirty. It was over two miles to the Flying H from Pinnacle City and Honey knew that the buggy horse was not a fast stepper.

Honey swore dismally and stood on one foot. He needed a big drink to kill the pain. Across the street was the Pinnacle bar, the most popular saloon in town. There was sure to be several men in there and they would be sure to make some remarks about Honey’s clothes.

Farther down the street was the Arapaho bar. Honey did not like the place. “Limpy” Nelson owned the Arapaho, and Honey did not like Limpy. But Honey knew that no one would make remarks about his appearance down there, because Honey’s friends frequented the Pinnacle—and friends were the only ones entitled to make remarks.

So Honey stifled his pride and went to the Arapaho, where he leaned against the bar. Old Limpy was the only person there,

except a drunk sprawled across a card-table near the rear of the place.

Limpy squinted at Honey and shifted his eyes toward the back of the room as he slid the glasses across the bar.

“Didn’t somebody say that the sheriff was gittin’ married t’night?” asked Limpy.

Honey poured out his drink and looked at it wearily. Lifting the glass, he looked critically at it.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “I’m waitin’ for him.”

“That’s him back there,” Limpy pointed toward the rear.

“Eh?” Honey jerked around, staring. “What’s that, Limpy?”

“Joe Rich. Drunk as an owl.”

“For ——’s sake!” Honey dropped his glass and limped back to the table where Joe Rich sprawled. He slapped Joe on the shoulder, swearing foolishly.

“Joe! Joe, you —— fool! Wake up, can’tcha?”

But Joe merely grunted heavily. He was still wearing the clothes he had worn when Honey saw him last, and he had not shaved.

Dead drunk on his marriage night! Honey sagged weakly against the table, speechless. He could visualize all those people out at the Flying H, waiting for them. He shoved away from the table and looked at Limpy.

“My God, this is awful, Limpy! He was to get married at eighty-three. It’s almost that right now, and look at him!”

“Pretty drunk,” nodded Limpy.

“Dead t’ the world! Who’d he get drunk with?”

“Alone, I reckon. He was shore polluted when he came here. Got a couple more with Len and went to sleep back there.”

Honey groaned painfully. Joe reeked of whisky.

“Oh, you —— fool!” wailed Honey. “Joe, can’tcha wake up? Let’s go for a walk. Joe! A-a-a-aw, you drunken bum!”

Two men came in and walked up to the bar. They were Ed Merrick and Ben Collins. Merrick owned the Circle M outfit, and Ben was one of his cowboys. Merrick had been the one who supported Joe Rich and had asked Joe to appoint Len Kelsey deputy. Len had worked for the Circle M for several years.

They came back and looked at Joe.

“And this is his weddin’ night!” wailed Honey.

“For —— sake!” snorted Merrick disgustedly. “He was goin’ to marry Peggy Wheeler.”

“Loaded to the gills,” declared Ben. “He’s shore a —— of a fine specimen for sheriff.”

“Yuh can throw that in a can!” snapped Honey. “Since when did the Circle M start judgin’ morals?”

Evidently Ben did not know; so he shut his mouth.

“What are yuh goin’ to do?” asked Merrick.

“Put him to bed. My ——, I can’t take him out to the Flyin’ H. Joe! You brainless idiot, wake up!”

“We better help yuh, Honey,” said Merrick. “He’s plumb floppy.”

Honey managed to get the office key from Joe’s pocket, and between the three of them they managed to carry Joe back to his office, where they put him on his bed.

“What’ll yuh do about it?” asked Merrick when they came out.

“God only knows, Merrick!” wailed Honey. “I can’t go out there and say he’s drunk. Oh, why didn’t the —— fool get shot, or somethin’? I—I—aw ——, I’ve got to go out there. I hope to —— the horse runs away and breaks my neck. But there ain’t much hopes,” dismally. “These Pinnacle livery horses never did run away from home. Well, I—thanks for helpin’ me put him to bed.”

Honey limped out, untied the horse and got into the buggy.

“I’d rather go to a funeral any old time,” he told the horse as they left town.” By ——, I’d rather go to my own funeral. But it can’t be helped; I’ve got to tell ’em.

It is not difficult to imagine the frame of mind of those at the Flying H when eight-thirty passed and no sign of the groom and best man. The aged minister paced up and down the veranda, trying to make himself believe that everything was all right.

Down by the big gate stood Jim Wheeler, a dim figure beneath the hanging lantern. All hilarity had ceased in the kitchen. Uncle Hozie was seated in the living-room between Aunt Emma and Grandma Owens, grinning widely at nothing whatever.

Upstairs in a bedroom were Peggy Wheeler and Laura Hatton. An old clock on a dresser ticked loudly, its hands pointing at a quarter of nine. Peggy sat on a bed, her hands folded in her lap. She was a decided brunette, taller than Laura, brown-eyed; well entitled to the honor of being the most beautiful girl in the Tumbling River country.

There were tears in her brown eyes, and she bit her lip as Laura turned from the front window, shaking her blond head.

“Nobody in sight, Peggy. I just can’t understand it.”

Peggy shook her head. She couldn’t trust herself to talk just now. Aunt Emma came slowly up the stairs and looked in at Peggy.

“I’ll betcha the buggy broke down,” she said. “They’ll both come walkin’ in pretty soon. Peggy, you dry them tears. Joe’s all right. Yuh can’t tell what’s happened. Bein’ the sheriff, he might have been called at the last minute. The law don’t wait on marriages. You just wait and see, Peggy.”

“Oh, I hope everything is all right,” sighed Peggy. “He’s twenty minutes late right now, Aunt Emma.”

Still they did not come. Some of the cowboys volunteered to ride back to Pinnacle City to see what the trouble might be, when the long-looked-for buggy hove in sight. They could see it far down the road in the moonlight. Laura had seen it from the bedroom window and came running back to Peggy.

“Good gracious, stand up, Peggy!” she exclaimed. “Your gown is all wrinkled. They’re coming at last. Heavens, your cheeks are all tear-streaked! No, don’t wipe them! You little goose, why did you shed all those tears?”

“Well, what would you have done?” laughed Peggy, allowing Laura to smooth her gown.

“I wouldn’t cry, that’s a sure thing.”

She darted back to the window, flinging the curtain aside.

“They’ve stopped at the gate,” she said. “I think they are talking to your father. Now he’s coming with them.”

Aunt Emma came running up the stairs, calling to Peggy.

“They’re here,” she called. “Goodness knows, it’s time.”

“I’m ready, Aunt Emma,” called Peggy.

Laura still stood at the window, watching the buggy come up to the veranda. But only Honey Bee got out of the buggy. He was talking to Jim Wheeler and forgot to tie the horse. Then they came into the house. A babel of questions assailed Honey, but Jim Wheeler’s heavy voice silenced them. Came several moments of silence. Laura had stepped back beside Peggy, who was listening.

“There ain’t goin’ to be no weddin’,” said Jim Wheeler slowly. “Joe Rich is dead drunk.”

A silence followed Jim’s announcement. Peggy looked at Laura, and the blood slowly drained from her cheeks. She grasped for the foot of the bed to steady herself. Then came Honey’s voice:

“Aw, —— it, don’t look at me thataway!” he wailed. “This wasn’t anythin’ I could help. I was to meet him at seven-thirty, and he didn’t show up; so I waited until after eight. Then I found him in the Arapaho saloon—asleep.”

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