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## **Hardluck Dick Fellows**

All manner of cutthroats, highway men, and bandits rode the mountain trails and valley roads in the colorful era of banditry which marked the first 30 years or so of California's statehood.

But of all the bad men of this age, one of the most interesting was Hardluck Dick Fellows, the blue-eyed, red-bearded luckless misfit who tried so hard to be a desperado, but was a pathetic failure.

For example, one afternoon in 1873, Dick was riding up the steep Kern County trail to Caliente. He had promised his old pal Paddy McGuigin that he would be the best man at Paddy's soon approaching wedding. Even though he was a desperate man, a bandit, a hard living ruffian, he was a man of his word above all. He would appear at Paddy's wedding, promptly and ready to serve. But the truth was that Dick considered matrimony a fearsome state of unnecessary bondage.

But there was a slight problem. Dick had no money for a proper wedding gift, and his appearance and clothes were hardly appropriate for such an auspicious occasion, and his role therein.

What to do? Paddy needed to come up with a plan, and quickly. For once, it appeared that luck was smiling on Dick that day, because a rider appeared ahead of him – an opulent looking, well-dressed stranger, with apparently, no means of defending himself.

Upon reaching the smartly dressed rider, Dick quickly availed himself of his pistol. There was no contention. The man quickly and quietly agreed to Dick's request to hand over his clothing. In turn, Dick gave the man his own clothing, and both seemed satisfied in the exchange, even as one sided as it would appear to have been.

Dick was soon whistling a happy tune, because in the interior pocket of his new fashions, Dick found a generously filled wallet, containing many photos of President Abraham Lincoln within. Of course, Abraham Lincoln was pictured on the one hundred dollar bill of 1869, so Dick felt that luck was surely his lady that day.

When he caught up with Paddy in Caliente, they decided to go on a pre-nuptial drinking spree, and spent most of the afternoon in the saloon. After an appropriate amount of celebration, they wandered over to the bride's home, completely ready for the important event that was soon to come.

But upon arrival, Dick thought that there might be something familiar looking about the Justice of the Peace who was to perform the ceremony. His clothes. It was his clothes. They looked so familiar, but in his somewhat blurry state of mind, Dick couldn't quite place them.

Suddenly, he realized that those were his former clothes, and the Justice of the Peace was the owner of the clothes Dick was currently wearing. The Justice quickly declined to perform the ceremony unless his clothes were returned. Once the exchange was made, Dick ate his wedding cake in a nearby jail cell.

But clothes weren't Dick's biggest nemesis. Horses were. He always seemed to have problems with horses. No matter the breed, all horses vexed him.

Once, in 1875, Dick and a companion decided to hold up a stage bound for the sleepy little village of Los Angeles. This stage was carrying \$200,000, so there was much planning before attempting the act. Dick watched the transfer of gold chests onto the stage, just for good measure. His partner rode ahead to the point where they would attempt their rendezvous with the stage. Once the gold was transferred, Dick headed up hill. But his horse had better plans for the day. It bucked Dick off, and ran off, leaving Dick sitting in the middle of the road, only halfway to the rendezvous point.

Dick trudged back to Caliente, stole another horse, and while travelling uphill, Dick met the northbound stage and decided to rob it. But before he could hoist any treasure up onto his saddle, the horse took off, galloping down the hill, neighing derisively as it did so.

Thinking quickly, Dick took to the brush and attempted to hide the loot, while the stage driver vehemently urged his steeds to vacate the premises. While wandering in the brush, Dick stepped in a hole and sprained his ankle. That laid him up for several days, and spoiled the plan to be \$200,000 richer.

When Dick was well enough to travel, he stole yet another horse and rode out of town. But this horse had been shod with a mule's shoe on one hoof. He was spotted leaving town, and it was easy work for the sheriff to track down Dick's ill shod steed. But this time, Dick was placed in more sumptuous accommodations, for the new Kern County jail had just been built in Bakersfield.

Dick was still suffering with his broken ankle, and some kind soul gave him a pair of crutches to ease his burden. Dick quickly managed to bash one of his jailers over the head and escape from the fancy new jail.

Just outside, Dick found a horse and quickly climbed aboard. But the flopping crutch frightened the poor animal, which kicked up its heels and tossed Dick to the ground. On the way down, Dick hit his head on a rock and knocked himself out, cold. The sheriff found him, laying there very docile and serene, and soon transported Dick to San Quentin, where he would be a guest for the next 8 years.

Of course, Dick had learned his lesson while in prison, and he would never again stoop to such desperate criminal tactics...until the day after he was released when he went right back to household burglary, petty thievery, and holdups of lone horsemen.

But Dick's great luck with horses followed him. He was stranded after a holdup by an inconsiderate Pinto that was reluctant to become his partner in crime, leaving him miles from nowhere. Once more the law caught up with him, and once more he was housed in the Kern County Jail in Bakersfield. And once more, Dick escaped, this time by prying loose a bar in the jail window.

Once free of the window, Dick spied a horse tethered by a long rope to a post. It was a sad looking sway backed nag, not looking much like a real getaway horse. Not being one to learn from his mistakes, Dick grabbed the mane and leapt unto the horse's back. It didn't budge.

Dick dug his heels into the horse's flanks. The animal gave a big lunge, ran for some distance, suddenly stopped, and began bucking. In fact, it put on a bucking exhibition. Any nearby horse that was watching would have been impressed. In short order, Dick fell off the nag and banged his head on the ground. When he awoke, the horse was gone, and in its place was the sheriff.

On his way to Folsom Prison, where he was sent as a habitual criminal, Dick learned the reason for his latest (but not his last) mishap with a horse. It seemed that the horse was recovering from eating an overdose of locoweed, but had not recovered fully and was still the craziest horse in the San Joaquin Valley, when Dick had arrived to take her for a test drive.

Dick's unfortunate career as a highwayman, burglar, stage robber, and master criminal was over. He spent the rest of his life in Folsom Prison....a life which came to an end when he hit his head on a concrete slab after falling off a wooden sawhorse in the prison yard. Or so the story goes.