

STREET & SMITH'S **WILD WEST**★

15¢

WEEKLY

CONTENTS COPYRIGHTED 1934

NOV. 3

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

RIDERS of RIO MESA

A
**"HUNGRY
AND
RUSTY"**
NOVELETTE

By **SAMUEL H. NICKELS**



CREAM OF KENTUCKY 100 proof straight whiskey. *first* choice in Kentucky...home of beautiful women, thoroughbred horses and fine whiskey



MADE IN U. S. A.

A *Schenley* MARK OF MERIT
PRODUCT—PRICED LOW

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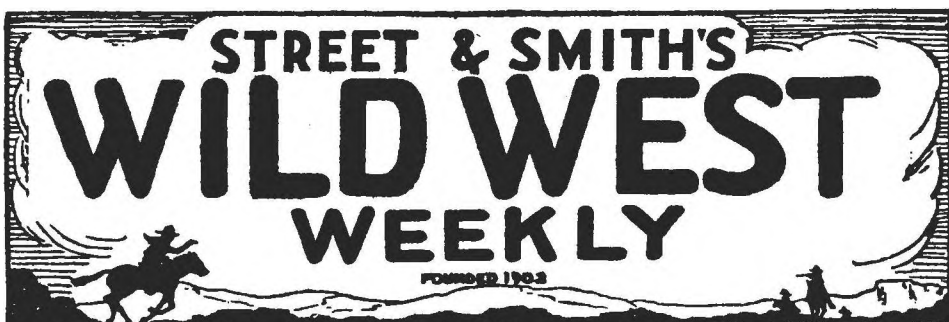


FOR A REALLY FINE GIN • TRY SILVER WEDDING GIN

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WW-1 F

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements



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Six Months, \$3.00

Single Copies, 15 Cents

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Vol. 88, No. 6 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 3, 1934 Whole No. 1672

Cover Picture—Scene from

"Riders Of Rio Mesa" . . . Painted by H. W. Scott

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Riders Of Rio Mesa . . . Samuel H. Nickels . . . 6
 They can't ride fast enough ter git away from Hungry an' Rusty.
- The Bitter Creek Buckaroos . . . Philip F. Deere . . . 59
 An old feud busts out, spite of all Tex Carnochen kin do.
- Gun Bait of the Cow Trail . . . Cleve Endicott . . . 94
 Trouble's shore ter pop when crooks try ter stop a Circle J cattle drive.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- The Snappin' Turtle Kid . . . James Perley Hughes . . . 35
 Ther ranny is jest as proddy as the critter he's named ter.
- The Bar U Twins On Circle N . . . Charles E. Barnes . . . 45
 Which same means that thet spread's due fer a big whiff o' gun smoke.
- Six-guns And Salt . . . Allan R. Bosworth . . . 85
 Ter say nothin' o' sand, supplied by Shorty Masters an' the Sonora Kid.
- The Lazy Stranger In Longhorn . . . Charles M. Martin . . . 125
 But what a rip-snortin' ruckus he causes when he gits started!

BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

- Ranger Courage . . . 44 Signs Don't Lie . . . 131
- A Resourceful Texan . . . 58 A "Boomer" Heroine . . . 134

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- Western Pen Pals . . . Conducted by Sam Wills . 135
- The Wranglers Corner . . . 140

Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Arlenas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1934, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1934, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$9.00 per year.

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STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.

Have you the wrong idea about LAXATIVES?

IF you think you have to take nasty-tasting laxatives to get results—you are *wrong!*

If you think that to get results you have to take laxatives that upset the stomach, that shock the system, or that cause bad after-effects—you are *wrong!*

If you think a laxative can be taken as a cure-all—a treatment for a thousand ills—you are *wrong!*

EX-LAX IS EFFECTIVE—IN A GENTLE WAY

Ex-Lax will not upset you, and it will not disturb digestion. It acts gently but thoroughly. Ex-Lax will not form a habit—you take Ex-Lax just when you need a laxative. You don't have to keep on increasing the dose to get results.

Children like to take Ex-Lax because they love its delicious choco-

late flavor. Grown-ups, too, prefer to take Ex-Lax because they have found it to be thoroughly effective without the disagreeable after-effects of harsh, nasty-tasting laxatives.

Over 50,000 druggists sell Ex-Lax—in 10c and 25c boxes.

WATCH OUT FOR IMITATIONS!

Ex-Lax has stood the test of time. It has been America's favorite laxative for 28 years. Look for the genuine Ex-Lax—spelled E-X-L-A-X. Avoid substitutes.



Keep "regular" with

EX-LAX

THE CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

Help Your Kidneys

Don't Take Drastic Drugs

You have 9 million tiny tubes or filters in your kidneys, which are at work night and day cleaning out Acids and poisonous wastes and purifying your blood, which circulates through your kidneys 200 times an hour. So it's no wonder that poorly functioning Kidneys may be the real cause of feeling tired, run-down, nervous, Getting Up Nights, Rheumatic Pains and other troubles.

Nearly everyone is likely to suffer from poorly functioning Kidneys at times because modern foods and drinks, weather changes, exposure, colds, nervous strain, worry and over-work often place an extra heavy load on the Kidneys.

But when your Kidneys need help, don't take chances with drastic or irritating drugs. Be careful. If poorly functioning Kidneys or Bladder make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Stiffness, Burning, Smarting, Itching Acidity, Rheumatic Pains, Lumbago, Loss of Vitality, Dark Circles under the eyes, or Dizziness, don't waste a minute. Try the Doctor's prescription Cystex (pronounced Sies-tex). See for yourself the amazing quickness with which it soothes, tones and cleans raw, sore irritated membranes.

Cystex is a remarkably successful prescription for poorly functioning Kidneys and Bladder. It is helping millions of sufferers, and many say that in just a day or so it helped them sleep like a baby, brought new strength and energy, eased rheumatic pains and stiffness—made them feel years younger. Cystex starts circulating through the system in 15 minutes, helping the Kidneys in their work of cleaning out the blood and removing poisonous acids and wastes in the system. It does its work quickly and positively but does not contain any dopes, narcotics or habit-forming drugs. The formula is in every package.

Because of its amazing and almost world-wide success, the Doctor's Prescription known as Cystex, (pronounced Sies-tex) is offered to sufferers of poor Kidney and Bladder functions under the fair-play guarantee to fix you up to your complete satisfaction or money back on return of empty package. It's only 3c a dose. Ask your druggist for Cystex today and see for yourself how much younger, stronger and better you can feel by simply cleaning out your Kidneys. Cystex must do the work or cost you nothing.



City Health Doctor Praises Cystex



Dr. W. R. GEORGE

Doctors and druggists everywhere approve of the prescription Cystex because of its splendid ingredients and quick action. For instance, Dr. W. R. George, graduate Medical Dept., University of Indiana, former Health Commissioner of Indianapolis, and Medical Director for Insurance company 10 years, recently wrote the following letter:

"There is little question but what properly functioning Kidney and Bladder organs are vital to the health. Insufficient Kidney excretions are the cause of such needless suffering with aching back, weakness, painful joints and rheumatic pains, headaches and a general run-down, exhausted body. This condition also interferes with normal rest at night by causing the sufferer to rise frequently for relief, and results in painful excretion, itching, smarting and burning. I am of the opinion that Cystex definitely corrects frequent causes (poor kidney functions) of such conditions and I have actually prescribed in my own practice for many years past the same ingredients contained in your formula. Cystex not only exerts a splendid influence in flushing poisons from the urinary tract, but also has an antispasmodic action and assists in freeing the blood of retained toxins. Believing as I do that no meritorious product deserves the endorsement of the Medical Profession, I am happy indeed to lend my name and photograph for your use in advertising Cystex." Signed W. R. George, M. D.

WESTERN ART CARD CO.



Western pictures; Cowboys; Action! Your friends in the East will be wild about them. Every card a work of Art, suitable for framing; wonderful souvenirs for yourself. 8 cards (all different) \$1.00. 20 cards (all different, including 6 beautiful Old Mexico Cards) \$2.00. Cash or Money Order. No risk; money refunded if not satisfied. ORDER NOW.

WESTERN ART CARD CO.

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San Antonio, Texas



FOLLOW THIS MAN

Secret Service Operator No. 25 is on the job! Summing down dangerous Counterfeit Cases. Make false finger prints in murdered girl's room.

Free The Confidential Report Operator No. 25 makes his chief. Write for it.

\$3000 a year and up YOU can become a Finger Print Expert at home, in your spare time, at small cost. Write for full details full report and details. Instructor will NOT be sent to you under 17 years of age.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1225 Broadway Ave. Chicago, Ill.

Sept. 1908

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

Detectives—Instructions

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. Work home or travel. DETECTIVE particulars free. Experience unnecessary. Write. **GEORGE WAGONER, 2040-A Broadway, New York.**

DETECTIVES—EASY METHOD TRAINS YOU. Write International Detective System, 408 Journal Square, Jersey City, N. J.

BE A DETECTIVE. Make secret investigations. Experience unnecessary. Write, United Detective System, 1623 West Grand, Chicago.

BECOME A SUCCESSFUL DETECTIVE. Experience unnecessary. Detective Paper and Particulars FREE. National System, 310-K Electric Building, Omaha, Nebraska.

Poem, Song Writers

WANTED: ORIGINAL POEMS, SONGS for immediate consideration. M M M Publishers, Dept. 88, Studio Bldg., Portland, Ore.

Patents Secured

PATENTS—Reasonable terms. Book and advice free. L. F. Randolph, Dept. 513, Washington, D. C.

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

Salesmen Wanted

MAN WANTED by shoe manufacturer established 28 years for sales work. Ready cash daily. No experience needed. Sales credit free. Write **Macon Shoe Manufacturing Co., Dept. B9, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin.**

Old Money Wanted

OLD MONEY WANTED. \$5.00 to \$2500.00 each paid for old coins. Buying catalogue 10c. Bob Cohen, Mankings, Ohio.

OLD MONEY WANTED.—Will pay Fifty Dollars for 1913 Liberty head nickel (not buffalo). I pay cash premiums for all rare coins. Send 4c for Large Coin Folder. May mean much credit to you. B. Max Mohl, 440 Mohl Bldg., Fort Worth, Texas.

Personal

WE BUY Lincoln Head Pennies. Will pay up to \$1.00 each if over ten years old. Indian Head pennies worth up to \$21.00 each. Send 10c for Buying Catalog. Continental Coin Co., R F-111 W. Jackson, Chicago.

Old Coins

UP TO \$50.00 paid for Indian Head Cents. Half Cents \$250.00. Large Cents \$3,000.00 each. Send Dime for list. **ROMANCOIN-SHOP, DEPT. 315, Springfield, Mass.**

NEW LOW PRICES

GOODRICH Firestone GOOD YEAR U.S. FISK and OTHERS

YOU CAN'T BEAT OUR PRICES

And we defy anyone to exceed our quality. Every standard tread tire manufactured by our superior modern method is positively guaranteed to give full 12 months service under severest road conditions. This guarantee is backed by the entire financial resources of an old reliable company. Order Now as Today's Lowest Prices.

BALLOON TIRES			Reg. CORD TIRES		
Size	Run	Tires Tubes	Size	Run	Tires Tubes
28x4.00-36	\$2.15	\$2.25	30x3.50	2.35	70
28x4.00-30	2.25	2.35	30x3.50	2.50	100
30x4.00-30	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-34	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-38	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-42	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-46	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-50	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-54	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-58	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-62	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-66	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-70	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-74	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-78	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-82	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-86	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-90	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-94	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-98	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-102	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-106	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-110	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-114	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-118	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-122	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-126	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-130	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-134	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-138	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-142	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-146	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-150	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-154	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-158	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-162	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-166	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-170	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-174	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-178	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-182	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-186	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-190	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-194	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-198	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-202	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-206	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-210	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-214	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-218	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-222	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-226	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-230	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-234	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-238	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-242	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-246	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-250	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-254	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-258	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-262	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-266	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-270	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-274	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-278	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-282	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-286	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-290	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-294	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-298	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-302	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-306	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-310	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-314	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-318	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-322	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-326	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-330	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-334	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-338	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-342	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-346	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-350	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-354	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-358	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-362	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-366	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-370	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-374	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-378	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-382	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-386	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-390	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-394	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-398	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-402	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-406	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-410	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-414	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-418	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-422	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-426	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-430	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-434	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-438	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-442	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-446	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-450	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-454	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-458	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-462	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-466	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-470	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-474	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-478	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-482	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-486	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-490	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-494	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-498	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-502	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-506	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-510	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-514	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-518	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-522	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-526	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-530	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-534	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-538	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-542	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-546	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-550	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-554	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-558	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-562	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-566	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-570	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-574	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-578	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-582	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-586	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-590	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-594	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-598	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-602	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-606	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-610	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-614	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-618	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-622	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-626	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-630	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-634	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-638	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-642	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-646	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-650	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-654	2.40	2.50	30x4.00	2.50	100
30x4.00-658	2.40	2.50			



Riders Of Rio Mesa

A "Hungry And Rusty" Novelette

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Rusty Gits Lynched," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE VANISHING HOMBRE.

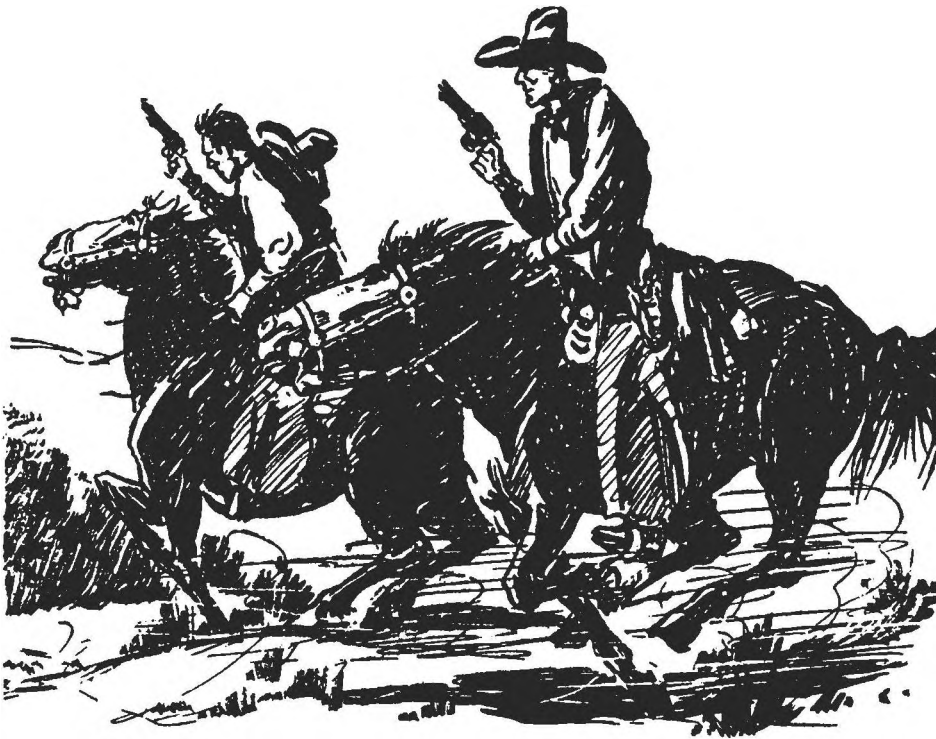
THE rider, "Hungry" Hawkins, frowned grimly and whirled his sweat-streaked horse to a quick halt behind a thicket of cedars near the rim rock. With his eyes keenly on an approaching dust cloud which boiled up from out on the barren mesa behind him, the lanky, lantern-jawed young Texas Ranger gave a shrill warning whistle.

An answering whistle instantly came back from beyond the trees.

In scarcely a moment, little "Rusty" Bolivar spurred around the thicket and reined to a bouncing halt a few steps away.

There was an inquiring scowl on Rusty's freckled face, and his slim right hand rested on the scarred butt of one of the low-swung Colts that sagged his crisscrossed belts of gleaming cartridges. He darted a quick look at his tall, awkward partner, then dropped his hand away from his gun and leaned forward in his saddle.

"What'd yuh whistle fer?" he snapped. "From the way it



sounded, I thought maybe yuh'd hubbed a rookus over here an' was needin' help. What's up?"

Hungry pointed in the direction of the dust cloud and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the brush beside his horse. He then slouched sidewise in his saddle and shaded his eyes with the brim of his hat.

"Watch thet dust cloud," he finally answered in a lazy Texas drawl. "Whoever thet hombre is, he's shore in a powerful hurry. He's headed straight toward us. I wonder has he seen us?"

Rusty jerked around. Hands on his saddle horn, he rose on his toes in his stirrups to stare at the oncoming rider. He scowled for a moment, then shaded his eyes with his hand.

The spurring rider had just crossed a shallow draw. In the blazing sunlight, the watching Rangers could catch the glitter of conchas on the fellow's chaps. As he came

closer, they caught the glint of double rows of brass cartridges at his waist and holstered guns at each hip.

Suddenly Rusty snarled a sharp warning and grabbed at the stubby carbine which swung in a scabbard beneath his right leg. As he dragged the weapon clear and hastily levered a cartridge into its barrel, Hungry's big hands blurred down and came up with his twin Colts cocked and ready for lightning use.

"Git behind these hyar trees!" Hungry barked softly. "Thet hombre's masked, an' he may be one of the very jaspers we come to hunt."

"Like I don't know it!" Rusty snarled, his eyes dancing with the light of battle. "Git back! Maybe he ain't spotted us yit! If he ain't, we'll nab 'im as he goes by."

Whirling their horses, the two young Rangers spurred hastily between the trees. There they threw

their mounts back on their haunches and spun them around.

The masked rider was still more than three hundred yards away, but he was rapidly closing the gap between them. The watching Rangers could now see that he was heavily armed. In addition to the white-handled Colts which sagged his crisscrossed cartridge belts, there was a rifle buckled to his saddle.

"He's a big, long-legged jasper, ain't he?" Rusty snapped. "Look at thet black horse he's straddlin'. Feller, yo're lookin' at a real horse. Watch how it covers the ground."

Rusty looked around at his lanky partner as he spoke. Hungry nodded grimly, then both again turned to watch the strange rider.

A startled yelp instantly burst from Rusty, and Hungry gave a grunt of surprise. The hombre was nowhere in sight. Horse and rider had vanished as completely as if the barren mesa had suddenly opened and swallowed them.

"What in the dickens an' tarnation do yuh make of thet?" Rusty snarled. "Dog-gone it! Thet hombre was right plumb out in the open, an' now he ain't nowhere. He——"

Hungry hissed a warning and dropped his Colts back into his holsters. Without taking his eyes from the open mesa beyond, he snatched out his own carbine and levered a cartridge into its barrel.

"Thet jasper didn't just vanish into the air," he barked to Rusty. "Somethin' fishy has happened out thar. Keep yore gun up an' ready. Thet feller must've spotted us, an' he may be watchin' us right this minute. Don't git out whar he kin see yuh."

Rusty flounced sidewise in his saddle and threw up his carbine. With the weapon poised, he braced himself for a lightning shot.

Suddenly the masked rider burst into view far out to their right. He was now headed straight away from them and spurring his powerful horse to utmost speed.

"After 'im!" Hungry whooped. "He's too fur away to shoot. We've got to close in on 'im. Roll the steel to thet hoss! Come on!"

With an angry yell, Rusty whirled to his horse from behind the cedars and lifted it into a dead run with one rake of his big-roweled spurs. With Hungry close beside him, they raced in pursuit of the escaping hombre.

Dust boiled from beneath their mounts' shod hoofs as they streaked across the open mesa. They did not even try a shot at the hombre, but gripped their carbines ready for use when they could get closer.

Suddenly Rusty let out a warning yelp, and he tried to rein aside to keep from riding into a deep arroyo that appeared almost under his mount's nose. Too late. He leaned forward in his saddle and gave his horse its head as the powerful animal bounded into the air in a long leap.

For a split second, it looked as if the big cow horse would never reach the opposite bank. From the corner of his eye, Rusty caught one fleeting glimpse of Hungry, then both landed in a shower of dust and sped on.

"Say, yuh long-legged pelican, thet was a long jump we just made, if yuh was to happen to ask me," Rusty panted. "We done it, though."

"Yeah, an' we found out how thet hombre managed to disappear on us," Hungry snapped as he spurred to a faster gait. "He seen us an' got in thet arroyo. He rode down it out of sight an' come out again when he was out o' range of our guns. Hurry! He's spurrin' thet

black fer all it's worth, an' he may pull another trick on us."

Just then, they saw the fleeing hombre twist around in his saddle. Sunlight glistened for a moment on his rifle barrel as he snapped the weapon to his shoulder.

Bang! A thin puff of smoke lanced from the muzzle of the weapon.

A bullet kicked up a spurt of dust in front of Rusty's horse. Another roaring shot echoed across the mesa, and a second bullet fell short.

Neither Hungry nor Rusty attempted a return shot. Instead, they leaned low in their saddles and spurred their big cow horses to top speed. They kept their carbines ready for use when they could get closer.

Suddenly, far out in front of them, they saw the canyon of the Rio Grande which split the western edge of the mesa. At that point, the river narrowed to a deep gorge where the yellow water roared over a mass of boulders and caused treacherous whirlpools in the depths beyond.

Hungry stared out at the blue haze which hung above the canyon and over the Mexico hills beyond. His horse seemed to be unable to close in on the masked hombre's powerful black, and he had almost decided to try stopping the fellow with a long-range shot.

"Hey! Look yonder!" came a sudden yelp from Rusty. "What's thet masked jasper fixin' to do? He's headed straight to the edge of the cliff thet hangs out over the river. Watch 'im!"

Hungry gave a startled grunt. He started to raise his carbine, but dropped it quickly back across his arm and straightened in his saddle.

The masked rider's black horse had just topped a little rise of lime-

stone rock that rose abruptly from the mesa floor between the spurting Rangers and the river canyon. In another second, he was out of sight.

Spurring frantically in an effort to get within carbine range, Hungry and Rusty sped on at break-neck speed. As they rocketed over the rise where they could see beyond them, Rusty let out a yell. The masked rider had again vanished.

"Keep goin'!" Hungry whooped. "If he's rode his hoss over thet cliff into the river, maybe we kin fish 'im out."

"Yeah!" Rusty snarled. "Like blazes we will! Yuh long-legged pelican, if thet jasper's jumped his horse offn thet cliff, he's dead."

In scarcely a moment, the dusty Rangers slid their panting horses to a halt near the edge of the cliff. They leaped from their saddles, ran forward, and looked down from the dizzy height.

Far below them in the seething water, they saw the masked hombre's black sombrero. It was floating rapidly away in the boiling, foam-filled yellow flood, but rider and horse were gone.

CHAPTER II.

A BANK BANDIT.

FOR a moment, Hungry said nothing. Motionless, his lantern jaws clamped on the big chew of tobacco that bulged his cheek, he stared down. Finally he sighed and shrugged his gaunt, bony shoulders.

"Well, what do yuh make of it?" Rusty snapped disgustedly. "First, we're headed to thet town back there in them brakes where we've been sent to find what's become of an hombre thet disappeared. Before we gits there, we jumps a masked

stranger thet does a high dive into the Rio Grande. What's goin' to happen next?"

Hungry wrinkled his forehead and spat thoughtfully. He glanced down at the river again, then sighed and began fumbling in his chaps pocket. In another moment, he had hauled out a crumpled letter, which he smoothed out on his carbine stock.

"Aw, what's the use of readin' thet again?" Rusty snarled. "We've read it a dozen times since our captain handed it to yuh. What do yuh think yuh'll find in it now?"

Hungry did not reply. He stared at the soiled letter for a moment. Then he tongued his tobacco into his cheek and read:

CAPTAIN ROBERTS,
Company B, Texas Rangers.

DEAR CAPTAIN: Please send a couple of your best Rangers to help locate a ranchman who has disappeared from this locality. He was an ex-outlaw, and he may have gone back to his life of crime. There has been an outbreak of cattle stealing and thievery since he disappeared, and he may be responsible for it. This missing hombre's name is Brad Spence, and he owes my bank a lot of money which will soon be due. If he is not located at once, I will be obliged to take his ranch.

Sincerely,
GEORGE SPAID.

He slowly folded up the letter and shoved it back in his pocket. He stared down at the river for a moment. Then he looked sharply at Rusty.

"I smell somethin' fishy in thet letter," he suddenly snapped. "If this Brad Spence owes Spaid's bank money, why don't Spaid just fore-close on his ranch an' collect it?"

"Yeah," Rusty snarled, "an' if this feller Spence is again ridin' the outlaw trail, why don't their sheriff nab 'im, or do somethin' about it? Why bother us?"

Hungry nodded grimly. With a

muttered grunt, he strode back to his horse and shoved his carbine into its scabbard. Then he swung into his saddle.

"Thet might have been Brad Spence thet just rode his hoss offn thet bluff into the river," he drawled quietly. "Again, it might not have been. I've got a hunch thet we ain't heerd the last o' this yit. We'll git on to town an' see thet feller Spaid, but somethin' tells me we're goin' to wind up back hyar sooner than we expect. Come on!"

With a parting glance at the river, the two Rangers whirled their horses and galloped away in the direction of the little cow town of Zacaton, which lay just a few miles beyond the place where they had first noticed the masked rider.

It was late in the afternoon when they finally rode down a steep trail from the rim rock to a brush-covered flat beneath the mesa. In a few minutes, they were galloping up Zacaton's single dusty street between rows of unpainted shacks, saloons, and stores.

The Stockmen's State Bank was a long, low building of rock and mud. Hungry glanced toward it as they rode past. Rusty started to stop, but Hungry motioned for him to keep going.

"I want to find out somethin' about thet Spaid hombre 'fore we go in thar," Hungry explained, in answer to Rusty's inquiring scowl. "We'll put our hosses in a stable an' see to feedin' 'em. Then we'll come back."

Riding on around a bunch of old corrals, the two Rangers at last found a long adobe barn. There they swung from their saddles and led their horses inside, just as a tough-looking hombre hurried through a back door to meet them.

"Hold on thar!" the hombre

growled. "What do you two punchers want in hyar?"

"What?" Rusty snapped, his freckled face hardening with anger. "Say, feller, yuh'd better keep a civil tongue in yore head, or I'll flatten yuh out. This is a livery stable, ain't it?"

The hombre glared sullenly, and slid his grimy hands close to his Colt butts. Before he could reply, Hungry suddenly nudged Rusty and nodded toward a stall just in front of them, where a big black horse was munching hay.

"Whar'd thet hoss come from, feller?" Hungry barked. "Keep yore paws away from them guns yo're tryin' to reach, an' answer my question!"

With a muttered oath, the hombre jerked his hands hastily from his gun butts, and he tried to step between the Rangers and the black horse. Rusty instantly grabbed his arm and shoved him aside.

"Yuh'd better start talkin', feller, or I'll bend a Colt over yore bullet head," Rusty snarled. "My pard just asked yuh whose horse thet is."

"Thet hoss?" the hombre growled. "Thet hoss belongs to a banker hyar by the name o' George Spaid. He just rode in from his ranch on it. What do yuh want to know thet fer? What business is it o' yores?"

Hungry and Rusty exchanged meaning glances. Both then looked keenly at the horse. Little Rusty ran his hand over the animal's sweated rump, and a puzzled scowl twisted his wizened face.

"Yuh could call me a liar fer what I'm thinkin'," he said to Hungry. "I'd swear thet I seen this——"

Bang! Bang-bang-bang! A sudden bellowing roar of guns from somewhere back on the street in-

stantly drowned what Rusty meant to say, and both Rangers leaped toward the door.

"What's happenin' here?" Rusty barked.

Boom-boom! Bang! Cra-c-kl! A shotgun whanged twice, then there came the rattle of Colts.

This was instantly followed by the pound of flying hoofs. Then the shotgun thundered again, and there came a chorus of excited yells.

"Fork yore hoss!" Hungry shouted. "Somethin's happenin' over thar, an' we may be needed."

They grabbed their bridle reins, hastily led their horses outside, and leaped into their saddles. With a swift rake of their spurs, they went streaking in the direction of the shooting.

As they rocketed around the corals, guns poised for instant use, they were just in time to see a crowd of cowboys pile from the nearest saloon and go running across to the front of the bank, where a tall, wide-shouldered hombre stood with a smoking Colt in each hand. A slim rider was just disappearing at a dead run at the end of the street.

"After 'im!" came an angry bellow from the big man in front of the bank. "After thet robber! He just held up the bank! Shoot 'im!"

Hungry and Rusty slid their plunging mounts to a halt in front of him while the crowd of cowboys whirled and went running to the livery stable for their horses.

"You!" the fellow roared as he caught sight of the badges on Hungry's and Rusty's shirts. "You fellows are Rangers! Git after that bandit! He just held up my bank!"

"Yeah?" Hungry barked. "Yore name's George Spaid, I reckon. We was sent to see yuh about thet letter yuh wrote our captain."

"Well, you can see me later about

that!" Spaid roared angrily, face reddening and black eyes glaring. "Blast yuh! Don't stand here arguin'. Git after that robber, or I'll have you kicked out of the Ranger service! I'll——"

"Yeah, yuh won't do nothin'!" Rusty cut in harshly. "We just asked yore name to make sure who yuh was, yuh big bag of wind! We don't like yore face, an' I may change it 'fore I'm done with yuh. Come on, Hungry, an' let's git thet robber first thing we do."

Without waiting for the crowd of cowboys who were hurriedly slamming saddles on horses at the livery stable, the two Rangers whirled and spurred away. Spaid glared after them for a moment, then ran to get his own mount.

On past the edge of town, dust boiling from under their horses' pounding hoofs, Hungry and Rusty streaked in pursuit of the escaping bandit. They could still see the fellow spurring away along beneath the mesa wall.

Suddenly they saw him swerve sharply aside. He vanished for a moment. Then the speeding Rangers saw him guiding his panting mount up a steep trail that led through a crack in the rim rock.

"Hyar!" Hungry suddenly barked. "Turn up thet gully thar! If we kin make it to thet mesa above us, maybe we kin head thet ornery jasper off. It's worth tryin'."

Whirling his horse into a rocky wash, Hungry led the way up over ledges toward a gash in the rim rock where a gully had been washed by heavy rains. Their horses stumbled, and at times went to their knees. Sparks flew from under their shod hoofs as they hurled dirt and gravel behind them.

As Hungry's horse slipped and slid back a short distance, Rusty passed

him and reached the mesa above. In another moment, Hungry spurred up beside him.

They were just in time to see the masked robber burst from the shelter of some stunted cedars and spur madly away across the mesa. Rusty's gun swung up for a lightning shot, but a quick shout from Hungry stopped him just in time.

"Don't shoot 'im! Don't shoot!" Hungry whooped. "Thet ain't a man. It's just a boy! Stop 'im! Take 'im alive!"

Rusty gave a startled yell and hastily lowered his gun. He got one glimpse of the rider's slender figure, then slammed his gun back into his holster and grabbed at his lariat.

"Close in on 'im!" he yelled to Hungry. "Dog-gone it! We can't shoot up no kids, but we kin rope 'im. Dab yore lariat on 'im. Nab 'im 'fore a posse gits here an' wants to hang 'im!"

Swinging their ropes, the two Rangers burst from the cedars and tried to close in on the youthful bandit. They could see that the kid was heavily armed, and that he was clutching a heavy sack in front of him.

"Halt, thar!" Hungry shouted. "Halt, thar, kid! We don't want to hurt yuh, but yuh've got to surrender!"

Like a flash, the masked kid whirled in his saddle, and he whipped a gun from one of his holsters. Leaning forward, ragged clothes flapping about his slender figure, he threw the weapon to a level and jerked the trigger.

Bang! Flame and smoke belched from the heavy muzzle of the weapon, and a hole appeared in Hungry's old hat.

The gun roared again, and Rusty felt the wind from a bullet that screamed past his ear.

CHAPTER III.

FLEEING FROM THE POSSE.

RUSTY ducked as if a bee had stung him. He batted his eyes and darted a hasty look at Hungry. Then he spurred straight at the kid's blazing gun.

"Stop!" the kid shrilled. "Stop, or I'll drill you plumb center! I won't surrender! I'll die first!"

"Hold on, kid!" Hungry called sharply. "Don't shoot no more. We're goin' to take yuh, but we won't hurt yuh none. Shoot us if yuh want to, but it won't stop us onless yuh kill us. Yuh don't want to kill nobody, do yuh?"

With a muffled cry, the kid jerked his second gun, and he held them pointed straight at the two cowboy Rangers. Smiling, Hungry rode on until the Colt muzzles touched his chest. Then he chuckled and took the weapons from the kid's hands.

"Thet's better, kid," he drawled. "Yuh ain't no killer, an' yuh don't never want to be. What in tarnation made yuh hold up thet bank? Who aire yuh, anyhow? Pull off thet fool mask so's we kin see what yuh look like."

As the kid shrank back, Rusty reached over and yanked off the faded bandanna that served as a mask. As he did so, the kid's tattered hat fell to the ground beside his horse.

Glaring, the little fellow squared his thin shoulders. He could not have been over sixteen years of age. With his brown hair clipped close to his head and his old shirt far too big for him, he looked even younger. His gray eyes flashed defiantly as he clutched his sack of bank loot and faced them.

"I didn't take this money because I wanted it," he shrilled, chest heaving. "It—it was a paper I was

after, but I had to take the money to keep that treacherous George Spaid from suspecting who I was. I—I'll send his money back."

Hungry stiffened instantly, and a startled look flashed into his mild eyes. With a muttered grunt, he darted a quick glance at Rusty. Then he looked keenly at the kid's pale, delicately featured face.

"Who aire yuh, kid?" he asked quietly. "Talk fast. Thar'll be a posse along hyar any minute. I've been smellin' somethin' fishy about thet Spaid hombre, an' we might want to hide yuh until we could thrash things out an' do some investigatin'. What's yore name?"

The kid bit his lip and looked searchingly at the two cowboy Rangers. As Rusty leaned down and picked up his old hat for him, the youthful bandit finally nodded.

"I—I'm Bill Spence," he said. "That George Spaid claims to have a note to show that my father owes him a lot of money. He lies. He just wants to steal our ranch. If he has a note, it is a forged one, and I wanted to get it. I may have it in the sack with this money, and I——"

A sudden snarled warning from Rusty caused them both to whirl. Racing along the trail beneath the mesa wall, they saw a crowd of spurting riders coming at a dead run. George Spaid was in the lead, and he had a short carbine balanced across his arm.

Hungry instantly swung his horse around. Jerking his hat tight on his head and nodding to Rusty, he grabbed the sack of money from the kid's hand.

"Whar's yore ranch, kid?" he barked. "Lead us thar as fast as yuh kin. We'll git this money back to the bank, but we ain't turnin' yuh

over to no sheriff until we've done some investigatin'."

"Yuh bet we ain't!" Rusty barked. "Git goin', kid, an' don't try escapin' from us! Roll the steel to thet horse 'fore thet posse sees us!"

With a sharp cry, the kid darted a quick look over his shoulder and raked his horse with his spurs. Leaning forward in his saddle, he turned to the right and led the way at a swift run through the stunted cedars. In scarcely a moment, they plunged down into a shallow draw just as Spaid and the posse burst into view on the rim rock.

"Git out in front, kid!" Hungry barked. "In case they see us, we want it to look like we aire chasin' yuh. Keep out o' sight if yuh kin, an' take plenty o' short cuts. Ride fast!"

The kid needed no urging. His big buckskin shot forward in a terrific burst of speed. Hungry and Rusty pulled back on their bridle reins until he was well in front of them. Then they snatched guns from their holsters and streaked after him.

For a time, they raced on along the bed of the draw where the pursuing posse could not see them. Suddenly the kid swerved sharply to the left and streaked out onto the open mesa.

Bang! A rifle cracked from far behind him, and a whizzing bullet threw up a shower of dust and dirt beside his straining horse.

A second bullet screamed between Hungry and Rusty as they topped the rim of the draw behind him.

The speeding Rangers shot a quick glance back at the oncoming posse. The hombres had spread out like a fan and were coming at a dead run. George Spaid was well out in front, and he held his carbine

ready for another shot as he savagely spurred his flying horse.

"Keep goin', kid!" Hungry barked. "Watch thet yore hoss don't fall with yuh!"

At that instant, the kid again swerved, and he headed straight toward a belt of cedar brakes. Rusty darted another look back, just as George Spaid jerked up his carbine.

Bang-bang-bang! Three sharp, thudding reports blasted across the mesa.

The two Rangers saw dust bounce in front and behind the kid's panting buckskin. In another moment, he was among the cedars.

Close behind him, their horses a lather of sweat, Hungry and Rusty sped on until the trees hid the posse from view behind them. Spurring to a swifter gait, they came closer to the kid.

Suddenly, through a slight opening in the cedar brakes, the two Rangers caught sight of a long adobe ranch house and a few corrals. In another moment, they saw the kid slow down and stop before the gate that led into the yard.

"Drop off an' hide, kid!" Hungry called. "Leave yore hoss an' git out o' sight until we come back fer yuh. We're trustin' yuh not to try to escape from us. Yo're still under arrest until we git this mess cleared up. Savvy?"

The kid nodded and threw open the gate. With his big guns flapping at his slender waist, he disappeared at a run around the corner of the house as the two Rangers drove his horse past the corrals.

They had barely reached the shelter of the trees beyond when Spaid and the posse burst into view behind them. Hungry watched as they circled around the house and searched the corrals. Then he motioned Rusty on.

"Keep goin'!" he barked. "Spaid's outfit will soon see thet the kid's hoss an' ours never stopped thar, an' they'll be right on after us. We want to be a good way off when they catch up. Hurry!"

As they drove the kid's horse on, Hungry hastily opened the sack of money and searched through its contents until he found a folded paper. When he saw it was the note the kid had mentioned, he crammed it in his chaps pocket and again closed the sack.

The two Rangers had barely reached a place where the cedar brakes ended in a maze of uptilted ledges and broken rock, when they caught the loud beat of hoofs behind them. Hungry instantly hurled the sack of money beside one of the ledges. He then jerked both guns from his holsters and stood up in his stirrups, just as Spaid and the posse burst from the tree.

"Which way did he go?" Spaid roared, his cocked carbine poised. "I see that bank robber's horse there. He must be——"

Bang! Hungry's left-hand Colt flamed, and his whizzing bullet kicked up a spurt of dust far out among the broken rocks.

Spaid instantly threw himself sidewise in his saddle, and he jerked up his carbine. With weapons cocked and poised, the posse also stared in the direction Hungry had fired.

Hungry did not even glance around. Too shrewd to risk another shot, he merely pretended to be watching for another glimpse of the bank bandit.

"Did you see him?" Spaid shouted. "Do you suppose you hit him?"

Hungry shrugged his shoulders. He then spat a brown stream into the brush beside him and shook his head carelessly.

Spaid let out a snarl of rage. He glared at the lanky, homely-faced Ranger, then leaped from his saddle and motioned to the posse.

"Hit the ground, men!" he bellowed. "These two blasted Rangers couldn't catch a blind sheep in a dobe corral. Scatter, and we'll search through these rocks. That bandit's hiding among them somewhere! Hurry!"

With angry yells, the posse lunged from their saddles and scattered among the rocks. Spaid glared savagely at Hungry and Rusty, then snarled an oath and lunged after them.

"Hold on, thar, Spaid!" Hungry suddenly barked. "What's thet sack I see over thar to yore right? Take a look at it."

Spaid whirled. As he caught sight of the sack where Hungry had purposely thrown it, the big banker gave a hoarse shout and grabbed it up.

"It's the money that bandit stole!" he bellowed. "He can't be far away, men. Keep hunting! He's hid in them rocks somewhere. He's probably just——"

With a startled oath, Spaid bit off what he meant to add and began fumbling frantically in the sack. Suddenly he straightened, and his beefy face went livid.

"Lost somethin', Spaid?" Hungry drawled quietly. "Ain't all the money thar?"

Spaid caught his breath in a whining snarl. He pawed again in the sack, then let out a yell of fury.

"The bandit stole a——" He started to finish, then stopped and darted a wary look at the two Rangers. "No," he finally snarled, "I reckon the money's all here, but we've got to catch the skunk that took it. After him, men! Try to get him alive so we can hang him!"

CHAPTER IV.

BLACK HORSE RIDERS.

AS Spaid cocked his carbine and lunged on after the scattered posse, Hungry and Rusty exchanged quick glances. Hungry smiled grimly, then winked.

"Did yuh catch thet play?" Hungry drawled.

"Did I catch it?" little Rusty snapped. "I'll say I caught it! Thet Spaid started to raise a holler about thet note yuh fished out of thet sack. Then he changed his mind. There's somethin' back of this."

Hungry nodded and snatched up his bridle reins. He shot a parting glance at Spaid and the posse who were now searching among the rocks, then motioned to Rusty and whirled away.

They got into the cedar brakes without being noticed by the posse, then spurred swiftly away. Hungry darted a quick look over his shoulder. He led the way at a swift gallop in the direction of the ranch house.

In a few minutes, they rocketed at a dead run around the old corals and threw their sweating mounts on their haunches in a sliding halt at the door.

"Oh, kid!" Hungry barked. "Kid, whar aire yuh?"

"Out here, Ranger!" came a muffled reply. "I'm out here by the barn."

Hungry instantly spun his mount. As he led the way around the house, he was just in time to see the kid scramble out of a big haystack near some low sheds. The little fellow paused to slap the straw from his faded shirt. Then he pulled the big guns forward on his hips and hurried to meet them.

"Up behind me, kid!" Hungry

barked, darting a quick look over his shoulder. "Climb up behind me, an' we'll git yuh on away from hyar 'fore Spaid an' thet posse gits back. Hurry!"

As he talked, the lanky Ranger jerked his left foot from his stirrup so the kid could use it in mounting. He then grabbed the youthful bandit's slim hand and helped him up behind him.

Instantly there came a warning yelp from little Rusty. Hungry jerked around, and he was just in time to catch a glimpse of spurring riders among the cedars.

"It's Spaid an' thet posse!" Rusty snarled. "Git on the other side of the house an' ride like blazes 'fore they see us!"

Hungry's big cow horse was in a dead run before Rusty finished speaking. One lunge of the powerful animal carried him out of sight around the house. Then he headed at top speed for the shelter of the trees across the little clearing, just as Spaid and his men burst from the cedars behind them.

"I don't think they seen us," Rusty snarled. "It's lucky the sun's gone down. It'll soon be too dark to——"

Bang! A carbine suddenly crashed, and a whizzing bullet clipped a twig from a tree above Rusty's head just as he spurred among the cedars.

Another bullet fanned Hungry's cheek and tore a shower of bark and splinters from a limb in front of his racing horse.

"Like blazes they didn't see us!" Rusty yelped. "Dog-gone it! Here comes the whole kit an' caboodle of 'em! Spaid's in the lead. I'll——"

"Keep goin'!" Hungry cut in sharply. "They just got a glimpse of us. It'll soon be dark enough to

maybe lose 'em among these trees. Keep close behind me!"

Bang-bang-bang! Cra-c-kl! Bram! A ragged volley thundered from carbines and Colts, and a hail of searching bullets whipped spitefully through the branches of the stunted cedars.

Through the blast of gunfire, Hungry and Rusty now caught the pound of flying hoofs as the angry posse spurred after them.

Twisting and turning, weaving back and forth, Hungry led the way in a wide circle through the thickest of the trees. Behind them, he could hear the angry shouts of their pursuers as the hombres tried furiously to ride them down.

Suddenly Hungry doubled back on his trail like a running fox. With little Rusty spurring close at his horse's heels, he managed to get in behind the posse. The hombres were still shooting in a wild effort to reach the Rangers by a chance shot.

Rusty giggled and swept up beside his lanky partner. "Them jaspers might have some luck if they'd shoot straight behind 'em," he said. "They're runnin' like a coyote chasin' its tail an' don't know it."

Darkness was now rapidly closing down, and the galloping Rangers had to watch to keep from riding into trees or being swept from their saddles by low-hanging limbs. They had led the posse quite a distance from the ranch house.

Suddenly, above the clatter of hoofs, they heard a shout from George Spaid. The two Rangers recognized his bull voice instantly, and Hungry swerved slightly aside.

"We can't locate that bandit in the dark, men!" Spaid called harshly. "I don't know what's become of them blasted young Rangers that was supposed to help, but we

can come back here in the morning and make another try to track that robber ourselves. We'll go on to town now, and give it up till daylight. Come on!"

Rusty gave a startled gasp and leaned forward in his saddle to stare at Hungry. Hungry's homely face cracked in a slow smile, and he nodded.

"It's kind of as I figured in the first place," he said to Rusty. "Them fellers just got a glimpse of yore hoss as we rode into the trees, and they didn't really recognize nobody. They just figured it was the kid hyar an' come chasin' after us. Waal——"

Holding their tired mounts motionless in the thickest of the trees, they waited until the posse rode away toward town. When all sounds of their horses' hoofs had died away in the distance, Hungry glanced around at the kid.

"I reckon we'll git on back to yore dad's ranch house now," he drawled. "Yuh kin tell us all about this bank business an' whar we kin find yore dad, so's we'll know what to do an' what's been happenin'."

"Yeah," Rusty snapped, eying the kid sharply, "Spaid's letter said that lots of cattle was bein' stole around here, an' thet yore dad had disappeared. He also intimated thet yore dad had been an outlaw, too."

With a flush of anger, young Bill Spence met Rusty's inquiring glance. He took a long breath and shoved his old hat back farther on his close-cropped head.

"He wanted you to think that my dad might possibly be the thief you're hunting," he replied, his chest heaving. "Yes, dad was once an outlaw, but he was never a thief. He was a gun fighter, and he was forced to kill an hombre who had a lot of political pull. He was on

the dodge a long time for that killing."

Hungry twisted around in his saddle and looked down at the kid's upturned face. When the youthful bandit met his gaze squarely, Hungry gave a grunt of satisfaction and guided his horse on.

"And I know that this lying George Spaid is back of father's disappearance," the kid continued. "Spaid is said to be claiming to hold a note against father for a lot of money that I don't believe father owes him. I've been away to school for a long time, but I don't believe father ever borrowed from Spaid."

Hungry stiffened, and a thoughtful look crept into his mild eyes. He leaned forward and spat out a stream of tobacco juice. Then he frowned and reached into his chaps pocket.

"I reckon this is thet note yo're talkin' about," he drawled. "I got it out o' thet money sack yuh had. Take a look at it an' see if yuh kin recognize yore dad's writin'."

Hungry stopped his horse and handed the kid the note. He then struck a match and held it shielded in his big hands so the kid could see.

The slender bandit took the note and hastily unfolded it. He bit his lip almost girlishly, and his nostrils quivered as he read it. When he came to the signature at the bottom, his face paled with anger.

"This is a forgery!" he cried sharply. "I'd know my father's signature anywhere. He did not sign this. Spaid is just working a deep scheme to get our ranch. He wants all of Rio Mesa for himself. I'm glad I stole this. It's worth the risk I took of getting it."

Hungry nodded and tossed away his burned match. He then took the

note and shoved it carefully back in his pocket.

"I figured it fer somethin' like thet when Spaid wouldn't tell it was took out o' thet sack," he drawled. "He maybe decided he could write another one, if nobody knowed the first one was gone."

Rusty had been a silent listener, and he had been watching the kid closely. He now straightened in his saddle and spurred on.

"We're backin' yuh in this, kid," he snapped. "We may have to take yuh to jail in the end, but I don't think so. I didn't like thet feller Spaid's face when I first seen it. I figured him fer a crook thet'd stop at nothin'. We'll——"

A sudden hissed warning from Hungry stopped Rusty before he could finish speaking. Hungry swerved his mount squarely in front of Rusty's and motioned him behind a thick cedar.

Rusty's right hand streaked down to a gun butt, and he leaned forward in his saddle. Hungry motioned for him to be silent, then pointed down at their horses. Each animal had its head up and ears shot forward alertly.

"What the——" Rusty muttered. Then he drew his gun.

Suddenly there came the sharp click of a shod hoof from in front of them. In scarcely a moment, a shadowy form moved slowly out from among the trees.

Hungry's right hand slid toward his holster and came up gripping a gun. As he softly cocked the weapon, both Rangers caught a faint glimpse of a masked rider on a big black horse just in front of them.

Like a flash, they jerked up their guns. Before they could shoot, the masked hombre threw himself down on the side of his horse and whirled

the animal behind the trees, out of sight.

With a snarl, Rusty started to spur after him, but a warning grunt from Hungry stopped him before he moved out from the shelter of the cedars.

"What the blue blazes yuh holdin' me back fer?" Rusty grated softly. "Thet's the very hombre we thought we'd chased offn thet cliff into the Rio Grande this afternoon."

Without replying, Hungry pointed to the clearing between them and the ranch house. There, in the feeble light of the rising moon, they saw a second masked hombre. Slightly to their left, there was still another. Two more stood just beyond the place where the first rider had vanished, and all were dressed alike and mounted upon black horses.

Hungry smiled grimly and nodded. "If yuh'll just point which one it was thet done thet high dive offn thet cliff into the river, we'll go ahead an' try to nab 'im," he drawled softly. "Feller, I'm thinkin' thar's a gang o' them black-hoss riders. I'm bettin' this brush is full of 'em to-night."

Rusty blinked in astonishment. Then a fighting scowl twisted his freckled face. With a muttered remark, he caught his bridle reins in his teeth and grabbed out his second gun.

CHAPTER V.

HUNGRY GETS KNOCKED OUT.

BEFORE either Ranger could make a move, they heard a sudden sharp snap of a twig straight behind them. Both instantly jerked around in their saddles.

Bang! A gun blazed in the darkness a short distance away, and a whizzing bullet fanned Hungry's cheek.

Another gun spat a stream of fire from another direction, and a second bullet screamed above their heads.

Bang - bang - bang - bang! Both Rangers fired at the flash of the second weapon.

Instantly they were ringed by a hail of bullets that split the air all around them.

"Hit the ground an' duck behind a tree!" Hungry barked to Rusty. "Down, kid, an' hide!"

Rusty made a flying jump from his saddle before Hungry finished speaking. With both Colts roaring and bucking in his hands, he ducked aside and darted behind a cedar.

Hungry and the kid hit the ground behind him. The lanky Ranger paused long enough to shove young Bill Spence into some thick brush. Then he dropped to the ground near him and began shooting.

In scarcely a moment, the Rangers and the kid were surrounded by flaming guns that tore bark and splinters from the trees above their heads.

A bullet slapped through Hungry's hat and knocked it back on his head. Another ball hit the ground in front of him and threw dirt in his face as he rolled over behind a boulder.

Rusty was shooting as best he could, but there was nothing to guide him except the stabbing flash of enemy weapons. The thud of bullets into the tree beside his face kept him half blinded by flying splinters and bits of bark. From the brush near him, there came the steady crack of young Bill's old guns as the kid tried gamely to help beat off the masked hombres.

Suddenly Hungry rose to his knees and crawled over closer to Rusty. There he dropped down and fired a few shots, then hastily re-

loaded his hot guns and crept on to Rusty's tree.

"We've got to try reachin' our hosses an' git away from hyar," he said to Rusty. "We'll maybe git Bill Spence killed if we stay an' keep fightin'. We'll hide him, then try leadin' this crowd o' gun slingers away from 'im."

"Run from these sneakin' polecats?" Rusty snarled.

"We've got to, or maybe git this kid shot," Hungry insisted. "Git ready! We'll make this gang chase us away. Then we'll come back fer 'im when we've got shed of this crowd. Fight 'em off until I tell the kid what to do!"

As Hungry crawled over to the kid, Rusty's guns began crashing with renewed fury. Bullets screamed back at his hiding place like a leaden hail.

"Hyar, kid!" Hungry called softly as he reached the kid's hiding place. "Me an' my pard's goin' to try makin' it to our hosses an' lead them jaspers away from yuh. Bury yoreself under thet brush an' lay still. We'll come back fer yuh later—if we make it through. Stop shootin' an' hide! Adios!"

The lanky Ranger waited until the kid dropped his hot guns into his holsters and crawled under the brush. Then he whirled back to Rusty.

"Come on!" he barked. "Thar's our hosses over thar by thet cedar. We'll fog them hombres up good first, then make a run fer it. Yuh ready?"

Rusty had just finished reloading his weapons. As Hungry finished speaking, he began shooting as fast as his nimble fingers could trip Colt hammers. Beside him, Hungry's blue-barreled guns rattled in a steady blaze.

"Let's go!" Hungry suddenly

barked. "Hit yore saddle, pard, an' hit it fast! We're leavin' hyar!"

Bang! B-r-r-a-m! Bang-bang-bang! The flash of roaring weapons lighted the cedar brakes with stabbing tongues of flame as the two Rangers bounded up and dived across an open space to their horses.

Panting, they threw themselves into their saddles and spurred away at a run, with searching bullets cutting through the brush all around them.

Rusty lost his hat as he dropped down on the side of his plunging horse, and a bullet split the air where his head had been. Another bullet plowed a groove along Hungry's back and tore a limb from a cedar beside him.

Suddenly, through the roar of gunfire, the speeding Rangers caught the beat of flying hoofs as their enemies came spurring after them. Hunched low, Hungry and Rusty instantly urged their own mounts to a still greater burst of speed.

With limbs whipping them across their heads and shoulders, and tearing at their bodies, the two Rangers hastily crammed fresh cartridges into their hot guns. Behind them, they could hear the masked hombres scattering to ride them down.

"Turn to the left!" Hungry suddenly barked. "We'll circle an' let 'em ride on past us. In the mornin', we'll take their tracks an' see who they aire. Yuh ready? We'll turn hyar!"

Hungry instantly whirled his horse sharply aside and spurred on. He darted a quick glance at Rusty, who was spurring around a tree a short distance away. Then he twisted in his saddle for a look behind him.

As he did so, his racing mount sped beneath a leaning cedar, and

a heavy limb hit him a terrific blow on the side of the head. Before Hungry knew what had happened, he was knocked to the ground, and his horse thundered on without him.

When the lanky Ranger began to recover consciousness, he rolled over and tried to sit up. His head throbbed painfully, and his neck felt as if it was broken.

He clenched his teeth and panted for a moment, then opened his eyes. It was still dark, but he could no longer hear any sound of the hombres who had been after him.

Suddenly he thought of Rusty. By an effort, he heaved himself up on one elbow and stared around in the faint moonlight, but he could see no sign of his little bow-legged partner anywhere.

"Oh, Rusty!" he called softly, but got no answer.

With a muttered grunt, he managed to sit up. He shook his head for a moment to clear it. Then he caught hold of a cedar limb and pulled himself to his feet.

As he did so, he caught a faint glint of metal on the ground near him. Stooping, he picked up one of his guns, where it had fallen when he was knocked from his horse. His other Colt was still in his holster.

"I wonder where Rusty is," he muttered. "I hope them masked jaspers didn't git 'im. Waal, I've still got my guns. If them hombres has killed 'im, I'll git some of 'em fer it. I'd better see kin I find whar he is. Thet Spence kid is maybe all right yit."

Hungry shook his head again and tenderly rubbed a big bump above his ear. He then limped away in the direction he had been going when he got his fall. He knew that his horse would not go far, unless the masked hombres had found it and led it away.

As he limped away, he leaned down in an effort to look for tracks, but could find none. He stopped from time to time and called softly for Rusty, but at last decided that Rusty was nowhere around.

The lanky Ranger trudged on for quite a distance, and was just starting to turn back toward the place where he had left the kid, when he thought he saw a slight movement in a little opening among the trees. He stopped instantly and dropped one hand to a gun butt.

He waited a moment, then crept slowly forward. As he neared the edge of the opening, he saw a riderless horse just in front of him.

"Waal," he muttered, "if I kin catch thet hoss, I'll have something to ride. I'll git him an' hurry back to thet kid. I can't do no good trailin' Rusty ontill daylight."

Hungry paused to glance warily around him. Then he dropped his gun into his holster and started on toward the grazing horse.

As he did so, he failed to see a shadowy form step from behind a cedar almost beside him. In another second, the icy ring of a Colt muzzle was jammed roughly against the back of his neck.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOY VANISHES.

HUNGRY stiffened. Then, like a flash, he ducked and knocked aside the muzzle of the fellow's gun, just as its thundering roar almost burst his eardrums. Instantly, he and the unknown hombre were struggling on the ground in the darkness beneath the cedar.

For a moment, they fought silently, but with the slashing fury of a pair of maddened wolves. Hungry got a grip on the hombre's steel-like wrist and kept him from using

his gun, and he hugged the fellow to him to keep him from getting a second gun from his holster.

Over and over they rolled. Hungry dared not attempt to try reaching his own weapons. To have loosened his hold would have given his slippery foe a chance to use the long Colt he still gripped savagely in his right hand.

Bang! The fellow's gun roared again, and a bullet tore up the ground almost against Hungry's knee.

Another shot cut a twig from the tree above them.

"I'll git yuh, blast yuh!" the hombre snarled wickedly. "When you an' the rest of them masked polecats think yuh kin chase me an' thet pard of mine offn this range, yo're mistook in yore Rangers. We don't run from nobody!"

It was Rusty's voice. Hungry recognized it instantly.

"Rusty!" Hungry gasped. "Look out! It's me, yuh danged fightin' wild cat!"

Rusty instantly stopped struggling. With a startled grunt, he sat up.

"Well, dog-gone!" he snapped grouchy. "Here I've been tryin' to kill what I took to be one of them masked hombres, an' I wake up an' find out it's *you*. Yuh durn long-legged pelican, where have yuh been? I've done hunted all through these cedar brakes fer yuh. Yo're lucky I didn't shoot yuh."

Hungry smiled wearily and rubbed his left ear where the flash of Rusty's gun had burned it. He then sighed and pulled his battered plug of tobacco from his hip pocket.

As he slowly gnawed off a huge chew and tongued it into his cheek, he stared thoughtfully at Rusty, who was busy reloading his gun. He

finally shoved the plug back in his pocket.

"Whar's thet kid?" he suddenly inquired. "Did yuh go back to see about 'im while yuh was huntin' me?"

Rusty shook his head. "Naw," he grunted, "I figured he'd be all right so long as he stayed hid. Thet's yore horse out there. Go git it while I go after mine. Then we'll go see about Bill Spence. Hurry!"

Hungry instantly lunged to his feet. He shoved his holstered guns back on his hips and hurried to get his horse while Rusty ran back into the cedars where his own mount had been left.

Hungry had just swung into his saddle when the thudding bark of a gun echoed faintly through the cedars. With a grunt, he whirled his horse, just as a second report reached him.

"Did yuh hear thet?" Rusty barked as he spurred out into the opening toward him. "Thet come from the direction we left thet Spence kid. There goes another!"

As the sound of a third shot rattled through the cedars, Hungry nodded and raked his mount with his spurs. Gripping their guns, the two cowboy Rangers were racing back to where they had hidden the kid.

Down over their horses' necks to avoid the low-hanging limbs, they sped on until they reached the edge of the clearing near the ranch house. There they swung hastily from their saddles and hurried along on foot.

In a few moments, they reached the place where they had had their battle with the masked hombres. They stopped there to listen. Then Hungry crept to the brush where he had last seen the kid.

"Oh, kid!" he called softly.

No answer.

Hungry called again, sharply. Then he jumped forward and searched in the thicket of brush. The kid was gone, and the brush was trampled in every direction.

"Them hombres has captured 'im!" Hungry barked to Rusty. "Look hyar at this brush! It's mashed down all around, which shows thet the kid put up a scrap when they nabbed 'im. Maybe he was——"

The sudden loud whinny of a horse from the direction of the house caused Hungry to jerk around. As he did so, he heard a snarled oath, then a quick rattle of hoofs.

"Keep that horse still out there!" came a muffled voice. "Them blasted Rangers may be snoopin' around here yet."

"Oh, they've pulled out fer town, boss," another voice spoke up. "I don't think we need to bother about them till mornin'."

"Yeah," the first speaker growled. "Well, you're not paid to think. You shut up and keep that horse still like I'm tellin' you!"

Hungry jumped back and gripped Rusty's arm. Both waited a moment, listening. Then Hungry nodded grimly.

"Uh-huh," he grunted. "Some o' them masked hombres is down thar at thet house right now, an' I'm bettin' they've got the kid. We'll leave our hosses whar they aire. Come on!"

Hastily jerking their guns, Hungry and Rusty hurried toward the house. As they drew near it, they slowed down and dodged warily from bushes, rocks, and stumps, until they reached the sheds near the haystack. There they paused for a moment to listen.

There were five black horses standing at the front gate, and a

masked hombre stood near them. A flickering light showed through a window of the house, and the listening Rangers could hear a rumbling voice from inside.

"And you're the little cub that held up the bank," the speaker growled. "Behind that mask an' them big guns, you made folks think you might be a bad hombre. You needn't try to deny it. Them clothes you've got on shows you're the bandit."

Hungry stiffened. As he heard a sudden shuffle of feet and a sharp cry from the kid, he nudged Rusty.

"Git ready!" he snapped softly. "When thet hombre thar by them hosses turns his back, make a run fer thet back door. Now. Let's go!"

Holding their guns cocked and poised for lightning use, the two Rangers stepped from behind the shed and ran lightly to the back door of the house. Hungry listened for a moment. Then they slipped softly into the kitchen.

The gleam of a candle came from the cracks of the door beyond. Hungry and Rusty could now distinctly hear every word that was said. With guns held ready, they crept across the floor.

As they peeped into the room beyond, they saw the kid on the floor near a table. His hands were tied together behind him, but he was staring up at a big masked hombre who stood over him. Three other hooded ruffians stood watching near the door, and all were heavily armed.

"Well, are you goin' to tell me what you done with that note you stole when you took that money from the bank?" the big hombre growled savagely at the kid.

His voice sounded muffled beneath the heavy mask. As he spoke,

he picked up a heavy bull whip from the table beside him and drew its long lash through his fingers threateningly.

"Won't talk, huh?" the hombre snarled. "Well, I've got something here that'll make you. I'm counting three. If you don't decide to talk when I reach three, I'm going to cut the hide off of you. One!"

With a muttered remark to Rusty, Hungry fumbled along the edge of the door and softly loosened the latch that held it.

"Two!" the big hombre roared.

A deadly greenish glint suddenly blazed in Hungry's eyes as he made ready to throw open the door. Snarling softly, Rusty stood braced beside him.

Through the cracks, they saw the big ruffian plant his feet wide apart and draw back his heavy whip. The kid's face paled, but he faced his tormentor gamely and pressed his lips tightly together.

"Three!" the ruffian bellowed, and his long whip curled up for a downward slash.

"Hold it!" Hungry barked as he and Rusty leaped into the room with leveled guns. "Drop thet whip, yuh cowardly skunk, an' reach—all of yuh!"

"Yeah, an' be mighty fast about it, too!" Rusty snarled. "Yuh blasted coyotes, I'm itchin' to start shootin' yuh down fer hurtin' thet kid! Up with 'em, or start fer yore irons! It don't make no difference to us which yuh do."

For a split second, the three ruffians at the door stood with their hands hovering above their gun butts. The big hombre whirled and dropped his whip. He started to throw himself into a fighting crouch, but got a look at Hungry's slitted eyes above those leveled guns, and slowly raised his hands.

"Thet's better," Hungry barked coldly. "Now reach down, one of yuh at a time, an' unbuckle yore gun belts. We're——"

Bang! Without warning, a gun suddenly blazed at the window, and the candle winked out, throwing the room into inky darkness.

Bang-bang-bang! Wham! Bang-bang! The stuttering bellow of hastily fired guns instantly shook the old ranch house to its foundation, and a hail of shrieking bullets shattered the door behind the dodging Rangers.

"Get 'em, men!" the ruffian leader yelled above the uproar. "Shoot at the flash of their guns! Down 'em, the blasted, meddlin' Rangers!"

A bullet split Rusty's shirt across the shoulder and tore a shower of plaster from the wall behind him. Another slug split his hat brim from front to back until it flopped down over his left ear.

Ducking and weaving, dodging back and forth at every shot, both Rangers fired at every flash of an enemy's weapon. A bullet raked Hungry's hip and shattered the knob on the door behind him.

"Lay flat on the floor, kid!" he yelled. "Keep down, so's we won't hit yuh!"

At the sound of his voice, a thundering volley split the air where he had been standing. But Hungry had darted aside as he spoke, and a shot from his left-hand Colt downed an hombre near the opposite wall.

"Yuh got one!" Rusty yelled. "I heard him hit the floor. Watch me git another'n!"

Added to the inky darkness, the swirling cloud of powder and smoke made it hard to see even the blaze of the fighters' guns. The flash of weapons winked dully like fiery eyes in the thick gloom.

Suddenly Rusty's hot guns clicked

empty, and he dropped flat on the floor to reload. Near him, Hungry was already swiftly jabbing fresh cartridges into his own weapons.

Above the rattle of guns, there came a sudden muffled command, then a thud of running feet. This was followed almost instantly by a scream from the kid. Then there came the rapid thud of flying hoofs.

"They're gittin' away on us!" Rusty yelled. "They're escapin', an' I believe they've killed the kid!"

With a hissing intake of breath, Hungry slammed the loading gates on his twin Colts and leaped through the door. Too late. The escaping hombres were already out of sight in the darkness, but he could hear the sound of running horses beyond the corrals.

He whirled instantly back to Rusty.

"Run fer our hosses!" he barked. "Git 'em an' rush 'em hyar as quick as yuh kin, while I strike a light an' see if the kid's really killed! Hurry!"

As Rusty slammed his smoke-blackened guns into his holsters and bounded away, Hungry ran back into the house. Snatching a match from his pocket, he snapped it alight with his thumb nail and held it above his head. A masked hombre lay on the floor in a corner, but the kid had been carried away.

CHAPTER VII.

HUNGRY AND RUSTY CAPTURED.

HUNGRY started to rush back to the yard, but a shuddering groan from the masked hombre on the floor stopped him. He darted a quick look at the fellow's crumpled form, then picked up the candle and touched his half-burned match to its bullet-severed wick.

When it flamed up, he hurriedly

crossed the room and dropped to one knee by the fellow. He paused to listen for Rusty. Then he rolled the ruffian over and pulled off his mask.

The hombre was dying fast. A crimson froth trickled from one corner of his unshaven lips, and his eyes rolled wildly.

"Better—better—git on——" he mumbled thickly, then stopped, and a spasm of pain twisted his brutal face.

Hungry hastily unbuttoned his flannel shirt to give him air. As the fellow again moved his lips in a feeble effort to say something, Hungry leaned closer.

"Cliff—b-better git on back—till blasted Rangers leave," the ruffian choked feebly. "B-better stay h-hid t-till——"

His voice faltered. He coughed and gasped weakly for breath. He panted for a moment, eyes rolling. Then the death rattle choked him. His body slowly stiffened. A sudden quiver shot through him, and he went limp.

"Dead!" Hungry muttered. "I wonder what he meant by a cliff, an' stayin' hid until we left. Whar's any cliff? Maybe——"

With a startled grunt, Hungry bounded to his feet. He stared thoughtfully down at the dead outlaw for a moment, then slapped out the candle and leaped for the door, just as Rusty galloped around the corner of the house with the horses.

"Is thet kid hurt?" Rusty snarled.

"The kid's gone!" Hungry snapped as he leaped into his saddle. "Foller me, feller! Me an' you is goin' places."

Hungry whirled his horse through the open gate and raked it with his spurs. With Rusty close beside him, the lanky Ranger led the way at

top speed past the corrals toward the wall of cedar brakes beyond.

For a few minutes, they sped on without speaking. Hungry was leading the way straight west from the ranch house.

"Say, yuh long-legged pelican, yuh ain't follerin' them hombres' tracks!" Rusty suddenly yelped.

"Nope, I'm follerin' a hunch!" Hungry drawled grimly. "I figure I know whar them black-hoss riders has got their hang-out. Better make plumb shore yore guns is all loaded. If I'm right, me an' you is goin' to soon be mixed up in the go-gettin'est rookus we've ever been in yit."

Rusty stiffened and blinked inquiringly. With a grin, eyes dancing, he hastily examined his guns, then slammed them back into his holsters and raked his horse with his spurs.

"I learned somethin' else, too, but we've got to prove it," Rusty gritted. "George Spaid is in cahoots with these masked hombres. If he ain't, why did that big feller ask the kid fer thet note back at thet ranch house? Nobody knowed thet was gone but Spaid."

Hungry glanced across at him and smiled dryly. "Yeah?" he drawled. "Waal, it happens yo're right. The big hombre with the whip was Spaid himself. The mask changed the sound of his voice some, but I think I recognized it. We'll prove it, an' find out what's back o' all this 'fore we're through. Spur up!"

At this information, Rusty shot his horse forward at a swifter gait. The scrappy pint-sized Ranger was now keyed to a fighting pitch, and he was anxious to reach the end of the trail.

Suddenly they burst from the cedars and raced along over the open mesa until they saw a little rise of

limestone rock just in front of them. Rusty instantly recognized the place, and he jerked around in his saddle.

"Hey!" he snapped. "Ain't this the place where we lost sight of thet black-horse rider just before he jumped his horse over the cliff into the river?"

Hungry nodded and motioned for him to halt. "Yeah," he drawled softly, "only my hunch says that guy didn't ride offn thet bluff. He just throwed his hat in the river to fool us. Then he went somewhar else. Thet hombre we killed at the ranch house mentioned a cliff, an' I figure thet's it over thar. We'll leave our hosses hyar until we have a look."

As he finished speaking, Hungry swung from his saddle and dropped his bridle reins. Rusty hastily jumped from his horse. Then they loosened their guns in their holsters and crept warily on foot toward the river.

As they neared the edge of the high bluff, they slowed down and crept along with extreme caution until they could look over at the dark river. There they stopped to examine the rocky ground as best they could.

They worked silently back and forth for several minutes, searching in every direction for tracks. Rusty had just started to circle toward a patch of brush a short distance away, when he suddenly jerked around. He listened for a moment, then jumped back and grabbed Hungry's arm.

"I hear a rider comin'!" he whispered sharply. "Listen! Yeah, it's a horse comin' this way. Let's git out of sight until he gits here, then nab 'im."

Hungry whirled. He darted one quick look in the direction of the

approaching hoofbeats. Then he and Rusty ran to a scanty growth of brush and hid themselves as best they could.

In scarcely a moment, a muffled figure appeared out of the darkness to their left and rode straight toward them. Rusty instantly flattened himself on his stomach and shoved his cocked guns in front of him for a lightning shot.

"Hold on!" Hungry whispered hastily. "Don't shoot that jasper until I give the word. Let's watch 'im an' see whar he goes. He's liable to be worth more to us alive than he'll be dead."

The rider was almost to their hiding place. As he came closer, the watching Rangers saw that he was masked and mounted upon a powerful black horse.

The feeble starlight glinted dully on his silver-mounted saddle and crisscrossed belts of gleaming cartridges that sagged under the weight of white-handled guns. Motionless, the Rangers watched him and waited to see what he would do.

The rider passed within a few steps of them and followed the edge of the high cliff until he came to a bunch of tall brush some distance away. He paused there to look behind him. Then man and horse vanished as completely as if the mesa had suddenly swallowed them.

"Gone!" Rusty gasped.

"Just as I figured he would," Hungry drawled. "Now, feller, business is shore goin' to begin pickin' up around hyar. Whar that masked rider went is plumb whar we're goin' to find that kid. Savvy?"

Hungry rolled over and lunged to his feet. Rusty bounded up beside him, and they started toward the place where the rider had disappeared. They were almost there

when the sudden sharp click of guns brought them to a quick halt.

"Hands up, Rangers!" came a muffled voice from in front of them. "Freeze, an' drop them guns! We've got yuh both covered, an' yuh ain't got a chance. Reach, or we'll let yuh have it!"

Like a flash, Rusty threw himself into a fighting crouch, but Hungry grunted a sharp warning and stopped him before he could shoot. The lanky Ranger then glanced in the direction of the unseen hombres and chuckled mirthlessly.

"Yuh win this hand, hombres," he drawled. "We're sheddin' our guns because we can't see to use 'em on yuh. Come on out an' git us!"

After a meaning nod to his scrappy little partner, Hungry carefully dropped his guns. With jaws squared grimly and a deadly greenish glow blazing in his slitted eyes, he then braced himself and stood waiting.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE OUTLAWS' HANG-OUT.

FOR a moment, their unseen enemies made no move to come from their hiding place. The two Rangers could hear them talking in hoarse whispers.

"Step back away from them guns yuh've just dropped!" one of the hombres finally ordered. "Git back from 'em! Start tryin' any tricks, an' we'll drop yuh yit!"

"Yeah?" Rusty flared. "Well, yuh——"

"Sh-h-h!" Hungry hissed softly. "Keep yore head! With them fellers hid, we ain't got a chance. Wait!"

Muttering, Rusty glared for a moment, then moved back away from his guns. When he had done so, two masked hombres appeared out

of the thicket and stepped warily toward them.

"So yuh finally follered us hyar, did yuh?" one of the ruffians growled as they stopped in front of the trapped Rangers. "Waal, I reckon the boss'll have a way o' fixin' yuh when we lead yuh to 'im. Git their hands tied behind 'em, Pete. I'll keep 'em covered."

With a sarcastic chuckle, one of the hombres holstered his guns and pulled some lengths of buckskin string from his chaps pocket. While his companion held his guns on the two Rangers, he stepped forward to tie their hands behind them.

"Yuh worked this pretty cute, didn't yuh?" Hungry drawled to the fellow who held the guns.

The hombre's eyes glittered evilly through the holes in his mask, and he chuckled. The other ruffian growled an oath and reached to tie Rusty.

"Yeah, I think we worked it pretty cute," the fellow with the guns sneered. "All we had to do was wait an'——"

Thud! Hungry's big foot shot out in a lightning kick that caught the fellow in the stomach and sent him flying backward.

Then before the other ruffian could whirl or draw his guns, Hungry smashed him under the right ear with his fist and crashed him down.

"Git his guns!" Hungry barked as he leaped back to the first hombre. "Don't let 'im yell fer help, even if yuh've got to bat 'im over the head to keep his mouth shet!"

Rusty was on the fellow before Hungry finished speaking. He snatched the half-dazed ruffian's guns from his holsters, jammed one of them against his chest, and drew back with the other to smash him in case he started to yell.

Hungry had kicked the first ruffian even harder than he thought. The fellow had dropped his guns, and was now hugging his stomach in a frantic effort to get his breath.

The lanky Ranger caught him by the throat and snatched off his mask. Working swiftly, he tied the fellow's hands behind him. Then he shoved a bandanna in his mouth and fastened it there to keep him from shouting.

"I reckon he'll now change his mind about how cute he worked it in gittin' the drop on us," Hungry remarked as he rolled him over and jumped back to help Rusty with the other prisoner.

When both prisoners were bound securely and gagged, the two Rangers carried them away a short distance and hid them between some ledges of rock. This done, they turned back to get their guns.

At a whispered suggestion from Hungry, they picked up the masks that had been worn by their two prisoners and put them on. They then wiped the dust from their Colts and dropped them into their holsters.

"Waal, I reckon we'll take these other guns, too," Hungry drawled, picking up the guns of the masked ruffians. "We can't hardly have too many shootin' tools when we run afoul of the rest o' thet gang."

The two Rangers shoved the captured guns inside their shirts where they could be easily reached, then hurried to the thicket where the ruffians had been hidden. In a moment, they were searching for the hidden passage which they knew must lead either through or around it.

Rusty was the first to find it. He pushed through a fringe of the bushes and found himself in a narrow trail that led around the shelf

of rock on the face of the cliff. He darted one swift look ahead of him, then stepped back and motioned to Hungry.

"Uh-huh," Hungry grunted softly. "I figured we'd find somethin' about like this. Waal, git yore guns ready. We'll——"

Before he could finish what he meant to say, they caught the sudden sharp click of shod hoofs from in front of them. Hungry instantly grabbed Rusty's arm, and they jumped back into the bushes.

They had barely hidden themselves when a masked rider rode into view around the bend of the trail and came toward them. Behind him came still another.

As these drew closer to the screen of bushes, more riders appeared behind them. The watching Rangers counted six of the ruffians, and all were mounted upon coal-black horses.

"Waal," the hombre in the lead growled to the fellow behind him as they passed the Rangers' hiding place, "the boss says to pick up as many o' old Spence's cattle as we kin find an' shove 'em across the river whar we kin change their brands to his without bein' seen. Tell them fellers behind yuh to hurry. We're goin' to have to work fast to git it done by mornin'."

The other hombre grunted disgustedly and called softly to the other riders. He then adjusted his mask and snarled an oath.

"Looks like the boss could've brought the rest of the gang an' come with us, like he always does," he snapped to the fellow in front. "What's he want to keep foolin' with them prisoners fer? Looks like he'd just bump 'em off an' have it over with."

Hungry instantly nudged Rusty. When the masked riders had shoved

through the screen beyond and vanished from sight, he gripped Rusty's arm.

"Yuh heard thet, didn't yuh?" he whispered. "The boss is still hyar with part of his gang. They've got prisoners, too, an' I'm bettin' one of 'em'll be thet kid."

"Yeah," Rusty snarled, "an' when we git us a squint at thet boss, we're goin' to know whose roddin' the cattle thieves thet's pullin' off so much orneriness on this range. Lead on, feller! My trigger fingers is both itchin'."

With a grim nod, Hungry rose and led the way around the narrow ledge. As they hurried warily along, they could hear the sullen rumble of the river as it foamed and swirled among the rocks and boulders far below.

Suddenly the trail swung sharply to the right around the face of the cliff. As the creeping Rangers followed it, they soon found themselves on a wide shelf that had been hollowed by the action of water far back into the crumbly rock. Hungry motioned Rusty to a halt, and they stopped to listen.

Almost instantly, Rusty's sharp eyes caught the faint glimmer of a light from almost beside them. With a whispered warning to Hungry, he reached out and touched a big canvas curtain that concealed a huge opening in the cliff.

"Uh-huh," Hungry grunted softly. "The black-hoss riders' hidin' place! Waal, now we'll just proceed to do some——"

Before Hungry could finish, a muffled cry of pain reached them from beyond the curtain. Hungry stiffened. Then he gave a startled grunt and leaped through the opening in the curtains, with Rusty at his heels.

CHAPTER IX.

COVERED FROM BEHIND.

SIDE by side, guns cocked and lifted for lightning use, the two Rangers flattened themselves against the rock wall inside, to get their bearings. They had fully expected to be greeted by a hail of bullets, but there was no one in sight.

The place smelled strongly of stabled horses, and a smoky lantern shed a feeble light on bales of hay that were stacked a short distance away. Beyond the hay, Hungry finally caught the gleam of another light through a narrow opening in the rock wall.

At that instant, a low, sneering laugh reached them. They heard a groan and the clank of a chain. This was followed by a muffled voice and a sudden thud.

"Come on!" Hungry whispered. "Somethin's happenin' in thar, an' we've got to see what it is. Watch yore step an' keep yore eyes peeled."

"Yeah," Rusty snarled softly. "An' I'm also goin' to shoot first an' ask questions afterwards, if any jasper pokes his nose where I kin git a crack at it. Lead on! I'm right with yuh!"

Keeping back from the lantern, Hungry and Rusty crept along the wall until they reached the stack of hay. There they dropped behind it and slipped noiselessly on, until they stood in the thick gloom beside a wide crack in the crumbly wall.

By the light of a candle in the cavern beyond, they saw three masked hombres. The heavily armed ruffians were standing beside a ragged man who lay on his side on the rock floor. There was a stain of crimson on the man's bearded face, and a chain clanked as he tried to raise on one elbow.

"So you're not goin' to tell me

where you located that gold on your ranch, are you?" one of the masked men growled. "Better think again, Spence. At last, I think I've found a way to make you tell me."

Both Rangers instantly looked closer at the hombre. He was the same ruffian who had started to whip the kid at the ranch house. They recognized him by the silver-banded, black sombrero he was wearing.

"Yuh scoundrel!" the prisoner on the floor panted gamely. "When yuh find out where I found thet little vein of gold, yuh mean to murder me an' steal my ranch. No, if there's much gold there, it's fer a motherless kid of mine thet's off at school. Yuh'll never git yore thiev-in' hands on it."

The black-sombreroed ruffian snarled an oath. As he started to kick the prisoner in the side, both Rangers' guns flew to a level. With fingers curled about the triggers of their weapons, they waited for his foot to move before filling him with a hail of bullets.

But the hombre changed his mind and stepped back. With a gloating laugh, he turned to the two masked men beside him and jerked a thumb toward the opening in the wall.

"Bring in that other prisoner!" he snapped. "I'm bettin' both of you the price of a new saddle that Spence, here, will change his mind when he sees who I've got. Hurry!"

When they saw the two hombres whirl and start toward them, Hungry and Rusty leaped back and crouched behind the hay. Gripping their guns, they waited until the masked ruffians vanished into another opening a short distance away. Then they jumped up and crept after them.

In a few moments, a candle flickered up beyond the hole where the

ruffians had gone. Crouched in the shadow of the uneven wall, the Rangers watched until they saw the masked hombres stoop over a pile of straw in a corner beyond the candle. Then they slipped closer.

"Git up from there!" they heard one of the hombres growl harshly. "Roll over, so's we kin onloosen yore feet. Set up!"

Something moved on the pile of straw. Then the kid sat up awkwardly in the light of the candle.

His hands and feet were lashed with heavy thongs, and he was breathing heavily. There was a bruise on his cheek, and one sleeve was torn almost off, which showed a long scratch below his elbow.

"What are you men going to do?" he demanded gamely. "When those Rangers get after you, you'll pay for this!"

"Yeah?" one of the masked hombres snarled. "If them blasted, med-dlin' Rangers come snoopin' around hyar, they'll git bumped off like they deserves."

As the hombre talked, Hungry and Rusty managed to creep almost to them along the wall. The Rangers crouched back in the shadow of a jutting rock a few steps away while the ruffians loosened the kid's ankles and jerked him roughly to his feet.

"We've got yore old man in there whar the boss is," one of the hombres rasped. "I reckon it's yore old man. We'll soon find out when out when we git yuh to 'im. We'll——"

"You dirty coyotes!" the kid interrupted sharply. "You've——"

Spat! One of the masked ruffians slapped him across the cheek and almost knocked him down. As the kid staggered, the fellow drew back to hit him again.

But the last blow never landed. Like a flash, Hungry and Rusty

bounded from their hiding place, and their clubbed Colt barrels crunched down over the ruffians' heads, smashing both hombres unconscious to the floor. Rusty would have hit them again, but Hungry stopped him, then whirled to the kid.

"It's you!" the kid gasped when he recognized Hungry's voice. "I thought you might be some of this gang, on account of those masks you have on. Yuh just came in time."

"Uh-huh," Rusty grunted. "If yuh'll just take the trouble to check up on us, yuh'll find thet we usually *do* arrive on time. We'll pay these jaspers off fer hurtin' yuh, kid. We'll——"

"Hyar!" Hungry barked softly. "We ain't got no time fer palaverin'. Grab this hat an' put it on. We'll lead the kid in thar to thet boss hombre. Then we'll nab 'im. We've got to work fast. More o' thet gang may be gittin' back at any minute."

Hungry picked up the hats of the two hombres they had knocked out. He tossed one to Rusty and crammed the other on his own head. Then he hastily tied the unconscious ruffians' hands behind them and motioned to the kid.

"Come on, kid!" he snapped. "We've got to hurry. We're takin' yuh whar yore daddy is, but yuh want to be ready to duck out o' the way if bullets starts flyin' plumb suddint. Hurry!"

As they passed the candle, Hungry blew it out. They hurried with young Bill Spence to the room where the boss of the masked riders was impatiently waiting. At the door, they shoved the kid in front of them.

"It's time yuh was getting back," the big hombre grated to the two masked Rangers. "I thought maybe the kid had got away on you. Come here, boy!"

The big hombre scarcely glanced at Hungry and Rusty. His eyes were on the kid, and he had slipped a long-bladed bowie knife from a sheath at his belt.

"If you happen to be old Spence's kid, I reckon he'll talk now and tell me where he found that gold vein," he growled wickedly. "Come over here where he can see you."

As the big ruffian grabbed the kid's arm and jerked him brutally forward, the chained prisoner on the floor rose on one elbow. Panting heavily, he stared until the candle-light struck the kid's bruised face.

"Billie!" he gasped hoarsely.

"Father!" the kid cried, and he tried to spring forward, but the masked ruffian gripped his arm and threw him back.

"That's all I need to know," the outlaw roared, and he drew back his bowie. "Spence, you either tell me where that gold is you've found, or I cut this boy's throat right before your eyes."

Eyes glittering wickedly through the holes in his mask, the hombre twisted the kid's arm and shoved the long-bladed bowie toward his throat. The kid shrank back, face suddenly pale. The chained prisoner lunged to his knees, with a hoarse cry of horror.

"Hold it, hombre!" Hungry barked sharply. "Drop that sticker! That'll be no throats cut to-night. Reach!"

With a whining snarl, the big fellow whirled. Hands hovering above his gun butts, he glared at Hungry and Rusty, then gritted an oath.

"You ain't my men!" he bellowed.

"Yuh bet we ain't, feller!" Rusty snarled. "Drop that sticker an' hoist them hands like yuh've been told. Rangers talkin', an' we ain't tellin' yuh no more!"

"Is that so?" came a sudden

harsh voice from behind them. "Rangers, yo're trapped! We found yore horses where yuh hid 'em, an' it seems as if we arrove back just in time. Lower them guns an' spill 'em to the floor before we drill yuh!"

CHAPTER X.

THE FIGHT TO THE FINISH.

HUNGRY darted a quick look over his shoulder. He got one fleeting glimpse of the six masked ruffians who had ridden from the hang-out a short while earlier in the night. His right-hand Colt flew up.

Bang! As the weapon flamed, the candle winked out, and both Rangers leaped back and aside.

"Down, kid!" Hungry barked, his voice almost drowned in the jarring roar of hastily fired guns.

Bang! Br-r-a-m! Bang-bang-bang! A hail of shrieking bullets split the air where the two Rangers had been standing, and a shower of dirt and splinters of rock rattled from the wall beyond.

Marking the flash of their enemies' weapons, Hungry and Rusty crouched low and went into action. At Rusty's second shot, they heard a hoarse gasp of pain.

Ducking and weaving, dodging back and forth at every shot to keep the masked hombres from locating them in the darkness, the two fighting Rangers tried hard to make every shot count.

For a moment, they forgot the big hombre. The fellow had not fired a shot to betray his position. But suddenly, without warning, he landed on Hungry's back, and they went rolling on the floor.

"Charge 'em, men!" the powerful ruffian roared. "I've got one down. Get that other one an' come help me!"

With triumphant howls, the hom-
WW-2F

bres at the door tried to charge forward, but a hail of whizzing lead from Rusty's bouncing guns drove them back. Behind him, Hungry and the outlaw leader were locked in a death struggle.

Hungry's first thought was of the hombre's long-bladed bowie, and he fought desperately to keep him from using it. He felt the razor-edged weapon graze his neck, and instantly jerked his head aside. He then struck out with both elbows in an effort to get the fellow off his back where he could reach him.

For a moment, they rolled over and over on the floor. The knife cut a slight gash along Hungry's left shoulder, and he felt a warm trickle inside his shirt. As the slashing weapon again burned his shoulder, Hungry suddenly shoved his right-hand gun back beneath his left arm and fired.

Bang! At the muffled blast of the blue-barreled .45, the outlaw leader gave a hoarse cry of agony, and he loosened his hold on Hungry's neck. Like a flash, Hungry twisted partly around and fired again, then lunged to his feet and whirled to help Rusty.

Suddenly the lanky Ranger gave a grunt and dived to the opposite side of the room. There he could get a faint glimpse of the other masked ruffians between himself and the dingy lantern in the passage beyond.

Bang-bang! At his first two shots, two hombres went down.

Instantly he felt a searing stab of pain as a bullet grazed the muscles beneath his left arm. He winced, then clenched his teeth and kept shooting.

Rusty's first pair of guns were already empty, but he fought on with the second pair he had hidden inside his shirt. A fog of black powder

smoke swirled around the place where he stood.

Suddenly the three remaining hombres at the door began to fall back. The two Rangers instantly leaped after them and dropped one beneath the lantern near the pile of hay. As the fellow went down, clawing at his chest, the other two threw down their guns and hastily raised their hands.

It was only the work of a moment for the panting Rangers to tie the beaten ruffians. They then hurried back into the other chamber and lighted the candle.

They found the kid crouched on the floor beside his father. The dead body of the big outlaw leader lay sprawled in front of them. Hungry picked up the bowie knife from beside him and freed the kid's hands. Then he turned to Rusty.

"I'll bet yuh I kin name thet jasper before I pull his mask off," Hungry drawled.

"Yuh'll git no bet out of me on thet," Rusty snapped. "I recognized his voice this time. It's thet skunk George Spaid. See if it ain't."

Hungry wiped a smear of crimson from his cheek, then stooped and pulled off the dead outlaw leader's mask. It was Spaid, and he had two bullet holes through his chest.

"Spaid thought he was workin' a pretty cute trick when he wrote to our captain to send Rangers to find Spence," Hungry drawled. "I reckon he didn't think we'd really find 'im. Waal, we did, an' we uncovered a lot o' orneriness, with him right in the middle of it. He'd have had Spence murdered, too, if it hadn't been fer thet gold vein he wanted to locate."

It was the work of only a few minutes to remove the chains from the old ranch owner and help him to his feet. When they had done so,

the kid impulsively grabbed Rusty around the neck and kissed him on the cheek. Before Hungry could dodge out of the way, he was also kissed.

"Hyar!" Hungry yelled, throwing up an elbow and jumping back. "Cut thet out! What's the matter with yuh, boy? Yuh gone locoed?"

"Boy!" the old ranch owner chuckled, and he dropped his arm around the ragged kid. "This ain't no boy at all. Rangers, I want to interduce yuh to my daughter, Billie."

With startled gasps, the two cowboy Rangers ducked back and stared. Rusty's freckled face slowly reddened until its color matched his hair, and he edged away as if he meant to start running.

Hungry's homely face paled in horror, and he opened and closed his big mouth like a stranded catfish. With eyes dilated, he slowly touched the place where Billie had kissed him. Then he turned and blinked helplessly at Rusty.

"Pard," he choked hoarsely, "let's git our hangable prisoners an' git away from hyar quick. N-no, we've got to git this gal an' her daddy home first, then we'll g-go."

Early next morning, as they hur-

ried their few prisoners back toward the Ranger camp, Hungry and Rusty stole bashful glances behind them. Hungry nervously munched a big chew of tobacco, and Rusty was jerkily smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Suddenly Rusty jerked around in his saddle, and he glared savagely at his awkward-looking partner for a moment.

"Say," he snarled, his face again as red as his thatch of hair, "I want to warn yuh about somethin'. Yuh long-legged pelican, if yuh ever tell about what happened to us back there, I'll bend a gun over yore bullet head! Yuh hear me?"

Hungry winced and eyed him reproachfully. "Don't yuh never worry none about *me* tellin' it," he said hastily. "Pard, if folks ever was to find out thet we'd been kissed by a gal, we'd never be able to live it down. We'd be ruint fer life."

Hungry an' Rusty may not be lookin' fer young ladies' kisses, but they shore git kissed by whizzin' lead plenty. Thet ain't nothin', though, ter what them thet takes shots at 'em generally gits. Thar's many a Boot Hill whar they're a-layin', an' the two cowboy Rangers are still on the bad-man trail. Watch fer 'em ter be back soon in another thrillin' story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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The Snappin' Turtle Kid

By James Perley Hughes

Author of "Savin' His Boots," etc.

THE flush of excitement stained Walt Martin's boyish face as he crossed the ranch yard, flicking his quirt. It was not the usual whip of the cowboy, but an ornate thing of plaited horsehair which Old Stalking Wolf, a Navajo chief, had given his father. At its end was a long, thin lash of braided rawhide.

The boy saw the head of a small snake raise itself in the sparse grass and his whip shot out. A crack, like a rifle shot, and the headless body of the reptile threshed wildly, and then lay still. Walt stuck his quirt under his arm and continued on toward the ranch house.

Tall, rawboned, and freckled, he was as awkward as a pup, and as lovable. His long, thin neck added to his ungainliness. Scarce sixteen, he had taken his place among the men in the rough cow country.

Pay day had come to the Circle Dot—Walt's first as a rider for that vast spread. A score of cayuses were saddled and tied to the corral fence.

The waddies were planning their half-yearly ride into Tres Rios. Whisky, green tables, and dance halls beckoned. But Walt Martin had no thirst for those joys.

In the show window of the Tres Rios Emporium was a sombrero

that had held the kid spellbound for a year. Fawn-colored, flawless, and high of crown, it was circled with a band of filigreed silver. It was a hat fit for the owner of vast acres, perhaps a king.

Walt went to the ranch house and drew his pay. Half of it he left, with the request that it be sent to his mother. The remainder he pocketed in shining gold pieces, the first of six months of labor in the saddle. Soon he would be riding to town, a man among men.

"I reckon yuh'd better leave that trick quirt tuh hum," "Old Tom" Tomlinson told the youngster, as they prepared to mount. "Yuh won't find no sidewinders in Tres Rios."

"I ain't leavin' it," the boy replied, "Somebody might smouch it. It belonged to my dad an'——"

"*Bueno*—let's go," the veteran waddy broke in. "My innards are howling for redeye."

Walt forked his bronc and joined the rest of the outfit. The man quirted and roweled down the road leading to the little town that supplied the luxuries of civilization.

Horses slid on their haunches when they drew up in front of the Emporium. Men leaped from their saddles and trooped to the nearest bars and gambling houses. But Walt Martin paused to loosen the cinches of his pinto and remove the heavy Spanish bit.

"Coming with us, younker?" Old Tom Tomlinson yelled.

Walt stood up, his long, boyish neck seeming to thrust out from the folds of his black *reboso*. His black eyes darted up and down the street to see where his companion had gone.

"Jes' a minute," he called.

A bellow of mirth came from a hulking figure leaning against the

Emporium's faded front. Huge, unshaven, and bleary-eyed, the man's vast mouth opened cavernously.

"Dod-gast it, ef he ain't a reg'lar snappin' turtle," the man bawled, pointing to Walt. "See the way he stuck his haid out, jes' then? Say, Snappin' Turtle Kid, whar all did yuh——"

"I ain't no snappin' turtle," the youngster broke in, his freckled face crimsoning. "My name is——"

"What all do I care what yore name is? Snappin' Turtle Kid is *muy bueno*, and thet's what I'm calling yuh."

"Yuh'd better not ef——"

Walt's long, bony fingers had closed over the butt of his quirt and his dark eyes flashed. He had taken a step forward, when Old Tom Tomlinson grasped him by the arm.

"Come along, kid," the veteran whispered. "Quit flirtin' with the undertaker."

"But did yuh hear——"

"Shore I did—and who said it. That hombre's Pete Jepson, son, and he's plumb pizen, drunk or sober."

"Yuh mean Two-gun Jepson?"

"Shore do. He kin shoot the eye out of road runner when he's blind drunk. See all them notches in his irons. Them's men—daid men."

Guiding Walt as he talked, Old Tom steered the younker toward the door of the Emporium. Sight of the magnificent sombrero drove all thought of insults from the young cowboy's mind.

Here was the thing he desired more than anything in the world. It had been his dream when he slept beneath the stars on the range. He had visioned it during the long winter nights in the bunk house. This was his first pay day, and he would

have that sombrero if it was humanly possible.

"Two-gun" Jepson lounged down the street. Walt Martin's swift anger had amused him, but he thought no more about it. He had seen the majority of the Circle Dot cowboys heading for the Gold Dollar bar.

Pay day on the range meant easy money in Tres Rios. Free drinks would be served and later, Two-gun would realize larger sums by methods with which he was thoroughly familiar.

But as the bad man lumbered down the street, Walt Martin stared at the high-crowned sombrero with its silver band.

"Gosh! Ain't it swell?" he whispered to Old Tom.

"Some bonnet," the withered cowpoke agreed. "Somebody told me it was wuth two hundred dollars"

"Gee, I ain't got thet much!"

Walt swallowed hard. His long neck went through a series of contortions. Then he settled his chin in his black *reboso*. The light died in his boyish eyes, and he half turned to quit the sight of magnificence for which he longed, but which poverty denied.

"Like that hat, sonny?"

Steve Harrison, the Emporium's proprietor, had seen the youngster staring in the window. Steve had ordered the sombrero for a cowboy, who had since left the lower Pecos Valley, and it was too small for the average cowpoke. He used it for a show piece, but had despaired of ever selling it.

"How much is it wuth?" Walt asked diffidently.

"It's wuth two hundred, but——" Steve Harrison paused when he saw the corners of the boy's lips droop.

"But seeing yo're young and tender and got a small haid, I'll let yuh have it for jes' half price."

"Gosh! Gee! That shore is cheap, but—I ain't got thet much. Yuh see I sent my mother half my pay an'——"

"How much have yuh got?" Harrison broke in.

"Not more'n seventy-five."

"I'll tell yuh what I'll do," the merchant began. "Yo're working for Jeff Carlton of the Circle Dot, ain't yuh? Waal then, pay me fifty now and fifty next pay day, and the hat's yores."

"Will yuh keep it for me?"

"Naw, take it with yuh. I'll trust yuh same as anybody."

A wave of joy crossed Walt's youthful features. He clumped into the store, and Harrison placed the silver-banded masterpiece upon his head. It fitted perfectly.

"It's mine now—mine to wear?"

"Shore is, buddy."

Old Tom Tomlinson gaped as he watched the transaction move swiftly to its completion. His out-jutting lower jaw sagged slowly until it rested on his wishbone, and his pale, bulging blue eyes threatened to pop out onto his lined and leathery cheeks.

"By the Jumped-up John Rogers and the Great Horn Spoon," he swore. "I never reckoned I'd see that bonnet on a human critter."

Walt counted ten gold pieces into Steve Harrison's cupped palm, and then carefully settled the great sombrero upon his head. His freckled face glowed as he surveyed himself in the mirror. He was wearing a hat fit for the winner of the El Paso Rodeo, and he had made the money himself. Pride swelled and he drew his lanky figure to its fullest height.

II.

Out on the sidewalk, Walt Martin swung along, conscious of the sensation he was creating. That silver-banded sombrero had been in the Emporium's show window too long not to be recognized by every man, woman, and Chinaman in Tres Rios. The male population was frankly envious of Walt's grandeur.

Old Tom Tomlinson hobbled beside his young friend, basking in reflected glory. Such magnificence had not been seen since "Dandy Dan" McAuliff won the El Paso Rodeo.

Walt strode along, flicking the long lash of his trick quirt. A spider stopped its swift ascent of the adobe wall of the post office and the young man's whip shot out. A sharp pop, and a blur marked the spot where the insect had been.

"Ef yuh could use a shootin' iron like that, yuh'd be the *hombre grande* of this man's town," Old Tom applauded.

"Going to, some day," the young ranny answered. "I'll get me a couple of irons, when I get this hat paid fer. Then yuh jes' watch and see——"

He paused as he heard a bellow of laughter from the other side of the street. He spun to see Two-gun Pete Jepson lurching toward him. The man's eyes were more bleared than ever, and his unshaven lips wide with mirth.

"For the love o' mavericks, see what's clumb under that prize bonnet of Steve Harrison's!" the bad man yelled. "Believe it or not, it's the Snappin' Turtle Kid."

Walt Martin's boyish face crimsoned, and he grasped his quirt in his right hand. Old Tom Tomlinson

saw the gesture and wrested the whip from the young man's fingers.

"Give me that thing," he growled, when he saw two pale spots appear on the boy's cheeks. "Yuh shore are set on burrowin' into a grave."

"But, Tom, he——"

"He's a two-gun bad man and yo're jes' a half-baked kid. I ain't itchin' to sing 'The Cowboy's Lament' over no open grave. Come on with me."

"I ain't going to run. I ain't skeered," the boy protested.

"No? Well, I am for yuh. 'Sides, thet hat is too new to bury. Come on!"

"No—I ain't going to."

Walt Martin stood his ground. He even fixed the silver-banded sombrero at a jaunty angle.

Two-gun Jepson swaggered up, his hands on his six-guns. He had cadged half a dozen drinks in the Gold Dollar bar and was spoiling for trouble. The boy's expensive head covering offered the best target for humor he had had in years.

"Whar'd yuh git the bonnet?" he demanded.

Pete had seen it every day for the past six months in Steve Harrison's show window, but the question made a good opening jibe.

Walt's cheeks flamed, but he did not retreat.

"I jes' bought it."

"Bought it—and paid for it?" the bad man jeered.

"I—I paid half." The waddy's flush deepened.

"Too bad—too bad! Yuh and Mr. Harrison are both going to lose something." Jepson taunted.

He jerked out his shooting irons and spun them expertly. They stopped their whirl with muzzles pointing to the crown of Walt's new hat.

"Bonnet like that sweats yore

head considerable—ought to be ventilated," the man bellowed, "Whar all do yuh want me to put the air holes."

"Yuh leave me alone!" the boy cried.

He felt his voice break in the tense moment. It only added to the merriment of the quickly gathering crowd. Tres Rios was afraid of Two-gun Jepson. It had seen too many men go down before his flaming guns to do anything save applaud his acts.

"Leave yuh alone?" the man bawled, his small eyes twinkling. "I'm jes' fixin' up yore sky piece for yuh—fixin' it up right. Kid like yuh oughtter be happy with a new hat. Oughtter be so happy he'd dance and sing."

"You jes' leave me alone or——"

Walt Martin jumped to one side as Two-gun fired both six-guns at the same time. The bullets ripped holes in the sidewalk close to his feet. Another burst, and he skipped across the walk. A yell of outrage.

"That's right—sing and dance! Merry little man shall sing and dance!" Jepson bellowed.

Howls of delight came from the crowd.

"Gosh! Gee! Ef yuh——"

Walt tugged awkwardly at the six-gun that was strapped to his waist. Old Tom Tomlinson leaped forward and yanked the weapon from its holster.

"Roarin' rattlesnakes, kid!" he whispered. "Don't go committing no suicide."

Another blast made Walt dodge again. The citizens of Tres Rios had formed a half circle behind the town bully. They were enjoying the scene immensely.

"Now for the bonnet," Jepson yelled. "Ef it was a silk stove pipe, I'd jes' naturally chaw it up. Being

it's a he-man hat, I'm only goin' to ventilate it."

"Yuh leave that hat alone," Walt screeched, pale with rage.

"Jes' doin' yuh a kindness, Snapping Turtle," the bad man laughed. "Jes' helpin' yuh——"

Wham! His right hand six-gun flamed, and a hole appeared magically in the hat's high crown.

A squeal of laughter came from several women, who had joined the throng.

"Gimme my six gun, Tom," Walt appealed to Tomlinson. "I ain't goin' to——"

"I ain't let yuh commit no suicide," the veteran waddy barked.

Two-gun Jepson was putting on a show. He held Walt still, menacing him with one gun, then the other, while he reloaded. Then the guns flamed again.

Men from the Circle Dot rushed from the Gold Dollar, but they were helpless. A shot straight at Jepson might kill innocent bystanders. Any bullet which did not stop him in his tracks would lead to Walt Martin's death.

Agony lined the boy's face. He was being publicly humiliated. Worse than that, his treasured hat was being torn to ribbons.

He wanted to get his hands on Jepson's hairy throat and tear the pulsing veins from their enshrouding flesh. The man had held him up to ridicule from the moment he had come to town. It was his first pay day, his first fling among men, and this had had to happen.

"Yuh need more air, Snappin' Turtle," Two-gun bawled, when his guns were reloaded.

Once more the muzzles flicked upward.

A shot, and a cut appeared in the wide brim. The bullet plowed upward and tore a long rent in the

crown. Another punctured the silver band.

A scream of rage came from the lad's white lips.

Jepson jeered. He took that cry for childish fright.

Next tears came into the younker's eyes. They were tears of anger, but to the two-gun bully, they were signs of weakness, fear.

"Bawl-baby!" he jibed. "What yuh all mean by wearing a man's hat? Dag-gone, I've got a notion to shoot it all tuh pieces. Yuh ain't even a snappin' turtle. Yuh're jes' a cry-baby kid who——"

A screech of fury burst from Walt's throat and he hurled himself at his tormentor. Old Tom caught him before Jepson's six guns spat. At the same time, Harvey Crane, one of the Circle Dot riders, edged in between the bully and his victim.

"We 'low as how this show's gone far enough. Two-gun," the man said.

"We? Who's we?"

"Me and the rest of the Circle Dot outfit," the cowpoke replied. "Never mind getting fancy with them irons. Yuh might drill me, might drill several more of us, but when yuh got done smokin', what's left of us would tear yuh to pieces. Savvy?"

"So yo're taking up the kid's fight?"

"No, he can take keer of that himself with half a chance, but this show's gone far enough."

Crane turned to follow Old Tom into the Gold Dollar. The old waddy had dragged Walt Martin off the street and was trying to soothe him.

The kid stared silently at his riddled sombrero. It had been the thing of which he had dreamed for a year. He had paid fifty dollars, as much as he earned in two months, and was still in debt for a like amount.

Now the hat was a ruin. Even the silver filigree was damaged. Four months' work had been thrown away to appease a drunken bully's sense of humor.

The Circle Dot riders tried to calm the fury-gripped waddy. They knew how helpless he was in the face of the killer. They talked of swooping down upon Pete Jepson in a crowd and forcing him to pay for Walt's damaged sombrero.

"No, he might kill yuh," the boy protested. "I ain't going to have my amigos kilt trying to help me. I'm going to do my own fighting."

"But listen, kid——" Old Tom began.

"Don't call me 'kid'—he said I was the Snappin' Turtle Kid, an'—an'—a bawl-baby. I'll kill him—I'll kill him—I'll kill him!"

Friendly hands restrained him, and he finally quieted down, but the hate born of Two-gun Jepson's cruel humor did not perish. Walt Martin took off the battered silver band and threw the hat's remains on a scrap heap. Then his friends lost track of him.

III.

In the meantime, Old Tom, Harvey Crane and some of the other Circle Dot cowpokes hatched a plot all their own. They had heard that Two-gun Jepson had been in funds during the last few weeks.

There were whispered tales of poker games in which his six-guns had forced timid souls to lay down their hands rather than trade lead with a desperado.

"We'll jes' get Two-gun into a little game o' stud and see ef we can't git Walt a new bonnet," Old Tom suggested.

"Yuh said a mouthful!" Harvey Crane applauded. "That's jes' what we'll do."

The preliminaries were not difficult. Two-gun Jepson knew the Circle Dot outfit was jingling six months' pay in its pockets, and the Tres Rios bad man seldom overlooked opportunities.

Stud was the game he liked best of all. It was fast and gave him plenty of action. His beetling brows and ready six-guns were enough to drive all but the bravest out of the rich pots.

"Mighty pleased to jine yuh, gent'men," he told the Circle Dot riders. "Hope thar ain't no hard feelin's. I was just having my little joke with that kid o' yores."

"Oh, that's all right," Old Tom lied.

The game started with stakes high enough to attract the attention of the loungers in the Gold Dollar. A ring of faces formed around the players.

Old Tom and Harvey Crane had had a good idea, but their tactics were not those of the Tres Rios bad man. As a hanger-on of the gambling halls and bars, Jepson was versed in the tricks of the lily-handed gentry to whom cards were a means of livelihood.

Pitted against professional gamblers, his success would have been small, but the riders of the Circle Dot were not past masters in the art of crooked cards.

Although they tried to drive him out of the pots in which he had invested heavily, Two-gun Jepson refused to be frightened and his winnings grew steadily.

A smile came to his thick, hairy lips, and his shifty eyes flicked from one player to another. Aces seemed to hunt their holes in front of him, and he carried the battle to the Circle Dot waddies with growing aggressiveness.

The crowd thickened. Two-gun

Jepson looked up to see Walt Martin craning his long neck to watch the play. The kid was wearing the battered old sombrero he had had when he first entered the Emporium.

"Hello, Snappin' Turtle!" Jepson railed, raking in a pot. "These amigos o' yores shore are showerin' down right handsome. I thought mebbe they'd chip in and buy yuh a new hat, but——"

"Nobody can buy me a new hat but yuh," the lad broke in.

"An' I ain't going tuh," the man bellowed back.

Walt Martin squirmed his way through the crowd, his eyes intent upon the game. He did not know his friends were trying to retrieve his loss. He sensed their loyalty, but he did not dream that they were risking their money to help him.

His freckled face paled when he noted the trend of the game. Small spots of red appeared upon his cheek bones. His eyes narrowed.

Two-gun Jepson was winning with sickening regularity. Any one could see that in a short time the Circle Dot waddies would be stripped of their last dollar.

The boy drew closer. The tide of gold was moving steadily in Jepson's direction. Walt saw knowing smiles passed between two professional gamblers, who had stopped to watch the play. He saw one of them nod to his companion, and then touch his sleeve.

Walt's lids tightened, and he turned to fix his gaze on Jepson. The arms of the man's coat were long and almost to his knuckles.

The kid watched, his lips twitching. He took his braided quirt from beneath his arm and gripped it savagely.

He noted that Two-gun Pete's hands were always plucking at his

coat sleeve. A frown furrowed the youngster's freckled brow. He was not familiar with the ways of gamblers, but he suspected Jepson's fumbling gestures might have something to do with his success.

He leaned still farther forward, his eyes straining. Then his intent gaze caught a flick of a card that seemed to come from nowhere. Another had disappeared, and this had taken its place. Jepson held it, face down upon the green-covered board. It was his hole card.

The betting mounted swiftly. Walt gauged the hands of the Circle Dot players. A king was the highest in sight, except for a pair of deuces in Old Tom Tomlinson's hand. Jepson had only an ace showing, but he met Old Tom's bet with a whooping raise that put a small pile of gold pieces in the center of the table.

"I can't more'n call yuh," Old Tom shoved in the last of his money.

His wages for six months' labor were in the pot. He flipped up his hole card. It added nothing to his hand.

"Aces, back to back," Two-gun Jepson roared, raking in his money. "Little ol' ace in the hole—all the time."

"No, no! You can't do that!"

Walt Martin had pressed forward, his eyes blazing. He had suddenly understood what Two-gun had been doing.

"Can't do what?" Jepson snarled.

"Take that pot—it belongs to Old Tom. He——"

The bad man's hand dropped to his six-guns. Men scattered, right and left. Old Tom Tomlinson kicked back his chair and darted forward.

"Look out, son!" he yelled.

"I'm lookin'——"

Walt Martin's hands were at his sides, but in his right was the braided quirt with its lash of plaited rawhide. He knew he was facing a two-gun killer who had been robbing his friends.

The man had shot Walt's treasured sombrero to pieces. Now he was taking the money for which Old Tom, Harvey Crane and the others had worked six months to earn.

"Give 'em back their money, then buy me a new hat," the young waddy's colorless lips were firm, his eyes unwavering.

"Why, yuh little snappin' turtle, I've a notion——" Two-gun's hand tightened on his shooting irons.

"You ain't got no notions at all," the boy shot back. "Yo're a thief an' a——"

Pete Jepson's guns flicked from their holsters.

Men dodged under the tables. Others bolted for the door. Even Old Tom Tomlinson retreated. No use in everybody getting killed. The kid was asking for it.

But as the crowd dove for cover, a shot cracked out. No smoke dimmed the sight of the drama beside the card table. Eyes widened with astonishment as they saw Two-gun Jepson stagger backward, clawing at his face. He raised one gun and fired, but the shot went wild. He was blinded.

Then the crowd flicked its gaze to Walt Martin. In his right hand was a horsehair quirt, tipped with a lash.

The snakelike thing shot forward again, and once more a noise like a rifle crack sounded through the room.

An oath from Two-gun Jepson. The lash had struck the hand that had protected his face. He dropped his arm, and the crowd saw an ugly red welt between his eyes. Walt's lash had had been aimed perfectly,

and Two-gun Jepson was blinded for the moment.

In his hairy hands were his well-notched shooting irons, weapons which had sent almost a score of men to untimely graves. But they were useless when he could not see.

"Blast yuh! Ef I ever git my eyes open, I'll shot yuh to ribbons like I did that hat!" the bad man threatened.

"Yuh won't ever git 'em open as long as I'm here," the kid rapped back.

"Then I won't wait——"

Jepson brought his guns up to fire by the sound of Walt's voice, but as the one in his right hand leveled, the whip shot out and the cutting lash jerked the weapon from the bully's grasp. A clatter as it struck the floor.

"Now drop the other, before I give another dose of leather."

An oath and Pete threw the iron from him.

Then came a burst of savage swearing. Disarmed by a stripling and blinded by the whip, Two-gun Jepson summoned the world to witness his oath for revenge.

He called Walt Martin all the lurid names his tongue could utter, swearing he would strangle him if he could get his hands on that thin, boyish neck.

"What's the matter, bad man?" Walt Martin jeered. "Yuh ought to be happy that yo're alive. Yuh ought to be singing and dancing like a merry bad man. Start dancing, Two-gun."

"I won't do it, you dang——"

"No? Well, I reckon I'll have to quirt yuh, then."

"You do, and I'll——"

Jepson lunged forward, guided by the boy's voice. But the cut of the whip stopped him in his tracks. Next the lash twined about his legs

and the bad man leaped in agony. He bellowed his rage, dodging to escape the stinging blows.

"That's right, Two-gun—step high and handsome!"

A roar came from the crowd that had gathered in the Gold Dollar. Many of the men had laughed at Walt Martin earlier in the day. Now their mirth was stirred by his tormentor's discomfiture.

"If I ever git my hands on you——" Pete swore as he leaped.

"Yuh won't after these hombres know what yuh are," the boy broke in. "Take off yore coat."

"I won't do it." Pete's smarting eyes opened to stare around.

"No?"

The rawhide flicked out to catch the tip of Jepson's ear. A screech of pain lifted as a crimson trickle coursed down the bully's thick neck.

"Take off that coat or——"

More laughter from the throng, but it died when Jepson's garment fell to the floor. Strapped to his left arm was a strange device that was connected by straps to his chest.

A clawlike hand held several playing cards. A deep breath would send this metal arm down Pete's sleeve, and in its jaws was room for a dozen or more cards.

Walt Martin stepped forward to snatch several from their hiding places. They were aces, kings, and queens. Pete Jepson was wearing a "hold out"—a crooked gambler's instrument for hiding cards, stolen from the deck to be put in play when he needed them.

The spectators recognized the apparatus, and an angry growl sounded through the room.

"Take him out and string him up!" several men yelled. "Take him out and——"

Two-gun Jepson turned and

lunged into the crowd. He could see dimly now and knew that unless he escaped, frontier justice would soon be meted.

"I've got him," Walt heard a man yell. "Now let's——"

"No," the boy strode forward, whip in hand. "Let him go—let him keep on going."

Pete Jepson continued on his way, the crowd parting to give him room. Next, he was stumbling down the street toward the horse corral. A few moments later, he was in the

saddle, spurring toward the road that led across the range.

"I'll be danged!" muttered Old Tom Tomlinson, when quiet had been restored. "He done went and left all that dinero."

He pointed to the gold upon the table at Two-gun Jepson's place.

"Yeah, I noticed that," Walt Martin said; "but I reckon thar's only enough to pay his honest debts. By the time yuh boys git back the money he stole, thar won't be more'n enough to git me a new hat."



RANGER COURAGE

SHORTLY after Jim Gillett joined up with the Texas Rangers, he was sent to kill or capture three dangerous desperadoes, the Dublin brothers, Dell and Dick, and Starke Reynolds. He caught Dell and five other outlaws and landed them all in jail.

He was then given the task of going after brother Dick and Reynolds. He caught Dick, and as he refused to halt when commanded to do so, Gillett followed orders and shot him. This left one of the three bad men at large.

The Rangers were moving camp and were riding leisurely when they saw a lone horseman at some distance. It was Starke Reynolds. As soon as he saw them, he wheeled his horse and raced off at a gallop, with the Rangers in hot pursuit.

Gillett's horse was a fast one, and he outstripped his companions. The Ranger in command called out to him as he raced by, "Go ahead, boy! Stop him or kill him!"

The outlaw turned his head and saw that only one man was drawing

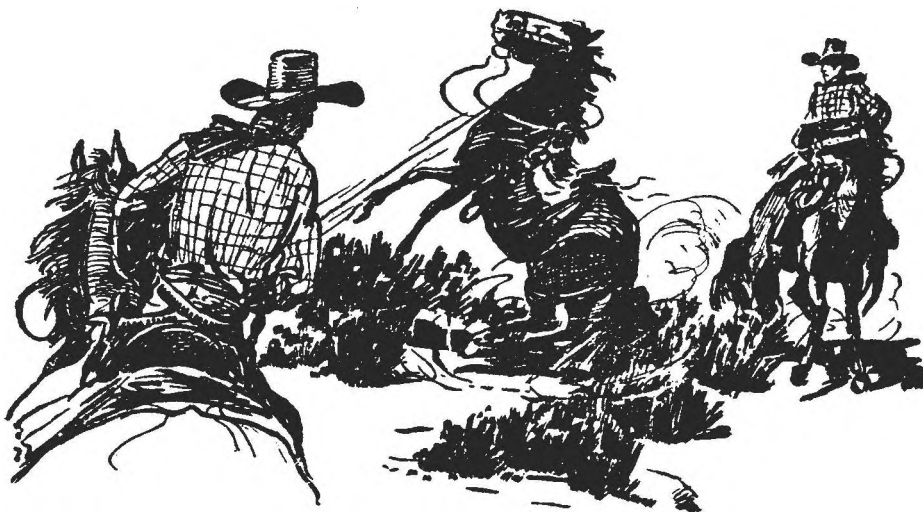
anywhere near him. This looked easy to Reynolds.

He jumped from his horse, drew his gun, and called out to Gillett: "Stop right where you are, Ranger, or I'll kill you."

This meant nothing to Gillett, who kept right on, and the outlaw fired two shots at him, but a man on a swiftly-running horse makes a poor target, and both shots missed. Then Reynolds started on foot for the timber.

Jim Gillett sent a bullet after him that broke the branches from a scrub oak in front of his face. Reynolds ran back quickly and took shelter behind his horse, that was standing quietly where he had left it when he dismounted.

Gillett slipped out of his saddle, and unsheathed his rifle. He was taking careful aim at a spot where he knew that Starke's head would soon appear, when two of the straggling Rangers rode up and saved the life of the desperado by accepting the surrender that was offered in haste.



The Bar U Twins On Circle N

By Charles E. Barnes

Author of "The Bar U Twins Carry The Pay Roll," etc.

THE wild-eyed bronc galloped madly through the sage. Trailing reins snapped and popped against its legs, scaring it almost loco. Empty stirrups banged against its heaving sides.

The Bar U twins spotted it from a ridge top. With one accord, they started after it, loops spinning in their bronzed hands.

The twins made a strange picture as they spurred down the slope after that riderless cayuse. They were identically dressed, from pearl-gray, crease-crown Stetsons, to fine-tooled Coffeyville boots. In face and build, they couldn't be told apart, even by their best friends.

Both had wide, innocent blue eyes, smooth, boyish faces with high,

wide foreheads, straight noses, firm lips, and square, almost stubborn jaws. Just now, their faces were as solemn and innocent-looking as a couple of barn owls. No trace of excitement showed in their blue eyes.

One of the twins looked like that all the time. Nothing ever changed his expression. He was Jerry Carter. The other was Tom, and Tom sometimes—in fact, quite often—grinned, and a twinkle showed in his eyes.

Just now, there was nothing to grin about. A saddled, riderless, cayuse, running loose on the range, many miles from the nearest town or ranch, isn't usually a laughing matter. It may mean tragedy.

The twins were far from home.

They might have figured that the bronc—and what it might mean—was none of their business. But that was not the twins' way.

They had left their home ranch, the Bar U—owned by their father, Sam Carter—because things had grown pretty tame in the Eagle River country, of Wyoming. So they had ridden north, looking for excitement. Excitement, not trouble.

But trouble wouldn't worry him if it came. "Trouble" was each twin's middle name.

Jerry's spinning loop leaped out. It hung suspended for a second, then dabbled down over the strange bronc's sweaty neck. Instantly the critter came to a sliding, panting halt. It was rope-wise, all right.

The twins rode close to look it over. Tom gave a low whistle of surprise. Jerry's boyish face grew more solemn than ever, and his blue eyes widened. The empty saddle on the bronc's back was caked with a dark-red, sticky-looking substance. More red stains showed on its trembling left foreleg.

The twins looked at each other. If they hadn't been so used to each other, each might have thought that he was looking into a mirror. Each dropped a hand to the butt of one of the two big Colt six-guns that he wore, thonged low on chap-clad thighs.

"What d'yuh make of it?" asked Jerry.

Tom shrugged. "Looks like some pore waddy has hubbed trouble, all right," he said. "Let's try back-trackin' this here cayuse an' see kin we find 'im."

Back-tracking the bronc proved to be no cinch, even for such expert sign readers as Tom and Jerry Carter. The sage-and-grass-covered plain retained very few tracks.

But they stuck to it. Tom rode

ahead, eyes searching the ground. Jerry followed, leading the now docile cow pony. It was a buckskin bronc and a pretty good one. There was a small Circle N brand on its left hip.

The trail, what there was of it, wound in a northern course, apparently leading to the range of low hills which loomed purple on the horizon. After two hours of patient work, the twins were sure that the hills would be their destination—unless they found the bronc's rider before they got there.

"By jing!" grumbled Jerry finally. "I shore hope we find thet feller soon. I jest thought thet if some jasper was ter find us leadin' this Circle N hoss, with thet stained saddle on it, we might have a hard time ex——"

Something that sounded like a huge bumblebee sped past Jerry's ear, so close that he actually felt the wind of its passing. He broke off talking abruptly and threw himself flat along his horse's neck. A six-gun appeared in his right hand even before the booming roar of a buffalo gun reached his ears.

Ka-zung! Another two-ounce chunk of burning lead zipped past Tom's nose as he swung around in the saddle.

Both twins instantly spurred apart. Jerry cast loose the rope that held the buckskin to his saddle horn. They jabbed home their spurs and rode like mad, straight away from each other.

The rifleman, whoever he was, could only get one of them before the other could get out of range. And he'd have a hard time lining the sights of a heavy Sharps on either one of the speeding twins.

Boom! Zing! Plup! The gunman swung his gun in Tom's direction,

and the slug tore up the turf three feet behind his bronc's hind hoofs.

Tom marked the spot where the sharpshooter stood. The next instant, figuring he was out of range and safe, he started on a wide circle. He saw Jerry, far out on the range, start the same maneuver.

The rifleman was on a low rise of ground, boldly outlined against the sky. He was holding the buffalo gun on a crossed-stick rest. He plainly meant business.

Circling way around the rise, the twins met again and stopped—safely out of range—to have a war talk. What to do was the question. Of course, they could just light a shuck away from there and forget the whole matter. But they never even thought of that.

"I got a hunch thet thet Sharps-shootin' gent is takin' us fer hoss thieves or somethin'," said Tom.

"Did yuh figure thet out all by yoreself, or did a little bird tell yuh?" jeered Jerry. "Course, he does. But how we goin' ter set 'im right when he keeps firin' thet danged ol' cannon at us every time we git in range?"

"If he's honest," said Tom, "he'll prob'ly respect a flag o' truce. S'pose I tie one on my rifle an' start ridin' up ter him. Yuh come along, with yore gun ready. If he don't start shootin', yuh stop in rifle range of him, an' I'll ride up an' try ter palaver. Yuh kin be ready ter shoot if he tries any tricky business."

Jerry nodded solemnly. The trick might work. There didn't seem to be any other way to get at the owner of the Sharps.

Tom tied a white handkerchief to the end of his rifle barrel and raised it high in the air, waving it back and forth so that the enemy would be sure to see it. Then both twins

started forward, holding their broncs to a jog trot.

Nothing happened. No big slugs came screaming at them. But they could see that the man with the Sharps had them covered.

Finally, Jerry halted his bronc, hauled out his Winchester. Tom rode on alone.

The man with the Sharps proved to be a fiery-eyed, white-bearded old-timer with a cherry-red nose, bushy brows, and a skin burned to the color of an old saddle by the sun and wind of a lifetime on the range.

"Well," he snapped at Tom, as the Bar U ranny rode up, white flag still fluttering from his rifle, "talk fast, dad-burn yuh! What're yuh an' thet other snake doin' with Curly Markham's hoss? An' whar's Curly? If yuh've bushed him——"

"Easy on, there, ol'-timer," drawled Tom. "Hobble yore temper an' listen ter what I got ter say."

Then, as briefly as possible, Tom told of finding the riderless buckskin and back-tracking it to the spot where the ol'-timer had started shooting at them. He likewise told his and Jerry's name and where they were from.

"So yo're the Bar U twins, huh?" barked the old-timer. "I've heerd o' yuh. Call yore pardner up here, an' if he looks jest like yuh—like I've heerd tell—I'll believe yuh."

Tom waved for Jerry to come up. He reined in beside Tom, and the two Wyoming waddies sat staring solemnly at the gray-bearded old hombre. He returned their stare keenly, then batted his bright-blue eyes.

"Blast my cinch straps!" he exclaimed, as he noted the amazing likeness between the two punchers. "Never seen nothin' like it in all my borned days. Even yore broncs is

twins, by gravy! Everlastin'ly blast my cinch straps!"

Tom grinned broadly. "Now thet yuh believe us," he drawled, "s'pose yuh take a load off our minds by spillin' the news o' what this is all about."

The old-timer blinked. "Shore! Shore!" he snapped. "Light down. Reckon I owe yuh an apology fer turnin' ol' Mary Ann loose on yuh." He patted the butt of the Sharps. "Bend an ear, then, buckaroos, an' listen ter a tale thet is sad. Blast my cinch straps, if it ain't!"

He went on to tell a story that the twins had heard many times. His name was Henry Norwich, and he owned the Circle N. Some one—he didn't know who—wanted him to move.

"They've stole my hosses; they've beefed my steers," said he. "They've dynamited my water holes; they've bushed my punchers. They've tried ter burn down my house, an' they've set grass fires in my best pastures. Now all my riders has quit, an' it looks like Curly—who'd stick through brimstone an' ashes—has gone over the Great Divide in a blaze o' glory. Likewise gun smoke, if he had a chance ter draw."

The twins listened solemnly, then looked at each other. There was a question in Tom's blue eyes. Jerry saw it, read it, and nodded. Tom then turned to Henry Norwich.

"Do yuh figure," he asked, "thet yuh could use two top hands fer a while—till this here crooked business kin be stopped? Me an' Jerry'd be plumb glad ter help out, seein' as how we ain't had no fun fer a plumb long time."

"I've heerd o' yuh," the old man said. "An' if yo're as handy with them lead-chuckers yuh pack as people say, I'd hire yuh in a minute. But yuh don't look—thet is, yuh

seem kind o' young an' innercentlike an'—— Hey, what the blazes?"

As if by magic, two guns appeared in each twin's hand. Before old Henry could duck or move, those Colts started talking. Then Henry didn't dare move.

For Tom's first slug ripped the rancher's battered hat from his head. Jerry's following two kept it sailing through the air. Tom's connected then, and beat it to the ground. Then both twins emptied their weapons at the wrecked head-piece.

Norwich dazedly walked over to pick up the remains. He bent down, and his eyes bulged.

"Blast my cinch straps!" he yelled. "Bar U twins, yo're hired!"

There was only one hole in the hat crown—a hole not much bigger than a silver dollar. Every one of the twins' bullets had gone through that hole, just nicking the edge.

Tom grinned. Jerry looked as solemn as ever, but it was he who spoke to the flabbergasted rancher.

"Yuh kin use the money thet yuh mebbe figure ter pay us as wages," he said, "ter buy yoreself a new hat. Now come on, an' let's finish trailin' thet buckskin bronc."

II.

The task which Jerry Carter had suggested was soon finished. Scarcely a mile from the spot at which the old rancher had first fired on them, they found all that was left of "Curly" Markham. The body lay in a small dry wash.

"Shot through the back!" snapped old Henry Norwich, and his eyes blazed with wrath. "Blast my cinch straps! If I don't——"

Tom unholstered one of the dead waddy's guns, examined it closely. The barrel was clean; all chambers in

the cylinder were filled with unfired shells. The other gun proved to be in the same condition.

"Murder! Dirty, back-shootin' murder!" breathed Jerry Carter.

The twins' solemn expression did not change. But there was a red gleam showing in the depths of their innocent blue eyes. Their square jaws stuck out just a bit more than usual.

The sun was setting by this time. Deep shadows filled the dry wash.

Tom loaded the body of the dead puncher on the buckskin horse which he once had ridden. Then old Henry Norwich led the way back to his headquarters ranch.

It was a small, neat, well-kept-up place, consisting of a main house built of logs, a bunk house, a barn, and a trim pole-railed corral. The twins and Henry Norwich dismounted and carried the body of Curly Markham to the main house.

As they paused in front of the closed door, they saw a small white square of paper tacked to the wood. They stepped closer to read these crudely printed words:

**NORWICH — WE KILT MARKHAM
TUDAY — THIZ IS THE LAST
WARNIN YULL GIT
YURE NEXT**

There was no signature to the "last warning." Old Henry Norwich fairly exploded with rage. Tom carefully removed the note and put it in his pocket.

All the rest of that evening, the twins and Norwich talked things over. The rancher insisted that he didn't have the slightest idea who his enemy was. His nearest neigh-

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bors were Ike Chase, owner of the C 11, and Pete Degenring, boss of the 20 Bar.

"An' both o' them roosters is squar," said old Hank. "I've known 'em both fer y'ars. Course, they're both plumb proddy gents—and bad uns in a scrap. But heck! They been losin' stuff, too."

"Waal," drawled Tom, "somebody round here is ter blame fer yore grief. Reckon Jerry an' me will start ridin' range ter-morrer. Yuh take Curly's remains inter town fer the law ter view. An' don't say nothin' 'bout hirin' the Bar U twins, neither. It comes in plumb handy, sometimes, fer folks not ter know thet there's two of us."

Just after sunrise, the following day, the twins rode away from Circle N. Henry Norwich headed for town—and the law—with Curly Markham's body.

The twins separated, a few miles from the ranch, intending to ride in a wide circle, keeping their eyes open for any sign of the outfit which was trying to ruin the Circle N.

Jerry rode slowly, slumped in the saddle, apparently asleep. But beneath the wide brim of his Stetson, his keen gaze missed nothing on all the vast sweep of rangeland around him.

Thus it was that he spotted the thin column of blue smoke rising from the depths of a dry wash, not far away. Instantly alert, coming

upright in the saddle with a jerk, he reined his bronc in that direction.

He dismounted when still several hundred yards from the wash. Then, loosening both Colts in the leather, he started forward on foot, eyes wide and innocent, boyish face as solemn as an owl's.

Soon he caught the low mutter of voices. He quickened his pace. Then a steer bellowed loudly. As Jerry reached the rim of the wash, a faint breeze brought him the familiar odor of singed hide and hair.

He peered down into the wash. Three men were down there. A steer lay hog tied by a small fire. One of the men was bending over the critter, working with a running iron.

Jerry couldn't see what the brand on the critter was, or what it was being changed to. But he had a pretty strong hunch that it was a Circle N critter, and that the brand mark was being blotted to—what?

Jerry didn't know, but he intended to find out. He drew both guns.

"Drop thet iron, hombre!" he snapped. "Drop it an' claw fer a cloud—all three o' yuh!"

There was instant action down in the dry wash. The man dropped the branding iron and spun around, hairy hands grabbing, not for a cloud, but for the big butts of his six-guns. One of the other men bawled an oath and likewise dug for iron. The third man obeyed orders.

Wham! Bang! Jerry Carter cut loose with both guns, and the two hombres who had showed fight went over backward, guns spilling from their fingers, bullet holes in their shoulders.

Keeping them covered, Jerry slid down into the small gulch. He kicked the guns out of reach of the two downed toughs, and disarmed

the other. Then he took a good look at them.

Hard-boiled jaspers they were. One of the two he had dropped was a squat, husky-bodied man with a scraggly yellow beard and a pair of pale-yellow eyes. His pardner was tall and skinny, as thin as a corral post, with a rat face, sloping forehead, pointed nose, and no chin.

The third hombre who had surrendered was a little better than the others, but he was bad enough. He looked like a saddle tramp, and was dirtier than Jerry had ever thought a man could be.

From the men, Jerry turned his attention to the hog-tied steer. He was almost startled out of his solemnity at what he saw. The steer was a C 11 critter. The man with the running iron had already changed the "C" into a Circle, and Jerry saw at once that one more line would change the "11" to an "N."



"Say, what's the meanin' o' this?" he snapped at the dirty hombre whose hands were still high above his head. "How come yuh blottin' Ike Chase's C 11 inter a Circle N? Yuh ain't doin' it fer——"

"They're doin' it 'cause I told 'em to, see?" broke in another voice from the rim of the gulch. "Drop that hardware, kid, an' lift 'em, or I'll blast yuh full o' buckshot!"

Jerry turned calmly and looked up. Sitting his horse on the edge of the wash was a long-necked, horse-faced hombre with a wide, ugly mouth and tawny eyes gleaming beneath shaggy brows. He held a shotgun in his hands, and it was pointed straight at Jerry.

There was no use trying to buck

that drop. Even though Jerry might be able to get the gunner, the latter would unquestionably also get Jerry. So, shrugging, Jerry let his guns drop.

"Ol' Norwich has gone an' hired himself a gun slinger, eh?" sneered the man with the shotgun, keeping Jerry covered while the unwounded brand-blotter picked up the Bar U waddy's Colts. "An' a danged baby-faced kid, at thet, by grab! Waal, waal, thet shore is somethin'!"

"Who," Jerry drawled easily, "might you be, mister?"

The man spurred his horse down into the wash. He rode close to Jerry and sneered down at him.

"Me," he said, "I'm Ike Chase, owner o' the C 11. These are my riders. The two yuh beefed is Frog Hawley an' Skinny Gasper. The gent thet now holds yore pretty guns is Dirty-face. He don't have no other moniker."

"What's the idea, yuh blottin' yore own brand?" asked Jerry.

Ike Chase dismounted, swag-gered over to where "Frog" Hawley had dropped the running iron, and laid it back on the fire. He grinned over at Jerry.

"I been wantin' ol' Norwich's Circle N fer y'ars," he said. "Now, I aims ter git it. I was framin' him fer rustlin', see? I figured we got his last rider yestiday. But yuh showed up. Now we'll jest frame yuh, string yuh up fer brand-blottin', an' git him jailed fer orderin' yuh ter do it."

Jerry felt an icy chill shoot up his straight backbone. But he didn't show it. Outwardly, he was as solemn and boyish-looking as ever. But he well realized the ease with which Ike Chase could carry out his fiendish scheme.

He would have three witnesses to back up his word. Jerry was alone.

The brand would stand as plain evidence of crime. Jerry and old Henry wouldn't have a chance to prove their innocence.

Ike Chase had lowered his shotgun by this time. Jerry was covered by "Dirty-face"—covered with his own pet six-guns. There didn't seem to be a chance to escape, but Jerry kept his eyes open, alert for the first sign of a break, however slight.

It came when Chase turned away to look at the reheating running iron. For a second, only Dirty-face was on the job. Frog and "Skinny" were rolling on the ground, swearing, pleading for some one to bind their wounded shoulders.

Suddenly Jerry tensed. His eyes grew wide as they stared past Dirty-face toward the opposite rim of the wash. He nodded his head slowly.

Dirty-face squalled an oath, leaped sidewise and spun on his heel. "Look out!" yipped Skinny. "He's slickin'——"

Sock! Jerry leaped forward. His fist lashed out, catching Dirty-face behind his right ear.

The grimy cutthroat collapsed without a sound. Jerry bent low to grab his guns, got them, and made a dash for the shelter of a fair-sized boulder not far from the wounded men.

He might have made it. But Frog Hawley had his wits about him. He tripped Jerry as the Bar U waddy ran past him. Jerry went sprawling. He lost his guns in the fall.

The next instant, Ike Chase leaped at him. Jerry tried to roll aside. He clawed for his guns.

Ike swung a boot. And suddenly Jerry Carter slumped limply. That boot caught him above the ear. With a roaring in his ears that soon died to nothingness, he passed out—cold.

III.

Ike Chase stood there for a moment, glaring down at Jerry. Then he began to grin evilly. A low chuckle welled up from his long, corded neck. Kneeling down, he pulled pigging strings from his pocket and bound Jerry's wrists tightly together behind his back.

Then, still chuckling, he moved over to see what could be done about his gunmen's plugged shoulders. He fixed them up, after a fashion. But all the time he was at it, he kept swearing at them for letting a danged slick-ear kid like Jerry Carter get the drop on them and plug them.

When Frog and Skinny were up on their feet again, Ike turned his attention to the still hog-tied steer. The branding iron was red-hot again by this time. He picked it up, bent over the steer. With a single steady-handed sweep, he put in the final line to change the "11" to an "N."

Then he moved over to his horse and got a canteen from the saddle horn. He dumped it on the still slumbering Dirty-face. The latter stirred, groaned, and opened glassy eyes. Ike shook him, slapped him, yanked him to his feet.

"Fool!" he snapped. "I ought ter plug yuh. Fork yore bronc an' start hazin' thet there steer inter headquarters! Drive it inter the small corral! Me an' Frog an' Skinny are takin' this danged brand-blotter there, too. We'll hold him an' the steer till we kin git the sheriff an' ol' Norwich out here."

Dirty-face hastened to set the steer loose. Then he forked his piebald cayuse and started hazing the critter down the draw. Ike Chase found Jerry's horse, loaded Jerry—still unconscious—across his saddle, and then helped Frog and Skinny

to board their own mounts. A few moments later, they were all fogging toward the C 11.

Arrived there, Ike hauled Jerry through the front door and dumped him in a corner of a small unused room off the main living room. Then he shouted loudly for his riders to come running.

They came, and Ike swiftly explained his plan. He detailed two of the outfit to go find Henry Norwich and the sheriff.

"Bring 'em here pronto," he said. "I aims ter git rid of ol' Norwich ter-day—fer good and all. Don't tell Norwich what's up, yet."

The two messengers—a pair of unwashed, slit-eyed jaspers who rejoiced in the names of "Pug" Hanlon and "Scar" Peters—lit a shuck for the horse corral, and in a very few minutes, were making tracks in the direction of the Circle N.

Scar—so called because of the great livid welt that crossed his ugly face from ear to chin—laughed as he thought over the boss's scheme.

"Old Ike shore is strong on brains, even if they ain't never been eddicated up ter readin' an' writin'," he guffawed.

Pug Hanlon chuckled. His moniker came from his nose—an almost invisible button on the vast, moon-shaped disk of his face.

"Yeah," he drawled. "Ike is shore there on brains, all right. An', heck! What's the use o' knowin' how ter read an' write, nohow? I never learnt, an' look at me."

"Look at yuh!" jeered Scar. "A danged dumb lead-pusher. Now don't git on the prod. That's what all of us is—all except Ike, an' he's got brains."

The two fell silent while their horses pounded on. Finally, Scar broke the silence again.

"Wonder," he said, "where ol' Norwich ever picked up thet baby-faced gun slinger. Gosh! He didn't look like he was able ter git the drop an' outshoot Frog and Skinny. Looked like a danged school kid, ter me."

"He was jest lucky," said Pug. "I bet yuh Frog an' Skinny fights the sheriff fer a chance ter yank him off the earth."

Miles unwound beneath the hoofs of the two C 11 broncs. The sun was still two hours above the western horizon when they spotted the buildings of the Circle N. While still a mile away, on top of a low rise, they saw three horses standing outside.

The two gun slingers exchanged quick glances. Pug's moon face showed a trace of fear. But Scar laughed.

"Never mind," he said. "All we got ter do is tell Norwich thet the Ol' Man wants ter see 'im. One of us go with him. The other'll go fer the sheriff."

On they rode. When they had come to within a hundred yards of the ranch-house door, it opened, and two men stepped out, watching them. Scar and Pug swore in surprise. One of the men was Henry Norwich. The other was Sheriff Pat Grayson, of Sage County.

Scar reined down to a walk. Pug pulled up beside him. They rode on slowly.

Then suddenly both men saw another hombre come to the door behind the sheriff and Norwich and stand there watching their approach.

At first, Scar couldn't make out the hombre's face, because of the gloom inside the cabin. Then, when he came closer, Scar yanked his horse to a sudden halt.

A coarse, loud-voiced oath of

amazement came from his wide-open mouth. For an instant, his eyes bulged in disbelief. He was dimly aware of the blank look of surprise and fear on Pug's round face.

The hombre leaning against the door was a young, boyish-faced, blue-eyed, solemn-looking puncher, dressed in light-colored Stetson, checkered flannel shirt, and packing a pair of ivory-butted Colts.

"It's thet danged slick-ear the boss caught!" the thought flashed through Scar's mind. "He beat us hyar, somehow, an' has spilled the hull story ter Norwich an' the law. I got ter git 'im!"

Fear and rage swept over Scar in a chilling flood. But they didn't slow up his gun hand. That worked like clockwork, sweeping down to his holstered Colt with the speed gained by a lifetime of practice. The gun leaped from leather, snapped up, and——

Bang-bang! Two shots roared out, so close together that they sounded almost like one.

But one had come a fraction of a second before the other. That one hadn't come from Scar's gun. Instead, Scar sent his bullet screaming over the ranch-house roof as a hot slug caught him in the chest and knocked him lifeless from the saddle.

The blue-eyed cowboy in the doorway had beaten him to the draw and shot. Scar was dead before he hit the ground.

Pug Hanlon saw what happened as his half-broken bronc reared and whirled. He had no chance to draw, even if he'd dared. He sank spurs into his bronc and started burning the wind back toward the C 11.

Tom Carter leaped clear of the doorway, gun raised for a quick, chopping shot. But he couldn't.

burn a slug into Pug's back, and he wouldn't plug the horse. He made a dash for his own waiting mount.

Sheriff Pat Grayson yelled at him. Tom turned to see the lawman covering him with cocked Colt.

"Where yuh goin'?" snapped the law. "What's the meanin' of all this, nohow?"

"Thet skunk drawed down on me, an' I had ter plug 'im!" snapped Tom. "He figured I was my brother, Jerry. Yuh know. Norwich an' I told yuh we was twins. Thet means Jerry's in trouble somewhere. I'm follerin' thet dish-faced gent an' findin' Jerry!"

"Thet was Pug Hanlon," volunteered Henry Norwich. "He rides fer Ike Chase's C 11. So did the gent yuh plugged—Scar Peters. I don't understand it. I——"

"Let's ride fer the C 11, pronto!" snapped Tom. "I tell yuh, I know the signs. Those jaspers had some reason ter be plenty scared ter see me here. Thinkin' I was Jerry, an' believin' Jerry couldn't be here, they figured——"

"I git it!" yelled Norwich. "I don't think Ike's got nothin' ter do with it, but let's slope. We'll find Jerry, or——"

"Yo're both crazy!" snorted Sheriff Grayson. "But I'll tag along ter see there ain't no shenanigans."

The three men made a dash for their horses. In a split second, they were in leather, fogging it for the C 11.

Pug Hanlon wasn't far ahead. He saw them coming, and started quirt-ing and spurring his bronc in a frenzy of fear.

He, too, thought that Jerry Carter had escaped and told all about the boss's game to the law. He had to get back in time to warn Ike.

IV.

Ike Chase and his outfit of hard-boiled, gun-slinging riders were sitting on the front porch of the rambling, run-down C 11 ranch house. They had a big jug of redeye, and they were passing it from one to another frequently. They were in high good humor.

"I tell yuh, boys, this was a slick scheme o' mine," Ike said for the sixth time. "I been wantin' the Circle N fer a long time. But Hank wouldn't never sell. I tried stealin' his stock, shootin' his riders, an' everythin'. Nothin' worked. So now I'm framin' him fer rustlin'. When he's in the pen, the Circle N's mine."

"An' the best part of it is, boss," laughed Frog Hawley, feeling much better now, with a pint of liquor inside his beefy paunch, "thet the ol' coot ain't got an idea thet yo're the one thet's been after him."

The gang laughed, and all took another drink. More and more often, their eyes began turning toward the trail that led toward Circle N. It shouldn't be long now before old Norwich showed up. Then the fun would begin.

Suddenly Ike Chase spotted a dust cloud coming toward the ranch. He gave a snort of satisfaction and raised a pair of field glasses to his eyes.

"Here he comes," he began. "A-foggin' the breeze ter beat the —— Say! What in blazes?"

"What's the matter?" the gang chorused the question as one man.

For a moment, Ike was silent, staring through the glasses as if to make certain of what was only a suspicion. Then he swore loud and long. Lowering the glasses, he turned to the gang.

"Thet's Pug!" he roared. "Tain't

Norwich a-tall. It's Pug. He's all alone an' ridin' like he was only a jump ahead of a posse!"

A mutter of fear ran through the group. They came to their feet, hands dropping to their gun butts. Ike, too, leaped up. Then he seemed to get control of himself.

"Set down!" he ordered. "Nothin' kin be wrong. No matter what happens, all of us kin swear thet we saw Norwich's rider blot thet brand on the C 11 steer. Thet's all we need. Nobody's got nothin' on us. Keep calm, gents!"

They settled down, but nervous fingers played over gun butts as Pug Hanlon came spurring up, left his saddle in a flying leap, and ran staggering up to the porch.

"Boss! Boss!" yelled Pug. "Thet danged baby-faced puncher got loose from here an' beat us ter Norwich's. When we got there, he was spillin' the hull plan ter Norwich an' the sher'ff."

Ike leaped to his feet as if a bee had stung him. "Yo're loco!" he yelled. "Thet cowpoke is still in the back room, all tied up."

"He ain't!" wailed Pug. "He's on his way back here, though, with Norwich an' Sher'ff Grayson. I ain't lyin', boss. I tell yuh, I seen him. He killed Scar, an'——"

With a harsh oath, Ike turned and dashed into the house. He stormed through the living room and burst into the room where he had left his prisoner, hog tied and helpless.

He struck a match. One look was enough. The ropes lay on the floor where the cowboy had been. But the cowboy was gone!

Ike didn't bother to search the room. If he had, things might have been different. For Jerry was hiding in a far, dark corner, having just managed to escape his bonds. Howl-

ing with rage, Ike leaped back to the porch.

"Keep cool, gents!" he advised. "We got plenty o' witnesses ter swear thet we seen thet cowboy blottin' our brand. It'll only be his word agin' ours. So keep cool. Leave me do the talkin'."

Another dust cloud showed on the horizon now. The C 11 bunch stood on the porch, watching it come closer. Every man was tense, his hand resting on his gun butt.

Soon the dust cloud came close enough for all to see who was making it. Three horsemen—Henry Norwich, Sheriff Grayson, and the cowboy whom they thought had been securely hog tied in the back room. They came thundering up to the steps.

"Sher'ff Grayson," bellowed Ike, before any one else could say a word, "arrest Norwich an' thet baby-faced, gun-slingin' rider o' his fer brand-blottin' and rustlin'!"

"Huh?" Grayson was flabbergasted. So was Norwich, and so was Tom Carter.

But Tom didn't show it. He stared with solemn blue eyes at the ugly-faced C 11 owner.

"I said arrest 'em fer rustlin'!" snapped Ike. "Me an' three o' my men caught thet innercent-lookin' jasper, there, blottin' a C 11 brand inter a Circle N. We got the steer right over there in the corral ter prove it. I shore never thought, Henry, thet yuh'd git low enough ter steal my beef."

"Why, blast my cinch straps!" yelled old Henry Norwich. "Yuh accusin' me o' rustlin', Ike? Why, dang yuh fer an ornery snake in the grass! Mebbe thet explains——"

"Whar's thet steer?" bellowed Grayson importantly. "If what yuh say is true, Chase——"

"It's true, all right," said Chase.

"Frog an' Skinny an' me all saw this cuss, right while he was doin' the blottin'." I got yuh dead ter rights, skunk!" he yelled, pointing at Tom. "So yuh better give up an' don't get no fool notions."

"Are yuh plumb shore thet thet gent was the one yuh seen on yore range ter-day?" drawled another voice suddenly.

That voice came from the doorway behind Ike Chase and his C 11 riders. As one man they whirled—and stood gasping like freshly landed brook trout.

There in the doorway was another blue-eyed and solemn-faced waddy, a dead ringer for the one who sat his horse in front of the steps. This second waddy held a pair of steady Colts in his bronzed hands. They were the guns that the gang had taken from their captive and left on the table in the main room of the house.

For a moment, there was stunned silence. Then Ike began to swear. One of his men made a move toward a six-gun.

Blam! A bullet from Jerry's gun stopped him, as it passed, half an inch from his big bat ear.

Ike soon recovered himself. He stood in deadly calm as Jerry briefly told what he had seen and had done to him that day. When he had finished, Ike Chase sneered.

"A dang pretty story, cowboy," he said. "I don't know which one o' yuh we caught blottin' thet brand, but one o' yuh did. An' I got the steer ter prove it. If yuh'll come with me, sher'ff, I'll show it ter yuh."

The sheriff nodded. He was plainly puzzled by the whole business. He didn't know who or what to believe. A plain case of brand-blotting, done that very day, would be fresh enough evidence to give

him some idea about what was what. Ike started to go down the steps.

"Jest a minute," snapped Tom Carter, speaking for the first time. "I may be dumb, but would yuh mind showin' me jest how a waddy could change a C 11 inter a Circle N?"

Ike swore. "I guess yuh shore ain't the waddy I catshed," he said. "Look here! I'll show yuh."

He dropped to one knee on the ground beside the steps, and, with a short stick, traced the lines of a C 11 brand mark. Then he changed it to a Circle N.

"Oh!" said Tom, sheepishly. "Simple, ain't it? Wonder I didn't think of it before. Come on! Let's look at thet steer."

The whole outfit—Sheriff Grayson, Henry Norwich, Tom and Jerry Carter, and the hard-case C 11 outfit—trooped down to the corral. There one of Chase's cowboys mounted and rode in after the white-faced steer.

His rope whirled, and he soon was dragging the critter toward the gate. Another rider's rope swirled out, snagged the beast by the forelegs and spilled it neatly on the ground. A waddy leaped out and hog tied it. Then the rest strode forward.

"There!" crowed Ike Chase, pointing a long bony finger at the freshly burned brand on the critter's hip. "There's yore proof thet——"

"Thet yo're a murderin' danged skunk!" snapped Tom Carter. "Lift 'em high, yuh back-shootin', water-poisonin' sidewinder! Lift 'em, or I'll shore salivate yuh!"

Two guns had appeared like magic in Tom Carter's hands. And Jerry, drifting sidewise to make a flank attack, had likewise drawn. The guns of the Bar U twins were trained on Ike Chase and his C 11 gunmen.

"What—what——" Ike stuttered. "Look at thet brand, sheriff!" snapped Jerry Carter, for he, too, had seen what Tom had seen. "Look real close, an' then remember the way Ike Chase showed Tom how ter blot a C 11 ter a Circle N."

The sheriff looked, and a great light dawned in his eyes. He lifted his head, and a blistering oath ripped from his lips.

"Chase, yuh ornery, lyin' hound!" he roared. "I got a notion ter——"

"What the heck?" bleated Ike. "What's the matter with thet brand?"

The sheriff sneered. "Nothin'," except thet the 'N' is backward, jest like it was on the one yuh drawed in the dirt back up there by the steps. No rider fer the Circle N would do thet."

He pointed toward the hog-tied steer.

This was the brand:



Ike took a step backward. His cold eyes gleamed with a ferocious light. He realized he was trapped as he took a quick look at Henry Norwich's bronc and saw the small shoulder brand.

He knew that he was licked—for the present.

"All right," he snarled. "What of it? S'pose I did frame this deal. I ain't admittin' it, but s'pose I did. Yuh can't run me in fer thet."

"I ain't so shore," spoke up Tom Carter. "But he shore kin get yuh fer the murder o' Curly Markham. Look at this note, sheriff. The writer admits killin' Markham, an' all his 'Ns' are backwards jest like thet brand. If thet don't prove thet Chase is a murderin'——"

"We're finished, boys!" yelled Ike Chase. "Burn 'em down—or hang!"

Guns leaped from tied-down holsters. The C 11 started the business that it was paid to do.

Bang! Crash! Wham! Flame and smoke spat from blued-steel gun barrels.

Lead shrieked and whined across the C 11 ranch yard. Men screamed and went down.

For the first four guns to get into action were those of the Bar U twins. Ducking and weaving, strong thumbs working the heavy hammers of their ivory-buffed Colts, Tom and Jerry went to work like the trained fighting machines they were.

They played havoc with the C 11 gunnies. And they themselves made poor targets. Still, they collected a little lead.

A slug nicked Jerry in the arm. Another seared its way along Tom's thigh, and he went down. He saw Ike Chase coming for him, guns running red as he fired wildly.

Tom came up on one elbow. He aimed and fired calmly. Ike disappeared in a cloud of gun smoke.

Jerry dropped Frog Hawley, who, although with only one good arm, could still sling lead in fine style. Then Sheriff Grayson and Henry Norwich bought into the game.

Wham! Bang! Boom! The remaining C 11 toughs tried to shoot it out.

Three of them went down. Jerry got one, Tom another. Sheriff Grayson and Norwich accounted for another. The rest surrendered.

"Gosh, feller," sighed Sheriff Grayson, when the smoke had cleared away, "yuh could never 'a' convicted Chase on thet backward 'N' business. Didn't yuh know thet?"

"Shore," said Tom. "But I fig-

ured *he* didn't. If he was very smart, he wouldn't 'a' made an 'N' thet way. I ran a bluff on him, hopin' he'd blow up an' show his hand. He shore done it."

"I'll say he did!" roared Henry Norwich. "Blast my cinch straps! How 'bout yuh twins stayin' on at Circle N, permanent?"

"Nothin' doin'," snapped Jerry, face solemn as an owl's. Tom grinned. "We got ter be slopin'. Mebbe the next outfit we hit will have somethin' *real* in the way of excitement."

Sheriff Grayson and Norwich watched them go. The old rancher

shook his head. There was suspicious moisture in his blue eyes.

"Bar U twins," he muttered. "What a pair! *Blast* my cinch straps. What a pair!"

"Henry," drawled Sheriff Pat Grayson, "yuh done said a mouthful. What a pair!"

Them Bar U twins is always bobbin' up somewhar they ain't expected. An' thet goes fer hombraes thet needs their help an' sidewinders needin' lead-pizening alike. When it comes ter bein' good mixers an' fittin' inter the company, them twins can't be beat. Watch fer 'em ter mix in proper with blazin' six-guns in the next story about 'em. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly 'fore long.

BLOCK



DIAMOND

A RESOURCEFUL TEXAN

THERE was a time when Roy Bean, before he became "The Law West of the Pecos," had been forced out of several profitable business ventures through circumstances over which he had no control.

While he was considering what he should do next, he made the sudden discovery that San Antonio was in urgent need of a well-managed dairy. The health of the citizens and the welfare of the children demanded it. So he determined that it was up to him to supply the demand.

It didn't take him long to get started, for Roy was resourceful and quick of action. He rounded up a few strays and mavericks, herded them in a corral, and let the town know that the finest milk in the world could be bought from Roy Bean.

The business flourished. Customers were plenty, and they paid his high prices without a kick. When the supply of milk was not enough to meet all the demands, Roy

blended it with water from the San Antonio River.

The unsuspecting customers did not complain. It is doubtful if they noticed that the milk was not always as rich and creamy as it might be. Everything ran smoothly until, one morning, a customer discovered a minnow in his milk.

The next morning, he was waiting for Roy, and demanded an explanation. He wanted to know since when fish lived in milk, for the minnow was far from dead when he discovered it.

He also wanted his money back, and told Mr. Bean in plain language that he would have nothing to do with him in the future, and he might take his milk to some other place, but never again should it enter his house.

Roy was apologetic, but quite unabashed. He said, in a flash: "Well, well! One of my cows must have swallowed that minnow when she drank at the river."



The Bitter Creek Buckaroos

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Gun Trouble On Bitter Creek," etc.

CHAPTER I.

COMANCHE FRAZEE.

BENEATH an overhanging canopy of red sandstone and black lava rock in the deep canyon, "Tex" Carnochen yanked his clay-bank bronc to a sudden stop and reached for his lariat. His ears had caught the swift thudding of hoofs in the soft river-bottom soil far up the painted crevasse.

"Wild horses," he muttered, and swung his mustang behind a clump of chokecherry and larkspur.

Tall, handsome, curly-haired, and double-gunned, Tex Carnochen

waited there with every nerve in his body alert, eyes fixed on the mountainous jumble of granite and sandstone boulders in the direction of the sound. Standing up in his stirrups, his six-foot, rawhide-muscled frame ready for instant action, Tex shook out his rope and prayed that Silver Cloud would be in that band of outlaw cayuses.

Silver Cloud was a lion-maned, golden-hued *palomino* horse that for two weeks had defied all efforts of Tex and the Curlicue S horse hunters, who were gathering bronses to be used in a big cattle drive. The other mustangers were resting up

from their strenuous work, but Tex had ridden out alone into Sacaron Canyon, hoping to get another glimpse of the beautiful horse that twice had escaped their traps through his marvelous speed and cunning.

Abruptly the band of racing wild horses appeared, a long-legged colt in the lead. Following the colt were two handsome animals, one a coal-black mare with flashing white stockings, and the other, Silver Cloud himself with his creamy mane and tail flying in the wind. Straight toward Tex Carnochen they came, heads up, nostrils flaring, flailing hoofs scattering gravel.

Tex Carnochen's claybank bronc snorted and tried to break away. Reining the saddle pony down, Tex began to spin his rope, although the broncs were still more than a mile away. His whole attention was fixed on the fiery *palomino*, which seemed to float through the air like a silvery cloud. It was this resemblance that had given the wild fellow his moniker.

Tex was very fond of horses. The golden sorrel held him spellbound with its magnificent appearance, jaunty carriage, and thundering gallop.

Flashing in and out among the enormous boulders and patches of willows, Silver Cloud whistled defiance at all the world and kept coming. His great dark eyes were prominent and alert. His coat was shining satin, gleaming in the sun. His creamy crest and foretop were proudly arched.

"What a horse!" muttered Tex. "And he's mine. I'll nab him this time."

Br-rrang! The crashing explosion of a rifle shot broke the quiet of the wilderness.

The black mare running beside

Silver Cloud dropped to its knees, turned a complete somersault down a sand bank, and lay still.

Before Tex could move or utter a word, the other mustangs scattered in all directions and vanished. Spurring his cayuse forward, Tex splashed across a shallow stream and raced toward the spot where the black horse lay.

Out of a cross gulch ahead of him appeared another horseman, savagely quirting and roweling his mount. He was a slit-eyed, bristly-bearded hombre with bushy eyebrows and a twisted, thin-lipped mouth.

Being closer to the black than Tex, he reached the fallen animal first, dismounted, and began putting a hackamore on it. He paid no attention to Tex when the young Curlicue S rider clattered up and dropped down beside him.

One glance told Tex Carnochen that the handsome black mare was not dead. Its ebony crest was crimson-stained from a wound through the cartilage at the top of the neck. The slit-eyed mustanger had performed one of the most difficult feats known to horse hunters. He had "creased" the mare, halting the critter without permanently injuring it.

It was a shot often tried, but seldom successfully. Generally, in attempting to crease a wild horse, the hunter either killed it or missed it entirely.

Still ignoring Tex, the bristly-bearded, squinty-eyed hombre began putting cross hobbles on the black mare, which had started to toss its head and struggle.

"That hoss'll kill itself with them hobbles on," drawled Tex.

Beneath heavy black brows the stranger glowered up at the young cowboy, lips twisted in a sarcastic grin.

"When you kin do as good, I'll ask yore advice," sneered the bristly-bearded ruffian. "They ain't many men kin crease a hoss without killin' it. Yo're talkin' to Comanche Frazee, kid, and yuh better ride yore words."

Tex gazed at the stranger with quickened interest. He had heard of "Comanche" Frazee down on the border. The slit-eyed gent had got his nickname from his nerve-curdling war cry, like the yell of a Comanche Indian. Killer of a dozen men, Comanche Frazee was considered unbeatable with six-guns or rifle.

Tex wondered why Comanche, a hired gunman, was up here in the Sangre de Dios Mountains, hunting horses, when he belonged on the Mexican border. He was about to reply to Frazee's challenge, when the black mare suddenly reared to its feet and began plunging around at the end of the hackamore rope which Comanche gripped in his hairy hands.

At the first bound, the cross-hobbled mare fell heavily to the ground. Instantly it was on its feet again, squealing with terror and rage, trying frantically to break free. Comanche Frazee threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Tearing at the hobbles that bound its legs, the black tumbled over the edge of a small gully, threatening to break its neck.

"Do you want to kill that mare?" burst out Tex, unable to restrain himself longer in the face of such cruelty. "Mebbe yo're Comanche Frazee, and mebbe you kin crease a bronc with yore rifle, but you don't know hosses. What good will that black be if she breaks a leg or snaps her neck?"

Still laughing at the mare's frantic efforts, Comanche Frazee com-

pletely ignored Tex Carnochen's words.

Hot anger welled up in Tex's brain. The ebony mare struggled to its feet again and stood trembling, pulling on the rope which Comanche held taut. Another jump or two and it would injure itself permanently.

Suddenly Tex's Colt .45 flicked out of its holster. Sunlight glinted on the blue-black barrel as the weapon flashed through the air. A spurt of smoke leaped from the gun muzzle, and then Tex slapped the six-gun back in the holster again.

The shot severed the rope of the cross hobble, leaving it holding by only a few strands. At the first jump, the black's legs pulled free and the animal was able to move without falling.

Roaring angry oaths, Comanche Frazee hung onto the hackamore rope as the plunging mare started away from there. Tex was about to run to Comanche's assistance, when Frazee suddenly looped his end of the rope around a small tree and yanked the black to a halt that left it stunned and snorting.

Tying the rope, Comanche slowly turned to face Tex Carnochen. In his hand he held a cocked six-gun. His little black eyes were blazing with hate and killer rage, and his lips were drawn back from ratlike teeth in a murderous snarl.

"Now, you interferin' young puppy," jeered Comanche, "I'll settle yore hash! You started the shootin'! I'll finish it!"

"I didn't shoot at you," said Tex coolly. "I plugged the cross hobbles to keep yore black from crippling herself."

"Shut yore blasted trap!" roared Comanche Frazee. "I've heerd tell of you. Yo're the gun-slick of the Curlicue S, ain't yuh? The town smarty! Jist the kind of hombre I

like to tame. Mebbe you'd like to match irons with me?"

Slouching lazily there with his left hand holding his bridle reins and his right stuck in his belt just above his gun, Tex fixed his cold gray eyes on Comanche's purpling face and slowly shook his head.

"I don't kill folks for the fun of it," he said. "It ain't my style."

"Are you hintin' that I do?" grated Comanche Frazee.

"I ain't hintin' nothin'," replied Tex. "I'm jist tellin' yuh that I never drag out my .45s unless I got good cause to. Why are you so anxious to gun me?"

Comanche sneeringly looked Tex up and down from his rattlesnake-banded Stetson to his tight-fitting, hand-tooled boots and silver Mexican rowel spurs. Being the son of a ranch owner, Tex was partial to rather fancy clothes.

A crimson neck scarf whipped in the wind over his shoulder. The sweat-soaked shirt that clung tightly to the rippling muscles of his back and arms was a vivid green in contrast to the jet-blackness of his woolly chaps.

The holsters that contained his oiled and polished guns were embroidered in colors, and the insides of them were worn so smooth that they glistened. Tex's bronc and saddle were in the same class with the rest of his equipment.

The claybank bronc was part thoroughbred—known as a "cold-blood" on the range. The big forty-pound stock saddle was ornamented with silver and had strips of rattlesnake hide glued over it to form odd designs.

Tex's outfit was in vivid contrast to Comanche's sloppy clothes, flea-bitten bronc, and battered saddle. Because Comanche could not have the better things, he hated any one

who did have them. Besides that, he had other reasons for wanting to kill Tex Carnochen.

"Yo're scairt of me," crowed Comanche. "You ain't no gunman; you jist wear them shootin' irons for show. What would a feller have to do to yuh to make yuh fight?"

"If you could tell me some reason why I should kill you, Comanche, I might be willin' to tangle with yuh. I don't like yuh. I wouldn't even like yuh if you was good."

With a low, animal growl, Comanche slapped his .45 into its holster and stepped back three paces.

"Now roll that smoke pole," he barked. "You got an even break. We'll both draw to onct. The slow man dies."

CHAPTER II.

GUN DUEL!

IN spite of the deadliness of his situation, Tex Carnochen still stood in a slouching attitude, humming a cowboy song under his breath and studying Comanche Frazee as if the border killer were some strange bug.

It was a show-down. He knew now that he would have to fight Comanche. If he did not, Frazee would find some excuse for killing him. Could he beat the notorious dead shot?

Doubts were stirring in Tex's mind, but they did not show in the stony expression of his face as he slowly pushed his hat back on his curly brown hair.

It was bitterly against his principles to kill a man in a row just for the love of fighting. He knew no reason why he should shoot down Comanche Frazee, and he did not want to do it, yet there seemed no way out of it.

On all sides of him stretched a wilderness of beetling cliffs, vast shadowy canyons, scalloped mesas,

and black chasms. There was no man nearer than the Curlicue S camp, fifteen miles away. So he could expect no interruptions.

"Yo're plumb sartain you can kill me, ain't yuh, Comanche?" asked Tex. "It's a sure-thing proposition with you."

"You started the shootin'," grumbled Comanche stubbornly. "You shouldn't oughter begin anythin' you cain't finish. Hop to it now; I'm drawin' my smoke-pole."

Before the last words were out of Comanche's mouth, Tex's tanned, calloused fingers closed over the grips of his big Colt and snagged it from its sheath.

The .45 was spitting smoke as it cleared the holster. Comanche's move had been almost as quick, but Tex beat him by a split second. The smashing slug hammered into Comanche's left arm, jerking him half around. His six-gun, leveled at Tex's chest, swerved off its mark just enough to send its bullet buzzing past the claybank's ears.

Tex had to drop the reins of the startled horse as he leaped at the wounded Comanche, slashing out with the long barrel at Frazee's right arm. That arm still gripped a smoke-wagon and was swinging around to fire again.

The heavy steel tube cracked against Comanche's forearm, and he dropped the gun with a roar of rage and pain. For a moment he seemed stunned. Then a fit of senseless rage swept over him, and he crashed into Tex, clawing at him with his well hand and kicking like a wild bull.

Beating a hasty retreat, Tex covered Frazee with his hogleg.

"Stand back!" ordered Tex. "I plugged yore arm to keep from killin' yuh, but I ain't foolin' with yuh no more."

Screaming and swearing like a maniac, Comanche snarled his defiance of Tex Carnochen and his gun. He seemed to understand that Tex was too decent to kill him, and he took advantage of it.

Uttering his famous heart-curdling war cry, Comanche dropped to the ground, pawing for his fallen Colt.

With another warning shout, Tex thumbed back the hammer of his own shooting iron and stabbed it at the shrill-voiced killer. Comanche was going to force Tex to kill him. In a fit of rage, the border gunman was out of his mind.

Comanche was too far away from Tex now for the cowboy to try another disarming shot. This time he would have to shoot for a vital spot.

"Tex! Tex Carnochen!"

The voice that cried Tex's name was that of a woman. The sound of it caused Comanche Frazee to drop the hogleg he had picked up and begin moaning and crying as he held his arm. It made Tex lower his gun and stare open-mouthed at the golden-haired, blue-eyed girl, who raced up on a pinto pony and dropped down beside the squirming killer.

The girl was Eleanor Holmes, daughter of "Ringy" Holmes, of the Skillet-brand ranch. She and Tex had been engaged to marry, but trouble between the families had broken it off.

Tex stared in amazement as Eleanor Holmes caught Comanche's wounded arm in her hands and began ripping off the crimson-soaked shirt sleeve.

Holstering his gun, Tex sheepishly walked over and looked down at her.

"You shot him!" cried the girl accusingly. "Why did you do it? This is terrible, just when our fami-

lies were beginning to make up again."

"What do you mean?" blurted Tex. "What has this got to do with our families?"

For a moment, Eleanor Holmes was too busy doctoring Comanche's wound to answer. It gave Tex a chance to study her. She was just as beautiful as the last time he had seen her.

Dressed in pearl-gray sombrero, neat riding outfit with a quirt suspended from her wrist and a small gun in her fancy holster, the tall, slender heiress of the Skillet Ranch was a queen in the Bitter Creek range country.

Her wavy hair reflected the rays of the sun like spun gold. Her high forehead was broad and smooth, tapering down to dimpled cheeks and a firm chin and mouth. Her big blue eyes were now clouded with worry.

Tex had to repeat his question before she looked up and answered him.

"Comanche is one of our men," she said half defiantly. "Dad brought him in to hunt rustlers, and now you've shot him. Oh, Tex, why did you do it?"

"He forced me to it," said Tex stonily. "You know I never go out of my way to pick a quarrel."

"That's a lie, ma'am!" whined Comanche. "He bullyragged me until I agreed to match irons with him. He fired the first shot. Shot the hobbles off that black hoss I jist ketched. You kin see the frayed ends for yoreself. He dasent deny it. He fired the first shot."

Tex lowered his eyes miserably before the girl's questioning gaze.

"Well, yes, I did shoot the hobbles offn that mare," he admitted. "But I done it to keep Comanche from killin' her. Anybody ought to

know better than to cross-hobble a wild horse. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen. I cut the hobbles with a shot to keep the black mare from bustin' a leg."

Tears welled up into Eleanor Holmes's eyes.

"Why, oh, why did you do it?" she cried. "This means the renewal of the feud. Dad will be furious. He'll insist on getting even with you. You know what that means."

Tex knew what it meant well enough. Only a short time before, he had stood in a saloon and had seen Eleanor Holmes's father shoot down Bob Carnochan, Tex's brother. Before that there had been a long series of killings over a period of more than fifty years, during which the Holmes-Carnochan feud had cost scores of lives.

The war between the two outfits had been going on for so long that no one remembered what had started it. It would die down for a year or two, and then flare up, sometimes over nothing at all.

The last conflict had started in an argument over "Peg-leg" Parker, said to be the best camp cook west of Denver. The Carnochans hired him, and the Holmes clan had tried to get him away from them.

Tex and Eleanor had vowed to end the feud and to take no part in future family quarrels. Twice they had prevented outbreaks, but the last time they had failed. In the ruckus over Peg-leg several men had been killed, one of them being Tex's brother, Bob.

"I'll see yore dad and square this, Eleanor," growled Tex. "I'll ride with you to yore camp and put it up to him fair and square."

"No, no, you mustn't do that," protested the girl. "You know how hot-headed some of our folks are. Many of our men have lost fathers

and brothers because of Curlicue S bullets. They're bitter, Tex. If you go into our camp, you'll be challenged. Some one is sure to try and force you to fight. Dad's getting too old to keep the younger firebrands under control. Let me handle it. I'll tell him what happened."

"And I'll have something to say about that, too," grumbled Comanche Frazee. "This weaner's got to answer to me for what he's done. If you wasn't here, ma'am, I'd make him shoot it out right now."

Eleanor's big blue eyes flashed as she turned them on the slit-eyed border gunman.

"You'll do as I say, or I'll see that you are discharged," she snapped. "Surely you don't think that my father would take your word against mine."

A greasy smile banished the scowl from Comanche Frazee's distorted, black-bearded face.

"I don't want no argument with you, Miss Holmes," he said. "If you'll excuse me now, I'll tend to this black mare that I ketched. Take a look at her. Ain't she a beauty? Belongs to yore dad, seein' I caught her while workin' for him. She'd make a right smart saddle pony for a lady."

"Miss Holmes ain't acceptin' no presents from you, Frazee," cut in Tex curtly. "If she wants that black she'll ask her dad for it."

Hunching his head forward, Comanche glared at the young cowboy.

"Yo're safe talkin' to me like that, 'cause there's a woman present," he barked. "But I'm warnin' yuh now, if yuh try to razzle-dazzle me, yo're ridin' to a fall."

Turning on his heel, Comanche stalked over to the black mare which had got tangled up in the hackamore rope and had thrown itself.

As soon as Comanche was out of
WW-5F

earshot, Eleanor caught Tex by the arm and looked up into his lean, tanned face.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "I know Frazee will try to make trouble. My people will believe him. They'll start the feud all over again."

Tex frowned and slowly shook his head.

"If yo're so dead set against me comin' with you to camp, then there's only one other way to handle this. That's to git yore dad to meet me some place, say down in Navajo cow town, so's we kin talk this over. Will you try to arrange it?"

"Yes, I will," agreed Eleanor. "And now you must go. Our camp is not far from here. Go before some of our riders come here and catch you."

Tex gripped Eleanor's fingers tightly and smiled down at her before he swung into the saddle. As he kneed the claybank about, he saw something that caused him to drop the reins again and swing down with a wry grin.

From out of an arroyo rolled a cloud of dust billowing up around half a dozen armed riders who were approaching swiftly. At the head of the gunmen galloped a short, stocky, red-haired cattleman on a big roan, Ringy Holmes, head of the fighting clan of that name and the big boss at the Skillet Ranch.

It was too late to run. If the Skillet gunnies saw Tex Carnochen trying to leave, they would ride him down.

Uttering a triumphant yell, Comanche Frazee left the black mare tied to a tree, mounted his bronc, and raced to meet the Skillet fighters, waving his hat over his head. The border killer was bent on stirring up trouble. He had lied to

Eleanor when he promised to keep hands off.

Knowing the quick-trigger tempers of the Holmes riders when dealing with a Carnochen, Frazee felt certain that he could rouse them to take vengeance on Tex for shooting him.

CHAPTER III.

TAKEN PRISONER.

WIND devils were kicking up spiral columns of dust like small cyclones, when the Skillet riders galloped up and surrounded Tex Carnochen there in the rugged gorge. It seemed peaceful in this lonely mountain gorge walled in by high forest-capped mountains, jagged peaks and ridges and perilous precipices.

The beauty of the rocks splashed with bright colors and, carved and sculptured by wind and rain, was made more vivid by the tapestries of blooming flowers—purple beard-tongue, crimson wild roses, blue-flowered vetch, yellow lupins, and the spicy, fragrant yellow of the golden currant.

But the peacefulness was only an illusion, and the beauty of the place went unnoticed by the horsemen who swept in on all sides of the lone Curlicue S waddy.

Flinging himself out of his saddle, Ringy Holmes planted both feet wide apart in the loose gravel and glowered at Tex Carnochen.

"Yo're a fittin' whelp of the Carnochen tribe!" bawled the squatty Skillet Ranch owner. "Yuh think yo're a purty salty hombre, I guess, shootin' one of my men. I thought you didn't like feud warfare."

Tex Carnochen's good-natured grin broadened as he gazed into the freckled, inflamed face of the short, stocky cattleman.

"You can't rile me, Ringy, and

ain't no use in trying," he drawled. "You know how it is between Eleanor and me. I figger to marry her if we can ever establish peace between our two outfits long enough for me to do it."

"I'll see you burned in torment first," raved Ringy Holmes. "Yo're too blamed free with yore shootin' irons to suit me. I ain't goin' to let yuh get away with this!"

"Father!" protested Eleanor. "Hear Tex's story first before you pass judgment. After all, Comanche Frazee is not a member of the Holmes family. He's only a hired hand, and a new one at that. Why are you so sure that he was in the right?"

"I got eyes, ain't I?" demanded Ringy angrily. "I kin see the crimson stains on Comanche's sleeve and the white bandage you've wrapped around his wound. There's the frayed rope ends, showin' where this interferin' young fool shot the hobbles offn the mare Comanche ketched for us. If that don't back up Frazee's story, then what does?"

"But, dad——" began the girl.

"You keep out of this, Eleanor," Ringy snapped. "If I hear another yip outta yuh, I'll send yuh home. This is a man's fight, between men."

Tossing her head defiantly, Eleanor glanced around at the hard-bitten gunmen who were waiting gleefully for a chance to get a crack at Tex Carnochen. Any Carnochen would have been meat for them.

The Holmes family was a big one. Through intermarriage they had increased by cousins and nephews and uncles until they were a small army, all related. Not one of the relatives but had lost some loved one at the hands of a Carnochen gunman.

Although there was supposed to be a truce between the two outfits, they lived in hope of getting venge-

ance. Thus the old feud was kept alive, and thus it threatened to break out again, because Tex unwittingly had shot a Skillet ranch hand.

Tex Carnochen, on his side, found it bitterly difficult to keep smiling as he gazed into Ringy Holmes's red, freckled face and remembered the scene when Ringy had shot down his brother, Bob, in a Navajo saloon.

"This is a personal fight between Comanche Frazee and me, Ringy," said Tex. "I don't figure it calls for interference from either one of our families. Suppose I admit that I was wrong in shootin' the hobbles offn that black mare. I thought Comanche was treatin' the critter cruel, and I got riled and boiled over. I figured that the black was goin' to kill herself."

"That was no skin off your knuckles," put in Comanche Frazee. "You had no call to butt in."

"I'll admit I didn't," agreed Tex. "But you had no cause to make me fight yuh over such picayune trouble. You know danged well that you forced me to sling lead."

"That's a lie!" growled Comanche.

"Peel yore irons, and I'll ram them words down yore throat!" rapped out Tex, his temper getting the better of him.

"Stop it!" roared Ringy Holmes. "There'll be no fightin' unless I give the orders. You see, Eleanor, how quarrelsome he is. He's a Carnochen. He wants to beat up one of my men now. Not bein' satisfied with woundin' him. There's only one way to settle that, and I'll attend to that myself. Put up yore dewclaws, Tex Carnochen."

Ringy Holmes's six-gun, leaping from its holster, covered the surprised Curlicue S cowboy. As if this were a signal, other guns stabbed into his back and sides.

Tex felt his belt unbuckled and his cartridges and holstered Colts jerked away. In a moment, he was a helpless prisoner, with snarling, frenzied gunmen glowering at him and swearing at him.

Eleanor screamed and tried to rush to his assistance, but her father caught her and held her back.

"Git on yore hoss, gal," he ordered roughly. "We're ridin' to camp, and we're takin' this trigger-free gun buzzard with us. I'll decide there what to do with him."

It all had happened so suddenly that Tex would have had no chance to resist even if he so desired. He had no intention of making any gun play with Ringy Holmes. He knew that Ringy was a hot-headed product of the old wild and woolly days and that he was acting in a fit of anger now.

Down in his heart, Ringy Holmes desired peace as much as any one, and when he had taken time to consider, Tex felt that he would change his mind about any harsh actions.

The trail to the Skillet camp climbed zigzag up out of the canyon and meandered through a broken country of pines, piñons, and junipers amid sunlit crags and blackened lava rock. Rolling down a jagged ridge, flashing through patches of evergreen, and spanning a low mesa, the riders finally dipped down into a meadow on a gently flowing mountain stream.

Here were the wagons and tents and the penned-up cavvy of the Holmes horse hunters. As chance would have it, the ancient enemies of the Carnochens had come here to catch wild ponies at the same time as the Carnochens. An old log cabin stood beside a tumble-down barn on the bank of the creek, surrounded by sagging fences and rotting corrals.

The Holmeses had fixed it up as their horse-hunting headquarters. The horse-pasture fence had been repaired with sapling poles to hold the frisky Skillet-branded saddle stock. The high pole fence of the round pen also had been fixed up for busting operations.

Tex could see three punchers over there now, taking the pitch out of a recently captured mustang that tucked its head between forelegs and seemed to be trying to plow up the ground with all four feet bunched together.

Halting beside the chuck wagon, among willows, towering spruce and fir, Ringy Holmes ordered Tex to dismount.

"I ain't tyin' yuh up," growled Ringy, "but you kin consider yoreself my prisoner jist the same. If yuh try to make a break, you'll get a bellyful of lead. Stay right here until I come back."

"What's the game, Ringy?" drawled Tex. "Now that you've got me, what do you figure to do with me?"

"I'll decide that when I git good and ready," grunted Ringy Holmes. "Come on, Eleanor, you're going up to the house."

"No, no," protested the girl, "I won't go! I won't leave Tex here helpless with all these armed men. Comanche Frazee would make any excuse to kill him."

"You'll do as I say," grumbled Ringy, "or you'll leave this camp and go home. I don't stand for no petticoat interference in my business."

"All right, I'll go," agreed Eleanor, "if you will stay here and be responsible for what happens to Tex. I'll ride up to the house and stay there, but I'm warning you, dad, that if anything happens to Tex Carnochen while he's here, you'll be

to blame. I'll leave home, and I'll never see you again if you let Frazee or any of these gunmen hurt him."

Eleanor's words were bold and her manner defiant. But tears were standing in her eyes as she tried to smile at Tex, and then rode slowly toward the old log house where she was staying with her father.

Blowing through his nose and snorting angrily, Ringy Holmes turned on Tex Carnochen, who stood beside his mustang, still holding the reins.

"If yo're hopin' that that will save you, git rid of the idea," he snapped. "No woman's tellin' me how to run my affairs. Set down there on that log. Eph will take yore horse and turn him loose in the pasture. You won't be needin' him for a spell."

Tex was looking at Eleanor, who had dismounted at the house and had turned back to wave at him. Reluctantly he let Eph take the reins of his claybank, and gave the handsome animal an affectionate slap as it was led away. Then he sat down on the log beside the purling stream, and calmly began rolling a cigarette.

The big freckles on Ringy Holmes's horse-face got redder and redder as Tex's cool indifference angered him. On the arrival of the party at the camp, other horsemen had come up to see what the excitement was about. Now a dozen gunmen, some on foot, some leading horses, and others sitting in their saddles, hemmed Tex Carnochen in.

Their eyes were hostile and their faces savage. They knew they were looking on a man whose bullets had probably killed some of their kin-folks.

Tex Carnochen saw their expressions, knew that they hated him, that they would be glad to kill him

at the first chance. Yet he was as calm as if he were at his home ranch.

"Yo're a nervy jasper, Tex," admitted Ringy Holmes. "And slick. But all yore cunnin' and slickness won't get you outta this. What are you doin' up here so fur away from Bitter Creek?"

"I'll tell yuh," said Tex agreeably. "I come up here to ketch a hoss, a certain wild bronc that I'd ruther have than most anything."

"He's talkin' about Silver Cloud," said Comanche Frazee. "That's what he was layin' for when I creased the black mare. But it won't do him no good. I figure to get that *palomino* stallion the same way I ketched the midnight mare. They say Silver Cloud is too slick for any man. He allus gets away. He even busts out of corrals or jumps the highest fences. He's too fast for any saddle horse. But he ain't fast enough to git away from a bullet, and if I ever get within a hundred yards of him I can crease him without harmin' him any whatever."

"You better not try," warned Tex Carnochen. "If you kill that handsome wild horse, you'll answer to me for it. And this time the bullet won't go through yore arm."

Throwing back his head, Comanche Frazee bared blackened teeth in a snarling laugh.

"That's tall talk from a feller that's a helpless prisoner," he jeered. "When we git through with you here, you won't never plug nobody else nowhere. And that's whatever."

"You keep yore nib out o' this, Comanche!" ordered Ringy Holmes. "I'll make the war talk for this outfit. I don't think this rip-snortin' young wild cat is after Silver Cloud or any other mustang. Don't it strike you funny that he

should turn up here in the Sangre de Dios Mountains at the same place and the same time we're here?"

"Sure!" shouted one of Ringy's sons, a pock-marked puncher called "Two-spot." "I know what you mean, dad. He come here to spy on us. Follered us up here. Maybe he's got gunmen with him and is plannin' to raid us."

A chorus of growls burst from the lips of the Skillet rannies, and they surged closer around Tex, snarling threats and harsh names at him.

"String him up!" yelled Comanche. "Choke the truth out of him!"

"*¡Sta bueno!*" roared Zopo Forteza, a squat, scar-faced half-breed who wore a red band around his forehead. "Hang heem! I make heem talk weeth the point of my knife!"

Backing against the trunk of a cottonwood tree, Tex Carnochen prepared to sell his life dearly. Cocked guns were pointing at him, and Zopo Forteza had a throwing knife in his hand, drawn back ready to hurl. One quick flick of Forteza's wrist would plunge the blade into Tex's throat.

CHAPTER IV.

ZOPO FORTENZA.

THE hot sun, slanting upward in the heavens, shot a blinding shaft of light through the interlacing branches of willow, alder, and evergreen to strike squarely in Tex Carnochen's face. The air was sharp with the vigorous tang of high altitude and fragrant with the scent of wild honeysuckle.

A gentle breeze sighed through the cone-shaped tops of pines and firs, filling the air with a rustling sound like the distant hum of many voices. Blue jays cawed unmusically from a

wild-cherry thicket, and a woodpecker drummed against the trunk of a black oak. The drumming sound seemed to beat into Tex's brain like the throbbing of his temples.

Death was very close. It leered at him from the slit eyes of Comanche Frazee, from the scarred face of the half-breed knife thrower, Zopo Forteza, and from the brown pupils of red-haired, freckle-faced Ringy Holmes.

A sudden silence fell over the assembled gunmen. The *clop-clop* of flying hoofs on hard-packed gravel and stony lava cap came to their ears.

All turned as a dust-covered horseman on a sweat-streaked bronc plunged out of a network of brush, down a crazy trail off the top of the high mesa, and did not slacken his speed until he dropped, panting, in front of Ringy Holmes. Tex recognized the horseman as Sterling Holmes, one of Ringy's cousins.

"I got news for yuh, Ringy," blurted Sterling, as soon as he could catch his breath. "Mebbe I ought to tell it to you private."

"Spit it out," growled Ringy Holmes. "What's on yore mind? I got nothin' that I want to conceal."

Sterling Holmes scowled doubtfully at Tex Carnochen.

"It's about the Carnochens," he warned.

Tex's heart sank. Had Sterling Holmes discovered the Carnochen horse camp? Tex had not mentioned it, because he feared some of the Skillet hotheads would try to raid the Curlicue S mustangers. If Sterling had happened onto it, then lightning and brimstone would bust loose.

"Speak up!" snapped Ringy. "What have you found out about that murderin' outfit?"

"I'll be a whopper-jawed skunk if there ain't more Carnochen gunmen in these woods," said Sterling defiantly. "I cut sign on a lot of horse-shoe marks way down in lower Sacaron Canyon. I'm dead sartin they wa'n't made by our bronses. This kinky gun-hawk not only follered us in here, but he brung a bunch of hired lead-pushers with him. I come a-tearin' to warn you about it."

Ringy Holmes darted at Tex and rammed his cocked gun against the cowboy's stomach. Comanche Frazee appeared on Tex's left hand, also with drawn gun, while on the right young Carnochen looked into the wide, blazing eyes of Zopo Forteza.

Zopo was grinning hideously as he jabbed his needle-sharp fighting knife into the front of Tex's shirt and, with a quick slash, lopped off all the buttons.

"Now you're tellin' the truth or I'll kill you!" barked Ringy. "Why did you trail us in here? What do you want?"

Thrilled with danger, his fists clenched at his side ready to strike out with them, Tex Carnochen gazed calmly into Ringy Holmes's inflamed features and slowly shook his head.

"Call off yore bloodhounds, and I'll talk," he said. "If you don't, I won't say a word."

Comanche Frazee raised his gun barrel to slash at Tex's head. Zopo Forteza's knife darted in, and this time left a crimson streak along the fleshy part of Tex's arm.

"I make heem talk," gritted Forteza. "Thee knife weel open his lips."

"Let me clout him over the head," cried Comanche Frazee eagerly.

Both Comanche and Zopo were hired gunmen who had been brought in from Chihuahua to help protect the Skillet stock from rustlers. Even

Ringy Holmes thought that they were carrying on with a pretty high hand, considering they were strangers in the Bitter Creek country, and he waved them aside.

"Holster yore guns, all of yuh, and stand back!" grumbled Ringy. "This business has turned into a regular saloon brawl. Don't be so free with that knife, Forteza, or you'll be ridin' the chuck line again. Stand back, I say."

Grumbling under their breath, Comanche, Zopo Forteza, and the hotheads of the crew slowly widened the circle around Tex. The Curlicue S waddy resumed his seat on the log.

"All right, I'll tell yuh the truth," he said, opening his knife and starting to whittle on a stick. "I never come here to spy on you. I didn't even know you was up here, until I tangled with Comanche Frazee. I never brung no gunmen in here to fight you, Ringy, and you ought to have sense enough to know it. You savvy how much I think of Eleanor. I'd give my right arm for her."

As Tex talked he could see the anxious, white face of Eleanor Holmes, who stood on the rickety porch of the log house with a rifle in her hand, watching the proceedings.

Ringy Holmes saw his daughter, also, and it seemed to bring him to his senses. He had almost let his loco killers murder a man before Eleanor's very eyes. Suddenly he turned on his men, bellowing orders.

"Saddle fresh horses!" he shouted, "and look to yore guns. I'm takin' the hull of yuh to run down the skunk sign that Sterling found in the lower Sacaron."

There was a clatter of hoofs, creaking of saddle leather, and a volley of oaths as the Skillet crew snapped around to obey Ringy's or-

ders. Only Comanche Frazee and Zopo Forteza lingered.

"What about this trigger-free kid that plugged me in the arm?" protested Comanche.

Ringy Holmes's enormous freckles glowed a bright, angry red.

"You obey my orders, Comanche, or get out!" blazed Ringy. "I don't take no back talk from my help, savvy?"

For a moment, it seemed that Comanche would defy the Skillet boss. His thin lips curled back from his teeth, and his slit eyes glinted as his hand dropped to his gun. Then, as if changing his mind, he turned on his heel and stalked away.

"You, Zopo," said Ringy, "I'm leavin' you to guard Carnochen. We'll tie him up before we go. And I'm takin' Eleanor along to make certain you won't be interfered with."

Tex's hands were bound in front of him and he was led up to the cabin. Eleanor met them at the door, white-lipped and trembling.

When her father told her his plans, she protested, but it did no good. Ringy himself superintended the tying of Tex's legs before he left.

"You better not try to get away, Tex," Ringy warned. "Zopo Forteza is only waitin' for a chance to kill yuh, anyhow. He's got orders to treat yuh right if you're a good prisoner. But at yore first false break, he'll knife yuh. I wouldn't try anything if I were you."

Tex made no answer. Sitting down at a table in the cabin, he rested his arms on the top and looked out through the open door at the dust cloud raised by the vanishing horsemen.

If the Skillet gun fighters found the Carnochen horse camp, it would mean war. Tex's father, old Clem Carnochen, all crippled up from

feud bullets, would start shooting at the first sight of a hated member of the Holmes clan.

Once the family war broke out again, Tex knew from experience that it might run on for months with each side sniping at the other. There was no telling how many, or who, might be killed.

Tex's eyes sparkled with a cunning light as he watched Zopo Forteza, who sat across the table from him, whetting his knife on his boot. If he could lick Forteza, he would be able to saddle his horse and ride to the Carnochen camp, by a short cut, to sound the alarm.

Cautiously Tex tugged at the ropes. They did not give an inch, but only seemed to bite into the flesh all the harder. His wrists began to burn where the skin was torn. He felt warm fluid running from his finger tips and dropping to the floor, as he held his hands between his knees.

With the quickness of a striking panther, Forteza suddenly hurled his knife. It whistled past Tex's throat, clipped through his shirt, and buried its point, quivering, in the wall against which Tex sat.

Tex found himself staring into the gaping black barrel of a six-gun, above which loomed the laughing, snag-toothed face of the half-breed killer.

"Nex' time I don' miss," jeered Zopo Forteza. "Keep the hands still. Do not move the legs unless you want to die." Forteza calmly reached over and pulled the knife out of the wall and laid it on the table beside him. He placed the Colt along with it and began rolling a cigarette.

"What've you got against me, Forteza?" asked Tex.

"*Caramba!*" muttered Zopo Forteza. "You shoot my good fr'en',

Comanche Frazee. That's enough. I like keel you for that."

"Hired gunman, ain't yuh?" pursued Tex Carnochen. "I suppose Ringy Holmes pays yuh about a hundred dollars a month, and I doubt if he'll use you longer than that. You could make two hundred dollars easy money by cutting me loose."

Zopo's swarthy, knife-slashed face twisted in a derisive grin.

"You no got two hundred pesos," he grunted. "You don't can make fool of me."

"I'll leave my horse and saddle with you as a guarantee," insisted Tex. "I'll borrow one of Ringy's brones and ride him bareback. You can keep my guns, too. Then I can meet you in Navajo cow town, and buy them things back from yuh."

Zopo's eyes gleamed greedily; but, after a few minutes' thought, he fell into a sullen silence and refused to say another word. Producing a pack of cards from his pocket, he began practicing his favorite game—three-card monte.

With his bound wrists aching so that his hands felt numb, Tex Carnochen sat helplessly and watched the flying cards slip from Zopo's agile fingers while precious time went by.

"I'm some monte player myself," said Tex. "There's a little money in my jeans. I'll play yuh a dollar a round."

"Close thee mouth or I'll slit it wider for you with my leetle knife!" snarled Zopo. "Señor Ringy Holmes warned me that you are very bad man. I don't untie your hands."

"You don't have to untie my hands," argued Tex, placing his bound arms on the table again. "I kin work my fingers and deal them cards. Give me them pasteboards, and I'll show yuh. Just one hand."

Watching Tex like a hawk and keeping him covered with his gun, Forteza shoved the deck of playing cards across the rough pine table. Tex picked them up, riffled them, shuffled them expertly, and tossed them over for Zopo to make the cut.

"Peel off three cards," demanded Tex, "and turn 'em face up."

They were the ace of spades, deuce of hearts, and seven of diamonds.

Tossing the other pasteboards into discard, Tex picked up the three and manipulated them with lightning rapidity. From his pocket he produced some silver money and tossed a dollar on the table.

"Seven of diamonds," said Zopo, and reached over and picked up one of the cards which Tex had placed face down on the board.

Forteza had called it correctly. He turned up the seven of diamonds and raked in the money.

A plan of escape was forming in Tex's mind as the game went on. On the fourth deal he tossed one of the cards on the floor.

"I'll get it," he said.

Fear and suspicion flaring in his eyes, Zopo snatched his gun from the table and covered Tex as he started to stoop.

Don' make me keel you," he warned. "If you move like that again, I shoot. I weel pick up the card."

Still keeping Tex covered, Zopo recovered the playing card and the game went on.

Tex was desperate. He had to get away and warn his father and the others of their danger. Apparently accidentally, he dropped a card on the floor again. Zopo was a little more careless this time in picking it up, but still he kept Tex covered.

Half an hour passed, thirty min-

utes during which the Skillet gunmen might be getting closer and closer to the Carnochen horse camp.

Tex yawned and asked for a cigarette. Zopo let him get the makin's from his shirt pocket.

Tex opened up his sack of tobacco and started to pour it onto the brown paper. Then he changed his mind, picked up the cards, and started to deal. This time he was going to strike whether Zopo Forteza had him covered or not. He had to risk his life to get away.

CHAPTER V.

SIX-GUN TALK.

SWEAT was running down the faces of both men at the card table. The heat of the noonday sun made a bake oven of the place. The air was filled with the sickening sweet smell of hot, crushed tarweed and the odor of heated wood.

Tex wiped his fingers on his shirt and flipped the cards toward Zopo Forteza. Forteza's gun and knife lay on the table close to his hand. Two cards fell in front of the scar-faced half-breed. The third slid across the table top and fell on the floor.

Zopo made an instinctive movement to reach for it, leaning farther away from his guns. It was the moment Tex had been waiting for. Surging to his feet, he overturned the table, hurling it on the stooping man.

Quick as a striking rattlesnake, Zopo's hand darted for his gun, but it fell before he could catch it. The table hit Zopo and knocked him to his knees. Tex dived to the floor, pawing around for the gun which he could not see.

With an angry snarl, Zopo Forteza sprang up and hurled himself on the bound cowboy. If he thought

those ropes made Tex Carnochen helpless, he was due for a rude shock.

Tex pulled both arms in close to his body and shot the bunched fists hard into Zopo's stomach.

Gulping and gasping with pain, Forteza doubled up, holding his middle. Hobbling to his feet, Tex raised both bound hands and smashed them down on the squirming half-breed.

Squawling with pain and rage, Zopo rolled away from him, eyes darting around the floor, searching for his gun or knife. With an exultant yell he pounced on something under the table.

It was the gun. Again Tex used the table effectively. Giving it a mighty shove, he crashed it against Zopo's side, sending the gun spinning again.

Tex saw the blue-steel Colt about six feet from him, saw Zopo poised to leap for it, knew that he could never make the jump on hobbled legs, and he deliberately fell forward on his face.

The stunning fall knocked the breath out of him, but it did not matter. A surge of triumph hammered new life into his veins as his fingers closed around the grips of the six-gun. With a yelp of fear, Zopo leaped back, scooping his knife up from the floor.

Struggling to his knees, his back pressed against the wall, Tex swung the six-gun in an arc to draw bead on the half-breed killer.

Swish! Zopo's throwing knife sized through the air, stabbing into Tex's vest and shirt, and pinning a fold of the flesh under his arm into the wall just as he squeezed trigger.

Zopo was backing through the door when Tex fired. As he leaped outside, he uttered a screech of pain, and then was lost to sight.

Tex's head was spinning dizzily. His stomach seemed to be turning over from a great sickness. The knife that pinned his flesh against the wall seemed to be biting into his very vitals.

Gritting his teeth, Tex reached over, gripped the knife blade, and yanked hard. Lights flashed before his eyes as the dripping blade came clear. The next instant, he was sawing at the ropes that held his hands, holding the knife hilt between his knees.

A great joy swept over him as his arms came free. It took but a minute to slash the thongs from his legs, and then he was staggering toward the door, smoking gun in one hand, crimson-stained knife in the other.

His brain was afire with the joy of conflict. His one thought was to find Zopo and fight it out. He knew that Forteza had had time to get another gun, but that did not stop him.

Boldly he lurched outside, squinting his eyes against the glare of the sun, darting glances in every direction in search of his prey.

A bullet whistled past his ear. A rifle cracked in an echoing explosion down by the chuck wagon.

He saw Zopo down behind a log, raising his Winchester to fire again, and he flung a swift shot at him. The bullet missed, but it threw off Zopo's aim, giving Tex the precious seconds he needed to charge in closer.

Down the gentle slope from the cabin, across the narrow clearing, he raced. Zopo, flat behind a log, levered another shell into his long gun and then began slowly to rise, watching his chance to shoot again.

Tex was a hundred feet from Zopo Forteza when he saw the coarse black hair, bound by a crimson

band, rise up behind the sights of the Winchester.

Zopo's evil eyes glared at him with inflamed hate along the octagonal barrel. Steadying his gun, Tex drew a bead on that red band and gently squeezed trigger.

Zopo's rifle seemed to jump out of his hands, and he vanished with the suddenness of a prairie dog popping into its hole. The bullet had caught him dead center through the middle of his forehead. He was dead when Tex reached down and unbuckled his gun belt.

Still sick and staggered, Tex reeled down to the creek, plunged his head into the cold water to clear it, and washed his wounds and bruises. Returning to the chuck wagon, he searched until he found his own gun belt and saddle.

Carrying the big forty-pound hull, he raced to the horse corral and saddled a big iron-gray. There was no time to get his own claybank from the pasture. As his foot settled into the stirrup and he swung up to clamp his legs against the ribs of the mustang, Tex felt new life and confidence flood over him.

He always felt better when he was forking a bronc. With two loaded six-guns in their holsters and a Winchester under the *rosadero*, he had a feeling he could whip the world.

His growing suspicion of Zopo Forteza made him return and search the half-breed. There were no incriminating papers of any kind. But next to the swarthy skin he found a calfskin money belt.

It was heavy. When he opened it up, the sun glinted on gold pieces, eagles, double eagles and twenty-five-peseta pieces.

"Funny this killin' half-breed's got so much gold," muttered Tex, as he spurred the iron-gray in the direction of the short cut to the Car-

nochen horse camp. "I reckon Ringy Holmes will begin to get kind of suspicious, himself, of his hired gunnies when he finds that loaded money belt beside Zopo's body. I wondered why Zopo and Comanche were so danged anxious to plug me. They suspicioned I might be onto their phony deal."

Emerging from a patch of mountain birch and service-berry bushes, Tex dragged the bronc to a sudden, startled halt, then yanked around and plunged back into the thicket again.

To his ears came a sound known only to mountain men and very familiar to them. It was the gnawing of steel shoes biting into granite and limestone. It carried for miles across the mighty crevasses of this endless wilderness.

Dropping to the ground, Tex put his hand over the iron-gray's muzzle just as a party of horsemen appeared around the turn. It was Ringy Holmes and his men coming back.

Tex counted the men and the horses, and heaved a sigh of relief. None were wounded and none missing. They had not found the Carnoohen camp.

But Tex saw something else that caused him to utter a low growl. At the tail end of the procession came four cowboys, half driving and half dragging a blindfolded, loose-hobbled wild horse.

One glance at the golden-hued body, the proud crest, and the silvery mane told him that this was Silver Cloud—the California sorrel, also called a *palomino*—which he had been so anxious to capture.

He wanted Silver Cloud for his own for a secret purpose. Now that dream was ended. Somehow, by some streak of luck, the Holmes mustangers had captured the fa-

mous wild horse that had escaped man's rope so long.

Hidden by the thick leaves and branches, Tex remained perfectly quiet while Ringy Holmes, Eleanor, Comanche Frazee, and the others filed slowly past him, headed for the round pen, a barrier from which no horse had ever escaped.

Once Silver Cloud was lodged in that corral, his free days would be gone forever. The Skillet brand would be slapped on his shoulder, and he would become one of the ranch cavvy.

"We was plumb lucky, trappin' that feller in a blind canyon," said Ringy Holmes, loud enough for Tex to hear. "That boy is worth more than all the other brones that we've grabbed. I figure to gentle him myself."

"It was me roped him down," protested Comanche Frazee. "I ought ter git the privilege of bustin' him."

"You'd bust him all right," admitted Ringy. "But that's jist what I don't want. Treatin' a horse rough spiles him. I want Silver Cloud broke until he's gentle as a lamb."

Most of the hands gathered around the round pen to watch the riding of Silver Cloud for the first time. Eleanor and several *cholos* continued on to the house.

Suddenly a woman's screams cut sharply through the stillness. A shout went up from the *cholos*, who began crying out that Forteza had been killed and Tex had escaped. There was a rush toward the house.

The horse wranglers finished pulling Silver Cloud inside the pen, threw off the ropes, and joined the others in a race to the scene of the killing. Only Ringy Holmes and Comanche Frazee remained at the round pen. The lion-maned sorrel was racing around the inclosure,

snorting in terror and tossing its head as it sought a way to escape.

Still keeping under cover, Tex left his horse and approached close to Ringy and Comanche. Ringy was growling something about "a bunch of hyeenys going plumb on the prod."

"If he's gone, there's no use bustin' our galluses about it," said Ringy. "As for Zopo Forteza, I'm afeerd he had it comin' to him. Comanche, you know how to read sign. Take about three men, pick up Tex's trail quietlike, and foller him while them other loco rannies is yippin' over a dead body. When you come back with yore prisoner, I'll be ridin' this Silver Cloud horse."

Abruptly, Ringy broke off speaking. A gasp escaped him and then a startled cry.

"Look! Gosh! Watch him jump!" shrilled the Skillet Ranch boss. "He'll never make it. He'll kill himself sure. Delirium tremens. He done it!"

Prancing and curveting around the corral, the silver-maned *palo-mino* spotted the gate as the lowest point in the barrier, and headed for it full tilt.

The sun made silver wire of his streaming tail and creamy mane. With a final defiant whistle, Silver Cloud stabbed its ebony hoofs into the soil, spurned the ground, and went sailing through the air as pretty as a hawk on the wing.

Up, up he went. The gate was high. For a moment Tex held his breath, thinking that the wild horse would cripple itself against the heavy rails. There was a click of hoofs against the top rail, and Silver Cloud lit a-running.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tex Carnochen saw Comanche Frazee start to run after the escaping stallion, yelping angry oaths. He caught

the movement of Comanche's hand, just as it snagged a shining Colt from the holster. Comanche was going to kill Silver Cloud rather than let him get away.

Tex's fingers clamped over the grips of his own smoke-wagon, which came up streaming flame and lead. Comanche spun around, bawling with pain and gripping the fingers of his gun hand. The .45, knocked from his grasp, thudded to the ground, raising a little cloud of dust.

Before Ringy Holmes knew what had happened, Tex leaped in front of him with leveled six-gun. Smoke curling from the blue muzzle seemed to warn Ringy of the deadliness of Tex's purpose, because he flapped his hands up in the air without waiting for the order.

Tex Carnochen's second gun covered Comanche Frazee, who stopped yelping as soon as he saw that his hand had only been wrenched a little.

"You murderin' hound!" burst out Ringy Holmes. "You'll never get away with——"

"Shut up!" interrupted Tex Carnochen. "I've heard all I want to of your bellerin' and yippin'. Now yo're goin' to listen to me. Yo're a quarrelsome, hammer-headed, ring-boned old fool! You act like you was crazy fer yore outfit to go on a six-gun bender. I know you don't want the feud renewed, but you act like it."

"That's a lie!" flared Ringy Holmes. "It was you follered us here, and not us follered you. It was you plugged one of my men, and now yuh try to say that I'm quarrelsome. Why, dang yore measly hide, I believe yo're crazy!"

"I ain't crazy," said Tex earnestly. "I never spied on yuh, and I don't want to fight. 'Pears like

our misunderstandin's will never come to an end. I admit I killed Zopo Frateza, but he was a skunk. He's been sellin' you out, or somethin', all the time. Otherwise, he wouldn't have five hundred dollars in gold on him, which I found and left layin' beside his body. No hired gunslick ever saved that much out of his month's pay. They ain't built that way."

Ringy Holmes started to grumble and sputter. From the direction of the camp came the sound of approaching horsemen. Tex felt it would be perilous to stay longer. He turned and darted into the brush where his horse was hidden.

A hail of bullets clattered among the branches and clipped leaves on all sides of him as Ringy and Comanche opened up at the same time. With a bitter smile on his lips, Tex vaulted into the saddle of the iron gray and raced toward the thick jumble of trees and boulders where he had seen Silver Cloud disappear.

Those bullets told him plainer than words that Ringy Holmes did not believe him. The Holmes-Carnochen war was on again. Who could tell which one of the two families would be the next victim of gun or knife?

CHAPTER VI.

ON SILVER CLOUD'S TRAIL.

EVENING shadows were playing among the tall pines and pinnacle rocks of the mountain meadow as Tex Carnochen quirted the iron gray across an open pasture, bending low to avoid the bullets that whistled past him.

The gray mustang was tough and fast. Stretching out until its belly seemed to touch the ground, it swept the young cowboy out of the clearing into the shelter of a small corral.

Concealed for the moment by the

pole fence, Tex drew rein to consider his next move. He knew the speedier horses of Ringy Holmes, Comanche Frazee, and some of the others would quickly overhaul his second-rate bronc. He had to work some trick, or he would be caught and killed before he could go a mile.

Over toward the house he heard the thud of galloping hoofs, and Ringy's harsh voice, yelping angry commands. As he watched, he became aware that the corral was occupied by half a dozen mares that were racing around the inclosure frantically, trying to break out.

He knew the reason for that. Silver Cloud, in passing, had tried to coax them away. His scent still hung heavy in the air.

To Tex's ears came Silver Cloud's defiant blast from far up a rocky gorge. Even in flight he was still trying to lure those mares after him. A sudden inspiration came to Tex.

Dropping off his horse, he slid around the corral to the gate and began pulling down the rails of the opening. His heart was beating a triumphant tattoo. If this trick worked, he could not only escape the Holmes sharpshooters, but capture Silver Cloud as well.

Straight toward him, across the meadow, raced a bunch of enemy riders. They were holding their fire now, until they caught sight of the fugitive. The dusk made it hard to distinguish faces, but Tex recognized Comanche's black beard and stocky figure.

Yanking down the last rail of the gate, Tex turned and forked the gray horse. Behind him he heard the swift rush of the mares as they swept out of the corral and headed up the gorge after Silver Cloud.

A volley of bullets raked the manzanita and chokecherry brush. As one man, the Skillet rannahans

swerved after the galloping mares. With an exultant chuckle, Tex trotted off in the other direction, which had been left clear by the maneuver.

Ring Holmes was bellowing at his men angrily.

"Don't shoot, men!" he roared. "Them's our mares he's turned loose. He's gone the other way. Fan out and git after him!"

The Holmes gunmen turned in confusion, spread out in a skirmish line, and raced in the direction Tex had taken. But they were too late.

In the depth of the dark woods, Tex struck a path carpeted with pine needles that deadened the hoofbeats of his horse as he back-tracked in the direction taken by Silver Cloud and the mares.

In a few minutes the noise and hubbub of pursuit fell away. Mighty rock walls rose on both sides of him as he entered the gorge. He hit a streak of slick soapstone, and had to dismount and lead his horse, which slipped and slid in spite of its steel shoes.

The steep, winding trail led sharply upward toward a notch in the barrier of towering granite. This was the entrance to a vast tableland, crisscrossed by lateral gorges and roaring torrents, typical wild-horse country.

Skirting the rim of a cliff, he could look straight down two hundred feet into the black jaws of a rock-strewn canyon. One slip on this slick soapstone trail would send him hurtling to his death.

At intervals he had to stop and catch his breath. Already the gray was flecked with foam, its sides heaving.

Down below a loud yell told him he had been seen. A glancing rifle bullet shrieked off a boulder just above his head, and a split second later the echoes of the explosion

filled the walled chasm with its rumblings.

The iron gray tossed its head and snorted with fright.

"Whoa, hoss!" said Tex, patting the ewe neck of the fagged bronc. "Don't throw no fit, or you'll tumble off into that canyon and take my saddle with yuh. That would put me in a hole."

More shots rang out, and the shouting increased. A slug clipped through Tex's Stetson. Above him the cleft in the granite wall was only fifty feet away. It seemed hours before he reached it, and flung himself to safety behind a pile of rock, yanking the iron gray in after him.

A man on foot, carrying a rifle, started up the trail. Tex aimed at the limestone wall beside him and knocked rock dust into the attacker's eyes.

A rain of lead swept through the pass as the Skillet gunmen fired at the flash of his rifle. Tex's next shot dug up a spurt of dust between the legs of the climbing man.

With a growl of fear, the fellow turned and darted back down the path.

"Reckon that'll hold 'em for a spell," chortled Tex Carnochen. "Let's go, old gray hoss. We're winnin' now. This way leads them gunnies farther from my dad's hoss camp and brings me closer to Silver Cloud."

Steel-cut stars and an orange moon in a cloudless sky made it almost light as day as Tex picked up the plain trail left by the escaping mares.

It was midnight before Tex caught sight of the stolen mares, and of Silver Cloud, standing on a knoll like a sentinel, guarding over them. The big horse vanished as he caught the hated scent of man.

Tex raced after him, but the iron

gray was no match for the *palomino*. Tex stopped the staggering saddle pony beneath a buckeye tree and let it get its wind. The mares appeared, following Silver Cloud.

Tex roped one, saddled it, turning the iron gray loose, and set out in pursuit of the stallion.

The way led across a broad plain, crisscrossed by lateral gorges. It dipped down into deep canyons and across wooded ridges. At intervals Tex caught a glimpse of the *palomino's* creamy tail and mane as it darted away.

The wild horse wanted to keep close to its mares, hence it did not go far, but kept circling around. Tex pursued it relentlessly. He would rest until he heard Silver Cloud trumpeting to the mares, and then he would set off after him again.

As soon as one mount was tired out, he changed to another. The mares did not race around as Silver Cloud did, and therefore he did not become exhausted. All night long Tex dodged Silver Cloud's trail, never giving him a minute's rest.

It was toward the hour of sunrise that he came upon the *palomino* in a small ravine. The place was narrow, walled up by a rock barrier at the far end. Its sides heaving, nostrils flaring, and handsome head tossing this way and that, the golden-hued mustang tried to dart past the cowboy.

Riding full tilt on a freshly saddled mare, Tex set his rope spinning. Suddenly the loop darted down and flipped around the *palomino's* forelegs.

Popping out of his saddle, Tex pounced on the wild horse as it went down hard in a cloud of dust, and had it hog tied before the critter knew what had happened.

Then began the difficult task of transferring his saddle to the squirm-

ing, bawling, blindfolded animal. A bronc buster generally had several men to haze for him, but Tex had to do it all himself.

At last the wild horse stood on trembling legs, its eyes still blindfolded, a saddle clamped around its middle, and its head incased in a bridle and a hackamore.

Placing one hand on the saddle horn, Tex set his left foot in the stirrup and jerked the blindfold away. Instantly the angry horse leaped forward.

Its speed helped fling Tex into the saddle. He jabbed his other foot in the stirrup just as the snorting, pawing Silver Cloud tucked its muzzle between its forelegs, arched its back, and broke into a series of muscle-twisting crowhops.

Tex fanned the wild horse with his hat, raked it from shoulder to flank, and whooped at the top of his voice.

Head swinging from side to side, Silver Cloud whirled around and began sunfishing. Tex rode him high, wide, and handsome. He knew that the harder a horse was to conquer the better saddle animal it would be.

For half an hour man and horse battled desperately. Then, squealing, kicking, the *palomino* started along the floor of the ravine at a dead run. It was all over. When a wild horse did that, it was a sign he was licked.

Tex let Silver Cloud have his run out, then he dismounted in a creek bed, removed the saddle, and staked his prize out in a little clearing to let it burn its legs by getting tangled up with a rope, and learn that the lariat was its master. Exhausted, Tex lay flat on the grass and slept for an hour.

The sun was mounting in the heavens when he awoke refreshed, saddled the cowering, terrified wild

horse, and roweled him out of another fit of bucking before he set off toward the Curlicue S horse camp.

It was afternoon when Tex rode into camp, which was breaking up. The Carnochens had captured all the wild broncs they needed, and were returning to the home ranch on Bitter Creek.

Bullet-riddled, crippled-up old Clem Carnochen started bawling angrily at Tex for delaying their departure, but at sight of Silver Cloud he changed his tune. Every one gathered around, congratulating Tex on his capture.

Silver Cloud was the most prized catch in the whole Sangre de Dios range land.

"Good work, my boy," approved Clem Carnochen. "I'm glad you got Silver Cloud. Now them danged Skillet mustangers won't get him."

"I forgot to tell you, dad," said Tex. "The Skilletts got a hoss camp over beyond Sacaron Canyon. I had a ruckus with one of their men."

Old Clem's eyes rested on Tex's crimson-stained shirt. He saw for the first time that his son had been wounded, and his gray-bearded face writhed in a snarl of sudden anger.

"They plugged yuh," he burst out. "The murderin' hounds ambushed yuh. Do you hear that, boys?" he bellowed, turning to his men. "The Skilletts renewed the feud. Finish packin', then we'll git our guns and raid 'em. We'll attack their hoss camp and make 'em pay for this!"

"No, dad, wait a minute!" protested Tex. "It wasn't none of the Holmes family that plugged me. It was a hired gunman that done it without Ringy's knowledge. I talked to Ringy and found that out. I salivated one hombre named Zopo Forteza, and wounded another, so I reckon we're even, if Ringy wants to consider it that way."

Old Clem Carnochen's bullet-marked face lighted with a triumphant grin.

"So yuh kilt one of 'em, eh? That's the stuff. That'll learn 'em to leave a Carnochen alone. Well, mebbe we better not raid 'em. Let them make the next move. It's their ante."

Tex gripped his dad's hand and shook it vigorously.

"There's a favor I want to ask yuh, dad," he said. "Can I have Silver Cloud to do whatever I want with him?"

"Sure you can!" cried Clem Carnochen. "Any of my sons that kills a Skillet gunman can have anythin' he wants."

Tex rode away down toward the branding chute, where he built a fire and prepared to mark the *palomino* bronc.

As the Curlicue S waddies bent their backs to the task of packing the cook and hoodlum wagons, armed men burst in on them from all sides. Bristling with drawn rifles and six-guns, the hard-looking hombres covered the Carnochen hands before one of them got a chance to draw.

At the head of the raiders came Comanche Frazee, .45 in each hand, an evil grin of triumph on his face. Both his weapons were pointed at old Clem Carnochen, who was so stove up from gun fighting that he could not mount a horse without assistance.

"Yore son, Tex Carnochen, stole Silver Cloud from us and run off a bunch of our mares!" snarled Comanche. "We come to git 'em back, and to take yore catch of wild broncs to pay for the trouble. If ary man of yuh lifts a hand to stop us, he'll be shot down like a dog! Do yuh savvy?"

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CHAPTER VII.

HORSE THIEVES.

IN the depths of the woods, two hundred yards from the Carnochen camp, Tex set to work branding the shoulder of Silver Cloud, using a running iron. Clamped in the branding rack, the creamy-maned California sorrel was held helpless as Tex traced the small letters with a cherry-red iron.

Daubing the wound with creosote to prevent infection, Tex released the stallion from the chute and saddled him again. His mind was filled with the thoughts of what he was going to do with this horse.

Old Clem had told him he could do whatever he pleased with it, but the cowboy was not so sure his father would like his plans. The thud of galloping hoofs, and then the blat of a six-gun was the first hint that Tex had that anything was wrong at the camp.

His first thought was that Ringy Holmes had attacked them. That meant the renewal of the Holmes-Carnochen family war. It meant the ruin of his plans to marry Eleanor.

Astride the *palomino*, he raced back to camp, which was in a turmoil. Dust kicked up by the hoofs of the stolen broncs still hung choking in the air.

Old Clem Carnochen, bullet-torn and pain-racked, sat helpless in the wagon, howling for somebody to help him onto a horse. He had been so ripped and battered by slugs in the feud wars that he could not even walk.

"They've raided us!" he yelped at sight of Tex. "The Skillet! That murderin' outfit's run off our broncs."

Tex felt all the joy go out of his

life as he halted the *palomino* beside the wagon and looked at his father.

"Who done it? Ringy Holmes?" he asked.

"No," snorted old Clem. "The coward's hirin' gunnies to do his dirty work now. Seven or eight breeds, led by a slit-eyed black-beard."

"Comanche Frazee!" burst out Tex. "I'll get him. Soon's the rest of yuh kin find any brons, foller me! He's left a plain trail, and cain't git away."

Not waiting to hear his father's shrieked commands, Tex Carnochen quirted the wild horse into a dead run along the trail taken by Comanche Frazee. The way led out of the wooded canyon into a dry watercourse which meandered in a southerly direction toward the Skillet camp.

Tex had hoped that Ringy Holmes was not in on this, that it was a private raid by Comanche and his *cholos*. But even this hope died as the trail followed the stream bed unerringly toward Ringy's camp.

Silver Cloud was speed itself. In a few minutes Tex caught sight of the fleeing raiders. At the same instant they saw him, and two of them fell back and began firing. Tex did not shoot back—not from the back of a green horse—but he charged straight at the riflemen.

The river bed dipped, and rolled, and twisted in and out among boulders, so that he made a poor target. A bullet nicked skin from the back of his hand. Another buzzed off the horn of his saddle like an angry bumblebee. Still Tex kept on, holding his fire.

He knew that he would be lucky to get in more than two shots before the explosions frightened the wild horse into a panic of bucking.

Not a hundred feet from him, one

of the swarthy Mexicans lifted his rifle to fire. Tex's gun cracked with such sharpness and suddenness that Silver Cloud seemed not to know that he had fired a shot.

The Mex fell flat on his face and lay still. The other *cholo* dropped his rifle and whipped out a Colt.

Again Tex's deadly fire had instant effect. With a wild shriek, the gunman threw up his hands, spun around, and then dropped to his knees. Snorting with terror, Silver Cloud took the bit between his teeth and tried to turn around. Tex slapped his head with his hat and kept it going. Two down, and only five men left! If luck favored him, he might beat Comanche Frazee yet.

Now he was so close on the heels of the stolen band of wild horses that he could plainly hear the shouts of the herders as they hazed the animals along.

Abruptly Comanche dropped back, leaving his men to ride on with the cayuses. He was going to deal with Tex personally. Frazee's twin six-guns churned out their death messages as he raced toward Tex.

All the bullets went wild. Tex held his fire as he closed up the distance between them. Comanche wheeled away up a gulch that Tex knew would lead to the cabin of the Skillet camp.

For a moment Tex hesitated, undecided whether to follow Comanche or pursue the stolen horses. If he left Comanche at his rear, he would be in even more deadly danger. He had to get Frazee first.

Silver Cloud fought his head, but Tex forced him to turn into the gulch. Comanche heard him coming, and reined around to fire again. Tex's single shot went wide of the mark. Comanche's horse dropped in its tracks, flinging its rider clear.

With a wild war cry, Frazee emptied his .45s at Tex and then turned and raced toward the log house in the clearing. Before Tex could shoot him, Comanche popped inside the house and slammed the door.

Dropping off Silver Cloud, Tex tied him up in a clear space under a great live oak and circled the house on foot. The camp was deserted. Neither Ringy Holmes nor any of his men were in sight. Tex wondered about that.

The situation was desperate. There was open ground on all sides of the cabin. He dare not charge across that with Comanche firing at him through loopholes in the log wall. It would be suicide, yet he had to get Frazee, and get him quick.

With Comanche in his hands, he could force the slit-eyed killer to tell him where the stolen horses were being taken. Watching the cabin like a hawk, Tex climbed to a steep hill just above it. He had seen a balanced rock up there, and he wondered if he could budge it. The rock stood just above the cabin wall.

Tex tried to push it, but it would not move. Darting a glance around him, he saw a broken oak limb. This would make a good pry bar.

It took only a minute to jam the pole under the rock and heave on it. The enormous boulder, taller than a man, needed only a start to send it hurtling downward.

With a splintering crash it smashed into the outer wall of the house and went on through.

Tex was right behind it, running with such speed that he almost fell from stepping on rolling stones. Out of the front door of the cabin darted Comanche Frazee, freshly loaded guns gripped in his hands.

Tex opened fire just as Frazee began to shoot.

For a few minutes the mountain meadow was filled with the rumble and crackle of gunfire, the shrill Indian war cry of Comanche Frazee and the triumphant laughter of Tex Carnochen. Tex felt bullets sting his flesh, but still he laughed and sang as he fought.

Comanche stumbled and went to his knees, grabbing at his leg. Before he could recover his balance, Tex Carnochen stood over him, gun pointed at his head.

"You got me!" gasped Comanche Frazee. "I give up."

Suddenly the place seemed filled with men. Horsemen appeared from every direction, angry-faced and threatening. Their guns covered Tex Carnochen.

Tex looked up into Ringy Holmes's red, freckled countenance, and his feeling of triumph gave way to one of despair.

Eleanor Holmes spurred her pinto to his side and dropped down with him.

"Hold yore fire, Ringy!" cried Tex quickly. "I ain't fightin' you, but this skunk, Comanche Frazee."

"You done good work shootin' this coyote, Tex," growled Ringy Holmes. "The hoss thief turned traitor to me, run off my cavvy, too. I got another crow to pick with you. You stole Silver Cloud from us. We had him penned up. That means that we got first claim on him. You got to turn him over to us, or I'm holdin' you as a hoss thief for runnin' off my mares."

A slow smile crossed Tex's tanned, weather-beaten face.

"Let me talk to Eleanor a minute," requested Tex.

Ringy grumbly agreed. Tex said something to the girl that caused her to run over to Silver

Cloud and study the animal keenly. Then she burst out laughing.

"Come here, dad, quick!" she cried. "There'll be no family feud or dispute about this horse. Look at the brand Tex has put on him."

Ringy Holmes gaped unbelievably at the small brand on Silver Cloud's golden shoulder.

"Holy heifers, it's a Skillet brand!" burst out Ringy. "Why did

you put my mark on that animal, Tex?"

"It may be yore mark, but it ain't yore hoss," laughed Tex. "I ketched Silver Cloud jist so's I could make a present of him to Eleanor. That's why he's branded with a Skillet."

"Well, I'll be a ding-danged, hammered-down, bow-legged chuckwaller!" snorted Ringy Holmes. "You never kin figure a man and a girl."

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The illustration depicts a lion in the foreground, looking towards the right. In the background, a man in a suit and hat stands next to a large, ornate cage or enclosure, holding a whip. The scene is set outdoors with some architectural elements visible.



# Six-guns And Salt

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Cow Dip—And Cow Thieves," etc.

**T**HE young freighter tossed restlessly in his sleep, muttering to himself and throwing aside the single blanket he was using for covering. A few yards away from the freight camp, where cat's-claw and scrub mesquite grew in a tangle over a dozen unmarked graves, a gaunt, dark shape was skulking, slowly drawing nearer.

"Lay into yore traces!"

"Shorty" Masters sat up suddenly, awakened by his own words. He stared across the faintly smoking ashes of the camp fire and saw Willie Wetherbee, better known as the "Sonora Kid," lifting his head inquiringly.

"What did yuh say?" demanded

the freckled, sawed-off mule skinner.

The tall cowboy snorted. "Me? I didn't say nothin'. But *you* have been rantin' at them musical mules of yourn loud enough to wake up everybody over at the 72 Bar!"

"I was dreamin' about the mules all gittin' balky at once," Shorty sighed, mopping his forehead. "Gosh, it shore is hot—too hot to sleep! But I reckon we'd better try and git some shut-eye so's we can start early fer the Rafter X with that stock salt. Pete Ludlow seemed kind of in a hurry to git it, accordin' to the store. Sorry I woke yuh up. Good night!"

The partners lay back down. In

the fringe of the chaparral, the ghostly shape paused for a few seconds, then circled warily, sniffing the air. It retreated as a longhorn cow lowered her threatening head to protect her six-month-old calf. It came in from the rear of the three freight wagons, unheard, unseen.

Shorty lay awake for a few minutes, looking out over the dark divide where the breathless heat lay stifling. Those low, brush-covered mounds marked an ancient mule-train massacre.

Shorty's own six mules—dubbed the "Sextet from Lucia," because he liked music, and they were all offspring of a mare named Lucy—were hobbling restlessly across the graves. One of them snorted.

The little freighter heard it and sat up. Now, however, all was quiet except for the muttered growl of thunder far in the southeast.

"Wish it would rain here and cool off!" he told himself, as he eyed the distant lightning flashes. "I'd git out in it with nothin' on but this nightshirt I'm wearin'!"

He sank back on his blanket. Overhead, the moon shone fitfully through thick clouds. The mesquites drooped listlessly, without the breath of a breeze to stir their leaves. Cattle wandered about, refusing to bed down. The hush was ominous, foreboding.

The next thing Shorty knew, he was wide awake again and reaching for the .45 that lay under his pillow.

Somebody was slashing the taut wagon sheet that covered the third freight wagon!

Shorty opened his mouth to call his sleeping pard, then changed his mind. The intruder might hear and get away. The little freighter tossed aside his blanket, got silently to his bare feet, and started cautiously

around the wagons. He brought up suddenly, his heart leaping. A ghostly white object, floating wraith-like in the air, moved over the ancient graves.

Shorty cocked the .45 noiselessly, and brought it up to fire. Then the disembodied white thing vanished, and he heard hoofs stumbling about. A feeling of relief swept through his tense body.

"Jest a white-faced steer!" he thought. "Shore had me all excited fer a——"

*Slash!* Sudden anger flamed through the little mule skinner as he heard the wanton destruction of his property.

He left the gun cocked and kept his finger on the trigger as he resumed his way around the wagons.

Black clouds moved slowly over the face of the moon. Shorty could not see anybody cutting his wagon sheet. Whoever it was, he was at the very end of the freight vehicle.

Then, without warning, something cold and clammy thrust itself against Shorty's bare leg. A startled yell leaped to his lips; his trigger finger jerked involuntarily.

*Braang!* The gun roared, ripping the darkness with dazzling flame which surprised Shorty as much as anything else.

He whirled, ready to blaze away at the thing behind him. There was a queer, animal grunt, and the thud of a heavy body on the ground.

The freighter leaped back, lowered the gun, and stood staring. Willie Wetherbee, piling out of his bedding and rearing for a fight, came racing to his partner's side with drawn gun.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "Who is it?"

Shorty pointed. A longhorn cow lay dead. A frightened calf, six months old, retreated and stood



bawling a short distance away. Under the wagon, cowering with tail tucked between its legs, was a skinny, black hound.

"Nothin's the matter!" Shorty said in disgust. "Except that there cow was chewin' heck out of the waggin sheet, tryin' to git at that rock salt. I killed her."

He tried to pocket the .45 and remembered he wore only a short nightshirt. He strode back to the bedding and put the gun under his pillow.

The Sonora Kid, frowning at his pard, replaced his own weapon and started back to look at the cow. The hound hung around, apparently afraid to come within reach after the startling result of his first effort at making friends.

"She's old and mighty decrepit!" Willie announced. "Still, yuh hadn't ought to have shot her—even if the calf is big enough to take care o' hisself. Yuh could have throwed a rock——"

"I didn't kill her on purpose!" protested Shorty. "Yuh see that hound? Well, he come sneakin' up behind me and rammed his cold nose against my laig. And when he done that, the gun jest natcherally let go! How would *you* like fer a dawg yuh didn't know was around to come up and stick a hunk of ice on yore bare laig?"

The comedy of the situation struck Wetherbee with a sudden force. "Ha-ha!" he roared. "Ha-ha! I'll bet yuh thought a ghost had yuh, shore enough! That's what comes o' wearin' nightshirts in camps!"

"Nightshirts is cool, anyhow!" Shorty retorted. "And it ain't so funny. I made a dogie out o' that calf, and I reckon I ought to pay the 72 Bar fer——"

"Listen!"

Shorty and his pard whirled. A quick flurry of hoofs drummed out of the hot darkness. The moon burst forth again—in time to disclose five riders who swept out of the mesquites and jerked their horses to a sliding halt.

"Stick 'em up, both of yuh!" roared a tall man who shoved his way forward with a .45 glinting in his hand. "Reach high and sudden! You're goin' to tell me what's goin' on here!"

## II.

Shorty Masters gasped as the muzzle of the six-gun jammed hard against his unprotected ribs. The other men closed in. A heavy-set, broad-shouldered waddy had the Sonora Kid covered. The partners elevated their hands.

"Nothin's goin' on!" Shorty answered. "I jest accidentally shot a cow, that's all. Put this here artillery away, and I'll tell yuh how come. Who are yuh, anyhow?"

"I'm Bill Mortimer, and I own the 72 Bar!" snapped the tall man. "Take a look at the cow, Gotch, and see if it's mine. I'll put a stop to folks passin' through here and killin' my beef! Git over by yore camp fire!"

Gotch struck a match to light a cigarette, and the flame showed battered features and a notched ear. He stepped to the side of the slain longhorn. The hound came out from beneath the wagon, whining and fawning on Mortimer's boots.

"Bugle!" exclaimed the ranchman. "I'll be dog-goned if it ain't ol' Bugle! Look, boys! He's come back, and he's half starved. Been gone more'n a month, and I'll bet he ain't had a square meal in all that time! So, yuh not only kill other people's stock, but yuh steal their dawgs, yuh—yuh——"

"Jest a minute!" Shorty flared. "If it hadn't been fer Bugle, the cow wouldn't have been killed! I can tell yuh——"

Gotch came back, the glowing cigarette dangling from a corner of his scarred mouth. He spoke without removing it.

"Looks like we've found the rustlers, boss! They wasn't killin' that cow fer beef—she's so tough a panther couldn't chaw her. But she's branded 72 Bar, and the calf is wearin' a fresh Rafter X. These hombres must work fer Pete Ludlow."

Bill Mortimer swore triumphantly. Shorty's heart sank. It was an old rustler's trick to brand a calf and kill the mother so the markings would not conflict. Somebody apparently had found the calf alone and had taken a chance that it was a dogie.

"We got yuh, yuh mangy thief!" exclaimed Mortimer. "What's yore name? I never seen yuh on the Rafter X spread!"

"You're plumb loco!" flared the Sonora Kid. "Yuh can see he's a freighter."

"Shut up!" barked the heavy-set cowboy who had Willie covered. "Let yore pard do the talkin'!"

The gun prodded Shorty. "My name's Masters," he said. "Shorty Masters, M. D., the which means 'Mule Driver.' My pard is Willie Wetherbee. We was jest passin' through yore range with a load o' rock salt fer Pete Ludlow. Yore cow——"

"That's enough! You're in cahoots with Pete! That settles it. We been findin' cows shot dead and missin' calves by the dozens. Two and three or more every day. That's why we went scoutin' around to-night—and we caught yuh at it!"

"If yuh'll let me explain——"

Shorty began patiently, but the rancher interrupted with a wave of his free hand.

"Yuh can tell the judge. Git yore team hitched—we're startin' fer Tarantula right now. As fer the salt, yuh can dump that out as yuh go back through my pasture. My stock need it, and it'll pay fer the cow yuh killed!"

Shorty climbed into his trousers, still covered by the gun. Willie Wetherbee was drawing on his boots.

"Yeah, yore cattle shore need the salt, all right!" the freighter retorted. "All the way acrost yore range, to-day, they kept follerin' me. They could smell it a mile. Yuh hadn't ought to let yore salt run out."

"Git busy!" grunted Mortimer. "Keep him covered, while he gits his team, Curly!"

The 72 Bar cowboy took over the guard and kept his gun jammed brutally into Shorty's shoulder blades as the little freighter strode into the mesquites. The Sonora Kid was still arguing with Mortimer, at the risk of being shot.

In the southeast, the muttered thunder grew to a rumble, and lightning etched a vivid, zigzag trail across the sky. It was going to rain.

"Here, Chopin! Come on, Beethoven! We're hittin' the trail!"

Curly stared as Shorty called his mules. Chopin, the right-hand leader, came readily and had the halter slipped over his ears.

"Them's shore funny names, yuh got fer a passell o' flop-eared, worthless jacks!" the 72 Bar rider commented.

"They ain't neither flop-eared nor worthless!" growled Shorty. "When I git out o' this mess, I'll make yuh take them names back!"

"Yuh ain't gittin' out!" Curly

jeered. "Come on—round 'em up! We ain't got all night!"

Shorty led the mules to the wagons by twos. The Sonora Kid was still protesting, and Shorty knew he was stalling for time. The bedding was still spread on the ground; the freighter knew the two guns remained under the pillows.

"If we could grab them guns, we'd stand a chance!" he told himself grimly. "Circumstantial evidence will send us to the pen, shore as the world. I shot the cow, all right. But I reckon it's easy to see who's been doin' the rustlin'—Pete Ludlow and his Rafter X crowd."

He backed the wheel mules into their places. Bill Mortimer turned to Curly.

"Help him hitch!" he ordered. "It's goin' to rain cats and dawgs, and I don't want this thievin' outfit bogged down on my range."

The cowboy obeyed. Shorty edged around to the side on which the bedding lay. He lifted harness from the pile on the wagon wheel, watching every chance to go for the .45 under the pillow.

When all the mules but the two leaders had been harnessed, the freighter tossed a strap with a heavy buckle at its end over Chopin's back.

Curly did not see the strap coming in the dim light. The buckle struck him squarely between the eyes. He dropped to his knees, a groan wrenched from his lips.

Bill Mortimer heard and ran around in front of the mules to see what had happened. Shorty shot a quick glance at the Sonora Kid—and dived for his bedding roll!

He came up, the .45 in his right hand, the pillow in his left. There was a shout from Gotch:

"Drop that! Bill, they got guns!" Mortimer ripped out an oath and

jumped clear of the mules so he could shoot. A six-gun's roar split the sultry air. Another shot cracked close on the heels of the first.

Shorty hurled the pillow squarely at Mortimer's face. It dropped midway between them, a .45 slug from the rancher's gun buried harmlessly in its soft stuffing.

*Braang!* The freighter shot low. Mortimer howled as his right leg buckled, and he fell, losing his gun.

"Kill 'em!" he shouted. "Owww! He shot me—kill 'em!"

The Sonora Kid came out of a twisting crouch, with Gotch's bullet whizzing harmlessly over his head and chipping splinters from the wagon wheel.

The tall waddy's gun flamed even as he brought it up from the bedding, and Gotch staggered back, tripped over a mesquite root, and sprawled heavily. He rolled, clutching at his shoulder.

*Braang!* Another 72 Bar man dropped his gun and grabbed his wrist, a dark stain creeping between his tightly clenched fingers.

Curly was getting to his feet, shaking his head dazedly. Shorty leaped to his side and took the gun from the puncher's limp grasp.

"Jest drop that hawglaig!" drawled the Sonora Kid softly. "I reckon there ain't no use of cripplin' all of yuh!"

The fifth 72 Bar rider looked into the steady muzzle of Wetherbee's .45 and obeyed. Willie turned to the mule driver.

"What's next?" he asked. "Did yuh shoot Mortimer bad?"

"Nope!" Shorty's voice was grim. "I jest pinked him in the laig, so's he wouldn't be so free to accuse folks after this. Hated to do it, Mortimer, but yuh wouldn't listen to reason. Now, jest to-show

yuh we are on the square, I got a plan. We'll help yuh round up the real rustlers!"

### III.

The ranchman groaned, rocking back and forth as he sat on the ground nursing his wounded leg. Gotch climbed to his feet, and the Sonora Kid went about collecting guns.

"This is what's next!" Shorty said. "Tie up Mortimer, and Gotch and the other hombre yuh winged in the wrist. We'll let 'em ride in the waggin with me. The other two hombres can fork their hosses after they've harnessed the other mule. We'll let 'em dump the salt out and save us the heavy work."

"You'll shore enough go to jail now!" threatened Mortimer. "I'll have yuh sent up fer attempted murder as well as rustlin'!"

"Mebbe you'll feel better, after a while!" Shorty retorted. "The time has come fer a little coöperation, instead o' so much bellyachin' about a little thing like a shot in the laig. How far is it to the Rafter X fence, or have yuh got a fence?"

"Three miles," answered the ranchman surlily. "There's a fence, but it's down fer a distance of a hundred yards, across the draw. What yuh want to know fer? It ain't none of yore business."

"I'm makin' it my business. I'll show yuh how to trap the rustlers in the act. It's a good thing yore cows ain't had any salt, mebbe. Fork yore hoss, Willie, and let's git movin'. You able-bodied buzzards can help the lame ones into the waggin. Better put the hound up here, too, he walks kind o' like he's foot-sore. And tie them three hosses behind the waggins."

The 72 Bar riders obeyed. Willie Wetherbee saddled and mounted the

sorrel mustang he called Tumbleweed. A few minutes later, Shorty shook the reins over the mules, and the freight outfit started rolling over the dark divide.

Curly and the other man who had escaped being shot rode ahead, with the Sonora Kid behind them, gun ready. Mortimer, Gotch, and the other wounded puncher jolted along back of the wagon seat, swearing and threatening at first, then subsiding into a sulky silence.

"Trouble with yuh is yuh don't savvy strategy!" Shorty grinned back at the rancher. "Yuh could have caught them buzzards long ago, if yuh had used yore head. They've been gittin' away with yore calves so long they think it's safe. So it's a double-barreled cinch they'll be out to-night!"

"What makes yuh think that?" growled Mortimer.

Shorty pointed to the sky. The clouds were growing thicker, blacker. Now and then the lightning split them and the crash of thunder boomed over the chaparral. The smell of rain was already in the air.

"If I was a rustler," Shorty explained, "I'd ride to-night and try to make a big haul. Because the rain would cover my tracks before mornin'. Savvy?"

Mortimer grunted something about some people being smart. Shorty turned the freight wagons down into a swale where the mesquites grew taller and thicker.

"Whoa!" he ordered the Sextet from Lucia. "All right, Willie. Look and see if we're bein' folloed!"

The Sonora Kid made an inspection. "There's about twenty cows amblin' after us!" he reported.

"Thought so!" chuckled Shorty. "It's so dang hot they ain't beddin' down to-night. And yuh see, that

salt has got sulphur mixed in it—they can smell it a mile. Dump the salt right here!”

Bill Mortimer raised himself to a sitting position and began protesting.

“If I’m gittin’ that salt, I don’t want it all dumped in one place!” he said. “Besides, this is too close to the Rafter X fence.”

“Shut up!” Shorty ordered. “In the first place, yuh ain’t runnin’ this show, and in the second place yuh don’t know beans about what’s good for yuh. And in the third place, yuh will have to pay Pete Wilson’s store in Tarantula fer that salt. Now jest keep yore trap closed!”

The Sonora Kid kept the two 72 Bar men covered as they dismounted, climbed the rear wagon, and began tossing out the heavy blocks of sulphur-treated salt.

Before they had half unloaded the shipment, the bunch of cattle had grown to thirty head. By the time they finished, there were more than fifty cows, calves, and steers.

“There yuh are!” chuckled Shorty. “The answer to a rustler’s prayer. All the cows in one bunch, handy to git to, and not far from the break in the fence. We’ll roll down into the brush, back there a little ways, and see what happens!”

He turned the Sextet around, threading the mesquites. A quarter of a mile from the pile of salt, he halted the mules and climbed to the ground.

“I’ll take Mortimer’s hoss—the big black!” he said. “That’s four of us in the saddle. We ought to be able to put up a purty good scrap.”

“I still think yuh are in cahoots with Ludlow!” accused Bill Mortimer. “Yuh are fixin’ it so’s he can make a big haul!”

“Fifty head ain’t a very big haul—not when yuh show yore hand

rustlin’ ’em, so that everybody knows who’s doin’ the stealin’!” Shorty retorted. “I still think yuh are plenty thick in the *cabeza*—yuh jest ain’t got no savvy.”

Mortimer grumbly subsided. The minutes dragged through a hot, heavy silence that was shattered intermittently by thunder, and broken by the restless stamp of the mules and horses. Shorty brought the black cayuse around to the side of the Sonora Kid and mounted.

An hour passed. Once Shorty was forced to crowd the horse close to the wagon and threaten Bill Mortimer with a gag unless the rancher remained quiet.

Once a few oversized, pattering drops of rain sprinkled them. But the cloud passed overhead as though reluctant to shed its moisture.

Other cattle straggled past, lured by the smell of the sulphurized salt. Shorty cocked one leg over his saddle horn and waited, wondering if his plan would be successful, after all.

Then, suddenly, the sound of shod hoofs on the round rocks of the draw bed, farther down to the left. The little freighter snapped erect in his saddle, listening intently.

A low murmur of voices came from the mesquites. Shorty drew his .45. It might be that the rustlers would pass so near they would detect the trap. Then the voices died, the creak of saddle leather faded away.

A low, insistent whistle floated on the still air. Somebody called:

“Pete! Pete! Over this way—here’s a bunch!”

Shorty turned to the Sonora Kid.

“Give these waddies their guns!” he said grimly. “I reckon they’ll be smart enough to use ’em on the people they ought to. Let’s ride!”

## IV.

They started slowly, Shorty leading the way down the swale where the grass was thickest and the horses' progress made the least noise. Two hundred yards from the place where the salt had been dumped, he reined in the black mustang and held up his hand.

"Here's where we split up!" he said in a tense whisper. "They're over there, ready to move in and cut out the calves. Hear 'em?"

The others nodded. The Sonora Kid loosened his black-butted .45 in its holster.

"All right. Curly, yuh can stay with us. We'll ride around to the other side. That clear?"

It was. Shorty turned to the other man. "You ride back to the waggins and cut the ropes on yore boss and the other two. I seen a couple of Winchesters on them saddles, and a man in a waggin can handle a .30-30, even when he's shot. Tell 'em we're goin' to try and drive the rustlers their way—and to open up on anybody they see comin' unless they hear a yell that it's one of us. Savvy?"

The 72 Bar rider nodded. Shorty motioned for him to leave. The freighter, the Sonora Kid and Curly rode silently out of the swale.

A soft breeze, pungent with the smell of rain on grass and mesquites, sprung up from the southeast as they reached the far side of the salt dump. Lightning ripped through the black sky—and in its split-second brilliance, Shorty and the Sonora Kid saw eight or ten riders closing in on the cattle.

"Let's go!" ordered the mule skinner. "Spread out—and sling plenty lead!"

*Crash!* Another jagged bolt streaked the sky.

Rain poured forth with blinding suddenness. Lightning came close upon itself, and revealed the startled faces of the riders who looked up to see three yelling, shooting horsemen clattering out of the mesquites.

*Braang! Bang! Bra-aang!* Two saddles emptied as the first volley of gun thunder cracked as an echo to the rumble in the heavens.

*Crash! Broooooom!* Another long, brilliant play of lightning flashed across the sky.

Shorty Masters, leaning forward tensely, with the rain beating into his face, fired again.

*Braang!* Another Rafter X man pitched from his saddle.

The frightened cattle began to mill. A score of cruel, cutting hoofs passed over the spot where the rustler had fallen.

"They're on the run!" shouted the Sonora Kid. "Come on, boys! Pete, you and Bill swing to the east. Jim, you and Shorty ride west. The rest of us will go straight ahead."

A grim smile split Shorty's wet face. That was strategy—making the rustlers think they were opposed by a superior force. And the way the three riders kept their guns flaming, there might easily have been a dozen men galloping out of the south with the rain at their backs!

*Braang! Braang!* Rustlers' guns began to bark out of the confusion of bellowing, trampling cattle and slashing rain.

Tiny darts of powder flame cut the darkness, to be paled a second later by the forked tongues of lightning blasting the clouds above.

A wet branch whipped into Shorty's face and carried away his Stetson. Water showered down his jumper collar. He grinned again. It was the first time that evening that he had been cool.

"Stop, yuh yeller-bellied coyotes!" came Pete Ludlow's angry shout. "Stop and fight!"

*Braang!* The Sonora Kid cut down at a spurt of flame.

There was a lightning flash an instant later, and it reflected from wet saddle leather.

Four of the rustlers were down. The others broke into sudden, disorganized flight, heading north, taking to the swale where the mesquites offered cover. Their horses splashed in water that was already running ankle deep to empty in the draw.

Terrified cattle got in their way. Behind them, gaining and throwing vengeful lead, the three pursuers came with flaming guns.

Shorty and Willie stopped to reload. Curly fumbled at his cartridge belt on the run and managed to slip fresh ammunition into his cylinder after dropping a half dozen cartridges.

"Hey!" shouted Shorty. "Be careful, Curly, or——"

*Crash!* The freighter's warning was drowned in a thunderclap.

The lightning showed Shorty's wagons, standing in the swale—and from underneath the taut wagon sheet of the first one protruded a pair of rain-wet rifle barrels.

*Crack!* One of the rifles barked.

The other echoed. The rustlers reined their horses to a splashing halt. They were caught between a murderous cross-fire.

Shorty turned the black horse to the left. One of the Rafter X men was heading that way. The rustler blazed back over his shoulder. The freighter's next shot caught the horse, and cayuse and rider went rolling in the mud.

"Stop shootin'!" Pete Ludlow screamed. "Stop! We'll surrender!"

Guns splashed in the water. The milling of terrified, unmanageable horses ceased. Gunshots died in a straggling volley, and there was only the beat of the rain on the mesquites and the rumble of thunder as the rain clouds passed overhead. The moon broke out through a rift, and the driving shower slackened.

The fight was over. Shorty and his pards closed in to find Ludlow and four men left. One of the riders was wounded.

"Move on!" ordered the freighter. "I'm goin' to turn yuh over to Bill Mortimer. From now on, this ain't no fight of mine!"

Mortimer himself rode up in time to hear the last remark. He was astride one of the 72 Bar horses, his wounded leg held stiffly at the right side.

"Mebbe it ain't, Shorty," he said slowly. "As a matter of fact, the fight's all over. But yuh shore made it yore fight, while it was goin' on, and—and I reckon I ought to tell yuh that—well, I'm a dawg-goned bullheaded fool, and——"

"Shucks!" Shorty interrupted. "I guess it's all right. Me and Willie jest had to take kind o' strong means to show yuh we wasn't no rustlers. As fer the fight—well, if we hadn't got in it, our beddin' would have still been on the ground, and it would have got all wet. Come on, Willie, let's git the Sextet out o' this swale before they bog up to their ears!"

Thet was shore a ticklish spot fer Shorty an' Willie—at least, fer a while. It looked like they was due fer the hoose-gow, shore. But like usual, Shorty teamed up his brains an' six-guns, an' the result was a plumb winnin' combination. Watch fer the next adventure o' the young freighter an' his cowboy pard. It'll be in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



# Gun Bait of the Cow Trail

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Black Coyotes," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### A TREACHEROUS GUN.

**D**EATH was arranging the deal for crimson gun play on the last day of the Bitterroot round-up when Billy West went scouting the foothills for strays.

As he guided his chestnut bronc to the higher benches, he felt no warning of the hand to be given him in the game of Fate. The autumn frosts had not yet melted in the morning sun, and cow sign was easy to find. In the crystal-clear atmos-

phere of the ridge slope, his muscles tightened like taut bows eager for release.

Sighting a parcel of Boxed T steers, he set to work yipping them out of the spicy cedars and sending them down the cuts to the pick-up men. By noon, he was prodding into draws choked with golden scarlet brush and frightening Anchor 9's and Lazy P's toward the prairie land.

The late afternoon sun found him drifting back to the main camp to make his final report. Humming an



old range ballad with the satisfaction of work well done, he came upon the rim of a hidden gully and discovered a small herd of strangely branded cows.

"3X," he read the flanks of the critters in the shadowy defile below. "Who owns that brand?"

The sound of a snarling voice drew his attention to the upper half of the gully, where a crude lean-to was built against the cliff. He spied two hombres facing each other like bristling mongrels.

One of them, Billy recognized as "Fanner" Garat, a swaggering newcomer to Montana who was working with the big round-up pool for the first time. Garat's blunt-nosed .44 was out and covering the other hombre, a ragged Blackfoot Indian.

"Hold it, cowboy!" Billy yipped.

Vaulting from the saddle, he went skidding down the clay cliff, knowing that Garat would recognize him.

"I caught me a rustlin' snake," Garat called. "Yuh come at the right time, amigo."

So that was it—an Indian cattle thief! As Billy turned up the gully to join the captor and captive, he cast an inquisitive glance at the freshly branded cows.

Their 3X signs didn't show the slightest evidence of having been blotted over any other ranch brand. It looked as if the stock had been maverick, with unscarred hides. If the Indian had caught unowned stock and burned them for his own, there was nothing wrong with that.

Puzzled, Billy halted beside Fanner Garat and the Blackfoot, and said, "Rustler, eh? Are you sure there's no mistake, cowboy?"

"Mistake nothin'!" Garat scoffed, without taking his glittering eyes off the Indian prisoner. "This coyote has sneaked off his reservation whar he's supposed ter stay put. I caught

him brandin' mavericks what belong ter the round-up pool."

"No," the Indian protested.

"Shut up!" Garat roared, and then spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Billy West. "Dab a loop over his cussed neck, waddy. We'll swing him from the nearest limb."

Garat's high-handed manner rubbed Billy the wrong way. Billy had been named to the round-up committee because he owned the Circle J spread, one of the oldest outfits in the section. As a committeeman, he was authorized to act as a referee in cattle disputes.

His reputation for square shooting was apparently unknown to Garat. And Garat also must have missed hearing that Billy was top-notch with guns and fists. Otherwise, Garat wouldn't have used the tone of a hardened foreman giving orders to a young fence rider.

The cards of Fate were certainly stacked for a feud. Billy was no man to let Garat bulldoze him, and he came back at the tough with a testy order:

"Put up your cutter, Garat. The Injun has done nothing wrong. The round-up pool doesn't own the mavericks in these foothills."

What followed then was swift. Garat jerked his eyes away from the Indian.

"Yo're loco!" he spat contemptuously at the Circle J boss. "Every head o' wild stock is supposed ter be driven inter the big pool. Go learn yore eggs, tenderfoot. If you're scared ter hang this mangy Blackfoot, I'll simplify matters by perforatin' his belly with lead."

It was a long speech. Too long!

Billy saw the Indian dart to the doorway of the lean-to, for Garat was not watching him. Billy waited until Garat's ears caught the rustle of the Indian's feet over the earth.

Then, as the gun fanner whirled to shoot at the fleeing Blackfoot, Billy acted with the speed of a released spring.

The right arm of the Circle J boss whipped up. His fist was not doubled. The flat of his palm smacked Fanner Garat on the side of the head. It was the sort of blow that a grizzly gives an ornery cub. It caused no injury to Garat, but it packed a stunning force that sent the tough spinning to earth.

And as Garat went down, his .44 exploded skyward, and Billy kicked at the barrel, knocking the weapon flying down the gully.

"Yuh dirty double-crosser!" Garat shrielled, scrambling to his knees, teeth bared, green eyes aflame.

Billy West drew in his breath.

"Don't make the mistake of calling me after your own stripe again, Garat. You're new to these parts. I'll accept your apologies because I had to hit you when you weren't looking."

"Apologies?" Garat yelled, leaping to his feet. "Yo're a sneak an' a skunk. If yuh didn't wear a gun, I'd tear yuh ter pieces."

Billy's fingers flashed to the buckle of his low-slung gun belt. He didn't want to fight Garat, for it meant the making of a deadly enemy. Now there was no choice. He heard the Indian breaking out of the farther side of the lean-to to escape up the gully, so he tossed his holstered .45 into the doorway of the shelter.

"If you want fight," Billy challenged Garat, "come an' git it."

Garat hesitated. He was not a husky hombre, but neither was Billy West. Garat must have been ten years the older and undoubtedly skilled in all the dirty tricks of rough-and-tumble scrapping.

It was possible that he took Billy

for a grown-up kid, perhaps the pampered son of a wealthy rancher. Others had been fooled by Billy's clean-cut features, his yellow silk shirt, and expensive batwing chaps.

But Garat still hesitated, and Billy noted that the tough's greenish eyes had strangely lost their fiery anger and were now glinting as if from some secret amusement. The Circle J boss wondered if the tough had a hide-out gun on him.

Then, with a start, Billy suspected that Garat had detected the presence of some hombre on the rim of the cliff above them. Billy's back was to the wall of the gulch. He didn't dare to twist his head with Garat directly in front of him.

"Yo're smart, eh, Garat?" Billy snapped.

Without warning, the Circle J boss swiftly ducked and bounded to the left. At the same instant, his ears caught the hissing of a rope dropping through the air. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder and saw the lariat snaking down from the cliff rim.

Its outer strand flicked the brim of his ten-gallon hat, missing looping him, and he glimpsed the tough-jawed hombre who had thrown it from the cliff rim. The man was with two other toughs, and all three were members of Garat's outfit.

"Look out, boss!" one of the three yelled to Garat.

Billy's eyes flicked back to Fanner Garat. He found the gun fanner diving toward the doorway of the lean-to, where lay the holster and gun belt of the Circle J boss.

With a spring, Billy threw himself headlong to stop Garat from reaching the weapon. His body was hurtling through the air as he saw the gun fanner's fingers closing over the walnut butt of the six-gun.

Then Billy landed on Garat's legs.

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There was no time for argument, for Garat twisted about to shoot.

Billy's fist drove for the tough's jaw. It wasn't the flat of his palm that crashed into Garat's face, but rock-hard knuckles. The blow was backed up by the weight of the Circle J boss, and it knocked the gun fanner tail over tincup into the depths of the lean-to.

There was a roar of anger from the cliff rim as Billy scuttled into the flimsy shelter in pursuit of his foe. He found Garat flat on his back, eyes shut tight, mouth wide open, unconscious.

"I'll take my smoke-pole now," Billy growled, jerking the .45 from Garat's numb fingers.

Outside, the yells of Garat's three cowboys filled the gully, and the Circle J boss listened.

"Don't shoot through the walls o' the lean-to, or yuh'll hit the boss."

Another hombre was shouting, "Watch out that the yellow-shirt doesn't drill yuh through the shack wall hisself."

Billy's lips twisted in a hard grin, and he called back to the three.

"Your boss is listening to the birdies sing, hombres. You all better hike up along the rim of the gully to its upper end. An' stay there out of six-gun range until I slope back to camp. You'll find Garat unharmed. But pull any tricks, an' somebody will get hurt."

He could hear the hombres on the cliff in argument. Then one of them shouted:

"Who are yuh an' what is this all about?"

Billy answered with the details of the story, gave his own identity, and added with grim amusement:

"There's a Blackfoot - skulking around somewhere, gents. You better get up to the head of the gully

before he takes it into his head to burn powder on Garat's friends."

Creeping to the side of the lean-to, the Circle J boss made a hole in the bough-covered wall and focused his eyes to the cliff rim. He could see Garat's three punchers standing there with cocked guns, but they didn't notice him.

They argued a bit, looking behind them as they did so. It was plain that they feared an Indian shot from the brush. They started trailing their broncs along the edge of the gully.

"I'll take a chance that their sizes won't be accurate," Billy said to himself, when the three hombres had gone a hundred yards up the defile.

With a dart, the Circle J boss went out of the door of the lean-to. Starting down the gully, he glimpsed Fanner Garat's blunt-nosed .44 on the ground. He snatched it up and raced on along the base of the cliff while the three punchers shouted derisively from the upper end of the gully.

"Yuh git off easy this time, cowboy, but jest wait until Fanner meets yuh ag'in," one called.

"Yuh'll be buzzard bait afore long, Circle J," another promised.

Billy scrambled up the cliff, hopped over its rim, and sighted the chestnut bronc that he had left waiting for him. He halted, cupped his hands, and yelled toward the brush:

"Hey, Injun! That 3X stock belongs to you. Get it away from the Bitterroots pronto. If Garat tries any monkey business, he'll answer to the round-up committee."

Then, swinging to the saddle of the waiting chestnut, the Circle J boss threw in his spurs and headed toward the prairie and the round-up pool. He little suspected the trouble that the story of the Black-

foot was going to cause among the cattlemen.

Billy was due to make many more enemies before the day was out. Now he thought that Fanner Garat was the only hombre that he'd have to watch in the future, and watch carefully. A hasty examination of the gun fanner's .44 told the Circle J boss what to expect.

That weapon had no front sight, which fact lessened the chance of the barrel catching in the holster on the draw. Its trigger was lashed back to the guard with rawhide, so that every time the weapon was cocked the hammer immediately struck at the firing pin without the necessity of pulling the trigger.

Billy had once seen an expert demonstrate such a gun. It had made him catch his breath. The fanner had drawn with incredible speed with his right hand, and had used his left palm to cock the weapon as he stabbed it into aim at a target.

Not only once did the fanner shoot at the target, but he fanned the hammer four times in such rapid succession that the powder explosions had molded into one long roaring blast.

It was almost impossible to miss hitting an enemy at short range with a gun like Fanner Garat's.

## CHAPTER II.

### RACE.

**WHEN** Billy sighted the prairie valley where the round-up members had been pooling all the stray cattle, he discovered several herds already separated according to their individual brands and being driven to sink holes where each rancher was holding his own market stock.

The roar of feverish activity in-

formed the Circle J boss that something was in the wind.

Cantering down the valley slope, Billy heard the excited cries of hard-riding cutting men, the bawl of panicky steers, the tremble of the earth under thousands of hoofs.

In the past, the various chuck wagons usually had been wheeled into a big ring at the end of the valley, and the punchers were accustomed to hold a small rodeo of their own on the last day. Now there were no chuck wagons.

"It looks as if the outfits plan to drive for the railroad junction right pronto," Billy opined.

Standing in his stirrups to see over the squads of steers and drovers, he cried to a white-haired rancher who was bawling orders to dusty cutting men. The man was Jack Drake, chairman of the round-up committee, owner of the Triangle Cross Ranch, and a fair and square hombre if there ever was one.

At Billy's call, Drake pivoted his bronc and loped out of the milling cattle.

"What's all the hooraw?" the Circle J boss asked, as the white-haired rancher halted beside him.

"Trouble is shore poppin'," Jack Drake replied, wiping sweat from his grimy brow. "You're better late than never, Billy. The hull six outfits are goin' ter start racin' fer the shipping point to-night."

"In the dark?" Billy questioned.

"Night an' day," the Triangle Cross boss said grimly. "We jest got word about a beef surplus this year. All the ranchers east of us are selling reserve stock, because the drought ruined the hay crops. Nobody's got enough fodder ter keep cattle over the winter."

Billy frowned at the punchers fighting into the pool of strays and chasing branded steers. "I cer-

tainly have little hay this year," he admitted. "Jack, is there any chance of the cattle buyers refusing to pay for any Bitterroot herds this year."

The Triangle Cross owner spat disgustedly. "That's jest it, Billy. The buyers have sent word that they'll take only the first two Bitterroot herds to reach the junction. There are at least six herds hitting the trail to-night. That means that four o' them won't be sold an' will have ter come back."

"Jumping jaspers!" Billy exclaimed. "If we ranchers all don't sell, we'll go bankrupt. No wonder the outfits are starting to drive to-night." He caught himself, remembering Fanner Garat. "Say, Jack, I've got a report to make about a cattle dispute back in the foothills."

Then he told the round-up chairman about Fanner Garat and the Blackfoot. He handed over the blunt-nosed .44 to be returned by Jack Drake to the gun fanner.

Jack Drake whistled at sight of the murderous weapon. "I kin see whar Garat got the nickname o' Fanner," he said. "Billy, you've let yoreself in fer something. Yuh best ride north ter yore own chuck wagon, an' let me powwow with Garat."

Billy West was not the kind to run away from a fight. "Garat will think I left the valley to avoid him," he said. "No, Jack, I'll stay an' meet him."

The white-haired rancher shot a nervous glance at the decreasing numbers of the cattle pool.

"Billy, any shooting right now might mean open warfare between the outfits," he pointed out. "Don't yuh know that most o' the old-time waddies hate Injuns like poison? They'll say that yuh never should

have given those mavericks to a Blackfoot. Garat might start a war right hyar that will stop any Bitterroot herds from getting to the junction. Yuh high-tail it to yore chuck wagon."

It was on Billy's lips to protest, but second thought told him that Drake's advice was best. Too many ranch homes were at stake in this cattle race. Billy's feud with a cheap gun fanner was not nearly as important as the sale of Bitterroot stock.

He had not realized that some of the ranchers were so opposed to allowing Indians to hunt wild cattle in the foothills. There was a big chance that Garat might draw every Bitterroot outfit into open feud.

"All right," the Circle J boss said. "I'll go on only to stop trouble, Jack. But you tell Garat that I'm leaving the next play up to him. If he wants to call quits, I'm willing. If he wants to scrap it out, I'm just as willing."

Giving his chestnut bronc the steel, he headed north through the rolling hills to where his own outfit was holding the Circle J steers already cut out of the big pool. The red banners of sunset were unfurling in the western sky.

And when he pulled up to the picket line outside his camp, he noted that his hands were gathered about a camp fire and wolfing down beef stew, cornbread, and coffee. One of them, Foreman Jim Benson, came over to talk as Billy unsaddled and prepared to blanket and feed his horse before supping himself.

"Did you hear the news, boss?" the pink-cheeked foreman asked.

"Drake told me, Jim."

"I've got the herd ready ter go at yore word, Billy," Jim Benson said. "We kin beat every outfit to the

junction. Why, Buck Foster bet in the cowboy pool that we'd hit the shippin' pens in six days from the second we start."

Billy sloshed water over the hoofs of his horse. He had almost forgotten about the cowboy pool which the round-up staged every year.

It was nothing more than a lottery. Each puncher of the six ranch outfits contributed two dollars as his share to a general stake, and then estimated the exact hour when the first Bitterroot herd would arrive at the railroad. Whichever waddy estimated the closest hour to the time when the winning herd drove in to the shipping point, took all the bets.

Sometimes the winnings amounted to almost a hundred dollars, and it meant that the lucky winner could buy himself a new saddle, outfit of clothes, and a big time in town.

"So Buck Foster bet that Circle J would hit the junction in six days, eh?" Billy grinned. "It's always taken us at least seven in the past, Jim. But I wouldn't be surprised if we made the trip in five and a half."

The foreman gasped. "Five an' a half!" He turned toward the diners at the camp fire, and bellowed at the top of his lungs. "Whack leather, yuh lazy, good-fer-nothin' sheepherders! We're gettin' the herd on the drive in record time. Hey, Sing Lo!" he called to the Chinese cook. "Throw that apple pie ter the buzzards. This is a cow camp. We ain't got time fer no pink tea an' sweets."

Billy started toward the camp, watching his pards grabbing big slices of apple pie out of three tins and cramming them into their mouths as they raced for their broncs. He chuckled at the sight of his red-headed top hand, Joe Scott,

whose freckled cheeks were bulging like a woodchuck's.

The lean, walrus-mustached Buck Foster, the explosive-tempered old waddy who made the six-day bet, stumbled as he bow-legged toward the picket line. Billy halted to pound the veteran on the back and save him from choking to death.

"Ugh! Psosh-sh! Water!" Buck gasped.

"Water, nothin'," Foreman Jim Benson came up to say. "If we don't git on the trail, all the other herds will drink up the water holes from hyar ter the junction. Git movin', Buck, afore I shoot yore spurs off!"

Billy accepted a plate of stew from the yellow-faced Chinaman, who whirled to pack the chuck wagon. Bolting down his supper, the Circle J boss kept an eye on his hands. Orders from him were not necessary. They galloped up to the milled herd, spread out with yips and ropes whirling.

With a muffled roar, the stock moved up the eastern slope of the sink hole, and Billy saw the red-headed Joe and the walrus-mustached Buck lashing four old steers into line at the head of the drive.

Other punchers pressed in on the flanks of the herd, thinning the stock out. Horns clicking and hoofs pounding, the cattle were forced into a line of march. Foreman Jim Benson fought back runaways and goaded the drags.

Billy washed down his grub with a cup of coffee and went to the picket line to saddle a black cayuse. He meant to save the chestnut for emergencies.

It was too fine an animal to waste on the first few days of the drive. He had broken and trained it from a colt, and there was no faster cayuse in the Bitterroots.

He was swinging into the black's saddle when he saw a horseman galloping up to camp in the lengthening shadows of the falling night. It was Jack Drake, the round-up chairman, who came to a plowing halt.

"Billy!" Drake cried. "I ain't got much time. My outfit is gettin' the stock goin'. But I wanted ter warn yuh about Garat. He's causin' more trouble than a skunk at a picnic."

Billy's gray eyes glinted. "What's he up to, Jack?"

"He's told all the outfits that yuh hit him when he wasn't lookin'," the round-up chairman replied angrily. "He's got a busted nose ter show for it, an' a big purple whelt alongside o' his cheek. His hands swear yuh jumped him from behind an' took his gun away from him. But worst of all, Billy, he says that the Black-foot was rebrandin' steers with signs already on 'em. He says they wasn't mavericks, an' yuh must be in cahoots with the Injun."

"The skunk!" Billy exclaimed. "Do you believe that?"

"Sartin I don't," Jack Drake snorted. "But nobody has got time now ter go an' verify Garat's story. I admitted that you gave the Black-foot some mavericks. An' that started all the old-timers ter cussin'. They claim that the entire tribe will be down hyar next y'ar after wild cattle. They figure yuh acted too hasty, Billy."

The Circle J boss bit his lips. "What's Garat going to do?" he asked.

"Yuh can't tell," the round-up chairman replied in a worried tone. "He swore that yuh'd never git yore herd to the junction. He's gettin' his own stock on the trail now, but I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he didn't try ter dry-gulch yuh, Billy. He said yuh hit him from behind, so if that's the way yuh fight, he'll

show yuh a few dirty tricks of his own."

Billy's tanned face flushed with anger. "Thanks, Jack," he said abruptly. "I'll watch out for Garat. If you run into any of his outfit, tell them that I'm ready to shoot on sight. My herd will be first into the junction, Garat or no Garat. An' I hope you are second, Jack."

"If I ain't first," the round-up chairman replied with a grin. "Adios."

And Jack Drake galloped off, leaving Billy alone at the picket line and more worried than he had been in a long time. So Garat might kill him from hiding? Well, the Circle J boss knew what to expect. That was half the game.

### CHAPTER III.

#### COUGAR MEDICINE.

LIKE a vast, ghostly army in the dark, the white-faced herd tramped across the open prairie that had become a battlefield for the race to market. Occasionally a steer bawled in rebellion at the yipped commands of the cowboy officers.

The thudding of a thousand hoofs made a low thunder like that of distant cannonading. And behind the regiment of beef rattled the big canvas-topped chuck wagon, sounding like a dozen snare drums urging the Circle J forces on.

"Keep your guns in their holsters," Billy West had ordered as he galloped up and down the flanks of the steers to speak to his lieutenants. "No shooting at the heels of the stock to keep them moving. If we hear a shot, it will mean that Garat's staging a raid."

For once on the trail, the Circle J waddies didn't chant the old driving ballad of "Whoopee, ti-yi-yo, git

along little dogies." Their nerves were at hair-trigger.

Billy had told them about his run-in with Fanner Garat, and each and every one of the outfit was certain that the gun fanner would try to make good his threat of stopping the Circle J herd from getting to market.

"That cussed Injun!" the veteran Buck Foster raged, venting his indignation against the Blackfoot, for a brave once had beaten him in a rodeo contest, and he had hated Indians ever since. "It's all his fault. He'll hurt my chances o' winnin' the cowboy pool."

Foreman Jim Benson was plumb worried. "There are four other outfits besides ours an' Garat's in the race," he said to the Circle J boss. "They all must be sore at yuh, Billy, for lettin' a Blackfoot take away Bitterroot mavericks. I know them ranchers from the past. Some o' them fought the Injuns in the old days. They think a redskin ain't got no rights off his reservation."

"We won't ask help from any of them," Billy West replied, and turned his bronc away from the flank of the herd.

Balancing a carbine over his saddle pommel, the Circle J boss took up the duties of scout for the advancing army of beef. He trotted from one hilltop to another, halting, surveying the surrounding prairie for foes.

His eyes were baffled by the inky darkness that cloaked coulees and draws. But he hoped to detect skulking riders when they crossed the higher ridges of the plains and were outlined against the faint starlight.

He couldn't hear the approach of hoofs because of the thunder of his own stock. Nor could he tell how far away the other five herds were.

He knew they were lined up in a front like race horses leaving a starting tape, each outfit straining to get ahead of the others. Any attack from Garat's men might come from the south, with a swift rush and a hail of lead.

"I hope that the coyote is too busy to try tricks to-night," Billy muttered. "I'll drive hard all day to-morrow, then rest the stock during the dark. It's risky, this night work."

Time wore slowly. Midnight passed, and the Circle J boss didn't relax vigilance. His nerves jumped. A dozen times, he thought he saw riders slipping through the low troughs of the plain, only to discover that the illusion had been caused by the swaying of a lone pine.

Another hour, and he felt dire forebodings. He became positive that the enemy were near, perhaps lurking in a sink hole with rifle barrels sighted at his heart.

He wheeled his bronc toward the Circle J stock and galloped up to Foreman Jim Benson and several hands who were prodding the drags.

"We'll drive for just another hour," Billy called above the rumble of hoofs. "The stock ought to rest before going on at dawn. Change your hosses, men."

"Good idea, Billy," Foreman Jim shouted back. "The cattle can't keep up this gait much longer."

"If there is shooting, Jim, stay with the stock," the Circle J boss instructed, and spurred up the flank of the herd toward the red-headed Joe Scott, who was at right swing.

"If Garat strikes, it will be any minute, Joe," Billy warned. "Don't let the stock bolt. I'll handle the skunk."

"The critters are gettin' ranicky, Billy," the redhead replied. "This



night drivin' goes against thar grain. It's hard to keep 'em in line."

Billy galloped on to the lead steers, where the walrus-mustached Buck was guiding the drive.

"Go back an' get a fresh hoss, pard," the Circle J boss ordered. "An' bring my chestnut up here with you."

"By heifers, I sartin need new hoss flesh," Buck Foster said. "This plug is actin' spooky. If them gunfannin' skunks come, I want ter be able ter ride 'em down." And he started back.

"You won't do no fightin'," Billy shouted after him. "My orders are to stay with the stock."

But Buck didn't hear. Perhaps he did, and pretended not to, for there was nothing the veteran enjoyed more than a good scrap.

But this time, Buck Foster missed the fight. No sooner was he gone than it happened. Billy should have suspected something from the veteran's last remark about his horse getting spooky. The wind was coming straight from the east into the face of the Circle J boss. It was bringing a scent that alarmed the lead steers and Billy's black bronc.

Suddenly the first cattle in the drive halted in their tracks. Billy's bronc went up on its hind legs in terror. The Circle J boss saw the lead steers swap ends and buck into the horns of beefs behind them. His own bronc unleashed with a violent bucking, and the stock bellowed in panic.

There was no sound of shot, for the herd made too much noise, but the Circle J boss saw an orange flash in a clump of brush not twenty yards to the south.

*Swish!* A bushwhacker's bullet slipped under Billy's nose just as his bronc stumbled to its knees.

Its movement caused the coyote

in the brush to miss killing Billy, but the movement of the horse also caught Billy unawares. For the mount's leg had gone into a prairie-dog hole. Its rump came up, and the Circle J boss was thrown whirling from the saddle.

Before Billy hit the earth, he had his gun out. Rearing up, he pumped three bullets in hot succession at the buckbrush twenty yards away. There was no telling if he hit the bushwhacker or not, and no time to find out.

His horse was jerking its leg out of the prairie-dog hole, and Billy leaped to fork its saddle, hoping that the animal had not broken a bone.

At that moment, he spied a dark rider racing into the head of the fighting steers.

"Halt or I'll shoot!" Billy shouted, and then smoked a bullet over the rider's head.

He saw the horseman veer away to the north and hurl something at the steers. It looked like a bag, and as it fell behind the heels of the lead steers which were trying to get away from the east, a small, dark animal slid out of the folds of the bag.

Billy's six-gun barrel turned from the fleeing horseman to aim at the small animal. He shot twice, scored, and his ears caught the hair-raising scream of a dying cougar lifting above the noise of the herd.

"The scum!" Billy exclaimed, leaping to the saddle of his bronc as it darted away. "They brought cougars up in thick bullhide sacks an' threw them into the stock to scare them. No wonder the cayuse bucked. No wonder the herd is bolting."

The Circle J herd was on the stampede, heading back to the west in the direction from which it had come. It was as disorganized as the

roust of a craven army. Steers stumbled, plunged nose down to earth, and other animals piled on top of them.

Billy saw the flashes of Circle J guns trying to frighten the panic-stricken critters to change direction to the north, but he knew it was no use. He forgot about Garat's raiders and spurred to save his cattle.

Billy reckoned that those steers were going over background with five times the speed that it took them to come up the trail. If he gave them two hours of running, they'd lose every inch of distance that they had made toward the railroad junction that night.

Circle J couldn't afford to be set back so far in the race. The other herds would beat Billy's outfit to the shipping point.

"Turn them north!" the Circle J boss shouted, but he might have tried to yell instructions in a hurricane.

With long strides, his black horse bore close to the rear of the racing steers and then around to the southern flank of the stampede. He passed Joe Scott, who was reloading a six-gun. He pointed his arm to the north, knowing the redhead would recognize that the signal meant to turn the stock in that direction.

Pounding on, Billy overtook Foreman Jim Benson and three other Circle J hands who were hauling Sing Lo out of the wreckage of the chuck wagon. Apparently the steers had crashed into it.

*Crash!* Billy fired his gun, caught their attention, and waved for them to follow.

In two minutes of hard riding, the Circle J boss was at the left of the terrified steers leading the stampede. His slicker was much better service than a six-gun. Ripping it loose

from behind his saddle, he set to work slapping at the cheeks of the first critters of the herd. Behind him, other Circle J riders galloped, shooting into the earth to turn the loco cattle from the west.

It was an hour before the outfit made any impression on the herd. Then, inch by inch, the crazed leaders of the cattle veered northward. Dozens of steers dropped. Soon the stock were running on staggering legs. For a mile, the herd kept north, and then Billy and his pards forced them around to the east.

"We've lost at least ten miles, mebber more," Billy shouted as the thunder of hoofs began to die away. "Let the stock bed down, boys. They're exhausted." He eyed the horsemen about him. "Anybody missing?" he asked.

Foreman Jim Benson and Joe Scott swung out of their saddles and wiped grime from their brows.

"I pulled Sing Lo out o' the chuck wagon," the foreman announced. "He wasn't hurt, but he was talkin' chink a mile a minute."

"Buck was knocked cold," the red-headed Joe announced. "He must have been at the picket line when the cattle bolted. He was caught right in front o' them, so he piled into the chuck wagon. Yuh can't hurt that walrus. He's all right."

"Who's a walrus!" Buck Foster's voice roared, and the veteran rode up, trailing a chestnut bronc. "Hey, Billy, I finally got yore chestnut saddled. I'd have been hyar long ago, only I tried ter find some shootin'."

Billy's temper was a bit ragged, and he saw nothing amusing in Buck's disobedience of orders.

"Hereafter, you'll stay with the stock an' keep away from fights," Billy snapped. "Boys," he ad-

dressed the outfit, "try an' find fresh horses somewhere. Then start rounding up all the lost cattle. It won't belong before dawn."

"Where are you going, Billy?" Foreman Jim Benson asked.

The Circle J boss changed horses, mounting the chestnut that Buck had brought up.

"I'm going to check up on the other ranchers," he said. "We've got to find out what's happened."

"Yuh ain't goin' after that gun-fannin' snake, aire yuh?" Buck asked.

Billy rode off without reply.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE LAST STRAW.

[N fifteen minutes, the Circle J boss caught the gleam of a lantern ahead of him, and he loped up to the wreckage of the chuck wagon. Sing Lo was still muttering dire threats against Fanner Garat in the Chinese language.

Billy halted to watch the cook gathering potatoes, canned goods, battered tin plates and bent eating tools. The Chinaman had always considered the chuck wagon his own estate, and inside it, he had cached many of his prize belongings.

These included many gadgets for performing feats of magic, articles which he had saved from the day when he had been an assistant to a traveling magician. There was a faint aroma of moonshine in the air, evidence that a jug of hard liquor had been broken in the smash.

The cook was fond of a drink of tanglefoot now and then, so no wonder he was in a rage.

"I flix him, I flix him plenty good some day," he fumed, shaking a fist at the dark reaches of the prairie in the south. "Sing Lo know plenty much who cause touble. Sing Lo

put um clarving knife in homblay's belly."

"You let me take care of Garat," the Circle J boss said. "Load all the grub on pack horses. Sing Lo, an' strike back to the outfit. The boys need a hot breakfast."

"Chinee no give Mistle Foster any more chow," Sing Lo announced. "Mistle Foster play velly mean tlick."

"Wasn't Buck at the picket line when the stampede happened?" Billy asked.

The Chinaman's eyes flashed. "When stampede come," he replied, "Mistle Foster was sneaking into the back of the chuck wagon. Sing Lo flix Mistle Foster velly good. He hit him on the head with a flying pan. Mistle Foster no wake up until stampede all over."

"What was Buck sneaking into the chuck wagon for?" Billy asked.

"Apple pie," Sing Lo said wrathfully, and turned to his chores.

Hiding a grin, Billy loped westward for two hundred yards, where he found a clump of brush. Dismounting, he searched on hands and knees in the thicket for some evidence left by the bushwhacker who had tried to kill him. His fingers touched a sticky liquid that splattered the earth.

"I must have drilled the coyote," the Circle J boss muttered, "but he got away. Not another sign left of him."

Mounting, the Circle J boss spurred due south to learn the whereabouts of the other outfits. Thick mists scudded across his path, and he saw by their graying color that dawn was coming and routing fog out of the low troughs to the higher ridges. It was bitter cold, and Billy felt the autumn frost for the first time since the stampede. Sound carried far in the chill atmos-

phere. He heard the squeak of prairie dogs scolding him as he passed. Grouse whirled out of the sage. A blue jay awoke and cried mockingly at him.

Then, his ears caught the distant rumble of marching cattle. The sound was due south, evidence that a herd had reached the position that Billy's cattle had been before the stampede. He saw the flash of six-guns, and rode hard in the graying light until he came upon an army of steers starting out for the day's drive. He halted, slightly surprised, and some cowboys spotted him.

"What outfit is this?" Billy called.

"The Lazy P," they shouted back.

"Who are yuh?"

"Boss o' Circle J," Billy replied, cupping his hands to make himself heard above the noise of the stock. "You're going good, Lazy P."

Two waddies rode closer to him. "We don't want no advice from the Injun-lovin' Circle J outfit," one of the punchers yelled. "Clear out o' hyar afore we lose our tempers. We heard all about yuh givin' a Black-foot them Bitterroot mavericks."

Billy stiffened in the saddle, anger sweeping him. He caught himself from making a reply, and rode off around the rear of the Lazy P herd. So that was the way it was? Garat had aroused the ranchers against Circle J.

Every outfit in the Bitterroots must be wishing Billy hard luck. Well, he had had it. The Lazy P outfit had made just as good time as Circle J on the trail the night before. If Billy's stock had not bolted to the west, he'd be driving in the dawn neck and neck with Lazy P.

But now, he was a good ten miles behind Lazy P, his cattle tuckered out. And he doubted if he could get going until near noon.

Riding on to the south, he dis-

covered two more herds close beside each other, but they were not as far along the course as Lazy P. Billy swung wide of the two outfits. He recognized the Anchor 9 chuck wagon, and then spotted a stray steer bearing the Boxed T brand.

Neither sign was Garat's. That meant that the next stock Billy sighted would be his enemy's or Jack Drake's Triangle Cross herd.

It was an hour before he spied cattle in the pink light of the rising sun. He halted a good two miles away, and studied a big chuck wagon, which was not moving. It lay half a mile behind the drive, and no horses were picketed near it.

"Those hombres abandoned their grub haul," Billy opined, kneeling his bronc into a coulee.

Jockeying from one low draw to another, he reached the chuck wagon, and had a look at it. All the supplies had been removed. There was a sign pinned to its canvas side.

THIS WaGon ainNt abAndonEd  
The SNeek wHat toUchES iT  
WILL PaY tEr

F. Garat

Billy's eyes narrowed. "You figure you can travel faster without the rig, eh, Garat?" he said. "Well, the Lazy P, the Boxed T, an' the Anchor 9 are ahead of you in the race. You wasted too much time stampeding Circle J last night."

He spurred to the rear of the chuck wagon and halted abruptly at sight of a fresh mound of earth. It was evidently a grave, but there was no stone at its head, no indication of the name of the hombre lying inside it.

"Not Garat," Billy muttered, "for he wrote the sign on the chuck wagon." He bit his lip, turning his bronc away. "Mebbe it's the coyote

who tried to ambush me. Garat brought the body here."

Surveying the prairie for indication of Jack Drake's herd, Billy discovered a cloud of dust rising from the plain about five miles to the west. There was no doubt that cattle were making the ground disturbance, but it seemed strange that Drake's cattle should be so far behind all the other stock.

Billy galloped west to find out if Drake was having trouble. He knew that Jack Drake was one of the best trail drivers in the Bitterroots.

It wasn't long before the Circle J boss sighted the steers. They were not marching, but a dozen punchers seemed to be working hard to get them in a line. As Billy loped up, he saw Jack Drake ride out to meet him.

"I thought I recognized yuh, Billy," the round-up chairman yelled. "I was stampeded just before dawn, an' jest got the stock stopped. I can't figure out why it happened. I was drivin' fine all night, an' was way ahead o' the rest."

As Drake halted, the Circle J boss cast a glance to the east where Fanner Garat's stock was going on to the railroad junction.

"My critters stampeded, too," Billy growled. "Only I lost more ground than you, Jack."

"Yore stock bolted!" Jack Drake exclaimed. "What was wrong? Did the night make 'em spooky?"

"Some skunk threw a cougar into their path," Billy replied. "I shot the cougar, an' I also drilled another skunk who tried to bushwhack me."

"Who was it?" Drake asked quickly.

"I dunno," Billy said. "But his body is buried over by Garat's abandoned chuck wagon."

"The scum!" Jack Drake raged. "Come on, Billy! We'll call Garat to accounts. He must have pulled the cougar trick on me, because I stuck up fer yuh in the Blackfoot story. I couldn't figure out why my stock stampeded. Now, I know."

"Hold your hosses, Jack," the Circle J boss cautioned. "It don't do no good to fly off the handle. We've got no evidence against Garat. He'll shoot us on sight. The other Bitterroot outfits are against us on that Injun deal."

Jack Drake was purple with anger. "But don't yuh realize that we stand no chance o' beatin' the other outfits ter the railroad?" he demanded. "I've lost a half a day o' drivin'. The other herds are miles ahead. We kin never make up the lost ground. That other stock will drink out all the water holes, an' we'll never make any time with thirsty stock."

"I know all that," Billy West replied. "But I also know something else. Getting my cattle to the railroad is more important than a shoot-out with Garat. I can't afford to take the chance on letting his men kill me, not until I sell the Circle J steers. I've got a pardner to think about. Ruth Dawe owns half of Circle J. If I'm killed, my stock might never reach the junction, an' she'll be left without a cent."

"How kin yuh git ter the junction in time ter sell?" Jack Drake snorted.

Billy's eyes turned eastward. A good fifty miles away, the blue wall of a solitary mountain range rose out of the prairie. It was the Lonesome Range, a stretch of high bad lands that lay directly in the path of the herds marching from the Bitterroots to the railroad junction.

In the past, ranchers had always

passed around the northern end of the Lonesomes in their trek to market. That meant a thirty-mile detour.

The high bad lands were a good ten miles deep, but so full of chasms, sink holes, and sheer cliffs that it would have taken two days to go through them. And the journey promised to kill the stock, for it was said that all water in the Lonesomes was poisonous.

"I'm going to do something that I've always planned," Billy told Jack Drake. "I met an old trapper this last summer who told me of catching a mess of trout in the Lonesomes. He said that there's a small creek right in the center of the bad lands. In the summer and fall there's just enough flow in the creek to keep several big holes full of water. He said he scooped trout by the hatful out of those holes. Jack, steers can drink water where fish live. I'm heading into the Lonesomes to make up lost time."

Jack Drake's mouth dropped open. "You're loco!" he exclaimed. "I've also heard stories about a gang o' owl-hooters in them bad lands. Yuh don't stand the chance of a Chinaman. You'll kill every head o' stock on the steep grades. You'll never do it, Billy."

The Circle J boss gathered up his bronc's reins. "I'm leading the way, Jack. You can follow me if you want. I ought to hit the range in four days. Adios."

"Wait!" Jack Drake shouted, but Billy West sped off to the north toward his own stock.

As he went, the Triangle Cross owner shook his head, ground his teeth, then clenched his fists.

"By golly," he said, "I'm goin' through the Lonesomes, too. An' I'll beat Circle J there. I'll show

Billy West that he's not the only hombre what kin take a risk."

And Drake galloped toward his critters to give orders to drive that morning, no matter in what condition the stock were.

## CHAPTER V.

### SNAKE SIGN.

FANNER GARAT had the jim-jams. It was nearing the end of the third day of the race, and he twisted and twitched nervously in the saddle. He was running in fourth place in the drive, and behind him, the dust clouds of the Circle J and Triangle cross herds were creeping up.

"That West snake an' the Drake skunk must know I stampeded 'em on the first night," Garat said to his tough-jawed foreman. "Why didn't Acey beef that Circle J boss? I should have done the shootin' myself, instead o' throwin' the bagful o' cougar."

"Yuh might have got killed yoreself like Acey did fer his trouble," the foreman replied. "Acey was a good shot. I can't understand why he didn't hit the West snake. That's one more score we got ter settle against Circle J."

"It won't be long now," Garat promised, showing his yellow teeth in a wicked grin.

In front of his herd stood a great barrier of cliffs and peaks. It was the Lonesome Range. And those mountains held hope. Now, he could waste no time in going back to raid Circle J. He knew that Billy West and Jack Drake were driving side by side up the prairie, as if they expected an attack.

Garat was certain that if he struck either rancher, the other would rally to the fight, in which case Circle J and Triangle Cross

would outnumber the gun fanner's men.

But what made Garat's nerves so jumpy was the fact that an Indian was spying on him. Three times that day, he had discovered a lone mustang in the distance. His experienced eyes told him that the cayuse was not wild because of the way it ran.

He knew that a Blackfoot could ride along the flank of a mustang without being seen. And he recalled a dirty trick that he had played on a Blackfoot on the last day of the Bitterroot round-up.

"I made a mistake in slaughterin' that Injun's herd o' mavericks, after Billy West left the gully in the foothills," Garat said to his foreman. "The Injun must be followin' me ter git revenge."

"We'll take care of the hull bunch soon," the foreman chuckled. "It won't be long afore our old gang turns up."

As the sun began to set behind Garat's groaning beef, he made no attempt to halt. Water was needed badly. The three outfits that were beating him up the trail had drunk up all the water holes. But the gun fanner knew where there was more. It lay back in the Lonesome range, where he once had ridden with an owl-hoot crew.

The darkness was setting in, black and chill, when Garat's long-lost friends turned up. He was riding with the leads, watching the shadow of every coulee and sink hole.

His quick eyes discovered a dozen horsemen trotting down a draw that crossed his path. The starlight glinted on their rifle barrels, and one of them flashed a bull's-eye lantern three times.

Garat threw in his spurs and galloped toward them, waying his hat as a signal.

"Howdy, Fanner!" the leader of the owl-hooters shouted as Garat slowed down in front of them. "We didn't know if this was yore stock or not."

"Glad ter see yuh, boys," Garat called with a deep sense of relief. He shook hands with the bearded boss of the gang. "How does it go, Dag?" he asked. "Do yuh miss yore ol' gun-fannin' segundo?"

The bearded Dag chuckled. "I've been missin' yuh, Fanner," he admitted. "But it's been slim pickin's all summer, what with the drought an' no money goin' along the stage lines. The gang has been countin' on the big haul yuh planned last spring, afore yuh turned rancher. Is everythin' all set ter nail the Triangle Cross an' Circle J herds?"

Garat drew tobacco and papers from his mackinaw pocket. It was the first cigarette that he'd risked making that night, for fear that a match flame would draw a shot from the dark.

Fanner Garat was not the man to take foolish chances when his enemies were so close to him. But now that he was back in his old haunts, ringed by his former outlaw pards, he breathed easier.

Success seemed to be within his grasp. He had planned for months to rustle the two biggest ranch herds in the Bitterroots. That was the reason he set up as an honest granger in the foothills in the spring. He had been watching Circle J and Triangle Cross at every opportunity, and had decided that the best way to rob them was to take their stock on the market trail.

The Indian trouble had helped Garat's plans, rather than blocked them. He had turned the other Bitterroot ranchers against Billy West and Jack Drake, so that they wouldn't be able to expect help in

getting their stock back after the theft.

Garat figured that he could hide the Circle J and the Triangle Cross herds in the Lonesomes until the law got tired of hunting for them. Then he'd drive the critters south to winter pastures, and sell them when the price of beef went up.

But he also wanted to get rid of his own cattle at the present market, for his herd was made up of stolen steers driven up to Montana from Wyoming.

"Triangle Cross an' Circle J are right behind me, Dag," the gun fanner told the bearded outlaw. "We've got enough men to wipe them out in a surprise raid. But those hombres are suspicious. We've got to bide our time an' wait to catch 'em in their blankets."

Dag spat at the earth. "Mebbe we better drive yore critters into the Lonesomes right now," he suggested. "When Circle J an' Triangle Cross don't see yore stock no more, they'll think that yuh pulled away from 'em in the dark. They might git reckless, an' we'll have our chance."

"Put the boys ter work," Garat replied. "Tell 'em ter drive all night an' by mornin' they'll reach that water hole ter the north o' Wolf Butte. We'll save the other water hole ter the southeast o' Wolf Butte fer the other cattle what we're goin' ter swipe."

It took the combined efforts of Garat's drovers and the owl-hooters to goad the weary herd into the mouth of the canyon that led back into the torn and twisted mountains. But once within the confines of the defile, they could use their six-guns without fear of detection by the Circle J and Triangle Cross outfits still out on the prairie. Shooting at the heels of the critters to keep them

moving, the outlaws drove mercilessly.

Up the long winding defile, the stock climbed, bawling in terror of the night, grazing their horns against the granite cliffs, stumbling, staggering on.

Horses went down, and riders leaped to safety. Their oaths were drowned in the thunder of hoofs, the blast of guns, the squeal of broncs, and roar of activity.

Hour after hour, Garat and Dag kept their men at it. Lanterns were lighted to guide the way. Whisky was passed to encourage those who began to protest.

"We've got ter git this stock ter water afore we tackle West an' Drake," the gun fanner answered every comment. "Keep movin', yuh yella-bellies! Thar will be plenty o' time ter loaf after the big killin'."

Garat was positive that Circle J and Triangle Cross would never reach the Lonesome range that night. He believed that Billy West and Jack Drake would turn north to follow the other ranchers on the route around the mountains. On the next day, he'd scout them, and prepare to raid them when they turned into their soogans with the dark.

His only fear was that the Blackfoot Indian might trail him, and warn his foes. But he kept those fears to himself, for the bearded Dag might fly off the handle on hearing about the slaughter of the 3X mavericks.

At midnight, the steers climbed out of the head of the canyon and dropped to their knees on a tableland, unable to go on. Coffee was boiled for the drovers, and beans were dished out.

More liquor found its way down leathery throats. The outlaws rested with the stock. Two hours



was all the time allotted. Garat and Dag gave the word, and the job of getting the beef moving was begun.

"It ain't as bad as I thought it would be," Garat said to Dag, as they watched the herd getting to its feet. "The stock must smell water. The wind is comin' from the due east, pard, an' bringin' the scent from the pool just ter the left o' Wolf Butte."

Dag nodded. "We turn left o' the butte, don't we?" he asked. "That other pool is to the right. Is there any chance o' the herd splittin' up an' goin' ter both pools without us stoppin' 'em."

"Not any," Garat replied. "The water ter the right o' the butte is farther away—three miles, I'd say. The pool at the left is closer. The critters smell that first. Look at 'em."

The herd had picked up stride. Across the plateau, the steers trotted, bellowing thirstily. There wasn't much need to drive them, but they had to be shown the way in the dark. Garat and Dag galloped to the lead beefs, lanterns in their hands, and shouted to their gang to keep the critters in hand.

"We're goin' on ter look the water hole over," Garat added. "No stallin', yuh hombres."

By the time Garat and Dag approached the water hole, dawn was in the sky. Deep mists blanketed the hollow through which a small stream of water ran. They slid their brones carefully down the slope, and trotted into the lowland to its center, where a natural dam of rocks had caused the stream to back up.

Garat dismounted at the edge of the water. "I want ter see how deep it is," he spoke to his partner.

A light breeze lifted the fog bank, and the gun fanner bent to the

earth to pick up a stick. It was then that he got a shock that split his nerves.

Instead of a stick, it was the cold, dead, slimy body of a rattlesnake that he touched. He recoiled with a wild "Yow-ow-oweee!"

"What's wrong?" Dag asked excitedly.

"Rattler!" Garat gasped, staring down at the stiff reptile. Then: "Jumpin' jaspers! Look, Dag; there's dozens o' them!"

Their eyes fastened in horror upon the edge of the water hole, where a line of dead buzztails lay, heads all pointed at the pool. It was impossible to believe that the snakes had died in such a fashion. A human being could only have ringed them about the water which the cattle needed so badly.

"Injun sign for poisoned water!" the bearded Dag gasped. "That's what it is, Fanner. I ain't seen no Injuns in these mountains, but some Blackfoot travelin' solo must have killed them rattlers an' put 'em thar ter warn his friends."

"A Blackfoot?" Garat repeated breathlessly.

He knew instantly the Indian who had done the trick. It was the Blackfoot whose mavericks had been slaughtered. And this was the way that the Indian was getting even with him.

Garat was positive that the water hole had not been poisoned before, but the presence of those snakes convinced him that the Indian had extracted the deadly toxin from their fangs and poured it into the pool.

"We've got ter stop our herd," Fanner Garat suddenly cried. "Dag, we'll have ter drive to the water south o' Wolf Butte."

They sprang to their horses. The

rumble of the distant herd was in their ears as they spurred up the slope of the hollow and plunged into a cut. Through the twisting defile, they raced frantically, while dawn pinked the eastern sky behind them.

Out to a benchland they galloped, across, and down a long shale slide. Below them, the stock was just beginning the climb.

"Turn 'em south!" Garat yelled, drawing his six-gun. "Don't let 'em up the shale. Drive 'em through the gullies to the south to the next hole below Wolf Butte."

His words were drowned by the thunderous bellowing of the thirsty critters. Drivers came up the shale to meet him and Dag. No time was lost when the outlaws learned the situation. Guns blazing, they rode at the lead steers, fighting them to turn to the south.

It was a battle that promised to last for an hour. For the steers had scented the water ahead, and there seemed to be nothing but dry gulches and sink holes in the southerly direction. But Garat's men had one advantage. That was the shale slope. The steers could not climb it with the drivers bucking them forcing them back.

"Fanner!" Dag yelled. "We've got ter ride down ter that other water hole as soon as the herd heads that way. It might be pizened, too."

"We'll take some o' the boys with us," Garat replied, eyes narrowing. "Mebbe we'll run inter that Blackfoot, an' find out what he's doin' in these parts."

Fanner Garat had the jimjams again. He didn't intend to be fool enough to ride alone with Dag in the bad lands. It would be too easy for the Blackfoot to dry-gulch them.

## CHAPTER VI.

### FIGHT.

THE rising sun which revealed the snake sign to Fanner Garat, enabled Billy West to make an important discovery that same morning. All night long, he had been driving the Circle J steers across the plains, and now his outfit had halted to rest at the foot of the Lonesomes.

They had made record time, and were in much better spirits than they had been in for days. But Jack Drake's herd was not a mile behind them, bedded down in a prairie valley.

Billy stood watching the white-haired round-up chairman come riding with the dawn to his camp. Circle J and Triangle Cross had been driving side by side for three days now, first one getting ahead, then the other. Now in the lead by a slim mile, Billy had every reason to lord it over Drake, who had twice promised to show him up.

But the Circle J boss was not in a mood to joke. A dark frown furrowed his tanned brows. As Jack Drake rode up, Billy took no notice of the sheepish grin on the chairman's lips.

"What's happened to Garat, Jack?" Billy asked. "I can't see his dust in the north."

Drake halted abruptly and turned his eyes to the northern reaches of the prairie, where Garat's herd should have been in sight.

"Jehoshaphat!" the Triangle Cross boss exclaimed. "He couldn't have made more time than we did last night. We ought ter be seein' him, if he turned north to go around the mountains."

"If he did that, Jack," Billy West replied. "I'm suspecting that he sneaked into the mountains last night."

"Yuh don't say," Jack Drake gasped. "Do yuh think he knows a trail?" He glanced at the barrier of cliffs and crags before him. "Billy, if Garat went through the mountains, he'll beat us ter the junction. One of us will lose out in sellin' our stock."

"What's more important is that his herd might have drunk up all the water," the Circle J boss said grimly. "Our stock must get water to-day, Jack, or they'll cave in. While the herds are resting, you and I had better take a little look-see in the Lonesomes."

For long, the Triangle Cross owner had been eager to lock horns with Fanner Garat, and Billy had kept him from it only by constant warnings. Now Jack Drake wanted to ride back to his herd and collect his hands. If Garat was in the mountains, it might mean fight, and Drake wanted to be ready for a real shoot-out.

But Billy argued that the time was not ripe.

"There's plenty of opportunity coming," the Circle J boss said. "I'll ask Joe Scott an' Foreman Benson to ride with us, Jack, just in case."

"Bring Buck Foster," Jack Drake said. "He's a tough hombre in a scrap."

The Circle J outfit was riding up to listen to their boss's parley with Jack Drake, and they overheard. Among them was the walrus-mustached Buck, who beamed at the mention of his fighting mettle.

"Shore, I'll go," he yelled. "Did I hear yuh say somethin' about attackin' that gun-fannin' skunk? What's happened ter him? I ain't seen a speck o' his dust up north."

Billy faced the veteran. "You don't go anywhere," the Circle J boss said decisively. "This ain't no

war party, yet. If you hadn't tried to swipe a pie from Sing Lo on the night o' the stampede, we might have stopped the cattle sooner. Here's where you pay for that, Buck. I'm leaving you in complete charge of the cattle. If anything happens to them, I'll never forget it."

Buck was unaccustomed to being spoken to in such a fashion. Had he been told off by any other hombre than Billy West, the veteran would have exploded. But now his mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged.

"Did that heathen tattletale on me?" he exclaimed.

"Come on, Jack!" Billy interrupted, giving his chestnut the steel. "We've got to hurry."

As the Circle J boss galloped away, Jack Drake, Foreman Jim Benson, and Joe Scott followed, leaving Buck Foster grinding his teeth with exasperation.

The veteran whirled, eyes searching the Circle J herd for Sing Lo. Buck was inclined to blame the yellow-faced cook for every bit of hard luck that came his way, and now the veteran had a real cause to present. Sing Lo's story about the pie had stopped Buck from joining the search for Garat.

As Billy led the riders up the slopes of the Lonesome range, he was perfectly sure that Sing Lo could take care of himself in any tussle with Buck Foster. The Chinaman was constantly pulling the wool over the veteran's eyes. So the Circle J boss promptly forgot Buck Foster, and gave his attention to the arroyos and pockets ahead of him.

Billy's herd had struck the Lonesomes some distance south of where Fanner Garat's stock had entered the mouth of a canyon, so the Circle J boss failed to discover his

enemy's tracks. He picked a gully which ran back into the first steps of the bad lands, and marked it for a route for the Circle J herd. Climbing steadily through winding cuts and chasms, he kept his eyes on the higher peaks and buttes to the east.

"That trapper who told me about the trout stream," Billy spoke to Jack Drake, "said I'd find it by a butte shaped like a running wolf. There's a pool of water to the northeast of that landmark, an' another to the southeast."

"I still think it's a fish story, Billy," Jack Drake grumbled. "But it's a cinch that Garat wouldn't come inter these cussed mountains unless he knew somethin' about 'em."

"We ought ter climb out o' these gullies an' use the field glasses ter find that butte yuh mentioned," the red-headed Joe Scott suggested.

Foreman Jim Benson shook his head. "Billy," he said, "this is tough climbin' fer steers. We'll have ter spot a natural trail if we want the herd ter cross the Lonesomes."

The Circle J boss knew that Jim Benson was not talking nonsense. Leading the way between boulders, up gorge after gorge, Billy realized that cattle would never make the grade unless they were rested.

Craggy cliffs had to be avoided, chasms skirted, shale ascended, and ridges crossed. The present route was impossible. Billy struck for a high bench from which to survey the wild and tumbled bad land through field glasses.

He was still a bit south of the canyon up which Garat had gone, but when he focused the powerful lens to the east, the outline of Wolf Butte was plain to see.

"There it is, Jack!" Billy exclaimed. "That don't look like a

fish story. The trapper said there's water to the north an' more to the southeast of the mountain. It's closer for us to strike for the pool to the south."

The northern pool was the one to which Garat had ridden first, and now the outlaw's herd was passing behind Wolf Butte to reach the southern water hole; so the Circle J boss failed to detect his enemy's cattle.

"We ought to make sure about the water, Billy," Jack Drake said. "An' then we ought to find Garat."

They rode on at a reckless speed, jumping their brones down steep banks, hammering through stony defiles, clawing up slippery grades, and then sliding into a deep arroyo.

Down this, Billy loped his chestnut, swiftly passing around to the south of Wolf Butte without having crossed Garat's trail. The Circle J boss believed that the arroyo led down to a sink through which the trout stream trickled. And he was not wrong.

The party emerged from the dry arroyo on the floor of a low flat, in the center of which the sun sparkled upon a deep pool of water.

"Whoopee-ee!" the red-headed Joe Scott cried. "We've found it."

"Well, I'll be concerned!" Jack Drake exclaimed. "Billy, yuh win."

The Circle J boss kneed his bronc to a gallop, leaving his pards behind as he thundered across the sink to the edge of the water. He was too excited over the discovery of the pool to take heed of the bad position into which he had led his men.

The sink was rimmed around with cliffs, from which a gang of men might be able to trap him. Billy was in the open, with no protection from rifle bullets, except by getting behind the banks of the water hole.

Halting, he dismounted to ex-

amine the depth of the pool, just as Fanner Garat had done on reaching the water hole north of Wolf Butte. And it was then that Billy West got the same kind of shock that his enemy had received.

The startled eyes of the Circle J boss fastened on a score of rattlesnakes that were ringed around the banks of the pool. The reptiles were all pointed toward the water, placed in such a fashion by human hands.

"Poisoned!" Billy West exclaimed. "Garat must have caught those buzztails with a noose on the end of a stick. He ruined the water, so Jack an' I couldn't use it."

Behind Billy, the other riders leaped to earth and surged to the bank of the pool. A chorus of angry yells swept from their throats. Jack Drake tore off his hat and slammed it onto the ground, then gave vent to his rage in real hot language.

This was the last straw. The water was deep enough to satisfy both the Circle J and the Triangle Cross steers. A tiny stream trickled into the northern end of the pool, but not nearly enough flow to clear the hole of poison in two days.

"We're sunk," Foreman Jim Benson groaned.

Billy clenched his fists, and then he had a thought. "How about the pool above Wolf Butte?" he suddenly asked, turning to gaze at the north. "Mebbe Garat headed in that direction, but didn't use all the water." Then he caught himself. "Listen!" he exclaimed.

Every hombre in the outfit caught the distant rumble of marching cattle. It seemed to be a herd coming from the north, marching through deep gorges and sink holes which muffled their thunder.

It was Garat's stock, which the

outlaws were driving from north of Wolf Butte in order to reach the second pool. Billy and his pards had no way of knowing what had happened to their enemy. But they quickly suspected that Fanner Garat was driving down upon them.

"Them cattle are at least three miles away," Foreman Jim Benson said. "Billy, do yuh think that Garat is playing a trick? Do yuh think that this pool is really pizenized? The skunk might have left this snake sign jest ter fool us."

"Jim, you might have hit the nail on the head!" Billy West exclaimed. "Garat wouldn't be coming to this pool unless it was good water."

The white-haired Jack Drake let out a howl of wrath. "He'll never touch a drop o' this water if I have anythin' ter say about it!" he roared. "I'll stick hyar an' shoot ter my last bullet. If the skunk wants water, he kin use the northern pool, not this one."

Billy turned to Foreman Jim Benson. "Fork yore bronc back to the herds, Jim," the Circle J boss ordered. "Bring all the hands there. We'll hold this pool until you get back. An' bring Sing Lo with you. He knows something about poisons. We'll have him test this water."

"That chink knows everythin'," Foreman Jim Benson cried, and leaped for his cayuse.

"Joe, drive our horses back into yonder arroyo," Billy West snapped. "We don't want them to get hit in a fight."

As the redhead sprang to obey, Billy and Jack Drake turned to find stones with which to build up the rim of the water hole. The scrap promised to be a siege, and they needed shelters behind which to lie.

The bank of the pool was not enough. The sink was rimmed

around by cliffs, from the tops of which Garat's men would be able to throw a dangerous hail of lead. Rifle bullets would carry far.

## CHAPTER VII.

### • INJUN HATE.

WHEN Billy West left the Circle J cattle to find water, Buck Foster was as furious as a wounded grizzly. The veteran did not wait for his boss to vanish into the Lonesomes. His mind was set on teaching the chink cook a good lesson, and Buck started on the run toward the picket line where Sing Lo was packing the breakfast tins.

It was not only the story about the pie that Buck Foster had against the Chinaman. The veteran also remembered the blow that had been dealt him by Sing Lo, with a frying pan—a crack that knocked Buck out on the night of the stampede.

It never occurred to the veteran that Sing Lo had been perfectly right in felling him, since Buck had slipped into the back of the chuck wagon like a hungry old bear searching for sweets in the night.

"I'll l'arn the slant-eyed, yaller-skinned little polecat!" Buck raged, racing over the earth in long ungainly strides, woolly chaps flapping, the high heels of his cowboots catching in the sage. "I'll l'arn him ter—— Oops!" He tripped, and sprawled headlong.

As Buck went down, Sing Lo lifted his head from a pack near the picket line and eyed him suspiciously.

"Mistlee Floster have velly bad fall," the Chinaman chuckled, and then his slant eyes bulged.

Buck sprang to his feet, fists doubled. "Dang double-crosser!" he howled, bounding toward the China-

man. "Stop! Don't yuh try ter run away!"

Sing Lo knew what to expect, from the fire in the veteran's eyes. Buck Foster was the kind of hombre who went to extremes when angry. He didn't know how to keep a grip on his temper. There was only one way to handle Buck. That was to get away from him until he cooled off.

As the veteran came floundering in to grab Sing Lo, the Chinaman dodged aside, and Buck sprawled to earth once more, his chin digging into the cold ashes of the morning fire.

Eyes blinded for a moment, he staggered to his feet, clawing at the air in the hope of catching the Chinaman. He heard a horse grunt, and then the thud of hoofs. Suddenly he could see, and it was to find the Chinaman forking a paint pony across the prairie.

"Come back!" Buck howled, making for his own bronc on the picket line. "I'll git yuh if it takes a hull week. I'll run yuh so far away yuh'll never find yore way back."

His words made no impression on Sing Lo, who kept going to the north along the foot of the Lonesome range. Buck took after him with quirt and spur. He had no hope of catching up with the cook, for Sing Lo was light of weight and could ride with the skill of a jockey.

But Buck was beyond using his head to figure out the foolishness of pursuing the Chinaman. Yipping wildly, the veteran kept going, in the hope of getting a burst of speed out of his bronc, that would bring him within roping distance of the Circle J cook.

Their route was due north, and it was bound to cross the tracks which Garat's herd had left on entering the

canyon. Sing Lo drew away rapidly from Buck.

"Stop!" the veteran shouted, hand dropping to his six-gun. "I'll shoot yuh. By heifers, I'll show yuh if I won't!"

This was a bluff, but Buck hoped that the Chinaman wouldn't think so.

*Crash!* The veteran's gun sent a bullet high over the cook's head.

He saw Sing Lo's face turn back, and fright was plainly written on its yellow features.

*Wham!* Buck fired again, making sure that his bullet passed wide of the Chinaman.

"Help!" Sing Lo yelled, and turned his paint pony toward the mountains.

"Stop!" Buck roared. "Keep away from them bad lands."

Now a new fear lay hold of the veteran. He had been warned by Billy West to stay with the herd. If he followed the Chinaman into the mouth of the canyon, where Sing Lo seemed to be heading, Buck certainly would lose his job with Circle J.

"Job or no job," he suddenly yelled. "I'm goin' ter catch that heathen!"

Ahead of him, the Chinaman was almost at the mouth of the canyon, and Buck holstered his gun in the hope that the cook would not seek shelter from bullets. But Sing Lo went on, vanishing up the deep defile.

"The skunk!" Buck ground out, quirking his bronc desperately. "He knows what Billy told me. But mebber the canyon has a box end, an' I kin git him quick."

He heard the clatter made by the cook's horse on the stony floor, and the next moment Buck was in the canyon. He just caught a glimpse of the Chinaman rounding a bend. It

looked as if the canyon went far back into the mountains.

Buck's jaws sagged. Again he remembered Billy West's orders. His hands drew bridle rein. Fuming over his defeat, he halted, and shook a fist at the bend where the Chinaman had vanished.

Buck's eyes popped. There was a horseman coming from behind the bend. It wasn't Sing Lo. The veteran's hand reached for his six-gun. The rider didn't halt, but came on, with one arm held up in greeting.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster gasped. "It's an Injun."

Now Buck Foster was no friend of the Blackfeet. A hard grin twisted his lips. He remembered all the trouble that an Indian had made for Circle J in this race to the railroad.

If it hadn't been for the Blackfoot in the Bitterroot foothills, Garat never would have stampeded the Circle J herd. And Buck would have had a good chance to win the cowboy pool.

He had bet that Circle J would hit the railroad junction in six days from the hour of starting. Four days had already elapsed. Buck was convinced that the stock could not march through the Lonesomes and twenty miles farther on across the plains in two more days. He was certain that he had already lost the cowboy pool, and it was all due to the Blackfoot.

Buck Foster reached for the lariat tied to his saddle pommel. Here was a chance to get even with the Indian. He waited until the Blackfoot got within fifty yards.

"How," the Indian called in friendly greeting.

"I'll show yuh how!" Buck cried, and threw in his spurs.

With a leap, his bronc was off,

heading straight for the unsuspecting Blackfoot who was searching for the Circle J punchers. Buck whipped up his rope, whooped excitedly, and bore down on the tribesman.

For a fraction of a second, the Indian hesitated, and then whirled his bronc to flee. But he was too late.

Buck Foster's cayuse overtook the Blackfoot with the speed of a wolf after a rabbit. The veteran's rope snaked out. The noose settled over the Indian's head and shoulders.

"Whoa!" Buck cried to his bronc, and it came to a plowing halt, jerking the Blackfoot out of the saddle on the horse ahead. "Got him!" the veteran exulted.

Leaping to the earth, he raced forward to pounce on the Blackfoot. But the Indian lay powerless. He was stunned by the fall. Buck stood above him, fists clenched, eying him suspiciously.

"So yo're the skunk what took them mavericks," the veteran growled. "Yuh must be in cahoots with Garat. Yuh caused all that trouble so I wouldn't win the cowboy pool. An' yuh must have been ridin' back ter tell me ter lay off chasin' the chink."

A groan escaped the Indian's lips. His eyes fluttered open, and he stared fearfully at the walrus-mustached cowboy.

"Water," the Indian gasped.

"Water, nothin'," Buck replied scornfully.

The Indian struggled to sit up, his arm pointing to the east, as if water lay in that direction.

"Yuh mean thar's a hole up yonder?" Buck asked. "Does this canyon lead ter somethin'?"

The Indian's eyes widened. He seemed to recognize Buck Foster from the past. What he was going

to say about the water hole north of Wolf Butte was lost. The Blackfoot voiced the word:

"Rodeo."

At the mention of that word, Buck's mouth dropped open. He saw the connection between a rodeo on this Blackfoot. His mind flashed back to a bucking-horse contest long ago when he had been beaten by a brave. The Indian before him was none other than that brave who had prevented Buck from taking first prize.

"So it's yuh!" Buck gasped. "I swore I'd knock the stuffin' out o' yuh on sight." And he sprang on the Indian.

"Halt!" the Blackfoot cried, twisting away.

"Halt, nothin'!" Buck raged, slamming the brave to earth and holding him there. "I've been lookin' fer this opportunity fer years. Fight, yuh yaller skunk. I can't hit yuh when yuh don't fight."

The Indian rolled over on his face and lay still. No amount of encouragement from Buck Foster would make him move. The veteran prodded him in the back, threatened to burn him alive, and got to his feet and stood off.

"Git up," Buck ordered. "I'll lick yuh with one fist."

"No fight," the Indian grunted. "Some other time. Now I see Mr. West."

"Yuh won't see nobody, yuh white-livered coyote," Buck replied. "Yuh've caused enough trouble in these parts. Stand up an' fight like a man."

The veteran edged in, jaw jutting, fists doubled, and the Indian turned his face away. That Blackfoot had important information to give Billy West, who had befriended him on the last day of the round-up.

It was the story of the water hole



and news of Fanner Garat. To fight Buck Foster might mean his death. The Blackfoot was no coward, but he had a heap of sense. He lay silent on the ground, waiting for the veteran to get disgusted.

"Skunk!" Buck Foster snorted contemptuously. "I can't figure out how a yaller-belly like yuh ever forked a buckin' hoss. If yuh won't fight, I'll fix yuh."

He knelt down and grabbed the Indian's arms and drew them behind his back. With the lariat rope, Buck quickly tied the Blackfoot. Then, he dragged the prisoner to the mustang that stood waiting for its owner.

It was a tough job to hoist the Blackfoot aboard the mustang. But Buck accomplished it. And as the Indian sat on the bare back of the animal, Buck quickly tied the man's legs beneath its belly.

"Go on back ter yore reservation, yuh low-down, sneakin' son of a cross betwixt a sheep an' a dead rabbit!" the veteran roared. "Git out o' my sight. I never met an hombre what wouldn't fight. Yuh make me plumb disgusted. Vamose!"

And Buck brought his hand down on the mustang's rump with a hard smack. The pony sprang away, carrying the Indian.

"Garat!" the Blackfoot cried in alarm. "Tell Mr. West that he come this way."

Buck caught his breath as the Indian's mustang raced up the canyon. "What's that?" the veteran called. "Did yuh say that Garat——"

But the Indian was out of ear-shot.

Buck's eyes fastened on the canyon floor. There, for the first time, he saw the marks left by Garat's herd. Sight of them staggered him.

"Help me, Hannah! He used this

canyon ter go through the Lonesomes. It's the trail."

Whirling, Buck leaped for his bronc, his brain spinning with wild thoughts. He had found the route through the Lonesomes. No time must be lost in getting the Circle J stock moving. Hadn't the Indian said something about water in the upper reaches of the canyon? That water meant salvation for the Circle J steers.

"Thar's only two days left ter win the cowboy pool," Buck said breathlessly as he raced down the canyon to the prairie. "It gives me a chance. I can't wait fer Billy ter come back. I've got ter git the stock drivin' pronto."

Buck Foster had been left in command of the steers. He was responsible for what happened. Well, he reasoned, he'd show his boss what he could do.

Buck meant to drive the Circle J herd up the canyon and to the water hole in record time. But that water hole was the one north of Wolf Butte, not the pool to the southeast, which Billy had found.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### GUN FANNER'S LEAD.

**B**ACK at the water hole south of Wolf Butte, Billy West was in deadly peril. Fanner Garat's men had struck not many minutes after Jim Benson had departed to carry word to the Circle J and the Triangle Cross riders.

The swiftness of the attack had caught Billy, Jack Drake, and Joe Scott with the preparations for a siege only half completed. And what was more, they were astonished to find that Garat's forces numbered almost twenty men, instead of a slim dozen.

Lying flat on their stomachs be-

low the rim of the hole, Billy West and his two pards were weathering a scorching fire. They could tell from the crack of outlaw rifles that they were completely surrounded.

Their enemies had sneaked to the tops of the cliffs which looked down on the flat where the pool lay. And now and then a rifle bullet found its way right into Billy's stronghold.

"Keep low, boys," the Circle J boss yelled to Joe Scott and Jack Drake. "We've got to hold out until Jim Benson returns with help."

"The scum are climbin' the highest crags on the cliffs, Billy," Joe Scott shouted. "My carbine hasn't any accuracy at such a range. I can't hit them, an' they know it. They're gettin' reckless."

Billy thumbed fresh loads into his six-gun, and listened to the whine of outlaw lead passing over the water hole. He saw a rifle bullet smash against the inside of a bank.

It had come from a distant cliff which was much higher than most, and the hombre who fired it was evidently climbing to a position from which he could aim right into the water hole.

The Circle J boss realized that he was in danger of being shot in the back as he hugged the bank of the pool. He quickly shifted his position from the eastern side of the hole to the north, where Jack Drake was fighting.

At that moment, Drake let out a wild shout: "Garat! I seen him, Billy. He's wormin' down the bed o' the creek that empties inter this pool. Look!"

"Stay down!" the Circle J boss cried.

But Billy's warning failed to stop the Triangle Cross owner from rearing up to take a shot over the rim of the bank. Billy saw Drake's weapon blaze and kick. And as its

shot roared away across the flat, Billy heard the answering reply of a .44.

He knew it for Garat's deadly weapon. It made a continuous thunder for the time it took to slam six bullets at Jack Drake's head and shoulders.

"Yow-ee-ee!" Drake cried out.

Billy leaped to grab him as the Triangle Cross boss slid down the inside of the bank of the pool, clawing at his shoulder. Billy held him from rolling into the water, and grabbed his hands to stop them from gouging the wound.

"Take it easy, Jack," the Circle J boss said. "Does it hurt much? Let me plug the hole."

"Leave me alone, friend," Jack Drake groaned. "It ain't nothin'. Yuh told me ter be careful. I was a fool ter think I could——" His words caught in his throat, his eyes shut tight, and he was unconscious.

"Joe," Billy called, "stick to your post. Drake got hit, but he's not dead. I'll patch him up."

The redhead turned to stare at his boss, who tore off a neckerchief and was about to dip it in the pool.

"It's poisoned, Billy!" Joe cried.

"Gosh, I almost forgot!" the Circle J boss exclaimed. "We ain't got no water then. Why didn't we keep our canteens?"

Joe began to crawl toward him. "It was Garat who shot him, Billy. I heard him fannin' his .44 gun."

"Go back, Joe!" the Circle J boss ordered. "I'll attend to Garat. The coyote is creeping up through the creek bed. He's my meat."

There was nothing much that Billy could do for Drake's wound, since he didn't have a first-aid kit or water. He plugged the flow of the bullet hole and rested the rancher's white head on a folded buckskin vest. Then, placing a hat over

Drake's face to ward off the sun, Billy turned to where the creek entered the water hole.

"Yo're not goin' after Garat?" Joe Scott cried.

"I certainly am, Joe," the Circle J boss replied grimly. "The coyote is makin' a mistake by crawlin' up on us. If I beef him, his gang will be without a leader."

"Thunder an' lightnin'!" the red-head exclaimed. "He might get yuh, Billy. We ought ter wait for Jim Benson."

Billy's cheek muscles tightened. "We both might be dead by the time help comes," he growled, and crawled into the mouth of the creek bed.

The route that the Circle J boss had to follow was fraught with danger. The stream which fed the pool had dug a trough about three feet deep and ten feet wide down the flat.

Now, in the dry season, there was a mere trickle of water over the pebbles and rock, but in rainy months the creek had rolled big boulders down its course. These boulders prevented Billy from seeing up the wash, but he knew that Garat couldn't be very far away.

"The sneaking snake!" Billy growled under his breath. "He figured ter slip right into the water hole without being seen an' fan us with that trick cutter."

Gun cocked, the Circle J boss wormed over the gravel, from boulder to boulder, advancing carefully to meet his enemy. He halted, listening for some sound. He reached a bend in the stream bed and debated the danger of passing around it. And at that moment, his ears caught the sound of heavy breathing.

The Circle J boss tensed. An hombre was crawling over the rocky

floor, just the other side of the bend. Billy could hear the man pushing a long gun along ahead of him.

Then Billy saw the barrel of the weapon appear just at the corner of the turning bank. It was a ten-gauge shotgun, and the Circle J boss knew that such a weapon had not shot Jack Drake.

Were there men other than Garat creeping down the creek bed?

Billy's six-gun rose above his right shoulder. He held his breath, waiting. The shotgun barrel slid past his left side. Then the shaggy head of Dag appeared from behind the bend. The outlaw's eyes stared in astonishment at the Circle J boss.

"Howdy, stranger!" Billy said to him.

"Caught!" Dag suddenly yelled, and tried to swerve the shotgun barrel from the floor of the creek bed and into aim at the Circle J boss.

Billy's six-gun barrel swiped downward, hitting Dag on the top of the head. It was an ugly wallop, and it drove the outlaw's face down into the gravel.

An agonized groan escaped his lips. He shuddered, rolled out into the center of the wash, and tried to get to his feet. Billy watched him rise, head and shoulders above the rim of the trough; and at that moment, the Circle J boss detected the whine of a bullet.

It was a rifle slug that seemed to come from a distant cliff. Evidently it was fired by one of Dag's men, who mistook the outlaw leader for one of the Circle J party.

"Oh-oo-oo!" Dag yelled, lurching from the impact of the striking bullet.

He sprawled headlong against a boulder, dead before his head touched the stone.

The next instant, Billy heard the voice of Garat from behind the bend in the creek bed.

"Yuh've killed Dag!" Garat shouted. "Yuh fool, yuh've beefed the boss!"

Billy didn't hesitate.

"Garat!" he shouted savagely, and scuttled around the shoulder of the bank, eager for sight of the speaker.

His eyes found the gun fanner not ten yards away. Garat was on his knees. He held his deadly weapon with his right hand, close to his hip. His left palm was poised above the hammer of the gun, ready to fan. Billy saw the left palm flash down to brush the hammer back.

The Circle J boss triggered with deadly aim. He knew the strength of the small steel spring which worked his own gun hammer. He was counting on it being faster than Garat's mechanism.

Billy's weapon spat flame, and he thought that Garat's .44 fired a second later. He saw Garat jerk, as if from the force of a bullet.

And as Garat did so, his aim must have been thrown off, for the lead of the .44 parted the hair on the top of Billy's head.

"Skunk!" Billy exclaimed, thumbing back the hammer of his weapon to shoot again.

He expected a second shot from Garat, but the gun fanner was pitching forward, with his left palm groping vainly to cock the .44. And each time that Garat tried to find the hammer of the gun, he missed. There was a rattle in his throat, his eyes were white. He sprawled on his face, shuddered, and lay still.

"Got him," Billy breathed, and then lifted his voice to a shout. "Garat's down, hombres. I'll show him to you."

Crawling to the body of his foe, the Circle J boss rolled what was left

of Fanner Garat to the rim of the creek bed. As the gun fanner's corpse came in view of the distant cliffs, Billy heard shouts of alarm. There was a burst of shooting, but no bullets came toward the wash. He detected Joe Scott's voice, calling to him:

"Billy! The coyotes are running. Look at them. You scared them with Garat's carcass."

"Scared them, nothing," Billy said, and carefully peeked over the top of the bank.

As his eyes focused on the western cliff, he was astonished to find five outlaws racing their broncs along its rim. The riders were shooting behind them, as if they were being chased.

"Jim Benson!" Billy exclaimed. Then: "No. Jumping jaspers, it's an Injun!"

Not far behind the fleeing horsemen, a Blackfoot appeared on the top of the cliff. The Indian was riding a mustang. A carbine sprang to his shoulder, fired, and one of the outlaw fugitives fell whirling from his saddle. Again and again, the Indian's carbine fired, and each time it drilled an owl-hooter.

"What shooting!" Billy exclaimed. "Joe, that must be the Blackfoot who had the 3X mavericks."

"An' Sing Lo is with him," Joe Scott's voice came back. "Do you see the chink?"

Now Billy noted a second rider on a paint pony that had appeared behind the Indian. The Chinaman was brandishing a carving knife and yelling at the top of his lungs.

Billy ran to the opposite side of the creek bed. Rearing up, he looked at the cliffs on the eastern side of the flat. He spied several outlaws running away.

It was a complete rout. Without leaders, the owl-hoot tribe seemed

to be in deadly fear of the Indian. From the eastern cliff, they had witnessed his marksmanship against their friends on the western side of the flat.

"Come on, Joe!" Billy shouted. "We'll make a break to the west to get away from the water hole."

With a quick dash, he went up the bank of the creek bed, and headed back to the pool. There he found Joe Scott picking up the unconscious Jack Drake. Helping him, Billy took the feet of the Triangle Cross owner, and they started across the flat.

They didn't get far before a band of horsemen appeared at the mouth of the arroyo by which Billy had entered the lowland. The Circle J boss halted, then recognized the newcomers.

"Jim Benson!" he shouted.

In a moment, the Circle J foreman and ten fighting hands were halting in front of Billy and Joe. Jim Benson seemed to be highly excited about something.

"Buck Foster!" he exclaimed. "Billy, he's driving the Circle J herd up a canyon to a water hole north of Wolf Butte. I don't know how he's doin' it. He ordered all the Circle J hands to help him. I didn't have time to go stop him, Billy. I brought the Triangle Cross outfit here."

Billy saw that the riders in the foreman's party were all members of Jack Drake's outfit. They quickly told the story of how Buck Foster had started out with the Circle J herd, challenging them to follow him. They said that they were sure that Buck had gone loco.

"Huh!" Billy grunted. "Buck hasn't just gone loco. He's been that way for a long time. But mehbe he's found a good trail north

of Wolf Butte. There's a water hole up in that direction."

"But it might be pizened like this one," Jim Benson groaned. "Billy, we've got ter stop him."

"Just a minute, Jim," the Circle J boss said, for he had caught sight of the Blackfoot riding across the flat.

The Indian held up his arm in greeting, and Billy returned the salute.

"How?" the Blackfoot said, dismounting and handing a carbine to Billy.

"How?" the Circle J boss replied, then chuckled. "Keep the gun, amigo," he added. "You earned it. You've more than repaid any favor I did for you, back in the Bitterroot foothills."

The Indian's coppery face showed no emotion. "I take revenge," he said, pointing at the water hole. "Good drink for steers," he went on. "I kill the snakes." He shrugged his shoulders. "It was a trick."

Foreman Jim Benson let out a yip. "Yuh mean that yuh fooled Garat by putting them rattlers out for him? Say, mehbe Buck won't poison our steers, after all."

Sing Lo stepped up to Billy West. "Mistle Indian plenty mad at Mistle Floster," the Circle J cook said, and then he told what had happened in the canyon.

The Chinaman added that he had freed the Blackfoot from the mustang in the upper regions of the canyon, had given him a carbine from a saddle scabbard, and the pair of them had set out to discover the whereabouts of Billy West.

"You two certainly came at a good time," the Circle J boss admitted, turning to the Blackfoot. "But I've got one more favor to ask you, friend. Don't take your revenge against Buck. I'll talk to him."

When he hears what you did for me, he'll be all apologies."

There was a trace of a grin on the Blackfoot's coppery features.

"I have revenge soon," he said. "You will go"—he motioned with his arm to the cattle trail around the north of Wolf Butte—"to the shipping town in two days. You will beat all other men. Then you will go back to Twin Rivers. There will be a rodeo in another moon. Me, I shall win the ride on the wild horse."

Billy stared at the Indian. "Say, are you the hombre who defeated Buck Foster, three years ago in Twin Rivers?" he asked.

The Blackfoot nodded.

"An' you're going to do it again to show the old walrus up?" Joe Scott asked.

The Indian shrugged his shoulders, as if the plan was perfectly plain.

And the punchers gathered there broke out in gales of laughter. For all of them knew that there was nothing that would enrage the veteran more than being trimmed by an Indian in a bronc-riding contest.

"Boys," Billy West said, "our Indian pard says we can make the junction in two days. Let's snap into it. Circle J and Triangle Cross will sell this year, an' we'll have it on those other ranchers who don't know a good Blackfoot when they see one. I'm anxious to get the

drive over with so that we can see that Twin Rivers rodeo an' watch Buck lose his shirt."

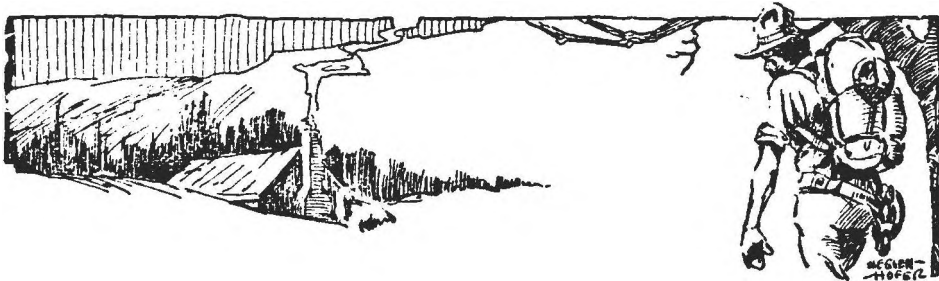
Sing Lo's yellow eyes held a crafty glint. "Mistle Floster win the cowboy pool," he whispered to Joe Scott. "He take plenty money and make bet on himself to win lodeo. Chinee an' Mistle Scott also bet."

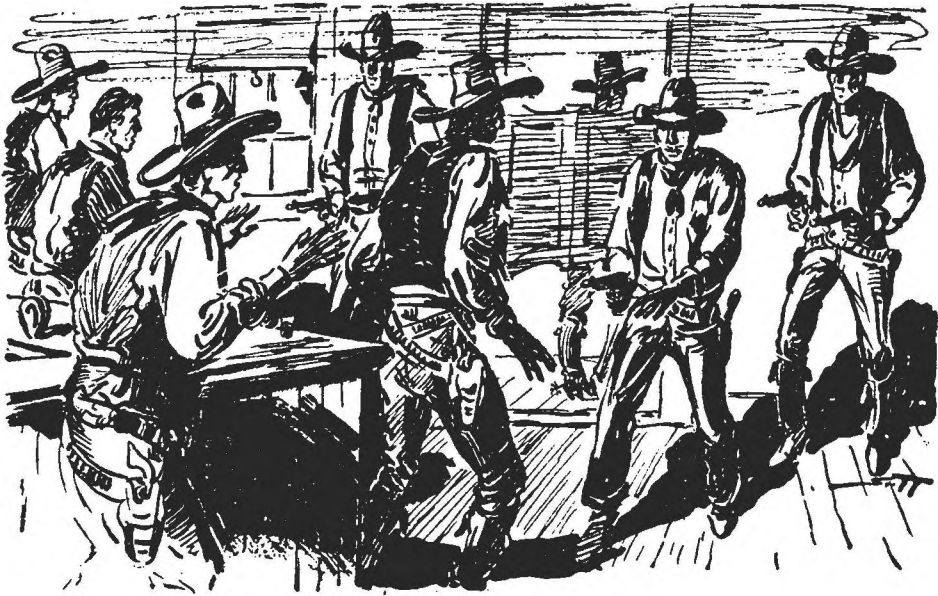
"I get you," the redhead replied in an undertone. "We'll cover Buck's bet with our money, an' then we'll win all the money he wins in the cowboy pool. Sing Lo, I think we ought to give a share of it to the Indian. Won't that burn Buck up?"

And two weeks later, after the Circle J and the Triangle Cross herds had been sold at the railroad junction, the Twin Rivers rodeo bucking-horse contest was won by a Blackfoot, and Buck Foster lost ninety-six dollars by betting on himself.

Joe Scott and Sing Lo are wearing new duds, and the Blackfoot has bought himself a fine hand-carved saddle.

All o' which, we figure, will make that ranty buckaroo, Buck Foster, a hull lot more proddy than ever. An' when the veteran goes on the prod, there's no tellin' what he'll do. Circle J better watch him plumb close, or he'll be gittin' 'em all inter another bad jam. Watch fer the next adventure o' the saddle pards. It'll be in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





# The Lazy Stranger In Longhorn

By Charles M. Martin

Author of "Star-toter," etc.

THE Square Dice Saloon was enjoying a good business at the long bar, with the games in the back room getting a good run of play.

A rickety old wall clock had just bonged out the hour of nine. It was this solemn clanging that started the old argument between "Shiftless" Shannon and old Tom Parker.

"I'll be gittin' back to the shack," Shannon began.

"Aw, stick around," Parker growled. "It's pay day, an' the evenin' still a pup."

Tom Parker was town marshal of Longhorn—a sprawling little cow town on the Texas and New Mexico

border, but Texan from hock to horns. The marshal's drooping mustaches jerked up and down as he chewed on his quid of twist while regarding the young cowboy beside him.

"I gits kind o' tired about this time of night," Shannon drawled. "Goin' tuh turn in while I've got the strength tuh git home."

"That's jest why these rannies has nicknamed yuh 'Shiftless,'" the old peace officer growled. "Whyn't yuh come out in the open, son?"

"What's in a name?" the cowboy countered lazily. "Shiftless is close enough."

"Well, so long," Parker growled

sulkily. "But I've seen the time when yuh didn't run much tuh sleep."

"Mebbe I'm gittin' old, Tom," Shannon answered, with a grin. "I'll be twenty-four tuh-morrer, if I lives that long."

"I'd run yuh out of town, was I the marshal," a thick voice spoke behind Shannon. "Yuh've been yere in Longhorn a month, an' yuh hain't turned a tap since yuh lit. This town is gittin' plumb cluttered up with saddle tramps an' shiftless loafers."

Tom Parker turned to stare at Clay Cutter, owner of the C Bar C. Cutter was past fifty, with the habit of expressing himself when he was drunk, which he was on every pay day.

"You ain't marshal," Parker grunted coldly. "An' Shannon ain't no saddle bum. So jest you keep on lookin' through the bottom of yore glass."

The young cowboy yawned as he stretched his long arms above his red head. "I'll be seein' yuh, Tom," he drawled lazily. "I shore am all tuckered out."

"He's goin' tuh sleep hisself tuh death," Cutter sneered as Shannon walked out of the saloon. "I ain't seen him take a drink since he lit yere a month ago. I don't know what the modern generation is comin' to."

"Them C Bar C punchers of yourn ain't doin' so bad tuh uphold the old traditions," Parker answered shortly. "Four of 'em drunk back yonder, an' nary one of 'em any older than Shannon."

"Shiftless," Cutter sneered. "He's too dang lazy tuh even eat reg'lar."

The old marshal glared silently before turning toward the batwing doors. His right boot stopped in

mid-air as a harsh voice barked savagely:

"Elevate, marshal! We're takin' th' town!"

Parker stopped the right hand that was clawing down for his gun. Three men faced him with backs against the front wall just inside the swinging doors.

He could see the legs of a fourth through the opening, evidently acting as lookout. The tall, hawk-faced leader who had barked the holdup order was regarding him wolfishly with hate-rimmed eyes.

"You know me," he sneered. "I owe yuh somethin', an' I always pays my debts."

"Swivel Drury!" the old marshal murmured. "I heard you had broke out of the pen. Long time no see yuh."

"Yuh saw me the last time when I wa'n't lookin'," "Swivel" Drury answered savagely. Now yuh see me again, an' I'll settle with you after I attend some other business. Keep him covered, Shorty."

"Make him shuck his cutter," the short desperado growled. "He won't send me to the pen like he done you, Swivel."

Swivel Drury glanced at the third man in his gang and jerked his head toward the marshal. "Dehorn that old maverick before Shorty guns him down," he growled viciously. "I'm savin' that old son of a gun fer my own iron."

A half-breed bandit walked behind Parker and plucked the old .45 Peacemaker from the officer's open holster. Parker growled like a wounded bear as he turned slowly to face his captors:

"I'll git you, too, Breed Lopez! Yo're due tuh make hosshair bridles fer the towerists."

"Breed" Lopez was half American and half Yaqui Indian, and he



grinned to show strong white teeth while his left hand fingered the throwing knife on his belt. A heavy .41 Colt in his grimy right hand covered the fuming marshal.

Clay Cutter was staring into the bottom of his glass, his face an ashy gray.

"Me, I theenk not," the half-breed answered silkily. "If Swivel misses, I cut yore t'roat with the so sharp *cuchillo*."

"Holster yore iron, an' yuh won't git a chance tuh draw that knife," Parker whispered hoarsely. "Yore pards is in the back room, if yuh want tuh settle it man tuh man."

Breed grinned as he glanced at the silent men along the bar. They knew Swivel Drury and his gang of professional gun fighters. Drury never bothered a puncher unless that waddy got ambitious and tried to make himself a reputation at the outlaw's expense.

The old marshal sighed as he realized that he could expect no help from them. He was getting paid to take chances, and none of them cared to fight any outlaws.

"Thees men of Longhorn, they are like the sheep," Breed sneered. "You see them in the back room, Señor Marshal?"

Tom Parker swung his eyes to the cardroom where "Square Dice" Madigan stood poised above a green-topped table, with the ivory cubes rattling in his right hand. The dice dropped to the table, when a harsh voice brought the players up standing. It said:

"Hoist yore dewclaws, gents! All we want is the winnin's, so don't make no sudden moves, onless yuh feels that life is onbearable!"

Six pairs of hands shot upward as their owners stared into the muzzles of long-barreled Colts in the hands of the outlaws.

Square Dice Madigan alone was unshaken. His smooth face expressed no emotion as he glanced from the glittering eyes of Drury to the pile of gold on the table.

"You win," he said quietly. "Take the money."

His right hand swung down slowly to wave at the stacked gold. A gun barked in the tall outlaw's right hand. The slender gambler fell across the table as the slug tore through his heart.

"I said not tuh make any sudden moves," Swivel Drury warned hoarsely. "That gent made a pass fer his iron."

## II.

He holstered his gun and reached for the gold while his short companion kept the crowd covered. The batwings swung open without a sound out front, and a quiet voice drawled across the smoke-clouded barroom:

"Drop that gun, Breed!"

Breed Lopez glanced in the mirror of the back bar and allowed the .41 to slip from his hand. "Shorty" Blake glanced up quickly, and the twin guns in his hands roared with sullen thunder.

Shiftless Shannon had shifted quickly as the report from his own gun blended with the explosions in the cardroom, and Shorty was hammered back against the wall before dropping limply to the floor.

Swivel Drury jumped through an open window, with the sack of gold clutched in his right hand, as men in the saloon snatched their guns and tore out through the swinging doors.

"Git yore iron back, Tom!"

The old marshal recovered his .45 from the gun belt of the half-breed as the young cowboy spoke softly. A volley of shots in the narrow street

out front, and Shiftless Shannon holstered his gun as he jerked his head at the prisoner.

"Guess he'll make them hosshair bridles, Tom," he said quietly. "I heard him from out front."

Black eyes glittered in the dark face of the half-breed when the old marshal reached for the handcuffs at his belt. Then a grimy brown hand snaked down to pluck the throwing knife, and Parker made a futile pass for his holstered weapon.

The right hand of Shiftless Shannon blurred under the yellow lights of the coal-oil lamps with pale flame blooming from the muzzle of the long barrel that had leaped into his slapping palm.

Breed screamed as the gleaming blade was torn from his fingers before it had cleared the lip of the oiled sheath. Now he stood staring at his torn hand that had lost two fingers in that sudden blast.

"Cuff him!" Shannon drawled quietly. "He kin still make them bridles fer the tourists."

The old marshal was taking no chances as he drew his gun and jammed it into the prisoner's belt buckle. Metal clicked as the bracelets closed on the thin wrists, and Lopez shrugged his shoulders as his black eyes held steady on the young cowboy.

"Me, I should have knowed better than to try to fool the great Shifty Shannon," he murmured quietly. "Wheech ees why Señor Swivel, he run away."

"Shifty Shannon! Well, I'm a gentle Annie!"

The old marshal smiled as Clay Cutter stared at the young cowboy with a new look in his eyes. The other cowboys had returned to the saloon in time to hear his words, and they cast guarded glances at Shannon while fingers jammed fresh

shells into the loading gates of their guns.

"Shifty Shannon!" the old cattleman murmured. "Depity U. S. marshal, an' the fastest gun swift in Taixas, an' we done named him 'Shiftless'!"

"What's in a name?" Shannon asked, with a grin. "I don't blame yuh none, old Clay, but I shore enjoyed my li'le rest yere in Longhorn."

"Swivel Drury escaped," Parker mourned. "An' he done kilt Square Dice Madigan—one of the squarest gamblers I ever knowed!"

"But that Shorty Blake cashed with his boots on," Cutter gloated. "An' this hombre, yere, won't work on no more pore pilgrims with that knife of hisn."

Two cowboys came through the swinging doors with a dazed-looking rider on the end of their guns. The lanky rider was rubbing a lump on his head when he saw Shannon regarding him with a grin.

"Howdy, Slim!" Shannon drawled. "Sorry I had tuh hit you so hard out there in front, but I didn't want tuh make no noise."

"I've got savvy enough tuh know when I gits a break," the lookout muttered. "We thought you was down El Paso way."

"This is Slim Howell, marshal. He's yore prisoner." Tom Parker handcuffed the fourth member of the Drury gang as Shannon made the introduction.

"'Bliged to yuh, Shifty," he answered. "I'm not forgetting that Swivel Drury was keepin' me fer his own iron after he had cleaned up the bank. I knew I didn't stand no show agin' him with that swivel holster he cut the end out of. You ever see that long rider go for his cutter?"

Shannon smiled lazily. "I've heard about him," he drawled. "I'll git him one of these days."

"He never draws his iron," Parker warned. "Jest slaps his paw down an' thumbs the hammer whilst he's swivelin' that Kingfisher holster in line. Shoots through the bottom of the boot before yuh kin wink, an' he's plumb straight the way he calls his shots."

"Yeah," Shannon drawled. "An' now he's hit out fer the hills with the gold, leavin' these pards of hisn tuh find out what he went through when you sent him up to the pen. Come daylight, I'll take out after him so's I kin finish up the li'l job of work I come up yere tuh do."

He turned slowly as he followed the staring eyes of the old marshal. A breathless silence had fallen over the long saloon while he was talking, but the young Texan showed no excitement as he turned slowly to face the front doors.

A tall figure was standing just inside the batwings, his right leg thrust out ahead of his body as his hand hovered above the cedar handle of the heavy gun on his leg. And the gleaming muzzle of that gun was peering through the end of the holster which was swinging gently on the oiled rivet.

Swivel Drury—the fastest and most ruthless killer of the outlaw tribe!

"So yuh come up yere from El Paso tuh finish up Swivel Drury an' his gang?"

Shannon nodded his head slightly in answer to the sneering question. "One dead, one wounded, an' the other in irons," he answered quietly. "I'd call that a fair start when a gent is as tuckered out as I am."

"Right now, yo're through packin' a Federal star, an' yuh ain't got

savvy enough tuh know it," the outlaw sneered. "So you was aimin' tuh meet up with me some day?"

Shannon shrugged carelessly. "It was in the cyards," he answered softly. "Yuh done kilt three peace officers what tried tuh give you a chance tuh surrender. Yo're wanted in four counties fer murder an' robbery, an' yuh never finished servin' yore time in th' pen."

"So what?"

"So the U. S. marshal give me a li'l vacation tuh rest up in," Shannon drawled. "He told me I could clean up the Drury gang while I was restin', 'cause he had a real job fer me when I come back. Said there was some really fast gun dogs cuttin' up over round Dalhart way."

Swivel Drury's long nose curved down to meet the thin lips under his drooping mustache. The muscles of his face writhed with anger as his fingers twitched eagerly.

Old Tom Parker moved his feet restlessly as he stared at the dreaded outlaw who had killed three peace officers with that deadly swivel gun.

Only the young Texan remained unmoved, and his keen blue eyes were watching the right hand of Swivel Drury without batting a lash. The outlaw grinned wolfishly as he controlled his temper.

### III.

"So there's real fast gun passers over Dalhart way," he mocked. "An' you was only practicin' up on the Drury gang while you was restin' yore shiftless hide."

"Keno," Shannon agreed. "Shorty missed me by three feet when you lit a shuck through that back window. Breed Lopez admits that his fingers stuttered when he tried tuh git his *cuchillo* out. An' now, yere

you are savin' me a long ride up in them hills where water is scarce as all git-out."

"Mebbe I run away from you," Drury sneered. "Yuh stop tuh figure mebbe I was afeard of yuh?"

Shannon grinned as he reached into his vest pocket with his left hand. He rolled a smoke with fingers that did not tremble, and the outlaw watched him intently as he finished the left-hand roll and scraped thumb-nail across the head of a match. Shannon talked quietly as the cloud of smoke rolled from between his lips.

"Knew yuh'd be back," he stated clearly. "I've got fairly good ears, an' I didn't hear no hoss high-tailin' it out of town. Thought I'd jest wait yere ontill yuh got yore nerve up enough tuh come back an' turn these boys of yourn loose."

"Yo're a liar!"

Shannon shrugged. "I'll git yuh, anyway, but not fer that," he answered. "I've been called a liar by every long-ridin' son I ever took in. Yo're under arrest, fer the killin' of Square Dice Madigan!"

"Now look," Drury answered silkily. "You should ought tuh have yore iron in yore hand when yuh tell a gent he's under arrest, especial when that gent is packin' a price on his pelt. They raised it any since last month?"

"Not fer Federal officers," Shannon answered, with a grin. "They didn't figure you would be so hard tuh take."

"You an' that old wart hawg right beside you will make five star-toters tuh make a try fer my scalp," Drury sneered. "I'll keep my promise tuh him after I've finished with you."

"Windjammin'," the young Texan drawled. "You surrenderin' peaceful?"

"I ain't, an' I've been waitin' patientlike all this time fer you tuh make a try fer yore iron," Drury retorted.

Gone was the shiftless attitude of the young Texan as he faced the outlaw with slitted eyes. His jaw was outthrust as his shoulders hunched over to shadow the heavy gun on his right leg.

Swivel Drury was facing him, with right hand taloned above the grip of his gun. His voice was a pin point of a whisper that cut across the smoky room like a knife:

"Start smokin'!"

His calloused palm slapped down to the cedar grip of his .45 with the words. Shifty Shannon was standing in the shadow of the lamp which cast a yellow halo about the form of the outlaw.

He leaped suddenly to one side as his hand darted down like the flickering tongue of a snake. A roaring flash lighted the bottom of the open holster as Swivel Drury fired without drawing—a flash that was reflected from the right palm of the young Texan as he fired from the hip to echo the shot of his enemy.

The tall outlaw was slapped into a half turn as his right arm jerked back under the shock of the heavy slug. He tried to reach the swinging holster with clawing left hand as Shifty Shannon leaped forward to pistol-whip him down.

Twice the heavy .45 raked the hawkish face of Swivel Drury, and Shannon stepped back when the outlaw cowered in the sawdust, with his left hand wiping his crimsoned face. His right arm hung limp and useless from the slug that had broken a bone in the shoulder.

"Whyn't yuh kill me?" he screamed. "Yuh know dang well I cain't ever trigger another iron!"

"Orders was tuh take yuh alive

an' return yuh to the big stone house tuh finish yore sentence," Shannon explained quietly. "They've got a lot of orders fer hosshair bridles, an' the warden done told me that yores was the best he had ever saw."

"Let's take these hombres tuh jail," old Tom Parker suggested dryly, "so's you kin make up some of yore sleep before you have tuh tackle them real fast gun dogs over Dalhart way."

"You take them others," Shannon answered crisply. "I'm startin' back right now with Swivel before the boys git a notion tuh hold a necktie party."

"But you hain't had no sleep fer

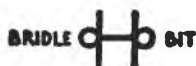
uh month," the old marshal objected. "Watchin' fer Swivel's gang day an' night ever since yuh lit yere!"

"I'll catch some sleep before I start fer Dalhart," Shannon promised. "Evenin', gents! So long, Mr. Cutter!"

The old cattleman shook his head to clear the daze. His wrinkled face was red as he held out his hand to the young Texan.

"I'm jest an old fool, son," he muttered. "An' tuh think it was me whut named yuh 'Shiftless'!"

"Forgit it," Shannon answered, with a grin. "It helped my play a lot."



## SIGNS DON'T LIE

ABOUT fifty years ago, a man named Robert Trimble, after transacting some business in San Antonio, started out for his home on the Rio Frio. He traveled in a wagon drawn by two fine mules. He had purchased quite a quantity of supplies and goods for his family, and carried a large sum of money.

The mules, without the wagon, came home, and a search was made at once for Trimble, who, it was feared, had met with an accident in the wild country which, at that time, was uninhabited for many miles around.

The next day, the searchers were guided by a flock of buzzards that flew in a circle over one spot. They made their way to it with much difficulty, and found Trimble dead, with a bullet hole in the back of his head and several others in his body.

Then they knew that it was no accident that had caused his death. He had been murdered and robbed. His wallet was missing, and the

wagon was nowhere around. It is probable that the body would never have been found if it had not been for the buzzards, for it was lying in dense chaparral, off the trail.

There was only one clew left by the murderer. But in the party of searchers was a young man who could read sign as quickly and as easily as most people read print. There was a dent in the tire of one of the wagon wheels, and the track of that dent was followed all the way to Mexico, where it led to the home of one José Cordova, who had hitched his horse to the wagon and thought he had made a clean getaway. The goods and the money were found in his shack, and the Americanos dealt with him very promptly.

When the young cow-puncher who had followed the trail so closely was complimented on his ability, he replied modestly, "A man's tongue may tell untruths, but signs don't lie."



## Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**S**EEMS like the winter is really settin' in fer a long, hard pull, these days. November is allus the month o' dreary days an' warnin' storms, an' sechlike. However, I reckon we can't be complainin' about it. Won't do any good, no-how, as I've said afore this!

Anyhow, why should we worry, with songs waitin' tub be printed an' l'arned an' sung?

"Dear Joe," writes M. C. McFadden, of Kansas, "I am inclosing a jingle of which I do not know the author. I clipped it a number of years ago when I was on the Western frontier. I had about the last ranch this side of the Great Divide. The song made quite a hit, so I'm passing it on to you. I also have served my time at homesteading. I bet Uncle Sam about thirty-

two dollars against a half section of land that I could stay three years, and I won the bet."

The song, folks, is a parody of Mr. Chapman's "Where the West Begins," thet I gave yuh a while back, an' it's called:

**A HOMESTEADER'S LAMENT**

Out where the drylander calls his home,  
Where nothing comes back from seed that  
is sown,  
And the cattle are nothing but skin and  
bone,  
That's where the West begins.

Out where the government gives you the  
land,  
Of sagebrush and cactus and burning sand,  
Where the people live on the cave man  
plan,  
That's where the West begins.

Out where your neighbor lives miles away,  
Where you never hear of a rainy day,  
And the owls roost with the chickens, they  
say,  
That's where the West begins.

Out where the world is big and wide,  
And the people lose everything, even their  
pride,  
Where a man isn't missed much after he's  
died,  
That's where the West begins.

Out where the drylander works away,  
From morn till night to make it pay,  
In hope of leaving the place some day,  
Out where the West begins.

Out on the desert they are stuck to stay,  
E-oh, they work away 'til they are old and  
gray,  
And the undertaker gets to take 'em away  
Out where the West begins.

But don't let thet discourage yuh, folks. Thar's joys in homesteadin', too. Only now an' then a man has tuh let off steam, in order tuh be able tuh face the hardships thet go with it.

Now here's a song I got from an article by J. Frank Dobie in one o' the journals o' the Texas Folklore Society. Mr. Dobie says as how an' ol' cowboy by the name o' Charley Johnson, o' Texas, told him he made it up.

Mr. Dobie calls it "The Cowboy's Stroll," and says thet it became a common trail song an' was sung all the way from the border tuh the Yellowstone.

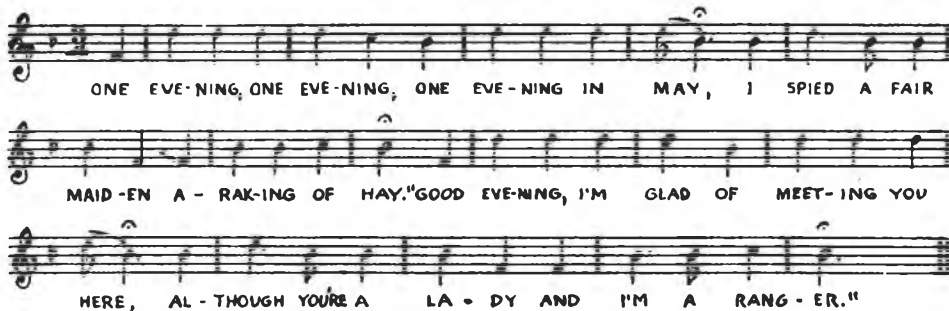
Howsomever, Mr. Dobie goes on tuh say thet the song was probably more "made over" than "made up" by Johnson, since it bears a strong resemblance tuh the song called "The Rebel Prisoner," which I gave yuh, some time ago.

Yuh kin see fer yoreself thet it ain't exactly Western in origin, bein' as it talks of knapsacks an' nightingales. But the cowboys knew whar tuh look fer songs tuh make over.

**THE COWBOY'S STROLL \***

One evening, one evening, one evening in  
May,  
I spied a fair maiden a-raking of hay.  
"Good evening, I'm glad of meeting you  
here,  
Although you're a lady, and I'm a ranger."

\* Words and music printed by kind permission of the Texas Folklore Society, from their Publication Number VII.



They walked and they talked until they came to the spring,  
And from his knapsack he drew a fine violin.

His bow, it being ready, his arm so strong,  
He played her sweet music the whole evening long.

Now says the lady, "Just play one tune more."

He tuned up his fiddle to a much higher string,

And he played her a tune called "The Valleys Do Ring."

Now says the lady, "Won't you marry me?"  
"Oh," says the cowboy, "that never can be.  
I've a wife in Texas and children three.  
One of the prettiest little babies you ever did see.

"I'll go back to old Texas and stay there one year,

I will drink of cold water instead of strong beer,

And if ever I return it will be in the spring  
To see the water gliding and hear the nightingale sing.

"I will build me a castle in some Texas town,

So strong that no wind can blow it down.

And if any one asks if I live alone,  
Pray tell them I'm a cowboy far away from home."

Thar, folks, I reckon I'll have tuh be leavin' yuh. So long till next week!



DUMBELL

### A "BOOMER" HEROINE

A GIRL from Missouri took great pride, in after years, at having been a "boomer" in the original rush for claims at the opening of Oklahoma, when free land was secured by the simple means of getting there first.

The Missouri girl rode from Arkansas City to Guthrie on a fast horse that fairly flew over the ground.

When the rush started, she was on the edge of Oklahoma, and tore ahead of the men. She pounced on one of the best lots, near the government office, and stood her ground.

Attempts were made several times to oust her from her position, but, with a six-gun clutched in her right hand, she held the intruders off, so they did not venture very near.

She remained on the lot she had chosen for two days and nights. Then some one told her that the lot was in the middle of the street, and she could not keep it.

She paid no attention to that, but got the land registered, and it

turned out to be right in the proper place.

It is now one of the most valuable lots in Guthrie. Later, she leased it for twenty years at a rental that kept her in comfort all during that time.

Many women were called upon to take part in the famous rush as assistants to fathers or husbands or brothers, and they proved to be just as courageous as the men.

Their sharp retorts and ready wit often put interlopers to shame. While the men went to the distant town for provisions, they were not afraid to leave the women in charge of the claims.

The vigilance and bravery of these frontier women caused many a claim to be saved that otherwise would have been seized by unscrupulous adventurers, who wanted the land only to sell it, and not to make a home on it. But when the women were on hand, their designs were always defeated, sometimes at the point of a gun.





# Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**T**HIS week's mail brought me a letter that made me feel real proudlike, an' I've been pattin' my back ever since. Hyar it is:

"I want to thank you for the courteous way in which you have handled my mail and the kind letter you wrote to me. It is more than

any other Pen Pal conductor does, and in return for the treatment you give your Pen Pal friends, I am going to do something that will mean most for your department! I will recommend the Wild West Weekly and especially your department to all my friends.  
R. D."

Yuh can jest bet thet when I find folks so appreciative, I'm goin' tuh try an' give better service all the time, so that nobody'll make a mistake recommendin' the magazine to thar friends. An' I hope thet every Pen Pal will become a real booster for the W. W. W.

Now fer the letters:

#### ASKIN' HELP TUH FIND A JOB

Now, who's goin' tuh assist me gettin' job-seekers fixed? I know it's not so easy, but I trust that any Pen Pal knowin' of an opportunity will promptly advise me.

DEAR SAM: I am a young widow of twenty-three with two boys, one six and the other two years old. My reason for writing to you is that I hope some of your Pen Pals will aid me in my efforts to find a job. I need work very badly and am willing to do most anything; preferably somewhere in the West.

MINNIE R., OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: Will you do an old navy Pal a good turn and publish this letter at an early date? Here it is: I respectfully offer my services as a ranch or farm hand anywhere in the United States. I am twenty-one years old, in good health, and able to take care of any task connected with farm work. My intention is to use the wages I earn to enter a naval school, so as to obtain a commission as naval officer when I graduate. I certainly would appreciate it if any one who reads this will help me. EDWARD MILLER, JR., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-three, looking for a job. I can do most any kind of work in connection with farm or ranch, and I hope some Pen Pals will aid me to get located on some Western ranch as cowboy.

HENRY BLEVINS, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a lad of seventeen, in need of a job. I have worked on small farms and can drive a car. Until I am considered worth real wages, I am willing to work for board and clothes. I hope that some one among the Pen Pals will come to my assistance.

IVAN RHODES, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

#### HOBBYISTS, TRADERS, AN' SPECIALS

Yuh can't go wrong in consultin' this section each week, because thar's always somethin' of interest, no matter whar yuh are, an' what special hobby yuh foller.

DEAR SAM: I am a sixteen-year-old girl who would like to get some cowgirls for Pen Pals. I am a stamp collector, am fond of nature and animals, and eager for adventure. All letters will be promptly attended to. LOUISE P., OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young colored woman of twenty-four, married, and I would love to have some Pen Pals in the West. I hope to hear from some Indian girls and also from some of my own race, a Northern colored girl. My special interest concerns Indian wares—bowls, blankets, baskets, and what not. Will exchange snaps and promise to answer each letter I receive.

ADA MANN, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, sixteen years old, and I am trying to get Pen Pals all over the world. I am a collector of postal cards with views and would gladly exchange those depicting the city in which I live, for others.

M. F. W., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen, looking for Pen Pals the world over and hoping especially that some cowboys and ranchers will answer my request. I am collecting songs and will gladly exchange with others, I also offer information about the State I live in and Hollywood. My desire to hear from Westerners is based on the hope that through them I might get located to work on a ranch, because the doctor thinks that work in the open will bring my health back to full hundred per cent. But don't think that I am a weakling, for I can do a real man's job, and I would not mind to start as handy boy.

BEN FERELL, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: Please let the request of this sixteen-year-old girl find room in your column. I desire Pen Pals anywhere and would be especially glad if some would write who indulge in the same hobby as I do. It is rather a unique one, that of col-

lecting small animals. I now possess horned toads, chameleons, turtles, and an alligator, of which latter I am most anxious to obtain another specimen. Perhaps some Southern Pen Pal can assist me in that direction, but I wish Pen Pals from all over the world would write, whether or not they can help me with my collection. Will answer everything, even postal cards.

BEVERLY H., OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: How about helping me to get a couple of Pen Pals? I am especially desirous of getting some correspondents in England and Spain, and I hope you can manage it. I am a woodsman, twenty years old, and can write interestingly about my vocation.

DYNAMITE, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen, the only girl member of an orchestra, interested principally in singing and dancing, of which I do a lot. My work is that of a waitress, and while as such I make many friends, I am still longing to have Pen Pals, and I trust you will help me find some.

SUE L., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I hope it is not against the rules and regulations for a sailor boy to write for Pen Pals. I have been in the Navy now for two months, and I rather feel the need of some correspondents, anywhere, between sixteen and twenty years old. I will give a souvenir to the writer of the first letter I receive.

JUST ME, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would appreciate it very much if you would procure some Pen Pals for me, especially in foreign countries, because I wish to hear about what I have not seen. I am a young man of twenty-two, have traveled quite a bit from Mexico to Canada and Cuba, and can tell interesting anecdotes about my experiences.

DAVE C., OF OHIO.

#### FROM FAR AWAY .

New frien's in foreign countries, wantin' correspondents hyar. Their pleas should find ready an' ample response.

DEAR SAM: I submit this plea for Pen Pals, hoping to get in touch again with two chums who are somewhere in the West. If

Tommy Mitchell and Bill Marlin see this letter, will they kindly write to me? I also invite any one to write who wants to hear about the beautiful country in which I live. Such information will be gladly exchanged for news from the West. I am a young fellow of twenty-three, will exchange snaps and postal cards with views, and promise to answer all letters.

BOBBIE, OF SCOTLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, thirteen years old, greatly interested in the West of your country, and I would ask you, for that reason, to get me in touch with some boys there. I am especially anxious to become the friend of some one who can teach me to rope and ride and tell me how to break bronchos.

GEORGE A., OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: Although I have intentions of visting your West some time, I desire to get information about it and trust that you will connect me with some real Westerners. I am a boy of eighteen and while my preference is for Westerners, I invite any one to write with whom I can exchange snaps, pictures, and what not.

TOM MARTIN, OF SOUTH AFRICA.

#### IN NEED O' CHEER

Lonely folks relyin' on Pen Pals tuh cheer 'em. Let yore letters be like a smile thet'll warm their hearts an' make 'em ferget thar troubles.

DEAR SAM: I am a poor lonely little girl seeking Pen Pals. I am sixteen years old, a junior in high school, fond of dancing and outdoor sports, also collecting songs. I promise to answer all letters no matter what part of the world they may come from.

TESS, OF NEW YORK

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome girl of eighteen. My favorite pastime is writing letters and reading. I am also fond of all kinds of outdoor sport. I would especially like to obtain some Pen Pals in the West—cowgirls or others who live on ranches—because their life interests me very much. May I hope that some cowgirl will take pity on me and write? I will be prompt in answering all letters and will gladly exchange snaps.

LONESOME FANNY, OF NEW YORK.

## JUST ANYBODY ANYWHAR

Can answer these hyar letters. The writers don't express any special choice, everybody is welcome as a new Pen Pal.

DEAR SAM: I am a young girl, fifteen years old, fond of books, travel, and all sports. I would appreciate it very much if you could secure some Pen Pals for me. I am by no means particular as to who writes or where they live. I will gladly answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

HELEN B., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Anybody who reads this is invited to write to me, no matter where her home or what her age may be. I am a girl in my teens, fond of outdoor sports, hiking and driving included, and travel. Please girls answer my plea promptly. You may be sure that I shall answer you.

LOU E. R., OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the United States, preferably those of about my own age—eighteen. I am now working upon my uncle's farm. My pastimes are swimming, boxing, and wrestling, and I spend considerable money visiting matches. Movies come next, and I am especially fond of Western pictures. Let me hear from you, Pen Pals, and you may be sure that you will get interesting replies promptly.

RICHARD J. A., OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve, and I wish you would try to find some Pen Pals for me. While I do not make it a special condition, I would like best to hear from girls who are interested, as I am, in dancing, aviation, and horseback riding. Each letter I receive will be promptly answered.

ELAINE, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, sixteen years old, fond of any pastime which requires beings in the open, like playing football, riding horseback, and so forth. I am writing to you in the hope that you will get some Pen Pals for me. Although I will gladly answer letters from anywhere in the world, I trust that some fellows in New York, California, and Florida will be among those who write to me.

CHARLES M., OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, in the seventh grade at school, anxious to find

Pen Pals anywhere in the world. I like all outdoor sports, horseback riding being my favorite. Being a real good rider, I have often mounted quite wild horses. Rodeos are a special attraction for me, and I have seen every one held near by.

MURRELL S., OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a boy of twelve, and I would like to have some Pen Pals of about my own age, especially some Western boys. I will exchange snaps and gladly offer to give whatever information I can about the State in which I live.

BOBBY F., OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I have been reading the W. W. W. for a long, long time, and have always been interested in your department. I am now in a hospital, so badly crippled that I am unable to go out. I am in hopes that you let me join your club in order to keep in touch with the outside world. My home State is Oklahoma, and I long for the West, but I am afraid that I will not go back. Whoever may read this, young or old, in this or foreign countries, please write to me. I am interested in stamp collecting, but more than anything else I like to write poems of a personal nature. And in exchange for a few canceled stamps, I am willing to write a poem on any subject whatever that is suggested. I am fifty years of age, an old-timer as it were, who has a lot of interesting facts to tell about the old Indian country back in '95.

D. C. BLAKELY, OF DISTRICT COLUMBIA.

## WESTERNERS WANTED

Thet's natural fer readers of a Wild West magazine, an' gals an' boys o' the West should respond readily, bein' glad o' the chance tuh boost their home.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, and I wish to get some Pen Pals, especially in the West, although I shall not refuse letters coming from anywhere in the world. I can ride horseback quite well, and expect to be a cowboy when I grow up. In the meantime, I like to hear about the West and the kind of life the Westerners lead.

B. DURHAM, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Please help a nineteen-year-old boy to find a few good Pen Pals. I am especially interested in the States of Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, and Cali-

fornia, and would appreciate it if boys there would write interesting letters to me with all sorts of information about the West. Letters concerning hunting and fishing experiences are most welcome.

CARL VALLE, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen. I am longing for Pen Pals and wish that you would ask some Western cowgirls to write to me. I like horseback riding very much and do it at every opportunity that offers. That is one of the reasons why I would like to have cowgirls for my Pen Pals.

LOUISE KNUDSON, OF NORTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen, fond of the West and of mountainous regions. For that reason, I desire to get some Pen Pals with whom I could correspond on that subject. I am, however, especially interested to hear from some middle-aged people who live far from any town and are lonesome. I hope that I will get some letters promptly and will not fail to reply to them at once.

LETA MARIE, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, nineteen years old. I have read a lot of Western stories and have seen some swell Western movies, but that is not sufficient for me, and I am going to join the Pen Pals so that I can get more information about the West. Cowboys or fellows living on ranches in any of the so-called cattle States, even city folks from out West, please write me soon. I will surely appreciate it and answer promptly.

BILL N., OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen. I have read about the West and would like to know more about it. For that reason, I would like you to get me some Pen Pals there. I would especially be glad if some cowgirls would write to me. Prompt replies are promised for every one.

BROWN-EYES, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a widow of nineteen. I would appreciate it very much if some

one from south of the Rio Grande would write to me. My husband came from Mexico, and I would surely enjoy having somebody there tell me about the country. Anybody else, anywhere, is also welcome to write.

BERTHA M., OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am very much interested in Western ranches, and I would like to get acquainted with cowgirls in order to learn more about that part of the West. I am a girl of sixteen and expect that in a couple of years I shall go West myself. Hence my desire to make a few connections there now.

EMMA SMITH, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, sixteen years old, very anxious to hear about the West and the possibilities of employment there. I intend to go West and figure on settling down either in Texas, Arizona, or Montana, from where I hope fellows around my own age will write to me with information.

THAD WHOLEY, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen, fond of all things Western, and hopeful, therefore, to get some Pen Pals from the States of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. I am working on a farm, myself, and therefore especially interested in hearing from ranchers and farmers out West, for exchange of information. Will gladly exchange snaps and answer all letters.

G. G. M., OF LOUISIANA.

That's the lot fer this week. I did my part, now yuh do yores: Pick yore Pen Pal an' start the ball rollin' by writin' first. Don't always figure on the other fellow bein' the first one tuh write.

An' remember the rules. Foller 'em an' everything will be hunky dory.

So long till next week.





# The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

AS usual when Rusty Bolivar an' Buck Foster git tergether, there's a ruckus in the Corner when we gits here ter-night. We don't savvy the whys an' wherefores o' what's goin' on, but the words is shore flyin' as thick as bullets in a range war.

We walks in, an' nobody pays any attention ter us a-tall. The hull outfit is so plumb interested in hearin' Buck an' Rusty tear inter each other thet they ain't got no time fer us.

We takes the roll, notin' thet aside from Hungry an' Rusty an' the saddle pards from Circle J, Shorty Masters, the Sonora Kid, an' the Bar U twins, has made the grade this week.

But finally we gits tired o' listenin' ter all the jawin'—an' tired o' bein' not noticed, too, we reckon. So we raps fer order. Nobody hears

us, or if they do, don't pay no attention ter us.

Thet sends us on the prod, though most allus we're plumb calm an' peaceful. Lookin' around, we sees thet Shorty Masters is settin' right close ter us. He's twisted round in his chair, so thet the butt of his six-gun sticks out where we kin reach it.

We grabs it out o' the holster, flips it up, an' slams three quick shots inter the ceilin'.

Waal, yuh never seen nothin' git quicker results than thet did. Son of a gun, do them waddies start doin' things pronto? We'll say so!

Hungry an' Rusty jump fer opposite corners o' the room, drawin' as they go. Billy West ducks behind the table, yankin' his hogleg, too. The Bar U twins unlimber their artillery, an' so does the Sonora Kid.

But Buck Foster stands right in

the middle o' the room, glarin' around an' tuggin' at the ends o' his long mustache. He spots us right off an' gives a snort.

"Huh!" he growls, "I knowed all along thet you fired them shots, Boss. These other young sprouts here is as spooky as a bunch o' broomtails. Look at 'em! Haw-haw-haw! Come on out o' the Corner, Rusty! Nobody's goin' ter hurt yuh."

Waal, Rusty comes out, all right. An' he comes a-runnin'. He's so mad at Buck thet he kin hardly speak.

"This here has gone fur enough," we says. "The meetin' will come ter order. We hereby declares this ter be a poets' night. Shorty, how 'bout readin' the first pome?"

"Shore," says the little freighter, grinnin'. "Glad ter, Boss. "An' mebbe yuh'll clean my six-gun whilst I'm doin' it."

"Huh?" we exclaims.

"Shore," Shorty laughs. "Thet was my gun yuh was shootin'. Yuh ought ter clean it, if I do the readin'."

"Waal," we says, "mebbe we'll do the readin' ourself, at that."

An' we does, an' here's the first letter an' pome:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just a few lines to offer you hambres of the 3W spread my congratulations. I have read about a hundred and twenty issues of your magazine, and I still say that it is the best one there is.

In fact, I like the W. W. W. so well that I have written a pome about my favorite waddies. Here it is, and I hope you like it:

#### TO THE GANG

Come on, you readin' hambres,  
And listen to what I say,  
And heed this little tribute  
That to my pards I pay.

There is that crafty chink, Sing Lo,  
Who likes to have his fun  
With proddy old Buck Foster  
Who sure can wield a gun.

And then there is red-headed Joe  
And gray-eyed Billy West—  
Of all the hambres on the spread  
These last two are the best.

And to these boys' cayuses  
Enough praise can't be given—  
They'll run all day and run all night  
And don't need to be driven.

Yours till Buck Foster catches Sing Lo.  
FURMAN STEWART.  
Camden, South Carolina.

"Help me, Hannah!" exclaims Buck. "Thet jasper am plumb loco, sayin', thet thet brockle-faced, carrot-topped pest am the best hambre on Circle J. If it wa'n't fer yores truly, Buck Foster——"

"We'd all sleep easier at night," interrupts Joe Scott."

"Am thet so? Why, yuh danged red-headed nuisance, yuh ain't——"

"Aw, cut it out!" snaps Rusty Bolivar. "Give yore jaw a rest fer a while, yuh ol' pelican!"

Here's another letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We haven't seen a poem in the Wranglers Corner from the old North State for a long time. So we thought we'd send you one. This is our first poem, and we hope that it doesn't find its way to the wastebasket.

We like all the hambres on the spread, but we are plumb fond of Sonny Fabor. We wish you would have more stories about him and Johnny Forty-five.

Now, here's the pome:

#### TWO READING HOMBRES

We are two reading hambres,  
And the thing that we like best  
Is reading in Wild West Weekly  
The stories about Billy West.

We are two reading hambres,  
And one of our favorites is  
Young Deputy Johnny Forty-five  
And that boastful pard of his.

We are two reading hambres,  
And one of the things we thinks  
Is that Buck should jump into a lake  
And stay there till he sinks.

Yours truly, TWO READING HOMBRES.  
Mount Olive, North Carolina.

Here's the next one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the second letter and poem I have sent to the Corner. If anybody doesn't like it, let them come down my way. I'm hankering for a fight.

Same as ever, Sonny Tabor, Circle J, and the Bar U twins are my favorites. But you ought to get some more stories about Vincente the Yaqui.

Here's the poem:

### 3W RANNIHANS

I wouldn't give a thin plugged dime  
To hear J. Forty-five make a rhyme.  
I'd rather hear Buck Foster holler  
When he gets hot beneath his collar.

As for Lum Yates, he is plumb yellow—  
A dog-goned sissy sort of fellow.  
He ain't a bit like the Bar U twins;  
He never loses, but always wins.

And Shorty Masters, he's shore dumb,  
But not so dumb as old George Krumm.  
The Circle J, they ain't so bad,  
But Calamity Boggs sure makes me sad.

Now, Sonny Tabor, he's the best,  
He's even better than Billy West.  
And Rusty and Hungry are a pair  
Who can't tell a mule from an old gray mare.

Yours till Buck quits sheep-herding,  
NEAL MARTING.  
Columbus, Georgia.

Thet makes Rusty plumb riled, o' course, an' gives Buck a chance ter tell the peppery little Ranger ter pipe down an' give his jaw a rest. An' *thet* jest makes matters worse, all around, till Billy West an' Hungry Hawkins steps in an' stops the fireworks.

Here's the next letter we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am sending you a poem which I hope you will use at some poets' night at the Wranglers Corner.

I am a girl of seventeen, and I can't remember when I started reading 3W. It was a long time ago.

Of course, I have my favorites among your waddies. They are all wonderful and I enjoy them all, but I like Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Johnny Forty-five, Circle J, and Apache and Wagonwheel the best of all.

I always boost your magazine among my friends, and I wish you even more success than you have had already.

Now here's my poem:

### ON READING 3W

I'm sitting here alone at home,  
Lonesome and very blue—  
I guess I'll buy a magazine;  
That's just the thing to do.

So I buy good old 3W  
And sit in a rocking-chair;  
I make believe that the chair's a horse  
That can take me anywhere.

I turn about in my saddle  
And see an old pard of mine;  
His name is Sonny Tabor,  
And to me he has taken a shine.

We gallop along together,  
Laughing and swapping yarns,  
When what do we see but a posse,  
Led by Deputy Karns.

I feel a thrill of pleasure  
As I look at that pard of mine,  
And I'm glad that he has escaped the law  
So many and many a time.

He starts Paint along at a steady trot—  
I'm keeping close to his side—  
When he yells to me to bend down low  
And spur my pony's hide.

The posse is gaining on us—  
Their horses are fresh, you see—  
But will we surrender without a fight?  
"No, ma'am!" says Sonny to me.

Then something happens to turn the tide—

We hear a horse's hoofs,  
And who should come riding from out  
of the sage  
But Blizzard and young Kid Wolf.

The posse stops and yells in alarm;  
The Kid drives them all away;  
And when he comes back, we all shake hands  
And tell him he's saved the day.

So here's how I feel when I'm reading  
The best magazine on the stand—  
Hurrah for the old 3W,  
I think it is perfectly grand!

Yours till Lum Yates's mule, Joshua,  
leads the Sextet from Lucia,

DORIS TRUCHON.  
Lowell, Massachusetts.



Now here's the next one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the second time I have written to the Corner. I hope you can read it at a meeting some night.

My favorite characters are Sonny Tabor, Circle J, the Oklahoma Kid, and Apache and Wagonwheel. All the others are good, too, however.

What has happened to Johnny Forty-five? You say that if enough people ask for him, you will bring him back. How many does it take? Seems like a lot are asking for him.

Here is a poem that I hope will make a bit with the Circle J rannies—especially Buck Foster.

**THE CIRCLE J SPREAD**

Lead and smoke from Circle J!  
Here they come, a-shootin' away—  
Billy on Danger, leading them all,  
On to conquer, whatever the call.

Few like Buck, but he is grand—  
Not many can fight like old Buck can.

Joe as a trailer is certainly fine—  
Trailing is right in that redhead's line.

Then there's Sing Lo, the little fellow,  
"Afraid of bullets," but never yellow.  
Buck and Joe, they always wrangle.  
But never have been known to tangle.

Buck, pay no heed to the things folks  
say—

They're only jealous; you're better than  
they.

Hoping that soon I will hear from  
you-all,

I'm putting an end to this little call.

Adios hombres! FRENCHY VINCELETT.  
Wilson, Connecticut.

An' adios ter yuh, too, Frenchy.  
Thet was a plumb fine pome, right  
fittin' ter close this week's meetin'  
with. Fer when we finishes readin'  
it, it's time ter adjourn fer another  
week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

**COMIN' NEXT WEEK!**

**HOSS THIEVES OF PORCUPINE CANYON**

*Novelette*

By WILLIAM A. TODD

They figure out a plumb slick scheme ter make plenty o' dinero, an' it might 'a' worked out fine if a certain gunwise young waddy hadn't bought chips in the game.

**THE GUN TRAIL TO BROKEN WALL**

*Novelette*

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

It's no easy trail fer a lawman ter travel, but Silver Jack Steele is used ter tough trailin' after tough hombres, an' he does it ag'in.

**KID WOLF AND THE BRANDED RIDERS**

*Novelette*

By WARD M. STEVENS

When a bunch o' salty jaspers stop the Soldier o' Misfortune an' hold him up on the trail, wise hombres ought ter look fer shelter. It's a shore sign thet lead will start flyin' pronto.

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