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OCTOBER

1st

1938

THE HERMIT OF
COUGAR MESA
a HUNGRY
and RUSTY
NOVELETTE
By SAMUEL H. NICKELS





Man!
 HOW THAT
LUSTER-FOAM
(C, M, P, O, S, M)
 GETS AFTER
TOBACCO
STAINED TEETH!

*Energizing agent in the new formula
 Listerine Tooth Paste an amazing cleanser...
 sweeps away surface stains and accumulations
 unbelievably fast... freshens entire mouth*

If you are troubled with dull, dingy, or tobacco stained teeth, don't fool around another minute. Start with the new Listerine Tooth Paste with amazing Luster-Foam, the dental discovery of the century.

Listerine-Foam detergent has remarkable penetrating power, hence cleans teeth so much better. The first touch of saliva and brush energizes it into a fragrant, lively foam which surges into tiny cracks and pits on tooth en-

amel that ordinary dentifrices may never reach.

It actually performs four benefits:

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2. Obliterates dull, stained film.
3. Combats dangerous acid ferments.
4. Reduces the number of decay germs.

And while it is performing a miracle of cleansing, Luster-Foam detergent gives the mouth a feeling of freshness that will simply delight you. Try the new formula Listerine Tooth Paste with Luster-Foam. In two sizes: Regular 25¢ size, and big, double-size, extra-economy tube at 40¢. At all drug counters—now!

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Building Estimating | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Heating <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge and Building Foreman |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work <input type="checkbox"/> Radio | <input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning and Cooling | <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Coal Mining |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Electric Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Mine Foreman <input type="checkbox"/> Fire Bosses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Management of Inventions | <input type="checkbox"/> Machinist <input type="checkbox"/> Toolmaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Navigation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineer | <input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaker | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Locomotives | <input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Electric Lighting | <input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines | <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Section Foreman | <input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacturing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Welding, Electric and Gas | <input type="checkbox"/> Aviation Engines | <input type="checkbox"/> Air Brakes <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Signalmen | <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints | <input type="checkbox"/> Auto Technicians | <input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Growing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals | <input type="checkbox"/> Auto Electrical Technician | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Poultry Farming |

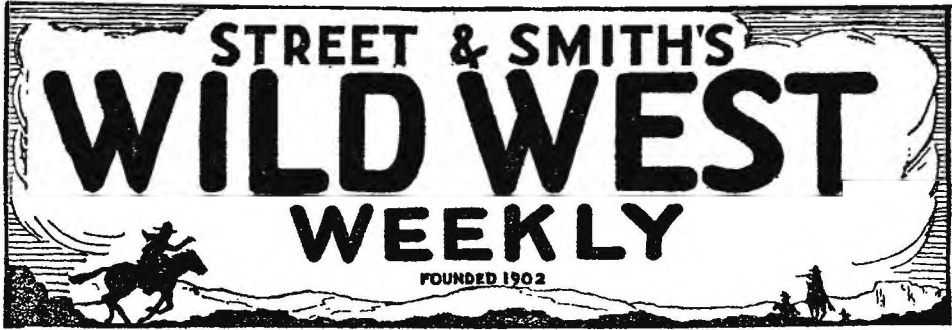
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- | | | | |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management | <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial Work | <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College Subjects | <input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy | <input type="checkbox"/> French | <input type="checkbox"/> Stenography and Typing | <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accountant | <input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship | <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service <input type="checkbox"/> Mail Carrier | <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning |
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 City..... State..... Occupation.....
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Vol. 122, No. 6 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 1, 1938 Whole No. 1876

Cover Picture—Scene from
 "The Hermit Of Cougar Mesa" . Painted by H. W. Scott

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- The Hermit Of Cougar Mesa Samuel H. Nickels 11
 He's a mysterious gent, but Hungry an' Rusty are good at solvin' mysteries.
- The Oklahoma Kid Schools A Ranger . Lee Bond 54
 With his experience in dodgin' lawmen, the Kid's a good teacher fer any hombre.
- The Y D Races With Death Andrew A. Griffin 96
 The odds are plumb agin' 'em, but Jim Tate ain't givin' up easy.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- Hard Dinero Chuck Martin 37
 Money's plenty hard when a wild shoot-out has to be fought fer it.
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 When it explodes, outlaw guns don't stand a chance.
- Mules On Murder Mesa Allan R. Bosworth 77
 An' Shorty Masters is right thar with 'em, his guns a-flamin'.
- Sailor Anson's Race With Death 92
 A story in pictures an' text.

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THIS MAGAZINE CONTAINS NEW STORIES ONLY. NO REPRINTS ARE USED.

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To facilitate handling, the author should inclose a self-addressed envelope with the requisite postage attached, and artists should inclose or forward return postage.

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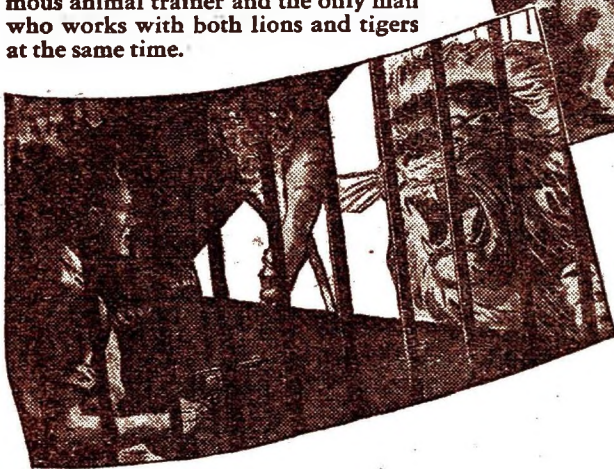
"MURDEROUS 'JUNGLE-FEVER' WAS IN THEIR EYES"

CLYDE BEATTY, CAGED WITH SNARLING JUNGLE CATS, FACES
BLACKEST MOMENT OF DEATH-DEFYING CAREER



1 "It was one of those days when you know something's going to happen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.

pen," writes Clyde Beatty, world-famous animal trainer and the only man who works with both lions and tigers at the same time.



2 "The animals had been sullen during the matinee. They came tumbling into the big cage for the evening performance with that murderous 'jungle-fever' still in their eyes, squalling, spitting and making passes. If they once drew blood it would be just too bad!

"And then, with that cage full of mixed cats raging at me and each other ...the lights went out!

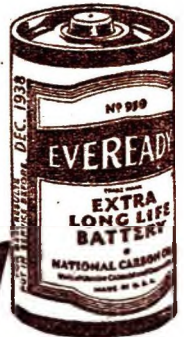
3 "In the flicker of an eyelash the huge, glaring big-top went dead black! In the dark the snarls of the beasts sounded twice as loud. Green eyes glowed. In an instant they would leap for me!

"I jumped back, pressed hard against the steel bars of the cage. I whipped out my flashlight, flung the beam square in the startled face of the nearest cat, then gave it to another and another.

4 "In a moment (a mighty long moment), the trouble was repaired, the lights flashed on again and a tremendous sigh rose from the crowd. I was still alive. The power of fresh DATED 'Eveready' batteries had held at bay the fury of the jungle!

(Signed)

Clyde Beatty



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BLOWIN' HARD

By ARTHUR L. RAFTER

He ambles into the Star Café,
An' says that his name is "Sandy" Fay.
He loops hisself on the side o' the bar,
A-smokin' an' wavin' a fat cigar.
When he gits three snifters in a row,
He sticks out his chest, an' begins to blow,
An' to hear him talk, he's been quite a hand,
In ruinin' many a rustler band.

An' then he admits, real modest-like,
"I'm after that cow thief, Indian Ike.
I'll git him, too, since I took the notion,
If I foller him clear to the Ar'tic Ocean."
Waal, things grow awful quiet then,
For Ike's at the bar with two of his men.
As Ike's hand drops to git his gun,
We're hopin' this windy fool will run.

But he keeps on boastin' o' what he'll do
To Ike an' his gang, before he's through.
Then the rustlers face the loco coot,
With guns half drawn, an' ready to shoot.
Then Ike sneers, "Boy, ef I heered yuh right,
Yuh shore are achin' to have a fight.
I'm kinder sick o' yore brand o' lyin',
So jest git ready to do some dyin'."

Now, Sandy's thumb's in the arm of his vest,
An' he holds his cigar agen his chest.
There's a flash o' blue an' a yeller spurt,
As he pulls a gun from the front of his shirt.
Ike never raises the gun from his side,
But drops with a hole in his ornery hide.
Then Sandy shies from the bar so fast,
That the rustlers' shots go flashin' past.

Then twicet agen does his six-gun roar,
An' the other rustlers are on the floor.
Then Sandy says, "They was three to one,
That's why I did the way I done.
I had to purtend I was blowin' hard,
To take them rustlers off their guard.
For I trailed them here from my pardner's shack,
Where I found him dead, with a knife in his
back."

I WILL SEND MY FIRST LESSON FREE

*It Shows How I Train You
at Home in Your Spare Time for a*

GOOD JOB IN RADIO



**J. E. Smith, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914**

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.



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Manager
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Stores**

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M— Furniture Co., for their four stores."—**JAMES E. RYAN**, 1535 Slade St., Fall River, Mass.

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Tripled
by N.R.I.
Training**

"I have been doing nicely, thanks to N. R. I. Training. My present earnings are about three times what they were before I took the Course. I consider N. R. I. Training the finest in the world."—**BERNARD COSTA**, 201 Kent St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a **RADIO EXPERT**. I will send you my first lesson **FREE**. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical experience become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

**Many Radio Experts Make
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Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$3,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays as much as \$200 to \$500 a year—full time repair jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers, dealers as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open their own full time or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, paying up to \$6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are never fields, offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read their letters. Mail the coupon.

**There's a Real Future in Radio
for Well-Trained Men**

Radio today is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 23,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Each year millions of Radios get out of date, need replacing or new tubes, repairs. Millions are spent each year for Radio repairs. More than 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And **RADIO IS STILL YOUNG—GROWING**. Radio is expanding into other fields. The few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and in the future!

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Find Out What Radio Offers You

Mail coupon for sample lesson and 64-page book. Both are free to anyone over 16 years old. My book points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing, earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny post card NOW!

**J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 6JD
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

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COUPON
NOW!**



**GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK FREE
SAMPLE LESSON**

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send the sample lesson and your book which tells about the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....

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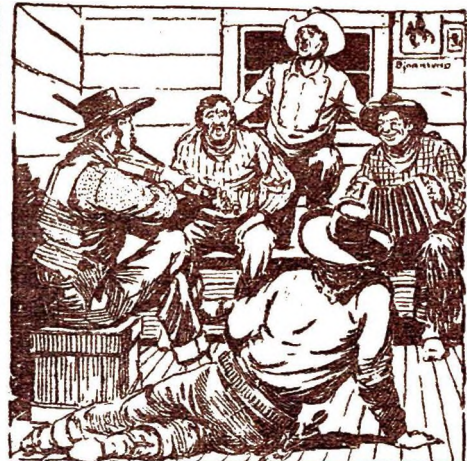
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Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, hyar we are ag'in, an' by the great horn spoon, I'm mighty glad tuh be here, too.

The ol' Corral bars are down, so come on in an' make yoreselves tuh home while we sample a few songs thet was born in God's country—you know, out thar whar thar's miles an' miles o' wide prairies tuh roam.

First we'll have a Texas cowboy song:

THE BOLD VAQUERO*

The bold vaquero is up with the sun
 And into the saddle is he;
 With a swinging lope he's over the slope
 And out on the broad prairie.

Continued on page 127

* From "The Bold Vaquero" Texas cowboy song, arranged by David W. W. Guilan; used by permission of the publisher G. Schirmer, Inc., New York.

THOUSANDS NOW PLAY

who never thought they could!



Learned Quickly at Home

I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.

*H. C. S., Calif.



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I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.

*W. H. S., Alabama



Wouldn't Take \$1,000 for Course

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*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



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*B. F., Bronx, N. Y.



Best Method by Far

Enclosed is my last examination sheet for my course in Tenor Banjo. This completes my course. I have taken lessons before under teachers, but my instructions with you were by far the best.

*A. O., Minn.

* Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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By this EASY A-B-C Method

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Fortieth year. (Established 1898)

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You'll say it's grand whiskey—and you'll like its real low price!

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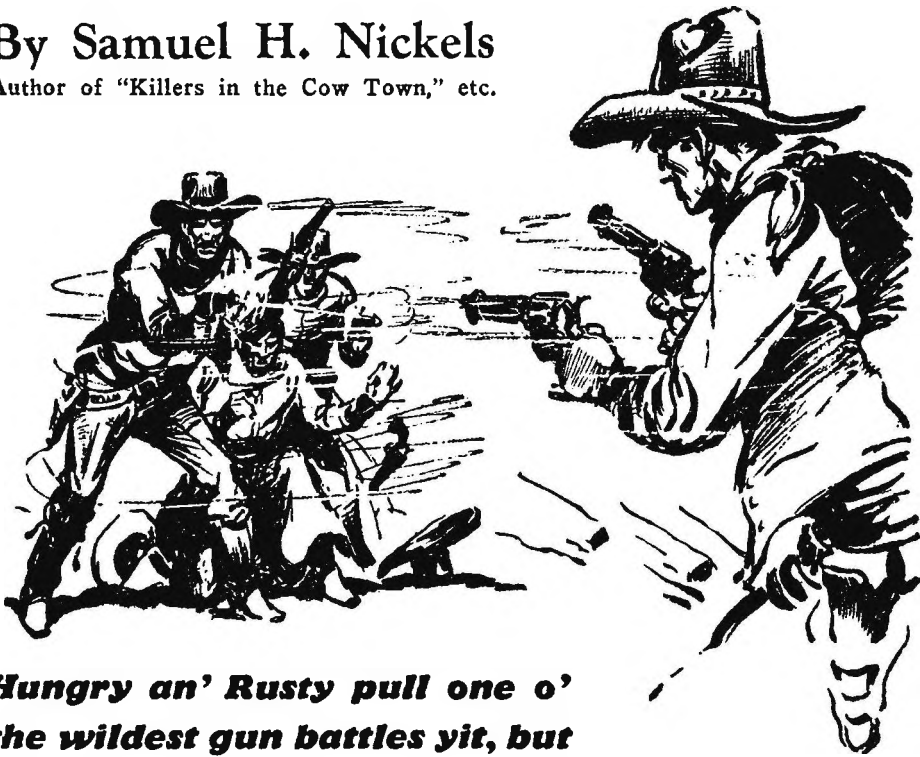
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The Hermit Of Cougar Mesa

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Killers in the Cow Town," etc.



Hungry an' Rusty pull one o' the wildest gun battles yit, but it's all in the day's work fer these proddy Rangers.

CHAPTER I.

RUSTY DISAPPEARS.

THE late spring blizzard increased in fury as night settled down. Howling savagely down out of the Panhandle, it ripped branches from many of the trees and bent others almost to the ground with the weight of drifted snow.

Huddled over a small camp fire in the heart of the cedar brakes, "Hungry" Hawkins and little "Rusty" Bolivar held their numbed

hands closer to the flickering blaze. In spite of the brush shelter that the two young Texas Rangers had hastily piled around one side of a leaning cedar, big flakes of wet snow sifted through and stung their faces.

Moisture beaded the handles of the long-barreled Colts which sagged Hungry's and Rusty's crisscrossed cartridge belts in tied-down holsters, and steam rose from their damp shirts as they hunched closer to the fire. Hungry sighed and spat a stream of tobacco juice to one side

as he watched Rusty try to roll a cigarette with wet papers.

"Dog-gone it!" little Rusty finally muttered. "I've had me enough of this. For two pins I'd quit Rangerin' an' go back to punchin' cows. That's the seventh cigarette I've tried to roll, an' I ain't had a smoke yit!"

Hungry shrugged and pulled his shirt collar closer about his neck. "Yuh might try a chaw of tobaccer," he drawled lazily. "Hyar. Take yuh a bite of mine."

With a wild yell, Rusty lunged to his feet. There was a fighting scowl on his freckled face as he grabbed up a chunk of piñon and glared at his lanky, lantern-jawed partner.

"Say that again!" he screeched. "Yuh durned long-legged pelican, just say it again! I dare yuh, dog-gone yuh! Anybody thet'd chew thet loco weed yuh call tobacco is a fool fer the want of sense! Yuh could spit one squirt down a prairie-dog hole an' kill every rattlesnake, an' prairie dog in it!"

"Aw, Rusty," Hungry grunted, yawning, "don't git so all het up about nothin'. Let's bile us a can of coffee an' try grabbin' off a few winks of sleep."

Hungry rose and picked up a smoke-blackened can that he carried rolled in his slicker across the back of his saddle. He packed it full of snow from the drift beside their shelter and set it on a tiny bed of red coals which he raked from the fire.

The lanky Ranger was just reaching in his saddle pocket for a small bag of coffee when the sudden muffled bark of a gun sounded above the roar of the storm. As a second shot blasted from somewhere out in the inky darkness, Hungry and Rusty jerked erect and slapped their hands to their holsters.

"What the——" Rusty ejaculated,

staring. "Did yuh hear thet? It sounded close. Maybe somebody's lost in this blizzard an' shootin' in hopes of gittin' help."

Hungry frowned and shook his head. "Nope," he drawled, "thet wasn't no signal fer help. Them shots come too close together. Somethin's happened out thar."

Almost as Hungry finished speaking, there came a wicked burst of shots from rifles or pistols. A shotgun blasted twice, then a faint yell reached the listening Rangers above the howl of the wind.

"Listen to thet!" Rusty barked, jerking around. "Thet's a fight goin' on out there! It's——"

"Grab yore slicker!" Hungry cut in harshly. "Git it on yuh quick! I hate to have to git out in this blizzard, but we got to see what's happenin'. Thet sounds like a killin' is bein' pulled off."

As Rusty grabbed up his rolled slicker and jerked it on, Hungry took time to throw a big chunk of piñon on their fire. In another moment, both Rangers were hurrying in the direction of the shooting.

They left the shelter of the stunted cedars, and the howling wind almost swept them off their feet. The driving snow pelted against their faces, but they pulled their hat brims lower and stumbled on.

They had gone only a short distance when Rusty suddenly yelled a warning and crouched down. With both hands shielding his eyes, he stared for a moment, then he clutched Hungry's arm.

"I thought I seen a light!" he shouted. "Yeah! There it is again! Yuh see it?"

Gripping his hat to keep it from being blown from his head, Hungry squinted in the direction Rusty was pointing. He nodded grimly as he

saw a faint glimmer of light through the flying snow.

"I see it," he barked. "It looks like it's movin'. No, it's standin' still. Come on, an' have yore guns ready! Thar ain't no tellin' what we're liable to bump into."

Hugging their slickers around them, they stumbled forward again. Clouds of flying snow often hid the light from view as they floundered through the drifts toward it.

In a few minutes, the two shivering Rangers almost bumped into the side of a big corral that had been built against a little bluff. The light had vanished, but as they blinked the snow from their eyes and peered around them, they finally saw the dark bulk of a ranch house a short distance away.

Gripping their guns and holding them ready beneath their slickers, Hungry and Rusty hunched over against the snow-laden wind and stumbled toward the house. They had reached the edge of the porch when Hungry suddenly halted and nudged Rusty with his elbow.

"Hold on!" he said, leaning down. "I know this place. I ain't never been hyar before, but I've heerd plenty about it. It belongs to the hermit of Cougar Mesa. Listen."

Rapidly and in a few words, Hungry told Rusty what he had heard of the mysterious hombre. As he talked, he watched closely in every direction and held his guns ready for lightning use.

The "hermit," as range men called him, was never seen in town. He ran a large herd of scrubby, inbred cattle and the two cowboys that he kept to do his riding and ranch work were vicious-looking half-breeds as silent and mysterious as himself.

When the hermit sold his steers, he always made the cattle buyers pay him in gold. He never trusted

banks, and it was reported that he had large amounts of money buried in secret hiding places about his ranch.

The hermit's real name was unknown, but it was reported that he had once been one of the deadliest gunmen ever seen along the Texas border until an old bullet wound along the side of his skull had affected his mind. One old cowman insisted that the strange hombre had once been a noted Texas Ranger who was supposed to have been killed in a battle with rustlers on the lower Rio Grande.

"Waal," Hungry went on, "nobody really knows just who he is or whar he come from. But all me an' you is interested in is thet shootin' we heard a while ago. Who this hermit is an' what he's been doesn't matter. Now keep yore eyes peeled. I'm goin' to holler."

Watching closely, the two young cowboy Rangers stepped softly up on the snow-swept porch. With guns cocked and poised beneath their slickers, they moved on toward the door.

"Hello!" Hungry called sharply. "Anybody home?"

Receiving no reply, the two Rangers exchanged quick glances. They waited, then Hungry shouted again.

"Huh!" muttered Rusty when a third call brought no answer. "Dog-gone it, kick open thet door an' let's go on in. We can't stand out in this snow an' wind no longer. My teeth is all ready whackin' together like a pair of nails."

Hungry frowned worriedly and slowly holstered his left-hand gun. Holding his other weapon ready beneath his slicker, he was reaching to turn the knob when the door suddenly opened in front of them.

"Waal, what do yuh want?" came

a harsh growl from the darkness. "What are yuh yellin' an' helloin' about out thar?"

Hungry jerked sidewise like a flash, his long-barreled .45 clamped at his bony hip and its muzzle pointed in the direction of that surly voice. Rusty had ducked into a fighting crouch, his cocked Colts ready to blaze from beneath his slicker at the first flash of a gun from the darkness inside the doorway.

"Talk up, you hombres!" came another impatient growl. "I asked yuh a question, an' yuh'd better start answerin'. What do yuh want?"

"What!" little Rusty flared angrily. "Dog-gone yuh, what'd anybody most likely be wantin' inside of a house on a night like this? Back up, yuh uncivil polecat, we're comin' in out of this blizzard! We're comin' in peaceable, or we're comin' in anyhow!"

At this, there came a muttered oath and a faint click as if the unseen hombre had cocked a gun. As Hungry stiffened for a headlong dive in hopes of knocking the fellow's legs from under him, they heard a wicked snarl and a scrape of feet.

"All right," came a sullen grunt. "I reckon yuh kin come on in. Wait till I strike a light, so's I kin have a look at yuh. Don't try no funny business or yuh'll git blasted full of lead."

Gripping their guns in their numbed fingers, Hungry and Rusty stepped warily forward. As the door was closed behind them, they moved swiftly aside and placed their backs to the wall.

In scarcely a moment, there came a scraping sound and a match flared up in the darkness. As it was being held to a candle on the greasy table in the middle of the room, both

Rangers darted a quick look around them. They glanced hastily at the doorways which led to other parts of the house, then their eyes snapped back to the stranger in front of them.

"What are yuh two saddle bums doin' prowlin' around this time of night in a snowstorm?" the fellow growled as he flipped his burned match into the huge stone fireplace and turned toward them. "Yuh'd better talk straight or it's liable to be just too bad fer yuh."

The two Rangers looked sharply at the tall, wide-shouldered hombre's belted guns that were thonged low at his hips. He was even taller than Hungry, and a filthy, tobacco-stained beard partly covered his evil face. He was glaring suspiciously.

"Waal!" he bellowed, sliding his big hands toward his guns, "I——"

"We heard yuh the first time, feller!" Rusty cut in harshly. "An' git yore paws away from them guns 'fore yuh start somethin' yuh can't stop! We're askin' the questions around here, an' yo're answerin' 'em! What was thet shootin' we heard a while ago?"

A murderous glitter flashed into the hombre's close-set eyes, and he started to roar an angry reply. But when Hungry threw back his slicker and he saw the badge on his faded shirt, he stiffened and darted a quick look at the partly open door on the other side of the room.

"Huh!" he finally grunted, his slitted eyes swiveling back to Hungry and Rusty. "A pair of Rangers, aire yuh? I might've guessed it. Waal, it might interest yuh to know thet thar ain't been no shootin' hyar. I reckon I must've heard the same shots you did. They sounded from somewhar out in this storm. Thet's why I was suspicious of yuh."

At this unexpected reply, Hungry

and Rusty exchanged quick glances. Rusty grinned crookedly as he slowly holstered his guns and began pulling off his slicker.

"I reckon thet changes the looks of things around hyar," Hungry said to the bearded hombre. "We was wonderin' how come yuh was so hostile an' proddy. But yore hyarin' the shootin' out thar explains it. We'll git out an' have a look around in the mornin'. I reckon you're the feller they call the hermit?"

The bearded hombre nodded and relaxed. He chuckled dryly as he pulled a black plug of tobacco from his hip pocket and bit into it with his yellowed teeth.

"Yep," he grunted when he had tongued his chew into his cheek, "lots of folks calls me that. I'll fix you Rangers a snack of supper an' show yuh whar to sleep. Come mornin', I'll git out an' help yuh find out about thet shootin' we both heard."

When Hungry and Rusty had tossed their wet slickers across the back of a hide-bottomed chair, the hermit picked up the smoky lamp and led the way to the kitchen. The two tired Rangers were soon wading into cold meat and bread which the bearded hombre set upon the greasy table.

Hungry had seated himself with his back to the wall where he could keep watch in every direction. As he ate the coarse food and washed it down with lukewarm coffee from the stove, his eyes were busy searching about the room.

The lanky Ranger was just lifting his fourth cup of coffee to his lips when he suddenly stiffened to stare at a big bullet hole through the top of the door behind Rusty. He waited until the hermit turned toward the stove, then he leaned over

and found a fresh splotch of crimson on the floor near Rusty's chair.

Hungry was starting to nudge Rusty with his knee when he thought he saw one of the doors open slightly on the other side of the room. He set his cup down and dropped his right hand beneath the table just as the hermit turned toward him.

Hungry yawned and shoved back his plate. As he did so, he managed to touch Rusty with his foot.

"I reckon me an' my pard hyar is ready to turn in," he drawled sleepily. "If yuh'll show us whar to bunk, I reckon we'll hit the hay. I hope this blizzard blows itself out 'fore mornin', so's we kin see about thet shootin'."

The hermit grunted and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the nearest corner. He nodded grouchily and picked up the candle.

Hungry and Rusty followed him to a small room at one end of the house. The hermit held a match to a stump of candle on a shelf, then he jerked a thumb carelessly toward a broad bunk in the corner.

"Yuh kin bed down over thar," he said, turning back toward the door. "I'll be callin' yuh early in the mornin' so's we kin see about thet shootin'."

Hungry yawned and began drowsily fumbling to unbuckle his gun belts. He waited until the door was closed and the hermit's footsteps had died away, then he hissed a sharp warning to Rusty.

"Never mind undressin'," he barked softly. "Me an' you is doin' no sleepin' this night. If we do, we won't both do it at the same time. One of us will stay awake an' keep watch. Listen!"

With his eyes warily on the windows, Hungry told Rusty of the hole he had seen in the kitchen door,

and of the fresh crimson stain on the floor by the table. As he finished, Rusty scowled.

"Yeah!" said the little Ranger. "If thet's all yuh seen, yuh ain't seen nothin'. I smelt powder smoke in the kitchen, an' if I didn't see some sneakin' polecat peepin' around a door at us while we was eatin', I'm a cross-eyed Chinaman. We've landed right in the middle of a killers' nest, an' I can't savvy why they ain't already tried to bump us off."

Hungry's lips tightened grimly. "I do," he whispered, darting a look at the door. "They figger to git us while we're asleep. Thet's safer fer 'em than to risk shootin' it out with us. We'll blow out the light an' git to bed, but we'll keep our guns on us, an' one of us'll stay awake. Savvy?"

As Rusty slipped off his boots and crawled into the bunk, Hungry crept to the door. He held an ear to the keyhole and listened carefully, then he blew out the candle.

"Waal," he drawled softly as he groped his way through the inky darkness toward the bunk, "when mornin' comes, we'll search this house. But we'll shore have to keep a close watch, or we're liable to be shot or have our throats cut by then. We'll——"

As a sudden rasping click sounded from almost beneath his feet, Hungry bit off what he started to say and leaped aside with both hands streaking to his holsters. But as his guns cleared the leather, there came a startled yelp from Rusty that was instantly drowned by a muffled thud."

Like a flash, Hungry sprang back against the wall and threw himself into a fighting crouch with guns cocked and clamped at his hips. He listened, but could hear only the

whine of the wind and the faint hiss of snow against the windows.

"Rusty!" he called softly. "Rusty, what happened? What was thet?"

Getting no answer, the lanky Ranger swiftly holstered one gun and clawed a match from his shirt pocket. In spite of the deadly danger from hidden gunmen who might be waiting to shoot him down, he crouched lower and raked it along the wall behind him.

But as the match flared up and Hungry held it above his head, he found that the bunk was empty. With a startled grunt, he lunged erect and darted a hurried look around the room. Rusty was gone.

CHAPTER II.

HUNGRY IN TROUBLE.

HUNGRY called sharply, then he hastily touched his match to the candle and searched the room. He looked beneath the bunk and behind it and examined the windows to make sure that neither of them had been opened.

"Huh!" he grunted, gripping his guns and glaring around him. I can't savvy thet, unless thar's a secret door somewhar in these walls. Rusty was layin' right thar in thet bunk when I blowed out the candle. I got to find him 'fore he's killed. Thet hermit may already have murdered him."

With teeth clenched and a deadly greenish glint blazing in his slitted eyes, Hungry rushed to the heavy door. When he turned the knob to hurl it open, he found it locked. He threw his shoulder against it again and again, but was unable to move it.

"So thet hermit figgered to fasten us hyar in his trap, did he?" he gritted, stepping back. "I reckon I know what to do about thet!"

Hungry turned to the bunk and took another look beneath it. Listening carefully and keeping an eye on the door and windows, he swiftly examined the walls around it for some hidden opening. Then he rushed back to the door.

His first thought was to shoot off the lock and hurl it open. He jerked up his left-hand gun, but he quickly lowered it when he happened to think that there might be plenty of hombres ready to riddle him with bullets or buckshot the instant he broke into the other room.

"No," he snapped, "I can't risk thet yit. I can't save Rusty if I allow bushwhackers to shoot me down 'fore I've found him. I'll git in thar another way."

Hungry blew out the candle and rushed to the nearest window. Working swiftly, he forced up the sash and climbed out into the yard. Snow pelted against his face as he hunched over and groped his way along the wall toward the back of the house.

Holding his guns ready and listening closely, he crept around the nearest corner. He was nearly to the back door when he suddenly struck his foot against something and went to his knees. As he threw out one hand to keep from going over on his face, he found that he had stumbled over the body of a dead man that was partly covered by drifted snow.

"What the——" he almost gasped. "This may be Rusty. No, it couldn't be."

Hungry holstered one of his guns and ran a hand hurriedly over the stiffened corpse. As his searching fingers touched the dead man's clammy face, he gave a sign of relief. The hombre had a beard.

"This proves one thing," said Hungry. "Thet hermit lied about thet shootin'. This hombre was

most likely killed right thar in thet kitchen. I'm shore glad it wasn't Rusty."

Hungry wanted to strike a match and have a look at the dead man, but he knew that he could not risk it. When he had again touched the hombre's face and ran his hand over the body, he stood up and crept to the kitchen door.

He looked through the keyhole and at the bottom of the door to make sure there was no light inside. He listened carefully, then slowly turned the knob and slipped cautiously into the kitchen.

With his back to the wall and both guns poised, the lanky Ranger waited. Hearing no sound, he hastily jerked off his boots and crept to the opposite door for a look in the other room.

"Huh!" he muttered softly, his eyes darting to right and left. "I don't savvy this. I can't hyar a sound, but I'm bettin' thet hermit ain't asleep. He's got Rusty some-whar about this house."

Keeping his guns ready, Hungry felt his way noiselessly on in the inky darkness until he reached the room where Rusty had disappeared. When he had located the key which was still in the heavy lock he pulled open the door and stepped inside.

"Just as I left it," he muttered when he had struck a match and looked around him. "Thar's Rusty's boots whar he pulled 'em off, an' thar's his hat on thet chair. I wonder if thet hermit took him to the attic or to a cellar? I'll find him if I've got to take this place apart."

As the wind from the open window blew out his match, Hungry hurled the burned stick aside and started back through the house. He searched carefully from room to room and stopped often to listen.

The lanky Ranger had just

reached the big room next to the kitchen, when he thought he heard a stealthy step behind him. As he whirled and ducked aside, something hit him a smashing blow on the shoulder and staggered him against the wall.

Bang-bang! Bang! The red blaze of a gun stabbed the darkness almost against his face. Hungry fired twice and threw himself backward into a fighting crouch.

But as he did so, a hurtling form struck his legs and brought him to the floor with a crash that knocked the breath out of him and sent his guns flying from his hands.

"I've got him!" came a wild yell, "Strike a light an' grab his guns, somebody! Hurry! Grab him!"

Gasping for breath, Hungry drove his knees against the fellow's stomach and tried to roll him over. He grabbed him around the body and fought desperately to pull a gun from his holster.

Just then, a match flared up in the darkness and more hombres leaped on him. Clutching hands almost ripped his shirt from his body as the lanky Ranger battled to tear free and reach his feet.

"Pin him down while I light the lamp!" came a bellowing voice. "Don't let him git away on yuh! We've got him this time!"

By a sudden quick wrench, Hungry got an arm loose and smashed an hombre in the face. He kicked another in the chest and hurled him against the wall. Before the others could drag him down, he struggled to his knees.

He was almost on his feet when a yelling hombre leaped on his back and locked an arm beneath his chin. In spite of his desperate struggles, Hungry was slowly pulled to the floor and his wrists were lashed together behind him.

"Waal," came a murderous snarl as two of the hombres stooped to hoist him to his feet, "we finally did git yuh, did we? I figgered we would. Yuh wasn't as slick as yuh thought yuh——"

Hungry looked up into the hermit's brutal face, and the fellow bit off what he started to say and almost dropped the lamp. His eyes widened and he snapped a startled oath.

"What the——" he bellowed, glaring. "This ain't him! This is one of them blasted Rangers I had locked in thet room! How'd he git out, an' what's he doin' snoopin' around hyar this time of night? Git in thar an' grab thet other one 'fore it's too late. Hurry!"

Hardly able to believe his ears, Hungry stared in amazement as the seven hombres went running toward the room where he and Rusty had meant to sleep. He looked around at the hermit and found him gripping a cocked gun and glaring savagely.

"Stand hitched, blast yuh!" the hombre snarled, red murder blazing in his slitted eyes. "I figgered to find some way of gittin' rid of yuh in the mornin' so's we wouldn't have the whole Ranger service jumpin' on our necks. But yuh ain't leavin' now. Yuh've seen too much. When my men gits back with yore runt partner, we're killin' yuh both, savvy?"

Hungry's lips tightened and he shook his head. Before he could reply, there came a burst of angry yells and the hermit's amigos rushed back into the room.

"He's gone!" one of them bellowed. "Thet bunk is empty, an' he ain't nowhere around!"

The hermit gritted his teeth and glared at Hungry. With a snarled oath, he grabbed the lanky Ranger

by the throat and jabbed his gun muzzle against his chest.

"Whar is he?" he roared. "Whar has thet runt amigo of yores vamoused to? Talk fast, or I'm lettin' yuh have it right hyar!"

Hungry smiled coldly. "I figgered thet *you* was the one thet could answer thet," he drawled quietly. "But it seems as if I was mistook. I don't know whar he went. I was huntin' him when you hombres jumped me. He was layin' in thet bed when I blowed out the light. The next minute I heard a yell an' he was gone. Thet's all I kin tell yuh."

At this, the hermit's face twisted in a snarl of fury. His blazing eyes met Hungry's in a searching glare, then he hissed an oath and turned toward his amigos.

"Git back an' search thet room again!" he shouted. "Search the house! Look everywhere! I'll fix this one while yo're at it!"

As his men again rushed away, the hermit whirled back toward Hungry. He spat a stream of tobacco juice to one side and leered wickedly.

"Ranger," he growled, "yore time has come. When my men git thet pard of yores, we're plantin' yore carcasses whar they'll never be found. Git ready to die!"

"Hold on!" Hungry barked hastily. "Just a minute, hombre!"

The hermit grimaced wolfishly and spun his heavy gun around his finger. "What do yuh want me to wait fer?" he demanded harshly.

"Aire yuh gittin' ready to start beggin'? All right. Let's hear yuh? It'll do me good to hyar a blasted Ranger whine."

Hungry scarcely heard him. He was looking at the large picture of a bearded Ranger that hung on the wall behind the hermit. He thought

he saw the picture shake as if something had touched it.

Hungry stared sharply when he noticed that there were no eyes to the picture. In place of eyes, he saw only a pair of holes that had been cleverly cut out of the face.

"Waal," the hermit bellowed impatiently, "aire yuh goin' to start beggin' me not to kill yuh? If yuh was, yo're too late. I'm lettin' yuh have it now!"

The hermit jerked up his gun for the death shot. As Hungry leaped aside, a pair of gleaming eyes suddenly appeared in the holes in the picture, and the black snout of a long-barreled Colt was shoved through the coarse wall paper just beneath it.

Bang-bang-bang! A thundering crash of blazing weapons instantly jarred the room and the lamp was smashed to hurtling fragments by whizzing bullets.

With flame from the hermit's guns splitting the darkness around him, Hungry tried desperately to reach the kitchen. He was nearly to the door when a big hand suddenly clutched his shoulder in a viselike grip and he was grabbed up in a pair of powerful arms.

CHAPTER III.

RUSTY AND THE BEARDED STRANGER.

AT that moment, Rusty was trying angrily to rub a thick blindfold from over his eyes. Bound hand and foot, he lay upon his side and scraped his face against the earthen floor.

"Dog-gone it," he snarled, "I wonder where I'm at? One minute, I was layin' in thet bunk. I was reachin' to pull up the blankets when the durn thing parted in the middle and I was flung through the floor into a cellar. The next thing I

knowed, I was layin' here like a hog-tied dogie. I'll bet I shoot the pants offn that hermit fer this!"

Heaving and twisting, squirming from side to side, the hot-tempered little Ranger tried desperately to loosen the cords that held his wrists. Failing in that, he again began working to rub the blindfold from his eyes.

"Blast it!" he gritted. "Them skunks may have already got Hungry. I got to git loose from here an' go see about him. I'll kill that hermit if I git half a chance to cross guns with him!"

As Rusty thought of his lanky partner, he struggled with renewed fury to free himself. He rolled over and over until he bumped against a wall, then heaved himself to a sitting posture.

By rubbing his head up and down against the rough wall, he soon loosened the tightly drawn blindfold. In a moment, it slipped up over his forehead and he was able to shake it off.

"Huh!" he muttered as he darted a quick look around him. "Dog-gone it, I'm in some kind of a cave. How in blazes did I git here? I sure didn't land here when that bunk let go under me."

As he caught the scent of burning cowchips, Rusty turned and saw a small fire smoldering in the middle of the floor. The faint light cast a red glow on the jagged walls and gleamed on the roof of the cavern which arched high above him.

Rusty glanced hastily around him to make sure he was alone. He then began looking in every direction for something he could use to sever the stout cords that held his wrists together behind him.

The little Ranger gave a grunt of satisfaction when his searching gaze came to rest on a couple of heavy

rifles which stood in a corner on the opposite side of the cave. A short-handled ax lay on the floor beside them, and his own belted guns swung from a peg on the wall a few steps away.

With his slitted eyes on that ax, Rusty lay down on his side and began scooting across the uneven floor. He had almost reached the opposite wall when he thought he heard a faint noise from behind him. As he jerked around, he found himself looking up into the glittering eyes of a big Indian or half-breed who had crept up on moccasined feet.

"Ugh!" the hombre grunted. "Little Ranger run off maybe? No go. Him stay here."

Rusty glanced at the powerful buckskin-clad figure and at the murderous-looking knife which swung in a beaded sheath at the fellow's thick waist. He darted a swift look at the butt of a stubby Colt that peeped from the front of the greasy shirt, then he scowled up at the dark face that was topped by a mane of coarse hair.

"Hello, Geronimo," he snapped, glaring. "Where'd you sneak from? Dog-gone yuh, start untyin' these hoggin'-strings offn me 'fore I git up from here an' bust yuh in the eye."

With a stolid grunt, the powerful hombre reached down and clamped a big hand in the front of Rusty's flannel shirt. Without bothering to use his other hand, he lifted the little bow-legged Ranger with effortless ease and carried him back across the cave where he tossed him carelessly down.

"Me no Geronimo," he grunted as he turned away. "Me Standing Elk. No bust in eye. Little Ranger stay here. Him no git hurt."

With a wild yelp, Rusty rolled over and heaved himself up on one elbow. His face reddened until

every freckle stood out like a danger signal as he glared at the hombres broad back.

"So yore name is Standin' Elk, is it?" he whooped sarcastically. "Come back here an' fight, dog-gone yuh! Yuh won't be standin' when I git done with yuh, yuh splatter-faced war whoop!"

This brought Standing Elk around. His coal-black eyes gleamed in his heavy face as he dropped a huge paw to the knife at his waist.

"Ugh!" he finally grunted. "The hermit good man. Heap fighter, him. Little Ranger mebbeso lickum Standing Elk. Him no lickum hermit."

With another stolid grunt, Standing Elk turned away. His powerful, heavy-shouldered body was swaying from side to side like a huge grizzly as he stalked swiftly across the cave and disappeared down a dark passage.

Rusty waited until he was sure the hombre had gone, then he again began scooting toward that short-handled ax. He glared hastily around as he finally rolled over beside it.

"So thet blasted hermit is a good man, is he?" he snarled. "A 'heap fighter,' is he? I'll shoot the pants offn him an' thet war whoop both if I kin git my hands loose an' reach them guns of mine up there."

Fumbling awkwardly with his numbed fingers, Rusty pulled the ax toward him. He finally got his wrists against its keen blade and began sawing carefully.

In scarcely a minute, he felt the tightly drawn cords begin to loosen. By a sudden quick wrench, he broke the few remaining strands and snatched up the ax. When he had cut the rope from his ankles, he sprang to his feet and grabbed his belted guns from the peg on the wall.

"Now, dog-gone, 'em!" he cried as he hastily buckled the familiar weapons about his slender waist. "I reckon I'd better see about Hungry first. When I've done thet, I'm goin' to mess up thet hermit an' Mr. Standin' Elk in a way thet'll make their heads swim. Pick me up by the front of my shirt like I was a sack of meal, will he? I'll——"

A sudden faint rumble of voices sounded from somewhere. Rusty's teeth clicked together and he jerked around with both hands streaking to his holsters. He started to draw his guns, but as he remembered his lanky partner, he ducked hastily into a wide crack in the stone wall and crouched down.

Rusty had barely hidden himself when he heard the muffled thud of footsteps. He crouched lower and peered around just as the tall, broad-shouldered form of a bearded hombre came into view from the passage across the cave.

At sight of the fellow, little Rusty's face twisted in a fighting scowl and he drew his guns. But as he got a better look at the fellow, he blinked uncertainly and slowly lowered his weapons.

"Dog-gone it, thet ain't the hermit," he muttered softly. "He's the same size an' he's got whiskers, but thet ain't him. I wonder who in blazes an' tarnation he is? He's bound to be one of the hermit's polecats."

When the hombre paused by the glowing fire to look behind him, Rusty saw that his hair and beard were snow-white. The man turned his face aside and began swiftly punching some exploded cartridges from his right-hand gun. Rusty noticed a seamed scar along the side of his head above his left ear.

But in spite of the man's apparent age, he carried himself erect and

his keen blue eyes gleamed like chilled steel from under his shaggy brows. The heavy guns which sagged his crisscrossed cartridge belts were thonged expertly at his thighs, and he wore the long-barreled weapons as if he knew how to use them.

Suddenly the hombre whirled and stared at the place where Standing Elk had left Rusty. When he glared around and saw the severed cords that the little Ranger had cut from his wrists and ankles, he muttered hoarsely and began searching angrily in every direction.

"Uh-huh!" Rusty snarled softly. "He's finally missed me, has he? I knowed he was bound to be one of that hermit's polecats."

The bearded hombre suddenly turned toward his hiding place, and Rusty crouched hastily back against the jagged wall. But as he did so, there came a growled oath and a match flared up in the darkness behind him.

Rusty jerked around and found himself staring into the gaping muzzle of a heavy Colt that was held on him by a murderous-looking ruffian who stood only a few steps away. Like a flash, the game little Ranger pressed the triggers of his own guns and hurled himself down and aside.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! The ear-splitting crash of swiftly-fired weapons roared like claps of thunder from in front and behind him. Rusty saw the hombre with the match suddenly stagger against the wall and go down.

The little Ranger thumbed his own Colt hammers again and again, but both guns only clicked on empty cylinders. He slapped a hand to his crisscrossed cartridge belts and found every loop empty.

"Blast it!" he gritted. "Some

skunk has stole every cartridge I had. My guns was even empty, an' I hadn't noticed it!"

As the bearded hombre's guns blazed again, Rusty bounded away in the darkness. He instantly stumbled over a sprawled body and went to his hands and knees. More bullets hit the wall and whined above his head, but he scrambled up and sped on with the bearded hombre in close pursuit behind him.

CHAPTER IV.

TRAPPED IN THE CAVE.

HUNGRY heaved and twisted in a desperate effort to break the hold of the hombre who had him. He was still struggling when a door clicked shut in front of him and a big hand was clamped over his mouth.

"No call!" came a savage grunt in his ear. "Tall Ranger keep still."

Hungry had thought that it was the hermit who had grabbed him, but he now knew different. That guttural voice was not the hermit's, but he was certain that he was in the clutches of one of the hombre's gang.

The lanky Ranger thought of the gleaming eyes he had seen through the holes in the picture, and of the gun muzzle that had been shoved through the wall paper. He wondered if it was that same gun that had shot out the lamp.

Just then there came another grunt, and Hungry was lifted up in his captor's arms. A gust of chill air struck his face as he felt himself being carried down a steep stairway.

"Hold on hyar, hombre!" Hungry suddenly barked. "What's goin' on in this house? Yeah, an' what've yuh done to my little pard?"

The hombre gripped him tighter.

"No talk," he grunted sullenly. "Bimeby maybe hermit tellum."

"Yeah!" Hungry retorted. "Feller, I ain't waitin' fer yore friend the hermit to tell me nothin'. I'm findin' out things fer myself."

Hungry straightened with a sudden jerk and almost threw himself out of the fellow's arms. In spite of his bound hands, he was instantly fighting with all his strength.

He kicked at the fellow's legs and tried to trip him. He got one foot against the wall, but his powerful captor pulled him around before he could shove them both backward off the stairway.

Suddenly Hungry's finger tips touched the handle of a big knife in the fellow's belt. He made a quick grab and snatched the long-bladed weapon in both hands just as a splintering crash and a muffled shout sounded from above them.

Like a flash, Hungry twisted and locked his long legs around his captor's knees. As they both went plunging headlong down the stairway, there came another crash from above and the yellow gleam of a candle split the darkness.

"Thar they aire, men!" came a wild bellow. "I knowed thar was bound to be a secret passage somewhere. Let 'em have it!"

Hungry and his captor hit the ground at the foot of the steps just as a roar of fanned guns thundered from above them. Gasping for breath and with bullets tearing up the dirt all around him, the lanky Ranger rolled weakly aside.

A bullet plowed a crease across Hungry's left shoulder as he sat up and hurriedly crossed his long legs under him. Another ball grazed his ear as he lurched to his feet and staggered backward with his cap-

tor's big knife still clutched in one hand.

"Git 'em, men!" came another bellow from the top of the stairway. "Git 'em both! Blast 'em down!"

Hungry looked up in time to see the hermit's hate-twisted face above him. As the hombre's twin Colts chopped down and roared, Hungry leaped aside. He caught one fleeting glimpse of a huge buckskin-clad figure near the foot of the stairway as the candle above flickered and winked out.

Now in inky darkness that was lighted only by stabbing streaks of powder flame, Hungry whirled and sped away. Savage yells and the thudding blast of guns roared behind him as he tried to find a way of escape.

Hungry stumbled and went to his knees, but staggered to his feet and kept going. Again he went down, and he felt the breath of a bullet which zipped wickedly past his ear as he pulled himself erect.

Suddenly he noticed that the roar of gunfire was beginning to grow fainter behind him. He darted a hasty look over his shoulder and found that he could no longer see the flashes of the thudding weapons.

"Huh!" he grunted, panting. "I didn't pass through no door to git away from thar. I wonder whar I'm at? This shore can't be no cellar I'm in."

With another searching glance behind him, Hungry stopped and began working hurriedly to free himself. He gripped the knife in his fingers and tried awkwardly to turn the blade against his wrists. He almost dropped the heavy knife, but at last he managed to sever one strand of the stout cord. In another moment, he gave a grunt of satis-

faction and pulled his hands around in front of him.

Just then, he heard a muffled thud of footsteps from somewhere. There came a low growl of voices that quickly stopped, then a match flared for a split second and there came a snarled oath.

Gripping his knife, Hungry crouched with eyes trying to pierce the blackness around him. He waited until the hombres had passed him, then he crept silently after them.

"I wish I knowed what's goin' on hyar!" he muttered grimly. "Whatever it is, thar's two different gangs at each others' throats. Yeah, an' both sides is gunnin' fer us. I wonder whar Rusty's been took? If I kin just git my hands on thet blasted hermit, I won't be long findin' out."

At that instant, Hungry heard the soft pad of moccasined feet near him. Stepping hastily backward, he bumped into a rough stone wall and almost fell. He waited until all sounds died away, then again began creeping on.

Minutes passed as he felt his way along the uneven wall. He listened closely, but could hear only his own heavy breathing. He wanted to strike a match, but knew that it might instantly bring a hail of bullets whizzing toward him.

Suddenly he felt something brush against his face. He jerked around with his knife gripped ready. When nothing happened, he reached warily with his left hand and found that he had stumbled against some kind of curtain.

Moving cautiously, he pulled the coarse cloth aside and stepped through a narrow opening in the jagged wall. He paused to listen, then with one hand held in front of him, he crept slowly on.

Hungry had taken scarcely a dozen steps when he suddenly hit something with his knee. Making a hasty grab to keep from falling, he heard a faint noise from behind him. He instantly ducked aside and crouched down.

With eyes darting from right to left, he gripped his long-bladed knife and braced himself. No other sound could be heard, but Hungry was not fooled. He knew that some hombre was hidden near him, waiting to locate him in the thick darkness.

Suddenly Hungry shifted the knife to his left hand. Working carefully with his right, he unbuckled one of his heavy spurs. He paused to listen, then tossed it cautiously out in front of him.

As the spur clattered against the stone wall, he heard a muttered grunt and a scraping sound from another direction. Before he could turn, a thrown chair smashed against him and knocked the knife from his hand. As he staggered back, a snarling hombre leaped on him and a clubbed gun grazed the side of his head.

Hungry jerked his head aside just in time to dodge a second blow that swished past his ear and struck his shoulder. Instantly he and the hombre were rolling over and over in the darkness.

Hungry tried desperately to pin the fellow's arm or to twist the gun from his hand. Fully expecting to feel the shock of a bullet, he lashed right and left with his fists in an effort to knock the hombre out or hurl him back away from him.

But the lanky Ranger's blows merely glanced off of the hombre's shoulders or the top of his head. The fellow was fighting with the fury of a maddened bobcat, and his

clubbed gun hit Hungry's threshing arms again and again.

Suddenly Hungry ducked his head and made a lightning grab at the hombre's legs. But before he could reach them, the fellow drove a knee against his stomach and doubled him up. Hungry's breath exploded in a whistling gasp, and he felt the icy ring of a gun muzzle against the side of his head.

"Git 'em up, feller!" came a wicked snarl. "Make one more move, dog-gone yuh, an' I'll salivate yuh! Hoist them dewclaws while yo're all in one piece!"

Hungry instantly stopped struggling. He took a long breath, then heaved a weary sigh.

"I said to git them hands up!" came another harsh command. "Git 'em up, yuh long-eared polecat! This is twice I've told yuh, an' I ain't tellin' yuh again!"

Hungry chuckled dryly. "I heerd yuh the first time, Rusty," he drawled. "Take thet gun barrel out of my ear an' git up offn me, will yuh?"

"Hungry!" Rusty gasped. "Yuh dog-goned, crazy, bat-eared pelican, if I'd have had any cartridges in my guns, I would've shot yuh!"

"Yeah," Hungry grunted as he sat up and began stuffing his shirt tail back inside his pants, "an' if I hadn't lost thet bowie when yuh busted me with thet chair, I might've carved yore innards out. So thet makes us even. Whar have yuh been, an' how come yuh managed to slip up on me like thet?"

Rusty hissed a quick warning. "Not so durned loud!" he snapped softly. "I was tryin' to outrun an old codger with white whiskers when I busted in here. When I first heard yuh, I thought yuh was him. Wait!"

Both Rangers listened closely for

a few moments. Hearing no sound, Rusty leaned closer and gripped Hungry's arm.

"Git ready," he whispered softly. "I'm goin' to risk strikin' a match. Grab thet knife yuh lost while I take a look around us."

Rusty hurriedly fished a match from his shirt pocket. He listened again, then hunched over and snapped it alight with a flick of his thumb.

The match flared up; the little Ranger cupped it in both hands and held it close to his body. He darted one hasty look around him, then gave a startled grunt and slapped it out as Hungry snatched up his knife.

"Feller, did yuh see what I seen?" he asked softly. "It looks like we've busted into some kind of an underground bunk house. Git set. I'm riskin' another match."

They listened closely, then Rusty snapped a second match on his thumb-nail. They looked quickly at some pole bunks that stood against the wall, and at a greasy table and a couple of chairs near them.

As Rusty held the match higher, they saw that they were in a small underground chamber. A canvas curtain at one end closed the only opening to the rest of the cave.

"All right," Hungry barked softly. "Wait till I make shore thet curtain is pulled shut, then we'll search this place. Maybe we kin find somethin' thet'll give us a hint of what's goin' on hyar. We'll have to work fast an' keep our ears open."

While Hungry examined the curtain, Rusty touched his half-burned match to a stump of candle on the table. Shielding their light with an old sombrero which Rusty snatched from a peg on the wall, they began

hunting swiftly through everything in sight.

They threw back the blankets on the bunks and searched beneath the straw mattresses without finding anything. Hungry was just reaching for a ragged coat which lay in a corner, when Rusty happened to notice a rawhide-covered chest against the wall behind the table.

"Over here, feller," Rusty directed, jerking a thumb toward the chest. "Take a look in thet. If we kin just locate some cartridges fer my guns, we kin find out what we want to know from thet hermit or some of his amigos. Fightin' tools first is my motto. Hurry!"

Hungry shoved the table aside and stooped over the heavy chest. As he raised the brass-bound lid, Rusty scowled impatiently and held the candle closer.

"Money!" Rusty ejaculated as he caught a sudden glint of metal. "Feller, yuh heard right when yuh was told thet this dog-goned hermit had gold hoarded up around his place. Look at thet, will yuh? Thet blasted chest is full of it!"

Hungry barely glanced at the stacks of gold that almost filled one end of the stout chest. His staring eyes were riveted on a tarnished Ranger badge and a pair of old cap-and-ball Remington .44s that lay in a shallow tray at the other end. Squinting thoughtfully, he picked up the badge and held it out to Rusty.

"Yuh see this?" he asked harshly. "What one hombre said about the hermit havin' once been an old-time Texas Ranger may be true. We——"

"Rats!" Rusty snapped, glaring. "No Texas Ranger would ever git to be as low-down ornery as thet hermit. If this badge is his, I'll bet yuh he stole it. See if them old guns

there is loaded. Thet's what interests me right now."

As Hungry turned back to the chest, the curtain behind them was stealthily pulled aside. He was reaching to pick up the two old weapons when a faint click of Colt hammers brought him lunging to his feet. He and Rusty jerked around just as the hermit and six of his ruffians leaped into the room with leveled guns.

"Git them hands in the air, Rangers!" the hermit bellowed wickedly. "I've got yuh this time. Make one phony move an' we'll blast yuh! Reach, an' don't try droppin' thet candle or yuh'll git riddled with lead 'fore it hits the floor!"

Little Rusty let out a wild yelp and started to stab for his guns. But when he remembered that both weapons were empty, he stiffened and darted a swift glance at his lanky partner.

Hungry nodded grimly and both slowly began raising their hands.

CHAPTER V.

GUN TORTURE.

THE hermit leered viciously as he eyed the helpless Rangers. A wicked grin twisted his bearded lips when he saw the pile of gold in the chest, and he winked at his amigos.

"Huh!" he chuckled. "Take a look at thet pile of money, will yuh? It begins to look like pay day is starin' us right plumb in the face. A couple of yuh bend some hoggin'-string on these two Rangers while the rest of us keeps 'em covered."

Two of the grinning ruffians stepped hastily forward. One of them slipped the empty guns from Rusty's holsters while the other took Hungry's knife and tossed it carelessly aside.

As the hombres reached in their pockets and pulled out some lengths of buckskin string, Hungry cleared his throat noisily and nudged Rusty with his elbow. One of the ruffians was reaching to take Rusty's candle when Hungry's right fist suddenly cracked against his bristly jaw like the pop of a bullwhip.

Rusty hurled the candle straight at the other fellow's face and ducked as a thundering crash of hastily fired guns almost burst their eardrums.

"This way, pard!" shouted Hungry. "Outside!"

Bullets split the air all around them and shattered against the rock walls as the two cowboy Rangers plunged through the darkness toward the entrance. Guns blazed almost in their faces, and bellowed oaths sounded from all round them.

"Look out, men!" came a savage yell from the hermit. "Git to thet curtain an' head 'em off! Stop shootin' or yuh'll be hittin' each other by mistake! Guard thet curtain till I kin light a match!"

The shooting instantly stopped, and there came a rush of feet for the entrance to the chamber. Rusty dived headlong against one of the cursing ruffians and they went to the floor in a clawing tangle of flailing arms and legs. Hungry tripped over them and went down with two more of the scrambling hombres on top of him.

"This way with a match, somebody!" came a frantic bawl from the ruffian Rusty was fighting. "I've got one! Strike a light an' bat him on the head 'fore he chaws an ear offn me!"

Heaving and twisting, slugging right and left, the two fighting Rangers tried desperately to hurl the hombres back away from them. Clubbed guns grazed their heads and

almost numbed their arms and shoulders.

Rusty drove his freckled fist against the ruffian's jaw and the side of his head again and again. He kneed him in the stomach and tried to twist a gun from his hand. By a sudden quick wrench, he tore partly free and rose on one knee. But before he could reach his feet, the fellow dragged him back and they went rolling over and over.

Three hombres were now on top of Hungry. One sleeve was ripped entirely out of his shirt as they tried to roll him over and twist his arms behind him.

Suddenly a match flame split the darkness almost above Rusty. The little Ranger caught one glimpse of the hermit's bearded face behind the light, and sent him sprawling backward against the wall by a well placed kick to the stomach.

"Blast yuh!" the hermit gasped hoarsely. "I'll cut yore heart out fer thet kick! Just wait till I kin light me another match!"

At that instant, two more hombres had leaped on Rusty. As a second match flared up, a clubbed gun glanced off the side of his head, and he went limp. Dazed but not knocked entirely out, he felt them lash his wrists together behind his back.

The entire crowd then piled on Hungry. In spite of his desperate struggles, they finally pinned him down and tied him up.

"Now, blast yuh!" yelled the hermit, panting. "You two fresh Rangers'll pay aplenty fer makin' thet break. Yuh'll both be buzzard bait when I git done with yuh!"

Gritting his teeth, he kicked Rusty savagely in the side. He then growled a murderous oath and

pulled another match from his pocket.

"Yuh cowardly bush-faced pole-cat!" Rusty gasped weakly when he could catch his breath. "Just remember that kick, will yuh! I ain't dead yit, an' I'll be pavin' yuh double fer it 'fore yuh've seen the last of us!"

The hermit grated an oath and kicked Rusty again. He then turned and touched his match to the candle which one of his amigos found on the floor against the wall.

"All right, men," he grunted as he turned toward the chest. "I reckon thet'll be the sergeant's gold we've happened on hyar. I heard he had plenty of it hoarded up around his place. This'll pay us fer the trouble it took to trail him down an' bump him off."

At this, Hungry suddenly heaved himself up on one elbow. There was a strange greenish glint in his slit-eyes as he stared at the hermit and his ruffians.

As the hombres pawed through the stacked gold, they once more began grinning. One of them burst into a guffaw of coarse laughter when the hermit picked up the tarnished Ranger badge and held it toward the light.

"Yuh see this, fellers?" he said, grinning wickedly. "The sergeant was wearin' this when I bush-whacked him on the Rio Grande an' put that scar along his skull with a Henry rifle bullet. To-night I'll git to finish him."

"Three of 'em, Pete!" a broken-nosed desperado whooped. "Don't fergit that we've got us *three* blasted Rangers now, instid of just old Sergeant Gordon."

"Yeah!" another interrupted, "an' we got them two danged half-breed Comanche cowhands, too. Let's

bump 'em all off an' git it over with so's we kin whack up this gold an' light a shuck away from hyar at daylight."

Hungry scarcely heard the last hombre. His steely gaze was riveted on the bearded ruffian that he and Rusty had thought was the hermit. So the hombre's name was Pete. Who was he? As he stared at the fellow's evil face, the lanky Ranger's thoughts went racing back to the pictures of wanted outlaws that lined the walls of his old captain's office at Ranger headquarters.

And who was Sergeant Gordon? Almost forgotten tales of an old-time Ranger named "Fighting Bill" Gordon instantly flashed into Hungry's head. But that Ranger Gordon had been dead for years. He was killed in a gun battle with a band of border raiders on the lower Rio Grande long before Hungry and Rusty had joined the Rangers. His body had never been found.

Hungry was still trying to puzzle it out when the ruffians slammed the lid of the old chest and came toward him. Savage grins twisted their villainous faces as they surrounded him and Rusty.

"I reckon we'll lug 'em on in thar with the rest of our haul an' git it over," the bearded hombre grunted. "We kin ditch their carcasses somewhar in this cave whar they'll never be found."

"Hold on a minute!" Hungry yipped as two of the ruffians started to pick him up. "If we're goin' to git bumped off, we'd like to know who's doin' it? I heard one of yore amigos call yuh Pete. Who aire yuh? Yuh shore ain't the hermit."

The hombre grinned wickedly. He winked at his amigos, then took a step closer and leered down.

"Uh-huh!" he chuckled, planting

his feet wide apart and hooking his thumbs in his crisscrossed cartridge belts. "So yuh finally got wised up, did yuh? Did yuh ever hear of a feller named Pete Trask? Thet's me, Ranger, but yuh'll never live to tell nobody about it."

Still grinning, Trask nodded to his men and took the candle. He pulled the canvas curtain aside and led the way as the others lugged Hungry and Rusty out of the chamber.

As he and Rusty were being carried on toward another part of the cave, Hungry tried to recall where he had heard of Trask. He knew that the fellow was a desperado and killer of the most deadly type, but he was unable to remember him.

Suddenly Trask turned aside through a narrow passage and led the way into another chamber. They were tossed down close to a small fire that was burning in the middle of the floor. An hombre with a crimsoned bandage around his head rose from near the wall and limped toward them.

"Waal," Trask snapped, glaring, "I see yuh still got old Gordon an' them breed punchers of hisn. I looked fer 'em to make a break to git loose on yuh while we was gone. Gordon is still plenty slippery, even if he is as batty as a locoed long-horn from thet bullet-cracked skull I give him."

Hungry and Rusty exchanged quick glances, then raised their heads and looked hastily around them. There on the opposite side of the chamber lay three more bound prisoners. Rusty instantly recognized Standing Elk's bulky figure, and the white-bearded hombre who lay close beside him.

Hungry was looking keenly at the bearded prisoner. He knew that he had seen the man's face before. Sud-

denly he remembered. It was the face of the bearded Ranger whose eyeless picture hung on the wall back in the ranch house. And the fellow's insanely-staring eyes reminded him of the ones he had seen gleaming through the holes in that picture a split second before a bullet smashed the lamp and saved him from Pete Trask's blazing guns.

Hungry lifted his head higher for a better look at the hombre. As he did so, Pete Trask stepped around the fire and swaggered importantly to where the man lay. He was grinning wickedly.

"I finally got yuh, didn't I, Gordon?" he grunted, leering down. "The great two-gun Ranger sergeant thet the border once knowed as Fightin' Bill is goin' to die like a sheep-eatin' coyote. I told yuh I'd git yuh when yuh turned me over to the rurales an' sent me away to rot in a stinkin' Mexican jail. I come to kill yuh."

With a startled grunt, Hungry heaved himself up on one elbow. Rusty sat up beside him, and they stared wide-eyed as the white-bearded hombre turned his face partly toward them.

"A Ranger!" Rusty whispered, darting a look at Hungry. "Did yuh git what thet polecat called him? He——"

"I got it," Hungry cut in softly. "An' I think I savvy a lot more than we've heard. Wait! What's thet cowardly coyote gittin' ready to do now?"

Trask had pulled both his long-barreled guns from his holsters. He examined them to make sure they were fully loaded, then he grinned wolfishly and spun them expertly around his fingers.

"Yuh remember me, Gordon?" he went on. "It's Trask thet's talkin'

to yuh. I know yore brains is addled from thet old bullet wound until folks says yo're crazy, but yuh ought to remember Sonora Pete Trask. I'm Trask, Gordon. It's Sonora Pete. Yuh know me?"

The old Ranger sergeant stared vacantly. His lips moved as if he were muttering to himself, and his steely eyes flitted from face to face. He blinked and wrinkled his forehead as if he were trying to think.

Trask grunted impatiently and spat a stream of tobacco juice to one side. He growled an oath and tried again.

"Listen, Gordon!" he barked harshly. "Yo're Sergeant Gordon—Fightin' Bill Gordon of the Rangers. An' I'm Trask—Sonora Pete Trask. I've come back to kill yuh like I promised years ago down on the Rio Grande. I want yuh to know me 'fore I let yuh have it, blast yuh!"

The old Ranger looked up at him, but there was no sign of recognition in his piercing blue eyes. Hungry and Rusty were watching closely, and Hungry was wrenching with all the strength in his lanky body to break the cords that held his wrists.

"All right!" Trask finally snarled. "I ain't got all night to fool with him. Hoist him to his feet an' stand him against thet wall over thar. Him not knowin' me won't save his hide. He may be crazy, but if he's still got savvy enough to run a ranch an' hoard all thet gold we found, he'll know when he's gittin' hurt. I'm goin' to shoot him to pieces so's he'll die slow an' hard."

As Trask's scowling amigos grabbed the old Ranger sergeant and hauled him roughly to his feet, Hungry and Rusty threw themselves down and began struggling desperately to free themselves. Rusty caught one fleeting glimpse of Stand-

ing Elk and the other half-breed. Both were straining furiously to burst the thongs that held them.

At a harsh command from Trask, the ruffians stood the white-bearded captive against the cavern wall and jumped back away from him. Trask showed his tobacco-stained teeth in a snarl as he raised his guns.

"Stop thet, yuh cowardly skunk!" piped up Rusty, his freckled face twitching with fury. "If yuh shoot thet old Ranger, yore stinkin' hide will pay fer it!"

Trask paused to glare around. He spat a stream of tobacco juice on Rusty's feet and legs and chuckled wickedly.

"Yore turn is comin' next, runt," he snapped. "Watch what I do to Sergeant Gordon an' yuh'll git an idea of what's goin' to happen to you."

Trask winked at his amigos and again raised his guns. The heavy weapons thundered and bucked in his big hands, and Hungry and Rusty saw a spot of crimson appear on the side of the old sergeant's faded shirt.

CHAPTER VI.

GORDON OF THE RANGERS.

FIGHTING to free themselves, Hungry and Rusty rolled from side to side on the rough stone floor. They heard Trask's long-barreled .45s roar again, then again.

Panting, sweat cutting furrows in the dirt on his homely face, Hungry rolled over. As twin streaks of flame once more stabbed from Trask's bouncing guns, he jerked up his head.

The game old Ranger sergeant had not moved. Both sides of his bullet-torn shirt were stained with crimson, but his lips were pressed firmly together and his piercing eyes were

fixed unblinkingly on his brutal tormentor. Trask's guns roared again, but he did not even wince as the flying bullets nicked his sides and burst to hurtling fragments against the wall behind him.

Hungry was thinking rapidly. Little Rusty let out a wild yell and started to roll toward Trask, but Hungry grunted a sharp warning and shook his head. Trask was deliberately slashing the aged Ranger's flesh at every shot, but taking care not to kill him outright. His bullets would soon begin cutting deeper and deeper. Hungry and Rusty could see what the murderous ruffian was doing.

Trask's hot guns were coming slowly up for another round of shots when a sudden desperate scheme flashed into Hungry's head. Instantly, he heaved himself up on one elbow.

"Hold on, Trask!" he barked. "I reckon it's time fer yuh to stop. If I ain't bad mistook, yo're right now due to be on the receivin' end of some bullets yuh hadn't figgered on. Listen!"

Trask was about to shoot, but he caught himself. With a growled oath, he jerked up his gun muzzles and glared suspiciously around.

"What was thet?" he howled. "What do yuh mean by thet, Ranger? Talk fast, blast yuh, or I'll turn these guns on you!"

Hungry was looking toward the opening that led to the main part of the cave. He turned his head to one side as if listening, then nodded to Rusty and chuckled grimly.

With a startled oath, Trask jerked around and darted a hasty glance in the direction Hungry was looking. His men clawed guns from their holsters, and all bent forward to listen.

"Blast yuh!" Trask gritted, "what

was thet yuh was listenin' to? What did yuh hyar? Talk up!"

Hungry's thin lips tightened. "Yuh'll soon find out, hombre," he replied in a lazy Texas drawl. "Just wait."

With his slitted eyes on the opening that led from the chamber, Trask hurriedly crammed fresh cartridges into his hot guns. Snapping the loading gates on both weapons, he glared around at Hungry and Rusty.

"Uh-huh!" he snarled, his lips twitching back from his yellowed teeth. "I savvy yuh now. Yuh didn't come hyar alone. Yuh had more snoopin' Rangers planted somewhar close. That's what yo're listenin' fer. Yuh can't fool a feller like me."

With a growled oath, he whirled to his amigos. He looked past them at old Sergeant Gordon and the two half-breed Indians on the floor, then he jerked a gun toward the opening at the end of the chamber.

"Outside, men!" he barked savagely. "If thar's more Rangers around, we got to locate 'em an' bushwhack 'em 'fore they have a chance to sneak up on us. We'll fool 'em. Jake kin stay hyar an' guard these prisoners till we git back. Come on!"

One of the hombres snatched the candle, and they rushed away. Hungry watched until they had vanished through the opening, then he looked at Rusty and nodded.

The eyes of both Rangers instantly snapped toward the ruffian who had been left to guard them. The flickering firelight gleamed redly on his low-swung guns and criss-crossed belts of blunt-nosed cartridges. The buckhorn handle of a wicked-looking knife protruded from the leg of his right boot. Hungry cleared his throat noisily, and the

fellow slid a hand to a gun and glared toward him.

"Waal, hombre," Hungry snapped sarcastically, "I reckon yuh think yo're man enough to stop us if we was to git loose from hyar."

The fellow scowled. "What do you think?" he grunted sourly. "Maybe yuh want to try it."

Hungry winked at Rusty. "Just what we was figgerin' to do," he drawled lazily. "Yuh don't think fer a minute that we'd allow ourselves to be tied up this way unless we had an ace in the hole, did yuh? I'm about out of these piggin'-strings right now."

With a startled oath, the fellow lunged to his feet. As he clamped a hand to a gun and sprang toward them, Hungry winked hastily at Rusty and braced himself.

"I think I'll just have me a look at them hands of yores," he growled. "Don't try no tricks. Make a move an' I'll cave yore face in with this Colt barrel!"

Gripping his gun and glaring wickedly, the ruffian stepped between Hungry and Rusty. With his eyes on the knife in the fellow's boot, Hungry instantly rolled over on his back. Rusty was watching closely and his freckled face was twisted in a fighting scowl.

The hombre stooped over him, and Hungry suddenly doubled up and lashed out with both feet in a terrific kick that thudded against the outlaw's stomach and sent him flying backward. His heels struck Rusty and he hit the stone floor with a crash that almost shattered his skull and sent the gun sailing from his hand.

"Git yore back to him an' grab that knife out of his boot!" Hungry barked. "Quick! Grab it an' git us loose 'fore he comes to!"

Rusty already knew what to do. Before his lanky partner had finished speaking, he had his back to the battered ruffian and was clawing for the knife.

It took the little Ranger scarcely a moment to get his hands on the long-bladed weapon, and he jerked it out. Working swiftly, he managed to cut the cords from his wrists, then he slashed the rope from his ankles and freed Hungry.

"All right," Hungry snapped as they sprang to their feet. "Let's git this jasper tied up. Quick!"

"Aw, rats!" Rusty grumbled. "There ain't much use of tyin' him. The way his head hit the rock floor, he'll be out fer a week. But come on an' git it over with so's we kin git them others loose. Trask an' his polecats may be back at any minute when they find out that yuh was playin' a trick on 'em."

Hungry snatched the cords that had been cut from their wrists and hastily knotted them together. When he and Rusty had carefully tied the unconscious desperado, they grabbed up his guns and turned to the other prisoners.

Rusty slashed the ropes from the white-bearded sergeant's wrists and ankles. The veteran Ranger grunted and stretched his long arms when he felt himself free. He cleared his throat and fixed his eyes upon the badge on Rusty's shirt.

"I—I got one of them," he mumbled hoarsely as if trying to think. "Folks calls me the hermit, but there's—there's somethin' I can't remember. My head hurts all the time, but I keep tryin' to—remember. I—"

He cleared his throat again and pressed his long-fingered gunman's hands to his bullet-slashed sides. They came away crimsoned and

sticky, and he wrinkled his forehead and stared at them as if puzzled.

"Sergeant!" Hungry said sharply. "Sergeant Gordon! Yo're Fightin' Bill of the Rangers. Yuh savvy the Rangers?"

The old Ranger lifted his head and stared vacantly. "They call me the hermit," he repeated as if groping for words. "I'm the hermit."

Suddenly he stiffened and a blaze of insane fury flashed into his rolling eyes. With a hoarse yell, he dived past Rusty and disappeared through a wide crack in the cavern wall.

"Him gone," Standing Elk grunted, rolling over. "Him like that sometime. Sometime him carry gun an' watch trail for days. Sometime him no eat. Sometime him all right. You cuttum Elk loose now. Hombres mebbeso come back."

A low growl of voices suddenly reached them through the chamber entrance. Rusty sprang toward the two half-breeds. He had barely time to slash the light ropes from the buckskin-clad hombres' wrists and ankles when he and Hungry heard the hollow boom of footsteps and an angry oath from Trask.

With a muttered grunt, Standing Elk rolled over and snatched up the short-handled ax that Rusty had used to free himself earlier in the night. He lunged to his moccasined feet like an angry grizzly.

Rusty tossed the long-bladed knife to the other hombre and grabbed one of the guns he and Hungry had taken from the captured guard.

At that instant, the two Rangers caught the gleam of candlelight through the entrance, and the rumble of voices grew louder. They jumped over close to the wall, and

thumbed back the hammers of their guns just as Trask's tall form appeared in the passage.

CHAPTER VII.

ALWAYS A RANGER.

THE unsuspecting outlaws were rapidly coming closer. With their guns poised and their bodies hunched over in a fighting crouch, Hungry and Rusty waited for them to step into the chamber.

"Blast thet long-legged Ranger!" Trask roared angrily. "He figgered to fool us, did he? Just wait till I——"

Bang! The sudden thudding boom of a big-calibered gun roared like a clap of thunder through the cave, and Hungry saw bits of rock fly from the wall almost beside Trask's face.

With a startled yell, Trask threw himself backward just as a second shot slapped his hat over his eyes.

"Look out, men!" he bellowed, clawing at his holsters. "Git back and git thet light out! It's a gun trap!"

As the light winked out, there came a rush of feet and a chorus of savage oaths. Another bellowing shot crashed from somewhere, and Hungry and Rusty heard the vicious whine of a bullet that glanced from the wall above their heads.

"What the——" Rusty cried, glancing hastily behind them. "Where's them shots comin' from? Who yuh reckon is——"

"After 'em!" Hungry cut in harshly. "We got to head them hombres off an' turn 'em back! They think they've walked into a Ranger gun trap, an' they'll try to escape!"

As they rushed past the smoldering fire, Hungry darted a look at their prisoner and saw that he was

still apparently unconscious. The two half-breeds had vanished.

With guns cocked and poised, Hungry and Rusty rushed through the passage. In the inky darkness, they turned sharply to their left and stumbled blindly on.

"Keep yore ears open!" Hungry barked softly. "Them hombres is most likely tryin' to reach the old stairway whar I was brung in at. It's their only way out."

"Yeah!" muttered Rusty. "How about the place where *I* come in? If they try to git out there, they'll be needin' 'em a ladder, or a pair of wings. I wonder where Sergeant Gordon an' them two war whoops of his blowed to?"

At that instant, Rusty stumbled and went sprawling. The red blaze of a gun stabbed the darkness to one side and a bullet split the air above his head.

Bang-bang! Hungry fired twice, as fast as he could thumb the hammer of his gun, and there came a quick rush of feet from somewhere near them.

Rusty bounded up, and he and Hungry jumped backward with their guns clamped at their hips. At that moment, a hideous screech of agony and terror sounded from another direction.

"Eeyah! Help!" came another scream. "Help! Somebody's knifin' me!"

A bellow of yells and oaths roared through the cave. A gun thundered viciously, and there came another pound of running feet.

"Look out, men!" came a hoarse hawl. "Look out fer thet knifer! He's cut my ear about off an' slashed my face! Strike a match an' shoot him!"

"Don't light no matches!" Pete Trask's bull voice roared. "Git back to thet stairway an' let's git to blazes

out of hyar! If we kin reach the house, we'll turn the tables on whoever thet is after us!"

Hungry pivoted hastily around and his gun chopped down for a chance shot. But he instantly caught himself and tilted up his gun muzzle.

"Don't risk shootin' yit!" he barked softly to Rusty. "Whoever thet knifer is, he's a friend of ours an' we might hit him. Come on!"

With Rusty close at his heels, Hungry sped on in search of the stairway. He was guided by the pounding of feet from the other side of the wide passage.

Suddenly they heard a wild, insane laugh from somewhere in front and above them. The bellowing double crash of a shotgun instantly roared like twin blasts of dynamite and a hail of buckshot and slugs raked the passage.

Screamed oaths and howls of pain burst from Trask's ruffians, and they fired a useless volley. Hungry barked a harsh command to Rusty and they crouched back against the cavern wall.

Just then, a blazing torch of oil-soaked rags hit the floor out in front of them. With startled yells, the outlaws scattered out of the light.

"Git back, men!" Trask bawled hoarsely. "Back or they'll blast yuh down! They've cut us off! Thar must be a whole squad of Rangers planted hyar!"

"Hold on, hombres!" yelled Hungry as he and Rusty bounded into view in the torchlight. "Hands up an' surrender, all of yuh!"

A few badly aimed bullets hit the walls around the two cowboy Rangers as Trask and his amigos whirled and sped away. With their owa guns flaming, Hungry and Rusty darted after them.

A back-handed shot roared from out in front of them, and Hungry

felt the breath of a bullet that zipped past his face. A second bullet hit the roof above his head and showered him and Rusty with bits of rock and pieces of flying lead.

Suddenly old Sergeant Gordon leaped into view from a crack in the wall just in front of them. The veteran Ranger was gripping a huge cap-and-ball Remington in each hand, and his eyes glittered insanely as he darted a look behind him.

"After 'em, Rangers!" he yelled hoarsely. "Cut 'em off from the river! Don't let 'em git across on yuh! Shoot 'em down!"

"Lead on, sergeant!" Hungry yelled. "We're with yuh!"

The old Ranger's tall form melted into the darkness with Hungry and Rusty close behind him. Bullets from the running outlaws split the air above their heads and glanced from the walls around them.

Suddenly Hungry clawed cartridges from his crisscrossed belts and gave part of them to Rusty. They had just finished reloading the empty chambers in their guns when they saw a faint glimmer of light to one side. Leaping past the old sergeant, they sped toward it.

A wild yell greeted them as they sprang back into the chamber they had left only a little while before. They caught one fleeting glimpse of Pete Trask's hunched figure beyond the smoldering fire, as a thunder of blazing guns jarred the cavern.

Bang-bang-bang! Bra-a-m! Bullets from every direction hissed and whined about Hungry and Rusty as they ducked and threw swiftly aside.

One bullet slashed Rusty's shirt beneath the arm. Another grazed his ear, and one cut a stinging gash along Hungry's left leg above the knee.

With his blazing gun clamped low in his right hand and fanning the

weapon's hammer with his left, Hungry dropped a yelling ruffian. Rusty broke the shoulder of a second hombre and staggered him back against the wall.

A piercing yell sounded almost beside them. Sergeant Gordon instantly lunged into view with his big cap-and-ball Remington blasting like a pair of shotguns.

"Cut 'em down, men!" the veteran Ranger roared, his tall form hunched forward and his slitted eyes gleaming madly over his bucking guns. "Don't let 'em reach the river on yuh! Wipe 'em out!"

Hungry and Rusty frantically crammed fresh cartridges into their guns, while the white-haired sergeant held the yelling outlaws back. A short-handled ax whizzed past Rusty from the passage behind them, and one of the outlaws staggered back with his skull split by the heavy blade.

A bullet gashed Hungry along the side. One almost numbed Rusty's leg, and another hit the wall beside him and cut his back with flying lead.

Again shooting as fast as they could fan their guns, Hungry and Rusty each dropped a man. Sergeant Gordon was staggering, but he was fighting like a wounded cougar to stay on his feet. He sank slowly to one knee just as Rusty got another ruffian through the stomach.

Hungry caught one fleeting glimpse of Standing Elk through the clouds of swirling gun smoke. The powerful half-breed was swinging a clubbed rifle about his head, and there was a wolfish grin on his crimson-smearred face.

"Blast yuh!" came a wild yell that cut through the bellow of gunfire. "I'll git yuh yit! I'll down yuh if I'm shot to pieces tryin' it!"

Hungry and Rusty jerked around

as Pete Trask lunged toward them. The hombre's lips were curled away from his yellow teeth in a savage snarl, and he was shooting with both hands as fast as his thumb could work his Colt hammers.

Bang-bang-bang! Wham! As Hungry and Rusty ducked and fired, the crash of their own weapons and Trask's bucking guns was almost drowned by a bellowing roar almost beside them.

Trask was hurled back against the wall by a charge of buckshot and slugs that riddled his chest. As he folded up and pitched to the floor, Hungry and Rusty glanced around in time to see old Sergeant Gordon drop a stubby sawed-off shotgun that he had pulled from beneath his bullet-torn shirt. It was the kind of shoulder gun that old Doc Holliday, the gun-fighting dentist, used when he helped Wyatt Earp clean up Tombstone. At short range, it was capable of almost tearing a man in two.

As the veteran Ranger's once-powerful shoulders sagged wearily and his head fell forward, Hungry made a flying jump and grabbed him in his arms. He was dying fast.

"We got 'em, sergeant," Hungry barked, holding him tight. "We got all of 'em. You settled Trask."

"Trask," the old Ranger croaked feebly, and he rolled his glazing eyes up at Hungry and Rusty. "Yeah, we—we got 'em. I—I knew we'd git 'em if we cut 'em—off from the river."

His voice trailed off weakly.

Rusty dropped to one knee beside him and picked up one of the gnarled hands. Tears were trickling down little Rusty's freckled face.

"What does he mean by that?" Rusty said quickly. "Why does he keep talkin' about the river?"

Hungry's lips tightened and he brushed the tangled mass of silvery hair back from the Ranger's wrinkled forehead with rough tenderness.

"He means the Rio Grande," he replied softly. "In his crazy way, he was livin' over some long-forgotten battle with outlaws that he took part in down on the border before me an' you was born. Run an' git his badge we found in that chest of gold. Once a Ranger, always a Ranger, an' I want him to die with that badge pinned on his shirt whar it belongs."

That shore was a fight! But to the two Rangers, it's all in a day's work. They've got plenty more work ahead of them, too—gun work yuh'll want to be readin' about. Yuh kin do it, too, by watchin' fer Hungry an' Rusty in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. They'll be back with us soon.



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Hard Dinero

By Chuck Martin

Author of "Colt Law For Rustlers," etc.

Payin' off the round-up dinero ain't easy with outlaws on the prod.

OLD Cole Bostwick stretched his long legs toward the camp fire with a deep sigh of contentment. The C Bar B round-up was over, with the beef gather being held out on the flat. The hard-riding crew of brush-popping cowboys were full to the last notches

of their belts, with grub another man had cooked for them.

"Luxury, I calls it," young "Bucky" Bostwick remarked to his father. "Every greasy-sacker in the outfit was plumb disgusted with his own cooking of corn bread and beans, and ready to start a war."

Cole Bostwick smiled with understanding. For six weeks they had been working the tangles above the Rio Frio where it was impossible to take a chuck wagon. Every cowboy carried a gunny sack with skillet and coffeepot on an extra horse, and every man had been his own cook. But to-night it had been different.

Old Coosa White was the best camp cook in Texas, and he had dug his trench fires near the holding flats. A young steer had been butchered for choice steaks, and old Coosa had nearly started a stampede when he had beaten on his triangle to call the hungry hands for grub.

"Steak, dough gods, and apple pie," Bucky Bostwick murmured softly. "And to-morrow is pay day!"

Old Cole frowned and glanced at the cowboys stretched out by the fire. Two saddled horses were tied to a cottonwood for night herding, but they were different from the other cow ponies. The C Bar B remuda was made up of little Spanish horses that could work the brush all day, and get their own feed at night.

"A man don't see many Morgan hosses down this away," old Cole grunted, and studied the two big animals. "On top of that, the jiggers what owns them have been feeding the critters grain!"

"Yeah," Bucky agreed. "Tim Stallings and Jud Benson packed a sack of oats in on one of their spare hosses. They're hitting out for Arizona after the pay-off!"

"Which won't be to-night," growled old Cole. "This way it makes every man in the crew a guard to see that he gets his dinero in the morning. Yonder comes Brad Wayburn, the cattle buyer!"

The two Bostwicks got to their feet when the lanky cattle buyer rode over from his camp with two of his

tally men. Brad Wayburn was leading a pack horse loaded with canvas sacks. One of his cowboys threw off the hitches and dumped the load while his boss was talking to Cole Bostwick, and all the cowboys around the fire grinned knowingly when they heard the chink of silver and gold.

"Howdy, old Cole," Wayburn greeted the cattleman. "I brought hard money to pay for the herd, and we'll settle as soon as we make the count!"

"Howdy, Brad," Bostwick answered cordially. "I figger we've rounded up better than a thousand head, and at twelve dollars a round, you won't have much dinero left to pack away when you make the drive!"

Bucky Bostwick was watching the round-up crew, and his eyes sparkled when every sweaty man of them reached behind saddles to slicker packs, and brought out worn gun belts. Bucky was only twenty-one, but his rope-burned fingers buckled his shell-studded belt on at the same time. A man didn't wear hardware when he was working the brush, but now there was something to guard.

The waddy fastened his tie-backs low on his right leg while he made a mental count of the money under the tree. There would be more than ten thousand dollars in gold and silver, and it was just as safe under the cottonwood as it would have been in the bank down at Corpus Christi. That is, until after pay day.

Bucky Bostwick narrowed his blue eyes when Tim Stallings stretched to his feet and hitched up his gun belt. Stallings was hard and lean, with a face like a hawk. His dark eyes were heavy-lidded and never seemed to wink. Now his curved nose was flaring slightly when he spoke to the old man.

"Me and Jud will take ours if it don't make any never-minds to you, Cole," he murmured. "You won't need us to make the tally, and we got the itching heel!"

Jud Benson was not so tall as his pard, but he was thick of hip and wide in the shoulders. He could wrestle down a yearling bull with his hands, and the other men had left him strictly alone because of his sullenness and temper. Now he backed up his pard and glared at old Cole Bostwick.

"I'll pay off in the morning when I get mine," old Cole barked sharply. "Right now I haven't the money!"

"I can let you have what you need, Cole," Brad Wayburn interrupted, and reached down for a small sack. He pulled the string from the ear of the sack and glanced at the old cattleman with his hand full of twenty-dollar gold disks. "How much you needin', ol'-timer?"

Old Cole Bostwick grunted and began to figure under his breath. "Six weeks per each, and two of 'em," he growled. "At forty a month, that makes a hundred and twenty!"

Brad Wayburn counted off six gold pieces and handed them to old Cole. Bostwick took the money and gave it to Stallings. Then, fingering his gun, he told the pair to high-tail.

"Git, you two!" he barked. "Straddle them grain-fed Morgans and start scratching them itching heels of yores right now. If a man can't wait until daybreak for his pay, he ain't welcome to sleep by my fire!"

Jud Benson edged his pardner aside with a grunt. His gun was half out of leather when young Bucky cleared his own holster and came out, eared back to shoot.

"Drop that cutter back in yore scabbard and hit yore saddles, you two!" he barked. "You heard the old man, and what he says goes!"

Jud Benson loosed his grip on the gun handle and stared sullenly at the cocked .45. Tim Stallings turned his head and looked at Bucky without winking. It was like a snake looking at a bird under a cut bank, with escape cut off.

"You drew on me and Jud, yearlin'," he said slowly. "If you ever get another chance to repeat, you want to come out smokin'!"

Old man Cole Bostwick grunted and went for his old Peacemaker Colt. The hammer clicked back to full cock while he was making his draw, and he buried the muzzle trigger-deep in the tall cowboy's lean belly when he ended the argument.

"Hit leather and fog it, yuh dang saddle-tramps. High-tail tuh blazes out o' here!"

Tim Stallings and Jud Benson backed slowly toward their horses, which were tethered on the other side of the tree. They stepped across their worn saddles at the same time, and old Cole kept them covered until they were out of sight. Then he holstered his old .45 with a grunt, and turned to Wayburn.

"I shouldn't have paid 'em," he complained. "But there was nothing to do when you handed me the hard money!"

II.

Both crews were up at daybreak when old Coosa beat out a tune on his triangle. Hot steaks and biscuits disappeared like leaves before a strong wind, and Brad Wayburn emptied his huge coffee cup and wiped his mouth.

"Set yore boys to thinning out the herd so we can pass them through the tally lines," he grunted. "They're all prime beef, and it won't take long to make the count!"

Old Cole Bostwick nodded and directed two men to make the first

count with a pair of Wayburn's men. The other riders he sent out to get up the bawling herd, and thin them into a straggling line. Wayburn picked a man to count with him, while old Cole and Bucky took their positions and fingered their knotted tally-strings.

Born and raised in the brush, the wild-eyed longhorns came through the tally-lines with a rush. Five steers counted one knot, with twenty knots on a string. The line slowed down some when the leaders passed through. They were drifted down on the big flat where they were turned over to Wayburn's driving crew, and old Cole Bostwick double-looped his last knot before the morning was half gone.

Brad Wayburn came riding down the line with his collection of strings, and he grinned at the old cattleman and wiped the sweat from his dripping brow.

"My boys made it a thousand and forty-two," he shouted. "My own count was two over!"

"Me and Bucky tallied 'er forty-three," Bostwick chuckled, "so that splits the difference. Let's hit the shade of that cottonwood for a spell."

Brad Wayburn slid from his saddle and hefted a heavy sack.

"There's a thousand in silver in those bigger sacks," he remarked carelessly. "The little fellers hold two thousand each in twenty-dollar gold pieces."

Old Cole drew a deep breath, as a man will do when a hard job is finished.

"That tallies up to a few dollars over twelve thousand five hundred," he murmured. "I owe ten thousand to old Jared Thompson, and he demanded hard money. Me and Bucky will leave it with him on the way home."

Wayburn counted sacks and made

a pile off to one side. "I'm glad to be rid of that dinero," he muttered earnestly, as he filled out a bill of sale for Bostwick's signature. "And I'll feel a lot better about it when I hear that you've delivered it to old Jared Thompson. That old jigger won't wait a day when his money is due, and he'd skin a man for the tallow he could get out of his hide!"

Old Cole grunted and looked up when a rush of hooves announced the coming of the round-up crew for their pay. The cowboys had forgotten the weary weeks of sweat and toil in the dense brush. Now they grinned when the old cattleman pulled a worn time book from his hip pocket and thumbed back the pages.

"Pay the boys their time, and give every man a twenty-dollar gold piece for a bonus," he told Bucky. "They've earned it and more!"

Bucky Bostwick counted out gold and silver and paid each man as his name and time was called. The greasy-sackers whooped like boys and rode to the remuda to rope out their pack horses.

The beef herd was a snaky line in the south when old Cole and Bucky rode up to the fire where Coosa White was frying steaks.

"We'll get a bit of grub and then ride," the old cattleman grunted. "You drift along slow and give the jingler a hand with the cavvy, Coosa. Me and Bucky will gear our tops and hit on down for the Rio Frio to see old Jared Thompson!"

"Count it done, boss," the old cook answered, and then he shook his grizzled head. "You and Bucky keep yore eyes skinned," he added.

"Skinner for what?" Bucky asked.

"For those two saddle-tramps the old man drove off at the point of his gun," Coosa muttered. "Them fellers is on the prod, and I don't trust neither one of them!"

"Don't you worry none about us," old Cole answered with a shrug. "We can handle our end."

"I heard them two talking one night," Coosa said slowly. "It wasn't my put-in, but both them jiggers is on the dodge. Tim Stallings killed a deputy over at Abilene!"

"That there makes him gun bait!" the old cattleman barked. He drew his .45 to check the loads.

Bucky wiped his hands down the seams of his chaps and took down his rope. Shaking out the coils, he walked over to the rope corral with his loop ready. The two men watched while he snared a long-legged gelding and led the animal over to the cottonwood tree.

"He picked a fast one," Coosa remarked. "But you ain't got a cayuse in the cavy that can keep up with them Morgan hosses!"

Old Cole snarled angrily and got to his feet. "You pack up and help drift the hoss herd down," he blustered. "Me and Bucky will ride out to meet you when we finish!"

He stomped over to the tree where Bucky was cinching a pack on the roan gelding. The cowboy had covered the sacks of money with his blanket, and he threw a squaw-hitch to bind the load just as old Cole came under the tree. The cowboy knew his father was worried when he called him by his given name.

"We'll saddle them two steeldusts and hit a high lope, Buckner. That a way, we ought to make the Rio Frio agin' sundown!"

"Like you said," the cowboy answered, and pulled the riding gear from the horse he had used in making the tally.

III.

Old Cole Bostwick glanced back over his shoulder when young Bucky led the pack horse through a pass

and started down the valley of the Rio Frio. For three hours they had traveled through the brushy foothills where ambush would have been easy. Another hour would put them at Jared Thompson's Double Circle Ranch with their load of gold and silver.

Bucky turned in his saddle and grinned at the old cattleman. "We won't be bothered with that metal much longer," he called back. "And don't forget you promised to make me a podner when the C Bar B is paid for again."

"I ain't forgetting, but it ain't paid for yet," old Cole answered. "And you was only twenty-one last week."

He jerked his horse to a stop when the pack animal squealed and went down in the narrow trail. Then they heard the belated explosion that told of a rifle shot at long distance. Bucky Bostwick threw off his turns where the lead-rope of the pack horse was wrapped around his saddle horn, and he dug with both blunted spurs to rocket his mount down the steep trail.

"Hands high, you hombres!"

Bucky Bostwick heard the whine of a bullet emphasizing the stick-up command. He had acted on impulse, figuring that only one man would be hidden at the mouth of the pass. The other would be behind the rifle up on the hill, and the cowboy knew his guess was right when he heard the thunder of his father's old Peacemaker .45.

Old Cole was handicapped when his horse nearly tripped over the dead animal blocking the trail. His old gun whipped out and squeezed off a quick shot toward the brush where the holdup men were hiding. Then he was spilled backward over the cantle of his saddle when a six-gun slug hit him in the left shoulder.

"You asked for it," a heavy voice

growled savagely, and the toe of a boot kicked out to send the wounded man's weapon into the brush.

Cole Bostwick sighed when his reaching fingers closed on thin air. He turned his head slowly to verify his suspicions, and Jud Benson shoved a smoking gun close to Bostwick's head.

"Dead men don't talk," he grunted. "I might as well do it right now, seeing I threw off my first shot!"

Old Cole fought against the weakness and nausea that engulfed him. "Press trigger, you blasted buzzard!" he snarled.

Jud Benson hunched his wide shoulders and tightened his finger on the trigger. Old Cole stared defiantly, waiting for the explosion that would spell his death. He smiled grimly when a sharp voice barked from back in the brush.

"Hold it, Jud! The boss said to get the money!"

Jud Benson mouthed curses angrily and stopped the pressure on his trigger. Tim Stallings pushed his Morgan horse through the brush, holding a rifle across his knees. He stared down at the wounded prisoner, then turned to Benson with a frown.

"Where's the yearling?" he rasped.

"He rode his spurs and boogered down the trail," Benson growled. "That's why I was going to do for the old one!"

"I might have knowed it," Stallings answered bitterly. "Now the law will be on our trail, and we won't have much of a start. You better load that hard money on Bostwick's steeldust for a fast trip!"

Old Cole was rocking back and forth on his haunches while he studied the hard face of Tim Stallings. Jud Benson sheathed his six-gun and went to his knees beside the

dead horse to loosen the pack. The wounded man was holding his shoulder tightly with his right hand, and his voice was low when he spoke to Stallings.

"I'd like to know," he began without anger. "Was it old Jared?"

"I'll ask the questions," Stallings sneered. "How come that salty chip of yores to lose the sand from his craw?"

Old Cole gritted his teeth and then forced a smile. "A gent that runs away, might live to fight another day," he answered quietly.

"I should have let him have that slug the horse stopped," grunted Stallings. "I always did figger him yellow!"

"He ain't yellow," the old cattleman growled. "I'd do the same if some dry-gulching skunk was throwing lead at me from a rifle, and him hiding behind a tree!"

"I gave him warning," Stallings sneered, "to come out smoking the next time him and me crossed trails!"

Jud Benson grunted and pulled the heavy pack-saddle from the dead horse. He threw it on the ground and reached for the trailing reins of the old cattleman's horse. Both hands were high above his gun belt when a soft voice came from the brush behind Tim Stallings.

"Reach high, hombre, or I'll start my smoking now!"

Jud Benson dipped down for his scabbard with the speed of desperation. A six-gun roared savagely to slap him into a half turn. Tim Stallings started to lift the Winchester when he saw his pardner's right hand blasted to a crimson pulp, and he raised both hands before he turned his head.

Bucky Bostwick was standing wide-legged in the trail behind his smoking six-gun. His blue eyes were glowing like coals, and daring Stall-

ings to take a chance. The robber grunted and shrugged his slender shoulders.

"So you came back," he muttered.

"You, old Cole," the cowboy said softly. "Reach out there and pull Benson's stinger. Keep the killing son covered while I make medicine with his pard!"

Old Cole came to his knees and slid behind Jud Benson. He lifted the heavy gun from the tied-down holster, and Benson growled when he felt the tug that emptied his holster.

"Keep on talking, Bucky," old Cole breathed huskily. "I've been hurt worse than this many's the time, and done me a day's work!"

His weathered face wore a grim smile of anticipation when he eased back and centered the gun on Jud Benson. He knew the seething anger that was making the eyes of his only chip glow brightly. Tim Stallings had made show-down talk, and had burned dry-gulcher's powder. Old Cole knew what was coming.

"Unload, Stallings," Bucky said softly. "Slide down off that Morgan and drop the whangs on the ground to tie him!"

Tim Stallings glanced down at the rifle and then let it slide to the ground. His curved nose was almost touching his lips, and his nostrils were flaring when he took a long look at the slender cowboy behind the gun. Then he threw his right leg back over the cantle and stepped to the trail.

Bucky Bostwick watched the tall man slap the big horse aside and drop the reins for a ground-hitch. Old Cole was watching intently, nodding his head from time to time while he watched his only kin. Tim Stallings squared around to face Bucky, and the cowboy glanced

down at the ivory-handled six-gun in the outlaw's holster.

"Do you want to trade some talk for a chance?" he asked quietly.

Tim Stallings straightened up with a jerk and stared for a long moment. "Come again?" he invited.

"I'll holster up and draw you evens," Bucky answered softly, "providing you talk straight, and spell out the name of your boss!"

"Why not?" Stallings murmured, and then he frowned. "How do I know you'll play from scratch?"

"You answer that one," grunted the cowboy. "The law wants you for murder!"

"Bridle yore jaw, Tim," barked Benson. "The boss will take a hand when he hears!"

He jerked his head around when a metallic click sounded just behind him. Old Cole Bostwick had eared back the hammer, and his face was grim with determination.

"You said dead men don't talk, Benson. Stallings either talks and gives the right answer, or I'm touching off your own trigger!"

Tim Stallings turned his head to listen without removing his eyes from the face of Bucky Bostwick. Then he squared his shoulders and sold out for a chance to cheat the rope.

"It was Jared Thompson!" he clipped.

Old Cole sighed and leaned back against the saddle pack. Bucky Bostwick nodded and waved his right hand. Tim Stallings widened his dark eyes when he saw the spiking gun disappear in molded leather, and he licked his lips with a dry tongue.

"I'm kind of used to taking orders from the old man," he almost whispered. "Let him give the go-ahead!"

"Keno," Bucky agreed. "We're waiting for orders, pard!"

Old Cole Bostwick smiled without fear. He had read the message in the softly spoken words of his son. As far as Bucky was concerned, the debt on the C Bar B was already paid off, and he was a partner in the spread. And with the old cattleman, that made it doubly certain.

"Get set, you two," he warned quietly, and without a tremor in his wind-roughened voice. "Draw!"

Bucky Bostwick saw the tall man stiffen at the end of the warning. Tim Stallings twitched his right shoulder to beat the go-ahead. Bucky saw the flash of gun metal when it caught the reflection of the late sun, and he drove his hand down as his right boot side-stepped to make up the difference.

He felt the tug of lead against the edge of his vest to tell him that he was beaten to the shot just as his own gun cleared leather. Blinding anger seethed through the cowboy's brain while his calloused thumb was notching back the hammer at the end of his draw.

Tim Stallings was leaning forward like a hawk making a strike. He caught the bucking gun on the recoil, with thumb earing back for a fast follow-up. He saw Bucky Bostwick's gun come up slowly, and then the cowboy squeezed his grip.

Tim Stallings triggered his second shot into the air before his gun barrel could level down. His fingers opened to drop the smoking weapon, and Bucky Bostwick crouched forward and watched the tall killer sway like a pine that has been struck by lightning.

A crimson stain bannered across the folds in the tall man's shirt, just over the heart. His dark eyes held a stricken, startled expression, and then his jaw began to sag. Again he swayed forward, and he crashed face-down without moving his boots.

Bucky Bostwick stared until the boots had settled to rest, after which he jacked the spent shells from his gun and thumbed fresh loads through the gate. His face was grim when he stepped up to Jud Benson and spoke softly.

"Was it Jared Thompson?"

Benson glanced at the dead man and answered with a shudder. "Yeah, he knew about me and Tim!"

"Keep him covered while I change the load to Stallings's horse," the cowboy said to old Cole. "Jud can ride back with his pard!"

"Just a minute, cowboy!"

Bucky Bostwick whirled swiftly, slapping down for his holstered gun. He stopped the move and shouted a name when he saw a nicked star behind the pair of heavy six-guns.

"Sheriff Bray! You got here just in time to save me and old Cole a load of trouble!"

A lean old-timer stepped out from the brush and swept keen gray eyes down to the body of Tim Stallings.

"You could have throwed yore shot off some, Bucky," he complained. "You went and drilled him center!"

"He jumped the gun, sheriff," the cowboy explained. "He took first shot, and I didn't have much time to think!"

"Saved the State money, sheriff," interrupted old Cole. "Stallings was wanted for murder, but here's Jud Benson waiting to make some talk to you!"

"I heard him," grunted the sheriff. "We'll all ride down to the Double Circle together. I'll listen while you auger with old Jared Thompson!"

IV.

The sunset was fading to twilight when old Cole and Bucky Bostwick rode into the big Double Circle

ranch yard. Bucky was leading a tall Morgan horse carrying a pack saddle. He dismounted and made his ties at the hitch rack, and he stepped back to let old Cole do the talking when a tall, lanky oldster came down from the broad gallery.

"Shore, man, yo're hurt," he said to old Cole. "Wait till I fetch you a drop of snake-bite!"

"Never mind the whisky, Jared," the old cattleman answered gruffly. "We owed you eight thousand, with two more for interest, and you insisted on hard money. Me and Bucky brung it!"

Jared Thompson was six feet three, and seventy years old. Snow-white hair jutted out from under the tattered brim of a droopy old Stetson, and he craned his head forward and swallowed a huge Adam's apple. Then his hand strayed down to an old Bisley Colt, thonged low on his right leg.

"I've seen that Morgan hoss before," he said harshly. "I ain't accepting no holdup money!"

Old Cole spoke softly to call attention to the gun in his right hand. "Drop that smoke-pole, you crooked old spavin!" he grunted, "before I forget yore years and do you a meanness!"

Thompson jerked up his head and slowly loosed his clutching fingers. "I'll have the law on you," he whispered. "I won't accept stolen money, and to-morrow I'm taking over the C Bar B!"

"You'll pry up hell and put a chunk under it," Cole Bostwick grated. "Tim Stallings is dead, but he talked before he took the long pasear!"

Jared Thompson gulped noisily and stared at the old Texan. Then he recovered some of his poise, and an oily smile wreathed his wrinkled face.

"If Stallings is dead, he won't talk no more," he sneered. "Now you better step about easy and talk soft, you and that chip of yores. Yonder comes the sheriff!"

Old Cole waited until Sheriff Bray rode up to the tie rail and swung to the ground. "What's the ruckus?" he demanded gruffly.

"Arrest them two, sheriff!" Thompson cackled excitedly. "They killed a man, and now they want to pay me with stolen money!"

"Naw," the sheriff denied. "I met up with Brad Wayburn, and he told me about paying old Cole for his beef gather!"

"That Morgan hoss yonder belonged to Tim Stallings," Thompson argued. "They admitted killing him!"

"Did they mention Jud Benson?" the sheriff asked softly.

Old Jared Thompson stepped back with his toothless mouth wide open. "Is Jud dead, too?" he asked jerkily.

"I got him tied up back there in the trees," the sheriff answered quietly. "He'll get mebbe twenty years, but he augers that he won't do time by himself!"

"He talked," Thompson whispered, and began to shake his head. "I'll cancel that loan agin' you, Cole," he babbled hysterically. "I'm an old man about ready for the grave, and prison would kill me. Tim Stallings threatened to kill me unless I did what he said!"

"I pay my debts," the old cattleman said quietly. "But I won't sign any complaint agin' you. You hear me, sheriff?"

"Heard you," grunted Bray, and then he spoke sharply to Bucky Bostwick who was getting ready to throw off the ties that held the load of money on the Morgan. "Leave it!" he barked.

Bucky turned slowly and stared at the old peace officer. "We owe him ten thousand," he said slowly.

"Which I'm takin' to make sure he pays his fine," the sheriff answered softly. "What you say, old man?"

"Take it," Thompson agreed hoarsely. "Take it and welcome!"

"Funny the way things work out," the sheriff said slowly. "Tim Stallings and Jud Benson robbed a bank,

and Stallings killed a deputy sheriff. The bank offered a reward of five thousand dollars for the robbers, dead or alive, and there was five thousand more on Stallings for murder. It's yore money, Bucky!"

Bucky Bostwick stared at the sheriff and then slapped the bulging sacks with his hand. "Ten thousand dollars," he whispered. "And all of it in hard money!"

INDIAN CHIEF FEARS FOR JOBLESS BRAVES

AN old Indian, who was a famous fighting chief when the West was wild and woolly, does not approve of too much schooling for Indian youths. He says that the education they receive does not enable them to make a living in the business world, and they are forced by necessity to return to their reservations.

Chief White Cloud is now ninety-seven years old, but he doesn't look it. His sight is good, almost as good as it was when he was a young brave, his teeth are strong and white, and his hair is thick, but gray-ing somewhat. His hearing is not as keen as it used to be, but that seems to be his only ailment.

He believes that some employment should be found for the young Indians, in keeping with the educa-

tional training they have received, but this is not done, and they soon become discouraged. There are nearly six hundred of the Indian Iowa tribe at the reservation at White Cloud, Kansas, less than one hundred miles from Kansas City.

On the reservation, the tribe lives to-day under nearly the same conditions as when the red men roamed the plains. They do not hunt the buffalo, as the old members of the tribe and their forebears did, but there is plenty of wild game, good fishing and lots of wide stretches.

When Chief White Cloud presides at the councils, he wears a huge war bonnet that belonged to his father, and a bear-claw necklace that has been handed down through seventeen generations of chiefs.

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Peewee Dynamite

By Scotty Rand

THE people's choice for sheriff of Pinto County, "Big Shorty" Ball, stretched his four feet seven and one-half inches to a more comfortable position in the cane-bottomed chair behind his battered office desk and looked up at the speaker before him. That hombre was Ed Graves, owner and operator of the only gold mine in the basin.

"Sheriff, yuh've jist got tuh do somethin'," Graves was saying with worry furrowed deep in his weather-beaten brow. "Them bandits is ruinin' me—suckin' me plumb dry."

There was sympathy in the runty

star-toter's agate eyes. He crossed his short, bowed legs on the desk top. "I know it, Ed," he answered in a deep voice that belonged to a six-foot ranny, "an' I've sifted the hills with a posse every time them owl-hooters lifted yore gold shipment off the stage, tryin' tuh nab them. I'm doin' all I can. Gimme time an' I'll git them."

Red anger crept up from the miner's open shirt collar and flushed his face.

"Give yuh time!" he snapped. "That's all I git out o' yuh—promises! Three times my dust has been

Thar's goin' to be some bug-eyed gun-slingers when they open the trunk expectin' to find gold dust.

lifted, an' three times them sneakin' road agents has got off. When I found thet ore on my place, I mortgaged my spread tuh buy a washer and hire some help. Now, the bank in Crowfoot is goin' tuh foreclose 'cause I can't git the payments tuh them. Wouldn't surprise me none if thet bank ain't payin' yuh not tuh ketch them bandits so's they kin git my mine!"

Big Shorty did not bat an eye.

"Ed, I know yo're a mite put out about yore troubles, but yuh'd best put a cinch on thet tongue of yores. If yuh say somethin' like thet to the wrong gent, yuh will git salivated."

The two men stared at each other in the afternoon sun that streamed through the fly-specked window of the little office. Graves opened his mouth to retort, but the sudden clump of heavy boots on the board walk stopped him short and he jerked his graying head toward the open door. The fat general manager of the stage office burst in.

"Big Shorty!" he exploded. "Another gold shipment is gone!"

Graves cursed shrilly. The runty lawman jerked his spurred feet off the desk, and varnish suffered.

"When did yuh git word?" he asked as he hit the floor.

"The stage went on tuh Crowfoot, but the driver sent in the news by a Slash B rider thet he met. The waddy jist rode in."

"Well, round up some of the boys tuh form a posse," barked the sheriff as he stood on tiptoe to reach his Stetson that hung on the wall. "I'm gonna question thet rider."

Hank Klasp bounced out toward the Blue Bull Bar to fulfill the lawman's orders. These repeated hold-ups were causing his job as general manager to hang in the balance, and he was as anxious to round up the robbers as anybody. But Ed

Graves, to whom this blow brought only dull pain, stood his ground and sneered in Big Shorty's face.

"The voters of the county shore made a mistake when they elected you," he whipped.

But Sheriff Ball ignored him as his short legs pumped his runty body out into the sun-scorched street of Basin City.

The badge-toter knew the puncher who had brought the news, but the dusty waddy knew nothing except that he had been stopped by the stage and asked to ride into Basin City. Two unmasked men had wounded the shotgun guard from ambush and then stepped out to relieve the driver of the express box which held the dust. They were the same two who had pulled the three other jobs, but nobody knew them.

Big Shorty left the puncher tending to his heaving, lather-flecked cayuse, and crossed to his own gelding pony that was tethered to the hitching rail in front of his office. He swung into the saddle on the little horse's back, and spurred over to join the rapidly forming posse.

"Let's ride, gents," he rumbled.

He noted that Ed Graves was on the walk, staring at him bitterly.

As the band of grim-faced riders thundered out toward the heat-baked hills, the diminutive sheriff turned the situation over in his troubled mind. This made four times that the owl-hooters had struck. Always they stopped the stage at a different point, but they never stopped it unless it had a gold shipment in the strong box under the driver's seat. That meant a leak somewhere. And that was what puzzled Big Shorty, that leak.

Ed Graves wouldn't help steal his own gold. Hank Klasp, big friendly Hank, had been with the stage company for eight years, so he was out.

The driver and guard never knew what was in the express box except, maybe, by guessing at its weight, but the driver had been with the company longer than Klasp, and the last four guards on the stage had been either shot up or killed.

Maybe Ed was right about the bank at Crowfoot having a finger in the pie. Ball knew the president over there; a dried-up penny-pincher who had foreclosed the mortgage on many a poor waddy's spread. But how could he know about the date of the shipments?

The miners! The miners that Ed had hired to run the big hydraulic outfit that he had bought with the mortgage money. They could be reached with some ready cash, and the banker had plenty. And they would know when Ed carried the dust into town for shipment.

The sun sank low and became a huge ball of red fire in the west. The hills had turned purple and cast long shadows into the mesquite when the posse came upon the spot where the stage had been hijacked.

They picked up the trail of the two bandits in the dusty road and roweled their cayuses in hot pursuit. But the half-pint lawman felt no disappointment when they lost it in a rocky draw two hours later. It had happened like this three times before.

II.

Basin City had only five business houses: Ball's office, the bar, a combination stage and post office, a general store, and a café. All of them except the bar was dark when the little sheriff pushed his tired gelding into town at midnight. The posse men had all dropped off at their own spreads, and Ball was alone.

His body ached for rest after the long ride, but he reined in for a

drink at the Blue Bull. As he eased his saddle-weary legs to the ground and tethered the cayuse, he heard a thick, drunken voice inside. Ed Graves's voice.

Big Shorty could not see over the swinging doors, so he opened them a crack and peered in.

The old miner was weaving drunkenly as he stood on a chair at one of the tables. The big barnlike saloon rang when he spoke.

"An' thet crooked peewee ain't even tryin' tuh ketch them bandits!"

His listeners, the moochers and older men who had not ridden with the posse, nodded with agreement.

The short badge-carrier banged back the doors and clumped into the kerosene light. All eyes twisted toward him, but he ignored the whole bunch as he marched to the bar, which came up to his chin.

"Git down off thet chair, Ed," he rumbled softly. His right hand was close to the worn smoke-pole thonged to his lean hip. "You might fall and hurt yoreself."

His words broke the tense silence that had fallen with his entrance. Graves looked at him defiantly out of whisky-reddened eyes, but he climbed unsteadily to the pine floor.

"Didn't ketch nobody, did yuh?" the miner stated rather than asked.

The lawman shifted his eyes over the muttering crowd.

"We lost their trail in the rocks," he clipped. "An' I savvy what you rannies are thinking after what Ed told yuh. But git it out o' yore heads because it ain't so."

He knew he could cow the moochers and oldsters, but Graves was plenty hooched up and he might start trouble. "I reckon I'd best lock yuh up in the hoosegow, Ed, until yuh get a little sense into yore head. Unbuckle yore hardware."

"Yuh ain't goin' tuh lock me up,

yuh dirty sidewinder!" shrilled the miner. He went for his hogleg.

Sheriff Ball had been nicknamed "Big Shorty" because his speed with a .45 made him as dangerous as any hombre. His slug spinged off the frame of Graves's gun even before it cleared leather, and the miner nursed a numb paw as his Colt skidded across the floor.

Big Shorty carried him across the dark street and locked him up. Then, he tended to his mount and hit the bunk.

The runty sheriff did a lot of worrying and thinking during the next two days. He had released Graves the next morning after his arrest, and the miner had stormed out of town, vowing revenge.

The old man's talk against the lawman had drifted over the basin, and Big Shorty couldn't help but get wind of the angry mutters that the ranchers voiced against him. He knew that something had to be done and done quick.

Then he hit upon a plan. It was a wild scheme, but it would work.

Ed Graves came into town after dark at the end of the second day. He had a pack burro behind with a heavy load on its back. He slipped into the back of the stage office and turned his dust over to the manager to be shipped out on the morning stage. They talked for a few minutes, then the miner left.

Big Shorty came out of the shadows behind the saloon as he watched Ed leave. Then he went into the stage office. Hank was putting the dust in his office safe.

"I guess we're all set now, eh, Hank?" he said.

"Yeah, we kin play our ace on them bandits in the morning," answered Hank, slamming the safe door. His round face lit up with

a pleasant smile. "Then, the main office will be off my neck, an' I won't lose my bread an' butter after all. They sent me a letter this afternoon and said thet if one more robbery was pulled, they would have tuh replace me with a fightin' man."

"Well, I'll be able tuh follow them road agents right into their back yard to-morrer, an' Ed will be off my neck. Did yuh git thet trunk fixed up?" asked the half-pint.

Hank opened a door that led to the company's storeroom and dragged out a small iron-bound trunk. A fresh hole was bored in the end of it, but it was under the leather handle and barely visible.

"Yuh can git plenty air through this here hole if yuh put yore head next tuh it," the manager told Big Shorty, "but danged if yuh ain't got twice yore share of guts, gettin' in thet box which might be yore coffin. Yo'll be mighty cramped up."

"Yeah," clipped the star-wearer, "but thar's goin' tuh be some bug-eyed gun-slingers when they open this trunk expectin' tuh git their dirty meat hooks on some more of pore old Ed's gold dust!"

III.

Hank Klasp's bellow pierced the morning air. "Handle thet trunk easylike!" he yelled. "Couldn't git all the mail in the strong box to-day," he explained to the two stage hands as they pushed the iron-bound trunk under the seat, "but thet trunk is as strong as it is. An' thar's a package in the rear trunk thet you kin give to the manager at Crowfoot. 'Tain't important, jist some of the company records, but don't forgit it."

Big Shorty felt his box being lifted and shoved. He could not see a thing because of the leather

handle over the hole, but he could hear Hank's voice. Good old Hank. He was carrying it out in fine style.

The driver's whiplash popped like a firecracker. "All aboard!" came his voice to the little sheriff's ears, and the trace chains jingled. The big Concord swayed; they were off.

It seemed to the runty lawman that he had been in the cramping box for days. He could hear the rumble of the stage's wheels, and the drumming of the team's hoofs. His body ached at every jolt. Stinging sweat ran into his eyes.

Then the Concord slowed, and the whip snapped again.

"Must be starting up out of the basin," thought Big Shorty. It was a heavy pull, and took a lot of time.

Wham! The report of a gun, muffled by the thick wall of the trunk, came to the sheriff's ears; he heard the driver's booted foot hit the brake, and the stage ground to a halt. The shotgun guard was groaning above him. He forgot his tortured back and listened with every nerve taut.

"Stretch!" snarled a coarse voice. "An' throw that cash box down!"

A higher-pitched one chimed in. "You passengers git yore noggins back inside an' be quiet afore I throw down on yuh."

The trunk moved and the runt braced himself for the shock. But luckily, it landed so that his booted feet were down, and his legs took most of the jar. However, his teeth rattled in his head, and the two bolts that came through from the hasp gouged his shoulder.

There was a bustle, and a couple of minutes' silence.

"Now, git that moth-chewed buggy out o' here fast!" cracked the coarse-voiced hombre.

The stage rumbled off, and boot heels crunched in the sand.

WW—4F

"There shore must be a lot of dust here from the size of this box. How're we gonna tote it?"

"We kin open it here an' split the load"—Big Shorty clutched his .45—"or we kin ride closelike an' hold them leather grips on the ends."

"Well, I'm fer gittin' out o' here fast, so let's lug it."

"Suits me. We kin open it later." The speaker chuckled.

The trunk was lifted. Hoofs pounded and saddle leather squeaked. The dwarfed lawman was on edge. Soon, he would come out like a jack-in-the-box when the owl-hooters opened the cover.

Blam! Big Shorty's world spun crazily and stilled. Then he realized what had happened. The trunk had been dropped. Hoofs approached as the riders turned and came back.

"Why didn't yuh hold on, yuh ape?"

"Aw, my cayuse swerved around a gopher hole an' I lost my holt. Don't git riled up; it ain't hurt."

"Well, let's git gone ag'in, an' yuh keep a tight squeeze on the handle."

More grumbling came to the sheriff's ears, and they were off again. He had bit his tongue in the fall, and a lump was rising on his head. But he would square accounts with hot lead when his moment came.

Time crept by, and the panting cayuses' shod feet rang on rock. They reined in and dropped their load with another smashing jar. Big Shorty wiped a trickle of blood from the corner of his set lips and held back a groan.

"Let's git forty winks afore we open this trunk."

"A good idee. I'm kind o' tuckered out myself."

Silence and more time. The blaz-

ing sun smote down on the iron bindings of the trunk and made them hot enough to fry an egg. The star-toter fought the wild desire to try to shoot the lock off his suffocating prison from the inside.

Sweat was pouring from every pore of his peewee frame, and his checkered shirt was soaked. His body felt like a solid bruise, and his dry throat was choking him. But he hung on and suffered dully. More time. Then the road agents came back, and their voices roused Big Shorty from his stupor.

"Wow, this strong-box shore got hot in this sun."

"Yeah, let's cool it off first."

The two hombres grunted as they lifted the trunk. They carried it a short distance and burst out with harsh laughter. The sheriff felt the box take a sudden jump, then, *splash!*

The gloomy light in the trunk became complete blackness as the light from the auger hole winked out and stinking water gushed in. The badge-carrier's breath caught in his throat as he savvied. They had thrown him into a water hole!

He jammed a hand over the opening, but the water was seeping in at the edges of the lid. His brain raced, and he remembered Hank Klasp's words, "gettin' in thet box which might be yore coffin." The heavy iron on the trunk made it sink, and he felt the slight jar as it hit the bottom.

Suddenly, Big Shorty realized that the owl-hooters knew that he was in the box. There was the "accidental" drop, the baking, and the laughing he had heard when he was heaved into the water. He cursed himself bitterly and his voice echoed mockingly in the trunk.

But he wasn't finished yet. He squirmed until the muzzle of his

shooting-iron was directly between the ends of the hasp bolts that had clawed his shoulder. He waited and gambled that the two killers would leave before his air gave out or the water filled the trunk.

Three minutes—then five crept by; one of his eyes was under water, and his lungs heaved; a great wind roared in his ears. His trigger finger tightened, and he emptied the blasting .45 into the wall of the trunk. Every ounce of strength in his wiry body went into the heave that he threw against the top. It gave suddenly, and stagnant water rushed in as he popped out.

Green slime clung to his sandy head as he broke the surface and gasped in the hot, fresh air. The hole was shallow and his feet were still in the trunk.

He scooped back the scum and drank before he dragged himself to the bank. Two dust clouds a half mile away told that the bandits had left him for a corpse.

IV.

The shade was drawn in the lighted window of the stage office in Basin City, but a crack of lamp glow at the bottom split the night, cutting across the battered face of Big Shorty Ball.

His bloodshot eyes surveyed the scene in the room. Hank Klasp, his usually pleasant face now lighted with greed and gloating, was seated at his desk with two shifty-eyed rannies that the half-pint lawman had never seen before. But their grating voices were the same as those of the outlaws who had tried to drown him. Big piles of dust pokes were stacked on the desk, and the fat manager was dividing them.

"I'd swap one of these sacks for a look at thet runt's face when we

heaved him in the hole," chuckled one of the gunnies.

"Or when we gave him thet bakin'," added the other. They slapped each other on the back.

"Yeah," grinned Hank, looking up from his counting. "Thet fool was jist too smart for his Levis. He got me tuh help him with his plan, an' I was the one he was lookin' fer."

The two owl-hooters started putting the loot in their shirts.

"It was the slickest thing I ever done in my life," continued Hank, "when I imported you boys tuh work with me. I was plumb loco tuh work these eight years for honest chicken feed. I'll git a letter firin' me when the main office hears of this last job, an' I'll have a perfect excuse tuh leave town. An' with the sheriff missin' after all of Ed Graves's talk, everybody will be lookin' for him with a rope."

The dirty shade was torn to ribbons as the hatless Big Shorty dived through the open window. His smoke-pole gleamed in the light.

"Grab the ceilin', yuh polecats!" he snarled through crimson-caked lips. His agate eyes were flaming like a panther's.

Hank knew of the runty lawman's deadly gun play and his fat hands shot up without hesitation; his face turned the color of a dirty sheet.

But the two renegades with him saw only a sawed-off hombre whom they had never laid eyes on, but had heard described by the stage manager's tongue.

They made their living with flaming .45s, and a runt like this couldn't bluff them. As if by a signal, they kicked back their chairs, their hands streaking to hardware.

Big Shorty gave them no more chance than he would have passed out to a rattlesnake. His thumb raked the hammer of his gun, and it bucked itself dry in his hands. Both of the hard-bitten gunnies folded in the leaden hail with smoke-poles clattering from lifeless hands. One of them twitched a little after he hit the floor.

Hank stared at their still forms and cringed against his desk. Drops of sweat stood out on his fat face.

"Don't gun me!" he pleaded. "Don't gun me, Big Shorty! Yuh know I never pack a gun!"

The peewee sheriff's bruised face screwed up in disgust as he peered through the layers of powder smoke.

"Don't worry, Hank," he answered. "I walked back from blazes tuh git yuh when I figgered thet yuh were the only one thet could've tipped these hombres thet I was in thet trunk. An' I aim tuh save yuh for an extra special neck-stretchin'."



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The Oklahoma Kid



***Clifty is a dangerous spot fer anyone to be in,
but fer the Kid it's plumb suicide.***

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAIL OF DEATH.

SINCE there was a small fortune in rewards offered for his dead-or-alive capture, there was nothing unusual in the fact that the little, wiry hombre was walking along the dark canyon trail with the alertness of a prowling wolf. And

because he was much more alert than the average man would have been, Jack Reese, better known as the "Oklahoma Kid," saw the two shadowy figures melt into the rocks and brush beside the twisting trail.

Those two hombres had moved with speed and silence, and had vanished so swiftly that the Kid had had but the momentary glimpse of

Schools A Ranger

By Lee Bond

Author of "The Oklahoma Kid Takes A Prisoner," etc.



their moving bodies. Yet it was enough to warn the outlaw that he was walking into a trap. And this half mile of trail which twisted between tall, scowling bluffs, was one of the most deadly spots the Arizona Territory had ever known.

At the one end of the crooked path lay the roaring, mad boom town of Clifty. At the upper end stood the frame buildings that housed one of the most vicious gang of murdering gamblers in these parts.

Steve Jelk was the boss among those murdering tinhorns who fleeced the miners of their hard-earned money with crooked cards and loaded dice. Or, failing to entice a miner to lose his roll over some crooked layout, Steve Jelk's hirelings would waylay the man here along this twisting, shadowed trail, kill him with club or knife, and take the money from his dead body.

Jelk and his breed had been run out of Clifty proper, and warned that their necks would feel the caress of a hemp necktie if they ever opened another game within the boom town. But Steve Jelk had simply moved up-canyon beyond the town's limit, built his big Miner's Palace gambling hall, and gathered about him a gang of tough, murderous men.

The Oklahoma Kid had heard the wild tales of this boom town's crimson rise to notoriety. He had heard it said that not a night passed but what at least one man was clubbed and robbed along this devilish bit of canyon trail. And the Kid had come, wanting to see this roaring boom town.

For some reason he could not have explained, he had felt the urge to leave his chunky, bald-faced, stocking-legged bay horse hidden up near Steve Jelk's big gambling hall and come down this murder trail on foot.

The Kid slowed his pace now, his breath coming faster as he stared toward the black shadows into which the two dimly seen men had dived.

His small, wiry figure tensed, and his slim brown hands dropped to touch the age-yellowed ivory butts of .45s that had already blasted crimson chapters into the Territory's history.

The Kid's lean, dark face was lined from the eternal strain of liv-

ing like a hunted animal. His eyes were beady and black, set much too close together. His nose was long and somewhat crooked, and his mouth was a thin, hard gash that drooped cruelly at the outside corners.

That ugly, savage face adorned many big "Wanted" posters that dotted the desert country, and the Kid knew from bitter experience that the sort of citizen who would kill a man simply for the reward that man's body would bring was more dangerous than lawmen. The outlaw's bitter lips twisted in a silent snarl now as he wondered who those two jaspers ahead could be.

The Kid had sauntered through Steve Jelk's huge gambling hall a few minutes ago, wanting to see the infamous place before starting this walk down the canyon of death to Clifty proper. He knew that some reward-hunting hombre could have spotted and recognized him as he milled through the crowded gambling hall. Or Steve Jelk had, perhaps, spotted the Kid for a man who packed a good roll.

In either case, those jaspers who had ducked into the shadows were extremely dangerous to the Kid. The outlaw's pace slowed as his keen brain raced, groping for some way of turning the tables.

For an instant the Kid considered turning, retracing his steps, and riding back to the lonely hills where he was forced to live. But quick anger came to him when he realized that those two jaspers ahead were unquestionably part of the murderous crew who had slain honest men along this very trail.

To walk on along the path until he was abreast of those two would be almost certain suicide. The Kid suddenly stepped from the trail,

passing swiftly in among tall, up-slanted boulders.

Thorny brush hooked at his buckskin-colored trousers, pricked holes in his soft yellow shirt. But the Kid moved with the ease and caution of a man long used to masking his activities from other humans. His small boots felt carefully ahead before each step, and there was no roll of stones or rattle of brush to herald his coming.

By glancing up at the rim rock, he knew when he was abreast of the spot where those two men had hidden themselves. The ugly little outlaw had swung wide, knowing that to go directly toward the hidden men would give them a chance to see or hear him.

He pressed in toward the trail now, each step a slow, silent movement. His hands tested those low-slung guns as he moved, and the black night hid a grin that made his face more savage-looking than ever.

The Kid heard low, uneasy voices dead ahead of him, and caught the faint scraping of rough cloth on stone as the two skulkers shifted.

"I tell yuh he turned back," a coarse voice insisted.

"That ugly little jigger is cagy as a wolf, they say," gritted a second, thinner voice. "Didn't I tell Steve that tryin' ter down the Oklahomy Kid fer reward money was risky business?"

"Yuh told him, an' got a cussin'," the first speaker reminded him. "An' if yuh don't stop jawin' with Jelk the way yuh do, Spot, yo're gonna git a bullet in yore belly."

"Jelk makes me sick," the thin voice of "Spot" complained. "Fellers like us do the dirty work, an' he's wallerin' in the money we take. If I had my way, Buzz, you an' me would operate along this trail on our own hook."

"Steve Jelk would have us kilt afore we made money enough to buy a new shirt," the deep-toned voice of "Buzz" pointed out.

The Kid was within a few paces of the pair now. He could see the boulders and brush that hid them, but had not yet located the killers. The ugly little outlaw bent almost double, passed under the thorny branches of a cat's-claw bush, and came to the first of the rocks.

A moon was beginning to throw red light down over the rim rocks, and the Oklahoma Kid squatted on his haunches, beady eyes slitted as he listened to the stealthy movements of the two men ahead of him.

"Jelk will give us fits," Buzz opined. "He'll swear we muffed this deal somehow."

"Or swear that we was too yaller ter tackle that ugly little owl-hooter," snarled Spot. "If he says that ter my face—— Hey, here comes that owl-hooter!"

The Oklahoma Kid had caught the crunch of boot heels out there along the trail. The red rays of the moon were reaching the canyon floor, and by lifting himself a foot or so the Kid was able to see out through the brush and rocks. He could see the twisting, well-worn trail of death. And along that trail came a blocky, solid-looking hombre who was glancing sharply right and left as if he expected trouble.

"That ain't Reese," Buzz croaked softly. "That's Joe Spain, Clifty's town marshal."

"Steve Jelk said he'd pay five hundred simoleons to the man who kilt Spain," Spot wheezed excitedly. "I dunno what Spain is doin' this far out o' town, but here's whar we make quick money."

The Oklahoma Kid's hand blurred down and lifted those ivory-butted guns from leather in a single, baf-

flingly swift motion. The outlaw's lips opened, but the warning yell he flung at the town marshal was drowned by the blast of four guns.

The marshal rocked, buckled at the knees, and fell face forward. And the Oklahoma Kid saw two men jerk erect there a dozen feet ahead of him. The pair whirled, cursing wildly, triggering leaden death at the Kid as the little outlaw surged up.

CHAPTER II.

"ELEVATE!"

SPOT GORMAN and Buzz Colby were shooting wild, scared half out of their wits, as they turned on the Oklahoma Kid. But the crime-hardened pair cooled down the instant their eyes saw the outlaw's moving figure.

Their hands steadied, and the Kid felt the keen burn of a bullet that tore the skin from his left cheek bone. Then the ugly little owl-hooter's big .45s were thundering answers to the guns of the bushwhack pair before him, and his big, crooked white teeth gleamed in the pale moonlight as his lips peeled back in a snarl of rage.

His first brace of slugs struck into the chunkier of the two men, upsetting the jasper, wrenching from his throat the gurgling wail of a man who knew that death was upon him.

The outlaw winced as a bullet fanned his face, and sent two more slugs squalling at the tall killer who was backing out into the trail. The tall bushwhacker sat down hard, moaned weakly, and fell sidewise to the rocks.

The jasper gasped a couple of times and died before the Kid could walk from the brush and out into the trail. The chunky killer lay just at the trail's edge, his hands and legs

flung wide, his sightless eyes staring up at the moon.

"Well, yuh two snakes won't murder anybody else along this trail," the outlaw rasped, and began reloading his powder-heated guns.

The Kid holstered his reloaded weapons, was turning when a shaky laugh made him jump high, spin while he was still in the air. He saw the blocky man who had been called Marshal Joe Spain by the bushwhackers. The marshal was sitting up, his hands clamped to his head.

"I don't know who yuh are, cowboy, but yuh saved my life," the badge-toter called. "If them two lobos yuh jist downed had found that I was only creased, they shore would have finished the job. Did yuh holler at me jist as they shot?"

"I did," the Kid admitted.

"Thought so," grumbled Spain. "I heard somebody holler, an' was duckin' when that slug gashed my head. If you hadn't hollered——"

"Know them two?" Reese asked when the marshal's voice trailed off wearily.

Spain got to his feet, mopping at the crimson which insisted spilling down one side of his square-chinned, hard-jawed face. His steel-trap mouth twisted wryly, and he spat toward the two fallen bushwhackers.

"Know 'em!" he stormed. "The slinky pair have likely kilt half a dozen good, honest men in the last month or so. The tall one is—*was* Spot Gorman. The sawed-off feller used to be Buzz Colby until yuh leaded him up proper."

The marshal retrieved a small soft hat from the trail, but tucked it under one arm instead of putting it on.

"So yuh figger them two have been hidin' along this trail an' killin' men, eh?" the Kid inquired.

The ugly little hombre was plenty

uneasy, and wanted to high-tail it. Being within a few feet of a badge-toter who looked as grim-lipped and stubborn as Marshal Joe Spain was not the Kid's idea of having a good time.

"Shore, them two have kilt men along this trail," snorted the officer. "An' until to-day, I've thought all along that Steve Jelk was their leader."

"Ain't he?" The Kid's voice was sharp.

From what he had heard pass between Spot Gorman and Buzz Colby he knew very well that Steve Jelk was the leader of the human wolves who prowled this canyon trail.

"Ed Sparks, a deputy sheriff from Two Forks, the county seat, got into town this afternoon," the marshal was saying. "An' Sparks tacked up a lot of big 'Wanted' posters that offer a man-sized reward for a feller named Jack Reese, who is also called the Oklahoma Kid."

The Kid smothered the snarl of anger that burned his throat.

Gangly, bug-eyed, rattle-headed Ed Sparks was one of the Kid's bitterest and most deadly enemies. Regardless of what happened in the county, Ed Sparks invariably laid the blame at the Kid's door. And the deputy's one ambition in life was to kill or capture the Kid.

The rattle-headed badge-toter carried a big double-barreled scatter-gun that was always loaded with buckshot. Sparks vowed that, sooner or later, he would pour that double charge of blue whistlers into the Oklahoma Kid's hide.

"Sparks accuses this—this Reese hombre of bein' behind yore troubles in Clifty?" The Kid could barely force the words past his lips.

He knew before the pain-dazed marshal spoke what the answer would be.

"That's the size of it," admitted Spain. "Sparks shore opened my eyes, and the eyes of every one else around Clifty. Ed told us all the things this Oklahoma Kid has done in the way of robbin' an' killin', an' it's plain that Reese is the man behind our troubles."

The marshal was pressing a crimson-soaked handkerchief to the gash on his scalp. His face looked white in the moonlight, and he swayed a little, evidently still suffering from shock.

"Yuh better get on to town an' have that head looked at," the Kid suggested.

With the whole mining camp up in arms against him, he reckoned the sooner he got to his horse, Shorty, and raised a tall dust yonderly, the healthier he'd be. And inwardly the Kid was raging, for this certainly was not the first time Ed Sparks had dealt him such a blow.

"Come on with me, cowboy," groaned the marshal. "I want yuh to tell Ed Sparks about this deal here. What's yore name?"

The Kid's nerves went as taut as fiddlestrings. To answer meant hubbing trouble, for the marshal was looking up at him, evidently collecting his scattered wits. To hesitate, meant arousing more than just suspicion in the lawman's mind. Yet to give his name meant hubbing sudden trouble.

"Names don't matter much, Spain," began the Kid. "As for goin' with you—"

The ugly little outlaw heaved a heartfelt sigh of relief when loud voices sounded down the canyon. The marshal turned away, staring toward the bend in the canyon which hid the talkers.

"A bunch of fellers have heard them shots, an' are comin' to investi-

gate," Spain guessed. "Likely some of the vigilantes that have lately formed."

Vigilantes! The Kid snarled under his breath, wondering if making a run for the brush wouldn't be about the best thing he could do. If a wild-eyed mob of vigilantes got their hands on him——

"Faster, men!" A deep, rolling voice boomed from beyond the bend in the canyon. "I tell yuh Ol' Ugly is up hyar some place. Any time yuh hear guns a-hammerin' like we jist heard, yuh kin bet the Oklahoma Kid is murderin' some pore feller!"

The Kid felt the short hairs stiffen along the back of his neck. He knew that coarse voice only too well.

"Ed Sparks!" he rasped. "The bug-eyed, clabber-brained whelp! I wish——"

The Kid broke off. Marshal Spain jerked around, was staring at him sharply.

The Kid had kept his big gray Stetson pulled low, and had held his chin pitched down into the folds of the red neckerchief that was about his throat. But in his anger and uneasiness, the outlaw had lifted his head, and had unconsciously shoved the hat back from his face.

Spain's eyes suddenly popped wide, an oath rippled past his lips, and his right hand made a dive for the gun holstered at his thigh. But as quick as the marshal was, the Oklahoma Kid was quicker.

The outlaw's right hand flashed out, snatched the marshal's gun a split second before Spain's fingers could close over the curving butt. The Kid hurled the gun into the shadows beyond the trail, began backing toward the brush and rocks from which he had come not long ago.

Marshal Joe Spain's face was a study in bewilderment and surprise, and he stood there, pawing dazedly at the empty holster, as if he did not realize that his gun had been taken away.

"I see yuh've recognized me, Spain." The Kid's voice was bitter. "An' before that flitter-witted Ed Sparks is through blowin' off steam, he'll have yuh convinced that I way-laid yuh here an' tried to kill yuh."

The outlaw felt the thrust of thorny branches against his back, turned sharply, and lunged into the bushes. As he circled behind an up-slanted boulder, he heard Marshal Spain's angry yell.

The Kid lurched into the black shadow of a mesquite clump, turning up canyon. He could hear Spain and Ed Sparks exchanging yelled phrases, and knew that the badge-toters and probably a sizable posse would soon be hot on his heels. The ugly little outlaw raced up the canyon as fast as stringy muscles would carry him. The moonlight helped him avoid gullies and boulders and brush clumps.

He saw the blazing lights of Steve Jelk's big gambling hall a few minutes later, and circled wide of the building, forcing his numbed legs to keep pumping swiftly. The Kid had left his horse in a thicket above the gambling hall, and his breath was coming in short, dry sobs when he finally reached the mesquites where Shorty, his bay bronc, waited.

The Kid was clawing at the first bushes, intending to part them, bore in to where he had left the bay. But suddenly those bushes shuddered violently, and three men leaped out, cocked guns in their hands. Those cocked guns almost rubbed the Kid's body when he dug spiked heels into the rocky soil, and skidded to a halt.

The outlaw's slitted eyes focused on the central man, and a snarl rode the pumping breath that wheezed through his dry throat. The Kid was staring at Steve Jelk, who gripped a pair of beautifully decorated six-guns and smiled like a death's head in the moonlight.

Jelk was tall and angular of build, and as sleek as a seal. From a thin-cheeked, sallow face his pale, chill gray eyes studied the Kid in cold appraisal. The gambler's small, tight-lipped mouth was twisted in a coldly threatening grin, and his slim white forefingers lay snugly against the gold-plated triggers of those expensive guns.

"We hold all the aces and the joker to boot, Reese," Jelk hummed. "Elevate, and we'll have a little talk. Touch hand to gun and I collect a fat reward for your hide. Decide your play, and make it."

CHAPTER III.

DEPUTY SPARKS HORNS IN.

ONLY a fool would have bucked the cold drop of those three wolf-eyed killers. And the Oklahoma Kid was far from a fool where such matters were concerned.

He lifted his slim brown hands, and stood gulping breath into his tortured lungs as the evil trio laughed in his face. From down the canyon came the faint bellow of many voices. The Kid knew that Ed Sparks and those others were coming lickety-larrup, beating the brush in the vain hope of flushing him.

The outlaw saw Steve Jelk and the other two killers stiffen as their ears finally caught the sounds of those approaching men. Jelk's pale eyes slitted, and his mouth was framed by deep, ugly lines.

"We heard shootin' down the canyon a while ago, Kid," snapped the gambler. "You had trouble of some sort?"

The ugly little hombre snarled inwardly, his hands itching for the feel of the guns at his thighs. He knew that to answer truthfully, tell Jelk what had happened to Spot Gorman and Buzz Colby, might bring a swarm of lead smashing into his body. Yet the Kid was not the sort to lie outright.

"There was some shootin' down the trail," he told the gambler. "When the smoke cleared up, Marshal Joe Spain was there in the trail, with a couple of dead fellers layin' close by. I sort o' gathered that the dead hombres were named Spot an' Buzz."

Steve Jelk's face twisted as if he were suffering physical pain. The murderous-looking pair beside him swore in explosive grunts, their evil eyes rolling uneasily as they glanced down the brushy canyon.

"You saw what happened, Reese?" There was suspicion in Jelk's gritty tone.

"I saw the whole thing," the ugly little outlaw admitted truthfully enough. "Then Spain seen an' recognized me, an' I took to the brush on the lope."

"No wonder there's a loud-mouthed pack of fools headin' this way," muttered the boss gambler. "But Joe Spain is out of his boundaries when he gets this far up the canyon."

"Deputy Ed Sparks is in that pack with his pet scattergun," the Kid informed him. "An' I reckon Sparks has got a passell of posse men with him, from the sounds I can hear."

"Get his guns, Biff," Jelk rapped. A big, shaggy-appearing man

slogged forward, coarse, brutal face scowling, pale little green eyes glowering as he met the Kid's bleak stare. The shaggy jasper shoved twin guns into low-slung holsters, reached out huge, hair-matted hands, and yanked the Kid's holstered .45s savagely from leather.

"Head for the back of my place, Reese," Jelk ordered. "An' step along lively. That fool posse is gettin' close."

The outlaw did an about face and marched stiffly toward the back of Jelk's place.

"Biff" slogged past the Kid, fumbled along the wall until he found a latch, and flung a door open. A medley of voices, whirring roulette wheels, the click of dice and stamp of feet blasted at the Kid as he stared into a dimly lighted hallway. But there was a thin partition which shut off his view of the big gambling room.

"Inside, an' turn into the first door on your right," Jelk clipped. "Jigger, ride herd on this cuss. Biff an' me will have to get out in the front room an' talk to Sparks an' the others."

Jelk and Biff hurried down the hallway, and the Kid caught a glimpse of the smoke-fogged, crowded gaming room as a thin door opened to let the pair into the front part of the building. Then the Kid was turning into the first door at his right, to find himself in a spacious, richly furnished office room.

There was a thick green carpet on the floor, half a dozen deep leather chairs, a big safe in the far corner, and a highly polished desk.

"Git into that chair yonder by the boss's desk," ordered the lanky, thin-faced fellow who had been left to guard the Kid.

The outlaw bit back the anger

that rose within him, walked to the chair and dropped into it. His beady eyes studied the spindly-shanked, tawny-eyed tough who hooked a long leg over one corner of the desk. The gangly jasper's twin guns covered the Kid carelessly, and a sneering grin wreathed the fellow's hard-lipped mouth.

The Kid settled himself in the deep leather chair, his lean face an unreadable mask. His beady eyes were hooded, and it seemed completely natural that he should slowly produce brown papers and tobacco sack, and twist a slim cigarette. He fished a match from a trouser pocket, brought his right leg up across left knee, and scratched the match on a boot sole.

When the outlaw tossed the match into a handy cuspidor and sat with right hand resting lightly on the top of his right boot, there seemed nothing unnatural in the action. At least "Jigger" Tolsen, the tawny-eyed killer who had been left to guard the Kid could see nothing alarming in the outlaw's actions.

But if Jigger Tolsen had known that the supple fingers of the Kid's right hand were within inches of a gun butt, the sneering grin would have disappeared from his face in a hurry.

Inside that right boot top, snuggled in a specially constructed holster, the Kid carried a little four-barreled, ring-trigger Remington pistol. The gun was of small caliber, yet in the Kid's practiced hands it had proven as deadly as a .45.

"Just what do you jaspers aim to do with me?" the Kid asked Jigger Tolsen.

The gangly killer lifted bony shoulders in a brief shrug.

"Yuh'll have ter wait until the boss an' Biff Fenton git back," he

grunted. "I dunno what Jelk wants with yuh. Me, I'd twist a slug into yore brain an' collect the dinero on yore scalp if I was runnin' things."

The Kid realized that the tawny-eyed rascal was not lying at all. But before he could think of a reply, the door opened, and Steve Jelk came striding in, grinning a faint, self-satisfied grin. His pale eyes shone with ugly humor as he dropped into a chair behind the desk, watching the Kid narrowly. Big Biff Fenton lumbered over to a highly polished cabinet, took out a bottle and glasses, and put them on the desk before Jelk.

"I got rid of your pal, Ed Sparks," the gambler told the Kid. "He's headed back for Clifty, feeling that you must have gone down the canyon instead of coming up this way."

Jelk filled the three glasses before him, pushed two of the drinks toward his hirelings, and lifted the third to his own lips. The trio tilted their heads, drank deeply. And while their heads were thrown back, the Oklahoma Kid's right hand darted inside his boot top, came winking out again. The Kid had the little four-barreled gun palmed, and his bitter smile flashed briefly as he glanced toward his ivory-butted guns that were sticking out of Biff Fenton's waistband.

Fenton finished his drink, smacked his lips noisily, and put the glass down. He drew the Kid's weapons, looked at them a moment, then laid them on a corner of the desk.

"Reese, I can use you," Jelk's voice pulled the Kid's gaze around.

"That so?" the ugly little outlaw drawled the words calmly.

"If it hadn't been so I wouldn't have mentioned it," Jelk grated. "Fact is, I sent Spot Gorman and Buzz Colby down the canyon to—

er—see you to-night. I told them two blunderin' idiots to—er—fetch you back here."

The Kid's lips tightened, and his fingers closed down angrily over the hide-out gun in his hand. He knew that Spot Gorman and Buzz Colby had been sent out to murder him for the reward on his head. Yet as anger stabbed through the Kid he felt a quick sense of relief and thankfulness at the same time.

When Jelk and the hairy, ape-faced Fenton slogged back into the room, the ugly little outlaw had fully expected to be accused of killing those two hirelings of Jelk's. The Kid had reasoned that Jelk would learn from Ed Sparks and the marshal that Spain had not dropped those two bushwhackers as the Kid's carefully worded answers to Jelk's earlier questions had led the gambler to believe. But Jelk obviously did not know the facts, and the Oklahoma Kid was silently thankful for that.

"So yuh wanted me fetched back here, eh?" The outlaw broke a long silence.

"I did," Jelk informed him. "Kid, the Rangers are comin' in here to put the lid on this camp."

"What am I supposed to do, cry about it?" the outlaw asked sarcastically.

Jelk flushed, and his two plug-uglies bristled, glowered at the Kid.

"Deputy Ed Sparks has got the whole camp convinced that you are behind the killing and robbing that takes place along the canyon trail between here an' town." Jelk's voice held a note of evil delight.

The Oklahoma Kid's face flushed darkly, and his lips peeled back in a grimace of angry disgust. "Ed Sparks is a blasted nuisance," he vowed.

"To you, perhaps," Jelk chuckled softly. "But to me Ed Sparks has proven a big help."

The Kid felt his nerves tighten. "Just how did that stupid Sparks help yuh?" he demanded.

"By getting this camp's attention focused on you," Jelk replied bluntly. "Whatever happens along the canyon trail from now on, Reese, you'll be blamed for it, thanks to Sparks and his loud mouth."

"Which leaves yuh in the clear," the outlaw spat angrily.

"Which leaves me a free hand to get rid of the Territorial Rangers who have come nosing into this camp." Jelk's voice was a cold, deadly hiss. "The Rangers will be singled out, and they'll stop lead the minute they prowl this canyon. The coyotes would ruin my trade if I didn't get 'em out of the way."

"An' I'll be blamed whenever a Ranger is found murdered on the canyon trail," snarled the Kid. "Jelk, yo're a snake-brained murderer of the lowest type. But if yuh think I won't stop yore Ranger-killin' scheme yo're crazy."

The gambler reddened under the lash of the Kid's words, and anger boiled hotly in his pale, deadly eyes. He half lifted himself from the chair, shoved his body across the polished desk until his face was only an arm's length from the Kid's face.

"You'll scotch no game of mine," he gloated. "You'll be a prisoner, Reese, until I find and have killed the six Rangers that have come snoopin' around here. Then I'll have the pleasure of puttin' a bullet through your middle for the things you just called me. The reward on your head is worth takin'."

"So yuh think I won't get a chance to stop yore murder game?" the Kid

hummed, and his lean fingers tensed on the hide-out gun he was palming.

"You will not!" Jelk spat hotly.

"No?" The Kid purred the single word, and his right hand flicked up with the darting speed of a rattler's strike.

Steve Jelk seemed actually to freeze, and the color ran from his sallow face as a sick, scared look crept into his eyes. Jelk was staring into the square end of that four-barreled Remington, and his bulging eyes saw the Kid's lean finger tighten inside the trigger ring.

"In case yore two heel-dogs get funny, Jelk, you'll butt a bullet before they can do me in." The Kid grinned that wicked, unnerving grin.

Biff Fenton and Jigger Tolsen were slapping for guns, oaths husking from their throats. But Steve Jelk's voice lifted in a thin, raspy order that stopped the pair, left them standing with guns half drawn.

"Steady, men," Jelk was getting control of himself now. "Don't crowd this tricky little devil. Don't you know a pat hand when you see one?"

Fenton and Tolsen let go of their guns, stood scowling murderous hate. Steve Jelk sank slowly back into the comfortable chair, his face a gambler's mask. Those pale, deadly eyes were as alert as the eyes of a hawk, however, and the Kid knew that the slightest slip on his part would be his undoing. But the Oklahoma Kid had been in too many tight spots to make a slip.

He stood up with deliberate calm, reached over to where his guns lay, and lifted one with his left hand. He cocked the .45, chuckled coldly, and settled the big weapon's muzzle on Steve Jelk's white face. The Kid slid the wicked little hide-out into his trouser pocket, snatched his sec-

ond .45, and was backing toward the door when booted feet hammered loudly out in the hallway.

"Hey, Mr. Jelk!" boomed the voice of Deputy Ed Sparks. "I want ter see yuh a minute, Mr. Jelk."

The Oklahoma Kid snarled like a cornered bobcat. The door latch behind him rattled, and he saw Steve Jelk and the other two killers tense, saw their hands rip down as they flung themselves toward the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

LAWMAN'S LEAD.

ONLY the unusual ability to think and act in split seconds regardless of pain or danger saved the life of the Oklahoma Kid. The ugly little outlaw whirled as the three killers dropped toward the floor, knowing that it would be a fractional part of a second before they could line their guns and pull triggers.

The Kid's own weapons rasped into holsters as his wiry body turned, and his lean hand flashed out, grasped the door that was opening. The Kid jerked the portal wide and dived headlong between a pair of long, saddle-bowed legs. As he dived he had a fleeting glimpse of gangly Ed Sparks, who stood there with jaw flapping open, his brown eyes bulging out more than ever.

The deputy's long-jawed face twitched, and the bristly brown mustache that almost hid his snub nose wiggled.

"What the——" Sparks began, and tried to lift the huge scattergun he carried tucked under one muscular arm. But the Kid was already down, slim body sliding between those saddle-warped legs. Then the Kid was rearing up like a sunfishing bronc, Ed Sparks seated briefly on his arching back.

Sparks squalled like a catamount and sailed head-first into Jelk's office as the Kid shot upward. Now guns were blasting, and the ugly little outlaw heard the hiss and snarl of slugs as he leaped clear of the doorway.

The Kid landed running and a few bounds carried him to the back door. He yanked the thin door open and lunged out into the night. But he halted suddenly, his beady eyes drawn to a pile of empty packing cases.

Quickly the Kid snatched two of the stout wooden boxes, and laid them in front of the back door. Then he was sprinting toward that thicket where Shorty waited, a hard, bitter grin on his thin mouth as he kept an ear tuned to the sounds that came from behind him.

He heard Ed Sparks roaring angrily, heard the mingling yaps of Jelk and the two killers who took orders from the snake-brained gambler. Those angry yells changed to a medley of wild curses, and the Kid glanced back to see a tangle of men threshing there at the back door.

Ed Sparks and the other three had piled through the door at top speed and were trying to untangle themselves after having crashed into those packing cases and rooted up a few yards of dirt that was far from soft.

The Oklahoma Kid put on a fresh burst of speed and dived into the thicket where his chunky, blazed-faced, stocking-legged bay bronc stood snorting uneasily. Leaping into the saddle with a single bound, the Kid rammed dull spurs against Shorty's round sides and sent the bay hurtling out on the far side of the brush patch.

The Kid's first thought was to turn up the canyon and ride out

among the ragged rim rocks far above, where he would be safe from pursuit. But the ugly little hombre did not turn Shorty up canyon.

He was suddenly remembering the murderous plot to destroy the Rangers who had come to put the lid on this wild boom town. The outlaw had a wholesome respect for those hard-riding, straight-shooting Rangers who were currying the bad lands for just such jaspers as Steve Jelk.

Unless the Rangers were warned, at least some of them would be slain by the hard-cased crew who took orders from Steve Jelk. The Oklahoma Kid had spent only a few minutes in Jelk's Miner's Palace that evening before starting his walk down the canyon toward the town. But in that few minutes the outlaw's keen eye had seen and catalogued the gun-hung rascals who lounged about the big room.

Those lounging men had reminded the Kid of half-sleepy rattlers as he sized them up. And he thought of them now as he let Shorty walk along the thicket-choked canyon. With that many men under his thumb, and no telling how many more boot-licking spies scattered around Clifty town, it would be only a matter of hours until Steve Jelk knew who the Rangers were.

Once the chill-eyed gambler learned the identity of the lawmen, some of those lazy-looking gunmen who hung around the big gambling hall would mosey calmly out into the night, as if bent on nothing more than a stroll to town. And by morning the camp would boil with the news that a Ranger or two had been killed sometime during the night. So ran the Kid's thoughts as his horse carried him down the twisting canyon.

He stayed out in the brush, well away from the trail. The outlaw saw the lights of Clifty at last, and circled warily out along a shoulder of the canyon's steep slope. He left his horse near a row of dark shacks and moved forward on foot until he could look out upon Clifty's one broad, dusty street.

The town was teeming with life, throbbing with the quick-pulsed recklessness of men who had found new wealth and were eager to give vent to their happiness. Dance-hall music wailed above the din, stores were open and doing a rushing business, and the saloons were packed to overflowing.

The Oklahoma Kid's brow was creased in a troubled frown as he stepped out from a building corner to join the yelping, laughing, jostling crowd that poured constantly along the hard-packed walks. Something of the excitement of this wild camp reached into him, quickened his pulse, brought a reckless sort of feeling to him.

But the Kid fought down that feeling of excitement, his mind busy with the problem of finding some way to warn the Rangers who had come to this camp.

That those Rangers would not hesitate to shoot or capture him if given the chance, the Kid knew only too well. He was outside the law they represented, and to show himself boldly to one of them meant death or capture. Yet the Kid meant to warn those Rangers somehow if it could possibly be done.

He let the surging stream of humanity carry him the full length of the street, his keen eyes searching half-seen faces, his brain struggling doggedly with his problem. The Kid crossed the dusty thoroughfare at the far end, and was again caught

in the wealth-mad stream of humanity that flowed along the hard-packed walk.

When he had traveled half the length of the town once more, the ugly little outlaw was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he forgot to step wide of the yellow pools of light which splashed on the milling crowd through store windows. He had just passed through such a pool of light when a gun muzzle jabbed his ribs, and a low, grim voice sounded almost in his ear.

"Don't make a bad move, Reese, or I'll have to kill yuh," that voice advised. "Ranger Paul Bishop speakin'. Turn off into the next vacant lot we pass. If this crowd was to see who I've snagged, they'd tear yuh apart before I could get yuh handcuffed an' put behind bars."

The Kid glanced sidewise into a square, grim-lipped young face. Ranger Paul Bishop was short of leg and heavily set. His dark eyes were coldly threatening, and the Oklahoma Kid knew that a gun would blast red death against his ribs if he made a wrong move.

"Don't get a nervous trigger finger," the outlaw husked. "I was lookin' for a Ranger, whether yuh believe that or not."

A surly grunt was the only answer, and the Kid turned now as he saw a vacant lot flanking the walk.

He had traveled perhaps a hundred feet from the walk when his foot sank suddenly into some sort of ditch or hole, and his body slewed sharply sidewise as he started pitching down.

Those big "Wanted" posters which dotted the waste lands advised officers to take absolutely no chances when approaching the Okla-

homa Kid. Ranger Paul Bishop knew that, for he had studied many of those posters. And the Ranger did not know that the Kid had stepped into some sort of hole.

Bishop leaped back, and the gun in his hand blasted at the lurching outlaw. The Oklahoma Kid groaned, and struck the earth in a limp, unmoving huddle.

The Ranger snarled at him as he advanced with gun cocked. But a moment later Bishop holstered the cocked gun with a muttered oath, struck a match and looked down at the Kid's hatless head. From the outlaw's thick black hair crimson was pouring in a broad, sluggish stream.

"Brained the tricky cuss," grunted Ranger Bishop.

CHAPTER V.

TROUBLE FOR SPARKS.

THE Oklahoma Kid was sick and trembling as consciousness returned to him. At each pulsing beat of his heart the right side of his head felt as if a hammer crashed against his skull.

Choking back a moan of pain, the ugly little hombre blinked into bright lamplight as his eyes opened. He heard a quick grunt, and booted feet rattled over a board floor.

The Kid saw a pitched roof above him, saw unpainted board walls that were broken by windows and a door. He realized that he was in some sort of house, and was trying to remember just what had happened when Ranger Paul Bishop's square-chinned face thrust into his line of vision.

"Yuh got yore wits back, Reese?" The Ranger's voice was hesitant, and his dark eyes looked troubled.

The Oklahoma Kid sat up, sur-

prised to find that he was neither bound nor handcuffed. The blocky, red-faced Ranger backed away, his hands hovering over gun butts. Glowering, the Kid lifted a hand to his madly throbbing head to find a thin, strong bandage.

"Listen, Reese," the Ranger burst out. "I found the post hole some fool had dug an' never filled in out in that vacant lot. I knowed when I found the hole that yuh had stumbled an' fell. I—I'm mighty sorry I misunderstood, an' slung a bullet at yuh."

"So that's the how of it!" choked the Kid. "I remember fallin' when my foot bogged into a hole. So yuh thought I was gettin' tricky, an' tried to blow my head off?"

The Ranger crimsoned, licked uneasily at his lips. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "It ain't my style to shoot a man unless I have to. But I thought——"

"Forget it," the Kid interrupted, his keen eyes traveling quickly over the small room.

He was on a bunk that smelled dusty, as if it had not been used for some time. And the simple furniture about the room was covered with dust. On the opposite wall hung a few discarded garments, among them a rather large-sized woman's dress.

The dress was crimson-colored and decorated with tarnished metal bangles around the bottom of the short, flared skirt. The short-skirted, tight-waisted dress was such as a dance-hall girl might wear.

"Where am I?" the outlaw asked, swinging his attention to the blocky Ranger.

"In a deserted shack at the edge o' town," Bishop told him. "Blame it, I've got to keep yuh hid out until I can lug yuh off to some jail. If

this camp found out yuh was a prisoner, Reese, yuh'd get that neck o' yores stretched inside of nothin' flat."

The Kid realized that such a thing might easily enough happen, since Ed Sparks had turned the whole camp against him. But the outlaw forgot his own predicament as his throbbing brain cleared a little. Remembering what had brought him into Clifty, he fixed Bishop with a hard stare.

"Listen, fella, where are yore five Ranger pals?" demanded the outlaw.

Bishop squinted at him his mouth tightening. "None o' yore business," he snorted.

"Yuh blamed galoot, listen to me," the Kid barked, and in clipped, angry sentences he explained how he had been taken prisoner by Steve Jelk.

The Kid told of Jelk's murderous plan to get rid of the Rangers. He wanted to slam a fist into Bishop's face when the Ranger merely curled a lip and glowered at him.

"For tall tales, that takes the spotted pup!" snapped the Ranger. "Ed Sparks has already told us how he blamed near snagged yuh while yuh was tryin' to hold up Steve Jelk an' make Jelk open the safe in his office."

"Tryin' to hold up——" Anger choked the Kid, caused him to break off.

He swung his feet from the edge of the bunk, but not until his hand had dipped swiftly into the top of his right boot and slid out the little four-barreled Remington.

Ranger Paul Bishop was not looking at the moment, for he had rolled a cigarette, and was tipping his head forward to touch a match to it.

"Yeah, Sparks almost got yuh," the Ranger half jeered as he puffed

on the cigarette. "An' that deputy is shore faunchin' to see yuh shot, hung, poisoned, drowned, an' knifed all at once. Yuh ought to see his shins, Reese."

The Kid remembered putting those packing boxes where Sparks and the other three hombres would stumble over them as they rushed out the back door of Jelk's dive.

"Bishop, I tell yuh that some of yore Ranger pals will be murdered if they go up that canyon to-night," the outlaw groaned. "Can't yuh get it through that thick head o' yores that I'm tellin' the truth?"

"I don't know what yore game is, Reese," said the Ranger with a shrug. "But whatever it is, forget it."

"Then an honest man or two will be murdered in that canyon to-night," gritted the Kid. "If you Rangers would only patrol that canyon in pairs, yuh'd——"

"Ah-ha!" Bishop cut in. "So that's yore scheme! Yuh've got that gang of yores that Ed Sparks mentioned planted out along the canyon trail, ready to mow down any Ranger that shows up. Yuh murderin' coyote, when Sparks gets back here I'll send him after Lew Denton. We'll snag—— Awk!"

With the speed of a pouncing cat the Oklahoma Kid leaped from the bunk, his slitted eyes blazing angrily. The stubby little gun jutted from his brown right hand, and the four small, deadly barrels stared Paul Bishop squarely in the face.

"Elevate!" the Kid snarled, and the Ranger swore a low, smothered oath, made a stab for the gun at his right thigh.

The Oklahoma Kid lunged forward, smashed at the Ranger's sandy head with the stubby little gun. The gun was too small to

make an effective club, and the blow of it did little more than wrench an oath from Bishop's twisting lips.

But the Oklahoma Kid's left fist came whistling up from his boot top and cracked sharply against the tip of the Ranger's square chin. Bishop sighed, buckled at the knees, and fell limply into the Kid's outflung arms.

"Crazy galoot!" gritted the outlaw. "If I'd been the killer yuh call me, I would 'a' shot yuh between the eyes."

He lowered the senseless Ranger to the dusty bunk, searched him, found a pair of handcuffs, and manacled Bishop's thick, strong wrists. Remembering that Bishop had said something about Ed Sparks returning, the Kid worked with feverish haste. He tore a blanket into strips, bound the Ranger's ankles together, gagged him, then rolled him to the floor and back beneath the bunk.

The Kid found his ivory-buffed guns and shell-studded belts on a dusty table down the room.

Snapping the belts about his middle, he was settling the holsters into place when he heard booted feet chugging outside the shack.

He took his Stetson from the floor beside the table, drew it carefully down over the thin bandage about his aching head. He started toward a back door, but heard those booted feet tromp on steps outside the front door.

The Kid knew he could never make an exit now. Charging across the room, he flattened against the wall where the front door would screen him as it swung back.

"Hullo, Bishop!" a voice boomed. "I've et, so I'll stay hyar an' watch Ol' Ugly while yuh go git yore supper. If that varmint tries to escape on me, I'll fix him plenty."

The voice was that of Ed Sparks, and the Oklahoma Kid yanked both guns as the door swung open.

Sparks came limping into the room, his bulging brown eyes blinking in the lamplight. He saw the empty bunk, and an oath rasped from his throat as he swung up the big scattergun. Ranger Paul Bishop had made a thumping sound beneath the bunk, was moaning through the gag.

"Crawl out o' thar or I'll shoot, Ugly!" squalled Sparks, and the shotgun flipped to his shoulder just as the Oklahoma Kid shouldered the door shut, took a single step, and smashed at the deputy's tall hat crown with a gun barrel.

The heavy shotgun floundered from the deputy's limp hands, and thudded against the floor. Sparks toppled forward, out cold from that clout across the skull.

"Blasted rattle-head!" muttered the Kid as he holstered his guns and stepped forward.

Ed Sparks would have sent a double charge of buckshot blasting through the shabby bunk into Ranger Bishop if the Kid had not clouted him. Sparks hated the Kid like poison, and had jumped to the conclusion that it was "Ol' Ugly," as he called the Kid, who was beneath the bunk, making that noise.

The ugly little outlaw took a six-gun from a holster at the deputy's thigh, and lifted the big scattergun up from the floor. He tossed the guns out one of the shack's windows, strode back to Sparks, and grasped one of the deputy's boots. The Kid yanked the boot from the badgetoter's limp foot, threw it out the window after the guns, and seized the deputy's second boot.

"By gollies, I've got an idea," cried the outlaw as he tossed the

second boot through the open window.

He grinned that cold, twisted grin and got to work in earnest. A few moments later, Deputy Ed Sparks was clad in nothing but his long white underwear. The deputy's socks, pants, shirt, and crumpled Stetson followed his footgear and guns through the window.

"Now, jughead, I reckon yuh won't come boilin' after me the minute yuh wake up," muttered the outlaw. "I've got to school a Ranger in the business of handlin' killers, an' I don't want yuh an' yore shotgun worryin' me. Yuh won't go— By gollies!"

The last two words came in an exultant yip. The Kid's eye had fallen again on the tarnished finery that had once been the pride of some dance-hall girl. The outlaw's lean face twisted into a broad, crinkling grin, and he was across the room in a few strides.

He took the red dress from the nail where it hung, shook dust from the garment's folds. He was chuckling as he hurried back to Ed Sparks and slipped the dress down over the deputy's head. The Kid chuckled constantly as he worked, and his beady eyes danced with devilment. And presently Ed Sparks was clad in one of the most outlandish of garments.

The deputy's big shoulders filled the upper part of the dress to the straining point, and his long, white-clad legs looked worse than ridiculous jutting out beneath the short, bangled skirt. And as the Kid looked down at those long saddle-warped legs, he had another bright hunch.

Producing a stock knife, he bent and sliced the legs from the deputy's underwear at each knee. The short

red skirt would, when Ed stood up, lack several inches of covering those haggled drawer legs.

The Kid cackled aloud as he saw the deputy's badly skinned and swollen shins. But his cackling ceased abruptly when Ed Sparks groaned and began twitching uneasily.

Charging to the bunk, the Kid reached under and dragged out Ranger Paul Bishop. Bishop was fully awake, and had clawed the gag from his mouth. He kicked at the Kid, started to curse him. But the Ranger's eyes swung, fairly popping out as he stared at Ed Sparks.

"What in blazes?" he gaped.

"I hope the whole town sees that addle-wit dolled up in them togs," snorted the Kid as he untied the Ranger's ankles.

He boosted Bishop to his feet and shook the Ranger sharply when he tried to fight.

"Yuh dumb walloper, yuh wouldn't listen to me about the death that's waitin' for yore pals when they go into the canyon trail," grated the outlaw. "So you an' me are patrollin' that trail. If we live until daylight, yuh'll know a blamed sight more about snaggin' two-legged skunks than yuh seem to know now."

"Yuh'll take me off up the canyon an' murder me," Bishop predicted grimly.

With a snort the Kid shoved him toward the door, keeping behind the blocky lawman.

When they stepped out into the night, the Kid saw that they were only a few paces from the town's busy street. A group of men were passing, and suddenly Ranger Paul Bishop lifted his voice in a bellowing call for help. The men on the walk only a few rods away whirled,

jabbering excitedly, their excitement quickly attracting other hombres.

The Kid slid an arm forward and crooked it about Bishop's throat before the Ranger could yell again. With knee jolts and angry shoves, the outlaw got Bishop to a scrawny thicket of mesquites which grew a few yards beyond the shack.

He halted there, his pulse racing as he watched a swelling throng of men pour from the street and come racing to the lighted shack. They swarmed before the little stoop and suddenly a tall, short-skirted figure appeared in the doorway.

"Good evenin', ma'am," some hombre greeted. "We heard a yell for help. Is there something— By gosh, yuh ain't no lady!"

Ed Sparks neither looked like a lady nor sounded like one. He was cussing at the top of his leathery lungs, tears in his voice as he realized his predicament.

"Ed Sparks!" some hombre in the crowd yelled. "What in the name of blue blazes are yuh doin' in a rig like that? If yuh ain't the funniest-lookin'—"

The speaker's voice ended in a bray of laughter, and suddenly the milling, growing crowd before the shack burst into a booming, howling gale of mirth.

CHAPTER VI.

HOT LEAD FOR LOBOS.

THE Oklahoma Kid's chunky bay carried double, for the Kid held Ranger Paul Bishop prisoner as he rode up the sinister canyon which led to Steve Jelk's evil dive. Bishop was tight-lipped and sullen, refusing to answer the outlaw.

The Kid halted Shorty when they were about halfway to Jelk's place, left the bay in a thicket, and

prodded the Ranger out toward the trail of death. And for two long hours they walked silently up and down that trail, the Kid keenly alert, Bishop more puzzled now than angry.

They were well up the canyon toward Jelk's place when the Kid halted suddenly, a low, hissing sound passing his lips. Coming toward him from Jelk's dive were two of the gambler's hirelings. The pair came at a trot, looking back over their shoulders frequently.

"Trouble's due, Bishop!" whispered the Kid. He yanked the Ranger from the trail, driving him back into the black shadows of a tall bluff.

A gun appeared in the outlaw's hand, and the muzzle rubbed Bishop's ribs in warning.

"Not a peep out o' yuh, fella," warned the ugly little outlaw. "Them two lobos comin' down the trail yonder are a couple of Jelk's hired killers. An' from their actions, they've been sent to waylay some poor fellow. If yuh call out, I'll smack yuh colder than a wedge."

"By gosh, them two fellers do act like they're up to somethin', Reese." There was no anger in the Ranger's voice now.

The two killers surged past in the moonlight, so close that the hidden outlaw and Ranger could hear their hoarse, labored breathing. The pair turned a bend in the canyon a few yards farther on, were lost to view. But the echoes of their slogging feet came back for a while, then pinched off abruptly.

Two more men were coming down the trail now, walking along calmly, talking as they advanced.

"I was right," breathed the Kid. "Them two miners comin' yonder would be found in this canyon tomorrow, stabbed or clubbed to

death, their pockets turned inside out. But here's where we take a hand."

The Kid fished a small key from a shirt pocket, grasped Bishop's manacled wrists, and fitted the little key into the handcuff lock.

"Yuh've got to let them two miners comin' yonder see that yo're a Ranger," the outlaw snapped. "An' for gosh sakes, Bishop, don't spill the beans by lettin' them know that yo're not exactly doin' what yuh want to be doin'."

Before the Ranger could question the outlaw, he was shoved out into moonlight. He saw the two men ahead stop jerkily, watched their hands grope clumsily toward coat tails.

"Hold on, boys," the Oklahoma Kid called, stepping out. "Wouldn't want to drill a Ranger, would yuh?"

"Ranger?" one of the men echoed suspiciously.

"Tell 'em who yuh are, an' flash that badge yuh've got under yore shirt-pocket flap!" the Kid hissed in Bishop's ear.

"It's all right, boys," the Ranger spoke crisply. "I'm Paul Bishop, Territorial Ranger. Here's the badge."

The two men laughed shakily when they saw the glittering emblem sparkle in the moonlight.

"You Rangers shore scairt the daylights out of us," one of them sighed. "Fred, hyar, is packin' a big roll of money. We thought mebber—"

"Two killers went down the canyon to waylay yuh," interrupted the Kid. "Give us them hats yo're wearin', then shinny up this slope an' blister the breeze for Clifty."

The miners were shaken, jabbering in alarm at their narrow escape. They handed over their slouch hats,

and the Kid also insisted on having the coats they wore. Then the two miners were scrambling up the steep bluff, and the Oklahoma Kid and the Ranger were turning down the trail, donning the coats and hats which the miners had worn.

"Listen, Kid, I see yuh've got my gun in yore waistband," growled Bishop. "Pass me that smoker, feller. When them two jump us I want to have a gun in my fist."

"So's yuh can get the drop on me, or drill me?" the outlaw countered gruffly.

Bishop turned beet-red, swore through grinding teeth.

"If I had the time I'd cram them words down yore neck," he choked. "Reese, I see now that yuh've played square all along. An' them dad-blasted 'Wanted' posters lie about yuh."

"That so?" gruffed the outlaw.

"Of course it's so," the Ranger snorted. "Why, yuh've had a chance to kill me, an' yuh had a chance to kill that fool Sparks. Instead o' killin' us, yuh've jolted some sense into my head, an' shore made a monkey out of that deputy sheriff. Thanks, Kid!"

Without a word the Kid passed Bishop's gun over, butt first. The Ranger grabbed it eagerly, a hard glint in his eyes as he stared down the trail.

Outlaw and Ranger slogged around the turn in the trail, walking elbow to elbow. They saw where black shadows cast by an overhanging bluff made a dark pool across the trail, and knew that death would lurk there in those shadows. But they were watching for the killers to make their play, and were not caught unprepared when they stepped into the band of blackness.

Two dark forms moved within shadows, and the Oklahoma Kid felt

steel rip into the shoulder of his borrowed coat as he flung himself sideways. The outlaw's guns roared hoarse thunder, and a man's choked scream wailed out.

The Kid twisted, saw Ranger Bishop wallowing on the ground, and saw a stooped figure above the threshing lawman. But just as the Kid's thumbs were ready to slip from gun hammers and let twin slugs hammer that stooping man, a streak of greenish yellow flame spurted up from the Ranger's twisting figure. The stooping man's gasping moan told of sudden death.

Bishop came groggily to his feet, staggered out into the moonlight. His borrowed hat was gone, and his face was drained of color. He holstered his gun, reached up, and grasped the hilt of a knife that protruded from his upper left arm. He cursed as he dragged the knife free and flung it at the huddled murderer who had driven it into his flesh.

The Kid made the Ranger peel off the borrowed coat and roll up a crimson-soaked sleeve. The outlaw bandaged the spurting wound with the Ranger's own neckerchief, then peeled the borrowed coat from his own back and glanced at the rent in his own shirt and undershirt where a murderer's knife had narrowly missed his flesh.

Sliding his folded hat from beneath his belts, the outlaw tossed the miner's hat from his bandaged head and tugged the more comfortable Stetson on gingerly.

"My Ranger pards aim to sneak into this canyon at two a. m., Kid, an' hide along the trail," Bishop told him. "When they get here, Jelk's killers will hub trouble."

"Yeah, I reckon so," the outlaw answered slowly. "But I'm headin' yonderly now, Bishop. After what

I done to Ed Sparks, that cuss will have yore pals an' all the miners in camp on my trail."

"Gosh, I guess that's right," grumbled the Ranger. "I wish to blazes yuh could stay, Reese, an' be here when the clean-up starts. I can tip the other Rangers off now as to who's behind this trouble, an' things will shore get hot when we raid Jelk's dive."

"I owe Jelk a little visit," the Kid bit out thinly. "So I reckon——"

He broke off, scowling at his own carelessness in having said so much.

"Say, I thought it was funny that yuh was ridin' yonderly!" Bishop yipped. "So yuh aim to ride by Jelk's place an' hog all the fun. Like blazes yuh do. Mr. Owl-hooter, jist try gettin' rid o' me."

The Kid moved into the brush and headed for Shorty. But Paul Bishop was at his heels and he bounded up into the saddle, letting the Kid sit behind him just in case the Kid might be nervous about a badge-toter being at his back.

They rode up the canyon, circled the Jelk dive, and halted a hundred yards away. On foot the Kid and the Ranger walked down to the back of the building.

Taking the lead at the back door, the Kid shoved it gently open and stepped up into the hallway. The office was lighted but empty, and there was a hard, twisted look to the Kid's face as he looked over one shoulder at the Ranger.

"They'll be out front," he said softly. "Bishop, the odds will be four-five to one against us. Yore badge might help some if it showed plain. But buckin' that gang——"

"Quit gabbin' an' lead on," Paul Bishop cut in roughly, and he pinned his Ranger's badge out in plain sight.

"Yo're askin' for a killin'," snapped the Kid as he stalked on down the corridor.

He opened the partition door, stepped through into the room. The place was not overly crowded, and unusually quiet.

Steve Jelk and the Kid spied each other at the same instant. Jelk leaped back from a dice table, his face working, his eyes wide with amazement. Biff Fenton and Jigger Tolsen saw their boss lurch and squalled oaths as they glanced down the room.

"Tinhorns an' killers, this is show-down!" Paul Bishop sang out. "I deputize every miner in this house, an' order yuh to kill the first gambler or gunman that makes a tricky move. Ranger law is talkin'."

The Oklahoma Kid had not expected that smooth move. He saw burly miners sway back from gaming tables, hook guns out in clumsy draws, and level those guns at pasty-faced tin horns before the dumfounded game keepers knew what was happening.

"There's only two of them fools!" yelled Steve Jelk. "Down that Ranger an' the Kid. Cut the four-flushin' whelps in two with lead!"

The Kid grinned and flicked his sinewy hands in a draw that no man had beaten as yet. His guns arched up in a smooth, flowing motion; belched flame-tipped thunder as they cleared leather.

Across the room, big Biff Fenton blasted two shots into the floor, then fell with the Kid's slugs through his lungs. And suddenly a handful of hard-cased men who had escaped the notice of the deputized miners were yanking guns, and the big gaming room was changed to a roaring, smoke-clogged inferno.

The Oklahoma Kid felt as if the floor were skidding from beneath his

boot soles, and he knew that a bullet had cut into his right thigh. He was thrown sidewise, but he managed to keep facing the room. And even as he rocked drunkenly, those ivory-butted guns thundered, and down at the front of the room a gawky killer wilted across a table.

The Kid turned, his thumbs lifting and dropping knurled gun hammers in a steady, deadly tempo. The killers who had opened up ducked and yelled and wavered, cursing the slugs that whispered death in their unwashed ears.

From the tail of his eye the Kid saw Paul Bishop waver and fall to one knee. But the plucky Ranger was still shooting, and the ugly little outlaw saw a man wilt under Bishop's lead. Then a slug ripped skin from the Kid's right cheek, and his swiveling glance caught Steve Jelk rushing at him through the roaring room.

Jelk's cold calm was gone, and the gambler's sallow face had changed into a hideous mask of murderous rage and hate. His lips were moving, and the Kid knew that Jelk was shouting at him, probably cursing and threatening as he charged behind spitting guns.

But the boom and roar of exploding powder drowned the boss gambler's words, and the Oklahoma Kid flung a slug at Jelk's gleaming teeth. He saw the twisted mouth become a spraying red blot, and watched Jelk land face-down and skid to a shuddering, dead heap.

"Jelk's down!" a voice shrilled. "We surrender, Ranger."

The Kid reeled, sick and dazed from pain and bullet shock. He planted his feet wide apart, his slitted eyes watchful.

Paul Bishop limped to his side, laughing shakily. The Ranger's face was a crimson smudge along the left

side from a bullet that had gashed his temple. Yet Bishop was in command of his wits, ready to drop the first gambler or gunman who showed further resistance. But with Jelk down, his hirelings were showing the yellow streak.

Suddenly the miners realized the importance of their position. A burly fellow took the lead, ordering his companions to disarm the shaking prisoners.

"By gosh, it's over," Ranger Bishop grunted dazedly. "Kid, I never thought— Say, listen!"

The Kid had already heard the boom of many voices outside. Through the front door he glimpsed a solid mass of men rushing toward the building from down the canyon. And in the lead was Ed Sparks, who had recovered his clothing and scattergun.

"Sparks!" the outlaw grated, and shuttled back toward the door which led into the hallway. Paul Bishop followed, to lay a friendly hand on the Kid's lean arm.

"Sparks would kill yuh on sight after what yuh done to him," Paul spoke swiftly. "But before yuh go, Kid, I—I want to say thanks, amigo, for schoolin' this Ranger in the gentle art of handlin' killers the right an' proper way."

"Sorry I had to wallop yuh tonight, Paul." The Kid's twisted grin came wanly. "But I never did fancy bein' lugged off to jail an' hung for crimes I never committed."

"Yuh should 'a' belted me a couple dozen more times, after I tried to blow yore head off," Paul snorted. "Adios, Kid. Happy trails."

The Kid was gone then, and Ed Sparks came through the front door like a cyclone a moment later.

"I knowed it!" the bug-eyed deputy howled to the mob at his heels.

"Men, jist look at the dead, dyin', an' crippled. I told yuh Ol' Ugly was hyar. But we'll git him. Search the place, an' shoot ter kill if yuh see thet——"

"Hey, Stupid!" the Kid shrilled through the thin partition. "Where's that purty dance costume yuh was rompin' around in?"

The crowd behind Sparks guffawed. The goggle-eyed deputy charged down the room, his face blazing, rage boiling in his eyes.

"Halt!" he thundered, lifting the scattergun. "Ugly, stand hitched or I'll blow yuh in two."

The Kid was already at the far end of the hall, darting outside. His face was white from the pain his swift movements brought to bullet wounds, yet a faint, sour grin touched his lips as he grabbed a big packing case which lay to one side and skidded it over in front of the door.

The Kid lurched sidewise barely in time to escape a charge of blue whistlers that came roaring at him. Setting his teeth against pain, he sprinted toward the thicket which hid his bronc. But he was little more than halfway to the thicket when Ed Sparks reached the back door.

The Kid was watching over one

shoulder, his nerves jangling as he realized that he was within range of that scattergun. Ed Sparks could have killed him then, had he used any sense. But Sparks had no sense when he was excited.

He sailed straight out the back door, screeched in pain when his already tortured shins cracked against the big packing case. The deputy landed on his snub nose, and his scattergun sailed ten feet before it thumped the earth.

The Kid trotted on to Shorty and swung into the saddle. Sparks was mouthing curses, trying to collect his scattered wits.

"Adios, Stupid!" the Kid taunted. "In case yuh don't know it, there's a box settin' in front of that door."

"Halt!" the deputy half sobbed. "Ugly, I'll snag yuh if it takes the rest o' my life!"

The deputy crawled wearily toward his pet shotgun, cursing each time either shin scraped the ground.

The Oklahoma Kid rode away into the moonlit night.

An' it's a safe bet he's headed fer another trouble spot. Wherever he goes, thar's goin' tuh be gunfire an' action. An' we'll be hearin' about it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Watch fer the next story about the Oklahoma Kid that's comin' up soon.

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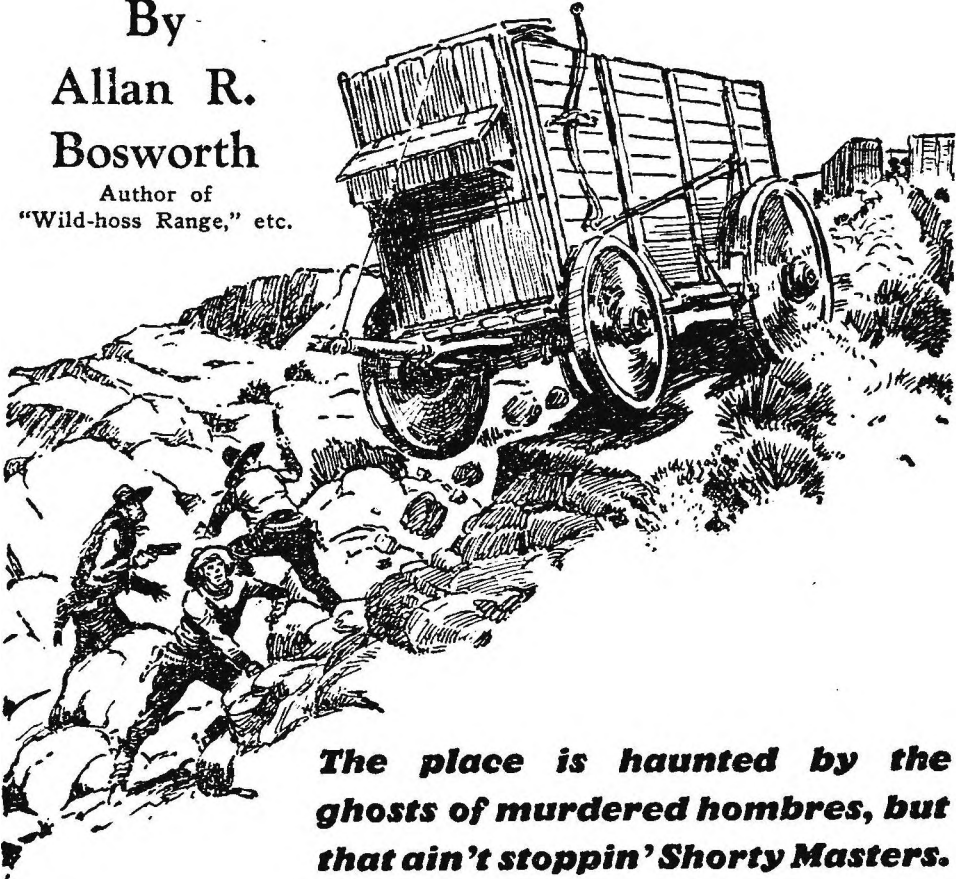
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Mules On Murder Mesa

By

Allan R.
Bosworth

Author of
"Wild-hoss Range," etc.



The place is haunted by the ghosts of murdered hombres, but that ain't stoppin' Shorty Masters.

THE attack came without warning. A dozen guns suddenly tore the shadows that twilight thickened on the Soledad road, twenty miles south of the Rio Grande. There were wild yells, the crashing of hoofs in the mesquites, and bullets hammering into the three freight wagons.

"Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), grabbed for his .45 at the first vivid streak of gun flame. Half rising from the wagon seat, he sent two shots ripping into the semidarkness. And then he was bowled over

backward to land in a shaken heap in the cluttered wagon bed.

A fragment of lead or a bullet-flung bit of gravel had stung the lead mules into a jerking lurch of speed. The shrill squeal of one of the animals was still in Shorty's ears as he bounced to his feet and fought the sway of the careening wagon.

Braang! Bang!

Powder blaze lanced along the arched canvas. The heavy slug slashed the taut tarpaulin as a knife would have done, and the wind

peeled it back to show a man riding there with a slouch Stetson drawn low over his face.

Br-room!

The man ducked as Shorty fired and missed because of the roll of the wagon. In the flash of the gun, the bow-legged little teamster caught a split-second glance of the hombre's features.

It was a peculiarly sharp and sinister face, oddly immobile and expressionless. But one thing etched itself on the mule driver's memory—the cheeks and nose were thickly pitted with pockmarks.

The next instant, and the rider had fired a shot that burned across Shorty's shoulder, then wheeled his horse out of danger. The teamster heard him shout an angry command to the men behind him.

Shorty Masters grabbed the wagon seat and vaulted over it to seize his reins. The mules had the bits in their teeth and were stretching in a harness-slapping run down the long slant into the little Mexican mining town.

It would only be a matter of a minute before the attackers could overtake the wagons. But the freighter was not thinking about himself, now. He shoved fresh cartridges into his .45, and wondered what had happened to his cowboy pard, Willie Wetherbee.

The tall, wide-shouldered puncher, who was better known as the "Sonora Kid," was riding his sorrel cayuse somewhere back of the wagons and driving half a dozen horses the pards were delivering to Joe Brandon, mine superintendent in Soledad. Now he had been cut off by the sudden attack.

Shorty thumbed back his hammer and peered around the bullet-torn wagon sheet. The outlaws were coming, ganing fast. They opened

up again with a blast of lead that chipped splinters from the wagon beds and rattling wheels.

Braang! Bang!

As the roar of his own gun died, the mule-skinner heard an indistinguishable shout back there where the dust billowed high on the upgrade. Then the thunder of hoofs swelled, and a Mexican was shrilling:

"El Picado! El Picado! Quedado!"

Some one was warning El Picado, whoever that was, and Shorty guessed that it would be the leader of the gang. Then a wild Comanche yell drifted down to him, and the Sonora Kid's voice formed words against the wind.

"Come on, boys!" Wetherbee shouted. "Shorty's in trouble! Come on, all of yuh!"

Another six-gun joined the clatter. There was a howl of pain; a *bandido's* horse shot past the wagons with its saddle empty. Shorty triggered at a vague, sombrero-topped shape and saw it reel and melt into the shadows.

The drumming tattoo of hoofs back there in the road sounded as though half a dozen riders were charging the outlaws. There was a constant hammer of pistol fire, too.

"After 'em, boys!"

A grin split Shorty's freckled face. El Picado's men were scattering, firing a straggling blast as they took to the mesquites and were swallowed up in the growing darkness. The hoofs drummed alongside, and Shorty saw what he expected to see—riderless horses, with the tall Sonora Kid driving them on.

Willie Wetherbee had used one of the oldest tricks of range warfare to rout the Mexicans. Shouting for a charge, he had sent the horses galloping toward the wagons while he

fired his one .45 fast enough to make it sound like two or three.

Now he drew rein beside the wheel mules and peered anxiously into the wagon to see if his pard was all right. Shorty's delighted grin relieved the tall cowboy of all anxiety.

"Listen to 'em high-tailin' it into the chaparral!" chuckled the Sonora Kid. "They shore thought there was a young army comin' down the road!"

"That was a mighty slick trick, usin' Joe Brandon's hosses that way," agreed Shorty. "I reckon if yuh hadn't done it, we'd have lost the waggins and the mules, and— and everything else."

Willie nodded and flashed his quick, likable smile. He knew that when Shorty Masters mentioned his beloved mules, the little freighter had covered just about "everything else."

Shorty owned six of the long-eared freight animals, all of which were offspring of a mare named Lucy. Because the bow-legged teamster liked music, he had named the animals after famous composers—Chopin, Mozart, Tschaikowsky and the like—and he called the team the "Sextet from Lucia."

The sound of flight died away in the mesquites. Shorty's lead mules dipped into a draw, topped a little rise, and brought the scattered lights of Soledad into view.

"Them *bandidos* was operatin' mighty close to town," the freighter commented. "I reckon there ain't much in this place but the Two Nations Minin' Company though, and outlaws don't have to worry about Federal troops. I'll be glad to turn them hosses and this load o' minin' machinery over to Joe Brandon."

"I'd kind o' like to swap lead with them buzzards some more," drawled the Sonora Kid. "Didn't get a

chance to see what they looked like."

Shorty grinned silently. It was typical of the tall waddy to want to pursue El Picado's gang. There was nothing Willie Wetherbee loved better than gun-roaring action. Whenever a fight took place within forty miles, Willie usually managed to horn into it somehow.

But now the Sextet from Lucia was jingling trace chains into Soledad, and the little Mexican town appeared to be as peaceful as an empty church. In the fading light, Shorty made out a big sign that read: "Two Nations Mining Company," and he pulled the wagons to a halt in front of the place. There was a light burning inside.

II.

Joe Brandon was a tall, powerfully built American, with thinning bland hair. He directed Wetherbee to a corral back of the office where the six horses could be penned, and then invited the pardners inside.

Shorty told him of the encounter with the outlaws, and Brandon clamped his teeth into his cold pipe-stem and shook his head gravely.

"It's a wonder you got here," he said. "That El Picado is a tough hombre. He pulls raids in spurts—this is the first time he's been reported in more than a month. Did you get a good look at him?"

"Jist in the flash of a gun," answered Shorty. "At least I see one man, and I figger he was the leader. He was pock-marked."

"That's him!" exclaimed Brandon. "Not many people have seen him. But they call him El Picado de Viruelas, which means 'The Pock-marked One.' I reckon he had a bad dose of smallpox once, so he kind o' lays low and lets his men do most of the dirty work, because he would be too easy identified."

The Sonora Kid leaned forward eagerly. "Yuh think mebber we'll run acrost him and his outfit on our way back to the Rio?"

"Not unless he thinks you're smuggling something. You see, there's a rail line from here to the Gulf ports, by way of Mexico City. It's about as cheap for us to ship our ore that way and a lot safer, on account of gents like El Picado. Not much of value is sent north from here, openly. So he don't bother northbound wagons very often."

"Heck!" growled the Sonora Kid, and Shorty grinned at his pard's disappointment. But Brandon suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "If you're looking for trouble, I've got a job for you!"

"Trouble's Willie's middle name," Shorty chuckled. "What's the job?"

"Ever hear of Mesa de Muerte?"

"Mesa of Death?" Wetherbee translated. "Nope, never have."

"We call it Murder Mesa," Brandon went on, and there was a tenseness creeping into his voice. "It might be called Haunted Mesa, too. It's fifteen miles from here—lies just below the Rio Grande, an runs ten miles down into Mexico. The cliffs around it are more than a hundred feet high. In the last six or eight years, half a dozen men have gone up on Murder Mesa, and none of 'em ever came back!"

"Must be a nice place," drawled Shorty. "What was they lookin' for?"

The mine superintendent rolled a cigarette, and lighted it thoughtfully. By this time, Shorty was as interested as Willie Wetherbee in the prospect of action. Murder Mesa—the place had an intriguing name, to say the least.

"A lot of money, maybe. And

maybe nothing but trouble—which they must have found," said Brandon. A good many years ago, before this company took over the Soledad mines, ore was shipped north by wagon trains. The drivers took one train up on the mesa once when there was a report that the Indians were off the reservation. It would have been an easily defended place; there was only one trail going up the side of the cliff."

"What happened?" asked the Sonora Kid.

"That night there was an earthquake. It shook down most of Soledad, and all the houses around this part of Mexico. It tore that trail away from the cliff on Murder Mesa. Accordin' to the story, the wagon drivers and their horses all died of thirst on top of the place. There's no water on top."

"I savvy!" breathed Shorty. "The ore is still there."

"If that part of the story is true," nodded Brandon. "That's what we want to find out. I've sent Mexicans, but they started out scared in the first place, because the mesa's supposed to be haunted. And they didn't come back. Rains have washed the cliff so that a man or a burro can go up it. I've wanted to look into the thing myself, but I can't leave the mine."

The Sonora Kid got to his feet and loosened the .45 in his holster. "When do we start, Shorty?" he demanded.

Shorty frowned thoughtfully. If burros could negotiate the climb, so could the sure-footed members of the Sextet. And if there was ore in the abandoned wagons, it could be brought down in packs. He squared his jaw.

"First thing in the mornin'—soon as the waggins are unloaded!" he declared.

Brandon smiled. "I thought you'd say that. Chances are there's nothin' on top of Murder Mesa but a few skeletons, and that was enough to scare them Mexicans I sent out of the country. Now, look." He reached for pencil and paper and began sketching a rough map. "Here's Rancho del Rio, owned by a high-class Mexican, Don Felipe Telamente. He raises some fine horses and white-faced cows. Go by his place. He can tell you about Murder Mesa."

The trail pards went out into the night. Brandon called from the door: "But don't believe everything Don Felipe tells you. He's pretty superstitious, himself."

Shorty and Willie made camp by the corral where Brandon's horses were penned. As the tall puncher slid into his bedding roll underneath a wagon, he grinned happily at the chance of adventure which waited them on the morrow.

"I ain't never seen a ghost that wouldn't stop a bullet," drawled the Sonora Kid just as Shorty drifting into slumber. "And when they stop a bullet, they're purty solid!"

Brandon had left for the mine by the time they had breakfast the next morning. He had men on hand to unload the equipment, and before the sun was two hours high, the pards were heading back toward the Rio Grande. Shorty was handling the Sextet from the wagon seat, while the Sonora Kid rode Tumbleweed, his sorrel cow pony, close by.

Now the wagons were empty and they made good time. Before noon, they were turning off to the left of the border trail, and a little later they saw white-faced cattle grazing in the mesquite flats. At twelve, to the accompaniment of loud barking from half a dozen dogs, the freight outfit rolled to a halt before the spacious

corrals and the sprawling adobe headquarters of Rancho del Rio.

A peon took Willie's horse, and the tall cowboy looked anxiously after the sorrel cayuse until he saw that the Mexican knew how to handle horses. Two other peons were about to begin unhitching the Sextet, but Shorty stopped them. From the wide veranda of the ranch house, a man who wore a white linen suit and high-heeled Mexican boots was coming, smiling easily.

Don Felipe Telamente was slender and wiry, with the natural grace of his people. He had been whittling on a heavy walking cane which he was fashioning from a stalk of a species of cactus. Now he tucked the cane under his arm and carried the knife in his other hand as he bowed in a courtly manner.

"Joe Brandon sent us to see yuh," Shorty said. "My name's Masters. This is my pard, Willie Wetherbee."

"Any friend of Señor Brandon ees a friend of mine," said Don Felipe. "My house is yours, señores."

"Much obliged," Shorty answered. "But we cain't stay. We're goin' up on Mesa de Muerte, and——"

Don Felipe dropped the walking stick with a muttered exclamation. When he picked it up, he began whittling on it nervously. The knife's keen blade gleamed in the sun.

"No!" he said violently. "No, señores! I implore you. Do not go to that place!"

Shorty smiled. "And why not? We ain't afraid of ghosts. Brandon said yuh could tell us how to——"

"It will be death!" interrupted the excited Mexican. "Nobody goes to the top of Mesa de Muerte and lives. Of night there are sounds and lights—things which cannot be explained, señores! And the las' man to go up there—his body was found at the

bottom of the cliff, with his own knife through his heart!"

Don Felipe's blade bit viciously into the stick as he remembered, and in spite of himself, Shorty felt a strange chill along his spine.

"We're still goin'," the mule driver said softly. "Me and Willie don't pack knives, nohow. Can yuh tell us where the cliff kin be climbed?"

"You are bound to go?" demanded Don Felipe. His knife clicked shut, and he made a little gesture with his thin, brown hands, as if he was washing them of the matter. Shorty nodded.

Don Felipe led them to one side. He pointed to the northwest. Just above the mesquites, the trail pards saw the scarred, garishly colored cliffs of Mesa de Muerte rising to an abruptly level line.

"There!" said the Mexican, harshly. "But I mus' warn you once more. Death goes with any man who goes to Mesa de Muerte!"

III.

The mesquite ended in a thin straggle, a quarter of a mile from the base of the colored cliffs where the afternoon sun splashed. Following the dim trail, Don Felipe had pointed out to them, Shorty saw why.

The rock that had tumbled from the giant wall in the last earthquake, and in many other temblors, perhaps, lay sprawled at the bottom and had washed into the flat to kill off all vegetation but the hardy cactus and a few desolate clumps of greasewood.

Shorty drew leather on the Sextet, and the Sonora Kid halted Tumbleweed. For a minute, both sat watching the Mesa of Death, study-

ing its forbidding outline against the soft blue of the sky.

"Yonder's the trail he was talkin' about!" said the Sonora Kid. "Looks to me like a fly couldn't make it up there without cleats on his feet!"

The mule-skinner surveyed the thin line that swung across half a mile of the cliff. Perhaps there had been mountain sheep or goats to wear that trail, which zigzagged from west to east, always climbing.

"It looks plenty tough!" he agreed. "But if a fly can make it, I reckon the Sextet can. Mebbe we ought to go up it on foot, first, so's we can pick out the dangerous spots. Then we can come back and take the mules, with some sacks and tarps to make packs out of. You'll have to leave Tumbleweed down here."

Wetherbee nodded regretfully. Whenever there was trouble of any kind, he felt better with the sorrel mustang under him. But he knew that Tumbleweed was no match for the mules when it came to climbing.

Shorty clucked his tongue at the Sextet, and the freight outfit jolted forward until it had threaded its way between the fallen boulders. Now the sheer wall of Mesa de Muerte rose for nearly two hundred feet above, dwarfing the surrounding country. Then he dallied his reins around the brake handle, and climbed down.

"Come on!" he said grimly, tilting his freckled face back to look up at the summit. A buzzard was flying there on motionless wings, as if waiting.

The Sonora Kid swung from his saddle and tethered Tumbleweed to the wagon wheel. Hitching up their heavy cartridge belts, the trail pards started up the difficult climb.

The trail was narrow and as crooked as the solid wall of rock on their left would allow. It clung

to this wall with only two feet to spare at times. It ran along a passably wide ledge here, skirted a boulder there that appeared as if the slightest jar would send it plunging into space, and then turned upward at an angle that more than once forced the climbers to their hands and knees.

They perspired and labored, clutching outcroppings of rock and occasional clumps of bushes that had found root in defiance of gravity. As they worked their way up the face of the cliff, both came to full realization of the fact that cowboy boots and spurs are not designed for mountain climbing.

Now the wagons and the Sextet from Lucia were around the curve of the cliff, and out of sight. The ground, Shorty thought, was at least a mile below his dizzy perch. He rested for a moment to get his breath, then struggled on.

So far, he was convinced, the mules could make it. Coming down with a pack might be more difficult. But he and Willie could use their reatas to snub the long-eared jacks around tight corners.

"Yonder," panted the Sonora Kid, "is the top!"

Shorty jerked his glance to the sky. They were indeed nearing the summit. That buzzard swooped overhead again, so near they could see his bald, repulsive head.

The freighter drew a long breath and resumed the climb. Five minutes later they rounded a cleft which looked as if another slide would tear it loose at any time, and came out on top of Mesa de Muerte.

For a minute, both were too breathless to speak. Shorty surveyed the tableland that lay before them, and saw that it was not all flat as he had supposed. There was a dry wash cutting through the cen-

ter of the level to empty into that cleft they had just passed, and beyond, perhaps two miles distant, the mesa top rose smartly in a rocky elevation.

"Look!" the mule driver managed to gasp, and pointed.

Willie Wetherbee looked, and nodded with his quick smile. Up there among the rocks of that rise were the wagons that had carried ore from the Soledad mine, still drawn in a circle to form a defense corral, as they had been left that night years ago!

Without a word, the pards started walking toward the wagons. Unless there was ore left in them, there would be no need of the pack mules.

They had covered only half a mile of the distance when the Sonora Kid plucked Shorty's sleeve and pointed to his right. Under a prickly pear that leaned against a boulder was a skeleton, bleached white by the suns of years.

"Mebbe that was a mule-skinner, Shorty," the tall puncher drawled. "There ain't a thing in sight on this place to give me the creeps—not even a skeleton does that. But I got the creeps jist the same!"

Shorty grinned. He felt the same way, but he knew it was because of the prospect of discovering what lay in those abandoned wagons. And even with a case of the creeps, the Sonora Kid would still be better than any man the freighter had ever known if it came to a gun ruckus here on the wind-swept height.

The mule-skinner instinctively fingered the butt of his .45, then put the idea of a fight out of his mind. Mesa de Muerte was uninhabited; there was no chance of such an occurrence. So far, the buzzard had been the only other living thing they had seen.

Joe Brandon's story of the death

of men and horses from thirst might be true, after all. A little farther, and the pardns saw the bones of a horse, half buried in the dry wash. Then they reached the slant that led up to the wagons, and trudged toward them.

Even before he had climbed up on one of the weather-beaten wheels to peer into the first of the wagons that stood with bare bows arched to the sky, Shorty knew he would not find ore, or anything else of value. For, just as he placed his boot on the first spoke, he glanced down the knoll on which the wagons had been corraled, and made a discovery.

There was a plain trail down there, passing at the farther base of the knoll—a trail that showed every sign of recent travel!

"Look, Willie!" called the mule-skinner. "If there ever was any ore in these waggins, it's gone. Somebody's been ridin' along here within the last week!"

The Sonora Kid's dark face went grim. Ghosts didn't make tracks.

"I see it!" he said. "I don't savvy what it is, but somebody's up to some crooked work. Anything in the waggin?"

Shorty peered inside. The wagon bed was rotting away, but it was bare of everything but its own débris. He climbed in and went around the circle. The wagons were all empty except for some mouldering harness and pieces of tarp that had fallen from the bows. At the far side of the circle there was another skeleton, propped up against a wheel.

"It's a wonder the wind hasn't blowed these waggins offn this rise!" the teamster declared as he rejoined Willie. "Wouldn't take much to start 'em rollin'. I savvy now. When the drivers stopped 'em here that night, they scotched the wheels!"

He pointed to rocks placed here and there under the rusty steel tires. Whoever the teamsters had been, they chose an excellent spot for defense when they corraled the wagons on the knoll. It commanded all approaches.

"Well, that makes it kind o' useless to bring the mules up here, with nothin' to take Brandon but a couple o' skeletons!" Shorty commented. "Let's go look at that trail."

Heading down the slant of the knoll, they examined the fresh tracks at close hand. The trail had been traversed within two or three days by burros, or small mules.

"Which explains what happened to the ore them waggins carried!" drawled the Sonora Kid. "I reckon there was somebody who wasn't so skeered o' ghosts, after all. Whoever that was——"

The tall cowboy bit off his soft-spoken words. Shorty saw his dark eyes narrow as he stared over the rim of Mesa de Muerte, into the mesquite flats that stretched drearily into the blue distance.

The mule-skinner saw it, too. There was a cloud of dust boiling out of the mesquite. It came from the general direction of the trail to the Rio Grande and whoever it was, was headed for Murder Mesa!

IV.

It was too far away for the trail pardners to count the men who rode through the chaparral, much less identify them. For a long moment, Shorty watched.

"Look!" he exclaimed suddenly. "I'll bet yuh a forty-dollar saddle them hombres spotted us. The're stoppin' in the edge of the mesquites to watch!"

"I wish they was in range!" growled Willie. "But they ain't."

And I don't think they could have seen us. It's too far."

"Might have some field glasses, though." The mule driver frowned. "Listen, I've got an idea. We'll have to use some strategy to find out what this is all about. Yuh want to take a chanst?"

The Sonora Kid had a lot of respect for the leadership of his sawed-off pard, and it was a waste of words to ask him if he wanted to take a chance. They crouched behind a boulder while Shorty unfolded his plan.

"For all we know, there may be lots of other people who think there's still ore in them waggins," the freighter concluded. "This may be somebody who was waitin' for us to make the first move. Now we've made it, and it's time to make the next one. Come on!"

Willie Wetherbee grunted, and got to his feet. They knew there were eyes watching from behind the curtain of chaparral, and they took great care to go nearer the edge of Murder Mesa so that the concealed men could see.

Then the pair on top of the high cliff rounded the cleft and started down the trail, talking loudly of their disappointment at finding nothing on the place.

The sun was setting by the time they had reached the wagons, and its red glow softened the garish colors of the giant wall. Purple shadows were stealing around the base of the mesa, deepening over the mesquites.

Shorty Masters climbed to his wagon seat and shook leather over the Sextet. The Sonora Kid was in the saddle. Just to make their departure more apparent, the mule-skinner cracked his big whip over the flattened ears of his team, and yelled loudly at them.

"Giddap, Mozart! Giddap, Tschai-kowsky!"

The freight outfit crawled away from the mesa and swung toward the northern trail. There was no sound from the shadowy chaparral as they passed the spot where horsemen were concealed.

Two miles farther, and Shorty drew rein on the Sextet in a brush-rimmed draw bed. Nobody could see the wagons here, and unless they had been followed, his scheme might work.

Now he cinched a saddle on Chopin, the biggest and blackest mule of the lot. The Sonora Kid, grumbling a little about having to leave Tumbleweed, removed his gear from the sorrel cayuse and slung it across the mule whose name he couldn't pronounce—Tschai-kowsky.

"I reckon I'll have to sneeze every time I want this here jack to stop or go!" he grumbled. "The plan may be a good one, but I shore hate to have to leave Tumbleweed here!"

"Yuh couldn't ride that hoss up in the dark," Shorty argued, unhitching the other mules and hobbling them. "This is the best way."

A few minutes later they were riding stealthily back toward the Murder Mesa trail, with their eyes peeled for trouble and their ears alert. Now they kept under cover of the chaparral until they had reached a spot opposite the beginning of the narrow path that angled up the cliff.

Here, Shorty called a halt and they listened intently for a long minute. There was no sound, and the little freighter's heart sank. Perhaps they had gone to all this trouble for nothing. There was only one way to find out.

He motioned the Sonora Kid to follow, and the trail pards rode across the open strip and started the perilous climb.

The mules ascended cautiously, virtually feeling their way. To the right of them was blackness, drooping away like a bottomless pit. Above, the mesa rim was a ragged line set against the powdery brilliance of the stars. The moon had not yet risen; Shorty remembered that it would be full and bright, and urged Chopin on. It was best that they reach the top before moonlight came to expose them on the trail.

Then, within fifty yards from the brow of the mesa, the pardners jerked rein and sat listening to one of the most eerie sounds they had ever heard.

Oooo-eeeeee-ooooo!

It was a long drawn wail, thin and screeching, that sent a shiver along Shorty's spine. Wind along the rim of the cliff could never make a sound so penetrating, and besides, there was only a soft breeze blowing.

Oooo-eeeeee-ooooo!

It might have been a chorus of all the ghosts of men who had died on Murder Mesa. Shorty turned his head and tried to locate the direction from which it came, but the noise seemed to be a part of the mysterious night. It was everywhere and nowhere.

And now there was a bumping, thumping noise; the wail died on a note of hair-raising thinness, and then lifted again.

Chopin snorted and tossed his head. The mule driver hurriedly urged him on. A ledge less than three feet wide was no place for a mule to get frightened.

By the time the trail pards were safe on the top of the mesa, the noise had gone again. They let the mules breathe and listened, but there was only the soft whisper of the wind. The moon was rolling up out of a sea of mesquites spread far be-

low them, and they could make out the dim bulk of the abandoned wagons up on the knoll.

"Settin' here gits on my nerves!" growled the Sonora Kid. "Let's mosey on somewhere. Anywhere. I'd like to draw a bead on whatever was makin' that screech!"

"So would I!" Shorty answered. "Come on, we'll ride around the rim of the mesa. There ain't nothin' in sight here on top!"

They let the mules travel slowly, heading eastward. Shorty remembered Joe Brandon's description of the place. It was ten miles long, reaching up toward the Rio Grande. It couldn't be more than a couple of miles wide.

Oooo-eeeeee-ooooo!

There it was, and close at hand this time! The little teamster caught the sound among a clutter of boulders that lay on the very edge of the cliff, a hundred yards ahead. And even as he located the mysterious noise, a dark mass of riders emerged from the rocks and a voice called:

"Andale, now! Take thees load as fast as you can. The boat will be waiting at the usual place. Tell Juan there will be one other load for him to-night!"

Things were becoming clear to the little mule driver. That wail was a pulley creaking for the want of oil. Something was being hauled up the face of the cliff and loaded on burros. He could see pack animals stringing out ahead of the riders.

Now he remembered Joe Brandon's remarks about smuggled goods. That was it—smugglers who used Murder Mesa had taken care to see that the place kept its reputation of being haunted!

Willie Wetherbee crowded alongside, dangerously near the cliff rim. He understood, too.

"This mesa runs right to the Rio Grande!" the tall puncher was whispering. "Nobody ever comes up here. The smugglers hoist stuff up this end, and down to a boat in the Rio on the other end, savvy? It makes a perfect——"

A sudden loud discordance split the night. It was Chopin, emitting a bray that was a challenge to the mules and pack burros of the other party!

The black mules was still exercising his lungs when the first shot cracked in the clutter of boulders and sent a bullet whistling past Shorty's ear. In the next few seconds, a dozen guns began popping from the rocks.

V.

Willie Wetherbee let out a Comanche yell and yanked his .45 from its holster. There was no longer any use of remaining quiet; the tall cowboy slammed a shot at the group of riders and sent them scattering for shelter.

Bang! Br-raang! Wham!

Now the stillness that had lain on Murder Mesa was shattered by a roaring volley out of the rocks. Shorty and Willie were plain targets in the moonlight. And the smugglers' gang could easily see there were only two of them.

The mule driver's own gun was out and hammering loudly. But he knew the odds were high against them. Leaning from his saddle, he caught the cheek strap of Tschaikowsky's halter just in time to prevent the hot-headed Sonora Kid from charging the pile of rocks.

"This way!" Shorty urged. "There ain't but one place we can make a stand. The old waggins!"

He whirled Chopin and spurred the black mule into a gallop that would have done credit to many horses.

The Sonora Kid hung back to empty his gun into the boulders, then he turned Tschaikowsky and followed, with lead singing around him.

"El Picado! El Picado!"

The shout lifted from the smugglers' shelter and drifted to the ears of the retreating pards. Willie let out a shout of joy. He had wanted to swap lead with the pock-marked outlaw again, and now he had his chance. But even the fight-loving cowboy could wish for more favorable odds—a horse to ride, and a battleground that wasn't bordered on all sides by hurtling death.

"After them! *Andale!*"

It was the same voice that had directed the pack party to hurry across the mesa. El Picado's voice. The pulley was screeching again as the outlaw leader abandoned it and allowed the load that was being hoister to drop back to the bottom of the cliff.

Shorty made the wagons, sent Chopin on a jump between two of the old vehicles forming the circle, and vaulted from the saddle. The Sonora Kid was a couple of seconds behind him. He jumped to the ground and slammed a fresh load into his gun.

"Git the mules down!" Shorty ordered. "And save yore ammunition till they git close, then let 'em have it. It's our only chance to beat off that many hombres. Must be more'n a dozen of 'em!"

"Let 'em come!" growled Willie. "I jist wish I had Tumbleweed here!"

The freighter forced Chopin to lie down, and then helped his pard handle Tschaikowsky. As they straightened from the task, bullets rattled with a deadly hail into the weather-beaten timbers of the old wagons. The guns of the outlaw gang were

like vicious fireflies stabbing the moonlight.

Shorty leaped to a wagon bed. The tall cowboy chose the adjoining vehicle. His gun snaked over the top, and the hammer clicked back. Squinting down the moonlit slant, the pards held their fire.

Bang! Br-raang! Braang!

Sideboards on the wagons leaped and rattled. The outlaws couldn't see the exact location of their prey, but they fired enough bullets to spray the whole half circle of wagons that faced them.

The mule driver drew a long breath and waited with every nerve taut. Now the hombres who attacked were less than a hundred yards away, spurring their mules up the slant, yelling wildly as they triggered. Shorty set his jaw. He hated to take the chance of hitting a mule.

Seventy-five yards; sixty yards. There was a triumphant note in the yells. El Picado's men couldn't understand the coolness that would keep two trapped men waiting so long. The gringo pair probably had been killed by that blast of lead. *Viva El Picado! Muerte a los gringos!*

Fifty yards now, and less. Shorty Masters let a yell rip from his throat and yanked trigger. The Sonora Kid's gun spat fire at the same instant.

Br-raang!

Two Mexicans pitched from their horses. Wetherbee's .45 blazed again, and the mule driver thumbed back his hammer. He caught the bulk of a squat, heavy rider against the sight, and let the hammer fall.

The man threw his hands high and spilled grotesquely from the mule. There was a sudden halt in the charge; the answering fire dropped to a hammering scatter of shots.

Most of the outlaws had emptied their guns in that first rush.

Now they fell back to the accompaniment of curses from El Picado. Shorty could make out the Stetson-topped leader in the background; most of the Mexicans wore sombreros. He and Willie took advantage of the lull to reload their guns.

There was a hasty conference down the slope. Shorty knew what was coming. The outlaws would waste less lead this time. They might spread out on either side of the little gully up which they charge, and circle the wagons. Or they might dismount and advance up the gully, taking shelter behind the boulders that scattered along its bed.

It was the latter course. He saw the mules left in a dark mass; the outlaws were moving from rock to rock, their guns temporarily silent.

Some of them would reach the wagons and come swarming over the sideboards. The trail pards couldn't kill them all before they were themselves cut down. There would be a last concerted, fatal rush.

Shorty leaped to his feet. "Come down here, Willie!" he called, and dropped over the side of the wagon into the circle.

The Sonora Kid followed, wondering. Shorty moved cautiously to the front wheels of the vehicle. An outlaw gun cracked and threw splinters in his face. He stooped over, holtering his gun.

"Pull that rock out when I roll the wheel back!" he instructed the cowboy. "We'll give 'em somethin' to dodge bigger than bullets!"

A cool grin split the Sonora Kid's lean face as he saw what his pard planned to do. With the rock withdrawn from beneath the wheel, a slight shove would send the wagon clattering down the gulch and even

the boulders were hardly big enough to stop it.

Braang! Bang!

El Picado's men were firing more often, now. Half a dozen of them were closer than they had been before.

The rock came clear. Shorty ceased his backward tug on the wheel and swung his weight forward instead, with all the power in his compact muscles.

Crash!

The wagon began to roll. Its tongue caught and splintered on a rock, it gained speed and lurched down a ledge.

"*Quedado!*" came the frantic shout from one of the nearest outlaws. He leaped from behind his boulder and turned to flee. The Sonora Kid's gun cracked through the gap left by the departing wagon, and the man sprawled where he stood.

Crash! Slam!

Now the wagon was a juggernaut, banging and lurching. The front wheels turned up to the right and it climbed halfway out of the gulch before the right wheel struck another rock and straightened it on its course. It went hammering and thundering down toward the rim of Murder Mesa, and dimly above the clatter were heard the yells of El Picado's men.

"Hurry!" Shorty panted. "Start this other one!"

They leaped to the next wagon. It would be the last one they could roll down the gulch without having to hitch the mules, for the other vehicles were not so near to that portion of the slant. A few scattered shots hammered into the wagon as they tugged at its wheels.

It began moving slowly. Looking down the slope, Shorty saw the first wagon nearing the cliff rim, leaving a demoralized scatter of outlaws in

the swirling dust of its wake. He grabbed the Sonora Kid's arm.

"Come on, Willie! Here's where we ride a runaway!"

Jumping aboard, the freighter crouched behind the weather-beaten seat and unholstered his gun. The Sonora Kid was scrambling into the wagon behind him, already unlimbering his .45s.

Bang! Braang!

The mule-skinner planted his boots wide against the lurch of the wild vehicle, and peered ahead.

Outlaws were scattering again, taking to the unsheltered sides of the gully. He saw the dark form of one outlaw with gun upraised and shooting, and Shorty's bullet scraped across the *bandido's* right shoulder. The Sonora Kid dropped another shooting outlaw on the other side, and Shorty saw two of the men go under the heavy wheels as they frantically tried to scurry out of the way.

Then he looked ahead and saw the rim of Murder Mesa only fifty yards away. They were rushing toward it with express train speed. Over the edge of the cliff there was a dim clatter above the thunder of the wagon. The first freight vehicle was plunging down that cliff.

"Jump!" Shorty yelled, and went over the side.

As he landed and rolled, he saw two things. One was the Sonora Kid leaping clear. The other was the figure of a Stetson-topped hombre astride a mule, spurring toward them with a flaming gun.

A bullet pumped into the gravel by Shorty's cheek. He lifted his head, half dazed by the shock of the fall. El Picado was very near; his next shot could hardly miss.

Braang!

The mule-skinner jerked his gun hand around and pulled trigger just as the flame leaped toward him. El

Picado's slug cut a burning furrow along his gun arm. A third gun was thundering close at hand.

El Picado went out of the saddle as if the mule had taken him under a limb. He struck the ground hard, and Shorty, climbing to his hands and knees, stared wide-eyed.

It seemed to him that the pock-marked outlaw's head had been severed from his body. No, but there was a face lying there on the ground—a face that showed pock-marks in the moonlight.

The Sonora Kid came on the run, his smoking gun still in hand. The wild wagon was hurtling over the cliff, smashing into a thousand pieces on the rocks.

"Look!" gasped the tall cowboy. He stooped and picked up a mask.

Shorty nodded slowly. "No wonder El Picado kept out o' sight!" he said slowly. "The next thing is to see who——"

The trail pards stood over the dead outlaw and took one amazed look at his face. It was Don Felipe Telamente!

"I reckon anybody could have a fine ranch with thoroughbred hosses and white-faced cows," drawled the Sonora Kid. "That is, if he was doin' a nice little smugglin' business on the side, with some highway robbery thrown in."

Shorty nodded, and remembered Don Felipe's last words to them at Rancho del Rio.

"'Death goes with any man who goes to Mesa de Muerte!'" he quoted.

But death doesn't go with Shorty an' Willie. Those two jaspers are too proddy, an' they've got too much gun work ahead of them to be stopped by that kind of outlaw. They're comin' back soon in a story yuh'll shore want to be readin'. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

DEAD MAN'S HANDCUFFS

Novelette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

Kentucky's roamin' loose an' all signs seem to show that Tommy Rockford's been dry-gulched.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN'S ROUND-UP

Novelette

By CHUCK MARTIN

When a born fighter's on the prod, he's apt to take some mighty grim chances.

THE Y D RIDES THE OWL-HOOT

Novelette

By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

The sheriff has got Jim and Windy trapped, an' the chances o' gittin' out are mighty slim.

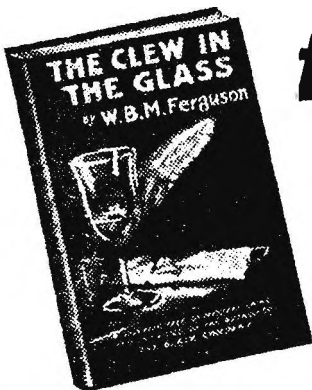
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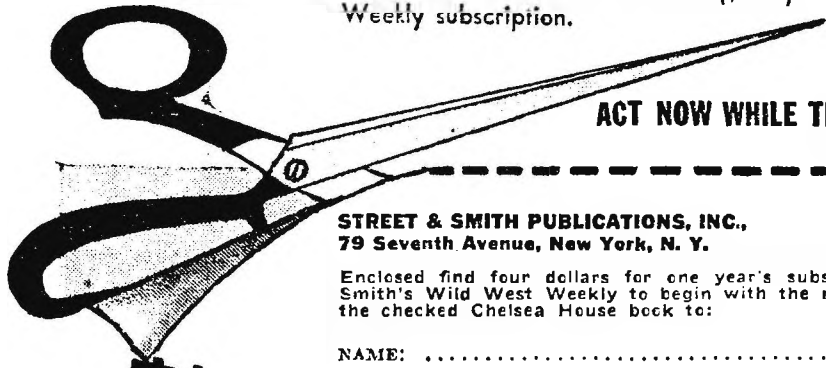
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Sailor Anson's Race



1. Hidden behind a rock, Sailor Anson watched the trail from the camp of outlaws who had destroyed the wagon train. He had just scouted a mule train carrying off the loot. A rider was approaching his hiding place. It was Black Ben Harney, the pilgrims' treacherous guide.



2. On the other side of the trail, at short range from the rock, Sailor spotted a rifle barrel sticking out of the brush. Black Ben rode nearer. "An ambush!" Sailor gasped. "I can't see even a snake like Ben shot down that a way." He drew his six-guns and brought them up slowly.



3. He fired one of his guns into the bushes where the ambusher was hidden. There was a yell, and the rifle barrel disappeared. Black Ben's startled horse went up on its hind legs, nearly pitching its rider from the saddle. "Only nicked him; didn't kill him," Sailor thought.



4. The wounded dry-gulcher crashed out of the brush and fled down the trail. Quieting his cayuse, Ben reached for his six-gun. But Sailor, sidling his horse Injun closer, already had Ben covered. "Fight it out with me in a draw match, yuh skunk!" he challenged. Black Ben hesitated a moment.

With Death



5. Ben pointed across the plain. Sailor looked, but kept Ben covered, suspecting a trick. In the distance, three horsemen rode toward them. "Git out!" Ben cried. "They'll beef yuh! I fight no man what saves my pelt. Ride tuh yore wagon like lightnin'. Tell yore folks tuh—"



6. Sailor lost no time. His first duty was to protect the Wallaces. He sent Injun plunging down the trail. Ben swung his bronc, apparently to meet the oncoming riders and head them off. But Sailor kept one of his guns out of leather. "Still may be a trick," he told himself.



7. Riding at top speed, Sailor followed the wagon road back toward the Wallaces' prairie schooner. One of the three horsemen rode hard to overhaul him, clumsily firing a rifle. Sailor replied with wild slugs from his six-gun. "Ben likely called off tother two," he muttered.



8. At last the pursuing horseman gave up the chase and faded out in the distance. Whirling Injun around, Sailor looked back over the road. "What was the warnin' I didn't wait tuh hear Ben finish?" he wondered. "Was it sumpin important—fer the Wallaces?" For a moment, he was uncertain.



9. He decided that he'd better find out. Instead of keeping on to the wagon, he followed the road in the opposite direction. As he rode he sighted two figures far ahead. Drawing closer, he saw that they were two riders, their horses' noses pointed toward each other. The men were talking earnestly.



10. As he neared them he recognized one as Black Ben. The other was Hopwell, big boss of the outlaws. Sailor reined Injun in sharply. Hopwell drew a six-gun. Ben reached for his Colt, but was slow. Smoke lanced from Hopwell's gun. Ben fell.



11. Six-gun in hand, Sailor rode to overhaul the killer. Ben lay where he had dropped from the saddle, his horse galloping off. With a snarl, Hopwell rode toward him, six-gun leveled to put a finishing bullet into his brain. The other outlaws were ahead with the mule train.



12. Sailor charged Injun at Hopwell, firing his six-gun over the outlaw boss's head. That saved Ben from another bullet, for Hopwell shifted his aim to cover the oncoming rider. He had been so intent on finishing Ben, he hadn't seen Sailor coming until now. And then—



13. *Br-r-rang-g!* The reports of their six-guns blended into one thunderous roar. But as they triggered, their nervous horses started to prance. Lead brushed Sailor's cheek. Hopwell lurched in the saddle as if hit, but braced himself again. He was not seriously hurt.



14. Hopwell didn't stay to finish the fight. Raking his bronc with steel, he burned the breeze to overhaul the mule train. Sailor didn't chase him, but rode to where Ben lay in a puddle of crimson, trying feebly to get up on his feet, but falling back each time. The thing was ghastly.



15. Kneeling beside Ben, Sailor listened to the dying guide's last words. "Break new trail no'th," Ben gasped. "This fake Oregon Trail. Guided pilgrims off real un. Hopwell ride back from mule train tuh meet me. Quarrel over loot. This time I guide yuh right!"



16. Sailor buried Black Ben. Then he rode back to the Wallaces. "Ben didn't lie," he decided. "Dyin', he told the truth." He shuddered when he thought of what might have happened to the Wallaces and himself if he hadn't won his race with death and reached Ben in time to hear his last words.

Next Week: "Sailor Anson's One-man Hoss."

The Y D Races With Death

By Andrew A. Griffin

Author of "Señor Mystery," etc.

***Every rancher fer miles is out to git
Señor Mystery, an' Jim Tate is accused
o' bein' that outlaw.***



CHAPTER I.

CREEPING DEATH.

AS if the death which crept toward him had boomed ghoul-
ish, gloating laughter to din in
his ears, Jim Tate was suddenly wide
awake. But there had been no
sound. Of that Tate felt certain as
he lay there, staring into the black-
ness of his bedroom. The chill that

ran along his nerves did not come
from any sort of noise that had pen-
etrated his slumber. It came from a
sixth sense—the result of delicately
tuned nerves screaming a warning
into his brain.

Tate's tall, muscular body tensed
slowly, and he found the breath
rasping through his constricted
throat as if unseen fingers were chok-
ing him. He wanted to yell, fling



himself madly from the bed. But Jim Tate, ex-marshal of the wild trail towns on the far-away plains, was much too canny to make any sort of move until he could locate that threat.

He turned his head very slowly and felt as if his body had suddenly slid down into a vat of ice water. There against the patch of star-studded sky which showed through

his open window was the shadow of a man.

The man was creeping forward, a black, stooping thing outlined against the Arizona stars beyond the window. The creeping man held one hand stiffly forward, and from the bottom edge of that outthrust hand a slim, pointed black line showed distinctly. That pointed black thing below the shadowy hand was a knife, poised for a death blow.

Just why he did not slip his famous black-butted guns from the holsters which hung looped over the bedpost at his head, Jim Tate never knew. The guns and holsters, hanging by their shell-studded belts, were within easy reach. To have lifted his hands and drawn those guns would have been the simplest sort of thing for Jim Tate. Yet he made

no such move. He lay still and tense, watching that stooping black shadow creep on through the path of pale starlight.

When the knifer was ready to quit that narrow strip of light, Jim Tate went into action. He moved with the speed of a great cat pouncing upon some unsuspecting prey.

The sudden creaking of the bed warned the intruder, caused him to stop stock-still, hunch a little farther forward. But the knife artist had no inkling of what was happening until a hundred and eighty pounds of tough muscle and bone struck him with the fury of a cyclone.

The man yelled in terror, tried to bring that wicked blade slashing down into the man who had struck him. But Jim Tate had expected the knife to slash at him, and his sinewy fingers were already wrapping about the unknown hombre's wrist.

Jim's bare feet hit the floor, and his broad, flat-topped shoulders bunched. He whirled half around, brought the would-be killer flashing up over one shoulder. Jim held to the man's stout wrist as the body whirled up and over. Tate was still holding that wrist when the night prowler smashed against the floor with a force that jarred the whole room.

From an adjoining room came a yell of alarm, the quick thud of bare feet striking the floor. "Jim!" a deep voice boomed. "What's that racket, younker?"

"Get in here, Windy, an' fetch a light," Tate yelled back. "Some jigger tried to knife me. Keep your eyes peeled when you step out in the hallway. A skunk that would knife a sleepin' man might have pards handy."

A door banged and a moment later

light flooded into the room where Jim Tate stood clad only in his underwear, holding both of the knifer's wrists. The hombre lay face down, and Tate had the fellow's hands shoved up toward the back of his neck in a double hammerlock. But Mr. Knifer was senseless, knocked cold by that terrific wallop against the floor.

"What in tarnation? Who is that skunk yuh've got there?"

Jim glanced around at "Windy" Winton, his pard.

Windy was a lanky, grizzled old waddy with a drooping gray mustache that almost hid his usually grinning lips. But Windy was not grinning now. His leathery face was screwed into a scowl, and his eyes were hard and slitted. He held a lamp in one hand, a cocked six-gun in the other.

Windy looked comical in his white nightshirt that came just below his bony knees. But there was nothing comical in the way that cocked gun centered on the chunky, sandy-haired fellow Jim Tate was bending over.

"Turn the critter loose, Jim," growled Windy. "I've got him covered."

Jim released the man's wrists, stepped back. Tate ran long, powerful fingers through thick black hair and a puzzled frown drew his thin black brows together in a hard lump.

He picked up a wicked, long-bladed butcher knife that had been ground down to a slim, ugly taper. The reshaped blade had been turned into a double-edged weapon that was as sharp as a razor.

Tate's wide, flat-lipped mouth showed a white splash at each corner, and the nostrils of his long thin nose flared as he examined the weapon that had been meant for his flesh. Hard lights glinted in the

waddy's black eyes as he turned to toss the ugly knife upon the dresser there in his room.

"What happened here?" Windy growled. "Son, can't yuh talk?"

"There's nothin' much to talk about yet," the tall, flat-muscled youth said grimly. "But there will be when that sneakin' whelp gets his wits back."

He told of having awakened suddenly, and explained briefly how he had leaped from the bed and grappled with the intruder.

"Why in blazes didn't yuh drag them guns out of holsters an' blast this skunk to blazes?" snapped Windy, nodding jerkily toward the black belts, holsters, and black-butted guns which hung on Jim's bedpost.

The tall youth shrugged, turned to the chair where his clothes lay, and began dressing hurriedly. He donned boots, trousers, and shirt that were jet black, then knotted a crimson neckerchief about his lean throat. Lifting the shell-studded belts from the bedpost, he fitted them about his lean hips, settling the holsters low upon his thighs.

The hombre on the floor groaned, stirred sluggishly.

"Put the lamp on the dresser, then close the door, Windy," Jim directed. "Our knife artist is comin' out of it."

Windy did as bidden, and was standing beside Jim when the man on the floor rolled over and blinked dazedly up at them. Both Jim and Windy gaped in amazement. They had naturally expected to see a hard, criminal face when the man rolled over.

Instead, they were looking down into a round, ruddy young face that turned slowly white as the dazed man stared up at them out of gray eyes that were certainly not the eyes of a killer.

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The sandy-haired young fellow sat up slowly, and his lips trembled as he met the eyes of the two men who stood over him.

"I—I should have knowed that I'd never be slick enough to kill Señor Mystery!" the sandy-haired youth choked bitterly.

"Say, what in thunderation are yuh talkin' about, young feller?" snarled Windy Winton. But both Windy and Jim knew what the young hombre meant.

Here in this Palomar country a murderous jasper who called himself "Señor Mystery" was robbing the ranchers and farmers right and left. And when Jim Tate had bought this vast Y D spread a month ago and come to take charge of it, Señor Mystery had framed him. There had been a black hood found in Jim's saddle pocket—a hood such as Señor Mystery wore when he led his killer pack against some rancher or farmer.

"Who are you, hombre?" Jim probed the white-faced man, who sat pale and shaken before him.

The hombre's lips twisted into a snarl of hate, and for an instant anger blazed in his gray eyes. "Yuh know who I am, blast yore black heart," he spat. "I'm Rex Belton, the feller yuh said yuh—yuh'd kill before to-morrow noon."

"You one of the farmers over in Palomar Valley?" Tate clipped.

The man who had given the name of Rex Belton got slowly to his feet, a desperate, half-wild look leaping to his eyes.

"Listen, Tate, be—be reasonable," he choked. "Like yore note said, I did have eleven hundred dollars clear after I sold my last cuttin' of alfalfa to Marvin Plummer. But—but I've got to have that money. If yuh'll jist wait—"

"Young feller, we ought to take the hide offn yuh in long, narrer

strips," exploded Windy Winton. "Who gives a darn whether yuh've got eleven hundred or eleven *million* dollars, huh?"

"You got a note from Señor Mystery, eh, Belton?" Jim Tate probed soberly. "In case you've got the note, would you mind showin' it to Windy an' me?"

The young farmer swallowed hard, and his shoulders sagged dejectedly.

"Yuh know what that note says, Tate, because yuh wrote it," Belton gulped. "Yo're Señor Mystery. All of us farmers know that. But here's the note."

He fished a small square of paper from a trousers pocket, held the paper out. Jim Tate took the note, unfolded it, and saw these neatly printed words:

I keep tabs on all you farmers, Belton. I know that you had eleven hundred dollars left after you paid up all your debts in town yesterday. But you failed to come to the appointed place last night and leave half that eleven hundred for me. You die before Wednesday noon, Belton, unless you are smart enough to find out who I am and kill me first.

SEÑOR MYSTERY.

Jim Tate passed the paper to Windy Winton, who read it hurriedly, cursing as he read.

"The dirty, underhanded skunk!" the grizzled old puncher fumed as he finished reading the note.

"I'm sorry you and the others think I'm that black-hearted whelp who calls himself Señor Mystery, Belton," said Jim Tate. "But I reckon there's nothin' I can do to convince you jaspers that I'm not that kind of an hombre. If you'd only——"

Jim Tate broke off, his lean right arm flinging out to smash solidly against Rex Belton's head and neck. But even as Belton rocked under Tate's sudden blow, a gun blared at

the window beyond them, and the young farmer cried out hoarsely and pitched limply forward.

CHAPTER II.

GRIM SUSPICION.

JIM TATE sent twin slugs screaming through the window. He crossed the room as he fired and dived headlong out into the yard, rolling sidewise as he struck the hard earth. He caught the sound of booted feet churning away into the night and fired toward the sounds.

But laughter mocked him, and a moment later the snort of a horse, the quick pound of hoofs, told him that the bushwhacker was spurring away toward the hills.

Tate gained his feet, sprinted madly toward the long bunk house which screened the killer's flight. But when he reached the corner of the bunk house and tore past it with guns ready, the unknown gunman had vanished beyond corrals and barns and other outbuildings.

Tate choked on the rage that boiled within him, and he stood trembling from the lash of that rage as he reloaded a chamber of each gun by feel. Holstering the big weapons, he turned and trotted back to the great, rambling ranch house. When he got inside he found Windy dressed, starting out to help hunt down the bushwhacker who had fired through the window.

"No use to chase after that coyote, Windy," Tate rasped. "He made a clean get-away."

"An' that Belton younker died, thinkin' yo're Señor Mystery," Windy croaked. "Son, what are we gonna do? We've got a ranch on our hands that would keep ten good cowhands busy the year round. Yet not a man kin we hire, because yo're accused o' bein' that masked skunk

that goes around killin' an' robbin' an' stealin'."

"I don't know what we're goin' to do," Jim admitted wearily. "When we caught that gang prowlin' around lookin' for the dinero we've got cached here an' shot it out with the snoopin' whelps, I thought this Señor Mystery business was solved."

"So did everybody else, fer that Runnin' M hand, Dode Porter, had on one o' them black hoods," Windy groaned. "But it wasn't three days until Señor Mystery an' his gang shot up one o' them farms over in Palomar Valley an' kilt a couple o' farmers."

"Yeah, an' now everybody in the country thinks that I'm that hooded snake," muttered Tate. "But maybe this is the break we've been needin', Windy."

"I don't see how havin' a farmer murdered here at the place could be a break in our favor," old Windy snorted.

"What I had in mind was to trail that blasted killer," Jim pointed out. "After that rain yesterday, the ground is still as soft as this blamed Arizona country ever gets."

"By gollies, that's right," exclaimed Winton. "Come daylight, we'll smell out that killer's sign."

"Which may be harder to do than we think," Jim reminded him. "Señor Mystery an' his gang head for this Y D range every time they finish one of their raids. They head here because these hills are plenty rocky an' they can fog their sign easy on such ground."

"Them buzzards also head fer the Y D because it helps keep folks thinkin' yo're Señor Mystery," Windy gritted. "Señor Mystery played the same trick on ol' Jerome Fugate, the gent who sold yuh this spread fer a silver dollar."

"An' I haven't forgot that one of

Señor Mystery's hired gunnies murdered Jerome Fugate, either," Tate said meaningfully. "I'll find out who that hooded coyote is if it takes the rest of my life, Windy."

"Right now we better go git that boy's body out o' yore bedroom," the old ranny scowled. "An' I tell yuh, Jim, this is gonna look bad. Sheriff Tom Wilson will come bustin' out here an' arrest us both unless I miss a guess."

"Thinkin' that I'm Señor Mystery, an' that you're in cahoots with me, Sheriff Wilson sure wouldn't overlook a chance to arrest us," Tate admitted. "Fact is, that badge-toter would have fetched a posse out from Palomar and arrested us before this if he even thought he had a case against us that would hold water in court."

"This boy gittin' murdered here gives Wilson the case he needs, I'm afraid," said Windy. "Jim, I've got a hunch that we'd better head fer the hills until this blows over."

"Nothin' doin'," snapped the Y D owner. "We've got to report Belton's death. It means trouble—likely arrest—for us. But we didn't murder him, and darned if I'll run like a coyote."

"Yuh shoved Belton jist before that gun fired behind him," Windy remembered.

"I did," the younger man answered gravely. "I seen the flash of that killer's face when he pressed close to the window. If I'd only been a little quicker—"

Jim's voice trailed off in a helpless groan. He turned from the living room where he and Windy had stood talking, and led the way back along the hall to his bedroom. Opening the door, he stepped inside—and yelled excitedly. There was an ugly red stain on the floor, but no sign of Rex Belton.

Windy and Jim rushed forward, their keen eyes searching the floor. Red spots led them to the window, and they saw a crimson smear on the sill.

"By gosh, Belton was only wounded," gasped Tate. "He woke up, staggered to this window, an' crawled outside. Come on, Windy. If we find him in time, maybe we can save his life yet."

But they did not find Rex Belton. By the light of lanterns they had lighted they followed Belton's red-spattered trail from the back of the house and out across the yard to where a horse had stood beside a tool shed. Belton had walked his horse out to the trail which led to Palomar, and the bronc's prints were plain in the still moist sand of the trail.

"He can't ride far, the way that wound was flowin'," Tate told Windy. "An' it's breakin' daylight. We'll pile gear onto a couple of hosses an' follow his sign."

The two of them rushed back to the corral, saddled horses, and stood fuming and impatient while the dawn crept slowly up the sky. When it was finally light enough for them to see the tracks of Belton's horse without quitting saddles, they rode down the trail at a long trot, their eyes glued to the sign they followed. Half a mile from the ranch house, Belton's horse had gone into a run.

Windy and Jim exchanged quick glances, their hopes mounting. If Belton had wits enough to walk his horse quietly away from the place, then spur the animal into a run when he was out of hearing, the fellow certainly could not be very close to death. A dying man would not be apt to show such cool thinking, and the hope that Belton was not fatally wounded mounted in the minds of the two men who trailed him.

Where the trail dipped into a little canyon which had a big spring, Windy and Jim found new evidence that Rex Belton was in command of his wits. Beside the spring were the tattered remnants of an undershirt.

"He stopped here an' bandaged his wound!" Jim exclaimed. "Belton ain't bad hurt, Windy, or he never could have done that. But it took him quite a while, likely. Maybe if we ram the hooks to these broncs we can overtake Belton an' make sure that he's all right."

Side by side they raced up out of the canyon and struck a long, gently sloping ridge down which the trail wound toward the flatlands beyond. Their eyes scanned the trail ahead and the flats beyond. But they could see nothing, and realized that Belton had had a good start on them.

"He's headin' on fer Palomar, Jim," Windy yelled above the throb of hoofs.

Jim saw that his old pard was right, for Belton would have been swinging to the right had he been heading for his home in Palomar Valley. Tate held up his hand, tugging sharply at pliant reins. Windy caught the signal and hauled his own bronc to a stop.

"What's up?" Windy questioned. "Ain't we goin' on after that Belton feller?"

"I don't see any sense in it," Jim explained. "Belton is evidently able to make it on to town, where Doc Fred Neal can fix him up. What we'd better be doin' is cuttin' for the sign of that blasted bushwhacker who followed Belton to the Y D an' tried to kill him last night."

"By gollies, son, yo're right!" cried Windy. "I'd plumb fergot about us aimin' to trail Mr. Bushwhacker. An' yuh know what I'll bet?"

Windy's eyes were squinted, sparkling behind puckered lids.

"What's on your mind?" Jim asked as they swung their broncs about.

"I'll bet my best pair o' socks agin' a secondhand toothpick that Mr. Bushwhacker's sign leads straight to Allison Fletcher's Runnin' M spread," Windy told him.

Jim Tate glanced sharply at his grizzled pard. "What makes you say that?" he demanded.

"In the first place, Allison Fletcher an' his cousin, Roy Fletcher, have been at outs with us ever since we showed up here an' took charge o' the Y D," Windy pointed out. "An' in the second place, that Dode Porter whelp who had that Señor Mystery hood on the night we fogged up them prowlers at our spread was a Runnin' M top hand."

"In other words," Jim questioned grimly, "you think Allison Fletcher, Runnin' M owner, is behind this Señor Mystery business?"

"Whoever Señor Mystery is, he's got brains an' nerve," Windy gritted. "The cuss would have to be somebody who knows all about this country an' the business of the people who live here, otherwise he wouldn't know when them farmers over in Palomar Valley sold crops an' how much they got fer 'em."

"Allison Fletcher an' his foreman cousin, Roy Fletcher, would be in a position to find out such things," Tate admitted grimly. "But we're not condemnin' any man on suspicion alone, old-timer."

"Shore not," snorted Windy. "But I've got a hunch that the bushwhacker's sign we're aimin' to foller will lead us to the Runnin' M. That would be something stronger than jist suspicion agin' Allison Fletcher, wouldn't it?"

"It would," Tate gritted. "So shake a lope out of that bronc, pard. Let's see if your hunch holds water."

CHAPTER III.

WINDY STOPS LEAD.

THE killer who had fired through the Y D ranch-house window at Rex Belton had made little attempt to hide his sign for the first four or five miles. After a hasty breakfast of cold stew and cold biscuits left over from the night before, Jim Tate and Windy Winton took the killer's trail. And about an hour later they were striking the first spot where the sign they followed led into rough going.

Jim and Windy had traveled carefully lest they lose the tracks of the would-be assassin's horse. They dismounted now as the sign reached a long, barren stretch of almost solid stone. But even upon that stone there were tiny scars where iron-shod hoofs had scratched in passing.

Windy and Jim walked for a quarter of a mile, then mounted again, able to read sign from their saddles the moment the stone gave out onto softer earth. And that sign was pointing straight toward the Runnin' M!

"It looks like your hunch was right, Windy," Jim observed gravely. "That back-shooter headed straight down this ridge, which will put him on Runnin' M range in another three or four miles."

"But we won't have no solid proof, button, unless Mr. Killer's tracks lead us to the Runnin' M ranch house," Windy grunted. "Anybody could ride across Fletcher's ground, yuh know. Hey, look there!"

Windy's last words came in a loud voice. Jim Tate had seen the spur lying there in the rocks ahead. Jim spurred his horse sharply, swung low

from the saddle, and snatched the spur from the ground. He halted, and Windy reined in beside him.

The spur was of a cheap make, thin-framed and long of shank. The leather had broken where the buckle had cut gradually through it during long wear. There was nothing distinctive about the spur that would point to a possible owner. But there was one thing which gave a good pointer on the disposition of the hombre who had owned it. The big, cheap rowel had long spikes that had been filed to almost needle sharpness.

"A jasper who would use a thing like that on a hoss ought to be hung up by the toes over a good hot fire," said Windy Winton in disgust.

"An hombre who would use a thing like this on a horse would be the sort to take a shot at a man's back," Jim Tate pointed out. "Findin' this spur don't help a lot, Windy. Still, we might run onto some jasper who only has one spur on. Which would— Ah-huh!"

Jim's voice ended in an exultant grunt. He had been turning the spur slowly over and over, studying it from all angles. And suddenly his eye caught on a dark-crimson stain that smudged three of the wickedly filed points. As Jim stared at it he saw several black hairs caught beneath the brittle clot.

Windy bent close, his eyes dancing with keen excitement as Jim's lean forefinger and thumb carefully pulled the few black hairs loose.

"We know somethin' now," Tate exulted. "Mr. Back-shooter may get cagy an' put on another pair o' spurs. But he'll likely not think to change hosses. An' not many hombres ride black brons."

"An' that black bronc will have a spur cut in its right side," Windy observed keenly. "The straps are

put on that spur fer right-boot wearin', so all we've got to do now is watch fer a black bronc with fresh spur cuts on its sides."

"Or a paint hoss, with a black spot on its right side," Jim pointed out. "A paint, you know, could have a black spot just about where a man's rowels would dig."

"An' paints ain't too plentiful, neither," Windy growled. "Come on, button. We've got somethin' to work on, now."

Tate stuffed the spur inside a saddle pocket as he and Windy walked their brons on down the ridge. The sign they followed swung gradually to the east, and Jim Tate's lean hands dropped often to the butts of those famous guns that had brought law and order to some of the wildest Kansas plains towns.

The tall, black-eyed young ex-marshal's lips were a thin, flat line, and his nerves were keyed to a straining pitch when the sign he followed left his own Y D range and cut into the hills on Allison Fletcher's Running M. The brassy Arizona sun climbed up the bright-blue sky and was almost touching the midday mark when Tate and his pard topped a tall, brushy ridge.

Jim called a halt, his shiny black eyes staring through the clear, warm air. There in a broad sink below him lay the Running M headquarters. From this height the ranch house, outbuildings and corrals looked almost like a small village that lay drowsing in the shade of big pepper trees.

"Well, our minds are made up now, I reckon, Jim," rasped old Windy. "That bushwhacker's trail points right straight down this slope. He went to the Runnin' M house, yonder, no mistake o' that."

"No mistake," Tate drawled coldly, and kept staring at the build-

ings below. Yet he was thinking of Windy Winton, and not of the killer who was probably somewhere about the place right now.

Windy was the only "folks" Jim Tate had ever known, for his own parents had died when he was a baby. As long as Tate could remember, he had drifted up and down the frontier with this grizzled old fellow who was what the West called a cheerful liar.

Windy was given to spinning tall tales of imaginary adventures, and was welcome wherever he landed. On the other hand, Windy was a fighting fool when scrapping was necessary, and was absolutely without fear. But in the past few years Jim had been careful about getting Windy into trouble.

The old ranny was a crack shot with either six-guns or a rifle, and was plenty active despite his gray-ing hair. But Jim's keen eyes had detected the fact that Windy's gnarled hands were a shade slower on the draw than they had once been.

Jim was considering those things now as he sat staring grimly down upon the vast Running M headquarters. Alone, he would have ridden boldly down there, used whatever excuse came to mind for showing up at the ranch, and looked over the horses and men who happened to be around.

But Allison Fletcher had twenty-odd punchers on his pay roll, and from what Jim Tate had seen of those Running M hands they were a mighty tough lot. On top of that, Jim had beaten Allison Fletcher in a fist-and-skull fight when he first came to this range country.

"If we rode down yonder, Fletcher an' his bunch might get ringy," the tall, black-eyed ex-marshal thought grimly. "An' if that hard-cased

crew was to smoke Windy down, it would be my fault."

"Say, what are we waitin' fer?" Windy demanded. "If we foller this sign on down the slope, we can make certain that Mr. Back-shooter landed at the Runnin' M, Jim."

"Yeah, an' we'd likely get peppered with a batch of hot lead," Tate grunted. "Fletcher an' his bunch— Get back!"

Jim's voice had lifted to a sharp pitch on the last two words. He and Windy backed their horses quickly into a stand of brush and swung down from saddles. Out from the ranch buildings below them, three riders had come on the gallop. And those three riders were heading straight for the ridge.

"Them three have likely seen us an' are comin' to look us over," Windy decided. "If the wallopers want to git ringy, I reckon we know how to handle their breed."

Jim said nothing, for he was pressing forward, getting to the outside fringe of the brush patch. He dropped to his haunches and sat studying the three oncoming riders narrowly. And as those three drew closer, Jim's pulse lifted to a quick, hard pounding.

"Hey, Windy!" he called sharply, and the old ranny came to his side, gnarled hands testing holstered weapons.

"Look at them three!" the younger man directed. "The leader is ridin' a black bronc. An' all three of the jaspers are bendin' over, readin' sign as they ride."

"By gollies, yo're right," Windy clipped. "But what do yuh reckon they're up to?"

"They're back-trackin' that hoss we followed this far," rasped Tate. "My hunch says that them three whelps are huntin' the spur I've got in my saddlebag."

"Shore, that's it!" Windy hissed. "An' the feller on the black bronc will be the gent who lost the spur, I'd bet. Now if we was to sort o' stop them three an' curry 'em fer brands, maybe we'd have an idea or two pop into our skulls, button."

"We'll stay hid here until they get up here," Jim decided. "An' when they get close enough we'll step out, get the drop, an'——"

Tate's voice pinched off. Through the brush above his head a bullet snarled angrily, to be quickly followed by half a dozen more.

Jim and Windy flattened out, their eyes popping as they listened to the rolling whang of Winchesters, and saw twigs and leaves shower down from the branches above their heads. The shooting was coming from somewhere up the ridge, and Jim squirmed hastily around, crawled to the far side of the thicket, and peered out.

Roaring down the ridge toward him came fully a dozen riders, led by two big, strapping fellows who pumped Winchester slugs into the brush as they came. Those big hombres were Allison and Roy Fletcher, and the men behind them would, of course, be a bunch of their hard-bit-ten punchers.

"The Fletchers," Windy whispered at Jim's side. "Them skunks aim to bust us wide open, son, if they git the chance."

"Fork leather," Tate directed. "If we've got to fight that whole gang, I want better cover than this brush offers. If we can get into the roughs down—— Windy!"

Windy Winton had levered to his feet, half turned toward the nervously lunging horses. But suddenly the old fellow tottered drunkenly, pawed feebly at the brush before him, then slumped down.

Jim Tate saw his old pard's floppy

Stetson skid off, and saw a quick, ugly spurt of crimson dye the silvery hair at the back of Windy's head.

CHAPTER IV.

FLETCHER'S ORDERS.

SOME sixth sense seemed to warn Allison Fletcher that raw, red death lurked there in the thicket toward which he and his men pounded. Fletcher stood up in the stirrups, held his Winchester high above his head, and waved his rushing riders to a halt when they were still a hundred yards or more from the clump of brush.

Allison Fletcher's big, powerfully muscled body stretched up stiffly and his hard gray eyes searched the thicket ahead while his riders milled and cursed impatiently around him.

Roy Fletcher, cousin of the Running M owner and foreman of the huge spread, spat angrily. Levering a fresh shell into the long gun he had powder-heated, he lifted the weapon to one big, stout shoulder. But Allison Fletcher slapped the gun aside, glowering at his cousin.

The two big, strapping fellows looked enough alike to be brothers, although Allison Fletcher's temples were frosted, and his craggy features were deeply lined, as if he were constantly beset by some grim worry. Roy Fletcher, several years younger than his cousin, had the same craggy features, the same gray, penetrating eyes. But Roy Fletcher's temples showed no gray, and his face held no lines of deep worry.

"What's the idea?" Roy demanded harshly. "You said fog them two whelps out o' that brush, didn't you?"

"Do what you're told, Roy, an' don't bother askin' questions," rapped the older Fletcher. "I've got a hunch that we'd start buttin' bul-

lets if we rode any closer to that brush."

Allison Fletcher never knew just how well founded that hunch was. Just inside the fringe of brush, Jim Tate sat crouched close to the ground, a cocked six-gun in each lean fist. Tate's face was a twisted white mask, and his eyes were the slitted, shiny eyes of a man who would plunge headlong into violent action at any second. Old Windy still lay as he had fallen, and Jim dared not look around.

"Come on, you murderin', skulkin' cowards!" he yelled suddenly at the Running M men. "You're ten or so to my one, since you murdered my pard. But come on into six-gun range, you mangy whelps, an' I'll settle scores for what——"

"It's all right to think I'm dead, jist so long as yuh don't go buryin' me, button," Windy's voice cut in sourly. "Owe-e-e! My noggin feels like a hoss had kicked me."

Windy was there beside Jim now, his leathery face pale from pain and shock. But Windy's gnarled hands were steady as he slid his guns out of leather, cocked the weapons, and spat toward the bole of a bush.

"Hold yore fire down there, Tate!" yelled Allison Fletcher. "If yore pard has been hit, it was an accident."

Fletcher twisted his body sidewise, jammed Winchester into saddle boot, and sat watching his hard-eyed crew slide rifles back into scabbards. Then Allison Fletcher was walking his horse forward, his hands crossed on the saddle horn before him.

Jim Tate's rage gave way now that Windy was himself again. And a slow, puzzled frown puckered the ex-marshal's brow as he watched the Running M men come up to the edge of the brush and begin halting their horses.

Jim and Windy stood up, the latter reeling a little as he stalked out into the open. Windy was munching doggedly at a big cud of tobacco which bulged his cheek, and anger boiled in the old ranny's eyes as he squinted up into the faces of the Running M crew.

At sight of Windy's crimson-dripping head, Allison Fletcher cursed sharply. He swung his horse so that he could glower at his tight-lipped crew of salty riders.

"My orders was to singe the tops of these bushes when we seen Tate an' Winton scrooch in here," roared Fletcher. "Which one o' yuh jaspers broke them orders an' tried to pot shoot Winton?"

Jim Tate and Windy exchanged blank looks. Allison Fletcher was either an excellent actor, or else he actually had meant no real harm with his bullet throwing.

"Aw, nobody broke your orders, Allison," Roy Fletcher snorted. "Besides, what if a bullet had busted that old wart-hog's skull. Since when did you get so blasted fond of Tate and that old Winton cuss?"

"Since when did yuh get to askin' me the whyfors of my own ideas?" Allison Fletcher countered hotly. "An' let this soak in, Roy: If I can find out who shot at Winton, I'll fire that man. An' yo're no exception, feller. Yo're gettin' too big fer yore britches lately."

Roy Fletcher's face mottled when several of the hard-cased riders snickered. But Allison Fletcher had turned his head, to stare stonily down upon Jim and Windy.

"I'm sorry yuh got nicked with a slug, Winton," the rancher growled hoarsely. "But maybe that'll learn you an' Tate, there, not to come nosin' around the Runnin' M."

"Don't go frettin' yoreself thin over this little nick on my head, Mr.

Fletcher," drawled Windy. "Why, this scratch ain't hardly nothin' to what I've had. Take, fer instance, the time a cavalry troop mistook me fer a hoss thief an' cornered me agin' a big bluff, where I couldn't git to cover a-tall."

"Oh, they just *mistook* you for a hoss thief, did they?" Roy Fletcher sneered.

Windy's eyes twinkled, and he spat noisily toward a bush. "Yup, that's what happened," he explained glibly. "An', backed up agin' that bluff, I shore was in a bad-enough fix. But I got in a worse fix."

"It's too bad the cavalry troop didn't shoot yuh afore they discovered that yuh wasn't the hoss thief they wanted," growled Allison Fletcher.

"Say, did them fellers shoot me!" Windy cried. "An' there I was, right out in the open. There was only one little old runty tree growing agin' the bluff."

"An' I suppose you got behind that tree, fogged up the whole United States army, an' come out laughin' about it!" Roy Fletcher snarled. "What you need, Winton, is some o' your lies jammed down yore gullet."

"Well, now, that tree did save my life by growin' there," old Windy vowed. "But it was what the tree had on it that done the trick. Yuh see, gents, that was a persimmon tree, an' at that season the persimmons was green. Ever bite a green persimmon?"

Windy's question was directed at the whole crew. He saw several of them make wry faces, and knew that at least part of his audience had made the mistake some time or other of having bitten a persimmon that was green.

"Well, yuh gents know how a green persimmon puckers whatever

its juice touches," the old ranny rambled on. "So what happens? Jist about the time I was ready to start lead singein' them fool troopers, blamed if a big green persimmon didn't come wallopin' down out o' that tree, hit the end o' my rifle barrel ker-plunk, an' bust wide open. Know what happened then?"

Some of the Running M hands were beginning to grin.

"Why, I'll tell yuh what happened," Windy went on. "The minute that persimmon juice splattered on my gun barrel, blamed if that rifle bore didn't pucker up so tight yuh couldn't even blow through the thing."

Two hombres guffawed outright. Allison Fletcher lost his scowl, and for an instant his eyes twinkled. But Roy Fletcher snarled an oath, his lips curling as he glowered down at Windy.

"With that gun all puckered up so's bullets couldn't git out o' it, I shore was at the mercy o' them rattled troopers." Windy sighed sadly. "An' they was shootin' me then—drillin' me so full o' holes I looked like a sieve. I was hit two hundred an' twenty times dead center, to say nothin' o' the nicks an' scratches I got. Boys, I shore felt awful at bein' treated that a way."

"Hit two hundred an' twenty times!" Roy Fletcher roared. "Why, you loose-tongued old codger, you wouldn't be here tellin' such a tale if you'd been hit center even once, much less two hundred an' twenty times."

"Well, now, if it hadn't been fer them green persimmons, likely I would 'a' had a long weak spell from all them wounds," Windy admitted. "But every time a bullet hit me I would grab up a green persimmon, cut it in two, an' slap the thing over the holes them bullets left in my

hide. An' blamed if them persimmons didn't pucker up them wounds so tight I didn't bleed a drop!"

"Yuh asked fer it, Roy," a burly cowpoke yelled, an' the whole crew roared with mirth, while the Running M ramrod glowered and cursed.

Allison Fletcher's eyes twinkled, and he hid a grin behind one big hand when he saw his cousin's embarrassment. Windy's wild yarn had broken the tension, perhaps saved grave trouble. Jim Tate met Allison Fletcher's eyes, and the Running M owner quit grinning.

When the hard-case rannies behind Fletcher stopped laughing, the big man leaned forward, glaring at Jim through slitted lids.

"We seen yuh two settin' yore hosses here on the ridge, lookin' down toward the house, Tate," Fletcher rumbled. "Then yuh darted back into this brush like yuh was hidin' from somebody. What's the idea, feller, in spyin' on the Runnin' M?"

Jim's nerves tightened as he remembered the three men he had been watching. He thought of the spur in his saddle pocket, and his keen, hard glance shifted from Fletcher's eyes to rake the horses of these men. There was not a black mount in the whole bunch, and Jim guessed shrewdly that the trio who had been back-tracking a horse to hunt a missing spur had heard the shooting and high-tailed it back to the ranch house.

"Well, can't you think up a good lie?" demanded Roy Fletcher.

Jim's lean face flushed, and those shiny black eyes lashed the Running M ramrod.

"Some day, fellow, you'll call somebody a liar at the wrong place and at the wrong time," Tate drawled. "For instance, if you didn't have a young army at your back

now to lend a hand, I'd likely pull you off that hoss an' try my luck at knockin' some manners into you."

Roy Fletcher boomed an oath, lifted his foot from stirrup, and started to dismount.

"Stay right where yuh are, Roy," snapped Allison Fletcher. "Yuh seen Tate clean my plow in a fair fight a while back, an' ought to have sense enough to know that he'd do the same thing to you. Stay in that saddle, an' don't argy none."

The elder Fletcher ignored his cousin's glaring, and turned hard eyes on Jim and Windy.

"You two," the Running M owner warned coldly, "are trespassin' on my range, an' actin' blamed suspicious at the same time. Get off the Runnin' M an' stay off. From now on my men will have orders to shoot to kill if they ketch either of you on my land again. That clear, Tate?"

"Mighty clear," Jim answered flatly. "In fact, it's so clear I can see the reason behind it. A gent in your boots shore wouldn't want strangers snoopin' around."

Jim saw a strange look leap into Allison Fletcher's eyes, and he watched the big man's fists knot slowly while a dark flush crept up his craggy features. But before Fletcher could speak, Jim and Windy were aboard their horses, riding back the way they had come. And they both rode with muscles tensed, more than a little fearful that hot lead would come smashing into their backs.

CHAPTER V.

THE SHERIFF HORNS IN.

JIM TATE had no intention of riding away without having had a look at the three jaspers who had tried to back-track the gunman who had visited the Y D the night before.

But Jim knew that Fletcher would be keeping a sharp lookout for him now, so he kept riding toward his own spread until he was sure no one followed. Then he and Windy holed up in a deep, brush-choked canyon and spent the long afternoon half dozing and trying to think this thing out.

When the sun finally set and purple shadows cloaked the hills, the two hungry punchers saddled the mounts they had turned loose to graze, and headed back across the hills toward the Running M. The big house, the mess shack behind it, and the long bunk house blazed with lights as they sighted the place again. And when they had ridden down into the valley, left their horses in a deep thicket, and approached the house on foot, the smell of food brought new pangs of hunger that wrenched groans from Windy.

The old ranny's head had been bandaged, and he seemed to feel as fit as ever. But Jim had noticed how Windy kept running his calloused palm over the bandage at the base of his head. A bullet had opened the skin there, and Windy's head ached maddeningly. Yet he would not admit it, even when Jim had questioned him.

Men filed out of the mess shack now, their cigarette coals glowing in the dark as they sauntered in well-fed laziness toward the bunk house. Jim and Windy hunkered down beside a tool shed, trying to figure out just what to do. And as they sat crouched there, a rider came up the lane, hailed the house, and walked up the long graveled path. As the fellow passed a lighted window, Jim and Windy recognized him as Marvin Plummer, who owned Palomar Valley and the water project which furnished irrigation for the farm lands in the broad, fertile valley.

Marvin Plummer was well liked by the farmers, for he bought their grain and hay at top prices in Palomar, thereby saving them the trouble of hauling what they produced twenty miles to the railroad at Mojave.

Plummer was a tall, well-proportioned man who had the polished manners of a well-educated person. His word was law among the farmers with whom he dealt, yet he was liked and respected by them, and no one had ever heard of Marvin Plummer trying to cheat a man with whom he dealt.

"Wonder what a gent of Plummer's caliber wants out here?" Windy whispered. "They say he don't pal around with any man."

"Allison Fletcher is a big duck in this country's puddle too, remember," Jim whispered in return. "Him an' Plummer are the two most powerful men, financially an' politically, in this neck of the woods. They'd naturally keep on the good side of each other."

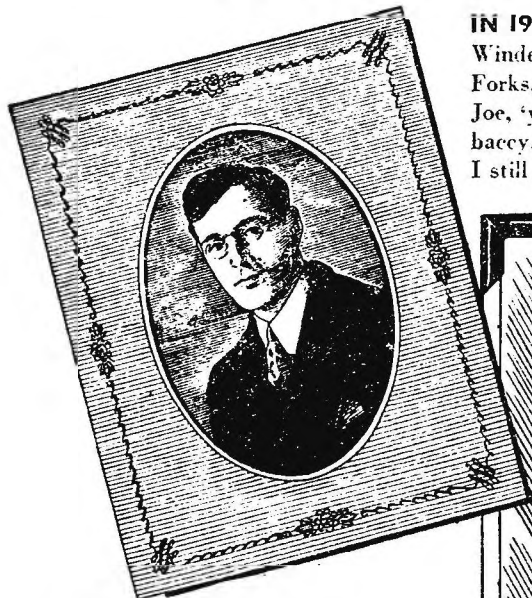
Plummer disappeared toward the front of the house.

"That hombre who rode the black hoss to-day as we set on the ridge watchin' him an' two others had on a yeller shirt, blue neck cloth, an' brown John B," Windy whispered. "I'd know him if I seen him. Maybe, Jim, we ought to slide to yonder bunk house an' peek inside."

"Just what I was about to suggest," Jim began. "So come on, an'—"

He got no further. An hombre came rushing out the back door of the ranch house. As the fellow sprinted past the lighted cook shack, Windy and Jim recognized big Roy Fletcher. And they needed but a single glimpse to see that the Running M ramrod was badly agitated. He struck the bunk-house door at

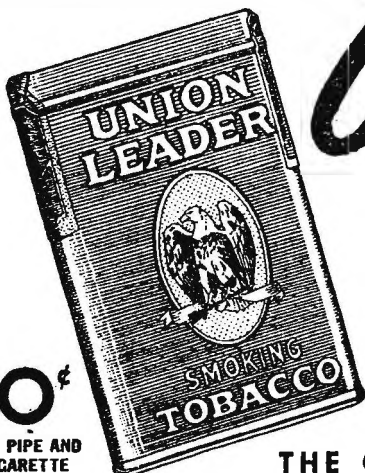
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full stride, and his hoarse bellow brought yells from the men.

"Come on!" Jim hissed. "Marvin Plummer evidently brought some kind of mighty excitin' news. If we get up to that bunk house in time, we'll likely learn a few things."

But Jim and Windy had no time to reach the bunk house. Men were pouring from it, yammering wild excitement as they raced toward the horse corrals out back. And now big Allison Fletcher charged through the back door, yelling for his cousin.

Confusion reigned for several long minutes, and Jim and Windy were forced to hug the ground beside a little shed. Riders thundered away from the corrals, and to the amazement of Jim and Windy they heard their own names shouted as the racing cowpokes talked above the pound of hoofs.

"Blasted shame we didn't drill them two to-day!" one hombre bawled. "So the sheriff has got the goods on 'em, has he?"

"That's what Plummer said up at the house," another voice answered. "Seems like the sheriff has got proof now that Jim Tate is Señor Mystery. Tate an' Winton tried to murder Rex Belton——"

Hoofs drowned out the rest, and Jim heard Windy cuss in a long, hissing sound.

"So that's it!" old Windy fumed. "That blasted Belton went to town an' swore we tried to murder him, the crazy galoot."

"Sh-h-h!" Tate warned. "All the rannies didn't leave the bunk house. Come on, Windy. Maybe we can hear more if we get over under a window."

The two scooted across the dark yard, came to the scaly adobe wall of the long bunk house, and hunkered beneath a lighted window. They could hear the low mutter of

voices, and had to go around the bunk house to a window on the opposite side before they could hear what those guarded voices were saying.

Jim Tate peered in one window he was passing—and almost cried out in amazement. There were still four men in the bunk house, and the first hombre Jim's keen eyes settled on was a tall, narrow-chested, frozen-faced jasper who had a badly scarred left cheek and slitted, chill-blue eyes of a born killer. The tall hombre's hair was pale-yellow, and a thin, ropy yellow mustache hid the corners of his thin, cruel mouth.

Old Windy lifted his head to the window and peered in, and his breath came in a quick, wheezy gasp.

"Bart Claypool, the killer yuh run out o' Muddy Fork town, out on the plains!" Windy gasped as he and Jim ducked. "Son, that's the jigger who was ridin' that black hoss to-day. His shirt an' neckerchief——"

"Shore, Claypool is one of the gents we seen back-trackin' the bronc we followed over here," Jim hissed. "An' did you notice who's with him?"

"Kib Hornby, Nate Roper, an' Cliff Iver," Windy husked. "Jim, this spells trouble fer you. Them four ain't fergot how yuh blasted the face half off Claypool, their tough leader. If they was to ketch us out here——"

"But I tell yuh, Kib, that Fletcher will fetch other men he kin trust an' jine us over at Big Curve," Bart Claypool's thin, gritty voice lashed out. "Quit bellyachin' now, an' listen to reason. The boss couldn't do anything but pretend to go help round up that blasted Jim Tate an' Windy Winton, could he?"

"Jist the same, I don't like it,"

blocky, powerfully built Kib Hornby snarled.

Hornby's face was broad and dark, and his chill eyes looked more white than gray against his thick, coarse skin. Nate Roper was a slim, sallow fellow, with squinty, burning dark eyes and a deceptively frail look about him.

Cliff Iver, lank, bald, and as wrinkled as a mummy, was rated one of the toughest hombres the plains country had ever known. His hook-nosed, gash-mouthed face was screwed into a mean scowl, and his deep-socketed eyes glowed as he twisted his shining head to look at Bart Claypool.

"Fletcher is allus lettin' us fellers do the dirty work," croaked Iver. "Why couldn't he come along an' help us pile them logs an' rocks on the railroad tracks?"

"That's what I say!" Nate Roper's voice was as thin and colorless as the man himself.

"You fellers listen to me now," Claypool snarled. "We've got no more time fer jawin'. By the time we hit Big Curve an' git them rocks an' logs rolled down onto the tracks, it'll be time fer the midnight train."

"An' what a splash that blasted train will make when it whips around that bend an' cracks into the stuff we'll have on the tracks," Nate Roper cackled. "We'll have plenty o' dry brush piled along the tracks an' among the logs an' rocks, too, so's we kin light the dry stuff an' have plenty o' light fer workin' on the express car, in case it don't bust open."

"If any o' the train crew an' passengers is able to see after the wreck, they'll give no trouble when they spot Señor Mystery struttin' around," Kib Hornby chuckled. "An' if the tip Fletcher got is right, that express car——"

Jim Tate laid a shaking hand on old Windy's shoulder, pulled the old fellow back away from the window. The moment they were clear of the bunk house, they began running toward the horses they had left hidden.

"My gosh, them dirty whelps aim to wreck that train, an' kill a lot o' innocent folks!" cried Windy. "Son, what are we gonna do?"

"Stop their game by ridin' to Mojave an' warnin' the telegraph operator what's up!" Jim answered. "But we'll have to do some tall step-pin', Windy. Jumpin' them four back there wouldn't help matters, for Fletcher an' the rest of his murderin' gang would go on to Big Curve an' pull this wreckin' stunt anyhow."

"We kin make it to Mojave if our broncs don't give out," was Windy's opinion. "Maybe we ought to git fresh hosses here afore——"

"We'll ride by the Y D an' get fresh mounts there," Jim hissed as they bored into the thicket, flung into saddles, and roared away into the night.

Nor did they spare the two mounts they rode as they pointed across the hills. When they finally reached the Y D, the horses under them were foam-drenched and wabbly-legged. But there were some other horses in the corral, and Jim Tate's hands shook as he unstrapped the rope from the pommel of his saddle.

"We've got to hurry, Windy," yelled the tall youth. "If that train full of people was to ram into a mess of logs an' rocks——"

"I know, son," answered old Windy. "Here, I'll unsaddle these two broncs while you ketch two fresh ones. These hosses ain't hurt, but they're shore fagged. Git two

big, stout hosses, Jim. We ain't got a minute to lose."

Jim trotted to the corral gate, opened it, and went inside. He approached the milling horses, groaning because he could not see to pick a big, blue roan and a deep-chested bay he knew to be there in the bunch. But all the broncs were top horses, and Jim flashed out a loop that snared one from the bunch.

The horse led easily, and Windy was already at the gate, ready to slap a saddle blanket on the fresh mount's back. But as Windy and Jim drew close together, shadowy figures sprang up from about the corral on both sides of them.

"Freeze, yuh two murderin' coyotes! I jist heard yuh plottin' some sort of a train job. Sheriff Wilson oratin', an' me an' my deputies are itchin' to pull triggers. Sky them paws, Señor Mystery Tate, or yuh die in yore tracks. That goes fer yore pard, too!"

CHAPTER VI.

BULLET CURE FOR BANDITS.

IF Sheriff Tom Wilson had had the good sense to stand still there in the shadows of the tall corral, he could have kept Jim Tate and Windy Winton at bay. But excitement poured through the dumpy, grim-eyed little badge-toter. And, too, Tate and Windy Winton had both lifted their hands.

"Watch 'em, men!" yelled Wilson. "I'll slide in an' get their hardware an' slap bracelets on 'em. By the time the Runnin' M boys get here, the show will all be over."

Sheriff Wilson slogged forward, confident that he had his men trapped. But the sheriff did not know that a desperation greater than any self-preservation could

have produced was driving Jim Tate almost mad.

Jim's lean, flat-muscled body tensed, and sudden hope pounded through his body. It was dark, and those deputies on each side would not be able to follow just what was happening.

The sheriff stepped boldly up—and squalled in sudden alarm. His deputies yelled, shifting this way and that.

"Stand steady, you deputies!" Tate's voice crackled. "I've got this thick-skulled sheriff where I can blow his head off if one of you fools make a move!"

Tate had flashed out a lean arm, hooked that arm about the sheriff's neck, and yanked the little lawman savagely to him. He spun the sheriff, flipping twin guns from Wilson's holsters with his free hand. And now Sheriff Wilson stood pressed with his back against Tate's body, and felt the cold, hard nose of a gun rub the back of his neck.

"Sing out, fool, before one of your deputies gets a crazy idea an' tries somethin'," Jim snarled.

"S-steady, men!" stammered the little badge-toter. "This—this whelp is usin' me fer a shield. If yuh shoot, yore lead will tally me."

Jim Tate could have whooped with joy, for the rattled sheriff's words were sure to tie the hands of those deputies.

"Windy, catch another hoss!" Jim ordered loudly. "An' if one of them deputies tries to stop you, this fat little badge-toter will get somethin' he don't want!"

Old Windy grinned into the darkness at Jim's bluff. Windy knew that Jim would not harm that sheriff for anything under the sun. But the deputies did not know this. They milled and cursed helplessly, while Windy roped out another horse.

The old ranny saddled the two fresh mounts, chuckling into his drooping mustache all the while.

"All set, Jim," he called fiercely. "Yuh aim to kill that ornery sheriff now, or wait until some other time?"

"That depends." The darkness hid Jim's grin. "I'm takin' the sheriff with me as protection. If his deputies follow— Well, the sheriff knows what he'll get."

Jim flung the little officer up into a saddle and bounded up behind him.

"Men, d-don't foller us," Wilson stammered. "I'll likely be murdered anyhow, but there's no use in you boys losin' yore lives. These two would bushwhack yuh if yuh tried to foller us."

Windy hit the saddle, and Jim Tate led the way at a long lope out past the corrals and into the night. And the moment he was out of hearing of those others, Jim began talking rapidly, explaining fully what he and Windy had heard at the Running M bunk house.

"I didn't tell you this in front of your deputies, Wilson, because there's no tellin' who works for a gent like Señor Mystery," Tate finished. "An' I know that them fellers back there wouldn't all be regular deputies."

"Are yuh crazy?" gasped the sheriff. "Do yuh expect me to believe that—that Allison Fletcher would be a dirty killer who rides around with a black hood over his head?"

"I didn't expect you to believe anything, Wilson," Jim growled. "That's why I took no chances on tryin' to talk sense into your thick head. But there's a trainload of innocent people headin' for death and maybe worse. Be man enough to keep what I've told you under your

hat. Don't tell a livin' soul what I've told you."

"I'll jail yuh if it's the last thing I ever do," Wilson threatened. "Unless yuh kill me now. Hey, what the blazes——"

Jim had suddenly reined in. He was perhaps a mile and a half from the ranch house now. He grasped the sheriff beneath the armpits, lifted him out of the saddle, swung him aside, and stood him upon the ground.

"If you've got any sense at all, get them deputies of yours an' head for Big Curve, wherever that is," Tate directed. "Windy an' me will do our darnedest to get to Mojave in time to warn the telegraph operator of what's up."

The sheriff spluttered, too rattled to understand more than half of what was being said to him.

Jim and Windy knew that they had already lost several precious minutes. Their spurred heels dug in and the horses beneath them shot into the night at a run.

But they pulled the broncs into a pace that would not kill them, and an hour and a half later the two riders struck the railroad. They were still a few miles from Mojave, however, and Jim's pulse hammered dull thunder in his ears as he realized that the race would be worse than close.

"If we only had fresh hosses about now to make this last sprint," he yelled at his pard. "Windy, if we knew where Big Curve was—— Say, what's that ahead?"

Patches of white gleamed in the light of a small, late moon. Jim and Windy stood up in their stirrups and wild yells of exultant joy issued from their throats when they recognized the scattered tents of a section crew. They roared in among the tents, yelling like raiders. Men

boiled out of the canvas shelters, some of them flourishing guns.

"Who's the boss here?" Jim yelled. "Quick, men. Talk up. There's trouble comin'."

"Say, you drunken cowpokes go on home," a gruff voice ordered. "I'm Mike Turner, boss o' these section hands. If yuh don't clear out——"

"Turner, where's Big Curve?" Jim cut in sharply.

"Big Curve is that wicked bend a couple miles down the tracks toward Mojave," Turner snorted. "But clear out o' here now."

Jim Tate began talking, and suddenly the camp was in wild confusion. He told of the plan to wreck the train, saying simply that Señor Mystery was behind the plot.

"But you hombres can flag the train here, warn the crew an' passengers," Jim finished.

"My gosh, man, if—if you ain't kiddin', then you've saved many a life," Mike Turner croaked. "Who are you fellers?"

"Jim Tate an' Windy Winton, of the Y D," yelled the ex-marshal. "But get your lanterns an' get busy. It must be nearly train time now, so——"

A long, moaning wail came out of the distance.

"There she comes!" whooped Windy Winton. "Turner, git set to flag that train or yuh'll be to blame fer the wreck. My pard an' me have got a skunk-huntin' job to do."

"Wait!" Turner howled. "I'll send men to help you."

But Windy and Jim were roaring down the tracks, laughing shakily into the wind that beat their faces. They slowed as they approached a hump of mountains around which the tracks had gone. That circular detour formed Big Curve, and the two riders walked their lathered mounts cautiously into the cut.

They found a little side gully half-way down the great, sweeping curve, and left their horses hidden there. Then they crept on around the rest of the curve, their ears and eyes alert.

The towering, snaggly-crowned mountains threw black shadows over the tracks. Jim and Windy bellied down when the curve began straightening out again. And ahead of them they saw the huge, lumpy mass of logs, rocks, and brush that would have cost the lives of no telling how many people, women and children included.

"You wait here," Jim whispered softly. "I'm snakin' on ahead, frin' that brush an' logs. And when the flames get goin' good, I've got a hunch that we'll have us a little shootin' to do."

Tate was at the brush and boulders and logs a few moments later, cursing under his breath when he saw what a solid mass of the stuff had been placed there. From somewhere above him came the faint sounds of some one moving, then the clatter of a pebble rolling down the embankment.

"Thought I seen somethin' move down there in the shadders!" a hard voice hissed. "It was right—— Hey, hear that train whistle?"

Jim Tate laughed a soft, mirthless note. He heard the shrill, angry blasting of the train's whistle, and knew that the engineer was even now being flagged by swinging lanterns back there at the section camp.

Finding a wisp of dry grass, the young ranchman stuffed it under dry brush and struck a match under a shielding palm. He touched the match to the tinder-dry stuff, then set two more spots before a choked oath rasped down from the embankment above.

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"Somebody's lightin' that stuff down there!" Bart Claypool's gritty voice yapped. "Who in thunder is——"

Jim crawfished into the shadows, backed hastily along until he reached Windy. Then they were creeping up the sloping embankment, one on either side. And there in the cut blazing brush was flashing red light over the scene, and men were cursing wildly along each rim of the embankment.

Shadows lifted up from the ground, and suddenly Jim Tate's hands flung down and up, guns nestling in his palms as he stiffened. Just ahead of him a tall, hooded figure had lifted from behind a lump of brush.

The figure looked ghoulish in the fire's red glow, for the black-clad shoulders appeared to be humped and round, and the arms looked huge and puffy, thanks to very full sleeves. But Jim Tate knew that Señor Mystery had that black robe padded across the shoulders to give that humped, disguising effect.

"You, Señor Mystery!" Tate flung his challenge. "Stand hitched, or you'll get a bullet in your belly. Make a move, Fletcher, an'——"

A panther squall that was Windy's battle cry split the night from across the narrow cut, and suddenly guns were blasting their hoarse thunder against the face of the scowling bleak mountains.

Jim Tate saw Señor Mystery draw, and knew that he watched an expert at the game. But the hooded, black-robed murderer was shuttling backward toward up-slanted boulders, his twin guns beating death at Jim Tate.

Jim's own weapons throbbed into life, but just as he let spiked hammers fall, a slug whacked into his

left thigh from a gun down the cut, and he fell heavily, knowing that he missed his one good shot at Señor Mystery.

Jim had to roll over and turn his guns on the dark blot of men who rushed along the cut at him, for their lead was beating the earth dangerously near his body. With a calm that had made him feared as a lawman, Tate's hands swung his spouting guns, and through the crash of powder and the roar of the huge fire down in the cut, the screams of stricken men lifted eerily.

A bullet cut into Jim's side, and another tore the flesh along his right cheek. His head spun crazily, and there were times when the guns in his hands felt strangely heavy. But he hung onto his wits, and the calm that had never failed him in a pinch kept his guns centered on those shifting, darting targets there ahead.

He saw three men fall, and knew that only one of the three moved after striking the ground. A fourth clapped hand to twisted elbow, ran screaming off into the night. Then suddenly the shooting was over, and Jim became aware of the fact that the train had stopped just beyond the cut, and that men were piling from the coaches, yelling wildly.

Jim got shakily to his feet, just as Windy Winton reached his side. Windy was crimson-smeared and ragged, but grinning from ear to ear.

"I got Kib Hornby an' that bald-headed Cliff Iver along with a couple others," Windy panted. "An' I see yuh've downed Bart Claypool an' Nate Roper, along with one other gent."

"Yonder!" Jim gasped. "Señor Mystery an' two others. They're headin' into that canyon mouth!"

With Windy half supporting him, Jim reeled after the fleeing trio. But

men had boiled up over the embankment farther along the cut and were shooting at the black-robed murderer and his two fleeing companions.

"Rush the mouth o' that canyon, men!" boomed Mike Turner's deep voice. "We've got that murderin' Señor Mystery fixed this time, fer that canyon is a box. Bottle Señor Mystery an' his two killer friends up in there!"

A dozen men swarmed over the brushy, boulder-strewn slope. They fanned out at the mouth of the canyon, and big Mike Turner's voice began ordering men to scale the steep sides, plant themselves along the rims. Windy and Jim Tate halted, for they felt that they were not needed now to put the finishing touches on the black-robed murderer.

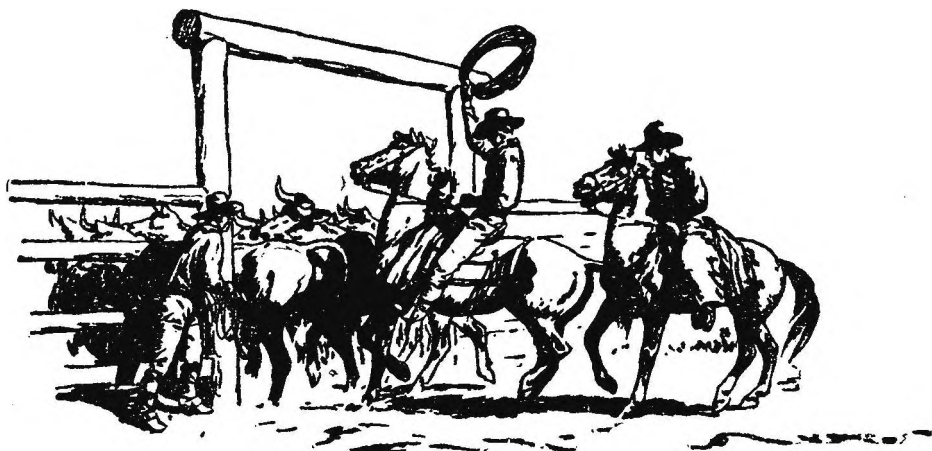
"We better git off some place an' look at these wounds o' yores, son," old Windy panted. "Them fellers yonder have got Señor Mystery as good as killed or captured right now. It looks like a couple of owl-hooters won a race with death, fer we shore saved that train from bein' wrecked."

"I'd like to go help rout that black-hooded skunk out of there," Jim croaked. "I ain't hurt to speak of. If we lend a hand down there, mebber—"

"Yuh come on with me so's I can take care o' them wounds you've got," Windy cut in sharply. "Them fellers have got Señor Mystery's hide ready to hang on the fence right now. An' I don't reckon yuh want to die from flowin' wounds jist when we've got a chance to begin enjoyin' one o' the finest spreads in Arizony!"

"You win, old-timer," Jim grinned feebly. "At that, I'm pretty shaky. We'll let them hombres yonder have the pleasure of snarin' Señor Mystery. An' would I like to see Sheriff Wilson's face when he finds out that there shore-enough was a gang over here tryin' to wreck the train an' rob it!"

It looks as though Jim is cleared o' the suspicion that he's Señor Mystery, but chances are he's headed fer more trouble. Anyway, we'll be able to find out soon, fer the young ranchman an' his tale-tellin' pard are comin' back with us next week in another ace story yuh'll shore want to read. Watch fer 'em in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





The Wranglers Corner

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from beginners and amateur writers and artists.

The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

Drawings should be in India ink on plain white paper. No pencil or crayon drawings can be used. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned, but an effort will be made to return drawings, provided it is especially requested, and a stamped, addressed envelope is inclosed for that purpose.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WE'RE jest openin' the fust mail bag this week, when Shorty Masters an' Willie Wetherbee drifts in.

"Ain't yuh kind o' late, you two?" asks the Oklahoma Kid. "But then, with them lazy mules o' yourn, Shorty, yo're prob'ly lucky tuh git hyar a-tall."

"I'll have yuh know them mules ain't slow!" Shorty busts out. "Any time yuh want tuh race that crow-bait o' yourn agin' my Mozart——"

"Save them braggin's fer some other time," barks Rusty Bolivar.

"We ain't wastin' no valuable moments at this meetin'. Don't yuh know it's Artists' Night?"

"Durned if 'tain't!" says Hungry Hawkins. "I plumb fergot."

"Reckon yuh wouldn't fergit if yuh was an amachoor with a pitcher in one o' them mail bags," speaks up Sailor Anson. "It shore makes a difference whose foot the tight boot's on."

"Waal, now," says Shorty Masters, roostin' comfortable on a soap box, "keep yore eye peeled fer a pitcher of a mule. Last Artists'

Night I was shore 'nough disap-
p'inted when a hull lot o' hosses was
roped out o' the mail bags, but no
mules."

"Yeah," says Willie Wetherbee,
"an' chances aire thet yuh'll be dis-
app'inted ag'in. Don't yuh recollect
the Boss told the amachooors we ain't
exactly honin' tuh git mule
pitchers?"

"We told the amachooors ter
choose their own subjects," we cor-
rects. "Now settle back, yuh wad-
dies, an' pass jedgment on the
pitchers. We're startin' with this
un."



By Jack Albitz—Age 15
Albany, California

"I'm thinkin' it'll take a plumb
fine pitcher tuh crowd thet un out
o' the brandin' corral," says the
Oklahoma Kid. "I'd ruther see ran-
nihans like thet hombre than mules
any time."

"I'm still holdin' out fer a mule,"
Shorty hangs on.

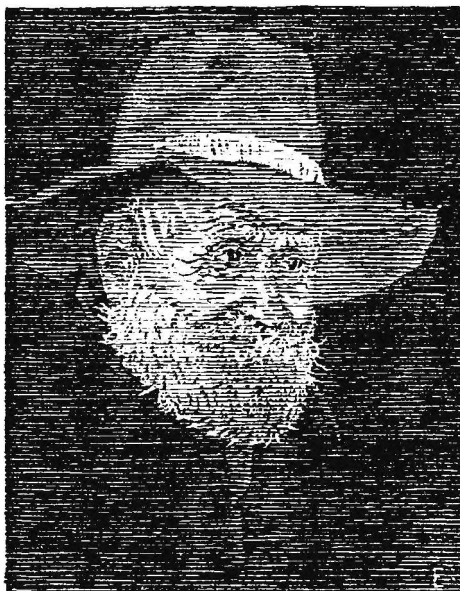
"Yuh crazy pelican," rasps Rusty

Bolivar, "the nighest ter a mule
yuh'll see in a pitcher is a pitcher o'
yoreself! Yuh——"

"Hold it!" yelps Hungry Hawkins,
jumpin' up, seein's Shorty an'
Rusty is startin' a pass fer their
guns.

"Yeah, set down an' look this un
over," we says, gittin' out the next
pitcher pronto.

They set ag'in an' eyes this un.



By Bob Easterday—Age 21
Estes Park, Colorado

"Now thar's a pitcher of an ol'-
timer thet shore gits my vote," says
Sailor Anson. "Yuh meet up with
hombres like him in a wagon train."

"The artist used plenty black
ink," says Hungry Hawkins.

"Thet's background, yuh long-
laigged galoot!" snarls Rusty Boli-
var. "Yuh don't know nothin' 'bout
art."

But the waddies knows 'nough
'bout it ter herd both pitchers inter
the brandin' corral, an' we ropes out
the next.



By John Ednie
Merritton, Ontario, Canada

"The hombre in thet pitcher shore looks like a cool un," says Willie Wetherbee. "He'd be the wrong gent tuh start a ruckus with."

"Yeah." Sailor Anson wants ter add more glory. "An'—"

But we has ter shut him off, seein's time's gittin' short. The pitcher's voted inter the brandin' corral, an' we reads the fust story.

HUNGRY RIDERS

By Wilton Pettit—Age 16
Franklinton, Louisiana

A group of riders for the Circle O were out hunting strays. They had been on the plains two days, and their horses were worn out. On their way back to the ranch they camped near the Buckhorn River, and being close to timber, some of them went where they knew the wild turkeys would be roosting, and killed a bunch.

Bill Wayne and Charles West were standing guard that night. All of the men had eaten turkey earlier in the evening, but they had been fed beans so long that they would get hungry every few hours.

The foreman of the ranch was Joe Root. He had put a turkey on a stick to roast and had rolled up in his blankets while it was cooking before the camp fire.

When the two men, who were on guard,

went to roll in for the rest of the night, they passed the spot where the turkey was on the stick and found that it was cooked to a turn.

They were both hungry, so Bill said: "Let's eat old Joe's turkey. He's fast asleep."

No sooner said than done. They tore the meat from the bones with their teeth and finished it all. Then they put the bones back on the stick and went to bed, satisfied and happy.

The next morning, Joe didn't mention the matter and the guilty ones were careful to keep silent, hoping that Joe didn't know who had stolen his grub.

Twenty years later, Bill Wayne met up again with Joe, who was starting a ranch of his own. After the two had talked about old times for a while, Joe said:

"Bill, don't you think that was a pretty mean trick that you and Charley played on me, to eat my turkey?"

Bill laughed and said: "I shore do, Joe. I have often thought of it with shame, and would like to square it up. I have some mighty good bulls in the Panhandle, and I'll be glad to send you one if you will call it square."

Joe agreed that he would, and Bill sent him a very fine pure-bred bull that proved favorable to Joe's growing herd.

"Ain't thet story shorter than most in the Corner?" asks Willie Wetherbee.

"Yeah," answers Rusty Bolivar, "an' ter my way o' thinkin', it makes plumb easy readin'."

"I'm sidin' yuh on thet, Rusty," Shorty Masters speaks up. "I'm waitin' tuh hear a voice speakin' agin' it?"

He don't hear none, though, so the story's another fer the corral. We takes up the next, which is:

"LOOK! INJUNS!"

By Sherman Glasier—Age 18
Lockport, New York

"Brick" Baxter and "Pigeon" Kane had gotten themselves into a nasty mess when they had let themselves get captured by a hostile band of Indians. They were laying in a rugged tepee bound hand and foot. Brick, however, had used the old trick of expanding the muscles while being tied and now he found the ropes slightly loose but



BOYS! GIRLS! BIKE GIVEN

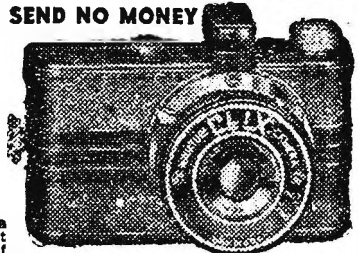
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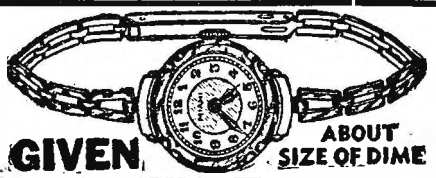
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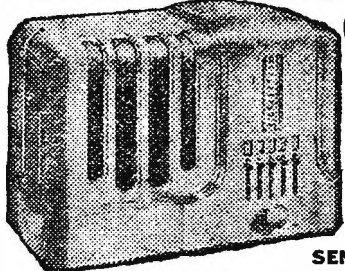
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realized that trying anything at the time would be foolish for they were being guarded by a huge and ugly warrior.

The silence was broken by the distant beat of hoofs and the guard leaped to attention. Leaving the two captives, he slipped from the shelter. The horses reined up before the tepee and the riders dropped to the ground.

They were welcomed by the chief of the tribe and then one spoke. "Chief, we've got the guns and fire water—are you gonna live up to your promise?"

"Ugh," came a deep grunt from the chief.

"If you wipe out the train crew it will end that new railroad they're building and we'll have full control of the cattle transportation once more and you'll get your guns and whisky!" explained the rider.

"Ugh, we finish them," replied the chief.

"We'll see about that," Brick gritted in a hoarse whisper.

He twisted and tugged at the ropes and finally, with wrists raw and bleeding, his hands slipped free! It was only a matter of a few seconds to free his legs and then he gathered up his gun and holster that lay near by. He started to release his pal when he was interrupted by the approaching shuffle of footsteps.

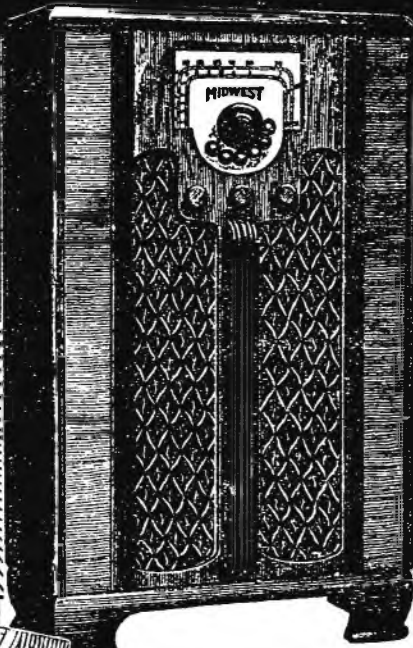
"I'll git caught unless I git out now. I'll come and git yuh later!" he hurriedly whispered. He then spun and slid out through the back. Racing to a group of horses he spied his own stallion and luck was with him for it hadn't been unsaddled. With a leap he landed on his mount and roared out onto the plains. He had covered but a few yards when bullets sang over his head.

After a few minutes of hard riding he reached Saddle City. He related his story to the sheriff and a posse began a hurried flight to aid the railroad crew. Brick hit leather once more towards the Indian camp. As he came in sight of the camp he saw the warriors heading for the railroad. Quietly Brick slipped toward the shelter where his pardner lay captive. An old grizzled warrior was seated outside and it was simple for Brick to overpower and silence him. Then he freed Pigeon and the two stole from the tent, raced to their mounts and roared off to aid the posse. They arrived just as the posse was putting the finishing touches on the raiders. Brick dove into the center of the fray and Pigeon spotted the warrior who had guarded them previously and with a single shot picked the Indian from his horse.

"I never did like thiet Injun." Pigeon grinned.

"I'm fer thet un, too," says the Oklahoma Kid. "Thet ain't a very

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**PAYS
BIG
PROFITS
DAILY!**

long un, either, but it shore reads easy."

"Yeah, an——" begins Sailor Anson.

"No time ter auger," we horns in, seein's the vote's bound ter be a landslide fer the story. "'Fore we busts up, we got a pome."

Hyar she is:

RANGE ROVERS

By Hallie Carter—Age 21
Leaksville, North Carolina

I guess we're just range rovers—
My pony, my dog and me.
We love to wander 'round.
We're happy, just we three.

We've drifted over the range
From Montana to the Rio Grande.
Topped the highest mountains
And crossed the desert sand.

Rode trail-herd in Wyoming;
Fought the Injun braves.
Had our share of rodeos—
We're rovin' rangeland slaves.

We've roped in crooked lawmen;
Brought wanted men to jail.
We've done about all there is to do
But ride the owl-hoot trail.

It's fun to wander 'round
Always feelin' free.
And till our days are done, I guess,
We'll wander—just we three.

"That's my idea of a plumb good Artists' Night," says Rusty Bolivar when the meetin's bustin' up. "Hyar's hopin' next month's is jest as good."

"Now 'bout that race with my Mozart," Shorty Masters harks back ter his run-in with the Oklahoma Kid an' Rusty. "If any o' yuh waddies reckons yuh got a hoss that stands any show tuh——"

"Come on!" Willie Wetherbee sings out, grabbin' him by the arm. "Cain't yuh see they're all skeered tuh take up yore offer?"

We got a hunch Willie's usin' some o' Shorty's strategy ter git his pard ter the bunk house. Anyways, it works, 'cause the rest of us is too tired ter hang round palaverin' any later. So we hits the blankets till next week. THE RANGE BOSS.

Continued from page 8

The cow may twist and the cow may turn,
But right in her track is he,
He'll get there, Eli, sure as you're born,
For a bold bad roper is he.

Chorus:

So "Whoop-la! Set 'em afire!"
Shouts the rider free—
Throw in your spurs, and burn the earth
For a cowboy's life for me.
So "Whoop-la! Set 'em afire!"
Shouts the rider free—
Throw in your spurs, and burn the earth
For a cowboy's life for me.

"Yip! Yip!" To the dogies he gayly yells,
As they curl their tails and pull.
He skirts to the heads of hollows and
draws,

"Yip! Yip!" to the lumbering bull;
He drives them out on the open flat
Where the herds are gatherin' in:
They curl their tails and sniff the breeze
When they hear the round-up din.

Around the fire on a winter's night
There's many a yarn they'll spin,
And many a game of poker play,
At which they lose or win;
And many a cowboy song they'll sing
When the redeye floweth free;
So throw in your spurs and burn the earth
For a cowboy's life for me.

Chorus: Repeat

You bet your life he's got the punch
Whenever there's work to be done;
He rounds them up and cuts them out;
An' mavericks just for fun.
Oh, bold and free is the cowboy's life,
No use for running him down.
He'll spend his wealth in drinkin' your
health
Whenever he gets to town.

Chorus: Repeat

That's a mighty good one, folks!
It was first heard on a ranch near
Ballinger, Texas.

An' now, folks, while we're right
in the mood fer singin' about the



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NEW FORDS GIVEN AS A BONUS

WONDERFUL SUCCESS

Reported by Others

Clare C. Wellman, N. J., tried my plan and cleared \$96.00 in a week. Hans Coordes, Nebr., made \$27.95 in a day; \$96.40 in a week. Norman Geisler, Mich., reported \$33.00 profit for one day and as high as \$129.00 in a single week. Ruby Hannen, a woman in West Virginia, stated that she made \$17.00 in one day and \$73.00 in a week. Wilbur Whitcomb, Ohio, reported \$30.00 profit in a day and \$146.00 in one week. I have scores of reports of exceptional earnings like these as evidence of the amazing possibilities of this money-making offer.

If you are married and willing to cooperate with your life partner in operating a Coffee Agency right in your own locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—FREE.

It is now possible for married couples to make up to \$60 in a single week if you can work harmoniously together. Wife handles the orders, keeps records, etc., while the husband delivers and collects. Steady, permanent business of one to two hundred customers can quickly be established if you follow the simple, proven plans that I send.

START EARNING AT ONCE

I'll send you everything you need—your complete outfit containing full-size packages of products, also printed forms, blanks, advertising literature, samples, etc., together with simple instructions for both the husband and wife, so you can start your earnings right away. Make as high as \$45.00 your very first week.

Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Baking Powder, Flour, Cocoa, Canned Goods, and other foods every day. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

FORD CARS GIVEN

Over and above the cash earnings you make I will give you a brand-new Ford Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. I offer a Ford Car—as an extra reward—to everyone who starts in this business.

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

You can start a Coffee Agency and make money the first week. You don't have to risk a cent of your own money. I absolutely guarantee this. No experience is needed. You use your home as headquarters. You can build your business on our capital. Full details of money making plans are free. Send your name today for the free book giving all inside facts. Then you can decide. Don't waste a minute as you might lose this opportunity through unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

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TAKES PLACE OF NEW RINGS AND REBORE!

Quickly placed through spark plug openings and at a fraction of the cost of new rings and rebore, this amazing mineral fills in and plates worn rings and cylinder walls. Ovrhaul gives your motor increased compression. Cuts oil consumption, increases gas mileage, adds new power and speed, with other substantial benefits of new rings and rebore. Ovrhaul has been thoroughly tested and proved by impartial laboratories and great Universities in the United States and abroad. Proved harmless to finest motors.

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Ovrhaul works on the mineral plating principle—No special tools needed. No car tie-up. No danger of ruining motor by grinding cylinder walls—works in while you drive, saves you time and money. Gives you months of extra car use. A single application lasts up to 10,000 miles.

SAMPLE FREE!

If your car is wasting oil and gas, before you spend up to \$150.00 for new rings and rebore—send your name and address on the coupon below for a free sample of this amazing mineral which expands up to 30 times when heated, and full details of a real money-making opportunity. Air mail reaches us over-night.

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Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you, with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today.—B. L. Mellinger, Pres.

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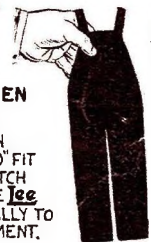
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