

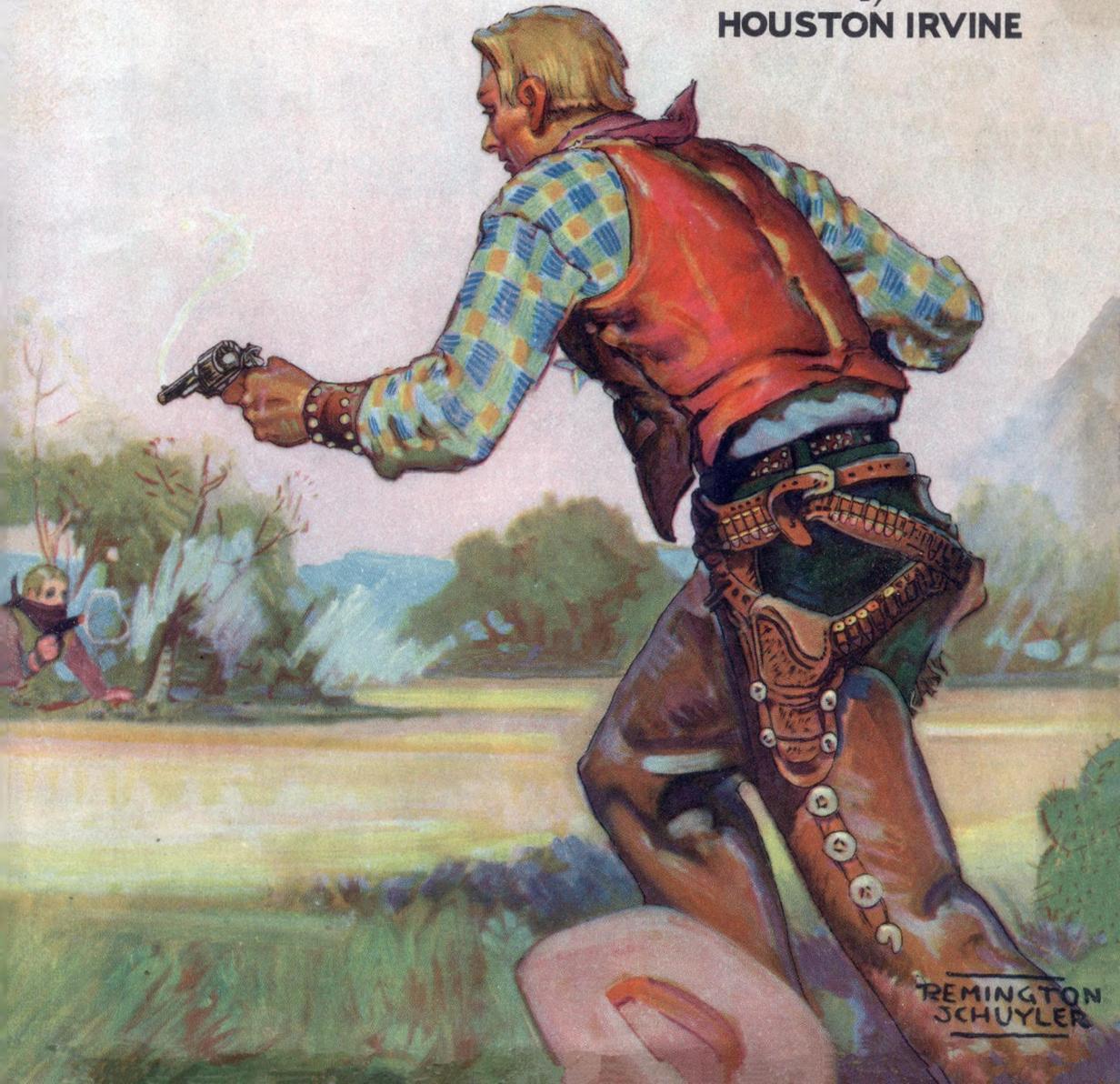
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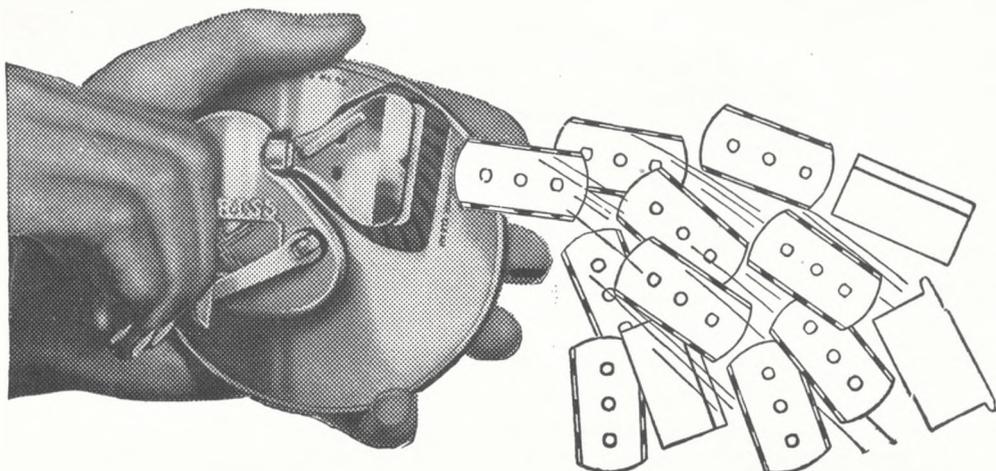


**WEEKLY**  
JAN. 11, 1930

**15¢**  
20¢ IN CANADA

**MAVERICKS' ROUND-UP**  
A "SHOOTIN' FOOL" NOVELETTE  
By  
**HOUSTON IRVINE**





# NOW... A Shaving Machine That Ends Buying Razor Blades!

**A**T LAST! The invention every man has been waiting for—a device that practically ends razor blade expense! J. T. Main (Wisconsin) has already gotten 1,500 slick shaves from one old Gillette blade. E. L. Vinal (Oregon) hasn't bought a razor blade for two years. Thousands write letters like this. Millions of dollars are being saved by Kriss Kross users with this amazing machine that makes old blades like new—in fact often makes them keener than when new!

## Unlike Stropers

This wonderful device is far improved over ordinary blade sharpeners by an uncanny new principle that makes "perfect edge" an automatic certainty. It sharpens any blade (except Durham Duplex) in eleven seconds, and even a child can safely use it.

Just imagine what you could buy with the money you've spent on razor blades for the last ten years—and how much you can save the

next ten—then you'll realize what a wonderful investment Kriss Kross is. But saving razor blades is only one of many Kriss Kross advantages. From now on, expect shaves that are 50% easier, cooler, quicker. No more tender, burning skin. No more tough, wiry beards or "missed" patches.



**A FREE FORD  
and  
\$5300 Profits**

Become a Kriss Kross man. Win a free Ford and make \$5,300 in a year like G. B. Loughren. Work full time or spare hours. No experience needed—we show you how to make money. Check bottom line in coupon below.

## New-Type Razor Blade FREE!

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Send me details of Kriss Kross Stropper. Also send free sample of your new type razor blade for..... Razor. (Fill in your make of razor.)

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Check here for agent's money-making plan, full time or spare hours.



# They Told Him Salesmen Were "Born" But Now He Makes \$10,000 a Year ...Thanks to This Little Book

IT was just a little free book that made the difference between Ed Pinkham and the rest of the men in our shop. Nobody ever imagined that Ed would land, even in the \$5,000-a-year class, let alone be making \$10,000 before he was thirty. Ed didn't know himself the abilities he had in him as a money-maker.

But one day, a strange occurrence changed his whole life. During his lunch hour Ed started to read a little book he had brought to work with him.

"It's a book called 'The Key To Master Salesmanship,' Bill," he told me. "It's the most amazing thing I ever read. I never dreamed there was so much in salesmanship. You ought to send for a copy yourself. It's free."

"Huh!" said Luke Jones. "Does that book tell you how to become a salesman?"

"It sure does," replied Ed, enthusiastically. "Don't waste your time," advised Luke. "You can't learn how to be a salesman. A fellow has to be 'born' that way to be a good salesman."

Ed just smiled at that, but he said nothing. Soon afterward he quit the shop, and we forgot about him. And then last night, I met Ed again—driving a snappy new sedan and dressed like a million dollars.

"For Pete's sake," I said. "What are you doing nowadays, Ed?" He smiled. "City salesmanager for the Steel Castings Company," he told me. "What are you doing?"

"Still at the shop," I replied. "But what I want to know is, how do you come to be salesmanager for Steel Castings? They're one of the biggest firms in the business."

Ed smiled again. "Remember that book on Salesmanship that Luke Jones was kidding me about one day? Well, when I finished my Salesmanship training the Association I took it from gave me a choice of twenty-two jobs through their Free Employment Department, and I took a position as salesman for Steel Castings Company. They made me City Sales Manager three months ago at ten thousand dollars a year."

"Good night!" I said. "And Luke and I are still punching the old time clock!"

Ed looked at me seriously. "See here, Bill," he said. "Are you sport enough to risk two cents that you can do as well as I did? Then spend the two cents to

write to the National Salesmen's Training Association tonight and get their free book. Then take their course. When you have your diploma, their Free Employment Department will help you get a good sales job—every year they have calls for over 50,000 salesmen. Not only will they help you get the job, but they give you an iron-clad money-back guarantee that you must be satisfied with the training received—or they refund your tuition!"

### FREE-TO EVERY MAN

A book—but what a book! Just seven ounces of paper and printer's ink—but it reveals facts and secrets that have led hundreds of men to success beyond their fondest expectations! See for yourself—FREE—why "The Key To Master Salesmanship" has increased the earning capacities of thousands, as a direct result of their reading it! You'll know then, how J. H. Huppert of Michigan learned from its pages the secrets that enabled him to make \$525 in one week. You can understand how it helped A. A. Fidler of Alabama to raise his pay 700%. Learn for yourself the REAL TRUTH about salesmanship. You do not risk one penny or incur the slightest obligation. And since it may prove the turning point in your career it is certainly worth your while to fill out and mail the coupon below. Do it now!

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Dept. A-582, N. S. T. A. Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

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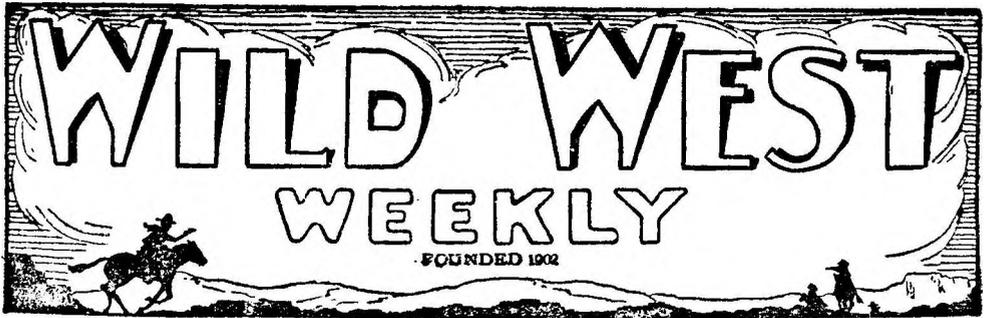
Without cost or obligation please send me my free copy of "The Key To Master Salesmanship," including details of your FREE EMPLOYMENT Service.

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Vol. 47, No. 1 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 11, 1930 Whole No. 1421

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Cover Picture—Scene from "Mavericks' Round-up" . . . . . *Remington Schuyler*

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when with just a little effort he could bring large success within his grasp.

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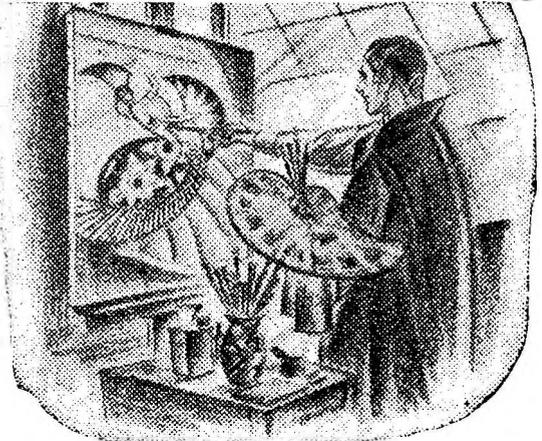
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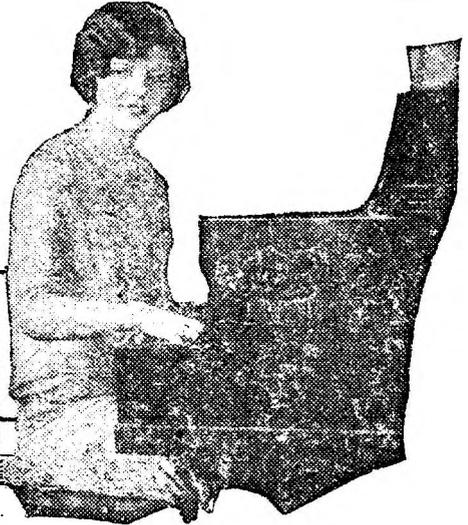
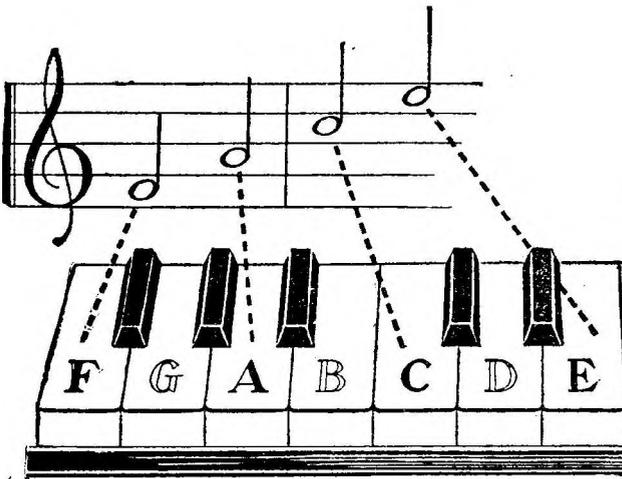
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# To those who think Learning Music is hard-



**P**ERHAPS you think that taking music lessons is like taking a dose of medicine. It isn't any longer!

As far as you're concerned, the old days of long practice hours with their horrid scales, hard-work exercises, and expensive personal teachers' fees are over and done with.

You have no excuses—no alibis whatsoever for not making your start towards musical good times now!

For, through a method that removes the boredom and extravagance from musical lessons, you can now learn to play your favorite instrument entirely at home—without a private teacher—in half the usual time—at a fraction of the usual cost.

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Soon when your friends say "please play something," you can surprise and entertain them with pleasing melodies on your favorite instrument. You'll find yourself in the spotlight—popular everywhere. Life at last will have its silver lining and lonely hours will vanish as you play the "blues" away.

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If you're tired of doing the heavy looking-on at parties—if always listening to others play has almost spoiled the pleasure of music for you—if you've been envious because they could entertain their friends and family—if learning music has always been one of those never-to-come true dreams, let the time-proven and tested home-study method of the U. S. School of Music come to your rescue.

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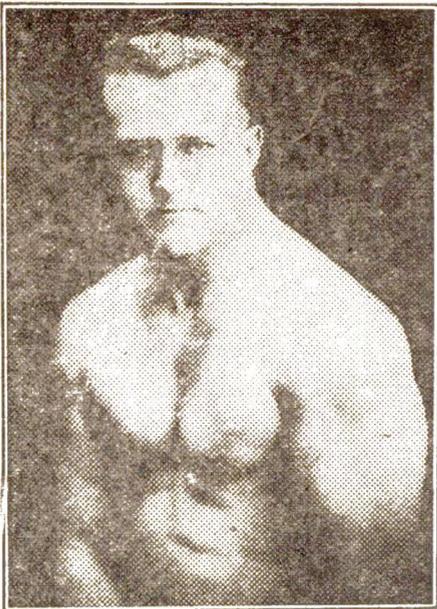
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There are thousands of men like Jones. They, too, could be happy, successful, respected and loved. But they can't seem to realize the one big fact—that practically everything worth while living for depends upon **STRENGTH**—upon live, red-blooded, he-man muscle.

Everything you do depends upon strength. No matter what your occupation, you need the health, vitality and clear thinking only big, strong virile muscles can give you. When you are ill the strength in those big muscles pulls you through. At the office, in the farm fields, or on the tennis courts, you'll find your success generally depends upon your muscular development.

### Here's a Short Cut to Strength and Success

"But," you say, "it takes years to build my body up to the point where it will equal those of athletic champions." It does if you go about it without any system, but **there's a scientific short cut.** And that's where I come in.

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#### I Strengthen These Inner Organs Too

But I'm not through with you. I want ninety days in all to do the job right, and then all I ask is that you look yourself over.

What a marvelous change! Those great squared shoulders! That pair of huge, lithe arms! Those firm, shapely legs! You'll be just as fit inside as you are out, too, because I work on your heart, your liver—all of your inner organs, strengthening and exercising them. Yes indeed, life can give you a greater thrill than you ever dreamed. But, remember, the only sure road to health, strength and happiness **demands action.** Start now!

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Over 500,000 men and women used Superba Remedy to help stop Cigarettes, Cigars, Pipe, Chewing or Snuff. Write for full treatment on trial. Contains no dope or habit forming drugs. Costs \$2.00 if successful, nothing if not **SUPERBA CO A-10,** Baltimore, Md.

# SONG WRITERS!



**SUBSTANTIAL ADVANCE ROYALTIES** are paid on work found acceptable for publication. Anyone wishing to write either the words or music for songs may submit work for free examination and advice. Past experience unnecessary. New demand created by "Talking Pictures" fully described in our free book. Write for it Today. **NEWCOMER ASSOCIATES**  
722 Earle Building, New York



# Skin

**TROUBLES  
CLEARED QUICKLY**  
... Poslam often ends pimples in 24 hours .....

No more costly and tedious beauty treatments! Pimples, rashes, breaking out, red or oily skin, eczema and other blemishes cleared up quickly and safely with just a few simple applications of **POSLAM.** Embarrassing eruptions often vanish overnight. Used successfully for skin troubles for twenty years. It must be good! Thousands of delighted users write telling us of amazing success.

Buy Poslam today at your druggist, only 50c., or let us prove to you **FREE** that **POSLAM** will clear and beautify **YOUR** skin. Booklet with each package, at your druggist, reveals valuable beauty secrets. **FREE PROOF SAMPLE**—See amazing improvement in 24 hours. Free, no cost, no obligation. Send today for generous trial size of Poslam. Simply mail your name and address to:  
**Sample Desk 14, Poslam Co., 254 W. 54th St., New York, N.Y.**

# \$3750.00 REWARD

Find the key to unlock this PRIZE Bag of Gold



THERE are 19 keys pictured here. To be sure, they all look alike, but, examine them closely. 18 of them are exactly alike, but, "ONE," and only one is DIFFERENT FROM ALL THE OTHERS. It is the key to OPEN THE PADLOCK on this \$3,750.00 FREE "Bag of Gold."

## SEE IF YOU CAN FIND IT?

**Clues** The difference may be in the size, the shape, or even in the notches. So, STUDY EACH KEY CAREFULLY and if you can find the "ONE" key that is different from all the others SEND THE NUMBER OF IT TO ME AT ONCE. You may become the winner of a Special Buick Sedan or \$3,750.00 cash money,—without one cent of cost to you. I will give away ABSOLUTELY FREE,—5 new six-cylinder 4-door Sedans and the winners can have CASH MONEY INSTEAD of the automobiles if they prefer it. 15 BIG PRIZES TO BE GIVEN FREE—totaling \$7,500.00 cash.

### Win a Special Buick or \$3750.00

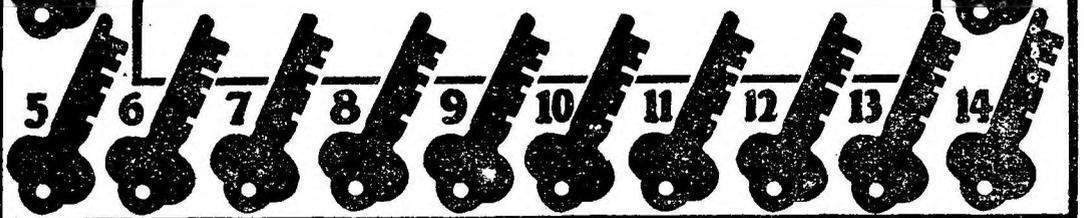
Choice of this beautiful Special Buick Sedan or \$3,750.00 cash. We pay all the freight and tax in full on all the prizes and deliver them anywhere in the U. S. A. This is an AMAZING OPPORTUNITY. No more puzzles to solve. ACT QUICK, and here is why—

### \$1,750.00 Cash—Extra for Promptness

I will pay \$1,750.00 cash money extra JUST FOR PROMPTNESS. In the event of a tie for any of the prizes offered, the full amount of the prize tied for will be awarded to each tying contestant. YOU CAN WIN the Special Buick or—\$3,750.00 cash. ANSWER QUICK!

**You Cannot Lose** Absolutely everyone who takes full advantage of this opportunity will be rewarded. But, hurry,—find the "ONE" key that is different from all the others and RUSH THE NUMBER OF IT and your name and address to me TODAY on a postal card or in a letter. And, just say:—"Key number \_\_\_\_\_ is different from all the others"—please tell me how I can get this magnificent Special Buick Sedan—or—\$3,750.00 CASH MONEY without obligation or one penny of cost to me." Absolutely no more puzzles to solve.

**G. FORD, Dept. 154, 537 S. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.**



# Get Groceries at Wholesale -and Make \$15 a Day Besides!



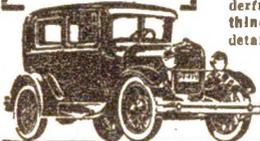
YES, right now, I'll give you groceries at rock-bottom, wholesale prices and a chance to pocket \$10 to \$15 cash profits in a day. I'll give you the same proposition I gave to L. C. Van Allen, of Illinois, who reports profits of more than \$100 a week. You don't need any experience. Gustav Karnath, a farm laborer in Minnesota, writes, "Made \$20.35 the first 5 hours." Mrs. B. F. Bagmell, of Louisiana, says she makes \$10 to \$15 a day in spare time. And I now offer you the chance to *make* money and *save* money on groceries that I gave these people.

**BIG PROFITS FOR EASY WORK**  
I am President of a million-dollar Company. I distribute high-quality Groceries and other Household Necessities direct from factory to user through Authorized Local Representatives. Last year my Representatives made nearly *two million dollars!* Now I invite you to share in these profits. I'll help you make money from the very start. And I will give you Groceries and other Household Supplies at *savings of nearly one-half!* You have a wonderful chance to *make* and *save* big money.

## NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED

You don't need capital, training or experience. All you do is call on your friends and my established customers and take care of their orders. I never sell to stores. *You alone get the profit on all orders from your territory.* Keep your present job and start with me in spare time if you want to. Oscar Stuart, of W. Virginia, reports \$18 profit in 2½ hours' spare time.

**FREE!**  
New Ford Tudor Sedan NOT a contest. I offer a brand-new car free to producers as an extra reward or bonus—in addition to their large cash profits. Mail coupon for particulars.



**SEND NO MONEY**  
If you want to get groceries at our rock-bottom, wholesale prices—and \$10 to \$15 in a day besides—send me your name at once. Don't miss this wonderful opportunity. You have everything to gain. I will give you full details of my amazing new plan without cost or obligation. I'll give you the big opportunity you've long been waiting for. So don't lose a moment. Mail the coupon NOW!

## Mail This NOW

Albert Mills, Pres., American Products Co.,  
5421 Menmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio.  
Send me, without cost or obligation, all the facts about your new proposition that offers Groceries at Wholesale and a chance to make \$10 to \$15 in a day besides. Also explain your new Ford Offer.

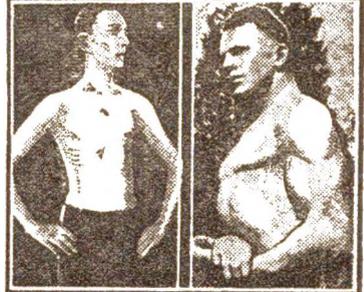
Name .....

Address .....

© A. P. Co. (Print or Write Plainly)

# Let Me Make YOU OVER!

LOOK at those two pictures! Which are YOU! A puny run-down weakling, scorned by your fellow-men, avoided by women, ashamed to show yourself in a gym suit or bathing suit? Snap out of it, friend! Take a look at that big boy at the right and cheer up. That's the way TITUS builds men. And YOU'RE NEXT.



## Big Muscles Quick

Let me cover your body with muscle. Let me make you over inside and out. Just give me 30 days and see the amazing change. New health—new strength—new energy—all in a few minutes a day! Why be a weakling when it is so EASY to be strong!

SEND For FREE BOOK

## FREE "MIRACLES IN MUSCLES"

Get my FREE BOOK—"Miracles in Muscles." Man, it will open your eyes! Read how scientific body building makes weak men strong, and strong men STRONGER. Just write your name and address in the margin and mail. Or send postcard or letter for FREE BOOK. DO IT TODAY.



TITUS (Dept. J-148) 853 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

# NERVE FORCE

Lack of Power or Energy, Weakness or excessive drains on the Nervous System. The Specific Pill, and Winchester's Hypophosphites. \$1.00 per box or bottle, postpaid, literature free.

Winchester & Co., Est. 70 Years Box 233, Mount Vernon, N. Y.

## START to PLAY Very First Day!

Pleasant, Easy Lessons Show You How!



## Extra Money—Hosts of Friends—Loads of Fun Within Your Reach

**HAPPY DAYS** are in store for you if you will only act on this suggestion! Cheerful evenings playing catchy music alone or with sweetheart, wife or sister; proud moments as center of interest at gatherings; nights of joy making \$8 to \$25 for work that is "play."

The Deagan Xylorimba is your opportunity! Wonderful for home, in demand at dances and entertainments, *yet easiest of all instruments to play.* No teacher necessary—you actually play simple melodies the very first day even if you cannot read a note of music right now!

**Earn \$60 a Week**—Ralph Smith Chicago, says: "Played 20 minutes at wedding. Received \$20." L. E. Halmann, Reading, Pa., writes: "Made \$300 in 5 weeks, spare time. Had never played instrument before."

**Send for Big Free Book!** Our new book tells all about the delightful, the five-day trial that reserves risk, the wonderful Deagan zero-payment plan. No obligation—simply fill in and mail the coupon.

J. C. Deagan, Inc., Dept. 1881, 1770 Berteau Avenue, Chicago  
Send me, without obligation, full details of Free Trial offer and easy-payment plan of the Deagan Xylorimba.

Name .....

Address .....



# - Say Fellows ! Let Me Show You How You Can Quickly Step Out of that Small Pay Job

Now ... and forever ... say good-bye to \$25 and \$35 a week. Let me show you how to qualify in 12 weeks for jobs leading to salaries of \$60, \$70 a week and up—getting into Electricity is far easier than you imagine.

## Amazingly Easy Way to get into ELECTRICITY in 12 Weeks in the Great Shops of Coyne No Books—No Lessons

You don't need a high school education or previous electrical experience here at Coyne. I train you in 12 weeks—NOT BY CORRESPONDENCE, BOOKS OR LESSONS—but right HERE IN MY GREAT SHOPS on real actual electrical machinery. I train you as you never dreamed you could be trained—on the greatest outlay of electrical equipment ever assembled for training purposes. Real Dynamos, Engines, Power Plants, Autos, Switchboards, Transmitting Stations—everything from Doorbells to Power Plants—full sized—in full operation every day.

### Free Employment Help

If you need part time work we will help you get a job to help out on your expenses. Then after 12 happy interesting weeks my employment department will give you employment help and assist you TO A BIG PAY ELECTRICAL JOB. This service we will give you free for life any time you want it. Nothing is left undone to make you a big success.

**COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL** H.C. LEWIS President  
500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 10-45, Chicago, Ill.

**SPECIAL Offer Now!** Right now, I'm including at NO EXTRA COST my big new AVIATION electricity, Radio and AUTOMOBILE electricity courses and a special Reduced Tuition Offer. Send coupon today for all the details.

**Get The Facts** Coyne is your one big chance to get into Electricity. Every obstacle is removed. Coyne training is tested—proven beyond all doubt. You can find out everything ABSOLUTELY FREE. Simply fill in the coupon and mail it to me today. Then I'll send you my BIG FREE BOOK. No obligation, no set at once. MAIL COUPON TODAY.

**Coyne Electrical School, H.C. LEWIS, Pres., Dept. 10-45; 500 S. Paulina Street, Chicago, Illinois**

Please send me illustrated FREE Book on Electricity and Coyne. No obligation. Also special offer on R. R. Fare and courses.

Name .....

Address .....

Town .....

## QUIT TOBACCO

No man or woman can escape the harmful effects of tobacco. Don't try to banish oneself, the hold tobacco has upon you. Join the thousands of inveterate tobacco users that have found it easy to quit with the aid of the Keeley Treatment.

## KEELEY Treatment For Tobacco Habit Successful For Over 50 Years

Quickly banishes all craving for tobacco. Write today for Free Book telling how to quickly Free yourself from the tobacco habit and our Money Back Guarantee.

**THE KEELEY INSTITUTE**  
Dept. D-812 Dwight, Illinois



## New Kind of Can Opener

**Works Like Magic!**

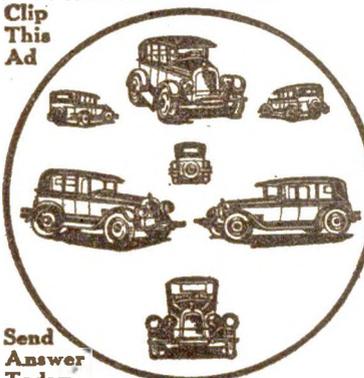
### AGENTS

Men and Women make \$6 to \$12 an hour, full or spare time. Big, worthwhile commissions on every sale. Exclusive Territories. Send quick for FREE OUTFIT and FREE TEST Offers.

At last! An automatic, simple little can opening machine for the home. This revolutionary invention in only a few short months has banished old can openers from over 100,000 kitchens. And no wonder! Imagine an amazing life-time device that holds the can and cuts out the top leaving can rim sleek, smooth and clean. Just turn a crank, that's all. Approved by Good Housekeeping Inst., Modern Priscilla, etc. Write today for special introductory advertising offer.

Central States Mfg. Co., Dept. A-2563  
4500 Mary Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

Clip  
This  
Ad



Send  
Answer  
Today

## Win Nash Sedan Or \$2,750.00 in Cash

Someone who answers this ad will receive, absolutely free, a fully equipped 7-Passenger, Advanced Six Nash Sedan, or its full value in cash (\$2,000.00). We are also giving away a Dodge Sedan, a Brunswick Phonograph and many other valuable prizes—besides Hundreds of Dollars in Cash. This offer is open to anyone living in the U. S. A. outside of Chicago.

### Solve This Puzzle

There are 7 cars in the circle. By drawing 3 straight lines you can put each one in a space by itself. When you do this send me your answer right away.

### \$750.00 Extra for Promptness

In addition to the many valuable prizes and Hundreds of Dollars in Cash, we are also giving a Special Prize of \$750.00 in Cash for Promptness. First prize winner will receive \$2,750.00 in cash, or the Nash Sedan and \$750.00 in cash. In case of ties duplicate prizes will be awarded each one trying. Solve the puzzle right away and send me your answer together with your name and address plainly written and I will send you full particulars. \$4,500.00 in prizes—EVERYBODY REWARDED.

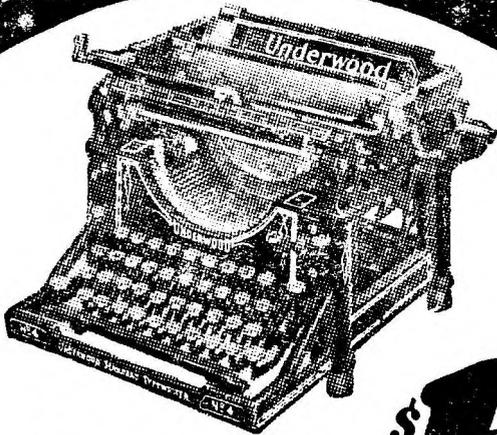
John T. Adams, Mgr.

Dept. 1421

323 S. Peoria St., Chicago, Ill.

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

**Genuine**  
**UNDERWOOD**  
**Below 1/2 Price**

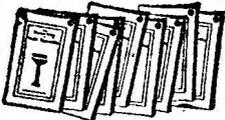


**NOW ONLY** **\$1 DOWN**  
**Standard 4-Row Keyboard**

Think of it! Only \$1.00 brings the World's most famous Underwood Typewriter for 10 days' free trial. Lowest price and easiest terms ever offered. Pay only 10c a day on easy monthly payment plan. This is the full size standard Underwood 4-row keyboard typewriter, manufactured to sell for \$100.00.

Do not confuse this 4-row standard office model Underwood with other trail machines originally costing only one-half as much.

**Typewriting Course FREE**



We teach you free. Complete Home Study Course of the famous Van Sant Speed Typewriting System, fully illustrated, easily learned, used in schools, business offices, everywhere.

**Easy Terms**  
**10 Day FREE Trial**

This late model Underwood, specially priced at \$39.90 (cash) is the lowest price ever quoted; has modern improvements, including 4-row keyboard, two-color ribbon, back spacer, ribbon reverse, tabulator, release, shift lock and many other improvements. Beautifully refinished and renewed. Looks and operates like brand new.

**Send At Once!**

This exceptional bargain offer is for a very limited time only. Remember, every one of these famous Underwoods is fully guaranteed and shipped on 10 days Free Trial. Sent at once.

International Typewriter Exchange  
231 West Monroe Street, Chicago, Ill., Dept. Y-1.

I enclose \$1 deposit. Send Underwood No. 4 at once for 10 day Free Trial. If I am not perfectly satisfied I can return it Express Collect and get my deposit back. If I keep it I will pay \$3 a month until I have paid \$44.90 (term price) in full.

Name ..... Age .....

Address .....

Town ..... State .....



**New Spectacles on 100 Days Trial**

Let us send you these latest Style, New Comfort Spectacles with Clear Vision Lenses on 100 Days' Trial. The most beautiful spectacles produced in many years. Worn by multitudes of people. Popular everywhere. Distinguished in appearance. Leaves no marks on bridge of nose. Light Weight. Will enable you to read the smallest print, thread the finest needle, see FAR or NEAR. Beautiful case included Free. Satisfaction guaranteed. If you are not amazed and delighted, if you do not think our spectacles at only \$2.98 better than those sold elsewhere at \$15.00, you can send them back. You don't risk a cent. SEND NO MONEY! Just mail the coupon. We will also tell you how to get a pair for yourself without cost.

----- MAIL COUPON TODAY -----

Dr. S. J. Ritholz,  
1447 W. Jackson Blvd.,  
Dept. X.C.F. 318  
Chicago, Illinois.

I want to try your New Comfort Spectacles for 100 days and learn how I may get them without cost.

Name..... Age.....  
St. & No..... R.F.D. .... Box.....  
Town..... State.....



**Styled On Fifth Avenue - TIES & SHIRTS PAY BIG**

**MAKE STEADY MONEY**

weekly selling this combined line. Public Service offers the best money-maker in the country for full time or spare time workers.

Splendid Fifth Ave. Styled shirts. Beautiful fabrics to satisfy every taste. Sell on sight to men and women at factory prices. Biggest assortment in the business. Collect your commission in advance. Finest new Spring Outfit FREE. Start earning more money at once. Write TODAY.

**PUBLIC SERVICE MILLS, Inc.**

515T-30th St., North Bergen, N. J.  
Canadian Office, 110 Dundas St., London, Ontario, Can.

**Backache**

If functional Bladder Irritation disturbs your sleep, causes Burning or Itching Sensation, Backache or Leg Pains, making you feel tired, depressed and discouraged, why not try the Cystex 48 Hour Test? Don't give up. Get Cystex today at any drug store. Put it to the test. See how fast it works. Money back if it doesn't bring quick improvement, and satisfy you completely. Try Cystex today. Only 60c.

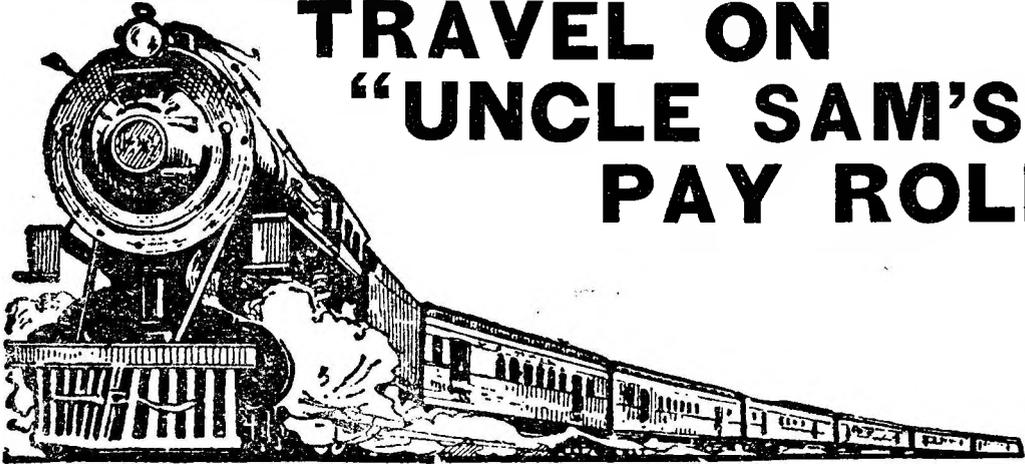
**MORE PAY with** 

**FREE SHIRTS TIES CASH BONUS GIVEN**

**QUAKER FREE OUTFIT**

Earn big money right from the start. Let Quaker help you. Wonderful free Sample outfit gets orders everywhere. Men's Shirts, Ties, Underwear, Hosiery. Unmatchable values. Unique selling features. Ironclad guarantee. You can't fail with Quaker. Write for your Free outfit NOW.

**QUAKER SHIRT CORPORATION**  
Dept. Y-1 1107 Broadway, N. Y.



# TRAVEL ON "UNCLE SAM'S" PAY ROLL

## RAILWAY POSTAL CLERKS

*\$1900 to \$2700 a Year*

MANY EARLY EXAMINATIONS COMING

Many U. S. Government Jobs  
open to Men—Women 18 to 50  
MAIL COUPON—TODAY SURE

Short Hours—Pleasant Work—Rapid Advancement—  
Permanent Employment—Long Vacation with Pay

Franklin Institute  
Dept. E-192 Rochester, N. Y.

Rush to me free of charge: (1) A full description of the position checked below; (2) Free copy of 32-page illustrated book "How to Get a U. S. Government Job"; (3) A list of U. S. Government Jobs now obtainable.

VALUABLE COUPON

... Railway Postal Clerk.....	(\$1900—\$2700)
... Post Office Clerk.....	(\$1700—\$2300)
... City Mail Carrier.....	(\$1700—\$2100)
... Rural Mail Carrier.....	(\$2100—\$3300)
... General Clerk—Census Clerk.....	(\$1400—\$2500)

Name .....  
Address .....

## STOP Tobacco

No human being can escape the harmful effects of tobacco. Don't try to quit without assistance. Let our simple, inexpensive remedy help you. A complete treatment costs but \$2.00. Every penny promptly refunded if you do not get desired results. Ours is a harmless preparation, carefully compounded to overcome the condition, that will make quitting of tobacco pleasant, and easy. It comes with a money back guarantee.

Anti-Tobacco League P. O. Box B-1 OMAHA, NEBR.

**Make \$100 a Week!**

**GET PAID DAILY—EXTRA CASH BONUS**  
I'll give you your own business. Won't cost you a penny. Make big money showing famous all-wool, tailored-to-measure suits, \$25.50 up. Daily commissions, liberal bonus. Super values, guaranteed fit, mean easy orders, steady customers. No experience required. FREE outfit, 500 all-wool fabrics. Union tailoring. Write, give experience and age.

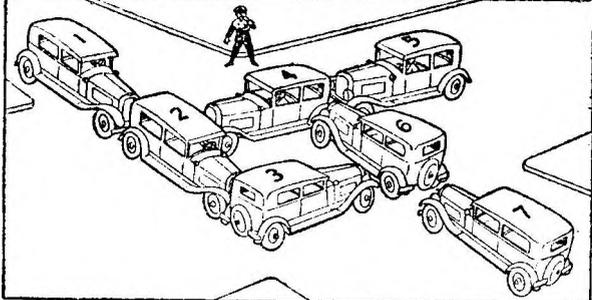
**ALL-WOOL Suits \$23.50**

W. Z. Gibson, Inc., 800 Throop St., Dept. N-476, Chicago

## Win Nash and \$500 or \$1,845 Cash Seven Brand New 6-Cylinder Cars Given

For advertising purposes I am going to give absolutely free a brand new six-cylinder "Special Six" Nash four-door Sedan, an Oldsmobile two-door Sedan, a De Soto two-door Sedan, a Pontiac two-door Sedan, an Essex two-door Sedan, a Whippet two-door Sedan, and a Chevrolet two-door Sedan, all six-cylinder latest model Sedans; also 4 splendid new console type radios, a Victor Orthophonic Victrola and other valuable prizes. Any person living in the United States outside of Chicago may enter an answer to this puzzle except employees of the

**Solve This Traffic Puzzle**



W. D. Boyce Company or members of their families, or winners of automobiles or first prizes in any of our previous offers, or members of their families.

In the picture there are 7 cars in a bad traffic jam. None of them can move forward, for each car is blocked by the one in front of it. One of these cars will have to be backed out. Which one? The traffic policeman seems to be stumped. Can you straighten up this tangle for him? Only one car may be moved backward, and if you pick out the right one, you will see that it is not necessary to back up any of the others. Send the number of the car which when backed out will relieve this traffic tie-up, and if your answer is correct you will be qualified for this opportunity.

**\$500.00 for Promptness** We are not only giving the Sedans, radios and so forth in our big prize list amounting to over \$6,800.00, but we also giving an additional \$500.00 in cash for promptness to the winner of first prize if he or she has been prompt. Thus, the first prize winner will receive the Nash Sedan and \$600.00 in cash, or \$1,845.00. Find the car which when backed out will relieve this traffic tangle and send the number of it in a letter or on a post card, or you can mark the car on the picture and send it to me. Be sure to write or print your name and address plainly. All who answer correctly can share in the prizes or cash. Duplicate prizes paid in case of ties.

ANSWER TODAY. G. W. ALBERTON, Dept. 318, 510 N. Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.

# Who Wants an Auto FREE?

## STUDEBAKER—BUICK—NASH! Your choice!

### OR \$2000.00 CASH

Thousands of dollars in new autos and grand prizes will positively be given free to advertise and make new friends for my firm. Choice of Studebaker or Buick or Nash new 4-door sedan delivered free, or \$2000.00 cash. Also Oldsmobile, Pontiac, Chevrolet, Fords, diamonds, other fine prizes and cash will be given free. No problems to do. No fine writing required. No words to make. No figures to add. Bank guarantees all prizes.

### Pick Your Lucky Star!

All the stars in the circle are exactly alike except one. That star is different to all the others and it may be a lucky star for you. Can you pick it out? If you can, mark the different star and send the circle to me at once along with your name and address. A prompt answer can start you on the way to win the great \$2000.00 free prize.

### BE PROMPT—WIN \$650.00 EXTRA

Someone like you who will write me at once can get \$650.00 cash just for being prompt, so you may thank your lucky stars if you send your answer right off. No risk. Nothing to buy. Nothing hard to do. Over \$7000.00 in valuable prizes will be given free of cost. Send today and I will show you just how you can get your free choice of these splendid new sedans or \$2000.00 cash, without cost or obligation of any kind. All win plan! A reward for everybody! SEND NO MONEY. Answer AT ONCE.

Address GEO. WILSON, DEPT. 25, AUGUSTA, MAINE



### SELL ROSECLIFF SHIRTS

*Make Steady Money*

Showing Samples Men's Shirts Ties, Underwear brings you big cash commissions. One Year Guarantee. No substitutions. Free silk initials. More exclusive Rosecliff features establish leadership. Write for your FREE Outfit NOW!

ROSECLIFF SHIRT CORP.

Dept. K-1

1237 Broadway, N. Y.

*Outfit Free*

**YOUR OWN SHIRTS AND TIES**

## Bladder Sufferers Make Free Test

**S**IMPLE, but amazing, new drugless hygiene for prostate trouble and bladder weakness, recently discovered by an American Scientist, usually stops frequent smarting urination almost over-night. No drugs, no medicine, no application of electricity—absolutely safe and unconditionally guaranteed. Test it for six days FREE. Get results. Already endorsed by physicians. Write at once for FREE illustrated, copyrighted booklet, "Why Many Men Are Old at 40." No obligation. Address W. J. Kirk, 7625 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.



## CORRECT! Your NOSE!

Improve your appearance with the Anita Nose Adjuster. Shapes flesh and cartilage—quickly, safely and painlessly, while you sleep. Results are lasting. Doctors praise it. 68,000 users. Write for 30-Day TRIAL OFFER and FREE BOOKLET.

ANITA INSTITUTE, 154 Anita Bldg., Newark, N. J.

# RUPTURE IS NOT A TEAR

Your physician will tell you that hernia (rupture) is a muscular weakness in the abdominal wall.—Do not be satisfied with merely bracing these weakened muscles, with your condition probably growing worse every day!—Strike at the real cause of the trouble, and

### WHEN—

The weakened muscles recover their strength and elasticity, and—

The unsightly, unnatural protrusion disappears, and—

You recover your vim, vigor and vitality,—your strength and energy,—and you look and feel better in every way,—and your friends notice the difference,—

### THEN—

You'll know your rupture is gone, and You'll know why for almost a quarter of a century numerous sworn statements report complete recovery and freedom from uncomfortable mechanical supports, without delay from work.

### SEND NO MONEY

A Test of the scientific self-treatment mentioned in coupon below is now available to you, whether you are young or old,—man or woman. It costs you nothing to make this test.—For your own good mail the coupon NOW—TODAY.

### FREE TEST COUPON

Plapao Laboratories, 691 Stuart Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

Send me a Free 10 day test supply of the remedial factor Plapao and 49-page illustrated book on Rupture; no charge for this now or later.

Name .....

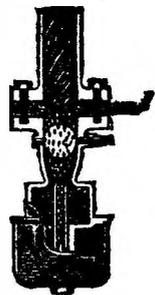
Address .....

## 450 Miles on a Gallon of Gas!

According to a recent article by the president of the world's largest motor research corporation, there is enough energy in a gallon of gasoline if converted 100% in mechanical energy to run a four cylinder car 450 miles.

### NEW GAS SAVING INVENTION ASTONISHES CAR OWNERS

A marvelous device, already installed on thousands of cars, has accomplished wonders in utilizing a portion of this waste energy and is producing mileage tests that seem unbelievable. Not only does it save gasoline, but it also creates more power, gives instant starting, quick pick-up, and eliminates carbon.

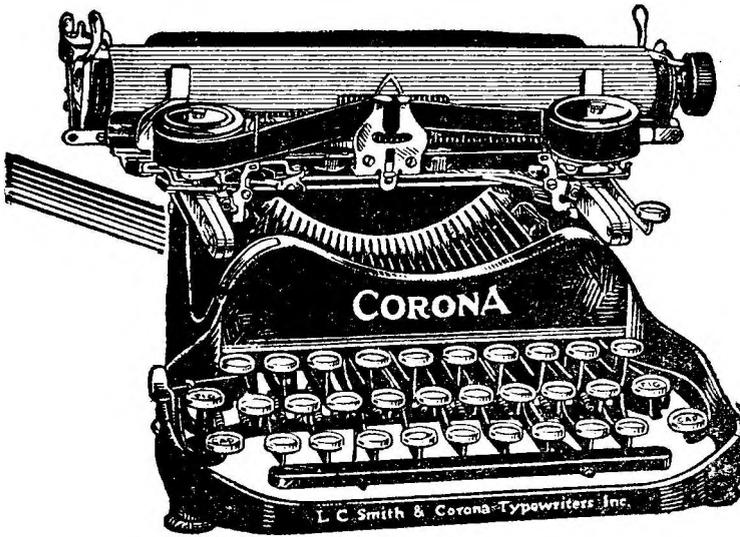


### FREE SAMPLE and \$100 a Week

To obtain national distribution quickly, men are being appointed everywhere to help supply the tremendous demand. Free samples furnished to workers. Write to-day to E. Oliver, Pres., for this free sample and big money making offer.

### WHIRLWIND MFG. CO.

999-86-A Third St., Milwaukee, Wisc.



# BRAND NEW

# CORONA GENUINE Model #3

*Lowest Price — Easiest Terms Ever Offered*



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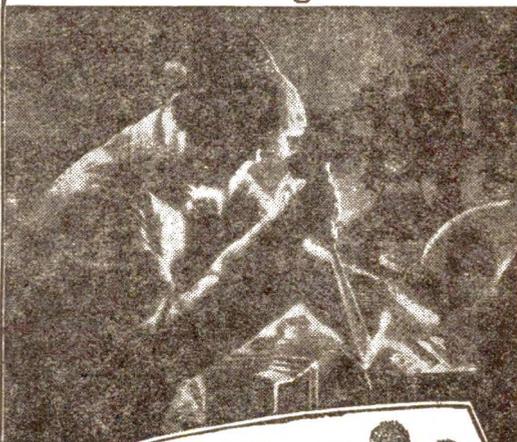
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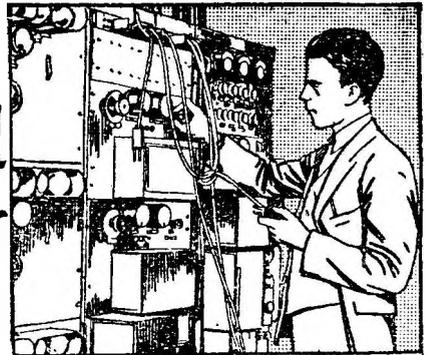
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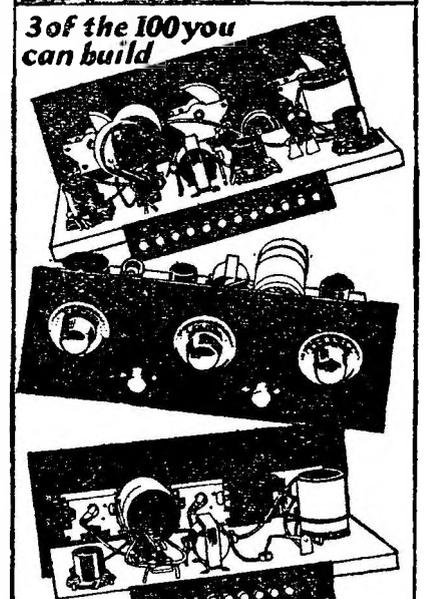
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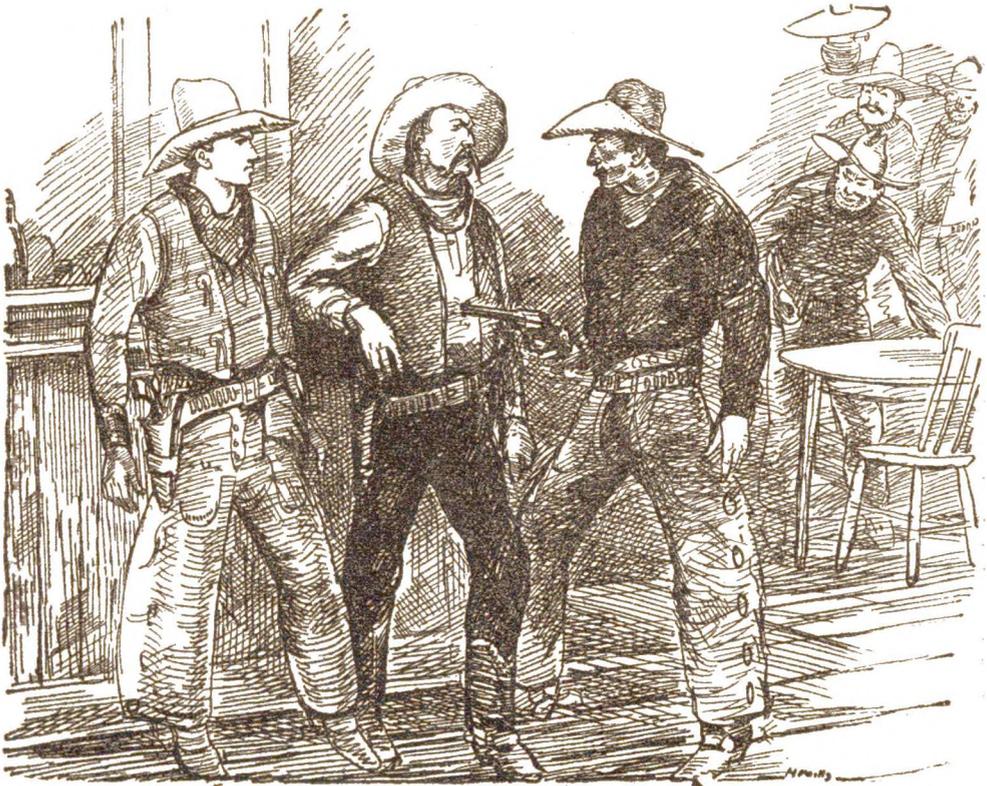
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# Masked Guns

A "Billy West" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Ghost Buckaroo," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE BLACK DOOR.

**T**HE four Circle J men reined abruptly into the knee-high sagebrush at the side of the road. Behind them sounded the tattoo of racing hoofs.

Overtaking the Montana waddies and their Chinese cook, seven shooting, shouting, hat-waving riders spurred.

Dust, churned up by the hoofs of the passing horses, swirled in a choking gray fog around Billy West and his pals.

**WW-1A**

"See yuh later!" the cry wafted back insultingly from the hard-riding strangers.

Six-guns, blazing at the cloudless New Mexican sky, punctuated the promise.

"Yo're danged right yuh will see us! An' when yuh does, I'll——"

Buck Foster broke off his angry threat to cough explosively, as the alkaline dust assailed his throat. The spluttering set the Circle J veteran's drooping grizzled mustache vibrating comically.

Buck fumbled furiously for his gun. But his holster was latched. By the

time he got his smoke pole free and the dust out of his eyes, the strange riders had fled a long way down the road.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" the old-timer ejaculated. "That's the third batch o' crazy-ridin' jaspers what has passed us in the same way."

Sing Lo, astride a small pinto pony, let out a cackle.

"What yuh laffin' at, yuh danged heathen?" Buck swung angrily in his saddle and glared at the cook.

The little Chinaman, expecting some display of anger on the veteran's part, had seen his belated draw and the quivering mustache. Buck and Sing Lo were verbal enemies of the most virulent type, and each was always watching to get something on the other. Down deep in his heart, however, each knew that he would lay down his life for the other if it were ever necessary to do so.

"Mistlee Flostee mustache——" the cook started to explain gravely, but broke off laughing again.

"What about my mustache?" the veteran growled.

That adornment, which, with his ancient bearskin vest, formed his chief source of personal pride, was a touchy subject with Buck.

Sing Lo's slanting almond eyes danced.

"Mustache fly up and down, wiggle-waggle allee same tadpole tails," he declared.

Buck's reaction was instantaneous. Pulling his battered old black hat down low over his shaggy eyebrows, he looked sudden death, while his face turned beet-red.

"Dang yuh, chink!" he snorted.

"What yuh reckon all this ridin' around an' shootin' means, Billy?" Freckle-faced, red-headed, bat-eared Joe Scott halted further hostilities by the question addressed to their young boss.

Billy West—owner of the Circle J spread in Montana—shook his head.

There was not a trace of worry in his lean, bronzed features.

"Reckon these hombres down here is tryin' to ride us?" he answered question with question, watching Buck with amusement in his clear gray eyes.

"If I thought they was, I'd git on the warpath." The veteran took the bait savagely. "If any more o' them mean-ridin' fellers comes t'arin' along, I'll be danged if I gits out o' the road for 'em! I'm goin' to defend my rights on the highway, if I got to plug me a jasper or two."

A stern glance from Billy stifled a fresh cackle from the slant-eyed little Sing Lo.

"Yuh had better keep yore hoglaig harnessed," the young rancher advised Buck. "As long as these hombres down here don't hurt us, I reckon we can leave them alone. We can't afford to let the queer ways o' this country worry us. We ain't tryin' to horn in on trouble. We're buyin' cattle an' aimin' to get out without any argument."

Joe Scott nodded in approval, massaging his beak nose with a thick finger. Sing Lo grinned at Buck. The latter grumbled under his mustache.

"That town of Puerta Negra can't be far," Billy said. "Let's be riding."

Two and two abreast, with Billy and Joe in the lead, they were silent for a while. Speculation as to what might be the attraction ahead could not be silenced permanently, however.

In their turn, the Circle J men were passing dozens of slower moving rigs of all descriptions, all headed in the same direction.

As far as the eye could see through the heat waves on the flat, sage, and cactus-covered mesa, wagons, buckboards, buggies and horsemen moved. The alkali dust rose in long plumes on the windless air.

Women and children, from babies in arms to boys nearly large enough to straddle a pony, peered out at the strangers from some of the vehicles.

Some of the men driving family rigs had honest, dust-grimed faces. Others were leering, hard-looking customers—the sort whom it might be unhealthy to meet in a narrow canyon on a dark night. The most that Billy and his friends received from any one was a curt nod, and a suspicious stare.

“What kin all these folks be headin’ to town for? There must be a thousand in sight.” Joe Scott was the one to break the silence.

“There shore is some big attraction,” Billy agreed.

“Mebbe it’s a hangin’.” Buck spurred forward to crowd into the conversation.

“Hangin’?” the redhead jeered. “Can’t yuh ever git yore mind off some-thin’ violent, yuh danged old walrus?”

“Women and children wouldn’t be going to town to witness a hangin’,” Billy hastened to intervene, before the two cowboys became involved in a hot argument.

“Besides, I don’t allow a hangin’ down here would cause sech onusual excitement,” Joe asserted.

“Mebbe it’s a circus, then,” the veteran grunted, with ruffled dignity.

“Like as not,” the young boss agreed. “Whatever it is, I’m turning off this road for the last time. Here comes another in-a-hurry bunch.”

Spurring behind Billy, the Circle J crew was a couple of hundred yards away when the shooting, howling, dust-raising pack of men passed.

“Waal, I’ll be a horned toad!” Buck tugged his mustache in utter bafflement. “It shore do beat yore hide what all this movin’ means.”

The Circle J owner and his pals did not return to the highway. The baked earth was hard under the horses’ hoofs, so that almost as much speed could be made in the sagebrush as upon the road.

The partners were not in any great hurry. Billy, especially, mounted on his great stallion Danger, could have kept ahead of any of the fast riders if he had cared to do so.

The dry table-land over which they were riding dipped into a dryer valley. The vehicles on the road appeared to drop suddenly out of sight. Two immense boulders formed a natural gateway for the wagon route at the rim. A fringe of stunted, twisted mesquite and prickly pear masked the edge of the plateau.

A few yards from the rim, Billy turned Danger back toward the highway, as the most logical way to descend the hill.

“There’s a trail. There ain’t no use goin’ back to that crowded road,” Joe said, pointing to a narrow opening in the brush.

“I reckon all roads lead to Puerta Negra,” the boss laughed, swerving quickly toward the spot where the trail dropped over the rim.

The sight which greeted the riders was not quite what they expected.

Puerta Negra—the Black Door—sprawled drunkenly upon the rough, furnace-hot floor of the valley. Even from far above them, the houses of the town could be seen to be nothing more than shacks. A few tin roofs reflected the dazzling sunlight back toward the Circle J visitors.

The pattern on which Puerta Negra was laid out was crazy. The lone street—a continuation of the road from the hill—zigzagged along the bed of what at one time had been a stream. Most of the buildings clung to the sides of the arroyo, but a few shanties perched on the hillsides.

Twisting along the rocky floor to the south was a trail from Mexico, only three miles distant. About as far away, the Arizona border was reached by a road ascending the opposite wall of the canyon.

Puerta Negra—the Black Door—had earned its name. As a haven for smugglers, rustlers, killers, and renegades, it was the doorway for mysterious border traffic.

The appearance of the entire valley was parched and brown. If there was

anything green at all down there, it was cactus.

Buying feeder cattle for the Circle J in Montana, Billy West and his pardes had come to this remote corner of New Mexico in response to a letter from an unknown cattleman, Ed Hightower.

Hightower's letter stated that he had a thousand yearling and older steers for sale. The letter inferred that the stock was close to Puerta Negra. But if Hightower—whom none of the Circle J had ever seen—owned ten head of cattle, he would have to pasture them somewhere other than in the valley.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck blinked gravely at the hot hole. "I'll bet even the rattlesnake crawl out o' thar every week end when they needs a vacation from bitin' folks. It'd take a burro a week to git breakfast down thar, an' folks claim them critters kin live on nothin' more'n three blades o' grass an' a pile o' rocks."

"Hightower must have his ranch somewhere else," Billy said.

"Mebbe he lied about havin' all them cattle," Joe suggested.

"Why would he do that?" the young Circle J owner replied. "There would be no object of getting us down here if he didn't have cattle to sell."

The need of paying attention to the trail prevented further conversation. Winding down the cactus-studded hillside, the path was on a steep, narrow shelf. It was flanked by another ledge, higher than a mounted man's head.

The wagon road was quickly out of sight, and the village also vanished, as the trail twisted around a jutting shoulder of the hill.

"This would be a skeery place for a feller to ride on a cloudy night," Joe laughed, with a touch of nervousness in his voice.

Unconsciously all of the riders took firmer holds on their reins. The free hands of the white men snuggled closer to the holsters at their hips. Sing Lo's face was lined with apprehension, but most of his worry was caused by star-

ing at the precipitous drop which a stumbling horse might take.

"Tech sky, hambres!" a nasal voice surprised the Circle J men.

A masked man sat on a dirty-brown Mexican pony, blocking the way where the narrow trail curled around a boulder in the hillside.

Billy West, in the lead of his three companions, stared down the black muzzles of a pair of heavy revolvers.

The eyes of the outlaw were hard and murderous. Although probably an American, the skin visible above his black-handkerchief mask was tanned as brown as a Mexican's. His slouch hat, clothing, and leather chaps were all of that dingy gray which black becomes when it is worn for a long time in the dust and storms of the range.

The Circle J owner recognized the holdup man's crouch as that of a true gunman.

There was small chance, when the fellow already had the drop. Yet Billy's strong hand closed about the butt of his .45. The young rancher was dimly conscious of the weight of the belt, strapped next to his skin and containing several thousand dollars in gold which he had brought down to pay for cattle.

Billy could not give that up without a struggle. The financial security of the Circle J was represented in the money belt.

"Tech sky, pronto!" the highwayman barked, his eyes glittering, as he saw the hesitation written in Billy's face.

The Circle J owner shot through the open bottom leather of his holster when he heard the other's hammers click.

The outlaw's right gun spun into space, hurtled noisily upon the rocks in the canyon below, and exploded harmlessly.

Swearing, the highwayman fanned a bullet from his remaining revolver through the crown of Billy's hat.

The youth, not wishing to risk another shot through his holster, drew and aimed at his opponent's body. The

holdup man did not shoot again. Yellow to the core, he slid from the saddle and sprang behind the boulder.

"Let me git the skunk out, Billy!" Buck puffed.

The veteran and the redhead had their guns out, although they had been kept from shooting by Billy's being between them and the outlaw.

"I'll get him!" the young boss declared, taking aim at the hand and pistol that were slowly snaking out from behind the rock.

"Hold up!" a new voice, clear and vibrant, interrupted the proceedings.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad! Billy, look out above!" Buck yelled.

The young rancher did not need the veteran's cry of warning. He, too, had heard where the words came from.

"The first one of yuh gents who makes a move will get plugged," the speaker warned. "I've got plenty of men with me, besides the one back o' the rock."

Billy, staring upward, saw the bandit on the higher ledge. A slender fellow, of medium height, he was in range clothing as expensive as the silk shirt, soft gray Stetson, and bat-wing chaps of the Circle J owner. Like his partner, the second outlaw wore a black mask which successfully defied identification of his face.

A holster, with its gun sticking out of the leather, hung at his right side. If Billy had had time, he might have noticed that the weapon was unusually far forward.

"If yuh doesn't drap yore guns, I'll drill yuh!" the outlaw gave second warning.

Both of his hands were empty, the right stroking the jaw under the mask, and the left fumbling with a stick pin which was thrust into his tieless shirt front.

He would drill? Perhaps he had men who could, but he could not get his right hand from his chin to his gun before Billy would be able to swing around in his saddle for a quick shot.

A little awkwardly, on account of the position in which he had been trapped, the youth whirled his .45 toward the bandit.

A mocking laugh greeted his ears. Unbelievably he stared at the man on the ledge, and his fingers released their grip on his gun.

The outlaw's left hand, which had been toying innocently with the pin, now held a revolver, aiming directly at Billy's heart. The single holster at his waist was empty.

An ominous click sounded behind the boulder.

"Put up yore gat!" the bandit on the ledge called to his henchman. "Then shake these fellers down quick."

Joe and Buck had been forced to drop their revolvers at the same instant that Billy let go of his.

"Kind o' s'prised yuh with my left-hand draw, didn't I?" the leader laughed. "Didn't think ary feller could cross draw that quick, when he had his holster fixed for his right fist, did yuh?"

The one from whose hand Billy had shot the revolver began to search the victims. The young rancher breathed a sigh of relief when the fellow, in great haste, missed feeling the heavy belt and contented himself with the loose change and bills which he found in the Circle J owner's pockets.

Joe, Buck, and even Sing Lo contributed small amounts to the loot.

"Got everything?" the leader asked.

"Yup," the searcher declared.

"Let's be goin'," the man on the ledge said. "Come on, gang!"

For the first time, Billy and his pals knew that there really had been other outlaws hidden on the upper ledge.

Half a dozen, in masks, appeared at their leader's back.

"Yuh kin go on to town," the victims of the holdup were informed. "We'll probably beat yuh in. Thanks for the loot, gents. See yuh later!"

Running to where their horses were hidden, the outlaws disappeared.

## CHAPTER II.

## RODEO.

**D**ID they get the belt, Billy?" Joe Scott asked in a low voice.

"No, thank Heaven!" Billy West replied. "My pockets are clean, though. Could yuh gents figger out that left-handed cross-draw?"

"I never seen nothin' like it before," the redhead admitted. "I saw cross-draws aplenty, but the gunmen allus wore their holsters so's they'd be handy. This feller had his gun where yuh would of said he couldn't git it quick, except with his right hand."

"He must be ambidextrous," the young boss said thoughtfully.

"Amby what?" Buck Foster exploded. "Thet feller ain't nothin' but plumb pizen. He is what yuh calls a sleight-o'-hand artist. I wouldn't be s'prised if he had a gun in his sleeve all the time, like some o' these gamblin' sharks has aces."

"Hidden gun, nothing," Billy retorted. "His draw was all right. Just too fancy, an' chain lightnin' to boot. I'd shore like to see him pull it again."

"He said, 'See yuh later,'" the walrus-mustached puncher exclaimed. "I shorely hope he keeps his word."

The partners descended the remainder of the winding trail in silence. The sounds of gunfire were continuous, as they rode between the shanties at the edge of Puerta Negra.

The reason for the shooting became apparent when the business section was reached. In the middle of the dusty main street, several gunmen were banging away at tin-can targets.

As the Circle J riders drew near, one fellow—a gaunt, knife-faced man in greasy clothing and hair chaps—kept a can rolling for two hundred yards, shooting first with one hand and then the other.

A cheer went up from the men and boys lining the board sidewalks.

Billy saw a livery stable and feed yard a short distance up the street. He

guided Danger toward it, but reined up in the center of the thoroughfare, as a young man elbowed through the spectators.

Dressed all in black of the finest materials, except for his scarlet-hued silk shirt and bright-yellow scarf, he formed a jaunty and debonair figure. A tiny, stiffly waxed mustache heightened the effect of his sneering, supercilious smile. Eyes as cold as steel flashed.

The Circle J owner stared at the lean, browned face and slim form, as if he thought he recognized their owner. Something about the stranger seemed familiar. But Billy was unable to decide what that something was.

"Make way for the 'Nueces Flash!'" some one shouted.

The crowd parted respectfully and a little fearfully. Laughing, the young man reached the street. The Circle J boss saw the revolver holstered at his slim, black-clothed waist.

"Who's the Nueces Flash?" Billy wondered, and gave a start.

Was that gun slung too far forward? Fixed for a right-hand draw, it was, but—

The eyes of "Slim" Traymore—the Nueces Flash—met those of Billy West for a second. Recognition was not startled in the gunman, however. With a sneer, he turned and regarded the cans at which others had been firing.

A whisper of admiration ran through the crowd. The Nueces Flash was showman as well as gunman.

With arms folded on his chest, he smiled at the crowd on the sidewalks and at the four men of the Circle J.

Barely glancing toward the half dozen cans, lying in the dust some twenty yards distant, he drew his revolver with a speed that made even Billy West gasp.

One after another, the cans danced, as the Flash's bullets struck them. The Circle J owner looked, but saw that the draw and shooting were done with the right hand.

Traymore reloaded, holstered his weapon and glanced at the crowd, waiting for the applause which he knew would come.

The cheering broke like thunder. Words of praise were shouted at the gunman.

Billy frowned, puzzled by such a display of enthusiasm. Almost any good shot could have done to the cans what the Nueces Flash had done.

The young Montanan looked at Buck Foster and Joe Scott. Both, leaning forward in their saddles, were staring fixedly at the gunman's lithe hands and holster. Billy knew that they were watching for the same thing as himself—a left-hand cross draw, such as the holdup man on the hill had used.

The crack of the gun again made the Circle J owner turn. Traymore was splitting silver dollars which he tossed high in the air. Billy had not seen the draw, but the Flash was shooting with his right hand.

The gun empty, Traymore loaded it quickly, while he smiled at the crowd.

"Show us some real tricks, Slim!" voices called.

"I'll show yuh some shootin' from the draw that I don't reckon nobody here can beat," the gunman said.

The visitors from Montana were already turning toward the feed yard, but they halted at the words. Billy found himself staring again into those sneering, laughing eyes of the Nueces Flash.

With a shrug, Traymore dropped the revolver into his holster. Taking a silver dime, he propped it against one of the battered cans and stepped back fifty feet.

A hush fell over the spectators. Although every eye was watching, few saw the gun leap from its holster. Flame spurted so quickly that it seemed the weapon had no time to clear the leather.

"Look for the coin," the Flash ordered, ejecting the empty shell.

"Hit plumb center! Druv cl'ar

through the can!" the first man to the target yelled.

"Can anybody beat that?" the gunman called, challenging the Circle J owner with his eyes. "If they can, I got plenty more tricks that they can't."

Billy rode to the feed yard.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster declared, after their horses had been cared for. "Did yuh ever see a draw an' fire faster'n that, Joe—ceptin' maybe Billy's?"

"Hit the dime plumb center." The redhead nodded. "I allows Billy kin beat that hombre, though."

"Don't bet any money on it," their young employer laughed. "I confess I'd hate to meet that feller in a shootin' match. He's plenty fast. I was sort o' hopin' he was the gent who would pull the left-hand draw."

"Mistle Billy can beat any homblay," Sing Lo asserted, worshiping his boss as a hero.

"Shore, we knows sartain he kin," Buck and Joe both answered.

Billy chuckled.

"Yuh can probably hold to them opinions a long time, boys," he said. "I don't reckon I'm goin' to tangle any with that other hombre. Come on. Let's go find the sheriff an' report that holdup. I'm also gettin' curioser every minute to find what this crowdin' to town is about."

The shooting in the street was still going on. The Circle J partners did not stop to watch it, but inquired from one of the bystanders where the sheriff could be found.

Jim Hardy—a stocky, range-seasoned hombre—was the officer, and an honest one. Ordinarily his round face was genial, but it was creased with wrinkles of worry when Billy led his crew into the office in front of the one-room jail.

"Howdy do." The Circle J boss introduced himself and his companions. "We wants to——"

"Stop right thar, young man." The sheriff held up his hand. "Yuh doesn't

need to tell me no more. Yuh wants to report that yuh been held up."

"Right." Billy grinned. "How'd yuh guess it?"

"Ever'body what has come in to-day has had the same story," Hardy groaned. "Like the police in them big cities say, I got to report that I am workin' on the cases."

"Are yuh making any headway?" the Montanan asked.

"Naw," the officer retorted gloomily. He shot his visitors rapid, appraising glances. "Yuh ain't from these parts, is yuh?"

"Yo're guessin' good to-day." Billy stuck out his hand. "How'd yuh figger that?"

"Yo're too honest lookin'." Hardy's wrinkles were erased by a smile. "Ain't many around here like that."

"What's all the crowd in town for?" Buck cut in, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Rodeo," the sheriff snorted. "Puerta Negra's riproarin', bronc-snortin', gun-shootin' celebration for visitors an' natives commences ter-morrer."

"Tough time, eh?" Billy looked at the officer steadily.

"Tough ain't no name for it." Hardy spread his strong, capable-appearing hands in a dismayed gesture. "Puerta Negra is allus onhealthy. The annual rodeo's the worst time of all. No tellin' how many hombres will die o' lead pizenin' the three days it lasts."

"What about the holdups?" the Circle J owner steered the conversation back to where it had started.

"I can't do nothin'," the sheriff said simply. "The only deputies I can git are crooks. The few honest men—mostly ranchers—around here are scairt to wear badges."

Hardy took out his worn, notched six-gun and spun the chamber thoughtfully.

"I can use yuh fellers, if yuh wants the jobs," he offered.

Buck stepped forward, about to accept on the promise of gun play.

"Thanks," Billy averted the veteran's taking a badge. "We ain't aimin' to mix none in affairs down here. Of course, if a show-down happened when we was around, yuh could count on us to help yuh, sheriff. We don't want no stars. We're goin' to buy some cattle from Ed Hightower an' clear out."

"Ed Hightower!" Hardy's eyes narrowed. "Does yuh know him?"

"Not a-tall," the young man admitted. "I jest got a letter from him, sayin' he had critters for sale."

The sheriff shrugged in dismissal.

"Yo'll likely find Hightower over at Nick Porter's Black Rock Saloon," he said. "I'd like to think I could count on yore help, boys. If yuh needs mine 'fore yuh leaves, yuh will have it."

The crowd in the street had thinned somewhat, although scores of hard-looking, gun-toting men still milled there. Stepping around groups of people and avoiding jostling into any, Billy led the way toward where a big sign proclaimed the Black Rock Saloon.

The place was jammed with men. On gambling tables along the right wall, roulette wheels whirled furiously, dice rattled, and dealers flipped the cards for various games. That the betting was high was evidenced by the huge stacks of chips and money before some of the players—mostly the house men.

In front of the bar was a six-deep row of drinkers. Half a dozen men in beer-spotted white coats set out bottles and glasses and rang up change at a feverish clip.

The interior of the Black Rock Saloon smelled of sweat and liquor, and near the ceiling, the air was blue with smoke.

"Promisin' place," Buck whispered, eying the crowd in front of the mahogany.

Joe Scott said nothing, but Billy noticed the redhead's eyes moving watchfully and his hands hovering near his belt.

Sing Lo stared wistfully at the bottles on the bar. "Tanglefoot"—as

the little Chinaman called whisky—was his weakness, when he could sneak away from Buck's guarding eyes long enough to get it.

"Is Ed Hightower in here?" Billy raised his voice above the medley of other sounds.

Instantly a third of the men in the room turned toward the speaker. Gun hands flexed expectantly. The Circle J owner guessed correctly that the fellows staring at him were all members of the same gang.

Two men, in earnest conversation at the end of the bar, had turned, also.

One—a paunchy, greasy-looking man in a gray sack suit—whispered something.

The other, hands sliding toward the twin holsters at his waist, nodded. The second man appeared to be at least three inches over six feet tall. He was broad in good proportion and as hard as iron. Smooth-shaven, his face was tanned by the sun, although at that moment it was also reddened by whisky. Deep-socketed blue eyes looked black beneath his beetling brows.

"I'm Ed Hightower," he snapped at Billy. "Who wants me?"

"I want to speak to yuh," the Montanan replied. "I'm Billy West, an' these are my pards from the Circle J. I got yore letter about havin' feeders for sale."

Hightower's eyes appeared to leap forward half an inch. He made an offhand remark to the fat man, which Billy could not hear.

Nick Porter, who was the cattleman's companion at the bar, sidled into the crowd. The Circle J owner stepped beside Hightower.

"Did yuh bring the cash tuh buy the critters?" the cattle baron demanded in a low voice.

Hightower's eyes bored as if they would see the loaded money belt beneath Billy's clothing.

The young man nodded.

"I'd like to complete the deal right away," he said.

The cattleman turned away quickly.

"I ain't got time to discuss cattle now," he growled. "Hey, bartender, another glass for this gent!"

"I don't drink," Billy replied. "Why can't yuh talk business now?"

"Got my hands full with other stuff," Hightower replied. "I'm one o' the rodeo judges an' chairman o' the entry committee."

"But——" Billy exclaimed.

"See me after the rodeo," the other cut his protests short.

Billy, at a loss what to do, looked around him. Nick—the greasy saloon owner—was circulating in the crowd, whispering to various men. These in turn eyed the Circle J owner and his pards.

"The gang on the hill missed the big gravy. He's got cattle money, prob'ly in a belt." were the resort man's words, which the Montanans did not hear.

"Set 'em up on me!" a man coming through the swinging doors yelled.

Billy and his pals turned to see the swaggering, sneering gun dude who had done the fancy shooting in the street.

### CHAPTER III.

#### GUN SMOKE.

TRAYMORE crowded into the space vacated by Billy beside Hightower. The cattle baron greeted the dapper gunman pleasantly.

"Are there any more contestants for the shootin' matches?" the latter asked.

"Yuh an' Joe Murchison is all," Hightower—chairman of the rodeo entry committee—replied. "Joe's liable to give yuh a run for yore money, Slim."

The gunman shrugged.

"Thet string bean in the curly chaps," he sneered. "Does yuh think he or any other hombre around here can give me a run for the money? Joe can't do nothin', 'cept to make them cans dance out in the street. These here rodeo six-gun contests won't be nothin' but exhibitions, with me doin' all the exhibitin'."

The cattleman grinned.

"I knows that, Flash," he said in a low voice. "Joe Murchison or any other hombre ain't got the ghost of a show against yuh. But yore reputation is makin' it hard to git any bets against yuh. I wish there was some gun slick who the suckers would sure 'nough rally round. Course, there'll be two or three o' them greasers up ter-morrer, an' one or two o' the local boys may git on a last-minute drunk an' enter against yuh. But the suckers won't figger none o' them actual competition against yuh. What we needs in the six-gun shootin' is——"

Traymore pinched his arm.

"Thar's a stranger," the gunman murmured. "Reckon he can shoot?"

"Billy West!" Hightower's eyes lighted with inspiration. "Thet's an idee. Mebbe he'll bet his money on hisself, too. That would be much better than——"

The cattleman did not finish, but winked knowingly at the Nueces Flash. The revolver expert laughed and twirled the points of his tiny waxed mustache.

"Send Nick over here," Hightower ordered. "Yuh might circulate among the boys yoreself, too. Tell 'em they've got ter force Billy West into the shoot-in' somehow."

The portly saloon owner and the cattle baron were soon in whispered conversation again. Traymore, weaving along the crowded bar, spoke softly, first to one man and then another. Nick Porter left Hightower's side and worked through the throng toward the gunman.

"Give me a drink!" Buck Foster spied an opening at the bar and jumped into the place before Billy or Joe Scott could stop him.

The bartender was busy, and the impatient Circle J veteran pounded his fist on the mahogany.

"Hurry up!" he puffed through his mustache.

The man on Buck's right happened to

be one of those to whom the Nueces Flash had whispered.

In a second, the Circle J veteran was the object of an abusive verbal attack, the intention of which was to draw Billy and Joe.

"What's yore hurry, old man? Scairt yo'll die 'fore yuh has time ter git a drink?" the man next to Buck said insultingly.

"Why, yuh measly——"

The Montana waddy, although the storms of many years had weathered his brow, was ready to fight at the hint that he was getting old.

"Don't call names, stranger," the Puerta Negra man next to Buck said. "It ain't healthy down hyar. Whar yuh from?"

Billy and Joe saw that the gangster had a gun nudging Buck's abdomen. But they did not interfere. The chance of the veteran's getting shot was remote, they knew. And secretly they were a little amused at Buck's being called when he so rudely demanded a drink.

"I'm from Montany." The puncher puffed up like an angry toad, but he was too smart to go for his own gun.

"Yeah," sneered the other man.

"Yo're danged right!" Buck was snorting wrathfully. "An' in case yuh never heard it, Montany is the place whar they grows *men*."

"Is yuh a specimen?" the gangster drawled. "I bet yuh claims yuh is a cowpoke, too. If yuh comes from the country whar they grows men, whyn't yuh enter some o' the rodeo events an' try ter show us somethin'? Mebbe yore pals would like to help yuh."

The Circle J veteran was too blazing mad to speak for a short time.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he spluttered at last. "I reckon I could show yuh jaspers down hyar a trick or two, especially shootin'. Has yuh got some six-gun matches in yore rodeo? If yuh has, I'll enter."

Buck felt a punch in his back. He turned and looked into Billy's eyes.

"Did yuh hear this hombre insultin' me?" the grizzled cowboy demanded. "Billy, I'm a-goin' to enter every event o' this hyar rodeo an' show this country what a real he-puncher is like!"

"No, yo're not," the young Circle J owner contradicted. "We came down here on business, not to take part in a fool rodeo. Besides, the gun-fannin' contest—the one yo're most keen to enter—is the one yuh would be sartain to lose."

Buck turned the color of a beet. He was about to insist that Billy let him enter, if not the shooting matches, some of the other events.

Before he could speak, the gangster who had been taunting him turned his insults upon the Circle J owner.

"Mebbe yuh would like ter take the ol' man's place," he sneered. "I jedge yo're from Montaner, too, sence yo're trailin' with 'Walrus-whiskers.' We ain't never seen none o' yuh Montaner he-men perform down hyar, an' we're powerful keen to witness sech."

Billy did not deign to reply. The young man well knew the trouble which might result if he permitted the Puerta Negrán's words to get under his hide. Seizing Buck by the arm, he started dragging him away from the untouched liquor on the bar.

"Cowards!" the gangster ripped out the insult.

Billy stiffened as if pricked with the point of a knife. But a quick glance told him that it would be folly to go for his gun. In a few seconds, the Circle J owner, Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo were the center of a circle of heckling men.

Hightower's strategy was simple. Figuring that Billy West would not enter the rodeo six-gun contests under ordinary-circumstances, the youth was to be badgered, in the hope that he would become angry enough to put his name down.

The cattleman took no part in the process, however. Standing with his back to the bar rail, he smiled tolerantly at the Circle J men.

"What yuh wear six-guns for, if yo're scairt to shoot 'em?" the Nueces Flash gibed. "O' course, if yo're scairt o' me——"

Buck Foster grunted.

"Billy," he groaned, "are yuh goin' to stand them insults?"

In an instant, the veteran would have gone for his own revolver. Then there would have been trouble.

"Get out of here!" the Circle J owner ordered, shoving his companions toward the door.

Hoots and jeers followed them, as they reached the street. Billy's lips were set in a grim line, which showed the fight that he was having with himself to keep from calling the insults.

Joe Scott likewise looked to be having trouble controlling his wrath. Sing Lo slouched along nervously.

"We'll look this town over," the boss of Circle J said. "Remember, all of yuh, we've got business to tend to. We've got to dodge trouble."

Pretty glum over the outlook, Billy and his pards set out to see the sights of the small town.

Aside from the necessary general-merchandise and hardware stores, the business houses consisted solely of saloons, gambling joints, a shooting gallery, and one hotel.

At the last place, the Circle J boss arranged for rooms, selecting for himself one on the second floor, facing the street across which was the shooting gallery, owned by Traymore.

After engaging the rooms, the companions continued their round of the town. The street was more jammed than ever, as the people of the surrounding country continually arrived. Mingling with the ranchers, renegades, and rustlers were hundreds of Mexicans, who had come up from below the border.

Even the Mexicans seemed to have plenty of money to spend, and bets on the various rodeo events were being made on every side.

Billy, Buck, and Joe saw all of the

saloons and gambling places, but tarried in none. While the other resorts had their quotas of the population, Porter's Black Rock Saloon, as rodeo headquarters, was the center of the town's activity.

Not wishing to sit in their hotel rooms, the Circle J men eventually turned back toward the place where they had been heckled.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck exclaimed, as they strolled along the street. "What's become of the heathen?"

Billy and Joe were surprised. In their inspection of the sights of Puerta Negra, they had supposed that the little cook was trailing along with them. It was easy to guess where Sing Lo had vanished to. He had a habit of sneaking off when he thought he had a chance to imbibe some tanglefoot.

"If that slant-eyed little heathen is drunk, I'll l'arn him a lesson this time for shore!" Buck promised wrathfully. "Why, I ain't even had a drink myself sence I hit this burg."

As they reëntered the door of the Black Rock, the three Circle J waddies heard a clamor of voices, a piercing scream, and laughter.

Billy hesitated in the doorway. A group of the saloon hangers-on were tormenting somebody or something, but the Circle J owner could not see the victim.

Another shriek resounded.

"Stand him up an' buy him another drink 'fore he dies o' fright," a gangster said gruffly.

"I'd like ter treat the rest o' thet Montaner outfit the same way," another declared. "We'll do it, too, before——"

"Ou-oo!" a little tipsy from the drinks which had been given him, and frightened for his life, Sing Lo wailed again.

Then, with the sudden strength that only intense fear can give, the little Chinaman struggled out of the grasp of the bunch that had been brutally pinching, kicking, and mauling him.

"Mistle Billy!" Sing Lo caught sight of his boss and ran toward him.

The torturers plunged in pursuit, but brought up, snarling, as they saw the Chinaman's protectors.

Billy, legs planted well apart, looped his thumbs over his cartridge belt. Buck and Joe, hands near their guns, were behind the Circle J owner. Sing Lo, bruised and battered almost beyond recognition, reached the rear and cowered just back of the veteran.

"Thar's the skunks now—blasted cowards!" one of the gangsters snarled. "Le's t'ar 'em ter pieces!"

Like one man, the ugly crew moved toward the Circle J men.

"Keep back!" Billy warned.

A roar of angry voices came from the gangsters.

The Circle J owner drew his gun with a lightning movement.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "I'll shoot!"

The mob halted. Billy, watching carefully, believed that he had them cowed. Backing toward the door, he was holstering his weapon.

One of the gangsters went for his gun without warning. Out of the corner of his eye, the Circle J owner saw the fellow's hand jerk the gun from its holster.

Billy brought his .45 up and fired at the gunman's wrist. Just at the flash of the gun, the mob surged suddenly. Instead of the Montaner's bullet striking the wrist of the gangster, the movement of his fellows threw the man's body into the direct line of the slug.

With a gasp, the gunman sank to the floor with a shot through the abdomen.

The others fell back in panic. Billy looked dazedly at the fallen enemy and at his smoking six-gun.

It had been far from the Circle J owner's intention to shoot to kill, or even seriously wound. As he watched, the life poured from the ugly wound in the gangster's stomach. After a feeble effort to raise his six-gun and fire at Billy, the gunman sank back, dead.

"Hah-hah-hah!" A laugh made the Circle J owner whirl.

His gun covered Traymore. The Nueces Flash had not drawn. He just stood there laughing and sneering into the Circle J owner's face.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### DRIVEN TO ENTER.

**I** SEE yuh does know how to shoot," the slim Texas gunman said.

"That—that was unavoidable." Billy West shuddered, as rough hands dragged the dead man toward the back door of the saloon.

"Yeah?" Traymore sneered. "I seen plenty o' guys kilt like that before."

"Why—ah——" Billy started to defend himself.

But before he could say anything, the hangers-on returned from carrying out the body of the dead man. Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo came in to see what was keeping their leader so long. In a few minutes, the Circle J men were again the center of a heckling mob.

"Whyn't yuh enter our rodeo?" the man who had first drawn Buck into an argument demanded.

"We haven't time," Billy retorted.

"Yuh haven't the sand," the other returned. "Yuh men from Montaner is a bunch o' four-flushers!"

The Circle J owner heard his companions groan at the insult.

"Yeah," the Nueces Flash put in. "Ifn yuh ain't scairt o' gittin' beat, whyn't yuh enter some o' the contests?"

The dapper gunman looked squarely into the eyes of Billy.

"Mister," he went on, "I'd perticularly like yuh to git into the six-gun matches. O' course, I'd beat yuh, but yuh might make things interestin'."

"I allow I might be able to do that." The Montana rancher scowled. "But, Mr. Gunman, we ain't interested in yore rodeo a-tall."

"Yaller!" Traymore spat the epithet in the other's face.

Billy's grip tightened convulsively on

the six-gun which he still held in his hand. It was with difficulty that he kept from shooting the insulting man. But that would have been murder, since the Flash had his gun in his holster.

Billy relaxed the grip on his .45, although his jaw tightened at the same moment.

"Mister"—the Circle J owner's voice was like a lash—"if yuh will go for yore gun, I'll make yuh eat that word 'yaller.' My pards an' me has took all we're goin' to stand off yuh gents."

Traymore made no motion to draw. Leaning back against the bar, he twisted his mustache with the thumbs and forefingers of both hands.

"Make me eat my words," he dared. "I repeats that yuh is yaller—too danged yaller to enter against me in the rodeo."

Billy dropped his weapon into his holster quickly. Then, with a hard right under the chin, he lifted the Nueces Flash clear off the floor.

The slim gunman was not knocked out by the blow, but he wished that he had been. The Montanan, squared off, stood over him, waiting to finish, when Traymore looked up from the floor where he had fallen.

"Had enough?" Billy asked.

The gunman made a motion as if starting to draw his revolver. The act was halted, however. The Flash nodded in acknowledgment that the Circle J owner could claim the victory.

"Now, gentlemen"—Billy turned with a suddenness that made the other gangsters start—"I reckon yuh will have to admit that the man who tackles yore best gunman ain't yaller. However, yo've been bluffin' us to compete in yore rodeo. My pards an' me ain't rodeo performers, an' we've got business to attend to. But I reckon we'll have to take time out to call yore bluff. Buck Foster, Joe Scott, an' me'll enter some o' yore contests, an' yuh can lay odds Montana is going to show this stinkin' border hole a thing or two!"

"I hope yo'll enter the shootin'

matches yoreself," Traymore muttered, fingering his swelling jaw, but winking at the gangsters.

"I will," the Circle J owner replied. "Show us where we can put our names down an' pay our entrance fees."

Ed Hightower, who had been too busy to talk about the cattle deal, stepped forward from his loafing place beside the bar.

"Come right over to the table with me." He seized Billy's elbow and dragged him away. "I'll see that yuh Montana waddies gits entered in all the tough contests yuh wants."

Joe and Buck, with mounting interest, stuck close to their employer.

"Put me down for the whole works, except the milkin' race," the veteran demanded.

"Put Buck Foster down for calf roping; Joe Scott down for the bucking horses; and myself down for the shoot-in' contest," Billy told the cattleman rodeo judge. "Don't pay no attention to what Buck says. Us boys from Montana will enter one class apiece and aim to clean up in it."

The formalities of putting their names down in the rodeo contestants' book were quickly completed. Joe was told to be on hand two hours later when entrants in the bucking-horse competition would draw for their first day's mounts. Billy and Buck were told that drawings would not be held in their classes.

As they turned away from the saloon table, the Circle J owner met Traymore face to face.

"Shootin' against me, huh?" the gunman sneered. "Does yuh think yuh got a chance to beat me?"

"Of course I'll beat yuh," Billy laughed, although his words carried slight conviction.

"I've got plenty o' money says yuh won't," the Flash retorted. "Let's see the color o' yore bank roll."

"I don't bet," the young rancher replied.

"Scairt," Traymore gibed. "Money's

the thing that talks in a thing o' this kind."

Billy felt the weight of the gold-laden belt next to his skin. There was money there—quite a bit of it. But although Billy felt highly confident of winning, he could not afford to wager a penny of the hoard. If that money were lost, the entire financial structure of the Circle J Ranch would be endangered.

"I am not afraid to shoot against yuh, or at yuh, at any time an' any place," Billy told the gunman. "But I don't sling lead for money, even if it's only to bet that I can hit a target. There's a thousand-dollar prize in the six-gun matches, I understand. That'll more than satisfy me. My partners, of course, will draw down the first money in the events they've entered."

"Yaller," the Nueces Flash uttered the fighting word again.

With a cry of rage, the Montana youth swung for him.

"Git yore gun!" Traymore warned, dodging the fist.

Billy saw the other's hand at his holster. Believing that his life was again in danger, the rancher drew his own weapon in a lightninglike flash.

The gun-slick's hand seemed to pause purposefully before it dragged the .45 from its holster. Traymore drew slowly on purpose. He did not want to appear too fast at that stage of the game, since he still hoped to get a bet out of the man from the north.

Billy covered the Nueces Flash, as well as all the other puzzled gangsters who stood around.

"What was the matter with Slim?" was whispered.

"I've got the drop on yuh, Traymore!" the Circle J owner barked. "Put yore gun back in its leather."

The gunman obeyed, smiling sheepishly.

"Yut beat me that time, all right," he said. "Now what will yuh bet?"

Billy nodded to his friends to leave.

"I never bet on a shore thing, Tray-

more," he threw back over his shoulder.

The revolver expert from the Texas country was left uncertain as to how to interpret that. Did Billy West think that he had a sure thing, or were the words a warning against the Flash, who was a sure-shot gambler?

Traymore and Hightower walked off together, after the Circle J men had left the saloon.

"Billy West has got a money belt chuck full o' gold. If he won't bet it, we've got to take it," Nick Porter told the ugly crew which frequented his bar.

## CHAPTER V.

### CROOKED JUDGES.

**T**HE Circle J entrants were greeted by a great round of applause when they entered the arena at the rodeo grounds the following afternoon.

All through the night, while Billy and his companions had been sleeping in their hotel rooms, the word had spread that some one had come who could beat the Nueces Flash at his own game. It was easy to guess that the gangsters themselves had been instrumental in getting the news started.

There were hundreds there outside of the Black Rock gang. They were the ones whom Hightower termed "suckers," and they were ready to bet on any one who appeared to have a fair chance of beating the Texas gun slick. The gangsters—wise guys—had been busy all the morning covering the wagers which had resulted from the knowledge that Billy West was going to compete.

The applause from their backers surprised as well as gratified the Montanans, however, since they did not know of the workings of the gambling ring.

The rodeo grounds were on the southern edge of town. The arena proper was in what had been the old creek bed. Wooden grand stands built against the sides of the hills were

packed to capacity. Fully half of the spectators were Mexicans.

In the narrow valley, there was no room for a circular race track, so that all the racing events would have to be run on a straightaway in front of the bleachers.

The stock pens and chutes filled the space at one end of the grand stands. Billy saw that a rude target range had been constructed against the wall beneath the eastern tier of seats.

"Ladeez an' gents!" The voice of the announcer rolled to the remotest part of the field.

The sweating, puffing cow-town band, which had been blowing discordant notes for half an hour, subsided quickly.

"Ladeez an' gents, the fust event on this afternoon's program of excitin' exhibitions will be bulldoggin'. All the steer wrastlers will kindly move over to the pens."

Event after event, the program dragged through the hot afternoon. The whole list of rodeo thrills was scheduled—horse racing, steer riding, plain and trick roping, fancy riding, wild-cow milking, and others.

Some of the contests were exciting, and some were merely amusing. Enough freak things and accidents occurred to keep the audience keyed up. But the real interest of the spectators, it was obvious, lay in the last three events, in which the three Circle J waddies were conspicuous competitors.

"The single calf-ropin' contest!" the announcer's voice pealed through his megaphone. "The fust contestant in this event will be Buck Foster, o' the Circle J spread in Montaner. Give the visitor a hand, folks!"

Cheers roared from a thousand throats. Buck, twirling his rope around his head, spurred his horse, as a wiry Mexican calf shot out of the chute.

The little critter headed for the center of the arena, with the Circle J veteran gaining on it at every jump.

"Clatch 'em, Mistlec Buck!" the

voice of Sing Lo piped out of the hush that had fallen over the grand stands.

The calf broke as its pursuer came near. Running at right angles to the right, the critter sought to escape.

Buck's lariat whipped once more around his head. Then, from a quick, shoulder-high cast, the loop shot out, straight for the calf's forefeet.

With a crack like a pistol shot, the rope tautened. The calf spun heels over head, landing with a jar that left it breathless for a second.

Before the animal was struggling, the Circle J veteran was out of his saddle and dashing toward it. Throwing himself on top of the calf, Buck pigged its legs, stood up and swept off his hat in a bow toward the judges' stand.

"Sixteen seconds!" the announcer sang out, after a confab with the time-keeper.

The spectators gasped. Buck grinned. Sixteen seconds was championship time.

"Whoopee!" Sing Lo, perched on a front seat on the east side, screamed.

Another calf was coming from the chute, with a rider in hot pursuit. Buck cut his animal's legs free and drove it out of the way.

The second man took eighteen seconds to rope and tie his critter. Several others were slower by varying numbers of seconds.

"I knowed none o' them could tie me," the Circle J veteran bragged to Joe, as he waited for the announcer to shout his name as the winner.

Something delayed the judges' decision. Sheriff Hardy could be seen in furious argument with Hightower and Porter. After several minutes, during which the audience wondered what was going on, the sheriff was seen to give up. He moved his seat farther away from the others and stared angrily down into the arena dust.

The other two judges talked to the announcer. After a pause, in which his face seemed to register amazement, the latter official lifted his megaphone.

"Ladeez an' gents!" he cried. "Announcin' the winner o' the calf-ropin' contest——"

Buck stiffened in pleasurable anticipation of hearing his own name called.

"Red' Riley, o' Puerta Negra!" the announcer surprised every one. Then, knowing that some explanation was necessary, he continued: "The first roper—Buck Foster, of Montaner—was disqualified by attachin' his loop to his critter's front legs. Although Foster made the remarkable time o' sixteen seconds, two of the three judges has ruled that the laws o' this meet calls for calf ropin' only by the hind legs, or round the neck."

"The dirty polecats!" Buck started toward the judges' stand. "They never told me nothin' about their rules. I'll be a horned toad, Joe! Did yuh ever hear anythin' like that?"

A murmur of dissatisfaction over the ruling arose in the grand stands. Billy caught the irate veteran halfway across the arena.

"Let it go for now, Buck!" the young rancher cried. "Sheriff Hardy's all right, but yuh can't argue with them other two crooks."

"But, Billy——" Buck growled like an enraged animal.

"The buckin' contests are now startin'," came from the megaphone. "'Bo' Martin, o' the Snake Ranch east o' Puerta Negra, first up on Midnight."

Billy and Buck raced for cover, as a snorting, squealing, outlaw black bronc plunged from the chute with a man on its back.

Five bronc peelers gave their shows before Joe Scott's turn came. All but one of the Puerta Negra riders had kept their seats without pulling leather or showing daylight. A couple, in the opinion of most of the spectators, had not raked their horses hard enough.

"Joe Scott, another waddy from Montaner, on Sudden Death!" the announcer bellowed.

The redhead had drawn the worst

horse of the bunch, and every one present except himself, Billy, Buck, and Sing Lo knew it. Sudden Death was a giant bay which had never been ridden, although years of trying had given it an education surpassing that of most of the riders.

The horse was dynamite, lightning, cyclone, and a bone-breaking machine all rolled into one. In the rodeo of the previous year, Sudden Death had killed two men.

Joe raked the creature from shoulder to flank, as it plunged out of the chute. The stands cheered wildly. In the middle of a straight jump, Sudden Death seemed to prick up his ears and listen. It was as if he knew the rodeo game and was determined to do his part to make the show worth while.

Gluing his knees to the beast's sides, the redhead went through a ride that would have hurled another bronc peeler off immediately.

Sudden Death was one of those horses which know all the tricks and which can change from one type of bucking to another without stopping to think about it.

Joe endured crow-hopping clear across the arena and raked the bronc at every leap. The audience was on its feet, yelling lustily.

Like a spinning top, Sudden Death whirled and started back toward the chutes. Then he was sunfishing. But that only lasted a few seconds, and he danced around on his hind legs, forefeet pawing the air.

The red-headed rider, flapping his hat and roweling deeply, managed to get the brute's head down again. Threading its nose between its fetlocks, the horse went into a series of running bucks which carried it in a circle around the arena.

The crowd whooped. Joe, with face drawn from the torture that he was already undergoing, raked his rowels the length of the animal again.

With one of his lightning changes of

form, Sudden Death went into straight up-and-down leaping. The beast's stiff legs struck the ground like pile drivers.

The redhead's legs felt like nothing at all; his head was a throbbing mass of pain; his backbone felt as if it would snap at every blow, and crimson showed on his mouth and ears.

But he rode to the finish.

The gun exploded, and Joe slumped in his saddle. He did not hear the stands wildly cheering his name.

Billy helped him out of the saddle, while other men held the outlaw's head.

"Guess I gave 'em a ride the judges won't dare throw me out for, huh?" the redhead sighed, blissfully passing out of the picture.

Warned by the previous hissing of the audience, the two crooked judges did not dare make another raw ruling that afternoon, although they should have liked to bar Joe.

Hightower and Porter had not expected Buck and Joe to show much stuff, and the way that they had threatened to carry off the prizes in their classes was upsetting to the gang's plans.

"We'll put the redhead out ter-morrer," the cattleman whispered.

"The final event on this afternoon's program!" the megaphone roared. "The show yo've been waitin' for, ladeez an' gents. Six-gun matches in which Slim Traymore—the Nueces Flash—will meet Billy West—the man killer from Montana!"

The Circle J owner winced at the description of himself, although it seemed to send the spectators into an ecstasy of cheering.

"The other contestants," the announcer went on, when the yells subsided, "will be Joe Murchison, of Puerta Negra, an' Pancho Monterey an' Pedro Pico, both prominent shoot-in' gents from tother side o' the border.

"The contest will consist o' three parts—slow firin' at thirty yards, an' rapid firin' at fifteen yards an' twenty

yards respectively. The rapidity o' the draw will be essential in each o' the rapid-fire classes, the fust feller gittin' into action winnin', pervidin' he hits what he's shootin' at."

Billy knew that he did not need to fear defeat by any but Traymore. Murchison was the knife-faced man who had been making the cans dance in the street when the Circle J crew arrived. Neither of the Mexicans could provide serious competition, as the results of the first slow fire showed.

One of them missed his target completely and was booed out of the arena. The other shot a good inch and a half off center.

Billy shot fourth, after Murchison, who was barely off. The Circle J owner's bullet struck a perfect bull's-eye.

The Nueces Flash stepped into firing position. The cheering which had followed Billy's shot lapsed into a dead hush.

Smiling disdainfully, Traymore shot. Without surprise, he turned on his heel, as he saw his bullet strike even farther away from center than had Murchison's.

The spectators hissed. Billy bit his lip. So, he had been supposed to win the first heat, eh? Well, how about the others?

The Nueces Flash outshot the young man from Montana on the fifteen-yard rapid fire, getting into action a split second quicker. Murchison was left in the cold.

"Win, Mistle Billy!" Sing Lo yelled, as the marksmen moved back for their third distance of twenty yards.

Billy smiled at the chink and tensed himself to be ready to go for the warm gun in his holster.

A shot from the timekeeper was the signal. At the report, the Circle J owner flew into action. His revolver leaped from his holster, and his bullet struck dead center in the target before Traymore pulled the trigger of his six-gun.

The professional gunman glared at

his competitor. The Nueces Flash had not intended to be beaten that time.

Billy grinned and turned toward the judges.

Porter was waving a white paper in front of Sheriff Hardy's face. Apparently the officer did not want to take it, for he shook his head emphatically.

The saloon keeper waved the paper some more, and Hightower got into the argument.

It ended by Hardy's taking the document. He leaped over the railing of the judges' stand and strode to Billy's side.

"I—I—I've got a warrant for yore arrest," the sheriff said apologetically.

"My arrest!" the Circle J youth gasped. "What's the charge?"

"Murder!" Hardy groaned feelingly. "Murder o' 'Rush' Watson—thet feller yuh plugged in the Black Rock."

## CHAPTER VI.

### A LONG SHOT.

**B**UT that killin' was pure self-defense—in fact, accidental. I was shootin' at the feller's wrist. His gang shoved him in the way o' my bullet." Billy told Hardy, a few minutes later.

Without even trying to argue in view of the rodeo throng, the accused youth had accompanied the sheriff to the latter's office.

"I know all about thet shootin' an' that yuh wasn't to blame," Hardy replied. "I kin see through Hightower's an' Porter's scheme to git a complaint ready for me to serve, in case yuh showed the Nueces Flash up. The Black Rock Saloon gang has got thousands o' dollars bet on Traymore, which they aims to win, if they has to put yuh out o' the way to do it."

"Well, what are yuh goin' to do with me?" the Circle J owner asked.

"Me?" The sheriff shrugged. "I aims to git yuh free so's yuh kin go back in that arena ter-morrer an' show the Flash what some real shootin' is."

"The warrant is from the county at-

torney over in another town, isn't it?" Billy queried. "I'm afraid yo'll have a hard time freeing me. Yuh ain't supposed to allow bail on a murder charge, are yuh?"

"That's the law," Hardy admitted. "But in yore case, I'm fergittin' jist what the statutes says. Yo're free now. Bail's done fixed, an' everything."

The grateful Circle J boss gripped the elder man's hand.

"Thanks, Sheriff Hardy!" he cried. "I hope yuh don't get in bad on account of this."

The officer stroked his jaw nervously.

"Mebbe I won't," he declared. "O' course, if Hightower an' Porter keeps ridin' high an' han'some, I'm liable to lose my job. But I got a hunch somethin' is goin' to bust loose around hyar right quick. If it does, them jaspers or me—one or tother—ain't goin' to be worrying what comes o' the sheriff's office."

"Yuh can count on the Circle J for help," Billy said warmly.

"I *am* countin' on yuh," the sheriff replied. "I wish yuh boys would take them stars I offered yuh."

"I refused them once, an' I'm doin' it again." The recent prisoner shook his head. "Me an' my pals don't need badges to make us reliable, sheriff."

Many eyes turned curiously upon the youth from Montana as he walked briskly from Hardy's office to the hotel. The glances of Hightower's "suckers" were admiring, but those of the Black Rock gang were full of surprise and worry.

Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo were waiting anxiously, when Billy reached the hotel.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck growled, when he heard the young boss' story. "They shore doesn't aim to let us Circle J folks do nothin' in this rodeo, does they? I'll bet my hat they rules Joe out ter-morrer."

"After that ride I made to-day?" the redhead, still stiff and sore, retorted. "Say, they can't do it."

"The two crooked judges can do most anything," warned Billy. "We've got to hang close together an' not lose our heads, whatever happens."

After a hurried supper at a lunch counter in one of the saloons, the Circle J men returned to the hotel to turn in. There was a double reason for retiring early. Billy felt that it was not safe to be out on the roaring street that night, and an abundance of rest would put the competitors in trim for the following day's rodeo events.

Billy's front room was about as quiet as a locomotive works. Besides the constant tramp of many boots over the wooden sidewalk and the voices which he heard, a steady fusillade was in progress at Traymore's shooting gallery across the street.

The night was clear, the moon and the giant desert stars turning the landscape silver. Before he blew out his lamp, the Circle J owner stepped to the open window to stretch and look out.

Neither the street nor the shooting gallery was visible, since the roof of the hotel portico cut off the view below Billy's window.

After a few deep lungfuls of the refreshing though heated air, the youth turned back from the opening.

*Rat-a-tat-tat!* The guns at the shooting gallery were in full-throated chorus.

*Zip!* Billy sprang backward and extinguished the light, as a rifle bullet sailed in through the window. So close was the shot that the youth felt the air fanned by its passing.

No second bullet came, and the Circle J owner crawled forward in the darkness. He peered cautiously over the sill.

At first, Billy felt certain that the shot must have come from one of the guns of the shooting gallery. Then he realized that could not be, since the veranda roof cut off the cut in that direction. If not from the gallery, where, then?

"From some place close by," the young Montanan answered the ques-

tion. "Whoever tried to shoot me figured on the guns in Traymore's shooting gallery masking the sound of his shot. In any other place, at any other time, a feller could count on a shot causing some excitement. But around here, if anybody noticed the report of the shot at me, they would say it was just the shootin' gallery."

Billy gazed out for several minutes.

"Why," he declared finally, "the shot couldn't have come from the street level at all. At no place down there could an attacker get a view of my window. The shooter would have to hide in that second story over the shootin' gallery, I reckon."

He ran down the hallway to the room where Buck and Joe were sleeping. The veteran snored with an open-and-shut motion of his mouth so that his mustache ruffled with every exhalation of breath.

"Get up!" Billy shook his pals.

The pair came awake, startled.

"What's up, Billy?" the redhead demanded.

"Not so much," the boss replied. "I been gettin' shot at. Now I want yuh to go with me. We're goin' to carry this here battle we stumbled into right over to the enemy."

"That's the stuff I likes to hear!" the Circle J veteran cried, climbing into his trousers and looking for his belt and holster.

A few moments later, Billy led his friends across the crowded street and up the dark stairs to the floor above the shooting gallery.

The building was not deep. The upstairs part consisted of but two rooms, which the Nueces Flash used for combined living quarters and office. A door blocked the head of the steps.

The Circle J owner halted, with his hand on the knob. From the other side of the door came the sounds of men's voices and laughter. Hightower's rumble mingled with the rest.

The cattlemen asked a question:

"Did yuh git that egg, Murchison?"

"Yeah," the gunman answered. "I seen him stumble back out o' the winder. Then the light went out. Reckon he falled against it an' knocked it out."

"Mebbe he blew the light out," Hightower retorted. "Like as not yuh never hit him a-tall."

"I couldn't miss, shootin' from this winder," Billy's attacker declared. "I'm willin' to bet——"

Billy turned the knob. To his surprise, the door gave before his push.

"I'm callin' that one bet, hombre!" he stated, springing into the lighted room.

Hightower, Porter, Traymore, and half a dozen gangsters—including the gunman, Murchison—sprang around to face the speaker.

"Up with yore hands, gents!" the Circle J owner barked. "Joe an' Buck, if yuh sees any o' these hombres tryin' to draw, shoot to kill them—the dirty skunks!"

None of the crooks attempted to go for his gun, seeing that they were already covered by the three weapons in the Montanans' hands.

Billy gazed about him at the rudely furnished room and the heavily curtained window from which Murchison had shot.

The young Montanan fixed his eyes upon Hightower's, and the cattle baron flushed under his coat of tan.

"When are yuh ready to talk about cattle?" Billy demanded.

"Er—yeah—any time." The big man licked his lips dryly.

"All right." Billy was jeering now. "Yuh will talk about 'em when I'm ready, I guess. That ain't my business over here to-night. I come to warn yuh to lay off us Circle J men. Any more shots at me, and I'm going to start shootin' back."

"Did somebody shoot at yuh?" Hightower asked.

"Yuh know danged well they did!" the Circle J owner replied, and whirled upon Murchison. "As for yuh, yuh dirty back-shootin' skunk, I intends to

see that yuh pays, along with all the rest of yore crooked gamblers and thugs!"

The knife-faced gunman was speechless. Traymore, sensing that the gang's superior numbers offset the advantage of the guns already in the visitors' hands, broke the tension.

"Say," he sneered at Billy, "go peddle yore papers some place else. This hyar is a business meetin'. Yo're crazy, if yuh thinks anybody would bother to shoot at yuh."

"But I heard Murchison telling about the shootin' when I came up the stairs," the Montanan asserted.

"Yore ears must have deceived yuh," the Flash retorted. "We ain't lookin' for trouble with yuh. But if yuh wants some, yuh shorely come to the right place to git it. Us men o' Puerta Negra will ride yuh out on a rail, pervidin' we don't fill yuh so full o' lead that yuh can't go at all."

The gunman's speech was little better than a dare to Billy to shoot. A shot then might have settled the entire affair. But it was not the Circle J owner's way to shoot a man upon whom he already had the drop.

Realizing that the visit had accomplished nothing—perhaps done actual harm—Billy and his pals backed down the stairs.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE PLOTTERS.

FOR several minutes after the departure of the Circle J men, the crooks in the little upstairs rooms were busy, each with his own thoughts.

Hightower broke the silence.

"Go on with the plan yuh was outlinin', Nick. It listens purty good to me."

"Yuh heard most of it 'fore them Montaner jaspers busted in," the saloon owner replied. "My scheme is shore to do the work, in case Slim falls down on us again."

The Nueces Flash swore.

"I never fell down on yuh," he de-

clared. "I explained why I lost that last match this afternoon. My front sight snagged on a flap o' holster leather when I drewed."

"Smart, gunmen don't have loose flaps hangin' around to snag their sights." The greasy Nick tore the alibi to pieces. "Why, slow as yuh was, even Murch could of outdrawed yuh. Yo're supposed to be the best gun slick what ever hit Puerta Negra, but yuh didn't show it this afternoon."

Traymore's rather good-looking face was twisted into a bestial grimace. The points of his tiny waxed mustache danced with indignation.

"Yuh knows danged well I'm the best gunman yuh ever saw!" he retorted angrily. "A feller mebber can't win ever' time. But I can beat that Billy West hombre nine times out o' ten, with either hand. I don't need no help from yuh."

Hightower coughed.

"Don't git on yore high horse, Slim," he warned.

"What'll yuh do?" The Flash's right hand stole toward his holster. "Yuh doesn't think yuh can beat *me* to the draw, does yuh?"

"I don't need to." The cattleman shrugged. "The draw which yuh brags about won't do yuh much good, if I tells the bunch to gang yuh."

Traymore realized the truth of that. His hand stopped moving toward the gun.

The Texas gunman had no scruples against resorting to trickery to win, but he had a professional pride which refused to let him see how he could be beaten naturally.

"Anyhow," he declared sullenly, "I repeats that I doesn't need any of yore schemes to help me cop the six-gun matches. Don't yuh worry none about Billy West."

"We ain't goin' to worry, is we, Hightower?" Porter laughed. "Ain't we goin' to perfect all the money we got bet, whether the Flash likes it or not?"

"Yuh can bet we are," the cattleman

asserted. "Listen here, Slim. Yuh might as well git it through yore noodle right now that yuh got to play the game the way we says. We're goin' to fix it so's yuh beats Billy West, whether yuh actually is able to do it or not."

The saloon keeper went on detailing the plan which he had discussed slightly before Billy West and his two partners had climbed the stairs.

Nick spoke in a low, coarse whisper, as if he were afraid of being overheard. All the gangsters, except Traymore, leaned forward to catch every word. The Nueces Flash sneered. Hightower grinned, in greedy anticipation of cleaning those who had bet on the youth from Montana.

"It's a slick stunt," one of the lesser gunmen muttered, when the saloon man had finished. "Who's goin' to do the work?"

Nick looked questioningly at Hightower.

"Murch had better be the one," the cattleman decided. "He's about the best, even if he did miss that rifle shot to-night."

"Some o' the other fellers had better be back thar with guns handy, in case anything should go wrong," the saloon man suggested.

"That's O. K.," Hightower nodded. "But only Murch is to do the work. I ain't scairt o' anything bein' found out. If it was discovered, we could shoot our way out like allus."

"How do I know what's goin' to happen to me when I can't see behind my back?" the Nueces Flash still had one argument.

"We ain't goin' to back-shoot yuh," the cattle baron retorted. "Specially not before all that rodeo crowd. Yuh had better decide that yuh O. K.'s the plan, however."

"All right, go ahead with it." Traymore grinned sourly. "But yuh got to promise yuh won't act unless I can't beat Billy West any other way."

"Shore, yo'll have yore chance," Hightower grunted.

Porter whispered final instructions to Murchison.

"Yuh had better git ever' thing ready to-night," he said. "Git the tools out o' the shed back o' my place."

In a few minutes, the knife-faced gunman and another gangster slipped away.

"Yuh ain't goin' to try to git rid o' West no more, then?" the Nueces Flash asked Hightower. "Yuh ain't goin' ter molest him?"

"Naw," the latter answered. "It'll be a lot better to let him shoot cl'ar through to the finals, long as we knows he can't win."

"What about that money belt? Are yuh droppin' the plan to pinch that? Really goin' to sell him some critters?" the gun slick queried.

"The belt is goin' to be got to-night." Hightower responded. "The order has already been give. As far as sellin' him cattle is concerned, yuh knows danged well I ain't got nary head 'ceptin' them longhorns we been rustlin' below the border. Billy West, I reckon, is too smart not to spot that they're stolen critters."

The Flash yawned, as if the entire conversation bored him.

"I'm goin' to bed," he declared. "I'm warnin' yuh that there will be heck to pay if yuh doesn't give me a chance to defeat West before yuh puts yore scheme into execution."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ROOM PROWLERS.

**B**ILLY WEST did not tarry on the stairs after leaving Traymore's apartment. With his two companions from the Circle J, he passed directly into the noisy street.

"I was going to bed," he said. "But I've changed my mind. I'm going to look up Sheriff Hardy before I turn in. Do yuh two jaspers want to come along?"

"Shore we does, Billy," Buck Foster answered for both himself and Joe

Scott. "What yuh goin' to see the sheriff about?"

"Nothin' in particular," the young boss replied. "Hardy did a darned white thing when he released me to-night. He an' us Circle J men have got to play close together for the next couple days. I want to tell him about the shootin' at me to-night."

The guns in Traymore's gallery were still banging away with unabated clamor, and the street was crowded, despite the lateness of the hour. Puerta Negra, for the duration of the rodeo, was one big carnival.

The saloons and other resorts roared with oaths and laughter. The whirl of roulette wheels and the click of dice were incessant.

Again and again shots rang out which were nowhere near the shooting gallery. Then still forms were carried out from the back doors of resorts.

The sheriff was sitting at the desk in his small office, listening disgustedly to the sounds which poured in through the flimsy walls. He whirled about with a gun in his hand, as Billy and his pals pushed through the door.

"Oh, it's yuh!" Hardy cried in relief, recognizing his late callers. "I was sort of expectin' some other visitors."

"Hightower and Nick Porter, meb-be," the Circle J owner laughed.

"Yo're right." The sheriff frowned. "I imagined I might have a argument on my hands, 'count o' turnin' yuh loose."

"They figure to take care of me themselves, I reckon." Billy dropped into a chair across the desk from the officer. "One of their men shot at me from the room over Traymore's shootin' gallery."

Hardy's frown deepened.

"That was another thing I was afeared of," he sighed. "After I freed yuh, I begun to think I ought to kept yuh in jail to perlect yuh. The Black Rock gang ain't goin' to let yuh compete no more in the rodeo, if they can help it. Hightower, Porter, an' the

rest has got every cent they owns bet on Traymore to win. There's mighty little bet on other events, but the Black Rock gang figgers to cop all the prizes in them, too."

"Somebody will have to do some ridin' to beat me after the way I tamed that Sudden Death hoss," the red-headed puncher cut in.

"Hightower an' Porter will vote agin' me in some rulin' ter-morrer that'll ban yore ride," the sheriff retorted. "West, does yuh know the hombre what shot at yuh?"

"Murchison," Billy replied.

"Are yuh sartain?"

"Absolutely." The youth shrugged. "Joe an' Buck an' me bearded the skunks in the Flash's den a few minutes ago. We heard Murchison tellin' about droppin' me before we busted in."

"I'll arrest the dirty rat!" Hardy sprang from his chair.

"Set down," the Circle J owner commanded. "Yo're——"

"I'll start the clean-up right now!" the officer cried, inspecting the loading of his revolver as he ran toward the door. "I been wantin' to do it a long time."

Billy caught him by the arm.

"Set down," he repeated.

"It ain't jist that yo're liable to become a corpse," the sheriff growled. "I got to think about perlectin' the pore suckers bettin' on yuh. Hightower an' Porter has been ridin' this country a long time, an' they're goin' to strip it, if we don't act quick."

"Arrestin' Murchison now won't do any good," the young Montanan pointed out. "Yuh can't get the others."

Hardy walked back to his chair and dropped down in discouragement.

"That's right," he sighed. "But what am I goin' to do? Thar's a long list o' things I holds the Black Rock gang responsible for, but I can't prove things. Thar's shootin's, an' holdups that——"

"Have yuh got any line on the user

of that left-hand draw yet?" Billy interrupted. "I've got a score to settle with that gent myself, yuh know."

"I ain't got a line on nothin'," the handicapped sheriff admitted sorrowfully. "I can put my finger on the guilty parties in most o' the things, but that's all. I ain't got no idee who the left-handed drawer is, however."

Hardy studied the desk top for a moment, and his next words were a decided surprise to the three Circle J men.

"Yuh had better beat it out o' town," he said.

"What does yuh mean?" Billy gasped.

"The gang is layin' for yuh," the officer answered. "Go for yore own pertection."

A chuckle from Joe Scott startled Hardy.

"Yuh ain't acquainted with Billy West, sheriff," the redhead laughed. "Him an' us waddies with him ain't runnin' jest 'cause some razor-billed hombre with a rifle starts shootin'."

"Yo're danged right we ain't beatin' it!" Buck seconded fiercely. "Is we, Billy?"

"We ain't," the young boss said proudly. "Sheriff Hardy, yore best play is to go ahead for the time bein' like nothin' was happenin'. I'll go on with the rodeo shootin', and I expect to beat the Nueces Flash. If I do, and the other folks take the Black Rock bunch's money, O. K. If trouble is brewin', the rodeo is going to draw it to a head. And yuh can count on us Circle J men to help yuh."

"I should of told yuh at fust that Hightower ain't got no critters to sell yuh, 'ceptin' stolen stuff from the Mexican side," the sheriff asserted.

"I been figgerin' somethin' like that." Billy smiled. "He ain't even got time to talk critters with me. That's on-usual, when he knows I got the cash to buy——"

"Yo've got cash on yuh!" Hardy exclaimed. "In a belt, mebbe? Billy

West, leave the belt in my safe. Yore life ain't worth a plugged nickel if the gang knows yuh got any amount o' money with yuh."

The Circle J owner studied the invitation thoughtfully. Then not because he mistrusted the sheriff, but because he felt unlimited confidence in his own ability, he replied:

"I'd rather wear the belt, thanks. The holdup on the hill missed it. I protected the gold by refusing to bet it. And I reckon us Circle J waddies can guard it better than anybody else can. Good night, sheriff. If I was yuh, I'd let things work themselves out, like I said."

"Good night," Hardy returned gloomily, reaching toward the drawer where he kept his deputies' badges.

"Don't offer them stars again," Billy laughed, herding Buck away from temptation. "But yuh can count on us."

Within a few minutes, the Montanans were back at the hotel.

"Doesn't yuh want one of us to swap beds with yuh, Billy," Joe asked. "In case——"

"I'm not expecting any gangsters to make a try for my money belt." The young rancher grinned away the other's offer. "I'm going to bed in my room and shore enough sleep."

"Be keerful about standin' in front of the light," Buck warned.

"They won't try shootin' through the window a second time," Billy laughed in derision.

Alone in his room, however, Billy did take precautions. He took off his boots in the dark, but crawled into bed with his clothing on, ready to leap out at the first sign of alarm.

His cartridge belt and holster he draped over the back of a chair, but he rested his fingers on the butt of his loaded six-gun, which he placed under the pillow.

The window was a moonlit square. For a good many minutes, the young Circle J owner lay staring at the light patch and listening to the sounds of

revelry that arose from the street below.

Then drowsiness began to steal over him. A few minutes later, he was sleeping soundly.

Billy, although a good sleeper, was one who could leap wide awake on the slightest notice. Even his keen ears, however, failed to catch the sound of the softly opening door.

"Set on his head an' hold his arms. I'll git the belt." With the whisper, two shadows sprang toward the prostrate form on the bed.

"Buck! Joe!" The Circle J owner's thought was to call his pals.

But the man who threw himself on his head muffled the sounds. The same man seized his arms in grips of steel.

Billy felt hands tearing at his shirt. In a second, the cloth had been torn away, and exploring fingers fumbled with the buckles of the money belt.

Billy wrenched his body away, twisting quickly and aiming a kick at the man trying to free the belt.

"Hold him," the fellow snarled. "Can't yuh keep him still?"

"I got his haid an' arms!" The other attacker swore. "Hurry an' git the belt 'fore his friends come."

"They won't come, if yuh keeps him from hollerin'." the first prowler retorted. "Choke the life out o' him, if yuh has to."

The man at his head seemed determined to follow the instructions, and the Circle J owner felt a strong hand shutting off his wind. It would have been wasted effort to try to call for help. In just a few seconds, things would be going black before his eyes.

"Can't yuh git the belt loose?" the strangler demanded.

"Hold yore hosses!" the other gangster growled. "They's more'n one buckle. Thar, I purty near got it."

Billy felt the band around his waist loosening. With a mighty effort, he levered his left elbow under him and threw off the man at his throat. The last buckle of the belt was unfastened.

The Circle J owner doubled his legs suddenly.

"Blast yuh! Hold him!" The lower thug reeled backward from a blow on the knees.

The two shadows dived toward the bed again.

Billy whirled his shoulder away to dodge the strangler. At the same instant, he kicked out and caught the other prowler in the midriff.

"Ow!" the latter groaned, and sank gasping for breath.

The other tore at Billy's throat again. Bringing his gun into action as a club, Billy pounded his assailant's face.

"Got the belt?" the beaten man groaned, backing away.

"No, yore partner hasn't got the belt," the Montanan snapped, flinging the money container to safety behind him. "If yuh jumps me again, I'll shoot yuh!"

The thug leaped toward the bed and stumbled over his companion who was recovering on the floor.

Both bandits were down, crawling toward the patch of light which marked the window.

"Buck! Joe!" Billy bellowed. "Come help me hold these skunks!"

Part of the moonlight was suddenly blotted out. The prowlers crowded and swore at each other as they went through the open window.

The Circle J owner dashed to the opening, calling to the shadows to halt. They were just dropping over the edge of the veranda roof when Billy reached the window.

For a second, he aimed his revolver, then turned away without pulling the trigger. A shot at that angle might hit some innocent person in the street. Besides, the money belt was safe, and that was the important thing.

"Open up, Billy!" Fists pounded on the door, which the thugs had taken pains to relock upon entering the room. "Did yuh call for help, Billy? Has somethin' happened?"

The young rancher stepped over and

turned the key. Guns in hand, and blinking with astonishment, Buck and Joe came in.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" the veteran snorted. "Yuh shore does git all the breaks, Billy. Hyar I been itchin' for a battle, an' it don't look like I ever was goin' to have one!"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE FLASH WINS.

**L**ADEEZ an' gents, owin' to a rulin' by two o' the jedges thet he should of held his left hand down instead of up so high, Joe Scott, of the Circle J in Montaner, forfeits the money!"

It was the second afternoon of the rodeo. As the announcer's words rolled from his megaphone, an electric hush fell over the throng which packed the grand stands. For an instant, it appeared that the crowd would leap the railings and storm the judge's stand.

The hands of the Black Rock gang hovered near their guns.

"Did yuh hear that, Billy?" the red-headed Circle J rider groaned to his boss, who was bending over him.

"Easy." Billy West pressed the other back to the ground. "It was what we expected, remember."

Joe had ridden Lightnin'-rod—a famous outlaw—in such a manner that the judges could not honestly do anything but award him the decision over the other bronc peelers. Therefore, Hightower and Porter, voting against the square-shooting sheriff, had been forced to grasp at the flimsiest pretext to rule him out. The deal which the redhead had received was even more raw than the one by which Buck Foster had lost the calf-roping contest the day before.

"Whoever heard yuh had to hold yore little finger crooked just so?" Joe, bruised from his torturing experience on the outlaw's back, sat up, despite his boss' efforts to make him recline on the ground and rest.

"Ladeez an' gents," the announcer

rumbled on, "in the six-gun matches, thar ain't but two contestants left. The two Mexican entrants was eliminated yestiddy. Murchison withdraws to-day in the face o' the odds. That leaves jist the Nueces Flash an' Billy West, of Montaner, shootin' it out."

The stands rocked with applause at the Circle J owner's name. Leaving Buck Foster and Joe together, Billy strolled confidently across the dusty arena to the shooting range.

The targets, he saw, had been shifted from their position of the day before. At the thirty-yard distance, Billy and Traymore would have to stand with backs a few feet from the wall which formed the lower part of the west grand stand.

"Whoopee!" The slant-eyed Circle J cook's shrill voice could be heard above the others'.

Sing Lo was hanging over the railing of the east stand, watching every move that Billy and the persons about him made.

Traymore, dapper and sneering as usual, strolled up to the line. Few cheers greeted him. He looked back of him once or twice at the blank arena wall, before he drew his gun for the slow fire at thirty yards.

Billy drew his weapon and inspected its cylinder. In the slow fire, he had no doubt that he could strike his bull's-eye dead center. And after the match of the day before, he was confident that he was the Flash's equal in the speed tests.

The professional gunman fired first, leisurely raising his .45 and aiming carefully at the target. Flame spurted from the revolver, and Traymore's bullet pierced the target a sixteenth of an inch too far to the right.

The Flash bit his lip and glanced nervously around at the wall back of him.

"The Flash is on edge about something. His hand was shaking." Billy thought.

The young Montanan did not aim so

long a time as Traymore. But when his gun roared, the leaden slug went straight to its mark.

The rodeo judges, having forsaken their regular stand, grouped around the targets. Sheriff Hardy measured the distance of the bullets from the centers.

"Billy West wins!" he asserted, and Hightower and Porter could not object. "His shot is plumb on. Traymore's is a trifle to the right."

Porter walked past the Nueces Flash. Without halting, the saloon keeper hissed something at the gunman.

Traymore fingered the six-gun trigger nervously and jerked a glance behind him. Hightower was leaning indolently against the arena wall. The big cattleman looked as if he were listening to something.

"Beat the skunks!" The Circle J owner received his own whispered applause from one of the judges, as Hardy passed within a few feet of where he was standing.

The rapid firing at fifteen yards was called.

The two gun hands tensed, waiting for the signal. Billy's face—a little paler than usual because of his excitement—was drawn into square lines of determination. The Nueces Flash, eyes looking slightly away from the target, wore a leer on his sharp features.

*Crash!* The signal gun boomed out.

Like a coiled snake, the Montanan's hand shot downward and came upward with his gun spurting flame.

Billy knew that he had drawn and fired more rapidly than he had ever done before in his life. Of course, at such speed, he did not expect to hit the bull's-eye dead center. No person could hope to do that. A fraction of an inch from the center would not matter. The Nueces Flash could not beat that.

"Huh!" the Circle J owner grunted in amazement.

The three judges ran forward to inspect the targets.

Traymore had bettered Billy's shot. His target was pierced exactly where it

should have been for perfect shooting. The targets being of paper and not backed against anything, the bullet was not visible.

There was no question but that the shooters had shown about the same speed in drawing. The fact that the Flash scored a better bull's-eye was the deciding factor.

A moan of disappointment went up from the spectators when Traymore's name was announced as the winner.

Hightower and Porter smiled at each other and at the Nueces Flash. But the latter answered with a scowl.

"Shoot the same way this time," the saloon keeper whispered a warning to the gunman.

"If Traymore can hit center like that, I've got to sacrifice a tiny bit of speed to do the same, I reckon," Billy muttered to himself.

The marksmen stiffened expectantly for the gun at the third distance—quick firing.

The signal came.

Not knowing what else he could do in the face of the Flash's straight shooting, the Circle J owner made his draw a little slower and his aim a trifle more exact. To the average watcher, the difference in time between Billy's draws would not have been noticeable. But the split fraction of a second was enough to give Traymore the edge.

His gun flashed just ahead of the Circle J youth's. Billy knew that he had permitted the other to beat his draw, although to the audience, the flashes appeared at the same instant.

"I know I hit center," the Montanan peered through the smoke. "Let's see if the Flash could do it twice."

Traymore had. His target, like the Circle J owner's, was pierced perfectly. Hightower and Porter loudly proclaimed that the Nueces Flash had got into action way ahead.

The gunman from Texas had not moved. On sudden impulse, Billy whirled around, expecting to see the gun in his left hand. Only the holdup

man who had used that cross draw could have bested him, the youth from Montana felt. And he wasn't sure that hombre could do it.

Traymore's right hand held his smoking weapon. His lip curled in a sneer at Billy, as he thrust the gun into its holster.

"The Nueces Flash winner!" the announcer bawled. "That makes him an' Billy West even, since the Montaner man took two heats yestiddy. Don't fail to be on hand for the final shootin' ter-morrer, folks."

The second day of the rodeo was past history. Billy walked away from the target range forced to believe the impossible—that any man living could draw so fast and shoot so accurately every time, as the Nueces Flash had done.

Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo fell into line beside their boss as he was going through the gate.

"How did the skunk beat yuh?" the redhead asked.

"I don't know." Billy shook his head wonderingly. "I never saw any man shoot like that. I reckon yuh watched to see that he used his right hand."

"Buck an' me has been watchin' Traymore all the time for that left-handed draw," Joe replied. "We've done decided he ain't the holdup man of the hill."

"I reckon I've just met a better shot than I am," the young Circle J owner sighed.

The eyes of his friends reflected that disbelief.

"Mistlee Billy," Sing Lo put in. "Me think that Tlaymoah fellah win clooked. Me see——"

"Listen to the chink!" Buck Foster growled, tugging at his mustache savagely. "The heathen thinks yuh was crooked out, Billy."

"Me think——" The little cook tried to explain. But the veteran cut him short once more.

"Yuh can't think about things like

this, Sing Lo," Buck asserted. "Leave it to Billy an' Joe an' me. Take a sneak for yoreself. But if I catches yuh tanglin' up with any tanglefoot, I'm goin' to teach yuh a lesson yuh won't never fergit."

Without getting a chance to tell what he thought, the Chinaman fled down the street in advance of his friends. Even the kindly Billy failed at the time to think that Sing Lo might really be on the track of something.

## CHAPTER X.

### GUNS UNMASKED.

THE Circle J owner went to a conference with Sheriff Hardy, but the official failed to have any suspicions regarding the honesty of the afternoon's shooting matches.

"Traymore didn't pull nothin'," he asserted. "I had my eyes on him all the time. Figgered he might start draggin' his gun afore the signal. He never done it, though."

"Shore he was shootin' with his right hand all the time?" Billy West asked.

"Sartain shore." Hardy nodded vigorously. "I reckon yo're on the wrong track, suspectin' the Flash of bein' the holdup."

"I reckon I am." The young Montanan grinned without humor. "But it seems impossible that any man livin' could hit plumb center like the Flash done from a natural draw, if it had speed."

"If yuh doesn't win the finals, West, this hyar country is sunk, account o' the gamblers," the sheriff gloomed.

"And if I do win?" Billy laughed.

"I reckon we'll have our hands full. Thar'll be heck to pay," retorted Hardy.

The third afternoon of the rodeo was hot and sultry. Billy, with Buck Foster and Joe Scott, entered the gate gloomily.

Although he was not one to give up, the Circle J owner had a sense of defeat. He knew that the cards were stacked against him, although he had

no idea of the method of the Black Rock gang.

The grand stands bore a greater load of perspiring humanity than on the two previous days. With the word spread that Billy and the Flash were shooting off a tie, every person who could possibly do so crammed the bleachers.

Billy looked for Sing Lo in his customary seat in the front row. The little Chinaman was not there.

The Circle J owner frowned. The cook, come to think of it, had been strangely missing since Buck had hopped on him the previous afternoon.

Billy began to worry. If he thought that something had happened or was happening to the chink, he would show this town of the Black Door some real shooting. Perhaps the Black Rock thugs had captured Sing Lo and were torturing him as they had done before.

"Ice cream, soda plop, plop clorn! Buy some chewing glum! All flavo's!"

A high-pitched, singsong chant in the stand behind him caused the Circle J owner to turn. There was Sing Lo, in a nearly white coat, vending refreshments to the crowd. The little Chinaman had his wares in a wicker basket, suspended by a leather strap around his neck.

He was so busy taking in money for a few minutes that he did not notice his boss regarding him. Then he looked down.

"Hi, Mistlec Billy!" he shrilled. "How you likem new job?"

"All right," the young rancher laughed in relief. "Take all their change. Sing Lo."

"Basket empty. Got to fillum," the chink informed, diving for the steps and disappearing under the stand.

Billy smiled to himself. It was all right if Sing Lo wanted to peddle refreshments to the crowd. It was just like the little cook, never still a minute.

Billy thought that the Chinaman was a long time returning to his job, however. When Sing Lo did not reappear in the stand, Billy squatted beside the

wall, watching the events which preceded his final matches with the Nueces Flash.

The Circle J owner did not think that the basket of refreshments which the Chinese cook had carried was only a blind. Figuring no other way that he could obtain liberty to walk around through and under the stands, Sing Lo had grabbed at the hawking job, when he would much rather have been out front cheering his boss to victory.

"Mistlec Buck!" The chink caught Buck Foster in a corner by the chute.

"What yuh want?" the veteran growled.

Buck was worried over Billy's contest. He yanked at his walrus mustache feverishly. He did not want to be bothered with any of Sing Lo's capers.

The little cook stood on tiptoe to whisper something in the other's ear.

Buck started back. He stared wide-eyed at Sing Lo, and his mustache ruffled up like the back hairs on a cat.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he declared, with hoarse emphasis.

"Wantem tell Mistlec Billy?" the chink asked.

The veteran weighed the question thoughtfully.

"Naw," he decided. "Leave Billy shoot it out in ignorance. I'll git Joe. The redhead an' me can take care o' the skunks."

"I helpem," Sing Lo said proudly.

"Shore, chink. Yuh got to show us the way." Buck patted the other's shoulder with a heavy hand.

In a few minutes, the pair found Joe Scott, gloomily sitting on the fence and watching the bucking contests from which he had been barred by a fake ruling.

Buck spoke in an undertone. The readhead sprang to the ground, loosening his six-gun in its holster as he leaped.

"Billy West and the Nueces Flash will take their places for slow firin'!" the announcer's voice rang out.

"Come on. We'll have to hurry," Buck growled, running toward the stand on the west.

As on the day before, Hardy, Hightower, and Porter abandoned their judging stand and came over to the target range.

The saloon man muttered something to the Flash, as the two marksmen took their places. The gunman nodded that he understood.

The Circle J owner, although he had every reason to be nervous, feared no man in the slow fire. He shot first, driving his lead exactly through the center of the bull's-eye. Traymore, less shaky than the preceding day, duplicated Billy's performance.

There was not a bit of difference in the marksmanship. Both of the targets were punctured perfectly.

Yet when the judges came out of their huddle, the Nueces Flash was declared the winner.

"I couldn't help it," Sheriff Hardy moaned as he passed Billy. "Hightower an' Porter decided Slim's shot was better'n yo'rn."

"Is it all set?" the Flash murmured to the greasy saloon man.

"Yeah. Shoot jist like yuh did yis-tiddy," Porter whispered in return.

Billy, jaw jutted into a hard block, and Traymore, with a sneer upon his face, stepped into position for the fifteen-yards rapid draw and fire.

The audience was silent, as tense as the marksmen. Too much was at stake for Hightower's "suckers" to cheer. Every eye was upon Billy West, however, and hearts held mute hopes.

"Are yuh ready?" the starter asked.

Both marksmen nodded silently.

*Crash!* The official's gun shattered the stillness.

On the tail of that report came two other roars. Billy and the Nueces Flash peered through their gun smoke at the targets.

The one at which Billy shot was pierced near the center. He had sacrificed a little aim to beat Traymore's

draw. If the Flash had again shot dead center—

The Circle J youth looked to see more than half fearful that the Texas gunman might have duplicated his marksmanship of the day before.

"What?"

Billy's eyes widened in amazement. Traymore's target was not pierced at all. The Flash had shot a clean miss!

The sneer faded from the gunman's face. He glanced quickly at the blank wall behind him, then at the faces of Hightower and Porter.

The two judges licked their lips dryly, with expressions of sudden fear flitting across their eyes.

"What happened to the Flash?" Sheriff Hardy whispered to Billy.

"I don't know," the youth replied dazedly.

"Purty nervous, I'd say," the officer muttered.

At the same moment, Hightower and Porter murmured with Traymore.

"What went wrong?" the Flash demanded.

"Don't know," the saloon man answered. "Yuh got to win on yore own now, Flash."

"I can't beat West!" the gunman groaned.

"Yuh had better," Hightower snarled, fingering the gun at his waist. "Yuh claimed yuh could outshoot him with either hand."

"Whyn't yuh try yore other stunt, Slim?" Porter demanded. "Yuh kin beat him that way."

"Gosh!" The Flash's voice was racked with terror, and he fingered his throat as if suffocating. "It means my neck, or a long stretch in the pen, if I'm caught."

"It means the gang'll fill yuh full o' lead if yuh loses," the cattleman retorted.

The sound of scuffling was heard. Traymore glanced quickly at the arena wall, shuddered and stepped to his firing station.

Billy West did not notice the deft

movement with which the Nueces Flash slid his holster forward. Some of the audience gasped, wondering what the gunman was trying to do. Two of the judges strolled away.

"Are yuh ready?" the starter cried.

"Yeah," the marksmen grunted.

The first gun roared.

Billy West, realizing all that was at stake for the gang-ridden people of Puerta Negra, threw all of the energy and skill that he possessed into the final draw. His six-gun flamed almost before the starter's ceased flashing.

The spectators watching the young Montanan gasped. Few of the eyes had been able to see the lightning leap of the .45 from its holster.

The people with eyes fastened upon the Nueces Flash cried out for another reason.

Understanding the fate in store for him at the hands of the gang if he did not win, Slim Traymore took a desperate chance.

Billy, hearing the two shots blend as one, knew that his record draw had been equaled. Before looking to see where his bullet had gone through the target, he glanced at the Nueces Flash.

"The left-hand draw!" He clutched at Sheriff Hardy's arm.

Quicker than the officer could look, the Texas gunman's left hand dropped his hot gun into the queerly thrust-forward holster.

"Hi, Mistle Billy!" Sing Lo's shrill voice echoed across the tensely still arena.

The Circle J owner's eyes shifted from the Flash to a gap in the arena fence. There, through the opening that they had made by knocking off boards, the Chinaman, Buck Foster, and Joe Scott herded half a dozen men.

The Circle J punchers had their guns trained menacingly on the prisoners. Sing Lo danced back and forth excitedly, shrilling Cantonese at the Black Rock gangsters.

Among the men with their hands above their heads were the knife-faced

Murchison and the fellow who had tried to strangle Billy in the hotel, recognizable because of his battered features.

"Here was why yuh was losin' the shootin' contests, Billy," Joe Scott explained. "They was back o' the wall, underneath the seats. Murchison had a rifle, equipped with a silencer, shootin' through auger holes. That's why Traymore's target was hit plumb center ever' time, no matter how fast he drewed."

"Sing Lo figgered it out," Buck Foster gave credit where credit was due. "Seen a puff o' smoke out o' the wall yistiddy. When we wouldn't listen to his suspicions, he got hisself a job sellin' refreshments so's he could spy the gang out hisself."

The Circle J owner stared in wonder at the smiling little chink. Then he turned, as if to question the Nueces Flash.

Traymore, seeing that the game was up, did not try to conceal his identity as the bandit of the hill. Like a cornered rat, he tried to fight it out.

Billy, drawing at the same time, nevertheless was able to see all of the Flash's movements. By nature ambidextrous, the gunman's left hand had a slight edge over his right when it came to speed.

Palm outward, the left hand gripped the revolver butt. Then, although it looked awkward to a right-handed man, a quick flip of the wrist turned the weapon up and outward. It was hardly a draw in the proper sense of the word, since the hand was not more than an inch away from Traymore's stomach when the trigger finger tightened.

Billy West felt a hot slug graze his left ribs. On the instant, his own gun cracked.

The Nueces Flash let go of his revolver, as the Circle J owner's bullet shattered the bones of his wrist. Then the gunman reeled, staggered and fell back, as the same lead bored into his vital organs.

Swearing with every tortured breath, Traymore was dying slowly.

"Stop 'em! They're gittin' away with the money!" The cry from the grand stands made Billy raise his eyes.

"The skunks! Elopin' with the prize money an' the gate receipts, I bet," Sheriff Hardy yelled beside the Circle J owner, and commenced firing in the direction of the main gate.

Billy, gun still in hand, saw Hightower and Porter, mounted, spurring through the opening. The cattleman had a gunny sack clutched in his arms. The saloon man was pointing a pair of revolvers at the ticket seller and the rodeo-association treasurer.

The young rancher from Montana did not need the sheriff to tell him that Hightower's sack contained money—the receipts of the rodeo and the prize money, including the thousand dollars for which Billy had been shooting.

Buck knelt beside Hardy, raining lead at the retreating horsemen. The shots were going wild, however.

Billy's six-gun rose quickly, blazed twice.

At the first shot, greasy Nick Porter toppled from his saddle, a lifeless heap of flabby flesh. The Circle J owner's second bullet knocked Hightower's horse over. The rancher, with his leg pinned under the saddle, shrieked in pain. He let go of the sack of money, and it rolled to one side.

Some of the gangsters in the stands escaped. Their abrupt departure, on top of the last-minute excitement of the rodeo, threatened to cause a panic among the spectators.

"Set down!" Sheriff Hardy bellowed.

"An' when yuh go, file out easylike. After a successful meet like this, we don't want to end up with a lot o' folks gittin' trampled. I got an important announcement to make."

The officer's words were reassuring. In a few minutes, the crowd began to settle down. Although the rodeo was officially at a close, the spectators kept their seats.

The sheriff walked over to Billy West, seized his hand and raised it high. The Circle J owner was puzzled.

"Folks," Hardy shouted, "as the only votin' jedge left, I reckon it's my duty to announce the winner. I hereby proclaims Billy West, of the Circle J of Montana, not only the best shot what ever hit Puerta Negra, but the finest all-around top-hand waddy in this hyar rodeo! If any o' yuh honest ranchers has got any o' yore cows yuh wants to sell——"

"Whoopee! Yip-ee! Billy West! Three cheers for Billy West and his pals from the Circle J! Cows? Billy West can have the shirts off our backs!"

The grand stands rocked with the tumult.

Tormentin' Sing Lo is plumb risky business fer any hombre if Billy West or Buck Foster is around. An' if they ain't, it's risky enough, anyhow, 'cause thar's never no tellin' what thet tricky little heathen's got up his sleeve. More'n one gent has thought the chink easy pickin', only ter discover all of a sudden thet the Circle J cook kin pull tricks in other things besides cyards. Him an' Buck an' Joe Scott will shore git inter fast action in the next Billy West story thet'll be in WILD WEST WEEKLY soon.





# The Whistlin' Kid's Vigilante Stuff

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid's Christmas Eve," etc.

**T**HE shod feet of the buckskin horse, going on springy pasterns, left trail on the soft sand that filled the floor of the draw, but made no sound.

The "Whistlin' Kid" was not bothering about his sign. He was on his way to a mission, but not yet entered upon it. And he was, as yet, far from any ranch—barely on the open range that started at the foot of the rocky range he had just crossed.

The walls of the draw were uneven. To his left, they rose some fifty feet; to the right, half again that height. The place was in shadow and cool. The Kid was whistling softly, and the higher cliffs reëchoed the melancholy strain—"The Cowboy's Lament."

WW—3A

Not that the Kid was in a despondent mood. There was a mystery to be solved, and he looked forward to it with keen anticipation. The danger that he might encounter only added to its zest. But he was not prepared for the sound that made him rein in the buckskin and stop whistling, listening to the reports of rifles, to the lesser noise of six-guns.

There was something like a miniature battle going on. It seemed to be happening on the high ground to his left. The entrance to the draw had been masked by mesquite. He had seen or heard nothing suspicious there. Now he was well down the gulch, and there was no immediate place where even Speed, the buckskin, could scale the wall.

The Kid did not hesitate. He slid from the saddle and left his mount ground-anchored in the shadow. Speed was used to the noise of guns, to the smell of powder and the whine of flying bullets. But right now he could not be used. The Kid knew he would find him where he left him, and he wanted to know what was going on.

He swiftly selected the best spot for scaling the rocky wall, which was well weathered, with little seams and ledges for hand and footholds. He saw that his holster flap was fastened—in no mind to lose his six-gun in the climb—and went at it, digging in fingers and toes, while scared lizards fled from where they were sunning themselves, and, once, a rattler gave shrill warning from a near-by shelf.

It could not reach the Kid, and he went on, climbing fast, until at last his hands clutched the rim rock, his feet on a jutting mantel of the cliff. The firing was still in full swing. There were several high-powered rifles pumping out their slugs, three or four six-guns in apparent answer.

There were loose boulders along the rim, irregular projections of the cliff itself, good shelter for scouting. The Kid did not see these yet. He set his sombrero on the edge in case he was sighted. It was a good Stetson, but he infinitely preferred a bullet through it rather than his skull.

Nothing happened and he drew himself up and over the ledge, hiding behind the natural rampart. His lips puckered involuntarily at what he beheld, but they gave out no sound as he took in the situation.

Before him there lay a plateau of shale and rock, broken masses scattered on it, fallen perhaps from the range, or left in earlier days by glacial action. Beyond the plateau was a ridge that was sharply cleft by a canyon.

Behind the big boulders lay six punchers, firing at a small shack, sometimes advancing closer. The shack itself was set close to rising ground.

There was no cover near it. The inmates were besieged, getting the worst of it, hemmed in.

The Kid placed it for a line shack of some outfit, built for distance work on the open range to suit the convenience of riders operating too far to reach headquarters. It was built of logs which protected its defenders for the time.

Its door, of planks, was splintered with slugs. The one window was shattered, though it was the only outlet for the bullets of the men inside.

Their six-guns were not of much use. The range was still set for rifles. In the last rush, they might score in a desperate rally, if they were not all killed beforehand. The odds were two to one.

But what made the dark eyes of the Kid widen in astonishment was the sight of the faces of the attackers. They were coal black. Were they Negro punchers? He had seen one or two, but here were six.

His hawklike face grew grim, little muscles set along the lines of his resolute jaw. He saw the black-faced men advance in short rushes. They were beyond the reach of his own six-gun.

Instinctively, his sympathy was with the smaller party. They were getting the worst of it. They could not hold out long. They must be getting short of the ammunition they were practically wasting, though he knew the strain of being shot at without return.

Then he saw something else. The attackers wore gauntlets—on their left hands only. They had stripped their right hands to better manipulate their rifles. And these were brown, tanned with sun, but they were the hands of white men.

There was no doubt now as to the right and wrong of the affair. Honest men did not blacken their faces, daylight or dark. Here, beyond question, were rustlers, caught in a raid by the rightful guardians of the stock, and now resolved on annihilating them.

The Kid went down the cliff as fast as he had come up it, dropping the last fifteen feet to the sand. He was going to take a hand into this. He did not want to return to the head of the draw. That would bring him directly into the line of rifle fire. He had to use strategy. That he was only one man never entered his thoughts.

He knew his own ability to fling lead, once in range. He knew the ability of Speed to dodge, guided by the Kid's knees. And he knew the value of surprise.

He scanned the draw ahead, watching the variation of the outline of the shade on the opposite cliff. There seemed to be an opening, and he caught at mane and saddle horn and swung to leather, as the buckskin whirled.

The opening was not large, but it slanted back at the end, and he thought they could make it. He meant to try. He knew that the six-gun fire was slackening. Either they had emptied their belts, or they were reserving shells for the final encounter—unless one or more of them had been killed.

"Git up there, hawss!"

The buckskin went at it with a rush, the Kid well forward. It dug in with its hind hoofs, and the plate muscles of shoulders and powerful quarters flexed and re-flexed as it mounted in a series of buck jumps, climbed with the agility of a mountain goat. At the top, the Kid slid off, caught at the reins and helped Speed to make the final obstacle, vaulting back to the saddle again instantly.

There was no need to prick the buckskin with steel. Speed was excited, nostrils flaring, breaking into a gallop. The black-faced men were close to the shack now, preparing for a charge, sending in a hail of slugs before they rushed.

Now the Kid saw a seventh man, holding the horses of the rest behind a mammoth boulder. As yet he was himself unseen, weaving his way between the scattering rocks. They might have

screened others besides himself, and this he counted on, with the element of surprise. Rustlers he despised, by nature and profession.

They could fight, but they preferred the advantage. They were men who lacked the honesty of purpose to earn their own living. They were always streaked with debauchery—hard drinkers and gamblers, catering to vicious appetites. Men like that, to the Kid, lacked real nerve. Experience had confirmed this, and he based his chance of success upon it.

They were gathering for the charge when he emerged into the open, Speed at full gallop. The Kid's six-gun was out, poised. He did not think the man with the horses would dare to leave them. There was no time to waste.

"Heyah! Yippee! Come on, boys! We've got 'em!"

He fired a shot, and though it fell short, it startled them. The next would find a mark. Under their blackened skins, they felt the dread of discovery, capture, or death. They saw a rider coming toward them full pelt—heard his yells. It never dawned on them that one man would dare attack so many. The rocks might hide a dozen more.

"Yippee! Cut 'em off from their hawsses!"

It was the final straw. They broke and ran, zigzagging between the boulders that had just now screened their fire on the shack.

The Kid's second shot winged one of them, and he stumbled but gathered himself and ran on, disappearing behind the big mass of granite, mounting in hot haste, racing without a backward glance toward the canyon in the ridge.

## II.

The splintered door of the shack opened as the Kid swung Speed toward it, once more whistling. A tall puncher appeared. One arm hung limp; the sleeve was crimsoned. He stared at the solitary rider.

"Howdy, stranger! You sure come in the nick of time. Rest of you after them skunks?"

"They would be—if there was any rest," said the Kid. "I sort o' horned in on this solo. Figgered it might work."

The man came out, followed by two more, gazing at the Kid with astonishment.

"I'm Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association," explained the Kid briefly. "The local grangers wrote in fer a man."

"They sure sent one! I'm Johnson, of the U Bar U. We were drivin' a herd to rail when those black-faced, black-hearted coyotes cut in on us. Twelve of 'em. Some gone ahead with the steers. Got us unawares. If it hedn't been fer the shack, they'd hev shot us up out of sheer deviltry. Shack's like a sieve from them high-powered rifles. We ain't got a dozen shells left."

"Save yore hawsses?"

"Yep. Took 'em round back. They're all right. We went in the back door. An' we wa'n't expectin' to come out alive."

"Well, they ain't comin' back," said the Kid, looking to where the raiders were hightailing it for the canyon. Its deep shadow swallowed them up. "Kind o' risky goin' after 'em," he said. "But we ought to trail those steers."

"They're beyond trailin' now," said Johnson, turning up his sleeve to expose his wound and bind it up with his neckerchief. "Country on top o' that ridge don't carry sign. They got a long start. We've lost the herd. Second time they've raided us inside the month, the skunks!"

"I reckon we might find some sign," said the Kid, "one way or another."

"Only one way I can see," said Johnson. "They took the steers up the canyon. Time they git 'em to the top there won't be any droppings. We drove 'em five mile' since sunup, anyway. You won't find any sign up there."

"What's more," said a second puncher, short and bow-legged, sandy-haired, with freckles showing through his tan, "they'll post some one in the canyon. It's narrer part way in. You'd never see 'em. They could hold off fifty men. You try an' git up there, an' they'll pot you."

"Top of thet," put in the third rider from the U Bar U, who had a crimson score on his cheek where a bullet had creased it, "if they see us comin', they'll likely come down on us again. We hit one of 'em thet went off with the steers. You hit another. They'll do us in with their rifles against our hawlegs."

"They're more likely to think we've got men posted back of them rocks to do the same to them they figgered on with you," said the Kid. "They're coyotes at heart, an' they're afraid of traps. I reckon you may be right about the sign up on the ridge. It ain't all."

"I don't git you," said Johnson.

"There's more ways than one of findin' out later where they took the steers," said the Kid. "Probable they'll hold 'em there to rebrand. I figger they don't all belong to any one outfit. They'll hurry through the job, doctorin', an' then go back to wherever they hang out."

"An' then what?" asked Johnson sourly. "We figger it's a combine of two or three smaller outfits, one of 'em a hawss ranch. But we ain't got proof. Suspicion don't help none."

"You didn't see the brands on their hawsses?" asked the Kid.

"Too smart fer thet. They black their faces over, an' they daub up the brands with paint or somethin' thet'll wash off easy. We got ter go back an' tell the 'Old Man' we lost the herd. It'll nigh bust the outfit up, with what we lost already. He's in deep with the bank since last year's drought. Lost a big bunch in the spring in a cloudburst. The U Bar U has sure been unlucky."

The Kid was whistling softly and they looked at him uncertainly. He had

saved them, but recovering the herd and finding the rustlers were other matters. The tune he whistled did not raise their spirits. "The Cowboy's Lament" seemed too pat to the occasion.

He was undoubtedly brave, a good rider, quick with his gun; but his face was smooth, though deeply tanned. He was younger than any of them, and he was not their idea of a range detective. There was an air of confidence about him, though a look in his eyes and something in the resolute set of his features that redeemed his youth.

"Suppose you take me to where they cut in on you," he said finally. "I'm pretty good at readin' sign, an' they may hev been more keerless comin'. Might not hev sech handy country to ride over. They'd keep out of sight as much as they could."

"It ain't fur from here," said Johnson. "Lucky fer us it wa'n't."

"You see," said the Kid, "trail like this reads two ways—farrard an' back. Let's see if we can't pick up a back trail. We might hev a surprise party waitin' fer some of 'em, if we hev time an' a little luck. If we git some of 'em, we may locate the rest."

"You'll hev a heck of a time makin' any of 'em squeal if you can't pin anything on 'em. Trailin' 'em back ain't enough. We can't identify 'em with the fellas who took the herd an' shot us up."

But Johnson's face was a little more hopeful. This range dick was resourceful. Neither of the U Bar U men had thought of the back trail.

"I've got a sort of plan thet might work out," said the Kid mildly. "Worth tryin', I guess. How about yore arm, Johnson?"

"It ain't bad. Didn't hit the bone any. I can make out."

They rode to where the raiders had come out of the mesquite to cut the herd of "primes"—thirteen men against three. Evidently the rustlers had no superstition against the number, or did not notice it. The Kid was not super-

stitious himself, but he had an idea that this time the old saying might justify itself.

He studied the confusion of hoof-prints, finding at last where the different parties making up the black-faced band had come in separately. There were five in one group, three in another, and two more couples. They had plainly ridden in to an agreed-on meeting place.

"They'd know of the drive," said Johnson. "You can't keep thet secret. They could watch us start from the hills with glasses. They knew we'd ordered cars at the junction. Easy to git a line on thet. Knew we'd come this way on ercount of water."

"We'll take the five," said the Kid.

They followed him as he led them, whistling—a sure sign, to the intimates who had given him his nickname, that his brain was working out the details of a definite idea.

As he had guessed and hoped, the rustlers had not been very careful of the trail to their meeting place. Sometimes it was lost on stony places, but the Kid set the others to circling, and twice he picked it up by his judgment of the most likely route.

The country was lonely, but they would not have risked being seen and perhaps followed. On the whole, they made good time. No one had trailed them from the gloomy canyon.

The chances were that the raiders would fake the U Bar U brand before they left the steers in some hideout to heal their scars. It was an easy brand to doctor. A few strokes with running irons over wet blankets would change the "U's" to "O's," the "Bar" to "H," "F," "E," or a dozen alternatives.

There were sixty steers. It would take time, even for thirteen men, two of whom were more or less badly wounded.

It was very doubtful if they had a corral in the hideout—anything more than a pocket canyon that could be fenced off. They would have to rope,

throw and tie in the open—hard work for men without remounts, but harder on the horses.

The Kid figured he would have five or six hours leeway. The wounded men might go home; the rest would stay to hustle the job through.

The less often they went to their hideout, the better for their game. They would wash off their disguise before returning and wash the blotched brands from their horses. It was primitive but clever concealment.

Once, the five they were following had come to a creek and ridden in the water. But the Kid found disturbed shingle on a bar that showed the direction, and again they recovered the trail.

The sun was high when Johnson threw up his hand for a halt, calling to the Kid.

"It's a cinch!" he said, excitement showing in his eyes. "I don't mean it's any cinch you can prove it on 'em, but these hombres hev come from Whitney's spread. He's one we've suspected right along. Spends too much loose money fer what his outfit can raise honest. Claims to buy in, to account fer the mixed brands in his tally book. There ain't no other outfit in this direction. It's over thet hawback."

The Kid nodded, still softly whistling. His plan was justified. It still might fail, but he had his own methods—methods that had surprised many rustlers whose brains lacked imagination, never dreaming of modern detective modes applied to cattle stealing.

"Is it far to yore place?" he asked Johnson.

"'Bout six mile'."

"Then you burn leather gittin' there. An' burn it back here with a few punchers thet are handy with their guns. I don't think we'll hev to smoke 'em out, but you can never tell."

"Don't you want two of us along with you?"

"No, I'm goin' in alone. Whitney got a cook?"

"Yep. Chink. A foxy one."

"He'd know you. Won't know me. I'll ride in as a stranger. I can handle him. If he spotted you, he might fix up some sort of warnin'. But I don't care how soon you come back. We ain't got much leeway."

"We can pick up some of the boys on the way," said Johnson. "Won't be any in this time of day. But the 'Old Man' may be there. We'll come a-hustlin'. An' I'll be with 'em," he added. "I'll stick a plaster on this arm. I don't know what yore scheme is, Prentiss, but you've sure called the cards this fur."

He seemed to hope for further information, but the Kid did not enlighten him. He turned the buckskin toward the hogback, still following the sign.

Speed broke into a fox trot. As the others divided, looking for U Bar U punchers circling, cutting out, or riding wire, they heard once more the sound of "The Cowboy's Lament," fading away as the Kid made distance.

### III.

Feng—Chinese cook for the Whitney spread—was a fat and outwardly genial individual, excellent in the kitchen, and generally a man of accomplishments. He knew very well that Whitney and his men were cattle thieves. Such knowledge could hardly be avoided.

Feng in his own country would probably have been a pirate or a bandit. As it was, he was doing better in America. He had made himself so handy to Whitney's gang that, over and above his wages, he got a cut from every deal they put across.

Whitney styled it a present. Feng called it *kums-kaw*, in his own tongue. The wily yellow man changed all into gold, buried it, waiting for the time when he could return to the Flowery Kingdom and live a life of ease and luxury. He was not recognized as an active member of the band. Even if they got into trouble, no one in the cow

country would dream of suspecting a Chinese cook as anything but a steak broiler and pot walloper.

But Feng was useful otherwise. In his sly way, using his limited pidgin English to cover up or deceive, understanding far more than he professed to know, Feng could always be depended upon to talk to strangers who might come along when Whitney and the rest were away on one of their marauding expeditions. He always had a ready alibi. Lying was a very fine art with him.

The outfit did not have to be cautious in front of Feng. Their interests were also his. The main difference between them was that Feng saved his money and they wasted theirs. It was Feng who fixed the mixture of lamp-black and grease that they used instead of masks.

If they came back after nightfall, Feng was always ready with hot grub, with hot water to wash their faces. He had proved his mettle more than once. When two visitors—part of the raiders' band—tried to haze him on one occasion, Feng had made such play with the knives he always kept sharp, neatly set in a wall rack of his own contrivance, that from then on he was treated with respect.

Feng was inclined to be grumpy this morning. He knew Whitney and the others would not be back until late, and he had indulged in a full ration of opium after they left. The fumes were gone, and so was the pleasure of the poppy paradise which he had entered.

The dishes from the early-morning meal were still unwashed, and Feng swore in Cantonese as he contemplated them. Dishwashing was a means to his end, but he did not like it.

He went outside for wood and saw a rider on a buckskin horse coming at a lope toward the ranch. A look of cunning came into his slanting eyes. Not many strangers came to the country. He had heard talk of a range detective's being sent for, and he had al-

ways held a shrewd idea that the rustling game was a risky one.

He had fellow countrymen in the little cow town, running a restaurant and a laundry. They were members of the same tong—the same secret society—and from them he learned all that went on.

Whitney and his men and some of the others of the band were under suspicion. They talked too much, bragged too much when they were drunk, spent too much money. To Feng, they were fools. But he would be in with them until he got his pile.

The man saw him, rode the buckskin round to the back. Feng sized him up more shrewdly than the riders of the U Bar U. He did not despise youth. The newcomer's face was, to Feng, an index of smartness and resolution. The dark eyes were searching; there were good brains in that well-shaped head. He was whistling as he rode up, to all appearances a puncher looking for a meal.

"Whitney in, John?" asked the Kid.

Feng was used to being called "John." All Chinese had that general name in the cow country. He wondered that the puncher was whistling such a melancholy tune.

"No. Boss go. All go on lange. Fixum fence. You savvy Whitney? I no savvy you."

"I wanted to talk with him," said the Kid, carelessly flinging one leg over the horn of his saddle. "Hoped I might catch him in. What's the chance fer chow, John? I'll pay fer it."

He did not underrate Chinamen. He admired their secretive ways of minding their own business. Feng was smart. He would know something of Whitney's affairs. And the Kid wanted to get into the kitchen.

He caught the glitter in Feng's eyes as he spun a silver dollar in the air. A dollar was always a dollar. It meant the value of five in Feng's own land.

"Can do," said Feng. "You wait little time. Got dish to washee."

The Kid was conscious that Feng was not sure of him, on his guard against all strangers. It was not just the dollar that counted. Feng meant to hold him, if possible, until Whitney and his men came back, to see just what he was after. And the Kid was quite willing to stay.

It might be awkward if Whitney and four others came back first before Johnson and the others arrived. It would mean not only danger, but would spoil his plan. Already there was a duel between him and Feng, fencing now with blunted weapons.

The Kid dismounted, hitched Speed in the shade and entered the kitchen, missing nothing. There were many dishes, a big pan of soapy water simmering on the stove.

"Want I should help you wipe, John?" he asked.

"No. Can do. I think mo' better you wait outside. I call you when chow is ready."

The Kid had caught sight of a stack of plates that seemed clean but interested him. Feng picked them up, about to slide them into the pan.

"You must be fussy to wash clean plates," said the Kid, and he saw Feng's black eyes flash between their smoothly hooded lids.

"That my business," Feng replied.

"Mine, too," said the Kid. "You put them down. Don't drop 'em. Put them *down!*"

His gun had flashed from the holster. It menaced Feng's bulky form.

Now the pirate showed in the Chinaman's face. The black eyes held red flame; his face was contorted, fierce. But he obeyed, then backed before the point of the gun to the wall, his hands slowly rising.

With his left hand, the Kid picked up the top plate and turned it over. The bottom had been smoked over a lamp to get a layer of smooth black. Grease had been added. The mess was smeared with finger marks. There were almost a dozen plates in all, fixed with the

make-up that Feng had prepared for the rustlers.

The Kid whistled a few bars softly. He had hoped to find some evidence of the blacking-up, and here it was, even to finger prints. But he was not bothering with those.

"You all same lange dick?" said Feng evilly.

"Wise, ain't you?" answered the Kid. "No wonder you wanted to wash those plates. Kind o' ties you up with what's been goin' on, John."

"I no savvy. My name Feng."

Feng's eyes glittered evilly, but he kept them slitted, watching the Kid, the gun. For all his craft, he had got himself identified with the gang. It had been a mistake to smoke that opium pill before washing up. Even as the vices of the rustlers made them do and say things that led to suspicion, so his own one pet vice had betrayed him.

"I'll hev to stow you away, Feng," said the Kid. "Mebbe you don't savvy, mebbe you do. Suppose you want to talk, mebbe you save yourself plenty trouble."

"No savvy," said Feng stubbornly.

The Kid did not fancy that he would get much out of Feng. Chinamen could be mute under torture. But, later on, he might see the light.

"Hold out yore hands in front of you," the Kid ordered.

He felt in his pocket with one hand and brought out some latigo strips of rawhide. Feng's face was resigned, placid. He brought his hands down, and then, as the Kid holstered his gun for the tying process, the fat Chinaman moved like lightning. He drew a curving butcher knife from the rack behind him almost as swiftly as the Kid could draw his six-gun.

Almost—but not quite. The latigo strip fell to the floor. There was the barking roar of the Kid's weapon and the broken knife shot from Feng's hand even as he lunged. The bullet had struck where steel entered haft. A wisp of smoke trailed from the six-gun.

"Jest fer thet," said the Kid, "you'll line up with the rest. Now you lay down, Feng, or whatever yore name is, flat on the floor, pronto, or I'll put you there, an' there'll be a dead Chinaman to bury. Try an' rip me up, would you? Lay down on yore face, with yore hands back of you this trip."

Raging, Feng knew he was beaten. He had made another error in letting this man inside the house at all. He had seen he was clever. And now he did as he was told.

The Kid marched him with bound hands into an outhouse, made him lie down once more, hog tied him hand and foot, united the bonds with other strips, gagged him, dragged him into a corner and covered him with a litter of odds and ends.

Then he went back to the house and searched it, going now and then to door or window to watch for sky sign. He found nothing incriminating, and he went to the bunk house, bringing back several articles that fitted in with his plan—if Johnson got back in time. Next, he brought straw from the barn, and worked in the open.

He was almost through when he saw dust rising. He stopped whistling. From the direction, it should be Johnson, and from the dust, there were several with him. They came up rapidly, eight in all, including the owner of the U Bar U and punchers from a neighboring outfit that had also suffered depredations from the rustlers, eager to capture them, cold-eyed, stern.

"I'm Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association," said the Kid, addressing the Old Man of the U Bar U. "Here are my credentials. I want it understood that I'm runnin' this. I've got evidence enough to tie up Whitney an' his men, but we got to find out where they planted the herd, likewise the names of the rest of 'em."

"Thet ain't so easy. They ought to be strung up."

"I've thought of thet," said the Kid, and his eyes twinkled. "I've got some-

thin' to show you before I talk. The chink is in cahoots with 'em. I figgered some on havin' him round when they showed up, but he's too dangerous. Tried to knife me. We'll git along without him."

Their eyes widened at the exhibit he showed them.

"What's the idee of *them*?" asked Horton—owner of the stolen herd.

"I'll tell you," said the Kid. "Keep yore eyes peeled fer Whitney, comin' in. We don't want him to see us right off. Now, listen."

#### IV.

Whitney came to the back door, shouting for Feng. He had ridden up with his men, satisfied but hungry, and the sight of the unwashed dishes angered him. He strode over to the shack where Feng slept, expecting to find him drunk on opium, then went raging back.

"Got to cook our own chow," he said. "Thet blasted Feng has trailed off somewheres. Hittin' the pipe, I reckon. We'll match to see who cooks."

"Let's hev a drink first," suggested one of them.

They had washed the black from their faces, and they were a hard-looking outfit. Their cleaning had been done in a creek, with soap but without towels. They had used their neckerchiefs instead.

Whitney swung up a half-full demijohn to the table, and they gathered round.

"I'll skin the yeller hide offn him," growled Whitney. "First time he ain't been on hand, an' it'll be the last. Well, we got a good bunch, boys. Here's how!"

The liquor wetted their lips, but never passed them. From front and back, punchers filed in with drawn guns—men they knew only too well. Their hands went up reluctantly, and they were deprived of their weapons.

"What's the meanin' of this?" blustered Whitney. They had got him cornered, but he knew the herd was well

stowed away. He was sure that they had not been recognized by Johnson and the two with him, though he had meant to make surer of that, if it had not been for the rider on the buckskin horse who had come charging in with help.

Whitney did not wonder they had not been followed. He had posted two men in the narrow part of the canyon, and Johnson, who knew the country, must have guessed the danger. Instead, Johnson had gone back to the ranch, gathered the owner and a force, and now they were acting on suspicion.

"You know what it's all about, Whitney," said Horton, of the U Bar U—a grizzled, weathered old-timer. "This is the man who rode in on you while you were tryin' to shoot up my boys. He's Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association."

"What of it? You got nothin' on me."

The Kid stepped forward.

"We've got yore chink," he said. "We've got the stuff you blacked up with. What's more, Whitney, you should hev done a better job of washin'. There's black back of yore ears now, an' in 'em."

Whitney snarled. He could not move his hands, or he would have involuntarily touched the spot. He was glad he hadn't, but he wondered if the range detective spoke the truth or was bluffing.

"Look at them neckerchiefs," the Kid went on. "All smeared up. Now, Whitney, make things easy fer yourself. Where's the herd?"

He had taken a careful survey of the rustlers. One of them was more uneasy than the rest.

"I don't know a thing about yore cows," said Whitney. "You can't prove I teched 'em."

"Come close to it. Tell us where the stock is, an' the names of the rest of the gang, an' it'll save you a heap of trouble."

"You dirty range dick! You can go

plumb to blazes, you an' the rest!" said Whitney defiantly.

Horton stepped forward.

"I told you it wouldn't be a mite of use, Prentiss," he said. "Now *we're* goin' to handle this. They tried to kill my boys. They're murderers, an' if they don't talk, they swing!"

Whitney sneered. The Kid protested.

"You can't do it, Horton. This thing has got to go through accordin' to law."

"Range law," said Horton sternly. "There's jest one of you, Prentiss, an' you're out of it. First an' last, Whitney, are you goin' to talk?"

"No. You dassen't hang me."

"Take him first," said Horton.

Two men led Whitney out. Two more held the Kid, as he started forward—took his gun from him. Two others followed Whitney and his guards.

Horton went with them. There was a grim silence for several minutes. Then they came back, without Whitney.

"Any one goin' to talk?" asked Horton.

Two rustlers shuffled their feet, looked at one another.

"Him next," said Horton, and a second man disappeared.

Once more Horton selected a man, this time the one the Kid had thought the most nervous. They took him outside, and he wilted as he saw two limp bodies hanging from the bough of a cottonwood.

"I'll talk," he said. "You ain't goin' to hang me. You'll swing yourselves fer this."

"*You'll* swing, in one minute," said Horton, "unless you come through. Take yore choice. Got another rope handy?"

"There's all the evidence you wanted, Prentiss," said Horton, when the frightened man got through. "Now you can take 'em over. We'll help you herd 'em in to jail. Yore scheme sure worked."

"An' you'll stay there with us," said

one of the rustlers. "You can't pull vigilante stuff these days."

"Never mind that talk," said the Kid. "I won't need all yore men, Horton. You can send fer the stock, now you know where it is. An' we'll round up the rest of the outfit. Might as well cut down those dummies before we leave, an' don't forget the chink."

The three rustlers swore volubly as they saw Whitney and their other comrade brought out from a shed. Feng's eyes opened wide, for once, as he saw the stuffed figures the Kid had prepared taken down from the tree. He sensed immediately the whole ruse.

"Too smaht, thet fella," he muttered, as he looked malevolently at the Kid.

The Kid stood watching the disposal of the prisoners. His lips puckered, and he commenced to whistle. Feng spat on the ground.

"Too much hoodoo, that tune," he said.

He was not altogether so crestfallen as he looked. His gold was still buried. They would not hold him as guilty as the rest. He would come back and dig it up, or get a tong brother to do it when he was visited in jail.

And the Kid, whistling "The Cowboy's Lament," was well satisfied.

**But the Whistlin' Kid is never so satisfied with hisself that he gits puffed up over his accomplishments. 'Cause he knows that a C. A. cow dick has got ter keep his gun hand in practice an' his wits sharp ter git the best o' them hard gents his profession stacks him up agin'. An' them bad hombres hev l'arned, too, thet ter beat the Kid at thet game is shore a puzzler fer the keenest rustler. Watch fer the next Whistlin' Kid story. Thar'll be another in WILD WEST WEEKLY soon.**



## HOW PANAMINT GOT ITS NAME

IN the early days of gold finding, long before the mines of the Panamint Mountains had been opened up, and before the rocky, forbidding range was known by any name, a prospector prepared his outfit for a long quest for "pay dirt."

The precipitous mountains, surrounded by dreary deserts and life-forsaken dry lakes, invited only the very hardest and bravest of adventurers to explore the rocky fastnesses of this range.

The natural dangers of the country were increased at every turn by hostile Indians, who were ready to kill any lone miner that happened along for his blanket or his grub, and every man who penetrated the unfriendly passes took a thousand chances to one on getting out.

When the daring prospector was ready to start off, he was asked where he was going and revealed his plan to explore the grim mountain range that forms the western rim of Death Valley. His

friends gave him lots of advice and solemn warnings, but all their talk had no effect. They gathered around him to wish him good-by, feeling sure that they would never see him again, and made their farewells with the sadness of comrades seeing one of their own going to certain death.

"You'll never come out of there alive," they said. "Even if you do get through that blazing desert and reach the hills, the Indians will lift your scalp, so you'd better give up your foolish notion and stick around with us where it's safer."

The prospector shouldered his kit, lighted up an ancient and odorous pipe that had done long and faithful duty, and said with all the optimism of the gold seeker:

"I'll get through all right, never you fear, and what's more, when I get to those mountains, mark my words, I'll *pan a mint o' gold.*"

He did, and the name stuck.



# Ghosts of the Desert

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "The Apache Kid's Murder Trial," etc.

**P**ETE BRADY slid his racing pony to a bouncing halt at the rim of the mesa and sat for a moment staring at a distant plume of smoke which marked the approach of a heavy freight.

Below him, far out in the shimmering heat of the Arizona Desert, lay the gleaming rails of the Southern Pacific. Away off to the right, near a tall butte where a swirling dust devil rose in a thin gray column above the sand and mesquite, the cowboy could see the dim outline of a lonely water tank.

Jerking a pair of powerful field glasses from the back of his saddle, Pete studied that tank and the surrounding desert closely. Finally, thrusting the glasses back into their case, he urged his sweat-lathered horse down the steep trail which wound between cactus, ocotillo and greasewood to the boulder-strewn floor of Devil's Canyon.

At the far-off whistle of the approaching train, the cowboy turned his horse's head toward the mouth of the canyon and spurred the panting animal

into a dead run in a determined effort to reach the water tank in time.

"Sheriff phoned me that the bank robber was headed this way an' for me to try to cut 'im off from the railroad," the slim young cowboy muttered. "Gosh! But I could sure use that five thousand dollars' reward. Come on, horse!"

Crouched in the shelter of an overhanging ledge of sun-blistered rock and screened from view behind a dense clump of thorny mesquite, a slit-eyed watcher caught the sound of the horse's thudding hoofs.

Whirling with a snarl of disgust on his repulsive countenance, he snatched a pair of bull-nosed automatics from his shoulder holsters, and with the heavy weapons clutched in his skinny hands, sat waiting until the hard-riding young cowboy came close enough for an effective shot.

Totally unaware of the deadly trap into which he was riding, Pete spurred his sweating horse on toward the tank, which was now less than a mile away.

In a few moments, he would pass the place where the bandit lay concealed.

"Benny the Wop" snatched a gaudy handkerchief from his pocket and quickly wiped away the sweat which trickled down his low forehead. Then, with a sneer of satisfaction on his pasty face, he rose on one knee for a more effectual shot and lifted his heavy automatics.

Pete was now within fifty yards of the treacherous bandit's hiding place, but his eyes were upon the oncoming train. Lifting himself on his toes and leaning forward in the saddle to make it easier on his horse, he urged the flying animal to a still greater burst of speed. He meant to reach that tank ahead of the train.

*Crack!* With the sudden roar of the crook's pistol, Pete slumped forward on his horse's neck. Then with a groan he slid to the ground and went rolling in the sand. The horse, trained to stand with bridle reins dropped, slid to an abrupt halt and turned to wait for its master.

"Sap!" Benny the Wop snarled, as he stepped from his hiding place and approached the body of his victim. "You're another one o' dem wise hicks what t'ought dey'd collect on Benny, huh? Nix, guy, not a chance! I've croaked harder nuts dan you."

Benny kicked the prostrate form unfeelingly, then turned to stare speculatively at the swiftly approaching train. Presently a sneering grin twisted his ratlike countenance, as he pulled a package of cigarettes from his pocket and hungrily thrust one into the corner of his loose mouth.

"I t'ought I'd make me get-away on dat rattler, but nix on dat lay now," he muttered. "I bet every hick bull dis side o' K. C.'ll be combin' dem side-door Pullmans in hopes o' pickin' me up. Nix, I got ter lay low here in dis desert fer a while. I'll just glaum dis guy's horse an' do a fade-away back into dem hills. I'm wise, I am."

Benny hurried toward Pete's horse

and attempted to pick up the bridle reins. But the wise animal gave a wild snort and backed quickly away from the outstretched hand.

"Whoa, you blamed skate!" Benny snarled. "Whoa, I said!" He gave a sudden dart forward and managed to snatch one of the trailing reins. "Now, I got yuh," he growled angrily. "Stand still till I git on youse. Whoa! Back up! Dat's it. Stand still now, or I'll bat youse one in de ear."

Benny heaved himself awkwardly into the saddle and started the animal across the desert toward a distant line of low hills. But suddenly he pulled the horse to a stop and sat staring speculatively back at the cowboy's silent figure as it lay, face up, in the burning sun.

"Gee!" Benny remarked. "I got ter git into dat stiff's clothes. I can't go ridin' around dis country in dese I got on. De foist sap dat piped me'd git hep sure."

He got off and tied the horse securely, then he hurriedly undressed the silent figure and clothed himself from head to foot in the cowboy's clothes. He dropped his own where he took them off, and had started for his horse, when a sudden inspiration caused him to turn back again.

"Why didn't I t'ink o' dat before?" he leered. "I'll just go ahead an' dress up dis stiff in my glad rags, an' when de bulls find 'im, dey'll t'ink it's me dat's been croaked. Dey's not'in' to it. I got a cinch. Dey'll stop huntin' me de minute dey find dis cow farmer's carcass."

Benny quickly dressed the cowboy in his discarded clothes, then stepped back to admire the result of his craftiness.

"Maybe I'd better leave 'im his gat. Dat'll make it look more natural," Benny remarked, as he tossed the cowboy's long-barreled Colt down beside the body.

Leaving Pete Brady's body dressed as probably no real cowboy was ever dressed before, the wily crook climbed back onto the horse and went trotting

away toward the hills. In a few moments, he was out of sight among the mesquite and desert growth.

## II.

It was getting late in the afternoon, and the sun hung low over a distant butte like a huge disk of molten brass.

A cooling breeze had finally sprung up and caused the gnarled limbs of the greasewoods to sway gracefully, and feathery puffs of dust to arise from the alkali soil. A lone coyote gave a weird wail from behind a ledge of rock, and a desert hawk went winging away toward the distant hills.

The body of the cowboy lay silent where it had fallen when the crook's treacherous shot had hurled it from the saddle. A coyote slipped wraithlike from a near-by thicket of mesquite, and after sniffing the air for a moment with its keen nose, trotted toward where Pete lay. Within a few yards, it stopped, and with lolling tongue sat staring at the prostrate figure.

Suddenly there came a hollow groan, and with a savage snarl, the scavenger wolf whirled and darted away. The cowboy's head had moved. Presently one of the hands was raised. Then the cowboy rolled over painfully and attempted to get up, only to fall back, helpless.

In a few moments, he tried again and sat up weakly. He then made an effort to get to his feet, but fell prone upon the sand, where he lay for a long time as though in a faint. The sun had sunk behind the desert horizon when he was at last able to stand erect.

"Confound it! I've been shot," he muttered dazedly. "Waylaid. I've been a fool. I ought to have known that bandit would be watchin' for me. Now, I've——" Pete had just noticed his strange garb, and stood staring down at himself in amazement. "Swapped clothes with me!" he gasped. "Well, he's forgot an' left me my gun, anyhow. I reckon that'll help some."

Pete sat down upon a boulder and examined the wound in his head where the bullet had creased him. Then he tore out a piece of the lining of his coat and bound up the hurt as best he could. Finally he arose, and picking up his long-barreled gun, looked it over carefully.

"Loaded all around," he remarked with satisfaction, as he thrust the heavy Colt into the waistband of his trousers. "Six cartridges to land the thief with. Well, one's all I'll need, if I can get within range of 'im."

With but the six cartridges for his gun, no water, and with his injured head throbbing in an agony of pain, Pete gamely took the trail of his horse and started out to capture the murderous crook, who already had more than two hours' start on him.

It was now dark, but the tracks were easy to follow in the pale moonlight, so Pete pressed on into the desert. He felt certain that the city crook would stop and camp within a few miles, and he meant to close in on him while he had the chance.

The light breeze had died down until every sound came to the cowboy's keen ears with startling clearness. A desert owl wheeled silent about his head, then disappeared in the shadows.

Somewhere, far to the southward, a lone wolf howled dismally and was instantly answered by the staccato yelping of a pack of hunting coyotes. From a tall butte that loomed ghostlike in the dim light of the clouded moon came the wailing scream of a cougar.

The death squeal of a stricken rabbit sounded close at hand. Then, but for the steady crunch of the sand underfoot, again all was still.

Suddenly from a short distance ahead came the whistling snort of a horse. Instantly the cowboy dropped behind a mesquite, where he crouched, listening alertly. Presently the horse snorted again.

"Shut dat up!" Pete heard a hoarse voice snarl. "Foist, it's somethin' howl-

in' or screechin' till a guy can't sleep. Den youse has got to start dat blamed snortin'. Cut it out, "before I bounce a dornick off o' yer blamed slats!"

Pete raised himself cautiously and was trying to locate the crook in the gloom ahead of him, when the weird, tremulous cry of a screech owl sounded close at hand, followed instantly by another scream from a cougar.

"Now, what in de blazes?" came a startled yell from Benny the Wop. "Dis sounds like a cemetery or a bug house around here."

Another loud snort from the horse, and Pete heard the crook scrambling to his feet.

"I told youse I'd lam a dornick into youse if youse pulled dat snort again!" Benny howled. "Take dat, youse blamed skate! Whoa! Now, what de—— Whoa, I said!"

Pete heard a crash, then the horse's hoofs thudding away in the darkness, with the angry crook in hot pursuit. The stone that Benny had thrown in a fit of rage had caused the high-strung animal to break loose, so the bandit was now left afoot the same as himself. And Pete knew well that the horse would never stop until it had got back to the ranch where it belonged.

The cowboy sprang instantly to his feet and struck out in the direction taken by the bandit. In a few moments, he heard Benny talking to the horse as though he had found it.

"Whoa, skate! Whoa, boy!" Benny coaxed. "Dat's a nice—— Whoa! What de blazes is dis? Ha-a-l-p! Murder!" came an anguished howl of mortal terror, followed instantly by a couple of pistol shots, then a clatter of loose rock, as Pete heard the crook coming back toward him at a dead run, hotly pursued by some heavy animal which he could hear snorting fiercely along behind.

What could it be? Six-gun in hand, Pete leaned forward and waited. Another screech of terror, a wild bellow, and the cowboy saw Benny come tear-

ing through the mesquite with the wide, gleaming horns of an old mossback steer within a few yards of him.

Suddenly Benny hooked his toe under a mesquite root and, with a shriek, crashed to the ground squarely in the path of the maddened brute.

The savage steer instantly dropped its head to gore its howling victim, when Pete made a flying leap and grabbed the widespreading horns in his steellike grasp.

With an outraged bawl, the big steer shook its shaggy head and lunged forward in a mad effort to get away from the man who now clung to it. This was no squealing Benny the Wop who had launched himself like a thunderbolt out of the darkness, but a rangewise bulldogger—one who had won top money time and again at rodeos throughout the cow country.

The mighty steer stiffened its huge neck and plunged on toward the mesquite. It was too powerful to be thrown in the ordinary manner, but this meant nothing to Pete.

The wiry cowboy made a sudden leap, threw his left leg over the nearest horn and shot his foot beneath the slaving jaw to give him added leverage. Then grabbing the opposite horn in both hands and placing his right knee against the big, thick neck, he threw himself backward with a powerful heave which brought the maddened brute crashing to the ground.

Pete glanced over his shoulder and saw that the thoroughly frightened crook had just staggered to his feet and was staring about in bewilderment and terror.

"Hey, you!" the cowboy called. "Come here with them clothes o' mine you're wearin'. Hurry! I want that hoggin' string that's in the pocket o' them chaps."

"Yuh—yuh—what?" Benny stammered, coming forward with uncertain steps.

"I want my hoggin' string, quick!" Pete snapped. "You think I want to

hold this blamed steer all night? Feel in the right-hand pocket o' them chaps for a long rawhide cord."

Benny reached a trembling hand into the pocket and drew forth the long length of tough rawhide, which he gingerly extended toward the impatient puncher.

"How in blazes did you happen to run a foul o' this old mossback, fella?" Pete snapped, as he reached for the hogging string.

"Aw, g'wan!" Benny snarled sullenly. "How'd I know it was a steer? I t'ought it was me horse out there in de dark, an' when I tried to catch it, it—— Say!" he suddenly shrieked as he got a better look at the cowboy.

"What is it now?" Pete ejaculated, twisting around in surprise.

"Fella," Benny asked hoarsely, "ain't youse de guy I croaked?"

"I'm the hombre you thought you'd ——" Pete began.

"It's him! Ha-a-l-p!" Benny screamed. "It's de ghost o' de guy I shot!" The superstitious crook tore away through the brush as though imps were at his heels. And at Pete's loud commands for him to halt, Benny only ran the faster.

### III.

Pete snapped his hand toward his gun, but found that he had lost it in the scuffle with the steer. He was now weaponless and without means of compelling the crook to surrender.

He could still hear Benny crashing through the brush, and he knew that if he intended to overtake and capture him, he must do it at once. But with Benny heavily armed, how was he to overpower him?

Suddenly a wild idea flashed through his head. No one but a devil-may-care cowboy would have even thought of such a dangerous and foolhardy scheme.

With Pete, to think was to act. He would catch that crook if he had to ride him down on the steer. He did not know whether he could even herd the

wild-eyed brute in the right direction or not, but he recklessly meant to try.

Still holding the struggling animal's head so that it could not get up, he watched his chance and shoved the long hogging string deep around the thick neck to act as a makeshift bucking strap which would assist him to ride it.

With one hand, he quickly tied the ends with a couple of half hitches. Then as the enraged longhorn lunged snorting to its feet, Pete landed astride and slapped it on the side of the head with his hat.

Away it went, plunging and bucking through the mesquite in a frenzy of bovine rage, as it sought to dislodge the cowboy who stuck like a burr to its heaving back.

Its first wild burst of bucking failing to dislodge its expert rider, the big steer let out a mighty bellow and went thundering away through the brush at a lumbering run.

Pete was watching for this; it was what he had been hoping for. Instantly, with a triumphant shout, he leaned forward and began guiding the flying brute in the right direction by slapping it on either side of the head with his hat.

In the light of the full moon, which was now out from behind the clouds, Pete began watching for his quarry. Crossing a wide stretch of bare sand, Pete finally saw the dim form of the fleeing crook and instantly headed his ungainly steed toward him.

Benny heard the uproar behind him and paused for a moment to glance back. What he saw brought a shriek of horror to the lips of the already terrified bandit, but it also brought an added burst of speed to his flying feet. The wild steer which had come so close to getting him was now after him again, and it was being ridden by the man he had shot.

The wide-flanged chaps and the heavy riding boots which he had stolen from the cowboy interfered seriously with

his flight. But Benny felt that he simply could not spare the time to take them off.

As he neared the lone butte where Pete had heard the scream of the cougar earlier in the night, Benny saw a long, tawny form slink ghostlike across his path. With a howl, he changed his course.

"Oh!" he wheezed. "How I wish I was back in some safe jail!"

A wild snort and a thud of flying hoofs close behind caused him to take a hurried glance over his shoulder. The steer was almost upon him; he could feel its hot breath on his neck.

Suddenly he stumbled and went down. Blubbering with terror, the horror-stricken Benny buried his face in his arms to shut out the awful sight. This meant the end.

Pete saw him go down, and with a grin he leaned forward to slap the maddened steer on the side of the head with his hat. Then as the flying animal thundered past the prostrate outlaw, Pete slid from its heaving back and landed with a thud upon his prostrate victim.

"Aw-oo!" came a howl of anguish from Benny. "Ha-a-l-p!"

Pete rolled him over and jerked the crook's two heavy automatics from the shoulder holsters. Then he stepped back and ordered Benny to get up.

"Don't youse touch me! Don't!" Benny shrieked. "I give up!"

"Say, have I caught a lunatic?" Pete snapped. "Get up, I said."

"Say, listen, guy, I'm all in!" Benny begged piteously. "Don't kid me, but tell me, quick. Are youse a spook?"

"Me?" Pete grunted. "O' course not. Why?"

"Den youse ain't dead?" Benny insisted.

"Not so's you could notice it." Pete chuckled.

"Don't laugh at me, guy; I'm almost off me nut," Benny entreated earnestly. "I been seein' things to-night, an' what I ain't seen, I've heard. A little more o' dis spooky stuff, an' I'll be ready fer de dippy house. Quick, take me to jail an' lock me in good—any jail!"

#### IV.

Benny made not the slightest effort to escape, as Pete led him to the nearest ranch, where he procured horses with which to carry him to jail. The crook seemed actually glad when the cell door clanged shut behind him late that afternoon.

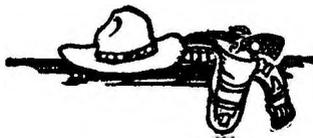
"Listen, guy," he called to Pete, as the cowboy turned to leave. "Youse ain't holdin' no hard feelin's at me fer dat shot I took at youse, huh?"

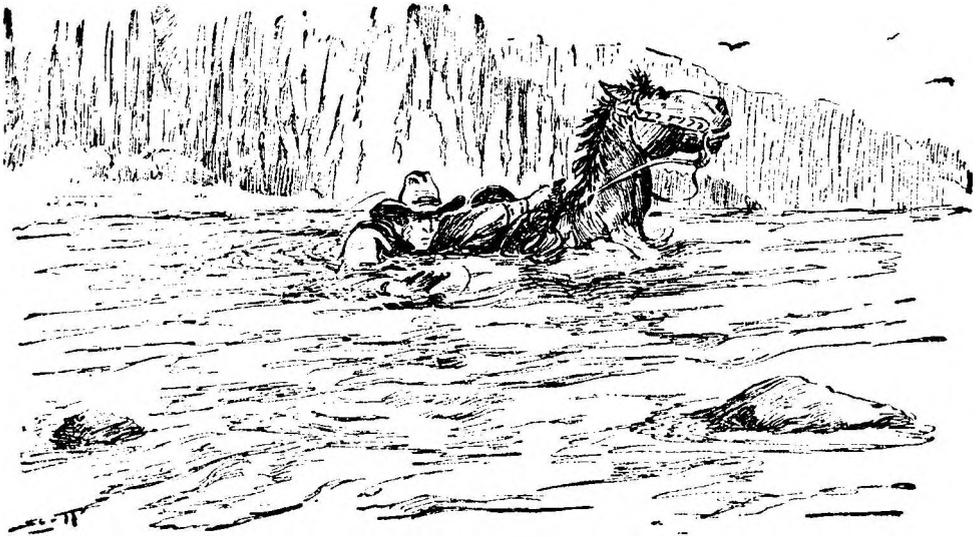
"No," Pete laughed. "O' course not."

"Thanks, pal. You're a regulār guy," Benny remarked feebly. "An, say, bo'," he added, "wit' dis reward money youse gits, youse might be able to give a fella a job when he gits out o' stir, huh?"

"I might," Pete replied slowly, "if you want to cut out this crook stuff an' make a man out o' yourself."

"Fella, youse said a mouthful then," Benny remarked. "Now get dis, ar' get it good: I'm a reformed guy, I am. Nix on dis crook stuff. I'm handin' youse straight goods. Us wise gazabos is de simps after all. Dey's not'in' to it. I done a bunch o' thinkin' last night when dat old he-cow come so near hookin' de pants off o' me, an' den is when I makes up my mind what a sap I been. Hold dat job for me, bo'. I'm comin' back fer it some day. So long!"





# River Horses

A "Bud Jones Of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "Santa Claus' Silver Spurs," etc.

**M**AN and horse were like rock carvings, as they watched the rolling river and the bluffs on the Mexican shore, from a leafy covert in the dense chaparral.

Flecks of sunshine filtered through the brush and touched the big roan charger's hide and the cheek of the rider to glowing spots of bronze and copper. The light tipped here and there the rims of the cartridges for six-gun and rifle in the man's crossed belts.

Across the Rio Grande, the bluffs showed red and purple and green. There was no sign of life. The muddy current rolled without a boat on its surface—the border between the United States and Mexico.

"Bud" Jones—corporal in Company F—was on patrol. The three troopers of his squad were flung out along the cliffs, watching for signs of contraband crossing. It was not likely, by day, but the watch had to be maintained.

A bee buzzed by, its bag filled with

honey from mesquite bloom. The roan pricked its ears as the insect boomed past—and kept them pricked. It heard something, and so did its master—a dull thud of hurrying hoofs, a creak of harness, a bumping noise, and the hoarse shout of a man.

Bud swung the roan to the right, riding through the narrow trail by which he had come up from the wide gulch between the bluffs. The river road dipped into this and, just short of the creek that flowed into the Rio Grande, swung east to run behind the bluffs.

He saw a buckboard hurtling down the farther slope. The team of half-tamed buckskin bronchos was running away, out of control, though the driver had not lost his head and was doing all he could as the light vehicle bounced and bounded, threatening every moment to overturn.

The bronchos had the bits in their teeth. At the pace they were going, in

their wild frenzy, they could not make the turn. They must plunge into the creek. It was deep. There was no ford. They would strike it in a wild tangle of harness and sinking buckboard.

Bud gave the roan the prick of steel. He had no idea who the man was, white or brown—but he did not hesitate.

"Git there, Pepper!" he said, and then clenched his teeth, well forward in the saddle as the clever roan went lunging, leaping, sliding down.

They hit the creek, and Bud dropped off into the water, swimming with hand on saddle horn, as the powerful troop horse churned its way across, striking the bank, scrambling out like a great cat, while the Ranger swung up to the saddle again and once more raked with his spurs.

Snorting, strong, his mighty muscles flexing, crimson-lined nostrils wide open to supply the bellows of its great lungs, Pepper answered the call.

The buckboard, careening wildly, was almost at the bottom of the pitch. The screeching brake was on, the driver—a short, bearded man—still sawed at the reins, hoping to get the bits back within those iron jaws of the frenzied team.

They struck the road, maddened, seeing nothing definite.

"Hit hard, Pepper!" cried Bud. "Smash into 'em."

The roan drove its shoulder and its weight against the off horse of the team.

Bud leaned out, his knees welded to the withers, and grasped the bridle close to the bit, yanking it back of the clamped teeth. He and Pepper raced alongside, while the driver did his best.

Little by little, the team swerved off until it was galloping jerkily among the sage and rabbit brush that lined the creek, sending up clouds of fine red dust, slowing down, halting, once more under control.

Bud reined in. The bearded man got down and examined the harness, his reins twisted about his brake. He went

over the now trembling bronchos, then he grinned at Bud, brushing the dust out of his beard.

"Wonder they ain't pulled every last tendon an' busted the hull outfit," he said. "Better be dusty than hev the catfish nibblin' you. I can't swim a stroke. I saw you comin', but I didn't figger you'd git here on time, or do much if you did. You're the eighth wonder of the world, Ranger. If they're all like you, it's no wonder you're rated high."

He pulled off his Stetson and showed a bald head, grimed with sweat and dust. His eyes twinkled, and Bud liked him.

"Señor, as the Mexes say," said the man with a salute of the sombrero, "my life is yours. I'd sure given it up. My name is Bates—Clem Bates. I'm on my way to Colores, thanks to you. Goin' to collect an account from a mañana greaser who runs the town. You might hev heard of him—Ignacio Serrano?"

The twinkle was still in his eyes, heightening when he mentioned the name.

"I've heard of him," said Bud.

"A smart hombre," said Bates. "He may be jest too plumb lazy to pay his bills, but I aim to stir him up some. Twelve months' credit is plenty an' too much, an' I've got a notion he can pay."

"He seems prosperous," said Bud. "What started yore team?"

"Fool willow hen flew ercross the road right under their noses. Ranger, I may not be perlitte, but I'm grateful. Hope I can return the favor some day. You goin' my way—to Colores?"

"Not yet," said Bud. "You might return the favor by not mentionin' you saw me."

## II.

"I'll bet a new saddle there's some-thin' stirrin'," Bud muttered, as he put the roan once more to the creek and rode up to the top of the bluffs.

There he cleaned carbine and six-gun against the rust, leaving them oiled, ready for action. His hunch tingled to the inner warning that, so far, had never failed him.

There were drugs coming across the river. Colores, he was sure, was one place where the "white powder"—heroin—crossed the border. But he saw nothing of importance.

He camped for the night, awake after four hours' sleep, dawn coming. He watered the roan, gave it a ration of corn, satisfied himself with jerked beef. Back of him, the sky was lightening.

Bud went to the rim of the bluffs, stiffened.

There were horses crossing the river.

He could see the white water where they made the ford, hear a nicker ring out sharply, like a bugle in the quickening dawn. Men were herding them.

He marveled at their daring. He knew well enough that he and his squad were spied upon by the Mexicans on the United States side—men who claimed to be American citizens by birth or naturalization, their sympathies still allied to their breed. The Rangers did their best to fool them, and this time Bud, at least, might have eluded them. He had seen no signals from either bank.

It did not matter. Here were horses being forded, from Mexico. It could only mean a train of contraband.

He knew his way to the beach, had selected his camp with that in mind, and he set Pepper to the slope of red earth. The light was growing. He could make out three mounted men—peons, by their high sombreros—a herd of over a score of horses, splashing through the shallows, almost ashore, on United States territory.

As a Ranger, he held no authority on the far shore and was forbidden by international law to venture there. But here—

He set the roan to a gallop over the beach, wet from the receding tide that flowed and ebbed from the Gulf of

Mexico, hundreds of leagues away. Three peons meant nothing. He would not have stopped for a dozen.

Up on the bluff, there came a spurt of flame. A bullet whined past the Ranger. He turned in his saddle, his six-gun out in a flash, and returned the lead. Another gun barked a little way off, and he flung lead there as he rode the gantlet. The crossing was protected.

But he had nicked or notched one of them. There was a flurry in the brush, and only one gun still tried to reach him, as he rounded a promontory and raced headlong toward the horses, now coming out on the sand, making for the road that led between the cliffs to Colores.

"Halt!" His voice rang out, authoritative.

The herders had heard the shots. In the gray dawn, they saw the charging roan and its indomitable rider. They stopped in their tracks, muttering, "*Rangero!*" while the horses began to nibble and fuss with tufts of coarse grass.

Bud stared. They bore no packs of any kind, no bridles or cinches. But why, then, had he been shot at? One of the peons turned toward him with a flash of white teeth that showed plainly, even in the scanty light. His face was impudent, assured, though his two fellows plainly sulked.

"Whose hawsses are these?" Bud shouted. "Where are you taking them? Where do they come from? Have you a permit to bring them over the river?"

Bud snapped out the demands sternly. He felt that he had been fooled, yet his hunch persisted, urged by the memory of those bullets that had missed him by so little. He wanted to hunt out the pair who had fired at him, but the herd had seemed the important thing. And they would be gone by now.

The light strengthened, and his face showed hard, authoritative. The peon smirked.

"We do not bring them across the river. We bring them back, señor. They have strayed, broken from the corral because of that accursed pinto, who is still a wild mustang. It is he who has caused us all this trouble. He led them across the river, but we stopped them in time. There is nothing wrong in that, *Señor Rangero?*"

Bud's hunch told him there *was* something wrong, but not shown on the surface. The horses carried no contraband. But he ordered the three men to dismount. He searched their saddles and their persons, but found nothing.

"Whose horses?" he demanded again, chagrined and puzzled.

"From el rancho Ronzal, which belongs to Señor Serrano."

They both spoke in Mexican, the peon's voice holding still a barely covered mockery. Bud knew they were pleased to have brought a Ranger on a fool's errand—if it *was* a fool's errand.

Against his eyes, his search, Bud still felt he had not made a mistake. Serrano's name heightened the conviction. He knew the ranch—nothing there in the way of stock but a few steers and sheep.

What did Serrano want with all these horses? Still, horses were common enough. He could not hold them.

"I was fired on just now," he said. "Are those your men?"

The peon shrugged.

"Quién sabe? I do not know, unless, perhaps, it might have been others who came after us and thought the señor, not knowing who he was in the dark, wanted to steal the horses."

He grinned. Bud was left with the satisfaction that he had winged one of the men. He might know who, later.

"Get on," he said, and watched them send the herd up the road, with a sense of futility.

Then he followed them. Later, he would take a look at the Ronzal ranch. Now he could do nothing.

The prints puzzled him. All the horses were shod, even the wild mus-

tang pinto that was blamed for their straying. That could mean little, but it was unusual.

Ranch horses were not shod, save for travel over hard trails, especially on a Mexican outfit. He looked at them more closely and loped on to town with a frown on his forehead, trying to make something out of it. But he found no answer to the problem, save the feeling that there was some suggestion lurking in his mind, trying to take definite shape, as one tries to recall a word, a phrase or incident—things that seem on the tip of the tongue, but cannot be produced.

The sharper, wet imprints on the sand changed to shapeless hollows in the soft dirt. The cavvy vanished in dust clouds, tinged by the sun that had at last broken through the haze.

Bud drew up outside the restaurant of Chang Li, preferring his ham and eggs to the chili-spiced food at the *cantina* counter. Colores was barely awake, but Chang was ready to serve breakfast, to provide a meal at any reasonable hour.

### III.

After his meal, Bud rode out of town, making his way by a roundabout and hidden route to where he could overlook the ranch from a low, brush-covered hill.

It was not an enterprising place. Serrano did not breed cattle. He bought steers and sheep to provide meat for his inn and the *cantina*.

There were few signs of activity. The horses had been replaced in a corral. One peon was throwing hay to them.

Bud stayed where he was, watching the ranch through his field glasses. There were twenty-six horses altogether, and he still could not see why so many were kept up or needed for the working of a ranch that had less than fifty acres. Those acres were within wire, the stock hand-fed for the most part, most of the land used for

hay and alfalfa. The horses were not remarkable in any way.

Toward noon, he saw a man ride in from town. This was Serrano himself, too fat to be much of a horseman, seated on a comfortable-going bay. On his arrival, three more men appeared, and he gave orders, seated sidewise in his saddle to see them carried out.

Three hazed out the horses two at a time, roping them, snubbing them to a post, where another man took off their shoes and tossed these inside a shed with an open door. It did not seem a reasonable procedure. To take off their shoes would not prevent them from straying. As they were finished with, they were turned into a pasture, where they kicked and rolled in relief.

Afterward, Serrano dismounted and went into the shed, closing the door. He stayed there almost half an hour, and Bud wondered what he was after. Then he came out, remounted and jogged into town.

The peons went inside the ranch house. The chimney smoked. They were enjoying tortillas and mutton stew with chilis, rolling the thin cakes into cones, dipping them in the mess, and eating without knives or forks. Soon it would be the siesta hour. Bud was wide awake. He felt that a solution was near. But he was destined to be baffled.

The peons came out on the back gallery of the ranch house, smoking corn-husk cigarettes, yawning. They brought with them coverlets which they spread on the dirt floor, and presently coiled themselves on them to sleep. A fifth man, who Bud judged to be the cook, joined them.

He viewed the motionless forms and then crept down the side of the low hill. Keeping himself unseen, he reached the little shed and opened the door with infinite caution.

Inside, there was little but a pile of horseshoes. It looked as if Serrano must have stacked those last taken off—over a hundred. There were a few

tools, but no forge or anvil. If horses were shod on the rancho Ronzal, they were shod cold.

Bud examined the pile of shoes, emerged and went back up the hill, the frown again on his forehead, the solution of the hunch still evading him, though it seemed closer.

He was back in town at four o'clock. It was growing cooler. People were coming out of doors, guitars beginning to strum, women cooking, sprawling children clamoring for an early meal, dogs slinking about with slavering jaws.

At Serrano's *cantina*, men were gathering. The monte games would not start until after dark, but they were playing cards between themselves as Bud entered, looking up at the Ranger with ill-concealed dislike, of which he took no notice.

He was still at a loose end. Serrano was at the core of Bud's bewilderment. He could not understand why that sleek, swarthy, stout Mexican should bother to ride out to his ranch at mid-day and oversee horses unshod, pile up their shoes. He could not see why Serrano should be making any active moves that were not immediately profitable.

The memory of the bullets that had come so close to him was not forgotten. To Bud, they seemed linked with Serrano, with the strayed herd. He meant to keep in touch with the man he thought the principal in some crooked deal that was being brought off under his nose.

He sensed an air of suppressed excitement, an undercurrent of sneering sentiment against him that determined him not to leave town.

Serrano did not show up, and Bud went to the *posada*, ostensibly to take a room for the night, which he did not expect to occupy, for long. It gave him an excuse to ask for Serrano. But no one seemed to know where he was.

There was something in the wind.

Bud was sure of it. He remembered Bates and made inquiries.

Bates was in town, they thought, but they were not sure. There was a conspiracy of silence and misinformation arrayed against the Ranger, so Bud believed, and it heightened his determination. Not that he thought Bates was mixed up in it.

He located the buckboard and Bates' team. It was late when Bud finally found him at the *cantina*, slightly the worse for liquor, playing Mexican monte and winning. He quit the table when Bud appeared in the doorway and came over to him, insisting on buying a drink.

"I got my money," he said. "Had to gouge it out of him, but I got it. An' I'm gougin' him some more. Playin' on velvet. Leavin' to-morrer mornin'. Listen, Ranger, you sure saved my life this mornin'. I want you to take half my winnin's."

Bud turned that subject.

"We'll wait an' see how you come out," he said, humoring the man.

Bates seemed as if he could take care of himself, but he was in a cocky, exultant mood, which was not a wise one for a town like Colores. Bud determined to keep an eye on him. Bates' lucky streak seemed to continue, and he was not slow about openly announcing it.

Bud got a deck of cards and played solitaire, watching the monte table. If his hunch ever counted for anything, it now indicated developments, as a barometer announces stormy weather.

It happened as Bud had expected it. Bates had been rooked, and he had protested. It was all prearranged. Knives flashed, voices rose. Swift as he was, diving into the *mêlée*, Bud was not quite in time.

His gun rose and fell like a club. He could not pick out principals. As a Ranger, he could not afford to kill an innocent man. But he was not so fussy about putting one out.

Bates was down on the floor, a blade

through his ribs from behind. The mob surged about him, trampling like wild cattle.

The Ranger surged into them, enjoying the combat. He went in two-handed—the right with his hogleg clubbed, the left with cold steel, his bowie knife.

The Mexicans professed that the knife was their weapon, but they did not like to oppose it. And they knew that this raging gringo in their midst was accepting their style of battle, withholding his shots.

They had orders against Bates which had included Bud if he interfered. But they were not prepared for his onslaught. He seemed everywhere at once, flung them into confusion, his eyes flashing, his gun smashing down.

A man slashed at him and found his steel caught, engaged, twisted, and the Ranger's knife cleanly laying open his arm.

What sort of gringo was this, who fought with gun and knife, who stood over the prostrate body of Bates and swung the muzzle of his weapon on them as they cringed back?

There was no doubt about its being a preconcerted attack. Four men had come to meet the Ranger. Two were down with gun-barrel blows; one had a slashed shoulder. His eyes were flaming balls of fire as he drove them. He stood over the prostrate body of Bates, defying them as they shrank, watchful.

He saw the two bartenders dodge behind their counter, and he called to them.

"Come out with yore hands up, you coyotes," he cried, "or stay there an' keep out of trouble!"

They did not appear, and Bud backed to the end of the bar, his gun now swinging in an arc—a reserve offensive that they properly appreciated.

The Ranger dominated them. His fury had swept aside their onset. They watched him, like a wolf pack, and saw no opening.

"First man of you moves, he goes

down," he told them, and they believed him.

He held them, taut, petrified, with the menace of his six-gun. They knew the record of the Rangers.

Only the dealer of the monte table slowly raised his head back of his piles of chips, inch by inch, his throwing knife ready, poised.

Bud saw his faint, creeping shadow on the wall, and fired. Chips leaped, shattered into the air, and the man fell back, creased on the top of his skull.

The Ranger looked at the skulking barmen, crouching low like bayed badgers.

"One of you go git Serrano," he ordered. "Git him pronto an' tell him the Rangers are runnin' this town. If he tries any funny business, there's goin' to be some fancy shootin', an' I'll do the demonstratin'. Vamose!"

He had them utterly cowed. They stood, fingering their knives, until he contemptuously told them to put them up and place Bates on a table.

"If he dies, you're goin' to be a sad outfit," he said. "You fools, you're buckin' more'n you can tackle! I'm a Ranger. Sabe?"

#### IV.

Bates lay on the Ranger's cot. Bud had taken off his clothes and attended to his wound. It was nasty, but not necessarily fatal. He ordered some brandy—aguardiente that had never paid duty—and it was brought to him, reviving the hurt man.

"You saved my life twice over," said Bates faintly. "Serrano put up a job on me, the skunk! Tried to git back the money he paid me. Ranger, he's runnin' white powder. What's more, he's gittin' ready to light out of here. I got the tip an' came to collect what was due me. I don't know how he pulls it off, but they figger they've got you Rangers fooled."

"You go to sleep," said Bud, "or try to. I'll attend to Serrano."

His trooper came within the hour.

Bud saw him riding up the street and whistled to him. The Ranger mounted the stairs, and Bud met him.

"Ride to camp, fetch the medico," said Bud. "There's a man here named Bates who's a friend of ours. Light a fire on Red Bluff an' signal the boys. I want them here at the ford before sunup."

"An' me out of it?" said the trooper. "Not if you hurry. Git goin'."

At two o'clock, Bud heard what he was waiting for—soft thuds of hoofs. Serrano's herd had got away again.

The stars shone to-night, and he saw the pinto mustang leading the string of bronchos to the river, headed for liberty, perhaps for original pastures.

"It ain't the first time, by a long shot, they've crossed thet ford," Bud told himself. "Reg'lar river hawsses. Question is, how soon will they come after 'em? I'm bettin' they'll all be back this side before it gits light."

He did not go downstairs, but crawled through the window and dropped to the soft ground, running afoot after the horses. He saw the pinto go into the water, drink a little, lift its head, then start across, the rest trailing.

"He acts like he'd been trained," Bud thought. "Might jest be eager to git back. He's a stallion, at thet. Now let's look."

Out of sight of the town, he squatted on the sand, struck a match or two and examined the imprints, sharp on the wet, firm beach. They were still unshod.

Bud shook his head. He was sure the answer was under his nose, but he could not read it yet. But it seemed as if the struggling idea in his mind was growing stronger, would yet surely evolve.

He went back to the *posada*, looked in the front window. The one man in the office was sleep. Bud took off his high-heeled boots and opened the door, passing the other on noiseless, stocking feet, regained his room.

Again he waited at the window. Almost two hours passed before he got his reward. Meanwhile, men began to leave the *cantina*, to go to their homes or come to the *posada*. He heard them, but could not see them. Quiet settled over the town.

At last he heard the quick *clop-clop* of hoofs. Three riders went down to the river. They were going to bring back the horses.

Bud could not recognize them, but he was sure that they were the same trio. They thought him up with Bates, as he was. They knew another Ranger had come in and left to bring back a doctor.

Bud waited a little longer. Bates was sleeping. His fever was beginning to mount, but the surgeon would be there soon, knew where to come.

This time, Bud went to where he had left the roan, saddled it and rode to the strand, finding a place where he could watch the ford, tucked himself away in a niche. There might be others on guard, but he knew his two troopers could take care of them, hoped they could pass unseen.

It was getting close to dawn again. Bud had never ceased to look across the dark water—to look and listen. His hand was on the neck of the patient roan, and he felt it quiver. Pepper, as he had done often before, was warning him.

Slowly the daylight filtered in. He saw the horses returning. They had been into Mexico. How far, he could not tell. But he did not think it was much of a distance.

They came splashing through the water, packless, innocent of any harness. Their chests made white ripples, then their fetlocks, their knees, as they waded out.

It seemed nothing more than a repetition of the night before, but it was curious that they should have got away again so soon. The three peons seemed to take their task as a regular job, skillfully handling the *cavvy*.

Bud did not interfere. He let them go up the street, bound for the ranch. But as the light gained, he looked at the hoofmarks. Now his hunch asserted itself. His hidden thoughts leaped out of cover.

The river horses had gone over unshod, but had come back with shoes on!

Bud almost chuckled aloud as he carefully examined the sign.

A slight noise brought him to his feet, his gun out. He holstered it, as he saw two riders whose mounts he knew, aside from the men. They were the two remaining troopers of his squad.

"No trouble on the way, boys?" he asked.

"No."

"They thought it was a cinch," said Bud. "Now you ride to the Ronzal rancho. You'll find a herd of horses corraled. There'll be some greasers there. You make sure of them. They won't be expectin' you. Make sure those hawsses are safe in the corral, an' wait till I show up. Don't be in sight."

They said little. They did not salute their corporal. Rangers were picked men, independent, and they saluted only the troop captain and the surgeon. But they respected Bud.

Bud stayed at the ford for a little. The town would not be stirring yet. He took another long look at the hoofmarks, and then he rode back to the *posada*, hitched the roan. From now on, he would be fully exposed in the open.

The sun rose. Down the street came the doctor of the company and Bud's trooper.

"You're both in good time," said Bud. "You can save Bates, medico. Edwards, I'll need you. I'll take you up, doc, an' then I'll leave you fer a while."

This time, he roused the sleepy man, who stared to see the three who acted as if they owned the *posada*.

"You go tell Serrano I want to see

him, right away. Tell him to come dressed," ordered Bud.

"Señor, I dare not waken him at this hour."

"I'll kick the pants off you if you don't," said Bud grimly. "Sabe? Go git him, pronto."

Edwards grinned. He knew Bud's methods. Something was coming off.

Serrano came down inside of five minutes, hiding his wrath under a smirk.

"How can I serve you, señores?" he asked. "I trust Señor Bates is not worse."

"You hang onto that same trust," Bud told him. "You an' me, we're takin' a trip out to that ranch of yours."

## V.

They rode fast. Bud speculated what might have passed between Serrano and the man sent to waken him. Serrano, he had a hunch, felt entirely too confident. His hunch was confirmed by the Mexican's manner. He was not going to give Serrano a chance to destroy evidence. He could not know of the two troopers sent ahead, but he had something up his sleeve—no doubt of that.

The horses were in the corral. Serrano's features turned from deep olive to dull gray, as he saw the two Rangers come from the ranch house to the corral and heard Bud give his orders:

"You'll find tools in the shed. Take the shoes off all of 'em. An' be easy with the leather pads that are over the frogs."

Bud glanced at Serrano, grinned at his chopfallen countenance.

"Derned curious them hosses of yours should run erway twice in succession," said the Ranger. "It's a derned sight funnier they should go across unshod an' come back with shoes on. Those bronchos ain't worth more'n fifteen dollars apiece, but here they are, coddled up with pads, like they were crack racers. Plumb curious. Looked

that a way to me yestiddy when I couldn't see their frog marks, even in the thick dust."

"I know nothing of what you speak, señor." Serrano's shifty eyes roamed down the road toward town, rested on the bluffs.

"You're a pore liar, Serrano," said Bud. "Go to it, boys!"

The first horse was roped, thrown, tied, a trooper on its neck, while another wrenched and levered off the shoes.

Under every leather pad that covered the soft part of the foot, there was a flat package.

Inside these were inclosures of thin rubber, sealed envelopes filled with snowy crystals—white powder, morphine from Mexico. Four to each horse.

"I know nothing of this," protested Serrano. "It is true that I bought these horses in a trade. But some one has taken advantage of me. You know yourself, señor, that they left this side. It is not I who have shod these horses. You know yourself they were not shod when they left this place."

"Sure," said Bud. "But you *don't* know that I watched you yestiddy, when the shoes were taken off—watched you when you went inside the shed to look 'em over, mighty interested. Next time you do any tradin', Serrano—which ain't likely to be very soon—don't do it on the hoof. Collect the prisoners, boys," he added to his men. "We'll git goin'."

Devils lurked in Serrano's jetty orbs, peering out between the slitted lids. The Ranger saw them.

Halfway to Colores, the bluffs mounted on both sides of the road, forming a gradually heightening and sometimes narrowing canyon that led to the river. At its entrance there were heavy brush and several water-worn gullies.

Serrano and the peons were practically lashed to their saddles, ankles tied

to linked stirrups, wrists bound with thongs secured also to the saddle horns. They rode back of Bud, dejectedly, the troopers bringing up the rear.

Dust rose like a cloud from their going, advertising it ahead. The heat waves shimmered, making things look unreal, distorted. There was no air stirring. Bud thought he saw brush moving and looked again, to be sure it was not a mirage born of the sun.

He checked the roan, swung it, looking suddenly and sternly into the face of Serrano. There was little to read there now, but there had been something, erased swiftly, as a guilty school-boy cleans a slate. Even now, Serrano's eyes held shiftiness, a hint of malicious triumph.

Bud gave an order. Now Serrano rode between two of his men, the bridles of all three horses joined by latigo straps. If they should bolt, they would not get far without entanglement. Bud had a hunch—a very lively one—that there was going to be trouble. The card that Serrano had up his sleeve was about to be played.

"I think they're goin' to try and jump us," he said to his two men in a low tone. "We'll beat 'em to it. Look out for movin' brush. Then rush 'em. Spray ther chaparral with yore carbines, then let 'em have a dose from yore lawglegs."

The troopers grinned. They realized there was an ambush, that they were in a bad place. But they had fought better men than Serrano's would-be rescuers, had charged Yaquis lurking in cover. Now they were going to break up one surprise by another—carry the fight to the enemy.

Their carbines roared. Some one leaped in the chaparral, twisting, falling. A bush rocked violently. Bullets came whining back with spurts of fire, pale in the sunshine, betraying wisps of smoke.

It was one thing—an easy thing—to lie in the brush and pick off unsuspecting gringos as they rode past, to rescue

Serrano. But it was quite another matter with those gringos charging, their six-guns poised, shooting, as the big troop horses crashed through the bushes, leaped them, uncovering the Mexicans, who bolted like scared rabbits, seeking better cover.

Bud sent the roan hurdling toward a crouching figure. The other's bullet came so close to his cheek that it seemed actually to sear the flesh, though it did not touch it. He saw the man suddenly curl up, as his own lead went home.

A slug nipped his arm, nicked the flesh. Bud's six-gun was empty, his carbine scabbarded. The ambush was broken up. The greasers were on the run, but they were still dangerous, firing as they fled.

Bud spotted a man squatting behind a clump of low mesquite. It was the glint of the rifle he saw, rather than the man's body. It was being leveled, aimed at him.

There was no time to reload. He set spurs into Pepper's flanks, deeper than steel had ever gone before, and the roan fairly soared into the air.

The Mexican fired wildly, flung himself on one side to avoid the trampling hoofs as they came down. Bud's six-gun muzzle cracked his skull, bringing him down.

On the road, the horses of Serrano and the peons had stampeded from the rush and noise of the fight and the bullets that had swept among them in the beginning of the skirmish.

Now they were tangled in a thorny thicket. The two peons still sat their saddles erect, though they had been unable to control the frenzied mounts with their tied hands.

But Serrano was curiously slumped, twisted, his bare head limp on the mane of his horse, his body held in position by the lashing at the saddle horn. Bud did not need a second look.

"Stopped one of the bullets of his own outfit," he said, as the troopers came up. "Hawsses bolted, an' he

must hev got plumb in the way of a stray slug."

A trooper looked at the hole at the base of the skull, made a grim jest.

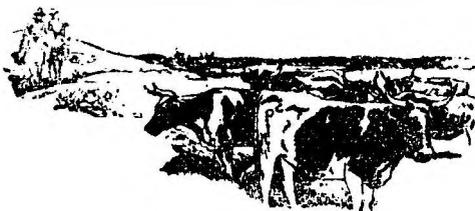
"He sure got it in the neck," he said.

Bud nodded.

"Busted his spine at the top," he announced. "That's the end of him. An' there won't be any more smugglin' in Colores. We'll send out fer those hombres we plugged in the brush an' exhibit them, with Serrano. It'll sort of discourage others an' let 'em know the

Rangers are runnin' this side of the Rio Grande."

**Mebbe the next time a Texas Ranger rides inter a certain bad town on the Mexican border, he'll be treated with more respect than Bud Jones was when he first showed up thar. 'Cause ef thar's one thing Bud insists on, it's ter have the Rangers looked upon as the friends o' law-abidin' people. Which also means that they're shore death ter them that don't know no law but the kind they try ter make themselves. Thar's soon goin' ter be another Bud Jones story in WILD WEST WEEKLY.**



### THE MARSHAL'S QUICK TURN

SHORTLY before Charlie Siringo became marshal of Caldwell, Kansas, the First National Bank was held up and its president was killed. It was found that the robbery and murder had been committed by the then marshal of Kansas and two of his deputies. A mob got after them and all three were hanged without any delay or ceremony of trial. The town was left without law and order, and the mayor, calling on Charlie, invited him to take the vacant post of marshal.

"I'll do it on one condition," said Charlie.

"What is that?" asked the mayor.

"That I don't have to wear any uniform or star," answered the former cowboy. "My pistol is all the badge of office I need."

"You just go ahead your own way," agreed the mayor. So Charlie became the law-enforcing power of the town right away.

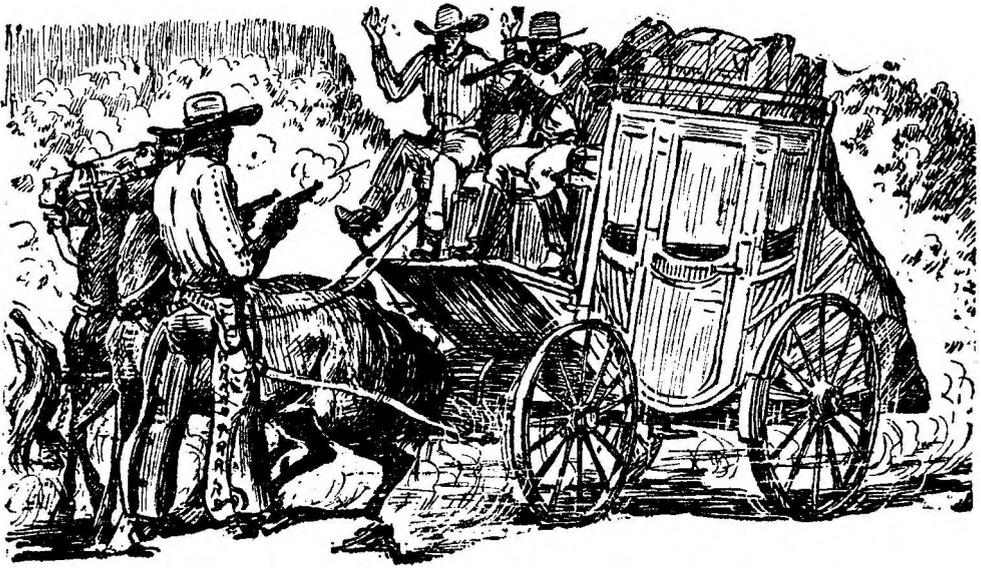
Shortly afterward, Newt Boyce, a particular friend of the new marshal, was dragged out of his bed one night and stretched at the end of a rope. He had enemies, and some one who wasn't in on the hanging party, told the marshal

that he had seen the face of a deputy sheriff, Bill Lee, with the mob.

Charlie suspected Lee of being the leader and trailed his bunch, but made no arrests. Lee soon found out that the marshal was after him, and pretty soon they were both looking for each other with itching trigger fingers.

One day Siringo went to a store to settle a bill and the manager told him to sit down at the desk in the back part of the store, where he could write a check for the amount of his account. As he sat down on a revolving chair and began to write, he saw through the back door, that was slightly ajar, Bill Lee coming for him with a sawed-off shotgun.

The chair helped the marshal to make a quick turn, for before the would-be assassin realized that his plans had gone wrong, he was looking into the muzzle of Charlie Siringo's .45. But the marshal didn't fire. He just told Lee to march out of the front door and keep moving. Then he gave him a warning. "If ever I meet you again with a gun in your hand," he said, "I'll kill you." And Bill Lee disappeared after that and never showed up again in those parts.



# Mavericks' Round-up

A "Shootin' Fool" Novelette

By Houston Irvine

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## CHAPTER I. THE HOLDUP.

**O**UT of the chaparral stepped the bandit. Twin .45s in his big, capable hands threatened the driver and guard on the stagecoach.

"Hands up!"

The two words were uttered in a cool, matter-of-fact tone. "Buck" Larnin—the driver—took one long glance at the man, dressed in more than ordinarily colorful cowboy garb, standing spread-legged in the road.

Buck's arms shot skyward.

Rod Turner tried to bring the front sight of his shotgun to bear on the highwayman. Laughter rippled from behind the blue-handkerchief mask of the robber.

A bullet from one of his revolvers, singing past Rod's ear, caused the little guard to change his mind about offer-

ing resistance. The shotgun dropped from his hands, clattered against the side of the stagecoach and fell in the dust.

"Now the box. Toss it down," the highwayman ordered.

Buck and Rod were brave men, the one tall, heavy, and ham-fisted; the other small, wiry, and quick with a gun, they formed a team which had beaten holdups before. But the calm self-assurance of the man in the road made them meek.

The money box followed the shotgun to the road.

Buck grabbed for his lines, expecting an order to proceed in a hurry. Ordinarily a robber drove a stage crew off as quickly as possible after obtaining the loot.

The highwayman appeared to be in no hurry, however. Still blocking the road with his .45s, he stood regarding

the box for a moment. Then a chuckle issued from the mask.

"Yo're smart hombres," the robber complimented the pair on top. "It's lucky for yuh that yuh didn't try to fight. Yuh don't neither one of yuh know me, does yuh?"

The driver and the guard shook their heads vigorously. Of course, it was impossible to recognize a man by his eyes only, framed between the top of a mask and the lowered brim of a sombrero.

Then, as if unconscious of his action, the highwayman took off his hat and scratched his head. Both motions were accomplished while he still held his guns in his hands.

Buck and Rod gasped, then quickly controlled themselves, lest the robber note their surprise. The men on the coach stole quick, knowing glances at each other.

Apparently, the man in the road overlooked their reaction. For another full minute, he allowed the sun to beat down on his uncovered head. Then he restored his hat to its rightful position and walked over to drag the box away from the wheels.

"Git goin'!" He waved his revolvers. "Yuh gents is shore yuh doesn't know me?"

"Naw."

"Naw."

Buck and Rod denied recognition quickly, but glanced understandingly into each other's eyes again.

"So long, gents!" the highwayman bade, fading into the thicket with the box. "Remember me to the sheriff when yuh gits to town."

Buck kept his team running for half a mile. Then he dragged the horses to a standstill, and turned in his seat to face Rod.

"Did yuh reckernize what I did?" he asked, his tone full of excitement.

"Thet yaller hair?" the guard responded, looking sad. "Shore I reckernized it. Who would ever o' think he'd turn bad?"

"Yuh never can tell. I seen young fellers go thet way afore," Buck replied, taking on some of his partner's glum demeanor.

"Lots o' guys never liked him, but he was the last feller in the world I'd ever s'pect o' turnin' holdup," Rod declared.

The driver built a cigarette, lighted it and gave the horses a slap with the lines.

"It's goin' to be a terrible blow to Sheriff Alcorn," he muttered. "I shore hates to tell him."

"Mebbe—mebbe we're mistook. Mebbe the holdup wasn't him a-tall." The guard's disbelief in his own words was obvious.

"I reckon thar ain't no 'mebbe' about it." Buck puffed smoke like a coal burner. "We both seen the hair, an' thar ain't another crop o' yaller hay like it in this hull country, is they?"

"Naw," Rod admitted. His manner suddenly changed. "Looshis Carey is a danged fool, not only a shootin' one," he raged. "Imagine any feller turnin' holdup an' advertisin' the fact like that! Guy with the yallerest hair in the hull country takes off his hat to show it after pullin' a robbery. Did yuh ever hear o' anythin' as dumb?"

"He wanted to be mighty positive we didn't recognize him, too, the crazy sap!" the driver grunted. "I come purty nigh admittin' thet I knowed him."

"Yuh would prob'ly drawed a bullet if yuh had," Rod asserted. "Any feller what's crazy enough to risk a good deputy-sheriffin' job by turnin' holdup would be purty apt to shoot yuh, if he figgered yuh would squeal."

Lucius Carey—the "Shootin' Fool Deputy"—jogged slowly down Main Street, passed the jail and turned into the yard of the neighboring livery stable.

At sight of the stagecoach halted in the lot, with its team tied, he gave a cry of surprise. Ordinarily the vehicle remained in town only long

enough to discharge and receive passengers, mail, and express.

"What's the coach waiting for?" the deputy asked the stable man.

"Holdup!" the latter replied.

"Where? When? What's the story?" Lucius was already starting to loosen his saddle cinch, but he straightened up with the task unfinished.

"Down the road a piece, about an hour ago. I don't know what happened. Driver an' guard jest busted in here, said they'd been stuck up, an' run in to see the sheriff," the stableman said.

The Shootin' Fool decided that his unsaddling could wait. Dropping his reins on the ground and taking a quick hitch at the holsters flapping at his hips, he dashed for the little office in front of the jail.

"Holdup!" he panted. "I just got in in time. Maybe Alcorn will——"

Thought and motion fled from him as he reached the doorway. Within the office, three earnestly talking men had their backs toward the deputy.

"Are yuh shore it was Looshis held yuh up?" Sheriff Alcorn's question was a groan. "That's a purty serious charge to make against a feller, 'lessn yuh are sartain o' yore facts."

"We're sartain," Buck Larnin and Rod Turner retorted at the same time.

"We seen his yaller hair. Ain't another head as yaller as thet this side o' the State line, I don't reckon," the driver hastened to explain.

Alcorn let out a loud sigh.

"Looshis may of been a shootin' fool as a deputy an' all thet," he declared, "but there ain't no man livin' can persuade me he would be a big enough fool to advertise hisself if he did turn hold-up, which fact I ain't acceptin' yet."

"Yo're jest sold on Looshis 'cause yo've sort o' brung him up sence he come out here a greeny," the guard replied. "I tell yuh thet's jest what he done—advertised hisself by pullin' off his hat an' showin' his hair."

"Course he never figgered it," Buck

put in. "He took powerful pains to ast us if we knowed him. Wanted to be purty shore we didn't."

The voices inside droned on, with Alcorn's rising now and then in sharp, doubting questions. The bald-headed sheriff was unwilling to believe the accusation against his young deputy.

The Shootin' Fool, meanwhile, went limp in the doorway as he stood there and listened to the charges of Rod and Buck.

An expression of dismay flitted across his clear, strong features. His jaw gaped. Color, caused by a mixture of surprise and embarrassment, flooded his smooth and scarcely tanned cheeks.

He took off his sombrero and ran his fingers through his hair—long golden hair.

"All right," Alcorn spoke decisively. "If what yuh gents says is true, I can't do nothin' but start a hunt for Looshis, of course."

The driver and guard of the stage emitted affirmative grunts.

"But," the sheriff went on gloomily, "it'll be a turrible day when we catch him. Folks will jest about hang him an' me both—me for havin' him around."

The expression of simple dismay on the deputy's face changed to one of fear. He put on his hat and dropped his hands reassuringly to the handles of his .45s.

A shuffling of feet told that the conference in the office was breaking up. For a second, Lucius stood undecided whether to go in and surrender to Alcorn or not. Then, hardly seeing where his feet led him, he ran back to the livery yard where his horse remained saddled and tied to the ground.

"Ugh!" He touched his throat. "The sheriff said I might hang. I won't. I'm not guilty."

Organized thought was impossible for the young deputy at that moment. In a sudden panic, all that he could think of was escape. And by the time

he came to the realization that flight was the most self-accusing move that he could make, he was several miles out of town, in the dense prickly pear.

He halted his horse and puzzled what he should do. In his mind he pictured the sheriff and Hank Rogers—the elder, veteran deputy—gathering posses to track him down. His eyes filmed as he thought of his friends.

"I guess I ought to go back and explain." He turned his horse toward town.

For a short distance, he rode in deep thought.

"Maybe I shouldn't be in any hurry about returning," he decided. "Probably if I went in right now, the citizens would get me before I had a chance to explain to the sheriff. I made the worst move I could have made when I ran out a little while ago. If nobody else saw me, the stableman can say I was in and left. Looks like I'd pretty well cinched guilt on myself."

The horse was abruptly about-faced, again headed away from town.

"What could I explain?" Lucius mused. "It's certain somebody with yellow hair held up the coach. And there isn't any hair as yellow as mine in this part of the country, except maybe that——"

He rode in circles for the following half hour, while his thought raced on a new track.

"I haven't even seen him, or anybody else down here has, I reckon. But his hair's yellow—as yellow as mine. And he's the kind of a gent who would hold up a stagecoach."

The Shootin' Fool was referring to the "Del Rio Kid." Lucius, in a way, felt acquainted with the Kid, although the latter was a stranger in the pear country.

The Kid had a reputation as a gunman and killer which had spread far beyond the town of Del Rio. Furthermore, he had yellow hair, which was as notorious as his gunwork and almost as famous as Lucius' golden thatch.

On one occasion, when spying on rival gangs of rustlers, the Shootin' Fool had won his way into the councils of the crooks by allowing himself to be mistaken for the northern gunman. Similarity of hair had accomplished that, since none of the rustlers had seen the Del Rio Kid and knew him only by description.

"If the Del Rio Kid is down here holding up stagecoaches, I've got to get him before the posses get me," the deputy concluded. Then he laughed, "The Kid and I are about even, I reckon. I play myself off as him, and he turns around and makes folks think he is me.

"Get up, horse! We've got to move pronto before he plugs some hombre and draws me a real hanging sentence."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE KID.

NOT having counted on being stampeded from town, Lucius lacked food for an extended stay in the thicket. He had been riding several hours before he thought of that predicament, however. By then, the shadows of night were falling.

In a wild country, fairly teeming with deer, quail, and other game, the deputy discovered that it was too late that day to shoot any.

Of course, a fast of a few hours never really hurt any man. But the Shootin' Fool, who in town would have gone to bed without his supper if he was too excited over anything to remember it, might have been starving. It was the fact that he could not get food that helped to make him so hungry.

"Golly!" he groaned, as the last glow of the sun seemed to flicker out beyond the western pear. "I'll have to raid a ranch for something to eat, if I get much hungrier. I haven't had a bite since morning. It feels like the front of my stomach was rubbing against my backbone."

Several times, lights gleamed at distances. Lucius gazed at them hungrily, tempted to ride up to the houses and ask for supper. Knowledge that he might be shot, if word of his being wanted had been spread, kept him away from the habitations, however.

Unrest and the feeling of hunger kept him riding slowly throughout the night.

Not knowing even where the stage holdup had occurred, the youth had no trail to follow. Something of the futility of his search for the Del Rio Kid under such circumstances crossed his mind frequently. But he kept on drifting, more west than south, because he was unable to figure anything else to do.

Meanwhile, led by Alcorn and Hank Rogers, men from town undoubtedly were scouring the wilderness for Lucius.

"Dog-gone it!" the young deputy said rebelliously about dawn. "Every mile I ride, I see all the more clearly what a pickle I've got myself in. I reckon I haven't got the ghost of a show of finding the Del Rio Kid, just riding around aimlessly. And every minute I've stayed out has made going back to town more risky. I'll bet any posse that's out looking for me would start shooting before I got within a hundred yards."

To Lucius' notion, having got himself in the mess, the only way out was to find the outlaw who looked like him. That might happen after several days, or never. And food, meanwhile, was growing hourly more essential.

The Shootin' Fool wisely decided against trying to bring down a deer with his six-guns.

"Quail's next best, I guess," he declared. "I think I'll shoot one or two of the birds for my breakfast."

To one accustomed to hunting quail, the foolishness of going after the birds with a pair of .45s would have been apparent at once. Lucius might have

knocked one over if he could have sneaked up on it, but he failed to do that.

Coveys whirred up from almost beneath his horse's hoofs. The deputy blazed away, but the birds always dodged the bullets. Sometimes the birds settled after short flights. Lucius pursued them, thus burning powder at the same bunches time after time.

After he had been shooting over an hour and through nearly a square mile of prickly-pear thicket, the youth gave it up.

"Whew!" he panted, flushed of face and aching hollowly. "I never knew birds were so hard to hit. It looks as if I wasn't going to have fowl for breakfast, after all."

Lucius checked up on his cartridges. He discovered that he had very nearly emptied his belt while hunting. For a moment that worried him more than did his shortage of food.

Then a dove winged down on a bough not more than forty feet away.

"There's my breakfast," the young man sighed in relief. "Whoa, horse! Hold still, bird!"

Lucius dismounted to make certain of his shot. Resting the barrel of one of his revolvers on the saddle, he aimed it as carefully as he would have done a rifle, and fired over the horse's back.

"Whoa!" He grabbed the startled horse's bit, at the same instant that he looked and saw that the dove had disappeared.

Half fearful that the bird had flown away instead of being blown away, the deputy ran to the spot.

On the ground were the remains of the dove—an ugly little pile of torn feathers, broken bones, and flesh.

"Huh!" the Shootin' Fool decided, feeling sorry for the bird. "I reckon I don't want any breakfast, after all. It would appear that a .45 bullet bores too big a hole for dove hunting. If I'd had the sense to aim at its head, I might have saved enough to eat."

The deputy reloaded his gun and

thrust it back into its holster. He was halfway to his horse when a noise a short way to one side made him halt, with his hands dropping back toward his holsters.

"Stick 'em up!" a voice ordered.

Lucius' fingers touched his gun handles. A bullet from ambush fanned the air beside his left ear.

"Stick 'em up, I said!" the voice commanded.

The Shootin' Fool thought quickly, sickeningly:

"The posse has caught up. Ready to shoot me, too. I won't have a chance to explain anything. I might as well go down fighting as to get strung up for a crime I never committed."

The Shootin' Fool acted. Ignoring the command of another bullet sailing past his head, his hands swept out his guns. Rapidly fired slugs ripped through the pear behind which the foe was hiding.

A grunt told of the enemy's surprise.

"You'll never take me alive!" Lucius yelled, fanning more shots into the brush.

The deputy's triggers suddenly halted in mid-action. Like a poled beef, the youth pitched forward on his face. The hot pistols sailed from his hands and fell to the earth.

The victor of the gun fight stepped out of hiding, lowered his mask and walked calmly to where Lucius lay.

The toe of one decorated boot nudged the fallen deputy. Failing to arouse Lucius in that way, the assailant turned him over on his back, fetched a canteen and splashed water liberally on his face.

In a few minutes, the shootin' Fool's eyes flickered.

"Wh-what——" he groped for words.

"Take it easy, buddy," the other cautioned, pressing the deputy back and holding the canteen to his lips. "Yuh ain't hurt much. Bullet jest scratched the top o' yore head."

"A bullet—scratched the top of my

head?" Lucius felt gingerly of his slightly torn scalp. He saw his punctured hat on the ground several feet away.

"Yeah, yuh crazy coot!" The stranger grinned. "Yuh ought ter had better sense'n to go for yore guns when yuh knowed I had yuh covered from ambush. Any other guy would probably 'a' killed yuh, 'stead o' jest creasin' yuh."

The Shootin' Fool lay quiet, staring up at the blue heavens, while his aching brain struggled to figure out what had happened.

A choking feeling arose in his throat. He rolled over and faced his assailant, who had walked over and was inspecting the deputy's horse.

"Aren't you a posse man?" the young officer asked.

The other wheeled with a laugh. He pushed back his sombrero and stared at Lucius quizzically.

"Oh!" the deputy's eyes widened as they glimpsed the light-yellow hair under the hat brim. "You're—you're the Del Rio Kid!"

"Yeah." The Kid grinned. "An' I knows yuh. Yo're Carey—the Shootin' Fool Deputy—what done me dirt by posin' as me with them rustlers. I swore I was goin' to git even."

Lucius cringed in fear of a bullet. But the feeling was quickly dispelled.

"Purty smart, ain't I?" the Northern bandit guffawed. "Showin' yuh that two kin work the same gag, ain't I? It saves me a heap o' trouble, too, to pull my stick-ups an' have the posses lookin' for another feller—a smart depity, at that."

The Shootin' Fool was ready to agree that the other had chosen a clever way of turning the tables.

"What did you waylay me here for?" he demanded.

The Del Rio Kid started out of his enjoyment of the situation and glanced quickly about him.

"I heard yuh shootin' all over the thicket," he said.

"I was hunting breakfast." Lucius nodded.

"I needed a hoss. Mine went lame, so I come to git yores," the Kid explained. "I'll be goin' 'fore some o' the posse what prob'ly heard yuh shootin', too, arrives."

The Shootin' Fool glanced at his guns, which the other had made no attempt to recover from the ground. The Kid saw the look.

"Naw, I ain't goin' to take yore guns." He smiled. "Jest yore hoss. Yo're liable to need yore guns too bad when the posse catches up with yuh." He lowered his voice confidentially, "An' say, if I was yuh, I wouldn't go bangin' around like yuh was doin' when yuh was huntin' breakfast. Yo're bound to attract somebody else, jest like yuh done me. Yo're too valuable to me, takin' the guilt like yuh does. I don't want to see yuh git yore neck stretched."

Lucius leaped for his guns. The Kid was already in the saddle, plunging away through the thicket. His laughter floated back to the deputy.

"I'm a goner!" The Shootin' Fool shuddered over the fate that seemed to be in store for him. "Horse gone, cartridges pretty nearly gone, posse hunting me. Good night!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE MAVERICKS.

LUCIUS arrived at the realization that, sitting there on the ground, he formed an easy object for capture by a posse.

Walking in that wilderness might be little better, but at least it was movement. Hunger was forgotten, but a desperation greater than that of hunger momentarily tormented the youth.

He threw it off with an effort. At once, anger replaced the feeling of hopelessness.

"Dog-gone it! I *will* catch that Del Rio Kid yet," the deputy wrathfully asserted. "I may be afoot and just two

jumps ahead of a posse myself, but I'm going to catch up with that hombre. I'm not going to let him get by with the things he's done to me."

Lucius started on the trail of the bandit. Before he had gone a mile, with his high heels sinking into the soft sandy soil at every step, he was beginning to suffer. Another mile, with the sun making the thicket hotter every moment, and he began to realize that he could not hope to catch the Kid, who was mounted.

The Shootin' Fool raged impotently at the heat, the clawing thicket, his own impetuous and useless actions, and the Del Rio Kid.

"That fellow doesn't look like me, except his hair and maybe his general build," he snorted. "He's three or four years older than I am, with a face hard enough to bust a looking-glass."

By the time blisters decorated his feet, Lucius decided that he would have to seek some other plan than trailing the Kid on foot.

"Hanging couldn't be much more painful than this walking in a pair of hot high-heeled boots," he groaned. "About another hour of it, and I'll be willing to give myself up to the first posse that comes along. I might even go to town, if I could get there, to surrender."

Thirst then began to add its torture, since the Kid had taken the canteen. The hungry feeling also returned. The pain of the minor wound on Lucius' head multiplied itself a thousand times. It was sultry, breathless in the pear, and the deputy felt that he was beginning to go a little mad.

"I—I—I can't make it!" he groaned. "Can't ever catch the Kid this way. Got to try to make town—or a ranch. Got to—got to try to find one or the other!"

The Shootin' Fool abandoned all plans. More by instinct than reason, he sought out landmarks and turned himself toward Cotulla. He had but one hope. Somewhere along the way,

he might come across a ranch, might obtain a horse, or at least water.

Lucius lost all realization of hours. Again and again during his dry, tortured wandering, he wished that a posse would come. The excruciating pain of his blistered feet gave way to dull, constant torment. A few miles more, and the deputy must collapse.

It was nearly sundown—the end of another day.

"Goin' to lie down—take nap—wait for moon." the young man muttered crazily.

He stumbled. He lay where he fell, oblivious to the roughness of his bed.

"Um!" His lips moved, but his voice was scarcely a dreamy whisper. "This is good. Never thought I'd get home to bed again. Goin' sleep——"

The words trailed off. In a second, the Shootin' Fool would have been dead to the world. All thoughts of the Del Rio Kid, posses, and physical pain would have been forgotten in the unconsciousness of sleep. But that sleep, famished and racked as he was, might have been one from which Lucius would not have awakened.

Suddenly gun shots split the quiet of the thicket. The reports were far off, and the deputy merely stirred on his earthen couch and smiled.

The firing swept nearer. Volley after volley boomed out. Lucius sat upright, clutching at his own weapons.

For a few minutes, the deputy wondered whether he was alive or not. In paradise, the music which he would have wanted to hear would have been the roar of six-guns rather than the strains of harps.

Then he pinched himself and realized that he was very much alive. The firing acted as a tonic upon his frayed nerves. With a couple of heartfelt groans, he lurched to his feet and limped away in the direction whence the noise of battle came.

It sounded like a regular young war, sweeping back and forth over a radius of perhaps a quarter of a mile.

The Shootin' Fool's rapidly clearing senses told him that the firing was being done by horsemen, who were probably chasing something back and forth through the thicket.

A moment's calm thought might have warned the deputy that the best thing he could do would be to lie low. Actually, he suffered acute disappointment when the battle moved abruptly away.

Another sudden shift swept the guns back toward him. Nearer and yet nearer the shooting came. Below the roar of .45s, Lucius caught the noise of horses plunging through the thicket.

"Thar he goes!" a man yelled.

"Headin' yore way!" another cried. "Nail him!"

"He's turnin'! Plug him!" a third bellowed.

A slug ripped through the brush two feet from the Shootin' Fool. He leaped, looking vainly for a target.

"Here he is!" a voice rang out near by, to be followed by half a dozen shots, some of which nearly struck Lucius.

"Posse, huh?" The deputy groaned. "I didn't think they were hunting me!"

His eyes darted back and forth, searching for foes that did not appear.

A shriek came. Lucius limped cautiously toward the spot.

"Don't! Don't! It's a mix-up! Let me go! I tell yuh——"

The deputy tried to place the voice which screamed out.

"Tell us, nothin'!" a man laughed. "We captured yuh. Yuh don't need to try no alibi. Where'll we take him, gang?"

"Ol' Double Diamond's gate is a good—built for the business," some one answered.

With their prisoner screaming oaths and pleas, the horsemen moved away. The Shootin' Fool, running as fast as his aching limbs would carry him, arrived in time to see the last of a small procession twist out of sight in a lane of the thicket.

The deputy followed. He was puz-

zled over what was happening. If the man hunters had been a posse from town, how did it happen that he was not in the place of that shrieking fellow up ahead?

Something had been said about the Double Diamond gate. Lucius had passed the ranch on the Laredo road many times.

"The Double Diamond gate," he pondered. "What's peculiar about it? What did that fellow mean when he said it was built for the business? What business?"

The Shootin' Fool quickened his pace, as a mental image of the gate in question came to him. His hands gripped his guns, and his lips set in a firm line.

The mounted men ahead were gaining. The screams of the prisoner were getting farther and farther away.

"Gosh! I hope I get there in time," the deputy muttered, ignoring blisters, as his feet raced along the trail.

A scream louder, more terrifying than the rest sent a chill down Lucius' spine. Another fusillade of shots, and the youth realized that his guns were too late.

Stumbling, with revolvers outthrust, he burst from the thicket onto the Laredo road. The gate of the Double Diamond was two hundred yards away, on the opposite side of the highway.

Men on horseback milled there.

"Pin the note on him an' cl'ar out!" the leader barked.

In a moment the riders wheeled. Lucius saw what he had feared to see.

As fast as he could pull the triggers, his guns belched lead at the horsemen. One of the riders lurched and started to slide from his saddle. Two companions seized him and held him upright. Then the whole crew swept down the road, away from the Shootin' Fool. The latter strode forward tremblingly.

The gate of the Double Diamond was one of those high-posted structures with a piece across the top. It might have been built for a gallows.

Dangling at the end of a rope was a yellow-haired youth—the Del Rio Kid. He was dead, his body riddled by a score of bullets.

At first, Lucius thought that the hanging was the work of a posse which had been hunting the stage bandit. Poses did not leave notes pinned on their victims' breasts, however, and the Shootin' Fool reached up to seize a square of paper. The note read:

This is the way we treats Shootin Fools an meddlin deppities. We ain't scairt o neither.  
THE MAVERICKS GANG.

"Whew!" Lucius fanned his yellow hair with his hat. "Another mix-up in identity. I guess, Kid, I'm more than even. I pretty nearly got hanged because I was mistaken for you. And you got the noose when a gang of crooks mistook you for me, an honest deputy."

He paused a second, then went on:

"Some folks will say, Kid, that your hanging's a good thing. I'm not denying that maybe it is. But those Mavericks—they're a new gang down here. They are going to pay dearly for murdering you. Ugh! It came darned close to being me!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE TRAIL OF THE GANG.

LUCIUS CAREY, the Shootin' Fool Deputy, shuddered at the thing hanging on the crossbar. Lucius had looked upon death before, but never with a greater shock. The body swaying there in the slight breeze of the great pear thicket was supposed to be his own.

In his hand, the young deputy held the note. He perused it for the dozenth time.

Lucius stared pityingly at the corpse, which the stranglers had riddled with bullets. A look of cold determination settled on the deputy's boyish features. He uncovered his shining yellow thatch—hair like that of the man who had

been hanged—and stood reverently for a minute.

"Yes, sir," the Shootin' Fool spoke to the corpse, "I reckon I'm more than even for all the trouble you caused me. Your getting the noose that was intended for me wipes out a lot of scores. Actually, I suppose hanging's what you deserve—what you would have got, anyway, if you dodged bullets long enough. But I am going to run down the skunks who did it."

The deputy paused for a second. A half smile flitted across his lips.

"I—I guess I won't only be avenging you, Kid," he went on. "I'll sort of be avenging myself, since the rope around your neck was knotted for mine."

The Del Rio Kid had been hanged by a bunch of desperadoes who had mistaken him for the deputy sheriff. The mix-up in reality had started months before, when Lucius, running down gangs of cattle rustlers, had been mistaken for the Kid. Accepting the identity thrust upon him, the Shootin' Fool had been able to bring about the downfall of the rustlers.

The face of the youthful gunman hanging on the gate was hard even in death. The Shootin' Fool, on the other hand, was pink-cheeked, innocent-looking, with the appearance of a pilgrim, despite the numerous notches he had carved on the handles of his .45s.

"Well, I'd better be starting after that outfit, the dirty stranglers!" the deputy said, by way of farewell to the deceased Kid.

Lucius knew that he should cut down the body and report the hanging. Still, the fact that posses might be pushing a hunt for him in connection with the stage holdup decided him against taking so much time.

The deputy wanted to take his own time, have his innocence established before he met trailers, most of whom could be counted upon to shoot first and give him a chance to explain afterward.

"I'll leave things like they are here," he declared. "Somebody from the

Double Diamond can discover the body, if some of the posses chasing me fail to."

He started to pin the note back where he had found it. Reading it once more, he crumpled it up and thrust it in his own pocket.

"I'll be darned if I'll leave a thing like that," he muttered. "I'll keep that note to myself. I don't want everybody around this neck of the woods calling me the man who was hung. My name—the Shootin' Fool—is bad enough."

The deputy's horse, which the Del Rio Kid had appropriated out in the thicket and from the back of which the unfortunate gunman had been jerked to death, stood with reins dragging in the road.

Lucius went to it. He had one foot in the stirrup when he remembered that he had spent most of his ammunition.

"I'm sorry," he apologized to the defunct Kid, "but I'll have to borrow some cartridges. I—I don't reckon you'll need them, while maybe I'll have plenty of use for .45 bullets."

Trembling a little as he emptied the dead man's belt, the deputy filled the loops of his own. Then he mounted and fed the spurs to his horse.

Lucius did not take another backward glance.

"Gosh!" he thought. "I'd surely like to go up to the Double Diamond and get a drink of water and a bite to eat. But I guess I'd better pound along. I've got two jobs to do, and it's going to be hard to make them balance with each other. I've got to catch these Mavericks, whoever they are. And I've got to be dodging a posse while I'm doing it. If I could just get the one job chasing the other——"

The Shootin' Fool reined abruptly from the road, as a couple of Double Diamond cowboys came by on their way home from town. They still had a long way to go, since the Double Diamond buildings sat back several miles from the front gate.

"What a surprise those fellows are going to get!" Lucius could not restrain a slight grin. "About the time they pass the next clump of pear, they'll see it. I'm going to dig spurs away before somebody tries to tack that hanging on me."

Lucius had not eaten since the day before. Lack of water had added to his misery while he had been pursuing the Del Rio Kid on foot. The flesh inside his tight-fitting, high-heeled boots was blistered and raw from his unaccustomed walking.

In fact, the Shootin' Fool had not been far from complete collapse when the sounds of the gunman's capture had aroused him. Determined to run down the slayers, all thoughts of hunger, thirst, and personal pain were forgotten for a while.

The deputy was relieved when he found the place where the Mavericks had turned off the highway into the brush. Lucius felt that he had a better chance to follow the hoofprints of the horses in the chaparral than on the beaten route.

Pushing his horse as rapidly as the animal could stand, after almost thirty-six hours of wearing leather, the Shootin' fool dashed along the trail.

"Gee!" he declared several times. "These fellows I'm chasing sure are dumb. They don't know the first thing about concealing their trail. It's plain as day."

The trailing continued for several hours. In the excitement of the day, the young man had forgotten all about time. With his eyes riveted on those tracks stretching out before him, he did not once look at the sun until he was entering a small gulch.

It was already darker in the depression than it had been in the main thicket.

"It's pretty near night." Lucius gave a start. "Isn't but a little piece of the sun showing above the pear. Get up, horse! We've got to move fast now—

catch the murderers before we lose their trail on account of darkness."

For fifty yards, the floor of the dry glen was sand. The prints of the horses were easily seen.

Then the bottom changed to rock.

"Trail's gone," Lucius groaned, dismounting hastily.

On his hands and knees, with his led horse almost stepping on him as it moved along behind, the deputy prospected the rock for sign, and found it—stones marked by hurrying shod hoofs; tufts of dwarf pear ground underfoot; a print in the pebbly sand between two rocks.

"I'll catch them! Just let me get over this rocky place, and I'll make time," Lucius panted.

In the thicket, the sun seems to drop away all at once, like a big rock falling into the sea without a splash.

The deputy raised his head from his trailing. A thin segment of the sun was still visible to the west. Then it vanished. The half light in the gulch began to change to blackness.

"I don't reckon I need the trail," Lucius asserted hopefully. "Guess the Mavericks couldn't have gone any way but straight down it, unless they climbed out over the sides."

His optimism was short-lived, however. Mounting and riding ahead through the thickening gloom, he found that the wash opened out within a quarter of a mile. The murderers again might have traveled in any direction.

"Well, I guess I'll have to go back and camp on those rocks," the Shootin' Fool decided sorrowfully. "I'll pick up the trail in the morning again. But I'd hoped to catch up with the crooks in a little while."

For half an hour, he displayed the patience of a burro, sitting on one of the larger stones and trying to keep awake.

Then consciousness of his old hunger and thirst began to return. His abused feet felt as if they were on fire. When he moved, he realized that there was

not a muscle in his body that did not ache.

Discomfort contrived to keep the deputy awake. Combined with the sort of spirit that ever tended to make Lucius active, they proceeded to make him extremely restless, dissatisfied with waiting there for the morrow's sun to show the way.

"Maybe I could find the men I'm after if I sort of scouted around among the crooks I know," the youth thought. "But a wise trailer would probably stay right here."

For a time, impetuosity and reason battled in Lucius' brain. The first won the argument, as was generally the case with the Shootin' Fool.

"Tracking, when you've got to wait all night without moving an inch, may be sure, but it's too slow," he decided. "I'd get the willies if I had to camp on these rocks till sunup."

The deputy's new plan had some logic in it, at that. He figured that he knew a number of suspicious characters in the neighborhood, any or all of whom might be members of the Mavericks gang.

The organization of crooks was a new one to the officers of the prickly-pear country. That did not necessarily mean that the members of it were from the outside, since the quick-triggered local gentry were constantly changing their scheme of things.

At least three exceedingly suspicious characters whom Lucius knew by reputation could not live very far away. One was a former convict, whom Sheriff Alcorn had sent up for manslaughter years before. Another was a horse thief, who had often been arrested, but had escaped conviction. The third was a gunman, who so far had always been able to get freedom on his self-defense plea that the other fellows drew first.

Those three were the first ones the deputy determined to visit.

"City police use that method," Lucius told himself. "I've read about it.

When a crime is committed, the cops always know a lot of guys who might have done it. They always go after the suspicious characters first, I reckon."

Renewed hope surged high in the Shootin' Fool's breast as he rode out of the gully.

It took some little riding in the thicket to determine his directions. But in less than an hour, he got himself straightened out, and he set off confidently for the place of Mose Gartland, the ex-convict.

## CHAPTER V.

### SUSPECTS.

THE night was balmy, the darkness velvety.

The Shootin' Fool saw a light far off in the thicket and rode toward it.

Riding unannounced up to the door of an honest man is reckless enough in desperate country. Approaching the house of one who has already served a term for manslaughter is doubly dangerous. Blithely careless in his resolve to question Mose Gartland, Lucius did not stop to consider danger.

He and his horse made enough noise just traveling through the chaparral, trampling down brush, colliding against bushes, and snorting with pain as the barbs of mesquite or pear pricked their living flesh.

Mose had the protection of a wire fence around his shack. The deputy could not see it in the darkness, and rode his horse into it.

The taut wire resounded. The startled horse plunged. A hoof struck against a post.

"What's the matter with you, horse?" Lucius strained his eyes to see what was causing the delay.

The light in the house had been extinguished at the first sound from outside.

The Shootin' Fool dismounted and groped around until he felt the wire. He was leading his horse in the hope of finding a gate, when a voice at his elbow gave him a start.

"Who are yuh? What yuh doin' hyar?" was demanded.

"Oh, er——" Lucius murmured dis-jointedly.

"Speak up!" The man on the other side of the fence prodded the deputy with the muzzle of a rifle which he carried. "I'm Carey—Deputy Sheriff Carey," the youth hastened to state.

"Yeah!" Mose's voice was sneering. "What yuh want hyar? Ain't yuh got no better sense'n tuh sneak up on a guy in the night? If I was feeling guilty or anythin', I would 'a' plugged yuh quicker'n yuh could o' said 'Jack Robinson.' In fact, I might start shoot-in' now, if yuh doesn't explain pronto."

The ex-convict's tone held nothing of the emotion that might have been expected of one confronting the man he had hanged. Mose did not seem surprised to learn that Lucius was alive.

That fact alone upset the deputy. But he briefly told why he had come on the nocturnal visit.

The former time-server roared with laughter.

"Tryin' tuh put me through the third degree, huh?" he cried. "Thunk I was the feller fixed that necktie for yuh, did yuh? Waal, deputy, yuh shore barked up the wrong tree when yuh come tuh my place."

The Shootin' Fool decided that interview was something of a failure.

"I reckon I was mistaken," he apologized.

"I reckon yuh was." Mose sailed off into another gust of laughter. Then he grew serious and poked Lucius' ribs with the gun again. "Now, young feller, yuh git goin' 'fore I shoots. Yuh better be mighty keerful how yuh goes up tuh other fellers' houses in the middle o' the night."

The deputy got started without delay. Ned Scanlon—the horse thief—lived about three miles away.

"I don't believe Gartland had anything to do with—my hanging," Lucius said, satisfied with his first inquisition.

He took more pains to approach the

second place quietly. Scanlon holed up in a one-room shack which perched precariously on the edge of the quicksand traps of Culebra Creek.

Because of the sand at his back, the horse thief only had to guard his hearth in one direction. The deputy, advancing the last twenty-five yards softly on foot, got clear to the door before he was discovered.

"Who's thar?" the lean, leathery brown man inside the cabin bellowed, reaching for a six-gun and the lamp at the same time.

"Lucius Carey, the deputy sheriff," the youth replied.

Scanlon relaxed visibly, although his right hand still hovered near his gun butt and the left was ready to tip over the lamp on an instant's notice.

"Waal, come in, Looshis," the shack owner invited. "I don't know what yuh could be wantin', an' officers ain't particularly welcome here never. If yo're lookin' for any missin' hosses this time, I ain't seen the critters."

The Shootin' Fool stepped inside gratefully. He felt that he could hold his own better in interviewing Scanlon in the light than he had in talking to Gartland in the dark.

"Scanlon," Lucius went directly to the point, speaking in an accusing voice, "were you in that gang that hanged—er—another fellow, thinking it was me?"

The horse thief looked at the deputy in blank astonishment. Then, as Mose had done, he burst into gales of laughter.

"It's not funny," the deputy asserted, blushing red to his yellow hair roots.

"Haw-haw-haw!" Scanlon had a hard time controlling his mirth. "It is funny. Here yuh been supposed to be hanged, but yo're settin' thar accusin' me of it. Go on, tell me the rest."

Bitterly the Shootin' Fool recited his story in detail. The only effect which it seemed to have on the horse thief was to amuse him.

"Naw, kid." He grinned at the end.

"I never had nothin' to do with yore hangin'."

"It wasn't my hanging. I'm here." Lucius defended the well-being of his neck.

"It's a good story," Scanlon retorted. "If I hear another one like it, I'm liable to begin likin' deputy sheriffs. Now yuh better vamose, unless yuh wants to sleep here."

Riding on through the prickly pear in the direction of "Slim" Mason's—his third suspicious character—the Shootin' Fool began to wonder whether his inquisition method of detecting was so efficient.

Although he had seen Gartland and Scanlon—been more questioned than questioning—he was not certain that they were not mixed up in the Mavericks gang. He had no way of knowing that they were telling the truth when they denied their parts in the hanging.

"Furthermore," the deputy nursed his disappointment, "I'm running into the danger of getting shot every time I approach one of these houses in the dark. I don't like to warn the suspects so that they'll have time to flee. But I reckon I'd better start hollering before I get up to Slim Mason's place."

It was close to midnight when the dwelling of the third suspicious character was reached. Lucius announced his presence with a series of whoops that might have been calculated to raise the dead.

"Hi, open up! It's Lucius Carey—the deputy from Cotulla. I want to talk to you, Mason," he bawled.

For a moment after the Shootin' Fool shut up, silence hung over that part of the thicket.

"He's probably got to get out of bed and light a lamp before he lets me in," Lucius thought.

When, after several minutes, no answer came from the cabin, he nudged his horse forward.

"Git away from hyar!" a bellow nearly startled him out of his saddle.

"I ain't done nothin'. I don't want no truck with deputy sheriffs."

An orange flash stabbed the darkness. The Shootin' Fool felt the rush of air as a bullet sang past his head.

Third degree No. 3 ended with the officer in full flight.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE OLD FLEMING PLACE.

"SHUCKS!" Lucius' tone was laden with disgust. "That idea didn't work worth a hang. I don't know a bit more now than I did when I started. I'd better go back to that ravine and wait for daylight, so that I can pick up the trail."

In his excitement over putting his third-degree plan into effect, he had paid scant attention to the location of the gulch. He realized that finding the cleft in the darkness would be next to impossible.

The hungry and thirsty feelings returned with renewed vigor. They kept the deputy moving restlessly. When he took time to forget about his torment, he thought about the chase.

"Gartland, Scanlon, and Mason couldn't have had anything to do with the hanging," he began to reason. "They weren't at all shocked to see me—except maybe Mason, and his voice didn't sound like it. Men who had hanged a fellow would be bound to show some surprise if the fellow later popped in on them. I reckon, like Gartland said, I was barking up the wrong tree—three trees."

Lucius rode a little longer, and another idea intruded itself.

"Furthermore," he thought aloud, "the stranglers must have been strangers in the pear country. I should have thought of this yesterday. I've been around here long enough so that the local desperadoes all know me. There's not one of them could have mistaken the Del Rio Kid for me."

The Shootin' Fool's pride swelled with that bit of logic.

"And the hangers couldn't be such very experienced gangsters, either. Any regular gunman is bound to have heard of the Del Rio Kid, and wouldn't take a chance on stringing him up so quick."

Forgotten was disappointment over the failure of his last idea.

"What I ought to do," Lucius concluded, "is to figure out who's new around this part of the country. Not a crook, either. Probably a rancher or a hired hand or somebody who hasn't anything but the idea of organizing a gang. Somebody with ambition to be a tough crook, who thought the quickest way to get a reputation was by doing away with an officer."

The deputy tried to recall if he had seen or heard of any strangers in that section. For a long time, the result of his thinking was nothing.

Finally he happened to remember snatches of a conversation he had heard a few days before between Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers—the lank, black-mustached, tobacco-chewing elder deputy in the Cotulla office.

"Thar's a new outfit moved in on the old Fleming place," Hank had said. "Four or five fellers what don't look none too good."

"Outlaws?" the sheriff had snapped.

"Don't reckon so hardly," the veteran deputy had drawled in reply. "Just triflin', no-'count, po' white trash. Prob'ly got ambitions to be desperate, but too lazy to be."

The old Fleming place, Lucius knew, was only a few miles from where he was riding.

With plenty of time before dawn, the deputy reached the vicinity of the ranch and waited for the skies to brighten. He had no particular plan in mind, although he hoped to confront the suspects and force a show-down.

"Maybe my third-degree method will work this time," he consoled himself.

Gray light filtering through the green wilderness of the prickly pear showed him what he had ridden so far to find.

The old Fleming place was little more than a name.

Once one of the flourishing ranches of the region, it had been sold and resold a number of times. Each successive owner had been more careless than the preceding. The house was in sad need of repair and paint. The barn and outbuildings were similarly neglected.

It hardly appeared that the place could be occupied. But horses were stirring in a wire corral.

"About the sort of a place to find shiftless, no-account fellows," was the Shootin' Fool's comment.

He was afraid that the horses in the corral would reveal his presence if he rode his own mount too close. Despite his lessons of the night about approaching houses unheralded, Lucius was determined to make this visit a surprise.

He tied his horse to a mesquite limb and went forward on foot. Nervous hands tested the .45s in his holsters.

"I don't know who I'm running up against," he murmured. "These may not be the men who hanged the Kid. But I'm going to ask my questions, if I've got to keep them listening with my guns."

The chaparral, growing back over what had once been cleared land, extended almost to the door of the house. Lucius, sneaking as silently as possible, was almost to the door.

Suddenly it opened.

The Shootin' Fool, thinking himself trapped, sprang back into the brush, his guns trained steadily on the man who emerged from the house.

The fellow was tall and strongly knit. But his face was singularly lacking in intelligence. His chin was that of a weakling, and he breathed with his mouth open. Dressed in shabby range clothing, he wore a pair of six-guns—rather awkwardly, Lucius thought.

The man yawned and stretched. Toward the movement which the deputy made in the chaparral, he evinced only the interest that an early riser might

show when a jack rabbit bounds out of his front yard. He did not draw his guns, and the Shootin' Fool somewhat relaxed the grip on his.

The fellow walked to the corral. It was apparent that he was only on an early-morning ramble.

In a moment, that belief of the deputy was confirmed by the appearance of a shorter, more intelligent-looking man in the door.

"Come ter breakfast, Mert!" the second fellow called to the first.

"Yep." The one at the corral started back. "How's Jerry? Feelin' any better this mawnin'?"

"He ain't so good," was the reply. "Shoulder's busted, I reckon. Mebbe tore up otherwise. I wish we dared have a doc."

Both of the men returned into the house and shut the door.

Lucius hesitated but for a minute or two.

"That Jerry fellow," he thought, as he raced across the open space. "I'll bet he's the one I shot. Fact they don't dare get a doctor shows he wasn't hurt honestly."

The Shootin' Fool could not have had a more opportune time to stage his play than while the men were at breakfast. Satisfied that they were safe from pursuit, they were taken completely by surprise when the front door burst open and Lucius stood framed there.

Four men were seated at a table. Coffee, bread, and a stew composed of meat and beans comprised their breakfast. One of the men had a flour sack tied around him. He was the cook, and a beefy, red-faced one, at that.

The two whom he had seen outside drew scant attention from the deputy. But the fourth man—a slight, nervous person with more brains than all the rest put together—appeared dangerous. He was sly.

While his partners looked with dismay at the .45s which the Shootin' Fool held menacingly, his hands slid toward his own holsters.

"Are you the Mavericks?" Lucius blurted the question.

A surprised look swept the faces before him.

"Mavericks?" The leader killed time while his fingers closed about the handles of his guns. "Naw. What's them?"

"Gang of stranglers. Hung a man yesterday," the deputy explained, every second feeling less sure of his ground.

"Who are yuh?" the little man asked.

"Lucius Carey—the Cotulla deputy," the Shootin' Fool replied.

Instantly a change swept over the quartet at the table.

"The Shootin' Fool?" the cook gasped, the color draining from his face.

"We hung yuh—yuh ain't him!" the man who had summoned Mert to breakfast cried.

"A ghost!" shrieked the weak-minded bandit. "Let me out o' hyar!"

"I'm the man you thought you hanged." Lucius grinned. "Sit still, all of you. I'll drill——"

The balance of his threat was drowned in the roar of a six-gun.

A bullet struck the door casing an inch from the deputy's head. The slight gangster held a smoking six-gun in his hand.

Lucius' right revolver spat. The gunman dropped his weapon with a scream, whirled half around and fell to the floor.

"Any more?" the Shootin' Fool barked.

The others were satisfied with the exhibition of gun play that had already been given. They herded like cattle. Lucius directed them to catch horses and load themselves and their two wounded companions for the trip to jail.

Setting his course by the sun, the deputy started the cavalcade on what appeared the shortest way.

"I reckon the folks will pardon me for that stagecoach holdup that I never pulled," he exulted.

Half a mile from the old Fleming place, he suddenly commanded a halt. Something about the gulch in which they were then riding looked vaguely familiar.

"Yes, it's the same," Lucius declared. "There's the rock I sat on for a while. To think that when darkness stopped my trailing here last night, I was right in these fellows' back yard, pretty near!"

He waved his party to proceed.

"Waal, I be figgered!" a familiar voice echoed from the rim of the wash.

The Shootin' Fool gave one glance at the horsemen tumbling down the bank. Then his arms shot skyward.

"I give up!" he shouted.

Sheriff Alcorn—medium-sized—rode up, removing his hat and patting down the fringe of red hair which half ringed his bald spot.

"I—I was in hopes I could get to town—explain there of my own free will," Lucius mumbled. "Honest, sheriff, I never robbed that stagecoach. It was——"

"What do yuh know about that?" demanded the sheriff.

"I heard part of your conversation with the driver and guard after the holdup, when they accused me on account of my yellow hair, the like of which they had seen on the highwayman. Then I ran," the Shootin' Fool admitted.

Alcorn smiled—a wide, warm smile.

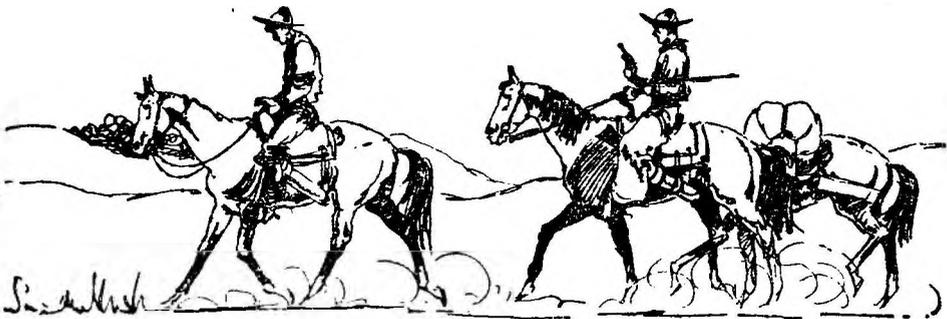
"I knowed yuh couldn't 'a' done that robbery, Looshis," he asserted. "'Fore the stage men got out o' the office, I happened to recall the Del Rio Kid an' knowed he pulled the holdup. Trailin' him with this posse, I found him strung to the Double Diamond gate. So I was trailin' them fellers I see yo've already got."

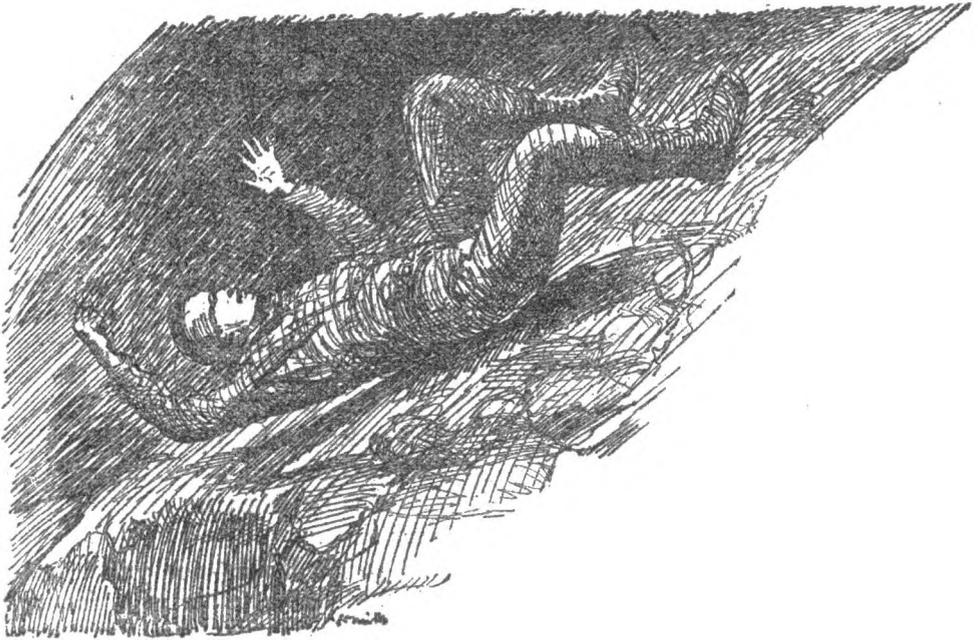
"And—and you weren't chasing me?" Lucius asked. Then suddenly relieved and conscious of his suffering at the same time, he demanded: "Have you anything to eat?"

He wondered why, in his excitement, he had not grabbed something off the breakfast table when he captured the Mavericks.

"We wa'n't lookin' for yuh." Alcorn looked like a father who, fearing he has lost a favorite son, finds him safe. "But we was shore a-goin' to, quick as we had this pressin' official business off our hands. Yuh know, Looshis, I was actually afeared some-thin' might of happened to yuh when yuh didn't show up."

Ef Looshis Carey hadn't showed up when he did, yuh kin bet Sheriff Alcorn an' Hank Rogers would 'a' scoured the hull prickly-pear country ter find him. 'Cause they know better'n any one else what Looshis means ter law an' order in that country, even if folks do call him the "Shootin' Fool." Watch fer the next story about him. Thar'll soon be another in WILD WEST WEEKLY.





# White Terror of the Spear Points

By Lee Harrington

Author of "The Last Patrol," etc.

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

**A** STRANGE, uncanny creature was abroad in the mountains—a creature with a voice that had never been heard; a monster that had never been seen, even by the three Tigor brothers of Black Canyon, and the Tigor brothers were the most skilled in woodcraft of all the mountaineers who dwelt among the lonely fastnesses of the Spear Point Range.

It was Bill Tigor, the eldest brother of the three, who had reported the matter to Jim Hazel, forest ranger.

"I found tracks that were made by nothing human," Bill Tigor had reported, "back thar in the Spear Point Range."

Knowing the superstitions entertained by some mountaineers, Jim Hazel had at first refused to believe the

story. But Bill Tigor had been so insistent that at last the ranger had consented to investigate the matter.

That is how it happened that a moonlit night in late October found Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor sitting by a blazing camp fire on the edge of one of the little valleys in the Spear Point Range where the white mountain goats come down to winter.

Snow covered the valley to a depth of six inches. But the night was bright and clear.

So intensely white was the flood of moonlight that one could have seen to read a newspaper, had there been one to read. Across the valley, a rocky, timberless hogback ridge rose abruptly toward the sky line.

But neither in the valley, nor on the

ridge, was there any sign of life. Nor did any sound break the wintry silence until Jim Hazel spoke:

"Three days out from Ghost Lake station, Bill, and we've found no tracks, nor have we seen hide or hair of the strange creature you say is killing off the mountain goats. Of all the wild-goose chases I have been on, this is the worst. If there is such a creature in the Spear Points, where is it, and why haven't we found any tracks?"

Bill Tigor plucked a burning ember from the fire and applied it to the tobacco in his pipe. His fierce black eyes, gleaming above his big hooked nose, looked steadily into those of the forest ranger.

"Why ain't we found tracks? Why ain't we seen the thing?" he asked. Then he answered his own questions: "'Cause it knows we are looking for it, that's why. It is one of them things which all hillmen know are somewhere among the mountains, but which man ain't meant to see."

Jim Hazel felt inclined to laugh, but he checked himself as he glanced at Bill Tigor. The mountaineer had risen to his feet. Towering to his full height of six feet and two inches, he extended a great arm and pointed toward the top of a ridge two hundred yards from their fire.

"If thar ain't no such things in the mountains, Jimmy," he asked, "what do yuh call that?"

Expecting to see one of the many cougars that prowl among the mountains at night, Jim Hazel gazed toward the ridge. But all he saw were the pale moon mist and the gleaming crystals of the snow.

"What do I call what?" asked the ranger, smiling broadly now.

"You didn't look up quickly enough, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor soberly. "It's gone now, as the toad remarked when he missed the fly."

"What's gone?" asked Jim Hazel.

"Jimmy," said Bill Tigor, "as shore as I'm nearly out of tobacco to-night, I

saw something white movin' slowly along the top of that thar ridge."

Still skeptical, but somewhat impressed by the evident earnestness of the mountaineer, the forest ranger rose to his feet and picked up his rifle.

"Guess I'll go over and take a look, Bill," he said. "If I find any tracks, I will admit that you are right. If I don't find any tracks, we start back to Ghost Lake in the morning. Want to come along?"

"Jimmy, yuh stay right hyar alongside this fire," said the mountaineer. "If yuh go up thar, yuh won't come back. And when I go up on the ridge to look fer yuh, you won't be thar. What I saw jest now is one of them things that a man ain't meant fer to see. No, Jimmy, I ain't coming along."

Realizing that it would be useless to argue against the superstition of the mountaineer, Jim Hazel made no reply.

Resuming his seat by the fire, Bill Tigor gloomily watched the ranger, as tall and straight in the moonlight, he strode across the valley toward the foot of the ridge upon the top of which Bill Tigor thought he had seen something moving.

No track of man or beast marred the white floor over which Jim Hazel strode. Nor did he see any sign of a living thing, as slowly he climbed the ridge. Once on top of it, he stood leaning on his rifle, as he scanned the snow.

And while he stood there, he felt something hard and round pressed between his shoulder blades. Harshly, a voice growled:

"If yuh turn around, I'll blow yuh to blazes."

Standing rigid as a statue, the forest ranger felt his rifle snatched from his grasp. Then he was told to raise his hands above his head. A moment later, he was blindfolded from behind. The voice spoke again:

"Straight ahead, and don't stop until I give the word."

Slowly the forest ranger strode forward until he had counted two hundred

and twenty-five paces. Then suddenly the earth fell away from beneath his feet.

Downward, downward he plunged feetfirst for what seemed to be an eternity of time, but which in reality could not have been more than a very few seconds.

Suddenly he stopped with a jar that seemed to shake loose every bone in his body. Before Jim Hazel could recover himself, before he could extend a hand, he began to roll down a precipitous slope which seemed to have no end. Then suddenly he was brought up with a sickening jerk which reduced him to a limp, unconscious heap.

## II.

From the top of the ridge which Jim Hazel had climbed came a laugh so fiendishly triumphant that it reached the ears of Bill Tigor, seated over his fire.

Every hair on the mountaineer's head seemed to rise in fear, and for a brief moment he experienced the strange sensation that invisible hands were lifting his wide-brimmed Stetson from the top of his head.

Paralyzed with superstitious fright, he sat gazing at the top of the ridge from which had come that taunting laugh. But for a moment, he saw nothing.

Then suddenly his keen gaze caught a movement among the rocks. For a moment he thought a mass of snow had become dislodged and was about to roll down the mountainside. For the object he saw was pure white in color.

Then he knew it was not snow he saw, but a living creature which, from that distance, appeared to be about the size of one of the white Rocky Mountain goats that are so numerous in the more isolated parts of the savage Spear Point Range.

"A billy goat," muttered the mountaineer. "Jimmy must have scared him up when he climbed the ridge."

Silently Bill Tigor sat over his fire, watching the creature, as slowly it passed along the top of the ridge, at last to disappear from sight behind a snow-capped pinnacle. Not until then did Bill Tigor remember the awful laugh he had heard.

"It might have been Jimmy who laughed," muttered the mountaineer, as he rose to his feet. "But what made it sound like that, unless it was that he was seeing something that man ain't meant to see?"

Picking up his rifle, Bill Tigor stood leaning on it, as he gazed steadily toward where he had last seen what he had thought to be a wild white goat. But although he stood there a full twenty minutes, he saw nothing more, nor did he hear any sound.

Wondering why Jim Hazel had not returned, and feeling mighty uneasy; at last Bill Tigor raised his great voice in a shout that echoed from rim to valley rim:

"Oh, Jimmy! Oh, Jimmy!"

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" replied the echoes, dying away at last into the great white silence.

Bill Tigor glanced up at the moon that was now only partly visible above the crest of the ridge. Resembling the half of a gold twenty-dollar piece standing on edge, it seemed to hesitate a moment. Then suddenly it disappeared as though drawn behind the mountain by invisible hands.

Darkness settled down on the hills. Bill Tigor shuddered.

Resuming his seat near the fire, Bill Tigor settled himself to wait until Jim Hazel would return. Aware that the forest ranger was a capable woodsman who knew how to take care of himself, the mountaineer was not yet ready to admit that he was worried.

Besides, Bill Tigor had no desire to be laughed at by Jim Hazel when he returned.

And so, hunched over his fire with his rifle lying across his knees, the

mountaineer at last surrendered to the drowsiness which was creeping over him. In a few minutes, he was sound asleep.

Clouds crept out of the north with the waning of the moon, and a bitter wind began to whisper among the pines behind the sleeping mountaineer.

After a while, a few big flakes of snow drifted down like great white butterflies of the night. Lightly they came to rest on the bowed shoulders of the sleeper by the dying fire, as though afraid to awaken him until they had covered the tracks left by Jim Hazel during his ascent of the ridge.

Faster and faster the snow fell, as the storm turned to a blizzard so fierce that a blast of snow-laden wind struck Bill Tigor full in the face.

Awake in an instant, he leaped to his feet and cast a startled glance around. Dawn, like a pale specter, was creeping over the mountains, and Jim Hazel had not returned.

Shaking the snow from his mighty shoulders, Bill Tigor stood gazing toward the ridge. But it was invisible behind a curtain of driving snow.

Filled with an awful fear for the safety of Jim Hazel, the mountaineer shouted a dozen times. But only the echoes answered—faint echoes, muffled by the voices of the storm.

Satisfied at last that something terrible had happened to Jim Hazel, yet realizing that he would need his strength, Bill Tigor took time to boil a pot of coffee and cook some frying pan bread and bacon, out of which he made a hasty breakfast. Then he hung the missing forest ranger's pack to a low-hanging pine branch and slipped on his own pack.

With his revolver in his belt and his rifle on his shoulders, he crossed the valley and climbed the ridge.

No track was left to show which way the ranger had gone, nor were there any tracks on top of the ridge. Swept by the fury of the blizzard, it offered no

clue as to what had happened to Jim Hazel.

Bill Tigor had never been on top of that particular ridge before; in fact, he knew very little about that section of the mountains. But he was an experienced mountaineer, and as such, he judged that Jim Hazel would have followed the easiest mode of travel, which seemed to lie along the top of the ridge.

So savage was the storm and so fierce the wind, it was all Bill Tigor could do to remain in an upright position. To watch where he was going was out of the question, for he could not see twenty feet ahead of him through the driving snow.

Like a man partially blind, he actually felt his way step by step along the top of the ridge in the direction he thought the ranger had taken.

For nearly three hundred paces, the mountaineer followed the top of the hogback, shouting the ranger's name at intervals, in the hope that if still alive—or at least, if not too badly injured—Jim Hazel would answer.

Receiving no reply to his shouts, Bill Tigor stopped at last and listened. For a little while, he heard nothing but the whine of the wind among the rocky pinnacles which rose like white ghosts on every hand.

Then suddenly Bill Tigor thought he detected the sound of shuffling footsteps behind him. Thinking that Jim Hazel had heard his shouts, Bill Tigor started to turn.

A great, shaggy white form hurled itself toward him. Before the astounded mountaineer could raise his rifle, a horned white head struck him squarely in the stomach and toppled him backward over the edge of a precipice which had been hidden from his sight by the storm.

As Bill Tigor fell, his head struck against the edge of a snow-covered rock, and he lost consciousness.

He opened his eyes to find himself lying beside a blazing fire in what seemed to be a small cave. Over the

fire crouched a man whom, in his befuddled state, the mountaineer did not at first recognize.

Then a surge of emotion swept over Bill Tigor's lean features as he identified the missing forest ranger.

"'Lo, Jimmy," said the mountaineer. "Did that billy goat butt yuh in the whiskers, too?"

Jim Hazel leaped to his feet and surveyed the mountaineer with astonished blue eyes.

"Goat be hanged!" exclaimed the ranger. "A man stuck the muzzle of a six-shooter between my shoulders and forced me to jump off a cliff. Where did you get the idea about the goat?"

"In my stummick, Jimmy," replied Bill Tigor without a smile. "It's a way mountain billy goats have. Guess the old devil thought I was another goat. Where are we, and why?"

"In the bottom of an ancient crater," replied Jim Hazel soberly. "And we are going to stay here. For as far as I can see, there is no way out. Better get a cup of coffee into your insides. I found some in your pack, and there's some bread I cooked."

Bill Tigor took a cup of coffee, but he waved the food aside.

"I ate before I left the valley," he said. "Guess we'd better save what grub we've got. If, as you say, there is no way out of this hole, likely we'll need it."

Bruised but not badly injured by their unceremonious descent, the ranger and the mountaineer stood side by side in the mouth of the small cave in which Jim Hazel had sought refuge from the storm. From where they stood, they could see the bottom of a funnel-shaped crater some acres in extent.

From the floor of the crater, snow-covered slopes too steep to climb reached to the foot of an almost perpendicular cliff which surrounded the place in which they found themselves.

Apparently it was impossible for man or beast to find a way out of the crater. Yet even their desperate situation could

not dampen the spirit of the mountaineer, now that he had found Jim Hazel again.

"Seems like we're bottled up, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor, "as the huckleberry remarked to the grape."

In vain Jim Hazel insisted that he had been forced over the edge of the crater by a desperate man armed with a revolver.

Bill Tigor only tapped his forehead suggestively.

"Did yuh see this feller, Jimmy?"

Jim Hazel had to admit that he had seen nothing of his attacker.

"Well, I did see my goat," insisted the mountaineer. "And what's more, I felt him, too. 'Tain't nothing onusual fur a mountain billy goat to butt a feller this time of the year."

"If I didn't see the man who drove me over the edge of that cliff," said Jim Hazel, "at least I heard him speak, which is more than you can say about your goat."

"He didn't need to speak, Jimmy," chuckled the mountaineer. "A billy goat's actions speak louder than words."

For a while, they wrangled; then Jim Hazel saw the uselessness of it.

"Best thing we can do is to see if we can find a way out of here," suggested the ranger. "See, the storm is ceasing now. Maybe, after all, there is a way out that I have overlooked."

### III.

Bill Tigor picked up his rifle, and they stepped out of the cave into the crater. Jim Hazel still had his revolver in his belt, but that was the ranger's only weapon.

Three times they circled the steep slopes of snow which led upward to the foot of the cliff that encompassed the crater. But they found no trail by which they might escape. Apparently they were doomed to starve to death in that crater among the mountain snows.

Never very talkative, the mountain-

eer's tongue seemed to have been silenced by the terrible situation in which he found himself. But not so that of Jim Hazel, who rose to the occasion with the courage which had made his name known wherever outdoor men gather.

"Bill," said the ranger, "if animals can enter and leave this valley, we should be able to do the same. Somewhere there is a trail up that cliff, if we can only find it."

"Huh?" Bill Tigor ceased twiddling the ends of his drooping black mustache. "Animals, Jimmy? How do yuh get that way? We didn't see any tracks larger than those of mountain rats and white weasels. We ain't pack rats, Jimmy. No, nor weasels, either, as the pine marten said to the mink."

"Just the same," insisted the ranger, "animals have been in this crater recently. I noticed where the tips of the underbrush had been bitten off. Here is a scrap of white hair I found hanging to a bush."

Bill Tigor glanced at the hair in the ranger's hand.

"Goat!" exclaimed the mountaineer. "I'll bet a snowball agin' an icicle, Jimmy, that that's h'ar off the billy who butted me in the stummick."

"Then," said the ranger, grinning, "if the goat got into the crater, he got out of it. For he isn't in it now. We know that, beyond a doubt."

Still holding the goat hair in one hand, Bill Tigor stepped out of the cave and once again glanced up at the cliff. Then he whirled in his tracks and made a wild grab for his rifle.

"Thar he is, Jimmy!" shouted the excited mountaineer. "See him, coming down the cliff? Great gosh all fish hooks! He'd ought to have been a cat!"

One glance Jim Hazel gave, then he struck the rifle from the grasp of the mountaineer.

"You fool!" snapped the ranger. "If you shoot that goat, we'll never be able to find our way out of here."

Quick to realize that Jim Hazel's keen brain had saved him from sealing them both in a living tomb, Bill Tigor let his rifle lie in the snow where the ranger had dropped it.

Side by side, the two men stood at the mouth of their cave, watching a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound white Rocky Mountain billy goat pick its way sure-footedly from ledge to narrow ledge down the face of an almost perpendicular cliff, which, from where the ranger and the mountaineer stood, appeared to be utterly unscalable.

Apparently entirely unaware of the presence of human beings in the crater, slowly the animal that is the king of all mountain climbers picked its way down the face of the cliff, until at last, clear-cut against the white snow, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor could see the short, black horns surmounting the narrow head, and the six inches of white chin whisker which betokened the great age of the mountain billy.

Reaching a point on the cliff no more than a hundred feet above the tensely watching men, the wild goat paused in its descent of the cliff. Turning its head, it lifted its white-bearded face, and with tiny black eyes looked back up the goat path it had just descended. Involuntarily Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor followed the animal's gaze.

"Great Goobas!" whispered the mountaineer huskily. "Danged if thar ain't another one, as the dog remarked to the flea!"

Fifty feet above the descending billy goat, the white, bearded face of another goat peered down at the first animal, as though bent on following it into the crater.

Fascinated by a sight which few men are privileged to witness, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor watched the two goats staring at each other.

"Great Goobas!" whispered Bill Tigor, "the one above is a bearded lady, or my name is Sweet Adeline!"

Fifty feet apart, the two goats continued to stare at each other, while from

the crater floor the two men stared at both animals.

Then, for the second time within a few minutes, Bill Tigor snatched up his rifle and whipped it to his shoulder. Quick though Jim Hazel was to reach for the weapon, he was not quick enough. For the mountaineer's great finger pressed the trigger before the ranger could stop him. The crack of the high-powered weapon was echoed back from the face of the cliff.

Horrified at what seemed to him to be a foolish, if not wanton act, Jim Hazel saw the lower of the two mountain goats—the huge, bearded white billy—stiffen against the side of the cliff.

For the space of a breath, the great white animal stood outlined against the cliff. Then slowly the huge form crumpled down onto the goat path, toppled sidewise, slipped over the edge of the narrow trail and fell a sheer hundred feet onto the slope of snow which reached halfway up the cliff.

Rolling over and over, and bouncing twenty feet through the air at every bounce, at last the great white carcass came to stop about a hundred feet from the spot where Bill Tigor stood, still holding his rifle in his hands and gazing upward at the cliff.

"Why in the name of tarnation did you have to kill that goat?" demanded the outraged ranger. "Don't you know anything at all?"

"I sure do, Jimmy," replied Bill Tigor. "That's why I took that pot shot at that devil up there among the rocks for."

"What do you mean?" asked Jim Hazel, looking angrily at the unperturbed mountaineer.

"Jest this, Jimmy," replied Bill Tigor. "In the first place, I didn't kill that billy goat laying thar at the foot of the cliff; and in the second place, the second goat wasn't a goat at all. It was one of them things I told yuh run around the mountains, but which man ain't meant to see."

"So's my foot!" exclaimed Jim Hazel.

"If it was a goat, why did I miss it?" countered the mountaineer. "I'm most generally considered to be the best shot in this section of the hills. I fired p'int-blank at the thing, but I shot ten feet too high."

Jim Hazel took the rifle from the unresisting hand of the mountaineer and examined the sights. The front sight was entirely covered by a mass of frozen snow.

When the ranger explained why Bill Tigor had overshot his mark, the mountaineer shook his head.

"I tell yuh, Jimmy," he insisted, "that second goat wasn't a goat."

"How do you know?" asked the ranger irritably. "If it wasn't a goat, what was it?"

"One of them things, Jimmy," persisted Bill Tigor stubbornly. "That's why I shot at it when I did. It had a goat's face all right and a goat's horns. But it was wearing its horns backward!"

#### IV.

Jim Hazel stared at the mountaineer as though he thought Bill Tigor had suddenly gone insane. Then as a wild idea crossed the forest ranger's mind, he broke into a hearty laugh.

"If you are correct in your supposition," said Jim Hazel, "the creature must have been a man dressed in the skin of a white goat and wearing a mask made from the scalp of a goat. I have heard that the Rocky Mountain goat is sometimes hunted in such a manner."

"Great Goobas!" exclaimed Bill Tigor. "Why didn't I think of that before? Seems like I heard dad tell me years ago that he had hunted wild goats that way, but I plumb forgot all about it."

"So, you see," said Jim Hazel, "it looks as though we were thrown into this crater by a poacher who is killing off the mountain goats for the sake of

their white skins, which find a ready market in the cities at a high price."

"I was butted into this hole by a billy goat," insisted Bill Tigor. "Think I don't know what butted me?"

Jim Hazel made no answer, but gazed at the huge white body of the billy goat which lay at the foot of the cliff. Then the ranger scanned the cliff itself. No living thing was in sight. But plainly now Jim Hazel could see the narrow trail left by the descending billy goat before it had been shot.

"We ought to be able to find our way up the cliff now," said the ranger.

"Better wait until dark," advised Bill Tigor, "or likely we'll both get shot dead by the poacher that killed the goat."

Jim Hazel had to admit that it would be better to await nightfall. But during the long hours which they had to spend sitting in their cave, the ranger fretted considerably.

"More than likely the poacher will clear out of the country, now that he knows we were not killed by the fall into this crater," said Jim Hazel.

"It's a dang sight more likely that he's laying low among the rocks waiting to shoot us down the minute we show ourselves," argued Bill Tigor. "But it will never occur to him that we'd be crazy enough to try and climb over that cliff by the light of the moon."

Dusk came at last, and then dark. Not until nearly midnight would the moon rise over the Spear Point Range. And in darkness that was relieved only by the light of the stars, Bill Tigor and Jim Hazel skinned the big mountain goat which had been shot by the poacher.

When at last the moon rose over the rim of the crater, no longer was Jim Hazel to be seen.

Seated in the mouth of the cave with his rifle across his knees, yet invisible to any one who might have been peering from the top of the cliff, Bill Tigor watched a creature which, in the pale

moonlight, bore a remarkable resemblance to a white mountain goat. Slowly—too slowly for a goat—it climbed from ledge to narrow ledge over a goat path which led upward toward the rim of the crater.

It had been Jim Hazel's idea to try to deceive the poacher into the belief that he had failed to kill the big billy goat, and that the animal was trying to escape from the crater by the same trail it had descended.

This would have been impossible, had the poacher been able, from the top of the cliff, to see the body of the animal which he had killed. Fortunately for the ranger's plans, the carcass had been entirely out of sight of a man standing on the top of the cliff.

It was a desperate chance to take, and Jim Hazel well realized it, as he slowly climbed from ledge to ledge. Yet it was not so foolhardy as it seemed, as long as Bill Tigor sat in the mouth of the cave commanding the cliff with his rifle.

So dangerous was the climb, and so impeded was the ranger by the shaggy white goatskin which he had draped around his shoulders and secured by his belt, that often he thought he would fall.

Yet upward he went at a snail's pace, clinging to jagged outthrusts of rock and feeling for places where he might for a brief instant rest his quivering muscles. So narrow and slippery with snow were the rocky ledges that most of the time Jim Hazel had to crawl on all fours.

This, coupled with the fact that he had fastened the scalp of the white goat onto his head so that the short black horns were in their natural position, gave him a most startling resemblance to the animal he was trying to imitate.

A hundred feet above the floor of the crater, Jim Hazel reached a ledge wide enough for him to stand erect. With his back against the cliff, he raised a hand and wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow. Then he glanced downward.

A white mountain goat was slowly walking across the snow-covered floor of the crater!

Hardly believing his own eyesight, Jim Hazel watched the creature, asking himself whether it was really a goat, or whether it was the poacher himself disguised to resemble one of the beasts he was hunting for the sake of their skins.

At that very instant, the wild goat raised its head and daintily nibbled at the twigs of one of the bushes which grew in the bottom of the crater. No question about it—the animal was what it seemed, the leader of a band of five more that were descending the cliff on the opposite side of the crater.

Intent on watching the animals descending the opposite cliff, Jim Hazel forgot his dangerous position on the ledge until he was suddenly recalled to himself by a strange sound. As he cast a startled glance along the ledge on which he stood, his heart almost ceased beating.

Facing him from a distance or not more than fifteen feet was the largest Rocky Mountain goat the ranger had ever seen.

Apparently taking the disguised man for one of its own kind that had come to dispute the trail, the huge white billy goat stood gazing at the man. As it gazed, it moved its jaws to and fro, to and fro, so that his six-inch white beard wagged continually.

Realizing that should the goat decide to charge him he would inevitably be hurled off the ledge, Jim Hazel snatched his revolver from his belt.

"Get out!" he yelled. "Go back the way you came, darn you! There is not room enough on this ledge for two."

At the sound of the ranger's voice, the white goat stopped wagging its beard. Then suddenly it reared on its hind legs in angry challenge to the strange invader of its domain.

Down came the beast's front hoofs with a clatter on the ledge. It bounced forward with head down.

From the crater below came the sharp report of Bill Tigor's rifle. Shot through the head, the big billy goat rolled off the ledge, dropped a hundred feet and tumbled headlong down into the bottom of the crater.

Shaking at the narrowness of his escape, Jim Hazel holstered his revolver and resumed his climb. Inch by inch and foot by foot he struggled upward until at last he gained the top of the cliff.

Panting from his exertions, with the shaggy white goatskin hanging from his broad shoulders and the short black horns adorning his head, in the moonlight he might have been mistaken for one of the strange things which Bill Tigor said dwelt in the Spear Point Range.

No sound broke the moonlit silence. But in the snow at his feet Jim Hazel saw a double line of strange tracks, following the top of the ridge until the ranger lost sight of them among a forest of jagged white pinnacles.

Knowing that Bill Tigor would follow him as soon as possible, and being anxious to take the trail of the poacher before he had gained too much a start, swiftly Jim Hazel strode along in the strange tracks of the goat hunter.

## V.

An hour later, he saw before him a shack which had been built of flat slabs of rock piled on top of one another. It was a crude affair, roughly roofed with the green-needled branches of nut pine, which is the only timber found at that altitude.

By the fact that no stovepipe protruded from the roof, the ranger guessed that the poacher did his cooking over a camp fire and used the abode only as a shelter during the hours of darkness.

In front of the shack there had been erected a crude scaffold, from which hung the hindquarters of a yearling mountain goat.

The tracks Jim Hazel had followed led right up to the threshold of an opening which, used by the inmate as a means of entering and leaving, was curtained by the shaggy white skin of a mountain goat. As there were no outgoing tracks, the ranger felt pretty well assured that he had cornered his man.

For a moment, Jim Hazel was tempted to cast aside the cumbersome skin which made him appear to be half man and half animal. Then with a grim smile on his lips, he decided to keep it on until he had captured the poacher.

With one hand, the ranger pushed aside the goatskin in front of the opening. His revolver was in his right hand as he thrust his head and shoulders into the shack, now dimly illumined by the moonlight streaming over his shoulder. With his horned head and the long white hair of the goatskin flowing from his shoulders, the ranger looked like nothing human.

On the floor of the shack a man lay extended full length beneath a number of white goatskins. Beyond the skins protruded a pair of feet wearing cumbersome goatskin moccasins.

A folded goatskin rested beneath an unkempt black head with a flowing beard.

Against the farther wall of the shack was a bale which the ranger estimated to contain a full dozen of the snow-white, long-haired, shaggy hides of the rarest game animals in the West.

For a moment, Jim Hazel stood looking down at the rise and fall of the sleeper's exposed hairy chest. Then he spoke sharply:

"Wake up!"

Twice the ranger had to repeat his command before the sleeper's eyes opened.

One glance he gave at what seemed to him, no doubt, to be the combined spirits of all the mountain goats he had slaughtered. Then, with a wild yell, he snatched up a revolver and fired point-

blank at the terrifying apparition in the doorway.

Struck by the poacher's bullet, one of the goat horns on Jim Hazel's head snapped in two. Before the poacher could fire again, the ranger had hurled himself headfirst at the man's stomach, at the same time grabbing for the poacher's legs.

Down went the poacher on his back, with Jim Hazel on top of him. Holding his man down with his knees, the ranger dragged a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and snapped them shut on the hairy wrists. Then he leaped to his feet.

"I arrest you in the name of the law," he said sternly, "for wantonly killing wild game and for the attempted murder of two men."

From the opening used as a doorway came a chuckle which caused Jim Hazel quickly to turn. Standing there with his white teeth showing in a pleased smile beneath his drooping black mustache was Bill Tigor.

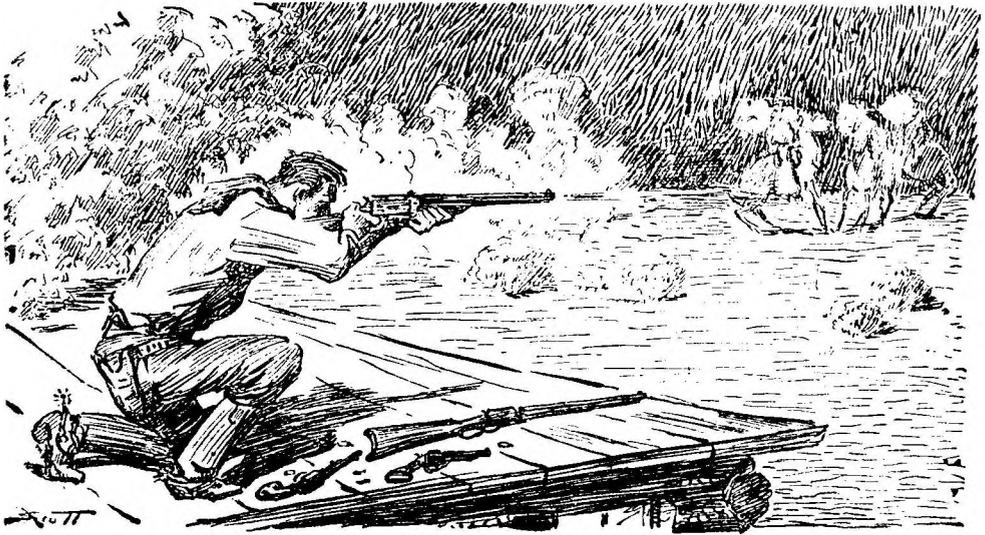
"So yuh got him, did yuh, Jimmy?" asked the mountaineer.

"Looks like it," admitted Jim Hazel.

Bill Tigor grinned down at the swearing, dirty, bearded brute lying handcuffed on the skins of the goats he had slaughtered.

"Pardner," drawled Bill Tigor, "yuh shore had me stumped for a while. I thought yuh were one of them things which live in the Spear Point Range. But yuh couldn't make a goat out of Jimmy."

**Makin' a goat out o' Jim Hazel has been tried before. But them that has tried it don't report no alarmin' success. 'Cause the average bad hombre what comes ter the Spear P'int's seems ter fergit that forest rangers know the big woods like a book an' usually keep on speakin' terms with the critters thet live in 'em, which is apt ter make the gents stacked up agin' 'em look like plumb green tenderfoots. Watch fer the next Jim Hazel story. It'll be in WILD WEST WEEKLY soon.**



# Peeler Henderson's

By Kent Bennett

Author of "Blade's Buckaroos," etc.

# Lone Hand

## CHAPTER I.

### THE WARNING.

**W**RAPPED warmly in his soogans, "Peeler" Henderson slept late that morning. And when he did wake up, he just lay where he was for five minutes and stared happily at the roof of his cabin.

His cabin! Say, that sounded pretty swell! No Fifth Avenue millionaire ever thought of his house with more pride. For the fact that Peeler could say "my cabin" meant that he wasn't a cowhand any more. He was a cowman. And what a big difference there is in those two words—the difference between bossing and being bossed.

"Got the world by the tail on a downhill pull." Peeler grinned, as he wriggled out of his coverings and prepared to wash up, put on his hat and boots and buckle on his two guns. "Yes, siree. With fifty head o' beef cattle, four hosses, ten hens, and a house— Now where the Hector is that hat?"

He saw the hat almost immediately. And what he saw besides stiffened him into tense anger. Peeler Henderson was a slight, wiry young man, with curly, chestnut-colored hair and brown eyes which were normally rather large and good-natured.

Those eyes weren't good-natured now, though, as they stared at his new beaver-belly sombrero fastened to the cabin wall with a knife. And fastened to the hat was a large sheet of dirty brown paper with the words scrawled:

GIT OUT STRANGER AFORE YORE  
RUN OUT THE COMITEE

With a savage jerk, Peeler drew the knife from the wall, caught the hat and examined the crude and sinister notice.

"Opened the pot, hev they, so quick?" grunted Peeler Henderson. "Waal, I reckon I'll set in an' draw some cyards my own self."

The courageous young cowboy who had determined to establish himself in that dangerous section of the West

known as the Deep Draw country had not commenced his venture with his eyes shut, or with his ears shut, either. There were plenty of people to tell him how perilous was the undertaking upon which he had set his heart.

For a score of years, the Deep Draw country had been the haunt and refuge of outlaws and fugitives from justice. Its reputation was so bad that homesteaders had feared to try to establish their small farms there. And though there was plenty of grass and water, the ruggedness of the mountains and the deep canyons with their torrential streams made cattle raising on a large scale difficult.

Stampeding steers have a bad habit of plunging headlong off precipices and carrying mounted cowboys with them in their mad flight. The open prairies to east and south were, therefore, far more suitable to the raising of beef cattle.

But that sort of thing requires capital. One has to run up fences, pay hands, buy hay.

Peeler, after he'd secured his stock and bought his lumber for his cabin and sheds, had just forty dollars left. Hence he would have to do all the work and do it alone. He had to be carpenter, builder, and farmer as well as cowman.

Now it seemed that he would have to be a fighter as well. Quite evidently some of these desperadoes didn't want him around.

"Waal, I don't want them round, neither, so that makes us squar'." He grinned, and, putting on the sombrero—the brim of which scarcely showed the slit of the sharp knife thrust—he strode out to the small corral and roped and then bridled the piebald colt he called Dasher.

He rode Dasher down the trail alongside the brook for a distance of about half a mile till they came to the pleasant pasture which Peeler called the Green Soup Plate.

There he was relieved to see that his longhorns were grazing peacefully. The outlaws had been decent enough at least

to give him fair warning of their foul intention.

Carefully and gently Peeler fogged the cattle back to the bench in front of his cabin, a space about a hundred rods square which he had inclosed in smooth poles to serve as a pasture lot.

"Reckon I'm due tuh set up all night," he confided to the intelligent little Dasher. "An' I'd jest as well have them longhorn lambs o' mine whar I can watch 'em."

Fortunately, it was going to be moonlight to-night. And if the outlaws did invade the place—the Lazy H, as Peeler had christened it—they could come from only one of two directions, from upstream or down. For to the west, Mink Brook ran deep below the bench in front of the cabin. And to the east, Handlebar Butte rose steeply in an almost perfect semicircle behind what Peeler was pleased to call his "ranch house."

Under the circumstances, it seemed a good idea to provide the ranch house with some sort of front door. In the first rush of work, Peeler hadn't bothered with that. But if folks were going to pay calls in the middle of the night and leave their dirty visiting cards spiked onto his best hat, it would be just as well to provide some kind of door to discourage them.

So Peeler occupied himself for the remainder of the morning with the construction of just such a door—a good, stout, double-ply affair, hung on heavy hinges and furnished with a massive bolt. That obstacle couldn't be caved in by anything less than a battering-ram.

That job finished, the solitary young rancher sat and smoked a while, deliberating. He already had a promising stand of alfalfa along the bottom of the butte and he had intended to plant some corn and oats to-day, so that he wouldn't have to spend all his profits from the fall beef shipment in buying feed for the winter.

But as matters stood, it seemed wise to do a little more fortifying rather than

planting. If they were going to force him to turn his rancho into a block-house—

"All right, gents." Peeler said to himself. "If yo're so sot on comin' tuh see me, I'll fix up a right warm welcome."

In a low shed back of the cabin, and right at the foot of the butte, Peeler had stored a box of dynamite cartridges and fuses. A few of these he had used for blowing out big stumps so that his pasture lot might be smooth and clear.

He took a couple of them now, and with a handy battery box blew out several cubic rods of dirt and gravel from the face of the butte.

He had a lot of old feed bags, too. These he filled with the loose dirt, then climbed his homemade ladder to the roof of his cabin and laid the bags around the edge of the roof to form a rough parapet. He had been thoughtful enough to provide a trapdoor in the roof, so that he might get on top of his house without going outdoors.

Thus, by evening, he had turned his cabin into a fairly strong little fort. Anybody who tried to come sneaking up in the dark was due for the surprise of his life.

With his ponies at the hitch rail back of his house, and his fifty head of stock fenced in in the pasture lot, Peeler stretched out on the roof with two rifles and two revolvers for his vigil beneath the stars.

His visitors arrived at midnight. This time they did not come stealthily, however.

The uproar that roused Peeler from his light doze sounded like a regular artillery battle. Upstream, a dozen guns were blazing in the night.

He could see the ghostly figures of the riders in the moonlight. But that sort of light is very deceptive. And though the young rancher fired as fast as he could, he was unable to be sure what effect his shots had.

It puzzled him, too, to fail to hear the whining whiz of bullets over his head. And the attackers did not appear to be

heading directly for the cabin. Instead, they kept well away over in the direction of the brook.

But in the pasture lot in front of the cabin, the beef cattle were milling in panic. Stray steers ran here and there, but most of the animals were all jammed together in a crazily revolving mass. Now they milled close to the cabin; now they headed madly for the brook.

Then, all at once, the whole dark mass seemed to vanish against the tricky shadows of the willows and junipers along the edge of the brook. The mounted raiders as well as the cattle were gone.

"If they've drove 'em over the cut-bank!" Peter groaned at the mere thought of the frightful slaughter that would mean.

No such calamity had actually occurred, though. The bellowing of the terrified animals could still be heard on the night air. The thunder of the galloping hoofs of the rustlers was still distinctly audible. But the sounds were rapidly growing fainter.

Peeler knew what that meant. Some clever rascal had dropped the bars on the downstream end of the pasture lot. The stampeded steers had eventually blundered upon the outlet. And after them had galloped the ruthlessly pursuing rustlers.

"They've run off the hull herd!" said Peeler.

It was madness to attempt to follow. But the dauntless young rancher was not of the type to quit without putting up a battle. Dropping down through his open trapdoor, he rushed out of his cabin, slipped a saddle on the first horse he came to—a handy blue roan called Skippy—and, with rifle in its boot on his left-hand side, his right hand holding a drawn revolver, he pushed the blue roan at breakneck speed to the path which led down along the brook's margin.

But though he had lost only a little time, the stampeded herd was already out of hearing. Beyond the Green

Soup Plate and the end of Handle-bar Butte, the rough country was broken up by a hundred draws and arroyos.

His cattle might have been driven down any of these defiles. Or, as was more likely, they might have been broken up into small groups and hazed hither and yon. And in the moonlight it was impossible to follow sign.

Peeler realized this after an hour's fruitless search. He knew that his only chance to collect even a few of his stock was to wait until daybreak and then slowly track them and round them up bunch by bunch—if the Deep Draw gang would let him do so. Dejectedly, therefore, he turned back and walked Skippy home.

Before he had time to dismount, however, the big placard fastened to his wide-open door caught his eye. Even by moonlight he could read the huge, roughly scrawled words:

DONT BE HEAR TOMORRA NITE  
OR YOU'LL STAY HEAR FEREVER  
THE COMITEE

## CHAPTER II.

### THE TRAIL.

**I**T was a very discouraged young cowman who put up his horse that night.

"Cowman!" he exclaimed to himself. "Fine one I am tuh call myself 'cowman' without one horned critter tuh call my own on the hull spread!"

Discouraged and baffled, he walked to the cabin door, jerked down the threatening notice and ground it under his boot heel. Then he sat down on the bench outside to try to think.

The pale glow of morning showed above the rim of the butte before the daring idea of which he had had just an inkling finally formulated itself.

Once he had the idea worked out, however, Peeler acted upon it promptly. The moment it was clear enough to see the trail, he saddled Dasher and started down the stream along the path of his stampeded stock.

The rustlers had done their work as he guessed they would. Every few furlongs, a few cattle tracks led off to right or left.

Peeler disregarded these. It was not his purpose to undertake the tedious task of rounding up each bunch of stock separately and trying to fog them home. For a single puncher, that would mean days of labor, perhaps.

Peeler was bound for headquarters. It was the hoofprint of horses he searched for.

He didn't have to look far. Secure in the strength of their numbers, his Deep Draw enemies had left a plain, broad trail. For two hours, Peeler followed it westward, eyes watching for some ambush, gun always ready.

But, as he had guessed, the outlaw gang didn't favor operating in daylight. No one stopped him; he saw no living thing, even after he entered a crooked trail which led downward through slashes of burned timber, while all about, the mountains seemed to rise higher.

Edging Dasher forward carefully, Peeler finally passed through a great gate in towering rocks. This, he guessed instantly, was the outlaws' citadel.

Before him stretched a dark and narrow glade in the heart of the pathless mountains. Only for an hour or so at midday would the sun rise high enough to strike directly into that deep and well-hidden hollow.

Of the brigands themselves there was no sign. Doubtless they were sleeping in their camp somewhere at the end of the shadowy valley.

Nor was there any sign of Peeler's stolen cattle. As the young rancher guessed, they had been driven away in malice, rather than for the profit that might be derived from their butchery or sale.

But what Peeler did see satisfied him. By a pool at the foot of a tiny waterfall grazed a cavvy of at least a hundred handsome ponies.

No rough fuzzies, these, though they

were of every color—chestnuts, roans, sorrels, buckskins, grays, and pintos—but hand-picked top horses, all of them, such mounts as any man would covet.

Hissing gently at Dasher to still any friendly whicker the little bronc might emit, Peeler sat there motionless a moment. His eyes admired the pretty animals, but his ears were intent for a certain sound. He heard it.

He traced that sound to its source. It was from the neck of that big, brown mare that the bell tinkled.

"Dasher," said Peeler Henderson softly. "we got 'em licked!"

Immediately he pulled Dasher about and briskly fox-trotted off homeward.

For the remainder of the day, Peeler's operations might have puzzled a spectator who knew that this young cowman no longer had any cows to call his own. For from noon till dark, Peeler was extremely busy.

From the shed at the foot of the butte, he produced hundreds of yards of barbed wire. This he strung several times round his pasture lot, weaving the wire in and out of the poles and rails. This formed the cruelest and most effective sort of barrier.

It was twilight when he finished the job to his own satisfaction and grabbed himself a hasty snack out of a can of corned beef. He had no time now for comfortable relaxation.

As soon as his meal was finished, he saddled the blue roan, Skippy, and rode out leading Dasher.

Having already spied out the trail and discovered the grazing ground of his enemies' cavvy, he had no need to delay. Warily, but with assurance, he rode directly back to the mountain valley he had discovered that morning.

At the opening of the mountain gate, he paused a while, whispering softly to quiet any restlessness of his own two horses. Even in the gloom, it was easy to locate the bell mare.

Peeler knew right well what she was there for—to keep the other ponies together and to make them easy to find in

the dark. Horses and steers alike are strongly endowed with the herd instinct, preferring to stick together. Naturally they look to the bell mare as their leader.

Pretty secure in the belief that there were as yet no human beings abroad, Peeler pushed Skippy forward at a slow walk, pulling Dasher behind on the lead rope. Gradually the two horses with the motionless rider drifted into the very center of the unsuspecting cavvy.

Peeler was able to come right up beside the bell mare and drop his lariat over her neck.

The big brown reared and fought them, of course. But the expert cowboy quickly snubbed her in close to his own saddle horn and deftly sliced the bell from her withers. Then he slapped her smartly and let her go.

The bell he fastened round the neck of the gentle and well-trained Dasher.

As quietly and silently as he had come, Peeler led out on Skippy. Dasher, clanging the bell, followed slowly. And, obedient to the sound of the bell, the whole cavvy came trailing behind.

Slowly and patiently, moving at no more than a crawl, Peeler tolled the whole bunch of valuable broncs back up Mink Brook, through the Green Soup Plate, and into the single gap which he had left in the bristling barbed-wire inclosure.

Dismounting with the same slow leisureliness which had characterized all his movements—for Peeler well understood how sensitive horses were—the young cowman strolled lazily through the midst of the animals, touching a neck here, gently smoothing a flank there, until he arrived at the gap in the fence. This he quickly blocked up with poles and strands of twisted wire.

Then he went round to his cabin to wait. Comfortably settled behind the parapet of sand bags on his roof, supplied with plenty of tobacco and his two single-action six-guns, as well as his faithful Winchesters, Peeler looked forward to a thoroughly pleasant evening.

"Mr. Peeler Henderson, Esquire," said he, grinning. "will be at home tuh all his frien's, from twelve until six o'clock a. m."

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE ATTACK.

FOR an hour, while the moon climbed up the sky, Peeler waited. The band grazed or drowsed comfortably in the rectangular inclosure. Now and then the bell round Dasher's neck tinkled.

Peeler wished it were safe to take Dasher and Skippy out of there. But attempting to withdraw his two saddle ponies might start a panic, which was just what must be avoided.

So comfortable was the lone sentinel that he must have dozed. For he was aware of human voices before he had been warned of the enemy's approach.

"He shore run a sandy on us that time," a hoarse voice was whispering only a few feet below. "Ef we could cut that wire without stirrin' up the critters——"

"Waal, we can't," put in another voice. "We gotter wait till daylight. You know how spooky broncs is ef you start stirrin' 'em round in the dark."

"Thet's right. Let's stop his clock fust."

Peeler smiled with grim satisfaction. Stop his clock, would they? All right—let 'em commence!

"Likely he's snorin' his head off inside, thinkin' he's sech a smart Aleck," observed the first voice below. "There's a hole in his roof, with a door onto it. Reckon we kin get in that a way."

"Shore. Give me a leg up."

Peeler waited. But he didn't bother with his revolvers at all—merely took his Winchester by the barrel, holding it like a baseball bat.

When the head and shoulders of the outlaw appeared above the edge of the sand bags, Peeler swung.

The man fell like a bag of cement.

"Pick up yore friend an' vamose,"

said Peeler in a perfectly calm and conversational tone to the invisible outlaw beneath. "Come round in the mornin', if yuh want tuh talk business."

Frightened oaths and scuffling from below indicated that the imprudent intruder was accepting the sound advice.

It was half an hour before anything else developed.

The plan of the outlaws from Deep Draw had certainly received a severe setback. Confident in their strength of numbers, and relying upon the fear which their sinister reputation had always aroused, it was a stunning surprise to them to discover that their lone opponent had had the nerve to strike first, to run off all their ponies right beneath their noses.

And the members of the Deep Draw gang, being horsemen, were well aware of what would happen if they tried to run bronchos through barbed wire. Even if they should be able to cut the wire in places, the frightened horses would get all tangled up in it. The ensuing slaughter would be too horrible for description.

Peeler, at the moment, surely held the winning hand.

So when again voices sounded in the darkness of the shadow of the butte, Peeler was not surprised to recognize that his enemies had changed their tone.

"How do yuh want tuh trade for our broncs, mister?" came the hail.

"When yuh bring back my steers, you can have 'em," was the short answer.

"How do we know yuh won't pick us off with that Winchester o' yours?"

"Yuh'll have tuh take my word for that," said Peeler.

Let them do the worrying. Their ponies were worth ten times as much as his steers.

"How'll we locate yore beef critters in the dark?" was the whining complaint.

"Don't want yuh to. Want you should bring 'em back in broad daylight. Can watch yuh-all easier that a way. An' it seems like you pore, helpless ten-

derfoots sort o' need lookin' after." Actually, Peeler was enjoying himself.

There were angry growls and oaths from beneath the shadow of the butte. The moon was high now, and out on the far sides of the inclosure the figures of half a dozen mounted men were distinct enough.

But the men on foot in the shadow of the butte were just a huddled, vague mass. Peeler could have pumped a couple of shots into them on a chance. But they could easily find cover behind the brush and stumps and boulders which had rolled down the precipitous face of the crumbling butte. Peeler's best bet was to make them do the attacking.

"Waal, we're goin' tuh send a couple o' men up to the top o' the butte whar they kin shoot down on yuh," was the next shouted challenge from the shadowy gang.

"Yeah," chuckled Peeler. "Then I'll have tuh go in out o' the nice, cool night air. Wouldn't that be too bad?"

But he waited to see if they really intended to make good their threat. Considering all the circumstances, he did not think it necessary to warn these ruffians that the top of the butte had a dangerous overhang which would cave in under the weight of a fox. Anybody who tried to do any sharpshooting from that advantageous elevation——

Apparently that was just what they did plan to attempt, though. The group beneath the shadow of the butte seemed to be smaller. Peeler thought, though he could not be sure, that a couple of figures had drifted away.

For a time, there was no further sound, save an occasional nicker from the penned-in ponies and the monotonous tinkle of the bell around Dasher, the decoy's neck.

Abruptly then from far above echoed a terrible cry. Down the side of the butte came a landslide of stones and roots and gravel. And in the midst of the rubbish of the landslip there was a whirling black figure.

It made Peeler feel rather sick. But

it was that figure's life or his. This was grim warfare.

The hours of darkness dragged on. The besieged man, alone on the roof of his cabin, kept alert and ready.

But apparently the bandits had a stomachful of disaster for the time being. If one of the restlessly circling horsemen outside the barbed-wire fence showed signs of approaching the wire too closely, Peeler sent over a warning rifle ball.

He could not be at all sure of his aim in the moonlight. But more than once, judging from the rapidity with which the rider went away from there, Peeler guessed that he had at least nicked the enemy.

Daylight came at last. And as soon as it was clear enough to see, the visitors decided to treat for terms. Three of them, with hands held wide from their sides, came riding toward the cabin. All three had their bandanna handkerchiefs tied over their faces.

That didn't suit Peeler. He let them come within six rods, then shouted:

"Take off yore muzzles, gents, even if yore faces are homely! Guess I kin stand 'em."

The three masked riders exchanged uneasy glances. But they hadn't any option in the matter. Momentarily their intended victim had things all his own way.

But, among themselves, they had very good reason to believe that the situation would not continue very long. One after the other they bared their faces.

An ugly-looking lot they were!

The leader in the center had a curly brown beard as tangled and dusty as a buffalo's. He had enormously shaggy brown eyebrows, too, and what there was visible of the skin of his face was as red as rusty iron.

On the leader's right was a tall, thin fellow, with a long, loose-hanging jaw, above which were visible yellowish pointed teeth. This man's face was extraordinarily pallid, as if he seldom exposed himself to the light of day.

To the left of the bearded man was a shriveled little fellow who looked like an ex-jockey. His leathery face was deeply wrinkled and lined. And while he stared straight ahead with his right eye, his left eye rolled round weirdly in its socket.

"Sweet a lookin' gang as ever bust loose from the penitentiary!" said Peeler aloud, and with small regard for the gentleman's feelings.

"How'll yuh trade on our hosses?" said "Buffalo-beard," going directly to the point.

"I told yuh last night," Peeler answered.

"You know we kin burn you out o' here in a couple o' nights, soon as there ain't any early moon," threatened the villainous-looking leader.

Peeler recognized the truth of that statement. In the darkness of early evening, before the moon would rise, it would be easy enough for these venomous enemies to sneak in close and ignite oil or powder enough to roast him out of his cabin.

Once in the open, he wouldn't have a chance. There were two days more of grace, however, before it would be pitch-dark before moonrise—if the weather kept fair.

So the young rancher answered contemptuously enough:

"Yeah? An' stampede yore hull band o' broncs into the bob wire?"

"We'll wait, then," said Buffalo-beard. And his two accomplices nodded.

They pulled round to ride away.

Peeler knew they were bluffing, however. They had not gone ten rods before they turned back again.

"Well, how do yuh want us tuh do it?" The leader swore savagely.

"Drive back my steers—all of 'em—to-day," Peeler laid down the law. "Drive 'em into the pasture lot. Then cut the bob wire, but leave the poles. Then drive yore broncs out quiet, while I set an' watch yuh with my Winchester. An' don't fog out any o' my

steers by accident apurpose, neither. See that tin can on the farthest post?"

He pointed to a tomato can on one of the pasture-lot posts a quarter of a mile distant. He dropped his gun sights on it and fired. The can leaped and went spinning.

Growling ferociously in his beard, the leader of the Deep Draw gang wheeled his horse and rode off.

Sure enough, toward five o'clock that afternoon, the first bunch of steers appeared on the trail upstream. Peeler smiled happily and watched carefully while the outlaws opened a small gap in the poles and wires and shoved the animals through. The broncs didn't take kindly to the steers, but didn't go loco—merely milled round and round uneasily.

By threes and fours and sixes, the cattle came drifting home. They could not have been handled with more care had they been county-fair blue-ribboners.

By dusk, every animal had been returned. The wire which circled the inclosure had been cut and removed. One by one, the captured ponies were roped, snubbed up to lead horses and led out.

Peeler, his rifle across his knees, sat on his sand bags and watched happily.

As the last mustang was led out and the gap carefully closed—with poles, not with wire—Peeler waved his baffled enemies farewell.

But Buffalo-beard didn't immediately follow his gang. Over by the post from which Peeler had shot the tomato can, the bandit leader seemed busy with pencil and paper.

What was the message now, Peeler wondered? As soon as Buffalo-beard disappeared, the young rancher went over to read the notice the man had left.

The words were short and fateful:

TOMORRA WE PICK OFF YORE  
STEERS ONE BY ONE WITH RIFLES

This time, there was no signature. Buffalo-beard was "The Comitee."

## CHAPTER IV.

## THE THREAT.

THE very simplicity of the enemy's proposed operation left Peeler with a feeling of utter helplessness.

He had discounted their threat to burn him out of his cabin. He could have balked that project.

With his dynamite cartridges and fuses, he had planned to lay a line of miniature mines around his cabin, which would furnish an astonishing surprise if the gang tried to rush him. He had planned to use his barbed wire, too, to keep them from sneaking up on him in the darkness.

But this proposal to slaughter his cattle at long range—how could he combat that? The contemptible cruelty of such a proceeding had been beyond his imagination.

And the loss of his herd would ruin him. They were all he had in the world. Watering his stock, feeding his horses, he mulled the matter over. But for a long while, he could find no answer to the bandits' threat.

Fortunately, he had the whole night to try to devise some remedy for the appalling situation which confronted him. Toward midnight, a faint hope dawned.

Had the outlaws left any sentinels to watch the Lazy H, they would have drawn the conclusion that their threat had finally routed the courageous young owner. For with all lights extinguished in the cabin, and himself moving silently as his own shadow in the moonlight, Peeler saddled and bridled the blue roan, Skippy, and cautiously headed the little horse downstream along the brook trail. He was headed for Vermilion, the nearest town, thirty miles distant.

Certainly it did look as if the owner of the Lazy H had been driven to desert his post.

And Peeler, to tell the truth, had none-too-rosy hopes for the success of this expedition of his. The Deep Draw

outlaws had long been the terror of three States.

Murderers, train robbers, bandits of all descriptions had long found sanctuary in that rugged and all-but-impentrable wilderness. County and State officials with their posses had been defeated again and again.

Peeler's only hope now was the help of a United States marshal. And he had a hunch—just a hunch—that he possessed information which might lead the Federal government to act. He'd see how sound his hunch was when he reached the Vermilion post office in the morning.

He arrived in plenty of time—had time for breakfast before the postmaster arrived to open up.

Peeler met the postmaster at the door, spoke to him briefly and accompanied him inside to the official bulletin board.

And there, sure enough, were three pictures in full face and profile, beneath the legend:

Wanted for Murder and Robbery of the  
United States Mail.

No one who had ever seen them could have forgotten those villainous faces. Their names, as advertised by the Federal government, were Buffalo-beard Burlington, "Coyote-jowl" Keen, and "Wall-eye" Smithers.

The postmaster of Vermilion was a doddering and timid old man, as afraid of the desperadoes of Deep Draw as all the rest of the citizens of the county.

But even the postmaster could not refuse to take down the message Peeler dictated, and to despatch it by telegraph to the nearest Federal office. Such a message would be sure to bring the marshal and his men within a day's time.

Just before noon, having made such purchases of provisions as he required, Peeler was standing on the steps of the general store, about ready to mount Skippy again and return to his perilous home.

He hated to think of the sight that

would probably meet his eyes when he once got back to his home spread. In his absence, his enemies would probably have killed off all his cattle—might even have burned his house.

Only the thought that he would soon be revenged cheered him. Once the Federal men settled to their work, they could be no more shaken off than hungry wolves in winter. Buffalo-beard, Coyote-jowl, and Wall-eye must surely pay the extreme penalty.

But the sudden announcement of a new depredation was a surprise. Up the dusty main street, a hatless cowboy came galloping. There was red on the man's cheek, and his pony stumbled and staggered as it ran.

"They held up the stage last night!" the cowboy shouted. "An' they killed Matt—the driver—an' Mr. Thompson!"

Immediately a crowd gathered. Oaths and lamentations filled the air. For not only had the mails been stolen again, but it was known that Mr. Thompson—the local banker—carried most of the month's deposits of the whole town.

That, most likely, meant serious loss to many people in Vermilion. The bank was a private institution of Mr. Thompson's; and if he were dead and the money stolen, who would make the loss good?

A pick-up posse was hastily formed. Now that they had suffered directly themselves, the Vermilion folk were in an ugly temper. But the holdup had occurred fifty miles away, and with the start the robbers had, there was small chance of tracking them.

Peeler deliberated as to whether or not to tell this rather disorderly mob of a posse where it would be best to look. He had a good deal of contempt for the Vermilion crowd, however. Certainly they had not lifted a hand to try to help him, or several other small ranchers and nesters who had attempted to settle in the Deep Draw domain.

The Federal officers would be different. And they should be here to-mor-

row. Peeler decided to hold his tongue and attend to his own affairs.

He started home northward as the scrambling, yelling posse headed toward the west.

Well loaded as Skippy was with provisions and plenty of fresh ammunition, Peeler pressed the blue roan on at a steady pace. He was anxious to reach home before dark, for he had no desire to run into such skulking murderers as might be waiting for him. On the other hand, he anticipated with dread the sight which might meet his eyes.

But as far as the Green Soup Plate, no one attempted to molest him. And as he topped the rise which gave full view of his cabin and pasture lot, he let out an involuntary whoop of joy and relief.

His cattle grazed peacefully in the pole inclosure. His cabin stood with open door just as he had left it. Even a pair of overalls and an old flannel shirt that he had washed and hung out to dry were still suspended from the clothesline which ran between cabin and corral.

Dasher—the little piebald pony—and the two other mustangs he could not see immediately, since they were at the hitch rail behind the cabin. But from every outward indication, not a thing on the whole spread had been disturbed.

"Waal," philosophized the young cowman, "it shore is an ill wind that blows nobody good, as the sayin' is. They was too busy stickin' up the stage, I reckon, to bother with me."

Delighted—but with his six-guns ready, nevertheless—Peeler cantered up to his cabin and dismounted.

A cautious survey told him at once that there was no enemy lurking inside his house. Well, he'd been lucky.

Then, as he circled the cabin to speak to his broncs, his sense of satisfaction received a rough jolt. Dasher—the little piebald, his favorite mount—was missing.

There was no dangling fragment of tie rope on the rail to indicate that

Dasher had chewed himself loose. No, certainly the piebald had been stolen.

But the theft of a single pony was puzzling. Why take just the one colt, when all the stock was at the thieves' disposal?

But contrary to their custom, the thieves hadn't left any message this time. Peeler went about his usual evening chores, wondering and a good deal disturbed. What devilment was up now?

Then in the course of preparing a rather elaborate supper for himself—for he expected trouble to-night, and preferred to have a full stomach to face it—an apparently insignificant discovery set Peeler thinking hard again.

On the dirt floor of the cabin, just in front of his single straight-backed chair, lay a tiny nub of leather no bigger than the end of his thumb. The bit of leather was brown and wedge-shaped, and Peeler instantly recognized what it was—the piece which was usually fastened at the back of a riding boot to hold the spur up.

Peeler's own boots were black.

Quickly he stepped to the corner of the room where his old tan boots, with the spurs still on them, stood. He had not worn those boots for two months. They were old and too big, and the heel had come off the left boot.

Standing there so long, those boots should have been covered with dust. They weren't dusty now, though. And the little nub of leather was missing from the left heel.

Peeler Henderson sat down to ponder.

"What consarned kind of a rinkydoo is this?" he said aloud. "First Dasher's vamosed; then somebody's been wearin' my old boots. It shore beats me!"

It was an obvious conclusion. Often the little leather nub is sheared off a boot when a man puts one foot on the spur to force the boot off the other foot. Yes, some one had worn those boots, missing heel and all and then carefully put them back where he had found them.

But that some one hadn't noticed the loss of the small leather nub.

While it grew dark, Peeler sat on the bench in front of his cabin, still puzzling. When at last he could no longer distinguish the individual moving bodies of his cattle, he went inside, barred his door and prepared to take up his night's vigil on the roof.

The hour before the moon rose was likely to be the most dangerous time. But he was prepared to stay on guard all night. And, he thought to himself with vast relief, this ought to be the last night of his ordeal. The Federal officers ought to be giving Buffalo-beard and his gang something to worry about to-morrow.

"An' that gang won't dast do much stock-killin' by moonlight," Peeler reflected.

That was reasonable. If they tried pot-shooting at a distance, they couldn't aim well in the tricky moonlight. If they ventured to come in close, the flashes of their own rifles would give Peeler himself something pretty definite to fire at.

So on the roof, behind the sand bags, he waited, ready.

But he was not prepared for the sudden fusillade of shots, accompanied by the whoops of human voices, which suddenly echoed from upstream.

What were the lunatics doing? Trying to charge in on him and take the cabin by weight of numbers? It would be a slaughter.

But there they were, evidently. No outlines could be distinguished, but revolver flashes spat up in the air in leaping darts of fire.

Peeler cracked out two shots from his rifle. He aimed high purposely, just to let them know he was waiting for them. Their wild shooting ceased.

"Stop whar yuh are!" warned Peeler, as loudly as he could call.

"You, Henderson! We want you!" came the amazing answer. "Might as well come peaceful. I'm the sheriff, with my lawful depities!"

## CHAPTER V.

## THE SHERIFF CALLS.

HERE was an astonishing situation. Peeler couldn't believe his ears, yet he knew his ears didn't deceive him. The voice was not the voice of the bandit known as Buffalo-beard. It did sound like the voice of the fat Vermilion sheriff.

But what was the law doing pestering Peeler Henderson? It ought to be protecting him, though it never had done so. Could it be an ingenious ruse by the Deep Draw gang?

"Light up an' let's see who yuh be!" Peeler challenged.

Promptly there was the flashing of matches. A couple of short sticks of jack pine flared. The faces of a dozen men were illuminated. They were the same men whom Peeler had seen start out from Vermilion that morning.

In puzzlement Peeler shook his head. But there was no use trying to fight such a show of legal authority.

"All right, I'll come down," he answered. "But of all the double-distilled, dumb foolishness!" he grumbled, as he descended the ladder.

By the time he had his door open, other pine knots were lighted. The mob of riders moved up to the door in a glare of brilliance.

"Keep yore hands up, you, Henderson! An' don't forget it," warned a man at the front of the crowd.

"All right. But let a feller in on the joke, won't yuh?"

"You'll see the joke plenty quick," was the answering threat. "Think yo're a purty slick article, don't yuh?"

From the rear of the crowd came a hysterical cry:

"String 'im up now! Hang the danged robber!"

Other men began to yell hoarsely.

The sheriff, however, and five or six of the men in the forefront of the mob dismounted calmly enough and walked up to Peeler.

"Put out yore wrists," ordered the of-

ficial of the law, and snapped on the handcuffs.

"But now yuh might tell me what all the fun's about," suggested Peeler.

He faced his visitors calmly in the lurid glare of the torches.

"Waal," drawled the sheriff, "yuh'd ought to know. But we might as well tell yuh the hull of it. After you stick up the stage an' kill Matt an' old Thompson——"

"Me—stick up the stage!" This was too preposterous.

"Looks so," was the dry answer. "Do yuh want tuh talk or listen?"

"Go on," said Peeler.

"After you stick up the stage," the sheriff continued his slow indictment, "yore hoss gets hurted some way an' yuh have tuh walk. Yuh made a big mistake in havin' the heel off yore left boot, though, Henderson. Yore sign was shore simple tuh foller."

"Why—I haven't worn those boots since——"

"But yuh have a pair o' boots with no left heel," said the sheriff significantly. He turned to the restless mob behind him. "Now, boys," he called, "fall off an' rummage round an' see what yuh kin locate."

A dozen men crowded into and around the cabin. Then from one corner of the cabin nearest the corral came a triumphant shout:

"Here's some of it!"

The successful searcher waved something in the light. It was a flat packet of money bound up with a thick red elastic band. Mr. Thompson, the banker, had always made up his bank notes into bundles with red elastics.

"Found it right in the pocket o' that shirt hangin' on the line," came the incriminating statement.

Slowly Peeler began to comprehend the terrible net of circumstantial evidence in which he was entangled.

"Tell me," he asked. "Yuh say yuh found my piebald pony, hurt. Was he hurt bad?"

"Hamstrung by a rifle ball."

In the new jail in Vermilion, which the town had just proudly erected, Peeler sat in the newly constructed cell and summarized the sequence of evidence which seemed so likely to doom him to the rope of the hangman.

He had made the serious mistake of underestimating the cleverness of his enemies. He had thought them only crude ruffians—loud-mouthed, braggardly gun fighters. They were far, far smarter than that.

What they had done was clear. They had stolen Dasher and then cruelly crippled the poor little piebald pony so that it might be found near the scene of the stick-up.

At the same time, some one had stolen those boots which would leave so clear a trail. Then after the boots had been returned—just as they were before, save that the accumulation of dust had been brushed off and the leather spur chock on one pulled loose—the sly thief had left the packet of money in the pocket of the old shirt as conclusive and final evidence.

What possible defense could Peeler make? He had no one to prove where he had been all that previous night when the stage had been held up. He was comparatively a stranger to every one in Vermilion, had no friends there. How could he possibly prove himself guiltless?

Yet every moment now was precious. As the morning light grew brighter, the prisoner could hear the ever-rising roar of the mob outside the new jail.

When he had been brought in during the dead hours of the early morning, Peeler had had no thought of the angry temper of the general population of Vermilion. He had been captured in orderly enough fashion and had expected to be tried in orderly enough manner, however fatal might be the verdict against him at that trial.

But now a far more fearful and immediate danger impended. The murder of old Mr. Thompson and the theft of the money he carried might well mean

the failure of the local bank. Every one's savings might be imperiled. No wonder the fast-gathering mob was howling for vengeance!

And if it came to a concerted attack, what could the easy-going sheriff do?

"Lynch 'im! Hang the murderer!" came the ferocious cries from all around the little jail.

The cell in which Peeler was confined was of modern enough type, with a board bed, a stool, and a spigot for running water. The floors of the jail had not been laid as yet. But the barred steel door was stout enough, and the window was a mere slit far over his head.

But neither stone walls nor steel doors would serve to keep out the mob, once they had overpowered one of the keepers and taken the keys from him.

Peeler's hands were free now. They had taken the handcuffs off when they locked him in the cell. Instinctively his fingers kept slipping to his thigh, naturally searching for the familiar checked-walnut stock of one of his six-guns.

If they had only left him his weapons! It would take more than an angry mob to come down the narrow cell corridor, open the door and take Peeler Henderson alive.

But without his guns, he was helpless—helpless as a baby before the fury of a frenzied populace.

"Take 'im out an' hang 'im! Fill 'im full o' lead!" came the hoarse roars and shrill screams of the savage rabble.

"Now, you boys—now, you boys—ca'm down!" was the feeble reply of the sheriff on the front steps. "Jest as soon as we kin get a jedge an' jury——"

"We'll be jedge an' jury!" somebody bellowed. "Bring 'im out, an' we'll try 'im here!"

"Hang 'im first, an' try 'im atterward!" said some would-be humorist.

"Git out o' our way, sheriff, 'fore we tromple yuh!"

For the first time in all his rough and adventurous existence, Peeler Henderson experienced the numbing shiver of

cold fear. He had never dreaded the thought of death in the open.

He had often taken desperate chances—ridden man-killing bronchos, charged into the dust of a cattle stampede to turn the wild-eyed animals, shot it out with bad men and Indians, and, for one whole terrible night, fought off the hungry wolves of the north country when the mercury was thirty below zero. He was not afraid of dying like a man, in fair fight, with his boots on.

But to be hunted down here in this narrow cell like a human rat in a hole—it was horrible! To be beaten by the gun butts and fists and clubs of the maddened mob, to be knocked down, to be trampled and kicked by spurred boots—

The tramping of feet was on the steps outside the jail. There was the scuffling, grunting sound of men wrestling, though not a shot was fired. Then came a triumphant roar from the throng.

Right well Peeler knew what that meant. The rioters had overcome the flabby sheriff's feeble resistance. They had secured the keys of the jail.

It would be but a minute or two now before they found the right keys for the locks. Then, raging and howling with unreasoning savagery, they would be upon the helpless prisoner.

At the extreme rear of his narrow cell, Peeler crouched ready. His strong fingers were crooked like claws. Hitting with the fist would be of no use.

No, Peeler was resolved to spring for the throat of the first man who dared enter that narrow cell. Then his claw-like fingers would take hold, hang on, and so take at least one of his tormentors with him down into the abysmal darkness of death.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE MARSHAL ARRIVES.

**T**HEN, even as Peeler crouched, ready to leap forward, utter silence fell.

The howls of the mob were stilled. In that amazing quiet, the imprisoned

rancher heard the tinkle and clink of bit chains, the soft *pad-pad* of trotting horses.

Some one said, outside the jail:  
"Federal marshal!"

Peeler Henderson was a strong and brave man. But in that instant he was as near fainting as a frightened girl.

For the arrival of the Federal official meant at the very least that he would not be lynched, that he would be permitted to defend himself at a fair trial. Moreover, the postmaster was there to prove that it had been he, Peeler Henderson, who had demanded the presence of the Federal authorities.

Not that that would clear him, of course. The sending of the message might well have been the gesture of a wise and wily criminal, who was thus preparing to divert suspicion from himself. Buffalo-beard would have been quite capable of such an artful ruse.

All that didn't matter now, however. It was enough for Peeler that he was to have a square and honest chance.

Immediately he was his normal self again. He was even calm enough to turn to the water tap in his cell and wash his face and hands while the marshal was being let into the building. Thus he was able to face the Federal officer coolly and apparently perfectly at ease.

Marshal Madison was a typical, gaunt old Westerner—a tall, bony man, with a drooping mustache and eyes as keen as an eagle's under his huge black sombrero. In old-time style he wore a long blue coat with brass buttons, with the big gold shield of his office over his heart.

Waving everybody else out of the corridor, the marshal unlocked the cell door, entered and stood staring steadily at the prisoner.

"Waal, son," he said at last, "what's yore story?"

Slowly and carefully Peeler told him. Now and then the marshal nodded. But at the end of the narrative, the tall man shook his head.

"I'm sort of inclined tuh believe yuh," he said soberly. "But you ain't got a mite o' proof o' what you say, an' thar's a powerful lot agin' yuh. Yo're goin' tuh get a trial in a Federal court, howsomever, which is plumb lucky, fer you wouldn't have the chance of a mouse on a cat farm in this crowd hyar. But afore we take yuh along with us, I aim tuh do a little snoopin' round on my own hook in this vicinity."

"Buffalo-beard an' his gang will get away, marshal," Peeler warned.

"Waal, that'd be my tough luck, not yourn, young feller," Madison answered grimly.

Old-timer that he was, the marshal was wary and slow to leap at conclusions. He didn't intend to let himself be horswoggled by any barefaced boy.

Instinct told that Peeler was all right, but logic and evidence indicated that Peeler was a sneaking murderer. Marshal Madison was determined to play safe.

All day, therefore, Peeler had to remain in the cell. Outside, the voices of the Vermilion folk were still loud and angry.

But the mob had been thoroughly broken up, for the marshal had four deputies with him—hard men who would shoot as quickly as they could draw, and who could draw as fast as the wink of an eye.

These deputies remained in close proximity to the jail, while Madison circulated through the town and picked up whatever information was available.

Peeler killed time as best he could. The day dragged interminably. Often the jail was so quiet that the *drip-drip* of the water faucet in the cell was the only sound.

The nagging, irritating little noise bothered the prisoner, and more than once he had wrenched at the handle of the spigot to try to stop the persistent trickle. The washer, however, must have been defective, for he couldn't completely stop the flow.

"Wonder it don't drown me out,"

thought Peeler. "Lucky they haven't put the concrete floor down yet."

He sat up then abruptly. Where was all that trickling water going to?

The jail certainly didn't have a cellar. Then—

Standing on the plank bed, Peeler grabbed the edge of the narrow window sill and pulled himself up till he could survey the patch of bare ground behind the jail. Yes, sure enough, there was a big damp spot. The water was leaking out down a slight grade under the jail wall.

Peeler Henderson grinned like the cat that has just swallowed the canary. Here was an idea.

If he only had a trowel now, or even a sheath knife!

He hadn't. But perhaps he could do something with a spur. He swiftly unbuckled his right spur and began to poke into the damp floor beneath the water spigot. Yes, he might do it.

But they would be bringing supper soon. He stamped the earth back lightly, received his supper without a word, then waited for the dark.

Out in the big front office of the jail he heard Madison's voice. From what scraps of conversation Peeler could overhear, he gathered that the marshal and at least one of the deputies intended to sleep in the front office that night—just in case some wild-eyed Vermilion folk tried to start another riot.

After a while—along about nine o'clock, it must have been—Marshal Madison walked down the corridor to take a last look at his prisoner.

Peeler stretched on his plank bed and pretended to be fast asleep.

The marshal stared through the bars for a moment, shook his head in perplexity, and then went away to the front office, clanging the door of the cell row behind him.

Instantly Peeler went to work.

He turned on the water tap halfway, so that there would be a steady but soundless flow to soften up the stamped-down earth. Then with spur and fin-

gers. Peeler began to burrow like a terrier at a gopher hole.

It was tough work at first. The jail masonry went down only a foot or so; but until Peeler got below that, he was constantly skinning his hands and breaking his finger nails.

Once he got under the bottom of the wall, though, the job was easier. The water flowed smoothly through the hole, constantly cutting a wider passage. Peeler soon had an opening through which he could shove his two hands.

He paused then only long enough to chin himself once more on the window-sill to be sure that no one outside had observed his operations or noted the constantly spreading pool of water. The open space behind the jail was hidden from the street, and no windows looked directly out upon it.

Peeler resumed his mining operations. Long before midnight, he had an opening big enough to squirm through. Presently he stood outside the jail wall, beneath a waning, lop-sided moon.

The town of Vermilion, wearied with all the excitement of the day, slept.

Edging cautiously round the wall of the prison, Peeler spied the horses of the marshal and the deputy hitched by the jail's front door. Boldly enough he walked up to the larger of the two animals—a fine, dark beast, with the U. S. brand distinct on its left haunch.

"Lo, ol' man!" Peeler stroked the glossy neck. "You an' me's goin' somewhere."

The big animal, sensing the friendly touch and the gentle voice, seemed to bob its head in assent.

But Peeler did not immediately mount and make off. His plans included more than mere flight. Ever since the young ranchman had discovered that escape from the jail was within the realm of possibility, an elaborate scheme had been shaping itself in his brain.

Working round to the west side of the jail so that he might not be betrayed to any casual passer-by in the moonlight, Peeler peered into the front office win-

dows. The two sleeping figures were easy enough to discern.

But it was not the sleeping men that Peeler looked at most intently. His eyes searched the wall of the office.

Nodding smilingly to himself, he stepped to the front door and with infinite caution opened it. Neither of the sleepers stirred.

Gliding like a ghost, Peeler slid silently across the room; helped himself to the marshal's long .45, which lay in a moonlit patch on the table; and then, from its hook on the wall, took down the big blue overcoat with the brass buttons.

As quietly and swiftly as he had entered, Peeler left the jail. He donned the big blue overcoat; mounted the marshal's big horse.

The few midnight loafers who saw the figure canter past wondered where the marshal was going.

## CHAPTER VII.

### PEELER STRIKES.

**P**EELER was extremely glad that he had a big, strong horse to fork, for he had to ride far and fast before day-break.

He headed first for home, and made the trip in better time than he had ever covered it before.

As he had expected, he found his home spread just as he had left it. His ponies nickered at him from the hitch rail, the steers lowed in the pasture lot. They must be awfully hungry and thirsty, Peeler thought. But they'd have to wait to be attended to until later.

Peeler's immediate errand was at the shed beneath the butte where he stored his dynamite fuses and cartridges. And within ten minutes he was ready and off again.

The various members of the Deep Draw gang lay comfortably wrapped in their blankets and soogans about their smoldering fire. It was the last night they planned to spend in this cozy mountain hideout. Buffalo-beard had deter-

mined that they must move farther into the rugged wilderness in the morning.

The gang, of course, was aware of everything that had happened on Peeler Henderson's home spread. Half a dozen of them with field glasses had watched the whole proceeding from a safe distance.

They knew also just what had occurred in Vermilion. Coyote-jowl and Wall-eye had both gone down to the town and hung around the edge of the mob which had planned to lynch Peeler.

The two rascals had been disappointed to see the lynching thwarted. But the arrival of the big blue-coated marshal had fitted in with their plans well enough.

It had been perfectly evident from the marshal's action that Peeler was, as yet, the only man suspected of the holdup of the mail stage and the murder of Matt and Mr. Thompson. Later, after Peeler had been shipped away for trial by the Federal authorities, it was likely that Marshal Madison would push his investigation further and more thoroughly.

Plenty of time to hit the trail, though, was the general sentiment of the Deep Draw desperadoes.

So they slept as undisturbed and innocently as a lot of little children.

It was the sudden snorting of horses and the thunder of galloping hoofs that roughly awakened them. Scrambling to their feet, all entangled in their blankets, the dozen members had a hard time dodging the wild stampede of a hundred panic-stricken ponies.

Four patches of burning tumbleweed showed what had startled the mustangs. The fiercely burning fires illuminated the little glen with fitful radiance.

There was plenty of light, though, to see the big solitary figure in the blue overcoat with brass buttons, who sat there upon a gigantic horse, with a shining revolver leveled.

"Give 'em a volley, men! An' see how quick we kin make 'em put their hands up!" came the command in a deep bass voice.

The desperadoes of the Deep Draw had all dropped their hands to their weapons. After their first instant of fright, they had quickly recovered their usual poise. Buffalo-beard had actually laughed as his fingers drew out his own notched six-gun.

Who was this fool marshal, to think he could take them single-handed?

In the flickering light of the brush fires, they could not see what the mounted figure held in his lap on the saddle horn; they could not discern the swift motion of the left hand which pushed down the plunger, or see that it was an electric battery box which was now tossed off the saddle.

So the reverberating roar which suddenly shook the valley stunned them with its frightful detonation.

And scarcely had the echoes of that first fierce explosion died when the masterful voice was heard booming again:

"Pour it into 'em, men! Pour it into 'em!"

Again, from a hundred yards to the right, came another deafening blast. The jagged horizon of the hills which hemmed the valley in seemed fairly to shiver.

The mounted man in the blue overcoat pushed his horse a couple of rods forward. Again he roared:

"Blast 'em out o' hyar!"

To the startled desperadoes, dazed with sleep and the fumes of the liquor with which they had been celebrating their achievement, it seemed that they must be surrounded by a whole army of officers armed with big-caliber buffalo guns.

Half a dozen of the outlaws dropped their own weapons and shot their hands upward in token of abject surrender.

Then, as the third explosion shattered the heavens and sent the stars dancing as if in a crazy jig, all the rest of the gang lost all their courage. Twenty two hands waved high.

All the rest? Not quite—not the leader called Buffalo-beard.

With a throaty oath, the bandit chief,

standing solid as a pinnacle of granite, raised his long .45 and fired.

Had not the fourth explosion boomed out at just that second, Peeler Henderson would have been drilled through the heart. But the roar of the fourth explosion sent the big black horse up on its hind legs, whirling.

This was no time for Peeler to display his horsemanship; instantly he recognized that. As the cayuse reared and plunged, Peeler deftly let himself slide over the animal's rump, and he landed on one knee in the valley grass.

Buffalo-beard, disconcerted, fired wildly.

Peeler, his elbow propped on his right knee, lined up his sights with cold grimness, and shot his enemy through the temple.

Sure, then, that all eleven of the desperadoes still kept their hands well aloft, Peeler turned and shouted to the empty woods:

"Wait till I drive 'em out, men! Then you can take 'em!"

One by one, he made the slinking bandits file by, slapping the hips and arm-pits of each to be sure that they were without weapons.

Once he was satisfied that they were harmless, he took his time about catching his frightened black horse and remounting.

He lined the dumfounded outlaws up in front of him in single file.

"Now—as they say in the army, I believe—forward march, yuh weasels! Hay-foot, straw-foot—we'll all take a nice walk tuh Vermilion."

They must have gone half a mile before the bewildered prisoners realized that Peeler's supposed army was still strangely absent. But with not a single shooting iron among the lot, they couldn't do much about it by that time.

As he had anticipated, Peeler was not obliged to haze his peculiar herd quite all the way to the town of Vermilion. As day broke, galloping horsemen came riding. Their leader was a tall, elderly man, without coat or vest.

Peeler halted his prisoners and sat waiting. He kept his gun handy, though. He could not be sure that some townies might not start shooting.

But the mob of riders was evidently well under the control of the marshal. And old Madison didn't even bother to move his right hand from his hip to the borrowed six-shooter which was strapped on his leg.

"Waal, young man," said he, after a brief survey of the sorry-looking captives, "who's yore homely friends?"

"This is a gang o' wild an' woolly outlaws," replied Peeler.

"'Was,' not 'is,'" the marshal corrected. "Just now the hull kit an' boodle on 'em is likely tuh git free board from Uncle Sam fer a right smart while. How come yuh ride trail-herd on 'em so easy?"

Briefly Peeler told his story. At the incident of the dynamite cartridges connected up with the plunger box to imitate volleys of rifle fire, the marshal chuckled delightedly.

Then he directed willing volunteers to search the gang for the stolen bank notes. Every outlaw had evidently received his cut, for money was found all over them—in pockets, socks, hatbands, and boot toes.

"Ain't it the deuce?" the marshal rambled on, when the Vermilion people, overjoyed at getting back their savings had somewhat subsided.

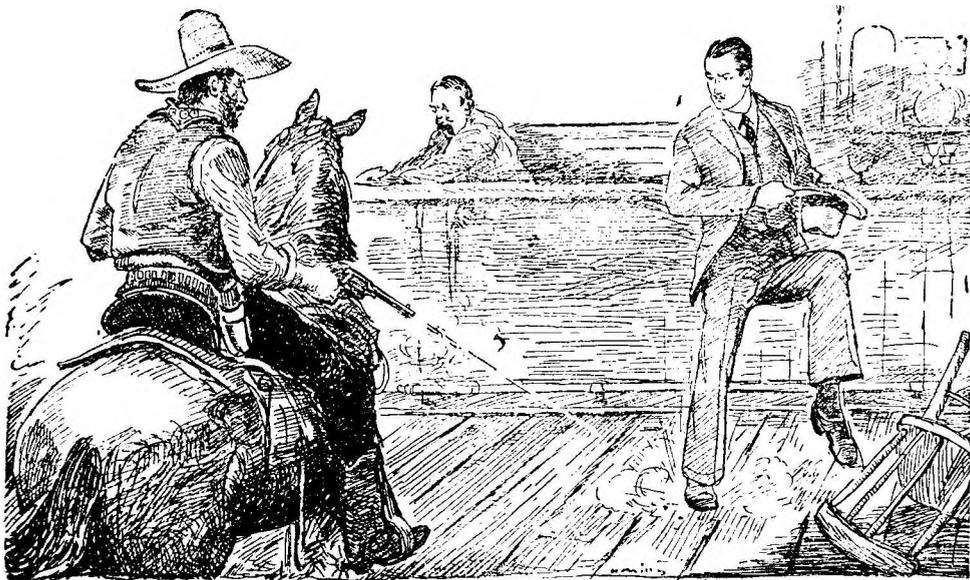
"Ain't it the deuce? Yuh risk yore life ketchin' these coyotes. An' then have tuh spend good money feedin' 'em an' givin' 'em nice warm cells tuh sleep in! Gov'ment builds better cells than they do round hyar, too," he added.

The sheriff of Vermilion squirmed a little at that.

In the chill morning breeze, Marshal Madison shivered. He looked at Peeler.

"Son," he said, with a smile, "wonder if yuh'd mind shuckin' off that nice blue overcoat yo're wearin' an' givin' it tuh me. You ain't got any use fer it, hev yuh, any more?"

"Not any more," said Peeler.



# A Tenderfoot From By Franklin B. Holt Author of "Plumb Good Sheriff Timber," etc. Texas

IT was shortly after noon when "Freck" Duncan reached the mountain cow town of Hoofville, at the end of a forty-mile drive from Zach Baker's ZAK Bar outfit.

Having taken care of the buckboard team at the town corral, he stretched himself out on a pile of loose hay to rest until the time arrived for him to go down and meet the stage, which was due at Hoofville at three thirty.

Jacob Storm—a west Texas cattle king—would be in on the stage. Freck had driven to Hoofville to meet him, and to-morrow morning, after the team had had a good, long rest, he would take him out to the ZAK Bar home base. Mr. Storm was coming to look over Zach Baker's spread, with a view to buying it for his son, whom he wanted to establish in a business for himself in Arizona.

Zach Baker was anxious to sell his outfit. Being confined to the house with

serious heart trouble, he was no longer able to look after his affairs. And besides, the doctor had warned him that he must get down to a lower altitude quickly and stay down, or he might drop off any minute.

Freck Duncan—"Freck" was short for "Freckles"—was the foreman of the spread, and to him had been assigned the task of looking after Jacob Storm and showing him around. Though Freck—tall, rangy, red-headed, and elaborately freckled—was only twenty-three, Zach Baker had such abundant confidence in him that he practically entrusted him with the full management of his big cattle business.

"I sure do wish that 'Crimp' Lupton hadn't drug his pay yesterday," Freck mused, as he reclined on the hay. "I can't savvy what got into Crimp all of a sudden to pull up and slope. If the report is true that old 'Coot' Daggs and his scaly bunch has moved in on these

here Arizona parts from over Prescott way, I'd feel safer if I had another handy man with a gun besides myself—like Crimp, for instance—to sort o' ride guard when I drive this Jacob Storm gent out to the ranch mañana, for mebbe—mebbe——”

His thoughts became blurred, and he dropped off into a doze.

He came drowsily awake, yawned and looked at his nickel watch. It said three o'clock. It was well that he had not slept any longer. But he had wakened in good time, for it was still a half hour yet before the stage would come rolling in.

He arose, stretched and yawned again. It was a walk of only a block up to the main street, and then three more blocks down to the stage office, so he need not hurry. He had no description of Jacob Storm. But he needed none, for a strange cowman would be readily recognized.

Just as he reached the main street, six yelling riders, one of them leading a horse on which was an empty saddle, came racing up the road from the stage station.

“Seems like I don't savvy them gents,” Freck observed to himself. “They're sure plumb strangers to me, and I 'lowed I knowed every cow poke in these here Arizona parts.”

The six strangers jerked down in front of a rough-board shack on which hung a crudely lettered sign, which read:

#### POP'S PLACE—RIDE IN, GENTS

Pop's establishment had been designed especially to meet the requirements of those recklessly exuberant punchers who chose to take their refreshments while sitting in their saddles.

The six strangers wheeled in across the heavily planked porch floor, and then, with a chorus of cat squalls, crowded on through the wide doorway. The led horse was dragged in protestingly after them.

Freck quickened his pace. He was curious to know who the strangers were. When he reached the porch, terrified shrieks began to pierce through the hilarious clamor that the six men had carried with them into the saloon.

Thumping through the doorway, Freck saw five of the roisterers, still mounted, either pouring their drinks or preparing to do so. The sixth—a huge, red-bearded fellow of middle age, also still in saddle—was crowding the empty horse close against a screaming young man, apparently a tenderfoot. The victim was fighting off the animal with a suit case, which was plastered with the stickers of many foreign hotels.

This young man, who could not have been more than twenty-three, was small, athletic-looking, and of fair complexion, with a scant, downy mustache, and was attired in a fashionably tailored gray suit.

“Sling a laig over the cack, purty boy!” the red-whiskered man blared. “You're goin' to lick up with us, and it's agin' the law for a customer to swizze from the floor in this j'int!”

“You're no gentleman!” the young man screeched in a fit of terror, cringing back to the end of the bar. “S-stay away from me! And k-keep that animal off my toes, please!”

“Ye-e-ow!” whooped the playful bully. “Hop up, kid! Hoist a laig!”

“B-barkeeper,” the young man pleaded in a hysterical pitch. “S-save me! P-protect me!”

“I've got my customers to wait on, son.” The barkeeper himself showed fright, but he was trying his best to appear cool. “Anyhow, what d'you mean by rompin' into my place on foot?”

“There, you said it!” the big man yowled through the delighted applause of his crowd. “Fork this critter quick, baby! You're delayin' our deluge!”

“Help! Help!” the young chap cried lustily. “Will nobody p-protect me from these b-brutal ruffians?”

The six men shook the building with their gross laughter.

"Brutal ruffians is right, *bobo!*" the redbeard barked. "Now up with you! Jump!"

He jerked out one of his guns and fired a shot close to the feet of the young man, who went into the air to the accompaniment of a piercing screech.

"Now look it here, *hombre,*" Freck protested, stepping up close to the boisterous blusterer. "I don't know you from Adam's off ox, but seein' that this here young gent ain't hankerin' for your company and don't like your style o' settin' up the drinks, I——"

Coincident with a vicious oath that checked Freck's rebuke came the swift streak of metal toward the side of his head. He ducked, but too late. He went plunging through space amidst a dazzle of stars, which suddenly winked out into utter blackness.

## II.

When light began to peep back into Freck's consciousness, he became painfully aware that he was gagged, bound hand and foot and lying on the floor behind the bar. A muffled voice close to him was swearing incoherently. Then he discovered that a man, gagged and hog tied like himself, was lying beside him.

"So they floored you, too, did they, kid?" Freck mumbled.

"'Tain't the kid—it's Pop." It was the barkeeper. "Comin' alive, are you?"

"Gradual. What're we waitin' for?"

"For somebody to sift in and pry us loose. But ever'body in town must 'a' crawled under their beds, for nary an *hombre* has stuck his nose in my place since them gents knocked you out and hogged up me 'n' you both like a couple o' dogies, and then pulled their freight. And the big jasper whacked the skeert tenderfoot, too, when all of a sudden he comes alive and unravels a talkin' iron as long as your arm——"

"Heh?" Freck interrupted in amazement.

"Sure did, and out it come faster'n

a rattler could spit his tongue. But he was too late, at that, and right now he hit the floor. Then they piled him onto that empty hoss and took him off with him."

"How long they been gone?" Freck asked anxiously.

"Half an hour, *mebbe* longer."

"Great jumpin' mavericks!" Freck groaned, his wits suddenly beginning to function. "And I was to meet the stage at half past three! *Mebbe* I've still got time, if I could only break loose."

"You're locoed," growled the barkeeper. "It come in and left five-ten minutes before you rammed yourself into this mess."

"No!" Freck went cold.

"That fool tenderfoot, or whatever he is, come in on it," Pop advised. "He eased in here to ask me if I'd seen you in town, him sayin' you was to meet him, when in romps them *hombres*——"

"Say! Say!" Freck, cutting in, heaved in alarm, an appalling truth beginning to dawn on him. "Where did that kid come from? And who is he? And who was them fellers that nabbed him and drug him off?"

"Nobody else but Coot Daggs and his bunch, who's sure enough drifted into these parts, jest like the report said. I knowed him from them red whiskers the minute I set eyes on him."

"And the young feller——"

"He said he come from Texas. He never told me who he was, but I seen on that valise of hisn the name 'J. Storm, Jr.,' which, I take it, means he's the son of his old man, don't it?"

"Great 'Hoss'phat!" Freck was caught up in a giddy swirl. "Jacob Storm's boy! I've got to git loose in a hurry, Pop. Got to ketch them murderin' killers—got to git back the kid, or—or——" His voice broke.

"There ain't a thing in the world we can do, Freck," grumbled Pop behind his gag, "but lay still until somebody comes in and cuts us loose. I can't even holler for help, with this old rag tied across my mouth."

## III.

Another fifteen minutes passed before tiptoed footsteps were heard on the porch. A cautious voice called Pop's name. Pop answered with a loud groan. Then a man came round the bar, and he quickly released the two bound men.

Freck's head was spinning from the blow that he had received. He staggered to his feet. His first concern was his two guns. They were still snug in their holsters. The bandits evidently had plenty of weapons of their own, for they had not bothered to strip him of his.

Sick at heart, he reeled out of the saloon and stumbled toward the corral. His brain was all a-clutter. His first sensible reaction was a guilty feeling of satisfaction that the bandits had carried off Jacob Storm, junior.

It nauseated him to think that the good old ZAK Bar might have fallen into the hands of that high-collared tenderfoot. He would never work for a dude like that. Not Freck Duncan!

But he was sure that the chance for any such calamity had passed. When the bandits had cleaned young Storm of all he had, they would turn him loose, without doubt, and he would streak straight back to Texas. He would have his fill of Arizona.

Texas—a tenderfoot from Texas! Freck gave a snort of disgust. What in the world was Texas coming to?

Then rebellion against his wicked satisfaction at the plight of the junior Storm began to pound at his conscience. No matter what the young man was, he was in trouble and needed help. He must be rescued from the vicious hands of the bandits, even though he might afterward buy the ZAK Bar. There was no law that would compel Freck to work for a dude tenderfoot.

Freck was shamed, too, by the self-accusation that he had defaulted in an important mission with which his boss had intrusted him. It was not fair to Zach Baker to let this chance to sell his

spread slip away from him when the need to do so was so urgent.

These thoughts moved Freck toward a definite purpose, and by the time he reached the corral, that purpose had hardened into firm determination.

He looked at his watch as he passed the stall where the buckboard team were munching their hay. It still said three o'clock. The watch had stopped.

Neither of the horses had been broken to ride. So he hired a saddle animal, and soon he was up and away on the trail of the kidnapers and their captive, which led straight toward the high mountains.

As he pounded over the hills, he began to wonder how Coot Daggs and his gang had known that Jacob Storm, whether the elder or his son, was coming on the stage that afternoon. They certainly must have known it, for the conviction of foreknowledge was in the sureness with which they had acted. The problem troubled him.

Freck's zeal to overtake the bandits and clean them up in a dashing surprise attack—he was swift and deadly with his six-guns—sent him on at a desperate gallop. Dusk was thickening by the time he began to ascend into the rugged heights. Soon it would be too dark to hold to the trail. But he had the course, and night would not halt him.

Darkness had deepened when he entered a heavily timbered area, which was slashed through with a maze of box canyons. By leaning low from the saddle, he was still able to hold to the trail.

He was following it at a stiff lope up a canyon when, swinging round a sharp rock formation that thrust out from the wall, his mount suddenly tripped over a rope that had been strung from one tree to another across his path. The outlaws had caught sight of him far back along the trail and had set a trap for him.

The horse went down. Freck was flung over its head, and he spread-eagled on the ground. Before he could catch his breath, three men pounced upon him,

whisked his guns from his holsters and in a trice had his wrists bound together.

When the horse was dragged to its feet and it was found to have suffered no injury, Freck, subdued by the threat of guns, was lifted into his saddle and his feet were tied to the stirrups.

Then his mount was led on up the canyon a hundred yards or so. There Coot and his two other men were keeping close guard on young Storm, who was gagged and snubbed to stirrup and horn.

Freck was amazed to see that Storm betrayed not the slightest sign of fatigue from the long, arduous ride. He sat his mount with the easy grace of one born to the saddle. He was perfectly cool, too, and appeared to be altogether indifferent to his predicament.

"So they got you, too, cowboy," he said to Freck in a casual tone when his gag was removed. "If these blacklegs hadn't tied that nasty rag across my mouth, I'd have let out a yell and warned you."

"Shut up!" Coot rasped at him. "It's somethin' else besides talk I want out of you. Don't forget that."

#### IV.

Freck and Storm had no chance to exchange any talk, for they were kept well separated on the tedious ride that then began. All night the grim party rode, the six outlaws in sullen silence, climbing higher and higher into the mountains, crossing deep canyons, scrambling up stiff slopes, winding in and out among spruce and firs, to which the pines of the lower altitudes had given way.

Not a whimper came from Storm. There were times when he even presumed to chaff his captors and rawhide them. But Coot promptly suppressed his bubbling attempts at levity.

Shortly after dawn, they came to the rim of a deep, narrow box canyon. Here Coot halted his men and prisoners and called out in a guarded tone:

"Hey, boys! Come a-runnin'!"

After a brief wait, two young men, hardly more than boys, came slouching out of the thick grove of spruces that began a few yards back of the opposite rim. They were hatless, ragged, unkempt. Their long hair fell over their eyes and about their necks in shaggy disorder. They looked more like slinking beasts of prey than human beings. Each wore a pair of heavy guns.

"How's the lay?" Coot sent across to them.

"All clear, dad!" one of them answered in an indolent, drawling tone.

"Then we'll be right over," said Coot. "Now hustle yourselves back to the shack, boys, and shake up a good breakfast. We're hongry."

He led the way down a steep blind trail, up the opposite wall, down along the rim to the point where the two boys had appeared, and then through a jungle of spruces to a dilapidated old log cabin, until lately long deserted, which was hidden in a snug niche in a high bluff that thrust up a full two hundred yards back from the canyon rim.

The cabin was not unfamiliar to Freck. It was no farther than twenty miles from the ZAK Bar home base, and there had been times in the past when his duties as primero had brought him into this wilderness region.

The two boys came moping out and gawked at the dusty travelers.

"You hain't got nothin' but a cowboy and a dude," drawled the elder, a loose-lipped, lanky youth of about twenty, "and I 'lowed you was goin' after big game, like you said you was, dad."

"And it's big game we got, boys," Coot crowed. "The cowboy jest happened; but the dude ain't nobody else but the tenderfoot kid o' the old man we rid to Hoofville to corral. Seems like the younglin' come instid of his dad. I happened to know it was him when I seen that name on his valise yander."

He waved his hand toward the suit

case, which one of the men carried. On it was lettered: "J. Storm, Jr."

"And who'th the cowboy?" lisped the younger boy—a gangling lad of not more than eighteen, with a harelip and a weak, vicious face.

"Him? Name's Freck Duncan. He's the ZAK primero. He driv in to meet the gent who came to buy out his boss, but we beat him to it. Then he got brash, and we ketched him."

Freck gave a start. How could Coot know who he was? He caught the eye of Storm, who nodded and smiled at him as though acknowledging an introduction.

Coot dismounted and put an arm about the younger boy. "And how's my little boy 'Dodo'?" he asked with a tender concern that indicated a deep affection for his younger son.

"Fine ath thilk, dad," Dodo replied.

"How about breakfast?" Coot twined his fingers in the boy's hair.

"All thet but the meat," said Dodo, "and that'll be ready by the time 'Bim' puth the hothes in the pathture."

The two prisoners were dragged from their saddles. Then their ankles were bound, and they were carried into a large, puncheon-floored room, which was thick with gloom.

It was both kitchen and bedroom. In one corner was a decrepit old cook stove. In each of two other corners was a disreputable bunk. The posts and rails of the beds had been crudely fashioned out of aspen saplings, while the headboards and footboards, now badly checked, had been hewn from the same material. Freck was tossed roughly on one bed, and Storm on the other.

When the breakfast of biscuits, venison, wild honey, and muddy coffee was ready, the two captives were helped to a bench at the rickety table, and their hands were given freedom. Both were famished, and they ate with relish.

After the meal, Freck submitted to being returned to one of the bunks. He was stretched out, and a rope was looped about each wrist and ankle, which were

respectively tied to headboard and footboard.

A noose was then slipped over his head and the rope knotted about the headboard in such a manner that movement was restricted by the threat of strangulation.

"Now for the main business," Coot announced briskly.

He tossed Storm's suit case on the table and squinted at its decoration of stickers.

"Looks like you must 'a' traveled some, kid," he grunted.

"All over the world after I graduated from college, crook," Storm replied in an insolent tone.

"Cool as an icicle," Freck said mentally. "That kid's got narve. He shore ain't the wild-eyed tenderfoot now that he was in Pop's place."

"All over the world, huh?" Coot sneered. "Well, me 'n' my two boys are goin' to do some o' them kind o' travelin' when I make my stake—which time's comin' pronto."

## V.

In obedience to Coot's sharp order, one of the men searched Storm's pockets and brought forth the key to the suit case. Coot fitted it into the lock and sprang open the lid.

"Here's what I'm lookin' for." He lifted up a check book and peered eagerly between its covers. "I see there's some blanks in this book that's got the name o' Jacob Storm already writ at the bottom. I reckon that's your old man, kid?"

"You guessed right, highbinder," Storm admitted with a foolish frankness that caused Freck to mutter under his breath.

"He's got quite a pile o' dinero in this here El Paso bank that's printed on the checks, ain't he?"

Storm's brow became lined with a puzzled frown. "Dinero? What's dinero?"

"You're shore ignorant," growled Coot. "Money, o' course."

"Oh, yes." Storm yawned. "He's got a little money in that bank."

"How much?"

"Not much, though I don't know exactly. Probably something above a hundred and fifty thousand."

"Why, the cockeyed young fool!" Freck muttered inaudibly. "Right now I see where he ain't never goin' to buy out pore old Zach Baker—and I'm kind o' sorry. I reckon I wouldn't mind workin' for a narvy kid like that, after all, even if he is somethin' of a fool—though he ain't quite the tenderfoot I'd taken him for."

"Whew!" Coot whistled through the exclamations that came from his men. "A hundred and fifty thousand! That's some pile o' dinero, say I. And I savvy what your old man signed them blank checks for, young feller. But it's my spread you're goin' to buy out, and not the ZAK Bar."

Storm squinted at him. "Your spread? And where's your spread, pirate?"

"Right here." Coot swept a gesture about the shack, amidst the hilarious guffaws of his gang. "Now all you've got to do, kid, is to fill in one o' them checks in your own handwrite for a hundred and fifty thousand, and the spread's yourn. Savvy?"

"But I don't want your crumby old spread!" Storm laughed.

"That don't make no difference," Coot yapped at him. "You're goin' to buy it, whether you want it or not."

Storm eyed him coldly. "Who said so, thief?"

"I said so! And if you don't fill out that check like I said, you stay right here until you starve to death. So you'd better come through neat if you want to keep your ribs from stickin' out."

Storm heaved a sigh. "That wouldn't be a bit nice, so maybe I'll take on your spread, after all, thug. But I'm afraid you won't be able to get the money on the check without going to a lot of trouble."

"Why for?" Coot snapped at him.

"Just because there probably isn't a bank in Arizona that would take the risk of carrying that much cash, with you and your dirty bunch snooping round."

"That's enough o' them insultin' remarks, *bobo!*" Coot dashed at him. "And don't you fret about me gittin' the check cashed."

He turned to his men. "We're ridin' straight to Clifton, boys. That burg ain't so far from El Paso but what the bank there can git the dinero in two-three days. We'll wait until it comes, and then make the split and part company. I'll hang around Clifton until Bim and Dodo shows up, and then we start travelin'."

"But what about my cowboy friend and myself?" Storm queried with frank concern. "Where do we get off?"

"I ain't sayin' you're goin' to git off," Coot replied wickedly. "All depends on whether you make me a first-class, ironclad check. These two boys o' mine'll wait here and keep you company for eight days. If we don't show up by then, they'll savvy that I've got the money, and they'll fix you two up so's you can work loose in two-three hours. You git that, Bim and Dodo?"

"Shore," answered Bim.

"You two boys'll take all the hosses so's the gents won't have no critters to ride after you on." Coot jerked his head toward Freck. "You savvy these parts, cowboy, and you'll come in handy in gittin' the kid out. By that time, we'll be far, far away. And you don't need to think that anybody's goin' to trail into this place, for we'll ride back a long stretch on the trail we left comin' in, and that'll fool any people that comes prowlin' for to look you up."

"Eight days!" Storm shook his head. "Do you mean to say that we're going to be kept tied up in this foul-smelling shack all that time?"

"You're goin' to stay hogged up right here until I git the money," Coot decreed. "And if there's anything wrong

with the check and I don't git the dinero, back we come on a high lope, and we'll croak you both. So git busy, kid, and be shore to make that check air-tight."

Storm continued to protest mildly. But in the end he yielded to the demand, making the check payable, under Coot's direction, to Herman Daggett.

"There you are, bad man," said Storm flippantly, tearing out the check and passing it to Coot's clutching hand.

Coot pocketed the check with a satisfied grunt. "Now, boys," turning to his men, "we're stirrin' the dust for Clifton. Bim, you 'n' Dodo"—addressing his two sons—"want to take good keer o' the gents—and don't take no chances with 'em."

"We'll hold 'em stiddy, all right, dad," Bim promised.

Storm was then placed on the other bunk and was tied up in the same manner as Freck.

"That'll keep 'em gentle," Coot chortled. "Now fetch up the hosses, Bim, and we'll hit the grit."

## VI.

A half hour later, Coot and his five men mounted at the front door and rode away, leaving the two prisoners in the hands of Bim and Dodo.

For about fifteen minutes, the boys busied themselves with kitchen chores. Then Bim languidly picked up two tin pails and went out by the front door, saying that he was going to the spring for water.

Shortly after Bim had gone, Dodo dragged himself out the back way, and soon the whacks of an ax was heard at lazy intervals. Both doors were left open.

"So you're Freck Duncan, the ZAK Bar primero, are you?" Storm questioned in a low tone.

"The same. And I take it that you're Mr. Storm."

"Jake Storm," came the prompt correction.

**WW—8A**

Freck gave a start. After all, the young tenderfoot was human.

"Pleased to meet you, Jake," he said cordially.

"Same to you, Freck. Zach Baker, your boss, wrote dad that he'd have you meet me at Hoofville——"

"It wasn't you I was to meet," Freck interrupted. "It was your old man."

"So it was, Freck; but at the last minute dad decided that I was the one to look over the ZAK Bar, since it was to be my spread in case the deal was made with Mr. Baker. Besides, dad says that he'd rather trust to my judgment than his own, when it comes to range and cattle. So I came instead of him."

Freck sucked in a quick breath. This hint that young Storm, whom he had taken for a dude tenderfoot, was well versed in range matters greatly startled him.

"I 'lowed you was a greenhorn when I seen you steppin' high, wide 'n' handsome in Pop's j'int," he said.

"That's where I fell down bad," Storm admitted. "I knew that was a bad bunch when I saw them come whooping in, and I suspected that they were after me. For nearly everybody in the Southwest knows that dad is one of the biggest cowmen in west Texas. So I played the tenderfoot racket to throw them off. But I forgot all about my name being on my suit case, and, of course, they saw it. And right there I was sure enough tenderfoot."

"Some tenderfoot!" A tinge of admiration for Storm's cool audacity was in Freck's voice.

"From Texas." Storm laughed softly.

Dodo's ax was still whacking behind the cabin.

"Now here we are," said Storm; "and, Freck, we've sure got to get out of this fix we're in before I can buy the ZAK Bar."

"But where's the money to come from now," Freck grumbled, "when you went and give that crook a check for all

you've got in the bank? It was right there you showed you was a softy ag'in, Jake."

"Can't you see that I had to get the main bunch out of the way?" Storm retorted in a low, hurried tone. "Having done that, we've now got only these two half-baked whelps to handle. And if you and I together haven't got brains enough to rib up a scheme to loop them, then we sure deserve to be croaked."

"And we've got eight days to do it in!" A ray of hope began to stream in on Freck's brain. "I see your p'int, Jake, and I got to hand it to you for havin' a real think box."

He squirmed back on the bed to relieve the tension of the rope that was clawing at his throat, for he had slipped down a little and had drawn the noose uncomfortably close against his wind.

The bunk was made for a shorter man than Freck, and in the movement, his feet pressed hard against the footboard, which was nailed to the outside of the posts. The hewn aspen board was checked with age, and he felt it yield to the pressure.

This was a momentous discovery. Pulling himself up, he then experimented with the headboard by pressing his head against it, and he found that it, too, was insecurely fastened.

"Anyhow"—Storm was speaking again—"that check I gave the old rascal isn't worth the paper it's written on."

"It ain't no good?" Freck gasped. "But your dad's name was signed to it, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but not mine. It's got to be countersigned by me before the bank will honor it. And if we don't get out of this before the head crook discovers that he's been gypped——"

"We're goin' to git out," Freck interrupted hurriedly. "And your not signin' that check is what'll help us do it. First thing to be done is to git one o' them young cubs to ride after the bunch and bring 'em back, sayin' you forgot to sign the check yourself."

"And then fix it so the old blather-

skite can get the money on it? Nothing doing, cowboy! I'd let 'em kill me first."

"Same here," Freck made haste to assure him. "But I can break loose from this bunk, and one of 'em'll be easier to handle than two. We'll git him, and then we're gone from here."

"I'm from Texas, Freck, and I'm with you to the finish! My brain is working right along with yours. But I won't be satisfied with merely getting out of this. We've got to clean up on the whole gang before I'd think of buying a ranch in Arizona—— Sh!"

His sentence broke off with the sibilant warning, for footsteps told that Bim was quickly approaching the front door.

Bim entered with two pails of water, and a moment later Dodo came moping through the back door with an armful of wood.

"Say, boys," said Storm in an agitated tone, "could one of you ride fast enough to catch up with that old man of yours?"

"I reckon," droned Bim. "Why for?"

"To save him a long ride for nothing. He got me so excited when I wrote that check that I forgot to sign it myself, and it's not any good without my name on it."

"Ain't your old man's name writ on it?" Bim asked suspiciously.

"Sure—but that's not enough. I've got to sign it, too, under dad's name. I don't want your old man to ride all the way to Clifton on a wild-goose chase. So one of you jump on a horse quick and chase right after him and bring him back."

"Dad would be thore ath a bile if he wath to lope all them miles to Clifton and then found the check ain't no good," predicted Dodo, wagging his head wisely. "You go after him, Bim. I'll look after them two people."

"We've got to have that money," Bim declared, "so's we can go travelin' like dad promised. I'll ketch 'em."

Then he was gone, and in a few min-

utes the thud of hoofs told that he was on his way.

Dodo pattered about the kitchen for a few minutes, then he dragged his heels indolently toward the back door. "Now you two genth lay gentle," he ordered, "while I tote in the rēth o' my wood."

A moment after he had disappeared beyond the door, Freck gave a savage shove with his feet. The footboard broke loose with a creak which, he feared, was loud enough for Dodo to hear. But the boy did not come back.

Then Freck drew up his legs, braced his feet and butted hard against the headboard, at the same time wrenching at it with his hands, which were free for action beyond his bound wrists. The headboard yielded to the desperate effort, and he flung himself to a sitting posture on the bunk.

"If you put it over, Freck," Storm whispered hoarsely, without a tremor of excitement, "I'll buy the ZAK Bar sight unseen——"

"Watch me!" Freck cut in.

He broke the headboard in two over his knee and jerked the rope from his neck. Then he rose and shuffled behind the door, only a second or two before Dodo came shambling in.

Down crashed both the pieces on the boy's head, and he went to sleep, with his load of wood for a pillow.

"Slick!" Storm suppressed a shout of triumph. "Now grab that big knife off the table quick, Freck, and cut me loose!"

"You bet!" Freck crossed the punch-eon floor to the table, snatched up a butcher's knife, and soon both Storm and he were slashed free.

"Now I'm going to boss the rest of this job," said Storm authoritatively, "for I see a way to nab the whole bunch."

"Go to it!" acceded Freck, with full confidence in the resourcefulness and cool courage of this amazing young man whom he had looked upon as a tenderfoot. "You be the big auger, Jake, and I'll be proud to be the primero."

## VII.

When Dodo was revived, he found himself bound hand and foot and his two guns in possession of Freck Duncan and Jacob Storm, junior. His captors took down one of several ropes which were hanging on the wall and slipped the noose under the whimpering boy's armpits, first protecting him from injury by padding his body with an old coat. Then dragged him to the brink of the canyon, and there they stationed themselves to wait for the gang to come.

"What're you goin' to do with me?" Dodo, slumped on the ground, whined in abject fear.

"Nothing that'll hurt you much, papa's precious," Storm assured him. "We're going fishing and are using you for the bait, that's all."

"Dad'll kill you!" Dodo croaked with weak defiance. "He'll kill you both! You'll thee!"

"And when he does, he'll kill you, too," Storm breezed. "So he's pretty sure to go on the killing business when it comes to a show-down, for I noticed that he thinks a lot of you, baby crook. I'm predicting that he'll take the bait, line, sinker, and all."

It was more than an hour before the crashing of brush across the canyon gave the warning that the gang was coming.

"Now, Freck!" Storm jerked out in an undertone.

The shrieking boy was shoved over the lip of the rim and was there held suspended at the mercy of the two pairs of hands that gripped the rope.

Freck and Storm eased back a dozen feet or so to a smoth-skinned young spruce. They had just taken a dally round the tree, when a troop of riders came lunging up to the opposite rim, for the yells of Dodo had brought them in haste. And beside Bim, there was now an extra man in the bunch, making eight in all.

They reined in and gaped at the

dangling Dodo in bewildered but horrified silence.

"No fair shootin', Coot!" yelled Freck, when he saw the hand of the bandit leader crawl toward one of his guns. "Can't you see that if you kill us our paws'll slip on this here rope, and down goes the purty Dodo kid?"

While he was speaking, one of the men made a dash, to take flight.

"Ketch that gent, or down goes the kid!" Freck shouted.

"I'll kill you, Crimp, if you try to sneak out on us now!" Coot raved in a hysterical voice, as he hurriedly headed off the deserting rider, who was none other than Crimp Lupton, until two days ago a ZAK Bar cowboy.

Then Freck saw the answer to the several questions that had bothered him. Crimp Lupton was in league with the bandits. Coot Daggs and his men had probably been camped near enough to Hoofville to ride in on short notice, and Crimp had passed the word to them that the prospective purchaser of the ZAK Bar was coming on yesterday's stage.

"That's the idea, lobo!" Storm sent across, to Coot. "We've got to have every mother's son of you, and don't you let a single one of your coyotes sneak out on you, or down goes your darling boy."

Coot gave a groan.

"So there you are, buzzard," Storm sang out. "My partner and I have laid down the law for you, and you're going to say you like it. Savvy?"

"Pull up my boy!" Coot implored Freck and Storm in high-pitched terror.

"Not until you come to terms, Coot,"

"Terms? What sort o' terms?"

"They're simple enough," Storm replied. "You'll pile all your weapons together on your side and then herd your whole bunch across to our side. And come on foot. When you get here, I'll string you all together tandem with a couple of your lass' ropes."

"And my boy?"

"My partner will keep him swinging, as a guarantee that nobody gets mean

while I'm performing the ceremonies. When you're all hooked up, we'll lift the boy and add him to the string. If you don't agree to all this, you old rat, down goes the kid. Now say it quick: Do you want to save your beloved brat from making a big splash down on the canyon floor?"

"It'll kill me if my boy was to fall!" Coot cried. "But if I give in, what're you goin' to do with us?"

"Herd you on foot across to the ZAK Bar, o' course," Freck spoke up. "We'll look after you there until the sheriff comes. And you're goin', too, Crimp Lupton, and you'll git somethin' besides a split o' my partner's dinero. What Old Man Zach Baker'll do to you for double-crossin' him will be aplenty."

"Well?" Storm questioned impatiently. "Our hands are beginning to get tired, yegg! Better hurry and make up your mind."

"Thave me, dad! Thave me!" pleaded Dodo in a tragic scream.

Coot jerked up his head and said in a shaky voice:

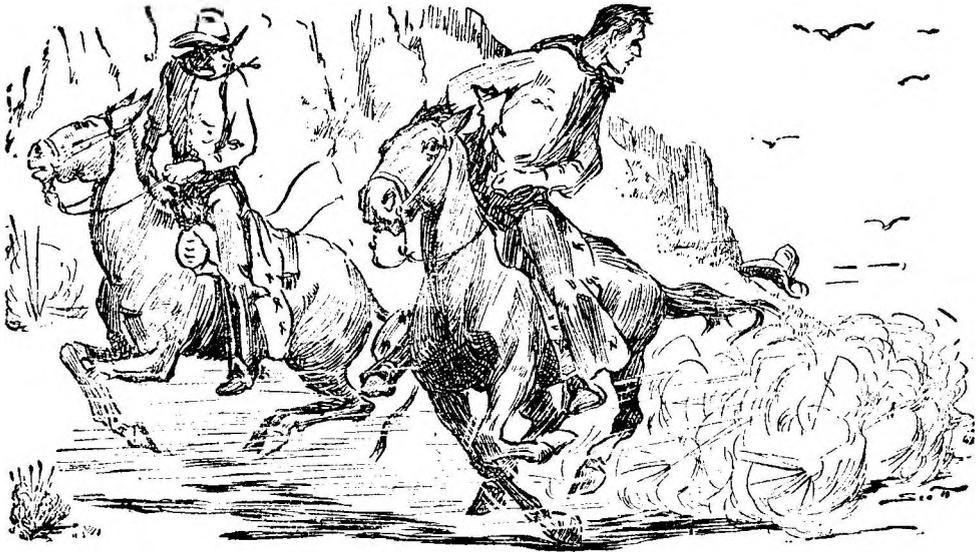
"I shore got to save you, son! All right, fellers! Seems like you've got us where we can't make a move. I'll herd 'em all over—but don't you drap my boy!"

"Hurry, dad, hurry!" wailed Dodo.

"There are still blank checks in that book of mine for all my needs, Freck," said Storm casually, as Coot started to drive his men, all on foot and glumly silent, across the canyon. "And there's four times a hundred and fifty thousand in that El Paso bank for me to draw on. I'll stick to my word and buy the ZAK Bar sight unseen. I know that any outfit's all O. K. that's got a man like you for primero—and you've got to stay on as primero, too."

"I'd sure be proud to work for you, boss," Freck returned warmly. "And I'm seein' right now that me 'n' you are goin' to pull together fine, even if you are a tenderfoot."

"From Texas," Storm supplemented, with a careless laugh.



# Spottin' That Spotted Steer

By Collins Hafford

Author of "Thet Y 6 Varmint," etc.

# Steer

## A "Lum Yates" Story

"I can take the wildest broncho in the tough old woolly West.  
I can ride him, I can break him, let him do his level best;  
I can handle any cattle ever wore a coat of hair,  
And I've had a lively tussle with a tarnel grizzly b'ar."

**L**UM YATES sang the words of the rollicking range ballad in his clear, boyish tenor, as Zeke Olroyd coaxed the melody from his battered and worn old harmonica.

Instinctively Lum looked down at the nose bag which hung at his saddle horn. Then he remembered that Job—his little yellow dog and inseparable companion—was chasing jack rabbits in the sand hills. For once, the young Bar M punchers could sing in peace.

"I can rope an' throw the longhorn of the wildest Texas brand—"

Lum stopped his song in mid-strain.

His exclamation of amazement caused Zeke to snatch the harmonica from his mouth and turn his eyes in the direction of Lum's pointing finger.

For a long minute, he surveyed the scene. Then he twisted in his saddle and faced Lum.

"What's the matter, Lum? Yuh look like yuh seen a ghost or somethin'," he said.

And in truth, Lum's actions were hardly explainable. For a more peaceful scene would be hard to imagine. The two young punchers sat their mounts on the crest of a high sand hill at the very southwest corner of the Bar M Range. Only a scant half mile beyond lay the dry bed of the Cimarron River that marked the Bar M boundary.

Between the young punchers grazed a herd of over a hundred yearling steers. They carried the Bar M Bar brand, which was Lum's own. And the slim

Missouri puncher was proud indeed of these hundred yearlings.

An hour before, the cowboys had finished inspecting and counting the little herd. Then they had stopped on the crest of the hill for a rest, while Job chased rabbits. They had sung and played at least a half dozen old ballads, while Joshua—Lum's old dun mule—and Lightnin'—Zeke's runty little sorrel—grazed contentedly. Then had come Lum's strange exclamation and Zeke's question.

"Look again, Zeke! Don't yo' see nothin' peculiar?" Lum's voice was strangely puzzled in tone.

Again Zeke bent his gaze intently on the little herd. And again he turned bewildered toward Lum. "I don't see nothin' but yearlin's, an' sagebrush, an' soapweed, an' sand," he said slowly.

"Sometimes I think yo' ain't quite so observin' as yo' might be," drawled Lum. "Thet theah spotted steer, now. He wasn't daown theah when we counted 'em. Fact is, he neveh was with my herd befo'. All my critters is red, with white faces. He's slipped in whilst we was singin'. But where'd he come from?"

"By jing! Yo're right, Lum," exclaimed Zeke. "I'm right ashamed that I never noticed the difference. But I reckon it's right easy to find out."

"Sho' it is, Zeke. We'll jes' ride daown an' look him oveh."

Lum pulled on the reins, lifting Joshua's reluctant head from the rich gramma grass. He turned the old mule to the down trail, and Zeke followed.

Through the scattered herd they threaded their way. As they approached the strange steer, Lum's eyes widened still further in puzzlement. Zeke followed wordlessly.

Now they circled the spotted animal. The branded side came into view. Both young punchers saw the mark at the same time. And at the first glimpse, their bewilderment grew to monstrous proportions.

"Well, I'll be blasted——"

Lum's startled exclamation broke off short, as the wicked buzz of a bullet made him dodge instinctively. It was followed in a second by the far-away crack of a high-powered rifle.

Another leaden pellet followed sharply in the path of the first, kicking up the sand beyond the two young punchers.

With one accord, the two youngsters whirled their mounts and made for the sand hill they had just quitted. Habitually lazy and slow, old Joshua made almost unbelievable time to the urge of the sharp rowel. And Zeke on Lightnin' followed right at his heels. But no other bullet came their way.

The young riders were well down the other side of the high sand hill before Lum drew Joshua to a stop.

"Now what do yo' make of thet, Zeke—thet brand, an' them bullets, an' the strange steer?" The words fairly tumbled over one another.

"It seems mighty funny—an' foolish to me," answered Zeke. "Ain't no common sense to it at all."

For a long five minutes, Lum sat his saddle. His thin lips were a straight, tight line, and there was a furrow on his brow.

Zeke, who knew his companion well, remained wordless. For he knew Lum's keen brain was working at top speed on the problem.

At last Lum looked up. "Theah's jes' one reason I can figger out fo' the whole thing, Zeke. Does this heah sound sensible to yo'?"

For a full ten minutes, he talked swiftly. And as the shrewd deduction unfolded itself, Zeke's eyes lighted with comprehension. He could hardly wait for Lum to finish.

"I'll bet yuh my best saddle yuh done hit on the truth, Lum." There was admiration in his tone that brought a flush almost of embarrassment to Lum's face. "But what'll we do about it?"

"They's jes' one thing to do, Zeke. We got ter ketch thet waddy thet was shootin' at us. An' then we got ter do a little brandin' on our own account."

"All right, Lum. We ain't never missed out on one of yore hunches yet. Fact is, I'm kind o' beginnin' to believe thet they ain't hunches a-tall. I'm 'bout half in the notion thet they're pure common sense thet most waddies ain't got brains enough to figger out."

"Yo're prejudiced, Zeke," said Lum with embarrassment. "We're jes' lucky, is all. An' we'll need it this time sho'."

A shrill, penetrating whistle brought Job to the old mule's side. Lum stooped from the saddle and snatched the little dog up. Tenderly he placed it in the nose bag.

"We'll be needin' yore he'p, Job," he said softly. Then he turned to Zeke. "I'm most sho' I saw wheah thet last bullet came from. Seemed like I could kind o' make out a wisp of gray smoke. So thet's the way we'll be headin'."

By a roundabout way, the two young riders stalked the dune that had drawn Lum's suspicion. Two hundred yards away, they slipped from their mounts. The rest of the way could be made more safely afoot.

"Betteh take yore rope, Zeke," said Lum, as he lifted his own loop from his saddle.

Stealthily, taking advantage of every slight cover, they wormed their way forward. As yet they had seen no sign of the bushwhacker.

But hardly had they got well started when a deep, fierce growl welled from the little dog's throat—a growl much too big for such a small animal.

A shiver, half excitement and half fear, chased itself up and down Lum's back. He quieted Job with a low word. Then he whispered a few words of warning to Zeke:

"Reckon I was right, Zeke. Thet waddy is ahead of us. We got ter go mighty careful from now on. A ranny thet'd do what he's already done wouldn't think nothin' of goin' a step farther an' pluggin' us plenty."

Now they redoubled their caution. Flat on their stomachs, they wormed their way forward.

Still they saw nothing of the marauder. Lum was half persuaded that the bushwhacker had considered his work done when he frightened the young punchers away, and had fled to his hideout.

After a full fifteen minutes of pains-taking and arduous work, they were within a scant five feet of the crest of the hill. Lum stifled even the low rumble of wrath that still came from Job's throat. Motioning Zeke to remain, he inched his way up the last few feet.

Now, just his eyes topped the ridge. Through a clump of bunch grass he scanned the down slope on the other side. He stifled a gasp with an effort.

For not more than half a rope's length away sat a man. He was well hidden from view from the other side by a sprawling soapweed. But from above, his broad back loomed up like a mountain.

For a breath-taking moment, Lum surveyed the man. He was sure that he had never seen him before. And such a broad back, such a shock of black hair, and such a vividly purple shirt would never be forgotten. At last he let himself slowly back beside Zeke.

With his lips at Zeke's ear, he whispered the result of his survey. Zeke's face blanched, but his teeth clenched as he fought down his fear. Once more Lum whispered, and this time it was instructions. Zeke nodded his agreement.

Zeke began a stealthy crawl along the side of the hill, parallel with the crest. Lum watched as his lanky companion made the fifty-yard stretch. At last, the young puncher disappeared around the shoulder of the hill.

Lum coiled his rope swiftly. Again he inched to the crest of the hill, Job bellying along behind him. He crouched behind the clump of bunch grass, muscles and nerves tensed as if for violent effort. For a moment, he waited.

Then it came—a long, mournful howl from the right—a howl of which a coyote might well be proud.

The man behind the soapweed below leaped swiftly to his feet, his rifle coming to his shoulder with the same movement. He swung toward the end of the hill.

But now Lum was erect, and his loop was hissing around his head. Then something entirely unlooked for almost meant tragedy. For Job as well as the bushwhacker below was fooled by Zeke's imitation of a coyote.

The little dog yelped at the top of its shrill little voice, and dashed madly along the crest of the hill toward the weird noise.

The big man swung sharply toward the new sound. His eye caught sight of Zeke, and his rifle swept toward the slim young puncher.

But the rope was already on its way. Like a circle of light, it settled about the man's head. He flung up his arms to ward it off—and succeeded. But the loop tightened about the stock of the rifle, and a terrific jerk snatched it rudely from his hand.

Fist over fist, Lum dragged the weapon toward him. The big man leaped for the disappearing rifle. Twice it seemed he would clutch it, but a desperate jerk of Lum's arm kept it beyond his reach.

Up the slope he stumbled in pursuit of the gun. Now he was but five feet below Lum. The young puncher stooped and snatched up the rifle, just as the big man's fist shot out to clutch his ankle.

The thick fingers found their mark. Lum tumbled backward.

But the long rifle in his hand came up. The heavy butt crashed into the bushwhacker's face. With a groan, the man toppled and lay still.

Lum leaped to his feet, catlike, his rifle upraised for a smashing stroke. Then he lowered it slowly. The marauder was out—and would be for some hours to come.

Lum called, but Zeke was already on his way. Together, the two young punchers made a most workmanlike job of binding the bushwhacker.

"What's next, Lum?" asked Zeke, as soon as he could find his voice.

"Reckon we got a little brandin' to do on ouah own account, Zeke," drawled Lum.

On the bank of the dry Cimarron, in the midst of Lum's own herd, they built a small chip fire. With the aid of a red-hot cinch ring, they worked on the flank of the spotted steer. The animal bawled angrily, but Zeke's rope held it fast.

Lum and Zeke surveyed their handiwork.

"Looks jest as natural as if it was meant to be that way, Lum," said Zeke admiringly. "'Black Jack' himself couldn't 'a' done no better."

"It'll do," answered Lum.

Not a word of their adventures did the two young Bar M hands breathe to old "Sandy" McClure—the peppery but soft-hearted owner of the Bar M spread. And so it was a very surprised old ranchman who greeted three riders the next morning at sunup.

The sheriff rode ahead, followed closely by Luke Bridgers of the Box Diamond spread. And behind them was old Zack Arnett of the Lazy Z. It was plain to see that Zack came rather unwillingly.

Zack and Sandy were close friends, but there was no love lost between the Bar M owner and Luke Bridgers. Twice, with the very efficient aid of Lum, Sandy had prevented the oily Bridgers from besting him in crooked deals.

And to cap the climax, Sandy had lately refused Bridgers pasture on this side of the Cimarron. His excuse was that Lum needed the grass for his Bar M Bar herd. But his dislike of the man from across the river was at the bottom of this decision.

After the first surprise, Sandy scowled silently, waiting for the men to state their business. Luke Bridgers grinned in his oily, maddening way.

The sheriff and Zack Arnett seemed

genuinely sorry for their errand. They looked at each other questioningly. At last the sheriff spoke:

"Sandy, I shore hate to do it. But I got ter arrest that young hand of yores—Lum Yates. Seems like he's been runnin' his iron on 'Lazy Z stock."

Sandy McClure whirled toward the smirking Bridgers and roared:

"What you got to do with this, yuh blasted skunk? Yuh know Lum Yates is as square as a die! Yo're mixed up in the deal somewhere, an' as soon as I find out jest how, I'm plumb liable to smoke yuh up plenty!"

"I ain't mixed up in it," Bridgers replied, "except thet I found the critter thet carries the blotted brand. An' of course I told Zack Arnett. Zack's been missin' critters fer quite a spell. Reckon thet's where they been goin'."

"Yo're a blasted liar, Luke Bridgers! An' fer half a cent I'd——"

"Wait a minute, boss!" Lum's drawling voice broke into the conversation. And there was a hint of a smile on his face as he spoke "Bridgers says he's got proof thet I've been runnin' my iron on Lazy Z critters. Mebbe the sheriff'll take yo' an' me along, whilst Bridgers produces his proof."

The old sheriff looked hopefully at Luke Bridgers. The oily ranchman smiled crookedly.

"Thet's jest what I'm a honin' to do!" he grated. "Fork yore broncs. My proof's down on the south Bar M range amongst them Bar M Bar critters."

The trip was made with scarcely a word spoken. The sheriff and Luke Bridgers led the way. Sandy McClure, Zack Arnett, Lum Yates, Zeke Olroyd, and Benny Burnett—the foreman of the Bar M—followed. Once during the ride, Lum contrived to whisper to Sandy:

"Watch Bridgers, boss. If he makes a break, draw down on him."

Sandy looked mystified at the words, but he nodded his head in assent.

The riders stopped at the crest of the same hill from which Zeke and Lum had first seen the spotted steer. And

in almost the same place, the animal loomed up among Lum's red cattle.

"Yuh'll find my proof on thet spotted steer," snapped Luke Bridgers. "He's a Lazy Z animal, but he's got a Bar M Bar run over Zack Arnett's brand."

While the others stopped at the edge of the herd, Benny Burnett rode in and cut out the spotted steer. As he hazed the animal toward the waiting riders, Lum grinned at the puzzled expression on Benny's face.

Now the steer stopped and threw its head high in fright. It started to run madly toward the hills.

Luke Bridgers swung his rope swiftly—perfect neck cast. The steer pitched forward. Like the real tophand he was, Benny threw himself from his saddle and hog tied the animal.

With a sharp word to his horse to keep the rope taut, Luke Bridgers slipped from the saddle and joined the others, who were gathered around the prone steer. He stooped and looked at the brand. Then he straightened in amazement. He took a swift stride toward his horse

"Wait a minute, Bridgers!" Sandy's voice was deceptively mild. But the muzzle of his long six-gun that was trained on Luke Bridgers' middle spoke louder than words.

"Looks like thet brand was blotted, all right," continued the old ranchman. "But it ain't the Bar M Bar brand by a heap. It's yore own brand—the Box Diamond—or I'm a wall-eyed Piute. Yuh must 'a' been seein' crooked, Bridgers, when yuh made it out a Bar M Bar. An' unless yuh can show how yuh come by the animal honest, the sheriff'll be wantin' yuh fer rustlin'."

Luke Bridgers' face grew scarlet. His hands trembled in helpless anger.

But there was nothing he could say. The brand was as Sandy had named it.

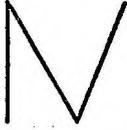
Lum grinned at the disgruntled ranchman for a long moment, while the others waited for Bridgers to explain. Both the sheriff and Zack Arnett moved menacingly toward Bridgers.

At last Lum spoke up. In a few terse words, he told of the events of the afternoon, then concluded:

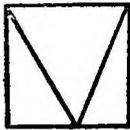
"An' when we tied up that waddy, we ketcht the steer an' looked him oveh. Right away we figgered out what was goin' on. So while Zeke kept the fire hot, I done a little brandin' of my own."

With a twig of sagebrush, he sketched on the sand, and the others watched him, open-eyed.

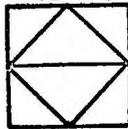
"That steer was a Lazy Z critter first. Branded



"But Bridgers an' his men made a Bar M Bar out of it:



"But then we put an M Bar upside down on top of it:



"Yo' see, that makes a Box Diamond, which is Bridger's brand. So I reckon the steer is a Lazy Z animal after all."

Without a word to the slim young puncher, Zack Arnett whirled to Bridgers and said:

"Bridgers, yo're a dirty skunk, as well as a rustler! I reckon I know now where my steers have been goin' to. Yuh deserve to be plugged plumb center. But the Lazy Z nor the Bar M, neither, don't play that way. We're a-lettin' yuh off, but I'm a-warnin' yuh personal thet the next time I find yuh anywhere clost to the Lazy Z range, it'll mean hot lead!"

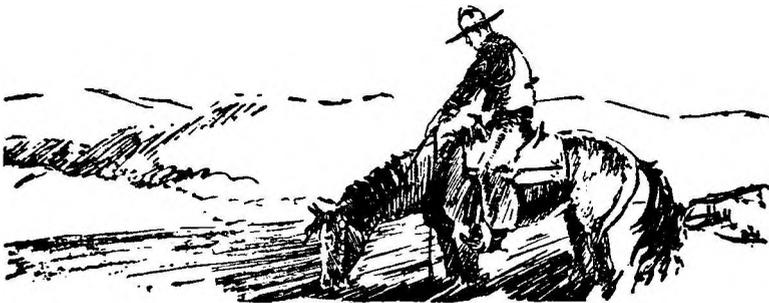
"An' that goes double," snapped Sandy McClure.

Sputtering and fuming, Bridgers strode to his horse. He swung into the saddle, and Benny Burnett loosed his rope from the spotted steer.

Bridgers coiled it swiftly. Then he whirled his horse and roweled it cruelly. But before he was out of ear-shot, Lum Yates called after him:

"Yo' might stop up in that little valley beyond the nex' hill. Reckon one of yore men is gettin' right smaht thirsty by this time. Tell him fo' me thet he'd betteh do a little straighter shootin' nex' time."

A heap o' nerve, a little yaller dawg thet travels in a nose bag, an' an ol' dun mule kin go a long ways toward bringin' the gents thet pester the Bar M ter terms. An' them thet tries once ain't apt ter try it ag'in—not when Lum Yates is around, anyhow. Lum will be back in WILD WEST WEEKLY right soon in another story 'bout him an' his Bar M buddies.





# Western Pen Pals

Conducted by Sam Wills - Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself—instead of just reading about it—to the Western outdoors, where the adventures in the stories have happened. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West, when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of **WILD WEST WEEKLY**. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—real information based on actual firsthand experience and knowledge, information about ranches and rodeos, big timber and lumber camps, getting work, hunting and fishing, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of **WILD WEST WEEKLY**. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of **WILD WEST WEEKLY**, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

**W**AAL, folks, I reckon the holiday season's over, an' it's time now for us all to git right down to work. But thar's some nice things we can take along with us through the whole year, an' one o' them is Pen Pals. They don't have to stop with the holidays! So come on, get your pens an' pencils an' find a pal in this batch.

### WANTS REASSURIN'.

Hyar's a right nice letter, I take it:

DEAR SAM: I am an enthusiastic reader

of the W. W. W. and all that the magazine typifies. My age is nineteen years, and I would like to become acquainted with some lad of my age or older. I am a bit skeptical about the real West and can't seem to get any authentic facts about life out there. When I say "West," I take in a wide sweep from Texas to Utah or Wyoming—perhaps I should say, then, "Southwest."

I live in Wisconsin and have lived here all my life; and I sure would like to know if there are any places left where a man can ride a hoss, wear a six-gun and a sombrero. I know there isn't the West of old, but perhaps there are places where a man could

carry a gun just for the sake of convincing himself he's a regular guy. I have always wanted to go and see if there is any West, but I have never had any objective to go for. I should like to work on a ranch, especially this winter, as it gets pretty cold here in Wisconsin. Perhaps you could tell me, or the Pen Pals could tell me, where I can secure information regarding work in the old Western style.

I am willing to write to any one who writes me about the West or Southwest.

MARTIN NIELSEN, of Wisconsin.

I reckon he needs to have some cowboy write to him an' tell him that the old West is still there, with spurs on.

#### OKLAHOMA GAL.

"I would like to have some Pen Pals from the East as well as from the West," writes Irene Dahl. "I have lived on a ranch for nearly fifteen years. I have dark-brown hair and brown eyes and am nearly five feet tall. I love all kinds of sports. I cannot rope very well, but am learning better every day. I will answer every letter I receive, and am wanting to hear from all."

#### OREGON BUCKAROO.

F. C. Cowherd interduces himself: "I am a buckaroo from Oregon. Just happened to pick up a W. W. W. and saw your Pen Pals. I was born and reared on the high desert in central Oregon, and can tell about most parts of this State. If you ask me questions I don't know, I'll find out the correct answers, anyway. I am twenty-two years old, six feet tall, blond, and wear horn-rimmed specks—but I can ride. Breaking horses is my trade. Right now I'm going to high school here in an old Indian Reservation town. Yes, this is the West. If I went nine miles farther west, I'd be a mile out in the Pacific Ocean."

#### OTHER REQUESTS.

Maynard Peck, of Wisconsin, writes: "I am a steady reader of your magazine, and I don't know what I'd do without it. I am a young man of poor health, and I would like to get in touch

with some one in Texas or some Western State who would need help on a ranch, so I could work to get my health back. I have no home, only my room, and I'd like to have some pals from Texas."

Lonely Alaskan Girl writes: "I am twelve years old and would like to have Pen Pals. I love the wide, open spaces and would love to hear from girls out in the Southwest. Long live WILD WEST WEEKLY!"

"I happened to glance through a W. W. W. and ran across your Pen Pal section," announces C. M. T., of Illinois. "I am very interested in the West, as I have had several correspondents in Montana, one of whom was a cow-puncher. I would like very much to join the Pen Pals, and will answer any letters the girls may write to me. I am a girl of seventeen, have gray eyes and an olive complexion and dark-brown hair."

Louis M. Barry, of Illinois, also, writes that he'd like to have some Pen Pals write to him about ranch life—what they do an' how they do it. He's nineteen years old.

"I am a girl of twelve; I have dark-brown hair and eyes, and I live in Alabama," Roma M. Drew interduces herself. "I would like some girls of my age who live on ranches in Mexico, Texas, and in any other State out West, to write to me. I am an only child, and I get awful lonesome. So tell all the Pen Pals to write to me."

Little Ott, of Washington, writes: "I have noticed you Pen Pals many times, and have become very much interested in you. I lived on a farm five years and then moved into a town—not exactly a town, because it's only a lot of shacks scattered around. I am fifteen and a sophomore in high school. I have been around horses all my life

and have ridden horseback since I was five. I rode a bucking cow to a standstill, or at least until she was all in, and I jumped off. I have had an offer to ride a colt, but don't know whether to take it up. I'd like to hear from anybody. I like to ride and dance, though I'm not much of a dancer. Come on, all you Pen Pals, give me a handout, and I will answer all letters pronto from anybody, anywhere."

"I am a typical Easterner, eighteen years old, and work for my living as a clerk in a store," announces Lew Clark, of Massachusetts. "I'd be glad to hear from Pen Pals from any point. The wide, open spaces surely lure me. Fishing is my chief sport. If any one would drop me a line, I certainly would return the favor."

From Texas, Nora M. Scatterfield writes: "I am a girl of sixteen. I have dark blond hair, brown eyes, and am five feet four. I think your magazine is a fine one. I would be very glad to hear from anybody in the West, around my own age, who lives on or near a ranch, as I hope to see the real West some day myself."

"I am a boy of fourteen and I would like to have some Pen Pals from twelve to eighteen years old," writes Robert Johnson, of Oregon. "I first lived in North Dakota, then in Montana, and now in Oregon, in a place where there is no excitement. I would like to hear from Montana and Texas pals. I will answer all letters I get. I would also like copies of cowboy songs such as 'The Dying Cowboy,' 'The Cowboy's Dream,' and 'When the Work's All Done Next Fall.'"

"Please have somebody out West write and tell me about that part of the country," asks Forrest Dephew, who lives in the rugged hills of Jackson County, Indiana. "I am fifteen years old and like to hunt, fish, and trap. I

like the W. W. W. better than any Western magazine I have ever read, and I read a good many. I am a pretty good shot with a rifle and shotgun. Be sure to have somebody write me about the West."

Virginia Bopst, of Maryland, writes: "Would you please find me some Western Pen Pals? I will answer all letters I receive, because I keep house for my mother and brother and have lots of time. I am a girl of sixteen, am slender, and have brown hair and blue eyes. I can tell you lots of interesting things about our small city, so please hurry, everybody, and write to me."

"I am crazy to get a job out West," announces Charles Kraig, of Illinois. "I have a pal here, and we want to get jobs as forest rangers. Both of us are seventeen, near eighteen. We don't care how much we get paid, just so we find the kind of job we want, somewhere in North or South Dakota. And if we can't find ranger jobs, we'd like ranch jobs; so I hope the Pen Pals can help us out with information about both."

Luck Verduco, of Ohio, writes that she's plum satisfied with the pals she already has obtained from a previous request, but she sure would like some more from out whar the cowboys an' cowgals are workin'. So help her out, gals.

Edward Fennessy, of Illinois, writes: "I am a W. W. W. fan and am seventeen years old. I would like you to send me some information on ranges in Texas where I might spend a vacation or work for a while. I would also like some Pen Pals from out West. I will gladly answer all letters I receive. Don't forget to send me some info, pals!"

From Nebraska, Stanley Svobodo writes: "I would like very much to

have some Pen Pals. I am seventeen years old. But the main thing I'm writing for, Sam, is a copy of 'The Cowboy's Lament' and other songs. I've written to many other places for Western songs, but none seemed able to supply me with them. So I hope the Pen Pals will be able to help me out."

V. T. Mullins, of Kentucky, says as how he would like to have some Pen Pals from Texas an' Arizona, plumb brieflike.

Susie and Anna Vandermeer, of Washington, are sure anxious for pals. They're sort of afraid, somehow, that if I don't print their full addresses in the magazine, none o' you pals will write to 'em. But I reckon you-all know that by sendin' a letter to me with the name an' State o' the pal, you can be sure it will be forwarded to the proper place—an' once you've started the ball rollin', so to speak, you kin correspond direct.

"I was raised in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia," writes Miss Willie Jennings. "I am eighteen years of age, have black hair, blue eyes, and love to read, to hear good music, and write letters. So come on, pals, and write. I'll answer all letters I receive, if you will only give me time to read the W. W. W."

Ken Freshwater, of North Carolina, writes: "I am a country boy of eleven. I want to hear from boys or a boy out West who can tell me about ranches and the work done on them and also about how to rope and ride. I want Pen Pals especially from Montana, Nevada and Colorado."

"I am a girl of fourteen and live in Oregon," announces Lou Burbank. "I would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the United States, especially in Texas, Nevada, Arizona and Montana. I would like to hear from real cowgirls.

I like to ride horseback, and I want to learn to rope. I would like to have pictures of horses and cowgirls, and also of ranch buildings. I will answer all letters immediately, so come on, you cowgirls and write a whole pageful to a lonesome girl in Oregon."

Lola King writes: "I am a lonely little girl of Maryland and live in a little village. I would like to have some Pen Pals all over the State and will answer any letters that I receive. I am nine years old and love all kinds of good sports. I'd like to hear all about the Western countries from some girls between the ages of nine and twelve."

"Have you room in your column for a lonely girl from the plains who is searching for Pen Pals?" asks Dottie Webb, of Texas. "I am a small blonde, sixteen years old, and am taking typewriting and bookkeeping. I like all outdoor sports, especially swimming. I would like to have some copies of Western songs, too. Please write to me!"

Grace Thursby, of New York, writes: "I am sixteen years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, can ride horseback, and have seen parts of Europe. I am very lonely as I do not care for any one in the neighborhood where I am living, but I wish I could find some real Pen Pals who would answer my letters and be real friends."

C. L. Livingston, of Alabama, is only twenty-four, but he seems to have had an excitin' life already. He writes: "I have been in the Marine Corps since 1925 and have done duty in the tropics and in Asia. I just returned from China three months ago, and I have also been in California and old Mexico. I would like to swap yarns with some of the readers. I want a job out West, too."

Reckon that'll be all fer this week, folks. But seems to me you got a nice batch o' pals to pick an' choose from.

# The Wranglers Corner



THIS evenin's business," we announces as we calls the meetin' to order in the Wranglers Corner, "is hearin' from the readin' hombres who wants to hev their say. And we don't want no interruptions from nobody," we adds, lookin' with a stern glare first at Buck Foster and then at Joe Scott.

Both Buck and Joe looks kind of ashamed o' theirselves, 'cause they'd got into sich an argyment last week that we couldn't read out no letters a-tall.

So we starts in readin' out letters right away:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: The Wranglers Corner is about the best part of WILD WEST WEEKLY. When I get my magazine, I turn to the Wranglers Corner first.

Then come Billy West and his three pards, Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and Sing Lo. Next, the Ranny Kid and Lum Yates. Jim Hazel, forest ranger, is also one of my favorites. In fact, every one of the 3W is. Tell 'em to keep up their good work. So long, Boss.

BENJAMIN RUBIO.

The next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Tell Sing Lo he should play some more jokes on Buck.

I like Billy West and his pards, Lum, and the whole bunch, for I am not going to kick. What is the use of kicking when everything is O. K.?

And I wish you would have some more of "Sonny" Tabor. He shore is good.

Three cheers for the 3W spread!

So long! ANEATTA TEWS ALLEN.  
Marshfield, Wisconsin.

"Now, here," we says, takin' up another letter, "is a gent who has some suggestions fer the improvement of yore doin's. So all listen!"

"Seems as if all we're doin' to-night is listenin'," grumbles Buck Foster. "And I'll be a horned toad ef I likes it. If we got nothin' to do here in the Wranglers Corner but listen and listen and not git a chance to say nothin'——"

We pounds on the table. "Thet'll be enough from you, Mr. Foster," we says, knowin' that the ol' walrus don't like bein' "mistered" and that it always gits his goat fer keeps. "If yuh don't like the way things is run in the Wranglers Corner, the door is open and yuh kin take yore hat and hightail it any time yuh pleases."

Buck mutters to hisself, but says nothin' more out loud. So we reads the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been a reader of your magazine for quite a while. All the stories are the best in print. The 3W can't be beat far action.

Why doesn't Lum Yates trade that mule

off for a fast range horse? He could travel so much faster. Also, if I were the Ranny Kid, I wouldn't stop to argue with Ad Bland. I'd blow his gizzard clean past his backbone—if he had one. But he hasn't got any. Then I would feed his body to the buzzards, but they would not touch such a black, dirty skunk.

But I guess if the Ranny Kid killed Ad Bland, there wouldn't be any more action for him.

GEORGE YOUNGBLOOD.

Ennis, Texas.

"That gent said a mouthful in his last paragraph," remarks the Whistlin' Kid.

"Yeah," Billy West agrees. "He's like the hombres who's always hollerin' to see Devil Tripp killed off. That couldn't be no more stories about Devil—and them gents would be the first to holler!"

"That's so, Billy," we agrees with

the young boss of Circle J. "A lot of hombres kicks without realizin' just what their kickin' will lead to."

And then we reads out this letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I'll be a horned toad if the W. W. W. isn't the best magazine in all the U. S. And, oh, you Billy West! Say, when are you going to catch Devil Tripp?

Say, Boss, when are you going to give us Sonny Tabor and Bud Jones? And, say, that Whistlin' Kid is a wonder. Lum Yates is fine. I have a little yellow dog named Buster.

But listen to me when I say I want the Whistlin' Kid to sing his song instead of whistling it. Let's have another story of "The Arizona Buckaroo." Boy! He's good. Good luck to the 3W spread. Bob P.

Chicago, Illinois.

Anyway, the readin' hombres got a chance to air their opinions this week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

### COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

#### KID WOLF'S STAMPEDE

*Novelette*

By WARD M. STEVENS

The gun hombre from Texas who is "Kid" to his friends and "Wolf" to his enemies again plays his part of "soldier of misfortune," with gallant courage and daring.

#### THE BAR U TWINS RUN FROM TROUBLE

By CHARLES E. BARNES

But that don't keep Tom and Jerry Carter out o' trouble—not by no means.

#### FUNERAL BULLETS

*A "Ranny Kid" Story*

By CLEE WOODS

Ad Bland was dead. All of Caliente Valley turned out to give him a fine funeral. And of course the Ranny Kid was there.

#### TEXAS GUNS

*Novelette*

By GALEN C. COLIN

And those are plumb bad guns to buck up agin when they're spittin' lead.

Also stories of Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger, by Lee Harrington; The Shootin' Fool, by Houston Irvine; Lum Yates, by Collins Hafford—and other characters.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

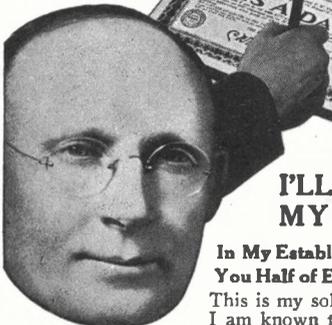
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*Signs a Guarantee that is bringing \$15 a DAY to Van's happy partners*

What other man could have dared to make such an outstanding written Guarantee as C. W. Van De Mark now offers to every honest man or woman? He can

do it only because of the amazing principles which he discovered in his active experience of 33 years. "Van" himself has knocked at 150,000 doors! And the secret he learned—which he now gives you, makes \$15.00 a day easy for anyone who will follow his instructions.



## I'LL MAKE YOU MY PARTNER

**In My Established Business and Give You Half of Every Dollar We Take In!**

This is my solemn promise to you (and I am known to 20,000 partners as the man who always keeps his promise). Send the coupon today—let me show you how I set you up in a permanent dignified business of your own in your own locality and **SHOW YOU HOW TO MAKE \$15 A DAY STEADY INCOME.**

## I'll Take All The Chances

I don't want you to risk a penny. I'll take the chances—I'll furnish everything; I'll set you up in a business of your own and show you how to make others earn money for you. My instructions will show you how to be free from money worries for life.

**NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED**  
Simply distribute teas, coffees, extracts, foods, things people need, to an established list of my customers. I want you to look after my business in your locality. No experience needed—I show you exactly what to do—guide you and help you every step of the way.

**RIDE IN CHRYSLER COACH**  
I offer a new Chrysler coach to every one of my partners. I give it absolutely free to producers to use in our business. No strings attached—it's yours to keep.



### SPARE TIME OR FULL TIME

Thousands now free from all money worries through my new, easy way of making money in their spare time or full time. I assure \$3 an hour for spare time work to anyone who will follow my easy plan. Hundreds have quit hard, low-pay jobs to make from \$95 to \$150 a week easy with me. Mail the coupon now!

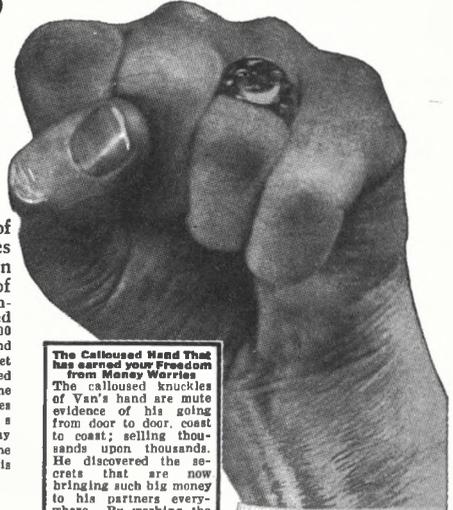
### YOU CAN HAVE \$50 EXTRA CASH NEXT SATURDAY

Send coupon at once and I will prove my honest promises by making it possible for YOU to have \$50 EXTRA CASH within a week from tonight!! Someone else in your locality may be reading this same offer this minute—so rush the coupon to me at once and have a steady income for life.

**C. W. Van De Mark, President,  
Health-O Quality Products Co.**

1093-AA Health-O Bldg., Cincinnati, Ohio

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**The Calloused Hand That has earned your Freedom from Money Worries**  
The calloused knuckles of Van's hand are mute evidence of his going from door to door, coast to coast; selling thousands upon thousands. He discovered the secrets that are now bringing such big money to his partners everywhere. By working the hard way, he discovered the easy way for you to be free for life from all money worries.

## LET VAN PAY YOUR BILLS, TOO!

**"You Paid the Mortgage on My Home"**  
Says Rev. C. V. McMurphy of Alabama. McMurphy got "Van's" offer. The first afternoon he made \$30. He writes, "The notes on the house have been burned—we have a new car—I no longer fear financial problems." He has made as high as \$300 in one week.



**Mother Makes \$2,000 Spare Time**  
Mrs. S. M. Jones, of Georgia, holder of four, says, "First hour and half made \$30.47." She could only work on Mondays and Saturday afternoon. But with this easy work she has made over \$2,000 in a few short months.

**Big Money in Spare Time**  
C. C. Miner, Iowa, made \$74 his first four days—part time. His first 15 days (part time) he made \$200! He writes, "Van, I thank God for the day I signed up for you."  
**I'LL KEEP MY PROMISE TO YOU AS I HAVE FOR THESE PEOPLE**

## MAIL TODAY

**C. W. Van De Mark, President,  
Health-O Quality Products Co.,  
Dept. 1093-AA**

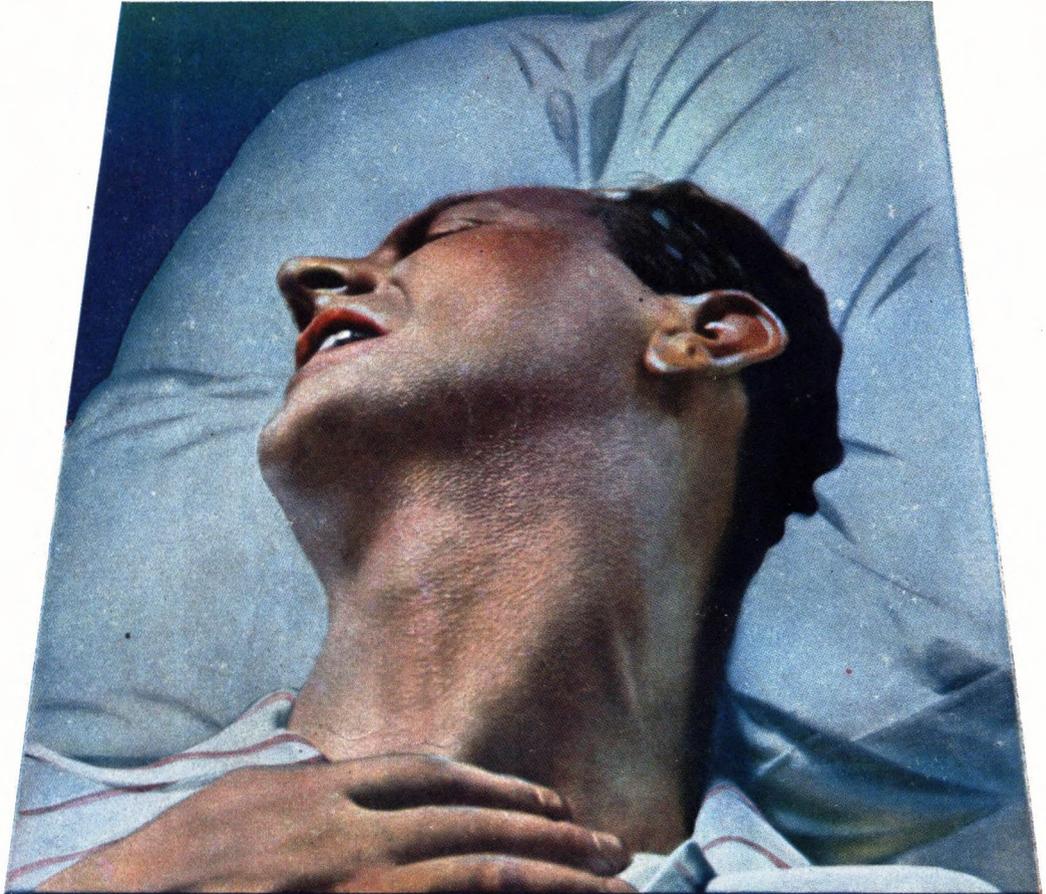
Mr. Van—Without cost or obligation to me rush me your amazing portfolio, WRITTEN GUARANTEE and CHRYSLER offer. Prove to me that I can have \$50 cash in my pocket within a week.

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Address .....

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