

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

AUG. 15, '42

WEEKLY

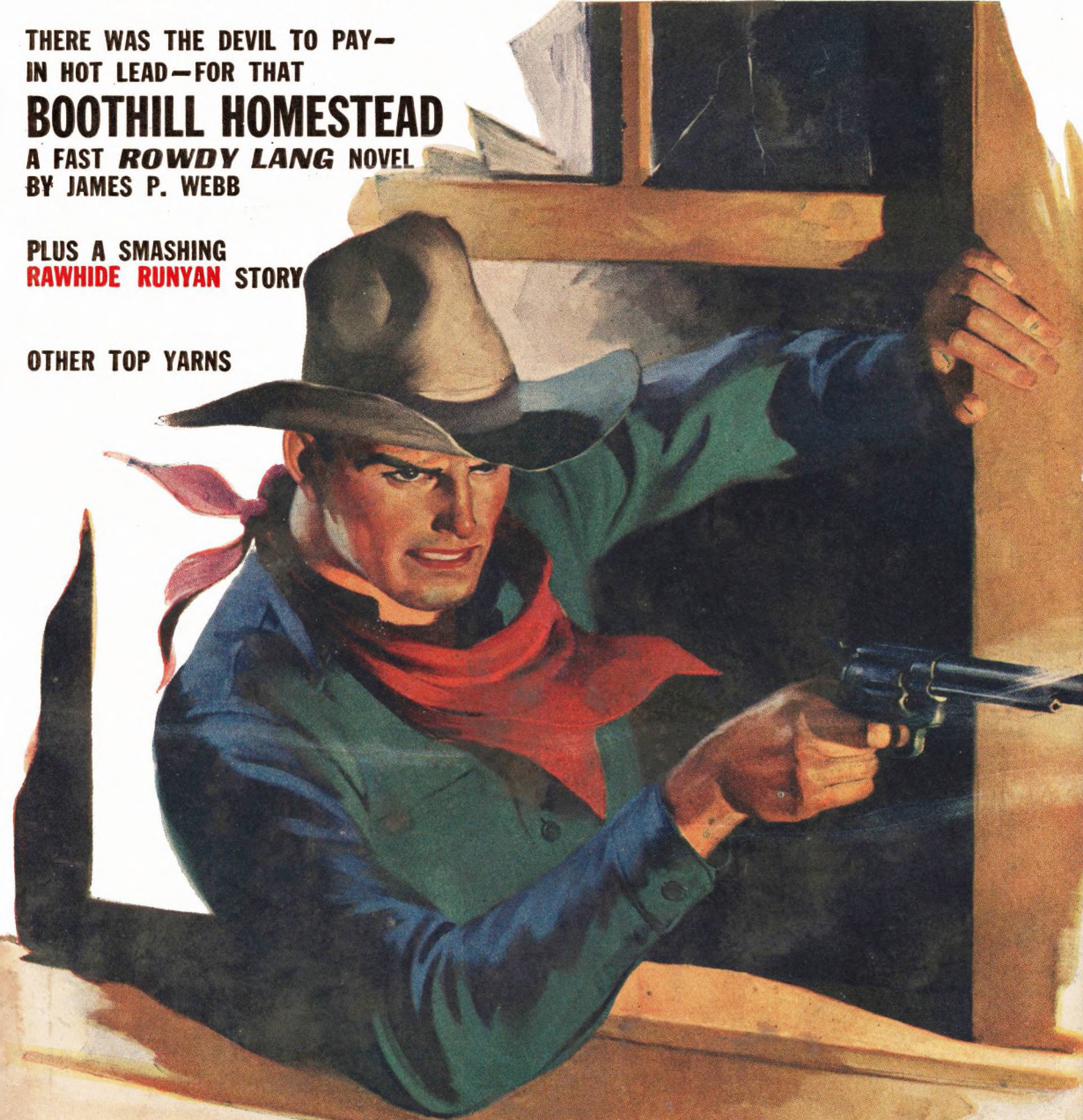
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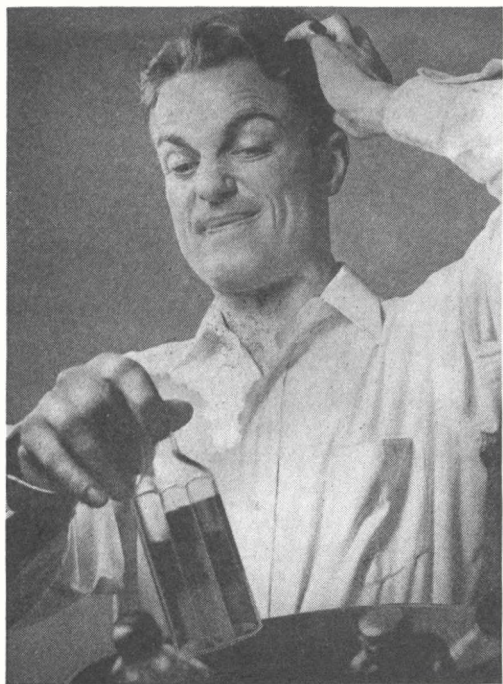
THERE WAS THE DEVIL TO PAY—
IN HOT LEAD—FOR THAT
BOOTHILL HOMESTEAD
A FAST **ROWDY LANG** NOVEL
BY JAMES P. WEBB

PLUS A SMASHING
RAWHIDE RUNYAN STORY

OTHER TOP YARNS



ALL STORIES COMPLETE



BOB WAS FOOLED . . . he thought he could get rid of those distressing flakes and scales with one application of some overnight remedy. He found, however, that it required persistent treatment, and used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice daily to fight the condition. Now his scalp feels "like a million."



AND SO WAS MRS. K . . . she had blamed her itching, irritated scalp on reducing and changed her diet. Then an advertisement suggested that the condition might be the infectious type of dandruff. "It's simply wonderful," she says, "how Listerine Antiseptic and massage helped me."

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IT MAY BE **INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF!**

AND in the infectious type of dandruff millions of germs are active on your scalp. Now, isn't it sensible to fight an infection with a treatment that *kills germs*? Listerine Antiseptic and massage, the *tested* treatment, does just that—and often brings wonderful improvement! When you massage Listerine onto your scalp, millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff are literally "blitzed" to death.

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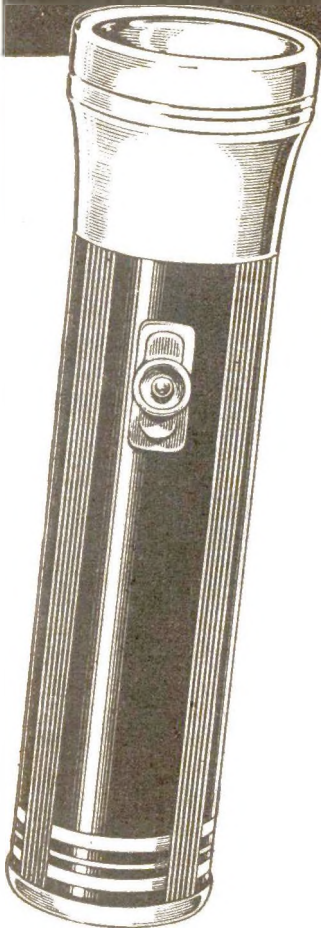
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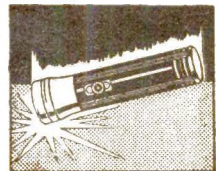
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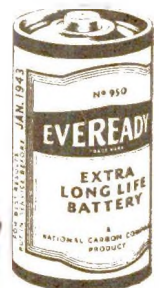
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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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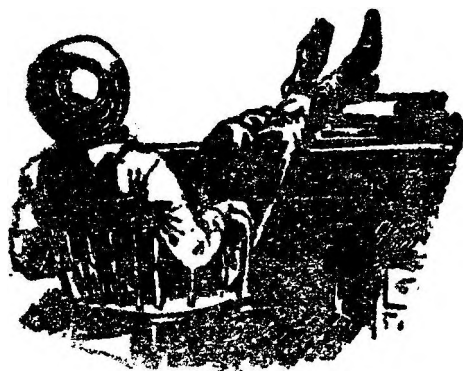
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

During these humid dog days, cowpokes take every opportunity to ease away toward the old pond or the nearby creek to cool off. In the Northwestern flat country or in the low parts of the Southwest the water is of agreeable temperature at this season. But on the high mountain ranges the creeks and rivers are apt to be mighty chilly on even the hottest day.

Regardless of the water's temperature, the old swimmin' hole is still a great Western institution. A big percentage of Western towns are located on the banks of rivers, because easy access to water was a prime necessity for settlements in the early days.

Me, I growed up out thataway. I can't recall that any of my youthful pards failed to learn how to swim. It was natural to head for the swimmin' hole at an early age and to spend as much time there as possible during warm weather.

Yep, swimmin' is a pleasant pastime. But it should be learned carefully in shallow water and with somebody around to keep an eye on you until you've got it mastered.

Yore old pard, Chuck Martin, cools himself off by fanning six-guns. He's got a note on the Rawhide Runyan novelette in this issue.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This latest Runyan story has a kind of triple play in it, which made it right interesting to work out.

A man who wore a six-shooter in the old West was regarded as an hombre who could take care of himself. If he couldn't handle a gun fast and accurate, he didn't wear one—because some expert might go at him expecting him to make a fight of it. If he didn't wear one at all, he was fairly safe—because it was bad ethics, except among the skunkiest killers, to shoot an unarmed man. Incidentally, few of the old-timers called it a six-gun; it was nearly always called a six-shooter in the wilder days.

Like always,

CHUCK MARTIN.

Waal, whatever it was called, Chuck, it shot the same—meanin' loud and powerful. The shock power of a .44 slug or a .45 slug, for example, would nearly always knock a man down if it hit him solidly above the waist.

The dauntless Trig Trenton, otherwise known as the Border Eagle, is the star figure in next week's complete novel. It's entitled "Border Eagle's Brand," and the author is Philip F. Deere—who unflinchingly packs his yarns with power, punch, drama and suspense. Those ingredients are mixed together better than ever this time. No wonder the Eagle maintains his great popularity with you customers.

Clay Starr gives us some unusual and thrillin' angles in "Timber Cattle," an action-packed novelette. The other novelette is called "Renegade Guns at Rawhide." It's by a first-class pen pusher named Lee E. Wells. A bang-up job he's turned in, take it from me. You'll find his yarn a welcome addition to the old favorites.

Hasta la vista!

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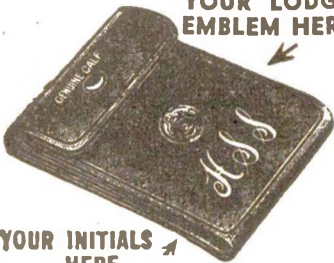


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GUN PI FOR A PRINTER

by LYNN WESTLAND

It takes more than ink to print a cow-town newspaper—that is, if you want more than just a slug feast for its owner!



The paper made the rounds of town like wildfire.

THERE had been only one shot, and that shot had meant murder. Young Vane had had a gun, which in this case amounted to a death warrant. He hadn't even touched it, though some nervous onlookers suggested that he might have been reaching for it when Lanwell shot him.

But it was known that Vane had had some sort of trouble with Lanwell the day before, and had stubbornly refused to get out of town

when warned to do so. So it was only what might have been expected, the same sort of thing which had happened to several men before him. Only, in this case, it had been more open and callous, for Lanwell was getting more cocky as his killings increased.

The significant thing was that Ed Prescott happened along only a few moments later, and his lips compressed as he stared down at Vane, lying there in a spreading pool of

his own blood. Ed had met the youngster only a few days before and had liked him—as did nearly everyone else. Sympathy welled up in Prescott, induced partly by a pair of drinks he had just had down the street at Sam's Place.

Prescott walked the remaining block to the building which housed the Bear Creek *Sentinel*, of which he was editor and publisher. The whiskey and the sympathy had worked to a fever pitch by then, and he sat down and wrote the finest editorial of his career—an epic in which he named the killing of Vane as wanton brutal murder, and demanded to know if the people of Bear Creek were going to allow themselves to be terrorized any longer by an ape with a gun, Gus Lanwell.

THAT done, Prescott handed the copy to Hunk Morrell, printer and man of all work, without whom the *Sentinel* would long since have ceased to be a going concern.

"Put this on the front page, right away," Prescott instructed, and gave a complacent twist to his rather droopy mustache. "Play it up big."

Hunk took the copy between inky fingers and read it, shoving back his disheveled red thatch and leaving another ink smudge on his forehead. He glanced across to where Prescott, now seated on the office cot, was pulling off his boots.

"This is pretty strong stuff," he warned. "Maybe you'd like to tone it down a little?"

"Not a bit," Prescott declared loudly. "Don't you change a word."

Hunk shrugged.

"It's not my funeral," he said. "But it may be yours, when the Gun Ape reads it."

"I'm not afraid of no Gun Ape,"

Prescott asserted, and flopped on the cot. A minute later he was snoring.

Shrugging again, Hunk proceeded with the job. Two hours later, while the editor still slept, he was working the hand press, and the weekly issue of the *Sentinel* hit the street on schedule late that afternoon. Through all this job, which Ed was supposed to supervise and help with, the editor slept.

It still lacked an hour to darkness when Prescott yawned and sat up, stretching. He reached for the water pail and, tipping it up, drank copiously, spilling some down his shirt front. Then, red-eyed and uncertain, he fumbled for a copy of the freshly inked paper and stared at it owlishly. Suddenly his eyes opened, and he straightened with a jerk.

"Hunk!" he yelled. "Come here!"

Hunk came, from the next room. He didn't need to ask the cause of Prescott's excitement, nor to follow his pointing finger.

"How the devil'd anything like this get in here?" Prescott demanded.

"That's what I tried to tell you, but you wrote it and told me to print it just as it was," Hunk pointed out.

The editor glared.

"But the Gun Ape—that's an apt phrase, isn't it?—he'll be out gunning for *me* next! Holy mackerel, man, you knew I was drunk!"

"You usually are," Hunk retorted unsympathetically. "But you write your best stuff then."

"It's all true enough, but . . . but I don't want to be planted in boot-hill next to Vane!"

"Then get ready to act like a man, for once, and live up to your words," Hunk suggested, glancing out the window. "Here comes the Gun Ape now."

Prescott jumped to his feet and glared wildly around, looking for a way of escape, but none was offered. He sank back on the edge of the cot as the door was flung unceremoniously open and the Gun Ape strode in.

GUS LANWELL did have something of the look of an ape. He was tall, with broad shoulders and extraordinarily long arms. But for all that he was good-looking, and, before leaving the East rather suddenly for what had seemed sufficient reasons, he had acquired himself a fair amount of learning; and too, although he came of a family whose name he no longer used, he still had a great deal of pride in his social standing. So it was only natural that Lanwell should be furious at being branded in the public prints as nothing more than a Gun Ape.

But even in this moment there was about him a good deal of the poise and coolness which, along with his extraordinary ability with a gun and his fondness for using it, had won him another title. It was barely whispered in the street, but it was at least as accurate as the Gun Ape: King of Bear Creek.

In one well-tended hand Lanwell held a copy of the *Sentinel*. Ignoring Hunk, he paused before the quaking Prescott.

"The law never hangs a man," the gun hawk said pleasantly, "without first convicting him, and that cannot be done without producing the corpus delicti—in other words, the body, the evidence. I have brought the evidence along with me." And he flourished the paper.

Prescott opened his mouth, but no words came. He was staring at the coldly smiling face of the Gun Ape as if fascinated. Lanwell had

had the same look on his face earlier in the day, while young Vane was dying.

"The heading of the *Sentinel* announces that Ed Prescott is editor and publisher, so that seems to complete the case," the Gun Ape went on. "You've stirred up a devil of a lot of talk around town, Prescott. And I dislike that. Also, I take offense at this new title which you've thought up for me. It may be descriptive of my ability with Colonel Colt's invention, but I dislike the word *Ape*."

Prescott rasped a tongue across dry lips and gulped.

"Accordingly," the Gun Ape went on pleasantly, "I've come to suggest that you print a retraction of the whole thing—along with an apology. You'll confess that you're a liar and a poor custodian of the public interest, and after that I'll allow you to leave town. Perhaps I'll even take over the *Sentinel* myself. It has possibilities. You are to have the retraction and apology on the streets the first thing in the morning. Is that clear?"

The editor got unsteadily to his feet. A six-gun and studded cartridge belt was buckled about his middle, as the result of long habit, but he seemed to have forgotten it completely.

"I . . . I . . . I guess I made a mistake, Mr. Lanwell," he stammered. "I . . . I had a few drinks too many—"

"I guessed that something of the sort must have occurred," the Gun Ape said. "If I were you, Prescott, I think I'd leave liquor alone from now on. Completely. It has killed more than one man—some of them good ones. And the retraction and apology is to be on the streets by morning, remember,

with this heading in big black type: 'The Editor Is A Liar.' If it isn't—"

"I . . . I'll see to it, Mr. Lanwell—"

Hunk Morrell had been standing there, ignored by both men. But now he spoke.

"Think you can do it, Ed? You'll have to set the type and run the press yourself."

PRESCOTT turned to stare, his mustache like the tail feathers of a despondent rooster, and the Gun Ape favored Hunk with a slow, searching glance. Up to now, the King of Bear Creek had never concerned himself much with this itinerant printer. Hunk Morrell wasn't a big man, nor particularly impressive to look at. But, like the Gun Ape himself, Hunk had rather long arms and extraordinarily well-developed shoulders, all a result of his trade. And those ink-stained fingers were very quick and deft among the type.

He was, the Gun Ape saw, younger than he had supposed—not much older than Vane had been. And, if his hair were brushed and the ink washed off, he might make a rather impressive figure of a man in his own right.

"That's your job, Hunk," Prescott said nervously. "It's what I pay you for."

"It's what you're supposed to pay me for, but you've turned all the profits down your neck these last weeks, instead of paying me wages," Hunk pointed out. "I set up what you told me because it was the truth, and it was high time that the truth was told in this town. But I won't print any retraction or apology. You'll do the work yourself, Ed. Not me."

Prescott was staring, new dismay in his reddened eyes. But the Gun Ape was bending a closer look on the printer.

"Of course, the workings of the mechanical press are none of my business," he said pleasantly. "But when you become so personal in my presence, that is a matter of concern. So that apology will have to be signed by both of you—and be on the streets strictly on time. I hope I make myself clear?"

"You speak pretty good English," Hunk conceded. "But I aimed to make myself clear, too. I don't pack a gun, but to a murderer, it seems that don't make much difference, anyway."

The Gun Ape's face whitened, then went red. He stared, noting that Hunk indeed had no gun, then his eyes shifted to the editor's weapon, and words twisted from a quivering mouth.

"You wrote that article in the first place, Prescott, and you've got a gun. And you're payin'—"

His hand was beginning the familiar arc, straight for his own gun—prelude to murder. Palsied by fear, Ed Prescott couldn't even move—not that it would have made any difference. Already, the Gun Ape's Colt was getting ready to buck.

But there was no thunder of burning powder. With one sweep of his arm, in a blinding flash of speed which more than matched that of the Gun Ape, Hunk had hurled the type tray beside which he stood. It struck the Gun Ape's lifting arm, hitting on the wrist and knocking the gun spinning, and type showered into the Gun Ape's face and around the room.

For a moment the Gun Ape stood, amazement struggling with rage on

his face, while Prescott crouched farther back to the wall. Hunk did not move at all. Then, with a snarl, the Gun Ape's eyes fastened on something hung on a nail above the door, and with a leap he had it in his hands—a coiled bullwhip.

"Damn you," he yelled, "I'll teach you to interfere!"

THE whip writhed out a venomous lash straight at Hunk's face. He threw up an arm—but not for protection. Somehow he had caught that writhing lash, before the Gun Ape could quite understand or prevent it, and a swift jerk tore it loose. Then Hunk had it in his own hands.

Almost before the staring eyes of the editor could follow, the whip had changed ends as well as hands, and Hunk was laying it on—and now it was easy to see that it was in the hands of a man who understood its use. He wrapped it around Lanwell's legs, causing the Gun Ape to leap, howling, clear off the floor. Another stroke took Lanwell around the body, and a third lanced straight at his eyes, stopping with a scant inch to spare, to snap back again with a crack like a pistol.

Back to the wall, cringing in terror, hands before his face, the Gun Ape stood while the lash barely touched his nose and ears each in turn, to jerk back each time. Then Hunk stopped.

"Maybe you can see by now that I could cut you to pieces or break your neck—if it was worth it," he said contemptuously. "I was a mule-skinner for a while, but I draw the line at jackasses. Get out—and don't come back this way again!"

The Gun Ape obeyed, backing toward the door, and there was no dignity in the manner of his go-

ing. While Prescott still stared, Hunk slowly recoiled the bullwhip and hung it back on its nail.

"Doggone," he sighed. "It's going to take a lot of work to sort out all that type again, after I get it swept up."

Prescott seemed to come out of his trance.

"Do you know what you've done?" he demanded hoarsely. "You've sealed our death warrants now—for both of us. After this, he'll never stop till he gets us."

"He was aimin' to get us awhile ago," Hunk pointed out. "But he seemed to sort of change his mind."

"You were lucky, but you won't be that lucky another time. What the blazes will I do? I'd print the apology, but it wouldn't do any good now—"

"You can't set type," Hunk pronounced, and a little of the scorn in his eyes crept into his voice. "You'd better hunt a hole, since that seems to be your style."

Prescott raved. "How can I? I've got to leave town—I can't stay here now—and leave all this behind—"

"It's mighty little you're leavin' behind, and he told you you had to leave, anyway. But if it'll make you feel any better, I'll give you five hundred dollars for the whole business, and you can sneak away in the dark."

Prescott stared, unbelieving.

"Five hundred?" he repeated. "But . . . but you haven't any money."

"Not from workin' here, I haven't. But I've got that much. Here." Hunk delved into a pocket, brought to light a well-worn leather purse and extracted a collection of soiled bills. He counted most of them off into a pile, tossed them to

Prescott. "Count 'em. And if that suits you, why you can hit the trail any time. It's getting dark, and the Gun Ape won't be after you—not now."

Prescott didn't waste time in a recount. He thrust the money hastily into a pocket and grabbed his coat, as the mournful whistle of a train wailed through the night.

"I can just catch that freight," he exclaimed. "Here's luck to you. You'll need it."

LEFT alone, Hunk returned the thinned wallet to his pocket and looked about with slow appraisal. It wasn't often that he acted on impulse, but he had done so today, stepping into the middle of a quarrel which he had had no need to make his own. But the thing was done, and he found that he had no regrets.

He'd always figured on getting himself a paper, one of these days, since running a paper was his business—the only thing he knew, aside from mule-skinning. Up till today, he'd never seriously considered the *Sentinel*, even though he did like the town—aside from the way it had become of late under the domineering rule of the Gun Ape.

But today, for the first time in the five months he had worked here, the *Sentinel* had risen to something of the proportions that he felt a newspaper should attain; and after that events had moved fast. Now he owned it, and, if it was kept at the new standard, it would be worth the money—providing he lived to publish it.

There was the catch. Sober, Ed Prescott had been mighty anxious to get out of the same country that the Gun Ape inhabited, and Hunk knew that he had bought himself

plenty of trouble. But this thing was bigger than any single man, the way he looked at it, including himself. It was an issue of whether guns or law should rule in Bear Creek. There was no law in Bear Creek, but there could be. And he had already learned something which Ed Prescott would never know: that there was no pay in running away from trouble.

Hunk took the broom, swept up the scattered type, and set to work to sort it out again. Presently, as a boy passed on the street, he stuck his head out and beckoned him.

"There'll be a special, in the morning, Bub," he announced. "Let the other kids know it, will you?"

That done, he went back to work. It would take a good part of the night to sort the type and get out a new paper, even for a man like himself. But the news would reach the Gun Ape's ears that the special edition which he had demanded would be out the next day, and he would wait to see what it had to say.

One change in the heading had to be made. Hunk Morrell was now editor and publisher in place of Ed Prescott. And a brief statement of the change of ownership, with an editorial explaining the *Sentinel's* policies. Hunk had written plenty of editorials in the past, on the *Sentinel* and other papers. Indeed, he had written most of the *Sentinel* since his arrival in town, when Ed Prescott had had too many drinks to care whether it appeared or not. But this was the first time that Hunk could write as he felt that things should be written.

Late at night, with the new edition off the press, he curled up on the deserted cot for a few hours' sleep. The extra would create as much of a sensation as the regular

edition had done, there was little doubt of that. For it told of the Gun Ape's call at the office, his demands and his attempt at more murder when they had been refused.

Hunk announced, simply enough, that the citizens of Bear Creek should unite for law and order and purge the community of such a blight. And that it would be the policy of the *Sentinel* to lead the fight in all movements for civic betterment.

WITHIN a few minutes after the extra had hit the streets, he knew that it was a sensation. But as the day wore on, he was left severely alone. No one, whether they sympathized with him or not, dared to come openly to the office to say so. Neither, it appeared, did the Gun Ape want to risk coming to the office and meeting him on his own ground again.

But as long as he remained there in comparative safety, Hunk knew he was just postponing the showdown that had to come sooner or later. Hunk was under no delusions about that. So he clapped on his hat and headed down the street.

One thing was in his favor. Sam's Place, where the Gun Ape was usually to be found, was only a couple of blocks away, so Hunk wouldn't have far to go. It was well understood that Lanwell had taken over the saloon, as he was doing with other good business establishments, his buying ability consisting chiefly of his gun. Since the thing had to be done, Hunk preferred to beard the Ape in his own den.

Word of his appearance on the street had apparently preceded him, but the loungers in the saloon looked

a little startled as Hunk pushed open the doors and walked in.

The Gun Ape was there, as Hunk had counted on, and a tense hush fell. Hunk moved forward, so did the Gun Ape. And men stepped quickly back out of possible gun range.

"I left my whip in the office, Ape." Hunk said pleasantly. "And I'm not packin' a gun today, either."

The Gun Ape snarled in his throat. This open defiance wasn't helping his prestige any in Bear Creek, and he had been goaded to the point where he was in a mood for more murder. Yet this brash ink slinger was counting on the fact that he didn't pack a gun to save him.

"You've got a gall," the Gun Ape said slowly. "But, while I was willing to give you two choices yesterday of either printing a retraction or else getting out of town, those choices have changed some today. You can get out of town or stay—but if you stay, it'll be a permanent sort of thing."

Hunk shrugged, but he didn't smile. He knew what the Gun Ape meant, knew that he wasn't bluffing. So did everyone else know. And while the majority of those in town probably favored Hunk and hoped that somehow he'd win this fight, it was equally plain that they had little confidence that he could do so.

And unless and until he won, they were keeping as neutral as possible. If the Gun Ape chalked up another murder to his tally, they wouldn't like it, because it would bring them that much more under his sway; but still the town saw fit to keep out of the struggle.

To stay, for Hunk, meant a bullet—either in daylight or dark—but certainly a bullet. Hunk shrugged again.

"I'll take the next train out, Ape." He nodded. "Providin' you'll come down to see me off."

THE Gun Ape's face cleared suddenly. He had been a lot more nervous about this printer than he cared to admit. Hunk's methods were unorthodox, but they had gotten under Lanwell's skin. He was ready to go all the way with another killing; yet to have to do it against a man who wouldn't pack a gun had worried the gunman. He hadn't dared hope that he could bluff the new editor at this late date.

"I'm glad to see that you are being sensible," Lanwell purred. "Very glad. For the good of the community, one of us has to go. There's a freight just coming into town now, and I think we'll have time to make it."

There was disappointment but a shading of relief on some faces.

Hunk paid no attention. He walked to the station, listening to the mournful whistle of the freight. A good part of the town was coming along to watch, still a little incredulous, as the Gun Ape walked with him. Hunk wasn't displeased. With such a crowd, the Gun Ape wouldn't change his mind and risk a shot.

The train had pulled in and was ready to go again as they neared the box-car station. Hunk noted that three cars had been hooked on behind the caboose—a freight and two flats. The train was starting to move again.

"You'll have to keep moving to catch it," the Gun Ape warned.

"Better come along to see that I don't change my mind," Hunk jeered.

Hunk likely didn't need to utter that last taunt, but as he caught the iron and swung suddenly up on

to the front of the last flat car, he had achieved his purpose, for the Gun Ape was within reaching distance. Hunk turned with the same speed that he had shown the day before and grabbed.

His fingers closed on the surprised Gun Ape's collar, and, with all the power of arms and shoulders, Hunk lifted and heaved. Before the Gun Ape quite knew what was happening, he was on the flat beside Hunk, and the train, starting on the down grade now, was picking up speed.

"I'm leavin', but you're coming along," Hunk growled. "And only one of us'll be coming back!"

Making full use of his moment of surprise, Hunk jerked the gun from the Gun Ape's holster, sent it spinning over the side of the car and stepped back.

"Without your gun, Ape, I figure that I've whittled you about down to size. But if you want to be whittled some more, just come ahead!"

The Gun Ape stared, still not quite certain of how it had happened. He could still have jumped off the train, but that last taunt drove any such thoughts from his mind. He rushed suddenly, fists flailing.

"Only one of us will go back, all right," he grated. "And it won't be you, you ink-slingin' devil!"

HUNK'S only answer to that was a fist, solidly driven to the Gun Ape's midriff. It stopped him with a grunt, doubling him up. And then the contest grew as fast as the spinning wheels below them. Already they had left Bear Creek and its amazed spectators behind. And both men knew that Death was riding with them now, a third passenger on the swaying flat.

"You can't ever go back to Bear Creek, Ape, no matter what hap-

pens," Hunk informed him, dancing away. "After I've made a laughingstock of you, disarmed you and took you along, you're through in that town, no matter what happens here."

The taunt was driving the Gun Ape berserk, for he realized the truth of it. Which was exactly what Hunk wanted. The Gun Ape was a bigger man, but he had always depended on a gun, and Hunk had not. That was the big difference.

The rocking of the train, rounding curves now at what seemed like a reckless speed, was a factor which hampered both of them. The flat cars at the end of the train were swaying like the tail of a kite.

And here were narrow, sharp little valleys, deep cuts, and some tremendously high grades which the train thundered over. It was new country to Hunk. He had come in to Bear Creek the other way, had expected to stay a few weeks, as most tramp printers did, then see this stretch of country on the way out. It was a great way to see the country, as an itinerant printer. But he had stayed longer than he had expected, and was leaving in a different way than he had counted on.

Now a new idea had come to the Gun Ape. Hunk could see it in his eyes. Gunless, he couldn't beat the printer on such a swaying stage as this one. But if a man could be knocked off the train at some of these high grades, he'd be dead when he hit the ground, mangled by the fall. And there was the sway and lurch of the train to aid in such an enterprise, as well as the Gun Ape's superior weight in a swift rush.

Hunk saw him coming. Below,

out of the corner of his eye, as they whirled out of the shrouding walls of a cut, he saw the open, deep drop—down for what was a dizzying distance. He couldn't side-step this time, and the sudden lurch of the train caught him off balance as the Gun Ape struck.

"If I can't go back, you never will!" the Gun Ape gritted.

Hunk was going off. But now his clawing fingers, which could snap a bullwhip or set type faster than the eye could follow, flashed back and found, for a second time, a hold on the Gun Ape. It was the end, all right—but he wasn't going to meet it alone. They were both flying out into space and down, down—together.

Somewhere in the fall he let go of the Gun Ape.

Surprise was Hunk's first sensation as he struck, for he hadn't counted on any more sensations after that. But he had hit water, feet first as it happened, and he went down and down until he had a fleeting moment of wondering whether he'd ever come up again. Then he was coming up, and the shore of this creek, made wide by beavers, was close at hand.

He saw the Gun Ape as he crawled out. The Gun Ape had struck scarcely a dozen feet from where Hunk had gone down. Only he had hit on the bank, instead of in the water. The body was recognizable only by its clothes—

BACK on the tracks, Hunk started walking. Back to Bear Creek, as he had promised. Some day he'd see some more of this country, down this way. Right now, though, he had to help the *Sentinel* keep watch over a town.



Bleak-eyed Rowdy Lang aimed to drop his hot-lead handle and work that new spread of his—until he learned that he had to pay bullet toll to gun lords for a

BOOTHILL HOMESTEAD

by JAMES P. WEBB

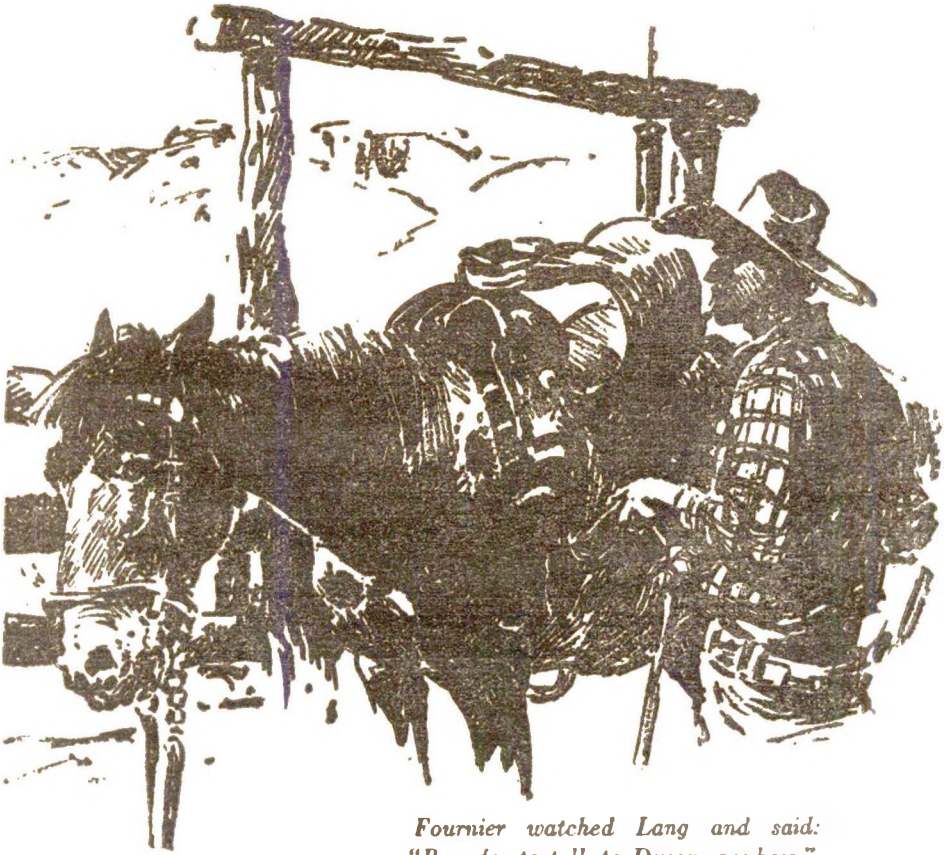
CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE PAYS A VISIT.

TROUBLE seemed far away when Rowdy Lang forded the creek and rode slowly toward the corral near his house.

Then he saw the two horses stand-

ing with dropped reins at the far corner of the house, and a tense warning of danger ran through his nerves. He halted his bay horse, and the bleak, slate-gray eyes in his lean brown face swept a glance over the house, barn, corrals and surrounding country. There was no



*Fournier watched Lang and said:
"Be safer to talk to Dyson, anyhow."*

sign of the riders, and the outlaw supposed that they were inside the ramshackle dwelling.

Touching his horse with the spurs, he rode on past the corral and circled back toward the front of the house. Thirty yards away, he drew rein and studied the saddled horses, his glance moving slowly across the wall of the house to the door. It was open, but he couldn't see anybody inside.

The outlaw, hoping to be allowed to live here in peace, had bought this quarter section two weeks before, and had changed his name to Clay Flint. He knew that old Carl Woodson, the previous owner, had enemies; that was the reason the old man had been anxious to sell.

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Maybe somebody was bent upon making trouble with Woodson, but Lang had an even stronger reason for not wishing to be caught unprepared.

For years he had drifted from one hide-out to another, while his reputation as a fast and deadly gunman grew into a legend among the cow towns and mining camps of the Southwest. And the ten thousand dollars' reward would still be paid to the man who could kill or capture Rowdy Lang.

The outlaw dropped his hand to the walnut handle of his Remington .44 and loosened the weapon in the holster. To conceal his identity, he had abandoned the Frontier Model Colt which had his initials scratched

on the back strap, and he had quit wearing a glove on his left hand. Also, he had left off his chaps and the tied-down holster, and had tried to change his appearance in every way possible.

He shook the reins and rode forward at a walk, his tall, lean body tense and his hard eyes alert. These riders might be innocent visitors, but the outlaw had a strong feeling that disaster was lying in wait for him. He couldn't define that feeling, nor account for it, but there it was.

TWO men came out of the house and strode toward the corral, and stood waiting for him. Nobody spoke until Lang had come up within ten feet of the strangers and halted. Rowdy stared at the men, his coffee-brown face impassive.

One of the strangers was a sharp-featured, small man whose two guns were both tied down. Lang saw in him a gunman of the fourflusher type, dangerous when the odds were all in his favor.

The other man, taller, had a craggy face, high nose and thin lips. He wore a single-action Colt that showed signs of much use. Though his holster was not tied down, Lang knew that this man was the more efficient gunman. Rowdy watched them both impartially.

"Don't reckon I know you hombres," he finally said softly.

The taller man's grin was a hard, unpleasant twisting of the set lines of his face. He did not speak.

The short man's lip curled. "You don't, eh? Mebbe you've heard of Sam Kemper."

Lang hadn't, but he nodded.

"That's me," the short man said, and there was a note of pride in his voice. "He's Mack Fournier."

Lang's bleak stare met Mack

Fournier's eyes. "You want to see me?" he asked.

"The boss wants you to come and see him right away," Fournier said.

"Who's the boss?"

Fournier's brief grin disturbed the surface of his craggy face again. "That'll be Clem Dyson."

Rowdy Lang saw something of himself in Fournier—a little-speaking man who would shoot to kill if crowded too far.

For Sam Kemper, Lang felt that contempt which always stirred in him when he faced a braggart. But a tense uneasiness squeezed at his heart when he looked at Kemper, for it was this type of gunman who insisted upon shooting just for the joy of it.

"Clem Dyson," Lang drawled, "owns the Long Spur Ranch north of here, and the Long Spur Saloon in Eagle Rock. Why would he want to see me?"

"Maybe he wants to give you your orders," Kemper answered harshly.

"I want to live here in peace," Lang said slowly, leaning on the corral. "I don't want any orders."

Fournier's blue eyes gleamed. "That's the way old Woodson talked, Flint. He didn't last long."

"He lasted long enough to prove up on his homestead."

"Dyson didn't start on him that long ago," Kemper snapped. "Anyhow, you go and see him. Do it today."

Lang's flinty eyes regarded Kemper with an unwinking stare, but Rowdy bit back the words that came to the tip of his tongue. He couldn't afford a gun fight. Unless he could stay out of trouble, he would be riding the dim trails again almost before he knew it.

"What's he want to see me about?"

Fournier walked to his horse and

picked up the reins. "He'll tell you that." Watching Lang, he found a stirrup with one boot and went up into the saddle. "Be safer to talk to Dyson, anyhow."

Kemper mounted and swung his horse around. "He'll talk to him, all right," he said darkly.

LANG was cooking supper when he saw three riders coming up from the south. He moved the skillet to the back of the stove and went through the house to the front door.

The riders were just beyond the corral, and Lang could pick out details of their appearance. One was a big man with a strong jaw and iron-gray hair. Another was a loose-jointed, angular-faced man. The third was a youth, perhaps fourteen years old.

The outlaw remained in the doorway while the riders drew near and halted. His left shoulder leaned against the door frame, and his right hand hung down past his gun. But his lean face and bleak eyes belied the carelessness of his posture.

The big man said, "Howdy," turned his head and glanced around at the corral and the little barn. "Heard Woodson had left the country."

Lang nodded. "He has. My name's Clay Flint."

The big man brought his gaze back to Lang's hard face. "I'm Tom Burrell. The Walkin' Bar iron." He jerked a thumb toward his adult companion, then at the youth. "Bill Homley, here, is my range boss. This is my son."

Lang nodded again. A man of few words, he waited for what was to follow. He thought he knew what it was. His homestead was too close to the Walking Bar Ranch, and they didn't like nesters. He

thought Tom Burrell was going to say that, but he was wrong.

"Did Woodson tell you what you're gettin' into?"

Lang shook his head. "I know he was havin' trouble. He was afraid of somebody. Said folks was callin' this place Boothill Homestead—but didn't say why."

Bill Homley snorted. "He oughta told you why."

"They call it that," Burrell said slowly, "because anybody who lives here just now is apt to be planted here—unless he takes orders from Dyson. This quarter section stands right between my Walkin' Bar and Clem Dyson's Long Spur outfit, and trouble's brewin'. You're apt to be caught in a crossfire, as you might say. And that ain't all."

Lang took a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket. He rolled a cigarette and waited. He saw Bill Homley studying him, and he caught the glance of Buddy Burrell; and he wondered if one of his visitors would know that his name was not really Clay Flint. The reward dodgers had described Lang's face vaguely. The description had been better when it touched his general appearance, but he had changed all that.

He did not fear that young Buddy Burrell would know him, but there was no certainty that Burrell or Homley hadn't seen him before.

"Clem Dyson," Burrell continued, "lives in town most of the time, and he owns the Long Spur Saloon. Two of his friends have sort of taken over the town. There's no real law in Eagle Rock, but Andy Hukles claims to be a justice of the peace, and Otto Rush wears a marshal's star. They just took these jobs, so maybe that'll give you some idea how things are."

Lang struck a match on the door frame and lit his cigarette. "I'm not

lookin' for trouble," he said. "I aim to mind my own business."

A brief smile touched Burrell's lips. "You won't have any trouble with my Walkin' Bar. Woodson had a few cows, and they strayed over on my range, but that's all right." He swung his horse. "But it's different with the Long Spur." He lifted his hand and touched spurs to his horse. "Good luck."

Buddy Burrell grinned at Lang and turned his horse. Bill Homley gave the outlaw a long, calculating stare, nodded and rode after his companions. Lang, who had scarcely moved during the visit, watched the riders jog across the semiarid plain. Thought stirred the depths of his bleak eyes.

What had Burrell wanted? Lang knew that the Walking Bar men had come here for some definite purpose. The fact that they had turned back southward, toward Walking Bar range, seemed to prove that. But what had they wanted? Maybe they had gone out of their way merely to warn him of Clem Dyson and the self-elected lawmen of Eagle Rock, but Rowdy didn't think so.

Yet the outlaw was convinced that if trouble was coming, he must stay out of it. He had bought this homesteader's layout with the definite aim of living a quiet life. It was his hope that the owlhoot days were all behind him. And the surest way to defeat his purpose would be to get mixed up in a range war.

CHAPTER II.

"ARREST THAT MAN!"

EAGLE ROCK was a collection of drab houses lined up on either side of a single dusty street. It was past noon next day when Lang drove into town.

The outlaw swung the wagon in toward the hitch rail in front of Graham's store and climbed down. After tying the team to the rail, he turned into the store. Nobody was there but Stamp Graham himself, a kindly-looking old man reading a newspaper spread out on the counter. He looked up as Lang moved toward him.

"Come in," he said belatedly, his mild eyes studying Lang for a moment. "You'll be Clay Flint, I think."

Grim amusement put a gleam in Lang's gray eyes. He'd be Clay Flint, all right, if folks would allow it. He hoped he wouldn't have to be Rowdy Lang. He drew a folded scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Graham.

"I want this stuff ready as soon as I eat," he said. "I've got it all down on this paper, and I've got the money to pay for it."

He had some money, and none of it had come from the banditry of which he had been accused. He had been able to avoid robbery because his brother-in-law had kept him supplied with money from their joint ownership of a cow ranch and a low-paying silver mine. Unfortunately, Lang could not live in the vicinity of these enterprises because he was too well known there.

After eating at Mallison's restaurant, two doors west of the store, Lang rolled and lighted a cigarette and stepped out on the sidewalk.

Across the street, in front of a large one-story house with a faded hotel sign painted on its false front, Mack Fournier lounged at ease. He lifted a hand in greeting as Lang appeared. The outlaw turned toward the store, then stopped as Fournier's low but penetrating voice reached across the street to him.

"Wrong way, pardner. He's

waitin' in the saloon office. It's down here."

Lang squared around and looked at Fournier, who still lounged against the wall of the hotel with a cigarette between his lips. Lang stepped down off the sidewalk and moved out to the middle of the street, little puffs of dust rising where his boots touched.

Midway of the street, he stopped, tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the thick dust and stared at Fournier with bleak eyes which had ceased to wink.

Lang's voice came through his thin lips with a sound deceptively soft: "You aimin' to make me go and see Dyson?"

The suggestion of a smile which had touched Fournier's lips vanished, as his blue eyes met Lang's gray stare. Fournier spat the cigarette out over the edge of the sidewalk and brought his shoulders away from the wall.

"No. I ain't been told to do anything about it if you don't go," he said. "I was told to remind you, that's all."

Lang shuttled a glance up and down the street. "Tell Dyson if he wants to see me, he knows where I live."

Fournier nodded, and his craggy face did not change expression. "I'll tell him—if that's the way you want it, pardner." He, too, threw a glance along the street and brought his gaze back to Lang. "But Dyson don't like to ride, and it wouldn't do any harm to drop in at the saloon."

"I need to get back home," Lang said, "soon as I load my stuff." He glanced toward the saloon. "But I'll stop in a minute."

Fournier stepped off the sidewalk and stirred the dust. "I'll help you throw your stuff on the wagon."

THE supplies Lang had bought, which included feed, flour, bacon, sugar, coffee, canned milk, beans, tobacco and cartridges, were piled on the counter and the floor. With the help of Mack Fournier, Lang soon had everything stowed in the wagon.

Lang rolled a cigarette, struck a match on the metal tire of one of the wagon wheels and regarded Fournier with a bleak stare.

"I'm not for hire, Fournier."

Fournier grinned briefly. "Maybe not, but Dyson's the man to trail along with around here."

"What I want," Lang said softly, "is a chance to live in peace."

Fournier's wide lips drooped, and his right shoulder lifted in a faint, expressive shrug. "Don't we all? What say we drift along? Dyson'll be gettin' impatient."

Shoulder to shoulder, the two lithe men strode along the sidewalk till they were nearly opposite the Long Spur Saloon; then they stepped into the ankle-deep dust and cut diagonally across the street.

The Long Spur had no batwings, and the door stood open. From force of habit, Lang fell back to let Fournier precede him inside. There were three men besides the bartender in the saloon, and Lang's bleak glance moved from one to another.

At the bar was Sam Kemper, making rings on the pine bar with the bottom of his wet glass. In a chair tilted against the side wall was a second man, apparently taking his afternoon nap. He was middle-aged, with a neat mustache and imperial, and he wore a wide black hat, black broadcloth coat, striped trousers and flowered vest. His white hands were clasped over a flat stomach, and his eyes were closed. There was a gun under the long tail of his coat.

The third man was a wide-shouldered, moon-faced hombre with guileless hazel eyes and thick lips. He was slightly paunchy around the middle, wore his gun well toward the front and had a nicked star pinned to his shirt pocket. The badge identified him as Otto Rush, who had elected himself town marshal.

Lang stopped, looking at the man with the imperial. "That Dyson?"

Fournier shook his head and stepped back beside the outlaw. "Naw. He's in the office. That's Judge Hukles." He pointed a finger at a door in the rear wall. "Dyson's in there."

Lang turned his head and looked at Fournier's craggy face. "You go ahead of me."

Fournier's blue eyes narrowed, but he said, "All right," and strode along the bar.

Lang followed and did not look back till he reached the office door. Fournier turned and strode back to the bar.

Lang put a hand on the doorknob and shifted a slow glance over the watching Dyson men. Then he opened the door and entered the office without invitation.

Clem Dyson sat behind a desk in the rear of the office, and he glanced up when he heard the door go shut. He was not the kind of man Lang had expected to see. Small in stature, with clothes of expensive quality, he had a beak of a nose, deep-set piercing eyes and a neat mustache.

He laid an immaculate hand on the desk in front of him, leaned back in his chair and fixed the outlaw with a cold stare.

"I didn't hear your knock." His voice was not deep, but it had a

strong, vibrant timbre. "Certainly I didn't tell you to enter."

Lang's lips thinned, and his un-winking eyes went bleak and stony. His voice had a softly ominous sound: "I'm here."

Dyson, imperious and unafraid, met the outlaw's stare. "Who are you?"

"Flint."

Dyson's expression changed from cold resentment to haughty anger. "Flint, eh? Took you a long time to get here."

Lang did not answer. He remembered that he was trying to lead the life of a working nester, and fights must be avoided.

"Why didn't you get here sooner?" Dyson demanded. He rose from his chair and braced his white hands on the desk. "When I tell a man I want to see him, he doesn't waste time getting here."

Lang kept his thin lips clamped shut, and his bleak eyes did not betray his thoughts. A gun fight now would throw too much attention on him, and he didn't want that while he was still a stranger here. He waited.

Dyson's indignant mood dissolved suddenly, and he smiled. "Well, you're here now, and I'll tell you what I want you to do. In the first place, my word is law here. The only man in this country who has tried to defy me is Tom Burrell. The others are gone, and Burrell will regret his stubbornness." He paused, opened a drawer and extracted a cigar. His bright, piercing eyes watched Lang. "You happen to live in a strategic spot. Woodson refused to obey my orders. I gave him a certain period of time to get his affairs settled. He sold his place to you just before the deadline."

He cut the end off his cigar with a small knife and took a match out of one of his vest pockets. "It had been my intention to take over the Woodson place, but I became careless. Frankly, I didn't know that he was dealing with you." He struck the match, held the flame to his cigar and carefully lighted it.

"However," he went on evenly, "you look like the kind of man who can perform the duties I'll have for you without bungling. Woodson didn't have much ability, and he was handicapped by ideals."

Dyson puffed a cloud of smoke, and his eyes regarded Lang speculatively through the haze. "If you'll be sensible, I'll allow you to keep your homestead."

Lang's anger stirred without touching the bleak surface of his face. He said, "I aim to keep it, mister."

Dyson's tone was matter-of-fact. "Yes, if you follow my instructions. I must bring Burrell to terms. It will be your job to—"

"You don't need to tell me," Lang cut in sharply. He stepped back to the door. "I don't like you, Dyson. I'm stayin' clear of your scheme, whatever it is. I'm goin' to mind my own business." His cold, unwinking eyes held Dyson's stare, and his voice became soft: "I hope you don't try to interfere with me, Dyson."

Dyson took his cigar from his mouth and made a motion of dismissal with his hand. "You've had your chance. I'll expect you to be out of Arizona, or on your way out, in three days. That's all."

Lang stared at him, wondering. There was a strange self-confidence, a casual certainty in Dyson's manner that puzzled the outlaw. The saloon man seemed to consider him-

self beyond the reach of human opposition.

Lang opened the door, turned sidewise and went out into the barroom. Sam Kemper, Otto Rush, Judge Hukles and Mack Fournier were just about where they had been when Lang had entered the office. All of them were looking at him.

Lang moved slowly across to a side door, his bleak eyes watching the four Dyson men and the bartender. This was Dyson's saloon, and Rowdy knew that the barkeep was a Dyson man, too, and probably had a weapon under the counter.

Mack Fournier, standing against the bar, spread his wide lips in a hard grin. Hukles, Kemper, Rush and the bartender watched Lang's progress with sharp and interested eyes as he made his way along the rear wall, turned the corner and reached the side door. No word had been spoken, no move had been made by any of the Dyson gunmen, but Lang's acute senses warned him that he was in danger. He put out his hand to the door handle.

Mack Fournier spoke. "Why don't you go out the front?"

Lang put pressure on the door handle. His glance ranged slowly from face to face, and his thin lips turned down at the corners. The side door was locked.

"This way's closer to where I'm goin'," he said quietly. "You got the key, Mack?"

Fournier, still wearing the hard grin, shook his head. Lang looked at Sam Kemper and found the little gunman's right hand on his holster.

The office door opened, and Clem Dyson appeared. Lang's glance jumped toward him, then back around the room again.

"Otto," Dyson said calmly, "arrest that man."

CHAPTER III.

A GAME OF BLUFF.



Lang saw Rush hurrying along the sidewalk.

LANG put his back against the wall, his coffee-brown face a rocklike mask that gave no indication of his racing thoughts. His stony glance settled on the moon-faced Rush. The nicked star on the man's soiled white shirt, Lang thought, would make a good target.

"What you arrestin' me for?" he asked softly.

"It doesn't matter," Dyson said. "Put him in jail, Otto."

Thoughts poured through Lang's mind while he stood against the wall in that instant following Dyson's order. Time seemed suspended for a moment, and nobody moved or spoke.

What should he do? He was neatly trapped. When Otto reached for his gun, Lang could swap lead with him. He might get Otto, and he might get one or even two of the others. But there were six men against him—six hard, gun-swift men. Even if he were lucky enough to shoot his way out of here, he would be riding a fast horse on the owlhoot again. For all Lang knew, Otto Rush was legally the town marshal.

On the other hand, if he submitted to this arrest, they'd probably hang him. The Long Spur owner had decided to get Clay Flint out of the way, and Judge Hukles would hand out any sentence Dyson told him to.

Then this chilling thought cut through Lang's mind and made his blood run cold: what if Dyson had recognized him as Rowdy Lang? Maybe the high-handed saloon man had arranged this trap for the purpose of collecting the ten thousand dollars' reward.

The time for thought passed.

Otto Rush moved out from the bar, his hand cuddling his gun.

"Get your hands up, Flint," he rasped.

Lang said, "What are you arrestin' me for?" and did not raise his hands.

Rush moved a few steps closer and stopped. He looked at Clem Dyson.

"Rustling," the saloon man said. "You vented some Long Spur brands. You'll have a fair trial."

Lang's hand moved in a smooth blur, came up with the Remington. The outlaw heard Andy Hukles, over to his left, gasp in amazement. Lang moved a little toward the corner, realizing that he could not watch all these men at once. The barrel of his gun tipped toward Dyson.

"Come away from that door," he said coldly.

He saw Dyson's indecision; whether to obey Lang's order or risk jumping backward into the office. The outlaw, trying to watch everybody, was not sure that he could prevent this move from succeeding if Dyson tried it. But he had decided not to submit to arrest.

Dyson made up his mind. Scowling, he stepped forward three paces until he was well away from the door.

Lang went across the corner fast, put his back against the rear wall and began inching toward the office. His six-gun, tilted slightly upward, was ready for a shot in any direction, and his hard eyes moved restlessly between unwinking lids.

Sam Kemper's right hand still rested on his holster. Hukles had scarcely moved in his chair, but he was watching Lang with an eagle's keenness. Mack Fournier's grin was gone, and his pale-blue eyes were

still and hard in his craggy, sun-scorched face. Otto Rush's moon face was turned toward Lang with an expressionless innocence, his hand still gripping the butt of his Colt. These men were waiting for some word from Clem Dyson.

The word did not come.

Rowdy moved over till he was in front of the office doorway, with Dyson between Lang and the gunmen. A sense of triumph touched Lang's tight nerves, but his wariness did not relax. There was still plenty of time for trouble.

He moved backward into the office, caught the edge of the door with his left hand and flung it shut with a wall-shaking crash. Thrusting his gun into the holster, he sprang across the room unlatched the lower sash of the side window and jerked it open.

The outlaw peered out, saw nobody, and threw a leg over the sill. The next instant he was standing in the narrow, littered space between the saloon and a feed store. He started toward the street, thought better of it and turned back.

He went around behind the feed store at a run, kept on past the vacant adobe beyond and turned warily toward the street.

He saw Otto Rush hurrying along the sidewalk. The marshal did not glance into the space between the buildings. Lang, a tall, lean shape in blue shirt, brown duck pants and flat-crowned gray hat, pressed close against the rough wall of the adobe. An instant later, Sam Kemper passed on the run, his boots echoing on the boards. Lang waited a minute, listening for more sounds.

Then he moved up warily to the edge of the sidewalk. In front of Graham's store, diagonally across the street, Rowdy's loaded wagon stood where he had left it.

Otto Rush, at the hitch rack, was apparently untying the tie ropes, and Sam Kemper was putting one foot on the hub of a front wheel, preparatory to climbing up. They froze that way when Lang's voice cut harshly across the silence:

"Get away from that wagon."

Down the street, Clem Dyson, Mack Fournier and Judge Hukles were grouped in front of the Long Spur. They were a little too far away for accurate shooting at the moment, but close enough to be a menace to the lone outlaw. He held his place at the edge of the sidewalk, in the slim shadow of one of the buildings.

Sam Kemper took his boot off the hub and turned around, his foxlike face drawn tight, his hands fluttering nervously near his gun. Otto Rush dropped his hands from the tie rope and turned slowly, his moon face washed clean of any readable expression.

Rush said: "This here outfit's been confiscated."

"Who by?" Lang's voice was bleak as a wintry wind, his words clipped and sharp: "Get away."

"By order of Judge Hukles," Rush answered.

The three men in front of the saloon were listening, but a quick glance told Lang that they had come no closer. He stared at Rush.

"Get away," Lang repeated.

"You can't get out of town," Kemper snarled. "You're under arrest!"

"Move," Lang said. "Right now."

Sam Kemper crouched; his hands hovered almost against his two guns, and his lips peeled back to expose his teeth. Otto Rush, his round body half concealed by one of the horses did not move. From down the street, Fournier's voice carried

clearly in the silence:

"Better call 'em off, boss. There'll be another time."

Dyson shouted: "Come away, boys. Let him have his wagon."

Kemper straightened, staring at the outlaw. Otto Rush moved away from the hitch rail into the street. Lang's thin lips bent upward in a faint smile, and he watched the marshal and the little two-gun man strike diagonally through the dust toward the saloon. He cast a glance at Fournier and stepped up on the board sidewalk.

Fournier was smiling again. Lang said dryly: "Thanks, Fournier."

Fournier's grin faded. "No need of thanks, hombre. There'll be a time, unless you decide to throw in with us. But I don't like it this way."

Keeping close to the front of the houses, the outlaw turned his back on his enemies and strode along the sidewalk till he was directly opposite Graham's store. Dyson and his men were too far away for accurate shooting, and Lang gambled on his hunch that back shooting was not in Fournier's code.

No shots came. Lang paused and looked back toward the saloon. Otto Rush and Sam Kemper had joined the others, and they were standing in a tight group, watching him. Across the street, Graham appeared in his doorway, his pink face creased in a worried frown.

Lang crossed the sidewalk and moved into the dust. He reached the hitch rail and untied the tie ropes. He looked up at Graham, nodded and climbed aboard the wagon. He turned the team and let the animals walk until they were well past the group in front of the saloon.

Nobody said anything. Lang turned sidewise on the seat and

stared back at them until he was beyond effective six-gun range.

CHAPTER IV.

VENGEANCE VISITOR.

LANG drove his team and wagon off the road half a mile from his house and followed a dim trail which led in to his barn.

When he came over a rise behind the corral and saw the horse standing in front of the house, he checked the impulse to halt the team. He let the wagon roll on, while his bleak eyes studied the saddled horse and the man sitting on the doorstep. If he were going to be a nester ranchman, he would have to quit acting like a man on the dodge.

He halted the wagon near the kitchen door, fastened the end of one of the hair tie ropes to a hitching post which Woodson had seen fit to plant there, and walked around to the front to greet his visitor.

Buddy Burrell, still sitting on the doorstep, looked up and grinned. He was a pleasant-faced lad with carrot-colored hair and friendly eyes. He wore a new Stetson, a cotton shirt open at the throat, and brown chaps with large silver conchas. He was unarmed.

"Howdy, Mr. Flint," he greeted.

"Howdy, pard," Lang said. "Come around to the kitchen while I get my stuff off the wagon."

Buddy got up. "Sure. I'll help you unload." He walked ahead of Lang with an exaggerated cowboy swagger. "I want to talk to you," he added.

They began carrying the supplies into the kitchen. Lang wondered what Buddy Burrell wanted to tell him, but he did not ask. He waited until Buddy chose to talk.

"I kind've figured it wouldn't do any harm to let you know how

things stand," the youngster said. "I'd like to have you on our side."

"I hadn't aimed to take sides," Lang drawled.

"You'll have to," the boy said earnestly. "Clem Dyson'll see to that."

The outlaw could easily believe this. His visit to Eagle Rock had convinced him that Dyson wouldn't let him be neutral. Furthermore, if Dyson succeeded in gaining control of Burrell's Walking Bar outfit, Dyson's fantastic scheme to set himself up as boss of the Eagle Rock range would be almost complete. Boothill Homestead couldn't hold out long against such overwhelming odds.

"Dyson took charge of Eagle Rock," Buddy went on, "and he's been hirin' gunmen."

The youth laid a sack of flour on the table in the kitchen and settled his new Stetson more firmly on his head. "Clem Dyson acts like he owns the world. He says he's goin' to be boss. If it wasn't for you and the Walkin' Bar, he just about would be, too. Pretty soon there'll be big trouble around here. Dad's hired a few pretty tough hombres in self-defense, but he ain't got the crew that Dyson's got."

"How many's Dyson got?"

"Must have fifteen at his ranch," Buddy said worriedly, "and four or five in town. They say Dyson's a gun hawk himself, but he don't look it."

They had everything off the wagon except some feed which belonged in the barn. Lang untied the team and climbed into the wagon. He looked down at the younker.

"Why do they call my place Boothill Homestead?"

"Dyson named it that. Told Woodson his homestead would be a boothill if he didn't talk turkey."

Buddy climbed over a wheel and sat down on a sack of feed. "Woodson was lucky to get away."

At the barn, Lang unhitched the horses, hung up the harness and lifted the sacks out of the wagon. Buddy leaned against the wall, watching him with moody eyes.

"When the fight comes off," he said, "we'd like to have you on our side."

WHEN they went outside, a rider was drifting around the nearby corral. Lang's face hardened, and his eyes went bleak when he recognized Mack Fournier. The outlaw heard Buddy mutter something under his breath.

Fournier drew rein and sat looking down at Lang and the boy. There was a hard smile on his high-boned face.

"Thought I'd ride over for a chat," he said.

Lang drawled, "Dyson send you?"

Fournier, easy in the saddle, shook his head. "On my own."

"Get down," the outlaw invited, his bleak eyes watching the Dyson gunman. "This is Buddy Burrell."

Fournier nodded, his pale eyes shifting toward Buddy for a brief glance. "Know him," he said briefly. He lifted a leg over the saddlehorn, tossed his reins and slid to the ground. "Sam Kemper started talkin' about you before you got out of sight. Says he'll get you."

Lang's expression did not change. "Why?"

"Claims you can't run a bluff on him and get away with it." Fournier drew a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket and began rolling a cigarette. "Dyson's goin' to boss this range, Flint. Want to come in with us?"

"No."

Fournier thumbed a match and

lit his smoke. "Hoped you would."

"What's Dyson tryin' to do?" Lang asked.

Fournier grinned. "He's hungry for the feelin' that he's the biggest man in the country. All the nesters and small cowmen are takin' orders from him." He gestured with the hand that held the cigarette. "All but one. Woodson wouldn't, and now you won't."

Buddy Burrell asked hotly: "Why's he threatenin' my dad?"

Fournier put his cigarette between his lips, and a thin column of smoke curled up past his hat brim. "Same reason. The small spreads are under his thumb, but he can't feel comfortable while the Walkin' Bar holds out. Your dad's outfit is a little bigger than the Long Spur." He chuckled dryly. "Fewer riders, but more cows. Tom Burrell won't admit that Dyson's the boss, and that's goin' to mean trouble."

Lang stared. "You mean that's all there is to it?"

Fournier nodded. "That's all." His blue eyes studied Lang. "The law's in Dyson's hands, and the sheriff's a long way off."

Hoofs of a running horse hammered the hard ground. Lang moved a pace or two sidewise, farther away from the barn, and Fournier half turned to look across the corral.

"Here comes Sam," he said quietly. "I was sort of expectin' him. Sam's a mighty impatient critter when he gets his feelin's hurt."

Sam Kemper pulled his horse back to its haunches and glared at Lang. His foxlike face was red, and his teeth gleamed between parted lips. He had had two or three drinks, but he was not drunk.

"What you doin' here, Mack?" he demanded. "You got no business hobnobbin' with a nester."

Mack Fournier did not answer; he leaned, picked up his trailing reins and moved his horse closer to the barn wall. His pale-blue eyes watched the little gunman.

Kemper's gaze clung to Lang's lean face. His left hand held the reins high, while his right hung close to his gun.

"I'm settlin' your hash right now, Flint," he rasped. "Reach for that gun and I'll—"

Lang felt cold. He hated the thought of having to kill another man, especially when there was no reason for a shooting; but he knew from bitter experience that, when a man like Sam Kemper downed a couple of drinks and wanted a fight, there was no good way to avoid gun-play.

CHAPTER V.

PALAUVER AND POWDER SMOKE.

"I DON'T want to fight you, Kemper," Lang said.

Kemper sneered. "Course you don't. Nobody wants to swap lead with Sam Kemper, but you've gone too far."

"I've never harmed you."

"Drove me away from your wagon, when you thought you had the edge on me," Kemper snarled. "You knew I wouldn't draw on you then."

There was nothing to be gained by argument, Lang knew. When a bragging gunman wanted to add another notch to his gun, he always had these same unreasonable arguments on the tip of his tongue, and nothing that Lang could say would do more than increase the other man's anger. The outlaw kept silent, then, and watched Sam.

"Pull your gun, you nester skunk!" Kemper yelled.

Lang did not move; even his eyelids were still.

Kemper glared at him, and the veins in his neck swelled against the collar of his blue shirt. The fingers of his right hand, bent like a claw, moved close to his gun. Lang knew that the little man was going to draw.

Then Mack Fournier's voice, slow and cool, cut into the tense silence:

"Maybe you'd like to know, Sam, that this hombre you're goin' to kill is Rowdy Lang."

Kemper seemed paralyzed by the shock of Fournier's words. His eyes bulged, and the red flush drained from his cheeks. But the effect lasted only a moment.

"You're crazy," he snapped. "Rowdy Lang got killed three months ago."

His right hand whipped out his gun.

Lang's Remington nosed up and roared, and Kemper cried out sharply. The six-gun flew from his hand, and blood poured from his shattered wrist.

Kemper's horse reared, wheeled and lunged. The wounded gunman, his face contorted with pain and rage, dropped the reins and drove his left hand down to his other weapon. Lang held the Remington tilted up, thumb hooked over the hammer, and his bleak, stony eyes watched without expression while the horseman clawed his left-hand gun out of the holster.

Kemper's horse stepped on the dragging reins and wheeled around. The little gunman's left-hand weapon jerked up and roared and the slug whispered past the outlaw's ear.

Then Lang killed Kemper.

BEFORE Kemper's limp body had struck the ground, Lang's gun came around to bear on Mack Fournier.

Fournier, staring at the outlaw's cold mask of a face, seemed jarred. He made a backward step, and his blue eyes widened a little.

"Hold on, Flint!" he said. "I ain't in this fight."

Lang's harsh voice cut like a knife: "You called me Rowdy Lang."

"I thought that might scare some sense into Sam," Fournier said earnestly. "I know you ain't Lang. He's been killed."

Lang found time to wonder what dead man somewhere had been identified as Rowdy Lang. Relief flooded through him. So Fournier didn't really believe that Flint was the ten-thousand-dollar outlaw?

Lang lowered his weapon, eased the hammer down, shucked two shells out of his belt and reloaded.

"All right, Fournier," he said softly. "But I hope you remember that I ain't hankerin' to be tagged as an outlaw."

Fournier took a long breath. "I'll remember." He took his makings out of his shirt pocket and grinned. "I didn't see you pull that gun, but I reckon it was because I was watchin' Sam." He looked down at Kemper's sprawled body. "Looks like he'll have to be buried."

"Take him back to town," Lang said harshly. "And tell Dyson to leave me alone."

After Fournier had loaded the dead man on his horse and headed toward town, Lang turned to find Buddy Burrell staring at him.

"How come he called you Rowdy Lang?" Buddy asked.

Lang rolled a cigarette and put it between his thin lips before he answered. "Said he wanted to scare Kemper. I wish it *had* scared him, but it didn't—not enough."

"I never saw anybody draw a gun

and shoot as fast as you did," Buddy said. "It was like—"

"I didn't have much time," Lang drawled.

Uneasiness gripped the outlaw. Was this kid wondering whether this stranger might not really be Rowdy Lang? If the youth went away and told somebody, and several other people began wondering, it would mean the end of Lang's fine plan to live here in peace. Peace! He had been here two weeks, and already a kill-crazy gunman had forced him into a senseless fight.

"A man can move fast when he has to," Lang added. "You heard Kemper and Fournier both say Lang's been killed."

The youth's troubled frown vanished, and he smiled suddenly. "Sure, I heard 'em. I heard other fellows say so, too." They started back toward the house. "I got to be ridin'. Dad wants you to come over to the Walkin' Bar and talk things over. That's mainly why I'm here."

Lang suddenly remembered that Clem Dyson had given him three days to pull up stakes and leave the country. Rowdy had no doubt that Dyson would try to enforce that order, and if he did try, it would mean a gun-smoke showdown. If Lang fought side by side with the Walking Bar, maybe he could conceal his outlaw identity.

"All right," he said. "I'll ride over with you now."

CHAPTER VI.

TALK AND TRIGGERS.

THE sun was down when Lang and Buddy reached the Walking Bar. They rode into the ranch yard, and Bill Homley came out of the main house.

"Tom was gettin' worried about you, Buddy," he said gruffly. He put his glance on the outlaw. "Howdy, Flint."

"Howdy," Lang said. "Where's Burrell?"

"In the office." Homley swung a long arm to indicate the house. "Buddy'll show you. Want your hoss fed?"

Lang nodded and dismounted. "I may stay here tonight."

Homley stepped into Lang's saddle and reached Buddy's reins. Buddy went up the steps to the porch, and the outlaw followed. They entered a central hallway.

The boy opened a door on the left, and Lang peered into the room. Dusky shadows lay in the corners of the office, but he could see the two men at the desk near a window. One was Tom Burrell.

The other was Mack Fournier!

Both men glanced up, startled, when the door opened. Buddy stepped inside, and Lang kept close at his heels. The outlaw's bleak eyes watched Fournier as the gunman straightened up.

"You made a quick trip if you took Sam to town and then rode out here," he said softly.

"I didn't," Fournier said. "I

brought Sam here, and some of the boys are buryin' him."

Tom Burrell was staring intently at Lang's face. "Glad to see you, Flint. Fournier brought me some word from Clem Dyson."

Lang's eyes gleamed. "So that's why he's here?"

Burrell nodded. "Looks like it's goin' to be a fight. Judging by the way you handled Kemper, maybe you don't aim to join in with Dyson."

Lang shook his head.

Buddy Burrell frowned at Fournier. "Why's he here?"

"Never mind," his father said sharply. "He came here on business. You'd better go and talk to Bill."

Thus dismissed, Buddy turned on his heel, muttered something and went out. Tom Burrell rose from his chair and went over to the door. He peered out into the hallway, pushed the door shut and returned to the desk.

"Now we'll talk," he said.

He struck a match on his boot and lit a lamp which stood on the desk. His strong face seemed a little pale, and there was a haunted look in his eyes. He sat down and looked at Fournier.

"This has gone about as far as it



Bowling – or Biking



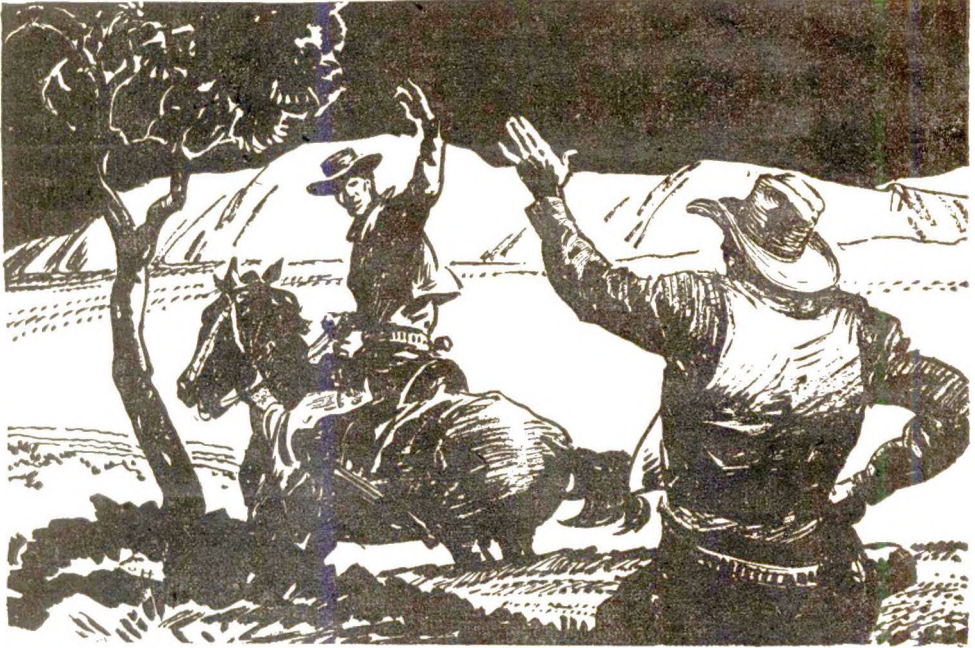
can go," he said. "I can't pay much more without losing my ranch, and I've no assurance that Dyson'll keep quiet even then."

Fournier nodded. "That's right." Burrell turned his head and

The outlaw shook his head. "Not unless I'm fightin' for myself," he said flatly.

"You will be."

"Maybe you ought to tell me what's goin' on," Lang drawled.



"Tell Buddy good-by for me," Lang called, then rode off.

looked at Lang. The outlaw did not know what these two men were talking about, but a vague idea was beginning to stir in his brain.

"You're the only man on this range," Burrell said, "who hasn't knuckled to Dyson. That's why I want to talk with you." He seemed to remember something and lifted a hand. "Mack's my friend. He fell in with Dyson to get information for me, but I'm the man he's really working for."

Lang nodded.

Burrell drummed his fingers on the desk, watching Lang. "If we fight Dyson to a finish, are you with us?"

"Where does Dyson get all this power?"

Burrell made a weary gesture with his hand. "You tell him, Mack. Tell him the truth."

Lang backed to a wall, from which position he could watch the two men, the door and the side window without exposing himself much if anybody happened to be watching them from outside. His thin lips tightened bitterly when he realized that he had taken this outlaw precaution from force of habit; but he held his place and waited for Fournier to speak.

"It's this way, Flint," Fournier said. "Tom, here, got mixed up in

some deals once that didn't smell just right. He's plumb reformed now, but the trouble is that Dyson found out about what Burrell had done, and now Dyson's threatenin' to drag Tom over the coals if he don't toe the mark. Dyson wants complete control of all this range around Eagle Rock. Tom can't fight back on account of Buddy. He don't want Buddy to know."

He paused, his hard blue eyes speculative. "Dyson'll get you if he can. If you and Tom work together, maybe you can beat him out. See the point?"

Lang didn't see the point, but he nodded.

"I'm not goin' back to Dyson any more," Fournier added. "When he finds out I ain't comin' back, he'll probably be lookin' for me."

Tom Burrell seemed nervous and ill at ease, and his troubled glance shifted back and forth between his two visitors. Suddenly he put both hands on the desk, pushed himself out of his chair and started across the room toward the door.

"If you'll come with me," Tom said, "I'll show you where you can sleep. Mack, you wait here."

Lang hesitated briefly, then moved after the ranchman. He was out in the middle of the room when Burrell reached the door and grasped the handle. One of Mack Fournier's spurs jingled faintly.

The outlaw sprang to one side, turned around in midair and reached for his gun.

Mack Fournier, his long legs braced and his shoulders pushed forward, had his Colt in his right hand. His high-boned face was grim, and his voice rapped sharply even as the outlaw spun about.

"Get 'em up!" Fournier yelled.

Then, seeing that it was too late for talk of surrender, Fournier

turned loose a desperate shot which missed the fast-moving outlaw. A second shot, blasting the echoes of the first, tugged at Lang's shirt sleeve.

Lang's boots thumped the floor, and his gun juttred from his hand. The muzzle winked red in the lamp-light, and Mack Fournier threw his left arm across his chest and weaved blindly around the room.

Lang leaped again, back toward the wall, and turned so that he could see both the ranchman and the wounded gunman. He held the Remington tilted up, and his bleak eyes were like stone.

"Come in here and shut the door," he called in a flat voice to Burrell.

Fournier, the six-gun still in his grasp, blundered against the desk, then reeled off, plunged down and rolled over on his back. Burrell, staring, pushed the door shut behind him and moved a pace or two toward the fallen man.

"W-what—" Burrell stammered. "Why'd you do that, Flint?"

"All I know is he pulled his gun on me," Lang said coldly. "You know anything about it, Burrell?"

The rancher shook his head dazedly. "No. Why should he do that?"

Lang stepped close to the sprawled form of Mack Fournier, who was breathing his last. Lang's hand went up and removed his flat-crowned hat, and he flicked a glance at the dying man's face.

He had liked Mack Fournier. Even now, he didn't believe that Fournier had intended to shoot him in the back without warning. Fournier had tried to capture him alive for the reward, but things had happened too fast, and Fournier had seen that his only chance lay in shooting. Lang knew now that

Fournier really had recognized him somehow.

Lang's bleak face gave no indication of his thoughts, and before Burrell had quite recovered his composure, boots hit the porch and pounded into the hallway.

Bill Homley, closely followed by Buddy, burst into the room and stopped suddenly at sight of the dead gunman. Lang put on his hat.

"What's this?" Homley said. "Who—"

He lifted his bearded face and looked at the gun in Lang's hand; then he glanced down at the weapon in Fournier's fingers.

"Flint did it," Burrell said. "I reckon Fournier must have started it. First I knew was when I heard the shots."

Lang's thin mouth drooped at the corners. Why had Burrell taken an abrupt notion to show him where to sleep? This move, and the ranchman's request to Fournier to stay where he was, had put Lang on guard. The whole thing had a planned and unnatural air.

Yet, if Dyson and Burrell were enemies, it didn't make sense for both of them to be plotting against Clay Flint. Or had Fournier told Burrell that Flint was Rowdy Lang? Did Dyson and his men know it, too? If the whole Eagle Rock range knew his identity already, he would be wise to abandon Boothill Homestead at once.

"He drew on me when I started out," Lang said softly. "I don't know why."

"Reckon Dyson must have told him to get you," the foreman hazarded.

Lang cased his gun into the holster and looked at Buddy Burrell, who was staring wide-eyed at the dead Fournier.

"Buddy," he drawled, "will you

saddle my hoss and bring him up to the porch?"

Buddy nodded, pulled his gaze away from the sprawled gunman and went out.

CHAPTER VII.

ESCAPE TO DOOM.

"WHAT was Fournier doin' here?" Bill Homley growled.

Lang stared at the foreman. If Burrell was not exactly what he seemed to be, and if there was more going on than a range war between Dyson and Burrell, how did Homley fit in?

"He was really workin' for me," Burrell explained. "He joined up with Dyson to find out what his plans were."

"Did he find out?"

Burrell nodded. "Some. Dyson aims to get Flint, here, out of the way first. Then he'll attack the Walkin' Bar and try to smoke us out."

"He can't get away with that," the range boss muttered. "He can't—"

"I don't think so, either," Burrell said. "But he's got away with a few things already. He's got all the small ranchers, except Flint, eatin' out of his hand." He strode over in front of Lang. "Wish you'd stay here tonight, Flint."

Hoofs rumbled faintly in the yard. Lang yanked his hat tighter on his head and looked at Bill Homley. Was the loose-jointed range boss an enemy or a friend? Lang didn't know; but he had suspicions about Burrell, and Bill Homley was working for Burrell. Lang was not in a mood to take unnecessary chances now, and he had a feeling that time was crowding him.

He said in a flat voice: "Move over against the wall."

Homley's bearded face hardened, and anger gleamed in his eyes. Unused to being ordered around by strangers, he met the outlaw's bleak stare for a moment; then, as if against his will, he moved slowly sidewise until he was no longer in front of the doorway. Lang looked at Burrell.

"You, too."

Burrell backed away, watching Lang. The ranchman's blocky face was pale and strained.

Lang moved forward with quick tread. Halfway to the door, he swung around and walked backward, the better to keep the two other men under his glance.

When a soft footfall sounded in the hallway, the outlaw stopped, his unwinking eyes watching Burrell and Homley. Without turning his head, he called out:

"Buddy!"

The voice of Otto Rush rapped out a sharp reply: "Stand steady! Keep your hand off that gun, and don't turn around."

Lang's lean body went tense and motionless, his thin lips moved, but no sound came. Inwardly, he was cursing himself for carelessness. He had been too sure that Buddy was making the sounds he had heard.

"Get your hands up, Flint," Rush snapped. "You, too, Burrell. Get 'em up, Homley."

Lang raised his hands level with his shoulders and saw Homley and Burrell do likewise. He was remembering that Burrell had sent Buddy to fetch him to the Walking Bar, and now these Dyson men were here. Was that a coincidence?

"Get Flint's gun, judge," Rush said.

Lang turned his head for a glance over his shoulder. Andy Hukles, wearing a long-tail coat and a wide black hat, slid around Rush and

moved toward the outlaw. Reaching a long arm, he lifted Lang's gun and backed off.

"What you want with me, Rush?" Lang asked. He turned to face the Eagle Rock marshal. "The three days ain't up yet."

"The boss wants you," Rush said stolidly. He flicked a glance down at the body of Fournier. "And he'll want you worse when he finds out you killed Mack." He stepped to one side, motioned with his gun. "Get outside. Judge, you watch these other two hombres."

Hukles nodded and tilted Lang's Remington up. Although the light in Hukles' eyes was hard and cold, his grave face, neat mustache and graying goatee made him seem out of place with the moon-faced Rush.

"Stay where you are, gentlemen," Hukles said in a deep voice. "If you don't move, you won't be fired upon."

"Dyson's goin' too far now," Burrell said. But there was no steam in his voice.

LANG walked along the hallway toward the front door. There was no light burning here, but the outlaw knew that Otto Rush could see him well enough. He could hear the marshal's footfalls just behind him, and he could see the twilight beyond the open front door ahead.

"What right have you got to come out here and arrest me?" Lang asked without looking around.

"I got a gun, ain't I?" Rush growled. "When Clem Dyson says do a thing, it'd better be done, I reckon."

Lang went on to the doorway. He regretted that, since settling on Boothill Homestead, he had quit carrying the little .32 hide-out gun in a shoulder holster. He had wanted to get away from guns, and

he had deceived himself into thinking that he could get away from them. Now he knew better, but it might be too late. He was not certain that Otto Rush and Andy Hukles had any intention of taking him into town.

He paused in the doorway. "Don't Dyson ever keep his word?"

Otto Rush chuckled in his fat throat. "He says he'll keep his word to his friends, but he allows only a fool would keep a promise to an enemy. Get on out there."

Lang's glance slid around the darkening yard. Two horses stood just beyond the porch. "What'll I ride? There's only two hosses."

"Don't worry about that," Rush snapped. "You can walk—soon's I get my rope on you. Step on out."

Lang glanced back. Judge Hukles, the outlaw's gun in his hand, was backing out of the lighted office. He was saying something to the men inside, but Lang couldn't catch the words, as he stepped out on the porch and headed for the steps. Rush came down them behind him.

Hukles, backing along the hallway, was nearly to the front door, and Rush's booted feet had just hit the ground at the bottom of the steps, when Buddy Burrell rose up at the end of the porch with a rifle in his hands. His sharp, excited voice startled the marshal:

"Throw up your hands, Otto Rush! Throw 'em up!"

Rush wheeled; but Lang, trained to take advantage of his opportunities, was already turning. The marshal's side was toward the outlaw, and the lawman's gun was swinging around to cover the far end of the porch when Lang jumped in close and drove his right fist to Rush's jaw. The rotund marshal lurched, tangled his feet and fell,

just as Judge Hukles, running through the doorway, came to an abrupt halt on the porch.

Lang jumped again, kicked Rush's wrist, knocked the gun out of his hand and snatched the weapon off the ground—all in one continuous motion. The barrel struck Rush on the head, and he lay still.

Buddy shrieked: "Around here! Your horse's around here!"

Andy Hukles, who had been watching Lang in apparent bewilderment, spun around at the sound of the kid's voice. Buddy swung the rifle at hip level, and the muzzle spat fire. Hukles returned with a shot from the Remington, missed, and cared back the hammer.

Lang, cursing under his breath, shoved Rush's six-gun forward and yelled harshly: "Hukles!"

Hukles twisted around toward him. Lang eared back the hammer of Rush's gun as he saw the bogus judge throw the Remington level. The heavy .45 in Lang's hand let go with a thunderous crash, and Dyson's fake judge jerked under the impact of the lead. The Remington fell from his hand, and he rose high on his toes. One moment he was a long, backward-arching form in the shadow of the porch; then his knees buckled and flung him down.

Buddy was calling excitedly: "This way!"

But Lang lunged forward, bounded up the steps and scooped up his own .44. The lighted doorway of the office suddenly erupted two forms as Burrell and Bill Homley surged out. Lang fired two fast shots from the marshal's gun and drove the men back into the office.

The outlaw backed off the porch, flung the marshal's gun into the darkness and transferred his own to his right hand. Rush, on the ground, was just beginning to stir.

Lang darted around the end of the porch. His own horse stood in the shadow of the house, where Buddy was a small dark shape against the wall.

"Thanks, pard," Lang said, and swung into the saddle, reloading his pistol. He looked toward the dark bunkhouse. "Where's the riders?"

"None here," the youth said. "Dad sent 'em all out to round up some steers this mornin'."

Lang peered down at the youngster. Conscious that time was pressing, Rowdy held the horse motionless a moment.

"Why'd you do it?" he asked softly. "Reckon you saved my life, son."

Buddy's uplifted face was a white blur in the shadows. "I know you're really Rowdy Lang," he whispered. "I thought maybe you'd fix Dyson so's he'd leave dad alone."

His mouth thin and bitter, Lang stared at the kid. "You think a heap of your dad, don't you, kid?"

He gigged his horse and rode to the front of the house. The front door was still open, and there was no sign of Tom Burrell and Bill Homley, but Rush was mounting a horse at the other end of the porch.

Seeing Lang, the marshal spurred his mount into a quick run, reined the animal in a sharp half circle and looped back toward Eagle Rock. Lang gave his own horse its head and thundered after him.

Half-turned in the saddle, Lang saw Bill Homley and Tom Burrell rush out of the ranchhouse. They paused at the corner of the house, gesticulated wildly for a moment, then headed toward the corral at a run. Buddy followed them, dragging the stock of his rifle.

Lang straightened in the saddle, urged his horse to a faster gait and began overtaking Rush. The fake

marshal looked back, then leaned forward and spurred desperately. Having no weapon, his only chance of escape lay in flight, and it was obvious that Rush was badly frightened.

Lang's fast bay gained steadily, little by little, as the two riders continued to hammer furiously along the trail. Then suddenly, Rush slowed his mount, halted, turned crosswise of the road and held up both hands.

Lang rode close to him and stopped.

"I ain't got anything against you, Flint," Rush said hoarsely. "I just done what Dyson and Burrell told me to."

"Dyson and Burrell," Lang said softly. "Now, we're gettin' somewhere." His voice turned cold. "I want to know some things, Rush. You're goin' to tell me."

Rush shifted uneasily on the saddle.

The outlaw stared back along the trail, then said sharply: "Somebody's comin'. Ride over into the mesquite till he goes by. Then we'll talk."

Rush did not argue. Without a gun, and riding an inferior mount, he seemed to accept defeat. Reining off the road, he spurred into the brush. Lang followed.

The horseman came past at a gallop. Lang, holding his gun against Rush's ribs to keep him quiet, easily recognized the rider in the moonlight.

It was Tom Burrell.

CHAPTER VIII.

.44 FAREWELL.

THE long street of Eagle Rock was deserted when Lang rode into it. The moonlight cut heavy black shadows among the houses, and the

street was a wide gray band between them. Even the Loug Spur Saloon was dark.

The hoofs of his horse beat a hollow tattoo on the deep silence of the night. He knew where Clem Dyson lived, for Otto Rush had told him. Rush had seemed very eager to talk when Lang had promised to let him go. Lang knew that he would have to go away from Eagle Rock and try to find some place where he could live in peace. Boothill Homestead had been an unfortunate choice.

Resolved to go away, Lang had



made up his mind that he would not lose all the money he had put into Boothill Homestead. That was why he was going to visit Clem Dyson. He knew that he would find Burrell there, too. Rush had told him all about Burrell, and Lang was sorry—not for Tom, but for young Buddy, who had a lad's faith in his father.

The outlaw tied his horse in front of the barber shop and went on about. Dyson's house was three doors beyond, and Burrell's horse

stood in the unfenced yard. At first, Lang thought the house was completely dark, and then he saw a thin thread of light at the edge of a drawn blind in a side window.

He moved across the yard fast and put his ear to the windowpane. A faint mumble of voices was all he could hear. He slipped around to the rear and found the kitchen door—locked. He moved on to a window, paused there to peer across the long row of moonlit back yards. The town seemed asleep.

Rowdy tried the window and grunted with satisfaction when he found it unfastened. It slid up with a faint grating sound, and he climbed inside.

After pausing to listen and take stock of his surroundings, the outlaw walked softly across the kitchen, unlocked the back door so that he could get out quickly if necessary, then made his way carefully around a table and into a narrow hallway. A streak of light showed under a closed door at his right.

Lang reached the door without making a sound. He grasped the knob, turned it gently, and pushed the panel inward about an inch. Now he could hear the voices.

Dyson was saying angrily: "It would have worked. We'd have had the whole country the way we wanted it, if you hadn't insisted on pretending we were fighting each other. You didn't want that kid to know."

Burrell's deep voice was low and constrained: "No, I didn't. And I don't yet. I was crazy to let you talk me into that business. It couldn't have worked, anyhow. We'd never have kept control of the whole range. My own foreman, for one, would have turned against me as soon as he found out

what was goin' on. Now we've got that man you call Flint against us, and I've seen what he can do. I'm quittin'."

Lang flung the door wide open and stepped quickly into the room.

Dyson and Burrell sat on either side of a small table, with a bottle of whiskey between them. Dyson was just raising a glass to his lips.

"Take your drink, Dyson," Lang said softly. "Then we'll talk."

Dyson lowered the glass to the table, while his deep-set eyes stared at the intruder. He shoved back his chair and stood up. He had removed his coat and vest, but he still wore his pearl-handled six-gun.

"What do you want, Flint?" he demanded, his voice vibrant with forced indignation. "How'd you get in here?"

"My name ain't Flint. Have you got a blank deed?"

Dyson's eyes narrowed. He flicked a glance at Burrell, still seated at the table. "Maybe," he said.

"Get it," Lang said. "I'm sellin' you my place for a thousand dollars."

Dyson laughed harshly. "Not me. I aim to get it for nothing."

Lang's voice slid out from between his thin lips with an ominous softness: "That game's played out. The place is worth more than a thousand, stock and all. Get that deed and the money."

Rowdy moved along the wall, watching the two men narrowly, until he was in the corner. Dyson's coat hung over a chair almost in front of the outlaw. He reached out his left hand, dipped into the inside pocket and extracted a thick wallet.

"Damn you!" Dyson roared. "Put

that wallet back." His immaculate right hand jumped toward his gun, stopped.

Bleak eyes watching Dyson, Lang tossed the wallet on to the table and said: "Fill out a deed, then get a thousand dollars out of that wallet and lay it on the table. Do it now."

"Flint," Dyson answered in a level voice, "I'll see you in hell first. You've killed three of my best men, and I—"

"Otto Rush has left the country," Lang cut in sharply, "after tellin' me all about the way you and Burrell schemed to get control of this country."

Burrell put his hands on the table and started to get up; then he sank back weakly. "Well, I reckon—"

Dyson snapped: "You're talking in riddles." His face became a white mask of fury, and his hand jumped closer to his gun; but something restrained him. "Get out!"

Lang's bleak voice lashed sharply, "Keep your hand off that gun. Set down and fill out that deed."

Burrell lifted his head. "Better do it, Clem. He's Rowdy Lang."

Dyson's face suddenly went white as ashes, and his jaw dropped. He jerked his hand away from his gun and sank down on his chair.

Lang had not drawn his gun. His hand hung at his side, but his stony eyes watched Dyson unwinkingly. He did not say anything as the saloon-man rancher pulled open a drawer in the table and took out some paper, a bottle of ink and a pen. Dyson's hand was trembling visibly when he started to write.

Burrell sat slumped down in his chair, his arms hanging. His heavy chin was drooped against his chest, and his eyes stared from under thick brows at the wall.

For a moment, the scratching of the pen in Dyson's hand was the only sound in the room. Then Burrell twisted around to look at Lang. He wet his lips with his tongue.

"Does Buddy know?" His voice was hoarse, and his tongue seemed thick.

Dyson finished writing and shoved the paper to the middle of the table. He reached for the wallet, opened it and laid some bills beside the sheet of paper. He seemed to have recovered his calm.

"Buddy don't know you're hooked up with Dyson," Lang said, watching both men. "Bill Homley don't know, either. I reckon you've found out your mistake, Burrell."

"I must have been loco," Burrell whispered, turning farther around on the chair, his blocky face full of misery. "It was Mack's idea to get that reward, Lang. I thought he'd take you alive. He said—"

"This isn't a regular deed, but it'll do," Dyson cut in. "Come on and sign it and get your money." He picked up the ink bottle and put it back into the drawer as Lang moved forward.

Then Dyson's hand jerked out of the drawer. "If you can get here!" he snarled.

Lang's eyes caught the gleam of the gun which Dyson was lifting from the drawer. He sprang to one side, and Burrell tumbled off his chair to get out of the way.

Dyson's bullet bored through his own coat and the back of the chair and burned across Lang's thigh. The outlaw's gun, nosing over the edge of the holster, winked a streak of pale red, and the bullet caught Dyson on the point of the shoulder, twisting his slight body sidewise.

Dyson steadied himself, stabbed

his gun hand forward and dropped hammer once more. Lang was leaping again as Dyson fired, and the slug ripped into the wall. The outlaw's long-barreled Remington flashed to the level, and his second shot struck Dyson full in the chest and knocked him down.

Lang stared at Burrell as the ranchman got up.

"Nearly missed him," Lang said softly. "Time I was ridin' on." He moved forward, holding the gun ready, and picked up the bills. He shoved them into his pocket, shifted his gun to his left hand, picked up the pen and signed the improvised deed for Boothill Homestead.

"Buddy done me a favor," he said, "and I get few favors. I'm leavin' here, Burrell, but I don't forget easy. I don't want to hear of any more owlhootin' out of you."

"You won't," Burrell said fervently. "I reckon I was crazy, but anyhow I've learned my lesson." He shook his head wearily. "What Mack told you about me wasn't true, Lang. I never was mixed up in anything shady before."

"All right," Lang said. "Go on home."

"You don't have to go away," Burrell remarked. "Nobody knows but me, and I swear I won't tell."

Bitterness thinned the outlaw's mouth.

"Otto Rush knows now," he said. "He may come back." Rowdy dropped his bleak glance to the huddled body of Clem Dyson. "And anyhow, I've sold Boothill Homestead. Tell Buddy good-by for me."

The bleak-eyed, gun-skilled Rowdy Lang will be back for another grim barter with boothill in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Watch for it!



OLD LINE RIDER'S SOLILOQUY

by F. S. SAUNDERS

It shore is mighty lonesome
 Ridin' fence, I will admit:
 But when a feller's sixty
 He must take what he can git.

A man has time for thinkin'
 When he's months all by himself,
 And I know I'm mighty lucky
 That I ain't upon the shelf.

Of course, it's human nature
 To be wantin' something new,
 Or makin' lots of money
 With an easy job to do.

If I was only younger
 Maybe I would up and squawk.
 Though this ridin' fence is tedious,
 It's shore better than to walk!



"The trouble with you," said Jim bitterly, "is that you've got a spine made out of jelly!"

By EDWIN K. SLOAT

ALL SET FOR THE OWLHOOT

—that's what that kid was—and it looked as if it would take a hogleg to halt the wild youngker's plans!

For the third time in as many hours, Jim Hornby leaned his pitchfork in a corner of the loading pens, and walked through the scorching heat across the railroad tracks and up the main street of Wagon Fork to peer in through the dirty windows of the Longhorn Bar.

Bud Wilson and Ort Snakker were still inside. They had quit playing pool and sat at a table with their heads close together. Ort Snakker clutched a glass of beer in his fist, but Bud Wilson wasn't drinking. The bartender must be worrying,

thought Jim Hornby bitterly, because he wouldn't dare sell drinks to young Bud; it was bad enough just to have the fifteen-year-old boy hanging around the Longhorn Bar.

Jim Hornby turned away from the window, his lean face grin, hesitated a moment, then went back up the street to the sheriff's office. Hank Felter, Sheriff Green's brother-in-law, who acted as deputy, drowsed in a chair behind the desk, his bald head nodding and the end of a toothpick sticking out of the corner of his mouth. He jerked up

his head when Jim entered, then relaxed again.

"What's on your mind?" he asked listlessly, without removing the toothpick.

"Sheriff Green in?" Jim asked, as he took a chair.

"Nope. He's over at Buffalo. Won't be back till tomorrow."

"Listen," began Jim earnestly. "Bud Wilson came into town three days ago with a handful of dogies his dad shipped East. He hasn't gone home. Right now he's over at the Longhorn Bar with Ort Snakker. They've been together two days now."

"So?"

"Bud ought to be getting home. He's only fifteen, even if he is big for his age, and he acted mighty sullen when we were loading those steers. He didn't say anything, but I know as sure as I'm standing here that he thinks his dad is holding him down too tight, and he's thinking about running away from home."

"Lots of kids think that," observed Felter indifferently.

"But Ort Snakker is nobody for him to be listening to!" argued Jim Hornby. "Ort Snakker and his two brothers are owlhooters from all I hear. Ort Snakker is a lot older than Bud, and besides that he's just finished a stretch in prison for horse stealing and has been strutting around town for a week bragging about it."

"The sheriff will be back in the morning," said Felter. "He can ride out to the spread and have old man Wilson come in and take his kid home."

"Tomorrow may be too late," said Jim.

"I can't do anything." Felter shrugged indifferently. "I got to watch the office. I can't ride out to the Wilson spread."

"Who said anything about riding out to the spread? You're the deputy sheriff. Go over to the Longhorn Bar and tell Bud Wilson that someone wants him at the hotel. That's where he's been staying. When he leaves, you tell Ort Snakker to get out of town and not to come back or you'll jug him. Tell him that Wagon Fork doesn't want his kind hanging around."

"Me tell Ort Snakker that?" Felter's pale eyes widened in horror. "Say, I ain't that big a fool! He'd go straight out to the Snakker ranch over in Broken Hills and come back with his two brothers. You're kind of new in town, Hornby, and maybe you ain't heard much about 'em. They're bad medicine when they're sober, and when they're drunk they're plain killers. If I'd run their kid brother out of town, I'd be in boothill inside of a week. No, sir!"

"The trouble with you," said Jim Hornby bitterly, "is that you've got a spine made out of jelly. I'll bet that tin star on your vest is ashamed of itself."

"Just the same I ain't gonna do it," said Felter doggedly. "It ain't any of my business. They ain't done anything wrong, cepting maybe Bud shouldn't hang around a saloon so much at his age. But Bud Wilson ain't any kin of mine—or yours either, so far as I know. I don't see why you got to get so worked up over him."

"You couldn't see anything!" Jim flung at him, and slammed the screen door as he went out.

THE hot, dusty street was deserted save for a couple of horses dozing at the hitch rack of the Cattleman's House up the street. While Jim stood on the sidewalk before the sheriff's office wondering what he should do, Bud Wilson came out of

the Longhorn Bar and hurried up to the hotel.

As Bud disappeared, Jim Hornby's lean jaw set itself with sudden grim decision, and he strode down the street to the Longhorn Bar, mounted the porch and entered.

Ort Snakker was alone in the place, talking with the bald, paunchy bartender. Ort stood with his foot on the brass rail and a glass of beer at his elbow, a dark-featured, hard-faced youth.

"Doing time in prison ain't half bad," he said to the bartender. "I met a lot of big-timers from all over the West. They sure make their money plenty easy."

Ort Snakker paused and glanced aside at Jim Hornby who had taken his place six feet down the bar. Ort Snakker's black eyes, measuring Jim's rangy body, saw the gun holstered at Jim's belt in skimpy, cut-away leather that hinted at a lightning draw. Then Ort's attention returned to the impassive bartender.

"Yes, their money comes plenty easy—" he began again.

"Listen, you," said Jim Hornby tonelessly. "This town ain't big enough for both of us. Understand?"

"Wh-what do you mean?" Ort's tone was not as resentful as it was whining.

"Just what I said. This town's not big enough for both you and me, and I'm staying."

"We don't want any trouble in here," put in the bartender hurriedly.

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes," Jim said to Ort. "If you're anywhere in town then, I'm going to kill you."

"I ain't done anything," Ort Snakker whined again. "Why, I don't even know you."

Jim paused at the door. "Just

fifteen minutes," he repeated ominously and went outside and up the street.

Near the sheriff's office he paused to watch. Five minutes later Ort Snakker hurried out of the saloon, went down to the livery barn and got his horse. He spurred west out of town in a cloud of dust.

Jim still waited, watching the Cattleman's House. Presently Bud Wilson came out, lugging a pair of saddlebags. He went down to the Longhorn Bar and disappeared inside. After a while he came outside again, slowly, and stared up and down the street. He shook his head and started back aimlessly up the street again.

Jim crossed the street and met him.

"Hi," Jim said, with a grin. "Going home, I see."

Bud gave him a puzzled stare, then looked at the battered saddlebags in his fist. "Yeah, I guess so," he said.

"You did a swell job handling those dogies you brought in," said Jim heartily. "The boss sure admired the way you handled 'em. He said to tell your dad to bring in beef any time."

"Sure," said Bud vaguely, and turned back toward the livery barn where he was keeping his horse.

He came back up the street riding slowly with his chin on his chest, passed Jim without looking at him and rode east out of town toward the Wilson ranch.

Jim went back to the loading pens across the railroad tracks and got his pitchfork again. He was grinning. But when he raised his blue eyes a moment later toward the irregular blue line of the Broken Hills to the west and saw the tiny dust cloud that marked Ort Snakker heading for the home spread,

the grin faded and Jim's mouth grew grim.

FELTER came to the loading pens next morning. He stood chewing his toothpick and watched till Jim finished driving new spikes into a loose plank.

"Sheriff wants you over at the office," Felter said, when Jim's hammering ceased. "I thought you'd have drifted out before this. It's about that Snakker business. I tried to warn you, but you wouldn't listen. I still can't see where it was any of your business what Bud Wilson did."

Jim laid down the hammer and climbed out of the pen.

"There are plenty of things you can't see," he said shortly, and departed for the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Green sat at his desk, a quiet little man with graying hair and cold blue eyes.

"Drag up a chair," he said when Jim came in, "and tell me about Bud Wilson and Ort Snakker."

Jim related bluntly what he had done yesterday. "I almost knew that Bud was figuring to run away with Ort," he concluded. "Something had to be done. I couldn't make Felter see it, so I took it on myself."

Sheriff Green sighed. "You probably saved Bud Wilson from the owlhoot trail, Jim, and I hope he appreciates it some day. His dad has been a little too tough with the kid. But that's not the real point. You've put your own foot in it. Those Snakkers won't forget it, and they're killers at heart. I reckon you'll be wanting to leave town. Your boss says you've been about the best help he ever had at the loading pens. He'll give you a fine reference."

"I'm staying right here," said Jim

flatly. "No outlaws are going to run me out, either. I did what was right, and I'm sticking."

A fleeting grin touched Sheriff Green's thin lips. "O. K., then, Jim. I'll try to keep 'em off you."

JIM said nothing about the trouble to anyone, and neither did the sheriff or the bartender at the Longhorn apparently; but Hank Felter was loud in his opinion of what a big fool Jim Hornby was to take up for a fool kid who needed to sow a few wild oats, anyway.

Some people agreed with Felter, but a lot more seemed to think that it was a pretty fine thing that a stranger like Jim Hornby who had drifted into town a couple of months back and hired on as helper at the cattle-loading pens would act as he did.

Tight-lipped old man Wilson didn't say anything one way or the other, but inside a week Bud came riding into Wagon Fork on a fiery young paint horse with a new Mex saddle and bridle and a twenty-dollar Stetson.

"Hi, Jim!" cried Bud, hauling up at the loading pens where Jim was pitching hay off a wagon. "Just look me over! My dad sure jarred loose!"

Jim jabbed the fork into the hay and mopped his face.

"The gals won't be safe now," he said with a grin. "You sure ought to be proud of your dad."

Bud's freckled face sobered. "I am, Jim, but he wouldn't ever have changed if it wasn't for you."

"Me?"

"Oh don't pretend you don't know! Sheriff Green came out home and told dad how you ran Ort Snakker out of town when I was getting ready to pull out with him—and I was, too. Dad didn't say much, but

he sure changed toward me. He'd like to thank you, too, ma says, only he don't know how to go about it."

"Let's just forget it," said Jim.

"Now they say the Snakkers have got it in for you, Jim. Well, it's none of their business. When I see Ort again I'm going to tell him to keep his big nose out of it and let you alone."

"You stay away from Ort Snakker," said Jim grimly. "Even with that new holster and gun, you're not up to that kind of business."

Bud frowned defiantly, then grinned suddenly.

"Ma won't even let me wear the gun when I'm with her," he confessed.

"Your ma is mighty sensible, Bud."

"She wants you to come out to dinner one of these days. So do I."

Jim pulled the fork out of the hay. "I'll think it over," he said. "I . . . I'm pretty busy."

"You wouldn't be if you knew how ma cooks. Well, I got to be riding back. I had to come in and get a side of bacon. We're plumb out of meat till we butcher. So long."

"So long."

A WEEK slipped past, and nothing happened. It began to look as though Ort Snakker hadn't gone back home to the ranch after all, or his brothers would have come to town before this. Ort must have drifted out of the country, people said, and it was a good thing all round.

Then one blistering afternoon while Jim Hornby was lying in the chair in Maneely's little barber shop. Lathered to the eyebrows, he heard the clump of high-heeled boots on the boardwalk outside and heard the

screen door open. Jim opened his eyes to see three men crowding into the little shop.

Two of them were tall, with high cheekbones, black eyes and straight black hair. They looked enough alike to be twins. Jim looked longest at the third man. He was younger, but he looked a lot like the other two. He was Ort Snakker.

"That's him," said Ort in an undertone, indicating Jim.

Maneely, the barber, gasped in horror and edged frantically away. Ort Snakker jerked out his six-shooter. Pete Snakker struck it down and rocked back on his high-heeled boots, his low-lidded eyes fixed on Jim's face.

The pungent odor of raw corn whiskey filled the stifling air of the little shop. Maneely reached the corner of the room and tried desperately to make his skinny body as small as possible. His panting breath sounded loud in the tight silence.

"Ain't you gonna kill him?" demanded Ort Snakker savagely.

Pete Snakker still rocked on his heels, his hairy right hand hanging by the thumb to his gun belt.

"There ain't no hurry," he said. "I just want a good look at the polecat that says Wagon Fork ain't big enough for him and a Snakker at the same time."

Jim thought wildly about his own gun and belt hanging with his hat on a nail across the room. He'd be dead before he could reach it. He'd be dead in just a few seconds, anyway. There was no mistaking the murderous glow in Pete Snakker's black eyes.

"I haven't got a gun," said Jim quietly. "It would be plain murder."

"Hurry up, Pete," urged Ort

Snakker. "We got to get away from here."

Pete Snakker gave the briefest of nods, and his hand moved to the handle of his gun.

"Hold it!" rapped a voice sharply from the doorway behind the Snakkers.

They stiffened. Pete Snakker's right hand left the gun handle and rose slowly into the air. Sheriff Green eased into the little shop behind them, gun in hand.

"All right, Jim," he said calmly. "Get up and dehorn 'em."

Jim got out of the barber chair, paused to wipe the lather from his face on the cloth spread over him, and collected the Snakkers' guns. Pete Snakker's eyes were veiled now, and he rocked indifferently on his heels. The odor of raw corn whiskey was still strong on the air. Sheriff Green herded them out of the barber shop up the street to the jail. Jim got his gun and went along to help him.

When they were locked in their cells, they sat in stony silence, refusing to answer any questions. Jim went back to the loading pens to work. He had forgotten all about the shave.

The Snakkers still refused to talk next morning when they were taken before Judge Langtree. They had hired a little shyster named Silsby, and they let him do all the talking. Judge Langtree was red-eyed and puffy of face from last night's drunk, and all he wanted was to get the hearing over so that he could get his morning's morning.

"And you see how it was, your honor," concluded Silsby. "They came into town on business and had one drink too many. You can understand how that is. Then they decided to throw a mild scare into Jim Hornby who had murderously

threatened Ort. Pete Snakker didn't even draw his gun. We have the barber's testimony for that. Sheriff Green put them in jail till they sobered up. I think they have been punished enough. They swear they won't be back in Wagon Fork for a long, long time after this experience."

The red-eyed judge licked his dry lips and nodded.

"Case dismissed," he said.

"But Ort drew a gun—" began Jim angrily.

"Silence!" roared the judge. "Court adjourned."

JIM was at the loading pens painting a new plank he'd nailed into place, when the Snakkers left town. He didn't see them go, but he heard about it next morning when Deputy Felter came to the pens chewing his ever-present toothpick and leaned against a post to watch Jim put a second coat of red paint on the new plank.

"I reckon we can get another barber," said Felter indifferently.

"What do you mean?" demanded Jim.

"Maneely pulled out last night for parts unknown. He's just like everybody else; he knows that the Snakkers are gunning for you. Likewise he knew that they'll be gunning for your friends now. The Snakkers are that kind. That was enough for Maneely."

Jim put down his paintbrush.

"I hadn't thought about that side of it," he said soberly. "A man can stand his ground, but not when he drags his friends into it."

"That's what I tried to tell you from the first," complained Felter. "But you wouldn't listen. I still don't see why it was any of your business to mix into it at all. You put me in a bad light."

"Is Sheriff Green at the office?"

"No, he had to go back to Buffalo. What do you want to see him for?"

"You can tell him I've decided to drift out of town," said Jim.

He put the paint bucket in the shack that served for an office. The boss wasn't around. Jim could see him when he came back. He went up to the east end of town where he roomed, packed his war bag and came back to the loading pens.

The boss hadn't come back. Jim put his war bag in the corner and sat down to wait for him. He was sitting there fifteen minutes later when he saw a woman go running up the street toward the sheriff's office, a gray-haired woman who ran with her mouth open as though she wanted to scream and couldn't.

As she vanished past the barber shop, Jim saw a man crouching beside Winrod's general store, staring furtively down the street whence she had come. A dread, tight silence seemed suddenly to clutch the sun-stricken empty street.

The woman came back, running and stumbling frantically. She came across the railroad tracks to the loading pens. Her face was white, and her eyes staring with horror. Jim stepped outside to meet her.

"Jim Hornby! I've got to find Jim Hornby!" she cried.

"I'm Jim Hornby, ma'am. You mustn't run like this in the sun. Come inside and sit down."

She clutched his shirt with shaking hands. "They've got him—they've got Bud!" she screamed.

"Steady, ma'am." Jim spoke soothingly, but inwardly he was taut with growing dread. "Who got Bud?"

"The Snakkers! I'm his mother. I tried to get him across the street

to pass them on the other side, but he flared up and jerked away from me. He walked right up to Ort Snakker and swore at him. He told Ort to leave you alone. They grabbed him, and he fought at them. Pete Snakker had a blacksnake whip. They dragged him into the Longhorn Bar. I tried to stop them. They pushed me down on the sidewalk. Then I remembered Sheriff Green and ran to his office. He's out of town. I begged Felter to come, but he wouldn't. Then I remembered you. Oh, they're killing him!"

Jim said gently: "You wait right here, ma'am, and I'll go fetch Bud. If the boss shows up, tell him where I've gone. Everything will be all right."

THE weight of the gun in the high holster at his belt made itself felt with each long stride as Jim crossed the tracks. The man crouching beside the store saw him and motioned furtively. Jim didn't know what he meant and couldn't wait to guess. There was no sign of anyone else in all the tight, sun-blistered silence of the deserted street toward which he moved.

The Snakkers had done this to pull him into a trap, Jim told himself. They knew that Sheriff Green had gone to Buffalo. They knew, too, that Felter wouldn't dare face them.

Jim told himself that they'd expect him to enter the Longhorn by the front door, if he dared to come, and they'd be spread out to cut him down when he stepped inside.

But the Longhorn Bar had a back entrance, too. Jim remembered it—a dreary-looking spot with a whiskey barrel or two and several beer kegs standing against the wall. There was a window beside it.

He changed his course and cut behind the buildings till he came to the saloon, and paused to study it. The back door was closed, and the window had an iron grating before it. He slipped up to the window and peered through the dirty glass.

Pete Snakker stood with his back against the bar which ran along the left wall nearly the full length of the room. From his position he could fire either at the front door or the back without moving. Knife Snakker, the second brother, sat on the edge of a card table with his back to Jim, facing the front door.

There was no sign of either Ort or Bud Wilson. Then Jim saw a high-heeled boot projecting past the corner of the pool table, and guessed that Bud Wilson was lying on the floor, probably with Ort Snakker crouching over him.

Jim could have shot either Pete or Knife from the window, but Ort was safe behind the pool table. Jim knew that he'd have to get inside the place before the shooting began.

He tiptoed to the door and tried the handle softly. It was locked. He stepped back and surveyed the door. Figuring that the weight of his body would smash through the panels, he gathered his legs to hurl himself against it.

A slight sound spun him around, gun leveled.

The paunchy bartender had risen up from behind an empty whiskey barrel. His fat face was gray with pain, and on his bald head was a purple lump as large as an egg. He clung to the barrel dizzily.

DON'T try it, Hornby," he whispered. "That door is barred on the inside. A steer couldn't break it down. The boy ain't hurt. Just lashed a few times with the whip to

make him lie down on the floor. Ort's holding him there so's he won't mix in the fighting. I tried to argue with 'em. Pete slugged me with a whiskey bottle, and I woke up out here. You can't get the kid out. You'll have to rouse the town."

"They'd kill Bud sure if I did that. No, it's up to me. Will you help?"

The bartender nodded, and clung desperately to the barrel to keep from falling from the wave of dizziness that engulfed him.

"I'm going round in front," whispered Jim. "When I pass the corner yonder you start counting slow. When you get to a hundred I'll be at the front door. Then you break the window here—and duck. Understand?"

"Sure. A hundred, slow."

Jim cat-footed to the corner, waved his hand and hurried along the side of the building. There were no windows here to reveal him to those inside. At the end of the porch he dropped to hands and knees and crawled beneath the windows to the door. As he drew his gun, the back window of the saloon was shattered with a loud crash.

Knife Snakker cried a warning and upset the card table on which he rested so that its round top shielded him from the expected gunfire from the back window. Pete Snakker's gun hammered two swift bullets through the opening.

Jim Hornby stood up swiftly, opened the screen door and stepped into the saloon.

"Look out, Jim!"

Bud Wilson screamed the warning from the floor where he lay under Ort Snakker's knee, and Jim had barely time to see the boy heave himself up frantically as Ort's six-gun blasted. Splinters flew from the

end of the bar a yard from Jim as the bullet went wild.

Before Ort could fire a second time, Jim's bullet slammed into the outlaw, knocking him over backward under the pool table.

Jim had no time to think about Bud. He thumbed a shot at Pete Snakker as Pete spun around to fire at him. Pete jerked, teetered stiffly on his boot heels, staring queerly at Jim. He was still staring as he toppled stiffly forward and crashed down full length on the floor.

Knife Snakker's gun blazed. Jim knew that he was hit, but managed to stay on his feet while his own six-shooter stabbed with savage brightness. Twice Jim's gun thunder crashed against the walls as Knife tried to trigger his second shot to finish Jim off, and failed.

Knife grunted and fell back against the table top. He tried to lift his gun again, gave it up as a bad job, sighed and slid down in a limp heap.

Jim swayed on his feet, peering about through the blue fog of powder smoke. Then his knees buckled, and he collapsed.

"You hurt bad, Jim?" cried Bud Wilson, struggling up to his feet.

"How do I know?" mumbled Jim. "You get on over to the loading pens. Your ma is waiting for you." And with that Jim passed out.

A LOT of things happened before Jim regained consciousness in Doc Waverly's office up the street. Sheriff Green returned unexpectedly from Buffalo, and old man Wilson somehow learned of the shooting and came fogging into town.

"The bullet glanced off a rib," explained Doc Waverly to the crowd before his office. "Jim's lost a lot of blood and suffered from shock,

but he'll be around as good as ever in a week or two."

The crowd cheered. Doc Waverly grinned.

"Wilson just told me if I didn't fix him up, he'd skin me. He's going to set Jim up in the cow business out on the old Jacobs spread."

Deputy Felter who had been hanging around anxiously on the edge of the crowd, straightened his shoulders and sighed with relief at the news. A horrible idea had been bothering him: suppose, in view of Jim's gun prowess, Green would want to make Jim deputy in Felter's place? But now that danger was passed.

"No more than right that Wilson should," Felter observed, getting his well-chewed toothpick out of his pocket. "Specially after what Jim did for the boy."

He went on, unaware of the cold silence that greeted his words, "But I never could see what gave Jim his idea of mixing in the business at all. Bud wasn't any kin of his."

"Maybe others have been wondering about that," said Sheriff Green quietly. "I reckon I won't be telling any tales out of school now, since Wilson knows all about it. Jim Hornby faced exactly the same thing that Bud Wilson did. Jim thought that his old man was holding too tight a rein on him, and he listened to the big talk of a cheap owlhooter. Only nobody took up for Jim Hornby and ran the owlhooter out of town. Result was that Jim went outlaw.

"But he didn't go very far. They left him holding a stolen horse when the law got hot on their trail in the first raid. Jim went to the pen for five years. When he got out he found that his dad had died of a broken heart and the ranch had gone for debts. He had no mother"

Felter turned pale.

"With his prison record he couldn't get work until he finally came to me," the sheriff went on. "I knew his dad. I got Jim a job at the loading pens and promised to keep his secret. But he just couldn't stand by and see any boy go through what he himself had. That's why he ran Ort Snakker out of town."

"Well, it's all plain enough now," said Felter indifferently, chewing on his toothpick. "I'm glad it's all settled."

"It's not quite all settled," said

Sheriff Green, and the grimness in his voice made Felter stare at him in sudden alarm. "Mrs. Wilson told me how she begged you to go and rescue Bud from the Snakkers, and how you turned her down. I might as well say it before everyone here, because they're going to know about it. Brother-in-law or not, I couldn't keep a deputy like that any longer. Maybe you can find a job down at the loading pens, since Jim won't be back there. There's a good fork down there waiting for someone to swing it. It might be about your size."

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *What was Abilene, Kansas, famous for seventy-five years ago, and what sporting event is it famous for now?*
2. *What two famous Western characters became showmen?*
3. *What were the original names of Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas? How did the latter get its original name?*
4. *What change of time occurs at Dodge City, Kansas?*
5. *When is Arbor Day, and why is it celebrated on that day of the month?*
6. *Who was Buffalo Bill's father, and what was his business?*
7. *Which of the following cities are the capitals of which States: Oklahoma City, Bismark, Carson City, Tulsa, Reno, Sioux City, Fargo, Guthrie?*
8. *What was the model name given to the first Colt six-gun? What was a "thumb buster"?*
9. *How many legs has a tarantula; a house fly; a centipede?*
10. *What is a hay house? Where, when and why did they become most plentiful in the West?*

Answers on page 114

Maverick Macey was down on his face, with the hide-out gun still gripped in his hand.



THREE SIXES TO BEAT

by CHUCK MARTIN

Those three mysterious lone-wolf Nevada buscarderos stopped hating each other only long enough to promise venomously that they would salivate Rawhide Runyan on sight!

RAWHIDE RUNYAN was riding his black horse through the rugged mountains of the Virgin Range on the Arizona-Nevada border. His

sheep-lined brush coat was buttoned to keep out the evening chill of Iceberg Canyon, and his gloved right hand was never far from the

long-barreled .45 Peacemaker Colt in the cutaway holster on his sturdy right leg.

A brooding silence hung heavy in the twilight shadows which slanted out on the canyon floor from the overhanging cliffs on both sides. Something was in the air, some hint of danger which the Arizona cowboy could feel like a strong omen.

Rawhide Runyan frowned as he rode down the one-way trail through a perfect bushwhack trap. In his early twenties, Runyan was a veteran of the long trails, with powder smoke in his blood. His own Diamond Double R spread was a cowboy's paradise, but Rawhide Runyan had a weakness. When an underdog sent out a call for help, the young boss of the Arizona Strip never failed to answer.

The hastily scrawled letter from Jim Barbee had mentioned mysterious enemies, and Barbee was a fighting man who seldom asked for help. Now Jim Barbee was making a last stand against forces he could not see.

The silence became more oppressive, unbroken except for the swish of the high Jimson weeds against Rawhide's leather-clad legs. Now Rawhide knew why the little town at the mouth of the canyon had been named Jimson. He'd reach there in an hour and get on the outside of a good hot meal.

"Stand your hoss, stranger, and elevate—pronto!"

Rawhide Runyan instinctively checked his horse as that buzzing voice cut through the brooding silence. Runyan's hands rose slowly. He turned his head to the left.

A tall man stepped from the brush with a cocked six-shooter in his right hand. A blue bandanna covered the lower part of his tanned face.

"Cowboy, eh?" the stranger said, eyeing Rawhide. "You've straddled that black hoss for quite a spell. If you're packing a running iron, you're one dead hombre!"

Rawhide Runyan felt the hot blood racing through his veins. Only rustlers carried running irons on their saddles.

The masked man held the high hand. He circled Runyan slowly. A grunt came from the man's tight lips as he read the brand on Shadow's sleek black shoulder.

"You wouldn't be Rawhide Runyan?"

"Wouldn't I?"

"Then I won't have any competition from you." The masked man grunted. "Hit out for town, but don't prowl the hills if you want to stay healthy. Drift along, cowboy!"

Rawhide scowled, clucked to his horse and rode on through the Jimson weeds. He wanted to circle back and find out more about the stranger. But Rawhide decided against that. The masked man with the cocked gun was on familiar ground and figuring any stranger might be a rustler.

It was almost dark as Rawhide turned a sharp bend in the trail and raised his eyes to a cluster of distant lights down at the mouth of the canyon. That would be Jimson town not more than a mile away. Rawhide tugged his gray Stetson down to shade his eyes against the light. Then:

"Keep that hand up, stranger," a smooth—entirely different—voice purred, from behind a big boulder at the side of the trail. "If you're an owlhooter—well, it's always open season on 'em!"

Rawhide Runyan gritted his teeth and seethed inwardly. He had been caught twice in the same

kind of trap. And now he was accused of being an outlaw. It wasn't his turn to talk, so he held his hands high as he listened.

"Why didn't you come in by the stage road?" the purring voice asked.

Runyan turned his horse slightly to put the lights of the town at his back. His eyes narrowed as he saw a black mask covering this new stranger's eyes. The blue six-shooter in the masked man's steady right hand was eared back for a shot.

"I figured this was the stage road," Rawhide answered.

"You're a liar, cowboy," the stranger said sharply. "You rode through Jimson weeds all the way down the canyon. What's your business in these parts?"

"I figured to hunt some white-tailed deer," Rawhide answered shortly. "Any law against it?"

"If either your six-shooter or rifle have been fired recent, you're a dead stagecoach robber," the tall holdup man answered.

He came close and stared at Rawhide's holstered gun without touching the weapon. Then he circled and touched the .45-70 Winchester in Rawhide's saddle scabbard. After which the masked man grunted and waved his hand.

"Drift," he said laconically. "If I'm wrong this first time, I can always find you later."

Rawhide Runyan scowled again, wheeled his horse and clattered down the widening trail. He put his right hand on the butt of his six-shooter, and he did not release that hold until he branched into a dusty street. He headed for a lunchroom which was overshadowed by a big false-fronted saloon with glaring yellow coal-oil lamps at each corner. He smiled grimly when the sign informed him that the saloon

was the Long Chance.

Rawhide Runyan swung to the ground and hitched his Shadow horse with trailing reins. He dusted the alkali from his worn range clothing with his gloves, high-heeled across the boardwalk and shouldered through the screen door. He took a seat at the counter—and then his wide shoulders jerked back.

A smiling girl waited for his order, but Rawhide was looking beyond her rounded shoulders. There was an open door in the wall, into the saloon. Several men were watching him from under the brims of low-drawn hats. Rawhide shrugged. He ordered a thick steak well done, a side of ham and eggs, French fries, and a mug of coffee.

"Give me the coffee first," he told the girl. "I'm choked with trail dust."

"Did you ever try whiskey for sluicing?" a deep voice asked with a chuckle. "Lay your hackles, cowboy. I'm Jo-Bob Keene. I run this Long Chance. I'll roll you some dice for your supper. You're Rawhide Runyan from up in the Strip, eh? We might do some business together."

Rawhide turned slowly to stare at Keene—a mountain of a man who towered six feet four. Keene wore a neat broadcloth suit, its frock coat of the type worn by frontier gamblers. He also wore a brace of silvered .45 Colt six-shooters belted high on his powerful legs. His black eyes matched his hair.

Rawhide was about to reply that he could pay for his own grub, but a movement in the saloon brought his head up. A man of forty-odd was staring intently at him, and the man nodded his head one time. Rawhide recognized him—Jim Barbee of the J Bar B. Jim was not a stranger in Jimson.

"It's your shake," Rawhide told Keene. "One roll for the grub. Make it double or nothing!"

Keene picked up a leather cup and shook the five dice with his hand over the top. Rawhide Runyan sipped at his hot coffee as he studied the big gambler's face. Keene was as straight as a tall pine, and he wasn't fat. Rawhide Runyan was five feet nine, a hundred and fifty pounds of rawhide and whalebone. He wondered why Keene wore a brace of six-shooters when he could break a big man in two with his bare hands.

"Size don't count up here, Runyan," Keene said softly, as though he had read Rawhide's thoughts. "A Colt makes all men equal, or nearly so. Some are faster than others, and if they're not, they go gun-naked to keep out of fracas. I hear you're right rapid with your tools."

Rawhide knew he was facing a deadly gunman. None other would mention six-shooters as *tools*. And Keene was the boss of Jimson town.

"I can take care of myself," Rawhide answered coolly. "Roll the dice."

Keene tipped the leather cup and made his spread. After studying the cubes, he leaned back with a smile crinkling his dark eyes.

"Three sixes to beat," he told Rawhide.

Rawhide sipped his coffee as he picked up the dice with his left hand. After rattling the leather cup, he slapped it lip-down on the counter and raised it slowly. Keene leaned over, drew in a deep breath.

"You're shot with luck, cowboy," he said softly. "Three sixes and a pair of aces make a full house. I'll see you later about the business I mentioned."

CHAPTER II.

WHO ROBBED THE STAGE?

RAWHIDE RUNYAN left the lunchroom and walked to his horse. He glanced about for Jim Barbee, but the stocky cattleman was nowhere in sight along the dusty main street. Rawhide mounted his scarred saddle when he saw a sign announcing the Jo-Bob Corral and Livery Stable across the street. A small frame hotel stood adjoining the corral.

A gruff voice called softly as Rawhide rode into the darkened livery stable:

"Hold your gun, Rawhide. Better grain your hoss before you ride out to the Bar B with me."

Rawhide slid his gun back into the holster. Somebody was going to get shot if these Nevada gents kept giving him the holdup order in the dark! But he grinned now as he recognized the voice of Jim Barbee. He had worked with Jim back in the Arizona Strip when outlaws and rustlers had been as thick as flies in tick time.

Rawhide shook hands with the stocky cattleman, asked where he could find the oat bin, and led Shadow to an empty stall. After giving the black horse a double measure of grain, Rawhide loosed the saddle cinch. Then he told Barbee about the double holdup during the ride through Iceberg Canyon.

"I couldn't say for sure, but that first gent sounds like Maverick Macey," Barbee answered thoughtfully. "Tall lean gent about thirty, who hunts maverick cattle for a living. That's what he meant when he said you wouldn't give him any competition."

"The second holdup was also a tall gent, with a low smooth voice."

Rawhide volunteered. "He wore a black mask over his eyes, and said something about the stage being robbed."

"Did he talk educated?" Barbee asked sharply.

Rawhide nodded.

Jim Barbee frowned. "Sounds like Garse Steadman. He owns a quality outfit up the canyon a ways. He gets plenty of money from the outside, and raises hot-blooded horses. Of course, I'm just guessing that it could have been Steadman."

"You don't have to guess about Jo-Bob Keene," Rawhide said confidently. "All three of these gents knew who I was. But Keene said he wanted to talk *business* with me. What kind of business?"

There was no light in the barn. Rawhide listened carefully while Jim Barbee talked in a low voice just above the crunch of Shadow's grinding teeth. Rawhide grew more puzzled as Barbee droned out what things he knew.

Jo-Bob Keene owned most of Jimson town, and was due to own considerably more. The big gambler was always ready to loan money to small cattlemen at a high rate of interest. If they couldn't repay when the loan was due, Keene took over their ranches, sold off the cattle, and added to his land holdings. According to Barbee, Keene owned forty or fifty sections of land in Iceberg Canyon.

"My ten sections control most of the water in the canyon," Barbee added, interrupting Rawhide's thoughts. "Keene has wanted my place for quite a while, and I owe him two thousand dollars. I was all set to pay him after shipping my beef, but rustlers cleaned me out one night. They drove off a hundred and fifty head. I blamed it on

Maverick Macey, but I couldn't find a trace of my stock, so I sent for you. You've got to help me, Rawhide."

"Macey and Keene might be working a squeeze play on you," Rawhide suggested. "Macey gets the cattle, and Keene gets your ten sections of land."

"Except that Maverick Macey hates Keene from the ground on up," Barbee added dryly. "It would be more like Garse Steadman to stand in with Keene, but even that doesn't make sense. Keene has cleaned Steadman out several times at stud poker, so Steadman's not very friendly to Keene."

Rawhide Runyan sat on the feed box and tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. A hundred and fifty head of three-year-old steers just didn't disappear into thin air, and the three men he suspected were not overly friendly with each other. It was a plain case of dog eat dog, and the devil take the hindmost.

"Let's ride over to see Garse Steadman on the way up to your spread," Rawhide suggested, sliding from the grain box to tighten his latigo. Jim Barbee led out his own horse while Runyan slipped the headstall on Shadow before fitting the bit in place. Rawhide left a silver dollar on the grain box.

The two old friends rode out of the barn and headed for Iceberg Canyon.

It was new country to Rawhide Runyan. Barbee took the lead. He bore to the left until they came to a weedy, deep-rutted road. Barbee explained that Steadman lived close to the stage road.

An hour later the lights from the windows of a big house glowed through the shadowy night.

The two men rode up to a tie rail in front of the house and swung

Rawhide hefted the fragment and grunted his surprise. He turned the rock over and exposed a dull leaden surface—which explained plenty.



to the ground. The front door opened to flood the yard with yellow light, and a tall man called a question from behind a cocked six-shooter:

"Your names, gents?"

"It's Jim Barbee with a friend," the cattleman answered promptly. "We're coming up."

Carse Steadman made no answer as the two men walked into the light and up the stairs to the broad gallery. Steadman stared at Runyan and took a quick step forward to jam his gun against Rawhide's lean-muscled belly.

"Now you talk straight, mister," Steadman whispered, his voice like the angry buzz of a rattlesnake's

tail. "I saw you making medicine with Jo-Bob Keene, and if you've got business with him it's bound to be crooked!"

Rawhide Runyan held his breath for a moment, and gently expelled it. He was staring into Steadman's angry blue eyes, wondering how the tall dandy would look with a black mask covering those light blue eyes. The voice did not sound the same, and it had been too dark to see either holdup man's clothing.

"I didn't talk business with Keene," Rawhide said evenly. "We wanted to talk to you first."

"You talk," Steadman purred.

"I was held up down in the canyon not far from here," Rawhide

began. "The stick-up man mentioned something about the stage being robbed. I told him I thought I was on the stage road, but he called my attention to the Jimson weeds growing high. You got any idea who he might be?"

"He might be Maverick Macey," Steadman answered, but he did not remove the gun from Rawhide's midriff. "Don't touch your gun, Jim!" Steadman barked at Barbee. "You owe money to Keene, and the stage carried five thousand dollars this afternoon. You might find that money useful to pay your debt."

Jim Barbee stepped back, growling in his throat. His right hand was poised for a strike at his low-slung gun, but Steadman shifted his own weapon to cover the angry cattleman.

Rawhide Runyan moved with the shifting gun, striking like a cat with his right hand. His fist crashed against Steadman's outthrust jaw, and the cocked gun exploded harmlessly as Steadman sagged to the porch floor under the glaring coal-oil lights. Rawhide Runyan stepped back and slipped inside the door with the same lithe movement—just as the crunch of heavy boots came from the outer darkness.

"Lift 'em, Jim," a deep voice ordered sternly. "I'm what law there is in Jimson, and it looks like you've killed Carse Steadman"

Jim Barbee turned slowly just as big Jo-Bob Keene came up the steps with one of his silvered .45 six-guns in his right hand. Barbee was short on temper but long on courage. His right hand slapped down to his holstered gun.

"Don't draw, Jim," Keene warned softly. "I've never been beaten in a game of draw, and you know it. What became of that wide-should-

ered cowboy from the Arizona Strip?"

"Standing right behind you, so unclutch that shooting iron, Keene!"

Keene opened his fingers and dropped his glittering weapon to the planking. He glanced sidewise, jaw the open window through which Rawhide had crawled out, and nodded his head. Then Keene made his first proposition:

"Holster up and draw me even, Rawhide. You heard what I said to Jim Barbee, and the same goes for you."

"You said it from behind a full house," Rawhide answered. "That's how I'm talking now, and I don't talk much. You mentioned business between you and me. Such as what?"

"Cattle business," Keene said evenly. "I own sixty sections of grazing land here in Iceberg Canyon, and I need a good man to ramrod the spread after I stock it with cattle. A hundred and fifty a month—cartridges furnished!"

"Pay him no mind, Rawhide," Barbee cut in quickly. "His land ain't worth shucks without my water."

"Which same I mean to get," Keene answered smoothly. "I'll buy out what stock you have left, and you can get a start some other place. Holster yore smoke pole, Rawhide."

Rawhide stepped back as Steadman began to stir. Keene drew in a startled breath as he watched Steadman stagger to his feet.

"I thought he was dead," Keene whispered.

Carse Steadman saw Keene as he was coming out of the daze. Steadman shook his head to clear away the fog, and blurted a savage accusation:

"I had five thousand dollars com-

ing in on that stage, Keene! The stage was held up by a tall road agent before it reached my place."

"That's what I heard," Keene answered. "You owe me five thousand. I know who sent the money, so don't try to run me up a blind trail. You've got a week to get what you owe me, or I'm taking over your Circle S outfit."

Carse Steadman listened with his head turned slightly to the side. He began to tremble with anger as his voice rose to a scream:

"Fit a gun to my hand and draw me even, you killing ape! The holdup was a tall gent, which lets Barbee and this Runyan hombre out!"

"I don't want to kill you, Carse," Keene said softly. "You forget that there's another tall gent prowling the badlands, and Jim Barbee has forgotten the same thing. Lay your hackles and use your brains."

A pistol shot roared out from the murky yard as the Acey-Deucey Stetson hat jumped from Keene's black head. Keene smiled with his lips, but showed no emotion.

Then a snarling voice ripped through the darkness, a voice Rawhide Runyan was sure he had heard before.

CHAPTER III.

DRY-GULCH GUNS.

THAT voice said: "You're a snake-tongued liar, Keene! I don't make mine robbing stages, and you know it. The five thousand bucks on that stage belonged to *me*, and you know how I got the money!" It was the voice of Maverick Macey.

Rawhide Runyan had stepped behind the corner of the house just as Maverick Macey had shot the hat from Keene's head. The big gambler's body had hidden Raw-

hide, and now Runyan crept around the big frame house like a stalking Indian. He could hear the murmur of voices as he crept down the opposite side, and Macey was still holding the drop when Runyan came to the corner.

Knowing that Keene would see him when he stepped away from the house, Rawhide wondered if the gambler's eyes would give him away. He stepped out with his gun in his hand, while he watched the gambler's face. Keene's eyes never flickered, but his deep voice began to speak persuasively.

"I wouldn't talk too much, Carse," he said to Steadman. "And I wouldn't get nervous with that gun, Maverick," he added to Macey.

"I either get my money or I'll talk plenty," Maverick growled. "But before I give up head, I'm going to drill you center!"

Rawhide Runyan poised on the toes of his boots as he measured the distance. His gun crashed down as he leaped at Maverick Macey's broad back, and Macey triggered a futile shot into the night before he sank to the ground with a smothered groan. Carse Steadman turned just as Rawhide leaped back with his gun covering the two men on the porch.

"I'm gunning you on sight, Runyan," Steadman promised grimly. "And if I know Maverick Macey, he won't rest until he pays his score. You're shot through with luck, but it won't hold out!"

Jim Barbee drew his old six-shooter, backed down the three steps. Keene was still smiling, but there was a red gleam in his dark eyes. Keene ignored Carse Steadman as he walked down the steps toward his horse.

"Your luck might last if you take

up my offer, Runyan," Keene said quietly. "You're not sure which one of the three of us is the worst, but you've put two of us to sleep without firing a shot. When you work your way around to me, it's going to be different."

"I'll think about that offer," Rawhide answered thoughtfully. "I'll also remember your warning. Evening to you, gambling man."

Keene reached down and picked up his gun from the ground. He pounced it with his back turned to Runyan and Barbee, mounted his gray gelding and jingled out of the yard.

Carse Steadman picked up a water bucket and dumped the contents over the porch rail into the upturned face of Maverick Macey.

Macey whooshed and struck out like a swimmer. He struggled to his feet with his hand slapping at his empty holster until the sneering voice of Carse Steadman recalled him to his whereabouts:

"Stop clawing air, you dry-gulching swine! Rawhide Runyan dehorned you just as you were finding your sights on Keene!"

Maverick Macey slowly turned his rawboned frame to face Runyan. Water dripped from Macey's sandy hair and from the tip of his long nose, but he dug his boot heels into the slop as he hunched his shoulders.

"I'm coming, gun hawk," he warned hoarsely. "The man don't live and keep on living who buffaloes me from the rear with his cutter!"

"Don't jump," Rawhide warned quietly. "You can't fight a .45 slug, and I've got one ready. You mentioned something about giving up head. I'm listening if you still want to talk!"

Maverick Macey dug deeper and glared; there were yellow flecks in his greenish eyes. Then he slowly came out of his fighting crouch.

"There were three of us on the prod, Runyan," he said gruffly. "Who do you think robbed the stage?"

"Who rustled Jim Barbee's shipping steers?" Rawhide countered.

"Macey did," Jim Barbee accused hotly. "That owlhooting son twirls a wide loop and packs a careless running iron. He got my cattle, and Keene gets my land!"

"I'll pass that for now, Barbee," Macey said just above his breath. "I'm accused because I trap wild mavericks back in the tangles. Well, a herd like yours can't be run off without leaving sign. Steadman's the gent who did the job, and he had five thousand on the stage when it was robbed, or so he says!"

"Look, Macey," Carse Steadman answered in a low, venomous tone. "I'll shoot it out tonight, or the next time we meet. I'm coming out smoking when I make my pass, you lop-eared horse thief. I just noticed that's one of my quarter horses under your saddle. I've hunted that dappled colt for more than a year!"

Rawhide Runyan knew cowboys, and Maverick Macey was a good one. Macey was set again for a fight. But Rawhide stepped between the two men and spoke over his cocked six-shooter.

"You gents better make it the next time you meet," he suggested firmly. "I rode down here to help my old saddle pard, Jim Barbee—and if you three gun rummies are mixed up in his trouble, just count me in. Get your horse, Macey; you can ride with Jim and me."

"You've got trouble with me re-

ardless, Runyan," Carse Steadman announced grimly. "You hit me with your fist, and what I said to Macey goes for you. I'll smoke you down or give up the gun!"

"You called the turn, dude," Rawhide answered carelessly, but the angry blood was pumping through his veins. He told himself that men would have been shot in the Strip with less than half the gunplay that had occurred since he rode down Iceberg Canyon in the twilight. He climbed his black horse while Jim Barbee held the drop, and he did the honors while Jim mounted his brush-scarred saddle.

Carse Steadman, with a scowl on his dark face, watched the three men ride out of the yard. He was too well dressed for cattle and mining country, but no one in Jimson knew the source of his income. That is, unless Jo-Bob Keene was in on the secret. And Keene wasn't the kind to talk.

Maverick Macey rode between Runyan and Barbee as they trotted up Iceberg Canyon in the faint light from a sickle moon. Macey was strangely silent after his truculence. But when the tall cowman began to chuckle, Rawhide turned quickly.

"I know where a bunch of cattle

are hidden," Macey said, looking straight ahead. "There's going to be a war in these parts, and I might talk—for a price."

Jim Barbee glanced at Rawhide and nodded. "Let's light down," Barbee suggested. "I'd like to hear some plain talk."

"A dog that will fetch a bone will carry one back," Rawhide said coldly. "I don't compromise with rustlers or horse thieves—and Maverick Macey is both."

"Easy there, cowboy," Macey said thinly. "I offered to fight your gun with my bare hands once before, and the same goes now. Unsay them words!"

"You stuck me up when I rode down the canyon this evening," Rawhide accused bluntly, "after reading my brands and earmarkings. And you talked out loud that I wouldn't give you competition."

"I should have let you have a slug then," Macey snarled. "Am I still a rustler?"

"It's not legal to carry a running iron on your saddle, even back here in the tangles," Rawhide answered, as he pointed to the iron by Macey's left leg.

"My brand is the M Bar M," Macey said hoarsely. "I take out mebbe twenty head a year, and a

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maverick hunter gets his beef the hard way!"

"About that five thousand dollars you claimed you had on the stage," Rawhide said quietly. "That's just about what a man would net from a hundred and fifty head of steers."

"Or he might have run onto a rich vein of silver somewhere back in the hills," Macey answered slyly. "Now what would a cowboy do with a silver mine—especially if it was on another hombre's land?"

Rawhide Runyan stopped his horse to block the trail. Jim Barbee closed in from the other side to put Maverick Macey in a squeeze trap. Barbee's features were quivering with excitement as he jerked his six-shooter from the holster and jammed the muzzle against Macey's lean ribs.

"Talk, you rustlin' son!" he growled hoarsely.

Suddenly, then, a rifle barked from a timbered ridge on the right canyon wall.

Jim Barbee, hit by the bullet, grunted as he slid from his saddle.

Maverick Macey dug under his left arm with his right hand. Rawhide Runyan clawed for his holster when he saw the sheen of metal in the moonlight—the sheen of Macey's hide-out gun.

Rawhide nicked Shadow with the spurs just as the snub-nosed gun roared in Macey's freckled fist. Rawhide flipped a shot at Macey from his hip just as his horse lunged forward. A Macey slug tore at the edge of Rawhide's calfskin vest. Then he heard Macey's body thud. Rawhide necked Shadow into a turn to ride back in a crouch above his smoking .45 Colt.

Maverick Macey was down on his face, with the hide-out gun still gripped in his hand. He was dead.

Rawhide picked up the battered black Stetson to cover the dead man's partly visible face. Then he growled in his throat, turned to Jim Barbee.

"Hunt cover, Rawhide!" Barbee said from the shadow of a rock. "That dry-gulcher with the rifle only nicked me in the shoulder. Now you know why I sent for help!"

CHAPTER IV.

JIM BARBEE REMEMBERS.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN had not seen the flash of the rifle, and he had no way of determining the hiding place of the hidden marksman. He crouched between rocks across the stage road from Jim Barbee, watching the waving Jimson weed on the canyon floor as he tried to reason just where Maverick Macey fitted into the picture.

Jo-Bob Keene was the undisputed boss of Jimson town, and it was evident that the big gambler entertained dreams of empire. Recalling Macey's remark about a rich silver vein, Rawhide wondered how much Keene knew about Macey's discovery. Rawhide also remembered the group of men in the Long Chance Saloon who had watched him as he was rolling dice with Keene. Gunmen all, probably working for the gambler.

He pondered the puzzle for a time, shrugged, and shifted his thoughts to Carse Steadman. Steadman operated a gentleman's ranch, raising thoroughbred horses. The source of his income was unknown, but he had lost five thousand dollars to Keene at poker.

Rawhide stirred restlessly and called softly to Jim Barbee, telling the cattleman that they would discover nothing if they remained guarding the trail. They both

needed sleep, and Barbee suggested that they ride on to his ranch which was just a mile up the canyon.

The three horses had taken cover in the high, flowering weeds. The two men worked away from the trail. Rawhide Runyan whistled softly and caught the split reins when Shadow came to him with the other two horses following. Jim Barbee caught his own horse and asked what they would do about Maverick Macey.

Rawhide stared for a moment at Macey's empty saddle. He spoke softly to Barbee and led Macey's horse toward the body of its master. They picked Macey up and placed him face down across the saddle. They mounted their own horses and Jim Barbee led the funeral horse by the bridle.

"Macey's M Bar M spread is just over the ridge," the rancher told Rawhide. "We can leave the body there, while we take a look inside his shack."

The shack was littered with discarded clothing, and consisted of a small sleeping room with a lean-to kitchen. They placed Macey on his cot, pulled a blanket over the corpse, and Jim Barbee said he was glad that part of it was over. Rawhide Runyan was poking around the room, but he stooped suddenly to pick something from a half-filled gunny sack.

"Look here, Jim," he called sharply. "I don't know much about metals, but this sample looks like silver to me."

Jim Barbee hurried to Runyan's side and took the heavy piece of quartz. The rancher held it close to the smoky lantern, turned it over in his hands, and whispered low in his throat.

"Say! I've seen that kind of quartz somewhere around here.

That's high-grade ore, Rawhide! There's a dozen or more silver mines south of Jimson, but they don't handle ore like this piece."

Rawhide Runyan was continuing his search as Jim Barbee talked excitedly. There was a war sack under the cot, the kind which serves a cowboy for a trunk. Rawhide reached under the cot, pulled the sack into view, and Barbee watched as he dumped the contents on the dirty plank floor.

Several bills of sale for small jags of shipping beef were clipped together. Rawhide thumbed through the papers. He remarked that Macey had been telling the truth about the maverick cattle he had trapped and sold, and the pickings *had* been slim. Twenty-two steers for one year; twenty-three the year before. Rawhide leaned forward to study a signature on the bills of sale.

"Macey sold his catch to Keene," he said softly. "This one calls for thirty dollars a head, delivered at Jimson. How much land did Macey own here?"

"One section," Jim Barbee answered. His roughened hands caressed the piece of high-grade ore. "All Macey had was a small barn and several holding corrals. He used a pair of big oxen to bring in the wild steers. He'd fasten a steer to one of those big oxen with a neck yoke, and the ox would always come to its own pen for the grain Macey fed it."

"Year in and year out, Macey never could have saved five thousand dollars." Rawhide grunted, reached for another piece of paper and read it. "Look, Jim," he said, and his voice rose with the excitement of discovery. "Macey somehow sent out a shipment of ore to

the smelter at Red Wing. If Macey had five thousand dollars coming in on the stage, it must have been payment for his shipment of silver ore."

Jim Barbee nodded slowly, but his eyes were bright with excitement. Maverick Macey had kept a tally book, using four straight lines up and down with a cross bar to make a tally of five steers. Any cowman could read his crude figures, and Rawhide Runyan frowned as he studied the old tally book.

"Maverick Macey didn't run off your shipping steers, Jim," he said positively. "He would have kept a record for his own protection, and none of these pages adds up more than twenty-five head. But Macey did say he knew where a hundred and fifty head of beef were hidden. Him-m-m. Let's get on over to your place and sleep on it."

Jim Barbee turned up the lantern chimney and blew out the light. Rawhide stuffed the tally book and bills of sale into his hip pocket as he followed Barbee outside. They reached the Bar B Ranch as the moon was waning. After stabling their horses, Barbee led the way to his comfortable log house. He indicated a bunk in the front room where Rawhide was to spread his blankets.

Rawhide Runyan came out of a sound sleep with a start. A hand clutched his shoulder! His thumb cocked the hammer of his six-shooter as he raised his right arm in the dark. Then he held his shot—for the husky whisper of Jim Barbee identified the hand on his arm.

"Rouse around, Rawhide," Barbee murmured. "I just remembered where I've seen that kind of rock. It lacks only an hour till sunup. I've

got fresh horses in the barn. Breakfast can wait! Let's go!"

Rawhide yawned as he reached for his boots. He had already started the day by putting on his hat, and his shell-studded gun belt was hanging on a peg at the head of his bunk. Jim Barbee told Rawhide not to be finicky; said they could wash their faces and hands in the spring at Wolf Hole. The two men left the house by the kitchen door and walked out to the long, low barn.

Shadow whickered at Rawhide, and the cowboy glanced sidewise at Barbee as he gave the tired black horse a half gallon of white oats. Barbee jerked his thumb at a big gray gelding in a box stall, and Rawhide carried his riding gear to the stall. He would ride the gray on this jaunt.

There was a gray smudge in the eastern sky as the two men quit the ranch and headed for a high ridge at a brisk lope, with Barbee in the lead. The smudge brightened over toward Squaw Peak, and the sun broke through as the two riders stopped on a timber-fringed mesa.

Rawhide sat his saddle and filled his lungs with the rarefied air. A clear spring was gurgling out of the rocky soil, and a deep hole had been formed about a dozen feet below the spring.

"I dunno why, but the natives and Injuns have always called it Wolf Hole," Barbee explained. "You're looking at the main water supply for Iceberg Canyon, so now you know why Keene wants my land."

Rawhide Runyan dismounted and tethered his gray horse to a springy branch. He walked over to the pool, doused his head under the icy water and lathered his brown hands with a small bar of soap. Jim Barbee looked on and called him a

dude, but Rawhide completed his ablutions with a smile on his rugged bronze face. After drying on his neckerchief, he settled his hat and turned to Barbee.

"Don't stand there like a fortune-teller," Rawhide said casually, knowing that Barbee would be disappointed at his apparent lack of interest. "You mentioned something about that silver ore. It certainly didn't take long to spend the night on your four-bit outfit!"

"Ten sections ain't a feed lot," Barbee snapped, and then he grinned. "Leave the horse and follow me afoot," he said.

Rawhide Runyan followed Barbee down a twisting trail to the base of a towering cliff. Part of the peak had broken off to leave a rubble of glittering rock at the bottom. Barbee picked up a chunk and passed it to Rawhide.

"Heft it!"

Rawhide hefted the fragment and grunted his surprise. He turned the rock over and exposed a dull leaden surface which he tried to scratch with a thumbnail. Then he balanced the chunk in his left hand as he stared at Jim Barbee.

"You're plumb rich, Jim!" Rawhide said, with a ring of awe in his deep voice. "You ought to make a million out of this ore on the mesa!"

"My note is due day after tomorrow," Barbee said in a hollow voice. "Keene'll foreclose. It'd take a month to freight out enough ore to pay what I owe."

"Mebbe not," Rawhide contradicted stubbornly. "Let's ride back to your spread for a bait of hot grub. After we get some vittles under our belts, you and me are riding over to the Circle S to make medicine with Carse Steadman. I just now remembered something."

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CHAPTER V.

THE RED WING STAGE.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN and Jim Barbee might have been two cattle rustlers as they kept to the heavy brush, riding the deer trails on the horse ranch of Carse Steadman. Part of the Circle S was under stake-and-rider fence, and Rawhide stopped his gray to stare at a section of crossed rails.

The weathered poles made an unusual pattern to a man who had been trained to read sign from early childhood. Jim Barbee rode over when he saw Rawhide stop. Barbee stared his unbelief for a long moment. Then his face hardened as he turned to Runyan.

"That section has been moved recent, Rawhide," he said hoarsely. "Moss always grows on the north side, and it's growing thataway on those other sections. Whoever let down these bars didn't put them back so's they'd show the moss—and Maverick Macey said he knew where my stolen herd was hidden."

He and Runyan reached for their ropes at the same time, and each caught an upright in his dinky loop. The horses were turned for a pull, and the tampered section spilled to the ground when the trained cow horses went to work. Rawhide flipped his noose free, coiled his twine, and sent his horse across the tumbled rails.

Jim Barbee followed with his eyes watching the ground. They rode for several minutes during which they crossed a small stream three times. At each crossing they noted marks of the cloven hoofs.

Jim Barbee reached for the rife under his saddle fender as he jerked his head toward a brushy horse trap.

"That's a blind valley over yonder, Rawhide. She's brush and cac-

tus all around, with walls making a saucer. There's only one opening. That's it on the yon side of Coyote Creek. Carse Steadman uses it for a horse trap to hold his brood mares, but those tracks in the mud weren't made by horses. C'mon!"

Rawhide Runyan nodded grimly as he followed Barbee across the shallow creek. He knew what they would find in the trap, but his mind was busy with another problem. A hundred and fifty head of shipping steers were as good as money in the bank, but they merely represented money until they were sold. A man either sold his beef to Jo-Bob Keene or shipped it out—and Barbee's note was due the day after tomorrow.

Runyan knew that Keene would not buy the steers. To do so would give Jim Barbee the two thousand he owned Keene, and Keene wanted Barbee's ten sections of land which controlled the water supply of Iceberg Canyon. Barbee would recover his stolen cattle, but he would lose his land and, with it, the rich silver deposit.

A shout from Barbee brought Runyan back to realities, and he sent his horse at a high lope to join the rancher. Barbee had snaked down a stake-and-rider, had ridden through the opening, and was staring at a small herd of grass-fattened steers scattered over the blind valley. Every steer was branded with the Bar B iron. Jim Barbee was staring at his stolen money-on-the-hoof with fight in his eyes. He gripped the handle of his belt gun until his knuckles showed white.

"Carse Steadman is the rustler, and we called poor old Maverick Macey it," he muttered savagely. "I'm taking powder smoke to that rustler, and I ain't lingerin'."

"Wait!"

Rawhide clipped the one word vi-

ciously. Jim Barbee faced him sullenly, weathered face black with rage.

"Wait is what broke the wagon," Barbee blurted. "I waited myself out of the years it took me to build up this spread since I left the Arizona Strip. I'm taking showdown to Carse Steadman!"

"You ain't," Rawhide contradicted inelegantly. "You forget that nick in your right shoulder, and your gun arm is stiff. You likewise forget that Macey stole a shipment of your high-grade ore, and that Macey and Steadman claimed to have had five thousand each on the Red Wing stage."

"Money!" Barbee muttered savagely. "I need money. If you wasn't here, I'd stick up that stage myself."

"And either get yourself shot or a long stretch in prison," Rawhide said. "Let's put that fence back to keep in your beef, and then you and me are taking a ride. I just got me another hunch."

Jim Barbee grumbled as he fiddled with his six-shooter. Rawhide Runyan rode away, dismounted by the break in the fence. He replaced the bars after Barbee had ridden through. Then he mounted his borrowed horse and led the way through the brush at a gallop.

It was easy to back-track the trail through the brush and Jimson weeds. Rawhide Runyan had learned to track in more difficult country—the badlands of high Arizona. He did not speak to Barbee until they came to a hairpin turn in the stage road, where they stopped to blow the horses. Rawhide stood up in the stirrups and pointed without speaking.

Far below in the valley, they could see the Red Wing stagecoach

Continued on page 70

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

Continued from page 68

with its four-horse hitch. The driver had stopped his teams, and he was holding the ribbons in his upraised hands. A tall bandit stood in the road, with the sun glinting on a pistol in his right hand.

"It's a stick-up!" Barbee gasped. "The road agent has a black mask over his eyes!"

"He's one of the gents who stopped me last night," Rawhide said. "Too far for rifle range, so don't spoil our play with a wild shot."

Jim Barbee lowered his Winchester reluctantly. He and Rawhide watched while the driver kicked the strong box from under the seat. The bandit stepped aside, waved the driver ahead. After the stage had rattled away in a cloud of red dust, the robber shot the lock from the strong box, fumbled for a moment in the box, and disappeared in the brush. Not until then did Rawhide give the word to ride.

"Let's take the shortcut to the Circle S ranchhouse," he said to Barbee. "We can talk to him about that herd of yours, and find out if he lost any more money on the stage."

Jim Barbee nodded with a little smile of anticipation curling his lips.

BARBEE asked no questions, and Runyan volunteered no information on the long ride down Iceberg Canyon.

They raced into the Circle S yard, rode behind a long log barn where they dismounted and tied their horses. Then Rawhide led the way to the house.

Just as they reached the broad gallery which ran the full length of the front of the house, Carse Steadman raced into the yard and slid his lathered horse to a stop.

He was dressed in an expensive riding suit with tight-legged pants tucked down in polished English boots. His light-blue eyes widened as he saw his visitors, but he recovered himself instantly.

"It's happened again!" he shouted. "The Red Wing stage was held up and robbed!"

"Looks like you'd have hightailed into Red Wing to notify the law down there," Runyan said. "Did you lose some more money?"

Carse Steadman dismounted slowly before answering. He wore a belted .45 six-shooter around his lean hips under the tight riding coat. His voice was low and deadly as he leaned forward, staring at Rawhide Runyan.

"Are you the law?" he asked in his smooth voice. "Deputy marshal, or Wells Fargo detective?"

"Neither," Rawhide answered with a shrug that put his right hand above his holstered gun. "Which was you expecting?"

"Maverick Macey had you tagged for a stock detective," Steadman answered, his voice more composed. "We knew Barbee had sent out for help."

"Maverick never stole Jim's beef herd," Rawhide said quietly. "We found the herd in a horse trap back in the brushy hills. We just rode in to ask you about it."

"Meaning you think I rustled that shipping herd?" Steadman asked, and once more that deadly note crept into his humming voice.

"Call yourself names," Rawhide answered with a careless shrug, but his gray eyes were steady and watchful. "Me and Jim saw that stage holdup a little earlier today, and I recognized the road agent."

A deathlike silence seemed to creep across the big yard. Jim Barbee was holding his right shoulder

with his left hand, while Rawhide and Steadman faced each other in a duel of nerves. The distance between them was not more than five paces, and neither man could miss if powder began to burn. The fastest man would win the showdown, and both knew it was coming.

"You slugged me last night, Runyan," Steadman buzzed just above his breath, and the sound mingled with the hum of bottle flies.

"You bushwhacked Maverick Macey last night," Rawhide retaliated, speaking softly so as not to set off taut muscles. "Macey was just getting ready to talk."

"Macey packed a hide-out gun, and he swore to get you," Steadman answered, but his voice was husky. "Jo-Bob Keene said he'd match your six—but after me, he's first. How do you want it, Johnny Law?"

"After you, *I'm* first," Rawhide Runyan said. "Make your pass, you rustling stick-up!"

Carse Steadman dropped his right hand and started his draw. Rawhide Runyan drove his hand down and side-stepped at the same time. He never underestimated an opponent, and he knew that a tie was the same thing as a defeat when old Judge Colt sat on the gun fighters' bench.

Rawhide's gun snouted over the lip of his holster and exploded at his hip in a perfect point shot. Carse Steadman was bringing his gun up to catch the sight with his squinting eyes, and the report of his gun was like a stuttering echo to Runyan's shot. It was that lingering stutter which marked the difference between life and death.

Carse Steadman spun sidewise and unhinged his long legs. A bit of black cloth fluttered from his vest pocket as he fell across the smoking gun—a silk mask like the one

the road agent had worn to cover his eyes.

CHAPTER VI.

PAID IN FULL.

WHEN Steadman's polished boots had stopped rattling, Rawhide walked over to Steadman's sweating thoroughbred and lifted a pair of saddlebags from behind the cantle. Jim Barbee watched while Rawhide emptied the pouches. The rancher's mouth flew open as Runyan flipped a flat package to him.

"But this is addressed to Jo-Bob Keene," Barbee argued. "Five thousand in currency, mailed by the Red Wing smelter."

"Yeah," Rawhide grunted. "For a shipment of *your* silver. Keene was the holdup who robbed the stage *yesterday*. Carse Steadman stuck up the stage today, but this money belongs to you. Now you can pay Keene what you owe him."

Jim Barbee skinned the heavy wrapping from the money and shoved the new currency down into his hip pocket. He didn't like the set-up. His right arm was inflamed from the bullet nick in his shoulder—and he was remembering that Jo-Bob Keene always kept his promises. Keene had promised to shoot Rawhide Runyan on sight, and Barbee wanted to be in good shape for his own showdown with Keene.

Jim Barbee argued back and forth in his mind without finding the answer. He told himself that he'd get the drop on Keene, pay off his note, and save a shoot-out between Keene and Runyan. Rawhide turned slowly in the saddle, shaking his head.

"You won't take cards in it, Jim," he said quietly. "I knew Keene was rated a fast gun-swift before I got your letter. Mebbe I was just look-

ing for a good excuse to come down and match his cutter. In any case, I made a promise of my own."

Jim Barbee felt like a small boy who has been whipped by a big bully—even though his land and cattle had been saved and he owned a rich silver deposit he hadn't known was on his land.

"I've got to dress this scratch, Rawhide," he said in a hollow voice. "It hurts like the devil!"

Rawhide Runyan smiled grimly with his face turned away. His blood was tingling as he thought of a meeting with big Jo-Bob Keene, but his voice was quiet and steady as he agreed:

"Sure, Jim. Keene won't run away. And that wound might give you trouble. We'll hit out for the Bar B because I want to stop at Macey's place on the way back."

Jim Barbee looked surprised at Runyan's prompt acceptance of his request. What he didn't see were the tracks of a big horse in the red loam. Those prints were deep, as though the horse was ridden by a heavy man—tracks with a scarred frog in the right front hoof, like the tracks that had been made in front of Carse Steadman's house the night before.

Rawhide Runyan swung his horse and checked the loads in his .45 Peacemaker Colt. Five loads, with the hammer riding on an empty for safety. If a man couldn't hit what he was shooting at with five shots, he'd better throw the gun away and run like a coyote.

Jim Barbee rode beside Rawhide with an expression of relief on his tanned face. His arm was hurting like a sore tooth, and like as not he had some fever. Dizzy spells swept over him from time to time, and his tongue was dry and thick from thirst.

Barbee swayed in the saddle when the two horses stopped in front of Maverick Macey's shack. Rawhide dismounted, went inside. His eyes narrowed when he saw that Macey's body had been removed. A pair of town pants hung from a peg, and Rawhide searched the pockets, removing some papers. After studying them for a moment, he tucked them inside his shirt and went out to rejoin Barbee.

"We'll ride past the mesa and stop at Wolf Hole," Rawhide said casually. "The cold water'll do you good, and we can look at your wound again."

Jim Barbee nodded dully as he swung his horse to follow Rawhide Runyan. A man could ride when he couldn't walk. Rawhide noticed that Barbee's eyes were almost closed, and that the fever was getting worse. Barbee was riding by instinct, gripping his right shoulder with his left hand.

Rawhide was studying the ground as they climbed the steep trail leading to the springs. His eyes shifted across a little valley to the glittering rubble at the base of Squaw Peak. He dismounted, caught Jim Barbee, who was swaying in his saddle. Rawhide helped the feverish man to the ground near the water-hole.

Barbee flattened out, stuck his head under the cold water. The shock revived him almost instantly. Drawing his frogging knife, Rawhide cut the right sleeve from Barbee's shirt. He frowned when he saw the deep gash was rimmed with red alkali dust. After washing the wound, he took a small bottle of permanganate from his saddlebags to cauterize the bullet scrape.

Jim Barbee bit down hard on his teeth and drew in a deep breath. Taking the makings from his shirt

pocket, he rolled a corn-husk quirly and flicked a match to flame with a thumbnail. He inhaled deeply, blew a cloud of pungent smoke over his head. As he was lifting the cigarette to his lips again, he stopped abruptly and spoke in a low, jerky tone:

"We've got company, Rawhide. Jo-Bob Keene's ridin' up the trail from that silver ledge!"

"Yeah. I saw him," Rawhide answered, as he turned slowly to face the oncoming horseman.

Keene stopped his big dappled gray and swung leisurely to the ground. His black eyes were watching Rawhide Runyan, and he elbowed the tails of his long black coat away from the silvered guns on his powerful thighs.

"You look kinda peaked," the gambler said to Jim Barbee. "You've got until tomorrow to pay off your note."

"I'll pay it off now," Barbee answered. He reached slowly to his hip pocket.

Keene poised his right hand above his holster until Barbee's hand came into sight, gripping a sheaf of new bills. After counting out the correct amount, Barbee shoved the stack down into his pocket and tendered the counted money to the gambler.

"Just give me back my note, Keene," Barbee said quietly. "I collected some dinero, and I found that shipping herd of mine. Not only that, but my pardner found a rich silver mine right here on my own land."

Keene straightened slowly, but only his piercing black eyes showed any emotion. Now they glowed like rubies while the gambler smiled with his lips.

"Did you rob the stage this morning?" he asked.

"Carse Steadman robbed it, and Steadman's dead," Rawhide Runyan answered for Barbee. "He figured it was his turn because you did the same thing yesterday."

"Prove it!" Keene rasped. "I figured Macey did that job yesterday—and then you killed Macey to get the money to pay off your note, Barbee!"

Jim Barbee was sitting by the pool, paying no attention to Keene or Runyan. His eyes were closed.

Keene flicked his black eyes to the face of Rawhide Runyan.

"It was *you* killed Macey," Keene said. "You also killed Carse Steadman, and they were both fast with a six-shooter. You and me rolled dice not long ago, and I made you a promise. Remember?"

"I remember," Rawhide answered. "I saw your horse's tracks pointing this way, which saved me the trouble of riding to town—where you might have too much help."

"I don't need help," Keene stated arrogantly. "I've never been beaten on the draw. You rode in here and ruined my plans just as I was about to strike it rich. With you out of the way, Jim Barbee'll be a cinch."

"Uh-huh," Rawhide grunted. "But you forget that I did beat your hand once before."

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same place," Keene said positively. "You had three sixes to beat, but that was with the dice."

Rawhide shrugged carelessly. "I was thinking about you and your two business associates. Both of them were fast with a six-shooter, and they both tried to kill me. Both of them are dead."

"They would have died anyway," Keene said, as he imitated Rawhide's shrug. "You saved me the trouble. I made you a promise; now I'm giving you a chance."

Keene telegraphed his intention when he elbowed his coat tails away from his brace of silvered six-shooters. His long-fingered hands struck down in perfect unison. But Rawhide Runyan was already in motion.

Rawhide dipped his right hand down and up, with flame lancing from the muzzle of his .45 Peacemaker. He was concentrating on *one* gun while Keene was drawing *two*. The big gambler took a slug in the left side of his chest just as his weapons cleared leather with the muzzles pointing down.

Keene blasted a pair of holes in the ground just before he crashed down on his face, dead.

Rawhide Runyan jacked the spent shell from his smoking gun and thumbed a fresh cartridge through the loading gate. He turned with a ring of smoke making a gun fight-

er's halo above his head. Then he heard Jim Barbee chuckle grimly.

"Look at that packet sticking out of his pocket," Barbee whispered. "It's as much like mine as two peas in a pod."

Rawhide reached down into Keene's pocket. The packet was addressed to Maverick Macey from the Red Wing smelter. The seals had been broken, but the bank band around the currency was marked: FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS. Rawhide handed the money to Barbee without comment.

"Macey, Steadman, and Keene," Barbee said in a hushed voice. "You did it, Rawhide—even if you had three sixes to beat!"

Rawhide Runyan will be having other sidewinder set-ups to beat in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Reserve your copy at your dealer's now!

HE'LL DO TO TAKE ALONG

THAT'S the highest compliment a Westerner can pay, and is based primarily on a man's honor and courage. Following this come the qualities of knack in doing things—of accomplishing whatever he sets out to do, quickly and without lost motion. If one can meet these qualifications and remain modest in his claims to his ability, he will measure up to the outdoorsman's standard. A braggart never gets invited to go on a trip the second time. On the other hand, self-confidence is a necessary quality on the range. There is no time, when a herd of wild horses is plunging down a mountain-side, to ask the advice of someone else. The rider must act quickly, courageously, and with perfect timing in order to make his action fit in with that of the other riders. The novice can, of course, trust somewhat to the smartness of the horse he rides, and if he has been alert to the quiet talk of the men in camp and has remembered what they have said, he will likely do his part satisfactorily. If he receives praise with a quiet smile and never yields to the temptation to tell of his exploits, he will be given another opportunity; and, even if he makes a mistake, it may be overlooked for the time being: later on an old hand will tell him where he might have done better.

The Western cow range is no place for a weakling or a quitter today any more than it was when Apaches lurked behind the sand hills. There is plenty of open range and plenty of excitement for the man who wants to take the risks and do the work because he loves to do it, without thinking too much of the small pay check he will get for a month's hard work.



COW COUNTRY SPANISH

by S. OMAR BARKER

XIV. Cussin', Countin', etc.

Continued from our August 1st issue.

Hijo de un demonio (EE-boh day un day-MOH-nee-oh): son of a devil.

Qué chingadera (kay cheeng-gah-DAY-rah): what a dirty mess.

Abajo con el alguacil (ah-BAH-hoh cone ale ahl-gwah-SEEL): down with the sheriff; or make it anybody you don't like, by changing *alguacil*.

Por vida mía (pore VEE-thah MEE-ah): by my life.

Por vida tuya (TOO-yah): by your life.

Ojalá (oh-hah-LAH): would to God.

Chihuahua (chee-WAH-wah): just an exclamation like "gosh all fish-books." Comes from an old Mexican oath. Por Chihuahua mi tierra y Méjico mi país (por Chee-WAH-wah mee tee-AY-rrah ee MAY-hee-coh mee pah-EECE): by Chihuahua my homeland and Mexico my country.

Ladrón (lah-DRONE): thief.

Sinvergüenza (seeh-vair-GWAIN-sah): shameless.

Embustero (aim-boo-STAY-ro): braggart; liar.

Borracho (boh-BRAH-choh): drunk.

Embolado (aim-boh-LAH-thoh): drunk.

Cochino (coh-CHEE-noh): pig.

There are other Spanish cuss

words whose English equivalent would hardly do to print, so we leave them out. Many natives nowadays do lots of their cussing in English, like: Gee for wheez; jeem for Creemas; for gosh my sake; et cetera.

And now here's a sample of the way they count in Spanish:

Uno (OO-noh): one.

Dos (doce): two.

Tres (trace): three.

Cuatro (KWAH-troh): four.

Cinco (SEENG-coh): five.

Seis (sace): six.

Siete (see-AY-tay): seven.

Ocho (OH-choh): eight.

Nueve (NWAY-vay): nine.

Diez (dee-ACE): ten.

Cincuenta (seeng-KWAIN-tah): fifty.

Cien (see-AIN): one hundred.

Doscientos (doh-see-AIN-toce): two hundred.

Mil (meel): one thousand.

Millón (meel-YONE): million.

And here's some salutations:

Como le va? (COH-moh lay vah): howdy.

Adiós (ah-dee-OCE): good-by.

Hasta luego (AH-stah loo-AY-go): see you later.

Hasta la vista (AH-stah lah VEE-stah): till I see you again.

To be continued in our August 29th issue.



A MAN needed his wits about him when he stumbled onto murder. Yet when the muffled shot brought Cole Kimball stampeding through the offices of Thorsville's Golden Dawn Mining Co., deserted at this noon hour, he was numbed by a nameless dread. That gun had spoken in Dan Beauregard's office. And Big Dan, superintendent of the syndi-

cate-owned Golden Dawn, was Cole Kimball's best friend. Nothing must happen to Big Dan! But when Cole careened into Beauregard's littered office it had already happened. Big Dan lay sprawled in a widening pool of blood, the life gone out of him.

A tall, stoop-shouldered youngster, Cole came to an abrupt halt, his homely face twisted with horror.

THUNDER UNDER THORSVILLE

by CLINT McCLEOD

*When you stumble onto murder,
young Kimball found, you need an
alibi—and a gun to go with it!*



*The fight was short and hectic,
each outlaw singling out a guard.*

Of debits and credits Cole knew much—of sudden death very little. Reared in such turbulent mining camps as this Thorsville, he had veered from violence all his days, living apart from it. Now death had plucked away a friend. A great grief choking him, Cole was kneeling gingerly beside Big Dan's body when

boots thundered, and Burk Carver, the mine's foreman, spoke breathlessly from the doorway.

"Big Dan dead!" Carver gasped. "But who—"

Then he was in the room, jerking a rope hanging over Beauregard's desk, making the big bell above the office building speak clamorously, the bell that summoned Golden Dawn employees whenever disaster stalked.

"How did it happen?" Carver demanded. "Who did it?"

He was a lanky, colorless man, but Big Dan had sworn by his efficiency.

Cole regarded him blankly. "Big Dan's holding a gun by its barrel," he observed tonelessly. "He must have jerked it out of the killer's hand just as the devil fired. That skunk can't be far off. Start the boys hunting as fast as they get here."

As Carver came closer, peering at the gun death-gripped in Big Dan's hand, his eyes widened. Already boots were drumming toward the building, the vanguard of the miners crowding into the office, others at their backs. But above their startled questions Carver's voice rose stridently.

"Cole, we won't have far to hunt!" he snarled. "*It's your own gun that killed Big Dan!*"

TO Cole, staring speechlessly, it was like being hit with an ax. Every Golden Dawn employee in a trusted position must pack a gun, a stringent rule that was a tribute to Blackie Snell, outlaw extraordinary. The gun skill of Snell and his partners, Curly Jack Gentry and Hap Hansen, had kept the mine from shipping gold these past months, and there'd been a growing fear that Snell might raid the mine itself. Guns had become the order of the day; but Cole, no great shakes with a six-shooter, had kept his in his desk. Now it was here in Big Dan's hand. No denying it.

"Me shoot Big Dan!" Cole muttered, coming to his feet. "He was my friend—he gave me a job here six months back when nobody in Thorsville would hire me. Why on earth should I shoot him?"

"I don't know," Carver admitted. "But I found you standing over Dan and him dead from your gun. He trusted you—maybe too much. It might do to check your ledgers."

"Look, Carver," a miner muttered. "You know this bookkeeping gent better than we do. Maybe you like him and want to do some stallin'. But I say to blazes with checking his books! Big Dan was our friend and the best super we ever had. Fetch a rope, somebody!"

There was a sudden stir among the miners, a low rumble of assent.

"Wait!" Carver shouted hoarsely, his speech lost as the rumble became a roar.

Justice was sudden in these boom camps, and a white collar had made Cole an alien. They'd worshiped Big Dan, these miners. In his heart Cole couldn't blame them for their

attitude any more than he could blame Carver, who'd believed what his eyes told him. But a rope and death were on the way. That was enough to shake Cole out of his grief and paralysis.

He might have appealed for a delay, but Carver had tried that and been shouted down. Today the miners would act, tomorrow they'd think. It was time for desperate measures.

Elbowing Carver out of the way, Cole charged for the blocked doorway, head down, a maneuver that fooled the miners. For Cole abruptly veered toward an open window, diving head foremost through it.

Landing in a heap, he came to his feet as the miners boiled out of the office. Yonder stood Burk Carver's saddle horse; the foreman toted no lunch bucket, eating down in Thorsville instead. Vaulting into the saddle, Cole jerked the tie rope and thundered away.

There were very few guns among the miners, but lead spattered around him. Zigzagging, Cole galloped through the sprawling cluster of buildings that was Thorsville and on down the slope into the tangled country beyond. Pursuit would shortly be in the saddle, but it would take time to organize it. Meanwhile he must put miles behind him.

AN hour later, in a canyon that was a maze of brush and stunted trees, he began to realize a handicap. Not many miles out of Thorsville, he was still in alien country, for Golden Dawn employees shied clear of this section, the domain of Blackie Snell. Here the outlaw had stopped many gold shipments, and the canyon had become forbidden for mining men. An outlaw himself now, Cole might become hopelessly

lost in outlaw country.

Yet Cole found it hard to realize that he was a hunted man, accused of murdering Big Dan Beauregard. Obviously the murder gun had been taken from his desk, but who'd wanted to throw suspicion upon him—and why? His friends weren't many in Thorsville, but his enemies were even fewer.

In the midst of this reflection, he rounded a turn to burst upon three men standing near a small, smokeless campfire.

They'd heard him coming and they were ready. He had one glimpse of hands going hipward, sunlight dancing upon gun barrels. He heard the roar of a gun, and something hoisted him from his horse. But just before unconsciousness came crowding, there was time for one thought: all his luck was bad today, for he'd stumbled upon the camp of Blackie Snell.

STARLIGHT made a faint sheen overhead when Cole opened his eyes. His head throbbed, and he found it bandage-swathed when he raised faltering fingers to it. At this sign of his returning consciousness, four men crowded around him. Three he recognized, just as he'd known them before they'd shot him from his saddle. He'd never seen them before today, but he knew them from often-repeated descriptions.

"How you feeling, pardner?" Blackie Snell asked—be of the clean-shaven face and twisted nose. "Shucks, you shouldn't have come busting up on us! How were we to know you weren't the law? Hap, fetch this gent some coffee."

Hap Hansen, blond giant, thrust a can of vile-smelling coffee under Cole's nose while Curly Jack Gentry, tall and bearded, helped ease the

bookkeeper to a sitting position.

"You're among friends," Snell assured Cole. "We know all about your killing Dan Beauregard today."

That cleared Cole's head in a hurry. How could this crew know what happened? Snell's men didn't dare show their faces in Thorsville. But, as though divining Cole's thoughts, Snell laughed, jerking a thumb toward the fourth man, a lean youngster with prominent teeth.

"Yonder's the Latigo Kid," Snell said. "Four States ahead of Texas law. He's not known hereabouts. Since he joined up, we can keep an ear in Thorsville."

Looking at the Latigo Kid, Cole knew he'd seen the Texan around Thorsville. Cole struggled for voice, but Snell spoke first.

"Posses are hunting you, Kimball, so we moved you here. You're one of us now, savvy? The Golden Dawn hasn't shipped in months, has it? They must have quite a store of gold. Would you be likely to know where it's kept?"

Comprehension flooded Cole then, and he was almost shocked at the simplicity of what had been a mystery. Too quickly had he been accepted by these men, and now he could understand why! The Latigo Kid could enter the mining camp, but the Kid couldn't hope to reach the Golden Dawn's hidden treasure room. But the Kid could have familiarized himself with Golden Dawn routine, crept into the deserted offices and stolen Cole's gun. And the Kid could have pumped a bullet into Big Dan and left that gun behind to be found. The Kid could have done that, making an outlaw out of Cole and sending him into Blackie Snell's trap!

Obviously Snell hadn't counted

on a lynching, nor had he figured Cole would ride right into his camp. Probably he'd presumed that Cole would be jailed, and the Latigo Kid was to have managed a jail delivery. Thus Blackie Snell would have recruited a man who knew his way into the carefully guarded treasure vault. It was a scheme that might easily have been cooked up by Blackie Snell, outlaw extraordinary, who'd displayed diabolical cleverness in holding up treasure trains.

And now Snell had put a question to him. Did Cole know where the gold was kept? Of course he did, but to Cole the Golden Dawn and Dan Beauregard were the same, and betraying the mine would be akin to betraying the memory of the man. Yet saying so would invite death.

COLE, who'd shunned violence all his days, didn't have much courage for resistance. But something else also bade him play this hand cautiously. He hated these men, these killers of Big Dan. But where there was gold there could also be a trap, and with luck he could lead them into it. Once they were prisoners the truth about Big Dan's death might be forced from them. There lay the way to avenge Big Dan and, perhaps, to clear himself.

"What's in it for me?" he stalled.

"A split of the gold," Snell promised. "And us to help you dodge the law."

"A bullet when my usefulness to you has ended," Cole thought bitterly. Aloud, he said: "Yes, I can lead you to the treasure room."

"Can you sit a saddle?" Hansen inquired eagerly. "We figger on ridin' right away!"

"I . . . I think so," Cole murmured, and struggled to his feet. "Anything we'll need for the job we can get at the mine."

Thus he shortly found himself riding with the outlaw crew, heading toward the low-lying hills that sprawled in smooth waves against the northern sky. They hadn't given him a gun, and, even though he wasn't too handy with one, he wished he had a weapon. But maybe if—

Nobody else was abroad in this star-canopied silence, and Cole guessed the posse had turned back. It came to him that this was a fine position to be in! Death at his elbow if these riders suspected he meant to betray them—death ahead if the men of Thorsville sighted him.

Thorsville. Its lights glimmered faintly as they neared the foot of the slope. Six months before Cole had come to the camp, possessed of the clothes he wore and an eagerness to work. But men had looked at his stooped shoulders and waved him away. Then, desperate, he'd gone to a restaurant, ordered the best and topped it off with a cigar.

"I've no money to pay," he told the proprietor afterward. "But I'm willing to work."

The mildest term the man had used was "Swindler!" and Cole had slept in jail that night. The tale, tall with retelling, had reached Dan Beauregard. Whereupon the mine superintendent had laughed himself sick, paid Cole's fine and given him a job.

"A man with the nerve to bluff will come through in a pinch!" Beauregard had remarked.

Cole hadn't been so sure, but he'd been grateful. Burk Carver, substituting since the last bookkeeper had disappeared in a cloud of alcohol, had eagerly turned over a set of books in perfect order. And since he'd had previous experience with

ledgers, Cole had gotten along fine. Until today.

Yes, he owed a great deal to Big Dan, and tonight he might repay that debt in part. For now, at Cole's orders, they were skirting the base of the slope, following a tumbling creek. The Golden Dawn did both sluicing and underground mining, and lapping water made a lonely sound against the sides of sluice boxes, ghostly and coffinlike in the gloom.

"Where you taking us?" Snell whispered suspiciously. "The mine entrance is up above."

"There's an abandoned shaft under the slope," Cole said. "It will get us into the mine without running a gantlet like we'd have to do above." He drew in his breath. "Yonder's a supply shack. It has a padlock and hasp, but a gun barrel will force it quietly. Give me a gun and I'll get us some candles."

SNELL hesitated, but only for a second. He offered a gun, and Cole slipped from his saddle, scuttling away in the darkness to the shack. Using a gun on the lock might ruin the barrel, but Cole carried a spare key since he inventoried the shack's supplies each month. In a few minutes he was back with a handful of candles which he doled out. The gun he kept. Snell didn't ask for it, and Cole breathed easier. At least he'd succeeded in arming himself!

"Hang onto the candles," he advised. "We'll need them later."

Ground-anchoring their horses, they approached the shaft's entrance, a dark hole concealed by heaps of tailings. They had to drop to hands and knees, Cole in the lead with Snell directly behind him. Proceeding in this manner they followed the shaft for many yards as it led

them under the slope. Soon they were able to come to their feet in a lateral tunnel, timber-shored and high enough to permit their passage erect. It was a heading that hadn't been worked recently, but Cole didn't tell them that.

"Safe enough to light candles now," he said, and scraped a match aglow, the others following suit. Shadows danced weirdly upon the rocky walls as the outlaws milled nervously about.

"Where now?" Snell queried.

"Follow me," Cole instructed, and took the lead again, glad to put his back to them. For now there was light, and they might see the elation in his eyes. He'd won their confidence completely, it seemed, and he, the slightest among them, was now, by virtue of that fact, the strongest.

He knew this mine well. Often he'd come to these lower levels, far under Thorsville, to check reports with Burk Carver and the various shift foremen. Two hundred yards beyond was the entrance to the room for which he was headed, and midway was a room where four guards were posted. But Cole wasn't counting on them. Not far ahead there'd be a cord stretched along the tunnel wall, a part of the Golden Dawn's intricate signaling system. One tug upon that cord, and Cole's trap would be sprung. Men would converge from other tunnels, drawn by an alarm which would be soundless here.

Onward he pushed, the outlaws strung out behind him, the shuffling of their boots keeping time to the *shush-shush* of his own soles. Unconsciously he counted the steps—fifty—sixty. Then they were paralleling the signal cord, and Cole paused.

"Notice any tools scattered along the way?" he queried innocently.

"We'll need a crowbar when we reach the room. Better get one now."

The outlaws bent, peering in every direction, candles thrust before them. Cole was sure his heart stopped beating as he raised his hand, groped for the signal cord, tugged upon it. But it went slack in his hand, and a gun barrel prodded his back.

"Kimball, did you think I was loco?" Snell asked. "From the first you was too willing for a man who'd never been outside the law until today. I cut that cord ten paces back. Now fork over that gun you were so anxious to get. Show us where that treasure room is—and no more monkey business!"

Welling bitterness flooded Cole. He'd been so sure of himself, yet he hadn't fooled Snell for a minute! Now Snell was jerking the gun from Cole's belt, the other outlaws glaring belligerently. It was a bad moment, yet so long as he was still useful to them he'd live. There was some consolation in that, and he still had two sleeve aces.

ONE lay in the fact that there was another signal cord in the very room to which he was leading them. The other ace, nearer at hand, was the guarded room midway. His first impulse was to let them go blundering into that room, but suddenly he knew he couldn't. Blackie Snell wasn't a man who blundered, and the lives of those four guards were at stake.

No; in a certain sense he'd betrayed those guards by leading Snell's crew through the forgotten tunnel; and now he'd have to save them.

"Listen, Snell," Cole said, speech coming with a rush, "there's guards

up ahead. You can get the drop on them easy enough. Toss lead and you're liable to bring miners from everywhere."

Snell regarded him calculatingly. "All right, Kimball," he decided. "You're taking the lead. Get going!"

Once again they were on the move, stealing along now, and soon they rounded a turn to find the way blocked by a door which was partly ajar, lantern light streaming under it. With a sudden intake of breath, Snell came to a halt.

"One squawk out of you—" he warned Cole, then spoke to his men. "Ready?"

Lunging, Snell kicked the door inward and charged into the room, his men behind him. The four guards, lulled to a false sense of security by many weary nights with a monotonous sameness to them, were clustered about a table, playing cards. They came to their feet now, surprise etched across their faces. One of them grabbed for a nearby shotgun, and Snell risked a shot then, blotting out the lantern on the table.

"After 'em, boys!" Snell bellowed.

Cole felt Hap Hansen's thick fingers clamp about his wrist, and he was dragged into the darkened room as candles were quickly snuffed out. A shotgun belched violently, the funnel of flame lighting the room as shot stung Cole's cheek. Then there was darkness again with pandemonium in the midst of it.

The fight was short and hectic, each outlaw singling out a guard and subduing him quickly and efficiently, Hansen managing to drop one with his gun barrel, yet hanging onto Cole all the while.

Snell spoke when there was comparative silence. "Get a candle

Continued on page 84



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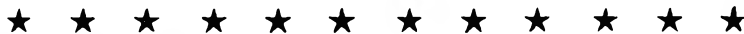
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burning," he ordered. "We'll make a tally."

Curly Jack Gentry was nursing a wounded arm when the light blossomed, but three of the guards were unconscious, the fourth moaning upon the floor, the Latigo Kid kneeling upon him.

"Tie and gag them," Snell ordered. "Use their belts and bootlaces if you can't find anything handier. Hurry!"

Candles flickering, his wish was carried out with no wasted motion, the four guards tethered in opposite corners so they could not untie each other once they recovered consciousness. Gentry was crudely bandaged, and then they were yanking open the door on the opposite side of the room, heading into the tunnel again. Snell proceeded warily, tense and alert.

"Those gunshots didn't arouse anybody," he finally decided. "Was that more of your plan, Kimball? Now get on to that treasure room and be quick about it!"

He propelled Cole forward with a violent shove. Sickened by the recent display of this crew's ruthlessness, Cole choked back words to denounce them, knowing the effort would be wasted and would only arouse them further. He stumbled onward until the tunnel broadened and became two tunnels, one leading to the left, one to the right.

"Which?" Snell demanded. "And if you guess wrong, Kimball, it will be your last guess!"

"To the right," Cole said wearily, and led the way. "We're not far from the room now."

THE marching minutes proved him right, for soon they came upon a heavy iron door set into one side of the shaft, a ponderous padlock

holding it shut. Here Cole paused, the others gathering around him.

"This is it," Cole said.

Excitement danced in Snell's eyes, but disappointment replaced it. "From the looks of that lock," he observed, "we should have fetched dynamite."

"I told you we'd need a crowbar," Cole reminded him.

"Saw one back in that guard room," the Latigo Kid said. "I'll fetch it."

Candle in hand he slid away, returning shortly with a crowbar and the report that the guards were still firmly tied. Hansen put his weight against the bar once it was slipped under the hasp, the veins standing out on his broad forehead as he exerted pressure. There was an explosive snap, and the padlock went flying.

Then the outlaws were snatching open the door, crowding into a granite room, square-hewn, flickering shadows leaping from wall to wall as they held their candles high. Here, with gold presumably within their grasp, elation became a sort of frenzy. But suddenly Snell snuffed out his candle with a strangled curse, the others doing likewise. It was no place for an open flame, for the light had revealed not iron treasure boxes, but kegs of powder lining the walls!

"The powder magazine!" Snell roared. "This isn't the treasure room!"

Cole chose then to kick the door shut, reaching at the same time for a cord he'd located while there'd been light, and yanking upon it.

"Where is he!" Hansen bellowed in the darkness. "I'll put a slug in him!"

"I'm right here," Cole announced evenly. "Start shooting if you want. But my back's to the powder

kegs. And likely the mine would come down on top of us!"

Someone cursed hysterically, then there was silence, many minutes of it. Finally Snell spoke.

"We don't dare shoot, but you can't get past us to the door, Kimball," he said. "Take us to the treasure room and we'll cut you in on the gold. Is it down that left-hand tunnel?"

"I had my guess," Cole retorted. "You can go to blazes, Snell!"

The silence descended again, running on.

"Join hands, boys," Snell at last announced. "Spread across the doorway and move forward. Maybe we can't shoot, but if we get our hands on him we'll make him show us what we want!"

But now Cole was hearing what he'd been straining his ears to hear—the distant rush of boots. "A man once accidentally got locked in here, Snell," he said. "He almost strangled before he was found. After that Dan Beauregard ran a pipe in here with a signal cord through it connecting to the office up above. Help's coming right now!"

"I hear 'em coming," Snell snarled. "You've trapped us! But we'll be hard to handle! Unleather your guns, boys!"

"Start shooting," Cole reminded him, "and that rescue party is just naturally going to shoot back. We'll all likely be blasted sky-high—"

"Snell!" a voice thundered on the other side of the door. "We've found those guards, and we know you're in there. Come out with your hands up!"

"Throw down your gun, Snell!" Cole rapped. "One way or another you're finished! Throw down your gun before somebody yanks open that door and puts a bullet in here that's likely to hit a powder keg!"

THE blood was pounding in Cole's temples, and for a moment he thought he was going to faint. Snell and his men had courage.

But finally Snell said shakily, "He's right," and his gun clattered to the floor. "The game's up."

The other guns hitting the floor, Cole groped for his candle and a match. "You, outside!" he shouted weakly. "Come in!"

The opening door revealed a half score of miners with bobbing lanterns, Burk Carver leading them. They poured into the powder room, collaring Snell and his men. Near Cole squatted a small, open keg, nearly filled with a black substance. Cole sagged to a sitting position on the keg, then hastily came erect again, clammy with the knowledge that the keg undoubtedly held blasting powder and a lighted candle was now in his hand.

"Carver," Cole said hoarsely, "hang onto these outlaws. If we can make them talk, they'll tell you who killed Big Dan."

Carver wasn't impressed. "What is this?" he snapped. "Did you pull that signal cord, Kimball? I don't know what your game is, or how you come to be with these men. But I do know who killed Big Dan—and why. I checked your books today. Big Dan trusted you, and you've been systematically stealing gold from the mine all these months! The books show a clumsy attempt to falsify so the steal wouldn't be checked. Did Big Dan begin to suspect? Is that why you shot him?"

"Double-crossin' your pardners ain't going to help you," a miner shouted. "We've still got that rope, Cole. And now we know for sure who needs it!"

Then the whole hideous truth hit Cole Kimball. Big Dan Beauregard

hadn't been killed as part of a scheme of Snell's to toll Cole into his outfit! The Latigo Kid had merely heard about the murder and, coming back to camp and finding Cole unconscious there, had told Snell about it. And Snell, recognizing who'd fallen into his hands, had heard the knock of opportunity.

That's the way it really was. All night Cole had been going on guesswork. And all his hopes that the Latigo Kid might be forced to confess went winging. The Kid couldn't confess—for Burk Carver was the real murderer of Big Dan! For Burk Carver lied when he said Cole's books were doctored. Which meant that Carver had been stealing gold himself and had juggled Cole's books this afternoon to make it appear that Cole was guilty. But what good was that knowledge when these lynch-minded miners wouldn't give Cole a chance to prove it? When he'd wrung the signal bell that fetched Carver here, Cole had wrung a death knell for himself!

Carver had pretended to try and stop a lynching the noon before, knowing the miners wouldn't listen, but Carver wouldn't stop a lynching now. Cole was the one man who might be able to expose the mine foreman, so Carver would want him dead.

"The game's up," Snell had said a few minutes ago. And now the game was up for Cole as well. He was going to die for the murder of Big Dan, the one man who'd had faith in him. But what was it Big Dan had said? "A man with the nerve to bluff will come through in a pinch!"

WITH that crowding recollection, Cole saw his only chance. All night he'd played a game of bluff with Snell's outfit, and bluff had

carried him through. But bluff would no longer serve him. It was play the game as the cards fell, and the last ace was in his hand.

"Stop!" he cried, holding the candle over the powder keg, and hearing his own voice as a hysterical thread of sound. "Shoot me and the candle drops into the keg. Come a step nearer and I drop it!"

It dropped the hush of death upon this rocky chamber, miners blanching beneath their grime.

"Carver," he snapped, "I'm the one man here who hasn't anything to lose. It's this or a lynch rope for me, and this way I'll have the satisfaction of blowing you sky-high with me. For the rest of these hombres, I'm sorry. But talk up and talk straight, Carver. Or—" His hand dipped significantly.

"Don't!" Carver gibbered. "You crazy fool! *Don't!*"

The man's face was oily with perspiration.

"Talk!" Cole commanded.

Time was standing still, the outlaws like statues still held by miners who fingered guns and lanterns as though they'd frozen to their hands. Yet, oddly enough, Cole felt no fear, but an odd sense of coldness as though he were a disinterested spectator.

"I'll talk!" Carver suddenly quavered. "Yes, I've been robbing the treasure vault! Big Dan was beginning to suspect. I stole your gun, Kimball, and shot him, knowing you were in your office and would come running. You see, I wanted both him and you out of the way so I could doctor your books and pin the steal onto you. Then I'd be free to spend the gold with nobody suspecting."

"You hear him, men?" Cole asked, but the belligerent stares the miners bent upon Carver were proof enough

that they'd heard—and understood.

But now the ghastly face of one of the guards who'd been overpowered was at the doorway. The rescue party had untied him and hurried on here, leaving him to recover consciousness. Still groggy, he obviously grasped only part of the situation.

"Grab him!" he cried, aiming a shaky finger at Cole. "Don't be afraid, boys. Don't you understand? When we have to have a light in the powder room, we need a safe place for it. There ain't no powder in that keg! Just black-sand tailings we packed in here to stick a candle into!"

Instantly Carver, eyes wild with desperation, was clawing for his gun. Freed from the menace of the powder keg, he was obviously going to try shooting his way to freedom, even though this was still no place for gunplay! Clawing at the floor, Cole snatched the gun Snell had dropped, bringing it up flaming. He wasn't very handy with a gun, but he couldn't miss at that distance. He triggered twice, gun thunder echoing deep below Thorsville, and Burk Carver, weaving on his feet, dropped his gun and collapsed in a heap.

Slowly Cole staggered into the tunnel, the miners respectfully making a lane for him.

"Lock up Snell and his crew, boys," Cole ordered. "No lynching, remember! Or have you learned your lesson about rope play?"

The aftermath of all this had left him weak, and he wondered if his legs would betray him. Yet there was a sustaining strength to bolster him, too, a new-found strength born of the proof of Big Dan's faith in him. He'd walk erect now and through all the years, for it would be as though Big Dan were at his side, steadying him.

THE END.



STRANGLEHOLD ON RED DESERT

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THE MAD GRINGO

by PHILIP KETCHUM



Red saw Landeros half twist and go down.

What made Red Cassidy ride back to Sonora when he knew he'd be inviting bounty-hunting lobos to a trigger feast the minute he crossed the border?

CHAPTER I.

GAMBLER'S LUCK.

THERE was a fortune in gold in the center of the table, and all but two players had dropped out. The

game was stud, and the hole card and three more had been dealt. Arn Hewett, the owner of the High Line Saloon, had two aces and a king showing. He was a heavy, broad-

shouldered man with a rugged, iron-jawed face. He took a peck at his hole card and then shoved another hundred in gold into the pot.

"You'd better drop out, Cassidy," he said tonelessly. "I'm going to fill."

Red Cassidy grinned. He had been in La Paz for three days, and most of those three days had been spent right here in the High Line Saloon. He had run twenty dollars into as many thousand by means of good poker playing and through one of the most amazing streaks of luck the hard-faced gamblers of La Paz had ever seen. Red was a tall, thin young man with a splash of freckles across his face, rust-colored hair and laughing blue eyes. Down across the border there was a price on his head, and there wasn't a town in all this country where a sheriff could rest easy while Red Cassidy was around. Trouble seemed to follow him as surely as night follows the day.

"Only a hundred?" he asked slowly. "That don't sound very strong to me, Hewett. How about five more? Either I make it or I don't."

Arn Hewett stared at the cards Cassidy was showing. They were the six, seven and eight of clubs. He moistened his lips and scowled and then, with a sudden determination, matched Cassidy's bet and bumped it another hundred.

Red Cassidy grinned. "And five more."

There was a tight, silent crowd of men around the table. There wasn't another game going on right now, and the men behind the bar were doing no business. Bennie Johns, short, stocky, middle-aged—Red's almost constant companion for the past five years—stood behind

Red's chair, his face giving no hint of his interest.

Hewett shoved an additional five hundred into the pot and turned to glance at the dealer. "Cut the cards," he said sharply.

The dealer set the cards on the table, and the man to his left cut them. The dealer stacked and dealt, giving Hewett a deuce and Cassidy the nine of clubs.

Red Cassidy chuckled. "Just like I had asked for it, Hewett," he said. "Your bet, I reckon."

Arn Hewett bit his lips. He had been afraid that Red Cassidy might make a straight flush, and it was possible that he had. But that didn't make so much difference, now. Cassidy could have either a straight or a flush and still beat him, for the best that Arn could possibly have was three aces. Arn's scowl grew deeper. There was just as good a chance, he knew, that Cassidy had only a small pair—or perhaps no pair at all, for time and again during the past three days Cassidy had run a bluff.

"Go ahead," Red advised. "Bet the aces."

"Checked to you," Hewett said tightly.

Red grinned. He shoved every cent in front of him into the pot, held a hand back to Bennie Johns and took the heavy, leather sack Bennie handed him and added it to his bet. "Eighteen thousand, five hundred, Hewett. That's the best I can do."

THERE wasn't a sound in the room. Arn Hewett swallowed a couple of times. Perspiration showed on his forehead and around his mouth.

"I . . . I don't have that much," he said huskily.

"Then what about this saloon?"

You own it clear, don't you? I'll match my bet against the saloon."

Arn Hewett got to his feet. He stared across the table at Red Cassidy, his eyes narrowed to mere slits. And suddenly he shook his head. "Go to blazes, Cassidy! Take your winnings an' get out!"

Red Cassidy's laugh was low and mocking. He gathered up his cards, reached for the deck and shuffled them into it. Bennie Johns gathered up the money and added it to the stake in the leather pouch, and then Red took the pouch and dropped it carelessly into his pocket. "Come on, Bennie," he said, and angled for the door.

In an almost complete silence, they left the place. But outside, Bennie stopped and turned around and looked back.

"I don't like that, Red," he growled. "We were almost ordered out of there. I think I'm goin' back."

Red shook his head. "Why?"

"I don't like to be ordered out of places. I don't like Hewett. I don't— Say, what was your hole card, anyhow?"

Red Cassidy grinned. "It might have been the five of clubs, or the ten or, for that matter, any five or ten."

"Only it wasn't."

Red chuckled, but made no answer.

A Mexican boy hurrying up the street caught sight of them and stopped. "Señor Cassidy," he said, "there is a señorita at the hotel who wishes to speak to you. She sent me to find you. She would like to talk with you at once."

The boy spoke in Spanish. He looked about fourteen and was tall and thin and dirty.

"A señorita?" Red repeated. "Is she beautiful?"

"Si, señor. Very beautiful. And in trouble. She was crying when she asked for you."

Bennie tugged at Red's arm. He said, "Come on, Red. We've got things to do. We ain't got no time for beautiful señoritas who are in trouble and who have probably heard that you have been cleanin' up a wad of gold."

"She is Americano," said the boy.

Red pulled free. "Wait a minute, Bennie," he said. "What's all the rush? Maybe there's something to this kid's story."

"Sure, an' we've got twenty thousand in gold, an' there's a hundred men in La Paz who would cut our throats for a tenth of it and plenty of beautiful señoritas they could get to help them. We—"

"I'll soon take care of that," Red grinned.

THE mission of San Felez was just across the square, and Red headed that way, trailed by a grumbling Bennie Johns. His knock on the mission door was answered by Father Antonio, who was old, stooped and gray-haired, but whose many hardships hadn't yet served to wipe a look of serenity from his face.

"Good evening, father," Red hailed. "I brought you something. Perhaps it isn't good money for it was passed to me across the gambling tables in a saloon. I thought that perhaps you could find a better use for it than that."

From his pocket, Red took the heavy leather pouch. He held it out to the old man.

Showing no surprise, Father Antonio took the money. "I can find good use for it, son. You are he whom my people call the Mad Gringo?"

A smile tugged at Red's lips.

"Perhaps. And some call me other things. I fought for Solano in the last revolution. It seems that I didn't pick the winning side."

"To pick the right side is more important."

Red shrugged. He touched his hat and said, "Good night, father."

"Good night, my son," answered the priest.

Red turned away and Bennie Johns tagged along after him. "What did you want to do that for?" he grumbled. "We coulda bought a mighty nice ranch with all that money. We coulda quit chasin' around all over the country."

Red shook his head. "A ranch would have kept us tied down. Shucks, Bennie, you wouldn't have liked that."

"All right, but tell me this. Why did you win all that money if you just meant to give it away?"

"Maybe I like to play poker."

Bennie kicked at a rock in the street as he spoke again. "The stable's over this way. Let's get out of here."

"You're forgetting the beautiful señorita. We're stopping at the hotel."

"But—"

"Come on, Bennie. We can't keep her waiting."

It was early evening, but the night's darkness was softened by lights glowing through the windows in the buildings around the square. There was gentle, warm wind. Somewhere a violin was playing, and a woman with a very high voice was singing an old Mexican song. Here and there in the square were groups of people and the sounds of conversation and laughter. Most of the talk was in Spanish, for though La Paz was north of the border, most of its people were Mexicans.

It was an old town, built up almost a century before around the mission. Its buildings were mostly flat-topped adobe structures, though here and there was a frame house.

The hotel had only a narrow front on the street but stretched back for a long ways and boasted more than a dozen rooms circling a patio. It had no porch, but, as Red and Bennie neared it, Red could make out the tall, slender figure of a young woman waiting near the door, and something in the proud, straight way in which the woman was standing seemed awfully familiar. He caught his breath and then came to a full stop.

"Hannah!" he said under his breath.

Bennie had stopped, too, and was now watching narrowly; and, after a glance at Bennie, Red guessed that his pard, too, had recognized the woman waiting at the hotel.

For an instant, Red was silent. Then he said: "Why didn't you drag me to the stable, Bennie? Why did you let me get this far?"

There was a harsh, bitter note in Red's voice. His lips were a thin, tight line across his face. Bennie made no answer, and after a moment Red Cassidy moved on forward.

CHAPTER II.

LOST RANSOM.

HANNAH DUGAN, just twenty-one, was the daughter of Matt Dugan, whose Six Star Ranch was the biggest ranch along all this border country. In many ways she was like her father: proud, hotheaded, stubborn. As a youngster she had been more like a boy than a girl, but several years in an Eastern school seemed to have changed her a great deal, and when she had come

back to the ranch last spring she had seemed every inch a young lady, calm and beautiful and very sure of herself.

Red had been working for Matt Dugan at the time. It was just after Solano's defeat in Mexico and at a time when he and Bennie, who had barely escaped with their lives, were dead broke. To Red, the girl had at first seemed to be beautiful, wonderful beyond all imagination and wholly unattainable. Then as the weeks passed he had gradually been able to see in her some of the realness that he had known in her years before, and on a certain never-to-be-forgotten night, she had promised to marry him.

Red's father, who had settled near La Paz some twenty years before, had been killed in an Indian uprising when Red was about fifteen, and since then Red had shifted for himself. He had worked on practically every ranch along the border, jumping from one job to another as the inclination moved him. In the opinion of a good many people, Red would never settle down. It just wasn't in him to stay put. Any lost cause would find immediate support with Red Cassidy, any impossible task was his meat.

But he would have settled down, or at least he had planned to, as soon as he and Hannah Dugan were married. And they might have been married by now excepting that a chance quarrel with old Matt Dugan had stood in the way. The quarrel really hadn't amounted to much. It had involved a cattle deal with a man named Valdez who lived south of the border, a deal which was much to the advantage of Matt Dugan and of which Red didn't approve. Valdez had been Red's good friend for a long time. That Valdez might have taken the same advan-

tage of Dugan, had their positions been reversed, didn't make any difference. Red wasn't going to see his friend cheated.

He and Dugan had almost come to blows over the matter, and Hannah had happened to hear them. And perhaps it was some reference to Rosa Valdez, the Mexican's daughter, that caused her to take such a violent stand at her father's side. When Bennie and Red had been trying to escape from Mexico, Rosa Valdez had helped them, and Hannah had heard the story.

Red could be as hot-tempered and as hasty as either Hannah or her father, and the result of that quarrel was that he packed up and left Dugan's Six Star Ranch and tried to forget all his memories of the girl who had promised to be his wife. He had heard of her marriage to Jim McNeil, a month later, and had taken it in silence. And until right now, when he was seeing Hannah again, he had thought that he had succeeded pretty well in forgetting her.

Abruptly, now, though, he realized that he hadn't forgotten her and that he never could.

HANNAH watched him as he moved forward, and it seemed to Red that she stiffened a little as he came up. He touched his hat and nodded, and when he spoke he tried to keep his voice steady.

"Hello, Hannah. You wanted to see me?"

The girl nodded. "Shall we go in to the patio?"

Red glanced around at Bennie, but Bennie was waiting some distance back. He hadn't followed Red to the hotel.

"I'll not keep you long," Hannah promised. Her voice was very low, and the sound of it, so fa-

miliar to Red's ears, stabbed through him like a knife. He turned back to look at the girl and then shrugged his shoulders. "Of course. It should be cool in the patio."

Hannah led the way through the hotel and out a side door to the patio. Others were there, but the arbor at the far end was deserted, and Hannah moved that way. She sank down on a bench in the deep shadows.

"I don't think I've ever congratulated you on your marriage," Red said slowly. "I hope you are happy, of course."

"Thank you, Red," Hannah answered.

Red scowled down at her. He couldn't see the expression on her face, and he wondered, suddenly, if she *was* happy. He didn't see how she could be. He knew Jim McNeil, the man she had married, and he knew that McNeil was no good. He was a slender, handsome fellow, but a man without character. He was weak, selfish, egotistical. By now, surely, Hannah had seen through him. Red was suddenly sorry for her.

"I—this must seem very strange to you," Hannah murmured, "but there was no one else to whom I could turn, Red. I . . . I haven't even the right to expect any help from you, but—"

"What's the matter, Hannah?" Red broke in. "What's wrong?"

"Jim's in trouble."

Red Cassidy's lips tightened. "What kind of trouble?"

"He's being held a prisoner by Solano."

"He's what?" Red gasped.

"He's being held a prisoner by Solano. He had gone across the border for some reason or other, and he must have run into some of Solano's men. Solano, of course,

knows that dad is wealthy, and perhaps he's trying to get together enough money to finance another revolution. At any rate he sent my father word that Jim would be killed unless we would pay twenty thousand dollars for his release."

Red whistled. He knew, of course, that since the failure of his revolution, Solano had been living as an outlaw, surrounded and helped by a few of his still faithful followers. And he didn't doubt but that Solano would like to raise enough money to finance another revolution. In spite of all that, however, it wasn't like Solano to take a flier in kidnaping to raise the money. Jim thought that he knew Solano pretty well. There was a good deal of the idealist and dreamer in the swarthy Mexican who had tried to upset his government and institute a new government in its place. Even when the struggle had been going against him and he had needed more men, Solano had refused the services of a renegade guerilla band. A man as strictly honest as that, Jim thought, wouldn't hold another man for ransom.

HOW do you know Solano has him captured?" Red demanded.

"He sent us a note," Hannah answered. "And a note from Jim, as well. Father knew the man who came to see us. There isn't any question about it, Red. Jim is in Solano's hands and, unless we pay twenty thousand dollars, we'll never see him again."

Red wanted to say that both Hannah and her father would be better off if they never saw Jim McNeil again, but he held those words back. A faint smile creased his face. Twenty thousand dollars! That was just about the amount

he had given Father Antonio. If he hadn't stopped at the mission, if he had come straight here, he could just have given Hannah the money and could have told her to go ahead and buy Jim McNeil back again.

"You know Solano," Hannah whispered. "You fought for him, Red. You could get word to him—word that Jim is your friend. Perhaps—"

"Who was the man who came to see your father, Hannah?" Red interrupted.

"His name was Landeros. Captain Landeros, he said. But he didn't look like a captain. He—dad knew him."

Red Cassidy nodded. He knew Landeros, himself. Landeros had fought with Solano and probably had gone into hiding with him after the failure of the revolution. But Landeros wasn't at all like his leader; at heart, he was an outlaw, cruel, vicious, without mercy. It had always been Red's notion that Landeros had joined in the revolution for the possible loot that he might get from it.

"I wouldn't want you to go into Mexico yourself," Hannah whispered. "If you could just get word to Solano I would ask no more."

Red stared down at the girl. "Hasn't your father the money Solano has demanded?"

"Yes, but he won't pay it. He—Jim and my father didn't get along very well, Red. Father has never forgiven me for marrying him."

Red turned away toward a small pool in the patio. He stared down into it. He had thought at one time that Hannah had married Jim McNeil out of spite, but he knew, now, that he was wrong. She must have loved him a great deal to have

humbled herself enough to come on this mission. Her stubborn pride was at the same time her strength and her weakness, and this request hadn't been easy.

After a moment Red swung back. "I'll get him for you," he said bluntly.

Hannah came to her feet. "You won't cross the border! Red, I wouldn't ask that."

Red Cassidy grinned as he said: "Go on home and quit your worrying."

BENNIE JOHNS was waiting for him outside the hotel, a tight scowl on his usually pleasant face. "What did she want?" he demanded.

"I'll tell you after we get started," Red answered. "Let's get our horses."

They headed for the stable. The old man who customarily looked after the horses wasn't anywhere around when they got there. Red pulled open the door, and he and Bennie moved on inside; and, the instant they stepped through the door, something smashed down on Red's head, half stunning him and sending him to his knees.

Bennie's cry of alarm sounded faintly in his ears, and then he heard the roar of a gun and a scream of pain. Red threw himself flat on his face, rolled away and came to his knees. Against the gray background of the open doorway he could make out several struggling figures, and he caught the flash of a knife.

Red had never in his life moved any faster than he did in that moment. He came to his feet and lunged forward, head down, and he hit the struggling group in the doorway with every ounce of drive that he had. Three of the figures went down with him on top of them and

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A band of Solano's ragged warriors appeared outside the barracks.

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Bennie somewhere on the bottom, yelling at him and trying to squirm free.

Red Cassidy clawed out his gun. He smashed one of the men over the head, rolled away from a slashing knife in the hands of one of the men who was still standing. His gun roared, and the man who had tried to knife him grabbed at his chest and twisted sideways and went down. Two other men were racing toward the stable's back door, and now Bennie Johns was standing on his feet and clubbing at the two men who a moment before had been on top of him.

"That's enough, Bennie," Red said heavily.

He stood up and wiped a hand over his face. He still felt a little

groggy from the blow over the head.

"You let the rest of 'em get away," Bennie growled.

"They won't get far," Red answered.

A crowd of men from the street came pushing into the stable, and in a moment lanterns brightened up the interior, and the town marshal, a grim, heavy-jawed man, was asking Red Cassidy questions, and a doctor was examining the men on the floor.

"So you figger they waited here to jump you for the money you won at the High Line, huh?" said the marshal finally.

Red shrugged his shoulders. He saw Hewett in the crowd, scowling. He looked worried, and Red was suddenly sure that Hewett had sent these men here.

"That's how I figger, marshal," Red answered. "An' there were more than these. Some of 'em got away. I—" Red broke off. He was slapping his pockets. He gulped a couple of times. "The . . . the money's gone."

Hewett slipped away. The men in the stable looked around for it, but the money wasn't found. Bennie had a slash in his arm, which the doctor dressed. After a time the marshal drew Red Cassidy to one side.

"I'll find that money for you if it's humanly possible," he promised, "an' when I get it I'll hold it for you. If you want my advice, Cassidy, get out of town. I'm not gonna stand for any private war in La Paz."

It's quite possible that the marshal was surprised at the way Red agreed with him, for Red ordinarily wasn't a man who took orders. And it may be that he felt a little proud of the way he was handling this.

"You'd better get out now," the lawman added.

Red Cassidy nodded. He found and saddled his horse and then Bennie's, and a few minutes later he and Bennie Johns were headed south. Bennie was still grumbling.

CHAPTER III.

KIDNAPER KIDNAPED.

WHERE are we goin'?" Bennie asked after a while.

"Mexico."

Bennie pulled up. "Mexico! Across the border? Maybe you are, but not me, Red. I want to go on livin' for a while."

Red Cassidy chuckled. "Why, Bennie?"

Bennie Johns scratched his head. "Five hundred pesos," he said. "That's what they're offerin' for you

in Mexico, Red, an' there ain't a man south of the border who wouldn't like to collect it. Why, shucks, they'd turn you in for nothin' but the honor of havin' helped to capture the Mad Gringo."

"Maybe."

"Maybe! That's the truth, an' you know it. You're slippin', Red. You walked right into that stable in La Paz like a lamb. That ain't like you."

"I was thinking of something."

"An' you let some of those men who jumped us get away."

Red grinned. "They won't get far. Everyone thinks that they got the money I won. They'll have some tall explainin' to do to the man who sent them."

Bennie grunted. They were riding on, now, and after a while he asked again why they were going to Mexico, and Red told him of Hannah's request.

"An' you fell for it, huh?" Bennie growled. "How are we gonna find Solano? Tell me that."

"We'll find him," Red promised.

"An' if we do, how are we gonna get Jim McNeil away, an' what makes you think that McNeil's worth savin'?"

"She asked it," Red answered.

"So you're still crazy about her."

"No."

Bennie grunted. "Like blazes you're not. They're right, down there below the border. They call you the Mad Gringo. It's a good name. Go ahead if you feel like it. Go ahead an' get yourself killed. I'm stayin' where it's healthy."

Bennie pulled up again, and Red looked around at him and then said, "Sure, Bennie. So long."

He rode on alone and after a while looked back. Bennie Johns was following him.

SOME dozen miles south of the border lay the town of Escalon, which, by some trick of fate, was the seat of the provincial government. It was a small, dingy town on a sun-baked plateau, and its crumbling adobe buildings looked more like old ruins than places of habitation. Even the governor's home was little better than the others, and the army barracks were a positive disgrace.

The governor of this province, by name, Don Mario Morales, was still a young man, and had come out here with a great enthusiasm for his work. The sight of the town had shocked him, and the attitude of the soldier garrison had been another shock. The soldiers here were not the smart, well-equipped troops he had expected. They were dirty and ragged, and many were even without shoes. In addition to this they were lazy, and the discipline was lax.

It took a day or two for Don Mario Morales to surmount the keen disappointment he experienced, but after that he set to work to improve things. Beyond his ordinary responsibilities as governor, another task faced him. Somewhere in the mountains of this province, the outlawed Solano was in hiding, probably hatching another plot against the government. It was Morales' job to capture Solano, and he meant to do it; but he knew he could never succeed with the kind of an armed force he had inherited. He had to revamp his men first.

He explained all that in his reports to the president, but it seemed that the officials in Mexico City didn't understand, and now, after three months, nearly every post from the south brought its tart demands that Solano be arrested and

its vague hints as to what might happen to Don Morales should he fail.

Today's mail had been even more pointed in what it had said, and tonight the governor was restless in his sleep, and suddenly was wide awake and perspiring and listening for the sound that had seemed to come to him just a moment before. After a moment he reached out and felt for the lamp beside his bed, struck a match and lit it, and then caught his breath and sat upright, staring across the room with fear-widened eyes.

A short, swarthy man in a ragged uniform was leaning against the far wall near an open window. There was a gun in his hand, and it was pointed at the governor.

"Who . . . who are you?" Morales managed to gasp. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

His visitor came forward, and something in the way he moved reminded the governor of a huge cat stalking its prey. The governor bit his lips. He had never thought himself a coward, but right now he wasn't so sure.

"Who . . . who are you?" he managed again.

THE short, swarthy man stopped a foot or two from his bed. "I am Captain Landeros," he announced. "You have perhaps heard the name. I serve under Solano."

Don Mario Morales moistened his lips. He was sure, now, that this man meant to murder him. Perhaps on his last search into the hills he had come uncomfortably close to Solano's hidden camp.

"What do you want?"

Landeros shook his head. "Nothing. I thought that perhaps you might want—Solano!"

There was a slight noise at the window. The governor's eyes flicked that way, thinking that perhaps the guard had been made curious by the light in his room. No one showed up at the window, however, and the governor's eyes turned back toward his visitor. All at once he was feeling much better. This was the kind of a break he had been hoping for. He was already convinced that unless Solano could be betrayed, he would never be caught.

"I do want Solano," he admitted. "Can you lead me to where he is hidden?"

Landeros grinned. "I can do better than that. I can deliver him to you, bound and helpless."

"When?"

"Within a week."

This was too good to be true. The governor leaned forward. "The reward offered for his capture is five thousand pesos in gold. I will see that you receive it—and I will ask no questions."

"But that is not enough."

The governor frowned. He was not a wealthy man, but the capture of Solano should bring him a fine promotion and a better income. "Ten thousand," he offered.

"Still not enough."

Morales sucked in a long, slow breath. "That is—the best I can do. I—"

"It is not nearly the best you can do, governor. You can recommend me for your post when you leave here and until then you can make me your personal aid—all this, of course, in addition to the ten thousand pesos."

"I could never guarantee a thing like that."

"You will if you want Solano."

"But—"

"Do you mind if I join you?" asked a voice from the window.

LANDEROS jerked around and looked that way, then dropped his gun and lifted his hands and backed off until the governor could catch a glimpse of Landeros' face, suddenly strained and pale. Morales, however, was only vaguely aware of that. He, too, was staring at the window, staring at the thin, red-headed American who was leaning into the room and who had such an audacious grin on his face and who had spoken in such perfect Spanish when he had asked permission to join them.

"Cassidy," Landeros breathed. "Red Cassidy, the Mad Gringo."

The governor blinked. He had heard of Cassidy, whom men called the Mad Gringo, but he had never expected to meet him. Cassidy, he had understood, had escaped across the border, and Morales had never thought that the man would return. Still, next to Solano, there was no one whose capture would give Morales more pleasure. The tales he had heard of the prowess of the Mad Gringo were almost like legends. Certainly, great honor would fall to the man who should take him. There were guards nearby. If Morales could only summon them—

"What do you want, Cassidy?" Landeros asked huskily.

"You," Red answered. "Come along, Landeros, or shall I come in and get you?"

Landeros swallowed. "What . . . what do you want of me?"

"We'll talk about that later. Come on. I'm in a hurry."

Landeros edged forward very slowly. Red watched him and kept an eye on the governor as well. He and Bennie had spotted Landeros an hour before in one of the saloons on the square and had followed him,

when he left, meaning to make him a prisoner. Only the fact that he had headed for the governor's residence before leaving town had held them back. Curious as to what Landeros could want of the governor, Red and Bennie had moved in after him. Red was glad, now, that they hadn't jumped Landeros any sooner.

There was a gun on the table near the governor's bed, and the governor's hand slid that way. Red shook his head at the governor. He said, "Don't try it, governor. Of course, I'm sorry that you can't go through with this little scheme, but Solano is really too fine a man to end up in front of a firing squad. He—"

Landeros, nearing the window, stepped between Red and the governor, and the governor grabbed for his gun. Red reached out and caught Landeros by the coat, jerked him forward out through the window. The governor fired, and then smashed out the lamp and fired again and began shouting for the guards.

Bennie Johns, waiting outside the window at Red's side, caught Landeros' body as it spilled through the window. He smashed his gun over the outlaw's head, shouldered him and started away. A blast of gunfire raked at them from the adjoining barracks as the soldiers who were answering the governor's warning caught sight of them. Red swung around and threw several shots toward the barracks, then caught up with Bennie at the gate. Their horses were across the square, but there were other horses nearer. They took the first three they could reach, tied the unconscious figure of the outlaw across one of them and mounted the others and raced out

of town. Behind them, a swift pursuit was being organized.

CHAPTER IV.

RENEGADE OUTLAWS.

TWO nights later, deep in the hills beyond the plateau town of Escalon, Red Cassidy, Bennie Johns and their prisoner, all three exhausted, made camp. The past forty-eight hours had been hard ones. Time and again it had seemed as though the soldiers Morales was leading had cornered them, but on each occasion they had managed to wriggle out of the trap. At dusk, this evening, they had again escaped and, for the time being, had shaken pursuit. But it would be renewed in the morning, Red was sure of that.

Landeros had been no help to them. He had refused to talk, insisting that he knew nothing of Jim McNeil or of Solano's hidden camp; but Red, because he knew that Landeros could lead him to Solano, had refused to let the man go.

After a half-hour's rest, Red got up and moved over to where Landeros was lying. "Which way, Landeros?" he asked bluntly.

Landeros shook his head. "I don't know."

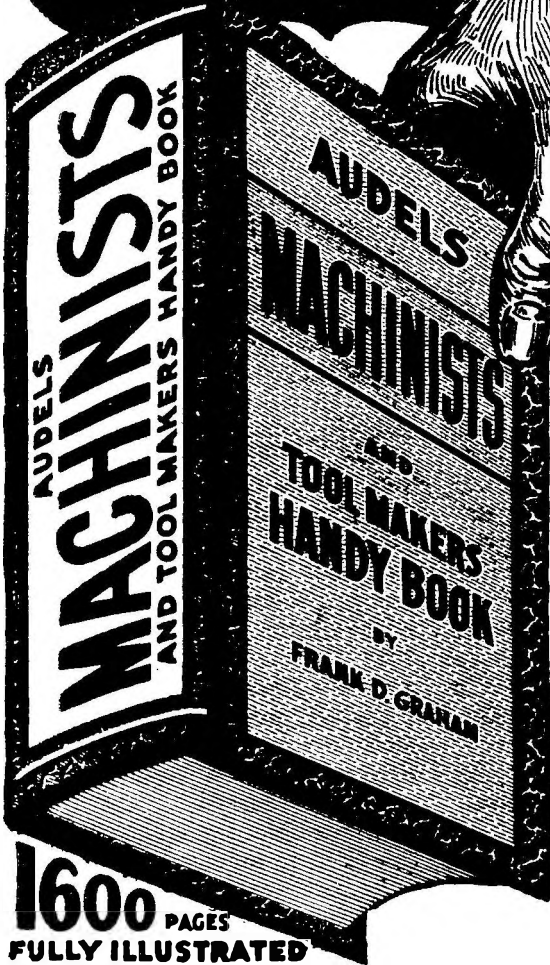
Red's lips tightened. He reached down and hauled the man to his feet, chopped a fist at his face and buried his other fist in the man's stomach. Landeros started yelling, dropped to the ground and hugged it, but Red pulled him up again.

It wasn't pleasant work which followed, but after a few minutes more Landeros was babbling out directions; and in another half-hour they moved on again.

Dawn found them still deeper into the hills, and during all the next

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Continued from page 100

day there was no sign of any pursuit. Morales seemed to have given up—though Red doubted it.

They rested that night, Red and Bennie taking turns guarding their prisoner. Red, who stood the first watch, awoke with the dawn to find Solano sitting near him and to see a crowd of the man's followers overrunning the camp. He sat up and grinned and stuck out his hand, and Solano clasped it.

"The Mad Gringo," Solano cried with delight. "He is back again. A new day has come for my country."

Red made no immediate answer. He rolled a cigarette and then passed the tobacco and papers to Solano. Bennie was lying in the shade of a tree, asleep. Landeros wasn't anywhere around.

"I could never have sent for you," Solano went on. "I could not have expected you to return. Still you have come."

"Landeros showed me the way," Red said slowly. "Where is he?"

"He has gone on to our main camp. He has been away on a mission for me."

There was no hint of suspicion in Solano's voice. Red stared at the man. Solano was thinner than he had been and looked much older. His shoulders were stooped, and there wasn't a very good color in his face. Only his voice and his words seemed natural. It was hard to face him and realize that here was the man who had almost upset the government of Mexico, who had rallied thousands to his cause and who had battled the strongest forces which could be sent against him for more than a year. He didn't look dangerous at all.

"You getting ready again?" Red asked.

"The day has almost come."

"Revolutions cost money."

"The money is being provided by another American who believes in liberty, who had joined us just as you and your friend Bennie Johns."

Red scowled. "Who is this new recruit? Jim McNeil?"

"You know him?"

"Yes."

Solano stood up. "That is good. He is at our main camp, not far from here. As soon as you have eaten, we will go."

Food was brought, and someone aroused Bennie, who joined Red.

"I didn't say nothin' about Landeros when Solano got here," Bennie explained. "I don't think Solano would have believed me. He seemed too glad to see that snake. Maybe he'll believe you, but I doubt it."

Red Cassidy grunted. He paid little attention to Bennie's words. He was trying to figure out the other angle. It was possible, he knew, that Jim McNeil might have joined Solano and might have written the ransom note in order to raise the money Solano needed. Red had to recognize the possibility. But at the same time he couldn't believe that Jim McNeil was the kind of man who would ever invite the personal danger present in a cause like this. It would seem much more likely that Jim might try a scheme such as this to raise money for himself. And if that were true, Landeros was probably in it with him. The two were only using Solano to hide behind him.

"Are you ready, my friend?" Solano called.

Red, anxious to move on, nodded and stood up. Yet, as they headed toward Solano's camp he became aware of a vague and disturbing uneasiness.

THERE were probably fifty men in Solano's camp. A good many of them Red knew, and during the morning he had an opportunity to talk to some of them. In the main, they seemed glad to see him, but a few of them acted rather strangely and were hesitant in their greeting. Red marked that and wondered about it. He didn't get to see Jim McNeil or Landeros. They were busy, Solano explained vaguely. Red would get to see them tonight.

Red tried to hide his impatience. He took a long afternoon siesta, awoke in time for an early dinner,



and a short time later was summoned to Solano's cabin by a man whose life he had once saved but who wouldn't meet Red's look.

"I don't like the looks of things," Bennie grumbled. "There's somethin' wrong about all this. Red, I'm goin' along."

Red Cassidy scowled. "Bennie," he said, "Solano's getting old. He has the same dreams that he once had but he isn't so keen. I don't like the looks of things, either. I sorta wish you hadn't come along."

"To blazes with that."

Red's scowl deepened. He meant it, but it was too late now for any regrets, and deep in his heart he knew that Bennie would have followed him, no matter what the odds. Just as Red would have followed Bennie. The bond of friendship between them was deep and strong.

"Let's get over there," Bennie grunted.

Red nodded. He headed for Solano's cabin, spoke to the guard at the door and then knocked. Someone opened the door, and he and Bennie stepped inside and then came to a sudden stop. Half a dozen guns covered them, guns in the hands of Landeros and McNeil and four other men whom Red didn't know. Solano was there, all right, but he lay on his side in the far corner of the room, his arms and legs bound tightly together. He was unconscious, and a cut above his temple was bleeding a little.

"You will stand perfectly still, señores, while one of us removes your guns," Landeros ordered.

Red had lifted his hands. He heard a growl of anger from Bennie Johns, and he glanced quickly at Bennie and shook his head. "Let's play along, Bennie," he said, aloud but indifferently. "Landeros seems to be in the saddle, but a good many of the men around here ain't gonna like it. They think too much of Solano."

There was a mocking smile on Landeros' face. He spoke to one of the other men in the room, and that man edged around and grabbed at Bennie's gun and then at Red's. He was very careful not to get too close to either one of them.

Red stared at Jim McNeil. The man was thin and flushed with excitement, his eyes narrowed and cruel. The notion suddenly came to Red Cassidy that McNeil had at

last found his true level, that he really belonged with a crowd like this.

"I SUPPOSE my wife sent you after me," McNeil said suddenly. "That would be like her. My loving wife."

There was a slur in McNeil's voice that struck at Red with all the force of a blow. A hot, choking anger swept over him, and he took a step forward but was brought up sharply by the way McNeil's hand tightened over his gun.

"Yeah, that's it," McNeil nodded. "She thought that you could save me, or maybe the old man put her up to it, but when you don't come back they'll dig up the money we demanded. After all, I'm Hannah's husband, and the Dugans have as much pride as they have money. Matt Dugan hates me, but he would never let it be said that he refused to pay a ransom for his daughter's husband. He'd never let the world know what he thought of me."

Landeros stared over at McNeil. "Enough talk," he grated. "We have work to do. Go get the horses, McNeil."

Jim McNeil moved over toward the door, and, as he passed Red Cassidy, Red kicked him in the shin. A howl of pain broke from McNeil's lips. He stabbed a fist at Red's face, but Red jerked out of the way, then moved in and smashed a fist into McNeil's stomach and, as the man doubled over, lifted a solid blow to his jaw.

The others in the cabin were closing in. But it came to Red suddenly that they didn't want to use their guns, didn't want to explain why gunfire had been necessary.

"All right, Bennie, let's take 'em," he yelled, and threw himself toward Landeros.

Bennie gave a satisfied grunt and

charged forward. He didn't look like much of a fighter, but, in a brawl like this, Red had never seen the man's equal. He was quick and could hit hard and knew how to use his fists and feet and head. He butted one man out of the way, reeled into another and carried him to the floor, rolled away and grabbed at the legs of a third man. In a moment, then, he was free and had grabbed at one of the crude chairs in the room and was smashing it at two men who were closing in on him.

All this Red Cassidy glimpsed as he ducked under the slashing gun in Landeros' hand and staggered him backward with a blow in the face. As Red burrowed in at the others, the cabin door opened, and the guard appeared in the entrance. He started a scream of warning, but one of Landeros' men hauled him inside, jerked the guard's rifle away and broke its stock over his head. Someone else closed the door.

For a while after that it was a good fight, but Landeros and the others were too many for Red and Bennie. Someone got behind Red Cassidy and slammed a gun down on his head, and a film of pain half blinded him. He drove forward at the nearest of his enemies, but his legs wouldn't hold him up. Near where he had fallen he caught a glimpse of Bennie Johns. Bennie was down, too, but was still fighting. Red rolled over. He kicked up at one of the men, then was aware of another sharp but numbing pain in his head, and a heavy blanket of darkness closed in over him.

WHEN he recovered consciousness Red was bound hand and foot and was lying on the cabin floor between Bennie Johns and Solano.

The lamp, tied to the cabin's rafters, was smoking up its chimney, and the light wasn't good. But Red could make out Landeros and two other men in the far corner of the room. Landeros' face was puffed, and one eye was swollen shut. The other men didn't look much better.

"How you feelin', Red?" Bennie asked.

"No so good," Red mumbled.

He wasn't. He had a notion that someone was trying to beat in his head with a hammer and that one ear was torn off.

"We got some real action for a while, didn't we?" Bennie went on. "Yep, for a while it was pretty good."

Landeros came over to where the three of them were lying. He kicked Solano experimentally but the man

was apparently still unconscious. Landeros transferred his attention to Red Cassidy.

"What's next on the program?" Red asked, staring up at him.

Landeros' cracked lips parted in what was meant to be his mocking smile. "A little trip, señor," he answered, "and then, perhaps, the firing squad."


"You mean—"

"I mean that while I was gone, today, I rode back to see the governor, who was still on our trail. I had previously promised him Solano, but he will also be glad to take the Mad Gringo and his fat shadow off my hands."

Red wasn't much surprised. This was about what he should have expected of Landeros.

There was a faint knock on the window. Landeros stepped that

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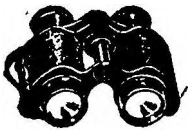


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way and opened it, spoke to the men outside and then, with the help of the men in the cabin, lifted Solano's body through the open window. Bennie Johns was next, and after Bennie it was Red's turn.

There were horses outside the cabin, and Solano, Bennie and Red were tied across three of the animals, like so many sacks of grain. Not far away there was a huge campfire and the sounds of drunken revelry. In order to cover this departure, Landeros had apparently supplied the camp with plenty of liquor and had taken care of the guards. Red considered yelling for help, but he knew that the only probable result would be a blow over his head.

Someone started the horses toward the pass, and the sounds from the camp gradually faded away.

CHAPTER V.

PASSPORT FROM A PADRE.

THE jail in Escalon was of thick adobe construction, and the barred window and door were strong and secure. An armed guard surrounded it at all times. During most of each day, crowds of children and even adults could be seen through the steel-barred door, watching, perhaps, for a glimpse of Solano or of that strange man called the Mad Gringo and his fat pardner.

Occasionally, Governor Morales would come down to the jail to look in on his prisoners and assure himself that this wasn't all a dream and that he had really taken them. He walked straighter, now, with a definite swagger in his bearing, anxiously awaiting his instructions from Mexico City and the commendations which would naturally come with them. Perhaps it was the commendations he was most anxious to see. He had no question about what the fate of the three men would

be. Their guilt was well known. A firing squad had already been chosen.

There were two things, however, which troubled the governor. The first was the attitude of his new aid, Captain Pancho Landeros. Pancho Landeros was assuming too much authority to suit him. And second, he couldn't understand the attitude of the three prisoners. They didn't seem at all worried over their fate. Solano, he knew from the guards' reports, expected his men to come to his aid, but if they did they would be warmly received. He had made sure of that.

It was a week after the three prisoners had been lodged in the jail that the American woman came to see him. She was tall and beautiful but more pale than suited the governor's taste, and he at first refused her request to see the condemned men. After thinking the matter over, however, he decided that if her conversation with the men could be overheard it might give him some clue as to what their plans were for escape, for surely they had some plans. Consequently he had a guard who understood English conduct her to the door of the prison.

Red looked up when he heard Hannah speaking his name, then got to his feet and crossed over to the barred door. "You should never have come here, Hannah," he said sharply. "You had better get back across the border. You—"

Hannah was shaking her head. There were tears in her eyes. "Red, I wouldn't have had this happen for anything in the world," she murmured bitterly. "[...] I didn't want you to cross the border. I've made a mess of everything, Red. My own life and yours and Bennie's. I wish

I'd never been born."

Red managed a grin. "Chin up, Hannah," he said. "I'll get out of here. I've been in tighter holes than this one."

The guard who had accompanied Hannah looked suddenly very interested. Red winked at him. "We're tunneling out," he whispered sarcastically.

Hannah bit her lip. "Red, dad's doing everything that he can to help you. He wired the president and every senator whose name he could get. I think he blames himself for all that has happened. If you and he hadn't quarreled and if I hadn't been so stubborn— Red, I don't want Jim back so bad that you have to face a firing squad."

There wasn't a bit of color in the girl's face. Her shoulders sagged, all of her fine pride was gone. Red stared out at her wide eyes, his hands gripping the bars on the door until his knuckles showed white, and suddenly felt strong enough to tear the door open.

"I'll get out of here," he said again, and this time he meant it. "I'll get out of here, Hannah. There's nothing can stop me, now."

HANNAH would have said more, but the guard took her arm and led her away. Red watched her until he could see her no longer, and then he became aware of Bennie's voice.

"An' how are we gonna get out of here, Red?" Bennie was asking. "Tell me that. How are we gonna get out?"

Red sucked in a long, slow breath. He shook his head, unable to give any answer. They had discussed every possible means of escape during the past week, but no plan that had come to them seemed at all practical.

That day passed and then another, and with the third day there came dispatches from Mexico City, the dispatches that the governor had expected. A form of court-martial had been held immediately after the three men had been arrested, and the sentence of the court had been approved. There remained now only the matter of execution.

Morales doubled the guard around the jail and throughout the town and issued an order for the execution on the following dawn. And then he turned to other and more pleasant tasks. The day before he had met a girl named Rosa Valdez—not the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, but certainly pretty enough to be the governor's wife. And tonight she had agreed to visit him.

He was eagerly awaiting her an hour after dusk, and when there came a knock on the door he opened it, expecting it to be she. Instead, however, the stooped, black-frocked figure of Father Antonio was waiting outside.

Morales was only slightly acquainted with Father Antonio, whose mission was above the border, but who occasionally came to Escalon. Ordinarily Morales would have invited the priest in and talked with him, but tonight the governor was anxious to be free.

"What is it, padre?" he asked, frowning.

"I have come to see the men who are to die," Father Antonio answered.

The governor's frown deepened, but he knew that he couldn't refuse Father Antonio's request. It was customary to allow a condemned man the comfort of a priest. He turned back into the house, scrawled

out an order to the guard and carried it to Father Antonio who thanked him and started away.

CHAPTER VI.

PATRIOT POWDER SMOKE.

THERE was a faint smile on Father Antonio's face as he looked at Red Cassidy and Bennie Johns. Solano, shortly after the priest's entrance, had dropped on his knees for a benediction, but Red and Bennie were still standing.

Father Antonio spoke quietly. "It would be well, my sons, if you and your friend should kneel, too. That way it would look better to the guards who are just outside, and it might be easier, too, for you to reach under my robe and secure the pistols that are strapped to my legs."

Red caught his breath. "Pistols!" "Six-guns, I think you call them."

Red mopped a hand over his face.

"I guess that money you gave him is beginnin' to pay off," Bennie muttered.

"No, son, it is not the money," Father Antonio answered. "I am here because I dislike injustice and admire the courage of men who stand in the path of tyranny. Solano is no outlaw, but rather is a patriot. It is not right that he should die. And, as for you two, there is work for you yet to do."

Red dropped down on his knees. "What work, father?"

"There is a man in Escalon named Landeros. He carried a note across the border to Señor Dugan, demanding money for the release of Señor Dugan's son-in-law, who was not held prisoner as the note said but who was really an associate of this man Landeros. Señor Dugan refused to pay. Since your arrest, however, Señor Dugan's daughter has come to Escalon, as you know,

and it is now the plan of this man Landeros to kidnap her. He has told her he will help you escape. She is to ride away with him to where he has told her Solano's men are waiting. But she will not find Solano's men, for such of them as are loyal to Solano are already in town."

Red reached under the priest's robe. He found a gun and passed it to Bennie, passed another to Solano and kept the third for himself. "Where is she?" he demanded.

"She is to meet Landeros in the square. Perhaps she is there now."

The priest turned away, moved back to the door and rattled it. A guard stepped up and turned the key in the lock, and suddenly, as Father Antonio stepped outside, there was a rattle of gunfire from each side of the jail, and the shout, "Solano! Solano!" seemed to rise from a hundred throats.

Father Antonio stepped quickly to one side, and Red rushed forward and thrust the door wide open. A shot from one of the guards tugged at the shoulder of his coat as Red tore out and headed toward the square. Bennie came pounding after him, and behind Bennie came Solano.

A high, shrill order sounded from Solano's throat, and a score of his ragged warriors appeared outside the barracks, blazing away lead at the soldiers and shouting the name of their leader. One of them reached the place where Solano was standing, threw himself from the saddle and handed over his reins. He didn't hear Solano's order to remount and instead raced straight ahead on foot.

Red Cassidy saw all that in a hurried look that he threw over his shoulder. He saw Solano pull himself into the saddle and heard him scream at his men to turn back. Red stumbled and almost fell,

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caught his balance and ran on. The square was just ahead and was almost deserted, but at one corner Red caught a glimpse of Hannah and Landeros. They were both staring toward the jail, toward him. Landeros had drawn his gun.

Red brought up his own gun and fired, and he saw Landeros twitch and then clutch at the girl and jerk her in front of him. A bullet whistled past Red's ear, but he kept hurrying forward. Hannah had jerked away, now, and Red fired again and saw Landeros twist half around and go down. In another moment Red had reached the girl's side.

THE sudden burst of firing and the shouts and sounds of confusion in the town shocked the smile from the governor's face. He had been pouring Rosa Valdez a glass of wine when those shots drove away all thoughts of the girl from his mind. He grabbed at his gun and hurried to the door and opened it. For just a minute he stood there, trying to orient himself to the scene before his eyes. He didn't hear Rosa's light step behind him or see the motion of her arm as it lifted and fell. The heavy wine bottle crashed over his head, and all consciousness was blotted out in a sudden veil of darkness.

Rosa Valdez caught her breath and stepped back. She looked down at the figure on the floor, and a brief, tight smile showed on her face. Her part in this hadn't amounted to much, but she was glad to have helped even this little. Without the governor to direct things there would be a delay in organizing any pursuit.

Stooping over, Rosa pulled the man's body away from the door and then closed and locked it. She got out through the window and hurried away.

Bennie Johns came pounding up behind Red Cassidy. He stopped, jerked around and fired a couple of times at a score of soldiers who were coming after him.

"Come on, Red!" he screamed. "Let's get out of here."

Red clutched Hannah's hand and hurried her toward the closest buildings, but stopped as he saw Solano riding toward him. From somewhere, Solano had secured three horses, and he pulled up near Red and threw him the reins. "Ride, amigo!" he called. "Ride for the hills. The new day has come."

There was a high excitement in Solano's voice. After a year of hiding he was again tasting the sweets of victory. In this momentary confusion in Escalon he saw the defeat of an oppressor.

Red gave the reins of one of the horses to Bennie, helped Hannah to mount another and turned to the third horse himself. But he didn't mount it. From the shadows of a nearby building there stepped a thin, gaunt figure, the figure of Jim McNeil. There was a leveled gun in McNeil's hand, and a burst of flame tore from its muzzle. Red felt a lick of pain across his neck, and jerked up his own gun; but Bennie suddenly rode between him and McNeil, and Bennie's gun was spitting fire.

Red clawed himself into the saddle of his horse. He caught a glimpse of Hannah staring wide-eyed at the reeling figure of Jim McNeil, who fell dead in the street. Bennie twisted around and kicked at Hannah's horse, his face tight and ugly. "Let's move on," he grated. "I've had enough of this town."

Solano and his men were being driven back by a stubborn, fighting crowd of soldiers, and, even as Bennie was speaking, the first of them broke and raced for the outskirts of the town and the distant hills. Once more, Red realized, Solano was going into hiding where he would dream his dreams of the Utopia he had planned, but which a man could never bring to pass. And from the shadow of the jail, as Red looked back, he saw Father Antonio moving to the side of a wounded soldier in the street. He didn't want to leave here without Father Antonio, but he knew that the priest wouldn't leave as long as he was needed. Besides, Father Antonio wouldn't be blamed for the escape. Solano's patriots would get the credit.

"Come on, Red," Bennie was calling.

He and Hannah had started away, and Red nodded and galloped after them. To the north lay the border and a freedom of such a kind as Solano only dreamed. To the north lay happiness and a calm and peaceful life. Red Cassidy hurried to catch up with Bennie and Hannah.

Behind them, the firing stopped; soon there would be a pursuit, but they had too good a start to be caught.

Bennie noticed Red's smile and grunted. "The Mad Gringo settles down," he muttered. "An' that suits me just fine—or does it?"

He scowled at the ears of his horse. He was still scowling a few hours later when they had crossed the border and didn't have to hurry any more. Red and Hannah rode close together now.



READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West Weekly, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.



FROM THE SHOW-ME STATE

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just finished reading the May 23rd issue of 3W. The magazine was very good. Following is a report of my opinions of the seven stories in that number:

1. "Brand of the Striking Snake," by Sam H. Nickels, was a very good story. Hope Mr. Nickels gives us more Hungry and Rusty stories like it.

2. "Trouble Hunter at Bay," by James P. Webb, was almost as good as the above-mentioned story. Blacky Solone, from my point of view, is a very fine character.

3. "Powder-smoke Pascar," by Archie Joselyn, was a very good short story.

4. "Last Call for Killers," by C. William Harrison; this was the best story ever written by Mr. Harrison; let's have more like it.

The other three: "Hot Lead Buys a Tombstone," by Dean Owen; "Pay Dirt for Outlaws," by Edwin K. Sloat, and "Six-gun Survey," by Ralph Yergen, were all about the same.

Now to ask some questions. What in tarnation has happened to the Wranglers Corner? Where's Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral wandered off to? Huh?

I like most all the 3W characters, especially the old ones. Say, what's happened to the fun U twins? Have Charles E. Barnes write a story for us.

The Readers' Branding Irons is the best department in 3W. Cow Country Spanish isn't any good. But Quinc Sabé? is all right.

Adios,

E. A. Brown.

Kennett, Missouri.

Give us more story ratings one of these times, pard. As for the Wranglers Corner, we didn't think it was too popular with readers other than those who contributed

to it. Fiddlin' Joe ran out of songs to publish. Author of the Bar U twins stories is in retirement.



ARKANSAS TRAVELER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have just put the June 13th issue with the rest of my 3Ws. Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, Sonny Tabor, Tommy Rockford, Blacky Solone and the Circle J pards are my favorites.

"Blind Man's Trail," by J. Allan Dunn, was the first story I read in your magazine. The best continued story you ever published was "Gunhawk's Gamble," by Walker Tompkins.

Brand this note with a big YES.

You can't please everybody a hundred percent--so 3W is all right the way it is. Keep the girls in, too.

Yours till Kid Wolf gets a lickin'.

HOMER BYNUM.

Russellville, Arkansas.



KENTUCKY SPINNER

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been a steady reader of Wild West Weekly for a number of years, and think it's one of the best darn magazines on the newsstands anywhere. I have read about every brand of Western magazine, and I still rate 3W tops.

Say, boss, every now and then I find a tall tale in your Chat With the Range Boss. Being pretty good at spinning long yarns myself, I thought I send you one of mine. Here goes:

I've heard a lot of talk about the coldness of the weather up North. But, shucks, let me tell you, they don't know what cold weather is. I remember the time I was firing a saw-mill boiler, and one of these cold spells

struck. I had that boiler popping at two hundred fifty pounds. Believe it or not, that dang boiler froze up, and the saw stopped dead in the center of the log. The steam issuing from the whistle froze, too—in the shape of a huge mushroom! Pretty cold, huh?

DEWARD STEVENS.

Lancet, Kentucky.

That's a right tall one, pardner. But don't think we ain't a-believin' you! How's about some more whoppers from you readers?



TEXICAN CRITIC

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been reading 3W for quite a spell, and I must say that for a while it got pretty bad. But now it's getting better right along, especially since you've brought back the Oklahoma Kid and some of the others. But you should bring them back more often.

Give us more of the Oklahoma Kid, Blacky Solone, Silver Kid, Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Circle J and Hungry and Rusty.

Boss, I must say you don't bring these characters in enough.

But your mag or should I say *our* mag?—is still the best, at its worst, even.

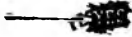
I want to say again that I think the Oklahoma Kid is the best of all.

Yours till Ed Sparks becomes a friend of the Oklahoma Kid!

Mrs. R. L. CAMPBELL.

Houston, Texas.

Ma'am, that's sort of a backhanded compliment. But we'll take it as approval, till we hear from you again.



FLYIN' HIGH

Howdy, Boss: This is to thank you for the swell yarns you've been printin' lately. You've shore got an eye peeled for quality when you put yore lasso on a Risky McKee or a Circle J story.

Yore magazine has been my favorite for nigh onto eight y'ars; you shore print the best. The Silver Kid, though, is my particular hero, and I haven't seen him in a long spell. Is he goin' to ride any more for 3W? I'd give plenty to see him burn a bullet brand on an owlhooter again.

Boss, it ain't natural for all them good-lookin' cowpokes to do nothin' but ridin' and shootin'. How about rustlin' up a few spunky gals for 'em?

Yores till Sufferin' Joe gets cattle ticks,
U. S. army air corps. PRIVATE R.

The Silver Kid will likely return in an early issue, pardner. Can't be certain, though. As for the gals, most of our readers object to more than an occasional one in this hyar magazine. Good luck to you up thar in the sky!

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¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers

Continued from page 54

1. *Seventy-five years ago, it was a leading shipping point for trail herds. Today it is one of the great national centers for devotees of greyhound racing.*
2. *Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was highly successful, but Wild Bill's dramatic offering came to grief in St. Louis.*
3. *Westport, Missouri, and Wyandot, Kansas. The latter got its name because it was founded by Wyandot Indians.*
4. *Since this city is the railroad division point between Central and Mountain time, watches must be set back or ahead one hour when crossing this point.*
5. *April 22nd. This is the birthday of J. Sterling Morton, who promoted the Arbor Day idea and later was secretary of agriculture. Its purpose is to promote replanting in areas where trees have disappeared.*
6. *Isaac Cody, proprietor of Cody's Tavern, an inn located in Leavenworth County, Kansas.*
7. *Bismark, North Dakota; Carson City, Nevada; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.*
8. *The Texas. A "thumb buster" was a cowboy's pet name for a single-action, single-shot pistol.*
9. *In order, they are: Eight; six; two legs to each segment of the body, the total number of legs depending on the number of segments in the body, which varies in species.*
10. *It is a tent-shaped structure of poles thatched with grass. In the 1850s these structures were erected by settlers of Kansas where no other building material was available. The first religious service in Lawrence, Kansas, was held in a hay house.*

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Reduce Pounds and Inches Without Danger from Abdomen, Chin, Hips, Thighs, Neck, Legs, Arms

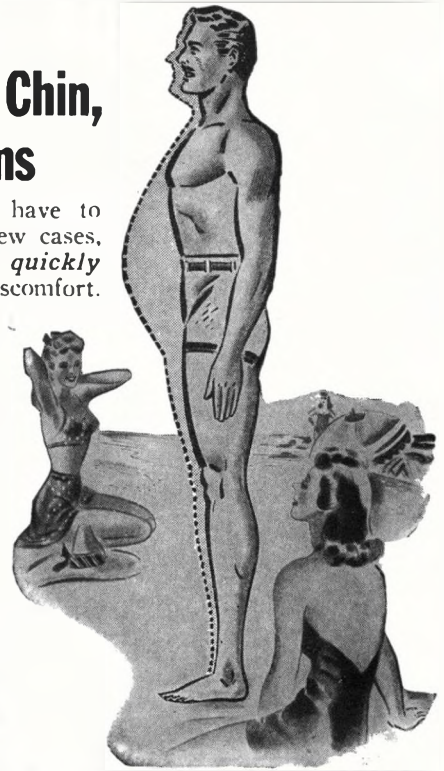
Modern science now shows that most fat people don't have to remain overweight any longer. Except a comparatively few cases, every one of these thousands of persons can now reduce *quickly and safely* . . . without unwarranted diets, exercise or discomfort.

SOMETHING NEW . . . SAFE, EASY, QUICK

Are you one of these thousands, most of whom have tried to reduce by following food fads, menus, etc. . . . and failed? If you are, here's something new, what modern science has discovered on reducing foods, drugs and devices. Here's how you can reduce scientifically, with new health and attractiveness . . . and without unnecessary exercise, dieting, massage, etc.

Simple Directions . . . Guaranteed Harmless

The "Complete Weight Reducer," a wonderful new book, has just published these marvelous reducing revelations. No matter how overweight you may be from non-glandular dysfunctions, these measures will help slim you considerably in a few short weeks. Just follow the simple directions on general reducing and spot reducing on abdomen, double chin, neck, thighs, arms, legs, hips, etc., at once and your reducible pounds and inches of excess fat will go down, down, down . . . until you soon feel like a different person, with new pep and popularity.



Endorsed in Medical Journals

Illinois Medical Journal says: "Can be used quickly and easily." Michigan State Medical Journal says: "Gives positive advice and instructions." Medical World says: "Should be read from cover to cover before starting any treatment." Journal of American Osteopathic Assn. says: "Of value to physicians and laymen alike."

Also praised by many editors and columnists all over U. S. A.



Send No Money Examine It Free

You need send no money—just mail coupon now. We will send you the "Complete Weight Reducer" for 5 days' free examination. When it arrives, deposit \$1.98 (plus a few cents for postage and handling) with the postman. Follow its simple instructions immediately and start reducing. If within 5 days you are not convinced that this shows you the way to considerable weight loss, pounds and inches, you may return it and we will instantly refund your deposit of \$1.98 in full. Remember you risk nothing in mailing the coupon. This is your great opportunity of becoming slimmer and slimmer. So act NOW!

Mail This Coupon Today!

HARVEST HOUSE

70 Fifth Avenue, Dept. J-668, New York

Please send me at once in plain package, for 5 days' free examination, the COMPLETE WEIGHT REDUCER. When it arrives, I will deposit \$1.98 (plus a few cents for postage and handling) with the postman. If within 5 days of following its simple reducing instructions, I am not completely satisfied, I may return it and you will refund my full deposit of \$1.98. Otherwise, I will keep it and the deposit will be considered payment in full.

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CITY.....STATE.....

Check here if you want to save postage. Enclose \$1.98 with coupon and we ship prepaid. Same return privilege with refund guaranteed.

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