

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST

Oct. 18, '41

WEEKLY

RIDERS OF HELL'S LEGIONS

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by PAUL S. POWERS

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OCTOBER
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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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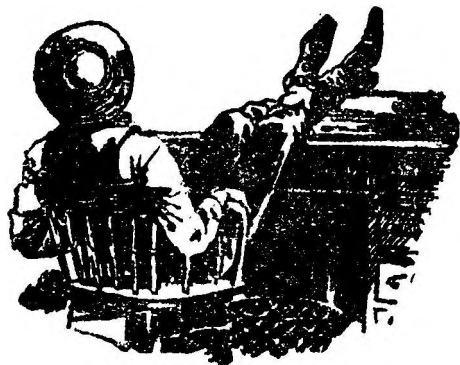
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A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

It's always interesting to hear from authors and to have them tell us how they get the plot ideas or backgrounds for fiction stories. So right off the reel, here's a letter from yore old pard, Chuck Martin, in regard to his new Rawhide Runyan novelette, which you'll find in this issue under the title of "Colt Law for Lobos."

DEAR BOSS: Last fall when I was returning home from Louisiana, I took 'er slow through east Texas to look over the country made famous by Judge Roy Bean, who called himself the Law West of the Pecos.

From Langtry south, in the 1880s, that territory was known as the deadline for sheriffs. At one place across the Pecos River, the bridge must be five hundred feet high; the high mesas are flat as a table and have been used by several despondent people for jumping-off places. Right then I got the germ of an idea for my new Rawhide Runyan story.

I also stopped to see my old pard, Captain Earl Fallis, who is now chief of the border patrol in east Texas, with offices at Alpine. Then I again visited Langtry and renewed old friendships, and every conversation had something containing that old bartending Judge Bean. Most of the char-

acters are founded on fact, so I sent Rawhide on across the Pecos River to see what he could see!

You asked in a recent published letter about the origin of the name of my prize pinto filly which I have named Palomar. She was foaled here on the ranch three years ago, and I gentle-broke her myself. I really cribbed the name from our famous mountain, fifty miles from here, where the world's largest telescope will be, or now is, located—the two-hundred-inch scope. Palomar Mountain shore pokes her crest up into the blue, but the translation of the Spanish name is disillusioning. Palomar means dove cote or pigeon house, literally.

Which brings me to a pet peeve. The Spanish word most mispronounced all over America is the breed of those beautiful Spanish horses brought over here from Spain by the conquistadors. Most people, including the breeders' clubs, call this horse the Palomino. Tell the scholars to look it up in any Spanish dictionary, and they will discover that Palomino means pigeon guano!

The correct pronunciation is Palomillo, pronounced *mío*, as the double l's are silent. It means a white or cream-colored horse. The o on the end signifies male sex, or used with an a means the female sex. But the old-time Westerners hate to hear a beautiful boss called pigeon guano!

But when I get to talking about good horses, it's a bad day for fiction writing, so I better gather up my coils and ride to the wagon for day orders. Incidentally, I am master of ceremonies tomorrow night down at Camp Callan, and one of the acts features Rex, the wonder horse, which was caught on the plains of North Carolina six years ago by a cowboy pard of mine, and trained to a frawg's hair. I knew this colt when it was eight months old, and Bill Neary, its owner and trainer, is an old range-riding saddlemate of mine from the old days too many years ago. I was punching in south Wyoming at the time, and we met on the line between Colorado and Wyoming. Could it be thirty years ago! Even then all outfits were on a wild-hoss hunt to rid the range of the scrub mustangs which ate off grass needed for good stock and also killed the valuable domestic horses. And when you have a three-hundred-dollar hoss killed by a three-dollar jughead, you soon lose your sentiment. Just let a scrub stallion get into a bunch of blooded stock and your next crop of colts is going to look like something the

dog-food canners overlooked. If Ed Repp is listening, tell him to make some romance out of that.

Like always,

CHUCK MARTIN.

You and yore pard, Señor Repp, have quite a time calling each other names and disagreeing, eh, Chuck? Well, that sort of thing is good for the soul.

Here's a note from the author of this week's complete novel. He says:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: If any of the readers doubt that such a country as the Devil's Homestead really exists, I suggest that they visit the Sunset Crater region in Coconino County, Arizona. If they do, they'll find that my descriptions are very tame compared with the real thing. This volcanic wonderland (it must have been an inferno at one time) is a little east of the beautiful, isolated San Francisco Peaks, which rise to 12,611 feet near Flagstaff. I did a little exploring around there about twelve years ago. In the lava fields are some so-called bottomless pits, formed by acid-charged waters which disintegrated the rock, or so some geologists think. All that country through there is worth visiting. Not so far from there are such marvels as Walnut Canyon with its mysterious cliff dwellings, the Painted Desert, Canyon Diablo and Meteorite Crater, to mention only a few.

Of course, the people, towns and places in "Riders of Hell's Legion" are imaginary. But then, anyone who has lived in Arizona doesn't need much imagination! Don't ask me if such a "Legion" ever existed; you know, of course, that they most certainly did, all the way south from Montana to the Mexican border.

Anyhow, I hope the reading hombres and gals like this *cuento de aventura*. Hope

they like Forty-four Cal as well as they were kind enough to tell me they enjoyed the King Kolt yarns of some time back. My thanks and best regards to 'em all!

PAUL S. POWERS

Next week James P. Webb has that ever-popular ironic giant renegade Ranger, Blacky Solone, cutting rough and tough capers in our lead-off complete novel. It's entitled "Six-gun Powwow," and Blacky does a heap of peculiar talking, in the way bad hombres understand best. It's as dramatic and colorful an adventure as Blacky—or most any other character—has ever had. You'd be loco to miss it.

There'll be two bang-up novelettes—"Gun Courier of the Badlands," by Brad Buckner, and "River Packets to Boothill," by Charles N. Heckelmann, whose yarns have been so well received in these pages the last few months. Though widely different, these two middle-length stories pack a pile of thrills. J. F. Houghton will be in with another funny Cameron Claflin short called "Keep Away From My Bull!" It's guaranteed for everything from chuckles to all-out laughter. And there'll be other good shorts, too, plus our usual features. As if that weren't the biggest dime's worth to be found, we're throwing in a *bueno* extra novelette, "Satan's Segundo," by Tom Curry. Tie that anywhere! *Adios*.

THE RANGE BOSS.



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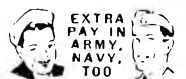
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COLT LAW FOR LOBOS

BY CHUCK MARTIN



Could Rawhide Runyan cross that owl-hoot border and survive to match gun speed with rattler-fast Deadline Devin?

CHAPTER I.

THE BAR OF JUSTICE.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN rode his black cow horse into Langtry with the warm Texas sun at his back. He nudged Shadow up to the tie rail with a blunted spur, swung to the ground in the ankle-deep dust, and

slapped the alkali from his worn range clothing while he glanced briefly at several men loafing in front of the Silver Buck Saloon.

A smile curled the cowboy's lips as he saw a small sign over the name of the saloon. This one read:

LEGAL MCGUIRE
Justice of the Peace.

A big man with a bartender's curl over his left eye, came toward Runyan from the shade of a wooden awning. He wore sweeping black mustaches, a long white apron and a pair of .45 Peacemaker Colts.

"Mebbe you see something funny, cowboy," he said, and his deep husky voice rang with a peculiar note of authority. "My name is Legal McGuire, and I deal out what law there is west of the Pecos. What's your handle?"

"Rawhide Runyan, and it struck me as a bit unusual for one man to have two trades under the same roof. No offense meant, judge."

"So you're Rawhide Runyan," Legal McGuire said, and stepped back with hands on hips to look Rawhide over. "Are you a United States marshal?" he asked slowly.

"Nuh uh."

"Texas Ranger, mebbe?"

"Nuh uh."

"Deputy sheriff," McGuire grunted, and now his voice was gruff with exasperation.

"I'm not riding behind any kind of a law star," Rawhide explained with a smile, but his gray eyes hardened when a big man with wide shoulders walked toward him from the shade.

"Langtry is the end of the trail for saddle tramps," he told Rawhide with a sneer. "It ain't healthy across the river."

"I'm always curious to see what lies across rivers and hills," Rawhide said slowly, measuring the big man with a cowboy's rule. The stranger was six feet tall, wide of shoulder, and heavy of flank. His craggy face was pitted with smallpox scars, and he wore a brace of Texas six-guns tied low on his thick legs.

"Curiosity killed a cat," the stran-

ger grunted. "My name is Crag Fargo, shotgun guard on the stage."

Rawhide merely nodded to acknowledge the introduction. He didn't like the expression in Fargo's little black eyes, nor the swaggering tilt of the guard's fifty-dollar Stetson. Crag Fargo wore top-hand riggin', and he reached out a hand toward Rawhide's bridle reins.

"Nice hunk of hossflesh you straddle, Runyan," he said patronizingly. "You mind if I try him for a run up the street?"

"Yeah," Rawhide answered shortly. "Me and Shadow covered better than fifty miles today, and he's my own personal hoss."

"Don't pull that high-and-mighty act with me," Fargo said in a low rasping voice. "I'll ride the black hoss if I have to whip his boss to do it!"

Rawhide Runyan glanced sideways at Legal McGuire, but the bartending jurist simulated a lack of interest. Crag Fargo took a quick step forward and gripped Rawhide's two wrists with his long hands—and then hell erupted all over Langtry's main street.

Rawhide Runyan threw himself backward, and pulled with all the strength in his muscular arms. Crag Fargo was bracing himself on the far side of the tie rail, but he flew through the dusty air like a side of beef before he could release his grip.

Rawhide rolled up in the dust and danced after Fargo just as the shotgun guard was stretching to his feet. Fargo lashed out with a haymaker, putting his two hundred pounds behind his right fist. Rawhide ducked under the swinging blow, jabbed lightly to jar Fargo off balance, and then he blasted the big man with a straight right to the jaw.

Crag Fargo grunted and fell face-

forward. His heavy body sent up a swirling cloud of red dust, and a heavy hand touched Rawhide on the shoulder as he stepped out of the dust cloud.

"You're under arrest for disturbing the peace," Legal McGuire said quietly. "Step inside and pay your fine."

Rawhide frowned, and then he stepped toward the saloon doors with a smile. It was worth five dollars to whip a windbag like Crag Fargo, and Rawhide reached into his chaps pocket for a gold disk.

Legal Fargo took off his white apron and shrugged into a tight black coat. He drew one of his six-guns and hammered on the mahogany bar; and the drinkers carried their glasses to chairs along the back wall.

"Court will come to order!" McGuire announced. "The prisoner, Rawhide Runyan, is accused of disturbing the peace, and of whipping the stoutest man in Langtry with his bare hands. Guilty or not guilty, cow feller?"

"Guilty as charged, your honor," Rawhide answered humbly. "I acted in self-defense, and I throw myself on the judgment and mercy of the court."

"Five dollars and costs, with the fine remitted due to a proper respect for law and order," Legal McGuire announced judicially. "I hereby deputize you to bring in the other half of the aforementioned ruckus, one Crag Fargo by name and nature!"

Rawhide Runyan looked surprised, but he turned on his heel and shouldered through the slatted doors. Crag Fargo was just sitting up, with one big hand rubbing his jaw. He lurched to his feet when he saw Rawhide, and he gripped the tie rail

with his left hand to steady himself.

"The judge says for you to breast up the bar of justice and make your manners," Rawhide told Fargo. "He deputized me to herd you inside!"

"Herd hell with a bull whip!" Fargo roared, and slapped for his right-hand gun.

Rawhide Runyan dipped his right shoulder and shelled his old Peacemaker from the holster. The hammer clicked back under his thumb while he was completing his draw, and Fargo raised both hands in token of surrender.

"You win this time on a sneak, you damn law dog," he snarled. "But I'll square with you one of these days."

"Inside," Rawhide said quietly, and his gun was back in leather when he followed Fargo into the Silver Buck.

Legal McGuire glared at the shotgun guard, and smiled behind his hand when he noticed the swelling on Fargo's jutting jaw.

"You provoked a brawl right under my very nose, Crag Fargo," McGuire began sternly. "You know better than to try to top off a cowboy's personal hoss, and you took fight to Rawhide Runyan, even if you do outweigh him by forty-odd pounds. Guilty, or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," Fargo stated brazenly. "This ranny is a stranger, and there might be something in his past we ought to know."

"Like as not," Legal McGuire agreed carelessly. "We don't ask many questions down here along the Pecos, on account of most of us has pasts what are pasts. Don't evade the legal issue, Fargo. Guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," Fargo shouted hoarsely. "You call yourself the

Law West of the Pecos, but your jurisdiction stops right at the edge of town!"

"Fifty dollars and costs on all counts, including contempt of court!"

Legal McGuire passed the sentence in a flat deadly voice, and backed up his findings with his six-gun in his right hand. Crag Fargo glared for a minute before he reached for a canvas sack in his hip pocket, and counted out gold eagles.

"Write me out a receipt!" he demanded.

"Mend your manners," McGuire barked. "Remember that you are addressing the court. Now try 'er again, you gun-hung maverick."

"Please make me out a legal receipt," Crag Fargo muttered, and he tucked the paper in a vest pocket after McGuire had finished his crude scribbling. Then Fargo faced Rawhide Runyan with anger contorting his rugged face.

"The judge here calls himself the Law West of the Pecos," he began slowly. "I wouldn't bank on it too strong if I was you. There's only one kind of law hereabouts, and that's gun law!"

"Right," Legal McGuire agreed promptly. "And Rawhide has plenty of that same in his holster like I noticed when he herded you before the bar of justice. Court is dismissed!" he announced brusquely, and then his manner changed as he stripped off his coat and put on his long white apron. "All hands to the bar," he shouted, and began to set out glasses. The drinks are on the loser, and I'll buy another round. It was worth it to see Rawhide put Fargo to sleep. Good name, Rawhide. All give and no break. Name your pizen!"

"Small beer," Rawhide said with a grin. "I think I'm going to like it around this Pecos country."

CHAPTER II.

AN OUTLAW MAKES A PROMISE.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN sat his black horse in a motte of scrub oak. A thousand feet below him in a mighty canyon, the Pecos River was like a streak of glistening silver in the early morning sun. The stage road was a ribbon of red dust where it followed a wandering course along the high cliffs, and the thud of hoofs brought a gleam of anticipation to Runyan's gray eyes.

Rawhide leaned forward in the saddle when a four-horse hitch swung around a steep bend in the trail. The stage was west of the Pecos, and the driver was pouring leather into his galloping teams. The bulky figure of Crag Fargo loomed large behind the driver against the skyline, and Rawhide saw the driver suddenly throw his weight back against the leather ribbons.

Four horsemen rode out from the trailside brush, and one of them stood his mount in the middle of the dusty road. One of the road agents threw a shot at Crag Fargo, and the shotgun guard pitched his scattergun away and raised both hands above his head.

Rawhide Runyan drew the heavy Winchester from his saddle boot and lined his sights. The outlaw in the road jerked back when Rawhide's rifle roared, but his three companions opened fire on the stage-coach. The sharp barking roar of a six-shooter answered from inside the coach as Rawhide snugged his rifle under the saddle fender and sent his horse through the brush at a dead run.

The clatter of receding hoofbeats warned Rawhide that the outlaws had heard him coming. They were topping a distant rise when he rode out of the brush, and a tall spare

man stepped from the coach with a smoking six-gun in each hand. The top of the stage appeared empty, but Rawhide was watching a shadow move behind the driver's high seat.

A shot blasted the stillness, and the slug jerked the gray Stetson from Rawhide Runyan's head. His hand dipped down and came up belching flame before the hombre on the box could ear back for a second shot. Then a heavy body tumbled from the far side of the Concord coach, and Rawhide quartered behind the stage and slid down from his horse.

Crag Fargo was groveling in the red dust with his right hand cradled against his chest. The tall stranger tightened his lips, stepped behind Runyan, and waited with both his guns covering the cowboy.

"I thought you was one of those holdups, Runyan," Fargo blurted through pain-twisted lips. "There were four of them, and they killed old Leather Bill, the driver. I got to get to a saw bones quick before I bleed out!"

"I should have drilled you between the eyes, Fargo, Rawhide said quietly. "You meant to kill me, and I'd like to know why you didn't do some fighting against those road agents!"

"They had me covered," Fargo moaned. "That was Stinger Tracy in the road, and Butch Beaudry was on his side. Deadline Devin and Kingfisher Boyd was shootin' it out with that Ranger captain, and I never had a chance."

Rawhide turned slowly and faced the tall stranger. Runyan's gun circled with his body, and his face was a stony mask when he saw the two six-shooters in the stranger's hands, still with the hammers eared back. The stranger stared for a moment, and then holstered his weapons.

"I'm Joe McCloud, Ranger cap-

tain," he introduced himself. "From what I heard from Legal McGuire, you will be Rawhide Runyan."

"Right," Rawhide murmured. "You took a long chance riding the coach west of the Pecos, and by yourself."

"I had a suitcase with me, and it was lined with sheet lead," Captain McCloud explained with a wry smile. Then his face grew stern as he turned to Crag Fargo.

"Shotgun guard," he sneered coldly. "You threw your shotgun away, and made no effort to fight."

"You got me wrong, cap'n," Fargo tried to explain. "Stinger Tracy had me under his sights and Deadline Devin never misses. He threw one shot and killed pore old Leather Bill."

"How much gold is riding in the boot?" McCloud barked.

"Ten thousand," Fargo answered, surprised at the sudden question. "I mean that's what Leather Bill allowed, and it was going to the bank down at Tyrone."

"I've been watching you for quite a while, Fargo," McCloud said sternly. "Three drivers have been killed on as many trips, and you've never even been scratched until today. The Devin gang stuck up the stage each time it was packing gold."

He stepped forward suddenly and shoved his gun against the wounded guard's broad chest. Crag Fargo cringed back, but McCloud pointed to the hub of the left front wheel.

"Climb up to the box," he said crisply. "This gold is going through to Tyrone, and I'm going to handcuff you to the guard rail. If we are attacked again, one of your pards will kill you first. I'll do the driving, and Runyan can bring up the drag."

"Pards?" Fargo whined. "Those outlaws ain't pards of mine!"

"Climb," McCloud repeated sternly. "You've been tipping them off, and you've been spending more money than a shotgun guard could earn honest."

Fargo climbed the stage, and the Ranger captain handcuffed him to the steel guard rail. Then McCloud and Rawhide put the body of old Leather Bill into the coach.

After this was done, the Ranger clambered onto the driver's seat and picked up the leather ribbons. He frowned slightly when Rawhide mounted his horse and rode up beside the bullet-scarred coach.

"I'm not wearing a law star, and I'm working on my own," Rawhide said quietly. "You can't give me orders, Ranger!"

Joe McCloud dropped the reins and sent his right hand down to his holster. Rawhide Runyan dipped his hand smoothly and stared at McCloud across the sights of his cocked gun. McCloud glared angrily, and then shrugged his lean shoulders.

"We need men like you in the Rangers," he said slowly. "The pay ain't high, and we stand together. Say the word and I'll hand you a badge and put you on the pay roll starting yesterday."

"Sorry, captain," Rawhide answered quietly. "I don't want your pay or your badge. I drifted down here to match my gun against Deadline Devin, and I'll do it lone wolf."

"Gun fighter," McCloud grunted. "You wouldn't stand a show against Devin in a draw-and-shoot. He's faster than chained lightning, and he never misses."

"That's what I heard," Rawhide murmured, but his gray eyes were bright with some inner excitement. "I'm twenty-four, and up to now I've always called my shots. Not only that," he added dryly, "but every man wearing a Ranger's badge

is what you called me—a gun fighter."

"I reckon you're right, Rawhide," McCloud admitted. "I'm asking it as a personal favor. Will you cover me from the rear while I tool these bronses into Tyrone? It's just a matter of seven miles."

"Putting it thataway, I'll bring up the drag," Rawhide agreed. "Ain't the sheriff's office in Tyrone?"

"It is, and Buck Banton don't know the meaning of fear," McCloud answered. "Buck has been sheriff for ten years, and he's lost four deputies in the last four months. All of them were cowhands who thought they were fast on the draw."

"I'd say you was fairly rapid," Rawhide said slowly.

"All I want is a chance at Deadline Devin!" McCloud burst out hotly, and then his jaw dropped slightly. "By dogies," he whispered. "You beat me to the draw, and your cutter was cocked before mine had cleared leather!"

"Yeah," Rawhide drawled. "Legal McGuire told me that the only kind of law a man could count on west of the Pecos, was gun law. Kick the brake off, and let's hit a high lope to Tyrone."

Joe McCloud picked up his reins and kicked off the heavy brake. The half-broken Texas bronses lunged against their collars, and the Concord bounced over the rutted road with Crag Fargo clinging tightly to the guard rail.

Rawhide Runyan gipped his horse into a smooth loping gait and kept a hundred yards to the rear. Two miles rolled by swiftly, and Rawhide drew his Winchester from under his left leg as the coach came to a steep uphill pull. He stopped his Shadow horse when the brush waved slightly from an overhang on the right side

of the road, and the trained black stood like a granite boulder.

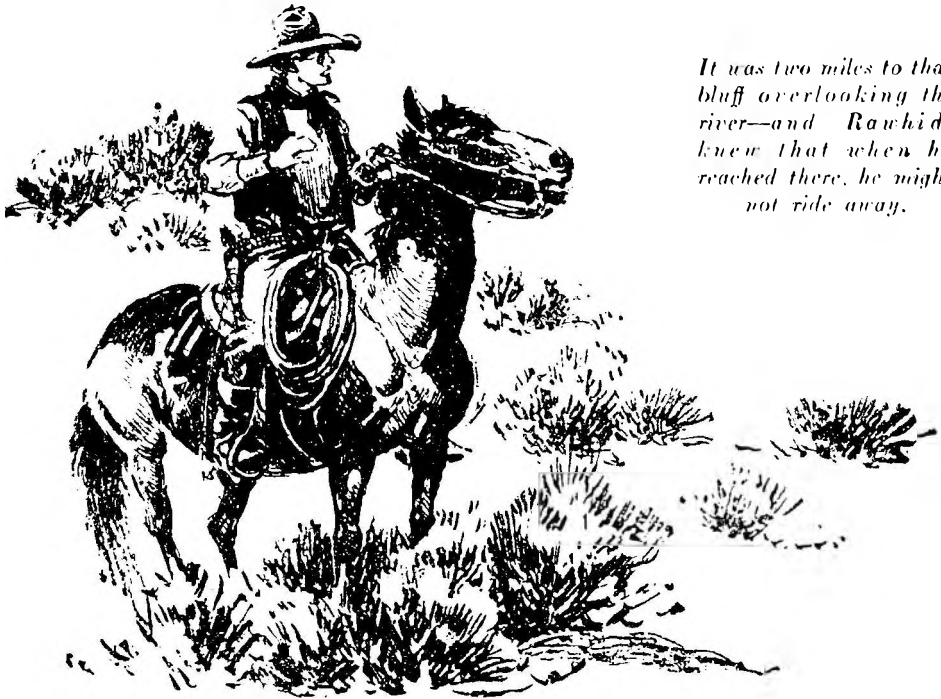
A six-gun roared suddenly from the high shelf, and Crag Fargo jerked on top of the bouncing stage. Then a bull-shouldered man stepped from the brush with a rifle in his hands, and he brought the gun to his shoulder while his squinting eyes stared at McCloud's back.

Rawhide Runyan lined his rifle and squeezed his filed trigger. The bushwhacker yelled hoarsely, and pitched down the steep bank to the red dusty road. Ranger McCloud

high above him, and a glance ahead showed him that the stage was now out of range. He also knew that he would be an inviting target if he kept to the road, and he leaned forward to listen when a man cleared his throat.

"I've heard of you, Rawhide. You wouldn't have a chance. Better get long gone, and ride back to high Arizona."

"If you dog it out of Texas, I'll follow you to hell and gone," Runyan answered softly. "And I won't ask for an edge."



It was two miles to that bluff overlooking the river—and Rawhide knew that when he reached there, he might not ride away.

whipped up his teams, and Rawhide Runyan rode under the shelter of the overhanging bank.

"You can hear me, Deadline Devin," he said slowly, but his voice was clear. "Rawhide Runyan speaking, and I won't leave the Pecos—unless I leave *you* planted behind!"

Runyan heard a rustle in the brush

He heard a mutter followed by a rasping cough. "I'll whittle for you, Runyan," Devin promised in a low voice. "But I'll get you fair and square, and in the open!"

Rawhide heard a horse lunge, and then the sound of galloping hoofs. A contented smile wreathed his deeply tanned face as he shook out his bridle

reins and rode after the distant stage. Deadline Devin had promised him a shootout, and the outlaw always kept his word.

CHAPTER III.

RAWHIDE SENDS A MESSAGE.

CAPTAIN McCLOUD did not speak until he stopped his sweating teams in front of the stagecoach office. A wide-shouldered man was waiting on the platform, and he stretched on tiptoes to stare at the body of Crag Fargo. Then he seemed to notice the Ranger for the first time.

"Cap'n McCloud!" he barked. "How come you to be down this way, and especially driving the stage?"

"Old Leather Bill was killed," McCLOUD explained. "He's inside the coach. Sheriff Banton, get used to Rawhide Runyan. He's a foot-loose cowboy from high Arizona, and handy with his hardware."

The sheriff looked Rawhide over briefly and nodded his head. "Heard of you, Rawhide," he said quietly. "You've smoked your guns recent. What's the tally, if you don't mind the law asking?"

"Deadline Devin shot and killed Fargo back there where the road makes a steep climb," Runyan answered in the same tone. "Then a barn-shouldered hombre stepped out of the brush with a Winchester. He was lining sights on the captain's back, but I beat him to the shot. You'll find Butch Beaudry back there under an overhang."

"You a Ranger?" the sheriff asked.

"Nuh uh."

"I'll pay you a hundred a month and cartridges to side me as deputy," Banton offered eagerly. "I've been trying to get the Devin gang for more than a year."

"Is Devin as fast as they claim?" Rawhide asked slowly.

"He's faster than any two gun slingers in the Southwest," the sheriff answered emphatically. "We might have a chance against him if we work a cross fire. He's gun proud thataway, and he don't care if he lives or not. He's got a spot of lung trouble," Banton explained, and then his face hardened. "It was Devin who made the Pecos River a deadline for the law," he finished angrily.

"I've heard about that deadline," Runyan said quietly. "That puts Tyrone right in the middle of it. Do any of these outlaws ride into town?"

"They have slipped in at night," the sheriff admitted with an angry flush. "Being short-handed, I can't watch but one spot at a time. Yonder comes Underground Hargis," he said in a hushed voice. "He's our local undertaker, and he can spot a corpse as far off as a buzzard."

A tall cadaverous man drove up alongside the stage with a low black-covered wagon. The sheriff helped him load the two bodies in his wagon without speaking, and then Hargis nodded at Rawhide Runyan and cleared his throat.

"Howdy, Runyan," he said, in a deep solemn voice. "I've heard about you, and I know Deadline Devin well. He has contributed considerably to my business. If you're lucky when you meet that killer, I'll give him the best funeral I've got, and entirely without cost. Good morning, and good luck."

"I don't depend on Lady Luck," Runyan said coldly, but a spot of color burned on his high cheekbones. He turned to Sheriff Banton and spoke in a low voice. "Where would the Devin gang go to get their liquor?"

"There's a cantina down in Mexican town run by Manuel Supel-

vada." Banton answered. "But they have been known to patronize the Stag Saloon at the far end of town. Something on your mind?"

"I'll just ride around and get used to your town." Rawhide answered carelessly, and climbed his saddle. "I'll be seeing you around."

It was just before noon when Rawhide tied his horse in a manzanita thicket and approached a long low adobe building from the rear. The sound of a guitar came to him from inside the cantina, and the high falsetto of a singing Mexican blended with the muted chords. Runyan pushed the back door open a crack, and he loosed his six-gun as he peered through the narrow opening.

A swaggering group of Mexicans were drinking at the long bar, brightly-colored *serapes* draped over their shoulders. Only one white man was in the saloon, and his money was buying the drinks. He was a small wiry man with black mustaches under a long hawkish nose and a pair of black eyes which shone from under his hat brim like polished ebony. A Winchester stood against the bar close to his left hand, and a glass of liquor stood before him on the bar.

Rawhide Runyan studied the stranger, and the blood began to race through his veins. The little man would be Stinger Tracy, *segundo* to Deadline Devin. He wore a .44 Colt on his right leg with the tie-backs thonged low, and a long-bladed bowie knife rested in a scabbard on the left side of his belt. His thin face was flushed from drinking, and his high-pitched voice was a trifle unsteady as he boasted to the peons who were drinking his liquor.

"All I want is one chance with this stranger who did for Butch Beaudry. Calls himself Rawhide Runyan, and let's on to be fast with his hand gun."

"What will you do, señor?" Manuel asked politely. "They say the Americano is very rapid."

"Him fast," Tracy sneered. "After I put a slug through his right arm, I aim to stick my knife through his heart, and then walk around him in a circle. Me and Butch was saddle pards!"

Rawhide Runyan felt a chill run up his spine as he stared at the long-bladed knife. Then his lips set in a thin straight line as he pushed the door open slowly and stepped into the back room. Manuel, the saloon-keeper, was the first to see him, and the fat Mexican moaned softly and stepped back away from the bar.

The dark-faced peons followed Manuel's frightened gaze, and retreated to the back wall. Stinger Tracy emptied his glass, and then noticed that he was alone at the bar. He too followed Manuel's staring eyes, and the little outlaw stiffened like a hunting dog coming to point.

"Bushwhacker," he accused venomously. "You had to pull a sneak!"

"I figured to keep you honest," Rawhide answered quietly. "You were waiting for me to come through the front door, and I never met the owlhooter who didn't try to grab an edge for himself. You were looking for me?"

"I'd 'a' found you," Tracy snarled. "You crossed the deadline when you left Langtry, and you throwed in with the law."

Rawhide Runyan clicked his teeth when he discovered something he had overlooked. Stinger Tracy wore his pistol on his right leg, but the handle was pitched out and reversed for a cross draw. The little outlaw was left-handed, and now his thin shoulders were stooped forward in the gunman's crouch, with his right hand about six inches above his gun.

"Meat on the table," Tracy taunted, and licked his thin lips. "Cut loose your wolf!"

His gloved right hand moved slowly up and down to attract attention, and then Tracy's left hand whipped across his lean belly like the tail of a scorpion.

Rawhide Runyan was leaning forward a trifle, with his boots spaced wide. His right hand moved swiftly in the cool gloom, and the back room was lighted when his gun roared to flame just as Tracy's weapon was clearing leather.

The .45 slug hit the little outlaw high in the left arm and jerked the gun from his hand. It flew from his clutching fingers and clattered against the adobe wall, and Stinger Tracy went to his knees under the battering impact.

Rawhide leaped forward and kicked with the toe of his right boot. The bowie knife jumped from Tracy's scabbard, turned in the air, and stuck in the splintered planking where it vibrated like a plucked fiddle string.

"On your feet, Tracy," Rawhide hummed in his throat. "I pulled your stinger, but I let you live for one purpose."

Stringer Tracy pushed up to his feet, and retched violently. He was sick at his stomach from the bullet which had broken the bone in his upper left arm, and Manuel pushed a glass of tequila across the sloppy bar. Tracy downed it at a gulp, but all the bravado was gone from him when he turned to Rawhide Runyan.

"You could 'a' killed me," he admitted shakily. "I'll never trigger another gun."

"Get on your horse and ride," Rawhide said slowly. "Tell your boss what happened. Tell Deadline

I said he don't pack the sand to meet me for a showdown."

"Deadline will get you, cowboy," Tracy whispered. "You name the time and place."

"There's a stand of oaks on the mesa where he tried to stick up the stage," Rawhide answered. "I'll be there when the sun comes up *mañana!*"

"Tomorrow you will be a dead hombre," Stinger Tracy said quietly, and turning his back, he walked from the room holding his broken left arm.

CHAPTER IV.

TROUBLE WITH THE LAW.

RAWHIDE RUNYAN was walking his horse into town when Sheriff Banton came roaring down the street toward Manuel's cantina. Banton slid his horse to a stop when he saw Runyan, and an expression of relief spread over his florid face.

"Thought they'd got you, Rawhide," he blurted. "What was the shooting about?"

Rawhide told his story briefly, and Banton growled his disappointment. "You shoulda killed that sidewinder," he muttered viciously. "There's a reward of two thousand on his scalp, and you took a mighty big chance."

"I'm not hunting bounty, sheriff," Rawhide said stiffly. "I heard about Deadline Devin killing off the law down here, and it's always open season on wolves."

"I take it back," the sheriff apologized softly. "You aren't a bounty hunter. You're a glory hunter!" he accused bluntly.

Rawhide whipped around in his saddle with a deep flush staining his bronzed features. His hand slapped to his holster and half-drew his smoke-grimed gun; then he loosed his grip with a little shrug.

"You sing a funny hymn for a law dog who's had four deputies killed without getting a scratch yourself," he retorted.

Banton edged his horse closer with a scowl of rage darkening his full face. "Meaning what?" he barked.

"Meaning what you told me yourself," Rawhide answered evenly. "You're always some place where the outlaws ain't."

"Get off that black hoss," the sheriff ordered, and he backed up his command with the six-shooter which leaped to his hand.

Rawhide dropped his split reins and stepped quickly to the ground. Buck Banton also dismounted, and motioned Rawhide up on the porch of a store. Then the lawman's lips parted in a snarl to show his clenched teeth. His gun was touching Rawhide's lean belly when a gruff voice spoke from just behind the sheriff.

"Holster your smoke pole and step back, Buck. "It ain't like you to crowd a man who rides in and helps the law do its work without fee!"

Buck Banton held the drop, but he turned his head to glance quickly over his shoulder. He jerked when he saw Captain McCloud sitting his roan horse, and Rawhide slapped with his left hand like a cat.

Banton tripped trigger, but Rawhide caught the falling hammer on his thumb and wrenched the heavy gun from Banton's hand. Then he threw it into the street with a grin on his hard fighting face.

"Like I said," Rawhide told the sheriff. "Four deputies killed, and you didn't get a scratch!"

Buck Banton weighed a hundred and eighty-five; twenty pounds more than Runyan. He leaped forward without warning, and his right fist pistoned at the cowboy's face.

Rawhide moved his head to the side and jabbed with his left. Then

he clipped the sheriff on the jaw with his right, and Banton sat down suddenly.

"Never lead with your right," Rawhide said quietly, and without anger. "If you've got enough, we can talk things over."

Buck Banton rolled off the porch and surged to his feet. He lowered his head and charged in like a fury-crazed range bull. Rawhide sidestepped, and Banton stumbled and almost fell when he met no resistance.

Rawhide moved like a dancer on his toes, and he was waiting when the sheriff stopped his rush and whipped around. A left jab landed on Banton's nose and brought a spurt of blood. The blow also knocked the sheriff off balance, and while the lawman was shifting his feet, Rawhide uncorked a looping right which landed flush on the sheriff's unprotected jaw.

Buck Banton grunted and fell forward like a felled pine tree. He lay in the red dust of the street without moving, and Rawhide spoke quickly to McCloud.

"I'll take it for truth the way you say it, captain. Is Banton in cahoots with the Devin gang?"

"I've knowed Buck for better than ten years, Rawhide," McCloud answered without hesitation. "He's as honest as the day is long. He killed an outlaw two different times after they had killed his deputies, and it got under his skin when you hinted that he was afraid to track them back in the badlands."

"That's all I wanted to know," Rawhide murmured, and then he lifted the sheriff and rested the sagging man against his knee. He was fanning Banton's face with his hat when the sheriff opened his eyes with a jerk.

His body was like a rag one min-

ute, and then it changed to a steel spring. Banton's big arms whipped around Rawhide Runyan, and the sheriff rolled back, pulling the cowboy with him.

Rawhide went with the pull and kicked his legs over his head. He broke the sheriff's grip as he went on over, and Banton staggered up and jumped before Rawhide could turn. Again his long arms circled the cowboy, but Rawhide bowed his back and pulled with all his strength as he made a headlong dive.

Buck Banton flew through the air like a bronc rider who has lost his stirrups. He landed flat on his broad back, and Rawhide was astride him before he could regain his breath. Rawhide pinned the sheriff's arms with his knees, and he spoke softly with a grin on his dust-smearred face.

"Sorry for what I said, sheriff. You couldn't have held down your job if you didn't have what it takes."

"And I can hold 'er down without any outside help," Banton gasped. "Get off me, and we'll start the next go-around, you salty shorthorn!"

Rawhide jumped to the side, but Captain McCloud stepped in front of Banton. "Stand yore hoss, Buck!" he said sternly. "What's it getting you to fight your head thataway? Rawhide just had a little run-in with Stinger Tracy down at Manuel's place."

Banton straightened his shoulders and glared at Rawhide. "I'm the law here in Tyrone," he muttered harshly. "You shoulda killed that waspy owlhooter."

"I ain't a killer," Rawhide answered slowly. "I knew I had Tracy beat, so I just pulled his stinger and sent him back to Deadline Devin with a message."

"What was the message?" Banton demanded.

"Rawhide shrugged. "It wasn't law business," he answered shortly. "Like you said, you can handle that end by your lonesome."

"We ought to run this pilgrim out of Texas," Banton said to the Ranger. "He just came down here to hunt glory."

Rawhide stiffened, and his face turned red with anger. "That's what got you that lump on the jaw," he told the sheriff. "You ain't a glory hunter, which might explain why you don't go in after Deadline Devin!"

"One side, Ranger," Banton bellowed, and tried to get at Runyan. "The hombre don't keep on living who brings me fight right in my own town!"

"Turn him loose, cap'n," Rawhide pleaded. "Let him paw and beller, and bow his neck. This is a free country, but it's deadline for the law. I'm no part of the law," he added grimly.

"You better pin on a badge, or ride out of town, Rawhide," McCloud answered slowly. "You'd be in a tight if you tangled with the sheriff again."

Rawhide nodded, smiled at the alarmed storekeeper and his wife, and mounted his black horse. He turned south and headed toward the river, but he circled slightly just outside of town and made camp. The law could fight its own battles, but Deadline Devin would be waiting for him out on the mesa when a new sun lifted over the eastern rim.

CHAPTER V.

THE BORDER SHIFT.

RAWHIDE figured that he had covered his tracks, but he had underestimated the savvy of the Texas Rangers. Captain McCloud rode into Runyan's fireless camp just as

Rawhide was fixing to roll into his blankets. It was close to ten o'clock by the moon, and Rawhide waited behind a deadfall with his six-gun cocked in his hand.

"Hold your fire, cowboy," McCloud called softly. "I need your help."

"Ride in and rest your saddle," Rawhide growled, and came from his hiding place. "The law told me it didn't need any outside help," he added sulkily.

"I met Sheriff Banton riding into town about half an hour ago," McCloud explained. "Buck had two gunshot wounds, and while they're not serious, he won't be able to ride for a spell. He ran across Kingfisher Boyd down by the river, and Buck was hit bad in the left leg."

"That's his hard luck," Rawhide answered stiffly, and he turned his face away from the Ranger as he asked a question. "Where did he meet this Kingfisher gent?"

"Down close to Rustler's Ford," McCloud answered with a grin. "Saddle up your hoss, and let's hit out for the Pecos!"

"Naw," Rawhide muttered stubbornly. "I won't do it, Ranger. I'd just be hunting glory, and the law don't need any outside help."

"I could deputize you," McCloud murmured thoughtfully.

Rawhide twisted angrily. If McCloud deputized him, he would either have to ride with the Ranger, or suffer arrest.

"I'll go," he growled savagely. "And I don't need any help from the law."

"Lay your hackles, Rawhide," McCloud answered soothingly. "Buck Banton asked me to ride down and see you. Buck says you can take Kingfisher by the heels if any man can, and he asks you to ride his circle as a special favor.

"I'll ride circle, but I'm doing it for myself," Rawhide growled, and picked up his saddle. "I'll be geared up and ready to start in a shake."

Riding through the brush-choked river bottom of the Pecos, Rawhide Runyan was thinking of his meeting with Deadline Devin, and the



wounded Stinger Tracy. He was positive that the waspy little outlaw would deliver his message, and he aroused himself with a start when Captain McCloud spoke softly.

"I'm warning you, Rawhide. If we come up with Kingfisher, don't throw off your shots. He's like a rattlesnake, and he won't be dead until he's dead all over and his tail stops rattling."

They climbed a little rise where the brush grew sparse and reached the crest of the hill. Rawhide instinctively edged his horse off to one side to avoid being skylined, but McCloud sat his saddle and cupped a pair of field glasses to his eyes. The Pecos was like a silver ribbon in the moonlight, and the flat crack of a rifle came from a copse of alders near the river bank.

Captain McCloud gasped sharply and jerked in the saddle. He whipped his .45-70 Winchester to his shoulder and shot at the flash until his magazine was empty. Rawhide Runyan had emptied his saddle, and he was spacing the shots from his saddle gun with slow but methodical regularity. A horse began to thrash around in the heavy brush down below, and McCloud spoke with his teeth clenched against the pain in his bullet-shattered right leg.

"It's up to you to go in after him, Rawhide. One of us got his horse, but he got me through the right leg."

"I'll go on foot," Rawhide answered slowly. "You better tie off that leg to stop the bleeding, and then load up your saddle gun. Keep firing off there to the right in front of Kingfisher, and I'll try to come up on him from the rear."

"He's a tall lanky jigger," McCloud explained. "Wears a coon-skin cap and a buckskin hunting shirt. He can shoot out the eye of a snake and call which eye, and I hate to ask you to go in after him. If Kingfisher sees you first, you won't keep that date with Deadline, come sump!"

Rawhide stopped in his tracks, with his head half-turned in astonishment at the Ranger's knowledge of the meeting. Captain McCloud

laughed shortly and tore a strip from his shirt tail to make a tourniquet for his wounded leg.

"Manuel talked some," he explained softly. "Yon are to meet Deadline in that stand of oaks on the stage road, high above the Pecos. Mebbe you will, but right now we've got to get Kingfisher Boyd."

Rawhide made no answer as he started to creep down the slope with the stealth of a stalking Indian. He had come to Texas to settle a score with Deadline Devin, and the delay was getting on his nerves. First it had been Crag Fargo, and then Butch Beaudry. Stinger Tracy, and even Sheriff Buck Banton had both asked for fight, and now it was Kingfisher Boyd.

He shrugged his square shoulders with a twinge of anger which fled from him when the Ranger's rifle began to bark from up on the slope. Another rifle answered from the alder thicket, and Rawhide watched the flashes until he had located the outlaw's position. Then he began to move forward like a hound on a hot scent.

Piles of driftwood lined the river bank, left by the receding waters after a late flood. Rawhide moved from one to another, placing his feet carefully to avoid breaking brittle twigs which would betray his presence. As though sensing that Rawhide was nearing his quarry, Captain McCloud began to fire rapidly, sending his bullets through the trees like leaden fingers which sought to feel out the outlaw.

Rawhide took advantage of the burst to move in on the hiding place of Kingfisher Boyd. He caught his breath sharply when he saw a tall lanky man resting a rifle in the crotch of a dead tree. There was no mistaking the coonskin cap and

buckskin shirt, and Rawhide waited until the outlaw had fired two shots.

"Don't load that long gun again, Kingfisher," he said sharply. "You're covered from the rear!"

Kingfisher dropped his hot rifle and whipped around like a cornered fox. Rawhide could see the long buck teeth protruding from under the short upper lip as the outlaw snarled.

"Shoot, you damned bounty hunter! You'll never take me alive!"

"Dead or alive, it's all one to me," Rawhide said coldly. "Now you turn slow and put both hands behind your back, or I'll part your hair with a slug and take you back to Langtry to see Legal McGuire!"

The lanky outlaw glared defiantly in the bright moonlight. He was wanted for murder, and he knew what would happen to him if he came before Judge McGuire for sentence. As though fretful of the silence, McCloud sent a questing bullet into the trees.

The slug chipped off a dry branch just above Kingfisher's head, and the outlaw jumped to the side to avoid the falling branch. His right hand whipped down to his holster just as his boots touched the ground again.

Rawhide Runyan was also forced to leap aside to avoid the falling branch, but he never took his eyes from Kingfisher's vicious face. He saw the outlaw make his pass, and Rawhide landed lightly, whipping out and triggering his right-hand gun in one continuous motion.

Kingfisher screamed when the heavy slug took him high in the right shoulder and smashed him half-around. His whole body was racked with pain from the battering impact, but he stomped his right boot to stop the turn.

Rawhide Runyan was crouching

over his smoking gun, watching the outlaw through slitted eyes. He eared back the hammer on the recoil; sucked in his breath sharply when Kingfisher executed the old border shift.

Even while the six-gun was falling from his numbed fingers, Kingfisher Boyd jerked his body to the left and threw the gun to his left hand. The move was sudden and unexpected, and the outlaw's gun exploded only a split second after Rawhide triggered.

Rawhide felt the wings of death brush him lightly when his vest jerked on the left side. Kingfisher Boyd was staring at him with his lips drawn back, and a red blotch on his buckskin shirt. The stain widened and billowed out in the folds of his greasy shirt, and then his knees buckled to topple him to the trampled ground.

Rawhide waited until the drumming boots had stopped their tattoo of death, and then he pulled his hat low and started up the slope. It was McCloud who spoke first when he reached the Ranger.

"You get him center?"

"Yeah," Rawhide answered sullenly. "I'll help you on your horse, and you can tell Sheriff Banton to move over and make room for you. I've got a gun date with a man, and it won't wait!"

CHAPTER VI.

DEADLINE!

RAWHIDE RUNYAN was moody as he walked his horse up the steep stage road. He glanced at the overhanging bank where he had talked to Deadline Devin, without seeing the dreaded outlaw. Sunrise was three hours away, and he stopped Shadow and led the black horse back



into the trailside brush. After stripping his riding gear, he went to bed standing up, by pulling off his boots.

He awoke from a sound sleep when the first gray fingers of light streaked the black sky. The false dawn would last but a few minutes, but it would give him time to clean his old Colt Peacemaker. When the light faded, he climbed his saddle and started down the road to keep his appointment with Devin.

It was two miles to the bluff overlooking the muddy Pecos, and Shadow broke into a rolling lope. The crisp morning air was like an exhilarating tonic, and Rawhide rested with the smooth gait as he stared straight ahead. All his thoughts were focused on his meeting with Devin.

Devin had set up a deadline over which the forces of law and order

might not pass. Some had tried it, but they had been shot from the brush. All his life Rawhide had respected the men who carried the law into the far and dangerous outposts, but he admitted to himself that there was yet another reason why he wanted to cross guns with the owl-hooter. Deadline Devin was reputed to be the fastest man with a six-shooter in all the Southwest. And Rawhide couldn't stand the thought that any man was faster than he was.

A sheriff back in Rawhide's State of Arizona had explained the uneasy urge that comes to every gun fighter when he hears of some other champion. It had nothing to do with jealousy, and was seldom tainted with hatred or any personal feeling. When a man felt that he had to straddle his horse and find another man reputed to be faster with a gun, the sheriff had called it, "Powder-smoke blood!"

Rawhide admitted to himself that his blood was tainted with powder smoke, but he had never matched his iron against the law. Always he had fought the forces which operated against the law and to aid those caught or threatened by gun-hung riders of the long trails.

Now he saw the stand of tall oaks on the high bluff as he rounded a bend in the stage road. But he did not slow his pace or seek the brush for protection. He knew what Deadline Devin was feeling and knew that the outlaw would die before he would take any advantage. When it came to showdown, a proven gun fighter would live or die by the code of old Judge Colt.

Rawhide came on at a high lope, and swung his horse into the shadows of the tall oaks. He saw another horse grazing on the far side, and he dismounted and left Shadow to wan-

der to the edge of the clearing. He shifted his Peacemaker one time to make sure it had not cramped in the leather during his ride, and then Rawhide faced about and pulled his hat brim low against the morning sun.

A tall slender man stepped from behind a tree, thirty yards away. He was dressed in somber black with a Windsor tie at the throat of his white linen shirt. He saluted gravely with his left hand, and then smothered a rasping cough before he could speak.

"You will observe those two rocks," he said clearly. "They are ten paces apart," and again a spasm of coughing shook his slender frame.

Rawhide turned his head and saw that two big rocks had been placed in the center of the clearing, exactly ten paces apart. Devin would start walking from his position, and would stop at the rock nearest to him. Rawhide Runyan would do the same from his end, and he nodded his head to show that he understood.

Neither would waste time with talking. Their guns would speak for them, and a question would be answered for all time. The two boulders represented another deadline; another one that had been established by Deadline Devin.

Rawhide squared his shoulders and started his march of death. Devin started at the same moment and matched his stride to that of the grim-faced cowboy. Neither quickened their steps, but black eyes and gray locked in a silent watchful duel, knowing that one of them was marching straight toward death.

Deadline Devin was a man entirely without nerves. He had many times boasted that some day a bullet would cheat the disease which had claimed him for its own. He had

nothing to live for, and he was not afraid to die.

Rawhide Runyan was also a fatalist. He was young and strong, and filled with the zest of living. But he had gunpowder smoke in his blood, and he did not consider himself important. Other men fought and ran away, to fight again another day. The real reason they had ran was to save their lives, because they considered themselves important.

If you died, you died, and that was the end of it. If your time wasn't up, nothing could cut a man down. That was just a gun fighter's simple philosophy, but it also had something to do with the code of old Judge Colt.

Neither man faltered as they continued their casual walk. Now they were approaching the two boulders, and Rawhide lengthened his stride to make certain that he would arrive at his rock at the same time as the outlaw. A slow smile curled Deadline's lips to show that he understood, and they both halted like soldiers when they came to their respective deadlines.

"Howdy, Deadline," Rawhide Runyan said respectfully.

"I'm happy to meet you, Rawhide," Devin murmured, so as to not set off his cough. "You will give the signal."

Rawhide Runyan frowned. Either of them could drop his hat, but that would require some concentration that each would need to do his best work. A movement on the ground caught Runyan's eye, and he lowered his eyes.

"Yonder is a hill of ants, Deadline," he said very softly. "They are just beginning a march for breakfast. They are heading for that dead spider closest to you, and they will have to cross that twig right between

us. When the first ant crosses the twig—"

"*Bueno,*" Devin murmured. "*Adios, amigo.*"

"Good-by . . . friend," Rawhide repeated and spaced his scarred boots for balance.

Deadline crouched a trifle, and his right elbow twitched the long tail of his black coat away from his open holster. Rawhide saw the ivory handles of a blued gun barrel inlaid with silver and noticed that the long-fingered hand above the gun was steady as a rock.

Rawhide could see the outlaw from the tail of his eye even as he watched the march of the soldier ants. Either he or Devin could hit the other without looking, and they watched the march of hunger with an intensity that could almost be heard in the still morning.

The big ant in the lead swerved neither to the right nor to the left. Its eyes were fastened on the body of the dead spider, and if it saw the slender twig, it gave no sign. Nearer and nearer the column approached, and Rawhide felt a pulse ticking in the ends of his fingers. Two inches to go . . . one, and then the big ant touched the slender twig.

Rawhide Runyan drove his right hand down with his fingers spread to fit the grip of his gun. He saw an answering flash when Deadline Devin started his pass. Rawhide hunched his right shoulder up and dipped his right knee, rolling the heavy gun sideways from the oiled

holster with his thumb notching back the hammer. Then he shot from below the hip to save that eye wink of time necessary to bring the gun up for a point shot.

The six-shooter roared as gun-fire flashed from its muzzle. The explosion had a stuttering echo on the end, and Rawhide went to the ground as his left leg was jerked from under him. The smoking gun flew from his hand when he jolted down hard, and he rolled like a cat and came to his feet.

Deadline Devin was still on his feet, but he was swaying like a tree in a hard wind. A red spot was spreading on the left side of his white shirt, and then he fell forward without moving his polished boots. Two men rode from behind trees, and Rawhide jerked up his head to stare at Legal McGuire and Captain McCloud.

"I'm the Law West of the Pecos, and I pronounce this killing done in self-defense," McGuire announced judicially.

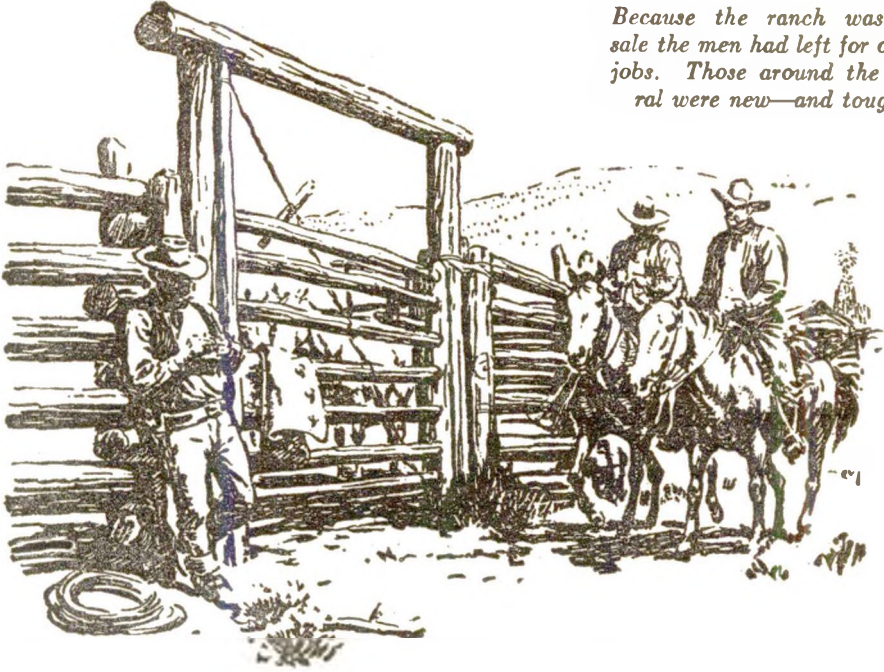
"I thought you was done for, Rawhide," McCloud said in a hushed voice. "The two shots sounded like one, but that hip shot made the difference. Devin's gun didn't come up, and his slug tore off the heel of your left boot. You brought us the only thing that could wipe out those outlaws. We needed some *gun* law west of the Pecos!"

Don't miss a smashing Rawhide Runyan story that's coming soon in *Wild West Weekly*. Reserve your copies *now!*

THE END.


RUNNINGW

Because the ranch was for sale the men had left for other jobs. Those around the corral were new—and tough.



KILLER'S HOLE CARD

BY B. BRISTOW GREEN

That cave held a murdered man and a dead horse—but it also held the secret that led to a hang-rope payoff for a bushwacker.

THE corpse was so far back in the cave that coyotes had not attacked it. The body, and that of a horse fully rigged, had been somewhat mutilated by pack rats but the dead man's face was still recognizable. Here was all that remained of Jim Anderson, Texas cattleman. He had come to his end in these New Mexico hills a long ways from home.

By the light of a candle Tom Col-

lins studied the cave. Two weeks ago, in the town of Westwater, he had learned that there were numerous caves in this section of the Guadalupe Mountains. In the past ten days he had found and searched many of them for what he had just discovered here, and he had almost passed up this particular cave because it was so low and narrow. His peaked Stetson barely missed the

roof. A horse couldn't have been led into it unless it had been blindfolded and its head held low.

Tough-fibered though he was, Collins' flesh crawled as he gingerly rolled the corpse over, face down, looking for a bullet hole. Instead, there was a knife wound under the left shoulder blade. "So," he muttered. "To get that close the hombre that done it must've been somebody he trusted."

Collins' next job took all his nerve. He went through the dead man's pockets and found them empty. "Murdered and robbed, that's what he was," he murmured.

Leaving his gruesome find, Collins went out into the sunlight. The foothills of the Guadalupes lay around him. East of them he would find open range and the Rocking M Ranch which Jim Anderson had come from Texas with the idea of buying. That was two months ago. Later Jim's wife had received a letter from the owner of the Rocking M, saying that Anderson had disappeared on the eve of closing the deal and that no trace of him had been found. That letter was the reason for Tom Collins, Anderson's brother-in-law, being in New Mexico.

When he had fixed the landmarks near the cave in his mind, Collins went to his horse hidden in a clump of trees. A typical Texas cowpuncher, Collins was tall, lean-muscled, sandy-haired and blue-eyed. And he had a high-boned, long-jawed face. For a week he had been in these hills and his jumper and overalls showed the accumulated dirt from the caves he had been searching. He removed the dirt as best he could, then buckled on a pair of shotgun chaps. There was trail dust in the creases but that did not matter. Last of all, he carefully oiled

his six-gun. Then he mounted and headed east.

He had covered some two miles and knew from information picked up in Westwater that he was on Rocking M range when he sighted a rider. Collins had hoped to reach the ranch quarters without meeting anyone. If Jim Anderson's murderer turned out to be someone connected with the Rocking M, that man would know where the body had been hidden and would be suspicious of anyone coming from the direction of the cave. When the rider started toward him, Collins pulled up. It wouldn't do to appear to avoid a meeting.

When the rider pulled up a few feet from him, Collins felt somewhat relieved. The man was a lanky, seedy, solemn-faced fellow around thirty years old, stupid-looking rather than vicious. "I take it the Rocking M quarters are somewheres hereabouts," Collins said.

The man jerked his head toward the east. "A mile that way." Then he asked, "Lookin' for a job?"

Collins nodded. "That pegs my situation."

"It's liable to be a short-time job—if you get one," the man said. "You come across the mountains?"

"No, from Westwater. Seems like I held too far west." Collins knew the answer would be unsatisfactory to a keen-witted man. There was a well-traveled road from Westwater to the ranch. Still, he wasn't willing to admit that he had just come from the foothills. He watched closely, but there was no change in the fellow's expression as he said:

"I'll ride in with you. It's gettin' on toward chuck time. He swung in beside Collins and they joggled along together.

For a few moments they rode in silence. Collins was aware that he

was being sized up with sidelong glances that took in every detail, even to his horse's rigging. His saddle was a rimfire rig common enough. One distinctive ornament, a silver star, he had taken the precaution to remove from the skirts. Now he regretted it. The shape of the star showed plainly on the leather. An observing man might think the rider was trying to conceal the fact that he came from Texas. Collins was beginning to doubt if this fellow was as dumb as he looked.

"If you're lookin' for a steady job you won't find it on the Rocking M," the man said. "Old Abe Middleton, the owner, is gettin' out of the cattle business. The outfit's for sale. At the price he's askin' somebody will grab it."

Collins shrugged. "It's a job right now I'm lookin' for. I ain't botherin' about the future."

His hope of hooking up with the outfit was based on what he had heard in Westwater. Because the ranch was for sale most of the old crew had left to find other jobs. The Rocking M was a sizable spread requiring a dozen hands. Now there were only eight men, six of them new; a bunch of saddle tramps, his informant had told him.

"How long you been with the outfit?" he asked.

"Three months," the man said, and pointed to a clump of buildings ahead. "Yonder's the Rocking M."

Collins made no reply. He was reflecting that this man must have been here at the time Jim Anderson visited the ranch.

The sun was low when they pulled up at a tie rack in front of the bunkhouse. Two men stood in the doorway talking. One was a heavily built man with a grizzled mustache. That would be Abe Middleton, the owner, Collins judged. The other

man was around forty years old, close to six feet tall and big-boned. This was the foreman, Slade Steele, Collins guessed from what he had learned in town. It was this man to whom Collins' companion spoke: "This gent," he jerked his head toward Collins, "is lookin' for a job." Without waiting for a reply he rode on to the horse corral.

Collins sat his horse waiting for an invitation to dismount. No such invitation came. He was aware that both men were measuring him carefully. That didn't disturb him. Having lived his twenty-seven years on cattle ranches he knew they would see in him a seasoned range man.

Under different circumstances he felt that he might have liked old Abe Middleton, but now he wasn't so sure. The old man's manner was definitely unfriendly when he shot a blunt question at him: "What do you call yourself?"

Collins gave his name and added dryly, "It happens to be the one I was born with."

The old-timer grunted. "I'm fed up on driftin' cowpunchers," he said, and turned into the room. He spoke over his shoulder, "You're roddin' the outfit, Steele. We need men. Put him on if you like."

The foreman spoke in a flat tone and his words were noncommittal: "Chuck will be ready time you look after your horse. There's a feed shed in the corral."

"Obliged," Collins murmured, and rode toward the corral. "A good cattle man but a hard boss, this Slade Steele," he told himself. "He'd kill a man quick enough but he don't look like a knifer."

The man he had ridden in with passed him going to the bunkhouse. Another, who had just ridden in, was unsaddling in the feed shed when

Collins dismounted. He was solidly built, dark-skinned, blunt-featured. He gave no greeting but over the back of his horse watched Collins strip his mount and hang the saddle on a peg. Glancing at him, Collins saw that his eyes were fixed on the saddle and knew that it was still plenty light enough for him to see the imprint of the star on the leather. The man turned abruptly and left the corral.

THE clanging of a triangle announced supper. By the time Collins reached the bunkhouse the men were trailing into the mess room. He followed them in.

As the men sat down Steele said, "Jeff, shove along and make room for a new hand. His name's Tom Collins."

So he was to get the job, Collins thought. When he was seated Steele spoke again:

"That's Jeff Armond on your left. He grewed up on the outfit so I know it's his real name. On your right is Lefty Fallon, the man you rode in with, and next is one of the Jones family, Sam, or so he says. Across the table, takin' 'em as they come, is Twist Malone, horse wrangler, Frisco Ames, the good-lookin' hombre, and last, Pete Bartell."

Jeff Armond, sitting at old Abe Middleton's right, grinned at Collins but none of the others looked up. They were already eating with strict attention to the job. Collins ate with the same silence but he was carefully appraising these men. Jeff Armond, the old-timer on the crew, he ruled out as beyond suspicion of possible complicity in the murder of Jim Anderson.

The others, without exception, were a hard-looking lot. Frisco Ames, referred to as the good-looking hombre, was one of the toughest-

looking men Collins had ever seen. Ames wasn't tall, but had the neck and shoulders of a wrestler. His heavy-browed face with its wide, hard mouth and solid chin looked as though it had been chopped from a block of wood with no attempt to smooth off the angles.

The horse wrangler, Twist Malone, was a slight-built, wiry man with a crooked mouth and broken nose. A bronc peeler whose luck had run thin, Collins judged.

As for Lefty Fallon and Sam Jones, they were plainly down-at-the-heels cowpokes of the grub-line-riding fraternity. And then there was Pete Bartell, dark, alert-eyed, unsmiling, the man who had been in the feed shed when Collins unsaddled.

Sizing them all up, Collins understood why old Abe Middleton was fed up with drifting cowpokes. "A crooked, bushwhackin' bunch except maybe that rock-faced Frisco Ames," Collins thought. "He's just plain tough, a fightin' fool, from the looks of him." How many of those five men had been here when Jim Anderson came to look over the ranch? To know that would narrow down the number of suspects and, by the same token, lessen the number he had to watch for his own safety.

Frisco Ames, hunched over his plate, was watching him but when their glances met Ames averted his eyes. It was the crooked-mouthed wrangler who spoke, and there was a provoking insolence in his tone: "I seen you in Westwater two weeks ago. You was talkin' to the deputy sheriff—or maybe he was talkin' to you."

The inference to be drawn from that distinction was so plain that all the men, even Middleton and the foreman, looked at Collins with sharpened interest.

Collins eyed Twist Malone levelly. "Whichever it was, I judge you'd do your damndest not to be caught that close to a lawman."

Even the grim-faced owner of the outfit smiled and Jeff Armond, the old-timer on the crew, laughed. He cut it short when the wrangler shot a slant-eyed, wicked glance at him. It was clear to Collins that this Twist Malone was a bad man to cross.

What bothered Collins most in this set-up was Abe Middleton. From inquiry in Westwater he had gathered that the old man was pressed for money. There was a mortgage on the Rocking M; not a large one considering the size of the ranch, but more than the owner could meet. Jim Anderson had come prepared to make a down payment of three thousand dollars cash if he liked the outfit. Had the temptation to get that money and at the same time keep his ranch been too great for Middleton? And the hard-bitten Slade Steele was another enigma. Collins determined to play a card that should get a rise out of somebody.

Grinning at Malone he said, "As a matter of fact that powwow with the deputy was plumb friendly. I wanted to know if there was any law against a man doin' some huntin' in the hills west of here. He told me the only requirement was that a fellow should be able to tell the difference between a buck's antlers and a steer's horns."

Three of the men, Lefty Fallon, Frisco Ames and Pete Bartell, lifted their heads and glanced at him sharply. Twist Malone merely said sneeringly, "I judge you could qualify."

Then Collins played his card knowing that he was inviting a knife or bullet in the back. Still grinning, he said, "I put in ten days in them

hills and never fired a shot. I run onto a slew of caves and wasted my time prowlin' around in 'em."

The effect was not what he had expected. The silence that followed might have had an element of strain and tension but he couldn't be sure. In perhaps half a minute Frisco Ames got up, rolled his thick shoulders and walked out of the mess room.

It was Middleton who suddenly leaned forward to look at Collins with piercingly bright eyes. "Caves did you say? What did you find in 'em?"

Collins laughed. "Bats mostly."

Twist Malone grunted. "Wonder you didn't stay there. Seems like a fellow locoed enough to go crawlin' around underground would be right at home with a flock of bats."

Collins shoved back his plate and got up. "Some fellows would feel at home in a nest of sidewinders," he said, and walked to the door. He was curious about Frisco Ames.

The deep softness of approaching night limited his vision. Across the yard the ranchhouse made a dark bulk against blacker trees. Nothing moved in the space between. A glance along the wall showed no light in the bunkhouse windows. If Ames had gone into the bunkhouse, he had not lighted a lamp. In the mess room men were leaving the table. Collins stepped out, shifted to the end of the building and around the corner.

A big cottonwood tree stood between the bunkhouse and the corral. Moving softly to the tree, he could make out dimly the interior of the shed in the corral and the shape of his horse. To the right of the horse was the stanchion where he had hung his saddle. A vague, bulky shape moved there. A match flared showing a hand lifting the saddle skirts. The light went out. The figure left

the shed, swung over the far side of the corral fence and disappeared.

So Frisco Ames had been examining the saddle and had found the imprint of that star on the leather. "Seems like I stepped on somebody's corns when I mentioned them caves," Collins murmured. "Maybe now—" A sharp thud in the trunk of the tree made him look up. Three feet above his head a knife quivered in the tree. He wheeled just in time to see a man disappear around the rear corner of the bunkhouse.

Collins reached for the knife and then decided to leave it. Whoever had thrown it wouldn't claim it before the rest of the crew but would come back for it. He noticed that had the throw been a foot higher the knife would have gone into a ragged hole in the tree.

Looking toward the bunkhouse, he estimated the distance as close to forty feet. At that distance it required a high degree of skill to hit even the thick trunk of the tree in the uncertain light. That the knife had struck so far above his head made it seem more of a warning than a definite attempt to kill him. It wasn't likely murder would be attempted that openly so close to the bunkhouse.

COLLINS went on to the corral where there were a dozen horses. He turned his own mount loose with the others, took his bedroll from the saddle and started for the bunkhouse where lamplight showed that the men had gathered.

He reflected that at least three men knew about the star mark on his saddle. They were Lefty Fallon, the man who had ridden in with him, Pete Bartell, the one who had watched him unsaddle, and Frisco Ames. That he came from Texas could only be important if con-

nected with the fact that Jim Anderson was a Texas man. There was, Collins concluded, no chance that Frisco Ames could have thrown the knife even had he been aware that he was being watched from behind the tree.

Remembering the inspection he had undergone by Middleton and Steele while he sat his horse talking to them, Collins knew they might have noticed the star mark. Old Abe Middleton would hardly be an expert knife thrower. Slade Steele, he wasn't so sure about.

As Collins walked into the bunkhouse, Slade Steele looked up and saw the bedroll. He motioned toward a bunk. "You can camp there, Collins," he said. Collins pitched his blankets on the bunk and sat down on the edge of it.

Steele said, "Now that you've seen this outfit, do you still want that job?"

Collins let his glance run over the men. They were all here except Frisco Ames. All of them were smoking cigarettes except Middleton, who wasn't smoking at all, and Pete Bartell who was sucking on a cold pipe. With the exception of Middleton and the old-timer, Jeff Armond, each man was wearing his six-gun. It was something Collins had noticed in the mess room and it had given him an excuse for not taking off his own gun belt. He turned amused eyes to Steele.

"Sure I want that job. I've seen worse outfits." He chuckled as he added, "Though I'm admittin' it's the first time I ever set down to chuck with a bunch of cowpokes all dolled up like a war party."

Twist Malone said raspingly, "Better get the habit if you tie in with this bunch. I got an idea I ain't the only one who would sidestep from a sheriff."

A drawling voice murmured, "If you don't hobble your tongue, horse jingler, somebody'll let the pizen out of you, one way or another."

There was a soft huskiness in the voice that reminded Collins of a snake moving through dry grass. To his surprise the speaker was the seedy-looking saddle tramp who called himself Sam Jones and seemed to be teamed up with Lefty Fallon. Collins began to wonder about that quiet pair.

Old Abe Middleton was sitting against the end wall of the room, a brooding, worried expression on his face. He seemed unaware of the explosive elements in his crew. Looking at Collins he said, "If you stay on, you'll take orders from Steele, but I want to have a talk with you at the house in the morning."

"Sure," Collins replied. It would, he thought, be those caves the old man wanted to talk about. He recalled Middleton's sudden interest at the mention of them. He caught the sidelong glance of Lefty Fallon toward his partner and the almost imperceptible nod of Jones' head. How much did those caves mean to that shifty-eyed pair?

Just then Frisco Ames came in. He crossed the room and sat down on his bunk. He spoke to no one but his glance ran around the room as though he were attempting definitely to place each man. Except for the keenness of his eyes Ames' face was expressionless, but something in his manner suggested to Collins that the man's nerves were fiddle-tight.

Sam Jones' husky voice broke the silence. "Steele, me and Lefty are thinkin' of pullin' out. We're fed up on the gloom and grouchin' round here. We'd like our time in the mornin'."

Slade Steele eyed the pair with

disfavor. "Ordinarily, I'd say it was good riddance, but you know what happened here soon after you fellows hit me for a job. It'll look some peculiar if anybody that was here then quits before that business is cleared up."

"Which is why we stayed long as we have," Jones replied. "We stuck it out two months but we figure that killin' ain't ever gonna be cleared up. Fact is, we'd hit for town tonight if we can have our money."

Frisco Ames looked at the man with a disgusted twist to his mouth. "Plumb sure the murder of Jim Anderson is covered up for keeps, are you?"

"I'm plumb certain Lefty and me had nothin' to do with it, and that's all that matters."

Pete Bartell said around the stem of his pipe, "If a not-guilty plea was all that was necessary I judge we'd all be riding."

It was the first time this dark-faced, unsmiling man had spoken since Collins came. But for two small things Collins might have eliminated Bartell from his list of suspects. The first was the way the man had watched him in the feed shed. The second was that quick lift of his head when the hunting trip in the mountains had been mentioned.

Frisco Ames suddenly swung to Collins. "You come here from Texas," he said bluntly.

"From Pecos County," Collins replied. "I've got the saddle ornament you were looking for in my pocket."

Frisco showed no sign of being disconcerted. "You shoulda known it would leave a mark on the leather," he said, and switched the subject abruptly. "About them caves; I wasted four days foolin' around in 'em."

It was as though the whirl of a rattlesnake had suddenly sounded in the room. Old Abe Middleton's chair had been tilted against the wall. It came down with a thump and then there was no other sound.

Slade Steele had made one small movement; his right hand sliding to his thigh just in front of his gun. After that he was motionless, his eyes fixed on Collins' face.

Collins had noted these things before he replied to Frisco. "Maybe you found some of them caves that looked too small to bother with," he said, wondering why Frisco Ames should have been prowling around those caves.

Frisco said, "You might be right. I was looking for a dead man and a dead horse."

It was strange, Collins thought, that the faces of all the men should grow strained and still. Then he realized that the innocent among them must feel that they were under suspicion until the murderer was discovered. That might account for Frisco's interest in the caves—if he were innocent. Collins was by no means sure of that. Ames might have heard of the caves for the first time at the supper table and be attempting to give the impression that he had been trying to solve the murder.

Frisco said, "It would take a man-high cave to get a horse into."

Collins shook his head. "Not if it was blindfolded and its head held low. A fifteen-hand horse ain't but five feet high at the shoulders."

He sensed that the tension in the room was nearing the breaking point. Slade Steele's hand was close to his gun, and his eyes were bright danger signals. Only two men were not looking at him, Collins realized.

Twist Malone had his eyes on Frisco and his wiry body seemed

tight as a coiled spring. Pete Bartell sat with elbows on his knees staring at the floor. Except for the way his lips clamped his pipestem he showed no strain. The room was a powder keg. A man had only to move a hand and somebody would jerk a gun.

COLLINS got up deliberately, crossed to the bunkhouse door and faced around looking at Frisco. "I can show you that dead man and dead horse in one of them caves," he said. "The dead man happens to be my brother-in-law, which is why I'm here." His glance went to Sam Jones and Lefty Fallon. "I reckon nobody's quittin' this job tonight."

Now that the showdown had come, Collins had no way of pinning the murder of Jim Anderson on any of these men. Whoever had thrown that knife at him was probably the man. He regretted that he had not brought it with him. Somebody might have been able to identify it.

Old Abe Middleton was on his feet, eyes blazing. "If I could find the man who murdered Anderson, I'd hang him with my own hands. Half of the men in this county think I killed him for a measly three thousand dollars. I never knew for sure he was dead or, if he was, how he died."

"I can tell you that last," Collins said. "He was knifed through the heart from behind. I've an idea you'll find that same knife sticking in the cottonwood tree between here and the corral. Some hombre in this outfit threw it at me about fifteen minutes ago."

Pete Bartell got up, quietly put his pipe in his pocket and moved toward Collins. "I'll get that knife for you if you like. More'n likely we could tell who it belongs to."

Slade Steele said sharply, "Set

down, Bartell. If anybody goes for that knife it'll be Middleton or me."

Twist Malone laughed sneeringly. "Why you? I don't see no wings on your shoulder blades." Then he added, "Anybody could swipe another man's knife to do a killin' job with."

Jeff Armond pointed out that the only way to catch the killer was to find the money. "It must be cached somewhere around the ranch. Nobody's been to town except Middleton and Steele. I reckon Frisco's in the clear seein' he didn't come here till a month after the murder."

Twist Malone said, "I was in town. I told you I seen this Collins hombre there. Make somethin' of that if you can."

Pete Bartell had sat down again. He looked up at Collins. "I ain't accusing anybody of murder, but just because Frisco wasn't working here at the time don't prove nothing. Plenty of outsiders knew this Jim Anderson was here and had money to close a deal for the spread."

But at Jeff Armond's suggestion that the money must be hidden on the ranch something had clicked in Collins' mind. It was a hunch too strong to be ignored. If it was good, it should get a raise out of the guilty man. He turned to Middleton.

"Boss, I'm asking you to get the knife you'll find sticking in the cottonwood tree. While you're doing it take a good look at the trunk just above the knife."

The old man was moving toward the door when Frisco Ames spoke: "Never mind, Middleton. The knife ain't there."

Every man in the room jerked around to look at the stolid-faced Ames. Collins, alert to every movement, saw Bartell quietly pull in his legs till the balls of his feet pressed

the floor. Lefty Fallon quickly glanced sideways at his partner and their hands edged toward their guns.

Frisco Ames was looking at Collins and seemed not to see any of this. "You're gettin' plenty warm, fellow," he said, "but I'm one jump ahead of you right now."

He stood up, reached behind him and pulled a knife from the back of his belt. It was a thin, long blade with a flat haft and no hilt; a weapon that would fit inside a man's boot or a sheath under the back of his shirt.

Taking it by the point, Frisco held it toward Pete Bartell. "You've got a neat little pocket inside your right boot that this will fit in, Bartell. No use denying it. I've seen it when it had the knife in it."

Bartell's face had lost some of its swarthinness but he eyed Ames steadily. "So what? Like Malone said, a knife can be stolen."

"Sure," Frisco said. "But the gent that throwed this at Collins uncovered his hole card so to speak. If Collins had looked in that hole in the cottonwood he'd have found this." He was reaching under his jumper when Bartell whipped out a gun and drove a shot through the lamp hanging from the ceiling.

In the sudden darkness something rammed into Collins, driving him backward through the door. He went down, but made a grab for the man charging over him. A gun exploded almost in his face. There was the thud of a blow and Frisco Ames' dry voice said: "All right, Collins. I got the whelp."

Somebody lit a table lamp. The light showed Bartell weaving on his feet, blood dripping from a slashed scalp, and Frisco Ames just snapping handcuffs on him.

Frisco pulled a flat can from inside his shirt, opened it and tossed a sack

on the table. On the sack was printed, Sterling Pipe Tobacco. "Found that in the hole in the cottonwood when I got the knife. Bartell is the only man here who smokes a pipe and uses that kind of tobacco. The money's in the sack."

Ames looked at Collins with something almost like a smile. "I've been a month on this case and got no place. You come along and bust it wide open in less'n an hour."

"All I had was a hunch," Collins said, and looked at Ames curiously. "Just who are you that you took a hand in this?"

Frisco Ames' face went grim.

"Texas Ranger. Before Jim Anderson inherited money and went to raising cows we were in the same troop. When I heard he was missing, I got a leave of absence to look into it."

Bartell snarled at him. "A Texas Ranger has no right to make an arrest in New Mexico."

"No," Frisco said dryly. "Seems like somebody put a pair of handcuffs on you, and I reckon Middleton can turn you over to the law."

Twist Malone said disgustedly, "And here I been figurin' them two saddle buns pulled that job. Ain't it hell to be born half-witted?"

THE END.

¿QUIEN SABE?

Who Knows?

1. *How far can a rattlesnake hear the approach of its enemies?*
2. *How did jackrabbits get their name?*
3. *How long does it take for a longhorn steer to get its full growth? Do its horns stop growing then?*
4. *What is the average width of a full-grown longhorn steer's horns? What is the record width?*
5. *What were John Chisholm's brands? How many head of cattle did he run?*
6. *How were these brands made?*
7. *Where did the Comanche Indians live before the days of Indian reservations? In what did they excel over all other Indians?*
8. *What is the advantage of locating a cow town near an army post?*
9. *What is a jayhawk, a jayhawker?*
10. *What is the principal occupation of Yaqui Indians? Where do most of them live?*

Answers on page 111

RIDERS OF HELL'S LEGION

BY PAUL S. POWERS

That vicious pack of cutthroats had the young Southwestern puncher trapped between the devil and the deep blue flames of Hades—but there was one slim chance that he could pull those sidewinders' fangs and save himself from a tortured death.



CAL JUSTIN'S eyes were wet, but his jaw was as hard as a lump of sandstone when he left the little east bedroom where his mother had just

died. Doc Stanley, the kindly old medico, tried to put a consoling hand on the young puncher's shoulder, but Cal fiercely shook it off. The

doctor understood, but he was terribly afraid, too, of what might happen. So he quickly but gently closed the dead woman's eyes, covered the quiet face by drawing up the sheet, and hastened after Cal—who was just then opening the door that led into the main living room of the Pony Track ranchhouse.

The lamps had been lighted. The door that led into the connecting bunkhouse stood open, and all the Pony Track cowpunchers were lounging about the room, smoking and talking. Three of them were playing cards at one end of the long table.

Jeff Stone, Cal's stepfather, was huddled on a chair in a corner, with a straw-jacketed jug between his feet. He was drunk, but that was nothing unusual—he had been that way for nearly a year, ever since Milo Frontag and Charlie Ford had come along and been made first and second foreman, respectively. They had changed things at the ranch, these two, and not for the better. Frontag and Ford had fired the faithful old waddies, most of whom had been at the Pony Track for years, and hired these other hombres, hard and tough men of their own stripe.

Since the coming of this disreputable crew the spread had gone to wrack and ruin; the once great beef herds had thinned almost to the vanishing point, horses had been sold or traded off, and valuable rangeland had been lost. Jeff Stone, who had married Cal's mother two years after Cal's father's death, had gone utterly to pieces. He was now boss of the Pony Track in name only. In reality, Frontag and Ford ran it to suit themselves.

Cal Justin looked across at his stepfather, too much overwhelmed to speak. Jeff seemed unaware of any-

thing but his own thirst. Without looking at Cal, he splashed some whiskey into a tin cup and gulped it down. He had been drinking harder than ever the last few weeks; his bloodshot eyes were almost hidden in the puffiness of his purplish face, and his flabby cheeks were covered by a five days' growth of beard.

Doc Stanley took it upon himself to break the news. "It's all over, Stone," he said shortly. "Your wife has just passed away."

Jeff started blubbering a little. Maudlin tears trickled down his swollen cheeks. He hiccupped, and poured more liquor into his cup. His hands shook so much that a puddle of the cheap, new whiskey was spilled onto the floor.

"You oughtn't to drink any more of that rotgut," the medico advised sharply. "If you're not careful, you'll be coming down with the d. t.'s, or worse. I can see the signs. Better let me give you a little something to make you sleep."

Charlie Ford seemed drunk, too, but Cal knew that most of his intoxication was pretense. Ford patted Jeff on the back, and took a small drink himself.

"Nobody's goin' to dope up no frien' of mine," he protested. "Old Jeff can carry his likker, Jeff can. Don' need no advice from no saw-bones. Time like this is a sad time. Man needs drink."

"That's right," said the coldly sober Milo Frontag. "You can keep your nose out of this, Doc. We'll take care of Stone."

Frontag was a formidable hombre, just turned forty, tall and swarthy. He wore his hair long, and it was jet black, as was his short, downturned mustache. Frontag had a poker face if ever a man had it; his slanted eyes and strangely placed

cheekbones gave him an inscrutable Oriental look.

"You've been taking care of him about long enough," Cal Justin said in a low, strained voice. "Maybe you didn't get it—but my mother died, just now."

The Pony Track punchers had paid little attention; the tragedy disturbed them not at all. Joe Stiles and Karl Ruhlin were arguing with the pock-faced Pete Carr over the euchre game, and in their callous disregard for young Justin's feelings they hammered boisterously on the table.

"You didn't take your three tricks. I told you that you'd be euchred on this hand," whooped Stiles.

"We score two each," Ruhlin exulted. "Let's double the bets."

"It was that left bower that done it," Carr grumbled.

Wagner and Wing Pidgeon added to the hubbub by resuming the talk that the entrance of Cal and the doctor had interrupted. Cal's face had gone even whiter under his tan, for memories of a happier time were piercing him like a sword of pain. In this house that had once been his kind, hard-working father's, he felt an alien. More than ever he was a stranger, now that his mother had gone. But anger seethed through him, too. A fury not directed against his stepfather, but toward the schemers who were capitalizing on his weakness.

"I'll be going," the doctor said, taking a firmer hold on his medicine bag. "Got to be getting back to town."

"Wait a minute, amigo," Cal Justin requested, for he wanted the medico's advice about the funeral arrangements. Loud and hooting laughter from the card players over some point in their game almost drowned his words. Cal's eyes were

dry now, and they had taken on a steely edge.

"You jaspers all clear out of here!" he ordered crisply and suddenly. "Get back into the bunkhouse where you belong!"

The five cowhands turned their heads to stare blankly at the ranch owner's stepson, as if unable to credit their ears. To them, Cal was a nonentity, and they were used to ignoring him. It was true that he was a marvelous revolver shot—his uncanny ability with a pair of Colts had won him the nickname of Forty-Four Cal—but young Justin had been so quiet and self-effacing that the men had treated him like a useless dogie.

"Since when are *you* tellin' us off, Forty-Four?" the surly Karl Ruhlin demanded out of the corner of his wide mouth.

"We know your old lady's dead, and we're sorry about it," Pete Carr grunted. "But that don't mean we're goin' to be put to bed by you, sonny."

Wing Pidgeon laughed as he rolled and lighted a brown quiry. "We're still takin' orders from your pa," he sneered, with a meaningful wink at Frontag and Ford. Wing had long been secretly burned up at Forty-Four Cal's inborn wizardry with guns, for Wing had thought that he himself deserved to be reckoned as champ of the Southwest—but that had been before he had seen Cal draw and shoot at targets. He was jealous of young Justin, and cordially hated him.

Jeff Stone had continued to weep. Even *his* alcohol-soaked brain could grasp something of the misfortune that had come to him, and in a dim way perhaps he realized his loss. But Cal couldn't feel sorry for him—he knew what his mother had gone through, these past years.

"I got more troubles than I can stand, boys," Jeff mumbled thickly, and he reached out for the whiskey jug.

Remembering that his dead mother had loved this man, once, Cal struggled with Jeff to prevent his drinking. He got the jug away from him, and for safekeeping he handed it to the embarrassed medico. But at that point Charlie Ford interfered.

He chopped a heavy blow at Cal's chin. "I'll teach you to leave Jeff alone!"

Cal jerked his head aside, avoided the punch, and in return he smashed Ford's flushed face with a hard, straight left. There was so much steam behind that pistonlike fist that the straw boss jarred backward over the card table. He slumped half down, and for a long moment he seemed all legs and arms as he scrambled for his footing.

"I'll kill you for that!" shouted Ford in a frenzy, and his hand clawed for the stag-handled Colt that was holstered at his right hip.

Cal Justin wasn't wearing his gun belts. Before making his last visit to his mother, he had shucked them off and tossed them over the back of a chair in the living room. They were still dangling there, and to make doubly sure of Cal's helplessness, Wing Pidgeon was sneaking toward them to cut Justin off.

But Cal had already acted. Whirling like a panther, he reached his weapons at a bound. There was no time to yank a gun free of the leather, for the hammer of Charlie's .45 was already rocking back!

Young Justin fired through the holster end. A blink of red-yellow flame, a spew of smoke, and floor, walls and ceiling shook at the thunder crack of the explosion. The lamp flame dimmed and flickered, then

grew bright again while Charlie Ford teetered on his feet. A maroon-colored smudge was rapidly widening between the edges of his unbuttoned vest. For an absurdly long time he stood tottering, gasping, trying vainly to drag air into his bursted lungs.

Then Ford fell. He writhed, a violent spasm passed along his body, and he lay still. Before Doc Stanley could reach his side he was dead, the look of hatred on his twisted features frozen there forever.

CHAPTER II.

THE VERDICT.

IT was during the noon hour, and the crowd that packed the courtroom in Espanola had thinned out somewhat, for the jury had retired to deliberate and the trial had come to a standstill. This was the third day of it, the momentous one that would decide Cal Justin's fate.

While the defense lawyer was making his last appeal to the "twelve good men and true," Cal reviewed the dragging days that had elapsed since he had been forced to kill Charlie Ford.

After the shooting, there had nearly been a general fight. Milo Frontag and his henchmen were infuriated at what had happened, and if the medico hadn't been present more blood might have been spilled. When Cal had offered to give himself up to the law, the doctor had agreed that this would be his only honorable course.

"Just tell the true story of what happened, Cal," he had assured Justin, "and you'll have nothing to fear. Luckily, I can back you up in every detail. And, after all, I'm the coroner."

And so he had surrendered to

Sheriff Hedinger in Espanola. Since then, except during the hours of the trial the last few days, he had been confined in the county jail.

Cal's stepfather was dead. After a week more of steady, heavy drinking he had been stricken with an illness that had been fatal to his undermined constitution within a few hours. Jeff Stone could never testify, now, with evidence that would help clear his stepson.

The testimony of Frontag and his friends had been a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end, and Cal was afraid that their exaggerated, highly colored stories had been believed. The doctor had told the true version on the witness stand in a quiet, straightforward manner, but the prosecuting attorney had cross-examined him ruthlessly, and the old medico had been trapped into losing his temper. He became so angry that his story was confused, and on some minor points he had contradicted himself. That had hurt Cal Justin's case.

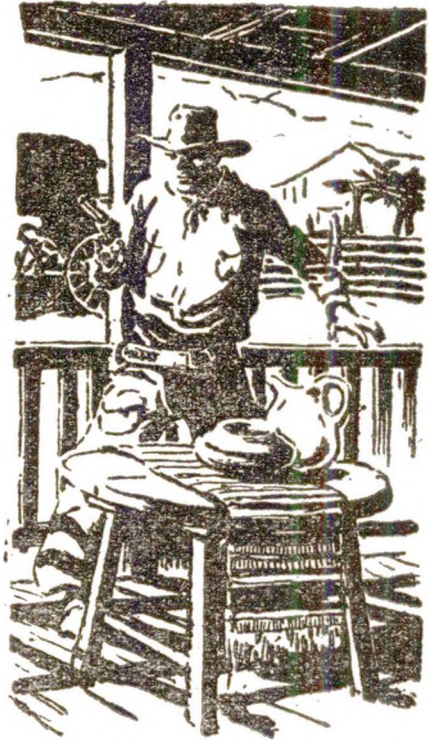
Wagner and Wing Pidgeon swore solemnly that Cal had made several threats against the slain man's life over a period of five or six months. The others, too, perjured themselves. They lied about the exchange of blows in the Pony Track ranchhouse and the cause of the quarrel; they vigorously denied that Ford had made any attempt to draw his gun.

"Justin hated his stepfather—we all knew that," Milo Frontag had said in his flat, cold voice. "He tried to beat up the old man that night, and poor Charlie Ford was shot and killed when he tried to interfere."

Against all this perjury—and it was made to sound very plausible—was only the word of Doc Stanley and Cal himself. The fact that Jeff was dead, too, weighed against the

accused prisoner. Everyone seemed to have it in his head that Cal was somehow to blame for the rancher's sickness.

Frontag and his bunch were still in the courtroom, occupying first-



row chairs. Cal was seated almost under the judge's high desk, alone now at the long table except for Squatty Haynes, a fat, good-natured deputy sheriff. Cal's right wrist was manacled to Squatty's left.

Smoking was not permitted, and most of the spectators were chewing tobacco. Talk came in a low hum, and Cal heard a sniggering laugh from Joe Stiles. It was echoed by the other Pony Track punchers. Milo Frontag bent across Pete Carr and whispered something in Karl Ruhlin's ear. More guffaws. A chill crossed Cal Justin's heart. Had he been a fool to give himself up? But

then, what else could he have done? He felt panicky. A sickness both mental and physical gnawed at his empty midriff.

DOC STANLEY came in after a little while and took his place again beside the prisoner, and Cal felt better. The physician had attended to everything—he had arranged for the burial of Cal's mother, had helped arrange the same for old Jeff, and it was Doc's money that was paying for Cal's lawyer. The medico was the only friend Cal had now.

"You still don't want to go out to eat? I could bring you in some sandwiches," Doc suggested. "It doesn't do any good to stew and fret, you know."

"I'll wait another hour," said Forty-Four Cal. "Jury might come in with a verdict. I'm not hungry, but I wish I could smoke."

It was a stifling hot day, and nearly everyone, including the judge, was in shirt sleeves. Flies buzzed at the dusty windows behind the dilapidated blinds, and half the crowd seemed at the point of going to sleep. Deputy Haynes pulled out a blue bandanna with his free hand and mopped his perspiring forehead.

"Cal, I'm afraid I've got some pretty disagreeable news for you," said Dr. Stanley in a low tone. "No, it's not about the trial," he explained, as Cal gave him a startled glance. "It's about your late stepfather's will. He made one just a few days before he died."

"Well?" Justin shrugged.

"He left half the Pony Track property to Milo Frontag, the other half to be divided equally among the five cowhands." The doctor's voice was trembling with indignation.

A wave of anger sent the blood pounding in Cal's ears. He had been too worried over the murder trial

to think much about the Pony Track. The thought that Frontag and his grinning cronies would inherit the spread his father had worked so hard for was maddening.

"Could the will have been faked?" he asked.

Stanley shook his silvery head. "No, it's all in order—it was witnessed by three reliable citizens. I've talked to them. They were dumfounded when they saw the will, but they could do nothing."

"Except refuse to be witnesses," Cal said bitterly.

Well, the ranch was lost, and that was that. His mother had deeded the Pony Track over to Jeff on the day of their marriage, never dreaming, of course, that her second husband would repay the trust by disinheriting her son.

A dried and wispy bailiff came from the direction of the jury room and, going up to the rostrum, he whispered something in the judge's ear. The latter, who was reading a newspaper behind a thick law book, nodded, and the court official hastened away again.

"I guess the jury is coming in," Doc Stanley murmured.

"How are you betting, amigo?" Cal tried to smile.

The twelve men filed back into the courtroom, lining up in front of the jury box. About half were townsmen, the others being cattlemen from ranches nearby. Their faces were grave, and none looked in Cal Justin's direction.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached your verdict?"

Doc Stanley whispered into Cal's ear: "Four or five of those jurymen didn't believe my testimony—they owe me bills. It looks bad, son," he said cynically, as the white-mustached jury foreman faced the judge and began unfolding a piece of paper.

"We, the jury," was the decision, "after due deliberation, find the accused defendant—"

"Get on with it," interrupted the judge in a testy voice. "What's your verdict?"

"Guilty," said the foreman hastily. "Guilty of murder in the second degree."

There was an uproar among the spectators and the judge rapped loudly for order. Every time his gavel fell it sounded, to Cal Justin, as though someone were knocking on his coffin. All was blurred, and like a man in a dream the convicted cowboy found himself standing alongside Deputy Haynes in front of the judge's high desk. In the hush that had fallen over the crowd he heard a low ripple of mirth from where Frontag's men were sitting.

"Calvin Justin, have you anything to say before sentence is passed upon you?" asked the judge, who had seemed a bit surprised at the verdict.

"Nothing," Cal said, "except that I had to shoot Ford in self-defense."

The judge's voice seemed to come from far away. "The law gives me no alternative. Calvin Justin, I sentence you to a term of ten years at hard labor in the State penitentiary."

The fat deputy gently pulled on the handcuffs and led Cal toward the aisle. And in all that sea of faces, the only ones that the condemned man saw were the smirking, satisfied ones of the new owners of the Pony Track.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH TRAIN.

ON the following Wednesday, at six-twenty in the morning, the Southern Pacific passenger train pulled up at the Espanola depot. The rangy,

mountain-type locomotive came to a stop under the yellow-painted water tank, and the fireman clambered up onto the top of the tender to pull the chains that lowered the long spout. A long, desert pull lay ahead on this "Devil's Division," and the engine and the crew were already thirsty.

The only passengers to board the train were bound for the State prison at Yucca, and only two of these—the officers—had round-trip tickets. The Espanola law mill had ground out four men as grist for the penitentiary at that term of court, and among these was Cal Justin.

Doc Stanley had come down to the station to see him off and to offer encouragement. He promised to do everything possible toward securing Cal a new trial, but he admitted that the prospects were gloomy.

"The Frontag outfit isn't going to be very popular around Espanola—the whole county is up in arms about it." The old doctor sighed. "Well, son, I guess you'll have to go now. Good-by—and don't let your chin drag. I'll try to visit you soon."

"Adios, Doc. Thanks for all you've tried to do for me," Cal said, as he gripped his friend's hand.

He dragged and shuffled his way up the steps into the vestibule, for the prisoners were chained together in pairs. An iron band had been riveted to one of his ankles, and a yard-long chain connected it to the leg of a big, blond youth named Whitey Luce, who had been sentenced to serve two years. Cal liked him—they had been in jail together long enough to become well acquainted.

The other two convicts, likewise fastened together by an ankle chain, were vicious characters and of a far different type. One was a Mexican with furtive eyes and a coffee-col-

ored face deeply pitted by smallpox scars. He was due to serve twenty years for rustling and armed robbery.

His companion on the chain was Brazos Jake, a huge and hulking hombre who was being sent up for life after a particularly brutal series of crimes. In the Espanola jail he had been loud-mouthed and violent, a trouble maker. He boasted of having been a member of the notorious band of bandits and killers known as Hell's Legion. He had thick lips, beady little eyes, and instead of a normal nose two flaring holes pierced his flat face like the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun.

"All right, you men. Get into your seats," ordered Sheriff MacAndrews, as the engine bell began clanging.

The other guard was the jovial, tubbily built Deputy Haynes. There were only a few passengers in the smoking car, and Haynes rolled back two of the black, leather-covered seats to form double ones across the aisle from each other. The sheriff seated himself opposite Brazos and the Mexican, while Squatty Haynes slumped his fat body down in the seat facing Whitey Luce and Cal Justin.

"Take it easy, boys," he said. "Got a long ride ahead of us."

The train jerked, then started ahead with a rattle of couplings. Cal was next to the window, and he stared through the grimy pane, watching the scattered, adobe outskirts of Espanola drift gradually behind. Then they were in the open desert and gaining speed: the coach began to sway slightly, and the clicking of the rails became more rapid. The rhythm of the wheels became a singsong chant that seemed to repeat, over and over, without end: "Goin' to the pen, the pen, the pen;

goin' to the pen, the pen, the pen—"

Trying to get the mocking tune out of his head, Cal rolled and lighted a cigarette and started talking to Whitey Luce and Squatty.

"We'll get to Mariposa about noon." The fat deputy grinned.

"I thought the pen was at Yucca," Whitey said.

"It is. We get there at three-twenty." Squatty beamed. "But the train stops twenty minutes at Posa. That's where we'll eat dinner. Gosh, I'm hungry already."

The candy seller passed through the cars just then, and Deputy Haynes invested in three gigantic sacks of salted peanuts. He generously offered two of them to his prisoners, but when they declined with thanks he proceeded to attack all three, throwing the goobers into his mouth in enormous handfuls.

Cal had already learned something of Whitey Luce's troubles, and now he heard more. This was the first jam that the big, tow-headed waddy had been in.

"It was embezzlement or something like that they charged me with, and I'm guilty, I reckon," Whitey confessed. "I'd been workin' on a spread south of town, the Diamond Dot. Boss sent me into Espanola with three hundred and some dollars to pay a feed bill. I got kinda drunk. Can't stand likker, nohow. I'm goin' to lay off of it after this."

Deputy Squatty Haynes snorted with mirth, spraying them with peanuts. "You'll be layin' off for the next two years, anyhow," he roared.

Whitey chuckled, then grew serious. "I was rolled," he scowled. "That's how I lost that dinero, I'm dead sure of it. Last I remember I was playin' pool with some jasper named Pete, a pock-marked yeller-faced kind of slicker—"

"I think I know him," Cal said,

and as Whitey went on to describe him more fully he nodded grimly. "That's Pete Carr. He pulls tricks like that—he's one of the riders on our ranch."

"You got a ranch?"

"Not now." Forty-Four Cal smiled.

"Shore tough the way you was treated, Cal." The fat deputy nodded sympathetically, refilling his mouth with peanuts.

Justin glanced across the aisle at the other two prisoners. They were being closely watched by the dour, cigar-smoking sheriff, and there was little or no talking. The Mexican was half asleep, his head thrown back on the cushion, a dead cigarette pasted to his lower lip.

Brazos Jake sat as motionless as a carved idol, but his crafty black eyes were never still, and they glittered with an evil sort of aliveness that caused Cal to remember some of the desperado's boasts. Among them was the obscenely phrased promise that he would never do time in the Yucca pen.

Towns were far apart in the vast wilderness through which the train was crawling, and it was nearly ten o'clock when a brief stop was made at Fort Loma. One of the passengers left the smoker, but nobody boarded the train, and it steamed out into the badlands again.

"We don't see much of the conductor—he spends all his time with the ladies in the parlor car. Never knowed it to fail." The good-natured Squatty laughed.

Cal found himself staring intently at Haynes' holstered six-gun. The fat officer was slow-moving, not a quick thinker, either. If Cal could reach out fast enough—

But he put that temptation out of his mind. An escape attempt, even if temporarily successful, might

make his ghastly plight even worse. It could ruin his life, for keeps.

Squatty bought his charges each a bottle of red-colored pop, and ordered two for himself.

THE heat had steadily increased, but when they tried to open some of the windows in the coach they were showered with dust, and stung with gravel and cinders from the roadbed. A hot wind had whipped in, too, and on the whole it was more comfortable with the windows down. The conductor came in with his long hook and fooled with the ventilators, and then returned to the car behind. A traveling man at the rear of the coach was asleep with a paper spread over his face, and was snoring loudly.

Outside the train the desert slipped steadily by, always the same and yet always different. Patches of Spanish bayonet, paloverde clumps, sun-tortured willow trees in the arroyos, then a vast inland ocean of mesquite and mirages filling the hollows with sparkling false water.

After a while the character of the scenery began to change. They were climbing, winding their way into the high, volcanic range that walled the arid region on the north. The cactus and sagebrush were replaced by cedars and then by pines. It became cool as the altitude increased. The locomotive was puffing hard with the exertion, and the train moved along at less than twenty miles an hour.

The next time the blue-uniformed conductor came in, the sheriff told him to light the coach's oil lamps. "There'll be some long tunnels soon," Sheriff MacAndrews reminded the trainman, "and I have desperate criminals in my charge."

"I'll see to it right now, sir." The conductor nodded understandingly,

and a sneer curled the thick lips of Brazos Jake.

"The chief never overlooks no bets," Squatty Haynes chortled. "Maybe that's why we've never lost a prisoner."

In a little while the train entered the first of the tunnels. It was short, and after a minute of daylight they were plunged into the heart of the mountain again. This second tunnel was a good quarter of a mile long; the windows of the coach went black, cinders rained on the roof, and bitter-tasting smoke filtered in through the ventilators. Thanks to the hanging lamps, however, the car was well lighted, and Sheriff MacAndrews never once shifted his eyes from the men he was watching.

The locomotive toiled to the top of the pass, crossed a high, curving trestle, and then began its descent of the other side of the range. There was another tunnel, then a long down grade where the brakes caught jerkily at the screeching wheels. At the end of half an hour they were out of the mountains and coasting through the foothills.

As they reached the comparatively open desert country again, Sheriff MacAndrews relaxed a little. Brazos laughed hoarsely.

"What's the matter, sheriff?" he taunted. "Did you think we was goin' to jump through the window back yonder? Or are you just scairt of the dark?"

"I was mighty sorry when the judge handed you a life sentence, Brazos," MacAndrews said mildly. "I thought you should have been hung." He rose from his seat and spoke to his deputy. "Keep your eye peeled for a minute until I get back, Haynes," he ordered, and went to the washroom at the rear of the coach.

Then it happened—and with

nerve-shattering suddenness! Cal never saw the actual drawing of Brazos' hidden bulldog revolver, but he judged afterward that it had been secreted in one of the desperado's ill-fitting boots. At any event, things broke loose before Cal could open his mouth to warn his friend Squatty. Out of the corner of his eye Cal saw Brazos jump away from his Mexican fellow-prisoner as far as the chain permitted, and fire at the fat deputy, point-blank!

Cal could almost *feel* the slug rip its way into Squatty's paunchy middle. As the roar of the gun sounded through the car, the fat deputy lurched forward, his knees striking those of Whitey. Although mortally hit, the deputy was fumbling blindly at his holstered gun.

A second shot from Brazos' stubby six-gun came upon the heels of the first, and the bullet passed through Haynes' neck, splattering Cal and the window behind him with scarlet.

While Squatty was falling, half in and half out of the aisle, the door of the washroom flew open and Sheriff MacAndrews burst into view, his features twisted in an expression of wrath. The passengers, terror-stricken, were huddling down beneath their seats.

"Howya, sheriff!" Brazos laughed demoniacally. "Here's one for you! Take it, you mangy son—"

Again his gun crashed, spewed fire and smoke. MacAndrews fell side-wise against the water cooler, but his own revolver blazed in return. As he fired, Brazos ducked down behind the bewildered Mex who was chained to him. The sheriff's bullet, misaimed, brained the Mexican and killed him instantly. Brazos let go a fourth time, finishing MacAndrews with a shot through the heart.

The smoke was still swirling through the car in an acrid fog when

the conductor came stumbling through the vestibule doorway. Rubbing at his eyes, he shouted to ask what was wrong. Brazos answered him—with a revolver shot. The trainman, the fourth victim of the gunfire, crumpled lifeless to the floor.

CHAPTER IV.

INTO THE DESERT.

ALL this shooting had taken place in the interval of three or four breaths, so swiftly that it was over before Cal Justin could really grasp what was happening. His first reaction was one of horror and nausea, for he was spattered with the blood of the officer who had treated him with sympathy and kindness all during his trouble. At the same time a sort of panic swept over Cal, and over Whitey as well—the instinct of trapped animals to escape, no matter what the cost. For the next few minutes their minds were both slightly haywire; they acted without reason.

Brazos had yanked the bell cord and, in response to the signal to the engineer, the train was grinding gradually to a stop. The spot where it finally halted was a remote and desolate one; nothing could be seen from either side of the coach except a scorching waste of sand, stone, and alkali.

"Hurry, you two *tontos!*" Brazos bellowed. "Luce! Justin! On out of here, ahead of me. Drag them carcasses out of our way! Don't stand there—"

In his excitement and rage he flourished his still-smoking gun at them, and the two companions in chains lockstepped toward the vestibule as fast as their fetters permitted. Brazos, swearing and tugging, dragged his way after them, pulling along the corpse of the slain Mexi-

can which left a long, smearing trail of red behind it.

The passengers in the smoker were still under their seats, frozen there in terror, but Brazos knew that the other trainmen would quickly start investigating the cause of the stop. He made a frantic effort to rid himself of the chain that fastened him so inexorably to the dead convict; holding the muzzle of his gun close to one of the links, he fired. It was no use; not one bullet nor a dozen could do anything to break the tough and heavy steel. No good searching the bodies of the officers for keys to the fetters—there were none; they had been riveted on. It began to look as if the murders had been in vain, as far as Brazos' escape was concerned.

Then the killer's desperately roving eyes fell upon a glass-faced case at the end of the car. It contained emergency tools, including an ax, and the instructions *In Case of Fire, Break Glass* were stenciled upon it. Brazos dragged himself and the Mexican toward it, smashed the cover with a blow of his gun, and yanked out the ax.

Cal Justin gasped.

The flat-faced desperado hissed. The ax rose and fell, once, twice, a final time.

When he was free, Brazos ran into the vestibule, herding Cal and Whitey ahead of him, dragging the chain with its now empty anklet. The three convicts jumped from the coach onto the cindery roadbed.

The fireman and engineer had left the locomotive and were trotting toward the smoker, but when Brazos threatened them with his gun they scrambled back. "Pull the train out of here, and pronto! Highball 'er!" the killer yelled.

The engine crew hastened to obey. The wheels spun, took hold, and the

train jerked forward. In less than a minute it was around a distant curve and out of sight.

Brazos Jake sat down, drew off his free boot and shook out a double handful of cartridges. Ejecting the empties, he pushed six fresh shells into the cylinder of his revolver. Then he glanced up at the three telegraph wires that were strung alongside the track.

"We ought to cut those, just in case," he grunted. "But how we goin' to shin up one of them poles?"

"Lend me your gun," Cal said dully.

His mind was still numbed by the events of the past few minutes; it was dominated by only one urge just then, the overwhelming anxiety to avoid what he considered to be an unjust sentence to the penitentiary.

Brazos hesitated, then handed Cal the revolver, standing close beside Cal and Whitey while the former stood under the nearest pole and took deliberate aim at one of the wires where it was attached to its green glass insulator. He squeezed the trigger, and splinters flew from the cross arm.

"Missed! I can't afford to waste them cartridges!" protested Brazos.

"Throws a bit high and to the left—gun needs cleanin'," said Forty-Four Cal, and he fired three more shots in rapid succession.

Brazos blinked at the three hanging wires that Cal had cut, and his jaw sagged a little. "That's as good pistolin' as ever I saw, Justin," he admitted, extending his hand for the return of the gun. "El Pelirrojo can use an hombre like you!"

Cal returned the revolver to Brazos. If his mind had been functioning normally he might have kept the gun, just to keep it out of the murderer's possession.

Whitey Luce shook his head

slightly when Brazos repossessed the gun.

In spite of the baking heat, Cal shivered a little. "We can't just stand here," he reminded them. "Where are we?"

"There's a little town named Pickpan, off the railroad, five or six miles north of here," said Brazos Jake. "We'll head for there, and then get these irons took off our legs."

They started away from the railroad tracks and into the torrid wilderness of the desert. The going would have been hard in any circumstances, but handicapped as they were with heavy irons, the town of Pickpan seemed terribly far away. Cal and Whitey adjusted themselves as best they could to each other's stride, and Brazos struggled along with his own fifteen-odd pounds of chain. He dragged it, at first, but after it had caught several times in the brush he wound it around his leg, and tied it with a strip torn from his shirt.

Never had miles seemed so long to Cal Justin. Through cruel thickets of shiny-spined cholla they toiled, across treacherous, steep-banked arroyos, up hill and down. Whiplike *sangre de drago* clawed at them, thorny brush and rank-smelling creosote tore at their clothes. The sun was at its hottest at this time of day; it roasted their exposed flesh, stung their eyes with its white-hot lances. Even the rattlesnakes and lizards had sought the shade, and the brassy sky, too, was empty of birds. Cal's lips and throat were already like drying rawhide.

"Pickpan is over the next ridge," Brazos panted. "Another two miles. I know this here country like the inside of my hat. Used to range through here with El Pelirrojo."

"Who is he?" Cal asked, knowing

that in English the name meant the Red-haired.

"Boss rider of Hell's Legion," said Brazos. "The hide-out is over in the Devil's Homestead country, as they call it. Place named Moon Crater. That's where we're goin' to hit for. I'll get you two hombres into the outfit and there'll be plenty of dinero!"

"Not for me," Whitey decided after a pause. "I don't want any part of it. How about you, Cal?"

Justin dragged their chain another yard. "Rather than join them, I'd sooner be in the pen. They're cut-throats."

Brazos Jake's thick lips expanded in a sneering grin. "You coyotes will do what I tell you! Get that through your noggins, before I blow 'em off. Savvy?"

"I savvy," Cal said briefly. His mind had cleared now, and he realized that he was in a worse predicament than when on the train in the custody of the officers.

"You were fools." Brazos sniggered at them. "Fools not to have grabbed away them law dawgs' shootin' irons. Now *I'm* the kingpin, and don't you forget it!"

Shoulder to shoulder, Whitey and Cal traded glances that meant a good deal. They felt the same way about this sinister business; in some manner they would have to shake loose from this killer. He was poison.

They rested for a while in the first shade they had reached since leaving the railroad, the meager shadow cast by a pale and scrawny paloverde. Then they pushed on again, climbing the ridge that Brazos Jake had pointed out, and from its summit they saw the forlorn little settlement of Pickpan spread out below. There were a couple of dozen adobes, a few trees and a scattering of windmills.

"See that shack standin' away off

by itself at the end of the side road?" Brazos grunted. "That's a blacksmith shop. We'll sneak up to it through them willows. C'mon, you pilgrims."

THE blacksmith was a man of about sixty, strong and energetic in spite of his whitening hair and bent shoulders. He was working at his anvil, fitting an iron tire to a wagon wheel, when the side door scraped open. He turned as three men pushed their way in. His words of welcome died abruptly on his lips when he saw that one of them was brandishing a short, ugly Colt revolver.

"Now don't open your yaparoo—do as I tell you, or your bellers-pumpin' days will be over!" snarled the noseless hombre who held the gun.

The smith had seen the fetters on the legs of his visitors, and he understood. An anxious glance toward the large main doorway showed him that the driveway was empty and that no help was in sight.

"You . . . you men are escaped criminals, aren't you?" he questioned with a sharp intake of breath.

"Never mind what we are, pop." Brazos rasped menacingly. "You strike these irons off'n us, and do it quick!"

"I'll have to, I reckon." The blacksmith gulped, his seamed face white under its grime and soot.

He knew how to handle his tools, and in less than five minutes he cut through the rivets of Cal's and Whitey's leg irons, freeing them of their painfully heavy weight. Then he set to work upon the ankle of Brazos Jake, while the desperado toyed significantly with the short-barreled gun. The two younger men—who were, in fact, the unwilling captives of Brazos—rubbed and

kneaded their aching muscles. Their bruised and chafed ankles had already begun to swell.

While Cal and Whitey drank thirstily from the smithy's water barrel, Brazos was chiseled free from his chain.

"This is mighty nice of you, ol' feller." Brazos grinned wolfishly, while the smith was finishing. "I think I ought to give you somethin' for pay."

"Only think I want is for you to leave here," was the indignant reply.

"But I think we ought to hand you a leetle rec-ward," Brazos insisted.

"Don't!" snapped Forty-Four Cal, for he had seen the unholy light glistening in the killer's snakish eyes and he had learned what it signified. "Don't kill him!"

With a pitiless laugh Brazos yanked the trigger of his six-gun. And as the shot roared out to end the old blacksmith's life, Cal's groping fingers closed around the handle of an eight-pound hammer that lay on the bench near him. He hurled it at the murderer with all the power in his muscular arm!

The missile thudded against Brazos' head just above the ear, and he went down like a lightning-struck steer, sprawling heavily over the huddled body of the man he had just slain.

Cal remained leaning against the bench, his breath coming in jerks, his smoldering glance fixed upon the noseless, bestial face of Brazos Jake. Whitey Luce, first to recover himself, bent over the bodies.

"The old hombre is dead," he muttered, and then he raised his voice. "Burn my saddle! I think Jake is, too! He ain't breathin'—the whole side of his *cabeza* is smashed in like an eggshell. That was a danged good throw of yours, Forty-Four!"

"I was tryin' to spoil his shot,

but I wasn't quick enough," Cal Justin said slowly. "I didn't go to kill him, but I'm not a bit sorry I did. Brazos was blood-crazy, not fit to live."

Whitey picked up the fallen six-gun, emptied Brazos' pockets of loose cartridges and handed them over to Justin. "Here—you're better than I am with a gun, so you take it. We're on our own now, and maybe we— Hold on!" he broke off sharply, turning to stare out through the wide front door.

"What is it?" asked Cal as he slipped the revolver inside his shirt.

Whitey had grasped his pard's arm. "Rider just turned into this side road. He's wearin' a badge, looks like!"

"Think he heard that shot?"

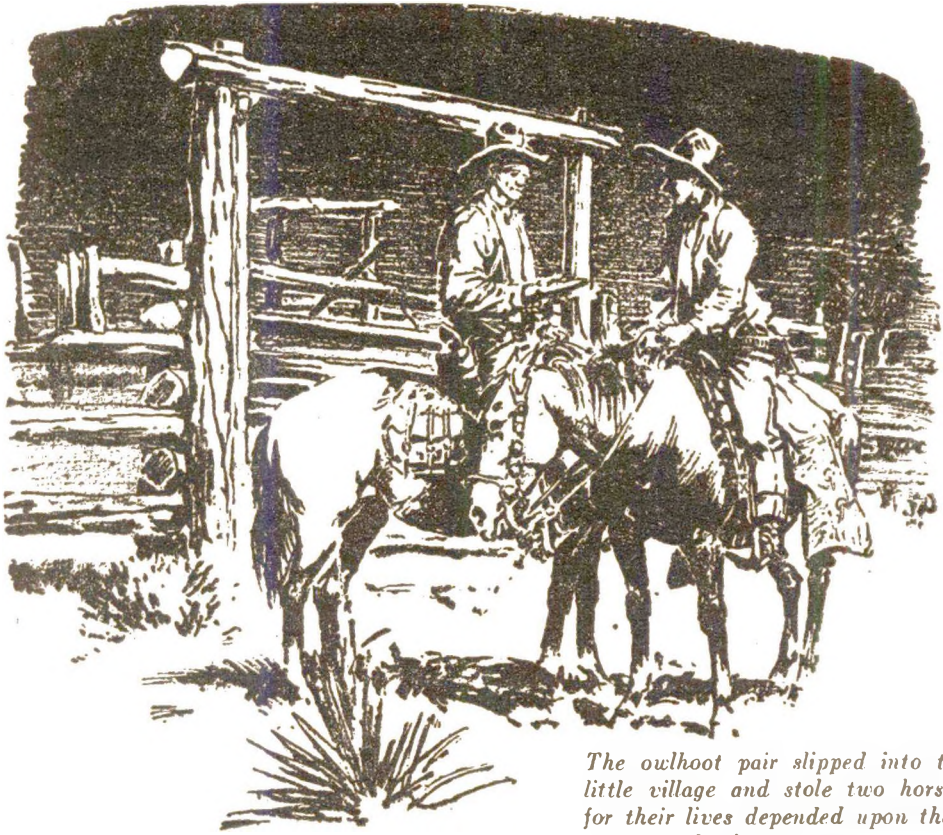
"Don't think so. He's comin' along easylike."

"Then we'll try to bluff it out." Cal decided. "Help me hide these . . . these bodies."

There was a stack of empty gunny sacks that had been used for wood and coal, and with these they covered over the bodies of Brazos and the blacksmith. The chains, too, were thrown out of sight. Cal found a grimy leather apron and whipped it about his middle, then rolled up his sleeves to the elbows.

When the shadow of the horseman fell across the open doorway, the stage was already set. Whitey, with his face freshly smeared with soot, was poking at the fire in the forge, and Justin was industriously finishing up the wagon tire. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the rider urge his chestnut cayuse on into the shop and then dismount. He noticed that the badge pinned to the newcomer's vest was a six-pointed gold star with the words: SHERIFF MARIPOSA COUNTY engraved upon it.

"Howdy," the officer greeted



The outhoot pair slipped into the little village and stole two horses, for their lives depended upon their having mounts.

civilly enough, and he ladled out a dipper of water from the barrel before saying anything more.

His shrewd eyes were of a pale blue that contrasted with the deep tan of his face; his nose was slightly beaked, and the thick, reddish mustache over his straight nose was streaked with gray.

"What become of the old man that used to have this place? What was his name? Cassingale, Massingham, or something like that."

"Cassingham," said Cal glibly. "Me and my pard here have taken over. What can we do for you, sheriff?"

"I think my hoss has just lost a piece of shoe on the left forefoot. Better take a look at it."

WW—4c

Forty-Four Cal made an inspection, and nodded. "Poor job. Not much worn, either. We do a better class of work here," he added in a businesslike tone. "Better let me plate him all around."

To Cal's relief, the sheriff said he hadn't time. He, too, looked at the hoof, and watched while Cal expertly drew out the nails that held the intact fragment in place. Fortunately, Justin knew what he was doing; he had done a lot of shoeing on the Pony Track. After he had pared and shaped the hoof, he heated a shoe of the type the sheriff selected, bent it a little, and nailed it on.

"Quite a ways from headquarters, arent you, sheriff?"

The officer lighted a ready-made

cigarette. "Yes, I've been visitin' Pickpan and all the other towns in the county," he said. "Wanted to warn 'em to keep a sharp lookout—"

"A lookout?" repeated Forty-Four Cal, his pulse quickening.

"Yes, for Hell's Legion," the sheriff replied sternly. "It's on the rampage again. Been raidin' towns up north. I've just got word about it from Big Pine County up north, and they say nearly twenty people have been killed in the last month. Better keep your eyes peeled, you men. Banks and business houses are in danger particularly, though the gang isn't apt to bother a place like this, I reckon."

"No," agreed Justin. "A blacksmith's shop is a peaceful spot. That'll be four bits," he said as the officer drew out his purse.

As the sheriff left, he gave Cal a dollar and told him to keep the change.

CHAPTER V.

OUTLAW TRAILS.

THAT night Cal and Whitey slipped into the little village of Pickpan and stole two horses. Self-preservation, they had learned, was the first and strongest law of nature, and their very lives now depended upon their having mounts. However, they left a carefully scrawled document behind at the scene of their enforced theft:

WE-O-U

We owe you for one grulla branded Fry-ing Pan, and one roan branded Lazy G, also for saddles and bridles of same.

(signed) CAL JUSTIN & WHITEY LUCE.

During the weeks that followed they left other We-O-U's, each of them painstakingly itemized, for the supplies they needed in order to keep alive. They knew that the law would consider their actions sheer bravado, but both Cal and Whitey

were of the same mind—somehow, some day, these obligations would be repaid. On the third day they had broken into a hardware store, and had left their promissory note for the guns and ammunition they had to have.

Whitey equipped himself with an army model .45 "thumb buster" with a belt and holster to fit, and Cal had selected a pair of his Colt name-sakes—.44s.

They were fugitives from justice now, and they soon discovered the hardships and perils of the outlaw trails. They had several escapes that were enough to raise their hair afterward. Once they suddenly quit a ranch job, because of a hunch of Cal's, just an hour before a marshal's posse had galloped in. Another time they traded shots with some deputies in a mining camp, fortunately without having to kill any of them. They were on the move continuously; more than once they broke camp in the middle of the night to ride, warned by some subtle instinct of the hunted.

"I think we're a couple of hard-luck birds, Forty-Four," Whitey Luce growled one morning while they were eating their slim breakfast. "We wanted to be free as eagles—and we're only a couple of owlhooters. The law is goin' to grab us, one of these days. No gettin' around it."

"Right, amigo," Cal Justin agreed soberly. "It's not all our fault, but we're in deeper than we were at the beginnin'. It might be a hanging matter if we're caught. That paper we saw—they think we murdered Brazos and the blacksmith."

Although they had covered three hundred miles since leaving Pickpan they had done so much circling and doubling back that they were within a day's ride of it again. They had camped beside a little mountain

spring, and in the gray light of the morning they could see the desert unroll to the south of them almost to infinity.

"You've got folks, Whitey? Never heard you speak much of 'em," Cal said, as he laced a brown quiry and lighted it with an ember from their little fire.

Luce nodded glumly. "I never wrote to them to let 'em know I'd been sentenced to the pen. They're good people, and I was ashamed. Didn't want to worry 'em."

Well, they surely know now, after all the ruckus we've raised," Cal said.

Whitey rose restlessly and started to saddle the roan cayuse. "I savvy what you're thinkin', Forty-Four—and you're right," he muttered finally. "I ought to go see my folks, and let 'em know. Will you come along?"

"Bein' as I've got none of my own now, I'd admire to." Justin smiled. "There ought to be somethin' we can do besides give ourselves up and surrender to the law. Maybe seein' your people will help us to think things out. We sure need a heap of advice."

The fugitive pardners hurriedly broke camp, now that they had made up their minds. They traveled hard and far that day, pressing deep into the high, timbered country toward the north, and next morning they were at the edge of Big Pine County, only a few miles from the crossroads store owned by Whitey's father.

AFTER the blazing cruelty of the desert, these high trails were a paradise. The piny air was like spiced wine, cool and exhilarating. The sun was no longer a tyrant, but a cheerful friend. Little parks opened out here and there between the groves of towering pines.

"Nice country—if they can keep

the sheep out of it," said Forty-Four Cal. "How much farther, Whitey?"

"Dad's tradin' post is just around the next bend, down in the hollow," Luce told him, and Cal had never seen him so happily excited. "You were sure right, Forty-Four. I can square myself with my folks, anyhow."

But when they came to the turn in the road Whitey Luce, who had hastened ahead, pulled in his roan and jerked backward in his saddle as if he had been slashed in the face with a quirt. Sensing that something was terribly wrong, Cal sent his grulla bounding forward and he was at his pard's side in a moment.

"Look at it, Cal! Just look!" Whitey groaned, and with a shaking hand he pointed ahead.

Justin stared, and then the two men pressed forward. The store, once a good-sized building of logs, was now nothing but a pile of ruins and ashes from which blackened timbers projected like a crazy jumble of jack straws.

As they drew near, Cal estimated that the fire had taken place about a month before, for weeds and grass were just beginning to send up their first pale shoots in the charred wreckage. Whitey, with a face like that of a sleepwalker, jumped from his saddle and at a dog trot circled around what was left of the Luce trading post. Hearing him cry out, Cal followed.

On the other side of the burned store were two recently made mounds of earth, each with a headboard painted white and lettered in black. There were flowers on the graves, some dead and brown, and others that might have been put there only a few days before, for they were still unfaded.

The headboards, pathetically side by side, bore the names of Whitey's

father and mother, together with the dates of their births and deaths. The latter was the same for each, the 12th of July. Just a month ago!

Cal knew that there was nothing he could say to his friend; Whitey would have to have it out in the depths of his own soul. He took it—and like a man. The stunned look did not leave his face, but after the first shock was over his thoughts returned to the living.

"I've got a sister—couple years younger than me," he said quietly. "She escaped what happened here, it looks like. There's no other grave . . ."

Cal gripped his hand, let his other hand rest on Whitey's shoulder for a moment, and then both returned slowly toward their horses. There was nothing that could be done here.

At the intersection of the two trails they met a wagon and team of mules. The driver, a long and lean skinner in blue jeans and wearing a straw sombrero, pulled up to pass the time of day. Whitey Luce was in no mood for small talk, however.

"What happened over there at the store?" he demanded.

The mulero leaned out and sprayed the roadside weeds with tobacco juice. "Didn't you hear about it? Must be new to these parts, then. Why, the Hell's Legion raided ol' Luce's store quite a while back—him and his wife was shot, and then after they took what they wanted the outlaws set the place afire. That's a plumb mean outfit, that Legion! They done a lot more dirtiness around here, too. They—" The driver stopped abruptly, all at once looking pale and scared. He realized that he was talking too much to these strangers. They might be members of the gang themselves!

"The old folks used to have a girl livin' with 'em," Whitey Luce said

after a long pause, during which Cal saw his pard's eyes blaze up in ferocious rage. "Know what become of her?"

The mulero wagged his thin face in the negative. "Couldn't say," he quavered. Whipping up his team, he hastened off, leaving Luce and Justin gazing silently after him.

"Got any idea where your sister would be?" Cal asked.

"We'll try Summit City. That's the nearest town," Whitey said grimly.

A ride of nine miles through a mountainous, rocky country brought them into Summit, which was built on both sides of a wide canyon. A white, swift-running stream dashed down the single street, and was boarded over in places by bridges and sidewalks. There were a dozen business houses, mostly saloons, and twice that many log cabins. As Whitey's folks had moved to the district only two years before, he was practically a stranger here, and there was small chance that he would be recognized.

Having decided that their best bet would be the little post office, they left their mounts at the hitch rail and Whitey made inquiries at the single, grated window.

"Young lady named Luce? Carol Sue? Why, yes," piped the old postmaster, and he came out into the lobby in order to point out the house more accurately. Whitey brightened; he was getting some favorable breaks at last. "She lives in that cabin with the white curtains up yonder." The old man showed them. "You can see it just above the top of the livery stable. There's a little side road—"

But Cal, at least, wasn't listening. His glance had fallen upon a large "wanted" poster that was tacked, amid several older, yellowed ones, on

one of the post-office walls. In swollen black type it shouted the following:

\$5000 REWARD! DEAD OR ALIVE!

—

CALVIN JUSTIN—WHITEY LUCE
FOR MURDER!
ESCAPED CONVICTS WANTED FOR
SLAYING OF OFFICERS!

There were details and descriptions of the fugitives in smaller printing, but he had already seen enough. By Whitey's startled expression he knew that he had noticed the handbill, too. Hurriedly thanking the postmaster, they hightailed it for the street.

"Our visit in Summit City had better be short, *compadre*," said Cal as they swung aboard their broncs again. "But first we'll see your sister."

"I wouldn't want to disgrace her any more by bein' arrested here," Whitey agreed. "There's a tin-star marshal standin' across the street, but he don't seem to be payin' attention to us—yet. This is the path, I guess, that goes up the hill to the cabin. Come on!"

WHITEY'S meeting with Carol Sue was an episode that Cal wouldn't soon forget. The girl was sharing the cabin with a widow lady, but she was alone in the house when the two outlaws made their unexpected call.

Carol shed a few tears, but not many, for she had Whitey's brand of defiant courage. In the stuffily furnished little parlor Cal stood near the door, twirling his Stetson in embarrassment while his pardner exchanged confidences. Fortunately for her, Carol had been visiting in town the day of the bandits' raid on the trading post. She knew, of course, that her brother was a fugitive.

"Dad and mom never knew that you'd gotten into trouble, Whitey. I'm glad for that anyway," she said. "Of course, I never did believe you murdered anyone, but that other thing, the money you took from your employer—"

"I'll make it good, sis," muttered Whitey, his face scarlet. "I got nobody but myself to blame for the jam I'm in."

"I'm not so sure of that," the girl replied, and she gave Cal a look that froze him to the marrow.

"I . . . I'd almost forgot to introduce you to Cal," Whitey stammered.

She did not offer her hand. "You're Calvin Justin, are you?" she asked scornfully.

"Yes, miss," Cal said awkwardly, hardly knowing what to say.

He always felt clumsy in the presence of girls, especially pretty ones like Carol. How blue her eyes were! With just a glint of green to make them bewildering. And her hair was the color of bright new copper.

"You got my brother into this terrible thing!" she accused bitterly.

"You've got it all wrong, Carol," Whitey defended. "Cal's my pard, my best friend. He had to kill—"

"He was sent up for murder to begin with," she said, wilting Justin with another frigid look. "Listen, Whitey, you've got to give yourself up. It's the only way! I'll go down to that town of Espanola, and do what I can—"

"Now see here, sis," he said sternly, "I've got too big a job to do without surrenderin' to any law! No—don't ask me what it is." He frowned as the girl's expression changed. "Now, good-by, kid, and don't worry about me. Next time we meet maybe you'll feel differently—about Cal and me both."

The fugitives didn't return to the

main part of Summit, but skirted the edge of the town and took the trail that led into the southwest. Neither of them spoke until they were deep in the timbered wilderness again.

"She's a mighty pretty girl," Cal said finally. "Too bad she hates me the way she does."

"Don't feel bad about it, amigo. She'll savvy the truth some day," Whitey promised. "Seem' Carol sure takes a load off my mind—there was some insurance, and she aims to start teachin' school this fall. She'll be all right."

"What you told her about that big job you had to do—did you mean it?" asked Forty-Four Cal.

"Of course! Are you with me?" Whitey Luce snapped.

Cal's white teeth gleamed in a mirthless smile. "All the way! We're going to enlist in Hell's Legion!"

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE LAIR OF THE RED-HAIRED.

THE Devil's Homestead country, lonely and forbidding and almost unexplored, was one of the most fantastic regions in the border country. It was as hot as the infernal kingdom, and its landscape was so weird and grotesque that it might have been transposed from Hades itself. It was volcanic country, burnt out thousands of years ago, but as awe-inspiring as when first erupted in those days of brimstone and fire. Spires, turrets, queerly shaped and painted rocks towered everywhere in mad confusion. The colors were violent, blinding to the eye, and little or nothing grew there. Streams of frozen lava, congealed like furnace slag, alternated with fields of reddish ashes and cinders that had been spewed forth before the coming of man.

A week had passed since Whitey and Cal had left Summit City, and for the last two days of that period they had been wandering through the outlying reaches of the Homestead. They had seen no sign of any human being, nor of any trail, and they had begun to think that Brazos Jake had deceived them. Then they accidentally stumbled upon a well-concealed piece of roadway. Following this, they had discovered other trails marked by the shod hoofs of horses, and now they were investigating the most likely of these.

"That might be Moon Crater over yonder—it's a whopper of a mountain, anyhow, and these tracks seem to be leadin' us there," Whitey said, and he swept a brown hand toward a huge and formidable mound that rose just ahead and to the left. It resembled a volcano with its top blown off, an enormous ash pile, black, red, and poisonous yellow.

"If it is, they've picked a good spot," growled Forty-Four. "They could stand off a small army from that castle. What a crazy country!"

The trail curved sharply around a massive lump of rock that had taken the shape of a distorted human head. They made the turn, and then Cal, who was a few yards in the lead at this narrow point, reached halfway toward his holstered Colts. Changing his mind, he raised his hands shoulder high, palms outward.

"That's right! You're covered plenty!" a voice advised acidly. "Both of you get 'em up and keep 'em toward high noon!"

Two sunburned, hard-bitten hombres had the drop on them, one with a Winchester carbine, the other with a long-barreled S. & W. Nearby, in a great cleft in the basaltic rock, were their saddled broncs. One man had grabbed the bridle reins of Cal's

horse, and he ordered both the prisoners to dismount.

"Where did you jaspers figger you was goin'?" The desperado with the carbine leered, swerving its menacing muzzle from Cal to Whitey and back again.

"We been watchin' you from up above for the last half hour." The other, an unshaven, crooked-mouthed hombre, glared. Both carried heavy armament, their waists glittering with the brass of looped cartridges.

"We want to see El Pelirrojo," Cal drawled coolly.

There was a hoarse, foghorn whistle of astonishment from the carbineer, and his whiskey companion scratched his ear in puzzlement. "Yeah? What in blazes you want to see him for?"

"We want to join your outfit," Whitey barked.

"Better search 'em, Gila. They might be more law spies," advised the bandit with the carbine.

Gila began to frisk the captive pair. "We'll take you to meet the Red-haired, all right." He grinned like a wolverine. "I pity you poor jumpers if he don't like your looks, and I don't think he will. You've either got a lot of sand in your craws, or else sawdust in your heads! What's *this*?" he demanded, finding a large, folded piece of paper in Cal's pocket and spreading it out. "Whew! Is this *you*?"

He was staring at the "wanted" poster that described Luce and Justin. The bandit sentries were much impressed. Cal and Whitey could have presented nothing better in the way of credentials. The handbill was a ticket of admission to the Devil's Homestead.

"Come along with us," Gila grunted after comparing them with their printed descriptions. "You

can keep your guns, I reckon. For the time bein', anyhow."

So far, so good. The two would-be recruits were allowed to mount their horses, and the sentries jumped aboard their own, one riding ahead and the other behind Cal and Whitey.

It was near sundown, and the lava lands, flooded with eerie crimson light, were more sinister than ever. By the time the base of the broken-topped peak was reached—and they knew now that it was really Moon Crater—the evil landscape was illumined by the final afterglow. In the red fire the faces of the men looked like those of demons.

The trail up the treacherous sides of the huge crater was narrow and dangerous until they were nearly at the top. Then it widened, and a few minutes later Cal and Whitey were blinking their amazement on the summit of the long-extinct volcano.

They hadn't expected to find so much room here at the mountain's flat top. There were at least twenty fairly level acres, all sloping somewhat toward the center. There were several feed lots and a corral under fence, and a big remuda of horses could be seen. But before they could do much looking around the evening stillness was shattered by a terrible yell of fear and agony. It was loud at first, becoming muffled as it died away.

"What in blazes was that?" Whitey muttered.

"We nabbed a sheepherder this mornin' that the chief figgered was a snoop for the law dawgs." Gila grinned. "Reckon that was the last of him."

As they neared the supper fires that were burning near the middle of the area, Justin counted twenty-three men. About half of these were Mexicans, some wearing steeple-

crowned sombreros and serapes. Under canvas and tarpaulins were stores, arms, and ammunition—and probably loot. The bandits had been rigned closely about something that seemed to be the crater itself, but now they turned their attention to the newcomers.

"Here's two owlhooters that wants to join up with us, Pelirrojo," Gila sang out.

As Cal and Whitey climbed from their stirrups they found themselves facing the ugliest, most brutal-looking hombre they had ever laid eyes upon. Without being told, they knew it was El Pelirrojo, famous leader of Hell's Legion. He was a short, barrel-chested hombre, typically Mexican except for the flaming red hair that contrasted so violently with his spider-black eyes and swarthy skin, and that proclaimed his half-breed origin.

"*Hch-zoose!* Eef they are *pillas-tres* like the hombre who say he herd sheep— Do you know what happen to that man just now? Look! I show you!" snarled the Red-haired. He picked up a good-sized rock and tossed it into the yawning black mouth of the crater.

The old volcano's pit seemed to extend downward to almost infinite depths, for they could hear the rock ricocheting and echoing for a long time before its rumblings became fainter and finally died into silence. The opening at the top was about twenty feet across, and the walls were smooth and sheer. Heaped all around the circular opening were piles of broken rock, rhyolites, cinders and other ejected stuff.

"That hole, he leads down to Inferno," bellowed the Red-haired. "Into it you go, eef you are what I theenk—"

"I think they're O. K., boss," Gila said. "We found this on 'em." He

handed the bandit leader the printed handbill.

Pelirrojo's thick lips moved as he spelled out the words. "How you know of thees place?" he demanded, looking up with a changed expression.

"Hombre named Brazos Jake told us—he. escaped with us," said Forty-Four Cal. He didn't give Whitey a chance to speak, for he saw the hatred smoldering in his pard's eyes and he was afraid he would lose his head and hurl himself upon this murderer of his parents.

"Brazos? Ah, it was me who had a gun delevered to heem at that jail in Espanola," chortled the Red-haired. "Where ees he now?"

"He took a long trip," Cal replied, and naturally he didn't go into details about that "trip".

"And he sends me two *matasietes* in hees place, eh? *Muy bueno!*" approved the bandit chief. He clapped his hands sharply. "We weel now make them of the Legion. Breeng the *Taza de Muerte!*"

The Cup of Death that the Red-haired called for was a basin made of a human skull! It was filled with whiskey, and while the assemblage yelled hoarse approval, it was passed first to Cal and then to Whitey. They drank unflinchingly from the horrid basin. They knew that they would have even worse things to do before their dangerous game was finished.

CHAPTER VII.

MURDER RAID.

IT was not long before the two Hell's Legionnaires were called upon to prove their ability at gun fighting and robbery by force of arms. The very next day El Pelirrojo announced that a raiding expedition would be sent into the town

of Warner's Spring to loot the two banks and the Wells Fargo express office. Only about half the gang would be riding, and they would be headed by Slim Price, the Legion's second in command. The Red-haired and about a dozen men would range closer to Moon Crater in order to secure provisions for the bandits and their horses—all the feed for the latter had to be carried in from quite a distance.

Warner's Spring was a long day's ride from the Devil's Homestead, and during it Cal and Whitey had plenty of opportunity to size up their fellow bandits. Slim Price, their leader on this vicious escapade, was a queer sort of hombre, skeleton-thin and yet ferociously strong. He had taken a dislike to Cal and Whitey for some reason, and his bloodshot, suspicious eyes were on them continually.

They made camp that night a few miles from the town, and were up and ready at dawn. Price had thoroughly "cased" the layout, and he scratched maps in the sand, giving them their last instructions. "We'll fog in from two sides," he said, "and we'll hit all three places at once." He singled out five of the men and detailed them to hold up the Miners & Stockmen's Bank, and another group which he was to head was to strike at the First National. That left Cal, Whitey, and two others to take care of the Fargo office.

"Shoot 'em up," Price rasped. "Dead men don't do any testifyin' afterward. And fifty dollars bonus to the one that kills the town clown. Let's ride!"

One of the two men who had been put in Cal's party was a Mexican named Ramon, a thick, long-armed *bandido* with the repulsive features of a gorilla, and the other was a paunchy, buck-toothed white rene-

gade called the Grinner. The latter was to be in command of the squad.

Cal and Whitey had already made tentative plans, schemes whispered in the night. But whatever they did would have to be on the spur of the moment—there was no telling what would happen, or how.



The three divisions of the Legion smashed into the town at the same time, just as the business houses were opening, sweeping in from opposite directions in a rolling tornado of dust and thundering hoofs! It was the first time that Cal had seen a bandit gang in operation, and to be a part of it filled him with an emotion that both excited and sickened him. No wonder Hell's Legion had spread such panic through the country. They came in yelling like demons, blasting away at everyone in sight, women and children not excluded. Before Cal's party had reached its objective, five or six people lay sprawled in the street. Cal and Whitey had fired some shots, but had been careful to miss.

The two banks stood on opposite corners of Main Street in the center of town, and in the haze of dust and

smoke Cal saw the rest of the raiders leaping from their saddles, just as Cal's group came up abreast of Wells Fargo. Everything had been perfectly timed. Cal and Whitey jumped to the ground outside the small, stone express office, secured their horses and ran across the sidewalk just behind Ramon and the Grinner. The pards had flashed each other a look of mutual understanding. It was time for action, and not of the sort that their two murderous companions expected!

There were three men in the office, all employees. One of them was making a dash toward the safe in order to slam it shut, and the others already had their hands up. There was no excuse for any killing, but Ramon's big single-action six-gun belched flame and smoke as he crossed the threshold. One of the clerks slumped against a desk, then bounced to the floor, dying from a wound in the chest.

"Here's your pay for that hombre!" said Forty-Four Cal with a freezing smile—and he shot Ramon down, killing him with a slug that struck the Mexican under the armpit and ripped through his chest.

It would have been hard to say who was the more bewildered, the Wells Fargo officials, or the Grinner! The dumfounded desperado spun on the toes of his boots, bringing his gun in line with Cal Justin.

"Why, you crazy—"

There were three shots this time, but the bandit's ricocheted wildly from the safe. His aim had been spoiled by the two leaden pellets that Whitey and Cal had thrown into him! Folding at the knees, he thudded to the floor, his smoking six-gun clattering after him. That toothy grimace was stamped forever on the Grinner's face now; it was the bloody smile of sudden death!

Cal spoke quickly to the quaking Fargo men. "Clear out the back way—through the alley," he ordered. "Take the cash with you—some more of those devils might come here. So hurry!"

ON the way back to the lava country the raiders pushed their horses to the limit, so that Moon Crater would be reached before dark. On the whole, the foray had been very successful, the proceeds of the double bank robbery amounting to twenty-six thousand dollars. A number of Warner's Spring citizens had been slain, and among them had been the town marshal—Slim Price having saved the bonus money by shooting the lawman down himself.

But Price was not satisfied, for the Wells Fargo stick-up had been a complete fiasco. The expressmen, it seemed, had fought it out with the bandits, had killed two of Price's most capable gunmen and escaped with the bank roll. All the way back to headquarters he threw his ire at the new recruits.

"Trouble with you stump heads is that you can't fight! Justin, you and Luce have got to learn how to handle your guns—if you're not too yeller to use 'em! Only one of them Fargo men was downed, and I'll bet neither one of you was in on *that!*"

"That's right," admitted Justin meekly. "We wasn't."

"We don't throw men out of the Legion," hinted Price darkly. "When an hombre can't hold down his job we see that somethin' happens to him. El Pelirrojo won't give you greeners many more chances."

"The Red-haired likes to feed Moon Crater's crew," guffawed one of the others. "I'd like to have a gold piece for every hombre he's

had thrown into that hole-with-no-bottom!"

By spurring their horses unmercifully, the troop made the climb of Moon Crater before sunset. Sentries had been posted as usual near the foot of the mountain, and from them Price's band learned that a prisoner had been taken during their absence—a law officer had been captured near the edge of Devil's Homestead.

Piling off their lathered mounts at the top of the old volcano, they went toward the campfires where the Red-haired met them, heard Slim Price's report, and took charge of the stolen money. Cal Justin went for a look at the captured lawman, and to Cal's surprise he recognized the man. It was the sheriff whose horse Cal had shod at Pickpan!

The Mariposa officer, bound hand and foot with lariats, lay face-up near the yawning pit. In order to communicate with him, Cal decided upon a grandstand play. Swearing loudly at all sheriffs in general and this one in particular, he strode over to the prisoner and ripped the gold-plated badge from his vest. He kicked the man in the ribs, a boot that looked vicious but which was pulled at the instant of impact. "Take it easy—I'm a friend," he whispered without moving his lips, and then he raised his voice to insult and berate the officer again.

"Here's what we'll do to your kind," he snarled, and throwing the badge straight up into the air, he whipped out one of his .44s. When the badge had reached the top of its flight, some twenty feet from the ground, Cal's gun roared. The glittering star, struck squarely, leaped tremendously, then fell humming to the ground, a twisted piece of hot metal.

A roar of approbation went up

from the watching bandits, for Cal's marvelous exhibition had been nonchalant and apparently without effort. But Slim Price sneered.

"Too bad Justin couldn't have done some of that in Warner's Spring," he taunted. "Why don't you ask him about that, chief? Him and his tow-headed pard ain't got the guts—"

Slim's tirade was interrupted by the trampling of hoofs. Turning quickly, Cal Justin stared. The sentries had come up from below, and with them were three other riders, the last men that Cal would have dreamed of seeing!

They were Milo Frontag, Wing Pidgeon, and Pete Carr, his enemies of the Pony Track—and El Pelirrojo was hailing them as old friends!

There was no time for him to plan anything; the Pony Track men had already recognized him, and they seemed just as surprised as he! Milo Frontag, first to recover, pointed a long forefinger at the son of his former employer.

"Grab up that hombre, Red! Never mind why—get his guns!" he yelled.

CHAPTER VIII.

INTO THE BOTTOMLESS PIT.

IN the midst of more than twenty gunmen, any resistance was out of the question. Cal was disarmed and so, after a few moments, was the astonished Whitey Luce. Frontag, it appeared, was not only a member of Hell's Legion, but was second in authority to the Red-haired himself! After their guns had been taken from them, the two pards had their arms bound behind their backs with a couple of picket ropes.

Whitey was almost frothing with rage. He recognized the pock-marked Pete Carr as the swindler who had caused his arrest and downfall!

"I figured all along," Slim Price hooted, "that these rannies was wrong uns! You know 'em, do you, Milo?"

"I know Justin well enough," Milo Frontag barked, "and I want him out of the way, for keeps!"

A long talk began and lasted through supper, a meal that Cal and Whitey and their fellow prisoner, the sheriff, were given no share of. Most of the talk was between Frontag and the Red-haired. Cal could hear most of it, and he writhed inwardly as he heard the Legion making new plans. Frontag told Pelirrojo how he had acquired the Pony Track Ranch.

"It's just the spot we've been lookin' for, Red—a place close to the border where we can hold wet cattle. That's where the money is, in the long run, and with smaller risk. We'll run cattle in there from five States!"

"Thees Pony Track Rancho of yours, eet sounds *bueno*," the red-thatched breed chuckled. "A good blind for our work, eh? We weel move from here to that new place. Moon Crater ees getting too much dangerous—too many know about eet."

Frontag nodded, lifting a brimming cup of whiskey to his lips. "And to make things even easier"—he laughed harshly—"we've got a sheriff down there now that don't savvy his business."

"*De veras!* We break camp here *esta noche*—tonight! By daylight we weel be started, amigo!"

Little sleeping was done that night, none at all by Cal and his pard. The Legion spent the hours in packing by moonlight, and in drinking and carousing around the fires.

Cal was bending every desperate effort toward escape, for he knew that he and Whitey were to be cal-

lously murdered just as soon as Hell's Legion got around to doing it! The picket rope they had used to tie arms was worn rather thin by contact with the ground, and he set to work on it, scraping it against the sharp lava. It was slow, cramped toil, but he kept at it for hours.

Whitey was doing the same, but he didn't have much hope of working himself loose. "Looks like we've made a mess of it, pard," he whispered, and Cal couldn't encourage him much. The sheriff from Maricopa County was sleeping restlessly.

Gradually the east began to be tinged with ghostly gray, and with the coming of the daylight Cal's despair increased. His bonds seemed as tight as ever. And the Legion was getting its horses ready. Time was short.

The Red-haired almost forgot his prisoners in the hurry and bustle of departure. He was leaving three men behind to load up the remainder of the gang's supplies and to take charge of the extra horses. El Pelirrojo was already in his saddle when he gave them orders to finish off the three captives.

"When you are ready to *vamos* from here," he shouted at the trio, a gringo and two Mexicans, "shoot them, cut their throats, or throw them into the volcano—*como usted quiere!*"

The killers all laughed uproariously. Milo Frontag rode his horse over to where Cal was sprawled, looking down at him with cynical amusement.

"It was bad luck to run up against me, Justin," he mocked. "You learned that in Espanola, and now you've found it out again, haven't you? Good-by and good riddance."

When the Hell's Legionnaires had vanished over the rim of the moun-

tain, the three remaining bandits threw diamond hitches on some pack animals and made ready to abandon Moon Crater for good and all.

But there was one more task to do, and judging from the grins on their evil faces, they were looking forward to it with pleasure! Deliberately the trio stalked toward the helpless men at the crater edge, their boots crunching the cinders and pumice.

"We ain't goin' to waste much time with you," sniggered the gringo, a burly hombre in filthy buckskin pants and shirt. "All right," he told his two companions. "Into the hole with 'em!"

Whitey Luce was the first they came to, and the executioners got right to work. The two Mexicans grabbed up Whitey, in spite of his furious kicking, and pushed and dragged him to the brink of the horrible black well, while the other man stood watching, his shoulders heaving with mirth.

Whitey gave a yell, more of fury than of fear—and then it was over. The murderers hurled him over the edge and he vanished from sight, swallowed by the inky darkness of the pit!

Cal found himself on his feet, the broken rope dangling from his arms. He hadn't been conscious of the last burst of strength that had snapped his bonds. He knew only that his pard Whitey had just met a hideous death, and that the crime must be paid for!

The bandits were unreal figures in a red mist, phantoms that must be blotted out. Hurling himself at the nearest—the gringo—Cal got a backward hold on his holstered gun before the desperado grasped what was happening!

"What in blazes—"

Cal's little finger was inside the

trigger guard, his thumb on the hammer as the gun flipped from its holster. There was a jarring explosion, and the man went down heavily, his buckskin skirt scorched and smoking from the point-blank shot.

"*Cochinos!* Skunks!" roared Forty-Four Cal in berserk fury. He snapped the belching muzzle of the gun toward the terrorized Mexicans. One of them was dragging out his gun and Cal shot him first, blasting his heart. Then he killed the other, with no more compunction than in shooting a rattlesnake.

The sheriff broke the silence that fell so abruptly after the echoes had died away. "Good work, son. I thought we were goners. Would you mind letting *me* loose?"

Slowly, like a man in a nightmare, Cal Justin took a knife from the body of one of the Mexicans, came over to the officer and cut his bonds. He didn't speak to the sheriff, nor look at him; he dragged his feet back to the brink of the pit and looked over, his eyes misty. Whitey, his pard, dead—it seemed impossible.

It *was* impossible! A voice came up from somewhere down in the blackness, faint and muffled, but unmistakably Whitey's! Cal was so surprised that he nearly tumbled in!

"Is it really you, pard?" he shouted back, crawling on his knees to the very edge and looking over. "Where . . . how in the devil—"

"I'm . . . on a little ledge down here. It's only a couple feet wide!"

"How far down? Are you hurt?"

"About twenty feet down. No, I'm just bruised up a little. Afraid to move—might drop the rest of the way."

Knowing that Whitey could never get hold of a rope with his bound hands, Cal decided upon a plan of action. He knotted two lariats to-

gether, tied one end around his waist and gave the other to the sheriff. A convenient tongue of rock near the rim made a good snubbing post, and Cal was lowered into the gloom. In less than ten minutes the rescue was accomplished, and Whitey Luce, pale and shaken but none the worse after his miraculous escape, was on solid ground.

The Mariposa officer mopped his forehead with a bandanna and swore fervently. "My name's Crawford—Sheriff Dave Crawford," he said. "And you're the blacksmith boys! This ruckus was a close thing, eh? What do you say we round up those Hell's Legion skunkaroos, now that we savvy where they're headed?"

"Suits us!" Cal and Whitey chorused as they shook hands with him. And while they were arming themselves with the dead men's guns and selecting their horses they told Crawford all that had happened, holding back nothing.

Crawford nodded sympathetically. "We'll go after 'em, even if Espanola is out of my bailiwick. You know where the Pony Track is?"

Cal Justin nodded grimly. "It's my ranch, or it used to be."

"Good! We'll co-operate with the Espanola sheriff," said Crawford. "They haven't held an election since MacAndrews was murdered on that train. Seems that the county coroner—he's a sawbones—had to take over the sheriffin' duties down there. I dunno who he is—"

"I do!" exclaimed Forty-Four Cal. "It's old Doc Stanley!"

CHAPTER IX.

TRAP JAWS.

EVER since dark—and it was now about eight o'clock—well-armed citizens of Espanola and thereabouts had been drifting rather furtively, in

twos and threes, toward Dr. Stanley's house at the upper end of Main Street. Inside, the doctor's office and waiting rooms, thick with tobacco smoke, were crowded with men. Among them were Sheriff Crawford, Whitey Luce, and Forty-Four Cal. They had been in town only a few hours, after a three days' trip down from the Devil's Homestead country.

"Horses is ready, Doc, and I reckon we're all here," one of the Espanola men announced.

Stanley nodded. His sheriff's badge, upside down, was negligently pinned to his frock coat. Taking a piece of paper from his pocket, he scanned the names there, then told the men to raise their right hands while he swore them in as special deputies.

"Maybe you wonder why I administer the oath to escaped convicts, Justin and Luce," he smiled faintly. "It's irregular, but then I'm an irregular sheriff. I've arrested them and given them their parole, and sometime soon you'll know my reasons for it."

"I can vouch for the reasons." The sheriff from Mariposa County nodded.

Lowering his voice, Doc Stanley drew Cal and Whitey to one side. "I've got a surprise I've been saving for you." He duckled. "Follow me."

He led the way back into his living quarters, beckoning mysteriously, and the puzzled pardners wondered what it was all about. They weren't long in finding out—in the little parlor, with the medico's motherly white-haired wife, was Carol Sue!

Cal almost stampeded out again, but he needn't have been panicky. After the girl had kissed her brother she warmly welcomed Justin, taking his hand in both of hers.

"The doctor's been telling me all about you, Cal." She smiled, and he marveled to find that the angry, greenish glint in her eyes was gone. "I'm sorry for what I said, and thought, that day. Can you forgive me?"

"That's . . . it's all right, miss." Cal stammered, reddening and feeling as awkward as a newborn dogie.

"I kept my promise, you see, that I'd come to Espanola to do what I could to straighten things out," Carol said, "and I'm glad I did. For more reasons than one."

"Well, we've got to go now," the doctor reminded them. From a corner of the room he took an enormous muzzle-loading buffalo rifle, then he picked up his medicine case. "I'm apt to need *this* more than the blunderbuss," he grunted. "My buggy is ready in the alley. I'll go in that. We'll all meet in the little grove south of the Pony Track corrals."

Whitey and Cal bade good-by to Carol and Mrs. Stanley, then hurried out to join the rest of the posse. Swinging aboard their horses, they cantered through the outskirts of Espanola along the wagon road that led toward Cal's old home ranch. It was a still, clear night with plenty of stars and a brilliant moon.

Cal's mind was not so concentrated as it should have been. Between his angry thoughts of Hell's Legion there would drift, at times, other visions . . .

It was about ten-thirty when they reached the grove, and they waited for the doctor to drive up. In the meantime they dismounted and secured their horses, gave their weapons a final inspection. In all, the posse numbered about two dozen.

"Here comes the sawbones," Sheriff Crawford noted after a while.

"Now we can map out our campaign."

It was Cal Justin, who naturally knew the lay of the land better than anyone, who originated the strategy and decided on the tactics. A low ridge prevented them from being seen from the house, some two hundred yards away, and Cal decided to set fire to a small shed. The shed was out of range of the gang's vision, but they would see the glow of the conflagration against the sky.

"And that will fetch some of 'em out to see what's wrong down here," Cal said grimly. "The more we can divide 'em, coax from cover, the better."

They started the fire, and waited expectantly. Cal and Whitey knew that the Hell's Legion outfit was at the ranch, for they had scouted the place on the way down to Espanola. Whitey Luce's excitement was at fever pitch. He quivered like a race horse at this prospect of bringing El Pelirrojo at last to a judgment seat that would be wreathed in gun-smoke. Then his parents could sleep in peace up there at the crossroads.

"Here comes somebody—just heard a door slam," said a member of the posse, and they took up their positions just outside the circle of firelight.

Then four men showed themselves over the ridge. One was Wagner of the Pony Track punchers, and one of the other three was Gila, who had acted as sentry at Moon Crater. The posse jumped them without further ado, taking them prisoners without firing a shot. They were bound and gagged with materials already prepared.

Cal laughed shortly. "Pretty soon some more of 'em will be out to see why the first ones didn't come back."

It happened just that way. Only this time the suspicions of the ban-

dits had been stirred, and there was shooting. Of the three Hell's Legionnaires in this second expedition two were killed and the third hombre wounded and captured.

"Preliminaries are over," Doc Stanley said sharply. "Those shots were heard in the house, and the rest of 'em will be sharpening up their stingers. We'll rush 'em before they have too much time to prepare. Come on, men!"

They closed in rapidly but with caution, taking advantage of every bit of cover and throwing skirmishers forward until the big, two-story dwelling and its connecting bunkhouse were surrounded. But the Pelirrojo-Frontag forces knew by this time what they were in for. They began shooting, and their volleys became hotter and more accurate. One of the possemen was killed. Stanley had to give first aid to a couple of wounded. The clearing, already lighted by the moon, was alive with the firefly flashes of many guns. In that first minute most of the glass was shot from the lower windows, and from every one of them came a slashing, leaden hail.

There were two doors, one serving the bunkhouse and the other opening onto the gallery, and Cal knew that both were flimsy affairs. He had also noted that no gunfire was coming, as yet, from the upper windows of the house. It gave him an idea.

On the west, growing close against the end of the house, was a huge alligator juniper. Cal had often climbed the tree as a boy, and he remembered that one of its big, gnarled limbs almost touched one of the upstairs windows. That had been his old room, and he'd often used that tree and window as a means of getting in and out in his younger days. There

was no reason why it couldn't be used now!

"Let's hit 'em from three sides at once—through the two doors and from above," he suggested to the two sheriffs. "Whitey, you and I will shin up the tree, and when I yell the signal you others rush 'em below."

"*Bucno!* I'll pass the word along," agreed Sheriff Crawford, and he crawled off through the moonlight and shadows.

"I'm right with you, Cal." Whitey grinned, and the two of them edged toward the juniper, keeping it on a line between them and the roaring fortress that had once been the peaceful Pony Track ranchhouse. Cal hurried, wanting to make an entrance before it occurred to the bandits to go upstairs—and that might happen at any moment.

He reached the crotch of the tree without much trouble, gave the puffing Whitey a hand and pulled him up. Then they scrambled out on the foot-thick limb. Cal shouted the signal, repeating it to make sure that it was heard amid the gunfire, and smashed the window with the barrel of a .44. He stepped over the sill and into the darkened room with Whitey right behind him.

Cal felt his way to the door, flung it open, and they rushed into the hallway. They could see pretty clearly now, for light came up from the open stairway that led down to the living room.

"Somebody comin' up!" Cal warned.

They flattened themselves against opposite walls just as the head and shoulders of Pete Carr rose above the floor level. He had a drawn revolver in his hand and had taken several steps up the hallway before he realized that he was not alone.

"I was hopin' I'd see *you*," Whitey

exulted, recognizing the one who had swindled him into the penitentiary. "Better use that iron!"

His shot and Pete's came almost together, but Whitey's had sped to the mark, and the other's slug had banged into the wall alongside Whitey's head, showering his shoulders with plaster. Pete's sallow, pinched features were lighted momentarily by the orange-red flash; then he fell. Cal and Whitey jumped over his twitching body and sprinted to the head of the stairs.

Things were working out! They heard the crashing of splintering wood as the front door was hit by charging shoulders.

In from the adjoining bunkhouse came four or five of the bandits, being forced steadily back by the part of the posse that had broken in from the other direction! Then the door to the gallery tumbled inward, and in rushed more and more of the sheriff's fighters! The big room below had become a madhouse of yelling men and exploding guns!

Death was not only rushing in upon the bandits from two sides, but rage broke loose upon them now from above!

"Look out!" Slim Price yelled. "On the stairs there! For the love o'—"

He thudded down, nailed in his tracks by a slug from Whitey Luce that drilled through his head.

The posse was swarming through the room now, firing at arm's length range or less, clubbing their guns when they were empty. Karl Ruhlin and Joe Stiles of the Pony Track were killed, the latter in the act of escaping through a window. No quarter was given, or asked! Not until Pelirrojo the Red-haired was killed was any surrendering done.

It was Whitey and Cal, shooting as a team from the stairs, who accounted for the leader of Hell's Le-

gion. The red-thatched breed had fired twice at them, one slug skimming Cal's shoulder, the other passing between him and Whitey Luce. Returning the shots, they ended Pelirrojo's terrible career, dropping him with bullets through the head and body.

Another of the Pony Track schemers, Wing Pidgeon, was killed at almost the same instant by a shot from Sheriff Crawford. That practically ended it. The few desperadoes who still remained on their feet threw down their weapons. Lifting shaking hands ceilingward, they squalled for mercy.

WITH sleeves rolled up and a red-soaked kitchen apron tied around his middle, Doc Stanley was working over the wounded, taking them all as they came, bandits and possemen alike. He had just operated upon Milo Frontag, but in vain. Before the severed artery could be tied, the one-time foreman of the Pony Track died, cursing the doctor and Cal Justin.

Five members of the posse had been killed in the fight, and seven had been wounded, none very seriously. The struggle had been costly, but Hell's Legion had been broken up forever.

Sheriff Crawford and Doc Stanley were discussing Cal and Whitey's case. "You'll both be pardoned, there's no question about that," Crawford told the pardners. "We'll subpoena as witnesses the passengers who were on that train, and I can straighten out the Pickpan affair and the rest."

"Whitey and I have got some horses and other things to pay for," Cal remembered.

"The State owes you both a debt for what you've done to wipe out the Hell's Legion," said Crawford.

The conversation was interrupted by one of the possemen, who came up smiling broadly. "We'd better cover up these here bodies," he said, motioning toward the grim mementos of the battle. "There's a young lady outside, Doc. She says she's coming in."

"That locoed sister of mine, I'll bet a hat!" Whitey snorted. "I told her to stay in town, but she don't mind me worth a cent! I pity the husband she gets," he added, with a gently malicious glance toward Cal Justin.

Doc Stanley grumbled in pretended anger, and he wouldn't admit Carol until the ghastly room had been made more presentable.

"You couldn't come in at all, Miss Luce, if I didn't know you to be worried about your brother," he told her sternly, when she came in. "He's quite all right. Oh," he said with a dawning smile, "I understand a little better now. Whitey isn't the *only* one you're interested in."

The shrewd old medico could diagnose the look that passed from

Carol to Cal Justin. It was a symptom of a disease that no doctor had a cure for.

"I've got some good news for you, Cal," Doc Stanley said, presently. "I've been holding it back until now. It's about this ranch—the Pony Track."

"Uh . . . what did you say, Doc?" Cal asked sheepishly, like a man awakening from a dream.

"I've had your stepfather's will set aside by giving medical testimony regarding his mental condition," said the doctor. "He was judged to be of unsound mind. As you're the natural heir, Cal, all the property goes rightfully to you. Congratulations, my boy! And I might add, there's enough money in the bank for you to get married on."

"If it don't beat all!" Whitey roared in well-assumed indignation. "He was chained to *me* once, right by the leg, and he's no sooner loose than he wants to get chained to my sister Carol! Sawbones, how about *his* mental condition?"

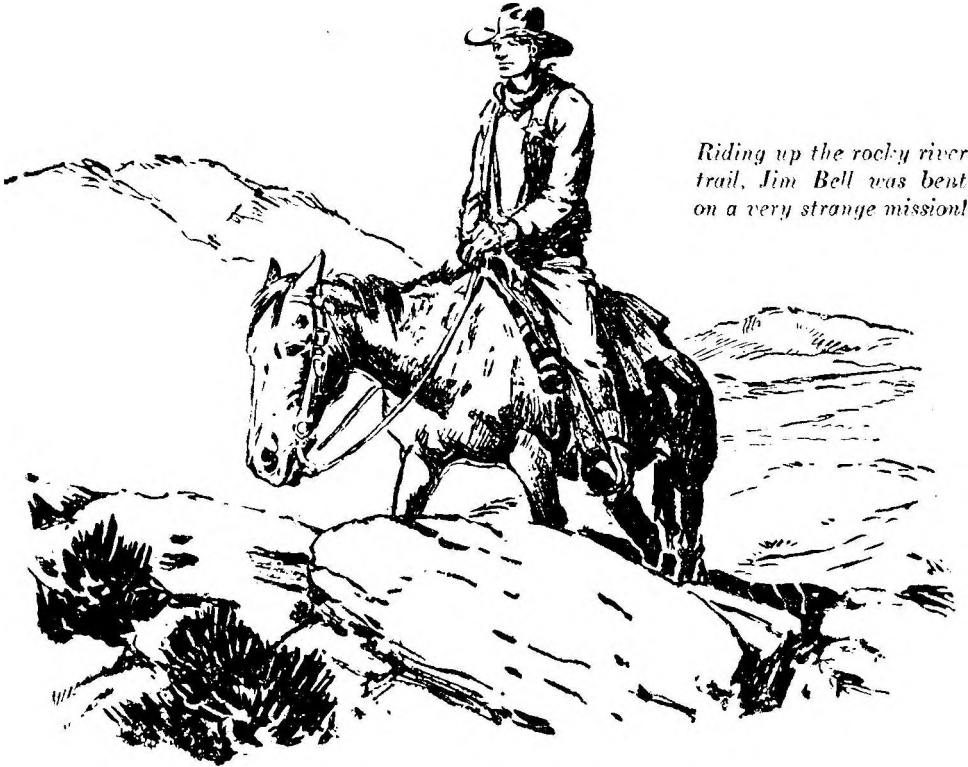
THE END.



The young sheriff knew there couldn't be any such animal—but just the same he was forced on the

QUEST OF THE PURPLE HORSE

BY NELSE ANDERSON



Riding up the rocky river trail, Jim Bell was bent on a very strange mission!

JIM BELL entered the race for the office of high sheriff more as a lark than for any other reason. It was his idea of a joke at the moment. He would get maybe a dozen votes, he thought, those of his closest range-rider friends. To his intense surprise, he found himself elected!

He realized that it was a fluke. A

wise somebody explained to him: "People weren't voting for you, Jim, as much as they were voting against George Connerford. Old George has got to be so crabbed and mean that a pleasant word from him is a rarity."

Connerford, who'd held the office two full terms, had also looked upon young Bell's entering the race as a

joke. He didn't even stay in town the day of the election. But he wouldn't have stayed in town anyway, perhaps. For old George did take his job seriously, and he spent that day hunting a desperado.

Bell was anxious about the outgoing sheriff when midnight struck and he hadn't returned. He'd have been looking for Connerford if he'd had any idea as to the direction Connerford had taken. Because of heavy rains up country, all the bigger streams were rampaging, and this did nothing to ease the new young sheriff's mind.

"If he's not back here by morning," Bell told a deputy, "I'll light out and hit his trail."

The next day's sun had just fully risen when grizzled George Connerford stepped wearily into the office that was his no longer, and found Jim Bell at the desk buckling on a worn old six-gun. There was bitter resentment in Connerford's voice:

"Well, cowboy, now that you've got it, what are you going to do with it?"

"Best I can," drawled Bell, soberly. "I can't be a quitter, George. I'll have to be game enough to chew what I bit off. You went after a bad jasper named Hape Coxon; I notice you didn't bring him in, so I reckon that's up to me now. I've never seen Coxon and know nothing about him. Tell me things, George, will you?"

Connerford's gaze seemed to narrow. There was the barest suggestion of a hard twinkle in his eye. Presently he said: "Oh, you're smart; you'll know Coxon when you see him."

"How would I?"

"Well, for one thing," said Connerford, and the flinty twinkle in his eye now was plain enough, "Coxon has got a purple horse. Find that nag

and you've found Coxon."

"Purple horse?" Jim Bell almost scowled. "I can see that you're not drunk, George, and you never was much of a kidder."

"I'm not kidding you," Connerford said. "I'll take oath that Hape Coxon's got a purple horse."

Bell shrugged. There was no such thing as a horse of that color. "What kinda looking man is this desperado Coxon, if you don't mind telling me?"

The grizzled ex-sheriff said:

"Hape is older'n you, Jim; twenty-six, at least. Blue eyes, sandy hair, size medium, and of course don't use his own name. Rode a year for the Wild West wing of a circus as its best trick shot. Is quite a gambler. He's right now up at Gold Rock, waiting with some pilgrims for the river to go down so that they-all can cross it. Maybe I could have brung him in, I dunno. You see, cowboy sheriff, that's your job now."

It occurred to Jim Bell as he rode up the rocky river trail that a horse might be dyed purple. Anything was possible in a circus. No trick at all, and probably no harm to the animal. Make it showy, as well as extremely odd. Hape Coxon had ridden for a circus, Connerford had said. That would explain the why of a purple horse.

GOLD ROCK CITY in its heyday had been a bigger town than the county seat. The diggings were playing out fast, and half the population had departed, but there was still a big saloon going and enough tough hombres to give a law representative some concern.

Not many here seemed to know or care anything about the change in sheriffs. Bell, not yet in possession of a badge, might have been only an average drifting cowboy for

all the attention he drew. He took advantage of it, loafed and talked with this man and that—most of them were close-mouthed—and kept his ears and eyes wide open. There were in Gold Rock not less than seven men who fitted the description of Hape Coxon as given by George Connerford.

When night came, Bell had seen no sign of a purple horse. He had mentioned it to a few, in an offhand way.

"What you been drinking, pardner?" they had asked him.

The muddy yellow river was beginning to fall, would be low enough for crossing when the next day broke. Jim Bell realized that he would have to nail Hape Coxon that night or not at all. If he went back without the desperado, George Connerford would probably see that he was laughed out of town!

He hadn't forgotten Connerford's saying that Coxon was quite a gambler. Idling into the back half of the saloon, he found twelve men at three tables playing stud. There were many onlookers; nobody, apparently, took the slightest notice of Bell. He ran his eye over the players. Of the round dozen, five answered to the old ex-sheriff's description of Hape Coxon. Each of the five was armed. Each had a cold, hard, expressionless countenance. There was little talk among them.

Jim Bell stood watching every move, thinking with all he had to think with. Ordinarily he would have said that when a man didn't have a chance, it was up to him to make one. Making a chance now seemed impossible. But if one came along, he'd grab it. For instance, if one of the others knew Coxon and unthinkingly addressed him by his name—or, if Coxon himself some-

how furnished a clue to his own identity. So Bell kept watching.

An hour passed, another, yet another. The playing had gone smoothly. No player had ever fumbled a card in shuffling.

Then one man did just that. The card fell to the floor. He had to reach a long way for it, had to reach almost to the toe of Jim Bell's left boot, and Bell saw the chance he'd been waiting for.

"Don't move a hair, Coxon," he said sharply—the muzzle of his old range six-gun almost against the desperado's temple—"I'm the sheriff of this county. Move, and I'll kill you."

Early the next morning George Connerford stepped into the office that had been his. Jim Bell sat at the desk, tired but grinning.

"Somebody said you brung in our desperado just now and jailed him," began old George. The twinkle in his eyes was good-humored. He proffered a hand. "I owe you an apology, Jim; and you've sure got it. Too contrary I was, to tell you all I could have told you about Hape Coxon. You put his purple horse in jail with him, I reckon?"

He laughed heartily. So did Bell as he rose to shake hands with the ex-sheriff. Then Bell said:

"I sure did put it in jail with him. Be a plumb hard job to separate that critter from Coxon. I suppose his havin' that horse was natural enough, seeing as how circus people go for that sort of stuff. He dropped a card, and his sleeve pulled up when he reached for it. And there it was—the purple horse tattooed on his arm. Reckon it's a picture of the horse he rode in the circus, George?"

Connerford laughed again. "I dunno," he said, "but what I do know is that it's the horse he rode into Jim Bell's jail!"

TRAIL TO HADES

BY SHOSHONE GWINN

The strange antics of that Irish stagecoach driver were plumb mystifying to his held-up passengers—but when the Mex bandido returned, the showdown took a couple of sharp and startling turns.

This road had been named the Devil's Highway by some jolted pioneer and the name had stuck, to be muttered in bitter tones by all comfort cravers who traveled it. Right now a bright-green Concord stagecoach was rolling over it, heading southwest toward the railroad and a strong steel safe that no man could crack.

Four white horses, pulling the stage, moved at a steady trot down into dips and over hills; the steel springs absorbed only part of the jolts. On the driver's seat one young man sat alone, humming a song entitled "The Belles of Killarney Are Ringin' the Bells." This driver had a deceptively cherubic face. He wore a green silk shirt and a greenish Southwestern-style hat, which had its front brim turned back in a dashing manner. They called him Lefty McGee and they said that while a man might be left-handed and mild or even Irish and mild, no man could be *both* Irish and left-handed without being a mite strange. Perhaps they were right.

Behind the driver's seat there was a little oblong window through which the occupants of the coach might gaze out. The window slid back and a long face, notable for its rimless eyeglasses, opened to speak:

"Driver! Halt the conveyance at once!"

"Pull in your neck," said Lefty McGee, without looking around.

The proud Easterner, who was from Boston, sputtered indignantly. "I refuse to be addressed in that manner by—"

"You'll be addressed thataway and like it," McGee said. "This is my first run over this route, and I aim to be on time."

"But a fellow passenger has informed me that you are transporting some ten thousand dollars' worth of gold, and that the countryside is infested with outlaws who may have designs upon the stuff. This strikes me as being deceit of a low order." He shifted his eyeglasses, fuming slightly.

"How come deceit?" McGee asked.

"You distinctly assured me and my fellow travelers that we need not fear molestation by highwaymen. It so occurs that I have upon my person a considerable sum of money, and—"

"Afraid? Are you tuckin' tail?" McGee had the coal-black hair, high cheekbones and pale-blue eyes that bespoke a Northern Ireland ancestry. The eyes twinkled slightly now.

The Easterner's face reddened rapidly. His thin cheeks swelled and receded with the outrageous suggestion. "It is not a question of my

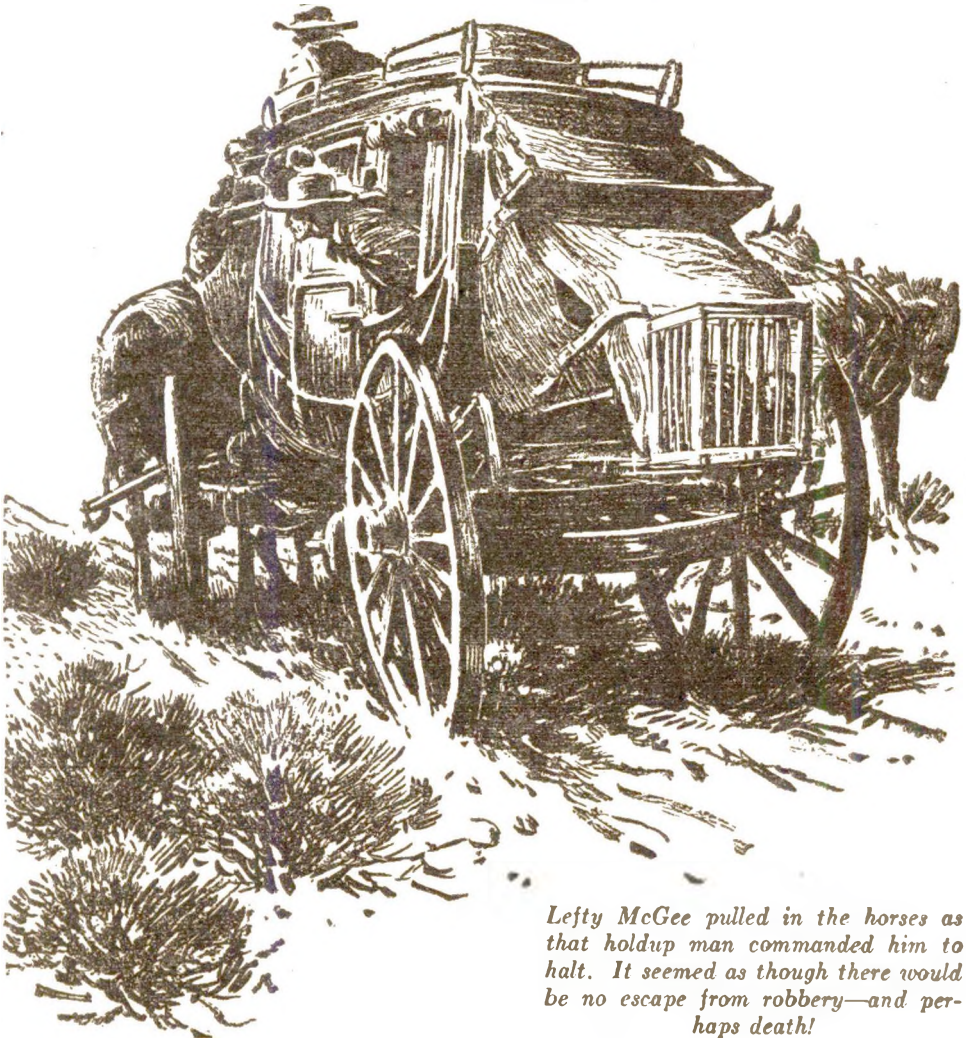
courage, you barbarian. It is a matter of fraud with regard to your pledge!"

"Well, why don't you wait till I'm proved a liar?" McGee drawled. Lightly, he prodded with his foot the small but heavy padlocked strong box which reposed in the stage boot below him. "And supposin' I *am* carryin' ten thousand dollars' worth of gold dust; if I lose it, I've ruined my business the first day on a new run. And I've plumb damaged some honest miners who believe I can de-

liver—if anybody robs me. I got more to lose than you."

"You fail even to carry a weapon!" The Bostonian seemed to observe McGee's wiry and quite gunless hips for the first time, and his indignation increased.

"Well, I'm a peaceable gent," McGee said—with his mouth. His eyes said something different. He leaned back on the leather lines, pulled the two-team hitch to a halt on the isolated badlands road. Harsh outcroppings of rock, barren gullies and



Lefty McGee pulled in the horses as that holdup man commanded him to halt. It seemed as though there would be no escape from robbery—and perhaps death!

hillocks comprised the landscape on all sides. "You wanted to stop. It seems like a good idea."

The left-handed stage driver leaped lithely down to the packed earth, took a couple of swift steps to the left coach door, reached brusquely inside and got somebody by the throat. Not the Bostonian, who was moving around the country trying to buy up likely mining properties for an Eastern syndicate. Not the sniffish spinster from the territorial school board, who had been up to Wet Gulch mining camp to see about starting a school there, and who was returning now to civilization firm in the belief that the two benighted urchins who were the only young uns in camp were beyond saving; the urchins both had chewed tobacco and stated their distaste for learning in certain words of four letters each.

The man McGee grabbed was a big, loose-fleshed hombre who sat on the back seat chewing tobacco and holding a double-barreled shotgun between his knees. McGee pulled him right out of there, and the shotgun fell to the floor.

Miss Higginbotham, the spinster, *ecked*. The loose-fleshed man's eyes opened wide—though one of them started to close very promptly thereafter as knuckles bounced off it—and he bawled hoarsely:

"Hey! What the—"

"I didn't"—*bop!*—"like your looks back in the old man's office when"—*splat!*—"you happened to be standin' there to hire out as my shotgun guard," said McGee. He held the guard upright against the side of the coach with his right and smacked him with the left. "You had orders not to say anything about gold shipments to anybody—including these other two passengers."

"I . . . I was only whilin' away

the time, tryin' to get a rise onto the dude," the guard gasped. "Wasn't no harm in that, was there?"

"Where I come from, a man obeys his boss' orders—or winds up obeyin' a doctor's orders," McGee said. "How do you know but what this here lady and the dude're not on the swipe for some gold dust themselves?"

"Insolent snippet!" Miss Higginbotham's bosom tossed like a ship in a tempest, and her eyes flashed witheringly.

"Crude frontier bounder!" said the Easterner, Mr. Smythe.

McGee snapped at the shotgun guard: "You can ride, Slade. But no more shotgun. The dude can keep hold of it from here on in." He looked at Smythe. "You willin'—or do guns white your hair?"

The Bostonian turned a shade redder. He bristled. "I shall show you. I am considered more than fair at grouse shooting, through New England."

"All right then. If you want a slug of redeye—" McGee glanced up at the top of the coach, where the luggage rode, with a foot-high iron fence around the edges to keep it on.

The Bostonian climbed up the metal side ladder, opened one of his bags and got a bottle of Scotch.

McGee smacked Slade with the flat of his hand, so the memory would linger, and searched the man for concealed guns. The Irishman found a derringer and tossed it to the spinster, who was frowning now and sniffing the air—*sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff!*

"Get back in there, Slade, and tread easy on my toes," McGee was saying. "You'd be ace-high for low-down if Gonzales and his pack of polite cutthroats swooped down on—"

"Heavenly hairpins!" gasped Miss Higginbotham, staring out the small rear window of the coach at the carrying rack. "I *thought* I smelled someth—"

"A civet cat! What extraordinary cargo!" The Easterner, having climbed down with his bottle, had also caught the light, but special and unmistakable aroma. The hot autumn breeze had shifted.

"Plain skunk. Or polecat, if you like that label better." McGee shrugged, watching Slade, who sulked with venomous eyes inside the coach.

"I refuse to ride with any such odiferous creature!" Miss Higginbotham's face was long and forbidding. "You must have sneaked that cage on after we were inside the vehicle!"

McGee didn't deny this fact. He said: "I haul any kind of cargo, long as it's not too heavy. Gent wanted that skunk freighted to the railroad and shipped East to a friend. Told me the critter wouldn't do any damage unless somebody messed with him. He's a good quiet skunk."

Horace, the skunk, looked cross. He bared his teeth at the spinster's face which looked down through the glass at him so disapprovingly.

"I won't," said Miss Higginbotham, "ride another step in the company of that foul beast!"

McGee shrugged, and bowed from the waist. "Whatever you think best, madam. It's forty-odd miles to the railroad, and there's only one place to get a drink of water along the way. Maybe Smythe would contribute a bottle of Scotch, though, to bathe the blisters."

Miss Higginbotham fumed. She glared. She arched her eyebrows high. But she didn't get out and walk. She sat down and, furtively, swept the derringer into the folds of

her black dress. "I shall report you to the owner of the stageline, you young ruffian!"

"Now's a good time. I won't be too rough with me." McGee grinned. He walked around the end of the coach to see that Horace, the skunk, rode comfortably in his wooden cage. There was a thick layer of fresh-cut hay in the bottom of the cage. The bars were set close together. Horace also had food. "Take it easy, pard," McGee told Horace. Then the confounding Irishman went back to his driver's seat, put his feet on the strong box and said: "Giddap, angels!"

It was no terrifying event in McGee's life when, half an hour later, with his stagecoach dipping down into a wide gully, a bullet sang a warning song about two feet from McGee's right ear.

Speeee! Like that. It came from the rimrock a dozen rods or more above and to the right of the road.

McGee called through the little window down into the coach, to the Easterner and the spinster: "Don't use those guns—unless maybe on Slade, if he gets crosswise. Take it easy."

From the rim a politely murderous and liquid voice called:

"Stop the coach, señor—unless you weesh to drive eet through the pairly gates eento 'eaven!"

"Elevate the *manos*—the 'ands, señor!" This second polite voice came from the other rim.

The Irish stagecoachman calmly pulled the horses to a halt, wrapped the lines around the brake handle and raised his hands above his head.

"What do you *hombres* want?" he snapped, as if angry—and as if he didn't already know what they wanted!

"Not merely to kees the beautiful

señorita who sees the passenger," Gonzales, the bandit, admitted. He rode his palomino down over the shaly sloping side of the gully. He was a swaggering Mexican. Swaying easily in the saddle, he flourished a six-gun carelessly in his right hand. Another rider followed him. From the opposite side of the gulch, two other Mexicans rode down, likewise well armed.

Gonzales had made life painful for the mining camp of Wet Gulch, which was some fifteen miles to the north. It was no boom town. Most of the mining claims thereabouts paid their workers good rich day wages—but not enough to start any big influx of fortune hunters. To ship their gold to the San Francisco mint, they had to send it down this southwest trail to the nearest railroad junction—even though the miners themselves seldom traveled the road, for the reason that they could get necessities and entertainment at cowtowns fairly nearby to the north.

Such a set-up made things ideal for Gonzales and his pack. The miners had to send their gold down this desolate road, which was nearly ideal for ambush purposes. Gonzales' pack was small in number, but ruthless and efficient in their polite way. They had twice before robbed stages hauling gold dust down to the railroad. When both attempts were successful, with Gonzales getting the gold each time, and killing a couple of mounted guards in the fracas, the stageline owner had given up, quit cold.

Which was where Lefty McGee had entered the picture. His uncle, old Mert McGee, ran the crude general store in Wet Gulch camp. He had the only strong steel safe in the camp, too. The miners brought their dust to him for safekeeping

until shipment time. When the first stageline folded up, old Mert had sent a hurry call to his brash nephew—at the time running his private stageline up in Colorado. Lefty could handle this Wet Gulch job if any man could. Mert had told the miners. Having confidence in the old storekeeper, the miners had agreed to give him a trial. If he failed, they'd hire a small private army to transport the gold; the cost of the army would be less than the loss of all the gold.

So now, on Lefty McGee's first run, here was Gonzales.

"Warm today, eh?" McGee said.

The handsome Spaniard flashed white teeth in his politely wolflike style. "Not so 'ot as Inferno, señor—where you weel be if you make the wrong move."

"Hardly ever make a wrong move on a day like this." There were peculiar lights in the Irishman's eyes.

"Pablo! Pedro! The strong box!" Gonzales gestured with his gun to the wagon boot. The fourth Mex he directed to the coach.

"You—hombres and señora! Come out," said No. 4.

The Easterner came out first, gulping a healthy slug from the now half-empty bottle of Scotch. He lowered the bottle with that haughtiness that comes from the right amount of whiskey and gave the Mexican the the chilly eye.

"An outrage, you accursed buccaneers! I shall report you to the authorities!"

"Oh, no, no, señor! You break the poor bandido's 'eart to do so!" Gonzales smiled in gentle mockery and shot the heels off the Bostonian's shoes—*brrang! brrang!*—like that. Mr. Smythe's jaw dropped about three notches, his eyes widened, and he blinked downward, somewhat

amazed to find himself suddenly an inch shorter.

"Search him, pronto!" Gonzales snapped.

"You may have my wallet, you swine," Smythe said, reaching around for his hip pocket. But he hastily raised the hand again as he saw Gonzales about to shoot an inch or so off his fingers. The fourth Mexican searched Smythe thoroughly. There was little more than a hundred dollars in his wallet. Gonzales' glance went sharply into the stagecoach, and the Spaniard nodded faintly.

"I think he hide the real beg green dinero een the coach seat," said the bandit leader. "See."

"Si." The fourth bandido entered the coach.

Gonzales turned his attention back to the other two buscaderos, Pablo and Pedro, who were lifting down the small, strong, heavily pad-locked strong box.

McGee said: "Why don't you shoot off the lock and make sure the gold's inside? I might be foolin' you."

Gonzales smiled. "You are very eager, eh, señor? Maybe you 'ave plant wan, two steecks of dynamite eenside, eh, to blow us op? I 'ave seen the trick. No. I open heem elsewhere, the safe way, my own way. Pablo! The weight—she ees right?"

Pablo hefted the strong box. His brow furrowed as he estimated. Then he nodded. "Si. The gol', she mus' be een eet, compañero."

"You see," Gonzales boasted to McGee, "I know the weight of the strong box when eet ees empty. Pablo I 'ave train to guess witheen two or three pounds. The ten thousand' dollars worth of gold, she's weigh about thirty-five pounds at the standard Americano price now. Pablo say the box ees now about that moch 'eavier than when empty. The gol' must be een eet—bot still perhaps, too, the steecks of dynamite, eh? Now, we search the rest."

The voice of Miss Higginbotham came from within the coach. It was a voice high with outrage:

"First I'm deceived! I have to travel with a foul skunk. Then I

ZING!

RING!

CLING!

Whisk Off Tough Beard Easily With Smooth-Shaving PROBAK Jr. Blades...

Twenty For A Quarter!

RECEPTACLE FOR USED BLADES INSIDE!

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must witness a coarse, ugly fist fight. Then an Easterner gorges himself with whiskey and blows his breath into my face while telling me of his fearless witchery with a shotgun in the New England swamps. A coarse ruffian sits in the opposite seat glowering at me as if *I* were responsible for disarming him. And now this . . . this unspeakable cad dares touch his Mexican hands to my lower limbs while searching under seat cushions! It's . . . it's an unspeakable series of outrages!"

"Aw, tie a loop to that tongue, woman," Slade growled from the opposite seat. "Me and you and Smythe and McGee're all in the same boat. We're *all* gettin' held up."

Up on the driver's seat, McGee's eyes glinted. They had searched him thoroughly, found no weapons and little money. Pablo was tying the strong box securely onto the rump of his horse for transportation to a spot where the box could be opened safely.

The Irish stagecoachman had taken time, before starting this trip, to get details of Gonzales' methods and aversions. Despite Slade's growling about being held up, McGee strongly suspected that the now retired guard was undercover man for the pack, who were treating Slade impersonally, as if they never had seen him before.

The fourth Mex, searching under the seat cushions, suddenly yelped gleefully. "The green dinero, compañeros! The Boston peeg ees hide the four, five, seex thousan' dollars onder the seat."

"So?" Gonzales purred. "I shall cot off 'is ears, eh, for thees lie. I do not like the deceivers!"

"Cut, you barbarian!" Smythe said, stoutly, this challenge rousing the best in him. "Never did a

son of New England bend knee to a cutthroat!"

Gonzales, who had been thumbing the blade of a knife which was stuck into his sash, stared in surprise at the doughty Bostonian. For long moments, Gonzales looked at him. Then the bandit threw back his head and laughed heartily. "You 'ave the sponk, eh? I like the hombre weeth sponk. *Keep* the ears, señor! Pedro!" The head bandit looked up to the top of the coach, where his man was prowling through the luggage. "W'at you find, eh?"

"The clothes, the whiskey, the razors—many things," said Pedro.

"Put the whiskey eento wan bag. Leave the rest."

Pedro was suddenly laughing with happy, childish glee—holding up and waving in his hand some rather personal feminine garments from the top compartment of a suitcase. "The decoration for the horses' manes, eh, compañeros?"

But Gonzales' face showed swift displeasure. "No, Pedro! The señora's theengs you do not touch! Gonzales does not rob the women—excep' of the kees, perhaps. Come down, Pedro. *You* shall kees the so-beautiful señora!"

Miss Higginbotham's face had changed from wrath to amazement at Gonzales' orders that her things were not to be touched. But now her expression became wrathful again—especially as Pedro showed a hasty lack of enthusiasm for the great honor.

"No, no. You are the boss bandido," said Pedro. "*You* must 'ave the so-great honor!"

The fourth Mexican figured that the "great honor" might descend to him, so he hastily ducked around the end of the coach—and ducked right back again promptly, because he figured the kiss the less of two

evils. Horace, the skunk, had displayed quick displeasure, waving his bushy striped tail and baring his fangs. "Diablo! A skonk!" The Mex glared at McGee. "You are loco, señor?"

"Naw," said McGee. "Just left-handed. Seems to me you should have stayed to have a chat with Horace, he bein' a sort of first cousin to you."

The fourth Mex didn't savvy this, so he merely grunted, watching his boss hold a gun on Pedro, while that discomfited bandit crawled into the coach and inflicted his lips in a gingerly fashion upon Miss Higginbotham's countenance. This lady's expression was one of feigned outrage mingled with a smirk of secret pleasure. Only once before had a man's lips thus defiled her; the other, years ago, had been a blind man.

"We go now," Gonzales said. He picked up the double-barreled shotgun—the only weapon they had found in their thorough search—and peered curiously around the end of the coach at the polecat in its cage.

"Outrageous!" Miss Higginbotham muttered.

Gonzales pointed his gun at McGee's head. "I take the strong box to the machine saw een the cave to saw off the lock and not explode the dynamite. Should there be no gold een the box, cef you 'ave deceive me"—the bandit leader made a slitting motion across his throat—"I ron you down long before you 'ave reach the town, an' keel you *all!*"

"Hope you do—if you're able," McGee drawled. "So long."

"*Adios.*"

They departed as swiftly as they had appeared, heading due west.

Smythe and Miss Higginbotham started to hurl accusations and threats at the same moment. They

called McGee a coward, and other things.

McGee's jaw set hard, the muscles rippled along it. Then, suddenly, Miss Higginbotham's denunciations changed into a shrill shriek. McGee turned, bounded into the coach and got his hands on Slade just as the loose-fleshed ex-guard found the derringer which Miss Higginbotham had kept concealed in her black garb. The Irishman smashed a solid right to the big man's jaw, weakening him enough so that it wasn't difficult to grab the gun from Slade's hand and crack him alongside the head with it.

"I hired you to come along as guard because you were so eager for the job back in Wet Gulch camp," McGee snapped. "You were so eager, I suspected you must be the inside man for Gonzales. This is final proof. I noticed you kept quiet while they pulled this job—and I'm sure now that you signaled Gonzales where Smythe had hidden his money, under the cushion."

"Which doesn't bring back my funds!" the Bostonian said irascibly.

"You'll get it back—and maybe pronto!" McGee snapped over his shoulder. And to Slade: "You told Gonzales I was carrying gold, and the exact amount. No doubt you also told him the exact weight the strong box would be, empty or with the gold in it."

Miss Higginbotham sank back in a corner of the seat, dabbing at her pale battle-ax face with a handkerchief. Life, it seemed to her, could hold no further ignominy.

The Irishman tied and gagged Slade swiftly, securely. Then he snapped: "Get in here, Smythe! I'm givin' orders and we've no time to spare!"

Smythe, muttering, got in as McGee got out. The left-handed driver

crouched under the coach for a few seconds, and when he appeared in the coach doorway he held two sawed-off shotguns and a six-gun. One shotgun he handed to Smythe, with terse orders: "Don't shoot it till I give the word, savvy? All right. These guns? Well, I discovered a handy niche under the coach. Nailed some canvas to the boards, with the guns between."

McGee got up onto the driver's seat, called in through the oblong little window: "Hold tight. We're travelin'." And he lashed the four white horses into a lope.

The stage careened, tilted, bounced on the rough road. But it had good springs and McGee knew how to handle it. Miss Higginbotham, discovering that there *could* be further acute discomfort in this life, gave in to fate. She swooned gently.

LEFTY MCGEE figured he had, at the very most, less than an hour to get safely where he was heading. It might mean the difference between being six feet above the earth and six feet under it. Things surged through his Irish head.

The most important thing McGee had heard about Gonzales, before this trip began, was the Spaniard's fear of shooting the lock off a strong box. According to the legend—which had been proved sound by Gonzales' talk during two previous stagecoach raids along this road—a bandit friend of the Mexican some years ago had shot the lock off a strong box and the power of the bullet had exploded the dynamite shrewdly planted inside it. The dynamite, of course, had blown off the friend's head.

This of course explained the rest of the legend, which Gonzales himself had just now hinted at strongly: Gonzales was careful to *saw* the pad-

locks off. He did it with one of the new patented hand-powered machine saws used around mines. They were cumbersome things—too heavy to carry along on a holdup job. But one could be hidden, say in a cave not too far from the scene of a carefully planned holdup. Such a saw would cut through a heavy brass lock in minutes, where a hand saw would take hours in the hard metal. And no dynamite would be jarred off by the saw—for the movement of the saw was less jolting than that of a stagecoach traveling over a normal road; and no sane stage driver would risk using old, easily exploded dynamite for that kind of job.

Well, there was no dynamite in McGee's strong box; but his whole plan, none the less, had been based on Gonzales' supposition that there easily *could* be!

The four white horses, showing their fine teamwork and speed, thundered on. McGee kept a sharp lookout on all sides.

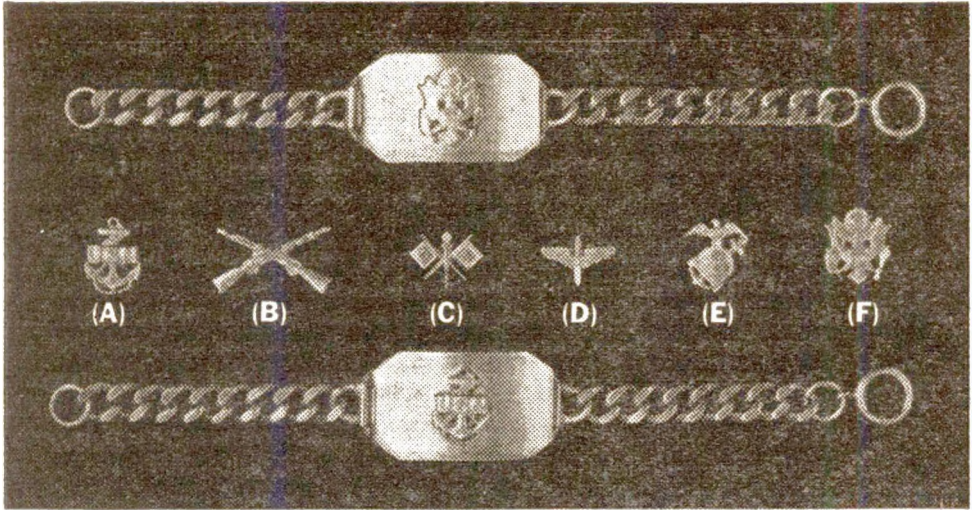
Then the destination loomed. It was that one waterhole which McGee had mentioned to the spinster. Situated on a large, flat area, it afforded a clear view of approaching riders from any direction. Furthermore, there was a small grove of large-boled oak trees close to the north of the spring, and several big trees to the east.

McGee drove right up to the spring, gave his hot horses only a few sips of the water—and gave Smythe orders. Immediate battle orders, without the whole plan.

"I shall act as you instruct, in the hope that I shall retrieve my funds," the Bostonian said.

They carried the still-unconscious spinster to a glade behind one of the bigger oaks back in the grove, where

Continued on page 82



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Continued from page 80

she would be safe. After that, the two men took their posts.

They hadn't long to wait.

Gonzales and his associate bandits, certain that the occupants of the stagecoach were unarmed and that Slade would help them in any kind of showdown anyway, came down the trail heedless of danger and lashing their mounts.

Lefty McGee smiled wryly. Finding thirty-five pounds of plain iron chunks in that strong box had enraged them plenty, and they were coming to do as Gonzales had promised—to kill them, mercilessly. They were killers only when half-loco from having been outwitted or, in other circumstances, when somebody else showed fight first. They saw the green stagecoach now.

The Irishman gave them a chance they didn't rate. When they were seventy or eighty yards away, McGee poked his head around his tree trunk and yelled: "Drop those guns and you'll live long enough to hang! Pronto! We'll shoot—straight!"

The bandits heard and figured it for a bluff. They came on, bunched.

McGee and the Bostonian stepped around from behind their tree trunks at the same instant. The Mexicans saw them at that precise moment. It was an even break, except that the bandits were paralyzed with astonishment at seeing those unexpected shotguns and the warlike stance of the two by the trees. Their split second of inaction made the difference.

There were but four shells in those two guns, but those four bunched riders were hard to miss.

Smythe, from a more broadside angle, let go with both barrels at

once. And he proved that his hunting experiences in the New England countryside had not been in vain. But the recoil kicked him over backward, which was all right, too—as Pedro's six-gun slug whined through the space where the Bostonian's lungs would have been. About that time, most of Pedro's and Pablo's faces disappeared in a red smear.

McGee fired a barrel at a time, getting the fourth Mex, but merely wounding Gonzales, who fired his six-gun crazily at the Irishman. More crazily than accurately, because of the wounds. McGee slammed the empty shotgun down, jerked his .45 Colt and took careful aim. He squeezed trigger once only. A gap appeared in Gonzales' forehead, and the bandit leader pitched slowly from the saddle.

Smoke curled lazily from the barrel of McGee's six-gun. He grinned bleakly over at the Easterner. "Well, pardner, they asked for it and they got it. I reckon we can pile the ruins here in the shade and send the coroner out for 'em."

"Yes! I say . . . uh . . . cowboy—this well excels quail shooting as a sport!"

THE sun was setting as the weary white stage horses pulled the vivid-green coach up to the new stone depot in the growing railroad town. McGee wrapped the lines tight on the brake handle, jumped down to the ground, went around and opened the coach door.

The New Englander and the spinster were snoozing, Smythe's head, unknown to him, on her shoulder.

"This is as far as your fares are paid! All out!" There was a twinkle in McGee's pale blue eyes.

"Eh? How's that?" Smythe sat up with a jerk, automatically bring-

ing up his shotgun. He stared, blinked, and lowered it. "Oh, I see!"

Miss Higginbotham awakened slowly, and shuddered slightly. "What now?" she asked weakly.

"Food. Drink. Sleep. Peace. Quiet. All that now," said McGee.

"Such things can't exist," Miss Higginbotham muttered. "Go away. Go away and never wake me."

"But they do exist, madam."

The Bostonian, who was still in the dark about some things, interjected: "It was pleasant for me to retrieve my money from the dead bandit—but really, I'm awfully cut up you had to lose your ten thousand of gold."

"It wasn't ten thousand," said McGee gently. "It's *twenty* thousand, and I didn't lose it."

"Come now! You're spoofing!"

McGee strolled around to the rear of the stagecoach, calmly untied the cage of Horace the skunk, and removed it from the rack. He took it around. Smythe recoiled, goggling.

"Horace has traveled with me off and on for three years," said McGee. "He's a nice honest skunk. He did have a careless habit of perfumin' things at awkward times, though. So I got a hoss doctor to . . . uh . . . remove the perfume permanent, like. Of course, nobody but me knew that, up to now. But I was right certain nobody was goin' to make a test case to find out! That includes Gonzales."

Lefty McGee reached into the cage and, from under the thick layer of fresh hay, he pulled forth several long and heavy buckskin pokes. "Ten thousand dollars' worth, that nobody was likely to steal," McGee drawled. And while they stared, he reached up onto the roof, got a suitcase, opened it and pulled out a vast handful of—

"The audacity of you! My . . . er . . . spare pretties! You—" Miss Higginbotham turned three shades of irate crimson. "Why—"

"Strictly business, madam." And McGee pulled forth from the bottom several similar pokes of gold dust. "Before startin' this journey, I found out things about Gonzales. One thing was that he had a childish chivalry about women. Never robbed 'em, never let his men touch their luggage or anything. So this mornin', when you checked your bags over my uncle's grocery counter—well, I took the liberty of slip-pin' these pokes to the bottom when your head was turned. I'll buy you a whole trunkful of pretties," he added hastily. "And I think that we could all use a drink right now. How about it?"

They were staring now, but the invitation soaked in gradually. Miss Higginbotham blushed shyly.

"I . . . er . . . never touch stimulants. But in this case—"

She meant *yes*. They put the gold in that unbustable steel railroad safe, and then they went—

A HALF hour and four drinks later, McGee leaned across the table and kissed Miss Higginbotham smack on the countenance. "You're a great gal. Real pioneer woman."

She tittered. "Oh, thank you, Mr. McGee!"

"It was a pleasure, madam," said McGee.

And the way he was feeling then—with a good prosperous stage-line business ahead of him—he actually almost meant it!

Besides, a light smack was economical settlement for what could easily have been a stiff lawsuit for reckless usage of a female passenger's life and limbs!

THE END.

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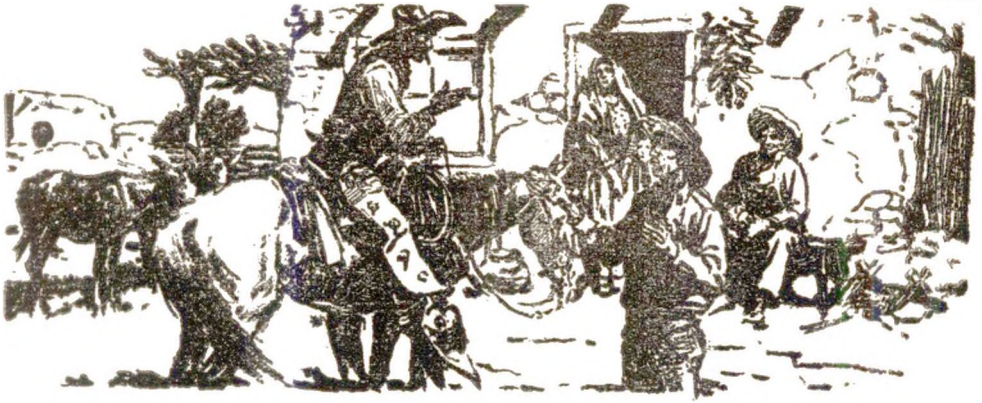
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COW COUNTRY SPANISH

BY S. OMAR HARKER

★ ★ ★

The words, phrases, meanings and pronunciations here given are those in common use by the native Spanish-Americans and Mexicans of the Southwestern range country, particularly New Mexico, Arizona and Texas, rather than pure Castilian Spanish, though in many cases words and phrases are the same.

★ ★ ★

Even among non-Spanish cowhands a good many Spanish words for different parts of the vaquero's outfit are commonly used. Here are some of them.

Silla (SEEL-yah): saddle; also any seat or chair.

Montura (mon-roo-rah): saddle; riding outfit.

Cincha (SEEN-chah): cinch; saddle girth, usually made of hair or strong cotton fishcord.

Látigo (LAH-tee-go); latigo strap; the leather strap attached to rigging ring on left side of saddle by which the cinch is fastened.

Rosadero (roh-sah-DAY-roh): stirrup strap or leathers.

Sudadero (soo-dah-DAY-roh): literally a "sweat catcher," hence the

saddle skirt's lining, next to the horse.

Cabeza (cah-BAY-sah): literally, head; the saddlehorn or "button."

Estribo (ay-STREE-bo): stirrup.

Tapaderas (tah-pah-DAY-rahs): stirrup fenders; leather coverings over the front of the stirrups to protect the boot toe against brush.

Conchas (CONE-chahss): shell-shaped ornaments on saddle or bridle, of nickel, silver, etc.

Plateado (plah-tay-AN-thoh): silver trimmed; California buckaroos in particular are fond of silver on their riding gear.

Maleta (mah-LAY-tah): saddlebag.

Freno (FRAY-no): bridle.

Riendas (ree-AIN-dahss): reins.

Ramal (rah-MAHL): the long ends of a pair of bridle reins tied so as to serve as a quirt or whip; also called romal (roh-MAHL); sometimes a quirt is called a romal.

Chacote (chah-CO-tay): whip; quirt.

Jáquima (HAH-kee-mah): bitless bridle or nose halter, usually of rope or braided rawhide, used in breaking and schooling broncs, also as a lead halter; a hackamore, which is just the cowboy's way of pronouncing *jáquima*.

Bosal (boh-SAHL): nose ring or strap of a hackamore, usually of leather or rawhide, sometimes of iron fitted around the nose of horses hard to rein-break.

Fiador (fee-ah-DORE): a control rein from the front of a *bosal* up over the horse's head to the rider's hand; most cowboys call it a "Theodore." Usually a piece of rope.

Cabresto (cah-BRAY-stoh); any kind of a rope.

Riata (ree-AH-tah): catch rope; lariat (*la riata*).

Lazo (LAH-so): snare; loop; hence the loop of a lariat. From this word come lasso and lass rope.

Lazar (lah-SAIR): to catch with a loop; to rope.

Honda (OHN-dah): the slip loop of a lariat through which the catch loop passes; usually knotted or braided in the rope itself, sometimes a brass insert.

Magüey (mah-GWAY): lariat made of the fiber of the magüey yucca or century plant; it's a very light, strong rope. Cowboys called it "maggie."

Mecate (may-CAH-tay): a string; particularly a piggin' string, the short length of rope used to tie down roped cattle. Cowboys call it their "McCarthy."

Vaqueta (vah-kay-tah): leather.

Dále vuelta (DAH-lay VUAYL-tah): literally means "give it a turn," hence the turn or hitch of the lariat around the saddlehorn to hold a roped animal; a dally; a Dolly Welter. Most Southwestern cowboys tie fast instead.

Pial (pee-AHL): a rope catch by the hind feet.

Mangana (mahn-GAH-nah): a rope catch by the front feet.

Mangana de cabra (CAH-brah): "goat catch"; a fancy loop forming a figure 8, top half catches the calf's head, the lower his front feet.

Sombrero (sohm-BRAY-ro): hat.

Barbiquejo (bar-bee-KAY-hoh): chin strap of a hat.

Eslique (ay-SLEE-kay): slicker; raincoat. (Borrowed from English).

Chaparreras (chah-pah-RAY-rahss): seatless leather pants; chaps (pronounced *shaps*).

Chaparejos (chah-pah-RAY-hoce): same as above.

Bota (BOH-tah): boot.

Espuela (ay-SPWAY-lah): spur.

Chihuahuas (Chee-WAH-wahss): large-roweled, cruel spanish spurs. Chihuahua is a State of old Mexico from which come the Mexican hairless dogs called also Chihuahuas.

Pistola (pee-STOH): pistol; six-shooter.

Rifle (REE-flay): rifle.

Cartucho (car-TOO-choh): cartridge.

Navaja (nah-VAH-hah): pocket knife.

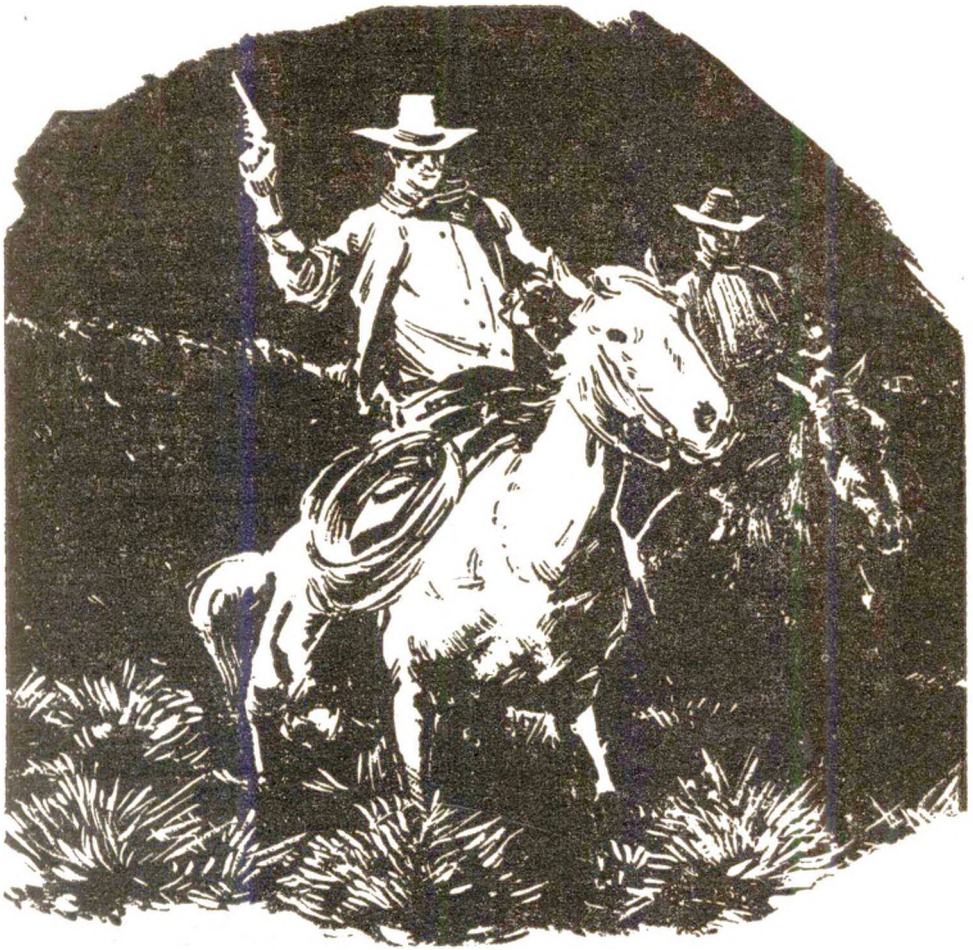
Morral (moh-RAHL): nose feed bag for horses.

Aparejo (ah-pah-RAY-hoh): pannier; pack saddle pouch or box; also called kyaek.

Tarpa (TAR-pah): tent; tarpaulin.

Herradura (ay-rah-DOO-rah): horseshoe.

Fierro (fee-AY-roo): iron; brand; branding iron.



What gruesome past lay behind the mysterious actions of

THE HOMBRE WHO TALKED WITH GUNS

BY PHILIP F. DEERE

No one knew why the old codger had come to Muscatero in the first place. But by now he had waited so long in the Last Chance Saloon that he was a sort of fixture, like the

brass rail or the fly-specked mirror behind the bar.

Always he was the same: a brooding, gray-whiskered old man, his large ears thin and veiny like autumn

leaves; wooden leg crossed over a bony knee, elbows bracketing his solitaire layout at a corner table.

He never touched the glass of *aguardiente* which Set 'em up Pete, the bartender, put before him every morning. He would stare fixedly for hours on end at the barroom doors, silent and impassive as a mummy.

Silent Sam, the barflies nicknamed him. His seamed, tanned face was sensitive and bore the stamp of suffering. A man past seventy, he dressed in Levis and faded shirt which told nothing of his past. No one knew whether he was cowman, miner or drifter.

The Last Chance was the only saloon in town. Muscatero, in turn, was the only settlement on the cattle trail between Stirrup City and the border, sixty-odd miles in either direction. So it was likely that every rider who drifted through Muscatero would find himself, sooner or later, inside the Last Chance.

Sam ate his meals at the same table. He never joined in poker games or in free drinks at the bar; never spoke to anyone. There was a good reason why Silent Sam was silent, though. His neck bore a livid, puckered scar, where a bullet had nicked his Adam's apple, rendering him mute as a statue.

Muscatero, of course, did plenty of guessing. The trail-town denizens figured that Silent Sam was waiting for someone—the hombre, maybe, who had paralyzed his vocal chords with a bullet. And if that hombre ever walked through the Last Chance's batwings, Silent Sam would be ready for him.

For the big stag-handled Peacemakers in his holsters were always loose for action; and between rounds of solitaire the oldster constantly oiled and polished those blue-bar-

reled Colts, squinting down their mirror-bright bores and twirling the cylinders with a thumb.

He was a man of mystery, indeed. No one knew how he had arrived in Muscatero; he had appeared one evening about six months back, red with Arizona dust. He had a pair of saddlebags hoisted over one angular shoulder, but he hadn't stabled a horse anywhere in town. And the weekly stagecoach had passed through two days before.

Silent Sam paid five dollars a week to Set 'em up Pete for a bunk in the attic over the barroom, and another five for the meals which the saloonman cooked in the kitchen out back. The rest of the time he sat facing the door, his eyes filled with mute suffering as he studied the windows overlooking the main street. He was a sphinx in a Stetson.

Six months of this, and he finally came to attract no attention from anyone. Men didn't resent his sitting there in the corner like a wooden Indian, appraising each newcomer and then resuming his solitaire or his gun oiling.

Visitors were infrequent in Muscatero except when big outfits hazed their beef herds up the trail toward Stirrup City and the railroad. One day a big Tri-State Syndicate herd passed Muscatero and the drovers jammed the Last Chance that night. But if Silent Sam found the man he sought among the gun-hung, loiterous waddies, he gave no indication of it.

Next day a norther blew up, scouring the cow town's false-fronted frames and Mexican dobes with sand off Catclaw Desert. Set 'em up Pete, busy dispensing alcoholic refreshment to his customers, happened to glance over at Silent Sam's corner to find the old man gone.

When night came and Sam's chair

was still empty, the bartender climbed the attic ladder to investigate. The old man's saddlebags were gone, too.

They found his tracks leading out the back door, the pegleg punching the dirt as he headed north into the storm-swept Catchlaw wastes. But the wind had erased the trail at the dunes on the outskirts of town.

Not even a prowling coyote was out to see Silent Sam hobbling across the desert that afternoon in the teeth of the sand storm. Stopped under the burden of his saddlebags, the old man was moving against the sand-laden gale as unerringly as a homing pigeon winging through the black of night.

His face was covered with a bandanna, to keep the stinging particles of grit out of his mouth and nose. His eyes were screwed shut, for there was no way of seeing landmarks in the flying sand, anyway.

He slept that night on a heap of tumbleweeds in a sheltered draw, eating pemmican and chocolate from his saddlebags. Daybreak found him stumping across the desert toward the foothills of the Badwater Range, the storm blown out and the sun blistering down on his flop-brimmed sombrero.

The heat would have killed many a man half his age. But the oldster hobbled on tirelessly. His hickory shirt was drenched with sweat and his wooden leg sank into the sand with each tread, slowing him down. But otherwise he was conquering the malpais with the iron stamina of a man wise to the ways of the badlands.

Zigzagging from waterhole to waterhole, Silent Sam reached the Badwater Mountains at dusk, his second day out of Muscatero. If the desert town made a hunt for him,

it would not be a long one. They would shrug and figure that he was *muy loco*, and by now probably was coyote bait.

There were silver diggings back in the Badwater canyons, and a mining railroad snaked through the foothills toward the boom camp of Buzzard Stope. Silent Sam caught an up-bound train of empty ore cars at sundown. When he climbed out of a slag gondola at midnight, he found himself in the town.

Buzzard Stope was a cluster of twinkling lights between beetling granite cliffs, as the oldster's wooden leg thumped up the plank sidewalk from the railroad siding.

Honkatonks and gambling dives were going full blast, catering to the jackleg muckers who worked the silver stopes up and down the gulch. But Silent Sam strode past the saloons and dance halls with the purposeful manner of a man who knew where he was going.

He had never been in Buzzard Stope in his life; but he found what he was looking for in the center of town—a tar-paper-roofed shack squatting between a noisy stamp mill and an assay office.

A light gleamed in the window, late as it was; and the sign painted on the glass made Silent Sam peck up:

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LAWRENCE WAYNE, SUP'T

For the first time in over two years, a smile twisted the blade-thin lips behind Silent Sam's mustache. Peering through the grimy panes, he saw a husky young redhead bent over a drafting table. The youth was in his late twenties and was dressed in the whipcord breeches and high-laced boots of a surveyor. His lean waist was girdled by a cartridge

belt which sagged under the weight of a walnut-butted six-gun.

Silent Sam rapped the window with his knuckles. He was standing on the steps, a dried-up old hulk in the yellow glare of the lamp, when the young engineer opened the door.

It took several seconds for the red-head to recognize Sam. When he did, he reached out with both hands to grip the old man's shoulders.

"Dad!" he exclaimed. "You . . . you found him? You located the skunk who killed mother?"

Silent Sam nodded affirmation to his son's question.

CHAPTER II.

MURDERS IN THE PAST.

LARRY WAYNE hoped his face didn't betray the grief and pity which surged through him as he saw what the bitter months had done to his father. Sam's own face was relaxed with pride and a sense of fulfilled obligation as he wolfed down the grub which his son rustled up for him.

The younger Wayne was rugged as an oak, and he was tanned and supple from years of outdoor living. Like his father, Larry possessed a diploma in civil engineering. The mining railroad into Buzzard Stope was a monument to his prowess. It had entailed the building of high trestles and long tunnels and grades that hugged the Badwater rimrocks, a project to tax the ingenuity of an engineer of twice his experience.

"I've got twelve hundred bucks saved up, dad," Wayne said, busily clearing blueprints off the littered table. "I'm surveying the line up to the summit now, and it'll net me enough to pay for that throat operation, dad. Six months from now you'll be jabbering like a magpie."

Silent Sam Wayne stroked the bul-

let scar on his throat, and a faraway look kindled in his eyes. Both men were thinking back to that rainy night, almost two years gone now, when they had been playing a friendly game of rummy in their tent at the survey camp down on Catclaw Desert, where the mining railroad was building.

Mrs. Wayne had been with them that night. Even before Larry's birth at a railroad camp up in Utah, where her husband had been a Union Pacific survey chief, Lottie Wayne had always traveled with her husband. Born on a covered wagon on the old Oregon Trail, she had always shared the rigorous existence of Larry's father.

Life had been a dangerous, but always happy adventure for the Wayne family—up until that night in Catclaw Desert, when disaster had struck without warning.

A pay car bearing the money to pay off the construction gang had been switched onto the siding near their tent that day. The fourth member of the rummy game had been the paymaster, who had the key to the pay-roll strong box.

Larry Wayne was recalling vividly, as he watched his wasted parent finishing his meal, the events of that grim night.

A masked man had ridden up out of the rain and invaded the privacy of their tent behind jutting guns. The paymaster, sensing the reason for the intrusion, had reached for his guns—and had died before they cleared leather.

Larry, whirling about to face the bandit, was felled in his tracks by a clubbing gun barrel, so that he had been spared the ghostly spectacle which followed.

Sam Wayne, leaping to snatch up a Winchester .30-30 which hung from a tent pole, was downed by three

slugs from the killer's guns. And his wife had flung herself upon the slicker-clad outlaw, clawing at his .45s.

She had succeeded in tearing the slicker half off the killer's body, before point-blank slugs killed her instantly.

they moved him to a hospital in Phoenix.

Another slug had been dug out of his side, and a third had grazed his Adam's apple, paralyzing his power of speech. Sam's voice could be restored, the doctors told Larry; but the operation would require the skill



The Tri-State Syndicate hired hard and range-wise men, who might be killers but who knew how to drive a herd to railhead.

The smoked-up tent was a shambles when the spikers and track layers, roused by the thunder of gunfire, got there. The paymaster's keys were gone, and the pay car had been looted by the time the construction crew learned what had happened. The torrential rain made tracking the bandit impossible.

Larry Wayne, doused with cold water, revived to find the company doctor working over his father. A bullet had smashed Sam's left knee, necessitating an amputation after

of a surgeon from New York, and would cost five thousand dollars.

Five months after the shooting, Sam was out of the hospital, his voice gone, but his heart seething with a grim resolve: to avenge his wife's death.

Sam didn't have much to go on, and the trail was half a year cold before he got on his legs again—one of them wooden. The only clue was that torn-off piece of oilskin slicker.

In a pocket, attached to the ma-

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at last



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terial, had been half of a pay check bearing the printed address of the big Tri-State Cattle Syndicate. The name of the bearer, unluckily, was on the missing half of the check.

That clue revealed to Sam Wayne that the pay-roll bandit had probably been a Tri-State drover, heading back from Stirrup City after helping drive a beef herd to railhead. In addition, Sam Wayne carried in his memory the sound of the killer's voice, and a mental picture of the peculiar, apelike crouch of the man.

"If I ever hear that voice again, or see that devil, I'll know him," Sam had written Larry from his hospital bed. "I'm laying aside my transit and T square for keeps, Larry. My life job from now on is to track down your mother's killer."

The task seemed hopeless from the outset. Tracing the Tri-State check resulted in the discovery that the big syndicate hired hundreds of cow-punchers, working over a wide area of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona. It was almost impossible to search out each member of the Syndicate pay roll, and men were always leaving the employ of the beef combine.

Larry Wayne had carried on with their railroad survey into the Bad-water Mountains, and the mining trains had been running on his steel, up to Buzzard Stope, for months now.

But Sam Wayne had evolved an idea of his own. If the killer remained with the Tri-State Syndicate, he might be with another trail drive working up toward Stirrup City. It would be next to impossible to keep tabs on every drover who came into that railhead town; but there was the way point at Muscatero through which all Tri-State drives must pass.

So Sam Wayne had taken up his patient vigil at the Last Chance Sa-

loon in Muscatero, determined to wait there on the off chance that Lottie Wayne's murderer might some day pass through the town on his way to Stirrup City with another beef herd.

"You found him, dad?" Larry Wayne asked, as the old man shoved aside his dishes and wiped his face with a bandanna. "You're dead certain you haven't made a mistake?"

Sam Wayne reached for a pencil and a pad of drafting paper.

"I'm positive it's the man, son," the old man scribbled. "I knew that gorilla walk the minute he came into the saloon. And his voice had been haunting my dreams ever since that night. I couldn't mistake it. It's the man, all right."

Sam Wayne had risen out of his chair as Larry read the note. The young engineer found his eyes drawn to the staghorn-butted .45s thonged low on Sam Wayne's thighs, and the old man read the question in his son's eyes.

Again pencil raced over paper, and Larry read:

"No, I didn't kill him. He was sided by too many gun-handly pards for that. Besides, I want to face him—let him know who I am, and why I'm blasting him to hell—before I let him go for his cutters."

The young engineer nodded. Knowing the hatred which had festered in his father's heart for so long a time, he overlooked the fierce, bestial light in the eyes which, in a happier past, had twinkled with good will.

"Who is he?" asked Larry. "Where is he now?"

"His name is Rod Jaccard," the old man wrote. "He's a trail boss for the Tri-State beef pool. He and his men are hazing a couple thousand

head of shorthorns up to Stirrup City, now.

"The cattle were bedded down at Muscatero Sunday night. A bad sand storm kept the herd on bed-ground until Tuesday morning. Allowing fifteen miles a day, I figure they won't hit the loading pens at Stirrup City until Saturday morning."

Larry pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"It's too fantastic to be credible, that you found him this way," the engineer mused. Then, looking up swiftly: "Why did you come here, dad?"

Silent Sam Wayne scribbled again:

"I want to rent a horse here in town, son. I aim to reach Stirrup City before Jaccard does. This is the only way I could make it in time."

The two men stood up, locking glances across the table.

"Tomorrow's Thursday," Larry said. "I'll lock up the place and ride down to Stirrup City with you, dad. I want to be in on this show-down with Jaccard as much as you."

CHAPTER III.

SYNDICATE TRAIL BOSS.

THE following Saturday, Larry Wayne and his father sat on the top rail of the loading pens at Stirrup City and watched the bustling activity of the Arizona railhead town.

An abilene in miniature, Stirrup City lay at the terminus of a spur of the Arizona & Western railway. The shimmering bands of steel which stretched away toward Globe and Albuquerque was a link connecting the border country with the big Eastern beef markets.

Tapping a rich rangeland which had no other outlet, Stirrup City was

a bustling metropolis during the roundup season.

Cowpunchers packed its saloons and gambling dens; ponies lined the hitch racks along its dingy main street, and the Wells Fargo stage-coaches brought in daily loads of cattle buyers from the East.

The news had already hit town that the mammoth Tri-State combine was heading up the Catclaw trail with a pool herd collected from spreads as far south as Nogales.

The Tri-State outfit owned no range of its own; it trafficked with ranchers direct, its representatives attending fall beef gathers and buying cattle on the hoof, at prices below the Omaha market.

Entrusted to the rugged drovers of the Tri-State outfit was the responsibility of getting critters to Stirrup City without losing too much tallow along the way. The Tri-State trail bosses were hard men who ram-rod hard crews, but they knew the best places to ford rivers and had a keen knowledge of grass conditions over thousands of square miles of frontier.

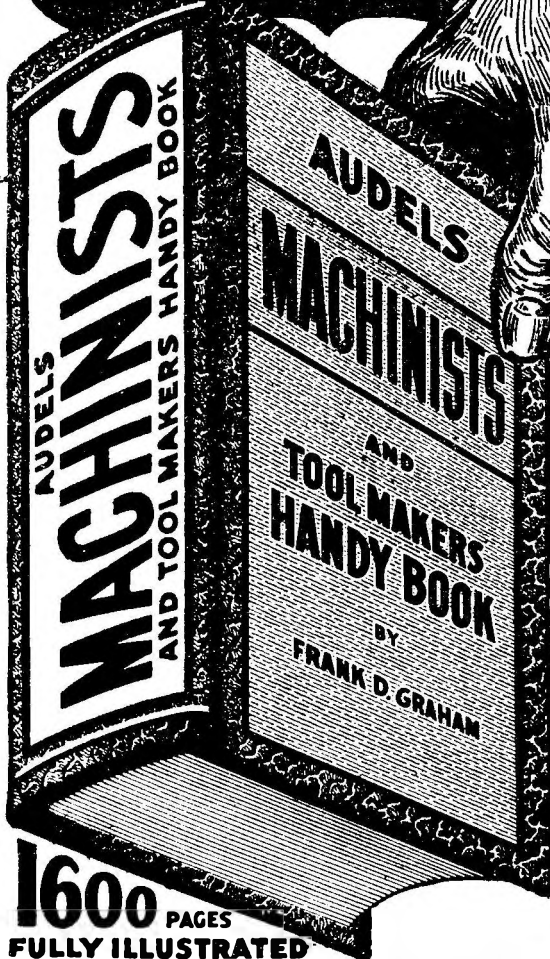
As a result, cattlemen from the Panhandle to Arizona sold prime steers to the Tri-State Syndicate, taking a loss off market quotations rather than take the risk of having their herds whittled by rustlers or diminished by drought conditions en route to rail.

Larry Wayne caught sight of the Tri-State herd when it topped the southern horizon, before his father's eyes traced the smudge of dust to its source.

Born and bred an engineer, Wayne nevertheless caught the excitement which went through the cow town as the long, tenuous queue of bawling steers wound its way

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across the sage flats toward the railroad yards.

Sunlight flickered on the metal saddle decorations of the vanguard of point riders. Cowpunchers beat strays back into the line with rope ends. Lost somewhere in the dust of the drag, other buckaroos hazed up the stragglers.

The two Waynes, scanning the sombreroed and chap-clad drovers as they brought the bawling Syndicate herd through Stirrup City's wide street, searched in vain for the towering figure of Rod Jaccard.

"He was with 'em at Muscatere," the mute oldster wrote with a bullet tip on the peeled-pole rail between them. "Jaccard will show up when the tally master checks the count."

A snorting locomotive jockeyed a string of cattle cars onto a siding behind them. Larry Wayne, searching the white-faced Herefords as they came surging into the main corral, saw that the cattle bore a wide variety of brands. But each one carried the Triangle road iron of the big stock syndicate. There could be no doubt that this was Jaccard's herd.

Dust choked the scene. Cloven hoofs made a dull thunder on hard-packed dobe. Cowpokes yipped shrilly. Railroad tally men hunkered on gateway posts, counting the Tri-State critters as they streamed into the loading pens in a bawling, russet tide.

Two hours passed before Silent Sam Wayne dug trembling fingers into his son's arm. Larry followed the line of the old man's pointing finger, and stiffened as he saw a burly rider on a coal-black horse dismount a short distance from the main gate.

It was Rod Jaccard. Larry Wayne knew that, without benefit

of his father's excited gesturing.

The young engineer felt his heart turn into a numb, icy weight as he watched Jaccard slouch over to the stockyard boss.

Jaccard walked like a bull ape, and he was built like one. Overlong arms ending in hairy, ham-sized fists swung at Jaccard's side. His face was a dusty caricature with overhanging brows and blue-stubbed jowls.

Six-guns protruded from tied-down holsters. Jaccard wore cactus-scuffed batwings and a high-crowned Stetson that was red with desert dust.

"She'll tally twenty-two hunderd an' eighteen, Joe!" boomed the trail boss, above the racketing din of hoofs and bawling cattle. "Lost nary a stray between here an' Muscatere, an' bucked a sand storm to boot."

It was the final confirmation Larry Wayne needed, even if he had not trusted his father's instinct. The same harsh, guttural voice had ordered the rummy players to throw up their hands, the night Jaccard had murdered Lottie Wayne and the paymaster nearly two years ago.

Father and son swung down off the fence, their eyes slitted into pin points of steel-blue light. Both men seemed to sense the presence of Lottie Wayne, as they stalked over to where Jaccard was conversing with the tally master and a beaver-hatted cattle buyer who was taking over the herd.

"You're count's O. K., Jaccard," the Eastern buyer was saying, as he took a manifest sheet from the tally man. "Here's my draft. You'll find the cash for these critters waiting over at the Stockman's Bank here in town."

Larry put a restraining arm on his father as Rod Jaccard went back to his black horse and mounted.

"I'm not letting you goad Jaccard into gunplay right here with his men around to back him," the younger man said. "One reason I came down with you was to keep you from going off half-cocked, dad. We'll turn Jaccard over to the Stirrup City sheriff and let the law take its course."

The old man clamped his mouth doggedly. He had trailed his wife's killer too long to risk the possibility that a jury trial might free Rod Jaccard. It would be hard to prove in court that the Tri-State drover was the same man who held up the survey camp pay car. This was an affair that could be squared only with gunpowder.

Silent Sam Wayne, his brain burning with searing memories, loosened his staghorn-butted Colts and said nothing. Larry, with his life and a brilliant career ahead of him, could temper his desire for revenge with common sense. But not until Lottie Wayne's murder had been avenged with lead was the old man going to unbuckle his gun belt—even if the final act of justice brought him to a hang rope.

They saw Jaccard ride out into the main Street, but he was not heading in the direction of the Stockman's Bank, which was located on a side street.

Walking rapidly, the two Waynes watched Jaccard rein into an alleyway between a livery barn and a mercantile store, two blocks west of the railroad-loading chute.

"This is working out fine, dad," said Larry Wayne, as they saw the trail boss vanish between the buildings. "Jaccard's probably going to stable his bronc. We can get the drop on him while he's away from his saddle pards, hustle him over to the sheriff's office and swear out a warrant for him."

Sam Wayne hobbled on, jaw out-thrust.

"If our testimony isn't enough to swing him, maybe some of his gunhawk friends will turn State's evidence if we bait 'em with that reward the railroad posted for the capture of mother's killer," Wayne went on, as they turned into the alley where Jaccard had ridden. "We got to handle this by legal means, dad—"

The two men halted, as they saw Rod Jaccard and his horse at the far end of the alley. The Triangle-branded animal was tied to a hitch rack in front of a boarded-up saddleshop, and the trail boss was busy untying a bundle from behind the cantle.

"Move in here out of sight," Larry warned, pulling his father into a livery-barn doorway. "Chances are Jaccard won't recognize us, but we'd better wait till he walks out toward the main street to get a drop on him at close range."

Peering around the barn door jamb, they saw Jaccard unroll the bundle from his cantle. It was an oilskin slicker, which the drover shrugged on. The raincoat's skirts completely masked Jaccard's costume.

"Dressed the same as he was the night he shot mother!" Larry Wayne whispered tensely. "He's up to some skunk play—"

But instead of retracing his way back up the alley to the main street, Rod Jaccard vanished behind the mercantile store.

Of one accord, Wayne and his son moved out of hiding and raced to the end of the building. To their surprise, they saw no trace of the slicker-clad drover.

The back door of the mercantile store was locked, and the junk-littered back lots were empty and shimmering under the torrid sun.

Jaccard had apparently vanished somewhere among the jumble of adobe-walled shacks where Stirrup City's Mexican population lived in sordid squalor.

A sense of frustration filled the two men as they searched for Jaccard's tracks. But the dingy town had swallowed him up.

"We know he'll go over to the Stockman's Bank to turn over that draft," Larry Wayne suggested, as he saw a frantic look cross his father's countenance. "Come on!"

Heading across vacant lots, the young engineer grinned with relief as he caught a glimpse of Jaccard's yellow-slickered figure entering the Stockman's Bank building from the side street.

"He's cashing in his beef money," Larry said. "We'll take it easy and tackle him as he comes out of the bank."

Several minutes later they had reached the side street and were heading toward the red brick bank building.

"I'll go in the main door up front, just in case he goes out that way," Larry said. "That way, we won't miss h—"

A thunder of gunshots roared out inside the bank, followed by the high-pitched scream of a mortally injured man.

For a moment the two engineers stared at each other in shocked dismay. Then, guns palmed, they crossed the street and raced up the steps of the side door of the bank.

Leaping into the bank lobby, a grim scene met their eyes. Gun smoke moved slowly in the stuffy atmosphere of the room. A uniformed bank guard lay sprawled near the front door, an unfired shotgun clutched in his hands, blood gushing from a ripped-open skull.

The front door was still fanning

the threshold, indicating somebody's hasty exit. Of Rod Jaccard's slicker-dressed figure there was no trace.

Silent Sam Wayne thumbed his Colts to full cock and his wooden leg beat a tattoo on the bank floor as he limped over to the teller's cage and glanced behind a counter.

The bank cashier was sprawled over his desk, face gray with agony, the front of his shirt soaked with blood.

Larry Wayne spotted the half-open door of the bank vault and was heading toward it when a voice lashed out from the back end of the lobby:

"Stand where you are, you pole-cats! One false move and I'll mow you down with buckshot!"

Silent Sam whirled, to see a white-haired banker stalking out of a private office in the rear. A double-barreled shotgun was hugged to the banker's cheek, the twin bores aimed at Larry Wayne. But old Sam was square in the line of fire, should the banker decide to shoot.

"You got us wrong, fella!" protested Larry Wayne, dropping his walnut-butted .45 and lifting his arms. "We came in to—"

"You're coverin' that damned bank robber!" screamed the banker, swiveling his buckshot gun a few inches to cover Silent Sam, who still clutched his .45s. "Drop them shootin' irons, you one-legged old goat, or I'll blast you from hell to breakfast!"

Sam Wayne's lips moved in soundless protest, as he let his Peacemakers clatter to the floor.

Simultaneously the front door of the bank slammed open, and a gun-toting stranger raced into the lobby. He skidded to a halt before the guard's corpse. A sheriff's badge glittered on the hombre's vest.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" cried the lawman, looking up. "What's goin' on, Dixon?"

Behind the Stirrup City sheriff appeared another figure, clad in black Stetson and batwing chaps. It was Rod Jaccard, no longer wearing his oilskin slicker.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER ARREST.

YOU'RE a mite late, Simpson!" rasped the banker, as the sheriff came forward, rock-hard eyes staring at Sam Wayne and his son. "A jigger wearin' a raincoat an' a mask cleaned out my vault a minute ago. These two buskies were guardin' the door leadin' on to Mesa Avenue."

Larry Wayne flushed angrily.

"There's the bank robber standing behind you, sheriff!" he yelled. "Rod Jaccard was the man wearing that raincoat. I saw him come in the bank!"

Sheriff Mike Simpson turned to

stare incredulously at the Syndicate trail boss. Jaccard had halted just inside the door, staring in well-feigned amazement at the dead man.

"What kind of loco talk is that, Jaccard?" demanded the star toter.

Jaccard's yellow teeth showed in a grin.

"That stranger's crazy as a nit, sheriff. I heard shooting inside the bank just now, and saw you duck out of the jailhouse an' leg it over here. I was on my way to the bank myself, aimin' to deposit a draft for the Tri-State beef I brought in this mornin'."

Sheriff Simpson suspiciously turned his eyes back to Larry Wayne. The engineer bit his lip in dismay.

It seemed impossible that Jaccard could have disposed of his loot and stripped off his bandit disguise so quickly. It was a cunning ruse on the drover's part to return promptly to the bank he had just rifled. No doubt he had passed his loot to an

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, published weekly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1941.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

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H. W. RALSTON, Vice President,
Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1941. De Witt C. Van Valkenburg, Notary Public No. 84, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1942.)

accomplice waiting outside, along with the incriminating slicker.

"You're caught red-handed an' tryin' to run a long bluff, stranger!" clipped the sheriff, jerking a pair of handcuffs from a hip pocket and striding up to Larry Wayne. "I've knowed Rodney Jaccard for years. He ain't the stripe to go around robbin' banks in broad daylight!"

"I know it sounds crazy," Wayne confessed, "but—"

The engineer groaned as Simpson fettered his left wrist to his father's right arm. Silent Sam Wayne was making grotesque whispering sounds, but his paralyzed vocal cords remained mute.

"What happened, Dixon?" the sheriff demanded, turning to the banker. "Which way'd the owlhooter vamoose?"

Dixon uncocked the twin hammers of his shotgun and jerked a thumb at the handcuffed prisoners.

"I was workin' inside the vault when this masked hombre snaked in off Mesa Avenue," Dixon explained. "Jackson, the teller, was busy in his cage an' the guard was standin' out in the front vestibule; so they didn't see him come in. First thing I knew I had a gun in my ribs an' had to shell out what loose cash an' negotiable paper I had in the vault. He shoved it in a gunny sack. The whole thing didn't take two minutes."

Simpson glanced around at the sprawled corpse of the guard.

"Just about then," Dixon continued. "Jackson come over to the vault as the bandit was fixin' to lock me inside. The owlhooter put a slug in Jackson's belly an' then lit a shuck for the front door. I was headin' to the office for my shotgun when Slim Ferris, the guard, heard the shootin' an' come runnin' inside. The bandit plugged him at close

range, an' was gone when I come out. These two skunks were just fixin' to follow him."

Larry Wayne started to speak, but the sheriff was already heading for the front door. Pausing with hand on knob, Simpson barked orders at the banker:

"Ride herd on these men, Dixon. I'll go out and hunt for sign. That owlhooter might have been dustin' out of town."

Rod Jaccard hesitated a moment, then headed on a run after the sheriff. Wayne saw Simpson closing the front vestibule doors, to keep out a crowd of morbid spectators who were milling about the front of the bank.

Larry Wayne turned to face Dixon, who was covering them belligerently with his scattergun.

"You've got to listen to reason, Dixon!" pleaded the engineer. "Here's the set-up—"

Dixon listened with obvious skepticism as Wayne explained their presence in Stirrup City, how they had trailed Rod Jaccard across back lots to the bank, and the fact that they had seen the Tri-State trail boss disguising himself in a slicker.

"After he'd passed his loot to some confederate outside, he came back inside to throw suspicion off himself!" Wayne concluded, fully aware of how flat his story sounded in Dixon's ears. "You've got to believe that."

The bank president granted cynically. Then a groan of pain from the teller startled him.

"Get marchin', you two!" Dixon ordered gruffly pointing toward the Mesa Avenue door with his shotgun. "We'll take a *pasear* over to Simpson's hoosegow. Then I got to get a medico over here to look after Jackson. He's bad hit."

A curious crowd trooped after the old banker as he marched Silent Sam

Wayne and his son, handcuffed together, out to the main street.

Five minutes later they found themselves in the custody of Rick Vanpool, a rawboned individual who was turnkey for the Stirrup City jail-house.

Still shackled, the father and son were clapped into an iron-grilled cell in a far corner of the jail block, and Dixon hurried away to fetch a doctor to administer first aid to the wounded cashier.

Seated side by side on a cot, Larry Wayne eyed his father and grinned bleakly.

"Looks like we're hock-deep in trouble, dad," he commented. "Personally, I doubt if we can make anyone believe our story about Rod Jaccard, the way things are stacking up. One thing, I don't believe Jaccard recognizes us as the men who were

in that tent the night he . . . he shot mother."


Silent Sam Wayne fingered his bullet-scarred neck and nodded despairingly. The trend of events had put both of them in line for the gallows. The fact that both of them had reputations as law-abiding civil engineers over in the Badwater country would prove of little avail in their present difficulty. Sam, at least, had come to Stirrup City with the avowed intention of killing the Syndicate trail boss.

An hour elapsed before Sheriff Mike Simpson appeared at the jail. To the prisoners' surprise, Rod Jaccard was still with the lawman.

Standing outside the cell, the Stirrup City sheriff eyed his manacled prisoners quizzically.

"Your pardner made a clean git-away with the bank loot," Simpson

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admitted. "But you two hairpins know who he is, and where he'll high-tail to. As accomplices to this crime, I got ways of sweatin' out the truth from you."

Rod Jaccard stepped up to the bars and stared long and hard at the two engineers. It was obvious he had not yet placed them.

"What I want to know," Jaccard asked, "is why you told the sheriff that I was the hombre who robbed that bank?"

Before Larry could answer, Silent Sam got to his feet, rummaging in his shirt pocket with his free hand. He drew out a smudged, folded piece of cardboard, which he thrust through the bars into Simpson's hand.

Scowling puzzledly, Simpson unfolded the placard. It was a reward poster:

\$5,000 REWARD. DEAD OR ALIVE! will be paid for information leading to the capture of an unknown bandit who robbed a pay car of the Arizona & Western Railway Co. in Catclaw Desert on the night of June 15th. The robber killed Joe Lafferty, company paymaster, and Mrs. S. W. Wayne, wife of a surveying engineer. He was masked, and wore a yellow oilskin slicker. So far as is known, he had no confederates. The outlaw was about six feet tall, heavily built, and walks with a peculiar gorillalike crouch. Send information to your local law-enforcement authorities, or to
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Simpson looked up from his square of the reward blazer, eyes

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slitted inquiringly at Silent Sam Wayne.

"I don't savvy," he said. "What's this bounty poster got to do with the holdup of Dixon's bank?"

Larry Wayne crowded up to the bars, his eyes riveted on Rod Jaccard's face.

"The killer described in that handbill is your friend Rod Jaccard!" he accused grimly. "This man is my father, Sam Wayne, husband of the woman Jaccard killed in that payroll robbery. We trailed Jaccard here to Stirrup City and we were going to turn him over to you, sheriff. That's why we happened to be in Dixon's bank."

Jaccard's florid visage had gone pale during Wayne's recital. Then, recovering himself with an effort, the trail drover laughed harshly.

"I leave it to you, sheriff," jeered the cowman. "Can you imagine me, holdin' down a responsible job handlin' the Syndicate's dinero, going around robbin' people and murdering women?"

The sheriff pushed the reward poster back through the bars.

"These skunks are tryin' to cover up for their *compadre*," he said to Jaccard. "I got ways to make them talk."

Speaking rapidly, Larry Wayne told Simpson the story he had recounted to Dixon over in the bank. As he spoke, Rod Jaccard's complacent grin widened.

"Looks like a bad case agin' me, sheriff, don't it?" grunted the trail boss, smiling sarcastically.

The sheriff waved Jaccard aside.

"I've known you too long to swallow any fish story like these strangers are dishin' out, Rod. They'll sing a different tune after they sweat a few days in this *juzgado*."

Rod Jaccard turned to leave.

"In case you think different about

me, you can find me an' the boys over at the Bunkhouse Hotel, Mike," Jaccard laughed. "I reckon I'll dust over to the stockyards and tell my crew their pay may be delayed a bit by this bank robbery. Dixon claims he was near cleaned out."

When Jaccard had left, Mike Simpson turned to stare at his prisoners, his face grim as a thundercloud.

"You fellers think things over," the sheriff suggested. "Your pardner got away clean with the bank's money and is leavin' you two to face the music. Tell me where he's holed up, and it'll go easier with you when you face a judge an' jury."

CHAPTER V.

TRAIL TOWARD MEXICO.

EXCITEMENT gripped the cow town during the long afternoon. The bank president, Dixon, posted an offer of three thousand dollars for the recovery of the stolen money. Curious spectators jammed the street in front of the county jail, hoping for a glimpse of the prisoners within.

At three o'clock a heavily-armed posse led by Sheriff Mike Simpson clattered out of Stirrup City on the trail of a suspect, who proved to be an innocent desert rat trailing a pack mule, and bound for the silver diggings up in the Badwater Mountains.

The posse came back at nightfall, saddle-weary and short of temper, to learn that Jackson, the bank teller, had died during the afternoon as a result of his gunshot wound.

Lynch talk fanned into open flame wherever men congregated to discuss the holdup. Jackson and Ferris, the dead men, had left widows and children. The townspeople, egged on by excitement-hungry cowboys, believed

that Sam Wayne and his son, caught red-handed backing the bandit, were logical candidates for hang rope.

The two Waynes knew nothing of the threatening undercurrent which spread through the town, however. Still handcuffed, and as yet unfed, they fought flies and heat and thirst inside the Stirrup City jail while they waited for Simpson to return.

An hour after dark their jailer, Vanpool, unlocked the cell and brought in a steaming tray of food from a Chinese restaurant next door. The only concession he would make to his prisoners' comfort was to remove the handcuffs which linked the pair wrist to wrist.

An hour later Vanpool came back to get their dishes, carrying a lantern. He brought ominous news.

"The town's honin' to stretch you hombres' pelts on a rail. Sheriff's makin' the rounds of the saloons now, tryin' to squelch lynch talk. Why don't you get wise an' do some talkin'?"

Neither prisoner answered. Silent Sam Wayne was stretched out on the cot, and Larry sat next to him with elbows on knees, face buried in his hands as if in abject gloom.

"Suit yourselves," grunted Vanpool. "You fellers might save yore necks, if you told where that owl-hoot boss of yours is hidin' out. Maybe collect Dixon's reward dinero in the bargain."

The prisoners remained glum. Vanpool stooped to pick up his lantern.

Larry Wayne went into action like a springing trap then.

His left hand shot out to grab Silent Sam's hickory peg leg. The straps which fastened the wooden leg to the old man's stump had been unbuckled—a detail which naturally had meant nothing to the jailer.

The wooden leg sped upward like a club. Vanpool dropped the tray of dishes with a clang and dug for his Colt.

But he was too late. The peg leg whistled down with the full weight of Larry's arm behind the blow and caught Vanpool on the side of the head.

Hickory whacked soddenly on bone. With a wheezing grunt, the jailer sprawled on the floor, smashing the lantern under him and plunging the jail in blackness.

"Your scheme worked slick as bear grease, dad!" the young engineer said, rolling the jailer over and prying the man's fingers off the butt of his six-gun. "Put on your leg and we'll be ready to drift."

Silent Sam Wayne quickly buckled on his peg leg and tied a wadded bandanna over the end, to muffle his steps across the stone floor of the jail.

Leaving the unconscious Vanpool inside the cell, Larry closed the iron door, locked it, and removed the ring of jail keys for further use. Then they hurried across the cell block to the sheriff's office in the front end of the building.

The office was dimly lighted by the window overlooking the street. There was a gun locker above Simpson's roll-top desk, and a moment's search on the key ring produced the key to open it.

"*Bueno!*" whispered Larry Wayne, sizing up the arsenal of shotguns, rifles and six-shooters racked in the locker. "We'll take a pair of .45s apiece, dad."

They made sure the chambers of their borrowed guns were loaded and opened a box of .45 cartridges to fill their pockets with reserve ammunition.

"We'll take the back door. People might be watching from the

front," Larry whispered. "Let's get going."

Like two ghosts in the night, the escaping fugitives let themselves out into a shadow-clotted alley behind the calaboose. Larry Wayne hung the key ring on the doorknob, and they made off at right angles to the main stem, in the direction of the Bunkhouse Hotel where Rod Jaccard had said he was registered.

"Jaccard and his crew are probably bucking the tiger and swilling retgut in some saloon," Larry Wayne said, as they reached the hotel. "Thing for us to do is hide in Jaccard's room and wait for him to show up. The sheriff'll find Vanpool soon enough, but he wouldn't think to look anywhere in town for us."

They followed the long porch which flanked the Bunkhouse Hotel and let themselves in through a side door.

Common sense dictated that they should leave Stirrup City behind and make tracks while they had night to cover their getaway. With charges of being accomplices to a bank robbery and double murder hanging over them, it was inevitable that Sheriff Mike Simpson would order them shot on sight.

But running away from Stirrup City would accomplish nothing. Not only was their own record at stake, but as long as Rod Jaccard was on the loose, their errand to the railroad settlement was unfinished.

Entering the hotel, they found themselves in a corridor which extended from the staircase to the front lobby. Silent Sam moved with caution to keep the thump of his padded wooden leg from sounding too loud on the creaky floor.

"We've got to find which room is Jaccard's," Larry pointed out. "I've got to take a chance on nobody recognizing me in the hotel lobby. You wait here, dad."

Silent Sam Wayne gripped his

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son's hand in the darkness, and then Larry was gone.

Luckily, the hotel's dingy lobby was deserted. The stifling heat of the night had sent its patrons out on the cool porch facing the street.

A mestizo clerk was drowsing behind the hotel counter where the dog-eared register lay open. Running down the list of entries for that day, Wayne saw Rod Jaccard's signature scrawled at the bottom of the page. But his room number was not indicated.

"You weesh a room *si?*" asked the half-breed, thrusting a penholder at Wayne. "Dollar a night—"

"I'm looking up a man who's stopping here," Wayne answered. "A cattleman named Rodney Jaccard. Which room is he stabled in?"

The breed started to consult the register, then shook his head.

"Señor Jaccard an' hees cowboys have left Stirrup Ceety," the clerk said. "They go back to Nogales."

Wayne groaned. He knew the probable reason of Jaccard's decision to quit town without the customary drinking bout which most drovers celebrated in Stirrup City at the end of a long trail drive. Fearful of what might develop when the sheriff had time to question the Wayne's further, Jaccard was pulling stakes while the going was good.

"When did he leave?"
"Thees afternoon, señor. Before sundown."

"They're going to Nogales, you say? That means they'd probably take the trail toward Muscatero?"

The mestizo shrugged.
"Quien sabe? I suppose so, señor. There ees only one trail leading to Nogales, señor—the one going through the Catelaw Desairt."

Wayne flipped a Mex peso on the counter to thank the clerk and hurried back to tell the news to his father.

"Jaccard can't have gone far from

Stirrup City before camping for the night," the elder man added. "I imagine his crew will stop at the nearest waterhole, which would be Apache Springs. That means we'll have to rustle up a pair of horses *pronto pronto*."

Out on the Bunkhouse Hotel porch, the two fugitives halted to think things over. Their own horses were stabled over at the Bluestem Livery Barn, near the railroad yards. But it would be foolish to call at the stable for their own mounts. The hostler would recognize them and spread the alarm.

Silent Sam clutched his son's arm and pointed toward a row of cowponies which were switching flies along a cottonwood hitch rack by a saloon across the street.

"Nothing else we can do," Larry agreed. "With murder charges hanging over us, we can't hang any higher for stealing horses."

A silver-dollar moon was riding the night sky, and by its soft glow they picked out leggy horses which showed promise of being able to carry them fast and far.

A few moments later, in saddle and curvetting their borrowed mounts out from the hitch rail, a loud yell sounded from a window of the saloon next door.

"Hey! Where you goin' with my nag, you blasted hoss thief?"

Wayne bent low over the pommel and lashed his mount into a gallop, his father slapping his horse at the same time, close behind him.

The cowboy leaning from the saloon window opened fire with a Colt, and bullets whined overhead as they left the outskirts of Stirrup City in the dust.

"Just our luck to be spotted stealing a horse!" yelled Larry Wayne,

facing the wind. "That'll bring a posse hell-bent on our tail."

They had chosen their horses well. At a hard gallop, they pounded over the first cactus-spined hogback rimming the south end of town, and headed out across the moon-gilded expanse of Catclaw Desert.

Somewhere ahead of them, Rod Jaccard was bound for the border with his bank-vault loot and his crew of Tri-State Syndicate riders.

The odds which faced the Waynes, in the event they caught up with the south-bound punchers, might well be suicidal. But Rod Jaccard was the only man living who could clear them of Sheriff Mike Simpson's charges, and they were faced with the alternatives of going on the dodge for life or bringing Jaccard to bay.

Twenty miles to the south they would find Apache Springs, the only oasis within easy riding distance of Stirrup City.

In all probability, Jaccard's crew would camp there for the night. If not, they would have to push the chase on and on across the bleak malpais.

A well-defined trail of horses, going south, led across the sandy wastelands from Stirrup City. It gave them hope that they were on the Syndicate crew's track.

As they rode, an ominous smudge of dust lifted on the skyline behind them, and both men knew what that meant. The cowhand who had spotted them stealing his horse had roused Stirrup City to a man hunt.

Some three hours later, halting to rest their horses on a rocky upland, they caught sight of a pin point of red light flickering on the black floor of the desert to the southward.

It was a campfire, at Apache Springs.

Their horses were lathered and blowing heavily under the grueling pace as the Waynes reined off the trail and made a wide circuit to the west to approach the waterhole from a different angle.

Two hundred yards from the campfire, the Waynes dismounted and tied their horses to a smoketree snag under the shale cutbank of a dry wash.

Then, guns ready, they stalked toward the black motte of trees which marked the waterhole.

Shoulder to shoulder, moving with infinite caution across the moonlit sand, the stalkers passed a cavy of saddle horses grazing in the grass on the outskirts of the springs. They bore Triangle brands. This, then, was Jaccard's crew.

There were nearly a score of men spending the night at Apache Springs. Most of them were already in their bedrolls, near the outer circle of the firelight. A few others, sombreroed and gun-hung silhouettes against the skyward-dancing sparks, were about the campfire, talking.

Moving up through the willow scrub and dwarf cottonwoods which girdled the waterhole, the Waynes saw a burly figure stand up and stretch, yawning noisily.

It was big Rod Jaccard.

Silent Sam Wayne leaped forward out of the brush, six-guns jutting from his bony fists.

Jaccard whirled about at the sound of the oldster's wooden leg thudding over the earth, and then the trail boss was staring with half-open mouth at Sam's gun.

"Hoist 'em, Jaccard!" Larry Wayne snarled, speaking for his mute father. "The first man in this camp who digs for a gun will get a quick trip to hell!"

CHAPTER VI.

HOT-LEAD RETRIBUTION.

THE circle of Tri-State cowhands about the fire leaped to their feet, raising their arms aloft as they saw the two gunmen stalk out into the firelight behind weaving guns.

"What is this, anyhow?" bellowed a lanky, straw-haired cowpoke standing back of Jaccard. "If it's a holdup, you buskies have drawn a blank. We didn't get paid today!"

Larry Wayne's ice-blue eyes were raking over the blanket-shrouded punchers, many of whom were sitting up sleepily in their soogans.

"Your trail boss robbed the bank at Stirrup City this morning," rasped the engineer. "We aim to search this camp and get the evidence we've after. If you men are wearing Jaccard's collar, you better make sure you keep your hands in sight."

A stunned silence followed Wayne's announcement. Then Jaccard cut out viciously:

"He's lyin', men. It's a frame-up."

Larry Wayne sighed with relief. The craven fear in Jaccard's voice told him a welcome fact: Jaccard's hands were not in on their foreman's outlawry.

The blond puncher who had spoken out first came forward, eying the trail boss narrowly.

"These are the gents that the sheriff found in the bank an' clapped in jail," he said. "I ain't so sure they ain't talkin' turkey, Rod. I been all-fired curious to know why you insisted on leavin' Stirrup City so damned soon today. You mebbe wouldn't be runnin' away from anything?"

Rod Jaccard snarled through locked teeth.

"Keep your horns out o' this, Fosberg!" he roared. "These gunnies

figure we're packin' the money for that beef herd. I—"

Fosberg turned to Silent Sam Wayne, whose guns were weaving over the line of men about the campfire while his son kept the bedrolled crew in line.

"I'll show you the *alforja* bags that belong to Jaccard, stranger," volunteered the yellow-haired cowboy. "If our *segundo* is packin' bank money tonight, we got a right to know it. Jaccard insisted on pullin' stakes this evenin' where we usually stick around Stirrup City a few days to rest up an' have us a time. If you gents got the deadwood on him, I—"

Hell broke loose at Apache Springs in that instant.

Over in the group of men who had already turned in, a beefy-chested drover with a bush of cinnamon-red whiskers leaped out of his blankets and triggered a six-gun frenziedly.

Bullets whistled about Sam Wayne. One slug hit his wooden leg and dumped the old man off his feet.

Simultaneously Larry Wayne whipped up his guns and let hammers drop. Blanket-clad waddies, roused from sleep, had sense enough to flatten out on the ground as criss-crossing bullets screamed overhead.

The cinnamon-whiskered gunman squalled an oath as Larry Wayne got his range and drove a slug into his midriff. The gunny stumbled a few steps, then sprawled headlong against the hind wheel of the Triangle chuckwagon.

Rod Jaccard had not been idle. With a yell of panic he swung a rock-hard fist at Fosberg's jaw, sending the blond cowboy reeling back across the campfire, his spurred boots scattering fiery embers in all directions.

Then the trail boss, crouched like a gorilla about to charge, snapped six-guns from leather and brought them to bear at point-blank range on Silent Sam Wayne.

The old man was sprawled on the

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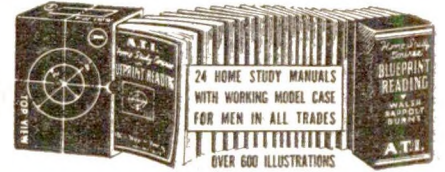
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ground, thrown there by the impact of the red-bearded man's slug splintering his wooden leg. He was staring up at death in Jaccard's gun bores, but the old engineer had waited too long for this moment to be cheated of his revenge now.

Lifting one of the Peacemakers he had taken from the sheriff's office, Silent Sam squeezed trigger.

Flame and smoke swam up into Jaccard's contorted face with the roar of the explosion.

Knees buckling, Jaccard's body collapsed; and he landed on his face beside Silent Sam.

With the din of gunshots ringing in his ears, Larry Wayne was caught unprepared for the rush of horsemen who pounded out of the night from the north.

The camp was in pandemonium as Sheriff Mike Simpson piled out of saddle and ran forward, guns drawn.

Among the possemen from Stirrup City who had trailed the father and son across the desert wastes, Larry Wayne recognized the cowboy whose horse he had borrowed.

"We got 'em—escaped prisoners!" yelled the sheriff triumphantly, hauling out his handcuffs. "But it's too late to save Rod Jaccard, looks like. This killin' will put hang rope around their necks for sure!"

But it was Fosberg, elbowing through the crowd of half-dressed punchers a minute later, who halted Simpson in the act of handcuffing the Waynes for a second time.

Fosberg carried a gunny sack, and the blond cowpoke fished inside the sack and got a packet of currency.

"Swag from Dixon's vault, sheriff," Fosberg said. "I thought I'd find it in Jaccard's saddlebags, but I didn't. Red Purdy, the cook who started this shootin' tonight, had this gunny sack hidden under some spuds in a box in the chuck wagon."

"I don't savvy this atall!" wailed the dumfounded lawman, shoving

back his Stetson to scratch his head. "Where does this Red Purdy fit in?"

Larry Wayne answered that:

"I got a hunch Red Purdy was the man waiting outside the bank when Jaccard pulled off that robbery this morning, sheriff. Jaccard peeled off his slicker and handed it and the loot to Purdy, who could drift off easy enough, unnoticed in the excitement."

Simpson glared suspiciously at the Syndicate cowpunchers.

"I don't think any of the rest of us were in on Jaccard's dirty work, Simpson," spoke up Fosberg. "Jaccard wanted to leave town in a hurry, but he knew that would look suspicious. So by tellin' us our pay checks wouldn't be comin' up, he talked us all into ridin' out of Stirrup City with him—just to make every-thing seem on the up an' up."

Larry turned to Silent Sam Wayne, and saw that the bitterness had left his father's eyes at last.

"Dixon's reward'll go to you fellers, then," the sheriff said, poking an arm into the sack of loot. "Three thousand bucks, cash money."

Larry gripped his father's hand and grimed.

"That money'll make up for what we hoped to collect for Jaccard's other crimes, dad—which we probably couldn't have proved anyway," he said. "It'll help pay off the doctor who's going to remove the scar tissue that's keeping you from talking."

Contentment welled up in Silent Sam's chest, as a happy thought occurred to him. As soon as a medico had patched up his damaged throat, he'd go down to Muscatero and talk a leg off the boys in Set 'em up Pete's saloon.

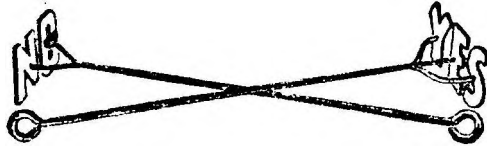
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¿QUIEN SABE?

Answers

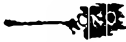
Continued from page 36

1. *It cannot hear, because snakes have no ears. Instead of hearing, they have sensitive nerves which feel vibrations, so the approach of an enemy is announced by the vibrations he makes, like heavy or light footfalls. The strength of the vibrations measures the distance.*
2. *From "jackass hare," which they are sometimes called because of the resemblance of their long ears to those of a jackass.*
3. *Ten years. No, its horns continue to grow until it dies.*
4. *Seven feet from tip to tip. The record width is eight feet nine inches.*
5. *The Jingle Bob and the Long Rail. He ran 70,000 to 100,000 head.*
6. *The Jingle Bob was made by splitting a steer's ears so that one half of each ear stood erect, while the other half was looped over like a hound's ear. The Long Rail was made by burning a line along a steer's side from the shoulder to where the hair ends along the flank.*
7. *In the Rio Grande country of Texas. They excelled in horsemanship, and were said to have made horse stealing a fine art.*
8. *Cattle herds driven in for shipment are often bought by the army to replenish the beef supply, thus providing a quick and profitable market.*
9. *A jayhawk is a tarantula spider of the West. A jayhawker was a guerilla who belonged to irregular soldier bands in Missouri and Kansas, before and during the Civil War. They were called "jayhawkers" because their quick and daring raids resembled those of the jayhawk spider.*
10. *Farming and cattle raising. Most of them live in the State of Sonora, Mexico.*



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.



OLD FAVORITES

DEAR EDITOR: I have been reading your 3W for nearly seven years, but the last year or so it has not been so good. I think this is because you have not put in enough of the old characters. Give us more stories about Freckles Malone, Risky McKee, Johnny Forty-five, Bar U twins, Silver Jack Steele, the Whistlin' Kid, Sheriff Pete Rice, Silver Kid, Flame Burns, Billy the Kid novelettes, and all the other old characters. My memory of the old favorite characters is so good because I keep all the covers from your magazines. I like your Readers' Branding Irons, but wish you would bring back the Wranglers Corner.

I guess the readers who brand YES just haven't read the old authors' stories. When they brand NO, they ask for more of the old favorites.

Yours till Buck Foster herds sheep,
Cumberland, Md. BRUCE GORCHE.

As I've stated before, pardner, some of those authors have retired or virtually retired. But several of 'em are going to bring the characters back in forthcoming issues.



NO HECKLER OF HECKLEMANN

DEAR RANGE BOSS: "Death Trap for an Iron Horse Rebel" was as good as they come in stories about early Western railroading. That Charles N. Heckelmann really knows his stuff; keep your ropes on that writer.

Let's have more of James P. Webb's stories

featuring Rowdy Lang, and please don't let your readers of long ago make you go back to those old characters who would—and did—keep your magazine below its present level.

Put the Wranglers Corner back and contents to leave out the continued stories.

Adios, amigos,

WALLACE BOOCHEE, JR.

Birmingham, ALI.



A LADY SPEAKS

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am writing in regard to your magazine, which I sure enjoy very much. My husband and I both read 3W and have been reading it for some time. We would do without our Sunday paper before skipping buying Wild West Weekly.

We like all the characters, but have some special favorites: Rowdy Lang, Sonny Tabor, Silver Kid, Kid Wolf, Whistlin' Kid, White Wolf—but many others also seem good.

We like both long and short stories, but like them better when not continued. We also like the Wranglers Corners. Sure wish you would bring it back, as it was the first thing I read when I bought a new copy. Give those amateur writers a chance; after all, it may be the turning point in their lives.

I sure would like to grab hold of some of those hard-to-please gents. They should remember that women read 3W as well as men. If they would stop and think about the other readers, instead of themselves all the time, things would be more agreeable to us. I think we women have as much right in a story as the men have. There never was a magazine or book that pleased everyone, and there never

will be. I say keep up the good work with your magazine.

Please print this letter, as I'd like to know if there are any more readers on my side.

Yours truly,

Champaign, Ill.

Mrs. H. V. R.



RAH, RAH FOR RITA!

DEAR EDITOR: I have been aiming to scrawl a few words to you for a long time.

First, I would like to ask: Why did you stop putting in the Wranglers Corner? Is there any special reason? (We weren't sure how popular it was with readers other than the non-professionals who contributed to it.—Ed.) I thought it was one of the best features of your magazine, and a lot of other readers, I think, agreed with me.

Second, may I praise Sonny Tabor? (Shore—go right ahead.—Ed.) I think he is the top hand on the 3W spread. His adventures wouldn't be half so interesting if Rita wasn't in them. Please keep Sonny and Rita together and you will have a newsstand draw.

Your Western amigo,

CLYDE PORTER.

R. F. D. 3, Ellensburg, Wash.



EH? HOW'S THAT?

DEAR RANGE BOSS: What has happened to the Silver Kid, Kid Wolf, Bud Jones? I would like to see them on the pages of Wild West Weekly again. (Kid Wolf appears regularly; J. Allan Dunn, author of the Bud Jones stories, passed away last spring.—Ed.) And why don't you put Hungry and Rusty on the front pages again? (Hungry and Rusty have been appearing from time to time lately; haven't you seen 'em, huh?—Ed.)

Yours truly,

GERALD SEVERANCE.

North Creek, N. Y.



WE'RE THE CREAM, SAYS HE

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I don't have much time for reading, so I have to make the best of the time that I do have. So I try to be sure that what I read will be good. I like to read Western magazines, and since I have time for just one, I read 3W. Long experience has taught me that by buying 3W I buy the cream of Western fiction. It means a lot to be sure of what you are getting.

I noticed that one of your readers suggested that you put the price of 3W back up to fifteen

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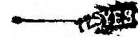
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cents. I would be glad to pay an extra five cents for a better 3W. That is, if it's possible to have a better one. Sincerely,
Atlanta, Ga. CLAUDE FOWLER, JR.



IS IT?

DEAR EDITOR: It's mighty square of you to give your readers a chance to squawk, as well as praise, right in your own pages. I don't know another magazine with courage enough to do that. In spite of small flaws now and then, you get out the best magazine in your field. Keep on!

Sincerely,
St. Paul, Minn. OTIS SWENSON.



BOO-HOO! WE'RE THITHIES!

DEAR RANGE BOSS: The first issue of 3W that I ever read featured Freckles Malone in "Danger Drums on the Pony Mail." After that I thought every issue of Wild West Weekly that I could get my hands on.

If I wanted to, I could state my present opinion in a few words by saying: Change the name of your magazine from Wild West Weekly to Sissy West Weekly.

However, I want to tell you what is wrong with 3W.

These characters are all right: Circle J pards, Silver Jack Steele, Oklahoma Kid, Silver Kid, Yuma Bill, Blacky Solone, White Wolf, Tommy Rockford.

Bring these characters back: Pete Rice, Freckles Malone, Flame Burns, Billy the Kid, Flash Moran, Hungry and Rusty, Shorty Masters, Calamity Boggs, Pole Pickett. Make Sonny Tabor an outlaw again and dump Rita. Do not refine Kid Wolf's Southern drawl. Put the Whistlin' Kid back into the role of a C. P. A. detective. Do not have girls in the stories at all—or if you must have them, don't have them gushing all over the heroes. Keep out the serials, regardless of the length, and run series such as those that featured Prairie Scout, Pinto Shane, Buckskin Ben Brady, Buckaroo, and Border Eagle.

Have your covers painted by Scott, Stanley, or one of the other good ones.

Now for the departments. Bring back the Wranglers Corner, Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral. Keep *Quien Sabe?* and the Western poems, as well as the fact stories and A Chat With the Range Boss. But have Readers' Branding Irons as the Wranglers Corner was when the magazine characters got together for the reading of letters from the customers.

Now, Boss, I realize this is a large order. But fill it as near as possible. Wild West Weekly remains my favorite magazine and I remain a steady reader.

Tarrant City, Ala. C. JAMES YARBROUGH.



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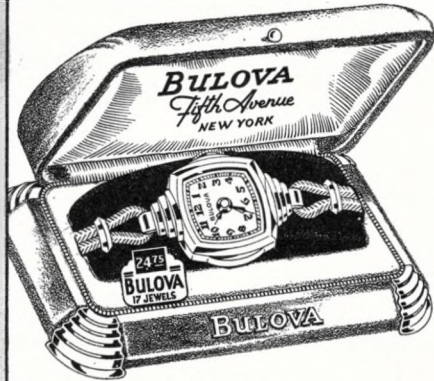
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