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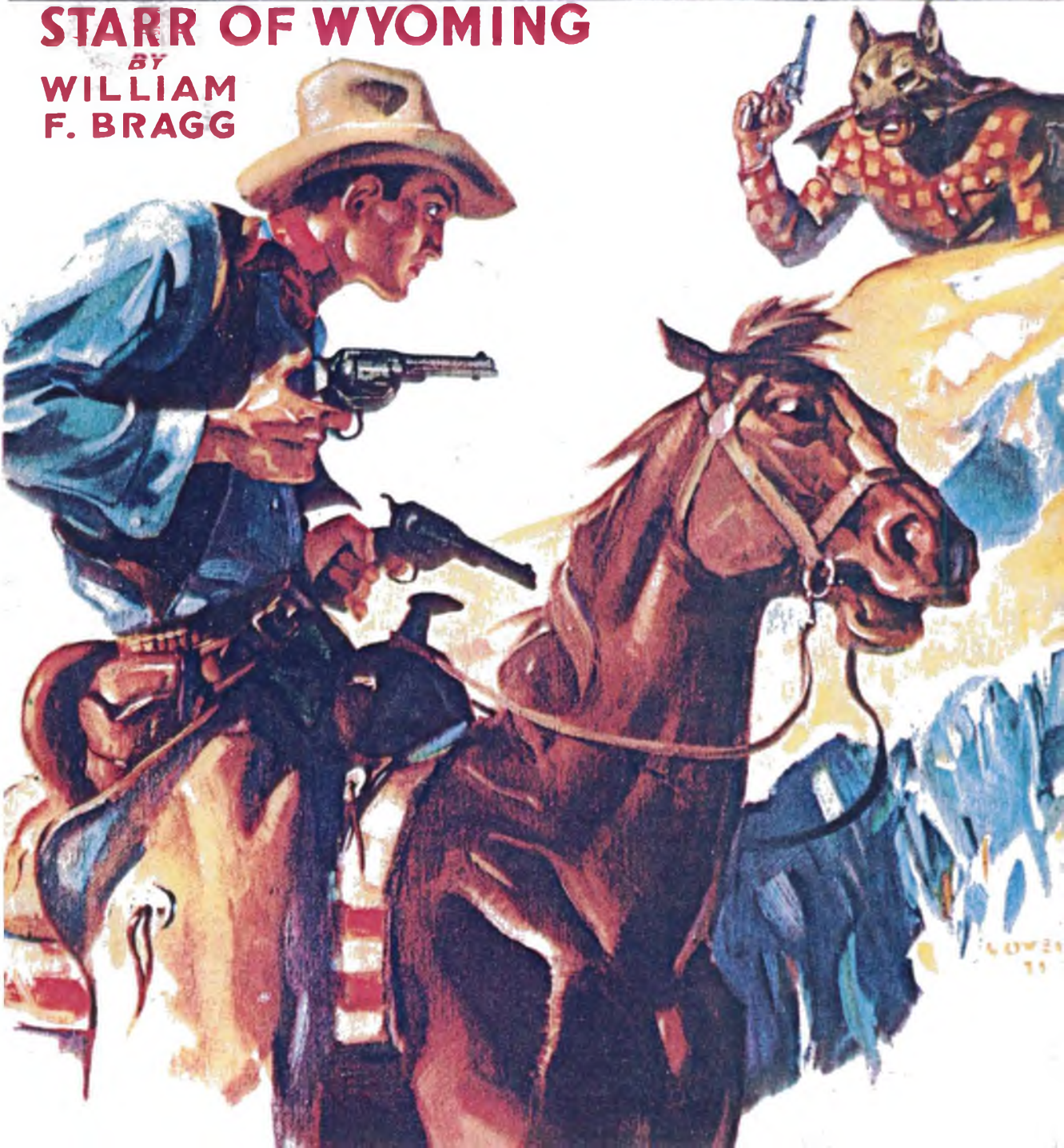
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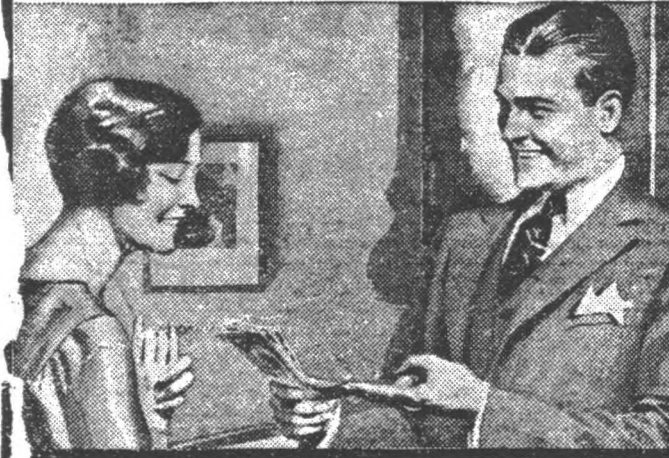
ALL STORIES COMPLETE

STARR OF WYOMING

BY
WILLIAM
F. BRAGG



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GREAT NEWS"

I TELEPHONED Nora that I had a surprise for her and she could hardly wait for me to get home. I should have seen her face when I told her the news I had called me in and given me a \$25 raise. "It's wonderful," she said, "just wonderful. Now we can pay those bills that have been worrying us and even put a little in the bank. Remember the night we saw that coupon in a magazine and you decided to take up an I. C. S. course? It made a new man of you, Bob, and I know it wouldn't be long before the firm would notice the difference in your work. We certainly owe a lot to the International

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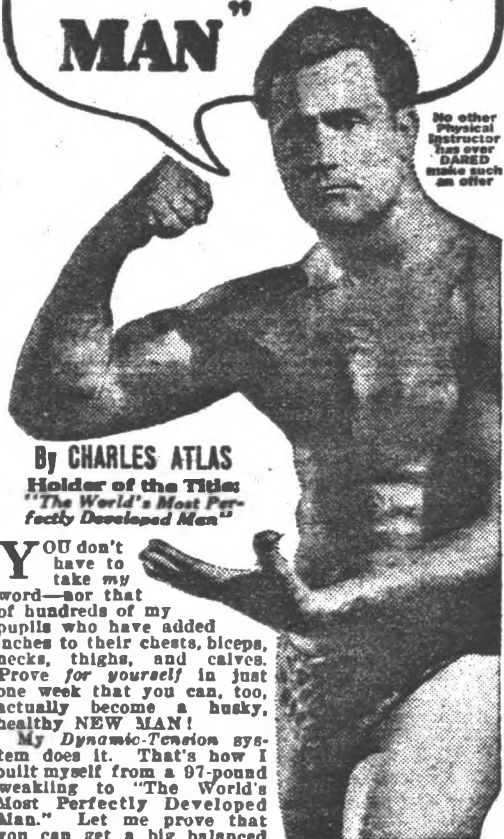


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28x39.60-18	19.55	30x47.50	18.25
28x39.80-18	19.65	30x47.75	18.35
28x40.00-18	19.75	30x48.00	18.45
28x40.20-18	19.85	30x48.25	18.55
28x40.40-18	19.95	30x48.50	18.65
28x40.60-18	20.05	30x48.75	18.75
28x40.80-18	20.15	30x49.00	18.85
28x41.00-18	20.25	30x49.25	18.95
28x41.20-18	20.35	30x49.50	19.05
28x41.40-18	20.45	30x49.75	19.15
28x41.60-18	20.55	30x50.00	19.25
28x41.80-18	20.65	30x50.25	19.35
28x42.00-18	20.75	30x50.50	19.45
28x42.20-18	20.85	30x50.75	19.55
28x42.40-18	20.95	30x51.00	19.65
28x42.60-18	21.05	30x51.25	19.75
28x42.80-18	21.15	30x51.50	19.85
28x43.00-18	21.25	30x51.75	19.95
28x43.20-18	21.35	30x52.00	20.05
28x43.40-18	21.45	30x52.25	20.15
28x43.60-18	21.55	30x52.50	20.25
28x43.80-18	21.65	30x52.75	20.35
28x44.00-18	21.75	30x53.00	20.45
28x44.20-18	21.85	30x53.25	20.55
28x44.40-18	21.95	30x53.50	20.65
28x44.60-18	22.05	30x53.75	20.75
28x44.80-18	22.15	30x54.00	20.85
28x45.00-18	22.25	30x54.25	20.95
28x45.20-18	22.35	30x54.50	21.05



Starr Of Wyoming

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Tracks Up Wildcat Crick," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD HOME RANGE.

RAWHIDE BUTTE rocked and roared with its annual spring celebration as young Dave Starr drifted into town on his roan pony, Pardner. Joyous punchers raced their horses the length of the main street with six-guns popping at the sun. Panting cayuses lined the Maverick Hotel hitch rack, while their swaggering masters trailed ringing spurs through the swinging, bullet-battered doors.

"Boys takin' the lid off." Dave grinned, and his gray eyes twinkled under the brim of his slouch hat. "Green-grass time in Wyomin'. Round-ups start to-morrow. Winter's gone. No wonder they yell like Sioux Injuns. Most of 'em busted. But after six months of hard ridin', they'll all be flush ag'in."

After feeding and stabling Pardner, for Dave always cared for his horse before himself, the rangy young puncher slid his six-foot frame through the Maverick's rear door. Not that he was dodging

trouble, but he wished to see certain men of this range before they spotted him.

"I'll bet Smiler an' Bear-foot are millin' around," he allowed, "gittin' rid of what money they got. They been punchin' cows for thirty years, an' never yet quit town in the spring with a dollar in their pants."

It felt great to be back on the home range here in Wyoming. He was among friends, among his brethren of the rope and saddle. He had spent his winter money, rambling over a half dozen Western States from Oregon to Arizona.

Up at the barn was Pardner, a wonder horse picked up in Nevada, that would be the envy among all his mates. And best of all, in his pocket was a letter.

"Smiler an' Bear-foot," Starr thought, "will shore be surprised when they hear that Stormy Abe Gorman has hired me as range boss of his Spearhead cow outfit—a kid like me."

Starr wasn't much past the voting age, but he looked all man as he leaned against the bar. His garments weren't flashy, but they denoted the top hand to all wise eyes.

His big, wide-skirted, bull-leather chaps were decorated with the Lone Star of Texas, his home State, from which he had started up the old Western trail, years before, as a gangling horse wrangler. He wore a heavy cartridge belt around his slim middle. From it were slung the twin guns with old ivory butts—handles that Dave had worked over to fit smoothly into the grip of his brown, rope-calloused hands. His shirt was faded-blue flannel. He wore a gay red bandanna closely tied around his muscular throat.

His gray eyes gleamed under the shade of his hat that had cost twenty dollars, new. His jaw was

square, his nose long, but broad at the base like any fighter's.

All man was Dave Starr, of Wyoming, ready for fight or frolic, but never boasting of his hard-earned ability to go through to the finish.

If he hadn't been a man, "Stormy Abe" Gorman would never have hired him, gone to the trouble of writing and asking him to boss forty hard-riding punchers and thirty thousand longhorn cattle. Gorman paid high wages, and he consequently got the cream of the range.

A sweating barkeep hustled up, but Dave smilingly declined any dust cutter.

"Jest waitin' fer a couple of waddies," he explained. "You seen anything of Smiler McPike an' Bear-foot Bangs?"

"Them two," the barkeep sniffed. "Who could help seein' or hearin' 'em, if they was within forty miles? They're out standin' the town on its head. Last I heard, they was linin' up a hoss race. Bear-foot won a buckskin Injun pony from ol' Chief Buff'ler Hump in a stud poker game. He's bettin' all his roll that his hoss is the fastest north of the Platte. An' Smiler——"

"Smiler's backin' the play," Dave finished. "That would be Smiler's way. He'll go the limit fer his pards—money, marbles, or chalk."

But as the barkeep moved away, Dave's grin faded. His friends, "Smiler" and "Bear-foot" were getting along in years.

"Time they saved their money, got a little land, and some cattle, an' settled down," Dave mused. "They're too dang free an' easy. I'll bet some shark has roped 'em into this race."

But a young man couldn't give advice to such veterans. They would resent it. In Wyoming, a puncher did his work, minded his

own business very carefully, and lived or died by the final tally.

"If I could somehow engineer it so they'd not be stripped of their money," Dave decided, "I might git my head blowed off, but I'd be doin' them a big favor. We'll see how the play comes up on this hoss race."

A shrill, quavering voice interrupted his thoughts. He swung on his high-heeled boots and stared at the speaker.

The old man—for silvery-white hair and a flowing beard denoted his age—sat at a poker table across the room. He wore faded buckskin garments with fringe two inches long on shoulders and seams. A faded old hat with an Indian beaded band was shoved back from his leathery face with its hawklike nose and squinting watery blue eyes.

"Looks like Buff'ler Bill or Dan'el Boone," Dave thought, and grinned at the picture, for buckskin garments had gone out of style with the last trapper. Nowadays, men wore chaps, overalls, high-heeled boots, spurs, and such rigging.

"Why that ol' feller even packs a bowie knife," the young puncher muttered.

Then the grin froze on Dave's face. The friendly glow died in his gray eyes. Something cold grew there instead, the steady, icy stare of the Western fighting man. And instinctively, Dave's hands dropped until trailing fingers brushed the worn ivory butts of his sixes.

"They're framin' that ol'-timer," Dave growled. "Fillin' him up with Maverick snake juice. An' worst of all, throwin' their own liquor away when he ain't lookin'. Now why?"

Another man sat at the poker table with bold eyes watching every move made by the veteran. Along the wall were four or five others of similar cut—hard-faced and dressed

in the dusty garments of cattle land. All wore guns.

"I'm tellin' you, son," the old man wheezed, and he swayed in his chair. "Thar's rich diggin's in the Longhorn Mountings. The Injuns know the trail to that lost mine. Massacree Mine, they call it. Fer they killed off the prospectors what fust found it. Why ol' Buff'ler Hump was tellin' me all about it."

The other man at the table, stocky and bullet-headed, refilled the old man's glass, pushed it toward him. Then, as Starr watched with an increasing rage, he served himself, laughed and toasted his guest, then deftly emptied his fire water on the floor as the old man tilted his head to drink.

"The skunk!" Dave Starr blazed. "Only a crook would do that."

Intent on the talk, the gang around the table did not hear Dave's approach, for the puncher stepped up as quietly as a panther.

Said the bullet-headed man: "Mebbe I'm not perlite to ask questions, but I'm allus interested in these ol-mine yarns. You was sayin' that the Injuns told yuh the trail to this one?"

"Better than that. They give me a map. It's a tanned elk-skin robe with Indian sign paintin' all over it. It shows how they jumped the prospectors, scalped them, and it marks the landmarks an' the sleeps or days' travel from the forks of Buff'ler River to the mine."

"That's a valyble elk robe."

The old-timer laughed shrilly, and pawed his beard. "You bet yuh. But it wouldn't be much good to any white man but me. I'm Arapahoe Brown. Spent years aroun' the tribes. Done several good turns fer 'em. They taught me the secret of their sign paintin'. Yuh see it's a sort of a code. To find an' foller

that trail, me an' the map got to be together."

"But you might write out a list of these code signs. Supposin' you was to die or somethin'? Nobody would know how to find that mine."

"I'll take my chance on that. I don't figure to talk an' have some rascal rob an ol' man like me of all he can bank on to keep out o' the porehouse."

The other laughed harshly. "You shore talk wise fer an ol' rooster. Waal, have another drink."

"Don't mind ef I do. Been a long time on the trail lately. Jest rolled in with an emigrant wagon. Gittin' too old to fork a pony. Here's lookin' at yuh!"

Dave's cold voice cut short the toast. He had gripped the bullet-headed man's wrist as the fellow attempted to empty his glass.

"You better git out of here," he drawled, "before these crooks fill up yore hide, an' find out all yuh know about that elk robe."

"Arapahoe" Brown blinked.

"You dang young sprout!" he piped angrily. "What do yuh mean by grabbin' my friend that a way?"

"Friend?" Dave sniffed. "Would a friend fill yuh full of forty rod, an' throw his own p'izen away? Ef so, you pick danged queer friends."

The man who owned the wrist, amazed and startled by Dave's sudden interference, kicked back his chair, gave a savage jerk, wrenched away, and hit the table. His friends along the wall, like a row of hungry vultures, leaned forward with hands curled over their guns.

The rest of the Maverick crowd, aware that something was up, looked toward the scene of trouble. There came an instant of deathlike silence. Then the man who had been wasting his drink, snarled between his thick lips.

"Nobody kin interfere with Wild-hoss Parr."

"Are you Wild-hoss Parr?"

"That's me. An' I'm plenty wild."

"Then mebbe you need softenin'. It ain't perlite in Wyomin' to foul an ol' man like Arapahoe Brown. If he'd been yore own age, then I wouldn't have stepped in. But a graybeard needs lookin' after."

"I'll look after *you* a hull lot!"

With that, "Wild-hoss" Parr lowered his round head, and rushed Dave. The puncher met the rush, hit from the waist with his left fist. He was careful about that, for a man could break his knuckles easily on the concrete chin of a man like Wild-horse.

All asprawl, Wild-hoss went down on the table. It collapsed with a crash. The old miner arose with an Indianlike whoop. He snaked out his eight-inch bowie knife, and circled toward Dave.

Braced against the wall, Parr's four mates jerked their guns. Starr's left hand was numb, but his right moved with the flashing speed of a prairie hawk. His long blue Colt leaped from leather; that old gun with trigger tied back so that bullets would snap forth as Starr thumbed the hammer.

"One at a time!" Dave yelled. "Startin' from the right!"

But he saw that he would have plenty trouble. He wasn't fighting dead-game sports. He fronted four treacherous gunmen. Another man scrambled in the wreck of the poker table, clawing for his gun, swearing through his grimy growth of sandy beard, vowing he would cut out Dave Starr's heart. And coming in from the flank was the buckskin veteran, all steamed up with fire water, and slashing wildly with his bowie.

Over against the bar stood a wasp-waisted puncher with thin bowed legs stuck into run-over boots, a battered hat pulled down over his wise blue eyes, and a big, hay-colored mustache drooping from under his long, inquisitive nose.

"That boy," he drawled, "looks right to me. So I reckon I'll sit in."

Starr was cat-stepping away from the men along the wall. All held their guns on him. But not one dared try to beat his bullet. The gray gleam of the puncher's eyes, the swinging muzzle of his Colt, warned them he had stepped in determined to make it a finish fight.

The Maverick held its breath. Even the boss of the joint dared not try for his sawed-off shotgun.

"One at a time," Dave said between his teeth. "Or if any of you feels lucky, an' aims to lead his mates, why yo're only four on yore boots. An' this here hogleg packs five slugs. Five slugs, gents!"

He was sparring for time. Starr wasn't a killer. He had broken up the dirty play on Arapahoe Brown. That was enough. But if he must fight them all, he would turn loose five hot slugs before he passed out.

"An' some of you will go shoutin' across the Big Divide with me," he snapped. "Some of you—or all!"

Then old Arapahoe broke in. He cut at Dave's gun arm. The puncher whirled. But the waddy with the hay-colored mustache was there. Deftly, he grabbed the knifer, caught him off balance, sent him whirling through the rear door.

"Back to yore Injun robe!" he snapped.

Plucking a long gun from behind his overalls waistband, he planted a bullet between Wild-hoss Parr's boots as the stocky man scrambled up. Quick as the move was, Starr's bellowing gun play beat it.

For Dave, as he whirled from Brown's attack, had sensed action from the four along the wall. Turned slantwise, he opened up. He fired low. Five times, his hammer fell from under his rolling thumb.

A gunman dropped his Colt, and grabbed his right leg.

A second yelled as a slug dug splinters from the wall within two inches of his short ribs. The third and fourth, losing all interest in Wild-hoss Parr, jerked up their arms, and bellowed that they were through.

Starr laughed, and holstered his smoking Colt. With a diagonal draw, he jerked his second gun. For his left hand still felt numb from crashing against Parr's chin.

"Take yore friend," he commanded, "an' file out slowly."

But Wild-hoss lingered. His tiny green eyes were rimmed with red. The man was so furious with anger that he could barely speak.

"You jumped us without warnin'!" he grated. "You won't git a second chance."

"Aw, shucks!" the puncher with the blond mustache drawled coldly, "if five of you—aided an' abetted by a wild-eyed ol' coon hunter can't take this kid into camp—you better steer clear of him an' live to a green ol' age."

"An' you to!" Wild-hoss roared, turning on the speaker. "I know yuh, yuh bow-legged varmint. They call yuh 'Windy Bill,' 'cause they say you are too danged quiet. Waal, I'll quiet you fer this. I'll see yuh laid away in Boot Hill fer a good long quiet spell."

"Windy Bill" swung his right boot. The toe ripped into Wild-hoss Parr's rather paunchy middle. The man grunted, gasped, fell back, and was hauled, blue-faced and gurgling, through the Maverick's rear door.

"Windy Bill, hey?" Dave said, and turned with a smile. "I've heard of you. My name's Starr—Dave Starr."

They shook—and knew as they looked deep into each other's clear eyes that they would be friends until the end.

"I've heard of you," drawled Bill. He grinned and stroked his mustache. "From two ol' reprobates named 'Smiler' McPike an' 'Bear-foot' Bangs. They friends of yores?"

"Best I got."

"Then they need lookin' after."

"Why?"

"That gent you jest busted, that Wild-hoss Parr, is on a deal to win all their money in a hoss race."

"Crooked?"

"What would yuh expect?"

Dave laughed shortly. "A foolish question. What's the game?"

"They talked ol' Bear-foot into believin' he's got the fastest hoss in town. So him an' Smiler has bet all they got—about five hundred bucks—agin' the field."

"Nothin' crooked there. Jest dang foolishness which you'd expect from Bear-foot an' Smiler."

"They're dead-game sports." Bill agreed. "That's why they fell easy. They figured others was of the same cut. But Wild-hoss an' his friends have got in a thoroughbred runnin' hoss from Colorado. Got the hoss hid in town. After they got all the money in sight bet, they'll spring this nag an' clean up. It ain't 'xactly crooked, an' ag'in, it ain't quite straight."

Dave nodded gravely. "An' Smiler an' Bear-foot wouldn't back down fer a Derby race winner. Not once they'd bet their money. No, the cards are stacked, but they'll go through. Lose all they got. Pore ol' hombres."

CHAPTER II.

FAST HORSES AND FASTER MEN.

A DOZEN wild-eyed ponies bawled and tried to buck as their riders forced them reluctantly to the raw-hide lariat stretched across the dusty road. A mile away, across the sagebrush flat, the two judges awaited the finish. They were men selected for their honesty.

Here at the start, the greatest excitement centered around two cow-punchers and a line-backed buckskin pony with scrawled Indian brands burned all over its right hip.

"I've run short of cash!" one of the punchers bawled, "but I got extra-size boots. I'll bet 'em on this buckskin, by grab, or my name ain't B'ar-foot Bangs."

The crowd laughed, for Bear-foot told the truth. His boots were extra size. He was blessed with the largest feet in central Wyoming. He wore No. 12s, and had them made to order.

The rest of Bear-foot shaped up with the boots. He was long and slab-sided, jutting of knees, chin, ears, and big black mustache. Even his nose, that was red as a berry in the sun, stuck out like a buzzard's beak. His eyes were round and black and deeply sunken under bushy brows laced with gray.

He wore battered batwing chaps that failed by six inches to reach his ankles, a pair of mighty spurs with Mexican rowels, a checkerboard shirt with the tail hanging out, and a long, old, single-action .44 Colt in a half-breed holster.

His hands were as big and red as hams—at least they looked that large. And his ordinary speaking voice was a cross between a bull's bellow heard across a low hill and a rusty pump handle.

"I'll even bet my shirt, by grab,

an' it's all I got left," boomed Bear-foot, "that the buckskin whups the field."

"The field?" a drawling voice cut in. "You mean you'll bet yore hoss beats any animal that starts?"

"Any animal—hoss, dog, cow, buff'ler, antelope, or elephant. You know me, Len Hackner."

Len Hackner's long thin face creased into a jeering grin. That was Hackner's usual expression. Men didn't like that smile. It wasn't a merry grin. It was cold, deliberately mocking, the sort of smile that sets men's nerves and tempers on edge. It had that effect on Bear-foot.

"I've bet all my money," he howled. "You know that, Hackner. But I'll go with boots, saddle, everything but my gun."

"I'm takin' you, then," drawled Len Hackner, and he laughed as he twirled the tiny black rat-tail mustache under his high-bridged nose.

Hackner made rather a picture there under the Wyoming sun. He was a slim, dark man with slanting eyes a trifle closely set. He wore fancy leather chaps, a loud silk shirt, and a hat of black beaver.

Like all men of this range, he packed two guns—pearl-handled pets with silver work against the dark steel. His spurs were hand-made, and silver also flashed there as it did on his hand-carved saddle.

A range dude was Len Hackner. And also a dangerous man, for his yellow eyes were as alert and intelligent as those of a big lobo wolf.

"Take off yore boots," drawled Len Hackner. He grinned at the crowd. "Take 'em off, if yo're a sport."

The rider of the buckskin, a short-coupled fellow whose bald head shone under the sun because he wore no hat, chirped up:

"You take off yores, too, Hackner."

"This ain't yore bet, Smiler."

Said Smiler McPike, and his round blue eyes gleamed in his red chubby face: "Any play ol' B'ar-foot makes is my play. I'm ridin' his hoss, an' I ride tuh win. So if yo're a sport, Mr. Hackner, you'll pull yore boots an' not make a clown out o' B'ar-foot."

Bear-foot's black eyes blinked rapidly as he sized up Hackner. He had already jerked off one big boot, and his red wool sock was displayed with a shameless hole in the toe.

"You makin' a jackass of me, Hackner?" he bellowed.

Len Hackner laughed mockingly. "That ain't possible," he drawled.

"It ain't possible?" Bear-foot pondered the answer.

But Smiler, quicker of wit, snapped up Hackner. He dug in his spurs, and jumped the buckskin into Hackner's high-headed gray. The chubby veteran waddy had stripped off his gun to lessen riding weight during the race, but he packed plenty of nerve.

"Hackner," he barked, "some time you'll go too fur. Me an' B'ar-foot don't class up as heavyweights on brains. We're out to do as we're done by, without havin' to figure out what snaky-tongued gents like you mean. B'ar-foot may be a jackass, all right, but only his close friends kin say that an' make it stand. So if yo're a dead-game sport, you'll shut up that slit mouth of yores, jerk off them fancy boots you wear, an' lay 'em on the sand alongside B'ar-foot's. An' to show you I'm also a sport, an' that I back up a pard, I'll do the same.

"We're givin' yuh odds, Hackner. You wear No. 8s. I wear the same. B'ar-foot takes No. 12s. If yuh win, you got an extry pair of boots yuh

kin wear, an' another set to furnish plenty leather fer patches."

"But you won't win, Hackner!" Bear-foot roared, doing a dance to avoid prickly-pear stickers. "Drag off yore boots, if yuh feel so danged sporty."

Hackner had started out to mock the two old-timers, but now the crowd was cheering for them. He was forced, much as he hated it, to take off his boots. Smiler laughed and piloted the buckskin up to the line. For the starter was yelling:

"Hosses to the mark!"

Hackner grinned and climbed his pony. Other horsemen were around him. It was the custom in a cowboy race for spectators to follow the ponies as they sped down the course. Guns boomed to speed things up. Only tin horns and suchlike stood on their feet at the finish.

The judge raised his gun as the unwilling ponies stuck their heads over the rope.

"One fer the money——" he began.

A man yelped. "Jest a jiffy, judge!"

And through the crowd rode Wild-hoss Parr on a blanketed pony. The animal paced up as if accustomed to crowds and race dust. The blanket was stripped away. A race horse stood revealed. All the cowboys groaned.

"Framed right!" a man growled disgustedly. "Look at the lines of that nag."

Bear-foot Bangs, a veteran horseman, ran his eyes over the clean lines, the slim legs, the small head, and the satin skin of Parr's mount. Then he swung on Hackner. And as he spoke, his gloomy glance rested occasionally on his boots.

"Yo're so dang smart," he allowed, "that likely I'll quit this town, busted, an' in my sock feet.

But smart hombres gen'rally find thar's a smarter gent to beat 'em. I ain't that smart man, Hackner, but I know one."

"Yeah? Hollerin' yo're a dead-game sport, an' then cryin' because yo're goin' to lose yore boots. Who is this smart gent?"

"A lad named Dave Starr. There was three of 'em, Hackner, down in my section of Texas. The fust was the granddaddy. He got rooted in Texas about the time of the Alamo, an' he held his ground agin' greasers an' Apaches. The second was the daddy, an' he tooted a bugle in the cavalry durin' the big war. This is the third Starr."

Hackner grinned. "The rootin', tootin', shootin' Starrs."

"You named him yoreself. The 'Shootin' Starr.' He does that best. An' he's about due, Hackner, to boss Abe Gorman's Spearhead outfit. That's the word that's passin' around."

That took the wind out of Hackner's sails. He owned a small outfit, but he had longed for years to stand in good with old Abe, and boss the Spearhead.

"Let's fergit all this," he snarled, "an' start the race."

A puncher rode up, a blue-eyed man with blond mustache. He spoke quietly to Hackner.

"You bettin' on Parr's mount to win?"

"I'm bettin' the buckskin won't."

"Yo're a liar," Windy Bill drawled evenly. "You own that thoroughbred. Parr's jest the dummy. It's you that took them old fellers for their money. Waal, I'll give you some more. I'll make the same sort of a side bet with you. A thousand even that *yore* hoss can't win."

"I ain't admittin' he's my hoss," said Hackner, "an' I'll let that talk about lyin' pass fer the minute. But

from his looks, I figure he can beat anything around here."

"I'm bettin' he can't. An' here's the money. Call over a stakeholder. Thar's the boss of the Maverick. He'll do. Count out these bills."

Hackner's eyes gleamed as the bills fluttered. Here was a chance to win an extra thousand. He dug up a roll of currency, and balanced the difference with an I O U.

"Ready!" bellowed the judge.

"Not yet," drawled Windy Bill. "Here comes the thirteenth rider. An' he looks like bad luck to some of yuh."

A roan horse came as quietly through the milling crowd as had the thoroughbred. This roan was blocky-built, bright and round of eye, blessed with the long Roman nose that indicates intelligence in a horse, endowed with sturdy legs that yet were shapely and straight. Atop the pony sat a rangy rider, stripped to shirt and overalls for jockeying, and with a red bandanna tied around his face.

"Who's that black-headed guy?" Hackner asked suspiciously. "An' why does he hide his face that a way?"

"The thirteenth man," said Windy Bill. "An' it ain't agin' the law to keep the dust of fast ridin' out o' yore eyes an' throat."

Hackner wasn't a fool. As the judge raised the starting gun, he yelled:

"Parr! Watch that roan! He's a——"

Bang! The big six-gun cut short the warning.

The crowd howled. Thirteen horses shot away as the rope fell down. A wild-riding gang spurred in the flying haze. Windy Bill and Hackner rode knee to knee. Old Bear-foot, mounted on a slower

horse, cut away from the road so that he could see the racing ponies.

"Parr in the lead!" he moaned. "That stranger second. An' my buckskin runnin' third! By grab! Here's whar I go bar'-footed until my credit gits good!"

Up in the lead, Wild-hoss Parr flashed a backward glance, saw the strange roan a length behind, and then the buckskin. He rolled his spurs. The thoroughbred, unused to steel, broke its stride. But Parr quit the spurs, used his light quirt, and eased the horse back into its professional gallop.

"Yuh kin beat this bunch of cayuses easy as pie," he snarled. "Nothin' but a bunch of stuff with tails full of cockle burs. Come on, boy! Prove yo're wuth the two hundred that Hackner paid fer yuh—if he paid fer yuh. He's sich a sly cuss, I'll bet money he stole yuh."

Riding second, Dave Starr allowed Pardner to run his own race. He had an infinite faith in the roan that had carried him a thousand miles—this sturdy, faithful pony from Nevada. Not often did he put Pardner to the hard test of a mile race, but this was a case of saving two old friends from a shark's game.

Dave had bet all he had through the agency of Windy Bill. To save the money and boots of Smiler and Bear-foot, he must also save his own cash by winning this race. And it would be a race. For Pardner was fighting against a thoroughbred.

The buckskin which Bear-foot fondly called Bobcat showed surprising speed for such an ill-shaped animal. Bobcat pounded down the road with wicked eyes rolling, and short tail stuck out like a corkscrew. Old Smiler rode low on Bobcat's neck, and talked to the pony in what he believed was Arapahoe Indian. For Buffalo Hump, former

owner of the cayuse, belonged to the tribe.

"*Allygowash!*" barked Smiler. "Git out an' bust yore couplin's, yuh dang goat! *Wassahollahowhow!* Split the breeze, yuh line-backed hunk of lemon-colored sin!"

Bobcat split the breeze, came flashing down the track, burst past Starr. The rest of the field trailed by many lengths. Not far ahead, the judges waited. And they had adopted a queer way of picking the winners. They had stretched a lariat across the road. Facing each other, across the home stretch, the judges held their six-guns aimed along the lariat.

Locked in a fighting finish, thoroughbred, cow horse, and Indian cayuse whirled into the last hundred yards. Parr led by a length. His gravel cut Starr's face. Bobcat pounded along with his wrinkled nose at Dave's knee.

Parr whirled and grinned. Mockingly, he raised his right arm. It looked like an easy win.

"Come on!" he yelled above the thunder of hoofs.

Starr spoke. Not once had he used quirt or spur.

"Pard!" he snapped. "All you got!"

The roan had been running like a prairie fire. Now it unkinked all its speed, put its whole big heart and range-bred strength into this battle. It rocketed ahead, eyes bulging, red nostrils flaring. Parr heard the roll of hoofs, peered through the rolling haze, saw the Roman nose at his knee.

"You snake!" he snarled. And cut viciously with his quirt.

The whip struck Pardner's eyes, blinded the pony. For an instant, his stride broke.

"Straight ahead!" Starr's voice rang out, a steely voice that was

brimming with anger. For Starr had seen the fall of Parr's whip and had flinched with his horse at the treacherous attack.

Pardner was a mild pony and ever obedient. But wrinkling his nose and rolling his eyes from the agony of the lash, the roan let its temper boil over—just for an instant. Pardner whirled his head, bared his teeth, and with all the speed of a range rattler, he bit a chunk out of Wild-hoss Parr's leg.

"Wow!" Parr yelled, and involuntarily, he dug his spurs into his mount.

The thoroughbred—a nervous, high-strung animal—bawled, broke gallop, jumped the track.

Pardner whirled toward the finish. But now he felt a restraining hand.

"Steady, Pard," whispered Starr. "Here's a race we kin afford to lose."

And held up hard, Pardner watched Bobcat sweep past, and cross the line, winner by a nose. For so the six-gun judges declared.

"We let our hammers fall," they told the crowd. "Course the guns was empty. But if we'd used bullets, we'd have shot the pink spot right off that Injun plug's nose. B'ar-foot wins his boots back. An' Hackner's also. The general pot goes to Smiler an' B'ar-foot."

"An' I win our side bet," Windy Bill told Hackner.

"Yore hoss didn't win."

"I wasn't bettin' on no hoss in perticular. I jest bet a thousand that yore hoss wouldn't take fust money. An', Hackner, you better cough up—pronto!"

A man yelled. "What's goin' on down the road?"

The mob surged that way. They saw Dave Starr standing in the dust above Wild-hoss Parr. The young puncher's face was pale with rage.

He had pursued Wild-hoss, dragged him from his thoroughbred, slid off at the same instant, and literally ground the man into the ground.

"You kin jump me with fists or gun," Dave stormed, "but yuh can't hit my hoss foul. Stand up, yuh skunk, an' let me finish poundin' yuh!"

Len Hackner drew his gun.

"That man's down," he rasped. "Don't jump on him."

A gun ground into Hackner's ribs. Windy Bill spoke softly:

"He's down because Dave Starr knocked him down."

"Dave Starr?"

"He's the thirteenth rider. Yore unlucky star, Hackner, if you'll excuse my bum wit. His bandanna is off his face. Take a good look, Hackner, an' go easy with yore gun. Or you'll never look ag'in."

But the booming yell of Bear-foot Bangs, the chirpy shout of Smiler McPike rang out. Forgetful of socked feet, of horses, of money won, the two old punchers grabbed Dave Starr, did a sort of welcoming grizzly-bear dance.

"Starr!" they bawled to the world. "Starr of the rootin', tootin', shoot-in' Starrs!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK WOLF STRIKES.

AT daybreak, four horsemen rode out into the sagebrush sea. The big reunion was over. Now it was work ahead, for Starr had hired Smiler, Bear-foot, and Windy Bill to ride for the Spearhead spread.

"I'll bet my roll," Bear-foot boomed, as the four hit a brisk trail pace toward the Longhorn Mountain country where Gorman operated, "that you'll make the best boss west of the Big Muddy, Dave."

"Yo're runnin' a bigger chance than you did in that hoss race,"

Dave laughed. "Better save yore roll until Abe Gorman says I'll do. They claim he's a hard man to please."

"Hard is right," Windy Bill, who appeared to know everything worth knowing, put in. "Right now, Abe's linin' up fightin' men to run the settlers out o' the Longhorn country. Been a flood of nesters this spring. Abe says his cattle are starvin' to death."

"He's only got thirty thousand," Smiler sniffed, "an' rangin' 'em on Uncle Sam's range." The chubby man swung on Dave. "What do you think of these fightin' nesters?" he asked. "If you boss the Spearhead, that's about the first job you'll git."

Dave found it a hard question to answer. He knew how open-range cattlemen like Gorman, men who had won the land from the Indians, resented the coming of settlers and the stringing of barbed wire. But he also saw that they were fighting a losing battle. As the Indians had gone, so would go the great outfits.

"If Gorman keeps it a fair fight," he said finally, "I'll play his game. But I don't stand fer bullyin' folks, burnin' 'em out, an' sich. Mebbe I kin square things 'tween Abe and the nesters. After all, it's a big country."

And his gray eyes ranged over this mighty land that he loved—this sagebrush empire ringed by snow-capped mountains.

But Windy Bill shook his wise head. "I'm afeerd," he said, "that you'll find ol' Stormy as hard as nails when it comes to settlers."

At noon, they watered their horses at a spring, and rested under a bunch of cottonwood trees. The sun was blazing hot. The trail led up a high divide.

Smiler and Bear-foot were snoring

loudly in the shade. Dave and Windy were quietly talking things over. The latter had just explained to Dave that Len Hackner had hoped to get the Spearhead boss job.

"You'll find him a dangerous man to buck," the puncher concluded. "He don't fight fair. Look at the way he run that hoss in on Smiler an' Bear-foot."

Dave grinned. "I wonder," he mused, "if Hackner left town in his sock feet. Ol' Smiler shore hung on to his boots. Fancy things——"

Braam! A rattling sound across the divide cut short his words.

Instantly, Smiler and Bear-foot were awake, and going for their guns. Dave and Windy rushed for the horses. That sound was only too familiar to them all.

"Gunfire!" Dave Starr exclaimed. "Sounds like a half dozen rifles."

Windy grabbed for a swinging stirrup. "Listen to that ol' cannon," he barked.

Bang! The roar of a heavy-caliber gun rang above the sharp crack of lighter weapons.

"I'll scout ahead," Dave told his friends. "Git into this dry gulch that leads up the hill. Keep under cover! When I want you, I'll circle with my hat."

Edging Pardner up the steep slope, he slid down, took off his hat, and crawled to the top of the hill. Below him, in a rock-littered basin, was a scene of battle.

Dave was a cow-puncher. Consequently, his sympathies lay with cattle interests. But above all, he was a fair-and-square fighter. His jaw tightened grimly as he surveyed the sharp fight below. It didn't shape up as an equal battle.

Halted in the middle of the flat there was a canvas-topped prairie schooner. Out in the brush, a small herd of cattle milled wildly, and two

or three twitching carcasses lay on the ground. A horse of the wagon's lead team had been killed. The three remaining animals were fighting and kicking in the traces.

"An' more than *critters* dead," Dave whispered.

For he saw the body of a man stretched alongside a horse.

"Looks like one man is puttin' up a fight agin' about a dozen," he decided.

For he saw white spurts of powder smoke flash from under the wagon. And from rim rocks and boulders that ringed the vehicle roared a red answer.

Dave knew nothing about attackers or the lone wagon defender. All he could see was an unequal battle. That didn't fit in his code. Turning, he whirled his hat in a cautious come-on signal. His mates slipped up the hill, cautious as prowling coyotes. Expertly, they sized up the fight before they passed judgment.

"You know," Windy Bill drawled, "that we are now in the Spearhead range. We are probably watchin' a fight between a settler's wagon train an' a bunch of cattle guards. You carry an offer from the biggest cowman on this range for the best job in his power. Supposin' it's Stormy Abe Gorman that has jumped that train, an' you ride in an' bust things up? What about that?"

Starr snapped out his answer. "No man," he declared, "can hire me as a brute killer. I'm bettin' it ain't Abe Gorman. I don't think he's a yaller skunk. You boys can do as yuh please. But me, I'm goin' down thar, an' help that hombre."

Windy Bill laughed. "Did you think we'd stay behind?"

Bear-foot boomed out. "Any sort o' fight suits me. You bet!"

Dave outlined his plan. At least a dozen men were hidden around

the bullet-riddled wagon. They would not expect an attack from the ridge.

"We'll split," Dave said. "Circle the basin at a gallop. Take 'em by surprise. Windy will ride with me on the right, Bear-foot an' Smiler on the left."

Panting horses clawed to the rim, swooped down into the basin. Six-guns were barking. Old Bear-foot's booming war whoop rang above the crash of weapons. Dave and Windy charged along the right flank. The old partners clung to the left.

Hidden men boiled from behind rocks as bullets bounced from the guns of Dave and Windy. Some ran toward picketed horses. Others ducked behind handy ant hills and rocks, and sought to cut down the charging horsemen.

Dave, riding with high held reins the better to use his twin sixes, gasped at a strange sight.

"They look like wolves," he gasped. "Wearin' queer caps with pointed ears."

The ambushers were masked with the scalps and muzzles of great gray wolves. They made a weird sight as they scuttled like bugs among the rocks. From a high point came a quavering howl. Dave glanced that way. Real wolves never howled in broad daylight.

Outlined on the ridge, a man sat a great black horse. He was the howler. And he was masked with a black wolf's scalp. Dave flung up his six-gun, emptied it. The range was long. The mysterious rider whirled, retreated over the ridge.

Windy Bill spurred a jump behind Dave. He had raked out a stubby carbine. He checked his mount, slanted the rifle for a quick shot at the man who looked like a black wolf.

Out from behind a tall boulder, a

man leaped with a six-gun in each hand. He wore the ghastly wolf mask with its round eyeholes that showed gleaming eyes.

As Bill's rifle smashed, the new attacker cut down on the puncher. Bill had barely time to sink in his left spur. His cayuse lunged wildly. The slug meant for Bill cut into the pony. The animal went down. Bill was flung ahead. He hit a rock with his head, lay senseless.

Starr heard that fall of Bill's horse. He swung Pardner, for the roan would turn on a dime. He spotted the wolf-masked man whirling to plant a slug through Bill's body.

Bram! Starr's right gun thundered.

The masked man turned half around, flung up his hands, and pitched headlong over a sagebrush. He lay there motionless, grinning up at the sun with his ugly wolf mask.

A rifle bullet dug up gravel around Bill's body. A second ambusher had bought in.

Dave raced Pardner to Bill's side. He slid from the saddle. The roan stood unflinching as lead whined past. The animal had been broken to stand under gunfire. A slug cut a chunk from the saddle. Dave gathered up Bill, reached for a stirrup. Carrying his comrade, he had no opportunity to use his guns for defense.

"But I owe Bill somethin'," he panted, "he stood up fer me in the Maverick, an' I was a stranger."

He flung Bill's lean frame over the saddle, reached for a stirrup. A hundred yards up the hill, a man rose deliberately from behind a rock, took steady aim with a long rifle, centered the black barrel on Dave Starr.

There was no time for Dave to fire.

"I'll take it standin' up," snapped Dave. "An' alone!"

With that, he hit Pardner on the hind leg, barked out a sharp command. The pony jumped ahead, carrying Bill out of range. Dave snapped up a six-gun. He might get in a shot although the chances were slim.

Wham! Guns thundered from down by the stranded wagon.

The marksman up the hill flinched as bullets tore past him. His heavy weapon thundered. But the big slug missed Starr by six inches. Then Dave had dived for the nearest shelter, which was a towering sagebrush decorated with a dead man. And there he lay until Smiler and Bear-foot came racing to his aid. By that time, the man with the heavy gun had fled. But where he had lain, the punchers found a heap of empty cartridge shells.

A drink from a canteen revived Windy Bill. His horse was dead, but the rider had escaped without broken bones.

A search of the battlefield revealed two men wearing the wolf masks.

"I don't know 'em," Dave observed. "But then, I've been away since last fall."

Windy Bill frowned. "That short hombre with the scarred face looks like one of them hombres that jumped you in the Maverick."

"You don't reckon Wild-hoss Parr is behind this ambush scrap?"

"I don't know."

Down at the wagon, they discovered that the lone defender's fight had been in vain: he was going out with a bullet through his body. As Dave bent over, the man gasped:

"Framed! Black Wolf! G-git the robe!"

His head rolled back. Dave stared at his friends.

"The Black Wolf," he said slowly. "Say, I saw a man wearin' that color mask on the hill. He was ridin' a tall black cayuse. Why—why he howled like a big lobo."

"I tried to kill him," snapped Windy Bill, "but one of his men dropped my hoss."

"I wonder," Smiler asked, "who this Black Wolf is? Been a long time since I was out on the Long-horn range. Things have changed, what with settlers movin' in."

"An' what did that pore hombre mean when he spoke about a robe?" Bear-foot Bangs asked. "I'll bet my hat he was killed over that."

Dave pondered the question. Somewhere, and recently, he had heard talk of a robe. But in the excitement of the fight and the saving of Windy, it was hard to muster his thoughts. Not until later, did he recall the story told by Arapahoe Brown in the Maverick.

"Don't seem to be any trace of the dry-gulchers," Windy Bill observed. "I picked up a few empty shells. Common calibers."

"So did I," Dave answered, and he passed over the black shells pumped from the heavy gun of the man who had tried to kill him as he aided Windy Bill.

The keen-eyed puncher shook his head. "These ain't common caliber," he said gravely.

"What do yuh mean?"

"They are big stuff. About .30-40 I'd say."

"That's purty common caliber," Bear-foot cut in.

"Yeah, but these shells are different. They weren't bought from no store. They were loaded out on the range. You kin see where the ends was crimped down to hold the lead bullet. That pair of crimpers has left a little nick on each shell. If we find the man that loads his

own .30-40 shells, then we'll have the gent that jest tried to kill Dave."

"That would be like huntin' a needle in a haystack," said Dave. "Lots of men load their own shells. Saves 'em money. An' ag'in, lots of expert riflemen like to load their own ca'tridges."

Windy Bill looked at Dave. "I know one man that packs a rifle of .30-40 caliber. And he loads his own shells."

"Who?"

"The man who hired you—Stormy Abe Gorman."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWINS FIND NEW DADS.

DAVE stared at the two dead men. Then he said grimly:

"If Gorman leads a bunch of killers like that wolf gang, then I'll hunt 'em down like they was real wolves."

"Give up a good job for a bunch of settlers yuh don't know?"

"What else can a white man do?"

The nearest county officer—sheriff or coroner—was a hundred miles distant. So Smiler and Bear-foot scooped narrow graves in the sand. Windy saddled the remaining lead horse, and back-trailed the wagon, hoping to find some further clew.

Dave rode out to round up the frightened cattle. They were all scrawny beasts and bothersome to handle, for two old bulls with brand-scarred hides were the leaders and persisted in fighting. As Dave spurred Pardner through the brush, he heard a sudden loud yell.

"Dave!"

Glancing toward the wagon, he saw Smiler and Bear-foot executing an excited dance.

"What's up?" Dave gasped, and made tracks to camp.

"By grab!" old Bear-foot bawled, black eyes popping. "Will yuh look what we found hid away in the back of the wagon?"

Smiler piped up. "Yuh wouldn't believe it, Dave."

He pointed toward a bundle on the ground. Dave saw that it was the outer side of a tanned elk skin.

"Waal," he snapped impatiently, "what about it? Tell me what's up? I got to git back to the cattle. Them dang bulls is fightin' ag'in."

"Here's somethin' to make yuh fergit bulls."

Grinning widely, Smiler tossed aside the robe. Dave stiffened in his saddle. There, sleeping soundly, and rosy-faced, were two cuddly children.

"Kids!" Dave gasped.

Then sadness came over him. He looked toward the narrow graves.

"Do you think," he asked, "that one of them hombres that jest cashed in is their dad?"

Bear-foot and Smiler looked gloomy. "Ain't nobody else around to lay claim to 'em."

Here was a problem. Two children, each about two years old, as near as the punchers could judge, were without parents in the middle of Wyoming and adrift in the sagebrush sea. Apparently, their father had been killed by the "Black Wolf's" gang. And three hard-eyed men of the saddle had become their guardians.

"By gum!" Dave Starr groaned. "I'd rather boss two or three cow outfits, and fight a half dozen gangs like the Wolf's. Shucks, what do I know about kids? But say, ain't they purty leetle tads?"

"Jest like pitchers," Smiler said, smiling down fondly at the waifs. "One's got sort o' black hair an' a dimple in his—or her—chin. Other kid runs to a brindle shade."

Bear-foot got down on hands and knees the better to examine the children. The black-haired one stirred, opened and blinked a pair of snappy black eyes, saw old Bear-foot bending over.

"Daddy!" the child cried.

And for the first time in forty years, Bear-foot Bangs blushed, while Dave and Smiler yelled with laughter. That aroused the other child.

"I'm hungry," this baby announced firmly, and then raised a wail that made the horses snort.

"What'll we do?" Dave asked. "What do yearlin's or two-y'ar-olds graze on?"

"By grab!" Bear-foot rumbled. "I'll bet my socks they kin drink milk. I've heard say that young uns go right smart fer milk."

"Milk," Smiler snapped disgustedly. "Whar kin yuh git milk in this country, except in cans."

In a land that ranged thousands of cattle, there were few cows broken to milk. Punchers, when they got cream in their coffee, got it out of a can.

Bear-foot had picked up the black-eyed child and was riding it on his big foot. The baby chuckled and crowed its delight.

"Makes me feel like gittin' married an' settlin' down," the old range warrior said proudly. "I allus did have a way with kids an' women. You kin bet yore poke on that."

But the brindle-haired twin—for Dave judged the little ones were twins—still wailed for dinner. Smiler circled around like a homeless dog, worrying about feeding the children.

This had become a real proposition. Men could build a sagebrush fire, boil a can of coffee, and fry a few slabs of bacon. But what about tender babes? Finally, old Smiler

took off his battered hat, rubbed his bald head to a glow, and looked meaningly toward the cattle.

"I see cows out thar," he announced firmly. "I'm goin' to rope one of 'em, lash 'er to a wagon wheel, an' feed these kids."

"Fly to it," Bear-foot roared. "I'm with yuh all the way."

So Smiler rode forth, dragging his rope. A gaunt roan cow was caught, and hauled toward the wagon. There, Bear-foot used his twine to tangle up her hind legs. Dave, meanwhile, rode herd on the "Heavenly Twins" as the punchers had nicknamed the kids.

"This cow," Bear-foot roared, "Don't seem used tuh ropes 'er milk buckets."

"She looks like a reg'lar ol' wild longhorn tuh me," Smiler agreed. "I'll bet she thinks we have gone plumb loco. An' she's mad because we have drug her away from her calf."

Spurs were dug in. Two horses went in opposite directions. The bawling cow was dumped on the ground, hind hoofs hobbled, and then her head was tied tightly to a rear wagon wheel. Smiler dug a water bucket from the wagon. Old Bear-foot rolled up his sleeves, hitched up his chaps, and cautiously approached the wild-eyed animal.

"Soo Bossy!" he rumbled soothingly. "Stand hitched now, yuh long-gear'd ol' tarrapin! Hand us the bucket, Smiler!"

He went into a crouch, frowning as he tried to recall all he had forgotten about milking cows. Smiler stood at the cow's head, patting her nose, and anxiously watching his mate. Dave sat on the elk robe, grinning at his friends.

Suddenly, the cow took up rope slack, whirled a long horn, and ripped half the shirt off Smiler's

back. The chubby puncher made a high dive. Old Bear-foot went over backward.

Dave jumped up. "Save the milk!" he yelled. "Whatever yuh do, don't lose it."

The rope had slackened. The cow had plenty of fighting space. She tore up dust, bawled, and pitched, while Bear-foot and Smiler scrambled to safety. But the lanky old puncher came up smiling. He passed the bucket to Dave.

"Some sploshed out," he said proudly. "All over my overalls. But I saved most of it. Say, I've seen these jugglers in the theayter. But none of 'em could duplicate what I jest did. Turn a complete somerset, holdin' a bucket of milk, an' come up all seerene."

Thus were the Heavenly Twins fed. The amazed and indignant cow was released. Smiler and Bear-foot took turns waiting on the kids. Dave rolled out the elk-skin robe. And a gleam came into his gray eyes.

"Injun paintin' all over it," he whispered. "I wonder if this is the robe ol' Arapahoe was jabberin' about in the Maverick. If it is, whar's Arapahoe?"

The center of the robe, which was soft as velvet and tanned almost white, depicted a string of Indian horsemen filing away from a camp. Three figures of men lay stiff. Their heads were colored red. Above them was painted a dripping tomahawk.

"Three white men, all scalped," Dave said. "The sign of the ax means a massacre. But I can't make out the rest."

There were various emblems, such as a triangle with a cross on the side, that looked like a three-pronged fork, other images resembling the rising sun, the moon, Indian tepees, and the like. The painter of the robe had used the natural colors

manufactured by tribesmen. And although the relic was years old, the colors still glowed brightly.

"But it will take an interpreter to explain what it all means," Dave judged.

Rolling it up, he placed it in the wagon. The children, hunger satisfied, and ready for sleep, were also placed back by the chuck box on soft blankets.

"Now," Dave announced, "we'll bury these pore hombres. An' head out of here."

"Whar we goin'?"

"Over the hump to the river. These little tads need a woman's care. Mebbe we'll find 'em a home among the settlers."

"How about the cattle?"

"That herd belongs to the Heavenly Twins. We'll take keer of their interests until somebody better fitted comes along."

Bear-foot growled like a big grizzly. "Somebody is comin'."

Hoofs thundered. Over the hill rode a tight knot of horsemen. In the lead was a rider whose equipment flashed in the sun.

"Hackner," Dave Starr grated. "The man who pulled that crooked horse race."

Bear-foot and Smiler had bunched the cattle. Dave was in the wagon, handling the leather reins. Hackner galloped up with his hard-eyed men at his heels.

"Whar yuh headin'?" he roared.

"Who wants to know?" Smiler chirped.

Bear-foot roared his wrath, raked out a big carbine, cocked it, and laid the gun across his saddle fork.

The men with Hackner, spotting that warlike move, promptly reined to right and left. If a fight flared, they could thus flank Smiler and Bear-foot. Then Hackner saw Dave Starr on the wagon seat.

"You?" he gasped, dark face blank with surprise. "Why—why I figgered this was a settler's outfit."

"What you doin' here?" Dave snapped.

"Some of these men are Spearhead punchers. We've been ordered by Gorman to keep all granger outfits from goin' into the Longhorn country.

"This here," Dave said, "ain't a granger outfit. We're goin' right now across that hill."

Hackner snarled. "You *look* like a dang granger. Wagon an' bony bunch of cattle. Pore hosses that could do fer coyote bait." Then the man's eyes narrowed, and he grinned coldly. "I figure it out now," he went on, and he spoke for the benefit of the riders with him. "You won plenty money on that hoss race. So you've bought an outfit, an' you figure to start a ranch on Spearhead range. You shore have turned traitor to yore kind, Dave Starr."

At that, Dave swung around, jerked a six-gun, and lined it on Hackner. It was a lightning draw. Hackner tried for his own Colt.

"Don't make another move," Dave warned. "It would be suicide, Hackner. Git off that hoss!"

"What yuh figure to do?"

"This."

With free hand, Dave wrapped his reins around his whip socket. Then he leaped from the wagon. Menaced by a six-gun, Hackner dismounted. Dave looked toward Smiler and Bear-foot.

"Throw down on this coyote's friends," he ordered.

Smiler and Bear-foot lined their weapons. Dave stuffed his Colt into its holster.

"Put up yore hands, Hackner!" he snapped, gray eyes blazing.

"Why?"

"No man kin call *me* a traitor, an' git away with it. Put up yore hands. I'll ruin yore good-lookin' face or git whipped tryin'!"

Hackner scowled, studied the angry young puncher. Then, swift and deftly, he rushed in, shot a right through Dave's guard. The young puncher, caught off balance by the unexpected attack, went back on his heels.

Hackner, never a fair fighter, whipped out his gun. Dave saw the barrel flash as Len slashed at his head. He flung up his right arm, stopped the gun with bunched muscles. At that, a shaft of pain shot to his shoulder. It stirred his wrath to a red heat. This man would *never* fight fair.

"Fer that," Dave gritted, "I'll fix you, Hackner, so yore own mother wouldn't know yuh."

From his knees, he snapped up an uppercut that caught Len Hackner just under his blue chin. As the man tottered, Dave planted a second blow.

"That'll close yore right eye," he panted.

Hackner was falling, but he tried to use his gun. Dave wrenched it away, flung it into the brush.

"A fancy pearl-handled thing," he sneered. "Better git a shootin' iron that's made fer business rather than looks."

Punchers are fair fighters. Even the men who had trailed Len Hackner cheered Dave Starr's win.

"That black-faced hound never was no good," growled a lanky rider. "But he's shore tryin' hard to boss the Spearhead outfit. We got a new boss comin'. I hope he pans out all right."

Dave grinned through his grime as he blew on his knuckles.

"I'm yore new boss," he announced.

"Pilotin' a nester's outfit?"

He saw that they didn't believe him. So he produced the letter from Gorman.

"Thar's my authority," he explained. "Now, some of you boys climb down, throw a leetle water over Hackner, an' then we got a job of buryin'."

A roar rang out. During the fight, a horseman had come up unobserved. He was well over six feet tall, raw-boned, and with mighty shoulders. A black beard tinged with gray hid his firm jaw. A bold, hooked nose jutted out from under the brim of a tall white hat.

"Jest a minute!" that stranger growled, sizing up Dave Starr with his coal-black eyes. "Jest a minute! No dang nester gives orders to a punch of Spearhead punchers."

Dave swung on his spike heels. He gasped.

"Gorman," he gasped. "Stormy Abe!"

CHAPTER V.

STARR QUILTS HIS JOB.

HERE sat the king of the Longhorn country, red with anger because his intended range boss had reported for duty piloting a ragged settler's outfit.

Len Hackner scrambled up, shaking his groggy head.

"Don't let him buffalo yuh, Abe," he snarled. "Him an' his pals won a big chunk of money off me in Rawhide Butte. They're out to settle on a homestead, an' run this measly bunch of critters as a blind fer rustlin' Spearhead beef."

"That right?" Stormy Abe Gorman roared, black eyes flashing as he glared at Dave.

Dave answered steadily. "Me an' my friends are workin' punchers. But since that polecat brought up the question, we can't see no harm

to folks settlin' on government land, an' makin' a livin'!"

"They don't settle the Longhorn Valley any more. Their danged bob wire makes my cattle starve. The dead line is drawed right here agin' outfits like yores, Starr. You kin make yore choice. Turn that wagon back to whar it come from, an' go to work fer me, or quit yore job, an' try an' bust through us."

No man—not even the cattle king of Longhorn Valley—could talk like that to Dave Starr. Calmly, he ranged his cool gray eyes over the enraged cattleman. He took in the picture of hard-eyed horsemen grouped around their chief with ready hands near gun butts, of Len Hackner, ugly as a coiled rattler.

"As it happens," he remarked, "this ain't my outfit. But if it was, I'd act the same way. This outfit goes ahead until these starvin' hosses an' cattle can find feed and water. You hear me, Gorman. It goes *ahead*."

"Agin' fifteen fighters?" Gorman's bold eyes widened.

"Agin' *twice* as many."

The cowman whirled, raised his huge arm. "Circle around, boys," he ordered. "Fust move made, turn loose with all yuh got!"

A ring of steel hemmed in Dave Starr, his old puncher friends, and the nester wagon and herd.

Starr spoke again: "Before this fight starts, Gorman, I'd like to ask one question."

"What is it?"

"Do you own a .30-40 caliber carbine that uses home-loaded shells?"

Gorman scowled. "Shore, but I ain't packin' it to-day. It's back at my ranch. Been thar fer a week as I know. What's that to you?"

Starr pointed to the dead men under the wagon. "They were ambushed," he explained, "an' mur-

dered by a band of killers led by a man who wore a black-wolf's head. That man used a .30-40 caliber gun. It pumped home-loaded shells."

Gorman's face went pale under his black beard. "The Wolf!" he gasped. "The Black Wolf!"

And Starr, amazed, saw fear sweep over the hard faces of Spearhead warriors. Then Gorman's anger blazed out.

"I stop nesters," he roared, "but I ain't no dirty killer! If my gun was used by the Wolf, it's been stole from my ranch. Anyway, what do I care about a couple of danged sod busters?"

"Mebbe you'll feel different about what they left behind."

And reaching back into the wagon, Dave picked up the Heavenly Twins, and exhibited their baby beauty to the astonished Spearhead riders.

"Kids!" Stormy Abe gasped. A queer change came over him. His iron-hard face softened. A spur drove his horse to the wagon. He put out a gaunt paw, clumsily stroked the black curls of one child, patted the auburn top of the other. "Kids," he said gently. "An' way out here."

"This is their outfit," Dave explained, and briefly related the fight on the wagon train.

Gorman stared at the young puncher. Then he half whispered: "Starr, I've put in thirty years tryin' to fergit the black curls of a kid about the age of this one. She was my little gal, my little Sue. I was ranchin' on the border atween Texas an' New Mexico. I was out on the range one day. I come back tuh find my cabin burned, my wife an' little gal gone. My little Sue. Looked like Injuns might have done it. I hunted a year after that—found nothin'. So finally I come up

the Texas trail. An' I've tried hard to fergit my little Sue. But—but I can't."

He brushed his great hand across his eyes. The moisture was gone. Again, he was boss of hard men and wild cattle.

"Stand aside!" he roared. "Let Dave Starr pass with the kids an' their critters!"

"But chief——" Len Hackner squalled.

"Shut up!" Stormy Abe roared. "I kin do at least one squar' thing fer the sake of a little gal named Sue."

So Dave Starr passed on triumphantly into war territory, passed through enemy lines, because a chieftain had loved and lost a little child—a little girl named Sue.

As dusk came on, the caravan swung down through Red Thunder Pass, and into the broad and pleasant Longhorn Valley with its green flats along the Buffalo River, and the pine-clad mountains on the east. Smiler was driving the wagon. Dave and Bear-foot rode ahead, trailing the cattle.

"Wire!" Bear-foot snarled suddenly. "Bob wire! Danged ef it ain' blockin' the trail to water."

Bear-foot had supported Dave in defying Stormy Abe, but he was a cow-puncher, and always he would resent wire across free range.

Starr, circling toward the lead on bright-eyed Pardner, flung deep his spurs. Pardner broke into a swift run. For Dave had sighted two horsemen squarely ahead of the cattle. And their coming had irritated the bull leaders, and started another battle between the longhorn veterans.

"Them dang settlers," Dave snapped, "don't know enough to git clear of fightin' bulls. If they stay thar, they'll git run down!"

After a bullfight, the defeated animal closes both eyes, whirls on hindquarters, and quits the country. It will run over a horseman in its path, crash into a tree, fall over a cliff. The defeated animal is always blind and crazed beyond control. No wise puncher ever lingers around a bullfight. He waits until the animals have finished their fight and cooled down.

Even as Dave strung Pardner out, the roan bull dug his horns into the brisket of his older opponent, bellowed out a resounding challenge, shoved mightily, and lifted the other animal half off the ground. One of the strange horsemen rode in, uttering shrill yells.

"Hit the grit, little hoss!" Dave pleaded. "That locoed granger will be tromped down in two shakes!"

Through the dust kicked up by the fighting bulls, he rounded the lead of the herd. The smaller bull, at that moment, gave way to defeat. Blindly, the animal swung around, flung up its branched horns, and surged into wild flight.

The settler rider, caught by the rush, spurred madly to evade that defeated rush. The panicky horse put a foot in a prairie-dog hole, went over. The rider's hat fell off.

Dave Starr had whipped out his right six-gun. He was riding in line with the bull. Pardner drove ahead, small ears laid back. Through the haze, Starr saw something that made his brown face turn the color of chalk. As the other rider's hat fell, soft hair fell in shimmering folds down to slim shoulders.

"A woman!" Dave moaned. "A woman!"

He had used his ivory-handled pet Colts in fight and frolic, laughed when his friends called him the "Shootin' Starr." Now—if he deserved any of that praise—was the

time for iron-nerved marksmanship. The horse was down and kicking, the girl flung to the ground, and stretched there, half dazed from fear. The blind bull was rushing toward her, sharp horns weaving as the great head rolled.

Starr checked Pardner. The horse, feeling the strange pull of sharp steel bit, reared back on its hind legs; was for a moment motionless. Starr had planned on that one flashing instant when a racking gallop would not jar his gun arm.

Wham! The Colt thundered.

The bit relaxed. Pardner lunged ahead. Dave's eyes closed tightly. He dared not look ahead. He heard a mighty smash, a choked bellow. He opened his eyes. The bull lay kicking on the ground, horns digging into the gumbo not a foot from the outstretched form of the girl.

Starr swung from his saddle. His knees shook as he picked up the slight form. Then two eyes opened—two eyes as blue as mountain larkspur.

"I—I'm all right," the girl whispered faintly. And the brown head sank again into the hollow of Dave's broad shoulder.

The second settler rode up; a thin old man attired in garments of professional black. He wore iron-rimmed spectacles, and carried a shotgun across his saddle fork.

"My name is Doctor Samuel Dale," he told Dave. "This is my daughter, Cynthia—all I've got in the world. We moved here this spring from Indiana. My health had broken down. We homesteaded, and have been trying to make a start in this new land."

Bear-foot had ridden up. Dave and the old puncher unhooked a canteen, forced cold water between Cynthia Dale's red lips. Her father dismounted and gave first aid.

"She isn't hurt," he announced to Dave's great joy. "She's always taking chances. I told her not to stop the cattle. But Cynthia's one to have her own way."

"Why did she stop our cattle?"

"She didn't see the wagon in the dust. She thought it was a trick of Gorman's cattlemen to break down our fence. We've been threatened and harried every day since we settled here."

Now Cynthia Dale, weak as she was, stood up on a pair of trim, high-heeled boots. She wore leather chaps, a neat blue flannel shirt, and a red silk scarf was tied around her neck. Dave thought it brought out the startling blue of her eyes.

But those eyes seemed to snap sparks as Cynthia glared at her rescuer.

"You are a cattleman," she declared. "And I'll keep on stopping cattle that tear down our fence. We've worked so hard for our little home. And dad needs a place to win back his health."

Dave Starr swept off his dusty hat. He grinned admiringly. "I am a cow-puncher," he admitted, "but right now, accordin' to Abe Gorman, I ain't workin' hard at it. I've got other things tuh herd."

"You and that big black man are driving cattle," she charged.

At this, Bear-foot scowled, and turned red as fire. It was his second blush of the day. But then, Bear-foot hadn't encountered many shyn and pretty girls like Cynthia Dale of Indiana. At this crucial moment, Smiler McPike rolled up with his creaking prairie schooner. Amazedly, he gawked at the girl, at her old father clad in spectacles and dusty black garments. He saw the dead bull on the ground, and roan Pardner still panting from his fast race.

"By the livin'!" Smiler vowed, "I've seed so many strange things to-day I wouldn't even lose my breath if a herd of elephants come walkin' across the mesa. No, sir!"

Dave cut short Smiler's amazement. "Show Miss Dale the real owners of these cattle," he ordered.

Then it was the Dales' turn for surprise as they stared at the chubby, sleepy Heavenly Twins. And then the men stood around awkwardly, shuffling their boots, while Cynthia Dale took the kids in her arms, and cooed and carried on at a great rate.

"They shore seem tuh like it," opined Smiler.

"Can yuh blame 'em?" snapped Dave Starr.

"Now I'll bet my roll," growled Bear-foot, "that Dave's careless days are dang near over."

And strangely, nobody disputed his bet.

CHAPTER VI.

HOME-LOADED RIFLE SHELLS.

CYNTHIA DALE soon forgot her wrath at headlong cowpokes. The Twins were taken down to the tiny cabin under the cottonwoods along Buffalo River. Doctor Sam helped Dave and his mates to pasture the dusty cattle, and pull the harness and saddles from tired horses.

"You mustn't blame us for being rather foolish," he told Dave as they sat under the round moon after supper. "This Gorman has ordered us out. But worst than that, we've received written threats."

"What do you mean?"

Doctor Dale passed over a paper. It was printed in crude letters. It ran:

Git clear of the Longhorn Valley. One week to pack up and drift. Or you git burned out.

As signature, there was a black blot that looked like the head of a wolf.

"The Black Wolf," Dave whispered, and thought again of the strange rider who had led the ambushers, of the man on the great black horse who had howled like a fiendish lobo.

From the high ridge above the clearing, a quavering howl went up to the stars. Dave felt the chills run up his spine.

"But wolves," he whispered, "howl under the moon. That's probably a real wolf."

Said Doctor Dale, and his eyes were sad: "I'm a man of peace, but I fight for my rights. I'm an American citizen. I have honestly homesteaded this ground. If it were not for my daughter, I'd stay here and fight."

"What does your daughter say?"

Dale smiled grimly. "What would you expect after that affair this afternoon? She says stay and fight."

Dave Starr assumed further responsibility. "She's right," he said. "Fight—and fight to the finish!"

"I'm the only man on the place. Of course Cynthy's been practicin' with a gun. But you can't expect a girl to be a warrior." He shook his head. "I love the West," he went on. "My old bones are getting full of sap again. I *hate* to quit. But—well, you see, my week's up to-morrow."

Bear-foot Bangs broke in. "What do yuh mean yo're the only man around here? How about me an' Dave an' Smiler? I'll bet my best Sunday shirt we kin lick Abe Gorman an' his hull pack if he's that dang-blasted Black Wolf."

"Let him come ridin'!" Smiler chimed in.

Starr smiled, reached out his

hand, shook Doctor Dale's skinny paw. "You've just got to stay," he said gently.

A strong guard was mounted that night. But the stars wheeled over a quiet earth. In broad daylight, the men rubbed red, sleepless eyes, and then cheered up when Cynthia served a hot breakfast of real light biscuits, flapjacks, and wonder of wonders in cattle land, ham and eggs.

"Fer this," Smiler announced between huge bites, "I'd stay an' fight off General U. S. Grant and the hull dang army of the Potomick."

There came another surprise that day. Windy Bill arrived with passengers in tow. One was Arapahoe Brown, the long-haired old miner in buckskin garments. He took one look at Dave, let out a yell, and then rushed toward the big prairie schooner.

"Whar's my robe?" he howled. "My Injun robe?"

"What's the matter with him?" Dave asked.

Windy touched his head. "He's locoed about that danged elk skin. Won't be happy until he gits it ag'in. Mebbe it's valyble. I don't know. But it had a lot to do with that murder yesterday pulled off by the Black Wolf."

Briefly, Windy told his story of back-trailing after the fight. A few miles distant, he had noticed tracks leading into a patch of cedar timber. Entering the grove, he had discovered the old trapper, and two other persons tied to trees.

"An' near gone from hunger and thirst," he growled, blue eyes flashing. "I used up my canteen. Then I rid to a spring, an' got more water. Bumped into a bunch of range hosses. Waal, I seen a couple with saddle marks showin' they was broke. I worked most all day but

finally managed to rope 'em both. Had to bust 'em, too, afore they would be rid bareback. But I only had one saddle. An' the woman was in——"

His audience, now including the Dales, gasped. "Woman?" they cried.

Windy pointed to a rider slumped over a saddle horn. It was a woman, weak, and almost senseless from suffering and fatigue.

"Mrs. James Clark," Windy said slowly, "the maw of them kids you must 'a' found in that wagon. An' this other man here is Jim Clark of Arizona, the kids' dad."

It was a great reunion. Mrs. Clark was cheered to find her little ones safe. Tears stood in her soft dark eyes as she thanked Dave Starr and his mates. Jim Clark, an up-standing frontiersman with firm, square-jawed face, and long brown hair rolling to the collar of his buck-skin hunting shirt, shook hands all around until men's fingers felt crushed.

"By gum!" Smiler McPike gasped, "yuh shore have got a grip like a bear."

Jim grinned, and wiped his eyes. "Boys," he declared, "I didn't aim tuh hurt yuh. But when I think how them fiends took a couple of parents away from tender kids, an' how you boys did the right thing, I shore feel like ruinin' the hands of real men. Because I'm so dang glad."

Jim explained that the theft of the elk-skin robe had brought on the holdup. The two men found dead by Dave and his mates at the wagon were the bandits. They had somehow learned in Rawhide Butte that the robe showed the trail to a rich gold mine. They had trapped Jim's wagon in the bad lands, held him at gun's point, stripped him of weap-

ons, then lashed the Clarks and old Arapahoe to the cedars.

"I know whar they heard about that robe," Dave said. "They must be part of Wild-hoss Parr's gang. They tried to double-cross Parr, an' he jumped 'em right back."

"That would mean then," Windy mused, "that Parr is really this Black Wolf."

But Dave shook his head. "I'm not so sure. I found out yesterday that Abe Gorman does own a .30-40 that fires home-loaded ca'tridges."

Clark explained then that old Arapahoe, a noted Indian scout in his younger days, had once been of great aid to Mrs. Clark. They had brought the old man to Wyoming, but had not attached much importance to the robe.

"My gold mine's out where I can raise good hay an' put fat on cattle," Jim laughed. "When my wife gits to feelin' pert, I'll start makin' a home fer her an' the kids."

"An' us," boomed Bear-foot, "we'll shore help yuh. You bet."

"First job," Dave Starr said with a grin, "they'll break out a milk cow so she'll act gentle."

Two horsemen spurred down to the ranch. Abe Gorman was in the lead. Dark-faced Len Hackner rode at his heels.

"Starr," the cattleman growled roughly, "you've found a shelter for these kids. So fergit helpin' settlers to fence range. Come back to my outfit."

Dave Starr glanced toward Cynthia Dale and her father in the doorway, at Jim Clark who had come hundreds of miles to build a home for his family. Then he faced the hard old man who owned thirty thousand cattle, and not over a hundred acres of land.

"Others need me more, Mr. Gor-

man," he said calmly. "I'm stayin' here. Me an' my friends."

"You've turned settler?"

"No reason settlers can't own an' run cattle. This is America, Abe Gorman. A land that wasn't framed fer the use of a few men with money. It's a land intended to make lots of people happy. People that have got kids like them Heavenly Twins. So—I'll stay here."

Gorman whirled his horse. He rode across the divide. Len Hacker grinned viciously as he spurred after. And his wolfish eyes rested fleetingly on pretty Cynthia Dale.

"This means war," Windy Bill said gravely.

And Dave Starr frowned, and laid his brown hands on the worn ivory handles of two big six-guns.

That night, the Dale ranch became an armed fortress. The two women and the children were placed in a dugout shelter back of the house where bullets could not harm them. Jim Clark and Arapahoe Brown mounted guard there. Dave and Windy remained at the corral with their saddled horses.

Smiler and Bear-foot bored loopholes in the walls of the Dale cabin and barricaded the doors. Doctor Dale opened his worn medical kit and loaded up the long squirrel rifle that he had brought with him from Indiana.

"But I reckon they're scairt out," Dave whispered sleepily as the round moon neared the Western divide. "Near daybreak, an' nothin' has stirred. Even the coyotes are quiet."

Windy Bill laughed grimly. "A shore sign of trouble. The coyotes would be barkin' carefree, if they didn't have somethin' to worry about." Suddenly, he grunted sharply. "What's that, Dave?"

It was the merest flicker of sound.

Only a keen-eared man like Windy would have picked it up.

"A hoss hittin' a rock with a steel shoe," Dave snapped. "That means a——"

"Whoever it is has padded the feet of his hoss, but a pad slipped. No wonder the coyotes are worried, Dave. I wisht——"

"Same here. I wish the light was better fer shootin'."

Abruptly, he ceased talking. For from the towering ridge to the east arose the high and hideous howl of a lobo wolf. As if that were a call to a murderous pack, the night silence was ripped wide open. Down through the darkness came a thunderous rush of horsemen. Where bodies were outlined on the sky line, Dave Starr saw the upstanding, pointed ears of wolves.

"The gang!" he rapped out. "The Black Wolf doesn't forget!"

Wham! The booming roar of Windy Bill's rifle deafened him.

He clawed out his own two Colts, thumbing the hammers as flashes of red fire lighted up the blackness.

A volley sounded from the house. Bear-foot and Smiler had come into action. But the Wolf's men had stolen near on horses with padded hoofs. Yelling riders swung down at the cabin, rushed to the dead ground under the doors and windows where the punchers' bullets could not reach them.

"They're settin' fire to the house!" Windy yelled.

"Come on!" Dave roared.

He whirled his horse, drove deep the spurs. Seldom had brave Pardner felt the touch of steel. He responded like a noble friend.

The night seemed alive with horsemen. Cayuses lunged toward Starr as he rode headlong toward the threatened cabin. Blue flames bloomed at the hot muzzles of guns.

In broad daylight, bullets would have cut Dave and Windy from their charging horses. But this was a fight by night; a breathless, panting battle with friends and foes mixed in a hot swirl of combat.

"Dave!"

Above the tumult rang the piercing cry of Cynthia Dale.

"They've jumped the dugout!" Dave gritted.

He whirled Pardner, rocketed past the cabin where red flames were already eating into the foundation logs. His tried friends were there, held captive by the Black Wolf's gang, likely to roast for their bravery in helping weak settlers.

Dave groaned. He couldn't stay to aid Smiler and old Bear-foot. Women and children were in the dugout. Straight toward its black mouth, he headed Pardner.

A horseman loomed before him—a rider on a gigantic horse. The moon outlined the round tabs of wolf's ears on the cap he wore. At the length of a horse's body, he slashed down a short-barreled rifle.

Bram! Starr felt the cut of hot lead as it creased his left arm.

He swayed in the saddle. Only the quick dodge of Pardner saved him from riding squarely down on that roaring gun. The horsemen passed each other, riding like the wind. Dave Starr crossed over his right six-gun. For his left arm hung numb and lifeless.

Bang! There sounded a hideous howl.

A great horse galloped madly away. A rider in black pitched to the ground. Never halting, Starr charged the dugout entrance where men were locked in battle. Pardner split the mass. Guns barked. There were howls, oaths. Then came flight. The gang fled into the hills as daylight came.

Dave Starr swung down from panting Pardner. Hoarsely, he called:

"Cynthy!"

She came out, gripping a rifle from which smoke trailed.

"You were in time," she whispered. "Just in time, Dave."

Jim Clark and Arapahoe staggered up. "A hull bunch rushed us," the twins' dad explained. "Snuk up like a gang of Injuns."

Arapahoe let out a yell. "My robe!" he piped. "It's in that shack. An' the shack's burnin' up."

The logs were green. Bear-foot and Smiler, grimy with battle, popped out with water buckets. Doctor Dale worked like a beaver. Arapahoe singed his beard by a quick dash into the burning cabin. But he emerged, triumphantly, with his robe.

"An' some day," he told Dave, "I'll lead the trail an' cut yuh all in on my mine."

Then Cynthia Dale cried out that Dave was hurt. But he grinned, and said the bullet had just grazed his left arm. The bone wasn't broken.

"Just the same," she insisted, "dad will take care of you."

"Later," he said gently. "Right now, I aim to look at a certain man's face."

"What man?"

"Better that you stay here. Come on, Windy."

The two went out to the dugout, stripped the black-wolf mask from the face of the man Dave had knocked from the mighty horse.

"Parr," the young puncher muttered. "Wild-hoss Parr."

"An' in his belt, home-loaded .30-40 caliber shells," added Windy.

"Do you think he was the Black Wolf?" Dave asked.

Windy studied the face of the

man who had first run afoul of Dave in the Maverick Hotel, the man who had used his wiles to lure the secret of the elk-skin robe from old Arapahoe.

"Hard to say," he muttered. "But he's the sort who *would* ambush helpless women an' kids."

"For their sake," Dave whispered, "I hope Parr was the Black Wolf. When he passed out, his gang quit. Let's hope it'll stay that way."

They walked back toward the smoldering cabin. The flames had been checked. A little repair work would right the building.

And as they walked, from the high ridge to the east, a long and quavering howl, the high-pitched hunting cry of a great lobo wolf, the terror of the cattle ranges saluted the rising sun.

"But wolves," Dave Starr said grimly, "*real* wolves don't howl in the daylight."

An' thet don't sound so good—wolves howlin' in the daylight. Mebbe Wild-hoss Parr wa'n't the real Black Wolf, after all. If thet's so, Starr o' Wyoming an' his fightin' pards will have plenty trouble comin' at 'em pronto. Watch fer the next story about 'em in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right soon.



HORSE THIEF'S LUCK

Two buffalo hunters, Shoemaker and Reed, who had gone out early in the morning to secure fresh meat for their hunting party, heard a noise on a hill. On investigating they saw about thirty Indians riding in a row. Each one was lying hunched forward on his horse, so as to look as much like a buffalo as possible in the uncertain light of early morning.

The two hunters hid in a cave until the Indians passed by on their way to Rath's store, where they shot up a camp and stole a number of horses.

Made bold by their easy success, the Indians came back the following day and robbed another camp. One of the men from this camp came over to the Shoemaker party and told them how they had been raided, cleaned out of everything, and their horses driven off by the Indians.

It was a common practice at that time, when Indians came into a section of the wild country, for white horse thieves to follow them, and

to say afterward that Indians had raided them and had stolen all the horses they could lay hands on.

In this way they diverted suspicion from themselves by laying the blame on the red men, while their accomplices were getting away safely with the horses.

After this man had told his story, the buffalo hunters held a council. Some of them believed he was a horse thief and was lying, and they were in favor of hanging him right away. But the cooler heads advised keeping him with them all night, and sleeping with one eye open, and if he should attempt to leave the camp, to shoot him down at once.

But the suspected man seemed only too glad to stay. After a good supper he slept soundly till day-break, when they all rolled out and went to the place where he said his party had made camp. Here they found that his story was true, and every one was glad that they had not dealt hastily with him and strung him up as a horse thief.



The Silver Cache On Chinky Mountain

A "Bud Jones of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Law Comes To Cock Crow Mountain," etc.

THE young Ranger came back along the ledge to where his big troop horse, Pepper, nibbled at a few blades of mountain grass. The roan looked up at the approach of its master, big eyes affectionate and intelligent, ears up.

"I've found a place, and I figure we can get down to it," said "Bud" Jones, as Pepper nuzzled at him. "It's got good grass, outside your corn ration; there's a spring and plenty shade. Ain't many places folks could see into it from above, none from below. If my hunch is

right, the outlaws hang out on the other side the mountain. That's where I aim to look for 'em."

They were halfway up Chinky Mountain, in southwestern Texas. Some said it was named for the chinquapin trees that grew on the lower slopes; others claimed it was because of the many chinks, or caves, found in its tumbled pile.

It was a wild place, a great natural pyramid of jumbled rocks where brush and trees grew wherever they could find footing. Outlaw country, if ever there was one.

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In this region, the bandits, thieves of various kinds, and fugitives from justice far outnumbered the true settlers. It was all wilderness, and it took bold spirits to set up a home here where land that could be tilled was scarce and seldom level, where there were no markets, no schools, no stores or churches.

The only well-marked trails were made by deer. Wild creatures were plentiful, cougars holed up in the chinks and howled on certain nights like screaming women or children. Great cinnamon bears had their dens here. But none of the animals were more savage and beastly than the human outlaws.

It was here on the fastnesses of Chinky Mountain that the gang headed by "Black" Vane retreated after their raids with their loot. Sometimes it was the money taken from a lonely traveler or the passengers of a stage. Sometimes they raided a small town, terrorizing the inhabitants, supplying themselves with the shopkeepers' goods and the contents of their tills; burning and killing if they felt like it, inflamed with liquor, more like fiends than men. Now and then, they robbed a bank or held up a mail train.

Always they vanished in the trackless wilderness, their trail lost in thickets, in streams, on rocky passes. The pursuit was often faint-hearted. Men were afraid to make up a posse under a sheriff or his deputy, fearful that Vane would revenge himself upon their families or ambush them in some gorge.

The latest crime of the robber gang was also the most vicious. They had swooped down upon the La Plata Mine at precisely the moment when the pack train of burros was ready to leave with the clean-up.

They had a lot of native silver at La Plata, and all the ore was free-milling. They did their own smelting. The shipments consisted of ingots of the precious metal.

The load of each burro was worth close to five hundred dollars. There were fifty-odd burros in the train when Vane and his men came galloping up, swearing and shooting. They got away with twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of silver, almost as good as coin. They left behind seven dead and a dozen wounded.

It seemed plain that some one on the inside had tipped them off. A great many Mexicans worked at the mine, and there were Mexicans with Vane's band. It was quite likely that the traitor might have been a relative of one of the outlaws. Just as likely that Vane had planted one of his men in the mine.

They had made no attempt to hold up the train, given no chance to any of those who opposed them. Swearing and drunk, the robbers had shot down drivers and guards, slaughtered the superintendent, his assistants, and the engineers, all Americans, who had tried to protect the silver.

Vane had planned his butchery so that he and his men would not be followed when they drove off the richly laden burros. They were well away in the wilderness before a survivor spread the news. It was forty hours before word got to the Rangers' camp where Company F, under Captain Halstead, had their headquarters.

Bud Jones was corporal of this troop, the youngest corporal in the whole organization, where a majority of the men were in their teens. Young as he was, he was a veteran. Tall and lean and deeply bronzed, his light hair and blue eyes made

him look like a mere lad when he was not on active duty or was in disguise.

There were only thirty-odd in the company, including the surgeon and the two men who drove the chuck and equipment wagons, and acted as cooks. The amount of territory they had to patrol was enormous, even if it had not been the rough country it was. Therefore, each Ranger was forced to become a unit when it came to scouting.

They possessed great authority. A Ranger could set a sheriff aside, declare martial law. They were thorns in the sides of the outlaws they hunted down, striving to protect the few settlers and encourage new ones.

Every trooper was a hard rider and a crack shot, reckless in his fearlessness, expert in woodcraft. Once on a trail, they never left it while they were able to move. Like the famous Northwest Mounted Police the Rangers always "got their man."

And this was a crime that called for their action. The merciless killing and the daring of the raid showed that Vane and his men considered themselves above the law.

Captain Halstead sent word to the other troop that shared with his the patrol of the western border of the Lone Star State. The fords of the Rio Grande would be watched. The silver ingots could be sold in Mexico at a good price without questions being asked.

But Vane was too cunning, Halstead believed, to try to take the train across. He would be content to transport the silver in small quantities, carried probably in the saddlebags of his men, selling enough to give them money for gambling and buying liquor. They bought little else. They stole it.

Halstead's theory seemed proved when scouts announced that burros had been found back-tracking toward the mine. As far as their sign could be read in such a country, it looked as if Chinky Mountain was where they had been turned loose, and where Vane and his gang had established themselves.

It was not yet proved that it was Vane's band that was guilty of the outrage. They had all been masked and, though the leader might have had a black beard, it would have been hidden by the silk neckerchief he wore tied across his face and by his stuffing if beneath his shirt.

There was not evidence enough for a jury that would be more or less terrorized. Vane and his men had to be caught with the loot in their possession. It was not at all probable they would remelt the ingots, since they expected to get rid of them across the Rio Grande, where the smelter mark that identified them would not worry the purchaser.

Therefore, Bud Jones had got his orders to go to Chinky Mountain.

"All I want you to do, Jones," said his commander, "is to locate the band and secure evidence of their possession of the silver. Watch and listen and get away without their knowing. Find out their plans, if they have any, and don't let those cutthroats get hold of you. If they do, and suspect who you are, they'll kill you in such fashion that you'll wish you were dead a dozen times before you pass out."

Bud Jones saluted smartly. "I understand, sir. I'll hide Pepper out, and I'll be a local boy out squirrel hunting, or some such idea."

Captain Halstead tugged at his long Texas mustachios, long like a Texas steer's horns, grizzled like his hair.

"We'll have to keep in touch," he

went on. "We've got work on our hands that keeps us scattered most of the time, but we'll round up these cutthroat murderers and thieves and give them an escort to the gallows.

"Don't try and do the whole job yourself, corporal. Remember your prime fault. Don't get too ambitious or impetuous. Go light on your initiative. That's all."

The captain's somewhat faded but still keen eyes held a twinkle as he watched Bud depart after another salute. That initiative of Bud's had got him into plenty of grief—and his wits and courage had got him out of it, somewhat damaged upon occasion.

It had brought results that went far to establish and sustain the reputation of Company F and make it dreaded by bandits and trusted by honest citizens.

When Bud rode out of camp, he was equipped as a Ranger—no especial uniform, but wearing the universal sombrero, his carbine slung in a saddle scabbard beneath his thigh, double cartridge belts for rifle and the long-barreled six-gun that was balanced on his other hip by a sheathed bowie knife.

Pepper, unmatched by any horse in the two troops, was heavier, better bred, groomed and fed than mounts used by cowboys. The roan stood out. Its lines announced speed and endurance.

II.

Bud led the way down to the little glen. He showed the direction and left the rest to Pepper. Then Bud unsaddled, cached his rigging in a shallow cleft that he covered up with brush.

He found a second place and hid there his cartridge belts and his rifle and finally, with reluctance, his six-

gun. He could not wear it in the rôle he was about to play. It could not be hidden in the scanty outfit he took from his saddle roll, before he also tucked that away with his sombrero.

Now he was a country boy in faded and patched homespun, well-worn and clumsy shoes on his sockless feet, an old slouch hat on his head.

He kept his bowie knife, and he put together an ancient rifle he had brought along in two sections. He had a powder horn and a little leather bag for bullets.

He gave Pepper his ration of corn and told him to be a good horse and wait until he returned. He was quite sure Pepper understood. They had played this sort of game before.

Bud had shot five gray squirrels earlier in the day in woods where the shots would not be heard on Chinky Mountain. He had various odds and ends in his pockets that were what a country lad would carry, in case he had actually to meet any of the band.

He might run into a sentinel or even walk into some cunning trap. And, if he could get his information no other way, he intended to risk going boldly into their camp. He was not going to fall down on his mission.

It was hard going up the mountain. Though he was fairly sure the outlaws were not on this side, since he had seen no sign of them and knew his search had been thorough. He had to avoid exposing himself whenever it was possible.

Close to the summit, he found rocky slides of weathered rock, stretches of granite as smooth and slippery as ice, and steep cliffs that were almost impossible to climb. It was almost dark when he reached the crest.

On the far side, there was more forest, with here and there great outcrops of rock. Haze was rising as night closed in. The sun was down, the twilight fading fast as Bud scanned the slopes for a hint of smoke.

He figured the band might live in a big cave, or in more than one. They might cook there, but it was more likely they would do so in the open and use dry wood. There was plenty of dead cedar that would make smokeless fuel.

He tried to catch the scent of wood smoke or of food, but what motion there was in the air was drawn down the mountain. It was very still, and he listened for voices.

It looked like a pretty big proposition to search all that bulk of rugged mountainside alone and in the darkness. There was no moon, and the mist would veil the top of Chinky before long and hide the stars.

But Bud had faith in his hunches. Unless Vane and his men had left the place, he would find them. They would leave, if they thought the Rangers were after them in force.

It was quite possible they had spied on the camp, but Bud was certain he had not been trailed. He had ridden out with other Rangers as if on patrol and made a long detour before he had approached the mountain on the far side.

They would be looking for a mounted trooper, not a raw kid on this side.

It took keen eyes and fine woodcraft to make anything of that puzzle, but Bud started down as silently as a cunning dog fox, slipping from covert to covert. He made for the rocky outcrops, creeping on his stomach. He stopped often to look, listen, and sniff. His progress was slow but sure, and suddenly, two

hours after he had left the crest, he knew that he had found them.

There was a spark of light, barely seen, a wider glow on the face of rock above the fire. Now and then, he caught the sound of a laugh, higher-pitched than talk, carrying farther.

He marked the place, got his bearings and went aside to travel more boldly through a dense growth of trees. He imagined that Vane might have sentries out, and the forest covered him until he began to work back to where he thought he should strike the camp.

Once out of the trees, he heard more plainly. Voices were singing in chorus, then came the solo, with the twang of guitars. Bud snaked along and came to the edge of a gorge that looked like the cleft of a giant's ax into the side of the mountain. It closed near by where Bud peered down upon the bandit camp, the roost of the robbers.

The fire blazed brightly, fed with cedar logs. Its ruddy glow lighted up the rough faces of the outlaws, some dark, all bronzed, and many bearded. They sat about the flames on stumps, on tree trunks and boulders. Liquor flowed from wickered demijohns and passed from hand to hand in tin cups.

Bud saw the dark entrance of a cave at the bottom of the opposite cliff and another where the gorge closed up. Out of this last cavern, a stream flowed down the ravine.

That outfit, Bud figured, would have little use for water, except for cooking purposes. White mule was more in their line. They were a wild and savage lot. He saw where the firelight glinted on weapons, the butts of six-guns and the hilts of knives.

They would have rifles in the caves, he thought. Their horses

would not be far away, perhaps lower down the mountain. They had chosen a good place to hide and defend themselves.

Bud saw where the gorge narrowed beyond the firelight. It would be hard to enter, easy to hold. If they should be attacked from above, they had the caves to retreat into. Caverns in these mountains, Bud knew, were often a maze of chambers honeycombing the cliffs.

The song went on with the men beating time with their cups, clinking them together. The words suited them—"The Ballad of Quantrell":

"Come all you bold robbers and open your ears,
Of Quantrell the lion-heart you quickly shall hear,
With his brave band of raiders in double-quick time,
He came to lay Lawrence low, over the line."

Then came the shouted chorus of drunken voices, howled between every verse:

"All routing and shouting and giving the yell,
Like so many demons just raised up from hell,
The boys they were drunken with powder and wine,
As they rode to burn Lawrence, just over the line.

"They came to burn Lawrence, they came not to stay,
They rode in that morning at breaking of day,
With guns all a-waving and horses all foam,
And Quantrell a-riding his famous big roan.

"They came to burn Lawrence, they came not to stay,
Jim Lane he was up at the break of the day,
He saw them a-coming and got in a fright,
Then crawled in a corn crib and hid out of sight.

"Oh, Quantrell's a fighter, a bold-hearted boy,

A brave man or woman he'd never annoy,
He'd take from the wealthy and give to the poor,

For brave men there's never a bolt to his door."

Quantrell was a shining light beside these bloodthirsty ruffians, Bud thought, as the song ended and the tin cups were refilled. He heard the sound of a distant sentry's challenge, repeated closer. Then a man entered the gorge who was beyond question the leader, Black Vane.

His beard reached almost to his belt into which two guns were thrust. He walked with a swagger, big and powerful. His eyes caught the glare of the fire and glowed crimson. A great beak of a nose jutted out. His entrance brought the outlaws to attention.

One of them brought a demijohn as Vane stripped off his gauntlets, another offered a cup. Vane took the cup and tossed it into the air, snatched a gun from his belt and sent the tin container spinning with three bullets. It was good shooting, even with the firelight showing up the cup. Bud silently acknowledged it.

Then Vane swung the demijohn up on his crooked elbow, one finger in the handle, drinking the straight liquor in great gulps. He handed back the demijohn and wiped his beard. The outlaw beside him turned the demijohn upside down, and only a few drops trickled out. Vane held up his hand.

"I got news," he announced in a deep voice. "It ain't so pleasant, but it ain't goin' to stampede us none. First of all, folks have gone to the Rangers an' complained about us."

There was a bellow of laughter at the tone of his last sentence. Men

shouted insulting things about the force.

"I ain't got any use for those time-servin' skunks myself," said Vane, "but the second part of my news is that the La Plata silver was consigned to the government mint—under a contract. That makes it more or less a Federal matter. There ain't no regular soldiers within two hundred miles, but those blasted Rangers'll git orders to combine troops an' scour this district."

"They can't prove it's us," spoke up a bandit.

Vane swung toward him. "You sure can use your brains," he said sarcastically. "But they *might* prove it, if they found the ingots in our possession. They're safe where they're buried in the big cave, but we may have to clear out and, if we leave it behind us, it won't do us much good. They got some other things they might prove against us."

Bud's skin tingled. He inched a little closer, to lose nothing. Already he had sufficient evidence to take back to camp. The Rangers would raid, dig up the silver. There would be his own testimony. Some of the Mexicans in the band would be sure to tell what they knew in the hope of getting off lightly.

"I'm ridin' to the river ter-night," said Vane. "Me and Dan Sheldon. We'll go to Pescadero and have a talk with the *jefe*, Martinez. It'll take time for the Rangers to organize, time to locate us. We'll set out plenty of scouts. Soon as I fix it with Martinez and git back, which'll be ter-morrer noon, we'll start takin' out the silver, all we can pack on our hosses. Ride no more'n two or three together, stay apart, make all the trips we can. We'll stow the stuff in Martinez's cellar, and then, the first dark night, we'll take it all across the river in a

boat. Once we're in Mexico, we can laugh at the hull United States government."

The suggestion seemed to be generally well received. Only the man who had spoken before raised an objection:

"How about Martinez? That's a lot of dinero to trust him with."

"He'd find it expensive to try and trick us," answered Vane grimly. "But Martinez has a son, fifteen years old. I think he values the son more than even that amount of silver. So I shall arrange to have young Martinez visit with us until the ingots are safe. The son is worth nothing to us, but the silver is. Martinez will look at it the other way round."

He grinned at them, and the man was silenced. Vane declared that he was hungry, called for some food. Bud started to edge back. He could not see where he placed his feet and, as a flake of brittle rock broke off, it slid past him down the surface that sloped toward the rim.

He made a grab for it, but it was too late. The fragment fell into the gorge, struck the hard bottom fairly in front of Vane and bounded up.

III.

Vane let out a bellow that echoed back and forth—a cry of warning. It was taken up instantly back of Bud and on the other side of the gorge, where a man came swiftly forward. The firelight gleamed on his rifle barrel as he held the weapon ready to fire, peering across the ravine.

A voice came out of the darkness behind Bud:

"I got you covered. Stick 'em up!"

Bud had already risen to his feet, ready for a bolt to the woods. He

was fairly caught. On his way in he had snaked past this man who threatened him, and the sentry would be angry at that, might fear being called for it. His finger would be on the trigger, and he might fire at any second, if only to justify himself.

"All right, mister," said Bud. "I ain't doin' any harm. If you're moonshinin', you don't have to bother about me. I know plenty of stills."

"What are you doin' this side of the mountain?" demanded the man, but it was clear that Bud had checked him.

"I don't know the country good yit," said Bud. "I was out after a mess of squirrels and sort of got twisted round when it was dark."

"Who is it?" bellowed Vane from below.

"Jist a kid out squirrelin'," said the sentry. "I don't see how you got by me," he added to Bud in a lower tone.

"I come out of the woods," said Bud. "Saw the firelight. It looked good, and I was hungry, so I——"

"Bring him down," Vane ordered.

The sentry set the muzzle of his rifle in Bud's back and ordered him to march. There was a narrow trail that led down to the floor of the gorge, and the outlaw set him on it, followed him down to the fire where Vane stood glowering.

Bud looked forlorn and dumb and anxious, repeating his story about the squirrels, taking out the five he had shot to prove it.

"Reckon he's one of the outfit moved into that old shack, foot of the mountain on the fur side, on Chinky Creek," said the man who stood by with his rifle still ready. "Your name Huggins?"

Bud often played rôles in disguise, but he hated a direct lie.

"You see, the Hugginses, they ain't exactly close kin to me," he faltered.

Vane was fingering the squirrels. He ordered a man to skin and clean and broil them for him.

"Search this kid," he said. "If you're a spy," he went on to Bud, "I'll slice your lips off and send you back to them that sent you, after I've made you tell who they are. Unless I change my mind and cut your heart out," he said ferociously.

Bud cowered outwardly, stood awkward and pitiful. He knew that his life was not worth much at that moment. It depended entirely upon the mood of the band. They had taken his rifle and were laughing at the ancient weapon. They had his bowie knife, his powderhorn and bullets. They had gone through his pockets.

"A mouth harp, some fishhooks, fishline, and marbles," declared his searcher, amid guffaws of laughter.

"Play you for keeps," cried one.

The marbles had done a lot to help Bud out. The squirrels had been dressed, broiled on a spit. They were brought to Vane, who munched them, spitting out fragments of bone, washing down the meat with a swig of liquor.

"How long you been up thar?" he demanded.

The sentry, saving his own face, less shrewd than Vane, saved Bud for the moment.

"He slipped out of the woods," he said. "Couldn't have been there more'n a minute. I was right where he was myself less'n two minutes ago."

Vane took another swig. "Safest to cut his throat and have done with it," he said. "No sense in rousin' more fuss right now, though. Tie him up and take him in back of the big cave, up on the ledge. One

of you go down to that shack to-morrow an' see if he's missin'. If he is, we'll let him go home after we're clear. If he ain't, flay the hide off him, hang him up to dry somewheres where the folks who sent him here'll find him when we're gone."

The ferocity in Vane's cold voice convinced Bud that they would not hesitate in carrying out the sentence and enjoying his torments. Unless he could escape, his doom was sealed.

It might be better to attempt it now and be shot down, than to suffer the tortures that would be his when they found out he had nothing whatever to do with the Huggins family.

But his duty came first. While there was a possibility of his carrying out his mission, he must take the most desperate risks. They would never find out from him that he was a Ranger.

If he did not return to camp within forty-eight hours from the time he left there, Captain Halstead would send a detail to Chinky Mountain. They would not be in time to save him, but they would, perhaps, capture Vane and so avenge their comrade.

The outlaws tied him hand and foot, trussed him so he could barely move, and carried him into the big cavern by the light of pitch-pine torches. They rolled him to the back of a wide ledge and left him.

"Don't I git something to eat and drink?" he asked, and they laughed at him.

"Ter-morrer, after we hear from the shack, mebbe," said one of them.

They left him in darkness, save for the feeble pulsing of the fire that came into the great cavern.

He could hear them singing and carousing outside. He heard

snatches of "The Song of Stacker-lee," while he worked at his bonds:

"Billy Lyons, Billy Lyons, staggered through
the door,
'Cause Stackerlee had got him with his
great big .44—

Everybody talk about Stackerlee!

Dogs did howl, dogs did bark,
When Stackerlee, the murderer, went creep-
ing through the dark—

Everybody talk about Stackerlee!"

They had used rope instead of rawhide, and Bud had set his muscles hard, arm and thigh, when they bound him. They had been drunk enough not to notice it, but they knew how to tie their knots. He managed an inch or so of slack when he relaxed, but it was hard to make use of it. His flesh chafed against the cords as he wriggled. All he wanted was one free hand.

He had a pocketknife in his shoe. He could draw up his feet. He struggled until the bonds cut into his flesh.

"Rubber tires on carriages, rubber tires on
hacks,
Took Stackerlee to the cemetery and never
brought him back—

Everybody talk about Stackerlee!"

Bud could curl his hand back and barely grip the coils about his wrists. The flesh there was raw, cut almost to the bone.

"What a bold, bad man he must be;
With his .44 and his bowie knife, never
hesitate a minute for to take your
life—

Oh, everybody talk about Stackerlee!"

Torches were coming to the cave. The men had almost forgotten their prisoner, safely bound, tucked away on the ledge. Bud stopped struggling, rolled and wriggled to the

edge, lying on his stomach, his neck twisted, gazing down.

There were Vane and two others. The two had spades. They were going to dig up some of the buried silver. Vane would change it at Pescadero, exhibit it to Martinez as a sample of what he would hide and hold as security for his boy.

Vane paced off measured distances from the two sides and the back of the cavern. Bud marked the spot. He saw them toss up loose soil like sand, uncover stone, lift a big slab of it, and then he rolled back to the far end of the ledge in case one of them might take the notion to come up and look at him.

He knew now where the silver was cleverly stowed. That slab of stone would stop the search of those who might think the ingots buried in the cave.

They did not disturb him. The torches vanished, and he was left in the dark.

It seemed hours before he got his mangled wrist loose, dreading to see dawn seeping into the cave. It was a warm night, and the outlaws were sleeping outside. Vane and Sheldon had long since gone. The bandits were stretched out by the dying fire, snoring, some of them blanketed, others uncovered.

The shadows were thick as Bud sneaked out of the cave and made his way toward the entrance of the gorge. It would be too risky to try the trail down which the sentry had forced him. He might meet the man at the top, and Bud had no weapon but the small pocketknife. At the mouth of the ravine, the stream gurgled amid big boulders that gave good cover.

Bud stopped and bathed his wrists in the cold water. It stung, but it was healing. He had come to where the gorge narrowed, with barely

room for the creek to flow freely. Then it twisted sharply, and he saw the light of another, smaller fire, heard two men talking. They were not entirely sober, but they were watchful, and he must pass them in the very throat of the ravine.

It seemed impossible. It was slowly growing light. Bud wriggled along, desperate. Vane was well on his way to Pescadero and the Rio Grande by now. Bud had to stop him and Sheldon, arrest them with the ingots still in their saddlebags.

He got close. One man was telling the other of his many successful gun fights. He poured out the last of a flask into their two cups. They lifted them.

Bud took a round stone into his palm. He stood up and hurled it like a baseball. It took the nearer man on the side of his head, and he flopped, motionless. The other man bent over him, thinking his fellow had collapsed from liquor. Bud leaped to the top of a rock and hurled himself upon him, bare-handed.

The man was strong. Bud was faint from lack of food. They thrashed in the gravel, got to their knees. The outlaw set a grip of steel to Bud's throat, and Bud set up his arms between the other's, his fingers interlocked. He surged his arms aside and down, twined his legs about the bandit's middle in a scissors that squeezed the wind out of the man, just as he started to yell.

A slug to the jaw ended that outcry, and the man went limp. Bud took their six-guns and tossed one of them over the cliff. He carried their rifles with him a little way and then threw them into a pool. He kept one six-gun. Day was coming fast as he made his way round the shoulder of the mountain, bound for Pepper and his own equipment.

IV.

He came out of trees and found himself on an open terrace of rock. A man stood there, leaning on a rifle. Bud was fully fifty feet away when the sentry challenged him. The outlaw fired from his hip, and so did the Ranger. It was rifle against six-gun, and the small arm won.

If it had been Bud's own balanced weapon, the slug would have targeted in the man's thigh. As it was, the lead tore through his hip, raking his intestines, bringing him down in a moaning heap. It was a mortal wound.

Bud passed him, his own cheek scored in a close call from death. Presently the man's comrades would do what they could for him, but they were murderers all, and Bud was the law. He had no remorse over the shot.

The reports might have aroused the rest. The two he had passed in the gorge would be recovering. But Bud knew where he was going, and they did not. He forged on, weak but resolute, and reached the mountain crest just as the sun struck it.

It was easier going down, but his strength was almost gone when he lunged into the little glen, and Pepper faintly whickered at him. Bud found his saddle and the dried beef he had in his saddlebags. He drank from the spring and bound up his rope-scalded wrist, bathed his cheek, changed his clothes.

Once more he was a Ranger. He saddled up.

"Pepper," he said, "here's where you've got to break all records."

Pescadero lay in the gap of the bluffs that bordered the Rio Grande. It was, as its name implied, a fish-

ing village, but its main industry and revenue came from smuggling.

Martinez, the *jefe*, or judge, of the district, was elected by Mexican votes of those who claimed to be American citizens. Many of them could show papers to prove their citizenship, but they were all Mexican at heart.

Vane and Sheldon walked their horses as they neared the gap. They expected no interference, and their mounts were tired, heavily laden down by their riders and the dead weight of silver ingots.

Pescadero was patrolled by the Rangers, and one of the troopers made it his headquarters, but he would not be there at this hour. So they took it easy.

"I've got the goods on Martinez, aside from holding his kid," boasted Vane. "He knows it, too. He'll do anything I tell him, and he'll see we get the best there is in town. Just a few minutes, an' we'll be sittin' down to one swell meal, with wine and tequila to sluice it down."

"I could use it," said Sheldon. "I'd rather have some of that smuggled aguardiente than the wine. It sure cuts the dust. Hold up, you!" he called to his horse, swearing and cruelly spurring the jaded beast as it stumbled.

The silver they carried had proved a fatal handicap. Bud had sent Pepper straight across country, over crest and through dale, swimming rivers rather than searching for a ford, making for Pescadero. The roan had sensed the need for haste and speed and had given its utmost.

Now it came sliding down a gully in the red bluff in a cloud of dust. It landed on the level, rearing high, full of spirit. As Bud flicked the reins, Pepper shot ahead of the two outlaws.

Through the dust, they saw a

rider who wore twin cartridge belts and straddled a scabbarded rifle. The face was stern under the sombrero, and they did not recognize it. But they knew that here was a Texas Ranger, on their trail, cutting them off.

Pepper's jaws were foaming and his sides lathered with sweat and dust. His ribs heaved, but he was not winded. Horse and rider barred the road, officially and unrelentingly.

"Lookin' for you, Vane. You too, Sheldon! Rein in and set still! You're all wound up!"

They looked at the Ranger, fury and despair in their hearts. The mention of his name staggered Sheldon. Arrest meant the gallows. The law had found them. Beyond this lone Ranger, there was Pescadero, with Martinez ready to help them, only the Rio Grande between them and Mexico.

They dug their spurs deep into the flanks of their jaded mounts, and the poor brutes tried to respond. Vane's horse reared up wearily. Sheldon flogged his with a quirt, lying along its back. They opened fire.

So did Corporal Bud Jones, Texas Ranger.

Shots rang out in the gap between the red bluffs. Down by the river, in Pescadero, Martinez and others heard them and paid no attention. Martinez was a justice of the peace elected by the votes of his own countrymen, and there were times when he could be very legal and administer the gringo law to keep the peace. This, he figured, was not one of them.

Muzzles spouted pale flame in the sunlight. The reek of powder was on the still air.

Sheldon's horse went pounding down toward the little river town,

dragging its rider, who could feel nothing of the bumping of his body. His foot jerked loose from the stirrup, and he lay in the dust, his mouth filled with it.

Vane slid from his saddle and lay in the road. One shoulder was blotched with crimson. His horse followed Sheldon's. Vane was groaning, one hand on his middle.

Bud threw a leg over his saddle horn and stood over the outlaw leader, thief and murderer. It had been a fast and furious *mêlée* while it lasted. Bud was hit twice in his left arm, and he had flung most of his lead snap-shooting.

He had not wanted to kill these men, but he had been forced to hit Sheldon in the head, and now, if Vane was shot through the stomach, he, too, would cheat the gallows.

Bud had not counted his cartridges, he was not sure if he had one or two loads left, if any. One of the bandits' slugs had lodged between the bones of his left forearm, and the shock and pain, on top of his headlong ride, did not help any to steady his nerves.

"You got me," moaned Vane. "I got something—to tell—you. Something you want to know—something I want to——" He closed his eyes, and his voice died down to a whisper.

Bud started to kneel to listen better and caught the quiver of Vane's eyelids just in time. The outlaw chief was not hit in the stomach at all. His movement had been toward a knife hidden beneath the sash he wore instead of a belt. It flashed out as Vane ripped upward at the Ranger.

Bud pulled trigger, and the hammer fell with a click. His left hand was useless, and he had dropped that gun after emptying it. Now he struck with his other one, as fast as

the strike of a snake—faster than Vane's mad slash.

The gun muzzle struck the blade, slid down the steel and cracked Vane's knuckles. The knife went flying. Bud watched it, realizing it was his own bowie knife which had been taken from him at the outlaw hide-out.

He stood astride Vane, swiftly reloading his six-gun, despite his wounded arm. His blue eyes blazed down into the evil orbs of Vane. The bandit knew his doom and glared, helpless but filled with hate.

"You're going to swing, Vane," said Bud. "Not a chance in the world to get away from it. I'm taking you into Pescadero, and Martinez himself will help to keep you safe, instead of holding the silver for you in his cellar."

Vane's glare of hate changed to bewilderment. How did this Ranger know about Martinez and the silver?

"The ingots in your saddlebags'll put the noose round your neck, if nothing else will," Bud went on. "I'm turning you over to a trooper who'll be here before sunset. Then

I'm going back to my headquarters, and to-night we'll raid your hide-out on Chinky Mountain. We'll round up your band and dig up that silver buried in the cave. I know just where to find it."

"You know? How do *you* know? Are you——"

"Get up," ordered Bud. "You can walk well enough. Never mind who I am. You've seen me before."

Vane stood on unsteady feet, blinking.

"Blazes!" he cried suddenly. "You're the kid with the squirrels!"

"And the marbles," answered Bud. "Don't forget the marbles, and the mouth harp."

He prodded the swearing bandit on toward the river. Pepper followed at his master's heels.

Bud Jones's captain will prob'ly raise ructions over Bud's doin' thet hull job hisself. At least, while Bud kin hear him, he will. But underneath, he'll prob'ly thank his stars thet he's got a corporal like Bud under his command. Thet young Ranger is *there*. Watch fer the next thrillin' story about Bud an' Pepper. Yuh'll find it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right soon.





Git Them Hosses!

By Stephen Payne

Author of "Johnny of the Hot Spur Stage," etc.

THE kid had come from the Sunflower State, so they called him "Kansas," there at the Down T Ranch in the Colorado Rockies. Although he'd been with the outfit less than ten days, he hoped with all his heart to be made "hoss jingler" on the beef round-up which was starting this frosty autumn morning.

Tingling with anticipation, Kansas hustled out of the bunk house. His new, squeaky boots hurt his feet like the very dickens. Although his spurs weren't worth the dollar they had cost him, he was proud of them. Proud, too, of his purplish silk neckerchief and his wide-brimmed hat.

In fact, this freckled, amiable youth, with round blue eyes, pug nose, and more tawny hair than a

porcupine has quills, was sure he looked like a real cow-puncher.

The soft, pink light of dawn was creeping across the plains and foothills, while westward, the higher reaches of the jagged mountain sky line were golden with sunlight. Sounds at the corrals told that the cavvy had already been brought in, and that cowboys were roping and saddling their ponies.

Kansas ran to join them, and the foreman, grizzled old Hank May, after jerking tight a latigo strap, turned to look into the kid's shining eyes.

"Which hoss'll I catch, Hank?"

Hank tugged at one end of his drooping mustache. It was hard to break tragic news to such an eager kid—a kid the whole outfit kind o'

liked. But the big boss had decided he was too new and inexperienced for to jingle hosses even.

"Sorry, son, but you ain't goin' along."

The light went out of Kansas's face. He stood as if stunned. Cowboys glanced at him, then looked away quickly. Some of these riders had razzed young Kansas unmercifully. But now they neither laughed nor hoorahed him. They savvied how this hurt.

Even though Kansas knew Hank May was boss of the riders, he wondered about appealing his case to Grant Withers, owner of the Down T. However, the unhappy kid recalled that the big boss had not been any too pleased when Hank May had brought him—green pilgrim—to the ranch.

"Here's a kid what's shore eager to be up and a-doin', Grant," the old foreman had announced. "I figured he'd make us a hoss wrangler some day."

But the boss had returned gruffly: "Put him to chorin'."

So, ever since his arrival at the big ranch, Kansas had been doing chores, all the while remembering and cherishing Hank's, "make us a hoss wrangler some day."

The kid had no appetite for breakfast. Mechanically he went about his duties, and was at the woodpile when the round-up outfit pulled out—without him.

The four chuck-wagon horses were so rollicky they were trying to run away. "Soapy" Rankin, holding the ribbons on the high seat, had his hands full.

Directly behind the rattling, bouncing wagon the cavvy strung out—about a hundred ponies, all colors, fat, sleek, sassy. Following them came the riders—tall men, short men, grizzled old-timers,

smooth-cheeked youngsters, some every bit as young as Kansas.

Three horses were bucking. Two cowboys were having difficulty in talking their mounts out of this same notion. Other ponies were tossing their heads, champing their bits. The punchers were laughing, joking the men on the buckers, cheering or hooting. It was a fresh, eager outfit, hilarious and rowdy, starting for the round-up. And Kansas wasn't a part of it!

The kid turned rebelliously to his wood sawing again. Mighty tough when a fella had figured—

A sudden shadow fell across the sawbuck, and Kansas looked up to see Grant Withers. The rancher's eyes were smoldering. In his right hand he gripped a letter as if it were some one he'd enjoy choking.

"Kid," he rumbled fiercely, and Kansas couldn't help jumping, "this letter came yesterday. Got overlooked some way and I didn't notice it till about five minutes ago. Now I ain't got a single cow-puncher to send on this funny business."

He jabbed the letter at young Kansas, who read:

dere mr grant withers sur and frind vor
hawses bursted mi fenc got inter mi meder
et up my gras i cudnt kep em out soe i got
to hav fed bil on em foar etin me out fiv
dullar a hed wil be rite they iz fiftie hed
yu git em soon to cuz no moar gras yores
frank farley.

"What d'you make of it?" the rancher inquired wrathfully.

"Why——" Kansas began, but Withers plunged on:

"Frank Farley is a worthless cuss who lives on the west side of the range"—waving a hand at the mountains. "He's fenced a little hunk of open ground along Blizzard Creek, and now he seems to be tryin' to soak me for a feed bill."

The kid nodded. "I got that part."

"Some of my horses do range in that neck of the woods," the rancher resumed. "So I send a couple of cowboys over Blizzard Pass every fall to round up and bring home the animals. My riders camp with Farley, who's always soaked me plenty for feedin' 'em and their ponies."

Withers again glared at the letter and continued:

"I can't see why my horses broke into his field. They never bothered him before. Kid, d'you reckon you can go get them cayuses? Reckon you can talk this ignorant, but mighty cunnin' jigger out o' his fool idea of chargin' me this outrageous sum?"

Kansas's freckled face brightened. The dull misery which had been in his eyes vanished. "You bet I can get 'em, Mr. Withers!"

The rancher eyed the gangling kid doubtfully. "Wish I had a man to send, but the broncs won't be no trouble to drive home. Think you can persuade Farley to accept a reasonable pasture bill? Say, fifty dollars?"

"I'll try my darnedest, sir."

"That's the spirit! I'll tell you how to reach Farley's ranch, and I'll give you a check for fifty dollars. You git them hosses!"

II.

Frank Farley was a slovenly, bulbous-nosed hombre with little, pig-gish eyes—eyes that were always blood-shot from drink and couldn't look any man straight in the face. A bachelor, he lived alone on Blizzard Creek, which came tumbling down the western slope of the mountains from Blizzard Pass. Following the stream's course was a trail, seldom traveled unless by hunting

parties or cow-punchers looking for strayed stock.

Farley always asked pay for the miserable accommodations and grub he furnished these infrequent riders or hunters. Yet he wasn't making enough to keep himself supplied with the necessities of life, to say nothing of the whisky he craved.

Therefore this cunning scoundrel had thought up the idea of stealing fifty or more Down T horses. On the ancient roan mare, which he rode with a blind bridle stolen from somebody's set of harness, Farley fairly slaved to round up those horses and get them into his field.

Then because he was a petty thief, he got cold feet. Where would he take the horses to sell them?

Pondering the matter, and already thoroughly scared, Farley considered opening his fence and letting the broncs go. Then he had an inspiration. Let 'em go after all the hard work he'd done? Never! He'd make the Down T pay him for his work!

Forthwith he wrote to Grant Withers and rode thirty miles downstream to the post office, at the forks where Blizzard Creek emptied into Blue River, to mail his letter.

While waiting impatiently for a Down T cowboy to arrive, Farley quite unexpectedly had a chance to sell the Down T ponies in his field. Two riders—a chunky young man with hard brown eyes and a smirk, and a rawboned old fellow with long-horn mustache and furrowed, leathery face—came riding up Blizzard Creek and stopped with the slovenly rancher overnight.

The old hand explained in a soft drawl that they were horse dealers, going over Blizzard Pass to pick up a few head.

Farley asked if they knew any of the outfits over the range. They did not. Then Farley took a long

chance. He said he ran the Down T iron, was in the business of raising horses, and had some under fence he'd sell. So the buyers looked at the horses.

"Good uns, Chess," drawled the old hand.

"Humdlings, Rawlins," approved the other. "See what you can do with this geezer." Aside, this young hombre, "Chess," added to himself, in a whisper which Farley heard: "I'd a heap rather steal 'em than buy 'em, but Rawlins don't know yet I'm that kind of a jasper."

The lean old-timer, who carried the pocketbook, saw "what he could do with the geezer." Farley was canny enough to ask a stiff price and stay with it. But Rawlins finally bought the herd for forty dollars a head and paid Frank Farley more cold cash than that pig-gish-eyed crook had ever seen before.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Farley helped Rawlins and Chess get the horses started toward Blue River.

Now that he had sold the horses, the crafty scoundrel found himself in a cold sweat for fear some Down T cowboy should show up before he could pack his few belongings and pull out for parts elsewhere—plenty far away. He regretted having written that letter to Grant Withers.

"But," thought Farley, upon leaving the buyers and returning to his shanty, "why get all steamed up and scairt?"

He could cook up a good lie to tell the Down T rider. Furthermore, before he skinned out, he'd manage to get the cash or the check which Withers would send for the feed bill. Though he had plenty of money now, two hundred and fifty dollars more would help a lot.

Late that very evening the

Down T rider showed up. Frank Farley, opening his shanty door at a hail from without, saw a freckled kid of eighteen. He noticed this kid's hat and chaps, his spurs and neckerchief, and the long-barrelled hogleg.

"I'm a cowboy from the Down T," stated Kansas.

"G'wan," scoffed Farley, his pig-gish eyes wide with amazement. "Yuh ain't no cow-puncher."

"W-h-a-t? I am, too."

"G'wan. Grant Withers don't hire brats what ain't hardly weaned and is plumb greenhorns."

"I ain't so green," retorted the kid hotly. "You're Farley? I got the letter you writ the boss. I got a check for you, too. 'Sides, my pony's branded Down T. I'll show you I belong to that outfit."

Farley was convinced when he had looked at the letter and check. "Yep, yuh come from Withers all jake. But say! Hey, what the— This check's jus' fer *fifty* dollars!"

"Anything the matter with that?" asked Kansas innocently.

"Anything the matter?" yowled Farley, his stubbled face twitching with rage. "I tol' Grant Withers my bill was five dollars a head—two hundred and fifty bucks. An' he sends me— Hey, yuh counter-feit cowboy, ramble back home an' bring what I asked! Git goin'!"

Holding young Kansas in the utmost contempt, the slovenly scoundrel thought he could scare the liver out of the freckled kid. He'd send him home to-night, thus avoiding explanations about the missing horses. While the kid was gone Farley would fan the breeze—with the measly fifty dollars.

"I'm stayin' right here," announced Kansas. "In the mornin', I'll take them hosses to the Down T."

"That so?" rasped Frank Farley. "Waal, I ain't givin' up them broncs 'thout the jack fer my feed bill. Yuh take my advice an' rattle yore hocks fer the Down T, to-night."

"Seems like your hearin's bad," barked the kid. "I said I was stayin'."

Farley doubled both fists menacingly. "Drift, an' drift now!" he roared. "An' yuh come back with a check fer the full amount!"

To the scoundrel's everlasting amazement, Kansas tugged his huge six-gun from its holster. The muzzle of this weapon looked to Farley as large as the mouth of a tunnel.

"You tellin' me what to do, you dirty walloper?" cried the kid from Kansas. "I'll tell *you* what to do for a change!"

"Shucks, kid," gasped Farley, "I didn't mean nothin'! I wasn't agoin' to hurt yuh. Nope, I was jus' a—a-jokin' yuh some. Shove that cannon back——"

"Dry up!" flashed Kansas. "I wouldn't trust yuh as far as I'd trust our scrappin' Jersey bull we had back home. Why, you blusterin' cuss, yuh smell kind o' skunkish to me. I'm again' to tie yuh up till I get them hosses and has 'em on the trail."

Frank Farley began to beg and whine, assuring the proddy kid over and over that he "hadn't meant nothin'." Shore he wanted him to stay all night. He'd help get the hosses and everything, if only the kid would holster that smoke wagon and be reasonable.

But he found Kansas as stubborn as a balky mule. He took Farley's gun, tossed it on the roof of the shanty and lashed the fellow's wrists together behind his back.

Had the man only known about the kid's weapon he might have

turned the tables, for this ancient single-action Colt .45 was a most unreliable shootin' iron. The mechanism was worn until the cylinder no longer revolved when the gun was cocked, and the cylinder must be adjusted to line up with the barrel before a shot could be fired.

Moreover, the spring which controlled the hammer had become so weak that when the trigger was pulled it was doubtful if the descending hammer would explode a cartridge. The gun was really junk, but it looked murderous.

There was no barn; nor was there any hay. So Kansas, taking Farley with him, picketed his pony on the best grass he could find in the dark. Next he marched his captive back to the tumble-down, filthy shanty, and set about getting a meal.

"Fust time a danged cub, 'thout no fuzz on his cheeks even—a danged greenhorn t'boot—ever treated me this a way," Farley grunted sourly. "Yuh'll shore pay fer it."

To tell the truth, Kansas was terribly bothered about his high-handed act. But he reassured himself by thinking that real cowboys never let anybody bluff 'em out or put anything over on 'em. What else could Kansas have done, when this filthy reptile had demanded that he head back for the Down T this very night—without the horses?

What to do with the man until daybreak was a problem which the gritty kid solved by sitting up all night, guarding his captive.

At the first sign of daylight Kansas was on the move. A hurried breakfast, then Farley was compelled to work his roan mare and ride with the kid while they explored the field between high, wooded hills along Blizzard Creek's narrow valley.

Of course, they found no horses. Farley said they must have broken out of their own accord. But Kansas had found tracks where those horses had been driven through an opening in the fence, heading south by west along the trail leading down the creek.

"Looks like them hosses was bein' driv," the kid commented.

"How d'yuh figger that?" grated Farley.

"Tracks of two shod ponies show plainer 'n other tracks. Only them two hosses is shod. Range hosses, as everybody knows, ain't never shod, 'cept for special reasons."

"Yeah?" sneered Farley, wondering how he could keep this determined kid from following the horses and taking him along, too. Farley didn't want to meet Rawlins and Chess under any such circumstances.

"Waal, I'll tell yuh somethin'," the slovenly crook went on. "Them thar Down T broncs busted out o' my field over a week ago, an' I ain't seed 'em since. These hosses yuh sees the tracks of is a round-up cavy some fellers had in my pasture overnight, when they was ridin' in these hills. Ain't no sense your trailin' *them*. An' you'll have to comb the hull range hereabouts fer them Down T cayuses."

"I'll start combin' the range hereabouts after I see what hosses made these tracks, not before," stated Kansas decidedly. He frowned thoughtfully. He'd have to hustle to catch those horses and Farley's old roan mare couldn't hustle.

"I jus' can't seem to get nothin' through yore haid, yuh loco pilgrim!" Farley was snarling. "I—Hey, what yuh doin' now?"

"Leavin' yore plug tied to the fence with you tied to it," announced the youth. "So long!"

"I'm shore up against a queer

proposition," thought the kid, as he loped down the narrow valley. "Yet, good gosh, I couldn't let that dirty cur run me away 'thout them hosses! I'd 'a' looked pretty ridin' in and sayin' to the boss, 'Mr. Farley sez to send him two hundred and fifty bucks.'"

This freckled kid couldn't see himself falling down on his job. There was a determined gleam in his eyes, an obstinate set to his jaw, as he spurred on down the trail. His mount was all alather when he overtook the two horse buyers with the Down T ponies.

III.

Chess and Rawlins, being in no hurry, had camped only a few miles below Farley's ranch and had started out again late that morning. Otherwise Kansas might have ridden all day to catch them.

Rawlins, the old-timer, was riding ahead, holding the horses down to a walk. So Kansas first met Chess, who brought up the rear.

The kid, having seen the brand on the nearest horses, replied to Chess's greeting with the challenge: "What the Sam Hill you doin' with these broncs?"

"Who wants to know?" asked Chess insolently. Sizing up the spindling figure and "mail-order" cowboy attire of this tawny-haired kid he snickered. "Whar'd you 'scape from, Willie Boy?"

"I'm a Down T cow-puncher," flashed Kansas, right on the fight. "I come over the range to get fifty head of hosses what Frank Farley was holdin' in his pasture for a feed bill and——"

"Yuh talkin' through yore hat?" Chess cut in. "Farley owns the Down T iron. He sold us these cayuses."

"Farley sold 'em? He owns the Down T brand? No! Feller, either you bought these brons not knowin' they never belonged to Frank Farley, or else you stole 'em."

"Stole 'em?" ejaculated the young horseman. "We shore didn't. Say, you dog-goned loco pilgrim, what you tryin' to play?"

"I'll show you what I'm tryin' to play," retorted Kansas, now thoroughly enraged. He reached for his six-gun, but changed his mind about drawing the unreliable weapon, as Chess's Colt came clear of leather and the smirking hombre snapped:

"Don't try it!"

Rawlins now came riding back to take part in the argument. The leathery-faced old-timer's eyes narrowed to slits as he sized up the kid.

"Easy with your smoker, Chess," he advised. "What's the trouble?"

Chess profanely told of the accusations of this "beardless greenhorn what don't look like he knows a cow from a cayuse."

"What's your side of this, kid?" inquired the old hand.

Thinking, "He's one hard-bitten old hoss thief, shore enough, but I'll tell him the truth," Kansas blurted out the story: Farley's letter to Withers; the kid's being sent from the Down T; Farley's strange reception; what Kansas had done so far.

"These is Down T hosses, and I figger to take 'em home," he finished.

Chess laughed scoffingly. "I figger it's all a lie."

Rawlins fingered his long-horn mustache thoughtfully. "The green jasper's forkin' a Down T hoss," he opined. "And they was somethin' queer 'bout that Farley jigger as I recall our dealin's with him, Chess. Maybe this kid's talkin' straight."

"You bet yore life I am." Kansas felt more kindly toward the old

hand. He noticed however, a peculiar, crafty gleam in the brown eyes of Chess.

"An' you got Farley tied up?" Rawlins resumed. "Don't seem possible a kid like you could 'a' got the best of that jigger. But a feller smellin' of that hogleg you tote would be tamed all right. Howsomever, we ain't minded to give up these ponies without gettin' plumb to the bottom of this deal."

Kansas reached into his overalls pocket, and Chess, watching him narrowly, said, "If you drag out any toy gun, I'll let you have a dose of lead."

The kid's hand came out of his pocket empty. "Thunder! I was goin' to show you hombres Farley's letter to Withers, and the check Withers sent by me. Them papers'd show you what's what. But Farley's got 'em both."

"One of us'll go back with you and get Farley," drawled Rawlins. "The other'll hold these hosses right here."

Kansas tried to get the old hand to back-trail with the brons. But Rawlins wouldn't hear of it. Chess, muttering something under his breath, agreed he'd ride with the kid.

"Howsoever, I'll take that cannon offn the loco jigger first."

The kid hated to give up his precious gun, but with Chess's Colt covering him, he had no choice. He saw his formidable-looking weapon stowed away in one of Chess's saddle pockets. Then Chess and Kansas took the back trail.

The two had ridden about five miles at a rapid pace, when the man suddenly called: "Pull up an' pile off!"

Kansas drew rein. "What's the idea?" he demanded.

"See that hunk of boggy land off

to our right?" retorted Chess. "Waal, there's sink holes or springs out there. We lost a hoss comin' down this mornin'. I want to see if it's out o' sight yet."

Chess was dismounting. The kid did likewise. He wasn't interested in a horse hopelessly mired. But he'd humor this smirking hombre. The two walked across the swampy ground, which was covered by moss and a rank growth of slough grass. Kansas, sinking almost to his knees at each step, had no inkling of Chess's intent until——

"Stop!" clipped an order. "Thar's a sink hole thet'll do. Jump in!"

Chess's gun was now in his hand. He had crowded up close to the kid to look at the slimy, oozy spring. Kansas, looking too, knew at a glance there wasn't any bottom to this mire hole. Chess intended to bury him alive!

"Jump in!" snapped the man again, prodding the kid with his gun.

But Kansas did not obey. One hand jerked to shove Chess's weapon aside; his other, doubled, drove to the man's jaw.

Wham! A bullet smacked into the oozy mire.

But Chess was reeling. Instantly the wiry kid, now behind the hombre, gave him a couple of punches which toppled Chess over.

The man hurled his smoking gun aside, grabbing wildly at the kid's legs, at the mossy ground, at anything by which to save himself. Failing, he plunged head-first into the spring!

Kansas almost went in, too, as he grabbed Chess's feet and tugged with all his might to pull him out. But the slimy mud held like quicksand.

Swiftly the kid ran across the morass to the saddle ponies on the solid trail. Chess's horse took fright

at this figure leaping toward it and bolted, regardless of trailing reins. Kansas's mount was inclined to follow, but stepped on the reins and stopped. Kansas reached his pony, sprang to the saddle, and sent his mount wallowing across the spongy ground. As he rode, the kid jerked loose his rope. In another moment, he was off, placing the loop around Chess's legs.

He mounted again, and dallied his rope around his saddle horn. His Down T pony jerked many cattle from similar places. Although knee-deep in the morass, it pulled like a freight horse. The slimy ooze went *gulp—glug!* and out of it came the would-be killer.

Kansas hopped down to look at Chess, who was black mud from boots to hair. He had lost all desire to fight. Indeed, he was almost gone. But as Kansas wiped off the man's nose and mouth and turned him over, Chess drew in a gasping breath.

Picking up the fellow's six-gun, Kansas stuck it into his own holster. Suddenly he found himself shaking. He had been plenty near a horrible death!

However, the kid assured himself that real cow-punchers didn't ever have the shakes or get jumpy. After a moment's thought, he dragged Chess out beside the trail, and lashed his hands behind his back and tied his ankles together with saddle strings cut from his own saddle..

By this time Chess had recovered sufficiently to swear. And how he did swear! The kid had sort of imagined the ornery hombre might thank him for saving his life!

"I guess you'll be here when I get back," Kansas cut in to this flow of profanity.

He coiled his rope, forked his horse, and loped down the trail to

capture Rawlins and recover those Down T horses. He rode like the wind, for it occurred to him that Rawlins had very likely kept going with the ponies. After the way Chess had acted, Kansas was positive those two jiggers were out-and-out horse thieves.

IV.

However, to his relieved amazement, the old hand, with the broncs, was where Kansas had left him. Not until this moment, did the kid realize that he had not taken Chess's cartridge belt from him.

He was examining Chess's weapon and found it to be a thirty-eight on a .45 frame. Kansas's own shells wouldn't fit it. There were only four good cartridges in the gun, for Chess evidently carried his weapon with one chamber empty, as most riders do, and one wild shot had been fired at the mire hole.

Rawlins was coming to meet the kid, who shoved his weapon back into the holster and rode forward as nonchalantly as possible.

"You an' your hoss has both been wallerin' in mud," stated the lean old rangeman, his steady gaze fixed upon Kansas. "What's happened? Where's Chess?"

Wondering how quickly the man could drag his iron, Kansas answered, "Chess tried his darnedest to murder me. Now I know you're a pair of hoss thieves, and—— Get 'em up!"

He had the handle of his new gun gripped hard. It was clear of the holster, but—Rawlins's Colt was pointing straight at young Kansas's nose! How had the man drawn so swiftly? Now came the old hand's voice, edged and stern, no longer soft and drawling:

"Hold it!"

The thunderstruck kid made no attempt to raise his weapon, just sat his saddle, staring.

"I'd shore like to learn to get my smoker like you got yourn," he said finally.

"I notice you got Chess's barker," returned the lean rider. "Drop it!"

Kansas let the gun fall. The kid felt foolish, felt that all he'd done so far had been of no use. He was worse off now than ever. He'd never take home the Down T horses, never make good with Grant Withers, never be a real cowboy.

Yet victory would have been his if only he'd been swifter on the draw. This Rawlins was sure some hand. Too darned bad he was a hoss thief.

"That's jake," said the old-timer, the drawl back once again. He calmly holstered his weapon, resuming: "Now, what was you startin' to tell me?"

Kansas blurted an account of what Chess had tried to do. Rawlins scowled. He tugged at his mustache, his eyes becoming frosty.

"So that's the kind of cuss I'm ridin' with! Talkin' straight, are yuh, kid?"

"Course I am. 'Twas all straight 'bout me comin' from the Down T, and Farley tryin' to send me home in the night and—— Look! Look a-comin'!"

Two riders, spurring down the gulch, had popped around a bend. One was Frank Farley on his old roan mare. The other was Chess, on the horse which had bolted—Chess, still hatless, still coated with black mud. But he had Kansas's six-gun in his hand. Farley, thundering mad, also had a gun.

"Crack down on that young skunk, Rawlins!" yelled Chess. "Don't give him no chance to draw on yuh."

As the panting horses of the two

newcomers thudded to a halt, old Rawlins said calmly, "Might put up yore hoglegs, fellers. I persuaded the kid to let loose of hisn."

"Yuh got him, huh?" yowled Farley. "I tell yuh, Rawlins, he's a slippery one. The biggest liar on earth."

"Liar? You bet," clipped Chess. "Pard, this kid was a-lyin' to us. Farley owned them hosses. The kid's a loco wild man what somehow got the notion he could talk us out o' these nags. He stuck Farley up an' treated him terrible rough."

"I managed to get loose," Farley rumbled. "Fogged to the shanty an' got my gun. Aimed to kill this rooster, 'count of what he done to me, if 'twas the last thing I ever done. Comin' along down the trail, I met Chess's hoss, caught it and come on. Found Chess tied up at the edge of the mud hole, and——"

"And now," bellowed Chess, "me an' Farley's goin' to bury yuh in that swamp, Kid. And, b'gosh! we're a-takin' these hosses, too."

"Cool down," said Rawlins calmly. "You ringy hombres ain't goin' to do nothin' to this kid. Chess, I no savvy your play in tryin' to kill him. The hosses is——"

"He tried to kill *me*!" shouted Chess, "not me him. Rawlins, show hoss sense. I already told yuh the kid lied."

"The hosses," Rawlins resumed, "is goin' back to Farley's ranch. Then us three an' the kid is ridin' over the range to find the Down T outfit an' get things straight. 'Gree-able, Farley?"

Farley's dirty face went white, then flamed red. He was holding his Colt by his right thigh, muzzle downward. Now the weapon came up in one flashing move to cover Rawlins.

The old hand had read Farley's

intent in the fellow's cunning eyes. His hand had shot to his hip, but this time he wasn't fast enough. With his six-gun half drawn, Rawlins held his hand motionless, realizing that if he tried to complete his draw, Farley would surely kill him.

Kansas found himself tingling in every nerve. He had thought Rawlins was against him. But the old hand had insisted he should have a square deal. He was square himself!

"Jus' as yuh allowed, Chess," Farley rasped. "Ol' Rawlins won't play our game. Waal, like we talked it over, a-foggin' down the trail, we'll kill him an' the kid both, huh?"

"Yep! Kill 'em both an' sell these hosses. Farley, you an' me'll make a good team. Rawlins has got cash on him—a heap more'n he showed when he paid for the broncs. Yuh keep him covered, while I get his smoker."

Chess dismounted. And Kansas wanted to do something. But what? His gaze darted to the Colt, on the ground where he had dropped it.

Chess was at the side of Rawlins's mount farthest from Farley, reaching up to unbuckle Rawlins's belt. The old hand, his face drawn, tense, hunted, yet defiant and wrathful, sat like rock. His arms were lifted shoulder-high. His eyes on Chess, he said:

"I've seen slimy snakes in my life, but never before was I double-crossed by a pard. Nor I never seen a couple of such contemptible reptiles as you two lizards!"

"Huh!" snorted Chess. "I fooled yuh into thinkin' I'd do to tie to, old hand." He now had Rawlins's belt with its holstered Colt in his left hand. His right gripped Kansas's huge, old, unreliable gun. He walked around behind Rawlins's horse to rejoin the crook, Farley.

"Kid, did yuh pick up my Colt thar at the mire hole?" Chess asked glaring at Kansas.

The kid made no reply. He was watching Farley, the more dangerous man of the two. If only Farley had not been covering old Rawlins, Kansas would— Ah! Farley was poking his Colt into its holster, believing Rawlins was no longer dangerous. With gloating triumph, he said:

"Chess, we'll herd the pair of 'em back to that thar bog hole. Me, I'll heave the kid in. I shore got a bone tuh pick with— Hey, yearlin'! What yuh——"

Kansas had dived from his saddle, on the off side of his horse, away from Farley and Chess. He landed on hands and knees, but his right hand was on the .38.

"Don't yuh try skinnin' out!" yelled Farley, spurring forward and yanking his Colt. Rawlins also spurred forward. Two horses collided. Grunts. Oaths. The horses swerved aside.

Rawlins's wild grab at Farley's weapon had missed, and his horse was out of control. But Rawlins's prompt action had given the kid the split second that he so desperately needed. Young Kansas was on his feet, with a six-gun in his hand!

With a snarled oath, Farley yanked his mount onto its haunches and threw his gun down on Kansas. Came the deafening roar of two shots sounding as one.

A bullet ripped through the kid's tawny hair, ruining his hat. A second bullet hit Frank Farley in the chest, ranging upward, tearing out through his backbone.

The man pulled trigger twice more while he swayed. Then his arms went wide, and his roan mare wheeled, snorted and fled. Some

fifty feet distant, Farley keeled out of his saddle.

Meanwhile, Chess, plunging into the battle at the instant when Farley and Kansas both fired, took time to aim carefully at the kid. But to his everlasting chagrin, the hammer of the huge old six-gun descended with a dull click.

There was no roar of an exploding cartridge! Hurling the old hogleg at young Kansas, Chess frantically tugged to free the gun he had taken from Rawlins.

The kid had just fired at Farley, when the thrown weapon hit him on the head, knocking him to his knees. Through a million pinwheeling stars he saw Farley's horse going away and Chess pulling Rawlins's Colt from its holster on the loose belt.

Desperately Kansas strove to rally his faculties. Must line his gun on that Chess hombre. Must shoot him. But he simply couldn't control the weapon in his hand.

Chess had the Colt. Kansas saw it through the stars dancing before his eyes. A shot boomed, crashing and roaring upon the kid's eardrums. Strangely, the noise cleared his head. At last he saw clearly, and could control his muscles. He didn't know that the bullet had ripped off a small part of his right ear as it whistled past. Chess was shooting again, and only Kansas's swift, twisting leap saved his life.

But now he was answering the chunky hombre's fire. Once—twice, three times Kansas fired, while hot lead from Chess's gun screamed about him, tearing at his clothing. Another shot, then his gun hammer clicked on an empty shell.

But Chess's weapon was also empty. The man's eyes were distorted with rage and hate as he leaped toward the kid—the kid he had failed to kill with five bullets,

because he had banged away like a loco sheep-herder.

Kansas had done no better. He had failed to hit Chess at all. Now the kid bounded forward to meet the man. As a clubbed gun swung at his head, Kansas ducked. Chess's weapon slid down his left shoulder. Kansas's own gun, swung wildly, struck hair and scalp and bone.

Thud! Chess reeled, spun slowly, and fell in a crumpled heap.

Old Rawlins came spurring back. He had at last controlled his frightened horse.

"You downed 'em both, kid!" cried Rawlins.

"Did I?" gasped Kansas. "Seemed like I never would."

"'Twas all done so dog-goned quick I hadn't no chance to help. My hoss bucked out to the side. Afore I could get him stopped, guns was bellerin' and Farley's nag was high-tailin' it. I got back jus' in time to see you beef Chess—the double-crossin' pup."

At twilight of the following day, two riders with one prisoner lashed to his saddle, and with fifty head of loose horses, reached the Down T Ranch. Grant Withers, watching, went out to meet the horses, the lean and weather-beaten stranger who was old Rawlins, the surly young

prisoner, Chess, and the kid from Kansas.

"Well, you got 'em, son," he said in a far-less-cranky tone than he had ever before used to the blue-eyed, freckled youth. "I reckon you persuaded Farley to accept the fifty dollars I sent him. But who's the sullen-lookin' gent tied to his saddle?"

"Let me tell you," drawled old Rawlins.

Rancher and old-timer went into the house together. Kansas waited, holding Chess's mount and his own. Presently Grant Withers came out, walked to Kansas, and clapped a hand on the kid's left shoulder, a shoulder that was mighty sore and swollen and bruised from the blow of a gun barrel.

Smiling into the freckled, earnest face, he said: "Young feller, first thing in the mornin', I'll fix you up with a note to Hank May and a string of ponies, and tell you just where you can find the round-up."

"Meanin——" the amazed and delighted kid began.

"Meanin'," completed the big boss, "that a kid as chuckful of grit as you are deserves a better job than just chorin'. Rawlins will be joinin' the round-up, too, just as quick as he takes this killin'-minded hoss thief, Chess, to town. You're to be round-up wrangler, Kansas."





Sonny Tabor At Last Water

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Kid Wolf Law In Poker City," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE SMOKING FUSE.

WHEN an hombre has been on the trail for two days, traveling through parched mesquite and prickly pear, and over lava and burning desert, there is nothing so refreshing as a good swim—even if the hombre happens to be an outlaw, wanted dead or alive, and with a posse maybe only a few jumps behind him.

Upon reaching the shaded lake formed by the Little Ranchland Dam, "Sonny" Tabor halted. He looked back toward the way he had

come. All was quiet; nothing was moving but a solitary buzzard. In the far distance was the blinding hot horizon of the desert, bordered by hazy blue mountains which seemed to waver in the heat waves as if seen through a crooked looking-glass.

In contrast to the sun-tortured stretch of sand and alkali, the deep pool was like a paradise. Big cottonwood trees, with leaning trunks, trailed their branches along the edge of the water. A turtle, while he watched, slipped into the lake with a little splash. A stream of bubbling spray dashed continually over the

dam's spillway, making a tinkling sound.

"Gee, Paint," the outlaw told his black-and-white pony, "what do yuh say we loaf here a while? I don't believe that Greenlee County posse could have followed us this far. Let's rest."

The cayuse was as eager as its master. Sonny Tabor unsaddled it and led the wiry little animal down to drink. Then, while Paint was contentedly cropping the lush grass along the lake edge, he began to peel off his clothes.

First of all he washed out his clothes, which were gray with alkali dust. Then, while leaving them to dry on a convenient bush, he dived far down into the crystal water. He came up shaking the water from his head, and with a joyful chuckle began to swim with long, easy strokes.

The sunlight, filtering down through the spaces between the whispering leaves overhead, glistened on his bronzed arms and shoulders. There were bullet scars on Sonny Tabor's back and shoulders—grim relics of past gun fights—and another scar on one cheek which resembled a dimple, especially when he smiled, and that was most of the time.

The water was deep, perhaps thirty feet near the dam, which was a large one, considering the size of the river that fed it. The canyon was even narrower at this point, and the dam was supported at either end by natural rock abutments.

After the scorching heat of the trail, the chilly water sent a welcome tingle through Sonny's whole body. His compact, toughened muscles seemed to take on new zip and strength.

But he didn't swim far from his guns. The two well-oiled, blued-steel Colt .45s were with his gun

belts on the bank, where he could reach them in a few strokes. It was the instinct of a hunted thing—the wariness of long habit.

Since his earliest teens—and he was twenty now, and past—Sonny Tabor had been a fugitive from the law. Even now he was alert, as watchful as a panther.

Lazily he turned over on his back and floated. Half an hour went dreamily by. All seemed serene, and the lake was as peaceful as ever.

"I think I'll stay right here till sundown," the outlaw murmured.

But it wasn't to be. Sonny's keen eyes noted something—something insignificant in itself, but to him it had a world of meaning.

From a distant tree, three birds had flown up as if startled. Sonny rolled over and struck out for the bank with powerful overhand strokes. The ears of his pony, Paint, were laid back.

"I think yo're right, Paint boy," Sonny said grimly. "Let's slope!"

It took him but a few seconds to jump into his clothes, adjust his chaps, and buckle the gun belts around his slim waist. Then he slapped the saddle on his cayuse's back, and, while tightening the girths with quick, practiced hands, looked out across the desert.

"That isn't the Greenlee sheriff, that's certain," he muttered as he made out the bobbing shapes of men and horses through the far-off dust smudge. His eyes puckered thoughtfully. "But the way they're ridin', it must be the law, and I reckon they must be after me!"

Swinging into the saddle, he urged Paint along the side of the lake toward the dam. Once he got below the dam, he thought, he would be out of sight, and it would be some time before the posse could get close enough to see him.

Below the twenty-foot dam, the ground sloped away sharply, and the gorge widened out a little, but not much. The embankment was strewn with boulders of all sizes, and the pinto pony had to pick its way carefully, in spite of the need for haste.

As Sonny Tabor reached the bottom of the dam, he sniffed once or twice and then pulled up his cayuse.

"Am I smellin' powder smoke already?" he thought.

Then he saw a little wisp of blue smoke climbing in a snaky thread from a crevice in the bottom of the dam. With it came a soft, hissing sputter.

"Why, it's a fuse!" he gasped. "Somebody's tryin' to blow up the dam!"

He jumped from his saddle, and saw what he had guessed was true. Somebody, while he was paddling quietly in the lake above, had lighted a dynamite fuse. A great cavity under the solid wall of the dam had been packed with explosive!

Near the spot were several boot prints, and a glove of yellow buckskin with a spread eagle worked across the gauntlet in red thread. In his hurry to get away, the dynamiter had probably dropped it.

But though he noticed this, Sonny's attention was on the fuse. If he could reach it to put it out—

But it was too late! With a final deadly sputter, the burning fuse ate its way beyond reach. Out of the crevice came an evil puff of smoke. The dam would blow up at any second!

CHAPTER II.

A GALLOP DOWN THE VALLEY.

FOR a few minutes Sonny Tabor forgot all about the posse that was so hot on his track. His heart seemed to rise in his throat as he

whirled his body up into the saddle and pinked the pinto with his spurs.

It was a case of getting away from there, and getting away pronto! Paint shot forward and down the gorge like an arrow sped from an Indian bow, leaping the boulders as he ran.

The outlaw ducked low and set his teeth. He knew there wasn't much of that fuse left to burn, and when it reached the detonating cap and the sticks of powder—

He didn't have much time to think about it. Luckily for him, his fast cayuse had taken him a hundred yards from the dam when the explosion came. But even then Sonny thought it was all over with him and Paint.

There was a terrific shock, as if the air all about him had been blown away by a giant's breath. Then came the jarring boom, followed by rumbling echoes. The ground under Paint's hoofs seemed to shake back and forth as if in an earthquake. But the cayuse gave only a startled squeal and dashed onward at even a faster clip.

"Good boy, Paint, but we'll have to——" Sonny's words were whipped out of his mouth by a mightier roar than ever.

Great fragments of rock began to fall on all sides of them, and one whizzed just a few yards from him. As it weighed half a ton, there wouldn't have been much left of horse and rider had it struck them.

Sonny ducked low in his saddle, riding for dear life. Water began to fall in a cold spray—a queer rain-storm. It had been thrown hundreds of feet into the air by the explosion. It stopped suddenly, and then the roar became an awful rumble behind him.

Turning in his saddle, he looked back at the spot where the Little

Ranchland Dam had been. It was gone, but in its place was a howling wall of water. It seemed at least twenty feet high, and was rushing down the gorge with the speed of a mountain avalanche!

"If *that* catches up with us, it's adios," muttered the outlaw, hoping that Paint wouldn't stumble.

The wall of water seemed like something alive. It took up huge boulders and seemed to float them in its fury before they finally vanished in whirling spume. The flood was brown with sand and debris, but the top was milky-white with foam. A gigantic cottonwood tree, torn up by the roots, was spinning in it, over and over.

Sonny saw that he could escape this easily enough. All he had to do would be to ride up the sides of the gorge down which the flood was plunging.

But suddenly he thought of the ranches below. He knew that Little Ranchland, as it was called, was occupied by a dozen or more settlers who operated little farms and raised hay and grain rather than cattle. It was these people who had built the dam. And this flood, Sonny knew, would not only destroy their little homes, but would probably drown them as well!

There were women and children in Little Ranchland. Whatever happened, the outlaw decided, he must warn them. At all costs, he must outride the flood and sound the alarm!

"We've got to—keep right on—goin'," he gasped. "Give 'er all yuh've got, caballo!"

The stanch-hearted cayuse was pulling away from the rushing wall of water now, yard by yard. The gorge was less steep here, and the valley had broadened out into a grassy park. It made good running,

and Paint gained slowly but surely on the water monster behind.

The flood wall had spread out a little, but was still eight or ten feet high at the crest—enough to drown anything and everything in its path. The flood lashed into narrow ravines, throwing great white arms of spray aloft, and made churning whirlpools around the spires of rocks that barred its path. A few minutes later Sonny was out of sight of it. Paint had flashed around a bend.

There before him now was the first little ranch house, a boxlike adobe surrounded by plots of growing stuff. Sonny jerked one of his Colt .45s from its holster and fired two shots in quick succession.

As the shots roared, the bent figure of an old man appeared in the doorway. Sonny hardly slackened pace.

"The dam's broke!" he shouted. "Get on higher ground—pronto."

The old nester didn't have to be told a second time; he could hear the rumble of the approaching flood. He dashed inside and out again as Sonny clattered past.

When he reappeared, he had an old-fashioned clock hugged in his arms—evidently his most precious treasure. Sonny saw him climb to the thirty-foot bluff above his house. He reached it just before the brown-white flood water burst around the rocky curve.

Paint's hoofs thundered on. In less than five minutes another house hove into view, and again Sonny fired his warning shots. A man and his wife ran out, and heard the news even before the outlaw was abreast of them.

"Yuh say the dam's——" shouted the nester, and his voice trailed away as Sonny galloped on.

"Yes! Run for the rocks!" the outlaw yelled back.

At the next place, Sonny had to waste a precious two minutes in argument. The cranky old hombre who lived there was working in his field, and at first he wouldn't believe what was told him.

"What kind o' tricks be yuh playin', younker?" he growled. "Why, thet dam can't be busted, specially this time o' year, when there ain't no floods to——"

Sonny grimly leveled his .45 at him. "If yuh won't save your life, I'll save it for yuh!" he cried. "I'll give yuh about two seconds to drop that hoe and make tracks for the bluff!"

The farmer dropped his tools and ran like a scared sheep. Sonny Tabor didn't have to look back and see if he made it safely or not—at the speed he was going, he *knew* he would!

The people in Little Ranchland had heard the explosion, of course, but none had guessed what it meant. Sonny set his jaw hard. These nesters had bitter enemies, that was certain. Somebody wanted them out of the way so badly that even murder wouldn't stop them.

And this was intended to be the worst kind of murder! If Little Ranchland hadn't been warned, dozens would have perished.

At the next house there were several children, and Sonny saw them through to safety before going on. One man almost lost his life in trying to save an old mule; another carried a chicken coop to higher ground.

Sonny's work was nearly done now. A few miles below, the gulch broadened out into a valley, and here the flood would widen out and do no harm except to crops. There was one more little nester spread to warn.

Looking behind him, the outlaw

saw a band of seven riders following him—the posse. They had not dared risk themselves in the gorge, but were galloping along the ridge, a hundred feet above. But they were still after him, just the same.

"The law never gives up, does it, Paint," he muttered, "until it gets its man?"

Little ravines opened here and there, going steeply upward. Sonny could easily have given the posse the slip, just then. All he would have to do would be to ascend one of these gullies, and he would put the canyon—soon to be a raging torrent—between him and his pursuers.

But that one ranch! He would have to warn the people there, even if he did have to sacrifice his own life and liberty. Without hesitating, he urged Paint straight on down the canyon. He wasn't sure that the sheriff's men would think of giving the alarm to the threatened ranch. It was up to him and Paint!

The tiny dot that marked the lower ranch rapidly grew larger. And, looking behind, he could see that the flood water, too, was coming fast. Paint was by no means fresh, and the outlaw knew that for all its gameness, the cayuse couldn't keep up the killing pace much longer.

Sonny fired three shots in the air while he was still a quarter of a mile from the house. Two men came out and stood waiting for him, questioning looks on their faces. One was an hombre of about fifty; the other seemed to be his son, a youth of about Sonny's age.

"What's the matter? Anything wrong?" shouted the older one.

"Plenty!" the outlaw cried. "The dam up there's been blown sky-high, and the water's just behind me. Yuh'll have to hurry, amigos."

He saw both their faces go white

under their sunburn. "Good grief! And mother's in there sick!" gasped the nester.

"We can get her out, dad," his son said quickly, "but the baby——"

"I'll take the baby; you look after the mother," Sonny suggested.

A little tot of a girl—about three years old, and unaware of any danger—was brought and held up to Sonny, who placed her in front of him against the saddle. Already the rumble of the flood was approaching nearer, and Sonny whirled on again, this time heading for the rocks above the house.

Carrying the sick woman between them, the two men of the house soon joined him there, just as the roaring wall of water ripped into the shanty below.

Everything was swept clean. The house melted away in a few minutes; except for a few boards bobbing here and there, it had vanished. In a great brown-and-white swirl, it wiped away all the nesters' possessions and then boomed on.

They saw it sweep out into the broader valley, rise, and then sink again as it spread out over many wide acres. The flood was over. The water in the canyon went down rapidly, leaving mud and sand instead of crops, jumbles of wreckage instead of houses.

"Everything's gone," said the old nester in an awed voice. "But we've got our lives, thanks to yuh, my boy," he said, turning to Sonny Tabor. "Yuh've saved us——"

The thud of hoofs from above made them all look up. Seven riders were climbing down the bluff toward them. In the lead was a sour-looking hombre who wore a silver sheriff's badge. He and all the others held leveled six-guns.

"Stick 'em up, Tabor! Yo're under arrest!"

CHAPTER III.

IN JAIL AT EL MORRO.

SONNY TABOR was still holding the little girl in the saddle, but with his free hand—instinctively and with the deadly rapidity of a striking snake—he reached for one of his .45s. Halfway to the gun butt he paused. His hand fell limply to his side.

"I reckon you've got me, sheriff," he said quietly. "I couldn't start a gun scrap with this baby on my lap. I'm yore prisoner."

"Danged tootin', yo're my prisoner," exclaimed the glum-faced officer. "Yuh didn't think I'd get word so soon about yuh from Greenlee County, did yuh? Well, whar they left off, I begun! Blowin' dams now, are yuh?"

"What do yuh mean?" demanded the outlaw, his mild blue eyes taking on a steely glint.

"Why, yuh blew up the Little Ranchland Dam, and don't try to deny it, young feller!" the sheriff growled fiercely. "Get him down off his cayuse, boys, and take his shoot-in' hardware away from him. He's the most dangerous gunman 'tween yere and the Pecos!"

The nester and his son, who had been standing by with looks of puzzled amazement on their faces, now found their voices.

"Why this is an outrage, sheriff!" cried the older man. "This youngster may be Tabor, as yuh say, but he shore saved all our lives. He shorely didn't blow up that dam."

"He *can't* be Tabor, the notorious outlaw!" put in his son indignantly. "He's hardly as old as I am, and he ain't——"

"I'm Tabor, the outlaw, all right," admitted Sonny coolly as he dismounted and submitted to search. "But I wasn't the hombre that

planted the powder under the Little Ranchland Dam."

"I'm not a ninny," sneered the sheriff. "And Draper, yuh and yore son keep yore noses out of this. I happened to catch a glimpse o' Tabor just as he was leavin' the dam. The explosion took place less than a minute afterward! I'm no fool, I reckon."

Sonny saw that it would do him no good to talk to these stubborn men—at least, not then. Captured though he was, and with the hangman's noose waiting for him somewhere in the background, he felt strangely happy. At least, he hadn't played the coward's part and left the people of Little Ranchland to die.

"I'll go along peaceably, sheriff," he said. "Doesn't it seem queer to yuh, though, that I'd blow up that dam and then warn all the nesters—afterward?"

"I don't pretend to be a mind reader," grunted the sheriff. "I dunno why yuh did it. I reckon yuh had a change of heart at the last minute—got yellin', mebbe."

A warm flush crept into the outlaw's bronzed face, but he kept his temper. He was used to insults and rebuffs—a fugitive from justice could expect little else.

By this time quite a crowd of men had come down the valley, walking along the bluff from above. They were the other nesters—except one hombre. This fellow was dressed like a cow-puncher, and rode a black stallion. Seeing him, the sheriff bawled out:

"Hello, Toalman! Come on down yere and help us tie this hombre up. He's Tabor, the bad man!"

"Yuh don't say!" Toalman replied, swinging out of his saddle. "Quite a catch fer yuh, ain't it, Houser?"

"Well, I guess!" said Sheriff Houser with emphasis. "Over six thousand standin' out fer him, dead or alive!"

Toalman wasn't such a bad-looking hombre, but for some reason, Sonny disliked him at first sight. He was well dressed in fancy chaparajos, calf vest, silk shirt, and expensive Stetson, and a Colt six-gun was cuddled at each thick thigh. He was about thirty, and powerfully put together.

But it was Toalman's face that sent a thrill of warning through Sonny Tabor. The jutting jaw was a bit too heavy, the eyes too far apart. There was something cold and evil about his loose-lipped mouth, as if a perpetual sneer was stamped there.

"Well, at ropin' I ain't easy to beat," Toalman chuckled as he took his lariat from his saddle. "Hold the *muchacho's* arms, fellers, and I'll tie 'em behind his back."

As he ran the rope through his fingers, Sonny noted with a start that he wore but one glove—and it was a yellow buckskin glove with a red spread eagle on the gauntlet.

"I see yuh've lost a glove to-day, hombre," said the outlaw in a level voice.

He knew now where he had seen the mate to that glove of Toalman's. There wasn't much doubt in Sonny's mind as to who blew up the dam.

"What's it to yuh?" snarled the cow-puncher. "I don't want no lip from yuh, savvy? I ain't talkin' to no outlaws."

"Sheriff," said Sonny Tabor, "the man who blew up the Little Ranchland Dam wore a glove to match that one. When I saw——"

"Now hold on—we don't want no gab," snapped Sheriff Houser. "No use tryin' to make me believe somebody else done this."

Sonny Tabor, though, had friends. The nesters were for him to a man. All gathered around in protest, while Toalman finished the job of tying Sonny's arms behind him. And the sneering hombre was angry enough to do the job up right. He jerked the knots cruelly tight.

"What if the boy is 'wanted'?" they chorused. "Didn't he save us all from drownin', at the risk of his own life? We'll set about gettin' a pardon fer him."

"Pardon!" sniffed Sheriff Houser, biting the end of his drooping mustache. "Huh! Might as well have talked of gettin' a pardon fer Jesse James! Tabor is plumb bad, and the authorities know it. But yuh can do as yuh like about *tryin'* to get him pardoned. In the meantime, I'm takin' him to jail in El Morro."

The nesters had heard something of what Sonny had said about the glove, and they began talking among themselves, looking gloweringly at Toalman meanwhile.

"I'd rather think it was Toalman than Sonny Tabor who dynamited ——" began young Draper, flashing a swift look at his father.

Toalman interrupted in a voice full of fury. "Why, dang yuh all! I ain't been near thet dam fer a week! And besides, what reason would I have to——"

"Yuh work fer Tiff Wallace, thet's why," said the elder Draper indignantly. "and everybody knows the grudge he's got agin' us at Little Ranchland. Tiff Wallace——"

"This has gone fur enough," snorted the sheriff explosively. "Yuh can argy all yuh want later, but right now I'm escortin' this fine Tabor gentleman to the *calabozo*. Let's go, boys!"

Sonny was tied to Paint's saddle, and then the posse—Toalman with

them—started off toward El Morro with their prisoner.

"We'll be in town just as soon as we can get thar," sang out old Draper encouragingly. "We're fer yuh strong, Sonny, so just keep a stiff upper lip."

"*'Sta bien*," the outlaw called back cheerily.

It was a long ride to El Morro, and it seemed longer both to Sonny Tabor and Paint. Sonny's arms ached from the ropes Toalman had bound him with, and the cayuse was weary from the day's exertions.

But at last, after traveling through miles of barren land, they reached the town. The jail was a solidly built structure at the lower end of Main Street, occupying part of a big and dreary-looking jail yard, in which nothing grew but a single tall and thirsty-looking cottonwood.

"I'll bring yuh yore supper after while," said Sheriff Houser gruffly, while he slashed Sonny's aching arms free. "This is yore hotel fer the time bein', and when yuh leave it, yuh'll pay the rent fer it—on thet cottonwood out thar."

The heavy steel door clanged shut, the key clicked, and Sonny Tabor was a prisoner in the El Morro *calabozo*.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAWYER HOMBRE.

SONNY TABOR had been in many an Arizona jail, but this one was just about the toughest one he'd seen. Escape seemed out of the question. Ceiling, walls, and floor were all of very heavy stone, cut into large slabs, and firmly cemented. The door was new and strong, and the lock couldn't be got at from the inside.

There was one window, looking out on the gloomy jail yard. It was

good-sized, and admitted plenty of light and air, but was heavily barred with steel. Feeling like a caged animal, Sonny sat down on the cot to think.

And even that cot, he noted, was proof against anything he might attempt. It jutted from the wall, and there were no legs to tear loose to use as weapons. Everything here was as strong as Gibraltar.

"Reckon I'm in for it now," he thought. "If that Toalman hombre hadn't dynamited that dam, I'd be free now—Paint could have given that posse the slip easy."

But there was no use glooming over things now. He was naturally too light-hearted to give up to despair, and when the sheriff returned an hour later with a tray of food, he ate eagerly.

"I've fixed yore hangin' date fer Friday—just a week from to-day, Tabor," Sheriff Houser grunted. "O' course, I could go through with it in the mornin', fer thet matter. But them nesters, they think they can get yuh pardoned, and I'm willin' to give yuh every chance."

"That's fine, sheriff." Sonny smiled boyishly.

"Well, it won't be so fine," growled Houser. "Yuh ain't got a chance fer a pardon, as I said before. But I'm squar'—I won't do anything either for or agin' yuh. Yuh've already been condemned to death, yuh know, and from more courts than one. I reckon I won't need to read any o' the standin' warrants to yuh."

"I guess yuh can skip that," said the outlaw as he sipped black coffee from the battered tin cup.

"Them special friends o' yores—ol' Draper and his son—is waitin' out thar now to see yuh," said the sheriff. "Yuh'll have to talk to 'em through the bars."

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Sonny Tabor was glad to talk to his nester friends—even with the iron grating between them. He learned that the younger hombre's name was Tim Draper, and that the father was called John.

They were not alone. A third hombre, surprisingly different in appearance, was with them.

"Sonny, this is Lawyer Dickson. He's the only legal jasper in El Morro, and I reckon he knows his business. We've hired him to do all in his power to get yuh free."

"It's fine of yuh," said Sonny gratefully, "and I'm glad to know yuh, Mr. Dickson."

"Howdy," said the lawyer dryly.

Dickson wasn't a very impressive sort of man. He was dressed in black broadcloth trousers and a long-tailed coat of the same color. Both garments had turned a greenish tint, were frayed at the seams, and hung about Dickson's gaunt figure like the costume of a scarecrow. A bulge at his hip showed that he carried a gun.

The lawyer's thin face and sharp features seemed to add to the shrewdness of his narrow eyes. He had a calculating look, and Sonny Tabor knew him at once to be a clever hombre.

"I think the best thing we can do—at least, the first thing," John Draper said, "is to get a petition started. I know thet all us folks in Little Ranchland will sign it, and we've got other friends thet'll help out. I believe we can get near two hundred names."

"Then we'll send it to the gov'nor," explained Tim.

"The gov'nor is a political friend o' mine," went on the old nester. "When we explain how yuh saved so many lives——"

"Anybody would have done the same," said Sonny, flushing.

"Not many," snorted Draper. He turned to the lawyer. "Don't yuh think sendin' a petition to the gov'nor would be the best thing, Dickson?"

"It shore would, and I'll help circulate it," said the attorney with surprising heartiness. "We ought to get a lot of names, and bein' as the sheriff tells us yuh ain't to hang till next Friday, we'll have plenty o' time to get an answer back from Phoenix."

"And if thet don't work, we'll get yuh out if we have to bust jail fer yuh!" cried Tim impulsively.

"In the meantime, I'll be workin' on yore case from another angle," said the lawyer. "They tell me yuh said somethin' about a glove there at the dam—a glove yuh think belonged to Toalman."

"I did."

"Have yuh got this glove?"

"No, I was in too big a hurry to think about pickin' it up," said Sonny grimly.

"That's bad, then—no evidence at all," said the lawyer. "If he did it and——"

"I'm dead shore in my own mind he did it," Sonny replied. "But as yuh say, there's nothing to prove it. That glove is covered with a hundred tons of sand by now."

"Toalman works fer Tiff Wallace," put in Tim. "Everybody knows thet Wallace would like to see us nesters washed away. Well, we'll show him! We've still got the land, and we'll all rebuild right away. The skunk!"

"I'm afraid we'll have to have something more to go on before we drag Toalman and Tiff Wallace into this affair," the attorney said shrewdly. "Well, Tabor, don't be downhearted. I'll do everything I can—everything that's humanly possible."

CHAPTER V.

THE SCHEMERS.

OLD John Draper and his son would have been astonished if they could have seen where Lawyer Dickson went when he left El Morro that night after dark.

Riding a mouse-colored mule, and with his long coat tails flapping out behind him, the attorney trotted north along the main road, and then left it for a fainter trail that led up into the cedar-covered foothills.

At about eight o'clock he had reached the Tiff Wallace ranch, the largest spread in that part of the county, a cattle outfit which controlled most of the desirable land within fifty miles. A lamp was burning dimly in the rear of the house when Dickson rapped on the door with skinny knuckles.

"Who's thar?" demanded a heavy voice, and with it came the sharp click of a Winchester lever.

"It's all right; don't be so plumb hostile," laughed the lawyer. "It's me, Tiff—Dickson, yuh know. I got important business."

The door swung open, and the attorney slipped his thin figure inside. He shuffled into the low-roofed ranch kitchen, chuckling to himself as if at some private joke.

"What's the matter, Dickson?" grunted a voice. "What's up? Sit down thar with the boys and have a slug o' thet rye liquor."

It was Tiff Wallace himself who spoke—the most powerful ranchman, as far as money and influence went, in that part of the country.

Wallace was a man of forty, squat, heavy-set, and with wide and muscular shoulders. He had a round face, fringed by a brownish-colored beard, and his pale, lifeless eyes reminded one of a dead fish. Just now he was rolling a cigarette.

Across from him, with his spur rowels resting against the edge of the table, sat Toalman—Wallace's unofficial foreman and right-hand man.

With Toalman were three other hard-faced men. Markette was an hombre built like a monkey, with hairy arms and short, crooked legs. Galt was a typical border ruffian, conspicuous for his bad teeth. The other man was of the same type, and like the others, he packed two six-guns. He was called "Slim" Gene-seo.

Wallace had two dozen waddies on his ranch, but these four were the only ones on the "inside." They were his trusted men, the crack gunmen he had hired to take care of his private affairs. No others were admitted to these whisky-bottle conferences.

"I suppose yuh know about this outlaw kid, Tabor, bein' arrested," began the lawyer, taking a drink.

"Shore," said the rancher coldly. "Thet isn't news. I got the whole story from Toalman."

"Tabor seems to have a pretty good idea of who blew up the Little Ranchland Dam," said the attorney, banging down his empty glass.

"Yeah, Toalman said the kid accused him of it," returned Wallace with a shrug. "What difference does it make?"

"What if Tabor has proof?"

"He *couldn't* have!" Toalman snarled. "Nobody saw——"

"The kid mentioned yore glove, Toalman."

"Thet ain't no proof," sneered Toalman. "Yuh couldn't convict me on thet glove, even if Tabor had it fer evidence."

"He hasn't got it, but what if Tabor has other evidence—some-thin' he didn't tell me about? He's wise, Tabor is."

The gunmen in the room exchanged uneasy glances. Then Tiff Wallace laughed harshly.

"Why should we keer how much he savvies? He'll hang in the mornin', anyway—he'll never tell."

"There's whar yo're wrong," said Lawyer Dickson triumphantly. "He won't hang fer a week—and mebbe not then!"

Wallace leaned forward in his chair, hands on knees, a worried look beginning to dawn in his fishy eyes.

"What's all this?"

Lawyer Dickson told him of his conversation with the Drapers, while the others listened with snorts of disgust.

"So they're goin' to get up a petition fer a pardon, hey?" rasped Wallace. "We've got to prevent thet! Tabor probably knows too much, and he's got to be put out of the way. See yere, Dickson, yo're a lawyer—yuh've got to scheme a way out of this."

"I already have." The lawyer laughed softly under his breath. "All we've got to do is get up a counter-petition. I've got it worked out in my mind already, Wallace. Those fools have retained me fer their lawyer, and I can play both ends against the middle—to win."

"Then all we'll have to do is let the law hang Tabor," said the ranchman with a sigh of relief. "I wouldn't feel safe, to tell the truth, with him loose. He's a mighty——"

"Here's somethin' else," interrupted the lawyer. "Some more bad news. If Tabor *don't* get thet pardon, the nesters plan to break the jail and rescue him."

Tiff Wallace got to his feet, and, with fists clenched, he began to walk the floor, swearing at the nesters.

"I've got even with 'em some to-day by havin' thet dam o' theirs

dynamited," he snarled. "But I see whar I've got to get even with 'em plenty more. Thet whelp of a Tabor kid! If it hadn't been fer him, I'd have wiped 'em out, every danged one of 'em."

"My idea is this," exulted Lawyer Dickson. "If the nesters are plannin' a rescue, why not beat 'em to it, and rescue Tabor ourselves, and hang him ourselves?"

The desperadoes stared for a moment, and then broke into profane yells of approval. There was much slapping of legs, and another bottle of rye whisky was brought out.

"Just the thing, Dickson," laughed Wallace. "Yuh shore have got 'em all hog tied when it comes to brain work!"

"And thet isn't all I've planned!" said the lawyer. "How'd yuh like to get hold of all the Little Ranchland property, legally and free of charge? Listen!"

And Lawyer Dickson put his thin lips to the rancher's ear and whispered for a full five minutes.

CHAPTER VI.

GLOOM—AND HOPE AGAIN.

FOR Sonny Tabor, locked in his dismal little prison room, the days passed slowly. It was mid-summer, with days of blazing heat, and the jail was like an oven. At nights the iron and stone chilled, and he was sometimes forced to pace the floor to keep warm, for he was allowed no blanket.

On the second day, the two nesters—John and his son Tim Draper—brought the welcome news that a petition had already been made ready, and was on its way to the governor.

"We got two hundred and fifteen names on it," chuckled old John. "We got it all down legal—got a lot

of 'whereases' and 'in-as-much-ases' and all thet fancy truck. It tells how yuh saved all us nester folks from drownin', too. When the gov'nor sees it, he'll pardon yuh shore. We ought to hear from it by Wednesday at the latest."

After that the time went by like the slow, deliberate sweep of a pendulum. Sonny was waiting—waiting for either death or freedom.

He was thrilled at the hope of a full pardon from the governor. It would mean that he could take his place among honest men again, after years of gun smoke and fiery trails. It would mean a job on the range, a job that he could keep, and maybe—who knew?—a ranch of his own some day.

And his conscience was clear. Although his guns had flared in defense of his life, he had never murdered, and had never stolen, even when hungry, among other men's cattle. Only a queer prank of fate had sent him down the outlaw trail—the trail that ends, nine times out of ten, in some lonely, grass-grown Boot Hill graveyard.

But he hardly dared let himself hope; he had been disappointed too often. On the other hand, he didn't allow himself to become discouraged.

And so the time dragged slowly along, and one day was much like another. Curious crowds sometimes gathered about the little jail in the hope of getting a glimpse of him through the bars.

Wednesday came, and no pardon. His day of execution was set for Friday, and it was to take place at dawn in the jail yard. Time was getting short. If the pardon didn't come soon—

Then, on Thursday noon, Draper and his son came up to the grated window to speak to him. He could

see from their faces that they brought bad news. The old man looked crushed, beaten. Tim's face looked savage.

"The gov'nor turned down yore petition fer a pardon," blurted old John, and then he blew his nose violently in his bandanna.

"It's Tiff Wallace's fault!" Tim cried angrily. "He's a sly one, Tiff is."

"So I didn't get it," repeated Sonny slowly. He was still smiling. His smile was only a little more wistful, that was all. "Well, amigos, I reckon I can go through with it like a mau. Don't worry about me."

"We had two hundred and fifteen names on our petition prayin' fer yore pardon," said the old nester. "But Tiff Wallace sent in a petition askin' the gov'nor *not* to pardon yuh—and his had nearly twice as many signatures."

"So many people owe him dinero around yere that hardly anybody dared refuse to sign what he wanted," Tim growled.

"What does the lawyer, Dickson, have to say about it?" Sonny asked.

"Oh, he feels mighty bad—he's plumb broken up over it," said old John. "He's still doin' everything he can fer yuh, Sonny, but—well, it looks bad, mighty bad."

"To think thet yuh've got to strangle, when hombres like thet snake Tiff Wallace——" rasped Tim through clenched teeth. "Well, yuh *won't* hang if we can help it. I've got——"

The sheriff always stood in the jail yard during these conversations—not to overhear, but to prevent anything being passed to the prisoner from the outside. Now he came forward, his sour face wry with suspicion.

"Hey, don't try to put thet package through them bars!" he blus-

tered. "What are yuh sneakin' in thar—a file? What's in thet paper?"

"I've got some cake yere," grunted Tim. "My mother baked it fer Sonny."

The sheriff looked at it. "Well, I reckon it's all right," he admitted. But as Tim was about to slip the cake through to Sonny, the sheriff's face became hard and stern again.

"Just wait! Let me see thet cake," he ordered sharply.

Reluctantly Tim passed it over. The sheriff gave a grunting expression and nearly dropped it.

"Huh! I thought so! I *thought* it'd be mighty heavy fer a cake yore mother made!" He broke the cake in two, and at the sight of what was inside, his eyes bulged like marbles. "Well, dang my hind sights! And yuh almost got away with it!" he fumed. "I'll bet yore mother don't allus put *these* kind of raisins in her bakin'!"

Sonny was almost as startled as Sheriff Houser. There, inside the cake, nestled a .41-caliber Remington derringer—a small weapon that a man's hand could easily cover, but carrying grim destruction in both its short barrels.

The old nester and his son looked sorrowfully—and sheepishly, too—at each other.

"The only thing we regret," grunted John Draper, "is thet we didn't get the gun in to him. Now listen, sheriff. Would yuh mind steppin' off a ways? We want a few more words with Sonny Tabor in private."

"I ought to arrest the two of yuh fer attemptin' to smuggle in weapons," grumbled the sheriff, but he did as was requested, and moved away, although watching the two nesters intently while they talked.

"Listen, Sonny," said John in a

low tone. "Accordin' to the law, yuh ain't got but a few hours more of life. Yo're to be strung up at daylight to-morrow."

"Yes, amigos," replied the outlaw, his blue eyes clear and steady. "I have just one request. Paint is over there in the livery stable yonder. When it's over, will yuh take him and always care——"

"Yo're goin' to ride thet cayuse plenty more times, Sonny," whispered Tim.

"What do yuh mean, compadre?"

"We're goin' to rush the jail yard at dawn and take yuh away from the sheriff," Tim breathed.

"Yuh mustn't do that," returned the outlaw firmly. "I'm goin' to ask yuh not to."

"Why?"

"I don't want any one killed on my account, that's the reason," said Sonny. "There's bound to be——"

"We'll be armed, but there'll be no shootin'—we promise thet," Tim pleaded. "I figure we'll take the sheriff and his deputies so much by surprise thet they'll surrender yuh without trouble. There'll be four of us—two of the other nesters have promised to help us."

"But yuh don't realize what trouble yuh'll get into?"

"We'll all be masked; don't yuh savvy, Sonny?" Tim whispered. "Dad's got it all planned out. Sheriff Houser might guess who pulled the rescue, but he won't know, and he can't do nothin' about it."

Sonny argued a while, but in the end he gave in. He saw that if he didn't consent, they'd try to rescue him anyway. But he made them promise to ride masked, and if any shooting started, to give it up as a bad job. Tim, though, had his tongue in his cheek and a roguish look in his eye when he made that last promise.

When his two loyal friends had gone, the sheriff sauntered over for a brief talk with Sonny through the bars.

"I kind of hate doin' what I'll have to do at dawn to-morrow," he began. "But it's my duty, yuh see. I hope yuh won't hold it against me personally, Tabor, when I pull the trap and let yuh dangle."

"I won't hold it against yuh *long*, anyway," the outlaw laughed.

"I'm goin' to bring yuh a special feed to-night, Tabor—the best grub I can get in the chink rest'rnt across the street. Is thar any other little special request yuh'd like to make?"

"How about havin' my pony, Paint, near the scaffold when it happens?" asked Sonny carelessly. But his heart was beating fast.

"I'll do it," said the sheriff, chewing on his cigar. "Thet's sentiment, thet is, and I can savvy sentiment. Yuh'd like to have yore cayuse thar so yuh can bid him good-by. All right, it's a go!"

And the sheriff hurried away to bring what he firmly believed to be his prisoner's last supper.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WAITING COFFIN.

TRUE to his word, the supper that Houser brought to Sonny Tabor that evening was a big one—it weighted down a big tray. There were beans, a generous steak, baked potatoes steaming in their jackets, and a Mexican enchilada stacked with white and crumbly goat's milk cheese.

"G'night," grunted the sheriff. "I'll have a guard on duty outside all night, same as usual, so don't try anything desperate."

"The only desperate thing I'm goin' to try, sheriff, is to eat this goat's

milk cheese," the young outlaw laughed.

The scene outside was enough to take his appetite away if his nerves had been on the squeamish order. In the lengthening shadows of the jail yard a group of men were at work on the scaffold on which he was to die the next morning.

The gallows wouldn't need a crossbar; the big limb of the cottonwood furnished that. The boxlike structure had been erected right underneath, and the carpenters were adding the finishing touches to the steps that led upward to the trapdoor through which his body was soon doomed to fall.

But it didn't bother Sonny, and he ate with good appetite. He was sure that the nesters wouldn't fail him, and his big worry now was for their safety. If they were shot, he couldn't forgive himself. And even if the worst came to the worst—well, he wasn't afraid of death; he'd faced it too many times, and an hombre couldn't die but once, after all.

The twilight came, and the moon came up in the east behind the jail, bathing the mournful-looking jail yard, with its gloomy gallows, in silvery light. The stars came out one by one, grew brighter as the sky blackened, and soon the soft Arizona sky was swarming with them.

Hours dragged by, and although Sonny threw himself on his hard cot and closed his eyes, he couldn't sleep. His nerves were taut, and a suppressed excitement ran through his veins and kept him awake. Finally he did doze a little, and awoke with a start.

He went to the window and looked out. He had been aroused by a creaking noise in the yard outside, and now he realized what it was. The moon had gone, but the

east was growing pale, and a dim, gray light was growing slowly brighter. A wagon, drawn by a team of mules, and driven by an old Mexican, had entered the yard. He stopped his team, rolled a corn-husk *cigarro*, and waited.

For a while Sonny could make out nothing but the intermittent glow of the *cigarro* as the sleepy driver puffed to keep himself awake. Then, with a start, he saw what was in the wagon.

It was an empty coffin, partly covered by an old blanket. And it was waiting—for him.

"I'll soon know, one way or another," Sonny thought, steeling himself for the ordeal to come. It wouldn't be long. The dawn was coming swiftly.

The sheriff had kept the date of the execution secret, and Sonny was glad of this, for there wouldn't be any large crowd on hand. Would the Drapers and their two friends come through? A lot depended on it. He felt his heart thumping uncomfortably hard.

He heard the faint thud of hoofs and the sound of men's voices. The prisoner felt a strange thrill at the sight of Paint, his faithful cayuse. One of the deputies was leading him toward the gallows.

"Everybody ready?" some one said.

"Yeah," replied the sheriff. "Pete, me and yuh had better go in and get the prisoner."

Sonny could see very well now. About a dozen officials and spectators were gathered at the foot of the ghostly scaffold, some mounted, but most on foot. A rope, in which a hangman's noose had been made, already dangled from the creaking limb of the cottonwood tree.

The steps of the sheriff and a deputy came closer, and then the solid-

steel door opened with a clang against the stone. The shadowy figures of the officers were outlined there.

"Come on, Tabor—it's time," said Houser in a voice that was kindly—for him. "Hold out yore hands, kid. We want to see if they're empty."

"We won't tie 'em till we get him on the platform," mumbled the deputy in a shaky undertone. "All right, Tabor; walk between us."

The little knot of men about the gallows gathered closer as the condemned outlaw walked steadily toward it. Sonny recognized some of the men as having been in the posse a week before. Paint nickered eagerly as he recognized his master.

Sonny knew he would need all of his courage now. There was still no sign of the rescue party. For some reason they had failed, he thought; had given it up as too foolhardy a scheme.

"Up them steps, Tabor," said the sheriff. "Steady, now; just a minute. I've got to tie yore wrists together."

Sonny's wrists were knotted in front of his body by a light but strong cord. The outlaw's face hadn't changed expression, but he felt his heart rise in his throat. He clinched his teeth firmly.

He had to die. That coffin would take him away, after all. In a few brief, agonized moments it would be over. The sheriff was about to put the noose over his head—

Then, as nerve shattering as the crack of doom, came the swift thunder of galloping hoofs!

"What in——" gasped the sheriff.

Four masked riders had galloped into the jail yard, and all held leveled six-guns!

"Up with 'em, sheriff! Stick up yore hands, everybody!" threatened a cool voice.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNPLEASANT SURPRISES.

TAKEN by surprise, the sheriff nearly fell off the gallows' platform. His face went dark with rage and white with fear by turns. His hands slowly went up. The others also obeyed the command.

"I dunno who yuh hombres are," began the sheriff in a bewildered bel-low, "but when I find out——"

"Jest keep cool, feller," said the same voice. "All right, Tabor, one of us will help yuh on thet piebald cayuse o' yores, bein' as yore hands are tied."

Rescued from what was practically the brink of the grave, Sonny found it harder to walk down from the scaffold than it had been to walk up. His legs felt strangely weak. The nesters had come through, after all. And he wasn't to hang!

He didn't recognize the voice of the masked man. He was probably one of the Drapers' friends, he thought. Although his hands were still bound, he managed to scramble aboard Paint without help.

"Now we'll burn saddle leather out of yere!" snapped the voice of the hombre who seemed to be in command of the rescue party.

With the hoofs of the other ponies churning gravel around him, Paint swept forward, propelled by the pressure of Sonny's knees. A yell went up from behind as the five horses, closely bunched, drummed wildly out of the jail yard and into the street, where they whirled like dust devils around the corner.

Out of El Morro they pounded, with nothing behind them, it seemed, but dust. A few shots sounded behind them, but the firing soon ceased. On and on into the desert they raced, gray shapes in the dim light of early morning.

"Which of yuh is Tim? I can't make yuh out," Sonny asked, but the thudding of the hoofs must have drowned out his words, for he got no answer.

"The sheriff don't seem to be followin' us," spoke up a new voice a little later.

There was something about that voice that was familiar to the outlaw, and he turned his head. All of his rescuers were still masked, but there was something about this last speaker that caught Sonny's attention.

It couldn't be Tim, or old John, and yet this hombre reminded him of somebody—somebody he couldn't quite place.

For another mile or so they galloped on, and then they began to slow their pace as they neared a deep, brush-filled draw. Some more men, it seemed to Sonny, were waiting at this spot—five of them on horseback. Who were they, and what were they doing there? The Drapers hadn't mentioned anything like this.

"Who are they, Tim?" Sonny demanded, looking from one to another of his silent escorts.

"Ain't yuh gettin' wise to yoreself yet, Tabor?" was the puzzling response of the hombre next to him.

Sonny puckered his eyes against the dazzle of the sunrise. Suddenly a queer, icy chill passed down his spine, leaving his scalp tingling.

Four of the men ahead had their arms trussed to their sides with lariat rope, and the fifth hombre was holding a gun on them!

And among the four prisoners were Tim and John Draper! Sonny gasped, feeling sick and bewildered.

"Why—why, who are *you* hombres, then?" he cried to the four riders who were galloping along with him.

There was an evil chorus of jeering laughs as they yanked off their bandanna masks from their faces. Sonny saw four of the hardest, most brutal faces he had ever looked at. And one of them—the hombre who had seemed so familiar—was the dynamiter of the Little Ranchland Dam. Toalman!

Bewildered and dazed at first, the outlaw now began to see it all. These were Tiff Wallace's men, he guessed. His rescue wasn't a rescue, after all. He was out of the frying pan into the fire!

They were alongside the four other captives now, and old John lifted his lined, leathery face.

"Sorry, Sonny, thet things had to turn out this a way," the nester said gloomily. "I don't know how Wallace knew what we'd planned to do, but—well, he's got us, and looks like we're all in the same boat."

He was interrupted by a snarl from the fishy-eyed, short hombre who was holding his gun on him.

"If thet kid is Sonny Tabor," he rasped, "bring him over yere!"

"Yere he is, chief," leered Toalman.

Sonny found himself face to face with an hombre of forty, and in spite of himself he flinched back a little from the look of intense hatred stamped on his face. It was from disgust rather than fear.

"Thet's it, yo're yaller!" snarled the evil-faced hombre. "Know who I am, hey, Tabor?"

"I can guess," said the outlaw coolly, "that yo're Tiff Wallace."

"He's a good guesser, ain't he, Tiff?" taunted Toalman. "He talks right up, too, when he knows he's in a jam he can't get out of."

"If yuh all hate me so much," Sonny Tabor drawled, "I don't see why yuh didn't let the law hang me back there."

"Because thet ain't our way, thet's all," said Tiff Wallace with a cold sneer. "We're goin' to have the satisfaction o' sprayin' yuh with lead, kid—red-hot lead. And we'll spray these nester friends of yores, too."

"This ain't the place to do it," interposed Toalman, looking back.

"No, we're takin' yuh jaspers with us to our shack at Last Water. We've got a bright plan—a very bright plan," chuckled the evil rancher mirthlessly. "We'll tell yuh all about it on the way. It's a long ride and a long story. All right, boys, herd 'em along. I'm anxious to get this done with!"

CHAPTER IX.

LAST WATER.

SURROUNDED by the gang of five, Sonny Tabor and the four nester prisoners were forced to head across the broad expanse of lava and desert that spread off to the east. Tim's face was crimson with stifled fury.

"Somehow everything went haywire, Sonny," he blurted out. "We was all ready to hit fer the jail to save yuh when these sidewinders popped up from nowhere and stuck us up. They tied us, and then four of 'em went back to El Morro and got yuh. I can't figger——"

"It's all my fault, amigos," Sonny Tabor said. "If yuh hadn't bothered about savin' my skin in the first place——"

"Now jest shut up, all of yuh," gibed Tiff Wallace. "If thar's explainin' to do, I'll do it. Mebbe yuh'd like to know, Draper, how I got the low-down on yore plans. Well, it ain't no secret now. Yore lawyer friend, Dickson, happens to work fer me. Smart hombre, Dickson is."

There was a bellow from old John Draper. "If I thought thet ganglin' scarecrow——"

"It's true," chuckled Tiff Wallace, "so yuh might as well think of it. He's been in my pay fer years. Why, Dickson got up thet other petition that resulted in the gov'nor turnin' down Tabor's pardon!"

For a long time the only sound was the thud of hoofs. Sonny and the others were too angry to say anything, and besides, it would have done little good. Wallace certainly had them where he wanted them now.

"Great little joke, wasn't it?" Toalman said. "What do yuh say, boss, to havin' a jolt of rye to celebrate on?"

Wallace was supplied with two quart bottles, and drew one from his saddle pocket.

"Might as well drink the whisky," he grunted. "We're mighty short on water. I forgot to bring along any extry, and to-day's goin' to be a scorcher."

"Well, thank goodness there's allus plenty at Last Water," said the gunman called Geneseo.

The ranchman was right about the weather, and Sonny was desert-wise enough to know it. It was going to be hot—fiercely, pitilessly hot. And as the weary hours dragged by, the sun shone with rapidly increasing heat. At nine o'clock the desert was a white sand blast, by ten it was a sizzling griddle.

The alkali rose under the plodding hoofs in acrid white clouds that choked the throat and stung the eyes. There was not a particle of shade, not even in the numerous arroyos they were forced to toil across.

The mesquite drooped lifelessly, and even the chuckawallas, Gilas, and darting whiptails had crept into their hide-outs. No birds were in

the sky. It seemed that nothing could exist there beneath that dazzling, searing sun.

Tiff and his men drank one of the bottles of whisky, then all their water. One of the nesters had a canteen on his saddle, and with boisterous laughs, the gang drank this, spilling most of it on the ground in their drunkenness.

When the water was gone, they began on the second quart of rye—mighty poor stuff to travel on through an Arizona desert. For a while they forgot their thirst.

"Why not let these nesters go?" Sonny asked Tiff. "Yuh have me, and that ought to be enough. Yuh can't profit any by killing them."

"No?" said Tiff Wallace out of one side of his mouth. "Well, listen to this—I want to tell yuh again how clever Lawyer Dickson is. The day yore petition fer Tabor's pardon was refused at Phoenix, Dickson got busy. He had some papers made up, and he took those papers around to yore womenfolks, tellin' 'em thet it was another petition—a woman's petition.

"Naturally," Wallace continued with a grin, "they signed those papers, all of 'em did, and without botherin' to read 'em over first. Them papers was all quit-claim deeds fer yore property in Little Ranchland, made out to me, and them fool women thought they was signin' up fer a pardon fer Sonny Tabor!"

"Yuh cowardly sneaks!" gritted the outlaw.

He wrenched at the cords that bound his wrists, but they held fast. If he could, he would have leaped at Tiff, weaponless though he was.

"Yuh can't git away with it!" old John Draper roared. "A husband has to sign a quit-claim deed as well as a wife!"

Tiff's pale, colorless eyes squinted in amusement. "But if their husbands happen to be dead——" He shrugged meaningly.

It was a fiendish plot; everything had worked out to Wallace's advantage. Sonny's fingers itched for the throat of the treacherous lawyer, Dickson.

"It's the hottest day I ever seen," grunted one of the desperadoes with a bitter oath. "If we don't git to Last Water afore long——"

"We'll soon be thar," grunted Tiff, "and think of all the cold, fresh water we'll have to drink when we do! There's plenty, but there'll be none fer our prisoners—they'll have to die with dry throats."

The gang finished the remaining quart of liquor, and this did them more harm than good. In fact, Sonny and the nesters were in much better condition than the others, in spite of the fact that they had had nothing to drink all day.

Finally, when the heat seemed to have reached the limit of human endurance, Tiff pointed off ahead to a flickering blot on the horizon.

"Thar's the shack at Last Water, boys," he said through cracked and swollen lips. "I'll be danged glad to get thar myself. I've been thinkin' about thet water fer the last ten miles."

Eager with thirst, all increased the pace. Soon the shack was reached, a disreputable shanty made of boards and tar paper. It was one of Tiff's many lonely cattle outposts.

Behind it, some withered trees drooped around a circular hollow. Two of the men headed for this at once, taking a couple of big rusty buckets with them.

They came back on the run, faces sickly pale under their tan, and swinging empty pails.

"What's the matter?" demanded

Tiff harshly. "Did yuh two fools git——"

"Thar ain't any to git!" panted the gunman named Galt. "Last Water Spring has dried up—it's as dry as a bone!"

"Thet's impossible!" snarled Tiff, wolfish in his rage and fear. "Thet spring never has gone dry—even back in the year of sand storms and no rains. I tell yuh——"

"Come and look," grunted Gene-seo.

"I'll tell yuh what's happened, boss," cried Markette. "When thet dam was dynamited, it drained this underground spring some way. I tell yuh, Tiff, we're gettin' punishment from Heaven fer——" He began to whimper, and Wallace shut him up with a furious oath.

"Thet couldn't have happened—thet dam's twenty miles and more from yere," Tiff rasped, but he looked startled, just the same.

An examination showed that Last Water was indeed dry. There wasn't even any moisture, though they scratched eagerly. Some one brought shovels from the house then, and they began work.

"We can dig down to water easy," Tiff encouraged, but he was so hoarse from thirst he could hardly make himself heard.

"In this hot sun——" whined Markette hopelessly.

"Say, when Lawyer Dickson gets yere, he'll have some water with him," Toalman cried. "He's careful—never makes mistakes, he don't. He'll have water. When did he say he'd get yere, Tiff?"

"Thet mule of his is slow, but I'm expectin' him any time," Tiff grunted.

The men dug down a couple of feet, but found no indications of water. They threw down their shovels, unable to work. They were all

nearly maddened, and at the point of collapse from too much alcohol and too little water. Their eyes were red-rimmed, their lips cracked, and their tongues swollen.

"I'll make Tabor and them nester friends of his do the diggin'," Tiff Wallace decided. "Untie 'em, put shovels in their hands, and if they don't work, blow their heads off!"

The prisoners were released, but kept under careful guard of Toalman's drawn six-gun. Sonny Tabor was glad to have his hands loose again, and he toiled as hard as he could at the spring.

He, too, was suffering for lack of water. If they didn't find it, and got none anywhere else, they would all perish miserably.

"Them hosses of ours will never make it back to El Morro," growled Tiff, "and even if they could, *we* couldn't. If Lawyer Dickson don't show up pretty soon——" He licked his dry lips uneasily.

Though they dug deep, Sonny and the nesters found no moisture. Last Water Spring was hopelessly dry. Just as Tiff was forcing them to further effort, a yell went up from Toalman.

"Yere comes Dickson, fellers!" he exulted. "Lucky, too, fer us. Let's wait fer him in the house, out of this dang-awful sun."

The interior of the wretched shanty wasn't much cooler than outside, but the prisoners were brought along, prodded by six-guns, though their hands were not tied again. Toalman had elected himself as Sonny Tabor's special guard, and he carried a Winchester carbine as well as his two holstered .45s.

"I'm goin' to be the one to croak yuh, anyway, Tabor," he leered. "So if yuh want to hurry me, just try somethin'."

They waited impatiently inside

the shack for the lawyer's mouse-colored mule to come up. Dickson seemed to be riding very comfortably, and was taking his time. A shout from the shack hurried him, and finally he swung off his weary mount and strode to the door.

The lawyer's gaunt face was crinkled by a jovial grin—a grin that became even wider when he glimpsed Sonny Tabor and the nesters.

"Well, well," he cried, rubbing his bony hands together. "This is quite a pleasure, meetin' my clients like this!"

"Yuh scoundrel!" roared old John Draper. "If I——"

The lawyer shrugged at him with one thin shoulder and turned to Tiff Wallace.

"I've got those quit-claim deeds along with me, and—— What's wrong, Tiff? What's the matter with all yore faces?"

"We need a drink!" Tiff gasped.

"Sorry, but I didn't bring no liquor, bein' as I——" began the lawyer.

"It ain't liquor we want; it's water," Toalman groaned.

"What's the matter with the spring?"

"It's dry! Have yuh any water, Dickson? Fer the love o'——"

"Yes, I have a three-gallon canteen on my mule—it's nearly full," the attorney said, and his pinched face turned a sickly gray as he understood the situation. How far would his meager three gallons go among all these thirsty men?

"I'll—I'll go right out now and bring in the canteen." He hesitated.

"Bueno, but hurry, Dickson."

The lawyer hurried out toward his mule. When he was a few yards from it, he rushed forward, gave a jump, and crawled on the mule's back. Jabbing the animal with his

heels, he whirled its head about and started away at a lumbering gallop.

"Why—why, the skinny old miser ain't goin' to share his water with us! Jest fer thet——" It was Toalman who shouted, and his Colt .45 roared from the hip.

He missed the lawyer, but the bullet nipped the mule. The mouse-colored animal emitted a shrill squeak and flourished its hoofs in a farewell salute. It had not been hit in a vital spot, and it kept going, running even faster.

"Get him, Toalman!" snarled Tiff, purple with fury. "Yore rifle——"

Toalman holstered his smoking Colt and whirled his Winchester to his shoulder.

And that gave Sonny Tabor just the chance he had long been waiting for!

CHAPTER X.

PAYMENT OF THE DESERT.

THE scoundrelly lawyer never got the bullet in the back that Toalman intended for him. Just as the desperado's finger tightened on the trigger, Sonny leaped at him like a bounding wild cat!

"Watch out, Toalman!" screeched Geneseo.

Smack! Sonny's hard fist smashed solidly into the side of Toalman's ugly jaw, knocking his head against the door jamb, just as the Winchester exploded wildly.

At the same instant the outlaw, with his other hand, jerked one of Toalman's .45s from its holster.

Toalman recovered himself instantly. His eyes were tigerish, his teeth bared.

"Why, yuh pup! I'll kill yuh!" He twisted his Winchester around. The range was so close that the muzzle raked Sonny's shirt.

Br-r-r-rang! There was a puff of smoke, a flash.

Toalman spun around on the heels of his boots and fell, his rifle clattering after him. He had been shot through the heart.

"Come on, yuh nesters! Let's fight!" Sonny shouted.

The others hadn't needed the invitation. Tiff and his gang had been too much afraid of hitting Toalman to shoot at Sonny, and now they found their hands full as the four lanky nesters charged in with doubled fists and clenched teeth.

Tim Draper himself stooped down and picked up Toalman's Winchester, jumping back to the wall in order to sweep the shanty with hot lead.

"Now, yuh danged yaller coyotes!" he yelled, baring his teeth.

Tiff and his remaining men, though they had the first advantage, were slow in following it up. Their eyes were too swollen with whisky for them to see clearly. Their nerves were ragged, their muscles flabby. Galt went down like a stunned beef under the mighty impact of old John's gnarled fist.

Geneseo had rushed at Sonny with drawn guns, but the two other young nesters took him from behind and pinned his arms. The last Sonny saw of the struggling trio was a cloud of powder smoke. Somebody fell heavily.

He was up against Tiff Wallace himself now. He felt the stinging clip of a bullet as a shot passed just under his left armpit. His own thumb worked the hammer of the Colt he had taken from Toalman—once, twice.

Wallace's jaw sagged with amazement. A red stain widened out on his shirt. He sagged forward on his knees and then to his face, arms outstretched. Tiff's crooked ranching days were over and done with at last.

Sonny looked back toward Geneseo and saw him sprawled motionless on the floor. The two nesters had wrenched away his guns and killed him.

They turned on Markette. The Colts in their hands spat vicious flame. Markette got one of the bullets through the arm, but before he could fire again, he toppled, swearing and whining like a dog with a broken back.

"Thet settles 'em! Thet settles 'em!" yelled the nesters through the swirling gun smoke.

But Tim's Winchester cracked sharply. Galt had staggered to his feet and had been in the act of shooting old John through the back when the high-powered bullet from the rifle caught him in the throat.

And then it *was* over.

"And now," said Sonny Tabor as he and his nester friends left the shack on their tired broncs a little later, "now our best bet is to track down Lawyer Dickson's gray mule. It was hit, and I don't believe it can go far."

"Yeah, if we don't get water," said Tim, "we'll never make it to town or anywhere else. And Dickson has got a canteen."

"I wouldn't mind meetin' up with Dickson, anyhow," growled old John angrily. "I've a little score to settle with thet hombre."

It was easy enough to follow the mule's trail. Here and there were spots of red, and the trail became more and more wavering and uncertain. At times the mule had stopped to buck.

It was at the hottest part of the afternoon now, and nothing could live in that desert for long without water. The animals, too, were thirsty and tired. Paint seemed the freshest of them all.

"Now yere's a place whar the mule bucked ag'in—like he was in pain," said old John, shading his eyes and looking at the tracks.

"And Dickson was chucked off, too, as yuh can tell by those other marks, amigo," Sonny said smilingly. "Look! Dickson's tracks go off in the other direction, like he's hit his head, or has gone sun-blind, or something like that. It's queer, isn't it?"

"I'm danged glad the mule did throw him," said old John. "He never got back to his mule; that's plain as daylight."

"Which tracks shall we foller—the lawyer's or the mule's?"

"The mule's, of course. The canteen is on the mule," snorted old John, and they plodded on again.

"Dickson is done fer, anyway," said Tim. "A man out here afoot — Whew! I pity him. He'd have been better off if Toalman had plugged him."

They soon found the mule. It was sprawled out in a cactus clump, dead. The faithful little critter had deserved a better end.

The canteen was on the mule, intact, and nearly full. All of them drank eagerly but sparingly. That water, hot as it was, seemed as refreshing as the nectar of the gods.

"We'll make it to El Morro now, all right," said old John with a chuckle. "Come on, Sonny, and let's hope we can dodge the sheriff fer yuh again on the way in."

"That's just it." Sonny smiled. "I'm goin' to do my own dodgin' for a while now. I'm headin' the other way—over toward the river."

"Why, that's lots farther; yuh'll never make it!" Tim ejaculated.

"Yes, Paint is desert bred, and he'll pull me through in fine shape, if yuh can spare him half a Stetsonful of that water, amigos."

"All yuh want—all of it, but——"

But Sonny insisted. He knew if he reached the distant river he would be safe from his old and relentless enemy, the law. He took only a small portion of the water in the canteen, and then sang out his adios.

"Till we meet again, *compadres*," he said cheerfully. "Remember me to the Little Ranchland folks. I reckon Tiff Wallace won't bother yuh any more. Good luck!"

They gripped hands, and reluctantly saw him go. Already it seemed that they were comrades, and had been so for years.

Sonny, too, was sorry to part, but to reach that distant river seemed his only chance. He had been close enough to that El Morro gallows as it was!

For what seemed many miles he rode across the sizzling sands, and then he came quite suddenly on human footprints. He recognized them. He had struck Lawyer Dickson's trail again. The attorney had managed to blunder quite a way on foot.

But toward sundown Sonny came to the end of the attorney's evil trail. Several times he saw spots where Dickson's body had lurched down in the burning sand, and then finally he saw the man himself—what was left of him.

The lawyer had died just like his mouse-colored mule. He was jammed in a tangle of thorny cactus, his lean legs twisted under him like an enormous spider's. Already the ants and other crawling things had found him.

Clutched in his stiffened hands was a little sheaf of papers. Sonny opened the fingers with difficulty, and, when he saw what those papers were, he smiled grimly.

"They wouldn't buy him even one

little drink of water," said the outlaw softly as he tore the documents to bits and scattered them in the wind.

They were the quit-claim deeds that had been swindled from the kindly people of Little Ranchland.

Sonny Tabor, whistling cheerfully under his breath, mounted his faithful pinto cayuse once more and swung onward at a lope. Not so very far ahead was a long line of green trees that marked the river—and safety.



AN EXCHANGE OF PRISONERS

A vow to avenge the death of his father sent William Meers, nine years ago, on the trail of the killer, Manuel Villareal, a Mexican.

The elder Meers and some special officers were fighting off a gang of bandits in El Paso, who had made a raid on the eighteen-thousand-dollar pay roll they were guarding.

In the gun fight, Meers and a bystander were killed, several other persons were injured, and three of the robbers were captured. The others made their escape, including Villareal, who had shot Meers.

Young Bill Meers, then only fifteen years old, set out to get the man who had killed his father. He haunted border saloons, questioning every man he met, until he learned the killer's name.

Villareal was in hiding most of the time, as he was being hunted unceasingly by the Mexican authorities for crimes committed on his native soil.

Six years passed. One night, Bill Meers was seated in a saloon in Juarez when a practical joker pointed out a waiter to him and said that the man was Manuel Villareal, working here under another name.

Calling the waiter over to his table, Meers drew his six-gun and shot him dead. When the deed was done, the practical joker fled, and Meers was informed that he had shot an innocent man named Visconte, and that Villareal had been

killed some time before in a political feud in Chihuahua City.

Meers was arrested and was held in the Juarez jail for months. He hoped for a light sentence, as he had not killed the man he was looking for, but a Chihuahua judge sentenced him to death.

One of the robbers captured at the time of the pay-roll holdup, Carrasco, had been tried and convicted of murder at El Paso, for the killing of the bystander, but his death sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment.

While young Meers was in the Juarez jail awaiting his fate, friends in El Paso negotiated with the Mexican authorities to exchange the Mexican for the American.

Three years passed before the swap was made, but it was finally completed on April 27 last, when Governor Rodrigo Quevedo, of Chihuahua, signed the Texan's pardon.

A few days later, the two prisoners met at the international bridge. Carrasco was handcuffed to an El Paso deputy sheriff until Mexican officers took charge of him.

Meers's hands were free. He said he had never been manacled while he was a prisoner, but had always walked unshackled between two officers when being moved.

Meers and Carrasco shook hands and congratulated each other on being free again, after which each returned to his own country.



A Chest O' Spanish Gold

By Hal Field Leslie

Author of "Two Pardners From Texas," etc.

FOR a long time, young Dane Hollister stared at the disk of yellow gold that lay on the palm of his hand. Then he began to laugh—a sound that was almost terrible, in that bleak immensity of desolation that hemmed him in.

The mark of the desert—hard, cruel, unrelenting in its hostility—

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was upon Dane Hollister. His gray eyes were bloodshot. His firmly chiseled lips were swollen and cracked, dusted with alkali that bit into the raw flesh like an acid. His sinewy young body was the burned-out scarecrow of a man, swaying a little from side to side on wide-braced legs.

Dane Hollister was a true son of the desert. Ever since he had been old enough to crack down on a quartz fragment with a prospector's hammer, he had ridden the wild and lonely trails with his father, silent Brant Hollister.

A seeker for gold, Brant Hollister had been. A man of iron, who recognized no hardship in his long quest for the precious metal. More than twenty years he had prospected the desert; and at last the desert had rewarded him—with death.

Three days ago, Dane's horse and his father's had pulled their picket pins in the night, and drunk their fill from a spring of poison water. For two days, with only half a canteen of good water between them, Dane and his father had fought their way, side by side, across interminable miles of blazing desert.

At the second sundown, they had drained the canteen. At noon of the next day, with the water gone, the merciless sun had burned Brant Hollister down with a stroke. Within an hour, he had died.

Dane Hollister wasn't built of the stuff that visibly gives way to grief. His eyes had burned with unshed tears as he built a cairn of protecting rock above the body of his father. Then, ridding himself of all unnecessary weight—his cartridges, his six-gun, and his knife—he had fought on alone, courageously, as Brant Hollister would have wanted him to do.

And now—not more than five minutes ago, at noon of the fourth terrible day—Dane Hollister had stumbled upon the half-buried wreckage of a once sturdy wagon, and found near by the broken corner of a rawhide-covered trunk protruding from the sand.

Dane was in a right bad way, but

he wasn't too far gone to appreciate the grimness of this joke which Fate had played. His laughter—or the croaking, ghastly sounds that were meant for laughter—rasped like the drawings of a file across the infinite stillness.

Here was gold at his feet. Handfuls of gold—buckets of gold! More gold than a horse could carry, in that broken, nearly buried Spanish trunk. Gold minted and coined for the glory of a long-dead king. A fortune for the taking.

Yet not enough, for all its precious weight, to buy a single drop of the water that might have saved his father's life—a single drop of the water for which every fiber of his own tortured body was screaming.

Dane looked down at the golden coin upon his palm, and laughed. Then of a sudden he swung and hurled the glittering and useless thing far into the tormenting sun glare.

Without a backward glance at the treasure he was leaving, Dane moved straight away from the old Spanish trunk, the weathered skeleton of the wagon, and the bleached bones of horses and men. He walked straight on toward those three needlelike spires of rock that had been his landmark since the dawn.

The spires had changed from black to purple, then to shimmering blue in the day's pulsing heat. A straight line would eventually bring him out of the desert, if he could only keep his legs under him.

Fifty yards, and the coin he had hurled away gleamed yellow at his feet. Mechanically—every move was mechanical now—he stooped and picked it up, and kept on. Five paces, and his leathery face cracked in a mirthless grin. Might as well keep the worthless bauble. Me-

chanically he slipped the yellow disk into his pocket, and moved on.

Up and down, forward and drag, his feet moved wearily. The hot desert wind licked at him like some fiery dragon's tongue. Each forward step was a separate agony; but, animated by a stubborn courage, he kept going. He was determined that the desert should not claim him for it own, as it yesterday had claimed his father.

However, near sundown, the desert played another card of cruelty against him. The hot wind quickened. With it, a sand storm came blustering up across the wastelands. Swiftly, Dane was enveloped in a whirling chaos.

He could not see ten yards ahead. For a while, he tried to battle the rush of sand particles that stung him like driven needles. Then, hopelessly beaten, he flung himself down in the small shelter afforded by a black lava upthrust. There was no going on, when every breath filled the lungs with gritty dust.

Hour after hour, Dane lay there with his face buried in the crook of an arm, listening to the pour and scour of the rushing sand across the lip of his bulwark. And finally he fell into a deep sleep.

II.

DANE Hollister awoke with the sun hot upon the back of his neck. He roused himself, got up stiffly, and shook the sand from his clothing. Sleep had refreshed his tired body a little; but the torment of thirst seemed tenfold greater than yesterday's. The membranes of his throat were like old parchment.

The wind had died away, but the air was still filled with drifting, slowly settling dust particles, through which the hot sun glowed red, as through smoke.

As Dane resolutely squared his shoulders for this new day's battle for his life, his ears caught a peculiar whining sound, somewhere off at his right. He looked that way, and his startled, bloodshot eyes made out the shape of a ponderous covered wagon, drawn by four plodding horses and flanked by three riders in saddle. Dusty axles whining, the big wagon was drawing steadily nearer through the dun haze.

Dane Hollister knew, then, just how a castaway on a lonely raft must feel, when he sees a rescuing ship bearing down from out the fog. Dane tried to shout, but his thirst-burred voice could not have carried more than thirty yards.

Filled with thanksgiving, he broke into a stumbling run. Across a sea of freshly sculptured sand waves—beneath which was buried all trace of his yesterday's trail—he drove his legs to meet the approaching wagon.

The driver, on the high seat of the cumbersome wagon, drew his team to a halt. And a moment later, Dane was clutching the rim of a front wheel, and asking thickly for a drink of water.

He was a big man, the driver of that wagon. His heavy face was covered with a thick growth of red beard that was as crisp as curled wire. His rugged brow was shaded by a wide-brimmed hat of rusty black felt. His eyes, set deep under beetling brows, were hard, cold, calculating. He looked down at Dane with an uncompromising sternness.

"I ain't got any water to spare," he declared, and his harsh voice seemed to rumble up from deep inside his massive chest. "I need every drop I'm carryin'."

Dane, standing on braced legs, stared up at the man in sheer amazement. It was unbelievable, that one human being could be so callously

indifferent to the sufferings and the needs of another.

The three riders had drawn close. They were sober-faced boys, the youngest about ten, the oldest no more than sixteen. Their eyes betrayed a lively interest in the newcomer, but they kept a respectful, almost fearful, silence.

However, from the wagon's dusky interior, a girl's voice spoke earnestly:

"Uncle Joe! You can't turn him away like that. A little water——"

"Shet yore mouth!" growled the big man across his heavy shoulder. "When I want a word from you, Sue Bolton, I'll ask fer it. Until I do, you keep yore tongue in yore head!"

Without giving the girl a chance to retort, he tightened the reins in his hairy fist, looked coldly down at Dane, and growled:

"I've told you I ain't sparin' no water. Take yore hands offn that wheel—afore I run you down!"

Dane knew well enough that the big brute meant every word he had uttered. Helplessly, Dane let go the wheel and stepped back. Then of a sudden he remembered the gold coin in his pocket. He fished it out and flung it up to the driver's lap. It slid down between his beefy legs and rang musically on the wooden seat.

"If yore water is so almighty precious," choked Dane angrily, "maybe *thet* will buy me a drink!"

With a clutching move that betrayed his natural greed, the big man recovered the coin. For a moment, he studied it narrowly. Then his eyes returned to Dane, and they were filled with crafty lights.

"Where'd you come by this gold?" he demanded sharply. "This is an old Spanish piece."

"Gold is gold," retorted Dane thickly. "Spanish or not, it's good

enough to buy most anything—even a drink of water!"

"I reckon," said the big man heavily, "that murder's apt to be on this coin. A feller don't toss gold around unless he comes by it too easy."

A dull flush of anger welled beneath the tan of Dane's wind-burned cheeks. The man's plain implication that he was a murderer, rubbed him raw.

"Thet gold is honest money, far as I'm concerned," he asserted with what vigor he could muster. He swung a weary arm back in the trackless direction whence he had come. "I done found it yesterday, way back theah in the desert. A trunk full of it, half buried along with what's left of a wagon, and the bones of men and hosses. I reckon it was the outfit of some old *hidalgo*, up from California."

He broke off suddenly, for there had come a sharp gleam to the big man's eyes. Dane realized that he had said too much.

"So!" The big red-bearded man tossed the coin gently, almost caressingly, upon his broad palm. "So! A trunk full of Spanish gold, and this single piece is the value you set on a drink of water!"

Mention of water roused Dane to a fury of desperation. "A trunk full, yes!" he cried. "And half of it is yores, if you'll jest give me some water!"

The big fellow's gaze swept the inscrutable desert, off there across the trackless wastes where Dane had vaguely pointed. Then he looked at Dane, and his eyes were shrewd.

"Only *one* half?" he queried softly. "When a jasper's life is hangin' in the balance against a few pieces of gold, the gold hadn't ought tuh weigh much."

"You mean," choked Dane incredulously, "thet you want it *all*?"
"Shore—all!"

There was a merciless finality in those two words, so flatly uttered. It convinced Dane that it would be useless to argue, useless to try to satisfy the man's greed with anything less than he demanded.

"I've done met up with many a poison hombre," asserted Dane bitterly, "but you—yo're so low you'd have to climb on a rock to scratch a snake's belly!"

Beyond a scowl that drew his bushy red brows together, the big man paid no heed to Dane's words. Sure of himself, he smiled thinly and said:

"Yo're takin' my terms, then?"

"Not any!" retorted Dane with a sudden flare of recklessness. "I'd a heap sight rather take my chances with the desert, than give in to a wolf like you!"

For a long moment, the big hombre gazed down at that grim-jawed son of the desert, who was defying him with the last remnants of a sturdy strength and will. He gazed, and his narrowed eyes were filled with cunning speculation. Then the reins tightened purposefully in his hairy fist.

"You've done made yore choice, friend," he said softly. "I ain't got no more time to waste palaverin'."

He nodded curtly to the three silent boys; and obediently they swung on ahead of the wagon. A sharp word of command to the team, and the ponderous vehicle began to roll away, with axles whining.

For a moment, Dane was filled with black panic. His legs wanted to carry him alongside that front wheel again, his tongue wanted to cry out his surrender. But the sheer grit that was in him took command.

He'd made his choice. He'd stick by it, too—and to blazes with that ruthless redbear! No matter how badly he might want to get his clutches on the gold, there was no back trail for him to follow—the sand storm had seen to that. Dane stood still.

As the ponderous rear wheel rolled past, spilling a thin stream of lifted sand from its broad rim, Dane's eye caught a movement of the closed canvas curtains at the rear of the big vehicle. They parted slightly and a face appeared there—a girl's face, framed by a wind-blown tumble of golden hair.

Her big, blue eyes were upon Dane, and her red lips were forming some soundless word he couldn't understand. She pointed urgently past him, at the ground. Then the curtains fell back in place, and she was gone.

Wondering at the meaning of her gesture, Dane faced about. He saw, lying on the sand, a quart-size pickle jar with a tight screw cover. And it was filled with water.

"Water!" Dane's mind coiled around that sweet word. His charred throat was aching for the cooling trickle of it. But fear for the welfare of the girl who had slyly dropped it for him, held him rooted to the sand. Battling the desire that was consuming him, he waited for the slow progress of the wagon to build safe distance.

To Dane, the pace of the wagon drawing away in the thinning dust murk, seemed no faster than the crawling of a snail. Two hundred—three hundred—five hundred yards it covered.

Dane swung eagerly toward the water jar, and then something seemed to snap inside his skull. The desert wheeled and spun around him, and went black as night. His

weary knees buckled, and he fell sprawling on his face.

Dane's outstretched hand lay motionless, within half a foot of that gleaming water jar.

III.

When Dane Hollister recovered from that black fainting spell, the wagon had long since disappeared.

Head buzzing queerly, Dane sat up and reached for the water jar. His hand shook with eagerness, but he had sense enough to take the water as a man in his condition should take it—drop by drop, sip by slow sip.

At the end of half an hour, Dane carefully screwed the cover back on nearly half the contents of the jar, and stowed it away in the bulge of his shirt. Then he got to his feet.

Hunger was gnawing like a coyote at his stomach, but the water had refreshed him amazingly. Thanks to the girl in the wagon, he now had a fresh grip on life.

The marks of the departed vehicle were twin ribbons in the sand. Dane began to follow those broad tracks of wheels. They were a trail to somewhere, at least.

He followed, and within the hour, he met up with one of those boys from the wagon. The oldest boy, returning with a lead horse bearing an empty saddle, a full canteen of water, and food tied in a compact parcel behind the cante.

These—horse, food and water—the boy turned over to Dane, with the simple explanation, that his Uncle Joe had sent them. Then without a further word, he wheeled his pinto chunk and dusted back along the trail of the wagon—hurriedly, as if he feared to incur the wrath of the big rebeard by lingering beyond an allotted time.

Dane, standing with knit brows beside the horse, was sorely puzzled. He could find no reason for this act of kindness, except that the man called Joe had undergone an amazing change of heart.

Dane finished the last of the water in the jar, and ate as much of the food as he dared. Then he swung into the saddle. With grub under his ribs, and the feel of good leather between his legs again, the desert lost its hostile aspect. On foot, Dane had been its victim; mounted, he was its master.

Quite naturally, Dane's thoughts turned to the gold that was his by right of finding. He rode back to the spot where he had spent the night of storm and, taking direction from those three tall spires in the distance, he retraced his way in search of the Spanish trunk.

It was midforenoon before Dane succeeded in locating the spot. Sand had flowed and settled on the place, and its only marker was six inches of weathered wheel spoke protruding from the tawny drift. Dane anchored his horse with trailed reins, knelt down where memory told him the treasure should be, and began to scoop away the sand.

At the end of a blazing hour, during which Dane had often to pause and drink from the canteen hung on the saddle horn, the broken trunk lay well uncovered at the bottom of a wide and shallow hole.

Dane thrust a lean, brown hand into its gaping corner, and drew out a score of coins, let them flow from palm to palm in a shining yellow cascade. He was rich, beyond his wildest dreams!

But even at this moment of triumph, Dane realized that he owed a debt. Had it not been for the belated kindness of the big man with the crisp red beard, Dane

wouldn't have been here with his hands filled with Spanish gold. He resolved, that his first concern would be to repay that debt. He would trail the wagon to its destination, return the horse, and——

Dane's thoughts were interrupted by the soft whickering of that horse. It stood with lifted head, ears pricked forward. Dane swung, and his eyes followed the gaze of the horse. Then he saw, in the flesh, the man who had been in his thoughts.

Not two hundred yards away, the big rebeard was sitting motionless in the saddle—a solid, almost gigantic, figure atop a short-coupled pinto chunk. There was menace in the very quietness of that red-bearded horseman, yet Dane was not aware of it as he got to his feet—not until he saw the glint of a lifting rifle in the big man's hand.

In one swift and bitter flash of realization, Dane saw how simply he had been tricked. The rebeard had sent back that horse, knowing full well that Dane would go straight to the gold. Then he had only to follow the plain trail Dane had left, to learn exactly where that Spanish coin had come from. And now——

Unarmed, Dane's only possible chance of salvation lay in flight. But even as he plunged desperately for his horse, the high-powered rifle cracked wickedly across the day's hot silence.

However, the bullet did not find Dane; it had not been intended for him. Dane heard the hiss of it past his cheek; heard plainly the ripping smack of it, as it penetrated the skirt of his horse's saddle.

The brute lurched, wheeled half around on crumpling legs, and went down heavily upon its side. Dane squared around to meet the second shot.

But no second shot came. The horseman rode in, carrying the Winchester alertly across the saddle horn. He halted a dozen feet away, and his deep-set eyes swept the hole that Dane had dug. He saw the broken trunk, caught the gleam of Spanish gold, and a dark pulse of greed began to throb at his temples.

"Why didn't you shoot *me*?" demanded Dane hotly. "Why take it out on a hoss?"

A crafty smile played around the big man's bearded mouth. "I ain't aimin' ever to have you picked up with a hole in yore skull. There's a safer way to shet yore mouth—slower than a slug of lead, but jest as shore. The desert can finish her job on *you*! As fer that horse—I couldn't come leadin' it back to the wagon with an empty saddle. Them brats talk too much. This way, I can say I found the gold and didn't see nothin' of you—and my hands is clean!"

"Yo're about the dirtiest skunk thet ever smelled up a clean country!" flared Dane. "Yo're——"

"Shet up! You prod me too far, and I reckon I might fergit myself! Here!"

He removed the two stout canvas sacks that were hung upon his saddle, flung them at Dane's feet. Then, with the muzzle of the rifle, he gestured toward the rawhide trunk.

"Fill them sacks," he ordered harshly. "Git a move on you!"

Dane knew that he stood a slender chance of again escaping the savagery of the desert. And for a moment he was tempted to try goading the big ruffian into triggering the rifle, then and there. Better the merciful quickness of a bullet, than the slow torment of heat and thirst, with the same result at the end!

But this feeling of despair quickly passed. Dane had too much backbone, to give up life so easily. He determined to see the matter through. And because there was nothing else he could do, at present, he picked up the sacks and moved to obey the redbear's command.

IV.

The lid of the Spanish trunk was held secure by a heavy iron padlock. The broken corner, its edges were sharply splintered and bent inward, as if it had sometime been struck a heavy blow, was the only way to get at the gold. So, handful by handful, Dane filled the first sack.

By the time the second sack was nearly filled, Dane perceived that there yet remained considerable gold in the bottom of the trunk—almost as much as he had already taken out. And, thereupon, an idea occurred to him: If he could make the ruffian believe that two sacks contained it all, and if he *should* manage to get out of this alive, he might be able to salvage the remainder of the treasure for himself.

The eyes of the big man were steadily upon him. Dane allowed no flicker of hope to show upon his face. At each handful, now, he crowded his arm deeper through the jagged corner, as if he were scraping bottom. At length he brought out a single coin; then appeared to feel around for more, and finally withdrew his arm empty-handed.

The big man scowled, and tossed Dane a pair of rawhide pigging strings. "Tie 'em up," he directed curtly, "and bring 'em here."

Dane brought him the sacks—one at a time, for each must have weighed fully fifty pounds. And the big man snagged them securely to the saddle horn.

"Now," he ordered grimly, "fetch me the canteen offn that dead fuzz-tail."

Those words were like a sentence of death, but there was nothing for Dane to do but obey. Slowly he moved over to the horse struck down by the ruffian's bullet.

"The canteen is underneath," said Dane quietly. "I reckon if you want it, you'll have to lend me a hand. I'm near caved in."

Dane got no answer. He looked up and saw that the big man's eyes were not upon him, but upon the Spanish trunk. And suddenly an oath broke from the fellow's lips. He dropped his reins, swung out of saddle and strode scowling toward the trunk. Dane knew the man's eyes must have caught the gleam of that gold he had hoped to save.

Dane realized that the gold was discovered, and he also realized swiftly, that this fact had given him one last and desperate chance for flight. If he could only reach the pinto—

One chance in a million, that he might escape the vengeful bullets that would follow him, but Dane took it gladly. He leaped desperately toward the pinto.

Out of the corner of his eye, the big fellow glimpsed Dane's attempt. With a yell of anger, he plunged to intercept Dane. For a man of his build and poundage, he was amazingly fast on his feet. His plunging rush barred Dane's way. Without pausing, Dane dropped his shoulders and lunged at the fellow's knees.

Under the solid impact, both went down floundering. And before either could regain his feet, the pinto chunk, alarmed by the sudden scuffle almost beneath its nose, wheeled and broke into a wild stampede.

Swearing, the big man came to his knees. Dane rolled away from his clawing hand and started to get up. But the redbear, growling like a mad grizzly, reached out and viciously wiped the side of Dane's head with the barrel of the Winchester. Dane crumpled in a shower of stars.

Had the blow been a clean one, Dane's skull might have been crushed like the shell of an egg. As it was, the glancing blow merely stunned him so completely that he couldn't move. It was a long minute before he became aware of the big ruffian standing over him and prodding him cruelly in the ribs with the muzzle of the rifle.

"Get up, you blasted whelp!" he was mouthing. "Get onto yore feet. I got a use fer you!"

Slowly, painfully, his ears ringing with a million tiny bells, Dane dragged himself erect. And he saw, far away, a swiftly moving dance of dust, that marked the going of the pinto.

"You've set me afoot, blast you!" raged the redbear. "And you've done me out of a hundred pounds of gold, unless I can catch up with that pinto. But there's more in that trunk, thanks to yore cute notion of lettin' on two sacks was all! You ain't goin' to do me out of *that*, by thunder!"

Rifle in the crook of his brawny arm, he strode over to the dead horse. "Come along, here, and git a holt on them hind laigs," he snapped. "I'm thirsty."

Together, they rolled the dead brute over. The big man grasped the canteen, and a queer look spread across his beefy face. Dane's eye was the first to read what had happened, and he began silently to laugh.

The high-powered Winchester

bullet, on its deadly way into the horse, had nicked the seam of the canteen. Lying on its side under the fallen brute, every drop of water had drained away. The canteen was empty.

The big man confirmed that ghastly truth by shaking the canteen beside his ear. Then he flung it away and glared at Dane.

"Laugh, you crazy fool!" he gritted. "You'll be needin' that lost water afore I will!"

"I ain't so shore about thet," retorted Dane grimly, for he had glimpsed the dread that was crawling deep in the big man's eyes. "Me, I done had a right good pull at thet canteen, just a spell before you showed up."

"You'll be needin' another one, time we've gone a piece," asserted the big redbear evilly. "I've changed my mind about turnin' you loose—right now. So git that trunk onto yore back, and start movin'!"

Driven by the menace of the Winchester, Dane had to submit to the big man's will.

With his aching back doubled under the dead weight of the Spanish trunk, Dane Hollister plodded wearily across the blazing desert.

The big man had set a quartering course that eventually would cut the trail of the wagon, which he had sent on to make camp at nightfall. Also he hoped somewhere to come upon the pinto. The brute had gone in that direction, and might easily be caught, once its alarm had subsided.

Frantic haste possessed the big redbear. He drove Dane mercilessly. Had not Dane's sinews been hardened by his years of desert toil, he would have crumpled before the first mile was done.

Dane's burly captor refused to

allow him a moment's rest from the grueling toil. However, Dane soon devised a scheme whereby his cracking muscles had short intervals of release from the load. Occasionally, he would stumble, purposely, and go down beneath the weight on his back. Then the big man would swear at him foully and jab him viciously with the Winchester, until he was on his feet again.

There came a time when Dane's stumbling was no longer of his own will. When he did fall, it was because he could not keep his legs from caving in. Each time, now, it took him longer to get going, and as his progress slowed, the prodding of the big ruffian's rifle took on an added savagery.

Dane realized that his strength was ebbing with each forward step. And as he dragged his feet haltingly across the burning sands, he roweled his tired mind for some plan of action, before it should be too late.

Quite suddenly, the idea came to him. Not much of an idea, yet it *might* work. If it didn't—well he couldn't be much worse off than he was now.

So this time, Dane stumbled and fell on purpose, and he saw to it, that the trunk came to rest upon its end, with the broken corner at the top. And when the rifle rammed into his sore ribs, he didn't move. Instead, he gritted his teeth at the pain of it and managed a note or two of harsh laughter.

"Seems to me," he said grimly, "thet yo're taking a mighty lot of trouble, keeping yoreself back from water and all, just for something that *may* not be worth as much as you think."

The rebeard drew back and eyed him narrowly. "What you drivin' at?" he demanded sharply.

"You maybe ain't so rich as you

thought," Dane told him quietly. "You wouldn't be, if the most of thet money in thet trunk happened to be *silver*."

The rebeard's eyes regarded Dane suspiciously. Then with a snort of disbelief, he moved to the trunk. Glaring at Dane, he transferred the rifle to his right hand, and thrust his other through the broken corner. The hole was barely large enough to admit his hamlike fist.

The fellow had done exactly what Dane had hoped he would do. And Dane said smoothly: "You dig along to the bottom, and see what——"

Snarling, the rebeard squeezed his thick arm deeper into the hole. He swore, when he found he could not quite reach the treasure, and jammed his arm the harder. Dane heard the clink of gold coins as the fellow's fingers clawed among them.

And then Dane threw all his remaining strength into one desperate play. He came to his feet and launched himself at the arm that was holding the Winchester.

The big man yelled, and jerked back the arm that was in the trunk. And the thing Dane had figured might happen, did occur: The splintered edges of the hole snagged the fellow's shirt sleeve, held him fast.

Growling with deep-throated rage, like a great bear with its paw clamped fast in the jaws of a trap, the burly ruffian floundered back. And with a hefty sweep of his free arm, he swung the rifle to meet Dane's attack.

The streaking barrel broke through Dane's outflung hands and smashed him wickedly across the chest. It stopped him in mid-air, drove him staggering aside, doubled in agony.

The big man was holding the rifle

by its grip. Before Dane could recover full breath and return to the attack, he heard the hammer click sharply back under the big fellow's thumb. Holding the Winchester in his massive hand as if it were a six-gun, the redbear swung its muzzle on Dane, and glared across the sights with murder in his eye.

Dane realized that no more than a split second might lie between him and eternity. In desperation, he hurled himself in a headlong dive beneath the weapon's muzzle; and as he hit the desert floor, he swept up a handful of sand, rolled like a cat, and flung it fair at the big man's snarling face.

Hampered by the awkward length of the Winchester, the fellow was trying to line its sights on his scrambling opponent. When that handful of gritty sand showered into his flaming eyes, he bellowed like a mad bull, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

Wham! The Winchester exploded, and sand spouted against Dane's cheek, so close did the bullet come.

Snarling, shaking his head from side to side, the big ruffian caught the stock of the rifle under his arm, and strove awkwardly to lever a fresh cartridge into the chamber. But before he could make a go of it, a lean hundred and sixty pounds of fury was atop him.

Down they went, the big redbear and Dane Hollister. Threshing, snarling, dragging the heavy trunk with his caught arm, the ruffian fought desperately. But Dane's cleverness had been too much for him. He couldn't free himself from that trunk of jangling treasure. Nor could he keep Dane off.

Dane got his legs under him, clamped a grip on the barrel of the

rifle, surged back, and drove a lusty boot heel smashing against his adversary's knuckles. With a yell of pain, the fellow slacked his grip. Dane went somersaulting backward, but the Winchester was his!

Dane came swiftly to his knees and levered a cartridge into the chamber. His eyes were blazing.

"Don't shoot me!" cried the big redbear whiningly. "Fer Pete's sakes, don't trigger that gun!"

"I don't aim to, unless you get too ornery," said Dane grimly. "I got a use fer you, like you had for me! We're agoing back to your wagon, and then I figure to hawg tie you and haul you out to the law."

Sullen anger smeared the big ruffian's countenance. He began to swear. Dane cut him short with a sharp word.

"Start worming yore arm out o' thet hole, and when it's out, pick up thet trunk and get moving! You'll find her plenty heavy, too," he added grimly. "'Cause there ain't any silver in it, none whatever. It's all gold!"

When the neatness of Dane's move to trap him percolated into the redbear's skull, his beefy face flamed with hatred. Rebellion gleamed in his eye. But the rifle in Dane's steady hands was a powerful persuader, and in black silence he began to twist at his prisoned arm.

V.

Before the big ruffian had covered more than two hundred yards with his burden of gold, he began to whine and plead for rest.

"All right," said Dane coldly. "I ain't agoing to prod you. Put it down and rest, but remember, the longer you take getting to yore wagon, the longer you'll have to go without water."

Fear of thirst leaped into the redbeard's eyes. It was a more compelling force than the jabbing of the rifle would have been. A sweat of dread stood out upon his massive brow. He shouldered the trunk and strode on, hurriedly.

A blazing hour passed. The hulking ruffian began to mumble thickly of water. Dane's own throat was parched, but he maintained grim silence.

Dane held his captive to a straight course. They had lost the weaving trail of the pinto. The big redbeard became aware of this fact, after a while, and he turned on Dane.

"Blast you!" he cried in thick-tongued frenzy. "Ya're drivin' me around in circles, aimin' to have me die of thirst!"

"Shut up!" said Dane grimly. "You've had a lot more water than I have, these past days. Keep moving!"

They moved. The big man was stumbling now. And with each forward step, his terror of the desert mounted. For all his massive build, he was going to pieces under that terror. There came the moment, when only the threat of the heavy Winchester at his back kept him going.

Near sundown, they picked up the pinto's trail again. Shortly they rounded the shoulder of a black lava hogback. And within a hundred yards along its base, they came upon a shallow water seep, where the pinto had paused to drink its fill.

The big redbeard flung the trunk from his shoulders and plunged forward. Dane yelled a sharp warning, for the water in that shallow pool was of a sinister, coppery hue.

"Hold up! That's apt to be poison water! Wait a minute!"

It was Dane's intent, to scan the

vicinity, to see if any telltale bones were lying scattered on the sand. But there was no stopping the frenzied redbeard—not with words alone. Dane leaped, and swung the rifle barrel down upon his head. It was a hefty smash, and under it the hulking fellow collapsed a yard short of his goal. He was knocked out cold.

Dane had a moment, now, to look about. He discovered no bones of animals, no sign that the water was poison. However, the sand storm might have wiped out those traces. Dane was not yet satisfied that the water was good; it looked too much like that water which had killed his own horse and his father's.

Dane looked afar for some sign of the pinto; but as far as he could see, the sand lay in empty waves. Among them, a hundred horses might lie unseen.

For better view, Dane climbed to the spine of the hogback. And he saw, no more than three hundred yards away, the body of the pinto lying asprawl in a sand hollow. The sacks of gold were still visible upon the saddle.

Dane's thoughts leaped to the canteen the brute had carried. As he started down the hogback after that precious water, he looked, by chance, across his shoulder. And his startled eyes beheld a rider, loping smartly up along the trail the big man and himself had made across the desert.

Unmistakably, it was the girl from the wagon. Eagerly, Dane swung about, and hurried down the far side of the hogback to meet her. And a moment later, he was standing beside her mount, and she was looking down at him with eyes filled with concern—eyes that were bigger and bluer than any Dane had ever seen.

"Are you all right?" she cried anxiously. "Where's Joe? I didn't figure out what he was up to, until he'd been gone a long time from the wagon. Then I made the boys go on, and I came back along his trail. I can read sign, and I know about what happened. Where is he?"

"He's a-restin'," said Dane grimly, "over on yonder side of the hogback. If you'll give me a pull at yore can-teen, I'll shore be much obliged. Then we'll maybe have a powpow with big Joe."

Refreshed, and with his story of the day's happenings briefly told, Dane led the mounted girl around the shoulder of the hogback. And there he halted, with a startled exclamation on his lips.

The big redbeard was a good hundred yards away from the base of the hogback! With the trunk of treasure riding his bulky shoulders, he was shambling hurriedly along on the pinto's trail. Shambling, and weaving queerly from side to side.

"Thunderation!" cried Dane. "He done come to and filled himself up with that poison water!"

Before Dane and the girl could get under way, the hulking fellow halted abruptly in his tracks. The Spanish trunk slid unheeded from his shoulders, and his big hands began to claw wildly at his stomach. Suddenly he pitched forward, rolled upon his back, and his heels began to beat a tattoo of death. A moment later, he lay inert upon the sand.

"He's gone," said Dane briefly. And then, more softly, "I'm right sorry it had to happen this a way, being he was yore uncle——"

The girl tore her wide eyes away

from the bulky figure on the desert floor, and looked down at Dane.

"But he wasn't my uncle—not really," she told him quietly. "We only called him that, my brothers and I, because he's worked for my dad ever since I was knee high to a gopher. Eighteen years, and I never dreamed his heart was so black!"

"If a man's got a mean streak in him," said Dane soberly, "greed for gold will bring it out, every time. Yore dad, now—he a cowman, maybe?"

"Yes. We had us a ranch back in the Big Canyon country. But a couple of dry years wiped us out completely. Dad lost everything, and a spell ago he went ahead to Idaho to homestead a new place. Joe was bringing us on."

"Which is a job," said Dane simply, "that I reckon I'll have to finish—if yo're willing I should stow away a couple of hundred pounds of Spanish gold in yore wagon."

"Why, of course. Two hundred pounds of gold! That must be an awful lot of money. Whatever will you do with it all?"

"Buy myself a ranch—in Idaho," said Dane promptly. "Thet is, if I can convince yore dad to go into a partnership. Reckon you'd—well, sort o' put in a word for me?"

A faint stain of color flowed beneath the smooth skin of Sue Bolton's cheeks. She said no word. But Dane, reading the look in her eyes that were dark with the softness of coming dusk, suddenly knew that he had found a desert treasure far more precious than any golden coins minted for the glory of a long dead king.





Johnny Forty-five On Haunted Range

By Andrew A. Griffin

Author of "Johnny Forty-five—Law Wrangler," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A JOB FOR THE LAW.

LEANING back in his saddle, Johnny Forty-five reached for his "makin's" and rolled a brown cigarette with his left hand. But instead of smoking it, or even lighting it, he flipped it carelessly into the nearest mesquite bush.

There was a snort of disgust from Johnny's partner, Deputy United States Marshal George Krumm.

"I'm askin' yuh fer the thousandth time, Johnny," he bleated, "why yuh don't quit thet tomfoolery? Yuh never smoke, yet

yuh're allus wastin' good tobaccer thet a way! Oh, I know what yuh're goin' to say! But don't say it, don't say it."

But Deputy Marshal Forty-five's reply was already coming, and in a cheery, singsong rhyme:

"Yuh ought to try this exercise.

It keeps yore trigger finger spry.

Do it, and yuh soon can prove

The gun han's quicker than the eye."

Deputy Krumm's round, pudgy face took on an expression of lofty scorn.

"Thar yuh go ag'in—allus rhymin'," he muttered. "Thet

crazy poetry of yores gets on my nerves more'n forty gun fights would. Sometimes I wish we wasn't sent out on cases together—yuh'll never learn nothin', in spite of all I can do to teach yuh. Yuh never will make a good marshal, Johnny, yuh never will!"

Johnny Forty-five, in fact, didn't look much like an officer. He looked like an ordinary saddle tramp, for he was dressed like a cow-puncher. He was much younger than Krumm, and about half his size.

But there was something about Johnny's ruddy, sunburned face that made him different from most waddies. Perhaps it was the impudent twinkle in his blue eyes, or his firm, fighting jaw.

Unlike his fat partner, Johnny didn't wear his badge in sight, but kept it in the pocket of his copper-riveted blue Levis, the legs of which were hidden by his worn brown chaps. Low on each thigh, however, swung a Colt single-action name-sake—a blued .45 in a well-oiled holster.

But Krumm looked every inch an officer of the law. Weighing fully two hundred pounds, he seemed to radiate authority and self-importance. On the left side of his loudly checkered vest was pinned his official silver badge.

He was so fat that his clothing seemed too tight for him, and about his bulging paunch was a gun belt of such size that, as Johnny often said, it could have been used as a saddle girth.

"What makes yuh think thet rollin' them quirlies makes yore fingers spry?" he went on irritably. "I'd like to see yuh prove it."

"Bucno, George," said the younger deputy with a grin.

He rapidly rolled another ciga-

rette, this time with his right hand, and tossed it high into the air. Then, while the breeze was whirling the paper cylinder, the same hand darted toward his hip and up again.

Br-r-r-rang! There was a puff of dark smoke, split by a streak of bright flame.

Krumm's face went blank as the cigarette, caught in the air by the bullet, came down in a shower of charred paper and scorched tobacco.

But the fat deputy soon recovered himself. "Thet's easy," he said loftily. "Watch me, now!"

He took the cigar butt from between his teeth. "O' course, I know," he said, "thet this is easier to hit than a cig. But I'm goin' to hit this *twice*, Johnny, while it's still in the air. And I don't need none o' yore so-called finger exercise first, either."

"Be careful, George," Johnny sighed.

"Huh! They don't call me 'Deadshot Krumm' fer nothin'. No, siree!" the fat deputy boasted. "Yere goes!"

Up went the cigar butt, and Krumm dragged out his six-gun. There was a loud explosion, then another. Lead whistled wildly and sand flew up between the two ponies.

"I told yuh to be careful," Johnny cried. "One of those slugs tore off my saddle horn!"

"And the other one hit my foot," moaned Krumm. "Oh, I'm done fer, Johnny! I've shot myself!"

Fortunately, however, the bullet had only grazed the toe of one of Krumm's huge boots. It was too close a call to be comfortable, especially as Krumm already had a corn on that toe.

"Somethin' went wrong with my gun, Johnny," he explained sadly. "Yuh know it wasn't my shootin'."

eye thet was at fault. Why, I'm the best shot in the Rockies. Did I tell yuh 'bout the time I——"

"Never mind the story now," Johnny Forty-five chuckled. "I have a hunch that there'll be plenty of shootin', for both of us, where we're goin'."

"I wish yuh'd read them orders ag'in," the fat deputy requested.

"Yuh haven't forgotten?"

"Why, no. We're to—er—go to Haunted Town and from thar to Sand Range to—er—see about a missin' Frenchman who stole some money from a person, and—well, I get kind o' mixed up sometimes, Johnny. Read them orders."

"Yuh were almost right," Johnny smiled, "here's what the chief says." And unfolding a paper, Johnny read the following aloud:

"DEPUTIES FORTY-FIVE AND KRUMM: Go to Sandtown at once, and do all in your power to clear up the mystery of Haunted Range. As the local authorities have been helpless, it is time for government intervention. For several years, this valuable grazing land has been deserted, and settlers have been frightened away.

"Also investigate the disappearance of John Cartwright, an Englishman, said to have had a large sum of money on his person, and who was last heard of in that locality."

"Hm-m-m!" said Krumm when his young partner had finished. "I savvy now. Haunted Range, eh? Well, I'll soon clear up the mystery. Yes, siree! And while I'm doin' it, just keep yore eyes open, Johnny, and learn my methods. It'll be good trainin' fer yuh."

"That must be Sandtown up ahead," said Johnny. "We'll probably find out more there about Haunted Range."

Above them, and still several miles away, was a little settlement sprawled out on a sloping mesa. The late afternoon sun was gleaming

on the roofs. The two deputy marshals increased the speed of their rugged ponies, and were soon at the edge of the town.

"Let's go to thet big saloon up yonder," suggested Krumm, moistening his lips. "We could get a lot o' info' thar, most likely, and—well, I could use a little drink, too."

"I thought yuh didn't drink," Johnny chuckled.

"Why, I don't—thet is, I don't except fer snake bite, and once in a while I take one when I think there's a chance o' bein' bit by a snake. O' course, I drink fer a cough, too—and thet dust back thar made me cough a lot."

They dismounted in front of Sandtown's only saloon—the Lariat and Spur. Leaving their broncs at the hitch rail, they pushed open the swinging doors and went in.

They found themselves in a place that seemed to serve the little cowtown as a combined saloon, gambling hall, and restaurant. A long bar ran the length of the room, and scattered here and there were tables at which some were gambling and others wolfing down food. Considering the hour, the Lariat and Spur was well crowded.

"I'll take a little whisky—just a wee bit," said Krumm, striding to the bar. "Just set a glass and bottle on the bar, feller."

The bartender looked curiously at the two newcomers and then asked Johnny what he would have. The answer, came in a tuneful rhyme:

"Just an answer to this question,
If yuh won't think it strange.
Which way, amigo, and how far do we go
To find the Haunted Range?"

The barkeeper stared in amazement, and then his eyes happened to fall on Krumm's badge.

"Oh, so yo're officers, eh?" he grunted. "Well, officers or not, yuh'd better keep off Haunted Range at night—that's my advice. It's a bad place, they tell me, though I got more sense than to stray out thet a way."

"Well, let me tell yuh, feller!" cried Krumm, smiting the bar with his fat fist. "I ain't scared o' nothin'—man nor ghost! I've come to clear up this Haunted Range mystery, and it's goin' to get a reg'lar Krumm clean-up, yes, siree! They call me 'Fearless Krumm, Terror o' Evil-doers!' Which way is this range?"

The bartender looked impressed, and he answered more respectfully.

"It's right due west of yere. Travel five miles, and yo're on Haunted Range," he explained. "But if I was yuh, I'd shore wait till mornin'. It's——"

"Excuse me, friends," a voice interrupted, "but are yuh gover'ment officers?"

They turned to see a tall, lantern-jawed hombre sauntering toward them. He was about forty years old, and evidently a ranch owner rather than a cow-puncher, for he wore expensive chaparajos, embroidered boots, pearl-handled guns, and a forty-dollar Stetson. A diamond glittered in his carefully knotted neckerchief.

"Shore we are!" thundered Krumm, swelling his chest. "My name is Krumm—Deputy U. S. Marshal George Krumm, crack officer of the secret service, ex-member of the Texas Rangers, ex-sheriff o' Scorpion County, Colorado, and ex-captain of the Arizony border patrol, to say nothin' o' bein' former congressman from Nevada! And this yere younker is my assistant, Johnny Forty-five."

"My name is Flood—John T. Flood," said the flashily dressed

hombre. "Did I understand right when I heard yuh say yuh intended to investigate what we call Haunted Range?"

"Yuh shore heard right," said Krumm loudly. "And I aim to find out what became o' the Englishman, too, thet disappeared thar."

"Well, I shore wish yuh luck," said Flood, heartily thumping Krumm on the shoulder. "It'll mean a lot to me if yuh do succeed in layin' the ghosts out thar."

"How so?"

"It's my land—or it will be in a few months," explained Flood. "Yuh see, I have it leased now, or rather I've leased it time after time. Allus the settlers run away, and never come back. When I get full title to the land, it won't be worth a thing to me, unless the mystery is settled. That's why I wish yuh luck."

"What seems to be hauntin' thet range, anyway?" Krumm demanded.

"Oh, there's lots o' stories told." Flood shook his head. "There must be somethin' to 'em, or people wouldn't be scarced off of such valuable grazin' land. They say skeletons, and so on, prowl there at night. Dead men's bones."

Krumm gulped once or twice. His little mustache wobbled on his upper lip.

"Uh—skeletons, yuh say?" he quavered. "Well—er—mebbe we'd better do our searchin' in the day-time. Not thet I'm afraid," he added. "No, siree! Only yuh can see more in daylight, yuh know."

A glint of what seemed like contempt appeared in Flood's dark eyes, but Johnny burst out in a cheerful chant:

"I never thought that dead men's bones
Were much good in a fight,
And so I think that George and me
Will hit the trail to-night."

"Have it yore own way," said Flood. "There may not be nothin' to the tales they tell. I dunno. There's a little empty ranch house out on the range 'bout fifteen miles. Yuh can't miss it if yuh keep headed due west along the creek. It might be a good idea to make thet point yore headquarters."

"Thet's a good idea," said Krumm enthusiastically. "Nights is mighty cold on them high mesas. I reckon Johnny and me will start right now."

"First, I'd like to have yuh meet my waddies," said the friendly rancher. "Come on over yere, boys, and meet up with the law."

A group of four rather hard-faced hombres swaggered up to the bar, leaving a card game at their employer's order. Krumm pumped their hands gladly, but Johnny Forty-five wasn't so sure—these caballeros looked more like gunmen than peaceable cow-punchers. All were heavily armed, and he hardly liked their expressions.

"If there's anything me or my men can do to help yuh, don't hesitate to ask us," offered Flood. "They're like most everybody round yere, my men are—afraid to set foot on Haunted Range after dark, but in daylight we'd be glad to help."

"Thanks, we'll remember yore offer," drawled Johnny dryly.

Flood stared at him with narrowed eyes. Ever since Johnny had broken into rhyme, Flood had watched him strangely. Evidently Flood thought the impudent-eyed deputy was about half loco.

"All I want is a chance to get at them ghosts, or whatever they are!" roared Krumm loudly, as he and Johnny left the Lariat and Spur Saloon. "My name is 'Fearless George Krumm,' and they don't call me thet fer nothin'! No, siree!"

There was a harsh, unpleasant laugh from Flood and his men as the doors swung shut behind the two deputies—a burst of mirth that George and Johnny didn't hear.

CHAPTER II.

THE SHACK ON THE MESA.

THE sun had set behind the distant mountains, when Krumm and Johnny Forty-five swung out of Sandtown at an easy lope. Already a faint star or two shone in the sky overhead. It would soon be dark, and there would be no moon. Before long, the dim lights of the settlement had vanished behind them.

"What's that yuh have in the bottle, George?" Johnny asked, spying something new among the fat deputy's gear.

"Why—er—it's a little bottle of wine I picked up back in thet saloon," admitted Krumm rather sheepishly. "I didn't want to buy it right out, bein' as I'm an officer, so I took it from one of them tables and left a dollar in its place. I figure I might get a bad cough ag'in."

As it became darker, Krumm's uneasiness increased. Johnny had been thoughtful ever since his meeting with Flood. Still, there didn't seem to be anything very alarming about Haunted Range. The vast floor of the mesa, stretching thirty miles to the mountains, seemed innocent enough, though a bit dreary.

"What did yuh think of that hombre Flood?" Johnny asked. "I thought there was something wrong about him, I can't say just what. His men, too, looked like some pretty tough specimens."

"Now thar's whar yuh make yore mistake, Johnny," protested the fat deputy. "Yo're allus jumpin' wild-

like at conclusions. Flood is honest, and I like him and his men, too."

"It might be to his advantage, yuh know, to keep folks scared off of Haunted Range," drawled Johnny. "If it's his property, it might be profitable to lease it and then scare the settlers off."

"Huh!" grunted Krumm scornfully. "Time yuh've been an officer long as I have, yuh'll savvy more, mebbe. I can read an hombre on sight. Flood would be tickled to death if we cleaned up this mesa fer him."

It soon became almost pitch dark, the only light being from the stars overhead. But by following the twisting creek they managed to keep their bearings. Coyotes began to howl in the distance, and the drumming of their ponies' hoofs echoed mournfully across the plain.

The air grew chilly, too, for the elevation was some eight thousand feet above sea level. Wind began to sweep dismally over the flats, whistling through the stunted pines that grew everywhere. Krumm shivered and complained.

Then there was a crashing noise near them, and a dark shape plunged passed them and vanished.

"Wh-what was thet?" Krumm muttered.

"Just a wild mustang, I reckon. Not afraid are yuh, George?"

"Afraid o' mustangs?" exclaimed Krumm indignantly. "Say, I'm one of the best mustang catchers in the West! Did I ever tell yuh how I used to trap 'em down in Texas?"

There was a chuckle from Johnny, then a warble:

"George, yuh know that lyin'
Makes me sad and blue;
So before yuh start yore story,
Make darn shore it's true."

There was a loud snort of indignation from the fat deputy.

"Are yuh hintin' I'm a liar?" he barked. "Do yuh think they call me 'Truthful Krumm' fer nothin'? Well, yere's how I caught the mustangs—I set out tobacco bait fer 'em, savvy?"

"Tobacco bait?"

"Why, shore. And then I'd hide near by," went on Krumm. "They'd start to chew it, and then they'd run when they saw me comin' after 'em."

"Well, how'd yuh catch 'em?"

"I'd grab 'em when they stopped to spit!" roared Krumm. "Haw-haw! I got yuh thet time, Johnny!"

"Yo're right—yore yarn must be true," said Johnny gravely, "because I never saw a mustang spit on the run."

As they penetrated farther into the wilderness, however, Krumm's spirits sank. He looked uneasily over his shoulder time after time, and more than once he reached toward his gun.

He heaved a long sigh of relief when a shack loomed up ahead of them, just as Flood had predicted. It was the deserted ranch house. The horses, too, seemed glad to be at the end of their weary journey. It had taken them nearly four hours to go the fifteen miles.

The shelter was gloomy and forbidding, but better than nothing, for the cold wind was now blowing harder than ever. It seemed to consist of just one room, with a sort of loft overhead.

"I'll go on in, Johnny, while yuh take care of the hosses," said Krumm, glad to escape this irksome work. "I've got matches."

Johnny nodded, and while Krumm waded his way through the high, coarse grass toward the shack, found the well, or rather water hole, for it was little more than that. He was drawing up some

water with a rusty bucket when he heard a shriek from Krumm.

"Johnny! Halp! Don't let 'em get——"

He heard the pounding of Krumm's boots coming toward him through the darkness, and in the dim light he could see the fat officer's ghastly white face and staring eyes. In spite of his clumsiness and ungainly size, Krumm was running with the speed of a frightened antelope.

"What on earth——" shouted Johnny.

"Ghosts! Thar's haunts in thet house!" Krumm screeched.

CHAPTER III.

INTERESTING DISCOVERIES.

JOHNNY had to sprint at full speed to catch the fat deputy, but finally he cut him off and managed to hold him down. A few minutes more, and Krumm would have left Haunted Range far behind him!

"What was it?" the younger deputy demanded, getting a tighter grip on Krumm's collar.

For a few minutes, Krumm was unable to speak. His breath came in wheezing gasps. Finally he managed to blurt a few words.

"Skeletons is in thar," he panted. "I saw 'em. They was shinin' in the dark, and dancin'!"

"Somebody's playin' tricks on us," snapped Johnny grimly. "It's what I thought—there's a wholesale scheme afoot to keep everybody scared off this range. If this mesa is haunted, George, it's by live hombres and not ghosts. Come on, let's go in and investigate."

Krumm's knees were thudding together, and he was shaking like an aspen, but finally Johnny managed to lead him toward the shack.

"Yuh—first," Krumm muttered.

Johnny edged forward gingerly. He wasn't afraid of anything supernatural, but he knew that they probably weren't alone on Haunted Range. Skeletons, if Krumm had really seen them, don't dance by themselves. Some human agency was at work.

The door banged open in the wind just as Johnny reached it. Krumm, holding his breath, was just behind. The two deputies strained their eyes for a moment, then even Johnny jumped backward.

"What did I tell yuh?" moaned Krumm. "Let's fork our cayuses quick, an'——"

There in the deep darkness of the shack danced two skeletons, keeping time as if to waltz music. Around and around they spun, and up and down went their horrible legs and arms. They shone with a hideous greenish light, and the fleshless skulls seemed to be leering at the deputies with ghastly, toothless grins.

"Wait just a minute," Johnny breathed. "I think I savvy this." He fumbled for a match.

Then there was a terrified yell from the fat deputy—a yell like a scream of a horse, beginning down in a deep bass and ending in a high tremolo:

"Ahr-r-r-rreek! Look at thet!"

The skeletons, as if tired of dancing, sailed up to the ceiling and vanished!

Then Johnny struck his match. He hadn't been prepared for this, but the flame of the light told him how it had been managed. There was a hole in the ceiling leading to the loft above. Wooden crossbars made a rough stairway up to it.

"Come on down and mix it!

I shore do hate to boast,

But I can whip the daylight's

Out of any trumped-up ghost!"

He had whipped out one of his Colt six-guns, and as there was no answer to his challenge, he started up the crude ladder.

"Come on, George!" he cried. "They've fooled with us about long enough!"

"I—I wouldn't go up thar fer a million dollars," Krumm wailed.

But the match had flickered out, and it was a question either of following Johnny or being alone in the inky blackness of the shack. Groaning, Krumm climbed up at his young partner's heels.

"Just as I thought," chuckled Johnny, as he lighted another match. "Look at this, George—nothin' to run from, is it?"

George still wasn't sure. His eyes bulged glassily at the sight of two skeletons on the dusty floor of the narrow attic.

"Let's get out of yere," he piped feebly.

"Can't yuh see that they're wired together?" explained Johnny Forty-five. "And ropes lead from them over this pully, through that little window there, down to the ground."

Krumm began to understand, though he still was far from comfortable. The dancing skeletons had been worked by somebody outside the shack. The rope led down into the darkness, dangling alongside the building.

"But what—what makes 'em shine like thet?" the fat deputy mumbled.

"Phosphorous," said the singing deputy with a grin. "There's enough of that in a box of wet matches, provided they're the phosphorous kind, to paint up a bundle of bones like these. Come on down now, and let's look around the shack. I reckon those hombres are too foxy to still be there, though. We'll see."

They searched carefully for fifty yards in every direction from the shack. But they found nothing. Whoever had worked the skeletons had scurried away.

They did find the end of the rope by means of which the bones had been made to dance so weirdly. And there was also another, stouter rope. Johnny found that this went through the window of the loft, where it was firmly tied to a two-by-four.

"This is their private outside staircase," chuckled Johnny Forty-five. "They can get in and out of the attic by climbin' up and down."

"Then let's cut it," said Krumm in alarm. "We don't want 'em sneakin' up thar and shootin' down at us to-night."

"I think I know of somethin' better," Johnny laughed. "We'll play a few tricks of our own. Just in case——"

He had noted a large kettle in the shack, and he filled this with ice-cold water from the well. Krumm helped him carry this to the loft, and to the handle of this Johnny tied the end of the rope.

"Now, let 'em climb up," he grinned.

They found several bits of candle in the dusty room below, also a tin lamp, but as there was no oil for this they had to be content with candlelight. The place, however, looked more cheerful now, and they made themselves at home.

Examining the shack carefully, they found nothing more to arouse their suspicions. Johnny pounded the floor from one end to another but discovered no trapdoors or secret openings. The one window had been boarded over and nailed up.

There was a bunk, and a pot-bellied sheet-iron stove. As there

was plenty of wood stacked near the latter, Krumm went to work and built a fire.

Krumm was feeling better now, and more his usual self. "I hope yuh don't think I was scared a while back, Johnny," he said. "I wasn't scared a bit. I was—er—sort of startled, thet's all. Nothin' can scare ol' George Krumm. No siree!"

Johnny was rolling one of the cigarettes he made for finger exercise and never smoked.

"Yuh know," he said thoughtfully, "I think Flood and his men are behind this. They think they can scare us out of here, and when they find we won't scare, then they'll try——"

"Wrong again," interrupted Krumm wisely. "Flood is a good hombre. I'd bet a blue stack on him."

"Whoever it is," Johnny muttered, "they're goin' to have their hands full! And then there's that missin' Englishman—— What happened to him? There's a whole lot behind this, and more than jiggin' skeletons and practical jokes."

There seemed little they could do now, except wait for morning—or for something to happen.

Krumm, cheered by the fire he had built, threw his massive body on the bunk and heaved a sleepy sigh.

"Say, what's that sack of flour tied up thar above the door fer?" he asked, a while later.

It *was* rather peculiar. Bound close against the ceiling was a sack of flour, gray with dust. Johnny punched it with a stick to make sure that it *was* flour.

"I suppose the hombre who lived here last tied it up thar to keep it safe from rats, George," he decided.

An hour went by. Then, suddenly, there was a clank from above,

followed by a jangle. The kettle had been overturned! Somebody had tried to sneak up into the loft by means of the rope!

There was a loud splash outside, followed by a stream of spluttering profanity. Then silence. Johnny stifled his roar of laughter long enough to warble:

"I'm shorely sympathizin',
I don't blame yuh for yore wrath,
I never saw a dirty man
Who liked to take a bath."

CHAPTER IV.

A SHOCK FOR GEORGE KRUMM.

THE rest of the night passed uneventfully, and the two deputies even managed to get in a little sleep before the gray light of dawn crept under the door.

Johnny, who was the first to wake, stirred Krumm from his snoring slumber, and then went out to bring in their provisions and supplies. He brought in all they would need, even Krumm's bottle of wine.

"Glad yuh thought o' thet," said Krumm. "I've decided to save thet thar *vino*, though, fer special occasions. I won't drink any till we've cleared up Haunted Range."

Krumm, who was always hungry, set about cooking an enormous breakfast, first building a scorching fire in the stove.

Johnny went out to look for sign. He knew that the shack had been visited during the night, and he hoped to pick up a clew.

The wide range, stretching out like a great, uneven table top, seemed peaceful and calm. Along the course of the narrow creek and in the draws grew taller trees, but for the most part nothing could be seen but an ocean of dwarfed pines. Grass, rich and lush, grew everywhere.

A buzzard, sailing on wide, flapping wings, flew in from the east, settling down in a ravine about a mile from the shack. And as Johnny watched, another came, then another and another. All of them, as if drawn to a common feast, flew directly to the same spot.

"George, do yuh see those buzzards flyin' over there?" he sang out.

"Shore, what of it?" grunted Krumm, peering through the open door of the shack.

"They're feedin' on something—and something bigger than a coyote," Johnny decided. "Let's go over and investigate."

"Humph!" snorted the fat deputy. "Do yuh think I'm goin' to quit cookin' breakfast to go buzzard huntin'? Yuh won't find nothin' anyway. I'm stayin' right yere."

"*Bueno*, then," said the rhyming deputy. "But while I'm gone, be careful. We may be bein' watched. Don't let anybody pull any tricks on yuh, and if yuh see anybody, fire a shot in the air, and I'll hurry back."

"If I fire a shot, it won't be in no air," boasted Krumm, swelling his chest. "When I shoots, somebody drops. Yes, siree."

Watching Johnny swing aboard his bronc and drum off toward the distant draw, Krumm went on cooking breakfast. From time to time, he pulled a strip of meat from the frying pan and devoured it greedily.

"Mebbe it's just as well Johnny's gone," he chuckled. "There'll be just that much more fer me to eat, this way."

The skillet was still sizzling when he happened to hear the thud of approaching hoofs. Thinking it was Johnny, at first, he looked up and was surprised to see the Sandtown rancher, John Flood, accompanied

by his four hard-faced punchers. They were nearing the shack at an easy trot.

"Hello!" shouted Krumm with a welcoming grin. "Come on and make yoreselves to home! Just in time fer breakfast. Thet is," he added more cautiously, "if yuh've brought yore own eats."

Flood and his men dismounted, eying the place shrewdly. Krumm was glad to see them. Haunted Range was lonely, even in broad daylight.

"Have any luck in figurin' out the Haunted Range puzzle?" asked Flood, sauntering toward the house. "Me and the boys reckoned we'd ride out to-day and see how yore makin' out."

"Well, I ain't captured nobody yet," said Krumm proudly, "but I expect to make arrests at any time. Yes, siree! I've found a lot o' clews, and I've follered 'em up. They tried to fool me last night with skeletons, but I was too smart fer 'em. Just leave it to ol' George Krumm, Terror o' Evildoers!"

"Thet's right interestin'," leered Flood, entering the shack with his men. "Whar's thet young pard o' yores? Did he git scared and run away?"

"To tell the truth," admitted the fat officer sorrowfully, "Johnny *did* show the white feather a little last night. But my iron courage carried us through. If he sticks with me long enough, he'll make a good deputy yet."

"Whar has he gone to, now?" insisted Flood.

"He saw some buzzards off to the west a bit ago, and he went off to snoop around a bit," chuckled Krumm. "It goes to show how flighty kids is, when they get on an important case like this is."

Flood and his men exchanged a

rapid, meaning glance. "Buzzards, did yuh say?" repeated the Sand-town rancher.

For the first time, Krumm began to get uneasy. In daylight, Flood's gummen looked harsher of feature and more evil of eyes than they had appeared in the saloon the night before. He remembered their names, but their faces were so cruel and cold that they seemed almost new to him.

Quin Canton and Ed Branch, especially, were ugly-looking desperadoes. Canton bore the stamp of a gunman, and Krumm blinked uneasily when he saw the grim notches that had been cut into the cedar butts of his Colts to denote victorious gun fights. He looked like a killer.

Branch was taller than Krumm and heavier, although his weight was muscle and not fat. The beef rippled under his rawhide-laced shirt every time he moved his powerful arms.

The other two, hombres named Hamp and Dury, didn't look much pleasanter—to Krumm.

"Why—why, yes," said Krumm with a weak grin. "He saw some buzzards and——"

"This singsong Forty-five jasper," snarled Flood, "is liable to become buzzard bait hisself. And so are yuh, fat feller!"

"Wh—what do yuh m-m-mean?" stuttered the fat deputy.

Flood's black eyes narrowed to savage slits. Before Krumm could take another breath, the rancher's hands had slid to his hips. And as if at an unspoken order, the other four gunmen reached for their smoke-wagons at the same instant.

"Stick 'em up high, yuh big buffalo, or we'll plug yuh!" rasped Flood. "We're goin' to kill yuh, and we're goin' to kill yore loco pard!"

CHAPTER V.

THE DEAD MAN'S STORY.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE was soon in the grassy draw and following it up to the point where he had seen the birds of carrion swooping down. He wasn't sure of what he would find, but he had a hunch that it would be unpleasant.

He wasn't quite prepared, however, for the ghastly spectacle that met his gaze, when he suddenly rounded a curve in the shallow ravine. A flock of at least a dozen buzzards flapped up unexpectedly—exposing the body of a man.

At least, it *had* been a man, several weeks or months before. Johnny dismounted unsteadily, feeling slightly sick.

Not only had the buzzards been at work, but portions seemed to have been dragged away by coyotes and other wild animals. What was left was so pitiful that it took courage to approach.

Johnny Forty-five had been a deputy U. S. marshal long enough, though, to know and do his duty, however disagreeable. It wasn't the first time he had seen such a sight, and such a tragedy always meant more work for Uncle Sam's officers.

For this hombre had been murdered! There was no question about that, for through the ripped clothing gaped a great bullet hole in the man's side.

"I wonder if this could be Cartwright, the missing Englishman," Johnny muttered, bending over.

Luckily, the part of the coat containing the inside pocket was still intact, and in this the deputy found a notebook. In the front flyleaf a name had been written in ink. It was dim and faded but he succeeded in making it out. It was J. W. Cartwright.

There was no money or other articles to be found on the remains. The dead man had been murdered for his money.

Then, almost by accident, he saw a stub of lead pencil between the finger bones of one hand. It struck Johnny it was something more than curious. He at once began a careful examination of the ground about the body.

He wasn't long in finding what he sought. Half under the outflung arm was a piece of yellowed paper, nearly buried in the sand. On it was scrawled something. Studying it, the deputy finally made it out in part as follows:

Flood—brought me out—sell me land.
Shot me and took—

Johnny whistled through his teeth. His usually boyishly impudent eyes became hard and chilly.

"Why, this is enough to hang Flood!" he gasped.

Fate had taken a hand. The message ended there, but the dead man had told enough. Shot down, robbed, and left to die, he had had just enough strength to scribble the words that would put a noose around the neck of his slayer!

And the murderer, Flood, hadn't had even the decency to bury his victim! No doubt he thought his evil work would never come to light. It was Flood and his gang who had "haunted" this gloomy range, and for good purposes of his own. Johnny saw through it all now.

How many other victims had been led out here to their deaths?—Johnny wondered.

After carefully pocketing the evidence he had unearthed, Johnny covered the unfortunate Englishman with sand and boulders, so that the beasts and birds of prey could never return to him.

"Maybe yuh can sleep better now, *compadre*," said the deputy, lifting his hat, "when yuh know yore message is in the hands of the law. Flood will pay for this—in full."

Swinging back into his saddle, Johnny rode up out of the ravine. He was about to head at a gallop for the shack when he saw something that caused his keen blue eyes to narrow in a surprised squint.

Drawn up near the old ranch house were five strange horses. Krumm evidently was entertaining company.

Johnny felt a sinking sensation at his heart. He had a very good hunch, now, who those cayuses belonged to. And poor, bungling Krumm hadn't fired that warning shot at first sight of them.

Instead of approaching the house directly, Johnny veered off to the south in a wide circle, following the shelter of the gully. Then he left his horse behind and cautiously approached the shack from its blind side, walking at a crouch and wriggling through the brush and tall weeds.

He was within thirty yards of the shack when he stopped to listen. All seemed peaceful at first, and then he heard Krumm's voice uplifted in a loud wail of terror:

"D-d-don't s-s-s-shoot me! I'll leave the country! I'll never tell nobody if yuh let me g-g-go!"

That was enough for Johnny! Carefully he made his way toward the door of the house, working his way as silently along the side of the shack, and taking care that his spurs didn't betray him with a jingle.

"Are yuh shore yuh've got them knots tight?" Flood's voice was rasping. "We don't want the fat badger to get loose. Them ropes will do right nice to bury——"

It was then that Johnny Forty-

five, with a blued Colt in each hand, jumped into the doorway! As the gun hammers clacked back, his voice rang out sharp and clear:

"I've got the drop, yuh killers!
Stick 'em up pronto soon!
Or these twin singsong sixes
Will sing a smoky tune!"

CHAPTER VI.

ONE SACK OF FLOUR.

FLOOD'S gang looked like a coyote pack surprised by a cougar. They had just finished trussing up George Krumm, and most of them had holstered their guns. Whirling, they found themselves staring into a pair of big black six-guns.

With an oath, Flood thrust his hands shoulder-high. His face reddened and then grew white and cold with fury.

"It's thet blasted depity!" he snarled.

The other desperadoes followed his example and elevated their empty hands. They hadn't dreamed that the young officer would dare to tackle the five of them.

"Bueno, men—now back up against that wall!" Johnny snapped crisply. "I've found Cartwright's body, and yuh'll all swing for it—unless yuh want to go out right now, in smoke!"

With his breath whistling between his bared teeth, Flood backed toward the wall. He wasn't beaten yet. He still had a card to play, and that card was an ace that still might win!

Flood was crafty—a schemer. He hadn't stopped in furnishing the shack with skeletons to frighten intruders away; he had also added a few traps for the unwary.

The flour sack suspended almost out of sight above the door was one of them. It was held there by a con-

cealed cord which was attached to a nail in the wall. He edged slowly toward that nail.

One movement of his elbow, now, would release the fifty pounds of flour.

"J-J-Johnny, I'm shore glad yuh g-g-got yere," piped up Deputy Krumm. "Get these ropes off o' me, quick."

"*Sta bien*—when they shuck their guns," Johnny drawled. "Turn around, yuh killers, with yore faces to the wall, and I'll——"

Flood's elbow released the trap, and Johnny's words ended in a gasp. Like a shot, down plunged the falling weight.

Johnny Forty-five never realized until later what had hit him. If his neck hadn't been strong it certainly would have been broken. As it was, lights flashed before his eyes, then came unconsciousness like a black velvet curtain.

He felt himself falling forward but never remembered striking the floor.

He must have been stunned for several minutes, for when he finally recovered his senses he found that he couldn't move his hands or feet. He had been tightly trussed up with lariat rope.

Above him, and staring down with jeering, mocking expressions, he saw the faces of Flood and his gang as if through a dim mist. His head ached and his eyes seemed full of flour. Near him lay Krumm, groaning and mumbling.

"Well, Mr. Deputy Forty-five," Flood was sneering, "did yuh have nice dreams? I reckon yuh thought yuh had us, didn't yuh? Well, ain't thet too bad!"

"Mebbe," leered Flood's right-hand gunman, Quin Canton, "mebbe he feels like singin' one of them po'try songs o' his!"

The deputy's reply came between clinched teeth:

"I still can sing, yuh coyotes,
So listen to this straight,
The time is soon a-comin'
When yuh'll be gallows' bait!"

This didn't add anything to the gangs' good nature. The giant gunman named Ed Branch gave Johnny a kick in the side so vicious that the youthful deputy's ribs almost cracked in like barrel staves.

"We'll soon change thet tune o' his," taunted Dury.

"What'll we do with 'em, chief?" Hamp growled.

Krumm, whose face had gone ghastly pale again, had a suggestion. "Yuh—yuh might let us go," he faltered. "Johnny and me will leave Haunted Range, and never say a word to anybody if yuh let us loose, an'——"

Flood laughed harshly. "Yuh've got as much chance to live as a snowball has on the Gila Desert!" he barked. "Yuh'll never leave this shack alive. Think it over."

"Oh-h-h!" moaned Krumm.

"Yo're a couple o' loco numskulls, yuh two," mocked Flood. "We didn't want to kill yuh especially, but bein' yuh wouldn't *scare* away, we'll have to try other methods. Savvy?"

"Maybe I savvy more than yuh think I do—who killed Cartwright, for instance," said Johnny steadily.

Flood started, then his face grew dark with fury.

"If yuh do, it's somethin' the gover'ment will never know about!" he snarled wolfishly. He turned to his men to give his orders, and they were fiendish enough.

"I'm goin' to Sandtown now, boys," he told them. "Quin Canton will go along with me. I'm leavin' the rest of yuh."

"What do yuh want us to do with 'em?" the big, brutish Ed Branch demanded.

"If a fire was to break out in the shack now," chuckled Flood, "the fat badger and the singsong kid wouldn't have much show, would they? *Compre?* Nobody could ever prove nothin' on us, either—there'd be nothin' left of 'em but ashes."

"Pul-ease, Mister F-F-Flood——" Krumm began to quaver, but his entreaty was lost in a chorus of hoarse guffaws.

"First, though," ordered Flood, "I want yuh to ride up thar to the draw and see what Forty-five could've found. We don't want nobody else blunderin' onto anything. Better bury what's left of the English jasper. Then come back and set fire to the shack. Thet's all."

He and Quin Canton went out and mounted their horses. Soon after they had galloped away, the other three desperades left for the draw.

"Don't try and roll out the door while we're gone," sneered Ed Branch. "It won't do yuh no good. Better pass what little time's left to yuh in makin' up po'try!"

"We'll be right back," laughed Dury mirthlessly, "so don't git anxious."

The two helpless captives heard the creak of their saddles and then the sound of hoofs. Johnny and Krumm were left alone, and probably had only twenty minutes to live!

CHAPTER VII.

HOT STOVES AND BOTTLES.

KRUMM'S fat double chins were trembling like colorless jelly. His eyes were rolling, and from time to time, he emitted a dismal groan.

"We're done fer, Johnny," he said

reproachfully. "This is all yore fault, every bit of it! If yuh hadn't gone off and left me yere to face them hombres all alone——"

But Johnny broke into his cheery warble:

"It's no time for groanin' and moanin'.

Things aren't as bad as they seem.

Whatever they sav, there's always a way.

If a hombre uses his bean!"

"It's no use, Johnny," wailed the fat deputy marshal. "Oh, why did I bring yuh along with me on this case anyhow? I knew yuh'd be the death of me some day!"

"See if yuh can reach the draft of that stove with yore boot," Johnny urged. "Turn it on."

"What fer?" muttered Krumm. "This is no time to be thinkin' of how comfortable yuh are! Cold chills is runnin' all through me, but it ain't on account o' the stove coolin' off!"

"Do as I tell yuh! I'm goin' to see if I can get up." Johnny panted, bracing his back against the wall and shoving his body with his tied feet.

Krumm managed to kick the stove draft open, and almost immediately the fire began to roar fiercely. From the long-forgotten skillet came the smell of burning meat.

"What yuh tryin' to do, Johnny?" the fat deputy demanded as Johnny hobbled toward the stove and turned his back to it.

"I'm goin' to burn through these ropes, if that stove gets hot enough—and if I can stand it," gritted Johnny.

"Now, I was just thinkin' of thet myself," said Krumm. "But I reckon yuh'd better try it 'stead o' me."

The sheet-iron stove, thanks to the fuel Krumm had stuffed it with

earlier in the morning, began to glow red-hot along the top and sides. Johnny set his teeth hard and pressed as close against it as possible. Sweat glistened on his forehead.

Three strands of the rope passed just under his elbows, and he managed to hold these against the fiery iron for several seconds. The heat was so intense, though, that he couldn't endure it for long.

"Yuh've just got to do it, Johnny," Krumm urged hopefully. "I can smell the rope burnin'!"

Johnny didn't know whether Krumm was smelling burning rope or burning flesh, but he resolutely pressed against the stove edge again. His skin was being scorched and blistered.

Then, unexpectedly, the strands came free! He felt the ropes loosen about his body, and in a few minutes, had freed his feet as well.

"Untie *me*, quick!" Krumm commanded, "Yuh was awful slow doin' thet—I could've done it a lot faster. Hurry! We got to get out o' yere, and get out fast!"

But by the time the fat deputy's bonds were loosened they saw that it was too late to escape from the shack. Coming back from the draw at a quick gallop, and already within two hundred yards of the shack, were Branch, Hamp and Dury!

"Oh, me!" wailed Krumm. "It ain't done us no good, after all!"

If they tried to make a dash for their ponies, they would be instantly shot down, and Johnny realized this as well as Krumm. And they had no weapons. Their guns had been taken from them.

"We've got one chance—a fair one, too," cried Johnny Forty-five. "We can take 'em by surprise. They won't be expectin' anything, and we'll hide by the door, me on

this side and yuh on the other. As they come in, we'll jump on 'em."

"All right, but—we're g-g-goners," Krumm chattered, knees wabbling under him. "Us two can't fight three armed men."

"We'll put up a pretty good imitation," said Johnny grimly.

"Good gosh, they're pilin' off their hosses out thar already," muttered Krumm shakily.

"Then shh! Not a sound!" whispered Johnny. "Our only chance is a surprise."

"Johnny!" breathed Krumm wildly.

"What?"

"The wine—I think I'll t-t-take a drink of it now. It might help my n-n-nerve," the fat deputy almost sobbed.

Reaching in his pocket, Krumm pulled out the small red bottle, uncorked it with trembling fingers, put it to his lips and tipped his head back.

The wine seemed very thick, and it ran slowly. Finally, though, Krumm got a big mouthful and gulped it down. Already the boots of the three killers were clumping toward the door of the shack. Johnny braced himself for the attack.

Something was seriously wrong with Krumm. His eyes had suddenly bulged, almost popping from his head. His hair stood on end, his face turned scarlet, then purple. His tongue protruded from his mouth like a roll of beefsteak.

Then, to Johnny's horrified amazement, Krumm jumped high into the air, gave a whoop loud enough to raise the dead, and ran madly through the door, right into the arms of the three desperadoes!

"Ah-r-r-r-r!" he bleated. "I'm afire! Halp!"

The bottle had rolled to the floor, and Johnny's quick eye read the

label. Krumm's "wine" was tabasco—a sauce made from the hottest and fiercest of Mexican peppers!

CHAPTER VIII.

FISTS—AND LEAD!

THE outlaw trio must have seen that Krumm was helpless, for instead of bothering with him, they charged on into the shack, leaving the fat deputy to flounder blindly into the brush, where he promptly fell down, groaning.

Johnny hadn't the advantage of surprise now. He had hardly time to take a breath before the gang was rushing in, pulling their guns from the leather!

Johnny ducked down and came up with the tabasco bottle in his right hand. Hamp was the first inside, and as he lurched through the doorway, Johnny hit him!

There was a crash as the bottle was shattered across the bridge of the ugly gunman's nose. The sauce flashed over his face and into his eyes in a red gush.

Hamp's scream was even louder and shriller than Krumm's! He staggered over and fell to his knees, sobbing and clawing at his tortured, burning eyes and slashed face.

An instant later, Johnny's hard fist smacked against the side of Ed Branch, who was whirling his gun up to send a shot ripping into the deputy.

Heavy as he was, Branch wobbled on his feet, and before he could recover himself, Johnny had wrenched loose one of his six guns.

"Come on in, yuh cutthroats!

Yuh've got me mad, all right.

Step right up and tangle,

I've just begun to fight!"

Every word in Johnny's chant had a punch behind it! Branch went

down and then bobbed up again, his eyes glittering pin points of hate.

Br-r-r-rang! Bang-bang! Dury was coming a-smokin'!

Johnny felt the scorching breath of lead as the shot whistled by his cheek. Another went ripping through the flappy batwing of his leather chaps. The other slammed into the ceiling. Johnny's gun was barking now!

"Git thet little mutt—get him quick!" yelled Branch over the roar of guns.

The shack was full of rolling smoke and spurts of flame and sparks. Branch fired at Johnny with his remaining gun, once—twice! He missed both shots. The sing-song deputy was a fighting jumping-jack. He seemed everywhere at once, and at no one place long enough to hit.

Added to the confusion were the piercing yells of Hamp, who was still trying to dig the tabasco out of his eyes. He was rolling over and over the floor in his agony.

Branch had been hit by one of Johnny's first shots, but he was hard to drop. With a bullet hole drilled clean through him, he still kept his feet. Once again, the deputy swept the muzzle of his flashing Colt around to cover him.

This time, Branch went down to stay. His giant form sagged to the floor and collapsed in an inert heap. Dury fell an instant later, shot between the eyes by the last slug remaining in Johnny Forty-five's smoking gun.

"Yo're my prisoner, hombre!" Johnny snapped at Hamp, who was still squalling with pain.

The deputy took pity on him and doused his face and eyes with water. Hamp was suffering too much to care much whether he was a prisoner or not!

"I think I did yuh a favor, after all," Johnny chuckled. "That tabasco is right hot, but the effects don't last as long as a bullet."

He was still splashing the desperado's face when Krumm came in, howling for water.

"I'm burnin' up!" he yelled. "I'm still on fire! Give me water! That was awful hot, Johnny! Awful!"

"It wasn't so cool in here, George," laughed the young deputy. "But I reckon yuh did me a pretty good turn, after all, with that tabasco wine of yores."

"O' course I did," said Krumm, taking his head out of the water bucket long enough to answer. "Why, I knew what thet stuff was, all the time, Johnny."

"Yeah?" drawled Johnny.

"Yeah! And where would *yuh* have been if I hadn't give my famous battle yell and rushed out at 'em?" cried the fat deputy indignantly. "I suppose yuh want all the credit fer this fight, huh?"

"Oh, no, George," said Johnny mildly.

"Chargin' them hombres like thet took courage. "Yes, siree!" said Krumm proudly. "They don't call me 'Iron-man' Krumm fer nothin', Johnny. Why, if it hadn't been fer me——"

Johnny Forty-five broke into his usual chant:

"Yo're a credit to the service, George,
And to the great old name of Krumm,
Yuh've a heart of gold, you're brave and
bold,
But sometimes I think—yo're dumb."

The proud grin on Krumm's face had gradually widened until Johnny reached the last line, then he snorted in disgust.

"I may be dumb, but I don't make up no fool po'try!" he cried. "Yuh

seem to forget thet yo're only a kid yet, while I'm"—Krumm swelled his chest until the buttons nearly popped off his checkered vest—"I'm Fearless Krumm, known over the West as the past master of the Colt, 'Terror of Evildoers,' and crack deputy marshal of the United States secret service!"

"Well, we won't go into all that now," said Johnny, with a twinkle in his eye. "Lend me a hand while I tie up our amigo, Señor Hamp. We'll have a prisoner for the Sandtown calabozo."

"What's yore plans now, Johnny?" asked Krumm. "Er—I mean, have yuh got any suggestions to make afore I make *my* plans?"

"There's only one thing more on our program, and then we can call this the Unhaunted Range," said Johnny Forty-five. "Flood and that hombre Quin Canton are in town. I have the proof that Flood killed Cartwright, the Englishman."

"I'll arrest him, and Canton, too!" Krumm roared fiercely. "Just wait and see. I'll get 'em."

"It'll probably mean fight," said Johnny soberly.

"Fight!" boomed the fat deputy. "That's what I crave! I want fight and plenty of it! Yes, siree! They don't call me 'Krumm the Fire Eater' fer nothin'!"

"'Fire Eater' is right," smiled Johnny.

But he didn't tell Krumm that he was thinking of the tabasco sauce.

CHAPTER IX.

FLOOD'S LAST LETTER.

IN the Spur and Lariat Saloon, John T. Flood and his henchman, Quin Canton, were writing a letter.

They were seated at one of the round tables near the bar, with a pen, sheet of paper, ink, and a bottle

of whisky before them. It took all these ingredients to write the letter, especially the whisky.

Flood wasn't much of a hand at writing, but Quin Canton had been a gambler, saloon man, and several other more unpleasant things and had picked up an education of sorts. So he wrote while Flood dictated.

Except for them, the saloon was empty. Even the bartender was half asleep. Flies buzzed lazily.

"Heh-heh-heh!" Flood was laughing. "Thet's purty good. Read as much as yuh've got down, Quin."

Grinning, Quin Canton took up the paper and read as follows:

"Chief United States Marshal,
"U. S. Marshal's Office.

"SIR: We feel very sad in taking pen in hand to-day and writing you about yore two marshals, Mr. Forty-five and Mr. Krumm, as we think there names is, or unfortunately, was. They died. We would send you there bodys, but there is not any bodys left, which same will explain.

"The two depities was much admired by us while in our midst, and we feel much greef in letting you know that they met with a fatal accident. While sleeping in an empty shack on haunted range, the said shack took afire in the night, and yore two depities was unable to get out, being burned up."

Flood threw back his head and roared with laughter. Canton chimed in. It was a great joke they were playing on the government!

"Thet's good, so fer," chuckled Flood. "Now write this, Canton. I'll speak slow: 'We was all very greatly shocked when we learned thet they was dead, for they had endeared themselves to us. We feel very sad indeed——'"

"Yeah, is that so?" interrupted a cool, drawling voice. "Well, hombre, if yuh have any tears, prepare to shed 'em now!"

Flood sat still, as if petrified, his eyes glassy. Then, slowly, he turned

in his chair, face twitching. Canton gulped and dropped his pen.

"Forty-five!" gasped Flood. "It can't be——"

The faces of the two schemers were gray with superstitious fear. Standing less than a yard away, holstered guns at his hips and with a smile on his face, was Johnny Forty-five. Behind him, somewhat pale, was Deputy Marshal George Krumm.

"Oh, we're ghosts all right," Johnny smiled. "We're the last ghosts from Haunted Range, and at yore service. In fact, yo're both under arrest, in Uncle Sam's name!"

Flood's lips were livid, his forehead wet with icy sweat. His right hand moved a few inches toward his hip, then he stopped. He lacked courage in the show-down. Flood was waiting for Quin Canton to start something. Canton, frozen in his chair, was waiting for Flood.

"Now, see yere, this was all a joke—nothin' more," Flood mumbled. "I didn't really intend to have my men kill yuh. A joke, thet's all it was."

"Stick up yore hands, men!

Murder's no joke!

Stick 'em up, or do yore laughin'

Through six-shooter smoke!"

"Why, what do yuh mean by murder?" Flood gulped.

"I mean I have the proof that yuh robbed and killed Cartwright, the Englishman!" Johnny snapped. "My evidence will stretch that neck of yores, Flood, longer than it is already!"

Johnny's eyes glistened like blue ice. He hadn't made a move toward the low-swung guns at his thighs, but his smile sent a chill into Flood and Canton.

Krumm had said nothing. Step by step, he was edging backward,

out of the danger zone. Something was going to pop—and pop quickly.

Flood didn't intend to hang. After all, he thought, he had more than a fifty-fifty chance. It was usually his policy to let his men do his evil work for him, but now he'd have to take a hand himself. He caught Quin Canton's eyes across the table. Now for it!

"Now sing, yuh little whelp!" he snarled at Johnny, and he jumped up, hands darting toward his pearl-handled sixes!

At the same instant, Canton jerked out his notched guns, whipping the blued barrels up to shoot!

And Johnny Forty-five drew—like greased lightning!

The saloon was shaken by the din of gunshots! Lead hissed its song of destruction and fire lashed back and forth in brilliant pencils of fury!

"He's—plugged me, Flood," Quin Canton screeched, and down he sagged in the smoke haze, his head striking the table as he fell.

Flood wasn't interested in that news—he would never be! His fancy guns slithered from his numbed fingers. He swayed, staggered. He himself had felt Johnny Forty-five's lead!

"Don't shoot me again! Don't shoot—I admit—I killed thet English——"

It was hardly necessary to shoot again. Johnny had already holstered his guns. Flood teetered back and forth on his feet, clutching at the slowly widening dark blot on the front of his expensive shirt. Then he fell heavily.

The rhyming deputy lifted his voice in a chant of victory:

"Yuh asked me to sing, yuh killer,

And right now I feel the urge.

This little tune, yuh rascal,

Will be yore funeral dirge!"

WW-7C

The next thing Johnny heard was the loud, excited voice of the bartender.

"Get out of the clean beer barrel—get out of it now!" he was roaring.

The singsong deputy peered through the still seething smoke and then burst into a laugh. Krumm was having his difficulties.

At the lower end of the bar was a large barrel, and from the top of this dangled Krumm's legs and enormous boots. They were waving wildly.

"I'm—I'm stuck!" came the fat deputy's muffled voice. "Help!"

"He's in my clean beer barrel," protested the bartender.

Johnny seized Krumm's waving legs and with a wrench, pulled the fat officer free. Krumm was breathing with difficulty and his face was purple.

"Never mind, George," Johnny chuckled, "there's no danger now."

If Krumm was sheepish, he didn't remain that way long.

"Yuh don't think I was tryin' to hide myself, do yuh?" he snorted. "I was right in the thick of that fight! Yes, siree!"

"Then what was yuh doin' in the barrel?"

"Why—er—I thought I saw somebody jump in thar, and I crawled in to get him, that's what!" Krumm roared. "Fearless Krumm, that's me! I've finished cleanin' up Haunted Range, that's what I've done! But when I make out my report, Johnny, I'm goin' to see that yuh get some of the credit."

"That's right generous of yuh, ol' pard," drawled Johnny Forty-five.

He rolled a brown cigarette, and to the bartender's bewildered astonishment, flipped it, unlighted, into the beer barrel.

BLOCK



DIAMOND

A HARDY PIONEER

A MAN by the name of Mattock was taken to the military hospital near Fort Chadbourne, Texas, by a soldier, and when a doctor looked him over, he found fourteen arrows sticking in his body.

Questioned as to what had happened, Mattock said he had been over the creek at the hut of a Dutchman who sold liquor, and having filled up, was on his way home, feeling very happy and contented.

At the crossing of the creek, some Comanches spotted him and hid in the brush. Then, as he passed them, they began shooting arrows at him. He ran and shouted so loud that the soldier, who lived near the creek with his wife, opened his cabin door to see what the ruckus was about, and Mattock tumbled right into him.

WW-8C

Seeing that he was bristling like a porcupine the soldier helped him to the hospital.

It was thought for a time that Mattock could not possibly recover, for three of the arrows had gone so far into him that the surgeon, in order to extract them, cut off the feathered ends and pulled the arrows out through the man's body.

While Mattock did a good deal of groaning and swearing during the process, he stood the ordeal bravely, and such was the hardy stuff of which those men of pioneer days were made that in two weeks Mattock was walking around.

Not long after, he was out hunting for Injuns in order to avenge the insult that he felt his dignity had suffered at being filled with arrows.



The Kid Catches A Cow Thief

A True Story of the Wild West

By Kent Bennett

Author of "The Kid Pays A Debt," etc.

THE morning sun was only an hour high when "Billy the Kid" rolled out of his old blanket under a towering spruce and sat up. The young outlaw glanced drowsily to where his hobbled horse was grazing on the dew-laden mountain bunch grass. Then he yawned and stretched himself.

A light breeze was blowing down from the snow-clad peak behind him. As it swept through the little mountain meadow where the Kid had spent the night, it was making the boughs of the pines and quaking aspens sway gently.

Billy shivered, then grinned, and stood up. "Gee, but it's cold up here in these hills this mornin'," he muttered. "Somebody must've left my bunk-house door open last night, an' I shore noticed it."

Straightening up suddenly, Billy glanced again at his horse, then he began looking keenly around him in every direction. Finally he shrugged his shoulders and began feeling in his pocket for a match.

Except for the solitary eagle that was circling high up in the chill morning air above him, there was no living thing in sight. He could

see only the endless blanket of dark-colored pines and spruce that covered the slopes of the mountain.

This slope was dotted in places with the bright yellow and gold of the quaking aspen, or a silver ribbon that marked the path of some little brook which trickled down from up near the snow line.

"Well," the slender outlaw gun fighter finally remarked, "I reckon I've give thet sheriff's posse the slip at last. I must have throwed 'em off my trail when I doubled back on Nogal Mesa."

The Kid grunted and carelessly slapped the dust from the sleeve of his threadbare shirt. With a dry grin, he then felt tenderly at the long bullet crease across his left cheek.

"They almost got me thet time," he chuckled. "Thet bullet shore had my name an' address on it. Well, a miss is as good as a mile. I wonder what I'm goin' to have fer breakfast—besides a drink of water out o' thet creek."

After another wary look about him, the Kid began gathering brush for a breakfast fire. He selected only the dried branches of quaking aspen which would give off no smoke. Smoke would guide any lurking watcher to his hiding place quicker than the bark of a gun. Also, smoke could be seen much farther than the report of a gun would carry.

When he had gathered a pile of wood, he hurriedly built a small fire behind a jutting ledge of rock. As yet, there was nothing for him to cook, but the rangewise young outlaw had heard a wild turkey gobble faintly from just over the nearest ridge. He meant to have a try at nabbing that turkey for his breakfast.

Presently Billy stood up and slapped the dust from his shirt sleeves. He walked over to the bank

of a shallow arroyo and selected the dried stem of a tall weed. Cutting off a short section of it with his bowie knife, he blew through it.

"I reckon this'll make me as good a turkey call as I need," he remarked, testing it critically. "All right, Mr. Gobbler, here goes the mess call, only this is goin' to be one breakfast yo're not goin' to eat."

Holding his improvised turkey call loosely between his thin lips, the Kid pulled his right-hand Colt from its holster and glanced at it. Dropping it back, he went walking briskly toward the opposite ridge.

As he neared a dense thicket of second-growth pines near the top, he slowed down and began watching closely. He was now stepping as noiselessly as an Indian, taking care not to tread on any dried branches that might snap underfoot.

Passing on through the pines, he finally crept into an oak thicket at the head of a narrow canyon. There he darted a quick look below him, then sat down with his back to a huge rock.

The Kid had scarcely seated himself when he thought he saw something move in the thick brush some distance down the shallow canyon. A moment later, a turkey gobbled noisily from some distance away.

Billy grinned. "He's too fur away fer a shot," he muttered. "I'll have to invite him over here where I can reach him."

Jerking out his right-hand gun and laying it across his knee where he could flip it up for a lightning shot, he waited a few moments. He knew that if the turkey had seen him, it would not do for him to begin calling at once.

After a short wait, he cupped his hands over the length of weed stem he was holding between his lips.

Watching closely in the direction of the turkey, he began calling.

Softly at first, then slightly louder, he called several times. After waiting patiently for a moment, he turned his head and held his face close to the ground for a second try. This was to make the wily gobbler think a hen turkey was moving about among the brush.

The Kid instantly saw a movement among the thickets below him. Grinning, he quickly jerked the hollow weed from between his lips, then he began the soft, plaintive, whistling call of a hen turkey.

"*T-gobble-gobble-gobble-gobble*," came a sudden loud reply from the thickets.

As motionless as the rock behind him, the Kid waited. His slim right hand was poised, ready for a lightning grab at the cocked Colt that was resting across his knees.

"I hope nobody hears this shot," the Kid muttered as he waited. "Well, even if they do, I got to eat. I never had a bite o' nothin' all day yesterday, an' I'm almost hungry enough to eat a turkey's feathers."

Watching closely, he whistled again coaxingly. Almost instantly, he heard a faint pattering among the leaves, then came the flash of a bronze body. Billy's hand streaked down to his gun.

Bang! The vicious, thudding bark of black powder roared through the canyon.

As the flaming Colt kicked in the Kid's hand, he saw the big gobbler fall and begin flapping in the brush.

"Got 'im!" Billy snapped. "Now fer a real breakfast which I'm shore needin'."

Thrusting a fresh cartridge into the cylinder of his smoking gun, he hurried down to get his turkey. As he picked it up, he tested its weight critically and grinned.

"He's shore a big un," he said, nodding. "I'll bet his crop is plumb packed with piñon nuts an' grasshoppers."

Holstering his Colt, the Kid hurried back to the fire with his gobbler. There was not time to pick the turkey, so he merely skinned it. He soon had juicy chunks of its breast broiling over the coals.

Billy was now glancing keenly at his horse from time to time. Also, he was keeping a close watch in every direction.

"If anybody heard the crack of my gun, they're liable to try sneak-in' up on me," he muttered. "Well, if they try it, I'll probably have to shoot my way out o' here. I——"

At that instant, the Kid saw his mount suddenly throw up its intelligent head. As it whirled to face a point slightly to the left, the little outlaw's slim hands went streaking down to his gun butts, and he leaped quickly behind the ledge of rock.

"Somebody comin'," he snarled softly. "I'll bet ten pesos they heard me shoot thet turkey. Well, I can shoot more'n turkeys—if I have to. If it's thet posse thet's been on my——"

Without finishing what he meant to say, the Kid's Colt hammers clicked back and his thin lips curled away from his prominent buck teeth. With slitted eyes gleaming in cold deadliness, he dropped into a fighting crouch, guns poised against his slender hips and fingers curled ready about their triggers.

II.

Just then, a wild-eyed cow burst from the pines some distance below him. Before she crossed the little open glade, the Kid's keen eyes spotted a young calf bounding along on the opposite side of her.

"Uh-huh!" the Kid snapped. "There's somethin' after thet cow an' calf. It may be a lobo. Whatever it is, I'll soon know. Somebody sneakin' through the brush might've scared 'em, too."

At that instant, a racing horse burst from the brush. Belly to the ground, it was streaking at a dead run after the vanishing cow and calf.

Straight up in the saddle, eyes riveted on the calf, a ragged boy was urging the horse to a still greater burst of speed. The little fellow was scarcely more than ten or eleven years old, but he was holding the loop of a lariat poised expertly in his right hand.

Billy's deadly scowl gave way to a friendly grin as the boy's big cow horse vanished among the trees. Lowering the hammers of his guns, he started to drop them back into his holsters.

He heard a loud crash in the brush, then came a frantic bellow of the cow and the wild, choking bleat of the calf. Billy nodded and chuckled.

"Thet boy has roped thet calf," he said, grinning. "Dog-gone it! He's tailed right after 'em an' dabbed his twine on it as good as a growed-up man. I wonder if he needs any help. I'll bet he don't, but I'll go an' see. Thet cow might go on the prod."

Grabbing up two big chunks of his broiled turkey, Billy went slipping swiftly through the trees. He soon caught sight of the boy's horse, then he saw the youthful cow-puncher.

The boy had already hog tied the calf, and he was now hurriedly piling up a few sticks for a branding fire. With lariat trailing, the horse was standing a short distance away. Snorting and bellowing, the cow

stood just beyond where the calf lay.

"Dog-gone!" Billy muttered, his mouth full of broiled turkey. "Thet boy's goin' at his brandin' job like a shore enough top-hand cowboy."

Grinning, Billy hunkered down out of sight behind a clump of brush. Still eating his broiled turkey, he was closely watching the boy's every move.

When the boy's running iron was hot enough, he saw him kneel over the squirming calf. A few puffs of white smoke boiled up from the singed hair, and the calf began bleating and struggling.

In a few moments, the boy tossed his branding iron aside, then he pulled an old barlow knife from his pocket. A few deft strokes of the keen blade, and the calf was earmarked. Then he removed the hogging string.

As the calf struggled to its feet and went wabbling to where its mother stood frantically bawling, Billy's face straightened grimly. He looked sharply at the brands and earmarks on both the cow and calf, then he darted a keen look at the boy.

"Huh!" he muttered, frowning. "What's goin' on here? Thet cow's wearin' a 7 H P Connected, with an underslope each ear, an' thet boy's branded the calf 8 Slash 6, with a 7 underbit each ear. I wonder is he stealin' thet calf. Looks like it."

Closely watching the cow and calf, the boy began swiftly coiling up his lariat. He was just starting to buckle the rope back on his saddle, when Billy stepped from the thicket almost beside him.

"Well?" Billy barked sternly.

With a startled cry, the boy whirled to run. Billy instantly grabbed him by the arm and held

him. He also caught hold of the horse's bridle.

"Let me go!" the boy screamed. "I ain't done nothin'. Turn loose o' my arm."

Billy looked down at the struggling boy for a moment, then he slowly nodded. "So I was right," he said grimly. "Yuh was stealin' thet calf. I'm plumb ashamed of yuh. Just when I was beginnin' to think thet yuh had all the makin's of a top cowhand, I find thet yuh ain't nothin' but a low-down, ornery thief. In my opinion, thet's just about the lowest thing in the world, unless it's a hole in the ground."

At this, the boy stopped struggling, and his face suddenly whitened. He glared hotly up at Billy for a moment, then his lips began trembling, and tears sprang into his eyes.

"I—I—I didn't want to——" he began haltingly, trying hard to hold back the sobs that choked his voice.

This was as far as he got. Dropping his head, he began crying miserably and dabbing at his eyes with his chapped knuckles.

Still holding his arm, Billy watched him thoughtfully. As he looked down at the boy's ragged shirt and overalls, his bare feet and tattered hat, he felt a tug of pity for the little rustler.

"Listen, kid," he said, the harshness gone from his voice. "Stop cryin' an' tell me about it. What do yuh mean by stealin' thet calf? I ain't goin' to hurt yuh, but I shore hate to see a youngster pickin' thet kind of business."

"I didn't pick it," the boy sobbed quickly, jerking up his tear-stained face with a sudden surge of spirit. "I—I had to. I reckon I hate a thief as much as you do. Look! Let me show yuh my back. Then you'll understand. I—I'll kill 'im fer this.

Wait till I'm big enough to git me a gun. I'll kill 'im, I tell yuh!"

Wondering what the boy meant, Billy let go his arm and stared as the little fellow began pulling off his shirt. Almost instantly, a surge of deadly rage whitened Billy's face, and he gave a startled groan.

The boy's back was crisscrossed with huge welts. Some one had given the little fellow a terrible whipping.

"Why, boy!" Billy snarled through his clenched teeth. "Boy, who beat yuh up like thet? Who done it? I'm goin' to kill 'im fer yuh. I'll gun 'im as long as these Colts o' mine'll bust a ca'tridge."

Gritting his teeth, Billy tenderly helped the boy put on his shirt. As he started leading him back to the camp fire, the boy told Billy a story that made the young gunman tremble with killing rage.

The boy was an orphan. He could not remember ever having seen his father, but his mother had been dead only a couple of years. He was living with a man who claimed to be his stepfather.

This stepfather was a big, brutal hombre who had a lonely ranch just a few miles to the north. He was a rustler and horse thief of the worst type, and he was forcing the boy to help him make away with stolen stock.

When the boy objected, the man would fly into a terrible rage and beat him. The stripes on the boy's back had been made the night before.

"Yuh won't take me back to 'im, will yuh?" the boy asked, looking pleadingly up at Billy. "Yuh won't, will yuh, mister?"

Billy shook his head and forced a smile. "Yuh needn't be misterin' me," he said shortly. "I ain't a mister yet. Just call me Billy, or

'Kid.' Thet's what I'm used to, though I've been called worse names."

At this, the boy's eyes widened and his mouth flew open. Staring in awe, he looked up at Billy.

"Billy!" he gasped. "Billy—an' Kid! Why, yo're Billy the Kid! Yo're the outlaw thet's always helpin' people who are in trouble!"

The Kid frowned. Without replying, he led the way to his breakfast fire. Motioning for the boy to sit down, Billy began slicing off more of the turkey.

"Aire yuh hungry, boy?" Billy asked. "I've got plenty o' turkey meat here."

"My name's Jack, Billy," the boy said. "No, I ain't a bit hungry. You go on an' eat yore breakfast. I'll keep watch fer yuh, in case——"

A worried look had crept into little Jack's eyes. He stopped talking and began biting his lip uneasily.

Billy the Kid looked sharply at him over the reddened coals of his fire. Suddenly aware that something was wrong, he darted a quick glance behind him, then stood up and dropped one hand to a gun butt.

"What's up, Jack?" he snapped. "Yuh seen somethin'?"

"No, it ain't—thet I seen anythin'," the boy said slowly, as if almost afraid to talk. "I—Billy, yo're in danger here. Git on yore horse an' ride away as quick as ever yuh can. Go!"

The Kid's other hand streaked down and gripped his second Colt. Thumbs hooked over each weapon's hammer, he pivoted around and shot a searching look in every direction. Still, he could see nothing.

"Listen, Jack. What's up?" Billy snapped. "Yo're wantin' to tell me somethin', an' yo're afraid to. Open up! I'll see to it thet yuh ain't hurt."

Billy's hands dropped away from his guns, and he again hunkered down beside the fire. Brushing the ashes from a piece of his savory turkey, he began eating.

The boy in front of him hung his head. Staring down and digging one bare toe into the dirt, he began slowly telling Billy what was wrong.

"It's my stepfather," Jack said. "He's already heard thet yo're hidin' out in these mountains, an' he's greedy fer the reward thet's offered fer yuh. He's huntin' yuh now, an' he's packin' a rifle. I—I heard 'im say yuh was worth as much dead as yuh aire alive, so he may just shoot yuh down on sight."

Billy the Kid burst out laughing. He looked across at the boy who was still staring worriedly down and digging his toes into the dirt.

Billy was so amused and intent on watching Jack that he failed to see a hunched figure slip from an aspen thicket a short distance away. The stranger slunk noiselessly across a narrow stretch of bunch grass and dropped out of sight behind the very ledge that sheltered Billy's fire.

III.

The stranger was a big, husky hombre, and a stubble of tobacco-stained bristles covered his bulldog jaw. His grimy shirt was open at the throat, and he was carrying a big-calibered rifle ready in his hairy hands.

"So yuh think I ought to be worried about one lone hombre, do yuh?" Billy laughed, carelessly reaching for another piece of turkey. "Nope, Jack, yuh needn't bother yore head about any one man takin' *me*."

While Billy was talking, the powerful stranger was creeping swiftly closer under the shelter of

the ledge. In spite of his big frame, he was moving with the wary deadliness of a stalking cougar, rifle poised for lightning use.

"No, yuh needn't be worried on my account," Billy chuckled. "Yore stepdad is the feller who needs to be worryin'. Especially if the man who owns thet cow was to find her with an 8 Slash 6 calf taggin' along behind her."

"He wouldn't be likely to find a calf with thet cow, if yuh hadn't jumped me when yuh did," the boy said. "I meant to drive the cow off of a bluff where she'd be killed. Dad makes me do it thet way so's he can't be caught up with."

Billy nodded slowly. As he looked solemnly at the boy, he failed to see the black ring of a rifle muzzle being shoved toward his back through a crevice in the ledge.

"Stealin' itself is bad enough business, Jack," Billy said quietly, "let alone killin' a pore cow to git away with it. I——"

"Hands up, you!" came a harsh bellow from just behind him. "Freeze, an' elevate! I'd just a leetle rather kill yuh than not to, so just try makin' a break if yuh want to die plumb sudden."

As Billy saw the sudden look of terror on the boy's face, he knew without turning his head just what was behind him. He knew instantly that he was covered and that there would be no use to try making a lightning draw.

"Don't—shoot—dad!" the boy choked fearfully. "D-do as he says, Billy. He's got his bear gun pointed at the back of yore head."

"I knowed it 'fore yuh spoke," Billy replied calmly. "I could almost read exactly what was happenin' in yore face. Nope, he's holdin' all the aces in this game, so my hands is goin' up—fer the time bein'."

A hoarse, gloating laugh rumbled from the hombre behind the ledge. Reaching across the rock, he shoved the cold rifle muzzle against the back of Billy's neck.

With hands in the air, Billy slowly turned to face him. The young outlaw looked straight into the brutal-faced ruffian's red-rimmed eyes, then he smiled dryly.

"All right, yuh dirty, sneakin' cow thief," Billy said calmly. "Yuh got me. Now what do yuh think yo're goin' to do with me?"

"What do I *think* I'm goin' to do with yuh?" the ruffian snarled sarcastically. "I'm goin' to take yuh in alive fer hangin', just to show folks thet I'm man enough to do it. Then I'm goin' to collect thet nice reward thet's offered fer yuh. Turn back around thar."

As Billy swung away from him, the hombre made the boy come and jerk Billy's Colts from his holsters. He then forced the boy to tie the Kid's hands securely behind him with a length of hogging string.

When Jack had finished tying Billy, the big hombre grabbed the boy by the arm and jerked him roughly toward him. Drawing back his left hand, he slapped the boy against the ledge, then kicked him brutally.

"Thet'll learn yuh to keep yore mouth shet," the boy's stepfather bellowed savagely. "I happened to hear yuh talkin' to 'im about rustlin' a calf. I'll learn yuh."

As the hombre kicked the cringing boy again, Billy tried to get between them. The little outlaw's slitted eyes were fairly blazing, and his face was white with killing rage.

"Yuh let thet boy alone, yuh dirty coward," he snarled. "Yuh ain't nothin' but a dirty, low-down back-shooter an' a sneak thief. Yuh ain't got the nerve to turn me loose an'

fight me. I'd shoot yore rotten heart out. I——"

At that instant, a crowd of spurring riders burst from the trees behind them and came streaking across the meadow. The cries of the boy and the sound of Billy's voice drowned the noise of their horses' hoofs as the men raced up near the fire.

"Hey! What the thunderin' blue blazes is goin' on hyar?" came a bellying voice. "What's thet big jasper kickin' thet boy fer?"

As Billy whirled and looked up, he saw a crowd of dusty cowboys. Their horses were caked with sweat and dirt, and their grizzled leader was sitting sidewise in his saddle, a long-barreled Colt gripped in his right hand.

At sight of Billy's face, the grizzled hombre's mouth flew open, and he jerked erect in his saddle. Staring in amazement, he spurred still closer.

"Billy the Kid!" he suddenly roared. "Men, this hombre hyar has captured Billy the Kid! Thet's him with his hands tied."

Billy nodded and smiled quietly. His face was still white with fury.

"Yes, it's me," he snapped, "an' I reckon there's enough of yuh now to see thet I don't escape."

Brandishing his rifle and puffing with importance, the boy's stepfather shoved Billy forward. Looking up at the grizzled cowman, he leered coarsely.

"I reckon I'm the feller thet'll see to it he don't escape," he chuckled, patting his rifle. "I'm the hombre thet was man enough to nab 'im, so I'm takin' 'im in an' collectin' the reward."

At this announcement, a sneer of disgust curled Billy the Kid's thin lips. Billy turned and looked keenly up at the big rustler, then he glanced

to where little Jack was sobbing miserably by the ledge where he had fallen when his stepfather kicked him.

Billy was thinking rapidly. He meant to escape, if he could possibly do so, but his first job was to save that boy from further punishment at the hands of the burly rustler.

Suddenly the wily little outlaw pivoted back toward the crowd of cowboys. He looked them over closely, then his steely eyes swung up to their grizzled leader's face.

"Yo're ramroddin' this outfit, I reckon?" he inquired sharply.

The grizzled hombre nodded.

"Runnin' cattle around here?" Billy shot back.

"Yeah," the grizzled hombre growled. He eyed Billy for a second, then added: "I own the 7 H P. What do yuh want to know thet fer?"

Billy laughed harshly. Darting a cold look at Jack's stepfather, he saw the hombre's face blacken in a murderous scowl. The little outlaw gun fighter then turned toward the boy.

"Come here, Jack," he called sharply. "Come on up here. Yuh needn't be afraid any more."

As the boy got up and came limping forward, his stepfather let out a bellow of rage. Lunging at Jack, the ruffian grabbed him by the arm.

"Yuh git on home!" he roared savagely. "Fork yore hoss an' git on whar yuh belong. I'm goin' to larrup yore hide fer yuh when I git thar."

"Stay here, Jack!" Billy called sharply. He then turned to the boss of the 7 H P. "Grab this hombre!" he barked sharply. "Grab 'im an' tie 'im up. Quick! Don't let 'im git the drop with thet rifle."

With a yell of murderous fury, the big hombre whirled and jerked up

his rifle to shoot Billy. Before he could pull the trigger, three of the cowboys lunged their horses against him and sent him sprawling on the ground.

The hard-eyed punchers instantly leaped from their saddles and pinned him down. In a moment, the cowardly ruffian was tied securely.

Billy laughed coldly. Eyes dancing, he nodded for Jack to step forward.

"Hyar," the 7 H P owner roared angrily. "What's all this about? Billy the Kid, if this is just another of yore slick schemes fer escapin' hanging, I'm hyar to tell yuh yo're plumb out o' luck. We're holdin' yuh. Savvy?"

"Yeah?" Billy chuckled dryly. "Been losin' any cattle lately? Been havin' many cows drop off bluffs along this here neck o' yore range holdin'?"

The big ranch owner suddenly stiffened. Face reddening, he glared down at Billy.

"Yes," he whooped. "I'll say I have. What do yuh happen to know?"

"A good an' plenty," Billy snapped, grinning. "Let four or five of yore punchers take a ride over there in thet open glade. They'll find what's left of a brandin' fire. There's a cow with a fresh-branded calf somewhere close. Have 'em haze thet cow an' calf up here where yuh can look 'em over."

Without being told, several of the punchers instantly whirled their horses and went galloping away. Billy soon heard them crashing through the brush beyond the fringe of pines.

In a little while, he heard a loud bawl, then the thud of hoofs and the yells of the cowboys. Suddenly the cow and calf came plunging from among the trees. Spurring swiftly

in pursuit, one of the cowboys roped the calf.

At sight of the fresh brand on the calf's heaving ribs, the boss of the 7 H P let out a wild yell. Face purpling with deadly anger, he spurred closer.

"Who done thet?" he shouted. "Who run an 8 Slash 6 on thet calf o' mine? Whar is the rustlin' coyote? We'll string 'im up to the nearest pine. Blast his ornery, thievin' hide!"

Without replying, Billy laughed and winked at Jack. He then nodded for the boy to tell his story.

Jack hung his head for a moment. He glanced down at his brutal stepfather, then looked appealingly at Billy.

"Yuh needn't be afraid o' thet hombre any more," Billy reassured him. "He's through—or will be when yuh finish talkin'. Tell these men how yuh come to try stealin' thet calf."

The boy cleared his throat, then gulped. Timidly at first, he began talking.

He told how his brutal stepfather had been whipping him and forcing him to steal calves and drive the cows over bluffs where they would be killed. And he also told of raids after horses.

Before the boy was entirely through, the owner of the 7 H P let out an angry whoop. Jerking the coiled lariat from his rope strap, he expertly whipped a loop in it and spurred toward the cringing rustler.

"Hold on, men!" Billy called as the other punchers leaped from their saddles and began dragging the ruffian to his feet. "Hold on! Don't hang thet jasper before this boy. It was bad enough fer him to have to give the evidence that caused it, but don't make him have to witness the hangin'."

The big ranch owner instantly motioned his men back. He scowled at Billy for a moment, then nodded.

"Billy the Kid's right, fellers," he said to the cowboys. "We'll take 'im around the hill to string 'im up."

Billy laughed grimly as the ranch owner and his punchers started away to hang the cowardly rustler. He saw that the men meant to leave him alone at the fire, and he instantly guessed their reason for doing so. For having helped them nab a rustler, they meant to give him a chance to escape.

"Hey! Hold on there a minute, fellers!" he called after them. "It's about this boy. He's goin' to need a job somewhere. Can't yuh give 'im one? He's a top-hand puncher right now, an' yuh'll never regret hirin' 'im."

"He's done hired," the 7 H P boss shouted back. "I'll see thet he's took care of. An' if you don't shuck them ropes an' make yore escape 'fore we git back, yuh got less sense than I figure yuh got. Adios, Billy the Kid, an' much obliged!"

As the ranch owner and his punchers went leading their prisoner away, Billy whirled to where Jack was standing. Face white and set, the boy was staring after his brutal stepfather.

"Here, Jack, untie this piggin' string from around my wrists," Billy barked. "Don't worry none about thet hombre. He needs hangin', an' if the real truth was told, I'm bettin' he ain't yore stepfather none a-tall. Brace up!"

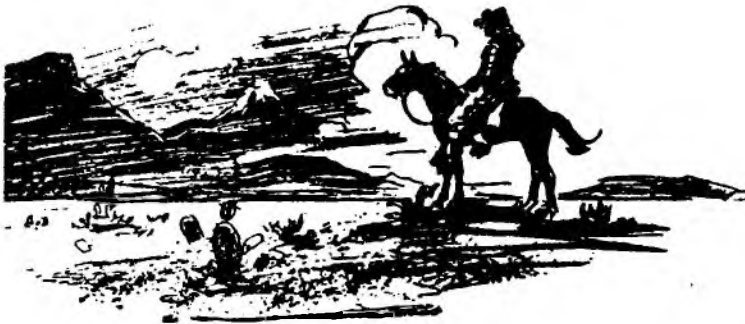
In scarcely a moment, Billy's hands were free. Snatching up his two Colts, he slid them into his holsters. He then ran to his horse and vaulted lightly into the saddle.

"Adios, Jack," he called to the boy. "Stick to the big boss of the 7 H P. He's a square hombre, an' he'll treat yuh right. Yore troubles is now plumb over."

"Adios, Billy, an' thanks fer what yuh done fer me," Jack called back. "Drop in an' see me when yo're ridin' through. I ain't never goin' to fergit yuh."

Billy laughed and waved his slim hand. In another moment, the outlaw had vanished beyond the grove of quaking aspen.

NOTE: Of all the outlaws who roamed the waste lands of the old West, Billy the Kid was supposed to be the worst. But is this true? Having lived right among the Kid's old friends for many, many years, and hearing the tales they have to tell of the little outlaw, the author positively refuses to believe that the Kid was all bad. He was a square shooter and would do anything for a friend.
—THE EDITOR.





Tailin' Onto Trouble

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "The Sonora Kid—Not Guilty," etc.

THE thick brush crashed under the impact of a heavy, plunging body. There was a vicious snort, the swift drumming sound of hoofs cutting into the hardpan, and then a few tense seconds of silence.

"Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), sat back on the reins and pulled his six long-eared jacks to a halt. This was the brush country—the *brasada*—where anything could happen. The bow-legged little freighter gave the leather a double half hitch around his brake handle, then slid a black-butted .45 out of his holster.

He hadn't long to wait. There was another sudden crash, and Shorty grinned in quick relief as a

rangy, wall-eyed red steer burst from the tangled black chaparral and stood in the trail.

"So it was you!" Shorty muttered. "*Ladino* steer, and plenty tough!"

The red steer lowered its head threateningly, as it regarded the six mules. It was branded O on the left flank, and it might have stood for "outlaw." Its left horn had been broken in half in some long-forgotten encounter, its legs were knobby with lumps left by the broken-off thorns of the *coma*, and its long tail was matted by burs.

For an instant it hesitated, nostrils flaring, sides heaving. Then hoofs clattered up the trail, and the steer flung its head high, hurled its scarred body almost sidewise, and

opened a hole in the *brasada* on the other side of the road.

Shorty sprang to the ground and began yanking the collar off the big black mule that was the right-hand leader. The hoofs came nearer, and a tall, dark-faced cowboy rounded the bend in the trail and broke into a lope when he saw Shorty unhitching.

"Whoa, Tumbleweed!"

The tall waddy reined in his sorrel cow pony by the side of his freighter pard. He was Willie Wetherbee, equally well known in the Texas range lands as the "Sonora Kid." Quick with his smile, his temper, and his businesslike .45, Willie had a facility for getting into any trouble that was within a hundred-mile range.

"What's doin'?" he demanded. "I heard the brush pop. Yuh lookin' fer trouble with a *ladino* steer, or was it a cowhand come to meet us from the Big O outfit?"

Shorty grinned as he piled the black mule's harness on the wagon wheel. "I'm lookin' fer trouble, and I'm goin' to tail onto a pile of it!" he answered. "That there brush popper was a *ladino*, all right. Charlie Owens said he'd pay five dollars fer every outlaw steer we could bring in out of the *brasada*. He thinks they're lurin' away them Herefords he's stockin' the Big O range with. I don't think it's that."

Wetherbee shook his head. "Nope, it ain't the same kind of outlaws!" he said meaningly. "Well, I'm with yuh when yuh git that musical mule saddled!"

The little freighter lifted his saddle to Chopin's sleek back. Shorty was tremendously fond of music, and because the six mules were offspring of a mare named Lucy, he had decided the team should be called the "Sextet from

Lucia." And each animal bore the name of a famous composer.

"I'll take a look at our passengers!" Willie remarked, turning the sorrel back toward the last wagon and peering through a crack in the high sideboards.

He could see sleek red-and-white bodies and the switching of a white tail. These were five prize Hereford beefs that the Big O was having brought back from the county fair at Bracketville.

"The shorthorns are hunky-dory!" reported the Sonora Kid. "Lot o' money in that waggin, Shorty! Say, if yuh catch the *ladino*, where yuh goin' to put him? If he was in that waggin, he'd hook a couple o' them beefs to death, and Charlie Owens would jest about kill *you*!"

"I'll put all the *ladinos* we snag in the middle waggin, or tie 'em on behind and learn 'em to lead!" Shorty said, as he cinched Chopin's girth strap. "Five dollars is five dollars, when it comes to buyin' oats fer these overgrown jack rabbits. Let's go!"

He swung into the saddle with ease that hinted at long range training. The powerful black mule shied at the brush. Where the *ladino* had vanished, it looked like an impenetrable wall of black chaparral, *huisache*, and mesquite. Between these grew cactus and cat's-claw, with a great many horny *coma* bushes.

"Yip-eee! Up and at 'em, Tumbleweed!"

The Sonora Kid's sorrel hit the *brasada* sidewise, with a crash that could be heard for a quarter of a mile. The tall rider ducked a limb that snagged at his Stetson, found a small, twisting trail in the dense growth, and rode down it. Shorty was at his heels, peering into the tangle for a glimpse of the red steer.

"If we cain't pile the twine on him, I'll tail him!" the bow-legged mule driver said. "And if I cain't tail him, I reckon we'll have to shoot him. Charlie Owens is plumb set on riddin' his ranch of all the *ladinos*——"

He checked his speech suddenly and whirled the mule to the right. Off there a hundred feet, behind a clump of the black chaparral that was even thicker than the rest, a bellow of pain suddenly lifted on the hot afternoon air. Then, as the partners looked, a quick flurry of dust rose, and the red steer burst into a small clearing, in a lumbering trot.

Shorty yelled and put the mule in a full gallop after the outlaw. Chopin showed surprising speed and was almost able to turn on a dime. The sorrel came after him, gaining on the straight stretches.

Crash! Scratch! Snap!

Wicked limbs snagged at the riders' cowhide chaps. Raised elbows fended off branches that would have scratched red furrows into their faces, and tough duck jumper sleeves ripped and snagged.

Like true *brasaderos*, the partners were riding half the time on the sides of their mounts to avoid being raked from their saddles.

A yell of excitement broke from Willie Wetherbee's lips. He shook out a small loop in his reata, struck out at an angle from Shorty's path, and made ready to throw. But a low jutting mesquite limb caught the loop and nearly jerked the Sonora Kid from his saddle as Tumbleweed dashed on.

Out of the corner of his eye, Shorty saw the mishap, just as the *ladino* crashed into an open space. The steer whirled, undecided as to where it should plunge into the brush again, and the delay was fatal.

II.

"Here he goes!" Shorty shouted. "Watch me tail the booger!"

Chopin streaked across the open space with speed that rivaled a cow horse. Shorty leaned from his saddle and grabbed the *ladino's* matted tail.

With a quick, deft motion, he gave the long hair a twist around the saddle horn, at the same time turning Chopin off at right angles.

Wham! The outlaw steer hit the hardpan with such force the breath was knocked from its body and the broken horn scored a gash in the dirt.

In another second, both partners were upon it, and Wetherbee was flinging the reata over the *ladino's* forelegs and running it to the hind quarters.

"Told yuh I could tail him!" panted Shorty triumphantly. "Once in a while, yuh bust a steer's neck doin' this, but it——"

"Stick up yore hands!" A harsh voice roared the command from behind.

Shorty Masters grabbed at his holster and gasped. The holster was empty; his .45 had been knocked out of it somewhere in the brush.

The Sonora Kid, holding tight on the reata, had no chance to get his gun. Both partners turned quickly, still stooping over the fallen steer.

A big man on a wiry roan mustang was looking at them over the blue steel of a .45, and his eyes were narrow and cold. Shorty's quick glance took in the details of horse and rider. Both were scarred from long battling with the *brasada*.

The man's unshaven face was coarse-featured and cruel. The roan had thorn lumps on its legs like the *ladino*. His rider wore a faded duck jumper with bulging pockets,

and there were *tapaderos* on his stirrups to keep his boot toes from being knocked out by the brush.

"Rustlin' my steers, eh?" he grated after a long silence. "Down here in the *brasada*, we kill *hombres* fer that!"

"You're loco!" Shorty flared. "I know Charlie Owens—in fact, I'm doin' some haulin' fer the Big O. This here's his steer. I seen the brand when he crossed the road!"

"Waal, yuh didn't read it right!" the horseman retorted with a sneering grin that showed uneven, yellow teeth. "Take another look at the brand!"

Shorty and Willie glanced at the dusty, heaving flank of the red outlaw. The little mule skinner's eyes widened in amazement. Instead of the Big O, there was another mark—Bar Q!

"Yuh see!" declared the rider triumphantly. "Yuh made a mistake lots o' *hombres* have been makin'—only most of 'em won't make it no more. I'm Joe Quinn, and I own th' Bar Q spread. But I reckon I wouldn't want to dirty my gun shootin' a mule skinner. Git that reata offn the steer an' clear out—savvy? If I ever see yuh tailin' a Bar Q cow ag'in, I'll make a milk strainer out of yore carcass!"

Wetherbee freed the red outlaw. The partners straightened, hands still aloft, and mounted warily to their saddles. Shorty cast another puzzled glance at the *ladino* as it struggled to its feet and lumbered into the brush.

The steer was branded Bar Q, all right, but the brand looked a little peculiar. Lots of dust was rubbed into it, and it was hard to tell just how fresh the mark was. Shorty sniffed the air suspiciously. There was some sort of sharp, acrid smell he could not identify. -

Quinn turned the roan mustang back toward the road, swinging in his saddle long enough to keep the partners covered until he had vanished in the brush. Then they heard him put the horse into a gallop.

Shorty slowly removed his Stetson, scratched at his tow-colored, tousled hair, and frowned in perplexity.

"I'll be dawg-goned!" he drawled. "I would have bet the Sextet against a team o' flop-eared jack rabbits that when I seen that *ladino* cross the road, he was branded Big O!"

"That's plumb easy to figger out, then!" Wetherbee exclaimed. "All yuh got to do to make a Bar Q out of it is to add the bar and the tail of the Q. Don't yuh see—that highbinder, Quinn, is the rustler, and not us!"

Shorty turned the black mule toward the thick growth of chaparral. Then he peered at the hard-baked ground.

"Here's Quinn's hoss tracks!" he said. "He come out from behind th' thicket there, same as th' steer. And I remember hearin' th' steer beller like he was bein' branded. But——"

"Yeah, 'but' is right!" agreed Wetherbee. "I never seen no smoke from a brandin' fire!"

"Neither did I. Let's take a look."

They rode slowly to the chaparral and rounded the thicket. There was a scraped spot on the ground that showed where the steer had fallen and struggled against Quinn's rope. Shorty looked closer, and picked out the boot tracks where the big man had squatted by the *ladino's* side.

Nowhere was there a sign of the branding fire!

"This shore has got me beat!" drawled the Sonora Kid. "Never

seen a brandin' iron yuh could heat at the home corrals and pack with yuh all over the pasture an' keep it hot. Often wished there was such a thing!"

"Reckon mebbe I was wrong!" Shorty muttered. "That outlaw must've been branded Bar Q all the time. Reckon I ought to go to San Antone an' git myself a pair o' specs—before I make another mistake an' git shot fer rustlin'!"

He shook his head and turned the black mule toward the road. The partners rode slowly, allowing their mounts to pick the easiest course through the brush. They came out of the *brasada* a hundred yards north of the wagons, and could not see them for the bend in the trail. Then, as they rounded the curve, Shorty jerked rein on Chopin with a sharp exclamation.

"Look, Willie! While we was chasin' that *ladino*, somebody went and rustled them five prize Herefords!"

Wetherbee looked. The sideboards were down on the last wagon. They had been leaned against the bed of the freight vehicle, affording a slant down which Charlie Owens's thoroughbred cows had been driven!

Shorty spurred the mule down the road. The Sonora Kid shot by him on Tumbleweed, drew rein at the wagons, and leaped from his saddle in a cloud of dust. Shorty was close behind.

"That settles it!" declared the little teamster. "If Quinn didn't run that brand, he had his waddies stealin' them cows, while we was arguin' with him! We got to trail them whitefaces—an' pronto!"

He ground-reined Chopin and began hurriedly unhitching and hobbling the other mules. Willie Wetherbee, enjoying the prospect of a fight, sprang to help his pard.

"They cain't travel very fast without killin' them shorthorns, in this kind o' country!" Shorty said. "Reckon I was responsible fer them steers, and they're worth a lot o' dinero. If I cain't git 'em back, I'll—I'll have to give the Big O my mules to make up fer it!"

Wetherbee's jaw set grimly. "You'd jest pine away an' die without them musical mules. We'll git back the steers. I don't know how many o' them rustlers there is, but we'll swap lead with——"

"Say, I ain't got any gun! I lost it out there in the brush!"

Willie stared in dismay. It might take hours to find the .45 in the tangle of the *brasada*. And the sun was already lowering over the rolling jungle growth.

"Mebbe we better go on to the Big O an' git some help," the tall waddy observed.

"Yeah, an' let the rustlers git a whole night's start on us?" Shorty retorted. "Nothin' doin'. I'll jest take myself a standard ofn this waggin' for a club, an' if I git a chance, I'll whale the stuffin's out o' them skunks. Come on!"

III.

Shorty lifted a six-foot cedar sapling, straight and strong, from its upright position against the sideboards of the wagon. He gripped it tightly and swung into the saddle again. The partners hit the trail down the road.

A hundred yards south, and the tracks of steers and a half dozen horses turned sharply to the left and vanished in the *brasada*. This was on the opposite side from where Shorty had tailed the outlaw steer, and the sun was at the partners' backs.

Wetherbee pressed forward ea-

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gerly, leaning over Tumbleweed's neck for a sight of the rustlers. The little mule skinner called a low-voiced warning:

"Take it easy, Willie! Remember, I ain't got no gun. It won't be so long till dark, an' mebbe they'll camp fer the night. We got to surprise 'em—if we caught up with 'em now, they'd be too many fer us!"

The Sonora Kid nodded, and fell back beside his pard. The trail was plain enough after that first tangle of brush at the roadside, but when darkness fell, they might have difficulty in following. There would be a moon, but not until nearly midnight.

Strange, forbidding shadows began to lengthen in the mysterious *brasada*. Shorty rode silently, presenting a ludicrous spectacle as he carried a club that was taller than himself.

He frowned, puzzled over the brand on the red *ladino*. It was very strange that he should read a brand wrong, despite his training as a cow-puncher before he took to freighting. It was true that the steer had only remained in the road for a few seconds, but——

"Wait a minnit!" exclaimed Willie Wetherbee.

Shorty halted the black mule, listening intently. From somewhere far ahead, over a brush-covered rise, there floated the dim bawling of thirsty cattle.

"That's them!" the Sonora Kid drawled coolly. "What's more, they got more'n jest five head o' short-horns in that herd. I reckon they been out rustlin' all day. Yuh better hold back here, Shorty, not havin' no gun. I'll ride on an'——"

"You're plumb loco!" flared the mule skinner. "I got a club, an' I'm jest achin' to bust it over somebody's head. Take it easy, now, or

they might skylight us against the sunset!"

They rode on slowly on their mismatched steeds. When they neared the top of the brushy rise, Willie dismounted and led Tumbleweed, and Shorty followed suit. A few yards farther, parting the chaparral, they looked down into a valley, brush-covered and surrounded by sloping hills.

Darkness was flowing into the low places like liquid purple. The dim forms of men and horses could be made out against a square splotch of something that was indistinguishable. Then a camp fire, just being kindled, leaped up to lick at dry mesquite wood and illuminate the scene.

Shorty leaned forward tensely. The square blot was a corral, made of wood from the *brasada*. There was no doubt but that Charlie Owens's prize steers were inside—with other cattle rustled from the Big O range!

"Campin' fer the night!" he breathed. "All right, Willie! We can wait here jest a little while. Let 'em eat supper an' hit the hay. Then we'll sneak up on 'em an' git back them steers or——"

"We'll git 'em back, all right!"

The partners squatted on their boot heels and let Chopin and Tumbleweed crop at the sparse grass. Behind them, the twilight faded from the western sky. Ahead, all was dark except for the camp fire against which the black shapes of men occasionally moved.

After what seemed an eternity to the little mule skinner, the fire died to a red glow of coals, and then, in another half hour, there was nobody stirring around it.

"They shore figured Quinn scairt us out o' half a year's growth!" snorted Willie. "Looks like they

didn't even bother to post a guard. But if they did—well, we got one gun. Guess we can git goin'."

They mounted and rode silently down the tangled slope, twisting through the brush, always keeping that faintly glowing camp fire ahead. Then they struck level ground and found the chaparral thinner and the rustlers' camp only two hundred yards away.

Shorty halted the black mule and dismounted. "Better leave yore hoss here," he advised. "From now on, we got to use strategy. You slip around the corral, and we'll see what we can find. If yuh have to start shootin'—and I reckon yuh shore will—git the rustlers to comin' toward yuh. I'll hide by the corral fence and lambaste some of 'em with this here club. Mebbe I can git a gun!"

Wetherbee nodded. The tall waddy gave his sorrel cow pony an affectionate pat, and Shorty noticed the farewell with a lump in his throat. They were going against heavy odds. Maybe he wouldn't see Chopin again, either, or even Willie.

He reached out his hand. "If—well—yuh know——" he stammered awkwardly.

Wetherbee gripped his partner's hand. "Shucks!" he drawled coolly. "It ain't goin' to be that bad. But jest in case, adios!"

They separated, leaving Chopin and Tumbleweed tethered underneath a shadowy, drooping mesquite. Wetherbee went to the left, Shorty trod cautiously to the right, trying to keep his spurs from jingling, gripping the cedar sapling in cold, sweating hands.

From the corral came the sleepy shuffling of tired cattle, mingled with infrequent, low bawling and the stamp of horses that were tethered near the camp fire. Shorty

circled the camp, giving it a wide berth, allowing plenty of time for Willie to make the longer journey around to the far side of the corral.

The mule driver could make out the shadowy forms of a half dozen men rolled up in their tarps near the fire. He fought a foolhardy impulse to leap into their midst and start cracking skulls with that club, taking his chances on getting a gun.

Then he reached the fence and backed against it. Made of gnarled and twisted mesquite trunks, bound together with barbed wire, it afforded visibility through the cracks. Shorty hugged the darker shadows close against the corral, and squinted through.

He could see a herd of forty or fifty cattle. They were mostly long-horns, but there toward the center of the pen, refusing to bed down like most of the others, were Owens's prize whiteface Herefords. This was the rustlers' holding corral. It probably had held many other stolen herds.

"Stop where yuh are!" a voice suddenly roared down the crooked string of fence line. "Put up yore hands!"

Shorty's heart leaped into his throat. There was a sentry, after all! He had been sighted!

Braang! Braa-aang! The little mule skinner flung himself sidewise into the deeper blackness of the fence.

Even as he did so, he saw guns split the night, and he knew the sentry's challenge had not been for him, but for Willie Wetherbee.

Confusion broke loose before the echoes of the shots flattened out over the *brasada*. Steers inside the corral leaped to their feet and plunged blindly against the fence, until it swayed and sagged under their weight.

In the camp, sleepers sprang from their bedding rolls, shouting, grabbing their guns. Somebody threw an armful of wood on the coals, and bright flame leaped up to shed a wavering light into the shadows.

IV.

Shorty crouched back against the corral fence. The builders of the cattle pen had taken advantage of every tree standing in the vicinity, rather than dig post holes, and the fence twisted and turned. The little freighter stood back in one of the niches thus formed.

"Hopper! Hopper! What yuh shootin' at?"

There was no answer to Joe Quinn's startled query. Shorty had a pretty good hunch that the man named Hopper would be lying on the ground, a victim of the Sonora Kid's gun.

"He don't answer," the Bar Q man said. "All right. Somebody tryin' to sneak up on the camp. Mebbe they got Hopper—mebbe it's the Rangers. Here, you two go straight up the fence line. Pete, you an' Tony circle the corral to the left an' see that nobody's tamperin' with the fence. Be keerful! Don't shoot each other! I'll stay here."

Shorty grinned. "The big brave hombre!" he muttered. "Sending the others out. Well, let 'em come!"

The first two men were already approaching. They would pass within a yard or two of where the freighter flattened himself against the crooked staves, gripping his club. If he wielded it now, he might be discovered by all the others in the camp. If he waited, Willie Wetherbee might be surrounded and killed.

He made up his mind quickly. As the two rustlers went by, treading

cautiously and straining their eyes ahead, Shorty took one step away from the fence to give him freedom of movement.

Swish! Crack! The stout cedar sapling whizzed down in a swift arc, and its heavier end struck the nearer rustler on the back of the head, crushing his Stetson, dropping him without any warning.

"What the——"

The rustler's companion whirled, grabbing at his partner. He caught the falling man's gun in a swift movement, and Shorty gritted his teeth. That was the gun he had hoped to get.

Braang! Bang-bang! The little freighter jumped.

It wasn't the rustler's guns, however, but the .45 in the hand of the Sonora Kid, farther up the fence line.

"Look out, Willie! They're surroundin' yuh!"

Shorty yelled the warning as he sprang fiercely toward the man with the two six-guns. To his surprise, the rustler crumpled before he could fire, or Shorty could swing his club. Willie Wetherbee, catching his target in bold relief against the growing fire, had brought down his second cow thief.

The mule skinner leaped to get a gun, but a man rushed him from out of the circle of light—a yelling, shooting man, Joe Quinn. The bullets from a blazing .45 slashed into the corral fence. A steer bellowed sharply as a slug ripped through the bark of a mesquite and spun into the milling, plunging herd.

Braang! Braang! Braang! Willie Wetherbee was shooting it out with two men, up toward the corner of the corral.

Dust and confusion, the roar of six guns and the thunder of frightened hoofs reigned over the camp.

Quinn plunged toward the bend in the fence where he had seen Shorty leap into the firelight. The mule driver was not in sight, now, but neither was he armed.

The Bar Q rancher slung lead before him. Shorty Masters, crawling cautiously back toward the camp and hugging the corral fence, saw that he had thrown Quinn off the track.

Now was the time to strike. Shorty leaped, lunging with the cedar sapling.

Smash! Quinn saw him in time to dodge.

The club missed his head and struck a bulging pocket of his jumper. There was a tinkle of glass shattering.

Braang! The rustler blazed away at such close range that the flame from his gun licked the freighter's cheek, but the bullet missed.

Shorty caught his balance and swung again, struck Quinn a glancing blow and then jabbed fiercely at him with the end of the sapling.

"Oww! Oh! I'm a-fire! I'm branded! Oh-h-h!"

The little freighter halted in amazement. Quinn had dropped his gun and was tearing at his clothes, trying to get a boot off, while he danced with pain. Shorty leaped upon the gun.

"Owww! I'm branded! It's burnin' me up, I tell yuh! Do somethin'!"

"I'll do somethin'!" retorted Shorty. "Move on to the fire, or I'll shore enough do somethin'!"

Willie Wetherbee came striding down the line of corral fence, slipping fresh cartridges in his .45. He stopped and stared at Quinn's antics.

"What's eatin' that hombre?"

Shorty sniffed the air. There was

a sharp, acrid smell—the same as he had noticed earlier in the day, when Joe Quinn forced him to release the *ladino* steer.

"Acid!" he exclaimed. "Now I savvy!"

Quinn threw himself in the dirt, rolling in agony. The light of the camp fire showed a large hole eaten in his duck trousers by the fluid from the bottle Shorty's club had shattered.

"Yo're branded, right enough," drawled the freighter. "Git up from there and stop yore hollerin'. Yuh got to fork a hoss and help us drive Charlie Owens's cows back over to the road. What about the other hombres, Willie?"

"They won't be botherin' us no more!" the tall waddy said. "But I still don't understand what this here coyote——"

"He's been runnin' brands without the trouble o' buildin' a fire to heat an iron," Shorty explained. "Jest stuck a stick in the bottle of acid and made his mark. That's why that brand looked kind o' funny. Ain't I right, Quinn?"

The rustler only groaned as he rubbed his burned thigh. Shorty chuckled again. "Let's git goin'!" he said. "We ought to hit the Big O Ranch by daylight. And five dollars or no five dollars, I ain't botherin' no more *ladinos*. When yuh tail them, yuh sometimes shore tail into trouble!"

Shorty shore said somethin', thet time. But thet same danger o' tailin' onter trouble is one o' the reasons why we'll bet him an' Willie jump the next *ladino* they see. The two pardners fairly live on trouble—wouldn't feel noways natural unless they was in it up ter their ears. So watch fer the next story about 'em. There'll be plenty trouble an' excitement when it appears, right soon, in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

I am a girl of twenty-three, Indian-Irish, can hit the bull's-eye seven times out of eight with bow and arrow and am a good shot with a gun as well. My father is a Seminole Indian with whom I often go on hunting trips, and I wish some of you Pen Pals could join me. I will exchange Indian relics and also snaps of our hunting expeditions.

BILLIE B., OF FLORIDA.

WESTERNERS WANTED

Hyar is yore chance, yuh lucky Westerners. Yuh don't even need tuh ask for Pen Pals, they're comin' tuh yuh:

DEAR SAM: I am greatly interested in things Western and wonder whether you can possibly find me some Pen Pals of my own age who would be willing to tell me all about the West—the land and its people. I am twenty-four years old—a girl, who is only too anxiously waiting for responses to this request.

LUE T. A., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Can you get some of the Pen Pals to write to me and tell me what they know of the West? That is what interests me mostly now, and I would be very glad if I could find some good Pen Pals in Arizona, Wyoming, Texas, or Montana. Who is going to write.

BUCK, JR., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Here is another boy of fourteen who wants to get some Pen Pals. Please try to find me some good ones, especially in the West. I don't care how many write to me; I will answer each and every one of them and be glad to do it.

LINCKE, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Just give me room enough to print my request for a whole lot of Pen Pals from everywhere—especially the Western States. I am a young fellow of nineteen, interested in many things and willing to exchange info on anything I know of.

DAN LILLO, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I understand that if I write to you I can get some girls out West as friends. Well, I would like very much to get in touch with girls on ranches or anywhere in the wide-open spaces, especially in Arizona and New Mexico. I am collecting Western songs and would gladly exchange them with girls of my age, which

is sixteen. I am living on a farm and for that reason am most interested in ranch girls.

HELEN E. TRENT, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I would like to get some Pen Pals among cowgirls in the Western States, especially Arizona, Wyoming, and Nevada. If any one writing to me sends her photograph, I will answer right back and inclose one of mine in exchange.

CLARA DALLMAN, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen. I like all kinds of sports, but my favorite is horse-back riding, and I never care how wild the horse is. I am also an expert with any kind of gun. My intention is to go West some time soon, and I would like to make friends with some cowgirls out there. I promise to become a sincere pal to any of them.

A. MAE MATTHEWS, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a fourteen-year-old girl and would love to hear from girls out West—most of all from some who live in the State of Wyoming. I hope that quite a number will answer my request, and I assure each one that there will be a quick reply to every letter I receive.

ELAINE KAROL, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen, anxious to get all the information possible about the West. My greatest wish is to go out there some time and have a chance to become a cowgirl myself. Please, you cowgirls, take me for a Pen Pal and write to me. You can be sure that I will answer promptly.

EDNA BROWN, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am just a little girl of twelve, but I can write a lot of letters. I hope that there will be many Pen Pals in the West who will try me out. I would like to be a cowgirl some time, and maybe one will write me and tell me all about what they have to do, so I can start preparing myself.

DORIS MOORMAN, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twenty-one. I think it would be great to receive letters and answer them and that is what I am looking for. What I am most interested in is to learn about the West, the way people live there. I hope some Westerners will write to me soon. Every letter will be answered, and I will also exchange snaps with any who wish it.

ARKIE P. CESERETTI, OF RHODE ISLAND.

DEAR SAM: Would you please get me in touch with some Western girls? I am fifteen years old, have gray eyes and dark

curly hair. Maybe some of the Westerners will just take a fancy to my kind of girl, and then I ought to get a whole lot of letters. It sure would make me happy to find friends out West.

HAZEL H. JENKINS, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve, a pupil in high school. I live where strawberries grow—and the biggest apples one can hope to find anywhere. It's the land of a million smiles. I enjoy all kinds of sport, especially horseback riding. That is why I would like so much to get some cowgirls as my friends, because, of course, they will know all about horses and can tell me about it, too. Please try to find some of them for me. Any one who writes to me can be sure that the next mail will bring my answer. MILDRED STARK, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of fourteen who desires to get some nice Pen Pals from the Western States—especially Arizona, Texas, Montana, and New Mexico. Can you fix me up? I surely would appreciate it. You can tell any girl who wants to write to me that she surely will get a reply by return mail. Of course, girls of my own age are preferred on account of the fact that we would have about the same interests. ELLEN WERSHLER, OF NEW YORK.

GENERAL REQUESTS

Somewhat, I reckon, hyar is the part thet most of yuh'll read, because it offers variety. These hyar frien's don't specify any special kind o' Pen Pal they want and thet's what makes this batch o' letters most interestin'. Jest see if I ain't right.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twenty, and I want Pen Pals, especially from Georgia, Florida, and Western States. I am a mind reader, can ride well, wrestle and box; am a pro-pector and can do pretty near anything that can come up for people living an outdoor life. With all that, it seems to me it should not be hard to get some Pen Pals interested in writing to me, and if they do they can be sure of a quick answer.

J. H. GERARDY, OF KANSAS.

HOWDY SAM! Please print this request for me in the W. W. W. I am a collector of cowboy songs, but my collection is still small, and I would like to get in touch with

Pen Pals similarly interested and with whom I could exchange songs. Every letter will be answered. I am a young fellow of nineteen, six feet four inches tall, with blond hair and hazel eyes. Wonder whether that description will help me to get plenty of pals?

ARTHUR DE FOREST, OF RHODE ISLAND.

DEAR SAM: I saw the W. W. W. for the first time, and I am sure glad I found it, because through the Pen Pal section I hope to make some good friends in your country. Please try to interest some fellows in the Western States to write to me. I am a boy of twenty, belong to the Territorials, and am a good rifle shot.

WILLIAM CAIN, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a man of twenty-eight, looking for Pen Pals wherever you can find any for me. My hobbies are fishing and swimming, but I am also a chur-ligger. Here is hoping that I will find a true-blue pal.

DAVID H., OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am in search of Pen Pals. Won't you help me out? I want Pen Pals from all directions of the compass. Please write. I am a girl of fourteen, have blue eyes and blond, curly hair, am five feet two inches tall, and weigh barely one hundred pounds. And with all of that, I am always in mischief, just keeping on the safe side of the calaboose. But don't be afraid, just write and you will find out.

MISCHIEVOUS LA VERN, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, twelve years old, who would like some good Pen Pals. I have done some traveling in the Southern States, and maybe my letters will be interesting to some who write me.

ROBERT LEE, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-three and very anxious to find a few good friends with whom to correspond. I live all by myself, because my parents are dead, and that is one reason why I want Pen Pals. I am interested in all kinds of sports, firearms and target practice. I also know a little about radio. I certainly hope that some of the readers will answer quickly, and they may be assured of a prompt reply.

HENRY J. R., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

An' thet's all for this time. I've done my job, an' now yuh do yore's—which means thet when yuh write, observe the rules. So long!



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the data of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HYAR'S yore ol' Sam ag'in with a whole remuda o' frien's back of him. It'll be a cinch for yuh to rope one or more of 'em. All yuh got tuh do is tuh write yore letters accordin' tuh them rules up thar—an' pronto, a new friend's

made! Now let's see what the letters say:

HUNTING JOBS

Jest a few Pals out o' luck! Who is goin' tuh hol' out a helpin' hand tuh them? Ef yuh have a job tuh offer get busy writin', an' ef yuh

don't think that any one o' the fel-las hyar'll fit the job, le' me know, an' I'll try tuh find the right man fer yuh.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen. For quite some time I've been without work, and I'm anxious to find something to do, anywhere. I would prefer a job on a farm or a ranch out West, especially in Texas. I hope that some one of the Pen Pals who reads this will be kind enough to help me get a place.

HENRY L. OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR FRIEND SAM: Could you possibly help me find a job on a ranch out West? Please try to get me in touch with some cowboys or ranchers who need help, and I will surely appreciate it. I am a boy of nineteen, willing to work the best way, and I am sure I can make good if I am only given a chance to show what I can do.

ELMER, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen and live on a farm. I would like to have Pen Pals all over the West to exchange information, because I want to learn all about the West, and especially I want to find out whether there is a job that I could get on some ranch.

HAMIL ELLIS, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty years. I would like very much to get in touch with some rancher in Montana, Wyoming, or any other Western State who would offer me the opportunity to work for him. I am perfectly willing to work for board and clothes until my boss feels that I am worth more. I hope I will find some one through your magazine. I can start West as soon as I get word that a job is waiting for me.

WALTER DOGER, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young fellow of twenty-one, and I am out of work. I wonder if you could put me in touch with some rancher who could give me a job. I am fond of riding and would like to be a cowboy, in Texas preferably. Please see what you can do for me.

JOHN DIXON, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a farmer boy of fifteen, used to all kinds of work on a farm. I am now trying to make friends out West through whom I can get a job on a large

ranch or farm. I am especially interested in Texas, Utah, and Montana. Please, any one who can help me, write at once.

CARL WRIGHT, OF ILLINOIS.

LONESOME FOLKS

Lonely people need sympathy an' plenty of it. Now, ef yore heart is located in the right spot, yuh'll sit right down and spill out the cheer these folks are clamorin' fer:

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome girl of fifteen. I amuse myself by riding horse-back and playing the guitar, but I am most anxious to get some friends to write to. I would like to get Pen Pals all over the world, but those in Western States like Arizona, Texas, and Wyoming are more than welcome. Please write to me. I assure you that I will answer promptly. Will also exchange snapshots.

SHORTY HELEN, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow of nineteen with lots of time on my hands and sometimes lonesome for want of something to do. I like to write letters and can find plenty of subjects to write about, and that is the reason why I would like to get some Pen Pals. Just get me a string of them, anywhere and everywhere, and all will be fine and dandy.

HOWARD P., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM WILLS: If there ever was a brown-haired, blue-eyed, thirteen-year-old lonely girl who needed Pen Pals, here is one. I would just love to have Pen Pals in Texas, Utah, Wyoming, or, for that matter, in any State in the Union. I am collecting pictures of movie stars and am fond of reading, although I do not neglect outdoor sports either. Write to me, Pals, and believe me, there will be an answer to every letter I receive.

PAULINE, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome boy of thirteen, living in a dreary city. What I would like is to get some Pen Pals out West, who can tell me about the open spaces of which I think so much, but which are so far away from me.

FRANK MACKENZIE, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I wonder if you would get me some Pen Pals, for I am so lonely. I would like them to be from the West, because I intend hiking out there some time.



The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

YUH could 'a' heard a pin drop when we opened this week's meetin' o' the Wranglers Corner. Thar was plumb good reasons why; 'cause them iron-jawed rannies, Buck Foster and Joe Scott, is takin' a week off.

It seemed kind o' quiet and lonesome without Buck suddenly flarin' up about somethin' that's got under his skin. And then Joe rubbin' salt in the wound ter make it sting worse.

At first it looked like the meetin' wasn't goin' ter be so well attended, 'cause only Bud Jones of Texas and Sonny Tabor and Shorty Masters and his pard Willie Wetherbee was present when the powwow was called to order.

But then we hears a big noise outside, and we knows thar's goin' to be enough of a big wind to make up fer the absence of Buck and Joe.

The door is shoved open, and in walks Deputy U. S. Marshal George "Fearless" Krumm.

"Howdy, gents," the big feller greets the rest of us in the Corner.

He nods to Bud Jones and Shorty Masters. Then his eye lights on Sonny Tabor.

"Sa-ay, young fella," he says, his eyes glistenin' with suspicion. "Ain't I seen yore face on a 'Wanted' poster somewheres? I kind o' think yuh——"

"This hyar young gent," we tells the fat depity, tryin' to cover up an embarrassin' situation, "is Sonny Tabor—a member in good standin' with all us folks in the Wranglers Corner."

"He may be in good standin' with the Wranglers Corner," says Krumm stubbornly, "but he ain't in good standin' with the law. And it's my

dooty as a United States marshal ter up an'——" Then he stops short and turns as a voice calls to him from the doorway.

"Oh, please shut up about the law. Yuh'll make me a nervous wreck. Yuh do all yore fightin' with yore jaw. And it gives me a pain in the neck!"

We all looks toward the door—and there stands Johnny Forty-five, who's also a depity U. S. marshal—and a durned good one—which fat Krumm ain't.

"Howdy, Johnny," Bud Jones shouts out.

"Come in an' set down, Johnny," Shorty Masters invites, "and make yore fat pard button his lip. Don't he know that he ain't supposed ter make arrests in the Corner?"

Johnny Forty-five's red face breaks inter a wide grin as he replies:

"Depity Krumm is kind o' dumb When it comes to catchin' a crook. He's powerful slow, and what he don't know Would fill a durned big book!"

Then Johnny goes over to his fat pal and whispers somethin' in his ear.

At once, Depity Krumm's face turns pale and he nods several times. Then he pulls out a big bandanna, removes his hat, mops his forehead, and puts the hat on again.

And fer the rest of the evenin', nobody hears a sound—not even a grunt—out o' the big depity marshal.

Then, seein' as it's time ter git down to business, we starts pokin' through the mail bag fer some interestin' letters ter read ter the boys.

This was the first one we entertained 'em with:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: First of all, I want to tell you that if you don't print more

stories about Sonny Tabor, you are going to lose six good customers.

Tell that old cross between a sheep-herder and a horse thief, Buck Foster, that Joe Scott could whip him blindfolded and with both hands tied behind him.

I wish Lum Yates and the Bar M waddies—all except Sandy McClure—would get dry-gulched.

Tell Sonny Tabor I need a good cow-puncher on my spread. I own the Bar O in Llano County and would give him two hundred and fifty dollars. But don't send that old sheep-herder, Buck Foster, or any others except Sonny Tabor.

BLACKSNAKE JOE.

Nederland, Texas.

"Ain't it too bad Buck can't hear that one?" says Shorty Masters.

"He'd make the Wranglers Corner sound like the lions' cage in a circus at feedin' time," remarks Johnny Forty-five.

"I wonder what he means by the two hundred and fifty," Sonny Tabor says. "Would it be two fifty per month or per year or——"

"Mebbe it'd be per-haps, Sonny," we tells him, with a chuckle, and goes on to the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We have been reading the 3W for about a year and a half, and thought we'd write a letter to the Wranglers Corner, as we always read it.

Sonny Tabor and Kid Wolf top our list of favorites. Two others of whom we like to read are the rhymin' depity, Johnny Forty-five, and "Iron Man" Krumm, the Terror of Evildoers.

The new series of stories about the Phantom of the Desert sure are real he-man stories, and we hope that the citizens around Catclaw Desert don't collect the reward which is on the Phantom's scalp.

TOAD AND PETE,

The Two Curly Wolves from
Kaler Creek.

"The next letter," we says, lookin' at Sonny Tabor, "is from a gal who's plumb anxious fer yuh ter git a pardon."

Sonny shrugs his shoulders and looks kind o' sad. "If she'll tell me

how, I shore will do that very thing," he answers.

"Waal, here's her letter, anyway," we tells him, and reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been reading the SW for nearly a year, and it's certainly a fine magazine.

I believe R. L. L., from Chicago, is right. His letter was in the June 10th issue. Sonny Tabor ought to get a break and be given a pardon. He certainly has had his share of troubles.

I hope Mr. Stevens will consider this, as I'm sure all the readers of SW would agree if questioned. Also, I hope to see Circle J and Sonny Tabor back in another grand story.

My favorites are: Circle J, Sonny Tabor, the Whistlin' Kid, the Desert Phantom, Hungry and Rusty, Silver Jack Steele, and Johnny Forty-five.

I like nearly all the stories, but the above are my favorites.

Yours till Sing Lo forgets to say "So be!"
SUSIE GIROLAMI.

Antioch, California.

"Looks like it's ladies' night in the Wranglers Corner," we remarks, after lookin' over the next letter.

"Gals is great hands fer writin' letters," says Shorty Masters.

"Yo're tellin' me," Willie Wetherbee puts in, and then his face flushes red and he shuts up like a bear trap. Which causes everybody to suspect that there's a secret in Willie's life which ain't got nothin' ter do with El Bandido Blanco.

So to cover up his slip o' the tongue, we reads this one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the W. W. W. for over three years and I never miss it. It's the greatest book on the market.

I was very sorry when Señor Red Mask and Storm King were through. But my favorites are Circle J, Sonny Tabor, Silver Jack Steele, the Bar U twins, Lum Yates, Kid Wolf, Smoke Walsh, and the Whistlin' Kid. Give us more like them.

I read your Corner, too, and I never see any girls' names there. So I suppose you won't print mine either, but I do want you

to know that I enjoy your magazine very much and look forward to the next week.

Buck Foster and Joe Scott aren't very good, but Billy West and Sing Lo are fine.

So long until Buck Foster gets some sense.
P. GELVIN.

Bloomfield, New Jersey.

"What do yuh s'pose that 'P' stands fer?" Bud Jones asks. "Thet's shore a funny way fer a gal to sign her name."

"Mebbe it's Pauline, and mebbe it's Prudence, and mebbe it's Phyllis," we tells the young Texas Ranger, "and then mebbe it ain't none of those names."

"Mebbe it's Patsy," Shorty Masters suggests. "Yuh never know what they'll christen a gal these days."

"I reckon gals like to make yuh guess a lot, huh?" Bud says, and nobody argues with that.

"Now listen ter this one," we says, changin' the subject, and reads the followin':

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Although I have read magazines of many varieties, I get the most kick out of the W. W. W.

What has become of all the good characters? You don't have enough stories about Storm King, Kid Wolf, Silver Carroll, and Sonny Tabor.

I have been a constant reader of the W. W. W. for about three years. I have come to like some characters more than others.

My favorites are Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, the Whistlin' Kid, Circle J, Storm King, Silver Carroll, and the Desert Phantom.

The Desert Phantom is the best series of novelettes you have ever published.

Yours until Buck discards his bearskin vest.
S. T. WINDSOR, JR.

Normangee, Texas.

We looks at the clock. "Time ter be gettin' back to yore home ranges, gents," we tells the crowd.

They all gits up and starts fer the door, but we calls Johnny Forty-five back.

His pard, George Krumm, starts

back, too, but Johnny tells him to go on ahead.

When George is out o' the way, we asks Johnny what he whispered in his fat pard's ear ter make him keep so quiet all evenin', 'cause Krumm ain't spoke a word since Johnny done that whisperin' act.

Johnny Forty-five grins at us and then gives a wink. Then he bends over close and says in a low tone:

"I jest told George that if he tried

to arrest Sonny Tabor, he'd hev to fight the whole Wranglers Corner."

"Come on thar, Johnny," came Krumm's impatient voice from the doorway. "I can't be waitin' fer you all night. I got important business ter——"

But Johnny interrupted him with:

"O. K., Pard Krumm, so tried and true, I'm comin' pronto, like a neighbor. It sure would be too bad—fer you—If you'd arrested Sonny Tabor!"

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

FEUD RANCH

Novelette

By LEE BOND

It was one o' those Western feuds that never end till Boot Hill's so full thar's no one left to carry on the fightin'.

BANDIT POISON

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

That's what them three waddies from Circle J generally are—to say nothin' of the chink.

WITH BLAZIN' GUNS

Novelette

By SAMUEL H. NICKELS

Hungry and Rusty, the Texas Rangers, in a new adventure.

Also stories of the Whistlin' Kid, by Emery Jackson; Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger, by Lee Harrington; Lum Yates, by Collins Hafford—and other characters.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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