

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST



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15¢

WEEKLY

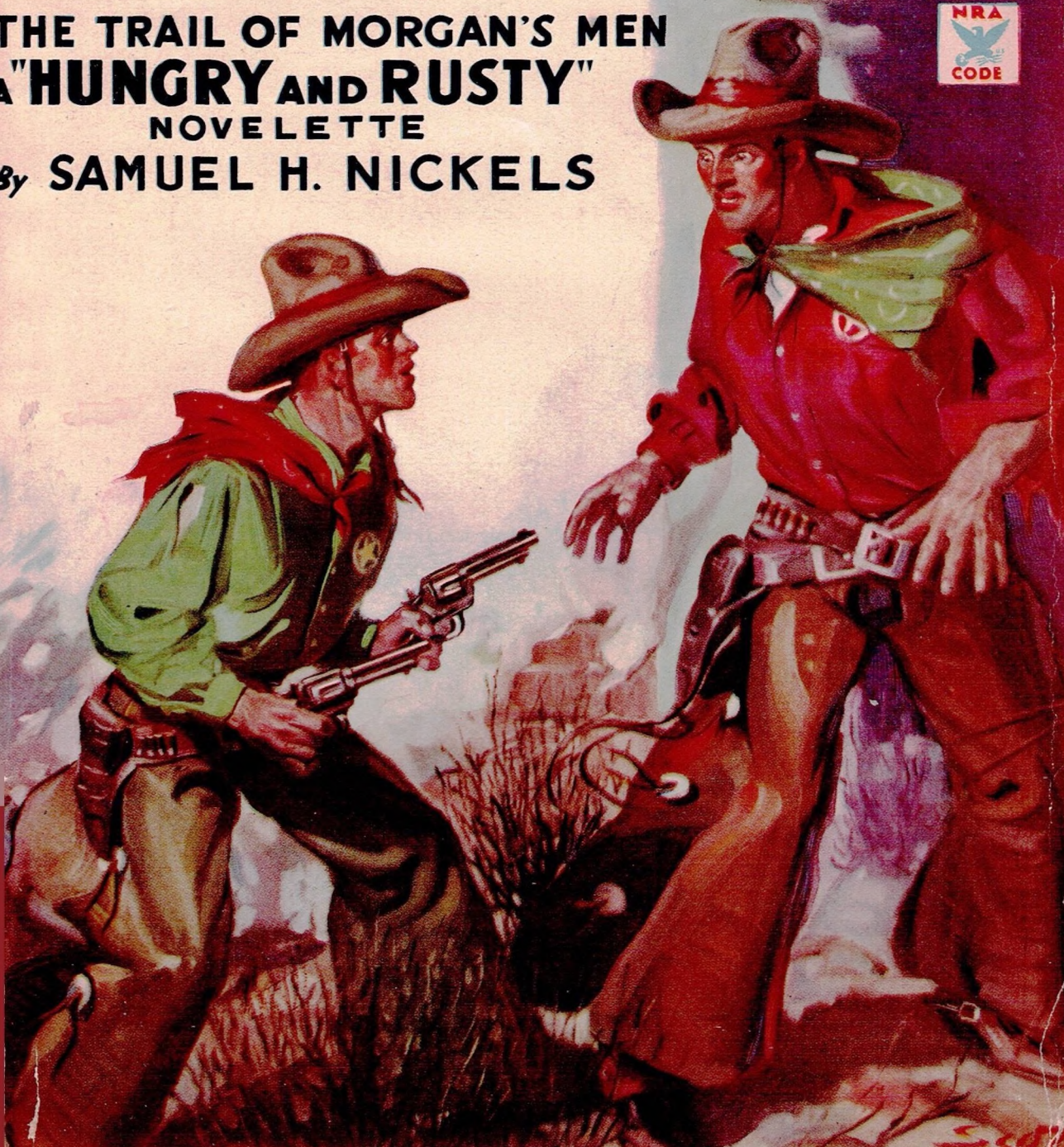
JAN. 19

ALL STORIES COMPLETE



THE TRAIL OF MORGAN'S MEN
A "HUNGRY AND RUSTY"
NOVELETTE

By SAMUEL H. NICKELS



HEIGHT
5FT. 8IN.

WEIGHT
160 LBS.

NECK
15 1/4 IN.

CHEST
40 IN.

WAIST
31 IN.

THIGH
22 IN.

CALF
14 3/4 IN.

ANKLE
8 1/2 IN.

Posed by
professional
model

SKINNY MEN

Get this news!

Amazing easy way adds solid pounds Quick!

*Thousands gain 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks
with new double tonic. Richest imported brewers'
ale yeast concentrated 7 times, iron added.*

THOUSANDS who were once scrawny, sickly, weak, praise this new easy way to gain weight, strength and health.

As you know, doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now with this new yeast discovery in pleasant tablet form, you can get far greater tonic results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on pounds of solid flesh—and in a far shorter time.

Not only are thousands quickly gaining husky, good-looking pounds—but also clear, ruddy skin, freedom from constipation and indigestion, new strength and pep.

2 greatest body-builders in 1

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new scientific process is concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

But that is not all! This marvelous, health-building yeast is then *ironized* with 3 special kinds of strengthening iron.

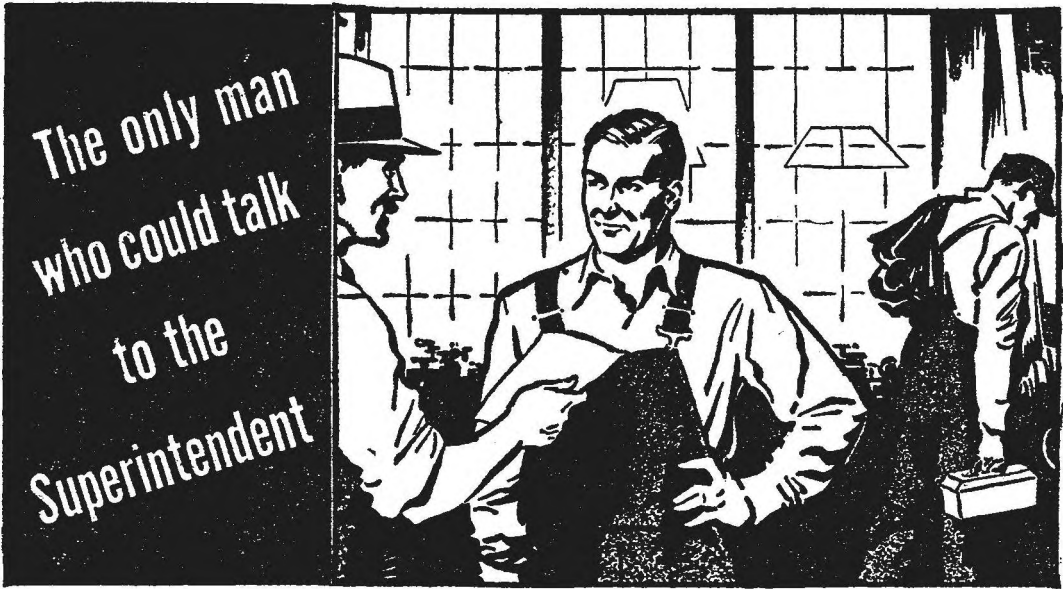
Day after day, as you take pleasant little Ironized Yeast tablets, watch flat chest develop, skinny limbs round out attractively, complexion clear—you're an entirely new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If you are not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health *right away*, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body," by a well-known authority. Remember, results are guaranteed with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 502, Atlanta, Ga.



For several years, he was just like a score of other men in the plant—a good, honest, fairly capable worker, but only that. There was nothing distinctive about him or his ability—nothing to make him stand out from the crowd—no reason, as a matter of fact, why he should ever receive a raise.

Then one fortunate day he decided that the reason he wasn't getting anywhere was because he lacked special training. He searched around a bit—asked a great many questions—and then enrolled for a home-study course with the International Correspondence Schools.

"Soon after I began studying," he wrote to us the other day, "we had a change in management at our plant. The new superintendent said that only

men who had really studied their work were in line for positions as foremen.

"I certainly was glad then that I had decided to study in my spare time. For, thanks to my I. C. S. course, I was the only man in the organization who could talk to the superintendent in his own language. As a result, I was promoted over men who had been here from ten to twenty years."

What are you doing with the hours after supper? Can you afford to let them slip by unimproved when you can easily make them mean so much?

One hour a day, spent with the I. C. S. in the quiet of your own home, will prepare you for success in the work you like best. *Yes, it will!* Put it up to us to prove it. Mail this coupon today.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work | <input type="checkbox"/> Heating | <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation | <input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry |
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Name.....Age.....Address.....

City.....State.....Occupation.....

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WW-1E

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Vol. 90, No. 5 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 19, 1935 Whole No. 1683

Cover Picture—Scene from

“The Trail Of Morgan’s Men” . Painted by H. W. Scott

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

The Trail Of Morgan’s Men Samuel H. Nickels 10

Hungry an’ Rusty follow it across the Rio to a show-down.

Owl-hoot Breed Philip F. Deere 65

It shore comes in handy when six-guns start ter roar.

Señor Red Mask and the Gold of Los

Gatos Guy L. Maynard 97

The justice rider has another excitin’ run-in with El Hiena.

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Which same is a mighty dangerous stunt fer hoss thieves to try.

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They show that hombre some tricks he never knew before.

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Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Ardenas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1935, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1935, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$9.00 per year.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your book which points out the spare-time and full-time job opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts.

(Please print plainly)

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ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....

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28x4-50-18	3.35	1.15					
29x4-50-19	3.35	1.15					
30x4-00-18	3.40	1.15					
31x4-00-19	3.40	1.15					
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Dr. W. R. George

take the doctor's special prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) which helps Kidney functions in a few hours. It starts work in 15 minutes. Gently tones, soothes, and cleans raw, sore membranes. Brings new energy and vitality in 48 hours. It is helping millions of sufferers and is guaranteed to fix you up and make you feel like new in 8 days, or money back on return of empty package. Get guaranteed Cystex from your druggist today.

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The Trail Of Morgan's Men

A "Hungry And Rusty" Novelette

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Fatty Stampedes," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A MURDER.

AS the oncoming rider spurred and quirted his staggering horse to a still greater burst of speed, "Hungry" Hawkins and "Rusty" Bolivar reined their own mounts out of sight behind a clump of stunted trees. There the two young Texas Rangers jumped from their saddles and ran back where

they could watch the trail below them.

"Well," Rusty snarled, his freckled face twisted in a suspicious scowl, and his hands resting on the long Colts that sagged his criss-crossed cartridge belts, "what do yuh make of thet hombre?"

Hungry shook his head and blinked his eyes. He spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt beside him, then straightened his



lanky figure to its full height for a better look at the speeding stranger.

"I can't figger 'im out yit," he drawled grimly, and shifted his belted guns to an easier position on his lean hips. "Thet feller's in a powerful hurry about somethin', an' he——"

Bang! They saw the rider suddenly dive down on the side of his horse, then the thin, whiplike crack of a high-powered rifle rattled viciously across the desert country.

"Come on!" Rusty yelled, and he whirled with his bowed legs flying. "Some bushwhacker is shootin' at thet hombre! We got to git to 'im!"

Hungry was halfway to their horses before Rusty finished speaking. As a second vicious bark of the rifle reached them, the two cowboy Rangers leaped into their saddles and spurred at a dead run away from the grove of trees.

Bang! The rifle barked again, and the two Rangers saw the rider's horse suddenly swerve and go to its knees.

It was up again almost instantly, and came staggering gamely on as another shot rang out.

The hombre was still far out in the desert, but Hungry and Rusty were cutting the gap between them at every bound of the horses beneath them. Both Rangers had snatched the stubby carbines from their saddle scabbards and were holding them ready for lightning use.

Bang! The unseen marksman's rifle barked again, and the oncoming horse stumbled and went down.

As another faint crack of the rifle sounded, the struggling horse dropped over on its side and lay kicking feebly.

"Look!" Rusty yelled. "Look at thet, will yuh? Where's them bullets comin' from?"

The rider had made a flying jump from his saddle as his horse hit the ground. He landed on his feet, staggered a step, then whirled. As the two Rangers watched, they saw him suddenly spin half around, then

clutch frantically at his chest and pitch headlong on his face.

Hungry barked a sharp warning and threw his mount aside. He motioned to Rusty as he leaped his horse down a sandy bank into a deep gully out of sight and sprang from his saddle.

"Hey!" Rusty yelled, spurring up beside him. "What's the big idea of stoppin' here? We got to save thet rider!"

"By gittin' shot ourselves?" Hungry asked grimly. "Yuh couldn't save 'im now! He's done fer! Thet bullet dusted 'im front an' back through the chest! We got to locate thet bushwhacker, 'fore we ride out thar in the open. Dead Rangers never caught nobody, an' I'm figurin' to nab thet killer!"

Rusty slid from his saddle and bow-legged through the sand and gravel to the opposite bank of the gully. There he cocked his big-calibered carbine and peeped through a fringe of bushes for another look at the slain rider.

The fellow lay partly hidden behind his dead horse. Hungry and Rusty peered keenly at a little rise some distance beyond for a glimpse of the hombre who had killed him, but they could see only a waste of desert brush.

"Waal, thet bushwhacker is some-whar around," Hungry said, and he leaned forward for a better look. "He couldn't hardly have got plumb away yit. We——"

Bang! The spiteful crack of the rifle sounded again from somewhere out in front of them, and a bullet zipped viciously through the bush within an inch of Hungry's homely face.

The lanky Ranger ducked back, then he spat a brown stream into the sand beside him and rose slowly for another look. A few steps away,

Rusty was peering closely in an effort to spot the rifleman.

"Yuh'd better watch out over there!" Rusty called sharply. "Thet guy's already spotted yuh, an' yuh'll be gittin' a bullet through yore face in another——"

Cra-c-k! The rifle pinged wickedly, and a bullet slapped Rusty's hat around on his head.

Another lightning shot made the sand boil from the gully behind him.

"Uh-huh!" Hungry grunted. "It seems like thet guy's spotted both of us! Keep still an' don't move!"

Hungry ran a few steps to another clump of bushes. There he slowly stood up and shoved his carbine muzzle over the edge of the bank.

"Git ready now!" he called softly to Rusty. "Put yore hat on the end o' yore gun an' raise it up whar he kin git a squint at it! When he cuts down on it, maybe I kin spot 'im!"

With a muttered remark, Rusty snatched off his bullet-torn hat and hung it on the muzzle of his carbine. At a nod from Hungry, he slowly shoved it up where the hidden killer could see it.

Crack! Bang! As the hombre's rifle barked viciously from near the top of the rise, Hungry's carbine blasted an instant reply.

Like a flash, a roughly dressed hombre leaped into view from behind a thick clump of brush near the top of the rise. With hands clutching at his throat, he staggered a few steps, then stumbled to his knees and pitched forward on his face.

"Yuh got 'im!" Rusty yelled. "Dog-gone, yuh made a bull's-eye on thet sneak the first pop! Come on!"

"Hold on thar!" Hungry called sharply. "Thar might be another bushwhacker planted somewhar close. I spotted thet jasper's hidin'

place by the flash of his gun, but we got to make shore he didn't have an amigo to help 'im."

Hungry then held up his own hat. When no answering bullet whizzed toward him, he pulled off his buckskin jumper and shoved that up on his carbine stock.

"I don't think thet thar's any more shooters around," he said. "I'll git up first. If nobody shoots at me, then you kin foller."

"Yeah!" Rusty snapped sarcastically. "As if I'd let yuh risk yore hide to save me gittin' a bullet in mine. Like blazes yuh will! Yo're bigger'n I am, an' yuh'd be easier to hit! I'm goin' first!"

Before Hungry could stop him, little Rusty bounded up the bank. With a worried grunt, Hungry leaped after him.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two fighting Rangers stood for a moment with carbines poised and eyes darting searchingly in every direction. Finally they lowered their weapons and dropped them loosely across their left arms where they could be fired quickly in case they might be needed.

"Git to thet rider first!" Hungry barked, leaping forward. "If he ain't plumb dead, maybe we kin find out what this rookus was all about!"

They found the slain hombre sprawled beside his dead horse. As they got a better look at him, Rusty let out a startled yelp.

"A tenderfoot!" he gasped. "Look at thet hard-b'iled hat, will yuh—an' them clothes he's got on? What do yuh reckon he was doin' way out here?"

Hungry shook his head. With a thoughtful grunt, he shifted his chew of tobacco to the other cheek and stooped beside the body.

The dead man was a young fellow of about twenty-three, and he was

neatly but inexpensively dressed. He carried no gun, and a careful search through his pockets failed to reveal a weapon of any kind. There was not even a letter to tell who he was.

"Thet's funny!" Rusty muttered, scowling. "I don't savvy what this hombre could've been doin' out here in——"

"Look out!" came an interrupting shout from Hungry. "Look comin' yonder!"

Rusty whirled, carbine poised and finger curled ready around the weapon's trigger. He started to throw the gun to his shoulder, but stopped and stood staring.

The bushwhacker they had thought dead was again on his feet, and he was staggering drunkenly down the rise. Hatless, the front of his flannel shirt a smear of crimson and one hand still clutching his throat, he came reeling straight toward the two cowboy Rangers.

Suddenly the fellow halted and braced his feet wide apart to keep from falling. He swayed dazedly for a moment, then with a rattling snarl, he managed to jerk a Colt from his holster and throw it to a level.

CHAPTER II.

RUSTY DOWNED.

BANG! Hungry's carbine flipped up and roared in one swift movement, and the bushwhacker's gun was knocked whizzing into a clump of mesquite before the fellow could fire a shot.

The hombre staggered. Crimson dripped from the stump of one severed finger as he took a step forward, stumbled and sank to his knees. Feebly he tried to rise, then pitched over on his face and lay helpless.

"He's through!" Hungry cried.

"Come on! Maybe we kin find out who *he* is."

They rushed to where the fellow lay and stooped over him. Hungry caught him by an arm and rolled him over so they could get a look at his face.

He was a tough-looking ruffian, and his unshaven lips were twisted back from his tobacco-stained teeth in pain. There was a gaping hole in his throat where Hungry's first bullet had hit him, and he was dying fast.

"I—I—g-got 'im f-fer yuh, boss!" he mumbled thickly, eyes rolling. "T—took—short cut—headed 'im off. B-blasted tenderfoot'll—never squeal now. I——"

The fellow's big chest rattled hideously, and crimson froth dyed his lips as he fought for breath. He shuddered and rolled his head from side to side, and his glazing eyes partly closed.

"Y-yeah—g-got 'im," he mumbled faintly. "N-now yuh kin hunt —'nother sucker with m-money to buy interest in hoss ranch."

The listening Rangers exchanged quick glances, then they leaned closer in an effort to hear everything the hombre said. His voice was now but a hoarse whisper, but he was still trying to talk.

"Hoss ranch!" he choked, then chuckled feebly. "Hoss ranch! S-some hoss ranch, b-but he fell fer it!"

The fellow tried to say something more, but stopped and lay gasping and choking. Suddenly his eyes flew open. He stared wildly up into Hungry's face for a moment, then with a shuddering groan, he went limp.

"Dead!" Rusty snapped. "What do yuh reckon he meant by thet palaver? An' who did he think he was talkin' to?"

Hungry shook his head and stared down at the twisted face. "I don't know," he finally drawled. "Thar's somethin' queer been pulled on thet tenderfoot, but me an' you is goin' to come mighty nigh findin' out what it is, 'fore we git through. Come on!"

With scarcely another glance at the dead ruffian, Hungry and Rusty hurried back to the murdered tenderfoot. There they knelt for a closer examination of the body.

They pulled off the young fellow's shoes and looked inside them, then they searched beneath his clothes to see if he might have a money belt around his waist.

Hungry finally twisted around and picked up the hombre's hat. A grim frown hardened his homely, lantern-jawed face. He turned the hat over and ran his finger beneath the sweat-band.

With a sudden grunt, he clamped his teeth on his chew of tobacco and rose to his feet. He nodded to Rusty and pulled out a tightly folded bit of paper that had been cleverly hidden inside.

"Waal, hyar's somethin' at last," he said. "Maybe this was only put in thar to make his hat fit tighter on his head. Still it might be somethin' else. We'll soon know."

Hungry hurriedly unfolded the bit of paper and found that it was a hastily written note. Stooping, he smoothed it on his knee, then read:

"Swindled. Inherited five thousand dollars and invested all in half interest in horse ranch. Man who sold it to me named Pete Morgan. I find he owns no horse ranch. He had a lot of fine horses to show me when I came here, but I have learned that they were stolen stock. I gave him check for my money, and learned last night that I was to be murdered as soon as they cashed check. Am trying to escape. If killed and this is found, it will explain how happened.

"JACK HARPER."

Rusty bounded to his feet before Hungry finished. He had started to roll a cigarette, but jabbed his tobacco and papers back in his pocket.

"Pete Morgan!" he snarled. "Why the ornery, low-lifed backshootin' horse thief! Him a ranch owner! An' he trapped this unsuspectin' tenderfoot into payin' him five thousand dollars fer a half interest in a horse ranch he never owned!"

Hungry and Rusty had heard of Pete Morgan, but they had never been sent to get him. Other Rangers as well as the rurales of Mexico had been trying for a year to pin something on him, but the slippery scoundrel had been too wily for the best of them. Nothing could be proved against him.

Morgan's gang of ruffians worked on both sides of the border. The best horses along the entire Big Bend country were rustled by them and sold in Mexico, and horses from Mexico were in turn driven across the Rio Grande under cover of darkness and disposed of in Texas.

Not only this, but it was said that Morgan's gang varied their horse stealing with occasional raids on border banks, mine pay rolls, and stage robberies.

Hungry and Rusty stared at each other for a moment without speaking. Suddenly Hungry folded the note and jammed it in his chaps pocket.

"Waal," he snapped, "this time it's you an' me thet's goin' gunnin' fer Pete Morgan. An' what's more, we'll either git 'im or cash in tryin'. We shore got somethin' on 'im this time. Savvy?"

"Somethin' on 'im?" Rusty snarled. "Yuh long-legged pelican, I'll say we have! Let's bury these hombres, then we'll backtrack one of 'em until we git Morgan's fake

ranch located. We'll either arrest 'im or shoot 'im. Speakin' personal, I don't care which it is."

As he talked, Rusty leaned his carbine against a bush. In another moment, he and Hungry were busy scraping a hole in the sand.

The sun was nearly down when they finished burying the two dead hombres. While Hungry heaped a mound of stones above the tenderfoot, Rusty hurried away to the gully to get their horses.

Hungry took time to scribble the murdered hombre's name on a bit of paper which he rolled tightly and placed in the shell of an exploded cartridge. When he had put this between two flat stones on top of the grave, he turned and hurried after Rusty.

"Them hosses must 'a' strayed off while we was busy," he muttered. "Rusty's more'n likely havin' to trail 'em."

Long shadows already shrouded the bottom of the gully as Hungry pushed through the fringe of chamisa and cat's-claw and glanced down. He called sharply to Rusty, then stepped closer to the bank.

As he did so, the lanky Ranger failed to see a slight movement among some bushes behind him. He was just starting to call again, when a powerfully built hombre leaped on him from behind and hurled him headlong into the gully where four more hidden ruffians pounced on him and began heaving to pin him down.

Dazed, Hungry fought desperately to break away. His carbine had been knocked from his hands, but he wrestled furiously to reach his holstered Colts.

Back and forth, over and over in the loose sand and gravel, he battled frantically to tear free. A

clubbed gun grazed his ear and almost numbed his left arm.

"Bust 'im again!" a panting ruffian snarled. "Don't let 'im break loose! Thar might be more Rangers around! Pin 'im down an' tie 'im, then we'll soon find out! Don't risk shootin'!"

As another chopping blow of a clubbed Colt whistled past his face, Hungry hurred himself aside and almost tore free. He got one good swing at a swearing hombre's jaw, then the other ruffians smashed him down and wrenched his hands behind him.

"Now, yuh blasted meddlin' Ranger, we got yuh!" a tall, broad-shouldered hombre panted when Hungry was securely bound. "We done finished that runt partner o' yores. How many more o' yuh is thar snoopin' around hyar? Talk fast, or I'll finish you, too!"

"Yuh'd better take this one along with us, boss, an' see how much he knows about Jack Harper," another ruffian suggested hastily. "If other Rangers has been hyar, too, they'll all be after yuh. They may already be out huntin' yuh."

Hungry had been looking around to see if he could see Rusty. When he heard the last speaker call the big hombre "boss," he jerked back and looked up.

"So, yo're Pete Morgan, aire yuh?" Hungry asked grimly, a deadly greenish glint flashing in his slitted eyes. "An' yuh say yuh've finished my leetle pard? Waal, if yuh have, I'll settle with yuh fer it! I'll——"

"Yeah?" Morgan snarled, and he kicked Hungry savagely in the side. "Ranger, yo're through! Yuh won't do nothin'! Drag that leetle runt out hyar, men! We'll hide his body, then we'll take this long-legged hom-

bre with us, until I have time to make 'im talk. Hurry!"

Hungry gave a groan and rose on one elbow as Rusty's limp body was pulled from behind a boulder and dragged up the bank into the bushes. A hot tear trickled down his homely cheek, but he shook it away and ground his teeth.

As he watched the ruffians gather brush and pile it over Rusty's still form, he tugged furiously to break the thongs that held him.

In scarcely a minute, his brutal captors hurried back and lugged him to where they had hidden their horses. There he was tied across a saddle and carried swiftly away.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE HORSE RANCH.

HUNGRY'S captors kept their horses down in the gully out of sight. Pete Morgan took the lead, and he paused from time to time to peep over the edge of the bank to see if any other Rangers were following.

Hungry saw that the ruffians had stolen his and Rusty's horses. One of the outlaws was leading both animals by their bridles as they sped along.

Soon he noticed that it was rapidly getting darker. A low moon had already risen above the distant hills and coyotes were beginning to yap shrilly from every side.

As Hungry thought of little Rusty's body lying back there where prowling animals would find it, he clenched his teeth and heaved with every ounce of his strength to tear free. In spite of his struggles, the stout cords only bit deeper into his wrists and ankles.

Finally, he relaxed down and lay panting. Dimly in the faint moonlight, he could see Pete Morgan and

his killers. The hombres were strung out in single file in front and behind him, and they were now spurring at a faster gait.

After a long ride, Morgan suddenly turned aside and headed down a steep trail that led around the face of a bluff. Gleaming in the moonlight below, Hungry could see the dark water of the Rio Grande.

As they reached a narrow flat beneath the bluff, the outlaws again spurred to a gallop. In a few minutes, the ruffians passed an old windmill and a few corrals and halted in front of a tumble-down ranch house.

"Waal, hyar we aire, men!" Morgan growled. "Git thet danged Ranger inside whar he can't escape! I wonder whar the rest o' the gang is? I told them to be roundin' up them hosses we aire goin' to drive across the river, an' to have 'em ready when——"

A sudden faint rumble of flying hoofs caused Morgan to whirl. As the noise grew rapidly louder, he spat an oath and nodded.

"It's them!" he snapped. "It's time they was gittin' hyar with them hosses. Hurry on with thet Ranger an' fasten 'im good!"

Pete Morgan shouted orders right and left, then whirled and galloped back in the direction of the corrals. Hungry caught a fleeting glimpse of a herd of running horses as two of the gang jerked him roughly to the ground and dragged him into the house.

The two ruffians did not take time to light a candle. Guided only by the pale light of the moon which gleamed through the open windows, they pulled Hungry across the littered floor and dumped him into a stuffy little closet at the back of the house. They took time to make certain his wrists and ankles were still

tightly bound, then they bolted the door behind them and hurried away.

Hungry waited until the sound of the hombres' footsteps died away, then he heaved himself to a sitting posture. By feeling with his feet and head, he quickly found that he could touch the walls on all sides.

"Uh-huh!" he gritted. "Thar ain't nothin' in hyar thet I kin use to loosen my wrists on. Waal, thar ought to be somethin' else I kin do. I shore as blazes don't aim to lay hyar until them thievin' skunks comes back to murder me. I got to live to settle with 'em fer murderin' thet leetle pard o' mine, blast 'em!"

As he talked, he wrenched and tugged in another effort to loosen his wrists. Suddenly he stopped and felt carefully with his head for the door.

"Waal, why didn't I think o' thet before?" he muttered grimly. "I hope this hole is small enough so's I kin git a shoulder against thet back wall."

Hungry hastily squirmed around and placed both feet against the door. With his bony shoulders against the rough wall on the opposite side of the closet, he braced himself and shoved with all his strength.

There instantly came a creak of hinges, and the old door bulged slightly outward. Hungry hastily slid his shoulders lower and tried again.

This time, the door squeaked noisily, but it held for a moment. Suddenly it crashed open and slammed back against the wall.

Without wasting a second, Hungry rolled out into the room beyond. There he rose on one elbow to listen, then he heaved himself on toward a window in the opposite wall.

The lanky cowboy Ranger knew

that he had no time to waste in trying to find a way to cut the thongs that held him. Pete Morgan or some of his gang of killers might come in at any moment, and he had to get out of the house before they found him.

He could hear the shouts and oaths of the outlaws from the direction of the corrals. Dim forms of spurring riders flashed back and forth past the front of the house as the hombres worked to pen the horse herd that had just been brought down from some secret hiding place.

Hungry had barely reached the window when he heard the bull voice of Morgan above the thud of flying hoofs and squeals of frightened horses. The big outlaw leader was headed toward the house.

"Come on, a couple o' yuh, an' go with me!" Morgan shouted to his men. "We got to hurry an' make thet Ranger tell us if thar's any more of 'em after us! If thar is, we got to git them hosses across the river, an' git 'em thar fast!"

Working swiftly, Hungry got his back to the wall and heaved himself to his feet. As he heard horses come pounding at a run toward the door, Hungry threw himself backward through the open window and rolled hastily away into a chamisa thicket which grew close to the house.

He had barely hidden himself when Morgan and two of the gang threw their mounts to a sliding halt at the door and leaped from their saddles. He heard them rush up the few steps and stamp noisily across the room, then came a snarled oath and a sudden bellow of rage from Morgan.

"Gone!" Morgan yelled. "Thet blasted Ranger has pulled out! He's—he's been rescued! Other Rangers is most likely hyar, an' they've

maybe already got us surrounded! Grab yore guns an' head across the line with thet hoss herd! Ride hard, an' be ready to shoot! Run, men, run! We ain't got a second to lose!"

With furious oaths and shouts, the hombres bounded back outside and threw themselves hastily into their saddles.

Hungry's homely face hardened in a deadly scowl as he listened to them race back to the corrals.

He heard Morgan bawling orders to his men. Then came the crash of the corral gate and the quick thud of flying hoofs. In scarcely a moment, he saw the outlaw band start a herd of plunging horses at a run toward the river.

"Waal, I've got plenty on thet feller Morgan now!" Hungry snapped, and he hastily sat up. "I got to git loose from hyar an' git my hands on a gun, then I'll git 'im! I'll down thet whole gang fer murderin' Rusty!"

Hungry listened until the sounds of escaping outlaws died almost away, then he darted a quick look around him. As his eyes fell upon a barbed-wire fence which partly surrounded the yard, he rolled swiftly toward it.

In scarcely a moment, he lay on his face beneath the lower strand of wire and was sawing his wrists back and forth against its sharp-pointed barbs.

Hungry scratched his arms in several places and opened a stinging cut across the back of his left hand before he felt the tightly drawn thongs begin to loosen. At last his wrists came free, then he sat up and quickly untied the cords that held his ankles.

"Now!" he gritted, and he lunged to his feet. "My next move will be to——"

As a stick snapped just behind

him, Hungry whirled. There in the darkness almost beside him stood a hatless hombre, and Hungry found himself staring into the gaping muzzles of a pair of cocked Colts that were held almost against his body.

"Hands up, yuh blasted skunk!" the fellow snarled. "Git 'em up, an' make it snappy. One crooked move an' I'll blow yuh apart!"

CHAPTER IV.

HANDS UP, HOMBRE!

AS the moon rose higher and higher above the place where the tenderfoot and his murderer were buried, it lighted the thickets of mesquite and chamisa along the rim of the gully. A pair of jack-rabbits could be seen playing near the pile of brush that had been piled above Rusty's body.

Suddenly one of the rabbits reared up on its hind legs and shot its long ears forward inquiringly. It wrinkled its pink nose and sniffed suspiciously for a moment. Then with a squeak of alarm to its mate, it whirled and vanished like a gray streak into the nearest thicket.

At almost the same instant, the brush above Rusty's body moved. There came a muttered grunt, then the brush was hurled to one side, and Rusty's red head shot into view.

"What the——" Rusty snarled, then he winced and pressed a hand to a lump on the side of his head above his right ear. "Where's Hungry? What——"

Rusty hurled the rest of the brush aside and scrambled to his feet. He batted his eyes inquiringly and darted a quick look in the direction of the two graves, then he scowled and dropped his hands to his empty holsters.

"Uh-huh!" he finally snapped. "I

get it now! Some jasper was hid when I went down in the gully after them hosses, an' he must've slammed me over the head with somethin'! I wonder what happened to Hungry? He——"

Without finishing what he meant to say, Rusty clawed matches from his pocket and scrambled hastily into the gully. One look at the tracks he found there told him what had happened.

He saw where Hungry and the ruffians had rolled over and over in the sand and gravel, and he also found where the outlaws' horses had been left. In addition to this, he also saw where he himself had been dragged up the bank.

"So they packed Hungry off, did they?" he gritted. "Thought they'd busted my skull, I reckon. Left me fer dead an' beat it away. Well, I'll show 'em, the skunks! They'll find out that I'm the livest corpse they ever seen, 'fore I'm done with 'em!"

Rusty struck still another match and followed the tracks for a short distance to make certain in which direction the outlaws had gone. As the match burned out, he hurled it aside and dropped his hands again to his empty holsters.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Nothin' to shoot with an' nothin' to ride. I shore——"

Suddenly he darted a keen glance to where the bushwhacker had been hidden when he dropped the tenderfoot. Muttering, he climbed out of the gully and hurried to where the murderer was buried.

Before he reached the grave, his keen eyes spotted the gleam of metal in the pale moonlight, a short distance away. Leaping forward, Rusty snatched up the dead outlaw's long-barreled .45s.

"Waal, thet's lucky!" he snapped, shaking the sand from the two

weapons and shoving them into his holsters. "I knowed we left these guns here when we buried that polecat, but I was afraid his amigos might have spotted 'em an' took 'em away. Now, I'm bettin' he had a hoss hid out somewhere beyond that rise. I hope he did, an' thet his amigos didn't find it. I'll soon know."

With the guns slapping against his thighs, Rusty hurried up the little rise. He quickly reached the top, then watching keenly in every direction, he turned down the opposite side into the mesquite beyond.

He had gone only a short distance when an impatient whinny brought him around with a jerk. There behind a thicket to one side, he saw the outline of a saddled horse.

"Now!" Rusty muttered as he untied the animal's bridle and leaped into the saddle, "I got a hoss under me, an' guns in my holsters. Yes, an' thet bushwhacker's rifle is still layin' whar Hungry dropped 'im! I'll git thet, too, then watch my smoke!"

Thirsty and hungry from its long wait, the outlaw's horse needed no urging as Rusty headed it back across the rise. The little Ranger had difficulty in holding it when he stopped for the rifle.

"Huh! This horse seems to be in a powerful hurry to git back home!" Rusty muttered. "Thet gives me a swell idea! I'll just let it take me there! I figure it'll lead me straight to the skunks thet's captured Hungry! Git on, horse!"

Rusty took time to shove the bushwhacker's rifle into the saddle scabbard beneath his right leg. Then he slackened up on the bridle reins and gave the horse its head. The animal instantly leaped into a gallop and struck out in the same

direction that Hungry's captors had gone.

For a time, Rusty could see the tracks left by the other hombres' mounts, but he lost sight of them in a patch of rocky ground a few miles away. From there on, he had to depend entirely on his horse.

Back and forth around dense thickets of desert brush, through rocky draws and over dry washes, Rusty's mount carried him swiftly on until he reached the canyon of the Rio Grande. There he turned down a faint trail to a little flat below. Then the horse turned sharply to the right. In a few minutes, it whinnied and quickened its gait.

"Hold on here, boy!" Rusty snapped softly, and he pulled the horse to a quick halt. "I think we must be close to where we're goin'. We'll go slow from here on!"

After a searching look in every direction, Rusty slackened up on the reins and rode warily forward. He had scarcely started when he whirled the horse back on its haunches and snapped his right hand down to a gun butt.

Just in front of him, he caught the dim outline of a house. He stared sharply, then swung from his saddle and tied the horse to a mesquite.

"I guess this is the place I'm huntin'," he muttered. "I hope thet blasted hoss don't start whinnyin' again, until I've had a look around."

Rusty jerked his other Colt from his holster and crouched to listen. With a muttered remark, he then cocked both guns and crept slowly toward the house.

"There don't seem to be nobody here," he snapped. "Still I may have already been spotted. Well, if anybody's lookin' fer a fight, all they got to do is just start somethin'. I

ain't in no humor to take nothin' offn nobody!"

Rusty clenched his teeth as a throb of pain shot through his aching head. He pressed one hand to the place where he had been hit when the ruffians knocked him unconscious, then he crept on.

In another moment, he dropped down in the thick gloom against the back of the house. He paused there to listen, then he peeped warily through the nearest window.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Nobody in sight. This house looks plumb deserted. Yeah, but looks is sometimes mighty deceivin'. I bet thet somebody's——"

A sudden slight noise from a short distance away brought little Rusty around with a jerk. Guns poised and eyes dancing, he threw himself into a fighting crouch.

As another slight sound reached him from somewhere around the house, Rusty flattened himself against the wall and began creeping warily toward it. At every step the scrappy little Ranger expected to feel the shock of a bullet from some hidden watcher, but he pressed his lips together and kept going.

He had barely reached the opposite corner of the old house when he heard the noise again. This time it seemed to come from directly in front of him.

Rusty instantly dropped down. He waited for a moment, guns poised for lightning use and eyes darting to right and left, then he leaned forward and peeped around the corner.

He was just in time to see a dim figure rise from a clump of chamisa. At first, Rusty started to shoot, but when he saw that the fellow's back was toward him, he slipped noiselessly toward him.

Suddenly a twig snapped under Rusty's foot, and the hombre spun

around like a flash. Without a pause, the little Ranger leaped at him and snapped an order for him to hoist his hands.

CHAPTER V.

A FORCED SWIM.

INSTEAD of obeying, the hombre straightened with a jerk and stared. For almost a minute, he gazed into the twin muzzles of Rusty's .45s. Then he relaxed and began chuckling.

"Rusty, I thought yuh was dead," he said. "The sight of yuh had me plumb flabbergasted fer a minute.

At this, Rusty's mouth popped open. "Hungry!" he gasped. "Yuh long-legged pelican, it's you, an' I come within an ace of shootin' yuh! Naw, I wasn't murdered, but it ain't them sneakin' jaspers' fault thet I wasn't. Where did they go? I want a whack at 'em fer givin' me this bump on my head!"

As Hungry led the way around to the door of the house, he rapidly told Rusty all that had happened. He had barely finished talking when a loud whinny from Rusty's horse brought him around with a jerk.

"Thet's only my horse," Rusty explained hastily.

"Yeah, but *thet* ain't!" Hungry barked sharply. "Listen!"

From far across the river, the two Rangers caught a faint answering whinny. Rusty's mount whinnied again, and another answering squeal shrilled back through the border night.

Hungry listened keenly until he located the exact direction of the second horse, then he nodded grimly and whirled to Rusty.

"Give me one o' yore guns!" he barked. "Quick! Then grab yore hoss. Morgan's gang must've stopped over thar to see if they was

bein' follered. We got to git on after 'em. Hurry!"

Hungry snatched the gun which Rusty instantly shoved toward him, then both rushed to where Rusty's mount was tied. In scarcely a minute they were astride the big cow horse and galloping toward the river.

"Hold on hyar!" Hungry suddenly barked as they reached the water's edge. "Wait a minute! I got us an idea!"

"Yuh what?" Rusty snarled impatiently. "Say, if ideas was dynamite, yuh ain't got enough of 'em in yore head to blow yore hat off. Them jaspers may be gittin' away! Come on!"

Hungry jumped from the horse before Rusty finished speaking. He grunted and looked reproachfully at his little partner, then motioned for him to dismount.

"I know what I'm doin'!" he snapped. "If them jaspers is hid over thar like I think they aire, they'll see thet hoss comin' an' be waitin' fer us! I got another plan! Just wait!"

Muttering disgustedly, Rusty slid to the ground and stood scowling at the opposite shore which could be dimly seen in the faint moonlight. He glared inquiringly as he saw Hungry pull the carbine from the saddle scabbard and step back.

"What do yuh think yuh're goin' to do with thet?" he snarled. "Yuh figurin' to shoot at them jaspers from here?"

Hungry shook his head and smiled grimly. "Yuh'll see in a minute what I'm figurin' to do!" he drawled quietly.

Hungry had scarcely finished speaking when their horse whinnied again and began pawing the sand with one front foot. An answering neigh instantly pealed from across

the river, but was quickly cut short as if the other horse had suddenly been struck to silence it.

"Turn this hoss loose—quick!" Hungry snapped. "Let it go to thet other hoss!"

"What?" Rusty snarled. "Yuh mean thet we——"

With a hissed command, Hungry jerked the bridle reins from Rusty's hand and looped them about the saddle horn. Working swiftly, he then jumped back and drove the horse into the river.

"Now yuh'll see what I wanted," he whispered. "This hoss'll go straight to thet one thet answered, but them jaspers thet's watchin' won't find us on it. While it's makin' a lot o' noise splashin' across here, me an' you'll be wadin' across lower down whar we won't be seen. Savvy?"

Rusty started to snarl an objection. Instead, he wrinkled his forehead, then grinned sheepishly.

"I savvy now!" he snapped. "While them jaspers is gittin' an eye-ful of thet hoss, me an' you'll be gittin' set to cut down on 'em. Come on! All I want is one crack at Pete Morgan!"

The two Rangers raced away along the sandy shore until they reached a bed of rocky shoals. There they took off their chaps, then sprang into the water and splashed swiftly toward the opposite bank.

"We're goin' to have to hurry!" Hungry barked. "I'm bettin' thet hoss is dang nigh acrost by this time! Move fast!"

"Yeah?" Rusty snarled. "Like I ain't hurryin'! What do yuh think I am? A catfish? Shut up an' keep goin'!"

Rusty would have said more, but just then he stepped into a hole, and his red head vanished beneath the water. He was up in a moment and

floundering on, but his unexpected bath had not improved his hair-trigger temper.

As they neared a thin fringe of tornillos which lined the opposite bank, Hungry slowed down until Rusty floundered up to him in waist-deep water. Hungry stared keenly at the shore which loomed above them against the sky line, then motioned Rusty back.

"What do yuh see?" Rusty snapped softly.

"I thought I seen somethin' move in them tornillos," Hungry whispered. "It's lucky we took off our chaps. I got us a hunch that we're maybe goin' to do some swimmin'. Go slow an' keep yore eyes peeled fer——"

Bang! The thudding blast of a big-calibered rifle lighted the tornillos with a sudden winking flash of red flame, and a heavy bullet chugged wickedly into the water almost against Rusty's hip. As if that one shot had been a signal, a roaring volley from rifle and Colt split the air about the trapped Rangers with a hail of screaming lead.

"Duck!" Hungry snapped harshly. "Don't just dive! Throw up yore arms an' fall like yuh was hit, then make fer thet deep hole below us!"

Rusty had jerked his dripping gun. Instead of shooting, he quickly threw up both hands and fell back as if he had been hit. Out of sight in the shallow water, he managed to shove the gun back into his holster and began swimming toward the deeper water below the shoals.

As he saw his little partner vanish, Hungry spun half around and dropped the carbine he had been carrying. He gave a loud groan, then fell over and dived swiftly after Rusty.

In scarcely a moment, both Rangers were in the deep hole be-

yond the shoals. They swam on beneath the water until their lungs seemed almost bursting, then whirled on their backs and drifted back to the surface for air.

Little Rusty came up first. His freckled face scarcely caused a ripple as he emptied his lungs, then sucked in a quick breath and dived on.

Hungry did not risk coming up until he was several yards farther on. When he did so, he managed to dart one swift look around to get his bearings, then he went down and swerved slightly toward the Mexican shore.

Their boots and water-soaked clothes were beginning to drag heavily on them when they again rose for air. Hungry came up in the thick gloom almost beneath the edge of the overhanging bank.

The lanky Ranger instantly lowered his feet and found that he could touch bottom. He quickly waded in where he could not be seen from above, then he whirled to look for Rusty.

He was just in time to see Rusty come up a short distance below him. He hissed sharply, and Rusty swam hurriedly toward him.

"Shhh! Don't talk none!" Hungry cautioned softly. "Listen!"

The shooting had stopped, but the two dripping Rangers could hear the muffled voices of Morgan's ruffians as they called back and forth. Suddenly the voices seemed to be coming closer.

"Git in close to the bank!" Hungry whispered sharply. "Quick! Pull some o' this brush down over yuh an' keep still. Them jaspers is comin' to make shore they finished us!"

Almost before Hungry finished speaking, they heard the snap of a stick and the thud of boots from a

short distance away. In a moment, they heard a low command, and Hungry recognized Pete Morgan's rough voice.

"I think we must've got 'em!" Morgan grated harshly. "I saw 'em both throw up their hands as they went down. Hurry an' search this bank, then we'll shove them hosses on to the hang-out in the hills. I'm bettin' these ain't the only Rangers thet's on our trail to-night, an' they may git word to the rurales. We got to work fast!"

Rusty nudged Hungry as they heard the ruffians stamp through the brush above them. In another moment, the outlaws had scattered and were busy searching along the shore.

Hungry and Rusty hastily flattened themselves against the bank and jerked their wet guns from their holsters. Each quickly tested the hammer of his weapon to make certain no mud or sand would keep it from working. They then crouched back to watch and listen.

Suddenly the brush crackled just above Rusty's head, and they heard a muttered oath. Almost instantly, a clump of tall weeds parted and a villainous face appeared.

With a startled snarl, the fellow darted one quick look at Rusty's crouched form, then he drew back with upraised Colt and struck with all his strength at the little Ranger's red head.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT IN THE TORNILLOS.

IF that savage blow had landed, Rusty's skull would have been split and his lifeless body hurled beneath the water. But the murderous blow never reached its intended victim.

Hungry happened to glance up just as the fellow struck. The lanky cowboy Ranger's bony arm

shot out with the speed of a darting sidewinder, and he grabbed the hombre's hairy wrist. Like a flash, he jerked the fellow down and shoved him under the water before he could fire a shot or let out a yell to the rest of the gang.

The outlaw struggled frantically to tear free, but Hungry held him down and kept his face under the water until he got a grip on the fellow's neck. He then slammed him over the head with his Colt barrel and knocked him unconscious.

"I had to hit 'im," he whispered to Rusty. "Help me hold 'im against the bank. We don't want to plumb drown 'im, but I couldn't risk lettin' 'im yell for help."

"Aw, chuck the skunk back in the water an' let 'im drown!" Rusty snarled softly. "It'd be good ridance of bad rubbish!"

Hungry shook his head and got a better grip on his victim's collar. He groped in the water until he recovered the hombre's gun and handed it to Rusty. When he had pulled a second Colt from the limp ruffian's holster, he paused to listen.

He could hear Morgan's gang beating through the brush some distance down the river. Finally he heard them coming back.

Both Rangers hugged the muddy bank until the outlaws passed their hiding place. They waited until the hombres were some distance away, then they climbed out of the river and pulled their unconscious prisoner after them.

"Waal," Hungry drawled, "we now got us a pair o' guns apiece an' another supply o' cartridges. We're all set to——"

A sudden sharp yell from one of the outlaw gang caused Hungry to glance up inquiringly. He heard them calling back and forth, then

Morgan's bull voice cut through the uproar.

"Git around thet hoss herd!" the outlaw leader barked. "Git goin', men! Bill Stark is missin'! A couple o' yuh go back an' see what's happened to 'im while we git these hosses away from hyar! Work fast!"

"Yuh hyar thet?" Hungry whispered. "Grab the rest o' this hombre's ca'tridges while I tie 'im! Quick! Morgan's sendin' two o' the gang to hunt 'im, an' we got to be ready!"

Little Rusty was clawing the brass cartridges from their prisoner's crisscrossed belts before Hungry finished speaking. Working swiftly, they tied the prisoner and jumped back into the brush.

Almost before they had time to hide themselves, they heard the roar of flying hoofs and knew that Morgan's men were leaving with their herd of stolen horses. A softer thud in the sand of the river bank a short distance away told them that two of the gang were coming to look for the hog-tied prisoner.

"Git ready!" Hungry snapped, jerking his guns from his holsters.

"Like I ain't ready!" Rusty snarled softly. "Just wait till I kin git me a crack at them jaspers!"

"No!" Hungry warned hastily. "No shootin' until I give the word! We want the hosses that them hombres is straddlin'! Savvy?"

In another moment, the dim forms of two riders loomed among the tornillos a short distance away. At sight of them, Hungry nudged Rusty and whispered for him to be silent. He then gave a loud groan.

Like a flash, both riders threw their mounts back on their haunches and whirled toward Hungry. Stiffly erect, hands on their guns, they sat staring.

"Oh, Stark!" one of them called guardedly. "Bill, was thet you?"

Hungry groaned again, then braced himself and pressed Rusty's arm.

One of the riders growled an oath. "Thet must be Bill," he snarled softly. "He's maybe had a bowie thrown through 'im. Thar wasn't no shootin' done! Come on!"

Hungry and Rusty heard the sudden creak of saddle leather as the two ruffians spurred toward them.

"What the blue blazes?" one of the hombres grated as he caught sight of the unconscious prisoner. "Why, thet's Bill!"

Both riders instantly jerked to a halt. They looked warily in every direction, then leaped from their saddles.

"Yeah, this is Bill!" one snapped harshly. "He's been—— Blast it, he's tied up! Git back, quick! We may be surrounded by Rangers or rurales! Run!"

Snarling oaths, the hombres whirled. Without even taking time to free their companion, they leaped for their horses.

"Hands up thar, you!" Hungry barked, and he and Rusty bounded from the brush with leveled guns. "Reach! Don't——"

Bang! The thudding blast of a hastily fired gun drowned the sound of his voice, and a whizzing bullet tore a shower of leaves and twigs from the tornillo above little Rusty's head.

As Rusty threw himself aside into a fighting crouch, Hungry fired a single hurried shot and leaped for the horses. He hastily shoved his left-hand gun into his belt and grabbed the bridle reins, then fired again from the hip with his right as the swearing outlaws cut down on him.

Bang! Bang-bang-bang! The

stuttering roar of outlaw and Ranger guns filled the thickets of tornillos with a hail of whizzing bullets.

Driven back from the horses by Hungry's quick work, the outlaws hurled themselves aside and dropped flat in the nearest brush. From there, they fought savagely to kill the two cowboy Rangers.

Rusty's twin Colts thundered like a pair of shotguns as he ducked and weaved from side to side in order to spoil the outlaw's aim. Hungry kept a tight grip on the frightened horses with his left hand while he fired with his right at the flashes of their enemies' guns.

As Hungry's first gun clicked empty, he dropped the weapon and snatched the second Colt from his belt in a cross-arm draw. With this last weapon spitting fire and smoke, he crouched on one knee.

A bullet grazed Rusty's cheek and tore a limb from a tornillo behind his head. Another ball whizzed beneath his left arm and whined spitefully out into the river.

Suddenly the outlaws stopped shooting. Rusty fired two more shots, then his own hot guns elicited upon empty cylinders, and he dived back into the brush to reload. Hungry fired again, then he, too, paused and leaned forward with upflung Colt.

For a fleeting moment, there was only the sound of clicking guns as the fighters frantically ejected empty shells and crammed fresh cartridges into their hot weapons.

Hungry did not move. With four cartridges still in the gun he held, he waited, his eyes riveted warily on the thicket where the outlaws were hidden.

Rusty was first to reload. His gun hammers clicked back, and he bounded up.

Bang-bang! Hungry's long Colt flamed twice, then there came a crackle of brush and the muffled thud of running feet. He fired again, then whirled.

"Hyar!" he yelled to Rusty. "Grab a hoss, quick! Them jaspers is decided to make a run fer it! Come on!"

Rusty was halfway to the nearest horse before Hungry finished speaking. The little Ranger slammed one gun into his holster and leaped into the saddle as Hungry bounded astride the other horse, then both streaked in pursuit of the escaping outlaws.

For a moment, whipping brush and low-hanging limbs almost tore them from their saddles. A sleeve of Hungry's shirt was ripped from shoulder to wrist, and Rusty got a deep scratch across his face.

Bang! Without warning, a gun thundered almost under the nose of Hungry's mount, and a bullet split a limb above his head.

Bang! Hungry's Colt blasted an instant echo, and he saw a dim figure reel and go down in the brush beside him.

As the lanky Ranger hastily threw his mount to a stiff-legged halt and whirled for a second shot, Rusty let out a yelp and tore away to the left through an opening in the trees. Hungry had just started to dismount for a look at the hombre he had killed when he heard Rusty and the other outlaw begin shooting.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! The four roaring guns sprayed hot lead through the brush for a split second, then it was over. Hungry spun his mount on its hind legs just as he heard Rusty come speeding back toward him.

"Did he git away on yuh?" Hungry barked hastily.

"Did he git away?" Rusty snarled.

"I'll say he didn't! Does this look like he got away?"

Hungry blinked and leaned forward in his saddle. He grunted and mopped the sweat from his homely face as he caught sight of two new guns in Rusty's belt and an extra pair of cartridge-filled belts at his saddle horn.

It was only the work of a moment for Hungry to dismount and unbuckle the guns from the waist of the hombre he had dropped. He hung these over his shoulder and swung back into his saddle.

"Waal," he drawled, reaching for his wet tobacco and biting off a soggy chew, "I reckon we'd better hurry an' see to nabbin' Pete Morgan. Thanks to these hyar men o' his, we've now got guns an' hosses to do it with. Come on!"

Without a backward glance, the two fighting Rangers whirled their horses and sped on at a dead gallop through the tornillos.

CHAPTER VII.

SHEEP TRACKS.

AS they hurried to the place where they had heard Pete Morgan and his gang start away with the herd of stolen horses, Hungry and Rusty carefully reloaded their guns. Each now had two long Colts in his holsters and an extra pair thrust inside his belt.

They quickly reached the place where the horses had crossed the river. At that point, they slowed down and began searching as best they could for tracks.

In the dim light under the trees, it was difficult to see. But when the two Rangers began circling among the scattered chamisa and cat's-claw beyond, Hungry gave a sudden grunt of satisfaction and motioned to Rusty.

"Hyar they go!" he drawled grimly. "They went this way!"

Rusty was beside him almost instantly. In scarcely a moment, they were slowly following the tracks through the scattered desert growth toward a low range of hills which they could dimly see against the starry sky line.

For a time, hardly a word passed between them. In the faint light, it kept them both watching in order to hold the trail of the escaping outlaws.

Though they worked patiently, they often lost sight of the tracks. Occasionally they were forced to ride in wide circles to locate them again.

Finally they turned up through a wide stretch of taller mesquite. Soon they passed through that into a dense growth of stunted trees at the base of the hills. There they again lost the trail.

With eyes riveted on the ground, they leaned low in their saddles and rode slowly back and forth for several minutes. Suddenly Rusty leaped from his horse and stooped in an open place among the trees.

"Found somethin'?" Hungry called softly.

"I'll say I have," yelled Rusty. "Come here, quick!"

Hungry drove his mount quickly forward and swung from his saddle. All around him, he saw hundreds of tiny tracks that led in every direction.

"Sheep!" he barked. "Thar's been a whole herd of 'em drove past hyar, an' it's happened since thet Morgan gang took them hosses through! Yuh savvy what thet means?"

Rusty gritted his teeth and jerked around. He glared sarcastically, then stooped over the nearest tracks.

"Sure I savvy what this means!" he flared. "Sheep is supposed to be bedded down at night. When they're drove around in the dark, yuh can bet yore bottom dollar it's fer a purpose!"

Hungry nodded and spat out a stream of tobacco juice. "Right!" he said. "An' the purpose in this case was to tromple out them hoss tracks so's they couldn't be follered if somebody tried to trail 'em. More'n likely, it's been tricks like this thet's always kept officers from catchin' up with Morgan in his orneriness."

Rusty muttered something and looked keenly in every direction. He glared again at the sheep tracks, then stood up.

"Waal," he snapped grouchily, "what are we aimin' to do? Yuh meanin' to stand here all night?"

"I ain't!" Hungry said sharply. "We're goin' to quit tryin' to track hosses an' track sheep instead! I figure thet'll be the way to find them hosses. When we find hosses, we find Morgan's gang! Come on!"

Hungry tossed his bridle reins to Rusty and leaned down. He studied the tiny tracks for a moment, then began following them slowly through the trees.

He had gone only a short distance when he and Rusty heard the faint bleat of a sheep from somewhere out in the darkness. Hungry instantly jerked erect and stood listening. A second bleat sent him hurrying back to Rusty.

"Did yuh git the direction on thet?" Rusty whispered.

Hungry nodded grimly and grabbed his bridle reins. "Git yore guns ready!" he snapped softly. "Them sheep is darned close to us! Fork yore hoss an' be ready to shoot!"

The Ranger partners leaped into their saddles. As still another faint bleat reached them, Hungry motioned in the direction of the sound and led the way through the trees.

As they rode away, both dropped their right hands to a gun butt. They also leaned low in their saddles and watched warily on both sides for ambushed outlaws who might be planted to cut down on them at any moment.

Suddenly Rusty motioned Hungry to a halt. Still holding up a hand, he stood in his stirrups and sniffed the air.

"What is it?" Hungry whispered.

"I smell sheep!" Rusty snarled softly. "We must be gittin' close! Yeah, what's thet ahead of us?"

Hungry bent lower and peered in the direction Rusty was pointing. There like a dark smudge among the trees, he finally recognized a brush corral.

"Hit the ground!" he instantly whispered. "We'll leave our hosses hyar an' slip over thar on foot! Yuh ready? Come on!"

Both dropped noiselessly from their saddles and looped their bridle reins over the nearest limbs. With guns gripped ready for use, they crept watchfully forward.

As they drew close to the corral, they stopped again. With every sense keenly on the alert, they stared to right and left, then went slowly on.

Suddenly Hungry nudged Rusty and crouched down. There just against the side of the corral, he spotted the dim figure of a man.

"Thet jasper has already seen us!" Hungry whispered. "He must've heard our hosses. He's starin' straight toward us!"

"Yeah, an' there's two of 'em!" Rusty replied hastily. "There's a second hombre standin' against the

brush just to the left of the one you seen. See 'im?"

Hungry stared, then nodded. He motioned quickly to Rusty, then cocked both guns and threw them to a level.

"Hands up thar, you two jaspers!" he barked sharply to the hombres at the corral. "No tricks, or we'll drill yuh! Reach!"

As if fully expecting such an order, both hombres instantly shot their hands above their heads.

"No shoot, señor!" one called hastily. "We ees only poor sheep-herders, señor! We haf do noth-eeng!"

"Yeah, too bad about you!" Rusty snarled. "Yuh ain't done nothin', huh? Feller, yo're a liar by the clock! Come on, Hungry an' let's git 'em!"

As the Rangers strode forward, they kept their guns pointed at the two Mexican herders. The hombres had surrendered too easily, and Hungry and Rusty suspected treachery.

"What was yuh doin' out with them sheep at this time o' night?" Hungry snapped. "Talk fast, hombres, an' no lyin'!"

"Oh, señor, the sheeps she haf no been out!" the nearest herder, a dark, powerfully built hombre replied. "The tracks you see were only of a few strays wheech we haf just find an' breeng in."

"Yeah!" Rusty snapped. "One does the lyin' an' the other stands ready to swear to it, huh? If yuh don't——"

Without finishing what he meant to say, Rusty suddenly jerked erect. Just beyond the corral, he had caught the faint outline of a cabin. He motioned toward it with his left-hand gun.

"See thet shack over there?" he hissed to Hungry. "Look! I'll bet

yuh these sheep-lovin' jaspers has got amigos planted there to shoot us down the minute we turn our backs."

Hungry's homely face hardened at sight of the house. He stared at it for a moment, then frowned.

"Yuh may be right at thet," he drawled, a deadly greenish glint creeping into his slitted eyes. "Waal, we'll soon find out. Lead us to thet cabin o' yores, hombres! We're goin' to have a look in it. If any shootin' starts, it's goin' to be just too bad fer yuh. Git goin'!"

In spite of the Mexicans' protests, Hungry and Rusty spun them around. Hungry barked a sharp command. Then he and his scrappy little partner drove both herders ahead of them toward the cabin.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIGHT AT THE CABIN.

AS they neared the house, Hungry and Rusty proceeded with extreme caution. They stepped closer to the two hombres and covered them with their cocked guns.

At a signal from Hungry, the powerfully built herder shoved open the door. The Rangers followed warily, then Rusty snapped a match on his thumb nail.

"Nobody here," he snarled, darting a quick look around them.

"Looks is sometimes mighty deceivin'," Hungry drawled quietly. "Light thet candle thar on thet table, an' we'll take a better look. My bet is thet Morgan always keeps these herders hyar to hide his trail fer 'im with sheep tracks when he passes through to his hang-out. In thet case, yuh kin bet thar's some other watcher planted not fur away—maybe several of 'em!"

Rusty muttered something and hastily touched his match to the

candle. As it sputtered, then flamed brightly up, they darted another look at the cabin.

Except for a couple of greasy, sheepskin-covered bunks and a pair of hide-bottomed stools, the filthy little room was bare. There was only one window, and it was without sash or curtain.

Hungry glanced sharply at the window and door, then he turned to the scowling herders. He stared at them thoughtfully.

"Now, hombres!" he demanded sternly. "I want to know which way Pete Morgan went when he passed through hyar with them stolen hosses. Tell us the truth, an' we'll not arrest yuh? Savvy?"

"Aw, rats!" Rusty snarled disgustedly. "Yuh long-legged pelican, the truth ain't in 'em! Let's tie 'em up, then we'll unravel Morgan's trail ourselves. Tie 'em or shoot 'em, then let's git busy!"

"Just wait!" Hungry drawled. "I want to——"

Zzzip! A whizzing knife split the air within an inch of Hungry's face and chugged spitefully into the wall where it stood quivering. A second knife grazed his shoulder as he leaped back and whirled.

Instantly there came the sound of running feet, and Hungry darted toward the open window. Before he could reach it, a muffled yell from Rusty brought him around with a jerk.

Thud! One of the hide-bottomed stools hit Hungry a terrific blow in the chest, hurling him against the wall. He staggered and went to one knee as the powerfully built herder dived on top of him and slashed wickedly at his throat with a razor-edged bowie.

As Hungry threw his head aside to dodge the blow, he got one fleeting glimpse of Rusty and the other

herder on the floor beyond the table. The next moment, the lanky Ranger was battling for his life beneath the window.

A back-handed rip of the knife grazed Hungry's chin as he heaved to one side. He wrenched frantically to free his hands and use his guns, but the hulking herder had both knees on his arms and kept them pinned to the floor.

Suddenly Hungry jerked up one knee and shoved the hombre slightly to one side. Like a flash, he then doubled up, drove both feet into the herder's stomach and sent him sprawling backward.

Almost before the fellow knew what had happened, Hungry was on him. A swinging blow of the lanky Ranger's right-hand Colt snapped the hombre's hairy wrist and sent the knife spinning against the wall. A second blow knocked him unconscious, then Hungry whirled to help Rusty.

Little Rusty and the other herder had rolled clear across the earthen floor and were battling earnestly beneath one of the bunks. As Hungry leaped toward them, he saw the bunk rip loose from the wall and rise from the floor.

"Take thet, yuh sheep-lovin' polecat!" came a muffled snarl. "An' here's another just like it! Try jumpin' on somebody's back again, will yuh? Unless yore blasted head's harder than I think it is, yuh've quit jumpin' on people's backs!"

Hungry heard a grunt and the sound of a blow as he upended the bunk and threw it out of his way. With one swoop of his big hand, he grabbed Rusty and dragged him off the limp form of the other herder.

"Let me loose, blast yuh!" Rusty snarled, struggling to get back at the hombre. "Thet skunk piled on

me from behind an' tried to carve my innards out! Dog-gone his ornery time, let me hit 'im again! Look what he done to my only shirt, will yuh?"

Hungry darted one look at his little partner's knife-slashed shirt, then he grabbed the battered herder by a foot and dragged him out into the floor. Without a pause, he snatched a bit of rope from a peg on the wall.

"Hyar!" he barked sharply to Rusty. "Git busy an' help tie these jaspers! Hurry! The hombre thet throwed them knives at me through the winder is most likely burnin' the breeze to tell Pete Morgan we're hyar! We maybe ain't got a second to lose!"

They quickly tied up the two herders and rolled them into a corner out of the way. They then collected the hombres' knives.

"Waal," Hungry snapped, cying the razor-edged weapons, "I can't say as I cotton much to these hyar kind o' fightin' tools, but I kin use 'em if I have to. We may need 'em, so we'll just take 'em along!"

He handed Rusty the two they had taken from the herders, and he selected the pair that were sticking in the wall. He saw that the latter were heavy-bladed throwing knives, and he gave a grunt of satisfaction as he thrust them in his boot legs.

With this he hurried to the window and peered out into the darkness. He listened keenly for a moment, then whirled and motioned to Rusty.

"Come on!" he called sharply. "We'll git these two hombres out an' hide 'em, then git ready fer Pete Morgan! He'll either be comin' back to finish us, or he'll send some o' his gang to do it!"

Working swiftly, Hungry and Rusty dragged the two herders out

among the trees and hid them where Morgan's men would not be likely to find them. This done, the two Rangers led their horses farther away and tied them where they would not be seen.

"Now, stay hyar while I go back an' blow out thet candle," Hungry said. "We'll——"

"Shhh!" Rusty suddenly hissed. "We'd better have blowed out thet light while we had a chance! Look over there!"

Hungry jerked up his head. There just beyond the corral, he saw two dim figures. As he stared at them, two more hombres came slipping around the corner of the cabin.

"Huh!" he grunted. "Pete Morgan couldn't have been fur away with them hosses. I wonder if them four hombres is all he sent back to see to finishin' us?"

"We'll soon find out!" Rusty snarled softly. "Watch me lift thet jasper thet's slippin' toward the door!"

Rusty lifted his right-hand gun to shoot, but Hungry shoved the weapon down and whispered for him to wait. Hungry then pulled a pair of his own Colts and noiselessly thumbed back their hammers.

"As long as yo're in the Ranger service, don't never take a shot at a feller without first givin' 'im a chance to surrender peaceable," he drawled grimly. "Of course, when they plumb refuse, see kin yuh shoot the tarnation out of 'em!"

With this, Hungry rose on one knee. He nodded to Rusty, then braced himself and raised both guns.

"Hands up over thar, you jaspers!" he called sharply. "Reach! We got yuh covered!"

The two hombres beside the house hurled themselves back and aside. The ones at the corral threw them-

selves into a fighting crouch, and all snapped their guns to a level.

"Yuh surrenderin'?" Rusty yelled. "We ain't tellin' yuh again! Yuh'd better reach while yo're all in one piece!"

Bang! Bang-bang-bang-bang! The stabbing flash of hastily fired Colts lighted the yard in front of the cabin, and a hail of whizzing bullets split the air viciously above Hungry's and Rusty's heads.

"Pour it to 'em!" Hungry barked as he and Rusty opened fire. "They've asked fer it! Down 'em all, an' try not to miss a shot!"

CHAPTER IX.

HANDS UP, HOMBRES!

FOR a moment, the thundering roar of guns drowned all other sounds. Hungry and Rusty fired slowly in an effort to make every shot count.

Bullets tore up the ground all around them and slashed twigs from the trees above their heads. Their own bullets ripped splinters from the wall of the cabin as the four outlaws ducked and dodged from side to side.

Rusty felt the breath of a bullet that fanned his cheek. Another slug knocked up a spurt of dust between his feet, and a third burned a crease along his left arm.

Suddenly one of the outlaws spun against the cabin wall, clung there weakly for a moment, then sank to his knees and rolled over.

"One down an' three to go!" Hungry snapped grimly.

At that instant, a bullet spattered against a boulder beside him and filled his cheek with slivers of flying lead and stone. Hungry wiped his face with his sleeve and kept shooting.

Another outlaw pitched forward on his face and lay twitching. With startled oaths, the other two dived hastily for shelter around the corner of the cabin.

Bang! A lightning shot from little Rusty staggered one of them before they could get out of sight. Hungry saw the fellow sag to his knees, then lurch weakly to his feet and reel back into the shadow of the wall.

"Come on!" Hungry instantly shouted. "We've cut 'em down to one! Let's git him 'fore he escapes on us!"

With guns poised for sudden use, the two young Rangers bounded into the open and raced for the corner of the cabin. A bullet sliced the air between them as they passed the door, then came a hoarse oath and a swift thud of feet from the darkness beyond the house.

"Git to the hosses!" Hungry yelled without turning his head. "Thet last hombre is makin' a git-away on us! Grab our hosses while I see did we finish thet other'n! Run!"

With an angry yelp, Rusty spun away toward the trees. Hungry darted on around the corner of the house and stooped for a split second beside the twitching body of the hombre Rusty had dropped.

"He's finished!" Hungry muttered. "I thought maybe he might live long enough to talk. I figured to bluff 'im into tellin' us the way to Morgan's hide-out. Waal——"

A sudden thud of flying hoofs sounded from the trees beyond the corrals, and Hungry bounded erect. He was just in time to catch a faint glimpse of a spurring rider, and his right-hand gun flew to a level.

Bang! He sent a bullet whizzing past the hombre's head, then fired again as the fellow vanished from sight.

He started to try one more shot, but Rusty rocketed around the corner with their horses and halted in front of him. Instead of shooting, he snatched his bridle reins and sprang into his saddle.

"Did yuh git 'im?" Rusty yelped.

"Missed!" Hungry snapped. "Git on after 'im 'fore he gits plumb away! Ride like blazes! Maybe he'll lead us to whar Morgan an' the rest o' his bunch aire! Git goin'!"

Hungry had his horse in a dead run before he finished speaking. With Rusty close behind him, the lanky Ranger led the way at top speed in the direction the escaping outlaw had gone.

"Listen!" Hungry called over his shoulder. "Listen close! We got to keep in hearin' distance o' thet jasper's hoss!"

"I hear it!" Rusty barked. "It's dead ahead of us! See thet?"

As Rusty spoke, a shower of sparks flew from under the shod hoofs of the horse in front of them. Hungry drove his own mount to a still greater burst of speed and balanced his right-hand gun for lightning use.

In a few minutes, they emerged from the trees and raced on up a rocky slope that led to the hills beyond. They could now see the dim form of the hombre they were following.

Suddenly they saw the fellow twist around in his saddle. Hungry saw his right arm whip up, and he ducked instantly.

Bang! A bullet split the air where the lanky Ranger's head had been, and a second shot tore up a spurt of dust beside his horse.

Bang-bang! Both Rangers fired at the same time, and they saw the ruffian slump down over his saddle horn. He sagged there for a moment, then pitched from his flying

horse and went rolling on the ground.

With guns poised, Hungry and Rusty slid to a halt beside him and leaped from their saddles. Hungry tossed his bridle reins to Rusty and rolled the fellow over.

"Is he dead yit?" Rusty asked.

Hungry shook his head and leaned down. "Not yit," he said. "He's hard hit, though. I hated to have to shoot 'im. I wanted him to lead us to whar Morgan's hid. That's the jasper we're after!"

Rusty grunted impatiently and dropped to one knee beside him just as the outlaw groaned and rolled his eyes up at them. He saw that the fellow was dying fast.

The hombre choked hoarsely and tried to raise his head. Crimson froth trickled from one corner of his unshaven lips as he fought to get his breath.

"B-blasted—meddlin'—Rangers!" He gasped, the muscles of his brutal face twitching. "Yuh—yuh'll git what's c-comin' to y-yuh! Yuh—g-got no right—f-follerin' us in Mexico!"

"Ain't we?" Rusty snapped. "Wrong again, hombre! We've been made honorary members of the rurales, an' we kin foller such jaspers as you into Mexico City if we're a mind to!"

Rusty would have said more, but Hungry motioned for him to be silent. The lanky Ranger then leaned closer to the dying outlaw.

"Listen, feller!" he drawled sternly. "We're after Morgan, an' we want to know whar his hidin' place is. Thet jasper has been dodgin' the law a long time, but we're goin' to git 'im! Come on an' tell us! Yo're cashin' in, an' yuh might as well come clean."

The hombre rolled his head weakly from side to side, and a

croak of hideous laughter twisted his thick lips. He glared up savagely and clenched his big hands.

"Want to f-find Morgan, d-do yuh!" he snarled, voice rattling in his throat. "W-waal, yuh'll soon find 'im! He'll git yuh fer this! He'll——"

A spasm of coughing choked him, and he fell back. Stark hate flamed for a second in his glazing eyes, and his lips curled back from his yellowed teeth.

"Y-yeah," he choked, chest heaving. "M-Morgan'll——"

With a hoarse cry, he flounced almost to a sitting posture, and one shaking hand closed on Hungry's arm in a clutching grip. He clung to the tall Ranger for a moment, then fell back and lay twitching.

"Dead!" Hungry snapped. "I hate to see 'em pass out like that!"

Hungry shrugged his bony shoulders, then he laid the outlaw's hat over the distorted face and stood up. With a quiet nod to Rusty, he took his bridle reins.

"Waal," Rusty snapped, "which way now? Since our late guide met with an accident, how're we goin' to find Pete Morgan?"

With his homely face as expressionless as the rocks around them, Hungry reached unhurriedly for his battered plug of tobacco. He calmly bit off a huge chew and tongued it into his cheek, then he glanced side-wise at the dead outlaw.

"Waal, I think this feller has already showed us the way to Morgan," he drawled. "He was headin' straight to 'im when we had to shoot 'im. We'll just keep goin' an' use our eyes an' ears. Let's go!"

Hungry threw his bridle reins over his horse's neck and swung into the saddle. With Rusty close beside him, he started on in the direction of the hills.

As they rode along, he and Rusty carefully reloaded the empty chambers in their guns and dropped the weapons back into their holsters. Then watching closely in every direction, they urged their tired horses on.

Soon they were riding through a maze of broken rock and jutting ledges. In some places, it was difficult to find a way through them.

Suddenly Rusty noticed that his mount kept pulling to one side. He at once slackened up on his bridle reins, and the animal started on another route through the boulders.

"Hey, look here!" he called softly to Hungry. "This hoss knows where it's goin'! Let's give 'em both their heads! They've been up here before, an' I'm bettin' they'll lead us straight to Morgan's hide-out!"

Hungry nodded and quickly loosened his reins. In another moment, he found that their horses were taking a faint trail which wound back and forth through the huge rocks.

"Waal!" he grunted. "Now, we're gittin' thar! It can't be very fur to whar——"

As a faint click sounded from the darkness in front of them, Hungry hissed a sharp warning to Rusty and pulled his mount to a quick halt. With both hands streaking to his Colt butts, he leaned forward in his saddle.

"Hands up thar, both o' yuh!" came a sudden snarled command from somewhere close. "Reach! We got yuh sky-lined, an' we're plumb itchin' to blow yore blasted innards out!"

At first, Hungry started to draw and shoot in the direction of the voice. Instead, he hastily motioned Rusty back and raised his hands above his head.

CHAPTER X.

MORGAN'S HANG-OUT.

RUSTY let out a yelp of fury and threw himself sidewise in his saddle. He had his gun half out of his holster before Hungry could quiet him.

"What the livin' blue blazes an' tarnation!" Rusty snarled. "Yuh ain't meanin' to fold up an' surrender at this stage of the game? Let's shoot it out with 'em right here!"

"Steady, pard!" Hungry barked quickly. "Git yore hands up 'fore them jaspers rips a bullet through yuh! We can't see to do nothin'—yit! Savvy?"

The way Hungry said that caused Rusty to stiffen and dart him an inquiring stare. Unable to see Hungry's face, he muttered disgustedly and slowly raised his hands.

"That's better!" the unseen hombre growled from the darkness. "I was just gittin' ready to drill yuh plumb center, yuh blasted runt! Now, shuck out o' them gun belts, both o' yuh! Reach down with one hand an' unbuckle 'em! Let 'em fall to the ground whar I kin see 'im!"

"Do as he says," Hungry managed to whisper. "Drop yore guns careful. Let 'em slide down the side o' thet rock, then move out from behind me. Hurry!"

As a snarled oath reached them from the darkness, Rusty hastily reached down and unbuckled his crisscrossed belts. He then let them slide along the side of a sloping rock to the ground and again raised his hand.

Hungry's guns thudded to the trail at the same time, then the lanky Ranger touched his horse's shoulder lightly with his heel and

made it spin around so that his left side was toward the hidden outlaw.

"Keep thet hoss still, thar!" the fellow snarled. "Keep them hands up, too, an' no tricks! I'm comin' out now!"

Instead of hoisting his right hand, Hungry dropped it straight down beside his body. With his left side toward the hombre, he knew that in the darkness the fellow would not know whether he had both hands in the air or only one.

The Rangers heard a muttered grunt and the crunch of gravel, then a muffled form moved from behind a huge rock directly in front of them and stopped close to Hungry's horse. The fellow was holding a big carbine ready in both hands and there was a sarcastic leer on his bearded face.

"Walked right plumb into it, didn't yuh?" he sneered. "It's lucky the boss sent me down hyar to watch this trail!"

"Yeah!" Hungry drawled dangerously. "Yuh was usin' the word 'we' back thar when yuh throwed down on us. So yuh was alone all the time, an' was tryin' to bluff us into thinkin' yuh had yore gang with yuh!"

As Hungry talked, he slipped his right foot noiselessly from his stirrup and pulled it up within reach of his hand. A greenish glint crept into his usually mild eyes as he stared at the rifleman.

The fellow chuckled coarsely and leered. "I reckon I fooled yuh!" he said. "I was alone all the time. Morgan'll have a good laugh when he hyars how I nabbed you two blasted Rangers single-handed."

"Yeah!" Hungry drawled, and his groping fingers closed on the buckhorn handle of the heavy throwing knife in his boot. "Waal"—he yawned carelessly, then his right arm whipped around, and he hurled

the knife with all his strength—"maybe Morgan'll git 'im a laugh out o' thet, too! How do yuh like it!"

With a startled grunt, the hombre whipped up his carbine, but before his finger could close on the weapon's trigger, the whizzing knife thudded to the hilt in his throat, and he spun half around. His carbine clattered to the ground, and he clutched frantically at the knife as he pitched sidewise among the rocks.

"Yuh got 'im!" Rusty ejaculated. "Dog-gone, yuh shore handed it right back at 'im!"

Hungry nodded grimly and spat a brown stream against the rock beside him. He swung from his saddle and picked up his double-holstered gun belts before replying.

"Yeah," he finally drawled. "I figured thet hombre was alone when he first spoke, but I couldn't be plumb shore until he got to braggin' how he'd fooled us. It's lucky we saved them throwin' knives!"

Hungry finished buckling his guns about his waist, then he walked over to the dead outlaw and pulled the heavy knife from his throat. He wiped the blade on the fellow's greasy shirt, shoved the weapon back in his boot top and again mounted his horse.

"Waal, where do we go from here?" Rusty asked. "I'm gittin' sleepier every minute, feller, an' I want to git this Morgan-chasin' over with. We been on the prowl nearly all night!"

"Just keep yore shirt on an' give yore hoss his head again," Hungry drawled, starting forward. "I don't figure thet guard would have been posted very fur from Morgan's hang-out. Come on! An' be ready as blazes to start fannin' them guns yore packin'!"

Quickly they passed between two towering cliffs and found themselves in a narrow canyon. There where the feeble moonlight could not reach them, they rode slowly on in complete darkness.

Suddenly the canyon widened into a grassy meadow, and Hungry and Rusty spotted several horses a short distance in front of them. At almost the same instant, Rusty caught the faint gleam of a light to one side.

"Look!" Rusty barked softly. "Look yonder! We've caught up with thet herd of stolen horses, an' there's a light to our left!"

"Morgan's secret hang-out!" Hungry drawled. "Waal, he's been dodgin' the law a long time, but Rangers has finally trailed 'im down. Yeah, an' the note we found on thet tenderfoot will help to convict 'im. Git off yore hoss an' come on!"

Rusty instantly sprang from his saddle and shifted his guns around on his hips. When he and Hungry had tied their horses close to the canyon wall, they turned and started toward the light.

As they drew closer, they slowed down and slipped their guns from their holsters. A cabin was just in front of them, and they could hear a hum of voices from inside.

"*Si, señor!*" an hombre suddenly shouted, and the two Rangers paused to listen. "I tell you, señor, eet ees those Hungree Hawkins an' Rustee Bolivar! I see them at the cabin where you keep the sheeps, an' I know eet ees them. I haf seen them before!"

A bellow of rage drowned the sound of the Mexican's voice. The listening Rangers heard the scrape of chairs and stamp of feet, then Morgan's bull voice cut through the uproar.

"Hungry Hawkins an' Rusty

Bolivar, was it?" he bellowed savagely. "I ought to have cut the long-legged Ranger's throat when I had 'im. Yeah, an' I should have done the same with the runt partner o' his instid o' just battin' 'im over the head with my gun. I thought I'd killed *him*, but I must 'a' only stunned 'im. Aire yuh plumb shore it's them?"

Without waiting for the Mexican's reply, Rusty let out a snarl of fury and darted forward with upflung guns. Hungry caught him just in time and pulled him back.

"Hold on thar!" Hungry whispered sternly.

"Hold on, nothin'!" Rusty gritted, eyes blazing. "Did yuh hear thet? Did yuh hear what Morgan just said? Blast his ornery time, it was him thet give me this lump on my head! It was him thet hit me! He can't——"

"I know! I heerd it all!" Hungry cut in softly. "Come on, an' no shootin' till I give the word. We want them jaspers alive—if possible!"

In a moment, Hungry and Rusty were beside an open window. Inside the cabin, they saw Pete Morgan and five amigos grouped around a rickety table. All of the ruffians were trying to talk at once.

"Shet up!" Morgan finally roared, and he kicked his chair behind him and lunged to his feet. "Thar ain't but only one thing we kin do. Juan hyar says thet them two blasted Rangers was headed this way when he seen 'em last. We'll git down to whar the canyon narrows an' shoot 'em as they come in. Grab yore guns!"

"Never mind them guns!" Hungry barked, leaning through the window with leveled Colts. "Yuh won't need no guns whar yo're goin', so just reach!"

"Yeah, an' make it dog-goned snappy, too!" Rusty yelled, kicking open the door and stepping inside. "Up with 'em, all of yuh!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE RURALE FIRING SQUAD.

WITH startled oaths, Morgan and his men shrank back, hands clawed above their gun butts and eyes darting from Hungry to Rusty. Pete Morgan's drink-redened face was twisted in a snarl of murderous fury as he watched Hungry throw a leg over the window sill and leap into the room.

"Git 'em, men!" Morgan suddenly bellowed, and his big hands swooped down.

Br-r-r-a-m! Bang-bang-bang-bang! Outlaw and Ranger guns crashed in one bellowing roar that jarred the old cabin to its foundation, and screaming bullets hurled splinters and dust in every direction.

A bullet tore through one of Rusty's holsters and slapped it around on his hip. Another ball clipped a lock of hair from his head and tore a gaping hole in the door behind him.

Hungry staggered as a bullet grazed his thigh, but he limped aside and downed two hombres beside the table. A bullet from near the window split his shirt across the chest and cut a stinging groove in his arm above the elbow.

The little room was a swirling cloud of black smoke, and the candle fell over on its side, sputtering. A thrown chair just missed little Rusty's bobbing head and smashed against the wall.

Three of the outlaws were now on the floor, and one of them was trying feebly to crawl into a corner out of the way. Rusty, darting past him, downed a fourth behind the

table. He sped on to the window to stop another who was trying to get away.

Hungry glanced through the pall of powder smoke, and he was just in time to catch a swift glimpse of his little partner's bowed legs as Rusty dived through after the hombre who had got outside.

Bang! A gun blazed almost in Hungry's face, and he felt the slight shock of a bullet that grazed his shoulder.

Hungry's left-hand gun thundered a reply, but the last remaining outlaw ducked under his arm and both went rolling on the littered floor.

Back and forth, over and over, locked in a struggle to the death, Hungry and the fellow rolled almost to the door. Both lost their guns, but fought on with their bare hands.

Suddenly the fellow butted Hungry in the chin. As the lanky Ranger's head snapped back, the fellow tried to gouge his eyes from their sockets.

But Hungry wrenched aside and kneed the hombre in the stomach in time to save himself. He then clinched with the powerful ruffian and rolled with him beneath the table. There the fellow tore free and bounded up.

Hungry was after him like a flash. The table crashed over, and the candle winked out on the floor beneath the outlaw's trampling feet as he dived forward and snatched up one of their fallen guns.

Bang! A bullet grazed Hungry's shoulder, but he stumbled aside as the gun swung up. He instantly darted back to the wall where he could dimly see the hombre between himself and the open door.

Bang! The outlaw's gun thundered again, and the bullet tore through the wall beside Hungry's head.

Hungry instantly swooped down and snatched the throwing knife from his right boot. He straightened with a jerk and darted aside. As the hombre's gun roared a third time, Hungry's arm whipped up and forward, and he hurled the long-bladed knife through the fellow's chest.

Without a pause, Hungry whirled to look for Rusty. As he did so, he heard a hoarse bawl for help from the yard. He sprang hastily through the door.

There in the faint moonlight, he saw Rusty. The scrappy little Ranger was seated astride a heaving figure, and he was swinging a clubbed Colt above his head.

"Help!" came another bawl, and Hungry instantly recognized Pete Morgan's voice. "Help! Pull 'im offn me! He's tryin' to hammer my brains out! Help!"

"Shet up!" Rusty snarled. "Blast yuh, yuh ain't got a single brain in thet head fer me to knock out! How do yuh like this?"

Thud! Hungry saw Rusty's gun smash down and heard a howl of pain from Morgan.

"Hyar!" Hungry barked, and he grabbed Rusty's arm. "Don't plumb kill thet feller!"

Rusty struggled for a moment to free his arm. At last, he allowed Hungry to pull him from his battered victim.

"Blast yuh, what did yuh have to go buttin' in fer?" he demanded, grinning crookedly. "Thet's Morgan I was beatin' up. Dog-gone his ornery time, I shore paid him back fer that smack he give me on the head! Take a squint at 'im! If he ain't beat up to suit yuh, I'll bust 'im again!"

Hungry grunted dryly and rolled Morgan over. He took one look at the half-dazed outlaw leader's bat-

tered face and skinned head, then he reached in his pocket for some hoggin string.

"Now," Rusty snapped, "I reckon thet hombre will git him a rope——"

Rusty suddenly clawed his guns from his holsters and leaped back. From just below them in the canyon, his keen ears had just caught the drum of flying hoofs.

"Listen!" he barked. "Listen to thet, will yuh? Is thet maybe more of Morgan's gang comin'?"

Hungry jerked around. As he saw the dim forms of a band of spurring riders, he bounded up. He started to dart back into the cabin for a pair of guns, but suddenly stopped and blinked his eyes.

"Rurales!" he gasped. "How in tarnation do yuh reckon they found their way hyar?"

Rusty hastily lowered his guns. In another moment, they were surrounded by a whole company of Mexico's mounted police.

"Hands up, señores!" a rurale captain blazed, spurring forward with uplifted saber. "Do you surrender, or shall my men be forced to shoot you where you stand?"

Hungry smiled grimly and held up one big hand. "Yuh needn't bother to shoot," he drawled. "The shoot-in' is done over, Captain Rodriguez. This hog-tied jasper is Pete Morgan, an' yuh'll find the rest o' his gang scattered from hyar to the Rio Grande."

"What?" the rurale officer barked sharply, and he leaned closer to peer at the Rangers' faces. "Why, eet ees Señor Hungry Hawkins an' Señor Rusty Bolivar. My frien's,

the rurales salute you! We hear the shooting, an' we come. What have you do here?"

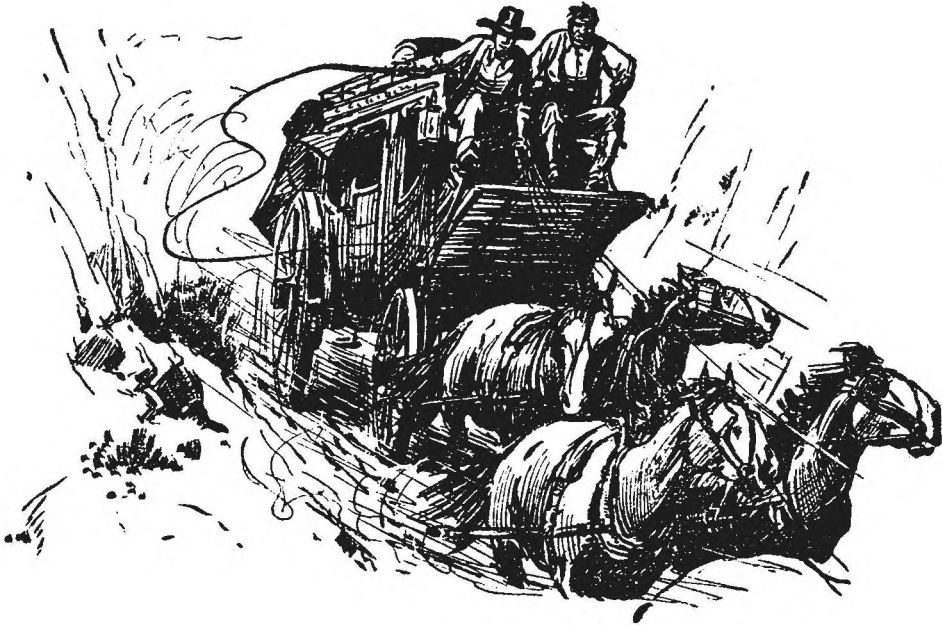
"Ain't my pard done told yuh what we've done?" Rusty asked, grinning impudently. "We've abolished thet Morgan gang yuh've been wantin' so long. There he is! Yuh'll find 'im sort o' bunged up, but he ain't too bungafied to be shot. Some of yuh kin treat 'im to a frin' squad, while me an' this pard of mine gits patched up."

While a rurale sergeant and a couple of troopers hoisted Pete Morgan to his feet and led him away to where they could stand him up against the canyon wall for execution, the two Rangers and Captain Rodriguez went into the cabin and lighted the candle.

The rurale officer was just wrapping a bandage around Rusty's arm when a sudden roar of carbines blasted from down the canyon. Rusty jumped, then he grinned and looked across at Hungry.

"A frin' squad has just finished Morgan!" he snapped. "Thet's what I call service! Fer downright fast work, these Mexicans has got the world beat. When a man needs executin', they don't fool around about it. They just finish 'im then an' there. Reach me a little more of thet liniment, cap. I want to rub some on my head."

Thet shore was one plumb excitin' night fer Hungry an' Rusty. It come purty near ter bein' the last one, fer them, too. Howsomever, it will take a lot o' lead ter sink thet pair. They'll be ridin' the Rio trails ag'in soon—in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss 'em!



Stealin' Hot Spur Stage Hosses

By Stephen Payne

Author of "Fire Trap On Flying E," etc.

WHEN the Hot Spur stage hove in sight of Holcomb's stage station, atop the mountain range, young Johnny Dowst felt a sudden hunch that all was not as it should be.

There was the haystack-dotted meadow stretching away to the south; there was the cluster of storm-proof log buildings and the corrals nestling under a low bluff. A mother cat and her kittens were sunning themselves near the door of the house, and chickens were clucking about in the yard. So everything looked serene.

But that day, there was no change of horses in the yard, harnessed and ready to be hitched to the heavy coach the moment the others were unhitched. Nor was Sam Holcomb, the rancher, who tended the stage stock at this station, in evidence.

The stage, on the up trip from Hot Spur to Rails End, was right on time, just as Holcomb always expected it to be since the little dark kid "who shore could handle his ribbons and his whip" had taken over the job as driver.

Johnny Dowst had slapped on the brake and called "Whoa!" quite un-

necessarily, for the team knew very well that this was the end of the run for them. Passengers began to crawl out of the stagecoach, to stretch, walk around, and pass remarks.

The rawboned fellow riding on the high front seat beside Johnny smoothed his huge walrus mustache and inquired:

"Whar at's yore stock tender, driver?"

The dark kid had done considerable wondering about this hombre, for the man wore two heavy Colt six-guns and crossed belts and looked as if he might be a cattle detective or a special officer of some kind.

"I aim to see," Johnny answered the question, and ran over to the log barn.

It was empty—empty when there should have been eight stage horses inside it!

Four of these were brand-new horses recently purchased by the stage company—a team of matched blacks, blooded stock that had cost upward of two hundred dollars apiece. Johnny Dowst had picked those horses himself, and he loved them as any true lover of good horseflesh would have. Now they were gone!

The kid stepped out of the stable and stood stone-still, his stormy eyes taking note of tracks in the dust and the gravel. Two men had come on saddle horses, leading one extra.

Those hombres had captured Sam Holcomb and forced him to mount the led horse. They had driven the stage stock southward down the valley, and since there were no horses in sight in Holcomb's meadow, they must have picked up Sam's own horses, also.

Suddenly Johnny became aware that the rawboned, two-gun hombre

had joined him and made himself familiar with the situation.

"Looks powerful like the broncs has been stole and the stock tender took along," the man said. "Kind o' leaves us stranded, huh?"

"Oh, the hosses on the stage'll haul it to the next station," retorted Johnny, annoyed by the sort of smug grin on this jasper's florid face.

"Course I hate to make 'em do it, but——"

"Hey!" rang a shout from the house, which three of the passengers had entered. "Hey, driver! There's a piece o' paper stuck to the kitchen table with a butcher knife. Writ on this paper is: 'We has took Holcomb along tuh pertect ourselves. If yuh foller us, we'll see yuh, and Holcomb'll be kilt. We don't mean maybe, neither.'"

Black eyes snapping, Johnny sped to the house, where the passengers—three drummers, a school-teacher, and a pimply-faced youth—were staring at the scrap of paper. As the kid driver entered, they bombarded him with questions.

"Yes," he replied, "Sam Holcomb lived here all alone, worked on his ranch, and took care of the stage stock. No, Holcomb himself would never have been party to any such steal. He's a square-shooter; mighty fine scout."

"Them tough nuts has shore got us where the hair's short," spoke up the rawboned two-gun man. "We don't dast to foller 'em."

Johnny whirled on the hombre. "Was yuh figgerin' on helpin' me?"

"Yuh bet I was. I'm a stock detective, me. Two-gun Randall's my name. Yuh must 'a' heard o' me."

Johnny shook his head, yanked off his floppy black hat, and ran one small, strong hand through his tangled midnight hair, while the

school-teacher whispered to one drummer, "He's an Indian, isn't he?"

"Dunno. Yuh might ask him."

The dark kid paid no heed. They could think he was a Mexican, for all he cared. This complicated steal had him fuming.

Follow the thieves, overtake 'em, shoot it out, were the things to do. But he didn't dare, for Sam Holcomb's life was at stake. The sheriff would be equally baffled.

Yet perhaps Sam Holcomb had managed to leave some word, or some clew that would help. Johnny abruptly turned into the second room, which was Holcomb's bedroom and living room.

Finding no messenger or clew there, he stepped outside, and as he stood staring off across the mountainous country, he heard Randall launching forth on a windy story:

"I hadn't no more to go on than this piece o' paper'd be, but I shore rounded up the nest o' sidewinders."

"Oh, yeah," snorted Johnny privately. "Yuh said yuh'd help me. Do somethin' now, big noise."

His horses, still hitched to the stage, gazed at him inquiringly, and two nickered softly, telling their driver they thought they should be unhitched. But Johnny's mind was elsewhere, wrestling with a thorny problem.

Trail the thieves, and Sam Holcomb would die. Fail to trail the dirty crooks, and the stage horses would be lost forever—and perhaps Sam would be killed, anyhow.

Suddenly the kid driver felt the mother cat, which had been sunning itself when the stage arrived, rubbing its arched back against his leg. He stooped to pet it, for he loved all animals except the natural enemies of stock and of man.

His troubled gaze passed from the cat to her playful kittens. What was that they were toying with and worrying? A large glove. One of Sam Holcomb's!

Picking up this glove, Johnny stood as if frozen. Scratched with the point of a nail on the sweat-soaked palm were two words "Osage Pass."

The kid thrust the glove into his hip pocket and went into action.

"'Board!" he shouted. "We're rollin'!"

Osage Pass, one of the highest along the mountain range, lay twenty miles, air line, south of Holcomb's stage station. Now, by driving on westward, Johnny would cross this same range far to the north of where the horse thieves intended to cross it—if Sam Holcomb's message was correct.

At the next stage station, ten miles distant, Johnny'd get a saddle horse and, if he was in time, he'd *meet* the thieves as they came over Osage Pass from the east.

Now steep grades lay ahead of the weary stage team, but Johnny unfurled his whip—a whip with a springy hickory handle and a twelve-foot lash. He drove his horses mercilessly. He hated this, but it had to be done. He took the down grades at a wild gallop, brake shoes screaming, the coach rocking on two wheels at every turn. The passengers inside the coach were too scared to kick, but "Two-gun" Randall, on the front seat, yelled:

"Yuh drive like a maniac. What's got into yuh?"

This hombre had said he was a stock detective. So Johnny told him.

"And yo're a-linin' out tuh head 'em off, huh?" boomed Randall. "Shore, I'm goin' with yuh."

II.

The stage thundered into the next stage station, where all was as it should be, the stock tender on the job, the change of horses ready. Johnny told this stock tender what was up, ordered him to drive the stage on to Rails End and return the next day, also to notify the sheriff.

Then the dark kid and Two-gun Randall swung to saddles on extra horses, and struck out across the hills. Johnny took his whip as well as his rifle, for many times previously, this four-horse whip had served him well. Just as a cow-puncher can do amazing things with a rope, the stage driver could do amazing things with his whip.

Leading the way, the kid set a furious pace, but he didn't leave Two-gun Randall behind. This florid hombre quickly showed that he knew how to manage a horse, regardless of how rough the trails, and knew how to ride with the best of the cowboys.

Johnny allowed privately that if the geezer didn't show a streak of yellow, he'd be good help in this crisis.

A great fear rode with the young stage driver. Unless the thieves had traveled slowly he would be too late to meet them at Osage Pass, and then Johnny and Randall would be forced to follow the stolen horses.

They'd be seen, of course. And Johnny could not forget how those cunning crooks had left the message: "If yuh foller us, we'll see yuh, and Holcomb'll be kilt."

However, the two man hunters were in time when they reached the low saddle between two snow-tipped peaks, there atop the immense mountain world. There were no fresh horse tracks in this swale, and looking eastward down a dark canyon

that cut the face of the range, Johnny caught a fleeting glimpse of the stolen horses coming up along the trail.

His mount and Randall's were as wet as if they had been dragged through a lake. Their nostrils were turned wrong side out, their sides heaved like bellows as their breath came and went in panting gasps. Of grim necessity, this had been a terrific, horse-killing ride.

"I just looked back an' seen the hull forest afire," remarked the two-gun hombre.

"Huh?" Johnny did not catch the other's meaning.

Randall chuckled. Evidently he considered himself quite a wit. "Waal, the way yuh burnt up the earth, it's a wonder the woods ain't afire," he opined.

"Oh, I get yuh. Say, yo're an old hand at this sort of thing. What's our next move? Pick us out a place to lay low and get the drop on them sidewinders afore they know what's up?"

"Yuh got the right idea," Two-gun said. "Fust, let's loosen the cinches on our hosses so they can get their wind easier, then we'll mosey down yander to whar the canyon opens, an' hide ourselves behint them big piles o' rock."

Randall swung off and began to loosen his latigo. Johnny did likewise.

Suddenly he felt the cold round muzzle of a six-gun pressed hard against his neck.

Never had the kid stage driver been so astounded. Off guard and unprepared for any treachery, the feel of the gun sent an icy shiver down his spine, while his muscles seemed to grow rigid. A chuckle sounded behind him, and Johnny found his voice.

"Hombre, if this is a joke——"

"Tain't no joke, stage driver. Move, and yo're a dead un. Drap flat on yore face, arms ahead o' yuh, or I'll squeeze trigger."

For a second, Johnny calculated his chances. He carried no Colt .45 himself. His whip was hung over his saddle horn; his rifle was in its scabbard tied to the saddle.

He was as quick as a weasel, wiry, agile, and of deceiving strength for one of his small stature, and he was a fighter from the word go. But Randall was a powerful hombre—with the drop. To fight back now would be to die.

Johnny obeyed the command.

"Now just put the little fists 'round behind yuh," ordered Randall, chuckling again. How the kid hated this sound, hated the man! "I'll just loop this cord over 'em, so."

"No savvy," Johnny grated. "Yuh gone bughouse, feller?"

"Not none. Keep danged still while I take yore whip and wrop the lash round yore ankles, 'cause I ain't got another piggin string. That whip did come in handy."

A minute later, leading Johnny's horse, the man loped along the swale to where the trail entered the canyon. As Randall reined up, a peculiar, long-drawn-out whistle floated across the mountain stillness.

An answering whistle came from the canyon. Then a rider spurred into view. He pulled up and spoke to Randall. The two looked toward where Johnny Dowst lay, struggling desperately to free himself and thinking bitterly:

"That two-gun hombre a stock detective? Huh! He's a smart crook, workin' hand in glove with the hoss thieves. Waited till he got me plumb off down here, where there ain't a chance of my gettin'

any help, afore he stuck me up. The tricky whelp!"

The stolen horses now appeared—eight stage horses, and six that had belonged to Sam Holcomb. Behind this herd rode a sawed-off hombre, as wide as he was tall, leading a brown nag with Sam Holcomb tied to the saddle.

Sam was hatless, his face skinned and battered, his shirt ripped to rags. Johnny could imagine the honest stock tender's dismay and wrath at seeing the kid upon whom he had banked, equally as helpless as he himself.

The three crooks now drove the horses onward until they came abreast of the dark kid stage driver, who sized up the newcomers more closely. The sawed-off fellow looked stupid, yet wicked and brutal.

The other was plainly the boss. A tall, rail-thin hombre, he had a cruel, thin-lipped mouth and the unblinking eyes of a reptile. Johnny didn't need to be told he was a killer who enjoyed killing.

"This would 'a' been bad medicine fer us," the fellow was saying, "but that yuh was on the stage, Randall, just fer to see what the driver or the sheriff'd do, and fer to protect us in case the driver did somethin' like he done."

"Uh-huh," returned the two-gun hombre, leering at Johnny. "It shore come out all jake, too. I told him I was a stock detective. Ain't that good? Me a cattle dick! Hah-hah! Course he never suspected me. Nobody in this neck o' the woods does, neither. So——"

"So yuh allow yuh'll hit the back trail," the snake-eyed man cut in, "minus yore guns, and kind o' bruised up like yuh had been in a fight, escapin' by the skin o' yore teeth. And yuh'll tell——"

"Uh-huh," interrupted Randall.

"Tell the sheriff o' Rails End, and others as is int'rested, how me and Johnny Dowst met up with the thieves, and Johnny got kilt, an' I got captured but escaped, and them tough thieves still swears they'll murder Sam Holcomb if they is folered. Will that yarn keep the law offn yore trail, Snake-eye?"

"Reckon so. Better shoot the kid full of holes and leave his carcass layin' here, eh?"

Johnny glanced at Sam Holcomb, to see an expression both horrified and hopeless on the man's rugged face.

"Kill me, 'stead of the kid," said Sam steadily. But no one paid him any heed.

"Yeah, shoot the dark kid driver," rasped Two-gun Randall. "He's shore a snorty li'le cuss. Gosh! If I hadn't been ridin' the stage, you jiggers'd be coyote feed now."

"Squatty," the snake-eyed man addressed the sawed-off hombre, "take Holcomb out o' the way and watch them hosses. They is plumb locoed tuh hit the back trail, 'specially them blacks what we wanted particular. Me an' Randall'll turn loose this kid an' practice shootin' on him as he runs."

Indeed, the stolen stage horses were anxious to head for home. Knowing horses, Johnny Dowst had realized this at once. The instant the men ceased driving them, they had faced about, looking down country, snatching a mouthful or two of grass and stepping forward restlessly.

He had known then that at the slightest opportunity, those blacks intended to make a break. They saw a chance to bolt now—and did.

As "Squatty" prodded his saddler to "watch them hosses," and as Randall dismounted to untie Johnny, there sounded a drum of hoofs. The stolen horses, the four blacks in the

lead, flashed past Squatty, who yelled and spurred his mount to head them off. Too late!

But "Snake-eye" went into action. Shouting at the top of his lungs and waving his rope, he sent his mount out ahead of the horse stampede.

He belted one of the blacks over the head, yet it swerved aside and darted past him. Others passed him on the farther side of his plunging saddler.

"Help me, yuh chumps!" roared Snake-eye.

Squatty had dropped the lead rope of Sam Holcomb's mount, because leading a horse handicapped him. He was feeding his nag the steel, racing alongside the runaway herd.

But he could not get around them: neither could Snake-eye leap his mount up ahead of those animals that had got past him. The bunch thundered into the canyon, carrying the two horse thieves right along with it.

III.

Meanwhile, other things were happening with breath-taking speed. Sam Holcomb's mount had stepped on the trailing bridle reins, promptly breaking them and then chasing after the bunch, taking Sam with it, of course.

Two-gun Randall, on foot, had reached Johnny just as the rush started. He turned back to get to his saddle. But his horse and the horse Johnny had ridden both joined the stampede before Randall was able to catch either one of them.

Johnny, sitting up in the dust, laughed for the first time in hours as he saw Two-gun Randall running for all he was worth after the herd and gasping: "Whoa, whoa, boy! Stop, yuh——" Oaths.

Randall seemed to think he would catch a mount, or that Squatty or

Snake-eye would catch one for him. At any rate, he kept going, vanishing into the canyon, where a streamer of dust was being kicked up by racing hoofs.

"If that ain't a hot mess," said the dark kid. "But them hosses saved my hide—for a little bit. Too bad Sam's still ridin' with the crooks. Now to get loose."

He had been unable to break the stout cord on his wrists, but the knot in the whip lash on his ankles had slipped and kept on slipping. Randall had tied a granny knot. Therefore, Johnny soon had full use of his feet.

He took the whip with him—it was his only weapon—as he ran toward the canyon. There were rocks to the right and left, and he wasn't long in finding a sharp-edged one.

But it seemed hours before he was able to saw that stubborn cord on his wrist enough to weaken it and break it. And to his dismay, he heard the ring of iron-shod hoofs—the stolen horses returning.

The kid hastily found a hiding place among a nest of big boulders. A minute later, up out of the canyon the bunch filed. Johnny's mount was among them; so was Holcomb's, the man still tied to his saddle.

Behind the sweating, panting horses rode Snake-eye, Squatty, and Randall. As they reached open country, they pulled up, and Snake-eye snarled, "Whar's that danged kid?"

"Wh-why, he is gone!" Randall gasped. "How'd——"

"Why didn't yuh stay tuh watch 'im or kill 'im?" rasped Snake-eye. "Yuh might 'a' knowed yuh couldn't do us no good. 'Twas me as headed off them danged smart hosses. I shore beat up a couple o' 'em aplenty, too."

Johnny's black eyes glittered with

rage. He had already seen the rope welts on two of his pets. It was a good thing for Snake-eye that the dark kid did not have a rifle at this instant.

A man who'd abuse a horse needed killing without warning. Snake-eye's own saddler was spur-cut from shoulders to flanks and wabbly on its feet.

"Boss, I never figgered he could get away," Randall tried to defend himself. "Anyhow, he's afoot and couldn't 'a' got far."

"Couldn't? Bet that kid's four miles on his way to that stage station whar you and him come from, Randall," growled the boss thief. "No use tuh hunt fer him. But we've still got our hostage," pointing at Holcomb. "Rope me a fresh hoss, Squatty. My wuthless nag's all in."

Squatty did as directed, catching one of Holcomb's horses which was saddle-marked. Snake-eye changed his saddle to this new mount, and snapped, "Come on, fellers! Le's ride!"

They passed onward, going down the western slope of the mountains. Johnny Dowst had been at his wit's end to know what to do, and had dared do nothing. But now he followed them.

At first, he had to be most cautious. However, the thieves soon reached forested country, and then Johnny was able to take their route without danger of his being seen.

Fortunately for him, he was an agile kid, with a rawhide, whalebone body. Otherwise, he would have been outdistanced in no time, for Snake-eye used his rope brutally on the stolen horses, forcing them along at a sharp trot, regardless of how rough the going.

That evening the three toughs halted to get a hurried meal for

themselves. Johnny's tongue was hanging out a foot, his clothes clung to his sweat-soaked body, and he felt as if he had passed through a driving rainstorm.

They drove the horses off the main trail into a gully, which widened out to a small open area, steep-walled to the right and left. The crooks blocked the entrance by building their tiny camp fire in it.

In spite of the way they had been driven and abused, those spirited blacks, and the other horses also, had not got over the idea of turning back, Johnny was glad to see. He was also pleased to note that the men took Sam Holcomb from his saddle, although they tied him hand and foot again.

When Randall and Squatty dragged the stock tender over to the fire, he stretched out as if dead. Quite evidently he was numb and cramped from the grueling ordeal he had experienced.

The three toughs made coffee, and toasted in the flames a couple of grouse one of them had killed with rocks. How good this crude fare smelled to worn-out Johnny Dowst, who had not eaten since six that morning; who had traveled twenty miles at breakneck speed on horseback, and then another twenty or more on his own feet!

He felt as if he could not compel his aching legs to do another thing. But he must. All this unsettled, wild, mountainous country was in shadowless twilight now. How the kid hoped darkness would descend before the hard-bitten crooks would push onward, as they undoubtedly intended to!

Randall, of course, had told the others that the stage driver had sent word to the sheriff of Rails End to come to Osage Pass. They allowed that Johnny would throw in with

the sheriff and his posse; that they would be pursued in spite of their threat to murder Holcomb.

However, if overtaken, they'd use the stock tender as a hostage, force the John Law to talk turkey with them. But they believed they were safe for at least five or six hours yet.

So much Johnny learned from scraps of cross talk as the thieves did their cooking. Snake-eye was furious that Sam Holcomb had managed to leave the message for the kid stage driver.

Two-gun Randall could not be blamed because Johnny had found this message, but Snake-eye still blamed Two-gun for the dark kid's escape. Randall should have shot him.

"Nice sort of reptile, he is," thought Johnny, wondering how he could turn the tables.

Even if he had been armed, the odds were by far too heavy for him to have the remotest chance of winning a gun fight. But something must be done, and done now. For when the thieves started onward, Johnny knew he could no longer keep up with them.

"If I could just get 'em split up, so I could tackle 'em one at a time," his thought continued.

He began to circle around the natural corral, and on the far side, where the steep-banked gulch entered this small open area, he found that poles had been placed across this narrow opening to bar a cow trail which led up to it. Johnny had considered attempting to stampede the horses past the three men, but the chances of success were few. The chances of being caught or shot himself were many.

But now, discovering the bars across the gulch, his black eyes kindled with hope. Across the open area from him, Johnny could

see the three hombres wolfing their meal.

Holcomb lay by the fire. Between it and the dark kid were all the horses, the saddled ones having been turned in with the others. And the light was growing dimmer and dimmer.

Working swiftly, silently, Johnny removed the poles that barred the gulch trail. Then he stole like a phantom in among the horses. No guns had been left on the saddles, but the kid had long ago noticed this, so he wasn't disappointed.

As he removed the bridles from Snake-eye's, Two-gun Randall's, Squatty's, and Sam Holcomb's mounts, he kept glancing toward the fire. Apparently the toughs could not see into the darkness beyond the bright circle of firelight. But they'd soon hear something.

The stage driver slipped the lash of his four-horse whip about the neck of one of the black horses, and led it up the gulch. The other three blacks followed their leader, and as Johnny turned it loose, it veered to the left, climbing the hillside to take the back trail.

"Shore a good thing for me you broncs is dead set on goin' home," whispered the dark kid.

He stole back to the natural corral to get all the other horses started. But this was unnecessary. There was no grass in the little pocket, and the ravenous horses, seeing and hearing others stringing out of it, had instantly trailed after the leaders.

Of a sudden, the sound of their hoofs striking rocks reached the ears of the three hombres. As one man, they bounded to their feet. One shouted:

"What the heck? Hosses gettin' away! Up that gully!"

"Can't be. I put poles 'cross it," yowled Snake-eye.

But Squatty and Randall were already running full tilt across the open area.

"Whoa, hosses! Whoa!" one called.

The other gasped: "Our saddle nags is leavin', too!"

Naturally, being left afoot alarmed these hombres as nothing else could. To them, it was the greatest of calamities, and Johnny enjoyed their panic.

Now Randall and Squatty had rushed up into the gully. One stopped long enough to bellow: "Somebody's took down the poles!"

Then the two ran onward, trying to overtake and catch at least one of the horses.

IV.

Meanwhile, Johnny was out on the rim, circling back to reach the other opening to the natural corral, to reach the fire, where Snake-eye had now jerked Sam Holcomb upright. Snake-eye's harsh voice roared above the ringing drum of hurrying hoofs:

"Somebody took down the poles? Wonder if it could be that danged kid we thunk had high-tailed it?"

No reply came from either Randall or Squatty. But Snake-eye flipped his Colt from its holster, aimed at Sam Holcomb's head, and boomed:

"Hey, yuh geezer what's tryin' tuh monkey with us, I'll count three, and unless yuh yell out yo're a-comin', or 'less yuh show yourself, hands up, right in this circle o' firelight, I'll kill Holcomb deader'n a nit!"

"The cur'll do it, too," grated Johnny, stealing silently nearer and nearer to the man and helpless Sam

Holcomb. "I can't let Sam be kilt, but——"

"One!" boomed Snake-eye. "Two! Yuh comin', hombre?"

"Comin'!" Johnny called.

As he spoke, his right hand darted back, then forward. His whip was gripped in this hand, the long lash unfurled, and Johnny had room to swing it!

Snake-eye whirled toward the voice. Thus, for an instant, his Colt .45 no longer covered Sam Holcomb. In that instant, Johnny's whip hissed and sang.

Snap! Its popper caught Snake-eye's right hand and cut it wide open.

The roar of a shot sounded as the six-gun flew out of Snake-eye's grasp to land—of all places—right in the camp fire.

How Johnny had wanted to get that gun! But he had not time even to swing his whip again before Snake-eye had hurled himself upon him.

The tall horse thief's right hand was numb, but he had full use of his left, and it clamped on Johnny's shoulder as the kid tried to dodge. Down they both went, Johnny underneath.

Snake-eye was yelling at the top of his voice: "I got 'im. Got the kid! Yuh catch any hosses, hombres?"

"Yuh got the kid!" a reply boomed across the night. "Naw, we ain't caught no hosses. Set plumb afoot, we is!"

Twisting, writhing, fighting with every ounce of his strength, Johnny squirmed out from under his heavier, stronger foe, gained his feet. But Snake-eye was up, too, slashing at the kid with his terrible left fist.

Before Johnny could leap out of reach, the savage man sent a smashing punch to his head which lifted

the lightweight stage driver into the air and laid him flat.

Groggy, half stunned, the kid was struggling to rise, and Snake-eye had snatched up a chunk of firewood, yowling, "I'll brain yuh!" when Sam Holcomb went into action.

Although tied hand and foot, Sam lunged forward. Head-first, like a goat, he struck the tall thief in the stomach, *thud!*

Snake-eye doubled up like a jack-knife, collapsed in a heap, and Johnny bounded erect, just as the spiteful crack of a rifle snarled across the small open area.

A bullet whistled close past the dark kid's head. In that instant, he realized that Squatty and Randall had returned from their fruitless chase, and one had fired at him—with his own rifle.

No time to try to get Snake's gun from the fire now. No time even to see if that hombre himself was knocked cold.

Johnny grabbed Sam Holcomb, who had lost his balance, pitching forward headlong, after butting Snake-eye.

Without knowing how he did it, the kid lifted Sam bodily, racing out of the circle of firelight. More leaden slugs had whined close before the darkness hid these two from Squatty and Two-gun Randall.

Johnny had felt something under one foot—the stock of his whip. Burdened though he was, he stooped, caught hold of it, rushed on for possibly twenty feet.

Here was a thick juniper-berry bush. The dark kid eased Sam Holcomb down behind it in the deepest shadow, fished in the man's pocket, found a knife and cut the cord on his wrists and ankles.

A sound of ringing spurs and thumping boot heels in the little basin behind Johnny—Randall and

Squatty racing across the open area to the camp fire. Randall was panting:

"That wiry li'le rip-twister's a-packin' Sam off. We'll shore drop 'em both!"

They had guns; the stage driver none. However, he had fled as far as he intended to. Leaping away from Holcomb, to the left, he dropped down close to the dark earth; saw the two hombres plain for a moment as they raced through the circle of firelight, and then saw them more dimly as they came on.

They passed between Johnny and the juniper bush that shielded Sam Holcomb, stopped, listened. One gasped, "Which way'd he go?"

"Don't hear nothin'," clipped the other. "What's——"

The man was about to ask, "What's that noise?" But he never finished his question.

"That noise" was the swish of Johnny Dowst's whiplash. And the popper at the end of this lash struck Squatty at the butt of his left ear. It opened a gash to the bone. It brought a yelp of pain. It caused Squatty to reel drunkenly.

Two-gun Randall, turning, and bringing up his Colt, though he had not seen Johnny, received the next lightninglike snap of the whiplash full on his mouth. He voiced a sort of unearthly, weird screech as he, also, reeled. To add to these two hombres' confusion, there came a sudden *bang-bang-bang!*

Ashes and embers flew every which way back at the camp fire. The shells in Snake-eye's Colt .45, which had dropped into this fire, were exploding.

But Squatty and Randall, both rattled, and neither knowing what had hit him with such cutting force, thought Johnny was shooting at them.

Rallying, they blazed away with their six-guns at the spot from which the explosions had sounded—the camp fire. Vivid streaks of flame; crash and thunder of bellowing six-guns.

Johnny, unseen as yet by either hombre, was counting the shots. Of course, Randall had another Colt, still in its holster, and Squatty held Johnny Dowst's rifle in his left hand, but——

Gun hammers abruptly clicked on emptied shells, and Squatty shoved his smoking weapon into its holster, while Randall gulped in a queer, strained voice:

"Heck! I never seen 'im thar. 'Id yuh, Squatty?"

"Naw. But I see 'im now!" yammered Squatty. "To our right! See 'im, Randall?" He jerked up the rifle.

But Squatty never had a chance to use the Winchester. A figure appeared behind the horse thief. It was Sam Holcomb.

Sam grabbed the rifle, hurled it aside, and then he and Squatty were at it, hammer and tongs, tooth and toenail. Sam, mad over the way he had been treated, was a raging fury.

Blow after blow from his rock-hard fists found the sawed-off hombre's face and chest, and soon Squatty buckled at the knees, sagged, wilted. The ground caught his body.

Meanwhile, Randall, upon catching sight of Johnny, had sent his left hand streaking to draw his second Colt. But the dark kid was ready for him. Ready with a singing whiplash that hissed viciously as it cut through the air, and cut with the savageness of a knife when it struck.

The first stroke caught Randall's left shoulder. Johnny was a little

wild, or it would have ripped the man's forearm. As it was, the blow rendered Randall's arm numb and useless.

The next slash hit Randall right under his chin, and he staggered backward, croaking out hoarsely, "'Nuff!"

"Get over to the fire!" snapped Johnny, throwing one glance at Holcomb and Squatty, and observing that Sam had the best of the fight.

Randall moved to the fire. Johnny followed, whip ready; and there was Snake-eye, just getting to his feet, groaning, and holding both hands over his stomach.

"Set down right in the light," ordered the dark kid, "or I'll pluck out one o' yore reptile eyes!"

Snake-eye staggered nearer the fire and sat down. So did Two-gun Randall. Both glared balefully at ragged Johnny Dowst, the little dark kid stage driver who, even yet, they

could scarcely believe had got the best of them.

"How yuh comin', kid?" sounded Sam Holcomb's husky voice. Sam himself appeared, dragging Squatty up close to the small fire. "Why, yuh shore seem tuh be comin' all jake," he ejaculated then. "Golly! Ain't I glad 'twas *you* as was on the job!"

"And ain't I glad you left me a message, Sam," said Johnny. "Pull Randall's teeth. He's still got a Colt. And tie all the hcss-stealin' whelps."

"Atter which, we'll eat," whooped Sam. "We're afoot, forty miles from no place. But the sheriff'll be comin' along about daybreak and"—his eyes met those of the little dark kid, with thankfulness and gratitude glowing in their depths—"and I'll tell him how Johnny Dowst larnt three foxy, tough nuts not tuh steal Hot Spur stage hosses!"



ANCIENT INDIAN BURIAL VAULT FOUND

IN southwestern Colorado, among the ruins on a mesa near Ackmen, in Montezuma County, there has been discovered lately a burial chamber of the prehistoric Indians.

The use of this chamber has been traced back to natives who lived in this section of the country two thousand years ago, or perhaps more than that, and is believed to be the most ancient ceremonial burial vault that has been uncovered so far. Five others have been unearthed at various times, but they were not as ancient as this last one. They are called kivas.

The recent operations in the ruins of Montezuma County prove that groups of various native races occupied the site long ages ago, but no records have been found to show

why the place was finally abandoned, but that it has not been occupied for about two thousand years is proved by the burial chambers. For what other purposes, besides burial, these chambers served, still remains a mystery.

The excavations show that the dead were dismembered and buried in sections, for not one complete skeleton was found. Enough separate sets of bones were uncovered to account for fourteen bodies.

It is supposed that some elaborate ceremonies must have been performed in the kivas at the time of the burials, or when the bodies were dismembered, and it is hoped that further explorations on the site will bring to light some objects that may solve the mystery.

A Brave Pioneer Mother

DURING the Civil War, the women of the new settlements of the West had a hard time. One young woman, Mrs. Derrick, who did not see her husband during the four years he was with the army, lived with her small child at Tarrant, Texas.

She raised her own corn and most of her cotton, pulled the lint from the seed with her fingers, spun the thread, wove the cloth, and made clothes for herself and her family. She did the same with the wool, which she sheared from her own goats.

There came a day when the entire community had no bread, no flour, and no salt. They had meat in abundance, because they killed and dressed their own beef and pork. They were tired of meat without bread and without salt and had reached the point when they could eat no more.

There had been some talk of wheat being held by a planter near the Louisiana line, and Mrs. Derrick persuaded a neighbor woman to go with her and get a load of it.

She had a span of large black mares. These were hitched to the wagon, and off went the two women on a ten to fifteen days' journey to buy the wheat.

But the planter was unfriendly and stubborn. He was offered twenty-five dollars for five bushels, and said he had no wheat either to sell or to give away. The women tried to persuade him, but he became angry and abusive, and ordered them to go away.

Then Mrs. Derrick picked up her

Winchester, and turned toward two slaves who were in the yard.

"Show me the wheat granary!" she commanded.

The slaves said not a word and did not move to obey.

Mrs. Derrick broke the silence. "I mean just what I say," she declared sternly.

Then the planter motioned to them to get the wheat. She drove over to the granary, and filled her wagon bed full to the brim. She offered again to pay for it, but the man refused.

He then asked her what her name was and where she lived, and she told him. When he learned what a journey the two women had made in order to get wheat, he called his wife out to meet them.

Then two slaves came along with a sack of coffee, a barrel of sugar, a hundred-pound barrel of salt, a fifty-pound barrel of honey, and one of sirup.

The planter then told them to go back by way of the mill and have the wheat ground into flour, saying that he would pay for the grinding. He gave them a written order for the miller, and as they were leaving he said:

"If you two women are brave enough to risk your lives for your own and other families, by making such a long journey alone through wild country, the least I can do is to help you out."

With many sincere thanks, the women drove away and arrived safely at home. They did not meet a single soul on the way, although hostile Indians were raiding only five miles west of their route.



The Bar U Twins and the Gun Artist

By Charles E. Barnes

Author of "The Bar U Twins On Thunder River," etc.

AS "Gunner" Harmon reined his iron-gray mount back on its haunches just short of the wrecked bridge across Eagle River, he grinned sarcastically about him at the shouting workmen and waving cowboys who were trying to flag him down. One more jump and the bronc would have plunged into the churning, foamy waters, forty feet below.

The babble of voices died down as Gunner made a flying dismount from his skittish pony and began looking around him as if hunting for some one.

He had never been in any danger of going over that broken bridge.

The wild ride and perilous stop on the brink of the chasm was just Gunner's way of serving notice on cowpokes and bridge workmen that he was a reckless hombre.

The bridge repairmen went back to work, growling under their breath about a "danged fool, scarin' folks half to death." The ring of hammers and the rasp of saws filled the air.

A cloud-burst had pounded tree trunks against the pilings of the old bridge until it had been battered away. The greater part of the male population of Mescal was out here either helping with the job or watching the others work.

The Mescal folks pretended not to notice Gunner, as he stalked among them, but nearly every one stole glances at his tall, beefy figure and the evil, scarred face, that was only partly hidden by the floppy brim of a hat pulled low.

Gunner's eyes were pale, watery, and set too close together. His mouth was an ugly slit in a dirt-stained, leering face.

For a few minutes, he stood on the bank of the river, holding the reins of his horse and watching the progress of rebuilding. Then he dropped the lines, shifted his two wooden-handled Colts, sat down on a piling and pulled a flask from his pocket. Placing it to his lips, he let the fiery liquid gurgle down his throat.

Now the Mescal people were looking at him with distinct dislike and distrust. A man who drinks alone is always an object of suspicion.

Gunner saw the glances directed at him, and he began swaggering about, glowering at the peaceful cow-punchers and town loafers. He was plainly looking for trouble.

As he moved he kept taking husky swigs from the bottle. There was a thud of hoofs and a tall, broad-shouldered young cowboy came galloping up.

It was Tom Carter, son of Sam Carter, wealthy owner of the Bar U Ranch. He was one of the famous Bar U twins. As he dismounted his wide, innocent-looking blue eyes rested with interest on Gunner Harmon.

In spite of his youth, Tom was a seasoned hunter of outlaws. Instantly he spotted Gunner as an undesirable character, and he took instant means of getting acquainted with him.

"Have you seen Sheriff Torby around here?" he asked.

Instead of answering, Gunner smashed the empty whisky bottle on a rock and glared at the young buckaroo. Both of his hands rested on the butts of his holstered guns.

Insolently he tried to stare Tom down, thinking that the young-looking puncher was some weaner who was not yet dry behind the ears. Tom's solemn eyes stared right back at him from an unlined face. The youthful waddy never ran from trouble.

Tom was a well-known figure in the Eagle River ranch country, but to Gunner Harmon he was just a dude-dressed kid, decked out in fancy Stetson, pearl-handled six-guns, checkered shirt, and flaring batwing chaps.

"Stop makin' faces at me and answer my question," drawled Tom. "I'm lookin' fer Jim Torby."

"Well," said Gunner, "thet's all I got to do—keep track of the sheriff. I'll be plumb tickled to go git him fer yuh."

The words were not so bad, but the tone was mean and sarcastic.

"I don't think I'm goin' ter like you," said Tom dryly.

"The blazes you say!" burst out Gunner. "Mebbe you'd like a gun barrel popped over yore haid."

Gunner Harmon took a step forward, yanking out his right-hand Colt as he moved. Then suddenly he halted, his jaw sagging. With magic quickness both of Tom Carter's hoglegs appeared in his hands. Steady as a rock, their muzzles pointed at Gunner's middle.

"If you don't like the way I play, we'll start all over again," said Tom with a grin.

That grin identified him. It was the only way most people could distinguish him from his twin brother, Jerry, who never smiled.

"You worked a trick on me!"

flared Gunner, his face crimson. "Holster them guns, and I'll beat yuh to the draw."

Tom's guns plopped back in their sheaths almost before Gunner had finished speaking. He was plumb ready to accommodate this hombre, who had all the earmarks of being a bad one.

"You make the first break, mister," said Tom. "I don't want it said thet I killed yuh by no trick. Go ahead now, smoke 'em up."

Gunner's rat-trap mouth twitched slightly. Fear widened his eyes and drowned out the effects of the whisky, the bottled courage that he always needed.

He took one step backward—two. Then with the laughter of the crowd ringing in his ears, he turned, ran to his horse, mounted, and galloped away.

But he did not go far. Not even far enough to be out of earshot of the jeering remarks and the hoots and catcalls that followed him.

It was not entirely the gun magic of Tom Carter that had caused Gunner to make his sudden departure. He had seen a short, red-faced man slowly approaching on a flea-bitten roan. It was Sheriff Torby, a man Gunner did not care to meet, even though the law officer did not know him.

Gunner watched Tom Carter ride to meet Sheriff Torby, and he sneaked closer to listen to what was said, leaving his bronc tied in a thicket.

Working around in back of some boulders, he crouched down where he could see Torby and Tom without being seen himself. He learned a lot in those few minutes. And when he finally remounted again, an evil grin was on his thin lips.

Chortling and chuckling, he spurred his iron gray back up the

trail in the direction from which he had come.

"Now thet I got friends in Mescal, me an' my gang is goin' ter pay them a visit," muttered Gunner with a laugh. "I'll kill two birds with one stone. One of them birds will be this feller the sheriff calls Tom Carter, and the other will be plenty of dinero that we'll take from the general store and the Wells Fargo office."

Tom Carter and Sheriff Torby walked slowly along, still talking. Tom had on a pair of new metal-studded wrist cuffs and Torby began kidding him about them. They were of brown leather with a big Bar U burned on them.

The Bar U twins had one hard and fast rule. When they bought something new, they both got the same thing so that they were always dressed alike. Unable to be told apart by their features, they were equally baffling in their clothes.

It was quite a joke with Torby that each time Tom got something, Jerry had to get the same thing.

"I don't know what's goin' ter happen when you fellers start goin' with girls," gibed the law officer. "If yuh don't find twin ladies, you'll both have to go with the same lassie, and she'll never know, unless yuh tell her, whether she's with Tom or Jerry. I wouldn't know right now which one you was if you hadn't told——"

"Save thet, will yuh, sheriff?" interrupted Tom. "I'm really serious. That feller I jist tangled with scooted because he seen you, not because he was scairt of me. He's bad medicine. And he's not the only strange gunman I've seen hangin' around. I jist thought I'd tell yuh."

"Thanks for nothin'," chuckled the sheriff. "You boys are always

stirrin' up a hornets' nest where there ain't none. Give yore pa my sympathy."

"I think you mean congratulations," retorted Tom lightly, and rode away.

II.

A tall, bronzed young cowboy on a single-footing sorrel, pushed into a boulder-strewn, brush-strewn canyon, Piute Pass. He whistled as he rode, halting now and then to wipe beads of sweat from his forehead and to rest his badly lathered bronc.

The puncher was an exact double of the gun-fighting waddy who had tangled with Gunner Harmon. But he was not Tom Carter, and he had never laid eyes on Gunner in his life. He was Jerry Carter, Tom's brother, the other Bar U twin.

In addition to his usual range outfit of gray Stetson, fancy checkered shirt, bullhide chaps, and Coffeyville boots, Jerry had added a new touch. He also wore steel-studded wrist cuffs, exactly like Tom's.

Jerry's whistle suddenly broke off, and his innocent blue eyes narrowed slightly. Just ahead of him on the rocky trail, a horseman blocked the way.

He was an evil-looking hombre on a big iron gray. He was tall and beefy and the floppy brim of a slouch hat partly hid a scarred face and a rat-trap mouth. That mouth was parted in a twisted grin as Jerry came to a halt in front of him.

The ruffian was Gunner Harmon, but Jerry did not know that. Gunner, for his part, thought he was looking at Tom Carter, whom he had almost fought at the bridge.

"Hello," said Jerry. "Has Sheriff Torby passed this way? I'm looking for him."

"Huh!" snorted Gunner. "Is that all you kin talk about? Every time

you see me, you ask me about the sheriff. I guess you ain't quite bright."

Jerry flushed with anger, and unconsciously his hands dropped toward the butts of his pearl-handled .45s. But he did not touch the weapons. For he understood, now, what had happened.

This beefy hombre had talked with Tom. Jerry also had been looking for Sheriff Torby to warn him about some hard-looking customers that had been prowling around Eagle River ranches of late.

The situation was not a new one for the Bar U ranny. Many times, strangers had confused the twins, frequently to their sorrow.

Jerry glanced around and for the first time saw the black barrels of rifles, pointing at him from behind rocks and trees.

"What's the matter, mister," he drawled, looking at Gunner fearlessly. "Are your boys too bashful to show themselves?"

"Ride your words!" warned Gunner. "I ain't takin' no more gab from you. We're goin' ter finish what we started back there at the bridge. And if you think you're a faster gunman than I am, snag out yore hogleg."

Jerry nodded toward the hidden outlaws and slowly shook his head.

"Not with them fellers all set to shoot me in the back," he objected. "When I fight, I want a chance to win. If you're robbers, git on with yore work and let me know the worst."

Jerry was filled with a wild desire to grab for his guns and make a fight of it, but his reason told him it would be suicide. Gunner blocked the narrow, brushy path in front of him. The rifle muzzles were so close that the ambushers could not

miss. For once, he would have to submit.

Gunner Harmon gave a signal and the outlaws rushed from their hiding places to surround Jerry Carter. "Loco" Pardee, a short, wizened, black-bearded man was second in command. He jabbed a cocked hog-leg against Jerry's back, while another stripped him of his weapons. His hands were tied in front of him with leather thongs, and then the band started up the canyon with him, one of them leading his sorrel.

Soon they left the arroyo, crossed a grassy meadow and finally emerged into a clearing, surrounded by high boulders. Jerry was jerked out of his saddle. Some one came up behind him and spoke to him.

As he turned to answer, a fist crashed hard against his unprotected jaw. Lights flashed before his eyes, as he hit the ground with a jarring thud. He could feel his legs being cinched together with ropes and heard the cutthroats talking about some loot that they had buried.

Gunner Harmon reached down, caught Jerry by the collar and jerked him to a sitting position. During the ride, the Bar U puncher had learned their names. He knew that this was the gang of the notorious Harmon and that he was in for a tough time of it.

When Gunner searched him and did not take any of his money, Jerry began to be puzzled. All Gunner seemed to be interested in was a number of letters and other documents Jerry had been carrying in an inside pocket.

Jerry's attention was now drawn to a lanky, peaked hombre, who sat on the ground with a cheap tablet on his knee, industriously making marks with a tally pencil. The others crowded around, watching his work with great interest.

The pencil wielder was "Slats" Connor, and he was drawing a picture. Suddenly the men doubled up with laughter, pounding each other on the back and guffawing. Gunner Harmon went over, took one look and roared with mirth.

"By jing, Slats, you shore kin make pitchers!" said Gunner. "I ain't seen nothin' so funny in a long time. Let's show it to him."

Still chuckling and gurgling, Gunner held up the drawing for Jerry to see. It was a fairly good likeness of the Bar U waddy with a lot of funny touches added. It made him look goggle-eyed and long-nosed.

"Yore nose got that way from pokin' it inter other folks's business," jeered Gunner.

The final touch was a nursing bottle which Jerry was pictured holding in his hand.

"I'm keepin' thet to remember you by, kid," chuckled the outlaw leader. "Too bad we got to kill the original."

"The original is much better," said Jerry coolly.

Gunner nodded his head up and down several times.

"You got nerve," he admitted. "I kind of hate ter plug yuh and leave yuh here fer the coyotes to gnaw on. But business is business. Slats, cut out the foolishness now and git busy."

"Shucks," said Slats, "why not let the kid write the note!"

"That's an idea," put in Loco Pardee, jabbing a knife against Jerry's throat. "I know jist how to coax him."

Jerry's blue eyes glittered, but he did not cringe as the keen point of the knife pricked his flesh.

"I don't coax worth a darn," he said.

With a low snarl of rage, Loco lifted his knife to strike. Gunner

Harmon hurled himself against the squat, wizened killer, knocking Loco to the ground.

"Put away that knife," roared Gunner, kicking Loco's prostrate form. "One more break out o' you, and I'll let yuh have it." Then turning to Jerry Carter, he continued. "We better git down ter cases. I listened to you an' the sheriff talkin', an' I know all about yuh, Tom Carter. Yore old man's rich, owns the Bar U Ranch, and has got a big drag with the sheriff. Yo're writin' Sheriff Torby a letter, sayin' thet bandits is raidin' the Bar U."

"What's the idea?" asked Jerry. He did not correct Gunner's impression that he was Tom.

"Do as yo're told," growled Gunner, his anger rising.

"I ain't writin'," declared Jerry stubbornly.

Gunner's clenched fist struck Jerry in the face, knocking his bound body over. Slats Connor, range-riding artist and forger, had been reading through the papers taken from Jerry's pocket. Some were in the handwriting of the prisoner, but Slats didn't know that.

"I don't find no writin' in the name of Tom Carter," said Slats. "Here's some of a feller named Jerry. But of course that wouldn't be this feller, would it, Gunner?"

"No," said Gunner. "This weaner's name is Tom Carter. I heard the sheriff call him thet with my own ears and heard him admit he was Tom. Never mind tryin' ter forge his signature anyhow. I got an idea."

Reaching down, Gunner unfastened the steel-studded wrist cuff from around Jerry's arm. The inner side of the leather was still shiny and new. Gunner and Slats talked in low tones for a moment. Then

Slats began to print words on the light-colored leather. The note said:

SHERIFF TORBY: Bandits raiding Bar U.
Send help. Tom.

Gunner and the others crowded around Slats's handiwork. Some one came up, leading Jerry's horse. The wrist cuff with the words written on it was tied to a saddle thong.

Jerry watched the preparations with solemn eyes. He knew what this meant. They would use this trick to draw Sheriff Torby and all the able-bodied men out of Mescal. Then the outlaws would raid the town.

Jerry glanced up to find the ugly, wrinkled face of Loco Pardee, glaring at him behind the glittering blade of a knife.

"We're through with him, Gunner," said Loco, gripping Jerry by the throat and lifting the dagger to plunge it into the cowboy's body. "I'll finish him off."

Gunner whirled, snarling like a wild cat. One of his guns leaped from its holster and came up flaming. Loco Pardee fell across Jerry Carter, both hands clawing frantically at a wound in his chest.

Writhing in his death throes, he rolled clear of the Bar U puncher. His heels drummed on the ground, raising tiny clouds of dust. Then he lay still.

"Drag him off in the brush an' leave him fer coyote bait," barked Gunner Harmon. "He's been askin' fer it, ever since he j'ined us. I'm boss of this outfit. If anybody doubts it, let him speak up right now."

No one spoke.

Gunner explained that he wanted to keep Jerry alive, in case he might want to use him again to lead them

to a hide-away or something. Slats was left on guard, and the bandits galloped away toward Mescal, leading Jerry's sorrel with the steel-studded wrist cuff flopping up and down on a saddle thong.

Despair filled Jerry Carter's heart as he watched the bandits ride triumphantly away. He was lying on the ground against a rock. His arms and legs were beginning to feel numb from being bound so tightly.

Escape seemed impossible. Slats Connor was walking back and forth in front of him, watching him keenly.

After a while, Slats sat down, gun in his lap, and began making a sketch of a golden eagle, perched high on a ledge.

Jerry began to inch his way along the ground, trying to get a purchase on something so that he could pull himself to a sitting position. His fingers closed over a slab of shale and he sat up.

He just had to get away and save Mescal from being raided. Gunner's talk had revealed the outlaw plot.

The bandits would drive Jerry's sorrel into Mescal. When Sheriff Torby saw the wrist cuff with the note on it, he would never think for a moment of trickery. He would gather every available man and ride to the Bar U, leaving the town unprotected.

Although he was bound and helpless, Jerry started wriggling noiselessly toward Slats Connor. He would try to make a break, even if he died in the attempt.

III.

A riderless sorrel bronc raced up the main street of Mescal, mane and tail flying in the wind, stirrups flapping. Several men saw it and made a grab for the plunging animal, but

missed. Finally a mounted cowboy seized the bridle and brought it to a halt.

Sheriff Torby, just emerging from his jail office, saw the cayuse and recognized it. Pulling his Stetson low over his forehead, he ran across to the little group surrounding it. A riderless horse was often the sign of tragedy.

"What's the matter here?" he puffed, his eyes centering on the Bar U brand on the bronc's shoulder. "This cayuse belongs to either Tom or Jerry Carter. Them boys ain't throwed off easy. Something's happened to one of them."

A spectator gave a cry and pointed to a steel-studded wrist cuff tied to the saddle horn. Torby took it off and slowly examined it.

A Bar U was burned in the leather. This was identical with the cuff that he had seen Tom Carter wearing earlier in the day. Or so Jim Torby thought.

On the smooth leather inside the big wrist cuff were some lettered words. The message said:

SHERIFF TORBY: Bandits raiding Bar U.
Send help. TOM.

"Dad blame my hide," muttered Jim Torby. "This says thet outlaws is tacklin' the Bar U Ranch. If it's a practical joke— No, it cain't be. Them boys wouldn't do such a thing. Besides, Tom was warnin' me against some outlaws early this mornin'. Git yore guns, boys, we're ridin'!"

Yelling and firing off their six-guns in the air, the crowd broke. Some raced to the hitch racks, untied their ponies, and galloped out on the road to the Bar U. Others hurried home to get their weapons and to saddle up.

For half an hour, the sheriff was

busy issuing ammunition and furnishing guns to those who had none. Mescal's streets were quickly emptied of men. Every able-bodied male who could ride or could get a horse joined the parade to get in on the excitement.

Torby was the last to leave. The sheriff was getting pretty old, and he was perfectly willing to let young men stand the brunt of fighting.

As he was locking up his office, a smooth-faced and broad-shouldered young cowpoke trotted his sorrel bronc around a corner and dropped down beside the law officer. It was Tom Carter, Jerry's brother.

Since Tom had tangled with Gunner Harmon, he had been out doing some quiet scouting, trying to locate the hide-out of the bandit gang that he felt sure was near by. His pearl-handled guns flapped against his batwing chaps as he dragged the dulled rowels of his spurs across the board walk.

"Hey!" cried the sheriff. "What're you doin' here?"

Tom Carter blew tobacco smoke through his nostrils.

"What does it look like I'm doin'?" he retorted. "You better take a tuck in yore belt, Torby. You look like yo're about ready to explode like a dynamite cap."

"But the ranch—the raiders?" burst out Sheriff Torby. "Why ain't yuh home?"

"Do I have ter stay home?" chuckled Tom. "Mebbe you figure because there's raiders around that I shouldn't be out alone."

Sheriff Torby's big paw, closing around Tom Carter's arm, brought the cowboy to realize that something serious was wrong. From his saddle-bag, Torby pulled the metal-studded wrist cuff and pointed to the words on it.

Tom Carter placed a broken thumb-nail on the signature, "Tom."

"Who is this Tom?" he inquired.

"Why, Tom Carter, yore brother," snorted Torby impatiently. "What's the matter with yuh? Cain't yuh read? Don't yuh see what's probably happened. They ambushed Tom, and he got a chance ter send me thet message, tied on his hoss."

The young puncher's eyes lighted with a peculiar expression. "That would be all right, sheriff, except for one thing," he drawled. "I'm Tom Carter."

Sheriff Torby's mustache wagged frantic signals of amazement. His mouth popped open.

"You Tom?" he exclaimed. "Why you cain't be. That's Tom's wrist cuff. I seen it on him only a few hours ago."

"Well, you'll see it on me still, if you look close," asserted the waddy, holding out his wrists to show the leather bands around his arms. "That note is a fake. Somebody who has captured Jerry and thinks it's me, done it. We got to find my brother."

Through the dirty window of the sheriff's office, Tom saw a lone rider, a big beefy man with an evil, scarred face, astride an iron gray, come riding up the street. Tom recognized him as Gunner Harmon.

"See that feller!" said Tom grimly. "I bet he knows somethin' about this."

Sheriff Torby placed his big hands on the window casing and peered through the pane of glass. Gunner had dismounted and was casting sidelong, suspicious glances into all the buildings.

"Now don't be too sure," said the sheriff. "You ain't got no evidence. Jist because you tangled with him don't mean——"

"I got a hunch," interrupted Tom

Carter. "You go an' talk to him. Git him back to the jail."

Sheriff Torby started to argue, but knowing that the Bar U twins had an uncanny habit of being right, he growled an oath under his breath, walked out of the jail office, and strode up the board walk.

Gunner saw him coming, and his face showed distinct surprise. Why wasn't the sheriff at the Bar U Ranch? The lawman started to speak.

"Bandits is raidin' the Bar U Ranch!" yelled Torby. "Come inter the jail office, an' I'll give yuh some ammunition! We'll ride out to the ranch together! Everybody else has gone!"

Although Torby couldn't see them, Gunner knew his men were creeping up, keeping in the shelter of buildings and alleys.

"All right, sheriff," he grunted. "I'll go."

Gunner followed Torby up the board walk. He had come in ahead to spy and see if his plan had worked. Gunner didn't want to shoot the sheriff down in the street. Plenty of time for that later.

Torby entered the doorway first, with Gunner right at his heels. The bandit leader was nervous, and his pale eyes darted into every corner. His spurs jingled, as he strode across the board floor.

A tall, broad-shouldered cowboy stepped from the jail corridor into the office. Gunner started to speak, but his voice trailed off in a breathless whisper. His heart seemed to stop beating, and unseen fingers seemed to clutch at his throat, shutting off his wind. Unbelief was written on his face as he gazed at a boyish cowpoke with wide, innocent eyes.

"Wh-wh-what're you doin' here?" stammered Gunner. "I——"

"Grab yore guns, polecat!" snapped Tom. "Let's finish the argument we had at the bridge! What have you done with my brother?"

Bang! A rifle spoke from outside, and the windowpane crashed into a thousand pieces.

Tom's hands blurred toward his guns, but Torby, his shirt front crimson-stained, slumped against him, throwing off his aim, as his Colts roared.

Bullets thudded into the walls and floor as Gunner leaped back through the doorway, both six-guns blazing. But Gunner was nervous, and his shots went wild.

As the bandit chief disappeared around a corner of the building, Tom dragged Torby toward the jail corridor, away from the whistling slugs that spurting from the weapons of the other outlaws.

A killer started to run into the office. Tom's six-guns spat flame and the hombre fell across the threshold. Charging across the room, Tom fired through the doorway. Another bandit toppled from his horse into the street.

Tom slammed the heavy door shut and bolted it as lead slugs ripped through the wood.

One of Gunner's men raised his Colt and aimed through the window at the limp form of the sheriff. Tom's hogleg barked, and the man threw up his hands and crashed to the sidewalk as the rest of the bandits took to cover.

Picking Torby up under the arms, Tom hauled him into a jail cell and placed him on a bunk. Outside, he could hear the bandits breaking into stores. He ripped away Torby's shirt. A jagged wound was revealed.

Through the jail window, Tom saw outlaws carrying giant powder into the Wells Fargo office. Shot

after shot, he fired at the flitting shapes, but Torby's groans brought him back to the lawman's side.

Tom wanted to rush out and battle the bandits, but he had to plug up the old sheriff's wound. Torby's life depended on it.

A loud explosion rocked the town. He knew they had blown the safe. Through the smoke and dust, Tom saw Gunner's men rushing out of the Wells Fargo office.

Kneeling down by the window, the Bar U waddy blazed away. One bandit, trying to mount, fell backward and lay still.

Sweat streamed down Tom's face. His lean hands clutched the butts of his hot guns tighter. The outlaws were keeping in the shelter of buildings, returning his fire.

Bullets slammed into wood, knocking splinters in his face, as the bandits raced away, driving riderless broncs before them. Pursuit was impossible. They had taken every horse in town.

A bitter feeling of failure swept over Tom. Gunner had made a fool of him.

IV.

Jerry Carter inched himself within a few feet of Slats Connor. The skinny hombre was busy drawing on the cheap tablet. A plan was forming in Jerry's mind.

"Light me a cigarette," Jerry said.

Slats glared suspiciously for a moment. Laying down his pencil and paper, he stood up. With bony fingers he extracted the "makin's" from his pocket and built a quirky. Lighting it, Slats bent down and placed it in Jerry's mouth. The Bar U ranny puffed and blew smoke through his nose.

Behind Slats, a row of boulders extended a foot high out of the ground. Working his bound hands,

Jerry strained at the ropes that held his wrists. Slats, quick to sense danger, knelt down.

"You've got them ropes loose!" he rasped.

Slats tried the bonds, but they were tight. As if by accident, the cigarette Jerry had been holding in his mouth dropped. Straight down it fell, alighting on the back of Slats's skeletonlike hand.

With a wild yell, the outlaw slapped at the burned place on his hand, jumping back. The boulders caught him in the ankles, throwing him off balance.

Jerry's muscles tensed. Like a huge spring suddenly released, he hurled his body through the air. His head smacked into Slats's stomach.

The bandit groaned and toppled backward to the ground, striking his head on a rock. Slats lay sprawled on his back.

Dragging his bound legs behind him, Jerry bent over the fallen hombre and got the bandit's knife from his belt. Holding the knife between his knees, he cut the ropes that bound his hands. Then he freed his legs.

Slats was moaning as Jerry disarmed him. The twin rubbed his numb wrists.

Jerry stuck one of Slats's guns in his belt, holding the other cocked in his hand. Slats rubbed his head and sat up as Jerry prodded him with his boot.

"You got some loot buried around here?" said Jerry.

"No," replied Slats.

"You're a liar," snapped Jerry. "I heard Gunner talkin' about it. Go dig it up!"

"Gunner would kill me," growled Slats sullenly.

"You dig up thet money, or I'll kill yuh," drawled Jerry.

Slats saw the threatening look in

Jerry's blue eyes and saw his trigger finger curl back. The outlaw got up and walked to a patch of brush.

Bending over, he pawed at leaves and twigs, uncovering a hole. He hauled out several money bags and piled them on the ground. Jerry took the sacks and put them in the saddlebags of Slats's bronc.

"You wrote a note about me," said Jerry, "now write one about yoreself. Git a piece of paper and write what I tell yuh."

The Bar U puncher's innocent, boyish face never changed expression, but something in the sudden icy tone of his voice, made Slats obey. In a minute, Jerry finished dictating the note.

After scanning it briefly, he put the note on a flat-topped stone, and placed a rock on it to keep the paper from blowing away.

With his hands tied in front of him, Slats mounted. Riding behind, keeping one hand on his guns, Jerry galloped toward Mescal.

The clatter of steel-shod hoofs on rock echoed from the granite walls of Piute Pass as Gunner Harmon and his gang rode toward their camp. The money bags, tied to Gunner's saddle, bounced up and down, causing the gold coins to clink together. The bandit leader's round face was covered with sweat.

Gunner believed that the blue-eyed cowboy in Mescal was the one they had left in camp. He had probably killed Slats in his escape. Slats was a danged fool. Anyway, the buried money would still be there.

Leaving Piute Pass, the bandits swept up the trail and into their camp. There wasn't a sign of Slats's body. The killer boss saw the ropes Jerry had cut, then his eyes lighted on the note.

Leaning out of the saddle, he picked up the paper. Gunner's eyes flamed, and his hand shook as he read the words. The note said:

SHERIFF TORBY: When you come back to Mescal, from the Bar U, you'll see this I hope. I'm one of Gunner's bandits. I've dug up his hidden money and will take it to your office and wait for you there. I want to go straight and make honest money by collecting the reward offered for Gunner in Bennet County. SLATS CONNOR.

A hoarse oath escaped Gunner Harmon's mouth. His thin lips drew back into a cat snarl. Crushing the paper in his hairy paw, Gunner hurled it to the ground.

"The dirty, double-crossin' skunk's got our money!" he roared. "We're ridin' back to Mescal! I'll fill him so full o' holes he'll look like a piece of window screen!"

All was confusion as the outlaws turned around and raced back toward Mescal. Faster and faster Gunner Harmon and his bandit crew urged their tired horses.

Once again they thundered up Mescal's main street and hurled themselves out of the saddle in front of the bullet-riddled jail office. Bristling with rifles and six-guns, they cautiously made their way toward the entrance. Suddenly a cool, clear voice broke the stillness.

"Do yuh want ter surrender or dodge hot lead?"

Standing in the doorway was a smooth-faced, wide-eyed cowboy, with pearl-handled Colts gripped in bronzed hands. It was Jerry Carter.

For an instant the bandits hesitated. Then one of the outlaws turned sidewise. A big .45 appeared in his hand and blazed swiftly.

Wham! Bang! Jerry's Colts jumped and backed in his lean hands.

Clawing crimson out of his eyes, the bandit fell forward on the board walk, stayed there a minute, and then rolled into the street.

Gunner was firing wildly, yelling oaths in a hoarse voice. Slugs whined through the air. Horses plunged and kicked; wounded men screamed.

Turning on his heels, Gunner started to run. A figure was walking toward him. At sight of the man, Gunner's mouth popped open and his eyes widened. He took a startled step backward. It was Tom Carter.

Gunner's face drained of color as he saw what appeared to be the same waddy who stood in front of the sheriff's office. His momentary confusion was fatal.

With .45 slugs zipping close to his head, Tom beat Gunner's bullet by a fraction of a second. Over the sights of his Colt, he saw Gunner stagger, fall to the ground, and lie still.

The fight was over. On seeing their leader go down, the other outlaws broke and fled.

Sheriff Torby lay in the jail bunk, his shoulder swathed in bandages. A cigar was clenched in his teeth, and he was grinning at the Bar U

twins standing in front of him. Jerry was talking.

"I knowed thet Slats liked to write notes," said the twin. "So I had him write one to you, sheriff. You'll never git it, but we got Slats and a bunch of money."

"Me an' Tom was shore glad ter see yuh come ridin' in," said Torby. "It looked like Mescal was cleaned out permanent. But the Bar U twins allus figure some way out. Go see what Slats is doin'."

Tom unlocked a barred door and stepped into the next cell. His firm lips twisted into a grin as he looked at the beanpole outlaw. Slats was busy drawing a picture of himself on the bare jail wall.

"By jing!" chuckled Tom. "That shore looks like yuh, Slats, but there's somethin' missin'. Give me thet pencil."

Taking the stub of pencil from Slats's hand, Tom drew a hangman's noose around the killer's scrawny neck.

The Bar U twins are shore bad hombres ter try ter buck. They got a plumb persistent habit o' nosin' out trouble, givin' it first draw, an' then shootin' it full o' holes. If it wa'n't fer them, Mescal would shore be in a bad way right now. Don't miss the story o' their next adventure. Yuh'll find it in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





Owl-hoot Breed

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Bitter Creek Ablaze," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE BREAK.

THE fall from the courthouse window to the sun-hardened earth was enough to have jarred Thad Carse badly. But Fate seemed dissatisfied with just shaking the young ranny up a bit.

From somewhere up there in that stuffy courtroom that was now filled with shouts and the sound of thudding feet came the hollow boom of a shotgun. Thad Carse felt buck-shot tear slantwise across his back and hips.

The blow knocked him forward on his face. From behind and above him came a triumphant yell.

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Thad's lean face was white already from the three long months he had spent in the little jail at the back of the courthouse. The pain of those biting shot turned him whiter, and from behind his locked teeth came a groan.

But he lurched up and started away as the scattergun roared again. He heard the hiss of the shot as it passed his body, but none of it found him.

Doubled half over, Thad ran a zigzag course to the hitch rack, leaped aboard the first horse his dull gaze found, and kicked the heels of his run-over boots into the animal's flanks with stinging force.

Somebody at the courthouse had

found a rifle, and Thad felt the hot breath of a slug that missed his bobbing head by the narrowest margin. The horse he had leaped aboard reared, spun on hind feet, and leaped in among a number of wagons and buggies standing in the shade of some big pepper trees.

Thad was sick now from the buckshot wounds in his back—so sick the world swam crazily before his blurring eyes. But he knew that he was heading west out of Monterey town toward the nearest hills.

It was a relief to have a horse beneath him and feel the beat of clean wind in his face once more. That rush of wind was clearing his head, too, and he could see a little better by the time he shot past the last adobe house and hit the gently sloping range beyond.

Each lunge of his mount brought pain to those wounds in his back, and he had to keep groans of agony locked behind his grinding teeth.

Behind him there was much yelling, and he could hear the occasional whine of a bullet in the air as he hammered away from town. But the horse under him was running smoothly. It would take those rattle-headed jaspers back there some time to get mounts and line out.

Thad looked down at the horse he strode for the first time, and there was suddenly a bitter grin on his wide lips. His smoky blue eyes puckered, and from his lean throat came something that resembled a harsh chuckle.

The horse was a trim-legged, deep-chested sorrel—a bronc that he knew only too well. He did not have to glance back at the Long H brand on its hip to know that it was Seth Haggerty's private horse.

Haggerty, owner of the mighty Long H, was the man who had

pressed the murder charge against Thad Carse.

Less than ten minutes ago, Thad had stood before a white-haired judge and heard himself sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. There had been a big crowd in the courtroom—a crowd that had waited in breathless silence while the judge's voice droned out that terrible sentence.

Numbed, sick with the thought of paying the supreme penalty for something he had not done, Thad had stood as if frozen, listening while the judge pronounced the sentence. Then a vagrant breeze, laden with the scent of sage and clean earth, had brushed Thad's gray face. He had turned his head, and discovered that some one had opened one of the windows in the courtroom.

Thad hardly remembered what had happened after that. The judge was still speaking, saying a kindly-sounding something to the doomed youth who stood before him. But Thad had not been listening.

The scent of sage and sandy earth did something to him, causing him to crouch and tremble as if he was frightened. He remembered, dimly, that there had been sneering laughter.

He had turned to see big, raw-boned Seth Haggerty and his Long H outfit grinning at him in a gloating manner. They had thought Thad was cowering because of what the judge had just told him.

Then Thad had leaped. His fist still ached from the blow he had driven into Seth Haggerty's face. There had been yells, the rush of feet—and Thad Carse, dodging like a rabbit among a pack of hungry hounds, was streaking for the window.

Somehow he had gained that

window, dived through, and landed on the ground, eight feet below, to be ripped by buckshot. And now Seth Haggerty, who had had that murder charge brought against Thad, was furnishing the horse that was swiftly carrying the youth toward the safety of the hills.

Thad grinned ruefully at the pursuit that was already stringing out behind him, then turned his smoky eyes ahead. The wind caught his sandy hair and whipped it out behind his well-molded head. It felt good to be forking a bronc down the breeze once more. He was free!

But how long could he remain free? That thought steadied Thad, brought his whirling mind up short. He was striking the hills now, well ahead of his pursuers. The big sorrel under him was a top horse in any man's string and had plenty of bottom.

"A little thing like hoss stealin' don't matter when a man's already slated for hangin'," Thad rasped aloud. "This red scamp under me can make the border easy, if I swing him an' head that way. Mebbe——"

Thad let his voice trail off. It had just occurred to him that a man in his boots would need something besides a good horse if he cheated the noose Seth Haggerty had put around his neck.

Pale features set grimly, Thad swung the sorrel, but not toward the border. North he traveled now, straight toward his own 7 spread. He had to have blankets, food, money—and guns.

The posse on his heels would, he knew, think of that, and likely enough head straight for the 7. But Thad was banking on the sorrel to keep him ahead of those kill-crazy jaspers who rode his trail with un-sheathed guns.

The big horse under him was still running smoothly, apparently just warming up. Thad headed it up a long wash, then topped out on high ground half an hour later.

He could see nothing of the posse that was somewhere on his back trail. But ahead, nestling beneath cottonwoods that stretched leafless branches toward the blue sky, was the 7 ranch house—the only home Thad had ever known.

Behind the big adobe house was the grave of the mother Thad remembered only faintly. And beside that old grave was a fairly new one that held "Blue" Carse, Thad's father.

Big, good-natured Blue Carse had been found on the range five months before, bound hand and foot, a bullet hole between his eyes.

Blue had been tortured fiendishly with a knife before that bullet between his eyes had killed him. His body had been bruised from head to foot, and some fiend had worked on his face and chest with a knife. The knife wounds showed that they had been there several hours before Blue Carse was shot. Blue Carse's wrists had been bound with new strings that had been cut from a saddle.

Thad, after the shock of his father's death, had begun checking up on that one slim clew. He had finally turned to Toby Wallace, who ran a saddle shop in Monterey.

Toby had done a stretch in prison for rustling 7 steers and made no bones about telling the world that he hated the Carse family. But Thad had swallowed his pride and gone to Toby in the hope that he might obtain some information that would lead him to the man or men who had murdered his father.

Thad had stepped through Toby Wallace's saddle-shop door just at

dusk one evening, with a gun in his hand. Wallace had made it known that he meant to kill the first Carse who stepped inside his place, and Thad was taking no chances on the hot-headed fool making a gun play. Men along the street had seen Thad go into the saddle shop, and a crowd had formed in the street.

Toby had sworn at Thad wildly, then a shot roared out, and Thad caught a brief glimpse of a man moving away from a window. He fired—and was found standing over the lifeless body of the saddler.

Three of Seth Haggerty's riders who had been in the crowd swore in court that they saw Thad Carse shoot Toby Wallace down cold. After that—

Thad jerked his whirling thoughts up short. He was at the familiar yard gate now. He dismounted, hit the ground running.

The wounds in his back pained terrifically, and his head was spinning again. But he locked his teeth and went doggedly down the sandy walk to the big front porch. He stepped up on the porch, leaped toward the door—and almost tumbled backward.

The door opened before him, and a man stepped out, grinning coldly down the barrels of twin .45s that were cocked and leveled at Thad. The man behind those guns was grizzled, cold-eyed "Tab" Mayse, one of the deadliest gun fighters who ever wore the badge of a lawman.

CHAPTER II.

THAD FINDS A CLEW.

FOR a long moment, Thad Carse stood there, breathing heavily, looking into those leveled guns. Then Thad's smoky eyes lifted to lock with Sheriff Tab Mayse's dull black gaze.

"Lift 'em, kid, or I'll see if yuh kin pack off .45 slugs easy as yuh did them blue whistlers I slammed into yuh," the grim sheriff snarled. "Sky them paws, Thad Carse, or I'll blow yuh in two!"

From inside the house came muffled swearing. Thad knew that "Chigger" Beal and "Lanky" Simpson, the two men who had been running his spread for him, were either bound or handcuffed so that they could not help him.

Wearily, Thad lifted his hands, mouth twisting in a bitter smile. He knew without being told what had happened.

Uncannily shrewd, the cold-eyed little sheriff had figured that Thad would be riding here to the 7 for such things as grub, bedding, and guns. The sheriff had crawled that famous pure-bred racer of his, hit the smooth trail, and headed straight to the 7 without bothering to cut Thad's sign in the hills.

Thad had thought of the grim little sheriff and that bay racer, but had naturally supposed that they would be somewhere behind him, following his trail.

"Yo're a Carse, all right," the sheriff was snarling thinly. "Nobody but the owl-hoot breed of man would 'a' made the crazy break yuh made to-day."

"Since when," Thad snarled back, "did the Corses git named owl-hooters?"

"Ever hear yore daddy, Blue Carse, talk much about his past?" the sheriff asked, and chuckled in a manner that made Thad go hot with anger. "An' did yuh know," the sheriff went on, "that yore uncle, Tom Carse, was hung hyar in this county fer stage robbin' afore yuh was born?"

There was something so insulting in the sheriff's manner and voice

that Thad felt himself trembling with rage. But he controlled his anger, fought back the desire to smash a fist into the man's face.

He knew this sheriff's record. Tab Mayse was noted for bringing in wanted men dead rather than alive. Blue Carse had called the sheriff a cold killer—called him that to his face and told him that he was unfit to wear the star he wore. Thad remembered that now as he saw the officer tense, saw his black eyes become slitted and dangerous.

"Go ahead!" Thad snapped suddenly. "Jerk them triggers, yuh cold-hearted little snake! Want to take me back under a tarp, don't yuh?"

The sheriff twitched, but those beady eyes did not waver. His thin mouth sagged open, then snapped shut again.

Thad laughed grittily, jarringly. "How much would yore brother-in-law, Seth Haggerty, pay yuh if yuh did drill me, Mayse?" he taunted. "I reckon he'd shore make it worth yore while, wouldn't he?"

That shot went home, for the sheriff's sallow face turned a sickly hue. He swore grittily, and the guns in his hands wavered the least bit. Paper-white, Thad Carse stood there, waiting for those guns to blast the life from him.

Despite his overhandiness with a gun, Tab Mayse was as honest as they came. A killer, yes, but a man who killed only when he felt it necessary.

Thad Carse knew those things, yet he was deliberately flinging insults into the teeth of that quick-trigger sheriff. Thad had suddenly decided that the blasting shock of lead that would hammer the life from him would be much better than sitting in some murky cell in prison waiting for the noose.

The decision made Thad reckless. He deliberately lowered his hands, smoky eyes blazing strangely in his white face.

"Go ahead!" he almost yelled. "Yank them triggers! Yo're Seth Haggerty's man, hide, hoofs, an' taller. Seth'll give yuh fits onless yuh kill me like he told yuh to."

The sheriff rocked back, gash mouth open to emit strangled oaths. He was as white as Thad now, and for once in his grim career he was letting his temper get the upper hand. With a flipping motion he holstered one famous gun, then came toward Thad with the other weapon slightly lifted.

"I—I'll pound yore danged head off fer sayin' them things, Carse!" he wheezed. "I'm nobody's man, an' I'll make yuh swaller them insults, yuh murderin' young snake!"

The sheriff leaped suddenly, the gun in his hand chopping down at Thad's hatless head. But in that brief instant before the sheriff leaped, Thad saw what his talk had done. He saw the sheriff lose his head, knew that the officer meant to gun-whip him.

Thad's lanky, hard-muscled body settled, and his hands balled into knotty fists. One of those fists whizzed out and up now, and the much smaller sheriff was lifted up and back as if propelled by huge springs.

Dazed, badly shaken though he was, the sheriff's brain still worked. He saw his mistake, saw Thad Carse leaping at him even as his body struck the rough flooring of the porch.

The gun in the officer's hand thundered. Thad Carse lurched drunkenly, crimson spurting from his cheek to turn his face into a twisted crimson mask.

But before the sheriff could fire

again Thad was on him, fists dealing terrific blows. The sheriff went limp, but Thad Carse was taking no chances on this chance of escape failing. He aimed a wallop at the sheriff's jaw, and grinned through his mask of crimson when the officer twitched half over, then became limp.

"Playin'—possum—huh?" Thad panted. "But yo're out now, dang yuh!"

He leaped up, kicked the sheriff's guns off the edge of the porch, and dived into the house. He could hardly believe that he had bested that dreaded little man hunter—could hardly believe that he was free now to ride on.

"Owl-hoot breed, am I?" Thad growled. "Well, mebbe that ain't a bad breed, after all."

There in the big, cool living room were two men, bound hand and foot. One of them was a short, thickset waddy, who turned bulging eyes on Thad and began to grin. That little hombre was Chigger Beal, a youngster who had been practically raised on the 7.

Beside Chigger lay Lanky Simpson, a ranny who was six feet four and weighed one hundred and twenty pounds. Lanky's bony face widened into a grin, and his long, skinny neck stretched as he lifted his big, shaggy head.

"Saw us loose, Thad," Lanky boomed in a very deep voice for such a skinny fellow. "Cut these piggin' strings an' we'll go take keer o' that star-toter. He told us how yuh busted loose."

"Say, hurry an' git us loose," Chigger yapped. "I see yore back is all soaked, an' yore face looks like it was half shot away. 'I'll tie up them hurts, then——"

"Nope, boys, can't turn yuh loose!" Thad grinned crookedly at

his two friends. "If I did, that danged sheriff would arrest yuh, claimin' that yuh helped me escape. If yo're tied like he left yuh, he can't make no fool charges."

Thad hurried to the big fireplace and lifted down a pair of worn belts and holsters from the mantel. Those crisscross belts were full of fat cartridges, and the scarred holsters held a brace of cedar-butted .45s.

The belts and guns had belonged to Blue Carse. Thad's hands trembled a little as he buckled his father's weapons about his waist.

He was moving with all possible speed now, for he knew that at any moment the posse that had taken his trail from town would show up.

From a tobacco jar on the mantel he lifted a roll of bills, shoved the money into a pocket of his service-worn trousers, then ran from the living room down a hallway that led to his own bedroom.

He reappeared a moment later, a black Stetson pulled low over his forehead, a blanket roll tucked under one arm. Chigger and Lanky were yelling wildly, swearing at Thad for not turning them loose.

"No can do, boys," he told them briefly. "I want yuh here to run the 7, not in jail for helpin' a fugitive escape. Adios. Yuh'll be hearin' from me, one of these days."

Despite the howls of protest from his two friends, Thad left the room, stepped out onto the porch, and started toward the sorrel. He would have no time now to gather up grub. Thad got to the sorrel, then wheeled to glance toward the corral.

"I better learn to think a little faster," he growled, and leaped aboard the sorrel.

He spurred down to the horse cor-

ral, where a dozen saddle horses stood regarding him with pricked ears. Thad grinned widely, for there in the bunch was Ute, his own big, brown horse. And tied back of the corral, nose lifted over the top bars, was the sheriff's famous racer.

Thad threw down the corral bars, stepped inside, and walked to where Ute stood snorting at his approach. The horse sniffed, then came forward to muzzle Thad's shirt pocket. The other horses were already pouring out and racing wildly away toward the open range.

Thad grinned, for he would have a fresh mount, while the posse that would take his trail would still be riding the horses they had left town on.

He led Ute to a saddle shed, piled gear onto him, and rode back to where the sorrel stood. Thad stripped gear from the sorrel, tied the blanket roll behind his saddle, then mounted and rode around the corral to where the sheriff's racer stood pawing and fidgeting. Thad slid to the ground once more, stripped saddle and bridle from the trimly built bay, and chuckled when the horse bolted with a squeal of delight.

He was about to mount again when wild shouts caused him to peer through the bars of the corral and toward the house. He was just in time to see the posse reining in at the gate. Sheriff Tab Mayse was running toward them, yelling and pointing toward the corral!

Thad whirled toward his mount, then seemed to freeze. His eyes widened, then became hot, glinting slits. He had glanced at the sheriff's saddle in turning. And there, just behind the cantle, were the stubs where a set of saddle strings had been cut.

Thad's hand shook as he fished in a trousers pocket. He drew out the crimson-smear saddle strings that had been tied about his father's wrists. Thad stooped, unrolled the saddle strings he had taken from his pocket. The cut ends of those strings matched the stubs on the sheriff's saddle.

CHAPTER III.

"KILL 'EM BOTH!"

ONLY by exerting every ounce of will power did Thad Carse manage to fight back the anger that flooded through him. But, controlling himself, he mounted and spurred away from the corral, almost instantly lost in a thicket of mesquite.

He could hear yells about the corral, and knew that his going had been discovered. But the only thing Thad could think of was getting to some water hole, bathing the wounds on his back, then figuring out some way of getting at Sheriff Tab Mayse.

Back there, he had wanted to lunge out into the open, drag his father's guns from their holsters, and pour the lead they held into that cold-eyed sheriff's body. But even in that moment of anger Thad had realized that the posse would, in all likelihood, cut him down before he could fire a single shot at the officer.

"Dad always said that little snake had no heart and was a plumb out-an'-out killer," Thad gritted through locked teeth. "But dad allus figgered Mayse as honest an' above doin' anything snaky. Dad was wrong there, Ute hoss. That startotin' little varmint was there when dad was tortured an' killed. If he didn't do it himself, he helped."

Thad loped on toward a water

hole he knew of, little dreaming of the turn events had taken at the ranch house.

In the 7 ranch yard, Seth Haggerty faced the cold-eyed little sheriff. Haggerty's iron-jawed face was flushed with anger, and there were dangerous lights kindling in his icy gray eyes. His lips lifted in a snarl as he glowered down at the battered sheriff.

"Let a slick-eared kid best yuh after bringin' in some o' the saltiest men that ever rode this border country!" Haggerty sneered. "Tab, I figured yuh had better sense than that."

The sheriff bristled, flat, expressionless eyes puckering. "Since when," he asked flatly, "did yuh git the notion that I had to answer to yuh fer what happens?"

Seth Haggerty snarled an oath, and let his big, bony hands smack against the butts of the twin guns thonged to his thighs. He yanked the weapons half out of their holsters, then seemed to hesitate as he caught the mirthless grin tugging at the sheriff's lips.

"Go ahead, Seth," the little star-toter spoke softly. "Ever since that sister o' mine that yuh married died, I've wanted to kill yuh. Yore abuse was the cause o' her death, Haggerty. I'd shore like to kill yuh."

Seth Haggerty shuddered, and let go of the guns he was gripping. Few men would have believed that gun-swift Seth Haggerty was afraid of any man. Yet Haggerty was afraid of one man, and that man was the grim sheriff who stood looking up at him out of those emotionless eyes.

"I—I was riled, Tab. Fergit it," Haggerty stammered. "Hearin' that that danged kid got away upset me some. I wanted——"

Haggerty caught himself, swear-

ing in confusion. But the sheriff had not missed the earnest tone in Haggerty's voice.

"Yeah," Mayse drawled, "yuh shore did want that kid dead. Like yuh've always wanted his pappy dead. Like yuh wanted his uncle dead, years ago. Why, Haggerty? How come yuh hated the Carses?"

Seth Haggerty snarled savagely, face going purple, then white. "That's my private business," he snapped. "Why I want to see the last Carse snake put six feet under is my affair."

"Not when yuh start usin' the law as a cat's-paw, it ain't, Seth." The sheriff's voice was still silky. "I've got a hunch them three men o' yores done some lyin' in court, feller!"

Seth Haggerty stiffened, and there was real concern in his icy eyes when he glared down at the sheriff.

"Say," he blurted, "are yuh stickin' up fer that danged kid? Wait until some o' the voters git wind o' this."

"I'm goin' after Thad Carse, when that bunch o' fools quit swarmin' all over the range." The sheriff shrugged. "Thad's wanted, an' I'm an officer. Reckon he'll come back feet first, 'cause he's got nothin' to lose by forcin' a shoot-out."

Some of the possemen who had ridden out from town just then came running to report that the sheriff's horse was missing. The little officer swore roundly, and bow-legged out behind the corral where his saddle lay.

He picked up the heavy hull, hung it on the corral, and stood glaring about at the mesquite that stretched away into the draws.

"The kid likely turned my hoss loose, like he did all the others," the sheriff snarled. "An' that thor-

oughbred will be somethin' to ketch."

"Fetch yore saddle," Seth Haggerty snorted, "an' I'll have one o' the boys turn a hoss over to yuh."

"Dang that saddle!" the sheriff flung back. "I've cussed it ever since I let yuh sell it to me last month. Danged thing's too heavy fer that hoss o' mine to run under."

Haggerty started to protest, but seemed to think better of it. He looked at the saddle on the corral, and it seemed that there was a slight smile on his lips as he eyed the stubs of leather strings behind the cantle.

But the sheriff was not watching Haggerty just then. The little officer turned, stalked back to where the possemen had left their horses, and picked out the best-looking horse among them. He shortened the stirrups, and was swinging up when the possemen came running toward their mounts, ready to follow the sheriff.

Chigger Beal and Lanky Simpson, having been turned loose by the sheriff, were seated on one end of the porch, glowering sullenly and making rather pointed remarks about having to fumigate the place to get rid of the skunk odor.

"Hey, yuh two," the sheriff yelled at them, "stop yammerin' an' act like yuh had some sense. Did Thad Carse say he was headin' fer any particular place?"

"Shore," Lanky boomed. "Thad said he was headin' fer China."

"Didn't either!" Chigger yipped. "Lanky, yuh know better than ter lie ter the sheriff. Yuh heard Thad say he was goin' to Africky same as I did."

"Yup, he did say that." Lanky nodded. "But he was goin' to China first."

The sheriff swore harshly, then wheeled to face the posse. "Yuh hombres," he bit out, "ride on back to town."

The sheriff wheeled the big *grulla* horse he had chosen to ride and went jogging away. He turned in behind the corral where his saddle had lain, then burrowed away into the mesquite, eyes coldly watchful.

Standing in the ranch yard, Seth Haggerty laughed croakingly, eyes dancing with evil delight.

"Tab Mayse has never failed to fetch back a man he went after," Haggerty chuckled, glancing toward Chigger and Lanky. "An' the funny part o' it is, he usually brings 'em back cold."

Chigger and Lanky both got up, a ridiculous pair when they stood side by side.

"Git!" Lanky boomed at the crowd that was milling about the place. "I'll count ten, then Chigger an' me will start throwin' lead at whoever ain't on his hoss or tryin' to git on."

"Count by fives so's the buzzards can't all git away," Chigger yipped, and yanked a Colt with no clumsiness whatever.

Lanky drew a six-gun, cocked it, and let the round barrel settle in Seth Haggerty's general direction. Haggerty swore uneasily and made for his horse, but as he passed a certain scrawny, tawny-eyed little hombre who looked as if he were badly in need of a good scrubbing, the Long H owner slowed down.

"Hang back when we ride away, Len," Haggerty rasped from one corner of his mouth. "Circle back when nobody is lookin', an' foller the sheriff. See that him an' Thad Carse both cash in their chips. Make it look like they fought it out."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SHERIFF GOES DOWN.

THAD CARSE was in worse condition than he had thought. With the excitement over for the time being, his brain became numbed again, and the gnawing pain of those shot wounds in his back made him sway dizzily in the saddle.

He made the water hole he had headed for, stripped, and bathed. The water was icy, and some of the fire seemed taken from his wounds.

Thad could feel five gashes across his back, but could not see how deep the shot had cut. He rinsed his undershirt free of the crimson that had soaked into it, tore the garment into strips, and completed a crude job of bandaging after no little effort. But with each movement of the muscles beneath that ripped flesh, Thad winced.

Out of the water and dressed again, he found that the numbness was returning to his brain. It was all he could do to keep from crawling beneath the brush that grew about the water hole and going to sleep.

But that, he told himself firmly, would never do. That cold-eyed little sheriff would be on his trail, following with the grim persistency of a bloodhound.

Thad's teeth ground whenever he thought of the sheriff. He remembered that saddle, and the stubs that had once been saddle strings behind the cantle.

"I'll smoke that fishy-eyed son if it's the last thing I do!" Thad muttered thickly as he reeled to Ute and climbed into the saddle.

Thad was cooler now, however, and able to think more clearly despite the heaviness of his brain. He realized only too well that he would

not have a show against the sheriff in his present condition, for that star-toter was faster than greased lightning with guns.

Or did he really want to shoot it out with the sheriff? Somehow, Thad's weary mind kept trying to buck at the notion. He could not help remembering things his father had said about Tab Mayse.

Blue Carse had disliked the sheriff, and had not hesitated to tell the little star-toter so. But Blue Carse had called Mayse square.

"Dad never misjudged a man that I know of," Thad grumbled as he rode away through the hills.

Still, there were those saddle strings in his pocket—rawhide thongs that were crimson-stained from Blue Carse's wounds. And the cut ends of those saddle strings matched the stubs behind the sheriff's saddle.

Thad shook his head wearily, trying to puzzle it all out. He was pointing toward a nester outfit that he knew of, in the hope that he could buy a hot meal.

Thad's lean jaws clamped as he thought of his neighbors. He had to go some place, get some sort of salve or liniment that would drive the fire from those wounds, and get some food. Thad realized that lack of food was hurting him, weakening him almost as much as the pain.

But to obtain food he must visit some neighboring outfit, and it had just occurred to Thad Carse that he had no neighbors who had ever acted friendly toward him or his father. He had often wondered why none of the neighbors ever rode past for a friendly visit, but had never got around to asking his father the reason.

He wished mightily, now, that he had asked his dad a few questions

—wished that his father had explained things to him.

For the first time in his life, Thad realized that the Carse family had never been welcome in the Monterey country. But the explanation to that would have to wait.

Ahead of him, nestling in a sickly-looking grove of cottonwoods that were leafless at this time of year, Thad spotted the nester's shack. Smoke lifted from the rusty stove-pipe, and as he approached the yard gate he caught the odor of frying meat and boiling coffee. Thad sniffed hungrily, mouth watering.

He was about to step down out of the saddle when the shack's door flung open, and an angular, frowzy-looking woman stepped out onto the little stoop. There was a shotgun in the woman's work-roughened hands, and the twin barrels of the weapon were slanting straight toward Thad.

The woman's dark eyes looked sultry, and her mouth was drawn into a determined line.

"Git yo'self away from heah, Thad Cahse!" she spoke suddenly. "Ah kin shoot bettah than that fool sheriff done. Git, yo' rascal!"

Thad blinked, utterly unable to understand the woman's evident dislike for him. "Why—why, say, Mrs. Turner," he stammered, "whatever is the matter? I never done yuh folks any harm."

"Co'se not," the woman drawled in her twangy voice. "Yo' stripe knows bettah than to fool with us hill folk. We——"

The woman broke off, for around one corner of the cabin stepped Lonny Turner, her husband. Turner was a lanky, thin-faced man, with fierce, black eyes and the sulky disposition of his kind.

He glowered at Thad Carse, fingering the trigger of a long rifle he held with apparent carelessness across the crook of his left arm. But that long rifle was cocked, and Thad saw that it covered him squarely.

"Heard my woman say git, didn't ye?" Lonny Turner snarled thinly. "We uns ain't bringin' the law on us by shelterin' yo' kind. I was in the co'troom when yo' got yo' sentence an' made that break."

Thad whirled Ute, afraid to trust himself to make a reply. He sent the big brown horse thundering away, quartering off toward the nearest hills.

He had ridden perhaps thirty yards when something snarled thinly past his bent shoulders, and up ahead he saw a little geyser of sand. Thad dropped forward instinctively, and felt another slug rip through his billowing shirt, narrowly missing his already painfully wounded back.

With a snarl of anger, Thad dropped low along his mount's neck and shoulder, on the right side. His left spur clamped under the saddle shirt, left hand gripping the saddle horn, he shucked the gun from his right-hand holster, raised his head above the crook of his knee and the saddle pommel, and slanted his gun backward.

He had naturally supposed that Lonny Turner, the hill-billy nester, was slinging those slugs after him. What Thad saw brought a gasp from his lips, and a worried frown to his brow. Back there at the nester's shack was Sheriff Tab Mayse, just leaping aboard his horse, Winchester waving wildly in one hand.

The sheriff had evidently dismounted and used one of the gateposts as a rest to do his shooting.

The officer was mounting now and spurring after his quarry, however, and Thad turned his eyes to a brushy slope just ahead.

"Them onhospitable nesters done me a favor, at that," the youth muttered as he reined Ute into the protection of heavy brush. "If they'd fed me like I wanted, that little star-totin' jigger would 'a' snagged me while I was eatin'."

The thought of food was gone from Thad's mind, replaced by the grim necessity of devising ways and means of losing Sheriff Mayse. Or did he actually want to lose the sheriff?

Thad wondered wearily whether or not he really wanted to escape. There was that business of the saddle strings. Perhaps it would be best to draw rein in that little clearing ahead yonder, step down from his horse, and wait until Sheriff Mayse rode up.

Thad knew that in his present condition he could never hope to equal the sheriff's famous draw. But he might stay on his feet long enough to get a shot or two at the gun fighter.

"If I stay on the dodge," Thad gritted aloud, "that sidewinder will round me up sooner or later, an' drag me back to hang for somethin' I never done. If I fight it out with him here an' now—well, a bullet is better than a rope."

Thad was in the little clearing now. He glanced up at the crest of the brushy ridge that lifted sharply above him, wondering suddenly if the sheriff would hit for the crest and try getting a line on the direction his quarry had taken.

Weak and sick, Thad knew that he could not stay in the saddle much longer. The sheriff would overhaul him, maybe shoot him out of the saddle without giving him a chance.

"Show-down is my only chance," the youth muttered, and was lifting his feet from the stirrups to dismount when from somewhere up that brushy slope above him came the coughing report of a rifle.

Thad flinched, ducking low. But no bullet had come near him. He was trying to understand the situation when the rifle barked once more, and into the clearing lunged the sheriff's mount.

In the briefest space, Thad saw that the officer was tumbling sideways, knew by the limp way he struck the earth that he was hard hit.

CHAPTER V.

HIDDEN SHACK.

BUT even as Thad Carse saw those things he was acting with all the speed he could muster. His pain-dulled eyes had caught the smudge of powder smoke puffing from a clump of cat's-claw well up the side of the slope as that second rifle shot whipped out.

Thad's right hand dipped, came up with a heavy Colt. The range was long, but not impossible. The gun in his hand boomed twice, and the cat's-claw clump wiggled convulsively. A man stood up, clawed at his face, then pitched headlong down the rocky hillside.

"Didn't have sense enough to allow for the fact that he was shootin' downhill, else that slug would 'a' got me in the head!" Thad snarled, and giggered Ute up the hillside.

The big horse scrambled up over treacherous loose rock, snorting and lunging over the poor footing. Thad was swaying in the saddle like a drunken man, the Colt still gripped in his fist, blurred vision riveted on that still form ahead.

He saw without dismounting that the man was dead from a slug that had struck him under one eye.

"Len Baxter," Thad muttered dully as he looked down into the glazed, tawny eyes.

This presented a new puzzle for Thad's numbed brain to untangle. Len Baxter was known in Monterey as a mean-tempered little walloper who always rode good horses, spent plenty of money, and herded by himself. If he were connected with any one in any way, nobody knew about it.

But Thad Carse was much too weary at the moment to struggle with the puzzle of why Len Baxter had sneaked along that ridge to gun the sheriff and him.

"He meant to get us both, that's certain," Thad grunted. "An' if he'd 'a' held his sights right, I reckon he would 'a' done it."

Thad turned Ute back down the slope, and a few minutes later was halting to sit his saddle and look down at the sheriff. The officer lay as he had fallen, face pressing into the dirt, hands outflung.

Thad saw the spreading crimson blotch on the back of his yellow shirt, and nodded grimly. "Shot plumb through," he began. "Looks like——"

But Thad's voice jerked to a halt, and he dismounted so quickly that his wobbly knees all but gave away beneath him. He had seen the sheriff twitch as if he were trying to turn. Thad stooped, grasped the officer's shoulder, and rolled him over.

The sheriff's eyes were closed, which meant that he still lived. A dead man's eyes would have been wide open.

Thad laid a hand over the sheriff's heart, and felt a faint, slow beating that meant the man's life

hung by the slimmest thread. There was a red smear on the front of the sheriff's shirt that ringed a tiny black hole.

Thad opened shirt and undershirt, his own troubles and suffering forgotten for the moment. The rifle bullet had struck the sheriff just above the collar bone, ranging downward. Thad turned the sheriff over, and saw that the bullet had gone through, leaving a small, clean wound at the back.

"Bullet didn't flatten, though it come out through the shoulder blade," he growled. "Which means Len Baxter was usin' jacketed bullets."

Breath was fluttering in and out the sheriff's slightly open mouth. His lips, pale and loose, were already rimmed with red-flecked froth.

"Drilled through the lung," Thad again spoke aloud. "But a jacketed slug wouldn't do a lot of damage. If a saw-bones could work on him——"

Thad's voice trailed off. His position was one to cause any man worry. There was his horse, and ahead lay the safety of brushy hills and hidden draws. All Thad Carse had to do was mount and ride on. But that meant leaving a man to die of thirst and fever.

Thad shook his head slowly, trying to get it all through his logy brain. He could not ride on and leave the sheriff, even if they were enemies. Nor could he stay here. There might be a posse following, men who would shoot Thad Carse on sight. And there was Lonny Turner.

The Turners were bound to have heard the shooting. Beyond a doubt, the sulky hill-billy would come snooping over to see what the shooting had been.

Thad knew what that meant. He would be either killed or taken prisoner by Turner. And that meant getting blamed for shooting the sheriff and Len Baxter both.

Thad's lips curled in anger, but he stooped, gathered the slight sheriff into his arms, and reeled to where the officer's mount stood snorting and trembling.

He tied the sheriff across the saddle, handling him as gently as possible. Then Thad reeled back to his own horse, mounted, and went up the slope past where Len Baxter lay. He found Baxter's big, grain-fed horse a few moments later, stripped it of riding gear, and rode back down into the clearing.

The sun was getting low, and Thad realized dimly that if he could get away from this spot before some one showed up, he would have a chance to hole up for the night and perhaps gain some strength.

The hills swam crazily before his eyes, and there were times when he felt as if he were falling from the saddle. But he managed to keep his mind working enough to head for a certain deep canyon back in the hills where he had once trapped wild horses. There was a crude stone shack there that he had built under a bluff, and a spring of clean, cold water.

It was not far across the rough hills to that canyon, yet it seemed hours to Thad Carse before he spotted the red cliffs at its mouth. He swung in under the cliffs, and was about to turn the bend that would bring him within sight of the rock hut he had built, when his nostrils drank in the tang of wood smoke. The sun had set, and dusk had deepened until it was almost dark in the valley.

Thad looked up at the tall cliffs, the tips of which were still painted

by the last rays of daylight. From his present position he knew that the little stone shack was less than a quarter of a mile ahead.

He slid to the ground, made sure the sheriff's horse could not slip the rope that was fastened to Ute's saddle horn, then started forward on foot. There was a strange roaring in his ears, and his senses were so numbed that he could barely tell when his feet were on the ground.

He forced himself to go on, knowing in a dim sort of way that he would soon keel over from sheer weakness and exhaustion.

Those wounds along his back were stiff and sore now, and his whole body cried out for rest and nourishment. He fell twice before he had traveled fifty yards, but managed to crawl to his feet and stagger on. He was in sight of the little rock hut now, and could see a dim red blur that he knew was light coming from the one opening he had left in a side of the shack to serve as a window.

Thad tried to hurry his steps, and was within fifty feet of the shack when the door opened and he saw the blurred figure of a man standing there as if peering out into the darkness.

Thad tried to jump toward an up-reared rock that was only a pace ahead, snatching at his guns at the same time. But his boots caught on something and he fell heavily.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, he heard a shout, and the clatter of booted feet on the stony earth. He knew that some one was running toward him from the shack, and tried to prop himself up.

But Thad had driven himself too hard. His brain reeled crazily for a moment, then darkness settled over him like a blanket.

Thad was unconscious when a match flared over him and a man's voice lifted in a hoarse oath as the flickering light showed his set, pale face.

CHAPTER VI.

"YO'RE GOIN' BACK TO JAIL."

SUNLIGHT in his eyes caused Thad Carse to blink, then glance about drowsily. He was snugly comfortable, and felt like going back to sleep. But a crudely shaped window held his sleepy gaze until his mind cleared, and he began remembering things.

He sat up suddenly, tossing aside warm blankets that had covered him. The movement brought twinges of pain to his back, and he was suddenly remembering those wounds. But Thad's mind was too busy at the moment to think much of his wounded back.

He saw at a glance that he was inside the little stone shack he had built some years ago. There was a fire in the stove across the room from him, and from a steaming pot came the savory odor of stewing meat. Thad blinked, groped for his clothes that were piled on an up-ended box, and was dressing when the cabin door swung open.

He saw two things then that brought him fully awake. On a thick pallet of blankets just across the room was Sheriff Tab Mayse, cold eyes regarding Thad steadily. In the doorway stood Lanky Simpson, bony face wreathed in smiles as he watched Thad finish dressing.

"What happened?" Thad blurted. "How come yuh here, Lanky? An' how'd I get here?"

Thad had only a hazy memory of what had happened the evening before. It did seem that he had come here to the deep valley and tried to reach the cabin. He had

seen a light and come in, or had that been a dream?

"Feelin' better, huh?" Lanky boomed, striding on into the room. "Yuh ought to, Thad. I took four buckshot out o' yore back an' used nigh a hull bottle o' screw-worm dope on them gashes."

Thad had smelled the pungent odor of the salve, but had thought little about it. In fact, he was thinking of other things even now.

"How come yuh here?" he asked again, eyes riveted on the gangly Lanky Simpson.

"I took out after this little weasel when he hit yore trail," Lanky boomed, jerking a big hand toward the staring sheriff. "Seen yore sign was leadin' him this way an' took a short cut, figurin' yuh might 'a' come hyar ter rest up."

"Play actin' won't git yuh two any place." The sheriff's voice sounded hollow and weak. "Better finish me while the sign's right, Thad Carse."

"I got hyar an' waited ontill dark," Lanky continued, calmly ignoring the sheriff. "Yuh come stumblin' in, an' after I'd taken keer o' yuh, I went to hunt yore hoss. Found the sheriff an' fetched him in. Looks like the jasper will live, too."

"Yeah," the sheriff sneered, "yuh made a poor job o' killin' me, Carse. Slick, way yuh got above me an' handed me this slug through the chest."

Thad opened his mouth as if to reply, then closed his lips firmly. Smoky eyes hard, he stood twisting a slim cigarette and staring at the sheriff. With the cigarette going, he seated himself on the edge of the bunk, aware that he was much improved after a night's sleep.

The sheriff thought Thad had bushed him, and the youth knew

that no amount of argument would change the grim little officer's mind. But it angered him to be accused of such a stunt.

He rammed a hand deep into one pocket, pulled out the stained saddle strings that had held his father's wrists together, and dangled them grimly from one hand.

"Ever see these before, sheriff?" Thad asked sharply.

His eyes were keenly alert, riveted on the officer's wan face. The sheriff was a mighty good actor if those saddle strings meant anything to him, for not a muscle in that wan face moved. Nor did the sheriff's dull eyes so much as flicker.

"Them things," the officer bit out, "was on yore daddy's wrists when he—when he was found. Why?"

"Yuh ought to know!" Thad snarled, getting to his feet suddenly. "Mayse, onless the sign lies, yo're about the lowest specimen that ever breathed. These saddle strings come from yore own saddle."

The sheriff's features twitched now, and for a brief instant there was a look of something that might have been alarm in his cold eyes.

"What," he snarled thinly, "are yuh drivin' at, young feller?"

In a voice thick with emotion Thad explained how he had found the stubs of missing saddle strings on the sheriff's saddle, and how the cut ends of those stubs matched the ends of the strings he held.

The sheriff's face went white, then red, as he listened. Thad saw something kindling in those flat, expressionless eyes, something that looked bleak and dangerous.

"So!" The sheriff's voice was little more than a soft whisper. "I wondered why a certain gent was willin' to sell me an eighty-dollar hull for twenty-five."

"Who?" Thad croaked, wondering at the strange feeling of relief that was flooding through him.

Beyond a doubt, the sheriff knew nothing of the saddle strings that had been cut from that hull he owned. And deep within him Thad Carse was glad. For the first time, he realized that he held a lot of respect for this grim-eyed little man who had made law and order stick in the wild border country.

The little room was so silent that the bubbling of the pot on the stove sounded like drum beats. Lanky Simpson was staring in amazement at Thad and the soiled rawhide strings he held in slightly trembling fingers.

Thad was as tense as a coiled spring, watching the sheriff's white face, waiting for the officer to name the man from whom he had bought that saddle. But the sheriff's dull eyes had become expressionless once more, and his thin lips were settled in a grim, hard line.

"Thad," his voice knifed the heavy silence, "do yuh think I'm the kind o' skunk that would kill a man the way yore daddy was killed?"

Thad groaned inwardly. He had hoped the sheriff would answer his question, name the man from whom he had bought that saddle from which those strings had been cut.

"An' do yuh think, sheriff, that I'm the breed of skunk that would bush yuh like yuh was yesterday?" Thad countered grimly.

"Thad, if I'd 'a' knowed about them saddle strings comin' from this little snake's saddle, I'd 'a' put salt, instead o' screw-worm salve, in them bullet holes in his side," Lanky Simpson's mighty voice boomed hoarsely. "Why, the ornery little skunk needs——"

"Thad," the sheriff's voice cut Lanky off sharply, "yuh made it hard on yoreself in court by refusin' to say why yuh went to Toby Wallace's saddle shop. Was—was yuh tryin' to find out, mebbe, who had bought new saddle strings lately?"

Thad nodded. "That's why I went to Wallace's shop," the youth admitted. "I went in with a gun in my hand, aimin' to make Wallace behave while I questioned him. I told the rest of it a dozen times at my trial."

"Yeah," the sheriff grunted, "I know yuh claimed yuh was augerin' with Wallace when some gent blasted him from the window. Shore yuh don't know who done that shootin'?"

"I ain't shore, but I've got a strong hunch that I salted him down permanent yesterday." Thad's voice was brittle, harsh. "The fool didn't know how to line his sights proper for downhill shootin'."

"So I noticed," the sheriff tried to chuckle. "He missed me first time, then got his sights set better afore I could spot him."

Thad blinked, then a grin tugged at his lips. "Then yuh know that I didn't bush yuh, like yuh accused me of doin'?" he asked, and wondered why it should matter so much to him what the sheriff's answer would be.

"Say, what yuh two talkin' about?" Lanky Simpson roared. "Why in blazes don't yuh tell a man somethin', huh?"

"I said what I did hopin' yuh'd tell what yuh knowed," the sheriff admitted quietly. "Lanky commenced askin' how I got plugged, an' by questionin' him I found out yuh wasn't packin' a rifle. Who drilled me, Thad?"

"Len Baxter," Thad snapped, and told what had happened at the lit-

tle clearing where he had stopped for a shoot-out with the sheriff.

The sheriff's face went bleak when Thad told of stopping for the purpose of fighting it out with him.

"Yo're owl-hoot breed, plumb through!" the officer grated, eyes hard. "I'm glad Baxter's slug slapped me to sleep. Otherwise, yuh an' me both would be buzzard bait to-day. An' we never would 'a' knowed that a certain snake-brained skunk planned it jest that way."

"Meanin', o' course, the gent who sold yuh that saddle." Thad's voice was flat, bitter. "Who was it?"

The sheriff wiggled beneath the blanket that covered him. Then one corner of that blanket flipped back, and a cocked six-gun was weaving from Thad to Lanky Simpson.

"Snuck this gun while yuh was out, Lanky," the sheriff rapped thinly. "Behave, yuh beanpole, or I'll cut yuh in two with slugs. Thad, sky them paws! Yo're goin' back to jail."

CHAPTER VII.

"HAGGERTY SOLD ME THAT SADDLE."

THAD crouched, white-faced and tense. He should have known that the waspy sheriff would pull something like this.

"Aim to take me back to stretch rope, do yuh?" Thad asked, sparing desperately for time.

From the tail of his eye Thad could see his belts and guns, piled atop the little table in the center of the room. A leap would carry him to those weapons, And after that—

"Ain't takin' yuh back to hang," the sheriff snapped, halting Thad's racing thoughts. "I'm takin' yuh back an' lockin' yuh up, which is

my duty. Then I'm goin' after the jasper that sold me that saddle. His neck, an' not yores, will stretch hemp—mebbe."

"Why the mebbe?" Thad growled heatedly.

"There's a chance," the sheriff answered softly, "that the buzzard will try his hand at smokin' his way out o' the mess he's in. In that case he won't need hangin'."

Thad shivered in spite of himself. There was something so cold, so utterly certain, about this lawman. He was crawling from his blankets now, coming out with slow, easy motions, flat eyes seeming to be on both Thad and Lanky at the same time.

Lanky's big, bony face was working, and his right hand had lifted less than shoulder-high. Plainly, he was ready to start something, and the knowledge made Thad Carse start nervously.

Sheriff Tab Mayse would start that gun of his talking at the first sign of trouble, regardless of what his personal opinion in the matter might be. Duty was the thing that made a slave of the sheriff, drove him mercilessly on, making of him a machinelike man feared by those outside the law.

"Lanky!" Thad rasped. "Take it easy. Want a bullet in yore gizzard? Mr. Mayse's pet hobby is killin'."

The sheriff flinched at the words, but made no reply. He was on his feet now, swaying a little, face whitened by the pain his movements brought him.

He shook his head sharply, and in that instant Thad Carse knew that the sheriff could never make the long ride to Monterey. Somewhere along the trail he would tumble from his saddle. That punctured lung would never stand the strain.

In fact, the lung was already acting ugly, for the sheriff was beginning to cough. Thad cried out in genuine alarm when he saw crimson smudge the sheriff's pale lips.

"For gosh sakes, yuh bull-headed ol' wart-hog, sit down!" Thad cried, and strode forward without realizing it. "Ease back down there, afore it's too late. Don't yuh see that— Gosh!"

The last came in a strangled gasp, and Thad leaped with all his might. The sheriff had folded up as if a bullet had pierced his brain. The six-gun spilled from his fingers, and he would have struck the hard-packed dirt floor jarringly but for Thad Carse's muscular arms wrapping about him.

Thad eased the officer down on the pallet, bending anxiously to place one ear against the bandaged chest.

Lanky Simpson strode forward, swearing boomingly. "Take out yore knife an' slit the skunk's throat!" he advised. "Take yuh in after yuh saved his life, would he?"

"I lost my knife," Thad growled, "but yuh've got one. I'll hold his head back while yuh do the whit-tlin' on his neck."

Lanky jumped back, big mouth hanging open. Not until he saw the look on Thad's lean face did he savvy that he was being kidded.

He grinned sheepishly, realizing how wild his talk had been. He was about to say something when Thad leaped up, alarm written on his face.

"Listen!" Thad hissed.

It took no great amount of listening to hear the churn of shod hoofs, squeak of saddle leather, and rattle of bit chains.

Thad leaped to the poorly shaped window, peered out, then whirled back into the room to make a flying leap for his six-guns.

"Seth Haggerty!" he snarled savagely. "Seth Haggerty, three-four of his men, an' that nester, Lonny Turner!"

"Let 'em git close, then we'll waltz outside an' git the drop," Lanky croaked hoarsely. "An' if that Haggerty snake makes ary bad move, I'll give him his needin's."

"Watch Lonny Turner," Thad warned, and told swiftly what had happened at the Turner cabin the day before.

Lanky swore roundly, gun out and cocked.

"I'll remember that," Lanky growled. "Turner has ate 7 beef all along, fer I've seen him butcherin' it twict. But yore dad allus said let fellers like Turner alone long as they ate the beef they kilt instead o' sellin' it."

"Don't talk so loud," Thad cautioned. "Them jaspers have spotted the smoke comin' out of the stovepipe, an' will be watchful. They must be close."

Thad's voice had barely trailed off when from somewhere outside came a hoarse yell, and the sudden rattle of hoofs as horses were spurred quickly away.

"Hunt cover!" a voice lifted wildly. "Told yuh we better not ride up hyar so bold. That brown hoss in the corral yonder is Thad Carse's. An' the *grulla* is the one the sheriff left on."

"Seth Haggerty oratin', dang his hide!" Thad snarled. "I wish to gosh he hadn't spotted my hoss."

"Boys," Haggerty's voice lifted again, "we've got that Thad Carse coyote cornered shore. An' I reckon it ain't hard ter figure out who kilt Len Baxter. Nor it ain't hard to figure out why the sheriff has never showed up."

"Tol' ye I heerd fast shootin' close tuh my place yistidy," came

a yelled reply, and Thad recognized Lonny Turner's nasal whine. "I 'low thet Cahse young un has done kilted the sher'f, Mistah Haggerty."

"Yo're right, Turner," Seth Haggerty answered. "Carse kilt my—er—kilt Len Baxter, then drilled the sheriff, too, or I miss a guess."

Peering out the window, Thad caught only brief glimpses of the men as they swarmed behind boulders and brush clumps in the canyon. Their horses were huddled together out in the open, and Thad counted six.

"Six of them an' two of us, Lanky," Thad growled, "which is long odds."

"Hey, Carse!" Seth Haggerty was bawling from behind a big boulder. "We know yo're in thar, so come out. Or do yuh want us ter smoke yuh out?"

In his anxiety to make himself heard, Seth Haggerty peered over the boulder, a gun gripped in each big fist. Before Thad could answer, a Colt crashed mightily within the little shack, and Seth Haggerty went tumbling backward, squalling in alarm.

Thad was about to turn and tell Lanky to stop the shooting when he saw a snaky motion in a clump of brush not far from the cabin door. Thad glanced over his shoulder, saw Lanky standing beside the door which he had opened a crack. Then Thad's eyes whipped back to the brush clump.

He saw a long rifle barrel poke slowly forward, and caught a brief glimpse of Lonny Turner's mean face as he nestled one lank cheek against the rifle stock. Thad could see Turner's left hand slide out along the forearm of the long gun, and his lips twisted in a cold smile.

His right-hand Colt stabbed through the window, steadied

briefly, and roared thunderously. Lonnie Turner leaped up, screaming oaths, wringing a bullet-torn left hand.

"Thanks, Thad!" Lanky croaked. "I never see that snake until yore lead jumped him out. He'd 'a' got me, shore."

Lanky's Colt thundered, and Lonny Turner quit dancing about to dive toward shelter.

Guns opened in a vicious roar now, and Thad and Lanky were both forced to seek the safety of the stone walls.

"There's more than one man in thar," Seth Haggerty yowled. "Be keerful, men. A bullet nigh brained me, an' Turner is out o' the fight. Watch sharp, boys!"

"What's comin' off hyar? Why all the shootin'?"

Thad turned at that weak voice. He had forgotten the sheriff until now. The officer was staring up at Thad, some of the glassiness gone from his dark eyes.

Thad told him briefly what the trouble was, grinning sourly as he spoke. "So it looks like a break for yuh, sheriff," he finished angrily. "Yore friend, Seth Haggerty, will be smokin' me out afore long."

There was an expression in the sheriff's eyes that Thad could not understand. The little officer sat up slowly, shaking his head sharply when Thad would have objected. The sheriff was moving with caution, wise enough to know that too much strain would start that lung pumping crimson again.

"Pass me my guns, Thad," the sheriff spoke quietly as he got slowly to his feet. "An' don't worry none about me tryin' to make trouble fer yuh. Seth Haggerty is the gent who sold me that saddle with the missin' strings."

CHAPTER VIII.

THAD HIRES TWO HANDS.

WHITE to the lips, Thad Carse stood there in the powder-fogged little shack, wild lights burning in his smoky eyes as the full meaning of the sheriff's words dawned on him.

Sheriff Tab Mayse, wise in the ways of men like Thad Carse, knew the storm that was passing through the youth's soul. The little sheriff reached forward, laid a steady hand on Thad's arm.

"I been a fool, son," the officer said softly. "Been an awful fool. Haggerty slated me an' yuh fer a shoot-out, knowin' that neither o' us would live through it."

"Haggerty's the snake that kilt dad!" Thad's voice was so utterly cold that the gun-fightin' sheriff flinched a little. "But why, sheriff? Why would Haggerty want dad dead? An' why would he want yuh an' me to smoke each other down?"

"Owl-hoot breed!" the sheriff rapped thinly. "Thad, yore daddy, Seth Haggerty, an' me was ridin' the owl-hoot trail when we was yore age. Ridin' it together. But yore dad steadied, settled down, an' talked Seth an' me into doin' the same."

There were voices lifted outside, and an occasional bullet snarled through the poorly shaped window to flatten on the stone wall of the shack.

Lanky Simpson was still at the door, now and then throwing a shot at brush or rock that hid a gunman. He was swearing hoarsely, listening to what was being said there behind him.

"Then—then folks know that dad used to ride the owl-hoot trail, huh?" Thad Carse choked. "That's why our neighbors never act friendly."

It was a statement, not a question. The sheriff nodded and swore under his breath.

"Haggerty, blast him, has kept devilin' yore daddy an' me to turn bronc again, after all these years," the officer growled. "He poisoned the minds o' yore neighbors by tellin' 'em lies on yore dad."

"An' he killed dad," Thad Carse almost panted the words, "because dad wouldn't turn outlaw. I see it all now, see why dad an' him quarreled, an' why our neighbors hated us. I'll——"

"Steady!" the sheriff clipped, tightening his grip on Thad's sleeve. "Yo're right, o' course. Haggerty worked on yore dad constant, figurin', I reckon, that if Blue went bronc I'd foller along. But Blue wouldn't do it, an' Haggerty figured a way to git rid o' him an' set yuh an' me onto each other at the same time."

Thad's wild rage had settled to a smoldering something that hammered through his nerves like a fever now. But his brain was cool, and working with lightning speed.

"That saddle business!" he cried. "Sheriff, it was a frame-up from the start. Haggerty knew I'd go to Toby Wallace, tryin' to find out who had bought saddle strings to replace the ones that were on dad's wrists."

"An' Haggerty had a man there—Len Baxter, likely—to drill Wallace foul while yuh talked to him." The little sheriff nodded. "It was one o' Seth's Long H riders that opened that winder which give yuh the idea of escapin'. An' it was Long H men that got in the way so bad nobody could stop yuh when yuh made yore play."

"Wanted me out, so's yuh an' me would tangle!" Thad's voice was dangerously calm. "With yuh alive, he was afraid to start sackin' the

country, knowin' yuh'd tumble to him. An' I reckon he was afraid dad had—had told me about the past."

"We figure alike." The sheriff nodded slowly. "But the game ain't over yet, son. If yuh kin fergive me fer the—the thing I tried to do when yuh escaped——"

"Forgit it," Thad clipped. "Me, I'm waltzin' out there. Seth Haggerty killed my dad—tortured him, then killed him."

"Steady!" Sheriff Mayse gritted. "Kill Haggerty, an' that charge will still hang yuh. We've got to have Seth Haggerty alive."

"What if he talks?" Thad bit out. "What if he tells about the past? Yuh'll be——"

"I'll be huntin' a ridin' job, askin' yuh to hire me!" The grim sheriff grinned crookedly. "I'll be done as sheriff. But I kin still hold down a ridin' job. We want Haggerty alive."

Thad nodded, a queer lump in his throat. Owl-hoot breed the sheriff might be, but he was a *man*.

Thad stepped to the little window, a gun in each hand. Lanky Simpson was swearing hoarsely because he could not get a shot at Seth Haggerty's arms or legs. Sheriff Tab Mayse walked slowly to the table where his famous guns lay, picked them up, and came slowly back toward the door where Lanky was standing.

"Stand over, beanpole!" The sheriff's white face twisted into a grin. "If yuh ain't skeered o' catchin' skunk scent, let me have part o' this door to shoot through."

"Ain't no skunk oil on a man that'll lay down a rep like yuh've got to a kid that shore needs help," Lanky rumbled softly. "Yuh'll do to ride the river with, sheriff."

There was a queer expression on the grim little man hunter's wan face as he looked up at Lanky, then edged in to where he could peer through the partially open door.

"You, Haggerty!" Thad Carse's voice made the sheriff and Lanky flinch. "I'm wise to yore hull play, yuh snake-brained whelp! Yuh tortured my dad, then killed him, because he wouldn't follow yuh down the owl-hoot trail."

The guns that had been firing intermittently were silent now, and a sultry hush settled over the canyon. Then Thad heard men swearing hoarsely and muttering things he could not understand.

"Yuh had Len Baxter drill Toby Wallace in a way that made it look like I killed him," Thad's voice knifed the silence. "Yuh knew I'd go to Wallace sooner or later, wantin' to know if anybody had brought a set of saddle strings lately."

Again there were muttered words out there among the brush and rocks, but Thad could not catch what was being said.

"But the sheriff didn't miss the saddle strings on that hull yuh sold him," Thad yelled almost wildly. "Yore scheme come close to workin', snake, 'cause I seen them missin' strings an' almost done what yuh aimed I should—shoot it out with the sheriff."

"I think I savvy how yuh got wised up," Seth Haggerty spoke at last, and there was a hint of uneasiness in his raspy voice. "Len Baxter give up head, afore he cashed in, huh?"

"Owl-hoot savvy wised me up, yuh mangy buzzard!" Thad yelled. "An' now I'm givin' yuh a chance to come out with yore hands up. The noose yore slick tricks built for

my neck has done changed to yore size."

"Like yore daddy, huh?" Seth Haggerty laughed harshly, mirthlessly. "Yuh don't know when yo're whipped, do yuh? At 'im, men! Smoke that slick-ear out an' yuh'll git a hundred bucks apiece. If yuh kin cripple him up, do it. I'll work on him like I did that psalm-singin' daddy o' his."

"I reckon yuh fergit that Thad ain't alone, Seth!" Sheriff Tab Mayse's voice was not loud, but it crackled like the popping of a whip. "Waltz out, yuh fish-eyed snake, an' we'll settle this—yuh an' me."

Silence fell again—a breathless, hushed silence that was somehow more ominous than shouts would have been. Then came a mutter of voices from among the rocks, and four men stood up slowly, hands reaching high. Those four men were Seth Haggerty's hard-faced, slit-eyed punchers.

"We hired out as tough hands, sheriff," one of them called. "But we didn't know that we was workin' fer a snake that'd kill a man the way Blue Carse was killed. Count us out o' the powder show-down an' _____"

Wham! Bra-aa-ng! Two blasting shots, and Seth Haggerty's voice lifting in a hoarse scream.

Two of the four punchers who had stood up dropped limply, Haggerty's lead smacking through their bodies from behind. The other two whirled, hands dropping to lift guns that boomed and roared.

Before Lanky and Thad Carse could lunge through the door and reach those two hard-case cowboys, the shooting was over.

Lonny Turner, wounded hand pressed close to his middle, was bolting down the canyon as fast as his long legs would carry him. The

two Long H cowboys stood side by side, each gripping a brace of guns that spouted smoke. Beside a big rock lay Seth Haggerty, doubled until his knees touched his chin, groaning oaths.

The sheriff, still moving with caution, stalked up, pinched face twitching, guns gripped in hands that trembled from weakness. The two Long H punchers dropped their guns, grinned ruefully, and turned to face the sheriff, hands lifting.

Lanky Simpson started to say something, but never spoke. There came the blasting, roaring thunder of guns.

Lanky and the two Long H punchers wheeled, eyes bulging. Sheriff Tab Mayse twisted his wan face into a slow grin, holstering his guns.

Thad Carse stood crouched half over, a smoking Colt in each hand. The three men who whirled were just in time to see Seth Haggerty straighten out, a cocked Colt spilling from his right fist, death rattling in his lead-torn chest.

"Haggerty's color wasn't right for a man that'd tasted lead," Thad explained simply. "I watched the skunk without him knowin' it, an' seen him unwrap from around that

gun he was holdin' all the time. I—I remembered dad, then."

"But—but yuh should 'a' jest winged him, Thad," Lanky Simpson boomed hoarsely. "Now, that charge agin' yuh——"

"That charge," the grim little sheriff horned in, "is as good as lifted. These two Long H rannies heard Haggerty admit that the hull thing was a frame-up. Their word an' mine will clear Thad."

"Yeah, we surrender," one of the Long H men snarled. "An' we'll talk Thad Carse's neck out o' the noose. Slip on the bracelets, sheriff, an' git it over with."

"Bad conscience, huh?" The little officer grinned feebly. "Waal, don't worry. Yuh two, an' the two that Haggerty killed, done a white thing. When yo're through tellin' a judge what yuh know, yuh'll be free to ride yonderly."

"The owl-hoot breed better hang together," Thad Carse chuckled suddenly, eyes on the two fidgety Long H riders. "If yuh two gents crave it, there's honest work on the 7 for yuh."

The two tough waddies blinked, grinning sheepishly. "Yo're took up on that!" they both blurted in the same breath.

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He dug the first well in that area, walling it up with rock hauled from the Palo Duro Canyon, about thirty miles northeast.

As there was no other settlement in all the great expanse, the new town soon had quite a population. The country was well stocked with deer, antelope, wild horses, some wild hogs, and plenty of small game.

The colony was prospering, and everything seemed promising for a permanent colony. Then Crosby County was organized, and the county seat was established at the new settlement of Estacado.

All went well for a while, but the county seat was later moved to Crosbyton, and the little colony began to languish and dwindle. Many moved to the county seat, and lands that had been cultivated were left idle.

In 1884, a meeting was held to discuss the future of Estacado.

Paris Cox spoke earnestly of what could be accomplished. In closing his speech he said:

"This is destined to be the greatest farming country in the world. Some day, you will see this entire land white with cotton. Our own gins will care for it, and a railroad will haul it from this very spot."

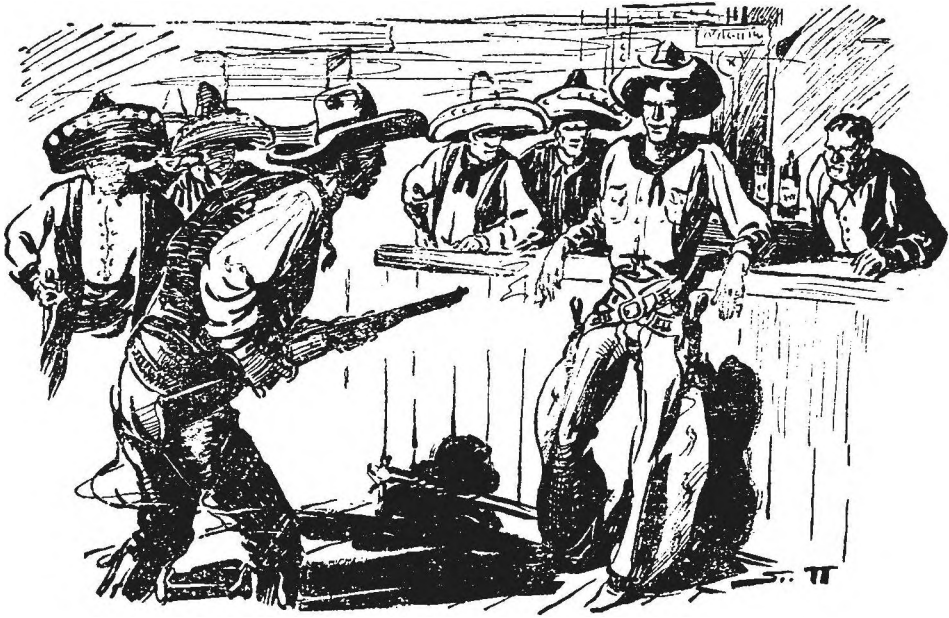
Paris Cox had farmed in the South, and he knew what he was talking about. But he was laughed at and ridiculed. Crosbyton soon attained prominence, and attracted the population. The discouraged settlers of Estacado scattered.

The ground went back to grass, and Paris Cox was looked upon as a false prophet. He died and was buried in the cemetery on a high knoll, about three miles to the south of the settlement, which he had selected himself as a last resting place.

For some years, the settlement was nothing but wild range land. Then the railroads came. The big herds no longer went on the long trails, and no cattle grazed on the land of Estacado.

To-day, the entire countryside is white with cotton. The whole section is just one large farm. A modern cotton gin stands near the former dwelling of the founder of the colony, and a few miles away the railroad provides transportation to market for the cotton and other products that flourish here.

Paris Cox sleeps his last sleep in the little cemetery, surrounded by miles of white cotton fields, the richest in northwest Texas, a living proof of the pioneer's prophecy. The name of Estacado has disappeared, and the site is now known as Crosby.



Jumped By Apaches

A True Story of the Wild West

By Kent Bennett

Author of "Escape from the Vigilantes," etc.

APPARENTLY safe among friends in the little Mexican village in the desert, Billy the Kid and three companions were enjoying a much-needed rest. Their gaunt, travel-weary horses were stuffing themselves with grass which grew at the head of a wide draw not far away.

At that moment, Billy and his pals were hunkered in the scant shade beside an old *cantina*. Close beside them, the fat bartender crouched lazily, a corn-husk cigarette glowing between his lips.

From an adobe shack not far away came the lilting strains of a Spanish

song that a little dark-eyed señorita was coaxing from a battered guitar. Above the sound of the music came the sharp tap of dancing feet and rhythmic click of castanets, drowned from time to time by shrill blasts of girlish laughter.

Billy the Kid grinned and shifted his heavy guns to a more comfortable position on his slender lips. The youthful outlaw gun fighter then winked at the Mexican bartender and nodded in the direction of the music.

The bartender smiled and lazily blew a smoke ring up into the still air. "Beeg *baile* thees night," he re-

marked. "The señoritas, they ees getting ready."

Billy chuckled. He pulled off his dusty sombrero and ran his slim fingers through his blond hair.

"Don't these girls ever do anything but dance?" he laughed.

The Mexican wrinkled his forehead and studied the tip of his cigarette thoughtfully. He sighed and glanced up as he caught a flash of red dress around the corner of the adobe. Then he shrugged his thick shoulders.

"Quién sabe?" he said carelessly. "Mebbeso they do something else *some* time. I don't know. The old ones, they cook the frijole an' the tortilla. But thees señorita, I theenk most time she dance."

Billy the Kid and his three Colt-armed companions burst out laughing. Billy darted another look in the direction of the music. Then he began softly humming the tune the girls were playing.

Suddenly he stiffened and darted a piercing look under the bartender's arm at a small dust cloud that had just appeared out in the desert. With a muttered remark to his companions, he sprang to his feet and stood staring.

"What do yuh see, Kid?" one of his amigos drawled, chuckling. "If yuh think it's worth lookin' at, let us know. If it ain't, we're just too ornery lazy to move."

"Riders comin'!" the Kid snapped, without turning his head. "Take a look out there. What do yuh make of that?"

With startled grunts, his companions bounded erect and stared. The Mexican bartender barely turned his head. He shrugged his fat shoulders and went leisurely on with his smoking.

Out there in the blistering sun, two riders had just emerged from the

head of a rocky draw. They paused for a moment behind a thin fringe of stunted mesquite, then came riding slowly on.

"One of them hombres is forkin' a burro," the Kid snapped. "The other is on a horse, an' they both look as if they'd come a long way."

Billy's companions stared keenly at the oncoming strangers. They slid their hands to their gun butts as the hombres drew closer.

"Hadn't yuh better git behind this *cantina* out of sight, Kid?" one of them growled, a look of suspicion in his slitted eyes. "Thar's a mighty big reward offered fer yuh now, an' yuh know thar's a pile of hombres out to try collectin' it. Yo're worth as much dead as alive, too. Better hide, Kid. Thet may be a sheriff."

Billy shook his head. His prominent buckteeth disappeared as his thin lips drew together in a grim frown, and his slim hands slid closer to the butts of the heavy Colt .45s that sagged his crisscrossed belts in thong-tied holsters.

"I ain't runnin' none from no two hombres," he snapped softly. "I'm stayin' right here, an'——"

With a sudden start, the Kid stiffened and bit off what he meant to say. He blinked and stared for a moment. Then he grinned and took his hands from his gun butts.

"A tenderfoot!" he barked, chuckling. "Now what do yuh make of that? A tenderfoot away out here in the desert. What the dickens an' tarnation do yuh reckon he's doin' here? Them fellers must have lost their way."

Puzzled, Billy and his companions stared at the oncoming riders keenly. The Mexican bartender lazily pulled his corn-husk cigarette from his lips and turned to look, his curiosity at last aroused.

As they turned the corner of a

tumble-down corral, the supposed tenderfoot took the lead. He whipped his horse to a faster gait and passed his companion's burro as he entered the tiny huddle of adobe shacks.

He was a tall, powerfully built hombre, and he carried a long-barreled rifle balanced across his left arm. A businesslike Colt .45 was thrust into the waistband of his gray trousers, but he was dressed in the garb of an Easterner from hard-boiled hat and collar and tie to long-tailed coat and low-heeled shoes.

His companion was an old Mexican. There was an expression of lazy indifference on his dark-skinned face as he flogged his long-eared burro forward.

"Howdy, gents!" the stranger growled, his cold blue eyes riveted on Billy's face. "I'm lookin' fer Billy the Kid, an' I reckon this here younker is him."

At this, Billy's companions jerked the guns clear of their holsters. Billy merely grinned and motioned for them not to shoot. Then he faced the big hombre.

"I'm Billy the Kid," he said quietly. "Was there somethin' yuh wanted to see me about?"

Like a flash, the fellow's rifle muzzle swiveled down and covered the Kid. A hoarse, gloating laugh rattled from the corner of his snarling lips.

"Hands up, Billy the Kid!" he rasped. "Don't none of the rest of ye try to help 'im none, either! If ye do, consarn ye, I'll——"

"Don't shoot 'im, men!" Billy cut in sharply, waving down his amigos' ready guns. "This fool ain't got sense enough to come in out of the wet. He don't seem to realize that we could've cut 'im down before he finished talkin', if we had wanted to. Wait!"

"What? What's thet?" the hombre roared. "Ain't got sense enough to—— Blast yore leetle runty carcass! I've got me a good mind to just go ahead an' finish ye right hyar an' now!"

The Kid's slender hands twitched for a lightning stab for his holsters, and his slitted eyes blazed like twin points of blue flame. For a split second, it looked as if he meant to draw and shoot.

But he soon got control of himself. The killer light slowly left his eyes, and a humorous grin twitched one corner of his thin lips.

In spite of the rifle, he suddenly burst out laughing. He could easily see that the big fellow was a tough tenderfoot from somewhere. The hombre was certainly not a Westerner.

"Ain't ye surrenderin', or do I have to shoot ye?" the man growled impatiently. "I'd a leetle mite ruther take ye in alive, if I kin. A dead man would soon spile an' git to smellin' in this hot sun, but if I've got to shoot ye, consarn ye, I kin do it!"

"Don't shoot!" Billy chuckled. "I'm surrenderin' plumb peaceable. I reckon yo're some pore fool thet's come West to try earnin' thet big reward thet's offered fer me. Well, when yuh've collected it, yuh kin go back an' tell yore folks that yuh sure earned it."

II.

As Billy talked, he swiftly unbuckled his gun belts. With a sly wink at his amigos, he handed the Mexican bartender his weapons.

"All right, feller," he said, grinning up at his captor. "Yuh've now captured Billy the Kid. Just what do yuh think yo're goin' to do with 'im?"

The big man sneered. With a

flourish, he drew a pair of cheap handcuffs from his pocket and had one of the Kid's amigos snap them on the youthful prisoner.

"Now, whar's yore horse?" the hombre growled. "Yeah, an' whar's thet blasted Mex guide I brung with me to show me the way hyar? Somebody tell 'im I want 'im. I ain't stayin' hyar to have somebody tryin' to rescue this blamed kid out-law. We're leavin' right now."

A little crowd of Mexican hombres had collected to see what was happening. When they heard the man speak of his dark-skinned guide as a Mex, they began muttering angrily. Several slid dusky hands toward the knives in their belts.

Billy the Kid hastily waved them back. Then, grinning, he barked rapid-fire commands in their own language and motioned one of them away.

With a quick nod of understanding, the Mexican darted around the corner of the old *cantina*. He was back in a minute with the missing guide.

"Hyar!" the hombre with the rifle barked, scowling. "Grab thet burro an' crawl on it, ye black-faced, lazy whelp! Git ready! We're pullin' back out o' hyar with this Billy the Kid. Come on!"

One of Billy's amigos led in the Kid's saddled horse and helped him mount. The Kid was still chuckling as his big captor drove him away in front of him.

"So long, amigos!" Billy called back. "Tell the girls to postpone thet dance until I get back. I won't be gone long."

As the crowd began laughing, the Kid waved his manacled hands and nodded impudently at the scowling rifleman. He then turned and jogged on into the blistering desert.

"So ye think we'll be comin' back

hyar, do ye?" Billy's captor snarled. "Well, ye won't! I didn't come way out hyar in this country to nab ye fer nothin'. I'm after thet reward thet's offered fer ye, an' I'm goin' to collect it. Ye onderstand? I'm counted a bad man whar I come from, an' I'd just as soon shoot ye as look at ye."

Billy merely chuckled. He glanced knowingly at the Mexican guide and began whistling tunelessly through his prominent buckteeth.

At a wink from the Kid, the guide headed away from all beaten trails and turned straight out into the desert. Billy knew that his captor would have to depend entirely on the Mexican to lead him to where he wanted to go.

All through the sweltering afternoon, the big hombre drove them mercilessly on. At times, the fellow paused to drink greedily from their only canteen of water, but he did not offer any to Billy or the guide.

On through scattered patches of greasewood and stunted mesquite, across dry washes that had not known rain for months, their guide led them steadily on. Billy had to smother a grin as they rode past a tall clump of ocotillo for the second time without his bullying captor's even noticing it.

Soon the sun sank behind the low hills to the west of them, and the sudden coolness of evening settled over the desert. Coyotes were beginning to yap shrilly from all sides, and an occasional rabbit scampered across their path.

As darkness settled down, Billy's captor began muttering. The fellow glared angrily at the guide and growled an oath.

"Say!" he finally snarled. "Whar's thet spring an' thet patch o' trees that we camped at last night? Why ain't we come to it yit? Whar is it?"

The Mexican was puffing lazily at a cigarette. He glanced around, then shrugged.

"Quién sabe, señor?" he replied carelessly. "I have take you by another way thees time. We not pass that place no more. Thees night, we sleep out een thees mesquite."

"Ye what?" the fellow roared. "Why in blazes didn't ye go back the way ye come? We might just as well stop hyar, then, blast ye! Git off o' thet donkey an' start buildin' a campin' fire, ye durned ignoramus! Don't set thar an' gape at me. Git down!"

The Mexican shrugged again, and lazily pulled his burro to a halt. He darted a sidelong glance at Billy, then swung from his old saddle and yawned.

While he built a fire of mesquite sticks, the big hombre hauled Billy down from his horse. The fellow then pulled off both saddles and tied their mounts to a stout bush.

"I reckon we'll eat us a snack o' vittles now," he growled. "I brung some sardines an' crackers along. Truck like thet costs an outlandish plenty in this danged country. I don't know whether I ought to feed expensive grub like that to sich as you or not. My danged guide gobbled down a whole can on me last night, the durned wuthless hawg!"

The fellow glared at Billy and the Mexican guide. Then with a muttered remark, he pulled a couple of sardine cans and some crackers from his saddle pockets.

The Kid was more amused than angered at the way his stingy captor grudgingly divided the meager supply of food between them. He and the Mexican guide exchanged glances. Billy talked to him in his own language, and the Mexican winked knowingly, then grinned.

"Ye needn't start jabberin' thet gibberish around hyar!" the big hombre finally snarled. "If ye're tryin' to overpersuade the Mex to help ye escape, ye kin save yore breath. Lige Neely ain't never let a prisoner git away on 'im yit, an' I'm too old to start. Now shet up, both o' ye!"

They soon finished eating. Lige Neely hauled a blackened cob pipe from his pocket and smoked for a time beside the fire. Finally, he got up and snapped a pair of leg irons on Billy's ankles.

"I reckon thet'll hold ye ontill mornin'," he growled. "Ye couldn't hardly make out to escape on me with handcuffs an' leg shackles both on ye. Now I'll tie ye hard an' fast to a bush. Then I'm goin' to sleep!"

With a length of picket rope which the Mexican guide carried on his saddle, Neely tied Billy's ankles to a stout mesquite. He then spread out both his own and the Kid's saddle blankets and lay down in them for the night.

III.

The Kid stretched out as comfortably as his shackles and the rope would allow and waited until Neely began snoring noisily. He then rose on one elbow and glanced to where the Mexican lay beside the dying fire.

A slight hiss brought the Mexican up with a jerk. Billy nodded and jerked his head meaningly toward Neely, and the guide rose noiselessly to his feet.

The hombre listened to the noise of Neely's snoring. Then he flashed Billy a white-toothed grin. Chuckling silently, he crept over beside the sleeping hombre and carefully picked up the fellow's heavy Colt, which lay on the blanket beside him.

He carried the weapon back to the fire and hastily unloaded it. Then, using his strong teeth, he pulled the bullet from each cartridge and replaced them with wadded cigarette papers.

When he had reloaded the Colt with blanks, he crept back and placed the weapon beside its unsuspecting owner and picked up the rifle. He carried that out into the mesquites and hid it. Then he waved at the Kid and slipped swiftly to the horses.

By working slowly and with extreme caution, he led Billy's mount and his own long-eared burro away through the sand and disappeared in the darkness. In a few moments, Billy heard a faint thud of hoofs as the hombre galloped swiftly straight away from the camp.

"Well," the Kid chuckled, "thet hombre has shore pulled Lige Neely's stingers. I wonder what Mr. Neely'll do when he wakes up an' sees his rifle an' thet guide gone. 'Mad' won't be no name fer it!"

Billy lay back and stretched out as comfortably as the rope would allow and listened with amusement to Neely's lusty snores.

Suddenly Billy stiffened. He lifted his head and listened for a moment. Then he rose on one elbow.

Boom-boom-boom! Boom-boom-boom-boom! The faint rhythmic beat of what appeared to be an Indian tom-tom or war drum sounded distinctly through the still desert night.

Billy waited. Soon the noise sounded again from a point nearer to him, and with it came the muffled thud of hoofs and a chorus of discordant war whoops.

Billy glanced across at Lige Neely. The hombre was still snoring loudly.

The noise of the drum and thudding hoofs grew rapidly louder. A startled coyote streaked past the camp. It paused to glance back, then gave a doglike yelp and quickly sped on.

For a time, the uproar died down. Then it burst out afresh. The hideous din of whoops and war drum sounded from the mesquites a short distance away, and Lige Neely's wall-eyed dun horse swapped ends, to stare in the direction of the noise.

As the ear-splitting racket came still closer, Billy jerked around and shot a quick look at Neely. He was just in time to see him open his eyes and rise hastily to a sitting posture.

"W-wh-what is thet?" Neely gasped, blinking dazedly. "Uh—it sounds like some sort of a shivaree. What the—what is it?"

"Yuh'll soon find out, feller," Billy the Kid snapped. "Didn't yuh never hear Injun war whoops before? Yuh'll think it's a shivaree if a bunch of Apache warriors starts rip-pin' poisoned arrows through yuh!"

"Injuns!" Neely gasped, and his mouth flew open in terror. "Is them——"

Without finishing what he started to say, he whirled and reached to where he had left his rifle. When he found it gone, he let out a hoarse bawl and snatched up his six-gun.

"My rifle gun is gone!" he choked. "All in tarnation I've got to battle them Injuns with is my pistol! I can't——"

With eyes dilated and face mottled with fear, he stood trembling. He stared out into the darkness, then ran across to the Kid and crouched behind a mesquite.

"What'll I do?" he stammered. "Tell me how I kin beat 'em! I ain't hankerin' to git skulped, an' maybe burnt at a stake, by no Injuns!"

Billy smiled quietly. "Well, yo're in fer it now, Neely," he snapped. "Thet racket is gittin' mighty close. Gittin' scalped alive an' bein' burned at a stake is shore an awful ornery way to die, but I don't reckon anything can save yuh now. Good-by, Neely!"

Billy had scarcely finished speaking when the war drum again let out its bellowing clamor. With wild shrieks and whoops, a crowd of galloping riders burst from the mesquites a short distance beyond the camp fire.

In the faint moonlight, Billy got one fleeting glimpse of feathered war bonnets and hideously painted faces. Then a shower of arrows rained about him and Neely as the yelling redskins surrounded them.

Bang! Neely's big Colt thundered, and he let out a howl of terror.

With hands shaking, he fired again and again.

The Indians sped past, whirled and came on again. This time, the few of them who had guns began shooting. The rest fired another shower of arrows that kicked up the sand all about Neely's huddled form.

"We're lost, Kid!" Neely bellowed hoarsely. "I'm goin' to be skulped alive. Ow-w-w!"

Again the warriors circled and came on. The crack of Neely's old Colt was almost drowned by the bark of Indian rifles and the roar of flying hoofs. Arrows thudded against the hombre's body and fell to the ground.

"Ow-w-w! I'm goin' to die now!" Neely howled. "I been shot with pizened arrers!"

"Then why don't yuh try runnin'?" Billy shouted. "There's yore horse tied over there to thet mesquite! Maybe yuh kin make it to 'im an' escape. Take me with yuh!

Hurry! Them Indians is circlin' to charge us again!"

Neely let out a shriek of mortal terror and bounded up. He darted one wild look over his shoulder at the oncoming Indians, and went racing at breakneck speed to his horse.

He made one frantic grab at his bridle reins, ripped them from the mesquite, then leaped astride the horse and tore away into the night, with the band of Indians streaking along behind him.

Bang! Bang-bang-bang-bang! Wham! The thundering roar of guns blasted and echoed across the desert.

Billy shook his head and smiled dryly.

He listened as the sounds grew fainter. After a time, they died away. Then Billy leaned back.

"I'll bet thet Neely hombre don't stop till he gits back to where he come from," he chuckled. "If he'll just give thet horse its head, it'll take him straight to where it belongs. If he gits out of this desert alive, he won't ever come huntin' me no more."

In a few minutes, the Kid heard the steady thud of hoofs. The sound grew rapidly louder and louder, and the Kid rose on one elbow.

Soon the band of Indians rode into view from the mesquites and galloped on to the camp fire. Their half-naked bodies gleamed in the moonlight as they sprang from their horses and began laughing uproariously.

"Beelly, you should be weeth us to see that faller run!" a fat one wheezed, grinning. In spite of his paint and chicken-feather war bonnet, Billy recognized the Mexican bartender. "The farther he go, the faster he get."

Laughing and giggling, the crowd of disguised Mexicans gathered around the Kid. Several had homemade bows, while a few carried old guns. One had a big empty canteen that he had been beating for a war drum.

"Beelly, your treeck for scaring those hombre ees pretty good, no?" the bartender said, chuckling. "I theenk maybe eef he don't geet some place pretty soon, he goin' to run those horse to death."

"Yeah, he's had him one good scare," the Kid laughed. "We circled clear around town three times to-day, and I was afraid he was goin' to get next to what me an' thet guide was doin'."

"Well, come on, Beelly," the bartender chuckled. "We load you on a horse an' take you back. Eet ees only half a mile back to town, an' we file those handcuff off so we can

have our *baile*. The señoritas are waiting for the dance, an' they say for us to hurry back weeth you."

"The dance!" Billy said, grinning. "Yes, I was so interested in the way thet Neely hombre left here that I almost forgot about that dance. Hoist me on a horse, somebody! I'll bet yuh Neely will sure have him some scary tales to tell his folks how he once held off the whole Apache tribe single-handed. Lead on to thet dance, an' let's forgit 'im!"

Note: Billy the Kid was always a great hand to play jokes, and he often played them on friends as well as enemies. Mexicans are also great hands for harmless pranks, and they certainly helped play a good one on this tough tenderfoot.

No one seems to know where Neely came from, but he seems to have been some backwoods tough who thought he was bad enough to go after the Kid.

—Editor.



EIGHT ON LINE

RUSTLER CAUGHT BY STRINGS

SHEEP had been disappearing mysteriously for some time from the fine flocks of Dan Crowell, rancher at Menard, Texas. Dan's sheep are valuable, and his wool fetches high prices. So he worried some at his losses.

After thinking up various ways and means of recovering his sheep, he hit upon a novel scheme for catching the thief. He tied around the necks of a number of the sheep pieces of fine string of different colors, which he knotted for identification purposes, concealing the strings deep in the thick wool. Then he waited.

For some time, nothing happened, except that the woollies continued to leave the flocks without saying

good-by to the owner or to the herders. Then, one day, a man was arrested on suspicion of having added to his flock by helping himself from the stock of others, and his sheep were corralled for examination. Among those who went to look them over was Mr. Crowell.

Pointing out some of the animals to the officers, he said, "That one will have a black string with two knots around its neck. The one over yonder has a green string with three knots, and on that fat feller in the corner yonder you'll find a red string with five knots." And so on.

Dan recovered all his sheep, and he is happy. The rustler is in jail, besides having paid a substantial fine, and he isn't so happy.

WW—6E



Señor Red Mask and the Gold Of Los Gatos

By Guy L. Maynard

Author of "Señor Red Mask At Haunted Mesa," etc.

CHAPTER I.

EL HIENA LAUGHS.

THE red-masked caballero watched the dim trail ahead with narrowed eyes. This bandit-infested Mexican bad lands was a dangerous place for a strange rider.

But young Tom Goodwin, better known along the Rio Grande as "Señor Red Mask," was little concerned about his safety. For he was on a hunt for "El Hiena," or the "Hyena," fiendish chief of the border crooks, who had cruelly tortured to death Señor Red Mask's boyhood pard, Jim Trent.

WW-7E

"That ornery cutthroat is likely ter be ridin' along here with a new gang thet he's picked up," Señor Red Mask told himself. "I hear that he escaped from the rurales after the big fight we had on Haunted Mesa."

Where the trail forked—one branch skirting the tornillo thickets that lined the river bank, the other turning abruptly southward to cross a dismal stretch of cactus flat—Señor Red Mask reined his big black horse to a halt. His dark eyes, gazing through the slits in his scarlet silk mask, noted the position of the low-dipping western sun.

"We'll rest a while, Thunder," he

murmured to the high-headed black. "This here's the time an' place where we was ter meet Gray Eagle."

Hooking a silver-spurred black kid boot round the broad silver horn of his fine Mexican saddle, the caballero sat at ease while he smoked a cigarette.

The last rays of the setting sun glistened on the silver buttons and conchas and the beautiful silver decorations of his handsome black velvet *charro* costume, which any rich rancher of old Mexico would have been proud to wear.

Touches of bright color were given by the red silk sash round his slim waist, from which peeped the gleaming white pearl stocks of a pair of long-barreled Colt .45s, and by the red-white-and-green silk serape flung carelessly across one broad shoulder.

It was the suddenly flagged ears of his mount that brought Señor Red Mask up straight in his saddle, alert for whatever might come. Hastily reining the big black into the cover of a mesquite beside the trail, he waited.

"Thunder must 'a' heard another horse comin' up the trail Señor Red Mask muttered under his breath after several moments of silence. "Funny thet the hombre don't show up: If it was Gray Eagle——"

"The señor ees wise to hide from those who ride thees bandit trail," a low, deep voice cut in.

With a start of surprise, Señor Red Mask turned quickly to face a stalwart Mexican Indian who suddenly appeared beside his mount.

"Gray Eagle, amigo!" exclaimed the caballero with a grin of relief. "If yuh'd 'a' been a rattlesnake, I would 'a' been bitten."

A twinkle lighted the Indian's dusky eyes for an instant, although

his bronzed face was as expressionless as a chunk of sandstone.

"An' eef I had been one of El Hiena's bad men, what then?" he asked dryly.

Before the last word was fairly out, the Indian's mouth closed with an astonished grunt. For he was staring into the cold black muzzle of a six-gun which had appeared as if by magic within a few inches of his head.

"Quién sabe? Maybe the hombre would be plenty sorry thet he sneaked up on me," rejoined the caballero, chuckling as he holstered his weapon with the same dazzling speed with which he had drawn it. "But we're wastin' time, amigo. What's new since I last saw you? What about the gold thet I sent you to give Jim Trent's mother?"

"She send many thanks to you, señor, weeth her prayers for your safety," the Indian replied.

Señor Red Mask's dark eyes misted. His thoughts went back for a moment to the young waddy who had been his well-loved pard. Jim Trent had left his widowed mother, his younger brothers and sisters, to go prospecting in the Mexican mountains.

Although he had found gold, enough to pay off the mortgage on the home ranch and replace the stock which had been rustled after his father's death, Jim Trent had been unable to carry it home. Followed by the bandit chief, El Hiena, the young waddy had been forced to cache his treasure in various spots along the homeward trail.

He had finally been caught, as he was about to cross the border to safety, and died under the awful tortures of his captor. Arriving too late to save his pard's life, Señor Red Mask had buried him in a lonely grave on the bank of the Rio

Grande, vowing to avenge his death and recover the gold for the dead waddy's mother.

The caballero came out of his sad reverie at a touch on his sleeve. Gray Eagle was holding a folded scrap of paper before him.

"Eet ees a message wheech was een that poke of gold the señor find on Haunted Mesa," said the Indian.

Señor Red Mask glanced quickly at the pencil-scrawled words on the paper.

"It's another cipher note, tellin' where the next cache of gold is hid," he murmured. "I'll figure out what it means."

Gray Eagle turned away to get the wiry buckskin pony which he had left concealed in the chaparral while he slipped forward on foot to see if the coast was clear.

Señor Red Mask read the strange message through carefully.

TOM: Tell spirits to look in secret cache for a pot of gold. It will be in the bottom of last coffin in a tomb built in middle of the Indians' old graveyard. There is danger in dark depths of the den of wild cats.

JIM.

The caballero had found other cipher messages directing him where to find treasure which Jim Trent had cached. He knew the secret of finding their real meaning. But he was plainly stumped by this one.

"Readin' every fourth word, this paper says: 'Look fer gold in last tomb of graveyard in the cats,'" muttered the puzzled caballero. "But thet don't make sense. Graveyard in the cats! Huh?"

For a long moment, Señor Red Mask bent his wits to the task of figuring out what those last few words could mean.

It was the forked trail beside which he had halted that finally gave him the clew he needed. One

branch of the trail—a dim pathway that twisted southward through the thorny chaparral—led to a Mexican town called Los Gatos. And the name stuck in the caballero's mind, once he had recalled it.

"The trail ter Los Gatos—why, dog-gone it, Los Gatos is Spanish fer 'the cats!'" Señor Red Mask suddenly exclaimed. "Thet message means the gold is hid in the Los Gatos graveyard."

Sure that he would remember the directions, Señor Red Mask lighted a match and held it to the paper. He did not want to risk having that message fall into enemy hands.

The bits of ash were still fluttering to the ground when a sound reached the caballero's ears that made him turn in his saddle with a start of alarm. Drumming hoofs were coming up the trail.

Then a sharp cry of warning rang out as Gray Eagle pulled his buckskin pony to a sliding stop beside Señor Red Mask's big black.

"Eet ees El Hiena an' hees bandits!" exclaimed the Indian. "They are loco weeth smoking marihuana. They ride the trail to rob an' keel."

Señor Red Mask's dark eyes gleamed through the slits in his scarlet mask. His veins tingled at the approach of his hated enemy. Sooner than he had expected, he was to have another chance at the murderer of Jim Trent.

Pop! The rawhide lash of a bull whip cracked like the report of a carbine above the pounding of shod hoofs and the shouts and oaths of marihuana-maddened riders.

Then the evil gang of border ruffians swept into view of the two watchers hidden in the mesquite.

Through the purple dusk that was already draping its shadowy mantle over the dim, brush-fringed trail, a dozen dark horsemen spurred their

sweating mounts. In the lead a sinister, hunched figure, like some weird, misshapen beast, clung to the saddle of a galloping white horse.

The leader's shaggy black hair streamed in the wind. His hideously ugly face, leering through a mat of greasy black beard, was contorted with rage.

"Hey-hey-y-y!" A shrill, blood-curdling cry, like the unearthly laughter of a grave-robbing hyena, echoed across the desolate cactus flat.

Señor Red Mask felt his scalp crawl beneath the black sombrero that covered his dark curly hair. That demon on the white horse was like an evil spirit of the night.

"Hey-hey-hey-y-y!" Again the eerie screech of the Hyena rang out, while the cutthroat crew streamed past Señor Red Mask and his Indian friend.

Then the shouts and thudding of hoofs grew fainter, the vicious cracking of the long-lashed bull whip died away, as the riders whirled their spooky mounts at the fork of the trail and spurred away to the southward.

"They're headin' fer Los Gatos," Señor Red Mask told himself, and turned quickly to his companion. "Let's go, amigo! We're followin' them coyotes."

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE IN LOS GATOS.

HUDDLED at the foot of a wind-swept mesa, the little town of Los Gatos offered scant welcome to the few travelers who chanced to pass that way. Strangers were looked upon with suspicion, for there was always the chance that they were spies for the rurales, seeking to locate the hang-outs of crooks who were hiding from the law.

It was to this dangerous spot that the trail of his enemies led Señor Red Mask, in the evening of the day following his sight of El Hiena and his gang on the river trail.

Saddle-weary and plentifully sprinkled with powdery gray alkali dust, the young caballero rode his big black horse down the narrow, starlit street. Gray Eagle, his faithful Indian amigo and guide, had left him on the outskirts of the dirty, evil-smelling village.

The Indian would scout around the *cantinas* and fandango halls, seeking the hang-out of El Hiena, while Señor Red Mask boldly entered a *posada*, or inn, and began carrying out the plan which he had formed to get his enemy.

For the rider of the justice trails had no intention of playing a waiting game. Action was his motto. He meant to carry the fight to El Hiena that very night.

"This ought ter be a tough joint, if it lives up ter its name," Red Mask told himself, as he spotted a low, gray-walled adobe building that sprawled over a considerable frontage on the dusty street.

The name painted in huge letters across the front of the place was La Posada del Diablo, meaning the Devil's Inn.

Reining his horse over to the hitch rail, the caballero dismounted. A moment later the musical tinkle of his silver spurs announced his entrance to the big barroom that occupied the front of the building.

A quick glance over the low-ceilinged, dingy room showed Señor Red Mask that there were few patrons. It was still early in the evening. Later, there would doubtless be a throng of thirsty hombres at the bar.

Gaming tables, which filled one end of the *cantina*, would attract

their share of business. It was just the set-up the caballero was looking for.

Striding up to the long bar, Red Mask rapped loudly with his knuckles on the damp pine counter. The summons got him the grumbling attention of a paunchy, pock-marked hombre who had been dozing on a stool tilted against the back bar.

But at sight of a masked stranger, dressed in the handsome, costly costume of a caballero, the *cantinero* showed very noticeable signs of interest. The evil light that flickered in his shifty eyes was not lost on Señor Red Mask.

The latter smiled to himself. He felt sure that the ugly-faced proprietor of the Devil's Inn had recognized him.

"He's been tipped off that I'm likely ter show up in Los Gatos," Red Mask told himself. "El Hiena is cunning as a fox. He knowed that I'd be on his trail. He would be purty shore ter pass the word around in tough joints like this, so's they could warn him, soon as I showed up."

The innkeeper was smirking and bowing, plainly trying to make his strange customer believe that he was interested solely in his welfare.

"In what way can I, Pedro Vargas, serve the señor?" he asked in Spanish.

"With a drink of cold water first. After that, I shall take lodgings for myself and my horse," replied Señor Red Mask, using the same language as glibly as a born Spaniard.

The fawning *cantinero* quickly placed a large and none too clean goblet of tepid water in front of the caballero. And while his customer drank, Pedro Vargas cast a crafty glance at two villainous hombres

who sat at a table near the arched entrance to the barroom.

One of the ruffians, a swarthy half-breed, nudged his companion.

"That ees heem, amigo—thee Señor Red Mask who El Hiena order us to keep watch for," whispered the breed. "Let us go and tell the chief."

The other hombre sneered. He was a burly gringo, broken-nosed, and with a three-day growth of yellow beard on his cruel, flat face. His pale eyes held murder as he glanced from the caballero standing at the bar, back to his slinky companion.

"Mug Haley ain't sneakin' out on no dude Mex," bragged the gringo cutthroat. "Yuh an' me will git thet smart red-masked jasper right hyar an' now, Gila. We'll give him a dose o' hot lead an' pack his remains down ter the Tarantula Cantina whar El Hiena is restin'."

"Mug" Haley eased his notched .45 in its holster while he muttered to the half-breed "Gila." Both hombres were top gunmen, vicious as sidewinders. They had been carefully selected by their murderous leader to act as his lieutenants in the gang of crooks which he had got together.

"*Bueno.* That suits me fine," agreed Gila, who was a knifer as well as a gunman. "But I haf heard much of thees masked hombre's skill weeth seex-guns. We mus' be ver' careful."

"Listen, Gila," growled Mug Haley contemptuously. "Yuh sit right hyar while I go git thet dude all by myself. I'll show him a trick o' gun-slingin' thet he ain't never seen afore."

The breed grumbled at his mean-tempered pard's rough speech, but consoled himself with a swig of raw *tequila* from the bottle in front of him.

"'Sta bueno, eef you weesh to take the chance," he said.

"It ain't goin' ter be no chance," grunted Mug, rising to his feet and starting toward the bar.

As he neared his intended victim, Mug Haley sized him up with more curiosity than caution. The broad back of the young caballero caught his eye.

What a fine target that would be, thought Mug, right where the edge of the gayly colored silk serape crossed the black velvet *bolero* jacket.

But the vicious gunman was in no hurry to do his murder. He had no doubt of his ability to beat this masked stranger to the draw, and to down him in a face-to-face gun battle. Mug intended to bait his victim before killing him.

About to voice an insult to the caballero, who still leaned idly against the bar, sipping water, Mug chanced to look in the dusty, fly-specked mirror that ornamented the back bar. And then he stiffened.

The figure of Señor Red Mask was reflected in the mirror. Below the edge of the scarlet silk mask, a mocking smile quirked the firm lips of its wearer, making the waxed points of his small dark mustache stick upward. Gleaming eyes looked out through slits in the mask.

Mug Haley halted for a moment, disturbed by that challenging vision in the mirror. He knew that Señor Red Mask could see him in the big looking-glass, too.

A slight chill ran down the gringo gunman's backbone as he thought of what his fate might have been had he decided to try that treacherous shot in the back.

Then Mug's bravado returned. Sneering to conceal his agitation, he

slogged up to the bar alongside the caballero.

"Put thet hog-wash down an' have a man's drink on me, hombre," Mug ordered rather than invited.

Señor Red Mask half turned to face the trouble-seeking ruffian.

"When I dreenk a man's dreenk, eet weel be weeth a *man*, not weeth a skunk," Red Mask answered coldly. "You onderstand, *si?*"

White-lipped with fury, Mug Haley drew back a pace. Growls of rage came from his corded throat. For a moment, he seemed unable to collect his senses to the point of attacking the defiant caballero.

And that moment was put to good use by Pedro Vargas, the innkeeper. Hastily slipping from behind the bar, the cowardly *cantinero* motioned for a thickset, low-browed swamper to take his place. Pedro foresaw trouble, and was taking no chances on stopping a wild bullet.

By that time, Mug Haley had got control of both his hand and his tongue. His clawing fingers snatched at the heavy .45 holstered low on his thick thigh.

"I'll blast yore insides out, yuh dang——"

Brang-g! A roaring gunshot drowned the words on Mug Haley's lips.

Before he could pull trigger, the six-gun in his hand was knocked clattering to the floor.

Señor Red Mask had coolly waited till his murderous foe's weapon was clearing leather before starting his own lightning-swift draw. Then he had snaked one of his pearl-handled Colts from its holster under his red silk sash and blazed away in time to spoil his opponent's shot.

"Git him, Gila!" roared Mug

Haley, shaking his numbed hand to restore feeling.

The gringo gunman's cry for aid was not needed. Gila, the half-breed killer, was already slithering across the barroom. His skinny brown hand streaked downward for a deadly six-gun. He was figuring on taking a safe and sure shot at the caballero's broad back.

But Señor Red Mask was not caught off guard. He had expected to take on odds in the battle. Pivoting on his silver-spurred heels, he crashed a shot at the swarthy crook.

"*Caramba!*" squalled Gila, clutching vainly at the butt of the holstered six-gun which had hung on his sagging cartridge belt an instant before.

Señor Red Mask's swift gun play had scored again. His bullet had cut the belt from Gila's lean hips, letting gun and all drop to the floor.

But with his enemies disarmed, the fighting caballero was still forced to give battle. Mug Haley had recovered the use of his numbed right hand. The big gringo leaped in, swinging a huge fist. Evidently, he hoped to land a knock-out blow while Red Mask's attention was on the treacherous half-breed.

Señor Red Mask heard Mug coming in time to block the blow with his elbow. He stumbled backward, jarred by the force of the border ruffian's attack. Disdaining to use his six-gun on an unarmed foe, he shoved the weapon into its holster.

"Fist an' skull, huh!" Red Mask muttered as he straightened and whipped over a looping left at the snarling outlaw.

Crack! The caballero's rocky knuckles landed like a sledge hammer on Mug Haley's ugly flat face. Crimson trickled from a ripped cheek.

"Argh-h!" snarled the gunman.

Swinging wildly, he rushed furiously at Señor Red Mask. One hammer-hard fist caught the caballero on the chest, knocking him backward against the bar.

The breath forced from his lungs, Señor Red Mask tried to rest for an instant before leaping back into the fight.

But Mug Haley thought he scented victory. He bounded forward, both big red fists cocked for knock-out blows.

"I got ter get goin' sudden," Red Mask gasped as he struggled to fill his empty lungs.

The hard-pressed caballero forced himself to move. He leaned forward, tensed his muscles for a quick lunge at his burly foe. And then the whole Devil's Inn seemed to collapse upon him.

Señor Red Mask reeled. His senses almost left him. Some hard object had crashed against the back of his head with stunning force. His dulled eyes saw Mug Haley's yellow-stubbled face light up with a leer of triumph.

"Hit him ag'in, Miguel! Bust the bottle on his hard haid!" yelled Mug.

Without seeing it, Red Mask knew what had happened. The villainous hombre behind the bar had seen his chance to aid the crooks in their unfair battle with the masked stranger. And the caballero realized that another blow of that bottle would finish him.

Señor Red Mask tried desperately to collect his senses, to force his partly paralyzed muscles to respond to his great need. But he knew there was not sufficient time. He heard the swish of the bottle as it circled for a crushing blow. When it landed, all would be over.

CHAPTER III.

DEATH STRIKES.

IN that terrible moment when the dazed and helpless caballero waited for the death stroke to fall, he suddenly glimpsed a familiar bronzed face framed in an open casement window across the barroom. He saw a flash of yellow lamplight on naked steel, heard a sinister humming that he knew for the deadly flight of a keen-bladed knife.

"Ai-i-i!" The sudden, agonized scream of the bottle wielder died away in a gurgling moan.

Red Mask heard the hombre's heavy body crash to the floor behind the bar. The caballero shook his head to clear his senses. His wabbling knees stiffened.

He saw Mug Haley jump back, bawling an oath of surprise and fear at the sudden death which had struck with the swiftness of a lightning bolt. And Gila, the half-breed, rushing in with uplifted knife, also halted like a man on the brink of a chasm.

Señor Red Mask's hands hovered above the gleaming white pearl stocks of his twin six-guns. A snarl of fighting rage replaced the cold, defiant smile which his brown-stained face had worn a few moments before.

"Pick up those seex-guns, you yellow-streaked cowards!" snapped the caballero. "I weel not draw till you haf the guns een your hands."

But the grim challenge went unanswered. Gila and Mug wanted no more of the masked rider's game. Like whipped and snarling curs, they turned and slunk away, disappearing a moment later in the dark street of Los Gatos.

"Bueno, let 'em go," Señor Red Mask muttered under his breath. "They'll head straight fer the can-

tina where their ornery boss is hangin' out. An' when El Hiena hears their story, things will shore start happenin' in this old town."

Striding swiftly to the window in which Gray Eagle had appeared, the caballero whistled softly.

"I am here, señor," a low voice answered from the shadows.

"An' it's danged lucky fer me that you were here," Red Mask observed dryly. "Thanks, amigo. An' now, will yuh please take my hoss to a safe place—down in the chaparral at the end of the street?"

"And the señor—what more trouble can he find, now?" asked the grim Indian, with a tinge of sarcasm in his guttural voice.

"Plenty," chuckled the caballero. "Señor Red Mask will now let Pedro Vargas show him to a sleepin' room."

"Een wheech his sleep weel be much disturb'," Gray Eagle grunted, and turned swiftly to get Thunder.

Señor Red Mask went quickly back to the bar. His work in Los Gatos was just beginning. He had no time to lose, if he was to carry out his plans successfully.

Pedro Vargas, pasty-faced and trembling, was overseeing the removal of the dead swamper by a couple of husky peons. He started like one who sees sudden death, at sound of the caballero's jingling spurs.

"What—what can I do for the señor?" stammered the innkeeper, turning to face Señor Red Mask.

"You might use more care in choosing the servants who will attend me," Red Mask said coldly. "An' now you will be so kind as to show me a room in which I may sleep comfortably."

Pedro Vargas's pock-marked face suddenly changed expression. The look of terror vanished. He gazed

at Señor Red Mask in utter amazement, like one who can scarcely believe his ears. Then a sly and evil look came into his shifty eyes.

"Ah, the señor shall have the best that my poor house affords," said the paunchy innkeeper. "I, myself, will be honored to show the señor to his room."

"Move quickly, then, fat one," Señor Red Mask ordered coolly. "I have no wish to be delayed."

Hastily grabbing a lighted candle off the back bar, Pedro Vargas waddled toward an inner doorway that led to a long, narrow corridor. Señor Red Mask followed close on the heels of his tricky host.

A few moments later the caballero found himself in a stuffy, poorly furnished bedroom, the only window of which opened upon a rear patio, or courtyard. And as he returned the oily mannered innkeeper's good night, he detected a sly grin of exultation on that hombre's face.

"A gent by the name o' Vargas shore ain't figurin' ter let me sleep in peace to-night," Red Mask told himself with a knowing nod. "He seems ter think that I'm loco enough ter lie right down here an' snooze while he puts El Hiena an' his cutthroat gang wise to where they kin grab me."

But in that, the caballero hardly gave his crafty host due credit. Pedro Vargas was smarter than he looked. He had already planned a little surprise for his masked guest, in case the latter should decide to depart before the arrival of his enemies.

CHAPTER IV.

BAD MAN'S BRAND.

IT was a wild scene that Mug Haley and Gila burst in on at the Tarantula Cantina.

The two cutthroats had lost no

time in getting back to the hang-out of their chief. Burning with desire for revenge on Señor Red Mask, their sole thought now was to set the whole pack of murderous outlaws on him.

"We got thet masked hombre located, chief!" Mug Haley bawled as he rushed through the *cantina* doorway one jump ahead of his evil companion, Gila.

The riotous gang of drinking and gambling crooks ceased their wild carousal. Turning quickly from tables and bar, they clustered round the two gunmen.

El Hiena, the brutal-faced leader of the gang, slithered across the bar-room, cracking his long-lashed bull whip viciously.

"Hey-hey-y-y!" The hairy, squat-bodied Hyena vented his horrid laugh as he shoved his henchmen aside and halted before Mug and Gila. "What ees thees I hear? Thee *maldito* Señor Red Mask ees een Los Gatos?"

"Yuh bet he's hyar," Mug Haley loudly declared. "He's up at the Devil's Inn, goin' ter bed this minute, unless he changed his mind after I give him a danged good beatin'."

"You beat heem weeth fists?" sneered El Hiena. "Bah! I weel slash heem to leetle bits for the coyotes weeth my whip, when next I catch heem. But for why did you not breeng heem here?"

The blustering gringo outlaw was none too quick-witted. He hesitated, confused for the moment by his wily chief's unexpected question. Fearing El Hiena's wrath, he did not dare tell the truth.

"Waal, yuh see, it was this a way, boss," Mug explained lamely. "Thet masked hombre had some of his amigos posted outside of Pedro Vargas's place. When I was gittin' the best of him, them cusses up an'

killed the bartender an' covered Gila an' me. We had ter leave him an' come high-tailin' it down hyar."

El Hiena snarled a Spanish oath through his greasy mat of tangled black beard. "You come here for help, *si?*" he sneered contemptuously. "Two very brave gunmen run like scared rabbits. But there ees no time to lose. Let us go to thee Posada del Diablo, pronto, an' surprise that masked hombre."

"Hooray! Viva!" shouted the motley crew of border ruffians as they surged out of the *cantina* on the heels of their leader.

But Señor Red Mask's enemies were not the only ones who were planning surprises. The young caballero was at that very moment scheming to bring his long ride on the justice trail to a swift and surprising end.

No sooner had the sound of Pedro Vargas's shuffling feet died away in the corridor outside his door, than Red Mask began preparations to depart secretly from the Devil's Inn.

Sitting down on the edge of the miserable bed, made of rawhide strips stretched over a framework of rough-hewn cottonwood poles, he removed the jingling silver spurs from his black kid boots and stowed them safely in a pocket of his black velvet *pantalones*.

The next move was to inspect the door. It was, as he had suspected, fastened in some secure manner on the outer side, by the wily innkeeper.

But this did not worry the caballero. He had no intention of going out that door. Finding it locked, only confirmed his suspicion that Vargas meant to do him ill.

"I'll slip out of thet window an' do a little spyin' around," Red Mask told himself. "El Hiena an' his gang will come chargin' up here

purty soon, if I don't miss my guess. An' he's the skunk I'm after. If I kin draw him away from his gang fer a minute, him an' me will have a show-down."

Going to the window, Red Mask pushed the heavy wooden shutters wide open and peered cautiously out.

A portion of the littered and dirty patio was dimly lighted by a nearly full moon that was rising above a distant range of rugged mountains. Only the ground beneath the window was in a deep shadow of the inn. There was no sound or movement, nothing to indicate that an enemy might lurk in the vicinity.

Reassured, Señor Red Mask climbed nimbly through the open window and dropped into the darkness below. But the caballero's feet had scarcely touched the ground when he stifled a cry of surprise and alarm.

A pair of powerful arms suddenly circled his slim waist, pinning his own arms to his sides. The hot, *tequila*-reeking breath of a burly, grunting human brute was in his face.

Caught completely unawares, Señor Red Mask was powerless in the grip of his unknown assailant. He was bent backward by the hombre's weight and strength. Losing his balance, he crashed heavily to the ground.

Jarred by the fall, Señor Red Mask lay quiet for a moment. His muscles relaxed, but his quick wit was working. He pretended to be knocked breathless.

The simple ruse worked. The husky Mexican who was holding Red Mask down, eased the bone-breaking grip of his hands and arms. He started to his feet, lifting his unresisting captive at the same time.

This was the fighting chance

which the caballero had hoped for. Suddenly exerting all the strength of his muscular young body, he broke his captor's hold. Before the hombre could grapple with him again, Red Mask leaped clear.

For the moment, the caballero was free. But he was in a desperate situation. His burly foe was lunging at him, snarling oaths and threats. As the hombre moved out of the shadows, Red Mask saw the glint of moonlight on a long-bladed knife.

"I could stop him with a bullet, but that would bring a whole mob here an' spoil everything," thought the caballero.

Whirling, to dodge a thrust of the deadly knife, Señor Red Mask tripped over a ragged sagebrush that grew in the shadows of the ill-kept patio. He heard an exultant grunt from his eager enemy, caught a glimpse of the knife in his stabbing hand.

But the caballero was as active as a wild cat. With a quick twist of his lithe body, he saved himself from falling. There was no time to dodge or run. Instead, he grabbed the thick wrist of his murderous assailant's knife hand.

Thud! Biff! Red Mask rained blows to the Mexican's ugly face with his free hand.

Grunting and swearing from the pain of his punishment, the hombre with the knife struggled furiously to wrench loose. But he soon tired of that. Finding that the steely grip of his cool and fearless opponent could not be broken, he tried another tactic.

Suddenly lunging forward, the vicious cutthroat tried to drive his long blade into Señor Red Mask's body in spite of the latter's hold on his wrist.

Sweating and straining with the

tremendous exertion of trying to hold off the heavier and more powerful Mexican, Red Mask quickly discovered that he was slowly but surely losing ground. Inch by inch the keen-edged knife was moving toward his pounding heart.

"I got to—to——"

The desperate caballero's panting whisper suddenly ceased. An idea born of his terrible predicament had flashed into his mind.

With a quick side step, he jerked his foe partly off balance. Before the surprised hombre could recover, Señor Red Mask thrust out a foot and tripped him. It was an old wrestling trick that had won many a brawl for rough-and-tumble fighters who knew it.

Without releasing his hold on the now panic-stricken hombre's wrist, Señor Red Mask dropped with him. But now the caballero had gained the upper hand. He was on top.

With the leverage of his enemy's falling body to aid him, he twisted the Mexican's arm violently to force him to let go of the knife. There was a groan. The heavy body beneath Red Mask went limp.

Hastily pulling his hand from under the prostrate hombre, Señor Red Mask saw a dark smear. He turned the body over, face upward in the moonlight.

"He's dead! Fell on his own knife an' drove it through his heart!" exclaimed the caballero.

Still bending over the dead man, Señor Red Mask quickly decided on a bold and dangerous stunt. The man was dressed in the loose, cheap cotton garments of a peon. Doubtless, he had been a roustabout in Devil's Inn, ready to do any villainous job in payment for plenty of vile liquor.

Señor Red Mask swiftly stripped trousers and shirt from the dead

hombre, leaving him clothed only in dirty undergarments. The two articles were of extra large size, and were easily pulled on over the caballero's tight-fitting costume.

A huge palm-fiber hat had fallen from the hombre's head during the battle. It, too, covered Red Mask's fine, silver-decorated black felt sombrero. A ragged serape of shoddy material completed Red Mask's disguise.

He slipped off his red silk mask and pulled the big sombrero low to help conceal his face. The muffling folds of the serape round his neck and jaws gave added safety from prying eyes. He looked exactly like every peon in Los Gatos.

"Now I'll slip around in front of this joint an' see if I can't fool El Hiena when he shows up," Señor Red Mask told himself.

But before he hurried away from the spot, the caballero plucked a couple of green shoots of sage from the scrubby bush over which he had tripped during the fight. These he placed, crossed, on the dead cut-throat's chest.

It was the "bad man's brand" of old Mexican-border days—now the famous mark of Señor Red Mask.

CHAPTER V.

A GRIM SURPRISE.

TRANSFORMED for the time being into the character of a poor peon, one which he frequently used for the purpose of spying on his enemies, Señor Red Mask now became "El Muchacho," or the Kid.

Leaping over the low adobe wall of the patio, he ran down an alley till he came to a narrow cross street of the little village. Then he hunched his shoulders and assumed the shuffling gait of the peon which he appeared to be.

As he reached a corner of the main street, a short distance above the Devil's Inn, El Muchacho halted a moment to get his bearings.

Loud voices and the thudding of booted feet on cobblestones, warned him that a crowd of hombres were moving rapidly up the shadowed street.

"I'll bet that's El Hiena an' his gang headin' fer the *posada*," muttered the Muchacho. "I ought ter get close enough so I kin hear what he aims ter do."

But the Devil's Inn was the leading hotel of Los Gatos. Peons were not allowed to loaf in and around its barroom. Their place was in the *cantinas* of the poor quarter.

Dressed as he was, El Muchacho would be kicked out, possibly shot, by some vicious-tempered outlaw. And it would be impossible for him to pass himself off as the burly ruffian who had attacked him in the patio. That hombre was too well known to his employer, Pedro Vargas.

Then the sharp crack of a bull whip, echoing down the adobe-walled street like a pistol shot, told the Muchacho that his guess had been correct. Only the fiendish Hyena would be wielding that wicked lash. And the gang was about to enter the inn.

"Standin' here like a lamp post ain't gettin' me nothin'," the Muchacho told himself. "I got ter be——"

A loud snore broke in on the young peon's thoughts. He glanced around, and saw a ragged figure sprawled on the ground in the shadow of a dobe shack. The hombre was probably a beggar, and he was most surely in a drunken stupor. But what caught the Muchacho's eye was a battered

guitar that lay in the dust beside its owner.

"That's a break," El Muchacho said with a grin. "I'll borrow that ol' noise-maker an' give them crooks some music while I'm spyin' on 'em."

Darting into the darkness, the Muchacho was soon in possession of the musical instrument and back on the street.

The barroom of the Devil's Inn was seething with a noisy mob of ruffians when El Muchacho took his stand in the shadow, close beside an open window. Curious passers-by were stopping to see what the uproar was about. At any moment, the poorly dressed peon might be driven away.

El Muchacho began hurriedly to play a lively Mexican fandango tune. Wandering street musicians were common in Mexico. It was a good excuse for his presence there. If his music pleased, he might be allowed to remain.

But after a few moments, the lilt-ing dance tune died away. El Muchacho was there for a purpose. He wanted to hear what his enemies were saying, what evil things they were plotting besides his own death.

Pop! El Hiena cracked his great whip to silence the mob.

"Hey-y-y! Where is that accursed red-masked hombre?" shrilled the angry voice of the bandit chief. "Tell me, Pedro Vargas, where he is sleeping, that I may rouse him with this rawhide."

A vile mixture of gringo, Mexican, and Apache breeding, the Hyena thought always of torturing his victims.

Pedro Vargas hastily left off serving drinks and waddled out from behind his bar. In mortal terror of the deadly outlaw leader, Vargas

fawned and smirked to show his good will.

"Ha, it is a great joke, señor," he began. "That miserable Red Mask has gone to his bed. But I, Pedro Vargas, at your service, am no fool. I haf locked him in his room, and posted a guard at his window. He is kept very safe for you, señor."

"*Bueno!* We will grab him pronto!" cried El Hiena. "I have much to settle with him, and there is a golden treasure of which I wish to know."

Outside the barroom window, El Muchacho permitted himself a derisive smile as he listened to the threats and plots of his enemies. There was a grim surprise awaiting them, back in the shadowy, ill-kept courtyard of the Devil's Inn.

Lifting his clear tenor voice, El Muchacho began singing the mournful Spanish words of "La Paloma":

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

The effect of the song on his audience was not what El Muchacho had expected. A screech of anger came through the open window as El Hiena started for the door. The outlaw chief was yelling to his gangsters to catch the unseen singer.

"He recognized my voice," was the alarming thought that flashed into El Muchacho's mind.

He was in a tight fix. El Hiena would remember his face, from having seen it in former encounters. A swift and cruel death awaited him, once the outlaws had him in their clutches.

Darting round a corner of the *posada*, the Muchacho ran through a narrow, dark space between the hotel and a near-by shack. He paused for only a few seconds at

the patio wall, to jerk off the flapping peon garments and sombrero and toss them into the patio.

He had barely finished, when the loud yells of his enemies warned him that it was dangerous to delay. He slipped behind a thick-leaved china-berry tree that grew beside the back door of the shack. Replacing his scarlet silk mask, he became Señor Red Mask again, ready to meet any danger that threatened.

Then the outlaw gang was streaming past the caballero's hiding place. They ran toward a corral and sheds at the rear of the patio, searching as they went. An hombre clambered up on the patio wall, glanced hastily over the inclosure.

Something he saw in the moonlight, brought a startled squawk from the hard-bitten crook on the wall. His evil companions came dashing up from all sides in answer to the alarm.

"Hey—hey-y-y!" The hair-raising laugh of El Hiena rang throughout the night like the cry of a maddened hyena. "It is the mark of Señor Red Mask!" he screeched. "He has killed the guard—he has escaped!"

Señor Red Mask stepped from behind the chinaberry tree. His sinewy fingers strummed fiercely on the battered guitar which he still clasped.

"Like the hawks of the Rio strike their prey,
I ride the dim trails and outlaws slay!"

The caballero's voice reached the surprised and furious outlaws who, by this time, were all inside the patio. They knew that grim fighting song of the Mexican rurales—"Camino de Muerte," or "The Death Trail." Wild with rage, they clawed for their six-guns.

"The't'll give the ornery skunks somethin' ter think about," Red Mask muttered as he darted away

through the shadows. "Meantime, I got ter give this ol' guitar back ter its rightful owner."

CHAPTER VI.

HIS BACK TO THE WALL.

RETURNING the guitar proved to be no easy matter. Señor Red Mask ran to the spot where he had seen the drunken beggar lying on the ground, only to find that he had disappeared.

"Dog-gone the luck!" exclaimed the exasperated caballero. "All thet ruckus must 'a' woke him up. But I got ter find him. It would be all the same as stealin' his guitar, if I was ter leave it here an' anything happened to it."

Hurrying to the main street, Red Mask glanced around for a sight of the beggar. He doubted that an hombre in his condition could have got far in so short a time.

"Yonder he goes, takin' up the whole street," Red Mask muttered, as he glimpsed a man staggering down the moonlit street, beyond the Devil's Inn. "I'll bet he's hoppin' mad 'count of not findin' his guitar when he woke up."

Shouts and oaths from the outwitted crooks in the alley told the caballero that they were hot on his trail. But he was determined to return the guitar which he had borrowed without leave.

The street was empty, as was the Devil's Inn when Red Mask sped past it. It seemed that every hombre in that vicinity had joined in the search for the supposed peon musician and the masked caballero. Most of them had no idea that he had played both parts.

"*Hola, hombre!* Here ees your *guitarra!*" called Señor Red Mask as he drew near to the reeling beggar.

Hearing, but not understanding, the liquor befuddled hombre turned and gazed owlishly at the instrument with which he was accustomed to earn a few *centavos* each day. It was in the hands of a masked stranger. An idea struggled through his sodden brain—an idea that spelled danger for Señor Red Mask.

"Help—help! Thieves!" howled the beggar, in tones that could be heard the length of the street.

Red Mask bounded close to the screeching man. He thrust the guitar into one of his clutching hands, a Mexican silver dollar into the other.

"Shut up, you loud-mouthed fool! There is more money than you could have earned in a week!" he snapped, and leaped back into the shadow of a *dobé casa*.

But the damage was done. That alarming cry had been heard by the caballero's enemies. Their yells and threats redoubled. In a moment they would come charging into the street. Where could he safely hide till they had gone past?

Señor Red Mask chuckled as he thought of the empty Devil's Inn. They would never think of looking for him there. He darted across the street, half-crouching in the shadows as he ran.

Through the low-arched open doorway he popped like a badger taking to its burrow. He almost collided with Pedro Vargas, who had apparently just entered the barroom from a side door.

"*Señor Mascara Roja!*" gasped the frightened innkeeper.

Red Mask leaped toward Vargas. He must prevent him giving the alarm.

But the fat *cantinero* was panic-stricken. Already unstrung at viewing the remains of his servant back

in the patio, he expected instant death for himself.

Even a rat will fight when cornered. Pedro Vargas carried a pistol. His trembling hand clawed it out of his *pantalones* pocket.

Bang! The pistol roared a split second before Señor Red Mask's range-hardened fist crashed on Vargas's quivering jowl.

But the *cantinero* was shaking so from terror that his bullet went wild. He dropped in a shapeless heap on the floor, knocked cold as a stone.

"Now I got ter run fer it!" Señor Red Mask told himself, as he whirled back to the front door. "Thet pack o' two-legged wolves was bound ter hear thet shot."

A moment later the caballero found that his enemies had heard plenty to urge them on to the kill. They were surging down the street in a living torrent. The instant they caught sight of their quarry, they cut loose with a fusillade of six-gun shots.

But Señor Red Mask was a very uncertain target. Weaving and dodging down the shadowy street, he escaped the hail of hot lead that whistled past his ears. Reaching a corner, he turned down a side street without checking the fast pace that he was setting his pursuers.

It was dark in that alleylike side street. The moon had not yet topped the adobe buildings that stood wall to wall, presenting a solid, unbroken front on both sides of the street.

"Here's where I lose 'em," panted the caballero.

A hundred yards farther, Señor Red Mask began to have doubts about giving his foes the slip. They had turned the corner and were in full cry on his trail. Ahead loomed a great iron-grilled gate whose skele-

ton framework was as grim and forbidding as prison bars.

Dashing up to the gate, Red Mask confirmed his worst fears. A chain and padlock held it securely shut.

Exultant yells came from up the dim street. Then the sinister crack of a bull whip, a shrill outburst of hyenalike laughter. The murderous gang was closing in.

"I'm caught like a rat in a trap," gritted the desperate caballero.

Turning to face his enemies, his back to the wall, Señor Red Mask determined to sell his life dearly.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GOLD OF LOS GATOS.

FACING certain death at the hands of his onrushing foes, Señor Red Mask's ready wit did not desert him. Several ideas flashed through his mind in swift succession for a means of escaping the doom which was about to overtake him. But only one seemed to offer even a remote chance of working out successfully.

"I could likely climb over this gate," he told himself, "but I'd shore make a fine target for them gun buzzards ter shoot at while I was climbin'."

Another disturbing argument against scaling the great iron grille was the fact that Señor Red Mask hadn't the least idea of what might be on the other side of it.

"Mebbe it's out of the fryin' pan inter the fire, but here goes!" Red Mask exclaimed.

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, the caballero was nimbly scrambling up the heavy, wrought-iron grillework.

But reckless and daring as he was, Red Mask felt his veins run cold as he rose above the dim, shadowed

ground. Every upward inch he gained brought him into greater danger from flying lead.

His howling foes were drawing near. Their shouts told him that his mad attempt to break out of the trap had been discovered.

Bang-bang-bang! Bellowing six-guns rained a shower of bullets at the hard-pressed fugitive.

Red Mask suddenly flinched from the searing pain of a hot slug that raked his ribs. Trail dust spurted in tiny clouds from his black sombrero as whistling lead ripped through its wide, curving brim and high peak.

Certain that every second would be his last, the caballero threw every ounce of strength he possessed into a final desperate upward lunge that would carry him over the top of the gate.

Panting, gasping for breath, he cleared the rounded iron rim. But in his reckless haste, his clutching fingers missed their hold on a bar. He slipped. A stifled cry of alarm burst from his lips.

He dropped like a plummet, landed in a breathless heap on the ground. But he was on the opposite side of the gate from his pursuers.

For a moment, the caballero lay gasping for breath. That fall would have killed or crippled a man less tough and hardy than he. But hard knocks had been his lot in life from earliest boyhood. Outlaw bronses and stampeding steers had failed to overcome him.

Staggering to his feet, Señor Red Mask shook himself, drew a deep breath. A quick movement of hands to holsters, reassured him that his pearl-handled Colts were safe.

With the furious clamor of his foes ringing in his ears, Red Mask

wheeled away from the gate and ran through a screen of shrubbery.

Once more in the open, he suddenly halted in amazement. His startled eyes beheld a strange and eerie scene.

Long rows of gray tombs, ghostly in the moonlight, filled the high-walled inclosure. He was in the graveyard of Los Gatos.

"Fer Pete's sake!" exclaimed the surprised caballero. "I got a break after all. I ain't scared of ha'nts, an' it'll take that gang of crooks some little time ter get in here."

Safe for the moment, Señor Red Mask walked rapidly down a row of tombs. He wanted to find a safe place of concealment before that gang of murderous crooks caught sight of him again. The thought of getting El Hiena, the fiendish outlaw chief, was still uppermost in his mind.

But before he was halfway across the old weed-grown cemetery, Señor Red Mask remembered a very important duty which he had to perform in Los Gatos—one that was second only to bringing the murderer of Jim Trent to justice.

"The gold!" Señor Red Mask ejaculated. "Thet message I got said it was cached in the last tomb in the graveyard of Los Gatos."

Now that he was in the Mexican burying ground, the caballero quickly decided to go after the gold. If he could secure it, he would place it in care of the faithful and trustworthy Indian, Gray Eagle. Then he would be free to follow the justice trail after El Hiena.

With this added objective to take his time, Señor Red Mask had need to hurry if he was to elude his enemies. He broke into a run, dodging clumps of cactus and chaparral that had been allowed to grow in the neglected graveyard.

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Upon reaching the farther side of the inclosure, he halted to survey the tombs around him. They were in fairly even rows, each row ending on a line with the others. How was he to tell which was the last tomb?

Red Mask hastened along the foot of the adobe boundary wall, watching keenly for any tomb that might extend beyond the line. In a far corner of the cemetery, his search was rewarded.

He sighted an age-decayed vault that had evidently been built with little regard for alignment.

"This must be the one," the caballero told himself as he got busy with the rusty latch on the heavy iron door.

There was no lock to hinder him. After a few minutes' work, he had the simple iron latch so it would move. Then he swung the door open and peered inside.

The tomb was large. Its ruined ornaments had once been handsome and costly. Doubtless, some rich don of ancient days had built it to hold his many kin. But it had evidently been long unused. A musty, decayed odor greeted the caballero's nostrils as he stepped inside.

By the dim light of the moon which filtered down through a small, barred opening in the far end of the tomb, the interior was seen to be practically in ruins. Bats flitted around the broken niches in the walls which had once held human bodies.

Anxious to get his unpleasant task over quickly, Señor Red Mask moved about the gruesome place, inspecting the crumbling niches. Many of them contained dry bones. In a dim corner he found a crude coffin of masonry. Its top had mostly crumbled away, exposing the contents to view.

As the caballero bent over the

open coffin, a dusty skull leered up at him. Gripping his nerves, he leaned closer and saw that it rested on some object that raised it several inches off the bottom of the coffin. Curious, Red Mask reached in and moved the grinning skull.

And then he saw the thing he sought—a well-filled buckskin poke. He had found the gold of Los Gatos—a portion of the treasure for which the young waddy, Jim Trent, had paid with his life.

As Señor Red Mask grasped the gold bag, he heard a sound that made his heart leap into his throat. Whirling in his tracks, he saw a hairy, dwarfish figure, dressed in wrinkled leather clothes, outlined in the doorway. A great bull whip was looped across its thick, muscle-padded shoulders.

Then the door clanged shut, the heavy iron latch slammed into place. A hideous cry, like the laugh of a carrion-eating hyena, rang through the old graveyard.

The caballero leaned against the crumbled coffin. A half-stifed groan of despair passed his clenched lips. He was in the power of his fiendish enemy, El Hiena.

CHAPTER VIII.

WITH HOT LEAD AND STEEL.

SCRREECHING with evil glee, El Hiena scurried away through the dry weeds and cactus to gather his band of cutthroats. Afraid to tackle Señor Red Mask single-handed, he meant to take no chances on the escape of his hated enemy.

"Hey, amigos! Come quick! Señor Red Mask is caught!" the Hyena cried at the top of his shrill voice.

They came running from every quarter of the old cemetery which they had been searching. Gringos,

Mexicans, and half-breeds, their exultant whoops mingled as they rushed up to join their boss. Vengeance and gold—they would have their fill of both when they got their hands on the red-masked caballero.

"He is locked in a tomb," shouted El Hiena. "Mebbe the gold is there, too, quièn sabe? Let us grab heem, pronto, hombres!"

Cracking his long-lashed whip, the outlaw leader guided his henchmen back to the old tomb where he had left his captive. With cocked guns in hand, they crouched in the weeds while the gringo outlaw, Mug Haley, slipped up, threw back the heavy latch and opened wide the vault door.

In breathless silence they waited, eyes fixed on the yawning entrance to the tomb.

"Come out, you skulking coyote! Come with your hands high!" angrily commanded El Hiena, after an impatient moment of waiting.

But there was no movement, no sound from within the tomb. A bat skittered through the dark doorway.

"Rush him, hombres!" El Hiena shouted. "Fill him with hot lead!"

The crooks had no liking for such an attack, however. They had already seen some examples of Señor Red Mask's fighting ability. Only too well, they realized what the desperate, sure-shooting caballero could do to them as they entered that door in single file.

It was Gila, the half-breed killer, who solved the problem. A few whiffs of marihuana, the poisonous weed that drives its smokers to deeds of deviltry, had given him false courage. Setting fire to a dry yucca, Gila darted up to the doorway and flung the blazing torch inside.

For a few moments the interior

of the old tomb was brightly lighted. Peering outlaw eyes saw nothing inside but crumbling coffins.

Suspicious, the crooks rushed the door. Part of their fear was allayed, now that they could see where they were going.

Crowding into the tomb with drawn guns, they hastily glanced into every nook and cranny where a man could possibly hide.

"Hey—hey-y-y! He's not here!" screamed El Hiena. "Again he has escaped us!"

"How is it possible?" asked the excited Gila. "The door was latched on the outside."

Mug Haley sneered an oath. "He had help, o' course, yuh danged fool!" he growled. "He's got an amigo thet slipped up hyar an' let him out soon as the chief's back was turned. An' they likely got the gold we're after, an' high-tailed——"

Mug Haley stopped like he had been shot. He had suddenly caught the sound of a mocking voice, floating in from the desolate, shadowy graveyard.

"Come out, you skulking coyote! Come with your hands high!" called the voice, repeating the exact words that El Hiena had used but a few moments before.

"It's thet danged Red Mask!" bawled Mug Haley. "He's turned the tables on us."

"Vamose! Get out quick before he closes the door!" El Hiena screeched in a panic.

Realizing their dangerous position, the crooks bounded for the door. Jostling and swearing at each other, they jammed the narrow exit. Better to risk bullets outside, than to endure the dread terrors of the dark tomb, perhaps die a horrible death by starvation and thirst.

But Señor Red Mask had no idea of locking his enemies in the tomb.

He actually wanted them to come out, particularly El Hiena. Now that the gold was safe in the hands of Gray Eagle, who had followed the outlaw gang to the graveyard and released Señor Red Mask, a few minutes before, the caballero was anxious to come to grips with the fiend he had sworn to kill.

Snarling and crowding, the panicky ruffians rushed into the open.

Brang! Bang! Six-guns roared their death song. Flashes of orange fire gashed the pale moonlight.

Señor Red Mask stood in the shadow of a low-walled tomb, the long Colts in his steady hands rocketing flame and lead. His keen dark eyes gleamed through the slits in his scarlet silk mask as he searched for the ugly figure of El Hiena.

"The dirty coward allus hides behind his men when trouble comes," snapped Red Mask. "I got ter fight my way through the whole gang ter get him."

Bewildered by the deadly hail of lead that met them as they emerged from the tomb, the surprised cutthroats milled uncertainly for a moment. Two of their number dropped in their tracks at the first fusillade from Señor Red Mask's deadly .45s. A badly wounded hombre staggered off through a weed-choked lane between two rows of ghostly gray tombs.

"Thet's cuttin' down the odds," grimly muttered the fighting caballero. "If I kin keep this up till Gray Eagle gets back ter the wall with the hosses, it'll be mighty near a clean-up."

From the shelter of the open tomb to which he had scurried, El Hiena shrieked orders to his gang.

"Hey-hey-y-y! Rush him, hombres! You, Mug an' Gila, give him the bullets!"

Crash! Brang! Señor Red Mask's flaming six-guns took their deadly toll of another crook.

At least two or three others became so panic-stricken at the sudden storm of destruction that smashed their ranks that they turned tail and fled like frightened rabbits.

But the marihuana-crazed Gila and his gringo pard, Mug Haley, lunged toward the dim figure of Señor Red Mask. Murder was their trade, and their evil reputations as gunmen were at stake.

Snarling like unleashed beasts, the crouching outlaws kept to the scant cover of weeds and brush as they ran forward.

"Spread out, Gila!" growled Mug. "Yuh take him from the left side, an' I'll cut in on the right. Give him both guns an' don't stop till they're empty."

The half-breed Gila snarled assent. His glittering black eyes were fixed on his prey as he slithered in a half circle to the left.

This dangerous movement of his enemies did not escape the watchful eyes of Señor Red Mask. Far from feeling fear of the show-down which was swiftly coming on, he was elated. His plan of battle was working out with even greater success than he had dared to hope for.

While he waited for the evil pair of killers that were stalking him to come in close range, the fighting chorus of "The Death Trail" came to his mind.

"With hot lead and steel I burn my brand On outlaw mavericks of the Rio Grande."

Señor Red Mask's clear tenor voice rang through the desolate, gray-tomed city of the dead. And as he finished the last word, his twin six-guns roared a blast that brought

sudden yells of rage and pain from his skulking attackers.

"Thet stirred 'em up," the caballero muttered to himself.

Mug and Gila were only scratched, however. Mouthing evil oaths, they plunged forward. Their own six-guns began to blaze.

"Ouch!" gritted Red Mask, flinching from a hot slug that burned a welt across his left arm.

Bang-bang! Outlaw guns roared as Gila and Mug closed in on each side of the caballero.

"We got him!" bellowed Mug Haley, dropping an empty gun and firing with the other as fast as he could pull trigger.

Those were the gringo gunman's last words. His narrow-lidded, pale eyes suddenly opened wide. A look of pained surprise overspread his flat, yellow-stubbed face. He stumbled, coughed, and pitched headlong to the ground as a ripping slug from Señor Red Mask's .45 bored his evil heart.

The caballero was down on one knee. A bullet raking his temple had dazed him for an instant. But he shook his head clear.

"Come on, you skunk!" he rapped at the half-breed Gila through a cloud of acrid powder smoke.

Gila came on—till a bullet smacked him between his glittering black eyes, and he died with a Spanish oath on his writhing lips.

Señor Red Mask bounded to his feet. The battle ground was clear.

"I got ter find thet ornery Hyena afore he makes his get-away," he muttered hurriedly.

El Hiena was not hard to find. Before Red Mask had taken a dozen strides he glimpsed a brutish, low-bent figure scurrying away between the silent tombs.

The caballero darted in pursuit. He could have downed the fugitive

bandit chief with a bullet in his hunched back. But that was not Señor Red Mask's style of fighting.

Twisting and dodging along the weed-grown rows of tombs, El Hiena kept his lead for a few moments. But it was quickly apparent that he could never escape the younger, faster-running caballero.

The chase came to an end even sooner than Señor Red Mask expected.

Panting and terrified, unable even to vent his hyenalike laugh, the hard-pressed outlaw suddenly turned at bay. The long lash of the bull whip to which he still clung snapped backward. His massive right arm flexed for the forward jerk of the whip.

But Señor Red Mask did not slacken his onward rush. With a hurtling leap, he got inside the blinding stroke of the bull whip. Refusing to use his fists on such a dwarf-like creature, he grappled with his hated foe.

"Hey-hey-y-y!" El Hiena's horrid screech burst out as he caught his breath.

This was a game to his liking. Señor Red Mask had played into his hands. For few men were as powerfully muscled in shoulders and arms as the Hyena.

Grunting and heaving, staggering like drunken men, the two combatants struggled for the advantage.

El Hiena's squat, powerful body got under the taller caballero, threatening to topple the latter off balance. His long arms had the grip of a grizzly bear.

Señor Red Mask struggled desperately to keep his enemy's clutching fingers from closing on his windpipe. He realized too late that his willingness to give his foe more than an even break had got him into deadly danger.

"Gosh, I got ter do something quick, or I'm a goner," Señor Red Mask told himself in a sweat of worry.

But what was there to do? Gray Eagle had gone to the other side of the little Mexican village. It would be several minutes, at least, before he could be expected to return with the horses.

El Hiena snarled like a mad wolf as he drew on every atom of strength in his great arms to crush his prey. He sensed that victory was near. He would yet have the vengeance and the gold for which he had schemed and fought.

"Hah! The great Señor Red Mask will soon be very dead," he jeered, as his thick, stubby fingers inched closer and closer to Red Mask's bare throat.

And struggle as he would, the caballero could not shake off that deadly grip. His breath was coming in short gasps. Strength was flowing out of his tortured body. He was aware of nothing, save the terrible battle for life which he was waging, and losing.

Then, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, an idea flashed into Red Mask's mind. An idea born of his desperate peril that offered a slim, fighting chance for life. He had been using a lot of precious strength in keeping upon on his feet, at the same time bearing the weight of his clinging enemy.

"I'll go ter the ground with him—I can't be any worse off," he gasped under his breath.

In a sudden surprise move, Señor Red Mask bent his knees and sagged forward. Where he had been holding up his opponent, the tables were now turned.

And just as the caballero had expected, El Hiena wasn't equal to the task of supporting him. The out-

law's short, spindling legs buckled under him. He toppled backward, crashing to the hard ground under the weight of Señor Red Mask's relaxed body.

That jarring fall loosened the Hyena's grip for a moment. And Red Mask was alert to grab the chance he was afforded. With a sucking intake of breath that filled his aching lungs, he threw all his strength into a wrenching sidewise jerk of his muscular body.

Too late, the outwitted Hyena tried to regain his throttling grip. Red Mask had broken partly free. He was jabbing short-arm blows in the outlaw's hairy face, blows that stung and cut.

Howling like a fiend, El Hiena flung himself at his battling enemy. He managed to get a grip on Red Mask's left arm. He tried to get close enough to set his yellowish fangs in the caballero's shoulder.

But Señor Red Mask pounded and slammed with grim determination to overcome his opponent. Rolling over and over on the weed-covered, uneven ground, the two deadly foes fought like wild cats.

Then Red Mask's big chance came—the chance he had been fighting and hoping for. With a mighty heave, he rolled the thick-bodied bandit chief over on his back. Before the squirming Hyena could fight out from under him, the caballero clamped his knees on the outlaw's body.

Busting bronchos from early boyhood had developed in Señor Red Mask's legs a grip like an iron vise. He exerted those powerful muscles to their limit, now. And was quickly rewarded by hearing grunts and groans of distress from his struggling enemy.

"I got yuh—yuh can't break a

bronc-twister hold!" panted the victorious caballero.

Nor could the outlaw break free. In a very few minutes, he was completely subdued.

When his beaten enemy finally relaxed and lay gasping weakly on the ground, Señor Red Mask hastily bound his wrists with the bandit leader's own belt.

"You will kill me, *si?*" El Hiena whined fearfully as he was jerked to his unsteady feet.

Señor Red Mask grimly started in the direction of the graveyard gate with his helpless captive. "Since you cannot fight, I cannot kill you," he growled. "But I will take you to the rurales, and they will shoot you for the cowardly skunk that you are."

But it was not the rurales at whose hands El Hiena was doomed to meet his fate. Before the outlaw and his captor reached the gate, a howling mob bore down on them.

Señor Red Mask halted in consternation. What did that crowd want? Was it a rescue party?

Sensing that he could not battle successfully against such odds, the caballero tried to drag his captive over to a tomb, where he could get cover for the fight he determined to put up.

But there was not time enough for this maneuver. A human tornado seemed to break over Señor Red Mask and the frantically struggling Hyena, before they had taken half a dozen steps.

Rough hands seized the caballero. He was buffeted and jostled by a raging mob of wild-eyed Mexicans. His prisoner was torn from his grasp. And to his surprise, he saw that El Hiena was getting plenty of the same rough treatment.

"Grave robbers!"

"Kill them—hang the accursed thieves of the dead!"

Angry threats and oaths filled the air. Half-clad hombres who had evidently just been aroused from their beds milled around the captives. Fists were shaken in their faces, clubs and knives were brandished threateningly.

"Gosh, these hombres are the honest village people, an' they think El Hiena an' me was robbin' the graves of their dead," Señor Red Mask told himself with a sudden surge of fear.

It was very soon apparent that the villagers meant to deal out what they considered well-deserved punishment to the offenders.

A long rawhide reata was produced. Husky peons dragged the victims of their wrath toward the graveyard gate. There was no doubt about it. A necktie party was about to be held by the enraged natives of Los Gatos.

"Reckon there ain't much use tryin' ter explain matters to these rampagin' hombres," Señor Red Mask muttered with a sinking heart.

El Hiena was not taking the affair nearly as calmly as Señor Red Mask was. Kicking and squealing and howling oaths, the outlaw fought his captors every foot of the way toward the gallows tree for which they were evidently headed.

"Vamose, amigos!" shouted a fat, long-mustached hombre who seemed to be the leader of the mob. "We will stretch the necks of these miserable thieves on the big mesquite which grows in front of my store."

Señor Red Mask shuddered as he remembered seeing that gnarled, heavy-limbed old tree that shaded a small store at the end of Los Gatos's main street. Already, the noisy mob was crowding through

the big iron-grilled gate of the cemetery. In a few minutes two kicking figures were due to dangle from a limb of that mesquite.

The despairing caballero walked quietly in the midst of a swarm of his captors. No less than four stout peons clung to his arms. There seemed to be no chance of escape from this death march that was to end at the gallows.

Into the main street they swung. The caballero could make out the dark, leafy bulk of the big mesquite. It sent a chill through his veins.

Then he heard the sudden clatter of steel-shod hoofs on cobblestones. He half turned his head, in spite of the restraining hands of his guards. He caught a glimpse of two running horses bearing down on the mob in the middle of the narrow street.

Startled shouts went up from the mob of villagers. Before they could scramble out of the way, a great black horse, sided by a smaller buckskin pony that bore a dark-skinned rider, was rearing in their midst. Frightened hombres were knocked right and left.

Two of the hombres who had been holding to Red Mask's arms and clothes released him and joined the panic-stricken mob that was struggling to get out of the street. But the other pair yanked the caballero with them as they made for the safety of a near-by shack.

"Here's where I balk," snapped Señor Red Mask, throwing himself backward and digging in his high heels.

This unexpected move was so disconcerting to his guards that one of them let go the caballero's arm and swung at him with a horny fist.

Smack! Red Mask's jarring right hand landed first, and it knocked the panicky guard sprawling in the street.

The other hombre still clung like a leech, shouting all the while for help. His cries were answered by several of the nearest villagers, who rushed to his aid.

Desperate, as he saw his last chance for freedom about to be snatched away, Señor Red Mask jerked one of his long Colts from its holster. He crashed its heavy barrel across his clinging captor's temple. The hombre dropped in his tracks.

Swinging the big .45 in a sweeping arc, the caballero cleared a path through the hombres that stood in his way. Suddenly he was alone on the edge of the milling mob. He saw the black horse, kicking and squealing as it fought the crowd back with teeth and hoofs.

"Thunder!" shouted Red Mask.

The raging black heard its master's voice, plunged toward him.

Grabbing at the silver-mounted saddle horn, the caballero swung up on the back of his splendid mount.

"Let's go, old-timer," he called into Thunder's laid-back ears. "We've done had enough of Los Gatos ter last us a lifetime."

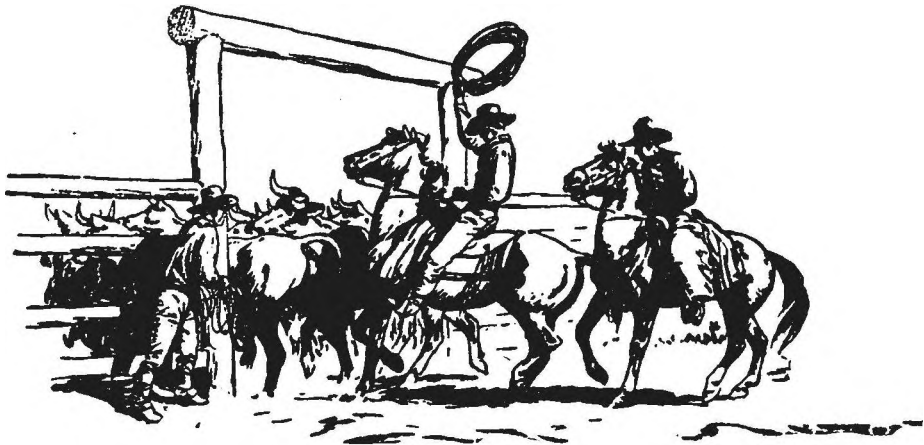
On the crest of a moonlit ridge overlooking the little town of Los Gatos, two riders reined their mounts to a halt. For a long moment they sat silently looking down upon the now peaceful village.

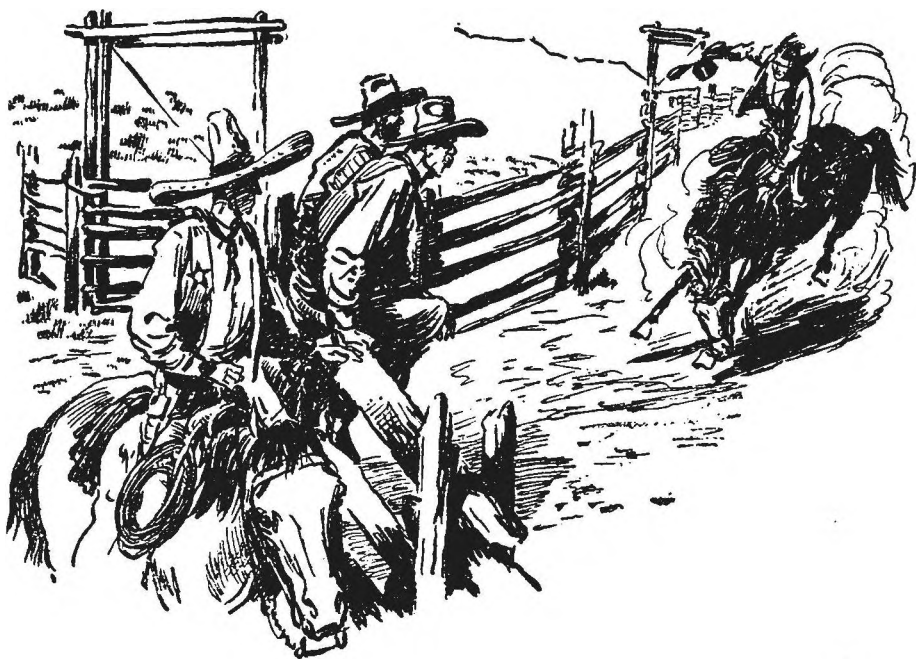
Then Señor Red Mask leaned forward in his saddle, his keen dark eyes gazing intently through the slits in his scarlet mask. He gave a little start of surprise as he made out a queer figure dangling from the limb of a big mesquite in the village street.

"I reckon that's him," the caballero muttered grimly. "Yeah, it looks like El Hiena got what was comin' ter him at last."

Gray Eagle nodded gravely. "Mebbe so, quién sabe?" he grunted. "That thief ees een a good place, een Los Gatos. He has as many lives as the cats."

Waal, we shore *hope* that that's the end o' the Hyena. But ontill we see that ornery skunk lyin' stiff an' cold, we won't be shore he's done fer. Howsomever, whether the Hyena is dead or not, there'll be another yarn about Señor Red Mask in next week's issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





The T Bar Boss Gets Barbered

A "Shootin' Fool" Story

By Houston Irvine

Author of "The Shootin' Fool Plays A Hunch," etc.

WITH his smooth, untanned cheeks flushing excitedly, Lucius Carey spurred his sleepy brown horse toward the T Bar corral.

"Ride 'im, cowboy!"

"Whoopee! Watch 'im sunfish!"

"Hold his head down!"

"Atta boy!"

The lusty yells came from a half dozen leather-lunged punchers, perched on the top rail of the fence. They were shouting encouragement

to a slapping, spurring rider, atop a furiously pitching buckskin inside the corral.

"Stick on him, cowboy!" Lucius—sometimes called the "Shootin' Fool Deputy"—gave a cheer, too, and stopped his cayuse, Molasses, close by the gate of the pen.

The young lawman felt himself to be in luck to get in on a homemade rodeo that way. He had just been going to make a friendly, unofficial call at the T Bar Ranch. And he

had arrived at the moment when the crew was busy breaking bronchos. Although he did not pretend to ride "bad uns" himself, he had the natural interest of the West in any contest between a man and a horse.

Pushing an unruly lock of his long yellow hair back underneath his big cream-colored sombrero, he watched the rider in the corral with admiring, popping blue eyes. His interest in the broncho-buster did not prevent his noticing the two other men inside the fence, however.

They were Alf Benson, the T Bar owner, and a stocky, short-necked, bearded hombre, whom the Shootin' Fool did not know. No doubt they were acting as pick-up men for the riders.

While the elderly rancher sat his small gray horse stolidly, watching the pitching buckskin, the stranger amused himself by spinning his lariat, putting the forty-foot maguety through such a series of twists and loops as the young deputy had never seen before.

"Why, that ranny and a rope are pretty nearly a whole show in themselves," Lucius grunted, stealing a look away from the broncho-buster.

The latter was getting the buckskin pretty well subdued. After all of its other tricks had failed, the horse made a final effort to scrape off its rider against the fence.

With a laugh, the cowboy drew his leg out of his stirrup in time to prevent its being crushed. Then, by the time the cayuse was a foot away from the fence again, the puncher was seated firmly in his saddle, raking the critter with his spurs and fanning it with his hat.

After one more feeble jump, the buckskin admitted defeat. With drooping head and widespread legs, it halted. Crimson gashes showed

on its shoulders and flanks. Bubbles of white froth dripped from its heaving nostrils.

With a grin and an elaborate bow to his friends on the fence, the rider sprang to the ground and started removing his saddle. With words of praise for the cowboy, old Alf Benson spurred forward to help.

As soon as the broken buckskin was again free of saddle and bridle, the bearded hombre, swinging his lariat like a whip, hazed it down to the end of the corral, where several other freshly ridden cayuses were huddled together.

There was another little group of unbroken bronchos at the other end of the pen. Riding back that way, the stranger singled out a mean-looking bay and roped it around the forelegs, with as neat a throw as the Shootin' Fool had ever seen in his life.

In an instant, the horse was down, thrown heavily on its side. The other cayuses scattered in terror. Dragging his saddle with him, another cowboy hopped off the fence and strode across the corral to make the next ride. In a few moments, the bay broncho was "dressed." The puncher leaped into his stirrups.

"This ride is going to be good," declared Lucius Carey, easing his tall, gangling form in his saddle, in order to watch the thrilling proceedings more comfortably.

He saw almost none of that ride, however. He was so interested in watching the first jumps of the bay that he did not notice the bearded stranger coil his rope and leave the corral, even though the man halted his black horse to open the gate a few feet away.

Evidently that was going to be the last ride of the afternoon. Half of the brassy sun already was hid-

den below the horizon of prickly pear and mesquite to the west of the T Bar clearing.

The first the young deputy knew that any one was near him, the stranger spurred his cayuse so close beside Molasses that the Shootin' Fool's left leg received a powerful squeeze. It felt as if his knee was being pulled apart.

That almost could have happened if he had not been wearing chaps of heavy yellow cowhide. And if Molasses, coming suddenly out of a doze, had not jerked violently to the right.

"Ouch! Why don't you look where you're going?" Lucius yelled, as he swung around in his saddle.

"Move over an' give a feller room!" snarled the other man, his snaggly yellow teeth gleaming through the curly red hair of his beard.

As there was plenty of room along the corral fence, the hombre's demand was entirely uncalled for. And the Shootin' Fool was not the waddy to take such an insult from any one.

"Move over yourself!" he snapped, reddening angrily. "And hurry up about it!"

The stranger's insolent brown eyes swept the deputy from the peak of his creamy sombrero to the toes of his silver-spurred cowhide boots. Lucius was wearing a bright-red shirt, in gaudy contrast to the violently blue silk scarf knotted around his long neck.

Because of his yellow hair, smooth complexion, and liking for plenty of color in his garb, people often mistook the Shootin' Fool for a greenhorn. Even his pearl-handled six-guns, in tied-down holsters on his slender thighs, did not look so deadly as the ordinary .45s.

"Yuh danged dude!" The

stranger sneered. "I said it was yore move, an'——"

His words suddenly broke off. As if noticing it for the first time, his brown eyes narrowed at the bright star pinned to the pocket of the deputy's red shirt.

Lucius Carey read both hatred and fear in that quick glance of the red-bearded hombre. The deputy's brain worked rapidly. If the stranger was afraid of the law that the star represented, it must be because he was a criminal on the dodge.

Lucius tried swiftly to recall the descriptions of "wanted" men that he had read in the reward notices in the sheriff's office at Cotulla. He could not remember that any red-bearded hombre had been sought recently.

But the memory of one reward notice flashed across his mind like a picture:

WANTED!

\$5,000 REWARD

WILL BE PAID FOR LESTER SIMS, FORMER CHAMPIONSHIP ROPER, NOW IDENTIFIED AS A STAGE-COACH ROBBER AND MURDERER. SIMS MAY BE RECOGNIZED BY A Y-SHAPED SCAR ON HIS CHIN.

There had been more to the description, which the deputy could not remember.

"The man must be a champion roper, to spin a loop like he was doing a few minutes ago," thought Lucius. "And he might have grown the beard to hide a scar on his chin. Still, I don't reckon I've got any right to arrest him without more evidence."

"What are yuh doin' hyar?" the hombre growled, still staring at the deputy's badge.

"I'm tending to my own business," retorted the Shootin' Fool. "If you don't like it——"

He would have said more. But an oath from the other cut him off.

"I don't like yuh!" The man scowled bullyingly. "Git off the T Bar, or——"

Like a streak of lightning, his hand jabbed for the worn handle of his .45, holstered low on his right thigh. But Lucius Carey was not taken by surprise.

A fraction of a second quicker, the deputy's fingers closed about the pearl handles of his six-guns. They leaped out of his holsters like living things.

Aiming quickly, his fingers were tightening on the triggers of his .45s. In an instant, his guns would flame. His bullets would scream through the hot Texas air. At such close range, the bully would plunge from his saddle, with his chest torn to pieces.

Already seeing that he was beaten on the draw, the stranger's brown eyes bulged with terror.

II.

"Hyah! What's eatin' on yuh two?" A shrill, excited yell by the corral gate suddenly held Lucius Carey's trigger fingers motionless.

A sneering light of relief flashed into the red-bearded hombre's eyes. By the smallest fraction of a second, he had been saved from death.

As he saw the other raise his empty hands, the Shootin' Fool let his twin six-guns drop back into his holsters. With his blue eyes bright, and his cheeks flaming, he turned slightly in his saddle to see the cause of the interruption.

Alf Benson was letting himself through the gate. A tall, grizzled veteran of the prickly-pear country, his face was leathery and seamed. A thin white mustache drooped over the corners of his thin, straight

lips. Beneath the brim of his battered Stetson, his steel-gray eyes gleamed questioningly.

"Waal?" he growled, looking at the redbear.

"Aw!" The latter laughed harshly. "This hyar kid an' me was jist havin' a little argyment."

"Yeah? It come purty nigh bein' a fatal argyment fer yuh, I seen." The T Bar owner nodded gravely. Then he turned to the deputy. "Looshis Carey, I want to make yuh acquainted with Red Powell. He's bossin' my outfit now."

"Your foreman, you mean?" The Shootin' Fool grinned, as he relaxed.

"Foreman is right, an' the best rope handler I ever sot eyes on," Benson replied proudly. "I don't want yuh two waddies gunnin' fer each other again."

Lucius flared up at once. "Well, if Mr. Powell doesn't want to get a bullet in his craw, he'd better watch his own step," he snapped, with the memory of the foreman's bullying attack still rankling in his mind.

With the old, strange light of fear showing again in his eyes, "Red" quickly bent closer to the deputy. And his words came in a hoarse whisper, which the owner of the T Bar could not hear.

"Yuh don't know me!" he snarled. "Yuh ain't got nothin' on me, yuh danged dude lawman!"

"I wonder." The Shootin' Fool bit his lip, thinking about the Y-shaped scar that the reward notice said the "wanted" Lester Sims had on his chin. If only the deputy could examine the foreman's chin beneath his beard, he imagined he might prove that Powell and Sims were the same hombre.

"What did yuh say?" Benson asked.

"I was just thinking," Lucius answered. "I'd better be ridin' for Co-

tulla, if I expect to get there to-night."

"Why don't yuh stop hyar till mornin'? We've got lots o' room in the bunk house, an' our cook ain't bad," the rancher said hospitably.

The Shootin' Fool thought swiftly. He ought to go to town. Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers, the older deputy, would be upset by his absence. But if there was a chance of getting the deadwood on Red Powell, he wanted to stay at the T Bar Ranch.

"I accept your invitation," he replied to Benson, with a grin.

He unsaddled Molasses and turned the sleepy critter into the corral with the regular ranch riding stock. Then, after washing off some of the trail dust at the horse trough, he shoved his boots under the supper table, with Benson and the cowboys.

Every one was hungry and ate heartily. What talk there was naturally concerned the broncho-busting of the afternoon. Red said nothing all through the meal, but glowered at Lucius from beneath scowling brows.

"It sort of looks like he didn't care for me," thought the deputy, as he rolled into the bunk that was assigned to him. "I reckon I'd better keep my eyes open."

Being a healthy, steady-nerved young fellow, the Shootin' Fool was accustomed to drop into a sound sleep the minute he hit the blankets. And after having been in the saddle all day, his body craved rest.

But that night, he was strangely restless. He fidgeted for an hour before he drowsed into a light nap. Ten minutes later, he awakened with a start, dreaming that a man with a red beard was holding the muzzle of a .45 against his head, about to squeeze the trigger.

But when fully awake, he felt nothing. He lay still, with his ears straining for suspicious sounds. There was no noise, except the snoring of some cowboy in a distant bunk.

"Dog-gone!" He turned over in his blankets. "I must be getting nervous."

But try as he would, he could not even drop into a doze again. He did not want to let himself get spooked up. But his hunch was too strong that something was about to happen.

As alert as he had ever been in his life, he slipped like a shadow out of his bunk. He rolled and wadded his blankets into a form that somewhat resembled a sleeping man. In the faint moonlight filtering through the bunk-house windows, any one would have difficulty in telling the difference.

Next, the Shootin' Fool crawled beneath the bunk, pulling on his clothes and strapping on his gun belt and twin holsters as quietly as possible. He did not risk putting on his boots, for fear of jingling his spurs.

It seemed to the deputy that he stretched on the hard board floor for hours. He was beginning to think perhaps his hunch had been a foolish one, after all.

Suddenly every sense became alert. Every nerve grew taut.

Pad-pad! Lucius heard the unmistakable sounds of bare feet approaching along the floor. The steps halted directly in front of the bunk that the deputy was supposed to be occupying.

Peeking cautiously out from his hiding place, the Shootin' Fool could see the shadowy bulk of the prowler in the moonlight. But he could not see the hombre's features. Still, he felt pretty sure the man could be

none other than Red Powell. The deputy knew Alf Benson and the T Bar punchers too well to suppose that any of them might try to attack him.

Lucius gripped his six-guns, then let them go. He did not want to shoot Red unless he knew that he deserved it. If the prowler tried anything, it would be better to capture him alive, there for all the T Bar outfit to see, thought the deputy.

The prowler suddenly lunged viciously at the bunk. The Shootin' Fool heard something strike the rolled-up blankets. At the same instant, the deputy dived at his enemy's ankles.

A smothered oath burst from the throat of the prowler. He kicked savagely. But Lucius hung on like a terrier ahold of a rat.

"Give up?" he panted.

His answer was another oath. A powerful kick hurled his body against one of the legs of the bunk. Ouch! That felt as if it might have broken a rib.

The deputy did not stay quiet a second, however. He knew that he ought to rear up and topple his foe over. Then, with both of them on the floor—

Crash! The jarring impact of something on his head interrupted the Shootin' Fool's thoughts.

He felt the blow. Then he seemed to see a bright burst of stars. Finally all went black, and he slept deeply, if not comfortably.

III.

When Lucius Carey recovered consciousness, he blinked his blue eyes at the lamp in the hand of one of the T Bar cowboys.

"What happened?" cried Alf Ben-

son, hopping around in his shirt and underwear, but no breeches.

"S-s-somebody knocked me out—with a gun barrel, I guess," groaned the deputy.

"Thet's funny." The rancher chewed the ends of his white mustache. "I don't know anybody who'd do thet to yuh on the T Bar."

"No?" Although his head felt ready to split, the Shootin' Fool staggered to his feet and pointed to the bunk where he had been supposed to sleep.

With its blade driven in to the hilt, the knife of the outwitted murderer thrust its handle above the rolled blankets.

"I guess I can be thankful I only got slugged," observed the deputy.

"Waal, what do yuh know 'bout thet?" one of the cowboys drawled. "We was woke up by some sort of a fight a few minutes ago. But by the time we got out of our bunks an' lit the lamp, whoever hit yuh was gone, an' yuh was layin' hyar dead to the world."

"Have yuh any idea who tried to kill yuh?" asked Benson.

"Where's your foreman?" Looking quickly around at the ring of waddies, Lucius saw that Red Powell was the only one missing.

"Why!" The T Bar owner looked surprised, as if he had not noticed the absence of the red-bearded hombre before. "Yuh shorely don't think Red Powell would do a thing like thet. He's the best boss the T Bar ever had. Nobody can beat him with a rope."

"I know that. That's one reason I'm going after him." Still reeling a little, the Shootin' Fool sat down on the edge of the bunk and pulled on his boots.

Then, picking up his creamy sombrero, he jerked it on at a jaunty

angle over his left eye. Patting the pearl handles of his holstered six-guns, he strode toward the door.

"Hey!" Benson called abruptly. "Yuh better lay quiet an' nuss yore head. If yuh think Red is guilty, I an' some o' my boys will ride out an' look fer him."

"Thanks." Lucius grinned back over his shoulder, though the effort pained him. "But I generally tend to my own coyotes—specially when the hair needs trimmin'."

Lucius did not give anybody time to ask him what he meant by that. Racing to the corral, he cornered Molasses and saddled quickly. Then springing into his stirrups, he jabbed his spurs into the animal's flanks.

He did not want any of the T Bar men to go with him. He knew, from experience, that a large body of men was often more of a hindrance than a help on a trail. He liked to work alone, depending upon stealth and clever headwork.

The prickly pear and mesquite grew close around the T Bar Ranch headquarters. A tangled mass of thorny growth, in places much higher than the peak of the deputy's sombrero, it afforded an almost ideal hiding place for criminals, as well as for deadly rattlesnakes, lizards, and horned toads.

But the great pear thicket did not worry the Shootin' Fool. He thought that he knew it as well as almost any other man. And trailing was trailing in any sort of region.

The moonlight was much brighter outdoors than it had been in the bunk house, and the deputy had no difficulty in finding the tracks of Red Powell's cayuse, leading into the chaparral, straight north of the T Bar corral.

In the shadowy thicket itself, of course, Lucius could not have fol-

lowed the trail without a lantern. But the fact that Red had headed north told the Shootin' Fool something.

"Uh-huh." He raked Molasses with his spurs. "He's heading for the Rio Frio. I've got to catch him before he gets into those canyons up there, or——"

He stopped without letting himself consider the possibility of failure. Nevertheless, he drove Molasses as the sleepy horse had seldom been driven before. And the animal made good time—for it.

The deputy did not try to follow the tracks of the fugitive. In the darkness, he simply tried to figure which way he would go if he was in Red's place and went that way.

Sometimes great areas of prickly pear blocked the way, and the Shootin' Fool had to circle them impatiently. Again and again, he was forced to pick his way through pitch-dark, narrow trails, where thorns tore at his silk shirt and neckerchief, and threatened to rake off his hat.

Every nerve was taut. Every sense was alert to the danger that the man ahead might halt and try to ambush him. But Red Powell apparently was thinking only about putting as many miles between himself and the T Bar Ranch as possible.

Molasses was doing his best, but that wasn't anything to brag about. The deputy's hopes sank when dawn came, and he saw neither his enemy nor any sign of a cayuse's trail.

"Dog-gone! I've got to catch that skunk and look at his chin," he groaned.

He remembered that there was a Mexican, named Esteban Gregorio, living up in that part of the thicket. Esteban's place was about the only chance for food and water up there.

"If Red happened onto the cabin, he'd probably stop for a few minutes, anyhow," Lucius thought, turning his horse toward the Mexican's.

In less than half an hour, he reached the tiny adobe hut where Esteban lived, with a few goats, chickens, and pigs. At the deputy's approach, the short, dried-up-looking little peon, with silver-streaked hair and lively black eyes, jumped up from a bench beside his door, waving a greeting. He appeared to own only two articles of clothing, a dirty red shirt and torn, greasy trousers. His feet were bare.

"Hello!" On account of his discouragement, the Shootin' Fool did not try out his slight knowledge of the Spanish language. "Have you seen another man, an hombre with a red beard, go by?"

"Si, señor." The Mexican grinned from ear to ear. "Thees hombre on black *caballo*, he ees pass maybe one hour ago."

"An hour ago!" the deputy groaned anew. "I didn't think he would have that much of a lead. Much obliged, and so long!"

"Weel *el señor* have sometheeng to eat?" inquired Esteban.

"No, I haven't got time to eat!" Lucius spurred madly away.

Now, since it was daylight, he had a clear trail to follow. But how was he going to catch Red Powell with the Rio Frio so near?

On account of his rage, the Shootin' Fool rode for some distance without thinking clearly. Then suddenly he reined Molasses to a stop and stared around him.

"Dog-gone!" he exclaimed. "I'd clear forgotten that."

The country above Esteban's place was a giant triangle. Two deep canyons, running down to the Rio Frio, formed the upper sides.

And the walls of the gorges were too steep for any man to get up or down them. Only at the point of the triangle, where the canyons met, was there a path downward.

Thus the region was a natural trap. If Red Powell had known the thicket thoroughly, he would have dodged it.

Lucius wheeled Molasses around on his back trail for a short distance. Then he guided the horse through the chaparral to the right. By making a long circle that way, the deputy knew, he could avoid the side canyons, approach the Rio Frio by a different route, and perhaps cut off the fugitive at his only path.

But Molasses had to be driven every mile of the way. Every minute might be the one that counted.

The Shootin' Fool himself was reeling when, with the noon sun blazing down overhead, he stopped his horse at the foot of a tall cliff. He had reached the point of the triangle.

At his back was the Rio Frio. To the right angled one feeder canyon; to the left, another. Just between them, down the angle of the cliffs, zigzagged the only path from above.

Pushing his yellow hair out of his blue eyes, the deputy stared dizzily up at the trail.

Was he too late? Had Red Powell already come down that way? Or had the fugitive got wise to the trap and dodged it entirely?

Those questions raced through his mind. But he was not left long in doubt.

"Haw-haw-haw!" A grim laugh sounded behind him. "So yuh thought yo'd trap me, did yuh, yuh bright young depity? The only trouble is, I got hyar first an' figured out what yore plan might be."

Lucius turned his head quickly to the right and saw Red Powell, sit-

ting his horse less than ten yards away. The T Bar boss had spurred out from between two jagged boulders, which the deputy had been too tired to notice before.

Red's snaggly teeth were bared through his beard. His eyes were ablaze with hatred and cruelty combined. But the fear that he formerly had shown was lacking. He thought he had the best of the Shootin' Fool that time.

Once he had tried to shoot the deputy. Again he had attempted to stab him in his bunk. But now his skilled hands whirled his lariat.

"Well?" Lucius tensed, about to grab for his six-guns.

"Go ahead! Draw!" Red sneered. "I'm goin' ter give yuh a taste o' what yuh lawmen give us crooks when yuh catch us. I'm goin' ter kill yuh with a rope around yore neck!"

"Tell me first"—the Shootin' Fool was stalling for time—"if you've got a Y-shaped scar on your chin. If you have——"

"Haw-haw-haw!" The foreman's guffaw cut him off. "If I've got the mark yo're so interested in, yo'll never know it. Yo're goin' ter die now, nice an' slow, while I drag yuh along at the end of my lass."

Hiss! With a quick overhand throw, the spinning loop sailed from Red's expert hand.

There was something almost like a striking rattler about the rope as it whirled through the air.

Lucius Carey might have reached for his pearl-handled six-guns. But he did not attempt to do so. With his face suddenly pale and his blue eyes narrowed, he sat as if he was frozen in his saddle.

Whir-r-r! The deadly loop suddenly settled down over his high-peaked, creamy sombrero.

WW-9E

IV.

Even while the rope had been hissing through the air, Lucius Carey had planned how to turn the tables on his enemy.

Before Red Powell could jerk the widespread noose tight about his neck, the young deputy grabbed the rope. Pulling it downward, he spread the loop over the pommel and back of the cantle of his saddle. The other end was tied fast to Red's saddle horn.

At the same instant, he spurred Molasses. The cayuse jumped forward. The lariat jerked tight. But it was the Shootin' Fool who caused the tightening, not Red Powell.

"What the——" the latter gave a startled yell when he found his own rope getting out of his control that way.

Lucius laughed. His thighs were pinched a little by the loop. But that was better than having his neck stretched.

Molasses was pawing the earth frantically, but making little headway in the pulling match against the black cayuse. The deputy figured his fight with the T Bar boss would have to be settled by guns, after all. He started to reach for his.

Snap! The breaking of Red's saddle cinch sounded almost like a rifle report.

Already old, and weakened by many contests, the strap could not stand the exceptional strain put upon it.

With a startled yell, the T Bar boss was jerked from the back of the black horse. His saddle went with him. As the tension on the rope suddenly relaxed, Molasses nearly pitched forward, too. And the Shootin' Fool felt as if he was jarred clear to his boot soles.

But he quickly jerked the brown cayuse's head up and dug his spurs into its flanks. It set off at a gallop, as much on account of its fear of the things dragging along behind as for any other reason.

Red had his left foot caught in a stirrup and could not kick it loose. So at every bounce the saddle made, the T Bar foreman bounced, too.

"Stop! Yo're killin' me! Let me loose!" His screams echoed against the canyon walls.

"A little while ago, you were going to drag me to death, nice and slow," Lucius shouted over his shoulder.

But he did not intend to kill Red that way, although he found a grim humor in the situation. For a quarter of a mile, he dragged the loose saddle and the whimpering man over rocks and through cactus. Then he drew Molasses to a halt.

The Shootin' Fool's cheeks were flushed, and his blue eyes bright, as he threw the loop off his own saddle and vaulted to the ground. The length of the rope away, the T Bar boss was staggering to his feet. He felt for his .45, but his holster was empty, the gun having been lost out sometime during the dragging process.

"If yo'll give me a gun, I'll shoot it out with yuh," whined the man. "Yuh ain't got nothin' on me."

"I haven't?" Lucius Carey looked at the hombre's face and laughed. "How about that Y-shaped scar on

your chin, identifying you as Les Sims, the former rope champion, and now a murderer?"

"Huh?" The T Bar foreman's mouth popped open. He felt his chin.

If he had not known he was dealing with such a dangerous criminal, the young deputy would have laughed. For Red Powell, or Les Sims, was a comical if somewhat gruesome sight.

During his long drag at the end of the rope, practically every hair as well as much of his skin had been scraped off. His face was swollen and bruised. And crimson dripped from almost every pore. But there was still enough skin on his chin to show the Y-shaped scar.

There could be no doubt that he was the "wanted" hombre.

"Dog-gone!" The Shootin' Fool grinned, as he stepped forward to snap the handcuffs about the prisoner's wrists. "I never knew before how much difference a shave could make in a fellow. I guess when I get too old for this deputy-sheriffin' business, I'll have to open me a barber college in Cotulla."

Thar's more ways than one ter skin a cat, an' more ways than one ter ketch a crook. In either line, Looshis Carey seems ter have the knack o' deliverin' the goods. With his six-guns blazin' an' their bullets landin' plumb straight, he ain't a gent thet bad hombres care ter git too chummy with. Watch fer him ter be back afore long in another thrillin' story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HYAR we are, well along in the New Year, an' I still ain't got used tuh writin' 1935, instead o' '34. Every year, I go through the same performance, but I reckon I ain't the only one. How about it?

I'm hopin' thet yuh folks who follow the Song Corral will keep in mind our campaign fer findin' real old-time songs. There still are lots

of 'em that ain't never been printed. But if all of us will keep our eyes an' ears open, thet state of affairs shore won't last long.

I got a couple o' plumb interestin' songs fer yuh, this week. The first one is about an outlaw who used tuh ride the owl-hoot trail with Jesse James. He—— But I reckon the song kin speak fer itself. Here it is:

JACK MIDDLETON*

My name it is Jack Middleton,
From Arkansas I came.
I am a highway ruffian;
Stage robbery is my game!

I went out into Texas
Some gamblers there to see;
I tell you, wild and reckless boys,
I got on a Western spree.

I wore a pair of six-shooters
Which made me feel quite grand,
I found myself in camp one day
With Jesse James's band.

You know it put sad feelin's o'er me
To think of days of yore.
And it's I'll be a good boy
And do so no more.

Jesse passed the bottle around;
We all took a dram,
Liquor put the devil in me
And I didn't give a dam.

There was Dick Little, Joe Collins, myself,
And Frank, and the other three,
A squad containing seven men,
And a merry bunch was we.

I took the train for St. Joe
And shipped the other three—
That left a squad containing
Joe Collins, Frank and me.

Our plan was to cross the Rio Grande
And enter the Western plains,
To intercept the U. P.
And rob the West-bound train.

O'Bannan's Rangers followed us,
One cold and stormy night.
At last, we saw our only revenge
Was to give the boys a fight.

They whistled bullets all around our ears,
Although they passed us by,
But every time our rifles cracked,
A Ranger had to die.

I then pulled for old Arkansas,
I thought it was the best
To put up at my girl's house,
And take a little rest.

There the sheriff tackled me,
He thought he was the boss,
But I drew old Betsy from my side,
And nailed him to the cross.

Looks like Jack was a mighty
tough old outlaw! I reckon he went
the way of the rest of 'em, too.

Now hyars an' ol'-timer—written
'way back in the 1860's. Like "Jack
Middleton," I reckon it tells it's own
story. It may be familiar tuh some
of yuh, fer I printed it in the Corral
'bout two years ago. But it's worth
usin' ag'in, I figure. So here's

THE BLIZZARD

By Eugene Ware

The fiddler was improvising; at times he
would cease to play,
Then shutting his eyes, he sang and sang,
in a wild ecstatic way;
Then ceasing his song, he whipped and
whipped the strings, with his frantic bow,
Releasing impatient music, alternately loud
and low;
Then wilting and reeling, he sang as if he
were dreaming aloud,
And wrapping the frenzied music around
him like a shroud;
And this is the strange refrain, which he
sang in a minor key:
"No matter how long the river, the river
will reach the sea!"

It was midnight at the Cimarron, not many
a year ago;
The blizzard was whirling pebbles and
sand, and billows of frozen snow:
He sat on a bale of harness, in a dugout
roofed with clay;
The wolves overhead bewailed, in a dismal
protracted way;
They peeped down the dobe chimney, and
quarreled and sniffed and clawed;
But the fiddler kept on with his music, as
the blizzard stalked abroad;
And time and again, that strange refrain
came forth in a minor key:
"No matter how long the river, the river
will reach the sea!"

Around him on boxes and barrels, un-
charmed by the fiddler's tune.
The herders were drinking and betting their
cartridges on vantoan,

* Printed by kind permission of "The Journal of American Folklore," from the article "Songs and Rhymes of the South," by E. C. Perrow, of Kentucky. In Volume 25 of the Journal.

And once in a while, a player, in a spirit of
reckless fun,
Would join in the fiddler's music, and fire
off the fiddler's gun.
An old man sat on a sack of corn and stared
with a vacant gaze;
He had lost his hopes in the Gypsum Hills,
and he thought of the olden days.
The tears fell fast when the strange refrain
came forth in a minor key:
"No matter how long the river, the river
will reach the sea!"

At morning the tempest ended, and the
sun came back once more;
The old, old man of the Gypsum Hills had
gone to the smoky shore.
They chopped him a grave in the frozen
ground where the morning sunlight fell;
With a restful look he held in his hand an
invisible asphodel;
They filled up the grave, and each herder
said good-by, till the Judgment Day.
But the fiddler stayed, and he sang and
played, as the herders walked away—
A requiem in a lonesome land, in a mourn-
ful minor key:
"No matter how long the river, the river
will reach the sea!"

An' now, folks, I got a plumb
special treat fer yuh. I don't reckon
none o' yuh need tuh be told who
S. Omar Barker is. We've sung lots
of his songs, here in the Corral.

Tuh-night, we got another one,
an' Mr. Barker has written it spe-
cially fer us. It ain't never been
printed nowhere, before. So lets git
goin' at it! Here's

THE MURDER BRAND

By S. Omar Barker

They branded the steer, and they cut him
free
To ramble the Texas range,
And the brand he bore for the world to see
Was big and grim and strange.

'Twas "MURDER" they'd burned on his
roan-white hide,
And the Trail Kid's face was gray,
For never again would his old dad ride—
Dead in the dust he lay.

For a yearling steer, two lawless men
Had drawn and fired and fled.
The herd moved slowly on again,
But the Kid stood by his dead.

Wild coyotes howled to the far North Star,
And blood-red rose the dawn—
Two killers galloped fast and far,
As the Trail Kid followed on.

Like a wolf, he scouted the prairie trails,
Through hunger and heat and cold,
But the weeks crept by, and the trackless
swales
Told him the trail was old.

The slow months grew into a year
As the Trail Kid combed the land,
And ever and oft he spied the steer
With MURDER for its brand.

Up the dusty trail the herds strung by.
Men urged the Kid to quit.
But never the grimness left his eye:
"Them two I'm bound to git!"

Two years had passed when "Llano Frank"
Showed up with a north-bound herd.
The gun rose swift from the Kid's lean
flank—
Frank died with never a word.

Like a skulking skunk in a rim-rock draw
The Trail Kid found Frank's pal—
And a phantom rider the ranchers saw
Rope a steer one night near Jal.

The Trail Kid never they saw again,
Yet ever and oft men spied
A roan-white steer roam o'er the plain
With a strange brand on his side.

Through the MURDER brand ran a blood-
red bar,
And under it, boldly rayed,
A new brand gleamed like the Northern
Star—
The Trail Kid's debt was "PAID."

There yuh are, pard! An' if thet
ain't a humdinger of a Western song,
even if it is brand-new, I ain't never
heerd one. Here's hopin' yuh all en-
joy it as much as I do.

Waal, now, let's see what we got
next:
Hyar's a little song thet I'd like

tuh give yuh ag'in, folks. Back in 1932, Florence Fritz, of Pennsylvania, sent it in. She said it was sung by the Pickard family. It has the lilt of a play-party or dance song. I wish, if any of yuh happen tuh recognize it an' have a more complete version of it, yuh'd send me a copy. Hyar goes:

BUFFALO GALS

Buffalo gals, would you come out to-night,
Come out to-night, come out to-night;
Buffalo gals, would you come out to-night,
And dance by the light of the moon?

As I was a-walking down the street,
Down the street, down the street,
Pretty little girl I chanced to meet,
Under the silvery moon.

I asked this gal to be my wife,
To be my wife, to be my wife;
Then I'd be happy all my life,
And skip to the lovely moon.

Buffalo gals, would you come out to-night,
Come out to-night, come out to-night,
Buffalo gals, would you come out to-night,
And dance by the light of the moon?

Reckon that's all we got time fer,
tuh-night, pard. I'll be sayin' "So
long an' good song-huntin'."



WHERE THE HUSKY IS KING

IN the far Northland, during the long winters, instead of being frozen in and asleep, as some folks imagine, men and dogs are on the job. The Mounties are at their stations in isolated outposts, ready for emergencies; trappers in their lonesome cabins, tucked in protecting sections of the bush, are watching their trap lines; sleds, harness and dog moccasins have been carefully examined and repaired; and above all, the hardy huskies have been rounded up after the summer's idleness and rest, and are now at their tasks again. The driver has laid in his supplies from the nearest trading post—a trifling two hundred or more miles away—and every one is glad to be busy again.

The first visit to the trading post, before the long hard winter sets in, is one bright big event for the teamsters.

During their brief stay there, the men of the North, grouped around the stove, discuss dogs. That is the one topic of conversation—the

merits of the different breeds, the training and breaking, the faults and virtues of various dogs, their performances, their endurance, their hauling abilities, their intelligence and speed, and last but not least, the superiority of each driver's team over all others.

It is often during this first visit to the trading post that the midwinter races, which have become world-famous, are decided upon.

Arguments are hot and furious, for every driver is proud and jealous of the standing of his own team, and will contest the claims of others in language that is plenty strong.

They will also tell the world that man's oldest form of transport in the snowy wastes, the dog team, is still the commonest and the best, in spite of the inroads of airplanes and other speedy machinery; that the husky is still the King of the North, and that nothing can approach him for the conveyance of travelers through ice and snow and blizzards over mountains and frozen lakes.



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 date 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.

FOLKS, I'm plumb ashamed tuh admit that I've delayed all this time in thankin' the Pen Pals who sent me Christmas and New Year greetin's. Waal, I reckon, it isn't too late yet, an' I shore do thank all o' yuh from the bottom o' my heart. But thar's plenty o' let-

ters, an' I guess we better get right down tuh cases. Hyar they are:

PEN PALS WANTED FOR A PURPOSE

Song lovers aimin' tuh increase thar collection, job hunters hopin' fer Pen Pals to help get located, gals

an' boys writin' in with special requests which shore are worth everybody's while tuh notice.

DEAR SAM: I hope you will print this letter, because it is the first time that I have written to you. I am a girl, a senior in high school where I am taking a commercial course. I am fond of horseback riding and baseball, but my favorite pastime is playing the guitar, especially as an accompaniment to cowboy songs of which I have a large number and am eager to get more. I am hoping Westerners, especially cowgirls, will answer my plea. I should be glad to have an opportunity to exchange cowboy songs with any one who writes. GOLDEN ROD, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twenty, anxious to get Pen Pals in Western States, although I would welcome others as well, especially if they are willing to exchange cowboy songs. I have a collection of about two thousand songs—all kinds. So there should be a good chance for making trades. Perhaps some Pen Pal has a guitar course which he no longer needs. I should gladly trade songs for it. Please let me know. C. WRIGHT, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: May a girl of twenty-five ask you to find some Pen Pals for her? I should like to hear from girls all over the world, but since I am collecting songs, I hope that some will answer who are willing to trade with me. Will also exchange snapshots and poetry. I am learning to play the guitar and also the piano. BESSIE MURPHY, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: My pal and I are going West, to Arizona or New Mexico. We are both hoping that some Pen Pals out there will write to us about the chances for securing work on a ranch, because that is what we are looking for. We are seventeen and twenty years old, strong and healthy and willing to work hard. Please let us hear from you, Pen Pals. VINCENT AND CLIFFORD, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get work on some Western ranch. I am a boy, seventeen years old, willing to work for clothes and board until I am considered worth some wages. I would certainly appreciate it very much if some Pen Pals would help me to get located. STAN J., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a woman of twenty-nine, with a daughter of nine and a son of seven. My husband deserted us and, having lost all by fire, I am in need of a change. So I am writing to you that you may possibly place me and my children on a Western ranch. BETTY V., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a chap of twenty-three, an invalid for the past several months and, of course, lonesome and blue in consequence. I wonder if you could not help me to find some pleasant friends with whom I could correspond regularly? I can write interestingly of my experiences and the adventures I went through until Lady Hard Luck caught me. TOMMY J., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a man, forty-three years old, a linotype operator and member of the Typographical Union. Having lived for twenty-five years in New Mexico, where I went through all the actual experiences of a cowboy, I can, of course, give information on that subject and am willing to do so in answer to any deserving letter written to me. B. R. U., OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a collector of postal cards with views of cities and countries, and I should like to find Pen Pals with a similar hobby. If Pen Pals answer this plea, I wish they would write postals. MATTHEW WOODS, JR., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of thirteen, interested in collecting photographs of movie stars and also fond of reading and sports. I should like to hear from girls anywhere in the world and promise to answer every letter I get promptly. LETA L., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl, sixteen years old, and I should like to find some Pen Pals of around that age in the South, especially in Virginia and the Carolinas. ELAINE M., OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen. My principal interest concerns Western life and for that reason I should like to get Pen Pals in the West who will send me pictures depicting the life of cowboys and cowgirls on ranches. Will gladly exchange snaps and answer all letters. FRANCES EDWARDS, OF NORTE CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I have been a reader of your magazine since my connection with the Colonel W. F. Cody Buffalo Bill Show when it toured England and the Continent. Now I am one of the unfortunates—or I should, perhaps, say “fortunates”—who are on government relief. Here is what I came to ask you: Will you try to find some Pen Pals for my boy? He is now about twelve years old and has been crippled since he was three. We spent all we had in an effort to cure him, and he is now being taken care of, as far as surgical and medical needs are concerned, by State agencies. He has been operated on time after time, and has recently been again in a hospital to undergo a major operation. Naturally, he has had little schooling, but by getting him interested in stamps, relics, books et cetera, he will educate himself to a degree, until he is able to go to school regularly, because he is exceptionally clever. Kindly see what you can do for him in the way of getting friendly Pen Pals interested in him.

HENRY LUCK, OF KANSAS.

REQUESTS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

When these folks show such great interest in the Pen Pal idea, I reckon they ought tuh be rewarded, an' I hope it won't be long before each o' these letters is answered.

DEAR SAM: I am a lumberjack, nineteen years old, and very lonely. Please get me in touch with some Pen Pals, no matter in what part of the world they may live, so that I can correspond regularly. I am a great lover of songs and will gladly trade with others likewise interested. Will also exchange snaps.

ROBERT BOLES, OF NEW BRUNSWICK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, seventeen years old, and I should like to have Pen Pals in the Western part of the United States, with whom I can exchange views and snaps of cities and countries. I promise to answer all letters.

JAMES MCCALL, OF IRELAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a lonely gunner in the British army, at present, my captain's orderly. I am nineteen years old, a great lover of Western poems and songs, just itching to find some nice Pen Pals through your department.

GUNNER SHAWCROFT, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow in need of Pen Pals, especially Westerners, because the West interests me more than any other country. I would love to go West sometime, but in the meantime, I hope for letters with firsthand information as a substitute.

• DAVID GAMES, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: Letters from my country may not reach you so frequently, hence I hope you will print this one in your corner. I am a young fellow of eighteen, a lover of all things Western, and therefore anxious to get some Pen Pals in the West. My favorite sports are hunting with the fox hounds and tennis. I also take part in stage performances. Will gladly exchange snaps and songs.

JACK CLEARY, OF IRELAND.

LONELY AN' FRIENDLESS

Everybody needs a friend an' none more than the lonesome folks. That should be incentive enough for the real kind o' Pen Pals tuh write promptly an' send along a word o' cheer.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome boy, and I wish you could find some Pen Pals, especially among country boys. I don't care how old they may be.

LOUIS MOFFET, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twenty-four, keeping house for my grandparents and very lonesome at times. I ask you to try to get some girls of my own age from Maryland, Oklahoma, Montana, and the South to write to me.

MARY R., OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely boy of eleven, and I would like a few Pen Pals in any of the Eastern States, because I am well informed about the West. I will exchange snaps and information.

BOBBIE S., OF WYOMING.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of sixteen, a city girl, with a great longing to be out West which is the part of our country I love the most. Please, Western girls, write and tell me about your way of living so that I can learn more about it.

ANNA ZSAK, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young woman of twenty-five, and I should like to hear from Pen Pals, especially in Arizona and New Mexico. I am boarding out and get very lonely at times. So I desire correspondents, and I promise to answer all letters, older friends not excepted, since I lost my mother about seven years ago.

MARGARET H., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonely girl, sixteen years old. I long for girls of from sixteen to twenty-one years, especially Westerners, to write to me and cheer me. All letters will be answered promptly.

ELSIE PHELPS, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Please have some Pen Pals write to me. I am a lonesome girl, nineteen years old, cooped up all by myself in an apartment nearly all day long. I like to hear about other places and countries, and I hope many will answer my plea. Will gladly exchange info and snaps.

J. DANIELS, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely country girl. I should like very much to have some Western Pen Pals, cowgirls especially. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snaps. ANN L., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome girl of seventeen. My ambition is to go West sometime, and I wish girls in Western States would befriend me and possibly help me get a job on a ranch. I love outdoor work, and I know that I can do my share of it, any time and anywhere.

EUNICE McC., OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a lonely girl, anxious to find some true-blue Pen Pals. I am a junior in high school, seventeen years old, a "petite" French girl. I should like to correspond with girls from sixteen to twenty-three years old, no matter where they may live, and promise to answer all letters as well as to exchange snapshots.

LENA FONTENAT, OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of fifteen. I am fond of books, travel, and sports. I should like some Pen Pals from foreign countries, but if that is not possible, I should be happy to hear from any Western girls of my age. TONI M., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of nineteen, living on a farm. I should like to get

some Pen Pals from the West and will gladly answer all letters and exchange snaps.

THELMA W., OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a man, twenty-three years of age. I live on a ranch, fourteen miles from town, and I get very lonesome. I worked in a CCC camp for quite some time and can tell of many interesting experiences. Please get me some Pen Pals from anywhere. Will exchange snaps.

VICTOR V., OF NORTH DAKOTA.

WESTERNERS WANTED

Come on, gals an' boys, an' satisfy these hyar writers who look fer first-hand info thet yuh ought tuh be only too proud tuh hand out tuh them.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen after some Pen Pals in Western States who can and will tell me about ranch life and cowboys. PETE FILINOWICH, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I should like to hear from Pen Pals in the West and can promise to answer promptly because I love to read and write letters. I am a boy, thirteen years old, fond of sports, especially hiking and swimming.

HOWARD POPE, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am a little boy of ten, but I can read and write letters and would like to hear from Western fellows who can tell me about horses which interest me a lot.

BILL M., OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I would like very much to correspond with some Pen Pals, no matter how old. I prefer to hear from cowgirls in the West, because having a horse of my own, which I broke all by myself, I feel that I have something in common with them. I am a girl in my teens.

RUBY SMITH, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: How about getting me some Pen Pals from the Western States? I am a girl of sixteen and live in the country, so anything that pertains to the open spaces out West is of great interest to me.

HILGA HANSEN, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: This is a boy of fourteen writing in order to learn more of the West and cowboy life. I have read a lot in the W. W. W., but it would be wonderful if I could get some info direct from Westerners.

EUGENE GLASS, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of twelve. I like to read, draw, and write, but I have no one to correspond with. I should like to hear from girls in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas.

DOROTHY Y., OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am looking for Pen Pals from all over the world, but especially Westerners. I am very fond of horseback riding. Since I do not know much about horses, I should like to get in touch with boys of my age or older who can tell me of their experiences with these pets. I am a boy, nineteen years old.

DAVE CHAMBERLAIN, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am greatly interested in the West and for that reason should like to secure some Pen Pals in any of the Western States. I would like especially to get some information about working conditions there, because before long I hope to be a Westerner myself. I am a boy, and I have already had some experience in farming and in riding Western colts.

RAY PETRIE, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I wish I could get some Pen Pals out West. I am a girl of fourteen, interested in horseback riding, and I feel that I can get a lot of needed information in corresponding with girls in the West. GEM CLAXTON, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to you in the hope that you can get some Western Pen Pals for me. I am a young girl of twenty, but any one from eighteen years old up is welcome as a correspondent. I am somewhat tired of the East, and news of the West would be indeed a relief to me.

DEE BENOTTI, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

OTHER REQUESTS

Jest the ordinary kind that it's easy tuh find an answer tuh. Pen Pals anywhere in the world is all they're askin' fer.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of seventeen. I should like to have Pen Pals all over the United States or in any other part of the world. Please round them up for me and start them slinging ink in my direction.

CHARLES B., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Will you please get some Pen Pals for me? I am not particular, and girls from any part of the globe are welcome. I am sixteen years old.

EDNA H., OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, and I should like to get Pen Pals, no matter in what part of the world they may live. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

DANIEL B., OF WYOMING.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, looking for Pen Pals from everywhere. My pastime is reading and writing letters, and I offer to give information on anything I know about and promise to answer all letters.

IRENE C., OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I am very anxious to get some Pen Pals, and I don't care from where letters come. I promise to answer all letters.

ADA C., OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young fellow, a six-footer of eighteen. I wish to become acquainted with any one who aims for true friendship, and I should be grateful to boys of my age who answer this letter. I have a car and have traveled a lot, so there are many things to tell.

DON, OF VERMONT.

DEAR SAM: I am just a little girl, ten years old. But I should like to get Pen Pals, anyhow, and hope that some one will write to me, no matter where they may live.

LOUISE J., OF ARKANSAS.

Thar we are. Plenty o' letters as per usual, an' it only needs fer yuh to answer in order tuh obtain new frien's. Good luck tuh all o' yuh. So long till next week.



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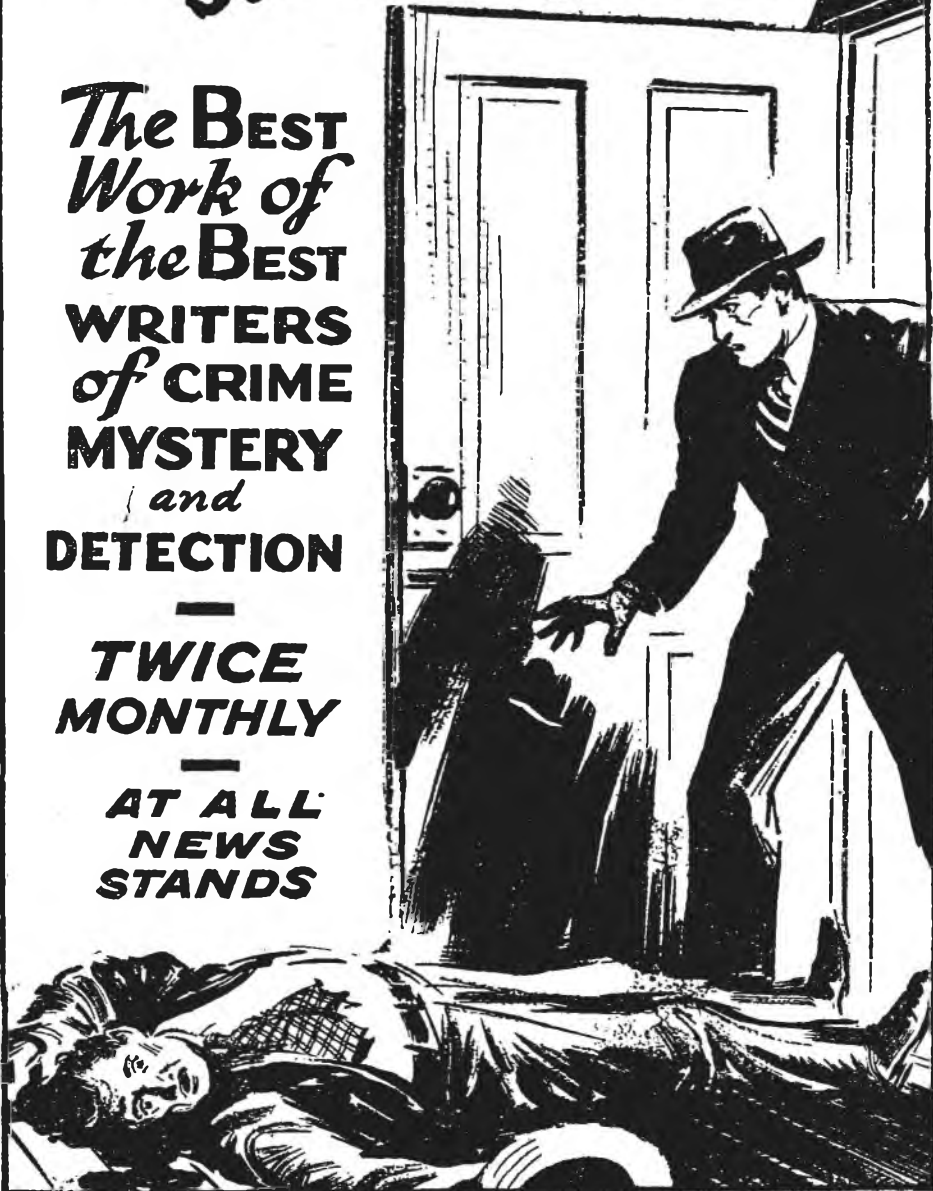
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Detective Story Magazine

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**TWICE
MONTHLY**

—
**AT ALL
NEWS
STANDS**





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.

THE Bar U twins an' the Shootin' Fool is chinnin' away at a great rate when we gets ter the Corner fer this week's meetin'. A couple o' minutes later, in comes Hungry an' Rusty.

"Reckon we're 'bout all the hombres thet's goin' ter be here, ter-night, gents," we says. "So we might jest as well git started with the business o' the meetin'."

"Where's the bunch from Circle J?" asks one o' the twins.

"Oh," we chuckles, "they're perambulatin' round down in Arizona, we reckon. Prob'ly Buck Foster has got hissself inter some kind of a jack pot thet takes all Billy, Joe, an' Sing Lo has got ter git him out of."

Rusty Bolivar snorts angrily. "Thet fool Foster!" he growls. "Why'n blazes don't the rest o' them Circle J waddies leave him in one

o' his jack pots? They'd be danged well rid of him, the ol' pelican!"

"Aw, Rusty," we says, "yuh knows yuh'd miss Buck Foster if he never come ter the Corner no more."

"Shore," drawls Hungry Hawkins. "Jest think, pard, if Buck didn't never show up, round here, nobody'd ever give yuh no argument. Yuh'd feel so danged peaceful, yuh'd be nigh sociable—mebbe."

Rusty glares at his lanky pard, but don't say nothin'. The rest of the gang laughs—all but one o' the twins. An' thet lets us know which twin is which. Fer Jerry Carter ain't never been known ter even grin.

"There's a whale of a lot o' mail, waitin' here in the sack," we says then. "Let's git goin' with it an' see how many letters we kin read."

Thet idea pleases the gang. So we opens the sack, dumps the letters out on the table, an' picks one off the top o' the pile. We hands it ter one o' the twins.

"Here yuh are, Jerry," we says. "Yuh start the readin'."

An' then we danged near falls offn our chair. Fer the twin takes the letter an' *grins* at us. It ain't Jerry, after all. Some way, them two pesky young varmint changed places when we wa'n't lookin'—jest ter fool us. Which same they done.

Dog-gone it!" we exclaims. "We ought ter brand yuh two. Thet's the only way we'll ever be able ter tell yuh apart."

Tom grins wider'n ever, then starts readin' this here letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just a few words to let you know what I think of your magazine, and the 3W boys. I have been reading W. W. W. for about eight years, I believe, off and on, but have to think twice before buying an issue without a Circle J story. Circle J should be in every week—and be the first story, too.

A new character showed up recently, who sure is close to the top. He was Buckaroo Jerome. He and his two pards are surely amusing. Let's have more stories about him.

The stories about Tex Carnochen, of Bitter Creek, were pretty good. But there was too much feud in them.

Don't dandify Billy West so much. And quit making Buck Foster so dumb. He's got sense. Six or seven years ago, he was better. It looks like the writers are running out of ideas.

Bud Jones and the Whistlin' Kid are still good and have been, all the way through. One or the other should be in every issue.

The gent who wrote in, a while ago, and suggested that you have "two novelettes a week," maybe meant "two magazines a week." That wouldn't be so bad!

Lots of times, I have to buy a copy of some other magazine because I finish W. W. W. too soon. Or maybe I get sore if that week's issue has no Circle J story in it.

I agree with the reading hombres who say that you should have a few girls in your stories. But make them girls of the

real Western type—good sports, not softies. Let Ruth Dawe get into the action of the Circle J stories.

Here's my idea of a swell issue: A Circle J novelette, first; then a short story of Bud Jones; a Bar U twins story; a Sonny Tabor novelette; a Whistlin' Kid short; a novelette about the Oklahoma Kid, and a Hungry and Rusty story.

Well, Boss, I'm afraid this is already too long to get printed in the Corner.

THE TEXAS KID.

St. Louis, Missouri.

"Waal," we says, as Tom puts the letter down, "thet mebbe was a little long ter print in the Corner. But it's sech a good one we'll give him a break, anyhow."

We hands the next letter ter Jerry Carter. He takes it, looks it over, an' begins:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I thought I would write and tell the waddies on the 3W spread exactly what I think of them.

In the first place, the stories are too impossible. The words are too vulgar for children to read. The stories are homogeneous and get very monotonous.

(Jerry danged near choked on thet "homogeneous" word.)

The heroes are all handsome and the best six-gun shooters in the country. They are just too good to be true. There is not a hiatus in the bunch of them.

There is too much cold blood murder and slaughter of humanity. I really think, it is my duty to objurgate you on printing such trash.

Many adventurous people can read your magazine and believe the hideous provocations you tell. Thus, they may become criminals. I should think you would be filled with ignominy if such a thing would happen. It is likely it will.

Some of the characters are extremely injudicious and indiscreet. For instance, Buck Foster and Rusty Bolivar. They are the easiest persons to infuriate. If they were not detained by their extremely calm pards, they would get their fool necks broken.

All questions are inscrutable to them. The calm and cool have a time and a half instilling and inebriating it to their inferior and infidel pards.

I must close. Here is hoping you will quit printing those vile and detestable stories. I will probably buy a magazine if you print different stories.

I also hope you will change your methods and instead of writing obnoxious, puerile dreams, write real Western stories.

I imagine this letter will go to the wastebasket, instead of being read in the Corner.

With as much affection as I could possibly give any one like you, Lucy L. Y.
South Dakota.

The gang looks kind o' breathless when Jerry stops readin'—almost as breathless as Jerry *is*. All them big, jaw-breakin' words plumb flabbergasts the cowboys.

We takes the letter from Jerry an' looks it over. We decides ter print it in the Corner, jest as it's written—not even changin' the spellin'—an' let the readin' hombres see what they kin make out of it.

Here's the next one, read by the Shootin' Fool:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to you. The first one was never printed. I have been reading the 3W for about a year and a half. It is the best Western magazine I have ever read. It can't be beat.

I read in a late issue of your magazine a story called "Shoot-away Steve—Sheriff," by Paul S. Powers. It certainly was swell. Let's have more like it.

I have not read a story about Jim Hazel or Johnny Forty-five for a long time. What has become of them?

My favorite characters are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, the Oklahoma Kid, Circle J, the Bar U twins, Hungry and Rusty, Jimmy Quick, and the Shootin' Fool.

Yours truly,

SAM LO CASCIO.

Ensley, Alabama.

Hungry Hawkins gits the next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: It makes me plumb sick the way some of the hombres who write in complain about the Circle J bein' stale. I, myself, think that the 3W is not complete without a Circle J story in it, every now and then, and I think that a

large majority of the people who read this magazine think the same thing.

Now I might as well tell you that I would rather argue than eat. So if any of you wish to contradict me—well, just come ahead. I'd like nothing better.

Now to get down to brass tacks: The best waddies on the spread are Sonny Tabor, Hungry and Rusty, Jimmy Quick, the Whistlin' Kid, and Johnny Forty-five. The rest are *bueno*, but those are my favorites.

Well, I hope that the hombres who read this letter will remember, and when they write in don't mention Circle J's gettin' stale. Because if they do, it will get me riled up plenty, and you'll have an argument on.

Well amigos, I guess I'm about through for this time, but I'm liable to write in some more. So, adios.

Yours till Jimmy Quick gets wide awake,
TWO-GUN SCOTT.

Jonesboro, Arkansas.

"Waal," we says, chucklin', "nobody kin complain any more about Circle J not havin' plenty o' friends among the readin' hombres. The saddle pards are shore pop'lar gents."

We gives the followin' letter ter Rusty Bolivar:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my third letter to the Corner. Neither of the others got printed. Here's hoping this has better luck.

I like all your hombres, especially the Oklahoma Kid, Hungry and Rusty, the Circle J pards, and Johnny Forty-five. Also, please let's see more stories about Buckaroo Jerome.

Charles E. Barnes and Samuel H. Nickels also write good stories.

I think Buck Foster is a pain in the neck. The same goes for George Krumm. Both of them are all mouth and not he-men.

Yours till you throw this letter in the wastebasket,
ARCADIA, Florida. CORTEZ MELTON.

We reads the next two ourself—figurin' thet they'll use up about all the time we got left. Here's the first one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been reading your magazine steadily since October of last year. Before that, I used to get an issue now and then.

I think the Oklahoma Kid is your best character. After him come Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, and the Bar U twins. The rest are all good, except Lum Yates and Bud Jones of Texas.

I've read all the arguments about romance and girls, in the Corner, and I think there should be none of that sort of thing in 3W. The series stories seem to prove that having girls in the stories is of no help.

Put in more combination stories like those of Circle J and Sonny Tabor. For instance, let Kid Wolf team up with the Oklahoma Kid. That would be a real story.

Yours till the moths eat Buck Foster's mustache,
 SENOR MAVERICK.
 Mosinee, Wisconsin.

P. S. The best story I have ever read in 3W was "The Return of the Wild Deuce."

An' the last one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've read your W. W. W. for a long time. It is a plumb good magazine. So don't worry over what some of the chronic kickers have to say about it.

I have noticed that a few people have said, recently, that your stories are too impossible. That shows their ignorance of Western history. If they'd look up the history of the Lincoln County cattle war and of the Montana vigilantes, they'd find stuff a whole lot wilder and woollier than you print in your stories.

Of course, plenty of waddies never were in a gun fight. But some were, and since that is the case, your stories are all right. You couldn't write stories about an uneventful life on the range. Nobody would read them.

So I say that you are all right, Boss. Keep up the good work. I'll read 3W as long as I can see it.

Yours for wilder and woollier yarns,
 WILD BILL.
 South Norwalk, Connecticut.

An' thet one winds up another Wranglers Corner meetin'. The waddies fork their broncs and head fer home. More'll be in next week, though, fer another powwow with
 THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

BULLWHIP ADAMS—MAN HUNTER

Novelette

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

He rides the ranges in a bright-colored ol' stagecoach, lookin' fer folks thet need help. Most allus, he finds 'em—an' finds trouble at the same time.

THE OKLAHOMA KID'S RUSTLER CURE

Novelette

By LEE BOND

Said cure comes in pills—little lead pills thet come steamin' out o' the Kid's pet six-guns. One dose is guaranteed ter cure a rustler fer good an' all.

SEÑOR RED MASK TRAILS TROUBLE

Novelette

By GUY L. MAYNARD

The "trouble" is in the ugly form of El Hiena who's got a plumb disconcertin' way o' bobbin' up ter start a ruckus with the justice rider.

Also stories of Bud Jones of Texas, by J. Allan Dunn; Shorty Masters, M. D., by Allan R. Bosworth—and other characters.

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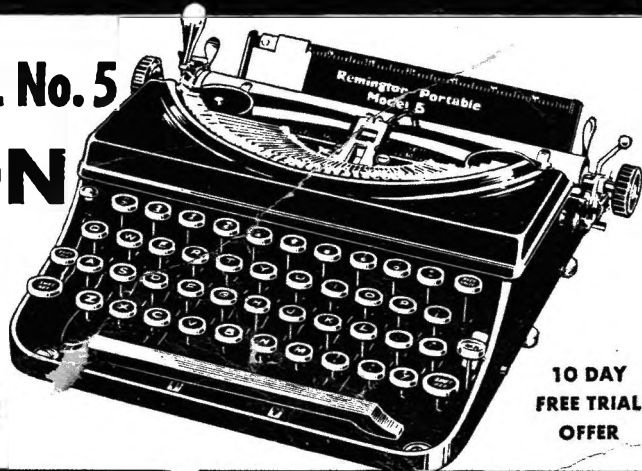
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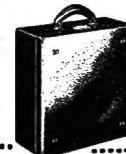
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