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Vol. 89, No. 3 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 24, 1934 Whole No. 1675

Cover Picture—Scene from

"The Brand Of Geronimo Brown" . *Painted by Walter Baumhofer*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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 When he burns it on bad hombres, it's on ter stay.
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 It's loud an' ter the point, an' Jimmy Quick savvies it plumb well.
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 He shore lives up ter his name, shootin' away at outlaws.

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 But he has ter sling a hull lot o' hot lead ter do it.
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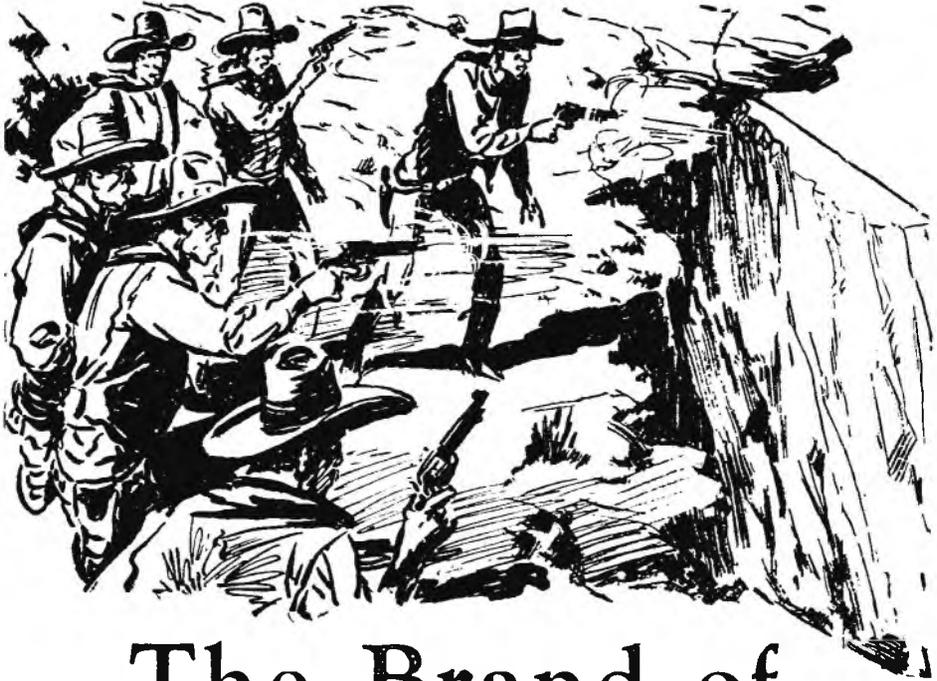
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The Brand of Geronimo Brown

CHAPTER I.

“YOU KILLED HIM!”

RAIN beat steadily against the window panes and iron bars of the Chicaree County jail. Streaks of lightning crisscrossed through lowering black storm clouds, filling the air with deafening peals of thunder.

“Geronimo” Brown—a tall, dark, gloomy cowboy—pressed his gaunt face against the windowpane of his jail cell and stared out through the rain-splashed glass into the storm.

A coal-black bronc stood at the hitch rack, head lowered, legs spread to brace itself against the bitter cold wind that whipped through its mane. Its ebony coat was shiny with moisture. The bed roll tied

behind the saddle was soaked in spite of the tarp that covered it. Rivulets of water ran down from the corners of the saddle blanket.

“My hoss!” burst out Geronimo bitterly. “Why the blazes have they tied him out in this storm?”

Turning angrily about, Geronimo grabbed the bars of his cell door, shook them until they rattled and yelled at two bestarred officers who were coming toward him from the direction of the sheriff’s office.

“Say, you!” shouted Geronimo, “what’s the idea of leavin’ my bronc out there in the storm? Ain’t yuh done me enough harm without makin’ my mustang suffer, too?”

One of the jail guards stepped forward, unlocked the cell door, and flung it open.

By George C. Henderson

Author of "The Texas Whirlwind," etc.



"Come on out, Geronimo," said the guard kindly. "The sheriff wants to see yuh."

Stumbling across the threshold of the cell, Geronimo Brown staggered weakly and leaned against the wall. When he had entered this place nearly a year ago, he had been a tanned, hard, healthy cowboy. The constant confinement in the damp, gloomy cell, deprived of the proper food, outdoor exercise, fresh air and sunlight, had undermined his health until he was only a shadow of his former self.

The terrible injustice of it had preyed upon his mind, until he felt as if he would go crazy. He was innocent of any crime. The sheriff and prosecuting attorney had admitted that. He was not held in jail for anything he had done, but

because of something he had seen. He was a material witness in the Granite Canyon stagecoach robbery case.

Shaking his head to clear it, the young dark-haired cowboy followed the jailer into the sheriff's office and stood glowering down at gray-mustached Sheriff Newt Baldwin.

Newt was a short, chunky man with keen, humorous hazel eyes. Those eyes saddened as he noted the change that had come over the once strong and healthy young puncher.

Geronimo was all skin and bones. His dark eyes gleamed in hollow sockets. His cheeks, that had been so firm and tanned, had taken on a saffron hue.

"I'm sorry, kid," grumbled Newt Baldwin.

"Keep yore sympathy to yore-

self," snarled Geronimo, savagely. "If you was sorry, you'd turn me loose. You know I'm innercent."

"I am turnin' you loose," said the sheriff. "You're free to go. There's yore guns on the table, and here's yore other things. Yore black hoss is saddled and waitin' fer yuh at the hitch rack."

For a moment, Geronimo Brown could only stare at the sheriff. Then he sank weakly into a chair and broke into a fit of coughing, that hacking cough which he had contracted in the dampness of his stone cell.

"I couldn't release you sooner," Newt was saying. "Superior Judge Burnell ordered you held as a material witness. I had to obey the law. A lawyer got an order yesterday for yore release, and I'm mighty glad. This is the fust time I ever had to hold an innercent man prisoner, and I hope it never happens again. They ought ter find some other way of guaranteein' the presence of material witnesses."

Geronimo wiped cold sweat from his forehead and leaned back in the chair. He had a frantic desire to get out of this jail as quick as he could, but he didn't have the strength to move just then. Nearly eleven months of confinement had made him a very sick cowboy.

"Wh-wh-what lawyer?" Geronimo gasped. "I never hired no law shark. Who put up the money? Who done this, I want to know?"

"I ain't supposed to tell," said the sheriff slowly, "but I'm goin' to, anyhow. It was Hazel Carlin. She couldn't stand it any longer, havin' you locked up here, jist because you seen them bandicks shoot her dad, Skinner Carlin."

Reeling to his feet, Geronimo Brown moved slowly over to the

table, picked up his things, and buckled on his guns.

"I used to stand up fer the law and fer you officers, but I don't any more," muttered the young cowboy. "There's somethin' wrong with a system that lets yuh ruin the life of an innercent man. From now on, Sheriff Baldwin, I'm agin' yuh. I don't want no truck with you, nor none of yore star-toters. If any of them tries to lay their hands on me, they better come a-smokin', because I ain't goin' to be dragged back to no slimy cell alive. Savvy?"

Geronimo's dark-rimmed eyes blazed with a fierce light as he stood with one hand on the doorknob, glaring at Sheriff Newt Baldwin.

"You got the wrong slant, Geronimo," retorted Newt gravely. "I know it's been an injustice to you. But I had to obey the court order. You were the only eyewitness to the stagecoach holdup in which Skinner Carlin was shot down. Superior Judge Burnell didn't want to take any chances on you leavin' or bein' kilt by the guilty parties."

"You kin save yore mushy talk!" interrupted Geronimo harshly. "There wa'n't no excuse fer jailin' a man you all knowed to be innercent. You blasted my whole life. I won't be strong enough to do a cowhand's work for months and when I do git well, how kin I git a job? Nobody wants to hire a jail-bird."

"I'll hire yuh myself," said Sheriff Baldwin.

"No, yuh won't!" burst out Geronimo. "I told yuh I don't want no more truck with lawmen, and I mean it. Now that you've branded me as a bandit, mebbe you'd like to see me make good."

Sheriff Newt Baldwin jumped to his feet, uttering a startled protest, but his words were addressed to a

blank wall. Geronimo Brown had slipped out of the door into the whipping storm.

Lightning blinded Geronimo Brown's eyes as he plunged down the jail steps, toward his black cayuse. A rumble of thunder seemed to shake the earth, and the pattering rain suddenly became a solid mass of water, deluging him, taking his breath away.

In an instant, he was soaked through and through. From the doorway he heard Sheriff Newt Baldwin, yelling for him to come back, shouting that he had a slicker for him, but he paid no heed.

He was free, out in the open. Even the thought of going back into that jail filled him with unnamed horror.

His boots sloshed through the mud, as he tramped over to the black horse, jerked loose the reins and slid into the sopping-wet saddle.

"Git goin', Blacky," he urged, prodding the bronc with his spurs. "Giddap, old hoss! I dunno where we're goin', except we're headin' as far away from this jail as I kin git."

The mustang was slow in answering to the rein. Geronimo had to yank its head up and feed it steel to get the critter moving.

The streets of Chicaree cow town were practically deserted, but the doors of the general store were open and Geronimo headed in that direction.

A rider on a pinto pony came racing up, as Geronimo stepped onto the store porch. A slender, blond youth leaped out of the saddle of the paint horse and sprang to Geronimo's side.

Geronimo recognized him at once as Art Carlin, son of the murdered stagecoach driver, Skinner Carlin. The boy was a brother of Hazel Car-

lin, who had put up the money to get Geronimo out of jail.

"Hello, Art," said Geronimo.

Instead of speaking, Art Carlin planted himself in front of Geronimo, both hands resting above his guns.

"I been watchin' fer you to git out!" cried young Carlin. "I don't believe all this stuff about yore innocence. You helped kill my dad, and yo're goin' to pay fer it now!"

CHAPTER II.

FALSELY ACCUSED.

DANGER seemed to drive strength into Geronimo Brown's wasted body. There was no fear in his black eyes, as he calmly faced the excited kid.

Art was the brother of Geronimo's girl. He was a salty youngster, very excitable and quick on the trigger. Geronimo had no intention of fighting him with guns.

Through a rain-splashed pane of the store door, Geronimo caught a glimpse of Hazel Carlin herself, standing at the dry-goods counter. Sight of her sad face, framed in soft brown hair, strengthened his determination not to harm her brother.

"Yo're wrong, Art," drawled Geronimo. "I never shot yore dad."

"Then why did they keep you in jail so long?" flared the quick-trigger kid. "I know they claimed they was holdin' you only as a witness. But that don't go down with me. Nor with a lot of other folks around here, either. Where there's so much smoke, there must be a little fire. Snag yore smoke-pole, I tell yuh, or I'll let yuh have it!"

Art Carlin's face was twisted in an angry snarl. His steel-blue eyes were blazing. Geronimo detected the odor of whisky on his breath and knew the kid was inflamed by

drink. He saw Art's hands stealing toward his gun grips and knew he must act quickly.

Without haste, Geronimo reached up and touched the brim of his water-logged Stetson. With a sudden jerk he yanked the wet hat off his head and flung it in Art's face. At the same instant, he stepped aside and slashed out with his fist at the kid's frail jaw.

Br-r-rang! One of Art's guns exploded, throwing splinters from the floor of the porch.

The weapon had just cleared the holster when Geronimo's blow connected. Weak as he was from his imprisonment, Geronimo still had strength enough left in that wallop to hurl the hot-headed youth backward off the porch to the ground below.

With a sickening thud, Art Carlin landed on his back on the hard-packed earth. Jumping after him, Geronimo piled on top of the fallen lead-slinger and yanked his other gun out of its holster. His precautions were unnecessary. Art was completely out.

Geronimo heard a low cry behind him and turned to see a gingham-clad girl, standing on the store porch, staring at him wide-eyed. It was Hazel Carlin.

"You!" she cried. "What are you doing to my brother?"

Slowly rising, Geronimo walked toward her, carrying Art's gun in one hand. The storekeeper and one of his clerks had come rushing out at the sound of the shot, and they now stood beside the girl.

"He's not hurt, Hazel," said Geronimo. "I had to knock him out to keep him from shooting me. I could have plugged him. You know I'm faster with guns than he is."

Without another word, Hazel ran past Geronimo Brown and dropped

down beside her brother, who was already beginning to stir. The storekeeper gave an order to his clerk, who ducked away toward the jail.

"I've sent for the sheriff!" cried the merchant excitedly. "He'll settle this. He never should have turned Geronimo loose!"

A little feeling of panic swept over Geronimo Brown when he saw Sheriff Newt Baldwin come out of the jail in answer to the clerk's shouts.

What if they locked him up again? He knew he couldn't stand to go back to that evil-smelling cell. A few months more of it would finish him.

Darting over to his black cayuse, Geronimo snatched up the reins and vaulted into the saddle. Neck-reining the bronc over to where Hazel sat on the ground with her brother's head in her arms, he halted and looked down at her.

"I'm ridin', Hazel," he said. "If I stay, there'll be trouble. I swore that no lawman will ever lay hands on me again. I'll kill him first. But you got to believe this ain't my fault."

"He lies," muttered Art Carlin, grimacing as he painfully rubbed his jaw. "He started it."

"You know that ain't the truth," retorted Geronimo. "What's the matter with you, Art? Why have you turned agin' me? We used to be friends."

"That was before you become a murderin' skunk," grated Art, struggling to sit up. "I didn't think you kilt dad myself at first, but when they held you so long in jail I knowed there was somethin' wrong. I did my own investigatin', and I got the goods on yuh. You was in on that stagecoach robbery and helped kill my father."

"Surely you can't believe that, Hazel," said Geronimo. "You know I was never even accused of it. If you thought I was guilty, you'd never paid for the lawyer that got me free."

Hazel Carlin stood up and faced Geronimo Brown. Tears gleamed in her eyes.

"I believed in your innocence all along," she declared, "until I saw you strike my brother down just now. You threw your hat in his face, and then knocked him out. What is the matter with you, Geronimo? You've changed so much, I hardly know you."

Geronimo's anger flamed up.

"You'd be changed, too, if somebody penned yuh up in a jail fer nearly a year," he said. "Mebbe I am different. Mebbe I ain't the easy-goin' cowboy that you knowed before. But whose fault is it? It ain't mine. Well, I see I ain't wanted here, so I'm goin'. And you kin tell the sheriff and everybody else that if they try to ketch me again, I'll fight. I'd ruther turn bandick than go back to that jail."

Lowering his head against the driving rain and bitter cold wind, Geronimo Brown quirted his bronc to a dead run, heading out of town, straight into the face of the swirling norther.

Icy raindrops, beating against Geronimo's face, slowly sobered him. He began to feel sorry for his outburst and to make allowances for Hazel. If he had only stayed and talked it over, he might have been able to convince her, in spite of Art's accusation.

As the excitement left him, he began to realize just how weak he was. He had to cling to the saddle horn to protect himself against the buffeting wind.

At intervals he felt as if he was

going to faint. A racking cough shook his body. Jail had done this to him. It had taken him in strong and healthy, and had turned him out a wreck, his brain inflamed with crazy ideas.

He realized he couldn't go on like this. In his condition, he would die in the storm. Ahead of him he saw the corrals and buildings of the Box W Ranch, and he turned in at the gate. Hank Waters, owner of the Box W, had been Geronimo's boss at the time of his arrest. Surely Waters would take him in.

Dismounting at the hitch rack, Geronimo slapped water from his hat, stepped up onto the ranch-house porch, and knocked. Gray-whiskered old Hank Waters opened the door in person.

Geronimo could look past him into the room at the blazing fire in the fireplace and at Mrs. Waters, sitting in front of it, knitting. Geronimo's jail-broken body ached for the comfort of that fire.

"Hello, Hank," said Geronimo. "They turned me loose at last."

"Come on in, boy!" said Hank. "Why, yo're soaked to the skin! What're yuh doin' out in a storm like this, without a slicker?"

"They let me out of jail," said Geronimo sheepishly, removing his dripping coat and throwing it on the porch before he entered the room. "And I was too blamed excited to wait for my slicker. If only you knowed what it means to be free — Gosh, even the storm seemed like heaven."

"Ma" Waters jumped up and uttered a loud exclamation at sight of the water-soaked puncher.

"Why, you'll ketch your death of cold!" she scolded. "You go right into Pa's room and change into dry clothes. Dad, you git the boy some of that alcohol to rub himself with."

In a few minutes, Geronimo Brown was feeling a hundred per cent better, as he sat in front of the fireplace in clean, dry clothes.

Ma was still grumbling and scolding him for his foolishness in going out in the storm unprotected. Old Hank was pacing back and forth across the room, with a worried look on his face.

"I figured to ask yuh fer my old job back, Hank," said Geronimo.

Hank Waters came to an abrupt halt and stood looking out of the window at the rain-swept corrals and sheds. He did meet Geronimo's eyes when he finally spoke.

"I'm sorry, Geronimo, but I cain't put you on. I'm full up now. I got a new foreman about six months ago. His name is Butch Drisko, a gun-toter. Had to hire a gunman, because there's so much rustlin' and outlawry goin' on. One of the things Butch insisted on was that he's got to do all the hirin'."

"And he ain't hirin' no jailbirds," put in a harsh voice from the doorway. "I'm Butch Drisko and if there's anythin' I hate worse than an outlaw, it's two of 'em. I know all about yuh, Brown, and I don't figure that you an' me could git along."

CHAPTER III.

"HIT THE GRIT!"

TWINE six-guns slapped against "Butch" Drisko's wide batwing chaps, as he came tromping across the room toward Geronimo Brown. Geronimo had never seen Drisko before, although he had heard of the border killer. A leering grin split Butch's bearded face as he halted in front of young Brown.

"I don't know why they ever let yuh out," sneered Butch. "Yo're guilty as blazes. I'm here to run

all bandicks out of this country, and I think I'll start on you."

Geronimo made no move to rise from his chair. Fixing his level black eyes on Butch's evil face, he stared at him fearlessly.

The new Box W foreman towered above Geronimo on enormous thick legs. His long arms, that hung almost to his knees, seemed as big as the trunk of a sapling. His hairy fists were the biggest Geronimo had ever seen, and his feet seemed to spread out over the floor like a pair of old-fashioned valises.

Beady brown eyes gleamed dully behind thick brows in an ugly, lumpy face. A crooked jaw, once broken and set wrong, gave all his features a twisted appearance.

Butch Drisko's looks alone were enough to strike terror in the hearts of timid people, but Geronimo Brown was not timid.

"Yo're makin' a mistake, Drisko," said Geronimo coldly. "I'm no outlaw and I kin prove it. I was merely bein' held as a material witness in the Granite Canyon holdup and killin'. The sheriff and prosecutin' attorney will verify what I am tellin' you. I was never even accused of the shootin'."

"Tell that to the Injuns!" jeered Butch Drisko. "I've heard all about you from Art Carlin. You had good reason for shootin' Skinner Carlin, the stage driver. He knowed the kind of a hound you was, and he'd ordered you to stay away from Hazel."

Slowly Geronimo Brown arose to his feet until his eyes were level with Butch Drisko's. The cowboy realized that in his weakened state, Drisko could crush him with one hand, yet he faced him without a tremor.

"Keep Hazel Carlin out o' this,

if yuh know what's good fer yuh," said Geronimo curtly.

Butch Drisko's face reddened, and his big paws clenched into fists. For a moment, it seemed that he would strike Geronimo down in his tracks. Then abruptly he threw back his head and uttered a loud guffaw.

"Yo're a cocky young rooster, ain't yuh?" he sneered. "Hot-headed and quick on the trigger. Well, you ain't bluffin' me none. I said I was runnin' yuh out and I am. Saddle yore hoss and hit the grit!"

Old Hank Waters cleared his throat uncertainly.

"See here, Butch," protested the Box W owner, "you cain't turn the boy out in the storm. He's a sick man, as it is. I'm givin' him a bed here for the night. He'll be ridin' in the mornin'."

Geronimo Brown stared in amazement at Hank Waters. His old boss seemed completely changed. He appeared to be scared of his own foreman. There was something wrong here.

Butch Drisko scowled at Hank, and the old man suddenly sat down again. It was Ma Waters who decided the issue.

"How you men do talk!" she burst out. "Of course, Geronimo's goin' to stay to-night. I don't understand why you are always quarrelin'."

Uttering a low growl, Butch Drisko wheeled about and left the room. Geronimo sat down again in front of the fire and gazed questioningly from Hank to Ma Waters and back again.

Ma was knitting away, as if she did not understand what was going on. Old Hank sat with his eyes downcast, nervously clawing at his beard.

The darkness of night had settled
WW-2C

over the ranch. Supper was already over, and the hands were all gathered in the bunk house, which was connected with the main building by a long runway or covered porch.

"Reckon I better hit the hay," grunted Geronimo, uneasily. "If I could travel, I wouldn't stay. But I'm plumb fagged out."

"You'll find some bed clothes in the spare room there," said Ma Waters. "Take what you need and go on into the bunk house."

Geronimo got the bedding and came back.

"You better not sleep in the bunk house, Geronimo," said Hank. "We got one spare bedroom you kin use. Butch and the boys might not be very friendly with yuh."

"I ain't scairt of Butch or anybody else," said Geronimo. "I'll bed down in the bunk house where I belong. If I let that broken-jawed gunman bluff me out, I'd never hear the last of it."

Hank Waters followed Geronimo along the dark hallway.

"Listen, kid," he protested, "you don't know what yo're goin' up against. Butch Drisko's plumb pizen. You better stay here in the house."

Geronimo Brown halted in front of old Hank, with one hand resting on the rancher's arm.

"Something's wrong here, boss," he said earnestly. "Cain't you tell me what it is? Kin I help you any?"

Geronimo was amazed to hear a low groan, almost a sob issue from Hank's leathery throat.

"Nobody kin help me," muttered the old man. "Nobody on this earth."

Letting his bedding fall to the floor, Geronimo grabbed the gray-bearded rancher with both hands and tilted the old man's head up.

"Say the word, Hank, and I'll kill

that broken-jawed skunk!" blazed the cowboy. "He's a no-good coyote. Let me help you, won't you? You know I think as much of you, as if you were my own dad. If any harm would come to Ma——"

"Don't say it," choked out old Hank, "I can't bear to think of what'll happen to Ma when I'm gone. Butch has got me in his power, Geronimo. He's fired all my old hands and surrounded himself with a crew of murderin' gun-slingers. What could you do against all them?"

"I could plug Butch Drisko," said Geronimo in a low voice. "You know I'm fast on the draw. Nobody around here kin beat me."

"But Butch Drisko's greased lightnin' with guns," said Hank Waters hopelessly. "I seen him shoot down one of his hands that got proddy. Yo're a sick man. You wouldn't be no match fer him."

A bulky figure appeared on the covered runway, leading to the bunk house. It was Butch Drisko.

"I got to go, Geronimo," whispered Hank excitedly. "I don't want him to see me talkin' to yuh. Don't try to pull off nothin', son. You'd only git yoreself killed."

Stooping down, Geronimo picked up his bedding.

"I'm comin' back to see you, later on, Hank," said Geronimo in a low voice. "You got to tell me what's wrong. I'll help yuh, if it's the last thing I do on earth."

CHAPTER IV.

RUFINO GARZON.

THE bunk house at the Box W Ranch was ablaze with light and noisy with the carousing of a half dozen hard-faced gunmen. A dice game was under way on the floor, near the pot-bellied stove. Three

Mexicans were playing three-card monte.

A scar-faced half-breed kept passing a bottle around, filling the place with his rumbling laughter, as he shoved and punched the other hands, playing tricks on them. This hombre was Rufino Garzon.

Decked out in silver-spangled *charro* clothes, with a big peaked sombrero tilted on the back of his coarse, black hair, Rufino came lurching toward Geronimo, as the cowboy tossed his bedding into a bunk.

"Ah, who ees thees pale-faced cheecken?" shouted Rufino Garzon. "Señor Drisko, why you breeng the skinny gringo here?"

"It ain't none of my doin's," grumbled Drisko. "Old Hank wants to put him up for the night. Mrs. Waters was goin' to raise a disturbance about it, so I let him stay. He's the jailbird that's been locked up for a year, account of the Granite Canyon stagecoach robbery."

Tucking his thumbs in his belt above the pearl-handled butts of his six-guns, Rufino planted his legs wide apart and stood staring at Geronimo offensively.

"Mebbe you like to play wan game with Rufino Garzon, eh?" snarled the half-breed. "Come, have a drink of aguardiente!"

The half-breed shoved the bottle in Geronimo's face, then jerked it away again with a roar of mirth in which his companions joined.

Geronimo made no move to step back or retreat from the drink-inflamed gunman. He wanted to escape trouble, but he knew that Garzon would try to make a fool of him, no matter what he did.

The big, swarthy hombre drew deeply on his cigarette, filling his pock-marked cheeks with smoke.

Then suddenly he blew the tobacco smoke full in Geronimo's face.

Caught unawares, Geronimo coughed and choked, bringing roars of laughter from the other gunnies. Butch Drisko was taking no part in the horseplay, but merely sat on his bunk, glowering blackly. He seemed to be waiting or listening for something.

Geronimo's anger flared, but still he took no action against his tormentor. Butch Drisko was the man he wanted to get. He could not afford to spoil his chances by tangling with lesser fry. In front of Geronimo, Rufino Garzon swept off his sombrero in a low bow, while he apologized mockingly.

"Now I show you treeck with thee throwing knife," exulted the half-breed.

With a lightning dart of his hand, Garzon started to snatch his bone-handled fighting knife from its sheath.

A roaring explosion filled the bunk house. The knife clattered to the floor, twisted and ruined, its handle shattered into a hundred splinters.

Geronimo's six-gun was back in its holster almost before any one had seen him draw. He had hardly moved from his tracks, but still stood with his back against the wall, a slow smile on his lips.

Every man in the room jumped to his feet, snagging out his gun. Many of them did not yet know where the shot had come from.

Only Butch Drisko remained where he had been sitting, a contemptuous sneer curling his lips.

"You've met yore match this time, Rufino," chuckled Butch. "You better go back and sit down. Leave this gringo for a man to handle. The rest of you, put up yore guns. I want no trouble here. First thing

yuh know, we'll have that snoopy sheriff down on us."

There was a tense moment, when it seemed as if the gun fighters in the room would defy their boss. They were just drunk enough to want trouble and excitement.

Geronimo Brown looked into the muzzles of their Colts and waited, his heart beating rapidly. All the jail weakness had gone from him. Once more he felt strong and confident.

At first glimpse of a forefinger curling around a trigger, he was ready to whip out his hoglegs and drop to the floor, to pour a deadly volley into this crowded pack of human hyenas. He would have no hesitation about killing these border ruffians.

After a moment, the men holstered their weapons and returned to their game. Snarling Mexican oaths, Rufino Garzon turned slowly away, then suddenly whirled on Geronimo, pawing out his gun as he moved.

Geronimo had been watching for just such an action. As the scar-faced hombre jerked about, the young cowboy stepped in, kicked a leg out to trip the half-breed and smashed a hard fist against the fellow's thick lips, knocking him to the floor.

Before Rufino Garzon could draw his gun, he found himself looking into the twin muzzles of Geronimo's sixes.

"I've had enough of this," said Geronimo curtly. "Are yuh goin' to leave me alone, or have I got to drill yuh?"

"No, no, señor! Don' shoot!" stammered Garzon. "I just play leetle game. Don' keel me, señor!"

Leaping to his feet, Butch Drisko began kicking the sprawled Mexican in the ribs.

"Git up, you dog!" snarled Butch. "Git up and go to yore bunk. I told yuh, you was tacklin' a man's job. Save yore funny tricks for yore friends, and leave *men* alone. I'll handle this gun-totin' jailbird!"

The scar-faced Mexican crawled off to his bunk, whining for Butch not to kick him. Geronimo holstered his guns again and waited for Drisko's next move.

He was athrill with triumph. He wanted a show-down with the broken-jawed bully. He might not beat Butch on the draw, but he felt sure if he died he could take Drisko with him. He would wipe out one snake and free poor old Hank Waters from the terror that ruled him.

Butch Drisko's spurs clattered and tinkled on the bunk-house floor as he slouched his hulking form over toward Geronimo Brown. A hideous leer was on his lips. His beady, deep-set eyes gleamed with hatred.

Geronimo did not understand why Butch should detest him so bitterly, but that did not matter.

Suddenly there was an interruption. The dim outlines of a face appeared at the bunk-house window, and a voice called Butch Drisko's name.

Geronimo did not recognize the face. Seen through the wet, stained window glass it was too dim. But the voice was familiar. It was the shrill, boyish tones of Art Carlin that caused Butch to turn suddenly away from Geronimo and move toward the outside door.

"Enough of this," he growled. "There'll be no ruckus here to-night. You fellers leave Brown alone. Go on, jailbird, and make up yore bunk. Yo're safe enough until mornin'. Then if yuh don't travel, I'll attend to you personal."

So powerful was Butch Drisko's

control over his men that all of them turned their backs on Geronimo and resumed their games. Geronimo Brown was filled with uneasiness, but he finally went over and began making up his bunk.

With a final glowering glance about him, Butch Drisko stepped out into the rain-swept darkness to join the shadowy figure awaiting him there. The rain had practically ceased, but water still was running off the roof, into the rain barrels.

Geronimo wanted badly to follow Butch Drisko outside and verify his suspicions about Art Carlin, but he knew that the foreman's gunmen would not let him do so. If he made one move toward that door, a half dozen guns would cover him.

He didn't care so much about Art himself, but he was thinking of Art's sister, Hazel. If anything happened to the kid, it would break her all up.

It looked bad for Art Carlin, sneaking out here in the night to visit Butch Drisko secretly, afraid even to show his face to the others in the bunk house.

"This settles it," muttered Geronimo to himself. "There ain't no other way out of it. Butch Drisko and me has got to tangle."

CHAPTER V.

A SHOT IN THE DARK!

THE night air was filled with the odor of crushed, wet creosote brush and with the fresh smell of wet earth. Clouds vanished, and the stars came out bright and clear, filling the sky like myriads of fire-flies.

The rain-soaked Box W ranch house seemed such a peaceful, quiet spot that Geronimo Brown could hardly make himself believe it was a den of destruction and death.

Butch Drisko's killers broke open a fresh bottle of whisky and passed it around. The dice and card game went on. The gun fighters seemed to pay no more attention to Geronimo, but the young cowboy was not deceived.

Each time he moved near the bunk-house door, the swarthy breeds shifted their positions and watched him furtively with sidelong glances.

"I've got to get out o' here and see Hank Waters," Geronimo muttered to himself. "But it looks like I ain't goin' to make it without a fight."

He made up his bed, then went over to the corner where his saddle and rigging had been thrown by the ranch hand who had unsaddled his black mustang. Taking some saddle grease from a shelf, Geronimo began to work on the rain-soaked hull.

By the time he had finished, Butch Drisko came back alone. The secret messenger, who had called him out of the darkness, did not appear.

Geronimo listened for the hoofbeats that would tell of the skulker's departure, but he heard none. If that strange visitor had really been Art Carlin, he was still hanging around.

More and more puzzled, Geronimo hit upon a clever plan to get out of the bunk house without arousing suspicion. Picking up his wet saddle blanket, he held the smelly thing close to Butch Drisko and began shaking it out.

"Git that stinkin' thing out o' here!" flared Drisko. "Ain't yuh got no sense?"

Pretending to obey, Geronimo hastily withdrew toward the bunk-house door. This time the gunmen did not watch him. They had heard Butch's order and had mistaken its meaning. Butch had no intentions

of ordering Geronimo out of the bunk house, but had only intended to shoo him away from his own bunk.

"Reckon I'll hang this saddle blanket outside," said Geronimo, and suddenly stepped out into the night.

He heard Butch's angry shout for him to come back, but already he had dropped the blanket and was darting around a corner of the main building. Opening a side door, he slipped into the kitchen.

It was pitch dark. He stumbled against a chair and barked his shins on a stove leg.

A shadowy figure appeared, dimly outlined in a doorway.

"Is that you, Geronimo?" whispered Hank Waters's voice.

"Yes," answered Geronimo. "But don't make a sound. Butch didn't want me to leave the bunk house. I think they're lookin' fer me. What's wrong here?"

"Everything's wrong," groaned the old man. "If it wasn't fer Ma, I'd limber up my old smoke-pole and blast Butch Drisko to kingdom come. But the sneakin' murderer has threatened to git her at the first false move I make."

For several minutes, Geronimo Brown stood wordless in the dark room, listening to the sound of boots crunching on gravel outside.

He didn't understand this at all. Why did Hank Waters stand for Butch Drisko and his rowdies? Why didn't the old man call in the sheriff and run the gunmen out?

In low tones he put his questions into words.

"Sheriff Newt Baldwin would be glad to help you, Hank," urged Geronimo, "and you got plenty of friends, includin' myself. Why don't you give us a chance?"

"You don't understand, kid," re-

plied old Hank. "I dassen't call in the sheriff. Butch Drisko's got me hamstrung. I'm even scairt to tell *you* the truth."

Outside the house, the noise of the hunt died down. Geronimo concluded that Butch Drisko had ordered his men back to the bunk house, or that they were hiding in the darkness, waiting for him to show himself.

"Listen, Hank," he said. "You got to come clean with me. I know something turrible is wrong. Butch Drisko's got you by the short hair. He's workin' some kind of a double-crossin' trick with Art Carlin. And he's got some slick reason fer tearin' inter me the way he does. If you'll only tell me the secret between you and Butch, I'll know what to do. I'm sure I kin stop this ornery jigger's game, soon's I find out what it's all about."

Old Hank Waters began to pace restlessly back and forth across the room. Suddenly he came to a stop in front of Geronimo.

"All right, I'll tell yuh," he said. "Butch Drisko and me——"

Crash! Bang! The roar of a six-gun, fired close at hand, deafened Geronimo's ears.

A spurt of flame lighted the darkness behind a door frame not five feet away. With a choking sob, Hank Waters fell to the floor and lay still.

At the first gun blast, Geronimo dropped to one knee, flashing his Colts out of their holsters. Lifting both weapons, he hurled a volley of slugs at the ebony blackness of the doorway from which the flash had come.

There was no answering shot. No sound to indicate that his bullets had scored a hit.

Excited shouts sounded from the direction of the bunk house. He

heard Butch Drisko's harsh, bullying voice roaring out a command.

What should he do? Flight was impossible without a horse. He had a wild impulse to charge out of there and begin plugging away at Butch, but he put the thought away as foolhardy.

The bedroom door opened and Ma Waters, barefooted, in her long flannel nightgown, carrying a lighted lamp, came toward him.

She saw Geronimo standing over the bullet-torn body of her husband with two smoking hoglegs in his hands, and she almost dropped the lamp.

"You!" she gasped. "What have you done to Hank? You've killed him. You've murdered my husband!"

"No!" shouted Geronimo, "I never done it. They ambushed him. Butch Drisko and his men. Hank and me was talkin' here in the kitchen. He was about to tell me something, when they fired. Let me have the lamp. Yo're goin' to drop it."

Geronimo caught the kerosene lamp as it was about to slip from Ma Waters's trembling fingers. Uttering queer, choking, moaning sounds, the old lady dropped down beside Hank, and began patting his cheeks and rubbing his hands.

Hank Waters was dead. There was no mistaking that. A bullet in the back, breaking his spine and drilling a vital organ, had finished him.

Geronimo heard the rush of booted feet as men came pouring in from several directions, but he made no effort to escape or to draw his guns. Any shooting would put Ma in danger of her life.

Butch Drisko's gun barrel jabbed into Geronimo's side. A half dozen

other weapons covered the black-haired puncher.

"I got the sneakin' killer, Mrs. Waters!" yelled Butch. "Got him red-handed. Look at the smoke curlin' from his guns. Even in their holsters. He slipped in here and salivated Hank. Me and my men was watchin' him, but he got away from us. Now we know who really did plug Skinner Carlin. Rufino Garzon, pull Geronimo's stingers. He'll never have no use for them smoke-poles again."

CHAPTER VI.

TRAPPED!

GERONIMO BROWN saw he was trapped. He felt his gun belt jerked from around his waist. Rough hands gripped his arms, pulled them behind him, and a hard-twist piggin' string was yanked so tight around his wrists that it bit into his flesh.

Rufino Garzon thrust his evil, scarred face close to Geronimo and glared savagely at the dark-haired young puncher.

"Now I cut yore heart out," he threatened.

Garzon's long, razor-sharp cuchillo flashed upward as if to carry out his boast. But Butch Drisko's ham-like fist smacked hard against Garzon's right eye, hurling him to the floor. The foreman's Colt pointed at the knife-throwing hombre.

"Do I have to kill yuh to make yuh obey orders?" growled Butch. "Put up yore knife and git out o' the house! I ain't goin' to stand much more from you!"

Snarling out of the corner of his loose mouth like a wounded bobcat, Rufino Garzon slunk away.

Butch Drisko glared around at the rest of his men, but none of them took up the challenge.

"Take the prisoner inter the sittin' room!" ordered Butch curtly, "and don't ary of yuh do him any harm. I got my own plans fer dealin' with this sneaky jigger."

Geronimo was shoved through the door and into the living room where he was flung into a chair in front of the fireplace. A few red embers still glowed among the gray ashes. One of the hands lighted the kerosene lamp on the table. Others helped carry Hank's body into a bedroom.

Butch Drisko supported Ma Waters, who insisted on accompanying her husband's body.

"I'll send over to the Randall's and have some womenfolks come to help yuh, Ma," promised Butch. "Jist leave everything to me."

Mrs. Waters was too stunned and shaken to answer. She entered the death chamber and the door was closed behind her. Butch came back into the living room and stood leering at Geronimo Brown.

His ugly crooked-jawed face was alight with triumph.

"This is workin' out jist as I thought," he chuckled, rubbing his huge, hairy hands together. "We've got the goods on yuh this time, Brown. You wormed yore way out o' that Granite Canyon shootin' purty slick, but I've caught up with yuh. When you hang fer the murder of Hank Waters, Skinner Carlin will be avenged too."

Leaning back in the chair with his hands bound behind him, Geronimo Brown turned his gaunt, sallow face toward Butch Drisko. His jet-black eyes were fearless. He felt sure his end had come, but they'd never make him crawl.

"Jist what is yore game, Butch?" drawled Geronimo.

"What're yuh talkin' about—my game?" flared Butch Drisko. "Be

careful what yuh say, or I'll knock a bunch of yore teeth out."

"You ain't scarin' me none," said Geronimo slowly. "You know danged well I never plugged Hank Waters. I think yuh know that I didn't kill Skinner Carlin either."

"Then why did they throw yuh in jail?" demanded Butch.

"Because I happened to see the stagecoach holdup," answered Geronimo. "I didn't have my guns. I couldn't do nothin' to stop them road agents. When I rode inter town and told what I'd seen, the prosecutin' attorney ordered me locked up as a material witness."

"Art Carlin thinks different, and so do I," sneered Drisko. "Skinner Carlin, the stagecoach driver, had warned you to stay away from his daughter, hadn't he? He didn't want Hazel runnin' around with yuh. That's the truth and you cain't deny it."

Geronimo Brown looked down his nose, frowning uneasily. He couldn't deny that Skinner Carlin had objected to his marrying Hazel. And he knew that it was a bad point against him.

"What're yuh goin' to do with me, Butch?" he asked in a different tone. "Why didn't you let Rufino Garzon use his knife? That would have finished it up quick."

"I got a better plan," grunted Butch shortly. "Jist killin' yuh wouldn't git me nowhere. There'd still be foolish people goin' around sayin' that you was innercent. Before you die, I'm goin' to tear yore reputation to shreds. Everybody's goin' to hear how you come here and murdered an old man. All right, boys, git busy. I want yuh to ride to all the ranches near by and tell 'em to come to a vigilante meeting. It's time us cattlemen took the law inter our own hands."

Butch Drisko's orders were promptly obeyed. Two gunmen, one of them Rufino Garzon, were left at the ranch house to guard Geronimo. Butch Drisko himself rode away into the night.

As the sound of hoofbeats died away, Geronimo started to get to his feet. Garzon's gun covered him, and he sank back again. He tried to work loose the rope that bound his wrists, but it was no use. The thongs, tied by a cowboy, drew tighter the harder he pulled on them.

The drum of hoofs sounded outside and a horseman came tramping into the room. It was Art Carlin, blond, steely-eyed and hot-headed.

At sight of Geronimo Brown, sitting in the chair before the fireplace, Art whipped out a six-gun and leaped upon the helpless puncher before the guards could interfere.

Geronimo felt the cold steel of a Colt pressed against the bare flesh under his shirt, and he gave up all hope. Art was going to kill him for the murder of his father.

Art's lips were snarling vicious oaths. His free hand crashed into Geronimo's mouth. Then the two guards pounced on the kid and pulled him back, still bawling and struggling.

"Let me at him!" shrieked Art Carlin. "He's the coyote that kilt my dad! Let me at him!"

"Stop, señor!" rumbled Rufino's deep voice. "Brown ees our prisoner. See, his hands are tied. Butch Drisko, he geeve orders not to hurt heem!"

"To blazes with Butch Drisko!" flared Art Carlin. "Untie Brown's hands! Give him a gun. I'll shoot it out with him!"

In the excitement, neither Rufino Garzon nor the other guard noticed

that the hogleg had vanished from Art Carlin's hand.

Nor could they know that at this moment the loaded Colt was tucked tight under Geronimo Brown's belt, beneath his shirt, next to the skin.

Geronimo had felt Art Carlin's fingers shove the gun there and had heard the kid's low whisper.

"Don't say a word!" Art had muttered between ravings. "I'm yore friend!"

A thrill of hope shot through Geronimo. Suddenly he understood a lot of things. Art Carlin was playing a part. He had been acting to deceive some one when he had attacked Geronimo at Chicaree.

Art had always been Geronimo's friend, and a fine, clean-cut hombre. Instead of being tangled up with Butch Drisko's killers, this meant that Art was spying upon them. The blond kid was a friend worth having.

The thunderous roar of hoofs outside told of the approach of many horsemen. In a few minutes, men came flooding into the room, some of them Butch's hands, others from neighboring ranches.

Art Carlin instantly quieted down. He even avoided looking at Geronimo.

The arrival of others had prevented Art from staging the rescue he had planned. But all was not lost. With a hide-out gun, Geronimo Brown would give a good account of himself if he could only get his hands free from those ropes.

CHAPTER VII.

"STRING HIM UP!"

G RIM-FACED, savage-eyed cowboys and ranch owners crowded around Geronimo Brown, as he sat bound and helpless in the Box W

living room. Most of the men were silent. Many of them had known Geronimo for years, and it sickened them to believe evil of him. Others, however, were already yelling for a rope.

"Don't waste no time on him!" urged one hard-faced buckaroo. "Git a rope and string him up!"

"Geronimo shore fooled me," said another. "I allus kind o' liked the boy."

"Well, we caught him dead to rights," put in Butch Drisko, "standin' over pore old Hank Waters, with two smokin' guns in his paws."

"I never plugged Hank!" declared Geronimo earnestly. "I was talkin' to Mr. Waters in the kitchen. Somebody ambushed him. I slung lead at them. That's why my guns was smokin'."

A low, menacing growl and a rumble of voices drowned out Geronimo's words. The crowd kept growing bigger and bigger, as horsemen began to arrive from other ranches.

Mingling with the men were a few women, some of whom fluttered over to get one glimpse of Geronimo's face, before they joined Ma Waters in the death chamber.

As the mob grew, the men became more and more excited. A little group of rowdies surged toward Geronimo, waving a rope over their heads.

"We're goin' to string him up!" shouted one of them. "Clear the way there!"

Rising to his feet, Geronimo Brown backed toward the fireplace, prepared to sell his life dearly, in spite of the fact that his hands were bound.

Butch Drisko hurled his hulking figure in front of the man with the

rope, brandishing his huge fists and yelling for order.

"Stop this wild talk!" snarled the broken-jawed hombre. "I asked yuh to come here as vigilantes, not as a crazy lynch-law mob. We'll run this meetin' accordin' to rules. Cut out the noise now, yo're disturbin' Ma Waters. All of yuh git outside. I'll bring the prisoner."

Grabbing Geronimo with one of his big paws, Butch Drisko prodded the helpless cowboy across the room, through the doorway and out into the yard.

More horsemen were waiting here in the moonlight, silent and menacing.

Geronimo could see riders approaching from several directions, and he smiled bitterly. He was beginning to understand the fiendish cunning of Butch Drisko.

Butch had some evil plan in mind. He had a good reason for framing this thing onto Geronimo Brown, the young cowboy felt sure, and he was working it pretty slick.

If Butch had let Rufino Garzon kill Geronimo, there would always have been whisperings and suspicions. But by handling it this way, Butch avoided all that.

"Git a hoss fer the prisoner!" ordered Butch. "We're takin' him fer a little *pasear*."

There was a moment's hesitation. It seemed that no one had any spare saddle horses and none of them seemed to be inclined to give up his own mount.

In front of Geronimo there was a disturbance and Art Carlin came forward, leading Brown's own black cow pony.

Geronimo's pulse quickened when he saw that the ebony bronc wore his own fancy, silver-mounted saddle. The forty-pound hull was

covered with silver conches from pommel to cantle. There was a trick about that saddle, and Geronimo knew that Art had learned of it, when the kid looked at him and winked.

The palm of Art Carlin's right hand was crimson-stained from a long, clean cut.

Geronimo was hoisted into the saddle. Riders surrounded him and they galloped away across the muddy mesa.

Water showered on them from the rain-soaked branches of trees. The air tingled with the freshness of early morning. The rising sun was crowning the eastern ridges with reddish gold, when the vigilantes and their prisoner descended the narrow, zigzag trail and emerged into the saucer-shaped valley, which was known as the Garden of the Gods.

Here, where nature had chiseled the cliffs into strange, weird shapes of animals and men and fabled demons, they halted above the black chasm of Rocky River.

Across the narrow canyon and slightly below them loomed the forested peak of Ghost Mountain, a place so ringed about by impassable gorges that no one could live there. Hillsides of colored flowstone added all the hues of the rainbow to this beautiful spot that long ago had been named the Garden of the Gods by the Spaniards.

On the very rim of the narrow precipice, Butch Drisko raised his hand in the air. The vigilantes came to a milling stop and swung down from their brones, which they tied to bushes and trees.

Willing hands yanked Geronimo out of the saddle and hustled him up a little slope, among a jumbled heap of house-sized boulders. Here the

wind and rain and sun had sculptured an enormous stone seat out of the country rock. This was known as the Throne of the Gods.

With a mocking laugh, Butch Drisko and his men flung Geronimo Brown upon this seat and then stepped back, jeering and swearing at him.

"There he is!" shouted Butch. "There's the slick killer that's been gettin' away with all these murders and robberies. He's waitin' fer his trial. Who'll be the first witness against him?"

Rufino Garzon slouched forward, his swarthy face twisted in a sneer. In broken English, he told how he had heard the firing and had rushed in to find Geronimo Brown standing over Hank Waters's dead body, holding two smoking guns.

Other members of Butch Drisko's crew testified to the same thing. When all the evidence was in, Butch motioned for Geronimo to rise.

"I aim to be fair," said Butch. "I want you boys to listen to Brown, without makin' no rumpus. I don't want it said that he didn't git a fair trial. Go ahead, prisoner, and make yore defense."

Standing on the brink of the rocky gorge, surrounded by hostile gunmen, Geronimo looked fearlessly into the faces of his former friends and slowly shook his head.

"I'm afraid it's no use fer me to talk," he said. "I reckon you've already made up yore minds that I'm guilty. Butch Drisko's hoodwinked you with a lot of lies. It was him or one of his men that kilt old Hank Waters."

An angry roar of protest went up from Butch Drisko's friends, but Butch silenced it with a wave of his hand.

"Let the feller talk," he said gen-

erously. "He cain't do me no harm. Nobody's goin' to believe that I would kill my own boss, a feller that's been a good friend to me. How you goin' to prove this tall story yo're tellin', Brown?"

"I could prove it quick enough if I had the time," retorted Geronimo. "When old Hank was shot down he was jist about to tell me why he was scairt of you, Drisko. The old man claimed that you had threatened to——"

"That's a lie," broke in Butch, "yo're jest makin' that up. Why should I want to do any harm to Hank Waters?"

"For the same reason you want to frame the Granite Canyon holdup onto me," answered Geronimo sharply. "Mebbe you know more about that than yo're tellin'. The bandits that day were all Mexicans except one. The leader was a big American, dressed in a black slicker with a handkerchief mask coverin' his face. I was purty close to him, and his jaw looked kind o' crooked to——"

"That'll do!" roared Butch Drisko. "You carry this too far. Pile him on his bronc, boys. Put a rope around his neck. Let's git this over with."

Before Geronimo Brown could make a move, a lasso gripped his body, and he was yanked down off his perch. A fist smashed into his face as the cowboys lifted him onto the black horse. His captors mounted and started off with him, along the rim of the precipice. It was now broad daylight.

Geronimo realized that his chance of escape was very slight, but he began slowly rubbing the rope that bound his wrists against the cantle of his saddle.

One of the silver conches that dec-

orated that cante was sharpened almost to a razor edge. It cut the strands of the hard-twist rope, leaving the bonds hanging by a mere thread. A thrill of hope shot through Geronimo's body. He had only to jerk his hands to get them free and grab that hide-out gun down under his shirt.

What he could do then, one man against twoscore, he did not know. His plight was still a desperate one, but he was not going to give up. He would go down fighting rather than let them hang him.

CHAPTER VIII.

GERONIMO SLINGS LEAD!

RIGHT in front of Geronimo Brown rose a slanting finger of glittering white rock, extending out over the deep chasm. Snowlike in its coloring and shining brilliance, the big stone finger was known as the Icicle.

The tip of the finger pointed across the chasm of Rocky River toward the slopes of Ghost Mountain. At this point, the canyon was no more than fifteen feet wide, its sides falling off sharply two hundred feet downward.

Here Geronimo's horse was yanked to a stop, and he was again pulled out of his saddle.

"We're hangin' him from the Icicle!" roared Butch Drisko. "One of you men try to throw a rope over the point. We'll use a long hangin' rope. Piece a couple of lassos together.

A woman's shrill cry and the beat of steel horseshoes on flinty rock caused every eye to turn toward the back trail.

Two riders came tearing up. One was the blond son of the murdered stagecoach driver, Art Carlin. The

other was a pretty bareheaded girl wearing a gingham dress, Hazel Carlin.

The girl's brown hair flowed down over her shoulders and floated out behind her as she rode. Her soft gray eyes were filled with terror, and tears stained her cheeks. When she dismounted, she rushed over to Geronimo.

"Stop it!" she cried. "You can't do this. Geronimo never shot my father."

She grabbed Geronimo tightly in her arms and held on, as if she never would let him go. Geronimo grinned at her.

"My hands are loose and I got a gun," he whispered in her ear. "If you don't keep back out o' the way, I'll be afraid to shoot for fear of hittin' yuh. I'm not licked yet, honey."

"Come on, cut out that whisperin'!" ordered Butch Drisko suspiciously. "You don't understand what's goin' on, young lady. We ain't hangin' him fer that Granite Canyon holdup; we ketched him red-handed murderin' old Hank Waters. We've found him guilty, and he's goin' to die!"

Jerking around with her back to Geronimo, Hazel faced the vigilante crew defiantly.

"You cain't do it! I won't let you!" she burst out. "I know every man here. If you hang Geronimo, I'll swear out warrants charging you with murder. I'll fight you to the bitter end!"

Several of the older ranchers crowded forward and began to argue with the girl.

A cowboy managed to throw a rope over the end of the Icicle and approached Geronimo with the noose ready for his neck.

One shove would hurl Geronimo

over the edge of the cliff. The fall would probably break his neck. If it did not, he would choke to death, swinging in mid-air. Should the rope break, the fall onto the rocks below would crush every bone in his body.

Butch Drisko grabbed Art Carlin by the arm and snarled threateningly into the blond kid's face.

"You double-crossin' fool!" he growled. "Why did you bring her here? You sold me out."

"Yo're crazy!" retorted Art Carlin. "She follered yuh, and I couldn't stop her."

"Well, you go over and drag her away from there, afore I have some of my men do it!" ordered Butch. "They won't be so easy with her, either. She ain't doin' Geronimo no good, but is only puttin' things off. Remember, if trouble starts, she's plumb liable to git throwed over the cliff."

Art Carlin's heart was burning with hatred for Butch Drisko, but he knew better than to defy the broken-jawed hombre now. Butch would not hesitate to harm Hazel, if she stood in his way.

Approaching the girl, Art took her by the arm and forcibly led her away. She fought and cried until finally he had to pick her up in his arms and carry her.

"Don't take on so, sis," he whispered. "Yo're ballin' things up. I slipped Geronimo a gun, and he's probably cut his wrists loose by this time. He has a concha on the cantle of his saddle that's got a razor-sharp edge. Geronimo ain't the kind to git caught nappin'. If you'll git down out o' danger, I'll throw in both my guns to help him, when he starts the fireworks."

Sobbing convulsively, Hazel Carlin yielded to her brother's argu-

ments. Moving behind a cluster of boulders, she crouched down to watch Geronimo Brown wage an unequal battle for his life.

As soon as he had released his sister, Art Carlin sauntered over among the rocks that surrounded the Throne. From this point he would be able to bring both guns into play, without exposing himself to attack from the rear.

Gripping a keen-edged fighting knife in one hand, Rufino Garzon stepped close to Geronimo Brown and started to put the noose around his neck. The scar-faced breed's features writhed in a triumphant smile.

"I goin' to cut off wan ear to remember you by," chuckled the evil killer. "Just wan leetle ear to pin on my saddle."

Rufino's knife flashed in the sunlight, as the brown fingers slashed it at Geronimo's ear. The movement was fast, but it was not quick enough. The blade cleaved through empty air. One moment Geronimo's head had been there, and the next it was gone.

Jerking his hands free, Geronimo Brown dropped low to the ground, caught Rufino Garzon around the legs and hurled the knife-thrower over his shoulder. Rufino's body thudded on the edge of the cliff, bounced once, and plunged out into space.

Shrieks of mad terror from Garzon's lips filled the canyon with horrible echoes as his twisting, kicking body shot downward. But Geronimo Brown had no eyes for the doomed man and no ears for his death cries.

Snatching the loaded six-gun from under his shirt, he fired two blasting shots into the close-packed group of Drisko's men. Then thrusting the

Colt back under his belt, he grabbed the lass' rope and leaped out into space over the yawning crevasse.

Death plucked at him with skeleton fingers, as his lean body went swinging in a downward arc. Bullets whistled past on all sides. He felt a slug burn along his ribs. Another tugged at his boot.

Below him, the rocks of the canyon seemed leaping up to strike him in the face. The rope acted as a pendulum. Fastened to the tip of Icicle point, it held firmly against the strain of his hundred and eighty-pound weight.

The tops of piñons brushed Geronimo's boots and he dropped to the ground, clinging to a spindly trunk on the very rim of the precipice. A bullet knocked dirt in his eyes. Another plugged through the flesh of his shoulder, spurring him to frantic action.

Rising to his feet, he plunged into the thicket and whirled around to face the enemy. The long rope swung back again toward the vigilantes. A dozen hands reached for it, but failed to catch it.

Bullets kept clattering harmlessly among the tree limbs over his head, filling the air with deafening explosions.

The vigilantes had gone crazy. They were shrieking, howling, swearing, jumping up and down, as they poured volley after volley at the spot where their victim had disappeared.

Above the din sounded Butch Drisko's harsh voice, yelling for order.

"Shut up, you fools!" bellowed Drisko. "Stop this and listen to me. Sling another rope from the Icicle. I'm goin' across after him. The rest of yuh kin foller if yuh got the nerve!"

CHAPTER IX.

"THEY'RE THE BANDITS!"

CROUCHING down behind a slab of black lava, Geronimo Brown thrust his six-gun through a crack in the rock and yelled a sharp warning.

"I'll drill the first man that tries to swing across that gulch!" he shouted. "I don't want to hurt anybody, but I'll kill, rather than let you take me!"

His answer was a fresh hail of bullets, that sent twigs and leaves falling all around him. A .30-30 slug shrieked off the lava, past his ear. Another showered his head with sand, as it thudded into the bank above him.

"You better save yore bullets!" he sang out, "I'm down behind a rock, ready to fire through a loophole! I got yuh stopped and yuh might as well give up your hunt!"

Yells of defiance greeted Geronimo's warning. A cowboy tossed another rope over the tip of the Icicle and got ready to swing across the chasm.

The mob was filled with lynch-law madness. Inflamed by the rage for a killing, some of those wild-eyed punchers would risk even certain death in a foolhardy attempt to reach Geronimo.

Setting his lips in a grim line, Geronimo glanced along the sights at the buckaroo who was about to make the leap.

"Don't make me kill you!" he roared. "Stay back!"

With an exultant howl, the daredevil cowboy stepped back a few paces, took a run at the bank and swung out into space, gripping the rope.

Still Geronimo did not fire. Desperate as was his plight, he could not bring himself to shoot.

The reckless hombre's booted feet touched the rocks on Geronimo's side of the canyon.

Then something happened. Either he released his hold too quickly or his hands slipped. A terrible shriek burst from his lips as he disappeared over the edge.

For what seemed endless minutes of time, Geronimo's ears were tortured by those terrified cries. Then suddenly there was silence.

The tragedy seemed to stun the attackers. Guns had been popping all the time, and it looked to them as if Geronimo had really killed the cowboy. There was a quick scattering of men, as some of the more timid darted for cover, but Butch Drisko's crew and the bolder cattlemen stood their ground.

"Did yuh see that?" howled Drisko. "Geronimo murdered that feller. You seen it with yore own eyes. Kirk, you ride to the ranch and git a waggin. Bring a load of long timbers, and we'll make a bridge acrost here. Hold up a minute. Reckon I'll go with yuh. The rest of yuh all stay here and keep that murderer penned up on Ghost Mountain."

The hulking, broken-jawed Drisko and another man, galloped swiftly away in the direction of the Box W. The others settled down to the siege, firing an occasional shot in Geronimo's direction, but getting no reply.

From where Geronimo knelt in the brush, he commanded not only the one crossing, but also could look down on all sides of Ghost Mountain.

He was on the very summit of this strange island of volcanic rock, surrounded on all sides by impassable gorges and straight cliffs. The only

place where any one could possibly cross to the lonely peak was at this narrow place on Rocky River Gorge.

He was safe for the moment. He could pick off any man who tried to swing across the gap, as long as his ammunition lasted. He had only four shells left in the Colt, but the attackers did not know that.

Still weak from his jail life and from the ordeal he had just been through, Geronimo Brown was content to bask in the blazing sun and watch the mob while he rested.

It seemed almost like a dream. He could hardly believe that those people, whom he could see across the gorge from him, many of them former friends and neighbors, could be seeking his life.

He felt almost as if he were a spectator on some distant planet, watching a human tragedy from afar.

In a few minutes, he knew he would have to make a desperate try to get out of this. He could not guard this pass forever. They would wear him down. When night came, they would certainly find some way to cross.

Up on a knoll, in the direction of the back-trail, Geronimo saw Hazel waving at him. She seemed to be sending some signal of encouragement before she finally wheeled her horse around and galloped off.

Geronimo turned his eyes from her, just in time to see a chap-clad cowboy, grabbing another rope to make a try at crossing the crevasse. This time, as he raised his gun, he thumbed back the hammer, his teeth gritting together.

"Don't try it, man!" he cried frantically. "I'll kill yuh sure."

The cowboy on the opposite bank raised his head and grinned. It was Art Carlin. He was going to try to

make that perilous leap, weighted down with double guns.

"Stay back, Art!" shouted Geronimo. "You'll never do it!"

Uttering a jubilant war-whoop, Art Carlin took a running jump out into space, swung across the deep chasm and landed in the brush right in front of Geronimo.

"Git him, Art!" the mob was howling. "Go in and git him!"

Still moving swiftly, Art Carlin dropped down beside Geronimo and gripped Brown's hand.

"I made it," he exulted. "Now we'll show them hyenas a thing or two. I knowed you didn't have many shells, and figured you needed help. What's the next move?"

The angry war-cry that went up from the lynch-law mob drowned out Geronimo's answer. As the posse realized they had been tricked, they began to rain shots upon Geronimo's position again.

"Let 'em shoot!" crowed Art Carlin. "The sound of them bullets whistlin' over my haid shore sounds good. I was sick of pretendin'. Hazel's gone for the sheriff. If we kin hold 'em off until he gits here with his deputies, we kin beat 'em."

"That was shore grand of yuh to come to my help, Art," said Geronimo. "I hope nothin' happens to Hazel. I'm scairt of what Butch and his gang might do. What do you know about all this business, anyhow? How come yo're spyin' on Butch Drisko?"

Art Carlin's fair face reddened, and his eyes blazed with anger.

"Butch Drisko killed my dad," he muttered between clenched teeth. "I got no evidence, but I know he done it. That's why I jined up with him and appeared to be fightin' you."

"What makes you think Butch

killed Skinner?" demanded Geronimo eagerly. "If you kin only prove that, it'll clear my name. That's why all those folks was so ready to believe that I plugged Hank Waters—because I was jailed in that stagecoach robbery. I was never charged with any crime, but it don't do no good to tell 'em that. That year I spent in the lockup burned the jailbird brand inter my hide so deep I cain't rub it out. If only you kin show 'em I'm inner-cent—"

"I cain't prove nothin'," interrupted Art, speaking loudly to make himself heard above the roar of guns. "But now that yo're workin' with me, I know we kin git the goods on Butch. Him and his crew are a tough bunch. They spend lots of money, considerin' they only git forty dollars a month as punchers. I think they're the bandit outfit."

"I think so, too," declared Geronimo. "But how are we goin' to convince others? We got no evidence at all. Old Hank Waters told me, with his dyin' breath, that Butch was up to somethin' crooked at the Box W. Hank was scairt of Butch. He was about to tell me why, when he was killed. I tried to tell folks about it, but they wouldn't listen to me."

"Wait until Sheriff Newt Baldwin gits here," said Art confidently. "He hates Butch Drisko and suspicions him, too."

"Newt's good," admitted Geronimo, "but he cain't do a thing without proof. We ain't out o' the woods yet. I'm sorry yuh got yoreself inter this on my account."

"Look!" cried Art. "There comes Butch Drisko with a load of lumber to make a bridge acrost the gorge, and he's got Ma Waters ridin' on the seat with him. What're we goin' to do now?"

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRET HIDE-OUT.

GERONIMO and Art sent several shots over the heads of the approaching team, but that did not stop Butch Drisko. With Ma Waters on the seat beside him, he knew that he was safe. The wagon was driven up close to the edge of the cliff and Ma herself helped unload the lumber.

"They're goin' to use pore old lady Waters for a shield," said Geronimo. "Now we shore got to git out o' here. When Hazel and me were kids, we used to cross over onto Ghost Mountain on an old log. We found some caves where we pretended that we was lost children, hidin' from the Indians. I'll scout down that way, Art, while you hold the pass. Three shots will be the signal yo're in danger. The same goes for me."

Geronimo had reloaded his guns with some of Art's bullets. Gripping the Colt in his hand, he plunged into the jungle formed by the twining branches of paloverde, interlaced with piñons, mesquite, spiny cactus, pale-yellow chico brush, and waving Apache plume.

Abruptly he came out onto a well-defined trail. The broken brush and trampled weeds indicated that the path was in use. He and Art were not alone on Ghost Mountain!

Startled by the thought of this new danger, Geronimo removed his spurs and hurried along as silently as possible, keeping a sharp lookout on all sides of him.

The mountain peak was scored by rocky fissures and wooded gulches. Making an abrupt turn around a giant boulder, Geronimo felt himself suddenly jerked off his feet. A lasso, clamping around his

throat, hurled him to the ground, almost knocking his gun out of his hand.

A dark-skinned man came piling in on top of him, gripping a throwing knife, eager to make a silent kill. White teeth gleamed in the saddle-colored face, as the half-breed arched backward, and then flung the razor-sharp blade straight at the fallen man.

But Geronimo's gun blazed a split second too soon. The big .45 slug, crunching through flesh and bone, battered the man to the ground, just as he made the throw. The knife clattered harmlessly on the rocks.

Flinging off the rope and leaping to his feet, Geronimo pounced on the dry-gulcher, but the fellow was dead. He stripped the body of a gun and a full cartridge belt, and then searched the pockets, hoping to find something that would explain the *cholo's* presence here. There was nothing.

From over by Art's position, three shots rang out. Geronimo promptly answered them. It was the signal that Art was in trouble.

Running to meet the blond kid, Geronimo saw Art coming his way.

"Butch Drisko's crossin' the bridge, usin' Ma Waters as a shield," panted Art. "What're we goin' to do now?"

"Come with me," said Geronimo curtly, starting swiftly along the trail.

The winding path carried them down the steep slope of Ghost Mountain into a junglelike thicket. Here it seemed to stop, but Geronimo kept on going until they came up against a blank wall.

"We're trapped here!" burst out Art. "We cain't go no further."

Getting down on his hands and knees, Geronimo crawled under an

overhanging screen of leaves. He found himself at the mouth of a cave.

"This is it," said Geronimo in a low voice. "It's a secret cave that Hazel and I discovered, but somebody's been here. Look at the tracks. Mebbe it's that buzzard I killed. I guess our safest bet is to hide inside. Come on."

With Art Carlin following at his heels, Geronimo hurried into the black depth of the cave. He kept going until he emerged into a vaulted, rocky chamber. A cleft in the rocks overhead admitted the light of the sun.

Both men halted in their tracks, staring at the boxes, clothing and other articles piled on the ground. An iron-bound chest stood in one corner. Its lid had been broken open, and it was empty.

"That's the Wells Fargo strong box!" cried Art. "The one that dad had with him the time he was shot. Geronimo, we've stumbled onto the stage robber's hide-out."

"Yo're right," exulted Geronimo. "By jing, this is luck. You guard the entrance against surprise. I'll search these things for evidence."

Dumping the contents of boxes and duffel bags out on the ground, Geronimo found all the evidence he wanted. Here was loot from a dozen holdups.

Letters and papers, bearing the imprint of robbed banks, and other documents proved Butch Drisko's guilt beyond a doubt.

He even found an old yellowed newspaper, showing a picture of Butch when he was in prison. Beside Butch in the photograph was a man Geronimo recognized as Hank Waters.

This was old Hank's secret. He had once been a member of Butch

Drisko's crew. That was why Hank had been afraid of Butch.

The roar of a six-gun caused Geronimo Brown to leap to his feet, grabbing at his Colt. At the first blast, Art Carlin pitched forward on his face and lay still. Into the place poured a close-packed group of steeple-hatted killers, firing at Geronimo as they came.

Madness filled the cowboy. To be trapped and shot down just as victory was in his hands was too much to bear. Yelling at the top of his voice, he charged straight at the swarthy gunmen. He had often used this trick to make an enemy miss, and it worked this time.

The *cholos'* shots, fired too quickly, went wild. Geronimo, in spite of the howls that he was letting out, shot with cool and deadly aim. At close range, he made every bullet count. At each deafening blast of his smoke-poles, a man crumpled up in his tracks.

A bullet clipped flesh from Geronimo's jaw, but he scarcely felt it. Another slug buried itself in the muscles of his hip. Still he kept on, like a man bearing a charmed life.

"El Demonio!" shrieked one of the Mexicans. "Thees man ees devil! You cannot keel heem!"

Squealing with fright the *cholo* turned and fled, followed by two others. The rest lay either dead or wounded on the ground.

Dropping down beside Art's prostrate form, Geronimo looked at the kid's wound as he reloaded his guns.

Art was not dead. A bullet through the shoulder had knocked him out. If Geronimo could stanch the wound, he could save Art's life.

In spite of his own desperate plight, Geronimo ripped a piece off his undershirt, lifted Art in his arms and plugged up the wound.

He heard the crunch of a boot on

rock and lifted up the gun, which he had kept close to his hand. Before him loomed the hulking figure of Butch Drisko. The enormous round head was bare. The crooked-jawed face was twisted in a hideous leer. Double guns, gripped in huge, hairy paws, covered Geronimo and Art.

"I got yuh both!" shrieked Butch, and squeezed trigger on his guns.

Throwing his body sidewise to protect Art Carlin, Geronimo Brown answered Drisko shot for shot. It was amazing how both men failed to kill each other at such close range, but they did.

Butch was the first to fling his empty smoking Colts aside and leap on Geronimo, knife in hand. The sharp blade ripped through Geronimo's shirt, smearing his chest with crimson. Brown's own balled fist stabbed deep into Drisko's fat paunch, doubling the hulking hombre up.

Slashing out at the broken jaw, Geronimo knocked Drisko sprawling on top of one of the dead outlaws. Drisko was down, but not out. He was a tough customer.

Bellowing with rage, he picked up a fallen gun and swung it around on Geronimo, who also had discarded

his empty weapons. Leaping in, Geronimo kicked the exploding Colt from Butch's hand, then dived for it and turned on the bandit chief.

Drisko had yanked the dead Mexican's other hogleg from its sheath and held it pointed at Geronimo. Both weapons flamed at the same instant.

Geronimo felt himself hurled to the ground. Butch coughed and sank slowly to the earth, dead before he hit the ground.

A glancing blow on the head had floored Geronimo, but he was not badly hurt. The firing inside the cave had not been heard by the honest members of the posse, and the rest of Drisko's crew were already in flight. But Hazel Carlin knew exactly where to bring Sheriff Newt Baldwin and his deputies.

Before they arrived, Geronimo restored Art to consciousness, and also had time to destroy all evidence against old Hank Waters.

The papers found in the cave proved Drisko's guilt and cleared Geronimo's name.

Geronimo and Hazel were reunited in the mysterious old cave where they had played Injun war, years before, when they had been children.

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The Whistlin' Kid Stops A War

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Solves A Riddle," etc.

THE whole cow town—men, women and children—turned out to the horse race. They were always ready for excitement, though sometimes they got too much of it in Mesaville, for there was a rough element living there, or drifting in, upon occasion.

The man who was riding the *palomino* bronc called Lightning, was one of the tough hombres: "Concha" Purdy, nicknamed because he always wore silver ornaments on his chaps.

He had come to Mesa County first as a broncho-buster. He had got a job as straw boss with the VV outfit, and got fired by "Old Man"

Vardon for reasons unstated, but not entirely unknown.

It was rumored that Concha Purdy had added to his pay by the sale of missing steers. He always had plenty of money to spend across the bars of Mesaville, or over its gaming tables. Consequently, he had plenty of hangers-on who might be called his friends, but who might also be his accomplices.

These things were not spoken loudly. Concha wore two guns, and was known to be expert in their use. There was no proof of his rustling, or Old Man Vardon would not have let him go. And Concha very

clearly and emphatically let it be known what he thought of Old Man Vardon.

There was plenty of trouble going on in Mesa County. There had been a long drought. The grass had withered without growing, dams shrunk, water holes and springs dried up, creeks turned to sour trickles.

Vardon, claiming an old right to Rabbit Creek, flowing across what was used as common range by the VV spread and its neighboring outfit, the QT, had fenced off the stream, what was left of it. It was sweet water, coming from the mountains.

None of this, it would seem, had anything to do with the buckaroo who loped into Mesaville, whistling softly to himself as he rode the buckskin he called Speed.

He appeared to be a rover, admitted he might be open to a job. He was a hawk-faced youth, deeply bronzed, with dark eyes and hair. He did not seem to be old enough to vote, but there was an air about him that suggested he was well able to look out for himself.

His horse attracted attention, with its fine points and its hide that gleamed like polished brass. Concha had openly admired it, but claimed that his *palomino*, Lightning, could beat it at any distance, for any money.

Lightning was locally famous as a racer, but there were judges of good horseflesh in Mesaville who noted the springy pasterns, the smooth, strong muscles on the short-coupled body of the buckskin, and who were willing to cover the bets of Concha and his friends.

The roving buckaroo, who called himself the "Kid," produced a hundred dollars. He put up his silver-

mounted, beautifully carved saddle for another hundred, which was all that Concha would admit it was worth.

Concha Purdy showed a fat roll. The bets were placed with Sayers, owner of the Jack Rabbit saloon, who was to be the starter. The race was set for the cool end of the afternoon, although there was little coolness, day or night in the cow town of Mesaville, in these days of serious drought.

By that time, every spare dollar in the town was up on the outcome of the race.

It was to be run Indian-style—on the open prairie. A blanket was tossed down, another one five hundred yards away. The winning horse was the one who first trampled the second blanket.

Concha Purdy brought his *palomino* to the start, rigged only in a hackamore and a pad with a single cinch. He wore a silk shirt and denim pants, mocassins on his feet. Strapped over them were Spanish spurs with rowels as big as dollars, but made of steel, ringed with sharp points.

He was hatless. He had discarded one gun, and he wore a wide grin of anticipated triumph.

The Kid trotted up on Speed, saddled as usual. He was whistling lightly his favorite air, "The Cowboy's Lament."

"It ain't fair to make the buckskin carry forty-pound overweight with that saddle," spoke up a man who had bet on Speed.

The followers of Concha laughed loudly. Purdy had used this trick before.

"Race was fixed fer five o'clock," said Purdy. "It's four minutes of, now. Either hawss not comin' to the scratch on time loses. The bet

was hawss against hawss, nothin' said about riggin'."

There was no time left for the Kid to secure a pad and cinch, but he did not look upset. He had already figured Concha Purdy for a tricky customer.

"Suits me," he said as he stripped the saddle from Speed, and shucked his leather chaps. "What could be sweeter, providin' you're willin' to double the distance, and the stakes. Unless that mustang of yours is just a sprint hawss, Concha."

It was a challenge full in the face of the crowd. Concha Purdy had to take it up or lose face. And furthermore the Kid had called Lightning a mustang.

Concha sneered. "Any distance," he said, "but where's the double stakes?"

"I've never done it before," said the Kid slowly. "I wouldn't do it now, if I wasn't sure of my hawss. I'll stake him against yours, hawss for hawss, on top o' the bets we put up."

"One minute of five," announced Sayers, fussy and important. The blankets were spread.

The Kid set one hand on Speed's withers and vaulted to his bare back. "I'm ready, if he is," he said. Some of the crowd cheered.

"You're goin' to lose a likely-lookin' cuttin' hoss, cowboy," mocked Concha. "You're on. Both hawsses have got to trample the far blanket. First one to tread the first blanket comin' home, wins."

Sayers lifted his starting gun. Lightning, with the blood of racing champions in his veins, champed at the bit. Speed stood turned sideways, back of the blanket, looking meek. But the Kid felt the buckskin's muscles, coiled like tense springs, beneath his grip.

"Go!" yelled Sayers, and pulled trigger.

The gun failed to explode a cartridge. Sayers swore and twisted the cylinder. It seemed as if he had overlooked the fact that there was an empty chamber next to his firing pin. That was a usual custom, but the Kid made a mental chalk mark against Sayers. He knew which way the saloonkeeper had wagered.

The *palomino* was off on the word, scuffing the first blanket into a heap. A protest would get nothing. The Kid leaned forward, and Speed started like an arrow from a taut bow in pursuit of the sprinting, quick-starting *palomino*.

It was two lengths to the good. It gained a little, going like a winged locust. The Kid was not worrying. This was not a sprint. He knew Speed's stamina, and he thought the *palomino* was a little leggy, not deep-chested enough, for a thousand yards.

The *palomino* was still a length ahead as it trod the far blanket into a heap with fast-flying hoofs, swung in its own length and came tearing home.

The Kid had to bunch Speed's feet to properly touch the blanket, or be disqualified.

Then the buckskin whirled, pawing the air as the Kid whispered in its ear. It struck its stride and ate up the distance, gaining, jump for jump. Now Speed was really living up to his name.

He enjoyed the contest, knew the goal, knew what he still had in reserve.

"We got him, old-timer," whispered the Kid, far forward, riding like a jockey, clinging with his knees.

The nostrils of both horses were flaring, but Speed's lungs worked

like steadily pumped bellows, while the *palomino* was sweating, sucking wind.

At a hundred yards from the finish Concha, riding hard, heard the galloping hoofs behind him, closer and closer, rhythmical as the piston strokes of a tuned engine.

Speed's nose came up to the *palomino's* flank, to its rider's knees. For a while they stayed the same, as Concha raked his mount with the cruel spurs.

Then Speed began to forge up closer. The crowd was yelling.

At fifty yards Concha reached over, as the two raced side by side. He grabbed the buckskin's bridle, yanked it to hold even, to break Speed's stride.

Then he felt the muzzle of the Kid's hogleg in his ribs. He half clutched for his own gun, but thought better of it. That could wait.

"Hold that grip, Concha," said the Kid grimly. "Hold it, until I tell you to let go. I want the crowd to see what a good sport you are."

Concha spurred deep, bringing scarlet streaks to the *palomino's* straining flanks, striving to make it break the hand hold by superior speed. But the buckskin skimmed the prairie like a swallow.

Now the cheers turned to howls. They had seen what Concha had tried to do. He had already lost the race by his move, but the Kid did not want any disputes.

Ten yards from the first blanket, which had been respread, the Kid holstered his six-gun, lightly pricked Speed for the first time.

Concha roweled, cruelly. The *palomino* made a final effort. The two mounts rocketed forward, but Speed was a length ahead when his hoofs spurned the goal.

II.

The mob swarmed into the Jack Rabbit. Sayers, scowling, began to pay out the bets. Concha tried to swagger, but the good sports were against him, even his own gang dared not openly excuse him.

"I set your hawss in the corral," he said sullenly. "You can claim him any time."

The Kid had stacked up part of his winnings on the bar, to pay for drinks for all comers. He turned to Concha.

"I don't need a second-string hawss right now," he said, "though yours is sure a good one. You can set your own price on it and pay, to Sayers here, as you see fit. Sayers, here's a bill for you to buy some cartridges. You seemed short just now. Some parties might excuse you, like me. Others might not, especially if it happened a second time."

Concha's face was a study. He seemed trying to turn a snarl into a smile, but there was menace in the voice he strove to keep even.

"You got a quick hawss, an' a quick gun, Kid," he said. "*This* time you win, with both. You raced me hawss fer hawss. The bet still lays as she was made. Lightnin' is in the corral, like I said. But you'll have to change the name. He ain't lightnin' no more. You raced him lame, Kid."

The Kid's dark eyes looked straight into the pale-gray ones of Concha Purdy. What he saw there showed him the crookedness of the man. He turned from the barroom and went straight to the corral.

Speed was there. The Kid had seen to the buckskin as soon as the race was over. It showed no signs of exertion. But the *palomino* stood by the fence, on three legs, head

drooping. When the Kid went toward it the *palomino* limped off, dead lame.

The Kid coaxed it, his suspicions of Concha already confirmed. He looked the horse over and at last held up the animal's injured nigh hind foot.

At first, he could see nothing, though the *Palomino* shuddered when the Kid softly prodded its frog. There was barely a sign of what had been fiendishly done, but the Kid discovered it. The broken tip of a knifeblade had been thrust deep into the spongy tissue, set in so far that the frog had closed above it.

Within a few hours, the place would fester, the bit of steel work deeper with every step of the tortured beast, and it would become incurably lame. As it was, it would be many days before it could use its foot properly.

The Kid's anger flamed. It was not at Concha's trying to welsh his bet, but the thought of some one, who imagined himself a man, deliberately ruining a horse that had given its best, just so that it would be of no value in payment of the horse-to-horse wager. That made him see red.

He looked up. Concha was seated on the top rail of the corral. He was wearing two guns. He was grinning.

"Looks like the hawss stepped on somethin' thet crippled him," he drawled mockingly.

Then he saw the blazing light in the Kid's eyes, and he hooked his high heels over a lower bar and went for his guns.

He was fast, and he could shoot two-handed. But he was not fast enough. The light was poor, but if there had been brilliant sunshine, Concha would have seen nothing

more of the Kid's draw but a blur that ended in a spurt of flame and a puff of smoke.

Concha's left hand was the nearer to the Kid, and the Kid's bullet crippled it. Concha Purdy's guns slid back into their holsters, half drawn, or they would have fallen to the ground. The shock and the pain of his smashed knuckles made him lose his balance. He fell over backward and tried to roll to cover.

Some of his pals had come along, to see him even things with the Kid. Concha screened himself with them, eager to get away from that flaming gun, to have his hand looked after. It was spouting a crimson torrent.

The Kid leaped to the corral rail, and the men shrank back. He did not say anything to them, but his silence was enough. Following Concha, they drifted away, hearing the tune that the Kid whistled as they left, the tune of the "cowboy who knew he'd done wrong."

He watched them for a little and then went back to the *palomino*. Poultices and rest might bring it round. There was a horse doctor in town. Concha's losses would pay for the treatment.

"One thing's certain, Speed, old-timer," the Kid said to the buckskin later, as they rode to VV headquarters, "after this Concha may *pack* two guns, but he'll be shootin' one-handed."

Vardon, owner of the VV outfit, was more than twice as old as the Kid. But, after he had learned the Kid's name, Prentiss, and looked at the credentials the Kid had brought from the Cattlemen's Association, he treated his visitor with a marked respect.

"I've heard of you," he said. "Crack range detective for the C. A.

Usually called the 'Whistlin' Kid.' What can I do for you? I didn't write in for help."

"Tucker, of the QT, is a member, same as you," replied the "Whistlin' Kid." "We figure to treat all members alike. We sometimes have to settle disputes, as you know. Usually do that from the Home Office, after an operative has looked over the ground and got hold of all the facts."

"Like *you* have?" said Vardon. He was pretty grim, but the Kid felt that he was sound at heart.

"I don't know all the facts," he said. "I've looked over the ground. Since you've wired off Tucker, his cows have started dying of thirst. I understand he's cut wire, to let 'em drink. Your boys have shot some of his cows. That's likely to lead to shootin' men. The C. A. can't stand back of that."

"Meanin' you'll expel me as a member, if it happens?" demanded Vardon, frowning. "You can't do it. Here's one fact you can't get back of."

He took an official-looking document from a drawer of his desk. The Kid read it. It was a "stay" from a court, preventing the QT, or any other outfit, from watering in Rabbit Creek for the distance it flowed through what was claimed to be the private range of Vance Vardon, by virtue of a grant issued to Vardon's grandfather by the Mexican Republican Government.

The Kid read it through, whistling under his breath. He had to be diplomatic here. Those old grants were still disputed, but Vardon had obtained a stay. He was within the law in forbidding Tucker to use the water of Rabbit Creek, but it meant the end of QT.

"I'm not talkin' myself, just quot-

in' the chief," said the Kid. "He 'lowed the main idea of the Cattle-men's Association was a get-together of spread owners for their mutual protection. It don't seem hardly mutual when a man shuts off a creek from a neighbor."

"I don't know how long this drought'll last," said Vardon. "There ain't enough water in that creek now for my herd, let alone his."

The Kid did not agree with him, but there was no use arguing. In a few weeks, there would be rain in the mountains, rain that would fill the creeks. Vardon was taking no chances.

But, before the small runlets on Tucker's land, as divided by the court stay, would flow again, or his spring and water holes fill up, Tucker would have to shoot his herd unless it died of thirst.

There was still grazing, of a kind, enough for them to get by on, with water. Now, there was not even any dew.

And both men were members of the C. A.

It was a tough proposition for older and supposedly wiser heads than the Kid's to solve. But the chief of the Cattlemen's Association knew what he was about when he sent the hawk-featured Pete Prentiss to Mesa County. He knew there might be war, as well as the Kid, and he counted on the latter to avoid it.

"What do you know of Concha Purdy?" asked the Kid.

"Not as much as I wished I did," said Vardon. "Two of my riders were in Mesaville and told me about your race. He's a *malo hombre*, and a slick one. I know *this* much. He'll never get another job in this county, and he won't rustle any

more cows, if the rest of the owners live up to what they said to me. On top of that, any dealer buyin' from Concha, knows the risk he's runnin'."

"You've got no proof he rustled your cows?" asked the Kid

"If I had, he'd be in jail. He's threatened to get even with me for firin' him an' spreadin' word of what I think of him, but it ain't keepin' me awake nights. You've seen that stay, Prentiss. Better see Tucker an' tell him so. He won't believe me, an' he chased off the poor jasper who tried to serve him with a copy."

"I'll see Tucker," answered the Kid, "but I sure hate to hand a man a death warrant for his herd."

Vardon shrugged his shoulders. He invited the Kid to stay the night, but the Kid refused.

He preferred to sleep in the open. Vardon was within his rights, but he was too hard for the Kid to choose him as a host.

"Some day, old-timer," he said to Speed, as he made his simple bed on the prairie, "somethin's goin' to rise right up an' open that hombre's eyes. The milk of human kindness ain't in him."

The buckskin thrust its muzzle at the Kid, who stroked its nose, playfully tugged at the soft lips, and scratched its ears. They understood each other. They went to sleep almost side by side, Speed lying down.

III.

The disturbance came an hour before dawn, with the sound of shots not very far away. Before they got through to the Kid's senses, Speed heard them, knew what they might mean. He pawed at the Kid's blanket, and the Kid sat up, instantly alert, pulling on his boots.

He had purposely camped on Rabbit Creek, and he knew there was trouble between the QT and VV forces. This was not the mere killing of cattle.

Tucker was striking back, in desperation. After all, he had not been served, as the law demanded. The court officer had been chased away, fearful of his life, as the Kid had heard in Mesaville.

When a man's whole fortune is at stake, when he faces the destruction of the herd he has built up for years, he is apt to do desperate things. And Vardon had no right to destroy the steers, even if the wire had been cut. He could have impounded them, brought civil suit against Tucker for snipping the fence.

But the drought had got into men's hearts.

Swiftly the Kid saddled, and rode to where the shots still sounded, like far-off whip cracks on the still night air.

The moon silvered the creek as he galloped. He was not whistling now. Punchers might be killed or wounded. It was his job, his desire, to stop such murder.

There were willows along the creek, low bluffs. Then it ran clear through the sage. Vardon's fence showed on the far side, a good hundred yards from the other bank.

The Kid saw cows lying still, close to where the creek swelled to a pool. One was in the water. There were spurts of flame from the cover of sagebrush clumps.

He rode fast, shouting, his own six-gun holstered. He ran the gantlet of lead from both sides. Bullets hummed past his ears like angry bees, and then stopped.

He had reined up, and the sheer fearlessness of him checked them as he held up his hand.

"If you hombres want a target, take me," the Kid shouted in a clear voice. "I'm Prentiss, of the Cattle-men's Association. Both your bosses belong. This thing is goin' to be arbitrated. The one who's handlin' each side of this shootin' come out in the open, an' I'll show my papers. And keep my hawgleg holstered."

There was no answer, no movement.

"I figured you for men, not coyotes," said the Kid. "I've got the nerve to chance your shootin'. Now the rest of you take your fingers off your triggers while we powwow. You don't think I've rid into this for fun, do you?"

It seemed their horses were either lying down or hidden in an arroyo. One man stood up on the far side of the creek, another on the nigh.

"I'm Tucker's straw boss," said the first. "I'll take a chance. They killed seven of our cows, an' they wounded Slim Peters."

The other man spoke up.

"I'm Haggerty, foreman for the VV. They got Red Jackson, bad, before we started shootin'. They cut the wire. We warned 'em."

"I'm warnin' you," said the Kid. "None of you got any right to kill, cows or men. You're layin' yourselves open, bosses an' all, to big trouble."

"To blazes with you," cried a hidden man, and fired a shot at the Kid that buzzed between his belt and the horn of his saddle. "We'll handle this war."

The Kid saw the muzzle flame. His hand touched the butt of his six-gun, but did not draw it, though he was in deadly peril. They were out of hand, heated by the wounding on either side. They ached to shoot it out. And he was between them.

Suddenly he heard the sound of beating hoofs, coming from VV headquarters. He saw a horse top a rise. Then Vardon himself appeared.

"They've got my boy," he said, "they've taken him! Tucker's outfit. Think they'll force my hand. The kid slept in a tent, and they snaked him out of it. Now——"

There was a growl from the VV riders. They started to crawl for their horses, to charge the QT riders.

The straw boss for Tucker spoke up boldly.

"That's a lie, Vardon," he cried. "You might kill our cows an' try to shoot us off the crick, but we ain't kidnapers. We wouldn't hurt your kid. Before this trouble started, he was always over to our place. I braided a quirt for him. You talk loco when you talk thet way, an' you know it."

The Kid saw Vardon spur his horse, saw the glint of his gun as it left the holster. He swung Speed and rode the owner off. He gripped his arm.

"They knew we'd be watchin', they cut the wire an' drove the cows to water to-night to cover their play," cried Vardon. "Let go my arm."

"Killin' ain't goin' to bring back your kid," said the range detective. "Act reasonable, Vardon. Whoever took him, left a trail. I'll follow it. You know somethin' of what I can do in that line. I'll cut the sign an' run whoever did it down. Call your men off. You, too," he added to Tucker's straw boss.

"Who do you think you are, governor of this State?" demanded Haggerty, and the half-spoken backing of the VV cow-punchers was behind him.

"I've got authority enough to arrest your Old Man, here and now," said the Kid quietly. "He's tryin' to break the peace. I'm a peace officer in five States, and I've got Vardon under my gun. Vamose, back to your headquarters, all you hombres. Pronto!"

They saw Vardon fling off the Kid's restraining arm, and then stiffen in his saddle as something flashed from the Kid's holster and rested against Vardon's ribs.

The ring of absolute authority had been in that quiet voice.

"How about it, Vardon?" asked the Kid. "How about it, you QT men? If you didn't snatch Vardon's kid, are you willin' to draw off?"

"You win," said Vardon, his voice charged with menace, "but if you don't prove up, you're goin' to be mighty sorry."

"Let's get back to the kid's tent," said Prentiss.

He whistled as they rode, while the stars died and the dawn came.

The QT men had withdrawn, but the QT cattle drifted through the cut wire and drank their fill. The Kid knew this would happen, and was content, for the moment.

It was full dawn when they got to VV headquarters, and to the tent where Vardon's eleven-year-old boy had slept, on his own desire, playing "Big Chief Indian," in his teepee.

There was sign to be read in the tent itself, to show that the boy had been snatched up violently, and had put up some sort of fight.

The Kid tried his best to keep the others away from the outside of the tent where they were rapidly destroying all chance of finding strange trail marks.

He picked up sign at last, where the rest stood baffled.

As the Kid read it, one man had pulled the trick, carrying off young Vardon, very probably unconscious from a blow. There had been only one horse.

That took time, comparing hoof-marks, and all the while, Vardon chafed like a wild horse under its first curb.

"He rode off into that gully," said the Kid finally. "The sign peters out on the sandstone. The man who did the snatching rode where he knew sign would fade out."

"We've got a start," said Vardon. "Come on, boys!"

"How fur do you think you'll go?" asked the Kid. "You want to trail this hombre with a dust he can see five miles off? Who found the sign, to begin with? I did. If you think you can pick it up, and follow it, Vardon, or any of your men, go ahead. Otherwise, I foller it alone. Poses advertise themselves. It's up to you, Vardon."

Some of Vardon's men had spurred up the gully that ended in a plateau of rock thinly sifted over with sand where nothing grew, where the wind immediately erased all tracks as blotting paper takes up ink.

The punchers came back, looking foolish.

"Might have ridden seventeen ways," admitted Haggerty, "for all you can tell."

Vardon looked at the Kid, as a man looks at a forlorn hope.

"Can you——" he faltered, thinking of his only son, held in pawn.

"I wouldn't wonder," answered the Kid, "but I ride alone. If I'm trailed, I quit."

He was not followed, and he put Speed to a lope. He could feel for Vardon, left behind; but the Kid had been forced to be stern.

Posses did not only throw up dust sign, where there might be a way for a single rider to travel on hard ground; also, they were apt to blot out the very sign they were looking for, especially when they were at fault, too eager about regaining the trail, scattering all over the landscape.

The trouble with Vardon and his men was that they did not know *how* to look. The sign showed well enough to the eyes of the Kid, and with it once picked up, he was not going to lose it unless it petered out on solid granite.

The still, almost level rays of the rising sun cast shadows from slight indentations, from fractured bits of rock, the fresh edges of which showed up. A few hours more, and those edges would be dulled, the shadows withdrawn as the sun mounted.

Once, on a patch of shaly, scaly rock, shod hoofs had scattered and crumbled the stuff.

Once, he found long tail hair from a horse caught in cat-claw cactus.

He held on toward the lift of the range. It mounted abruptly from the plain in sheer cliffs about a hundred feet in height, pierced with narrow canyons. These showed in dark shadow. But the Kid did not choose any of these to enter.

At last, his sign was failing him as he came to surface rock barely covered with grit. He rode up close to the cliffs, swung parallel with them, whistling very softly, watching for a blind gorge.

He found it, a place with the entrance slanting in sharply, the outer wing of the cliff screening the opening. At that hour, with the sun shining fairly on the face of the cliffs, the entry blended with the wall of rock, the light was flat.

Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have passed it by. But the Kid was not deceived. This was his hunch.

The hunch was confirmed almost as soon as he entered the angling gorge. Concha—it must be Concha—had felt safe enough to roll, and light, and smoke a brown-paper quiry. The butt of it lay on the ground, the end of a burned match not far away.

The Kid dismounted, changed his boots to the moccasins he always carried in his soogan roll. At first, Speed followed him like a dog, softly as a dog. It was almost as if the buckskin went on tiptoe, so careful was it how it picked up and lay down its hoofs.

But as soon as he found a convenient niche in the wall the Kid placed Speed in it, sure he would find him there when he came back.

IV.

Concha was making good his boasts against Vardon, getting even for what he considered an injury and injustice against himself. He had more cunning than mentality, it was easy for him to persuade himself he was right.

Now he knew that rustling stock was going to be a tough job. He had lost face with his own men, since the Kid had beaten him in the horse race, discovered the fiendish trick played on the *palomino*, and then had crippled his left hand.

That hand was hurting him badly. Bones had been smashed, plenty of them. He should have been keeping quiet, his hand above his head while it healed. Now it was burning up, festering. By the time he got to the masked gorge, he was in a devilish mood.

He had done this job single-handed. Since he could steal no more cattle, he was not going to split with anybody.

He had yanked the lad out of the tent, half smothering him, and that did not do his hand any good. He had bound the boy and set him in front of him, and he had had to hold him there.

Concha Purdy had brought along tequila, double-proof. The fiery stuff had seemed to deaden the pain in his hand, at first. Now it seemed as if the liquor had turned to molten lead in his veins.

It was made from the button tips of the mescal plant, and it was a drug that acted much like marihuana.

It gave Concha illusions of grandeur, but they were coupled with nightmarish desires that crept out from the back of his cruel and crafty brain.

He bullied the boy, and when the other pluckily spoke up, saying his father would come and get him and punish Concha, Purdy laughed.

"I'm goin' to give him the chance to come or send somebody with ten thousand pesos in good American dinero. Each day he holds off, the price goes up five thousand, until the sixth day. If it ain't in my hands then, I'll slit your throat, you young puppy!"

Looking into the eyes of Purdy, where the light of insanity was glowing, with pain and tequila for fuel, young Vardon knew that Concha Purdy would do it—that he *wanted* to do it, now. Only the thought of the money checked him. When tongue and brain both got incoherent, he would be utterly mad, thinking only of revenge.

He went on, in half maudlin fashion, to tell of his fancied wrongs

from Vardon, to go into minute and horrible details of how he would butcher the boy "just like they do a calf—you've seen 'em kill a calf?" He would leave the body to the coyotes and the buzzards.

A terrible, frozen fear crept into the boy's soul. It kept him rigid and silent.

They reached a little glade at the end of the canyon. The boy saw water, some bushes, and a few trees. Concha threw him roughly to the ground, caught him by the collar of the pajamas he had been wearing in the tent.

He dragged him, still bound, to where some of the bushes masked a cave. The pajamas were torn, the boy was bruised, hurt where Concha kicked him to the hard floor.

The bully in Purdy was beginning to get possession of him. He seemed to hear a whisper in his half drugged brain, telling him to kill—to kill.

Concha had been here before. He had cooking things in a narrow slit. He had to make a fire, heat water, dress his hand. It was swelling badly despite the bandages that cut off circulation.

The Kid saw him come out of the slit, an ax in his one good hand, looking for dry wood.

Concha was confident. He had turned his mount loose, and it cropped the scanty grass contentedly. What little wind there was blew down the canyon. Speed smelled the other horse, but did not whicker.

Then Purdy's horse caught sight of or heard the Kid as he moved like a lizard through the brush. Instantly Concha was on the alert. He saw the slight movement in the greasewood where the Kid squatted like a hare, wary and watchful.

Purdy had one good hand. It

was even guns. But Purdy's hand now held the ax. He raised it as if to lop off a branch and then hurled it straight for the Kid. It came flashing and twisting end over end, like a tomahawk, flung with a perfect aim.

The Kid had to throw himself to one side to dodge it as it slithered by his cheek, and buried itself in the ground. In that split second Purdy had his right-hand six-gun out, and fired at the Kid as the range detective rose to his feet from his crouch.

A bullet went through the Kid's thigh, scraping the bone. It brought him down on one knee. He was badly nerve-shocked by the strike of lead on bone.

For a moment, his nerves were short-circuited. It was pain a hundred items as intense as when a man is struck on the "funny bone." For a second or so, the Kid was powerless.

Concha came running up. He sent in shot after shot at where the Kid lay half paralyzed in the grease-wood.

A warm trickle ran down the Kid's forehead, dripped to the ground. His will fought for supremacy, regained control.

He shot from the ground before he rose. Now Concha Purdy lay wallowing in torment with a shattered knee. The Kid walked up on him, limping, but steady.

"I'll cripple your other hand, Concha, if you make any sort of a break. I counted your shots, an' that gun's empty. Don't try for the other one."

The agony of both knee and hand was too much for Purdy. It cleared his brain and drove the madness out of him, let in the fear.

"Listen, Kid," he begged, "you've crippled me enough. I quit. You take me in. The boy is all right. I

ain't harmed him any. I didn't ask for ransom," he added craftily. "I jest wanted to put a scare into Vardon. I'd have taken him back."

"We'll see what the boy has to say," replied the Kid grimly. "Looks to me like you didn't have time yet to talk ransom. You're lucky if I do take you in, Concha. The way the boys at the VV was feeling this mornin', if *they'd* caught you, they'd string you up. You'd be squintin' up some puncher's rope right now, Purdy. You'll do it, one of these days."

Concha could not walk, the Kid's leg wound needed attention. The boy rode behind the Kid on Speed, unbound, his limbs chafed back to circulation, his arms about the Kid.

Concha was tied on his own horse. There was a running noose about his neck that the Kid braided in the horse's tail. It did not make Concha feel any more at ease.

The boy was grateful, and the Kid told him how he might repay him.

"You like the Tuckers, don't you, son?" he asked.

"They're both swell," said the lad. "It's too bad them an' paw had a row over the water."

"I'm goin' to let Tucker take you home," said the Kid, "with a note from me, tellin' how he has helped out."

The help consisted of the buckboard ride, not yet delivered. But Vardon, in his joy, might read more into it.

"It was you rescued me," said the boy. "I heard the shootin'. I heard all about the hoss race the other day. You ought to take me home an' let paw thank you."

"I'll be there later, son. If *you* want to thank me, don't interrupt what your paw might say to Tucker.

He won't stay long, and he won't take too much credit, but if your paw should give him plenty, that might make things right between the QT and the VV, even includin' the water. I got to have my leg fixed, got to git Concha to a doctor—and jail."

The boy looked at him with hero worship. "You sure are swell, mister," he said. "And it'll be swell to be able to go over to the QT again."

Tucker had to be persuaded to deliver young Vardon, but the Kid pleaded his wounds, one in his thigh and one on the head. He pointed out that it would be risky for him to take Concha to the VV in case of a lynching.

"I ain't goin' to let this coyote out of my sight until he's in the calabozo," the Kid declared.

Mrs. Tucker clinched the matter. Tucker was a meek man where she was concerned.

When he had left with the boy in a buckboard, she turned to the Kid, gratitude and appreciation in her eyes. The Kid, while she looked skillfully after his wounds, grinned at her.

"Looks like the war is over," he said. "I reckon after this you'll get

all the water you want from Rabbit Creek. This sure has been my busy day."

Mrs. Tucker fixed his bandage, bent and kissed him. She was plenty older than the Kid, but she blushed like a girl.

"You'll qualify, any time, any place," she said. "I saw what you meant from the first, gettin' Tucker to take home the boy. I don't know as he sees it yet, but he will. And I only hope the right girl gets you, and you the right girl."

When she was gone, the Kid rested on the lounge, whistling while she was in the kitchen getting fresh hot water and bandages for Purdy.

The tune was not a wedding march. The Kid was not, and never had been, matrimonially inclined. The air was a melancholy one, "The Cowboy's Lament." It seemed to suit Concha, tied up in the barn, like a mad dog, better than it did the Kid.

Thet shore was a plumb slick job on the Whistlin' Kid's part. He solved the kidnapin', stopped the range war, an' prob'ly stopped the rustlin' thet had been goin' on in them parts. A danged good two days' work! Watch out for the next story about him. Yuh'll find it in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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Yaller Dog

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Brother Of Bad Men," etc.

FROM beneath the broad brim of his big Stetson, Art Kelly's gray eyes searched the wrinkled face of the runty old cowpoke suspiciously. He caught no recognition in the old puncher's expression.

Joe Farris did not know him in his new outfit with his face streaked with grime. That suited Art Kelly exactly. He wanted to catch Farris off his guard.

"Who are you?" demanded Farris, his hand on his gun, as he stepped out into the yard. "What do yuh want with me?"

Deputy Sheriff Art Kelly did not answer at once. Instead, he slowly produced the "makin's" from his shirt pocket, rolled a cigarette, and

lighted it. Out of the corner of his eyes he was studying the wizened face of the pint-sized, bow-legged old buckaroo.

Joe Farris had been out of State prison less than six months. His leathery cheeks were still somewhat pale, and the haunted expression had not left his eyes.

It was Art Kelly who had sent Farris up for rustling. It had been tough on Art. He had known Farris for years and liked the old man. But the rustling evidence had been too strong. Art had gritted his teeth and done his duty.

Towering there in the semidarkness of early evening above the spindly-legged jailbird, Art looked

big enough to crush the old fellow with one hand.

He had gained a reputation as a quick-trigger hombre since he had become a deputy. Bandits feared and hated him. Art wondered if old Joe Farris would feel the same way.

Abruptly, Art Kelly lifted an arm and flicked his hat back from his forehead, revealing a handsome, clean-cut face, a shock of tawny yellow hair, and eyes that were very large and clear in the directness of their gaze.

Twin six-guns slapped against his bull-hide chaps, and his spurs tinkled in the gravel when he moved.

"You!" burst out Joe Farris, taking a step backward. "Get away from here. I ain't done nothin'. You can't take me again. I won't let you. I'll kill you first."

With his jaw sagging and his eyes glaring with fear, the wrinkled old fellow crouched against the mud wall of his house, his fingers working convulsively above the grips of his gun.

"Wait a minute now," laughed Art Kelly. "Don't go flyin' off the handle like that. I ain't come to arrest yuh. Just dropped in to say 'Hello' and ask you a few questions. Aren't you goin' to invite an old friend in?"

"Yo're no friend of mine," grated Farris in a low tense voice. "I hate yuh. You had me locked up like a dog. For three long years I rotted in a cell, all on account of you. And now you talk about bein' friends! If you ain't got a warrant for me, git out of my yard. Yo're trespassin'."

Deputy Sheriff Art Kelly shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly and continued to grin at the frightened ex-convict.

"All right," he said. "I'll go. But

first I want tuh ask yuh about some one. Where's Freddy?"

At mention of the name, all the color drained from Joe Farris's face. His expression of defiance changed to one of fear and pleading.

"Freddy?" he gasped. "What do you—— I don't understand what yo're talkin' about. Freddy who?"

Art Kelly blew cigarette smoke through his nostrils and slowly nodded his head.

"You know who I mean, all right," he declared. "I guess you didn't know I was wise. Do you still want me to go? Maybe somebody else could tell me where I could find Freddy."

Old Joe Farris's chin dropped on his chest, and his hands fell away from his gun.

"You win," he muttered. "I'll talk. I'll tell yuh anything yuh want to know, if yuh promise me to leave Freddy alone. He's a good boy. He ain't done nothin'. Don't bring him inter this."

"Let's go inside and talk this over," suggested Art Kelly.

The old jailbird stepped aside, and motioned for Art to enter the mud-walled clay-floored house. Instead of doing so, the deputy sheriff reached down, caught Joe's arm, and forced him to walk ahead of him into the place.

It was a one-room shack, but it was clean. The shelves were lined with food. The bed was covered with a white spread. A pot of stew bubbled on the wood fire.

"I see Freddy has been to visit yuh," said Art Kelly. "He's good to his old man, ain't he?"

Old Joe Farris whirled on Art Kelly like a snarling cat.

"He ain't my son," he cried. "He's just a good-hearted kid, helpin' an old man keep from starvin'. Who told you Freddy was my boy?"

"Never mind that," said Art Kelly. "I know that you're the father of the lad thet calls himself Fred Emerson. Furthermore, I know thet Emerson has been visitin' you, an' thet you been havin' long talks together. If Freddy wasn't driving the mail stage, I wouldn't bother yuh about this. As it is, I can't take a chance. Thet stage-coach carries too much gold. If anything was tuh happen, the owners would be sure to find out thet Freddy is the son of a jailbird. Now do yuh understand?"

Sinking down on a pine box that served as a chair, the wrinkled bow-legged old man buried his head in his hands, and just sat there rocking back and forth.

"All right," he whispered at last. "Yo're right. Freddy Emerson's my boy, an' I'm proud of it. Even if I did desert him an' his mother when he was a baby. That's how come he was brought up as an Emerson instead of a Farris. It was his mother's maiden name. Now I told yuh the truth, what're yuh goin' to do?"

Before Art Kelly could answer, Joe Farris suddenly reached for his gun. Art had been lounging in front of Farris with seeming carelessness, but in reality had been ready for just such a move.

Kicking out quickly, he slammed the sharp toe of his cowboy boot against Farris's forearm, sending the gun spinning into the corner of the room. Almost in the same movement, his fist crashed against the side of the ex-convict's jaw, knocking him stunned and helpless to the floor.

When Joe Farris was able to sit up a few minutes later, Art was just dishing up the hot stew, and had the coffee ready to serve.

"Set up and eat, Joe," said Kelly,

flipping a half dollar on the rough boards of the table to pay for his meal. "Yore boy sure provides you with good meat. And this java ain't to be sneezed at. Sorry I had to smack yuh so hard."

Rubbing his sore jaw, Joe Farris staggered on wobbly legs over to the table and gulped down a big drink of steaming-hot coffee to clear his head. The deputy sheriff had not even removed Farris's other gun. It was still in Joe's holster.

"I wasn't goin' to kill yuh," said Farris. "Leastwise, I don't think I was. But yore talkin' about Freddy just drove me plumb crazy. I cain't bear to think of anythin' happenin' to him. If you'll protect him, I'll talk business."

Art Kelly finished wolfing down the stew, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and nodded his approval.

"Now yo're talkin'," he said. "As soon as you finished eatin', yo're goin' tuh show me how you and yore pards got away with all them Star W cattle. I never did find out the trick thet yuh used to git them out of the valley without bein' found out. Yo're goin' tuh put me wise, so thet nobody can use the same stunt ag'in."

Joe Farris's wrinkled face was expressionless as he looked up at the deputy sheriff.

"I swear thet there wasn't no trick," declared Joe honestly. "An' I don't know nothin' about it. I never rustled no cattle. You sent up an innocent man when you throwed me in the pen. If I knowed anything, I'd be glad to tell yuh. But I just don't know."

Kicking his chair back from the table, Art Kelly crammed his big Stetson down on his head, took a hitch at his gun belt, and stomped toward the door, heels popping and

spurs rattling. Joe Farris let him get outside before he darted in pursuit of him, yelling for him to stop.

"Wait! What're you goin' to do?" he cried. "Wait a minute, cain't yuh?"

"I cain't wait," said Art. "I've got tuh see Colonel Morehouse, who owns the stage lines. I got some-thin' important that he ought tuh know."

"Stop," groaned Farris. "Come on back! I'll do what yuh want. I'll show yuh the rustler trick. Only yuh got to promise me to leave Fred Emerson alone."

Deputy Sheriff Art Kelly came back slowly.

"Get yore horse," he ordered. "We're ridin'. I ain't takin' yore guns, because I know you won't try to kill me again. The minute I die, there's certain papers that will be made public that might do some folks a lot of harm. Mebbe one of them folks might be Freddy Emerson, the only son of Joe Farris, rustler, train robber, and one-time convict."

Art heard a rustling sound behind him. Whirling, he reached for his gun. A dark shape loomed before him. An uplifted hand, holding something ugly and black swished toward him.

Art Kelly's brain seemed to explode in a blinding flash of awful pain, and he knew no more.

II.

Art Kelly's sudden downfall seemed to stun Joe Farris. He merely stood there with his mouth open, gaping at the tall, slender, dark-haired youth, who stood bare-headed over the deputy's prostrate form.

The newcomer was a handsome, smooth-faced youngster. He was

well over six feet tall, but did not weigh more than a hundred and fifty pounds. The butt of a black-snake whip was firmly gripped like a club in his right hand.

At sight of the hatless intruder, Joe Farris's jaw wagged up and down several times before croaking words issued from his lips.

"Freddy!" he burst out. "You kilt him. You shouldn't ought ter done it."

Freddy Farris, who had always been known as Fred Emerson, dropped to his knees beside the fallen deputy and rolled him over.

"Shucks, he ain't dead!" He laughed. "It would take more than that to crack his thick skull. I heard him hazin' yuh, dad, an' I knocked him out."

"Don't call me dad," protested Joe, glancing around uneasily. "Not even here. Somebody might hear yuh."

"Let 'em hear," growled Freddy, pulling off his gloves so that he could feel Art Kelly's pulse. "I ain't ashamed of yuh. I'd like ter tell the whole world that yo're my father."

"No, no," grumbled Joe Farris. "I cain't let yuh do that. Bein' an ex-convict has plumb ruined me. But I don't matter. My life's about over. I wouldn't want anythin' to happen ter you. Keep the name of Emerson. It's a good name, and it belonged to yore mother."

Freddy and Joe picked up Art Kelly's limp body, carried it inside the old adobe and laid it in a bunk. At sight of the badge on Kelly's calfskin vest, Fred uttered a low whistle.

"Gosh!" he said. "He's a deputy sheriff. Now I am in fer it. What'll he do to me when he wakes up?"

Old Joe Farris shut the door and pulled down the window shades be-

fore he touched a match to the kerosene lamp on the table.

"You ain't goin' ter be here when he wakes up," declared the bow-legged old buckaroo sternly. "You didn't know he was a lawman when yuh slugged him, and I ain't goin' ter have yuh framed inter prison like I was. Git goin' now, afore Art Kelly opens his peepers.

Young Fred Emerson draped his lanky body over a chair and blew smoke rings toward the ceiling.

"You got me all wrong, dad, I ain't no yaller quitter," he chuckled. "I'll stick an' slug."

Wrinkled, sawed-off Joe Farris was almost short enough to walk under his son's outstretched arms, but he bristled up to the bigger man like a cocky bantam, grabbed him by the arm, hoisted him up, and propelled him toward the door.

"You git the blazes out o' here, afore I larrup yuh," he barked, yanking open the rough wood panel and forcing his son down the steps.

Jerking away, Fred Emerson turned around and stubbornly faced his father.

"I ain't goin' without you," he declared firmly. "I got an idea. Let's both of us make ourselves scarce until Kelly comes to an' gits out o' here. My wagon's down the road a piece. Yuh kin tie yore bronc on behind an' ride the seat with me. We got a lot of talkin' ter do."

Joe Farris glanced around doubtfully at the darkness that had settled over the cottonwoods and willows of the creek bottom.

"Do yuh think it would be safe," he asked. "You shouldn't ought to be seen with me. Especially after I slugged a deputy sheriff."

"You slugged him?" jeered Fred Emerson. "You were too slow. I slugged him."

"Yo're a danged liar!" retorted the old man. "It was me knocked thet deputy sheriff out. And I'm willin' ter swear on a stack of Bibles. An' if you come hornin' in, I'll disown yuh. I'll leave here an' you'll never see my face again. It's bad enough fer me ter be disgraced without you ruinin' yore chances."

After some argument, the bow-legged jailbird saddled his mustang and led him over to the wagon. As they left the adobe, they could hear Art Kelly beginning to groan and toss about as he recovered consciousness.

They knew that the range-hardened lawman would soon come to his senses and be able to take care of himself.

Unwrapping the lines from around the brake handle, Fred Emerson cracked the black-snake popper over the backs of his four-horse team, sending them trotting along the upgrade. Old Joe, having tied his bronc to the wagon, was on the seat beside his son.

"Now then," said Fred, speaking loudly to make himself heard above the rattle of iron tires on rocks, "what was the ruckus between you an' Kelly?"

"He was houndin' me," declared Joe Farris bitterly, "threatenin' ter expose you as my son. He drove me so desperate, I tried ter gun him, but couldn't. Finally ter make him let up, I promised ter show him the hide-out of the outlaws he claims I was tied up with afore I went ter jail."

"You promised him that?" exclaimed Fred Emerson. "What do you know about thet outlaw's hide-out? Do you know where it is?"

"I don't," vowed Joe Farris solemnly. "I was an innocent man when they sent me up. I never knowed about them bandicks, an' I

don't yet. But I had ter promise him something to make him let up. I tell yuh, he had me half crazy. I got some wild idea thet I'd git him out in the darkness an' find a chance ter kill him. Then I would throw myself over a cliff."

"You was loco," said Fred. "Don't git them ideas inter yore head. Art Kelly was facin' you when he was slugged. He knows you didn't do it. If he tries ter fix it on you, I'll come forward an' testify thet I was drivin' by an' seen a stranger sneak up an' attack him. Now forgit it an' let's enjoy ourselves."

When Joe Farris ceased his excited argument, he became conscious of a ground-shaking rumble that kept up a monotonous din like the noise of distant thunder. He knew it was caused by the stamps of the Calico gold mine.

Rounding a turn, they passed under a big flume and saw the lights of the mine, which was working nights, taking out fabulous sums of almost pure ore.

"See here, you cain't take me in there!" cried the old man, jumping to his feet. "You shouldn't be seen with me. Let me out. I'll hide here in the dark until you come back this way."

"Sit down!" ordered Fred Emerson, shoving his father back onto the seat with a gloved hand. "It would be even worse fer yuh if they found yuh sneakin' around here in the dark. If yo're so fidgety, you kin tell 'em yuh bummed a ride to the mine ter ask 'em fer a job. I come here on a special trip ter take some machinery away that's ter be repaired. It won't take 'em any more than a half an hour ter load the boxes on, and then I'll be drivin' back ter town."

"All right," agreed Joe. "I was

wonderin' why you was drivin' a farm wagon instead of the mail coach. I reckon if you was goin' ter haul gold, you'd be usin' the Concord coach with your usual passell of guards inside."

"That's right," said Fred, pulling hard on the reins and yanking the brake up tight, as he stopped in front of a big warehouse. "The foreman's over there in the old frame shack. You kin buzz him about a job, while I'm takin' on cargo."

Old Joe Farris stumped away on his high-heeled boots at a staggery, bow-legged gait. Handsome, bare-headed Fred Emerson hopped down off his wagon onto the loading platform, pushed open a wide door and stepped into the dimly lighted warehouse.

A strange sight met his eyes. Piles of gold bars were stacked up on the floor. Two armed men, their heads bandaged, were busy piling the bullion into heavy boxes marked "Machinery." The lamplight glinted on the precious metal.

Accustomed as he was to hauling these precious bricks, Fred Emerson could not repress a thrill at sight of all this wealth. He figured there must be at least a hundred thousand dollars.

The bandaged men were working swiftly. Without even glancing at young Emerson, they finished stowing away the yellow bricks and nailed the box tops in place, reinforcing the wood with strips of metal.

Wiping sweat from their faces, the two gunmen performed a transformation that changed them into helpless, limping invalids. One of them wrapped a white cloth around his hand and forearm and put it in a sling.

The other stained the bandage around his head with a red fluid.

picked up a crutch and began hobbling about. Suddenly the door burst open and a black-bearded man flung himself at Fred Emerson, snarling like an angry bobcat.

"You young fool!" flared this hombre. "You blithering idiot! Of all times for you ter bring Joe Farris out here with you! Farris, an outlaw, a robber! Have yuh gone plumb out o' yore head?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" chuckled Fred Emerson, "I was jist helpin' you practice yore deception. You want folks ter believe thet I ain't haulin' nothin' but some boxes of old machinery. If them outlaws has any spies in camp like you think, they'll be danged certain I wouldn't have Farris along if I was ter haul bullion. Do yuh savvy now?"

The black-bearded hombre was John Whaney, superintendent of the Calico Mine. There had been so many robberies of gold that Whaney was getting frantic.

He had reached the conclusion that there was an outlaw spy in camp. But he had not been able to locate him. To beat the bandit menace, they had decided to use this trick of sending the bullion to the railroad, disguised as boxes of machinery.

Whaney grumbled in his beard, but finally grudgingly admitted that Fred Emerson's argument was sensible.

"What's more," continued Fred, "I figure ter haul Joe Farris back with me. So don't you go givin' him no job. Anybody seein' him on the wagon seat with me will feel plumb certain thet I ain't haulin' nothin' thet kin be stole."

"All right, you win," growled the black-bearded mine boss. "These guards with the bandages all over

'em are supposed ter be miners that was hurt in a cave-in on the hundred-and-ten-foot level. They'll sit down in the wagon bed beside the boxes of gold. Joe Farris kin ride up on the seat with you. If everything's set, I'll send in the roustabouts ter load on them boxes. But remember this, Fred Emerson, I'm holdin' you responsible. If Joe Farris gits wise an' pulls off a robbery, yo're through. I'll fire you so quick it'll make yore head swim. Now git busy."

III.

A black-snake whip cracked over the backs of the spanking four-horse team. Old Joe Farris felt the wind in his face as the lumbering vehicle took the turn on two wheels, headed along the down grade on the way to the railroad.

Howls of anguish and angry protests went up from the disguised gunmen, sitting in the wagon bed, among the boxes of gold.

"Slow down!" bellowed one of the guards. "Are yuh tryin' ter kill us? Don't forgit thet my laig's busted."

A laugh went up from the crowd of miners who were standing around on the main street of the camp, waiting to go on shift. Fred Emerson grinned at his audience, waved his bull whip at them, and slowed his broncs down to a walk. At this more leisurely pace they began the trip to town.

Fred was talkative, but old Joe seemed silent and glum. He had a feeling in his bones that something was wrong. Perched up there on the high wagon seat, he kept trying to search the pitch blackness of the tree-bordered road with his eyes.

There was no moon, and lowering black clouds made it still darker. Even Fred Emerson's keen eyes did not detect the tree that had fallen

across the road until a lead horse snorted and shied.

Pulling the bronses to a halt, young Emerson applied the brakes. The bandaged men were suddenly transformed into gunmen. Throwing off their bandages, one of them leaped to the ground while the other jabbed a Colt in Joe Farris's back.

"I got you covered, Farris," snarled the guard. "If your pard starts shootin', I'll kill you shore."

Fred Emerson was the coolest of them all. Dropping down out of the wagon, gun in hand, he stopped a moment to slap the satiny rump of a wheeler and mutter a reassuring word to the trembling animal, before he crept toward the fallen tree.

No shots came from the night blackness of the brush. There was no command of "Hands up."

"Dad blast it!" burst out Fred. "This pesky tree fell over by accident. You kin see where the trunk was all rotted. Farris, you stay on the wagon seat an' hang onto them lines. The rest of yuh help me clear the road."

To say that Joe Farris was amazed at seeing the supposedly injured miners transformed into armed guards, would be putting it mildly. It suddenly dawned on him that something mysterious was happening.

There was gold in those boxes. Disguised gunmen would not be sent along to protect cases of old machinery.

The wrinkled old ex-convict kept one hand on his gun while with the other he kept a tight rein on the fidgety horses. Fred and the two guards tugged at the fallen tree until they pulled it clear of the trail.

Old Joe, watching them keenly, could see only dark shapes flitting in the shadows. Suddenly before

his eyes, a spurt of orange-red flame split the darkness.

A man screamed. There was the sound of thrashing in the brush. The first shot was followed by a thunderous roar and rattle as hot Colts churned their streams of leaden death.

The figure of a fallen man made a black blotch in the middle of the road. The lead horses, terrified, backed into the wheelers and tried to turn around. An inspiration suddenly came to Joe Farris. He might save the gold after all. Fred's whip lay on the seat beside him.

Picking it up, he lashed at the horses until they straightened up and started to move. The gun battle had surged off the road into the brush, hiding all the fighters from view. Joe held his gun ready, but he dared not shoot as he could not tell which was his son and which might be the bandits.

The heavy wagon rumbled forward and picked up speed. Joe Farris hated to leave his son to fight it out alone, but he realized in the gloom he was helpless to do anything. If he did jump into the thick of the battle, he would not be able to tell whether he was fighting the right man or not.

Something hard jabbed against Joe's spine.

"Stop them horses!" growled a harsh voice in his ear. Even though the tone was disguised, there was something familiar about it. Farris knew he had heard it before.

He wanted to jerk around and tear into the cutthroat behind him, but his common sense told him that it would be fatal. His ears had detected the metallic click when the gun was cocked. The bandit had only to squeeze trigger to blast him to eternity.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Joe, pull-

ing hard on the reins to stop the four-horse team. "I'm tryin' to pull 'em down."

The lines were yanked roughly from Farris's hand by some one behind him.

"Lean forward an' heave on that brake handle," snarled the same familiar voice. "Quick or I'll kill you!"

There was nothing Joe could do but obey. But even as he bent forward, his thoughts were flaming with hope. In one hand he still held his Colt. The utter darkness had prevented the holdup man from seeing it. Now, as he stooped, Joe half turned, lifting his gun to fire.

Before he could cock the weapon, he felt it knocked from his hand, something hard smashed against his jaw, and he went sailing over the wagon wheel to hit the ground with a terrific crash that knocked him unconscious.

IV.

One slain guard lay face down in a patch of snakeweed, his dead fingers still gripping a big Colt six-gun. Another was piled up in a thicket of long, spiny ocotillo poles, his body riddled with bullets.

The three horses left hitched to the wagon were mixed up in a tangle of harness. One of the brones was astraddle of the wagon tongue. The big, iron-tired vehicle was still there, but its load had vanished. The boxes containing more than a hundred thousand dollars were gone.

By the pale light of early morning, Deputy Sheriff Art Kelly sat looking over the scene from the hurricane deck of his big bay. Beside him, Fred Emerson lolled weakly on the bare back of one of the wagon horses which he had cut loose and had ridden into town to get help.

Kelly and Emerson had returned

at once to the scene of the robbery, leaving the posse to follow. Fred Emerson's hair was matted, and his face and neck were streaked with crimson that had run down from what looked to be a bad wound in his scalp.

"Got to work fast," grumbled Art Kelly, "before the rest of them hombres come chargin' in here stompin' out sign. Not much chance of makin' out tracks around the wagon. Looks like somebody had drove a passell of steers through here."

The big blond, yellow-haired deputy dismounted and began walking in ever-widening circles around the rig, stooping to study the ground. Fred Emerson also got off his horse and stood waiting.

When Art Kelly came back, he seemed to see Fred's crimson-stained head for the first time. Lifting his water bag from the saddle horn, Kelly grabbed the slender, handsome, dark-haired youth and began pouring the cool fluid on his wound.

"Let that go," protested Fred, pulling back angrily. "I ain't bad hurt. Git after them bandits. That's the important thing."

"That's right," said Kelly, "that's only a scratch on your head. Did you say it was so dark you couldn't see the robber's faces?"

"It was pitch-black," groaned Fred. "They shot the guards down from the brush without showin' themselves. I stumbled and fell like I told yuh. One of 'em pounced on me an' knocked me out. But I'm sure there was only two of 'em."

"Funny, danged funny!" drawled Kelly, rubbing his chin and squinting at the sun that was just peeking over the hilltop. "Two bullion robbers come in here without a horse or a rig and carry off a hundred

thousand dollars' worth of gold, weighin' more than three hundred pounds. Huh, we'll have to look into that."

Leading his horse, Deputy Sheriff Kelly picked up a trail like a bloodhound and set off following it, with Fred tagging along. A few minutes walking, brought them out on the road in front of Joe Farris's old adobe.

At sight of the mud house, Art Kelly dropped the bridle reins, whipped out both guns and charged across the garbage-strewn yard, straight toward the door.

No shots greeted him. He kept right on going, as he hit the flimsy door. With a crash of splintering wood, he lunged into the room and dropped to his knees close to the wall.

The place was empty. Joe Farris's saddle and rigging were gone. The old jailbird had fled. Fred Emerson, leading his horse, came running up breathlessly.

"What made you do that?" he demanded. "Do you think Joe Farris is in on this?"

"He's in it up to his ears," snarled Art Kelly. "Do yuh remember I wondered how they hauled that gold away. Well, the sign's perfectly plain. They drove that wagon right around here, unloaded it, and then drove it back and left it where the holdup occurred, to throw me off the track. That bullion ain't far from here. It's either in the house or in the yard. Git busy an' help me dig up the floor."

Kelly and Emerson had finished searching the house and were poking around the yard when black-bearded John Whaney, Calico Mine boss, came up snarling and angry at the head of an armed posse.

"Yo're fired!" cried Whaney, at sight of Fred Emerson. "I told yuh

not to trust that jailbird. Yo're lookin' in the right place, Kelly," continued Whaney. "Joe Farris rode the wagon up to the mine last night with Emerson. He had a hand in this."

"Why didn't you tell me, Fred?" demanded Art Kelly, taking Emerson by the arm and drawing him aside.

"I didn't tell yuh because I don't believe Joe Farris done it," declared Fred.

"Sure," said Art Kelly grimly. "And because Joe Farris is yore own father. Why don't yuh tell the real reason?"

A look of fear crossed Fred Emerson's face. Frantically he grabbed Kelly by the arm.

"You ain't goin' to tell 'em?" he demanded. "It would ruin me and make them certain that dad's guilty. I know he didn't do it, Kelly. You won't tell, will yuh?"

"I'll see," grunted Kelly, turning away to resume his search of the burned ruins of an old woodshed.

Suddenly Art Kelly uttered a triumphant shout. He had discovered the entrance to a cellar, concealed among the ashes and charred boards of the fire-gutted shed.

The men piled down into the cellar behind Kelly, eager to see its contents. They were not disappointed. The boxes of gold, with their lids torn off, stood in one corner. What was even more incriminating were the pieces of burned cattle brands which seemed to prove that Joe Farris was really the rustler.

The mute evidence seemed to blast his claims of innocence.

"Everybody out!" bellowed Deputy Sheriff Kelly. "Git outside, all of you."

The men piled out of there as fast

as they had come down. When all were gathered in the yard, Kelly suddenly jabbed his gun into Fred Emerson's stomach and deftly disarmed the dark-haired puncher.

"Here's one of yore robbers, boys!" he shouted. "I'll tell yuh somethin' about Fred Emerson that you never knowed before. His last name ain't Emerson at all, it's Farris. Freddy is Joe Farris's son. I done some investigatin' back in his home town and found this out. We're takin' Fred into jail.

The angry crowd of gunmen stared at Fred Emerson in stunned silence. All were waiting for the denial that did not come. The young stage driver's eyes were downcast. Only his pallor and his twitching lips showed his emotions.

Abruptly the silence was split by a shout that sounded from a high ledge above them. On the rim of a cliff, a hundred feet up in the air, stood a wrinkled, bow-legged, runty old cowboy, dressed in worn and patched range clothes. He had a gun in each hand, leveled at the possemen below. It was Joe Farris.

"Kelly is lyin'," yelled Farris. "Fred's my son, all right, but he never stole that gold. He didn't even know about that cellar. I don't want to see an innocent man suffer. That's why I'm tellin' yuh. Come an' git me if you can."

Firing two shots in the air, Joe Farris ducked back out of sight, just as a volley of bullets knocked gravel from the cliff on both sides of him. Instantly the orderly posse was changed into a wild mob. Mounting their horses they dashed madly in pursuit of Joe Farris.

In a few minutes, only Deputy Sheriff Art Kelly and Fred Emerson remained on the spot.

"Well, yore dad's confession

seems to clear you, Fred," said Kelly. "You hitch up yore hoss to the wagon an' bring it over here. We'll load the gold on, while them rannies are on their wild-goose chase. Here's yore hawlegs. Put 'em on."

Fred willingly obeyed. While they sweated and tugged, lugging the heavy boxes up out of the cellar and hoisting them onto the wagon, Kelly talked confidentially to the handsome, dark-haired kid.

A great many people disliked Fred Emerson. They said he was too pretty. His dark hair was always combed slick against his pate, and he wore fancy clothes.

Art Kelly did not seem to feel that way about him. He opened up and even told Fred some of the secrets of his investigation.

"You see I know yore dad ain't workin' alone," explained Kelly. "There's a slick hombre in on this. A feller that makes regular trips to the city. Likely he's got a hotel room there and is tied up with a crooked assayer so it won't be hard to trace him. I may want to ask yore help, Fred."

Fred Emerson's face was a twisted mask of fury and hate. Art Kelly seemed not to see it. Carelessly he turned his back on Fred. To his keen ears came the sudden creak of boots and leather rigging, and the slapping of a hand against a holster.

Whirling, he ducked aside just as Emerson's gun flamed. Kelly fired but one shot. It smashed into Fred's shoulder, spinning him around. Thrown off balance, young Emerson dropped to one knee. His left-hand gun fell from nerveless fingers, but his right came up, pointing squarely at the deputy.

Wham! Art's second bullet shattered Emerson's forearm. The fight was over.

Fifteen minutes later, the posse came boiling down off the mesa with a prisoner tied on a horse in their midst. It was Joe Farris. His bronc had stepped in a prairie-dog hole and had thrown him, knocking him out. He had been captured without firing a shot.

As black-bearded John Whaney yanked Farris off his horse, a wild-eyed cowboy dropped a loop around Joe's neck.

"Everybody in favor of a hangin' bee, say 'Aye!'" shrieked the puncher.

A veritable bellow of approval went up from the mob, to which had been added men that had ridden out from town. Art Kelly could hardly make himself heard above the thunderous din.

"Wait a minute, boys! Hold up!" bellowed Kelly. "Let me tell yuh somethin', will yuh?"

At first, they paid no attention to him, but finally they quieted down.

"All right, we'll listen to yuh," said a hot-headed gunman, "but don't you try to interfere with our fun. We're hangin' Farris whether you like it or not."

"Over my dead body!" flared Art Kelly, jumping to Joe's side with both guns drawn. "Joe Farris is innocent. He never stole the gold, and he didn't rustle them cattle that I sent him to the pen for. I made a terrible mistake. I done Joe a great wrong, and now I'm goin' to right it. I'm goin' to save him from this mob or die trying! Now will yuh let me explain?"

The madness of the mob wilted before the grim determination of the

yellow-haired giant, who stood crouched there with his back to the adobe wall, holding big, blue-steel .45s out in front of him. Even John Whaney consented to listen, seeing that Art had got back the fortune in gold for him.

"Fred Emerson's the real outlaw," announced the deputy sheriff. "He's just confessed to me. Remember, we sent pore Joe Farris to the pen because we found some suspicious cattle hides only partly burned in his stove. Joe didn't burn them there. Fred done it. An' then he was too cowardly to come forward an' save his own dad. This time, Fred proved himself to be even more of a yaller dog. He deliberately planned to throw suspicion on his father, so that he would be in the clear to get away with the loot. Ain't that right, Emerson?"

White-faced and suffering from the wound in his shoulder, Fred Emerson sat propped up against a tree.

"That's right," he admitted miserably. "But I never aimed for dad to be captured. I figured he would get away an' then after I'd sold the bullion, I could find him an' take care of him. My only worry now is what's goin' to happen to him. He's too old to work. I been takin' him grub and kind of lookin' after him. He's liable to go hungry now."

"No he ain't!" cried Art Kelly, throwing an arm around old Joe Farris's shoulder. "I'm takin' care of Joe. He's comin' to live with us. An' the missus an' me are goin' to try to make up to him for what he's suffered."



Gun Talk

A "Jimmy Quick" Novelette

By Frank J. Litchfield

Author of "The Gun Boss Of Roaring Fork," etc.

CHAPTER I.

UNINVITED GUESTS.

THE owner of Rafter S stopped his loaded fork halfway to his gray-mustached mouth. His eyes widened in amazement as three hard-eyed strangers stepped into the chuck house with drawn guns.

The regular crew looked up, startled. Then their attention veered to the windows on either side. More leveled .45s and flinty faces had appeared there.

There were seven men at the chuck table. They had been working from dawn until late afternoon amid dust and smoke at the squeezer chutes, venting the brands of two thousand head of cows and young beefs. The moaning voice of

the herd in the holding pen on the flats came now as a weird overtone to the tense silence in the chuck house.

"Lift yore paws, suckers!" one of the trio in the door nodded. "Good work, boys."

John Shanley, the owner, now realized that two of his seven riders had guns in their hands, too, and were holding them on himself and his four loyal riders. This pair had been on the Rafter S pay roll only for the round-up of the breeder herd.

A gunman prodded the cook into the room from the kitchen at that moment.

"Tie 'em up," the leader spoke again. He was short and powerful. Corded muscles played beneath his shirt as he moved. "Chunk"

Fleener, outlaw and killer, never had boasted of his beauty. Nobody ever had twitted him about it either—and lived. Now he glanced from a window at the herd, and leered triumphantly.

"The buyer is due in the mornin', hey, Ape?" he addressed one of the treacherous pair of cowboys who was swart and adorned with a bullet pucker on his cheek. "An' bringin' hard cash?"

"Yeah!" "Ape" grinned. "Shanley is one of them old roosters that won't take a check. He likes his dinero hard an' yaller."

Shanley and his four loyal punchers suddenly realized what was in the wind.

They had all been bound hand and foot by Fleener's seven ruffians. But "Moose" Davis, a giant in size and strength, went into a frenzy of desperate struggle against his bonds. Veins stood out on his head, and his massive neck bulged.

Pop! The unbelievable happened. The giant puncher had broken the rawhide thongs and was free and raging like a demon.

"Git him!" Chunk Fleener screeched, propelling his bulk at the big man.

The chuck house became filled with fighting, swearing men as the outlaws piled upon the single puncher. But Moose Davis was hard to stop. An outlaw reeled back, spitting out teeth. Another dropped with a gasp of agony, clutching his stomach.

Fleener had one of Davis's arms, but it was all he could do to hold it.

"Blinky!" Fleener gasped at a smaller ruffian who was dancing about uselessly. "Sandbag him, dang it! Don't—stand there—like a—fool!"

The outlaws evidently had come prepared for just such resistance.

"Blinky" darted to the door, reached out and came back with a wickedly weighted leather sling.

He circled about for an opening, then found it, and the sandbag whirled down on the battling puncher's head with a soggy, sickening *plop*. Instantly Davis sagged down on his face, limp as death.

Shanley and the other three punchers were straining like madmen at their bonds, their faces white as they saw the fate of their comrade. Chunk Fleener arose panting, his face suddenly venomous.

"Not a bad idea," he growled hoarsely. "Give me that little sleepin' sack, Blinky. These hombres are askin' for it, an' they're goin' tuh git it."

"Yuh sneakin'——" Shanley began.

Then he pitched down too, dropped by a smash from the weighted weapon.

Like a demon Fleener floored the other three, punchers and the cook, a vicious leer of enjoyment on his face. Then he stepped back, the insane glow beginning to die in his eyes.

"They won't feel much like escapin' for a while now," he rasped. "We should have done that in the first place, instead of bein' soft enough tuh just tie 'em up."

He prodded the six limp bodies with a contemptuous boot. John Shanley and his punchers were scarcely breathing. It would be many hours before any of them recovered consciousness.

Fleener was plainly proud of his work. He regarded this scheme as the slickest thing he had ever evolved.

About three weeks before he and his outlaws had held up a stage about three hundred miles north, in the Panhandle. Results had been

disappointing, the thin mail sack yielding only a few dollars.

However Fleener had happened to read one letter from a Wyoming rancher who signed himself "Powder" Bolton. It was addressed to John Shanley, of Chuckaluck, Texas, and revealed that Bolton was heading south with a trail crew to take delivery of a breeder herd from Shanley's Rafter S.

It was evident from the letter that Bolton and Shanley were total strangers. The sum of forty thousand dollars in gold had been mentioned as payment.

Fleener had thought it over, then remailed the letter to John Shanley. A week later Ape, and a second member of Fleener's bunch known as "Con," had applied for riding jobs at the Rafter S, which was in need of extra hands for the work of gathering the herd.

And now Fleener was ready to make that stage robbery pay big dividends, after all. With Ape and Con acting as spies, Fleener had kept in touch with the situation.

The Wyoming buyer and his trail crew had sent word by mail that they would be on hand on the following day to accept delivery. And Fleener had stepped in at what he admitted was the right moment.

The herd was ready. All the work was done. There would be nothing to do except take the forty thousand and melt away into the mountains. It would be a day, perhaps longer, before pursuit could be organized.

"Git a wagon, an' we'll cart away the dead timber," he boomed. "That line shack up in the canyon is all right, Ape. You go with the wagon, but come right back afterwards. Con, you an' Tombstone drag along too, an' you two boys better stay up there with these boobs. Take the

sleepin' sack along, in case they wake up. Don't be afeared tuh use it. If one of them hombres ever gits loose, we might find ourselves in plenty o' trouble. We'll pick you up on the way out with the dinero."

A team was hitched to a spring wagon and the unconscious men piled in like cordwood. They were covered with a dusty tarp that was stuffed in around the sides and tail.

The sun was setting as the wagon lurched away, heading for Whitewater Canyon, which cut into the Hondo Range five miles to the northwest. The chinless man handled the reins, with Ape and "Tombstone" leading the way astride saddle mounts.

Dusk was deepening as the team worried the wagon up the rocky, wheel-track road in the canyon. Whitewater Creek, a swift, dangerous stream, boiled and foamed to the left of the trail as they delved deeper into the mountain.

"Don't let 'em lag," Ape rasped. "It's gittin' dark an' we got that ford tuh cross. It gits blacker than the ace o' spades in this canyon after night——"

His voice broke off abruptly. A rider had suddenly come in view, a hundred yards ahead. He was vague and indistinct in the dusk, and Ape's hands instinctively dropped to his guns. Tombstone uttered an oath of dismay, and Con suddenly pulled up the team.

They waited grimly, ready for murder, if the need came.

CHAPTER II.

AMBUSH AT THE FORD.

THE stranger came steadily nearer. Then the three relaxed a trifle as they peered at him. His round, freckled face bore a vacant, sleepy grin. An expensive hat, glaringly

new, and of a sky-blue hue that struck the eye even in this failing light, was perched on the back of a mop of sunburned red hair.

The new hat was in violent contrast to his faded shirt, patched Levis, and wrinkled boots. He rode a good horse, a slim-barreled, deep-chested strawberry roan.

They now noted that his rather rotund waist supported cartridge belts from which sagged a pair of black-handled guns.

"Some fool kid, tryin' tuh act wolfy," Tombstone whispered from a corner of his mouth. "He ain't dangerous. Don't beef him unless he gits suspicious."

The stranger stopped his horse and hipped over tiredly to a new position. His round face seemed to split in a prodigious yawn.

"Howdy!" he gulped with an effort. "This is what I call luck right from the jack, gents. I'm headin' for a town called Chuckaluck. Figured on cuttin' down distance by crossin' the mountains. But I got tuh wanderin' around an' finally hit this dogtrot road which wanders plenty more. I shore hope yuh tell me I'm pointed right."

His long arms spread in a mighty stretch. The three shot derisive glances at each other. Ape summoned a smirk that he fondly believed was a friendly smile.

"Yeah," he said. "Yuh'll clear the canyon about two miles down. The trail is a mile out on the bench. Head north. It's another ten miles tuh Chuckaluck."

"Thanks!" the redhead said drowsily. "I shore hope they got good beds in that town. I aim to slumber right heavy to-night."

Ape realized some explanation of their presence in this gloomy canyon at dusk was necessary. "We're cartin' some chuck up tuh a line

camp above," he volunteered. "I reckon yuh passed the shack a couple miles back."

The redhead nodded sleepily, and his heavy blue eyes wandered to the wagon. He moved suddenly in the saddle. If it had not been so dark they might have seen a startled expression momentarily wipe out the drowsiness on his face.

Instantly, however, he broke into another cavernous yawn that ended in a gulp. Inwardly his pulse had started to drum.

Unnoticed by the three, a rear corner of the tarp had been jarred loose on the rough road. The light breeze had belied it slightly.

In the fading light, the redhead had caught a brief glimpse of a sinister row of limp, booted feet—many of them. The feet of five or six men, slanting drunkenly as if in death!

He mumbled another word of thanks, kneed the roan and rode on. He did not glance back.

The three looked at each other with relief. "Thet hombre didn't know how close he come tuh droppin' into a real sleep," Ape rasped. "Waal, let's git goin'."

The team bent to the task again. Then Tombstone happened to glance back at the load. He uttered a gasp of dismay.

"Fer Pete's sake!" he gurgled. "Look! The tarp is loose."

All three broke into startled profanity. The wind was again lifting the canvas and exposing the legs of the limp men.

"Say!" Ape cried, aghast. "Do yuh reckon that sleepy-headed mutt saw that?"

"He couldn't have missed it if the tarp was kicked back as he passed the wagon," Con shrilled nervously.

"Come on!" Tombstone said savagely, wheeling his horse. "We got tuh make sure he won't never talk."

"Wait a minute," Ape objected. "Maybe he didn't see it. An' if he did, he'll likely try tuh trail us. We'll move on aways then watch our back trail for a while. If he don't show up, it'll be a cinch that he ain't wise."

"Good idea," Tombstone agreed.

They pushed on rapidly, and soon came to a ford. The water ran swift, smooth, and hub-deep over a gravel bar here. Twenty yards below, it leaped with a roar over the lip of a boulder-studded rapids.

It was a dangerous ford. The current threatened to sweep the wagon away, but the two riders gave aid to the team with their lariats, and it was finally dragged lurchingly to the far bank.

Con drove it onward a short distance, but Tombstone and Ape crept back to the ford, and settled down among the willows, .45s in their hands. It was an ideal spot for an ambush.

Five minutes dragged along. Then Tombstone nudged his comrade. A rider was coming. They peered through the gloom and saw only a vague form.

The horse was entering the water, and as it cleared the shadow of the brush, made sure of his identity. The rider was the red-headed, sleepy-faced stranger.

In silence they waited until he had pushed his horse midway of the hundred-yard crossing. Then they leaped to their feet. Their guns roared savagely.

CHAPTER III.

EASY TO DIE.

WITH the startling vision of that row of limp feet still vivid in his mind, the redhead pushed his horse around a few curves in the dim trail, then halted it. Now he

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allowed his shocked emotions full play.

"A load o' dead men, or my name ain't Jimmy Quick," he muttered dazedly, a clammy chill in his veins.

Faintly above the rumble of the rapids in the canyon bottom he heard the wagon resume its rattling progress up the trail.

"It don't seem like I'll get much sleep to-night after all," he grumbled to himself.

He waited a few minutes, and then wheeled Socks, his strawberry roan. There was a ford above, and he needed a horse under him to cross it.

"I'll leave yuh on the other side, an' amble along on foot," he told the horse. "I'll make less noise than you. An' they can't be goin' far. It'll be too dark for a wagon on that trail before long."

Jimmy Quick's nerves were taut as he reached the ford, and stared dubiously at the dark brush across the oily, rushing surface.

He peered for an instant, but finally shrugged, and urged Socks into the water. The current spurted powerfully about the roan's legs.

He drew up the stirrups as the horse approached mid-stream where the water deepened. The animal was leaning against the force of the stream.

Then Jimmy uttered a gasp of horror, and made a frantic grab for his guns. But his position was awkward.

Crash! A .45 thundered at him, the flash painting the ford with a brief dab of red.

Jimmy felt a heavy blow on his side. It numbed him instantly, knocked the breath from him, and lifted him bodily from the saddle.

Splash! The rushing water closed over him.

More bullets whipped down on the spot in the next instant.

An elbow lifted from the surface a few yards below. Ape and Tombstone advanced ankle-deep into the water, and triggered bullets at the spot, but it vanished before they could aim accurately.

They waited for another shot. But they caught no more glimpses of their quarry.

Ape nodded and slowly sheathed his guns. "We kin tally off that nosey cuss," he rasped. "I put that first slug square in his belly. He's gone down the rapids. He likely never will be found. An' that's a long time."

They returned to their horses. "All set, Con," Ape told the driver with a leer. "He *was* trailin' us. We salted him."

The wagon resumed its progress. They reached the line shack in total darkness, and methodically began lifting the limp six men from the wagon.

They dragged them into the shack. Then Ape mounted again and headed down the dark trail to return to the Rafter S.

Whitewater Rapids boomed in savage triumph. A dripping head, topped with sunburned hair, rose from a seething roil of white water fifty yards below the brink of the rapids. Then it was dragged under again by the swift current.

It appeared farther on. Freckled hands churned in a desperate attempt to stay afloat, but once more the tumbling torrent closed over Jimmy Quick.

Again he was shot to the surface by powerful forces, but now his arms lifted only feebly. His mouth was open and gasping frantically for air. He sailed down a stretch of smooth, dark water at racehorse

speed, missed a foam-splashed boulder by inches, and was then caught by a whirling eddy that swept him around in a dizzy circle.

The redhead was numb from the waist down. He believed he had a bullet in his body. Still he fought for life. But he was nearing the end of his strength.

Then something clammy brushed his head. The eddy had carried him away before his reeling senses comprehended that it was a drooping aspen branch.

He had missed his one chance for life. It was agony to fight on. His lungs burned, and his chest seemed caught in giant, compressing hands.

It would be so easy to relax and sink beneath the surface. It was torture to continue the struggle. Still he fought to stay afloat.

Then wet leaves brushed him again. The eddy had once more spun him within reach of life. One freckled hand shot up desperately. That move sank his head beneath the surface, and he gulped water instead of air. But his clawing hand reached a branch. His fingers wound about it in an unbreakable grip.

After a time he gained strength enough to work nearer the rocky shore. He finally dragged himself clear of the water, and lay inert on a rock ledge, for five minutes. At last he stirred. Then he began fearfully exploring his body for the wound.

CHAPTER IV.

BACK FROM THE DEAD.

JIMMY uttered a sudden mighty sigh of relief. There was a painful bruise on his right side. But no bullet hole. The numbness was beginning to leave his legs now, also.

"That first slug must have struck square on the handle of my right

gun, an' rammed it intuh my side," he surmised. "It felt like a mule had walloped me. But it was a life-saver. It knocked me into the water before they had time tuh sink any more lead in me."

He climbed the steep, rocky flank, risking a slip in the darkness that would send him plunging back into the rapids. He finally reached better going, and pushed his way through a tangle of aspens and berry brush for two hundred yards until he came to the ford where he had been ambushed. He approached it cautiously, for he was on the side where the killers had waited for him.

But they were gone now, he decided after five minutes of tense listening and peering. It was too dark to think of cutting their trail, and his matches were soaked and useless. But there was only one direction a wagon could have gone, and that was up the wagon road.

He sat down and emptied water from his boots, while he took stock of his situation. Both of his guns were at the bottom of the rapids. His new, blue hat was gone too. And his horse.

His lips set in a thin line as he thought of Socks. Likely the killers had put a bullet in Socks, and the animal had been swept down the rapids too.

He wondered if this weird affair had any connection with the mission that had brought him into the Hondo country. It didn't seem reasonable.

Detailed as a special United States marshal, the redhead had been ordered to take up the trail of a masked band of outlaws who had robbed a stage in the Panhandle, three hundred miles to the north. Nothing of much value had been on the stage, but it was a mail robbery,

and interference with the mail was not passed over lightly.

The identity of the outlaws was unknown. There were at least eight in the bunch, however, and the redhead had followed their trail for two hundred miles southward. Then a rain had wiped it out.

He had continued on south, hoping to pick it up again. But he had circled the country west of the Hondo Range and nearly to the New Mexico line without result, and had been heading back on a final chance that they might have swung down into this country.

Jimmy pulled on his boots, a hard task in their soaked condition, then began working carefully up the trail through the darkness. It was plenty dark down in this gloomy canyon. He could hardly see the ground at his feet.

"They couldn't have traveled much farther," he reasoned grimly. "Not unless they wanted tuh wreck that wagon."

He knew that his chances would be mighty slim if they heard him. And it was difficult to move in entire silence. Brush entangled him before he saw it. Now and then he scraped boulders and rocks that intruded unobserved.

As the roar of the rapids faded out behind him, every sound he made seemed to echo fearfully loud in the black stillness.

Suddenly he halted, then drew into the shelter of brush at the side of the road. He could hear a rider coming down the dark trail.

Beyond a doubt it was one of the three who had tried to murder him. The redhead went taut as wire, the hope flaring in his mind that he would get a chance to tackle this lone man. Then he would have guns and a horse at his command again.

But luck did not run that way.

The darkness was impenetrable. The horse and rider came up and passed near at hand, but they were only a vague blob, and the redhead was unable to judge their exact position.

To spring blindly and miss would be fatal. He would be shot down before he could right his error. With bitter disappointment, he restrained himself.

The rider, phantomlike, passed on down the trail, and was soon out of hearing.

After a moment, Jimmy began pushing ahead again in the opposite direction.

"That means the wagon ain't far above," he reflected. "An' there's only two of 'em tuh deal with now. They must have brought that load of bodies up here tuh bury 'em."

Soon he halted abruptly again, straining his ears. Then he made sure that he had heard the stamping of idle horses not far ahead. He pushed on with infinite caution, and now he made no sound, for he chose each step carefully.

Finally he saw faint, yellow light ahead.

"The line shack," he breathed. "They said they was headin' for it. They told the truth that far, anyway."

He circled the shack carefully. It stood in a little grass flat in the canyon. Its crooked windows on either side, had been screened with canvas, but threads of light seeped out at the corners.

A rope corral had been made for the horses beyond the shack. He crept nearer, and his heart suddenly bounded. A spear of light from a window had caught the reddish gleam of a sorrel hide in the corral.

Socks! They had rounded up Jimmy's horse and brought it to the shack.

The spring wagon stood near by.

He crept to it and looked in. The wagon was empty.

"They haven't had time tuh dig any grave," he assured himself silently. "The bodies must have been taken intuh the shack."

That added to the weird aspect of the affair. He began to wonder if he was dealing with madmen.

He suddenly sank flat on the ground. The door of the shack had opened. It was the mustached man, whom his comrades called "Tombstone." He carried a smoky lantern and an empty tin pail. He headed for the creek to get water. There was wood smoke in the air. A meal was being prepared in the shack.

Jimmy waited until the bobbing lantern had rounded among the willows alongside the stream two hundred feet away. Then he moved on hands and knees in that direction and again sank down.

Tombstone was already returning, water sloshing from the pail. The bobbing circle of light touched Jimmy. But Tombstone was not anticipating danger. He did not look down.

CHAPTER V.

SILENT MEN.

JIMMY arose like a shadow as the paunchy outlaw passed him. A freckled fist drove in with crushing power.

Whap! It was a low, solid sound.

Tombstone began to cave slowly at the knees. Jimmy seized the lantern and pail from his hands before the stunned killer fell to the ground.

In another moment, the redhead felt more fully dressed. He had a brace of guns belted to him once more, and the loops were well filled with cartridges.

The guns were .45s. Not the well-balanced and smooth-handling

weapons that lay lost forever in the rapids, but guns. And the redhead wasn't particular, at that moment.

The paunchy outlaw was safe for many minutes. Jimmy paused a second, listening for any sign of alarm in the shack. But the slight sounds evidently had not carried that far.

So, carrying the lantern in one hand and a gun in the other he walked to the shack, his boots crunching boldly, and stepped in.

Con, the chinless man, who had been driving the spring wagon, was busy lighting a fire in the warped sheet-iron stove. He did not look up immediately, believing that it was Tombstone back with the water.

Jimmy's eyes moved around. Again he felt that clammy chill as he took in the limp forms that lay lined up in a silent row against the west wall. They occupied a big part of the floor space.

Then the chinless man looked up! His eyes bugged wide in sudden terror. A gibber of fear came from his thin throat.

He believed he was face to face with a ghost. Jimmy's sodden clothes and water-plastered hair strengthened the illusion.

With a hoarse screech, the chinless man leaped for a window, intending to dive bodily into the darkness. But Jimmy descended on him like an avalanche.

Con wriggled from the redhead's grasp with insane strength. Now he realized that he was dealing with a man of flesh and bone, and he clawed for his gun.

Jimmy brought the barrel of his .45 down with a thud, and the fight was over. Con sagged down, a welt puffing up on his scalp. He would be out considerably longer than the man Jimmy had left lying outside.

The redhead went out and dragged the first dazed victim into the shack. He looked about for a rope to tie them. Then he saw his own saddle, piled with another hull in a corner. He opened the saddle pocket, and with satisfaction found his two sets of handcuffs still there.

He handcuffed the two men, then to make sure they would stay in place, he tied them with a lariat to the uprights of the bunk, mooring their ankles securely.

Now he turned his attention to the silent forms. He knelt beside the one who seemed to be the oldest. He had gray hair and his longhorn mustache carried the tinge of age also. He was a rawboned, saddle-hardened old-timer with the marks of a lifetime on the range plain upon him.

Suddenly Jimmy peered closer. He heaved a mighty sigh of relief. He discovered that the gray-haired man was breathing!

His glance shifted to the others. All were alive, too. It was apparent only at close range, for their lungs were working weakly. Then Jimmy looked close at their heads and the explanation was clear.

"Slugged!" he gritted. "Sand-bagged, I reckon."

He felt better, for he had a horror of death, even though it had been his fate to encounter it often, and to deal it out on occasions. But he soon realized that this made the thing more puzzling than ever.

Their clothes and rope-hardened hands convinced him that the gray-mustached man, and four others were punchers who had seen recent hard service in the saddle.

The faint tang of burned hair and charcoal fumes clung to their clothing, unmistakable evidence that these waddies had been within range of branding fires and irons within

the last few hours. The sixth hombre's clothes were spotted with grease and smudged by flour. A cook, beyond a doubt.

"They look like honest rannies," he decided. "An' these other jaspers have the polecat sign stickin' out all over 'em."

He brought a pail of water and sloshed it over the pair. Tombstone was first to stir and finally sit up. Gradually his dull eyes cleared. They widened in consternation as they fixed on the redhead. Incredulity was there at first. Fear succeeded it.

Jimmy fired questions at him, but Tombstone remained stubbornly silent. He refused to say a word. Con, the chinless man, revived soon, but he took his cue from his comrade, and also held his tongue in moody defiance. They merely glared at Jimmy with poisonous hatred and resentment.

The redhead finally saw that they could not be trapped into talking, so he gave it up. He yawned widely, and his face now had resumed the round drowsiness that had deluded them at their first meeting.

He examined the six unconscious men. The redhead had seen many such victims in the past, and he feared that they were not likely to regain consciousness for hours—perhaps a day.

He searched the gray-haired man whom he instinctively picked as their leader. He found only a little book, on which was scrawled cattle tally figures for page after page. A name was on the inside of the front cover.

"John Shanley, o' Chuckaluck, Texas," Jimmy muttered aloud. "That's the town I was slantin' for when I got lost."

It might be the gray-haired man's name, then again it might be only

some notation he had made. At any rate, the name of the town was of no great help. All ranches in the Hondo range probably received mail at that post office.

Jimmy rebuilt the fire and finished the meal the chinless man had started. The prisoners had no appetite and refused food with snarls.

Then the redhead found blankets and made himself comfortable in a corner. "I'm goin' tuh cut me off a chunk of slumber," he yawned. "Make yoreselves as comfortable as yuh can, gents."

With his amazing ability at dropping asleep at times when most men would be too nerve-strung to think of it, he began snoring almost immediately.

The pair at once began sawing at their bonds. After a time they realized that the redhead's drowsy eyes were open and watching them.

"Take it easy!" Jimmy yawned. "How do yuh reckon I can get any rest with you hombres rustlin' them handcuffs around?"

Tombstone broke his long silence with profanity. He had already discovered that there was no hope of escaping. He suddenly went silent, awe in his face. For Jimmy Quick's head had dropped back, and he was asleep already.

CHAPTER VI.

SUDDEN GUNS!

AT dawn Jimmy awakened and hopefully examined the six. But he shook his head in disappointment.

"They shore got a jolt," he muttered. "They're good for hours yet."

He cooked a quick breakfast, and his sullen prisoners wolfed some in silence. Then Jimmy tried on Tombstone's black hat. It fitted fairly well. He picked up his saddle

gear, and went out without a word, leaving the pair puzzled and fearful.

He topped off Socks, and headed down the trail, cutting the sign of the third rider who had gone down after dark. Three miles down, the canyon fanned out into broad benches, which dropped away into the sweep of the Hondo Range.

About five miles to the southeast he sighted a ranch. A trail led from it, passing up the bench a mile away and continuing northward, evidently to Chuckaluck. The hoofmarks of the rider he was tracking, pointed toward the trail, veering slightly south.

"Maybe he was headin' for that ranch, maybe not," the redhead muttered, staring speculatively as he pushed Socks ahead.

There was a park of live oak flanking the trail at the point where he reached it. He emerged from behind the thick, low trees, and there before him was a buckboard with many bronzed riders accompanying it. Soft dust and the breeze had hid their approach.

They were startled. Two chap-clad men who were in advance of the others jerked back their horses, and then went for their six-guns.

But they did not draw. Magically they found themselves already covered, and the blue eyes that sighted over the lean barrels were grim and hard, with a spark of death in them.

The group of riders near the wagon paused. Their two comrades were in the line of fire.

Then the driver of the buckboard, who wore cowboots and a leather vest, and had a shotgun at his feet gave a low word:

"Steady!" he said. "It's only a young fella. An' maybe he's alone."

"Well," Jimmy said, and his eyes had suddenly grown drowsy again,

though he did not lower his guns. "You boys shore acted nervous. I figured it was better tuh reach first an' be friends afterwards if yuh want it that way."

The others had grouped alertly near the buckboard, and their eyes were keening the brush. They seemed to expect more riders.

"I ain't got any army hid on me anywhere," Jimmy yawned. "You can relax, cowboys. I'm not stick-in' yuh up."

They looked at one another and began to grin sheepishly. The man in the buckboard laughed.

"You must be one of the Rafter S boys," he said with relief in his voice. "We're a leetle spooky, all right. I reckon yuh know why. Did Shanley send yuh to meet us?"

Jimmy spread his arms in a muscle-cracking stretch. That gave him time to think. Shanley! The name he had found in the gray-haired man's notebook. He resolved to play out this string. These hombres certainly acted suspicious.

"Nope," he denied. "I'm a stranger here. I lost my bearin's last night. But I figure on hittin' the Rafter S. There might be work for me there."

He watched them from drooping lids, anticipating some hostile reaction. But there was none.

"Yuh might as well trail along with us," was the offer. "My name is Bolton. We're from Wyomin' and strangers, also. The Rafter S can't be but five miles more, if they give us straight directions in Chuckaluck last night."

The redhead rode with them. If they had knowledge of the six slugged men there was no hint of it in their demeanor. Yet there was a nervous alertness about them that kept his suspicions alive.

Their lingo and peculiarities in

their saddle rigs convinced him that they really were from Wyoming. All of them were heavily armed, too.

Soon the ranch came in view. Jimmy curiously eyed the crowded cattle corral. Then his attention shifted to the five men who had appeared from the log ranch house and bunk shed. They waved their hats, and Bolton's buckboard led the way in a final gallop to meet them.

Bolton alighted and looked around. "Which of you is John Shanley?" he asked.

Jimmy tensely awaited the answer. He studied the five Rafter S men. They too were heavily armed, and he didn't like their faces.

They were too hard of eye. There seemed to be a furtive, animallike alertness about them, and they stood grouped together, as if anticipating trouble.

The truth was that Chunk Fleener and his outlaws were waiting to see if any of these riders knew them. Recognition would have meant instant gun play. But none of the Wyoming riders ever had laid eyes on them before, and that crisis passed.

"I'm Shanley," Fleener said, stepping forward. "An' yo're Powder Bolton, I reckon. The herd is ready. We vented 'em yesterday. The critters are yores as soon as yuh plank down the dinero."

"I'll be glad to get it offn my hands," Bolton said. "It's been worryin' us ever since we left Cheyenne. Forty thousand in gold is rich bait for human buzzards. But nobody said boo to us. It's right here in the buckboard."

Jimmy tried to yawn. But for once he failed dismally. Forty thousand in gold! That explained plenty instantly. No wonder Bolton

and his punchers had been so ready to go to the gun.

"Turn yore horses intuh the cavvy an' have some breakfast," Fleener was rumbling, rubbing his big hands together. "Then we'll make the tally, an' close the deal."

"That sounds appealin'," Bolton nodded. "We pulled out of Chuckaluck before any beaneries was open. We're in a fence-bustin' hurry to start 'em north. We aim to get 'em located an' feelin' at home on their new range before snow flies. An' it's gettin' late in the season."

The hard-faced outlaws had entirely relaxed. They believed it was plain sailing now.

Jimmy was already suspecting the truth. Still, he might be wrong. This bearlike hombre might really be John Shanley. The redhead as yet had no positive proof that this sale of the breeder herd had any connection with the six dazed punchers. But he decided to quietly talk to Bolton, and then call for a show-down.

But he did not get a chance as they turned their horses into the corral. With the Wyoming outfit he was walking toward the rear door of the ranch house when an hombre who had not previously appeared, stepped from the bunk shed.

This was Ape, who had stayed under cover, with guns trained on Bolton and his crew as a safety measure. He had not previously noticed Jimmy, who had been staying well in the background.

Now he saw him. Ape was brought up dead in his tracks, his beady eyes flaring in startled dismay.

In that flashing instant as they stared at each other, Jimmy realized that this was clinching proof. The whole mystery was solved.

Then, with an oath, Ape went for his .45s. He was fast. He flipped them free with a sweep of his hands. They rose.

Wham! Jimmy Quick's freckled fist spouted twin streaks of fire. Sudden death had leaped upon the scene before any but these two knew that it was brewing.

Ape went reeling sickly back, doubling at the middle, his arms flailing in agony. Then he fell, twisted slowly on his face and lay still forever. His guns had not even been fired.

CHAPTER VII.

FLEENER THINKS FAST.

STARTLED faces jerked around and stared appalled at the red-head. He moved quickly aside, and placed his back to the log wall of the ranch house, near the rear door. Amazingly a ghost of a yawn was already forming on his mouth.

Chunk Fleener came out of his daze with a growl of rage, and his big hands streaked to his holsters.

"Steady!" Jimmy said without lifting his voice.

His guns swung to cover Fleener. The outlaw leader crouched, but halted his draw. His face was working. His four followers stood there awaiting his lead.

Jimmy noted that the five of them had turned partly so that they had Bolton and his Wyoming riders in view. But Bolton's outfit was standing clear, puzzled and bewildered.

Fleener's eyes bored into Jimmy Quick. Then sudden understanding dawned. Ape had told him about the sleepy hombre they had gunned at the ford in Whitewater Canyon. Fleener's eyes narrowed savagely.

"What was the idea?" he growled.

"That hombre done me dirt once," Jimmy remarked.

Bolton spoke up. "Your puncher reached first, Shanley. I saw it start. They seemed to recognize each other. This red-headed stranger was just naturally too rapid for your rider."

Fleener weighed that statement, with a spark of relief in his eyes. Then he said: "Stranger, yuh say? Ain't he one o' your outfit, Bolton?"

"Nope. We met him on the trail five miles back. He allowed he was headin' tuh yore spread."

Fleener had a crafty mind, and it was working at full speed. He knew that he was almost in a trap. But it appeared that Bolton was still in ignorance of the situation. Evidently the redhead had said nothing to him about the slugged men.

"Bolton, did yuh ever see Chunk Fleener, the outlaw?" Fleener asked abruptly.

Jimmy had been on the point of telling his story, but he waited, wondering what was coming.

"Chunk Fleener?" Bolton exclaimed, puzzled. "No. I've heard o' the skunk, though. He killed a pard of mine in a bank stick-up at Laramie a couple years ago."

"Waal, yuh've seen him now," the crafty outlaw boomed exultantly. He extended a thick, heavy finger accusingly at Jimmy Quick. "That's Chunk Fleener, the outlaw!" he yelled.

It came like a thunderbolt, startling Jimmy to his marrow. Instantly he comprehended that the heavy man was Chunk Fleener himself. But the outlaw had smartly turned the play in another direction.

Jimmy started a denial. But he was overwhelmed by a whirlwind of action.

"The devil yuh say," "Powder"

Bolton roared. Then: "I've swore tuh gun that skunk fer what he did in Laramie. Blast him, boys!"

Bolton was going for his guns. So were his men. And the triumphant outlaws were drawing also.

Bram! Bang! Once more Jimmy's six-guns roared thunderously.

Bolton's hat was lifted from his head. Fleener's sombrero also went flying.

"Hold it!" Jimmy gritted. "I'll drill the first man——"

He did not finish it. There wasn't time. His demonstration of sharp-shooting had given all of them a moment's pause. But their numbers were too great to be held for long by a single opponent. In the next instant, Jimmy could see that the Wyoming punchers were going to draw, anyway.

The redhead leaped to the rear door of the ranch house, jerked it open and popped in. A hurricane of lead beat upon it as he slammed it. But he had moved too fast for them.

Jimmy pounded his boots loudly on the floor.

"He's headin' out the front way," Fleener's deep voice boomed. "Blast him when he comes out."

There was a rush to the front. Jimmy instantly emerged from the rear door. The coast was momentarily clear. He darted around the bunk shed, and headed for the cavvy yard. The bunk shed hid him until he was twenty yards from the gate.

He glanced over his shoulder as he emerged in the clear, his short legs pumping at full speed. The two crews were milling at the far corner of the ranch house.

Angry yells arose. They had sighted him. Guns began to bark, but the range was two hundred yards. Bullets whined past, and kicked dust.

Jimmy set his boots and came to

a quick stop at the cavvy gate. His arms swept down the bars with a single thrust. Then he raced in among the two score of animals, which had started to mill wildly.

The shooting died as he gained shelter among the horses.

"Socks!" Jimmy yelled desperately, dodging the hoofs of rearing horses.

The thunder of hoofs changed in tempo and settled to a drumming roar. The cavvy was beginning to pour through the opened gate.

Then a reddish hide loomed through the dust. It was Socks. With a bound Jimmy landed astride.

A river of horseflesh was pouring out of the corral. The wind carried a screen of dust down upon the yelling outlaws and punchers as they came charging from the house.

Their oaths came faintly to Jimmy. But they were blocked off by the flood of horses which were heading for the open range, the scent of freedom in their nostrils.

Socks had been trained to answer the knee. Jimmy stretched flat against the roan's neck as they swept through the gate. Then he swung the animal westward, keeping the other horses between him and the furious men.

Socks ate up distance in a hurry. They were beyond six-gun range when the punchers and outlaws gained sight of them again as the dust blew away. Jimmy saw some racing to the houses for rifles.

He veered Socks for the creek timber which was slightly to the south. A bullet twanged the air over them before they reached it, and half a dozen more buzzed around them as the horse burst through the first line of brush. More metal searched savagely for them, but Jimmy had swerved the horse. Soon the futile firing ceased.

CHAPTER VIII.

JIMMY RETURNS.

JIMMY let Socks run for another quarter of a mile, then halted, dismounted and worked to the edge of the creek bottom. There was no pursuit. He could see the baffled men spreading out over the flat north of the ranch lariats in their hands. The liberated horses were separating now, and some beginning to graze, but warily moving away from the angry humans.

There was not a saddle mount left in the cavy, and Jimmy knew from past, humiliating experience that it was no easy task to lure a cow pony within reach of a rope on the open range.

Though he had escaped, the red-head was utterly disgusted with himself. "If it ain't enough tuh take the stretch out of yore pink gal-luses!" he groaned. "I let that box-headed outlaw run a sandy on me, just when I figured I was one smart hombre. Now, I've got Bolton's outfit on the prod against me. They'll try tuh drill me, the minute I come in sight. I won't ever get a chance tuh tell Bolton that this deal is wringin' wet."

There was no doubt in Jimmy's mind now but that the gray-haired man was really John Shanley. Somehow Fleener's bunch had contrived to capture Shanley and his entire crew, and get them out of the way while the outlaws posed in their places, and accepted the payment for the herd. It certainly was a slick scheme.

Jimmy bitterly regretted his failure to tell Bolton about the men in the line shack. But he was compelled to justify his caution. The Wyoming crew certainly had acted suspicious.

Well, his opportunity had slipped

by. He had snarled the thing plenty, and it was going to take drastic action to untangle it.

The thirteen men had now surrounded a horse a mile out on the range. The animal tried to break through, but two loops stopped it. Soon a puncher was astride. After that it did not take long to bring the remainder of the remuda back into the corral.

Jimmy did not believe they would attempt to trail him. Delivery of the herd was more important at that moment. Bolton was anxious to start the cattle north, and Fleener would be inwardly panting to get his hands on the gold.

"Fleener likely figures I'm slant-in' for town tuh get help," Jimmy reasoned. "That's what anybody with sense would do."

But it would be evening before fighting men could be brought back from town. By that time the outlaws would be in the wilds of the Hondo Mountains, and probably scattering with the gold in their possession.

There was no pursuit. Both outfits had given up the thought of breakfast, too. They were topping off cow horses. Soon the herd was being strung out of the holding pen, and filing down a rope chute, with Fleener and Bolton keeping tally.

Jimmy now noticed that two of the Wyoming punchers were missing. There were only eleven riders in sight.

Suddenly Jimmy Quick returned, mounted Socks, and pushed rapidly down through the timber, heading toward the ranch. He passed near enough to hear the yells of the punchers as they worked the herd, but the brush hid him.

A short distance farther on, the creek curved slightly to the north.

Again the redhead left the horse, and crept to the edge of the brush.

He was facing the east side of the ranch house. There was a two-hundred-yard meadow, waving with fox-tails to cover him. He advanced into the high grass on hands and knees, moving rapidly.

"I ought tuh let Bolton lose his money, dern him!" the redhead ruminated. "It would teach him not to be so immediate. If he hadn't sided in with Fleener so rapid, I'd have had this whole ball of yarn unwound by this time."

He reached the log wall, and crouched below a room window. It was closed. He could hear nothing, so he chanced a brief, one-eye glimpse.

The two Wyoming punchers were in the room, their feet on the big, oak center table, cigarettes dangling in their lips.

On the table was a leather satchel.

Jimmy crouched down again, nodding grimly to himself. He had guessed that the missing punchers would be guarding the gold.

He worked his way to the rear. The tally of the herd was nearing completion, but the riders were all busy. The redhead strode to the kitchen door quickly. He smiled grimly as he saw the bullet holes in it. Then he opened it silently and stepped in.

The door to the living room was slightly ajar. The bronzed necks of the punchers were turned toward him. He moved silently to the door and began slowly opening it wide enough to admit him.

If he could get the drop on them he would have a chance to do some explaining.

Then the hinges of the door squeaked lustily.

Instantly the pair sprang from

their chairs, whirling, their startled eyes fixing on the redhead and his pair of pointed guns.

Most men would have taken the drop. But these long-jawed punchers were reckless and nervy.

Their hands whizzed to their holsters. They meant to fight it out, even though their chances were hopeless.

"Yuh fools!" Jimmy groaned.

He leaped at them, his six-guns whirling over his head.

Whack! His gun barrels laid long dents in their high-crowned hats, and thudded on their skulls. Jimmy had endeavored to only stun them. He bent over them anxiously as they sagged down with groans.

"Yuh forced me tuh do it," he muttered regretfully.

He straightened, somewhat relieved. They did not seem seriously injured.

CHAPTER IX.

MISSING MONEY.

JIMMY was forced to admire their nerve, but they had once more blown his plans sky-high. If he could have explained things to them, they could have passed the word to Bolton.

"Everybody in on this deal shore works on a hair-trigger," he complained bitterly. "Blast it, won't nobody listen tuh anything but gun talk. If that's what they want, I'll give it to 'em."

He turned to the table and hefted the satchel. That required effort. It was heavy with gold coin. He peered out the west window. The last stragglers in the herd were drifting down the tally chute.

The redhead knew that if he was going to make his get-away he should be leaving. Bolton and Fleener would no doubt soon be heading for the house for the pay-

off. The heavy satchel would be quite a handicap if Jimmy was sighted.

There was another door leading from the living room. The redhead opened it and discovered that it led into a bedroom, long unoccupied. Evidently old John Shanley preferred to eat and sleep with his crew in the bunk house.

Jimmy pushed the satchel far under the bed. As he straightened, he paused, staring at a picture on the wall. It was a rather poorly printed, half-tone newspaper clipping, pasted on a mounting of cardboard and hung carelessly with a tack.

It was a picture of the real John Shanley. To prove it there was a caption beneath it.

JOHN SHANLEY

Well-known owner of the Rafter S, who is chairman of the Chuckaluck Round-up Committee.

It was a memento of some past celebration. Suddenly the redhead jerked it from the wall.

He returned to the living room in a hurry. His last chance to leave had already gone. Fleener and Powder Bolton were heading their horses for the ranch.

Fleener's four outlaws, and one Wyoming puncher were coming in, too. The remainder of Bolton's crew were beginning to drift the herd northward toward Chuckaluck, where Bolton had left his chuck wagon and remuda.

Jimmy stooped below the window line, moved to the tallest of the stunned punchers, and placed the picture in plain sight on his chest.

Then he retreated again to the bedroom, pulling the door back to a mere slit for vision. This door did not squeak. He made sure of that.

He was gambling everything on that picture. If Fleener saw it in

time, he would certainly hide it from Bolton. And it wouldn't take them long to discover Jimmy's trail through the foxtails.

That led only to the ranch. There was no trail away from it. They would realize he was still in the house.

That meant a shoot-out, with Bolton helping the outlaws. And Jimmy shrank from the thought of fighting the Wyoming outfit. They were honest men, even though mistaken in their intentions. Furthermore, the odds would be hopelessly heavy against him.

He heard them dismount at the door.

"Everythin's jake," Fleener's heavy voice boomed. "I'll give yuh a bill of sale, an' you kin be on yore way. I'll do the worryin' about that sneakin' outlaw. He's likely got his bunch near some place. But they won't ever get their hooks on that dinero. He shore had his brass nerve at that."

They came stamping in. Sudden, explosive oaths sounded as they saw the two dazed punchers.

Jimmy put an eye to the slit in the door. Bolton and Fleener were glaring around aghast.

"The money!" Bolton roared. "It's gone!"

Fleener began to swear steadily, his voice shaking. "That red-headed cuss sneaked back an'——" he choked.

His voice broke off. He had spotted the picture on the tall puncher's chest. Bolton followed his startled gaze. Bolton was nearest. Fleener took a fast stride in an attempt to reach it first. But Bolton already had picked it up.

Bolton read the name at a glance. A puzzled expression overspread his face. He looked up at Fleener—and found himself staring into the

muzzles of Fleener's .45s. Fleener's eyes were aflame, his teeth bared.

"Reach for the rafters, yuh simple-minded simp!" he grated.

His four men had followed his example. They were covering Bolton and the puncher who had come with him. Bolton stared in sheer, blank amazement. "Are you loco?" he asked uncertainly.

"Aw, shut up!" Fleener frothed. "Take their artillery, boys, an' hog-tie 'em. That sleepy-faced hombre has tried tuh outsmart us. He can't be fur ahead of us. He's got the dinero. We'll clamp down on him sooner or later, blast his heart!"

Fleener had realized instantly that the game was up as far as posing as John Shanley went. Bolton hadn't as yet had time to grasp the truth, but he would realize it sooner or later now.

Poisonous rage boiled in Fleener. He had been counting that gold as already in his paws. And now, at the very brink of success, he had been outwitted.

Fleener's face took on a purple tinge as he thought of it. Three weeks of careful plotting all gone for nothing.

CHAPTER X.

FLEENER'S CHANCE!

IN the bedroom Jimmy tensed, guns in hand. He was ready to come out. Bolton and his puncher were disarmed, and out of the play. His gamble had worked.

He could not see the pair of stunned punchers on the floor. The taller one was beginning to stir. His eyes opened sluggishly, and he was staring bewilderedly at the ceiling.

Jimmy heard the swish of ropes. He pushed open the door, emerged and stepped over the body of the reviving puncher.

"Were you lookin' for me, Fleener?" he rasped.

They whirled upon him, jaws slacking.

"Up with 'em," Jimmy said, his voice cracking like a whip. "You came within an ace of puttin' it over, Fleener. But yuh drew a blank, after all."

Fleener and his four outlaws were paralyzed. True to their type, the yellow showed in them, and their arms started up.

Bolton was staring from one to another. Comprehension was finally dawning in his eyes.

"Are you John Shan——" he began, then a startled expression leaped into his face. "Look out!" he shouted.

Jimmy heard a lunging football behind him. The tall puncher had come to his feet, his fighting spirit unquenched. The situation seemed clear to him. This mysterious redhead had the drop on his boss and the others. It was up to him.

Jimmy jerked his body instinctively aside in time to miss the full force of the big puncher's dive. Even so he was sent staggering. One of the puncher's muscular arms wrapped around his waist in a desperate attempt to drag him down.

It was a golden chance for Chunk Fleener and his men. Already they were streaking for their guns.

With a mighty wrench Jimmy tore himself free of the puncher who went sprawling.

Fleener's guns were leaping up as the frantic redhead veered the sights of his own .45s.

Bang! Bang! Twin guns spouted at twin guns, the explosions rattling the windows and doors.

A hot bullet clipped Jimmy's ribs. Fleener's other slug missed by a short inch. The redhead had been moving, and Fleener had not taken

the necessary instant to notch squarely on him.

And Fleener was not to be given a second try. The redhead's two slugs had not missed. They picked up Fleener, and swept him to the floor and out of the battle. He was dead.

The other four outlaws were flipping up their guns.

Wham! Jimmy drilled one of them through the shoulder, and he fell with a gasp of agony.

Then Jimmy dropped to his haunches into the shelter of the big oak center table in time to escape the roaring slugs that thundered across the room at him.

He lunged forward and came up beneath the heavy, oak table, lifting it on his shoulders and hurling it at the remaining three outlaws.

It struck two of them, knocking them off their feet.

The redhead's guns slammed again in unison. The remaining outlaw whirled, took one blind step, then pitched on his face without a sound.

Powder Bolton had grabbed the tall puncher and was keeping him out of the fight.

The two on the floor wriggled frantically from beneath the table. But their nerve oozed suddenly from them as they saw the fighting red-

head poised, his guns ready for them. Their sixes slid from their hands, and they uttered frantic gurgles of surrender.

"That's the first time anybody has showed any sense in hours," Jimmy approved grimly, kicking their guns out of reach. "The only thing anybody seemed tuh listen to was gun talk. An' I reckon it spoke the final word at that."

Bolton's punchers, aroused by the shooting, were galloping in from the herd. But through a window Jimmy sighted other figures coming down the trail from the benches. There were eight of them, and the glint of handcuffs could be seen on two of them. All walked wearily.

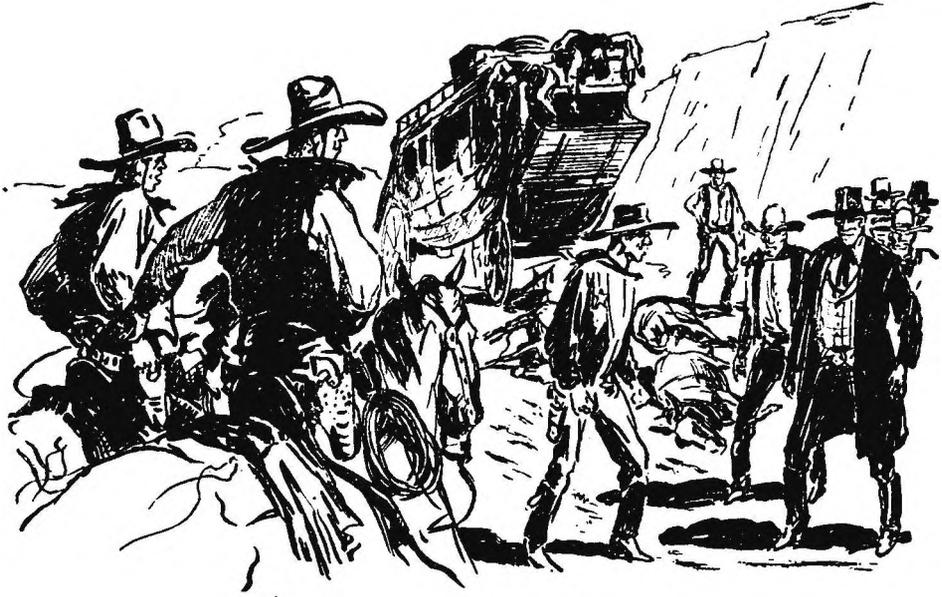
"Here comes the real John Shanley," Jimmy said, and he was yawning now, his round face suddenly drowsy. "He's proddin' in two more o' Fleener's gang."

Bolton stared. "Who the blazes are *you?*" he demanded. "What's this all about. Who——"

Jimmy lifted a weary hand. "Wait'll Shanley gits here," he yawned. "He don't know much more about it than you do. It'll save tellin' it twice."

Bolton stared helplessly at the redhead. Jimmy Quick seemed more than half asleep already.





Thet Lanky Lone Star Ranger

A "Hungry And Rusty" Story

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Riders Of Rio Mesa," etc.

WITH useless lines still clutched in his dead hands, the driver of the bullet-riddled stage lay back in his seat, glazed eyes staring up at the Texas sky. Behind him on the roof of the coach, with a crimson trickle still oozing from a ghastly hole above his right ear, lay the lifeless body of the shotgun guard.

Reining their tired horses to a quick halt on the steep bank above the stage, "Hungry" Hawkins and "Rusty" Bolivar took in the scene at a glance. With the two hard-

riding, straight-shooting young Texas Rangers, the investigation of such murders and robberies was only a part of their daily task. The sight of the murdered men was nothing new to them.

They stared down for a moment without speaking. A big crowd of heavily-armed cowboys and range men had already collected about the stage, and a tall, poker-faced sheriff was searching for tracks at one side of the road.

"Waal," Hungry grunted, "with our badges hid, nobody'll suspicion

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thet we're Rangers. We'll just set hyar a minute an' have us a look at the crowd."

Little Rusty scowled and reached in his shirt pocket for tobacco and papers. There was a look of sarcastic disgust on his freckled face as he rolled a cigarette and watched the sheriff.

"Take a squint at thet sheriff, will yuh?" he snapped to his lanky, homely-faced partner. "What good does he think he'll do huntin' tracks down there after thet bunch of bush-poppers had tromped the whole road up? We'll wait till they go away, then we'll go down an' see who done thet orneriness."

Hungry nodded. With a sigh, he shifted his long awkward body to a more comfortable position in his saddle. He then pulled a battered plug of strong tobacco from his hip pocket and thoughtfully gnawed off a huge chew which he tongued lazily into his cheek.

"Maybe we'd better ride on down thar," he finally suggested. "If them hombres takes notice of us just settin' up hyar watchin' 'em, they may git suspicious. Come on, an' we'll go see what the robbers stole."

With a muttered remark, Rusty clamped his cigarette in one corner of his mouth and picked up his bridle reins. He then shoved his twin guns to a more convenient position on his hips and started on.

With Hungry in the lead, they rode through the noisy crowd and stopped beside the coach. Paying no attention to the questioning stares of the hombres around them, Hungry leaned over and picked up the dead guard's sawed-off shotgun.

"Ain't been fired," he said to Rusty. "Thet means he was——"

"Hyar!" came a sudden sharp command from the sheriff. "You two meddlin' cowhands put down

thet shotgun an' git back out of our way! Leave things alone till the coroner gits hyar an' looks it over!"

"Aw, you go to blazes!" little Rusty flared. "You ain't doin' no good millin' around here like a motherless dogie. We're goin' to see who done this, an' the rest of yuh git out of *our* way!"

The sheriff spat an angry oath and dropped a hand to a gun butt. He darted a suspicious look at the two Rangers, then a cold, hard look crept into his brown-flecked gray eyes, and he strode toward them.

"Just whar did you two mavericks blow from?" he grated. "I'm beginnin' to think thet maybe you know somethin' about this. Fer two pins, I'd just lock yuh up. Yuh look like a pair of gun fighters to me, an' I wouldn't put a job like this past yuh."

At this, the crowd began muttering, then they suddenly surged forward and surrounded Hungry and Rusty. Guns slid from holsters in every direction and swung to cover the cowboy Rangers.

"Git a rope, men!" a bull-voiced hombre roared from the back of the crowd. "I'll bet them two strays is the very jaspers thet robbed this coach an' done thet killin'! Let's string 'em up!"

This was all that was needed to change the angry crowd to an infuriated mob. With wild howls, they leaped to drag Hungry and Rusty from their saddles.

Like a flash, the tall sheriff whirled. He tried to wave the thoroughly aroused crowd back, but the men were now too angry to listen.

Little Rusty threw himself sideways in his saddle, and his twin Colts almost leaped from his holsters in a lightning draw. Hungry made no move, except to smile dryly.

"Hold on, thar, men!" he called,

and he motioned for Rusty to lower his guns. "Steady, fellers! The sheriff is the cause o' this, an' he's got yuh stirred up without meanin' to. Wait a minute, an' see if he don't admit he made a mistake in accusin' us. Watch!"

There was something in the way he said this that caused the crowd to stop shoving. Muttering uncertainly, the hombres lowered their guns, but they stood ready to shoot in case either Ranger tried to escape.

Hungry smiled quietly and looked down at them. He then glanced at the sheriff who was eying him keenly from beside his horse. As he did so, he reached lazily in his hip pocket and hauled out his battered plug of tobacco.

"Have a chaw, sheriff?" he drawled. "She's maybe a leetle mite stout, but she's the primest spittin' tobaccer yuh ever socked yore teeth in."

The sheriff scowled, but when Hungry winked slyly at him he batted his eyes and darted a suspicious look at the black plug. Hidden beside it in Hungry's big hand was the little badge of the Texas Rangers.

As the sheriff's eyes fell on that badge, his mouth flew open, and he stared in astonishment. At a nod from Hungry, he took the tobacco and bit off a small chew.

Hungry kept the badge hidden in his hand until the sheriff returned his plug of tobacco. With a dry smile, the lanky, lantern-jawed Ranger then shoved both out of sight again in his pocket.

"Waal, sheriff," Hungry drawled carelessly, "I reckon yuh kin now tell this ambitious gang o' would-be lynchers thet yuh was badly mistook."

The sheriff gulped. "Y-yeah," he

said hastily, "I'll say I was. I was bad wrong, fellers. These two hombres couldn't've done this. They're both——"

A grunted warning from Hungry stopped him before he could explain who they were. Hungry then leaned down and whispered for a moment in the sheriff's ear.

The sheriff nodded from time to time until the lanky Ranger finished. He then turned briskly to the crowd.

"All right, men!" he suddenly barked. "All of yuh fork yore hosses an' git back to town. These two cowboys has already spotted somethin' hyar thet has maybe give 'em an idea who done this. You git on, an' I'll stay with 'em to see if they're right."

At this, a low oath burst from an hombre in the crowd. He pushed through toward the sheriff and stood glaring savagely at the two Rangers.

"Tryin' to git rid of us, are yuh?" he shouted. "Yo're workin' a trick, thet's all. If these two cowhands has found out somethin', why don't they tell us what it is? They don't look——"

As the fellow suddenly found himself staring into the muzzle of Rusty's left-hand Colt, he gave a startled growl and flinched aside. His hands dropped hastily away from his pearl-handled guns, and he glared murderously.

"Back up, feller!" Rusty snapped harshly. "Back up while yo're all in one piece!"

The fellow's coal-black eyes gleamed wickedly from under the down-pulled brim of his expensive pearl-gray sombrero. The fingers of his soft, well-kept hands twitched for a moment as if he meant to try a lightning draw in an effort to down Rusty.

Finally a mirthless laugh rattled

from between his clenched teeth, and he stepped back. With a sarcastic leer at the sheriff and the two Rangers, he suddenly turned and strode to where his horse stood at the side of the road.

"Threwed a gun on me, did yuh, cowboy?" he snarled wickedly, as he swung into his saddle and glared around at Rusty. "Just remember thet, puncher! When an hombre throws a gun on me, he'd better shoot while he's got a chance. We'll meet again, then yuh won't have a chance. Savvy?"

With a yelp of quick anger, Rusty started to spur toward him for a show-down. Hungry barked a quick warning, but he was forced to grab Rusty's bridle reins before he could get his scrappy little partner stopped.

"Let me alone!" Rusty yipped angrily. "Did yuh hear how he sassed me? Won't have a chance, won't I? Who was thet guy? Who was he?"

Without speaking, Hungry turned and looked inquiringly at the sheriff. He jerked his thumb toward the fellow who was at that moment speeding away with the crowd, then nodded.

"Thet hombre?" the sheriff growled. "I don't know what his right name is. Calls himself 'Captain Deadshot.' Owns a circus thet just blowed into town, an' he gives exhibitions of fancy shootin' with rifle an' hand gun. He's said to be forked lightnin' with shootin' tools of any kind."

"Yeah?" Rusty flared heatedly. "Well, if thet guy tries any forked-lightnin' shootin' in my direction, he'll think he's hubbed a lightnin' rod! I'll——"

By a shake of his head, Hungry managed to silence him. The lanky Ranger then motioned to the sheriff,

and they began examining the stage more closely.

The four big mules lay dead beside the lumbering coach's splintered tongue. Hungry walked over and took a look at the slain animals and found that each had been shot close to the right ear.

With a quiet nod to Rusty, he then examined the ground beneath and behind the coach. There, they found where something heavy had been dragged for a short distance in the dust.

"Waal," Hungry finally drawled to Rusty, "what do yuh make of it?"

"A one-man job!" little Rusty promptly barked.

"Looks like it," Hungry admitted lazily. "Them murdered hombres got it the same way as the mules. Guard got his first, then the driver, an' the mules follered close. One killer downed 'em all, an' he done it with some mighty fast an' straight shootin'."

The sheriff growled an oath. He stared at the two Rangers inquiringly.

"How can yuh tell this shootin' was done by one hombre?" he snapped. "If yuh kin tell thet fer shore, yuh got better eyes than I have."

Instead of explaining, Hungry questioned the sheriff closely for a moment. He learned that a shipment of money from the bank in town had been stolen, and a mail bag had also disappeared.

"Thet's a plenty, sheriff!" Hungry finally drawled. "Yuh've give us plenty to work on. Now you kin beat it on to town, an' keep yore mouth shet as to what we've asked yuh an' what we've said. Yuh kin hurry the coroner back to look at these dead men an' haul 'em in fer

burial. We're goin' to do some ridin', but we'll see yuh to-night."

With an understanding nod, the tall frontier officer walked across the road to where he had left his horse. He swung heavily into his saddle, then with a curt wave of his hand, he galloped away.

II.

The two Rangers waited until the sheriff had disappeared, then they exchanged quick glances and examined the bullet holes which had splintered through the right side of the stage. All had been fired from a .45.

Hungry and Rusty then climbed on top of the coach for a closer look at the murdered men. As had been the case with the mules, the dead men had both been shot from the right side. The bullets had hit each hombre above the ear.

"Yep, it was a one-man job," Hungry said. "Them marks thar in the dust under the coach show that the live mules drug the dead ones until all were shot down. More than one shooter would have downed them mules faster. Now we'll do some trackin' an' prove we're right."

Turning away from the coach, the two Rangers hastily climbed the bank on the right side of the road. It took them only a few minutes to find the tracks of a single horse that had been galloped from a bunch of cedars a short distance back to a spot just opposite the stage.

Hungry was just stooping to examine the horse's tracks when a sharp call from Rusty caused him to turn. There in the dry grass just a short distance away were several exploded cartridge hulls which the murderer had tossed aside.

"Uh-huh!" Hungry grunted, and he dropped them in his pocket.

"Thet'll be about the number o' shots thet was fired. Four fer the mules, two fer the driver an' guard, an' six in the side o' thet stage. Makes twelve in all, an' thar's twelve hulls hyar. Waal, let's git our hosses an' start trackin' 'im."

Both Rangers ran to get their horses which had been left standing ground-anchored behind the coach. Hungry was first to start down the steep bank to the road. As Rusty scooted down behind him, a rifle barked faintly from far out behind some cedars, and a bullet droned spitefully above their heads.

With a startled yelp, Rusty whirled back and clawed his guns from his holsters. As his head rose above the bank, a second bullet threw dirt in his face and screamed wickedly across the road.

"Git back down from thar!" Hungry yelled. "Don't yuh know yuh can't reach that guy with a Colt? He's too fur off. Wait!"

Hastily snatching a big-calibered Winchester carbine from his saddle scabbard, Hungry ran up the bank. He shoved Rusty aside and threw up his gun.

Bang! The faint bark of the sniper's rifle again rattled along the slope beyond them, and another bullet buzzed above Hungry's head.

"I can't locate 'im," he snapped to Rusty. "Watch behind me an' see whar the next bullet hits."

Before he finished speaking, another bullet clipped a twig from a bush beside him and kicked up a shower of dust across the road.

"I got it!" Rusty snarled. "Wait a second! Uh-huh! He's in them cedars somewhere above that red clay bank over there. There! His gun flashed! Did yuh see it?"

Hungry nodded grimly and snapped the carbine to his cheek. He gripped the stubby weapon for

a moment, then it kicked his shoulder in a thudding blast, and he saw his bullet throw up a cloud of dust from the red bank just under the fringe of cedars.

With a muttered grunt, he raised his rear sight and tried again. A whizzing bullet slapped spitefully through his hat as his own shot raised a spurt of dust among the cedars.

"Now I've got his range!" Hungry barked. "Next time his rifle flashes, he's goin' to know he's been in a fight!"

Rusty did not even hear him. The scrappy little Ranger was running to get his own carbine.

Crack! Bang! Hungry's and the bushwhacker's guns flamed at the same instant.

The lanky Ranger saw an hombre move hastily from a bush to a leaning cedar, then Rusty's carbine roared from a short distance away.

Bang-bang! Both Rangers fired again so close together that the blast of their carbines sounded almost as one shot.

This time, they got one fleeting glimpse of their enemy as he whirled from his hiding place and broke to run. In scarcely a moment, they heard the faint clatter of a horse's hoofs from beyond the cedars.

"Grab our hosses, quick!" Hungry yelled as he whirled and lunged down the bank. "We've smoked him out, an' he's makin' a run fer it!"

Rusty was halfway to his horse before Hungry finished speaking. Both leaped hastily into their saddles and went spurring back up the bank as fast as their cow horses could cover the ground.

They kept their carbines ready as they rocketed over the uneven ground toward the spot where the hombre had been hidden. They also leaned forward in their saddles,

ready to throw themselves down on their horses' sides in case the unknown bushwhacker was merely working a shrewd trick to draw them out into the open where he could shoot them down.

But the fellow was gone. As the Rangers rode their panting horses into the stunted cedars, they caught one fleeting glimpse of the hombre's hat as he vanished over a little rise far ahead of them.

Rusty whirled to dash after him, but a call from Hungry brought him around in his saddle with a jerk. He was just in time to see his lanky partner lean down and pick up a broken rifle from the ground.

"Uh-huh!" lean Hungry grunted. "Hyar's why thet jasper pulled out! One of us hit the rifle stock just behind the trigger guard, an' plumb ruint it fer shootin'. Look at it!"

Rusty rode back. He looked at the broken rifle, then motioned impatiently in the direction of the escaping hombre.

"Come on!" he snarled. "What're yuh wastin' time with thet busted gun fer?"

Hungry spat grimly and tossed the useless gun aside. Then without apparently hearing Rusty's questions, he stooped over the bushwhacker's tracks in the dirt near the tree.

"Thet gun happens to be the least o' my worries," he finally remarked. "Take a good look at these tracks so's yuh kin remember 'em."

Rusty leaned down from his saddle and peered intently at the tracks. He stared for a moment at the imprints of a pair of high-heeled riding boots. Just in front of each heel print he could see the marks of double spur chains.

"I don't see nothin' much to remember in *them* tracks," he

snapped. "Lots of punchers wear spurs with a chain under each foot."

Hungry shifted his chew to the other cheek and nodded, "Yeah," he drawled quietly, "but these hyar happens to be thin *doubled* chains, an' yuh notice thet the back chain on the right foot has been broke an' patched with wire. Look closer. Yuh see it?"

At this, Rusty swung hastily from his saddle. With eyes squinted, he leaned over the tracks.

"I noticed a pair o' the same hombre's tracks whar we found them ca'tridge hulls near the stage," Hungry continued. "The jasper thet was shootin' at us is the same feller thet done the stage robbin'. Savvy?"

With a startled yelp, Rusty swung back into his saddle. "Then come on!" he snapped. "We got to trail thet jasper an' nab 'im. We kin prove he's the guilty hombre by them chains. Let's go!"

In a moment, they were spurring swiftly on the trail of the bushwhacker. The tracks of his racing horse showed plainly in the dust and sand, and the Rangers could easily follow them.

For a time, they rode silently, carbines cradled across their arms and eyes searching every inch of the route in front of them. Both realized that the bushwhacker might be hiding somewhere and waiting to drop them with a .45 as they passed him.

But the fellow seemed to have kept going. The Rangers followed his trail until it hit the stage road far away from the scene of the shooting.

The sun had just gone down when they rode over a little hill into town. The unknown bushwhacker had held the road all the way, and the two cowboy Rangers knew that he was

probably already mixing with the crowds which they could see milling about the street below them.

"Waal, all we kin do now is watch fer a gent with a pair of double-chained spurs," Rusty grumbled.

Hungry nodded, and they slowed to a trot. In a few minutes, they saw the dingy, weather-beaten tents of a little wagon show that stood on a vacant lot at the edge of town.

There were only a few people on the show grounds as the two Rangers rode past. The crowds of cowboys, miners, and desert dwellers had already moved up into town and scattered among the saloons, gambling dens, and restaurants. Horses were tied to hitch racks and fences in every direction.

"I think thet me an' you had better separate hyar," Hungry suggested. "I'll go in one direction, an' you take the other. Thet way, we kin keep on the watch fer a jasper with double chains on his spurs. When we find such an hombre, we'll check up on 'im to see if one o' them spur chains has been patched with wire. Savvy?"

"I git yuh," Rusty snapped. "We'll leave our hosses here, but we'll have to work fast. It's gettin' dark."

Turning hastily aside to a ramshackle fence, Hungry and Rusty dismounted and tied their horses. This done, they carefully examined their guns and loosened them in their holsters, then separated and mixed with the crowds.

III.

With eyes keenly on the hombres around him, Hungry moved over toward the edge of the old plank sidewalk and shouldered his way slowly along. From time to time, he darted a look across the street to

where he could see his scrappy little partner.

Soon, Hungry spotted the big showman who went by the name of "Captain Deadshot." The powerfully built hombre saw him at almost the same instant, and he planted himself squarely in Hungry's path.

"Well, cowboy, did yuh spot thet stage robber?" he snapped, eying the tall Rangers keenly.

Hungry shook his head carelessly and shrugged his shoulders. Without appearing to do so, he had already looked down at Captain Deadshot's heels.

But the fellow was not wearing spurs. If he even had on guns, they were hidden beneath the long-tailed black coat which hung almost to his knees.

"Nope, we didn't nab nobody," Hungry finally admitted.

A flicker of amusement showed for a moment in Captain Deadshot's black eyes. With a slight sneer, he rolled his big cigar to the corner of his mouth and stared at Hungry.

"Who aire yuh, cowboy?" he suddenly snapped. "Just what did yuh tell thet sheriff back there on the road when yuh offered him a chew of tobacco? The sheriff seemed to have heard of yuh."

Hungry smiled dryly. "Yeah," he drawled, "most likely he had. Me an' thet pard o' mine is awful good cowhands, an' he'd maybe heerd about us. We'll drop around to see yore show to-night. So long!"

With a lazy yawn, Hungry turned away. As he pushed through the crowd, he managed to glance over his shoulder and saw the big showman staring sharply after him.

When he thought he might be a safe distance away, Hungry slipped

into a doorway and looked back. This time, Captain Deadshot was nowhere in sight.

"Huh!" Hungry grunted. "Waal, me an' Rusty'll have to go see thet jasper shoot to-night. If he's as good as thet sheriff says he is, he ought to be worth seein'."

Bang! The sudden muffled bark of a gun from somewhere brought Hungry around with a jerk.

Little Rusty Bolivar was nowhere in sight.

Bang-bang! As two more thudding shots blasted out, Hungry gave a worried grunt and went running across the street.

He darted a quick look to right and left as he reached the opposite sidewalk, then raced on around an old saloon.

"Dang it, thet shootin' seemed to come from somewhar back hyar!" he muttered. "I wonder was Rusty mixed up in it? It's gittin' almost too dang dark to hunt 'im."

Hungry stumbled along in the thick gloom until he reached a tumble-down corral. Seeing nothing of his little partner, he spat thoughtfully and turned back through a litter of old bottles and broken boxes toward the rear of the saloon.

The lanky Ranger was just starting to strike a match for a better look around him, when he thought he saw something move beside a pile of old whisky barrels. This was instantly followed by a low grunt of pain.

Like a flash, Hungry jerked a gun and jumped forward. In a moment, he was stooping over a crumpled form which lay between a couple of barrels.

"It's Rusty!" he gasped. "He's either been shot or hit with some-thin'! Rusty!"

Hungry spoke sharply in an effort

to rouse his little partner. Getting no answer, he hastily struck a match.

Rusty's left cheek was a crimson smear from a nasty wound above his ear. His two Colts lay on the ground a few feet away, and a hasty examination showed that one shot had been fired from each weapon.

"Uh-huh!" Hungry grunted. "Somebody jumped 'im hyar in the dark. I got to git 'im somewhar an' dress thet wound on his head. Looks like a bullet crease."

But a muttered grunt from Rusty caused Hungry hastily to light another match. Rusty was shaking his head dazedly and trying to sit up.

"Rusty!" Hungry barked sharply, and he shook his little partner's arm in an effort to rouse him. "Rusty, who downed yuh? Pull yoreself together! Can't yuh hyar me?"

Rusty mumbled thickly and pressed a hand weakly to his wounded head. He fumbled with his other hand at an empty holster as if trying to draw a gun.

"B-blast yuh, let me loose an' fight fair!" he stammered. "Yuh can't—"

"Rusty!" Hungry called, and he shook him again. "Hyar! Wake up! It's me talkin' to yuh!"

Hungry worked over him for several minutes. At last, Rusty was able to sit up unaided, then he recognized his lanky partner.

"D-did I git 'im?" Rusty suddenly demanded.

Hungry stiffened and darted a look around them in the darkness. "Git who?" he snapped softly. "I ain't seen nobody to git yit. Who was yuh fightin' with?"

Rusty shook his head. He paused for a moment to press a hand to his wound, then gritted his teeth to stifle a groan of pain.

"How do I know?" he finally snarled. "Some jasper reached out from behind me an' jerked me off the sidewalk. He pinned my arms down so I couldn't fight until he drug me back here, then he flang me against these barrels, an' I went down. I managed to yank my guns just as he shot at me. Thet's all I remember until yuh woke me up."

Hungry frowned. He then snapped a match on his thumb-nail and stepped hastily back. He leaned down and searched until he found some fresh tracks among the rubbish, and followed them swiftly until he came back to a corner of the old corral.

The lanky Ranger was just starting to turn away from what he felt certain would be a useless chase when he saw something glittering in the light of his match a few steps away. Jumping forward, he picked up the shell of an exploded .45

"Uh-huh!" he grunted. "I reckon thet sneak stopped hyar to punch the empty hull out o' his gun an' reload while he watched to see if Rusty was able to chase 'im. He probably decided thet he'd killed 'im, so he went on."

Hungry clamped his lantern jaws grimly and hurried back to Rusty. His little partner had already got up and was sitting on a barrel. Hungry hastily tied a bandanna around his wounded head, then he took him by the arm and they went in search of the sheriff's office.

They found it just a short distance down the street. The sheriff was seated at his battered desk when Hungry shoved open the door and led Rusty inside.

"What the blazes?" the sheriff barked, lunging to his feet and dropping some papers he had been reading. "Yuh been fightin'!"

"Tell me somethin' I don't know already," Rusty snapped. "Git some clean rags, an' if yuh kin locate some iodine, bring it out. I want to git patched up so's I kin find the jasper thet done this."

The sheriff growled an oath and moved to a shelf in the corner. By the light of a smoky lamp, Hungry was soon able to dress Rusty's wound.

When this was done and the sheriff had hurried to the nearest restaurant for some strong coffee for the wounded Ranger, Hungry pulled a bunch of exploded cartridges from his pocket. They were the ones that had been fired by the hombre who robbed the stage.

He sorted through them, examining the primers carefully, then arranged them in two piles. On six of them, the imprint of a firing pin had struck a lighter blow and slightly to one side.

With a grunt of satisfaction, Hungry then drew out the exploded cartridge he had picked up at the old corral near where Rusty had been wounded. A small dent to one side of its primer showed it had been fired by one of the same guns that had been used in the stage holdup.

"Uh-huh! Now we're gittin' somewhar!" he snapped. "When we find the hombre with the spurs, we kin prove he's guilty by his guns."

At that moment, the sheriff came back with a pot of coffee. Rusty gulped this down thankfully, while Hungry hurried out for a bite of supper and to take care of their horses.

Hungry was quickly back. He found Rusty hunched over in a chair with a cigarette clamped in the corner of his mouth.

"Well?" Rusty asked grouchily, glancing up.

"It's show time," Hungry announced. "If yuh feel like it, we'll go down thar an' see thet Captain Deadshot do his shootin' act. We might locate the jasper with the spurs while we're thar."

Rusty hurled his cigarette aside. A stab of pain made him wince as he sprang from his chair, and he paused to press a hand to his head.

"Come on!" he snapped. "My head won't hurt no worse there than it will here, an' we might nab the jasper we're after."

IV.

In a few minutes, the sheriff and the two Rangers reached the show grounds where a noisy crowd had already collected. At a nod from Hungry, Rusty and the sheriff left him and went on into the tent. Hungry then planted himself near the ticket box and stood lazily munching his tobacco.

As the crowd filed past him into the tent, Hungry watched every hombre closely without appearing to do so. Almost every man was in range garb, but he saw not a pair of double-chained spurs.

Finally when the crowd dwindled to a few stragglers, Hungry bought a ticket and went inside where he soon located Rusty and the sheriff in seats near the ringside. He strode toward them.

"Seen anything yit?" Hungry whispered as Rusty moved over to make room for him.

Rusty shook his head. "Seen plenty of spurs, but none with double chains on 'em," he said softly.

The sudden blare of a cornet and trombone in the hands of a pair of bored-looking musicians on a platform across the ring stopped further

conversation. Then a dusty clown trotted into the ring and held up a hand for silence.

"Ladees an' gen'lemen!" he bawled. "The first number on this evening's puffawmence will be the world's greatest marksman, Captain Deadshot, in a thrilling an' exciting exhibition of shooting with rifle and pistol! Captain Deadshot!"

As he finished speaking, a curtain parted at the end of the tent. Mounted upon a powerful black horse, Captain Deadshot spurred forward, and with a flourish brought his glistening mount to a rearing halt in the ring.

The big hombre was now dressed in a spangled Mexican costume, and a pair of beautiful pearl-handled Colts swung at his hips in fancy carved holsters. Enormous silver spurs jangled on his boot heels as he dropped gracefully from his saddle and swept off his silver-banded sombrero in a bow to the audience.

Instantly the clown swept the red cover from a long table behind him, and Hungry and Rusty saw a glittering array of rifles and pistols that had been hidden beneath it. The clown then picked up some small glass balls and placed them along the front of a big sheet of steel that stood on the opposite side of the ring.

Stepping back to the table, Captain Deadshot selected a small revolver. With the little weapon clamped at his hip, he fired six lightning shots, and the glass balls vanished from the face of the sheet of steel.

As he whirled and bowed low to the cheering audience, Hungry suddenly jerked erect in his seat and stared. His homely face slowly hardened, and a deadly greenish

glint crept into his slitted eyes as the clown again stepped forward.

"Ladees an' gen'lemen!" the clown bawled, holding up a hand. "You are now about to witness something that will hold you spell-bound. Using the two big Colts which he wears in his holsters, Captain Deadshot will now exhibit his dazzling speed by drawing and emptying those deadly weapons into a target in less time than it takes the average man to draw a gun from his holster."

As the clown stepped back and waved his hand in what he meant to be an impressive flourish, Hungry whirled and whispered something to Rusty and the sheriff. Rusty's hands snapped to his guns, and he started to lunge to his feet, but Hungry shoved him back and barked a low command.

"Hold on to 'im, sheriff!" Hungry whispered. "Hang on to 'im an' keep 'im out o' this!"

Little Rusty struggled for a moment to get up, and his eyes were blazing. As he again tried to shove Hungry out of his way, the crowd behind began shouting angrily, and Captain Deadshot whirled.

"What's goin' on over there?" Captain Deadshot barked harshly. "You two cowboys quiet down, or you'll get throwed out of here!"

Hungry whispered something to Rusty and scowled sternly. As Rusty sat back, muttering, Hungry then strode toward the ring.

"Yeah?" he drawled lazily, his slitted eyes now fairly blazing with that deadly greenish glint. "Just who'll throw us out if we don't quiet down? Feller, I want a good look at them spurs yuh got on!"

At this, Captain Deadshot's face went livid, and he snapped his long-fingered hands to his Colt butts.

"Spurs!" he snarled, dropping slightly forward in a fighting crouch. "What do yuh mean by thet, cowboy?"

"Shoot the pants off 'im, Hungry!" Rusty shrilled. "Either do it, or git out of the way an' let me do it! I'm bettin' it's him! I didn't like his looks none when I first seen 'im, an'——"

Hungry motioned for Rusty to be silent. He then stepped over the ropes into the ring and faced Captain Deadshot grimly.

"Hombre," he snapped, and he said it loud enough for the audience to hear, "the jasper thet robbed the stage an' murdered the driver an' guard was wearing double-chained spurs like yours, an' one o' them chains has been patched with wire. I want to see yores!"

As a roar of rage burst from the crowd, Captain Deadshot leaped back, his clawed hands trembling on his Colt butts. With lips twitching like those of a trapped coyote, he glared murderously at Hungry.

"Who aire yuh, cowboy?" he suddenly snarled, eyes glinting wickedly. "I asked yuh thet question once before. This time, I want to know. Then I'm goin' to fill yuh so full of lead yuh won't know what struck yuh."

Hungry's homely mouth twisted in a mirthless smile. He glanced over Captain Deadshot's shoulder at the crowd beyond, then he stepped slightly aside so that stray bullets would pass through the front of the tent where there would be less danger to the audience.

"Who am I?" he drawled, dropping his bony hands loosely at his sides and facing Captain Deadshot. "The name's Hungry Hawkins, of the Texas Rangers—if thet means anything to yuh."

A thundering roar instantly burst from the listening crowd. Though none there had ever seen him, Hungry's fame as a gun fighter was known from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande, and the audience rose with a burst of cheers.

"Nail 'im, Ranger! We're backin' yuh! Nobody else from this blasted circus'll jump yuh from behind. Make 'im show yuh his spurs!" came howls from all sides.

"Thet long-legged pard of mine don't need no backin' from nobody when I'm around!" Rusty yelled. "Git 'im, Hungry! Either git 'im, or let me at 'im!"

Captain Deadshot's face was a mask of stark hate and murderous fury. Mouthing hoarse oaths from between his clenched teeth, he took a step backward and hunched lower, shoulders braced for one of his lightning draws and eyes blazing.

Hungry made no move. With his long, lanky body awkwardly erect and arms dangling loosely, he stood munching the huge chew of tobacco that bulged his cheek.

Suddenly Captain Deadshot's long-fingered hands blurred down in a dazzling draw, and the entire audience heard the sharp slap of palm against Colt butt.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! The thundering roar of four quick shots blasted so close together as to sound almost as one, and a rolling cloud of powder smoke swirled above the ring.

Captain Deadshot stood for a moment stiffly, arms outstretched and eyes staring. Slowly, his legs buckled under him, and he went to his knees. His guns slid from his hands, then clawing at his chest where Hungry's bullets had ripped through him, he fell forward on his face.

With the yells of the crowd ringing in his ears, Hungry stared down at him through the haze of smoke. As Rusty and the sheriff reached the ring, Hungry walked over and examined the dead man's spurs.

"Aire yuh hit?" Rusty shouted. "Did he touch yuh?"

Hungry shook his head. "One bullet grazed my leg was all," he drawled quietly. "His other bullet hit the ground in front of me."

As he talked, Hungry jerked off one of the dead hombre's spurs and handed it to Rusty. With a nod, he pointed to one of the chains which had been patched with a bit of wire. He then showed Rusty the exploded cartridges in the hombre's guns.

"It was him, all right!" Rusty yelled. "Sheriff, here's yore stage robber. His name was Captain Deadshot, but now he *is* a dead shot. Come on, Hungry! I think I seen some pies in a restaurant winder down the street, an' my stummick says pie is just what I need to celebrate on. Let's go!"

Thet Captain Deadshot hombre shore made a big mistake when he figured thet Hungry an' Rusty was jest a pair o' dumb cowpokes, hornin' in on somethin' they didn't know nothin' about. But thet's a habit thet a lot o' bad hombres has got inter. An' most of 'em, like Deadshot, ain't livin' now ter regret it. Watch fer the next Hungry an' Rusty story in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



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Shoot-away Steve— Sheriff

By Paul S. Powers

Author of "The Ropin' Fool From Little Bend," etc.

CHAPTER I.

DEATH IN THE LONE STAR.

CLAY HAZARD, owner of the Lone Star Saloon, was alone behind the bar, a half-empty bottle of whisky at his elbow, when loud knocks thudded against the back door.

It was election day, the only day in the year when the saloons in Black Mountain were supposed to be closed, but Hazard had a good idea of who his visitors were, and he hurried to let them in.

"*Quién es?* Who is it?" he called out in both Spanish and English as he inserted a key in the lock.

"It's the bunch," returned a hoarse voice, and Hazard threw open the door. A half dozen heavily armed men entered hastily, their spurs jangling, and the Lone Star owner shut and locked the door behind them, his black eyes lighting up with feverish excitement.

"Well, any news yet, Barth?" he questioned eagerly.

"Blacky" Barth, a big-framed hombre with a gaunt and repulsive face, shook his head. "It's only a few minutes after six—the polls have jist closed," he said. "We'll know afore long. Pour us all a drink, Hazard."

The saloon keeper went behind

the bar and his six henchmen trooped up on the other side. They were a hard-looking crew, bleak-eyed and harsh of feature. Two of them were Mexicans, and most of them carried two six-guns. They gulped their drinks greedily, and Hazard filled their glasses again.

"I theenk you not need worry, Señor Clay," chuckled one of the Mexican gunmen. "Everytheeng it goin' come out *bueno* for you. We throw plenty scare in Black Mountain."

"Yeah," chuckled Barth, wiping his wide mouth with the back of his hairy hand. "We've filled 'em with the fear o' the hereafter."

"Shore, Hazard—yo're the next sheriff, all right," agreed a wide-shouldered hombre, tossing off his second drink. "What do yuh say we have a little poker while we're waitin' fer the returns?"

The Lone Star proprietor joined the others at the round, green-covered table at the end of the bar. He was a man of perhaps thirty, but looked much older than his years.

He wore his coal-black hair in long sideburns, and a straggly black mustache curved downward at the corners of his wide, thin-lipped mouth. His nose—reddened a little now from drink—was as curved as the beak of an eagle.

Like his men, Hazard was a gunman. A wide belt was buckled around his waist, its loops filled with .44 cartridges, and a pearl-handled gun of the same caliber holstered low on his right thigh. He wore a white silk shirt and a vest with facings of black leather.

"Whar's Corliss and Rexman?" he demanded, drawing a chair up at the table.

"They rode over to the Goldtown post office to make shore the folks at thet settlement voted the right

way," said Barth with a meaning laugh. "They'll be showin' up soon. Well, sit down; let's cut fer the deal."

The cards were shuffled and passed around, but none of them seemed to have much interest in the game, especially Clay Hazard, whose eyes were shining with nervous anxiety. The election was on his mind more than anything else, for it was an important one for him. He was running for sheriff, the biggest job in Black Mountain County.

It wasn't law enforcement that he was interested in, however. Unscrupulous, crafty, he knew that once in power, he could reap a fortune in the rich mining and cattle country. It would be a prize worth winning.

"I got to win to-day," he muttered, toying with his stack of chips. "I can't let Steve Neal beat me—not him of all men!" he cried, his voice taking on a tang of bitterness and hate.

"Don't worry," said Barth. "The kid ain't got the chance of an icicle in the Gila Desert."

"I'll take three cards," grunted an hombre in a green shirt.

"Two for me," droned one of the Mexicans and for a minute, they were engrossed in the game. Then the green-shirted desperado spoke up:

"Walt Larson has been workin' mighty hard to git Steve elected. If the younker wins, he'll owe a lot to thet stepfather o' his."

"I've tried to keep on the friendly side of Walt Larson, the old fool!" said Hazard slowly. "But if his stepson should happen to win to-day——"

"Steve won't beat yuh, chief," said Barth with a guffaw. "Why, he's jist twenty-one years old, and this is the first election he could vote in, let alone run fer office. If he *should*

happen to be elected, though, what would be on yore program? I reckon we'd put him out of the way, eh?"

Hazard's brow wrinkled, and he shook his head. "Not right away," he said after a pause. "Everybody knows how I hate thet younker, and I'd be suspected. First of all, we'd discredit him—show him up. If he's elected, we'll start the fireworks, and there'll be so much crime and outlawry yere thet he'd lose his reputation fer life! But heck! I've got it cinched."

"What makes yuh hate Steve Neal thet a way?" asked a gunman with jutting red eyebrows and a broken nose.

"Huh! I thought everybody in town knew about it. I reckon yuh haven't been in Black Mountain long enough to have heard the story, Jake," said Clay Hazard, thrusting a long cigar between his teeth and lighting it up thoughtfully. After a moment, he went on: "A long time ago, Steve Neal's father—his real father and not Walt Larson—was sheriff o' this county. My father—well, he was a rustler, and a good one." The Lone Star owner chuckled proudly.

"What happened?"

"My old man and Steve's killed each other," said Hazard, blowing a cloud of smoke across the poker table. "Old John Neal tried to arrest my padre, and they stood toe to toe and shot it out. Both was fast on the draw and quick on the trigger. When the thing was over they was both down. The sheriff had three slugs in his belly, and my old man had four. They died within three minutes of each other. I was just a kid, then, and Steve wasn't old enough to remember. Jist a baby. His old lady married ag'in."

"Whew!" ejaculated the gaping

desperado. "Mebbe Steve has took after his dad—mebbe he kin fan a cutter the same way!"

"Naw!" sneered Hazard. "He's heard all about what happened, o' course. I left town after the shoot-in', but four years ago, I came back and opened up the Lone Star. And did Steve ever speak so much as a word to me? Naw! He's been in this saloon time and ag'in with his stepfather, and he was as meek as a lamb. He's yaller! Sheriff!" Hazard showed his stained teeth in a noiseless laugh.

"Steve wouldn't know what to do, even if——" Barth began, but stopped short as a knock sounded on the back door.

Hazard jumped to his feet, his right hand automatically dropping toward the pearl handle of his Colt.

"It's prob'ly the other two boys back from Goldtown," Barth grunted. "Let 'em in!"

Warily the Lone Star owner slipped to the rear end of the long barroom, calling out a challenge when he reached it.

"It's Walt Larson," answered a jovial voice. "Got news fer yuh about the election, Hazard. Afraid it won't be good news fer yuh, though."

Hazard turned swiftly to exchange a meaning glance with his six henchmen, hesitated, and then unlocked the door.

"Are the returns all in, Larson?" he demanded, as a leathery-faced, white-haired hombre came into the uncertain light of the saloon.

"Yes. But I thought yuh were alone, Hazard," said the newcomer, glancing with surprise at the sextet at the poker table. "I won't bother yuh. Jist thought yuh'd be interested in knowin'——"

"No, come in by all means!" exclaimed Hazard with well assumed

heartiness. "Come up and shake hands with the boys. What will yuh have to drink?"

"Thanks, I—I don't keer if I do," said Larson. "I'll take jist a drop o' whisky. Hello, amigos!" he nodded at the Hazard henchmen.

The stony-eyed crew did not answer to rise from their chairs. The owner of the Lone Star hurried to pour out drinks, keeping his eyes on the old man as he did so.

"How did it all come out, Larson?" he asked carelessly. "How bad did I beat young Steve?"

"Yuh didn't beat him," chuckled the stepfather of the other candidate. "They've jist now counted up, and Steve carried the county by ninety-seven votes!"

Hazard's face twitched, his nostrils seemed to whiten and dilate.

"Yo're foolin'?" he choked. "When the returns from Goldtown post office come in——"

"They've jist come in," said Larson, taking his drink with a quick backward bob of his head.

He was standing by the poker table now, but didn't seem to notice the scowling expressions on the faces of Hazard's henchmen, or the evil glint in the eyes of the saloon keeper.

"Yeah, yuh carried Goldtown all right," he said, "but only by a margin o' sixteen votes. Black Mountain went so strong fer my stepson thet yore lead thar wasn't enough. I was jist passin' by, and I knowed yuh'd be interested, so I dropped in to tell yuh."

"Thet was kind of yuh, Walt," Hazard said in a low, unsteady voice. "Mighty kind. Won't yuh have another drink?"

"Nope, I'm a believer in the old sayin' thet one drink's all right, three's too many, and four's not enough," laughed the old man cheer-

ily. He nodded to Hazard's gunmen. "*Buenas noches*, boys."

"G' night," said Blacky Barth with a wolfish grin.

Turning to Hazard, the stepfather of the newly elected sheriff held out his hand.

"I didn't come yere to rub it in, Clay," he said kindly. "I know yuh must feel disappointed, but I'm shore yuh'll coöperate with Steve and make his job easy. He's jist a kid. I'm glad thet old feud between yore father and his is long ago forgot. Yo're a good loser, Hazard. Shake!"

"Why, shore!"

Clay Hazard gripped old Walt's hand—his gun hand—and held to it hard. There was a poisonous smile on his face as he whirled him half around.

"All right, boys—now!"

It was all over in a few seconds. Flame and smoke streamed across the table top as the guns of Hazard's desperadoes roared leaden death. Walt Larson writhed, coughing as the slugs chugged into his body. He slumped to his knees while Hazard held him up, at arm's length, and he was hit again and again.

The walls of the closed room shook from the explosions. Dying, old Walt lurched against the poker table, scattering cards and chips to the floor with his free hand.

"Turn 'em off!" shouted Hazard, and as he released the victim he jerked out his .44 and sent a final bullet crashing through the old man's head.

Then there was silence, broken only by brassy tinkles as empty shells flew to the floor, punched from the guns of the murderers.

"Pick up them empties!" ordered Hazard sharply. "Don't leave 'em yere. Quick! Somebody go to the front door and see if anybody heard

the shootin'! It's lucky the doors are locked."

"I'd thought of thet," nodded Barth. "These walls is purty thick, too."

Some of the gunmen listened at the doors for a minute or two. They came back, reporting that the shots had attracted no attention from the street which at that hour was practically deserted.

"Everything's *bueno*, I reckon, fer the time bein'," said Barth, licking the cigarette he had just rolled and lighting it coolly. He stared down at the quiet, strangely shrunken figure of Walt Larson. "Would yuh look at thet? We tore him nearly to pieces, Clay. We ought to git him out of yere. What's the plan?"

"It's nearly dark," said Clay Hazard. "When everything is clear, we'll carry him out and away from yere. No witnesses—nobody kin prove a thing." He laughed savagely. "Steve Neal kin try and git the goods on us. It'll be his first job as sheriff o' Black Mountain!"

CHAPTER II.

STEVE NEAL.

LEAVING his mother's white-painted cottage at the head of the gulch, the newly elected sheriff walked slowly up the slope to Boot Hill.

He had learned the news of his victory only a half hour before. The silver badge of his office was pinned to his calfskin vest, but there was nothing exultant in his stride, and on his face was a look of sadness and reverence.

He climbed through the sagging wire fence and found himself walking through the high, thick grass of the old cemetery. It was twilight, the sun had long since crept down

over the timbered summit of Black Mountain, and the sheriff's feeling of awe increased.

An owl, concealed somewhere in the dark thickets, hooted mournfully. From a sunken grave, a bat flew up with startling abruptness, its black wings beating with a convulsive flutter.

Before one of the long-forgotten graves the sheriff paused. The headboard was flat, but he could read the dimly painted inscription on the slab of decaying wood:

Sam Hazard

Killed by Sheriff
John Neal

He passed to the next grave, removing his wide Stetson and bowing his uncovered head. It was the grave of his father. Although the little plot was more neatly kept, the headboard of this, too, had been recently blown down and its inscription was strangely like that of the other—except that it was reversed.

Sheriff John Neal

Killed by
Sam Hazard

Steve Neal stood for a long minute in silence. He was a big, powerfully built hombre for his age, with broad shoulders that tapered down to a slim waist.

His flannel shirt was laced at the neck with a buckskin thong, and he wore softly tanned leather chaparajos and spurred, high-heeled boots. A wide cartridge belt sloped to his hip, suspending a holstered Colt .45 of the single-action pattern.

Steve was thoughtfully tapping the ivory handle of it now. That gun had belonged to his long-dead father. It was the Colt that had filled the other grave.

"Well, I'm here, dad," Steve whispered huskily. "I made it. I owe it most of all to Walt. Reckon yuh never knowed him, but he's meant a lot to ma and me, all these years, and I reckon yuh understand. I'm goin' to make him my deputy."

A wind, like a long-drawn-out sigh, softly stirred the rank grass of Boot Hill. From his pocket Steve carefully took a letter. It was from his dead father, sealed with red wax, and yellowed with age. In faded ink on the musty envelope was the following:

For My Son Stephen
To be Opened on the Day When He
Becomes Sheriff of Black Mountain.

A lump came to Steve's throat. That letter had been written long ago—a year or so before John Neal had met his end—but even then he had confidence and hopes in his son, who had been only a baby then. And now the day had come to read his father's words.

With fingers that shook a little, Steve tore open the letter and held it to the dying daylight that still glimmered in the west. The letter ran:

MY DEAR SON: I feel that someday your eyes will fall on what I'm writing here. I have every hope that it will. You are a Neal.

Stephen, if I'm fortunate enough to be in the land of the living when you're elected sheriff, I can give the following advice by word of mouth. If not, then by this letter. If you are going to be a good officer, and I know you are going to be, you will keep these points in mind:

First—Do your duty at all times, and don't let even the ones you love most dearly swerve you from it.

Second—Never make an arrest until you have evidence against him that will convict him in the courts.

Third—It's all right to forgive your enemies, but never forgive an enemy of the law.

Fourth—As sheriff you will have unpleas-

ant things to attend to. By this, I mean the hanging of murderers. To a man of fine sensibilities this is difficult, but do not allow a deputy or other officer to perform something you would shrink from yourself. Spring the gallows trap with your own hand.

Fifth and most important—Bring in your man, dead or alive, even though you have to die to do it!

Congratulations on your election, son,
from your father,
JOHN NEAL.

Misty-eyed, Steve carefully refolded the letter and put it away in the pocket of his shirt, buttoning down the flap. He felt that he was closer now than ever to his dead father, the man he hardly remembered. And this code of gun ethics that had once been Sheriff John Neal's would now be his own!

He was still at the grave when he heard shouts and the trampling of feet behind him. He turned, thinking that more of his friends and well-wishers had followed him here to shake hands with him over his victory at the polls.

He was about to wave them back—he didn't care for more acclaim, especially at this sacred place—when he caught something in their yells that made him stiffen quickly:

"Oh, sheriff! Steve! Somethin' terrible's happened! Is thet you up thar?"

Steve went down the hill toward them.

"What's up?" he demanded, recognizing the white-mustached Judge Hackert in the gloom.

With him were several other excited friends of his family.

"Yore stepdad's been shot. Yuh'd better come—we've carried him in at yore mother's."

"Bad?" cried the sheriff with a sharp intake of breath.

"He's dead, Steve," said the judge in a faltering voice. "He was found in the alley back o' Broughten's Liv-

ery Barn, and nobody knows who done it. He was shot seven or eight times."

Steve swayed a little on his feet, then straightened his wide shoulders.

"All right," he said in a low voice. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER III.

THE RED CHIP.

WHEN they reached the house, Steve, who had been leading the way, turned and asked the others to remain outside.

"If yuh-all don't mind, friends," he said quietly, "I think my mother would like to have me with her fer a while alone."

"Shore, Steve, we understand," said Judge Hackert. "We'll be waitin' out yere under the willows until yuh want us."

Steve hastened on into the dim, lamplit bedroom, white under his tan. On a couch in the shadow was a sheeted, motionless figure, entirely covered except for a wisp of silvery hair and one thin, relaxed hand that had drooped to the floor. But Steve's first thought was not for the shattered body, but for the frail little lady who was kneeling by it. He lifted her up into his arms.

"Don't cry, ma," he whispered. "Yuh've still got me."

For a long time, his mother continued to weep, clinging to him despairingly. Gradually, however, her sobs became less violent as he comforted her. He brushed back her disarranged hair awkwardly but tenderly and held her close to him.

"I'll find out who's responsible, maw," he muttered.

She lifted her tear-stained face—she hardly came to his shoulder—and shook her head.

"It won't bring Walt back, Stephen," she wept.

"I—I know that, but I'll get 'em," Steve said through clenched teeth.

"First your father, Stephen, and now—Walt," his mother moaned. "The law—law! Sometimes I think we're on the wrong side of it!"

"Don't say that!" Steve cried almost fiercely.

"Well, I can't let them take you, too. You're all I've got now. It's like you said, Stephen."

"What do yuh mean, ma?" he asked gently.

"You're sheriff of this county now—this bad, wicked county," she sobbed. "They'll kill you, too! I can't stand it, Stephen. You must resign. Promise me."

"Why, I can't do that, ma!" said Steve, startled. "I can't do it. I couldn't think o' turnin' in my star!"

"Wouldn't you, Stephen," she pleaded, "if I asked it? Would you refuse that to your mother if it meant her happiness?"

Sweat stood out on Steve's brow. He shook his head unsteadily.

"No—I'm sheriff," he choked.

His mother began to sob again in heartbreak, and Steve's own eyes filled with tears. He began to relent. After all, maybe he owed more to his mother than to Black Mountain.

But as he was weakening, his father's first stern command came to his mind and seemed to burn there in letters of fire:

First—Do your duty at all times, and don't let even the ones you love most dearly swerve you from it.

"No, ma," he told his mother gently. "Yo're a sheriff's widow and a sheriff's mother. Remember that, and be brave. I think yuh know what dad would want us both to do. Let's me and you try."

"But, son, they—they'll shoot you!" she faltered.

"Let 'em shoot away!" Steve cried fiercely. "I'll do a little of thet myself!"

Something in Steve's face must have reassured the mother and brought her courage. It was a strong, clean-cut face with a grimly determined jaw. He had the habit of dropping his left eye, and in times of stress it would be almost entirely shut—as it was now.

"All right, Stephen," she murmured. "You know best. I won't let myself be afraid."

He gave her an encouraging little pat on her stooped shoulders, kissed her forehead, and then strode toward the silent form on the couch.

He lifted the stained sheet from all that was left of his stepfather, then steeled himself to endure the shock of what he saw. Whoever the killers were, they had certainly been thorough at their work, and he felt a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach.

A lump came to his throat as he looked at the pitiful wounds in the huddled body, the gaping hole in the head. Old Walt had been good to Steve, almost like his own father. It was hard to bear.

He was about to enshroud the body in the sheet again when his glance fell on something in the tightly clenched hand of the murdered man. It was the left hand, and Steve pried it free with difficulty, for it was held in the grip of death.

When he saw what the object was, the youthful sheriff's brow wrinkled with surprise. It was a red chip—a red poker chip.

Then Steve made a noise in his throat. He recognized it—knew where it had come from. Inlaid in the red composition counter was a design he knew well—a small white star.

Only one saloon in Black Mountain had such chips. That was Clay Hazard's "Lone Star"!

Rage swept over Steve in a red tornado. Clay Hazard—the son of the hombre who had killed his father, the man Steve had beaten in the race for sheriff. This was the work of him and his crew, no doubt about that.

Steve had always been willing to let than ancient feud stay buried. Until now, he'd thought that Hazard felt the same way about it. Their fathers had killed each other, and Steve had thought that had squared things.

He knew that Hazard and his bunch had a very unsavory reputation, and he'd had no dealings with him. But this—

"I'll go and clean out thet skunk's nest!" he thought as he leaped for the door. "They'll get me, too, I reckon, but I'll burn some of 'em afore I go down. And Clay Hazard will—"

Then he stopped, looking down at the red chip in his hand. The advice of his father who had spoken to him from across eternity came to him again:

Second—Never make an arrest until you have evidence against him that will convict him in the courts.

His mother was staring at Steve's blanched face.

"What is it, son?" she asked anxiously.

"Nothin', ma," Steve told her, "I'll be back in a minute."

He slipped out into the shadow and called softly for Judge Hackert. The old man hurried up quickly.

"Anything I kin do, Steve lad?"

"Yes," whispered the sheriff tersely, "I found this in Walt's hand. Reco'nize it?" He stepped in the light of the window.

At the sight of the red chip, the judge jumped in amazement.

"I shore do, Steve," he nodded.

"Is it evidence? Yo're the judge, and yuh ought to know?" Steve questioned rapidly. "Is it enough to put the rope around Hazard's and his men's necks?"

Judge Hackert considered a moment, and then shook his head regretfully.

"No, I'm afraid it's 'way too slim, sheriff," he said in a low voice. "It ain't proof enough to convict. No jury in the land would hang an hombre on jist thet. But it shows yuh the lay of the land, don't it, Steve? Investigate plenty, and if yuh kin dig up more evidence——"

"I'll dig," snapped Steve, "and then there'll be some grave-diggin' done up on Boot Hill!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE REIGN OF CRIME.

DAYS dragged by and grew into weeks—nerve-racking and futile weeks for Sheriff Steve Neal. All his investigations came to nothing. On every hand he ran against a blank wall. He could get nothing more on the Clay Hazard gang, although he toiled with brain and body thirty hours at a stretch sometimes without sleep.

He ate little, and his face began to take on a haggard expression. But it became more determined, more grim. His left eye was more narrowed and steely than ever.

To make things worse, a wave of crime swept over Black Mountain and the surrounding county. The Toby Mercantile Store was robbed and eight hundred dollars taken; the office of the O. K. Stables was looted; bandits raided the Miners' and Cowboys' Rest Saloon and got away with over a thousand in hard

money. And there were other crimes—men were held up and once the stagecoach was robbed of a small sum.

Steve did his best, but there were too many of the bandits, and it always happened that he was somewhere else when the robberies took place. They seemed to watch him, to know his every move.

He would be trying to trail down clews after one robbery, when another would take place. The bandits did their work masked, and nobody knew for certain who they were, although many—and they included Steve—could make pretty shrewd guesses. But getting the goods on the lawbreakers was a different matter.

Steve found some of his friends turning against him—some of his most loyal supporters, the decent citizens who had put him in office. He was beginning to find himself whispered about, and what was even worse—laughed at.

The whole town was beginning to murmur against him. The few who suggested that Steve was in league with the bandits didn't dare say it openly, however.

Steve took it to heart. One day at breakfast, he could eat nothing, though his mother tried to coax him with all his favorite dishes.

"They think I'm the most stump-headed sheriff Black Mountain has ever had, ma," he said, staring moodily into his empty plate. "Reckon dad wouldn't be so proud of me, if he knew," he went on miserably. "I've worried so much about Walt's killin' thet it seems I jist can't think o' nothin' else. I can't get evidence on nobody."

"Your time will come, son," his mother said encouragingly, "and in the meantime don't worry so much. Promise?"

"Yes, ma, and when my time *does* come——"

He saddled up his sorrel bronc Red Lightning and rode thoughtfully into town.

Steve knew, by this time, just who were in Clay Hazard's bunch. They were Barth, Jake, Finn, Rexman, Wayburg, Corliss, "Chilly" McAdams, and two Mexicans named Francisco Lopez and Juan Montebio. Nine in all. The sheriff was sure, too, that they were the guilty ones. But how to get sufficient evidence to convict them? That was the question!

He was passing into Main Street and had just gone by the jail with its tiny connecting office, when an idea came to him. He rode up to the dingy little printing shop where the *Black Mountain Weekly Star* was published.

Dismounting, he hurried inside and stayed for a quarter of an hour. When he came out again, just the faintest suspicion of a smile was on the bronzed face of Sheriff Steve Neal.

During the three days that followed, there were several other crimes committed in town, all of them petty thefts, but all the more exasperating to the worried citizens of Black Mountain. There began to be talk of removing Steve from office.

Only a handful of friends, Judge Hackert among them, remained loyal. Then that week's issue of the *Star* was printed. It seemed to contain nothing very unusual.

The morning the paper appeared, however, an excited, angry little hombre in spectacles dashed across the street to the printing office, flourishing a copy of the *Star* in his hand.

"Whar's the editor!" he shrilled.

"I want to know why yuh made sech a crazy, loco mistake as tuh——"

"Calm down now, Mr. Everts," said the editor of the paper, looking down from his high, wooden stool where he was setting up type. "Yuh'll have to talk thet over with Steve."

For the first time, Everts, the assayer, noticed that he wasn't alone in the office with the editor. Steve Neal was there, tipped back in a chair, one booted foot crossed over his knee. A cigarette dangled from his mouth and one eye was half closed.

"Oh, howdy, sheriff," Everts blurted. "This article in the paper this mornin'—I don't savvy it. And if yuh think yuh know my own business better than I do myself, well—I dunno what to say! Anyway, it's a big lie! I'll read it:

"PLACER MINING IN COUNTY IMPROVES

"Gold production in the Black Mountain district seems to have reached a new peak, and it is hinted that we may enjoy boom days again. According to reports, Mr. Frank Everts, well-known local assayer, is shipping on this afternoon's (Thursday's) stage, gold bullion to the value of \$10,000.

"I wish thet was true, but it ain't!" cried the assayer indignantly. "I want to know who put thet in!"

"I did," said Steve coolly.

"The article is a lie from start to finish!" howled Everts.

"Not hardly, amigo," the sheriff chuckled. "Didn't yuh notice those words 'it is hinted' and 'accordin' to reports'? Thet saves it from bein' a downright falsehood." His face then grew serious. "Have yuh told any one else about this not bein' true?" he demanded.

"No, I came yere the fust thing," said Everts. "What's the meanin' o' this?"

"When this afternoon's stage rolls

in," said Steve, "I want yuh to put a package on it—a package of bricks, old iron, or anything yuh please, but a package. Will yuh help me?"

The light dawned on the assayer's face. "Yuh mean yo're goin' to try and trap those bandit hombres?"

"Exactly," said Steve patiently. "I'll be hid inside that stage when it rattles out o' Black Mountain."

CHAPTER V.

THE FIGHT ON THE TRAIL.

A CURIOUS crowd had collected on Black Mountain's main street when the big Concord stagecoach, after halting as usual at the Duncan Brothers Livery Stables, drew up again at the entrance of Everts's assay office.

The curtains of the huge vehicle were closely drawn, and while there seemed to be no passengers, the driver and the shotgun messenger were perched on their high seats, as usual, when the assayer carried out a heavy, iron-bound box.

"Be mighty keerful, boys," Everts panted as he hoisted it up, and the two stage men nodded grimly.

The box was deposited on the top of the coach, inside the ten-inch-high iron rail, just behind the guard. Then, with the rumble of wheels, the popping of leather and the loud oaths of the gray-headed driver, the stage rolled away in a smudge of yellow dust.

They were hardly out of town and over the first hill, when the shotgun messenger turned in his seat and called down guardedly:

"Bueno, sheriff! What's the plans?"

"Tell Pete to slow down a little," said Steve Neal through an opening in the tarp. "One of yuh hombres is goin' to leave the stage at the

next turn. I'll change places—and clothes—with yuh. I don't want either of yuh killed in this deal."

There were snorts of protest from both the driver and the express guard.

"Listen, when yuh sneaked aboard at Five Mile Ranch we told yuh we was in on this!" cried the old driver. "Them blasted bandits have held us up afore, and we figure we kin git the low-down coyotes this time, with yuh along, Steve."

The wheels of the coach creaked steadily up the long grade.

"And I told yuh thet there was no use in havin' either of yuh hurt over a fake box o' bullion," said Steve firmly. "If it was real, it'd be different, but as it is, I want to take all the risks. Pete, yo're the oldest—turn the lines over to yore pardner and pile off."

"My pard Bill ought to be the one to pile off," the driver growled. "He's got a wife and fam'ly."

"My job is to guard this yere old rattle-she-bang," began the shotgun messenger loudly, "and by golly, I'm——"

"I'm orderin' one of yuh to get down, anyway," Steve said grimly. "Decide pronto which it's to be. I'm expectin' the stick-up at the top of thet timbered grade two miles farther on!"

After a brief but hot argument, and much against his will, the married guard got down from his seat, and while Pete halted his team for a moment, changed hats with Steve. The sheriff also borrowed his black leather coat and put it on.

"Well, good luck, sheriff!" said the hombre who was leaving. "And remember—thet scattergun is powerful quick on the triggers, specially the back one."

Steve climbed up behind the

driver and, at a swifter pace, the stagecoach clattered onward.

The country around Black Mountain was as beautiful as always, and it had never seemed more grand and magnificent than it did that afternoon. There would be long stretches of dark pine timber, so close to the trail and so high above it, that the stage seemed to be thundering down an endless tunnel.

Then grassy little parks would open up like gardens, where silvery water rippled and aspen trees trembled green and white in the breeze. Towering over all were the Rockies, red and granite-gray, their peaks and domes glittering with everlasting snow.

"How many of them snakes do yuh reckon will jump us, Steve?" asked the old driver, as he nursed his team around a long curve.

"All of 'em, I hope, Pete," said the young sheriff grimly. "I'm shore gettin' anxious to start shootin' away at that bunch. But I'm afraid I'm gettin' *you* in a mess. We ain't got much of a chance, if the whole gang hits us at once."

"Shucks, Steve, have some eatin' tobaccer," chuckled the old driver, reaching for his tobacco plug.

Steve smoked a cigarette instead, but he grinned and gave Pete a slap across the shoulders. He had a brave hombre with him. Steve wondered if, when the show-down came, he would be as brave as Pete. This would be his first test. Steve thought of his father and set his jaw.

Unless he'd guessed wrong, the time was at hand for action—only a few minutes away. The stage was lumbering slowly up a long, steep grade. At the top of it was a sharp turn, and the team would be going at a snail's pace when they reached it. There, he was pretty certain, trouble would be waiting.

"When it starts, Pete," said Steve earnestly, "I want yuh to throw yoreself flat. Promise?"

"Shore—shore!" chuckled the driver, shifting his tobacco from one side of his leathery face to the other.

His long whip cracked. They were at the top of the hill now, rounding the curve.

Then it happened! Six men came rushing from the jack-pine thicket that bordered the trail. Watchful and alert as Steve had been, the attack came with nerve-racking suddenness.

Four of the bandits were on foot and two mounted. All were masked with bandannas, and all had guns in their hands.

"Up with 'em!" yelled one of the horsemen with an oath. "Put 'em up or we'll blow yuh out o' yore seats!"

"Throw down thet money box!" snarled the other mounted hombre, and at the same instant two of the others leaped in at the team leaders and grabbed the bits.

With a yell of triumphant anger, Sheriff Steve Neal sprang to his feet, whirling up the short-barreled shotgun. His left eye was shut and the other was like a fiery star.

"I'm shootin' away, yuh side-winders!" he shouted, and at the same moment he pulled both triggers of his scattergun.

Br-r-r-rong! Whan-n-n-n-ng! The double barrels spouted streamers of orange-red flame and steamy white smoke.

Buckshot hissed through the air like a cyclone of destruction, tearing limbs and pine needles from the near-by trees. But most of the leaden pellets ripped into the body of the nearest rider, striking him in the chest. With a weird screech, he tumbled from his horse into the rutted road.

"It's thet kid sheriff! Drop him quick!" the desperadoes bellowed hoarsely.

They tore loose with their Colts, charging in with profane shouts. Slugs squalled all about Steve. One nicked his ear, two others ripped through the slack of his flannel shirt. It looked like certain death for him, but the sheriff's teeth were gleaming in a grin.

He hurled the still smoking shotgun full in the face of the nearest bandit, swinging it with all his force. The man dropped like a log, his six-gun exploding as he fell.

"Shoot away!" Steve yelled, as he vaulted from his high seat and over the rump of the nearest horse to the ground. "We've just started!"

As he jumped he saw out of the corner of his eye that Pete the stage driver had taken his advice and dropped flat. Whipping out his big Colt, the sheriff fired twice from the level of his thigh, aiming at the two bandits who were still clinging to the bits of the rearing and plunging leaders. The two shots came as one.

The old single-action of John Neal was as accurate as it had been when another Neal had lined the sights. Both bandits sagged down, one killed instantly, the other dying with a hole below his heart.

"And I'm still," Steve barked, "shootin' away!" He spun on the heels of his boots to cover the masked desperado at his left.

"Don't shoot! I quit, sheriff!" shrilled the hombre in alarm, and throwing down his gun he jerked his hands aloft.

The sixth bandit, who was astride a cayuse, spurred his mount frantically and crashed out of sight through the jackpines. Except for him, it was a clean sweep for the law—three killed and two captured.

"Oh, so it's you, is it, Finn?"

Steve said as he ripped the bandanna mask from his shrinking prisoner.

He snapped one cuff of a pair of steel manacles around Finn's right wrist and dragged him back toward the hombre he'd stunned with the shotgun. The gunman was still unconscious, and the sheriff clicked the other handcuff over his wrist also, linking his two prisoners together.

"Wayburg, eh?" Steve clipped as he unmasked his other captive. "Well, I can't say I'm surprised a-tall."

The team of horses had run about thirty yards along the road and stopped. Evidently Pete had snatched up the lines and got them under control.

Steve kicked a gun out of reach of the two captured bandits and went over to look at the three dead ones. They were soon identified. The man Steve had cut from the saddle with the buckshot was Chilly McAdams, the other two were the Mexicans of the outfit, Juan Monterubio and Francisco Lopez.

"Not surprised at thet, either," muttered the sheriff of Black Mountain. "Hm-m-m! The skunk thet got away on his bronc could either be Corliss, Rexman, or Barth. I'd guess Barth. And I'm bettin' now thet Clay Hazard wishes he'd thrown all his bunch into this job instead of only six."

Wondering why old Pete wasn't turning or backing up his team. Steve hurried along the road to the wagon.

"Are yuh all right, Pete?" he sang out anxiously.

"Shore," came the reassuring answer. "Jist hit—thet's all. How 'bout yuh, Steve? Did yuh—"

"Hit?" The sheriff scrambled up on the seat.

He saw now that the team had

stopped on the trail of its own accord. The old driver was lying prone, his face drawn and waxy white. A splatter of crimson was on the footboard.

When he had lifted the old driver up as gently as he could and had eased him down on the road, Steve was grief-stricken to find that Pete's wound was mortal. He was sinking fast—beyond all human aid now.

"Pete, I—I don't know what to say," the sheriff blurted. "I'm afraid——" He choked up and couldn't go on.

"It's *bueno*—I don't mind goin', son." Pete smiled. "I'm old. Thet dang stage company was goin' to retire me next month—retire me from the only job I ever loved. Reckon—I fooled 'em—didn't I, Steve?"

They were the stage driver's last words.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE GALLOWES.

JUSTICE was swift. Within a week, Wayburg and Jake Finn had been tried in Judge Hackert's court for the murder of Pete and had been found guilty and condemned to hang.

At midnight, Friday, a little party gathered at the newly erected gallows in the jail yard to see the sentence carried out.

As Sheriff Steve Neal had kept the execution a secret as far as possible, there was not a large crowd—only a few of Steve's friends, including Judge Hackert. Most of the town thought the hanging was to take place the following Monday.

Steve had thought this necessary to prevent a possible rescue. The two condemned desperadoes had dangerous pardners, even though three of them had been wiped out.

It was rainy and dismal, and the

little group of spectators shivered in the shelter of the scaffold while the sheriff went into the jail to bring out the two murderers.

Gusts of wind howled drearily through the deserted street. Two lanterns had been lighted, but they had been carefully shrouded in blankets and not a light was to be seen.

Five minutes passed, and Steve came splashing up toward the platform with the shadowy figures of Finn and Wayburg marching before him. The hands of each had been tied behind his back and they were swearing and muttering in terror and hate.

"The boys will git yuh fer this!" Finn snarled. "If yuh know what's good fer yuh——"

"I just know what's good for *you*," said Steve grimly as he mounted the steps with them to adjust the dangling nooses. "All right, amigos," he called down. "Let's have a little light!"

The covers were taken from the two lanterns, which gleamed like a pair of baleful, yellow eyes in the misty rain.

The little knot of men below the scaffold held their breath. It was a tense moment.

"Anything to say before yuh swing, men?" Steve asked quickly. He was about to adjust the ropes about their necks. In less than a minute, if nothing went wrong, the stage driver's slayers would be in eternity.

Their courage and bravado breaking completely, Finn and Wayburg began to struggle and cry out hysterically. And as if their cries had been a signal, a shot rang out sharply!

It was the report of a Winchester .30-30 and with it came the tinkle of smashing glass! The bullet had broken one of the lanterns.

Before the echoes of the first report had died away it was followed by another. The second lantern was instantly extinguished, and all was plunged in pitch darkness.

Without releasing his hold on the two prisoners, Sheriff Steve Neal drew his .45. All was mad confusion now, and over the startled yells of the spectators Steve heard the splashing thuds of hoofs pounding closer.

He was afraid to fire, at first, for fear of hitting the wrong hombres in the darkness, and when he did jerk up his Colt to shoot it was too late.

He saw a spurt of red flame wink at him through the blackness—the Winchester again. But he never heard the report. Something crashed against his head like an Apache war hammer. He felt himself pitching forward down the gallops steps, then nothingness.

When Steve came to himself he was at home in his own bed, and the dawn was glimmering grayly under the drawn blinds of the room. On the bureau a lamp was burning dimly, sending up a twisting little spiral of smoke.

His head ached. Somebody seemed to be pounding at his temple with a hammer, the beats coming as steadily as the throbs of his heart. For a while that was all he understood.

Then he saw the kindly, anxious face of the old judge over him. Several other of his friends were there, too. Gradually, it all came back—the rifle shots, the pounding of those hoofs out of the night.

"The hangin'—it didn't come off?" he muttered, trying to lift himself on one elbow. "How did I get yere? Is thet you, ma?"

"Yes, Stephen," her familiar voice

replied soothingly. "Don't think about it—everything is all right. The doctor was here, a while ago, and he says you got only what he called a concussion."

"A leetle closer, Steve," said one of the sheriff's rancher friends, "and yore brains would have concused all over the jail yard. Feel better, boy?"

"I'm all right," the sheriff grunted. "So I lost my prisoners! A fine officer I'm turnin' out to be!"

"Wasn't yore fault—yuh took every precaution," said Judge Hackert. "Yuh've done fine—killin' three of thet gang was aplenty fer one man! What yuh ought to do is appoint yoreself a good deputy or two, so yuh wouldn't have to work so hard."

"When Walt Larson was killed, I swore to myself I'd clean up Black Mountain alone, and I will yet!" growled Steve. "I'm gettin' up from here!"

"But, Stephen," his mother cried in protest, "the doctor said you were to stay in bed for at least a day or two. Now you lie back down like a good boy. We haven't undressed you yet except for your boots, but if you'll let me, I'll——"

"Gosh, no!" Steve exclaimed, sitting up and beginning to pull on his boots. "Thet crazy medico ought to have examined his own noggin instead o' mine! Only one thing yuh can do fer me, ma. Mind gettin' me a cup o' java? Never mind the pink tea."

"Be reasonable now, Steve," put in Judge Hackert. "Those hombres are clean out of the county by this time—'way out of yore territory. Why not let 'em go?"

Steve shook his head, his jaws snapping shut with a click, his left eye narrowing. Stamped indelibly

on his mind was his father's grim admonishment:

Third—It's all right to forgive your enemies, but never forgive an enemy of the law.

CHAPTER VII.

SHERIFF'S WARNING!

SADDLING up his sorrel, Red Lightning, Steve mounted and rode down into town. He stopped at the jail yard, but the news of the night's happenings had traveled like wildfire and sight-seeing crowds had trampled it into a sea of muddy footprints.

He could learn nothing there, so he mounted again and trotted down Main Street to the Lone Star Saloon. Before he did anything else, he had a call to make.

He left Red Lightning at the hitch rail, dismounted, and stepped through the swinging doors of Hazard's headquarters.

It was early yet, and except for Clay Hazard himself, the place was empty. The saloon keeper was behind his high bar, polishing glasses. He stiffened as Steve entered.

"Well, if it isn't the sheriff! Kind of early, ain't yuh?"

"Oh, so-so," said Steve easily, coming up opposite. He was smiling, but with his lips alone.

He had caught the look of poisonous hatred that had flashed from Hazard's black, close-set eyes. It had quickly died away and given place to a sneering smirk.

"Looks like we're goin' to have a nice day," Steve drawled casually. "Cleared up a lot since midnight—be good huntin'. Rabbit tracks won't be washed out—be just good enough to track 'em good."

"What do I care about rabbits?" shrugged Hazard. "What did yuh come fer? A drink?"

"Yes, I'll buy one," said Steve, and he tossed a poker chip on the bar—a red chip with a white star inlaid.

Hazard's eyes narrowed, and he gave a nervous start at the sight of it. He flashed a quick glance up at Steve's bronzed face.

"Thet ain't money—it won't buy no drink," he grunted finally.

"All right," said Steve, picking up the chip and slipping it back in his vest pocket. "But some day, hombre, yuh'll take thet chip."

"Some day, sheriff," said the saloon keeper coldly; "yo're goin' to get killed. O' course I wouldn't threaten yuh—I wouldn't dream of it. I'm just tellin' yuh."

"I wouldn't be much surprised but what yo're right," said Steve, rolling a brown cigarette. "Do yuh aim to be around about thet time?"

"I'm still plumb interested to know," returned Hazard sourly, "why yo're favorin' me with a call."

"Well, hombre, to be brief, what do yuh know about the escape o' Finn and Wayburg?"

"Nothin' at all," said Hazard, showing his long, pointed teeth. "Shorely," he added mockingly, "yuh wasn't aimin' to arrest me or nothin' like thet?"

Steve lighted his cigarette. "Not until I get enough evidence, Hazard," he said softly. "Don't get impatient—as soon as I get it, I'll be in for yuh."

"And it'll be too bad fer you, if yuh ever do," said the saloon keeper in a whisper.

The sheriff's left eye drooped another notch. His lithe body grew tense, and as he flipped his cigarette into a cuspidor with a downward motion of his right arm, his hand remained near his .45.

"Yuh've got a high bar here,

hombre," he said crisply, "nearly chest-high. But I can see yore elbow in the mirror behind yuh, savvy? Now you start moppin' the bar and you start moppin' fast!"

The reflection in the mirror of Hazard's elbow ceased to move—it remained where it was as if frozen to the glass. Hazard's pasty face twitched and his sinister black eyes seemed smoking with repressed rage.

"Listen, Steve Neal!" he cried raspingly. "Why all this stallin'? Why pull this sheriff stuff on me? We savvy each other. I hate you—you hate me. Then step back and drag yore cutter. We'll shoot it out like our fathers did, years ago. Go on! I'm ready!"

"I admit thet yore offer sounds enticin'," Steve drawled. "Personally, I'd like to shoot away at you a whole lot. But get this—I'm here as an officer of the law, and there's nothin' personal about it. When I get enough goods on yuh, Hazard, to arrest yuh I'll do it—or kill yuh! That's all for to-day. Adios."

"Yuh'd better walk backwards out o' yere!" cried the saloon keeper, his voice shaking with fury. "Do yuh savvy what I mean?"

"Yes," said the sheriff. "And this is what I mean."

On the bar was an uncorked bottle of whisky from which Hazard had been drinking before Steve came in. Deliberately, Steve reached out and pushed it over. An amber stream rushed from it and gurgled down the full length of the counter.

"I'm goin' to walk out of here face-front," said Steve significantly. "If yuh think it's healthy to try and shoot me in the back—well, thet's up to you. But don't miss! In thet case, I think most *any* sheriff would feel justified in blowin' yore head off. I even think I would, myself.

Now I don't care much what yuh do, hombre, but if yuh want my advice, I'd suggest thet yuh start moppin' yore bar—and mop it pretty."

Steve turned, and slowly, without hurry, sauntered on out of the Lone Star. At the door he glanced back.

Clay Hazard was mopping his bar.

CHAPTER VIII.

KILLERS' CABIN.

THE sheriff's head still ached a little from the bullet crease it had received, but he was feeling immensely better when he galloped out of Black Mountain, shortly after delivering his "friendly" warning to Clay Hazard.

Steve was riding on a hunch. Several trails led out of the county seat, and all of them had been traveled that morning. He knew that he would lose much time—probably fail altogether—if he tried to track his men down the wrong one.

He tried to put himself in the outlaws' position and decide what he would do himself if he were in their boots. Two of the five hombres he was pursuing were condemned fugitives. They'd try to get as far from Black Mountain as possible.

"And the others will see 'em safe across the range," Steve told his sorrel. "They'll hole up to-night near the top of the Divide—thet means the Skeleton Gulch country. Anyway, ol' hoss, thet's where *we're* headin' for. Let's make time, Red!"

Red Lightning gave its best. The sorrel was a deep-chested, long-legged animal, and Steve was sure that it was a match for the best of the outlaws' broncs, especially in rugged, rocky country.

Steve followed no trail, but cut along in a straight line for a dozen miles, following the backbone of the

Continental Divide. The going was hard, but the cayuse was good for anything that might come.

Then Steve swung toward the mountains themselves, climbing an aspen-choked canyon and following a roaring stream upward. Finally they came out on a high plateau where there was but little timber. There were a few old, deserted mining dumps here, but soon they left all signs of civilization behind and cut through the unbroken wilderness.

"I may be wrong, Red," Steve grunted, after several lonely miles of this. It was noon now and the sun almost overhead.

He had been in the Skeleton Gulch several times hunting deer, and now he was hunting far more dangerous game. He rode as swiftly as he could, but remembered to be cautious.

It would be a mighty big and easy country to die in. An army could hide itself here—a regiment of ambushers.

Suddenly, two hours later, he came upon fresh horse tracks and droppings. Five riders had passed that way. His hunch had been right, after all.

"Now we'll quit cruisin' and start trailin'," said the young sheriff grimly.

Steve made better time now, for he knew where he was going. Within another hour, he'd entered Skeleton Gulch itself—a mighty chasm several miles wide between two mighty shoulders of sullen gray stone. By following it, one could reach a pass over the snow fields of the Rockies, and it was this pass that the five desperadoes were bound for.

Even in broad daylight, the gulch was weird and depressing. A great forest of dead pine trees, all washed

stark white by the rains and snows of many years, gave the place its ghastly name. It was as silent as a tomb and seemed empty of all life.

The bottom was filled with boggy marshes and rank growths of unwholesome bushes. Mosquitoes and midges whined in Steve's ears and danced madly before his eyes as he rode along. Those insects seemed to be the only living things in that haunted desolation.

Trailing the fugitives was as easy now as following a drove of oxen. Red Lightning sometimes bogged down in the deep tracks made by the other broncs.

The sheriff became more wary and alert with each passing minute. His keen eyes—the left one drooping a little—searched the lonely gulch ahead with painstaking care.

Then, in midafternoon, he quietly pulled his cayuse to a halt. A half mile ahead, partly hidden by tall reeds that had grown up around it, was a small corral made of whitened logs.

It was in a state of ruin, but attempts had been made to mend it, and there were horses inside! Five of them!

"Wait right here until I want yuh, Red! Don't budge," Steve ordered as he slid from his sorrel's back and led the animal out of view behind a clump of wild currant.

He tightened his gun belt a notch and pushed his Colt deeper into its holster, for he'd have some hard walking to do now. The gang surely couldn't be far away from that corral, unless—the thought came to him as a distinct shock—they had cached some fresh horses here in advance and simply changed mounts.

"But in thet case," he reasoned, "they wouldn't have put their

ganted ones in the corral. They'd have turned 'em loose."

He pressed on slowly over the treacherous, soggy ground, sometimes sinking to his boot tops in mud and water. The rank growth of bush offered him plenty of cover, and he took every advantage of it. He'd nearly reached the old corral now.

Then he stopped short. A couple of hundred yards up the mountain, built with one end against the rock, was an old cabin, made with the white logs that were so plentiful here. It was falling into decay and probably had been erected years before by some sheepman or prospector.

But that cabin wasn't deserted! From the sagging, sod roof projected a section of old stovepipe, and from it climbed the blue smoke of a wood fire!

Steve Neal chuckled. For him, the layout could hardly be better. They'd trapped themselves!

Cautiously he circled the hut and climbed a little above it. The door faced the gulch, and there was only one window, piercing the wall on the west side.

After looking over the situation for a few minutes, Steve approached slowly, advancing toward the cabin's blind, windowless side. A spring of clear water, he noted, was bubbling up between him and the shack.

Steve ducked behind a bush, dropping on one knee. An hombre was coming from the cabin, walking directly toward Steve. He carried a rusty bucket in his hand. He was after water from the spring.

It was Corliss—Steve recognized him by his whiskery red face and lop-sided nose. He was a paunchy-waisted man of about forty, and reputed to be quicksilver fast on the

draw, for all his apparent clumsiness.

Hardly twenty yards from Steve, he bent over and dipped in his bucket. The sheriff's right hand dropped toward his thigh.

"Yo're arrested, Corliss!" he said in a low voice. "Get 'em up."

The ruffian straightened, dropping his bucket. His beefy face turned saffron-yellow. His mouth sagged in amazement.

Then his hand streaked for the cedar handle of his Colt. It almost reached it, but not quite! Steve Neal's .45 flashed, a puff of dust flew from the bandit's coat, and the thunderous echoes of the death shot echoed in rocketing volleys across Skeleton Gulch. Corliss splashed down into the spring, roiling the crystal water with crimson as he fell.

CHAPTER IX.

SHOOTING IT OUT.

ONE of the bandits popped out of the cabin at the sound of the gun roar.

"What did yuh shoot at, Corliss?" he yelled. "Is anything—"

"I did the shootin'!" Steve shouted back. "Hands up, Rexman, or I'll do some more!"

"The sheriff!" yelled the desperado in surprise. "Boys, it's—"

He tried to jump backward to the shelter of the hut, and at the same time made the fatal mistake of reaching for his six-gun. Once again Steve's .45 crashed. Rexman bent double, gripped his stomach with both hands, and started to run blindly away from the cabin. He took a few steps and fell heavily, his big hat rolling over and over down the steep slope.

It was number two for Steve Neal! In less than twenty seconds, he'd cut

the odds down from five to three against one!

There was a profane howl of fury from the trio still inside the hut. But they didn't show themselves. As Steve was on the windowless side, he was safe from their guns.

"You hombres had better listen to sense in there!" the sheriff called to them. "I've got yuh, and if yo're smart, yuh'll come out peaceably."

"Yeah? And what if we don't?" Steve recognized Blacky Barth's snarling voice.

"Then come out a-shootin'," said Steve grimly.

There was a brief silence, and in the meantime the sheriff crept even closer to the bandits' refuge.

"We know when we're well off!" Wayburg sneered. "We ain't comin' out a-tall! And if yuh make a fool play and try to come in and git us——"

"That's just what I'm goin' to do, boys," said Steve cheerily. "But don't get impatient—I'm in no great hurry, myself."

He crouched down, rolled a brown cigarette and smoked it leisurely. He knew that there was no danger of the desperadoes slipping out through the window on the opposite side. It was too small for that, hardly more than a chink in the logs.

They couldn't get out except through the door, and it was so narrow that they could only come through one at a time. They wouldn't be foolish enough to try it.

Steve took plenty of time in making his plans. He knew that the waiting would get on the desperadoes' nerves, would stretch them to the snapping point, so that when the show-down came they would be likely to hurry their shots.

Steve knew the risk he would take if he popped into that doorway after

them. The advantage would be very much with them. He might get one or two of them, but he'd very likely be killed, himself. But if he could only distract their attention for a second—even a split second——

A slow grin dawned on Steve's face. Quietly, he picked up the water bucket that Corliss had been trying to fill at the spring. Steve put a good-sized rock in it to give it weight, then edged silently toward the door of the cabin.

The roof of the hut was low. Measuring the distance carefully, Steve balanced the bucket on the palm of his hand. Then he heaved it up.

The throw was perfect. With a loud, clanging jangle, the bucket landed on the opposite side of the cabin, just outside the window. And at the same instant, Steve charged in at the door, .45 in hand, his white teeth gleaming and his left eye half shut.

He was inside before a shot was fired. As he'd hoped, the three gunmen had leaped toward the window, forgetting the doorway for a moment.

The ruse had worked. Their attention had shifted for just the split second that Steve needed—the fleeting breath of time that meant all the difference between life and death, victory and defeat!

"Surrender, yuh coyotes," Steve cried, "or I'll shore shoot away!"

And as the trio whirled at him with guns in their hands, Steve did exactly that! His big Colt streamed flame and lead. The weapons of the desperadoes answered in ear-shattering bursts.

Blue smoke billowed up, slashed through by screaming bullets and spangles of crimson fire. With the

noise of the guns were the hideous yells of the stricken.

Warburg sagged to his knees, bored through at the belt line, but still firing wildly. Another slug flipped him backward, dead, as Steve gave him the works.

Blacky Barth had his back to the far wall, a Winchester was in his hands, and he was blazing away from the hip, churning the lever up and down with feverish haste. Barth's eyes were glazed with panic. He was fighting for his life, and he knew it.

The slugs of his high-powered rifle, however, were pounding the air over the sheriff's head. Steve had dropped nearly to the floor.

"Shoot away, Barth, yo're goin' good!" Steve growled between his clenched teeth and, tipping up the barrel of his gun, he killed Blacky with one shot. The desperado swayed, teetered, and fell upon his smoking Winchester.

"Finn——"

That deadly .45 barrel swerved for the last man.

"Don't!" shrieked Mike Finn, dropping to his knees and jerking his empty hands upward. "I give in! I'm yore prisoner!"

CHAPTER X.

STEVE'S HARDEST JOB.

THE sheriff smiled coldly as he holstered his gun, and then stepped forward to jerk Finn to his feet.

"Seems to me," he said, "that this surrenderin' stuff is gettin' to be a habit with yuh, Mike. It would have been better for both of us if yuh'd shot it out with me along with yore pard. But turn around an' put yore hands behind yore back."

Sighing with relief, the bandit obeyed and Steve snapped a pair of

handcuffs around his wrists. Steve saw a piece of old rope in a corner of the shack—unraveled and rotten, but it would answer the purpose. Outside the cabin in the fresh air he made his prisoner sit down while he knotted his ankles together.

"Thet's just to hobble yuh so yuh won't stray while I'm after my hoss," the sheriff said.

"Just as yuh say, Steve," said Finn meekly.

Steve turned. "I think yuh'd better call me 'Sheriff Neal,'" he said quietly.

He returned with Red Lightning. The cayuse had waited faithfully for him.

"Are yuh goin' to catch up one of our brons in the corral fer me, sheriff, or do yuh want me to ride double?" Finn asked politely.

Steve Neal did not reply.

"Because it's a long ways back to Black Mountain," the prisoner whined. "Couldn't yuh cuff my hands in front o' me instead of behind? It would be more comfortable fer me, and I'd gladly promise yuh not to——"

"Yo're not goin' anywhere, Finn," said Steve briefly.

It took a long time for this to seep through the ugly desperado's head. But when he saw Steve uncoiling his lariat rope he finally understood. His face went a sickly white.

"Yo're jist bluffin'," he gasped. "Jist tryin' to git me to talk. Well, I won't! Yuh can't hang me yere."

"Whether yuh talk or not won't make any difference, Finn," said the sheriff, carefully making a slip-noose. "And if yuh'll take a look at thet dead tree beyond the cabin, I think yuh'll agree thet it's quite possible to hang yuh."

He nodded toward a whitened trunk that stood upright like a

pointing finger. A thick limb protruded from it at right angles—a white, naked limb without bark or twigs.

In the queer, unearthly light of waning afternoon, the tree resembled a gallows—a gibbet put there for just that purpose.

"But jist me and yuh, sheriff— Yuh mustn't do that."

"The courts have already sentenced yuh to swing, Finn," Steve told him calmly, "and it's my duty to carry out that sentence at any time and place I see fit. This time, there'll be no friends to rescue yuh."

The coward broke down. "I—I'll tell what I know about Clay Hazard, if yuh'll only take me to town. Hang me later, but not now! I can't die yere like this!"

"Yore confession alone wouldn't convict Hazard," said Steve relentlessly. "As a condemned killer, yore word in court would amount to exactly *that*." Steve snapped his fingers. "Come on, Finn, and be a man at the last, anyway. Don't make it any harder for yuh than it already is."

Streams of cold sweat trickled down Finn's ghastly white face. His voice shook with pleading sobs. He wept. If the rope and the cuffs would have permitted, he would have groveled at Steve's feet. His body shook as if with an ague. His teeth chattered.

"I wasn't the worst o' the bunch, sheriff. It was Barth, if any one was. Clay Hazard—well, I hadn't been in his gang as long as most o' the others."

"I know it, Finn," said Steve. "I'm sorry for yuh—sorry it had to happen this way. But I can't let my personal feelin's interfere."

"Let me go, and I'll leave the country forever—go to Mexico—anywhar yuh say," moaned the des-

perado. "You got a mother, sheriff. Well, so had I once. I——"

"Yuh should have thought of her before," said Steve grimly.

He pitied this weeping wretch, and for a brief minute he hesitated, wrestling with the problem. What he had to do was harder than anything he'd ever yet faced.

To shoot an hombre down in hot fight, when his own life was in danger was one thing. To take a life coolly and without excitement was another. But it was the law, and he had sworn to carry out that law. His father's words came back to him:

Fourth—As sheriff, you will have unpleasant things to attend to. By this I mean the hanging of murderers——

"Come on, Finn," he said firmly. "It will soon be over, and it's shore got to be done."

In spite of the killer's prayers and pleadings, Steve dragged him over to the dead pine, got him beneath it and dropped the noose around his neck.

Then he made the other end of the rope secure to his saddle and swung aboard Red Lightning.

Seeing that his doom was sealed, Finn braced up as much as his cowardly nature would let him.

"It was Barth, I think, thet fired the shot thet killed the stage driver," he said unsteadily, "but I admit, sheriff, thet I took part in murderin' yore stepdad. Give 'er plenty o' slack and ride like blazes. Break my neck instead o' chokin' me slow."

"*Bueno, Finn!*"

Without looking back, Steve touched his big sorrel with the spur and sent him charging ahead full speed. Then came a terrific jerk. The horse reared back as if a heavy

steer had been at the other end of the rope, then stopped.

The sheriff still did not turn to see—he didn't have to. The sinking sun cast a long shadow, and Steve could see the outlines of the death tree on the ground, and the horrible, jerking, whirling thing suspended from it.

Not until five minutes or more had passed, when the grotesque, dancing figure finally hung motionless, did Steve Neal turn his cayuse.

Then, with his jaw set and determined, but with his eyes dulled by pity, he rode slowly back and cut the dead man down. Hard as it had been, Steve had carried out his duty to the law.

"In a little while, we'll be startin' back, Red," he told his sorrel bronc.

He began a systematic search of the bodies, beginning with Finn. On Corliss and Rexman he found a considerable amount of money, all in bank notes.

As this probably represented some of the loot that had been taken in their robberies, Steve painstakingly counted this and tied it up into a parcel.

On Barth, the last he searched, he found the largest sum of all—eleven hundred dollars.

He was still exploring Barth's pockets when he came upon something stuffed carelessly down in the watch pocket of his denim Levis—a folded envelope on which the following had been scrawled in ink:

Blacky Barth,
Goldtown, P. O.

Drawing out the crumpled letter, the sheriff's eager eyes fell on what was probably the most interesting note he'd ever read in his life:

BARTH: I'm sending this over by Juan. I'm writing it, as I'm afraid the Mex mite talk. They say they will be 10 thous. dols.

on this P. M.'s stage. Get the other Mex and round up 2 or 3 of the other boys, and stop the stage at Culver's Hill. Gold should be in reglar bullion bx. This should be quite a piece of dinero for us, besides giving S. Neal another knock. Be sure and burn this.
C. HAZARD.

"And he didn't burn it," chuckled Steve. "Hazard should have inclosed some matches along with the letter. Well, I've got the right goods now—and I don't have to ask the judge, either!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST COMMANDMENT.

IT was dark, nearly midnight, when Sheriff Steve Neal rode into Black Mountain. He had ridden far and fast, and Red Lightning's hide was flecked with foam.

Steve turned the cayuse into a livery barn, left orders for its care, and then strode on down the street where a patch of yellow light streamed into the street from the half-curtained windows of the Red Star Saloon.

In the entrance he paused, his hands on the shuttered doors. He could hear Hazard's voice, upraised in boasting talk. The saloon man was not behind his bar to-night, but was seated at the poker table with several cow-punchers and miners.

"So I told him, I says, 'Sheriff, isn't this a pretty early call fer yuh to be makin'?' And he looks uneasy an answers back: 'Mr. Hazard, I don't want no trouble with yuh, I jist thought mebber yuh could tell me somethin' about Wayburg and Finn's escape last night.' Well, I said——"

Steve smiled grimly. Hazard's voice went on:

"Yuh should have seen that kid sheriff back down! He turned three colors at once. 'Get out,' I says,

'and stay out, savvy? Because if yuh don't——,"

Very calmly, Steve Neal stepped in.

"Well, I didn't," he said cheerfully, "because here I am. Hazard, yo're under arrest. Come on, let's go to the jail!"

The silence could have been cut by a knife. Nobody breathed for a long moment, and then all except Hazard rose hastily from the table, scurrying for cover. Other hombres, who'd been playing cards at the far end of the room, jumped up with pale, scared faces.

Clay Hazard stiffened in his chair, rose halfway, then sat down again. He smiled, but his lips seemed stiff.

"What's this yo're handin' me, Neal? Yuh haven't got any evidence against me."

A greenish light was glinting from his icy eyes; his stained teeth were set tightly.

"I've got it, Hazard, or I wouldn't be here," said Steve with deadly quietness. "Yo're finished, hombre. I caught up with yore men in Skeleton Gulch. They're there to stay. I'm here for you!"

Hazard's beaked nose twitched. Slowly, very slowly, he was pushing back a little from the table.

Seeing the movement, Steve saw what he'd have to do. The last commandment of his father seemed to be spelled out by the yellow lamps of the saloon:

Fifth and most important—Bring in your man, dead or alive, even though you have to die to do it.

And very likely, Steve thought, he'd have to die. He and Hazard were scarcely two yards apart—impossible to miss at that range.

Clay Hazard was an expert with a gun. When the shooting was

over, probably, history would have repeated itself. They would both be dead, a Hazard and a Neal.

"Are yuh goin' with me quietly, Hazard?" Steve drawled, although he already knew the answer.

Out of the side of his eyes he noticed that men were slipping in through the back door—many of them Steve's own friends. The word had already flashed through Black Mountain that the two enemies were face to face in a show-down at last, and excitement was at fever heat.

But nobody said anything, not an hombre so much as cleared his throat. And the interested spectators were taking plenty of pains to keep out of the line of fire.

"So yuh think yo're takin' me, do yuh, sheriff?"

"Yes, it's up to you to decide which way," replied Steve Neal softly.

Supporting himself on the table with his left hand, the saloon keeper pulled himself slowly to his feet.

"I told yuh thet yuh'd die some day, Steve Neal," rasped Hazard.

And then, his right hand darting down at his pearl-handled .44, he cried out shrilly:

"This is the time!"

"Shoot away, hombre!" invited Steve.

Their guns spoke at almost the same moment—and kept speaking! The walls of the saloon seemed to dance and sway as the .44 blended its voice with Steve's .45.

Smoke leaped in between the two fighters like a gray curtain—a curtain pierced through by winking holes of powder fire. There were thudding, whacking sounds as heavy-caliber bullets crashed into bone and flesh.

Scarlet gushed from Hazard's mouth. He sank down, and the chair broke under him. But he still

kept his grip on the table and his flashing .44. Steve lurched sidewise. His head drooped for a moment, then straightened. He was laughing.

And still they fired. They pulled the triggers until both their guns were empty. Then Clay Hazard crumpled down over the poker table. He hung there for a moment, then fell at full length on the floor.

The — pay-off — Hazard," said Steve, throwing a red poker chip.

It landed on Clay Hazard's chest, and it remained there like a badge of guilt.

Steve holstered his .45 and started toward the door. Suddenly he fell to his knees. A horrified shout went up from the spectators as they rushed forward.

"Jist like what happened to their fathers, years ago!" some one cried. "They've killed each other."

Steve tried to get up, but he felt that the truth had been spoken, and that all was over. He saw the faces of his friends over him—faces that faded into the gathering darkness.

The white-haired doctor finished scrubbing his hands in the washpan that Steve's anxious mother had brought him, dried them carefully, and put on his spectacles again.

"He's coming out of it, ma'am,"

he said. "You needn't worry any more. His wounds are serious, but not especially dangerous to a man of his constitution."

"How many slugs did he git, doc?" asked Judge Hackert.

"Four—but only two did much damage," said the medico. He turned to the mother again. "Just keep him in bed, ma'am, and——"

"I've tried to do that before, doctor," she exclaimed. "And he just won't——"

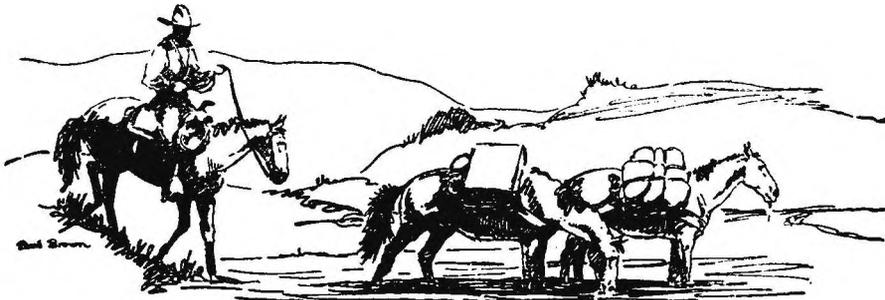
Steve Neal opened one eye—his right one.

"I will this time, ma," he whispered weakly. "I promise. That is, if—say, judge, how about Clay Hazard? Don't tell me he walked away. If he did——" He made a feeble effort to get out of bed.

"Hold on, young man!" said the doctor hastily. "You needn't worry—your prisoner didn't get away. He's got six bullets in him, and any one of the six would have been fatal."

"We've got a new name fer yuh, son," chuckled Judge Hackert. "It's 'Shoot-away' Steve. And believe me, yo're the best sheriff Black Mountain has ever had!"

"Say! You make thet *second* best!" Steve ordered. "Why, I wouldn't have got nowhere without dad's commandments!"



DISCOVERING LOST HORSE MINE

THE fantastic names given to gold mines have often excited curiosity or amusement, but these names usually originated in some unlooked-for event, or perhaps even a joke. In Johnny Lang's case, it was a near-tragedy named his mine.

Johnny was following a long, dry trail through sage, cholla and cat's-claw, tortured by thirst and sore feet. He was afoot because his horse had strayed during the night and had left no trail. Suddenly he came to the end of the canyon through which he was stumbling and found himself in an open valley bounded by walls that looked as if they had been piled up by a terrific explosion.

As his eyes searched the valley for sign of his horse, he saw a rider coming toward him. He was a good-looking hombre, with all the outward appearances of a cow-puncher—chaps, spurs, reata, and a ten-gallon hat.

In a hard voice he called out roughly, "Well, stranger, whar d'yuh think yo're goin'?"

Johnny was so delighted to meet up with a human being that the harshness in the man's voice was lost upon him and he answered:

"I'm huntin' a hoss, cowboy, that strayed from my camp las' night—a bay with a white face. Seen anything of him?"

The answer gave Johnny a bigger jolt than the loss of his horse had done.

"Listen here, stranger," the rider growled. "I'll tell yuh somethin' yuh better not fergit. Yuh ain't lost no hoss!" Johnny looked up in startled amazement and found himself gazing straight into the muzzle of a big Colt. Without a word he turned back toward his camp.

He was tramping along on weary feet, bursting with anger, when he met another prospector, who lent a sympathetic ear to his tale of woe.

After expressing themselves freely on the doings of horse thieves, they turned to the subject of prospecting.

Pointing to a mountain the new acquaintance said, "Why don't yuh go over the ground up thar? It looks a likely place to me." Johnny said that he would act on this suggestion, and the two separated.

Soon he was prospecting in the hills, and good fortune came to him suddenly. He found an outcropping of gold quartz. Reflecting on the incident that had led him to wealth, Johnny hit upon a good name for his lucky find—Lost Horse Mine.

In the winding canyons and hidden valleys of this California desert, rustlers had their hide-outs.

Johnny Lang's discovery brought other prospectors, and a gold rush was started, bringing so many miners to the section that the rustlers were crowded out and had to leave for safer parts. Johnny made a deal with a company that worked the mine, giving him a good share of the output.

Lost Horse Mine was one of the richest in the region, and Johnny led a life of ease while it lasted. He squandered his money until he was again penniless. Then he set out on another quest for gold, but Lady Luck did not show up again.

One morning, a road-maker saw in the brush what looked like a bundle of rags. He turned it over and found it was the body of Johnny Lang. He had been dead apparently about three months. Hunger and exposure had brought him to the end of a trail that had once filled his hands with gold.



The Shootin' Fool Pays A Debt

By Houston Irvine

Author of "Gambler's Frame-up," etc.

WITH an inward groan as a long thorn ripped the sleeve of his green silk shirt, Lucius Carey, the "Shootin' Fool" deputy, pushed through the wall of mesquite and prickly pear. Halting at the edge of a small open space in the dense thicket, the young officer stared with bulging blue eyes at the scene before him.

A man was there, squatting beside a tiny fire. His back was toward the deputy sheriff, so the latter saw only a battered gray sombrero and ordinary, worn range clothing, incasing a pair of massive

shoulders set upon a short, thick body.

A few feet to the left of the fire, a calf was stretched, bawling and straining frantically at the rawhide thongs that tied its legs together. Across the little clearing lay the calf's mother—dead. A wound back of her shoulder showed that she had been shot.

Lucius Carey's smooth, untanned cheeks flamed with sudden anger. A little sickened by the sight, he brushed an unruly lock of bright-yellow hair off his high forehead and imprisoned it beneath the tall peak

of his cream-colored Mexican hat. His long, square-cut jaw set hard.

"A fellow who would shoot a cow like that would murder a man," he muttered, reading the brand on the slain critter's flank.

It was a Circle Dot. But the brand on the horse of the hombre beside the fire was a Square X.

There was no question in the deputy's mind that he had caught a "mavericker" at work. He had made the unbranded calf a maverick by killing its mother.

The cow killer stood up, lifting a glowing branding iron from the fire. It was a straight running iron, the simple possession of which would have been enough evidence to hang its owner as a rustler in some sections of the cattle country.

The Shootin' Fool was not a cowboy, barely knew how to handle a lariat. But he had the rancher's viewpoint regarding a rustler. And a thief was a thief in any language.

Lucius had been riding his sleepy brown horse, Molasses, about a mile away, when he had heard the shot that killed the cow. Instantly suspicious, he had spurred through the chaparral as fast as possible.

About a hundred yards back, he had left his cayuse and come on foot, with his high heels and big-wheeled silver spurs biting uncomfortably into the sandy earth at every step.

It was hot in the thicket, too, with the noon sun beating down fiercely overhead. Sweat soaked the torn green shirt of the deputy, as well as his flaming red neckerchief.

But he was satisfied. He had trapped a mavericker at work. The thickset hombre was just bending over the orphaned calf, with his hot iron poised in his left hand.

"Just a minute, mister!" shouted

the Shootin' Fool, leaping into the clearing.

"Huh?" With a startled grunt, the rustler straightened and whirled around.

The deputy recognized the coarse, heavy features of "Lefty" Price, a rider for the Square X Ranch. Thick black hair grew close down over his deep-set dark eyes. His thick lips curled in a sneer.

"So it's yuh!" he snarled in a manner that indicated he considered Lucius to be no more dangerous than a horsefly.

Lots of folks in the prickly-pear country were fooled that way about the Shootin' Fool. His gaudy clothing, polished boots, and yellow chaps with silver bangles shaped like coiled rattlesnakes down their sides, were enough to brand him as a greeny. And, too, there were his bright-yellow hair and his smooth skin that would not tan.

He had been insulted by hombres who thought they were tough ever since he had come to Cotulla. But their scorn still stung.

"Yes, it's me," he retorted hotly, starting to pull his pearl-handled .45s. "You've gone into the business of making mavericks, I see. Stick 'em up, you crook! You're going to town with me."

"Oh, yeah? Yuh better think some more," shouted the rustler, suddenly rushing at the deputy and waving his branding iron.

Lucius was looking for the thief to drop the iron and grab for the black-butted six-gun on his left thigh. But the unexpected driving attack took the young officer by surprise.

When his foe did not reach for his .45, the Shootin' Fool did not like to complete his own draw. But he could not stand there like a dunce,

letting Lefty close in with smashing fist and heavy iron.

Swish! The metal bar slashed viciously through the air, with force enough to brain the deputy, but he dodged aside.

Wham! The clenched right fist of the rustler drove against Lucius's chin from the other side.

The blow hurt. But it woke the Shootin' Fool up to the need for action, rather than staggered him. He still could have jerked out his six-guns and shot the crook. But he wouldn't do that.

"If I can't beat him at his own game, I don't deserve to beat him, anyway," he thought.

"I'll pound the hide off yuh, yuh young whippersnapper!" bellowed Lefty. "Then I'll kill yuh so yuh can't talk an' send yuh ter town tied across a saddle."

He swung the iron in a big circle toward the deputy's head again. Suddenly slamming out with his right fist, Lucius knocked the tool out of the thief's hand with a paralyzing blow.

For a moment, Lefty was stopped. Then, with his dark eyes gleaming hatred, he rushed again, that time meeting a left-handed blow of the deputy on his barrellike chest. If the crook felt the thump, he did not wince.

"I got yuh!" he snarled, leaping in and grappling.

Although taller, the Shootin' Fool was no match for the other in brute strength. The rustler's powerful arms closed around the deputy like a vise. Wrapping his left leg around the officer's, the crook suddenly tripped him.

Crash! Both men fell to the ground with enough force to knock some of the wind out of them.

Neither moved for a few seconds. Then they went at it again.

Close-locked, they rolled and battled. Lefty Price got a fist loose. The Shootin' Fool's head snapped and rocked.

Three times the rustler struck him before Lucius could free an arm. The deputy was dizzy. Stretched on his back, he seemed to see Lefty's leering face swimming above him. He had to save himself quickly. The next blow might knock him unconscious.

Heaving himself to the right, he wrenched his left hand free. In his cramped position, he could not get any back-drive into his upward punch. But, in spite of that, his balled fist rocketed toward Lefty's stubby chin.

Smack! Thud! Lucius smashed the rustler twice in quick succession, once on the jaw, the second time full in the mouth.

"Dang yuh!" Spitting crimson, Lefty reeled back, with a look of surprised fear twisting his features.

The Shootin' Fool knew that he had the man beaten then. One more hard blow, and——

Suddenly the crook leaned forward. His eyes blazed exultantly again. He grabbed for something on the ground.

The next instant, the deputy saw what it was—the branding iron! Now Lefty Price had it again, gripped in both hands, swinging it down with crushing force at his victim's head.

"Yuh won't tell nothin', yuh danged dude!" mouthed the rustler. "I'll——"

Lucius Carey did not hear the rest. As the iron struck, something seemed to burst inside his head. For a split second, he imagined he was seeing shooting stars. Then he saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. All was black.

II.

With a sensation as if somebody was trying to split his head with an ax, the Shootin' Fool awakened, blinking up at the face of a man bending over him. For a moment, he had a feeling that his mind was detached from his body. Then he moved his arms and legs. And memory began to surge back.

He recalled his discovery of the mavericker at work and his battle. But the hombre beside him was not Lefty Price.

"Wh-wh-what——" the young deputy started to stammer.

"Shore now"—the square-featured, sun-bronzed face of the other man spread in a friendly, even-tooth grin—"I was beginnin' to think yuh never was goin' to wake up. Thet yuh was like—him." He nodded toward something.

Lucius Carey sat up and stared. And his blue eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. For the thing that the hombre had nodded at was a body—the body of the rustler.

"Dog-gone!" With a grunt of dismay, the deputy turned back to size up the other man.

He saw that the fellow was nearly as young as himself. His garb was that of a cowboy, worn and faded. Besides his square features, he had honest brown eyes and a quick smile. He was tall and well-built. And the way he wore his twin six-guns looked as if he would know how to use them.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" Lucius demanded.

"Name's Curt Jones, an' I come from the Red River," replied the puncher. "I bought the li'l C Bar Ranch, a couple o' miles no'th, last week."

"I heard the place had been sold." The Shootin' Fool frowned thought-

fully. "Somebody else wanted it pretty bad, didn't he?"

"I reckon." The other laughed. "Two of 'em, in fact. Buck Stout, o' the Square X, an' Walt Benson, o' the Circle Dot, was both biddin' fer the C Bar to round out their big spreads. Stout's sore at me now. Swears he'll git me."

"Benson and Stout are old enemies," said the deputy. "They accuse each other of misbranding every once in a while."

"Somebody shore is swingin' a wide loop round hyar," growled Curt. "But the li'l outfits are harder hit than the big ones. Though I paid fer plenty o' stock, I ain't got a calf crop worth countin', this year. I figured somebody was maverickin' the li'l dogies in these parts, so I was ridin' round, lookin' fer clews, when I happened to smell smoke an' head this way." The waddy's face suddenly hardened.

Lucius waited several seconds for him to go on.

"When I got hyar, thet skunk"—the C Bar owner pointed to Lefty Price's body—"had yuh knocked out cold, an' was p'intin' his .45 at yore head, goin' to complete the job o' killin' yuh. I yelled, an' he whirled around an' started throwin' lead at me. Waal, yuh see what happened. I killed him fair."

"I know yuh did." The deputy was almost choked with emotion. "Fellow, I want to thank you for saving my life." He thrust out his hand.

Curt accepted the grasp of friendship. But he flushed almost as red as the Shootin' Fool.

"Heck!" he grunted. "Yuh don't owe me nothin'. Yuh better thank yore lucky stars yore head was so hard when the hombre beaned yuh with the runnin' iron."

Both laughed. Lucius picked up

his creamy sombrero and brushed some dirt from it.

"Yuh better ride over to my place an' throw a feed into yuh, 'fore yuh go on to town," invited Curt. "A cup o' coffee'll help yore headache, mebbe."

"What about him?" The deputy pointed to the body of the slain rustler.

"Leave him whar he is," advised the rancher. "Some of his pals will come lookin' fer him, I reckon. It may 'do some good if they see how he died."

"O. K.!" The Shootin' Fool nodded. "Wait till I get my cayuse. I'll take you up on that invitation to dinner."

Late in the afternoon, Lucius Carey reached Cotulla. The bruise on his head still pained him some, but the coffee at the C Bar Ranch had worked wonders. And the long visit with Curt Jones had been exceedingly pleasant.

"I like that hombre," the deputy told himself, as he halted his sleepy horse in front of the little jail, swung out of his saddle, and looped his reins over the hitching rail.

A couple of long strides carried him across the wooden sidewalk to the door of the sheriff's office. He was about to dash on in, but stopped suddenly, blue eyes popping and ears straining. Four men were talking in the little room.

"I demand that you arrest Curt Jones!" thundered a big man, whom the Shootin' Fool recognized as "Buck" Stout.

The owner of the Square X Ranch was a blustery, bullying hombre, with a deeply tanned face that was too strong, if that was possible. His greenish eyes were slitted. He wore a small, carefully curled black mus-

tache and clothes that were better than the average rancher's.

"But"—Sheriff Alcorn, a medium-sized, middle-aged man, wrinkled up his broad, kindly face and plucked worriedly at the few stiff red hairs fringing his bald head—"but I don't generally arrest a feller without investigatin' the case some myself."

"I've done the investigatin' this time." Stout laughed gruffly. "I told yuh how I found Lefty Price killed an' the hoss tracks leadin' toward the C Bar. It's plain as day what happened.

"Curt Jones had shot the Circle Dot cow an' was startin' to brand the calf, when my top rider caught him. Jones murdered Lefty."

"Hey!" The Shootin' Fool sprang forward, with his cheeks reddening angrily. He was not going to let anybody accuse his new friend falsely if he could help it.

"Huh! Howdy, Looshis!" Sheriff Alcorn frowned disapprovingly when his keen gray eyes took in the deputy's battered appearance. "Can't yuh see I'm in an inpawtant confab with these gents?"

"But—but——" Lucius tried to tell his version of the shooting of Lefty Price.

"Go set down somewhar!" The sheriff cut him off abruptly, and the deputy had to obey.

"I've swore out a warrant, chargin' Jones with the murder," growled Stout, looking at the other two visitors in the office.

They were Ralph Sloan, the prosecuting attorney, and Fred Sheppard, a white-haired justice of the peace. Both were unquestionably honest, but the first was too young, and the other too old to understand his job thoroughly.

"Here's the warrant." The prosecutor pulled a paper out of his

pocket and handed it importantly to Alcorn.

"I issued it," declared Sheppard, not to be outdone, with a toothsome grin.

The sheriff read the document. Then he rocked back in his swivel chair and scratched his bald head some more.

"I reckon it's legal," he grunted. "But——"

"As a citizen, I demand that yuh arrest Jones at once," interrupted the Square X owner, sneering.

"But I got to leave fer a sheriff's meetin' at Laredo right now," explained the veteran officer. "Hank Rogers, my chief depity, ain't hyar to serve the warrant, neither."

"Thar's the Shootin' Fool," pointed out Stout.

"Mebbe Looshis could do it," Alcorn admitted.

"I—I——" The young deputy was on the point of refusing the duty.

"Take this warrant an' fetch Curt Jones in to jail," ordered the sheriff. "You'll have to keep yore eye on him to-night, too, since both I an' Hank will be away."

"But——" Lucius Carey still wanted to argue over what he knew was an injustice.

"Git goin'!" Sheriff Alcorn snapped him off, with a tone of finality. "Any h'le thing yuh got on yore mind kin keep, I reckon."

III.

Hating himself, his job, and everything connected with it, the Shootin' Fool met Curt Jones in the lamplighted kitchen of the C Bar ranch house embarrassedly.

"I 'lowed yuh was in town long fore this." Curt grinned good-naturedly.

"Pard"—Lucius Carey pulled an

official-looking paper from the pocket of his green shirt—"I'd rather quit my job than do it. But I figured maybe it would be better if I came for you, at that, since you'd probably resist anybody else. I'm sorry, but I'm arresting you."

"For what?" The young rancher's face suddenly paled.

"The warrant charges you with the murder of Lefty Price," explained the deputy. "Of course, I know you aren't guilty. I'll get on the stand and testify for you. But I've got——"

"Yuh can't arrest me!" Curt interrupted excitedly. "I won't go with yuh. I saved yore life once. Now, if I've got to take it, I will." His hands dropped to his holsters with amazing swiftness, and came up gripping his six-guns.

Click! Click! His thumbs pulled back the triggers.

"Come on an' take me!" he invited hoarsely.

Such a challenge to battle would have been accepted immediately by the Shootin' Fool under most circumstances. But, for once, he did not try to reach his pearl-handled .45s. With his thumbs hooked loosely over his belt, his blue eyes met the brown ones of his recent rescuer squarely.

"Put your artillery up!" he ordered. "Come on to town with me. That will be the best way for you. I'll see that you don't stay in jail, and that you get a fair deal all around."

The rancher looked thoughtful. He did not reply for several tense minutes. Then, abruptly, he reversed his guns and held them butt-first toward the deputy.

"I trust yuh, Looshis," he growled. "I reckon the best way is to go in an' beat the charge, all right."

But thar's more back o' this than thet warrant shows. Buck Stout would like to have me out o' the way, so he could try to grab the C Bar again. He ain't aimin' to let me go to trial."

"I savvy what you mean." The Shootin' Fool's jaw set tightly. "You'd better keep your guns, Curt, just in case we do meet any masked men trailing a rope on our way to Cotulla."

The best of friends, the officer and his prisoner went out to the corral. There the former helped the rancher rope out a big, rangy black cayuse and saddle it. Then, with Lucius astride his sleepy Molasses, they set out for Cotulla.

In spite of their worry about meeting a lynching party, the ride to town was uneventful. At the end of Main Street, where the chaparral began to give way to houses, the deputy drew rein. The moon was rising by that time, its soft light throwing the faces of both riders into bold relief.

"Maybe you'd better hand over your guns now, pard," said the Shootin' Fool. "It'll look better if I take you to jail disarmed."

"O. K." Curt handed over his .45s, but the tone of his voice belied his willingness to do so.

They rode on. Down the street, beyond the dark buildings that housed the bank, the stage station, and various stores, they halted in front of the little jail.

From the doors and windows of the Maverick Saloon, just across the street, poured streams of yellow lamplight. A score of saddled horses were standing at the hitch rail in front. The Shootin' Fool was able to make out most of the brands.

"Square X's!" he muttered to himself, with a worried frown.

A burst of drunken laughter came from the saloon.

"It looks like the boys was mournin' Lefty Price's death, all right," growled Curt.

From that, Lucius knew that his prisoner had read the brands on the cayuses, too. But if either of them had any fear, he did not mention it.

Dismounting, the deputy herded the rancher into the unlocked office, then into the rear room, where several strong, steel-barred cells were built against the walls. Pulling a big bunch of keys out of his pants pocket, the Shootin' Fool selected one and unlocked a cell door.

"Step inside," he invited Curt.

"Am I the only prisoner hyar now?" asked the rancher.

"Yes."

"Don't yuh reckon yuh better let me have one o' my six-guns—fer company?"

Lucius was tempted to agree to the prisoner's request. But after a moment's thought, he replied:

"No. Sheriff Alcorn would fire me for that. If a gun is needed, I'll be on hand with mine."

"Hyar's hopin' yuh know how to use it," grunted Curt, walking into the cell and staring out the barred window, through which the moonlight streamed.

Clang! The steel door shut like a trap.

The Shootin' Fool walked back to the office, closing the door between it and the cell room. When entering with his prisoner, the deputy had not stopped to make a light. Now, fishing a match out of the pocket of his green shirt, he raked it across the edge of the sheriff's scarred and battered desk and lit a lamp suspended from the ceiling.

As he blew out the match, he felt

something hard prod into the small of his back. A gun hammer clicked.

"Git 'em up!" snarled the intruder. "I ain't anxious ter kill even a worthless depity."

With the hard muzzle of a .45 sticking into his back, Lucius was helpless. His hands started up. His captor jerked the twin six-guns out of the deputy's holsters and tossed them into a corner of the room.

With his own face pale, and his blue eyes poppin', the Shootin' Fool ventured a glance over his shoulder. The hombre holding the .45 at his back, he saw, was a cowboy, with his neckerchief tied up over the bridge of his nose to mask the lower part of his face.

Dressed in a floppy-brimmed Stetson, faded shirt, and rusty chaps and boots, the ranny might have been any one of a thousand punchers in the neighborhood of Cotulla. The deputy thought that he probably was a Square X man, but he could not be sure.

"Mind if I roll a smoke?" Lucius stopped reaching for the ceiling and fished in his pockets as if hunting for tobacco and papers. He knew he didn't have them, but—

"Make it snappy!" growled the cowboy, as a dozen more men, masked exactly like him, filed in through the front door.

"Heh-heh-heh! I guess I haven't got the makings." The Shootin' Fool laughed nervously, raising his hands even with the lamp.

Clink! The tiny sound that the cell-room keys made as the deputy dropped them onto the base of the lamp was drowned out by the tramp of boots across the floor.

"Let us have Curt Jones, an' we won't hurt yuh, Carey," said one of the masked men, who now ringed the young officer.

"Go find yourself a nice big cliff

to jump off of," retorted Lucius, the flush returning to his cheeks. "I'm not letting that prisoner out of his cell."

"Search him! Find the keys!" snapped the hombre who seemed to be the leader of the gang.

A faint, mocking grin twisted the corners of the Shootin' Fool's mouth, as rough hands seized him and went quickly through his clothing.

"The keys ain't on him," announced the cowboy who had poked the gun in the deputy's back originally.

"Search the place, then!" snarled the boss. "Them keys is bound ter be hyar some place."

While one man guarded Lucius, the others immediately began ransacking the office. The contents of the sheriff's desk drawers were spilled out recklessly. Dark corners were poked into, the floor swept clean, and every piece of furniture overturned.

But the keys were not found. Nobody thought to look at the lamp. Finally the raiders gave up their search.

"Will yuh tell us what yuh did with the keys?" the leader growled wrathfully at the deputy.

"Never!" The latter stared defiantly through a lock of yellow hair that had tumbled down over his high forehead.

"If I had time, I'd make yuh talk." The other glared. "But we don't need the keys. Bill, yuh guard the danged depity hyar, while the rest of us go around back an' bust out the bars o' Curt's cell winder. Jim, yuh git the crowbar we brung along. Mike, yuh bring our hosses an' Curt's around the jail an' hold 'em ready. We'll be ridin' in a jiffy."

The men started out the front

door. The Shootin' Fool had a moment of sudden fear. He could not let them take out his friend, Curt Jones. Their intention to lynch the C Bar owner was all too plain.

"Wait, wait!" Lucius cried.

"Shut up!" bellowed his guard. "I'll wrap the barrel o' this gun around the side o' yore head if yuh don't pipe down."

The deputy bit his lip thoughtfully. But his flushed, blank face did not reflect any of the hope that suddenly flashed in his mind.

Gripping his .45, the guard straightened up Sheriff Alcorn's overturned swivel chair and sat down. Acting almost as if he was scared, the Shootin' Fool moved over and perched on the edge of the desk, with his long legs swinging idly and his hands still raised.

"Thet's right." The cowboy laughed. "Set right thar so I kin watch yuh while I take it easy." He tilted back in the swivel chair an inch or so.

Lucius looked down the barrel of the .45. But that did not worry him. From the rear of the jail sounded the battering of the crowbar on the bars of Curt Jones's cell window.

Suddenly, the captive deputy's idly swinging legs shot out. His boot toes hooked under the seat of the swivel chair and gave a quick jerk upward.

The Shootin' Fool had accidentally rocked over backward in that seat himself several times and knew how easy it tipped. With a startled oath, the guard turned over. Before he could squeeze the trigger of his six-gun, the back of his head struck the floor, knocking him out cold.

It took the deputy but a few seconds to stuff the hombre's mask into

his mouth as a gag and hog-tie him with his own belt. Then, sticking the unconscious puncher's .45 in the waistband of his trousers, Lucius dashed out the front door, pausing only long enough to sweep his own six-guns up from the floor, where they had been tossed.

He did not race to interrupt the crew tearing out the bars of the cell window, however. Instead, he ran toward the near-by spot where he heard the mob's horses snorting and pawing the earth.

"Thet yuh, boss?" The dark figure of a man emerged from among the cayuses.

Wham! One of the Shootin' Fool's six-guns rose and fell. And the puncher who had been guarding the horses dropped to earth.

IV.

As the bars of his cell window wrenched out, Curt Jones sneered at the friendship that had prompted him to put any faith in Lucius Carey. So the young deputy was going to let the lynchers get him, eh?

Two masked men with guns crawled through the broken window, seized the prisoner, and heaved him through to the gang outside. There he was sure that the end was near.

None of the men talked now. A tall, dark-garbed hombre, with a mask over his face like all the others, led up the horses. Curt was lifted into the saddle on his own cayuse. His feet were lashed to the stirrups, his wrists tied behind his back.

The other men mounted, the one who had brought up the cayuses last. However, when they started, he was the one who was leading the captive's horse.

Through town, the party rode slowly, so as not to arouse the slumbering citizens. When the chaparral was reached, the pace increased. A mile from Cotulla, the mob was joined by another rider, a big man, on a giant gray horse.

"It's time yuh was gittin' hyar!" he growled in a gruff tone that, in spite of his mask, identified him instantly as Buck Stout. "Did yuh git him?"

"Yeah, we got him fer yuh, boss," replied the leader of the jail wreckers. "But we had to tar out the cell winder ter do it."

"Why didn't yuh git the keys off that fool depity, Looshis Carey?" snarled the Square X owner.

"He didn't have 'em on him, an' we couldn't find 'em," was the answer.

"Waal, I don't care, as long as yuh got Curt Jones," grunted Stout. "It's too bad, fer the sake o' humanity, thet yuh didn't bring the Shootin' Fool along, too, though. We could string him up on the same limb. Might save ourselves havin' to do it, later, if he gits to nosin' around an' finds out we're rustlin'."

"Whar yuh goin' ter hang the C Bar waddy?" asked the other.

"Up in Hackamore Gulch." The boss grabbed the reins of the prisoner's horse out of the hand of the man that had been leading it and led on.

Hackamore Gulch! Curt Jones shuddered at the thought of what awaited him. The spot that the Square X owner had selected for the execution was very remote, a small gorge branching off the larger Bullhide Canyon. In Hackamore Gulch, Curt's body might hang for days or weeks before some wandering cowboy happened to find it.

But the C Bar owner knew that

escape for him was impossible, with his feet tied in his stirrups, and his hands bound behind his back. It would do him no good to talk, either, so he clamped his jaws together, resolved to die game, at least.

It seemed hours that the hanging party traveled, and it really was dawn when they turned into Bullhide Canyon. But it was still dark in the bottom of the gorge.

A quarter of a mile up was Hackamore Gulch.

The tall rider, who had originally led Curt's cayuse, had dropped back half a length behind the prisoner. The latter supposed the masked man was merely there to see that he did not try to escape in that direction. As if escape in any direction was possible!

Suddenly, in the darkness of the canyon, Curt realized that the tall rider had moved up even with him. A sharp knife blade slashed the rope around Curt's wrists. A heavy .45 was thrust into his almost numbed hands.

"Grab your reins and head up the main canyon a piece!" the tall rider hissed in the rancher's ear. "I'll mislead them into Hackamore Gulch, chasing you. Then you double back and come in behind them. We'll have every one of the rustling skunks in a trap."

Curt Jones understood, and yet he did not understand. How had Lucius Carey got here?

The prisoner did not have much time to puzzle. There was where Hackamore Gulch split off to the right. Stout was turning into it.

Stooping quickly, Curt grabbed his reins and jerked them out of the big rancher's hand. At the same instant, he gave a yell in his horse's ear, and the startled critter plunged away at a gallop.

"What the——" Curt heard Stout start to bellow, then——

"Up the gulch! Up Hackamore Gulch!" sounded Lucius Carey's excited shout. "Don't let him escape! Shoot him!"

Wham! Crash! Bang! A dozen six-guns were suddenly barking at once. But no bullets sailed near Curt Jones, who wheeled his cayuse around on its haunches in the main canyon.

"Dang!" He laughed boyishly, for the first time in many hours. "I reckon I kind o' misjudged the value o' the Shootin' Fool's friendship a mite."

With the wildly shooting and yelling mob strung out behind him, Lucius Carey kept going until a rock slide barred his path. Then he knew that the end of the game was at hand.

Win, lose, or draw, he had to face the bunch of Square X crooks. If Curt Jones had understood instructions and came up from behind the gang in time, the young deputy was confident that he could round up the rustlers. But if the C Bar owner did not get there pronto, the Shootin' Fool's neck was likely to fit a noose.

Fortunately enough, daylight was filtering into Hackamore Gulch by that time for Lucius to see his enemies. There they came, six-guns in hand, spurring like mad. Buck Stout's big gray horse was only a few feet behind the one the deputy was riding.

Sliding his cayuse to a stop, with its nose against the rock wall, the Shootin' Fool threw himself out of his saddle. Whirling to put his back against the stones, he raised his left hand and quickly tore off the mask that had hidden his face.

Buck Stout's eyes bulged over the top of his mask at the flushed features of the young deputy.

"Yuh—yuh—yuh——" The rancher sawed viciously on the bit of his gray horse.

"Yeah, I tricked you." The Shootin' Fool's blue eyes gleamed. "You tried to hang a waddy you knew was innocent. Now you and your whole rotten outfit are going back to the jail you tried to tear apart."

"Yuh ain't got us!" Stout snarled.

Crash! Instantly his six-gun spurted flame.

Lucius winced a little as the bullet grazed across his scalp, knocking off the dark hat that he had "borrowed" from the Square X horse guard in Cotulla.

"I'll leave yuh fer buzzard bait!" bellowed the rancher, starting to squeeze the trigger again.

Wham! Bang! Two guns roared then. And both of them belonged to the Shootin' Fool.

Two crimson holes suddenly appeared above Buck Stout's mask, where his eyes had been. Without even a groan, the big man toppled forward on his cayuse's neck, sprawled there a second, and then slid lifelessly to the ground.

"Some shootin', pard!" came an excited shout from way down the gulch.

Thankfully, the young deputy saw Curt Jones riding up behind the other Square X men. Lucius hadn't been quite sure whether they would try to rush him or not. But, trapped between two foes, they surrendered at once.

After Curt had disarmed them, while the Shootin' Fool covered them with his guns, the two captors faced each other.

"Dang!" The young rancher

held out his hand. "I shore do owe yuh my life, feller."

"I owed you mine, so I guess the account is squared." Lucius gripped and laughed. "Dog-gone! Let's herd these hombres back to town quick. I want to get my own clothes on again. I traded with that second Square X crook when I knocked him out and took over his job of guarding the horses. He and the one in the office and this gang here will sort of cramp us for

room, I'm thinking, until we get some more bars in that busted cell window."

Sooner or later, Sheriff Alcorn an' some o' the other gents in Cotulla will wake up ter the fact thet Looshis ain't so dumb as he may look. An' they may set up an' listen when he allows as how he's got somethin' ter say. But in the meantime, Looshis will have ter plug along bein' the Shootin' Fool, which same will be plenty hard on the outlaws. There'll be another story about him soon in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



PIONEER HOSPITALITY

DURING the Civil War, the Reverend Andrew Jackson Potter, known throughout the West as the "Fighting Parson," was stationed at Camp Verde. In addition to his eloquent preaching, Mr. Potter was also a man of war. With his Bible and hymn book, he carried his rifle, and he knew how to use it.

The desperadoes that infested the new settlements, mining towns and camps, were well aware of his ability with a gun. He was as fast as the fastest of them, and his aim was sure. So they took good care to behave themselves when he was around.

When he was at Camp Verde he preached frequently to the soldiers and prisoners, but there was some difficulty in singing the hymns, as hymn books were very scarce, and Mr. Potter had only one.

Sometimes he had to sing all by himself as none of the men knew the words, but they would hum the tune.

One Sunday, he was invited to preach at Bandera, and when the soldiers heard of it, some of them expressed a wish to go with him. He selected the hymns to be sung

there, and lent his hymn book to the soldiers so that they could commit the words to memory.

When Mr. Potter entered the hall where the service was to take place on Sunday morning, he found the place crowded, and his soldiers were all sitting together on one bench. He gave out the hymn and started to sing it.

The soldiers joined in heartily. They had learned the words of all the hymns and sang so well that the congregation was delighted.

When the service was over, Mr. Potter introduced his soldier singers to the Bandera people, who complimented them on their splendid vocal powers.

They were then invited by various families to a good Sunday dinner. Fine roasts of beef and home-grown vegetables, delicious pies, and everything of the best was placed before the surprised soldiers.

This hospitality of the pioneers made as deep an impression on the soldiers as the unexpected singing of the military had made on the congregation. All were happy, and the event was never forgotten by any one who was present.



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.

WAAL, folks, tuh begin with, hyar's all good wishes for yore Thanksgivin', next week. I hope we'll all have a measure o' peace an' plenty throughout the year, an' I hope I'll be receivin' some real finds from you song searchers.

I reckon yuh've all noticed how much more popular ol'-time songs

o' the West an' all kinds of ol'-timers are these days than they used tuh be, a while back. Waal, I think it's because the country's been havin' a hard time of it these past years, an' when folks do have hard times, nine tuh one they'll begin tuh think of past memories. They'll sort o' take stock of tharselves, too, an' of thar belongin's, an' thar history.

That's what the American people have been doin'. They've been harkin' back to the old pioneer forces an' girdin' thar belts an' sayin': "By Joe, we kin do it all over ag'in if we have to."

That's the spirit, folks, tuh be thankful for this Thanksgivin'! In general, thet is, an' in partic'ler, remember thet as far as songs are concerned, thar's plenty thet ain't available yet tuh the general public, because they ain't never been printed. Waal, it's my job an' yore job tuh keep searchin' out those old songs an' bringin' 'em tuh the light o' day, so's they kin be added tuh the lot.

Now, tuh celebrate my Thanksgivin', I'm goin' tuh print two songs thet have come in from readers, of which one is a version I've never seen afore.

The first one is sent by Mr. A. L. Greer, of Texas. It's a right old song, he says, an' if yuh know yore Western songs, yuh'll see thet it's plumb old.

For yuh'll be able tuh trace a lot of its phrases in cowboy songs I've been givin' yuh in the Corral. It's an old sea ballad, folks, of the sort cowboys were always usin' in their made-over ranchin' songs.

Mr. Greer says as how he used tuh hear it sung tuh the tune of "The Dying Cowboy," an' he's pretty sure it kin be sung tuh it properly.

EARLY IN THE SPRING

Oh, early, early in the spring
I went on sea to serve my king,
And leaving the only girl behind
Who had often told me her heart was mine.

Seven long years I sailed on sea,
Improving every opportunity
In writing letters to my dear,
But nothing from her could I hear.

I rode up to her father's hall
And for my love I loudly called.
Her father came out and made this reply:
"My daughter is married, I don't deny."

It must be true, it must be true
I feel my sorrow great renew
I'll go to sea and sail till I die,
And I'll spend my days where bullets fly.

"Oh, Willie, oh, Willie, don't go to sea.
There is more pretty girls around here
than me;
There is gold and silver, both bright and
fair,
So go no more where the bullets are."

It's curse the gold and silver, too,
And all pretty girls that won't prove true,
Who let your own dear promise break
And wed another for riches' sake.

It's now I have lost my golden crown,
I'll go back to sea and sail round and
round;
I'll go to sea and sail till I die
And sweep the waves where bullets fly.

Thar, folks, I'm right pleased
with thet one. An' if any of yuh
knows any other versions of it, I'd
sure be happy tuh hear about 'em!

Now hyar's another song thet
yuh'll be glad tuh have. This one
was sent in by Mr. O'Neill Breaux,
of Louisiana, an' I reckon yuh'll like
it, folks:

THE RAMBLING COWBOY

There was a rich old rancher who lived in
the country by:-
He had a lovely daughter on whom I cast
my eye.
She was pretty, tall, and handsome, but
neat and very fair.
There's no other girl in the country with
her I could compare.

I asked her if she would be willing for
me to cross the plains,
She said she would be truthful until I
returned again.
She said she would be faithful until death
did prove unkind;
So we kissed, shook hands, and parted, and
I left my girl behind.

I left the State of Texas, for Arizona I was bound.
 I landed in Tombstone City; I viewed the place all round.
 Money and work were plentiful, and the cowboys they were kind;
 But the only thought of my heart was the girl I left behind.

One day as I was riding across the public square
 The mail coach came in, and I met the driver there.
 He handed me a letter which gave me to understand
 That the girl I left in Texas had married another man.

I turned myself all round and about, not knowing what to do,
 But I read down some further, and it proved the words were true.
 Hard work I had laid over; it's gambling I have designed.
 I'll ramble this wide world over for the girl I left behind.

Come all you reckless and ramblin' boys,
 who have listened to this song.
 If it hasn't done you any good, it hasn't done you any wrong;

But when you court a pretty girl, just marry her while you can,
 For if you go across the plains, she'll marry another man.

Jest for fun, hyar's an old-time "Arkansas Hunting Song," by George McIntyre, printed way back in 1850, an' worth reprintin' fer thet reason, I reckon:

ARKANSAS HUNTING SONG

By George McIntyre

Bright, bright, merry ones, is the dawn's first ray!
 Let's be off, be off, and look for our prey,
 Ere the golden beams o'er the mountain gleam,
 To awake our game near the sparkling stream.
 Our steeds are waiting, our own dashing steeds,
 To proudly fly, where'er the wild sport leads!
 Up, up, merry ones, ere the break of day!
 Up, up, merry one, to the hunt away!

So long, folks, an' a happy Thanksgivin' tuh yuh all!



BULLWHACKERS' DELIGHT

WHEN all the mines were booming, and freight wagons moved over Yuba Pass in an endless procession, like fleets in full sail, the place where freighters gathered to slake the thirst that the dust of the roads aggravated to the verge of torture, was called Bullard's Bar, on North Fork.

The road at that spot split to run along both sides of the Yuba, and at Bullard's Bar, the incoming and outgoing freighters met and held high jinks.

There were three bars, comfortable corners where the guests could play cards, talk over their experiences and troubles on the road, and where they could smoke, eat, drink,

and be merry without restraint. And always there was a good welcome for every man of them.

No wonder the freighters and bullwhackers loved the place. Bullard's Bar was more than home to them, for here they met, at some time or another, every man that drove over the Pass.

The ruts made by the wheels of those wagons in the red earth can be seen to-day, wending like gullies through the countryside. But, at the foot of the long grade on the old Slate Ridge Road, there is an enormous dam, holding back a lake of sparkling water. In the depths of that lake rest the remains of glorious old Bullard's Bar.



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.

HYAR'S the kind o' letter that I would like tuh receive a dozen an' more of, every week, an' this is what it says: "Dear Sam: I've been reading where you've been asking for Westerners to come forward and offer info on conditions and such out

here, and I want to tell you that you can count on me. I was born and raised in the West, and not being exactly a youngster any more, there is little that I am not wise to. So, whenever you want to get some information, don't hesitate to write me, and I'll do my level best to get

what you want." Now, thet shore is what I calls encouragin', an' wish others would follow this example. But thar's plenty o' letters before me, so I'll dig right in an' spread 'em out for yuh tuh read.

ASKIN' HELP TUH FIND JOBS

I'd be plumb pleased if some o' the jobless could be placed through this department, an' I sincerely hope that any one who knows of an opening will let me know pronto. Many gals an' gents are registered with me and if none o' those whose letters I present tuh-day suits, I'll find the right party, anyhow.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, fourteen years old, but tall and strong for my age. I live on a farm where my father is working fattening cattle. The owner is raising on the average three hundred head of cattle, so you could call it a small ranch, for all it lacks are cowboys. I desire to go out and work for a living, but there is none to be found here for me nor for any man, and so I turn westward hopefully. If there is any one who can offer work to a young fellow like me, I sure would like to hear from him soon.

DICK BAKKER, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I have been reading the W. W. W. for a long time. although I have never written to you before this. But as I am looking for lots of Pen Pals and some one to help me find a job on a ranch, I am asking you to help me. I am a young man, twenty-one years old, strong and healthy, five feet ten inches tall, and a hundred seventy-five pounds in weight. Please, Pen Pals, do your best and help me. I will answer all letters and also exchange snaps and other pictures.

JIMMY E., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twenty-one, looking for a job on a ranch or farm or, as a matter of fact, any other kind of work in the West or South. I am very tired of town life and would like to hear from any one who could help me find work of such kind. While I am not experienced, I am willing to learn and am ready to work in the beginning merely for my board.

SHORTY, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow, eighteen years old, a farm hand. I would like to hear about a chance for work on a ranch in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, or Nevada, and would be greatly obliged to any one who would help me.

ALBERT JOHNSON, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-five. I was born in the State of California, and having tired of life where I am now, I long to be back in the West on a ranch. I can ride and can give satisfaction in anything I am told to do. Is there any one who will help me to get settled? HAROLD HUNT, OF MISSOURI.

SPECIAL REQUESTS COVERIN' VARIOUS SUBJECTS

Don't overlook this hyar batch o' letters. Possibly one or the other o' them jest contains what yuh've been wantin' tuh read for a long time.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl, thirteen years old. My favorite pastime is collecting foreign and American stamps, and as my collection is not so large as yet, I would like to get in touch with Pen Pals anywhere hoping that some of them might help me along. I will answer all letters.

ELEANOR PARKER, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a young girl of nineteen, very anxious to go West for my health. I was wondering whether you could help me find a family who lives on a ranch in Montana, Texas, or Colorado, and who is willing to take me in. I am willing to work for my board. Please let me know what you can do for me and kindly ask the Pen Pals to assist.

BETTIE KOVACH, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Would you please enter my name in your list of Pen Pals. I am a quiet, settled girl, and I should like to hear from girls anywhere, especially those past twenty and who are interested in exchanging candy recipes. I am a dress-maker with many years of experience and would be glad to pass on to those who are interested, any suggestions that might be helpful. Hoping to hear from quite a number of girls, I close with best wishes for your Corner. MISS R. S., OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a blue-eyed girl of fourteen. I am not lonesome, but I like to receive and write letters, and especially wish to hear from Pen Pals with whom I can exchange snaps and old songs of any kind. I am learning to play the Hawaiian and Spanish guitars and am, of course, very much interested in songs. Please, Pen Pals, think of me when you want to write.

BERNARDINE, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, seventeen years old, and I wish to correspond with boys in foreign countries. I am interested in everything and promise to answer all letters.

PIQUET, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young woman of twenty-two, and I would like to get some information from girls living in Arizona. I choose that State because there is where the doctor ordered my mother to go for her health. What I am especially interested in is to hear about chances regarding work for myself, and I may say that I am willing to try my hand at anything. Will answer all letters.

BEE R., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen, and I would like to get some Pen Pals in England. although I should gladly answer letters addressed to me from anywhere in the world.

CLENIN, OF MISSOURI.

REQUESTS FROM FAR AWAY

These kind o' letters are always welcome, as they show how the popularity o' the W. W. W. is gainin' wherever English is spoken. I hope that yuh'll respond quickly tuh show these forriners that it is worth while tuh belong tuh the Pen Pals.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely girl of twenty-four, and I come to ask your assistance, trying to find Pen Pals, which idea has appealed to me a lot. I feel certain that I would be greatly cheered if I could correspond regularly with a few girl friends, and I hope there will be quick response to this plea.

VOWELL, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of thirty. I am very lonely where I live as I have few friends. Being a steady reader of W. W. W., I thought of applying for some

Pen Pals, out West or in Canada. I lived in the latter country for seven years, and returned here only two years ago, on account of the depression. But I long to be across again and expect to make the trip next spring.

ERNEST HAWKINS, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of eighteen, anxious to get in touch with Pen Pals of my own age. It makes no difference where they live. I will answer all letters. Please, fellows, if you are interested in hearing about my country, write to me.

HARRY, OF HAWAII.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man, aged twenty-four years, at present out of work and in need of friends. I would like very much to get acquainted through you, with boys of my own age. fellows who would be genuine Pals. Would gladly exchange ideas, snaps, and pictures, and I promise to answer all letters I may receive.

JACK TAYLOR, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am writing to get connected with some Pen Pals, preferably real Westerners. I will trade snaps, and that may interest a few, because my regiment leaves for India, the Northwest frontier, where there is certainly going to be some excitement. So you will understand that I shall be able to offer some worth-while experiences in exchange for yarns of your famous West—a land of romance to us romantic Britishers. I am Irish and a regimental athlete. Let me hear from you, Pen artists and cowboys.

PTE. HERRON, OF ENGLAND.

FROM LONELY FOLKS

If yuh've any o' the real Pen Pal spirit in yuh, I hardly need to urge yuh tuh answer these pleas. It takes so little tuh bring a little happiness to one who is lonesome, an' the little means so much to the one who gets the letters o' cheer.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely young widow with a daughter, nine years old. With the child at school, time seems terribly long, and I would like to have Pen Pals with whom to exchange letters to while the hours away. I am willing to answer letters from young or old alike and being interested in almost anything, it will not be hard to correspond with me.

LONELY WIDOW, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty-one. I would like to get as many Pen Pals as I could obtain, because I am mighty lonesome when I get home at nights from work. I like all sports, hunting and fishing being my favorites which you can understand when I tell you that I am a taxidermist. To the first one who answers this plea, I shall send a mounted gray squirrel, and I promise to answer all letters I may get. Now, who is going to aim for the little price I offer?

JOSEPH B., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow, nineteen years old, and have finished two years at college, but I did not go back to continue my studies. I am a lonely boy, because I never tried to make many friends. Now I feel that it would be better to have a few, and therefore I ask you to help me find some suitable Pen Pals with whom I could exchange letters of mutual interest. I live in a big house in the country and have nothing to do but think and write. I often thought of going West to try my fortune, but I could never bear the thought of going anywhere without having some one to make me welcome.

LEW CARY, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of nineteen, exceedingly lonely since my sister died a few months ago. Of course, I miss her very much, and I need to get away from thinking about her all the time. So I am asking you to secure some Pen Pals for me, no matter in what part of the world they may live. I will exchange snapshots and promise to gladly answer all letters.

OLINDA E., OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely boy of fifteen. I would like to have Pen Pals anywhere in the States, especially among boys who are interested in drawing. I like horseback riding and all outdoor sports. Will exchange snaps with any one and am only hoping that you will print this letter and that answers to my plea will reach me soon.

JAMES WHIDDON, OF MISSISSIPPI.

CALLIN' ON WESTERNERS FOR INFO

Hyar's yore chance, Western gals an' gents, tuh boost yore part o' the country. I hope yuh'll answer freely an' besides, referrin' tuh the

letter I first printed, write me o' yore own free will that yuh'll hand out information on anythin' par'tainin' tuh the West yuh know of.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twenty-one. I would like some Pen Pals from Texas, Montana, Utah, and Arizona. I sure would enjoy to learn more about the West and offer in return all information I can give about my own State. I like to ride horseback and am a fair shot with a six-gun. Will answer all letters from Western Pen Pals and exchange snaps.

THEO. W., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: Please accept my request for Pen Pals, especially boys living in any of the Western States. I would greatly enjoy hearing from cowboys or shepherds as well as ranch owners, because their life interests me a lot. I am a boy who is at the present time principally occupied with wrestling, and I am able to give considerable information on that subject. Will gladly exchange pictures.

R. RICELLE, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen and in about a year I would like to go out West on a ranch as a cowboy. But at present I wish that you could find me some cowboys to exchange letters with, so that I can learn something of their way of working and living. I live on a farm, and am interested in horses. Some time ago, I tried to ride a young mule, but was thrown and broke a rib. Since then my father has forbidden me to try such stunts.

MICHAEL M., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Here is an Eastern boy of sixteen, trying to find Western Pen Pals. Boys from Texas, New Mexico, Idaho, and Montana, please write to me.

ALEX D., OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl in my early twenties. I wish to find some Pen Pals out West—in California, Montana, or Wisconsin. Will gladly answer all letters I receive and also exchange snapshots with any one interested.

RED, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would be greatly pleased if through your department I could get a few Pen Pals, especially boys living on ranches in Arizona and Texas. I am a boy of seventeen. All letters will be answered.

VINCENT LEAHY, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I am a fifteen-year-old girl, yearning for Pen Pals. What I would most like is for cowgirls to write and tell me about themselves. I will gladly answer with reports about the World's Fair or other topics which may interest them. Will answer all letters.

SPARKS, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen. I am longing to get in touch with some real Western Pen Pals, because I am so greatly interested in anything that has to do with the West. Please, cowgirls and others there, answer me soon.

TENNESSEE WEBB, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: We are sisters, thirteen and fifteen years of age. We are both fond of dancing, horseback riding, and other outdoor sports, but we are somewhat lonesome and long for correspondents in the West. Come on, cowgirls, show us how fast you can write as well as ride.

TOOTS AND BABE, OF COLORADO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen. I am looking for Pen Pals out West, preferably in Montana and Nevada, although I promise to answer all letters I get, no matter where from. I will also exchange snaps.

MARY PARSONS, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen. I am longing to get some real Western Pen Pals in order to learn more about the life of people out there. Please try and connect me with some cowgirls in any Western State. BLANCHE STIPP, OF KENTUCKY.

OTHER REQUESTS

Just of a general nature. Pen Pals wanted anywhar an' no special limit set so that it should be easy tuh answer any o' these letters.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young married woman of twenty, with a boy nearly three years old. I would like to hear from Pen Pals anywhere and promise to answer all letters, as well as to exchange snapshots.

MRS. L. H., OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a fourteen-year-old girl, and I am asking you to find some Pen Pals for me, no matter where or of what age. Please answer my plea.

ALICE COCHRAN, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a red-headed little girl of eleven. By my age, it looks as if I should not belong to the Pen Pals, but I sure want some, and I do not care where they live or what they are, as long as I get some letters. L. JONES, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl, about sixteen years old, living in the country where there are few friends around. I would like to get Pen Pals in any place the world over, because I am hungry to hear about different things, and I enjoy writing letters.

GENEVA HULETTE, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of the Golden West, seventeen years old, asking for Pen Pals anywhere in the world, my own age or older. You see I do not put any restriction as to where my Pen Pals shall live, am satisfied to receive letters and will answer them all with information about my State or on any other subject desired. Will also exchange photos.

MARTHA M., OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: Will you please get me some Pen Pals? They may be in this country, among cow-punchers, or abroad in any country. I was born in England and have traveled considerably; crossed the Atlantic Ocean seven times and saw quite a bit of French ports as well. Of course I traveled also over the U. S. A. and into Canada. Will answer any one who writes to me.

BRUCE WEST, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: Could you round up some Pen Pals for me? I am a boy of fifteen, born in the East, but now living in this wonderful State about which I shall gladly give information if asked. Will answer any one who writes, no matter from where or of what age he may be.

LEE PERRY, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I would like to have you put my name in your department asking for Pen Pals. I am a married woman of twenty-nine, mother of one girl. Next to reading the W. W. W., my idea of a good time is writing and receiving letters. I don't care who the Pals may be or where they live; I will answer all letters promptly.

MRS. ALBERT, OF NORTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of eighteen. I would like to have Pen Pals from all over the world, not to forget the West. Will exchange snaps and promise to answer all letters.

MAE KING, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, twenty-seven years old, in a strange town. Naturally being almost friendless here, I get so lonesome at times that I can hardly stand it. I come to you therefore in the hope that you can get some of the Pen Pals to write to me regularly, especially girls from Western States or the Northwest. I am fond of sports, including prize fighting. I dance, sing, and play my guitar, and yet it is hard to overcome my loneliness.

LILLIAN C., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, very fond of all kinds of sport, especially horseback riding. I would like to have some Pen Pals anywhere in the world, the West with its ranches included, and promise to answer all letters.

VERDONIA, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of twelve and I would like to pass some time in exchanging letters with others. Please get me some Pen Pals. I don't care where they come from as long as they will write to me. I am fond of drawing, singing, and playing the piano or listening to good music.

AUDREY LANFELL, OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, fourteen years old, and I surely would appreciate it if you would find some Pen Pals for me, no matter where or of what age. I am interested in songs and might find a chance to trade a few of them. D. E. BRYANT, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I wish you would rope some Pen Pals for me. I am a married woman of twenty-three, fond of writing stories and songs and also interested in making pretty things for a home. If there are blue and lonely ones among you, write to me and I will do my best to cheer you.

TRUE PAL, OF TEXAS.

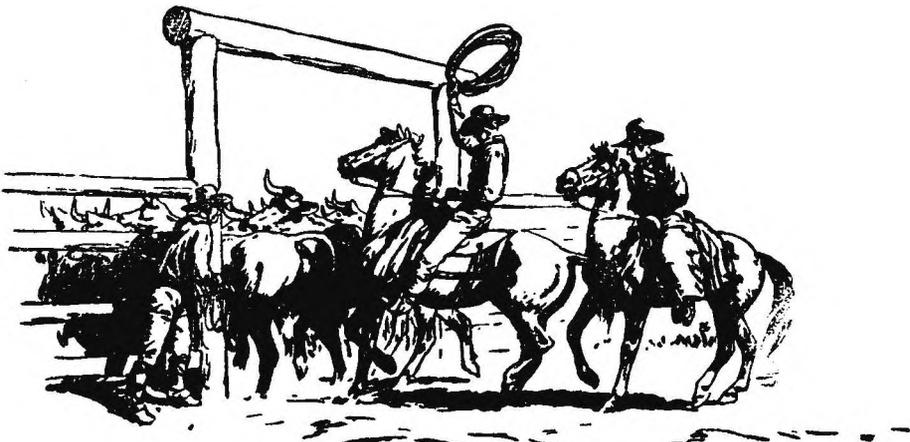
DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve, of German descent and naturally interested in Europe. Please try to find some Pen Pals for me there or anywhere else. I promise to answer all letters, and exchange snapshots. ERNESTINE GOBEL, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen in need of Pen Pals. I live on a farm in the summer and ride horseback a lot, also practice rifle shooting and am hopeful to learn also the use of a pistol. Pen Pals from anywhere, please write to me.

LLOYD MCC., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young soldier at this moment, laid up in the hospital with eye trouble, and letters from Pen Pals would surely be welcome as a diversion. I can tell a lot about our foreign forts because I am just back from service there. I am hopeful that some Pen Pals will write soon. PRIVATE MURRAY, OF ILLINOIS.

That's the lot fer this week, folks. It ought tuh be easy tuh find a pard among 'em. So long.





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.

LOTS o' times when Jimmy Quick is tilted back in his chair with his sky-blue hat pulled down over his eyes, he ain't sleepin' a-tall. But there ain't no doubt about it, ter-night, as another meetin' o' the 3W outfit gits under way. Jimmy's not only sleepin'—he's snorin'.

We grins as we sees him. Then we sees little Rusty Bolivar git up out o' his chair an' go tiptoein' across the room. He gits close ter Jimmy, bends down, grabs hold o' a chair leg, an' gives it a yank.

Crash! Down comes the hull works.

Jimmy lands on his back—an' then things starts happenin'. Quick-er'n an hombre could say "gun," thet sleepy redhead has a pair o' six-guns out. He's on his knees, wide-awake, coverin' the hull outfit.

Nobody's more surprised than Rusty Bolivar, who's shore no slouch

when it comes ter drawin' iron in a hurry. But he's caught cold. He glares at Jimmy Quick.

"Hey!" he yips. "Put up thet hardware, yuh locoed fire-eater! "Where d'yuh think yuh are, no-how?"

The hot light in Jimmy's blue eyes slowly dies out, an' he begins ter grin sort o' sheepishlike as he holsters his Colts.

"Shucks!" he says. "It's only you, huh? I thought I was captured by outlaws who wasn't goin' ter let me sleep never no more. Yo're plumb lucky I didn't salivate yuh fer keeps, Rusty."

"I'll say he is!" speaks up Hungry Hawkins, Rusty's lanky pard.

"Aw, dry up!" snarls Rusty. "Thet sleepy-eyed pelican couldn't 'a' salivated me, nohow. I'd 'a' dropped him so fast—"

We lets 'em argue while we looks

around ter see who's managed ter git here fer this week's meetin'. Aside from Hungry an' Rusty an' Jimmy Quick, we sees the familiar faces o' the Whistlin' Kid an' Looshis Carey, better known hereabouts, mebbe, as the Shootin' Fool.

Then we figures it's about time ter git goin' with the week's mail. There's a big sack of it, as usual, waitin' ter be looked at. So we calls the meetin' ter order an' starts readin' the first letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am very keen on the W. W. W. Although I am a boy of only thirteen, I read the 3W at every convenient chance. The stories are plumb *bueno*. I think it is the very best magazine in the bookstalls, and I am sure that many hombres throughout the world agree with me.

Of course, I can't get the 3W every week, because they don't sell them every week, over here. But I get a copy as often as I can.

I don't know all the waddies yet. There are some I haven't read about. I mean, Kid Wolf, Vincente the Yaqui, Bud Jones of Texas, and a few others. I hope to meet them soon.

The best hombre on your spread—the best Western character ever written about, I think—is Sonny Tabor. After him come the Bar U twins, Hungry and Rusty, and Johnny Forty-five.

The Whistlin' Kid and Shorty Masters rate about the same with me. Any one who says that Shorty is yellow or stale is loco. If he doesn't like it, let him come over here and fight it out with me.

By this time, you may have noticed that I haven't said anything about the Circle J pards. I'll tell you why: Circle J is stale, I think. Couldn't you put more Sonny Tabor stories in 3W in place of them?

Well, Boss, I've got to go now. Dad's trying to find my 3W. If he does, I won't see it to-day, for he will keep it for himself.

Yours till Buck Foster turns into a horned toad,
BENEDICT GAYNOR.
Kilmarnock, Scotland.

The Whistlin' Kid grins. "The argument about the Circle J outfit," he says, "is gitin' ter be almost as

hot as the argument about havin' gals in the stories, ain't it, Boss?"

"Yo're right, Kid," we says, drawin' out another letter an' glancin' over it afore we reads it. "Anybody who don't believe it listen ter this."

Here's what we reads then:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the first letter I have ever written to you. I have been reading 3W for about two years, and I'll say that you have a plumb fine spread.

Now let's get down to business. Some readers say, "Take out the Circle J stories," or "Don't put them in so often," or "They are getting stale." My answer to that is: If you fire the finest outfit in 3W—Circle J—I and thousands of others will stop reading your magazine.

Now don't any of the rest of you waddies feel bad about this. You're all sure of staying on the spread. You ought to resent the fact that a lot of hombres who have been eating loco weed want to have your pards—Billy, Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo—run off the spread. Don't let them get away with it.

My advice to you, Boss, is: "Keep 3W as it is!"

Yours as long as Buck Foster wears his bearskin vest,
Bud S.
St. Louis, Missouri.

The gang gets a chuckle out o' thet, comin' as it does, right after the one from the hombre in Scotland. They all realize thet them two letters are plumb typical. Fer every knock, there's a boost. An' the knocks mean jest as much as the boosts. Nobody's ever perfect.

Here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a reader of your W. W. W. magazine, and I think it is the best on the stands. I wish you would have more Kid Wolf and Silver Jack Steele stories, however, and not so many of Circle J.

My favorite characters, aside from the Kid and Silver Jack, are Sonny Tabor, Shorty Masters, and Johnny Forty-five. I also like the true stories of the West, by Kent Bennett.

Here's hoping that this manages to get past the wastebasket! Yours,
KEOKUK, IOWA.
PEWEE.

An' here's the next one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Although I have been reading W. W. W. for about three years, I have never written to you before. I hope my first letter gets read at meetin'-some night.

Here's the way I rate your waddies—arranged in order of preference: Johnny Forty-five, Sonny Tabor, Circle J, Jimmy Quick, Calamity Boggs, Kid Wolf, Shorty Masters, the Whistlin' Kid.

The Hungry and Rusty stories have too much *bang-bang* and not enough story.

Don't put girls in your stories. If any of the readers want to read about girls, let them buy some other magazine and not try to spoil 3W.

Yours for more Johnny Forty-five stories,
K 14.

St. Louis, Missouri.

The next one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the 3W for two years now, and it is the best magazine I have ever got hold of. It can't be beat.

The waddies I like best are Sonny Tabor, Johnny Forty-five, and Kid Wolf. But all the others are good, too. I wish you would run more stories about Johnny Forty-five, the Bar U twins, and Storm King.

Don't drop any of your regular waddies. If it wasn't for Circle J and Hungry and Rusty, I wouldn't like the 3W at all.

Some folks don't like Buck Foster. I do. He's a plumb fine old ranny and can't be beat when it comes to fighting. Billy West and Joe Scott would be in Boot Hill now, if it wasn't for Buck.

Yours truly,
BILLY BROWN.
Columbus Junction, Iowa.

"Thar yuh have it, gents!" we says. "All them last three letters goes ter prove that there ain't no settlin' the old argument about which one o' yuh the readin' hombres like best."

"Do you ever get any more of those letter from O. B. Joyful?" asks the Shootin' Fool. "Those used to be full of kicks, I remember."

"No," we answers, "we ain't heerd from our Joyful friend in a plumb long time. Mebbe he don't read 3W any more. Or mebbe he don't find

nothin' ter kick about, these days. We wish he'd write in an' tell us what's wrong. But he ain't the only one who kin kick like one o' Shorty Masters's mules. Jest listen ter this:

So sayin', we pulls this here little bo-kay out o' the sack:

TO THE RANGE BOSS: Being hard up for something to do the other night, I went out to a news stand to find something to read. After looking around for a half hour or so, I finally bought a 3W and took it home to read. Fifteen more cents gone fluoy!

Honestly, I never did read such a bum magazine as that one of yours. I started in with "Riders Of Rio Mesa," by Samuel H. Nickels, and nearly laughed myself sick. Those two Rangers, whatever their names were, burned enough powder to blow up a battleship. And I never heard of any one's doing so much whirling, dashing, leaping, snarling, snapping, galloping, and running. Don't those two ever move and talk like human beings?

In the same issue there was a story about a pair of cowboys called the Bar U twins. The story wasn't so bad, but it just isn't possible for two men to look so much alike. I don't believe it.

The yarn by Cleve Endicott, "Gun Bait of the Cow Trail," was pretty poor, too. That Billy West hombre is too good to be true. Buck Foster comes the closest to being real, but Endicott overdoes it and makes him too dumb.

I didn't think much of the other stories, either. Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral was all right, but Pen Pals was plain dumb. As for the Wranglers Corner—well, I figure it's the kind of department that won't print a letter like this.

So, you see, I don't think so much of your spread. In fact, I can't figure why I keep looking for the next issue to appear. But I do, and I reckon that when I see it, I'll buy it just to see if that Kid Wolf hombre is as good as all the letters in the Corner said he was. You'll be hearing from me again about it.

My sympathy to all the gang—I'm sorry for such an unfortunate outfit,

E. HARDING.

Montgomery, Alabama.

"Wow!" exclaims the Whistlin' Kid. "Beside thet Harding hombre, old O. B. Joyful is as easy ter please

as a baby. But d'yuh reckon he really thinks we're as bad as he says, Boss?"

"It don't sound that way, Kid," we says. "Anyway, he's goin' ter give us another chance. We'll be lookin' fer his letter."

Then we draws another one out of the sack. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the 3W for a good many years, and think that there is no better magazine on the market. I think that all of your regular waddies are fine.

Of course, I have my favorites, like everybody else, and here they are, in the order in which they appeal to me: Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Bar U twins, Hungry and Rusty, Johnny Forty-five, and Calamity Boggs.

Billy West would be a lot better off if he would keep his nose out of other people's affairs. Joe Scott is the only one of that outfit who is of any account. Buck Foster would be all right if he wasn't so hot-headed and didn't brag so much.

Please put in a lot more stories about Sonny Tabor and Kid Wolf.

Yours till you stop printing 3W,
DON.

Kansas City, Missouri.

An' thet's about all the mail we has time ter read this week. There's a hull lot more left in the sack, an' it's a durned shame we can't git ter all of it. Howsomever, if we did, there wouldn't be nothin' to the magazine but Wranglers Corner.

The gang drifts slowly out ter their waitin' broncs. They don't want ter leave any more'n we want ter see 'em go. But they've got work ter do, danger ter face, fights ter fight. So they hitch up their gun belts, an' fork their cayuses.

Pretty soon, we're alone in the Corner. Feelin' plumb low about it, we finally locks up an' hits the hay. We'll be back again, next week, fer another meetin'. THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

GUN SMOKE IN HUNGRY VALLEY

Novelette

By **CLEVE ENDICOTT**

There's plenty of excitement in this yarn about what happens when Buck Foster wins a Thanksgivin' turkey fer Circle J, an' then has a touch of gold fever.

THE BITTER CREEK PRISON BREAK

Novelette

By **PHILIP F. DEERE**

The pards of one o' the outlaws thet Tex Carnochen put away, once before, try ter git him loose. Tex gits wind o' the scheme, oils up his Colts, an' trouble begins ter pop.

TURKEY BAIT FOR SONNY TABOR

Novelette

By **WARD M. STEVENS**

No matter what kind o' bait a jasper uses, goin' trappin' fer the young Arizona outlaw is plumb dangerous business, especially if the trapper happens ter be a human skunk.

Also stories of Bud Jones of Texas, by J. Allan Dunn; Shorty Masters, M. D., by Allan R. Bosworth—and other characters.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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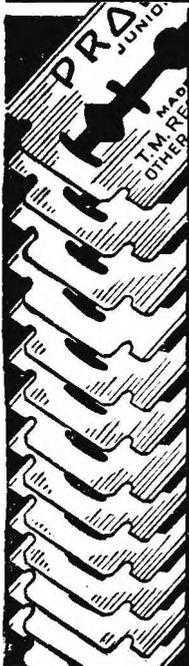
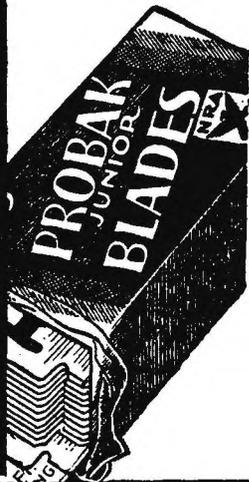
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"Sincerely yours,
E. Eugene Leonhart,
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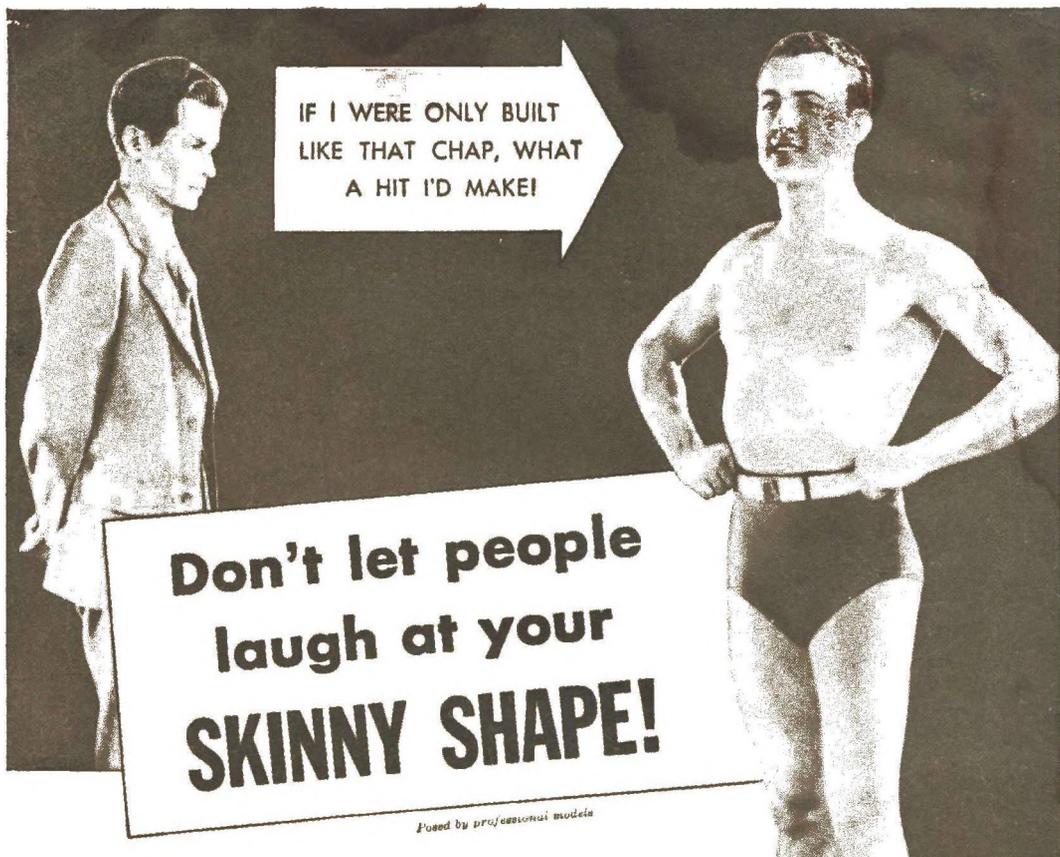
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This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured brewers' ale yeast imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new scientific process is concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

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Day after day, as you take Ironized Yeast, watch

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Results guaranteed

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"Top Off"

Your meals with TUMS!

The Delicious New Antacid Mint:

THOUSANDS of people everywhere are telling how they have ended the torture of "Fussy Stomach." People who used to have to pick and choose, and actually avoid the very foods they liked best, now simply let their taste guide them in the foods they eat. No longer do they fear the distress of acid indigestion, sour stomach, heartburn, or that nauseating, gassy fullness. The secret—a new candy-like antacid mint called Tums.

Almost everyone, about 7 out of every 10 Americans, suffers some of the effects of acid indigestion. Simply munch 3 or 4 Tums after meals—or when smoking or excesses of eating or drinking cause trouble. You will be surprised how quickly the excess acid is neutralized and the "Fussy Stomach" relieved.

"Top off" your meals with Tums—discover the pleasure of eating your favorite foods without the fear of bad after-effects.

If you have trouble sleeping, eat 2 or 3 Tums after your evening meal or before going to bed. See how much better you sleep when Tums have counteracted the acid and gas that torture your nerves and make you restless. No need to give up your favorite coffee—no need to buy expensive coffee substitutes.

Tums are so agreeable, refreshing and convenient that you will want to carry a roll with you always, in pocket or purse. Get a roll of Tums today at any drug store... They are only 10 cents.

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