

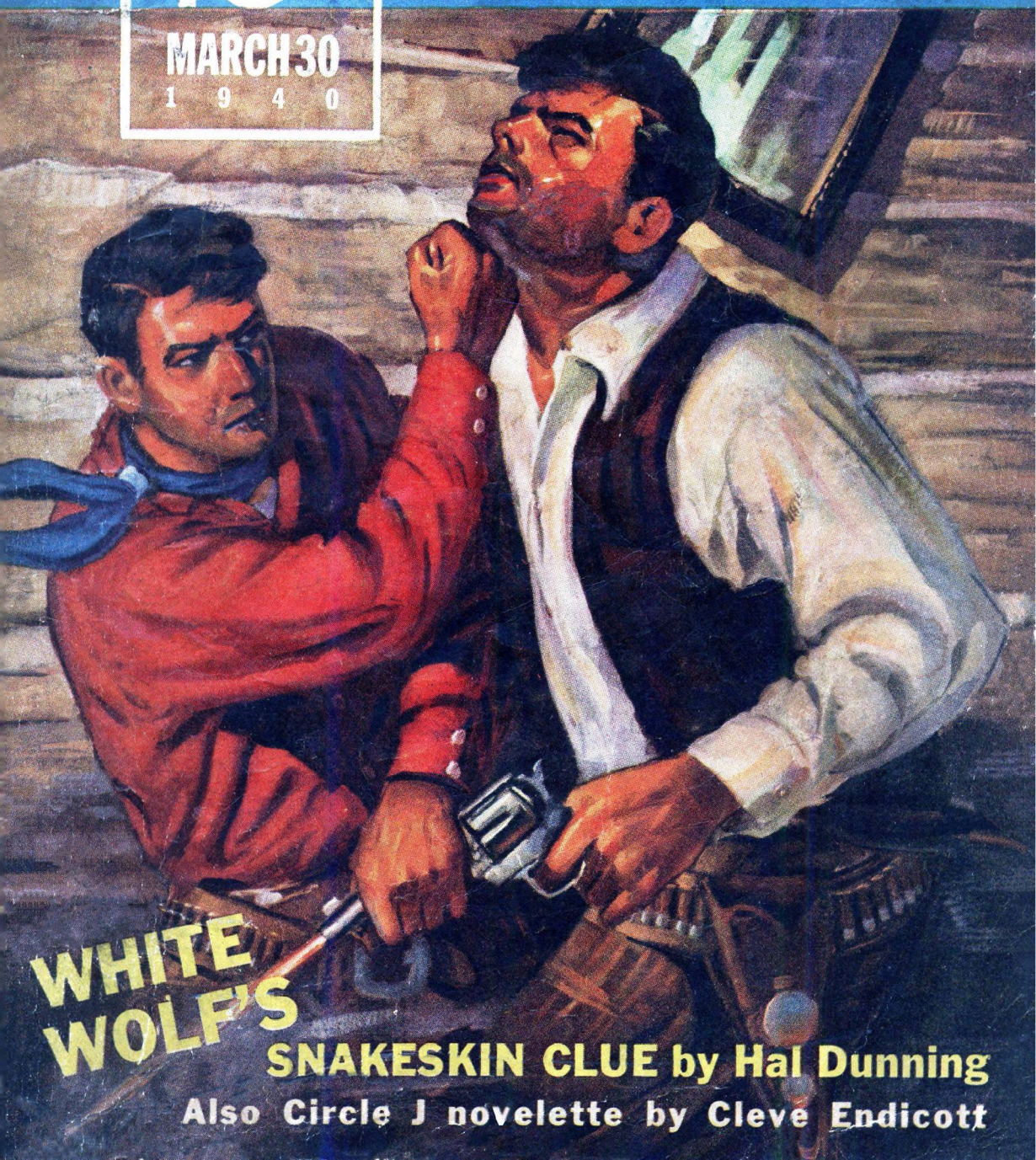
STREET & SMITH'S

# WILD WEST

MAR. 30, '40

10¢  
MARCH 30  
1940

## WEEKLY



**WHITE  
WOLF'S**

**SNAKESKIN CLUE** by Hal Dunning

Also Circle J novelette by Cleve Endicott



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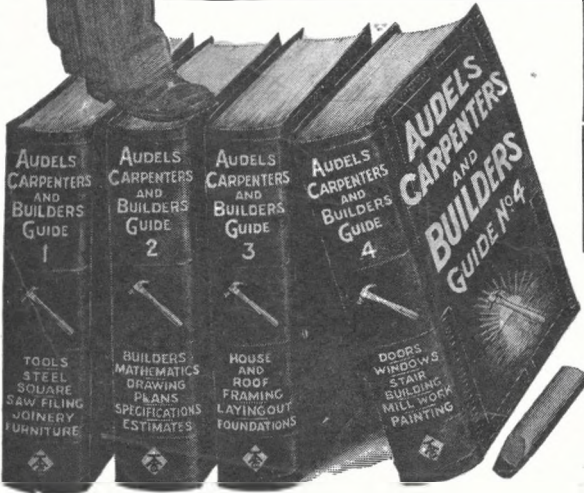
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# WILD WEST WEEKLY

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COVER BY RICHARD CASE

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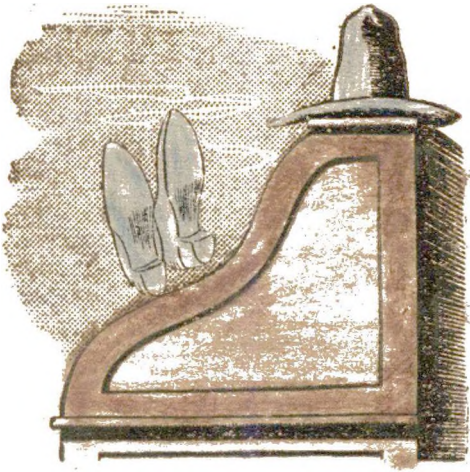


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## A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

It's important for any magazine to keep abreast of its readers' likes and dislikes. The readers are the real bosses. They know what they like and how they want it written. The editors find out and pass the word along to their regular authors. If the authors are alert and not too thick-skulled (as a few of them are when it comes to changing their writing manners, alas) they change their ways.

Story trends and writing styles change with the years. That's because readers' tastes change somewhat.

About six months ago we decided up here on the 3W spread that some writers were letting too much thick dialect into the speech of their characters. We told 'em to ease off. The ones who could understand a simple request did as asked. And the results have been most favorable. A number of readers have complimented our much more straight-up dialogue.

Here's a typical note we received recently:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've got an apology to make concerning one of yore range riders, or, rather, range writers.

It's been some months since I wrote you, criticizin' this particular writin' hombre, and his characters' dialect. Since then, the aforementioned hombre's written one of the best Western stories I've ever read.

I'm speakin' of Walker Tompkins. I never did like his style of writing until I started on his recent continued novel, "Trail of The Iron Hoss." Man! There was a yarn! I shore am proud to apologize to Tompkins, and I'm wishin' him all the luck in the world on his future productions!

Let's have more yarns like that! (You'll get 'em, pard.—Ed.)

Ease off the dialect, all the time.

Sincerely yores,

W. S. (SLIM) DAVIS.

Kannapolis, N. C.

Dialect always has been a problem. It's a known fact that *some* Westerners, especially old-timers, use such corrupted words as "yuh", "tuh", "ter", and such. But plenty of them speak correct English (or American, rather). Young Westerners, especially, are likely to speak properly. The one speech trait common to nearly all who live outside the cities is that of droppin' g's off the end of words ending in "ing."

So you'll still find *some* dialect in Wild West Weekly stories, but you'll also find plenty characters speaking pretty straight. That seems to be the way you want it, and I know it's the way we want it.

Another letter:

GENTLEMEN OF THE 3W SPREAD: My husband and I live alone on a ranch up here in Montana. We entertain ourselves mostly by reading. As I have always lived in the West, since the early days, Western stories interest me very much.

My husband and I especially enjoyed the December 23rd issue—and "Deacon Wildcat," by Mark Lish, in particular. Also liked "Christmas Six-guns," by Cleve En-

dicott and "Dead Man's Boots," by Nelse Anderson.

"Christmas At The Bar Z," by Arthur L. Rafter, was so good I clipped it out to keep.

We have read several short stories by Mark Lish, but "Deacon Wildeat" interested us most. It's so true to Western lore and the characters seemed so natural that we felt as if we knew them all personally.

Give us more stories such as those I've mentioned and we'll be steady customers of Wild West Weekly.

Yours truly,

SARAH A. CLEMETSON.

Sayle, Montana.

Kind words, ma'am. Ought to perk the authors up and make 'em turn out even better stuff.

This seems a good time to remind you letter writers that it's sometimes two or three months after receipt before we can print yore letters and then get 'em onto the stands in the magazine. You have to remember that a weekly magazine is set up in type six weeks or more before it reaches the newsstands. The job of distributing several hundred thousand copies to every good newsstand in the United States takes considerable time, which is one of the chief reasons why magazines are printed so far ahead.

Then again, we try to publish the most suitable letters in the order in which we receive 'em. So if you write us and don't see yore note printed here for a couple months, don't be surprised or sore. There's no way to do it any faster.

Without aimin' to hand ourselves too high a stack of compliments, I'd like to state that plenty of readers have commented favorably upon the cleaner-appearing and more vivid covers the magazine's been using the

past few months. And the smooth-cut edges of the right side and bottom also have been appreciated. Readers keep telling us it's far and away the best-looking Western magazine on the stands.

Well, I hope they're right. Street & Smith have always prided themselves upon the superior make-up of their magazines—and in the past year they've hit a new all-time high. I wouldn't be making that kind of statement if there weren't a heap of visible proof to back it up.

Let me know how you like "Keyboard Kerrigan's Colt Music" in this issue. We've an idea that Keyboard might do to feature in a series of stories. But that depends upon how popular he is with you. His talents are different from those of any character we've ever featured before. So bear down. Write me a letter telling me what you think about him—and about other characters whom you especially like or dislike.

The Silver Kid returns next week in a real bang-up thriller—"The Silver Kid's Gun Trail," by T. W. Ford. The Kid is one of the grimmest and most hard-boiled characters who ever threw a bullet on the 3W range. Ed Earl Repp writes a fine story featuring another favorite character; it's a novelette called "Yuma Bill's Boothill Exile." Then there's a gripping installment of "Stepson of Satan," the regular departments and several very unusual short stories.

Get out yore twine, rope a dime and earmark it: "Reserved for next week's issue of Wild West Weekly." I can't think of a better way to spend one of those thin pieces of silver.

*Adios, amigos.*

THE RANGE BOSS.



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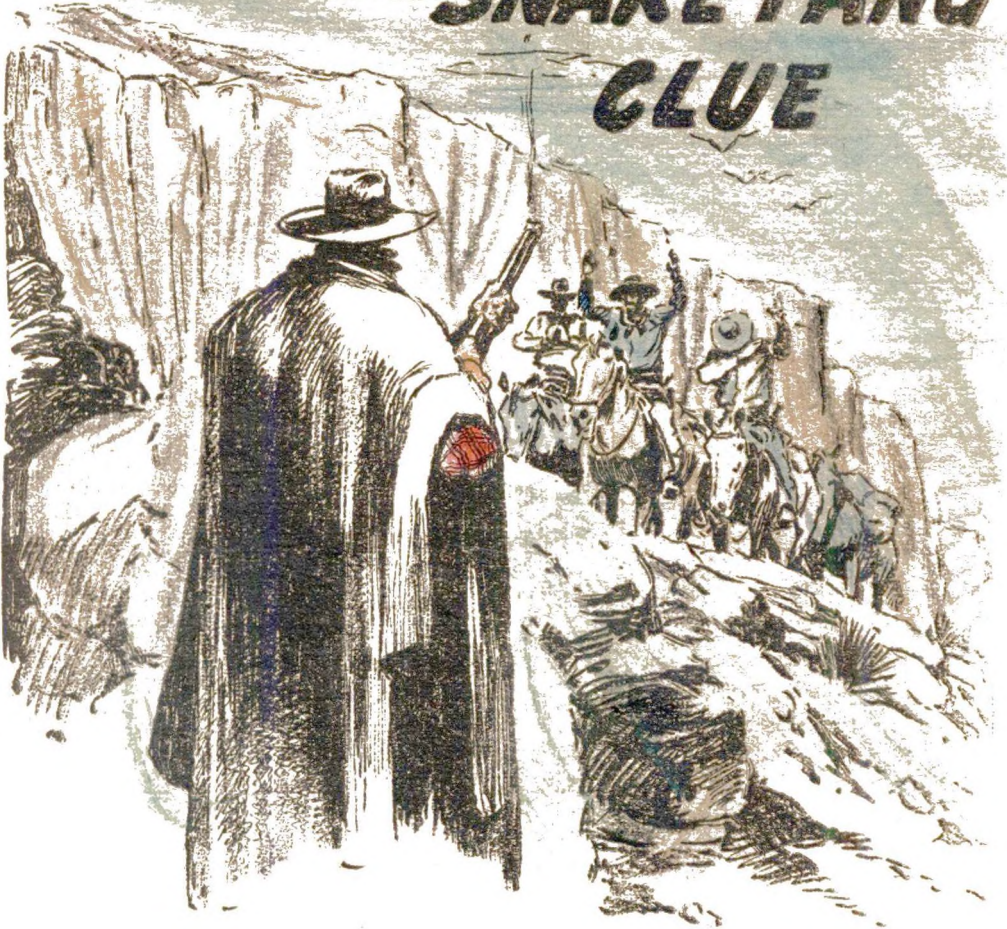
CENTS



# WHITE WOLF'S

## *SNAKE-FANG*

## *CLUE*



by HAL DUNNING

*There was a secret hidden in that spring—  
and Death lurked in the ice-cold water.*

A FIVE-FOOT rattlesnake was sunning its scaly length on the narrow Cholla Canyon trail as the White Wolf approached with his two grays.

The reptile whipped itself into a coil as the outlaw's mount plodded nearer, unaware of peril.

The horse's ordinary acute senses

were at a low ebb as a result of twenty hard-pushed hours of flight. Jim-twin Allen, the White Wolf, rode slumped in the saddle, head on chest, drugged by exhaustion.

*Whirrr!* Ten glistening rattles began their grim buzzing. But the warning went unnoticed by horses or man.

Somewhere, miles back in the rugged Sunblaze Mountains, the White Wolf had shaken off a trailing Arizona sheriff and his posse. That had been the night before; but not once had Allen dared pause for rest.

Thus it was that Princess, the leggy *grulla* mare the outlaw was riding, was within a single pace of the coiled rattler before the lathered pony heard the dread warning.

Allen sagged forward in saddle as the horse skidded to a halt, snorting its terror.

Then the panicked animal leaped back against Gray Comet, Allen's pack horse. The mare's back suddenly arched like a broken clock spring.

With a grunt of fear, the dozing outlaw came to his senses and snatched instinctively for his saddlehorn. But it was too late. The force of the bucking horse's backward plunge jerked Allen's kangaroo leather cow boots from the stirrups, and the rider catapulted out into space.

The Cholla Canyon trail hugged the broken rimrock of the dry gorge. Jim-twin Allen's hurtling body struck shoulder first on a roof-steep pitch of broken rock, and then he was rolling like a boulder toward the sheer drop-off which would hurl him into three hundred feet of yawning space.

Frantically, Allen sought to gouge spurred boots and outplayed fingers into the rocks, but momentum hurled him downward past outjutting

boulders that would have popped his skull like eggshell had his head hit one of them.

Clawing fingers ripped at brush, uprooting them.

For a terrible instant, the skidding outlaw had a glimpse of blue, haze-filled chasm below him. Then he reached the rimrock, beyond which lay eternity—

There was an agonizing wrench of his left leg, and the mad toboggan flight ended as Allen's left boot caught in the Y-shaped fork of a piñon which had taken stubborn root in a soil-filled cleft of the rimrock.

Fighting for consciousness, Allen stared about him. He was hanging head-down over three hundred feet of space!

Hanging by one ankle, spur and boot wedged securely in the piñon scrub, the outlaw struggled to ease his position but found it impossible.

Straight below his dangling body were the jagged rocks which clogged the dry pit of Cholla Canyon. If his foot came free of that boot, nothing could prevent him from being crushed on those fanglike talus chunks which waited below, as if eager to smash him into a bloody smear of cracked bone and bruised flesh.

Up on the trail above, Princess and Gray Comet pawed the ground in a lather of apprehension. The rattlesnake that had caused the mare to unseat its rider uncoiled and slithered off into the loose rocks.

Blood was rushing to the outlaw's head, tom-tomming in his ears, filling his brain with throbbing pain.

He reached toward his six-gun holsters, hoping to fire shots in a distress signal which might catch the ear of some prospector or trapper, though he doubted if this desolate corner of Arizona was frequented by such men.

But his holsters were empty. The



heavy Peacemakers they had contained had dropped out, gravity emptying the holsters as Jim-twin Allen hung 'upside down over the cliff brink.

He tried to bend his body upward so that he could grab the piñon snag which had saved his life, but it was impossible to accomplish such a feat in his precarious position.

The impact of landing on the rocks after being bucked from saddle, plus the injuries he had received during the brief but rapid slide, had sapped the strength in Allen's already exhausted frame.

He felt his leg loosening in the grip of the high-heeled boot, and instinctively he hardened his muscles. Once out of that boot, he would plummet to his doom. Yet, perhaps that grisly fate would be preferable to hanging upside down until he became unconscious.

The hammering sound in his ears was deafening. The outlaw's sun-bronzed face was now purpling with the downward rush of blood. The sharp throb in his twisted leg made Allen wonder, in a dull, stupefied way, if the leg were broken.

Then, as if from a great distance, Allen heard one of his grays whicker, up on the trail. He wondered, vaguely, if Gray Comet was bidding his master adios.

"Hey, down there! Hang on, busky!"

The hoarse yell reached Allen's eardrums, made him open his eyes and stare straight upward at the brassy Arizona sky.

As he did so, he caught sight of a sombreroed, gun-hung hombre scrambling down the short pitch of lava rock between the trail and the rimrock.

A coil of horsehair lariat was looped over the man's arm. A reassuring grim was on the hombre's

face as he came to a halt immediately above the suspended outlaw.

"Catch this loop, pardner, and put it around your shoulders. I'll have you out of that mess in another couple of ticks."

Relief and hope brought new strength surging through the outlaw as he saw his rescuer drop his rope. Desperately, Allen put the noose about his shoulders, felt the hombre draw it tight and then dally it to a heavy boulder.

A moment later he was drawn upward by the rescuer's powerful arms. Taking up the slack in the lariat, the man reached out with a free hand and extricated Jim-twin Allen's jammed boot from the crotch of the piñon.



WHITE WOLF

The strength ebbed from the outlaw's body as he felt himself dragged to the safety of the rimrock. He was dimly aware of being hoisted aboard

his deliverer's powerful, beefy shoulders.

Then the giant-sized hombre began the ascent of the loose rock. Strong though he was, it took every ounce of the man's strength finally to gain the level trail and deposit his burden at the feet of Princess.

Panting heavily, swabbing perspiration from his leathery countenance, the hombre peered down at the outlaw he had rescued from the very jaws of death.

Jim-twin Allen was light—not more than a hundred and ten pounds, all sinew and muscle. The outlaw's age was indeterminate—relaxed, his face might have seemed that of a button in his early twenties. Now, his countenance dirt-smearred and twisted with pain and exhaustion, he seemed fifteen years older.

Shuddering with relief and fatigue, Jim-twin Allen got to his feet and tested his weight on his sore leg. No bones were broken, but his muscles and tendons had been severely wrenched.

"Reckon you're the luckiest coot in these parts, feller!" his deliverer said in short gasps. "I just happened to be takin' a short cut along Cholla Canyon here, or I wouldn't have seen your bronc throw you. Another five minutes and you'd have been a dead man, even if you hadn't slipped out of your boot."

Allen extended a shaky hand, a grin of thanksgiving on his lips. Then his expression froze, as he caught sight of a nickel-plated sheriff's star on the hombre's dusty calf-hide vest.

"I'm Sheriff Lank Bedloe of Big Rock," panted his rescuer. "Got a telegraph call from Cococino to be on the watchout for that owl-hooter they call the White Wolf—he's supposed to be headin' for these parts."

Something in the stark dread which gleamed in Jim-twin Allen's

yellow-flecked eyes made the sheriff from Big Rock halt.

He sized up the man before him, then glanced over his shoulder at Allen's two gray ponies.

Seized with a sudden hunch, Sheriff Bedloe reached in his pocket for a copy of the telegram he had received from the sheriff's office at Cococino that morning: It read:

BE ON WATCH FOR JIM-TWIN ALLEN, KNOWN AS THE WHITE WOLF, BELIEVED HEADING YOUR WAY. FIVE-THOUSAND-DOLLAR REWARD FOR HIS CAPTURE DEAD OR ALIVE. IS FIVE FEET FIVE, HAS PECULIAR UPSLANTED EYES LIKE A WOLF'S. TRAVELS WITH TWO GRAY HORSES AT ALL TIMES. IF YOU SIGHT HIM BE CAREFUL AS ALLEN IS DEADLY AND GIVES NO QUARTER.

Jim-twin Allen lurched toward his gray saddle mare, in a desperate effort to reach the Winchester 30-30 carbine which reposed in his saddle boot.

Before he could do so he found his way blocked by Sheriff Lank Bedloe, felt the pressure of the sheriff's .45 muzzle in his heaving ribs.

"I'll be damned, Allen!" panted the lawman. "This is a loco set-up. Here I rescued you from fallin' into that canyon—an' now I got to take you to jail and a hang rope!"

## CHAPTER II.

### WELLS-FARGO LOOT.

**T**HE White Wolf's senses spun. He had no reserve strength at the moment, but resistance would have been suicidal anyway.

Handcuffs clicked in the stillness as notched jaws were shot home, and Jim-twin Allen glanced down to stare dazedly at the bright steel bracelets which fettered his wrists.

Gone, now, was the sympathetic light in the sheriff's eyes. A moment



before. Bedloe believed he had rescued a gangling kid from an awful fate. Now, he realized that sheer luck had put the notorious White Wolf into his grasp, without the exchange of a single bullet.

"I'm escortin' a Wells-Fargo express rider over to Fryingspan Butte," grunted Bedloe, as he assisted the White Wolf into his recently vacated saddle. "I reckon I'll just put you in the calaboose over there, Allen, and wire the Cococino sheriff to collect you."

The sheriff mounted his own saddle a heavy-withered black gelding. For the first time, Jim-twin Allen saw another rider farther down the trail, where it forked to go over the mountain divide to Fryingspan Butte.

It was from the forks of the trail that Sheriff Bedloe, a few moments before, had seen Jim-twin Allen's accident. But in the excitement of getting to the scene and rescuing the rider, Bedloe had forgotten the contents of the crumpled telegram in his vest pocket; otherwise the presence of Allen's two gray horses would have warned Bedloe to approach with caution.

A few moments later, Bedloe had ridden back to the forks. The rope he had used to rescue the White Wolf now was a lead rope tied to Princess' bridle ring.

"Run into a streak of luck back there, Jennings!" the sheriff called out to the black-mustached express rider. "That hombre we seen git backed off turned out to be Jim-twin Allen—the White Wolf!"

The Wells-Fargo express rider shuddered. In heavy *alforja* bags tied behind his saddle cantle, Jennings had a small fortune in gold which was consigned to a big mining outfit at Fryingspan Butte.

"I'm glad I didn't run across the White Wolf while I was ridin' alone

with this pay-roll money," grunted Jennings, gathering up his reins. "The Wolf shoots first and investigates afterward, without givin' the other man a chance."

Jim-twin Allen smiled sardonically. Well enough he knew his own reputation for ruthless cruelty. It was said by many that Allen was a killer wolf, who slew for the sheer joy of killing; there were plenty of fiends on horseback in the West who were of that merciless breed.

Yet Allen knew that he lived up to his White Wolf nickname. The White Wolf, according to ancient Indian legend, was a beast who killed only in self-defense; a mythical lobo who used fangs and claws in the defense of persecuted things, and not a heartless murderer.

"That's the rep the White Wolf's got, all right," conceded Sheriff Lank Bedloe, as they headed off toward Fryingspan Butte. "But there's some as say Allen ain't all killer. For instance, the time he was captured by that Arizona Ranger, Sonny Tabor—Allen could have stole six thousand bucks that belonged to a widder an' orphan, an' he didn't."

The White Wolf's face softened, as he recalled in mind's eyes his adventurous meeting with the Arizona Ranger, Sonny Tabor. He was proud to call Tabor his friend; possibly because Tabor himself had been an owl-hoot rider like the White Wolf, before he had won a governor's pardon and donned a Ranger's badge.

"Be that as it may," grunted Jennings, "I'm damned glad that the White Wolf's going to stretch hemp. I'll feel a heap safer transportin' gold through these badlands when I know there's one less desperado to—"

Suddenly, out of a boulder nest to the left of the Butte trail, came the ear-shattering report of a rifle.

Jim-twin Allen stiffened in saddle

as he saw the Wells-Fargo messenger reel violently in saddle, his right elbow smashed by ambusher's lead.

Sheriff Bedloe, holding his pitching horse in check with his left hand, stabbed his right to the big six-gun slung to his hip. Before he could draw the weapon from leather, a venomous command lashed out of the rock pile:

"Hold it, badge toter! You're under a three-way drop!"

Jim-twin Allen knew shooting talk when he heard it. He flung up his arms, taking no chances of being dumped from saddle by the trio of crooks who were in command of this situation.

Sheriff Bedloe snarled an oath as he saw a tall figure emerge from the rocks and cover him with a smoking .30-30.

The bandit was six feet tall, and his clothing was hidden by a faded old army blanket with a neck-hole cut in it, in the fashion of a Mexican poncho. A blue bandanna masked the ambusher from the eyes down.

The eyes over the rifle barrel were as penetrating and icy as chipped agate.

"Unstraddle and hit the ground, sheriff!" ordered the crook. "And help that express messenger offn his bronc."

Sheriff Bedloe dismounted and proceeded to assist Jennings from his mount. The bandit stepped forward and removed six-guns from the Wells-Fargo rider, whose face was drawn and blanched from the agony of his bullet-shattered arm.

A moment later the Big Rock sheriff was also disarmed.

Then the bandit turned his attention to Jim-twin Allen. His eyes slitted curiously as he saw the handcuffs on the White Wolf's uplifted arms.

"A prisoner, eh?" grunted the des-

perado. "Well, it's these Wells-Fargo saddlebags I'm interested in. Sheriff, do the honors—unstrap them *alforja* sacks, will yuh?"

Jennings ground out an agonized oath as he saw the money-laden bags unstrapped from his saddle by the purple-visaged sheriff. But the threat of the bandit's rifle, plus the guns of the other two crooks supposed to be in hiding, made the sheriff helpless.

Hardly had the sheriff unstrapped the Wells-Fargo leather sacks than the outlaw whistled. Out from behind the rock nest came, not a fellow bandit, but a saddled pinto cow pony.

Obedying the bandit's orders, Sheriff Lank Bedloe transferred the Wells-Fargo money sacks to the outlaw's paint horse and made them fast to the saddle.

The outlaw chuckled behind his blue bandanna mask as he thrust his rifle in the saddle boot, picked up his reins, and put one toe to stirrup.

"I wouldn't advise you trying to follow me, sheriff," grunted the desperado. "After all, you already got a prisoner to handle. It'd be unhealthy if you tried to—"

The blanket-clad outlaw screeched with fear as his speech was cut short by the ominous rattle of a diamond-back.

Jim-twin Allen felt his own mare rear violently, as the horses caught sight of the rattlesnake which had writhed out of the rocks bare inches from the bandit's right boot.

Before the outlaw could move his leg, the snake struck, imbedding both fangs in the thick leather of the Coffeyville boots.

The snake's strike was not dangerous in itself, but it demoralized the outlaw for a fraction of a second. And in that moment of advantage,



Sheriff Lank Bedloe pounced like a cougar.

His rush broke the bandit's grip on saddlehorn and reins, and the White Wolf saw the two go down, rolling over and over in a frantic grapple.

Allen had his own hands full, controlling Princess' panicked bucking. The Wells-Fargo messenger, half crazed with pain, looked on dumbly as he watched outlaw and sheriff engaged in desperate combat.

Then a six-gun exploded somewhere inside the flurry of blanket and bodies, and Jim-twin Allen groaned aloud as he saw Sheriff Bedloe relax, saw the masked desperado tear free of the lawman's grasp and rear to his feet.

Out from under the blanket came the bandit's right arm, and it clutched a smoke-spouting .45 Colt.

Drilled between Bedloe's shaggy eyebrows was a bullet hole which had killed the sheriff instantly.

### CHAPTER III.

#### HANDCUFF KEYS.

**P**ANTING heavily, the bandit stood staring at the corpse of the sheriff from Big Rock.

Then he shifted his gaze down to his right boot. The rattlesnake was writhing there, unable to get its fangs out of the outlaw's boot leather.

With a savage kick, the masked killer knocked off the snake and crushed it under heel. The White Wolf saw that the rattler's twin fangs had broken off and still protruded from the bandit's leather-increased ankle.

"Damn country is alive with rattlesnakes," panted the outlaw, swinging aboard his pinto. "I killed four of the things this mornin' while I was waitin' for you hombres to show up."

Without further parley, the killer wheeled his horse about and galloped off down the trail, the rhythm of his horse's hoofs gradually dying in the distance.

Jim-twin Allen swung out of saddle, to confront the Wells-Fargo agent. The express messenger was still staring dumfounded at the sheriff's corpse, sprawled out beside the dead coils of the rattler which had so nearly proved the bandit's undoing.

The White Wolf stepped swiftly over to the rock next and rummaged behind a wild creosote brush to recover the sheriff's twin six-guns, where the bandit had tossed them along with Jennings' weapons.

No sound came from the surrounding hillside; but Jim-twin Allen had already guessed that the bandit was alone, that his talk of two accomplices in ambush was pure bluff.

Jennings gasped with alarm as he shook himself out of his trance and looked up to see the White Wolf buckling his own cartridge belts tighter about his lean flanks. The sheriff's six-guns now reposed in the White Wolf's holsters, put there with difficulty by the White wolf's man-aced hands.

"Don't worry, Jennings—I ain't killin' you," said the White Wolf, as the Wells-Fargo man staggered back in alarm before Allen's approach. "All I'm after is the sheriff's keys to these bracelets."

A moment's search of Bedloe's pockets brought the handcuff key to light. Holding it between his teeth, Jim-twin Allen had no difficulty in freeing himself.

"Go ahead and vamose, Allen," groaned Jennings. "I ain't trying to stop you. Not with one arm bashed up this way."

Allen narrowed his eyes quizzically.

"How much gold did that hombre chouse in those bags?"

Jennings wiped sweat off his white face with a sleeve. It was evident that the express rider was in great pain.

"Why—you fingerin' on trailin' that owl-hooter and gettin' my saddlebags for yourself?" sneered Jennings.

Allen shrugged, and remounted Princess.

"*Quien sabe?*" he said. "I'm trailin' that killer anyhow, because I owe Sheriff Bedloe my life. The least I can do to repay him is to tally his killer."

Jennings thought rapidly. He was in no condition to trail the express robber himself. There was a possibility that the White Wolf would wreak vengeance upon the blanket-clad crook, if he knew there was a sizable booty in the Wells-Fargo bags.

Sooner or later, the White Wolf would be captured; the badlands swarmed with posses on the lookout for Allen, according to what Sheriff Bedloe had told Jennings only that morning.

"It'd be worth your while to catch that hombre, all right," returned Jennings.

Allen wheeled his grays, the pack horse trailing without benefit of hackamore.

"You take care of the sheriff's body, Jennings," called back Jim-twin Allen. "Maybeso you'll get your Wells-Fargo money back—leastwise, you will if I catch up with that skunk."

Jennings' jaw dropped in amazement as he saw the White Wolf head off down the trail which the sheriff's murderer had taken in getaway.

"The White Wolf could have killed me, plumb easy," mused the Wells-Fargo man after Allen had

vanished from sight. "And damned if he didn't sound sincere, about returning that dinero if he caught the bandit—but hell! No crook of the White Wolf's caliber would do a trick like that."

Well versed in the art of tracking men or game, Jim-twin Allen had little difficulty in following Bedloe's killer during the remainder of the day. However, in his bruised and exhausted condition, the White Wolf was unable to ride rapidly, even if his jaded horses could have been equal to the pace.

He camped that night in the bleak recesses of Cholla Canyon, near a spot where he had found the army blanket which the outlaw had used for a disguise in the holdup.

Next morning found him refreshed, and his horses ready for the long trail once more.

By now, he realized, Bedloe's murderer would have a long head start. This fact became even more apparent when, about midmorning, he encountered the outlaw's pinto pony, its back showing saddle marks and its flanks crusted with dried blood which testified to the outlaw's heartless roweling.

The paint horse had been turned loose to graze. It dragged no picket rope, nor was it hobbled.

That, to the White Wolf, told a plain story: the outlaw had mounted another horse which had been hobbled at this point prior to the holdup, on the off chance that he would be pursued and might need a fresh mount.

"Well, it's adios to that killer," mused the White Wolf. "But I might as well keep movin' this direction, as long as I'm headin' toward New Mexico anyway."

The sun was westering when Jim-twin Allen and his faithful grays

topped the backbone of the Sawtooth Range and looked down into the fertile, far-flung expanse of Apache Valley.

This was cattle range—some of the most fertile in the entire Territory of Arizona. Herds grazed on its lush range land; with his high-powered binoculars, Jim-twin Allen could pick out at least four groups of ranch buildings.

"Our supplies is gettin' low, hosses," Allen mused as he changed mounts. "And we ain't got dinero to buy new ammunition and grub. The best thing we can do is hire out as a cowhand to one of those outfits down yonder—and hope that they ain't heard about the reward I'm packin' on my scalp."

An hour later, Jim-twin Allen was dismounting in front of a rambling, weather-beaten ranchhouse in whose front door someone had burned the Box Diamond brand.

In answer to his hallo, a white-whiskered old stockman opened the door and stood regarding his visitor quizzically.

"Howdy," called the White Wolf, his tautness leaving him as he saw no hint of recognition on the ranchman's part. "I'm a driftin' saddle tramp, mister, with a good loop for hire. What's the chances of signin' up on your Box Diamond spread?"

The oldster came out to where Allen stood with his horses. His quick size-up told the rancher that Allen had had range experience; his saddle pommel bore rope burns, his hands were calloused, his legs warped by long years of riding, and Allen's wiry hardness told the rancher that this cowboy, in spite of his half-pint build, was made of whangleather and sawdust.

"You shore you ain't one of them damned Pebble Crick nesters that's givin' us so much trouble?"

"Do I look like a nester?"

"*Bueno*. We are a bit short-handed—havin' trouble hirin' hands, what with this range war between us big outfits an' the nesters. Can you use them guns you're packin'?"

Jim-twin Allen paused in the act of rolling a brownie, and his weird wolflike eyes gazed at the Box Diamond boss levelly.

"I'm no rovin' gun hawk, if that's what you mean," he retorted. "I'm honin' to rent my peg ponies and my ropin' arm, not my trigger finger."

The oldster grinned toothlessly and extended a bony hand.

"O. K., my name's Latigo McAllister. Take your soogans out to the bunkhouse an' report to my ramrod, Hoptoad Carter. He'll give the orders from there on out."

The White Wolf grinned his thanks, and led his grays out to a barn which McAllister indicated. After he had bedded down Princess



HOPTOAD CARTER



and Gray Comet, Allen carried his warbag and bedroll to a shabby frame bunkhouse, empty of waddies at this time of day.

He shaved a week's growth of beard off his face, donned a fresh shirt, and with a greasy rag cleaned off his chaps. When he had finished, Allen bore little resemblance to the rock-eyed outlaw of a week before; instead, he appeared to be a younker in his twenties.

He was busy spreading his soogans in an empty bunk when spur chains jangled and a tall figure entered. Allen turned to find himself being surveyed by a pair of brown eyes, under beetling brows.

"I'm Carter, the foreman," gruffed the newcomer, hitching the weight of crisscrossed gun belts. "Boss says you've signed on with the Box Diamond."

Allen nodded. His peculiar wolf-like eyes were sweeping up and down Hoptoad Carter's rangy height, missing no details of the man's costume. Something familiar in Carter's voice had set a warning bell to tolling in the back of the White Wolf's head. As an outlaw on the dodge, he had to be constantly on the alert lest he run into someone who would recognize him for a killer with a fat bounty on his pelt.

And then, as the White Wolf's gaze wound up at Carter's boots, he saw something which jelled the blood in his veins. Still protruding from the dusty leather of Carter's right boot ankle were the broken-off ends of a pair of rattlesnake fangs!

## CHAPTER IV.

### SUICIDE JOB.

**B**Y no flicker of eyelash or tightening of face muscles did the White Wolf betray the excitement which had speeded up his pulse.

Was Hoptoad Carter the blanket-disguised killer who had choused Jennings' gold-laden Wells-Fargo bags over on the Cholla Canyon trail the day before?

Was the Box Diamond straw boss a desperado in his spare time, a gunman whose bullet had plunged a sheriff into eternity?

It seemed improbable, yet Jim-twin Allen knew it was highly improbable, also, that another man would be wearing boots which contained the broken tips of imbedded snake fangs—fangs which Carter himself probably did not realize were there.

"You can put me down on the pay roll as Shorty Anson," said the White Wolf. "Reckon I'm ready to begin work any time you say, Carter."

The Box Diamond foreman jerked a thumb toward another barn.

"I've just sent one of our rannihans named Elmer Williams out on a fencin' job, stringin' bob wire around a waterhole," he said. "It's a two-man job, so you slap a hull on your pony and follow Williams out there."

The White Wolf hurried out to the horse barn to obey orders. Soon, astride Gray Comet, he was loping out to the open range. In the distance, Elmer Williams was a dwindling dot, headed for the waterhole fencing job.

Hoptoad Carter made his way to the ranchhouse, and a few minutes later was sharing a whiskey bottle with wizened old Latigo McAllister, his boss.

"We'll get that Elkhorn waterhole fenced yet, Latigo," chuckled the foreman, with an evil wink. "I sent this new waddy out there with Williams. It's ten chances to one they'll lock horns with that Clark outfit."

McAllister grinned toothlessly at his foreman.

"This bandy-laiged buckaroo we just hired looks like he'd swap lead with any sodbuster," grinned the Box Diamond owner. "Anyhow, he don't know we sent him out on a suicide job. If he an' Williams get that fence strung up, *'sta bien*. If they get their hides perforated—it aint no skin offn our backs."

Meanwhile, Jim-twin Allen was rapidly overtaking Elmer Williams, the Box Diamond cowboy he was supposed to assist in the fencing job at hand.

Thoughts were milling in Allen's head. It was entirely likely that Hoptoad Carter was the bandit who had shot Sheriff Lank Bedloe, over beyond the Sawtooths. After all, the fleeing killer's tracks had been what had led the White Wolf to this section of Apache Valley.

"Sooner or later, I'll spot somebody on the crew I can trust—maybe this Elmer Williams jigger," Allen told himself. "If I find out that Hoptoad Carter owned a pinto with a bangtail like that desperado was forkin', I'll know Carter's the man who got that Wells-Fargo cash."

Off in the distance was a clump of cottonwoods and dwarf willow. Elmer Williams, the Box Diamond puncher, was hobbling his cayuse in the shade of the cottonwoods when Jim-twin Allen galloped up and introduced himself.

Williams, a gangling youth of nineteen whose jaw was covered with gold-colored fuzz, jerked a thumb in the direction of a glassy pool of water nearby. The pool was more than a waterhole; it was a flowing, ice-water spring, with a rambling creek forming the outlet.

"I set them posts yesterday," Wil-

liams said. "We got to string up bob wire today."

Allen helped the kid roll a drum of barbed wire over to the waterhole. Williams carried wire-pullers, nails, staples and other fence equipment in a gunny sack.

"I thought this was open range?" inquired the White Wolf. "How come the Box Diamond is wirin' in a waterhole like this one?"

Williams shrugged, and started reeling out wire.

"Reckon it's to keep the damned nesters from usin' this water. Anyhow, the ramrod told me to pack this Colt cutter an' keep an eye peeled for them sod-bustin' snakes."

For the better part of half an hour, Jim-twin Allen toiled at the wire-stringing job without asking further questions. Young Williams volunteered the information that he had run away from his home over in New Mexico less than two weeks before, and had obtained his first job on McAllister's spread.

From what Williams had heard in the bunkhouse, plenty of nesters were settling in Apache Valley, homesteading range from the government; and the big cow spreads, such as the Box Diamond, were waging relentless warfare on the small-acreage homesteaders.

Elmer Williams, being young and inexperienced, had been thrilled at the idea of joining forces in a range war against sod-busters. But Jim-twin Allen, who owed his very existence to his ability to use his six-guns, saw little of the glamorous side of gunplay. He had felt bullets smashing through flesh and bone too often to hear romance in a gun's blast or be thrilled by the recoil of flaming guns in his own hands.

Sizing up Williams as a kid who would be safe to talk to, Allen voiced the question that had been burning

inside him ever since he had seen the snake fangs in Hoptoad Carter's boots over at the Box Diamond bunkhouse:

"By the way, Williams—this ran-rod, Carter. You happen to know if he rides a pinto hoss?"

The kid paused in the act of driving home a staple while Allen held a strand of wire taut against a cedar post.

"Funny you'd ask that, Shorty," returned Williams, "because I been wonderin' myself why Cart—hey! Here they come, damn 'em!"

Williams dropped his hammer with a yell and clawed out the Colt .45 in his belt holster.

The White Wolf whirled about to face the direction at which Elmer Williams was triggering his six-gun, in time to see two riders galloping up from the direction of the foothills.

Even as the Wolf looked, he saw one of the riders pitch off his saddle as one of Williams' wild shots made a clean hit through the rider's heart.

The other rider, a mere boy in his middle teens, reined up and snaked a Winchester carbine from his saddle boot.

Allen saw the younker draw a swift head, squeeze trigger.

There was a choked gasp, and Elmer Williams dropped his gun to stagger backward.

Blood was gushing from a bullet hole over Williams' heart, as his spur tangled in the water grass at the edge of the spring and the Box Diamond cowboy, a dead man before he fell, toppled backward into the water and sank from sight.

The White Wolf had made no move to go for his own guns. Now, as he saw prime evidence of the boy's wizardry with a rifle, Allen threw his arms aloft.

He saw the kid swing his rifle and crank a fresh cartridge into the

breech, as he slid off his horse. Then, seeing Allen's arms lifted in token of surrender, the kid started edging sidewise toward the prostrate victim of Williams' wild outburst of shooting.

Allen stalked forward, eyebrows puckered with bewilderment. What had caused the gun battle, or who the kid was, White Wolf had no idea. But he did know that Elmer Williams had cut loose with his .45 without warning—and that the approaching riders had showed no signs of hostility before the shooting commenced.

"Stop where you are, busky!" shrilled the younker, kneeling behind the older man's corpse. "Mebbe you got orders from McAllister to fence that waterhole, but you're on my dad's homestead an' I'd as soon drill you as—"

The kid broke off, big tears coursing down his cheeks. Yet the rifle cuddled to his cheek was as steady as granite.

"I'm not rowelin' you, amigo," assured the White Wolf in a gentle tone. "I'm plumb new to Apache Valley. I don't even know why my pardner started shootin' when you rode up just now."

The kid relaxed, apparently convinced of Allen's sincerity. Then he gave way to a torrent of grief, laying aside his rifle and cradling the dead man's head in his lap.

Jim-twin Allen shook his head sympathetically as he squatted beside the grieving youth. Then, with an effort, the kid brushed off his tears and fixed Allen with a cold, bitter stare.

"Dad's dead," he choked. "The Box Diamond killed dad. An' we had a legal right to Elkhorn Springs, yonder. Gov'ment homesteaded it an' give us water rights to Pebble Crick. But me an' dad was ridin' "



*Cold water below  
and hot lead above.*



down here to tell you fellers that the Box Diamond was welcome to use that spring, even if it did belong to us. We was comin' down to ask you not to fence it—an' your pard cut loose without warnin'—"

The White Wolf's yellow-flecked eyes glinted with anger as he looked at the dead nester, then let his gaze range over the sage-dotted prairie toward McAllister's ranch buildings.

He had stuck his horns into a range war—McAllister had intimated as much. But, sizing things up, Jim-twin Allen believed he was on the wrong side of the fence.

It was evident that the Box Diamond had plenty of range, and plenty of water. And the suspicion began to dawn on Jim-twin Allen that Hoptoad Carter had sent him—a new, strange cowhand—and Elmer Williams, a stripling with wild triggers—to do a crooked job of fencing.

Reaching out, the White Wolf dropped a kindly hand on the kid's shoulder.

"Son," he promised softly, "it looks like you're bein' wronged here. And if so, then you can count on me to . . . to help set things aright. The only way to fight gun-totin' ranchers is in their same language—bullets!"

## CHAPTER V.

### SECRET OF THE POOL.

**G**RATITUDE was in the youngster's eyes as he shook hands with Jim-twin Allen. With a kid's ability to size up character, this button was trusting the hard-eyed little owl-hoot rider without asking questions.

"I'm Gary Clark," he said. "This . . . this is my . . . father, Chilton Clark. Our . . . homestead . . . is the Twin C outfit."

The White Wolf assisted Gary Clark in loading the murdered home-

steader aboard his horse and tying him to the saddle.

"You tell me what the set-up is here in Pache Valley, son, and we'll do some plamin'," suggested Jim-twin Allen. "I've seen the way you use a rifle, so I know you got the guts to carry on for your father."

It was a sordid story that came from the lips of the nester's son.

A story familiar enough to the Western cattle country—the White Wolf had tasted the bitter injustice of range barons himself, in years gone by.

Apache Valley was wide as all outdoors, and plentifully laced with streams. Latigo McAllister was the range hog who was determined to seize the mastery of Apache Valley; already, according to Gary Clark's story, the Box Diamond had frozen out three other ranches bordering his range.

They were the ranches which Jim-twin Allen had picked up with his field glasses from the Sunblaze ridge that morning.

"Me an' dad an' my kid brother homesteaded a section up in the foothills yonder, with Elkhorn Springs in the middle of it," the kid wound up. "Our brands have been blotted by McAllister's riders; a cowboy we hired last winter was shot, an' I'm dead shore he was murdered by Hoptoad Carter, the gunny who's supposed to be McAllister's foreman."

Allen nodded thoughtfully. Gary's size-up of Carter's breed was much the same as his own, and verified his suspicion that Hoptoad Carter was the killer who had held up the Wells-Fargo agent and murdered Sheriff Lank Bedloe the day before.

"Supposin' you take your father back to the ranch an' take care of his grave, Gary," proposed the White Wolf. "Me, I'll fish Elmer Williams' carcass out of the waterhole an' tote

him back to the Box Diamond. Reckon I'll have a run-in with Hoptoad Carter—and I'll be driftin' over to your homestead later on this evenin', to report."

Gary Clark's brows puckered with worry as he sized up the White Wolf's small stature. But something in the way this cowboy carried his twin .45 six-guns in well-oiled, thonged-down holsters told the shrewd youngster that Jim-twin Allen could take care of himself, even against a six-foot killer like Carter.

"*Bueno*—but watch your step agin' that *segundo*," warned the kid, mounting his own saddler. "Carter ain't above shootin' a man in the back. McAllister's gettin' old an' shaky, but he can still handle a mean six-gun."

The White Wolf waited until Gary Clark had ridden off toward the foothills, leading the horse on which was tied the limp corpse of his father.

Then Jim-twin Allen headed back to the waterhole. The spring had cleared, and some eight feet down in the rock-lined pothole the White Wolf could see Elmer Williams' body sprawled on the muddy bottom.

It was a ghastly end to Williams' career of adventure. A fortnight before he had been living on his parents' ranch in New Mexico. A restless urge to play a man's rôle in the frontier country had sent Elmer Williams to the crooked Box Diamond—and a justifiable death.

Jim-twin Allen unbuckled his gun belts and hung them on the top strand of wire on the half-finished fence. If the White Wolf had his way, McAllister would never finish that inclosure.

Then the outlaw stripped. His body was slashed with past scars caused by bullet and whiplash, club and fist, knife and rocks. The story

of wild, desperate years on the dodge were written in those ghastly, healed-over wounds.

Poising himself on the grassy edge of the waterhole, Jim-twin Allen dived. The icy shock of spring water made his body tingle as he knifed his way downward through the stirring depths.

Opening his eyes as he touched the sludgy bottom, the White Wolf's arms moved in swimming strokes which carried him to Elmer Williams' body.

The dead Box Diamond cowpuncher was a heavy man, but his bulk moved with ease under water.

Wrapping one arm about the corpse's waist, Jim-twin Allen started for the top, breaking surface in a smother of foam.

From there on, it was difficult swimming to the bank and towing Williams' lifeless bulk.

Hunting for a rocky spot which would afford him some grip so that he could get on dry ground without releasing his hold on the waddy's corpse, Jim-twin Allen made a peculiar discovery.

Driven into the soft earthen wall of Elkhorn Springs, below the heavy grass roots and invisible from above, was a hardwood picket pin such as is used to stake out horses.

The presence of the pin, driven horizontally into the earth an inch or so above water line, was strange enough to arrest Jim-twin Allen's attention.

More unusual was the fact that a length of braided rawhide lariat was tied to the outjutting stake—and went down under the water.

Brow puckering with curiosity, Allen gave the stake a tug. It was firmly imbedded in the earth. The lariat was taut, as if tied to a heavy weight on the bottom.

But there was no time to investi-



gate the rope, which had obviously been hidden from view. Not when he was burdened with over a hundred and sixty pounds of dead weight.

Clinging to the imbedded stake, Jim-twin Allen scrambled out on the grass.

With extreme difficulty, he hauled Elmer Williams' water-logged corpse out of the pool and stretched the unlucky cowboy face-up on the ground.

That accomplished, the White Wolf dived once more into the icy pool. This time, he slid his fingers down the taut length of the mysterious lariat, until he reached the bottom.

The rope was tied to something—an object which was heavy, and slippery to the touch. Exploring it with his fingertips, the White Wolf at first thought it to be a saddle, which, for some strange reason, had been dropped into the pool.

He opened his eyes, but mud boiling up from the bottom, disturbed by his feet and knees, kept him from seeing what manner of object he had run across.

Lungs bursting for air, the White Wolf came to the surface and crawled out on the bank alongside Williams' corpse.

Then, lying flat on the ground, he was able to reach his arms over the projecting ledge of earth and get hold of the stake-bound rope.

Muscles rippled on Jim-twin Allen's back as he tugged the heavy weight upward. He was panting with effort when the object broke the surface of the pool.

"I'll be damned—a pair of saddlebags!"

It was true. The *alforjas* were still buckled shut; on the leathern strip between them the rawhide rope had been knotted fast.

Then the White Wolf saw something about the saddlebags which caused him to gasp with surprise. Deeply tooled into the brown cowhide was the inscription:

WELLS-FARGO EXPRESS  
BIG ROCK, ARIZONA

A low whistle came from the White Wolf's lips. He knew, now, what the contents of those *alforjas* bags were, and why they were hidden out of sight at the bottom of this waterhole.

They were the selfsame saddlebags which the masked outlaw had stolen from Jennings, the express messenger, the day before!

## CHAPTER VI.

### BLOOD ON THE WATER.

JIM-TWIN ALLEN let the saddlebags and their loot settle back to the bottom of the springs.

Then he got to his feet and hastily donned Levis, cow boots, hickory shirt, and bat-wing chaps.

"It's a ten-to-one shot that Hoptoad Carter hid them bags down there, knowing nobody would ever think to drag a pool bottom for anything valuable," thought the outlaw, as he buckled on his shell belts. "Findin' those bags here so close to the Box Diamond—that, an' the snake-fang clue on Carter's boots—is going to put hang twine around that *segundo's* neck, or I'm loco!"

For a moment, Jim-twin Allen debated whether or not he should recover the stolen Wells-Fargo treasure sacks.

Then he decided against it. After all, he had no definite and positive proof that Hoptoad Carter had been the blanket-disguised slayer of Sheriff Bedloe.

Carter would doubtlessly have an alibi for his whereabouts the day be-

fore. The fact that he had hidden the holdup loot here, instead of putting it in safekeeping somewhere on the Box Diamond, would indicate that Carter was not working in cahoots with Latigo McAllister—at least on the express holdup.

"Nope—I've got to be waitin' here at the springs when Hoptoad Carter comes for that gold," decided the White Wolf, as he went about the grisly job of loading Williams' body on horseback. "That'll be direct evidence that Carter is the skunk we're after."

Mounting his own gray, Jim-twin Allen headed back to the Box Diamond spread, his eyes slitted against the westering sun rays.

An excited group of punchers met him at the corral gate, asking questions about the dripping corpse lashed to the saddle of the horse Jim-twin Allen was bringing back to the ranch.

The White Wolf made no comments, however, until he saw Latigo McAllister and his foreman, Hoptoad Carter, coming at a run from the cauchhouse.

The ranch bosses exchanged excited glances as they recognized Elmer Williams' corpse.

"What happened, Shorty?" demanded Carter, his agate-brown eyes squinting venomously as he looked over Jim-twin Allen.

The Wolf swabbed perspiration from his face.

"Them Pebble Crick nesters cut loose with a Winchester when we was fencin' that waterhole," panted Allen, his voice sounding thoroughly frightened. "I'm damn lucky I didn't get perforated myself."

McAllister made a clucking noise with his tongue.

"That'll be Chill Clark an' his whelp, gunnin' my men ag'in," snarled the oldster. "Wait'll the

sheriff at Apache hears this—he'll run them nesters into the hoosegow for certain."

Hoptoad Carter turned to Jim-twin Allen with a frown.

"How come Williams' carcass is so wet?"

Jim-twin Allen returned Carter's piercing gaze as he answered:

"Rifle bullet knocked Williams into the pool."

Carter hesitated an instant, then asked:

"Did the body sink?"

"Like a rock."

"How'd you fish him out?"

"Dove down to the bottom an' fished around until I located his body. Then I brung him up."

Carter's furtive gaze avoided the outlaw's glance. Latigo McAllister said gruffly:

"We'll need your testimony about this murder, Shorty, when the sheriff investigates. We'll see those nesters in hell—this time they bit off more'n they're goin' to digest."

The White Wolf shook his head and backed toward his horse.

"Nothin' doin', McAllister. I ain't stickin' around no range war. I'm pullin' stakes—pronto. You don't owe me nothin' for my afternoon's work."

The White Wolf returned to the Box Diamond bunkshack and rolled his bedding. A few minutes later he was packing up Princess.

The others had carried Williams' corpse into a nearby barn, and Hoptoad Carter had saddled a horse when Jim-twin Allen rode out by the corral.

"I'm sending Carter to Apache for the sheriff," explained McAllister. "Where you headin', Shorty?"

The White Wolf pointed vaguely toward the Sunblazes, in the opposite direction from the waterhole.

"Back to Big Rock or Fryingpan

Butte. Anywhere to get out of this damned range-war country."

Without further ado, the White Wolf rolled his spurs and set off toward the foothills. Once out of sight of the Box Diamond, Allen made a wide circuit through the thickening dusk, and headed for the waterhole.

A moon had risen by the time he reached the cottonwood thickets surrounding Elkhorn Springs.

"Sooner or later, Hoptoad Carter will come for that dinero, to cache it somewhere else," Allen reasoned. "And I'll be hidin' here, when he comes."

Making sure that his gray horses were out of sight, the White Wolf headed across the moonlit patch of grass to the edge of the pool. He wanted to make sure that the saddlebags were still submerged; there was a faint possibility that Carter, on his way to get the sheriff at Apache, had stopped by to recover his loot.

Kneeling, Jim-twin Allen leaned far over and reached down to grope for the picket stake.

It was still there—and the lariat rope was still weighted with its submerged anchoring object.

And then, across the moonlit water below his face, fell the tall shadow of a sombreroed man.

Without turning his head, Jim-twin Allen knew the owner of the hissing voice behind him:

"You found more'n Williams' body when you dove in there, eh, Shorty?"

The White Wolf twisted his head, to find himself staring into the leveled bore of a six-gun held by Hoptoad Carter. The moonbeams glinted off the foreman's exposed, yellowish teeth, and cast harsh shadows over the crook's livid countenance.

"Your curiosity's drawn you a one-way ticket to hell, busky!"

snarled Carter, earing back the knurled hammer of his .45.

Frantically, Jim-twin Allen stabbed a hand to the butt of his own sixgun.

A stab of orange flame came from the muzzle of Carter's gun, and smashing lead knocked the White Wolf backward over the grassy ledge.

The outlaw's body struck the water with a resounding splash and sank from sight. Blood tinted the foamy bubbles with crimson.



LATIGO McALLISTER

With a snarl of satisfaction, Hoptoad Carter leaped forward through dancing veils of gun smoke, and peered down at his leering reflection in the moonlit pool.

The echoes of his shot bounced back from the Sunblaze foothills. The ripples died out on the surface of Elkhorn Springs; but the glassy depths were not broken by the White Wolf's body coming to the surface.

Pink bubbles tugged upward from the black depths and broke on the mirrorlike surface. For a long five minutes, Hoptoad Carter watched the pool, gun alert in his fist.



"If my slug didn't croak him, five minutes under water drowned him like a rat," grunted the killer, holstering his Colt. "It's damned lucky I come by here, or he'd have choused that Wells-Fargo dinero—"

Carter hauled up the braided rope which he had picketed under the overhanging bank the night before. Pulling the drenched saddlebags out on the grass, he unbuckled them to make sure the heavy pokes of gold coins were still there.

Then, carrying the dripping *alforjas* over to where his horse was hidden in the dwarf willow thickets some distance from where Allen's grays waited in the cottonwood brake, Carter loaded the Wells-Fargo treasure sacks behind his own saddle cante.

Mounting, Hoptoad Carter reined back toward the Box Diamond Ranch and the *clip-clop* of his horse's hoofbeats gradually died on the Arizona night.

Back at Elkhorn Springs, a timid frog started croaking once more. But the unbroken surface of the water-hole gave no hint of the human body beneath its moonlit ripples.

## CHAPTER VII.

### GHOST OF THE WOLF.

SEVERAL minutes after the sound of Carter's departing hoofbeats had faded in the night, Jim-twin Allen clung to the grass roots under the overhanging rim of Elkhorn Pool.

Ice water was numbing his body, but it felt cool on the deep furrow which Carter's point-blank bullet had plowed through the egg of muscle on his right shoulder.

It had been difficult, coming to the surface for breath when he could clearly see the outlaw's crouched form waiting on the bank above, gun

ready to trigger a fatal slug into his skull.

But safe in the black shadows underneath the very spot where Carter waited, Jim-twin Allen had kept his nostrils above water and had breathed air into his lungs without a sound.

At length, secure in the knowledge that the outlaw had departed, the White Wolf clawed his way out of the pool. The cold night air failed to warm his body, stiffened his muscles. But he was alive, and without serious injury.

"Carter was the skunk who killed Sheriff Bedloe, all right," thought Jim-twin Allen, as he made his shivering way back to his horses. "My snake-fang clue was *bueno*, but it wouldn't be worth a hoot in court. And now that Carter's got his Wells-Fargo *oro* back ag'in, I haven't any real evidence agin' him at all."

Allen grinned ruefully as he mounted Gray Comet and led Princess out of the cottonwoods. After all, even if he had all the evidence against Carter, he would not dare haul Carter before a judge and accuse him of robbery and murder. Not when he, himself, was charged many times over with those same crimes.

A dim trail led off toward the southeast, and Jim-twin Allen knew it led to Chilt Clark's nester cabin.

Twenty minutes later he was hailing a small sod-roofed cabin, where lamplight glowed through a square window. Soon he was greeted by Gary Clark. On his way across the front yard the White Wolf saw a new grave mound surmounted by a wooden cross, and knew that Gary and his kid brother had done their last sad duty for their father.

Gary's "kid brother," Link Clark, proved to be a pleasant-faced man in his early forties, a man whose

strength of character and honesty was apparent in his voice and manner.

"Gary told me—about your offer to help us," said Link Clark. "But you don't know what you're getting into here in Apache Valley, Shorty Anson. You . . . you better high-tail it and leave us to fight it out with the Box Diamond."

Briefly, Jim-twin Allen explained that he had fallen into the pool in order to escape being gunned to death by Hoptoad Carter. Details regarding the Wells-Fargo loot which had been sunk in the waterhole, Allen kept to himself.

Drying his wrung-out clothes before a crackling fireplace, the White Wolf proceeded to clean his six-guns and oil them carefully before reloading them with fresh shells given him by the nesters.

"I got a little private quarrel to settle with Hoptoad Carter, boys," explained the White Wolf, wriggling back into his dried-out shirt an hour later. "Reckon I'll mosey over to the Box Diamond pronto, and settle it."

Gary Clark, busy oiling his rifle, eyed their runt-sized benefactor worriedly.

"You'd be walkin' plumb into a snake den to tackle Hoptoad Carter tonight, Shorty," warned the younger. "Carter's play would be backed by old Latigo McAllister. You'd never get out of there alive."

Link Clark, the kid's older brother, confirmed the button's warning with a grave nod.

"The Box Diamond outfit has all of Apache Valley buffaloed," said the nester. "We been the only ones who've bucked the Box Diamond."

Jim-twin Allen tied the thongs of his holster tips and grinned boyishly at the sober-faced Clarks.

"My business won't wait," he an-

swered. "I'll be back before daylight, and tell you that Carter won't be hoorawin' you nesters any more. I got a hunch Carter's the kingpin of this range-hog stuff, more'n McAllister even."

Bidding the Clark brothers good night, the White Wolf headed out across the ridges toward the Box Diamond, trailing his pack horse as usual.

Ahead against the black backdrop of the Sunblazes, a yellow spot of lamplight winked from the Box Diamond ranchhouse. It served as a guide for Jim-twin Allen, as he circled between the foothills and the ranch, and dismounted.

Inspecting the cylinder mechanisms of his Colts, Jim-twin Allen headed for the lamplighted window of the Box Diamond house which he had approached a few hours before in search of a cowhand's job.

Gun in hand, the White Wolf stalked through the front gate, eyes alert for a possible sentry. Wind stirred the curtains of the open window through which the lamplight streamed, and a low mutter of men's voices reached Allen's straining eardrums as he crept along the wall of the house.

Peering around the edge of the window, the outlaw snatched a quick glimpse of the interior room. He saw plenty.

Latigo McAllister, puffing a corn-cob pipe, was striding back and forth before a table on which lay the still-wet Wells-Fargo saddlebags.

Seated on one corner of the table, and apparently returning pokes of gold coins into the saddlebags, was Hoptoad Carter.

"Much as we needed dinere, I'm afraid we overstepped by holdin' up a Wells-Fargo agent, Hoptoad," McAllister was protesting. "It strikes me damn peculiar that that

Shorty Anson hombre showed up on this spread the day after you pulled that holdup—an' that he knew you'd hid that *alforja* pack in Elkhorn Springs."

Carter scoffed.

"A coincidence, Latigo. He had to dive after Williams' carcass, didn't he? He accidentally stumbled over that saddlebag an' went back to investigate."

"I still don't like the looks of it. What if he was a Wells-Fargo dick, or one of Bedloe's depities who trailed you to my ranch?"

There was a moment's silence. Then Carter grunted:

"We're sittin' perty, boss. This Shorty Anson hombre will be found shot to death in Elkhorn Springs. The sheriff at Pache will think them nesters, Clarks, done the job. Sheriff'll take the nesters to stretch hang rope—an' with this dinero I choused from Wells-Fargo, we can buy the Twin C outfit. Then the Box Diamond will run the cattle business complete."

Jim-twin Allen inhaled deeply. He had heard enough; parts of the mysterious jig-saw puzzle of the Apache Valley range war now fitted into place, plain to understand in the light of facts.

McAllister had commissioned his gun-hung foreman to get money, by force of murder if necessary; the job was to freeze out the last remaining opposition to the Box Diamond, without the law suspecting that they were behind the crooked program.

Slipping back to the front door of the ranchhouse, Jim-twin Allen tested the knob and found it unlocked. A moment later he had crept into the Box Diamond ranchhouse and saw lamplight gleaming through a half-open door into the private den where McAllister and his foreman were talking.

Tiptoeing across the room, the White Wolf paused outside for a moment, while he squinted through the slot of the door to make sure of the positions of his two foemen. McAllister was rekindling his corncob pipe with a match; Hoptoad Carter was buckling up the Wells-Fargo treasure bags.

"We can't risk keepin' this dinero in the house—I told you that," McAllister growled through his pipe smoke. "We better bury it, until we're sure the law's quit lookin'—"

Latigo McAllister broke off with a gasp of alarm, as he saw the door opposite him flung open by invisible hands.

Then, into the lamplighted room, stalked the White Wolf.

"Reckon I'll take care of them saddlebags for you, gentlemen!" clipped the White Wolf, his voice deceptively calm. "I reckon you've froze out the last ranch you'll ever freeze out, McAllister. An' you, Carter, are goin' to stretch hang rope for the murder of Lank Bedloe yesterday."

Hoptoad Carter had not moved from the position he had taken upon spinning about and seeing Jim-twin Allen on the threshold. He was staring at the crouched form of the man he believed shot and drowned in Elkhorn Springs, hours before, as if he believed this was the ghost of the White Wolf.

"Lift your flippers, both of you!" commanded the White Wolf icily, edging forward behind leveled Colts. "Soon as I've drawn your fangs, we'll talk business."

The corncob pipe fell from McAllister's toothless jaws as he hurled his arms ceilingward. But Hoptoad Carter, seeing doom in the black bores of the White Wolf's guns, swept his left arm away from the Wells-Fargo saddlebags to knock the kerosene lamp off the table.

Darkness hit the room as the lamp smashed to tinkling bits on the floor, darkness which intensified the flash of Jim-twin Allen's left-hand gun.

But his bullet droned through empty space, as Hoptoad Carter flung himself sideways out of the line of fire.

Then, with hideous roars, the two Box Diamond crooks snaked guns from leather and charged their lone adversary, crouched in the gloom of the smoke-thickened room.

And then disaster struck the White Wolf, as he leaped to the right, intending to gain a corner where he could crouch in the darkness and fire at the gun flashes of his opponents.

A bearskin rug slipped under Allen's slogging boots, and he was hurled heavily to the floor.

Even as he sought to pick himself up, a heavy chair flung with all of McAllister's force nicked the White Wolf's head, and he collapsed on his stomach, fighting against the black swirl of unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### JUSTICE FOR RANGE HOGS.

**A**FTER an eternity of time—or so it seemed to the half-stunned Wolf—a light flickered in the darkened room.

As Allen groped frantically for the six-guns he had dropped when the chair smashed against his head, the outlaw saw Hoptoad Carter leap forward to ream a six-gun barrel against his ribs.

"I got him, boss. Light a lamp!"

McAllister groped along a fireplace mantel, found a lamp, applied his flickering match to the wick.

As the yellow rays flooded the room, the White Wolf got shakily to

his feet, to see Latigo McAllister staring in his direction.

"Your dead men don't stay dead very long," snarled the Box Diamond boss. "If this hombre hadn't slipped on that rug, we'd be as good as dead men ourselves this minute!"

Hoptoad Carter panted heavily. He lashed out a boot toe to kick Allen's guns into a far corner—the boot toe which still held the broken-off fangs of a wilderness rattlesnake.

"What'll I do with this busky, Latigo?" panted the foreman.

McAllister came forward to stand at Carter's side, his scrawny chest lifting and falling rapidly under his labored breathing.

"Put a slug in his brisket!" panted McAllister. "If he's a John Law, we got to have his carcass buried plenty deep before daylight. He may not be alone!"

Hoptoad Carter stepped back, his Colt making a clicking sound as he eared the hammer to full cock.

A matter of heartbeats, and the evil-faced *segundo* would blast a slug at close range into Allen's chest. Yet the White Wolf knew before he could lunge forward, he would be a dead man.

Even as he braced himself for the shock of tearing lead, a loud voice ripped through the open window behind McAllister and Carter—the voice of the youngster, Gary Clark:

"Drop that hardware, Carter! I ain't the stripe to shoot a man in the back, but I'll blow you to hell if you don't elevate—both of you!"

Carter's face went the color of stale milk. He twisted his head, to stare at the white oval of Gary Clark's face outside the window sill.

Jutting through the wind-tossed curtains was the barrel of the kid's .30-30, which once before that day had cut down one of the Box Diamond riders.



With a squall of berserk rage, McAllister dug a Colt .45 from his belt.

The rifle on the window sill swerved, spat flame, recoiled violently from the wood as a bullet clugged through McAllister's gun arm.

In the split fraction of a second that Hoptoad Carter stood motionless, Jim-twin Allen charged. His outflung hands seized Carter's gun arm even as the straw boss sought to trigger a slug into the White Wolf.

With surprising strength for so small a man, the White Wolf wrenched the gun from Carter's grasp and with a driving uppercut to Carter's jaw, sent the Box Diamond foreman reeling back to smash against the dazed form of McAllister.

Even as Carter snatched his second Colt from holster, the White Wolf spun the foreman's other gun on the trigger guard, thumbed back the hammer.

For an instant the two men faced each other through a pall of gun smoke, each with a dead drop on the other. But Jim-twin Allen's hammer dropped first, and the explosion of the .45 drowned the grisly *chug* of a leaden pellet through Hoptoad Carter's breastbone.

Driven off his feet by the impact of the bullet, Carter sprawled on his back at McAllister's feet, dead eyes staring at the ceiling.

The White Wolf grinned as he saw Gary Clark straddle in through the window, his recoiled rifle holding Latigo McAllister in check.

"I'm savin' McAllister to stretch legal hang rope, Shorty!" panted the kid, as Jim-twin Allen went over to the corner to recover his own guns. "Me an' my kid brother trailed you over here to the Box Diamond—an' Link is out at the bunkhouse, makin'

sure none of McAllister's hands try to join this scrap."

Jim-twin Allen holstered his guns and stepped over Carter's grotesque corpse to pick up the wet, gleaming saddlebags bearing the Wells-Fargo brand.

"I reckon you won't have to worry about this range hog trompin' on your rights to a ranch of your own, Gary," panted the White Wolf. "I wouldn't be surprised if all o' your neighbors here in Apache Valley don't get their spreads back, before this thing is finished. McAllister will talk plenty, to save his yellow hide."

The White Wolf shouldered the heavy saddlebags, the while he stared down at Hoptoad Carter's corpse. Allen had avenged the death of Sheriff Lank Bedloe, the man who had saved his life on the Cholla Canyon trail the day before.

"I'd plumb admire for you to hitch up as a pardner with Link an' me on the Twin C Ranch, Shorty," panted Gary Clark. "After all, we owe the whole works to your help—"

The White Wolf's peculiar, animallike eyes puckered wistfully. There was nothing he would rather do than have a cow spread of his own. But circumstances would force him to keep riding the long and smoky trail of outlawry, as long as there was reward money posted on his scalp.

"Thanks, kid," chuckled Jim-twin Allen, deciding to keep his identity a secret from the game little younger. "But I got to take these saddlebags back to a feller named Jennings over in Big Rock, before I can consider goin' into the cow business with you an' Link."

Look for a great White Wolf Story coming soon in Wild West Weekly. It's exciting, adventurous and one of the best from the West.

# “King of the Wild”

by E. A. BRININSTOOL

Oh, I am the king of the Western wild,  
 And the back of a hoss my throne!  
 I'm Nature's reckless and untamed child,  
 Of the prairie born and grown!  
 I worship only the rollin' plain,  
 And the gray buttes, grim and strange,  
 And the coyote's song is the only strain  
 That echoes across the range!

*Then it's ho, for the land of the long-horned steer,  
 By the tenderfoot undefiled!  
 With a bronc to ride o'er the prairies wide,  
 I'm king of the Western wild!*

I haven't a care nor an ill nor ache,  
 I'm free as the singin' lark!  
 A steer to brand or a bronc to break,  
 From the rise of dawn till dark!  
 I ride heart-free on the dusty trail,  
 And sleep 'neath the stars' pale light,  
 And bear the brunt of a howlin' gale  
 If the herd stampedes at night!

*Then it's ho, for the land of the sagebrush rank,  
 Where the rugged buttes are piled!  
 On a bronco throne I can hold my own,  
 For I'm king of the Western wild!*

My dress is rough and my language, too!  
 I'm some on the rope and shoot!  
 There's nothin' much that I dassn't do;  
 I'm about half man, half brute!  
 I'm keen for fun in my reckless style,  
 And there's nary a kick nor squeal  
 When I ride to town and I lose my pile  
 In an all-night poker deal!

*Oh, a cowboy's life is the life for me,  
 Way out on the range exiled!  
 Where the longhorns bawl and the coyotes call,  
 I'm king of the Western wild!*



## KEYBOARD KERRIGAN'S COLT MUSIC

*The piano banged out music, punctuated by the roar of six-guns, and a pearl necklace danced in time!*

by ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

BAT BUSSHANG parked his beefy frame against one of the awning posts in front of his Golden Roost Bar, there on the edge of Bullpen, and snorted. The snort was directed

at the redhead who stood before him.

"Never heerd of a cowpoke who played the pie-yano," he said. The long cigar parked in a corner of his

wide mouth, flung a shadow across his heavy jowls. "What's your name?"

"They call me Keyboard Kerrigan," the stranger answered. He was pug-nosed and his freckled face looked as if someone had flung a handful of wet coffee grounds right at it. "I was eatin' over at the chink's. They told me you was lockin' fer somebody to pound the piano. Waal, do I git the job?"

Bat Busshang pinched his forehead in a scowl. He looked at the weathered old hat on Kerrigan's red head. Saw the cotton shirt, the patched Levis stuck into the tops of old boots.

"Hell," he grunted. "You ought to be playin' nursemaid to cows instead of tryin' to work in my Golden Roost. Hell, a cowpoke who plays the pie-yano. What's this here country comin' to?"

Keyboard Kerrigan grinned. "There ain't no ridin' jobs hereabouts. I done formed eatin' habit years ago. Do I git the job?"

Horsemen trooped into town, hitched their ponies at the rail and whooped inside the Golden Roost while Bat Busshang studied Keyboard Kerrigan out of narrowed green eyes.

"No, you don't git the job," he snarled. "I ain't in no mood fer pranks this mornin'. That damn reformer bunch sent you over here to get me riled up. Whoever heerd of a pie-yano playin' cow nurse. Hell."

Four men came clumping down the boardwalk. Busshang growled again and took the cigar out of his mouth. The man in the lead was short. He wore a battered silk hat, a frock coat with the buttons missing. His mouth sloped into his neck without benefit of a chin. Busshang welcomed them like he'd welcome a good dose of smallpox.

"Hizzoner the mayor of Bullpen. Ira Bankle. What's eatin' you. You act like you had a pocketful of red ants."

Ira Bankle tried to heighten his five feet, a half inch, by sticking out his chest. His lips were a firm line.

"Busshang," he piped, "I might as well tell you. The honest, upright, righteous citizens—"

"Why don't you git yourself a soap box and a collection plate, you'd do more business." Bat Busshang laughed in the mayor's face.

But the high officer of Bullpen only showed his contempt for the saloon owner by remaining quiet until he had finished.

"In other words, Busshang, since you think it's so funny, we're giving you twelve hours to pack up and get out of town."

If Busshang gave a hang whether he had twelve hours or twelve years to leave Bullpen, he didn't show it. He spat an inch from the toe of the mayor's polished boot.

"An' I suppose you got somebody to make me leave town," he asked hopefully.

Two of the men with the mayor nodded emphatically. One of them was Pollock, who owned the mercantile. The other was Bill Harper, owner of the Deuces, saloon and gambling joint in the middle of town.

Ira Bankle slanted his silk hat over one eye. "I have somebody to back up my order, Busshang." He turned. Like he was introducing the feature attraction at a rodeo, he said, "This here is Sam Cobb."

For the first time Busshang looked as if he was impressed. He chewed on his lower lip, scowled. Then spat on the boardwalk. Sam Cobb was tall, skinny as a limbless cottonwood. He was slightly



stooped. His eyes, as they looked out from under the stiff brim of his hat, were cold as two December hailstones. He grunted and jabbed a bony forefinger at Busshang.

"What the mayor says, goes," he growled. "Twelve hours." He fingered a pearl-handled gun at his belt and stuck his chin out, as if expecting something to happen. Nothing did. "Twelve midnight!"

Mayor Ira Bankle let the breath wheeze out of his lungs.

"We've given you every chance, Busshang," he went on. "You rob and cheat the men who frequent your Golden Roost. You don't even stop at murder."

Busshang kept one eye on Sam Cobb and polished the diamond stickpin on his pink shirt front. Cobb had a murderous gun rep.

"My Golden Roost is on the edge of town," he said. "Harper and the rest of your pious businessmen don't like it 'cause I git all the business. You ain't yankin' no wool over my head."

"Take 'er easy," Sam Cobb said in his flat voice.

The mayor held up his hand. "Sam Cobb wears a gun. But he wears it in the interest of law and order, justice. He is a righteous man, Busshang."

At this moment Keyboard Kerrigan horned in. There was a grin on his freckled face when he turned to Sam Cobb.

"Hello, Cobb. Last time I run into you, you was playin' poker in Camarillo. You blowed hell out of a Mex because he caught you yankin' aces outta your sleeve. I was playin' piano in the Black Spider when it happened. Busshang might hire me if you'll give me a good recommendation."

Sam Cobb's long face turned red as a ketchup-smearred steak. His

long Adam's apple slid up and down his stove-pipe neck.

"You're baitin' the hook with your own hide, feller," he said ominously. "Didn't see your homely face when I first come up."

The mayor fingered his shoestring tie. The two leading businessmen of Bullpen, Pollock and Harper, exchanged glances. The mayor coughed, winking at Kerrigan. The redhead winked back.

"Must be some mistake, eh, Cobb?" Bankle said.

Cobb glared at the red-headed puncher. "The only mistake is this hombre's livin'!"

Bat Busshang's little green eyes opened another notch as he stared at this carrot-topped, bowlegged "pie-yano" player, who had the cold nerve to practically spit in the great Sam Cobb's left eye.

The grin was still planted on Keyboard Kerrigan's wide mouth. He wore no gun in sight, but there was a bulge under his shirt front. He spread his fingers.

"Thought you might help a feller out, Cobb," he said in a low voice. "Figgered me an' you was in the same business. I murder music, and you murder a Mex now and then."

Cobb's mouth cracked shut like a trap. "You're in business, all right," he growled, sticking out his chin. "You're in the business of dyin'."

Ira Bankle let out a frightened squeak. Pollock and Harper ducked. Bat Busshang jabbed his cigar back in his mouth and stood there as if his boot heels were set in cement.

But Keyboard Kerrigan lifted one red eyebrow. Sam Cobb snorted and dug for his gun.

It was then that Keyboard Kerrigan's right foot arched upward. The pointed toe of his boot ripped into Cobb's shin bone. Cobb yelped, dropped his gun in the dust and

danced like a one-legged Comanche on hot ashes. A stream of practical cuss words and some new ones of his own invention, crackled in the early-morning air like static.

"Gimme my gun!" he yelled. "Where's my gun? So help me, I'm blowin' that redhead in two!"

Bat Busshang was throwing back his head and laughing till the tears crawled over his fat cheeks. Harper, who owned the Deuces, picked up Cobb's gun. Pollock and the mayor each grabbed one of the killer's arms and propelled him down the street.

Ira Bankle turned and called back. "Cobb is marshal of Bullpen. He's the law. He'll be back." Bankle winked at Kerrigan again.

Keyboard Kerrigan rubbed his right foot. "Cobb must've had lead pipe fer shin bones." He grinned at the mayor's back.

"Feller," Bat Busshang said. "If you kin play a pie-yano at all, you got a job fer life."

At that moment high-heeled shoes rapped on the boardwalk. Keyboard turned, glowing pleasantly with the thought that he'd eat once again, and not at all worried that he had just incurred the enmity of the toughest gunman in Cristo County. A woman stepped to his side. Her dark eyes reminded Keyboard of two pools of black fire. She carried a parasol over her shoulder and held her long skirts in one white hand to keep them from dragging in the dirt. Around her white throat was a necklace of gold nuggets, the size of peas.

"And who is this, Bat?" she asked, fixing her gaze on the redhead. Her voice was deep, and when she spoke, Keyboard Kerrigan had the feeling that he was being wrapped in hot blankets.

"This here is Keyboard Kerrigan," Busshang announced without removing the cigar from his mouth.

"He's the new pie-yano player. A cowpoke who plays the pie-yano. Ain't never heard of it before, Lily."

Lily smiled and extended her hand. Keyboard took it in his own freckled paw and felt a shock run up his arm.

"I hope you play better than the last one," she said. "I sing in the Golden Roost," she said. Then turned and entered the saloon.

Keyboard watched the gently swinging doors. The perfume of Lily still hung like a cloud in the air.

"What happened to the last piano player?" he asked suddenly.

"He got lead poisonin'," Bat said. "If Lily likes a feller she'll lose that gold necklace I give her in the hopes the hombre will find it an' bring it to her room." Bat knocked ashes from his cigar. "I found the necklace in the last pie-yano player's pocket."

Kerrigan looked at Busshang and grinned. He wondered what Busshang would say if he knew that piano playing wasn't the only reason for his wanting a job in the Golden Roost. Kerrigan realized that he was like a man sitting in a creek in the middle of a forest fire, hoping the creek wouldn't run dry.

Bat Busshang had two gunmen who took care of the pistol end of his business. The one with the corner of his chin shot off was Ike Talbot. The other was Bill Boggs. He had gold teeth. Talbot lifted the front of the piano in the Golden Roost, stuffed newspapers inside, then dropped the board. Boggs showed gold teeth in a grin.

"Keyboard Kerrigan, the only pie-yano playin' cow nurse in captivity," Talbot chuckled. "He'll have a hell of a time playin' this box."

Luckily, Keyboard Kerrigan had been sitting in a far corner, his hat with the sagging brim tipped over his eyes. He watched the operation with a flicker of amusement crinkling his mouth.

"Hate to disappoint the boys," he said to himself.

After Keyboard had put away a steak, a small mountain of fried spuds and some apple pie, he was ready to go to work. The hours had whirled swiftly. He saw no more of Sam Cobb. But he did see Lily. She came by the corner where he was sitting, dropped a white hand on his shoulder.

"I hope we can get along all right." She smiled, showing those two rows of chalk-white teeth. "That is, professionally, I mean." She fingered the necklace of gold nuggets and slipped toward the door, graceful as a summer breeze in a cottonwood grove.

Keyboard Kerrigan went to work at nine. He played everything from "Chisholm Trail On A Piebald Roan" to "Sweet Maggie." The latter he played for a drunken cowhand who cried in his whiskey and threw silver dollars at Keyboard. The man ran out of dinero. Keyboard pounded the keys just a little harder when Bill Boggs bent a gun barrel over the drunk's head and he was lugged outside like a sack of beans.

"Tally one," Keyboard said under his breath.

The Golden Roost was jammed. Smoke hung like fog around overhead kerosene lamps. Perspiring bartenders slopped redevye into glasses and spun them up and down the wet bar.

Bat Busshang came by the piano. A cigar was stuck in his mouth. His hat was off and Keyboard could see his shiny black hair. Bat had his

hair combed to cover a bald spot. He reeked of cheap perfume.

"You're all right, Kerrigan," Bat said in his husky voice. "The customers like you. Lily likes you." He shot Keyboard a hard glance. "Likes your playin'," he added.

Kerrigan's fingers skipped over the yellowed piano keys. He glanced at Bat and smiled. His red hair was slicked back and looked like fire there in the yellow lamplight. He saw Bill Boggs and Ike Talbot eying him strangely. After the tenth whiskey, Boggs sidled over on his stumpy legs.

"Never knew a piano would play with paper stuck in it," he said. His pinched eyes glittered.

"It will if you take the paper out," Keyboard answered.

Boggs showed gold teeth and moved away. Right then and there Keyboard Kerrigan had a hunch he should have steered clear of Bullpen. But he shrugged his shoulders. There was some easy money to be made if the proposition he was working on turned out all right.

Lily came on the platform amid a round of applause. She looked like a white candle there in her beaded dress. She came close to Kerrigan. He had that smothering feeling again when he caught a whiff of her perfume. Blood pounded through his veins like water in a mill race. Keyboard looked up and grinned. He had a hard time looking into her black eyes. She was fingering that gold necklace again.

"What'll it be?" he asked, running a few chords over the keyboard.

Lily took a long time to answer. "Play 'At the End of the Trail with You.' Play it in F."

Keyboard Kerrigan played. Lily sang and the Golden Roost was blanketed in silence, with only the

throaty tones of the girl and the tinny sound of the piano breaking the stillness.

When Lily finished, the place went wild. Men banged glasses on tables, stamped their feet and whistled. Keyboard Kerrigan sat there eying the crowd.

"Just like the Black Spider in Camarillo," he mused, "only Sam Cobb's marshal here, instead of pullin' cards outta his sleeve and shootin' Mexicans. Wonder what he'd say if he knew I was workin' on his side of the fence?"

Keyboard Kerrigan made a bad mistake two hours later. He stepped out to the back door to get the smell of the Golden Roost out of his nostrils. He hated these places, but as he had reflected more than once, it was better than postponing the eats when there were no riding jobs handy.

Keyboard had been raised by an uncle on a big spread up North. His uncle had kept him chained to a piano stool during long days at the ranch, when the kid longed to fork a saddle. Kerrigan didn't know whether the old man loved music or whether he just took a delight in making him practice. Anyhow Kerrigan emerged from his teens, a combination pie-yano player, as Bat called him, and a grub-line rider. The redhead chuckled as he stood in the hallway.

A few minutes before, Keyboard had seen Lily pass down this hallway where he stood. He looked down and his heart bumped his chest. There, lying outside Lily's dressing room, was the golden sparkle of her necklace. Keyboard picked it up, knocked on her door. There was no answer. He stuck it in his shirt pocket.

He heard the argument from up

front as Lily tried to come down the hallway. Kerrigan went back to the piano stool on the raised platform. He glanced up, saw Bat Busshang standing beside Lily in a dark corner. There was a savage look on his flat face.

"Where's your necklace?" he said savagely. "You don't think I know. Every time you git stuck on somebody you conveniently lose the necklace. Hopin' they'll return it an' come an' visit you. Waal, where is it? You been my gal for five years. I ain't through yet."

Lily just stood there and smiled, her white teeth shining. She was facing Keyboard, and the redhead felt her eyes rest on him a fraction of a second.

"I lost the necklace, Bat," she soothed. "Now I must do another number."

But Busshang shook his head. "Nope. I'm findin' it this time. Then there's goin' to be a murder."

Keyboard Kerrigan had cut his teeth on gun trouble and he sure smelled it boiling up in the Golden Roost. While he played chords with his left hand, he snatched the necklace out of his shirt pocket with his right and quickly slipped it inside the piano.

Like a waddling bear, Bat Busshang came toward the platform. His greenish eyes slitted dangerously and there was a sneer on his lips. The cigar jittered up and down when he talked.

"If you got that necklace, Keyboard Kerrigan," he growled. "Take the money you got comin' tonight an' buy yourself a tombstone. You'll need it."

But Keyboard Kerrigan grinned and continued to play. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Bill Boggs and Ike Talbot had sauntered up. Boggs showed his gold teeth in



a grin and the redhead knew the gunman would enjoy shooting him. Talbot only fingered his bullet-torn jaw and scowled. Keyboard swung around. He knew when the odds were against him. And they certainly were now.

"I ain't got the necklace," Keyboard said coldly. "An' if I had it, I'd feel like makin' you eat it." He wheeled around and faced the piano when Busshang started to bluster.

Keyboard felt the bulge of the .44 he had stuck in his belt. He could yank that gun and blow a hole in Bat before the saloon owner could shift his cigar. But Keyboard wondered what Talbot and Boggs would be doing about then. He shrugged his shoulders and the piano *clanked*.

Bat Busshang raised his brows. "What's that?"

"My bum pie-yano playin'," Keyboard snapped.

He played again, trying to miss the bad keys. He hit another. Something rattled in the piano. Bat Busshang grimed, leaped on the platform and lifted the piano cover. He dug inside the strings and pulled out a glittering object. Lily's necklace.

"I remember now, Bat." It was Lily's voice. "The clasp is bad. I laid it on the piano. Some way it slipped down inside. Give it to me."

Bat Busshang stood there, not knowing what to say as Lily took the necklace from his fingers, stepped on the platform and started to sing. With a grin, Keyboard Kerrigan got her key and swung into the song. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bat Busshang and his two gunmen stomping away.

But Keyboard didn't see Bat pull Talbot and Boggs to one side and give them explicit instructions about going to the Deuces downtown and

starting certain rumors. Sam Cobb would be there. Then there would be a final act in the Golden Roost that night. An act not scheduled, and Keyboard Kerrigan would be one of the principal actors.

Sam Cobb was sitting at a table in the Deuces. His black hat was yanked low over his cold eyes. He had a bandage on his shin, and every time he thought of Keyboard Kerrigan he swore and threw down a whiskey.

Mayor Ira Bankle shook his head and rubbed a hand over the spot where his chin should have been.

"Bat Busshang's Golden Roost is a blot on our fair town," he said sadly.

"Rot," Les Harper snapped, chewing the end of his mustache. "You sit there an' moan. I got good money tied up in the Deuces." He waved a blue-veined hand. "There ain't five people in this place. Everybody's down at the Golden Roost."

"And me," Pollock grunted. "When Busshang fleeces the cowhands they ain't got dinero enough to buy stuff at my general store. I ain't sold a hat in two months." Lamplight glistened on his bald head. "You're the mayor," he shot at Bankle. "Why don't you do somethin'?"

"That's why we hired Sam Cobb," Ira Bankle said hopelessly. "And he lets a red-headed piano player kick him in the shins."

Sam Cobb's eyes were red-rimmed from too much whiskey. At mention of Keyboard Kerrigan he threw an empty bottle clear across the room. It crashed against the wall.

"I should've killed him when I was in Camarillo," he growled. "He had me run outta town."

"Then it was true about shooting

the Mexican?" Ira Bankle asked, his mouth hanging open.

"Sure, what's a Mex more or less."

Harper banged his fist on the table. "We want action, not words, Cobb."

A cowhand came toward the table. He grinned at Cobb.

"What do you want?" Bankle demanded irritably.

"Just was talkin' to Boggs and Talbot, Busshang's two gun hands. They're tellin' it all over town."

Sam Cobb poured a whiskey and glared. "Tellin' what all over town?"

"That redhead Keyboard Kerrigan says he's blowing the buttons off yore britches the next time you meet."

Sam Cobb acted like somebody had dropped ice down his neck. He shot to his feet, yelped when he bumped his injured shin against the table leg. There was a twisted grin on his lips when he kicked the chair crashing against the wall.

Ira Bankle wet his lips. "Now, now, Cobb. It ain't twelve o'clock yet. That's the deadline we gave Busshang."

"I don't give a damn if it's nine o'clock Christmas Eve. I'm fillin' Keyboard Kerrigan so full of lead that he'll double his weight when they throw him on the scales."

Keyboard Kerrigan saw the set-up of death. He could smell trouble, and his pug nose twitched now. Bat Busshang leaned against the bar, his green eyes sliding from the swinging doors to Keyboard Kerrigan. Bill Boggs stood in the far corner near the plate-glass window. Ike Talbot was by Busshang's side.

Men bought whiskey, got drunk and lost their money in the crooked games Busshang ran in his Golden Roost. Lily came up on the platform. She had a black shawl over

her beaded dress, which brought out the whiteness of her skin. She looked over the pile of music on the piano and leaned close to Keyboard Kerrigan.

"If it comes to showdown, I hope you kill Busshang," she said in her deep voice. "I hate him." Then she smiled coldly.

Kerrigan only grunted and continued to play. He strummed chords on the yellow keys. He grinned at Lily and Bat Busshang glared at him. Keyboard eyed the hanging kerosene lamp which dangled over the end of the bar. It hung by a rope from the ceiling, like all the rest, but it was over a stack of tinned alcohol. The redhead grinned and unbuttoned his shirt front so that the black butt of the .44 stuck through.

Busshang moved toward the platform, Talbot at his side. He halted at the railing.

"Git off the platform, Lily," he ordered. "It's drafty up there, an' I don't want you ketchin' cold."

"But," she started to protest, "I want to do a number—"

The cigar in Busshang's mouth jumped. "Git off."

The girl stepped down, her black hair shining in the yellow light. She walked into a back room, angrily hurling the necklace.

Keyboard Kerrigan tipped back on the stool and yawned. "Think I'll take a rest," he said.

"Think again," Busshang snapped viciously. "I want music. Plenty of it." He wiped sweaty hands on his pink shirt.

He wheeled around. Talbot grinned and rubbed his scarred jaw. Above the bedlam of noise Keyboard heard his harsh words.

"Cobb left the Deuces half-hour ago," he said in Busshang's ear. "Should be here by now."

Keyboard Kerrigan loosened the .44 in his belt and eyed the rope which held up the kerosene lamp. He grinned and watched Busshang's broad back.

Then it happened. The back door opened and Sam Cobb stood there on his long legs, a brace of Colts in his fists. Busshang and Talbot both had their backs to him.

"Hold it, Busshang," he ripped out coldly. "Make one move and I'll blast a hole in that fancy shirt." Talbot stiffened. "You, too, feller!" Cobb yelled.

Keyboard Kerrigan played with his left hand. His blue eyes narrowed. He heard the blanket of silence which suddenly fell over the Golden Roost. Men stopped dead in their tracks. Somebody dropped a whiskey glass crashing to the floor. Poker chips rattled at one of the tables. The eye of every man in the place was fixed on Sam Cobb, who stood there with his black hat slanted over his long face.

"Hello, Cobb," Keyboard said. "Why don't you polish that tin badge on your shirt front?"

Sam Cobb jumped like he'd been stung by a hornet. "So it's you again. You're goin' to blow the buttons off my pants, eh? Git a gun in your fist, you red-headed key-pounder, I'm doin' some blowin' myself."

There was a shrill scream as Lily came out of the hallway from her dressing room and saw the set-up. Her face went white as she saw the gun trained on Busshang's back. She ducked to safety out the back door. The slamming door seemed to set off the dynamite.

Sam Cobb blasted with both guns. Keyboard Kerrigan was down on his knees. He heard the *whang* as bullets ripped into the side of the piano and snapped off taut strings.

Then Keyboard raised up. His .44 was in his freckled right fist. The fist shot he flung at Cobb, the second clipped the rope which held the swinging kerosene lamp at the end of the bar. Cobb sat down on the floor with a thump, blood running out of his shirt front.

Down plunged the flaming lamp. There was a flash as it hit the floor and split its base, loosing kerosene in a flaming stream. Blue flames shot upward. Men yelped, made a wild scramble for the front door. Tables, chairs, glassware crashed as the crowd stampeded.

"Put out the fire!" Busshang was yelling, firing his gun at the general direction of the entertainers' platform. Bill Boggs was running, trying to reach his boss, but the crowd pushed him outside like a piece of driftwood on a raging river, to disappear.

Keyboard Kerrigan was dodging among the overturned tables. One of the bartenders threw a bucket of water on the flames. The fire leaped higher, raced along the floor.

Smoke hung like fog. Through the swirling haze, Keyboard glimpsed Sam Cobb crawling on all four out the back door. Bat Busshang was running around, a gun in one hand, his frayed cigar jutting from his mouth. He yelped.

"Where's that red-headed pie-yano player! Show me his hide an' I'll nail it!"

"There he is!" Ike Talbot shouted. "Over by them tables!"

A gun roared over there, and Ike Talbot went on his heels, grabbed at a table and crashed to the floor with it. He didn't move.

"Want some of the same?" It was Keyboard Kerrigan's voice above the roar of the flames.

Bat Busshang took a look at his fallen gunman, spit his cigar out and

ran like a crazy man out the back door.

The fire burned for two hours. The Golden Roost was far enough from town so that it didn't endanger the rest of the buildings. When dawn plastered the town with red-and-gold streaks, the Golden Roost was a pile of blackened junk. Only the fire-scarred piano remained visible. It was tipped up on one end, the keyboard ebony colored.

Keyboard Kerrigan had his horse and was ready to swing into the saddle when Mayor Ira Bankle strode up, his silk hat slanted over one eye.

"Kerrigan," he said ponderously, "we want to thank you."

The redhead tipped back his hat and grinned. There was quite a crowd standing around the smoldering ruins of Bat Busshang's Golden Roost. Harper and Pollock flanked the mayor.

"We want to thank you, also," they beamed together.

Ira Bankle fished a badge out of his pocket and tried to pin it on Keyboard's shirt front, but the redhead shook his head.

"No marshal's job," he said. "Just give me the five hundred you promised and I'll hit the trail. I was just comin' to see you."

Bankle coughed. His face reddened. Harper and Pollock exchanged glances. "Did you hire this hombre?" they asked Bankle.

The mayor nodded. "He came into town yesterday. He heard we wanted to run Busshang out of town and wanted the job. I didn't think he could do it."

"But you promised him five hundred dollars," Harper cut in.

Bankle pulled a sheaf of greenbacks from his pocket. "I was in hopes he'd take the marshal's job instead. It would be the best thing for Bullpen." A stagecoach rattled toward them.

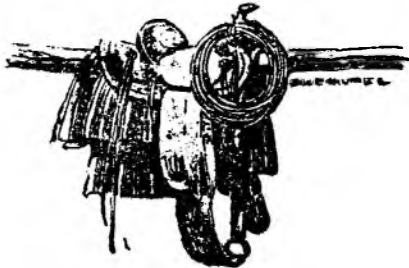
Keyboard grinned and took the money. The stage to Buckthorn rolled out of town. Three people stuck their heads out of the coach. Sam Cobb, looking sick and with his right arm in a sling, tried to glare. Bat Busshang, his face smoke-streaked, chewed on a cigar and swore so loud the team bolted.

But Lily smiled and waved a white handkerchief. Keyboard chuckled and felt in his pocket. There was a hard substance in his hand as he pulled it out. A yellowish, blackened mess.

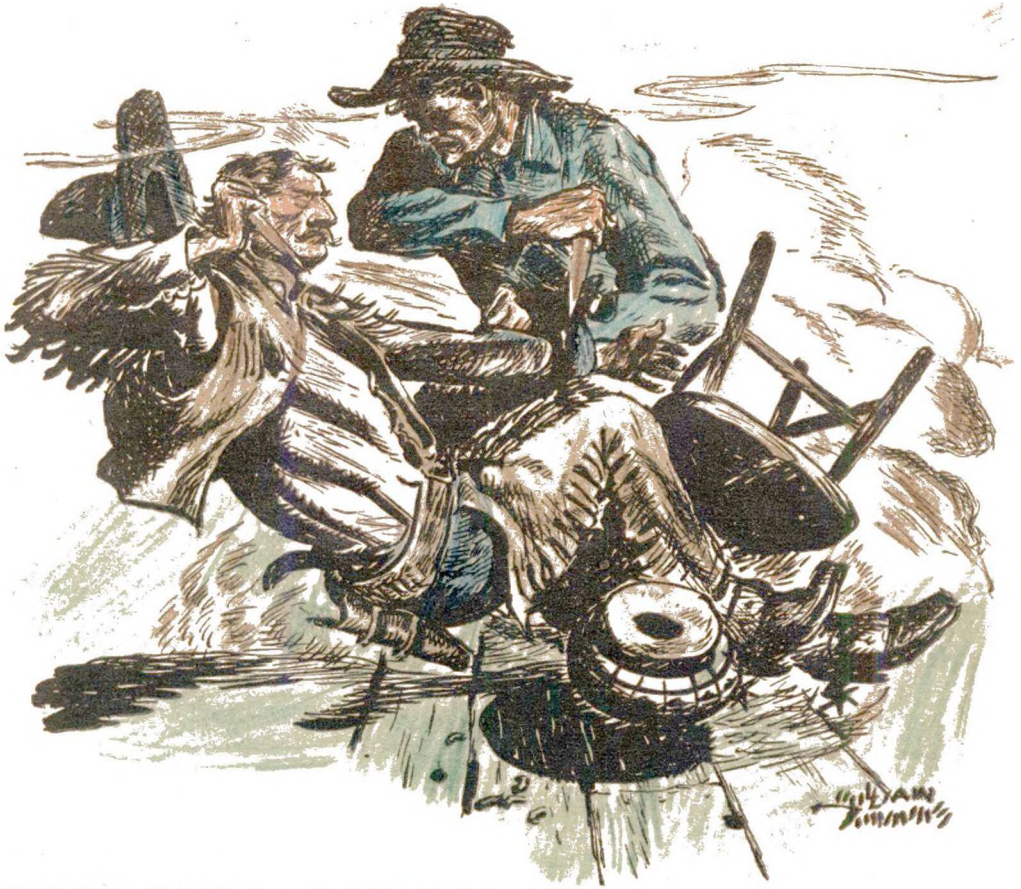
"Fire might melt that gal's necklace, but it'll never melt that rock heart of hers."

Mayor Bankle didn't know what he meant, and Keyboard didn't care. He rode out of town at a trot with the bulge of money in his pocket.

"Too bad the Golden Roost burned down," he sighed. "What a hell of a time I could have had spendin' this dinero in there."







## BANDANNA SHOWDOWN

by CHUCK MARTIN

*Tied with bandannas, the knives of the two men sought each other's throat!*

THERE was subdued excitement instead of the usual roistering clamor humming through Searchlight. Strong men with deep voices were talking in whispers, and it was their repression that filled the little mining town with electric expectancy. A storm was brewing and lightning was bound to strike soon.

Bottles and glasses clinked softly along the bar in the Nugget Saloon. Whiskey flowed freely to quiet taut nerves, while outside on the boardwalk, the sharp *ping* of Mexican rowels dominated every other sound.

There was something terrifying and inexorable about the metallic beat of that measured tread. You knew without seeing him, that a man was walking stiff-legged along the boardwalk in front of the saloon. Free and easy cowboys dragged their spurs with the straps let out to the town notch, but the man who was making spur music outside the Nugget was on the fight.

Young Tom Brannigan sighed and raised his head from his folded arms. He was sitting in the card room behind the saloon, and he tilted a bot-

tle of whiskey on the table and filled a thin pony glass. It was the first drink out of the bottle, and Tom Brannigan knew that it would be his last. He smiled when he remembered the famous line from newspaper stories.

*"The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast!"*

The young miner was tall and straight with the strength of youth when he arose from his chair and made ready for his execution. The tips of his fingers passed lightly over the scabbard slung low on his right leg to make sure that the tie-backs were tight. Long, sensitive fingers twitched the ivory-handled gun to make certain that it would not cramp against oiled leather.

His left hand tugged the flat-crowned Stetson low over his blue eyes. Then Tom Brannigan sighed and slowly swallowed his whiskey.

Every man in the Nugget stopped breathing when Brannigan began his march to the front doors. The flat heels of his laced mining boots thudded softly through the dirty sawdust. Keeping time with the chiming spurs on the splintered boardwalk outside. And then the swinging doors opened inward when Brannigan was halfway across the crowded barroom.

A tall, gaunt man came through the doors and took three steps before he stopped. He was dressed in greasy buckskin that carried the acrid odor of burning sage. Fringed buckskin leggings cased his lean, sinewy legs, and his black hat was shiny with grease.

A hawkish nose curved down to meet thin bloodless lips under tawny drooping mustache. A pair of piercing black eyes stabbed from lazy, hooded lids that had no more movement than the unwinking stare of a desert sidewinder. A spot of crimson burned on each high, bony cheek,

and added something to the feral glitter of those deep-set eyes of ebony steel.

Even the smoke in the Nugget seemed to hang just below the ceiling without movement. Hardened men caught their breathing in short gasps that told of tortured lungs. For the first time in an hour the beat of those big Mexican spurs had stopped. An hour during which young Tom Brannigan had sat alone, making his decision.

"I'm ready, Nip Credo," the young miner said quietly, but his deep voice rang across the silent room like a bell. "Get ready to touch off your powder!"

Nip Credo smiled and settled his boots until the drop-shanked rowels dug in for purchase. A bone-handled .45 Colt was slung low on his right leg, tilted out owl-hoot style for a fast draw. The open half-breed holster was molded to the gun, and had been worked soft with bear tallow. Again the gaunt buffalo hunter smiled when he saw Tom Brannigan staring at the white-handled gun.

Eight notches were whittled expertly along the bottom of the right-hand grip. Each notch was a crimson V, stained with the blood of the man it represented. Nip Credo was a man without nerves, and he had never been known to show excitement. His voice was a soft, purring whisper when he spoke to a bleary-eyed mucker at the end of the bar.

"Take yore hat off, Whiskey Bill. Hold it up over yore head with yore left hand. Count three under yore breath before you turn the hat loose. Me and him will touch off our powder when the hat begins to fall!"

Whiskey Bill moaned and reached for a glass of whiskey on the bar. The liquor belonged to another miner, but rights and privileges always became confused when Nip

Credo loosened his spurs. The gasping mucker caught up a glass of whiskey in each hand and used one for a chaser, making two rapid passes at his gaping mouth.

A grimy right hand reached up and wiped his mouth even while Whiskey Bill was swallowing his double shot. Then his left hand went up and tugged the shapeless hat from his tousled head. His arm went up to hold the hat high, and not a man moved along the crowded bar.

Tom Brannigan could see the hat while he locked glances with Nip Credo. Now the buffalo hunter was poised on the balls of his feet, with the big rowels hooked in the planking. All the cruelty of his Indian father stared coldly from those hooded black eyes which never winked.

Whiskey Bill began to move his flaccid lips without making a sound. Then the fingers of his left hand opened spasmodically to flirt the old hat away from his shrinking body.

Tom Brannigan dipped his right hand down with the exaggerated speed of desperation. His palm thudded against cedar and gripped tight as he started to shed leather. Finger through the trigger guard, with thumb curling back the hammer of his old single-action Colt.

Nip Credo waited until the young miner had slapped wood. Then his right hand blurred down so fast that none could mark its flight. His gun flipped sideways from the scabbard without stopping his strike for the upward pull, and a calloused thumb fanned the hammer just as the long barrel tilted up.

The deathlike stillness was shattered when the Buntline Special roared into flaming thunder. Tom Brannigan was hurled back a dozen feet before his gun had cleared leather. His wide shoulders thudded

against the floor while the explosion was still echoing in his ears, and then he went limp under the stunning paralysis of shock.

Tom Brannigan wondered why he could see the gaunt hunter crouching over his gun. A ring of smoke eddied above the killer's head, but the smoking gun was back in the molded holster on Credo's right leg. The young miner had fallen with his head on a tarpaulin-wrapped bedroll, and he saw Whiskey Bill stoop and pick up his battered old signal hat.

He watched the gaunt hunter with a curious sense of detachment that comes to man when all things are relative, and nothing important. Nip Credo should be reaching for the gun which had stopped smoking. His left hand should be reaching for the sharp skinning knife behind his belt, and after the notch was whittled, a drop of the dying man's blood would be used to stain the memorial.

But Nip Credo was not reaching for knife or gun.

The tall, gaunt trapper walked steadily to the bar, but now his knees were bent to allow his huge spurs to drag musically across the floor. He picked up a glass and filled it from a whiskey bottle. Then he walked swiftly to the place where young Tom Brannigan was lying, watching Nip Credo closely, but without interest.

"Bottoms up," Credo said, and placed the glass to the young miner's pale lips. "Drink this and come out of the fog!"

Tom Brannigan opened his lips and swallowed automatically. The fiery liquor burned his throat with a pleasant sort of pain that acted as a counterirritant. The numbness began to leave his side and shoulder, and he shook his head to clear his hearing. Noises began to take on their accustomed significance. The rattle of

glasses behind the bar, and the stomping of boots against the brass rail.

Men were clearing their throats, and Tom Brannigan knew each man by voice. Then his right shoulder began to ache with the agonizing pain of shattered bones. He turned his head and found Nip Credo watching him with a peculiar glitter in his deep black eyes.

"I didn't kill you, Tom Brannigan," the hunter said softly, with the slurring tang of Indian-Spanish in his vibrant voice. "Your gun never cleared leather, but I allowed you to live."

Tom Brannigan remained silent and thought that one over. He had expected death, and had prepared himself for it. His last act of courage had been made to die like a man. Nip Credo's Buntline Special with the long ten-inch barrel had cut him down before he could finish his draw. But he still lived.

"I'd like to know," he heard himself murmur, and raised his head at the whispering sound of his own voice. "Why didn't you kill me, Nip Credo?"

The lean trapper shifted his tall frame and slowly shook his head. "But no," he began softly, and his hawkish face was thoughtful. "You and one other man jump the claim of my people. I warn you to leave, but you remain stubborn. You will not dig the gold for many moons."

Tom Brannigan caught his breath and tried to sit up. Nip Credo put out a big hand and restrained the wounded man, and his voice was just loud enough for the miner to hear.

"Your brother must leave Searchlight at once, or he dies. I will be here one week from today, at this same time!"

He straightened up and whirled on his heel with the lithe grace of a

mountain cat. Men made way for him when he walked straight to the front doors and passed through with a twitch of his powerful shoulders. The hoofs of a wild mustang rattled for a time, and Tom Brannigan sighed and lost consciousness.

A tall man was sitting beside his bed when Tom Brannigan again opened his eyes. He knew that he had been carried to the log cabin overlooking the river. Built on the claim that he and his older brother had filed on early in the spring.

"Howdy, Bandanna," he murmured, and smiled at the stern-faced man bending over him. "I must have gone to sleep for a time."

Bandanna Brannigan nodded and continued to study the pale face on the pillow. Tom Brannigan was just turned twenty-three; twelve years younger than the gray-eyed brother who was known all through the Nevada gold country as Bandanna Brannigan. A blue handkerchief of heavy silk was knotted at the older man's throat, and he always wore the bandanna up over his mouth when working out of doors.

He raised a white hand to his lips and coughed violently before he answered his brother. His shoulders twisted under the convulsion that racked his lean frame, and then he wiped his lips with the handkerchief and leaned back to catch his breath.

"You've been asleep for three days, Tom," he said quietly, so as not to set off his cough again. "You won't ever use that right arm for much, but the sawbones managed to save it. He says you will be up and around within a month."

Tom Brannigan stared at his brother with an expression of terror in his eyes. Facing death had been easy enough, but the thought of being crippled for life—



"You mean the right arm is useless?" he whispered.

"You'd have to know it sometime, Tom," the older man said gently. "I figured now was the time, while you had a chance to think things out. The nerves are gone, but they might come back again when you get your feet under you."

His swarthy face had a peculiar grayish cast that made his blue eyes seem almost dark. His features were finely chiseled, with a stubborn angle to his lean jaws. A small, black mustache stood out boldly above his thin bloodless lips, and the rough miner's clothing he wore could not conceal his refinement.

Tom Brannigan stared at the long-fingered right hand covering his brother's chin. There had been a time when Bandanna Brannigan had won and lost several fortunes as a gambler in the booming mining camps. But that was before the disease which wasted his muscular body had made it necessary for him to work out of doors.

"We've got to give up this claim, Bandanna," Tom Brannigan said weakly. "Or else you will die!"

Bandanna Brannigan smiled slowly and shook his head. "Like you know, I am a mining engineer, Tom," he said softly. "I got a college education before the folks died. I mean to see that you get the same. Two years more will finish your course, and this claim of ours will make us both wealthy."

"Did you hear anything about Nip Credo?" the wounded man asked sharply, and his eyes widened when his brother leaned forward.

"I heard it was Credo who shot you," Bandanna answered evenly. "I heard that it was a fair fight, and I am thankful he allowed you to live."

"He waited until I was lifting my iron," young Tom whispered

hoarsely. "Then his gun belched before I saw his hand move. You've got to leave Searchlight, Bandanna!"

Bandanna Brannigan smiled and slowly shook his head. "I like it here," he murmured. "In time, I could heal this cough and get well."

Tom Brannigan knew that his brother was lying with the same careless courage that had marked him since the white plague had burned its unmistakable brand. The tall mining engineer knew that his days were numbered, but he could still smile when he told his customary lie.

"There's other places," Tom suggested. "Carson City and Tonopah are having a run, and you can spot high-grade ore with the best of them."

The tall man nodded and smiled again. "This claim is the best I've seen in fifteen years," he answered quietly. "We've filed on it according to law, and we've done our assessment work."

Tom Brannigan sighed and closed his eyes. For a long time he remained silent, trying to think out an excuse to send his brother away. A gentle touch on his left hand made him open his eyes, and he shuddered when he saw the expression in his brother's eyes.

"What about Nip Credo?" Bandanna asked quietly. "What did that half-breed say that might interest me?"

"His father was an Indian," Tom answered slowly. "His mother was Spanish, and Credo left a message for you."

"I looked for him," Bandanna answered carelessly. "But he left town in a hurry, and he hasn't come back yet."

"He left a message for you," Tom murmured. "He said to tell you that this claim belongs to his people.

Said you would die if you didn't leave Searchlight!"

"Said that, eh?" the tall man murmured. "Did he set any special time?"

"He said he would be back in a week," Tom answered slowly. "That would make it Tuesday morning just before noon. You won't have a chance with him, Bandanna."

"Right now we could sell this claim for twenty thousand," the tall miner changed the subject. "We could take that much and be long gone before Tuesday."

Tom Brannigan stirred restlessly while he watched the grayish face of his brother. Nip Credo was a tradition in the mining camps; a powerful savage who had never met his match in either strength or skill. Bandanna Brannigan had also made traditions, and he would always be a gambler.

The wounded man shuddered and tried to close his eyes. No emotion showed on the older man's smooth face to show that he knew he was waging a losing gamble with death. Only his iron will could control the cough that racked his lean body at the most unexpected times. Some day it would happen when he was facing a man like Nip Credo, and then—

"We could make a million out of this claim in a year," the tall gambler said softly. "Or we could take twenty thousand and leave before Tuesday."

Tom Brannigan closed his eyes to escape from the dominance of his brother's will. He could think clearly that way, and he jerked suddenly when the truth came to him.

"We've got twenty thousand now, Bandanna," he said huskily. "You meant to take me out and place the money to my credit so I could finish school. You had the time figured

down to the day, and you mean to come back here by yourself. It won't work, pard!"

Bandanna Brannigan sighed like a gambler will do when he throws his hand in the discards. He admitted to himself that it wasn't a very good hand, but he had won many a game by playing a poor hand well. Years of experience had equipped him with everything to back up a bluff, and then a startled gleam narrowed his steady blue eyes.

Could he back up a bluff now? A hundred and sixty pounds of rawhide and muscle mocked him with tormenting memories. He had weighed two hundred at Tom's age, but that was before he had started to cough. His hand went to the blue neckerchief and pressed the silken cloth against his lips. His body shook under a paroxysm of barking coughing that left him weak and trembling, and then he wiped his lips and smiled at Tom Brannigan.

"I could go to a good hospital for a long rest," he whispered quietly. "While you were finishing your schooling. I'd last a long time if I took care of myself, but it would take a lot of money."

Tom Brannigan almost stopped breathing. He was watching the lean wasted man who could lie with a smile on his lips. He knew that Bandanna Brannigan had the courage to tell the truth. Knew that the tall miner would only lie to save some one he loved. And that someone was himself; Bandanna Brannigan's kid brother.

"I'll get a buckboard and a pair of bed springs," Bandanna continued softly. "It ain't but about fifty miles over to Vegas, and we can both put up for a while at the new hospital."

"There's another reason why they call you Bandanna, and you might

have a chance that way," the wounded man murmured softly.

The older man jerked suddenly and then leaned forward to stare at his wounded brother. He felt as though Tom Brannigan had been reading his mind, and had caught him bluffing with a hand that had no chance of winning. Tom met his gaze and then smiled with his pale lips.

"Order the wagon for Tuesday morning," the wounded man said quietly. "Whiskey Bill is a good driver, and we will ride out together, you and me."

Bandanna Brannigan knew that his bluff had been called, and he nodded his dark head and answered the smile with a gleam of admiration in his blue eyes. The stakes were on the table, and the game had been named. Could any gambler ask for more?

The tang of early frost was in the air when a hickory buckboard drew up at the little cabin near the river. Whiskey Bill tied his lines to the whip stock and hopped over the front wheel with a tie rope in his hand. He anchored the half-wild team to a stout post before going into the cabin, and Bandanna Brannigan nodded when he saw that Bill was sober.

Tom Brannigan was bandaged tightly and dressed warmly for a long trip through the desert. He was lying on a set of heavy bed springs, and his brother jerked his head at Whiskey Bill and took his place at the head. He lifted his end without apparent effort, but he turned his back to fight a fit of coughing when the wounded man was placed safely on the buckboard. He was wiping his lips on the blue bandanna when Whiskey Bill spoke to Tom.

"We better start right out for Vegas," he whispered. "Or else you and me will be riding with a dead man."

"It's only seven miles to Searchlight, and we can make it in an hour," the wounded man answered gruffly. "Untie your team and get in the driver's seat. We don't want to keep Nip Credo waiting down there at the Nugget!"

Bandanna Brannigan controlled himself and turned with a smile. He took his place in the buckboard and sipped slowly from a tiny flask. Whiskey Bill watched with hunger in his eyes until he caught the pungent odor of creosote. He turned the team without speaking, and an hour later the buckboard rattled into Searchlight and pulled up at the whittled rail in front of the Nugget Saloon.

Bandanna Brannigan stepped to the ground and twitched the heavy gun belt around his lean hips. His eyes went to a buckskin pony at the end of the rail and rested on the rowel scars crisscrossing the bony flanks. Whiskey Bill followed that level gaze and shivered under his heavy brush coat.

"He's waitin' inside, Bandanna," he muttered hoarsely. "You ain't got a Chinaman's chance of coming out alive!"

The tall miner stripped his sheep-lined coat and laid it on the seat. Then he smiled and gripped hands with his brother. Tom Brannigan could see over the low swinging doors, and he could hear the sharp staccato *ping* of Mexican rowels chiming a fighting song on the scarred planking inside the saloon.

Bandanna Brannigan shrugged back his shoulders and stepped up on the boardwalk. His flat heels caught the beat from the chiming

spurs, and then Whiskey Bill fell in beside him and caught the step. Shoulder to shoulder they tromped the length of the walk to limber up stiff muscles. Keeping perfect time with the chiming spurs inside the saloon.

Whiskey Bill turned swiftly without missing a step. His heels hit the boards alone when Bandanna Brannigan darted up a weed-grown path to the side door. Brannigan pushed into the card room at the back just as Whiskey Bill shouldered through the swinging front doors, and the trembling mucker knew that he was close to death when he finished his part of the plan.

The tall gaunt hunter in the greasy buckskins came to a stop halfway down the crowded saloon. His Mexican rowels dug into the floor for purchase, and his flat-crowned Stetson was pushed well back to show black, stringy hair. His right hand was poised above the notched handle of his six-gun, and a whining snarl broke from his thin lips when he recognized Whiskey Bill.

"Reach high, Credo," a deep voice warned softly from the card room.

Nip Credo stiffened without turning. His lean muscular frame was poised for a leap, and then his knees relaxed to free his drop-shanked spurs. The wheels spun softly like the drone of insects around a campfire, and a gun touched the hunter's spine just as the droning chime died away.

"It's a week to the minute, Credo," Bandanna Brannigan said softly. "You left a message for me, and I came to meet you. You want to make medicine?"

His left hand slipped down and lifted the ivory-handled six-gun just as Nip Credo turned to face him. A

sowl of anger rippled over the dusky features when the hunter felt the tug that emptied his holster. For a moment it seemed that he was going to leap, but he controlled his muscles and relaxed with a careless shrug.

"Talk no good," he grunted. "You steal the land of my people, and now you die!"

The tall miner backed up a pace and leveled his cocked six-gun. He was breathing slowly, but the crimson spots on his cheek bones matched the color just under the black eyes of Nip Credo. Bandanna Brannigan waited a time before he spoke, and he smiled when he caught a glimpse of Tom's white face above the batting doors.

"That land where me and Tom filed our claim is government land, and open to prospectors," he said slowly. "The Indian reservation is thirty miles to the west."

"Land all belong to Indian," the gaunt trapper grunted. "My people are buried near your cabin, and mebbe so you better leave Searchlight. I have spoken!"

Bandanna Brannigan caught his breath sharply when the truth came to him. He and Tom had filed their claims on an old Indian burial ground, and his voice was sympathetic when he answered the gaunt old savage.

"We won't bother the graves, Credo. Our mining claim is off down the gulch, and I give you my word not to disturb a single grave!"

"You leave Searchlight, or you fight," Credo grunted. "Eight men have died because they stayed to mine the gold!"

Bandanna Brannigan turned the ivory-handled gun in his left hand. Eight neat notches had been whittled deep in the yellow bone. Each notch was stained crimson with the

blood of the man for whom it had been carved. Brannigan sighed and laid the weapon on the bar in a little space that had been cleared by the silent drinkers.

"You fight for dead men," he said slowly. "I'll fight for the living!"

Nip Credo smiled for the first time. His thin lips twisted under the drooping tawny mustache, and his black eyes glittered like bits of obsidian when he nodded his head.

"My gun," he said softly. "Whiskey Bill can give the sign one more time. I am ready!"

"Just a minute, Credo," Brannigan answered softly. "Your people are like mine in some ways. You challenged me to fight, and I will name the weapons."

The gaunt hunter leaned forward with a startled gleam in his deep-set eyes. For a long moment he searched the calm face of the tall miner, and then he measured the wide shoulders and long arms. There was little difference between them in height and weight, and both were in their middle thirties.

Nip Credo stared and slowly nodded his head. He could run all day and night without fatigue. He could wrestle down a steer and cut its throat without help. The suggestion of a sneer curled his thin lips when he answered the tall miner.

"It is your choice, white man. Name the weapons!"

Bandanna Brannigan reached to the back of his belt and drew a gleaming bowie knife from a soft-leather sheath. He laid the murderous weapon on the bar and pointed to Credo's belt. The hunter reached behind his belt and came out with his skinning knife, and he tested the edge on the ball of his thumb while his black eyes bit into the miner's rocky face.

"We fight with knives," he said simply. "I am ready!"

The tall miner shook his head and held the drop with his spiking gun. His left hand went up to his throat and fumbled with the knot that held the silken bandanna. Nip Credo stared when Brannigan freed the cloth and laid it on the bar. His lips trapped shut when Whiskey Bill shuffled up and made a wide circle around him to get to the bar.

"They used to call me Bandanna Brannigan," the tall miner explained without raising his voice. "I got the name down at Goldfield in just such a ruckus as this. That was ten years ago, and the other man has been dead that long."

The gaunt hunter narrowed his eyes and swayed back with surprise mirrored on his swarthy face. He could hear the labored breathing of the silent men along the bar, and then he shook his head slowly.

"Tell him, Bill," the miner said quietly.

Whiskey Bill swelled with importance and forgot his fear. He picked up the silk bandanna and folded it several times. Then he wrapped it around his forearm when he turned to Credo.

"She's what you might call a 'Bandanna showdown,' Nip," he began hoarsely. "I ties you gents together by yore left arms. Both of you take a good grip on yore skinnin' tools with yore right hands, and you start working on each other when I give the sign. The man who wins, cuts himself loose from the corpse!"

Nip Credo caught a deep breath and then nodded gravely. He stepped up to the bar and placed his left elbow on the smooth mahogany. Brannigan holstered his gun instantly and waited for Credo to turn, and he bent his arm and locked fingers with the powerful trapper.



"I'll empty my gun in yore carcass if you try a sneak, Nip," Whiskey Bill warned viciously. "There's a dozen guns covering you, and now I'll tie you gents together!"

He took the heavy silk bandanna and made three wraps around both sinewy wrists. The tall miner was scarcely breathing, and an occasional tremor twitched his shoulders to tell that a fit of coughing was imminent. Whiskey Bill read the signs and worked swiftly, and then he stepped back and cuffed the battered black hat from his bald head.

"Get set, gents," he barked. "Start carvin' yore meat when the old Stetson drops!"

Nip Credo tightened his muscles. A gleam of admiration flickered briefly across his swarthy face when he felt the answering pressure of steely muscles. One swift lunge at the heart would end the contest, and then Whiskey Bill opened his steel-claw fingers.

The powerful trapper twisted his left arm and lunged down with all his strength. His spurs bit into the floor to give him leverage, and he fell heavily when Bandanna Brannigan made no resistance. Both men rolled like cats, but a flashing blade streaked through the air when the tall miner landed on top.

The wiry trapper screamed once when the keen blade bit deep into his right shoulder. The knife was dripping when Brannigan stiffened his left arm to stop Credo's roll. The razor-sharp blade was denting the skin of the trapper's throat, and he sank back and loosed the fingers of his right hand to drop his knife.

"Strike swiftly," he growled. "I go to join my fathers!"

Brannigan stiffened his left arm and drew it close to his head. Then the knife in his right hand flashed

when Nip Credo closed his staring black eyes. He opened them with a jerk when he felt the weight leaving his body, and he was staring at the severed bandanna when Brannigan climbed to his feet.

"You can go to your fathers, Credo," the tall miner murmured softly. "You can have the cabin near the burial grounds of your tribe. Tom and I will build another one over by the shaft when we get back from Vegas. We won't bother the graves of your people!"

He turned his back when his shoulders began to tremble. Strong men turned their heads when he began to cough with a crimson foam bubbling at his lips. A strong hand gripped the miner's arm, and he turned slowly when savage Nip Credo thrust the severed bandanna in his hand.

Bandanna Brannigan took the cloth and held it to his lips until the fit of coughing had subsided. Then he took the little vial of colorless liquid from his shirt pocket and sipped slowly. The strength came back to his wasted frame when he turned back to Nip Credo with a mocking little smile curling his pallid lips.

"I'm sorry about that shoulder of yours, Nip," he muttered. "You better ride over to Vegas with me and Tom and get it fixed up."

"Sure, I come" the gaunt trapper agreed quietly. "Later I help you and your brother build the new cabin." His face was emotionless when he reached down inside his buckskin shirt and brought out a new blue bandanna of heavy silk.

"I buy him for me," he said simply. "You take him," and he pressed the cloth to Brannigan's lips as gently as a woman might do. "We spoil yours in that Bandanna showdown!"



# Smart Guns AND AN April Fool

by CLEVE ENDICOTT

**A joke led Buck Foster into a heap of strange trouble!**

THINGS didn't look right to Buck Foster, as he lay in his bunk, opened first one eye, then the other, and

let his gaze rove about the empty Circle J bunkhouse. He saw the bright sunshine pouring in through

the half-open door, and noticed that someone had drawn a ring in red pencil around the figure 1 on the calendar that hung on the wall.

Very slowly and laboriously, Buck spelled out the word at the top of the calendar page. It was tough work for him.

"Huh! Reckon it must be April," he muttered, and sat upright. As he did so, a groan escaped him. "Ouch! My mouth and stummick taste like I'd ate dinner with a buzzard last night! Oh-oo-oh!"

Holding his gray head between his gnarled hands, he nursed it tenderly.

"By ganny!" he continued, a moment later. "I believe that chink pizened me last night. That second cup o' coffee he give me tasted darn queer! If I think—"

Buck broke off his mutterings with another groan. When he opened his eyes again, he noticed something else: His worn old bearskin vest, that had been hanging on a peg beside his bunk, was missing, and in its place was a new-looking calfskin vest.

Buck recalled this garment as one his boss Billy West had given him about a month ago—accompanying the gift with the hint that Buck ought to wear it instead of the patched and moth-eaten bearskin vest which had been the veteran waddy's constant companion for more years than any one on the Circle J spread could remember.

In the midst of his thoughts, Buck became aware of a figure standing in the patch of sunlight that marked the doorway of the bunkhouse—a little man in loose-fitting shiny-black coat and pants, with a floppy black hat perched on his round head—the Circle J cook, Sing Lo!

"Hi-lo, Buck!" the little China-

man greeted the old puncher cheerfully, jerking his thumb at the calendar. "Aplil fool!"

Buck glared at him out of throbbing eyes. "You ain't makin' no April fool out of me, you rice-eatin' hoptoad!"

It annoyed the veteran cow-puncher to see Sing Lo standing there, his flat, yellow face spread in a wide smile that wrinkled his almond eyes up into tiny slits.

"No makee fool!" the Chinaman murmured. "Here's plesent for Buck!"

He held out his hand, with a silver dollar resting on its palm.

"A present, huh?" Buck reached out, took the coin, and bit on it with his snaggly, tobacco-stained teeth. Then he got up and made it ring on the wooden floor of the bunkhouse. "It sounds all right. What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing the matta, Buck!" Sing Lo declared. "Velly good dolla'!"

"Then what're you givin' it to *me* for?" Buck wanted to know.

Sing Lo nodded his head several times. "Man buy bearskin vest. You got new vest now. Not need old bearskin. Muchee stinkee! Me sell him fo' one dolla'!"

Buck Foster stood glaring at the little cook for a full minute. He felt that he had lost the power of speech. No words would come from his tight-corded throat. Slowly, his hands reached out, fingers clawed, toward the Chinaman.

"You—" Buck found his voice at last. "You sneakin' little pot-rassler! Pizened my coffee last night, didn't yuh? So I'd sleep sound and not wake up too soon! And you stole my bearskin vest and sold it! Just let me git my hands on your skinny neck, and I'll wring it till you're deader'n last Thanks-givin's turkey!"

With the words, Buck made a lunge for the Chinaman, caught him by his scrawny shoulders, and shook him, like a pup worrying a rag doll.

He noticed, with satisfaction, that he had Sing Lo scared by his loud-mouthed threats. For he could see that the Chinaman's slant eyes were full of terror, great beads of sweat were standing out on his flat, yellow face, and he was trembling in every limb. So Buck proceeded to rub it in.

"Gol darn you, chink!" he roared, easing up in his shaking. "You git my vest back for me pronto, or I'll skin yuh alive and nail your yaller hide on the door of your cook shack—as a warnin' to any other heathen grub-spoilers that try playin' April fool jokes on me!"

Sing Lo's piteous glance would have moved a heart of stone; but it didn't make any impression on Buck Foster.

"Please, Mistlec Buck!" he pleaded. "Not hurtee poor Chineee!"

"What did you do with my bearskin vest?" Buck demanded. "Who did you sell it to?"

"Cash-clo' Charley!" Sing Lo answered, in a faint voice.

"Cash-clo' Charley!" Buck roared. "That cheatin' skunk that runs the store in Twin Rivers! And he only give yuh one dollar!" He tightened his grip on the Chinaman's coat collar.

Sing Lo let out a loud scream. "Help! Help! Mu'del!" At the same time, the little cook gave a violent wrench of his whole body and made a dash for the doorway.

There was a ripping sound, and Buck Foster found himself holding nothing but a piece of shiny black cloth in his hand, while Sing Lo was streaking it outside on fear-driven legs.

Buck was after him, like a starv-

ing coyote on the heels of a rabbit. He was out in the sunlight—clad only in his long flannel underwear, and barefooted. But he wasn't going to let Sing Lo get away from him till he'd given the yellow-faced little pot-rasser the scare of his life.

The veteran waddy bow-legged his way across the ranch yard, with the long ends of his grizzled cow-horn mustache fluttering out on either side of his leathery face, like tumbleweeds in the wind.

He saw Sing Lo dodge around the barn, then head for the cook shack, hurdling a watering trough on his way.

Buck followed, making tough going of it, as his breath began to come in short, gasping puffs. He rounded the barn, and put on a fresh burst of speed.

As he did so, the big toe of his right foot struck something on the ground. Buck tripped, lost his balance, sprawled forward—*ker-splash*—right into the watering trough.

The ice-cold water was in his mouth, his eyes, his hair, dripping off the ends of his mustache, running down inside his underwear, soaking, and chilling his lean body to the very marrow.

He sprang out as quickly as he had fallen in, intending to continue his pursuit. But he saw the cook-shack door slam shut behind Sing Lo's disappearing figure, and he realized that he had lost the race. For he knew that the Chinaman would barricade himself in the shack and yell blue murder till someone came to his rescue.

Cussing under his breath, Buck limped back to the bunkhouse and pushed the door open, blinking his eyes from the strong sunlight. And there—to his horror—he saw the very last two persons in the world

he wanted to see at that moment—his boss, Billy West, and his red-headed bunkie, Joe Scott!

Buck felt sure that Billy West was trying to keep his rather stern features in a serious expression. His mouth—a thin, straight line in his bronzed face—was twitching slightly at the corners, as if he were holding back a good belly laugh with difficulty.

Then Buck looked at Joe Scott. Joe wasn't making the slightest effort to control his mirth. His big mouth was wide open, letting out roar after roar of laughter; his freckled face was screwed up into an expression of keen enjoyment, while his bat ears wiggled, as they always did when he was greatly amused.

"Hi-ya, Buck!" he gasped, when he could control his mirth sufficiently to get a few words out. "April fool!"

"April fool, Buck!" Billy chimed in, and then he, too, gave full sway to his merriment, guffawing even louder than Joe.

That mocking laughter was the last spark needed to touch off the flame of Buck's explosive temper. Balked of his purpose to punish Sing Lo, he turned the full force of his rage on these two grinning saddle pards of his.

His lanky body shot forward, fists flailing in a wild flurry of punches. He'd show these two young jackanapes they couldn't get away with making an April fool of *him!*

He felt one punch land on Joe Scott's head, and something like a hot knife-blade seemed to run up his arm, from the contact of his knuckles with Joe's hard skull.

"Come on, you two young coyote pups!" he yelled defiantly. "I'll lick yuh one at a time—or both at

once! Suit yourselves! Come an' get it!"

Billy and Joe promptly accepted the invitation. They swarmed all over the lanky veteran, pinioning his arms, bearing him down to the floor by their weight, while he kicked and squirmed and lashed out with fists and knees and elbows.

Then the three thrashed about the bunkhouse floor in a furious roughhouse. But Buck discovered that he wasn't landing any of his blows. One of his younger opponents was on his legs, holding them down and sitting on them. That was Joe Scott. And Billy West had pinned the veteran waddy's arms to the floor, and was sitting on his chest, digging his knees into Buck's throat and clamping down on his wind.

"Better give up, Buck!" Billy warned, in a calm tone. "We're not aimin' to hurt you, pard—not any!"

"I ain't lookin' fer no sympathy!" Buck retorted. "I kin lick the two of yuh in a fair-and-square stand-up fight. Gimme a chance—"

"You had your chance," Billy reminded him. "You just aren't yourself today, Buck."

"Looks like losin' that bearskin vest went to the old buzzard's head," Joe Scott suggested, with a grin that made Buck's blood boil.

"I believe *you* had a hand in stealin' my vest, yuh carrot-topped gopher!" Buck accused.

"Maybe it's me that's to blame." Billy put in. "I been sayin' I wished you'd wear that new vest I gave you, 'cause it seems to others like I don't pay your wages when you go around in clothes that look like they was picked off the town dump!"

"I want my bearskin vest back!" Buck said. "The chink went and sold it to Cash-clo' Charley for a



dollar—one solitary dollar—fer the finest bearskin vest in the whole State o' Montanner! By ganny, I value that vest more'n anything I own!"

"Suppose we shake?" Billy suggested, easing up the pressure on Buck's right arm a little. "We'll lay off you, and you can have the day off to go to town and git your vest back off Cash-clo' Charley."

Buck thought that over for a moment. After all, maybe Billy was right. Buck liked the younker a lot. He was kind o' glad the fight hadn't gone any farther, for he'd have hated to do Billy any hurt or harm.

The same held true for Joe Scott. The freckled redhead wasn't a bad cowhand—except for the fact that he laughed too loud and didn't have any respect for his elders.

Buck was plumb fond of Joe—like he was his own son—except when Joe razzed him too much, or laughed at him too loud, or played fool jokes on him—like this one! For Buck was sure that Joe had put Sing Lo up to the trick of selling the bearskin vest to Cash-clo' Charley.

"Just one think I want to warn you against," Billy added, as he and Joe let Buck get to his feet. "There's said to be a plumb bad hombre hanging around town—a half-breed outlaw known as Kiyote Jones. Remember—it's Sheriff Jim Hawk's job to take care of Jones. I want you back here at Circle J all in one piece. So don't you bother your head none about tangling with Kiyote. Savvy?"

"I ain't scared of no Kiyote Jones!" Buck declared, sitting on the edge of his bunk and starting to pull his pants on.

"You kin easy tell Kiyote," Billy went on, "cause he wears his hair

long—like an Injun. And he's got a scar in the shape of a letter X across his right cheek. You can't be mistaken about him! Keep away from him if you see him. He's bad medicine!"

"Waal, so am I!" Buck retorted.

## CHAPTER II.

### CASH-CLO' CHARLEY'S CUSTOMER.

AS he stood in the doorway of his store, peering with eager, restless eyes up and down the single street of Twin Rivers, Cash-clo' Charley reminded Buck Foster of a hungry buzzard on the lookout for carrion on which to gorge itself. To Buck's way of thinking, the little storekeeper's resemblance to the desert bird of prey was strengthened by the loose-fitting black coat that hung from his narrow shoulders, his vulturish nose, and the unhealthy mottled redness of his complexion.

As Buck rode past the store, he looked Cash-clo' Charley over, then drew rein at the hitch rail of the Oasis Saloon a couple of doors away. There, he tied up his cayuse and went inside for a drink. Buck sure needed something to warm up his innards after his ducking in the water trough this morning, also to sharpen up his wits for his coming business with Cash-clo' Charley. One drink would be just right!

Buck downed his liquor, swiped the back of his hairy hand across his grizzled cowhorn mustache, stroked the ends gently, and marched out of the saloon. Then he walked slowly back to the emporium of Cash-clo' Charley.

"Good morning, my friend!" Cash-clo' Charley greeted Buck, rubbing his thin hands together.

Buck stood in front of the store and glared at the skinny proprietor. "I ain't no friend of yours that I

knows of," he stated, thrusting his chin out. "I got business—"

Cash-clo' Charley came forward, seized Buck by a corner of the new calfskin vest he was wearing, and led him inside. "You got business, cowboy? Always glad to see folks who got business! Come right in!"

Buck noticed that, as Cash-clo' Charley entered the store, a sharp-eyed, dark-haired boy of about fourteen went and stood outside, evidently to carry on the work of keeping a look-out for prospective customers.

The little merchant shuffled behind the long counter and put on steel-rimmed spectacles, through which he peered at Buck keenly. His glance made the veteran waddy uncomfortable—like a chicken being sized up by a rattlesnake that's looking for a juicy meal.

"Now, then, Mr. Cowboy," Cash-clo' Charley went on. "What was it you'd be wanting today? I've got a new lot of check flannel shirts in, and some nice buckskin jackets. Or how about a good-looking silk shirt for when you go calling on your lady?"

Buck Foster spat on the floor and made a face as if he'd a bad taste in his mouth. "I ain't got no lady—"

"Then how about a present for your father?" Cash-clo' rattled on. "A nice pipe, my friend, or—"

"I ain't got no father, nor no mother, nor no grandfather, nor no grandmother, nor no old-maid aunt!" Buck cut the merchant short. "And I ain't no friend of yours, neither—like I told you once already!"

"Then what can I—"

"I want a vest—a bearskin vest that was brung in here and sold for one buck—one single solitary spondulick—by a thievin' Chinee!

That there vest belongs to me! It was stole from me. And I want it back right now!" Buck brought his horny fist down on the flimsy pine counter with a force that made the knickknacks and gimcracks on it bounce around like jumping beans.

Cash-clo' Charley lifted a skinny hand in protest. "But, my friend, I can't let you have that bearskin vest back. I—"

"What?" Buck's voice rose to an angry roar that shook the whole building. "You ain't goin' to give back my bearskin vest that was stole?"

Cash-clo' Charley shrugged his lean shoulders. "I've told you, my friend, I can't let you have that bearskin vest back—"

"You're givin' me back that stolen vest, you penny-pinchin' ol' buzzard, or I'll wreck your store and take it back anyways!" Buck threatened. "That vest's mine, and I aim to get it!"

Buck saw Cash-clo' Charley make a sign to the black-haired boy who stood in the doorway, then turn to Buck again, his hands spread out in a humble gesture.

"But I tell you, Mr. Cowboy, I can't give that bearskin vest back," the storekeeper insisted. "Now I got a nice calfskin vest here—that I can let you have dirt cheap!"

"I don't want no calfskin vest, nor nothin' but my own bearskin vest. So just hand it over and save your breath. There's the dollar you paid for it!" Buck held out the silver dollar Sing Lo had given him.

Buck could see that Cash-clo' Charley was scared, and he also appeared to be stalling for time. For he turned aside and took an elaborately stitched elkskin vest from a peg and showed it to Buck.

"Now this here," he said, in a

voice that trembled slightly, "is a vest anyone'd be proud to wear. You could have it for six dollars—and a dirt-cheap bargain at that!"

The storekeeper's stalling blew the lid off Buck's temper. His right hand slid down to the butt of the six-gun on his hip, came up with it swiftly, and brought the muzzle crashing down on the counter. Then he pointed the weapon skyward and sent a bullet through the wooden roof of the building.

"I want my vest—my vest that was stole, I tell yuh!" Buck shouted. "I'm payin' you back your dollar, and you ain't losin' nothin'. So—"

A soft footstep behind Buck made the floor boards creak slightly. He turned—but too late. A hand with an iron grip seized his gun-hand, twisted it sharply, wrenching the wrist and sending the gun clattering to the floor. At the same instant, Buck felt the muzzle of another gun prod into the small of his back.

Glancing around, he saw the ruddy face and white hair of his old acquaintance and friendly enemy, Sheriff Jim Hawks!

"Huh! What's this mean, Foster?" Sheriff Jim Hawks' voice had a note of suspicion in it. Charley's boy Ike told me some drunken cowpuncher was threatenin' to wreck the store, and I come and find *you* shootin' up the place! What you got to say for yourself, Foster?"

Buck's mind went back to the many run-ins he'd had in the past with this same Sheriff Jim Hawks. Of all the blundering fools wearing a law-dog's star, this Jim Hawks—in Buck Foster's opinion—was the worst. Buck himself would do a much better job of sheriffing in

Twin Rivers, if he could only get the chance.

But now Jim Hawks had him where the hair was short, and Buck's anger boiled over, as he saw the faint smile that tugged at the corners of the sheriff's mouth under his bristling white mustache.

"Well, Foster?" the sheriff prompted, as the old Circle J raunny remained silent. "I'm waitin' to hear what you got to say! Tell your story—and it better be a good one!"

Buck told the story of his stolen bearskin vest, and of Cash-clo' Charley's refusal to return it on payment of the one dollar, which Buck had offered.

Sheriff Jim Hawks turned to Cash-clo' Charley. "Well, Charley, what *you* got to say?"

Cash-clo' Charley's mean eyes held a light of triumph. "Sheriff, I've told this cowboy three times already I can't return his vest—and all he does is shout at me and shoot off his gun!"

"Well, why can't you return it to him?" Sheriff Hawks demanded. "I should think you'd be glad to get rid of the damn thing!"

"That's what I been tryin' to tell him, sheriff, "Cash-clo' Charley said. "But he won't listen to me. The reason I can't return his old bearskin vest is that I sold it this morning—to another customer!"

"You never told me that, you lyin' buzzard!" Buck Foster shouted.

"Hold your hosses, Foster, and keep your shirt on!" the sheriff warned, prodding the old waddy's spine with his gun muzzle. "Now, tell me, Charley, who did you sell the vest to?"

Charley shrugged his narrow shoulders and spread out his hands, palms upward. "Some cowboy

come in an' bought it shortly after the Chinaman sold it to me."

"Who was he? What was his name?" the sheriff asked.

"I dunno his name. Never seen him before," the storekeeper said.

"What was he like? Would you know him again?"

Cash-clo' Charley thought hard for a moment. "He had long, straight black hair—down to his shoulders—like an Indian; and a kind of funny scar on his cheek—the right cheek."

Buck Foster's eyes bulged in his head as they fixed themselves on the storekeeper's blotchy face. "Was it a scar like the letter X?" he asked.

Cash-clo' Charley nodded. "Yeah! That's just what it was. A scar like a letter X!"

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck exclaimed. "That thievin' skunk Kiyote Jones has got my vest! Just wait till I git my two hands on that ornery breed!"

"You'll have to wait," Sheriff Hawks said dryly. "I ain't turnin' you loose just yet, Foster! You're comin' down to the jail fer a spell—just till your temper cools off and you kin learn that you ain't allowed to shoot off your gun in the stores in this town!"

Sheriff Jim Hawks prodded Buck in the backbone with his gun again and urged him in the direction of the door. And Buck knew, from the expression of the white-haired lawman's face, that Hawks was getting a lot of satisfaction out of throwing him into the hoosegow.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE TRAIL OF KIYOTE JONES.

**S**HERIFF JIM HAWKS came to the barred door of the cell in which he had put Buck Foster. There was a broad, good-natured

smile on the ruddy face of the lawman, as he studied his prisoner. But Buck only scowled back at him. There was no kindness in the old mosshorn's heart for the sheriff of Twin Rivers.

"You been in nigh on three hours, Foster," the sheriff said mildly. "I reckon you've had a chance to cool off and think over the sinfulness of your ways by now!"

Buck got to his feet, bit himself off a fresh chaw of plug, and started to work it around into his left cheek.

"If you've made me lose the trail of that thievin' skunk that's got my vest," he mumbled sourly, "I—I'll run against you come election time, and you'll be out o' your job!"

Sheriff Jim Hawks laughed. "I ain't worryin' about that, Foster. As fer Kiyote Jones, I run him out o' town as soon as I got you behind the bars of this hoosegow, 'cause I don't want you and him raisin' no ruckus in my bailiwick!"

The lawman led the way to his office, with Buck at his heels. There, he gave the Circle J waddy his gun back and added a few more words of good advice, which fell on deaf ears, for Buck's mind was all on finding Kiyote Jones and recovering his precious vest.

Once more, enjoying his freedom, Buck walked along the street in the afternoon sunshine, and got his horse from the hitch rail of the Oasis. From hangers-on, he learned that Kiyote Jones had left town along the road leading eastward. So Buck took that direction.

He followed this road for several miles without running across any sign of the man he wanted. But one cowpuncher whom he met told Buck he had seen a scar-faced half-



*They thought Buck was another bandit horning in on their holdup.*

breed making camp in a gully about a mile farther on.

So Buck kept going and, as he reached the spot indicated, he noticed a plume of smoke curling up from a cleft in the rocks, about a hundred feet back from the road.

Knowing the reputation of this Kiyote Jones, Buck wasn't for go-

ing right into his gopher-hole and demanding his vest back. Billy had warned him that the half-breed was bad medicine, and Buck knew a gent of that kind had to be approached with caution.

So he tied his cayuse in a clump of alders and approached the tumbled malpais on foot. There was



a path leading up a giant boulder, and by climbing this, Buck was able to reach a vantage point from which he could look down in the gully.

It was easy to recognize Kiyote Jones from the description. The X-shaped scar stood out plainly—a darkly livid knife-brand on the coppery skin of his right cheek. And his straight black hair hung down to his shoulders under his flat-brimmed sombrero.

Buck looked eagerly for some sign of his missing garment, but the half-breed outlaw was wearing a checkered shirt—without any vest! He had a coffeepot on the fire, and Buck noticed that, while waiting for it to boil, he was engaged in sewing on something which he held across his knees.

Buck craned his neck and strained his eyes for a better glimpse of what the man was sewing. Finally, he realized what it was, and an exclamation of disgust broke from him.

"Gol darn his ornery hide!" he muttered. "He's sewin' on my vest. Mebbe makin' it smaller, so's I can't wear it!"

A shudder went through Buck's body, as if the sight made him cold. He drew out his gun, looked to its loads, saw that the mechanism was working smoothly, then holstered it again.

"By ganny!" he told himself, "I'm takin' my vest right off him—now!"

He started to climb down the narrow goat path leading to the gully below, but he found that it was one of those trails which are much harder to go down than up. Midway of his descent, he halted, puffing for breath, and pressed his lanky body close into a cleft of the rocks. Below him, he heard hoofbeats—and voices.

Peering through a narrow crevice, Buck saw that three men had ridden down into Kiyote Jones' hiding place, and that they were arguing heatedly with him. Their voices—sharp and angry—came drifting up to Buck's ears, as he crouched in his niche.

One of them—a lean fellow with the pointed features and sharp eyes of a rat—was kicking out the fire.

"You fool, Kiyote!" he barked at the half-breed. "What's the sense of makin' a fire—to show everybody where you been layin' for the stage?"

"Yeah, Kiyote," another of the newcomers said, in a friendlier tone. "That's dangerous business." Buck saw that this speaker was small and slight of build, with a face that wore a perpetual smile.

Then came Kiyote Jones' voice, harsh, snarling. "All right, Rat! All right, Smiler! I was goin' to put it out long before the stage came anywheres near! Don't worry!"

Buck now caught sight of the third visitor—a bow-legged cowboy of about his own age—with a cruel, hard-bitten face that suggested the jailbird. Buck recognized him as a hanger-on around the Oasis Saloon, in Twin Rivers—a cowboy who'd gone wrong, known as Alkali Jenkins.

This hombre had black masks in his hand—squares of cloth, with strings at the two upper corners—and he was giving them out to the others, who were tying them on, under their sombreros.

"The stage ain't so far off," Buck heard Alkali say. "We better get ready and be layin' in wait, down at the bend of the road!"

Buck realized that, in tracking down Kiyote Jones, he had run into a gang planning the holdup of the stage from Mustang City, which

generally came into Twin Rivers late in the afternoon. Probably that was how-come Sheriff Jim Hawks had been able to persuade Kiyote Jones to leave town without making any trouble.

The bandits were taking their time about starting, and as Buck crouched in a notch in the boulder, looking down into the gully, his legs began to ache from their cramped position. He hadn't figured on staying in this narrow fissure in the cliff, or he wouldn't have crawled into it. And he realized that he couldn't climb back up without starting a lot of loose stone and gravel and rock debris cascading down and revealing his presence. And then that bunch of polecats below would have Buck Foster up a tree!

So the old rannihan waited, gritting his teeth against the violent pains that were shooting through the calves of his legs and up into his thigh muscles. Gosh, wouldn't those damn badgers ever start off? Buck's leathery face was twisted in a grimace of agony, and he tugged savagely on the ends of his mustache to make himself forget the pain in his tortured legs.

When the four men in the gully finally rode away, Buck's legs were so numb that he couldn't move them, but he managed to slide and crawl, with the aid of his hands, till he reached the bottom of the trail.

There he had to sit on the ground and rub his cramped calf and thigh muscles till the circulation in them was restored. And all the time, he was fretting and fuming over the fact that Kiyote Jones and his bandit partners might hold up the stage and get clean away with their loot and—most important of all—with Buck's treasured vest!

Gradually, his pains dwindled to pins-and-needles in his feet, and he stomped his way out of the gully to the grove of alders where he had hidden his horse.

With one foot in the stirrup, he paused for a moment, as the roar of six-guns came to his ears—then the heavier report of a shotgun.

"By ganny!" Buck muttered, springing into the saddle. "Them varmints are holdin' up the stage already!"

Bending close over his horse's withers, Buck urged it with voice and spur to its best speed. The hoofs of the bronc pounded along the road, kicking up great clouds of alkali dust that stung Buck's nostrils, making his sneeze and cough—so much so that he was forced to pull up his bandanna till it masked his mouth and nose.

Ahead of him, he saw that the road curved sharply, with great masses of boulders on either side—a fine place for a holdup.

The sounds of exploding Colts and Winchesters were close at hand. Buck could see the stage, enveloped in powder smoke, dotted and dashed with gun flashes, as the guard and passengers tried to fight off the bandits' attack.

Taking in the scene with a swift glance, Buck noticed that Kiyote Jones and his men had divided up—two taking their positions on one side of the road, two on the other.

Buck reined his cayuse down to a walk and studied the scene of battle for a moment,—out of brown eyes that had narrowed down to gleaming slits beneath their shaggy gray brows.

"By ganny! Here's where I blow them murderin' snakes to hell-an'-gone—and git me my bearskin vest back!" he growled, as he swung out

of the saddle and sent the animal off to safety.

Then he advanced on foot; he could fight better that way. Through smoke-blurred eyes, he could see the two holdup men on the right side of the road, crouching in their hiding place, shooting their Winchesters at the stage; the right lead horse down; the others, panicked, milling around, kicking at their traces, reeling and plunging; the coach lurching from side to side; the guard and passengers putting up a good defense with their Colts, pouring a steady stream of lead at the positions held by the attacking outlaws.

Buck's temper flared as he caught a glimpse of the long black hair of Kiyote Jones, and he knew he had found the man he wanted. Jones and the skinny bandit known as Rat had taken cover behind a shoulder of rock that jutted out on the left side of the road.

The Circle J puncher saw Kiyote cast a swift glance backward, then turn and shout something in the ear of his companion, evidently warning him of Buck's approach.

Then the two whirled and turned their guns on Buck—no doubt taking him for some lawman, or else, seeing that his bandanna was drawn up like a mask, taking him for another bandit aiming to horn in on their holdup.

Bullets sang about Buck's ears as he dropped into a crouch and blazed away with his smooth-handled Colt. Through his narrowed eyes, he saw something that made the blood surge fiercely in his veins—his own treasured bearskin vest adorning the body of the half-breed outlaw Kiyote Jones.

Dimly, through the curtain of gun smoke that hung between him and the pair attacking him, Buck

saw Kiyote slump to the ground, his hat and mask falling off—showing the ghastly head wound from which the crimson tide of his life was ebbing, while the bearskin vest draped his limp body like a shroud. A fierce exultation filled the old buckaroo, as he realized that one of his bullets had found its mark.

Then Buck felt the shock of a slug burning across his head, grooving his scalp like a red-hot knife. His brain began to whirl in a pool of fire. Then the pool turned to blackness, stabbed with flashes of red-and-orange flame, and finally, it became all blackness. He felt his knees sagging under him, his body falling into the dust of the road, the bitter alkali choking him—and he knew no more!

## CHAPTER IV.

### SHADOW OF THE HANGNOOSE.

**R**EINING in his horse Danger at the top of a rise in the road, Billy West looked down on the town of Twin Rivers—a cluster of frame buildings sprawled out along either side of its single street. Then his gray eyes narrowed and his mouth tightened, as he let his gaze rove beyond the town—to the winding ribbon of dusty road that stretched eastward across the rolling prairie. He turned to his saddle mate Joe Scott—and saw that Joe, too, had his eyes fixed on the east fork of the road.

"Looks like my hunch about Buck was right, Joe," Billy remarked.

"Any time you git a hunch that Buck's went and run his fool head into a nest of hornets," Joe Scott said, with a grin on his freckled face, "you're bound to be dead right!"

Billy shrugged his shoulders and

nodded. "The old coot sure does get himself into the durnedest scrapes," he agreed. "Now, I wonder what—"

From where he sat his bronc, Billy could see a strange procession coming into town by the opposite road. In the lead, were two sheriff's deputies, riding on either side of the familiar figure of Buck Foster.

It looked to Billy as if Buck was in bad shape. A bloodstained strip of cloth—evidently torn from some one's shirt and hurriedly fashioned into a bandage—was wound around the oldster's head, and he was bogged down in his saddle in a way that suggested an hombre who's taken a good licking and is feeling plumb sick over it. It wasn't like Buck to fork his horse that way, Billy knew, unless he was feeling pretty bad.

"Looks like the old mossyhorn's got hisself in wrong with the law, huh, Billy? They got his hands tied to that saddlehorn!" Joe Scott spoke the very same thought that was in his boss' mind.

"And he hasn't got his bearskin vest back, either," Billy said, as he noticed that Buck was still wearing the calfskin vest, only it was now dusty and bloodstained.

A few yards behind Buck was the stagecoach that made three trips weekly between Mustang City and Twin Rivers, and Billy could see that its sides were newly scarred and splintered, as if it had just been through a heavy siege of gunfire. And on the roof of the bullet-torn stage, lay two forms hidden by blankets—unmistakably dead men!

"I wonder if Jim Hawks has really got somethin' on Buck this time," Joe Scott muttered. "Them two ol' he-goats sure are pizen to one another!"

Billy nodded, his straight mouth twisting into a faint grin. "Yes! I wouldn't put it past Hawks to frame Buck for somethin'—if he thought he could get away with it!"

"And I hate to think what Buck would do to git Hawks' sheriffin' job for himself," Joe added.

Billy shook the reins over Danger's neck and started to ride into town. "The feud between those two old haters is gettin' to be a durned serious matter," he admitted.

The two Circle J rannies rode into town and reached the sheriff's office at almost the same time as the posse and the stagecoach. Billy had difficulty preventing Danger from trampling the crowd that swarmed around the stage, shoving and elbowing, shouting excitedly, as they got the facts from the deputies and passengers.

As rumors and reports spread wildly, Billy gathered that some one had seen the holdup and come riding into town for the sheriff, who had hastily gathered a posse and reached the scene in time to drive off the holdup gang. Buck had been found lying in the road, bleeding from a scalp wound and unconscious. He had been placed under arrest by Sheriff Hawks, because some of the stagecoach passengers said they had seen him taking part in the holdup. The two dead men on top of the coach were the bandit known as Kiyote Jones, and Idaho Logan, a cattle buyer who had been a passenger on the stage and had taken an active part in its defense.

Billy could sense the rising tide of anger among the citizens of Twin Rivers, as news of the killing of Idaho Logan spread among the crowd. He himself knew Logan well. The dead man had been a

well-known figure among ranchers of the region for years.

Across the street from the jail, a group of townsmen were gathered, arguing in loud, angry tones. Billy caught snatches of their talk—and learned that they were planning to wreak swift vengeance on the lone prisoner Buck Foster—not because they had any knowledge of his guilt; not because there was anything to show that *he* had killed Logan; but because the spirit of mob violence had caught hold of them, inflaming them with the lust to take the law into their own hands. Billy knew the signs. More than once, he had seen senseless, wanton mob killings flame up from such tinder as this!

As he sat his horse, watching the crowd and listening to their excited talk, he noted Sheriff Jim Hawks strutting around, giving orders, assuming an air of great importance.

Somehow, Billy felt that Jim Hawks derived a lot of personal satisfaction at having caught Buck Foster in a spot where appearances looked bad for him. Billy liked old Jim Hawks; he was an honest, fearless lawman. But just now, as he stood in front of his jail, shouting orders to his deputies to get the prisoner inside, there was something of the look of a grouchy old bulldog in his ruddy face, with its button nose, bristly white mustache and heavy jowls—a bulldog that has caught an enemy at a disadvantage and is taking out its ill-humor on its victim by strutting around in triumph and showing off.

With the mob in its present temper, Billy saw that this posing on the part of the sheriff might well have tragic results. He beckoned to Joe Scott to come closer.

"Listen, Joe," he said to the red-

head, as the latter drew his cow pony alongside, "I'm thinkin' we better take Buck away from this crowd. They're half crazed over the murder of Logan, and there's a bunch of them over there that's likely to get a hemp necktie around Buck's neck, before that old fathead Jim Hawks can—"

A hoarse growl from the crowd cut Billy's words short. The men across the street were surging toward the jail, with the savage call of the wolf pack on the kill rumbling in their throats.

Deputies were thrust aside. Reaching hands were clawing the air, clutching at Buck Foster's arms and legs, grabbing hold of his clothing.

Billy West's voice was like a taut wire twanging in his throat—low, harsh, vibrant. "Come on, Joe! We got to stop this! And no shootin' if you can help it!"

With loud shouts of warning, the two Circle J waddies urged their horses in through the crowd, driving the mass of milling, excited men back in confusion.

Then Billy and Joe ranged their cayuses on either side of Buck, Joe slashing his hands free, while Billy shouted instructions to him and gave him a Colt.

Suddenly a gun flamed in the crowd. Billy saw the flash, heard the whine of a bullet pass his ear, and he knew that his fears were realized. The mob was reckless, goaded to killing frenzy by the murder of Logan and the belief that one of his slayers was about to escape.

There was no reasoning with a crowd in that mood of primal fury. They were ablaze with the killing savagery of a hungry wolf pack. Billy could not turn his guns on them—except as a last desperate measure of self-defense. For, in



their right minds, these men were honest, law-abiding citizens, good neighbors and friends of Circle J!

"Come on, Buck, Joe!" Billy barked to his two saddle mates. "Get goin' out of town! Burn leather—like Ol' Man Devil was after you—to Circle J!"

They crouched low in their saddles, roweling their cayuses. Guns began to roar from the crowd—wild, reckless shooting, but there was always the risk of a stray bullet finding its mark!

The seconds which followed were an inferno of blazing gun smoke, in which bullets whined all around the fugitives as they raced out of town—Buck and Joe in the lead, Billy in the rear.

The Circle J boss sought to cover the retreat of his saddle mates by turning and firing back, shooting high on purpose, or else making his bullets kick up geysers of dust at the feet of the angry townsmen—holding them back, cooling off the hunger for taking human life that had gripped them by the throat.

Then he was out on the open road. Danger's great, space-devouring strides carrying him ahead of his two cowpunchers. Billy could hear the harsh breathing of their horses for a few moments, as they labored to keep pace with Danger. Then he drew away—leaving them behind.

Danger was full of running, and Billy exulted in the feel of the cool, whipping wind against his face, roaring in his ears, ruffling the big horse's heavy mane.

He did not slacken Danger's pace till he was turning into the road leading to the cluster of Circle J ranch buildings. Then he drew rein and waited for his two saddle mates to catch up. And while he waited, he thought over the events

of the day. He must see Jim Hawks, have a talk with the stubborn old lawman, try to patch up that feud between him and Buck Foster, because it was getting to be a nuisance. Jim Hawks had to get it into his head that Buck Foster wasn't a thief, but a square-shooting cowpuncher, who—

The appearance of a horseman topping the rise of the road cut Billy's planning short. The glow of the sunset in the western sky showed him that it was Joe Scott. He saw the redhead wave to him, then ease his mount down to a lazy jog as he approached the clump of cottonwoods where Billy was waiting.

He saw that Joe looked a bit dazed, and that there was a trickle of blood on his forehead, where a townsman's bullet had nicked him.

"You got hit, didn't you, Joe?" Billy asked.

Joe wiped the thin streak of blood with his shirt sleeve. "Only a scratch. It don't amount to nothin'! Where's Buck?"

"Buck!" Billy echoed. "I thought he was back along with you!"

"I'm plumb certain he was ahead of me—up with you!" Joe said. "I'm sure he passed me on the road—"

"You weren't a bit woozy in the head after that slug hit you, were you, Joe?" Billy asked anxiously.

"Well, I did feel a bit queer for a few seconds," Joe admitted. "But it passed off in no time a-tall!"

"We'll wait a while and see if the old mossyhorn comes along," Billy said. "Maybe his horse got lamed."

But after ten minutes of waiting, there was still no Buck Foster.

"Reckon we better get ourselves fresh hosses and go back over the road and find out what's become of Buck," Billy decided.

Following Billy's suggestion, the two rannies rode all the way back to the outskirts of Twin Rivers. The town was now calm and peaceful in the gathering dusk. Lights were showing in its stores and saloons. There was no sign of strife or mob violence.

Nor was there any sign of Buck Foster!

## CHAPTER V.

### FOR A BOOTHILL BURIAL.

SOMEWHERE in the back of his mind, Buck Foster had the feeling that he was doing something a little more foolhardy than usual. An hour ago, he had ridden out of Twin Rivers with a mob of lynch-mad townsfolk at his heels. Now, he was back again—to recover his precious bearskin vest. He didn't intend to return to Circle J without it! There must be some way of obtaining his prized possession, he told himself, as he slipped into the back entrance of the chink restaurant run by a friend of Sing Lo's.

This little Chinaman wouldn't betray Buck's presence. He served the old cowpuncher a good meal, and helped him bathe and dress the painful scalp wound he had suffered in his fight with Kiyote Jones.

With his lean belly loaded with grub, and his wound less painful, Buck strode forth onto the main street of Twin Rivers without a care in the world. He saw no sign of the angry citizens who had sought his life, but he kept well away from the sheriff's office. He didn't want to run afoul of Jim Hawks again—not just yet!

His first stop was at the Oasis Saloon—the shadiest drinking place in Twin Rivers. Tonight—as a fugitive from the law—Buck felt that he would be more at home in the Oasis than any other saloon in

town. For he was aware that the bartenders and loafers around the Oasis were in the habit of protecting and shielding wanted men. Outlaws of all kinds, cattle thieves, escaped convicts, train robbers, and holdup men made the Oasis their hangout when they were in Twin Rivers. Birds of the owlhoot feather flocked there, Buck knew, from his past experiences of the place.

He slouched at the far end of the long bar and ordered himself a slug of moonshine, which he downed at a gulp. It was hot stuff, and he enjoyed feeling it scald his leathery gullet as it slid down. It warmed his innards, started his mind to working, and made him feel like fighting his weight in bobcats.

He ordered another, and that made him feel even more ferocious. He liked this Oasis joint. It was more interesting than the other saloons in Twin Rivers, because you never knew what might happen there. No one asked questions. A man's business was his own. Buck had often got into shooting scrapes in the Oasis. So he was known to the bartenders and regular patrons of the place. But none of them questioned him about his escapade of the afternoon, and he volunteered no information.

His brown eyes roved around the place, searching the faces of men grouped at tables or standing in knots at the bar.

And then the big Adam's apple in his stringy throat seemed to rise up and choke him. For, as he gazed in the bar mirror, he caught a reflection of three men sitting at a table behind him, and it was evident that they were staring at him—talking about him.

At first, he didn't recognize the men. One of them had his head

bandaged; the other two weren't showing their full faces. But, as Buck continued to study the three, he placed one of them.

It was the fellow known as Rat—one of Kiyote Jones gang, one of the trio Buck had seen as he looked down into the gully, shortly before the holdup. Then Buck saw that the man with the bandaged head was Alkali—the ex-cowboy whom he had seen on former occasions, hanging around the Oasis. And the third one in the group was Smiler. There was no mistaking his short stature and his habit of smiling most of the time.

Buck caught the evil expression—the sudden flash of fear in the face of the man called Rat, as he met Buck's eye in the bar mirror. For it was Rat who had shot Buck. It *must* have been Rat! The man had been with Kiyote Jones, ambushing the Mustang City stage!

These men were proof of Buck's innocence of the crime for which he had almost stretched a hangman's rope. For, if they could once be seen by the men who had been in the stagecoach, they would be identified beyond question as the holdup gang, in spite of the black masks which had hidden their faces. But how to get them to the sheriff's office and make them tell the truth—admit their part in the holdup?

Buck shook his grizzled head and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. It was too deep for him.

He felt a hand on his shoulder—and whirled around. It was the gunman Rat—looking up at Buck's lanky height, an ugly sneer in his beady eyes, his thin lips drawn back in a snarl over his pointed teeth.

"You—" Rat's voice was a low, rasping whisper. "It was you

spoiled the holdup this afternoon. Only for you—"

"Yeah! And you killed my pardner Kiyote!" This was Alkali speaking. The ex-cowboy had pushed Rat aside and was confronting Buck, blowing his hot whiskey breath into Buck's face.

The little man Smiler was coming over from the table, too, but he wasn't smiling now. His face was drawn in cruel, hard lines—an expression of bitterness and hate. His small, deft hands hovered close to the twin six-guns on his narrow hips.

Buck studied the three swiftly, read the message that gleamed from their narrowed eyes. Their intention was easy to see. They were ganging up on him, picking a quarrel, starting a vengeance killing. Then they would be gone—before any one in the Oasis would send for the law. Buck knew the reputation of the place; he knew, too, that it was well deserved. He'd seen things like that happen here before.

"Fill your hand, you meddlin' ol' fool!" snarled Rat. "You've spoiled your last holdup!"

Buck was cornered. But he went for his gun. He was the kind that would go down fighting. There was always a chance, when a man had a Colt in his hand. That was his philosophy—the code by which he had always lived; the code by which he would die—some time!

He lashed out with his booted foot, kicking the little gunman Rat—who was nearest him—in the belly, knocking him against his two companions.

Buck's surprise stratagem threw his three enemies into confusion, spoiled their aim, as they brought their guns to bear on him.

The three went staggering backward against a table. There, they

braced themselves, brought up their guns, and started to shoot. Flame and gun smoke swept across the barroom floor, but Buck Foster had thrown himself to one knee and was crouching low against the bar—while the leaden hail went over his head, smashing into the woodwork, shattering the glassware.

Shouts filled the air. There was a rush of booted feet across the floor of the Oasis—a rush which seemed to Buck to start at the doorway, as if the shooting had attracted attention outside the saloon.

Then Buck heard a familiar voice—Billy West's voice. "Hi-ya, Buck, ol'-timer! We're with you!"

"Come on, mossyhorn!" That was Joe Scott's roar. "Git busy with your smokepole!"

Buck saw his two saddle mates horning into the fight on his side. He scrambled to his feet and stood beside them.

"Hoo-ray, Billy!" he shouted into the Circle J boss' ear. "These skunks gunnin' me are the ones that done the holdup—pardners of that dead varmint Kiyote Jones!"

Billy nodded and took a step toward the three gunmen, as they crouched against a table.

"Throw up your hands, drop your guns, and march toward the door!" he ordered, in a loud voice.

The three looked at one another, irresolute, uncertain. Then Alkali made a move. His gun came up, spitting lead. In the same instant, there was a roar from Billy's Colt, and Alkali's gun clattered to the floor, while the ex-cowboy let out a scream of agony and clutched the shattered forearm above his gun hand.

Rat, dismayed by Alkali's fate, dropped his six-gun and put up his hands. Smiler, trembling in every limb, followed his example.

Then the three turned and were gun herded toward the door of the saloon by Billy and Joe, while Buck acted as rear-guard to protect them from attack by any of the tough hombres in the Oasis, who might be friendly to their prisoners.

Safely out in the street, the Circle J waddies headed their prisoners toward the sheriff's office. There, they made Jim Hawks send for the men who had been traveling on the stagecoach, and these hombres promptly identified Rat, Smiler, and Alkali as the men who had been engaged in the holdup with the dead Kiyote Jones.

With the evidence piling up that way, Sheriff Jim Hawks was finally forced, under some pressure from Billy West, to admit that he might have been mistaken about Buck Foster's part in the holdup.

So the whole business ended, by the lawman offering Buck his hand and saying, "I'm willin' to admit that I was mistook this time, Foster! Will you shake?"

Buck stood with his thumbs stuck in the pockets of the calfskin vest Billy had given him.

"Where's my bearskin vest?" he demanded. "It was on that murderin' thief Kiyote Jones—"

"Sheriff Jim Hawks scratched his white head and spat into the cuspidor. "All the property of the deceased Kiyote Jones," he stated, in a pompous legal tone, "includin' his guns, hoss, saddle, hat, and one bearskin vest, has been sold to defray the expenses of a boothill funeral for the varmint, same bein' held tomorrow at eleven a. m. sharp!"

"Sold!" Buck Foster exclaimed. "Who bought my vest?"

"The property of the late Kiyote Jones," Sheriff Hawks informed him, "was sold to Cash-clo' Charley!"

## CHAPTER VI.

## BEARSKIN LOOT.

IN less than five minutes, Buck Foster was hammering at the door of Cash-clo' Charley's store, howling for the skinny proprietor to open up the place.

Charley came to the door, in nightshirt and slippers, his eyes blinking sleepily, his blotchy face twisted into an angry scowl. But Buck was taking no lip from Cash-clo' Charley this time.

"Hand over that thar bearskin vest of mine!" he shouted. "I know you got it! The sheriff told me!"

Buck heard the storekeeper muttering under his breath, as he led the way inside the building and lit the lamp. Then he began to paw over a bundle of clothing, and finally produced a dirt-stained and blood-smear'd bearskin vest.

"Is this yours?" he asked.

"You know damn well it's mine!" Buck shouted, snatching it out of his hands.

"Hold on!" Cash-clo' Charley protested. "That vest'll cost you five dollars, my friend, and a big bargain, at that! Five dollars!"

"Five dollars!" Buck exclaimed. "Why, you thievin' centipede! You didn't pay more'n a dollar for that vest!"

"It don't make no matter what I paid for it!" Cash-clo' screamed. "The price is five dollars—and a big bargain—a wonderful bargain! Dirt cheap!"

"I ain't givin' you no five dollars!" Buck said firmly.

Cash-clo' Charley's voice rose to a shrill, piercing yell. "Ike—Ike! Go get the sheriff—quick, Ike!"

The boy, Ike, appeared at the back of the store and moved toward the doorway.

Buck gave in. He didn't want

any more run-ins with the law. He'd had enough of Sheriff Jim Hawks for one day.

With reluctant fingers, he pulled out his battered wallet and counted out five single dollar bills.

Then he tucked his precious bearskin vest under his arm and strode out of Cash-clo' Charley's emporium.

All was well with the world—and Buck Foster!

That night, he sat on his bunk, working over the treasured garment with needle and thread and a pair of scissors borrowed from Sing Lo.

The lamp on the nearby table showed his battle-scarred features twisted into a pleased grin, as he worked, and his brown eyes were twinkling, while he hummed a rather sour version of a familiar range tune through the nostrils of his battered nose.

The door of the bunkhouse was suddenly opened, and the flat, yellow face of Sing Lo appeared.

"Hi-lo, Mistle Buck! You got vest back, hey? Velly good!"

"No," Buck growled. "I ain't so good. I had to pay five dollars to get it back from that thievin' polecat Cash-clo' Charley!"

Sing Lo's face crinkled into a smile, his slant eyes narrowing into tiny slits. "Five dolla'! Hi-lo! Aplil fool, Mistle Buck!"

Buck grunted. He didn't like the little Chinaman's kidding for two-bits. Fingers trembling with anger, he ripped away with the scissors at the stitching which Kiyote Jones had put into his vest.

Suddenly his eyes bulged under their bushy gray brows. A low exclamation broke from his lips. He thrust his hand into the newly ripped-open lining of the old vest and began pulling out the slim sheaves of paper which had been



hidden there—paper engraved with green and yellow designs at the government printing office; folding money!

Buck counted it. Two hundred dollars!

"It looks like Kiyote Jones used my vest as a hide-out for some of his loot," Buck said, waving the handful of currency in Sing Lo's

flat face. "And that thar vest and its contents now belongs to yours truly Buck Foster!"

There was a gleam of triumph in the old buckaroo's brown eyes, as he raised his thumb to his bashed nose and wiggled his fingers in the traditional gesture of derision.

"April fool yourself, chink!" he added.



## ¿QUIEN SABE?

*Who Knows?*

1. Do black snakes kill rattlesnakes?
2. What did Pat Garret do, why was he unpopular for doing it, but what famous Western author praised him for it?
3. Would you wear a hondo in a rainstorm, kill it before it bit you, build something with it, or bed down in it?
4. What famous Western explorer was nominated for the Presidency but never elected, and what party nominated him?
5. What famous scout accompanied him on his explorations, and what State did they explore long before it became a State?
6. What does this mean: A long-looper shooting a long-gun was riding a long horse?
7. Did Buffalo Bill give up scouting because he was hated by the Indians and feared their revenge?
8. What is a cavvy, a manada, a remuda?
9. If a shooting iron is a six-gun, what is a running iron?
10. Is the Grand Canyon in Wyoming, Arizona or Colorado?

*Answers on Page 106*

## A FAMOUS RIDE

A FEW months after the Pony Express was established, the Piute War broke out. Some of the stations were strong adobe buildings, and were little forts. Just when Pony Bob Haslam began his biggest ride from Virginia City, the signal fires of the warring Indians could be seen on every mountain peak. All available men and horses were taken into service to repel the dangerous, warring Piutes.

When Pony Bob reached Reed's Station, on the Carson River, there was not one horse there. They had all been taken by the settlers for use in an expected battle. After feeding his horse, Bob started out for the next station, fifteen miles farther down the river. This was to have been the end of his trip, as he had already covered seventy-five miles. But the rider, whose job it was to continue from here, refused to go. The superintendent, W. C. Marler, then appealed to Bob, saying he would give him fifty dollars if he would make the ride.

Bob consented readily, and after adjusting his rifle and his Colt, he started off again. He had to make thirty-five miles without a change, and arrived at the Sink of the Carson without incident. Then he pushed on to Sand Springs, where he got a fresh horse and rode on to Cold Springs, thirty-seven miles. Here he was lucky enough to get another horse, and after a ride of thirty miles, he arrived at Smith's Creek. He had ridden a hundred and eighty-five miles, stopping only

to change horses and to snatch a bite to eat. On reaching Smith's Creek, he was quite exhausted. He was given a good meal, and rested for nine hours.

Feeling quite fresh after his rest, he started back on the return express, but a severe shock awaited him on his arrival at Cold Springs, his first stop. He was horrified to find that the station had been attacked, and the keeper killed by the warring Indians. All the horses had been taken away, and his own mount was tired out, but Bob made up his mind to go on. As he set off again for Sand Springs, it was getting dark, and the howling of wolves and coyotes made cold chills run up his spine. He reached Sand Springs safely and told the keeper what had happened at the other station, advising him to go with him as the Indians might swoop down upon him. The keeper went with him, and so saved his life, for the station was burned down at early dawn next day.

When he ended his trip at Virginia City, Pony Bob told the superintendent of the tragedies on the trail. Marley immediately raised his offer of fifty dollars to one hundred. After a short rest, Bob took up his own route, crossing the Sierra Nevada to Friday's Station. He had ridden three hundred and eighty miles through desert plains without mishap, suffering the tortures of thirst and fatigue, and covering the whole trip barely four hours behind the scheduled time.

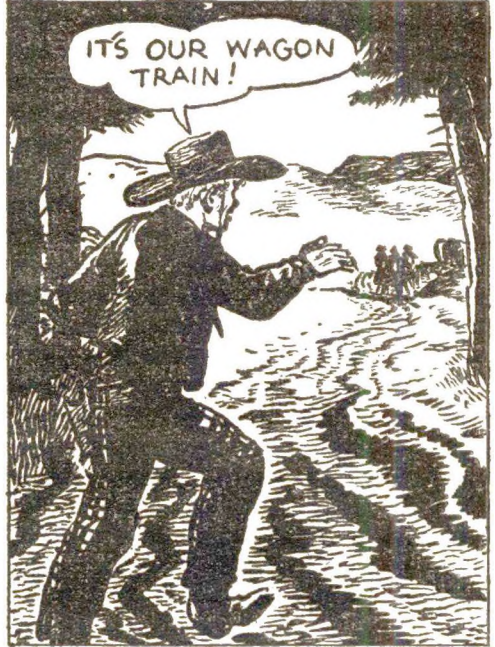
# OMAHA HOOKER ON THE OREGON TRAIL

WITH INDIANS ON HIS TRAIL, OMAHA PLUNGED ON THROUGH A THICK WOODS

THIS MUST BE THE OREGON TRAIL, I NEVER EXPECTED TO HIT IT AGAIN.



IT'S OUR WAGON TRAIN!



THAT'S THE WINANTS' WAGON, FIFTH BACK, THEY'LL BE GLAD TO SEE YOU.



BUT WHERE'S JOANNA AN' ABIGAIL?

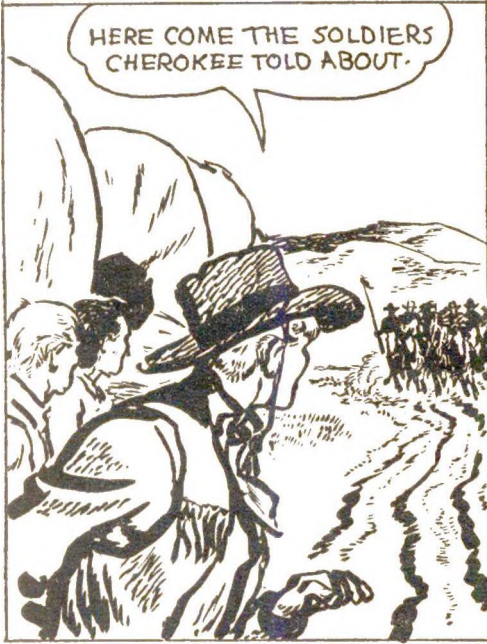
THEY NEVER CAME BACK, OMAHA.





# BY WARREN E. CARLTON

DRAWINGS BY BILL TIMMINS





WITH AN ARMY HORSE AND A SIX-GUN OMAHA LED THE TROOPERS BACK TO THE INDIANS' ENCAMPMENT.



I'LL SCOUT AROUND THE CAMP TO FIND THE GIRLS WHILE THE FIGHTIN' IS GOIN' ON -



NOT MUCH CHANCE TO FIND 'EM IN THESE EMPTY TEPEES, THE INDIANS HAVE ALL GONE TO FIGHT.



JOANNA! ABIGAIL!







# DUMMY OUTLAW

by NELSE ANDERSON

**Dummy Naylor couldn't talk—much. But he could act—especially when his clothes were gone!**

DUMMY NAYLOR hadn't been branded with that moniker because he stuttered. He just couldn't seem to trigger out enough words to stutter with. His impediment of speech was different.

Dummy could corral enough words in his mind. But when he started to drive them out, the words clogged up between his tonsils worse than yearlings trying to stampede through a loading chute.

At this time and minute, in the high Arizona Sierra, with a winter flood roaring through Mule Tail Creek, Dummy was thinking of enough words. Most of them were scorchers. If they had busted loose on the cold, rarefied air, they would have curled the ears of a pack rat.

Dummy was behind a cluster of aspen bush that was powdered with light snow. What he was thinking would have melted the icicles hanging around if his thoughts could have gone on the prod audibly. He was discovering that Deputy Sheriff Clayton and the three possemen with him were polecats.

The four skunks had their heads together. They did not know that Dummy had come up quietly, after seeing to their staked-out horses. So he was getting both barrels of a double-shotted scheme to do him out of his split on the reward, if and when they came up with Checkers Sabro, wanted outlaw.

They had been trailing the outlaw Checkers closely. Deputy Clay-

ton, Dummy and the other three. The fugitive's sign was becoming fresher. He had to be somewhere among the badland shelves of the Mule Tail Creek Canyon, for they had followed his plain trail through the only pass by which he could enter or leave the high mountain pocket.

Deputy Clayton was doing most of the palavering with the three possemen. It was almost unbelievable to the honest Dummy that they could be the brand of hombres who would want to run that kind of a ranny, but he had to accept what his big ears heard.

"We heard his hoss climbin' up the creek, goin' south, so we've got him holed in," said Deputy Clayton. "All we've got to do is trail up there an' lay low until it comes darker. He'll be makin' a break then. An', as I said, that two thousan' dinero on his head makes an even five hundred apiece between the four of us. We wouldn't want it split up into an odd five parts."

"So you're tellin' Dummy we ain't seen hide nor hair o' him, an' sendin' Dummy to keep an eye on that big log crossin' at the north end, huh?" grunted one of the possemen.

"Yup!" spat out Deputy Clayton. "An' when we dab our loop on Checkers, we'll light our shucks out through the pass, an' we can explain that Dummy went an' got





*He set the stuffed figure standing up.*

himself lost. That cuts 'im out o' any o' the reward dinero."

Dummy boiled inside and almost choked as the other possemen nodded agreement. If they had corralled the outlaw killer, Dummy had been counting on that clean four hundred of the cash reward to light out up Idaho way, where he hoped old Bill Murray's girl was still waiting for him.

He had it all figured out, too. He wouldn't have to explain to old Bill about the reward money. All

the objections old Bill had ever had to him as a son-in-law had been that he wasn't the saving sort with his riding wages. By this well-known affliction of having little if anything to say, he could just let it ride that he might have reformed his loose spending habits.

For a few seconds, Dummy was boiling to bust loose upon his four trail compadres and loop their neat little scheme up short. He would have liked to have curled their hair and ironed out their ears with what he was thinking. Maybe it was because he knew that he got a heap more dumb when he was angry that he scratched his head and changed his mind.

But there was a dangerous glint in Dummy's gray eyes as he pushed back his mop of sandy hair and started easing away unseen and unheard. He had made up his mind to appear to fall for Deputy Clayton's bait, and take it easy guarding the big log crossing while the deputy and the possemen bore the brunt of rounding up Sabro.

Then, Dummy had decided, there would be a different reckoning from what the others figured.

A few minutes later he joined the deputy and the others from a different direction. He accepted Deputy Clayton's order to keep an eye on the log crossing, to the north, without batting an eye.

"Yeh, sure," he agreed, which was one more word than he usually would have used.

Deputy Clayton and the three possemen started southward along the ragged shelves of the creek canyon. Dummy followed the shelves northward a short distance, to where he could see the big pine forming a bridge across the narrow gap over the roaring, flood-filled creek.

Dummy chuckled as he saw a small cougar hunter's deserted cabin of split shakes near the end of the log bridge. The shack was built close under a wall with a rock shelf above it that protected it some from winter storms. Dummy figured he would be able to build a fire and warm his chilled bones.

A light snow was sifting down. It wasn't sufficient to make tracking good. The cabin door was closed, but had only a string latch. Dummy opened the door with one mittened hand, shaking the snow off his slicker. It was nearly dark inside.

"Mosey right on in, an' stick up your paws!"

The growled words were backed up by the hard muzzle of a Winchester rammed against Dummy's breastbone. So Dummy pushed his mittens over his head and made no effort to reach for his short gun. He dropped the rifle he had been holding under one arm.

Dark as it was, Dummy could see the red-and-white checkered shirt that had given Checkers Sabro, the outlaw, his name. The outlaw's once-white Stetson was bright with silver conchas.

Dummy stood there, not saying anything, his eyes darting about. But Checkers' black eyes glittered behind his rifle, and his bristly black beard was split by a derisive grin.

"Thought all-a you lawmen would trail my hoss t'other way!" said Checkers. "But you're one smart hombre, huh! An' watchin' you comin' along, I figured I'd best be smarter!"

Dummy knew Deputy Clayton and the others could not have gone far by this time. A shot might bring them to his rescue. Probably though, he figured wisely, he wouldn't be worth saving if there was any shooting.

"What—" Dummy began.

"I'm tellin' you what, pronto!" snarled Checkers. "Seem' you in your slicker give me an idea! Maybe they'll find out I sent my hoss the t'other way to cross my sign! An' they'll be comin' back hell bent! So you come along, an' give me a new card to play!"

At that, the outlaw started unarming himself out of his loudly checkered shirt.

"Start peelin' off your duds, hombre!" he commanded Dummy. "An' don't waste no time chewin' words over it! I'm givin' your compadres somethin' to waste some lead on! Peel off, I said!"

Dummy's hands started down. Checkers made a quick movement and yanked Dummy's holstered .45 from its leather, without moving the threatening rifle from Dummy's stomach.

"But—" said Dummy, and that was all.

"An' you're puttin' on my pet shirt an' my sky piece!" growled Checkers. "Then you're lightin' out an' crossin' that pine log over the creek! When you're plumb exposed to the naked eyes o' them other lawmen, I'll do some shootin' that'll draw their attention! Maybe I'll give you start enough to make it up over the shelf wall on t'other side o' the creek, fore they pulverize you!"

Checkers managed to skin out of his checkered shirt without giving Dummy any chance other than to shuck his own shirt and chaps. Checkers unfastened his woolly red-dyed chaps. For a killer outlaw, he had made himself a target that could be spotted a mile, and Dummy judged that was on account of his conceit.

Dummy said nothing as he climbed into Checkers' chaps and loud shirt, and put on the outlaw's Stetson. He was so mad by this time he couldn't have uttered even a one-syllable word.

Checkers dumped Dummy's rifle and handed it to him unloaded. But he restored his .45 and left him with his belt of cartridges.

"You make it across that log, an' maybe you'll have to do some shootin' to keep your skin whole fore your compadres find out you ain't me," said Checkers. "Too bad for you the damn creek is makin' such a ruckus they couldn't hear you if you tried to tell 'em they're chasin' the wrong coyote. I'm keepin' my rifle on your back, but

I ain't aimin' to hit you. Now mosey along, hombre!"

Dummy found the big log slippery going. Mule Tail Creek was thundering a hundred feet below him. It made him dizzy, but he had nerve enough to glance up the canyon. He did not see Deputy Clayton or the other lawmen.

When he was halfway across the log, carrying his empty rifle, the Winchester of the outlaw cracked behind him. Dummy narrowly missed falling off the log as a bullet hit the bridge and whee-ee-ed into space. The outlaw fired two more shots.

Dummy was almost across, where the log rested by its upturned roots on a narrow shelf of rock when the guns of Deputy Clayton and the possemen started snapping. The creek's roar diminished the explosions, but Dummy saw lead chewing into the old pine tree.

"Damn!" he said, and no more, as he plunged forward and pulled himself into concealment.

He knew the lawmen had been taken in by the outlaw's trick. The thin snow made it impossible to see clearly, but they couldn't have missed that red-and-white checked shirt, the gleaming conchas on the brero and the red-dyed chaps.

And the lawmen would believe that Checkers was Dummy shooting at the outlaw, instead of the other way around. Smoke puffed out on the other side of the creek where the lawmen could see the narrow shelf where Dummy was crouching.

Dummy could see the cougar hunter's cabin, so he knew that Checkers Sabro was still keeping an eye upon him. When the chase moved on, if it did, no doubt Checkers would make a break for the lawmen's staked horses and get away through the single pass.



The possemen quit shooting for a spell. But Dummy had a glimpse of them moving among the rocks across the creek, and high up on the canyon wall. He thumbed his .45, spattering lead near them. At the minute it would have been all right with Dummy if he had nicked their hides a bit, after the ranny they had tried to run.

Lead from the rifles smashed into the roots of the old tree. Dummy looked around for a way out, and up. Then he realized how neatly he had been tricked by Checkers Sabro. This narrow shelf had no possible outlet.

No doubt but that Checkers had tried to escape over the log, and thus knew he was sending Dummy into a trap. This inspired Dummy to a whole flow of words, but only another, "Damn!" came out.

He could see the lawmen moving again, seeking a better range. Their lead came closer when they started shooting this time. Dummy was forced to flatten himself and crawl toward the back of the shelf.

In a crevasse of the wall, the canyon wind had packed a pile of dried grass and brush, and Dummy burrowed into this. He judged if he waited until darkness, not far away, he might escape being shot down long enough to make his identity known to the lawmen.

But in the meantime, Checkers Sabro would likely be on his way out through the pass. That sent Dummy's hope of any reward money glimmering. Lacking his slicker, the puncher was getting colder and madder every minute. He burrowed deeper into the dried grass, and it was then the great idea came to him.

Dummy acted as if he had gone completely loco, or as if the checkered shirt and his own pants had

been infested with vermin. He started shucking all of his clothes, right down to his red flannel underwear.

"Whee-ee-ee!" sang the bullets against the wall close to him.

Dummy reloaded his .45 and snapped shots in the direction of the lawmen. He had the quiet wish that maybe a chance bullet might break Deputy Clayton's arm. He didn't want to go so far as to wish the deputy anything worse.

The next thing, Dummy acted more loco than ever. He pushed a pronged branch into his Levis and stuffed grass in the legs around it. He fastened the checkered shirt to the pants, with the chaps over the pants, and packed both full of the dried grass.

More broken branches were required to hold the stuffed clothes upright. It was quite a job attaching the conchaed 'brero to the scarecrow he had made, but he finally did it.

Dummy surveyed the results and a grin crossed his broad mouth, then his face became grim. It was so dark now, he could just make out the hunter's cabin and the occasional shoulder or Stetson of one of the lawmen across the roaring creek.

Dummy then established almost a record in language, for him. "Me, Dummy, huh? I'll show them polecats a dummy!"

The rifle fire from across the canyon had fizzled out. But Dummy reloaded and slapped more .45 bullets around the lawmen. As he did, he pushed the 'brero and the shirt of his crudely fashioned dummy up over the top of the pine roots.

Bullets whined and spatting viciously into the wall behind him. He sent the dummy, with its checkered shirt and its red-dyed chaps,

suddenly into full view, and let it topple forward. It went tumbling end over end, nearly a hundred feet, into the foaming thunder of Mule Tail Creek.

The lawmen's shooting ceased instantly. Dummy saw Deputy Clayton and the others spring from their hiding places. They were peering downward. Dummy crawled into the pine roots where he could see the creek.

The checkered shirt and chaps, having all the appearance of a dead man, had whirled into an eddy of the creek on the other side, lodging among the rocks. The conchaed brero was dancing away on the water.

Dummy knew that Checkers Sabro must have seen the shooting and the final plunge of the "body" into the creek. Looking across, he saw Deputy Clayton and the others climbing. Due to the slippery smoothness of the rock near the water, Dummy could see they would have to make their way to a break in the canyon, then follow the creek to reach the shirt and chaps, and the stuffed pants.

It was easy to judge that the lawmen would be close to an hour getting to their quarry. While they could claim the two thousand reward, alive or dead, for Checkers Sabro, they had to produce the body.

And, thought Dummy, it will be another hour before they can get back to their horses after they discover they have been fooled by the stuffed shirt and pants.

Dummy was shivering. He was becoming aware now that even red flannel underwear, without other duds, is insufficient against a winter wind in the high Sierra of Arizona. But his boots, his red flannels and his .45 were his only attire.

For the next five minutes or so,  
WW—6F

Dummy was holding his breath, fearful that Checkers Sabro's rifle might crack at any second. He had to chance it that the outlaw had seen the "death plunge" of his lately prized shirt and chaps, and would lose interest in the log bridge. He crept out onto the slippery pine.

Dummy was crawling, flattened on his belly. Perhaps it was lucky that his red flannels merged with the increasing dusk, as the snow whirled down more thickly. He could neither see nor hear the other lawmen now.

He was nearly across the log, when he met with what amounted to disaster. His buckled cartridge belt loosened and slipped off. He made a wild grab for it, and nearly provided a real body for his fellow lawmen to find below. He clawed his way back onto the slippery log, but his .45 was gone and, besides being only in his red flannels, he was unarmed.

At that moment he became aware that the outlaw was still in the cabin only a short distance away. Checkers had taken a chance on lighting a quiry. As the match flared and died out, Dummy came off the end of the log. Empty-handed, he was unprepared to meet the killer and his guns.

It was then that Dummy's glance took in the shelf only a few yards above the thin shake roof of the cabin. Keeping close to the wall, he found a way up the rocks.

Dummy crouched on the shelf, looking down at the shake roof. He judged that Checkers was only awaiting a little more darkness before making a break to find the lawmen's horses and go out through the pass.

Because of the creek's roaring, he could not hear Checkers moving, so he had to take his chance wild.

By this time his body was numbed by cold. He was thankful he had been able to retain his boots, and not sacrifice them with the dummy that had gone into the creek.

Taking a long breath, Dummy jumped.

Checkers was fastening the slicker around him, making ready to ease from the cabin. Something like an earthquake or an avalanche smashed through the shake shingles. Checkers was paralyzed for a second or two as an apparition in red flannel underwear thumped to the floor.

The outlaw then attempted to bring his rifle into play. Six lanky feet of mad cowpuncher smashed into him. Bony knuckles drove bristles of his beard back into his skin. The outlaw's head popped back until his spine seemed to crack.

It was the shortest, sweetest ruckus in which Dummy Naylor had ever engaged. Checkers was tough and bulky, and he got in two or three wild punches before he groaned and lay still.

In less than five minutes, Dummy had the outlaw shucked out of his own warm clothes, including the slicker.

"Damn you!" seethed in his brain. "You'll be cooled off all over before we hit town!"

Somewhere down in the creek canyon, Deputy Clayton and his polecat, reward-grabbing compadres must by this time have reached the checkered shirt and the Levis stuffed with dry grass. Dummy wore a hard grin.

Checkers, revived and, cursing between his clenched teeth, shagged ahead of Dummy with his own Winchester prodding his spine. He was discovering the feel of an Arizona snowstorm in the high Sierra,

with only his own red flannel underwear to protect his hide.

Dummy ordered him to fork one of the stake-out horses. Then the cowpuncher debated gravely with himself for a moment. In a short time Deputy Clayton and three mad possemen would be looking for their horses.

When the stake ropes of the remaining three horses were loosened, Dummy slapped the beasts over the rumps. The possemen would be some time rounding up their stampeded saddle stock. Then two would be compelled to ride double on a single horse.

Rifle still steadily upon the shivering Checkers, Dummy said, "Ge'up!"

A numbed and thoroughly subdued Checkers Sabro fell out of the saddle in front of the jail at the town of Back Trail, twenty miles from where he had been put upon a horse in the mountain pocket. Sheriff Rayburn squinted at Dummy Naylor.

"You mean to say you stripped the notorious Checkers an' brung him in on your lonesome?" questioned Rayburn. "An' where's his famous checkered shirt an' his red chaps? An' where's Clayton an' the others?"

Dummy's bony face looked wooden. He was thinking of how long it would take to collect two thousand in dinero and light out for Idaho, and old Billy Murray's spread. So far as Sheriff Rayburn and Arizona was concerned, Dummy then achieved an all-time record for loose and freely flowing speech.

"Checkers went for swim in creek," he said, never batting an eye. "Lost duds. Others followed wrong sign. Got themselves lost, I reckon."



## THE BAR U TWINS MEET SORREL HERRICK

by CHARLES E. BARNES

*And Herrick meets two hom-  
bres who share a single face!*

NO ONE saw the redhead till he had every man in the saloon under his guns. The grim-looking visitor was in a crouch close to the bat-wing doors, which were still swaying slightly from his quiet entrance.

"Reach!" he said.

There was no thunder in the tone. There was more of a suggestion of lightning—a threat of death.

Thirsty Ed Cox found something of even greater interest than the

filled glass before him. Keno Valentine, Scar Gulch's greediest tinhorn, laid down a pat hand that he had dealt himself. They reached. So did the fat, slant-eyed proprietor, who stopped dead in his waddling walk toward the till. So did every other man in the place.

The newcomer's gray eyes burned fiercely. His mouth made a straight line beneath the eagle nose.

"Get out from the sober side o'

that bar!" he ordered the aproned drink server. "And that goes for you, too, Chink Totten," he added, waving a .45 at the saloonkeeper. "Drag your big belly over here and line up with the others. And Dude Weller—come over here!"

A weak-faced young hombre in store clothes walked over quakingly. He stared in horror, as a helpless squirrel within striking distance of a rattler might stare. "Y-yes, Sorrel," he stammered.

"Don't 'Sorrel' *me*, you skunk!" came the ripped-out retort. "It's Mr. Herrick—to you! Now, shut and bolt these outside doors and throw the hasp."

The shaking Dude Weller shut, bolted and hasped the outside doors, and the redhead called Sorrel Herrick smiled grimly. "Won't have any interruptions now. Turn your backs—everybody—and keep them paws up!"

He went through the dude's clothes, found no gun, and booted him back in line with the others. Then he strode toward the next figure, a rancher, took his .45 and prodded him for a hide-out gun. He continued along the line. Each time he tossed the loaded gun, if he found one, back of the bar and herded the disarmed man on ahead of him.

Finally he came to a blue-eyed, solemn-faced young cowboy who had been eating at the chuck counter in the rear of the barroom. He edged cautiously to the right of the puncher and stared at him.

"Huh! Newcomer to these parts," Herrick grunted as he prodded the tall puncher's duds and found no weapons. "Heard there was a new deputy comin' to town. Are you him?"

"Nope."

Herrick continued to stare suspi-

ciously. "Then who are you, and where you from?"

"My name's Tom Carter," was the calm reply. "I'm from the Bar U spread, down on Eagle River, Wyoming."

Herrick's hard glance swung to the low, empty holsters tied down on the puncher's leather-chapped thighs. "How come y' ain't packin' any artillery?"

The beardless stranger smiled slightly. "Well, if it seems important to you, I had to swim a river shovin' some dogies down here to Colorado, and I just put the hardware into the gunsmith's down the street to get oiled while I grabbed me some chuck and—"

His speech stopped—fast; and his right fist moved—faster. It swooped down in a short arc to catch Sorrel Herrick on the left cheekbone. A couple of inches lower would have meant a clean knockout. That punch was hard, and Herrick staggered back and almost lost his footing.

Tom Carter tore in after him, and some of the other cattlemen rushed in to help. But Herrick leaped over the bar, whirled to face them. The eyes trained over the gun sights were agate-hard. "Get 'em back up! *Up!*"

Everybody's hands went back up.

Chink Totten, the saloonkeeper, seemed eager to get this tough hombre out of his place at any price. "I'm advisin' everyone here not to make no more tricky moves," he said. "Sorrel, you can take the dinero from the till an'—"

"Shut that trap o' yours, Chink!" Herrick cut in. "Who wants your dirty dinero? I came here for somethin' even dirtier than that. Dude Weller, step over here again."

The pale-eyed man in store clothes shambled toward the door. There



was absolute horror in his weak face now.

"Open them doors!" Herrick snarled at him.

With trembling hands, Dude Weller unshaped and unbolted the doors and opened them. It was about noon, a dull hour in this section, which was on the outskirts of the little cow town near the cattle pens.

"Now, back out after me," Herrick snapped at Dude Weller. "One wrong move and—well, figure it out."

His .45s covered the men in the barroom, and also Dude Weller, who backed out after him across the yellow-pine sidewalk. A second later there was a clatter of hoofs up the road.

"Get 'im!" Chink Totten shrieked.

He ran back of the bar for a gun. Others stampeded at his heels, snatched up loaded .45s, scrambled to the doorway and crouched in its shelter.

The gun chorus was thunderous. The din increased as more men got their .45s in action. But Herrick and his prisoner were already out of good range. They kept going.

Armed men were running down the street. Some had leaped to the backs of their cayuses at the hitch rail. A small posse was being formed. There was a great deal of yelling. For the most part, the ones who had been the meekest while Herrick was in the saloon were the noisiest now.

Tom Carter, the only one in the crowd who had taken a real chance, was quiet and calm. He flashed a curious glance at Chink Totten. Totten was running around in circles like a ringy steer. "Get 'im!" he kept bellowing. "We just can't let that killer escape!"

Why, Carter was thinking, was Totten so eager to get a man who

had taken no money from the saloon till and had actually shot at no one in the place? And Herrick, in spite of his hard face, hadn't looked like a killer to the beardless young cowpoke from the Eagle River country. Might be more back of all this than showed on the surface.

Carter strode toward the doorway. A swamper who had been jittery with fear a couple of minutes before had grabbed a loaded Henry back of the bar and almost upset Tom as he bumped into him getting through the doorway to send a rifle slug up the road.

The fat saloonkeeper looked up at Tom Carter. "Seems like *you're* takin' things mighty easy, stranger," he said. "Why ain't you j'inin' the posse? We need every hombre in town to get that killer 'cause the new deputy ain't reached town yet."

The Eagle River cowboy stared down at Chink Totten's puffy face. "Killer, huh? I notice he didn't drill *me* when he had a right good chance to do it."

Chink Totten seemed uncomfortable under the calm, unsmiling gaze. "Why, you'd know all about that if you wasn't a stranger in these here parts." His voice got higher, partly in rage and partly to be heard above the swell of gunfire in the street. "He kilt Deputy Buckley in cold blood last week. Every honest man in town's j'inin' that posse."

"You joinin' it?" Tom Carter asked, almost too gently.

"If you're meanin' to infer," was the angry retort, "that I ain't—"

A rifle slug—Herrick's answer to the shots of the milling mob—smashed into the saloon window. Glass showered over the sidewalk. Chink Totten pressed closer to the shelter of the doorway.

Tom Carter grinned at the fearfulness of the fat saloonkeeper, then

turned and walked slowly up the street.

Chink Totten's slant-eyed glance followed him. Did this stranger know something? If he did, his mouth would have to be closed. And the best way—Chink Totten's way—of closing a dangerous mouth was with a dose of hot lead—from the back.

That was the way Chink Totten and Dude Weller had killed Deputy Buckley—and framed the crime on Sorrel Herrick!

## II.

Big-bellied Chink Totten was a burden even for the powerful bay that was carrying him along. And he seemed weighted down with fear as well as with tallow. What a fool he had been to go into that Buckley dry-gulching with a slope-jawed no account like Dude Weller!

Yet Weller's plan had seemed absolutely air-tight, and there was a big profit for both of them. Weller had brains, there wasn't any doubt of that. His plan had tossed the murder of Deputy Buckley right into Sorrel Herrick's lap. And after Sorrel Herrick was strung up, Herrick's spread could be bought in for almost nothing.

All of it hadn't worked out, though. Learning that the law was looking for him, Herrick had high-tailed it and holed up in the hills. And now this business of Herrick sneaking into town and yanking Dude right out of the Scar Gulch Saloon in broad daylight! Sweat seeped out of the hefty saloonkeeper as he rode along. If Dude, who'd never had much sand in his craw anyhow, squawked when Herrick got him out in the hills, things wouldn't be so good for Chink Totten.

Far beyond the edge of the town of Scar Gulch, Chink turned in his saddle and looked back. Some late starters among the possemen were dots in the distance. There was no one to see him. Chink rowelled the big bay into a high lope and reined off the road and through a little pass flanked by boulders. He hauled up close to the rim of a rocky gorge.

"Hiya, gents," he said.

There were six of them. They had been waiting for Chink to arrive. It wasn't the first time they had taken on a shady job that was backed with Chink's dinero. They were—all but one of them, and he was the leader and the most deadly—the toughest-looking desperadoes an hombre could pass in a day's lope.

Keno Valentine, the gambler who had laid down a pat hand when Sorrel Herrick had the saloon under his guns, was the exception. He had mild-looking blue eyes, the kind of eyes a man might think an angel had if he didn't know much about angels. His red-gold hair and mustache were inclined to curl. He looked quite harmless. He was about as harmless as a nest of rattlers, or forked lightning, or crimped dynamite.

"Keno," Chink Totten said, "if we don't get Sorrel Herrick, I'm—"

"Ain't got time for any guff," the gambler clipped. "We got to scrape gravel pronto. We'll drill Herrick, all right, and—a heap more important—Dude Weller, too." Murder was just an incident to Keno Valentine. "But remember, Chink—it'll be a thousand simoleons right on the barrel head when the job's in. That clear?"

"Sure thing," Chink agreed. It was a heap of dinero, but paying it was cheaper than dangling from the end of a rope. "I'm promisin'—"

"Let's go," Keno snapped.

Keno yelled for his men. A minute later all were riding hell for leather. The good-looking gambler had a hunch, and usually his hunches were right. This was rocky country, and he couldn't cut sign on recent riders, but he believed Herrick would find some shortcut to the Big Scar Gulch country. Over that narrow footbridge, for instance.

The Big Scar Gulch country was all mountain walls and cliffs, gorges and canyons. Trackless trails of solid rock led to numberless hide-outs. Risky business, crossing that footbridge on horseback, but Keno, with an icy nerve himself, gave Sorrel credit for a gizzard full of sand.

Half an hour passed. The mounts of the hard-riding killers were frothed with sweat. The trail climbed sharply. The riders drove in steel, rounded a bend. They emerged on a natural terrace of rock with a giant boulder in the middle called Hub Rock. Several trails angled out from this point, giving the impression of the spokes of a wagon wheel.

The gunnies yelled excitedly, for on a far ridge, leading toward the gorge spanned by the spindly little footbridge that looked like a spider web, a pair of horsemen could be made out. Keno Valentine reached into his kit for a pair of field glasses, clapped them to his eyes. "That's the pair of 'em—an' in good rifle range," he announced. "Here, Ed—live up to your reputation. This job's as good as cleaned up right now."

He reached for the Sharps slung stock forward and lock down in his saddle scabbard, handed it to Thirsty Ed Cox. Thirsty Ed, so folks claimed, could shoot the eye out of a needle when he was sober.

Ed took the rifle, dismounted—and then the clatter of hoofs to the

rear caused all the other desperadoes to slip from their saddles. A lean-faced, turkey-necked man galloped around the bend on a sweaty steeldust. On the newcomer's shirt, a deputy's badge was pinned.

The steeldust's shoes struck sparks against the rocky trail bed as he was hauled to a sliding stop. The turkey-necked man leaped from the saddle. The walnut butt of a .45 protruded from his holster, worn on the right side. "Howdy, folks," he greeted. "Part o' the posse, I reckon?"

Keno's poker face hid his annoyance. In fact, he smiled at the newcomer. "Bettin' you're the new deputy, replacin' Deputy Buckley, that Herrick killed. Heard you was about due in this neck o' the woods."

"Yep, I'm Lefty Bates, from the county seat," was the answer. "Pulled into town after most o' the posse left. I heard what happened. Figured Herrick 'u'd be makin' for the Big Scar Gulch country. We'll get him. I was raised in that country and know all the hide-outs."

"But we can get him right now, deputy," Keno said affably. "Them two riders over on that rim are Herrick and the hombre he took out o' the saloon, an'—he took the rifle from Thirsty Ed—"I'll show you how easy it is to—"

"Nope!" Bates cut in. "Too risky at this range and with this windage; you might hit the other feller. And I want Herrick alive if it can be done." He grabbed the barrel of the rifle.

"You're the doctor," Keno said. His eyes, still mild and smiling, swiveled for an instant toward Mex Gomez, one of his gunnies who had circled around to the rear of Bates. Keno could see Mex reaching for his .45. But Lefty Bates was suspicious—and smart. He whirled and ducked

just as Mex's .45 snarled. The bullet missed. The deputy's skinny left hand snatched his six-gun in a blurry cross-fire draw. The gun spurted flame. Mex fell, shot through the heart. The deputy whirled back, to get a quick shot in the shoulder from Keno's gun. He winced with the pain, and the lead he blasted at Keno went wild, but it got another gunnie in the chest. The gunnie dropped his .45 and flopped to the ground.

Lefty Bates was still cool, but he was doomed, and he knew it. He was still blazing away when bullets from the guns of Keno and his remaining men got him in the chest and the back. He hit the ground hard—dead. Keno put an extra pair of slugs into him for good measure.

The cool-eyed gambler pointed to one of the roads angling out from the rocky terrace. "Hide the carcasses up that trail to the old Gulch Mine." He picked up the Sharps rifle, turned to look up toward the rim. Then, for the first time, his composure left him. He swore volubly. The two horsemen had disappeared behind the cliff!

Yet as soon as the bodies were hidden he had regained his usual calm. "We can still get to the bridge in time," he said. "Come on. Make it fast. This needs all we got." His killer trade had trained him in the belief that a man's never the loser till the last card is dealt and played.

The remaining killers leaped into saddles, raked steel, rocketed along.

### III.

Jerry Carter forked his roan cayuse down through the hills to get on the trail that led back to the cow town of Scar Gulch. He was the image of the puncher who had been caught without artillery in Chink

Totten's place but who had nevertheless put up a battle. In fact, the resemblance was so great that no one could tell the pair apart.

Even their own father, Sam Carter, owner of the big Bar U cattle outfit on Eagle River, could only tell which was which when Tom smiled now and then. For Jerry never smiled. The pair were known through the Eagle River country as the Bar U twins, hombres with a positive genius for bumping into trouble.

The twins even dressed alike. Jerry's outfit was exactly the same as Tom's, from the pearl-gray Stetson to the tooled cowman's boots, except that right now a brace of ivory-butted .45s showed in his holsters.

Jerry's gaze swept over the wild mountain country. To the left he could see the great gash in the earth that was called Big Scar Gulch. And suddenly, from the same direction, he heard the crack of guns. Then he got an idea of what it was all about.

Two riders had just crossed the narrow footbridge that spanned the gulch. Jerry could see that the rider in front was tied to his saddle. The sun glinted from a badge pinned to the second horseman's shirt.

Across the gorge, rifles flamed behind boulders. There was only one thing to think—that the deputy, or sheriff, or whatever he was, had a prisoner that he was aiming to get away from a ringy mob.

Jerry gave the roan its head and galloped down the hill at right angles to the bridge. A rifle slug from across the gorge whined past his ear. It was hard to believe, but it was so—those riflemen across the gorge was blazing away at *him*, as well as at the lawman and his prisoner!

He reached for the rifle in his saddle scabbard, then slid to the ground and hazed the roan back of a tall boulder. He crouched and shouldered the gun, squeezed trigger.

"Well, this set-up beats anything I ever seen!"

Jerry looked up. The man with the badge and his prisoner had hauled up in the shelter of the big boulder and were staring at Jerry with their eyes bugging out. "What's that, stranger?" Jerry asked.

"Stranger—hell!" the one with the deputy's star said. "You know me, all right. Take a better look at this map o' mine that you hung a fist on in the Scar Gulch Saloon. But I can't see how you got your guns an' beat me out to the hills, Carter. An' fightin' on my side, too!"

Suddenly Jerry thought of Tom, who had stayed in town while he loped out to the Mountaintop Ranch to collect for the beeves he and Tom had driven down from the Eagle River country. "You must met my brother in town," he said. "We're twins. He's Tom an' I'm Jerry."

"Yeah?" was the incredulous retort. "No two hombres could look so much alike!" He appeared to think a minute. "But that feller in the saloon *did* say his name was Tom Carter, at that!"

"What you takin' the prisoner in for?" Jerry asked.

"Murder," was the grim retort. "He kilt—"

A rifle slug whined close. The weak-faced prisoner went greasy gray with fright. The redhead with the deputy's badge looked back over the gorge. "Ride along with us a piece," he said. "We'll get out o' the range o' them skunks. I got 'em plumb hog-tied. They ain't got the sand to cross that footbridge on horses, an' they ain't keen on leavin'

their cayuses there to come an' get me."

Jerry Carter topped his roan and rode up the trail with the strange pair. "Get *you*?" he said, suddenly. He stared at the redhead. "Say! I'm gettin' an idea you ain't a deputy any more'n I am!"

"That's right, I ain't," was the surprising retort. "Pinned on this fake badge so strangers I passed out here with this hog-tied skunk wouldn't think things looked funny. My name's Sorrel Herrick, an' them fellers over there figure I'm a killer. But I been jobbed."

Again Jerry Carter stared at the redhead. That's what many a killer claimed. Yet this man looked honest. "How you mean—jobbed?"

Herrick jerked his head grimly at the prisoner. "Tell him, Weller."

Stammeringly, shivering every time a slug from across the gorge came close, and under the baleful glare in Herrick's eyes, Dude Weller told how he and Chink Totten had dry-gulched Deputy Buckley and shouldered the blame on Sorrel Herrick.

"Me an' Chink wanted Sorrel's spread," he said. "But first we had to get Sorrel out o' the way. Sorrel'd been tradin' at my store in Scar Gulch. He'd been tellin' me about a big lobo that was killin' calves out on his spread. He'd promised me that when he killed the lobo he'd give me the hide to hang up in my store. Then one day Sorrel wrote me a note sayin' he'd killed the lobo at last. An' that's when Chink Totten got me in trouble. It was all Chink's fault."

"Go on with the story, skunk," Sorrel Herrick clipped.

"Well, we'd knowed Sorrel'd had words with Deputy Buckley. So Chink tears off the line 'I kilt him at last' from the note, then he dry-



gulched Buckley an' toted the body to Sorrel's land an' pinned that line in Sorrel's own handwritin' on the body. He figured that folks 'u'd give a quick necktie party for Sorrel, an' we could bid in his land cheap."

Sorrel Herrick broke in with: "See how they had an open-an'-shut case on me? But when the body was found an' the mob rode out to get me, I hightailed it up here to the owlhoot country. But I figured Weller must been back o' the murder, so watched my chance an' snuk into town an' took this skunk from the Scar Gulch Saloon. I'm still in a spot, though. Before I could get to Judge Spencer in town an' tell the true facts, I'd be tore apart."

"Listen here, pard," Jerry Carter said. "Where you holin' up?"

Herrick answered, without hesitation: "I'll take a chance on you an' come clean. I got a nice little hide-out—the Mountaintop Ranch. Owner of that outfit's a friend of mine."

"Friend of mine, too," Jerry told him. "Take your prisoner an' ske-daddle up there right now. I'll get to Judge Spencer, an'—"

The sudden silence caused him to look back over his shoulder. Across the gorge he could see the tails of horses disappearing around a bend in the boulder-flanked trail.

"Don't worry about them fellers," Herrick said. "Takes an hour to circle round the long way an' get over here."

His lined face sobered. "But now you'll run into them if you take the regular trail back to town. An' they seen yuh with me, an'—"

"Shucks! I can ride across the footbridge," Jerry said.

"Dangerous," Herrick warned him. "An' be careful of meetin' Chick Totten. This here dude didn't squawk about Totten's part in the

murder till I got him out here in the hills. Hundred to one, Totten's ridin' with that posse—an' his gunnies, too. He'll aim to—"

But the tall cowboy from the Eagle River country had whirled his horse and was pelting back down the trail to the bridge.

He was almost across the narrow, spindly little span before he realized that all the possemen had not left their shelter among the boulders to circle around to the Big Scar country. Two of them had raised up from behind the big rocks. Their rifles boomed. A slug snicked into the rotten planking in front of Jerry's roan. The roan reared. The little footbridge groaned and swayed.

Jerry yanked out his ivory-butted .45s. He was within six-gun range now. He squeezed triggers. One of the riflemen—the one close to the rim of the gorge—threw up his hands, dropped his rifle, clawed the air wildly, then toppled over the rim. The sight caused the second rifleman to race for better shelter, and Jerry's next shot dropped him.

Th Eagle River cowboy forced his teetering roan across the rest of the bridge. He was in the clear now—he thought. He knew better when he saw other horsemen exploding into sight around the boulder-flanked bend—three of them, and for all Jerry knew, there might be more.

Jerry gave his roan its head and burned the wind toward town.

#### IV.

Chink Totten, Keno Valentine and Thirsty Ed Cox, who had heard the gun battle and started back, saw Jerry hightailing it toward town along the curving, boulder-flanked trail. Keno reached for the Sharps, but couldn't snap a shot before Jerry disappeared around a bend.

Chink Totten's heavy face was purple with rage. He hadn't liked the attitude of the strange puncher in town to begin with. Then, when Keno's field glasses had picked out Jerry across the gorge, taking Herrick's side in the fight, Chink knew more than ever that he was an hombre to get. "He's even more important to get than Herrick or Dude!" he yelled.

Keno Valentine, riding his horse as if it had been stolen, grinned. "Don't get excited," he said. He was confident—and with good reason.

Like all gamblers, he was figuring percentage. He knew that the cowboy, a stranger in this country, was making for town and would have to pass Hub Rock. The stranger would find five trails leading south from there. From this high spot he could see the town far below, and would figure that any of the five trails would get him to town.

Keno knew, though, that only one of those trails led to town. The other four, used by pack mules of the now-abandoned Gulch Mine, led to the rim of the canyon on which the disused mine buildings were located. By the time the puncher found out his mistake and doubled back, he'd be within range. It was a five-to-one shot against the stranger—odds considered satisfactory even by Keno Valentine.

The tinhorn's grin widened when he galloped his mount up to Hub Rock and peered along the one road that led toward town. The road was free of riders. The puncher, then, had missed the right trail—and was trapped!

"Got him!" Keno gloated. "Chink, take that left trail. I'll look up these next two blind trails an' Ed can take the one to the right."

Chink Totten reined his big bay up the winding trail to the left. But

Chink wasn't any too game. If the tall cowboy was up that trail, he might hear the big bay's hoof clicks and get the drop on Chink. So the fat saloonkeeper slid from the saddle and crept along, gun in hand. He was beginning to hope that the puncher wasn't up this trail, and that Keno or Thirsty Ed would have to tangle with him. But when he came to the final bend, his heart sledged furiously. The cowboy was standing close to the rim of the canyon, evidently trying to see if there wasn't some back trail that would get him into town. His back was toward Chink—who was a fierce, curly wolf in a spot like this.

"Up with them paws!" he yelled. "I got you covered."

Jerry Carter turned. He put up his hands. He seemed resigned to his fate. "Seems like you got me, all right," he admitted, "but I can't let—"

He dived straight at Chink, whose gun snarled. The slug just grazed the crown of Jerry's Stetson. Then Jerry came up fast, hit the saloonkeeper's big belly with the force of a charging stallion, doubled him up. A hard left started Chink toward the ground. A harder right finished the job. Chink lay face down, helpless, as the cowboy raced for his roan, topped it, and rode out toward Hub Rock—only to run smack into Keno Valentine and Thirsty Ed Cox, each of whom had a cold drop on him.

"It ain't no use, stranger," Keno said. "Go for them guns and I'll shoot your hoss from under you."

As he had figured, this was the kind of softy that wouldn't take a chance on getting his horse shot. The cowboy's hands went up.

"Now, stranger," Keno gloated, "your name's just plain mud." His glance never wavered as Chink Tot-

ten, his fat face dripping crimson, staggered out from the left-side trail to let out a whoop of triumph.

"I'll just take your guns," Keno said, "and—"

"Take these—front ends forward—or else sky your paws!"

The steel-edged voice came from back of Keno.

The gambler and Thirsty Ed Cox whirled to see a puncher step out from behind Hub Rock. Thirsty Ed Cox shook all over as, with Keno and Totten, he elevated.

For the figure beside Hub Rock was the exact double of the cowboy they had just taken prisoner. He was tall, blue-eyed, solemn-faced. His features were identical. So were his clothes. And the two guns aimed at the killers had ivory butts, just like the guns of the mounted puncher.

Chink and Thirsty Ed almost collapsed. But the level-headed Keno had it figured out now. "Twins!" he yelled. "But we're three to two, an' we—"

Guns belched. Slugs whanged through the air, spatted against boulders. Tom Carter was swaying like a stalking panther, dodging bullets as his .45s roared thunder and flashed lightning. Jerry Carter had

slid from his horse and tumbled Totten with a slug from the hip.

One of Keno's bullets ticked Tom's shoulder, but Tom stood steady as the boulder he flanked and drilled Keno through the gun arm. Keno dropped his .45. He was helpless. Thirsty Ed Cox chucked his gun to the ground. He had been mighty shaky, anyhow, with the red-eye wearing off, and the shock of seeing double, as he thought.

"I'm through!" he yelled. "If you give me a chance, I'll tell plenty—"


The twins stared at each other, Tom grinning slightly, Jerry just as sober-faced as ever. "How you know I was here, Tom?" Jerry asked.

"I trailed after that posse," Tom explained. "Cut sign across that gorge, so I come thisaway by that footbridge and ran into a gunnie you plugged. He said you'd come this way. Then I heard a shot—an' rode right fast."

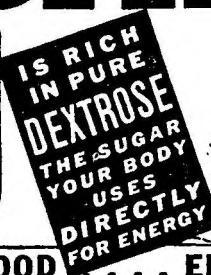
"An' not any *too* fast," Jerry said. He strode over and picked up the guns of the killers. "Let's take these rattlers to Judge Spencer, in town. Then, after he slaps 'em in the hoose-gow, the judge'll lope back with us to where Sorrel Herrick's holed up. Reckon Herrick'd admire to meet this here sweet-smellin' Chink Totten again, too."

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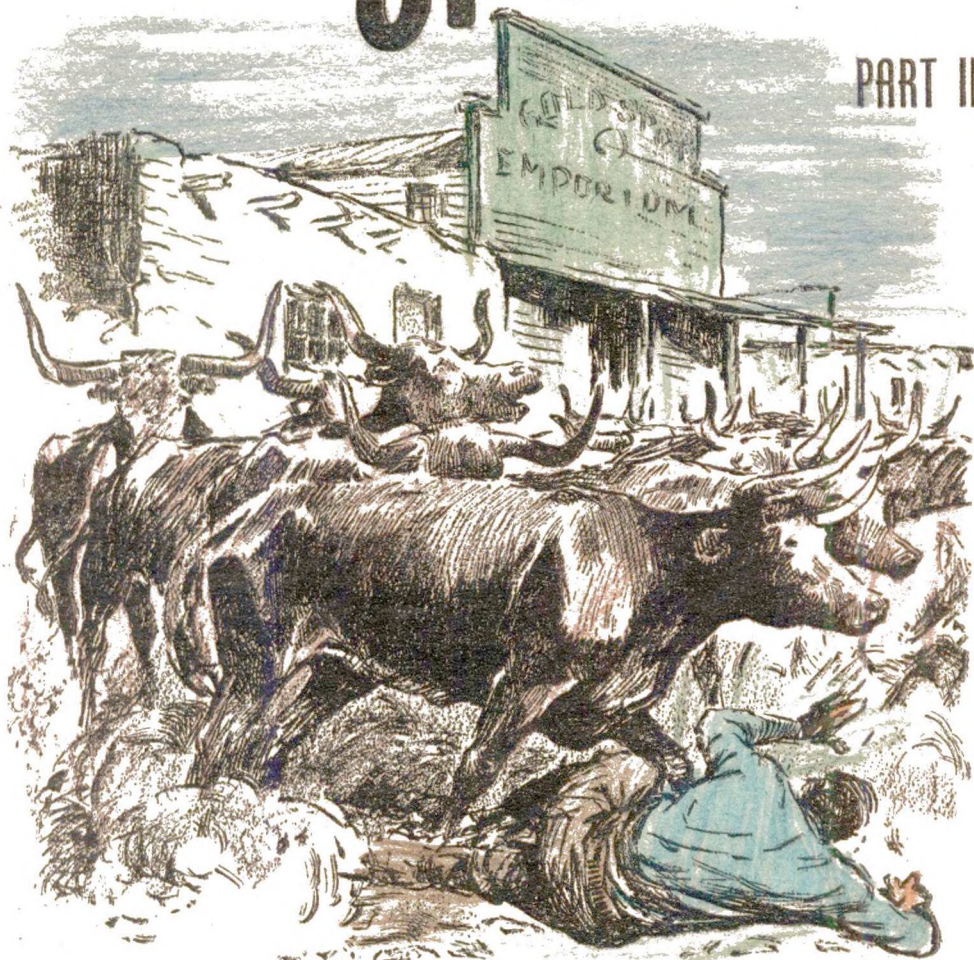


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# STEPSON OF SATAN

PART III



by C. WILLIAM HARRISON

*Death hatred flared between the two brothers—and an innocent girl fell prey to the brutality of Wordene's men!*

BLAIZE HURLEY'S sudden appearance on the porch of the agency office halted the onrushing gunmen as if an invisible wall had been dropped in their path. Surprise,

then the black of deadly fury struck their hard-bitten faces, as Hurley's guns swung up on them.

"Far enough, boys!" he jarred out. "And keep yore hands where I can

### THE STORY SO FAR:

Eastward-bound, the Hurley wagon train, loaded with gold, is waylaid by

**BOSS LINSTROM** and his gang of killers:

**HACK DONNELL**, his right-hand man; **STUD WORDENE**, a gambler and heartless lead-slinger; and

**CUFF MURMAN**, a hard-mouthed gunman.

Without warning they descend on the Hurleys as the little train crosses the heat-blasted Whetstones. Merciless, they kill Tom Hurley, the father; and Martha Hurley, the mother of

**BLAIZE HURLEY**, and his younger brother,

**CUB HURLEY**, a baby who is more frightened and puzzled than aware of the great tragedy that has befallen the family.

Linstrom and the killers search the wagons for gold, and Stud Wordene is shot in the hand by Blaize. Blaize runs to the hills, but is shot down by Boss Linstrom. Wordene saves the life of little Cub and decides to bring him up as his "right hand" in retaliation for the crippling wound that Blaize has inflicted on him.

Blaize is captured by Chief Tamanmo's Apache Indians; but the tribe is blamed for the wanton murders, for Boss Linstrom has had his men shove Apache arrows into the bullet holes of the pitiful victims.

The years pass quickly. Blaize Hurley grows up with Tamanmo's tribe. Boss Linstrom has grown wealthy with the start he made on the stolen money. Hack Donnell is sheriff of the county. Cuff Murman a large cattleman. Stud Wordene proprietor of the richest gambling house. Linstrom himself has also become Agent for the new reservation to which the Apaches have re-

cently been confined. Meanwhile, Stud Wordene has brought up young Cub, whom he has renamed "Ring Lacey," as a deadly, merciless gunman.

Still with the Apaches, and living so near his younger brother, whom he believes dead, Blaize has grown to young manhood. He has mastered the Indians' fighting methods as well as all the tricks of the white man, which latter he has learned from Utah Kells, an outcast saved by Tamanmo.

The Indians are near an uprising, as Linstrom is cheating them of food. Blaize goes to town to try and straighten things out with Linstrom, not knowing that this man is one whom he has vowed to track down. The only name Blaize knows is that of Wordene which he heard mentioned the day of the killing.

Strange to the town, Blaize is clumsy, bumps into the daughter of Hack Donnell's deputy, a girl named

**JANICE THURMAN**, and knocks a bundle out of her hand. He is confronted by an angry Ring Lacey! Blaize knocks his brother down. Wordene rushes up and tries to force Lacey into killing Blaize. But Wordene is only called "uncle" by Lacey so Blaize fails to realize that it is Wordene. Blaize goes to the agency office, demands rightful treatment for the Indians from Linstrom, tells Linstrom his name. The latter throws his gun on Blaize. Utah Kells appears, backs Blaize, and in the fight that follows is mortally wounded. They escape town together, and Utah gives Blaize his guns before he dies. But Blaize has been warned by Ring Lacey that next time they meet it will be "over guns."

see them. You"—he waved his guns toward Ring Lacey, whose slender hands already held drawn Colts—"drop them cutters, or start using them!"

A harsh laugh ripped from Ring Lacey's flat lips, and he moved forward slowly, pale features holding only a sneering contempt for Hurley's warning.

"Drop these guns!" he jeered, a taunting ring to his words. "I'm goin' to use these guns, mister."

No muscle moved in Blaize Hurley's face, as he moved slowly forward to the edge of the porch. On the street the main body of the gunmen held rigid silence that seemed to hinge on Ring Lacey's contemptuous drawl, but a strange expression was on the face of the gambler with the twisted hand. It was almost, Hurley thought, the look of a teacher watching to see how well his pupil had learned his lessons.

As for Ring Lacey, his gray eyes



were like ice, his lean, pallid face like chiseled stone. There was no fear in Lacey's bearing. Here, Hurley told himself, was a man who was killer all the way through, a man who would sneer as he fought against odds he knew he couldn't defeat.

Nor did Blaize Hurley feel fear. Instead his was a galling sense of bitterness that came with the realization that death from Ring Lacey's guns would crash into him before he could finish the job he had set out for himself. He rolled forward slightly, tensing for the shock of the killer's slugs, thumbs loosening on the dogged back hammers of his guns.

He said icily, "I reckon you know you couldn't kill me quick enough to keep me from landing a couple slugs in you."

Ring Lacey laughed with bleak cynicism. "I don't give a damn where yore slugs land," he ripped out harshly. "You cut yore rusty that showed me up in front of Janice Thurman. I swore I'd kill you for that."

Then as Lacey's guns tilted upward for his shots, Blaize Hurley faded a pace to one side. His guns swiveled, centering on the tall frame of the gambler with the twisted hand. It was a wild hunch at best, but he played it out.

"Make yore play, trigger man," he jerked out softly. "If you don't care about dyin', maybe yore gambler pard does. Drop them hammers, and my slugs will be in him before I hit the ground."

For an instant dark hatred stormed in Ring Lacey's cold eyes. Hurley saw a ghastly shade of yellow stain the cheeks of the gambler behind Lacey; he saw Lacey's thumbs start to rise from the rocked-back hammers, then tense in indecision.

"Go on—tell him," Hurley said thinly to the gambler. "You tried to egg him into killing me once. You've been itchin' to see him bust into me here. Let's see how good you are proddin' on a fight when you'll take part of the lead yoreself!"

Silence that was stagnant with the threat of violence fell to grip the street. A man smothered an oath, breathing heavily. Ring Lacey shivered as if under the lash of storming emotions, then, slowly, his guns swung down.

"Drop 'em!" Hurley whipped out.

Hurley eased down the porch steps, as Lacey's guns fell into the dust of the street, began fading down the walk in slow side steps that took him around the flank of the gunmen to a hitch rack where several horses were tied in. From the corner of his eye, he singled out a long-limbered bay, and backed to it cautiously. One of the gunmen guessed his intentions, and burst out hoarsely.

"Hey, that's Linstrom's hoss!"

Hurley grimmed thinly. "This'll make me owe him a hoss, then," he said mockingly.

He swung the animal so he could watch the gunmen, as he pulled himself quickly into the saddle. Any instant he expected to feel the shock of a slug plowing into him from behind, but no expression reached the bleak lines of his face. He knew the gunmen were only waiting for him to swing his horse and make his break up the street, but in that he took them by surprise. Without warning, he leaned forward and kicked his heels into the flanks of the bay, and the startled animal lurched forward, driving straight for the crouching gunmen. Oaths ripped from their throats as they scattered before the charging horse. Ring Lacey tried to snatch up his guns,

missed, and threw himself in a headlong dive to escape the pounding hoofs of the bay.

Then behind him a gun roared, and was picked up by others from the cover of the double row of buildings that flanked the street. A flashing glance the length of the hoof-gutted street showed him half a dozen gunmen poised over drawn Colts as they waited for him to draw closer. He knew with bleak finality, that he could not hope to ride that gantlet of gunfire and live to reach open range beyond.

As the conviction struck him, he swung his horse sharply, heading for a narrow lane between two buildings, but even as he flashed toward it a man appeared from a nearby open door holding leveled Colts that burst into a yammering roar. Lead burned past Hurley's cheek; a slug ripped through his shirt, raking a hot furrow across his flesh, as his own guns chopped down. The killer stumbled forward as his guns blared. He caught himself on limbering legs, and his Colts crashed again as he fell.

Hurley heard the sickening *thap* of lead striking flesh. His horse faltered in full stride, then lurched forward in a blinding burst of speed that carried it between the buildings as hoofbeats rattled on the street behind.

Hurley's lips went flat and hard as he saw the sprawling fences of the stockyards just ahead. He knew he couldn't outrace the gunmen behind him long with his horse stricken as it was. Then a tight grin twisted his mouth, as the echo of something Tamanno had once told him flashed across his mind.

"The wise coyote runs through the cattle herd so the hunter cannot catch him."

Maybe that would work backward. Maybe this time the cattle

would run through the coyotes so that the hunter could not be caught.

He pulled his mount in sharply before a gate that strained under the weight of the cattle that clogged the pen. He bent forward, jerking at the gate's locking pin, but the weight of the cattle inside held the pin firmly in place. Then from the corner of his eyes as he fought with the pin, he saw gun-ready riders stream down the lane between the buildings. Yells that were like the blood cry of a wolf pack ripped from their throats as they saw him, and their guns leveled with grim purpose. Hurley shouted at the top of his voice, triggered a shot into the air that drove the cattle back from the gate. Then he jerked out the locking pin, swung his horse, kicking it into a run, as the weight of the cattle, crowding from behind, pushed the steers forward to slam the gate open, and bawling, wild-eyed steers boiled through the opening.

Hurley laughed harshly, as he saw the gunmen jerk their horses up to avoid the cattle rushed toward them. One of them tried to swerve his way through the narrowing gulf between the running herd and the rear of the building, but the mad tide of hoof and flesh and bone bore down on him with deadly speed, a holocaust of doom that nothing human could have stopped that minute. The rider's horse halted as the cattle swept forward, reared up, wheeled, whistling in terror. It broke into a run, stumbled as it struck something, fell to its knees. Hurley heard the man's short, high-pitched scream, then all was lost to his vision behind the pall of saffron dust that billowed upward from under those thundering hoofs.

Hurley held his horse in slightly, as he rounded the end of the shipping pens, and headed across the

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broken range. He knew the cattle he had released would give him but a scant half-mile lead, and that would be lost rapidly once the killers picked up his trail. He couldn't force his horse too much. Already he could sense the failing strength of the lead-struck animal under him, but the bay had heart as well as speed, and he favored it, keeping to the level stretches as much as possible as he made for a huge brown-capped butte just within the boundary of the reservation.

Nor did he increase the pace of his horse when he heard the faint yells of the gun pack behind him. He glance over his shoulder to see them streaming after him. Each pounding stride seemed to lessen the distance between them, and he could see the faint splinters of light that shunted from the naked barrels of their guns.

He rode as high in his saddle as possible to help his straining mount, then as he reached a maize of draws and arroyos that gouged into the range, the animal faltered in its stride. Blood frothed from its mouth, and each gasping breath came with a hoarse whistle. But still it drove on toward the nearing butte, until all strength fled from its limbering legs, and it slowly faltered. Hurley leaped clear of the saddle as the animal fell, turned, glad to risk precious split seconds to put the horse out of its pain, but one glance told him the bay was already dead.

He whirled, lips thin and stiff, as he broke into the swift, distance-eating run of the Indians he had lived with. Behind him the muted beat of horses' hoofs seemed to rush toward him, growing louder and louder, as he raced for the talus-footed butte now a short quarter mile away. The rock-studded, cactus-clogged ground seemed to catch and throw back the heat that boiled down from the high sun above. His

heart hammered painfully, and the guns he still gripped grew heavy in his hands.

He heard the hoarse yells that split the heat-festered air, and knew the gun pack had reached his fallen horse. Hoof metal rang on rock, then a voice blared out.

"There he goes! Get the dirty devil!"

Guns blasted with an ugly, throbbing beat. Lead screamed from rocks near Hurley, spurted miniature volcanos in the sand on either side of him, then he reached the shelter of the boulders that footed the butte wall. Here the air was stifling with its dead heat, but he pushed on, threading his way through the rocks, moving ever upward. Down below he knew by their silenced guns, that the killers were shoving through the boulder field, and once they got through, he would be in plain view as he fought his way up the loose gravel and stone slope.

Abruptly, then, their guns crashed out again. Flashing a glance over his shoulder, Hurley saw them a hundred yards below him, guns bouncing in their hands. Suddenly, he lurched erect, back arching as if under the impact of lead. He swayed, stumbled, started to fall. A hoarse voice roared exultantly.

"Got him! Like shootin' cans off'n a fence rail. Watch the devil roll!"

Blaize Hurley's legs kicked and thrashed as he began rolling down the steep face of the slope, and each movement started rocks skidding into an ever-growing landslide. A thin film of dust lifting from the sliding sheet of stone and gravel thickened to a gray, heat-choked pall that was choking to his lung, and the rattle of the rocks quickened rapidly to the muted rumble of distant thunder.

After that first kicking that had

started the slide, his job changed to the grim one of keeping from being buried; the shifting mass was like quicksand trying to suck him into its grinding depths. Then gradually, the speed of the slide lessened, and he scrambled to his feet, stumbling through the dust pall to the cover of the boulders he could make out dimly ahead.

He was yards away from the slide when the rattle of falling stone finally ended. He heard the distant crunch of boots in gravel, and the harsh rasp of a man's voice.

"If my slug didn't kill him, the slide did."

Another voice broke in tonelessly—Ring Lacey's voice. "Hunt him down, I said! Maybe that was one of his damn Indian tricks!"

Then another man broke out ringingly. "By all hell! This rock here—" The voice ended on an oath. "Maybe it's nothin'." The man laughed nervously. "I'll take it along to remind me where I can find a good Injun if I want to dig him up."

After a while the noise of the search ended, and silence closed in.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### WAY OF THE KILLER.

LEANING forward grimly over his desk, his weight planted on wide-set arms, Boss Linstrom ran bleak eyes over the three men who had just filed into his office. The gray of trail dust was heavy on the three. Cuff Murman's square body was like a block of granite, lips jerking slightly as he met Linstrom's stare. Stud Wordene stood in slouching ease, his dark, smoldering eyes as fathomless as the pallid mask of his face. An unnatural flush was on Hack Donnell's pinched visage. His faded eyes were bright, almost



feverish, and his thin, bony hands flexed and unflexed at his side.

"What are you jumpin' us for, Boss?" he rapped out scratchily. "You heard me right the first time. I said we cornered that jigger on that butte just inside the reservation. He was tryin' to climb up the loose slope when we cut loose on him. One of our slugs must have got him, 'cause he dropped an' his body started a slide."

Boss Linstrom's thick lips tightened, bracketing with faint bands of gray. "And that's all, huh?" he jarred out. "You didn't check up on yore job."

Hack Donnell cursed throatily. "Shore, we checked up on it. We looked for him, but I reckon he got laurried in the slide."

Linstrom laughed shortly, his tone mirthless, rasping. "You fools! That was just an Injun trick. He wanted you to think he was dead. He probably rolled down with the slide—"

Donnell broke in harshly, his words thin-edged, biting.

"What if he did get away?" he whipped back. "I figured he might have cut that rusty on us. So did Ring Lacey, and he cussed me out big for callin' the deal off. But I found something a damn sight more important than that Injun—"

"Injun?" Linstrom laughed scornfully, muscles knotting along his blocky jaw. "You fools! He was no Injun. That devil's as white as we are. That younker you let get away was Blaize Hurley!"

Linstrom's jarring words struck like a bombshell in the room. Cuff Murman's square face went white, the glint of fear rising in his nervous eyes. Stud Wordene's tall frame swayed forward slightly. Red flecks flooded into his muddy eyes, but no muscle moved in the dead white of

his face. Hack Donnell cursed softly, grunted something under his breath, then cursed again.

"Blaize Hurley?" he said hoarsely. "That Hurley kid we thought—Boss, you shore of that?"

Boss Linstrom shoved back from his desk, bands of gray streaking his jaw. "He gave me that name himself. Chief Tamammo found him after we done that job, an' the kid has lived with the Injuns ever since. Utah Kells helped bring him up, an' you know what that means. Kells is dead, but that kid—he's half Kells an' half Apache. If Hurley ever gets a line on us—" His silence was dark with meaning.

Cuff Murman dropped heavily into a chair, his twitching lips white-edged. "That won't take him long," he said grimly. "He'll remember hearin' Wordene's name and that'll tie us in. I saw him when he busted out of town. That jigger is all ice."

An ugly glint lighted Hack Donnell's faded eyes, and his bony hands sank down to his guns. "I'm no oven," he said with scratchy deadliness. "He won't live to find out anything. I'll hunt him down—"

There was a faint smile on Stud Wordene's thin lips as he said, "Yuh're forgettin' Ring Lacey!"

The gambler's toneless words struck Boss Linstrom with blunt force, drove deep in his brain, flamed there, and gave vent to a harsh laugh.

"Shore, we're forgettin' Ring Lacey!" he jerked out bleakly. "Hurley's own brother! Wordene, this is better than you figured when yuh took that kid to raise! This'll be worth yore busted hand. You can set Lacey after Hurley, an' when the smoke clears off they'll both be out of the way. Now, Hack, what's that big thing you run up against?"

Hack Donnell's right hand lifted and dropped into the pocket of his

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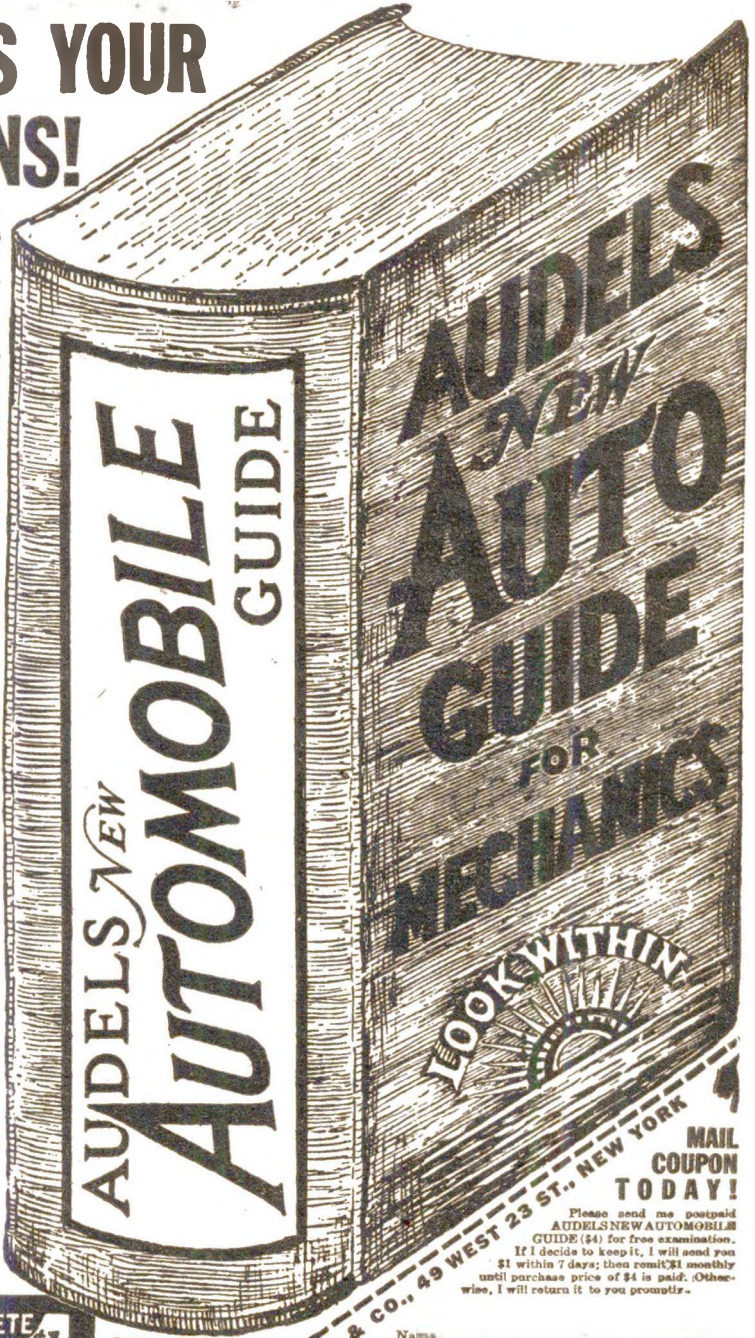
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*The arrow plunged, sickeningly, into the rider's back!*



shirt, came out holding a small piece of red, metallic rock. He tossed it to Linstrom, chuckling throatily.

"I'll tell a man it's big," he said. "Take a look for yoreself, Boss."

Boss Linstrom hefted the rock in

his hand, stared at it closely, then jerked his eyes up on the runty gunman.

A hoarse note throbbled in Hack Donnell's short laugh, and his pale eyes were bright, hot. "You want



me to say it, huh?" he jerked out. "Then listen, Boss, an' it's straight. The last time I saw stuff like that was down around Bisbee. It's copper! That peacock ore will grade higher than anything I ever saw before—maybe eighteen percent. And it's ours if we can get it!"

Cuff Murman was out of his chair as if driven. Stud Wordene smothered an oath that seemed to claw up his throat; Boss Linstrom swayed forward, greed darkening his heavy face, clouding his stare.

"You say where," he croaked. "By hell, we'll get it!"

Hack Donnell's thin lips tightened, and a hard light crept into his eyes. "It won't be easy," he said tensely, "but it's a bonanza if we can get it. It's that brown-topped butte in the reservation. I should have guessed it before. That brown is an iron capping that kept the limestone under it from erodin' away. There's millions in copper in that butte. I'd stake my life on it."

Linstrom laughed jarringly. "By damn, that may be just what we'll all have to do!" he broke out ringingly. Then he rocked back on his heels, eyes narrowing, as dark thoughts flamed across his brain. Then his jaw hardened. "We'll hit fast and hard," he said harshly. "Wordene, you shove all the liquor you got into the reservation. Give it to the red devils if they ain't got the money to pay for it. Murman, tomorrow morning them Injuns will be expectin' their ration cattle. Run a bunch into the reservation, and when they come to pick 'em up, have yore boys cut down every mother's son he can plug, then bust off with the cattle."

Cuff Murman's face went paper white. "We can't do that, Boss!" he said croakingly. "They're touchy

## ¿QUIEN SABE?

*Continued from page 72*

*Answers:*

1. *Black snakes do not kill rattlesnakes. A king snake kills rattlers.*
2. *Pat Garret killed Billy the Kid by shooting him in cold blood, which made him unpopular. But Theodore Roosevelt praised him for ridding the West of one of its most notorious bad men.*
3. *You would build a loop with it, for a hondo is a metal, rawhide, leather or horn eyelet at the end of a lariat, through which the free end of the rope is passed to form the throwing loop.*
4. *John C. Fremont was nominated by the Republican Party in 1856.*
5. *Kit Carson accompanied Fremont on his explorations in what is now California.*
6. *This means: A rustler shooting a rifle was riding a fast or long-running horse.*
7. *Buffalo Bill quit scouting because he became a showman. He was so well liked by Indians whom he had fought, many of them joined his Wild West Show, including a number of famous chiefs.*
8. *A cavy is a string of extra ponies driven to the roundup corral. A manada is a drove of wild horses. A remuda is the bunch of saddle ponies owned by a ranch.*
9. *A running iron is a branding iron in the straight form of a poker curved at one end, used by rustlers in faking brands.*
10. *The Grand Canyon is in Arizona.*

enough already. They'd go on the warpath shore!"

Linstrom chuckled bleakly. "They can't lick all the guns we can throw against them," he said thinly. "We can't file on that land as long as the government owns it, can we? Shore, we can't! But if the Injuns go to war an' we kill 'em off, there won't be no reservation no more!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

### BLOOD TRAIL.

THE flaming ball of the sun was sliding behind the high-flung crags of the Chiricahuas when Blaize Hurley reached the trail that dropped down into the canyon that had been his home since boyhood. He paused there at the lip of the trail, tired and drawn from the long miles he had covered on foot through the broken country of the reservation.

Overhead the sky was painted a blood-red by the dying sun, but on the ragged eastern horizon the bars of scarlet and vermilion were darkening as the curtain of night crept up from below the skyline.

The wall of the canyon shelved away at Hurley's feet, dropping in rocky slopes and granite cliffs, until his brooding gaze rested on the murk-clouded floor of the canyon. Down there he could see the winking campfires of the village. Warriors he had known from boyhood would be lounging around while the women in the crude wikiups busied themselves with the preparation of frugal meals. Tiny lines etched into Hurley's lean face as he stared into the depths of the canyon. He knew those Indians had grown to hate the food the white men were putting into their mouths. It was the cheapest Boss Linstrom could buy, half spoiled at times, and never enough of it. The warriors and squaws had

grown gaunt under years of such meals, when before they had known plenty of mule and horse meat, corn, and pinole, a dish that was made of mesquite beans ground into sweet flour. Hurley had seen squaws starve themselves so that their children might have a bit more to eat, and many nights he had been wakened by the wailing sobs of hungry babies.

Hurley's lips tightened as he moved on down the trail. It was a torturous, snaking switchback that dropped down naked slopes of loose rock and in places skirted the bare walls of cliffs where a single misstep would have plunged him into the murky abyss that yawned below. It was a trail that was treacherous even in daylight, but he strode down it swiftly, moving in the smooth, sure strides of the Indian.

The shadows of night had gathered between the looming walls by the time he reached the canyon floor, and the low, ominous murmur of voices floated to his ears on the chilling air. He lengthened his strides grimly, jaw hardening as he neared the village.

There were none of the savage yells that had rung out the night before. Instead, there was only a low, deep-throated muttering, as he strode between the wikiups. Warriors were seated like immobile statues around the blazing fire in the center of the village, their dark faces inscrutable under waving tendrils of light.

Hurley saw Tamanmo and Laughing Eyes standing at one side, and strode past the warriors to halt before the chief. He saw the girl's troubled eyes flash over him, then jerk toward the darkness behind him, as if searching for Utah Kells. Hurley shook his head slowly, then Tamanmo was speaking.



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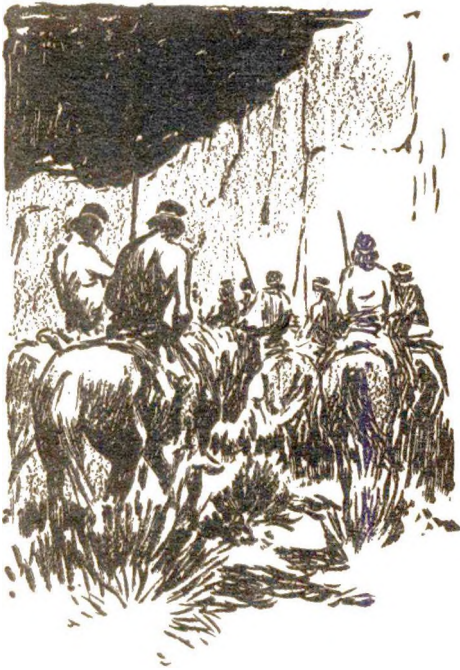
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"My son has come back, and that is good. But what he has to tell of the white chief is bad. Tamanmo knows, for he has lived many winters and sees things beyond the eyes of his people."

He waved his arm toward the fire, and Hurley turned, strode slowly toward the blaze. His lips went stiff and flat as he faced the warriors. All of them he had known as boys, and they had laughed easily then as they played their games. But time and bitterness and hatred had changed them. Their faces were like bronze masks, their eyes mirroring the savage cruelty that was building up within them. And yet, as he spoke, no hint of his thoughts reached the blank lines of his face.



"My brothers, you must listen and be patient. I have seen the white man in Brasher, and he is bad. His men killed Utah Kells. They tried to kill me. They have hurt us long, but we must not fight. The great

white cloud is too many. Tamanmo has told you this. I tell it to you again. But when the white chief in Washington hears about—"

He got no further. One of the warriors jerked to his feet, his dark face working. His yell rang out over the night air, piercing in its savage hatred.

"Always we have been told not to fight! And while we have listened to this talk, our squaws have gone hungry and our young have died. Our tongues were straight when we told the white chief we would keep peace. But the white chief's tongue was crooked. Tomorrow we will take the blood trail. Tomorrow we will kill so that our squaws will have the food and clothing the white men would not give us!"

"Wait, you fools! Wait!" Hurley jerked around, shouting at the top of his voice, but his words were lost in the war cries of the warriors. One of them stepped toward him, and he read the steely glint in the Apache's eye. His fist shot out, carrying all the weight of his lean, slab-muscled shoulder. The warrior went down, but others surged forward. He fought with all the power in his tall frame, but they swept toward him in a dark tide his clubbing fists couldn't hold back. A warrior leaped forward to throw an arm that was like an iron band around his neck, then others drove in. He felt his arms jerked behind his back and tied there with rawhide thongs that cut deep into his flesh.

From the corner of his eye, as he was thrown to the ground, he saw Tamanmo striding forward, calling to the maddened warriors. The warriors turned, hesitating, as they faced their chief, then one of them sprang forward, gesturing wildly.

"Tamanmo is old. For long he has

been our chief, but his blood has turned to water. He will not lead us in war. We will have a new chief."

Hurley fought against his bonds, then gave up in exhaustion, as the warriors tied up the old chief and shoved him to one side. He saw Laughing Eyes start forward, fear in her small face, but she halted at the jerk of his head, and faded back into the shadows that hugged her wikipup.

Hurley's eyes were chill and hard, as he watched the warriors turn back to the fire. They seated themselves, their faces reflecting the red glow of the flames, and one by one they got up, poured out their bitter eloquence for war.

Hurley gave up struggling with the thongs that bound his hands behind his back. He lay quietly, knowing the futility of trying to turn back the warriors now. Each fiery word only inflamed them further, released the pent-up hatred and bitterness within them. Hours dragged by, and the flames of the campfire died to glowing red coals. Now the warriors were stripped to the waist, their faces harsh with savage cruelty as they laid aside bows and arrows and long-bladed knives whose polished steel caught and held the dull red glow of the coals.

The blood trail! An icy hand closed around Blaize Hurley's heart as he thought what the war trail these Apaches were preparing to take would mean. What savagery and butchery this band would turn loose against the whites! Women and children in outlying ranches would be murdered. Punchers and prospectors would be cut down by this force that could strike without warning and disappear without leaving a trace of a trail for the white men to follow. Hurley knew how they would fight—he had played with them as boys, trying to match the skill he had developed against their



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inherent cunning. They could move like shadows, taking advantage of the least cover that offered, as they stalked their victims.

Then a furtive sound that was half audible even to his keenly attuned ears caught Blaize Hurley's attention. He flashed a glance over his shoulder, saw Laughing Eyes close behind him, holding a knife in her small hand. He heard her low whisper faintly.

"My brother—hold your hands back so I can cut you free."

"No!" The low-toned word burst tensely from Hurley's lips. "I couldn't get away, and they would discover it if I stayed here."

The girl's eyes widened. "But my brother—we must do something. They will kill. I know my people. We have been wronged, but our war is only with the white chiefs who have harmed us."

Hurley's mind raced. Over his shoulder, he could see the warriors gathering their horses. The hours of night were lagging, and soon dawn would break, and from the scattered scraps of their conversation, he knew the plans the warriors had made. A few of them would go to pick up the ration cattle Linstrom would have driven into the reservation, and the rest of the band would be hiding close by, ready to swoop down on the unsuspecting whites. Then he jerked his eyes back to the girl, his lips drawn tight and edged with bands of gray.

"Leave the knife under that rock over there. I'll get it after they've gone, and cut myself loose. Then I'll ride to warn the town."

"Laughing Eyes will go to town. My brother might be killed, but the white chiefs will not hurt Laughing Eyes."

Hurley's blood chilled to ice. "Not

that!" he whispered hoarsely. "Laughing Eyes, don't—"

But already the girl had faded into the night. He groaned under his breath, sank back to the ground, a cold sweat breaking out on his brow. He didn't think Linstrom would dare harm the daughter of the Apache chief, but an ugly doubt clawed at him with bony fingers. Linstrom and his men were bad—rotten bad—and the life of an Indian was cheap, even to honest whites.



Then one of the warriors came forward, his dark eyes flecked with cruel lights. He stooped to examine Hurley's bonds, then straightened, muscles rippling smoothly across his shoulders and chest. For an instant their eyes locked. Hurley offered no words, but his stare probed deep, reading in the Indian's impassive face the bitter hatred and merciless savagery that lurked there. It came to Hurley that his own race had made these Apaches what they had become, and the shame of this cut him like a knife. Then, his head set proud and stern, the warrior turned away, and Hurley watched them grimly, as the band mounted their ponies and moved off through the darkness.

## CHAPTER XV.

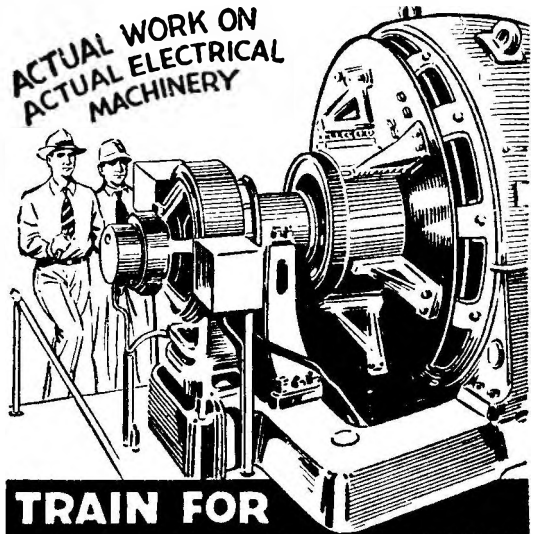
### LINSTROM STRIKES.

**B**LAIZE HURLEY worked rapidly after the war party had been swallowed into the darkness. Over the east wall of the canyon, he could see a faint tinge of gray that was creeping into the purple sky. The rattle would be driven into the reservation shortly after sunup, and he knew, leaving as early as they had, the Indians would have plenty of time to set their ambush trap for Linstrom's punchers.

He rolled over, twisting around on the ground until he felt the rock under which Laughing Eyes had hidden the knife gouge into his flesh. He hitched himself along the packed ground until he could slip his fingers under the rim of the flat rock, then bridged his body on neck and heels to flip the rock over. It was painful work. His hands, long bound by the rawhide thongs, felt cold and dead. He failed the first time he tried to turn over the rock, but the second time he slumped back to the ground, conscious that the naked blade of the knife was under his wrists.

He was aware as he struggled to grip the knife in his numbed hands, that the squaws and children of the tribe had crept forward from their wikiups to watch him with impassive interest. Once Tamanno, still lying where his warriors had left him, called out to the squaws to release them, but the squaws didn't move. But Hurley noted with grim satisfaction, that although the squaws wouldn't help him escape, neither did they make a move to stop him as he fought to slice the sharp blade through the thongs around his wrists.

He worked in grim silence. One attempt to grip the knife in his numbed hands told him this was useless, and after that he spent his efforts trying to wedge the handle under the rock so he could saw the



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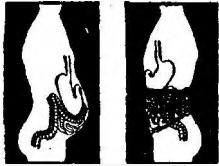
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rawhide thongs back and forth along the blade. The faint tinge of gray in the sky above the east wall paled to the unmistakable flush of early dawn by the time he wedged the handle of the knife in a solid position, and it seemed hours after that before the first thong gave way as he sawed the leather along the blade. He sat there rubbing circulation back into his numbed fingers until enough strength returned to his hands to grip the knife and cut through the thongs that tied his ankles. Then he stood up, and moved to Tamanno's side.

The old chief's face was bitter, as Hurley sliced the blade through his bonds. He stood up, shaking his head slowly.

"It is no good, my son," he said wearily. "You must ride to warn your people. My people no longer want me. They have chosen a new chief who will lead them into a fight they cannot win. It is not good that you be here with me when your people need you."

Hurley reached out his hand to Tamanno's shoulder, his face as blank of expression as that of the Indian.

"Tamanno will be chief again. Soon the warriors will see that they are fools. They will learn the brave warrior does not fight all whites, but waits in peace and patience until the time comes when he can fight those who harm him. And when they learn this, they will return to the wisdom of Tamanno."

Hurley turned then, stalked through the graying light to a crude mesquite and cactus corral at the edge of the village. He singled out a pinto, threw on a rawhide hackamore, led it out of the corral and mounted. It was a small animal, but it had both speed and bottom. He held it at a hard run up the canyon, then slowed it as the trail began its torturous ascent of the wall. Here

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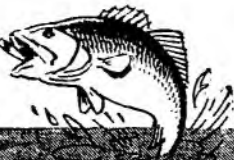
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the cayuse moved, sure-footedly, clambering up the steep pitches and skirting cliffs on narrow ledges where nearly any other horse would have had to be driven.

At the top of the cliff, Hurley kicked the animal into a run again. The chill morning air hammered at his face, and to the east, as he pounded over the rough ground, he could see the red rim of the rising sun peeping over the ragged horizon.

Then below him, as he quartered the shoulder of a ridge, he could see a faint gray fog of dust that marked the ration cattle Linstrom's men were driving into the reservation. Stunted by height and distance, he could make out the figures of three waiting Indians, then through the dust that rose from the hoofs of the cattle, the forms of several white riders. He counted them as he turned his mount down the rocky slope—seven, eight, nine. There were twice as many punchers as were needed to drive the dozen or so cattle. Hurley felt his face turn stiff, as an ugly premonition flashed over his brain.

A yell ripped upward through his throat, and died behind hard-set lips. He saw the white men move ahead of the herd, drawing together, as they halted a few yards from the three Indians. There was no warning. Hurley saw one of them gesture savagely, then their hands stabbed downward, and the early morning air split to the roar of Colts. Two of the Indians went down under the first shots. The other tried to swing his pony, and Hurley heard the faint ring of his cry that belled and broke as killer lead drove into his flesh.

Then Hurley's alert eyes were caught by the stream of half-naked warriors who came boiling out of a boulder field behind the white men,

bows shafted, full drawn. One of the punchers saw the red tide rushing down on them. He yelled piercingly, whipped his horse around, his gun blaring wildly.

Then arrows that were like splinters of light, flashed from the bows of the Apaches. A man screamed in mortal agony, his Colt blasting convulsively as he crumpled forward in his saddle. It was all a savage confusion of blazing six-guns, twanging bowstrings, and shouting men. The whites saw their impending doom in the first rush of the outnumbering Apaches. They broke under the charge, tried to escape, but a small band of warriors broke from the main force to angle around and cut them off.

But even as the Indians closed in on the whites, Hurley saw a larger group of gunmen pound out of a scrubby growth of cottonwoods beyond. Hurley jerked his guns, slammed two quick shots of warning to the Indians, but it was lost in the roaring blast of Colt fire of the onrushing riders. The Apaches spun at this new and unexpected danger, and were caught by killer lead from both sides. They wheeled their horses, confused, startled, yet brave in the face of the hail of gun lead that was thinning their ranks rapidly and strewing the ground with twitching bodies.

Hurley swung his horse off at an angle as he drew near, riding with reckless speed along a granite comb that thrust out from the side of the ridge. It was a steep, sloped hogback that ended in an almost perpendicular wall that swooped down to a gorge through which a tumbling stream of foamy water ran. If the Indians could get over the spur, they could hold the natural fort against twice that number of whites.

Hurley raised his voice in a piercing yell. "This way, my people! This way!"

The Indians saw him then, broke wildly under the charge of the whites and swept toward the granite spur. For an instant, the white men halted, gathering their forces, obviously fearing a possible ambush if they followed the fleeing Apaches too closely.

Anger that was like liquid fire, churned through Hurley's veins as he recognized Boss Linstrom's big frame at the head of the white men. And in that same glance, he saw the slender figure of Ring Lacey at one side. The gambler with the twisted left hand was near Lacey, saying something in a tone that didn't reach Hurley's ears. He saw Lacey stiffen, start his horse moving slowly forward. Lacey's voice lashed out in ringing scorn.

"I'm comin' after you! If you got

the guts, ride down an' we'll settle our ruckus here and now!"

For a moment Blaize Hurley's frayed temper snapped. He started his horse forward, grim purpose in every line of his jaw, then just as abruptly, he halted its movement. This was something more than a personal grudge. The lives of Tamanmo's Indians and of countless innocent whites were dependent on how long he could hold back Linstrom's killers. From the corner of his eye he saw the Indians forcing their ponies up the steep slope of the spur, but if he rode down alone to face Ring Lacey, Linstrom would order a charge that would wipe out the warriors.

Lacey came ever closer, moving his horse at a slow walk, his hands gripping drawn guns.

"Are you comin' down, renegade?" he called sneeringly, "or do I have to come up after you?"

One of the men behind Lacey



# STORM FOR A MAN FROM MEX

**Another bulleting story by Shoshone Gwinn,  
Author of "Hombre From Hades," etc.**

*The six-gun jumped from his hand,  
and left him as though a magic finger  
had ripped it away unseen!*

## Coming in next week's action-filled issue!



called out hoarsely. "Ring, come back heah! Them red devils may be—"

But the gambler broke that short. "Let him go. This is his fight, and he's playing it the way he wants to."

Hurley relaxed slightly, as the last of the warriors reached the top of the spur. One of them came up to his side, unconscious of the worms of blood that were crawling down his bare chest from a wound high in the flesh of his shoulder. The warrior's voice came in low bitterness.

"Our brother was wise. We have been fools. Many of us have died under the guns of the white men. Many more of us will die, but we will fight. We are not afraid to die, but while we fight, our women and children will have no food—"

"No!" Hurley jerked out. He spoke rapidly, with all the eloquence of their tongue. "If you think of your squaws and children, don't fight. The white chief down there wants you to fight so he can kill all of you. He sent his men to shoot you when you came for the cattle. We must wait. Go back to Tamanno and stay there until the time comes when you can fight and win."

A chorus of bitter cries answered him, but he overruled them with harsh words.

"The white men can't kill you as long as you stay in the canyon. But they can kill you if you leave it. Look—they come again! If they wanted peace, they would turn back."

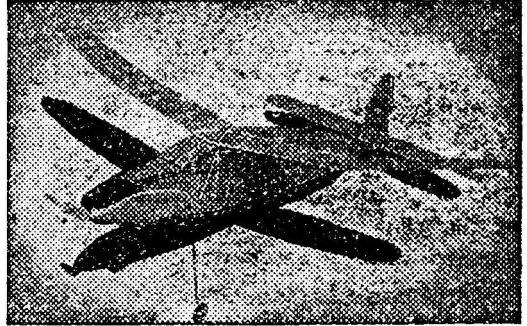
Hurley saw Linstrom and his gunmen start forward, moving slowly, cautiously, guns upraised, alert. Ring Lacey was almost within gun range, still closing in with deadly purpose. Then Boss Linstrom's heavy voice boomed out.

"Hurley, you better make them red devils give up. We mean busi-

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ness. They killed white men here, and they'll pay up for it. We're holding Tamanno's girl in town. Keep up this fight, and by hell, she'll never get back alive!"

The chill of ice raced through Blaize Hurley's veins. He leaned forward over his horse's neck, bleak clouds fogging his eyes. A savage, full-throated cry ripped from the throats of the Indians at Linstrom's words, and Hurley jerked around, jaw streaked with lines of gray.

"Stop it, you fools!" he jarred out. "They're using Laughing Eyes to force you into fighting. You can hold them back from up here. Let them charge if they want to, but don't go down there. Getting Laughing Eyes back to Tamanno is my job!"

He turned his horse then, and forced it down the steep slope of the spur. Even as he slid to the bottom of the pitch, he heard the muted thunder of hoofs beyond the hog-back. In a flashing glance over his shoulder, he saw the Apaches crouching behind the boulders that topped the granite spur, bows at full draw, mouths open and filled with blood-curdling howls of hatred, as they met the charge of Linstrom's killer pack.

Hurley didn't turn back his horse, as the beat of gunfire throbbed across the morning air, but held it at a hard run across the rock-studded stretch before him. Somewhere ahead he would find a break in the gorge where he could cross and circle back toward Brasher.

As he rode, the thought of Tamanno's daughter held in town by Boss Linstrom's men, fanned him to murderous rage. He leaned forward on his racing horse, lips stiff and flat, as he searched the rim of the gorge for a place where he could cross. But even after he had crossed the gorge, he knew with grim impatience that

it would take him long minutes to reach Brasher.

And he wondered what he would find when he got there.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### FROM OUT OF THE PAST.

THAT Boss Linstrom was trying to force the Indians to take the war trail, Blaize Hurley did not doubt. The murderous suddenness with which the punchers who had driven the ration cattle had cut loose on the three waiting Indians was in itself, proof that kindled bleak lights in Hurley's eyes. And he knew that the holding of Laughing Eyes was only to enrage the Apaches further.

But why? Hurley racked his mind, but could not find an answer to the question. Linstrom had been stealing from the Indians for years, but if he forced an uprising, it could only end two ways—the government would be called in to investigate, or else Tamanno and his people would be driven across the line into Mexico.

And through these bitter thoughts an insidious threat of menace he couldn't shake off mounted in Hurley's brain. His horse was staggering and blowing by the time he reached the outskirts of the town, weakened by the strain of the pace to which he had forced it, and he slowed it to a walk when he hit the hoof-pocked street.

Here the feeling of menace was an almost tangible thing, that strained his nerves to the breaking point. His hands drifted down to the butts of his heavy Colts, as his narrowed eyes shifted over the town. The freight engine and cars were still and silent on the rail siding; the emptiness of the shipping pens was mute evidence that the cattle he had turned loose the day before had not yet been



rounded up. The entire town seemed gripped by an ominous silence—it seemed dead, and yet there was something vibrantly alive about it.

At first glance the street appeared empty, then he saw a small knot of townsmen huddled at the front of the huge, false-fronted building he knew was the Gold Spot Saloon. As he drew nearer, he caught the low, ugly murmur that rose from the knot of men.

He slipped to the ground, strode forward slowly at first, then with quickening speed, as the presentiment of danger became liquid fire pounding through his veins.

He saw a girl—the one Ring Lacey had called Janice Thurman—push out of the crowd, her face paper-white and strained. She caught sight of him, and he caught her faint, choking cry.


"In there—quick!" Then Janice Thurman was running wildly down the street toward the jail.

Blaize Hurley knew fear then. It was a cold, crawling, gnawing something that gripped his stomach like bony fingers. It brought for some unaccountable reason, the picture of Laughing Eyes to his mind. It made him hot and cold at once, bleak, deadly, savage, as he broke into a hard run toward the knot of townsmen.

He elbowed his way roughly through the crowd, conscious of growling protests and searching faces. He heard a man's smothered oath.

"It's that damn Injun!"

Others jerked around, their attention pulled from the batwing doors of the saloon they had been watching. Near the inner fringe of the crowd, a thin, stooped man with a grease-smudged apron around his middle, twisted around to stare at him hotly. His voice came hard-clipped, tense.

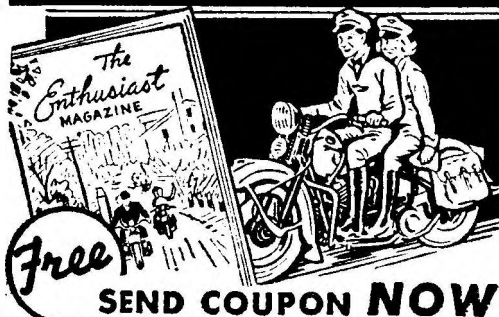


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"You dirty—" He changed that with an oath. "Hell, you're no Injun!"

Blaize Hurley lurched forward, savage purpose in every line of his face.

"What's going on here?" he ripped out.

The thin man stared at him, puzzled, startled.

"It's—in there!" he said hoarsely.

Hurley's big hand shot out to clamp on the front of the man's shirt. He felt a sudden cold stiffness strike his face.

"Speak up, man!" he jerked out harshly. "What's going on in there?"

The thin man flinched under the hell that blazed in Hurley's eyes as if he had been struck. His drawn face whitened as if all blood had been drawn from his veins.

"It's hell!" he croaked heavily. "It's one of Wordene's men—Ace Brackett—he's got an Injun girl in there! He's half killed her. She's blood all over!"

*Wordene!* Across fifteen long, bitter years the name leaped back to flame across Blaize Hurley's brain. He stood there on wide-spread legs, numbed by the savage fires of hatred that roared through him. *Wordene!* The first of his vendetta of four! The only name he had heard of the four murderers who had taken from him his mother and father and brother.

And even as the name inflamed the smoldering fires of his hatred, he heard the low, whimpering cry of agony that came from within the saloon.

In three long strides, he was across the plank walk and beyond the battling doors.

"Brackett!" he yelled piercingly.

TO BE CONTINUED.

And don't miss the exciting, pounding installment in next week's Wild West Weekly. Order now!

## INDIAN WOMAN HELPED KEEP PEACE

A REMARKABLE Indian woman, who died in October last, at the advanced age of one hundred and sixteen years, was the wife of a great chief, White Bear, the head of the Crees, who, himself, died thirty-nine years ago. After his death, Mrs. White Bear continued to make her home with her family on the reserve in the Moose Mountains, which was given the chief's name, and still bears it.

It was Chief White Bear, aided by his capable wife, who persuaded the restless Crees to accept life on a reservation, and to preserve peaceful relations with the white settlers and authorities. At the time of her death, Mrs. White Bear had completed sixty-four years continuous residence on the reserve.

She was a strong-minded, intelligent woman, with a horror of needless loss of human life, and she could always calm the Indians when they

became excited over fancied wrongs, and planned vengeance on the whites. She and the chief kept them from joining in the rebellion of 1885, and they could always be relied upon to quell any discontent that arose among the young braves of the tribe.

Mrs. White Bear's death removes one who was always ready and anxious to settle disputes by talks over the peace pipes, and her wise advice in troubled times was highly valued both by the white authorities and her own people. In her old age, she was loved and venerated by the Crees, who looked upon her as an oracle, and as a blessing to her race. She helped the young men of her tribe to desert the war path for the paths of peace and honest work, and it is believed that her counsels will never be forgotten. Her wise sayings will be repeated to the young Crees for all time.

★ ★

## THE SILVER KID'S GUN TRAIL

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by T. W. Ford

*"The silver skeleton that dangled from his chin shined in the light, and the brand of doom seared the wrong man!"*

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## THE WRANGLERS CORNER

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The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

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PARDS, we asked for it! Remember how we asked you cowboys of today to write down your true experiences and send 'em in? Well, you've done it, all right. Durn it, we never reckoned there were so many cow-town post offices west of the Pecos—or east, for that matter.

Kicking? You just bet we aren't! Those experiences of yours are plumb thrilling. They prove that a cowboy is still a cowboy, and that even in these times the old West

isn't only a memory. A lot of folks are going to be surprised plenty when they learn that what they read in Western fiction isn't the stuff dreams are made of.

You waddies who sent 'em in aren't all scribblers; some of you write in a plumb readable hand; some of you play a lively tune on the typewriter. Don't think, though that a well-written manuscript has any better chance of making the grade than a scribbled one. As in all departments of editing the 3W, the story's the thing.

If you don't hear from us, it doesn't necessarily mean that your manuscript has lit in the wastebasket. If we like it, we'll rewrite it and dress it up; that takes time, and there may be a flock of others ahead of it. One thing you can always be sure of—we'll shoot square with you, or do our durnedest to.

Here's the true experience of an hombre who isn't a real old-timer, but one who looks back over quite a stretch of years:

### THE HERMIT OF DEER CREEK

By W. L. Sprouse—Age 49

National Military Home, California

Out in Willow Valley, along the gravel banks of historic Deer Creek in California, the lure of gold led me to try my luck in panning for the precious metal. After making a sluice box out of driftwood, I started to work with pick and shovel.

Near the spot where I pitched camp were a number of old mines where in early days men from far distances came seeking their fortune. A big tunnel in the hillside had caved in where forty Chinese were buried alive in the early '50s.

I met an old prospector who told me stirring tales of early days when the Chinese came to get gold on Deer Creek. "Not long ago," he said, "the skull of a Chinaman was found by a sniper working along the creek. No doubt he was one of many who tried to escape with a bag of gold but fell into the hands of robbers and met his doom."

"Have you found much gold?" I inquired.

"Waal, I would not tell you if I had." Drawing heavily on his old cob pipe, he finally mused: "Strangers like you will have to find out for themselves. There is a fortune for you here if you will work and find it."

It is true of all prospectors that they are an optimistic lot, looking for the gold they have never found. Many spend their lives in vain looking for the yellow metal so highly prized by man.

Near the close of my first day on Deer Creek, as the western sun, like a big ball of fire sank below the pine-clad hills, casting its lengthening shadows on the rippling waters of the rushing stream, I turned toward camp. My partner, the Arkansas Kid, had gone ahead. I met him, all excited on the trail.

"Say," he said rather nervously, "there is a guy sitting up there by the spring with long hair and beard. I spoke to him and tried to talk with him, but he only gave me a wild stare."

Approaching camp with the Kid, I saw the lone man, sitting in the same place beside the spring. Gazing into the distance, he sat undisturbed by our approach. I raised my hand in salutation. He spoke cordially and smiled. Clad in the dress of the hill country, spattered with mud, long beard covered his otherwise youthful face while his hair had grown long and curled up from behind, he presented a picture which later led me to call him the Hermit of Deer Creek, though he told me his name was Bill.

"How's luck today?" he asked. We told him of our experience in panning for the day and showed the small amount of gold we had saved in our gold pan.

"This creek has been mined many times, and you will find the pay gravel very poor," he said.

Growing friendly, he told us of how his great-grandparents had squatted there and how the property and mining claims had come down to his own parents. "A lot of people seem afraid of me because of my hair and beard," he said with a smile. "The last big snow we had in these parts I decided not to ever shave or have my hair cut."

"What do you do for a living?" I asked.

"Oh, I am a miner, too. I have a mine up on the hill where I am sinking a shaft. I heard you fellows down here and came down to see if you were on our claim. You may pan along the creek, but not on these hills. They belong to us."

For several evenings that followed, he came down to visit us at the campfire and our associations became quite friendly. All

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the time he seemed to have a peculiar stare in his eyes. Often he appeared lost in meditation. Well versed in natural history, he was an entertaining talker.

One evening he brought a bundle of something wrapped up in a newspaper. "I would like to show you my day's work," he said. Opening the package, he showed us a large button of gold which he declared weighed enough to bring one hundred and ten dollars. "I have several of these, but do not intend to sell them for a while."

Near the end of my stay there, the hermit went with us on a hike several miles up the creek to the big dam, passing a number of old abandoned mines and seeing tracks of deer and other wild animals.

"We used to have many bears around here," he remarked. "One day I was picking huckleberries here and, while in the midst of the bushes, not knowing anything was in miles of me, an old bear came up behind. Standing on his hind feet, he reached with his forepaws around the clump of bushes, drawing them, with me, to him. As he proceeded to help himself to the berries, I gave a scream, hoping to get released. Frantic with fear that he might eat me, too, I continued yelling and struggling trying to get away from him. After devouring all the berries, he let loose of the bushes which also released me."

Meandering along the steep slopes of the upper reaches of the creek, we came to an open space and the hermit pointed to a cabin in the clearing, saying:

"That is my home. Would you like to see my mine?"

With crude equipment he had sunk a shaft and was mining, single-handed, valuable gravel from a depth of over a hundred feet.

"How much have you made?"  
"Plenty," was his only answer.

Reluctantly we left our good friend as we broke camp. He came down to say good-by, bringing cigars as gifts. With a wave of his hand, he bid us adieu, returning to his lone shack among the eternal hills where he lives peaceably undisturbed by the depression or worries of men. A child of nature, far removed from the bustle, stir and struggle of the man-made cities.

We think that's a plumb good study of a character who sure'd make a deep impression on a couple of greenhorn prospectors. One thing we like about these true Western experiences is that they don't depend wholly on thrills to hold the reader's

interest. They're just straightforward accounts of what happened, as told by hombres who were right there and saw it, or heard it from someone else who was there.

*Gracias, amigo.* Maybe you recall something else that happened in your gold-hunting days. If you do, send it in!

Just for a change, we're giving you two true experiences this week instead of one. How do you like the idea? Write in and tell us, won't you?

Here's the second, as told to the author by an old-timer—and in the old-timer's own words, as nearly as can be done:

#### WRANGLIN' TERMITES

By Lynn Eliot  
San Antonio, Texas

I've had some right brisk moments raslin' brones and hard-headed steers, but I don't recollect no more excitin' experience than a herd of termites caused me onct. I'd done give up broncobustin' after I got bunged up, and went to exterminatin' the pesky rascals.

I'd got a job treatin' a house for a lady that was sagged three inches in the middle, it was so et up. That mornin' I crawled

under the house to peel them cedar posts so's the stuff would soak in. Before I got halfway them joists had my head peeled, that house was built so low.

Feelin' for my pocketknife, I see two eyes glarin' at me from a corner. And behind them was the biggest black cat I have ever saw. It wouldn't 'a' took a smart man to tell they was sompin wrong with him, every hair on his hide was standin' different, and he was thrashin' his tail like a cornered bobcat.

Then he started at me stiff-legged, makin' a funny mumblin' noise. When he come closer, I saw he was slobberin'. I was on a piece of high ground, wedged in between two joists and couldn't move except forrard or back, and I started back'ards pronto.

My knife was gone, lost when I crawled in, I reckon. I started wigglin' back to my spray gun to squirt some exterminator on him. Then I recollected I'd sent my helper for cigarettes. He'd stand outside and pump the stuff to me while I'd shoot it. But he was gone, and it was thirty feet to daylight.

That cat come right on, eyes gleamin', claws out, and ears saggin' till he looked like a muley cow. I felt for my gas mask to perctect my face, but it'd got wedged in back of me. I was thrashin' my arms and legs like a turtle backin' water. That cat was so clost I could hear the slobber foam-in', and he was hookin' out with them glistenin' claws.

Next time he lashed I knowed he'd take off part of my face. Jest then my knee

---

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---

touched my spray gun and I yanked her up aimin' to hit him over the head with it. But I thumbed down the trigger—habit, I reckon—when out spewed a teeny bit of exterminator. I hadn't drained the hose the day before.

That cat dropped faster'n a pole-axed steer, and them fumes riz up in my nose and eyes and mouth till I like to never got out of there. I ain't never been so glad to see sunshine sence the mule kicked me out of the barn.

That termite wrangler sure did have his troubles. You rub elbows with some plumb interesting gents down San Antone way.

Now for the fiction stories that we just couldn't see crowded out this week:

#### GUN MARSHAL

By Reynolds Davis—Age 28  
Stigler, Oklahoma

Hardease Higgins stopped, hitched his gun belts, and threw a look over at the dignified, barrel-bellied individual coming sedately down the boardwalk.

Mayor Krendall had something on his chest. Marshal Higgins could tell that from the way the town ramrod cleared his throat.

"Feller down to the city hall while ago, marshal. Wants yuh to send out toward the Guadalupes to fetch in a dry-gulcher. Seems the dry-gulcher was after a poke of dust this gent was packin', but the said gent was gun-handly his own self. Waal, I told yuh now. Yuh don't have to, o' course."

Mayor Krendall moved on. So did Marshal Higgins, pondering the words, "Didn't have to." Heck no, he didn't have to do anything but—

He stopped abruptly. Whipped out a tattered muslin reward dodger. Gave it a glance and slapped another look at the trail-weary mustang at the Lucky Ace tie rail.

"Holy heifers! Killer Lactur's brone!"

Saddle carbine on right side. Stirrup leathers short. A mean-eyed skewball such as Lactur was reputed to ride. The dodger said Lactur was left-handed, wore one gun, and was all body with hardly any legs. Lactur's skewball brone, all right!

Suddenly, Marshal Higgins caved.

"I been sh-shootin' off my mouth how I was gonna take 'im, an' here he is."

He threw a nervous glance at the saloon batwings. Loosened his .45s in their tooled pouches. Then he jammed them down again, sagging weakly against an awning post. His voice was almost a whisper.

"I jest ain't got the skill tuh do it."

Sweat pinpointed his brow as cold dread surged through his whang-leather muscles.

"Sides, if I pranced in there foollike an' tackled the gun-swiftest he-wolf ever run outta Texas, Missus Higgins might suffer."

And on top of that, the last couple of hours in the livery-stable hay had fogged his brain. Probably would add a piece of a second to his draw.

"Help me," Marshal Higgins rasped, finally. "Boothill's better'n disgrace. I'm goin' in."

Men jammed the Lucky Ace. The air was tortured with tobacco smoke, whiskey fumes, and chin music. The barkeep spied the marshal. Twisting his neck, he cut a look at an hombre near the rear wall. Then he looked back at Higgins.

"Hey, marshal, where you been? Here's a gent that craves tuh see you."

"Yeah?" said the marshal softly, praying he could stall until his eyes became accustomed to the lesser light in here.

The stranger drifted away from the wall.

Marshal Higgins suddenly rocked back on his heels. He was looking into the slate-gray eyes of a colt-legged, two-gunned button.

"I don't like the set of yore face, marshal," the button snapped. "It was justifiable homicide an' I won't stand arrest. I'm no hoss thief, either. The dry-gulcherin' hellion shot mine, so I forked his in. It's out front. Now don't try tuh start anything, marshal, or—"

The marshal had blinked, scowled. Now he thrust out his jaw.

"Don't rile me, younker! I'm Hardease Higgins. Now, 'bout the bounty on Lactur—"

In reading this story, we agreed that the author could have developed his characters better. Yet after finishing the last page, we'll be sons of guns if we didn't agree that we felt plumb well acquainted with the actors! It's a cinch that they're a heap more than just names.

That's O. K. for their reactions,

but the reader should know more about what they look like. Develop your characters more in your next one.

The plot is quite good, but the writing is better. We liked the snappy ending.

We sure encourage you to keep at it, pard. Read and write plenty.

**HE COULDN'T BE BAD**

By Ken Hendrick—Age 19  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Tim Bradley had never robbed a bank, nor had he ever committed a murder. He never had wanted to before. But this day as he rode slowly up Pietown's back street toward the Stockmen's National, these two thoughts were strong in his mind. He needed five thousand dollars—bad. It would take this exact amount to send his invalid dad, left a cripple by bullets received in a recent range war, to that specialist in Denver. And Tim meant to take that money from the bank if he had to murder Cass Wilson, president, to do it. It was the only way he knew how to obtain that much money quickly.

Riding slowly along, the hoofs of his gun horse made little noise through the deep sand. Dusk of the late fall day was thickening. In a way Tim's plan of getting the money seemed easy. Wilson worked in the back of the bank until eight o'clock. By the time Tim reached the building, it would be dark. He felt sure old Cass would let him in without question. Then all he, Tim, would have to do would be to pull his gun on the little gray-haired man and demand his desired amount. This part would be easy, yes, but it would take more than a drawn .45 to convince Wilson that Tim meant business. Wilson was an old-timer of the grim pioneer stock, and had faced much worse things than one lone ranny with a gun. He wouldn't give up that money without a fight. Tim would be forced to use his gun. But somehow thoughts of killing old Cass didn't set well on his stomach.

It was dark when Tim reached the bank. As he started to dismount, he suddenly stiffened in the saddle. The back door was open and a saddled horse was nearby! Tim slid from his saddle, stepped to the door. It was then he heard the cold, rasping voice coming from within that caused him to stop and listen intently.

"Work the combination on that safe, you old fool, an' fork over that money or I'll shoot you down where you stand!" said the voice Tim could not recognize.

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## Miscellaneous

**SWORDS, DAGGERS,** rapiers, pistols, armor, curios, Catalog 10c. Robert Abels, M-360 Lexington Arcade, New York.

"I won't open it, you thievin' scoundrel!" came back Wilson's level voice. "If you get any money here, it'll be over my dead body."

Tim heard a muttered curse, the click of a cocked gun hammer. The ominous sounds made the short hair on the back of his neck prickle. Strangely enough he forgot his business here in Pietown. The fact that he was being beaten at his own game was furthestmost from his mind. Inside was a man who was about to be murdered because he refused to hand over other people's money. Hell, a man just couldn't stand by and see a thing like that done.

Suddenly Tim was through the door, his spurs jingling as they accidentally scraped the door facing. The holdup man inside heard the noise, swung around, the dim lamp light revealing his dark, evil face and the gun in his hand. Then the ruffian's gun was blasting. Tim flung himself to the floor, shooting as he fell, and the holdup man went down with a single low grunt.

Tim picked himself up, holstering his gun, and turned anxiously toward Cass Wilson. The little man was unharmed and grinning. At that moment, Sheriff Clem Doan, tall and skinny, with a gun gripped tight between long fingers, charged inside, drawn by the shooting. Gaping with unbelief, he eyed the dead holdup man.

"W-why, Tim, son," he spluttered. "Did you shoot him?"

Tim nodded gravely.

"Waal," said the sheriff, "you've just downed Kress Mantle, the worst outlaw this side of the border. There's a five-thousand-dollar reward for him, too. Come on over to my office and I'll fix up the papers so's you can get your dinero right away. I'll send somebody back after this skunk."

Tim said nothing as he turned to follow the sheriff outside. He couldn't have said anything. He was too choked up inside

We call this a plumb good yarn, well written. The author could have made more of his characters, but there's enough characterization to make the actors' reactions logical ones, and that's durned important. An amateur writer's first job is to build conflict on his characters' antagonism that results from their opposed natures, not what happens accidentally through the action they get into. Don't forget the rule of cause and effect.



And here's the poem:

### SIX-GUN LAW

By Leland Calder—Age 15

Andrews, South Carolina

Three-finger Morgan was a real bad man,  
Who lived by the six-gun law;  
But he made his final mistake that day,  
When he rode into Apache Draw.

Six hard-fighting lawmen were waiting there,  
Their guns were ready to shoot;  
They were waiting for Three-finger Morgan,  
Because he rode the wrong trail, the owl-  
hoot.

He came riding into the mouth of the Draw,  
His hand right close to his gun;  
The lawmen knew there'd be plenty of  
shooting,  
Before Three-finger Morgan was done.

"Get up them hands you back-shooting  
skunk."

Came the sharp command from his side.  
Quick as a flash, he slid off his horse,  
But somehow he knew he'd made his last  
ride.

Six quick shots were fired at once,  
That day in Apache Draw,  
And true to his word as he'd oft'n said,  
He had lived and died by the six-gun law.

### RUSTLERS' MISTAKE

By Hallie Carter—Age 22

Leaksville, North Carolina

When Rex Norman topped the rise,  
He began to curse and swear,  
For what he saw was enough  
To get into anyone's hair.

Four men were rustlin' his cattle;  
Why the very nerve of the crew.  
Rustlin' his cattle, the polecats,  
He'd show them a thing or two.

He spurred his horse in pursuit,  
And triggered a flamin' gun,  
Two rustlers bit the dust,  
And the others turned to run.

But Rex shook out his reata,  
And brought the rustlers down.  
Then he rounded up his cattle,  
And took the thieves to town.

Now Rex had no grudge against rustlers,  
Or any of their outlaw kin.  
But when they rustled his cattle,  
Then that got under his skin.

### OWL-HOOT TRAIL'S END

By Milton McIntosh—Age 18

Little Rock, Arkansas

Jim Hart rode off from the X Bar B;  
He was hitting the owl-hoot trail.  
He planned to rob the Twin Buttes stage,  
And to rifle the U. S. mail.

Young Jim was a first-rate top cowhand,  
But now he was starting off wrong—  
He had pulled his gun in a roundup row,  
And been chased by Foreman Strong.

As the stage came jolting down the trail  
Jim rode from behind some rocks,  
Shooting driver and guard as they showed  
fight,  
Then rode off with the iron-bound box.

Six thousand in gold Jim took from the  
box,  
But a posse was soon after him.  
And after a hot-lead, running fight  
The posse caught up with Jim.

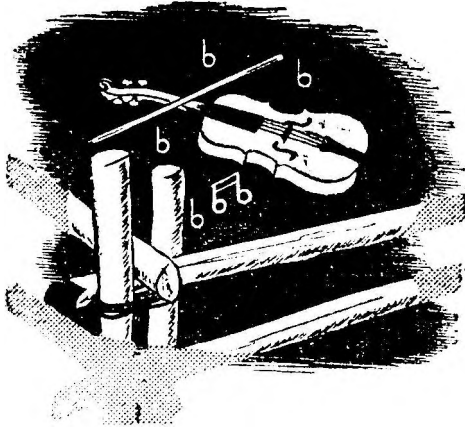
Robbery and murder they charged him  
with,  
And he died by a rope one day,  
Which goes to prove to all once more  
That the owl-hoot trail don't pay.

If any of you folks think the true  
Western experiences should be  
packed with thrills, we're warning  
you that there are plenty of 'em  
coming to you? Action? Say, some  
hombres' lives are nothing else but!

*Hasta la vista.*

THE RANGE BOSS.





## FIDDLIN' JOE'S SONG CORRAL

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Ever since I talked to you folks about tall tales and the like back in December, I've been wondering whether any of you would bite. Lo and behold, here's a reader who has! He sends in a good tale to start the ball rolling:

"Well, Fiddlin' Joe," he writes, "I see by the Wild West Weekly that you want to start some old tales. Well, I read yours of January 6th about the snake and the wooden leg, only you did not quite finish it because after that wooden leg healed up the boys scraped enough gum off it to chew the rag for the rest of the summer.

"Well, now, after waiting to see some more of these tales, I got the idea that the boys are kind of waiting for someone else to start, so I will try and start the ball rolling by telling you one of my tales that happened to me when working at Black Rock, Montana, for a gold-mining company.

"Here it is: I and two other pals had gone out hunting for wild game up near Three Fork. Well, we had been there just four days. I was the cook, so I did not go out much, but they had been out every day from dawn, and the only thing they brought back was a couple of rabbits. Well, now, rabbits I can catch any time just by calling them; I don't need no gun. But anyway, on the morning of the fifth day my two pals were talking about what they would do if they could only lay their eyes on some big game. 'Well,' I said, 'guess I'll go out and get some kindling wood for the stove.'

"I had to go out pretty far, because I had already gathered most everything around the camp. Well, boys, I was just about ready to start getting an armful when I heard a noise to my right, so I looked up, and there it was: a great big grizzly bear. Me with no gun or anything to defend myself. I just let out one big howl. (It must have gone clean across the world, for I come out of the camp the next morning about the same time and heard the echo coming back.) But now you listen, boys, get me right. I wasn't *afraid!* Only I had bought a brand-new hunting suit, and if I got in contact with Mr. Bear I might have torn my clothes, and I didn't want that.

"I started for camp on a run, Mr. Bear after me. Well, I was running so fast that for every eight steps I took, only two touched the ground. Well, I was almost to the camp, and

Mr. Bear most up to me, when I caught my foot on one of those creeping hemlocks, as I call 'em, and I went down just as Mr. Bear made a flying leap for me. As I fell, my hand hit the camp door and it flew wide open, Mr. Bear flying right through and landing plumb in the middle of the camp. I got up quick as I could, grabbed the door and said, 'There's the first one, boys; you take care of him. I'm going out to get another.'

"Well, I don't know what I ever did to those pals of mine, but they never wanted to go hunting with me again.

"Well, boys, come on, let's start something! Give us one of your tales, see if you can beat mine!"

I reckon Mr. T. Desloger, of New Hampshire, tells a mighty good story there. As he says, I hope you old-timers will get your wits together and start things a-goin' for these long lone winter nights.

Here's a poem that describes one phase of cowboy life and a picture close to his heart, too! For after the long hard days' work the chuck wagon is a mighty popular center of attraction.

**WAITIN' FER CHUCK**

By Harry Lee Marriner

(From the collection of  
Gerald McIntosh, Arkansas)

I like to lie sprawled on an old wagon cover with tan on my neck and with dust on my boots.

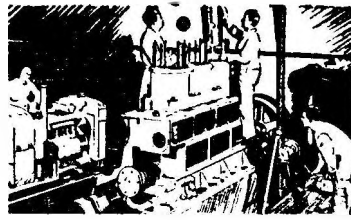
And watch the camp cook as he scratches up dinner about a small fire made of weather-dried roots.

The chuck wagon's near, and he slices fat bacon—throws biscuits together with never a slip.

And stirs the dried apples while humming a measure, a dead cigarette hanging limp from his lips.

The boys are now coming—they slide from their horses, the whole outfit's here—was there ever such luck?

All sprawling on slickers or on the bald prairie, all smoking and joking while waiting fer chuck.



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At last with a howl the cook shows he is ready! We grab our tin plates from the chuck wagon's shelf.

No waiter is needed; what use is a waiter when every one rather would wait on himself?

The biscuits are brown in the three-legged spider; the can of molasses is ready at hand.

The coffeepot simmers amid the red embers, it's contents black, strong and of perfume most grand.

And we cattle punchers sit cross-legged and gobble, and lie back replete as a man ever gets.

While into the air rises smoke as of incense—the blue haze that comes from hand-rolled cigarettes.

That's a peaceful sort of a picture of the end of a day; and I can bet that dinner, and then the haze of cigarette smoke while songs and stories were exchanged, wiped out the hardships of the day. Or, if they still hung in a cowboy's mind, he could make a joke of 'em, for the sting was gone.

Remember, folks, we're still looking for old-time songs that never have appeared in print. There must be plenty of them somewhere floating around that could be dug up for the Corral.

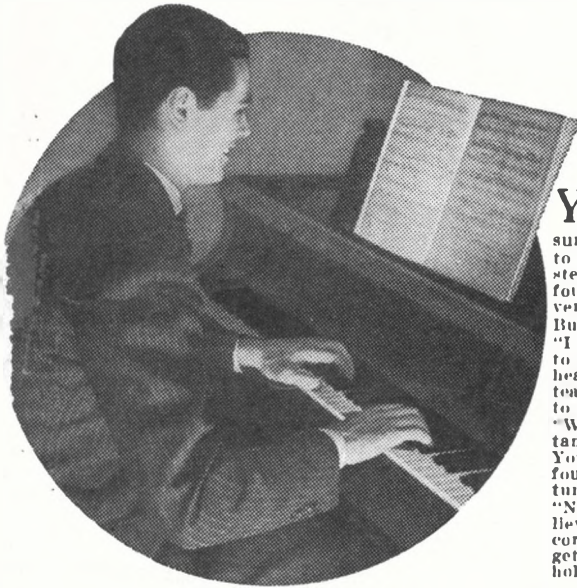
Sometimes songs of the West show up in the East, and they are kept alive by folks who never saw a prairie or a cottonwood tree. So, if you've ever sung a Western song, send it to Fiddlin' Joe. Maybe it was never printed before?

So long, folks, good luck till next time—and let us know if you can hunt grizzly bears any better than our friend in the story.





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