

STREET & SMITH'S WILD WEST ★

15¢

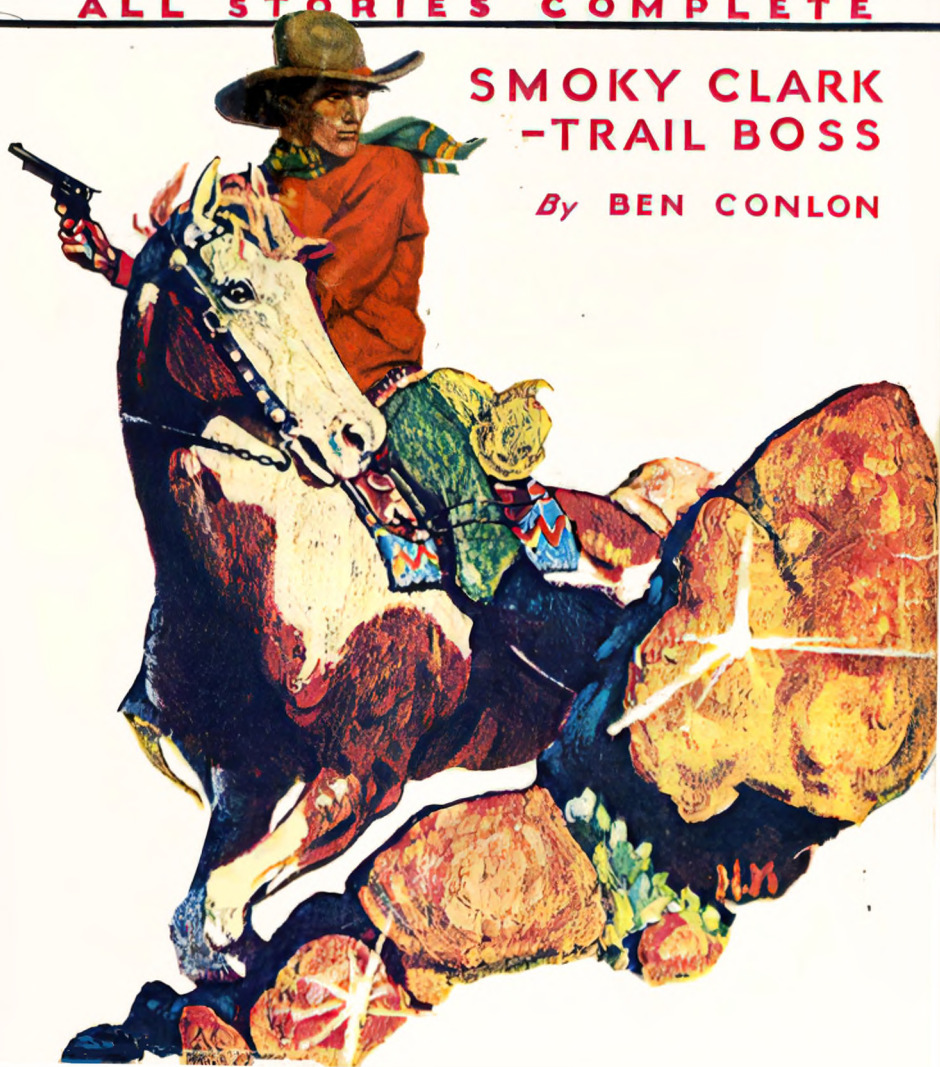
WEEKLY

AUGUST
5,
1933

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

SMOKY CLARK
-TRAIL BOSS

By BEN CONLON





WHO CARES WHO

YOU ARE — *If your breath isn't sweet?*

The answer is: Nobody!

Halitosis (unpleasant breath) is indeed the unfor-
givable social fault. It nullifies every other charm.

By the way, how is your breath today? Agreeable
you hope—but is it?

Statistics prove that everyone has halitosis at one
time or another—*without knowing it*. Close to
90% of halitosis cases are caused by the fermentation
of tiny food particles that even careful tooth brush-
ing has failed to remove from teeth and gums.

Recognizing this constant threat, why not put
yourself on the safe side? Why offend others needles-
sly when by simply rinsing the mouth with Listerine

you can make your breath sweet and wholesome—
beyond power to offend?

Listerine immediately halts fermentation, the
major cause of mouth odors, and then overcomes
the odors themselves. Keep it always handy and use
it before all engagements.

Don't expect questionable mouth washes to get
rid of questionable breath.

Use Listerine and be *sure*. Repeated tests have
shown that Listerine instantly overcomes mouth
odors that ordinary mouth washes cannot hide in
12 hours.

Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo.

to get rid of halitosis use **LISTERINE**

Classified Advertising

Detectives Wanted—Instructions

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. Great demand. Excellent opportunity. Experience unnecessary. Particulars free. Write George Wagoner, 2640-P Broadway, New York.

Sport-Lovers

BEAUTIFUL 8" x 16" OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF MISS AMERICA X. World's fastest power boat, with complete specifications. Price 50c postpaid. Majestic Art Ass'n, Marine City, Mich.

Story Ideas

STORY IDEAS FOR TALKING PICTURES, MAGAZINES, accepted any form for revision, copyright, and submission to markets. Established 1917. We know market requirements. Free booklet gives full particulars. Universal Scenario Company, 415 Meyer Bldg., Western & Sierra Vista, Hollywood, California.

Picture Play

selling at the new price of

10c

per copy is now the circulation leader of the movie magazine field.

Get your copy to-day

10c

PER COPY

WW-1A Please mention this magazine

GOOD YEAR

Firestone Goodrich

U.S. AND OTHER TIRES

DEALERS WANTED

NEW LOW PRICES

You can rely on Chicago's oldest, most reliable rubber company for tire replacement at lowest cost. Increasing thousands of satisfied motorists all over the U. S. A. prove standard brand tires, reconstructed by Midland are best. Low hard service on rough roads guaranteed.

50% TO 60% MORE SERVICE

BALLOON TIRES		REG. CORD TIRES	
Size	Run Tires Tubes	Size	Tires Tubes
29x1.40-21	\$1.90 \$0.85	30x3	\$1.90 \$0.85
29x1.75-20	2.15 0.85	30x3 1/2	2.75 0.85
30x1.50-21	2.15 0.85	32x4	2.75 0.85
29x4.75-19	2.20 0.85	32x4 1/2	2.95 1.15
29x4.75-20	2.25 0.95	34x4 1/2	2.55 1.15
29x5.00-19	2.60 1.05	30x5	3.25 1.35
30x2.00-20	2.60 1.05	38x5	3.25 1.45
29x5.25-19	2.75 1.15		
31x2.25-21	2.75 1.15		
29x5.50-19	2.95 1.15		
29x5.50-20	2.95 1.15		
30x2.00-18	2.95 1.15		
31x6.00-19	2.95 1.15		
32x5.00-20	3.00 1.25		
32x5.00-21	3.20 1.25		
32x2.50-20	3.20 1.35		

Send \$1.00 deposit with each tire ordered. Balance C. O. D. If you send cash 5% discount 5%. You are guaranteed a year's service or replacement at 1/2 price. Order today.

MIDLAND TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 78-C
1000-10 West Sixty-Third Street, Chicago, Illinois

190

29x4.40-21

SAVE ON TIRES

12-MONTH WRITTEN WARRANTY

BOND WITH EACH TIRE

FREE

SET OF NON-GLARE HEADLIGHT REFLECTORS

50% more headlight power; pierces fog; makes night driving easy

High School Course in 2 Years

You can complete this simplified High School Course at home inside of two years. Meets all requirements for entrance to college and the leading professions. This and thirty or other practical courses are described in our Free Bulletin. Send for it TODAY.

AMERICAN SCHOOL

Dept. HC-1 Buxton Ave. & 68th St. A S 1922 CHICAGO

"THE OLD RELIABLE"

PLANTEN'S C & C OR BLACK CAPSULES

REMEDY FOR MEN

AT DRUGGISTS OR TRIAL BOX BY MAIL 50c From Dr. Planten, 32 Henry St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

▲ BEWARE OF IMITATIONS ▲

A Baby In Your Home

Scientists now state that "Complete unity in life depends on sex harmony" and that the lack of it is the one greatest cause for unhappy marriages. Also that every woman "has the capacity for sex expression" but too often she is undeveloped or suffering with general female disorders, which rob her of her normal desires. During an experience of more than 35 years specializing in the treatment of diseases peculiar to women, I developed a simple home treatment which has brought new hope, health and happiness to many thousands. Many who had been childless for years became proud and happy Mothers. Husbands have written me the most glowing letters of gratitude and now I want every woman who is run-down or suffering from female disorders to learn about this splendid treatment, and how she may use it in the privacy of her own home.



Get This Knowledge FREE

In my two books "Full Development" and "A Baby In Your Home," I intimately discuss many important subjects relating to the female sex that are vitally interesting to every woman. They tell how you too may combat your troubles as thousands of others have and often again enjoy the desires and activities of Nature's most wonderful creation—a normal, fully developed vigorous woman. I will gladly send both books postpaid free. Write today. **DR. H. WILL ELDERS,** Suite 463-F, 7th and Felix Streets, St. Joseph, Mo.

when answering advertisements



Yearly Subscription, \$6.00 Six Months, \$3.00 Single Copies, 15 Cents

The entire contents of this magazine are protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted without the publishers' permission.

Vol. 78, No. 1 CONTENTS FOR AUGUST 5, 1933 Whole No. 1607

Cover Picture—Scene from
 “Smoky Clark—Trail Boss” . . . *Kiemle*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Smoky Clark—Trail Boss . . . *Ben Conlon* 3
 An' thar's plenty smoke when he shoots his way out of a dirty frame-up.
- Tangled Herds *Cleve Endicott* 50
 The saddle pards tangle, too—with a gang o' rustlin' skuuks.
- The Desert Phantom's Show-down . . . *Walker Tompkins* 91
 At trail's end, the justice rider evens up old scores.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- The Whistlin' Kid Climbs A Cliff . . . *Emery Jackson* 29
 By doin' which, he gits the deadwood on some plumb slick crooks.
- Some Sand, Ranger! *Frank J. Litchfield* 42
 He gits his man, but not afore plenty powder is burned an' caps busted.
- The Thunder Bird At Gray Horse Mine *Lee Harrington* 79
 Jim Hazel's old enemy escapes ag'in—which same spells trouble.
- The Sonora Kid—Not Guilty *Allan R. Bosworth* 121
 Shorty an' Willie trade lead with El Bandido fer a show-down.

BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

- A Murderous Mexican Rustler 28 Washington on the Brazos 78
 Freighters' Luck 120

DEPARTMENTS

- Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral 133
 Western Pen Pals *Conducted by Sam Wills* . 136
 The Wranglers Corner 141

Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. George C. Smith, Jr., President; Ormond V. Gould, Vice President and Treasurer; Artemas Holmes, Vice President and Secretary. Copyright, 1933, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1933, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, December 8, 1911, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$9.00 per year.

We do not accept responsibility for the return of unsolicited manuscripts.

To facilitate handling, the author should inclose a self-addressed envelope with the requisite postage attached.

STREET & SMITH PUBLICATIONS, INC., 79 7th AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.



Smoky Clark— Trail Boss

By Ben Conlon

Author of "The Smiling Avenger," etc.

CHAPTER I.

DOIN'S AT THE PALACE BAR.

IT was supper time in Panhandle Junction, and Chico Gomez's chuck joint was doing a lively business. Chico Gomez himself, dark, thin-faced, and smiling almost too pleasantly to mean it, was bawling short orders back to the smoky kitchen and helping the counterman dish out chili, red beans, enchilladas, coffee and pie. Also, like the clever business man that he was, Chico was

keeping the customers in good humor.

He winked at a group of cowboys circling one of the tables, then walked over to a grizzled, gaunt-faced man who sat at the counter. "You like the nice glass of water with your frijoles, *señor*?" he asked in a loud voice.

The punchers at the table guffawed. Chico had made a bid for a laugh and had won. For the grizzled, gaunt-faced man was known in Panhandle Junction and

other parts of Texas as "Thirsty Bart" Wilson, and his thirst was never for water.

Even Thirsty Bart himself took no offense. His gray mustache curled in a grin.

"*Mil gracias, señor,*" he said to Chico, with what he thought was an elaborate bow. "But yuh see, I'm an hombre as sticks ter good habits. I don't touch water—not in any form, I don't."

"Not even fo' a chasah?" called over a tall A Bar X waddy named "Dixie" Settle.

"Nope, not even fer a chaser," Thirsty Bart called back. "Ef thar's any gen'rous gent in this hyar assemblage as invites me ter a snort o' mescal, aguardiente, rare Spanish wines, rum, gin, or even plain whisky, I wouldn't offend him none by refusin'. I'm courteouslike that way, I am. But water—nope! I might git drowned."

He turned to a young fellow who sat on the next stool—a stranger who did not seem to consider himself as a part of this gathering of joshing and horseplay.

"Thet invite might even be accepted from a feller as was jest passin' through our fair village as well as from home talent," Bart said. "I allus likes ter be courteouslike an' mannerly ter a stranger within our gates, as yuh might say."

The young stranger smiled. "Thet's right kind o' yuh," he acknowledged. "But don't go out o' yore way bein' too polite to me, hombre, 'cause I ain't jest passin' through this neck o' the woods. I aim to settle here."

He ordered another cup of coffee and evidently regarded the conversation as over, so far as he was concerned. He looked about twenty-two. His hair and eyes were as black as an Indian's, and yet no one

could mistake him for anything but a white man. His features were inclined to be sharp. He might have been a saddle tramp, except for the expensive ten-gallon hat of light gray.

The dust of the trail clung to him, but his red shirt was clean and so was his neckerchief that looked like a striped serape. A .45 in a worn holster nestled close to each batwing of his brown chaps.

Thirsty Bart didn't appear to regard him as entirely hopeless. Often a humorous discussion of whisky ended in the drinking of it—which latter was the most expert thing that Thirsty Bart did.

"I'd shore admire ter welcome yuh ter town in a proper an' fittin' way," Bart persisted, "but yuh see, younker, when I'm broke, my throat gits sort o' dry until some kind gent wets it with——"

But Chico Gomez cut in on the moocher of drinks. "Eef you weel escuse me, Señor Weelson, I cannot have my customairs annoyed like that. Pliz to stop it, Señor Weelson—eef you will escuse me."

The oily Gomez reached to the back counter and took a cigar of poisonous appearance out of a cedar box. "Here, Señor Weelson," he said, offering the cigar to take the sting out of his reprimand of a moment before. "You weel find thees most excellent esmoking."

He struck a match and lighted the weed for Thirsty Bart. "You have pairhaps seen Señor Petty to ask heem to geev you the job on the A Bar X?" he asked.

Whether Thirsty Bart was employed or unemployed, or with or without "excellent esmoking," made little difference to Chico Gomez—except that Bart already owed him several dollars for meals. Bart would pay sooner if he got a job and

was kept on friendly terms. In his sober periods, Bart Wilson was a ranch cook. He had a frying-pan genius that made him sought after by many Panhandle outfits, in spite of his known slavery to red liquor.

"Naw," Bart snorted in disgust. "I trailed Jake Petty inter the Palace Saloon, but he didn't have no time ter talk ter me about a job. He was too dag-gawn busy braggin' bout what he'd do ter that new A Bar X foreman, when said foreman appears on the horizon."

The young man on the stool next to Thirsty Bart had his coffee cup halfway to his lips. He set it back on the counter. Suddenly he seemed to be taking an interest in the conversation.

"Yuh know," Thirsty Bart went on, "Jake Petty's been *segundo* on the A Bar X fer two-three year. He shore reckoned he was goin' ter boss the A Bar X boys when Tod Batten, the foreman, was kilt in that shoot-in' ruckus last month. But nope! Dave Leland, what owns the spread, telegrafted up north ter git him a new foreman."

The young man in the gray Stetson got up from the stool and paid Chico for his meal. He lingered long enough, though, to build a quirly and light it as Bart continued:

"Jake Petty's jest nach'ly goin' ter skin that new foreman alive when he hits town. He aims ter hang his hide up on a fence an' tan it inter saddle leather. He'll tweak that new foreman's nose, he says, an' tear out his mustache—ef any—by the roots, an' slice off an ear or two an' feed the pieces ter the houn' dawgs."

The young man in the gray Stetson touched Thirsty Bart on the shoulder. "I heard yuh mention the Palace Saloon, hombre," he said. "Lookin' fer a pertickler gin mill in this man's town is like tryin' to spot

a special clump o' cactus out on the desert. Would yuh mind tellin' me jest whar the Palace Saloon is?"

Thirsty Bart was on his feet—instantly. "I kin *show* yuh whar it is, young feller," he offered, stroking his mustache expectantly.

"That won't be necessary. I been in the saddle all day, but I reckon these feet o' mine'll still walk. I don't need to be guided by the hand, or toted over thar."

"Well, the Palace is jest two doors from hyah," Thirsty Bart told him, with deep disappointment in his tone.

The gray-Stetsoned stranger was grinning now. "Oh, mebber yuh'd better show me whar it is, at that," he reconsidered. "I might lose the trail, me bein' young an' tender."

And the now joyful Bart Wilson led the way like a bull to a salt lick.

The Palace Saloon did not live up to its name. It was a big, gloomy, bare-looking place, and none too clean. At the rear end of the long barroom were three barrels, and on top of each barrel were several empty bottles.

The proprietor of the Palace was not too particular—and neither were his customers. The whisky was bought by the barrel. It was cheap and strong, and of no special brand. It was drawn into bottles as needed.

The long room was well-filled with drinkers, but it was easy to pick out Jake Petty. Jake was plenty big enough to see—and plenty loud enough to hear. Liquor was bringing out his real nature. It was bad nature.

The A Bar X *segundo* was leaning against the bar. He was flanked by willing listeners. Jake would have an attentive audience as long as he bought drinks.

Jake Petty was not ugly-looking; that is, his features were not particularly displeasing. It was his expression that branded him as a bully. He sneered as he talked, and showed his teeth. They were tobacco-stained, and were worn down like an old Hopi Indian's.

A certain cheap vanity was reflected by the neckerchief that was a discord of pink, yellow and purple, and by the jumble of nuggets and trinkets dangling from his heavy watch chain. But his black sombrero was out of shape and the yellow shirt under the deerskin vest was badly soiled in the sleeves.

"Mebbe you hombra's'd better linger around a while," he was saying. "Thet ranny as thinks he's the new A Bar X foreman is in town." He grinned, and hitched his holstered .45 a little more toward the front. "He don't know it yet, but he's shore totin' his excitement right along with him."

"How yuh know he's reached town, Jake?" one of his listeners asked.

"Feller down ter the liv'ry stable told me; said this newcomer put up his hoss thar an' moseyed out ter git some chuck. Said he'd prob'ly be late fer supper at the A Bar X where he was goin' ter be foreman."

"Any idea what he looks like, Jake?" another puncher asked.

"Shore have. He looks a heap diff'rent than he'll look when I git through with him."

Jake laughed, and his listeners joined in. The bartender slapped his thigh in amusement. Jake bought another round of drinks.

"Feller down ter the liv'ry said he was about my height, only not so well-built, the feller said." Jake sucked in his belly and pushed out his chest. He was about thirty, but his heavy build made him look a

few years older. "Don't weigh as much on the hoof as I do, I reckon. Wearin' a light-gray skypiece, a striped necklash an' a blue shirt."

The newcomer guided to the Palace by Thirsty Bart had been standing a few feet along the bar, waiting to be served. Now he walked toward Jake Petty.

"In other words, hombre," he said, "the gent yo're talkin' about appears to be dressed jest like me—except that I got a red shirt on. For yuh see, sence I been to the liv'ry stable, I been up to the hotel an' had a wash. I feel more comfortable when I change my shirt once in a while." He looked meaningly at the sweat and liquor stains on Jake Petty's sleeves.

Jake Petty's light-blue eyes frogged out. "What yuh mean?"

"Are yuh too dumb to savvy, hombre? Or are yuh jest plumb yaller—makin' believe yuh don't reco'nize me? I mean thet I'm Smoky Clark, new foreman o' the A Bar X spread. Yuh seem to know a heap about me. Well, I'll just tell yuh a little more."

He stepped closer to Petty. "I'm easy to git along with—'ceptin' with skunks, c'yotes an' rattlers. I got some human faults. I reckon. an' yet I'm hopin' I ain't the wust in the world. I hate to see a skeered hoss whipped, or a sp'iled baby spanked, or a half-drunk hombre dealt too severe with. But a skeered hoss has to be pulled up, an' a spiled baby has to git spanked. An' a half-drunk hombre has got to git sobered up. Mebbe this'll do it."

Spat! A deathly silence followed the noise made by the newcomer's palm striking Jake Petty's face.

And Jake Petty's listeners and fellow drinkers had suddenly leaped to one side. No one, it appeared, wanted to be very near Jake Petty

now. And no one wanted to be very near the black-haired young waddy who had challenged the *segundo* to a fight in no uncertain terms.

Jake Petty had at least been right in one of his claims—the newcomer was “shore totin’ his excitement right along with him.”

CHAPTER II.

“SHO’ NUFF SHOOTIN’.”

THE newcomer put up his left hand in a warning gesture as Jake Petty was about to go for his gun. “Jest a minute thar, Petty!” he called out. “Yuh kin draw thet iron o’ yoren or not, jest as yuh like. Personal, I’m hopin’ yuh don’t, but I’m hopin’ it fer yore sake more’n fer mine. I’d admire to show yuh the kind of an hombre yo’re shootin’ it out with. I don’t want to be no show-off. But I don’t want to be no killer, neither!”

With the speed of lightning, one of “Smoky’s” .45’s had appeared in his right hand. But it was clear that he was not throwing down on Jake Petty. For Smoky had turned halfway around and was facing the whisky barrels at the rear of the long, gloomy room.

“Them empty bottles on the barrels—are they any good?” he flung over his shoulder at the man back of the bar.

“They’ll be better when they’re filled,” was the laughing answer. “Jest at present, in thet harmless form, they might be wuth two-bits apiece.”

Smoky Clark’s left hand went into his pocket and came out holding a silver dollar which he tossed on the bar. “I’ll take a cart-wheel’s worth,” he said. “The necks o’ them bottles looks too long an’ gawky to me.”

Bang-bang-bang-bang! And four quick shots rang out.

The necks of four bottles in a row disappeared. The crowd stared. Jake Petty’s jaw dropped. It was the speed, even more than the accuracy, which was astounding.

“Now, them bottles ain’t much good without necks,” Smoky Clark announced calmly. “Some feller might cut hisself on ’em. So them bottles might’s well disappear, too.”

Two of them did—in a pair of quick shots. They seemed to dissolve into a shower of glass. And Smoky’s now empty .45 was back in its holster.

He had turned back toward the bar and was smiling at Jake Petty, who was plainly at a loss just what move to make. But Smoky didn’t give him more than a second to decide. With a rattler-fast left-hand draw he had plucked the extra six-gun from his left holster. Two more quick shots smashed the remaining neckless bottles.

There was a tense silence as Smoky leathered his second six-gun. Then from behind the group came a drawling Southern voice—the voice of Dixie Settle, who had just entered the saloon:

“Thet’s some sho’ ’nuff shootin’. Ah ain’t nevah seen it tied. Not even with a squirrel rifle. No, suh! Not in a bad light like this heah.”

“Thank yuh,” Smoky acknowledged over his shoulder. And then to Jake Petty: “Now, feller, I s’pose mebbe I seemed like a danged show-off. But thet wasn’t my intention. I don’t like murder. An’ I was a little afeard thet’s what it might ‘a’ been if we tangled.”

And still Jake Petty was unable to speak. He was swallowing hard. That left holster of Smoky’s was a magnet for Jake’s prominent eyes. Jake Petty himself was no laggard with a six-gun; until this very evening he had regarded himself as the

fastest on the draw in this section of the Panhandle.

Now he was not at all certain. Should he take a chance? He might win glory in Panhandle Junction; might even find himself foreman of the A Bar X. Old Dave Leland, the A Bar X owner, could not blame a challenged man for fighting and doing his best to win.

But Jake Petty might—in fact, probably would—lose. And Jake knew that second best in a gun fight would win no prize but a grave in Boot Hill. Maybe there was another way out of this. He was listening to Clark.

"Petty," Smoky Clark was saying evenly, "I don't hold no hard feelin's agin' yuh. Yuh was braggin' purty tall, but mebber thet was the redeye in yuh more'n it was yoreself."

A snicker ran through the bar-room crowd.

"Now, I don't mean to bully yuh, Petty," Clark went on. "We don't want no gun fight. I don't—an' mebber *you* don't. I'm willin' to call it even. Or I'll fight yuh with my bare fists. Or I'll wrastle yuh. I'll bulldawg or hawg-tie a steer agin' yuh, or I'll match yuh broncho-peelin', or I'll run yuh a foot race. If yo're a better man than I am, I can understand why yuh want to keep me from bein' yore boss on the A Bar X."

He paused, as if for breath. The snickers in the room had become guffaws.

"Well, what yo'all say now, Jake?" Dixie Settle demanded.

Jake Petty had controlled himself by this time. This newcomer had offered a good-natured, harmless way out. And Jake was equal to the occasion.

"What do I say?" he repeated. "I say this Smoky Clark is got hoss sense. Thar ain't no use o' killin'.

I say I'm buyin' a drink fer the house, *thet's* what I say. Bellies agin' the mahogany, gents. Nominate yore pizen. The drinks is on me—an' I reckon the joke is, too. Howsomever, we'll slug down a welcome ter the new foreman o' the A Bar X."

"Now yo're talkin' my language!" Thirsty Bart Wilson piped up. "Yip-ee! Yo're all right, Jake Petty!"

To most of the others in the Palace Saloon, it also seemed that Jake Petty could be a good sport, after all.

Only two of the men in that group knew otherwise. One was Jake Petty himself. The other was Smoky Clark, who had met men of all sorts from the Cimarron to the Nueces and could usually brand them on sight for what they were. He'd be civil to Jake Petty. He'd be square with him, and hold no grudge. But he'd be on his guard.

There were drinks—plenty of them. There was a round on Jake Petty. There were rounds on several of the others, including Smoky Clark. Everybody wanted to prove his good-fellowship by spending money—everybody except Thirsty Bart Wilson, who proved *his* good-fellowship by taking whisky each time, while some of the punchers shifted to "sody pop" and Smoky Clark drank nothing but lemonade.

Smoky ordered it without apology, too, although it was an unpopular drink—the least profitable for the house and the most difficult to prepare. And yet Smoky Clark was gaining in popularity every minute.

Jake Petty was especially eager to regain the good graces of the new foreman.

"Ev'ry hombre makes a mistake in his time, I reckon," Jake said at

the height of festivities. "Thar ain't no man thet's perfect, is they? Well, I was wrong—plumb wrong—fer shootin' off my mouth."

"It takes a man to admit he's wrong," Smoky Clark replied. "An' I wasn't doin' no explainin' before, but I'm willin' to do it now. Mebbe it *does* 'pear sort of odd why old Dave Leland hired a stranger from other parts fer foreman o' the A Bar X. Thinkin' it over, Jake, I can't say as I blame yuh much fer bein' a little skittish over it."

"Aw, I was actin' like a woolly-brained fool," Petty admitted.

"Well, anyhow, I reckon it's up to me to tell how I fell into the job as foreman o' the A Bar X. Ol' Dave Leland was a pard o' my dad's. The salt o' the earth, ol' Dave is."

"They don't come no bettah," Dixie Settle agreed. "No, suh!"

"Thet's what I'm claimin'. An' it wasn't 'cause he knowed my dad thet ol' Dave thought I was a better man than mebbe I am. The real reason I got this job is—thet there."

He pointed to his glass of lemonade.

"He shore is a little narrer on the likker question, if thet's what yuh mean," Jake Petty spoke up.

"He's got reasons fer it," Smoky defended. "Ol' Dave's father was a drunkard. It ain't tellin' no tales out o' school—Dave hisself 'ud be the first one to admit it. Dave suffered as a kid. His dad spent a lot o' dinero on redeye, while Dave shifted fer hisself. Dave never had no shoes 'ceptin' ol' cast-offs till he was almost old enough to bulldog a steer. Result was thet ol' Dave growed up hatin' whisky."

Smoky finished his lemonade. "Dave's knowed me sence I been big enough to look over a jack-rabbit's ears, but I hadn't seen him fer a long time till he was up in my coun-

try—the Cimarron country—a year ago. We had a reunion together, an' some refreshments. He found out I never touched likker."

"Hyar's ter yuh—as a curiosity," Thirsty Bart put in, holding up his glass and then emptying it at a gulp. "But no un could ever say anything scand'lous like thet about me."

"Right then he offered me a job," Smoky continued, "but I was rod on a ranch up in my country, then. But when Dave's foreman was killed, he sent me a telegram to come down an' take over the job. An' I wasn't turnin' down no offers like thet. Well, thet's the entire story, I reckon."

But it wasn't exactly the entire story. Smoky Clark did not care to mention the name of Dave Leland's daughter in a barroom. And more than once, up on the Cimarron, he had thought about the golden-haired girl with whom he had been raised as a neighbor. Leah Leland would be about twenty now. Smoky had last seen her when she had been seventeen.

"Well, Ah sho' can see things speedin' up on the spread when yo'-all take things ovah," Dixie Settle predicted. "Dave's last fo'man was easy-goin'. But dawg-gone! Ah bet yo'all keep us punchahs hoppin'."

The celebration continued until Smoky called a halt on the drinking. Then he got Pete, his brown-and-white pinto horse, from the livery stable, and with Jake Petty and Dixie Settle, rode out to the A Bar X through the balm of a soft Texas night.

CHAPTER III.

DAVE LELAND'S SPREAD.

DAVE LELAND, the "Big Boss" of the A Bar X, sat on the gate of the south corral and watched Smoky Clark as the foreman tried

to persuade a fiery-eyed cayuse to change from a rowdy into a gentleman.

Smoky was putting the horse—a big black brought in from the remuda that morning—through the accustomed bronc-peeler's drill, using kindness when possible, but force when necessary—which was often.

The cayuse leaped and danced and squatted and sunfished. It stopped dead still every now and then, welted out with its forefeet and stamped and kicked with its hind ones. Its killer eyes were a challenge to the hundred and sixty pounds of man on its back.

Gradually, rider and horse drew a larger audience. Dixie Settle, originally from Kentucky and a lover of sweet horseflesh, yipped and cheered lustily. "Blacky" Gomez—a brother of the tricky Chico of the Panhandle Junction chuck joint—looked on with the jealous interest of an expert in the same line. His dark eyes showed unwilling admiration. Blacky was horse wrangler of the outfit.

Jake Petty, the big *segundo*, stood leaning against the gate, his face devoid of expression. But once in a while the prominent light-blue eyes brightened as Smoky Clark threatened to leave the rim-fire saddle, possibly to get pounded beneath the big black's hoofs.

Dave Leland bent forward a little nervously as the black streaked across the corral and threatened to scrape its rider against the barbed wire at the north boundary. But Smoky's foot was out of the fence-side stirrup and his leg was held out of danger. Then he yanked the black's head around, gave the animal steel and made it like it.

The big black shook itself in rage. It stood on its hind legs. But Smoky

was over on one stirrup now, prepared to step off if the horse toppled backward—an old cavalryman's trick he had learned when his father was supplying beef on the hoof to a Southwest army camp.

The broncho squealed and came back on all fours. It leaped into the air and changed ends. It put its head down, flagged its tail. It was planning mischief. It started to sunfish again. Smoky gave it more steel.

"I'll show yuh who's master here, yuh big son of a gun!" he yelled.

The broncho quit all tricks and went into straight speed. It ran like a jack rabbit gone loco. Six times around the big corral and it was about ready to quit. But Smoky gave it six more times as a penalty.

The black's sweat-streaked sides were heaving, and before its spirit was broken, Smoky got down, threw a hobble on the animal, stripped off hull and hackamore; then he turned the big black loose to think it over.

Dave Leland met Smoky at the barred gate. "Yuh shore l'arned thet black bronc a lesson, Smoky," he commended.

"Oh, he'll come round, I reckon," Smoky said. "A right fine hoss!"

Dave Leland—crippled from being thrown by a horse some months before—started to limp toward the ranch house and then turned. "Say, Smoky," he called, "don't go to the bunk house fer chuck to-night. Come up an' sit in with Leah an' me. We'll be waitin' fer yuh. Want to talk over somethin'."

And Smoky was so excited that he failed to notice the jealous gleam in Jake Petty's froglike eyes.

Dixie Settle's prophecy soon turned out to be correct. Smoky Clark, the new foreman, was making

things hum on the A Bar X. But he worked harder than anybody else.

There was plenty to do at all times on the ranch, for the Leland outfit was one of the biggest in the Panhandle corner of the State. Years before, old Dave Leland had made the most of a Land Act which started him out with big acreage, and he had shrewdly added to his holdings at every opportunity.

There were drones to speed up, for it was a tradition that Dave Leland seldom fired a man for anything less than getting drunk. A man who stayed sober could get away with almost anything. In his new job, Smoky had found it necessary to speed up the hands who were inclined to loaf while on routine duties.

Fences were repaired; a new tool-house was built; the big feed barn was repaired and repainted. A slovenly cook who seldom changed his shirt was given fair warning, and then permitted to look for a ranch where an unwashed man might be happier.

Thirsty Bart Wilson was hired in his place. On several trips to town, Smoky had talked with the thirsty old character and had found something likable about him. He had won Dave Leland over on condition that Bart quit strong waters for good. So far, Bart seemed to be keeping his end of the bargain.

Leland was just on the shady side of fifty. He was "Old Dave," though, to punchers who, at ages from eighteen to thirty, believed that half a century of living made a man almost aged. His thin, gray hair and crippled gait gave the impression of a much older man.

Dave's fortune was frequently talked about and probably exaggerated by men who drew thirty a month and held on to their wages

for sometimes as much as three or four days. Dave had taken advantage of good cattle seasons—had run dogies up from Texas to northern States and collected several times what it had cost him to raise them since they were calved.

A strange man in many ways, Dave Leland. His heart was big. His temper was as quick as a flash and as hot as Mex chili. He flew into rages and got over them, and often more than made up to the man he had picked on.

Old Dave was far from sanctimonious. He smoked big, black cigars, and wheat-straw cigarettes in between. He played a wicked game of poker and frequently bucked the wheel on his visits to town. He used strong language when a stubborn steer or a stubborn man demanded it. Old Dave stood for almost anything—except liquor.

The only whisky on the vast acreage of the A Bar X was a half-gallon jug kept for rattlesnake bites. And old Dave's hatred of a rattler was tied up, somehow, with the idea that rattlers and whisky went together.

The suppers at the Leland ranch house were fit for cattle kings. Smoky Clark's feeling usually was that he could have had a wonderful time with the same food if he had a chance to eat it elsewhere. But few men of his years could get their minds on food with Leah Leland at the same table.

Dave's motherless daughter was rather small. Her blue eyes were as pretty as Texas bluebonnets. Her red-gold hair had a tantalizing trick of waving into little curlicues all over her head.

To Smoky Clark it was always a delight to be near her; and yet, somehow, a relief to get away from her. She was too divine a creature for a man's peace of mind. And

Smoky wasn't really comfortable that evening until he and old Dave were sitting on the cool gallery of the ranch house.

Dave bit the end from a black Mexican cigar and passed its mate to Smoky, then lighted both of them.

"How yuh reckon Jake Petty'd shape up takin' the trail herd to Abilene?" he asked.

There had been talk and preparations for weeks connected with taking the big herd over the long trail to Abilene. Smoky Clark had a secret ambition to be in charge of the herd himself. But he would take no unfair advantage of Jake.

"Petty's a right fine cowman," he said.

He knew that Petty *was* a good cowman, and of late had given up drinking. Possibly, Smoky admitted to himself, his first impression of the big *segundo* had been wrong.

"Yeah," Dave conceded. "A good cowman. But Jake drinks."

"Not any more, he don't," Smoky said.

"A man thet drinks—well, he drinks," was Dave's retort. "I'd take charge o' thet trail herd myself, if it wasn't fer this." He patted his crippled leg. "Howsomever, thet's out o' the question now."

In the glow from his puffed cigar, his steel-blue eyes gleamed with ardor. "This is the fust time I ever sent any o' the Sussex cattle up. Always sent jest longhorns before. Them Sussex critters is the best in Texas. Fact, some folks might think they're too danged aris-teocratic fer a Panhandle spread."

"How many head o' Sussex'll go up?"

"Five hundred. Them critters'll cause tall talk in Abilene. They'll make money fer me—an' Leah. An' they're goin' to give the A Bar X a good name. I reckon I can't let 'em

go in charge of a man thet drinks—good cowman or not."

"I'd like mighty well to take thet herd," Smoky said.

"Well, it seems ter me yo're the man fer it. I was allus worried when I sent Tod Batten out on the long trail. Pore Tod drank. It was drinkin' thet got him inter the ruckus thet caused his death."

Dave looked keenly at Smoky. "You never drank—not at *all*, did yuh, Smoky?" he asked.

For the first time in months, Smoky made a sharp answer to the big boss. "I reckon yuh forgit thet we went all over thet question once before," he replied tartly. "I said I didn't. I thought as how thet was settled."

Before Dave could cut in, he went on: "Set yore mind at rest on thet, boss. I ain't trimmin' my personal ways to yore's or no one else's. Whisky's no good. No un knows thet better'n me. But I don't hate the idea as much as you do."

"Yuh would if yuh'd suffered as much," Dave cut in.

"I'm sayin'," Smoky persisted, "thet what a man does is his own business—if it don't hurt no one else."

"Thet's the p'int. It allus does," said Dave triumphantly.

"Anyhow," Smoky went on, "don't you worry none about me. It ain't no virtue on my part. It's jest thet the smell o' the danged stuff makes me sick. It snells to me like sheep dip or skunk stink."

"Well, we'll start readying things up in the mornin'," Dave decided, as if now his mind had been set at rest.

Smoky began to wonder if any one had told the big boss that he, Smoky Clark, might not be as temperate as he made out. But then Leah came out with some cold lem-

onade and stayed to drink a glass of it, and Smoky forgot all doubts and irritations.

He saw himself as the luckiest man in Texas. About all the younger men on the A Bar X were secretly in love with Leah. Her face would be outlined in camp-fire smoke for many of the boys who would go over the long trail to Abilene. But Smoky had reason to believe that he was the favored suitor.

Next day the blooded Sussex cattle were cut out of the big herd on the Creek Range miles away from the A Bar X ranch house and started up toward the bed ground near the Panhandle Junction road. Riders were stretched along the flanks to keep boogered steers from darting into the brushy stretches on either side of the trail.

The critters were hazed through a special corral. A careful count was made by Dave Leland, checked by Jake Petty, and rechecked by Smoky. Next morning, the men would "drink" the cattle at the big watering tank. The Sussex cattle would be bunched and taken along on the trail with the hardier long-horns.

It would be hard work on trail herd. But the men were like soldiers about to leave the soft, less interesting routine work of headquarters for the excitement and danger of battle.

They'd have to pass through hostile Comanche country. They'd have to deal with white men who might be even more treacherous than the redskins. But they were honin' to go—all of them, from Blacky Gomez, the youngest, to grizzled Thad Milburn, the oldest.

There would be the best provisions and the best camp cook in west Texas—Thirsty Bart Wilson.

Smoky's money belt was well-filled for emergencies. There were luxuries packed in the chuck wagon—many tins of plums and peaches and green-gages and good tobacco. But only *one* bottle of whisky. And that for possible rattler bites!

There would be some bad days and nights ahead. Smoky Clark knew that well enough. But he also knew that Leah Leland was pulling for him. And he'd put over this special job right. He felt good-natured toward the whole world, even toward Jake Petty.

Could he have been wrong on Petty? Couldn't any man be wrong? Smoky was not a man to hold grudges. And possibly he forgot that there were other men who did.

CHAPTER IV.

MYSTERY BULLETS.

FROM a little draw far ahead of the riders, Smoky could see the trail herd swimming through a shimmering heat haze. The herd looked like a great dun snake crawling wearily northward—a ponderous, dusty serpent convoyed by a score of dots that were tired horsemen.

A month ago, at the start of the long drive toward Abilene, that trail herd had numbered two thousand head of cattle, sleek and fat from a kindly summer among the lush grasses of the smiling Panhandle country. But now old Dave Leland's A Bar X burn lay sprawling wide across the gaunted ribs of little more than sixteen hundred critters.

The weather had been miserable. The less hardy Sussex cattle had stood the drive badly. Nearly a hundred of them had died on the long trail up to the banks of the Red River. And once across that stream, the Comanches had made life miserable for the outfit.

Night after night the redskins had hung like vultures on the flanks of the herd. At every opportunity they had swooped down and made away with cows. Scores of old Dave's beefs had gone to make winter jerky for Comanche stomachs.

There had been battle and there had been death. The redskins had been equipped with good Henry rifles, and they had been well led. Smoky Clark suspected there had been white men among them, dressed in Indian costume. It would not have been the first time that outlaw whites masqueraded as redskins to prey upon legitimate business in the West.

For the most part the raids had been made at the right time—or, rather, at the *wrong* time for the A Bar X interests. Smoky wondered if the raiders were being tipped off by some one in his outfit. He was taking extra precautions these days, riding far ahead to scout the country screened by trees or high brush.

He carried a carbine balanced across the pommel of his saddle. At the first sign of danger, that carbine would rear its muzzle as a snake rears its head, and almost as quickly. Smoky was taking extra risks, but he had to get the rest of the herd through safely. He just had to! Old Dave was depending upon him.

He finished his scouting, started back toward the herd. A storm was coming up. Thunder crackled and boomed. Lightning struck across the sky like a great fiery snake. Wind filled with the smell of rain ruffled Smoky's overlong, sweat-soaked hair. A few minutes later, the skies opened up.

The rain came in ropes and sheets. Smoky drew on his slicker, but the water dripped from his Stetson and ran down his neck. He felt chilly,

shuddery. Worry, loss of sleep, and doing the work of four men had overtaxed his strong body.

The water along the route had been bad—a feeder for fever. Nine men out of ten in Smoky's condition would have been under the covers. A few had already dropped out. But Smoky Clark felt that he just had to keep going.

The storm ceased abruptly, just before he joined Jake Petty, who was riding slowly along the flank of the herd. Jake's slicker glistened like a coat of mail. The dripping rain had channeled the mask of alkali dust on his big face.

"It's tough weather, now ain't it, Smoky?" Jake greeted.

Smoky nodded wearily—his only answer. His body felt hot with fever now.

"We'd oughter reach the Canadian River along 'bout the heel o' ter-day," Jake observed. "I ain't none too hopeful. Rain! Rain ev'ry danged day! An' look at them thunderheads 'way up north thar. I'm afeard the ol' Canadian'll be ab'in'."

Smoky nodded again. He was too utterly weary for talk. He gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering.

For a while, Petty rode along beside him in silence. Finally the big *segundo* dropped back with the drag.

Hour after hour, plodding wearily, the herd went on. The sun again blazed overhead, made a furnace of the prairie, sucked up the water from every shallow depression. Smoky's skin felt as if it might be burning off of his body—fever touches. The cattle bawled thirstily now and then.

A few hours before sundown, the lead cows smelled running water. They threw up their drooping noses and broke into a lumbering trot. With clashing of horns, the rest fol-

lowed, eager to slake their thirst in the cool waters of the Canadian. Soon the entire herd was scattered along a quarter of mile of river front, drinking their fill.

The river itself was a disappointment to Smoky—another obstacle in his path. Petty's prediction held. A cloud-burst had set the river in flood. In place of the usual placid ford it was now a swirling torrent of angry water, flecked with foam and drift, raw with the odor of sluiced earth. It was too deep for any cow to wade, too wide and swift for the herd to swim.

Petty joined Smoky where he sat his pinto horse at the river's brink.

"Shore looks bad, Smoky," he offered. "Yuh goin' ter try ter put 'em acrost?"

"Nope. After they've watered, we'll bed 'em on the flat back thar. I may lope along a few miles, try to hunt a better fordin' place—or we'll wait until the water goes down. Tell the boys to bunch 'em close an' set a good guard."

Petty looked searchingly into Smoky's lined, gaunt face. If Smoky had been less tired, he might have read the treachery there. Smoky's head was drooping as he put Pete into a lope and searched a fording place that might be safe for the morning.

He found a few places that might do within a day, provided that there was no more heavy rainfall. Sweat dripped from his face now, and he was hot and cold by turns.

But he clamped his square jaws. Shucks! This was no time to get sick. He'd hold out until he got the critters across the Canadian, anyhow.

He had been riding along the shore line with Pete at a gentle canter. Suddenly the pinto snorted and

turned its head toward a clump of trees a few hundred yards away. It must have been animal instinct. A second later—

Whee-ee-ee! Spat! A rifle slug kicked up earth just in front of Pete's forefeet.

A second bullet glanced from a cluster of rocks along the trail and went whining over the river.

Smoky's six-gun was out now. For the instant, he forgot his fever and any other worries but this present one. Some one was sniping at him.

Boo-oom! Whee-ee! Another rifle shot.

The bullet came uncomfortably close. Smoky heard it as it buzzed by.

He had sunk steel into the flanks of the surprised Pete. Pete was streaking it now, seeming to understand just what its master intended—to get a fringe of trees about two hundred yards ahead.

Boom! Spat! Closer than ever, that last shot.

It sounded as if it had ticked the metal disk on Pete's bridle.

Smoky pulled the animal's head around. His intention was to race across those few hundred yards where the lone rifleman was hidden and blaze away at him. Another report. There was a tug at Smoky's big gray hat.

No, it wouldn't do to take any more chances. The young foreman swung his horse back toward the river. He had never run from a fight before this.

He was running from one now, though. He was out of good six-gun range and the sniper was well concealed. To try to get to that would-be murderer in the clump of trees would be suicide. Smoky could be picked off easily before he ever made it.

Dave Leland had depended upon Smoky Clark to get the herd through. Smoky could never do it—dead. And that sniper might aim at the horse the next time. Smoky had raised Pete from a colt. He had no intention of breaking up that wonderful partnership now. He'd have to take to the only cover that would shelter him in a hurry.

He thought it out in the split of a second. A dive down the steep cut bank of the river was the only way out.

Like a flash he was off Pete's back; had slapped the pinto across the flank and stampeded it. The sniper wouldn't be likely to aim at the animal now. Smoky Clark was the desired target. And the next instant, Smoky Clark had dived over into the boiling river.

The cold water bit into him. The sensation was almost one of pain. Smoky couldn't keep his teeth from clicking together like castanets. But he struck out, scrambled up the bank. He removed his hat, peered cautiously toward the screen of trees while he lay in the mud and shivered.

There were no more shots. Whoever the sniper was, he was refusing to take anything like the even chance of coming out of cover to see if Smoky had been drowned or not.

Smoky was shaking badly when he got back to the herd. He had found Pete a few hundred yards away from where he had dived into the Canadian.

The cattle were browsing in bunches on the flats. The riders, except the point men who had spread out to hold the herd from straying up or downriver, were gathered in a group some distance from the camp fire where Bart Wilson was starting to prepare supper. Bart was talk-

ing to Jake Petty, and Smoky took advantage of the opportunity to circle back of the wagon until he came upon Jake's horse.

It was a big blue roan with bones and sinews capable of sustaining the big *segundo's* weight. Smoky ran his hand over the animal's coat. It was clear that the big roan had not been used lately, and Smoky felt a little guilty that he had suspected Petty.

The sniper might have been an absolute stranger—might have been an Indian or a longrider after a good mount like Pete. Smoky decided to say nothing of his experience, at least for the time being.

His clothes were wrinkled and damp, but a short time before it had started to rain again, and the boys could think that this was what made him look bedraggled.

The now-shivering trail boss cared for his horse and then strode over to where Bart and Jake were squatted down near the fire.

Jake Petty looked up. "Find any fordin' place, Smoky?" he asked in a natural tone.

"No. Not any right good uns. Might have better luck in the mornin'."

"You take it easy," Pete advised. "Say, man! Yo're shiverin'! Why don't yuh git over thar ter the wagon an' drag yore loop fer a little snooze?"

"Oh, I reckon I'll be all right, Jake. I aim to git this herd through to Abilene without losin' another hoof. I'll stay awake."

"But yuh've done gone yore limit, Smoky," Petty insisted. "Yo're plumb tuckered out. Ev'ry man in the outfit has had more sleep'n you have. Me, I've had double. You git to the wagon an' let me worry a little."

Smoky shook his head stubbornly.

"If them Comanches come down on us to-night——"

"They won't—not 'til it gits good an' dark, anyhow—an' prob'ly not then. Even ef they do, thar's men feelin' a lot more chipper than you are as kin keep watch. Git in a couple o' hours, anyhow. I'll have Bart wake yuh up. Yuh need it bad. Yuh might go all ter pieces ef yuh don't."

Smoky finally yielded. Petty's suggestion was reasonable enough.

"All right," he conceded. "I'll sleep a spell. I'm leavin' the rest to you."

The wagon was drawn up well on the flat where the critters would be held for the night. It was only a few paces away from the cheerful camp fire.

"You be shore ter wake Smoky up in two-three hours," Petty ordered Thirsty Bart Wilson.

"All right." Thirsty Bart turned his sooty face away to fuss with the coffeepot.

Smoky Clark was half asleep before he flopped down in the bed-and-chuck wagon and pulled the blankets over him. But he sat up wearily again when he heard Jake Petty's voice.

"Here, Smoky," Petty was saying. "Jest gulp this down. Yuh need it—plenty."

"What is it?" Smoky asked sleepily. Then he caught a whiff of an odor most unpleasant to him. Petty stood there at the tail of the wagon with a large bottle of whisky, full and uncorked.

"Now, yo're takin' a good hooker o' this afore yuh hit the blanket pile," Jake said.

Smoky shook his head. "Where'd yuh git thet stuff?" he demanded.

"It's the bottle we got along fer snake bites—an' jest sech emergen-

cies as this un. Yuh got to use a little common sense. Chills an' fever's a right bad thing. This'll chase it outer yuh."

"I'll git along without it, Jake."

"Now, no yuh won't, nuther," Jake differed. His tone was almost that of a parent with a pettish child. "Yuh want ter git through with this herd, don't yuh? I'm an older man than you are, Smoky—even ef yuh *be* my boss. Any doctor'd order this right now. Old Dave hissself ud order it. Now, you cain't be narrer-minded, Smoky. This is good fer what ails yuh. I know yuh don't drink. But this is medicine, this is."

Smoky took one gulp from the bottle. The glass neck rattled against his chattering teeth. Then he made a grimace, shoved the bottle away.

"Better have another. Any doc knows thet——"

"Nope. Take it away."

Petty shrugged his heavy shoulders and recorked the bottle.

Then Smoky Clark's trail-heavy, fevered body slumped down into the blankets again.

CHAPTER V.

DEAD BEEF.

THIRSTY BART WILSON got up from the ground where he had been watching a coffeepot bubble on the camp fire. His mottled face was working queerly. "Aw, I jest cain't do it!" he mumbled to himself. "He was right white ter me, pore Smoky was."

Then he heard a low whistle, and turned to see Jake Petty motioning him to join him back of the big wagon. They'd be sheltered from the view of the trail crew back there.

Bart also saw that Jake had a big, dark bottle under his arm. The

trail cook licked his lips, then began stroking his gray mustache. The yearning of a drunkard was in his red-rimmed eyes as he joined Jake.

The *segundo* peered cautiously into the wagon. Smoky's outstretched form was motionless.

"Bart," Jake said in a low tone, "yo're goin' ter wet yore whistle with the best redeye *you* ever drank."

Old Bart looked almost tearful. "Aw, but Jake!" he pleaded. "I been thinkin' it over——"

"Don't wear yoreself out doin' no thinkin'!" Jake cut in roughly. "Yo're in this with me now. Jest try ter pull out, an' yuh'll have lead in yore innards—'stead o' good likker. Here, hold this a minute while I roll a smoke."

He uncorked the bottle and handed it to Bart, then slowly curled a cigarette. The bottle was a few inches beneath Bart's drink-red-dened nose, which was crinkling up like a rabbit's.

Jake lighted his cigarette with a sulphur match. "Now, ef yuh start goin' soft on me, Bart," he warned, "yore bones'll be bleachin' on this prairie afore long. Thar's jest the three of us in on it—me an' Blacky Gomez an' yoreself. Yuh made a bargain. Keep it, or we'll git yuh! Yo're being' give two bottles o' good whisky—an' a hunderd dollars when this drive's over."

The *segundo* grabbed the bottle from Bart's hands and took a long drag at it. There was a gurgle that made Bart's mouth water. The odor that had almost sickened Smoky Clark smelled like rare incense to the broken-down cook. He grabbed at the bottle.

"Hey, what yuh doin'!" he demanded. "Yuh said thet bottle was fer me."

"All right. Better let it trickle, then."

Bart let it trickle. He licked his lips again and took a long, satisfying drink.

He finished to catch his breath and emitted a heavy sigh.

"Good redeye, huh?" Jake asked with a grin.

Bart didn't answer until he finished another long drink. "Thet tastes like honey!" he admitted.

Petty laughed. "Danged right. Thet's pure stuff. It's a shame I had ter waste thet other bottle I give Clark ter drink from."

"Wouldn't thet be any good now?" the drunkard asked eagerly.

"Naw. Yuh can't drink drugged likker, yuh fool! Better be satisfied with what yuh got. An' keep it out o' sight when the boys come round—or yuh'll be sorry!"

Ten or fifteen minutes later, when Jake Petty saw some of the boys riding in for supper, he snapped the butt of his cigarette into the fire and nodded to old Bart to walk over to the wagon with him. "Let's take a look, Bart," he said.

The two men walked over to the rail of the wagon and peered in. Smoky Clark lay asprawl upon a heap of bed rolls. His breathing was slow and regular and heavy. The whisky Petty had given him had been doctored with horse-colic medicine—which contains a generous measure of dope.

Blacky Gomez, the horse wrangler, had come over to the wagon. So far as the men riding toward the fire could see, Blacky might be looking for something and have business there. But Blacky had come on a signal from Jake Petty. Blacky Gomez would spend an extra double-eagle in Abilene for his part in this conspiracy.

"Smoky!" Jake Petty called in a low tone.

Smoky Clark made no answer, and Jake called his name again. He might as well have been calling to a dead man. The exhausted trail boss never stirred. Tired, outraged nature and a powerful drug had drawn a heavy veil of sleep over him.

Jake grinned. "Dead ter the world," he observed with satisfaction. "Nothin' less'n an earthquake ud bring him outn *thet* sleep!"

He reached in and plucked the long, dark bottle from his bed roll. He spilled the remainder of the drugged liquor on the ground, tossed the empty bottle in beside Smoky. From a flask of undrugged whisky, he saturated the blanket. Then, out of the tail of his eye, he watched until a pair of the incoming riders got within earshot. Now he appeared to be talking to Smoky Clark. He wanted those riders to hear him.

"All right, then, Smoky," he said in a loud tone. "I ain't doin' no more argufyin'. If *thet's* yore order, it's agoin' ter be carried out. After all, you're the boss."

Then he strode over to Big Blue, his powerful mount, and climbed into the saddle. He swung the horse's head toward the pair of riders approaching the fire.

"We're puttin' them cows acrost afore dark," he said crisply.

One of the riders, Thad Milburn, lifted his grizzled eyebrows in surprise. Thad, a veteran of the ranges, realized the danger of trying to put the herd across the swollen river.

"Who says so?" Thad wanted to know.

"I say so!" Jake snapped. "But ef it'll ease yore gizzard any ter know, it's Smoky Clark's order. Smoky's plumb wore out. He's over thar in the wagon restin'. Yuh kin ask Bart Wilson, Bart heard him tell me. Or wait! Blacky Gomez was at the wagon, too. Hey, Blacky!"

The dark-eyed horse wrangler strode over. "What did Smoky jest tell me ter do?" Jake cross-examined.

Blacky Gomez shrugged his skinny shoulders. "Eet was one leetle surprise to me. But he say push the cattle over the reever before the dark. He say pairhaps a beeg rain make it more hard tomorrow."

"C'mon. Thad!" Jake urged impatiently. "Slip *thet* word aroun' so we kin git ter supper in fair season."

Thad spat on the ground, then prodded his horse and rode back toward the trail crew.

There was no dissenting voice among the riders. They earned their salt by obeying orders—and by keeping their opinions to themselves. There were several roustabouts in the crew. They had no particular love for Smoky Clark, or Jake Petty, or any one else. The drive meant a good drunk when they got to Abilene. They moved to carry out the directions.

To push that herd of tired cattle into the swollen river meant to invite disaster. Every man in the outfit knew that this was so. But they knew that when Smoky Clark or Jake Petty gave orders, there was no argument. If some of the herd should be lost—well, that was up to Smoky Clark. He was the one who'd have to face the music—war music from fiery Dave Leland's trumpet.

They had been on trail drives before. They knew their work. They did not need Petty's warning to go about it quietly. Two riders hastened to inform the point men of the foreman's decision to take a chance and get the crossing over with. The rest spread out in a wide half circle to haze the straggling

critters in and bunch them at the river's edge.

As the herd grew more and more close-packed, the nervousness of the animals increased. They seemed to sense impending danger. They began to mill, wild-eyed, with flaring nostrils and horns a-rattle in the blue dusk. Relentlessly, the grim riders hemmed them in, squeezed them toward water.

Here the river bank was gradual, the water shallow near the shore. Gradually the lead cows were shoved into the stream and forced to wade by the press of those behind. The water crept up their legs, touched their bellies, set them snorting with terror.

Eyes rolling white in the twilight, they tried desperately to hold back. It was of no avail. The sheer weight of bawling numbers pushed them on, out into the current, off their feet. They had to swim.

They felt the pull of the current, yielded, and tried to go its way. But half a dozen shouting riders, horses splashing chest deep, headed them off, kept them going.

With a great snort of seeming resignation to man's will, a big steer with a six-foot spread of horns pointed its nose straight at the opposite shore and struck out. The rest followed—dumb brutes going to destruction—until several hundred cows were churning.

Old Thad Milburn saw the full extent of the danger when it was just a little too late. Thad was an old Texan. He had been raised with longhorns. A good many of the hardier Texas breed would make it. But those high-bred Sussex critters, he could see, would be doomed.

The Sussex were tired out from weary miles of trailing. As the water deepened and quickened, the current began to take its toll. The Sus-

sex cattle didn't have the fight in them. Thad turned in the face of orders and yelled to the men near him to head the costly critters back.

Some of them got back; others got crushed and trampled upon. The big dun steer with the mighty horns was leading its hardy breed magnificently. Hundreds of the cattle were making the far shallows and staggering ashore. But most of Dave Leland's prize Sussex breed would never make it.

Night dropped swiftly over that scene of slaughter on the Canadian. Grim-jawed and still, the trail riders sat their dripping horses. For a while no man spoke. They were tough hombres, most of them, but they were cattlemen. They had seen valuable beef sacrificed, as they thought, to the bad judgment of a too young trail boss.

Old Thad Milburn shoved back his tattered hat and wiped the sweat from his face. "Waal, thet's thet!" he said, briefly but eloquently.

No man added to Thad's comment. But deep in the prominent eyes of Jake Petty there lurked a smile of triumph.

"I got a right pleasant duty!" he said with a sour grimace. "It's up ter me ter tell Smoky the bad news. He may blame me an' the rest o' you fellers. But it was his orders. If he was with us, he couldn't done no better. Dang nice kid in some ways, Smoky, but he ain't got the years fer real judgment."

He picked out six veterans with big, powerful horses. "You fellers sling some chuck inter yuh. Then git over thar ter thet other side o' the river pronto. Hold what's left o' them critters. Yuh'll be able ter do it all right 'til the rest of us jines yuh. Them cows is right tuckered out."

He managed to have old Thad

along with him when he rode over to the wagon to rouse Smoky. And Smoky proved hard to rouse.

Jake lighted the lantern. Its rays gleamed on the empty whisky bottle beside the sleeping man.

Old Thad's eyes narrowed. "No wonder he's hard ter wake up," he observed. "Whar did he git it, Petty?"

"It was the bottle we had along fer rattler bites," Petty answered. "He took one snort of it. Fact, I reckoned it might be good fer him. But laws! I never knowed he'd go fer the hull bottle!"

Jake shook his head seriously. "Golly! I never figured fer one second thet he was drunk when he said ter put them cows acrost! Anyway, it wasn't my place ter ask too many questions."

"I heerd yuh argifyin' when I was ridin' in," Thad said. "Huh! I never knowed Clark so much as took a drink."

Jake Petty winked meaningly at the old cowman and a few of the other riders who had sauntered around to the tail of the wagon and had seen the empty bottle.

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," Jake remarked wisely. "But thar's some folks as drinks open an' above-board, kin take it or leave it alone, as yuh might say. An' thar's others as likes it so well they got ter keep thar habits a secret."

He shook Smoky again. "Gosh! A feller full of redeye is shore hard ter wake up, ain't he?" And then, as he managed to disturb the whisky-soaked blanket: "Hm-m-m! He smells like a dragged distillery."

When the punchers finally managed to rouse the foreman, he came out of the wagon with heavy eyes—with every appearance, in fact, of a man who had overdone it with liquor.

"How yuh feelin', Smoky?" Jake asked.

"Turrible," Smoky answered thickly. He looked around him blearily, took in the deserted flat. Then he started as if gone loco. "Hey! Whar's the herd?" he yelled.

Jake Petty's heavy face wore an expression of confidence. At the moment, he had no fear of Smoky Clark, a fit man for a doctor's care. He could beat Clark to the draw *this* time, if it came to a show-down.

"Hey! What yuh done with them critters?" Smoky barked.

"Now, Smoky," Jake answered calmly. "I done jest what yuh told me ter do. I put 'em acrost. I was afearid it was a fool notion. But I done it."

"What yuh mean?" Smoky demanded. He put his hand up to his aching head. "I told yuh to hold 'em here on the flat."

"Thet's right, Smoky, yuh shore did—at fust," Jake admitted, with the air of a man humoring a drunkard. "But yuh changed yore mind, you may recollect, after yuh clumb inter the wagon an' took a drink. Yuh was mumblin' somethin' about mebbe a heavy rain comin' ter-morrer."

"*You gi' me thet whisky,*" Smoky said. He was not sure of Jake's guilt, but he felt suspicious.

"Shore I did," Jake admitted evenly. "I seen yuh was offn yore feed, reckoned yuh'd ought ter sleep a spell. So I went back ter the fire an' had a couple o' cups o' java. When I come back ter the wagon, yuh told me ter shove them critters acrost, and I did—or tried ter do it. Most o' the Sussex critters is gone. It's tough gruel, Smoky, but it's got ter be took."

Smoky Clark reeled as if hit between the eyes with a sledge. His face went grayish.

"O' course," Jake went on quietly, "I didn't have no way o' knowin' thet yuh'd helped yoreself ter the snake-bite whisky while I was a-havin' coffee an' a smoke over the fire. Y'ain't got no apologies ter make. Them things happens ter all of us. But I reckoned yuh was plumber sober when yuh ordered me ter shove 'em acrost."

Smoky Clark's eyes showed his bewilderment. A slow flush of color dyed his tanned cheeks.

"You tellin' me I was drunk an' give out an order like *thet*, Petty?" he asked coldly.

"I didn't know yuh'd had more'n one drink—not until me an' Thad found the empty bottle here side o' yuh. But yuh shore did give thet order Smoky. Facts is facts. Yuh kin ask Bart Wilson. He heerd yuh. Or ask Blacky Gomez. Blacky heerd yuh, too."

Blacky Gomez stepped forward sheepishly from the rim of the crowd. "That ees right, Smucky," he said. "I am sorree to dispute the good frien'. But what Pettee say, he ees right thees time. I hear you geev that so-strange order."

Old Bart Wilson had heard it, too, it seemed. Old Bart admitted it. In his drugged condition, Smoky did not notice that Thirsty Bart wanted to get away at once.

Smoky turned appealingly to old Thad Milburn. "You believin' thet, Thad?" he asked earnestly.

"Waal, Smoky, I ain't got no reason not ter," Thad replied. "I heerd Petty argifyin' with yuh 'bout somethin' when I rode in. An' then thar's thet." He pointed to the empty whisky bottle. "An hombre cuts up some strange didoes, son, when he's full o' thet tarantula juice."

Smoky Clark's lean, hawklike face was a map of conflict. Anger,

suspicion, bewilderment, self-doubt—all were there. He asked himself if, half asleep, he really *had* reached for that bottle and drained it.

He had seen men do unbelievably crazy things when they were drunk. If he had got that way, why expect that he would be any exception? He thought of Dave Leland, of Leah. The world seemed to go black before him. But he gritted his teeth, held himself.

"Well, boys," he said finally, and his voice was curiously flat, "if I *did* do a thing like thet—a crime a loco sheep-herder wouldn't stoop to—I ain't tryin' to blame nobody else. Let's git all this outfit the other side o' the river. We'll take our loss an' go through with it. I'm the feller thet's payin' fer it. I'll square the rest o' yuh with the ol' man. As fer me——"

Smoky didn't finish that. He didn't need to. Not a man in the outfit but knew the thought that lay behind the three words. There would be no squaring the matter for Smoky Clark with old Dave Leland. The day he reported to old Dave would be weeks ahead. But it would come. It would be a black day.

CHAPTER VI.

LONE WADDY.

THE rest of the drive to Abilene was a nightmare to Smoky Clark. He was a man who had lost—and *knew* he had lost—but had to go ahead with things.

On the long back trail, too, he rode detached, alone. And at night, he sat for hours under the big stars, searching his troubled mind for an answer that promised to puzzle him to the end of his days.

What could he tell old Dave Leland? What could he tell Leah? Thirsty Bart Wilson had heard him

give that order to Jake Petty? Blacky Gomez had heard him give the order. Thad Milburn had heard Smoky arguing with Jake. Jake himself claimed that he would never have put the critters across except for Smoky's orders.

And most of the Sussex cattle had been lost. The credit in the Kansas cattlemen's bank was only a fraction of what old Dave had expected it would be.

Why report back to old Dave at all? But then Smoky Clark hung his head in shame for even thinking of such a way out. No, he'd face the music. He'd rather have fought a dozen mountain lions with his bare hands, but he'd see this thing through.

It was only a little after dawn one bright morning when Smoky Clark and the trail outfit reached the A Bar X Ranch, and the entire gang watched Smoky drag his heels up the steps and across the spacious gallery of the house. Smoky couldn't wait to get his disagreeable task over with. He'd wake up old Dave, swallow his bitter medicine.

The boys, seeming to be busy about the feed barn and the tool-house and the near corrals, watched old Dave himself appear on the gallery and call loudly for Jake Petty and Bart Wilson. A few minutes later, Thad Milburn and Blacky Gomez were summoned into the house.

In a quarter of an hour, Smoky Clark came out. He seemed to have aged a dozen years as he crossed to the bunk house. "It's all right, boys," he said to those he met. "You fellers ain't got nothin' to worry about."

He gave no explanation, but started to throw his belongings together. It was Bart Wilson who later revealed to the A Bar X wad-

dies something of what had happened inside the big house.

"Ol' Dave done made it plain ter Smoky thet Texas ain't big enough, now, ter hold a skunk like him," Bart told them. "Boys, fire an' brimstone ain't got no terrors fer me now—not after seen' ol' Dave with his mad good an' up! It seems ol' Dave had heerd afore this thet Smoky wasn't sech a pure-water hombre as he made out ter be."

The old cook broke off as Smoky came out of the bunk house. Old Bart started over to shake hands with him—then apparently changed his mind and, with head down, disappeared back of the feed barn.

Smoky was strapping his war bag behind the cantle of his saddle, when he noticed Leah Leland come out on the big gallery of the ranch house.

For just a moment he hesitated, then with quick decision, topped Pete and reined the pinto toward the house. He couldn't go without saying a word of good-by to Leah.

He drew up at the steps—and held silence. Leah was looking at him—or rather through him, beyond him. The lash of her silent contempt stung him to the quick.

Leah turned her back squarely and reëntered the house. Pride wouldn't let her reveal the wreck of tumbled dreams.

And Smoky Clark rode straight on, out the wide gate toward the blue hills eastward.

Smoky Clark did not linger in the Panhandle country—or in any part of the great Lone Star State. No matter where he might take a job, sooner or later news of his bungle on the Canadian would find him out. Smoky couldn't bear that.

He made straight for his old Cimarron country, sold the little spread that his father had left him

and that he had leased out. The day after the deal was closed, the money was on its way to Dave Leland of the A Bar X. But no word of Smoky's whereabouts went with it.

Two months later, he sent fifty dollars more. It represented nearly all the pay he drew for wages as a plain waddy on a Kansas cow outfit.

Smoky Clark was changing. He did not shave so often. His neckerchief was not so neatly knotted. His hat was not the best that he could buy. His eyes looked haunted—had been so ever since that night on the river.

He was a puzzle to his fellow riders, wherever he worked. He never laughed. And no one ever saw a drop of liquor pass his lips.

From early boyhood, Smoky had loved to be around cattle. Now, at times, it hurt him to look at a prize critter—especially of the Sussex breed. It brought to mind that terrible sacrifice on the Canadian, months before.

He did something that he thought he could never do—left the range and went on a gold rush into Colorado. He spent six months in placer mining along a creek before the strike petered out. Then, once more, a sizable sum went south to the A Bar X Ranch—sender unknown, and without address.

And then Smoky felt a hunger for the range again. He headed south. He didn't know just why. He only realized an urge within him that he couldn't resist.

After long days of lonely trailing, Smoky found himself well down in the Red Canyon country. And at the heel of an afternoon, he rode into Los Astros town—Los Astros, port of call for the great herds trailing toward Abilene, and an oasis for

the thirsty outfits bound north and south.

Los Astros lay upon the flat of a wide tableland, a quarter mile or so from a winding creek. Its main street was crowded. Half a dozen outfits were camped just outside of town. Scores of waddies were breaking the tediousness of their drive with drinking and gambling.

To Smoky Clark it was like being back in the cattle business once more. He turned into the Big Trail Saloon—not to drink but to look upon the faces of his fellow men.

The slab-floored barroom was crowded. There was loud laughter. There was singing. Glasses clinked. Dice rattled and poker chips clicked. And then through the buzz and clatter came an angry voice:

"You hit the grit out o' here, yuh danged no-'count rum-sot! Y'ain't bought a drink all afternoon. Yo're a danged leach, thet's what yuh be!"

Smoky instantly recognized the voice that rose in thick-tongued thick-tongued protest: "How kin I buy a drink, when I ain't got no dinero? I'm willin' enough ter——"

But Thirsty Bart Wilson—for that's who it was—clipped his speech suddenly. A giant of a young man in trail-herd costume had grasped the old drunkard by the nape of the neck and was shoving him toward the door.

Smoky saw old Bart stumble and fall. A second later, the man he had offended had drawn back his booted foot.

"Hold it! Wait a second thar, hombre!"

Smoky Clark had leaped forward. "Thet ain't no way to treat an ol' man—or a young un, either, fer thet matter," Smoky told the liquor-inflamed puncher.

The puncher transferred his rage

to Smoky. "Kin yuh back thet up?" he demanded.

"I reckon so," Smoky replied. "Any way yuh like, stranger."

"*This way, then,*" the bigger man retorted. He threw a terrific swing at Smoky's jaw.

It never landed. But Smoky's swing did. The young giant hit the dirty floor.

He got up, threw another swing, hit the floor again. He was wearing a holster, but no six-gun.

The proprietor of the place came out from behind the bar.

"Hey, we don't want no ruckus in here," he warned Smoky and the man on the floor. "If youz fellers want ter fight, take yore argyment outside."

"I'm willin'," Smoky agreed.

The young giant got up from the floor, rubbed his swollen jaw. "I ain't," he said. And then to Smoky: "Stranger, will yuh take a drink with an hombre as talked out o' turn?"

Smoky laughed. "Thank yuh jest the same. But I'm havin' one with an ol' pard o' mine."

He motioned toward old Thirsty Bart Wilson, who had got up and was looking on in a sort of daze. Then he took Bart by the arm and led him to one of the sloppy tables at the side of the room.

But probably for the first time in his life, Bart Wilson refused a drink. There were tears in his bleary blue eyes.

"I can't drink with *you*, Smoky!" he blubbered. "I jest can't do it, ol'-timer."

Bart flopped down into one of the spindly chairs and his bald head was bowed. "Yuh was allus my friend, Smoky," he said. "Yuh was my friend on the A Bar X, an' now yuh come along ter save me from a lickin'. An' me—me, I ain't fit ter touch a mangy yaller dog!"

CHAPTER VII.

GUN FIGHT.

AT first, Smoky Clark looked almost in amusement at the grizzled old trail cook. He had seen liquor do queer things to men—had seen it suddenly make them vain, challenging, noisy, had also known it to make them humble, sentimental, mournful.

"Aw, what's eatin' yuh, Bart, ol' hoss?" he asked. "Come on, have one on me. Me, I'll drink sody pop, but mebbe you'd better take a bracer an' git back to yore outfit. Yo're trailin', I reckon?"

Bart shook his head sadly. "No, I ain't trailin'. I ain't—well, I ain't nothin'. No un wants a rum-soaked ol' feller like me aroun'. I'm gittin' my jest desarts. I'm saddle-trampin' it."

"Better trail along with me," Smoky suggested. "We both need jobs. An' we'll both git 'em, ol'-timer. Jest wait an' see!"

But once more Thirsty Bart Wilson shook his head.

"Smoky," he said, "I jest got ter tell yuh somethin'. It's bothered me a lot. I was hopin' I'd meet up with yuh some day, so I could git it offn my chest. But now I'm findin' I ain't got no easy job. Yuh wasn't ter blame fer losin' them cows, Smoky. Not by a jugful!"

"No—only by a bottle full!" Smoky said grimly.

"But yuh wasn't ter blame a-tall," Bart snapped. "Jake Petty put up a job on yuh. Thet whisky he give yuh was doped ter make yuh sleep. After yuh went under, he dumped the bottle an' planted it in with yuh. Then he——"

Old Bart all but broke down. Then he finished, between sniffles, the story of Jake Petty's treachery, of Gomez's part, and his own.

"I ain't fit ter live," Bart mumbled. "If yuh drill me, Smoky, it ain't near what I deserve. A man ain't human, Smoky, when he's hon-in' fer likker. Jake Petty sneaked me lots of it on the A Bar X. I even knowed then thet Jake was slippin' the gossip aroun' thet yuh wasn't as fond o' water as yuh made out. I knowed thet ol' Dave Leland heerd it. An' you was my friend. But I never warned yuh."

Bart sniffled again, wiped his eyes. The grim-faced Smoky Clark could at least see that the old trail cook's remorse was real.

"Jake Petty was out ter git yuh from the fust day," Bart went on. "I got a more'n a good idea thet he was back o' them Comanche raids, thet he knowed the white men leadin' 'em. Gomez, too, was a yaller-bellied c'yote. But he wa'n't near as bad as me, at thet. You was my friend. But I was achin' fer liquor, an' I struck at yuh like a side-winder."

"Do you know who shot at me—when I had to jump inter the Canadian to get out o' range?" Smoky asked.

"I didn't have nothin' ter do with thet! Honest Injun!" Bart said forcibly. "I didn't even l'arn about it 'til a lot later. But it was Jake Petty. I know thet much."

"I reckoned mebbe it was," Smoky said. "But I examined his hoss when I got back to camp that night. The hoss didn't seem used up."

"Nope, because Jake's tricky thet way. He used another hoss. I'm plumb ashamed o' myself fer havin' anything ter do with thet rattler."

Smoky looked over at the wasted wreck of a man. Somehow he could hold no grudge against him.

"Anyhow, thet's all past, Bart," he said in an effort to be comfort-ing. "But I'm beginnin' to believe

thet ol' Dave Leland might 'a' been part way right on thet likker question, after all. An' Bart, ol' hoss, right this minute I'm feelin' more pert than I've felt in months."

He meant it. Before the clean wind of Bart's confession, the clouds of self-doubt had disappeared. Smoky Clark felt like a man again. And there in the smoke of that bar-room an image formed before his eyes—an image of a girl with golden ringlets all over her head.

He listened silently while Bart Wilson told him of what had been happening on the A Bar X the past few months. Jake Petty was fore-man now. Blacky Gomez had been made *segundo*. The pair of them had threatened old Bart with death if he ever squealed on them.

"I ain't no good with a hawg laig, so I had ter keep my mouth shet," Bart explained. "But I reckon Petty was afeard I might talk when I got drunk. So a couple o' months ago he fired me an' told me ter hit the trail."

"I don't reckon Jake Petty is—is married?" Smoky asked. His nails were digging into the palms of his hands.

"Nope," Bart answered, and Smoky's heart leaped like a bucking broncho. "Nope, he ain't married. Onct or twict we was afeard he'd dropped his loop on ol' Dave's gal. But Leah always shied off afore the rope settled."

He looked up at Smoky. "I don't know nothin' much 'bout women. But thar ain't no two ways about it—Leah was all fer one man, an' thet was you, Smoky. I ketched her cryin' more'n onct after yuh rode away."

Smoky Clark stood up. "Yo're ridin' south with me, Bart," he told the old trail cook. "I got enough dinero to buy our chuck along the

way. C'mon! We kin make a good ten miles before sundown."

It was in the cool of twilight when two tired-looking horses turned in at the gate of the A Bar X. One of them was a hammer-headed *grulla* and carried Thirsty Bart Wilson. The other was a well-formed pinto. And there was something about it which made the golden-haired girl on the Leland gallery leap up suddenly from her rocking-chair.

Smoky Clark saw the girl's action, and his heart beat faster. He urged Pete up the drive. Back of Leah he could make out old Dave Leland sitting in an easy-chair, and beside him the bulky form of Jake Petty.

Smoky spurred Pete into the lead and rode straight to the foot of the steps, swung lightly from his saddle. With firm tread he mounted to the gallery.

"Smoky!" Leah gasped.

"I thought I reckernized thet hoss," old Dave started, "an——"

"Evenin', Miss Leland," Smoky cut in. "Evenin', Mr. Leland. I was ordered not to come back here ever. But I'm wantin' a word with Jake Petty."

Petty had been looking down at the nervous Bart Wilson, and then at the slender form of Smoky Clark. And during the process, the fingers of his gun hand had slipped a little lower on his thigh.

"Reckon I kin accommerdate yuh, Clark," he said with his usual bluster. "Personal an' private, mebbe?"

"Right down thar." Smoky motioned to the little garden patch in front of the verandah. He backed down the steps. Petty clumped after him. Old Dave looked on with a puzzled expression.

"Petty," Smoky said. "No use of any big jaw-waggin', I reckon. I got yuh down here so thet no un but

you or me'll be hurt—if it comes to thet. Are you tellin' yore boss what happened on the Canadian? Or is it up to me to explain that you bribed Bart Wilson with whisky an' Blacky Gomez with money to——"

Smoky got no further. Petty's snakelike move of the gun hand cut him short. It was a last desperate effort to still forever the words that he didn't want old Dave Leland to hear. Explanations could come later.

They did. But not from Jake Petty. He was fast on the draw. But one man in the Panhandle was faster. Smoky's defensive bullet got away just as Petty's trigger finger was tightening. Petty spun sidewise under its impact. His shot went into the air. He crumpled, slid lifeless to the ground.

Smoky Clark holstered his gun. He turned to Leah Leland.

"I'm right sorry you had to see this," he said, "but——"

"Nonsense!" cut in old Dave. "Leah's seen snakes put away before. It ain't quite clear ter me yet jest what Petty done. But he was guilty o' plenty, if I kin read the look on a man's face. What was it, Smoky?"

Several waddies, attracted by the noise of the shots, were running across from the bunk house. Among them was a lean, snaky-eyed young fellow—Blacky Gomez.

Smoky singled him out for conversation. The hands of both men were close to their gun butts. But the eyes of Gomez showed terror. Smoky Clark's were grim, fearless.

"Gomez," Smoky said calmly. "Dave Leland jest asked me what Jake Petty was guilty o' doin' up on the Canadian. I'm givin' yuh jest one chance to answer thet question."

Blacky Gomez took that chance. As he talked, old Dave Leland's

eyes flamed with rage. Leah's brightened with joy.

She ran over and threw her arms around her father's neck.

"I knew it! And I think *you* did, too, dad—after you got cooled off, I mean. You always hoped he'd come back. And now that he's here——"

"Now thet he's hyah," Dave cut in, "I'm apologizin'. Yeah, I allus felt thar might be a rat in the wood-pile somewhar. An' I flew off the handle too quick thet day yuh come back from trail herd. I got to control thet temper o' mine."

But the next second, old Dave had forgotten his plan to control his temper. He spotted Blacky Gomez, slinking toward the bunk house.

"Pack yore duds an' git off o' this ranch, Gomez!" Dave yelled. "Ef yo're here in twenty minutes, I'll fill yore yaller hide with lead!"

And to Smoky: "Willin' ter take yore ol' job back, young feller? We kin use a good foreman here."

Smoky looked into the smiling eyes of Leah Leland. "I reckon so," he said. "It's a man's job. An' I'm feelin' like a man again."

HE-L-DOWN BELOW

A MURDEROUS MEXICAN RUSTLER

THE *alcalde* or mayor of a village on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, about twenty-five miles below San Felipe, kept men in his employ to steal cattle from the Texas side of the river and drive them over to him. He had them slaughtered and made good money from their hides and meat.

The Texans knew who was the chief of the rustling band, although he never showed up on their side of the river. On one raid, several small herds were cleaned out, and the Texas men were as mad as hornets.

They determined to get even, and about eighteen of them went over and made an attack on the rustlers' stronghold just as dawn was breaking. The place was known to the Texans as New Town.

As soon as the Texans let their bullets fly, the Mexicans ran away and hid, but the old mayor went into his adobe house and opened fire on the invaders.

One young cowboy, John Pullian, was mounted on an unruly mule that, in spite of all pulling and tugging, bore him right up to the window from which the mayor was

firing, and the old man shot him in the head, killing him instantly.

This act roused the Texans to deadly rage. They fired volley after volley into the house, until it seemed certain that the old thief must have been killed. Then another cowboy, Tom Evans, rode up to the window and looked in, expecting to see the mayor's bullet-ridden body on the floor. But the latter was still very much alive and sent a shot into Tom's stomach, knocking him from his horse.

The Texans were now in a frenzy and set fire to the house. The old *alcalde* ran out and was received with a hail of bullets. The boys then threw his dead body back into the building, which was a mass of flames, and prepared to leave.

The body of young Pullian was tied on a horse, and Tom Evans was mounted on another, his brother riding behind him to hold him on.

In this way they swam the Rio Grande, but Tom died that evening and, with his fallen comrade, was laid to rest on the banks of the Rio Grande.



The Whistlin' Kid Climbs A Cliff

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Crosses A Bridge," etc.

THE "Kid" eased a knee over the ledge and hauled himself up to it. He crawled gratefully into the shadow of the deep, overhung cleft and lay there motionless for a few minutes.

It had taken him almost two hours to climb the four hundred feet of cliff, and the whole trip had been taken with the sun blazing upon him. He was winded, his hands were torn, and he was not at all sure he had not made the effort for nothing—not at all sure if he could get down again.

He had left his buckskin, Speed, in a tiny glen nature had made in the sheer wall of rock. There was shadow there and a little grass, with a tiny spring of water. Speed could stay there, would stay there, for three or four days, waiting for his master. He might stay longer, as a dog stays on its master's grave, still waiting.

It was said by the old Indians, descendants of the cliff dwellers, that there was a way to the top of the cliffs which formed the northern border of fertile Graciosa Valley.

To the south, the valley opened out onto the broad mesa that formed the public range. The valley itself was shared by half a dozen fortunate cattle outfits whose stock fed on the rich grasses, drank the sweet water of Graciosa Creek.

The cliffs were a maze of weather-worn canyons, ravines, and gorges. Once, history and the scientists set down, the valley had been the home of the Zuyis—cliff dwellers. They had not actually lived in the valley, but it had been the landlocked pasture land for their flocks.

In those days, it was not open to the south, and it had held a great lake. Probably it was the crater of a volcano that awakened, split the southern wall, released the waters of the lake.

The Zuyis had lived as cliff dwellers to protect them against the forays of fierce neighbors. They had built their houses in the deep ledges, enlarging them by hand. They had reached them by a system of ladders, of which now only sockets remained, deep-hewn in the cliff or in its seams.

The Kid had gained his ledge by using these sockets. There had been places where he missed them, believed he should have edged along the cliff to pick them up, and so had been set to a harder, stiffer climb.

It was rumored, these days, that the ancient way was used by a band of outlaws. They were said to be fugitives from justice of many kinds, who had gathered in the valley cliffs, hiding from the sheriffs and deputies who sought to collect the rewards offered for them, to stop their raiding of cattle, and other crimes.

These had a back exit down the cliff in case of trouble, when a good escape was better than a poor stand. The Kid was pretty sure he had

been on these back stairs for most of this trip, especially the last end of it. He had seen certain unmistakable sign—burned match ends, two cigarette stubs, the splintered glass of a flask.

From the bottom, he had located a cleft, or chimney, above the cave where he now sprawled. It could not be reached from the overhang, but he still hoped he might find a way to it and a way up it. That would land him in hostile country for any stranger. Deadly territory for the Kid if the outlaws once suspected him for what he was—Pren-tiss, of the Cattlemen's Association, bent upon cleaning up the rustling in Graciosa Valley.

He sat up, started to roll a quiry, and stopped. The scent of tobacco would rise, might betray him. Instead, he softly whistled, almost silently, his favorite air—the melancholy tune of "The Cowboy's Lament."

It was this habit that had gained him the nickname of the "Whistlin' Kid." When he whistled this tune, it was a sure sign that he was either puzzling out a problem, or had satisfactorily solved one.

In the cleft were time-forgotten buildings, the separate dwellings, the community house and council chamber of the long-vanished Zuyis. Their bones were dust. Their utensils and ornaments had survived them. In those buildings, still far from ruins, could be found broken pottery, beads, arrowheads, and spearheads of flaked volcanic glass, and agate.

The Kid saw pictures on the walls, the outlines carved, then filled in with black and red pigments. It might have been the writing of the tribe, the story of their existence. Some of the designs looked as if they represented gods or idols.

The medicine men might have lived here on the highest ledge. It was very possible. In these old ruins, there was always a sacred path known only to the medicine men and wizards.

The Kid cudgeled his brain for legends he had heard and read about these ancient peoples. That was part of his success, part of the reason why he was the ace range detective of the association, chosen for this job. The Kid did not consider himself educated. The range had been his college; he had graduated on the leather deck of a broom-tail bronc. But he read plenty of all things connected with his profession, the regions and the peoples, ancient and modern, among whom he worked.

Out of his memory, a recollection started. He looked around, and the full answer came as he saw a gray patch of stone in the back wall of the cavern.

It was the Aco, the legendary white stone of the great god Quetzal, who had guided the migration of his people by bidding them search for the white rock. Since then, every Zuyi temple had such a stone in it.

The secret of the hidden way might lie behind it.

The Kid forgot his weariness and struck the stone with the butt of his six-gun. It sounded hollow. He pressed upon it, first at the bottom and then the top. Next the right side, and the left.

He felt it give. He thrust hard with his shoulder, and it trembled and then swung and showed the mouth of a tunnel.

Inside, the walls were rounded, as smooth, almost, as glass. It was a volcanic rift, used by man. It led upward, a bore averaging five feet in diameter.

The Kid knew well enough that no cattle could pass this way or down the cliffs now back of him. The outlaws ran off their stolen steers and hid them in some secret place on the rocky summit, rebranding them cleverly, then boldly replacing them in the valley.

Perhaps the stock would be claimed as strays by some outfit whose tally book would show the doctored brand. It was not unlikely that one of the outfits in the valley might be a traitor to the rest.

The fact was clear that the bandits had discovered this get-away trail and sometimes used it.

The white stone swung into place behind the Kid. It might, he thought, be easily blocked or put out of commission, but it was, for the time, at least, his own rat hole.

It led into the cleft he had glimpsed from far below, and here again he saw the sockets from which the old timbers had long ago moldered. The outlaws had not built new ladders. They wanted the place to look undisturbed if any one not friendly to them should chance across it.

The sun had shifted, and now this higher, narrow rift was in shadow and very silent. The Kid wondered if there was a sentry on top who would very simply dispose of any stranger by shooting him or toppling a loose rock down on him. He thought not. Security makes for carelessness, and he had to take the risk.

It was toward the end of the afternoon, growing dusk. He did not care to tackle the climb back in darkness. Speed would fare well. But the Kid did not like separation from his mount. They were close comrades; they had shared dangers and scars of combat. Speed's keen senses had saved both of them as

often as the buckskin's unmatched swiftness.

It could not be helped. This was an adventure in which, for the time, at least, the Kid had to depend upon two legs instead of six.

He started up cautiously. The sun glowed on the rim rock and then faded. But he had made it. There was brush on the top, and he snaked into it, lying there, hearing voices close by.

II.

They were voices in crude song, coarse laughter. Slowly he crept toward the source. Somewhere, not far away, the outlaws of Graciosa were in their lair. He caught the glow of a fire.

"Black Bart held up the Cow Creek stage
In his manner so polite;
'Ladies an' gentlemen,' he said,
Be pleased to now alight.

"Your money an' your jewelry
I'm aimin' to collect,
To aid a worthy purpose
That I trust you will respect."

"They lined up with their hands up,
And Bart he passed the hat,
They filled it and he grinned at them,
For he was standing pat.

"The driver was a brave man
Too gallant for his health,
And he had sworn that with his life
He'd guard the express wealth.

"He tried to draw his hogleg
But Black Bart twiggled the move;
He shot the driver through the head,
His marksmanship to prove.

"He spoke to all the passengers,
'Now take it in good part,
It's really quite an honor
To be held up by Black Bart.'"

Roars of laughter followed the song as the Kid wriggled to the edge of a rocky basin and looked down on the camp fire and the men seated about it, draining tin cups of liquor

and waving them to be filled again from a wicker-covered demijohn that passed from hand to hand.

There were nine of them, a tough-looking outfit. A stone house had been built against one wall, and there was a corral that held close to twenty horses. The Kid saw saddles racked on the poles. He saw bales of hay under a rough shed. There was a spring, or a well, that had been curbed, but none of them drank the water. That was for the horses, perhaps for cooking, but not for thirst.

Beside the fire lay pots and skillets, but, as yet, there were no preparations for cooking. Still the Kid did not doubt he had found the main hide-out of the outlaws.

A man came out of the stone house, hauling by the wrist a boy about twelve years old. The youngster came along bravely, his head up, the firelight showing his face smeared with dirt and tears.

The man was tall and lean. He had the face of a vulture. The face of the Kid was hawkish, with a high-bridged nose, searching, eager eyes, but it did not in the least resemble the cruel countenance of this outlaw chief.

One leg of the man dragged slightly. He yanked the lad along, and the men about the fire grew silent.

"He's a tricky pup," he said, "but I made him write the note. She's all set." He waved a scrap of paper.

"What's it say?" demanded one of the men. "Read it."

With a smile from a mouth that opened on a slant, the outlaw chief read the letter he had forced the boy to write:

"DEAR POP: They got me in Owl Canyon where I was looking for Felix. Try and find him, for he broke his hobbles and may

have got hurt. They have treated me pretty good so far, but I don't know what they might do if you don't do what they ask. Don't do it on my account if it amounts to too much. Don't let ma worry. I'll be all right.

SAMMY."

The Kid, hearing every word, felt them stir in his heart with admiration for the plucky youngster. He believed that the man, already rumored as the head of the outlaw band, was "Peg" Peters, lamed once by a slide of rock, wanted in three States, a reward on his head for stage and train robbery, for murder and cattle stealing.

He had no doubt of it as the man came close to the fire, throwing down the boy. The light showed a scar across his chin.

"We'll send in this note by a peon," said Peters, "and we'll add to it. I'll tell Saunders to send five thousand dollars in cash by a rep to Steamboat Rock at the head of Red Gorge to-morrow at sunrise. If he ain't met, he's to come at the same time the next day, an' the next.

"If I know that Scotchman, he'll have a posse planted out. All his own boys and others. He won't think about his steers. We'll round up a good bunch of the Double S an' tuck 'em away. We'll doctor the brands to Triple 8 an' plant 'em when the scars are healed. The kid's ransom is so much velvet."

"If Saunders loses a big bunch of steers, it'll be known," a man spoke up. "Maybe he can't raise the five thousand for the boy."

"You're a lawyer, Matthews—or, at least, you was one once," said Peters. "You're always raisin' fine p'int. I'm figurin' Saunders's friends'll put up for the boy. If they don't—"

"My pop ain't got five thousand dollars," said the boy shrilly. "There ain't five thousand dollars cash in

the valley. You know that. Not with beef the price it is. They're all tied up with the bank."

Peters grinned evilly, and the Kid's grip tightened on his six-gun. He wished it had been a cannon or a quick-firer, to wipe out this nest of skunks. The odds were too heavy. The boy was in their power. But he would have risked a shot if he had been within range when Peters slapped the boy and sent him sprawling.

"It's goin' to be too bad for you, kid, if your pop an' the neighbors don't gather your ransom," said Peters. "We'll git the steers, anyway. Rusty, you an' Bly'll stay in camp. You're responsible for the kid. The rest of us'll round up the steers. Some of us'll fix an alibi at Padilla's cantina. We'll eat there first, all of us, an' scatter. You'll grub here. Come on, hombres!"

The Kid watched the outlaws depart—nine men, riding out of the basin, bent on plunder. The boy was still slumped by the fire. One of the two men left walked over to him and kicked him to his feet.

"Behave yourself, an' you eat," said the man. "I'm goin' to hobble you so you can't make a break. You wouldn't git fur," he added. "See that cactus. Watch the top leaf."

A gun jerked from his holster. There was a spurt of fire, and the flat leaf twisted as the bullet went through it.

It was good shooting, and the Kid appreciated it. But now the odds were well reduced. The Kid's lips puckered to the tune of the "Lament." The boy, with his ankles tied, slumped by the fire as the two left with him began preparations for supper.

It grew darker. Savory smells wafted up to the Kid's nostrils. He

was hungry, but the odors did not bother him. He had brought his rope along, thinking he might need it on his climb.

Now he thought of other uses for it. There were horses left in the corral, two saddles on the top pole of the corral.

The Kid began to creep around the rim of the basin, like a lizard, swift and noiseless, to where he saw a dark gap. Somewhere there must be a trail out of the lair to the head of the medicine men's path, and this seemed the likely way.

III.

They were broiling stolen steaks and brewing coffee when the Kid arrived at the point he had chosen, a lift of rock that hid him from the blaze of the fire. The man who had shown himself a crack shot at the cactus was mixing camp bread in a skillet set against the heat. The boy lay hunched up. The second man stirred him with a foot.

"Git up an' eat," he said.

The boy raised his head. "I'd rather starve than eat with you snakes," he said, and the Kid silently applauded him.

"Then starve. It won't worry us none," said the man brutally.

The Kid's trigger finger itched. But it was not yet time.

The Kid turtled his bared head cautiously around an edge of the rock. The savory odors of meat and hot bread and coffee made his mouth water. He had eaten nothing since early morning.

The marksman speared a great slab of meat to his tin plate, scooped fried potatoes and onions from a second skillet into it, poured a tin cup of coffee, added sugar and a slug of liquor from the demijohn. He gulped down the almost scald-

ing liquid without blinking, leering at his companion.

In the shadow, the Kid eased out his gun noiselessly.

A bullet slugged through one tin plate. The man dropped it with its contents, startled and staring as a second chunk of lead ripped the bottom of his fellow's plate. The Kid reared up, gun in hand.

"Rise and reach for the sky, hombres!"

The marksman rolled, reaching for his hogleg, and collapsed, swearing and groaning, with the Kid's third bullet in his hip. His hand flopped into hot ashes, and he howled from the burn.

The second man stayed still under the threat of the Kid's six-gun, and the youngster sat up, eyes wide, as the Kid yanked the two outlaws' guns from their holsters, broke them and scattered the cartridges before he tossed the weapons over the rim of the basin, far down, to fall near where Speed waited patiently and wisely.

"You're in poor shape," the Kid told the man with the bored hip. "You'll get picked up before long. I'm Prentiss, of the Cattlemen's Association. I heard all about the snatching of young Saunders, and Peg Peters's slick plan to get the riders up Owl Canyon while they run off the Double S stock. That ain't all I'm interested in. Do you want to talk now or later, or maybe not get a chance to talk at all?"

The man snarled like a trapped mink, and the Kid turned from him to hog tie the other.

"It ain't comfortable," he said, "but you got it coming, and the punchers from the Double S'll be along for you, too. Maybe *you'd* like to spill a li'l information and ease things for yourself a bit, though I can't promise you anything."

The other spat at him, and the Kid spoke to the boy.

"Come on, Sammy. You and me'll borrow a couple of these hawsses, that have most likely been stolen. We'll high-tail it for your dad's outfit. Better snatch some chow first. It ain't like eating with those two coyotes, and I could stand some myself. We got plenty time."

The boy grinned, and the Kid's heart warmed to the freckle-faced youngster with two front teeth missing, who had declined to eat with snakes, but now ate in front of them with a magnificent appetite.

"Me, I didn't get any breakfast," he confided to the Kid. "I was out along the head of the creek last night where there's beaver. Our strawboss said they played by moonlight, so I figured I'd be there all night, and I took my blankets. The folks knew what I was doin'."

"My hawss, Felix, he's a pinto, and mighty brash," he went on. "He likes to go home, so I hobbled him, but he backtracked just the same. I was trailin' him at sunup, and I cut his sign into Owl Canyon when they rode in on me, and when I told 'em who I was, they grabbed me."

The Kid nodded. It looked as if they meant this raid to be their last one, in which case they would not deliver the boy over to his parents, ransom or no ransom, until the brands were changed from Double S to Triple 8. Or else they were in cahoots with an outfit in the valley that would do the doctoring and pay them off so they could get out of the territory.

The boy would be able to identify one and all of them. They had not been masked.

There was another possibility. The Kid's face grew hard as he

thought of it. They might have meant to raid the steers, collect the ransom and do away with young Sammy Saunders. Men like Peg Peters thought little of a life.

"Whatever they're fixing to do, they'll get fooled this time," he told himself.

The boy shortened his own stirrups on one of the saddles while the Kid caught up the best two of the mounts, roping them with a lariat attached to the saddle he chose for himself. He thought sadly of Speed, so near in actual distance, and yet so far when it came to time. It might take hours to reach the buckskin by riding out of the valley and finding a pass through the ridge.

The Kid's eyes found a coil of rope, probably used to make a night corral for a horse herd. It gave him an idea. It was stout stuff, and there was plenty of it. He moved it, hauling it close to the edge of the cliffs near the cleft where the secret path ended, hiding it in the brush.

Then they mounted and rode off before the eyes of the two outlaws, both bound, one wounded. If looks could have killed, the Kid and Sammy Saunders would have been riddled.

"We'll leave you at your outfit, Sammy," said the Kid. "Tell 'em what's on foot. They may have got Peters's message by now. Then all they've got to do is to act natural, but when they ride out, they'll surround your beef herd, 'stead of foolin' round Steamboat Rock."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll be there to see what happens at Steamboat Rock," said the Kid. "First, I'm going to ride into town after I've borrowed another hawss from your dad. I've got an idea it wouldn't be healthy for me to be seen near that Padilla cantina Peters talked about, with this cayuse. It

might be recognized. I want to get a good look at the men with Peters. I might not be able to do that in the dark, you see, and some of 'em might get away, though I hope not."

"Are you after them, for the law?"

The Kid smiled.

"I'll let you into a secret," he said. "You'd hear it soon, when I tell your dad what has happened. I'm a range detective."

"Gee!" said the boy. "I knew one was coming. What's your name?"

The Kid frowned a little. He did not like the news of his arrival to be spread. But he told his name.

"They call me the 'Whistlin' Kid,'" he added. "I've got a habit of whistlin' sometimes. This is my favorite tune."

"I know the words to that," said the boy, after the Kid had ended a verse. "I can sing it, too."

He started in his boyish voice:

"Oh, bury me on the hillside where the
grasses gently wave,
With a score of my companions to follow
to my grave.
With four of my good comrades to carry
me on my bier,
To speak a parting word for me and shed a
bitter tear.
I was a roving cowboy and I broke my
mother's heart,
With gambling and with drunkenness I
drifted far apart.
Now let me be a warning to all who see
me lie,
And listen to the tale of one who isn't fit
to die.

"I reckon that's the kind those hombres are, don't you? Will they be hanged?" the boy asked.

"It depends upon what they've done and if we can prove it, Sammy," replied the Kid. "I've a notion Peg Peters might get his neck stretched some."

"Gee!" exclaimed the boy again. "He told me he'd slit my throat if

I ever let on to know any of 'em again. It ain't far now to our place. You can see the home buildings from the next ridge."

Half an hour later, the Kid delivered the boy over to his stern, anxious father and weeping mother, while the riders of the outfit milled about excitedly.

"We got the note a few minutes ago," said Saunders. "A peon *muchacho* brought it. Says a man he don't know gave it to him in Humedad. Gave him a peso to bring it, and said he's get another this end. It wasn't signed, but it wasn't hard to guess who's back of it—that gang that raises Cain in Humedad, and hang out in the cliffs by the old Zuyi dwellings."

"It might be a good idea to collect the two hombres I left tied up there," said the Kid, and he went on to say what had happened.

"We'll sure gather 'em," said Saunders. "I couldn't get five thousand dollars together if I tried. I'd made up my mind to get some neighbors together and raid the cliffs if we couldn't trap 'em, some ways, round Steamboat Rock. But you've fixed that. They'll think they've still got Sammy."

"They'll drink at Padilla's until it's time to raid the steers, round sunup, time they figure we'll be fooling round Red Gorge and Steamboat Rock," he went on. "We'll get those two jaspers you rounded up, and then we'll set a circle round the herd to act as reception committee. Get there soon after midnight."

"It's a good idea," said the Kid. "Tell me how I can find the herd. I figure on followin' them from Humedad, but I might have to change my plans."

"You're sure taking risks going into Padilla's place," warned Saunders.

The Kid grinned at Saunders with a flash of white teeth in his deeply tanned face, almost as dark as an Indian's, high-boned of cheeks, high-bridged of nose, with a firm chin and resolute dark eyes.

Saunders looked at him and nodded. "I guess you know your business," he said. "Folks say you do. We sure are under big obligations to you, and I'd hate to see those skunks get the best of you. Padilla's as bad as any of 'em. So's the riffraff that hangs round the cantina. Mostly half-breeds that would as soon cut a man's throat as speak to him."

The Kid nodded. "I've been in such places," he said. "Now I'll swap my hawss and saddle if you can let me have 'em. My own outfit's at the bottom of the far side of the cliff. I climbed it so I'd come in the back way."

"You can have the pick of my cavy, or all of it," said Saunders. "I'd sure hate to have to climb up there."

"I reckon it ain't so bad if you're used to it," answered the Kid. "I got off the regular route two or three times, I guess."

Soon, while Sammy was still talking of his adventure and his rescue, the Kid' whistling the "Lament," was hitting the breeze toward Humedad and the cantina of Padilla. It was a place of bad reputation, still almost as Mexican as its name, little patronized by the cattle outfits.

IV.

The Whistlin' Kid never drank anything stronger than coffee. He did not like the taste of alcohol, but his strongest reason for leaving it alone was that it slowed the body as well as the mind.

He had been born and brought

up on a cattle ranch and had quit punching cows to join the Cattle-men's Association as a range detective from the desire for greater adventures.

He had found plenty of them and still hoped for more. They took him into peril, set him against odds that were desperate enough, but would have been worse had it not been that his foes were usually dulled by whisky or tequila.

It was not always easy to get away with his refusals to drink. They were likely to be regarded as an insult. His best excuse was sometimes to pretend that he was under the influence. So when he entered the cantina of Padilla, his wits were keen, his nerves responsive, and his body alert, but he looked as he wanted to appear—a half-breed, or even a full-breed Mexican, staggering, vacant of eyes, and purpose.

His clothing hardly fitted the rôle of a full-breed Mexican. In Humedad, these dressed in Mexican style. The Kid had certain articles he always carried in his sougan roll at the cantle of his saddle, but he could not well climb the cliff with any extra load, so he had left them in the little glen with Speed.

But he had peaked his sombrero, rumbled his dark hair, and made a sash out of his bandanna neckerchief. He spoke Spanish fluently, and he did not attempt to make a quiet entrance, but rolled against the bar, where Peg Peters and his friends were leaning, announcing his desire to pay for drinks for every one.

It was a suggestion that was always welcome. They might question him later, but they would accept his offer, and it was bound to have some effect in their attitude toward him.

He spun a double eagle on the

bar, told the bartender to hold the change until it was all gone.

"There's plenty more where that came from," he declared, with a flourish that spilled most of the liquor from his glass.

"Where?" demanded Peg Peters, also speaking Spanish. Not to talk it in Padilla's was to become a complete outsider.

The Kid blinked at him, wagged a finger drunkenly and placed it first in front of his lips and then against the side of his nose.

"*En boca cerrada no entran moscas,*" he said.

That meant that flies may not enter a closed mouth, or, in American proverb, that a wise man keeps a closed mouth.

"I come to this beautiful place for the sake of my health," the Kid went on, and the crowd laughed. It was the same as if he had acknowledged he was fleeing from the law.

"Come far?" asked Peters.

"My horse is very tired—and so am I," replied the Kid. "I need food and drink and sleep. To-morrow my tongue may be oiled."

He spoke always with a grin, giving the effect of a man who was drunk but not too foolish. Peters approved of him.

"Padilla will give you all that," he said. "Of the best. *Jamon, huevas, tortillas, frijoles, carnero, polluelo, vino.* You can get anything here, if you can pay for it."

"Give me all of them," said the Kid. "Bring 'em over to the table in the corner. My legs are funny. I've got to sit down."

They did not quite know what to make of him, to regard him as a clown, some one they might pluck, or somebody who could still take care of himself. A squat, pock-marked man with one eye—one of Peters's band—started to find out.

"Let me look at your gun?" he asked the Kid.

"Never let any one handle that but myself," the Kid returned. "No, sir. Drunk or sober, asleep or awake. Married or single. Always keep it handy."

"It don't look as if it would be much use to you, the shape you're in," said the man, also speaking Spanish.

The Kid, who had crossed the room toward the table in the corner, straightened up and stood against the wall.

"That's an insult," he said. "This gun is my younger brother."

The cantina was anything but a show place, a ramshackle adobe building, with walls that were cracked inside and out, with floors and ceilings that were warped. Cleanliness was not practiced. There was a cockroach crossing the floor, one of a horde that lived there.

"You see that?" asked the Kid as he swayed and set one hand against the wall, as if to support himself. "Now then!"

His draw was dazzling, merely a blur that ended in a spurt of fire and gas, the roar of the heavy six-gun. The cockroach disappeared.

"*Quién da primero, da dos veces,*" said the Kid. (He who hits promptly, hits twice.) "I see I killed both of them."

A roar of laughter went up. If the stranger had seen double, his shot was the more remarkable. It showed that he might be dangerous. His draw had been dazzling, and none of them could match it. Only Peters frowned. He flattered himself on his own speed. Perhaps he could use this man, who had ridden far and fast.

The Kid sat down, and his food was brought. Presently he was forgotten, and when the waiter came

to remove his dishes, he was asleep, or seemed to be, with his head on his arms. He had left a ten-dollar gold piece in sight, which the waiter took, and Padilla, ever watchful, pounced upon. The pickings in the place were his.

The night wore on toward midnight, and still the Kid stayed in the same position. Card games were started, liquor was freely bought. He caught snatches of conversation that did not tell him much.

The kidnaping of Sammy was not mentioned. Evidently, Peters also believed in a closed mouth. Perhaps he did not trust Padilla too far, or feared he might demand a cut. Peters kept more sober than the rest, or held his liquor better.

The Kid was forgotten. He meant to stay as he was until the others left, and then to follow.

Then Peters spoke in English: "Better cash in, boys, settle up. We'll be moving in ten minutes."

Not more than five had passed when the Kid heard the thud of galloping hoofs outside. The door was thrust open, and a man came in, excited. The Kid peered over an elbow and tensed.

Something had gone wrong. This was one of the men he had left in the outlaws' lair by the cliffs. Not the wounded one; the other.

Saunders must have delayed too long. The Kid guessed what had happened before the man spilled it. The Kid was in a tight corner.

"We got to clear out!" cried the newcomer. "Soon's you left us, this range detective comes out of nowhere an' gits the drop on Jim an' me. Says his name's Prentiss, an' he's heard you talkin'. The jig's up. He shoots Jim in the hip, an' he ties us both up an' takes the Saunders kid after they eat our grub. Took two hawsses an' both our saddles.

I come here bareback, after one whale of a time catchin' a mount."

"What happened to Jim?" asked Peters.

"He couldn't ride. I had to leave him, didn't I? It was him or us."

"You *would* do that," said Peters. "You leave Jim, and he gits sore and spills enough to swing all of us. Go on, you half-baked nitwit! You don't *have* to go on.

"The fat's in the fire," he raged. "This range dick takes the boy home, tells all he knows. They'll be waitin' for us to raid the herd. I've half a mind to go there and fight it out with 'em," he added grimly. "How'd you git loose?"

"I rolled over to Jim, and he untied me."

"Do the same to him?"

"It wouldn't do no good. He's shot through the hip, I tell you. I came to warn you all."

"Well, you warned us," said Peters. "What did this Prentiss hombre look like?"

The Kid could feel Peters's gaze boring in through the top of his skull. He was a stranger, unaccounted for. One hand was already close to his holstered gun. The other slid down toward the left leg of his chaps where he carried an extra in a special pocket.

"Dark, looked some like a hawk," replied the escaped man.

"Look anything like this lizard in the corner?"

Peters fired a shot that shattered the plaster just above the Kid's head. The bullet riffled his hair.

The Kid came to his feet, a gun in either hand. He heard the gasp of the man who had just come in.

"That's *him!*" the fellow cried.

The Kid lifted the table with his knee and sent it among them.

"You might as well quit," he said. "Consider that we've got the

place surrounded, an' that they let him come through to be sure of him."

It was a beautiful bluff, and it almost went over. The Kid had put into it a certain amount of conviction that was bred of hope. When Saunders's men found only Jim, the other gone, they might be smart enough to figure things out and make for the cantina.

If not, he might go out in fire and smoke and lead, but he would not go alone. There were two doors, one at the front, one at the side. The upset table had confused them a little. He saw Padilla bolt out of the side door, and now he saw him returning through the front one.

"They come!" shouted Padilla. "The vaqueros Americanos! A hundred of them. Vamose!"

V.

The thunder of hoofs was plain. Then there came the shouts of the cowboys, not to be restrained, roused by Sammy's kidnaping, the raid, other raids, and old scores to settle.

"Yi-yippi-yi!"

There came a volley from guns fired in the air, plenty of bullets left.

"Git goin'!" yelled Peters.

It was an admission of defeat. The outlaws broke for the side door, crowding one another. Peters fired straight at the Kid, a split second too late. His gun jumped from his hand, and the slug hit the ceiling.

It was Padilla who saved Peters from the second shot. The Kid did not want to kill this man who had murdered, but he meant to cripple him.

And Padilla, in cahoots with Peters, equally afraid of conviction, hating this range detective who had

fooled them as a gopher hates a snake, flung a full bottle of beer at the Kid!

The Kid ducked, but the bottle smashed on the wall, and foaming beer half blinded him. When he got it out of his stinging eyes, Peters was gone. The cantina was filled with punchers battling with the bandits who had not got away.

Outside, mounted men were riding hard, escaping and pursued. Gun flares stabbed the night.

Peters's horse was a pale, flea-bitten roan, powerful and fast. The Kid had noted it when Peters had ridden off, leaving the boy. Now, running for his own mount, the Kid saw in the moonlight the big roan leaping over the sage, heading north.

The Kid swung into his own saddle, spurred the Double S mount, wishing it was Speed. If it had been the buckskin, Peters would have had a slim chance of getting away.

But the roan was a picked animal, magnificent, hardly to be matched. Doubtless, Peters had a hidden cache of treasure in the lair or thought he might get away down the secret path.

It looked as if he would. The Double S horse was a good one, but its utmost efforts left it farther behind at every stride. Peters was out of six-gun range. The fight was raging about the cantina. Nobody followed them.

The Kid tried out his broncho, sized it up, eased it from a frenzied gallop. He had to get the best out of it, and it was badly outclassed. Peters had provided for emergency. Soon his roan was only a ghost in the moonlight, then it was gone, leaving only vanishing dust.

Again the Kid wished for Speed between his knees. But he still held to one hope. Peters knew he was

followed unrelentingly. He might not tarry in the hide-out, try to escape by the secret path. And the Kid had an ace in the hole.

He was sure he had, when he found the sweating roan in the corral, abandoned. He went to the rim of the cliffs and saw the figure of Peters, clambering down, sure-footed, sure of the way, close to the bottom, plain in the moonlight.

A rifle could have reached him, though it would have been a difficult shot, straight down.

The Kid saw Peters slither down the last twenty feet on the slope of loose rock, crumbled from the cliffs. He saw him pick himself up and run to the left. He might have horses there, kept for a get-away.

The Kid snaked out the coil of rope he had hidden. He carried it to the cleft, slid down to the inside of the white stone, and pressed fearfully against it. It swung, and he got down to the cliff cavern. He looped the rope about one of the smaller dwellings and slid down to a ledge, hauling the rope after him, seeking another hold.

The moon made him a perfect target as he slipped from ledge to ledge, scalding hands and knees in his haste. Once a jutting rock gave way, and he rolled, clutching until the rope caught in some stout growth and checked his fall.

He reached the foot of the cliff and whistled shrilly. Out on the plain, he could see dust rising, silver beneath the moon. It was Peters, galloping. Then there came a low whicker, and Speed arrived.

The Kid vaulted to the saddle.

"We got to catch him, old-timer," he whispered in the buckskin's ear. "Get goin'!"

This was another sort of race. Peters had a good mount, almost equal to the roan, but Speed was far

better. The buckskin was well rested. It was impatient. Always one with its master's aims. Now, with every leap, Speed gained.

Peters rode well, up on the neck of his horse. And so did the Kid.

When he overhauled Peters, Speed was playing with the race. Then Peters did a clever and unexpected thing. He made his mount swerve and rear, and slid from the saddle into a dense clump of sage.

From it, his gun belched, and the Kid felt a sting in his shoulder. Speed flinched and then swung and reared, out of hand, raging trampling through the bushes. The Kid had his gun in his right hand, the reins in his left.

He could not control Speed for the moment, and that was enough. Iron hoofs had ended the career of Peg Peters, saved him from the black cap and the noose.

The Kid examined the shoulder cut of the buckskin.

"Can fix that, old-timer," he said. "You'll be stiff for a spell, and so will I. Reckon we'll go the long way round and let the others clean up."

So the Kid and Speed came limping into the Double S headquarters, weary but triumphant. Saunders hurried to meet them, his face radiant.

"We sure rounded 'em up, thanks to you," he said. "Did Peters get away?"

The Kid stopped the tune on his lips. It was the "Lament."

"Not so you'd notice it," he said.

The Whistlin' Kid never acts too hasty. He makes shore he's right, then goes ahead. A cool brain gits him more'n hot six-guns do, he's found. But when he does slide his hoglaig from leather, she comes out blazin'. He's comin' back right soon in another grippin' range-detective story. Watch fer it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



Some Sand, Ranger!

By Frank J. Litchfield

Author of "Better Than Bullets," etc.

A HARD man was Cantrell. And such a man as was needed for the job of running "Fox" Quimby to earth. As he rode now, among the scattered mesquite and clumpy pin oak, with his quarry in sight half a mile ahead, he looked what he was—a relentless pursuer of wanted men.

Thirty days on Quimby's trail had changed the granite in Cantrell to flint. Thirty days of grim watchfulness had tempered the steel in him, for both he and Quimby knew that this game must soon end in death for one or the other—or both.

Cantrell lifted his carbine thoughtfully, then thrust it back into the saddle boot. There was too much brush between them for effective

shooting. And then, too, it was the Ranger code to bring them back alive, if possible.

Cantrell held the rank of corporal in the Rangers. Quimby had no long-range gun. He had burned out his rifle during a half-day running fight with Cantrell early in the game.

Still, Quimby was dangerous. They said that no lone pursuer ever had returned alive from his trail. Poses Quimby merely outwitted, for he never played odds. And down on the border, which was Cantrell's stamping grounds, it was tradition in the service that the corporal had never failed to bring in his man.

So here they were, Cantrell, the man hunter, and Fox Quimby, the

most cunning and merciless criminal in Texas, within sight of each other.

Cantrell had cut Quimby's trail down in Tom Green County, less than twenty-four hours after the killer had robbed and murdered a cattle buyer for the sake of a few hundred dollars. It was just another crime of a series that had made Quimby's name one of terror.

A long chase it had proved, a chase that looped southward to the Pecos, northwest to Horsehead Crossing, then across the hundred-mile waterless stretch to the Concho. A corner of the Staked Plains, a week of zigzagging back and forth on the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos—and now, in sparsely settled Deaf Smith County in the Panhandle, where fingering creeks and brooks—the headwaters of the mighty Red River—were never more than a half day's ride apart, Cantrell could follow his quarry by the eye.

"This reminds me o' that yarn they spring in the San Joaquin Valley in California about the houn' dawg chasin' a jack rabbit in July, with the sun hittin' about a hun'ed an' forty," Cantrell told his sorrel horse. "They was both walkin'."

For this pursuit was no saddle-creaking, wind-cutting dash. Too many long miles had been put behind their weary horses for that. Even so, these animals had been at it for less than a week. Both men had managed to obtain occasional remounts—and wear them out.

Quimby, on a shambling roan, disappeared in a dark-green clump of pin oak ahead.

"Yo're gainin'—but slow," Cantrell told his sorrel, whose flanks were gaunt. "That cayuse of Quimby's was good, but you've cut him down."

Cantrell himself had thinned out. He was of that type who might be twenty or thirty. But now his face, which was the hue of old leather, carried new peaks and hollows that made him seem older. However, he still rode erect as a ramrod. Quimby, ahead, was slumping a trifle in the saddle.

Cantrell's hazel eyes suddenly narrowed. He halted the sorrel and studied the oak clump into which Quimby had gone.

"He ought tuh have showed up beyond that clump," he muttered. "What is it—another ambush or a deadfall?"

He remembered the poisoned spring that Quimby had left for him back on the Tahoka Divide, and the ambush at Horsehead Crossing. A dead coyote beside the spring had warned the Ranger of the cyanide in the water. Quimby's first bullet at the Horsehead had only pinked him, and he had taken to cover before the killer could draw a finer bead. That was where Quimby had ruined his rifle.

Was this another ambush? Then Cantrell's long body eased, and he started the sorrel plodding ahead again, for Quimby had emerged beyond the stand of oaks—still fleeing northward toward the Canadian River.

But Cantrell knew that the outlaw had been unduly long in negotiating the clump of oak. So he was alert as he approached the gnarled, low-spreading trees. Quimby's trail lay plain. He had pushed deliberately between the interlocked branches of twin trees. Why? There were easier routes only a few yards to either side, for this rocky soil and the dry, hot summers thinned out the growth.

Cantrell turned aside, skirted the twin oaks, dismounted, and ap-

proached them afoot from the north. He carefully inched on hands and knees beneath their drooping branches, and looked up. Finally he smiled grimly.

Perched in the crotch of a limb at saddle height was a common olive bottle filled with heavy brownish liquid. It was olive oil right enough, and tightly corked; but there were no olives in it.

Cantrell cautiously removed it. "Crystals of nitroglycerin, suspended in heavy oil for safe-keepin'," he muttered, staring at the dim substance in the fluid. "If I had come smashin' along on Quimby's route, I'd have stirred that branch, an' the bottle would have dropped an' smashed. Why, he even placed some rocks under the limb, to be sure it would break."

He shrugged, pushed his way out, found a rocky gully near by, and hurled the bottle into it, crouching down. The explosion shot small rocks and dirt into the air. It was not a powerful blast, yet if it had occurred at the feet of a horse, the animal and its rider would have been killed.

"I heard of a prospector usin' that stuff tuh block his trail in the Mojave," Cantrell mused as he remounted. "Quimby must have heard of it, too. I wonder what else he's got up his sleeve? First poison, now explosive—what next?"

The delay had widened the gap somewhat. Quimby had disappeared over a low ridge ahead. It was mid-afternoon then, and Cantrell did not sight his quarry until dusk. Quimby was working down the long slant toward the flats of a creek, whose brush line could be seen meandering away to the north-west.

The day had been sultry, though the season was early. Low thunder

was growling among the Estacado Bluffs far to the west. Cantrell finally camped, because he knew what was coming.

The storm rolled briefly over his locality at midnight, the rain coming with cloud-burst force for ten minutes. Then it was over. But it cost Cantrell considerable trouble, for it was nearly noon the next day before he picked up Quimby's trail again, some ten miles out on the flats. Quimby had made a fireless camp for a few hours during the night, also, to rest his horse.

"We lost some distance," Cantrell muttered. "That sign is four-five hours old."

But the trail freshened rapidly. "His roan is plumb tuckered," Cantrell said. "If yuh can keep goin' until dark, hoss, we'll be lookin' him in the eye."

The trail ran along the bank of the creek for a few miles, then cut toward the brush that screened the stream. Quimby had taken no pains to conceal his route. It was not hard to follow, even in the bunchy grama on the flats. And in the stirrup-high, blue-joint meadows of the creek bottom it was a swath a blind man could have moved along.

Cantrell studied the heavier brush ahead as he neared the creek. Willows, juniper, box elder, cottonwood, and wild gooseberry grew rank and thick here.

Also, he noted that pecans were numerous, and he made a note of that to include in his report when he got back—if he ever did get back. The pecans that were springing up along the waterways in Texas were the pride of the Rangers. They had planted them.

A far-seeing governor, some ten years earlier, had pressed the Rangers into the duty of scattering pecan nuts when they rode the far

trails. And the plan had paid dividends, for the nuts were already affording a livelihood to settlers in more accessible regions.

This was new country to Cantrell. But the pecans proved that it had been patrolled by the service in the past. He wondered if his predecessor had been engaged in a man hunt, too.

The thickets were broodingly silent. A natural place for an ambush. Cantrell dismounted, tethered his horse, and worked ahead afoot with only his six-gun. The carbine would be a nuisance in the brush.

He scouted with every muscle taut, because every screen of buck-brush, every drooping willow, might hold death. He circled the denser points and picked up the plain trail beyond. He could hear the purl of the stream not far ahead now. And still nothing but brooding quiet.

Then he reached the creek. It was a mere brook, slightly roiled by the rain of the preceding night, but only a dozen feet wide at this point where it boiled over rocks. Ferns and blue stem grew waist-high on either bank.

He could see where Quimby's horse had labored up the opposite margin.

Then he saw a fern quiver over there, and he dropped flat just as a six-gun roared from the grass. An ambush!

II.

Cantrell's hat was lifted by the bullet. His own gun blazed twice, but he fired only to keep Quimby busy while he wriggled to another position.

Hissing slugs from the outlaw's gun scythed the grass about him. One slit the sleeve of his shirt. But none found his flesh.

"Left his horse an' doubled back tuh bush me," Cantrell was thinking.

Quimby's gun had ceased its thunder. The killer was waiting, hoping for some sign of a hit.

Weighted minutes dragged. Cantrell began inching to his knees, endeavoring not to disturb the ferns and grass. Once on his knees, he stretched to peer above the growth.

And there, rearing from the high grass across the brook, was Quimby, his eyes glittering in sunken sockets, his yellow teeth a-snarl in his unshaven, lean jaws. Quimby's .45 was lining on Cantrell, its bore looming big at that fifty-foot range. The Ranger could see the glitter of the big diamond ring on a finger of the Fox's gun hand.

That diamond, almost as big as a pea, was an identification mark that had linked Quimby to many crimes. The outlaw always wore it. It seemed to be a vain quirk in an otherwise crafty character.

Crash! Both weapons blared.

Cantrell had fired from the waist, the powder flame searing the grass, the bullet clipping a fern in its passage. Then he felt the sledgelike impact of a bullet in his left shoulder, and went down, sick and numb from the shock.

But, as he fell, he carried a vague impression that his own bullet had also found Quimby. The killer's gun hand had twitched, and Cantrell believed he heard a low moan. He lay there, stunned, for a moment, expecting Quimby to rake the grass with slugs.

But nothing happened. Again he thought he heard a moan of pain, then a vague rustling. Cantrell's nerves and muscles began to function sluggishly, and he dragged himself laboriously to a near-by pecan tree that gave him some shelter.

The bullet had broken a bone in his shoulder, and his left arm was useless. He plugged the wound as best he could with his neckerchief, and waited.

Minutes of that, then he heard the thud of hoofs beyond the stream. Quimby was fleeing. He had wormed away, and was in the saddle. Cantrell dragged himself erect, waded the brook, and pushed through the brush. But he was too late. The sound of pounding hoofs grew fainter, then died.

Cantrell found the circle of crushed grass where Quimby had lain in ambush. A dot of quivering light reflected the sun. It was the diamond.

But Cantrell recoiled as he knelt. For the ring was still upon a finger. The finger lay there in the grass, a grisly relic of Quimby's attempt to kill his relentless pursuer. Beside it was Quimby's six-gun.

Cantrell inspected the gun, first, and nodded grimly.

"My bullet glanced off his gun, an' clipped the third finger off his hand," he muttered. "Ruined the gun. The chamber is jammed plenty."

Fox Quimby was unarmed. That realization stirred Cantrell into action. The dizziness from his wound vanished. Impulsively he turned, intending to get his horse and take up the pursuit hotfoot.

With Quimby unarmed, the chances of an ambush were small. The Ranger could push ahead at full speed. The outlaw's horse was near the end of its endurance. The odds had swung in favor of the law. This long chase was about over.

Cantrell hesitated and returned. Reluctantly he removed the ring, and kicked dirt and leaves over the object that remained in the grass. He dropped the ring in his pocket.

"I've heard that rock was worth five thousand," he thought. "No matter what happens now, Quimby loses. He got only a couple hundred from that pore feller he murdered."

Soon he was on the trail again, setting his teeth as the sorrel's shambling gait sent twinges of agony through his shoulder.

The trail angled out onto the flats for a few miles, then cut abruptly back toward the creek again. Cantrell knew why Quimby was seeking cover once more. He had given up hope of reaching the Canadian River. The long gouges left in the rain-moist soil by the dragging feet of the outlaw's mount told why.

"His horse is foldin' up, pore critter," Cantrell told the sorrel. "Quimby's goin' tuh be afoot soon."

He had barely reached the brush of the creek bottom when he found the roan. It was down, its legs working convulsively. Cantrell dismounted, closed his eyes, as he shot it, and turned away, his face pale. He loved horses.

"The hoss didn't know what kind of a buzzard he gave his life for," he said hoarsely.

Then he looked at his own sorrel. It's head was drooping. "Another mile an' you'll be down, too," he said. "Here's where yuh rest, hoss. Quimby's afoot. I can get him without killin' you, too."

He slipped the rigging and turned the sorrel loose. The animal, exhausted as it was, would not wander. Cantrell left it and pushed ahead. Quimby's trail was harder to follow now, but the Ranger never hesitated.

Eventually it led to the creek at a point where the stream broadened and ran only a few inches deep over a queer gray bottom.

"That's got the earmarks of quick-sand," Cantrell muttered, "but it can't amount tuh much. Quimby crossed it."

For in the wet loam at his feet were the deep indentations of the killer's boots, and on the opposite margin, at that sixty-foot distance, Cantrell could see the outgoing trail from the stream.

"Looks like he made a run for it an' went through fast. If he did it, so can I."

The creek looked sandy as far up and down as Cantrell could see, and he was too weary to circle for a better crossing.

He backed away a dozen paces, ran, and took a giant stride out into the shallow water. His boots sank sickeningly as they struck. He managed to make two more floundering steps, expecting the bottom to harden. Surely it must get better. Quimby had crossed it.

But Cantrell felt a chill. He had barely been able to withdraw his right foot on that last stride. And he had left his boot in the clutching undersurface.

He was sinking into a clammy feather bed. He strained fiercely. His left foot would not lift. His right went down and seemed seized.

He realized with horror that water and sand reached his waist, and that a leaden force was tugging at his feet and pressing against his thighs.

Cold perspiration beaded his forehead. He tried to bend flat in the hope of withdrawing his legs, but he was too deep in the sand already. He could feel the clammy line creeping up.

The six-gun that he held above his head, seemed an intolerable weight that pressed him deeper, and he dropped it. It vanished into the engulfing sand forever.

He ceased to struggle, for that only sent him deeper, and looked desperately about. A leaning cottonwood, from the shore that he had aimed at, hung tantalizingly fifteen feet overhead, some of its branches drooping within only a few feet of his outstretched hand. But he could not reach it.

He opened his lips to shout, then closed them. A shout might bring Fox Quimby, and that meant death, anyway.

But suddenly Fox Quimby himself rose from the brush on the shore, cackling triumphantly.

Cantrell had never seen the killer at such close quarters. The view was anything but reassuring. Quimby was enjoying this scene. That was evident in every line of his stringy body with its stooped shoulders and long arms.

"You are some bloodhound," Quimby taunted, "but yuh got stuck in the mud. Yuh didn't know that I brought my lass rope with me. I looped that cottonwood overhead, took a run, an' swung almost all the way across. The rope helped me wade the rest of the way."

"What are you goin' to do about it?" Cantrell asked calmly.

"Sit here an' watch yuh sink," Quimby shouted. He held a crudely bandaged hand aloft. "Yuh crippled me, dang yuh! If I had a gun, I'd——" But he paused. "No, I wouldn't. That would be too quick an' too easy. The sand will do a better job—an' a slower one. Smotherin' ain't a nice death, they say."

Cantrell silently wished that Quimby did have a gun. That would be an easier and quicker death. He could feel the leaden grip of the sand stealing higher. The surface of the water was nearly to his armpits.

III.

Cantrell was thinking fast. Caught in the fangs of death, he remained icily calm. He studied Quimby's face. It was shockingly brutal—a smirched page that had never known a humane inscription. Merciless eyes, sunken, depraved chin; tight, greedy mouth—

That was it—greed! Cantrell grasped that straw, as he thought of the diamond ring. Quimby was his only hope. Quimby must be made to help him out of this, if he were to be helped.

"Too bad about yore diamond, Quimby," Cantrell said. "Quicksand never gives up anything, they say."

Quimby's jaws snapped. "Have you got that blazer?" he snarled. "I didn't know I'd lost that finger until too late tuh go back. I was so busy crawlin' away I didn't look at that busted hand until I reached my hoss."

"I've got it—in my pocket," Cantrell said.

"Yuh lie!" Quimby said uncertainly. "Blast yuh, I'll soon find out, though!"

He turned away and began rummaging among the brush. Cantrell waited. The water had reached his neck. But the clammy weight of the sand did not seem to be rising so rapidly.

Quimby reappeared, dragging a heavy cottonwood limb, from which he was breaking the twigs. He worked fast.

"What do yuh aim at?" Cantrell asked, but he already knew.

"I'll tap yuh on the head with this, then search yuh for that ring," Quimby assured him. He began ripping branches and willow boughs from near-by trees and tossing them into the water to form a rough

bridge that would support him across the quicksand.

Cantrell laughed scornfully. "Guess again," he said. "That ring is too far down for yuh tuh reach. An' you'll never be able to budge my dead weight an inch higher. The only way you'll ever get that rock is to help me out of here—alive. Both of us, workin' together, can make it."

Quimby knew he spoke the truth, but he was suspicious. "The minute I get near yuh, yuh'll grab me," he said.

"I've got a busted shoulder," Cantrell pointed out.

"An' I've got a bum hand," Quimby reminded him.

"Well, it's up to you," Cantrell remarked. "Better make up your mind—*blub*—plenty quick. I'm up to my chin. Swallowed water then. I'll be under in five minutes, and then you can kiss that diamond good-by."

"Stick yore arms down in the sand, an' I'll pull yuh out," Quimby cried hastily. "Then yuh can't grab me."

Cantrell immediately lowered his arms, and they disappeared under water. He stood with head tilted back, for the muddy stream was creeping higher. He could just barely stretch his mouth above it.

"Hustle," he said tensely.

Quimby worked like mad, ripping down branches and extending his bridge. He was forced to weight them down with rocks, as they threatened to float away.

But, just as Cantrell's mouth went under, leaving only his nostrils clearing the surface, the killer reached his side.

Quimby was up to his knees in water, too, but his feet were free of the sand. Cantrell, looking up at him, saw that same merciless light

in the Fox's eyes. The outlaw wanted that ring, and Cantrell knew that, once he got it, he would shove him back to the mercy of the quicksand.

"Keep them arms wedged down," Quimby warned. "If you start tug-gin' 'em free, I'll leave yuh."

He stooped to lift the Ranger by the armpits. But, as he bent, he gave an oath and tried to wriggle away.

But he was too late. Cantrell's arms shot from the water and wound around him. Quimby screamed as he was overbalanced. One leg missed the underfooting in the brush and sank to his hip in the quicksand. His other foot was still on the bridge, but Cantrell's weight grimly toppled him away from it.

"Yuh'll kill—kill both of us," Quimby screeched.

He strained insanely, but could not break the grip of Cantrell's arms. Quimby was down to his waist now, with the quicksand drawing him deeper. On the other hand, Cantrell had managed to lift himself a few inches, using the outlaw's body as a pivot.

Cantrell was still at a disadvantage. His injured shoulder was numbing under the strain. Quimby partly broke his grip, and the outlaw's clawing right hand tore at Cantrell's throat.

Cantrell, with his last gasping strength, saw an opening at Quimby's jaw. His right fist shot in with a solid spat.

Quimby slumped, his head disappearing beneath the water.

Cantrell, his breath wheezing,

seized the green willow branches nearest him just in time, for they came floating to the surface, and would have drifted beyond reach in another second. They gave him support. He drew more branches to them, thrusting some beneath Quimby's arms to support his head above the surface. The outlaw was half drowned.

After that, Cantrell, the veins bulging in his forehead, wriggled from the grip of the sand, the brush bridge giving him the support he needed.

Then he gained his breath, and began tugging at Quimby. The outlaw revived enough to help him. He did not even resist when Cantrell bound his arms with his own belt, once he was partly free of the sand. After that it was but a matter of strength and hard work to get him ashore.

Quimby was cringing as they reached the bank.

"They'll hang me," he wailed.

"I reckon," Cantrell said coldly.

"Yuh cold-decked me," Quimby chattered. "Yuh didn't bury yore arms in quicksand. The crick was risin', an' yuh only put them under water."

"Yo're right," Cantrell yawned. "The rise from that rain in the hills last night just reached this far downstream. I never was farther in the quicksand than my waist. I doubt if I would have sunk much deeper, because there's a bottom tuh that stuff not far down. But I would have drowned in another minute, if yuh hadn't come tuh pull me out."





Tangled Herds

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Circle J At Bad Medicine," etc.

CHAPTER I.

STRANGERS ON CIRCLE J.

THE grizzled waddy's long drooping mustache suddenly bristled. And from beneath shaggy gray brows, his bulging brown eyes shone with angry lights. He lifted a floppy old black John B from his head, combed strong, rope-calloused fingers through thin, gray-ing hair, then jerked the hat back on with a loud grunt. Then the tip of his crooked nose twitched, and his right hand dropped to the gun on his saddle-warped right thigh.

"Buck" Foster had just ridden

down a steep draw that ran back into the Bitterroot Mountains, shagging three Circle J dogies out toward the more open ranges. But now Buck sat his puffing horse, the three dogies completely forgotten.

Out where the foothills dropped off to a broad, level stretch of green range land, Buck had spotted a sizable herd of cattle, being shoved along at a pretty good clip.

It was too early in the season for any one to be rounding up, and besides, this was Circle J range. Buck knew very well that his boss, young Billy West, had not ordered any Circle J cattle gathered.

Buck, Billy, and a red-headed, freckle-faced young ranny named Joe Scott, had ridden to this particular section of the range early in the morning to comb the draws for strays. Billy West and Joe Scott were off east in the broken hills, for Buck had sighted them, less than an hour ago. So it couldn't possibly be they down there with that big herd.

"I'll be a horned toad!" Buck yelled suddenly, and sent his big black cow horse lunging recklessly down the rocky ridge. "I savvy now, by golly! Thet's a pack o' rustlers, tryin' ter git away with Circle J beef. They're tryin' ter make Antelope Crick an' git hid before anybody spots 'em. But I got the skunks spotted, an' their hides is just as good as on the fence."

Wind tore at Buck's battered, homely face, sending his grizzled mustache back past leathery cheeks in long streamers. A mangy-looking old bearskin vest, of which he was very proud, popped and snapped, billowing out as he leaned over, yelling at his horse to show more speed. The big grain-fed black thundered down the ridge at a dangerous pace, dodging rocks and brush like a frightened deer.

It did not occur to Buck that the horse might stumble, go crashing off into the boulder-strewn gulch to the right. In fact, Buck seldom had more than one idea at a time, and right now his mind was busy picturing what he would do to those jaspers down yonder who were pushing the herd toward the ragged scar that marked Antelope Creek's passage through the hills.

The grizzled ranny was a hot-headed, scrappy sort. He invariably rushed head-on into matters without stopping to consider the consequences.

Buck had got it into his mind that

those men down there were rustlers, and not once did he stop to consider any plan besides jumping them single-handed. He could see the cattle better as he neared the end of the ridge and counted eight riders with them. But the only caution Buck showed was to swing off behind the point of the ridge and approach the herd and eight riders from the rear.

Buck's lips peeled back in a satisfied grin as he rode into the dust cloud kicked up by the cattle. His horny right hand dropped, clamping over the butt of his gun. Through the dust he could see two riders, swinging doubled lariat ropes as they forced lagging critters to give up the idea of falling out of line.

"Skunks!" Buck snorted through his bent nose. "Jist plain low-down, rustlin' skunks! But hyar's where they gits a taste o' lead medicine. I—— Huh!"

Despite the efforts of the two drag riders, a lean steer slipped past them and came thundering back. Buck's black lunged without being guided, headed the steer, and sent it galloping back toward the herd.

But what brought the grunt of surprise from Buck was the fact that the steer his horse had turned did not wear the Circle J brand at all, but a big 66 on the left ribs.

Buck had little time to ponder over that, however, for the two drag riders had seen him, and suddenly they were scooting out of there as if a ghost had ridden up. Buck's lean jaw sagged, and his eyes strained through the dust to see where the riders were going.

It was just beginning to dawn on the slow-thinking old coot that those two jaspers had acted mighty queer, when he heard shouts from somewhere ahead, and saw the herd of cattle begin slowing down. Buck

rode past the steers, circled out of the dust, and came to a dead stop, a growl rumbling deep in his throat.

Those steers were all branded 66—or, at least, all of them that Buck could see were. But into his mind had popped the fact that the 66 herd was on Circle J range, headed straight for Antelope Creek, one of Billy West's best pastures.

"I'll find the boss o' the outfit an' let him know he ain't gittin' by with no sech monkeyshines," the veteran growled. "By heifers! If this herd gits into our Antelope Crick pasture, they'll mix with Circle J stuff so bad, it'll take a week ter ontangle 'em. I'll jist go find the boss o' this outfit an'——"

Buck had no looking to do, however, for at that very moment, eight riders came thundering toward him—dusty, red-eyed hombres who fanned out as they approached and let their hands slide to holstered guns. In the lead was a lanky, tow-headed man who bored Buck with a pair of cold blue eyes that were bloodshot and angry-looking.

The tow-headed man was dressed from boots to Stetson in dusty black clothing, and about his lean hips sagged two well-filled cartridge belts supporting two black-butted six-guns that rode his thighs in thonged-down holsters.

"Yuh lost somethin', stranger?" the black-clad hombre said in a flat, ugly tone. "I'm Poke Johnson, owner o' these 66 critters. What yuh huntin', huh?"

"I ain't huntin' nothin', feller, but yuh better be," Buck snarled, glaring at the hard-looking punchers who had closed in on both sides. "An' what yuh'd better be huntin' is a new trail. This hyar am Circle J range—deeded land, feller. You're headin' straight fer——"

"For Antelope Creek, over yon-

der," came "Poke" Johnson's flat voice. "We're drivin' this herd up that creek into the Bitterroots, where I aim to range 'em. Got any objections, ol'-timer?"

"Objections?" Buck Foster roared. "Yo're danged tootin' I'm objectin'! Thar's a big herd o' three an' four-year-olds in our pasture on Antelope Crick, an'——"

"Ain't that too bad, now?" a waspy little man cackled, winking one beady eye at Poke Johnson. "I reckon we'd shore stampede if we seen some nice——"

"Dry up, Keno Charley!" Poke Johnson snapped, then swung back to face Buck.

"They told me in Twin Rivers, the town we drove past yesterday, that we'd have to watch yuh Circle J wallopers," he gritted at Buck. "I was told that a big-headed young whelp named West an' a gal named Ruth Dawe own the spread. I also heard that yuh consider yoreselves a tough bunch, an' have the habit o' bulldozin' honest people. But yuh can't—— Hey, what the——"

Buck had suddenly rammed the hooks to his black, kicked his boots from stirrups as the horse lunged, then quit the saddle in a flying leap, sinewy arms closing about Poke Johnson's lean middle. Now Johnson and Buck crashed to the ground, snarling like a couple of wild cats. But Buck broke free, rolled over and leaped to his feet, wild battle lights blazing in his bulging eyes.

"Call Circle J names, will yuh?" Buck roared at the dazed man on the ground. "Crawl up on them hoofs, skunk, an' take the lickin' yuh got comin'! I'll——"

Wham! A big six-gun roared throatily, and Buck Foster buckled at the knees, crimson dyeing the crown of his hatless gray head.

The waspy little jasper who had been called "Keno Charley," sat grinning thinly, a smoking Colt grasped in his skinny right hand.

CHAPTER II.

A RUSTLER'S SCHEME.

TWO burly cowboys picked Poke Johnson up, steadyng him between them while he gasped and choked, his face gray beneath grime and tan. In falling, one of Buck Foster's elbows had bored heavily into Poke's stomach, driving the wind from him and leaving him weak and sick.

But he was recovering now. He pushed the two punchers away, then straightened, forcing his tortured muscles to stretch, regardless of the pain it caused. He took a wabby step, leaned against his big roan horse for a moment, then mounted slowly, eyes beginning to squint and blaze as he turned on Keno Charley.

"Thought I said there was to be no shootin' unless it had to be done, Keno," Poke Johnson's flat voice gritted. "Yuh've ruined my plans by bein'——"

"Yore plan was to git into West's Antelope Crick pasture, scatter these 66 steers, an' swear they stampeded while we was crossin' the range." Keno Charley grinned. "That'll force West to help us round up, an' while we've got all them fine three an' four-year-olds o' his bunched with these 66s, we kin stampede the hull works back into the Bitterroots, where West will never find his steers.

"But this ol' codger buttin' in makes things a heap easier, Poke. Now all we've got ter do is head these dogies on over ter the crick an' scatter 'em out. Then we kin go right ter Circle J headquarters, look up West, an' all swear that this

ol' buzzard jumped us, tried gunnin' us an' stampede the cattle. Then we kin——"

"Yo're a fool!" Poke Johnson cut in. "Think I'll lug one o' West's men in an' admit that anybody in my outfit kilt him? Not on yore life, feller! West an' his whole crew are powder-burnin' fools. They'd, why——"

"Aw, good gosh!" Keno Charley snorted. "We've bucked tougher outfits than this Circle J an' come out winners. Besides, I wa'n't fool enough ter kill that ol' geezer. I jist skint his noggin with a bullet ter keep him from poundin' the day-lights outn yuh, Poke. He had yuh licked, an' yuh know it."

There was an audible gasp from the hard-faced, tough-looking cowboys who ranged behind Keno, and they lost no time in getting to other positions. But to their surprise, Poke Johnson did not flip those supple, sinewy hands to his guns and blast Keno Charley from the saddle with blazing lead. Instead, Johnson grinned wryly, felt his still aching stomach, and nodded his head slowly.

"Yo're righter than a rabbit in a brier patch, Keno," Poke Johnson chuckled. "That ol' fool was lucky enough to fall on top o' me, an' one o' his elbows knocked the wind outn me. It would 'a' been easy for him to beat my head off, 'cause I couldn't 'a' lifted a hand. An' yore scheme o' layin' the stampede onto one o' West's own men will make it a heap stronger.

"Come alive, men! Start the cattle, an' don't be afraid to run a little taller off 'em. Pug, yuh an' Frosty hop down an' take care o' this ol' ranny. Tie him on his hoss, then foller the herd. Snake out his cutter an' empty it at the sky. Git a move on, all yuh rannies!"

Whooping, swinging slickers ripped from behind saddles, Poke Johnson, Keno Charley, and four salty-looking hombres swooped down on the herd. The steers bawled, broke into little bunches and tried to scatter. But expert cowhands and well-trained horses kept them loosely bunched—and kept crowding.

A big dun steer shot into the lead, kinked its tail, and headed for Antelope Creek, running at top speed. And within a scant two minutes, the whole heard of three hundred lean steers was running, swarming over the green range land with surprising speed.

Poke Johnson and his men flanked the cattle on both sides, emptying their six-guns into the ground, yelling like savages at the already frightened cattle. And not until the last steer had vanished into the wide, grassy basin that was Antelope Creek pasture did Johnson and his hard-case rannies draw rein. They sat watching the herd thunder up the valley, grinning broadly as sleek, fat steers trotted nervously behind the stampeding herd.

"My 66s will slow down before they've run another mile, 'cause there's water to attract 'em," Johnson chuckled. "An' look at them Circle J critters fall into line, follerin' mine! Boys, this is goin' ter be one o' the richest hauls we've ever made. Gosh, but them Circle J steers are shore dandies! If we're lucky, we kin collect two or three hundred o' them critters."

"I'll shore git a laugh, watchin' this West kid fire that ol' ranny I creased fer stampedin' strange stuff into Circle J's best beef herd," Keno Charley cackled.

The four tough cowboys with Poke Johnson and Keno Charley laughed loudly. One of them was

about to speak, when the pound of hoofs caused them all to turn and watch with satisfied grins while Buck Foster was ushered up by lathlike, hatchet-faced "Frosty" and short, thick-necked "Pug." Buck had regained consciousness, and the old ranny's face was purple with anger. Crimson still dribbled from his scalp, making irregular red lines along his leathery cheeks and splashing over his woolly vest.

But Buck seemed little the worse for his treatment. He tugged at the ropes which held his horny hands fast to the saddle horn, and wiggled his feet until the rope which held them together beneath his mount's belly threatened to throw the black into a fit of bucking.

"Yuh—yuh mangy bunch o' carrion-eatin' buzzards, turn me loose!" Buck howled. "Jist take these ropes off, an' I'll whup the hull stinkin' caboodle o' yuh coyotes. I'll l'arn yuh not ter monkey with me. Git these ropes off, an'——"

"Save your breath, Whiskers," Poke Johnson said quietly. "Those ropes are not comin' off, so stop bellerin'. If your boss, Billy West, wants to take the ropes off, he's welcome. I'm thinkin' he'll feel like hangin' yuh with a rope, when we tell him how yuh come dashin' up to my herd, started a row with me, an' then stampeded my cattle by unlimberin' yore shootin'-iron."

Buck almost exploded as the meanin' of the words soaked into his brain. He howled and fumed, jerking at his bonds so violently that the lathlike jasper called Frost, grabbed him by the shoulder, snarling something.

But Buck did not hear what Frost said, for the old ranny suddenly grizzled head on its leathery neck, grizzled head an its leathery neck, as he lunged sidewise. His hard

skull connected with Frosty's under-shot jaw.

The rest of the 66 outfit roared with laughter as Frosty lost his grip on Buck's shoulder and reeled in the saddle. For a second, he looked plenty groggy.

"Yuh—yuh blasted ol' coot!" he roared with rage, "fer two cents I'd——"

Frosty's hand flashed down, tugged at the gun holstered on his right thigh. But Poke Johnson suddenly spurred his horse forward, and sent his hireling slumping in the saddle with a stiff punch on the jaw.

"Just when we've got the best break we ever had, yuh'd try tuh spoil it by pluggin' this ol' fool, would yuh?" Johnson snapped. "Come on, all yuh leather whackers! I reckon we'll see some fun when West takes this ol' coot apart for stampedin' my 66 steers into Circle J's finest herd."

CHAPTER III.

JOE GETS PRODDY.

BILLY WEST'S youthful, strong-featured face wore a decidedly worried look as he reined a powerful chestnut stallion to a halt before the home corral. Billy slid hastily to the ground, stripped gear from the chestnut, and went trailing into a saddle shed, his tan batwing chaps flapping and popping as he took hurried strides.

Billy was a medium-sized, husky-shouldered ranny with a pair of wide-set, friendly gray eyes and firm, strong lips. Right now, Billy's lips were a little set, and his eyes were troubled.

But as he stepped inside the saddle shed to hang his riding gear on a peg, his lips straightened into a smile, and the look of worry left his face. He stepped out, chuckling as

he strode to where Joe Scott—a lean, beak-nosed, bat-eared young waddy—was just peeling a scarred hull from a trim gray cow horse. In the last rays of fading daylight, Joe Scott's face showed tense and a little strained as he turned, lugging his saddle.

"Buck's saddle is on its peg, Joe," Billy chuckled, "so I reckon we've been worryin' the past two hours for nothin'. Funny, though, that Buck skinned out for home without waitin' at the spring for us like we agreed. I——"

"Aw, that ol' sun-dodger just layed down on us, that's all," Joe muttered, and hurried away to put up his saddle.

But Billy did not miss the look of relief on Joe's face, and his smile widened to a grin as he strode back to the corral gate and let his chestnut stallion and Joe's gray into the big corral.

"Danger, hoss," Billy chuckled, stroking the chestnut's arching neck, "I reckon Buck an' Joe insult each other more than any two cow-pokes in Montana. But there never was a pair o' more loyal friends. But they'd never admit it, boy, an' me an' you know it. I——"

There was a light step behind Billy, then a low hiss. Billy turned sharply, eyes probing the gloomy shadows along the big pole corral. He saw a small form there, and a round yellow face from which two almond-shaped brown eyes shone excitedly.

Billy tensed in every muscle, for when Sing Lo—the little Chinese cook and handy man for the outfit—became excited, there was bound to be something wrong. Billy stepped closer, just as Joe Scott, who had also seen the little cook, came running up.

"Hully, Mistleee Billy, yo' an'

Mistle Joe!" Sing Lo whispered nervously. "Bad homblay bling Mistle Buck in all tie up. Mistle Buck gotee cut head, but homblays no let Sing Lo flix. So be."

"What?" Billy asked sharply. "Sing Lo, have yuh been guzzlin' tanglefoot again? Who brought Buck in? Who do yuh mean when yuh say 'bad hombres'? Yuh——"

"Sing Lo is telling the truth, Billy," came a soft voice from the shadows, and now a slender girl stepped into view, blue eyes troubled as she glanced nervously toward the big rambling log ranch house which sat well away from barns and corrals.

The girl was Ruth Dawe, Billy's partner, half owner of Circle J. Where Billy might have suspected Sing Lo of having taken a few nips of strong liquor—or "tanglefoot," as the little Chinese called it—he certainly did not doubt Ruth's word for a moment.

But before Billy could question either the little cook or Ruth any further, there came a bellowing roar from the long bunk house down near the big ranch house, and he was hurrying in that direction, Joe, Sing Lo, and Ruth right at his heels.

The lamps inside the bunk house had already been lighted, and Billy stepped through the door to stand blinking a moment in the brilliance. But his eyes focused rapidly, and he saw his entire crew sitting about on bunks and chairs, scowling at eight tough-looking, dusty men who lounged against one wall.

On the floor, bound hand and foot and nearly frothing with rage, was Buck Foster, grizzled hair stiff and matted with dried crimson. Buck let out a yelp of recognition when Billy entered, but his voice died to a snarl as Joe Scott came in right after Billy. Buck would have given

much to have kept Joe from seeing him, for he knew the redhead would razz him plenty. Joe did grin, then start snickering, although there was no mirth in his keen blue eyes as he shot a swift glance at the eight strangers across the room.

But before Buck and Joe could get into one of their jawing matches, a big, powerfully-built man with heavy features and a pair of serious, troubled eyes got up and came toward Billy. That big, slow-moving, slow-thinking hombre was Jim Benson, Circle J foreman—a man who knew the cattle business from A to Izzard, but a man who could not think with any great rapidity or clarity.

"Billy," Jim Benson rumbled, and the young boss of Circle J caught an angry note in his foreman's voice, "these—er—gents over thar claim Buck cut up some monkeyshines an' give 'em trouble this afternoon. But they wouldn't say what he done, an' wouldn't stand fer him bein' turned loose ontill yuh got home. I got a hunch——"

"Mr. West, I'm Poke Johnson, from down Wyomin' way. Sorry to make any trouble, but I figured it best that yuh saw Foster, there, just as he is. I'm peaceable——"

"What's the trouble, Johnson?" Billy cut in, and there was an unmistakable edge to his voice. "Leave out the apologies an' hit straight to the center o' things. In the meantime, Jim, yuh an' some o' the boys can let Buck loose."

"My men, here, and I were drivin' five hundred head o' 66 steers—which same belong to me—across what we thought was open range this afternoon, West," Poke Johnson said quietly. "Foster rode up on us, told us we was on Circle J range, an' started cussin' us out. To prevent trouble, I told my boys to

overlook what he was sayin', an' we started turnin' my herd, headin' 'em away from yore place.

"But Foster, likely thinkin' he was buffaloin' us all, got nastier all the time. Finally he hauled out his smoker an' started slingin' lead at us. Keno Charley, the little feller over there, creased Foster to keep him from killin' some o' us. But the shootin' stampeded my herd, an' they got away from us in yore Antelope Creek pasture. I figured we'd better come an' tell yuh afore we went roundin' up, 'cause we seen right off that yuh've got a lot o' stuff in there. I——"

"Billy, he's the lyinest, crookedest skunk what ever stood on two laigs!" Buck Foster roared. "By heifers, I never started nothin' a-tall. But jist wait a minute, an' I'll whup the hull works. I'll——"

"Yuh're a danged liar, Foster!" the lanky 66 puncher known as Frosty snarled hotly, stepping forward. "Yuh know yuh lie when yuh say——"

Cra-aa-ck! There was a sound almost as sharp as a rifle shot, then Frosty crashed backward, measuring his skinny length on the hard-board floor.

Joe Scott stood over him, blue eyes almost black with rage, huge freckles standing out plainly on his lean face. Joe's right knuckles were skinned, and there was already a lump forming on Frosty's lantern jaw. But Frosty didn't know, for he was sound asleep.

"Call my pard a liar, will yuh?" Joe gritted, then swung his hot eyes on the scowling 66 outfit. "An' I've got some more o' the same medicine fer ary other gent who claims Buck lied. I—— So yuh're tryin' to sneak a gun, are yuh, Keno man? All right, feller, yank it! I'm goin' fer mine!"

CHAPTER IV.

"WEST IS A FOOL!"

MORE than once, Billy West's cool head and swift thinking had saved his two scrappy saddle pards, Buck and Joe, from serious trouble. And Billy's cool thinking came to the fore now. Every man in the long room was suddenly tense, hard-eyed, as hands dropped to holsters.

In another fraction of a second the bunk house would have been full of powder blaze and whistling lead. But Billy stepped forward, blocking Joe Scott's draw with a downward sweep of his left hand, shoving Keno Charley halfway across the floor with his right.

"Cut it, yuh two," Billy snapped. "Johnson, corral yore man. No sense in lettin' these two start drillin' holes in each other. Joe, behave yoreself, savvy?"

Poke Johnson was only too glad to stop Keno Charley, for he had seen disaster as the only possible outcome of a fight. He cuffed the snarling little gun wasp into a corner, swore at him savagely, and made him holster his half-drawn guns.

Keno spat back like a surly cat, but a hissed word from Poke Johnson made him shiver, driving some of the insane anger from his beady eyes. Joe Scott, having cooled down as quickly as he had flared, glanced at Billy, with a sheepish grin, and holstered his drawn gun. A sigh went up, and the tension was broken, thanks to Billy.

"Waal, who in tarnation ast yuh to butt in, yuh brockle-faced, floppy-eared pest?" Buck Foster roared, coming to his feet as Jim Benson cut the last rope. "By heifers, yuh keep yore beak outn my business, hear? I'll l'arn yuh ter——"

"Aw, crawl off some place an' keep quiet," Joe came back hotly. "Somebody has to take care o' mush-brained, stove-up ol' coots like yuh are. I'll bet yuh did stampede them 66 steers, too. Billy shore ought to fire yuh this time, nitwit, 'cause roundin' up—— Hey, come back here, yuh lumpy-jawed, knock-kneed, box-ankled ol' billy goat! Cut it out, or I'll biff yuh one!"

Buck had tried to charge straight at Poke Johnson, gnarled fists swinging. But the veteran was clumsy from having been tied so long, and Joc held him easily. Billy stepped in, too, took a firm grip on Buck's arm, and with Joe helping, ushered him to the door and outside. Buck roared and fumed, but was ushered from the room just the same.

"Go to the house an' let Sing Lo fix that cut on yore head," Billy snapped. "An' don't come back down here ontill yuh've cooled off. Hear, Buck?"

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck croaked. "I never thought me pards would turn agin' me an' stick up fer sech skunks as them fellers in thar. I——"

"Pssst!" Billy West hissed, leaning out the door and speaking in a soft whisper. "I wanted yuh to go to the house so's I can meet yuh there an' hear the straight o' what happened to-day. I know yuh've got the deadwood on these jaspers, so amble on to the house an' wait for me. I'll be along in a jiffy."

Billy wanted to hear Buck's side of the story, all right, and he knew that he'd never get the veteran calmed down long enough to talk sense while Poke Johnson and his crew were in sight. Billy was both angry and worried, for he realized that if Johnson had let five hundred head of steers loose in Antelope Creek pasture, it meant a round-up

—and a round-up meant worrying tallow off beef at this season of the year.

Billy was not fooled in the least as to the kind of hombres Poke Johnson and his 66 punchers were, for he had tagged them instantly as tough customers—gunmen to a man.

What were they doing there? What was their game? Billy would have given a lot to know the answers to those two questions. But as he turned back into the room, none of his worry showed on his tanned face. Gray eyes puckering a little, he strode easily across the room to face Johnson.

"Buck Foster is a hot-headed ol' ranny, an' I reckon he goes proddy a little too easy," Billy spoke quietly, yet there was a hard note in his voice. "But I happen to know that Buck wouldn't yank a gun an' start shootin' just for cussedness, Johnson. Suppose yuh tell me the truth about what happened out on the range to-day."

Poke Johnson's pale eyes became two blazing slits, and his straight, hard lips jerked back from ugly yellow teeth in a sudden snarl. For a moment his hands hung over those twin guns, fingers trembling a little as wild anger dyed his face a deep red. But the 66 boss caught himself, straightened his shoulders with a jerk, and forced a gritty chuckle past his still twisting lips.

"Pretty hard to take that sort o' talk, West," he grunted. "But I reckon I see how yuh feel. Naturally, yuh'd believe yore own hand instead o' us boys. But yuh'll find five hundred head o' my steers mixed with them three an' four-year-olds o' yores up on Antelope Creek. O' course yuh may think that me an' my men shot my herd in there on purpose. But what'd be the sense in that? Why mix my

stuff with yores an' have to monkey around a week or so roundin' up an' cuttin' out?"

That stumped Billy. In fact, he had already been puzzling over it without figuring out a reasonable-sounding answer. There was apparently no reason why Johnson would throw his stuff into Antelope Creek pasture, for there was grass and water to be had everywhere.

Still, Billy, could not believe that Buck had stampeded a herd out of pure meanness. Billy had no trouble at all recalling cases where Buck's fiery temper had got Circle J into trouble. Perhaps the old rooster *had* gone proddy and started a scrap that had stampeded the steers.

But there was one part of Johnson's story that did not ring true, and that was Johnson's claim that Buck had pulled his gun and started shooting without cause. Buck was a hot-head, but Billy knew the old fellow would not deliberately try gunning men who did not have it coming.

Frosty groaned, rolled over and sat up, swearing groggily as he blinked ugly green eyes that still looked glassy. Billy's whirling thoughts came to an abrupt halt, for his full attention was on Frosty and Joe Scott.

Keno Charley, backed against the wall but still snarling and ugly-tempered, was watching Frosty and Joe Scott narrowly, plainly hoping they would start fighting again.

But Billy wanted no trouble now, for he had decided to give Poke Johnson more rope—let the cold-eyed gunman think he was getting by with whatever scheme he had in mind. That Poke Johnson was up to some crookedness, Billy could not doubt. Yet he could not savvy Johnson's play.

"Joe, yuh better amble on down to the house an' see how Buck's feelin'," Billy called, knowing that the redhead would tumble instantly. "Buck might get funny notions into that head o' his, an' we don't want any more trouble right away."

Joe grinned sourly at Frosty, turned, and went clumping from the room. Jim Benson and the rest of the Circle J hands seemed uneasy, and Billy turned to them now, letting a smile spread his lips, though his eyes showed no mirth.

"Jim, yuh an' the boys can show Johnson an' his men where the wash-bench is," Billy said levelly. "Reckon Sing Lo will be pilin' out grub afore long. Johnson, yuh an' yore riders will find extra bunks aplenty, so make yoreselves at home."

As Billy turned and stepped through the door, Poke Johnson hid a smile behind one grimy hand. He shuffled along down the room, wedging in close to Keno Charley as they followed the Circle J men out into the early night.

"This is like takin' candy away from a baby," Johnson snickered, nudging his evil little hired gunman. "West is a fool, an' we've just the same as got his steers run off now."

CHAPTER V.

"WE'RE ROUNDIN' UP SKUNKS."

ROUND-UP! Three days of heart-breaking labor, combing draws, riding good horses half to death, running pounds off fat steers. Billy West's gray eyes were sunken and red-rimmed from sun and sweat and dust.

But Antelope Creek pasture had been thoroughly combed, and now, on the fourth day, the main herd was shoved out of the canyon and onto a wide expanse of level prairie.

Billy, mounted on a short-coupled bay cutting horse, was weaving among the cattle, working 66 steers toward the edge, where Poke Johnson's riders instantly pounced on them and shot them off to where a herd was gradually growing.

The Circle J crew were sore-headed and proddy, and Billy had to keep an eye on every man. Since the round-up had started, Billy had had to stop a dozen fights, for the Circle J crew and Poke Johnson's men had been at one another's throats half the time. Buck Foster had been especially hard to manage, for the old fellow held a sullen grudge against the whole 66 outfit.

But now the thing was nearly over, Billy told himself wearily, and Johnson could soon be gone with his 66 steers. But as the morning stretched to noon, new worry assailed Billy.

The big herd had been worked thoroughly, yet a single glance at the 66 cattle told the young boss of Circle J that they were a long way short of five hundred head.

He had just hazed a big dun steer out of the Circle J stuff and watched it thrown into the 66 herd when Poke Johnson came galloping up, a scowl on his brow.

A top hand on anybody's range, Johnson had been helping cut the main herd for 66 critters. He drew rein now, motioned to Billy, then bawled for Keno Charley, who had been keeping tally on the 66 herd. Billy's own brow puckered, for he knew what was coming before Keno arrived.

"West," Johnson grumbled, "yuh don't have to be told that my cattle are tallyin' a heap short. We've worked this pasture dry, an' look at that measly bunch o' 66s over there. How many we got, Keno?"

Keno Charley thumbed the leaves

of a tally book, squinted down at a row of figures and grinned faintly.

"A even three hundred head, boss," he gritted. "Which leaves us two hundred head shy. Looks like we ain't through roundin' up yit."

Billy almost lost his temper at that. Round up more of his stock? If this Johnson hombre wanted his mangy 66 critters—— Billy forced the anger from his brain, trying to think clearly.

Buck and Joe were galloping toward him, and by their very attitudes, he could see they had guessed what was wrong. Buck and Joe had only to look at the 66 herd to see that it did not tally five hundred head. And now——"

"Johnson, while yuh an' the rest are goin' over this main herd once more, I'm takin' a little ride back to Antelope Creek," Billy said hastily. "Here comes Buck an' Joe, so I'll have 'em go along with me."

Before Johnson or Keno Charley could object, Billy whirled his horse and went galloping toward Buck and Joe. He merely waved at the pair, motioning them to follow, and led on across the prairie until they were nearing the timber along the rim of Antelope Creek.

Now Billy drew rein, making sure that he could not be seen from the herds on the open ground. Buck and Joe were eying Billy excitedly, for the rannicky pair guessed that their young boss had something up his sleeve.

"Buck," Billy gritted, "yuh've been too danged busy tryin' to start a ruckus to ever tell me much about what happened the first time yuh run into this outfit. That night at the ranch, I couldn't get yuh to talk sense. But this thing is gettin' serious. How many head would yuh say Johnson's herd tallied that day yuh had yore run-in with him an'

his men? He claims he had five hundred head."

"He ain't nothin' but a carnsarn windjammer!" Buck growled, tugging at his drooping mustache. "Like I tol' him right ter his face, he's a crook. But I'll settle his hash yit, Billy. Jist wait——"

"Buck!" Billy almost yelled. "Can't yuh think o' somethin' besides crazy threats? I asked yuh how big Johnson's herd was the first time yuh saw it. He——"

"Not a danged bit bigger than it is right now," Buck answered with surprising readiness, and proceeded to tell the exact facts of what had happened that first day he had met the 66 outfit. Buck did add a few fancy touches on how he "whipped the tar out o' Poke Johnson," but outside of that, he told exactly what had happened. And by the time the veteran had finished, both Billy and Joe were standing in their stirrups, faces flushed with excitement.

"Yuh hoss-faced ol' nitwit!" Joe exploded. "Why in the name o' knock-kneed gophers didn't yuh have sense enough to tell Billy all this before? If we had knowed yuh didn't fire them shells we found empty in yore gun, we would 'a'——"

"Close thet hole in yore face, carrot-top!" Buck roared. "By heifers, no slick-eared kid kin talk ter me like thet. I'll knock yuh so far it'll take——"

"Dry up, both o' yuh!" Billy West snapped angrily. "Buck, what Joe said is right. If yuh'd told us about this, five days ago, we could 'a' taken care o' Johnson a lot easier—an' saved a good many dollars that we've run off o' Circle J beef. Now Johnson is goin' ter demand that we——"

Billy broke off, for hoofs were thudding on the soft ground. A

moment later, Poke Johnson, Keno Charley, Frosty, and two more of the 66 men came galloping up, eying Billy and his two pards narrowly. Buck and Joe both started glaring and snarling, but a low, half-whispered word from Billy held them in check.

"West, I'm exactly two hundred head short," Poke Johnson stated in his flat, emotionless voice. "Which means that we've got to round-up for another day or so. I figure if we swing wider circles, comb higher into them hills yonder, we'll——"

"We would wear out men an' hosses for nothin'," Billy said levelly. "But two hundred head is a heap for a man to lose, so we'll start ridin' wider circles. I'll get my men right now, Johnson, an' start 'em to work. Come on, Buck, yuh an' Joe will ride with me."

Buck and Joe nearly tumbled from their saddles in genuine surprise. Here they had figured on seeing Billy make a play that they would be ready to back. But instead, he had given in to Johnson without a murmur—acted as if he was actually glad to start rounding up again. Was Billy scared?

"Come on, yuh knot-heads!" Billy's voice snapped out. "Come awake an' get a move on. We've got a heap o' right pleasant work to do—things yuh'll both like."

Billy grinned a little sourly as he spoke, hoping the 66 men would think he was rawhiding his two weary punchers. But Joe Scott's face brightened instantly, for he had caught Billy's hidden meaning. Leaning over, Joe whacked Buck's horse on the rump, causing it to leap forward.

"Billy mean we're startin' in to round up two-legged skunks. Buck," Joe hissed in the veteran's ear as he

leaned over, "so fer gosh sakes, don't say anything right now. Come on, an' we'll settle with these 66 polecats soon as Billy tells us his plan."

CHAPTER VI.

"RIDE YORE SPURS!"

POKE JOHNSON called his men together there at the 66 herd, and glanced sharply about to see that no Circle J man was close enough to hear what he was about to say. Johnson's face was tense, and his ugly eyes glittered angrily.

"Listen, men," he hissed, "things ain't breakin' like they should. I—I'm afraid we sort o' misfigured this West hombre. He ain't half as dumb as I thought he was. Fact is, West is beginnin' to smell a rat right now. When I mentioned ridin' wider circles, he grinned real funny an' agreed too dangd quick. So here's what we'll do to make him think we're on the level. We'll——"

Poke Johnson spoke swiftly for a moment longer, then wheeled his horse, leaving his men with smug grins on their faces. Billy West had called all Circle J hands, and was talking quietly to them. But Billy broke off as Poke Johnson approached at a gallop. The Circle J hands seemed more quiet now, and there were smiles on their sunburned faces as Poke Johnson galloped up.

"West," Johnson called loudly as his horse skidded to a halt, "this here business o' doin' more round-up work shore ain't pleasant, an' I hate it as bad as yuh do. But me an' my men ain't layin' down on the job none. Pick men from yore own outfit to guard my herd as well as yore own. Me an' every one o' my men is ridin' them wide circles, doin' all the work we can."

Billy was taken aback by that offer, for he had had a hunch that

Poke Johnson and his men would want to stay behind. But here Johnson was offering to take his men and ride long circles, and Billy could not understand. But the young boss of Circle J recovered quickly, and called the names of certain Circle J men who were to act as guards over the two herds.

Buck and Joe were plainly flabbergasted, and Billy got them aside as quickly as possible. But he had no chance to speak, for Poke Johnson was riding toward him once more, and there was a dark scowl on the 66 owner's brow.

He glanced about almost nervously, running a pointed tongue over cracked lips. He waited until all the Circle J hands except Buck and Joe had ridden away from Billy, then cleared his throat.

"West," Johnson grunted, "yuh an' me are cattlemen; so it ain't necessary to do a lot o' stallin'. Yuh an' me both know that there's mighty little chance o' findin' any o' my 66 steers out beyond this Antelope Creek basin. So——"

"So what?" Billy cut in dryly. "A few minutes ago, yuh was all for doin' more round-up work—wanted us to ride wider circles. Now yuh back down. Why?"

There was a cold challenge in Billy's words, but if Poke Johnson noticed, he chose to ignore. He shrugged, glanced about once more, then fixed his gaze on Billy's face. Buck and Joe crowded in beside their young boss, watching Johnson narrowly.

"I ain't backin' down about ridin' wider circles," Poke Johnson said quickly. "Fact is, we better keep our men out workin', West. Yuh see, I know what has happened on this range, so I've sent to Twin Rivers for the sheriff. My cattle was rustled, an' yuh know it!"

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster roared heavily. "So yo're callin' Circle J a pack o' rustlers, huh? Why, yuh squinch-eyed——"

Billy and Joe had their hands full for a moment. Buck was ranting and fuming, trying to get at Poke Johnson. The 66 owner sat sneering, hands resting on gun butts. Billy shot a sidelong glance at the hard-faced jasper, then turned his full attention on Buck. The old ranny was so hot under the collar, it took several seconds to cool him down, and by that time, Poke Johnson had wheeled his horse and ridden away. Billy shrugged, and Joe Scott turned on Buck like a cornered puma.

"There yuh are!" the redhead snarled. "Yuh had to go shootin' off that big mouth o' yores instead o' givin' Billy a chance to find out why Poke Johnson sent for Sheriff Jim Hawks. I wish Billy an' me had turned yuh loose. Johnson would 'a' knocked yuh flatter than a flapjack. He licked yuh onct, an' he could do it again."

"Am thet so?" Buck growled. "By heifers, I'll l'arn yuh better than to——"

"Oh, shut up, yuh two sage hounds!" Billy West's voice cut in. "Buck, yuh an' Joe give me a pain. Cut out the argyfyin', can't yuh? It's plain Johnson aims to use Sheriff Hawks in his schemes somehow. But I reckon Johnson don't know that Jim Hawks is a mighty good friend of ours. Fact is, I'm glad Jim is comin' out. I've got a hunch some cowpoke will be needin' handcuffs afore long—an' he won't be a Circle J waddy, either. The way I figure it——"

"Yo're wrong, Billy," Joe Scott piped up. "There's one Circle J hand who will be wearin' handcuffs,

an' that's Buck. He's a crook, an' the sheriff knows it."

"So help me, Hannah!" Buck squalled, eyes bulging more than ever. "No mangy, red-headed sheep-herder kin——"

But Billy was not staying to hear his two pards tangle in one of their heated jawing matches. He spurred away to where the Circle J cavvy was held, and was soon switching his riding gear from the chunky cutting horse to Danger.

Billy had let the chestnut stallion rest the day before, figuring that he might need him for some fast work. In the back of his head, Billy had had a hunch all along that Poke Johnson and his men were up to something—planning some crooked scheme that would go hard with Circle J. Yet Billy could not savvy the 66 owner's play yet, and frowning darkly, he saddled and mounted his pet horse.

"That Johnson hombre is up to somethin', Danger hoss," Billy grunted, "but I can't figure him out. Why drag the sheriff out here? He practically accused Circle J o' stealin' his mangy steers, but I could tell he was stallin'."

Buck and Joe were still wrangling, both of them yelling at the top of their lungs when Billy approached once more. But the young boss of Circle J had something to do besides listen to a couple of sage hounds growl at each other, and told them so. The rannicky pair stopped their fussing, but the looks they gave each other were far from pleasant.

"I gave all Circle J hands orders to ride in pairs an' not bother cattle that wear our own brand," Billy said when he had quieted his two pards. "If Johnson an' his outfit shag Circle J critters down this way, we'll turn 'em loose without throwin' 'em

into that herd out yonder. Johnson an' his men have gone to the hills, like our hands have. So I reckon we better mosey. I've got a hunch——"

Billy's voice trailed off, for from a near-by range of hills came the sudden roar of swiftly-fired guns. There were wild bellows from the cattle in the two herds, and Billy saw two 66 and three Circle J steers crumple almost at the same instant.

"Rush them hills yonder!" Billy yelled at Buck and Joe. "Somebody is mowin' down steers from both herds. Ride yore spurs, cowpokes, an' see that yore guns are ready for use. Fog it!"

CHAPTER VII.

A STORM BREAKS.

BILLY and his two pards had no chance to charge toward the hills, for the very good reason that the Circle J herd and the 66 herd had both been thrown into a panic by the shooting.

The steers were milling swiftly, giving the few cowhands left in charge a hard task in holding them. Billy, quick to sense the danger of a double stampede, yelled at Buck and Joe, then swung toward the cattle at full speed.

For nearly fifteen minutes, it was all Billy and his men could do to prevent those steers from making a run. Realizing that the cattle could never be held where the five freshly-killed steers lay, Billy yelled instructions to his punchers, and the two herds were permitted to move several hundred yards away.

But that moving was dangerous, for the steers were panicky, piling up and jamming into one another as they tried to break away. Doubled ropes and darting horses held them, however, and after nearly

a quarter of an hour, Billy drew back from the milling mass, for it had been necessary to throw both herds together once more.

Now Billy swung his dust-reddened eyes toward the hills from which the shots had come, and sent Danger rocketing over the grassy earth at top speed. Buck and Joe followed as fast as their mounts could run, yelling for their boss to wait. But if Billy heard, he gave no heed. Not until he topped the first ridge did he slow up and wait for his pards.

Billy's eyes raked the long ridge, probing cedar thickets here and there, flashing swiftly along the open glades. From the top of this very ridge he knew the shots had been fired at the steers, killing three for Circle J and two in the 66 herd.

But there was no sign of life along the ridge now, and Billy rode at a lope toward the spot from which he thought the shots had been fired. That his judgment was good was proved by sight of several shiny brass cartridges lying just at the edge of a clump of small cedars.

Billy dismounted, but he was careful not to move about much. Joe Scott was an expert at sign reading, and Billy realized that only the redhead could help now, for whoever had done that shooting had evidently stepped with care.

Billy picked up three or four of the empty rifle cartridges, saw that they were .30-30s and tossed them down again. Every puncher in the whole country would be packing that caliber saddle gun, so the empty shells offered no very helpful clew.

"Whar am the skunks?" Buck Foster's bellow caused Billy to turn his head quickly. "By heifers, jist let me git my sights on them cattle-shootin' varmints, an' I'll l'arn 'em

a lesson! Which way did they go, Billy? I'll nag 'em shore!"

"Careful, there!" Billy warned as Buck lunged his horse forward. "Keep that hoss back, Buck. Joe, get over here an' see what yuh can find in the way o' sign. No hoss tracks showin'. Whoever done that shootin' must 'a' climbed up from that draw yonder on foot. Us havin' to help hold the cattle gave the skunks a good start."

Joe Scott slid from his mount, holstered the gun he had drawn as he charged up the hill, and began walking short circles, blue eyes combing the grassy earth. Whoever had done that shooting had gone at it carefully, for to the average eye there was no sign other than the empty cartridges.

But to Joe Scott's keen eyes, such little things as a few bent blades of grass and a shallow, almost shapeless dent where a boot heel had been gouging the ground meant a lot.

The redhead grunted now and then, gradually drawing away from the thicket and heading downhill. Buck, eyes blazing wrathfully, spent his time glaring about the rugged hills and growling insults at Joe.

It burned Buck up to think that Joe could read such dim sign, and the veteran vowed loudly that Joe was simply stalling, trying to pretend that he knew a lot, when as a matter of fact, he knew less than a half-witted grasshopper.

But despite Buck's charges, Joe led down a steep hill and into a sandy ravine where even Buck could see the prints of several horses that had been left tied to bushes. The trail that led away up the ravine was plain enough, and Joe mounted his horse, which Billy had led down for him.

"Six in the party," Joe clipped. "No distinguishin' marks in the

tracks o' the hosses, but if we hurry, mebbeso we'll overtake the coyotes afore they get back into the Bitterroots proper. They likely meant to stampede both herds, but I shore don't see why. Nor I don't savvy who would do such a trick. I wonder——"

"Huh!" Buck Foster growled, preening his mustache with gnarled fingers. "I allus said yuh was loco, Joe Scott. If yuh had a grain o' sense, yuh'd know it was Poke Johnson an' his gang done thet shootin'. Jist wait until I ketch the varmints." "I've got a hunch it was Johnson an' some o' his men who did the shootin', all right," Billy West gritted. "An' I think I'm beginnin' to savvy the coyote's game. But the luck's still on his side, for look what's comin' over the mountains yonder!"

Buck and Joe glanced up, then began muttering uneasily. A huge, bank of black clouds had shoved above the Bitterroots, and even now the distant rumble of thunder could be heard. The air was hot and heavy, and not a branch moved on the trees and bushes along the hill-sides. But there would soon be wind aplenty, for those clouds were swooping down the sky with alarming speed.

"We may as well head back to the cattle right now, pards," Billy West gritted. "It's going to rain plenty, which means that the tracks left by the jaspers who killed those five steers will be washed out right pronto.

"An' besides, that herd is already spooky. When thunder an' lightnin' starts crackin' over their heads, they're going to run. Wish some o' the other boys would come in, 'cause I think we'll be needin' help."

There were already ugly red tongues of lightning licking along

the face of the black clouds, and Billy lost no time turning back toward the herd. The rumble of thunder was much more distinct now, and suddenly there were gusts of wind sucking down the draws.

But coming sharp and clear above the sounds of wind and thunder was something that made Billy West suddenly stiffen, then yell shrilly to his pards and rake Danger into a dead run with dull rowels.

"Gunfire—at the herd!" Billy yelled, and was riding recklessly over the rocky ground.

Buck and Joe heard the whiplike cracking of guns now, and flattened over saddle pommels as they spurred after Billy. But the storm was upon them before they had gone a quarter of a mile—a lashing, screaming wind at first, then sheets of icy rain water that bit through thin clothing to sting quivering flesh.

It was necessary to slow down now, for the first water hitting the ground made dangerous footing for the horses. Buck and Joe overhauled Billy, both of them shivering and hunched over the saddle horns.

But the ridge from which six hombres had shot at the herd not long ago loomed ahead, and the three pards rode on up the hillside in silence, straining their ears to catch any sounds that might come from the herd. Lightning was popping and crackling overhead, and the heavy roll of thunder seemed to shake the earth.

Billy, topping the ridge a few yards ahead of his pards, peered sharply out through the swirling sheets of rain—then suddenly raised his voice in a wild shout.

"The herd's gone, boys!" he yelled at his two shivering pards. "That shootin' we heard—— Look! Yonder comes a hoss with an empty saddle. Trouble has shore popped!"

CHAPTER VIII.

JOHNSON GETS THE DROP.

BILLY'S hands were stiff and numb, yet he managed to work his rope loose and build a loop as he sent Danger down the steep hillside toward the level ground. The riderless horse Billy had seen was at the foot of the grade, trying frantically to run despite dragging reins. Billy eased Danger down the last steep going, then let the stallion hit a hard lope on the level ground.

Now Billy's rope, already beginning to stiffen from the rain, swung above his head as Danger closed in on the riderless horse. The noose shot out, dropping neatly over the runaway's head. Danger plowed his trim hoofs into the slippery footing, stopping almost on his haunches.

The riderless horse squealed and lunged, fighting the rope as if it was a wild broomtail. That brought a frown to Billy's brow, for the saddle horse had unquestionably been roped and handled enough to know better than to fight as it did.

Then the young boss of Circle J saw an ugly red wound across the animal's quivering shoulder, and realized that the horse was maddened by pain as well as fear. Buck and Joe closed in now, and presently the wounded horse stood quivering and snorting between them. Joe's eyes flashed down to the wound, and a growl passed his lips.

"Bullet gouged this horse across the shoulder, Billy," he called as his young boss approached quietly. "I thought at first mebbeso a steer had gored him. But that's a bullet wound. An' this is the sorrel Curly Newlin, that new hand yuh hired last month, was ridin' at the herd when we left a while ago."

"The sorrel's not hurt bad," Billy gritted, examining the long gash in the quivering flesh, "but I reckon he'll not travel much for a while. Help me strip his gear off, an' we'll tie him to that bush yonder for the time bein'."

Buck and Joe slid to the ground and got busy, and within a few moments, the sorrel was standing tied to a stout bush, still snorting and trembling. But the horse would soon calm down, and now Billy and his two pards were in wet saddles once more, galloping swiftly toward the place where they had last seen the herd of 66 and Circle J cattle.

They had barely reached the spot when Buck Foster let out a whoop and went galloping off to the left. There, barricaded behind the bulk of a freshly-killed steer, lay a big, husky young cowboy. The puncher dropped the Colt he had swung toward Buck, and turned a pinched white face to the veteran. Billy and Joe were right behind Buck, flinging from saddles even as the veteran knelt beside the man on the ground.

"Curly!" Billy gasped. "Yuh hurt bad, fella? Where——"

"Curly" Newlin's white face spread in a game grin, and his big right hand tapped his left shoulder very gently. Curly's dark eyes were pain-dulled, and there was mud in his curly hair that meant he had had a fall from his horse. But the big puncher was game to the core, and when he spoke, his voice was thick with anger.

"Six ornery coyotes jumped the herd jist as that thunder, wind, an' lightnin' cut loose, boss," he told Billy. "Me an' the other three boys didn't see 'em comin', for we was busy with the cattle. First thing we knowed, guns was crackin' an' steers was droppin'—which shore spooked the hull herd in a jiffy. A

bullet nicked this shoulder o' mine some, but I managed to git me a shot or two at them raiders.

"I was overtakein' one o' the skunks when a bullet slapped that sorrel I was ridin' somewhere on the neck or shoulder, an' I got throwed higher than them Bitterroot Mountains over yonder. I got behind this steer that'd been dropped an' done what I could in the way o' slingin' lead. But I was dizzy, an' didn't hit nothin' but the wind."

"Did yuh get a look at the gents who done the raidin'?" Billy asked, as he examined a deep flesh wound in Curly's muscular shoulder.

"They had on slickers an' masks—sort o' funny-lookin' hood things that come down over their heads an' faces," Curly growled. "I didn't have sense enough to look close at their hosses. But the other three boys was pointin' that stampede over toward them big coulees east o' here last I seen of 'em, so mebber if yuh men hurry yuh kin give 'em a lift. Don't worry about me. I'll make out, boss."

Billy finished a hasty job of binding the wound, then turned to mount Danger. Buck and Joe were already scurrying away, eyes trying to piece the swirling storm ahead. Billy hated to leave the wounded Curly, yet he realized that the big cowboy could easily enough hoof it to where Sing Lo had kept the chuck wagon in a patch of timber overlooking Antelope Creek since the round-up had started.

"Git goin', boss!" Curly shouted, seeing that Billy was hesitating. "No use in wastin' time on me. I'll amble down to the wagon an' have the chink fix me up, now that yuh've stopped the wound flowin' an' made me this sling. Git after them raiders an' give the ornery jaspers my compliments—with a bullet."

Billy nodded, whirled Danger and went thundering away, eyes straining to catch brief glimpses of Buck and Joe. The young boss of Circle J pulled his big Stetson low, protecting his face from the lashing rain as best he could. In his gray eyes were angry lights, and his right hand dropped to the butt of his big Colt.

"Those six wallopers must 'a' circled around Buck, Joe, an' me while we were trailin' 'em back there in the hills," Billy gritted, "an' headed right back to the herd. They had likely seen that storm brewin' up in the peaks, an' figured on it helpin' 'em stampede that herd. But maybe the three Circle J waddies who were leadin' that stampede will get the cattle into a——"

Billy's voice broke off sharply, for from somewhere ahead, he had heard a loud shout. Now he made out dim shapes shuttling back and forth through the downpour, and lifted his Colt from the holster, lips jerking into a grim, hard line. But a moment later, Billy was reining Danger down, shoving his gun back into wet leather.

Up there ahead, he could see that those dim shapes were Buck and Joe, riding up and down the bank of a deep draw that twisted back into the hills. And presently Billy understood what was wrong, for that draw was running almost brimful of foam-flecked, muddy water. Buck and Joe seemed to be struggling, and Billy rushed forward just in time to see the redhead grab Buck's mount by the bit ring and yank back stiffly.

"Hey!" Billy yelled, reining in beside the pair. "What——"

"This ol' coot is tryin' to commit suicide, Billy," Joe Scott growled. "There's been a cloud-burst jist above here, an' that gully thar

would shore be the end o' a man an' a hoss if they got into it. But this ol' nitwit tried to jump right into it."

"Joe's right, Buck," Billy called sharply. "Yuh ought to know better than to try swimmin' that thing. I don't care how good a water hoss a man forked, that current in there would shore drown him. But I see that the herd went down this bank here."

"It did." Joe Scott nodded, after seeing that Buck had quieted down. "I figured the herd got to this gully a few minutes ahead o' this water, 'cause yuh kin see over yonder where they went up that other bank. But I'll bet we have to ride four-five miles either up or down this thing afore we get acrost. Which means them raiders will have plenty time to get away with the cattle, an'—an' mebbe plug our three friends. Of all the carnsarn luck I ever heard tell of, this is——"

"Plug me friends an' steal Circle J beefs, will they?" Buck Foster howled. "Waal, not while yores truly am on the job. I'm goin'——"

"Yuh're goin' yonderly on a hot-lead ticket onless yuh lift them paws! That means all yuh thievin' Circle J skunks. Lift 'em, or us boys'll cut loose!"

The voice had come from a little knoll directly behind the three Circle J pards. They whirled instantly—and froze as they found themselves staring into yawning muzzles of six leveled six-guns. Crouching a-top the knoll were Poke Johnson and five of his crew, faces savage as they squinted down wet gun barrels.

A single unwise move on the part of Billy, Buck, or Joe, and those leveled six-guns would spit a deadly hail of lead that could not miss at such short range.

CHAPTER IX.

"HYAR COMES THE SHERIFF!"

BILLY WEST felt as if he was sitting on a keg of powder to which some jasper had fastened a one-inch fuse. Buck Foster's bulging eyes were gleaming balefully, and his leathery face was slowly purpling with anger.

Billy knew what that meant, for he had seen the veteran in action enough to know that he had no caution whatsoever. Buck was about to explode—and the moment he did, those men there on the knoll would jerk triggers. Billy leaned over slightly, lifted his hands and spoke in a low, tense tone.

"Buck!" he hissed. "For the love o' Pete, use yore head, feller. Keep cool, an' help me capture these jaspers. Make a fool play now, an' they'll get away from us. Yuh may have to do most o' the fightin' when the time comes, so keep cool an' watch sharp."

Billy was trying the only thing that even remotely promised to work—playing up to Buck's vanity. The veteran eyed him, snarled something, then seemed to see the point. He nodded a little, lifting both gnarled hands.

"Shore, Billy, that's jist what I was thinkin'," Buck whispered back. "I was jist thinkin' thet them ornery crooks would likely git away if I started slingin' lead now. I'll keep me eyes peeled, pard, an' yuh kin give me the sign when I'm to start mowin' the critters down."

A whistling breath escaped Joe Scott's lips, for the redhead, too, had sensed the danger of Buck's explosive temper. Joe Scott liked a scrap just as thoroughly as Buck did, but Joe could use his head as well as guns and fists.

"All right, Frosty, slide down

there an' collect their cutters," Poke Johnson called suddenly. "An' remember, West, us boys'll shore mow yuh an' yore two hands down if yuh even bat an eye. Git goin', Frosty, an' watch yore step. West's tricky."

"I'll watch, all right—an' hope every minute that that red-headed skunk makes a play," Frosty snarled. "I'd shore enjoy thumbin' a slug into his yaller hide."

Joe Scott's rain-wet face reddened, and his raised hands clenched. But the redhead held his tongue, and within a very few seconds, Frosty had collected the Circle J guns. He stepped back, grinning evilly, still watching Joe Scott narrowly.

Frosty was evidently remembering that punch Joe had given him, and hoping for a chance to get even. But outside of glaring hotly, Joe showed no signs of going proddy.

"Now, Johnson," Billy West's voice crackled as he spoke, "suppose yuh tell me why yo're pullin' a stunt like this. An' how come yuh callin' me an' my men thieves? That, feller, is somethin' yuh'll swaller, feathers an' all, if yuh ain't right careful."

"I was back in the hills an' heard shootin'," Poke Johnson said thickly. "I figured the shootin' was mighty close to the two herds, an' started roundin' up my men fast as I could. But the storm struck us afore we got back to the level ground, an' we heard more shootin'. We found a crippled sorrel hoss o' yores tied to a bush, a bunch o' dead steers, an' a plain trail leadin' this way."

"With two hundred head o' my stuff vanishin' so mysterious offn yore range, West, it looks to me like yo're tryin' to run a sandy on me. How come yuh three wasn't out in the hills huntin' stock?"

Billy explained briefly about the

first shooting, and told Johnson how the storm had turned Buck, Joe, and himself back as they were trailing the six men. But Johnson only sneered, turned his back on Billy, and grinned at Keno Charley.

"Cut out acrost the range an' see if yuh can head that sheriff off afore he gets to the Circle J chuck wagon, Keno," Johnson instructed. "I told Pug to fetch the tin-star a-foggin', an' they ought to be along in a couple hours."

Buck Foster started growling and fuming now, for it had dawned on the salty old fellow that he was not in a position to do much shooting in case Billy gave the signal. In fact, Buck bent a rather accusing gaze on his young boss. But before he could decide just what to say, Poke Johnson motioned with the barrel of a gun.

"Pile down, an' sit in the mud, yuh three," he snapped. "This rain is shore freezin' me stiff, but I reckon I can yank this trigger in case yuh fellers get funny notions. Hurry up, an' get on the ground. Frosty, keep a eye on 'em while us boys get down there."

Buck and Joe both showed signs of revolt now, but a whispered warning from Billy held them in check. Stiff from the cold, shivering, muttering, the three Circle J rannies dismounted, trailed bridle reins and slogged over to where cold, wet rocks poked above the grass tops.

Poke Johnson and his men came down the little hillside, squatting on their heels less than six paces from Billy, Buck, and Joe. Frosty circled warily past Joe Scott, spat an oath at the redhead, then joined the other 66 men.

Billy eyed them narrowly from beneath the brim of his dripping hat, trying desperately to make up his mind about several things. Billy

suspected Poke Johnson of having had a hand in that stampede. Yet Johnson's story sounded straight in every detail. And these men certainly wore no slickers, for their clothing clung to their wet bodies in sodden lumps.

But if Johnson and his men hadn't stampeded the herd and almost killed Curly Newlin, who had? Did Poke Johnson have other men skulking about the hills? Billy toyed with that idea a while, then discarded it. But he couldn't quite discard the notion that Poke Johnson was behind what had happened.

"So yuh think I'm a rustler, eh?" Billy growled, eyes blazing as they bored the 66 owner's. "But did yuh stop to think that I had between four an' five hundred head in that herd? Fifty or sixty head o' my stuff was cows an' calves, which would leave about four hundred head o' A-1 prime beef steers that I've lost in case the six jaspers who raided the herd get away."

"Yeah, I thought o' that." Poke Johnson nodded. "But that could be a blind, West. In case yuh've rustled my stock like I figured yuh have, runnin' off yore own stuff would just be a blind."

"Shore," Billy came back, "I'd likely do that if I was rustlin' yore stuff. At the same time, fella, yuh'd run off both herds if yuh aimed to rustle my steers."

"O' course I would," Johnson answered promptly. "The thing works both ways around, an' yuh've got a right to suspect me if yuh want to. When that gully runs down so's hosses can cross, I'm sendin' some o' my boys to scout them hills off yonder. If they find the herd in the hands o' strangers, West, I'll shore apologize for what I'm doin'. But right now I think yo're a crook, an' yuh'll stay put ontill the sheriff

comes, or I see proof o' yore innocence."

That seemed fair enough, after all, and Billy had no argument to offer. But through the next hour and a half, he cudged his brain for an explanation. Try as he might, he could not give up the notion that Poke Johnson was responsible for the stampede.

Billy kept thinking of the three Circle J punchers who had ridden away at the head of the running cattle—risking their lives at every jump of their mounts as they tried to mill the cattle or lead them into some blind draw where they would be forced to stop.

What had happened to those three punchers? Had they been shot from their saddles by the raiders and left in the path of the stampede? Had they managed to escape? Would they recognize any of the raiders?

Billy's brain fairly whirled, and his temples pounded wildly. He wanted to be up on Danger and combing the hills off yonder, looking for his three punchers and the missing cattle.

But with a bunch of hard-eyed hombres watching him narrowly, he had to sit there in the rain, watching the roaring water in the ravine gradually lower until it could be forded. Now Poke Johnson stretched, swore at kinked muscles, and peered through the rain toward the gray hills beyond the ravine.

"Frosty, take two o' the boys an' amble over yonderly for a look-see," he growled. "Go easy, 'cause if them cattle have been stopped, there'll be guards out."

Frosty chose two hard-eyed punchers, climbed the hill with them, and presently the trio rode into view, fighting snorting horses down to the stream.

Billy watched them glumly as they crossed, climbed the opposite bank and rode away, leaning from saddles to follow the dim prints the rain had left of the missing steers. A little hope rose in Billy's heart now, for there were only three of the 66 men left.

But they were armed, while Buck, Joe, and Billy had nothing but their fists. Still, if a chance came—

No chance came, and at the end of another hour, Billy West was angry and found himself on the point of jumping those 66 men regardless of their guns. But suddenly there was a yell from across the ravine, and now Frosty and his two companions came into view.

Behind them, bound to their saddles, were the three Circle J waddies who had ridden with the stampede. And behind the three punchers were six horses that Billy recognized as Circle J stock, being led in single file.

"Hyar we are, boss," Frosty leered as he drew rein. "We found the cattle, all right, with these three coyotes guardin' 'em. Them six Circle J hosses back there was all hobbled out, an' yuh kin see they've been rode hard. I—"

"That cinches it, West!" Poke Johnson snarled. "But don't get funny, or I'll drill yuh. Yonder comes Pug an' Keno with the sheriff. Reckon yuh Circle J crooks will have a hot time explainin' to that Johnny Law."

CHAPTER X.

JOHNSON VANISHES.

THE fact that Sheriff Jim Hawks was arriving on the scene probably kept Billy West from losing his head completely. Buck and Joe were on their feet, snarling like cor-

nered lobos, ready to tear into the whole 66 outfit with bare fists.

But once more, Billy held them in check with low-voiced commands, then turned to the three scowling, half-frozen Circle J rannies who had been brought in roped to their saddles.

"What happened, Shorty?" Billy asked a sawed-off, grizzled little puncher who had worked for him for years.

"Happened?" young "Shorty" Blane exploded. "Why, boss, me an' Bud an' Newt, hyar, rode out that cuss-taken stampede, an' six son's o' coyotes tried to cut us down. But after we got over into them hills yonder an' got the cattle slowin' up, them six took out—jist naturally high-tailed it.

"Us three has been over thar ever since, figuring that yuh an' some o' the other boys would show up directly. But a while ago, these three buzzards rode up, tellin' us how the draws was full o' water an' they'd been held up. An' afore us boys knowed what was happenin', these three had thrown down on us. They took our guns, called us ornery rustlers, an'—an' tied us onto these hosses. That Frosty lizard, thar, went off into the hills a while, an' when he got back, he was leadin' them six Circle J hosses. If I git a gun, I'll——"

"Listen ter that, will yuh?" the lanky Frosty snarled, as he slid to the ground and went striding toward Shorty Blane's mount, fists doubled. "Boss, this little hunk o' cussedness is tryin' ter make it look like——"

"Six o' yuh sheep-brained crooks swiped mounts out o' Circle J's cavy, rode 'em while yuh pulled that raid, then left 'em out in the hills, aimin' to try makin' it look like Circle J had done that raidin'," Shorty Blane yelled. "But——"

"Why, yuh dang hammered-down shorthorn!" Frosty snarled thickly, "I'll learn yuh better than ter say sech as that. Yo're nothin' but a danged liar, an' I'll——"

Cra-aa-ck! In his rush to punch a helplessly-bound man, Frosty lunged forward.

But he did not reach Shorty's side, for suddenly a freckled fist came out of the rain to pop solidly against his jaw. In fact, that freckled fist landed on Frosty's already sore jaw—and it was the same fist that had floored him in the Circle J bunk house, five days before.

The lanky 66 puncher groaned miserably, buckled at the knees and measured his length on the wet grass. His eyes were glazed and hollow-looking, but he managed to focus them on Joe Scott's grinning face.

"Jist as soon—as we git them—cattle away safe," Frosty muttered drowsily. "I—I'm gunnin' yuh—red feller. That's the second time yuh—yuh've walloped me. If the sheriff wa'n't comin', I'd—settle yore hash right now. But I kin wait!"

"By heifers, Joe Scott, yuh may amount ter somethin' yit!" Buck Foster almost whooped. "Man, thet shore was a Lulu yuh handed thet skunk! I wish one would——"

"Señor Frosty made a little slip o' the tongue, didn't he, Johnson?" Billy West's voice sounded cold and cutting. "Funny, now, why he'd mention somethin' about gettin' cattle safe. An' it was *you* who sent for the sheriff. I wonder——"

Billy's voice trailed off, for Sheriff Jim Hawks came galloping up, clad from chin to boot tops in a flapping yellow slicker. The sheriff was a big, grizzled man, with a pair of keen eyes that looked levelly from beneath graying brows. He drew

his horse to a sudden stop, eyes darting glances about as he un-snapped the front of his slicker.

"Howdy, Billy," the sheriff rumbled. "What's goin' on, huh? What's Shorty, Bud, an' Newt hawg tied for? Why'd Joe jist knock that long feller down?"

"We've turned rustlers, Jim." Billy West grinned faintly. "Or, at least, that's what Johnson, there, claims."

In short, clipped phrases, Billy told swiftly what had happened, starting with Poke Johnson's showing up at Circle J, five days before, with Buck Foster tied and wounded.

"So yuh see, Jim," he finished, "we're a pack o' mangy rustlers, an' Poke Johnson sent for yuh so's we'd be lodged in jail. I——"

"I reckon yuh better get busy instead o' sittin' there listenin' to him gab, Johnny Law," Poke Johnson snarled. "He was fool enough to give yuh the facts o' the case; so I reckon yore duty is plain. If yuh ain't got handcuffs, there's plenty rope on our saddles."

"Jist a minute, feller," Sheriff Hawks snapped. "I reckon I don't have to be told by you how I'm to act. An' git this through that head o' yores right now. Any time Billy West an' his outfit turn rustler, I'll git me some bullhide shoes an' start herdin' sheep. Where yuh from? How long yuh been in this State? An' I'd like to see papers which'll prove yuh own the 66 brand. Also——"

"I reckon sendin' for you was my mistake, sheriff," Poke Johnson said thinly. "I see now that yo're all for West; so I'm out o' luck. May-be——"

"Buck, yuh an' Joe saw Shorty, Newt, an' Bud outn them ropes," Sheriff Hawks snapped. "An' keep yore shirt on, Johnson. I'm playin'

no favorites, man. Billy an' his whole crew will answer to me until this mess is cleared up. Fork leather, everybody, an' head for wherever the Circle J chuck wagon is. Mebbe after all yuh hombres have had some o' Sing Lo's hot grub an' coffee, an' found some dry duds, yuh'd feel more like talkin' sense."

"The sheriff's right, men," Billy West said quietly. "The herd will be all right where it is for a while. An' we all need dry clothes an' some hot grub. Besides, it's rainin' harder right now. Buck, Joe, an' me will take our guns now, Johnson."

The thunder and lightning had stopped, but from a leaden sky came gray sheets of water that chilled the men to the very bone. Poke Johnson and his crew glanced at one another uneasily, and Frosty made it a point to avoid his boss's eyes. Without appearing to do so, Billy West watched the 66 crew closely as they galloped away.

A faint smile tugged at Billy's cold lips and, once or twice, he chuckled a little. Frosty's slip had been almost a confession that Poke Johnson was the hombre who had started that stampede.

On that one slim bit of evidence alone, the 66 owner could not be held, however, and Billy knew it. But he meant to play with Johnson, tantalize him with veiled remarks, until the cold-eyed jasper lost his nerve and make a play that would give him away completely. Billy saw that Johnson was watching suspiciously, and it pleased the Circle J boss a lot to know that he already had Johnson nervous.

But Billy said nothing as they galloped through the rain and to the chuck wagon, where Sing Lo had a roaring fire and huge, steaming pots that gave off the pleasant aroma of

good food. From blanket rolls that had been protected by the canvas top of the wagon, the wet, shivering men fished dry clothing, clumped away to sheltered spots along a ragged cliff to change after each man had gulped a big cup of hot coffee.

Other Circle J men were arriving from the hills now, and as news of the stampede reached them, they yelped for particulars. Billy tried several times to get the sheriff alone and have a serious talk with the officer. But after half an hour of watching for a chance, he decided to wait until the camp had settled down.

"All right, men," Billy finally called. "Sing Lo says grub is ready, so come an' git it. We've got to get back to that herd afore dark. We can't move 'em until mornin', but—— Say, where's Johnson an' his men?"

For a long moment, tense silence held the camp. Then punchers were yelping excitedly as they dashed about through the rain, slickers flapping and popping noisily. Within a minute's time, it was learned that not only Poke Johnson and his men were gone, but that they had managed to take along their horses and bed rolls as well.

"Skinned out while we chattered like a bunch o' geese!" Billy West growled. "But they can't be far. Fork leather, yuh hombres, an' don't forget extra ammunition! In a rain like this, Johnson an' his gang will get clean away with that herd if they get much start!"

CHAPTER XI.

BILLY PLAYS A HUNCH.

BILLY WEST led the way at a fast clip to the knoll where Johnson and his men had got the drop earlier, looking anxiously into the

deep ravine. He saw that the water was rising swiftly, but that it could still be safely forded.

"After we're acrost this one, the ground gets hillier, and there are fewer deep draws," Billy told the sheriff. "Now I figured we'd better spread out. I——"

"I'll take most o' the boys an' angle off toward them tall ridges up yonder," the sheriff interrupted. "Yuh take the rest an' work up from the bottoms. Johnson an' his outfit ain't had time to make much distance yet. We'll bottle 'em up in one o' them canyons, Billy. Now pick yore men, an' give me ten minutes' start."

"Buck an' Joe are the ones to go with me," Billy said quickly. "Rest o' yuh boys go with Jim, an' do what he tells yuh. An' move fast, boys, 'cause we've got mighty little time."

There were angry growls from the punchers, but not because they had been detailed to go with the sheriff. Those waddies had spent a bad afternoon, most of them having been caught out in the storm without their slickers. And now they were riding again, slicker-clad this time to be sure, but sore-headed and proddy because a pack of rustlers had kept them from the hot supper they so sorely needed.

It would go hard with Poke Johnson and his 66 gang if those grumpy cowpokes caught them trying to run off Circle J beef.

"Waal, what are we settin' hyar fer, anyway?" Buck Foster asked through a dripping mustache. "I'm goin' right smack after them danged rustlers. We'll surprise 'em by sneakin' up quietlike."

"Huh!" Joe Scott snorted. "Yuh couldn't sneak up on a granite boulder without scarin' the thing into a run. Besides, who's boss here, nitwit? Billy ought to fire yuh

for gittin' us into this mess. Yuh started the hull thing by jumpin' Poke Johnson an' gittin' yore ears whupped down."

"Am thet so?" Buck came back. "Ef yuh don't shet up, I'll knock some o' them spots offn yore ugly mug. It was yuh held my hoss when I wanted ter swim thet crick an' go nab them rustlin' varmints. Ef yuh'd keep yore snoot out o' things——"

"Oh, pipe down!" Billy growled. "Yuh two sage hounds make fuss enough to warn a deaf man that we're comin' his way. Besides, I'm tryin' to think."

Buck and Joe stopped wrangling, but they sat glaring at each other through the rain. Billy knew that the pair were snarly because they could not go on, but he held them the full ten minutes the sheriff had asked for, then rode on across the hills.

Billy had a general idea of where the herd had been held by Shorty, Newt, and "Bud" that afternoon, but no more. Yet it couldn't be far, he reasoned. But now Billy was wishing that he had brought Shorty along. It would have saved time—and time was mighty valuable just now. Still, sending most of the men scooting up the long slopes would head the rustlers off, and perhaps they would.

Billy stopped so suddenly that Buck and Joe almost rammed into him. The Circle J boss sat for fully a minute, gazing blankly out into the swirling rainstorm.

"Say," he cried excitedly, "we've pulled a boner, boys! Poke Johnson an' his gang will never take the cattle into the Bitterroots. They'll head straight——"

"Huh?" Joe Scott grunted. "What yuh talkin' 'bout, Billy? O' course Johnson will head that herd

for the Bitterroots. Where else could he hope to hide 'em?"

"That's just it!" Billy cried. "Johnson will depend on us thinkin' that very thing. He'll bank on us doin' just what we have—rushin' our men into the mountains to watch for him.

"But stop an' think a minute. With this rain, every canyon will be plumb full o' water—too flooded to drive through. An' no rustler would drive a herd out on the ridges, that's certain. So Poke Johnson an' his gang will swing that herd south an' east, right across flat country that'll finally take 'em to the brakes an' river bottoms."

Ordinarily, Buck and Joe did not question Billy's reasoning. But they did now and made no bones about letting him know it. Billy merely grinned at the pair, however, and hurried on into the hills, watching what few barren patches of ground he could see.

He came at last to a sort of shallow bowl, where hillsides lifted sharply on three sides. He could see that the ground was deeply marked by hoofs, although the prints were overflowing with water. This, no doubt, was the spot where Shorty, Newt and Bud had milled the herd, stopping the stampede.

Joe Scott started to dismount, intending to tackle the job of finding out what way the herd had gone. But Billy called to the redhead, motioning him back into the saddle.

"No use wastin' time, Joe," Billy said crisply. "That herd moved south an' east—straight for open ground. Come on, yuh two rannies, if yuh aim to help snag the rustlers!"

But for once, Buck and Joe hesitated to follow Billy. They sat their horses, gazing off toward the place they knew the Bitterroots would be, though they could not see

the mountains through the rain. Billy rode a few yards, then glanced back.

"All right," he called. "If yuh two want to hit for the higher slopes, have at it. Me, I'm goin' huntin' for two-legged skunks."

Buck and Joe were in a cold sweat. They muttered and groaned, glaring at each other as if they meant to tangle. But when Billy rode out of sight, they spurred after him, yelping in alarm. The young boss of Circle J grinned faintly as his two pards came alongside.

"Billy, I—er—I think yo're mistook," Joe began. "I——"

Billy spurred up, and for over an hour, he led at a rapid pace through the shallow water that covered the level ground. Buck and Joe followed, but they were slumped and silent. Billy halted at last, and his two pals came up beside him, both scowling and muttering.

"I—I reckon yuh see now, Billy, that yuh was wrong, eh?" Joe said uneasily. "But mebbe if we hurry, we kin get back in time to help the sheriff round up——"

"Mebbe I was wrong," Billy said quietly, "when I took this way. I figured what I'd do if I was in Johnson's boots. But from what I see comin' yonder, my hunch wasn't so bad."

Buck and Joe fairly jumped, straining their eyes to follow Billy's pointing finger. And suddenly they were gasping in genuine surprise, for coming toward them at a heavy trot was a big red cow.

"An ol' mammy cow that had to leave her calf behind when Johnson an' his outfit started the herd," Billy chuckled grimly. "But she broke away an' is headin' back to her young un. Which means——"

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster cried. "Billy, I knowed

all along them skunks had come this way. Now——"

There was no holding Buck and Joe. The pair were off full tilt, swerving past the weary cow at top speed. Billy yelled at them, and was about to overhaul the pair when they stopped suddenly, flung from their saddles and dropped to a crouch.

In one brief glance, Billy saw the brink of a deep cut coulee ahead, and then his eyes focused on the dark blot of a big herd of cattle strung along beneath the rim.

"Wait, yuh two!" Billy snapped, lighting beside his pards. "Hold it——"

Billy was too late. With a roaring bellow, Buck Foster leaped over the rim of the coulee, rolled heels over head down a grassy bank, and came up with a gun spitting in his horny right hand.

Billy snarled angrily, leaped one jump ahead of Joe Scott, and brought up ten feet from Buck. The whole sink was roaring now, and pale tongues of blazing powder split the wet gloom.

Poke Johnson and his men had been taken by surprise, for they were crouched under an overhang where they had taken shelter. But now Johnson bellowed an order, and the slit-eyed crew came boiling out, yelling oaths as they thumbed gun hammers. Frosty and another puncher spied Joe Scott, and Frosty's whoop of murderous delight lifted shrilly.

The cattle, already weary from two hard runs that day, milled and bawled, but refused to do more than trot heavily away. Billy saw that much, then turned his attention to the fore—just in time to feel something nip his left thigh.

He spun, fell to his knees, and saw Keno Charley mincing forward

like a dancer, twin guns running red. Billy set his teeth, thumbed the hammer of his gun. But just as he did so, another slug seared his neck and he winced—not much, but enough to miss.

Wham! Billy slammed out another slug—and didn't miss.

Keno Charley jumped. A dazed expression leaped into his evil eyes. The gun dropped from his nerveless fingers. He stumbled, reeled, and then fell limply to the ground, his face plowing into the mud.

Br-rang! A gun roared behind Billy, and the young rancher's big Stetson tugged upward on his head.

Whirling, Billy saw Poke Johnson coming for him. The big rustler was grinning like a fiend, and moving in great leaps. He had a gun in each hand and even as Billy looked, he cracked down with them.

Billy's gun snapped into line. He thumbed the hammer just as two livid streaks of fire lanced from Johnson's Colts. Something hot seared Billy's temple, and he felt himself topple sidewise.

Dimly, through a red haze, he saw Poke Johnson still standing there, saw Johnson's thin lips writhe in soundless oaths. Rage and disappointment flooded through Billy West. Johnson, he thought, had beaten him to the shot. He did not mind dying, but he hated to let—

Then suddenly he saw something else. There was a blue hole between Poke Johnson's glazing eyes. And while Billy strove mightily to regain his reeling senses, he saw the rustler go down like a chopped-through pine tree. Poke Johnson had rustled his last steer. Billy had not missed.

With a great effort, Billy pulled himself to his feet. He saw Joe Scott, gun flaming in his freckled hand, go slithering along toward another rain-dimmed figure—Frosty.

But the cold-eyed gunman was screaming oaths, fanning his six-gun hammer with the heel of his left hand. Joe's weapon roared and spat flame. Frosty went over backward.

Where was Buck? Billy looked wildly around him and saw a sodden mass of arms and legs thrashing around on the ground. Two of Johnson's men had jumped the veteran, had him down, and were trying to hammer his head with their gun barrels.

Billy leaped forward to go to Buck's aid. But he was too late. Already Joe Scott had reached the struggling veteran's side. Billy saw the redhead's six-gun rise and fall. Then Buck was battling only one enemy. Joe stepped back. Billy saw that the redhead was grinning.

"Joe!" Billy West panted, as he reached the waddy's side and saw that Joe was holding his side and that there was crimson staining the fingers of his hand. "Yuh hurt pard?"

"Naw!" chuckled the redhead, and then his eyes became serious. "But yuh are, Billy. Yore head—"

"Nothin' but a scratch, I reckon," said Billy West. "Nicked in the leg, too, but it don't amount ter nothin'. We got the steers an' shore put an' end ter one rustler's career. This shore has been—"

There was a loud snort of triumph from Buck Foster. His horny fist, rock-hard, and backed by all the tough wiriness of a lifetime on the range, popped dully against his foe's jaw. The fellow stopped struggling suddenly, and Buck stood up.

He preened his drooping mustache and his eyes blazed proudly as he spotted his pards. He was battered, muddy, and crimson-stained, but he was victorious.

"Thar, by heifers!" he exclaimed. "I said I'd mop up thet bunch of

ornery sidewinders, an' I done it. Where in blazes has yuh two jaspers been? Help me, Hannah! Circle J'd be plumb ruined if it wa'n't fer yores truly, Buck Foster!"

Good ol' Buck! He's one hombre thet yuh kin allus depend on—yuh kin bet

thet when a fight's over he'll be crowin' about how he done it all. Howsomever, he *ain't* no slouch in a fight, an' thet's a fact. An' he'll have plenty more chances ter tangle with bad hombres in the next thrillin' story about Circle J—which same will be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right pronto. Don't miss it!



WASHINGTON ON THE BRAZOS

THE old town of Washington on the Brazos had been destined for great things, but owing to the stubborn qualities of its citizens, that greatness was torn from its grasp.

When the Republic of Texas was born, Washington was the capital of the provisional government. In the '40s and '50s, its commercial activities were at their height, the water facilities making it a distributing point for all middle Texas.

The old town was prospering and was building on safe and sure lines, with a wonderful future awaiting it. But in 1858, the citizens made the fatal error of refusing to give a bonus of eleven thousand dollars to the Houston & Texas Central Railroad.

Only two or three of the whole population favored the coming of the railroad, the others claiming that it would interfere with their river traffic and would ruin them all.

There was one man who had wisdom and foresight beyond his fellow townsmen, and he made frantic efforts to persuade them to raise the bonus. He walked the streets entreating the inhabitants to consent to the demands of the railroad officials, but in vain.

Finally, seeing how utterly useless his efforts were, he rose in his wrath one day in the public square and cursed the town.

In his anger he prayed that he might live to see the day when the

site of old Washington would be planted in cotton.

In course of time, his prayer was nearly granted.

The route that had been surveyed through the Brazos bottom was abandoned by the railroad officials, and the road was built to Navasota. The commerce and prosperity of Washington followed the railway.

The citizens who had made the outcry against the granting of the bonus followed where business led them, and they had good reason to remember the curse of the one farsighted citizen, for many of them were reduced to poverty.

To-day, there is nothing left of Washington on the Brazos but a few old buildings that are fast tottering to the end, and one store which supplies the wants of the farmers from outside.

Around the famous old town, the farms flourish, but the site of the once proud capital is so thickly studded with brick foundations, old cisterns, tumble-down dwellings, and the ruins of what was once a commercial center, that it is impossible to plow or cultivate it. So the cotton has not been planted there yet.

All that remains to recall the memories of a ghostly past is a shaft of gray Texas granite, which was erected by the school children of Washington County on April 27, 1900.



The Thunder Bird At Gray Horse Mine

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of "Blue Death On Thunder River," etc.

IN Thunderbolt City's single street puddles of rain water gleamed red beneath the slanting rays of the setting sun. Piled-up masses of woolly gray cloud still hung above the higher peaks of the Thunder Bird Range.

Two hours of blazing sunshine had followed the last attack of the storm, and in the old mining camp, steam was rising from the soaked roofs of the low log cabins. A plume of smoke was curling skyward from the

brick chimney of Cheerful Johnny's Hotel.

Into the camp rode a man mounted on a big gray horse. The sopping wet brim of a high-crowned black hat almost hid his eyes, and the hand which gripped his bridle rein had the raw, red look that comes of having long been exposed to the wet. But his big-boned, powerful body was dry beneath a bright-yellow slicker, which flapped around his heels.

He reined his horse to a stop in front of the white-painted frame hotel, leaned sidewise from his saddle and shouted in a hoarse voice:

"Hey, there! Anybody at home?"

The young fellow who stepped onto the porch in answer to the hail was a trifle under six feet in height, lean and muscular of build. His hatless head was covered with light curly hair, and his eyes were blue and steady. On the left side of his gray flannel shirt was the bronze badge of a forest ranger.

"Where's the livery stable?" asked the man on the gray horse, without greeting.

Jim Hazel, the forest ranger, sized up horse and rider with one piercing glance. He noted a bulge in the yellow slicker above the man's right hip, and rightly guessed that it was caused by a holstered gun. From where the ranger stood, he could not see the stranger's other hip, but he did see the stock of a rifle projecting from a saddle scabbard which lay beneath the rider's knee.

"You'll find a livery stable a few blocks up the street," replied Jim Hazel. "Ridden far?"

"Far enough," answered the man on the gray horse. "Much obliged."

There was nothing uncivil in the answer or in the tone of the stranger's voice, yet Jim Hazel frowned as he stood watching the gray horse splash through the puddles which dotted the street.

"Wet, tired, and hungry, probably," thought the ranger, "I've been that way myself."

Jim Hazel returned to the hotel office, where "Cheerful Johnny" sat in a big chair which faced the window. The fat hotel keeper's vast bulk overflowed his chair, his face was round and as red as a harvest moon, his pale-blue eyes looked like twin marbles embedded in rolls of fat, and

his pink skull was as hairless as an egg. He spoke to the ranger in a rumble like the echo of the thunder that was still muttering among the hills:

"'Bliged to you for answering the door, Jimmy. Who's the hombre in the yellow slicker?"

They were still discussing the stranger when he entered the office. He no longer wore his slicker. He was dressed in high-topped boots, corduroy trousers and a mackinaw. The removal of his yellow slicker had disclosed a belt full of cartridges sagging beneath the weight of two .45 Colts.

"Howdy do, stranger," rumbled Cheerful Johnny. "Kind o' stormy, ain't it?"

He heaved himself out of his chair, waddled across the creaking floor, stepped behind the desk and held out a pen which he had already dipped in the ink.

The stranger took the pen, scrawled a name and address in the dog-eared register. Cheerful Johnny read it aloud, as was his habit when a guest arrived:

"'Black Reeve, Los Angeles, California.'"

Cheerful Johnny's eyes seemed about to pop out of his head as he repeated the address in an awed voice. Here at last was a man who might bring real news to the lonely mining camp in the Idaho mountains.

"Was you in the airthquake, mister?" inquired Cheerful Johnny. "If you was, I'd like to hear about it. Shore must have been turrible."

"Black" Reeve's steely eyes glittered beneath his thin brows. He flung a ten-dollar gold piece down on the desk.

"Supper, bed and breakfast," he said. "Never mind the earthquake."

Cheerful Johnny stared at the

gold coin, picked it up, bit it, then turned toward his safe to make change.

"But I'd shore like to hear about the airthquake, mister," he said. "We don't ever have 'em in the Thunder Bird Range."

"That's why I came back," said Black Reeve. "Lost all I had in the shake-up. Fine business. Building toppled, burned. Everybody killed but me. Came back to get a fresh start up here in the mountains."

He hitched up his sagging belt, swaggered across the office, and dropped into a chair beside Jim Hazel. He reached into a pocket, took out a handful of cigars, and offered one to the ranger.

"Never learned to use tobacco," said Jim Hazel, "but thanks just the same. So you've been in this country before."

Black Reeve nipped an end off his cigar with his long front teeth and lighted it. Twin spurts of gray smoke crept from beneath the overhang of his nose.

"Left the Thunder Birds, ten year ago," he said. "Used to run the Gray Horse Mine. Left there a couple of days ago. Camped last night at Gunsight Lake."

"With the three Tigor boys?"

"Yes, they told me their names was Tigor," admitted Black Reeve. "Know 'em?"

"There isn't anybody I know better than the three Tigor brothers," said the ranger. "My name is Jim Hazel."

Black Reeve removed his cigar from his mouth, flicked the ash off the end, then glanced at Jim Hazel out of the corner of one eye.

"So you're the man who arrested the outlaw who calls himself the 'Thunder Bird' and threw him into jail," said Black Reeve.

"I only obeyed orders from headquarters," said Jim Hazel. "The Thunder Bird is wanted for a dozen murders."

"Think the sheriff would let me talk with him?" asked Black Reeve.

"Better ask the sheriff about that," said the ranger. "Did you ever meet the Thunder Bird?"

"Meet him?" echoed Black Reeve. "Sure, I know the Thunder Bird. Him and me were partners in the Gray Horse Mine, ten-'leven year ago. I rode over here to talk with him. Maybe you'll introduce me to the sheriff."

Jim Hazel weighed the request in his mind before answering. He could see no reason why the sheriff should refuse to allow Black Reeve to visit the Thunder Bird in his cell. Yet a sixth sense seemed to warn the ranger to have nothing to do with the matter.

"Who told you the Thunder Bird was in jail here?" asked the ranger. "The Tigor boys?"

Black Reeve took a news item from his pocket. It had been clipped from a Los Angeles newspaper, and was an account of the arrest of the Thunder Bird by Jim Hazel.

"Yes, the Tigor boys told me about it," said Black Reeve, "but I couldn't help seeing it anyhow, for it was in all the city papers. 'Tain't much I'm asking of you, ranger."

"All right," said Jim Hazel, "I'll make you acquainted with the sheriff, but you'll have to do your own talking."

II.

Sheriff Patterson was seated with his feet on his desk when the two men entered his office. Jim Hazel introduced his companion and the sheriff shook hands with Black Reeve.

Black Reeve took a handful of long black cigars from his pocket, selected one and was about to hand it to the sheriff, then he changed his mind and slipped it back into his pocket.

"That cigar got mashed somehow, sheriff," he said. "Try this one. 'Tain't often you get a smoke like this up in these hills."

When the sheriff had his cigar going, Black Reeve explained the reason for his call. Sheriff Patterson listened in silence, puffed a cloud of smoke ceilingward, then glanced toward the guns at his visitor's hips.

"So you and the Thunder Bird were partners years ago," he said thoughtfully. "Partners in what?"

"The Gray Horse Mine," replied Black Reeve. "We struck it rich, and I went to California. Lost track of the Thunder Bird for years. Didn't know that he'd gone bad until I saw the papers."

"And you came right up here to see him—after ten years?" The old sheriff's eyebrows went up as he asked the question. "Seems like a queer thing to do."

"Maybe it was," admitted Black Reeve. "If it hadn't been for the 'quake, I might not have come. Lost every dollar I had. Got to start all over again. Figured I'd rather live some place where earthquakes never happen. So I reckoned I'd come back and reopen the old Gray Horse Mine."

"Hm-m-m!" The sheriff's chilly gaze never left Black Reeve's face. "Man's got a right to live where he pleases. Don't know as I blame you. Ain't got no use for an earthquake country myself. All right. I'll let you talk with the Thunder Bird, but you'll have to leave them guns in my office; likewise, any knives or other instermunts of torture which same you may have in your jeans.

The Thunder Bird is about as hard to hold as a greased eel, and I ain't going to take no chances of him getting away."

Black Reeve unbuckled his belt, laid it on the sheriff's desk. Laid a clasp knife beside it.

"That's the size of my hardware, sheriff," he said, "unless you count my money and cigars."

The sheriff rose to his feet, frisked Black Reeve's clothing with deft hands, then called to a deputy in an adjoining room, "Hey, Ben!"

Deputy Sheriff Ben Smithers entered the office. Middle-aged, powerfully built, short of stature and hard of eyes, he stood glowering at Black Reeve, whom he evidently judged to be under arrest.

The sheriff grunted an introduction, then nodded toward the door.

"Let Reeve talk with the Thunder Bird, Ben," he said. "Don't let either of 'em out of your sight."

"Say, listen, sheriff," protested Black Reeve. "I want——"

"You'll either talk to the Thunder Bird under those conditions, or not at all," said the sheriff. "I'm running this jail."

Black Reeve muttered something beneath his breath, followed the deputy toward the door, stopped and spoke over his shoulder.

"May I give the Thunder Bird a cigar?" he said.

"Two of 'em if you want to," grunted Sheriff Patterson. "Walls and floors of the cells are concrete. He can't set the building afire."

As the door closed behind the deputy and Black Reeve, the old sheriff turned to Jim Hazel.

"What do you make of him Jimmy?"

Jim Hazel hesitated, then a thought struck him, and he glanced at the desk telephone.

"Black Reeve claims that he

stayed last night with the Tigor boys, of Gunsight Lake," he said. "S'pose we check up on him."

The sheriff thought it to be a good idea, so Jim Hazel rang up the cabin at Gunsight Lake. Bill Tigor answered the ring.

Jim Hazel talked over the phone a few minutes, then hung up and turned to the sheriff.

"Reever stayed with the Tigor boys last night, all right," he said. "Offered a twenty-dollar gold piece in payment for his accommodations. The Tigor boys refused to accept a cent."

"Gold money, huh?" The sheriff's brows came together in a frown. "Unusual for a man to be packing gold coin around with him these days. Guess I'll wire the authorities in Los Angeles, and see if Black Reever is a fugitive from the law."

A few minutes later, Black Reever returned to the office, followed by the deputy sheriff, who was puffing at a long black cigar. Black Reever picked up his gun belt, buckled it around his hips, then dropped his clasp knife into a pocket.

"Much obliged, sheriff," he said. "I told the Thunder Bird good-by. Don't see that I can do anything for him. I won't bother you any more."

"What did they talk about, Ben?" asked the sheriff, when the door had closed behind Black Reever.

Deputy Sheriff Ben Smithers rolled his cigar between his thick lips, puffed out a cloud of smoke, shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"Nothing in partic'lar, sheriff," he said. "It was a sort o' do-you-remember chin fest, with the Thunder Bird doin' most of the chinnin'. They talked mainly of a mine they called the Gray Horse. Seems like they used to work it together."

"Ever hear of the Gray Horse Mine, Jimmy?" asked the sheriff.

"No," replied the ranger. "But then, there are lots of old mines in the Thunder Bird Range."

"Then there was some talk of airthquakes," said the deputy. "Was you ever in an airthquake, sheriff?"

"Never was, and hope I never will be," grunted the sheriff. "I find trouble enough in the Thunder Bird Range."

Jim Hazel returned to the hotel, where he found supper ready. Cheerful Johnny seated him at a table facing Black Reever.

"Where's the Gray Horse Mine?" asked the ranger suddenly. "I'd like to know, so that I can mark it down on my map."

Black Reever's head snapped back as if he had been uppercut beneath the chin. A dark-red flush crept over his heavy features.

"Don't get curious about things that don't concern you, ranger," he said. "I'm telling you for your own good."

Jim Hazel's blue eyes flashed dangerously over the rim of the coffee cup he was raising to his lips.

"Is that a threat?" he asked.

"Take it any way you please," growled Black Reever. "But see that you keep out of my business. I don't need any ranger to tell me how to run the Gray Horse Mine."

"O. K.," said the ranger, who had found from experience that it did not pay to lose his temper. "I'm not interested in your business, as long as you don't make it mine."

They spoke no more during the meal. Afterward, Jim Hazel spent the evening visiting friends. Thunder was muttering far back among the hills when he returned to the hotel to find Cheerful Johnny sitting alone, playing solitaire with a greasy pack of cards.

"Where's Black Reever?" asked Jim Hazel. "Gone to bed?"

Cheerful Johnny nodded toward the stairs which led to the second floor.

"Reever went to his room an hour ago, Jimmy," he said. "I couldn't get a word out of him about the airthquake. Most unsociable cuss I ever seen."

Jim Hazel went to his room and to bed. Rain was pattering on the roof when he crawled beneath the blankets. Almost instantly he fell asleep.

He was awakened by a clap of thunder which shook the old building to its foundations. Flashes of chain lightning zigzagged outside the uncurtained window, filling the room with a weird blue glare. Jim Hazel got rather a thrill out of watching the play of the lightning and listening to the thunder and the roar of the rain on the roof.

Suddenly there came one of those peculiar lulls which occur in most electrical storms. The lightning ceased to flash and the thunder to roll. The rain stopped as suddenly as if some one had turned off a faucet. In the pitch darkness of his room, Jim Hazel lay listening. Suddenly he leaped out of bed as, outside in the street, he heard the sound of galloping hoofs.

A chair toppled over with a crash as Jim Hazel darted toward the window, threw up the sash and leaned across the sill. At the same instant, a terrific peal of thunder drowned out the creak of an opening door, and the sound of stealthy footsteps stealing across the floor in the darkness behind the ranger.

Above the roof of the hotel, the darkness burst into living blue flame, and by its light, Jim Hazel caught a glimpse of a gray horse galloping through the pouring rain. He thought he saw a human figure bent forward over the saddle horn, but

before he could be sure, something struck him a crashing blow on the back of the head. That was the last thing he remembered.

III.

Jim Hazel opened his eyes to find himself lying on his back on the floor of his room. It was still so dark that he could not see, but the storm had passed on. The only sounds were the muttering of distant thunder and the dripping of water from the eaves onto the sheet-iron roof of a warehouse beneath the window of his room.

Dazed from the blow on his head, the ranger scrambled to his feet, staggered across the floor and lighted his lamp. The open door of his room was evidence enough that somebody had entered it and clubbed him from behind.

Jim Hazel slipped into his clothes and buckled on his gun belt. Carrying the lamp in one hand, he made his way downstairs to Cheerful Johnny's room.

Cheerful Johnny came to the door clad in red underwear and a red nightcap. His eyes were heavy with sleep, but in one hand he carried an old-fashioned Frontier model, .45 caliber Colt six-gun.

"What's the matter?" he rumbled. "Anybody would think there was an airthquake around, with all the noise that's been going on to-night. Why can't you let a man sleep?"

"I think Reever tried to kill me," said the ranger, "but I've no authority to enter his room. You're running this hotel, and it's up to you."

Grumbling at having been awakened, the fat hotel keeper led the way up the creaking stairs to Black Reever's room. It was empty, the window was open, and out of it dangled a long rope, one end of

which had been fastened to the bedstead.

"He's gone!" exclaimed Cheerful Johnny foolishly. "I'm shore glad he paid me in advance."

"Bother your bill, Johnny," said Jim Hazel. "I've got to get the sheriff right away."

Leaving Cheerful Johnny in the act of closing the window, Jim Hazel hurried downstairs, left the hotel and made his way to the little house on the edge of town, where the sheriff dwelt alone. At the ranger's shout, the sheriff opened the door and stood blinking behind a lighted candle.

"Get your gun and your keys quickly, sheriff," said Jim Hazel sharply. "It looks as if the Thunder Bird has escaped again."

As they hurried down the dark, muddy street, the old sheriff pooh-poohed the idea of the Thunder Bird's having made his escape.

"He never got the chance," said the sheriff. "I had my deputy search the cell and told him to remain on guard all night outside in the corridor."

Ben Smithers was still in the corridor outside the locked door of the Thunder Bird's cell. He lay on the stone floor unconscious, with the fingers of his right hand gripping the butt of a dead cigar.

When he had been somewhat revived, he sat up and held both hands to his aching head. His eyes were sick with pain and misery as he looked from the sheriff to Jim Hazel.

"It must have been that cigar," he muttered. "Black Reeve gave me two of 'em, and one must have been doped. If I ever lay my hands on him, I'll——"

Grimacing with pain, he gripped his stomach with both hands and keeled over. The sheriff stepped

over his writhing body and unlocked the door of the Thunder Bird's cell. Followed closely by Jim Hazel, he stepped inside and snapped on the electric light.

Two iron bars had been cut out of the cell window. Lying on the cement floor beneath the window were four hack-saw blades and the wrappers of two long black cigars. Beside them lay a scrap of paper torn from an old magazine. On it, in bright-red letters, the escaped outlaw had scrawled his defiance:

Gone on a gray horse!

THE THUNDER BIRD.

"Smart!" The sheriff expressed his admiration in one grudging word. "By this time, they are both miles away, and the rain will have washed out their tracks."

"Two men couldn't have traveled very fast on one horse," objected Jim Hazel. "I'll try to pick up their trail as soon as it is light enough to see."

But when the ranger called at the livery bar to leave orders with "Dusty" Rhodes regarding his horse, he found that scraggly mustached old-timer lashed to one of his own mangers.

"B-b-black Reeve shoved a g-g-gun in my face, and the Thun-thun-thunder Bird tied me up," stammered the old liveryman. "R-R-Reeve went away on yore b-b-blue roan, J-J-Jimmy, and the Thun-thun-thunder Bird rode the g-g-gray."

"Saddle the best horse you have left," ordered Jim Hazel. "I'll be back before long."

The ranger returned to the hotel, fixed up a bad gash in his scalp, then ate a breakfast made ready by the Chinese cook.

Shortly after daylight, Jim Hazel was riding out of town, when the

sheriff hailed him from the doorway of the telegraph office.

"Here's a reply to the wire I sent to Los Angeles, Jimmy," said the sheriff.

Leaning from his saddle, Jim Hazel took the yellow sheet of paper and read:

SHERIFF PATTERSON,
THUNDERBOLT CITY, IDAHO

BLACK REEVER WANTED HERE FOR LOOTING
BANK AFTER EARTHQUAKE STOP GOT AWAY
WITH TEN THOUSAND GOLD STOP ARREST
REEVER AND HOLD FOR CALIFORNIA AUTHOR-
ITIES STOP DANGEROUS CRIMINAL STOP USE
ALL NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS IN EFFECTING
ARREST

CHIEF OF POLICE, LOS ANGELES

"You might phone the Tigor boys to watch the trails," said Jim Hazel, as he handed the message back to the sheriff. "I'll do the best I can. See you later."

The horse Jim Hazel had borrowed from Dusty Rhodes did the best it could, but it was lame in the right hip and could not travel very fast. It was late afternoon before Jim Hazel came in sight of the Thunder River ranger station.

The ranger had little hope of getting track of the outlaws, for they had left the main trail before the rain had ceased falling, and thus covered their trail. Even at that, it was possible that they had ridden up to the ranger station from the rear, hidden their horses among the timber, and were even then cooking themselves a meal in the cabin.

Jim Hazel had been watching his cabin only a few minutes when he saw a man ride out of the timber on the opposite side of Lightning Flat. The ranger's hand flashed to his six-gun before he recognized Bill Tigor.

Touching his horse's flanks with his heels, Jim Hazel rode forward at a trot to meet the mountaineer.

They reached the cabin at the same moment, swung themselves from their saddles and gripped hands.

"Lightning struck our pasture and killed one of our horses, Jimmy," explained Bill Tigor. "I'm on my way to town to buy another." He looked at the poor old horse Jim Hazel had been riding, and knitted his brows disapprovingly.

"Jimmy," said Bill Tigor severely, "yuh ought to be arrested for cruelty to animals. I never thought to see yuh ridin' a thing like that, as the cowboy remarked when he saw his brother on a mule."

Bill Tigor's black eyes gleamed fiercely above his big, hooked nose, as he heard about the escape of the Thunder Bird and the telegram regarding Black Reeve.

"Black Reeve was a danged fool to help the Thunder Bird escape," said the mountaineer. "The Thunder Bird won't thank him for it."

Jim Hazel was about to agree, when a sound inside the ranger station caused both men to whip their six-guns from their holsters.

"That's somebody inside yore cabin, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor. "I'll lay yuh a ten-dollar bill against a plug of tobacco that it ain't the Thunder Bird."

"You stay here and watch the front of the cabin, Bill," said Jim Hazel. "I'll go take a look through the window."

Jim Hazel stole around the cabin until he was beneath the window; then he raised his head and peered through the glass.

Sprawled face upward on the floor of the ranger station was the body of a man.

Startled by Jim Hazel's shout, Bill Tigor stepped around the corner of the cabin so suddenly that he almost knocked the ranger off his feet.

"Black Reeve is lying on the floor

inside the cabin," said Jim Hazel. "Looks as if he's dead."

But Black Reeve was still breathing when Jim Hazel stooped over him. The front of his shirt was stained crimson, and there was a bullet hole in his chest. He spoke with difficulty.

"The Thunder Bird shot me—for my gold—gone to Gray Horse Mine—ten miles south—Gunsight Lake—get—"

He choked suddenly, tried to speak again, but his voice was only a gurgle, and his head fell back on Jim Hazel's arm.

"Can yuh beat that, Jimmy?" said Bill Tigor in a shocked voice. "He helped the Thunder Bird escape from jail, and the dirty coyote robbed and killed him!"

Jim Hazel's blue eyes were as cold as ice as he looked down at the dead outlaw. He turned slowly, snatched a blanket off a bunk and covered the body of Black Reeve.

"That's what comes," said the ranger soberly, "of stealing earthquake gold."

Bill Tigor drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chew and spat through the open door.

"Jimmy," he drawled, "yuh can't blame no airthquake for the murder of Black Reeve. Yuh got ter blame the blackest-hearted hombre in the whole Thunder Bird Range."

"You'd better trade horses with me, Bill," said Jim Hazel. "Load the body of Black Reeve onto Dusty Rhodes's horse and take it into town. I'll use your big black to trail the Thunder Bird down."

"If yuh think I'm goin' to lead that limpin' old plug all the way to Thunderbolt City, yuh've got another guess comin', Jimmy," said Bill Tigor. "I never was no hand to walk, as the grouse remarked when it flew across the canyon."

Jim Hazel hesitated a moment, then he stepped to the telephone and rang up the sheriff's office. After he had talked a few moments, he hung up the receiver.

"All right, Bill," he said. "You can come with me. The sheriff is going to send Ben Smithers after Black Reeve's body."

They discussed the killing a few moments, then Bill Tigor suggested calling Gunsight Lake to see if his brothers had seen any sign of the Thunder Bird. But they got no answer to repeated rings.

"Jest our luck," complained Bill Tigor. "I'll bet Curt and young Gabe have took advantage of me bein' away and have gone gallivantin' among the hills."

IV.

Jim Hazel was two hours behind Bill Tigor in arriving at Gunsight Lake, for the ranger's crippled horse was unable to keep up with the mountaineer's big black. Bill was cooking supper when Jim Hazel entered the cabin.

"The fat's shore in the fire this time," was the mountaineer's greeting. "Look at this, will yuh, Jimmy?"

"This" was a note signed by Curt and Gabe Tigor. It stated that they had gone to have a look at the Gray Horse Mine, which Black Reeve had mentioned when he had stayed overnight at the cabin.

"That means that we'd better get started to-night," said Jim Hazel. "If the Thunder Bird should be at the Gray Horse Mine when your brothers arrive, he'll probably ambush and kill them."

They hurried through supper, waited until moonrise so that the horses might feed and rest, then they climbed into their saddles.

As they disappeared around the shore of Gunsight Lake, the Thunder Bird rode out of the timber on Black Reeve's gray horse. Behind him, the outlaw led the blue roan which belonged to Jim Hazel. The Thunder Bird had been on his way to the Tigor boys' cabin when he had seen smoke rising from the roof. Believing that Curt and young Gabe had been inside, he was very much surprised when at last he saw Jim Hazel and Bill ride away.

Not knowing how soon it would be before Curt and Gabe Tigor returned, the outlaw lost no time in stealing a pack saddle and some supplies, which he loaded onto Jim Hazel's blue roan. Then he mounted the tall gray horse and started toward the Gray Horse Mine.

Less than five feet in height, with a scarred and evil face, the lower part of which was hidden by a mass of coarse red beard, the Thunder Bird possessed immense shoulders and a great barrel chest. He looked like an ugly ape as, hunched over the saddle horn, he rode slowly through the moonlight.

With no suspicion that they were being followed by the very outlaw for whom they were searching, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor followed the directions given them by Black Reeve before his death. Daylight was breaking when they reached the top of a hog-backed ridge.

Far beneath them, in the depths of Gray Horse Canyon, they saw a huddled group of ramshackle buildings. Smoke was rising from a stove-pipe above the roof of one.

Leaving their horses tied on top of the ridge, Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor began the descent into the canyon. They reached the bottom in a short time, and found themselves standing in a heavy growth of timber.

"We'd better tackle the cabin from different directions, Bill," said Jim Hazel. "For all we know, the Thunder Bird may be inside. If you get the drop on him before I do, give him a chance to surrender before you cut loose with your gun."

"Shore, that's jest what I'm liable to do, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor. "But he'll have to surrender mighty quick if he aims to keep on livin', as the bobcat remarked when it met the rattlesnake."

Jim Hazel soon lost sight of Bill Tigor among the trees. Strangely aware of the silence in the canyon, the ranger stole forward until he was within ten yards of the cabin. Then he stopped and stood listening. Hearing no sound but the tinkle of the creek, Jim Hazel was about to enter the cabin when suddenly he felt a cold, hard object pressed against the back of his neck.

"Stick 'em up," rasped a harsh voice, "and get inside the cabin!"

Knowing that it meant death to disobey, Jim Hazel raised his hands above his head. Expecting every second that Bill Tigor would come on the scene, the ranger allowed the Thunder Bird to herd him inside the cabin.

Keeping the muzzle of his six-gun against Jim Hazel's head, the outlaw snatched the ranger's weapon from its holster and tossed it through the open door. He stepped back a pace, told Jim Hazel to face him, then leveled his gun at the ranger's heart.

"This is one time yuh won't get away from me," snarled the Thunder Bird. "I'm goin' to kill yuh, then I'm goin' to hunt them three Tigor boys down."

"Why?" Jim Hazel strove to keep his voice steady. "Take out your vengeance on me, but leave the Tigor boys alone."

"Yuh ask that!" The dwarf outlaw's voice was hoarse with fury, and his red-rimmed eyes were blazing in his brutal face. "I'm tired of bein' hunted like a wild beast. As long as yuh and them three Tigor boys live, my life ain't safe. Every time I've broke away from the law, yuh four have run me down and arrested me again. If yuh've got any prayers to say, yuh'd better be sayin' 'em, for I——"

The outlaw caught his breath suddenly as he heard a sound outside the cabin. As the sound came again, he glanced toward the window.

The crown of Bill Tigor's Stetson was just rising above the sill!

The roar of the Thunder Bird's .45 Colt was echoed by a howl from the outlaw as Jim Hazel charged him. The six-gun fell from the desperado's hand as the ranger's right fist smashed him full on his bearded lips. Staggering backward, the outlaw brought up against the wall with a crash.

Quick as a cat, the Thunder Bird bounced back from the wall. Bending double, he closed his long arms around Jim Hazel's knees and lifted him bodily off his feet. Using the ranger's body as a shield, the powerful dwarf rushed out of the cabin.

The Thunder Bird was only a few feet from the cabin door when Jim Hazel's powerful hands closed around his hairy throat. The muscles of the ranger's wrists stood out in knots as his fingers dug into the outlaw's corded neck. Exerting all his strength, Jim Hazel forced the desperado's head backward until it seemed that his neck would be broken.

Eyes almost starting from their sockets and face turning purple, the Thunder Bird strove with all his might to break Jim Hazel's grip. But he might just as well have tried

to loosen the steel jaws of a trap as to loosen the ranger's fingers.

Failing to break Jim Hazel's hold on his throat, the dwarf threw himself backward to the ground, raised both feet and aimed a kick at the ranger's stomach. But Jim Hazel rolled to one side, and the outlaw's hobnailed boots met empty air.

Releasing his grip on the desperado's throat, Jim Hazel sprang to his feet just as the dwarf bounced upright again. The ranger met the ape man's charge with a right-hand smash which caught him on the side of the jaw. Down again went the Thunder Bird, and up again with a snarl like that of a wild beast.

Howling with rage, he hurled himself bodily through the air, with the intention of clamping his short, powerful legs around Jim Hazel's body. But the ranger avoided the rush, and missing his aim, the Thunder Bird crashed into a stump with such terrific force that it knocked his breath completely out of him. He bounced backward almost into Jim Hazel's arms.

Falling to earth, the outlaw closed his fingers around a great stone. Jumping to his feet, he leaned backward in the attitude of a discus thrower, with the huge rock held flat on the palm of his enormous right hand. With all his strength, the outlaw hurled the rock at the ranger, but again Jim Hazel was too quick, and the rock missed his head by a foot.

As the stone left the outlaw's hand, he lost his balance and lurched forward, with his head held downward like that of a charging bull. So it happened that the Thunder Bird's chin encountered a right uppercut that had most of Jim Hazel's hundred and eighty pounds behind it. Flinging out his arms, the outlaw fell backward and lay still,

knocked cold by that tremendous blow.

Jim Hazel blew on his skinned knuckles, then he snatched a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and clicked them shut on the Thunder Bird's wrists. Leaving the unconscious outlaw lying where he had fallen, the ranger rushed around the cabin. He expected to find Bill Tigor with a bullet hole in his head.

But Bill was sitting up with his back propped against the wall of the cabin. Crimson was trickling down his cheek from a bullet graze in his scalp. Half dazed by the shock of the bullet, for minutes he had been staring foolishly at a bullet hole in the crown of his Stetson.

"Did yuh see anything of the Thunder Bird, Jimmy?" asked Bill Tigor.

"See him!" exclaimed Jim Hazel. "Sure, I left him lying in front of the cabin."

"The Thunder Bird came mighty near gettin' me," said Bill Tigor. "But, Jimmy, it shore seems like yore always around 'bout the time I need yuh the worst."

"Are you badly hurt, Bill?" asked Jim Hazel. "Do you think you can walk?"

"Oh, no, I ain't bad hurt," drawled the mountaineer, "but if I was hurt any worse, I'd be daid, as the rabbit remarked when it stepped on the porkypine."

Assisted by Jim Hazel, Bill managed to gain his feet. With arms linked, the ranger and the mountaineer rounded the corner of the cabin and ran squarely into Curt and young Gabe Tigor.

"We found the Gray Horse Mine," said Curt.

"How come the Thunder Bird hyar, Jimmy?" asked young Gabe.

The two mountaineers heard Jim Hazel's account of all that had hap-

pened, then they added some news of their own.

"We found yore blue roan saddle horse tied up in the timber, Jimmy," said Curt. "Somebody had tried to make a pack animal out of him. Maybe yuh'd better come and take the saddle off him. He don't seem to like it."

Bill and Jim Hazel followed the two younger Tigor boys to where the Thunder Bird had left his stolen horses. Jim Hazel's blue roan was standing with a pack saddle beneath its belly among the wreckage of a pack. Black Reeve's tall gray was standing with its head down. Ears pricked forward, it was looking at a patch of ground that was strewn with gold money!

"The gold that was looted from an earthquake-wrecked bank by Black Reeve, and then stolen from him by the Thunder Bird!" exclaimed Jim Hazel. "Bill, move the horses away before they trample the gold into the ground. Curt, Gabe, get busy and help me to pick up the money."

Bill Tigor picked up a twenty-dollar gold piece. Turning it over and over between his gnarled fingers, he stood looking down at the golden coins which strewed the ground. Slowly he drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chew and wiped his drooping mustache with the back of a hand.

"Jimmy," drawled Bill, "if that's the kind of gold airthquakes is made of, I'd admire to see an airthquake in the Thunder Bird Range."

It's too bad that things didn't break so that Jimmy could 'a' traded lead with the Thunder Bird. It looks like the only way that the ornery killer kin be put out o' the way fer keeps is fer him ter be plugged plumb center with a hot-lead slug. Watch out fer the next story about Jim Hazel in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



The Desert Phantom's Show-down

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "The Desert Phantom's Luck," etc.

CHAPTER I.

APACHE AMBUSH.

SLITHERING across the sand like a Gila monster, Black Hawk, the Apache, dragged his tawny body up behind a clump of wiry ignota brush and thrust the muzzle of a Colt .45 through the fuzzy gray leaves.

The Indian's bullet eyes squinted down the barrel of the gun, lining the sights on the chest of the lone cowboy who squatted beside his little camp fire of mesquite chunks and dry grass, eighty yards distant.

Black Hawk's trigger finger

tensed. His half-naked body quivered with savage excitement. It was long range, but from his carefully gained ambush, he felt confident that he could send a bullet through the puncher's heart.

Then the Indian relaxed. An Apache oath slid over his teeth, and his cruel mouth twisted in a scowl of impatience as he saw the form of a blue roan saddle horse, grazing in the middle distance, suddenly block out the white man's form which he had so expertly lined up with his gun sights.

But Black Hawk could wait for the horse to move on. After all,

minutes did not count now, when he had been all afternoon stalking three hundred yards, moving inch by inch so that the rays of the westerling sun would not betray a gleam of copper from his thick-muscled back.

The cowboy had made a typical dry camp, here on the edge of Catclaw Desert. Already, the floor of the bad lands was beginning to purple, as the sun slid down a metallic sky toward the spike-toothed backbone of the mighty Kiona Mountains.

The waddy was whistling a range tune to himself as he dumped the steaming contents of his skillet onto a tin plate. Hanging over the camp fire was a soot-blackened coffeepot.

The very bareness of the sandy desert flat on which the young ranny had made his camp indicated that no water hole was near. He had poured the last drop from his canteen into the coffeepot. He almost begrudged the steam which came from the blue-enameled lip of the pot.

In Arizona, when a man camps, there are usually only two reasons why he evades a water hole. One reason is that he may be a hunted man, and knows that an oasis is probably watched by an alert John Law. The other reason is that he himself may be that tin-badge, and realizes that the criminal he is seeking may be ambushed near the water hole, also.

But this young waddy was neither crook nor lawman.

The ungroomed neck of Catclaw Desert where he had camped seemed utterly uninhabited. The tawny sands, still hot from the long desert day, were devoid of even a stray rattler or lizard. The sweltered sky was vacant of winged life.

The cowboy would have sworn

that he was alone, save for his blue roan cayuse. Such had been the stalking skill of Black Hawk, the Apache.

The Indian's dark eyes glowed with the thirst for murder as he saw the cowboy finish his meal. And well he might. For this young waddy was his worst enemy—a justice rider known throughout Arizona as the "Desert Phantom."

The Phantom wore a pearl-white Stetson with high, dimpled crown and a band of rattlesnake skin. A red bandanna was knotted loosely about his throat, and his powerful body was clothed in a bright-green shirt with yellow cuffs and pockets that were shaped like half-moons.

He wore a pair of chocolate-colored batwing chaps, on which the three letters "DEX" had been fashioned with nickel-plated studs. No one in all Arizona knew the meaning of those three mystic letters, whether they spelled the hombre's name, or the brand of his home spread, or what. For no one knew the identity of the Phantom.

His feet were incased in kangaroo-leather boots, with butterfly inlays in yellow, and high spike heels. Silver-mounted spurs with star-shaped rowels were buckled on his ankles.

But the most striking feature of the Desert Phantom's costume, in the eyes of the ambushed Indian who watched him, were the gun belts and holsters which were strapped about his waist.

The six-guns were cedar-butted, and they reposed in slick holsters that had been fashioned from a steer's horns, steamed into shape so that they fitted the guns as the husk fits an ear of corn. They had been scraped thin, too, so that they were transparent, as if molded from cloudy glass.

Those two guns were famous. They had belonged to "Bearcat" Barry, one of the West's most colorful gun aces—a waddy who had been born and raised at Stirrup City, here on Catclaw Desert.

Bearcat's father had made those holsters and presented his son with those long-barreled six-guns just before Bearcat had left Arizona to try his fortune on the cattle spreads of Colorado and finally the Thundergust Valley country, in Wyoming.

Bearcat Barry had blazed an exciting trail with those guns. More than one gambler or highwayman had tasted lead justice before his blurring draw. So Bearcat's fame had preceded him, before he returned to Stirrup City and his father, Sheriff Lew Barry—astride Blue Blazes, the most magnificent horse Arizona had ever seen.

But Bearcat had also ridden into bad luck. Hardly had he arrived in Stirrup, before Sheriff Lew Barry had received a tip-off concerning the planned robbery of the Rainbow Flyer train, in the Kiona Mountains.

The sheriff, with his son Bearcat and a small posse, had ridden to the scene of the expected robbery. There had they fallen into a trap, to be disarmed and then knocked unconscious by a gang of six masked bandits.

The six outlaws had robbed the train. And after escaping with the gold shipment which the mail car contained, consigned to a bank in Stirrup City, they had piled the unconscious bodies of Lew Barry's posse beside the mail car and exploded a dynamite bomb upon them.

When the coroner of Concha County, Lurd Pesco, had arrived at the scene, it was to find the bodies of Lew Barry and his men, some horribly mangled, lying beside the dynamited car.

It had looked like a conclusive case of a premature bomb explosion exposing the old sheriff's scheme to rob the train. So the bodies of the posse men were taken to Pesco's undertaking parlor, with the exception of the sheriff himself, who had lived.

Then it was that the Phantom of the Desert had entered the picture. That night, the mysterious masked man who was to become famous throughout the Southwest as the Phantom, had stolen Bearcat Barry's coffin from the coroner's undertaking parlors, and had buried it beside Bearcat's mother's grave in the citizen's cemetery, thereby keeping it from a murderer's grave on Boot Hill.

And the Phantom of the Desert had likewise stolen Bearcat Barry's blue roan, as well as the famous horn-holstered guns, and had disappeared into the wilds of Catclaw Desert.

They had a trial for Sheriff Lew Barry. Grieving friends weighed the evidence and found him guilty of planning and participating in the ghastly train robbery. Judge Des Spaulding had decreed that the old sheriff must hang.

Then it was that the mysterious Phantom made his second appearance, climbing through a courtroom window before an astounded crowd, to tell the judge that Lew Barry and his son Bearcat and the posse had been victims of a frame-up.

Judge Spaulding, wanting to believe the masked man, had granted the Phantom thirty days in which to prove his claims. If he failed to produce the crooks who had framed Barry within that length of time, the sheriff of Concha County was doomed to death.

Twenty-nine of those days had now passed; but during those weeks, many strange things had occurred

on and near Catclaw Desert. In the first place, the deer-horn spread over the Concha County courthouse began to fill with bullet-riddled sombreros—left at night by the Desert Phantom, who declared them to be the hats of the crooks who had framed Lew Barry.

Five crooks out of the original six had been sent to their death by the mysterious masked Phantom, whose identity could not be guessed by any man. And now, with only one short day to go before the innocent sheriff was to hang, the Desert Phantom had only one more of the bandits to capture—the leader himself. That was why, that day, the Phantom had made his camp.

No one had been more surprised than the Phantom himself, to discover that the masked leader of the train-robber gang was none other than Lurd Pesco, the respected coroner of Concha County!

Pesco it was, who had planned the robbery and provided that the blame for the crime should fall on innocent shoulders. But Pesco had not reckoned on the appearance of the mysterious Desert Phantom, who took Bearcat Barry's guns and horse, to ride a trail of justice.

Black Hawk, the Apache, was Pesco's right-hand man. The long justice trail was reaching its end at last. The Desert Phantom was pitted against the ringleader of the outlaws.

Given time, the Phantom was confident of success. But for all he knew, that night might be the last time old Lew Barry would ever see the sun go down. For when the courthouse clock struck twelve o'clock noon the next day, the sheriff was scheduled to hang!

"Me get um closer!" grunted Black Hawk, sliding his body along the sand.

The Indian realized that he would sign his own death warrant if he missed. His victim was a gun wizard. And with the gathering shadows, the chance of not getting the Phantom with the first shot was now a very real one.

Moving with great caution, bred within him from his ancestry of Apache Indians, Black Hawk skulked from bush to bush, drawing ever nearer the Desert Phantom's lonely camp.

The wind was against him; Blue Blazes, the horse, could not catch his scent and betray his presence. Shoving the barrel of the six-gun ahead of him, the creeping Indian once more flattened out behind an ignota clump and cocked the Colt silently. His racing heart pumped off the seconds.

The time had come! His boss, Lurd Pesco, who was even now hiding back in the Kiona Mountains, had instructed him to slay the Phantom if possible. And Black Hawk knew, if he returned with the Phantom's glasslike holsters as a trophy, that Lurd Pesco would reward him richly with whisky.

The cow-puncher was squatting beside his fire, cleaning the frying pan with sand and a chunk of sod. Black Hawk smiled grimly and drew up his gun. The Phantom would never know what—

Brrang! A stab of flame burst from the hand with which the Desert Phantom was seemingly swabbing out his skillet.

At the same instant, a tiny geyser of sand blasted into the Indian's eyes, as a bullet spat into the very ignota clump which served as his ambush.

"Stand up, yuh danged Injun!" The Phantom was on his feet now, frying pan hurled aside and both hands filled with Colt .45s, from the

muzzle of one of which fumed a white rope of writhing smoke. "Yo're a purty clever stalker, ain't yuh? I been watchin' close an' jest spotted yuh a minute ago."

Trembling with rage and terror, the Indian struggled to his feet, gun dropping to the ground as he groped coppery hands to rub the biting sand out of his eyes.

In a trice, the young waddy had bounded to the Indian's side, ice-blue eyes blazing. With one boot toe, he kicked the Indian's gun into the brush. A Colt muzzle jabbed Black Hawk in the ribs.

"Danged near got me, at that!" the white man panted, as the Indian unsteadily lifted his arms. Streams of water dribbled from the Apache's sand-scoured eyeballs. "Reckon yuh been sneakin' across this flat all afternoon, huh?"

His first panic over, Black Hawk commenced breathing again. He knew that the Phantom had spared his life deliberately. The bullet which had so nearly blinded him might as easily have splattered his brains out on the sands.

"I suppose Lurd Pesco sent you here," the Phantom continued. "Where is he, Black Hawk? I'm honin' fer a show-down with the skunk. I aim tuh git him tuh that courthouse in Stirrup City by tomorrow noon, if I have to bring him in chunks."

Black Hawk lowered one arm, to fumble under the waistband of his tattered, grimy overalls. His fingers produced a small fragment of folded paper which had once been a coffeetin label.

Holstering one cedar-stocked gun, the Phantom unfolded the paper, while he kept the Indian under control with the opposite .45. He could take no chances with the desperate Indian.

The Phantom's eyes narrowed as he read the penciled scrawl:

DESERT PHANTOM: I reckon you win. I'm ready to talk business with you if you give me your word I won't get dry-gulched. Tell the Injun where I can meet you. I think I got a proposition that'll interest the both of us. LURD PESCO.

"Boss, he want um answer," mumbled the Apache uneasily.

But the Phantom's bronzed face twisted in a sneer.

"The idea was for you to croak me if you could, huh?" he grunted. "An' if you couldn't, Pesco wants to talk medicine with me, huh? That the idea? Well, Black Hawk, you go back to yore skunk of a boss an' tell him that the Desert Phantom pledges his word o' honor there won't be no dry-gulching, an' for him tuh meet me at the ol' prospector's cabin near Knife-gash Pass at about moonrise to-night—alone, savvy?"

CHAPTER II.

ENEMIES MEET.

LURD PESCO'S face went ashen as he crouched within the dark canyon where he had lain hidden all day. He was watching the approach of his Indian henchman—Black Hawk, the Apache.

The Indian was astride his mangy buckskin pony, and from the dejected slump of his shoulders, the treacherous coroner of Concha County knew that Black Hawk was returning in defeat. No white sombrero or steer-horn holsters hung from Black Hawk's belt.

"That means the Phantom wants tuh talk business with me," muttered the coroner, running a big hand through his bush of cinnamon-colored beard. "Waal, I'm ready fer 'im."

The coroner plainly showed that

he had been struggling through four weeks of desperate fear. His gooseberry-green eyes were gaunt and haggard marbles in sockets which looked as dark and sunken as a skull's, under the bushy brows. Under the battered, sweat-stained black sombrero, Pesco's head was as bald as a knob of rock, and laced with pinkish scars.

In the gathering gloom, Pesco was almost invisible. He was dressed in black shirt, black chaps, black boots. Even the grips of his pair of heavy six-guns were black, as were the half-breed holsters, mounted on swivels.

Pesco was a gunman and a killer. For years, he had pursued his life of crime along both sides of the border. But Pesco had changed his name a dozen times, and had grown a mop of cinnamon-colored whiskers which covered his mouth—a conspicuous mouth, for it drooped at one corner from an ancient wound caused by a whisky bottle cutting his jaw.

The robbery of the Rainbow Flyer had been Lurd Pesco's biggest deal in crime. He had organized his gang carefully, considering each member for months before selecting him.

Lurd Pesco was crafty. He had built up three distant barricades against possible discovery. First, every member of his picked gang had been masked, so that they had not known their fellow bandits, nor did they know him. That prevented a member of the gang from squealing on him or blabbing too much when under the influence of liquor.

Secondly, he had plotted the scheme of laying the guilt at Lew Barry's feet. The fact that the sheriff had lived, to be tried and found guilty and sentenced to death, had only strengthened Pesco's margin of safety.

Pesco's third point of protection was the fact that he had buried the

gold which had comprised the loot from the train. To make doubly sure that he would not be caught, he had made a map of the hiding place of that gold, on a piece of doe-skin.

Most important of all, that map had been cut into six pieces, like a jig-saw puzzle—one piece for each outlaw. No one man could recover the cache without having the remaining five pieces of the chart.

On top of that, Pesco had earned a name as being a respected citizen in Stirrup City. He had been elected coroner of Concha County for several terms. Who would ever suspect him of engineering the greatest robbery Arizona had ever known?

But in the Phantom of the Desert, Pesco had met his match. He had seen his gang of six chosen desperadoes die, one by one, until now only he remained.

"Phantom, he say you meet um come moonrise," grunted Black Hawk, after he had slid from his panting cayuse and had babbled out the story of his unsuccessful stalking on the floor of the desert. "He be at old cabin, Knife-gash Pass. No dry-gulch um."

Pesco's face was as dark as a thundercloud, as he threw a saddle on Thunder, his black saddler. He climbed aboard and shook his head as he saw Black Hawk, rifle in hand, mount his barebacked pony.

"No, I can handle him alone. 'Black Hawk,'" snarled the leader of the outlaws. "He'd git leery ifn he saw us tergether. I got a scheme that'll put Mr. Phantom whar he belongs. We'll be diggin' up that gold ter-morra, Black Hawk!"

Black Hawk nodded as Pesco vanished into the gloom of dusk. Now was his chance to tank up on Pesco's supply of whisky. He had

confidence that his boss would not fail as he had. The Phantom might be a tough hombre, but Lurd Pesco was tougher. If the Phantom was rock, Pesco was iron.

Thoughts surged through the outlaw's brain as he galloped across the floor of the desert, heading toward Knife-gash Pass. The horizon was glowing with silver, from the moon that was about to rise. The blue vault of the heavens was scattered with fresh stars.

There was only one reason why Pesco wanted to meet the Phantom, face to face. And that was that the Phantom of the Desert had in his possession, five pieces of that doe-skin treasure map which was the key to the gold cache in Catclaw Desert.

From every outlaw the Phantom had slain, he had taken one section of treasure chart. But Pesco held the sixth and vital piece of that jigsaw puzzle. And with it, he knew he would be able to talk business with the Phantom.

Two hours passed, to the clatter of the black's mile-eating hoofs. Once, Pesco paused, to test his two .45s. Then he pressed onward into the night.

"Hands up, Pesco!" Like a thunderbolt out of the night, the brisk command lashed the stillness. Pesco's horse shied, as the big outlaw threw up his hands.

Out of the murk of a mesquite-flanked draw to the right, came the figure of a horseman. Pesco's heart slammed as he recognized the Desert Phantom.

CHAPTER III.

MURDERER'S BARGAIN.

[JEST thought I wouldn't take any chances o' Black Hawk bein' with yuh, Pesco," came the Phantom's quiet voice, as the blue roan picked

its way through a hedge of chaparral, to stop a few feet from the outlaw's restless bronc. "We'll ride the rest o' the way tuh the cabin tergether."

Pesco's mouth twisted under the mat of cinnamon beard.

"So this is what I gits fer trustin' yore word, hey?" snarled the crook, his eyes fixed on the muzzles of the Desert Phantom's guns. "I didn't figure I was runnin' inter an ambush. You been playin' a pretty square hand against me, from the fust."

The Phantom smiled in the darkness. That was more than he could say for his double-crossing enemy.

The objective of his entire hunt had been to capture the leader of the gang which had framed Lew Barry. But he would never resort to treachery to accomplish that end. Besides, even if he dragged Pesco to Stirrup City now, how could he prove that the coroner had been responsible for the crime?

Pesco's word was better, in this case, than his. Pesco was a respected citizen. The Phantom was an unidentified masked man, with a ten-thousand-dollar reward on his head, at that.

"I'm huskin' my hoglegs, Pesco," the Phantom said, and Pesco heard the rasp of six-gun cylinders as they slid into the transparent holsters of Bearcat Barry. "But I'm keepin' my eye on yuh, every second. One false move, Pesco, an' you git the same dose yore gang got."

Pesco lowered his arms, and the two pointed their horses toward the break in the near-by ridges which indicated Knife-gash Pass. A white disk of moon was just sliding over the boulder-crested hogbacks as the two men rode in silence down a steep-pitched trail which led to the ancient cabin.

In the moonlight which washed through the tattered clouds of the horizon, the two could see the hut, looming gray and ghostly on a floor of aluminum-colored rock. Their horses' hoofs clattered emptily on the stone as they drew rein and swung from their saddles.

Both men were keyed to a high tension. Each watched the other's hands furtively, alert for a gunward motion. The Phantom knew that Pesco was biding his chance to throw a bullet at him from the rear. And Pesco knew only too well the amazing speed of the Phantom's nimble hands. He had no desire to be shot down in his tracks.

Still as silent as a pair of ghosts, the two made their way to the deserted cabin. The Phantom pulled a match from a pocket of his green shirt and struck it.

By its ruddy glare, the cowboy's clean-cut face stood out in sharp relief, the firm line of his mouth and jaw accentuated by the shadows. Where had Pesco seen that handsome, ruddy face before? It was familiar, yet he could not place it.

"Inside, Pesco," ordered the justice rider, cupping his hands to save the flickering match. "There's a chunk o' candle stickin' in a bottle on the table in there. We'll talk business after we gits settled."

Pesco hesitated, then entered the dark cabin. Although he knew that the Phantom had sworn to bring Pesco to justice, the evil coroner likewise knew that the young waddy would not take unfair advantage of him.

In fact, the Phantom could not afford to kill him just yet. His sole hope of saving Lew Barry from the gallows to-morrow depended upon bringing Pesco in alive—with evidence to prove his claims that Barry had been framed.

The Phantom lighted the bit of candle which projected from a wax-streamed bottle neck, on the rough table inside the cabin.

That done, the two men regarded each other hostilely in the candlelight. Outside, the soft moaning of the desert wind whispered eerily along the pole-raftered eaves. Pale shafts of moon-ray trickled through the roof like silver pencils.

"Have a seat, Pesco," grunted the Phantom, pulling cigarette papers and tobacco from his shirt pocket. Pesco shuddered as he saw that the Phantom had donned his beaded Indian vest—the vest with the white skull and crossbones figured on a black-beaded background.

Pesco drew up an old box to the table and produced a ragged cigar which he inserted, unlighted, between his fat lips. Across the table, the two men watched each other like wolves about to spring at each other's throats. Both men made sure their hands stayed well above the level of the table.

"I'll be brief, Pesco," said the Phantom, lighting his quirky from the candle and exhaling a little ring of smoke. "You framed Lew Barry, like the dirty black skunk you are. You know it, and I know it. And you've got the missing part of that map o' the gold in Catclaw Desert—an' I want that, too. But most of all, I want you to go to Stirrup City with me to-morrow and save Lew Barry from the gallows. I'll make it worth yore while."

Pesco sneered. His sharp teeth chewed the cold cigar which projected from his red beard.

"Put my own neck inside o' hangman's loop, eh?" he spat derisively. "What d'yuh take me fer, busky? A fool?"

The Phantom shrugged. His eyes seemed dreamy under half-closed

lids as he regarded Lurd Pesco through a haze of swimming tobacco smoke.

"You haven't a chance to win, Pesco," the youth returned. "I'm offering you ample reward. I'll strive to get leniency for you, from the court, if you give yourself up voluntarily. There's a lot of things I know about you that I won't mention. You'll get by with a prison sentence—and a chance to start life over again, when you get out. That's the best I can do for you."

Pesco's green eyes fastened themselves on the glowing end of the Phantom's cigarette. He shook his head disdainfully.

"I'll do *this*—an' yuh kin take it er leave it," he thundered. "You got somethin' I want—the five pieces o' treasure map. I've got somethin' you want—the power o' savin' Lew Barry from the gallows. Am I right?"

The Phantom nodded. Was Pesco about to make a murderer's bargain? The young justice rider shuddered.

"We'll compromise," whispered Pesco, leaning forward across the table so that his hot breath fanned the eddying smoke under the Desert Phantom's face. "I'll sign a written confession, citing evidence that'll establish Lew Barry's innocence beyond a shadow of a doubt. I'll expose the hull deal, from the time we trapped Lew Barry out thar whar we held up the train, through to now."

The Phantom's heart was pounding his ribs, but he made no sign of emotion, as he ground out his cigarette butt on the dusty boards of the table top.

"And your price?" The cowboy's brows lifted questioningly.

"What I said—them chunks o' treasure map." The words fell like the rasp of a saw, a harsh whisper

that made the flame shiver over the bubbling wax of the candle between them. "I'll take the treasure an' skip the country. You'll git the confession that'll free Lew Barry."

For a long minute, the Phantom appeared to consider. His keen blue eyes searched Pesco's shadow-lined face, sought to penetrate that hedge of cinnamon whiskers, determine what sort of treacherous smile flickered on the flabby lips which rolled the wet cigar between Pesco's teeth.

Then the Phantom stood up, the candlelight glinting off the rows of brass cartridges on his gun belts. The waddy's brown fists were planted on the edge of the table as he leaned forward, his eyes locked with Pesco's gaze in a glance that sought to ferret out the bandit chief's innermost thoughts.

The Phantom knew Pesco would disguise his handwriting, making the confession worthless. But his next words did not betray the fact that he was on to Pesco's game.

"We'll sleep on the deal," announced the justice rider through tight, thin lips. "I'll think it over."

Pesco relaxed. Inside his cunning brain, a plan flashed like an exploding skyrocket. Sleep on the deal, would he? Ha! Pesco smiled under his beard. If his plan worked, the Desert Phantom would not be awake to consider *any* deal, by sunup.

CHAPTER IV.

STABBED IN THE DARK.

THE two men stood up, hands hitching at gun belts. On either side of the room were bunks, on which were moldy straw mattresses incased in rotted ticking.

"I agrees," returned Pesco, "but I ain't honin' tuh sleep in the same cabin with an hombre as might salivate me."

The Phantom's blue eyes glowed. He unbuckled his twin gun belts with a swift motion and dropped them on the table, at the same time keeping his hand close to one cedar-butted gun. He was allowing Pesco no opportunity for a double cross.

"That's better, amigo," he said, a moment later, as Pesco's pair of big-butted irons joined the Phantom's on the table.

"Just to show you I mean business, I'll show you the five pieces o' treasure map I got off o' the five crooks I've kilt," went on the Phantom. "An' so I'll know that *you* mean what you say, I want to see yore moniker on a confession."

Pesco's eyes jutted from their sockets as he saw the Phantom count along the rows of brass-studded shells on one of his belts, then press five shiny cartridges from the leather loops.

With firm fingers, the young puncher twisted the leaden tips from the shells and drew forth from the hollow cavity five tiny squares of doeskin leather, tightly rolled—the pieces of treasure map which held the secret of the gold cache on Cat-claw Desert!

Pesco's big chest heaved under the black shirt as he saw the Phantom spread out the thin pieces of leather and fit them together. Traced on the doeskin were lines and figures and letters of brown—burned with a hot iron on the leather, the night Lurd Pesco and his robber gang had buried their loot.

"Fair enough!" grunted Pesco, seating himself and removing from a chaps pocket a folder which the Phantom recognized as the coroner's official receipt book. "When I gits through with this confession, there won't be no doubt as tuh Barry's innocence. All I asks is a day's git-away—an' they'll never catch me!"

With a stub of pencil, the double-crossing coroner of Concha County wrote for many minutes, using page after page of the book.

And while he waited, the Phantom of the Desert looked over the crook's shoulder, while the outlaw scribbled a complete confession of his crime—how he had planned and executed the robbery of the Rainbow Flyer, how he had killed Bearcat Barry and the other posse men, and pinned the blame of the crime on the innocent shoulders of Sheriff Lew Barry, and how the Desert Phantom had forced him at last to a show-down.

Last of all, the coroner attached his signature—a confession which, on the face of it, might save Lew Barry from the gallows. But Pesco was positive the confession would never be used on this side of eternity.

Laying the sheets down beside the five squares of doeskin, Lurd Pesco got to his feet and extended a heavy hand. The Phantom turned away, with a shrug of scorn.

"I ain't mittin' you, even if I agree tuh yore terms, Pesco," he returned shortly. "Come on out an' git yore soogans. I said we'd sleep on the deal afore I makes up my mind."

Together, the two enemies went outside to their horses. It was the work of only a few moments to unsaddle, hobble their mounts, untie their bed rolls from behind saddle cantles, and return to the cabin.

"Any choice o' bunks?" inquired Pesco, as they unstrapped their blankets. "An' remember—we're leavin' them treasure maps, an' my confession, an' all four o' them guns on the table."

The Desert Phantom nodded. He spread out his blankets on the bunk nearest him. Taking his cue, Pesco crossed the room to the opposite bunk, and began preparing his own bed on the rotten straw mattress.

"I think we've fixed everything satisfactory tuh the both of us," Pesco went on, unstrapping his black chaps and tugging at his high-heeled boots. "We both git what we want."

The candlelight gleamed off his bald head, then sputtered and went out. The two men were tense for a moment, and then the crackling of straw mattresses indicated that neither man had attempted to dive for the table and seize a gun. Spurs chimed and chaps leather creaked as the men undressed.

Moonbeams filtered through a slot in the roof, to fall like a shaft of a spotlight on the table in the center of the room. Rays of soft light glistened on brass cartridges, on shiny back straps of Colt butts. The white paper on which was recorded the vivid details of the most ghastly crime in Arizona's wild history, gleamed beside the pile of dark objects which were the key to a vast buried treasure.

As he crawled into his blankets, the brain of Lurd Pesco was racing, although he soon began to snore—snores calculated to fool the Phantom, who lay across the room. But inside Pesco's wicked mind, there stewed and bubbled a plan which he determined to put into action before this night was over.

Hours dragged by, while the moon climbed higher in the vault of the sky, and the measured breathing of the Phantom of the Desert joined the snores of the wide-awake Pesco.

Clutched in the coroner's sweating palm was the haft of a steel-bladed bowie knife—a knife which he kept in a sheath inside his boot. It had been Pesco's idea, their disarming before this amazing night in the cabin had begun. That was why he had been so eager to agree to the Phantom's plans, for the Phantom

did not know about that razor-edged knife in Pesco's boot. It was the coroner's hole card.

Occasionally, Pesco heard the straw mattress across the room rattle like dry paper, as the Phantom stirred. But from the waddy's breathing, Pesco was positive he was asleep.

Cautiously, bracing his body against the pole supports of the bunk so that the straw would not betray his released weight too loudly, Pesco swung out a socked foot, until it rested on the hard dirt floor of the room.

Then, taking long minutes for every motion, the evil coroner slid silently from his blankets, the while his snoring continued with uninterrupted regularity.

Sweat washed the coroner's face and seeped into his beard, as he crawled away from the side of the bunk, moving with tireless caution, dodging the stray wisps of moonlight which lanced through the ruined roof.

Now the bandit was a scant five feet from the Phantom's bunk. His gooseberry eyes, pupils widened in the darkness, could see the Phantom's guns, still reposing in their glasslike holsters, there on the table.

Breath whistled like escaping steam across Pesco's teeth, as he wiped his sweating palms on his shirt and clutched the grip of his bowie anew. In the darkness, his black garb rendered him invisible.

The straw mattress on the Phantom's bed rustled from the measured rise and fall of the justice rider's chest. There was no interruption in the soft breathing. Now was the time to strike.

Leaping like a cougar, the coroner sprang to the edge of the Desert Phantom's bunk. Moonlight made an arc of white light under the de-

scending point of the coroner's knife, as he stabbed through the blankets with all his strength.

The Phantom's gurgling moan rasped the coroner's ears as he withdrew the Bowie and plunged it hilt-deep again. Then he sprang back, panting wildly in the darkness.

The Desert Phantom's measured breathing was stilled!

Panic seemed to flood Pesco's soul. The nerve-sapping tension of hours of waiting, watching, listening, was over.

With a hoarse cry, the coroner of Concha County leaped forward, to scoop together the five precious fragments of deskin treasure map, and tuck them into a shirt pocket.

Moving with frantic haste, the outlaw climbed into his chaps, pulled on his boots and strapped his gun belts about his thick waist. He felt as if he was trapped in a haunted tomb. Even to a man of Pesco's callous soul, the stabbing of a man while he slept was enough to turn his veins to ice. He could not waste a moment in getting out of the cabin.

A wild laugh tumbled through Pesco's beard as he scooped up the receipt book which recorded his signed confession. A match snapped, glowed in the darkness. Soon the confession was reduced to a heap of ashes.

Sobbing with joy, the outlaw rushed outside, snatched up his saddle, hurled it on the back of his black gelding. The gold chart was in his possession! The six members of his gang were gone! None to share the loot with, none to possibly break down and squeal, years later, to ensnare him with the law!

He cinched down the saddle, mounted, and fled into the murk. It was nearly midnight. A sudden thought coursed through Pesco's

mind. While he would be digging up the gold cache on Catclaw Desert, Lew Barry would be hanging for the crime—when the courthouse clock tolled twelve noon, in Stirrup City!

CHAPTER V.

EXECUTION DAY.

LONG after the hoofbeats of Lurd Pesco's galloping horse had died away on the desert air, the lonely little cabin near Knife-gash Pass was silent.

Moonbeams still slid through holes in the warped, weather-beaten roof. The sweet night breeze still muttered under the mossy pole-raftered eaves. From some far-off ridge, a coyote bayed at the sinking moon.

Then the harsh scrape of a belt buckle on wood grated the silence, and a milky cloud of white dust blossomed in the patch of moonlight under the Desert Phantom's bunk.

A pair of brown-knuckled hands emerged from under the bunk, to be followed by a shock of crisp black hair and a pair of sturdy shoulders clad in a bright-green shirt.

"If I don't git rheumatism from lyin' so long under that darned bunk, I'm a frog-eyed leppy!" chuckled the Phantom of the Desert, as he crawled out and got to his feet, stretching his aching limbs wearily.

His scheme had worked! When the light from the stubby candle had gone out, the Phantom had proceeded to pull off his chaps and boots, even as Pesco had done. But the Phantom had gone one step further.

Under cover of the darkness, before Pesco's eyes could get accustomed to the blackness, the Phantom had rolled one of his blankets

into a shape roughly resembling a human figure. The addition of his batwing chaps and boots had made the dummy even more convincing. Then he had crawled under the bunk, where he could provide the proper sound effects.

It was an old ruse, but it had saved more than one life. The fact that Pesco had a weapon did not surprise the Phantom in the least. The only damage the knife had done was to puncture his blanket in several places.

Moving quickly, the young justice rider buckled on his chocolate-colored chaps and donned the boots with their star-roweled spurs. He noted, with a breath of relief, that his cedar-butted guns still lay on the table.

After all, if Pesco returned to his daily life in Stirrup City—which he no doubt planned to do—the possession of such distinctive and well-known guns as those of the noted Bearcat Barry, also owned by the equally famous Phantom of the Desert, would have required embarrassing explanations.

Strapping the transparent horn holsters tightly about his hips, the Phantom investigated the table top. The treasure maps which he had collected with such risk of life and limb were gone. But, strange to say, the young rider did not seem worried by this loss. In fact, he had intended that Pesco should recover the treasure maps!

Instead of showing dismay, he rummaged in a crescent-shaped pocket of his shirt and drew forth a sheet of paper. Drawn on the paper was an exact duplicate of the five pieces of map he had collected.

While the actual location of the loot cache was on that portion of the map which Pesco owned, the other five pieces of the map had

given the Phantom his general bearings, so that he knew within a radius of a square mile, the actual hiding place of the Rainbow Flyer loot.

His mouth twisted in a grim smile as he saw the little pile of ashes which represented the remains of Pesco's confession.

"I don't think that would 'a' held in court, anyways," the Desert Phantom chuckled, as he hurried out of the cabin and picked up his saddle. In the moonlight, his prize roan Blue Blazes, nickered joyfully. "But my plans are workin' out fine, at that."

The Phantom's heart was happier than it had been for many a day, as he adjusted Blue Blazes's quilted blanket and settled his saddle into place. The horse wheeled as he tightened the cinch, gripped mane and saddle horn and swung into the saddle.

His spur rowels rolled lightly across the blue roan's flanks, as he headed the animal toward the horizon break of the pass.

The transcontinental railroad line from California ran through Knife-gash Pass. Only a few miles from there—at the mouth of Bullet-hole Tunnel—the train robbery had occurred, which had started this whole amazing adventure, weeks before. The Phantom had had a very definite motive in mind when he had named Knife-gash Pass for his meeting place with Pesco.

The railroad described the shortest, most level course to Stirrup City, and that was where the Phantom of the Desert was riding, as he left the deserted cabin behind him. The short cut would save him the grueling ride over the saguaro-dotted expanse of Catclaw Desert.

And minutes counted, now. He had lots to do and many miles to ride, in the next twelve hours.

Twelve hours! That was execution day! This was the thirtieth day since that thrilling moment when Judge Spaulding had granted Lew Barry a month's postponement of sentence!

CHAPTER VI.

NIGHT RAIDER.

DES SPAULDING, judge of the Concha County court, climbed the steps of Stirrup City's most respectable dwelling house and stamped the dust of the wheel-rutted street from his boots. At the dance hall next door, the merrymaking was in full swing.

He did not know why his footsteps had led him to the home of Mert Kimzey, cashier of the Silver Moon Bank, at this absurd hour of the morning. Possibly it was because he knew he could not sleep on the eve of Lew Barry's execution; and he also knew that Kimzey's regular weekly poker session would be in progress.

It was Spaulding who had presided at Barry's trial, earlier in the summer. It was Spaulding who had granted the plea of the Phantom of the Desert, when the mysterious masked rider had stunned the jammed courtroom by leaping through a window near the jury box, to declare that Barry had been framed.

The door of Kimzey's home opened in response to the old judge's knock. It was Kimzey himself.

The poker game was breaking up; Spaulding could see that, by the fact that the men were standing, and the disorder of chips and burned matches and scattered cards on the table.

He knew all the men. There was El Grunbock, the deputy sheriff who had succeeded Lew Barry as chief lawman of Stirrup. And there was

Max Stanley, who had been the foreman of the jury that had recommended hanging for the old sheriff.

"Boys couldn't git playin' to-night, judge," Kimzey remarked, after greetings had been exchanged. "Guess we're all too closely connected with the hangin' that's about to occur. It was my bank that lost the gold shipment in the Rainbow Flyer; it was Max who pronounced the verdict of the jury against old Lew; an' El Grunbock, here, has stepped into the sheriff's shoes. Lurd Pesco, the coroner, was our fourth man, but he didn't show up to-night. He's away from town on business. So all in all, our poker party didn't get going."

Spaulding nodded and ran long white fingers through his crop of silver hair.

"I just came from the jail house," the judge whispered. "Poor ol' Lew—he's going to take his medicine like a real man. He says the end won't be quite so hard, knowing his kid Bearcat is sleeping up there in the cemetery beside his mother, instead of being in Boot Hill with the murderers and drunks."

Grunbock nodded. He was putting on a peaked Stetson, getting ready to leave. It was he who had the old sheriff in custody. The job of leading him to the scaffold, in a few short hours, was not going to be a pleasant one.

"He's got the Phantom o' the Desert to thank for that," the deputy muttered. "I wonder whatever became o' the Phantom."

There was a moment's silence. Stirrup City had never glimpsed the Phantom since the day of the trial. But they knew he had visited the town—for the hats of the crooks he had slain were hanging from the spread of deer antlers on the courthouse. That dead man's hatrack

was talked about throughout the State.

"I was—in hopes he'd make good in the thirty days you give him, Des," remarked Max Stanley. "Even though I can't help but believe, on the face o' the evidence presented the court, that ol' Lew was guilty o' that crime—jest the same, I hate like the dickens tuh see the ol' codger hang."

"That ten-thousand-dollar reward scared off the Phantom," mused Grunbock. "It made a crook out of him, sort of. Looks like you an' Pesco won't ever have to fork up the five thousand apiece, Kimzey. An' pore ol' Barry'll swing without ever knowin' who this Phantom hombre was."

Kimzey matched his finger tips above his vest and shook his head slowly. "I imagine the Desert Phantom, as that young fellow called himself, was some friend of young Bearcat's," said the old banker. "Or maybe he was the one who actually got the gold, and just hated to see old Lew swing for it."

Deputy Grunbock hitched up his belt and turned to leave. Judge Spaulding and Stanley moved toward the door, following him.

"Almost two o'clock," said the deputy, tugging at his hat brim. "Maybe the rest of you fellers won't have to witness ol' Barry's hangin', but I do. *Buenas noches!*"

Grunbock threw open the door and took one stride over the threshold. Then he stopped in his tracks, and he backed into the room, arms crawling ceilingward.

Standing in the dark hallway leading to the front door of Kimzey's home, stood the Desert Phantom, guns leveled!

"Hands up, men!" came the low, crisp voice of the masked hombre, as he stepped quickly inside. "There

ain't no need for any monkey business. I won't harm yuh. But I got to take all of you gents on a little trip to-night, so the best way is just to come peaceable."

Hands sprouted above heads, and the four men inside the room moved back, as the Desert Phantom planted his back to the closed door and regarded them coolly from behind his red bandanna mask.

The Phantom was dressed as they had seen him last—pearl-white Stetson, beaded Indian vest, green-and-yellow shirt, chocolate-brown chaps over kangaroo boots with silver-mounted spurs. Both hands held cedar-butted .45s which swayed like serpents' heads, covering them.

The air was sawed by the raspy breathing of the four astonished men, as the Phantom stepped quickly from man to man. He removed Deputy Grunbock's single .44-caliber gun from its holster and laid the weapon on the poker table. Spaulding and Kimzey were unarmed. Max Stanley surrendered a six-gun.

The Phantom paused, regarding the quartet dubiously.

"We're goin' outside tuh yore barn, Kimzey," he said. "We'll saddle up an' ride into Catclaw Desert. I hadn't figgered on so many, but yuh've seen me now, so it can't be helped. An' I swear none of yuh'll be harmed. Yo're just goin' tuh witness the man who robbed the Rainbow Flyer—doin' actions that'll prove Lew Barry's innocent!"

Grunbock found his tongue in a burst of profanity. "Fine talk tuh be comin' from a hombre that's got a ten-thousand-buck reward on his topknot!" he grated. "I'll git you fer this, busky!"

"It remains to be seen whether or not that reward is a misplaced one," the justice rider rejoined calmly. "I

warn you, gentlemen, tuh attempt no break. I've worked desperately hard tuh bring this tuh be, long before this, but I ain't succeeded so far. Barry hangs to-day—unless you fellers coöperate with me, an' move fast."

The Desert Phantom's left-hand gun jerked toward the door. Obeying the masked man's motion, the four men turned and silently filed out of the room into the kitchen, heading for the back door of the building.

On what mad adventure was this amazing Phantom taking them? What was his purpose? Why did he mask?

CHAPTER VII.

THE BURIED LOOT.

THE morning sun was just painting the eastern rim of the desert with gold when Lurd Pesco and his Apache Indian guide, Black Hawk, reached the summit of the backbone of naked rock which twisted its way across the desolate flat surface of Catclaw Desert.

It was from this point that the outlaw wished to get his bearings and establish in mind the various landmarks contained on the doeskin map which would lead him to a vast treasure.

The very desolation of Catclaw Desert had been Pesco's original reason for burying the loot of the Rainbow Flyer beneath its parched sands. He was positive no wandering gold-grubber or footloose waddy would stumble on the cache, in case a summer sand storm should uncover it.

The two men dismounted, hiding their horses in a dense tangle of yucca cactus. Having settled the Phantom's fate to his own satisfaction and immense relief, still the coroner was determined to take no

chances, with triumph almost in his grasp.

"As I rec'lect it, we stashed the gold near a canyon that was close to a rock butte shaped like a pyramid," said Pesco, unbuttoning a pocket of his black chaps and carefully removing the five pieces of doeskin which he had obtained in the cabin the night before. "Soon as we find them landmarks, we kin start searchin' in earnest."

Black Hawk, clad only in moccasins, grimy blue overalls, and a black eagle's feather stuck in his filthy hair, stood like a statue while the red-bearded outlaw spread the five pieces of leather out on a flat rock, carefully fitting them in their proper order.

Then, with a jackknife, the bandit chief slit a seam on his high-heeled ranchman's boots and ran a black-nailed finger between the layers of leather. A moment later, he drew from its hiding place the sixth square of doeskin leather—which would complete the treasure map and show the actual hiding place of the Rainbow Flyer gold cache.

Pesco's savage heart pumped wildly as he fitted the last piece of the map into the corner of the leather squares. It was the piece in which he had thumbed a .45 bullet, on the spot which represented the hiding place of buried treasure. For the first time since the train robbers had assembled, that pitch-black night after the robbery, the map was complete again.

An inhuman chuckle grated through Pesco's lips as he glanced out over the tumbled landscape before him, which glowed golden and crimson under the dawning sun. His gooseberry eyes squinted as he sought to locate a landmark which was burned with a hot iron upon that doeskin treasure chart

And then those sharp-sighted eyes picked up the landmark he sought—a pyramid-shaped pile of red, wind-scoured rock far to the north, which formed the most prominent landmark on his treasure map.

"We'll ride straight tuh that peak, Black Hawk," decided Pesco, as he gathered up his maps and returned them to his pocket. "We ought to make it in a hour, 'fore it gits too hot."

Black Hawk shrugged and vanished in the cactus grove. A minute later, he returned with the horses, and both mounted.

To Black Hawk, the finding of the gold cache meant only that he would be allowed to guzzle liquor for weeks, back in Stirrup City. But to Lurd Pesco, possession of the gold meant the climax of months of careful planning, besides the physical danger he had endured since the Desert Phantom had come upon the scene.

Pesco chuckled as he recalled how cleverly he had brought about the Phantom's doom. The signed confession had turned the trick, had brought the Phantom into the open.

As soon as he had returned to his camp, he had found Black Hawk half drunk beside the camp fire, but the Indian soon rode off his jag.

With the end of his long trail of crime so close, an uncontrollable restlessness surged through Pesco's frame. Soon the black horse's sides were dripping crimson, where his sharp rowels jabbed through the glossy coat. A shot-loaded quirt hung by thongs from Pesco's thick wrist, and he used it often, pushing the sturdy mount across the dunes and sinks and saguaro-dotted ridges of Catclaw Desert.

"Reckon I'll hang around Stirrup until they've fergotten all about Lew Barry's hangin', an' then at

next election, I won't run fer office," mused Pesco, when only a mile lay between the two horsemen and the pyramid of rock which marked his first destination. "Then I'll see the world, by gosh!"

The bleak malpais, shimmering hotly in the rays of the climbing sun, vanished before Pesco's musing eyes, and in its place he saw gorgeous apartments, suites on ocean liners, foreign cities, distant seas. The creak of saddle leather and the crack of his goading quirt melted into the tinkle of champagne glasses and the merry laughter of women, in cabarets and ballrooms of strange cities.

An hour he dreamed thus, and then his visions faded, and Pesco was drawing rein in the very shadow of the peak which he knew to be only a few hundred yards from the spot where, that moonlit night, he and his outlaw gang had buried the gold.

Again Pesco assembled his map, and this time the brown lines and marks and dots and letters took on a tangible meaning. He had made the map well. He had taken cross-bearings and established a dozen identifying landmarks, where two or three would have been sufficient. Pesco was taking no chances.

One could not afford to be careless, when burying a fortune in a sand dune! After all, a miscalculation of a few feet in some angle might lose the treasure forever.

"We'll leave our hosses in this chaparral, Black Hawk," croaked Pesco hoarsely, as he dragged a heavy silver watch from his shirt pocket. "Nine o'clock! Inside o' half a hour, we'll be puttin' our mitts on more gold than you ever seen before in one lump, Black Hawk. An' jest three hours more, an' ol' Lew Barry'll be stretchin' hemp—fer a job I pulled! Ha!"

But it was more than a half hour's

work. As he sighted landmarks and made calculations, Pesco came nearer and nearer to the actual site of the cache. But it took time, and time passed agonizingly slow when one's goal was so near at hand.

But one by one, the big outlaw checked off points on his treasure chart, gradually limiting the amount of space surrounding the place where the gang had buried the gold.

He was glad now that he had taken such pains in making the chart, for winds had shifted sand dunes and covered bushes. And the desert, in glaring daylight, bore no resemblance to the spot they had visited at night.

The ghosts of his sextet of bandits followed Pesco, as he entered the little draw which, at last, he recognized as the place where the loot of the Rainbow Flyer lay buried.

There was "Bat" Sturvey, the double-crossing train guard who had delivered the gold into crooked hands. And there was "Bronc" Sully, of the Wineglass cow spread, dead by the Phantom's hand.

The shade of Pedro Lagarto, the notorious Mexican killer, stalked side by side with Mike Tehan, the crooked prospector. And the ghost of Lurd's brother, Moon, whose corpse was even now stiffening in the shadow of Bad Luck Butte, was probably there, following Lurd Pesco as the red-whiskered bandit chief staggered down the slope of a long, curving sand dune, babbling like a baby in his fiendish joy.

"It's thar, Black Hawk! It's thar, it's thar, I tell yuh!" Pesco's voice was a high-pitched scream, waving the cinnamon-colored beard under his crooked, broken nose. "Not ten feet from the rim rock, by that barrel cactus. Dig, yuh danged Injun! We're hyar at last!"

Dropping on his knees, the Indian plunged copper-skinned arms into the hot sand. Pesco fell beside him, clawing like a great dog, scooping up sand with the crown of his sombrero.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Six of us cracked the Rainbow Flyer fer this, an' I'm the only one left tuh claim it!" yelled Pesco, as he and the Apache worked with frantic haste, ignoring the boiling sunlight. "Only one left! Ha-ha-ha! The Phantom! Ha! The salty young hombre thought he'd croak the six o' us—an' all the time he was only doin' me a favor! Haw!"

The big outlaw was going insane in his greed, as the hole sank deeper and deeper. Sweat glistened like droplets of wax on the crook's bald, pink-scarred head. He unbuckled his heavy gun belts and hurled them aside, so that he might work faster.

Suddenly the outlaw's clawing fingers encountered a strip of gunny sacking. The coroner planted his chapped legs far apart and tugged with all his brute power on the tough burlap, while Black Hawk clawed like a demon to rid the sack of its confining sand.

Then the outlaw staggered back, the sack coming free in his grasp. Pesco sprawled on his back, then leaped to his feet, his jackknife open and slashing at the bag as he dropped to his knees, a squalling laugh tumbling through his cinnamon-colored beard.

"Look hyar, Black Hawk! Feast yore eyes on this, will yuh?"

So saying, the leader of the dead train-robber gang plunged a hairy, sweat-greased arm into the slit he had torn in the sack. And when he drew forth his hand, it was to lift a leather sack which was stuffed with the familiar outlines of gold coins. The loot of the Rainbow Flyer!

Sweat drooled from the outlaw's red beard and dripped down on his flying hands as he fumbled to open the sack. Black Hawk stood by, his naked chest heaving.

And then suddenly the two men seemed to turn into wax statues. Pesco's trembling fingers stopped even as they slid into the leather poke and closed on a gold piece.

Falling down like a blot of doom across the sand between them was the motionless shadow of a sombreroed man!

Pesco's green eyes crawled, seeming to push his head slowly about on his bullish neck as he half rose, hands clutching the money bag. An icicle slid down Pesco's spine. Then the hairs of his cinnamon beard were drawn inward with the suction of his gasp, and the bag of gold fell from nerveless fingers, to thud on the sand at his feet.

Pesco and Black Hawk were peering up into the round black bores of two .45 six-guns, held by a tall young waddy whose face was covered by a red bandanna mask!

The Desert Phantom!

Pesco swayed on his feet, one hand going up to rub his eyes, as if to erase the appalling vision. And then his mouth dropped open, as he beheld a new sight.

If he lived to be ten thousand, he never expected to take such a jolting shock again. For the Phantom, standing up there on the curving rim of the little basin in which the gold cache had been, was not alone.

The heads and shoulders of four grim-faced men were exposed above the heavy growth of dwarf mesquite and stunted paloverde—four men from Stirrup City. Des Spaulding, the judge. Max Stanley, the jury foreman. El Grunbock, the deputy sheriff. And Mert Kimzey, cashier of the looted Silver Moon bank.

A moan of despair filtered through Pesco's beard. He swayed, darkness tumbling before his eyes. Then blackness came, and he pitched forward on his face.

CHAPTER VIII.

INDIAN STRATEGY.

BLACK HAWK'S swarthy arms lifted slowly above the single feather which stuck forth from his coarse black hair. His beady eyes followed the Desert Phantom as the young waddy wedged his spike heels into the shelf of white sand sloping into the basin, and slid to a stop above Lurd Pesco's body.

"Grunbock, handcuff the Injun!" snapped the masked rider, as he squatted beside Lurd Pesco and turned the big outlaw over with the barrel of one six-gun. "Overwork an' possible sunstroke have taken care o' Pesco for the time bein'."

Grunbock wedged his way out of the chaparral and leaped down into the basin. A pair of shiny handcuffs flashed in the morning light, and in a trice, the Indian was manacled, his dusky Apache face a livid mask of hate.

"I just hope Pesco hasn't had a stroke that'll kill him," chattered old Des Spaulding, sliding into the basin with Stanley and the banker at his heels. "To think of the injustice we have done poor old Lew Barry! Even if Pesco never comes to, his confession which we overheard will keep Lew from swinging!"

The Phantom holstered his guns and dragged Pesco's body into the shadow of the barrel cactus near the cache hole.

"It's ten thirty," he panted, as old Mert Kimzey and Max Stanley darted for the gold sack. "It's goin' tuh take some fast ridin' tuh git tuh Stirrup in time to save Barry."

Deputy Sheriff Grunbock crowded the Indian back against the rock wall, where Black Hawk stood panting, sullen and quivering with rage. Kimzey was counting gold bags in the ruptured gunny sack, his lips babbling off numbers.

"While Kimzey's countin' his money, you go an' bring our hosses where we hid 'em, Stanley," ordered the Phantom briskly. "Looks like Pesco's wakin' up. I want you to listen to anything he might have to say, Spaulding."

It was true. Pesco had turned over and was pulling himself into a sitting position. Sand was cascading out of his cinnamon beard, and clung like white frosting to his sweat-sopped head.

The Phantom's twin guns were out again. Max Stanley was climbing the sand dune, heading for the place where they had stashed their five horses.

The Phantom had copied the five sections of treasure map accurately while they had been in his possession. For that reason, he had been able to lead the four citizens whom he had kidnaped from Stirrup City, close to the hiding place of the Rainbow Flyer gold, before sunup.

From a safe vantage point near by, the five had seen Pesco and the Indian ride across the desert. Then it was that the prisoners had ceased raging at the Phantom's actions, and had begun to reconcile themselves to their kidnaping. After all, perhaps the young waddy's intentions were good.

Not once, since they had left Mert Kimzey's home in Stirrup City, had the cool young Phantom removed the mask which kept his identity a secret. That, he had promised, would come later.

While Pesco and the Indian had been slaving to locate and dig up the

cache, the Phantom had led his four unarmed prisoners to an ambush whereby they might actually witness the recovery of the stolen loot. Such had been the Phantom's clever motive in allowing Pesco to get possession of the treasure maps; for from what the four men gathered from Pesco's triumphant cries, all doubt as to Lew Barry's guilt had been wiped clean.

But the most important matter of all still remained—getting to Stirrup City in time to stop the scheduled execution. Even now, crowds from all over Concha County were probably assembling at the courthouse, to witness Barry's hanging.

"I reckon yore deer-horn hatrack will be filled tuh the sixth an' last prong now," chuckled El Grunbock, picking up Pesco's sweat-stained sombrero. "Six hats—six crooks! Well, that's what you promised tuh do, when yuh took up this job!"

Lurd Pesco struggled to rise, then fell back, panting heavily. His gooseberry eyes crawled like a serpent's, as his gaze lifted to meet the unwavering bore of the Phantom's six-gun, then strayed to the form of old Des Spaulding. Pesco shuddered under the judge's scathing glare.

Then the outlaw's gaze crossed that of Black Hawk, his Indian henchman. A look of quick understanding passed between the two. Pesco's gaze dropped to the gold bags which his gang had stolen from the Rainbow Flyer, and he sank back on the sand, his defiance crushed and broken.

"The cash is all here, Mr. Phantom!" cried Kimzey eagerly. "The count's correct, down to the last ba——"

"Bah!" The word cracked from the Phantom's mouth like the spat of a six-gun. "You sit there countin' yore danged gold, while the minutes

is passin' by that'll mean life or death tuh Lew Barry! I wish Stanley'd hurry up with them hoss——"

No one was prepared for what happened next. The events crowded so closely together, that time would be lost in the telling. But the Phantom of the Desert had not counted enough on the opposition he might expect from Black Hawk, the drunken sot of an Apache who was Pesco's right-hand man.

Pretending exhaustion, the Indian had slumped until his manacled hands were touching the hot white sand at his feet. By his side, Deputy Sheriff El Grunbock was hovering, eyes fixed upon the panting form of the coroner, across the sink.

Clutching up a double handful of sand, Black Hawk brought both his palms up in a vicious sweep. The full blast of hot, stinging sand caught El Grunbock in the face, filling his eyes and nostrils, to choke and blind him.

In the same movement, the Indian shot forward past Mert Kimzey's squatting form. His flying body dumped Judge Spaulding backward to the sand, and then Black Hawk's massive shoulders caught the whirling Phantom on the side.

Crash! The masked Phantom went down as he jerked his gun about to club the Indian's head.

But Pesco was not being idle. He gambled all on the few seconds of confusion his faithful Indian had created for him.

In a trice, the coroner was on his feet. He did not make the mistake of attempting to enter the fray and be cut down by a quick bullet from the Phantom's guns. Instead, he vaulted the rim of red rock which held the creeping sands away from the little basin, and started for the crest of the rimming dune.

Black Hawk's head ducked a

heavy blow of the Phantom's gun. The Indian's handcuffed fingers were closing upon the cedar butt of the justice rider's holstered gun, dragging it free. Fingers crawled through the trigger guard, and the Indian was pressing the long barrel against the Phantom's body.

Brrang! The Phantom's other six-gun exploded with a volley of white smoke, and the body of Black Hawk, the Apache scout, went spinning, his skull drilled by a bullet! But so fast had been the Indian's offense, that his steel-shackled hands held in their grasp the Phantom's second gun.

Black Hawk spun like a top and fell dead at the feet of the blind, helpless Grunbock. Spaulding and the Phantom got to their feet.

It had all happened in a dozen clock ticks, and even as the Phantom leaped forward, with six-gun crashing and slamming, he knew that his bullets had not struck the vanishing Pesco.

Screaming low in his throat, the Phantom vaulted past Mert Kimzey, the cashier, and topped the rise over which Pesco had fled.

His frantic gaze shot about the surrounding landscape, searching the plume of dust which clung to the sweltered air in Pesco's wake. But no sign of the fleeing outlaw did the Desert Phantom see. Lurd Pesco had made good his escape!

CHAPTER IX.

PURSUIT.

LURD PESCO plunged into the depths of the brush-choked *baranca* which offered the first hint of cover, his legs slogging across the salt-and-pepper sands like a sprinter on a cinder path. Black Hawk had paid with his life for the instant in which Pesco had made his break,

and the coroner did not intend that that sacrifice should be in vain.

Barbed foliage and brittle twigs tore the black shirt on Pesco's huge shoulders into ribbons, as he plunged on, now crawling on hands and knees, now wriggling on his stomach through heavy brush.

He could hear shouts, as the men behind him yelled and swore for their horses. But Pesco's keen gaze had observed one thing—the four men whom the Phantom had brought from that poker party in Stirrup City were unarmed.

Stumbling, hurling aside brush with his torn hands, the coroner of Concha County fought his way out of the *barranca* and scrambled to a standing position on a rim of blistering-hot, red rock.

He glanced about, foam slavering through his beard. No trace of the Phantom did he see, but he knew that the men, realizing that he was also unarmed, might be fanning out on horseback, to cut him off.

If he could once reach the chaparral where his black horse, Thunder, was hobbled, he would be safe. No horse in all Arizona could overtake Thunder, unless it be the horse of Bearcat Barry, the famous blue roan which the Phantom of the Desert now rode.

But, Pesco reflected, he still had the advantage. Thunder was rested; Blue Blazes had been traveling hard, probably.

Pesco sucked in a lungful of breath and staggered on, twisting his bald head on his thick neck at frequent intervals, to squint back across the heat-shimmering sands. He fled down a steep incline, his batwing chaps tearing through beds of soltol, protecting his flying legs from the brambles.

He staggered across a low sink, pounded up the following rise, and

fell flat on his face behind a clump of hackberry to regain his breath. A torpid rattlesnake slid out of his way, buzzing a sharp warning.

Pesco smiled between gasps. He, like that rattler, was fleeing for his life. Only he was a snake whose fangs had been extracted.

Suddenly the fugitive tensed, his gooseberry eyes, now red-shot and staring, fixed on a blur of movement, down in the basin he had just left.

The Phantom of the Desert! Pesco marveled at the tireless speed with which the young justice rider was traveling on his trail. Vaulting scrubby acacia growth, diving through hedges of yucca cactus which ripped beads from his buckskin vest, and left slots in the bandanna which masked his face, the Desert Phantom was following his trail as easily as a bloodhound might trace a skunk.

Glancing about him, Pesco saw that he was on the brink of an out-thrust crop of rock which formed one lip of a desert mesa. Ten feet below, a ledge made its way down to the lower levels of Catclaw Desert.

Pesco's eyes took in the layout. And within his alert brain there sprouted the seeds of an idea. His horse was still some distance away. The Phantom was fast closing in on him, and by now the other men had probably got their horses and would be trying to surround him. Why not ambush the Phantom, then, and obtain a gun?

Leaping to his feet, Pesco gave vent to a whoop of taunting derision. A chunk of heavy quartz was in his hand, and he hurled the rock with all his strength toward the Phantom, now toiling up the slope below.

As the rock crashed through a stalk of ocotillo and bounded harm-

lessly past him, the Desert Phantom looked up, his eyes blazing above his red mask. Like magic, the six-gun of Bearcat Barry snapped from its glasslike holster, and the hot desert air was rocked by the explosions of gunfire. Bullets buzzed like hornets, inches from the outlaw's head. Brush twitched under a leaden sleet.

With a parting whoop of defiance, Lurd Pesco turned and dived over the brink of the mesa.

He landed heavily on the ledge ten feet below. But he did not remain there long. Staggering along the trail for fifty feet, taking pains that his high-heeled boots should leave a plain track, Pesco suddenly turned, to face the low cliff.

With barb-slashed fingers, the outlaw seized the tangled roots of a mesquite. As a man climbs hand over hand up a rope, Pesco scaled the face of the low cliff.

An exploring boot toe found a resting place on a projecting knob of rock. Groping fingers clung to grass roots on the edge of the rim rock. Another moment, and Pesco's chap-clad legs had scrambled across the hem of grass, and he was worming his way into a dense growth of mesquite which grew on the edge of the tiny cliff. Crawling, he backtracked for a space.

Panting like a thrown steer, Lurd Pesco lay for many minutes, recovering his breath. His body ached from the exertion, his bald head was flaming under the red-hot Arizona sun.

Once again, Pesco tensed. The Phantom had just topped the rise, his body outlined on the sky line, not thirty feet away!

From where he lay, concealed in the thicket of mesquite, the outlaw could see the panting man inspecting the prints of Pesco's boots, there on the brink of the rim rock. At the same time, the Phantom was scan-

ning the far-flung expanse of desert waste land, seeking a glimpse of the man he pursued.

But then, Pesco might have disappeared in any one of a score of defiles, or hidden inside a shady *barranco*; possibly he had disappeared over the crest of one of a hundred near-by ridges.

The Phantom's desert-bred eyes detected the spot where his enemy had leaped from under the very threat of his bullets. Even as he glanced down on the ledge below, he saw where one of Pesco's spurs had broken and had fallen in the tracks of his boots. The marks of the coroner's big hands still indented the layer of dust which crusted the rock ledge below.

Holstering the smoking gun he still clutched, the Phantom slid down the short cliff and landed with a jangle of spurs.

Picking himself up, the young justice rider adjusted his white Stetson brim, settled his gun belts on his thighs and strode forward, eyes picking up Pesco's trail.

A few more feet, and his eyes would detect where the trail ended, where Pesco had climbed to a level above him. But Pesco, hidden in the chaparral above, was determined not to let the Phantom get that far, and thus be warned.

Crouched as tense as a steel spring, the mighty outlaw gathered himself for the leap, up in the tangled chaparral above the Phantom. No whistle of breath or crunch of heels on the sand betrayed the bandit's movement. Five feet—three feet—now the masked man was directly below him, eyes fixed on the trail, hand hovering over gun butt.

Crash! Like a ton of rocks, the heavy body of Lurd Pesco hurtled down out of the sky to land upon the Phantom's shoulders.

The Phantom's cry was pounded back into his mouth as he smashed down on the rocky ledge with an impact that exploded the air from his lungs.

Steel-muscled fingers tore at his throat as he rolled, arms fighting out from under Pesco's weight to get at his gun. A heavy fist crashed into his mouth, splattered his lips in a gush of crimson to soak the bandanna mask.

Through slitted eyes, he looked up through the screen of Pesco's sweat-sopping, rust-colored beard, and fought to keep the desperate coroner's brittle-nailed thumbs from closing his windpipe.

The Desert Phantom's final show-down had come at last!

CHAPTER X.

KNIFE AND KNUCKLE.

A WRESTLER'S twist, a half somersault, and the Phantom tore away, crimson smears across his neck where Pesco's nails had sliced away ribbons of skin.

But he had no opportunity to go for his gun. Charging with bald head lowered like a battering-ram, Pesco struck the dazed Phantom on the chest. Like a cow struck by an express train, the Desert Phantom doubled up and shot off the ledge, rolling like a bundle of clothes down the steep incline, with Pesco tumbling behind him like a boulder in an avalanche.

Bam! The Phantom's gun slid from its holster, struck a rock and bounded away, with sparks of sunlight glinting from its barrel. Then the Phantom and Pesco slid to a stop at the base of the long slope and struggled to their feet in a pall of thick dust.

Inhuman oaths squalled from Pesco's throat as the two men

squared off, equal now that the Phantom was disarmed.

Bam! The Phantom's terrific uppercut crashed against the pad of whiskers on Pesco's jaw, at the same instant that the younger man winced under a rib-smashing punch from the coroner's pistonlike fists.

Toe to toe they stood, hunter and hunted met in a last grim combat. Noses flattened and eyelids swelled as they twisted in a grapple, broke apart, met again with an exchange of pummeling fist work.

The Phantom staggered back before a flock of rocklike blows, fell, then dumped Pesco with coiling legs which seemed to snap the outlaw's backbone in a terrific scissors grip.

The Phantom's pounding drives crashed again and again against the coroner's jaw, but without effect as the cushion of cinnamon-colored whiskers absorbed the brunt of his punches. The coroner, in turn, was battering the Phantom's stomach and chest and neck and shoulders into a mass of bruises.

But sheer exhaustion drained the dynamite from their blows, and the two desperate men fell back, keeping their feet with difficulty, striving to control their swimming senses and keep from slipping into unconsciousness.

Pesco had the advantage of weight and sheer, man-killing, gorillalike strength. The Phantom counterbalanced his handicap with scientific boxing, swift footwork, dazzling speed.

And then Pesco was charging forward again, his bleared green eyes like a snake's, his black shirt clinging in tatters over his hair-matted chest. Threads of crimson trailed from crushed nostrils.

"Now I know who yuh are, Phantom!" screeched the outlaw, in a sudden flood of recognition. "Yuh

mangy skunk! Take off that mask, dang yuh! I remember who yuh are now, dang yuh! Yo're——"

Crash! The Phantom's straight-from-the-shoulder punch met the outlaw's charge, every ounce of a hundred and seventy-five pounds of bone and muscle behind the blow.

There was a pop of knuckle against cheek bone, and Pesco's head snapped back like a punching bag on a swivel.

Spinning backward, the coroner of Concha County somersaulted and stretched his length against the foot of the slope. He lay moaning, twisting, struggling to rise from the near knock-out.

It was the first moment of advantage that the Phantom had gained since the terrible fight had commenced, and now that victory lay within his grasp, he was too weak to follow it up.

Groaning, Lurd Pesco rolled over on his back, hands clutching at his neck which seemed to have been almost disjointed by the Phantom's savage blow. But as he did so, something happened which drove all thought of pain from the outlaw's mind.

Something hard was pressing against his backbone! He rolled over, a glad cry springing to his battered mouth. For that something was a blue-barreled Colt .45—the cedar-handled six-gun which had dropped from the Phantom's horn holster as the two had plunged down the slope!

Pesco bounded to his feet, with a yell, his hand groping around the butt of the heavy gun, horny thumb cocking the knurled hammer of the weapon.

The Phantom was striding forward, fists swinging. Pesco was standing spread-legged, still dazed by the masked man's blow. In a

second exchange of punches, the Phantom was confident of putting over the finishing knock-out.

Then suddenly the Desert Phantom's ruddy face paled under its bandanna mask, and his advance halted, not six feet from the towering Pesco.

"We'll see what's what now, dang yuh!" yelled the outlaw. "I didn't git yuh last night, but dang yuh, I'll salivate yuh good an' plenty now!"

The huge bandit's hand swung about in front of him, and sun rays glinted brightly off the muzzle of Bearcat Barry's six-gun!

The Phantom's heart sank as he saw the weapon explode with an ear-shattering blast of sound.

CHAPTER XI.

DEATH JUSTICE.

THE four men from Stirrup City reined up their horses on the mesa rim rock in time to see the finish of the most spectacular man-to-man struggle which had ever been staged under the blue sky of the great West.

They saw the spout of white smoke from Pesco's gun as he triggered it in rapid succession. And then saw the Phantom duck under the very whistle of Pesco's wild shots, to seize a rock at his feet.

And then, from their vantage point on the brink of the mesa wall, the men saw the masked Phantom hurl the heavy stone with all the strength his muscles could command.

Pop! There was a crack of stone against metal, and the fuming six-gun which Pesco strove vainly to hold steady in his palsied hands was knocked spinning into the sand.

The four witnesses leaped from their saddles, lowered themselves

over the short cliff, and staggered and slid their way down the slope toward the spot where the two men had grappled, to roll and twist, their boots roiling the dust, spurs gouging the brush. It was a fight to the death.

Locked in a grapple, the Phantom's steel-muscled arms gripping Pesco's straining arms, the two got to their feet, bodies swaying in a blind, savage struggle.

Pesco's face was transformed into a purple mask of hate. His blazing eyes bulged, as the two men toppled reeled, and crashed earthward again, tumbling over and over as they fought.

And then joints popped as the Phantom's last desperate surge of strength crushed Pesco's wrist as a steel vise would split a stick. Before the outlaw could separate from the clinch, the Phantom's knee was planted between his shoulder blades, and he held Pesco's thick head in the crook of one powerful elbow.

Roaring like a bull, Pesco writhed and struggled as he felt the Phantom twisting his head on his shoulders. His hot breath fanned the Phantom's face. Oaths pounded through his cinnamon-colored beard. His great hands clutched outward like the talons of a goshawk, his whole body paralyzed under the Phantom's neck-twisting hold.

And then there was a sharp crack, that caused the faces of the four men who slid to a stop before the fighters, to turn pale.

The great outlaw's straining body relaxed, fell from the Desert Phantom's iron-tight wrestling hold as might a hulk of raw beef.

And Spaulding and Grunbock and Stanley and Kimzey knew what that crack of snapping bone meant. They knew why Lurd Pesco's head lay twisted on his massive shoulders,

the cinnamon-colored beard gouging into the sand as his body lay on its side.

Lurd Pesco's neck was broken.

Stepping back from the outlaw's quivering bulk, the Phantom passed an unsteady hand over his eyes.

"Gosh! I thought he had yuh, Phantom!" Judge Des Spaulding's voice sounded as brittle as the croak of a broken horn. "What a fighter! Young fellow, you have killed a fiend to-day—saved the State the job of breaking his neck. Arizona owes you a debt of——"

The Phantom's eyes caused the magistrate to break off. They were pain-drenched and blackening, but they were staring past the four silent men, toward the spot where five horses lined the rim rock above. One of the five was Blue Blazes.

Disregarding the still, twisted form of Lurd Pesco, the young justice rider pulled from a pocket of his chocolate-colored chaps, a battered nickeled watch.

"Eleven o'clock!" he cried, staggering past the sober-faced quartet of men. "Can't you see? Can't you understand? Eleven o'clock! One hour till Lew Barry is scheduled to hang! One hour! An' we're a danged long hour's ride from Stirrup City! He's goin' tuh hang anyway before we can stop 'em! Hang fer what this skunk Pesco did!"

Four jaws dropped, as the men from Stirrup City realized the meaning of the Phantom's words. In the rush of action, they had forgotten Lew Barry and his terrible fate.

Was the long justice trail which had just ended, to result in galling defeat? Was Lew Barry to die when the courthouse clock tolled twelve—now less than an hour away?

Lifting his fingers under his frayed mask and placing them between his

teeth, the Desert Phantom whistled. And then the four astonished men saw the magnificent blue roan of Bearcat Barry arch its back, brace its forelegs, and plunge over the ten-foot cliff, and come sliding down the incline toward the Phantom.

"Quick—on behind me, Spaulding!" panted the Desert Phantom, as he hobbled forward to seize Blue Blazes by a curb ring. "If I manage tuh git tuh Stirrup in time, they'd just hang me, too, an' collect the reward on my scalp. Blue Blazes is the only hoss alive that could make it—if *he* can! I'll have to take you along, judge—to tell all yuh've seen this mornin'."

Trembling with excitement, the white-haired old judge allowed himself to be pulled astride the powerful blue roan, sitting on the saddle skirts back of the Phantom's cantle.

Then the spirited roan wheeled and galloped away, leaving three open-mouthed men standing over the corpse of the most desperate criminal Arizona had ever known—a criminal whose double life, in which his respectable citizenship acted as a shield to screen his dastardly crimes, made his death even more a blessing to society.

For a long, stupefied minute, the three citizens of Stirrup City stood gazing at the double-laden horse which was disappearing in the direction of the county seat, and then they cast off their spell, and fled back up the slope toward their own houses.

They had much to do: The gold must be transported to the vaults of the Silver Moon bank, nearly two months overdue; they must recover the outlaw's horses, that they might not starve in their hobbles; they must bury Black Hawk.

Pesco they disdained even to cover with rocks, so that the coyotes

would not disturb his corpse; the quicker they could get away from the gruesome body, the better. So the remains of Lurd Pesco were left alone to the flies and ants. High in the pewter-colored sky, a wheeling buzzard spotted the bald, gleaming head, the brush of cinnamon-colored beard, the staring, sand-filled eyes.

Soon other buzzards joined the first, and gradually the tightening circles lowered and lowered. Coyotes or snakes, outlaw or pilgrim—a buzzard is not choosy in its carrion.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PHANTOM UNMASKS.

SHERIFF LEW BARRY climbed the steep wooden steps of the gallows scaffold in Stirrup City. His head was covered by a cap of black cloth, under which dripped moisture that seeped down the leathern cheeks, through his sandy waterfall mustache and along his jaw.

The hands of the weather-faded old clock on the courthouse tower registered ten minutes to twelve noon. The fatal trap would be sprung at high noon. A deputy, acting in the unaccountable absence of the regular deputy, El Grunbock, was on hand to perform the gruesome task.

During the thirty days since his trial, Lew Barry had steeled himself for his fate. Actual death did not frighten him so much as the disgrace of dying by a hangman's rope.

Lew Barry, last of an old line of Barrys who had made history in England. Always honored, always revered! And now he was to die, branded a thief and a murderer by his fellow men!

Sobs shook the old lawman's shoulders, as he felt the dread hangman's knot being adjusted about his neck. The crowd was silent, too, for

many in that assembled multitude about the gallows had helped elect Lew Barry to the office he had held, year after year.

"I'll be on the—Great Range—with yuh, soon—Bearcat—son," whispered the old man, his wrists tensing under the handcuffs he wore.

But no one heard the prayer he breathed, or the sob which slipped through his mustache. He was determined to die bravely, like a man. Like a Barry.

Click! The black minute hand was crawling past the five-minute mark on the courthouse clock dial now.

The crowd was bareheaded to a man. A few old friends tried to call out a choked farewell, but failed.

Many eyes were moist that had not known tears for half a century. But the law must take its course. Lew Barry had been found guilty in a man's country where death is the penalty of crime.

Suddenly a drum of hoofbeats clattered out of the hot desert stillness. The heads of the assembled mob turned from the broken old man on the scaffold. Five hundred pairs of eyes glanced up at the brink of Sunset Bluff, which overlooked the ragged little frontier town.

There, rearing and wheeling against the desert sky line, a blue roan saddle horse was bearing the forms of two men, who were waving down to the mob which packed the courthouse square below!

"It's the Desert Phantom!"

"An' ain't that ol' Judge Spauldin' with him?"

"Pull that danged black cap offn Lew's head, deputy! Here comes the Phantom!"

"Wait'll we hear what the judge has tuh say!"

"Look at that blue roan travel, will yuh?"

Trembling hands tore the black cap from the old sheriff's tear-streaked face. Keys unlocked steel cuffs.

Into the faded old blue eyes of the lawman leaped a hope that had long been dead, as he saw the powerful blue roan that had belonged to his son, thundering down the single street of Stirrup City.

No one was thinking of reward money. Was not Judge Des Spaulding riding with the Phantom?

An aisle spread like magic through the jam of humanity about the scaffold, as the magnificent horse, dripping with sliding pads of lather and white with desert dust, crashed to a stop at the foot of the gallows amid a wild drumming of furious hoofbeats.

To the gallows platform leaped the Desert Phantom—a Phantom whose battered face was still covered by a dusty red bandanna, whose sombrero was missing, whose shirt was in rags and whose chaps on which the nicked letters "DEX" had baffled his watchers were brush-torn and smeared with crimson.

"Citizens of Concha County, hear me!" shouted the old judge, as the Phantom pulled Spaulding off Blue Blazes's back and lifted him to the platform beside Lew Barry. "Hear me, while I tell you the story of this masked Phantom—the story he told me as we rode to prevent a terrible injustice—to defeat death itself in the most amazing race ever enacted here on earth!

And while the tense jam of sombreroed humanity listened with open-mouthed amazement, the old judge of Concha County outlined the story of Lurd Pesco's treachery, of the Phantom's clever ruse in taking honest men into Catclaw Desert to witness the actual recovery of the loot of the Rainbow Flyer, and of

the outlaw's tragic but justifiable end.

"With my own eyes, I saw Lurd Pesco—our respected coroner and fellow citizen—dig up the gold!" shouted the white-haired old judge, in conclusion. "With my own ears, I heard him confess his appalling crime, without equal in the annals of Arizona.

"And the man who saved Lew Barry—the man who put the hats of five crooks on that deer-horn spread yonder—the man who used the guns and horse of Bearcat Barry to bring Pesco and his evil gang to the justice they deserved now stands before you. It was he who saved you depositors the loss of the Rainbow Flyer's gold shipment. It was he who saved the life of a trusted sheriff and a beloved friend.

"Fellow citizens, let me introduce you to this man—the Phantom of the Desert!"

Stepping aside, Judge Spaulding dropped down from the gallows platform, into the saddle of Blue Blazes, the panting roan whose matchless speed had snatched victory away from death with only seconds to spare.

And as the mob jammed closer in breathless suspense, they saw the Desert Phantom turn to face the man who had been doomed to die in the name of the law.

With gnarled old hands which were like twigs covered with brittle parchment, the sheriff of Concha County pulled aside the tattered bandanna mask which had covered the face of the Desert Phantom during his long trail of justice.

"Bearcat—son!"

The sheriff's startled gasp was true! He was looking into the ice-blue eyes and battered but smiling face of Bearcat Barry, the son he had supposed to be dead and buried

beside his mother's grave during all these long, harrowing weeks!

Bearcat's teeth flashed in a smile as he saw his father step back, and pass a trembling hand over his mist-laden eyes, as if unable to believe what he saw.

"I reckon you think I *am* a phantom, dad," chuckled the hombre who had been christened Dexter before he had been given the name of "Bearcat" by his friends. "But I ain't, dad—I just been playin' a phantom's part, to save you from this here noose."

Idly the handsome young justice rider untied the fatal knot which was to have plunged his father into eternity.

"That dynamite blast didn't kill me, because I was on the bottom o' that pile o' men," explained Bearcat Barry. "But it knocked me cold, and I woke up that night after the robbery, in a coffin in Pesco's undertaking parlors. I heard enough talk to know that dad, here, was going to have to stand trial, an' I also knew nothin' this side o' heaven could save yuh, dad, with all the evidence bein' so danged strong against yuh an' everythin'.

"Everybody thought I was dead; so that night, I sneaked out o' my coffin an' went over tuh the house an' got this outfit o' gaudy duds out o' my war bag. I'd never showed 'em to yuh, dad, 'cause they're—well, these 'DEX' chaps, for instance—I won 'em as a prize at a round-up north. The duds made a danged good disguise, which was what I wanted."

Tears were bubbling afresh from the old sheriff's eyes.

"Then—then you jest buried yore coffin that night?" The wet streaks continued to pencil their way through the dust on Barry's papery cheeks. "But—but, son—why'd yuh

mask up? I—I died a thousand deaths, son—thinkin' I was alone in the world, before I had tuh stretch a rope."

The Phantom laid big hands on his father's shoulders and glanced out over the dusty sea of sombreros.

"I had to, dad," he laughed. "If I'd let my identity be known, I'd 'a'—we'd 'a' *both* swung here together, dad! They thought we was guilty, an' I don't blame 'em. So I *had* to work masked!"

And then the crowd broke its spell and surged forward to jam about Blue Blazes and the scaffold, pouring out their greetings to the unmasked Phantom.

But a sudden sound broke through the babble of noise and

caused a hush to still half a thousand throats. It was a ringing, musical note—a chime that had once been like a knell to torture the Phantom's dreams, but now it seemed to vibrate with a joyful tone.

Silently Lew Barry and his son, Bearcat—destined to be known henceforth in that part of Arizona as the "Phantom of the Desert"—shook hands, standing side by side on the dusty gallows in front of a hushed multitude of cowmen and citizens.

As their hands gripped in the unspoken man token of the West, the musical notes tolled on, majestic and sonorous.

The courthouse clock was striking twelve.

4

FOUR J

FREIGHTERS' LUCK

A YOUNG man named Pleasant Rice, anxious to rank with the bold frontiersmen of Texas, figured that he would be considered as one of that adventurous band if he prodded a horned team yoked to a freight wagon across the plains. So Rice set out hauling corn for the government teams and saddle horses. They were big, fine animals, fat and shiny, and the savage Comanches would risk bullets any time to steal one of them.

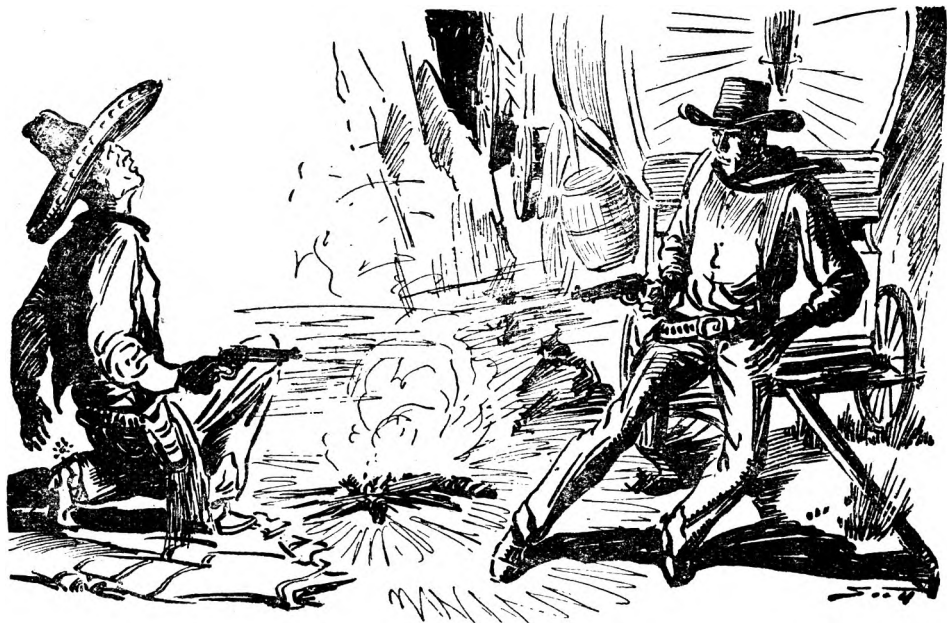
Freighters usually traveled in groups to keep the Indians from attacking them and stealing their goods. But on one occasion, in 1866, young Rice made a lone trip, as he was asked to deliver the corn without delay, and the other wagons were not ready to start. He had with him two other young fellows who had refused for some time to

take the chances, but were finally persuaded to go.

For several days, everything went smoothly. Not an Indian was in sight, and the youths concluded that the redskins were in some other place on their light-of-the-moon raids, and that the corn-laden wagons were safe.

On the fourth night out, they piled their saddles and blankets under the wagon and hit the hay in the wagon bed for an all-night snooze.

Their sleep was so sound that when they turned out at daybreak, they found that Indians had sneaked in on them while they slept and had stolen every blanket they had without waking one of them. But what surprised them more even than the theft was why the raiders had not left a few arrows in their bodies or scalped them alive.



The Sonora Kid— Not Guilty

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "The Razzberry Roan," etc.

CARRYING a freshly skinned cottontail, "Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), halted as he cautiously led the way down the rocky trail toward the camp that was hidden in Six-shooter Canyon.

"Listen!" he whispered. "Sounds like a hoss goin' down the gulch!"

The tall cowboy who trod warily behind him stopped and leaned forward, his dark face tense. Willie Wetherbee had more reason than Shorty to be alarmed. The law said he was the "Sonora Kid," who had robbed a Del Rio bank.

"Mebbe Tumbleweed or one of yore mules has busted his hobbles!" he drawled softly. "Or mebbe it's jest a steer!"

"Yeah, and mebbe somebody heard us shoot this here rabbit fer supper!" Shorty retorted. "I'd plumb hate fer El Bandido Blanco's outfit to stumble onto the camp an' rustle our stock!"

He moved forward again on the twisting trail. The last glow of sunset was on the rim rocks, and the canyon was filling with forbidding, purple shadows. The night wind was

freshening, tossing the tops of the cedars like uneasy, spectral giants. Mystery and danger walked hand in hand here in the Big Bend, where the "Blond Bandit's" border outlaws rode.

Shorty came to a turn in the narrow path and stopped. From here, he could look down into the boulder-strewn space where he and his mysterious partner had camped while they sought to capture "El Bandido Blanco"—the Blond Bandit. The yellow-haired border outlaw, according to Willie Wetherbee, could explain that Del Rio robbery.

"It looks all right," Shorty breathed in relief. "I can see all the mules, and there's yore hoss. Mebbe it was jest a steer, like yuh say. Come on! If we don't git supper purty soon, I'm liable to have to kill a mule and eat him, because a cottontail ain't goin' to be enough."

Willie chuckled. Shorty loved his six mules like brothers. They were all offspring of a mare named Lucy, and the bow-legged little freighter, being fond of music, had dubbed them the "Sextet from Lucia." Killing a mule, to Shorty, would be nothing less than murder.

"I reckon yuh can fill up on rabbit and frijoles," the tall waddy drawled as they strode into camp. "I'll make the fire while yuh feed them musical long-ears."

The mule skinner reached for his *morral*s and poured a generous measure of oats into each. He stepped on the other side of the three freight wagons to slip the feed bags over the heads of the team, and when he came back he stopped, staring at a cedar trunk that was lighted by the flickering camp fire.

"Willie!" he said in a voice edged with excitement. "Look! Somebody was here, after all!"

Wetherbee whirled. A sheet of

paper had been pinned to the tree, and the partners crossed slowly to where they could read the bold pencil print:

TO THE SONORA KID

It's time for a show-down. There are three of us. We give you till sunup to come out at the mouth of the canyon. If you don't come out with your hands in the air, yuh'd better come out shooting.

BUCK DAVIS, Texas Ranger.

Shorty swallowed hard. This might be the end of the trail for him and the tall pard who had always shot square with him, whether he was a bank robber or not. Three Rangers, out to get the man for whom there was a thousand dollars reward, dead or alive!

"I seen it comin'," Willie said softly. "Yuh cain't give the law the slip always, Shorty. They're givin' me a chanct to surrender. If I cain't pile the twine on that yaller-headed skunk, I'll be sent to the pen—and I'll shoot it out with 'em first!"

"Better not. Better light out into Mexico, Willie. It ain't like swappin' lead with three outlaws—or even a dozen outlaws. Them Rangers are crack shots. But, if yuh are goin' to fight, I reckon I'll be with yuh!"

"Nothin' doin'!" Wetherbee flared. "It ain't yore funeral, an'——"

He clicked his jaw shut. Somewhere out beyond the camp fire's circle, a man's boots dragged and stumbled on the rocks, and a man's voice called:

"Help! Help, señor! Help!"

Shorty whirled, jerking his .45 from its holster. This might be a trap. The man was staggering into the light, a vague, wavering figure that took shape as he came nearer. He was a Mexican, and the swarthy face under his broad sombrero seemed to be drawn with pain.

Shorty noticed that his left arm dangled limply.

"Help me, señor! *Agua! Agua!*"

The man stumbled over the wagon tongue and fell at full length. Willie sprang to his side and lifted him toward the camp fire, propping his back against a bedding roll. Shorty grabbed a canteen from the wagon and placed it to the parched lips.

"*Gracias!*" he murmured after a long drink. "You are kind, Señor Shorty!"

"Yuh know me?" Shorty demanded in surprise.

"*Si, señor!* I have ride with El Bandido Blanco, and——"

"Well, yuh got a lot o' nerve!" Wetherbee exclaimed. "Know what we ought to do with yuh?"

"But I have run away, señor! El Bandido Blanco shoot me here. He is one bad hombre! I try for many times to run away. I have come to help you. You want for capture him, no?"

Willie exchanged quick glances with Shorty. The little freighter was gently slipping the Mexican's duck jumper off the limp left arm. He found the shirt sleeve stained with caked crimson, and the Mexican shrank at the touch.

"Here, I'll fix it!" said Shorty. "Let me wash the wound an'——"

"But eet ees nothing, señor! Eet will get well. I have run away to help you—to tell you to-night you can capture El Bandido Blanco!"

II.

Willie Wetherbee forgot the man's wound in his eagerness. He leaned forward and grasped the Mexican by the arm.

"How?" he demanded. "How? Where?"

The Mexican's white teeth flashed

in a quick smile. There was a gleam in his beady black eyes.

"Ah, the Sonora Keed, eh? I know, señor! I have heard El Bandido Blanco tell with much laughing how eet ees you they are blaming for the bank robbery, while eet ees El Bandido Blanco who got the dinero!"

Shorty whirled toward his pard. "There's a witness for yuh, Willie!" he exclaimed.

"Yeah, but it's what them court hombres call hearsay evidence. It ain't strong enough. I got to pile the twine on that coyote, and the Mex says we can do it to-night! Say, what's your name?"

"Pedro Gonzales, señor."

"Well, Pedro, when and where can I find El Bandido Blanco to-night?"

The Mexican looked around him carefully. There was a moon topping the canyon walls, but the floor of the rocky gulch was still black with darkness, and nothing moved out there except Shorty's restless mules and an occasional stamping on the part of Tumbleweed, Willie's sorrel cow pony.

Pedro Gonzales leaned closer. There was hate in his whispering voice, and his eyes glittered in the glow of the camp fire.

"At the Circle Bar corrals, señor! There ees but one or two vaqueros at the Circle Bar, for the rest are moving cattle to the railroad. In the corrals are three very fine horses, señor, for which El Bandido Blanco have big want."

Willie Wetherbee sprang to his feet, his .45 flashing into his quick right hand. There was a crash of a rock overturning just below the camp—an unmistakable creak of saddle leather, and a strange horse's snort!

"Halt!" yelled Shorty Masters, leaping out from the rear of his

wagons. "Pull up, there, or I'll pull yuh!"

A white horse was streaking down the bed of the canyon, twisting and turning around cedars and boulders like a phantom of the moonlight. Low over the animal's neck was a rider, using quirt and spur. Probably he had heard every word Pedro Gonzales had said; no doubt he was a spy for El Bandido Blanco—

Braang! Braang! Braang! Shorty and Willie jerked triggers.

Lead screamed down the canyon like messengers of death. The shots crashed and rolled in thunderous echoes from the canyon walls. Swift jets of flame stabbed the darkness from the partners' guns.

The mystery rider did not return the fire. The white horse disappeared around a bend in the gulch, and they could hear its hoofs clattering over rocks, gravel, and sun-baked soil, gradually fading into a ghostly drumming, and then silence.

"There yuh are!" Willie drawled as he holstered his gun. "Spyin' on us. When he figured he'd better leave so's he could tell El Bandido Blanco, he knocked over that rock and had to make a break fer it!"

"He will not be able to reach El Bandido Blanco in time!" protested Pedro Gonzales.

It seemed to Shorty there was too much eagerness in the Mexican's tone. A vague suspicion began to take shape in the little freighter's mind, but he set his jaw and said nothing.

"Anyhow, I'm goin' over to Circle Bar and try to snag that yeller-headed skunk!" Willie gritted. "What time does he figure on the raid?"

"After midnight, señor, when the full moon is overhead. I would like for going weeth you, but my arm ees—"

"I'll go by myself!" Wetherbee said grimly. "This is my funeral."

"If it is, I'm one of th' mourners!" Shorty declared. "I'm goin', too!"

"There ees no need, señor! El Bandido Blanco is riding alone to get those three horses. The Sonora Keed can take care of heem. It would be well to sleep, señor!"

"He's right," Willie asserted. "Let's turn in. Shorty, I'd rather yuh stayed here an'—well, mebbe yuh will have to stall the rangers off fer a little more time. Tell 'em I'll show up fer the show-down, all right! Now I'm goin' to turn in till midnight!"

Shorty produced some spare bedding from the wagons and gave it to Pedro Gonzales. The Mexican thanked him humbly, but there was that strange light in his eyes. Maybe it was from pain and the thirst for revenge against the bandit chief. Perhaps it was something else.

The three ate a hasty supper of cold frijoles and hot black coffee, letting the rabbit stay until morning. Shorty put the thought out of his mind that Willie Wetherbee might not be with him for breakfast, then spread his bedding roll so that Pedro Gonzales would be between them.

Willie was healthy, young, and unafraid even of death. He was asleep in five minutes, and such was his range training that he would awaken shortly before midnight, when the full moon was overhead.

Shorty shucked off his own boots and crawled between the blankets. The camp fire died to a faint glow. A screech owl was mourning in the cedars near by, and off on some lonely rim rock a coyote was howling. The stars were bright, and the moon rolled higher over the canyon walls like a freshly minted dollar.

"Somethin's funny!" the freighter told himself drowsily. "The Mex ain't showin' anybody how bad he's shot. Mebbe he ain't shot at all. He might have smeared up his arm when the outlaw outfit was butcherin' a rustled steer. And then there's that rider on the white hoss. If El Bandido Blanco is startin' so late, why cain't the spy git back to tell him that Willie is goin' to be layin' fer him?"

It was all a tangled mystery, and yet it might offer a chance to the man who had to meet the Rangers in the morning—had to meet them for a show-down sooner or later.

Shorty fought off slumber that was drawing heavy hands over his eyelids. He had to keep awake—he was going to follow Willie if the tall pard insisted on setting out alone. It was difficult to lie quietly, eyes half closed, breathing as if he was asleep, and still keep watch over Pedro Gonzales.

Then slumber and drowsiness fled. The Mexican was lifting himself cautiously, listening, peering closely at Shorty and then at Willie Wetherbee's long form!

Pedro was satisfied the partners were both asleep. He reached out, silently, swiftly as a snake strikes. The moon gleamed on blue steel as he drew his hand back from Willie's side.

Shorty slipped his own hand under the slicker he was using for a pillow. The cold grasp of his .45 brought assurance. He could shoot Gonzales at any time, now, but it was better to wait and watch.

Pedro fumbled with the gun, and the mule skinner heard the slight clicking noise as the Mexican ejected the cartridges. He was replacing them. Perhaps he was worried about the proper loading of Willie's .45 after those shots had been fired

down the canyon. Perhaps he was reloading the gun with blanks!

Shorty did not stir. The Mexican returned the gun to Willie's side and sank back into his bedding with a sigh. In a few minutes he was sleeping as soundly as Wetherbee, but Shorty was wide awake.

III.

The moon was overhead, peering down through the gently swaying tops of the cedars. Willie Wetherbee quietly threw back his tarp and pulled on his boots. He buckled his cartridge belt around his waist and stood up.

Pedro Gonzales appeared to be sleeping, and so did Shorty Masters. But the Mexican's beady eyes were watching every move of the Sonora Kid through slitted lids, and the slight jingle of Willie's spurs aroused the little freighter.

Shorty watched his tall pard from the corners of his eyes. He knew Willie well enough to know the dark-faced cowboy would insist on going alone. But there was nothing to prevent Shorty from saddling a mule and following him to the Circle Bar corrals.

Willie trod cautiously out of the camp, lifted his saddle and bridle from their place on a wagon wheel, and approached Tumbleweed. In another minute, the well-trained sorrel was being led up the steep trail toward the divide.

Shorty waited for five minutes, then raised to a sitting posture and jerked on his boots. He started to get to his feet, and Pedro's voice came, soft and yet ominous:

"You are going somewhere, Señor Shorty?"

"I shore am!" the freighter retorted. "Yuh don't think I'm lettin' Willie ride into a trap, do yuh?"

Pedro raised himself, lithe as a cat. Out from under the bedding, a .45 whipped, its menacing muzzle flung on the freighter.

"You weel stay here with me!"

"Not much!" Shorty flared. "I seen yuh load Willie's gun with blanks while he was asleep, an' I got up an' reloaded it with live shells. Thet fixed thet. But if there's goin' to be a fight, I aims to be there with Willie an'——"

Shorty bit off his words and leaped to one side. His right hand flashed down and up. Flame lashed from the muzzle of the Mexican's weapon.

Braang! Shorty shot from the hip, just as Pedro's gun roared a second time.

The shots crashed as one, roaring, echoing in the little canyon. They would be muffled, however, by the rocky walls. Willie probably would not hear them as he rode swiftly over the level divide.

Pedro Gonzales coughed and fell, twisting over the bedding roll he had borrowed. He was tough, and he died hard. He whirled his tortured body over, and his teeth gleamed white in an animal snarl as he jerked the gun around toward Shorty again.

But suddenly the gun slipped from Pedro's limp fingers, and he lay still in death.

Shorty stooped and picked up the gun. Expertly, he threw out the empty shells, and then reloaded it from the belt he strapped about his waist.

"Yuh never can tell!" he muttered. "Two guns might come in right handy. Chopin! Come here, yuh black varmint. We're goin' fer a ride!"

The black mule, named, like his brothers, for a famous composer, lifted his head with a snort. Shorty

grabbed his saddle from the first wagon, threw it over the big mule's back, and removed Chopin's hobbles.

"What I want out of yuh is a lot o' speed!" he told the long-eared animal. "Yuh ain't as fast as a hoss, but yuh got to be to-night! We're gettin' there in time fer the shootin'!"

He swung into the saddle and turned Chopin up the canyon trail. The mule labored up the twisting, climbing path, and struck east over the divide, traveling at a gallop.

Gray-green mesquite trees flashed past, ghostly shapes under the same moon that was looking down on death in the canyon camp—the same moon that would soon be looking down on death in the Circle Bar corrals. Shorty leaned forward tensely, his Stetson flapping in the wind. It was five or six miles over to Circle Bar, and every minute counted.

He prayed that El Bandido Blanco would be late. He knew the Blond Bandit would not be riding alone, that there might be a dozen of his pack with him. And El Bandido Blanco need fear no shot from ambush as Wetherbee crouched in the corrals and waited, for Willie wanted him alive.

"He'll be settin' there with his rope, and he won't have a chanct o' gittin' out alive!" Shorty gritted. "Shake yore laigs, mule!"

Chopin seemed to understand. His ears were backed flat, his nostrils flaring, and his teeth bared. He was covering the divide in strides almost as long as those of a horse. Shorty set his jaw and peered into the dim moonlight, waiting for the sudden stab of flame from a .45 to start things going.

"If he don't git El Bandido Blanco to-night, the Rangers git

him in the mornin'!" the mule skinner muttered. "A show-down fer the Sonora Kid! I don't care who Willie is or what he's done; he's the squarest-shootin' pard a man ever had an'——"

Braang! Braang! There it was—a fiery serpent's tongue licked into the night against the farther hill as Shorty rode down off the divide.

There was the Circle Bar windmill, a gaunt skeleton rearing against the moonlit sky, wheel whirling, rods creaking dolefully. There were the corrals, a couple of hundred yards from the ranch house itself, stout pens built of native rock.

Braang! Zzzit! Another gun cracked.

The bullet struck fire from a flat, flinty stone that lay on the corral fence. It came screaming up the cedar-dotted slope toward Shorty Masters, and passed him by like an unearthly warning.

The hoofs of horses drummed on hardpan. Against the bleached white of the stone corrals, glistening in the moonlight, Shorty saw riders streaking, circling. From the corral walls came a single jet of orange, and a .45 roared to punctuate the clatter of running horses.

IV.

Shorty reined the mule in on sliding hoofs, a hundred yards from the corrals, where a clump of mesquites offered scanty shelter. No use exposing Chopin to the bandits' fire. There was a water trough halfway between him and the first rock fence, and the little freighter swiftly mapped his plan of action.

Braang! Braang!

Shorty looked up toward the hill on the other side of the windmill. Those shots came from the Circle Bar ranch house. There were two

waddies there, Pedro had said. That made four against the outlaws—four men who were separated and could plan no concerted defense.

Guns blazed again from the house. The bandits gathered on the far side of the corrals, all but four riders who kept circling the pens to keep their quarry from escaping. There was a vicious volley, and Shorty heard a yell of pain and the tinkle of glass from a ranch-house window.

"That's one of th' punchers down!" he muttered grimly. "I got to git to Willie!"

The broad sombrero of an outlaw was outlined against the moonlit sky as he came riding around the corrals, a difficult target for the tall waddy was crouched there with lead hurtling around him. The bandit was nearer Shorty.

Braang! The mule driver's six-gun spat flame.

The outlaw melted into the darkness below him. There was a thud as his body struck the hard ground.

Shorty leaned forward, crouching low, running swiftly toward the water trough. The outlaw's riderless horse was plunging off toward the mesquites. Shorty reached the man's side, glanced at the distorted face, and gasped in relief. It was a Mexican, and not El Bandido Blanco.

"I can use this gun, too!" the little freighter panted. He grabbed the weapon and the cartridge belt, then dropped flat behind the water trough. Another rider was coming, yelling wildly, firing steadily toward the rock fence.

Shorty took deliberate aim and jerked the trigger. The outlaw's yell died in a dull cough. He slumped over the horn, twisted sideways, and fell. His left boot toe caught in the stirrup, and a terrified horse ran wildly for the mesquite

flat, rearing and plunging, kicking at the gruesome thing which dangled there at his side.

The mule skinner did not turn to look. He jumped to his feet and dashed for the corrals, covering the ground with amazing speed for one so short and bowed of legs.

"Willie!" he yelled. "Willie! I'm comin'!"

A screaming bullet missed his left ear by an inch, struck the corral, and sang away into space. Shorty ducked long after the danger was past, twisted like a scared jack rabbit, and made for the shelter of the corral fence.

Braang! Braang! Wetherbee's gun blazed, ten feet down the fence, and the outlaw who was trying to drop Shorty before he joined his pard wavered and fell back to reload his gun.

The freighter threw the dead outlaw's .45 and cartridge belt over the fence and scrambled after it. He made the other side in a clatter of falling rock and picked himself off the ground.

"Willie! I figgered this was a trap!"

The tall waddy moved toward him, edging sidewise as he slipped fresh cartridges into the cylinder of his gun. He was cool as a Panhandle norther.

"Yeah, I walked right into it. But *you* should ought to have stayed back there at camp. It don't mean nothin', one way or the other, fer me. If I cain't pile the twine on El Bandido Blanco, I might as well stop a bullet here as one from the Rangers."

Braang! Brang! Shorty's battered Stetson whipped off his head; particles of shattered flint stung his cheek as a bullet spanged on the top of the rock fence. He ducked.

"You're plumb loco!" he retorted.

"We'll come out o' this! How many are they?"

Willie fired deliberately before answering. "About fourteen! And I reckon they got the two waddies up at the ranch house. I was a fool fer sneakin' into the corral and waitin' here with my rope. The blond-headed skunk rushed the pen jest as soon as they come up—and he had his men all scattered out. Sooner or later, they'll bust into the corrals and come at us from all sides!"

Shorty looked around the corral and nodded. There were wide gates, made of lumber, connecting the pens. Over to their right was the chute where stock could be branded, or the saddles could be cinched on broncs ready for the peeling. There were a dozen avenues along which the outlaws might come; but, as long as the bandits kept circling the corrals, none offered a chance of escape.

The little freighter jerked his Stetson low over his eyes and peered over the fence. He could see the bold shape of a rider against the gray-green mesquites.

Braang! Braang! Willie fired a split second after his partner.

One or both bullets hit the outlaw, and he piled into the dirt. Shorty Masters gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"We're cuttin' down the odds, Willie!" he declared. "Here, the Mex that had this gun ain't got no more use fer it. This gives us two apiece."

"We'll need 'em!" Willie answered. He was silent a moment, listening. Then he jerked his chin toward the ranch house.

"Reckon they got both o' the Circle Bar waddies that was here!" he said. "Shorty, it's come to the point where we probably will have to plug

that there yaller-headed polecat. If yuh see him comin' at yuh, don't hold off none! It might be yore life or his."

A momentary lull fell over the besieged corrals. Shorty took advantage of the quiet to sneak around against the rock wall toward the big gate. He came back and reached for the coiled lariat Willie had by his side.

"Might as well bust all the necks we can!" he muttered. "They're havin' a palaver o' some kind. That means they're goin' to rush us in a minute."

There was a snubbing post, worn slick by countless rope burns, not far from the big gate. Shorty slipped the lariat over this, drew it tight, and strung it low along the ground to the farther gatepost, where he made it fast. Then he slid back the bar that held the gate shut, and the heavy hinges creaked as the barrier swung open.

"Now!" grinned the little freighter mirthlessly. "Let 'em come on a-whoopin' 'er up!"

He took up a position under the shelter of the rock wall, where he could see into the adjoining corral and also into the open flat. No sooner had he done so than the attack burst upon the partners with renewed fury.

Braang! Braang! Braang! The bandits were burning a lot of powder.

They circled in groups of three and four, leaning low over the necks of their horses, stabbing the dim moonlight with swift jets of fire from their six-guns.

Shorty saw that Willie was returning the shots calmly, deliberately; saw another Mexican topple from the saddle. And then he heard wild shouts at the far side of the adjoining corral, the gate there

swung open, and a half dozen horse-men boiled into the empty pen!

"Here they come!" shouted the mule driver.

He jerked himself around, bracing his stocky body against the wall. The gate he had opened swung fully ajar, offering a seemingly clear path for the attackers to rush through.

Yes, they were coming. Six of them, racing across the corral in a mad swirl of dust, charging the partners from the rear, catching them between two fires.

The leader opened up with his .45. Shorty saw Willie Wetherbee leave the rock shelter at his back and advance slowly to meet the attack. He was standing almost in the center of the corral, his feet planted wide, his tense body leaned forward, a gun in each hand.

"Come on! *Andale! Git—*" The leader's shout died in a sudden crash.

His horse's forelegs struck the taut rope that was stretched low over the gateway. The horse fell, rolling, and the rider went underneath the heavy animal. Back of him was a wild confusion of arms, legs, and flying hoofs; a struggling mass from which came animal squeals and yells of pain and terror from the men.

A man broke clear of the cloud of dust. Shorty Masters's gun split the haze. The man's knees buckled, and he pitched face down.

Three of the attackers managed to fight their way clear of the mêlée. One was afoot, but he leaped to the saddle behind a companion, and they rode back out of the corral.

El Bandido Blanco's harsh voice could be heard out there, swearing at his men for their failure. Two of the fallen horses managed to get to their feet and run, riderless, around

the adjoining corral until they found the outside gate. But their owners were quiet.

V.

Willie Wetherbee came over to his pard. "That was a swell trick, Shorty!" he said gratefully. "That will hold 'em off fer a minute. But they're comin' again. El Bandido Blanco is determined to git it over with!"

"I know it," Shorty answered. "Look, here's an idea! See the brandin' chute? We can sneak along it until we're dang near out of the corrals. Then, if we could jump out and grab ourselves some hosses——"

"Come on!" Weatherbee replied. "I'm goin' first!"

He stooped low and cautiously stepped through the gate, avoiding the men who lay on the ground there. The bars to the entrance of the chute were down. Shorty was behind him as he made the yard-wide corridor between the two high board fences.

The outlaws were circling again, firing toward the spot where their prey had last been seen. Willie edged forward, then halted so suddenly that Shorty bumped into him.

"Listen!" cautioned the tall waddy.

Braang! Braang! The shots sounded as if they came from farther down the flat. There was a new clatter of running horses—a faster tempo added to the mad drumming in the night. Reënforcements for the outlaws, perhaps.

Both partners climbed the high chute fence for a quick look. Shorty's gaze swept the mesquite flat, and then he gasped.

Three men were riding into the fray—three yelling, shooting de-

mons. And one of them was on a white horse!

"That there's the hombre that was spyin' on the camp!" Shorty exclaimed. "They're gittin' new men as fast as we shoot 'em down! Hurry up; git on down the chute!"

Willie dropped to the ground and started forward again. He brought up suddenly, and threw his lean body against the side of the narrow passage. Ahead of him, a gun blazed, and a bullet fanned Shorty's cheek.

Braang! Wetherbee's .45 cracked viciously.

The outlaw's gun roared again, and Shorty gasped. In the swift spurt of flame, the little mule driver saw the face of the man ahead—saw a wide sombrero, a shock of yellow hair, a cruel, beaked nose, and thin, sneering lips. El Bandido Blanco!

The outlaw chief had hit on the same idea as the partners. He was attacking from the chute, and now they had met.

Bang! El Bandido Blanco's gun blazed again, and his face was a sickly yellowish white in the vivid flash.

Willie Wetherbee reeled, clutching at the chute for support. There was another man behind El Bandido Blanco, now, and Shorty could not fire for fear of hitting his tall pard. Willie was wavering from one side of the chute to the other, grimly advancing on the Blond Bandit.

Wetherbee's gun spat fire. El Bandido Blanco went to his knees with a cough. His gun flew out of his hand and fell in the dust six feet in front of him. He grabbed the side of the chute and pulled himself slowly to his feet again.

Willie held his fire. Shorty could hear his partner breathing hard. The man behind El Bandido Blanco

seemed willing to let the two old enemies fight it out without interfering.

"Come on, Parrish!" gritted Wetherbee. "Come on an' git yore gun! Let's settle the score! Before yuh die, yuh got to tell 'em about that bank robbery."

The outlaw's sombrero fell back and was held only by the chin string. His yellow hair was down almost over his eyes, glistening in the moonlight that showed his drawn, haggard face.

"They'll never know, Sonora!" he croaked. "You robbed the bank, and yuh know it. You took yore fifteen hundred dollars and kidnaped me. You can't kidnap the cashier of the bank and git away with it! You'll go to the pen for that!"

Inch by inch, El Bandido Blanco was pulling himself along the narrow chute, pulling himself toward the gun. Shorty's mind was in a whirl: his tongue was dry and swollen. El Bandido Blanco would never have given Willie the same chance for life that Willie was now giving him.

"Yeah, I kidnaped yuh to make yuh come clean with the fifteen hundred dollars my uncle left me!" Willie was saying. "But when yuh left the bank, yuh took along five thousand that didn't belong to either of us, and yuh high-tailed it across the Rio! Yo're a dirty crook, Parrish! All I did was take the dinero yuh was tryin' to beat me out of! Come on, git that gun and come up a-shootin'!"

El Bandido Blanco's laugh was ended in a shuddering cough. He was over the gun, now. He reached down for it with fumbling fingers.

"The jury will never believe yuh, Sonora!" he taunted. "I was too smart for yuh. I've always been too smart for yuh."

"Look out, Willie!" Shorty Masters screamed the warning.

El Bandido Blanco was straightening, without the gun. He seemed about to fall. He was twisting sideways, holding to the chute fence with his left hand. His right hand, concealed by his body, fumbled at his sash.

Then the moonlight flashed on swift, naked steel. A knife glistened, whistled through the air as El Bandido Blanco swept his right hand up in a swift, desperate move.

Bang! Wetherbee fired from the hip as he threw himself sidewise.

Spang! The knife hit a post, six inches from Willie's body.

Its keen blade buried deep in the soft cedar, and it quivered there, singing in the echoes of Willie Wetherbee's shot.

Shorty jerked himself upright, ready with his .45. His partner was slipping to the ground, faint with pain. El Bandido Blanco had pitched forward over the gun, and his breathing was a gurgling gasp that suddenly stopped.

The mule driver's gun flashed up. Outside the corral, as if they had been silent all this time, he heard guns roaring and the mad thunder of hoofs.

"Hold on!" commanded the man behind El Bandido Blanco. "Put up yore gun. I ain't an outlaw. I'm Buck Davis, Texas Ranger!"

Shorty caught his breath, then remembered the man on the white horse. The chute walls whirled about him. It didn't pay to resist the Rangers, but Davis was here to take Willie Wetherbee, alias the Sonora Kid.

"Put up yore gun, I said!" Davis ordered. "I ain't after yore pard, yuh fool! I heard the confession this skunk made. I heard what the Mex said in yore camp to-night, and

I rode back down to bring my men over here. Take a look at Sonora, and then come with me. We got to put the rest of the coyotes on the run!"

Shorty stooped over his pard, the joy which surged in his heart battling with dread. Maybe Willie had been killed! No—he was struggling to get on his feet again, clutching his left shoulder.

"I'm all right!" muttered the tall cowboy. "Jest got me in the shoulder. Come on! Let's give it to 'em!"

Shorty stepped over the dead leader of the Big Bend outlaws and helped Willie after him. Buck Davis led the way through the chute into the big corral. Here they found two men crouching behind the stone wall, beside their horses, blazing away at the bandits.

The little freighter made the rock shelter with a yell. He rammed his .45 over the wall and began shooting. Buck Davis and the Sonora Kid followed suit.

The outlaws' ranks had been thinned. When five guns began spitting from the corral, they fell back, gathered for a last charge, and left two more men on the ground. The rest broke in utter disorder, and the sound of running horses died in the mesquites.

"Hold yore fire!" Buck Davis ordered. "Well, Sonora, yuh can go back to Del Rio, now. I got to take yuh back, but when I tell the district attorney what El Bandido Blanco said before he died, they'll turn yuh loose. Jest what happened at that bank, anyhow?"

Willie Wetherbee's quick, likable smile flashed across his dark face. "Jest what Parrish said," he replied. "He was the cashier, and he was stealin' people's money all the time. When my uncle died in San Antone and left me fifteen hundred dollars, Parrish tried to beat me out of it. I ought to have gone to court, I reckon, but I was too hot-headed."

"Yeah, go on," said the Ranger.

"Well, I went into the place with a gun and told Parrish to pack up my fifteen hundred and come along with me. I took him down toward the river and told him a crook as big as him couldn't stay in this country. What I didn't know was that he packed away five thousand dollars besides—and so they accused me of takin' the whole amount."

"And then Parrish organized his gang?"

"That's right. Me an' my pard here have been tryin' to pile the twine on him ever since."

The Ranger chuckled. "Well, it shore was lucky we happened to be around. I shore figured from the evidence that yuh robbed that bank!"

Shorty Masters grinned. "So did everybody except me an' my mules," he declared. "We knew all the time Willie didn't rob no bank!"

An' that's thet. El Bandido Blanco got his, at last, an' Willie's free ter go where he pleases. We got a hunch he'll please ter go along with Shorty Masters an' the musical mules, fer him an' Shorty is pards if any two waddies ever was. Watch fer the next thrillin' story about 'em in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HOWDY, folks, it's right good seein' yuh ag'in! Dag-gone it, if it ain't August already! When August comes along it always seems tuh me thet the summer's jest about over somehow or other. It sure makes the time pass fast, anyhow!

How yuh comin' in yore search

for songs, folks? Don't forgit tuh try tuh git yore ol' folks tuh sing yuh some o' the ol'-timers. Mebbe yuh'll be visitin' some o' yore relatives durin' the summer an' kin tackle 'em then. Don't forgit the Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral where-ever yuh go!

I reckon if thar's one song thet's

been pop'lar with yuh folks, it's "The Strawberry Roan," which I published early this year with the author's own story of how it was written. Waal, ever since I got hold o' thet one for yuh, I've been tryin' tuh git some others of his; an' tuh-day I got a prize!

Curley Fletcher is plumb gen'rous in givin' me permission tuh publish some o' the famous songs in his book: "Songs of the Sage."* As he says in his preface tuh his book, "Songs of the Sage" was written for the lovers of the great open spaces—the mountains, valleys, an' deserts that form the Empire of the West, by a man who has spent his life in that part of the West known as the Great American Desert.

Fletcher grew up in Inyo and Mono Counties, California, and came tuh know the West as only a kid out thar could know it. He's been a cowboy, muleteer, prospector, an' all thet—but he's never yit herded sheep!

Hyar's the song, folks, an' it's a humdinger thet many of yuh've been wantin':

THE RIDGE-RUNNIN' ROAN

By Curley Fletcher

It was up in the Bad Lands, I was rangin' alone,
I first heard of this cayuse, the Ridge-runnin' Roan.
He was fleet as a deer and tough as a mule,
Pretty as a picture and nobody's fool.

High-headed and leggy, he was just built for speed;
The cowboy that roped him could own that there steed.
I figured the reason this bronc was still free
Was he never had crossed a mustanger like me.

* "Songs of the Sage," by Curley M. Fletcher, published by Frontier Publishing Company, Los Angeles, California, for one dollar.

So I went right to work and got me a pair!
Of the best saddle horses that ever wore hair.

I hunted that mustang and I took to his trail;

When he hit for the ridges he was packin' the mail.

I never did head him nor turn him about,
I aimed to just trail him till I wore him plumb out.

Then for five or six days I gained not an inch;

He was wearin' no crutches and that was a cinch.

He was tough as a boot and as wise as a fox;

He kept on the ridges and a-dodgin' the rocks.

I'd trail him till dark and at dawn I'd begin,

Till I got pretty weak and my horses got thin.

I followed those tracks till I got stiff and sore,

But he stayed right in front where he kept makin' more.

Then I got so I felt like a tired, locoed sheep,

A-trailin' that fuzztail and a-losin' my sleep.

He went short for water, with no time to graze,

While I camped on his trail for seventeen days.

Then he got awful gaunt, he was wearin' out fast,

Till he looked like a ridge-runnin' ghost at the last.

He was placin' his feet like he's walkin' on tacks,

Till I saw he was leavin' fresh blood on his tracks.

So I started to crowd him and turned him around;

He quit the rough edges and hunted soft ground.

I shook out a loop when we got to a flat,
I threw that reata and it fit like my hat.

He sure gave up quick when I jerked out the slack,

Then I noticed some old saddle marks on his back.

I had done myself proud and felt like a champ

When I got him all haltered and headed for camp.

He was strikin' an' kickin', and plumb
fightin' mad.
I could see he was spoiled and sure enough
bad.

Well, I got him at home and into the
corral,
I fed him some hay and oats for a spell,
When he got fat and strong I gave him the
news,
I hog-tied him down and nailed on some
shoes.

Then I put on the bridle and I fixed it to
fit,
It wasn't the first time that he'd champed
a bit.
I threw on my saddle and I cinched it
right down.
Then I crawled his old carcass—I was
headed for town.

I drug out my quirt, 'cause to me he looked
tame,
Like a twenty-two pistol on a forty-five
frame.
I got a deep seat, and I froze to the cantle,
I jabbed in my meat-hooks clear up to the
handle.

He let out a bawl and he went from that
spot
Like the ground where he stood had sudden
got hot.
He topped that first jump with a shimmy
and shake,
Like a-poppin' the head from a live rattle-
snake.

Then he went to sun-fishin', he sure was a
peach,
And I turned from a wild-cat into a leech.
He was mad as a hornet, and I guess he
saw red,
He was handy afoot and his feet wasn't
lead.

I thought I was up on the hurricane deck
Of an earthquake and a cyclone a-havin' a
wreck.
I was doin' my best and was just get-
tin' by,
But he's doin' better with blood in his eye.

He was duckin', and dodgin', and a-walkin'
the dog,
He had me so dizzy I was lost in the fog.
And then he got busy and the things that
he did
Was like a volcano that had blew off the
lid.

He was bawlin', and gruntin', a-humpin'
the hump;
He turned wrong side out with every new
jump.
At ridin' bad horses I'm no crippled squaw,
But he showed some tricks that I never
had saw.

With a gyratin' jump he goes over the gate,
And I grabbed for the horn, but I was too
late.
He hit with a jar that most shed his
hair;
And busted me loose and I quit him right
there.

Of all the bad horses that I ever rode,
None was like him, for he seemed to ex-
plode.
He busted me up and I'm still stiff and
lamed—
That Ridge-runnin' Outlaw will never be
tamed.

The last time I saw him, he was crossin' a
bridge,
He was high-tailin' back to his favorite
ridge.
I've borrowed an outfit, as I've none of
my own—
My riggin' ran off on the Ridge-runnin'
Roan.

Thar, folks! Thet's another song
tuh add tuh yore collection of songs
thet tell the tale o' hosses thet was
better'n the men thet tried tuh tame
'em. I reckon thar's few hosses thet
really can't be tamed—but thar's
fewer men, for thet matter, with the
same kind o' free spirit. Yuh can't
touch either of 'em.

I reckon I'll be leavin' now. So
long, an' good luck!



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the data of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

BEFORE I print this batch o' letters, thar's some things I'd like tuh have a heart-tuh-heart talk with yuh about. It's them pesky rules ag'in, as yuh may guess!

Letters from boys tuh gals, an' gals tuh boys, the which is agin' the rules, go intuh the wastebasket; an'

don't think thar's much chance for such letters tuh slip through! If yuh get a letter in answer tuh yore printed request, be sure yuh hang ontuh the address of the writer, because, unless he's been a Pen Pal before, I'm not likely tuh have his address myself.

As I've said before, once yuh have the address of a Pen Pal thar's no need mailin' yore letters tuh him through the office. Jest write direct. An' also, if yuh happen tuh have a unusual first name, please be sure tuh mention whether yo're a boy or gal. Some names is kind o' confusin', yuh know.

Thar, I reckon I've covered about all of 'em, folks. Except, o' course, the usual one o' printin' yore name an' address in full on the envelope an' in the letter so thet thar'll be no stray letters.

Now let's get down tuh the letters:

JOB INFO WANTED

I shore was tickled when I received two letters this week advisin' thet the writers could give employment tuh one or two boys. O' course, I sent each of 'em a dozen or more names an' hope thet by now at least two of my friends found a job. Thet's the spirit, folks, if yuh need help yoreself, or if yuh hear of any one who has a job open, take yore pick from yore Pen Pals?

Yuh can either write to the Pen Pals whose requests I print or ask me for some addresses o' those who need a job. Let's hope thet those who are askin' for a job tuh-day will find what they want.

DEAR SAM: I am seventeen years old and willing to work. I would like to get a job on a horse or cattle ranch. Would be willing to work for board and clothes until I am able to do my job well, and it is worth something. I have always been greatly interested in horses and sure would like to work with them.
PRESTON AMSPACHER, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Although I have been reading the W. W. W. quite often, this is the first time that I have written to ask for help. I would like to find a job on a ranch or farm out West, where I can work around horses, which are my favorite animals. I can ride very well and can also

use the rope somewhat. Please try and get me in touch with some ranchers either in Montana, Texas, or Arizona, and if any one does hire me, I sure will do my best to satisfy him. I am a young man of twenty-six, active and strong, and I certainly can work hard.

TROY B. CHASTEEN, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of eighteen, anxious to get a job out West or somewhere else, although I prefer the West. I have the roaming fever like most boys and would like to work along the way. Any one who has an opening for a husky chap, please answer.
BUS, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I am in hopes that I can locate a job in the Northwest through your magazine. I am a woman of forty-three, entirley alone and independent, well experienced in cooking, business, and public work; and I am looking for employment. Perhaps you will hear of some resort hotel or ranch where work such as I can do is needed. I have always been considered a good and willing worker, and can furnish references of the best kind. Any one can easily be convinced of my ability.

R. S., OF ILLINOIS.

WESTERNERS WANTED

Jest the usual crop o' Pen Pals who want to learn more about the West, an' I don't blame them for comin' hyar with thar wishes, because it is much better to get info firsthand. I'm shore thet thar's many a Pen Pal who'll be only too glad to spill some o' the knowledge in his mind about the West, an' I reckon thet all o' these requests will find ample an' quick response.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve, and I am writing to try and find some Pen Pals, especially cowgirls, from Texas, Arizona, or Montana. I am so much interested in these States, especially in Texas, that I hope I will get many letters from Pen Pals living there. I will answer each letter I get and will also exchange snapshots.

MYRTLE FRAY, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of thirteen who is very much interested in the West, where I would like to find some Pen Pals. My sister, Wanda, who is ten years old, would

also like to get some Pen Pals in the West, especially in Texas. We will answer all letters we receive and will exchange songs, pictures, and articles for Western togs.

BERNARDINE AND WANDA, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a chap, twenty-three years old and anxious to see whether I can wrangle a few Pen Pals, young or old. I know how to ride bronchos and race horses; can rope and bulldog cattle, and am an expert with rifle or pistol. Will be glad to give info about these things to any one who asks for it. So come on, Pen Pals, sling some ink my way and I think you will score a hit.

BRONCHO LON, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a boy of eleven years. I would like to get in touch with some Western Pen Pals, especially from California, Wyoming, Montana, and Texas—in fact, any State in the West. I like all outdoor sports and am especially fond of horseback riding, also running, swimming, and whistling. Could any one send me the song called "The Cowboy's Lament"? MARTIN WISECUP, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a lover of all things Western, and so I would like to get some Pen Pals in the West, for the information they can give me. I am a girl only twelve years old, but I will make my letters interesting, and anyhow will answer every letter I get. Please hurry and write me. I am waiting! ETTIBAE, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl, fifteen years of age, writing in for information about ranches. I would like to get some Pen Pals out West who can send me pictures of ranches and tell me all about life there. That has always interested me, and I saw my chance of getting what I want when I found your Pen Pal department.

FAY REEVES, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen and would like to get a Pen Pal from Texas who is about my own age. I have a little black pony, named "Crow" and a thirty-pound black saddle. By now I can ride pretty well, but I don't know anything about roping. I will answer all letters and will exchange pictures with any boy from Texas or Arizona.

A. J. JERNIGAN, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to find out whether I could get some Pen Pals between thirteen and sixteen years old. I

am especially interested to hear from real cowgirls in Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. I belong to the Girl Scout organization; can swim, play tennis and baseball, and also love to skate and watch hockey or football games. To any Pen Pal writing to me I shall gladly give information about the historic city of Cambridge; if it is of interest. Now I am hoping for many letters soon.

EDNA CARLAND, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fourteen and would like very much to find some Pen Pals. Although I live about as far West as any one can get, I would like to hear from Western cowgirls in Texas, Montana, Wyoming, or Arizona. Please try and find me some real fun-loving, go-getter Pen Pals.

DOROTHY SUTHERLAND, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen in search for Pen Pals. I will exchange songs, snapshots, et cetera, with any Pal, no matter where, but I especially would like to get some one in Texas. I am a lover of outdoor sports, and of course would prefer that whoever writes me likes them, too.

NORMAN FEASEL, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen and am asking you to print this letter for me so that I will get some Pen Pals, especially from the West. Some time ago the collecting bug struck me, and now I am interested in a number of things to collect—stamps, movie-star pictures, and especially Western songs. Therefore I sure would like to hear from girls who are interested in the same things, and I promise to answer every letter I receive.

NELLIE HOWARD, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

FAR-AWAY FOLKS

Thar's nary a week thet I don't get a couple o' letters from folks across the sea who want to join the Pen Pals. It makes me feel kind o' proudlike tuh think thet the W. W. W. travels so far an' finds so many admirers.

Now yuh do yore part an' show these frien's what fine letters yuh kin write and what wonderful things can be told about the good old U. S. A. But, don't ferget it takes a

five-cent stamp to mail letters overseas.

DEAR SAM: I was reading some of the Pen Pal letters in the W. W. W., and as I am interested in learning something about cowboys, firsthand, I am writing to ask that you let me join the Pen Pals. I will exchange information concerning my country for some about cowboy life and cowboy ways. I am twenty-three years old and, of course, would prefer Pals around my own age.

W. H. WESTERN, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a born Afri-cander, but nevertheless very much interested in everything concerning the wild West of the United States of America. I am a keen sportsman, big-game hunter, and can tell interesting things about the jungles here. City life does not interest me much, so I hope I will get my Pen Pals from the wide-open spaces. I shall gladly exchange snaps and also stamps.

BEN SMIT, OF SOUTH AFRICA.

DEAR UNCLE SAM: I am a boy of twelve, greatly interested in the American wild West. Please try to get me some Pen Pals out there, especially those willing to exchange snaps and stamps, and who can tell me real facts about Westerners and life on the ranches.

BOSSIE KRIEL, OF SOUTH AFRICA.

OTHER REQUESTS

If yuh didn't find yore Pen Pal among those listed under special headings, hyar's yore chance. Hyar's the group in which yuh'll find Pen Pals of all sorts of interest, an' it'll pay yuh to read thar letters carefully. An' I want tuh add, thet if any one of yuh is interested in the study of foreign languages, mebbe printin' a request in this group will bring results. Yuh might make connections with folks o' the same endeavor.

DEAR SAM: I only have one good Pen Pal so far, but I am hungry for more and would ask you to please print this letter for me. I am here once more looking for Pen Pals, because it seems to me that you did not do me justice when my

request was printed quite some time ago. I am a jolly sort of person, interested in sports, such as fishing, hunting, and especially camping. I don't think there is anything to equal a night beside a blazing camp fire, and I would like to exchange experiences with Pals.

DON, OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I am interested in getting some Pen Pals, and I am writing to you, hoping that you will find some for me. I am a boy about twenty years old and just love to write and receive letters from anywhere in the world. No, I am not hard to please and any Pen Pal will do, as long as he will stick and answer my letters promptly.

RILEY M. SAMPLES, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I have been thinking of going out West for homesteading and I would like some Pen Pals to write to me about all that I should know on the subject. I want to find out what land is still available and what is best suited for cattle raising.

T. C. B., OF MISSISSIPPI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of thirteen, and I am writing my first letter to you in the hope that you will be able to find some Pen Pals for me. I graduated this year from the eighth grade and have now enough time to answer all letters I receive. My main interests are outdoor life and horses.

HARRIET SHOMSHOR, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Does nobody over thirty years ever care to get letters? As far as I am concerned, I am a good bit over thirty, but letters are as welcome to me as ever, and now I am hoping that this appeal will be heard and that those Pen Pals of thirty and above will get busy to write to me. I can tell them a lot of interesting things about my own State and the places along the coast.

E. K. ORE, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen and would like to have Pen Pals from all over the country. My favorite sports are baseball, football, basket ball, and swimming, and I invite especially those Pals who are interested in the same endeavors to write to me.

RAYMOND CLARKE, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I wish you would find me some Pen Pals between fifteen and twenty years of age. I am sixteen years old, my-

self, and very anxious to make friends anywhere in the country.

THE WHISTLING KID, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen and would like to have Pen Pals anywhere in the United States, especially some who could give me some information about the Western States as well. I don't care whether the writers are young or old, each letter will be answered. I will also exchange snapshots. I sure hope I will hear from some one soon.

ANTHONY J. KOVAC, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen years of age and am looking for Pen Pals who are willing to trade broken guns, old lariats, spurs, holsters, and cartridge belts for post cards, snaps, songs, souvenirs, et cetera. I can shoot a rifle pretty well, but have not yet tried my hand at pistols. I can rope and am just learning how to ride.

JACK BUTLER, OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen, having lived all my life on ranches on the desert, about which I can tell quite a lot of interesting things. My hobby is collecting stamps, coins, and postal cards from all over the world, and I hope I will get many Pen Pals in far-away countries with whom I can exchange things. I might add that I am an invalid and very lonely; so please see that there will soon be plenty of letters in my mail box.

LONELY CLARITA, OF ARIZONA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I thought to get in around the stove, but not to get warm. I only want to get some real Pen Pals from anywhere in the world. I am about twenty-five years old and not bad-looking. When I was young I was badly bow-legged on account of riding horseback constantly, but I have outgrown that. I hope I get many letters, because I am all alone. Should my mother, Mrs. Alice Jackson, see this, I hope she will write; I have not heard from her and do not know where she is. I also hope that my old pal, Eva Gregory, will get in touch with me if she reads this.

MRS. NELLIE EDINGTON, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I would like to join your Pen Pals. I am a boy of fifteen and live on a ranch, so that I know all about the work and ways there. I enjoy horseback riding and other outdoor sports, but my real interest lies in playing the fiddle.

THE FIDDLING KID, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: Here come two girls in their teens from the "Land of the Thousand Lakes" with the old, old request for Pen Pals and more Pen Pals. We are not exactly lonesome, as we can find plenty to do, but we want Pen Pal friends, no matter where they are. We both skate, love music, play at sports of all kinds, read a lot, and want to hear from Pals who can write nice long letters. Anybody who writes can expect a speedy reply. We especially invite Jewish girls to write us, as we are Jewish ourselves.

PEGGY AND ANN, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of seventeen who is very much interested in cow-punching. I have a Western mustang and a cowboy outfit, and I would like for some one to tell me how to hold and throw a rope from a horse, also what to do after the cow is caught, how to throw and tie a cow and how to bulldog a steer.

GEORGE EBNER, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of ten and would like to have some Western Pen Pals. I like to hear about the West and have saved also quite a few of the songs you had in your magazine. Please get me some Pen Pals real soon.

ROWENA MORRELL, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, in the sixth grade. I would like to get Pen Pals from Kentucky, Colorado, and Texas, especially some who could tell me something interesting about their part of the country.

RONALD FRUIN, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR PEN PALS: Come on some of you ranch hombres who are around twelve years old. I would like to swap some things, such as a pair of cowboy boots for parts of a radio. I will also swap snapshots, and will answer all letters.

TOM RADIGEN, OF ILLINOIS.

Thet brings us to the end for this week, an' I'm jest wonderin' how many of yuh will think o' what I said at the beginnin' o' this department. Look back tuh it an' get them thar rules fixed in yore minds, so thet I can run this department as nicely as I want tuh do it. Yuh do yore part, an' yuh can rely on yore ol' frien' Sam Wills tuh do hisn! So long!



The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WHAT in tarnation am we waitin' fer?" growls Buck Foster, o' Circle J, at this week's meetin'. "Why don't yuh start readin' them thar letters, Boss?"

We looks over at the grizzled range veteran an' grins. "Jest waitin' fer Shorty Masters an' his pard, the Sonora Kid," we says. "They ought ter be here pronto, now, an' then——"

"Whoa, thar, yuh addle-headed long-ears!" yells a voice outside.

There's a squeak o' brakes, the rattle o' harness an' bits, then the thump o' two pairs o' boots headin' fer the door. The next minute, Shorty an' Sonora—better known, mebbe, as Willie Wetherbee—steps in.

We steps over ter Sonora an' sticks out our hand. "Congratulations, Willie," we says. "We

knowed all the time thet yuh wa'n't really no crook. How does it feel not ter be afraid o' sheriffs no more?"

The Sonora Kid grins all over his han'some, dark face as he grips our hand. "It feels plumb swell, Boss," he laughs. "O' course, Shorty an' me wa'n't never 'xactly afraid o' the law, but——"

"Waal, help me, Hannah!" explodes Buck. "So yuh finally got thet El Bandido skunk ter come clean, huh? I'll be a horned toad, if I didn't know yuh would! Put 'er thar, Sonora!"

All the waddies—the Circle J pards, the Whistlin' Kid, an' Jim Hazel, the forest ranger—crowd around Shorty an' Willie, askin' fer details o' the show-down with El Bandido. It keeps the two freight-in' pards plumb busy fer some time answerin' questions.

Finally, though, things quiet down a bit an' we raps fer order. When we gits it, we draws the first letter out o' the sack an' starts ter read. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: How is the spread coming along? I have been reading the 3W for almost five years, and I still think it is the best magazine on the market.

Why don't you cut out the Western Pen Pals department and increase the size of the Wranglers Corner? Pen Pals is no good, but you sure had an idea when you started the Corner. I never miss it.

Why in thunder don't you let Shorty and Willie pile the twine on that El Bandido Blanco skunk? It's getting tiresome, reading about their failing to catch him all the time.

My favorite characters are Sonny Tabor, Billy West, Buck Foster, and Joe Scott. The rest of the bunch aren't bad, however. I like them all.

That fellow who wrote in a while ago and signed himself Edward Coffee must have been eating locoweed. The whole 3W spread is fine, in spite of all he has to say.

Yours till Buck Foster quits Circle J and gets married,
OSBORNE EDWARDS.
Canton, Texas.

The gang is all grinnin' when we finishes readin'. The two what have the widest grins are Shorty an' Willie. Everybody figures that Osborne Edwards must be plumb delighted, now, ter learn that Shorty an' Willie have done what he was beefin' about—caught El Bandido an' fixed him so he won't ride the Rio trails no more.

As fer the suggestion that we cut out Sam Wills's Western Pen Pals—waal, we don't reckon thar's much chance o' doin' that. We aim ter please the readin' hombres, an' if the number o' letters Sam gits is any indication o' the popularity o' Pen Pals, that same department will stay put fer some time ter come.

The next letter that we draws out o' the ol' mail bag is this here one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I was born in the West and came East in later life. I figure

I'm still a Westerner. I have been reading 3W for six years, but this is my first letter to you.

I notice that some of the reading hombres who write in are always kicking about something. If they would only keep still, life would be a lot happier.

My favorite waddies are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Circle J pards, Silver Jack Steele, Johnny Forty-five, the Bar U twins, Señor Red Mask, the Ranny Kid, Hungry and Rusty, the Whislin' Kid, and Calamity Boggs.

If Buck Foster's brains were nitroglycerin, he wouldn't have enough to blow his nose. Tell him that—and tell him that if he wants to come down here on the prod, I am ready for him.

I am known as the fastest gun slinger in existence. I have hit a dime, three times, at twenty-five paces, before a nickel, dropped from a height of four feet, could hit the ground. I can also rope and tie a calf in eighteen seconds.

I have only two criticisms to make of your magazine. There should be more women and romance in the stories. Also there should be more stories of Sonny Tabor and Circle J.

I am going back out West in a year or so. When I get there, I may drop in and visit your spread. If I meet Buck, and he gets proddy, I'll remake his whole danged homely face.

Yours till Buck gets help from his old gal, Hannah,
SIX-GUN ADMIRAL.
Waynesburg, Pennsylvania.

Buck is plumb speechless after hearin' that. He glares around him an' snorts through his broken nose. His brown eyes is blazin' an' he starts tuggin' fiercelike at his droopin' mustache.

Before he kin let go, howsomever, an' disrupt the meetin', we grabs another letter an' starts readin'. This is it:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner. I have been reading the 3W for two years and think it can't be beat.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Calamity Boggs, Vincente the Yaqui, and the Circle J pards. Buck Foster is one real he-man fighter. He ought to ride herd on his pards now and then.

Kid Wolf is a little too perfect, I think.

Is isn't possible for a man to be quite so good as he is—good with guns, I mean. And why isn't he ever hurt or wounded?

Rusty Bolivar, that peppery little pard of Hungry Hawkins, is altogether too peppery and ornery. He may be a good pard for Hungry, but his captain is going to throw him in jail some day for being too fresh and proddy.

Shorty Masters and Willie Wetherbee ought to try ranching or cow-punching for a change. Freighting and mule skinning is no job for a pair of hombres like them.

I am interested in the Wranglers Corner. My friends all tell me that you make up the letters that appear in it. I don't believe that. But if I don't see this letter in there soon, I will believe it. Please print it so I can prove to my friends that they are loco.

Yours till Sonny Tabor drinks redeye.

SLIM HANUN.

Lake Villa, Illinois.

Here's the next one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to you. Why my first one was not printed is a mystery to me. If this meets the same fate, I'll know that there is no such place as the Wranglers Corner. This is my last fling.

Like all the other reading hombres, I have my favorites. First in line is Johnny Forty-five, then Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Señor Red Mask, Hungry and Rusty, Silver Jack Steele, and Storm King.

At this time, I want to say that you print entirely too many Circle J stories. They aren't very good anyway, and too many is—too many.

Yours till George Krumm plugs Buck Foster,

R. B. T.

Chicago, Illinois.

After thet, we comes ter this here one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Well, I'll be a horned toad, so help me Hannah, if this isn't the fifth letter I have written to you! When you didn't print the fourth, I said that I'd never write again, but—well, here I am. Just once more!

Listen, Boss: Why don't you bring back some of the old-time favorites like the Shootin' Fool, Blondy of Twin Bells, Bud Jones of Texas, Smoke Walsh, and Señor Red Mask? And put Ruth Dawe's picture on the cover some day. I'd like to see what she really looks like.

Buck Foster! There's a man! I'll bet

that, if he tried, Buck could lick Billy West, Joe Scott, and Jim Benson with one hand tied behind him. And then, with Billy and Joe out of the way, Buck could go out alone and catch Devil Tripp.

Well, I guess I'd better quit now. Yours till Buck doesn't forget to bring his glasses to the Corner.

ROBERT WINSTON.

Jackson, Tennessee.

Thet one shore makes Buck feel better. He preens his grizzled mustache and puffs up his chest till we thinks the buttons is goin' ter pop offn his flannel shirt.

But he don't enjoy himself long. Joe Scott, with a wink at Billy West, starts workin' on him.

"Yeah," drawls the redhead. "Thet's right! Git all puffed up, yuh danged ol' sage hound! I s'pose yuh b'lieve thet a broke-down, sway-backed ol' broomtail like yuh *could* lick Billy an' Jim an' me. Why, yuh pore ol' cross betwixt a spavined cockroach an' a——"

"Waugh!" With a bellow like a steer thet's been scorched by a runnin' iron, Buck is on his feet, shakin' his fist under Joe's big beak of a nose. "Yuh brockle-faced leppy!" he shouts. "Yuh can't talk ter yores truly, Buck Foster, thet way. Fer two pins, I'd——"

"What do yuh want the two pins fer?" jeers Joe. "Ter hold thet mangy vest from fallin' off o' yuh in pieces?"

It's high time ter call a halt ter the wranglin'. Billy West does same, an' we gits on with the readin'. Here's what we reads ter sort o' cool the atmosphere:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: *Hola, amigos! Como 'stan?* Waal, Boss, this is my first letter to the Corner, although I've been reading your flea-bit magazine for the past three years. Reckon I don't need to say how I like it.

Say, maybe some of the reading hombres would like to do the same thing I do with my copies of 3W. I have them all arranged according to dates, and when I run

out of reading matter I go back to 'em and read 'em again.

Also, when I first get an issue of 3W, I cut off the top and tack the picture on the wall to make a border. I've nearly covered my room now, and it sure is keno.

Help me, Hannah, Boss, if you don't print this, I'll sure come over there and smoke you all up pienty! And fer the love of a homesick doggie, what has happened to Lucius Carey? The last I heard of him was in the story, "Dinero From Bar X"—a plumb good one, too.

Among the stories that I have liked best in 3W are the following: "Kid Wolf On Murder Mesa"; "The Red Noose"—Circle J; "Ghosts Of Graveyard Gulch"; "The

Black Skull Riders"—Circle J, "Smoky Langdon o' the 2 Square"; "The Trackin Of Wild Hoss Peters"; and "Thet Ugly Little Hombre."

There were a lot of others, too, I guess. In fact, I always like them all.

Well, *buenos dias, compañeros. Hasta la vista!* EL VAQUERO.

Denver, Colorado.

An' thet jest about winds things up fer this week. We adjourns the meetin' an' the waddies high-tail it fer home. They'll all be back next week fer another meetin' with

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

Dead Man's Trail

Novelette

By SAMUEL H. NICKELS

Hungry an' Rusty, them two fightin' Rangers, is called on ter help solve a plumb bad mystery. They do the job with six-guns—an' it stays done.

The Bandit Killer Of Battle-ax

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

Buck Foster finds hisself a new job—which same means thet his three saddle pards have themselves another tough job gittin' the veteran out o' trouble.

Kid Wolf Law In Poker City

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

If there ever was a town thet needed a visit by the gun gentleman from Texas, Poker City is it. The Kid rides in on Blizzard, an' several tough gents goes out—feet first.

Also stories of the Bar U twins, by Charles E. Barnes; Lum Yates, by Collins Hafford—and other characters.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

15 CENTS A COPY

ORDER IN ADVANCE FROM YOUR NEWS DEALER