

STREET & SMITH'S

# WILD WEST

WEEKLY

CONTENTS COPYRIGHTED 1936

SEPT. 5, 1936

10

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

THE TRAIL TO SQUAW GULCH

## A "CIRCLE J"

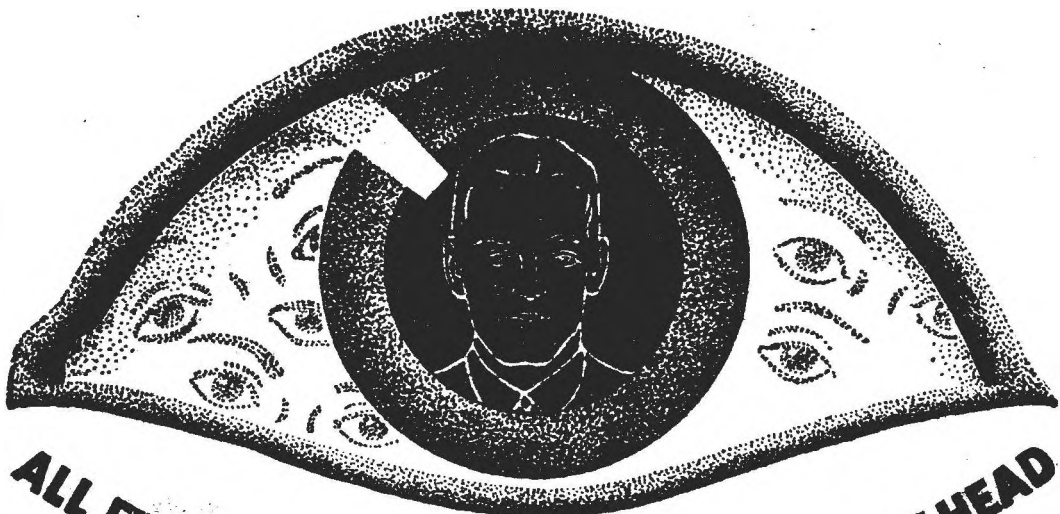
NOVELETTE

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

Also  
**RISKY McKEE**  
and  
**SEÑOR RED MASK**  
Novelettes







A MAN cannot conceal ability. And the man who is determined to go some place and is doing something about it cannot conceal that either. His associates feel it and his superiors recognize it. The man

who looks ahead knows the importance of training, and other men who have looked ahead and gone some place know that I. C. S. offers the right kind of training. Look ahead — mail this coupon!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 4903-H. SCRANTON, PENNA.



Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X:



- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><b>TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES</b></p>  |   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architect<br><input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Draftsman<br><input type="checkbox"/> Building Estimating<br><input type="checkbox"/> Contractor and Builder<br><input type="checkbox"/> Structural Draftsman<br><input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Management of Inventions<br><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Electric Lighting<br><input type="checkbox"/> Welding, Electric and Gas<br><input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints<br><input type="checkbox"/> Boilermaker | <input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment of Metals<br><input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Worker<br><input type="checkbox"/> Telegraph Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Work <input type="checkbox"/> Radio<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineering<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Draftsman<br><input type="checkbox"/> Machinist <input type="checkbox"/> Toolmaker<br><input type="checkbox"/> Patternmaker<br><input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Engines<br><input type="checkbox"/> Aviation Engines<br><input type="checkbox"/> Automobile Mechanic<br><input type="checkbox"/> Refrigeration | <input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing <input type="checkbox"/> Steam Fitting<br><input type="checkbox"/> Heating <input type="checkbox"/> Ventilation<br><input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning<br><input type="checkbox"/> Steam Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Steam Electric Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Locomotives<br><input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Section Foreman<br><input type="checkbox"/> Air Brakes <input type="checkbox"/> R. R. Signalmen<br><input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering<br><input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineering<br><input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping |
| <p><b>BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES</b></p>   |   |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Business Management<br><input type="checkbox"/> Office Management<br><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Management<br><input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management<br><input type="checkbox"/> Accountancy<br><input type="checkbox"/> Cost Accountant   | <input type="checkbox"/> C. P. Accountant<br><input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping<br><input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial Work<br><input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> French<br><input type="checkbox"/> Salesmanship<br><input type="checkbox"/> Advertising   | <input type="checkbox"/> Bridge Engineer<br><input type="checkbox"/> Bridge and Building Foreman<br><input type="checkbox"/> Chemistry<br><input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy<br><input type="checkbox"/> Coal Mining<br><input type="checkbox"/> Mine Foreman<br><input type="checkbox"/> Navigation<br><input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Woolen Manufacturing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture<br><input type="checkbox"/> Fruit Growing<br><input type="checkbox"/> Poultry Raising   |
| <p><b>SERVICE STATION SALESMANSHIP</b></p>  |   |   |
| <p><input type="checkbox"/> Service Station Salesmanship<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> First Year College<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Stenography and Typing<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Civil Service     <input type="checkbox"/> Mail Carrier<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Railway Mail Clerk</p>   |   |   |
| <p><input type="checkbox"/> Grade School Subjects<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> College Preparatory<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Illustrating<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning<br/> <input type="checkbox"/> Lettering Show Cards     <input type="checkbox"/> Signs</p>  |   |   |

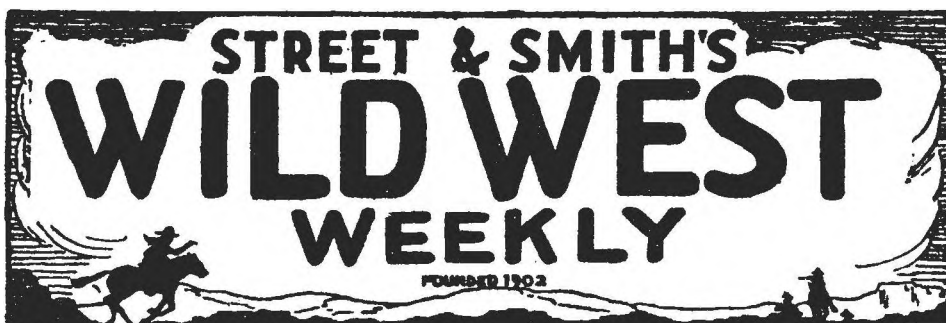
Name..... Age..... Address.....

City..... State..... Present Position.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

WW-1F

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements



Yearly Subscription, \$4.00

Six Months, \$2.00

Single Copies, 10 Cents

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

Vol. 104, No. 6 CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER 5, 1936 Whole No. 1768

Cover Picture—Scene from

"The Trail To Squaw Gulch" . . . Painted by R. G. Harris

### THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

The Trail To Squaw Gulch . . . Cleve Endicott . . . 10  
The Circle J pards ride it with roarin' guns.

The Guns Of Don Puma . . . William A. Todd . . . 61  
They make plenty o' trouble fer thet gun gambler, Risky McKee.

Señor Red Mask and the Riders of the  
Dim Trails . . . Guy L. Maynard . . . 95  
Plenty of 'em do no more ridin' on any trail after meetin' him.

### FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

Black Blizzard Gold . . . Hal Davenport . . . 36  
Woollies, a range hog, an' the gold shore cause plenty o' fightin'.

Killers of the Buffalo Range . . . Samuel H. Nickels . . . 49  
Their killin' days are numbered when Hungry an' Rusty bit their trail.

Owl-hooters In Maverick . . . Philip F. Deere . . . 83  
When a two-gun cowpoke's framed fer murder, trouble's bound to pop.

Brazos Lands in the Hoosegow . . . 120  
How thet happens is told in pictures an' text.

### BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORY

A Noisy, Useless Gun . . . 35

### DEPARTMENTS

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral . . . 124

The Wranglers Corner . . . 126

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; Clarence C. Vernam, Vice President. Copyright, 1936, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1936, 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, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries, except The Guianas and British Honduras, \$5.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, \$7.00 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.



Let's  
see what the  
**doctor**  
says about  
laxatives



AS SYMPATHETIC as your doctor is with his patients, he is strictly a scientist in his attitude towards health. He has, for instance, certain definite standards which he demands of a laxative before giving it his approval. These requirements are listed below. Read them carefully for your own good.

**THE DOCTOR'S TEST OF A GOOD LAXATIVE**

It should be dependable.  
It should be mild and gentle.  
It should be thorough.  
Its merit should be proven by the test of time.  
It should *not* form a habit.  
It should *not* over-act.  
It should *not* cause stomach pains.  
It should *not* nauseate or upset digestion.

**EX-LAX MEETS THIS TEST AT EVERY POINT**

Next time you need a laxative remember this: Ex-Lax fulfills the doctor's requirements at every point.

Doctors everywhere use Ex-Lax in their own families. Mothers have given it to their children with perfect trust for over 30 years. Since Ex-Lax was first introduced, it has steadily risen in public confidence. Today more people

use Ex-Lax than any other laxative in the whole, wide world.

**PROVE THE DOCTOR'S POINTS YOURSELF**

Try Ex-Lax. See how mild and gentle it is—how thorough. Find out for yourself how easy it works. No upset stomach. No pain. No nausea. Ex-Lax is intended only to help Nature—and to do it without shock or violence.

**A PLEASURE TO TAKE**

If you have been taking nasty, druggy-tasting laxatives, you'll be delighted to find how pleasant Ex-Lax is. For Ex-Lax tastes just like delicious chocolate. Children actually *enjoy* taking it. And it is just as good for them as it is for adults.

At all drug stores in 10c and 25c sizes. Or write for free sample to Ex-Lax, Dept. Y96, P.O. Box 170, Times-Plaza Sta., Brooklyn, N. Y.

When Nature forgets—  
remember

**EX-LAX**  
THE ORIGINAL CHOCOLATED LAXATIVE

# Arrest Him, Officer!

I'LL HAVE COMPLETE FACTS ON THE OTHER FELLOW TONIGHT!



## Follow This Man!

**S**ECRET Service Operator No. 38 is on the job... follow him through all the excitement of his chase after the counterfeiter gang. See how a crafty operator works. Tell-tale finger prints in the murdered girl's room that help him solve the great mystery! BETTER than fiction because every word is TRUE. No obligation. Just mail me the coupon and get—

## FREE The Confidential Reports No. 38 Made to His Chief

And the best part of it all is this—it may open your eyes to the great opportunity for YOU as a well paid Finger Print Expert. This is a young, fast-growing profession. The kind of work you would like. Excitement! Thrills! Travell! A regular monthly salary. Reward money. And remember: graduates of this school HEAD 47% of all Identification Bureaus in the U. S. Quick! Mail the Coupon NOW and I'll send you these Free Confidential Reports!

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE  
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. C277 Chicago, Illinois

### Institute of Applied Science

1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. C277 Chicago, Illinois

Gentlemen:—Without any obligation whatsoever, send me the Reports of Operator No. 38, also your illustrated Free Book on Finger Prints and your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. Literature will NOT be sent to boys under 17 years of age.

Name

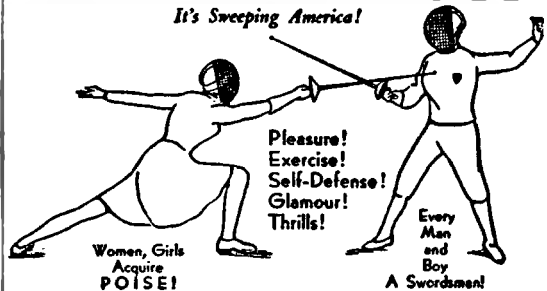
Address

Age

AT LAST YOU CAN LEARN

# SWORDPLAY

It's Sweeping America!



## A GREAT SPORT—A SAFE SPORT!

For the first time you are offered a chance to learn SWORDPLAY—the ancient art of skill and honor. NOT expensive. WE PROVIDE ALL NECESSARY EQUIPMENT and full instruction enabling you to get a Master Swordsman's degree, join our National Swordsman's Society, and earn the right to use our impressive Coat of Arms.

MEN—WOMEN—YOUTHS! Enrich your lives with this thrill of thrills! Give exhibition matches at social gatherings. Be the leader in your community, or form a fencing club with our help.

"Swordplay is Smartplay"

Write today for fascinating particulars.

"Everybody's doing it"

DONT  
SEND  
MONEY

American School of  
SWORDPLAY Incorporated  
Santa Fe, New Mexico.

# I WANT MEN

FORDS  
GIVEN

TEA AND COFFEE ROUTES  
PAYING UP TO \$60.00 A WEEK



National company needs more men at once to make regular calls on local routes. No experience needed. Operate on our capital. I send everything; give you brand new Ford car as bonus. Rush name on postcard. Get free facts. No obligation. Act today.  
Albert Mills, 1825 Monmouth, Cincinnati, O.

# Rheumatism

Relieve  
Pain In 9  
Minutes

To relieve the torturing pain of Rheumatism, Neuritis, Neuralgia or Lumbago in 9 minutes, get the Doctor's Prescription **NURITO**. Absolutely safe. No opiates, no narcotics. Does the work quickly—and must relieve your worst pain in nine minutes or your money back at Druggist's. Don't suffer. Use guaranteed **NURITO** today.

# Law!

## LEARN AT HOME

Are you adult, alert, ambitious, willing to study? Investigate **LAW!** We guide you step by step—furnish all texts, including 14-volume Law Library. Training prepared by leading law professors and given by members of bar. Degree of LL. B. conferred. Low cost, easy terms. Send **NOW** for Free, 64-page "Law Training for Leadership."  
LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 936-L, Chicago

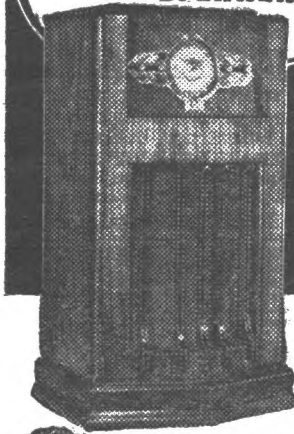
Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements

# The Whole Family Will Thrill to the Glorious Reception of this NEW 1937 AIR-TESTED MIDWEST

Only **MIDWEST** gives you **16 TUBES...5 WAVE BANDS...**  
**9 to 2200 METERS...ELECTRIK SAVER...PUSH BUTTON TUNING...**  
**AUTOMATIC AERIAL ADAPTION...DUAL AUDIO PROGRAM EXPANDER**

and Scores of Other Features  
 for only

**\$49.95**  
 COMPLETE,  
 WITH  
 GIANT  
 THEATRE-  
 SONIC  
 SPEAKER



**30  
 DAYS  
 Free TRIAL!**

**TERMS  
 AS LOW AS  
 10¢ PER DAY**

**SAVE UP TO 50% BY BUYING DIRECT FROM MIDWEST FACTORY**

ONCE again, Midwest demonstrates its leadership by offering the world's most powerful ALL-WAVE 16-Tube, 5-Band Radio. A startling achievement, it makes the whole world your playground. Powerful Triple-Twin tubes (two tubes in one!) give 18-tube results! It is a master achievement, a highly perfected, precisely built, radio-musical instrument that will thrill you with its marvelous super performance... glorious crystal-clear "concert" realism... and magnificent foreign reception. Before you buy, write for the FREE 40-page 1937 catalog. Never before so much radio for so little money. Why pay more?

## 85 ADVANCED 1937 FEATURES

This Super DeLuxe Midwest is so powerful, so amazingly selective, so delicately sensitive that it brings in distant foreign stations with full loud speaker volume on channels adjacent to powerful locals. Scores of marvelous Midwest features, many of them exclusive, make it easy to parade the nations of the world before you. You can switch instantly from American programs... to Canadian, police, amateur, commercial, airplane and ship broadcasts... to the finest and most fascinating foreign programs.

No middlemen's profits to pay! Buying direct from the Midwest factory makes your radio dollar go twice as far. See for yourself that Midwest offers you greater radio value—enables you to buy the more economical factory-to-you way that thousands of radio purchasers have preferred since 1920. You can order your Midwest 1937 radio from the new 40-page catalog with as much certainty of satisfaction as if you were to come yourself, to our great factory. (It pictures the beautiful 1937 radios... in their actual colors!) You save 30% to 50%—you get 30 days free trial—and you pay as little as 10¢ a day. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write today for FREE catalog.



**I AM TREMENDOUSLY IMPRESSED WITH THE REMARKABLE PERFORMANCE OF MY MIDWEST.....**  
*Robert Montgomery*



**MUSICIANS EVERYWHERE COMMENT ON THIS.... REMARKABLE INSTRUMENT.**  
*Johnny Green*

## ELECTRIK-SAVER REDUCES WATTAGE CONSUMPTION 50%

The magical exclusive Electrik-Saver enables Midwest radios to operate on low line voltage—as low as 80 volts!... and explains why they consume no more current than ordinary 7-tube sets. It is a real miser begrudging every penny's worth of current that flows through the meter.



**MAIL COUPON TODAY**

**Free 30-DAY TRIAL OFFER** and **40-PAGE FOUR-COLOR Free CATALOG**

**MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION**  
 Dept. C-43, Cincinnati, Ohio

Without obligation on my part, send me your new FREE catalog and complete details of your liberal 30-day FREE trial offer. This is NOT an order.

Special offer and prices prevail only when dealing direct with factory by mail.

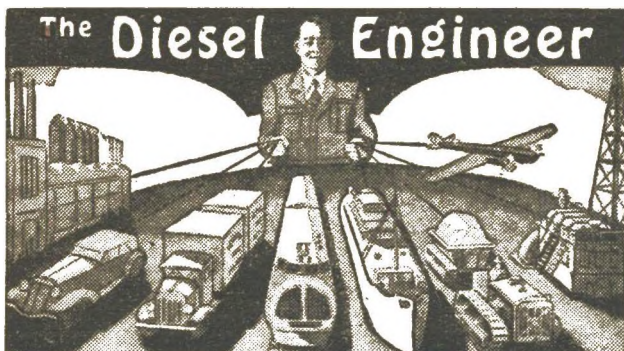
Name \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 Town \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

**MIDWEST RADIO CORP.**

DEPT. C-43 CINCINNATI, OHIO, U.S.A.  
 Established 1920 Cable Address MIRACO... All Codes

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements





## The Diesel Engineer

Now is your chance to get into a big new industry and grow up with it to an important position. Today there is practically no competition in the Diesel field, but the increasing use of Diesel engines will result in keen competition for jobs after a few years. If you start your training now and get established in this field, you need not worry about competition.

**American School, Dept. D61, Drexel Avenue at 58th Street, Chicago, Illinois**

## Train for a Well-Paid Hotel Position

COME  
to WASHINGTON

Good positions for trained men and women in hotel, club, restaurant and institutional field. Previous experience proved unnecessary. Qualify in FOUR MONTHS—learn on real hotel equipment, under expert instructors. National Placement Service FREE of extra charge. New Day Classes start Sept., Oct. Catalog FREE!

**LEWIS HOTEL TRAINING SCHOOLS**

Division RMP-1234

Washington, D. C.

in  
**4**  
months

## ITCHING

**TORTURE STOPPED in one minute!**

For quick relief from the itching of pimples, blotches, eczema, athlete's foot, rashes and other skin eruptions, apply Dr. Dennis' cooling, antiseptic, liquid D. D. D. Prescription. Its gentle oils soothe the irritated skin. Clear, greaseless and stainless—dries fast. Stops the most intense itching instantly. A 35c trial bottle, at drug stores, proves it—or money back. Ask for—

**D.D.D. Prescription**

Train for  
**12**  
Weeks in  
**COYNE**  
**SHOPS**

## ELECTRICITY

**LEARN BY DOING**—Actual work on real Electrical machinery—No books, classes, or correspondence. Prepare for a real job—many earn while learning.

**FINANCE YOUR TRAINING**—Write for my "Pay Tuition After Graduation" plan, and my offer of additional instruction in Diesel Engines, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning. N. C. Lewis, Pres. Coyne Electrical School 500 S. Paulina St., Dept. 68-11, Chicago, Ill.



By return mail we will rush you details of the most outstanding men's tailoring proposition ever made. No matter if you have tailoring experience or not, as long as you can sell—that's all it is necessary. And surprise of surprises!—**NO RAISE IN PRICE!** Strand's last season low \$21.50—Made-to-Measure Suits and Overcoats—**CONTINUED!** With big commissions—with big monthly bonus plan. Free Outfit, Free Advertising Help, Fast Delivery—**EVERYTHING**—Don't decide to sell anything before writing Strand Tailoring Co., Dept. 17, 2501-2521 E. Eager St., Baltimore, Md.

## Is Your Job Safe?

Just as the gasoline engine changed the jobs of thousands who depended on horse-drawn vehicles for their living—so now the Diesel engine is fast invading both the power and transportation fields, and threatening the present jobs of thousands of workers.

### What This New Field Offers You

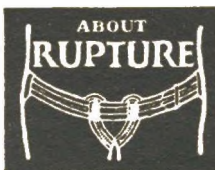
Diesel engines are fast replacing steam and gasoline engines in power plants, motor trucks and busses, locomotives and ships, aircraft, tractors, dredges, pumps, etc.—opening up an increasing number of well-paid jobs for Diesel-trained men. You will get full information about the latest Diesel developments—two- and four-stroke cycles; low- and high-speed and heavy duty types; Diesel-electric generating systems, etc.—in our course. Includes all text material—with special diagrams for quick understanding of this new power.

**Get our Free Diesel Booklet** and find out what the Diesel field offers you—how quickly you can obtain a complete understanding of Diesel engine principles and operation by spare-time study at home. Asking for information involves no obligation—but it may mark the turning point in your life. Write **TODAY** for full information.

## don't WORRY

Why put up with years of needless discomfort and worry? Try a Brooks Automatic Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance permits the opening to close, yet holds reducible rupture securely, comfortably—day and night. Thousands report amazing results. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads, metal girdle or parts to chafe or gouge. Patented in U. S. and 13 foreign countries. Try one 10 DAYS WITHOUT A PENNY'S RISK. You'll be delighted. Free Book on Rupture and convincing facts mailed postpaid in plain envelope.

**BROOKS COMPANY, 188D State St., Marshall, Mich.**



BE A TRAINED

## AUTO-DIESEL EXPERT

Learn AT HOME

**PREPARE NOW** for rich new fields of opportunity in this fast-growing industry. Diesel-Trained Men needed for trucks, busses, tractors, farm power and lighting plants. Practical, easy, spare-time training plan offers quick way to good jobs at good pay, or a profitable auto repair business at your own home from the pleasure automotive home-study school. Write today for Free AUTO-DIESEL Book and pay-as-you-learn offer.

**MOTOR INSTITUTE of AMERICA**

4554 Broadway, Dept. JD-19, Chicago, Ill.

EARN BIG MONEY  
SEND FOR FREE BOOK!

## LET KIDNEYS FLUSH OUT 3 LBS. A DAY

**Clean Out 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes**

Nature put over 15 miles of tiny tubes and filters in your kidneys to strain the waste matter out of the blood. Kidneys should pass 3 pints a day and so get rid of more than 3 pounds of waste matter.

When the passing of water is scanty, with smarting and burning, the 15 miles of kidney tubes may need flushing. This danger signal may be the beginning of nagging backache, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes and dizziness.

If kidneys don't empty 3 pints a day and so get rid of more than 3 pounds of waste matter, your body may take up some of these poisons causing serious trouble. Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and help the kidneys to flush out 3 pounds a day. Insist on Doan's Pills.

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements



# WAKE UP YOUR LIVER BILE—

**Without Calomel—And You'll Jump Out of Bed in the Morning Rarin' to Go**

The liver should pour out two pounds of liquid bile into your bowels daily. If this bile is not flowing freely, your food doesn't digest. It just decays in the bowels. Gas bloats up your stomach. You get constipated. Your whole system is poisoned and you feel sour, sunk and the world looks punk.

Laxatives are only makeshifts. A mere bowel movement doesn't get at the cause. It takes those good, old Carter's Little Liver Pills to get these two pounds of bile flowing freely and make you feel "up and up". Harmless, gentle, yet amazing in making bile flow freely. Ask for Carter's Little Liver Pills by name. Stubbornly refuse anything else. 25c at all drug stores. © 1955, C. M. CO.

**FREE—**

CARTER MEDICINE CO., 42 Murray St., N. Y. C.

Please send me FREE sample of Carter's Little Liver Pills; also FREE book entitled "The Interesting Story of What Makes You Feel Good."

Name.....

Address.....

Mail Coupon or Paste on Postcard 62-A



## Get Set for Life!

**MAKE up to \$65 WEEKLY** in new kind of wholesale business. Place famous line 5c-10c goods with stores. Merchants grab our FREE GOODS Deals, 2nd fast-selling products—all on salesmaking Counter Displays. Up to 140% profit for you and merchant. No experience or investment to start. Big catalog and facts FREE. World's Products Co., Dept. 9845, Spencer, Ind.

# ECZEMA

is not a skin disease, says Dr. Hoermann, well-known Milwaukee Eczema specialist. If you have Eczema, sometimes called skin rheum, weeping eczema, milk crust, scald head, moist tetter, write for book of little-known facts FREE. Also learn about Dr. Hoermann's simple home treatment which has produced amazing results in his private practice. Dr. Rud. Hoermann, Inc., Suite 258, 2200 N. Third St., Milwaukee, Wis.

## FREE SUITS and up to \$7 EXTRA DAILY

Easy plan brings you chance to get free suit first week and big extra profits daily. Show friends how to save up to \$10 on fine, all wool, made-to-measure clothes. Fine custom quality tailoring. Newest styles. 6-day delivery. Money back guarantee. You make up to \$7 including Free Suit and CASH BONUS on every suit you sell. No limit to number free suits we'll give you. Extra large samples and complete outfit FREE.

O. M. TAILORING COMPANY  
317 S. Market St., Dept. 8C-9, Chicago, Ill.



# NEW INVENTIONS

Revolutionary inventions—man's latest conquests. Read about them in Popular Mechanics. Every month this big 200-page magazine is crammed full of fascinating accounts and pictures (many in full color) of daring adventures, astounding scientific discoveries, new achievements in aviation, electricity, engineering, chemistry, physics, radio, etc. Special departments for home craftsmen and practical shop men—easy to follow plans—get real fun out of making things. Don't miss this month's issue—a thrilling and entertaining record of the world's newest wonders—25c at all newsstands.

**POPULAR MECHANICS**

## "I have REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT!"

... writes George Bailey



## WE WANT YOU TO TEST the Weil Belt at our Expense!

**DON'T** let a "bay window" make you the butt of locker room jokes! If the Weil Belt does not take 3 INCHES off that paunchy waistline IN 10 DAYS it won't cost you a red cent!

■ If you want that well-set-up appearance, get rid of the fat this easy way! No starvation diets... no strenuous exercises... just get into a Weil belt and appear inches smaller at once. You will feel, as well as look like a new man as the fat actually disappears. With the loss of burdensome fat vitality and pep will come back. Many wearers state that the reduced weight aids digestion and relieves constipation!

## IF YOU DO NOT... REDUCE YOUR WAIST 3 INCHES IN 10 DAYS... it will cost you nothing!

■ It would take a whole lot of nerve to make such an agreement if we didn't know, from the experiences of hundreds of men that our claims are conservative. W. T. Anderson writes "Lost 50 lbs."; W. L. McGinnis says "Waist is 8 inches smaller". Fred Wolfe says "Feel like a new man."

■ These men and many others are so enthusiastic about their new lease on life that they write us about it!... Why not prove at our expense that it will do as much for you?

## DON'T WAIT, FAT IS DANGEROUS!

■ Insurance companies think twice before they insure a fat man... doctors warn against overweight. Why not get that dangerous fat off before it harms your health?

■ The Weil method is safe and sure... it's the gentle massage-like action as you walk or sit at your desk that does the trick! And you feel more comfortable with sagging abdominal muscles supported. Don't carry around that excess baggage any longer! Mail the coupon today! NOW!!

## SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL CO., Inc., 619 HILL ST., NEW HAVEN, CONN.

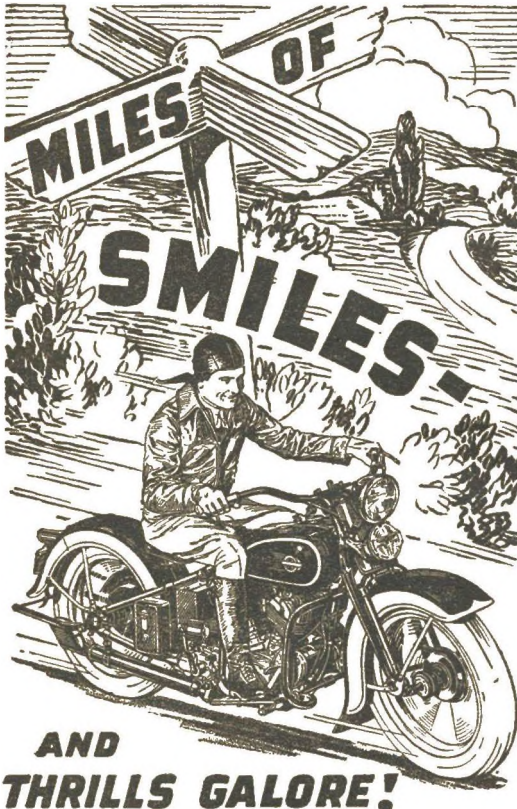
Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 day FREE Trial Offer.

Name.....

Address.....

Use Coupon or Send Name and Address on Penny Post Card





**AND  
THRILLS GALORE!**

Yes, miles of broad highways and picturesque by-ways. New sights, new beauties, new thrills at every turn, when you ride a 1936 Harley-Davidson. Thrill to its fast getaway—zooming speed—high-stepping power—eye-filling style, and gliding ride. Low-cost mileage, speed-line design and up-to-the-minute motor improvements give you plenty of extra thrills!

See your Harley-Davidson dealer for a FREE ride—ask about his Easy Pay Plans and send in the coupon — NOW!

Ride a  
**HARLEY-DAVIDSON**

MAIL THIS COUPON

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTOR CO., Dept. SC.  
Milwaukee, Wis.

Interested in motorcycling. Send illustrated literature. Postage stamp is enclosed to cover mailing cost.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

My age is ☐ 16-19 years, ☐ 20-30 years, ☐ 31 years and up, ☐ under 16 years. Check your age group.

# BIG HUSKY MUSCLES ONLY

America's Greatest Value

**\$2.99**  
Complete  
Send No Money



**WALL EXERCISER**



**SHADOW BOXER**



**ROWING MACHINE**



**30 DAY TRAINING FOR MEN ONLY**



**HERCULES EXERCISER**  
49 East 21st St. Dept. J-90  
New York, N. Y. © I. P. D. Inc.

**HOW TO GET STRONG**

# Classified Advertising

## Detectives—Instructions

DETECTIVES EARN BIG MONEY. Work home or travel. DETECTIVE particulars free. Experience unnecessary. Write, GEORGE WAGONER, 2640-A Broadway, New York.

## Patents Secured

PATENTS—Reasonable terms. Book and advice free. L. F. Randolph, Dept. 513, Washington, D. C.

## Business Opportunities

CORRESPOND FOR NEWSPAPERS: Profitable, interesting. Easily learned. Write Publishers' Service Bureau, 4258-M Drexel, Chicago, Ill.

## Photo Finishing

20 REPRINTS 25c. Films developed two prints each negative 25c. Skrugland, 6970-95 George, Chicago, Illinois.

## Salesmen Wanted

SALESMEN, COLLECT BIG commissions selling men's, women's, children's shoes. 102 styles. Special arch support. Experience unnecessary. Outfit free. Tanners, 526 C St., Boston, Mass.

Please mention this magazine when answering advertisements



FOR A  
LIMITED  
TIME

# FREE TUBE

With Each  
Order for  
Two Tires

**GOODYEAR  
GOODRICH - FISK  
FIRESTONE - U. S.  
And All Other Makes**

Assisting Tire Bargains, we have a local and unexcelled tire warehouse, on Standard Brands. Every tire repaired by our improved method and by skilled experts.

20 years of experience assure superior product. THOUSANDS OF USERS throughout the U. S. say our tire **GIVE LONG SATISFACTORY SERVICE. ORDER NOW! DON'T WAIT!**—Get a Brand New Circular Molded Tube absolutely FREE with each tire ordered. Offer good limited time.

## BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tire Tube	Size Rim	Tire Tube
28x4-60-20	\$2.15 \$0.85	30x4-60-20	\$2.15 \$0.85
30x4-60-20	2.34 .85	32x4-60-20	2.40 .85
34x4-60-20	2.40 .85	36x4-60-20	2.40 .85
38x4-60-20	2.40 .85	40x4-60-20	2.40 .85
42x4-60-20	2.40 .85	44x4-60-20	2.40 .85
46x4-60-20	2.40 .85	48x4-60-20	2.40 .85
50x4-60-20	2.40 .85	52x4-60-20	2.40 .85
54x4-60-20	2.40 .85	56x4-60-20	2.40 .85
58x4-60-20	2.40 .85	60x4-60-20	2.40 .85
62x4-60-20	2.40 .85	64x4-60-20	2.40 .85
66x4-60-20	2.40 .85	68x4-60-20	2.40 .85
70x4-60-20	2.40 .85	72x4-60-20	2.40 .85
74x4-60-20	2.40 .85	76x4-60-20	2.40 .85
78x4-60-20	2.40 .85	80x4-60-20	2.40 .85
82x4-60-20	2.40 .85	84x4-60-20	2.40 .85
86x4-60-20	2.40 .85	88x4-60-20	2.40 .85
90x4-60-20	2.40 .85	92x4-60-20	2.40 .85
94x4-60-20	2.40 .85	96x4-60-20	2.40 .85
98x4-60-20	2.40 .85	100x4-60-20	2.40 .85
102x4-60-20	2.40 .85	104x4-60-20	2.40 .85
106x4-60-20	2.40 .85	108x4-60-20	2.40 .85
110x4-60-20	2.40 .85	112x4-60-20	2.40 .85
114x4-60-20	2.40 .85	116x4-60-20	2.40 .85
118x4-60-20	2.40 .85	120x4-60-20	2.40 .85
122x4-60-20	2.40 .85	124x4-60-20	2.40 .85
126x4-60-20	2.40 .85	128x4-60-20	2.40 .85
130x4-60-20	2.40 .85	132x4-60-20	2.40 .85
134x4-60-20	2.40 .85	136x4-60-20	2.40 .85
138x4-60-20	2.40 .85	140x4-60-20	2.40 .85
142x4-60-20	2.40 .85	144x4-60-20	2.40 .85
146x4-60-20	2.40 .85	148x4-60-20	2.40 .85
150x4-60-20	2.40 .85	152x4-60-20	2.40 .85
154x4-60-20	2.40 .85	156x4-60-20	2.40 .85
158x4-60-20	2.40 .85	160x4-60-20	2.40 .85
162x4-60-20	2.40 .85	164x4-60-20	2.40 .85
166x4-60-20	2.40 .85	168x4-60-20	2.40 .85
170x4-60-20	2.40 .85	172x4-60-20	2.40 .85
174x4-60-20	2.40 .85	176x4-60-20	2.40 .85
178x4-60-20	2.40 .85	180x4-60-20	2.40 .85
182x4-60-20	2.40 .85	184x4-60-20	2.40 .85
186x4-60-20	2.40 .85	188x4-60-20	2.40 .85
190x4-60-20	2.40 .85	192x4-60-20	2.40 .85
194x4-60-20	2.40 .85	196x4-60-20	2.40 .85
198x4-60-20	2.40 .85	200x4-60-20	2.40 .85
202x4-60-20	2.40 .85	204x4-60-20	2.40 .85
206x4-60-20	2.40 .85	208x4-60-20	2.40 .85
210x4-60-20	2.40 .85	212x4-60-20	2.40 .85
214x4-60-20	2.40 .85	216x4-60-20	2.40 .85
218x4-60-20	2.40 .85	220x4-60-20	2.40 .85
222x4-60-20	2.40 .85	224x4-60-20	2.40 .85
226x4-60-20	2.40 .85	228x4-60-20	2.40 .85
230x4-60-20	2.40 .85	232x4-60-20	2.40 .85
234x4-60-20	2.40 .85	236x4-60-20	2.40 .85
238x4-60-20	2.40 .85	240x4-60-20	2.40 .85
242x4-60-20	2.40 .85	244x4-60-20	2.40 .85
246x4-60-20	2.40 .85	248x4-60-20	2.40 .85
250x4-60-20	2.40 .85	252x4-60-20	2.40 .85
254x4-60-20	2.40 .85		

# HIGH SCHOOL

*at Home*

Study in privacy, during your spare time. Prepare for College, Business, Teachers' Certificate or Pre-Professional Examinations. Thousands of successful graduates!

**Many Finish in 2 Years!**

School chartered in 1897 "NOT FOR PROFIT." All texts included in tuition payments—\$5 monthly. **Free Bulletin.** Write: **American School, Dept. H-61, Druxel at 59th, Chicago**

**MEN — WOMEN**

**Take up to \$3 IN AN HOUR**

**SELL NEW "EMBOSS-O CHRISTMAS CARDS**

Big sparetime money-maker! Sell seasons' sensation! "Emboss-O" Christmas cards, with "senior" signature in raised gold! Easily, quickly done! Set assortment of 21 cards, with "Emboss-O" materials, only \$1.00. Charming designs, beautiful papers. You make big profit on every sale. Also Religious, Anniversary, Gift Wrappings, other assortments, 50¢ up. Write today!

**FRIENDSHIP STUDIOS**  
823 Adams St., Elmira, N. Y.

**FREE** SAMPLE OFFER

# Prostate Sufferers



**DR. W. D. SMITH**  
**INVENTOR**

An enlarged, inflamed or faulty Prostate Gland very often causes Leucorrhoea, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Pelvic Pains, Lost Vigor, Insomnia, etc. Many physicians endorse massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Sciences, Vol. VII, 3rd edition). Use "PROSAGER," a new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate Gland and Rectum at home. It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

## FREE BOOKLET

**INVENTOR      EXPLAINS TRIAL OFFER.      ADDRESS**  
**MIDWEST PRODUCTS CO., B-308, KALAMAZOO, MICH.**

**SUMMER SPECIAL!**

**LOW-COST PURCHASE PLAN!**

**AT LAST** anyone can own a New Royal Portable Typewriter! Prices are low now and terms are easy—*only a few cents a day!*

**Brand-New Genuine Latest Model**

**NEW ROYAL PORTABLE**

with  
**TOUCH CONTROL**



**GREATEST VALUE**  
**IN ROYAL'S HISTORY!** With many exclusive improvements, including Touch Control—"it adapts the key-tension to your exact finger-pressure;" Finger Comfort Keys; Standard Office-style Keyboard. Easy to use. Perfect for student, teacher, or business man.

**ACT QUICKLY!**

**FREE!** LEARN TOUCH TYPING this summer. Type like an expert in the fall, be ready for school or business.

Royal's simple system shows you how — free with every New Royal Portable. **CARRYING CASE.** Handsome. Compact. Typewriter easily and quickly removed. May also be used as extra luggage case.

*\*Trade mark for key-tension device.*



**Don't Delay - MAIL TODAY!**

**Royal Typewriter Company, Inc., Dept. FF-96**  
**2 Park Avenue, New York City**  
 Please give me details concerning special low-cost  
 purchase plan on New Royal Portable.

Quote trade-in allowance on my.....  
Typewriter, serial number.....

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Street \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

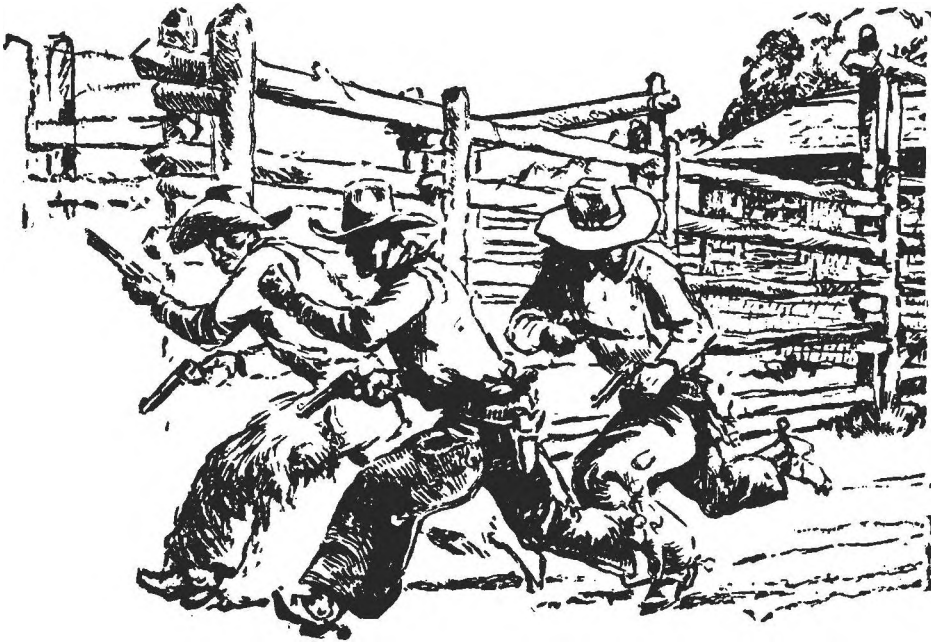
**SEND NO MONEY!**

# HOME-STUDY BUSINESS TRAINING

Your opportunity can never be bigger than your preparation. Prepare now and reap the rewards in earlier and larger success. *Free 64-Page Books Tell How.* Write now for book you want, or mail coupon with your name and address in margin today.

- |                        |                         |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| O Higher Accountancy   | O Business Mgmt         |
| O Mod. Salesmanship    | O Business Cases        |
| O Mod. Management      | O Credit and Collection |
| O Law, Degree of LL.B. | O Correspondence        |
| O Commercial Law       | O Modern Foremanship    |
| O Industrial Mgmt      | O Personnel Mgmt        |
| O Banking and Finance  | O Export Bookkeeping    |
| O Stenotypy            | O C. P. A. Coaching     |
| O Rail. Station Mgmt   | O Business English      |
| O Paper Salesmanship   | O Effective Speaking    |

**LA SALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY**  
Dept. 936-R Chicago



# The Trail To Squaw Gulch

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Three Gray Wolves," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### ROPES AND GUNS.

**C**OLD, fearless anger gripped the young Circle J boss, and he was finding it more and more difficult to keep his temper.

In the first place, he didn't like the looks of the big unshaven tough who had horned into the horse sale in the Wolftown corral. In the second, the hombre's bullying tone rubbed him the wrong way. And third, he had begun to suspect that

the belted and booted fellow was up to some sort of treachery.

"I'm tellin' yuh flat," the big tough snarled, "that no crowbaits like yores is worth twenty bucks apiece for pack hosses."

The Circle J boss drew in his breath. It was the only outward sign that he was nearing the end of his tether. His clean-cut, tanned face was as expressionless as granite. His gray eyes were chill, his lips a straight line.

Broad of shoulder, of medium





height, he looked more like a hard-riding young waddy in his batwing chaps and buckskin vest than like a ranch owner.

"I didn't know I was selling my string to you," he said coldly to the beetle-browed tough. "I named the price to the bald-headed gent over yonder."

And the young rancher jerked a thumb in the direction of a small, meek man who was gazing sadly at the twelve horses in the corral.

Twenty dollars a head was not a high price for those horses, and the bald-headed hombre had appeared willing to pay it, until the swaggering tough had entered the corral.

The mounts had failed to make good cutting ponies at Circle J, which was the reason that Billy West had brought them to Wolf-town to sell as pack animals. At Wolfstown, packers were always in demand to carry supplies back into the Bitterroot Mountains to the valley nesters and mining camps.

The Circle J string was almost too good for that work; so Billy wanted to be sure that their new owner would not mistreat them. He

would have trusted the meek old fellow, but not this bruiser standing before him, who had begun to chuckle.

"Yuh say yuh *did* want twenty bucks, eh?" the tough mocked him. "That was yore swindlin' price fer poor ol' Jim Snore. It's a good thing I'm hired ter guard Jim Snore when he packs that freight out o' town. Yuh aimed ter rob him at the start. But now I suppose yuh aim ter ask a heap less fer the crow-baits."

Billy's fists clenched at his sides until the knuckles showed white. But his face was still a poker mask. He was glad to know that the tough was the baldhead's guard, and he strongly suspected that the man called Jim Snore was scared to death of the tough. For Jim Snore had turned white with terror and walked away upon the bully's arrival.

"No, I don't aim to ask less," the Circle J boss said quietly, leaning forward for what was bound to come. "I don't figure to sell them at all—not to you."

There was a row of punchers perched on the corral rails like tur-

keys awaiting a feeding, and as Billy West finished his statement, they chuckled with deep-rooted satisfaction. It was their reaction that enraged the husky gent.

At first astonished by the young waddy's remark, the bully fell back, blinking his black shoe-button eyes. Then he stiffened, hunched his shoulders, and shoved his big chin forward.

"What do yuh mean by that?" he roared.

Billy scowled. "I mean that yuh don't strike me as a fit person to drive hawgs, let alone good broncs," the waddy said without raising his voice. "An' what's more, if yuh don't clear out of this corral pronto, I'll throw yuh out by the seat of the pants an' the scruff of yore neck. We're all gettin' just a bit sick at the stomach listenin' to your bar-room bellows."

"Jumpin' jaspers!" the husky tough exclaimed in amazement. "Do yuh know yore talkin' ter Spade Dillon? Why, yuh dirty little low-down——"

He came charging like a longhorn bull on the prod, snorting, swinging his arms, kicking his big feet.

One of the punchers on the corral rails let out a whoop, and another yelled to watch out for gun play. The bald-headed old man near the horses cried out in terror and hid his face in his hands, as if dreading to see what was going to happen to the Circle J boss.

But Billy West was not meeting that wild stampede of the bruiser. The Circle J boss ducked low under the tough's swinging right fist, and side-stepped out of the path. Billy had that hombre figured from A to Z, and knew what to suspect and how to act. As the bully went floundering past him, the Circle J

boss calmly thrust out a foot, and let the hombre trip over it.

"Whoo-oo-sh!"

The tough struck the ground like a ton of beef.

His six-gun was jolted clear from its holster, and he stabbed a hand out to grab it. But Billy West's boot toe beat him to it, and kicked the weapon flying out of the horse pen.

"Unload the cutter, Joe," the Circle J boss called to a freckled red-head who leaped down from the pen rails. Then, to a walrus-mustached waddy who was ripping off a bear-skin vest and gun belt: "Buck, you stay out of this. I can handle this Spade Dillon steer all by my lonesome."

On the ground, the big "Spade" Dillon had scrambled to his hands and knees, teeth bared, eyes red with rage. About to leap up, he hesitated to find out if the Circle J boss had palmed a six-gun, which he hadn't.

Spade swung his shaggy head to glower at the red-headed Joe Scott and the walrus-mustached "Buck" Foster, to whom Billy had spoken as pards. The tough saw other men on the rails and evidently took them for members of the Circle J outfit, although they were local waddies watching the horse trade.

"Tricky, ain't yuh?" Spade snarled, leashing his boiling temper. "Got yore gang with yuh!"

"Don't let that bother yuh," Billy replied, standing with clenched fists by his side. "Are you leavin' the corral, or am I throwin' yuh out?"

The tough swayed up from the ground, a crafty light in his small eyes, his ugly mouth pulled down in one corner.

"Yuh want me ter make a move so yore gang kin jump on me like wolves, eh?" he spat out. "But I'm

too slick fer yuh. I kin wait until I git yuh alone."

"Vamose!" Billy snapped, stepping forward, left shoulder in the lead, right fist cocked for a blow.

Spade Dillon leaped back. "I'm goin'," he growled, and retreated farther. "Come on, Snore!" he called to the baldhead, who was standing with wide-open blue eyes, amazed at the Circle J boss.

"Jim Snore is stayin' to complete the horse trade," Billy West said. "Git, Dillon, afore I lose my temper."

"It's a holdup!" the tough bel-  
lowed. "Yuh can't make Snore pay that money."

"Git!" Billy began to advance.

"I better go," Jim Snore said fear-  
fully from near the horse string.

"Stay where yuh are," Billy ad-  
vised in a calmer tone. "But as for the big skunk, he better——"

He started toward Spade again, and the bully whirled and scrambled through the corral rails.

"I'll have the law on yuh!" Spade was yelling. "I'll git yuh lynched. Jest wait!"

The Circle J boss grinned as the bully went running toward the wagon-rutted main street of Wolf-town. On the corral rails, a half dozen waddies howled with laugh-  
ter. And the freckled redhead in the green jersey and blue denims came forward with Spade Dillon's empty six-gun. Billy took it from him, and stuck the barrel into his belt. He turned.

"Well, Jim," the Circle J boss said in a friendly tone to the old bald-  
head, "I'm sorry to say that I can't let yuh have those broncs for any price, if yuh keep Spade Dillon on yore pay roll."

Jim Snore swallowed hard. "I ain't payin' him," he said. "He talked the miners up at Squaw

Gulch inter actin' as my guard. I got a contract with 'em ter haul sup-  
plies. Spade is gun boss o' that camp. I couldn't buy yore hosses now, Mr. West. In fact, I'm givin' up my packin' contract."

Billy felt his walrus-mustached pard, Buck Foster, edge up. "What's wrong with yuh?" Buck asked the baldhead. "Yuh ain't scared o' that big bluff, aire yuh? I could lick him with one hand tied behind me back."

The Circle J boss elbowed Buck aside, for the veteran waddy could always be counted upon to say the wrong thing at the right time. What was more, the leathery cowdog was always overestimating his ability as a scrapper, and he bore a bullet-  
lopped ear and a poorly mended broken nose as a result. Explosive-  
tempered, eager for any kind of a fight, he had had a difficult time keeping quiet during Billy's argu-  
ment with Spade Dillon.

Billy realized how scared Jim Snore was of the husky bully, and the Circle J boss felt a quick shame for having caused the old fellow to expect trouble for the fight. Billy didn't want Snore to lose money on his account. The old hombre seemed to be caught in a cross rip. Spade Dillon would beat him to within an inch of his life for having remained at the corral, unless Jim fled town.

"Why do the miners want guards?" the Circle J boss asked, feeling the baldhead out. "Are they havin' trouble with outlaws?"

"Four pack trains have been stole a'ready this season," Jim Snore answered, casting an anxious eye toward town. "The miners blame the nesters in the mountains. They agreed ter pay Spade Dillon because they figured he was too tough fer the nesters. He's got a

gang of gunmen down at the saloon."

Buck Foster edged up again. "What's that?" he demanded. "Nesters? I always knowed they was skunks. Spade Dillon must be in cahoots with 'em. Nothin' would please me more than ter see him show up with his gunnies."

"Pipe down!" the freckled Joe Scott entered the conversation. "Don't yuh see that Billy is tryin' to close the deal with the brons?"

The Circle J boss turned to the redhead. "No, we've done Jim Snore enough harm," he said. "He can't go through that nester territory alone, an' we can't let him go with Spade Dillon."

The baldhead touched Billy's arm. "Don't feel bad, Mr. West. I can tell yo're a square-shooter. The hayin' season will soon be on. I'll find a job drivin' a team for some cow ranch."

The Circle J boss swung back to eye the packer. "But yuh said that the miners need grub. Yuh can't let 'em down. They'd pay yuh if yuh got through with their freight, wouldn't they?"

"But I ain't goin' with Spade now, an' I ain't goin' alone," Jim Snore remarked sourly. "If he didn't beef me, somebody else would. That's a dangerous trail, West. Them nesters don't like the miners none, 'cause they think the miners have been robbin' 'em o' beef. An' the miners are plumb shore that the nesters have been holdin' up the pack trains."

"The miners would pay any guards who helped you, wouldn't they?" Billy asked.

"I reckon they would, 'cause they need grub," the old fellow replied. "But I don't reckon anybody in Wolftown would be willin' ter take

Spade Dillon's place. They know that hombre too well."

A hard grin curled Billy West's lips. "I hate to lose this horse deal," he said, winking at his pards. "It just so happens that work is slack back at the Circle J spread. Me an' my pards wouldn't be against earning a few extra dollars for new duds."

"Whoopee-ee!" Buck Foster yelled hilariously. "I knowed that was comin'. We'll guard that pack train. We've had a vacation comin' fer a long time, a real lead-slingin', smokin' party."

Jim Snore's mouth dropped open, and his eyes bulged. It seemed that he couldn't believe his ears. Or was it that this harum-scarum Circle J outfit didn't know what they were saying? Hadn't they heard of the dangers of the trail to Squaw Gulch? Were they loco?

Or were they kidding him in offering to guard him through gulches and timber in which lay mysterious bushwhackers who had been picking off pack guards one by one? The journey to Squaw Gulch was no vacation. It was a hard trip through death traps.

"No-o-o," Jim Snore shivered. "I wouldn't go now. I ain't got the nerve."

"Nonsense!" Billy West protested. "Yuh would have gone with Spade Dillon."

"But he bullied me inter it," the baldhead groaned. "He said he'd kill me if I didn't." He turned and stared hard at the town. "He ain't forgot me yet. He'll be comin' soon with his gun-slingin' gang. Thar he is!"

The Circle J boss spun around, hand dropping to a gun butt. Swagging out of the main street of Wolftown, big Spade Dillon was leading five ragged toughs toward



the corral, and behind them followed a dozen or more loafers to see the fun. Spade's gang carried ropes and rifles, and it looked as if they were intent on a lynching bee.

## CHAPTER II.

### TRICKED.

**W**ELL-TRAINED to act in emergencies, Billy West did not hesitate for a moment. He was no more excited than if faced by an outbreak of trouble in a round-up herd on his range, and his two pards were ready to accept his quick decisions and to act swiftly.

The first thought of the Circle J boss was, as always, for the safety of his stock. He whirled to old Jim Snore.

"Get the pack horses out of the corral," Billy instructed. "Take them to the arroyo just behind us. We'll handle Spade Dillon pronto. He doesn't want a gun fight any more than we do. He's trying to scare us."

But the loafing punchers of Wolf-town, who had been sitting on the pen rails, evidently didn't believe Billy's last words, for he saw them leap down from their perches to the outside of the corral and run like rabbits.

Buck Foster and Joe Scott had drawn guns and swung open the gate for Jim Snore to drive the cavvy through. The old baldhead was trembling with fear, and he didn't appear able to think for himself. But he obeyed Billy's orders and started the horses moving.

The Circle J boss himself slipped through the rails to face the main street of town, from which Spade was coming with his gun-hung toughs. Spade saw him and halted. Billy could hear him chuckle, and

the crowd of townsmen following the gang grinned with amusement.

"We give yuh one more chance ter sell them hosses fer five bucks a head!" Spade bellowed. "Any other price is a holdup, an' we'll lynch yuh. The constable ain't in town, or we'd git yuh pinched fer kidnagin' Jim Snore. Do yuh hear me?"

Billy's hand was on the butt of the weapon slung low on his right thigh.

"I hear somethin' like a cross between a coyote howl and a hawg call!" Billy yelled back. "Jim Snore has hired Circle J for his trail guards. You come another step nearer, an' we'll sink lead into you."

For a moment, Spade stood blinking at the puncher, and then he sank into a crouch, measuring the distance for a quick draw. But Spade didn't like the looks of things. He appeared to speak out of the corner of his mouth to his gang, and they began to separate. Spade straightened up, spat at the road, and turned to his left. He swaggered across the street and made a quick dive behind a watering trough.

Billy retreated to the corral, stepped through the rails, and got behind a thick post.

*Crash!* A six-gun spoke from the head of the main street, and lead came whining to bury itself in the pen post behind which Billy was hiding.

That first shot was the signal, and with a thunderous roar, the other guns in Spade's gang started shooting at the corral.

Billy held his position. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see Buck and Joe behind thick posts, weapons in their hands.

"When do we charge 'em?" the walrus-mustached Buck called. "Let's run 'em out o' town!"

"Stay where yuh are," Billy or-

dered. "I reckon Jim Snore has the horse string in the arroyo now. We don't want to kill anybody in Wolf-town. We'll give Spade Dillon every chance to make good his brags to lynch us, an' then if he doesn't vamoise, we'll smoke him up."

The red-headed Joe Scott tweaked a big red ear. "Spade shore won't come after us, now that we've called his bluff. But he can keep us under fire all afternoon if he wants. I'm gettin' hot for action, Billy."

"Yuh'll see some fun any second," the Circle J boss replied. "Don't forget, we left our chink cook at the general store buying grub for us. Sing Lo is up the street behind Spade's coyote pack. When they learn who he is, they won't linger behind those watering troughs long."

"Thar's the heathen comin' now!" Buck yelled. "He's slippin' down the plank sidewalk like an eel. Look at him, Billy! He's got a shotgun, an' he'll murder all the gang afore we git a chance."

At that instant, the Circle J boss saw the yellow-faced, slant-eyed Chinese cook whom they had left at the general store. Sing Lo was sneaking up the plank sidewalk to the protection of a rain barrel at the front corner of a blacksmith shop.

The Chinaman was no ordinary hash-slinger, but a good shot with a gun and a fine rider. He always accompanied Billy West on all trips, and had proved himself so sharp-witted that he had aroused the undying jealousy of the walrus-mustached Buck Foster.

Billy had been figuring that Sing Lo would soon learn of what was going on, but now the Circle J boss took alarm when he saw the double-barreled shotgun in the Chinaman's hands. As the cook ducked behind the rain barrel in front of the blacksmith shop, he lifted his weapon.

It looked to the Circle J boss as if Sing Lo meant to blast Spade Dillon's gang out from their cover of the two watering troughs at the head of the main street.

"Sing Lo!" the Circle J boss shouted. "Don't shoot 'em in the back!"

Too late! Billy's yell warned Spade Dillon but not quickly enough.

*Boom!* Sing Lo's shotgun streaked flame a yard long, and a thin thread of smoke sped up the main street toward the big tough's watering trough.

Spade and two henchmen leaped into the air from the covert like jumping jacks, howling madly. They dropped their own guns and came dashing out of the street in full view of the Circle J outfit in the corral, as if they had forgotten all about them. Then, Spade seemed to remember, and he swerved away from the corral, and raced for all he was worth toward clumps of brush to the left of town.

*Boom!* Sing Lo shot at the second watering trough, opposite the first one at the head of the main street, and three more of Spade's henchmen came howling from cover and followed the first toughs to the brush.

Billy squirmed through the corral rails as Buck Foster behind him exclaimed: "Waal, I'll be a horned toad! I never seen hombres hit with buckshot do anythin' like that afore."

"Buckshot nothin'!" Billy West ejaculated. "Sing Lo had both barrels of that shotgun loaded with salt an' pepper. I could tell by the color of the smoke an' the sound of the explosions."

The Chinaman was running toward the Circle J outfit, his broad

grin telling them how pleased he was with his trick.

"Sing Lo flix 'em plenty click, Mistle Billy!" the cook called. "He hear all about flight in sto'."

The Circle J boss hid a grin. "Thanks a lot, pard," he said. "I don't like that idea of drillin' hombres when they're not looking, but as long as it was only salt an' pepper, we'll let it pass. Spade Dillon was lucky he didn't get .45-caliber lead."

The red-headed Joe Scott stepped up. "That's the funniest joke I've heard in years," he said, laughing. "Spade ain't hurt much, but I'll bet his hide is smartin' plenty. He'll be mad enough to eat bob wire."

Billy turned to cast a glance at the arroyo at the rear of the corral. "Yes, an' Spade will take it out on ol' Jim Snore, if we don't find him quick. Come on, boys! We better see if he's safe in that cut."

As they walked around the horse pen, Billy leading, Buck Foster was jerking at the drooping ends of his mustache. It was plain that the veteran was angry because he had had no hand in the scrap with the gunmen, and he wanted to blame the Chinaman for it.

But Joe Scott was slapping the small Circle J cook on the back, and complimenting him for showing such good sense. Killing had been avoided twice in their encounters with Spade Dillon, but it was at his expense.

Billy West had begun to worry about Spade Dillon's next move. The big tough would be no hombre to quit the fight just because he had lost the first two rounds. There was apparently a lot of money in his plan to guard a pack train of supplies to Squaw Gulch, and Spade would commit murder to collect.

The simple task of selling pack horses in Wolfstown had brought the

Circle J outfit a dangerous job. Billy West was wondering if he had not taken too much on his shoulders.

Nearing the rim of the arroyo, he decided to question Jim Snore more about Spade Dillon's history and also the facts about the trail to Squaw Gulch. He halted at the edge of the cut, cast his eyes down to its deep bottom, and a cold shock went through him. There wasn't a pack animal below. The arroyo was empty.

"Jim!" Billy called, jerking his eyes right up the cut, then left. "He's gone!" the Circle J boss exclaimed.

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck Foster exclaimed behind Billy. "He swiped our bronses."

The red-headed Joe Scott leaped past the Circle J boss, and went skidding down the cliff to the floor of the arroyo.

"There's tracks, Billy!" Joe shouted back. "They lead west through the arroyo."

The Circle J boss bit his lips. "Read all the sign, Joe," he ordered the redhead, who was an expert tracker. "Can yuh tell if Jim Snore drove the cavvy off alone, or was somebody with him?"

Joe studied the bottom for a moment, then looked up. "It seems two hombres went with him, Billy. There's a chance that they grabbed Jim Snore, for I can see where he tried to run up the cliff, an' they pulled him back."

The chink cook touched Billy's arm. "Splade Dillon much smarter than we think," Sing Lo said. "When he hide behind water tlogh, two homblays sneak to this place and steal Circle J blonc."

"That's what I'm thinkin'," the Circle J boss replied angrily. "Spade figured we'd hide our cavvy in the arroyo when he laid seige to the cor-

ral. He's no fool. That's why he ran into the brush. His men kidnaped Jim Snore, took our brones up the arroyo to the timber, an' right now they're making away with 'em. Come on, boys. We better get our saddle brones from the livery."

Following the Circle J boss as he started toward town at a run, Joe Scott came up from the bottom of the arroyo, and Buck Foster began to yell that they had been double-crossed.

"Jim Snore wa'n't on the level!" the old walrus-mustached veteran shouted. "He was too yella ter fight the Spade skunk. He tricked us, Billy. He pulled the wool right over yore eyes, but he didn't fool me."

"Pipe down!" the Circle J boss replied, nearing the head of the main street. "The whole town is watchin' us to see what we do. Talk won't help matters any."

As they turned into the livery, dozens of eyes were trained on them from the windows of cabins and stores along the plank sidewalks. Few citizens were on the street, and brones and buckboards had been removed from the hitch racks.

Wolftown was evidently used to gun fights between cowboys and packers, and it had ducked into protection. It wanted no part of this war between Spade Dillon and Circle J.

The stable keeper was missing, but Billy had paid for feed and shade for his saddle ponies when he stabled them. He found his big chestnut bronc stamping restlessly in a stall, and threw a saddle on its back. His pards went to their mounts.

No time was lost. Every minute meant that Spade's gang was getting farther away with the stolen pack animals.

When the Circle J outfit pards

swung into their saddles outside the stable, Billy figured that the horse thieves had a good twenty-minute start, and that was enough time for them to cover five miles of timbered foothill country.

### CHAPTER III.

#### HIDDEN EYES.

ON reaching the arroyo, Billy's first thought was for the safety of his outfit while trailing the horse thieves. He figured that Spade Dillon would bushwhack them if possible. So he sent Joe Scott down into the cut to follow the sign, since the redhead was the best tracker of them all.

Billy spurred his bronc along the right bank of the arroyo, while Buck Foster rode the left bank. Their chink cook scouted the country beside them.

Riding hard, they soon came to the end of the cut, and struck into buckbrush and pines, where Joe Scott followed a trail of trampled bushes. Out of the timber, they reached steep hills and gullies, and swept through as fast as the redhead could call out the route. A shallow creek was met, and several minutes were lost finding the trail, for the gang had led the stolen brones downstream to hide tracks.

Billy began to realize that the rustlers were making much better time than the Circle J outfit, for Spade didn't have to search for tracks.

The country grew rougher as it climbed upward to the Bitterroot Mountains, and in some places shale had taken no prints of the missing cavvy. Ahead, a deep silent wilderness of cedars and crag waited for the waddies. They pressed on more slowly, rifles ready for an ambush,



the trail getting harder and harder to follow.

Joe Scott shouted for his pards to assemble in a deep hollow where the ground was soft.

"Billy," the redhead shouted, as the Circle J boss loped up, "those crooks split up the cavvy. The tracks here show only four brons now. When we started, I was followin' twelve. Spade must have sneaked one horse after another out of the cavvy. He's tryin' to make us follow these last four packers until dark."

The Circle J boss halted and looked down at the sign of four pack animals. Billy's tanned brows were knit in a frown, his gray eyes were serious. Now, he was sure that Spade Dillon was not the stupid jasper that the outfit had taken him for. Spade had too many rustling tricks up his sleeve for any honest man's good.

Jim Snore had said Spade was gun boss of Squaw Gulch, where the packers were supposed to take a load of freight. Was Spade Dillon serious about taking the supplies to the mine camp, or did he mean to make Jim Snore buy them with miners' money, and then run off with the loot?

Billy drew his powerful chestnut bronc back on its haunches and wheeled it about.

"Boys, we're headin' back to Wolfstown to see if he was tryin' to draw us off into the hills, so he could go back to town for that freight."

Spurring hard, the Circle J riders galloped back over their trail, three times as fast as they had come. Through gulch and timber, they roared, down over shale and rock, to the arroyo they had left an hour before.

The moment they saw the ramshackle buildings of the trading

post, they heard a distant shout. A six-gun blasted ahead of them. The town had apparently been watching for them, and it was going into hiding again.

Billy drove his bronc toward the main street, a weapon in his hand, but he did not strike into the town. He swerved his horse away from the road, and, followed by his pards, cut around behind the row of stores and cabins on the plank sidewalk.

Reaching the rear of the general store, he sprang from the saddle, and raced for the back door. It was not locked. Flinging it open, he plunged into the big trading room where canned goods lined shelves, and barrels of flower, potatoes, and apples stood along the walls.

He saw a white-haired hombre duck behind a counter.

"Show yoreself, hombre!" the Circle J boss called. "We mean no harm, but we want information. An' don't try a shot at me."

Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and Sing Lo were stumbling in the back door as the spectacled old clerk reared up from behind the counter, his arms raised.

"I don't know nothin'," the storekeeper whined, trembling with fear. "Yuh can't blame me fer what them mine packers do. They left the money fer yore hosses on this counter, an' I ain't touched it."

Billy's eyes flicked to the counter, where a canvas bag rested. He walked to it, untied the strings, and poured a stream of silver dollars out. At a glance, there were about sixty dollars there, which would have paid for twelve pack animals at five dollars a head. But the Circle J outfit had asked twenty bucks per horse, and the amount should have been two hundred and forty dollars.

"Pretty slick!" the Circle J boss growled. "Spade doesn't want to

get a constable on his trail for hoss-stealin', which would mean hangin'. So he leaves this swindlin' sum to clear his trail of the law." Billy looked at the storekeeper. "It was Spade who left it, wasn't it?"

"It was Jim Snore," the clerk replied nervously.

"But Spade was with him?" Billy insisted.

"Y-yes."

"Did they take the freight for Squaw Gulch?"

"Yes. It was already packed in boxes. They borrowed two wagons an' rode off with it quick."

"Huh!" Billy grunted. "They must 'a' done that as soon as we started to trail the stolen cavvy. They'll haul the freight to some place in the wagons, sneak the pack broncs there, an' change the boxes from the wagons to the backs of the animals."

Buck Foster exploded with wrath. "They can't git away with that!" the veteran roared. "They stole our hosses, an' we'll go all the way ter Squaw Gulch ter scalp 'em."

Joe Scott snorted in disgust. "Didn't Jim Snore say that Spade was gun boss of Squaw Gulch? Spade Dillon will rouse the whole town against us if we go there. He'll make up a story that we were cheatin' Jim Snore, an' we won't stand a chance. He might even say we're in cahoots with the nesters that have been robbin' the trains."

Billy West picked up the silver on the counter, and turned to the back door of the store.

"Button your lips, hombres!" he said. "We've been taken to the cleaners on a hoss trade. There ain't no use beefin'. Come on!"

"But we can't lay down an' quit!" Buck Foster shouted.

"Dry up!" the Circle J boss replied, stepping outside.

He whirled as Buck Foster came floundering out the rear door, howling with indignation. Billy lifted a finger to his lips, then nodded at the store, where the clerk might be listening. But Buck didn't get the idea.

"That yaller-bellied Jim Snore tricked us," the veteran said. "I knowed all along he was a snake."

Billy swung into his saddle and touched spurs to the bronc. He was riding off as Buck galloped up to him. They were out of earshot of the store.

"Don't fly off the handle so fast!" the Circle J boss said sharply to the veteran. "We don't want Wolftown to know what we're doin'. We ain't quittin' the trail. We're goin' to git back our pack animals. What's more, we'll stop Spade Dillon from stealin' that freight. An' we'll save Jim Snore from Boot Hill."

"Yuh mean yuh ain't serious about goin' home?" Buck inquired, eyes popping.

"Certainly, he ain't, yuh nit-wit!" Joe Scott snapped.

"Who is a nit-wit, yuh sheep-brained galoot?" Buck roared.

"No arguments," Billy yelled. "I've been listenin' to you two insult each other ever since we left home. If yuh want to stay with me, keep quiet."

"So be!" The Chinaman nodded.

There was no doubt in Billy West's mind that his pards could beat the pack train to Squaw Gulch, provided that he could find the route. That last fact was a hard one to surmount.

None of the Circle J outfit had ever explored the Bitterroot Mountains due west of Wolftown, although all of the waddies knew that the ridges were wilder than the range near their own ranch. The trails might be easy to follow, or

they might be difficult. No wagons went over them—only pack animals.

Billy was positive that Spade Dillon would try to find out if he was being followed. The horse thief would certainly steer clear of the regularly traveled route and worm his way through timber and chasm like a snake. It would be hard to stop him on the journey, but he had to be stopped, for the Circle J boss honestly doubted that Spade meant to go to Squaw Gulch.

Galloping out to the sagebrush at the rear of the Wolftown store, Billy made a wide sweep on the village to find a road leading due west. He remembered having been told that that road was the first leg of the journey to Squaw Gulch. The Circle J outfit reached the wagon route and raised a long streamer of dust skyward as they pounded along it for five miles.

Twice, they passed side trails which seemed to lead to small cow ranches, but Billy did not halt. Any information that men might give him could not be trusted. Spade Dillon was held in fear in this section. Circle J would lose time by stopping to ask questions about the trail.

It was well into the afternoon when they came upon two wagons rolling back to Wolftown. Billy eyed the grizzled drivers from a distance, then motioned to his pards to scatter to both sides of the road. He drew a six-gun and waited for the teams to come up. Their drivers slowed down, then halted and waved white handkerchiefs of truce.

The Circle J boss spurred his chestnut forward.

"We don't want no fight," the first driver yelled fearfully. "Spade told us yuh might stop us."

Billy's eyes narrowed. "Where

did yuh unload that freight for him?"

The first driver wiped beads of sweat from his brow. "Yuh can't blame us. We only did what we was told. He hired us ter haul the miners' supplies ter the river a mile back. Thar we loaded it on the ferry, an' it was took across."

"Clever trick," Billy growled as Joe Scott, Sing Lo, and Buck Foster came up. "I can guess the rest. The ferry is tied up on the far bank, ain't it?"

"An' yuh can't swim the river with brones," the second driver piped up. "Yuh better quit, hombres. Spade Dillon is a tough one. Besides, them mountains is full of nesters what will steal yore saddle hosses an' bushwhack yuh. Spade is the only gent what kin handle them fellers. He knows a way ter slip through 'em ter Squaw Gulch. An' the miners will pay him plenty fer it."

Buck Foster thrust his chin out. "If yuh ask me, Spade Dillon is in cahoots with them nesters. So is Jim Snore. An' so are you!"

The two drivers turned pale as death.

Joe Scott caught Buck's arm. "Let Billy handle this," he advised.

"Throw in your hooks, boys," the Circle J boss ordered. "We'll take a look-see at the ferry."

As the outfit galloped past the wagons, Buck turned in the saddle to shake a fist. He was hankering for a scrap, and didn't seem able to get in one with anybody. His temper was near the boiling point.

Two miles farther on, Billy and his pards halted on the bank of a swiftly moving river that was at least fifty yards wide. A heavy cable had once stretched across the water from the bole of one big cedar to another, and it had served as a

guiding line for a flat-bottomed scow to ferry two horses at a time across the river. This scow was on the far side of the river now, and the cable had been cut.

Billy dismounted and walked down the bank to eye the current. The river was high because of recent rains. It was dangerous to try to ford it. In addition, the Circle J boss suspected that one of Spade's men might be hiding in the brush on the opposite bank, waiting there with a rifle to snipe the waddies as soon as they got into the middle of the current.

"We're licked!" the Circle J boss called to his pards in a tone that would carry across the water.

"What do yuh mean, licked?" Buck Foster demanded.

Billy walked back to his pards. "We're licked for about two hours," the Circle J boss said in a low voice. "But we're goin' to pretend that we're goin' back to Wolftown. There must be a ford north of here. We'll cross before night sets in. Buck, pull in your horns! You'll get a chance to meet Spade Dillon's gunnies."

"By heifers, I can't wait!" the veteran snorted. "Why don't we swim the crick hyar?"

"Because yuh ain't got no sense," Joe Scott retorted. "If yuh don't want to drown, follow Billy."

Stuck with the steel, the Circle J broncs leaped out over the road that led back to Wolftown, but the riders did not go far before they swung off into the brush to the north. They thought that they were well hidden from eyes on the opposite bank of the river when they turned behind a bend in the road.

But none of them spied the glint of sunlight on the lenses of a pair of field glasses on the topmost branch of the big cedar tree that had held the western end of the ferry

cable. Up there in the cedar, a man was perched, studying the cowboys' route, and he was grinning at their ruse.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### NESTER SPOOKS.

ON the western side of the river, Spade Dillon and his gang were prodding the pack train along at a rapid gait, winding over a secret trail back into the Bitterroot Mountains.

The toughs were swearing heartily at old Jim Snore. They had beaten him after capturing him in the arroyo behind the Wolftown corral and kidnaping him. They would have killed him, but they had needed him to throw the diamond hitches on the packing boxes. And Jim Snore was the only man among them who knew how to handle the train on the rugged trail.

Behind the old baldhead rode the unshaven Spade, a six-gun in his hand, goading the packer on.

"Yuh tried ter double-cross us, didn't yuh?" the tough kept repeating, for it was a way of venting his anger over the stinging effects of the salt-and-pepper loads that had ripped his thick hide. "Yuh ain't cottoned ter me at any time in Squaw Gulch, Snore. Yuh advised them miners ter send the money ter pay fer this freight by a secret messenger. Yuh wasn't suspectin' me o' somethin', was yuh, Snore?"

Jim Snore said nothing. His lips were tightly drawn, and his face was pale. He pretended that he was too busy with the pack train to make reply. He knew his life hung by a thread. For he had advised the miners against giving him the money to pay for the freight in Wolftown.

Jim Snore had his own suspicions about who was holding up the pack trains, and it wasn't the nesters whom the miners suspected.

"Yuh won't talk, eh?" Spade Dillon sneered. "How would yuh like a slug in the spine? I could tell the miners that the nesters beefed yuh. They'd believe me, 'cause they know the nesters have been stealin' an' murderin' in these mountains fer more'n a year."

Jim Snore's back stiffened. But only for a moment. He flipped the end of a lariat at a lead packer that was slowing down.

The sun was setting behind the peaks of the Bitterroot ridge, and purple twilight had begun to cloak the deep pines through which their route coursed. Silence held the world, except for the piping of evening fowl and the thud of horses' hoofs. The train was climbing steadily to the wildest section of the mountains, and Spade was forced to call out the turns on this secret trail that he knew.

"Are yuh wonderin' how I know the way so well, Snore?" the tough asked the baldhead. "Don't it strike yuh queer that I don't take the main trail? We ain't goin' through them valleys whar the nesters live. We're goin' my own private road."

Behind them, a horseman shouted that a rider was coming hard. Spade ordered Jim Snore to halt, and the baldhead slowed the pack train down. He was trembling with anxiety as one of Spade's henchmen appeared on the back trail on a badly blown horse. Jim Snore listened to what the newcomer called out to the gangster boss:

"Them waddies rode north up the river lookin' fer a ford, Spade. They won't find one afore night. Yo're safe now."

Jim Snore watched a broad grin twist Spade Dillon's ugly face. The tough dismounted and winked at his

men. They all got down from their broncs, seven of them, and they came clumping up the trail to where Jim Snore sat his bronc.

"I reckon we don't need yuh no more, Snore," Spade Dillon chuckled. "Give me that lariat in yore hand."

Jim's eyes widened, and he seemed to catch his breath.

"What do yuh mean ter do, Spade?" he asked.

"Hang yuh," the gangster boss replied coldly, reaching to snatch the rope. "By to-morrow noon, them puncher friends o' yores will be trackin' us. Yore carcass will be a good lesson ter 'em. Yuh played the wrong hand, Snore. Yuh got ter pay the gambler."

The old baldhead underwent a strange change. Instead of terror, a cold fearlessness flooded his wrinkled face. A glint sprang into his blue eyes. He was no longer the cringing coward that he had seemed to be before. He sat his bronc stiffly, and looked steadily from one tough to another.

"I won't be the first packer yuh've hanged, will I, Spade?" he questioned.

His attitude made Spade Dillon hesitate. "What do yuh mean?" the tough snarled.

Jim Snore took a deep breath. "Yuh've been gettin' away with murder fer a long time," the packer said in an expressionless tone. "It's you an' yore gang that's been holdin' up the trains an' murderin' the guards. Yuh've led the miners ter believe it was the nesters. An' at the same time, yuh've been stealin' nester beef an' sellin' it ter the mine camp. That made the nesters think that the miners was stealin' it."

Spade's hand dropped to a gun butt, his lips curled in a snarl.

"Yuh know a lot, don't yuh?"

"I ain't the only one that knows it, Spade Dillon," Jim Snore growled. "Jest think back a bit. I went ter Squaw Gulch exactly two months ago. I pretended I was a miner, an' I washed fer gold. Then I got ter drivin' mules an' hosses. I made a lot o' friends thar, an' I learned a lot. That's why the miners asked me ter drive their next freight. But I ain't no miner. Spade Dillon, I'm a nester. The miners never knowed it. The nesters sent me ter find out what was what. And I shore did."

"An' yuh'll hang fer it!" Spade Dillon roared. "Yuh dirty sneak, yuh can't prove nothin' on me! Did yuh tell them punchers?"

Jim Snore grinned mirthlessly at the big killer, then turned his head toward the surrounding foliage. It seemed that he was seeing something in the dark brush that Spade Dillon did not know was there. And Spade's eyes glinted.

"Nesters learn a lot of Injun tricks, Dillon," Jim Snore chuckled. "I don't reckon I'm goin' ter hang. I'm thinkin' yuh might be the one."

Spade Dillon was no fool. He could guess what the brush hid—nesters, who had been slipping through the woods all afternoon, following the pack train to find out what would become of it. They were guided by Jim Snore, their spy. And at his word, they would blast Spade Dillon's gang to shreds.

But the outlaw thought quickly, too quickly for nester wits. Like a big enraged grizzly, he spun around, his six-gun spitting flame as it thundered at the brush. He charged with a roar of warning to his men.

"Look out! It's a trap! Run fer it!"

Spade Dillon's men also had taken

alarm at the strange change in Jim Snore, and no sooner was their leader's weapon blasting at the brush than they too were shooting and scattering for their lives. The pack horses squealed in terror and went bucking off the trail as the gang crashed into the brush. There was so much shooting that it seemed that nesters were firing back at Spade's fleeing gang. Each tough was for himself and ran for his life, thinking he was being fired at by hidden nesters.

Spade's big body plowed through the hazel bushes and low-hanging pine branches where the darkness was settling in deep pools. He was wild with terror and rage, for he knew that nesters used buckshot which did not miss. He didn't think it odd that slugs from scatterguns didn't strike him, for he had been quick to act. Perhaps the hidden nesters were gunning down his pards.

The outlaw did not slow down. Panting for breath, leaping on, he came to the bottom of a gully, and turned westward. The shooting had died away on the trail at his rear, and there was no sound of nesters chasing him.

But Spade kept on moving in the gathering darkness, knowing that woodsmen could glide through the forest without making a sound. Soon, he was staggering, completely winded and groaning for breath. His six-gun was empty, and he thumbed fresh loads into its chambers as he went along.

"I've got ter git ter Squaw Gulch afore anybody else," Spade gasped. "It's my only chance. I'll tell the miners that Jim Snore tricked us, an' the nesters held up the pack train. They killed my pards. Then, me an' the miners will come back



an' raid every homestead in these hyar mountains."

Spade did not suspect that he had been fooled by old Jim Snore, who had grasped at a straw like a drowning man to save his own life. There had been no nesters in the brush along the trail. Jim Snore had struggled for courage to throw a bluff into the spooky Spade Dillon.

He had merely glanced at the foliage and said something about Indian tricks. And he had let Spade suspect that a party of bushwhacking nesters had him and his gang trapped.

Spade's guilty conscience had played him false. The outlaw had arranged too many dry-gulchings along the trail himself in the past. And when Jim Snore accused him of robbing the pack trains, Spade Dillon had thought the nesters were up to the same trick.

While Spade went stumbling on in the darkness, Jim Snore had remained hidden in the brush near the pack animals. The old baldhead was making sure that all the gang had fled and that none were returning to discover the trick that he had played upon them.

There was a rifle in the packer's hands, a glint in his faded-blue eyes. One of the outlaws had dropped the weapon in his haste to get away. Let the hombre come back to recover it, and Jim Snore would show him that he hadn't forgotten how to shoot.

Jim Snore had taken a new lease on life.

## CHAPTER V.

### A DEATH TRAP.

NIGHT had fallen by the time that the Circle J outfit had found a ford up the river, had crossed, and were riding down the western bank to the spot where Spade Dillon had

left the ferry. It was hard going for the saddle broncs. Billy was forced to guide his pards close to the water's edge, where there were no trees and the gravel and sand made an open route. But he could not make speed because of the big boulders that stood in their way.

Had it not been for the moon and stars, the punchers would have been compelled to wait until dawn. For they couldn't risk their ponies in complete darkness. The silvery light of the heavens showed them the black rocks and the dead trees that had been tossed up from the river onto the shores. And the same light revealed the old flat-bottomed scow where the trail to Squaw Gulch started once more at the water's edge and led deeper into the mountains to the westward.

Billy drew bridle rein at the big cedar which had supported the ferry cable.

"So far so good," the Circle J boss said. "But now we're in a pickle."

Buck Foster rode up and halted. "All we've got ter do is foller the trail until we come up on the skunks, ain't it?" he asked gruffly.

Joe Scott halted. "An' get bushwhacked fer our trouble," the red-head growled. "Yuh ain't got no sense at all, Buck."

"Wait a minute," Billy interrupted. "I doubt if Spade Dillon will keep on the main trail. Let's have a look for tracks."

"Yuh can't see sign at night," Buck snorted in disgust.

Billy dismounted and started up the trail into the timber. He didn't get far before he removed his ten-gallon hat and struck a match inside the crown in order to shield its reflection. Bending over, he allowed the light to spill out of the hat onto the trail.

"Just as I thought, Joe," the Circle J boss said. "Those fellows either blotted out their sign or took another route to Squaw Gulch."

"But this must be the main one," the redhead said.

"An' if we kept going on, we might get to the gulch an' warn the miners by dawn," Billy added. "It's right through nester territory."

"We have no flight," Sing Lo spoke up. "Nesters no shoot Circle J."

"Am that so?" Buck Foster exploded. "Have yuh ever seen a ground hawg what wouldn't beef a puncher when he got a chance?"

"I thought you were lookin' for a fight," Billy said, allowing his match to flicker out, and then straightening up.

"By heifers, yuh hit the nail on the head that time!" Buck replied, jerking at the drooping ends of his mustache. "I don't care if the scrap is with them nester road agents, with that double-crossin' Jim Snore, or with the Spade Dillon coyote."

Billy turned to his bronc. "If yuh stick with Joe, Sing Lo, an' me," he advised, "yuh'll run into one of 'em."

Buck hurried to his bronc and swung into the saddle. "I'm through with talkin'," he growled. "I want action."

Joe Scott rode up beside the Circle J boss. "But what about bushwhackers?" he asked.

"I'll ride about fifty yards ahead of you, Joe," Billy said. "You stay behind an' listen to my horse. Buck can come behind you, then Sing Lo."

"Me, I'm follerin' yuh!" the walrus-mustached veteran protested. "Yuh promised me first licks at any scum we run inter."

"Yuh make too much noise," Billy

retorted. "Can't you put a knot in your tongue?"

"I won't say nothin'."

"I wish we could count on that," Joe Scott chuckled.

"So be!" the Chinaman added.

Buck would have replied, but he was afraid that another word would make Billy order him to the rear of the party. Snorting with indignation, the veteran cow-puncher took after the Circle J boss, not at a distance of fifty yards, but a close twenty-five.

Leading them, Billy was aided by the starlight and moon in finding the curves of the mountain trail. Here, there was no road. Only pack animals and saddle ponies could travel single file over the route, which climbed steep slopes and dropped into deep gullies. Tall pines flanked the way, and in some places their sweeping branches hung low over the trail.

The Circle J boss rode with one hand held far out in front of him, but his trained bronc always warned him of obstructions. It would slow its gait, duck its head. It seemed to smell out the route. The puncher could feel its tenseness.

He turned in the saddle now and then to hear the *clop-clop* of Buck's horse behind him. It would be hard for bushwhackers to trap them all, for they were strung out for a hundred yards along the route, and the darkness did not make them easy targets.

Billy doubted that Spade Dillon would be waiting for them. And he thought that Spade was the only one interested in their coming. But there the Circle J boss made a mistake. Up ahead of him on the trail, a different kind of outfit from Spade's gang was awaiting the arrival of riders.

The Circle J boss led his outfit unsuspecting on. He drew his bronc to a slow walk as he started down into a deep gully. There, the gloom was a black pool. Stones popped from under the feet of the chestnut mount. The horse jumped nervously, then dropped its head, and went on, flicking its ears, snorting. Billy turned in the saddle to listen for his pards.

And then it happened.

There was the snaky whisper of a lariat in the air. Billy ducked too late. The loop circled his shoulders, and he tried to throw it off, but the noose caught his neck.

"Look out!" he yelled. "There's a——" He didn't finish, for the rope was choking him, yanking him from the saddle. He got his gun out as he landed with a heavy jolt on the earth, and he fired.

*Crash!* His weapon thundered, filling the shadows with dancing flame, but Billy could see no foes.

He was being dragged by the neck into the brush, which almost tore his eyes out. He thrashed about, trying to get to his feet, to shoot, to claw the noose from his neck, but he was jerked down to earth again, and two heavy bodies fell on him.

In the distance, he could hear Buck Foster's war whoop, and then Joe Scott.

"Buck!" Billy tried to cry, but his voice was a throaty gurgle.

He swung his fists, but his foes caught his arms. He was choking to death. His strength was as nothing in the powerful hands of the two mysterious foes who held him. They had snatched his weapon away. They rammed a gunny sack over his mouth, and fingered the rope on his neck.

Back on the trail, Billy heard

Buck yelling madly, and shooting. Then, it seemed that the veteran had been roped, for he no longer cried out. There was the sound of a body being yanked off a bronc. And then another. That would be Joe Scott.

"Keep quiet, dang yuh!" a voice spoke above the Circle J boss, as men loosened his neck rope.

The gunny sack was removed from Billy's face, and he looked up into a pair of tawny eyes. The shadows of three men hung over him. He saw their six-guns. Voices of several more men were calling from the trail.

"We roped the rider what was wantin' fight so bad," somebody called in a nasal voice. "He's knocked out. We also got another rider, but he's still fightin' in the brush. No, he's caught. He lost his gun in the fall."

"That ain't all," an hombre above Billy spoke. "Thar was a fourth feller."

The voice answered: "By crickety, it's a chink! He tried ter turn his cayuse, but the hoss threw him, an' he crawled inter the buckbrush. We got him."

The hombres above Billy grabbed him by the shoulders, and jerked him to his feet. The Circle J boss was having a hard time to get his wind back. He staggered with weakness. His first thought was to recover strength. The sound of those voices told him that he hadn't run into Spade Dillon's gang. It was a nester outfit.

Somewhere a torch was lighted, and Billy was hustled toward its glow. Six-guns prodded him along. He stumbled out to the trail, and found Joe Scott and Buck Foster lying senseless on the ground. Sing Lo was standing up, with men

guarding him. A white-bearded hombre turned to peer at Billy.

"It looks like we ketched an outfit of cowboys," the old nester drawled. "Yuh never kin tell what the net will bring up when yuh start seinin' fer whitefish."

Billy drew a deep breath, and it sobered him. He saw Buck stirring on the ground. The veteran struggled to a sitting position and eyed the crowd of men in the glow of the torch. It was an eerie scene, all those unshaven, ragged hombres grouped along the trail with shot-guns and rifles in their hands.

"Nesters!" Buck exclaimed in wrath. "The dirty skunks what is in cahoots with Spade Dillon an' Jim Snore!"

"Button your lip, Buck!" Billy West snapped.

The white-bearded homesteader glanced shrewdly at the Circle J boss.

"Let him go on talkin'," the man said. "We're plumb anxious ter hear about Jim Snore an' Spade Dillon. We've been waitin' hyar fer two hours fer the pack train ter come along."

"Didn't I tell yuh!" Buck Foster roared. "The nesters has been stealin' them miners' supplies."

"An' yuh wasn't trailin' Jim Snore an' Spade Dillon fer nothin', was yuh?" the old hombre questioned the walrus-mustached veteran.

"Don't answer him, Buck," Billy warned.

"Shore, I'll call his bluff," Buck sang out, struggling on the ground as three strong-armed nesters held him down. "They know Jim Snore ain't no friend of ours. They knowed we was after our pack hosses."

"Buck!" Billy cried out. "Button your lip! There's some mistake here."

The white-bearded hombre glowered at the Circle J boss. "Thar shore was a mistake," he said. "We was all thinkin' that Spade Dillon was robbin' the pack trains an' blamin' it on us nesters. We aimed ter find out. Jim Snore told us ter hide along the trail ter-night. But he ain't come along. Whar is he?"

Billy West bit his lips, thinking fast. "Spade Dillon must have turned off the main route to another trail. He's your bear meat. We had a fight with him in Wolftown, an' he kidnaped Jim Snore."

There was a growl of disapproval among the nesters, and Billy realized at once that anything he might say would not be believed. It looked to the nesters as if the Circle J outfit had been trying to find the pack train for the purpose of robbery.

It would be hard to prove otherwise, what with Buck Foster ready to start talking at any time. Feeling between nesters and cowmen had never been good. The Circle J pards were in a tight fix.

"Yuh say that Spade an' Jim gave yuh the slip," the white-bearded farmer spoke up, scowling in the light of the flaming torch that he held aloft. "That feller with the funny mustache"—he pointed at Buck Foster—"says yuh was after the pack hosses. Yuh don't happen ter be workin' fer them miners, do yuh? Yuh couldn't be the coyotes what's been stealin' our beef an' sellin' it ter the mine camp?"

"You've got us wrong," Billy snapped, feeling the pressure of gums in his spine as he faced the nester leader who held the torch. "Spade stole our brons on us. He made Jim Snore leave sixty dollars at the store in Wolftown, but those hosses were worth twenty dollars a head. Jim Snore would have paid that."

"Huh!" the nester snorted. "I reckon we better hang yuh. Twenty dollars fer a pack hoss is highway robbery. Yuh shore put yore own head in the noose."

"Wait a minute," Billy protested. "While you're wasting time here, Spade Dillon is making off with that pack train. He'll kill Jim Snore."

But the nesters were in no mind to listen, and their leader turned to the three hombres who held guns in Billy's spine.

"Put a rope around his neck ag'in," the leader said. "Set them all on thar broncs an' sling the ropes over the limbs o' the trees. We'll git this done in a hurry."

Billy felt himself grabbed by hands from the rear. He was about to whirl and to fight. But suddenly he thought better of it. He heard Buck bellow with rage, and saw three nesters pounce on him as he tried to get up and swing. Joe Scott was in a tussle not far away. But the Circle J boss was still facing the white-bearded farmer who held the torch.

"If you hang us, you'll answer to the law," Billy said to the boss nester. "Bring that torch nearer, an' look at me. Don't you see who I am?"

The elderly hombre blinked his eyes at the Circle J boss. He held the torch nearer to Billy, studied him.

"I don't recognize yuh," he said. "Yuh ain't tryin' ter fool me, aire yuh?"

"I certainly am!" Billy exclaimed, and with that, he kicked his boot toe up from the ground with a wide swing that hit the nester leader's torch hand.

"Yow-ow!" the nester yelled as his torch was knocked flying into the air, showering sparks.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A FIGHTING VERDICT.

AT the same time, Billy had hunched his shoulders and bent over. The three hombres behind him, holding onto him, were caught unawares, and were pulled over on his back. The Circle J boss whirled around, twisting like a sun-fishing bronc. And the three young nesters were hurled to the ground.

The flaming torch landed in a patch of thick brush, where the leaves curtailed its light. Darkness fell over the trail as Billy leaped to the men who were struggling with Buck Foster. The Circle J boss plowed into them like an angry bull, swinging his fists right and left, knocking the veteran's foes flying.

"Don't shoot!" a farmer yelled in the dark. "Yuh'll hit our own kin."

Billy dragged Buck up to his feet by the scruff of his neck.

"Help Joe an' Sing Lo!" he barked, and went plunging toward the sound of bodies thrashing about in the underbrush.

Like wolves, Billy and the war-whooping veteran flung themselves on the nesters battling with the red-head and the Chinaman. A six-gun blasted, its flame searing Billy's shoulder. By its light, he saw a nester face, and smashed a fist into it. He also saw Joe's red head, and he reached down and pulled his pard up from the ground.

Beside them, Buck was howling with wrath as he struggled with a group of men on top of Sing Lo. Billy and Joe tore into the shadowy figures. A rifle barrel glanced off the skull of the Circle J boss, and he clutched it and tore the weapon from the grasp of its owner. Swinging the rifle like a club, he waded through the brush, smashing down

the swarm of nesters who came on the charge.

"Run for it, Joe!" Billy shouted. "Take Buck!"

"I ain't leavin'!" the veteran called above the roar of battle. "I got the heathen free. He don't deserve it."

The Circle J boss whirled toward the veteran's voice, shouting his name, and found Buck staggering around in the brush. Billy caught him by the shoulder.

"Come on!" the Circle J boss ordered. "Up the gully cliff. We've got to get guns!"

"Guns?" Buck exclaimed. "That's what we want. But whar in tarnation are they?"

"I'm climbing, Billy," Joe Scott called. "Sing Lo is with me."

The Circle J boss dragged Buck up the steep slope, while behind them, nesters were left pounding one another in the belief that they were fighting the waddies.

The torch had flickered out in the damp undergrowth and a deep gloom shrouded the gulch. Billy heard several nesters pursuing them. He halted, swung the rifle to his shoulder, and fired, not to kill, but to frighten.

Yells of alarm sounded in the gulch.

Billy went on up to the rim of the cliff, where Joe Scott, Sing Lo, and Buck Foster stood panting.

"Whar's the guns?" Buck demanded. "Yuh said we'd get 'em."

"They're in Squaw Gulch," Billy West replied.

"Yuh mean we got ter walk all the way ter that camp?" Buck exclaimed.

"An' get moving right now," Billy replied. "Those nesters have our broncs, an' there's nothing that we

can do about it. They know the mountains better than we do. It won't be long before they're after us with lead."

Buck protesting, Billy holding him by the arm, the Circle J outfit started through the timber, striking due west, guided by the stars. They little suspected that another hombre, Spade Dillon, was making that hike to Squaw Gulch in the darkness. He was far ahead of the Circle J outfit, and he was due to reach the mine camp before the punchers.

Billy and his pards pressed on, thinking that in Squaw Gulch they'd find friends, guns, fresh horses. But they were wrong.

All night long, the Circle J outfit groped through the mountains, scaling cliffs, descending into chasms, struggling through deep brush. It was almost dawn before they stumbled onto a trail.

The rising sun found them haggard, dirty, bruised from the fight with the nesters. Their high-heeled boots were hard to walk in as they came down the slopes to the first spirals of breakfast smoke in the mining camp.

Billy halted when they spied the roofs of the cabins flanking the rocky main street of the deep gulch.

"We're almost there," he said in a tired voice. "Now, let me do the talking, Buck. No matter what happens, you keep a tight lip. We don't want to get into any more trouble."

"All I want is a cayuse an' brace o' smoke poles," the veteran retorted. "Yuh kin give a mile-long speech if yuh like."

Billy started out again, noting that the main street of Squaw Gulch was completely empty. But the sun was not completely up, and he



figured that the miners were at their morning meal.

Approaching closer, he began to hear the gruff murmur of voices, much similar to the echo of a town meeting in a school house. He searched the street for a large building, and finally spied a big saloon with doors open.

"That's funny," the Circle J boss said, turning onto the plank sidewalks. "There's a big crowd in the barroom."

At that moment, a roaring cheer sounded in the saloon.

"What's goin' on?" Buck asked. "Mebbe it's an election. We don't want no constable stealin' our fight."

Billy hurried along the plank sidewalk to the door of the saloon, and turned into it. His first glimpse was of the backs of men crowding toward the bar. His eyes lifted to a big husky hombre standing on the bar. There was no mistaking the fellow. It was Spade Dillon, and he was waving his arms, and stamping his feet.

Spade was yelling: "We've got ter massacre the hull nester tribe. They stole another pack train. Jim Snore played traitor on us. They killed all my guards, an' I was the only gent ter escape. I calls on yuh miners ter a man ter jine me in a raid ter git back that freight an' wipe the Bitterroots clean o' killers."

Behind Billy West, Buck Foster was entering the saloon with Joe Scott and Sing Lo. The veteran halted short, stared, and cried in astonishment.

"Help me, Hannah! It's the coyote what stole our cavy. Don't let him git away!"

At that instant, Billy saw Spade Dillon's black shoe-button eyes rest on him in surprise. The Circle J

boss knew he was in for it. He whirled as Buck Foster spoke.

Retreat would have been the best policy at that moment, but Buck Foster was once more on the rampage. Instead of fleeing, Buck dodged out of Billy's reaching hands, and charged the crowd to reach the bar.

"Let me at the Spade skunk!" Buck was roaring. "Give me a gun ter shoot him."

Spade's voice lifted in the barroom: "Nail the punchers! They're the coyotes I told yuh about. They helped the nesters murder my guards. They're friends o' Jim Snore, who stole the pack train."

The twenty or more miners swung around to face the Circle J outfit, and a howl of anger went up. Buck Foster was leaping among them, and a half dozen men caught him in their arms. He tried to struggle free, and they hurled him to the floor.

Billy charged to the veteran's aid, and ran into a dozen fists that hammered him to the floor. Several hombres piled on top of him. He could hear Joe Scott and Sing Lo fighting beside him. Struggle was useless. The Circle J outfit was hopelessly outnumbered by more than six to one.

The fight was over before it started.

Billy was dragged to his feet to face Spade Dillon, who came forward with a wicked grin.

"Yuh walked right inter yore own trap, didn't yuh?" Spade chuckled. "Yuh thought yuh killed me along with my boys. Yuh figured ter come ter town an' say I ran off with the pack train. But we've got yuh with the goods, an' we'll soon have that traitor, Jim Snore, an' all his nester friends."

Billy West felt a half dozen guns in his ribs. The world seemed to be sinking under him. The night's trip had told hard on him, and the lambasting given him by the miners as he fell to the floor had not helped any.

But he did not mean to give up. He could sense treachery in Spade Dillon's manner, and he could guess that the big tough was not kidding about the loss of the pack train. Spade looked as if he too had been in a fight the night before, and had walked through the timber. Had he run into the nesters as well as had the Circle J outfit?

The Circle J boss scowled at the bully. "What have yuh been hand-in' these miners, Dillon?" Billy asked coolly. "They know the Circle J outfit has nothin' to do with nesters. Did yuh tell them that yuh stole our pack string in Wolf-town?"

"Stole it?" Spade cried, and roared with laughter. "I paid yuh for it in the Wolfstown store. Are yuh denyin' it?"

"Yuh left sixty dollars there," Billy retorted hotly. "But I wanted two hundred and forty. You kidnaped Jim Snore, an' yuh most likely murdered him on the trail."

Spade turned and winked at the miners. "Yuh see, he admits I paid him for the pack hosses. He tried ter hold me up fer a high price, but I beat him down. He says I ran off with Jim Snore, when yuh all know that yuh hired me ter protect the sneakin' baldhead against road agents like these hombres." He glowered at Billy. "How did yuh get them black eyes an' cut lips?" he demanded. "Wasn't it in the fight with my men?"

Billy's fists clenched. "We ran into the nesters, who were looking

for Jim Snore," he replied. "Go ask the nesters, Dillon. We had to fight 'em."

Spade Dillon turned to the miners, unbuckling his gun belt. "Yuh see, he even admits havin' talked ter the nesters last night. I ain't no hombre ter waste any time. This stinkin' range dog played me dirt in Wolfstown when he had his gang with him. I'm goin' ter give him all the fight he wants right hyar. I'm goin' ter beat the tar out o' him afore we take him out and hang him."

"A fight!" a miner yelled. "That's the way to settle it. Spade is ready to back up his own story. This puncher must be in cahoots with the nesters an' Jim Snore."

Billy felt an electric shock go through him. He realized that Spade Dillon was confident of his ability to lick him. The Circle J boss had been through a lot during the night, but Spade himself wasn't in the best of condition.

Spade weighed at least thirty more pounds than Billy, and he was huskier, and looked as hard as rock. But the Circle J boss was no hombre to turn down a fight. He had youth, clean living, and speed in his favor. Besides, he was fighting for his life, and for the lives of his pards.

"I didn't think yuh had the nerve to fight me, Dillon," Billy said. "I'll give yuh all yuh want."

"Listen ter him!" Spade Dillon roared. "Make a ring, boys! An' stop that walrus-faced fool from bel-lerin' over yonder. I'll take him next."

The miners fell back, making a big circle, leaving Billy and Spade Dillon in the center. They eyed each other as a dead silence settled. Billy's fists clenched, and he sank

into a crouch, jaw protected by his raised left shoulder, right arm cocked by his side.

He knew a thing or two about boxing, having read books on the subject at his home ranch and practiced with gloves with Joe Scott.

Spade sneered at him. "Yuh can't trip me ag'in, so don't try," the tough said. "I'm wise ter yuh now. Hyar's whar I hammer yuh down an' jump on yuh with my heels."

"I'm glad to know it," Billy snapped, edging in with a shifting step.

The miners began to call for the pair to lock horns. Spade set his jaw, narrowed his small eyes, and spread his arms wide, and began to creep toward Billy like a big bear trying to corner a calf.

"Here's a starter," Billy gritted, and he darted straight into Spade's widespread arms.

But Spade never got a chance to close his arms about the Circle J boss. Billy fired a left fist straight forward from the shoulder to Spade's bulbous nose, and knocked him back on his heels.

Again, the Circle J boss struck straight with his left, as if it was a sword, jolting Spade off balance. And as the bully staggered, Billy closed up and smashed him with a right uppercut that sent Spade down to the floor with a crash.

"Whoopee-ee!" the miners yelled. "Did yuh see that? The puncher floored Spade."

Spade howled with rage, and came swaying to his feet, unable to understand fully what had happened. He lost his temper and charged, head down, swinging his big brawny arms like windmills.

It was plain that Spade was a dirty rough-and-tumble fighter, no boxer. As he closed in, Billy side-

stepped and let him go rushing by. Spade piled up among the crowd of miners, who hooted him.

"I'll git him!" Spade shouted. "He's slippery as an eel. Give him ter me. He ain't fightin'. He's runnin' away."

The Circle J boss was circling the bully, watching him carefully. Billy knew that he could go on all day like this, tiring Spade out, punching him silly, until it was time for a knock-out. Spade was ungainly on his feet, and knew nothing of boxing. All Billy had to do was to keep away from him and out of his arms.

But the Circle J boss was not allowed to do that. As he moved around the big jasper, a miner darted out of the crowd behind Billy, and gave him a shove. The puncher was hurled across the floor and into Spade's arms.

"I got him now!" Spade howled with triumph, wrapping Billy in his arms, grabbing him by the back of the hair with one hand, and by the ear with another.

Billy tried to wrench free, punching at Spade's ribs, but the big tough had him. They locked, swayed, and tripped. Down to the planks they fell, and the entire bar-room shook from the impact.

The crowd was yelling madly for the kill. All bets were on Spade. The bully was a bear, rolling over and over until he got the Circle J boss under him.

Borne down under the man's weight, Billy felt a handful of his hair come away in Spade's fingers. The Circle J boss punched up at his foe's ugly face, scored on the nose again, and Spade shrieked with pain. Again, Billy struck at him, and Spade smashed him in the eye, closing it.

But Billy was wriggling clear now,

and he felt Spade's weight leave him. Spade was leaping to his feet. Too late to stop him, the Circle J boss knew what to expect. He threw himself over on the planks as Spade kicked at him and missed. Spade meant to give him the boots. Billy saw the big fellow leap in the air to come down on top of him.

All Billy's training with wild steers and loco broncs had not been in vain. He knew how to avoid flailing hoofs, and he put that knowledge to practice. He did not roll away from Spade's descending heels. Billy rolled right toward them, and under him, so that Spade struck the planks behind him.

With a twist, Billy turned on the planks, reaching for Spade's ankles, and jerking them. The big fellow came crashing down to the floor beside him, waving his arms, roaring with rage.

And as Spade landed, Billy was suddenly on top of him. The puncher's fists were pounding Spade with the rapidity of pistons, hammering his eyes, his nose, his teeth, his jaw.

"Help!" Spade yowled. "Git him off. I'll kill him!"

Wham! Billy walloped Spade in the mouth, stopping his yells.

The Circle J boss reared up on top of him, and swung an uppercut to the jaw. It was a blow that packed all his strength, and as it landed, it sounded as if Spade's jaw bones broke.

A grunt, and Spade Dillon's eyes snapped shut. A shudder went through him. His legs straightened. He was silent.

Billy West got to his feet, wiping grime and crimson from his face with his shirt sleeve. He turned to stare at the miners, who were eying him in astonishment.

"I don't reckon that proves anything," Billy said coldly. "My pack hosses were worth twenty bucks a head, an' I came here to collect. You men know that pack hosses are worth that much. Spade stole my string an' left sixty bucks for them. Send a rider to Wolfstown for the truth if yuh want."

A growl lifted among the miners. "That don't prove nothin' either," the crowd said. "We lost our freight, an' we're thinkin' yuh stole it. What happened ter Jim Snore?"

There was a bustle near the door, the gasp of voices, and a bald-headed hombre shoved through the miners to the center of the barroom floor.

"Jim Snore!" Billy West exclaimed. "I thought Spade had murdered yuh!"

The old baldhead stared down at the unconscious bully. "It looks like he got what was comin' ter him, doesn't it?" Jim Snore said. "No, he wanted ter hang me an' blame it on the nesters, the same as how he's been doin' all along about the pack trains. I got the freight outside, hombres."

"What?" a miner exclaimed. "Yuh mean nobody stole the train?"

"I stole it," Jim Snore snickered. "I had ter do it ter keep Spade from gettin' it. I was going ter pay Circle J twenty bucks a head fer them fine packers, but Spade pocketed the money an' left sixty bucks fer the string. If yuh search the big skunk, yuh'll find the rest o' the mazuma, Mr. West. An' yuh better do it in a hurry, afore these miners hang him."

A walrus-mustached old puncher staggered out from the crowd, and gaped at Jim Snore.

"How did yuh git that pack train away from the coyote?" Buck Foster

demanded. "How did yuh git through them nesters? Thar's some-thin' crooked about all this."

Jim Snore grinned. "Why, Spade Dillon gits all excited jest at the mention o' nesters," the baldhead said. "Jest like yuh. If yuh ain't careful, some day it's goin' ter git yuh in a lot o' trouble."

Billy turned to Buck Foster. "I

thought you promised me that you'd keep quiet," he chuckled. "I reckon that now is a good time."

Buck's gittin' excited at the mention o' nesters has already got him inter a peck o' trouble. An' it's likely ter git him— an' his pards—inter a hull lot more. Read another thrillin' story about the saddle pards from Circle J in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



### A NOISY, USELESS GUN

DURING the battle of the Salado, near San Antonio, one of the American fighting scouts, had emptied his rifle, and had no time to reload. Seeing a dead Mexican with one of the heavy "*escopetas*" which were in common use in the Mexican army at that time, the scout seized it, placed the breech against his shoulder, and fired at a party of the enemy that was in retreat.

When the gun went off, the scout thought he had been knocked to bits by a cannon ball. It kicked him head over heels, and when he came to, he found that his nose was broken and two of his ribs were stove in.

Later, he learned that the Mexicans never placed these guns to the shoulder, but held them with both hands above their heads and fired at random.

As the gun was practically good for nothing except to make a noise, it was not surprising that it did so little harm.

While the Americans were picking off the enemy with shots that counted every time, the unfortunate Mexicans were making a deafening noise with their *escopetas*, and doing very little damage with their random shots that seldom found a target.

*You Risk  
Being Fooled*

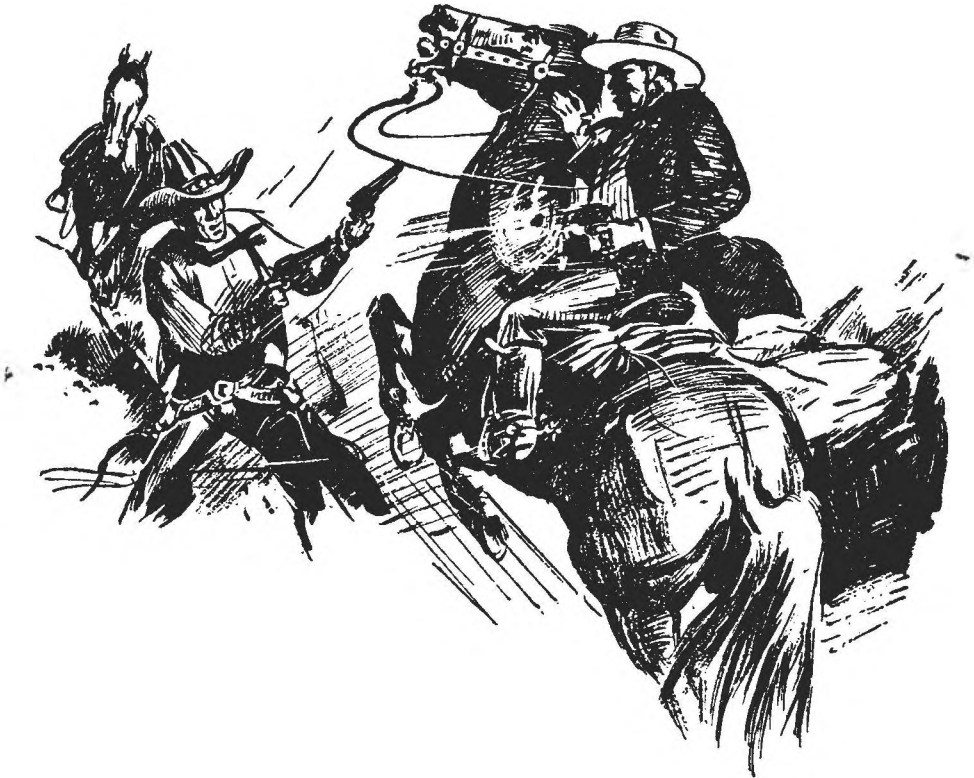


**WHEN YOU BUY THE *unknown***

● Why risk your good money on unknown razor blades? Probak Jr. is the product of the world's largest blade maker. This double-edge blade guarantees plenty of clean, cool shaves. Buy Probak Jr. today.

**PROBAK JUNIOR**





# Black Blizzard Gold

By Hal Davenport

Author of "Rodeo Ruckus," etc.

**W**EAK from hunger and tortured by thirst, "Tuck" Madigan lifted his stubborn head. For much longer now than he seemed able to remember, he and his pinto had been holed up here under the lee of what once had been a cut-bank.

For three savage days and nights the thick, choking sand of the fierce "black blizzard" had made Sabulosa Mesa a torture to man and beast. It howled, it cut, it rasped, flinging itself in vicious volleys, hiding the earth in blinding sheets with hardly ever a moment's stop.

To the red-rimmed eyes of the worn young rancher, the shelter was barely that any longer, for the wild rage of sand and grit had finally filled the dry-wash almost to the top.

"Shovelin' time again," he mumbled, coming to his feet and stumbling toward his pinto through the heavy looseness of an ever-growing drift. Head down and tail plastered flat beneath its belly, the cayus was a mere dust-grayed blur, although scarcely three yards away.

"Likin' it some better, ol' fellah?" Tuck tried to grin. "Dern our

stubborn hides, the both of us are responsible for this fix. I should 'a' started for the house sooner. And yuh should 'a' kept on fightin' the storm with me, 'stead o' clampin' onto the bit and driftin' blind thet whole first day, jest to show me who was boss."

In reality, the trapped young rancher blamed the horse in no way. No living thing could have bucked head-on into the fury of the blast in which they'd been so hopelessly turned around. The pinto had tried its best.

Where they were now Tuck had small idea, except in the vaguest, most general sense. Some place on the mesa, no doubt, but probably many long miles from the ranch.

Once they'd stumbled into this shelter, he hadn't been worried, at first. No sandstorm lasted forever. Tall and broad of shoulder, toughened by hard range life, he could stand hunger, discomfort. But then had come the thirst.

"Stubborn we are, ol' nag," he'd muttered, on sharing the last water in his canteen. "So we'll just stubborn it out."

But that had been ages ago. Grit in their eyes and nostrils, grit in their ears and teeth. A whole furious world upon the move, a blinding, screaming force. Doing its best to smother, to choke them, to bury them here beneath the bank.

Wouldn't the storm ever let up?

Doggedly Tuck Madigan used his hands as a scoop to drag away from the pinto the top of the mounting drift ever seeking relentlessly to heap high up above its hocks. He knew they couldn't afford to have the cayuse embedded, stuck. Within a few hours at most, thirst and the steady piling of the sand would force them into the open. Yet it would probably be to their death.

"No tellin' how far we are from the mesa rim—or them others scattered about," he grunted through his clogged teeth.

A single misstep, and the pair of them, blind in the storm, would plunge to a broken mass. Deeply cut by fissures and brakes, the mesa edge ran roughly south by west. Several of the cuts slashed back into it for miles. And which way was south, which west?

He shook his head as he worked away, every effort a drain on his strength. Judgment told him to stick here as long as he could, hoping for the tremendous gale to abate.

It was torture to know the few water holes on the mesa—three far-flung, short-lived seeps—and yet realize he couldn't even guess at their location now. They might be buried deep. Without landmarks to guide him, his chances weren't one in a million.

Down the vicious sweep of the wind fresh sounds came, shrill, long-drawn and plaintive, torn and shot about. He lifted his head to the force of the storm. Out of the darkness of its flying wall, a small form, a yellowish blur, suddenly pitched down over the bank.

Others came, came in a stream—with that high-pitched, mournful bleat:

*B-a-a-a-a! b-a-a! b-a-a-a!*

The young cattleman stared at them—and snorted, in disgust.

"Sheep!"

Holed up here with woollies! To have the nauseous smell of the hated things——

"By the livin' thunder," he burst out suddenly, "I'm on Guthrie's ranch!"

Bob Guthrie was a former partner of Tuck's. The pair had quarreled bitterly over those same sheep.

"But how the heck," Tuck muttered, "did I ever get over his wolf-tight fence?"

Ten feet high the darn thing was. Of course, sand drifts piled even higher, but hardly the first day of a storm—the day he'd wandered about.

The savage lift of the gale seemed rushing the woollies onward. Not one of them had stopped; they were headed down the dry-wash.

Suddenly Tuck reached for his bridle. "C'mon, Bugs," he ordered the pinto. "I don't think a sheep's got sense enough to hit out for water. But there may be a chance, at thet."

There was an added reason for his swift decision. Sheep always jammed close under shelter in a storm. The very fact that these were on the move seemed a mighty good indication that, somewhere on the mesa at least, the fury of the wild "black blizzard" might finally have let up. These storms were queer and freakish things. They never stopped all at once.

Yes, he thought that the force was lessening, if only a little bit. Maybe those sheep smelled water. He stumbled on, leading the pinto. A cowboy, following sheep!

Time and again he would have lost them save for the vague nearness of the arroyo banks. The gale still howled, swooped, lashed. Sand in vicious sheets shot along the meager wall, a constant slither and rasp. He stumbled so often he was astonished. He hadn't realized he was so weak.

A mile, and he seemed spent. Then abruptly the dry-wash turned, to pitch more sharply downward in a sudden series of ledgelike steps. Immediately the storm was less, venting its fierceness overhead. A rough dike of natural stone, looming

close on the left, rose ever higher as they worked down. They were getting into the brakes.

The air was still a yellow-gray pall; but more of fine dust settling, settling, than a savage, moving force. Gradually more and more of the nearer world was emerging into outline. As yet Tuck could find no landmark that he knew. But suddenly he doubted those sheep.

"Only one water hole," he reasoned, "anywhere in the brakes. And thet ain't on Guthrie's place. Them woollies have just been drift-in' with the storm. Mebbe we're farther from water than ever. Hoss, we better rest."

He sat down on a boulder, Bugs the pinto, beside him, their breathing still difficult. Tuck's eyes, a fiercely grit-burned blue, went on after the sheep.

## II.

The woollies were Bob Guthrie's, beyond any doubt. Nobody else on the mesa would own one of the things on a bet. Crazy old "Shotgun" Franey had left them to him. Franey, of the horrible scar running up cheek to temple, plowing through eye-corner muscles, so that one whole twisted side of his lean, sour face had drooped. Franey, who'd hated every man right up to his hour of death.

Yet his will had read:

I hereby bequeath my flocks, rights, and holdings to one Robert Guthrie, Sabulosa rancher, as some small recompense for the gold and debt I have owed him these many long years of my life.

What gold? What debt? Bob had been amazed. A partner then with Tuck in their small cattle ranch farther up along the mesa, he'd recalled no possible debt.

There'd been strange conditions to

the will. Bob mustn't sell those sheep. Only their annual increase.

"Ah-hah! Right there's the neat little joker," Tuck had cried, the day they'd had it out. "We know Franey owed yuh nothin'. He hated us both, in fact. Thet's all he ever put out to any man. He was doin' it on his deathbed, Bob—schemin' to carry on trouble from the grave. And he will, if yuh take them sheep."

"I don't see how," Bob had protested. "Oh, I know the mesa's cattle country. But them dang things won't live forever. And we could use the money for improvements on the ranch."

"We'd be sheepmen, just the same. And likewise a couple o' goats! Why, dang it," Tuck had snorted, "about all Franey ever had outside them woollics, was thet feud of his with Oscuro Rand! Thet's what he's willing yuh—us. We'd spend thet money for bullets."

Rand, biggest cattleman in the country, would have liked nothing better than an excuse to try crowding them out.

"Afraid of him, huh?" Bob had sneered.

"Yuh know danged well I ain't. But I ain't bein' made a monkey of, jist to carry on another man's hate! Yuh can like it, or yuh can lump it," Tuck Madigan told him flatly, "but I ain't defendin' sheep."

One hot word had led to another. Both were stubborn. It ended in their split-up, Tuck buying Bob's share of the ranch. But not until they'd come to blows. Tuck could feel the jarring impact of Bob Guthrie's hard fists yet.

"Just the same I knocked thet thick-head plumb flat on his back," he informed himself, totally over-looking in human fashion the undeniable fact that he himself had also

smacked the earth from a well-delivered sock.

That had been eight months ago. They seldom met. Never spoke. Bob, who'd considered it good business, was really running those danged sheep!

Down here in these brakes, Tuck reckoned. Behind a wolf-tight fence. For Bob was no trouble hunter. He'd put up the fence to keep the sheep from cattle range. Rand and his vicious gunnies had discovered no pretext to jump him. Nevertheless, Tuck felt—

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Crash-h-h! B-r-r-o-o-o-m-m!* The rocky dike rolled with echoes. Tuck leaped to his feet. Terrified sheep were flying his way, a thunder of hoofs behind them, bullets ripping into their midst.

Some dropped in instant death. Others fell, dragging hind quarters, pitiable in their efforts to scramble on.

Their former long-drawn bleating from the sufferings of thirst was gone in a swell of panic, lashed through by the savage shots. Down behind them the storm pall had lifted, revealing a rider nearly on them, and another down the sharp slope. As Tuck bounced to his feet, the sweep of his eye caught the vague outline of a small rock house beneath the men, or rather, just its top.

"Rand's lower line camp!" Tuck exclaimed. This wasn't Bob's range, after all. There was a water hole near that house.

*P-r-r-i-n-g-g!* Ripping rock fragments beside him, a slug hit the boulder face and went shrilling past his ear.

The nearer rider had seen him, was throwing down. Again the weapon crashed.

But Tuck had flung himself be-



hind the boulder, jerking out his own .45, its cylinder clogged with grit.

"Hold on there!" his harsh voice rasped. "If yuh think for one little minute——"

"Dirty sheep-lover!" the charging rider snarled, his vicious words filled with triumph. "Hyar's where we settle yore hash!"

Bugs, the pinto, had whirled aside. The fellow's weapon—clicked. The next instant Tuck was out, seizing the hombre's mount by the bridle, ramming the horse around and back.

Tuck's .45, its hammer eared back by an effort because of the clinging grit, stared the man in his brutish face.

"Drop thet empty gun!" Tuck clipped. "Yuh shot too many sheep—or mebbe yuh couldn't count. Pitch yore dirty paws up at the sky! Yo're lucky I haven't shot."

The fellow—"Hunk" Sloat, one of Rand's punchers—hesitated a moment only. Tuck's eyes were twin blue dots of fury in his storm-grimed face. Sloat's six-shooter fell to the ground. Slant-browed and thick-lipped, the man cried, as his arms went up:

"Honest, Madigan, I didn't know thet it was yuh! I—I thought yuh was Bob Guthrie. Yuh ain't never took up with sheep."

"How do you know I haven't?" the young rancher snapped back. "Anyhow, it looked to me like it made no difference to yuh! I give yuh yore chance to see who I was. And yuh tried to put in another shot!"

Tuck didn't look like Bob Guthrie, in build, face, any respect. Bob never rode a pinto, either. Anyway—whether his or Bob's—murder would have been murder. Mistake was no excuse.

Suddenly Tuck stepped sidewise, his free hand sweeping Sloat's up. The other rider was spurring up fast, but with as yet no chance to shoot because of Tuck's position and that of Sloat's cayuse. The man's course was unswerving, plowing over and through mangled sheep.

Tuck, guns held ready for action, saw it was "Oscuro" Rand himself. The wealthy rancher—hawkish of build and feature, with fierce, hard black eyes—had an old Sharps rifle stuck in his saddle boot. A right arm stiffly crooked at the elbow from an old bullet break yanked the horse to a halt. His left hand wasn't in sight.

"All right," Tuck clipped, "yuh can drop it!"

"Drop what?" the swarthy-faced rancher rasped, his thin lips a savage line. "What're yuh doin' with my puncher under them guns? What do yuh mean on my range with sheep?"

"I mean business, if forced! I said drop thet six-gun yo're hidin' behind yore horse!"

"Turned loco, huh—like all sheep-herders!" Rand grated the words out with a sneer. "Only gun I use is a Sharps." He laid his left hand upon the saddle horn. "And believe me, I'll sure use it any time yuh or yore partner try puttin' through this notion yuh can run sheep on my place!"

"I've got no partner," Tuck snapped. "And no interest in these sheep, except thet o' decency! I'm with 'em by accident."

"Yeah? And I reckon it's an accident," the rancher snarled, "thet they're even on my place! How'd they get over a wolf-tight fence?"

"Storm drift, more'n likely," Tuck replied. "It'd pile and pack higher'n thet. I know it heaped thirty feet

where I been trapped blind for the last three days—till these woollies helped me get out. Happens I'm a little grateful, Rand. So yuh and yore danged plug-ugly have put yore last bullet in 'em! Them sheep have suffered enough!"

"Uh-huh! Don't try to tell me yuh ain't half owner!" Rand's eyes were like a snake's. "Sheep-lover's plain all over yuh!" the swarthy rancher rasped. "Partners again with Guthrie—like yore daddies before yuh, before Clint Guthrie disappeared! I wouldn't any more trust the stripe——"

"Thet'll be enough!" Tuck clipped.

Suddenly he was guessing the reason for the big hawkish hombre's insistence on the sheep's ownership. Nothing would suit Rand better than building up a fake excuse for grabbing off Tuck's ranch, as well as Bob's. "Protecting" his range from invasion, would be the cry. But Tuck's guns covered the hombre. That stall wouldn't work—to-day at least.

"Listen, Rand!" he snapped. "Yuh don't pack yore nickname for nothin'. '*Oscuro*' in Spanish means 'dark'—or 'shady'; and it don't only apply to yore face. I've got yore record, snake! Make any claims, to yoreself, that yuh danged please. But make no moves against me! Or Bob either, over these sheep.

"Now I'm takin' 'em off yore place. First, though, I'm goin' to water 'em down at yore hole. And yuh and Sloat are goin' to help."

"Yo're crazy," the rancher rapped, eyes drawn taut with hate. "Yuh can't add thet insult! No sheep water on my——"

"Oh, yes they do," Tuck said firmly. "If they're anything like me, they're darned near dead from thirst. Start roundin' 'em up."

The gun that covered the scowling puncher lifted its muzzle slightly. Hunk Sloat hesitated, swore, rode off. Tuck went stepping toward Rand. "Now I'll just take thet Sharps."

"Anything else yuh want?" the rancher snarled. He'd started to turn his horse. "By the thunder, it seems to me—— Take it then!" he rasped.

With the slight turn of his cayuse, his left hand had shifted from sight, to whip up, gun-filled, blazing, with the speed of a venomous snake. The thunderous roar and flame of a Colt .45 was almost in Tuck's face.

### III.

How Rand, without gun belt or holster and no move toward his clothing, had managed to get a six-gun hidden when covered, was out of the realm of guessing now. With a desperate jerk Tuck's head barely cleared the path of death.

Powder-scorch hot on his face, he fired back—fired to kill. He used his right-hand six-gun, aiming at the hombre's middle.

But the weapon, Tuck's own, had hammer and cylinder clogged with sand from days of storm. Its trigger-pull suddenly stubborn, he had to yank to set it off.

For an instant he thought he'd missed. But an oath of pain and dismay welled from Rand. The slug, thrown an inch from its course, had ripped hard into gun steel, if not the rancher's body. Rand's Colt was in the air, spinning wildly.

The falling gun hit Tuck in the face. Rand, with drive of spurs and yell, was trying to flee, bent low behind the horse. The fellow still had his Sharps.

Tuck lunged for the heavy old rifle as it shot past in its saddle

boot. His fingers missed the weapon, but hooked for an instant in cloth that gave way with a ripping sound.

The jerk, and the rush of the horse, flung Tuck to his knees in the boulders. Part of Rand's coat pocket was in his hand, as he nearly sprawled on his face against a dead sheep.

A harsh thunder of hoofs sounded close behind. Hunk Sloat was trying to run him down! Tuck spun, rolled, fired blindly. Anything to keep the horse off!

The cayuse swerved at the shot, and went tearing down the slope hard after Rand. Tuck leaped to his feet.

"Halt!" he yelled, throwing up a gun.

If he let them gain the line camp under the bluff, they could probably keep him and the sheep from the water hole there. Rand's Sharps, already out, cut loose in a mighty crash.

The slug from the powerful buffalo gun sailed over Tuck's head with a vicious screech, as the tip of a boulder intervened, just as the ranny ducked. Rand's hand dived for a pocket for more shells.

A Sharps, which has tremendous range, is a single-shot weapon only. The big rancher fumbled wildly, gave a yell, and went flying on for the house.

"Ah-hah! Lost yore shells," the waddy snarled, "when I tore yore pocket out!"

Tuck was sprinting down the slope. But suddenly he stopped, dropped to a knee.

*Wham! Br-a-a-m! Wham!* His six-guns roared, hurling slugs.

Rock slivers ripped and screamed from boulders into the noses and faces of his enemies' straining mounts.

The withering fire turned horses, riders. In a matter of seconds, Tuck, suddenly weak from his exertions, was down at the old rock house. Oscuro Rand and Sloat were out of range, spurring their horses at every jump.

"Gone for help likely," the ranny growled, as the storm swallowed them up.

Still heavy in the middle distance, it would probably blanket the sky for a day or two more, even start its savagery once again if another fierce wind sprang up.

Too experienced to drink while still so heated, he nevertheless entered the rude stone shack, to size up the food situation and possibly pick up some six-gun shells if any were lying about. He was still a good dozen miles within Rand's range. Those skunks would probably be back after him long before he got off.

"And I got into this mess," he muttered ruefully, "slingin' bullets protectin' sheep. Bob Guthrie's sheep, at that!" Briefly it occurred to him to abandon them, but his stubbornness bulged at the thought. "No sir, they're plumb helpless. Least I kin do is take 'em out."

He found evidence of cooking, but no food in the place. A rarely used line camp, its meager supply of staples had been consumed by Rand and Sloat after the storm had forced the pair into refuge there, several miles from the main ranch house. Tuck's red-rimmed eyes, sweeping the one room, discovered a six-gun belt and holster on the floor near a dirty bunk.

"Rand dropped it, I reckon," he figured. "He was in such a rush to get out to shoot sheep. And it derved near cost me my life. If he'd had the belt strapped on him, I'd knowed the treacherous snake was

shore packin' a six-gun. Cocked in his hand, it must 'a' been, and he just let the hammer down easy to fasten over a saddle ring on the other side o' the horse."

Pocketing the shells, he took a drink from a bucket, and went back for his pinto and sheep. He picked up Rand's six-gun on the way, but discovered it so badly damaged from his slug that the weapon was past using. Well, he had two six-guns, anyway, and a reserve supply of ammunition. He rounded up the sheep.

Twenty minutes later, he was shoving them along, headed for Bob Guthrie's range, but still down in the brakes. Though refreshed by their watering, the woollies were much too weak to make good time.

"Even their fastest gait," Tuck muttered, "won't get them off Rand's range to-day. Or rather, the range thet lizard claims." Some of the land the wealthy rancher used, he held by no legal right.

Bugs, the pinto, still gray with dust, was in better shape than the sheep. A bait of grain from a sack found in the line camp had put new life in that tough un. Tuck himself had managed food, too—hastily cooked mutton from a slain sheep. His strong teeth were tearing it now as he rode along.

Meat from an animal so recently killed might bring digestive disturbances later, but his was no choice in the case. He'd also thought it wise to bring along a few extra cuts. Even if he managed to hide his trail, with the aid perhaps of fresh bursts of wind, he was due to be many an hour without other food, so long as he stuck to the sheep.

And that, he knew, would be to the end. Trust a Madigan's stubborn streak.

Like his daddy before him, he reckoned. Tuck barely remembered his father—an all-round Westerner, he'd understood, ever ready to tackle anything, ranching, freighting, mining, and carry on through to the last. Killed in the hills, he had been—cowardly shot through the back.

The motive was a mystery, although there'd been ugly rumors at the time that Clint Guthrie, his partner, who'd disappeared a few days before, had slipped back and fired the shot, because of a quarrel of some sort.

There'd been no proof, however. Gradually men all but forgot it. Nevertheless, they'd thought it strange when Tuck and Bob threw in together, years later, on growing up.

"Means trouble shore, one o' these days," had been the range's verdict.

Well, it hadn't come in any way, until that break over sheep. And that, darn it— Why, heck, dang the fool, Bob was just crazy, Tuck reckoned.

The storm, he saw, as he went along, had done queer things to the landscape. The lifting veil showed draws and fissures heaped so high that many were unrecognizable. If a man took a wrong turn here in the brakes and didn't discover it immediately, he was almost sure to lose both time and miles likely to cost him dearly.

Tuck spent small time watching his back trail, for Rand and his gunnies, a dozen strong, were sure to let him know when they got near. Inside of three hours at the most they were almost certain to overhaul him—unless wind and storm should swoop again, swallow him up. And even that was no pleasant prospect.

Two hours he put behind him at the best gait the sheep could make. The ruggedness of the mighty brakes was lessening a bit in character now, as the mesa rim above began to recede in a great irregular half circle. The *rinconada*, or "corner," men called it—a basin sometimes swept by storm, sometimes escaping entirely.

The pall hung low above it now; in fact seemed pressing downward, barely revealing the nearest of the long, low twisting sand dunes that filled its floor in curves and ridges, heaps and sprawls built up through the ages. Stunted yucca and *zucaton* formed meager vegetation, but only upon the edges, for the dunes, year in, year out, were ever shifting, changing.

Behind Tuck there suddenly sounded a long, shrill yell. And almost instantly more in chorus. He glanced back, spotted the enemy, horses lifted hard under drive of spurs now that they had seen him.

Here they came, ten or more. In these sand dunes would be the battle. And almost as if to mock him—now that it was too late to blot his trail—there suddenly dived down into the *rinconada* from the rim a fresh rattle and vigorous sweep of wind. Once more dust devils were flying.

#### IV.

Tuck's eyes swept the land for what he could see. The sheep would need cover as well as he. The dunes were more tumbled and twisting near the great lift of the mesa wall. Already the dip of the wind had hit their tops; sand leaped high in gritty spray and hurled its first sheets at him.

"By golly, mebbe it'll help blind them lizards yet!"

With the exclamation, Tuck was rushing the sheep straight ahead. Yells rose in volume; a rifle cracked. But he didn't believe, in the sudden new fog, that the slug came anywhere near him.

A gap in the dunes broke to his right, toward the wall. The opening, the mouth of a curving sand channel, was hardly fifty feet away, but the force of the wind and driving sand made of it a blur already. He threw a swift glance toward the rear; the horsemen seemed gone in the storm sheets.

"C'mon, Bugs! Turn them sheep!"

Tuck rushed them toward the opening. If the foe overran the gap, this thing might turn into a grim game of hide and seek. Scattering, Rand's gun dogs would still be fairly certain to come upon him in the end, but at least he'd have a chance to do his first fighting against small bunches.

Now in the winding vale, he thrust one gun within his shirt, and kept his bandanna close to hand to wipe grit from the other. Every shot would have to count. Each skirmish be short and final.

The sound of guns would bring the rest, but if they didn't all reach him in a wave or get him hemmed, surrounded—well, Oscuro Rand and his mess o' skunks were going to have no picnic.

On he rushed the sheep, on and on, turning frequently down sand-dune gullies. Yes, by thunder, he told himself, that wolf pack had overrun him. The flying sand swirled, dipped, and leaped; sometimes lifted, clearing things; sometimes howled solid, a curtain.

"Hate to run, sheep," the waddy growled. "But I set out to save yore muttons."

Once again the sand was jump-



ing high, clearing the nearer dune tops. Tuck thought he saw a rider.

*Crash-h! Crash-h! C-crash-h-h!* came the sound of guns. The storm-wrapped rider whirled his horse, disappeared, scooting down a sandy incline.

"By golly, sighted me!" the waddy cried. "And signaled to the others. He's hit for a gully to cut me off. It might pay to meet the varmint!"

Gun in hand, he sent Bugs at his gamest gait speeding along the sand-dune channel. Sound was smothered in the going underfoot, lost in the gale above it. Tuck was fairly certain he'd spotted the gully into which the man had dropped. The waddy, though, never reached it.

Bugs sped around a shelving bend; swerved, stumbled on something gleaming white, and went down in a pile-up. Tuck was flung far, a rolling fall, to bring up with a giddy shock. After soft sand, he'd hit boulders.

Groggy, he scrambled to his feet in the mouth of an unsuspected draw. Out of it a rider was charging.

Tuck flung up the hand that still held his gun. Their shots roared in close-range blare. Then, from out of nowhere, something furry, hairy, hit Tuck's chest with lunging force, and knocked him flat upon his back. A rocky ledge made his head ring. Dazed, confused, he surged half up, realizing he'd missed the rider.

The horse was barely a yard away. Tuck's gun leaped up as the animal reared. A weapon rang down at his face, yet strangely away, in almost the same split instant. Flash-blinded, he reeled, tried to fire. The man was diving straight on him from the horse.

"Don't do it, Tuck! It's me, Bob! Me!" The words came with the

driving impact that hurled Tuck Madigan flat again. A powerful grip had his gun wrist, was forcing it down. Animal snarls were close to Tuck's face. "Get away—get back I say, Bounder!"

Bounder! That was Bob Guthrie's dog! That was it—'twas a col-lie had hit him. Tuck's dizzy brain was clearing now. And, great thunder, he—he'd tried to kill Bob! They'd almost killed each other.

"Git off o' me, dang it!" Tuck Madigan said. "It's a derned good thing we're both bum shots. Between yuh and yore dog and thet hoss o' mine I'm still plenty woozy. We ain't got time, though, to lally-gag. Rand's men——"

"I know. They shot at me just a minute ago," Bob said hastily, rolling off. Square-shouldered, blocky, yet quick of limb, he was possessed of a good strong face and eyes like gray steel filings. Storm-grit grimed him from hair to boots.

"Thought yuh was one of 'em, for a minute," Bob went on. "Had my gun nearly in yore eye. Finger squeezin' the trigger. Scared me stiff, yuh son of a gun, when I seen who it was! Yuh lost in the storm, or somethin'?"

"Was," said Tuck. "With yore sheep. Yuh lookin' for them, I reckon. Well, they're back around the bend. C'mon, if yuh want to save 'em."

"Yuh mean yuh'll fight for them? For—for me?" Bob cried.

"Well, I shore been fightin' for somethin'."

Bob snapped a foot to stirrup and swung up. Tuck, limping a little, had hastened toward his pinto. Bugs was on his feet slowly. He had fallen in a mass of ribs and other bones protruding hooplike from the sand. For brief moments his hoofs had been tangled.

Tuck saw it was the skeleton of a horse, the long, white skull, detached near by, partly filled with a darker sand. Even at the instant of his quick glance, that skull seemed to move, shift slightly.

Then, with a lurch, it settled.

"Freak o' the wind," he realized.

The storm force, shooting down the draw these days past, howling twisting, tearing, had ripped away ancient layers of sand from around the bony structure. This fresh gale was still at it. The thought no more than a registered flash, Tuck reached for his pinto's bridle.

As he swung up, however, something glinted there below—an old canteen, its metal sand-scoured, polished, except for a dark and ragged hole almost squarely in its middle. Less than a yard away, the teeth of a human skull grinned at him, in stiff fixation. It, too, had a hole—neat and round—in the center of the forehead.

That was all he saw, save for a faint yellow gleam between two skeleton ribs of the horse, where the wind had hollowed a pocket. Then shrill yells burst from above, with a crash and roar and flash of shots.

A scream of lead went past his ear. Down the slope of the nearest dune three horsemen were coming in furious charge. Tuck's gun leaped in his hand like a living thing, steadied, hurled its thunder.

The nearest foe went from the saddle like a man jerked, one foot caught fast in the stirrup. Shriek of lead slashed from the storm. More men were coming!

Bob Guthrie's gun was a red-tinged flash, a continuous roar, from somewhere close beside him. Sheep darted in confusion under their feet. Tuck's voice rang with a battle cry, yet the fusillade all but drowned it:

"At 'em, Bob! Straight in fast!

Grab death by the throat, slam him around, and he usually turns out yellow!"

Straight at Old Man Death they charged—Death in the form of vicious foes, howling cutthroats, savage gunnies. The best defense was a smashing attack.

Two waddies low on their horses' necks—two waddies with twin guns flaming! Guns ripped and shrieked, blared and roared. Bullets tore at bodies, unseated men. Tuck reeled in the saddle.

He gritted his teeth. He tore on, one side numb, throbbing with pain. The fury of the pair's assault had struck the gunmen dumfounded. The shock of surprise, the shock of lead, the shock of a pair of young fighting fools who seemed wild to get at Death, run him down, kick him apart, and shatter and blast his henchmen.

They couldn't stand it, that gun-dog tribe; at least not for the moment. They turned, fled, scattered, up the dune. The wind and storm was a yellow sheet, yet the air seemed gray with bullets.

Suddenly Tuck became aware that Bob was no longer with him. And his own guns were all but empty. In a gale-torn spray, the last three of this batch of foes were spurring from sight over the dune's ridged crest. He shot anxious eyes behind him.

Bob was down. And so was his horse. But now Bob was staggering upright. He stumbled, swayed, went down again. Tuck whirled back as fast as he could. But once again Bob was upright.

A wide crimson smear stained his head. A trickle was down his jaw line. Tuck jerked to a halt, tumbled off.

"Hit—hard?" he panted, his voice breaking.

Bob's bruised lips grinned. "Ol' son of a gun, what d'yuh care? Ain't I just a derved sheepman?"

"But—but yuh look plumb shot to doll rags!"

"Got me a crease. And a dead hoss. Holes in my clothes, too, where bullets ripped. Where at have those lizards gone? Yuh don't mean that we've whipped 'em?"

"First installment," said Tuck. "The rest are likely comin' fast. I don't think Rand was with those first. C'mon, there's a loose horse down below! We better get yuh mounted."

Both piled on Bugs, Bob behind, and went flying downward. Tuck's face was gray beneath its grime, for the wound in his side had turned to fire, shooting pain all through him.

The loose cayuse below dashed away before the pair could near it. In the boulders at the side draw mouth, near the whitened arch of skeleton ribs, a human form lay wedged between the rocks, one foot in a broken stirrup.

Tuck's right-hand gun leaped to cover the man, but the fellow looked dead, or unconscious. At almost the same moment, a heavy, crashing roar sounded from around the bend in the sand dune's channel.

"Rand and his skunks—killin' sheep!" burst from Tuck, as he swept the pinto to a halt. "We better tear into the varmints!"

"Sure! But we got to do it here!" yelled Bob, diving off. "They're around the bend—plumb on us!"

His guns were thundering as he spoke. Tuck, too, dived from the pinto, in the other direction, into the rocks near the skeleton. He'd savvied Bob's move in an instant. Together on the pony, they'd have offered a double target.

Half a dozen riders were charging them, amid yells and snarls and

screaming guns, the nearest not thirty feet from them.

Tuck's first shot lifted a man completely out of the saddle. Rand's vicious face loomed just behind. Tuck hurled lead, but an enemy slug, ripping close, blinded him with a spurting hail of sand, rock, other objects.

Tuck dashed the stuff from his eyes, spat it out—some gray, some white, some yellow. Then his guns, like Bob's, were working again.

Horses went down, men were flung back in a churning swirl of shot-riven fury.

Rand's face was lost in the roar and blare. The charge went reeling to nothing.

Back around the bend of the dune spurred a pair of frantic riders. Another, low on his horse, was tearing hard up the rocky draw—the draw that the storm had deepened.

"Water! Water!" sounded a moan near the skeleton ribs. Tuck, just surging to his feet, saw that it came from the man he'd taken for dead, wedged there between the rocks where he'd been dragged by a frightened horse after the first battle. The open mouth was that of Hunk Sloat, his eyes, wide and wild, almost glassy.

The dying gunman's fingers, in spasmodic lunge, closed on the ancient canteen Tuck had seen there in the sand, with the human skull close beside it. Sloat sought to raise it to his lips. Tuck cried, with a touch of pity:

"Here, man, that's empty. Been for years. I'll get——"

"Look out, Tuck! Rand!" screamed from Bob.

Whirling, Tuck flung himself aside. Wrapped in storm up the draw, Rand had jerked his horse to a halt, throwing a heavy gun up to his shoulder. The deadly old buffalo

Sharps, snapped to a bead, bellowed its lead in mighty roar. But Tuck, too, had fired, like lightning.

And like a lightning streak his slug ripped home, tearing Rand, arms wide, from the saddle. Bob sprinted past, loading empty guns. But Oscuro Rand would never press trigger again. The fight and the rancher were ended.

Getting his own canteen now for Sloat, Tuck took the old one from the man's tight fingers. The gunman swallowed, then sagged back. Tuck handed the ancient canteen to Bob, saying in a queer voice:

"There's a message on it. Scratched with a knife. To my dad—from yore father."

"What?"

"Plain as day. It's sand-scoured clean," Tuck answered, watching Bob as the latter read words of long-ago tragedy:

Jim, pardner, they got me hemmed—Shotgun Franey, Rand and his men. I struck gold here, like you thought we might. It's all yours if I'm bumped off. Looks like good-by— CLINT GUTHRIE.

"Killed right here by them skunks," Tuck said fiercely. "Franey really owed you a debt, after all, like his will said. Of course, those devils took the gold. But—

but—— Great thunder!" he cried, pointing. "Look! There! They missed some! Under the ribs of the old dead horse, where the wind's tore out the sand. A pot hole! Crammed with nuggets!"

"Another hole? Under—the—hoss? I reckon that's how—we missed it." The gasping words came from Sloat. "Guthrie he put up—an awful fight. Franey, it was, thet got him."

"And who killed *my* dad?" Tuck wanted to know.

"Rand—when he—got suspicious. Thet gold shore did—funny things. Franey and Rand quarreled—shot it out. Derved near—killed each other. Ol' Shotgun got a slug in the head what turned him batty—and to sheep. Water ag'in, one o' yuh! Thanks. I reckon I'm——"

He died with the words uncompleted. Tuck looked at Bob, looked at the gold. Their dads had been partners to the end. Bob cleared his throat.

"My sheep are dead, Tuck. Some of 'em here; the rest over the cliffs, miles back, from the storm. What d'you say thet me and yuh——"

"Throw in again together?" Tuck took him up. "Why, heck, man," he said with a grin, "I thought we'd done done it."



**4 FOR 10¢**

**STAR BLADES**

★

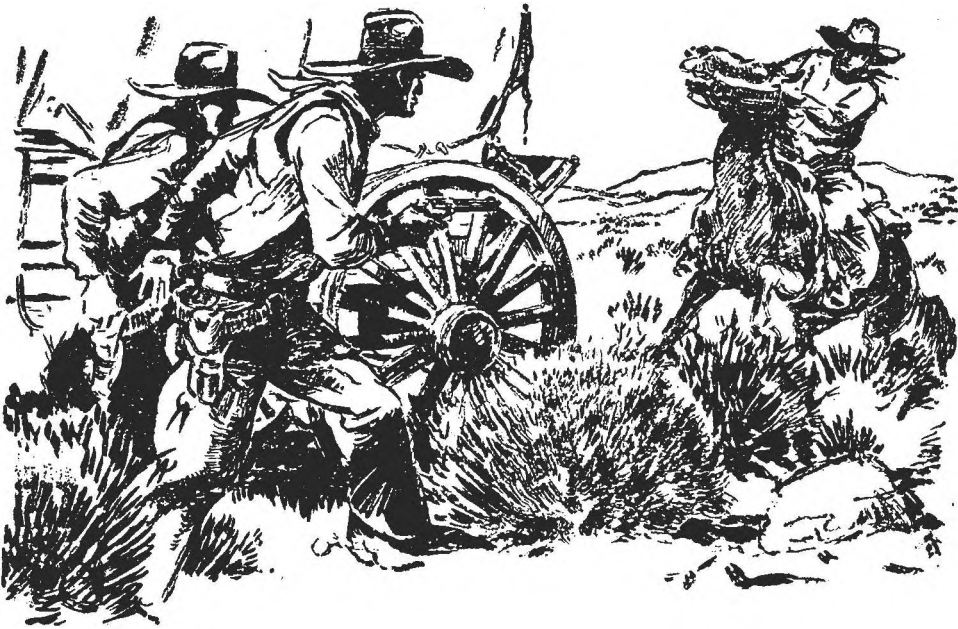
**THEIR  
KEENNESS  
NEVER  
VARIES**

MADE SINCE 1880 by the inventors of the original safety razor, Star Blades have 56 years of precision experience stropped into their keen, long-lasting edges.

If your dealer cannot supply you, mail 10c to Dept. AF-7, Star Blade Division, 88 Johnson St., Bklyn., N.Y.

**FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS**

**WW—3F**



# Killers of the Buffalo Range

A "Hungry and Rusty" Story

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "Ghost Guns," etc.

**F**AR out on the buffalo range, "Hungry" Hawkins and "Rusty" Bolivar reined their mounts to a slower gait. Long-barreled Colts sagged their criss-crossed cartridge belts, and down-pulled sombreros shaded their squinted eyes from the glare of the sun.

The two young Texas Rangers exchanged quick glances as their horses tossed their heads and tried to hurry on. Hungry nodded, and

**WW-4F**

a grim smile tightened his dust-caked lips.

"Thar's water ahead," he drawled. "The hosses smells it."

Rusty fidgeted impatiently in his saddle, and a disgusted scowl twisted his freckled face. He hooked one bowed leg over his saddle horn and glared across at his lanky, lantern-jawed partner.

"There'd better be water there," he snapped hoarsely. "Dog-gone it! I'm so dry fer a drink thet my in-



nards is squeakin' when I breathe. I wish our captain had left us on the Rio Grande, instead of sendin' us way off up here to——"

*Bang!* The heavy, sullen boom of a big-bored rifle roared from somewhere in front of them, and a whizzing bullet zipped wickedly past Rusty's face.

Like a flash, both Rangers leaped from their saddles and threw themselves flat in the knee-high grass. As they did so, the gun thudded again, and a bullet whipped spitefully through the grama grass between them.

"Thet's a buffalo gun thet guy's usin'," Hungry said, as a third bullet clipped grass stems past his shoulder and kicked up a shower of dirt behind him.

"Don't yuh suppose I know it?" Rusty flared angrily. "Nothin' else but a shotgun would make as much noise as thet. Wait till I git our own lead-chuckers offn thet pack horse. We kin reach him with 'em."

Keeping his head down below the level of the waving grass, Rusty scooted like a sand lizard to where their pack horse stood. He darted a measuring look at the butts of their own big octagon-barreled Sharps rifles that rested in brush-scarred scabbards beneath the pack ropes against the tarped bed rolls.

*Bang!* As another vicious roar of the hidden marksman's heavy rifle sent a bullet into the grass behind him, Rusty jerked his feet under him.

Without giving the unknown hombre time to reload for another shot, the little Ranger bounded up and darted to the waiting pack horse. Working swiftly, he snatched his and Hungry's rifles from their scabbards and ducked back into the grass, just as a bullet split the air where he had been standing.

"Got 'em!" he grated, shoving one of the weapons toward his lanky partner. "Now see kin we locate thet polecat, an' we'll shoot him loose from his orneriness!"

Hungry smiled grimly as he took the big Sharps and shoved a huge cartridge into its gaping breech. The weapon's hammer went back with an oily cluck, and he lifted it to his shoulder.

"Hold on!" he drawled quietly. "We've got to locate thet hombre first. Look close. I ain't been able to spot him yit."

*Bang!* Before Hungry had finished speaking, there came another thudding bark of the hombre's rifle, and a bullet clipped grass heads close beside him.

The lanky Ranger instantly rose on one elbow. He squinted back along the path clipped by the bullet, and shaded his eyes with his hat brim.

"I've got a line on him now!" he suddenly barked. "Set yore sights fer about four hundred yards. If thet don't lift him, draw a leetle coarser bead. Thar! Yuh see thet?"

Rusty rose hastily on one elbow and shaded his eyes with his hat. As another bullet droned above their heads, he looked in the direction Hungry was pointing and saw a faint wisp of smoke rising above a small bush far out in front of them.

"I savvy!" he snapped, jerking the big Sharps to his shoulder and bracing himself. "Thet guy's hid behind thet bush. Now——"

*Wha-a-m!* The interrupting bellow of Hungry's rifle made Rusty jump, and he jerked up his head in time to see his lanky partner's bullet kick up a spurt of dust between them and the bush.

"Raise them sights a little," he called quickly. "Set 'em up to five

hundred yards instid of four. Here! Watch me!"

Hungry rolled quickly aside as a return bullet from the unseen hombre plowed into the dirt where he had been lying. He reloaded hastily and turned to watch Rusty.

Rusty's gun was already at his shoulder. He cuddled the stock expertly to his cheek and lined the sights on that far-off bush.

*Bang!*

As the recoil of the big Sharps kicked the little Ranger half around, Hungry failed to see where the bullet struck.

"Well," Rusty snarled, ejecting the empty shell and slamming a fresh one into his gun, "where did I hit? I was holdin' square on thet bush with my sights set at five hundred yards. Maybe——"

The jarring blast of Hungry's rifle drowned the sound of Rusty's voice. As grass stems jerked and whipped forward in front of the rifle muzzle, Rusty thought he saw a movement beside the bush.

"Yuh got him!" he yelped. "Yuh've done somethin' to him, anyhow! Look!"

Just then, a hatless hombre lurched into view. The watching Rangers heard a faint cry as the fellow took one staggering step and slumped to his knees. He seemed to clutch frantically at his chest; then he pitched forward on his face.

"Got him!" Rusty said quickly. "Come on!"

Hungry barked a quick warning and motioned Rusty back. He reloaded his rifle and stared thoughtfully at the huddled form, then spat a stream of tobacco juice into the grass beside him.

"I'll slip over thar an' have a look at thet jasper," he drawled. "You stay hyar an' keep me covered, in case somebody else is hid

close an' tries to cut down on me. Keep yore eyes peeled!"

Hungry shifted his tobacco to the other cheek and looked keenly in every direction. He then nodded to Rusty and crept away.

Keeping well down in the grass and taking care not to get dirt in the barrel of his rifle, he wormed his way forward with as much skill as a stalking Apache. Rusty watched him as he began to draw closer to the bushwhacker.

Hungry kept going until he reached a bunch of cat's-claw. There he rose warily to one knee and peered through the scrubby bushes. He took one good look at the bushwhacker, then waved to Rusty and strode forward.

The hombre was sprawled upon his face in the grass, and his big Sharps rifle lay behind the bush where he had dropped it when he lunged to his feet. Frowning sternly, Hungry caught the fellow by an arm and rolled him over on his back. Rusty came galloping up with the horses.

The bushwhacker was roughly dressed in buckskin pants and greasy shirt. A curved-bladed skinning knife was thrust through one side of his cartridge belt, and a huge cap-and-ball Remington six-gun swung in a tallowed rawhide holster at the other hip.

Hungry was staring at the fellow's bearded face, when Rusty pulled their horses up beside him and swung from his saddle.

"What did we git?" Rusty snapped, glancing down. "He looks like a buffalo hunter. Maybe he's one of the jaspers we come to investigate. If he was, how come him to cut down on us? Nobody was supposed to know we was bein' sent here."

Hungry shrugged grimly and

reached into his hip pocket for more tobacco. As he bit off a huge mouthful and tongued it into his cheek, he stared thoughtfully at the hombre they had been forced to shoot.

It had been reported that outlaws of the worst type had been haunting the buffalo ranges for months, and that hide hunters were being murdered and robbed by them almost daily.

Whether the killers belonged to a large band, or whether they were just a few skulking ruffians out to rob lonely buffalo hunters, the Rangers had not been able to learn. They only knew that men were being murdered, and that their wagons, horses, and buffalo hides were being stolen and sold to crooked traders who seemed to be working secretly with the thieves.

"Waal," Hungry finally drawled, and he spat a stream of tobacco juice into the bush beside him, "this hombre's dressed like a buffalo hunter, but no honest hunter is goin' to waylay a pair o' strangers an' cut down on 'em without a word o' warnin'. We——"

With a startled grunt, Hungry suddenly bit off what he meant to say and jerked erect. As Rusty darted him a quick look, the lanky Ranger pointed hastily toward the end of a wagon which he could barely see through a fringe of brush that topped a small rise just beyond them.

"Uh-huh," little Rusty instantly snarled. "Come on, feller! We'll find the answer to this bushwhackin' over there. Up on yore horse an' git yore gun ready! Some other jasper may try cuttin' down on us 'fore we git halfway to thet brush."

Hungry was in his saddle before Rusty finished speaking, and both Rangers went spurring at a dead

run toward the line of brush. Each held his long Sharps poised for a lightning shot as they sped forward.

## II.

As they rocketed through the fringe of bushes, they saw the wagon just below them at the edge of a muddy water hole. Four gaunt mules stood in the harness in front of it, and three saddled horses were grazing a short distance to one side.

"Steady, now!" Hungry barked softly as they sped on toward the wagon. "I don't see nobody thar, but thet ain't no sign we ain't bein' watched. Better switch to yore hand gun! We may find ourselves in the middle of a real shootin' scrape 'fore we know it."

Like a flash, Rusty dropped his heavy rifle across his left arm and snatched his holstered Colt with his right hand. Hunched low in their saddles, they raced around the end of the wagon and leaped to the ground.

"Hello!" Hungry barked sharply.

Getting no answer, the two Rangers exchanged quick glances. Hastily dropping his rifle, Hungry snatched his second Colt from his holster and jumped to the rear of the lumbering wagon, while Rusty darted to the front.

"Nobody here!" Rusty instantly barked. "Looks like it's plumb deserted."

Hungry looked keenly at the stacks of buffalo hides that filled the heavy wagon beneath the dingy canvas. He slowly lowered his guns and walked around to the front.

"Say," Rusty suddenly yelped, "do yuh reckon thet was the owner of this outfit thet we shot? Do yuh reckon he was afraid we was robbers

after him, an' thet he cut down on us by mistake?"

A startled look flashed into Hungry's solemn eyes. He spat a stream of tobacco juice beneath the wagon and gulped worriedly.

The lanky Ranger started to reply, but as his eyes fell upon a streak of crimson on the back of the wagon seat, he bounded forward and climbed on the hub of the nearest wheel. His face instantly hardened, and he motioned quickly to Rusty.

"Look!" he barked, pointing to the seat and the floor beneath it. "Look at thet, will yuh? I reckon thet says we ain't made no mistake. Yuh savvy thet?"

Gripping his guns, Rusty leaped on the end of the heavy double-tree, where he could look over the end gate. He shot one hurried look at the smears of crimson on the floor and against the back of the seat, and a scowl twisted his freckled face.

"I reckon we didn't make no mistake in gunnin' the jasper we shot," he said quickly. "Look at the bullet holes in the top of this wagon, will yuh? There's been a big fight pulled off here."

Hungry nodded grimly. With teeth clamped on the big chew of tobacco that bulged his cheek, he dropped from the hub and looked at the ground on both sides of the wagon.

"Only the tracks of one lone hombre hyar," he said sharply. "Them was most likely made by the feller we shot. Up on yore hoss an' come on! We're goin' to back-track this wagon an' find out somethin'. Let's go!"

Rusty was bow-legging swiftly to his horse before his lanky partner finished speaking. Again snatching up their rifles, they leaped into their

saddles and went galloping back in the direction the wagon had come.

Heavily loaded with green and partly dried hides, the wagon's thick-tired wheels had bitten deep into the turf, and the cowboy Rangers were able to follow the trail without slackening their speed.

Up over the little rise, they passed back within a short distance of the dead bushwhacker into the open prairie. They had gone less than a half mile when Hungry suddenly rose on his toes in his stirrups and darted one swift look into the tall grass in front of them.

"Hyar's the place!" he barked sharply. "Look! Look out yonder! Yuh see what I see?"

Rusty let out an angry yelp as they bounced their horses to a plunging halt beside a dead man whose sprawled body was nearly hidden in the tall grass near the tracks of the wagon wheels.

The hombre lay upon his face, and the flattened grass behind him showed that he had dragged himself along for a short distance before he died. Hungry stared at him, then leaped from his saddle.

One of the man's arms was badly twisted, and the holes in his patched shirt showed where two big bullets had ripped through his body. His hat was gone, and the single holster at his right hip was empty.

"Uh-huh," Hungry grunted, after a hasty examination of the body. "This hombre was shot in the wagon. More'n likely he was drivin' it when the killers cut down on him. His arm was broke when they pitched his body out, but he come to and managed to drag himself a piece 'fore he died."

Hungry rose hastily and led the way back to where the hombre's body had struck the ground. He looked at the flattened grass. Then

he nodded sternly, and a deadly greenish glint crept into his mild eyes.

"Look at them tracks around hyar," he barked to Rusty. "See whar them wagon mules was stopped?"

It took Rusty only a moment to see what his lanky partner meant. Several riders had driven up to the wagon, and the trampled grass showed where some of them stopped the mules while the driver's body was being tossed out on the ground.

"I savvy," Rusty said quickly. "Yuh long-legged pelican, this is the work of thet bunch of robbers we was sent to run down. We—— Look over there! There's another dead man!"

Rusty reined his horse around and spurred hastily to where a second body lay in the deep grass. Hungry was close behind him as he leaped from his saddle.

One glance showed them that this last hombre had been riddled by a volley of rifle bullets. He had not moved after he had been shot down.

"This was the partner o' thet other hombre," Hungry snapped, after one look at the body. "These hide hunters never work plumb alone. Thar's always at least two to a wagon. This'n was most likely on hossback when the killers downed him. Waal——"

Without finishing what he started to say, the tall Ranger reached slowly into his hip pocket for his battered plug of tobacco. His eyes came to rest on the distant rise as he hunkered down and thoughtfully bit off a huge chew.

"Where do yuh reckon the rest of them killers rode off to?" Rusty demanded harshly. "Yuh kin see thet there was at least four or five in on this orneriness."

Hungry acted as if he had not

heard him. The lanky Ranger's eyes were still fixed unseeingly on that little rise, and he was slowly munching his huge chew of tobacco.

"I asked yuh what become of them other killers," Rusty snarled impatiently. "Do yuh reckon—— Say, aire you listenin' to what I'm sayin'?"

As Rusty let out an angry yelp, Hungry winced and eyed him reproachfully. "Thar yuh go again," he sighed, spitting out a mouthful of tobacco juice. "I was right in the middle o' thinkin' out somethin' important, an' you had to go interruptin' me. Now I've got to begin all over again."

"What!" Rusty yelled. "You blasted pinhead of misery, you an' yore spells of heavy thinkin' gives me a pain in the neck! Durn yuh! Here's two murdered hombres, an' we done found a stolen wagon full of hides. What more do yuh want to know? We've already got one of the killers, ain't we?"

Hungry stared again at the murdered man beside him. Suddenly he lunged to his feet and motioned toward their horses.

"Come on!" he barked. "We're goin' back to thet wagon. The sun's about down, an' we'll make camp at thet water hole to-night. We'll take them bodies with us an' bury 'em later."

Working swiftly, the two Rangers lifted the slain buffalo hunters across their saddles and hurried with them back to the water hole. When they had unhitched the mules from the wagon and hobbled them out where they could graze, Hungry got some blankets which he located behind the wagon seat.

In a few minutes, he had arranged beds for the dead men beneath the wagon and placed the bodies in them. When he had fin-

ished, he had made it appear as if both men were merely sleeping.

"Say, what's the big idea of thet stunt?" Rusty demanded, glaring. "What do yuh think yo're goin' to do?"

Hungry's thin lips tightened in a grim smile. He pulled the blanket covering up partly to cover the face of the last man, and arranged it carefully. He then spat thoughtfully and stepped back.

"Maybe yuh'll soon be findin' out what this is all about," he finally drawled. "We was sent to nab a bunch o' killers. We've only got one so fur. We want——"

At that instant, a dull thud of hoofs from beyond the water hole brought both Rangers around with a jerk. As they did so, they saw a galloping rider headed straight toward them.

Partly hidden by the wagon, Hungry's and Rusty's hands slid to their gun butts as they watched the hombre circle the water hole. They saw him glance carelessly at the hobbled mules.

Suddenly the man saw the Rangers' saddled horses at the back of the wagon. He instantly threw his mount back on its haunches and jerked upright in his saddle.

"Waal," Hungry called carelessly, and he stepped out where the man could see him, "come right on! Was yuh lookin' fer somebody, or was yuh just ridin' by?"

The hombre's right hand slid to a gun butt, and he stared as Rusty stepped out beside his lanky partner. He darted another look at the hobbled mules, then came slowly on to the wagon.

"Who aire you?" he barked as he pulled to a halt. "I thought this wagon belonged to——"

As his eyes strayed to the two dead men beneath the wagon, he

suddenly stiffened. He looked sharply at the carefully covered bodies and leaned forward in his saddle.

"I asked you two young strays who yuh aire?" he barked harshly to the two Rangers. "Where's——"

"The same right back at yuh, feller!" Rusty cut in heatedly. "Who are you, an'——"

A grunted warning from Hungry stopped Rusty before he could finish, and the lanky Ranger's right-hand gun almost leaped from his holster as the stranger made a lightning stab for his gun. As Hungry's Colt muzzle swiveled up, the hombre stopped his draw and muttered an oath.

"Pretty fast, ain't yuh?" the fellow growled, glaring down at Hungry's uptilted gun and nodding. "Yeah, thet was pretty fast gun work. An' I've been told thet there ain't but one man livin' thet might be able to top my draw like thet."

Rusty started to make a blistering remark, but Hungry grunted a warning and shook his head. Hungry then stared at the stranger.

The rider was a tall, wide-shouldered hombre, and a close-cropped black mustache edged his steel-trap mouth. His coal-black eyes glittered evilly as he fixed his piercing gaze on Hungry's homely face.

Suddenly the fellow seemed to relax. He shrugged and took his hand from his gun. His lips twitched in what he meant to be a wry smile, and he laughed.

"Maybe I flew off the handle a little too quick, punchers," he finally chuckled. "Yuh see, I—this wagon I figured belonged to two hombres I knowed. I——"

"I reckon most likely it still belongs to 'em," Hungry interrupted quietly. "Thet's them under the wagon. They was right bad shot



up, so we put 'em to bed. Was you a friend o' theirs—maybe?"

### III.

As Hungry asked that last question, he thought he saw a startled look flash into the stranger's close-set eyes. The hombre's lips tightened, and he nodded hastily.

"Yeah," he grunted, scowling. "Yeah, they was both friends o' mine. Thet is, I knowed 'em both. I—I'm a hide buyer, an' I—I was comin' out to meet 'em an' buy their buffalo hides."

The hombre started to say something else, but stopped and pressed his lips together. His eyes narrowed suspiciously for a moment as he darted a searching look at Hungry and Rusty.

Hungry saw him shoot another furtive look at the covered forms beneath the wagon. Then he glanced hastily around him. His eyes then came back to Hungry's expressionless face, and he appeared to be thinking swiftly.

"Uh—yuh say they been right bad shot?" he grumbled uncertainly. "Did—did they tell yuh who they thought done the shootin'?"

Hungry shook his head. Rusty started to speak, but his lanky partner managed to press his arm warningly.

"No," Hungry said, "they ain't come to long enough to tell who shot 'em. Thar'll be plenty o' time fer 'em to talk when they wake up."

At this, the fellow's eyes narrowed. He straightened in his saddle and hastily picked up his bridle reins.

"Well," he growled, darting another swift look beneath the wagon and around him, "I reckon I'd better be ridin' to send word to a sher-

iff or Rangers about this shootin'. There ain't no time to be lost. Them hombres thet done it might git away. I'll hurry!"

As the fellow whirled his horse and raked it with his spurs, Rusty's hands stabbed to his guns, and he took a step forward. Hungry clapped a hand on his shoulder and grunted a warning as the hombre sped away.

"What the——" Rusty snarled, glaring. "Why, dog-gone yuh, what're yuh lettin' thet jasper git away fer? If thet guy ain't one of thet gang of killers, I'm a Chiny-man's billy goat. Let me cut down on him! Git out of my way, durn yuh!"

"Just keep yore shirt on," Hungry snapped grimly. "I know what I'm doin'. He come to see what become o' the hombre he left to bring the wagon in. We kind of surprised him."

Rusty glared and stood muttering as he watched the spurring rider circle around the end of the water hole and turn his flying horse up the little rise beyond. He slammed his guns back into his holsters and scowled disgustedly at his lanky partner.

"Yuh've fixed things now!" he flared angrily.

Hungry smiled. "Better maybe than you think," he drawled lazily. "We couldn't have convicted thet hombre on what we know. But just give a feller like thet plenty o' rope, an' he'll hang hisself. Accordin' to my way o' thinkin', I've just handed him a whole coil o' rope. We'll now grab us a bite o' supper an' wait fer the hangin'."

Grumbling, Rusty clumped away and began gathering dried sticks and buffalo chips. While he started a supper fire, Hungry searched

through the chuck box on the wagon for food to cook.

It was rapidly getting dark by the time they hunkered down to a supper of buffalo steak, some warmed-over biscuits, and boiling coffee. A couple of straggling buffalo cows came down nearly to the opposite side of the water hole, but at sight of the wagon, they turned with wild snorts and lumbered swiftly away over the rise.

"Well," Rusty said, as he lifted a piece of sizzling steak from the fire, "I still don't savvy just what game yuh're workin' on thet jasper yuh let ride away from here. Yuh said yuh was givin' him rope to hang hisself."

Hungry nodded quietly and took a big cup of the steaming coffee.

"Just you wait," he drawled, reaching for a biscuit. "I've not only give him rope, but I almost furnished him somethin' to tie it to. If my figurin' is correct, we'll soon be headed back to the Rio Grande."

The moon had not yet risen, but stars were gleaming above them by the time they had finished eating. Their dying supper fire cast a red glow on the side of the wagon as they sat listening to the steady crop of the grazing horses and mules.

"Waal," Hungry drawled, dumping the grounds from the emptied coffeepot and setting it aside, "I reckon we'd better start thinkin' about grabbin' off a leetle sleep."

"Yeah," Rusty grumbled. "Thet reminds me thet we ain't unsaddled our horses yit. We ain't even pulled the riggin' offn them thet was with the wagon when he got here, either."

They rose to their feet and clumped away in the feeble starlight. They quickly led in the horses and tossed the saddles down

near the fire. This done, Hungry tied two lariats together and picketed his own mount a short distance away.

Hungry took time to pile more buffalo chips on the fire. Then they carried their blankets back at a safe distance and spread them in the deep grass. Rusty carefully pinched out his cigarette as they lay down.

Rusty was soon sound asleep, but Hungry propped his head up on one elbow and lay slowly munching the huge chew of tobacco that bulged his cheek. From time to time, he glanced drowsily toward the wagon.

Coyotes were yapping shrilly from somewhere out past the top of the rise beyond. Occasionally, he could hear the far-off howl of a prowling lobo. He glanced toward his picketed horse. Then he looked down to where the rippling surface of the water hole shimmered in the faint starlight.

Suddenly Hungry noticed that his horse had stopped grazing. The animal's head was up stiffly, and it was staring past the wagon.

Instantly, the lanky Ranger rolled over. His right hand crept down and closed on a Colt butt as he watched warily in the direction the horse was looking.

Minutes passed, but still he could see nothing. The horse nervously picked a few mouthfuls of grass and again raised its intelligent head, its ears pointed forward alertly.

Suddenly Hungry thought he saw a slight movement in the grass near the back of the wagon. As he rose slightly to watch, he saw the top of a hat appear for a moment in the red glow of the camp fire.

The hat vanished almost instantly. It appeared again beside a wagon wheel. Then the head and shoulders of a man rose into view.

Hungry reached hastily and

gripped Rusty's arm. As Rusty stirred drowsily and began mumbling, Hungry hissed a quick warning and shook him sharply to wake him fully.

"W-wh-what the——" Rusty muttered thickly. "Say——"

"Shhh!" Hungry hissed again. "Wake up, pard! No noise! Grab yore guns!"

Wide awake almost instantly, Rusty made a lightning grab at his holsters. He would have bounded up, but Hungry gripped his shoulder warningly.

"Toward the wagon!" Hungry whispered quickly. "Look! Somebody has just crawled to it. It may be only one lone hombre, but I've got a hunch thar's more hid close. Watch!"

Almost before Hungry finished speaking, they saw the hombre rise again beside the wagon wheel. They caught one dull-red glint of firelight on steel as the fellow stooped to creep beneath the wagon.

"Come on!" Rusty said softly, and he swiftly thumbed back the hammers of his guns. "Thet'll be one of them killers we're after. Let's collect him!"

"Hold on!" Hungry whispered sharply. "Wait! Look thar! Yuh see thet?"

As Hungry pointed with a Colt barrel, another head appeared above the grass behind the wagon. At almost the same instant, another head was raised a short distance to one side.

"Huh!" Rusty ejaculated softly. "There's three of 'em!"

"Four!" Hungry corrected hastily. "Thar's still another behind 'em. No, thar's one more just stuck up his head to one side. Thar's five in all! Git ready! We want to keep 'em between us an' the firelight."

#### IV.

Hastily examining their guns to make certain that they were fully loaded, both Rangers rolled over and pulled their feet under them and went crawling in a circle through the deep grass.

When they reached a point on a line with the rear of the wagon, they turned sharply and crawled swiftly closer. When they were near enough for accurate shooting, both stopped to locate the five treacherous prowlers.

As they carefully parted the tall grass in front of them, they saw the first hombre rise to his knees beside the blanket-covered bodies of the two murdered buffalo hunters. Again that reddish glint of firelight on steel came as the fellow's arm rose and fell viciously.

"What the——" Rusty snarled softly. "Look at thet, would yuh? Thet skunk's stabbin' them dead bodies with a big bowie! Look!"

The killer's arm whipped up and down like a piston as he buried his long-bladed bowie again and again in the stiffened bodies of the slain men. As he watched the murderous ruffian, a deadly greenish glint crept into Hungry's slitted eyes, and he clamped his lantern jaws grimly on his chew of tobacco.

"Yuh remember what I said about givin' a feller rope?" he whispered to Rusty. "Waal, do yuh recognize thet knifer?"

Rusty raised his head a little higher for a better look. As he recognized the black-eyed hombre who had ridden up to the wagon at sundown, his freckled face went livid with killing fury.

"It's him!" he almost snarled. "Dog-gone the sneakin' skunk! He's gone an' brung his amigos back with him. Yuh sure made him

think them buffalo hunters was still alive an' maybe able to tell who shot 'em."

Hungry nodded sternly and got ready. "Right," he said softly, "an' he evidently shore believes in the old sayin' thet dead men tell no tales. I figured he would. Yeah, an' me an' you is next on his program o' killin', only we're goin' to have somethin' to say about thet."

With a grim nod to Rusty, Hungry rose on one knee and lifted his guns. He waited only long enough for the five killers to gather at the end of the wagon. Then he nudged his fighting partner and lunged to his feet.

"Hands up, thar, all o' yuh!" he yelled. "Reach! Yo're covered!"

"Yeah," Rusty shrilled, his twin Colts chopping down for a lightning shot, "an' make it blamed snappy! Rangers talkin', yuh murderin' skunks! Yo're pinched!"

As if a buffalo gun had exploded beneath them, the five startled killers shot to their feet. Backs to the wagon, they threw themselves into a fighting crouch and stood glaring like a pack of trapped wolves.

The black-eyed hombre's hands trembled above his gun butts as he faced the Ranger partners in the red glare of the smoldering fire. With an oath, he braced himself.

Suddenly, with a hoarse yell to his amigos, he threw himself aside and down, his long-barreled Remingtons belching fire and smoke as they cleared the leather.

*Br-r-a-m! Bang-bang-bang!* The bellowing crash of hastily fired guns smote the eardrums like a sudden clap of thunder as outlaws and Rangers crouched and began shooting.

A bullet whipped through Rusty's old hat and slapped it around on his head. Another fanned his ear, and a third almost numbed his left arm.

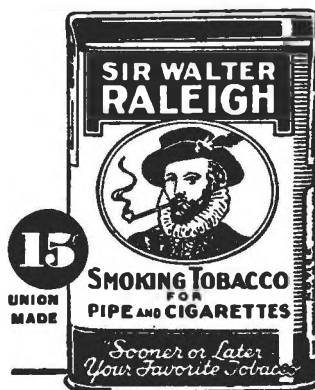
But two of the murderous outlaws



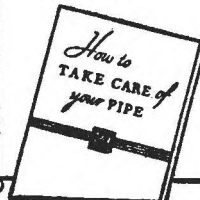
## PIPE GAVE THE BUCK FEVER!

**B**OYS, we see no sport in gassing deer with a gooey old pipe filled with garlicy tobacco. But we see a lot of pleasure in a well-kept briar packed with a gentle, fragrant blend like Sir Walter Raleigh. We've put a lifetime into mixing this rare combination of well-aged Kentucky Burleys that wouldn't nip a baby's tongue or a doe's nose. Sir Walter's got a delightful aroma all its own. Buck up and join the happy herd of Sir Walter Raleigh smokers. You'll have the world eating out of your hand! (Full tin, with heavy gold-foil wrap for freshness, at the unbelievably low price of 15¢.)

SWITCH TO THE BRAND  
OF GRAND AROMA



**FREE** booklet tells how to make your old pipe taste better, sweeter; how to break in a new pipe. Write for copy today. Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation. Louisville, Ky. Dept. SS-69



went down at their first fire. The black-eyed hombre reeled back against the wagon wheel, but he caught himself instantly and began fighting with increased fury.

"Blast yuh two!" he bellowed hoarsely. "Rangers, aire yuh? I figured as much when the long-legged hombre topped my draw. I've heard of Hungry Hawkins an' his gun speed. Take thet, an' see kin yuh match it!"

*Bang-bang-bang! Bang!*

As the fellow's Remington .44s and Hungry's long Colts exploded in one thudding roar, Hungry felt the shock of a bullet that tore his cartridge belt almost in two and cut him along the edge of his left hip.

But the black-eyed hombre was falling even as he jerked his gun triggers. As he slumped against the wagon wheel and went slowly to one knee, Rusty dropped another of his gang beside him.

Like a flash, the one remaining member of the killer band made a frantic leap for the tall grass beyond the end of the wagon. Hungry's and Rusty's guns dropped him before he could make his escape, and he rolled almost beneath the wagon.

"Got 'em!" Hungry said, lowering

his hot guns and pressing a hand to his injured hip. "I wish they could have been took alive."

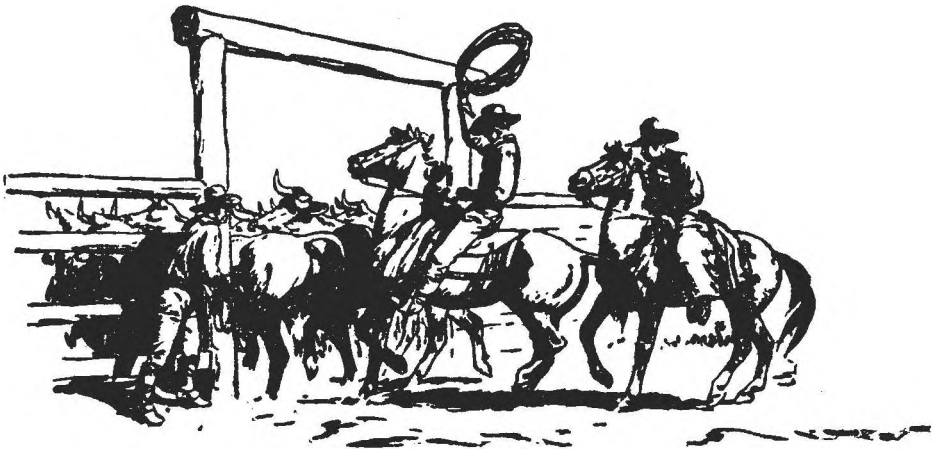
Rusty sniffed. He holstered his smoking Colts and limped over for a closer look at the black-eyed hombre Hungry had shot.

"I'll say we got 'em!" he said harshly. "I reckon this'll put the kibosh on these killin's an' robbin's here on the buffalo range. We sure played it lucky, bumpin' square into these jaspers as soon as we got here."

Hungry nodded grimly and began pulling up his shirt to get at the cut on his hip.

"Yeah, luck an' a leetle hoss sense," he grunted, spitting out a mouthful of tobacco juice. "Always remember what I said about givin' a man rope to hang hisself. It dang nigh always works out."

Waal, now, it ain't nothin' remarkable ter see Hungry an' Rusty save the expense o' hangin' a plumb bad hombre. But it ain't often thet they let thet hombre hang hisself. The way Hungry worked it, though, shows thet them cowboy Ranger pards use a lot of hoss sense as well as six-guns, an' when a hombre's obligin' enough ter take their bait, why not let 'im bite? They'll be back pronto in another gun-slingin' story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





# The Guns Of Don Puma

A "Risky McKee" Novelette

By William A. Todd

Author of "Vulture's Roost," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### MYSTERY MAN.

**T**HE sound that awakened "Risky" McKee could have been the gallop of fat pack rats across the attic of the ramshackle hotel. But he wasn't certain, so he lay breathless on the floor in a black corner of the room.

Arizona moonlight was filtering through the solitary window over-

looking the silent desert outside, and the silvery light reflected on an iron cot that he had rejected as a bed. He had stuffed the blankets on the cot in the outline of a sleeping figure. On the pillow, he had curled a dark gun belt in the shape of a man's head. It was an old trick, but it had often saved a careful puncher's life.

Risky was being plenty careful in this wild border town of Desert Jump. Ten thousand dollars were



hidden in his clothing. It seemed to be no secret from the owl-hoot tribe. For Risky had been followed by strange horsemen all the way from his ranch, two hundred miles distant, and he could not explain how the news of his mission to Mexico had leaked out.

Now, the mysterious noises in the attic overhead began again. An iron hinge creaked, and Risky felt a downward current of musty air brush his face and glide toward an open window. It was as if some one had opened a ventilator to cause a draft.

His fingers closed on the butt of a six-gun. His gray eyes focused upward to the shadows of the ceiling. Within those shadows, he saw a square of ebony-black, the size of a trapdoor.

Apparently, cold murder was afoot.

Risky felt a deep loathing for any coyote so cowardly as to kill a sleeping man. He heard the skulker in the attic kneel at the black hole in the ceiling.

The waddy's weapon lifted. He did not want to shoot, but he had played in too many desperate games not to know that the loser must always pay. It was his life against the man's above.

He cared back the hammer of his weapon.

*Twang-g-g!* The unmistakable snapping sound of a bowstring came from overhead, and Risky heard the downward slip of an arrow.

He didn't turn his eyes to see the deadly shaft bury itself in the cot. His trigger finger was quickly jerking, and the hotel room shuddered under the flaming explosions of pungent powder as he drove bullet after bullet upward to the secret trapdoor.

"Ee-ya-a-a!" A human screamed in the attic.

A body thrashed through the ceiling, came hurtling downward and struck the floor with a resounding crunch.

Risky scuttled along the base of the wall to another corner and lay still, listening to the scamper of another hombre across the attic. Then silence held the hotel, only to be broken by the slamming of doors.

Boots thudded in the corridor outside the waddy's room. Gruff voices called.

Risky turned his eyes to the body that had fallen near the iron cot. The moonlight shone on the coppery chest of a Yaqui. The Indian's eyes were open, blank in death; his teeth were bared. He still gripped the murderous bow.

A fist hammered on Risky's door. "Hallo, thar!" It sounded like the hotel proprietor, a fat, beery-faced hombre who operated a saloon on the street level of the inn. "Anythin' wrong, Mr. McKee?" His tone was hopeful, not worried.

A scowl creased Risky's tanned brow. "Go back to your soogans," he replied gruffly. "I only shot a varmint."

"Yuh mean yuh plugged a coyote skulkin' round outside yore window?" the hotel hombre asked loudly. "It must be the one what's kept me awake fer months. I'll find it in the mornin' an' bury it. Much obliged, stranger."

"Keep the change," Risky grunted sourly.

"What's that?" the man in the corridor inquired.

Risky didn't answer, and boots thumped away. Funny that the hombre had got his walking gear on so quickly after the shots.

The waddy thumbed fresh loads into his warm weapon, taking the

cartridges from a new box. He stood up, a broad-shouldered buckaroo of medium height, square of jaw, with a serious expression.

He took his clothes from a chair and dressed in batwing chaps, yellow silk shirt, buckskin vest, and red neckerchief. Removing the two bullet belts from the cot pillow, he buckled them crisscross about his slender midriff, letting the holsters sag low on his thighs.

He left the arrow shaft buried in the mattress and blankets, and did not disturb the dead Yaqui.

Slipping out of the door of his room, guns in hand, he moved stealthily down the corridor to the stairs and descended on tiptoe to a barroom below. Moonlight shining through the windows gave the empty saloon a ghostly look.

Risky left his room key on the bar and glanced at a ticking alarm clock on a back shelf, from which all liquor bottles had been removed and locked in a safe.

"Dawn will be pushin' up soon," he said in a low tone.

Leaving the hotel by a back door, he glided through the shadows cast by the rear of old cabins and stores. This was not an easy town for strange cowboys.

He reached the livery stable, entered cautiously and found his big-boned sorrel horse safe in a stall. Slapping it awake, Risky saddled quickly. He laid a silver dollar on an upturned water bucket, then helped himself to a gallon of oats.

"That Yaqui must have been hired by a white skunk to kill me," Risky decided aloud. "I've been followed all the way from my ranch. Here's where I get the jump on the fellers, who are after my scalp an' the ten thousand bucks!"

Letting his bronc outside by a back door, Risky swung into the sad-

dle and threw in his spurs. He left town by the chaparral route, pointing toward the Mexican border.

The big sorrel under Risky knocked off ten miles of wasteland before crimson dawn lifted its banners in the eastern sky. Ahead of the waddy, a ragged grove of palm trees marked the first water hole in the rolling sea of sand dune and volcanic rock ridges.

Desert quail were flying low. Woodcock were running in search of reptiles and insects. The world was awakening peacefully, but Risky was no hombre to take chances.

He approached the oasis at a slow trot, circling it twice for sign of a foe, and then dismounted. Taking a rifle from his saddle scabbard, he went ahead on foot, letting his bronc wait. The palms hid his view of the water hole itself. He did not trust the spot, where he planned to eat breakfast and feed his sorrel.

Advancing cautiously, he slipped through the trees, rifle hammer cocked. Suddenly he halted. A strange cayuse nickered. Risky leaped forward, darted around a clump of mesquite and stopped within ten yards of a spring. He was just in time to find a man rolling out of his blankets on the brink of the water hole.

"Don't reach for a smoke pole!" Risky yelled, rifle at his shoulder.

The sleeper turned toward him, and the morning sunlight flashed on his even white teeth. His olive skin and clean-cut features, with curly black hair, branded him as a Mexican of high Spanish caste. His clothing was badly rumpled from having been slept in, but Risky recognized the expensive quality of his blue velvet vest and bell-bottom trousers.

"Ha!" the Spaniard exclaimed.

"Señor McKee, or could I be mistaken?"

Risky did not know the gent.

"Stand up! Turn around and struck that gun you've got hidden in the shoulder holster!" the puncher ordered, advancing.

"As you please, my friend," the Spaniard replied, smiling. "I did not expect you so early. Perhaps you have had your troubles already in Desert Jump."

Risky stared hard at the stranger. "You seem to know too much for your own good," he growled. "A little talk might help us both."

"It is what I hoped," the Spaniard replied. "But first, I should disarm myself, yes?"

"Yes," Risky snapped.

"You are afraid of the money that you carry," the stranger chuckled, and turning around, he plucked a gun from his shoulder holster and tossed it on his blankets. He wheeled back, smiling. "You have no need for worry with me, Señor McKee," he said. "I am not an enemy. I am here to help."

Risky was wondering how this hombre knew about his mission and the mazuma. "Keep on talkin'," the waddy snapped. "You're doin' fine."

The Spaniard spread his hands in an easy gesture. They were delicate hands, with long, tapering fingers—the kind that could be lightning-quick with knife or gun.

"You are going to the rancho of Don Felipe de Acosta," the stranger said confidently. "You wish to buy the finest palomino yearling in all Mexico and take the horse back to your own country, yes?"

"Don't stop," Risky growled. "I'm listenin'."

The Spaniard had been right thus far, much to Risky's annoyance. For the puncher was headed to Don

Felipe's rancho to buy a year-old palomino horse for ten thousand dollars.

It was a big sum, but the animal was one in a million, of purest gold color, of finest Arabian descent, a horse that any fancier would give his life to own. And though Risky's life had been in danger for over a week, since setting out on his mission, he was not purchasing the horse for himself.

Once again, the cowboy had accepted a reckless bet with another rancher. Risky was noted for his willingness to gamble against the owl-hoot tribe, provided he could win for law and order by the use of horse and gun.

This time, the odds were high against him that he'd ever reach Don Felipe's ranch with the ten thousand dollars. And if he did, friends said he'd never be able to bring the palomino back to the United States.

"You are a gentleman gambler, a true caballero, Señor McKee," the smooth Spaniard was saying. "I have much respect for you, but you are being made a fool. You gave your rancher neighbor—the hombre who sent you for the palomino—a mortgage on your own outfit to guarantee the ten thousand Americano dollars that you carry."

"Well, what of it?" Risky growled.

"If you do not return alive," the Spaniard went on, "your neighbor will take your ranch, because you will have lost his ten thousand dollars. If you do return with the yearling, he will tear up the mortgage and give you the first colt from the palomino. Is it not so?"

Risky's gray eyes narrowed. How did the Spaniard know these details of the bet? Risky had accepted ten thousand bucks from a rancher neighbor to buy the palomino from Don Felipe. If the puncher failed to

return with the horse, his neighbor would own Risky's ranch.

Perhaps the waddy had been a fool to accept such an arrangement. All that he stood to win was an Arabian colt, and he might lose his own ranch and his life.

"Might I ask just who you are?" Risky inquired in a cold tone.

The tall olive-skinned stranger made a bow. "I am the no-good nephew of Don Felipe," he replied. "I am a great patriot, Señor McKee. I could never let such a fine palomino horse leave Mexico. It would be too great a loss to my country. The palomino should stay where it is. Some day, perhaps I shall inherit the prize. I do not wish to inherit the ten thousand dollars that you would give. For money is beneath me, señor."

Risky snorted in disgust. "I reckon you got all your information from Don Felipe," he said. "He aims to sell the bronc, an' I'm takin' it back home, an' nobody is stoppin' me. That Yaqui didn't in the hotel. Nor did those scum that you set on my trail back yonder last week. Fork your cayuse an' vamoise before I lose my temper!"

The Spaniard turned pale. His fists clenched. He was no coward. Beneath all his sweeping manners and smooth speech, there was courage, and Risky knew that he was not listening to a blowhard or a fake.

"You make a great mistake," the Spaniard said bitterly. "It was not I who sent some Yaqui to the hotel. It was not I who employed outlaws to kill you. That is not my way. I shall fight you in the open if you cross the border. Don Felipe is no friend of mine. He is an uncle, who stole my father's ranch. I am a lone wolf, señor. We shall meet again, if you live. Adios!"

WW-5F

The Spaniard turned on his heel and strode toward a splendid roan horse that was tethered on the far side of the spring.

Risky watched him, rifle ready. It was in the waddy's mind to call the hombre back, to speak further with him. But Risky couldn't bring himself to do so.

It seemed that the Spaniard had challenged him to future combat. Risky was no man to refuse. He watched his foe mount and ride off into the desert, without looking back. The Spaniard left his gun and blankets behind.

When he was gone, Risky whistled to his own sorrel out on the sands. Before going on, he had to eat a meal and water his bronc. Here was the place to do it. Fifty miles of wasteland lay between him and the border, where he was to meet Don Felipe and be guided to the rancho where the palomino awaited him.

## CHAPTER II.

### A STACKED DECK.

THE town of Cisco Crossing was divided in half by a high, close-strung barbed-wire fence, which marked the international border between the United States and Mexico. For many waddies, it marked the line between life and death.

North of the fence, on the American side, the wagon-rutted main street was flanked by false-fronted stores, cabins, plank sidewalks, and sturdy hitch rails. South of the barbed wire, there were dirty adobe cantinas, rickety shacks, and open sheds where everything from tortillas to grain was sold.

It was noon when Risky McKee bought his last supplies in the American quarter of Cisco Crossing and trotted toward the barbed-wire gate halfway down the main street. Two

United States immigration officials in khaki uniform watched him halt and dismount.

He was no different in looks from a lot of waddies who had crossed the line, except that he wore two guns. Hombres heeled double usually sneaked around Cisco Crossing through the hills where there was no fence, not bothering to talk with the authorities. But the two immigration men did not take Risky for a gunman.

"Howdy, Mr. McKee!" the taller gray-haired officer addressed Risky. "We heard you were coming."

The waddy elevated his eyebrows, surprised that these men knew about him.

"Do you mind tellin' me where you got your information?" he asked.

"Why, it's all over town," the khaki-clad man replied, grinning. "Men are betting in the saloons that you'll never bring back that palomino. I doubt if you will, myself. You don't know what you're getting into. Once you go through this fence, death will be your saddle pard. Those Mexicans think a lot of palomino bronses, an' they've all heard of Don Felipe's yearling."

Risky drew a deep breath, casting his eyes across the wire at two swarthy-faced Mexican immigration men who were waiting for him.

"I can't blame the Mexicans for hatin' to lose a fine horse," the puncher said. "Don Felipe has offered it for sale. I'm buyin' it." He paused. "What kind of an hombre is he? Do you know him?"

The American officers frowned.

"He's a *malo hombre*, a bad actor," the gray-haired one spoke up. "Some of our border ranchers thinks he's the coyote what's stealing their stock. He never leaves his rancho any more in the daytime, so

we don't see him on the Mexican side o' town. Be careful of him, partner."

"What about a young nephew, a good-lookin' Spaniard about my age, who figures that Don Felipe cheated him out of his rancho?" Risky asked. "Is that on the level?"

The immigration men started, and the smaller bald-headed one exclaimed:

"Yuh ain't run inter Don Puma already, has yuh?"

"Don Puma?" Risky questioned. "Meanin' Mr. Mountain Lion? A fancy name, if you ask me. That might be the gent."

"There's a reward of five thousand gold pesos on his head," the taller immigration man said. "But no peon south of the line would turn him in. They figure he's a kind of Robin Hood, a hard-riding revolutionary who stops at nothing."

"That so?" Risky asked.

"There ain't a rancho that he hasn't stolen from. It's all on account of his old man, who left the Acosta spread to Don Felipe when he died," the other went on. "Young Don Puma was cut off in the will because he wouldn't work an' wasted his time gambling an' flirting with the gals. Now, he's tryin' ter get even with Don Felipe."

"There might be somethin' in it, if Don Felipe is a rustler of American stock," Risky said slowly, thinking of the dashing Spaniard who had warned him at the water hole.

"Mexicans don't count stealing American stock a crime," the bald-headed officer said. "Don Puma has stolen many a head from Mexican rustlers. He scatters his money to the peons, who ride with him an' protect him."

A hard grin twisted Risky's lips at the thought of how many men were playing in this game of poker. All

except him seemed to be trying to stack the deck.

First, there was the hombre back home who had bet him he couldn't buy the palomino and bring it to the United States. Secondly, there was this young Don Puma, who called himself a Mexican patriot and had threatened to prevent Risky from accomplishing his mission. Lastly, there was Don Felipe, a suspected border rustler, who had offered the palomino for sale.

Any one of the three would be glad to see the Americano waddy die. Perhaps the three of them were in cahoots and would split the ten thousand dollars that he had hidden on him.

"Well," Risky said, shrugging his shoulders, "I've opened the pot, so I'll stay with the game."

He moved through the gate, leaving the immigration men shaking their heads over his foolhardy stubbornness.

The two swarthy Mexican border officials came forward, asked Risky his business as a matter of formality, and he told them briefly in Spanish, which they had used. The waddy had picked up the language from peons who had worked for his spread.

It surprised the immigration men that he spoke it so well. They did not ask for credentials. They seemed to know all about him, and one said:

"We have a letter for you, Señor McKee."

Risky took the note, which was not sealed. It said:

SEÑOR MCKEE: My peon awaits at the San Jacinto Cantina to guide you to my ranch.

Graciously yours,  
DON FELIPE DE ACOSTA.

Mounting his big sorrel, Risky trotted down the littered street of

the Mexican quarter. Chickens flew squawking out of his path. Small pigs scattered. Ragged children made ugly faces at him and hurled insults. A score of blanketed peons watched his passing from dark doorways.

He paid little attention to the fact that the town was keenly aware of him. His eyes found the big sign advertising the San Jacinto Cantina, and he steered his horse to the hitch rail. The front of the low-roofed adobe structure was deserted—a bad sign. But Risky did not hesitate. Dismounting, he turned to the fly curtains of the doorway and jingled into the big barroom.

A surprise awaited Risky McKee. The *cantina* seemed empty at first glance, but the shadowy light was deceiving to his eyes after the glaring sun. There was no one at the bar which flanked the right wall, and the rear platform upon which a string orchestra played at night was deserted. The tables surrounding the small dancing floor were vacant—all but one table in a deep, sheltered corner of the barroom.

Risky's eyes narrowed upon two gun-hung Americanos who rose from their chairs to greet him. One of them was a tall stoop-shouldered hombre with a long horselike face and bushy gray eyebrows.

The other was a stocky, bow-legged waddy with the pudgy features of a bulldog. Both were covered with alkali dust, chap-clad, with flannel shirts open at the throat. He recognized them both.

"Gan Clymer!" Risky gasped in a low tone. "How did you get here?"

The man, "Gan" Clymer, was the rancher who had given Risky the ten thousand dollars with which to buy the palomino yearling. At that time, Clymer hadn't said anything



about going to Mexico to see the deal accomplished.

The stocky hombre with Clymer was his tough, hard-riding ranch foreman, "Froggy" Coxe, who had come from the north Montana ranges to work for Clymer.

"Glad ter see yuh, Risky," Gan Clymer said in a slow, tired voice. "We didn't expect yuh'd ever git hyar."

At that, Froggy Coxe frowned and sat down at the table, as if he was not expected to speak.

Risky walked up to them, his tanned face a poker mask. He didn't like this mysterious meeting. Experience told him that something crooked was in the wind.

Gan Clymer held a mortgage paper on Risky's ranch in order to insure the delivery of the palomino colt. The puncher had never done business with Clymer in the past, although their ranges were separated by not more than sixty miles. He had never heard any complaint against Clymer, but now he felt a distinct distrust for him.

"How did you beat me to Cisco Crossing?" Risky asked coldly.

Clymer shrugged his shoulders and sat down. "Me an' Froggy came by way of the Gila River," he replied. "Yuh must have ridden across the desert. We kept changin' broncs to make good time. After yuh left, word got out what yuh was goin' ter do. So we was afraid for yuh. We thought we might catch up an' warn yuh that the border knew yuh carried my ten thousand bucks."

Risky sank into a chair across the table from them. He had watched a good many skin games in his short life, and he was no fool. Clymer's story sounded as if it had been memorized. He thought of the attempt that the Yaqui Indian had made on his life in Desert Jump,

and he remembered the horsemen who had followed him all the way from home, always keeping in the distance.

There was a pretty good chance that Froggy Coxe and Gan Clymer had been those riders. There was also a good chance that they had sent the Yaqui to murder him. He doubted if they had come to Cisco Crossing by way of the Gila River banks.

"You needn't have come, Clymer," Risky said coolly. "I can take care of myself."

The tall horse-faced rancher studied him shrewdly. "Yuh ain't sore, aire yuh?" he asked.

Risky did not reply to that question, but changed the course of the talk.

"What did you figure to do?" he inquired.

"I want that palomino bad," Clymer said, smirking. "Me an' Froggy will help yuh. It won't changed our bet none. If we three bring the critter back home, I'll hand yuh over that mortgage paper on your ranch, an' I'll also give yuh the first colt from the palomino."

Risky had guessed the same answer, and it did not please him. He had the feeling of a man who stood at the entrance to a dangerous trap. Caution warned him to withdraw.

He turned his head right and left to look the *cantina* over. No waiters or other customers were present; it was the siesta hour. But why should Gan Clymer and Froggy Coxe have been left in complete control of the barroom, if they had not arranged it?

"Where's Don Felipe's peon?" Risky asked carelessly, removing his ten-gallon hat as he did so and wiping the sweatband with a handkerchief which he drew from a pants pocket.

"The peon is sleepin' down at the livery," Gan Clymer replied easily—too easily. "Did the immigration men tell yuh about him?"

Risky saw Froggy Coxe move his hands lazily below the rim of the table, where they would be near his guns. Risky put his big hat on the table. He bent forward, replacing his handkerchief in his pants pocket, and as he did so, he secretly snaked a gun from its holster. Without Froggy Coxe or Gan Clymer seeing him, he slipped the weapon under his hat on the table.

"Why didn't you two meet me on the American side of the line?" Risky inquired coolly.

Clymer's horselike face reddened. "Look hyar!" he exclaimed. "Yuh don't think me an' Froggy is up to somethin', do yuh? If yuh do, yuh kin jest hand over my ten thousand bucks. We'll call all bets off. Yuh might not know it, but one o' the worst cutthroats on the border is after yore scalp. He's made his brags that yuh'll never take the palomino back to the United States."

A cold smile twisted Risky's lips. "Don Puma is a great little kidder, ain't he?" he asked.

Froggy Coxe stiffened. "Yuh know him?" he cried.

"A nice gent, too," Risky replied easily. "I've got a six-gun an' some blankets belongin' to him. Those good-lookin' Spaniards are shore loose with presents."

Clymer's eyes widened. "Yuh shot Don Puma!" he exclaimed. "Did yuh know he was Don Felipe's worst enemy? He figures that Don Felipe cheated him out o' his rancho. That's why Don Puma won't let us get the palomino. Whar did yuh kill him?"

"My friend is alive an' kickin'," Risky answered. "The fact is, we

have a date to meet again. Do you want me to take him any message? I've got a heap of respect for him, Clymer. I don't think he's as bad as you paint him, an' I don't blame him for wantin' to keep the palomino in Mexico."

Clymer and Froggy Coxe stared at Risky, suspicion mirrored in their eyes. It was plain that they feared Don Puma and were no friends of his.

"Yo're in cahoots with that outlaw!" Froggy Coxe suddenly snarled, hunching his shoulders. "Yuh can't work for Gan Clymer no more. Hand over his ten thousand bucks! Gan will give yuh back the mortgage paper."

"Shore I will," the tall rancher snapped, and he plucked a folded paper from his pocket and held it aloft. "Hyar's the mortgage paper on yore ranch. Give me that ten thousand, McKee! I don't do business with hombres who pick up with border scum."

Risky's eyes went hard. His right hand slid under his hat, for he saw Froggy busy under the table rim.

"It will take a long time to produce that ten thousand, hombres," Risky chuckled mirthlessly. "It ain't in no money belt around my stomach. An' as for that paper you're holdin', Clymer, it don't happen to be the one that I made the mortgage out on."

"What?"

"Because the mortgage paper," Risky went on icily, "had a thumb-nail crease in the upper right-hand corner. I did it just for identity, in the same way that a crooked gambler might mark a poker card. We aren't callin' any bets off now. It's too late. You an' Froggy are losin' the first pot in this game."

Froggy Coxe's jaw thrust forward, his eyes lighted with fire, and he said

hatefully: "We're losin' the first pot, are we?"

Risky's face was as cold as death. "Don't try to shoot me under the table, you sneak," he growled. "I'm holdin' a cocked gun under my hat right now, an' I'll put a slug through your mangy heart. Gan Clymer will catch a second one between the eyes."

Froggy Coxe turned pale, and Gan Clymer threw himself back in his chair.

"Wait!" Clymer cried out.

Risky lifted his hat with his left hand, revealing a cocked weapon in his right.

"Go on an' shoot, Coxe," Risky invited tauntingly. "I'll take your lead in the midriff, but it won't kill me before I send you to Boot Hill. Shoot, or lift your dewclaws to the table! Both of you skunks are leavin' this *cantina* like nothin' has happened. You'll hike up the street an' pass through the wire gate to the United States. An' if I ever see you on this side of the line again, I'll make you eat .45-caliber lead!"

For a moment, the ugly gunman hesitated, flicking his eyes from Risky's cocked gun to the puncher's face. What he read in Risky's features did not please him. Froggy sneered and lifted his hands, empty, above the table.

Gan Clymer breathed deeply in relief.

"Come on, Froggy!" the tall rancher growled. "Let McKee git himself killed. His ranch is worth twice that ten thousand bucks of mine. He'll never even see that palomino hoss after we send word to Don Felipe that he's in cahoots with Don Puma."

Froggy got to his feet, teeth bared in a snarl. "I'll be seein' yuh, McKee," he spat out.

Risky did not reply. As Clymer

got to his feet, Risky rose from his chair, his big hat once more covering his six-gun. He moved backward to a corner of the *cantina*, let them pass him and go clumping toward the front door.

Risky feared that one of their henchmen might be hiding in the shadows of a rear doorway of the barroom, and he didn't want to be drilled in the back if he followed them.

### CHAPTER III.

#### COYOTE-HUNTIN'.

THE moment the tall horse-faced rancher and his bow-legged gunman passed outside the barroom, Risky acted. Whirling, he leaped to a side window near the corner table, threw a leg over the sill and slipped to the open sunlight.

Now every hand was against him in the game. The very man who had sent him for the horse was trying to double-cross him. Don Puma, the border bandit, had threatened his life. And Risky did not know what to expect from Don Felipe de Acosta, but he was figuring that a bullet welcome awaited him at the rancho.

Weapon in hand, he ran along the outside wall of the *cantina* to the front corner. Halting, he peered around the building to the door by which Clymer and Froggy Coxe had left the barroom. In the short space of time since then, the pair had vanished.

They had not gone north to the barbed-wire barrier separating Mexico and the United States, or Risky would have seen their figures heading up the dusty street. They apparently had sneaked into an adobe hut next to the *cantina* and were waiting for him to show himself, to murder him.

"Like two yellow coyotes," the waddy muttered under his breath,

turning his eyes to the hitch rail where his big sorrel stood waiting.

Risky whistled softly, and the animal swung its head toward the corner of the *cantina*. The puncher whistled again. The animal nodded and tossed its mane. Turning, the horse began walking toward him, switching flies with its tail, throwing the dangling bridle reins aside so that it would not step on them.

Risky held his breath, fearing that the bronc might be shot from the adobe next to the barroom. But Clymer and Froggy Coxe must have thought that the sorrel was taking a stroll of its own accord. As the animal turned the corner of the *cantina*, Risky caught up the bridle reins.

Vaulting into the saddle, still holding his gun, he threw in his spurs. The bronc leaped along the side of the building, striking to the rear, where the mesquite and chaparral offered a refuge.

A shout sounded behind the *cantina*, and Risky knew he was in for it. Men were there, warned by the thunder of his horse's hoofs. He ducked low in the saddle, swerving his six-gun barrel to the right as he rocketed past the rear corner of the building.

He glimpsed two Mexicans diving in at the back door of the *cantina*. A third peon was stabbing a six-gun into aim to shoot him.

*Crash!* Risky fired, beating the ragged peon to the trigger by a whisker and hurling the man backward by the force of the bullet.

As Risky's sorrel sped on to the chaparral, the puncher turned in the saddle, smoking bullets at the back door and windows of the *cantina*. Howls of alarm echoed inside the building. An hombre screamed, as if hit while trying to shoot Risky. But the yell was drowned out by the

roar of shouts from the main street of the town, where Mexicans seemed to be searching for the fight.

Risky's sorrel plowed into the brush like a bull on the prod, trampling down the branches and leaves, leaping through thicker growth, carrying its rider to safety in the twinkling of an eye. The waddy turned left.

It was well that he did. Rifle lead began smashing into the thicket. He heard Mexican voices calling for horses to give chase. He rode on through the chaparral, turning behind big mesquite trees, until he came out on the open range on the far side of the foliage.

"Show these tin horns what you've got, Redhead," Risky spoke to his bronc, giving it full bridle in order to reload his spent weapon from loose cartridges in his pants pocket.

The sorrel answered his order by stretching its neck, nosing the hot breeze off the flats. Its legs whipped with trained rhythm. The earth throbbed under the tattoo of the animal's hoofs.

The waddy made a good mile of open country before riders appeared behind him. He grinned at their flaming rifles, knowing that the range was too long for them. His faith was in the big sorrel, which he had saved all the way on his trip from the ranch for a test of speed. But he watched the dozen Mexicans behind him for several minutes, to size up their broncs.

"We can take it a little easier, pard," Risky turned in the saddle to speak to his bronc. "Watch out you don't stumble in a prairie-dog hole. There's a line of hills ahead, an' we'll have to do some climbin'."

Risky was more worried than he would allow himself to believe. His main plan was to get to Don Felipe's rancho as soon as possible, in order

to beat any messenger whom Gan Clymer would send. But the puncher did not know the exact location of the Spaniard's spread. It lay about fifty miles southwest of Cisco Crossing, in a green valley surrounded by the high barren foothills of a mountain range. The hills ahead of him marked the first slopes of the uplands where he must go.

Risky trained his keen gray eyes upon the distant ridges and cliffs where there were no roads or trails. He recognized grave danger in that unknown country. His mind was touched with the memory of Don Puma, and he wondered if the Spaniard would be laying for him.

Don Felipe himself might have riders out to halt him. And there was a chance that a dozen small-fry bandits were angling for his scalp and the ten thousand bucks that he carried.

Glancing behind, he saw that the pursuit was being shaken off one by one, with only a few good horsemen remaining. He did not have to think about them now, as long as he kept traveling at a fair speed.

When his bronc began to warm up, Risky pulled it to a fast trot, for the first grades were at hand. He picked a wide draw and reined toward it. It was perilous to travel in arroyos and narrow passes, where a lone dry-gulcher would find easy shelter from which to drill him as he passed. Yet by keeping in the open, riders would be able to sight him from a distance. He was in a pickle, and recognized it, but he had faith in his bronc.

Putting away his six-gun, he drew a high-power hunting rifle from the saddle scabbard, and balanced the weapon across the pommel. His sorrel was in the draw now, climbing rapidly.

He was nearing the end of the

draw, where great white stretches of slide rock led up to the first ragged ridge top. Beyond that ridge, he didn't know what to expect. An entire gang of raiders could be hiding behind its crest. They would have seen Risky coming. So he turned left, threw in his spurs and galloped hard for a half mile over a level on the slope. Then, wheeling his bronc to the ascent of the shale, he climbed swiftly to the top and halted.

His precaution had been well taken. Far to his right, a rifle cracked, and a bullet whistled high over his head. His eyes jerked to the north along the top of the ridge. The spot where he should have crossed the upland was not deserted. Two horsemen were quirting toward him.

"Don Puma!" Risky exclaimed, recognizing the white sombrero and crimson sash of his old foe at the water hole. "He's ridin' that roan, which is no cow-hocked critter."

Alarmed, he twisted in the saddle to stare southward along the ridge top. Two more riders appeared not a quarter of a mile away. He looked westward and found another pair of horsemen.

A cold chill went down his backbone. They had him cornered. He could not go back to Cisco Crossing, because the Mexicans were on the flat. His route was cut off to the north and the south, just as it was to the west. But westward was the way that the waddy was determined to go.

"Redhead, we've got some hard ridin' an' some hard shootin' to do," Risky growled. "Get movin'."

Another bullet whistled over Risky's head, and he spurred the sorrel westward down the steep slope. Sliding, jumping, stumbling, the bronc took the descent like a mountain goat. The animal made a hard

target to hit, if Don Puma and his men were shooting at it. But Risky realized that the lead was all whining high, and it gave him hope. Out of the corners of his eyes, he could see his foes angling down the ridge, but they had no hope of cutting him off.

He reached hard ground, and the sorrel leaped into a gallop, straight across a wide bench spotted with cactus and mesquite. There were horsemen in Risky's path, a half mile away. They drew apart, as if to catch him as he passed between them.

Shaking his right leg loose from its stirrup, he hooked it around his saddle pommel for support. Then, stiffening his left leg, his body rose from the back of the horse. He could balance himself in that position and lessen the sway of his shoulders while riding. The rifle came to shooting position. He had often drilled coyotes on the run in this manner.

The rifle flamed, kicked, and a bullet was on its way, whining toward those Mexican riders ahead of him. He saw one duck, and knew the shot had been close. The pair rode farther apart. The range was still long, but they tried shots at him.

He listened to the bark of their weapons and saw the bullets fall short. Their guns were carbines, while his was a high-power rifle.

Risky fired at the rider on the right, and the man's hat was torn away. He whooped. The Mexican rider had had enough. He threw in his hooks and rode as hard as he could go for shelter in a sink hole. Risky swung his smoking rifle toward the second hombre, but that fellow also was riding for his life, leaving the route to the west clear.

Settling back into his saddle, Risky turned his head and waved an

arm at the Spaniard coming hard behind him, a mile away. Don Puma replied with a high-sailing bullet. It came from no short-range carbine, but from a rifle as good as Risky's.

The puncher bit his lips and turned to see what the Mexicans ahead had done. They had dismounted in hiding, and were waiting for him to ride between them.

Risky dropped his rifle into his saddle scabbard and drew his six-guns. The range was shorter now. He let the pair have a fusillade of lead from each weapon as his bronc rocketed between the sink holes. The Mexican sharpshooters ducked for cover, and Risky was past them, riding a zigzag course.

Screaming slugs followed him, and he could hear his foes yelling in rage. His bronc was approaching another ridge, and Risky guided it toward a deep arroyo that would make the grade easier and provide better footing.

Behind him, Don Puma and his men were not to be shaken off. If anything, they were gaining, and Risky knew his only hope was to get out of sight.

In a cloud of dust, he sailed into the mouth of the arroyo and pounded up it, watching the cliffs mount high and steep on either side.

His heart caught in his throat. The sorrel turned a bend, and Risky found himself faced with what he most feared. A dry waterfall blocked the horse's path. It could not climb the sheer rock which hung over at the top.

Risky drew bridle rein. Far behind him, he heard Don Puma's horses pounding into the arroyo. Risky leaped from the saddle, tied his sorrel's reins to the pommel, turned the bronc down the deep cut and patted it on the rump.

"Sorry to leave you, boy," the



waddy called, "but it looks like I'm goin' ahead on foot. We don't want you to take lead."

The sorrel did not run far before it halted and turned its head back to its master. Risky saw its ears prick up. He whirled, glancing up at the top of the dry waterfall. The cone of a hat showed among the boulders up there.

He had no time to draw. With a leap, he dived under the overhang of the falls, just as a gun crashed. A bullet snapped off the end of his right spur, and then Risky was scuttling to safety among the rocks below the overhang.

"Trapped like a bobcat!" he said.

Keeping low in order to reload spent six-guns from loose cartridges in his pockets, he listened to Don Puma approach on horseback. The pound of hoofs stopped. Risky figured that the border hawk had dismounted behind the bend in the arroyo, fifty yards below the dry falls.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### DUD CARTRIDGES.

**R**ISKY cocked his guns. His lips parted in a cold smile. He was forced to give Don Puma credit for springing a thorough trap. The Spaniard had made good his boast so far. Don Puma had promised to meet him again, if Risky crossed the border.

"Señor McKee," the Spaniard's voice called in the silence of the arroyo, "it is my pleasure to welcome you to the country of song and wine."

A hard scowl furrowed Risky's brow. He failed to see the humor in the greeting.

"You'll find your gun an' blankets behind the cantle of my saddle, hombre," Risky shouted back. "What else you want will cost heavy."

He heard the Spaniard's chuckle. A six-gun crashed, and lead chipped the boulder behind which Risky hid. Again Don Puma's gun sounded, chipping more stone from the right, then the left side of the sheltering rock.

It was a fine exhibition of shooting. Risky could not deny it, nor was he inclined to reply to the fire. To do so, he'd have to show himself, and he suspected that at least four members of Don Puma's gang were waiting to snipe him.

"How long does the so reckless caballero plan to remain in hiding?" Don Puma's voice called. "There will be moonlight for the next three nights. Hunger and thirst are foes no one can beat, Señor McKee."

Beads of sweat appeared on Risky's brow. He knew he could not hold out for three days and nights, even with water and food. His muscles would become cramped, and if he got a chance to make a dash for freedom, his aim would be bad.

"I might as well make a break for it an' go down fighting," Risky said to himself.

"Señor McKee," Don Puma was calling again, "I am no hombre not to repay a favor. You gave me my freedom when you caught me in your country. It is my privilege to do so to you."

"For how much?" Risky countered suspiciously.

"The little matter of ten thousand dollars, señor," the border raider replied. "It is a mere precaution to prevent the palomino from leaving the rancho which rightfully belongs to me. I had hopes that your traitorous friends would take the money from you in Cisco Crossing. But you were too clever. Am I right?"

Risky's face became thoughtful. For some strange reason, he trusted

this Spaniard, who would steal ten thousand dollars from him. They were both playing a shrewd game. Don Puma had drawn chips without an invitation. It remained to be seen if he could play a cool hand of poker and could see through a bluff.

The border raider could not read all the cards that Risky held, nor was he certain of the pasteboards in Gan Clymer's hand. Don Puma was betting on a guess, on nothing sure, and Risky was too old a gambler with life and death to allow his rival to read his hand.

The ace was loose in the game. That ace was the ten thousand dollars, and Don Puma was not certain who held it. Risky did not mean to let him know for certain, until it came time for the final show-down.

"Hombre," Risky called, "Gan Clymer an' Froggy Coxe right now must be headed for Don Felipe's rancho. By holdin' me up here, you're wastin' time. It will take a smarter gambler than you to find that ten thousand bucks on me."

There was a short silence. "You give me your word that you haven't got it, Señor McKee?"

"I'm sayin' nothin'," Risky replied.

Another silence, and then the waddy heard the scrape of boots on the overhang above him. A shadow fell swiftly from the top of the falls, landed before Risky's hiding place, and his nostrils caught the odor of smoke. They had started to throw burning grass down.

Risky knew he was through. He reloaded his six-guns from his bullet belt.

"All right, hombre," he called. "I'm comin' out."

"To fight means death," Don Puma replied. "Leave your guns behind. If you have not the money, I

will send you back to your country. The next time, it will be different."

Risky's eyes narrowed. He swiftly made his decision, and then unbuckled his gun belts. Leaving the guns in their holsters on the ground, he stood up and slowly sauntered out from under the cliff, picking his way between the flaming bundles of hay.

He saw Don Puma waiting for him down the arroyo, a cocked six-gun in his hand. The Spaniard's lips were parted in a smile, the sunlight flashing on his teeth.

"It is a wise man who trusts a son of Miguel de Acosta," Don Puma said. "You will disrobe, Señor McKee."

"Right down to my red flannels?" Risky asked.

"I apologize for the necessity," the Spaniard replied.

Risky grinned and unbuckled his chaps. His shirt came off, then his denim pants, followed by hat, boots, and socks, until he stood in nothing but his underwear. Two of Don Puma's Mexicans came forward to search his clothing.

Ordered to lift his arms, Risky allowed the peons to pat him for hidden money. Don Puma studied him intently as the Mexicans went under the dry falls and hunted for buried treasure. The pair returned with Risky's gun belt and weapons.

"No, señor," one of them said to Don Puma.

"Tough luck," Risky spoke up. "You'd better head off Clymer an' Froggy Coxe, hombre."

Anger flashed into Don Puma's eyes. "They have the money, yes?"

"Somebody's got it," Risky countered. "You ain't found it on me."

"They laid a trap for you in Cisco Crossing," the Spaniard replied, brows knit in a frown. "But you play with me, Señor McKee. You

do not tell all. It is just as well. I have no use for a man who lies, and a man who refuses to lie, I have for him much respect. We will talk with those gringos who would buy the palomino from Don Felipe. Then I shall see you again."

He spoke in Spanish to the two Mexicans who had searched Risky, telling them to keep him prisoner until his return.

The peons were armed with rifles. Risky watched them eye the six-guns that had been resting in the holsters of his gun belts. One of them laid his rifle aside, examined a six-gun, found the chamber was filled with cartridges, and grinned wickedly. The other took the second weapon belonging to Risky.

Don Puma had turned around the bend of the arroyo, and Risky heard his steps fade out. The Mexicans motioned to Risky to dress in his clothing. They drew back, cocked six-guns in their hands, and seated themselves on boulders.

When he had donned his chaps, they motioned for him to move under the overhang of the dry falls. They apparently didn't know that he could speak Spanish.

Risky turned to the shade of the overhanging rock, took a seat and said in Spanish: "How long will Don Puma be gone?"

"He speaks!" one of the Mexicans cried.

"We know now," said the other craftily. "It is better that we had not said something."

"All I'm askin' is how long will Don Puma take to pick up Clymer an' Froggy?" Risky chuckled. "There ain't no harm in tellin'. How far is it to Don Felipe's rancho?"

The Mexicans glanced at each other. Then one could not resist the desire to boast.

"Don Puma will not have to go

to the rancho," he said. "He will be back before dark. He has been too noble with you, gringo. For me, I would shoot you like a dog."

"That wouldn't get you ten thousand dollars," the waddy chuckled.

"No, but it would save the palomino!" the other Mexican cried out.

"Why hasn't Don Puma taken the horse from Don Felipe, if he's so clever?" Risky shot back, egging the pair on.

"Why," the first Mexican exclaimed, "because Don Felipe keeps his horses within the walls of the rancho. Night and day, his peons stand guard against Don Puma. Don Felipe's rustlers ride the hills to find Don Puma. They blame all their raids on the Americanos on him."

Risky shook his head, as if he didn't believe the yarn. "If Don Puma doesn't do a bit of rustling himself, how can he pay you hombres?" he asked.

"We are the loyal servants of old Don Miguel de Acosta," the second peon said angrily. "Some day, we will kill Don Felipe. The ranch will be Don Puma's, and we will herd his cattle—the very cattle which we have already stolen from Don Felipe and hidden back in the mountains. That time is short, gringo."

Risky got up from his rock seat, stretched and started out to the arroyo.

"Time is gettin' short," the puncher muttered.

"Go back!" the Mexicans cried, raising their weapons—the guns that had been in Risky's belts.

Risky halted, grinned at them, then strolled nearer. "Do you Mexicans know anything about fist-fightin'?" he asked.

They sprang to their feet, weapons leveled. "One step more, and you die!" the first peon threatened.

"Not from those guns," Risky snapped, and he lunged in at him.

Before he reached the nearest Mexican, he heard the gun hammer fall on a dud cartridge. The Mexican didn't get the opportunity to trigger again. Risky was on him, swinging a fist for the peon's jaw. The blow knocked the Mexican off his heels and dumped him senseless on the ground. At the same time, Risky heard the other peon triggering on another dud shell in the second gun.

There was a howl of rage from the second Mexican as Risky whirled. The peon was leaping at him, weapon raised to strike the waddy.

Risky did not jump back. He leaped forward, throwing out a left arm to catch the gun barrel as it descended. With his right fist, he dealt the peon a smashing blow on the cheek that hurled him back, but did not floor him.

The peon dropped the gun, hand streaking to a sash for a knife. But Risky was on him before the blade came to light. Twice more, the waddy struck with his rock-hard knuckles, knocking the peon backward.

The man tripped and fell, eyes closed, swarthy face twisted in pain. He was senseless when Risky knelt beside him.

"I never knew a peon yet who could resist takin' a gringo's gun when it came his way," Risky said under his breath. "But I didn't realize that the habit would make things so easy for me."

He dragged the senseless pair together, back to back, and bound them with lariats that he found on their horses behind the bend in the arroyo. After stowing the pair under the dry falls, Risky picked up his six-guns and extracted the cartridges which had failed to explode. He

placed them in his belts, and loaded with loose cartridges that he had in his pants pocket.

"Won't these two hombres be hoppin' mad when they find out that each one of those dud cartridges was worth about eight hundred dollars," Risky McKee chuckled, turning down the arroyo.

Behind the bend, he found his sorrel bronc waiting in the shade of a cliff. Don Puma had unsaddled the animal, but its hull was lying on a boulder. The Spaniard had searched Risky's blanket roll and had taken the six-gun which the waddy had made Don Puma leave behind at the water hole.

But the puncher's high-power rifle had not been taken. Risky examined its mechanism, then loaded it with shells. Saddling his sorrel, he mounted.

Risky's eyes sought the floor of the arroyo as he rode down it. There were many tracks, but most were coming up the cut. He followed the prints of five brons leading down the defile to the eastern side of the ridge, where they turned southward. On the sandy earth, the trail was plain, and Risky urged his sorrel to a lope.

In his mind, he was counting up the loyal Mexicans in Don Puma's outfit. There had been five when the Spaniard first gave chase on the ridge beyond Cisco Crossing. Two peons had been on the south, two on the west, and Don Puma himself had been with another Mexican on the north. Then there had been the lone peon waiting above the waterfall when Risky rode up the arroyo.

Now two of those Mexicans were hog-tied in the arroyo, and Risky was following the tracks of five riders, so he figured that they be-

longed to Don Puma and four helpers.

"I wouldn't want to be in Clymer's boots," the puncher chuckled. "Every one of Don Puma's peons would willin'ly die for him. I'm beginnin' to think that Spaniard is on the level. If I ever get that palomino back to the United States, one thing is certain. Gan Clymer is never goin' to own it."

For five miles, Risky followed the tracks, which veered to the southwest in the rugged hills, winding through deep gullies. Twice, he almost lost the trail on hard rock, but picked it up again farther on. He was constantly on the alert for another trap.

His route was in the general direction in which Don Felipe's rancho lay, and he wondered if Don Puma had planned to halt Clymer and Froggy Coxe at the very threshold of his enemy.

He was still thinking about the dashing Spaniard, when his ears picked up the echo of distant shots. His hands drew bridle rein, and he listened intently. A dozen rifles and six-guns were in the battle—a hard one, for there was no pause. In the high, clear air, the noise of the fight traveled far.

"He's got Clymer an' Froggy holed up just like he had me," Risky said aloud. "But those two coyotes are not alone. They've got some Mexicans helping them."

Risky pressed ahead, listening to the distant thunder of guns. He couldn't make up his mind as to a course of action. If he threw his weapons on the side of Clymer, Risky was helping a sworn enemy.

But Don Puma was no friend, either. Yet the waddy could not let Clymer die for the ten thousand dollars which wasn't in his possession.

Another mile, and Risky was

climbing into high, rocky hills. His eyes constantly sought the ridges ahead, and soon he made out a strip of road angling up a steep cliff. That road was evidently the one leading to Don Felipe's rancho, and somewhere along it, Don Puma had trapped Clymer and Froggy, but it was on the farther side of the ridge.

Risky drew his rifle from his saddle scabbard. It would be foolish to strike for the road and follow it. He turned his bronc toward the ridge at a spot a half mile north of where the trail crossed by a narrow pass.

The going was hard, and his sorrel began to protest against the rocky grades, but Risky prodded it on up the steep slopes. He was nearing the scene of the struggle. It was either in a pass or on the other side of the ridge.

Now the puncher took care to conceal his approach. Winding up cuts, slipping behind rearing crags, he reached the crest of the ridge and halted his bronc in the lee of a break.

Dismounting, he stole over the ridge top to see what lay beyond. His eyes found a deep green valley, in the center of which a rancho stood, surrounded by a high adobe wall. There was no sign of cattle or riders, and the fight was not at the home of Don Felipe. The shooting was coming from the ridge pass on the south.

Risky turned away from the valley, aware of its beauty and loneliness. Behind the walls of the rancho there was the palomino for which he had come to Mexico.

But human lives were at stake, and they were more important now. He could not resist entering the scrap. There was no doubt but that it had drawn Don Felipe and the rancho vaqueros. All the men who had taken cards in the game for the palomino would be in this final pot,

Risky being the last to see the show-down.

## CHAPTER V.

### FIGHT IN THE PASS.

**R**ISKY kicked off his chaps and removed his hat. Rifle in hand, he started southward along the crest of the ridge, slipping from behind one crag to another.

Now he was certain that the battle lay in the narrow pass that cut through the high barrier to Don Felipe's valley. The thunder of guns had not lessened, and there seemed to be more men engaged in the fight than the waddy could account for.

"Don Felipe's vaqueros are there, or I'm a Chinaman," the waddy told himself.

Soon he could make out the rim of the deep defile ahead. He halted short. Men lay on the ground, shooting down into the pass—men in gringo clothes. Risky ducked low and advanced, taking his rifle in his left hand and drawing a six-gun with his right for close-quarters fighting.

His ears caught the yells of wounded hombres echoing above the crash of guns. He watched those Americans firing from the rim of the cliff into the pass below, and suddenly he recognized them.

"Gan Clymer an' Froggy Coxe!" Risky exclaimed. "An' who is that with 'em?"

His eyes fastened on a fat figure attired in an expensive red velvet vest worked with silver threads. The bell-bottom trousers, purple sash, and yellow silk shirt made the hombre look ridiculous. He had little neck and a mop of greasy black hair. He sat back from Clymer and Coxe, loading their spent rifles for them, laughing to himself, shaking like a jellyfish as he did so.

"If that's Don Felipe," Risky

grated, "my guns are on the side of Don Puma. The skunks must have laid a trap for me in the pass, an' caught my Spanish amigo."

The waddy was closer now, stalking the three like a wolf, and he heard Clymer shout in triumph.

"I nailed another o' Don Puma's men!" Clymer said. "The skunks have gone back into the cave. They're bottled up, Don Felipe. Your vaqueros are creeping in both sides of the pass. Come have a look!"

Risky saw the fat Don Felipe shake his head. "I am too busy weeth my work, señores." He was afraid of being shot from below. "Eet ees thee first time that Don Puma has ever taken my bait. We weel seet on hees carcass and dreenk wine. He cannot escape now."

Risky was within twenty feet of the three men. He laid his rifle down, then holstered the six-gun in his right hand. Taking a deep breath, he waited until Clymer and Coxe turned to give Don Felipe empty rifles.

Risky saw that both the Americans had six-guns in their holsters. They would need them. He sank into a fighting crouch, eyes slitted, hands poised over the tops of his holsters.

"Hello, Clymer!" Risky cried out. "An' you, too, Froggy! What's all the excitement?"

Clymer and Froggy jerked their eyes up from Don Felipe. They saw Risky, and their jaws sagged. At the same time, Don Felipe swung his head around and stared at the waddy.

"Who ees eet?" the Mexican asked fearfully.

Clymer swallowed hard. He could not speak. It remained for Froggy to say something.

"He ain't got us covered,"

Froggy suddenly snarled. "He can't outdraw us all. He's got that ten thousand bucks."

Risky watched the pair rise to their knees, and he saw Don Felipe's hands inching toward a loaded rifle on the ground beside him.

"You three shore picked grandstand seats for yourselves, didn't you?" Risky mocked them. "You planned to nail me when I came through the pass, but you caught a fightin' cougar, didn't you? I'm callin' all bets, hombres. Who is goin' to be first to show his hand?"

Froggy's shoulders sagged, and his eyes glowed red. "Bullet bets, Mc-Kee," the gunman snarled. "I can flash my iron just as easy on my knees as standin' up. Yuh can't win against three. Yuh'd better pass."

"I'm counting on yuh, Froggy," Gan Clymer whispered. "Yuh know what I hired yuh for."

"I'm countin' three for all of you," Risky growled. "One!"

He never voiced the second number.

Froggy's hands were snatching for his gun butts. Risky knew that the gunman was fast, even as he went for his own weapons. He saw Froggy's body jerk violently as the man's guns came out of their holsters.

Risky's wrists were slapping against his own thighs. His wrists bounced out, and he had his fingers wrapped around his guns. The puncher threw himself aside as he thumbed back the hammers.

*Crash-sh!* Risky's guns blazed, kicked, and his lead was smashing into the swarthy gunman, knocking Froggy rolling back to the cliff rim. Froggy was shooting desperately, missing aim because of the impact of Risky's bullets. A horrible scream echoed from Froggy's throat. He was over the cliff and falling into the pass.

Risky was still shooting, this time at Gan Clymer, who had drawn and was trying to trigger. It seemed that Clymer's finger was paralyzed, and it could not pull. Risky's first lead had taken him in the right shoulder, numbed the muscles, and Clymer fell back, gasping.

"*Caramba!*" Don Felipe cried out in rage, swinging the loaded rifle up to get aim at the American puncher.

Risky leaped at the Mexican, kicking the rifle barrel aside as it came up. The weapon flamed, missing the puncher. Risky leaned down, his six-gun barrel descending on Don Felipe's greasy black head with a force that laid the Mexican senseless.

"Clymer," Risky shouted, whirling toward the wounded American rancher, who was flat on his back, clasping his right shoulder with his left hand and moaning in agony, "where's my mortgage paper?" Now was the time to ask for it. "Quick, Clymer! Your life hangs by a thread."

Clymer's eyes showed terror. "In the sweatband of my hat," he whined. "Yuh can't kill me, Risky. Yuh can't do it! I'll tell yuh everything. There ain't no palomino hoss."

"There ain't no what?" Risky asked.

"There ain't no hoss," Clymer said pitifully. "It was a fake. I've knowed Don Felipe a long time. He made up the story in the hope of catchin' Don Puma. We thought yuh might run inter Don Puma, an' yuh'd kill him, or he'd kill yuh. It was a way for me ter git yore ranch, an' a way for Don Felipe ter git rid of Don Puma."

Risky crawled to Clymer's sweat-stained hat, felt under the band in the rim, and extracted a folded piece



of paper. One glance at the writing told him it was the real thing. He touched a match to it, and it began to burn.

The shooting in the pass below had not stopped. Risky ordered Clymer to lie on his stomach. The puncher bound him, hand and foot, then turned to look at Don Felipe. The pudgy Mexican was waking up, eyes blinking at the sky. Risky picked up a loaded rifle and waited until Don Felipe sat up.

"Get movin' over the rim of the cliff!" the waddy ordered.

"What ees that?" Don Felipe gasped.

"You wanted fight with Don Puma," Risky replied. "Now go get it!"

"Eet ees sure death!" the Mexican cried out in terror.

"It was sure death for Don Puma when you cornered him in this pass," Risky snapped. "It was the same for me if I came along. I'm givin' you a fightin' chance, you snake! Get over the rim of the cliff! I'll throw you a six-gun."

Don Felipe shut his eyes, then opened them. He crawled to the rim of the pass, gazed down and drew back.

"I can't!" he whined.

"Tell your vaqueros to go on to Cisco Crossin'," Risky ordered. "Tell them you are captured by me, an' that you double-crossed Don Puma. Snap into it!"

Don Felipe choked, swayed, and then lifted his voice to his men below. Risky sneaked up behind the fat Mexican, a six-gun in his hand. He peered over Don Felipe's shoulder and saw a dozen vaqueros hiding behind boulders in the pass. Their heads were lifted.

The shooting had stopped. There was a cave in the center of the pass,

and that seemed to be where Don Puma was holed up.

Risky raised his six-gun and fired three shots down into the pass to show the vaqueros that he meant business. He had the drop on them from the cliff.

They began to run for all they were worth up the pass to the east, in the direction which led to Cisco Crossing. As they went, a tall, handsome Spaniard appeared from the mouth of the cave.

"What'll I do with this gamblin' cheat?" Risky shouted to Don Puma.

The Spaniard below holstered a six-gun. "I salute you, my friend!" Don Puma replied. "Once more, I owe you my life. You have beaten me fairly. You cannot buy the palomino. It is yours for a gift."

Risky grinned at the thought that the story of the palomino had been a trick to draw him to Mexico, where he would lose his life and also his ranch.

"No, I could not take the horse now, Don Puma," Risky called out. "My own sorrel suits me. I'll be on my way back to my own country now, with Clymer. The folks don't think much of cheats at home. I'm payin' Clymer back his ten thousand when we cross the border, an' he'll be headin' for parts unknown. But what about Don Felipe?"

Don Puma strolled out to the center of the pass. "Give him a gun and send him down."

Risky saw the fat Mexican tremble in terror.

"The rancho is yours, my nephew!" Don Felipe cried out. "I have no wish to fight a duel."

"Send him down with a gun, Señor McKee," Don Puma called. "I am to inherit the ranch upon his death. My father, Miguel, appointed Don Felipe to manage the rancho until

death. Don Felipe hoped to sell all the stock and flee with the money. I stole my own stock to stop it. Don Felipe tried rustling and blamed it on me. Now it is my turn for vengeance."

Risky thrust a six-gun into Don Felipe's back. "Start climbin' down to your fate, hombre," the puncher ordered. "Don Puma will give you a gun. Losers must pay."

Don Felipe stiffened at the touch of Risky's weapon. The Mexican was caught in the trap of his own making. But he still had a fighting chance. He moved over the rim of the cliff, groaning with desperation, and started down. Risky drew back.

"Come on, Clymer!" he said shortly. "This isn't our country, nor any of our business. We're goin' back home."

Risky was prodding his prisoner along the top of the ridge to where his horse was waiting, when he heard two shots, one closely following another. A scream echoed. Then there was silence. It had not been Don Puma's voice. Risky mounted and motioned the trembling Clymer to find his bronc. The crooked rancher stumbled, terror-stricken, to a rocky covert where three animals were tied up.

As Clymer mounted his bronc, Risky was thumbing cartridges from his bullet belt into two six-guns. He rode over to Clymer and dropped them into the man's saddlebags. Clymer's eyes widened in terror.

"You will make me fight a duel!" he cried. "I won't! I'm buying my life with the ten thousand."

"I wouldn't touch your filthy mazuma," Risky growled. "Those guns are yours an' Don Felipe's. There's no powder in the cartridges I put into the chambers. If you unscrew the lead bullets from the brass shell cases, you'll find your money, in one-hundred-dollar bills—nine bills in each o' four o' them shells; eight bills in each o' the other eight. I've changed my mind about taking you home, Clymer. I've never ridden with a skunk in my life. You smell bad."

"I can go free?" Clymer questioned.

"Not for long," Risky replied coldly. "Cheats don't live long in this world. You'll try to double-cross somebody again, an' you'll run into a bullet. I'm leavin' the killin' job for somebody else to do. Adios."

Risky turned his horse on its hind-legs, threw in his spurs and rode away along the crest of the ridge.

**\$3,500.<sup>00</sup> FOR WINNING ANSWERS**

## BIG PRIZE CONTEST!

FIRST PRIZE, \$2,500 CASH—10 PRIZES OF \$100 EACH

***Ingram's Shaving Cream***

FOR FURTHER DETAILS SEE YOUR DRUGGIST or the current issue of *American Magazine*, *Life* and *Esquire*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* of Aug. 15th, Sept. 12th, Oct. 10th. — *Collier's* Sept. 12th, Oct. 10th, Nov. 7th. *Liberty* Sept. 5th, Oct. 3rd, Oct. 31st. — *Time* Aug. 31st, Sept. 28th, Oct. 26th. — *Literary Digest* Aug. 29th, Sept. 26th, Oct. 24th.





# Owl-hooters In Maverick

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Trail Wagons For Santa Fe," etc.

STAN GRAHAM heard the hard slamming of swiftly traveling hoofs on the twisting trail, but thought nothing of it. The trail was well used, and the fact that other riders were coming up the steep, heavily timbered slope toward him did not excite Stan in the least.

Stan was, therefore, utterly unprepared for what happened. He was letting his lank body sag wearily in the saddle, and had his blue eyes half closed against the brightness of the sun when four riders swept around a sharp bend in the trail

ahead of him. Stan stirred a little, reining instinctively aside.

He noted instantly that the horses were badly lathered, and that the four riders were surprised half out of their wits at seeing him there so close to them. Then the four were swarming around Stan, reining the lathered mounts to rearing halts.

For the first time Stan Graham sensed something wrong. One of the men—a tall, thin-faced fellow who had somber, unwinking eyes—was uttering lurid oaths from one corner of his tight mouth. And that som-

ber-eyed jasper was clawing at a pair of ivory-butted guns which were slung low on his hips.

Stan Graham's lanky body snapped erect, and his own lean hands made swift motions toward the cedar butts of the twin guns at his hips. But in the brief instant it had taken him to scent danger, one of the four strangers had shifted in behind him.

Stan sensed, rather than saw, the man leaning toward him, and tried to crouch forward over the saddle horn as he hooked his guns up from their soft scabbards. But something landed with jarring force across the back of Stan's neck, causing him to become strangely numb. He felt himself slipping sideways as his own leggy buckskin cayuse reared, leaped in terror.

Stan hit the trail dust, rolled sideways, and tried to lift his guns. The thin-faced, somber-eyed man spurred toward him, and Stan Graham saw livid streaks of blazing powder spear down at him from the hombre's outflung guns.

Then the world seemed to explode before Stan's eyes, and he felt as if he were being dragged at the end of a lariat. Dimly, as if from some great distance, he heard the four strangers talking. And, too, Stan felt himself being jerked and rolled about.

Not until water splashed into his face, and rough hands shook him violently, did he begin to lose that numbness of brain and muscle which had held him in its grip. Stan blinked water from his blue eyes, sat up slowly.

He stared in disbelief, for now there were almost twenty men ringing him in. Stan shook his head, ran a hand up through crinkly red hair to feel of a deep gash which slanted across the top of his head.

He grunted in anger as he remembered that thin-faced, somber-eyed man's attempts to kill him. Stan's fingers ran on back, to find a lump at the base of his skull where he had been struck—doubtless with a gun when that stranger worked in behind him.

Stan's wide mouth jerked into a hard line, and his eyes, puckered to thin slits, began running swiftly about the circle of grim, angry faces. But nowhere could he find that thin, cold face of the somber-eyed man who had shot him. Nor could he see either of the other three men.

Stan remembered them—a burly, barrel-chested fellow with close-set little eyes; a fat little man with a bulging stomach, big, unwinking eyes and the wide, lipless mouth of a frog; and a small, wiry little fellow who had edged in behind him and clouted him hard enough to raise that lump at the base of his skull. Stan Graham would not forget those four very soon!

But right now there were other matters to occupy his mind. Something in the grim silence of these men about him caused him to look about more sharply. Stan's eyes came to rest at last on a lank, grizzled man, who stood glowering down at him, toying with a cocked six-gun.

Stan's breath sucked in slowly as he caught the look in that grizzled hombre's puckered blue eyes. And there was a big, five-pointed star on the man's shirt front with "Sheriff" lettered across it in black.

"Well, young feller, we got yuh cold turkey." The sheriff's voice came grimly. "Where are yore three pards? Where have they gone to hole up?"

"Pards?" Stan echoed blankly. "Say, what is this, anyway? I was ridin' along this trail when——"

From the crowd leaped a lanky,

tow-headed young hombre. The fellow's face was white and twitching, and there was the sudden glistening of tears against the brown skin on his cheeks.

"Stall, will yuh?" the towhead snarled in a choked voice. "All right, jist try stallin'. Mebbe this will loosen yore blasted tongue."

The towhead swung a booted foot with a wild sort of savagery. The boot toe caught Stan Graham along the cheek, opening the skin as the slash of a knife would have done.

Stan crashed backward, and the towhead leaped, spiked heels driving for Stan's crimsoned face.

Stan managed to roll enough to avoid the boot heels. But the towhead raked suddenly with a spur, which caught Stan along the ribs, tearing through shirt and skin in a savage thrust.

"Talk, yuh coyote!" the towhead almost wailed the words. "Talk, or by the livin', I'll tromp yore rotten heart out, yuh murderin'— Leave me be, yuh hear? Git yore hands offn me, Henshaw."

The lank old sheriff had leaped forward, grabbed the towhead by an arm, and was yanking him away. But Sheriff Sim Henshaw had more than he could manage, for the fellow seemed crazed. He fought the sheriff, striking out blindly, kicking and lunging as if his very life depended on shaking off the sheriff's hands.

But other men were coming forward now, and the towhead was dragged aside, snarling and shaken. But the mad rage left the man suddenly, and he stood with head hanging, dry sobs shaking him. The sheriff laid a kindly hand on the young hombre's shoulder, and talked to him a moment in a low tone.

Stan Graham watched that scene, as he sat wiping at his badly bruised

face with the spotted neckerchief he had taken from about his lean throat.

Then Stan got to his feet. His movements were unhurried, deliberate. Yet a stocky man whirled on him, snarling an ugly name and cocking a knotty, square fist for a quick blow.

Stan Graham was already trembling under the lash of a cold rage. He saw the cocked fist, and his slow, deliberate actions changed to lightning swiftness.

His own lean right hand looped over in a hard, driving blow which sent the stocky man crashing into his fellows, spitting oaths and teeth through crimsoned, badly smashed lips. Stan spraddled his long legs far apart, let his lithe body sway a little forward, and balled both hands into hard fists.

"All right, yuh pack o' fools!" he rasped. "I don't know what this is all about, an' right now I'm too hoet-in' mad to give a dang. If yuh muddle-headed jaspers want to keep yore good looks then stay out o' my reach."

"Yuh do a little reachin' yore own self, young feller!" the grim-eyed sheriff growled. "Sky them paws, an' back up. Yuh're under arrest."

Stan Graham choked back his rage, but made no move to lift his hands. He stared unwinkingly into the sheriff's blazing eyes and leveled six-gun.

"Go ahead an' shoot, star-toter," he said finally. "But before yuh pull the trigger, would yuh mind tellin' me why in blazes yuh pack o' num-skulls are jumpin' me?"

"Yuh're under arrest, young feller, fer murder an' highway robbery," the sheriff bit out.

"As if he didn't know what he's wanted fer!" the towhead who had kicked Stan's face snarled. "Sheriff, handcuff him afore I lose my head

ag'in. Do yuh think I can stand hyar an' look at my brother's murderer much longer without puttin' a slug through him?"

"Sheriff, yuh an' this yellow-topped jasper here who likes to kick unarmed folks in the face are both loco—or lyin'," Stan Graham rasped coldly. "I shore as blazes never done any highway robbery in my life, an' I never murdered nobody."

"Liar, am I?" the tow-headed hombre squalled. "A snake like yuh can't call me that an' live over it. I'm savin' the country the expense of a trial."

And as the towhead spoke, his hands flashed down, ripped out twin six-guns!

## II.

Stan Graham would have died there on the trail but for the quick action of a lanky cowboy who had stood next to the ranting towhead. The lank cowboy had flung out a long leg, expertly tripping the fuming hombre. After that a half dozen possemen piled onto the fellow, took his guns away from him, and led him toward a horse.

Now the sheriff stepped forward, snapped handcuffs on Stan Graham, and stepped quickly back.

"Crawl yore bronc, owl-hooter," the sheriff growled in a low tone. "This posse is in a bad mood, so yuh better watch yore step. Tom Walker an' ol' Mike Freeman were mighty well liked. Watch yore step, or I'll never git yuh to Maverick an' behind bars."

"Just what in blazes is this all about?" Stan gritted. "Sheriff, I'm a reasonable hombre. But danged if yuh an' yore posse naven't got me pretty sore. Who's Mike Freeman an' Tom Walker, an' why all this row over 'em?"

"Ol' Mike Freeman was the stage

driver yuh an' them other three snakes killed this mornin' when yuh held up the Flagstaff-bound stage," the sheriff rasped. "Tom Walker was the young guard yuh four shot to ribbons. That boy who kicked yore face, an' who nigh drilled yuh there a minute ago, is Ed Walker, Tom's brother."

"Now we're gittin' some place," Stan snapped. "So yuh an' these other galoots think I helped rob the stage an' helped kill the guard an' driver, eh?"

Stan's anger was leaving him swiftly now, and his mind began working at terrific speed. He was suddenly remembering those four strangers who had jumped in. They had been on lathered, badly winded horses. And those four had, Stan remembered, been a mighty hard-looking lot.

His pulse quickened, and he was opening his lips to tell the sheriff about the four when the old officer growled an oath, jabbed him sharply in the ribs with a gun barrel.

"Head fer yore bronc, I said," the sheriff snarled. "Yuh blasted snake, yuh're stallin' to give them three pards o' yores a long start. I know their bronses are winded, same as yore bronc is. But me an' my men got fresh mounts at the Cross 8 back yonder, so we'll overtake yore pards yet."

"Say, are yuh loco?" Stan asked. "Does my hoss look winded or run out? Take a look at—— Say, where's my bronc?"

Stan half turned as he spoke, glancing about for his leggy buckskin cayuse. But the horse was not in sight, and Stan was about to turn back to confront the sheriff when his eye fell on a lathered, droop-headed sorrel standing up the trail a little way.

Stan's eyes widened, and a slow,

throbbing something seemed choking him. He remembered that sorrel—remembered it all too well. That tall, thin-faced stranger with the somber, black eyes had been mounted on that sorrel.

Realization-struck at Stan like a physical blow. He was sure now that the four men who had so ruthlessly attacked and tried to kill him were the bandits the sheriff and his posse were hunting.

As he gazed at the sorrel, Stan savvied why those bandits had attacked him. That sorrel had been run completely out, and the thin-faced, somber-eyed man had realized that unless he got a fresh horse he would have to drop back and let his three pards ride on.

Those thoughts flashed swiftly through Stan's mind. Once again he opened his lips to speak, intending to explain matters to the sheriff. But when he faced about he discovered that the sheriff had backed away, and was glancing toward the possemen.

"Bilby," the sheriff called, "yuh take yore Cross 8 punchers an' fog on after the other three murderin' coyotes. I'll turn back, an' take this skunk to jail. If yuh boys make it snappy yuh'll overtake them other three."

"By thunder, boys, Sim's right!" a short, gray-haired little hombre yelled. "Come on, an' we'll overtake them other three killers inside o' ten miles!"

There was a sudden rush for waiting horses, and a moment later grizzled little Nelse Bilby led the posse on up the trail at a roaring clip.

The sheriff sighed, dragged his free left hand across his face, then motioned with his drawn gun toward the spent sorrel.

"All right, Mr. Killer; hit that

saddle o' yores," the officer growled. "I don't usually mistreat prisoners, feller. But yore case is different. I'd as soon gun-whip yuh an' tie yuh on that hoss as not. Git a move on."

Stan Graham had a hunch that the sheriff was deliberately threatening him in the hope of frightening him. Stan's swollen and crimson-stained face twisted into a slow, mirthless grin, and his broad shoulders lifted in a brief shrug.

"Yore bluff ain't worth a plugged peso, sheriff," he said levelly. "Yuh think I'm a bandit, an' figger to scare me into tellin' yuh things. That right?"

The sheriff blinked, then flushed a guilty red. Stan saw a sparkle of anger kindle in the old officer's eyes, however, and turned quickly toward the sorrel, not wanting a run-in with the sheriff just then.

Stan swung aboard the sorrel, reached for the stirrups, and found that they were just a little too long even for his own lengthy legs.

"Now, sheriff, I've got a chance to show yuh somethin' that may make yuh listen to what I've got to say." Stan's voice held a trace of triumph as he spoke. "If yuh'll take the trouble to look, yuh'll see that these stirrups are too long fer me. If this was my bronc, I wouldn't be ridin' stirrups that didn't fit, would I?"

"Huh?" the sheriff grunted.

He came close, keen eyes watching while Stan reached as far down with his feet as possible.

"Yuh have to tip-toe to reach them stirrups, at that," the sheriff snorted. "From the looks o' yuh, I'd say yuh'd punched cattle most o' yore life. An' I never knowed a cowpoke to ride stirrups that was too long fer him. That's about the way yuh wanted me to think, wasn't it?" The last sentence came in a gritty, snarling tone.



Stan stared, completely flabbergasted. "I—I only aimed to show yuh that this wasn't my bronc," he stammered. "What in thunder yuh so hot under the collar about?"

"Young feller, yuh'll have to git up mighty early in the mornin' to run a sandy like that on me," the old officer thundered. "Don't yuh think I've got sense enough to know how yuh happened to be layin' hyar in the trail with yore scalp bullet-split?"

"Just what's yore opinion?" Stan asked thinly.

"Yuh're only a kid, which means that some older gent is the real brains behind the bandit outfit yuh've been ridin' with," the sheriff snapped. "Yore leader—or some hirelin' that he thinks a heap of—was ridin' that sorrel."

"Yeah?" Stan prompted in a dry, toneless voice.

"Whoever rode that sorrel this far, seen that yuh had a stout hoss, an' decided to take it," the sheriff went on grimly. "They shot yuh—left yuh fer dead—an' rode on. Young feller, them gents shore ain't friends o' yores or they'd never do yuh a turn like that."

"I'll say they're no friends o' mine," Stan bit out. "An' if I ever git in shootin' distance o' the blasted snakes——"

"Now yuh're talkin'!" the sheriff cried. "Boy, I give yuh my word that if yuh'll tell me where them pards o' yores are holin' up, I'll see that yuh're dealt with jist as lenient as the law allows."

Stan groaned inwardly, realizing that the sheriff had completely misunderstood his flare of anger at the bandits. Stan started to explain matters, but suddenly thought better of it. He looked at the handcuffs which held his wrists linked to-

gether, then glanced down into the old sheriff's leathery, eager face.

Stan had hot-footed it out of New Mexico only a couple of weeks before, after drilling a couple of quick-trigger gents who had tried to relieve him of a roll of money he had got by selling a little spread he had built up by four years of mighty hard labor.

Those two gunnies who had tried to pull the hold-up had been hirelings of the man to whom Stan had sold his spread. Knowing that if he stayed in New Mexico he would have still more shooting to do, Stan had banked his money and headed into Arizona, hoping to outrun gun trouble.

But he realized now that outrunning gun trouble was apt to prove mighty difficult. For here he was, up to his ears in trouble again. And Stan Graham knew that guns were about all that could pull him out of this mess.

Somehow, he had to get these handcuffs off his wrists, get his guns strapped back on, and find those four jaspers who had left him for dead after stealing his horse. Stan's keen brain was working swiftly, forming a plan that called for daring and a lot of luck.

"What if I don't happen to know just where them snakes aim to den up, sheriff?" he asked slowly.

"Yuh'd have a fair idea which way to start lookin'," the sheriff said sharply. "Kid, I can see by yore looks that yuh ain't been on the wrong trail long. Yuh lack that hard-bit somethin' that most owl-hooters git after a time. Take this chance, boy, an' mebbe yuh'll be a better citizen fer it."

Stan Graham was almost trembling now under the lash of eagerness and excitement. "All right, sheriff," he said quickly. "I—I'll do

my best to lead yuh to wherever them bandits are holin' up."

The grizzled sheriff studied Stan narrowly for a long moment, then shook his head almost sadly.

"Somethin' in yore eye tells me that yuh're up to some trick, young feller," the sheriff growled. "But mebbe yuh'll give up sech notions after a few days in jail."

Stan's hopes took a swift descent, and there was an angry sparkle in his eyes as he glared at the sheriff. "What in thunder could I be up to?" he demanded. "I promised to do my best to lead yuh to them bandits, didn't I?"

"Yep, yuh did." The sheriff shrugged. "But yuh agreed a little too quick, fer one thing. Besides, I want Nelse Bilby an' the posse to git back to town afore I let yuh lead me any place."

"Why wait fer the posse?" Stan's voice held a note of desperation. "Now's the time to git after them bandits, sheriff."

"Uh-huh, reckon so." The grizzled officer's voice was a disgusted grunt. "But if I wait until the posse returns, I'll know from them which way the bandits headed from hyar. Then, if I do decide to let yuh lead me to 'em, I'll know whether yuh're travelin' in the right direction, or whether yuh're jist stallin' when we set out."

"Dang the luck, why can't yuh listen to reason?" Stan bit out. "If we act quick, mebbe we can snag them murderin' coyotes afore they git plumb out o' the country."

"Kind o' sore because yuh won't git yore cut o' that twelve thousand dollars' stage loot, eh?" the sheriff growled. "Well, if yuh git sore enough, mebbe yuh'll tell where yore three pals are holed up. Come on, kid. Jail's where yuh belong right now."

### III.

It was midafternoon when Sheriff Sim Henshaw led his prisoner into Maverick's one broad, dusty street. A yell went up at sight of the handcuffed man riding ahead of the grim-eyed sheriff, and within five minutes the street was swarming with shouting, excited men.

But within that five minutes the sheriff had reached the jail, which was a squat stone building out behind the somewhat shabby little courthouse. The front end of the jail served as a sheriff's office, and there Stan Graham was halted, searched carefully, and asked his name.

A gnarled little old jailer helped search Stan, and it was the jailer who led the way back to a grim cell, unlocked the handcuffs from Stan's wrists, then slammed and locked the door of long, stout iron bars.

Stan stood chafing his wrists, listening to the roar from the crowd out front. He paced to the cell's one small window, peered out and down the side of the building. Men were boiling about out there like bees from an upset hive. And some of the yells told Stan that it would take mighty little talking to turn that crowd into an unreasoning mob.

"I didn't say that feller I brung in was one o' the stage robbers." Stan heard the sheriff's angry voice plainly. "All I can tell yuh now, boys, is that I picked the feller up on suspicion. If yuh wallopers will go on about yore business, I'll have a chance to question the feller, an' mebbe learn a few things. If he's one o' the bandits, an' I can find it out, I'll tell yuh about it."

That seemed to satisfy the crowd, and Stan watched men moving back along the street in tight clusters, talking and gesturing excitedly.

Stan watched until most of the men had drifted through the doors of the log and frame buildings which lined the street on each side, then turned wearily to pace up and down the narrow cell. Stan heard the sheriff talking to some one up there in the office at the front of the building, and stopped to listen, although he was not especially interested in the conversation.

"But I tell yuh, Cloud, I can do my own questionin'," the sheriff was saying in a vexed tone. "Yuh an' Zorn couldn't git any information out o' that prisoner that I couldn't."

"Likely not, sheriff," came a thin, cool voice. "On the other hand, a man in my business has to be a pretty keen judge o' human nature. Mebbe I could tell yuh whether this prisoner was lyin' or not when he answered whatever questions yuh asked."

"The boss is shore keen that way, sheriff," came a crisp, sharp voice. "I've seen him spot many a sandy jist by listenin' to a feller talk an' by watchin' his eyes while he did talk."

"Mebbe yuh're right, fellers." The sheriff's voice had lost its peevishness. "Ownin' an' operatin' a place like yore Navajo Bar An' Gamblin' Hall does call fer a gent with sharp wits an' eyes, Cloud. But I want yuh an' Zorn both to promise me that yuh'll keep whatever we learn under yore hats. If this feller did turn out to be a stage bandit——"

"Sure, sheriff," the cool, thin voice of Cloud put in, "I know exactly what yuh mean. That bunch out there would start a lynchin' bee if they found out yuh had one o' the men who helped kill Mike Freeman an' Tom Walker when the stage was robbed."

"The boss an' me know how to

keep our traps shet," Zorn's voice clipped.

Stan Graham was frowning darkly, his mind working swiftly. Somewhere, sometime, he had heard the voices of Zorn and Cloud.

A prickling sensation went along Stan's taut nerves, and he leaned against the bars of the door, peering out intently. He saw three men move into the mouth of the runway which led between a double row of cells. And suddenly Stan Graham was as stiff as the iron bars before him. His eyes bulged slowly out, and breath rasped and whistled through his locked teeth.

Into that little corridor had stepped two men, followed by the sheriff. One of those men in the lead was a tall, thin-faced hombre, who had hawkish, dark features, a crooked red mouth and somber black eyes. That hombre was the one who had sat that winded sorrel, firing down at Stan.

And beside the somber-eyed jasper was a small, wiry hombre, with hard gray eyes. Stan remembered that little jasper instantly, for he, too, was one of the four who had jumped Stan out there on the trail and left him for dead.

Stan felt his whole body trembling, and a blinding, savage rage rise within him. But seeing those two murderous rascals at a distance gave him a chance to control himself before they reached his cell. Stan fought back the rage, trying to think of some plan, trying to figure out some way of getting at the cut-throat pair who were there in the corridor.

He gripped the iron bars before him until his fingers ached, yet no gambler's face had ever been more expressionless than Stan Graham's face was now.

The thin, somber-eyed hombre and the wiry little cutthroat halted before the barred door, their eyes probing, questioning. That the pair were plenty uneasy, Stan saw instantly. And he saw, too, the sultry, murderous lights smoldering in the opaque eyes of the tall gunman who wore the ivory-buttoed guns slung low on lean thighs.

"Graham, this here is Bill Cloud, owner o' the Navajo Saloon An' Gamblin' Hall," the sheriff said gruffly, flinging a hand toward the somber-eyed killer. "An' this other gent is Jack Zorn, lookout in the Navajo."

Stan Graham met the probing eyes of Bill Cloud and Jack Zorn without a hint of recognition. "Howdy," he said shortly, and gave his red-thatched head a brief nod.

Bill Cloud and Jack Zorn exchanged quick glances. Stan saw the uneasiness flow from their eyes, saw the tenseness leave their faces.

"Uh-huh, think I don't recognize yuh," Stan thought grimly. But he was looking at the sheriff now, frowning as if slightly puzzled.

"Young feller, I'm hyar to ask yuh a few right pointed questions," the sheriff clipped. "Don't mind Bill Cloud an' Jack Zorn. They—they're friends o' mine."

"Go ahead, sheriff," Stan shrugged. "I'll answer—if I feel like it."

The sheriff fired question after question for the next hour and a half. But at the end of that time he knew no more than he had at the outset.

Perspiring, and growling in a hoarse voice, the sheriff stomped away from the cell. He had tried begging, reasoning and finally had resorted to abusive language, yet Stan Graham had stood there eying him coldly.

Stan had answered what few questions he could. Yet the sheriff felt sure that he could have answered all questions.

Stan was a little pale from anger, for the grizzled sheriff had said some pretty hard things to him. Stan knew that the sheriff had simply been trying to roil him up, knowing that an angry man sometimes tells things he would not tell otherwise.

Stan's eyes shifted now, and bored into Bill Cloud's somber orbs. The sheriff was well up the corridor, and still walking swiftly.

Cloud leaned forward, a faint, half sneering smile on his twisted lips. "I reckon yuh've told the whole truth, eh?" he purred in a low tone. "Yuh—er—wouldn't be able to describe them bandits, would yuh, Graham?"

It was quite evident that Bill Cloud and Jack Zorn thought Stan Graham had not recognized them. The evil pair were grinning smugly as they stood before the bars. And on a sudden impulse, Stan decided to throw a good scare into the pair. In the same instant, a half formed plan popped into his mind. He leaned close to the bars, eyes blazing coldly.

"Cloud, yuh collar the sheriff an' take him into yore saloon," Stan gritted. "Keep the sheriff there, an' keep him busy while Zorn, here, sneaks back down to this jail an' has a talk with me."

"Say, are yuh loco?" Zorn sneered cockily. "Why in blazes would I want to talk to yuh?"

"To keep me from rememberin' that yuh batted me over the head with a gun out on the trail," Stan rasped. "An' to keep me from rememberin' that Cloud stole my buckskin hoss an' left me his wore-out sorrel after tryin' to kill me. Do what I say, or I'll decide to tell the sheriff a few things."

## IV.

It was dusk before Jack Zorn returned to the jail. The wiry little cutthroat came slinking down the narrow corridor like some preying animal, his skinny hands resting on gun butts. In the dim light, Stan could see that the little killer's face was twisted into an ugly mask of rage and hate.

"Think yuh're smart, don't yuh?" Zorn snarled. "Blast yore hide, yuh better keep that mouth o' yores shet, yuh hear me?"

"I hear yuh," Stan said coldly. "The sheriff will also hear me when I tell him that yuh an' Bill Cloud an' them other two are the stage robbers he's huntin'."

Zorn was drunk enough to be ornery, and badly enough scared to be doubly dangerous. He half drew his guns, oaths dribbling past his twitching lips.

"Aim ter talk, do yuh?" he wheezed. "Yuh blasted coyote, I'll ream yuh if yuh open yore trap."

"Pretty cocky, ain't yuh?" Stan rasped. "But I'll overlook that. Who was that big, barrel-chested cuss an' the little fat-bellied, frog-eyed feller with yuh an' Cloud when yuh held up the stage to-day?"

"None o' yore business," Zorn gritted. "Feller, yuh know too much. But the boss says ter keep yore mouth shet an'—an' he'll do somethin' fer yuh."

"I'm no fool, Zorn!" Stan rasped. "I've been at the window, watchin' men dart this way an' that, to meet behind barns an' such. Do yuh think I'm too dumb to realize that yuh an' yore three stage-robbin' pals are cookin' up a lynchin' bee so's my mouth will be shut permanent?"

Zorn staggered, choking on words that tumbled over his tongue. "It ain't so," he managed finally. "The

boss an' us boys is—is tryin' ter help yuh. Jist set tight, an' we'll peel this jail offn yuh. An' if yuh act sensible, yuh'll git part o' that loot. The boss said so."

"Right interestin'," Stan grunted. "But yuh're lyin', Zorn. Cloud aims to have me lynched. Or mebbe yuh aim to shoot me before yuh leave here."

"All I come fer was to tell yuh ter keep yore mouth shet a few more hours," Zorn panted. "I've got ter go now. That mob is organizin' of its own will. If—if they git yuh afore the boss an' me can bust yuh out o' hyar, keep yore tongue from waggin'. If yuh blab an' git us fellers in trouble yuh'll git——"

"Suppose *you* git them hands high, Zorn. Nope, don't turn, or I'll fill yuh with buckshot. Steady, snake!"

Zorn's face became a white patch in the gloom. His legs threatened to buckle under him, but his hands crept up, shaking noticeably.

From the cell directly opposite Stan's stepped Joe Regan, the gnarled old jailer. Regan clutched a double-barreled scattergun.

"By thunder, Graham, I thought yuh was loco when yuh made me yore proposition," the jailer called. "But I'm danged glad I let yuh talk me into it now, son."

"All I asked was that yuh hide in that cell with yore scattergun, an' keep yore ears open," Stan said quickly. "Did yuh hear what was said?"

"Think I'm deaf?" the jailer growled. "Danged tootin' I heard what was said."

"Tricked me!" Jack Zorn whined, and began babbling wild oaths and threats. But a very few moments later Jack Zorn was in a cell down the little corridor, securely trussed and gagged.

And now Stan Graham and old

Joe Regan were stepping out the front door into the soft crisp blackness of the night.

"That big, barrel-chested, pig-eyed feller yuh asked about is Shag Sumner, the Navajo Saloon bouncer," Regan said in a husky tone. "The little fat cuss with the frog mouth an' eyes is Froggy Cramer, a lookout like Jack Zorn."

"All right; yuh leave Sumner, Cramer and Bill Cloud to me," Stan Graham rasped. "Keep that scattergun on whoever else horns in, an' let me handle Cloud an' them other two."

"Like I told yuh a minute ago, the sheriff is up in his hotel room, dead to the world," Joe Regan growled. "I've got a hunch that he was given a knock-out so's he'd be out o' the way. Leastwise, I couldn't rouse him."

"But yuh pack a deputy's commission, which makes this legal," Stan gritted. "It suits me better this way, Regan. The sheriff called me some pretty mean names, an' I'd as soon not have him around."

"Sim didn't mean them things," the old jailer-deputy defended. "But he's hot-headed, son, an' makes enemies that way, sometimes."

Their conversation trailed off now, for they were in a cluttered alley, passing along behind buildings at a swift, yet silent pace. Old Joe Regan grunted, pointed with his shotgun toward a back door.

"There's the Navajo's back door," he whispered. "Give me a couple o' minutes to git around front an' inside. Then come on in."

He was gone then, leaving Stan Graham to pace back and forth, fidgeting the butts of his guns which he had taken from the sheriff's office.

Stan waited what seemed a long time, then opened the back door and stepped inside. He blinked a little as

light struck into his face, waited until he could see better before advancing down the long, almost deserted room.

Yonder was old Joe Regan, being kidded by a couple of ornery-looking gamekeepers about that scattergun he packed. And at the bar, huddled in close conversation, were Bill Cloud, fat little "Froggy" Cramer and big "Shag" Sumner.

Stan Graham paced quietly along the bar until he was only a few feet from them, then stopped. A few men at a card table and others at a roulette wheel looked up, began staring at the white-faced, grim-eyed Stan.

"He ort to be gittin' back, dang him," Froggy Cramer's voice complained. "Want me to go down to that jail an' see what's takin' him so long, boss?"

"Jack was half soused, an' is likely down there shootin' off his face," Shag Sumner rumbled. "He talks too much when he's drunk, boss."

"All right, yuh two mosey down that way." Bill Cloud's voice barely reached Stan's ears. "I've got to go down to that livery-barn meetin' an' pep them lynchers up a little. If they don't string that Graham cuss up he's liable to talk. An' if he——"

"I figured yuh murderin' highway robbers would try ribbin' a lynch mob into hangin' me, Cloud!" Stan cried loudly. "But the game is up. Jack Zorn is already in a cell. An' I'm here to help the law put yuh an' Sumner an' Cramer behind the bars, or in Boot Hill—dependin' on how yuh act. Where's that twelve thousand dollars yuh four took off that stage this mornin'?"

Bill Cloud did not waste words. He sprang sidewise from the bar, lean hands dipping, a harsh, bitter oath ripping past his thin lips. Stan's own brown hands dipped

down, then up. But Bill Cloud was faster.

The saloonman's guns roared, and Stan staggered, crimson showing along his left jaw where a bullet had opened the skin. Stan triggered, missed as Cloud leaped farther out into the room.

But Stan's bullet caught Froggy Cramer full between those bulging, round eyes, dumping that murderous rascal backward before he could trigger the guns he had drawn. Cramer's body smashed into Shag Sumner, causing the big bouncer to miss with twin slugs.

And in that moment of confusion Stan got his reeling senses in hand, came to a fighting crouch there before the bar. Another slug stung the flesh along his ribs, and still another whipped through his stiff red hair. Yet he did not dodge or wince enough to throw his aim off this time.

Stan's guns blared in unison, and Bill Cloud took a few mincing steps, face white and twisted, disbelief and horror showing in his somber eyes. Then Cloud was falling, and Stan was rocking under the hammering impact of a slug boring through the flesh of his left thigh.

He fell, rolled half over, and fired two shots from each gun as big Shag Sumner rushed forward with spitting guns. Sumner stopped, lifted

up on tip-toe, then wilted with a ghastly, rattling cough.

And now Stan sat up, smoking guns swinging, his eyes cold, blazing slits. But the thing was over, for Stan could see cowboys and townsmen who had been in the room holding cocked guns against the ribs of Bill Cloud's gamblers. And old Joe Regan had put down his shotgun, was running toward Stan along the bar. Stan got to his feet, white and trembling from pain.

"Yuh hurt, son?" old Regan panted at his side. "Hurt bad, I mean?"

"Nothin' fatal." Stan shrugged wearily. "I'll see a sawbones, then drift on out o' this danged country. I'm sick o' gun trouble, an'——"

"Boy, yuh'll git over that sickness when they pay yuh the two thousand dollars' reward fer them bandits," a voice called from across the room. "An' if that loot is recovered, yuh'll git another thousand from the express company."

"The loot will be in that big safe back in Bill Cloud's private office," Joe Regan chuckled thinly. "No doubt o' that, fer them murderin' snakes ain't had time to split an' spend the dinero. I wouldn't mind hubbin' a little gun trouble my own self, Stan, if I could come out as well as yuh have."



**Alkalize with Alka-Seltzer**

AT ALL DRUGGISTS **30¢ 60¢**

TIME IN THE NATIONAL SALT DANCE SATURDAY NIGHT 8:00 - 11:00 PM





# Señor Red Mask and the Riders of the Dim Trails

By Guy L. Maynard

Author of "Señor Red Mask At Rio Amargo," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### TRAIL TROUBLE.

**T**HE masked rider leaned low in his saddle, rolling his silver spurs on the sweaty flanks of his racing black horse.

*Crash! Bang-bang!* A ragged volley of gunshots roared in the back trail.

Bullets whined around the fugitive horseman. Galloping hoofs thundered in grim pursuit.

Like a flying black cloud, the big bronc tore down brushy draws and across barren cactus flats. Gallantly, it breasted the slope of a bald ridge.

The lone rider glanced backward as his mount topped the crest. He had outridden his pursuers. They

were strung out in a far-flung line behind him. The hot Mexican sun glinted on their carbines.

*Crack-crack!* Sharp reports that sounded like popping firecrackers in the distance, came to the ears of the mysterious red-masked rider. The droning of spent bullets filled the air above his head.

"Reckon I'm safe for a few minutes," muttered young Tom Goodwin, owner of the Bar G Ranch above the border. He was better known, however, as "Señor Red Mask," rider of the justice trails. "But them Mex rurales are hard to shake off. They'll keep foggin' right along after me, unless I kin give 'em the slip."

Jumped by a squad of Mexican mounted police, Señor Red Mask had been dodging and running for many minutes in a desperate effort to keep from being killed or captured.

Since the night that he had forcibly taken "El Tigre" (the "Tiger"), famous Mexican bandit, from prison, the justice rider had been hunted relentlessly by the rurales.

But Red Mask's intention had been to compel the murderous crook to guide him to a secret mine where El Tigre kept many poor captives toiling under the torturing lash.

He had meant to release the prisoners at the mine, including his own pard of the range, young Brad Turner, and then return El Tigre to the Mexican authorities, to be executed. But the plan had failed. El Tigre's henchmen had rescued him from the caballero. Until he could recapture the bandit chief, Señor Red Mask would be a fugitive from the law.

With a quick touch of blunted rowels, he sent his big black plunging down the opposite slope of the low ridge. He had not dared to

linger for more than a few seconds of breathing spell for his faithful mount. That gain on his enemies had been too hard won to be wasted.

But as he rode, the caballero's keen eyes were searching continually for some way to elude the deadly peril that hung on his heels. The chance, slim as it was, came when he reached the foot of the slope. A dim trail, scarcely more than a deer path, crossed his course.

Riding ahead a hundred yards, Red Mask doubled back through the chaparral till he cut the trail again. Wheeling his mount, he followed the path at a sharp pace till he had covered more than a mile.

"Reckon we've thrown them rurales——" Red Mask suddenly bit off his words, reining his horse to a halt.

His alert glance had caught sight of a Mexican jacal, or hut, mud-walled and brush-thatched, half hidden by scrubby mesquite trees at the edge of the trail.

A sweat-streaked bay bronc stood with drooping head before the door of the lonely shack. There was no other sign of life about the place.

"Fog along, Thunder!" Red Mask murmured into the flicking ears of the black. "We'll see who the hombre is thet was in such a hurry ter git here."

Pulling up, a few second later, Red Mask hailed the jacal.

"*Hola, amigo!*" he called out, wary eyes on the half-closed door. "A word weeth you, please!"

Instead of a man appearing in the doorway, as he had expected, it was a bent and withered old woman who greeted Señor Red Mask.

"A *charro*—a masked *charro!*" she cried in shrill Spanish, gazing with faded eyes at Red Mask's massive black felt sombrero, his tight-fitting black velvet jacket and *pantalones*,

all richly trimmed with gleaming silver conchas and filigree.

"The same, señora," replied Red Mask, who wore the handsome costume of a *charro*, or rich Mexican rancher, and whose hand-tooled black San Marcial saddle and bridle were heavily mounted with purest of silver.

"What do you want at my poor house?" demanded the cracked-voiced hag.

Red Mask glanced at the weary bay bronc. "The one who rode far and fast—he is here?" he countered in fluent Spanish, turning back to the old woman.

Hate and anger brought a wicked glitter to her witch's eyes. "He has gone—into the bad lands," she snarled venomously.

Red Mask knew she lied. Even as she spoke, his keen eyes glimpsed a dark, evil face peering out at him through a crack in the flimsy wall of the jacal. Beyond a doubt, there was a gun in the hombre's hand.

"That is well," the caballero coolly observed, although he realized that his life might be snuffed out by a treacherous bullet in the next moment. "In the bad lands, one is safe from the rurales—and others. But one more question, señora, and then I will ride on."

"Speak, and begone!" the woman snarled.

"It is said that El Tigre, most famous of all the bandits of Mexico, has recovered from his wounds," rejoined Señor Red Mask. "You know where he is?"

Watching her closely as he spoke, something about the evil old creature sent a shiver over the caballero. His lips tightened in a hard, straight line below the edge of his scarlet silk mask, bristling the twisted points of his tiny, dark mustache. Then her

WW-7F

answer, weird and ominous, came to him.

"Fool! Digger of your own grave!" croaked the old woman, pointing a trembling, clawlike finger at Red Mask. "You seek El Tigre? You will find him—find him where the buzzards grow fat—in the Shadow of Death!"

Señor Red Mask stiffened. His hand moved by instinct to one of the long Colts whose white pearl stocks gleamed above the crimson silk sash that encircled his slim waist.

The Shadow of Death? Señor Red Mask knew that awful place. A desolate valley in the Mexican bad lands, where El Tigre's slave-worked mine was hidden.

Wheeling his mount into the trail, Señor Red Mask spurred the black horse to a fast lope. He wanted to get out of sight of that evil old woman as quickly as possible. She had said that El Tigre was at his hide-out in the Shadow of Death. But was she telling the truth?

"Reckon I might as well head in thet direction," the caballero muttered to himself as he rode. "Mebbe I'll run across somebody thet kin tell me fer sure where the ornery skunk is hangin' out."

But Señor Red Mask had covered no more than a mile of trail, which swung around to the westward in a great horseshoe curve, when the whine of a bullet, passing within scant inches of his head, brought him to an abrupt halt.

Whirling with the quickness of a startled wolf, Red Mask's hand darted to one of the .45s holstered under his crimson sash. It whipped up in the same instant that his swift glance caught the telltale puff of powder smoke which marked the bushwhacker's hiding place.

*Brang-brang!* A double blast of

six-guns made the hot midday air quiver.

A bullet glanced from the broad silver horn of Red Mask's saddle, went screeching off through the branches of a mesquite tree.

*Wham!* The caballero sent another hot slug tearing into a clump of greasewood fifty yards back from the trail.

He saw a leather-sleeved arm jerk into sight for a moment, then flop back out of view.

No more shots came from the bushwhacker. But Señor Red Mask was wary. Bending low in the saddle, he wheeled his mount back down the trail a short distance, then turned into the cover of the brush and started working his way cautiously to the rear of his unknown enemy.

Twenty yards from the greasewood clump, he reined up. His searching gaze quickly discovered a leather jacket, half-concealed by bushes. Slipping from his saddle, he moved swiftly forward till he was standing over a sprawled body.

The bushwhacker was dead. His dark face was upturned, sightless eyes staring at the sun. He was a Mexican.

Red Mask gave a little grunt of surprise. The scarred and ugly face was the same one that he had glimpsed back at the jacal, peering at him through a crack in the wall.

"Huh, he was a fast worker, thet hombre!" muttered the caballero. "He slipped out the back door of thet shack an' cut across the neck of the trail curve, so's he could lay fer me. He shore had his mind set on murder."

Swift thoughts shuttled through the caballero's mind. This was dangerous territory—doubly dangerous, because of the cutthroats who rode its dim trails and the

rurales who were always searching for them. Red Mask's life was in constant peril from both law and outlaw.

"I cain't leave this hombre layin' here fer the buzzards," the caballero told himself. "I'll take him back ter thet jacal. But if the rurales heard the shootin'——"

What would happen if the Mex officers had heard those shots, didn't need to be mentioned. Red Mask interrupted himself by stooping quickly to pick up the dead hombre. But as he grasped the stout leather jacket, it came to him suddenly that he had better find out who his would-be murderer was, if possible.

Slipping a hand inside the Mexican's jacket, Red Mask felt in a pocket. A folded bit of paper rewarded his search. It was a note written in Spanish:

SENOR CARLOS MENDEZ: Will deliver fifty wet American horses at ranch to-night. Have money ready. EL TIGRE.

Red Mask gasped in surprise. This was a big piece of luck. "Wet horses" meant stolen horses. The dead hombre had been the advance messenger of El Tigre, scourge of the border. He was riding to notify the Mexican rancher, Mendez, that a bunch of broncs, rustled above the border, were being hazed down to his ranch.

"This here's the first break I've had in a month," Red Mask told himself with grim satisfaction. "This Mendez is a buyer of stolen stock. All I got ter do is locate his ranch an' lay fer El Tigre."

Shoving the note into a pocket of his own jacket, the caballero was about to pick up the body at his feet, when the pounding of horses' hoofs came to his ears.

Jerking to his feet, he listened intently for a moment. Trained to

the sounds of the range, he knew almost instantly that a small party of horsemen were heading directly toward him.

"It's them dog-gone rurales!" Red Mask exclaimed bitterly. "They must 'a' been ridin' close by an' heard the shootin'."

No time, now, to care for a dead bandit. Running back to his horse, the caballero hit the saddle in a flying leap.

Whirling the big black with a quick play of dull rowels, Red Mask sent it plunging down the dim trail. At the same instant, he saw a half dozen gray-clad riders lash their mounts out of the cover of the near-by brush. Crashing carbines hurled a leaden hail around the justice rider.

## CHAPTER II.

### LAW OF FLIGHT.

SHOUTING orders in Spanish, the black-mustached and bearded captain of the rurales sent his men fanning out across a small flat. Familiar with every foot of this wild country, they meant to cut off the masked caballero's escape, to corner him in one of the blind arroyos that gashed the rough rangeland.

Señor Red Mask realized that he was at a terrible disadvantage in not knowing the country as his pursuers did. Nor could he defend himself with his six-guns, by returning the fire of officers of the law.

"I got ter depend on Thunder ter git me out of this mess," the caballero gritted, and in the same breath urged the big black to greater speed.

A shallow, brushy arroyo cut the fugitive justice rider's course. Without drawing rein, he sent his horse lunging toward it. The black squatted as it plunged over the brush-fringed rim and went sliding down the bank on its haunches.

A wild chorus of exultant yells from the rurales spurring on his trail warned the fugitive that he had made a mistake. That arroyo would probably come to a sudden end at a sandstone wall.

But there was no turning back. Grimly, Red Mask sent the black horse racing along the arroyo's winding course.

Then he began to understand why the rurales had shouted in elation. The arroyo was rapidly pinching out. It narrowed with every stride of the black, till there was barely room for him to pass through. Then, suddenly, Red Mask was facing a mass of earth that completely blocked the arroyo. A cut-bank had caved in.

"They got us, Thunder!" the caballero groaned as his mount slid to a halt.

He could hear his enemies coming, whooping their joy at the easy capture of their quarry.

"If I could use my guns on 'em, they'd yell a different tune," Red Mask muttered bitterly.

Then the rurales were yanking their mounts to a halt on the rim of the bank above him. Their carbines covered him.

"Surrender!" bawled Captain Carrillo in Spanish. "Lift your hands and come up the bank."

Red Mask obeyed promptly. As well to get it over with quickly, he decided. With hands almost touching the wide-curving brim of his silver-crusted black sombrero, he kneed Thunder toward the bank.

The black horse took the steep slope in plunging bounds, like a great cat. Snorting and rattling its silver bridle chains, it topped out in the midst of the watching officers.

Cries of admiration burst from the lips of the rurales. Those brown-skinned, gray-uniformed guardians

of the border could appreciate a fine horse and a daring, skilled rider.

At a sharp order from the burly captain, a short, rawboned sergeant reined his horse close to the prisoner and disarmed him. The handsome, pearl-stocked Colts were shoved under the officer's belt.

"At last the coyote is caught—the masked ladrone has reached the end of the trail," growled Captain Carrillo, with a gusty sigh of relief.

"The captain is mistaken," Red Mask said coolly. "I am neither a coyote nor a thief."

"But you are a great rascal," sneered the rurale captain. "You set that bandit, El Tigre, free. And for that, the governor has decreed that you must die."

"It is very sad that the governor will not believe why I freed El Tigre," rejoined Red Mask. "Then I would not be chased by the brave rurales."

"Teller of lies!" grunted Captain Carrillo, scowling fiercely at Red Mask. "You are a great friend of El Tigre. Even now, you are no doubt spying for him."

Red Mask suddenly remembered the note which he carried in his jacket pocket. If the captain should have him searched, and find that message regarding the wet broncs, he would certainly consider it as proof that Red Mask was in cahoots with the rustlers.

But no search was made. At Carrillo's order, the small troop of officers moved away with their captive.

Red Mask had not been bound. He was allowed to ride his own horse, without restraint, at the head of the little band. The undersized sergeant, whose name was Valdez, rode beside him.

A half mile had been covered this way, when Red Mask began to

notice that his captors were lagging behind. They seemed to have relaxed their vigilance over him. Even Sergeant Valdez dropped back a few paces.

For a moment, the caballero was puzzled at this strange lapse of duty on the part of such efficient officers as he knew these rurales to be. Then it came to him in a flash of thought that they wanted him to try to escape.

It was to be another case of the famous "*ley de fuga*"—the Mexican "law of flight," where the prisoner is given a chance to break away from officers of the law, then is shot down. A very simple and effective form of execution, and one that was often used by the Mexican officers to save bother with prisoners and the time and expense of trials.

Understanding the situation, Red Mask could have spoiled the set-up by refusing to run. But the quick-witted caballero saw a chance to turn it to his advantage. By a daring and highly dangerous move, he meant to attempt an escape. Doing the unexpected thing was always Red Mask's way when in a tight place.

Dark eyes gleaming, the caballero tightened his grip on the bridle reins, set himself for the break. He could almost feel the menacing gaze of his captors boring into his back. Carbines in hand, they were ready to give him a volley of hot lead the instant he broke clear.

But instead of dashing forward, Red Mask suddenly whirled his mount backward with a sharp jerk of reins and rake of spurs.

The big black horse snorted and reared, pivoting as it came down in a racking plunge that almost crashed him against Sergeant Valdez.

Red Mask's right hand shot out as the startled officer tried to rein his

horse out of the way. It gripped Valdez by the collar of his stout jacket, jerked him clear of his saddle and flung him like a bag of grain across the caballero's broad shoulder. The next instant, the sergeant's wrists were grabbed in a viselike grip.

Whirling the black again, Señor Red Mask roweled it to a furious pace. The small-sized rurale was no handicap to the powerful Thunder in a short run. Bounding forward in mighty strides, the black opened a wide gap before the surprised rurales could regain their wits.

Wild yells of rage burst from the outwitted Mexican officers as they saw how the tables had been turned. Instead of being able to shoot down their escaping prisoner, there was the helpless Sergeant Valdez as a shield to protect him. As they spurred their mounts in pursuit, they saw Señor Red Mask and his struggling captive disappear round the brushy shoulder of a ridge

### CHAPTER III.

#### WET BRONCOS.

THE instant Señor Red Mask found himself at a safe distance from his enemies, he made quick shift to get rid of the hampering burden he was carrying.

He had already recovered his fine pair of Colts from the sergeant. The officer's own guns he had tossed into the brush.

"You like the ride, my friend?" the caballero taunted his swearing captive.

"Thief! Murderer!" sputtered the furious Valdez. "You will release me quickly or my amigos will kill you."

"Who knows what will happen to you, sergeant?" retorted Red Mask. "You and your brave friends meant

to kill me, a little while ago; so why should I not kill you, now?"

"But I am an officer," Valdez protested in quick alarm. "I will let you go free if you put me down safely."

"Hah-hah! You make a great joke," Red Mask jeered. "I am already free. And how will you make me put you down?"

Valdez bit his lips in silent chagrin. He was in a tough spot, and there was no way out that he could figure.

But the caballero quickly relieved the worried officer's mind. He had only joked about the killing. Now that he had made good his escape, he meant to release his captive.

"You have been of great service to me, for which I thank you," Red Mask went on. "And now that I am finished with you, I will set you free."

Slowing the black horse for a moment, Red Mask swung the rurale to the side and dropped him feet first on the ground.

"Adios, amigo! Give my regards to your brave captain!" Red Mask called back to the bewildered officer, with a mocking laugh.

Then the caballero spurred his mount and bent himself to the task of shaking off his pursuers. For he could hear the rurales thundering on his trail, grimly determined to wipe out the sting of being outwitted and losing their prisoner.

While the exciting chase of Señor Red Mask by the rurales was going on, another band of horsemen was surging down a dim trail that led from the Rio Grande to the ranch of Don Carlos Mendez.

El Tigre and his gang of eight gringo and Mexican cutthroats were on the last lap of a very successful raid across the border. Fifty fine



American horses, still wet from swimming the Rio Grande, were being hazed at top speed toward the thieves' market for horses and cattle which was run by Mendez.

As befitted his position as leader of the rustler gang, El Tigre rode point on the swift-moving herd of stolen broncs. He had fully recovered from the wound which he had received in a recent gun battle with Señor Red Mask.

Dressed in tight-fitting *pantalones* and a jacket made from the handsome spotted skin of an ocelot, or *tigre* as the Mexicans called the savage wild beast for which El Tigre was named, the half-breed rustler chief looked fully up to the evil reputation he bore. His sallow, bony face was the worse for a stringy, black mustache that drooped over his cruel mouth. Yellowish cat eyes glinted wickedly under his black brows.

Easing the rapid pace of his rangy dun bronc, El Tigre allowed the rider nearest behind him to draw alongside.

"Chino" Montez, a squat, slant-eyed breed in whose veins Chinese blood mingled with Mexican, was El Tigre's right-hand man. As deadly as a sidewinder, he was also a cunning plotter.

"Ho, Chino! All ees *bueno, si*," El Tigre called above the thunder of pounding hoofs. "There ees no sign of the *maldito rurales*."

"Quién sabe? Who knows when they cut our trail?" Chino shouted back doubtfully. "Ees eet not better that we stop at the *casita* of old Aunt Mary till darkness comes?"

"You theenk Pedro, that peeg-headed son of hers, has reach the ranch of Carlos Mendez weeth the message?" rejoined El Tigre.

"He weel ride very hard, that Pedro, but there ees not time yet for

heem to get to thee ranch," Chino said.

"Then we weel hide the caballos een an arroyo and wait at Tia Maria's teel night," announced El Tigre.

A sly grin writhed across Chino's evil yellow face. He had won his point, as he usually did with his hard-bitten chief.

El Tigre reined his galloping dun bronc against the leaders of the stolen horse herd. Chino was close on his heels. Lashing viciously with their long Mexican quirts, they forced the running broncs to swerve in the direction of the mud-walled *jacal* where the witchlike old woman, Tia Maria, lived.

Meanwhile, Señor Red Mask was hard put to it to keep from falling into the clutches of the law again. The pursuing rurales used their knowledge of the rough country to harass him relentlessly. He no sooner rode clear of his enemies in a straight-away race than they took some short cut and came driving in on his flank, forcing him to twist and dodge, and constantly cutting down his lead.

"Another mile or two of this kind of goin', an' they'll have me trapped again," the caballero told himself as he threw an anxious glance back at the oncoming officers.

Suddenly swerving his flying mount into the scant cover of a scattered growth of mesquites, Red Mask took hope that he could elude his pursuers before he was forced into open country again. But he had gone only a few hundred yards when the trees thinned out and he found himself on a sage flat that stretched away to the foot of a steep hill.

"Dog-gone the luck!" Red Mask exclaimed. "Them rurales will be

throwin' hot lead at me afore I'm halfway across this flat."

He could hear the drumming of hoofs above the pounding of his own mount. Those grim lawmen must know that an open flat lay ahead. Doubtless, they were exulting at having maneuvered their quarry into it.

But as the hard-pressed caballero raced out into the open he caught a sound coming from the direction in which he was heading—a sound that chilled his veins.

Like the rumble of thunder, it swelled louder and louder. Instantly, Red Mask knew it for the thudding hoofs of a horse herd in full running stride.

"Gosh! It must be El Tigre an' his gang with that bunch of wet broncs!" Red Mask cried in alarm.

To go ahead meant disaster. Could he turn back into the mesquites and find cover?

Shouts from the rear told the caballero that the Mexican man hunters had spread out, were combing the thin growth of brush and trees as they rushed forward. There would be no hiding from them.

Even as the desperate justice rider pulled his sweating black horse to a sudden halt, he glimpsed the leaders of the oncoming horse herd. They were streaming around the base of the hill, manes and tails flying in the breeze of their running.

"An' yonder's El Tigre an' thet ornery chink breed, ridin' point," Red Mask gritted as he glimpsed the famous rustler chief's flashy jacket. "An' likely six or eight more cutthroats are behind 'em."

Whirling his mount with a quick rake of spurs, Red Mask raced back toward the mesquites. It was his only chance, if such a dangerous move could be called a chance.

But he was still a hundred yards

from cover, when a yelling rurale burst out of the brush directly ahead of him. At almost the same moment, the other mounted officers broke cover along the edge of the mesquite and spurred their horses out on the open flat.

Caught between two onrushing bands of deadly enemies, Red Mask was in one of the most perilous situations of his thrilling career.

Again pulling his snorting mount to a halt, the cornered caballero glanced around him like a wolf in a trap.

"Don't look as if I had a chance ter come through with a whole hide," he muttered desperately. "But it's shore goin' ter be some fight when them rustlers an' rurales tear inter each other."

## CHAPTER 1V.

### FLYING LEAD.

**S**TUNNED by surprise at their unexpected meeting, neither outlaws nor officers fired a shot for a moment. Even Señor Red Mask seemed to be forgotten as the opposing horsemen pulled up their mounts and stared at each other in wide-eyed amazement.

With quick wits sharpened by his own deadly peril, Red Mask instantly snatched the chance offered him by that moment of surprise to his enemies.

Jumping his horse toward the mesquites, he was in a fair way to escape when the nearest rurale suddenly woke up to what was happening. With a startled yell, he spurred his horse between the daring caballero and the cover he sought. At the same time, he jerked his carbine to his shoulder for a short-range shot.

Red Mask saw the move and realized that death stared him in the face. A fighting snarl lifted a corner

of his mouth as he dug for one of his Colts. This was no time to be squeamish about drawing on an officer of the law.

"I ain't foolin' no longer, I'm fightin'," Señor Red Mask rapped grimly to himself.

*Brang! Crack!* The six-gun roared a split second ahead of the carbine.

A squall of pain broke from the rurale's lips as he dropped his smoking gun and grabbed one hand with the other. Crimson trickled from a shallow gash across his knuckles.

Red Mask raced past his disarmed enemy, to the shelter of the nearest trees. He was safe. Before the rurales finished with El Tigre and his gang, the caballero knew that he could be far away.

But as he glanced back across the sage flat, Red Mask was startled by the savage scene that met his eyes.

The stolen horse herd was stampeding down the flat. But the rustlers remained behind. With eight gun-swift desperadoes at his back, El Tigre had seen his chance for a murderous revenge on his enemy, the law.

Yelling like fiends, the crooks jabbed spurs to their mounts and charged the smaller band of rurales.

*Crash! Bang!* The once peaceful sage flat suddenly became a battlefield, as six-guns and carbines roared their song of death.

The rurales were caught at a disadvantage. Strung out to catch Señor Red Mask, they had no time to close up their ranks for heavy fighting. Two of their saddles were emptied in a trice.

Captain Carrillo shouted orders to his few remaining men to close in. Too late! With fiendish cunning, El Tigre hurled his vicious gunmen forward like a thunderbolt. They split the little troop of officers into

two pitifully small sections. A massacre was only a matter of seconds and a few volleys of outlaw lead.

Watching this swift game of death with startled eyes, Señor Red Mask gave up all thought of immediate escape. A fighting rage seized him as he saw the success of El Tigre's murderous strategy.

"I ain't standin' by an' seein' them Mex Johnny Laws shot down without a fair fightin' chance," snapped Red Mask.

Reckless of his own life, the caballero whirled his mount with a sharp jab of spurs. The snorting black cayuse plunged forward.

*Brang-bang!* With a roaring, blazing .45 in each hand, Señor Red Mask charged the killer gang.

Taken by surprise, El Tigre and his gunmen turned to meet this unexpected attack.

"Señor Red Mask! Keel the dirty spy!" El Tigre howled in a fury of rage at sight of his most hated enemy.

But before the crooks could get into action to check Red Mask's sudden and deadly attack, two of their number were reeling helpless in their saddles and another had pitched headlong to the ground.

Then the rurales seized the moment of confusion to rally at the rear of the milling gang of horse thieves. Their blazing carbines took quick toll of the outlaws.

The sage flat was in an uproar. Blasting guns, a whistling hail of hot lead, and wild yells, rocked the smoke-laden air. Riderless horses snorted and galloped about in high-headed alarm. Bodies of dead and wounded dotted the ground.

Señor Red Mask halted to reload his hot six-guns.

*Crack! Bang!* Carbines crashed on the caballero's right.

A whining slug sheered a silver

button from the front of his black velvet jacket. Bullets buzzed past his head.

A startled glance told Red Mask that two rurales were doing their best to drop him from his saddle.

"What the—— They must not 'a' seen me helpin' 'em!" he gasped in alarm.

Throwing himself low over the black's heaving withers, Red Mask spurred frantically toward the cover of the mesquites.

While back on the sage flat, El Tigre swore furious Spanish oaths as he looked over over his dead and wounded.

"*Vamonos, hombres!* Let us ride queeck and catch the caballos wheech haf stampede!" the rustler chief shouted to his remaining gunmen.

Steeling their mounts, the beaten crooks dashed away on the trail of the rapidly vanishing horse herd.

In a few seconds, the rurales were left in sole possession of the battle field—left to bind up their wounds and bury their dead.

## CHAPTER V.

### "HANG HIM!"

**R**IDERS of the dim Mexican trails were plentiful that hot summer day. Within an hour after the smoke of battle had cleared away on the sage flat, seven hard-riding, grim-eyed Texas cow-punchers were fogging through the bad lands on the trail of El Tigre and the rustled horse herd.

"Tex" Austin, lanky, long-mustached foreman of the Lazy J spread in the Big Bend country, leaned far out of his big stock saddle to scan the sun-baked ground.

"Rattle yore hocks, boys!" Tex roared above the thudding of hoofs. "The sign's gittin' fresher every min-

ute. We'll ketch them ornery hoss thieves afore they high-tail it another ten miles."

"Lead us to 'em!" whopped a young waddy named "Slim." "Us Texans kin lick the hull danged Mex tribe."

"Shorty" Stark grinned as he reined his sweating bronc closer to his lanky pard.

"Yuh said a mouthful, cowboy!" he yelled. "We'll show them saddle-colored rustlers they cain't raid the ol' Lazy J an' git away with it."

Whirling round the brushy point of a ridge, the little band of hard-bitten Texans met a surprise.

"Hey, look yonder!" Slim called out. "Who's the Mex dude?"

Grizzled Tex Austin shot a withering glance at the lean cowpoke. His keen gray eyes had seen more than the younger man's had.

"Yuh need specs, Slim," Tex said sarcastically. "Cain't yuh see thet red rag acrost the hombre's face? He's the leader of thet bunch of hoss thieves, or I'm a string-halted centipede."

"Look at him travel!" a waddy called admiringly. "Thet big black bronc kin shore split the wind."

"So kin a bullet," clipped Tex. "Spread out, all yuh rannies, an' give him what ol' General Sherman called war."

Swerving their mounts, the Texans spread a living net that swept down on the masked horsemen like a hurricane. Winchesters were jerked from saddle boots.

*Bang-bang-bang!* Volleys of gunfire streaked at the fleeing rider. A hail of hot lead hurtled after him.

Señor Red Mask raced ahead of his pursuers for half a mile, vainly looking for cover. The Texans were getting his range. With every stride of the black Thunder, their bullets were coming more dangerously close.

"They'll drop Thunder, if they don't git me," the caballero muttered anxiously as the big horse flinched from a slug that seared his shoulder. "Anyhow, them jaspers ain't got nothin' on me. I didn't steal their broncs."

On a sudden impulse to join forces with the Texans, to help them recover their rustled horses, Red Mask pulled his mount to a sliding stop. With one hand held high, palm outward, in the old Indian sign of friendliness, the caballero waited for the Texans to come up with him.

They came with a rush, six-guns and rifles covering Señor Red Mask. Tex Austin was the first to reach his side.

"Git *both* hands up, yuh ornery hoss thief!" bawled Tex.

"The masked coward was too skeered ter put up a scrap," Slim sneered in disappointment, as he drove in close to lift the caballero's six-guns.

"For why should I put up a fight?" Red Mask asked coolly. "I haf done notheeng to you Texas men."

"Naw, like heck yuh ain't!" jeered Tex. "Yuh an' yore measly gang stole a bunch of the best broncs in the Bend. Whar yuh got 'em hid?"

"You are meestake, amigo," Red Mask asserted firmly. "I am not a——"

"Don't 'amigo' me, yuh sneakin' Mex ladrone," Tex cut in with an ominous growl. "I ain't no friend of yores. An' cut out the lies. Whar's them broncs?"

Red Mask tried to conceal his worry over this turn of the situation.

"I cannot tell the señor where those caballos are at thees moment," he said. "But I weel be very glad to lead you to——"

"Shore, shore," Tex broke in impatiently. "More lies. Yuh'd be

danged glad ter lead us inter a trap. Keep them paws skied while Slim goes through yore pockets."

It took the willing Slim only a few seconds to find the note Red Mask had taken from the dead bush-whacker.

"Hyar's somethin' interestin'." Slim held up the scrawled message. "It's writ in Mex. Who kin read it?"

"Reckon I kin figure it out," Shorty put in, reaching stubby fingers for the note.

"Huh, kin yuh beat this?" Shorty exclaimed as he hastily glanced at the writing. "Near as I kin make out, it says fifty wet caballos will be delivered to-night ter a gent named Carlos Mendez, an' the dinero must be ready. Signed by a skunk thet calls hisself the 'Tiger.'"

Tex Austin growled deep in his leathery throat. "Thet settles it," he snapped grimly. "We done caught the boss crook. The Tiger, huh? Dab a rope on him, Slim. Us Texans know what ter do with a hoss thief. Hang him!"

Red Mask glanced at the ring of glowering faces around him. The color drained from his face as he read his fate in their bitter eyes. But terribly mistaken as they were, he could hardly blame these stern men of the range. They certainly had plenty of grounds for believing Red Mask to be the leader of the rustlers.

But the masked caballero had been in many tight places before. He was not one to give up in despair. Dark as this situation looked, there might be a way out.

"Better that the señores find their horses first," the caballero said calmly, as a loop darted from Slim's expert hand to settle over his shoulders and be drawn taut around his chest. "I weel show——"

"Yuh'll show us nothin' but a hemp prance," rasped Tex Austin.

"Thet's a stall. We don't need yore help ter find them bronses. We're follerin' a plain trail an' we'll run 'em down."

"Come on, let's find a tree an' git it over with," a waddy suggested impatiently.

"Yeah, find a tree," jeered Shorty, hiping around in his saddle to scan the near-by country. "Thar ain't nothin' higher'n a greasewood bush in sight."

"An' we're losin' vallyble time foolin' with him, while them bronses is gittin' farther away every minute," put in another cowpoke.

"Let's git goin' then," barked Tex. "Keep yore rope on him, Slim, an' we'll haze him along till we find a full-grown mesquite."

With a rake of spurs, the rough-riding Texans hit the trail again. Red Mask was forced to ride at a fast clip, to keep from being jerked from his saddle by the rope round his body. But his hands and arms were free and his wits were working overtime.

"I'm shore hopin' trees are scarce fer the next few miles," the caballero told himself desperately.

But it was a vain hope. For less than a mile had been covered when a clump of mesquites came in sight. Not tall, but at least one tree in the little grove was large enough to serve as a makeshift gallows.

Red Mask's heart sank as he listened to the grim remarks of his captors. And cudgel his brains as he would, he could think of no way out of his terrible plight. Every stride of his horse carried him nearer to the doom that awaited him.

Then, in a flash, he thought of a desperate, dare-devil stunt that offered a way of escape—and a long chance to stop flying lead.

Dashing up to the edge of the mesquite clump, the Texans pulled

their bronses to a plunging halt. To a man, they were anxious to get their grisly job over with, to be on their way to recover the stolen horse herd.

Red Mask's left hand was on his bridle reins, apparently trying to stop his horse, which had suddenly become fractious. But he had managed to touch the black with a spur, unseen. And the rearing and plunging of Thunder had taken him clear of the caballero's captors and up to the leafy branches of the mesquites.

Red Mask's next move was made so swiftly that it was no more than a blur. His right hand darted to a leather knife sheath at the back of his neck, barely hidden by the collar of his jacket. It whipped downward with a flash of steel. The rope round his body fell away.

Thunder, the black stallion, snorted and lunged into the leafy thicket with a mighty bound, as silver rowels bit his flanks.

Thorny branches tore at Red Mask's clothes, his hands were scratched till they dripped crimson. Throwing himself low over the horn of his saddle, he let his huge black sombrero take the brunt of the raking from brush and trees.

The caballero's action had been so quick and unexpected that his erstwhile captors lost several seconds of precious time before they realized what had happened. Slim's startled yell, as he felt his rope go slack, set them going.

"After him!" bawled Tex, whirling his mount into the mesquite thicket. "Shoot him down!"

Horses thrashed blindly through the brush. Yelling riders fired at random. They made so much noise that the movement of Red Mask, crashing ahead among the trees and chaparral could not be heard.

The fleeing justice rider was clear of the thicket and fifty yards in the

lead before the first Texan broke out in the open.

"Yonder he goes!" a waddy bel-  
lowed.

*Crash! Bang-bang!* A volley of  
gunshots followed the shout.

Red Mask urged his racing mount  
with voice and spur. The big black  
stretched itself in a flying stride  
that fairly ate up the ground.

Glancing ahead, Red Mask's  
heart skipped a beat. A coulee cut  
across his path. If he was forced to  
turn aside, or slow down to cross it,  
those wild riders on his heels would  
almost surely blast him out of his  
saddle.

Swiftly, Red Mask measured the  
narrow ravine with his eyes.  
Grimly, he drove straight toward it.

Thunder didn't falter in his stride  
as his rolling eyes saw what was  
ahead. Red Mask felt the game  
black tense his mighty muscles for  
the take-off.

"Over yuh go, old-timer!" en-  
couraged the caballero, as he bent  
over the big bronc's arched neck.

Like a bird on the wing, Thunder  
took the long, soaring leap from rim  
to rim of the coulee.

Earth crumbled under the black's  
hoofs as he landed. For a split sec-  
ond, while Red Mask's life hung in  
the balance, it seemed that he would  
go crashing to the bottom. Then he  
was scrambling up to solid ground in  
catlike bounds.

Red Mask glanced back as he  
reined Thunder around a greasewood  
clump. The yelling, shooting  
Texans had pulled up their mounts  
on the rim of the coulee, not a man  
daring to attempt the leap.

"Adios, amigos!" Red Mask  
shouted mockingly to the beaten  
cow-punchers.

Savage oaths and bullets rang in  
his ears as he disappeared in the  
chaparral.

## CHAPTER VI.

EL MUCHACHO SERENADES.

**R**OARING down the trail like a  
whirlwind, El Tigre and his cut-  
throat crew hazed their wet broncs  
across the ranch of Carlos Mendez,  
dealer in rustled cattle and horses.

In a cloud of dust that half hid  
the setting sun, they thundered up to  
the big adobe ranch house.

While his henchmen milled the  
leg-weary stolen horses down by the  
big adobe corral, El Tigre pulled up  
his lathered dun bronc at the arched  
doorway of the house.

"*Hola*, the house!" he hailed.  
"*Hola, amigo Don Carlos!*"

A hawk-faced Mexican of middle  
age framed himself in the open door-  
way, grunting a surly greeting to the  
rustler chief.

El Tigre frowned. He was accus-  
tomed to a more friendly and courte-  
ous reception at the Mendez ranch.  
Hadn't his dealings with the ranch  
owner been on a large scale, and  
highly profitable to Señor Mendez?

"What ees the matter, amigo?" El  
Tigre asked, puzzled.

"Much ees the matter," growled  
Mendez, using the same broken Eng-  
lish that the half-breed El Tigre pre-  
ferred. "For why you breeng these  
caballos to my ranch weetout to  
send me a message een advance?  
Suppose the rurales are here, and I  
not know you are breeng——"

"But no, you are wrong," El  
Tigre cut in sharply. "I send thee  
message by Pedro, son of old Tia  
Maria, thees very day."

Mendez widened his little piggish  
eyes in quick alarm.

"That ees the more worse," he  
snapped. "Pedro does not deeliver  
that message. So, tell me what hap-  
pens, now, eef you can."

El Tigre snarled an oath. He  
could easily think of several things



that might happen. What had already happened to Pedro? And into whose hands had the telltale message fallen?

"Quién sabe? Who knows what bad luck comes now?" the rustler chief rasped harshly. "Eef the rurales caught Pedro and take the message——"

"They come to my ranch and catch all of us," Mendez finished with a bitter sneer. "And who else but the accursed rurales would stop Pedro?"

A murderous scowl darkened the fallow face of El Tigre as he suddenly recalled the deadly battle back on the sage flat. He well knew whose blazing six-guns had caused him to lose that fight.

"There ees a *maldito* spy who ees called Señor Red Mask," he grated. "Eef he get that message, there weel be trouble."

"But you cover the trail of those caballos, *si?*" Mendez asked.

"Like thee fox," El Tigre replied. "We take those gringo horses up a creek, and over much very rocky trail een the bad lands. Eef any one try to follow that trail, they weel be lost."

"That ees *bueno*," Mendez nodded, in better humor. "But eet ees not enough. Listen! I weel tell you how we fool everybody that come looking for those wet horses."

El Tigre listened. And very soon he learned of a scheme that was cunningly devised to keep the rustled brones from falling into the hands of the law or of their rightful owners.

"*Bueno!* Good—very good!" El Tigre exulted when the rancher had finished. "*Vamonos, amigo!* Let us hurry weeth that fine treeck, *si*."

Starlit dusk had fallen, when a lone horseman quietly approached the Mendez ranch house.

"El Muchacho" (the "Kid") was apparently a poor peon youth. He was dressed in a shirt and baggy *pantalones* of cheapest quality. Indian sandals of cowhide, called *guarachas* by the Mexicans, were thonged on his bare brown feet. With the old straw sombrero that covered his dark hair, his simple costume was completed.

Halting his buckskin pony in the deep shadow of several leafy cottonwood trees, El Muchacho dismounted and dropped his reins. He was not armed. But across one of his broad shoulders he carried an old guitar slung by a stout cord.

That this brown-skinned peon youth and Señor Red Mask were one and the same person, would never have been suspected even by the caballero's best friends. It was a disguise that he sometimes used in order to spy on his enemies.

With quick glances of his dark eyes, El Muchacho sized up the rambling adobe house and outlying buildings and grounds.

The front part of the big ranch house had an upper story. There was an iron-grilled balcony across it, about ten feet above the ground. A light showed dimly through a narrow door that opened on the balcony.

As far as he could judge, the place seemed to be deserted, except for this upper room and probably the servants' quarters in the rear. Where the men of the ranch had gone, he could only guess. He meant to find out for sure, if possible. And where were the stolen horses?

Moving forward like a flitting shadow of the night, the Muchacho soon came to a halt beneath the overhanging balcony.

"If I know Mexico, there'll be a señorita, mebbe two-three of 'em, in thet upstairs room," he told himself

shrewdly. "An' I'm bettin' there's been more'n one young caballero come from near-by ranches ter serenade 'em."

Pulling his old guitar into position for playing, El Muchacho strummed a few soft chords. Then, in a tenor voice that was naturally rich and strong, he began to sing a love song of old Mexico, a song that was called "Love is a Butterfly":

"Love is a butterfly,  
That flits from flower to flower.  
Love is——"

The singer paused, ever so slightly. Did he hear a light footstep on the balcony above? Then the song went on, filtering upward through the velvety starlight to the unseen listener. The softly strummed accompaniment of the guitar blended richly with the singer's voice.

When he had finished the serenade, El Muchacho sighed loudly. But a grin quirked his lips at the same time. He was waiting for results, which came promptly.

"*Gracias*—many thanks for the serenade, Juan," a girlish voice said in melodious Spanish.

El Muchacho glanced upward, just in time to receive a dropped red rose full in the face. He hastily murmured a few words of courtesy. His little scheme to get information seemed to be off to a good start.

"And how fortunate, my Juan, that I could send you word of my padre's absence to-night," the señorita added archly. "But you must have seen him driving the new caballos to Canyon Perdido, with that loathsome El Tigre, *si*."

El Muchacho gave a start of mingled elation and alarm. He had found out the most important thing that he came for—the location of the hide-out for the stolen horses. But Juan, the señorita's lover, would

be here any minute. Discovery of El Muchacho, at this time, might mean spoiling his chances of catching El Tigre and helping the Texans recover their rustled broncs.

"I better be makin' tracks out of here," El Muchacho muttered under his breath. "But I don't know where that Lost Canyon is. Like as not, it's one of them blind-walled gashes thet yuh got ter have a guide ter find."

Something had to be done, and quickly. The girl on the balcony was chattering to her supposed sweetheart. El Muchacho mumbled a Spanish reply. To stop further talk, he hastily played and sang another melting song of love. He had barely finished the last lingering note, when the *clop-clop* of a horse's hoofs came faintly to his alert ears.

"It's Juan comin'," El Muchacho told himself. "Now, I got ter git busy."

Aloud, he called softly, "*Adios, señorita*," and faded away swiftly in the darkness.

Running back to his own buckskin pony, El Muchacho hung his guitar over the horn of his crude rawhide saddle.

A half minute later, he was waiting in the shadows beside the trail leading up to the Mendez ranch house. The thudding of hoofs was growing louder every second. A tall figure on a quick-stepping horse loomed out of the darkness.

El Muchacho fully realized the danger of what he was about to attempt to do. Juan would doubtless be armed. The Muchacho had only his bare hands. Even if he had carried a six-gun, he could not have used it against this young rancher, who evidently had nothing to do with the dishonest Mendez, except to court his daughter.

But El Muchacho needed a guide

to the Canyon Perdido. He meant to find the rustled Lazy J horse herd and El Tigre. Juan was just the man to help him, but the Muchacho was not foolish enough to believe that the Mexican youth would willingly render aid.

Tensing in the shadow, El Muchacho scarcely breathed for a moment. Then, like a cougar leaping on a deer, he hurled his lithe body to the back of the jogging horse. His muscular arms flung out to grasp the surprised Juan in a strangle hold.

But in that same instant, the skittish bronc jumped sidewise in panicky alarm. The two men struggling on its back were jolted off, to strike the hard ground with a breath-taking thud.

El Muchacho's hold was broken by the fall. For a moment, both men lay gasping for breath. Then they were locked in a clinch, rolling and thrashing over the ground, fighting like a couple of wild cats.

Fearing, no doubt, for his life, Juan battled with frenzied desperation to overcome the unknown assailant who had sprung on him out of the shadows.

Just as fiercely, but more coolly, El Muchacho sought to get the upper hand of his powerful young opponent. That the latter was armed, he quickly discovered when the butt of a heavy six-gun gouged him in the ribs as he rolled in Juan's tight embrace.

A stifled groan died on the Muchacho's lips as a sharp-roweled Mexican spur gashed his leg. For an instant, his grip on Juan relaxed.

The young rancher made the most of his advantage. His right hand jerked down to the butt of his gun. The weapon seemed to stick in its holster. Tugging frantically, Juan had the big six-gun almost clear of

leather before El Muchacho could move to check him.

*Smack!* The rocky right fist of El Muchacho jabbed a sharp blow to Juan's jaw at the same time his left hand closed on the latter's gun hand.

Half-stunned by the jolting punch, Juan sank back on the ground. Before he could recover, El Muchacho had his gun. In a trice, his hands were bound with his own stout leather belt. A gag made from an end of his serape was forced into his mouth.

Panting from his violent exertions, El Muchacho got to his feet. Half-dragging his beaten opponent along with him, he helped the latter to stand up.

"Now, friend Juan, you will come with me," El Muchacho said firmly. "Together, we will ride to Canyon Perdido in which are hidden many fine American horses."

## CHAPTER VII.

### EL TIGRE SETS A TRAP.

GROUPED around a camp fire at break of day, the Texas cow-punchers ate their bacon and flap-jacks in moody silence. Losing the trail of their stolen horse herd in the desolate bad lands on the preceding day, they had made camp where night overtook them.

Slim gulped the last drop of black coffee in his tin cup.

"What's the next move, Tex?" he asked, fishing in his shirt pocket for the "makin's" of a quirly. "Back ter the Bend?"

Tex Austin checked the steady movement of his lean jaws for a moment. "Danged if I know," he grunted. "I shore hate ter go back an' tell the Old Man we failed ter git his broncs."

"Mebbe we could locate thet ranch

mentioned in the message we took offn the red-masked Mex dude," suggested Shorty.

"Then what?" growled Tex. "Ifn we found the blasted ranch, the brons wouldn't be waitin' in no corral fer us. Them rustlers is smart. By this time, they done got our hosses cached in a hide-out somewhere."

Slim halted a lighted match halfway to his cigarette. Cocking an ear toward a bend of the dim trail which led to this lonely spot, he listened intently.

"Music!" he exclaimed. "Kin yuh beat thet? Some hombre is singin' an'——"

"An' playin' a mean guitar," put in a waddy, rising to his feet the better to hear the approaching musician.

"I am the wandering dove that seeks  
The sad nest where I was born."

Full and rich, the tenor voice came rolling up the trail through the dawnlight. The words were Spanish, but most of the Texans understood them. It was a favorite tune, "La Paloma."

"Yuh hear thet, boys?" jeered Shorty. "He ain't no man, he's jest a pore wanderin' dove."

"Shet up, yuh dumb idjit!" snapped Tex. "Thet's the best dog-goned music I've heerd in a coon's age."

The musician drew rein at the edge of the circle of firelight.

"*Hola, amigos!*" he hailed the Texans.

"Hello, hombre!" Tex Austin greeted the poorly dressed young peon, who was El Muchacho. "Light an' rest yore saddle. Yo're jest in time fer chuck."

El Muchacho quickly accepted the hearty invitation. He well knew the hospitality of the Texans. And he was both weary and hungry, after

riding most of the night. Observing the camp fire from a distant ridge, he had lost no time in coming to visit the baffled rustler chasers.

Squatting by the cheerful fire, El Muchacho was soon putting away a good meal.

The Texans watched their guest in glum silence for a few moments, then returned to further discussion of the subject uppermost in their minds—the stolen horses.

El Muchacho finished eating and rose to his feet, courteously thanking his hosts.

"Shucks, yuh don't owe us no thanks," said Tex Austin. "Thet music yuh give us more'n paid fer what yuh et."

"I am very glad you like eet." El Muchacho smiled. "Eef the señores are stay here een camp I weel come again and play for them."

"Naw, we're movin' on, pronto," Tex said, glancing around at his sour-faced crew of cow-punchers. "Don't know jest whar, but we're goin'. Ain't seen nothin' of a bunch of Americano hosses, have yuh?"

El Muchacho tightened his lips to halt an elated grin. That was the question for which he had been waiting.

"*Si, señor!*" He nodded. "I haf seen many fine caballos yesterday, weeth thee Lazy J brand on their shoulders."

Tex brightened visibly. "Them's the brons we're huntin', along with the hombres thet rustled 'em," he declared. "Whar did yuh see 'em?"

El Muchacho seemed to be trying to remember. In keeping with his character as a poor peon, he didn't want to appear overly smart. He knew these Texans were very suspicious of native Mexicans. Hadn't they nearly hung him on suspicion the day before? If he appeared too anxious to guide them, they would

probably refuse to go with him, fearing a trap.

Glancing furtively around at the near-by brush, El Muchacho spoke in a voice hardly above a whisper.

"Eet ees very dangerous, señor, to tell thees," he murmured. "El Tigre keels those who speak of hees stealings, *si*."

Tex Austin twisted his long Texas mustache fiercely. "Go on an' tell us," he growled. "We ain't skeered of thet red-masked Tiger hombre. He got away from us yesterday, but the next time we git our hands on him, we'll string him up higher'n a kite. An' we won't tell nobody about yuh tippin' us off on them hosses."

"Then I weel tell," whispered El Muchacho. "El Tigre and the Señor Mendez haf drive those caballos to Canyon Perdido. Then El Tigre and all hees *hombres malos* haf return to the ranch weeth Señor Mendez."

"Whar's thet canyon located?" Tex asked eagerly. "We'll be head-in' that a way, pronto."

"Eet ees very hard place to find, señor," El Muchacho replied, trying to keep his own eagerness out of his voice. "But I weel be glad to show you the trail."

"Thet's a go!" exclaimed Tex. "Come on, boys! Let's high-tail it fer Lost Canyon. If this young hombre knows the way——"

"An' ifn he ain't aimin' ter put somethin' over on us," cut in Shorty.

Tex Austin stiffened with a sudden flash of suspicion. "Huh, what's thet?" he snapped, hard gray eyes boring into the young peon who faced him. "Ifn we was led inter ary trap, it'd shore go hard with the hombre thet did it."

"Better then that thee señores go

alone," retorted El Muchacho, moving toward his waiting buckskin.

Tex Austin drew in his horns. He knew when he was beaten in an argument. Without a guide, he and his men could never find the rustler hide-out.

"Hold on, hombre," Tex called after El Muchacho. "Yuh win. Wait till we saddle up, an' we'll hit the trail with yuh."

El Muchacho turned his head to hide his elation. His plans seemed to be working out perfectly. He would guide the Texans to their stolen horses, then down to the Mendez ranch to wreak justice on the rustlers.

While he was at the hide-out in Canyon Perdido, he would release Juan, the young rancher whom he had compelled to lead him to the place. He had left Juan there, bound hand and foot, while he went in search of the Texans.

Unfortunately for the success of El Muchacho's plans, Juan had managed to free himself soon after his captor had left him. He had mounted his horse and raced at top speed to the ranch house of Carlos Mendez.

Excited and disheveled, Juan burst in on El Tigre and his gang, together with their host, Mendez. His wild story brought them to their feet in alarm.

"The hombre wheech mak' you show heem the hide-out ees a spy for thee rurales!" El Tigre declared in rage.

"They weel take the caballos first, then come here for us," Mendez added fearfully.

"But no, we weel fool those *mal-ditos hombres* of the law," snarled El Tigre. "For them we weel set the trap of death at thee Canyon

Perdido. Weeth my men, and those brave vaqueros of yours, amigo Mendez, we weel bushwhack the rurales when they come for those wet horses. *Vamonos!*"

Whooping their approval, a dozen hard-bitten gringo and Mex cut-throats dashed outdoors and headed for the corral where their horses were resting. Murder was in the air!

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE TRAP IS SPRUNG.

**F**OLLOWING a dim trail that twisted through boulder-strewn arroyos and over bald, sun-baked ridges, El Muchacho led the Texas cow-punchers deep into the bad lands.

Tex Austin rode in the lead, beside the Muchacho, with Slim and Shorty close on their heels. The other four waddies were strung out in the rear.

"How much farther we got ter travel in this danged bake-oven, Muchacho?" Slim grumbled as he mopped his sweaty face with a soiled bandanna. "I'd ruther fight rustlers than mosey around here lookin' fer a bunch of bronses."

El Muchacho hipped around in his old rawhide saddle to face the Texan.

"Eet ees not far, now, *Señor Tejano*," he replied, his dark eyes narrowing as he let his gaze fall on a pair of fine pearl-stocked Colts stuck in Slim's belt. "But you, who carry so many gons een the belt, weel have no use for them een Canyon Perdido."

Slim glanced down at the extra weapons he carried. Together with the two .45s holstered on his lean thighs, and the Winchester rifle in his saddle boot, those six-guns made him seem fairly to bristle with deadly weapons.

"I sort o' fell heir ter them smoke-poles yesterday," Slim explained sheepishly. "Picked 'em offn thet ornery red-masked rustler chief yuh call El Tigre."

A sly grin crossed El Muchacho's darkly stained face. "I theenk you are meestake about that masked caballero," he said. "He ees always wear the black *charro* clothes, *si*. But El Tigre wear thee spotted skin of thee great *tigre* cat for wheech he ees named."

"Huh. Mebbe yo're right," Tex Austin grunted. "But I got ter see them two hombres together, afore I'll believe they ain't the same ornery hoss thief."

El Muchacho didn't argue the point further. In due time, he meant to show these Texans their error. Meanwhile, he knew that the rustler hide-out was very close at hand. The mouth of a narrow, steep-walled canyon gaped no more than a hundred yards ahead.

"Look, señores!" El Muchacho said, pointing with a brown finger. "A leetle way eenside that canyon ees a very narrow crack een thee wall. Eet ees covered weeth brush and great rocks, so eet ees not easy to see. But when you go through that break you are een another canyon—the Canyon Perdido, where are hidden those caballos wheech El Tigre steal."

Tex Austin's homely face cracked in a wide grin of joy. The recovery of those horses meant a lot to the middle-aged foreman, who had been responsible for their care back on the Lazy J. Behind him, his waddies were openly exulting over the success which seemed already to have rewarded their grueling ride into Mexico.

"*Bueno*, Muchacho!" Tex exclaimed. "Yuh shore have done us

a big favor, an' I aim ter pay yuh well fer it."

"For notheeng, señor," El Muchacho answered happily. "I am very glad to help the Americanos."

Even the saddle horses of the little group of riders seemed to liven up as they approached the entrance to the gloomy defile, which offered shade from the hot sun.

But between the Texans and the rustlers' hide-out, lurked grim and terrible death, like a treacherous sidewinder which gives no warning before it strikes.

The bushwhacking rustlers were hidden among the sandstone boulders and brush clumps that partly masked the mouth of the canyon. With carbines and six-guns close at their hands, they waited to give the close-range, murderous shots that would wipe out their enemies.

Hearing the hoofbeats of approaching horses, El Tigre took off his huge, high-peaked gray sombrero and peered out cautiously with one eye, past a ragged corner of sandstone boulder. Instantly, he jerked back, his sallow, bony face paling.

"*Caramba!* Eet ees not the rurales!" he swore in a muffled mixture of Spanish and English. "Eet ees those *malditos Tejanos*—the Texas hombres! They haf followed us."

Chino Montez writhed closer to his chief. The Oriental strain in the half-breed Mex-chink, gave him a cold fatalism. He had no fear of death, such as possessed El Tigre.

"What ees the difference?" Chino leered evilly, shifting his carbine to bear on the approaching horsemen. "A dead *Tejano* can shoot no better than a rurale who ees food for the buzzards."

"That ees very well said, Chino," El Tigre grunted, somewhat relieved at hearing his slant-eyed henchman's evil logic. "We weel keel those gringos, pronto."

But the slaughter of the Texans was not to be done so easily. A bit of suspicion still lurked in Tex Austin's one-track mind. It grew into a powerful hunch as he and his waddies came into that deadly trap which the rustlers had set. He had fought both Indians and rustlers on the Texas border. It had bred in him a wariness that would not be denied.

"I ain't so sure about this lay-out, boys," Tex quietly told his men. "Afore we go any farther I want ter scout around a bit."

"What'll we do?" Slim asked.

"When I give the word, hit the ground an' hunt cover," clipped Tex.

El Muchacho slowed his quick-stepping buckskin. "You are afraid, señor?" he asked, perplexed by the unexpected order. "There ees no danger at—"

"Jump!" barked Tex Austin.

Those hard-bitten waddies had a deep respect for old Tex Austin's wisdom and experience. As one man, they obeyed his order. Diving from their saddles like prairie dogs taking to earth, they scrambled for the nearest brush or boulders.

All but Slim. As he turned in his saddle to jump, he found his way blocked by El Muchacho, who had pulled up his mount alongside the lanky cowboy just as the order to dismount was given.

Slim swore as he lashed out with a blow at El Muchacho's head.

*Crash! Bang-bang!* A fusillade of gunshots roared from the canyon mouth.

El Muchacho heard the vicious hum of bullets as he ducked to avoid

Slim's fist. He heard the cowboy cry out in sudden pain as a flying slug grazed his cheek. In a flash of thought, the startled Muchacho guessed what had happened.

Dropping his bridle reins for an instant, El Muchacho leaned out of his saddle and snatched the pair of pearl-butted Colts from Slim's belt. Then he whirled the buckskin with a kick in the ribs and dashed into the scrubby chaparral.

It was not lack of courage that made the young peon desert the little bunch of Texans he had offered to guide. To remain with them meant death. They would never believe that he hadn't deliberately led them into a murder trap.

"Only way I could help them cowpokes was ter leave 'em," the Muchacho told himself as he fogged at top speed through the brush. "I'll go git old Thunder, an' then I'll give thet ornery El Tigre the surprise of his life."

## CHAPTER IX.

### STAMPEDE.

**W**HILE El Tigre raved and swore at the failure of his murderous scheme to bushwhack his enemies, the Texans were in little better humor.

Outnumbered about two to one, as near as they could tell by the crashing guns of the rustlers, the cowmen dared not charge their hidden foes. Nor would they retreat, and leave their stolen horse herd in the hands of the thieves.

"We'll jest set hyar an' snipe at the skunks till night comes, an' then we'll crawl up thar an' blast 'em from heck ter breakfast," Tex Austin grimly passed the word to his waddies.

But El Tigre had no intention of

playing a waiting game with the feared Texans. The tricky rustler chief preferred half a loaf to none. Since he had failed to catch the cowmen in his death trap, he would quietly slip away up the canyon and leave them holding an empty sack.

"But leesten, amigo Mendez," El Tigre said to the rascally rancher who had crawled within speaking distance. "When we leave these fool gringos, we weel go to the Canyon Perdido and get thee caballos, *si*."

Mendez grinned evilly. That would be a fine joke to play on those miserable Americanos who had come so far for nothing. And for all this trouble and risk that he was being put to, he meant to cut down the price he would pay El Tigre for the horses.

Leaving a few of his cutthroats to fire on the Texans, thus preventing the discovery of his scheme, El Tigre took the greater part of his gang and began a stealthy retreat through the rocks and brush at the canyon mouth.

The rustlers' horses had been tied a short distance up the narrow gorge. As soon as the gangsters reached them, they mounted and quickly disappeared in single file through the secret entrance to Canyon Perdido.

Half an hour passed before El Tigre and his ruffianly crew reappeared in the main canyon. When they did, they were driving fifty head of fine American horses.

"*Andale, hambrecitos!* Hurry weeth the caballos!" El Tigre called to his henchmen.

Turning the high-headed, snorting broncs up the canyon, the rustlers fell in behind them and started their get-away. It was an easy drive. In the narrow, steep-walled defile it was impossible for the horses to break away. Moving at a swinging



trot, they forged steadily up the sloping trail.

Meanwhile a masked rider was racing across a small mesa dotted with clumps of piñon pines. Sunlight glinted on the solid silver mountings of his black horse's saddle and bridle. His handsome black *charro* costume gleamed with silver conchas and braid.

Arriving at the head of a brushy ravine, Señor Red Mask reined his mount into it, at a slower pace. For many minutes he rode down the sloping, winding course of the slash, which gradually widened and deepened until it became a gloomy, steep-walled canyon.

Rounding a bend of the defile, the caballero suddenly pulled his mount to a halt. The unmistakable thudding of horses' hoofs was sweeping up the canyon in a rumbling volume of sound that swelled louder and louder as he listened. There could only be one explanation of so many horses being in that lonely spot.

"It's them Texas broncs!" Red Mask exclaimed in surprise. "El Tigre is making his get-away with the herd."

The whole bunch of horses and rustlers would be on Señor Red Mask in another minute. He'd have to move fast if—

"I ain't runnin'," snapped the caballero. "I'll give El Tigre thet surprise right here."

Hastily reining the black behind a clump of cedars at the edge of the trail, Red Mask made quick preparations to carry out an idea which popped into his mind.

On came the horse herd, the snuffy leaders rolling their eyes as they shot nervous glances at every rock and bush.

"Spooky as wild broomtails," Red

Mask told himself with a grin as he peered between the cedar boughs.

The broncs began to snort and prance as they caught the scent of the hidden Thunder. The leaders were only twenty yards distant—fifteen—ten—

"Ai—yah-h-h!" With a wild yell that woke the echoes along the rock walls, Red Mask rolled his spurs. Thunder bounded from cover like an avalanche, at the same time losing an ear-splitting screech of defiance at the strange broncs.

*Brang-brang!* One of Red Mask's heavy Colts roared and blazed over the heads of the fear-paralyzed horses. Dropping his bridle reins round the saddle horn, he snatched a gayly colored serape from his shoulders and waved it wildly as he charged straight at the leaders of the horse herd.

Mad with terror, the broncs whirled back down the canyon. In their frenzied efforts to escape the awful thing that thundered and blazed at their heels, nothing less than a stone wall would have halted them.

Caught in the pathway of that rushing torrent of horseflesh, the rustlers turned tail and ran before it. Lashing and spurring frantically, they drove their panicky mounts at racing speed down the rough trail.

"Eet ees the rurales!" howled El Tigre, raking his dun bronc till the rowels of his big Chihuahua spurs dripped crimson.

Chino Montez risked a quick backward glance that showed him what seemed to be a masked madman on a thundering black demon horse that snapped and tore at the rumps of the stampeding broncs.

"Worse than the rurales—eet ees Señor *Mascara Roja!*" squawked Chino.

Down at the mouth of the canyon, three rustlers heard that ominous sound rolling toward them. With alarmed glances up the defile, they hastily broke cover and raced for their horses. Before they had gone a dozen paces, they were cut down by a deadly hail of Texas lead.

"What the heck started them skunks?" Slim called to Tex Austin, who was reloading his six-guns behind the nearest boulder.

"Cain't yuh hear?" Tex yelled back. "Thar's either a stampede or a cloud-burst roarin' down thet canyon, an' I don't see no clouds."

"We better git ready ter run or swim," Shorty yelped from a clump of greasewood. "Somethin' turrible is goin' ter happen sudden."

It happened—almost before the words were out of Shorty's mouth.

A bunch of wild-eyed Mexican and gringo crooks burst out of the canyon like a whirlwind. Fifty yards behind them, a thundering herd of fear-crazed broncs stampeded into the open. Who was riding, shooting and yelling on the heels of the flying broncs, the Texans didn't wait to see.

"Give 'em hot lead, boys!" belated Tex Austin, leaping from cover with a blazing hogleg in each hand. "Remember the Alamo!"

*Crash! Bang-bang-bang!* Six-guns and rifles blasted a withering volley of leaden death at the fleeing rustlers. Three saddles were emptied. A couple of horses went down, hurling their riders to the ground.

Standing in the open, firing their hot guns as fast as they could pull triggers, the Texas cow-punchers hurled hot lead as long as a rustler was in sight.

Carlos Mendez escaped in the brush, reeling in his saddle from a bullet-torn shoulder. Chino Montez

spurred to safety with a sickening wound in his side.

El Tigre and a scar-faced gringo outlaw reined their running mounts round the flank of the stampeding horse herd and tried to gain the cover of some cedars.

A *charro*-clad, masked rider on a racing black cayuse cut them off.

Snarling oaths, the two cutthroats came to bay. Six-guns leaped to their hands.

"Keel thee masked skunk, Scar!" El Tigre spat like a mad cat, his yellowish eyes blazing with murderous hatred and fury.

*Wham! Bang!* Outlaw guns roared.

Señor Red Mask winced as a whizzing slug scorched his neck. A hot-barreled .45 rocketed flame and lead from his outthrust hand.

The scarred bandit sagged in his saddle. An oath moaned from his lips as he toppled to the ground, a bullet in his evil heart.

Pale with fear, El Tigre missed a second shot at the fighting caballero. Whirling his dun bronc in a panic, he raced toward the nearest rocks.

Red Mask spurred his snorting black in hot pursuit. Thunder shortened the dun's lead with every stride. His head was soon at the dun's flank—at his withers. Then they were neck and neck.

El Tigre cowered in his saddle. Snarling and swearing, he jerked up his six-gun for a body shot.

But Red Mask's long Colt was swifter. It swung in a whizzing arc.

*Thud!* The steel barrel of the heavy weapon crashed against El Tigre's head. With a groan, the outlaw pitched from his saddle.

Señor Red Mask reined his mount to a quick halt. Leaping to the ground, he hastily plucked two green shoots from a near-by sagebrush.

Going back to the sprawled body of Scar, he placed the crossed sage shoots on the dead outlaw's chest. It was the bad man's brand of early border days—now the mark of Señor Red Mask.

Tex Austin and his fighting Texans came racing up to where the masked caballero stood beside the still unconscious El Tigre. Dismounting, Tex strode forward with outstretched hand.

"I'm askin' yore pardon, amigo," he said to the coolly waiting Red Mask. "Yuh shore done us a big favor, after what we tried ter do ter you, yesterday."

"That ees *bueno*," Red Mask smiled. "And now that you see us together, thees ladrone een thee *tigre*-skin jacket, and me who wear thee *charro* clothes, you weel remember what you say about the horse thief, *si*?"

Tex Austin stared in astonishment. "Huh—how come yuh ter know thet I said I'd believe yuh wasn't thet Tiger hoss thief when I seen the two of yuh tergothor?" he asked.

Before Tex got an answer, the lanky Slim broke in, wide-eyed with

wonder. "Look at them guns!" he cried, pointing to the big Colts whose pearl stocks gleamed above Red Mask's crimson silk sash. "If they ain't the same pair of smoke-poles I took offn the masked caballero yesterday, I'm blind."

Red Mask nodded. "The same, amigo Slim," he said, smiling.

"Why, then yuh must 'a' caught thet rascally Muchacho an' took 'em from——"

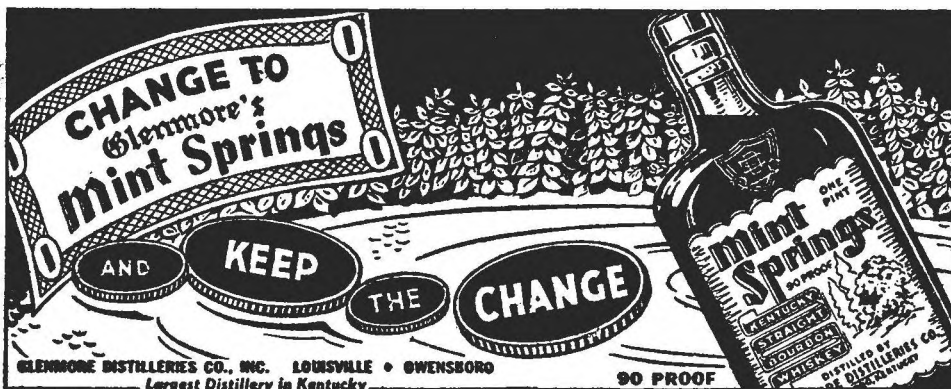
"You are meestake, amigo," Red Mask interrupted. "El Muchacho and Señor Red Mask both take those seex-guns from you when those rustler fool us and spring the trap."

Slim grinned sheepishly. "Kin yuh beat thet?" he asked the group of staring waddies around him.

"He beat us plenty," added Tex Austin, "an' I'm shore glad he did."

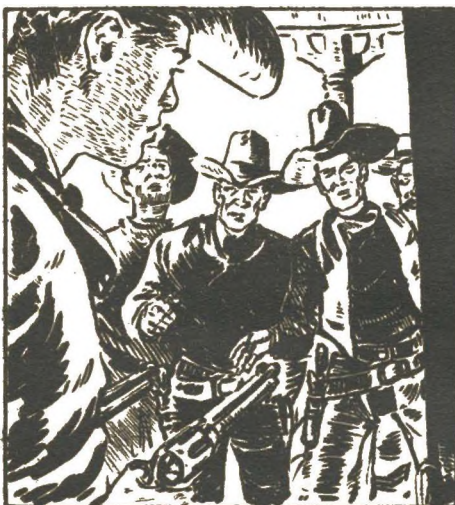
Señor Red Mask stooped and lifted El Tigre's limp form. Carrying it to the waiting dun bronc, he quickly tied it in the saddle. A moment later, he was astride his impatient black Thunder.

"Weeth your permission, I weel hit the trail," he told the wondering Texans. "Thees ladrone and I have far to go—ento the Shadow of Death, *si*. Adios, amigos!"



This advertisement is not intended to offer alcoholic beverages for sale or delivery in any state or community where the advertising, sale or use thereof is unlawful.

# Brazos Lands



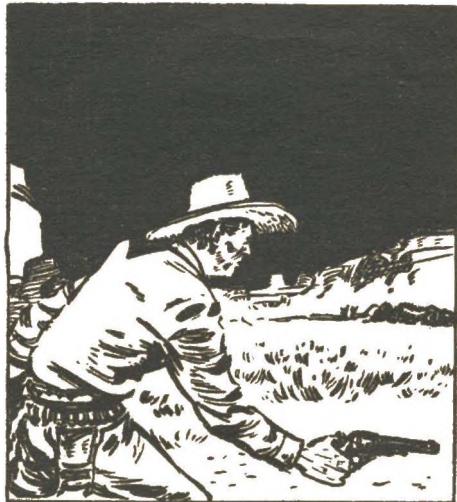
1. After shooting it out with Jake Slade, the murderer of his foster-father, Brazos backed out of the outlaw hang-out. None of the other owl-hooters seemed anxious to try to avenge Slade's death. They plainly figured it a private quarrel.



2. Reaching his horse, Brazos leaped aboard and was soon spurring away. He was near the end of his outlaw trail now. Slade had told Brazos who had hired him to do the killing. Now Brazos had to go home and show that hombre up.



3. He made a dry camp and turned in for the night. For the first time in many weeks, he felt almost happy. It wouldn't be long now, he felt, before he would once more be able to show his face among honest men, no longer an outlaw.



4. But there had been one hombre in that outlaw roost who had determined not to let Brazos get away. It wasn't so much that he was a pard of Slade's and wanted revenge as it was the lure of the reward that was offered for Brazos—dead or alive.



# in the Hoosgow



5. He had followed the young outlaw away from the hide-out. He crept up to the sleeping figure. Already he was figuring on how he'd spend the reward. Suddenly Brazos awoke. With an oath, the man raised his gun and struck hard.



6. The heavy steel gun barrel crashed against Brazos's head. Chuckling evilly, the outlaw tied him up, then caught up his own horse and Brazos's. He chuckled. "Reckon the boys'll look up ter Salt River Sam, after this!"



7. "Salt River Sam" tied Brazos's unconscious body across his saddle, then swung aboard his own bronc. Leading Brazos's black, he set out for town, still feeling mighty pleased with himself over the success of his treacherous scheme.



8. Dawn had broken when he arrived in town. Brazos Bell had come to. But he was bound and helpless. He could do nothing when Salt River turned him over to the law. He wouldn't even answer the sneering taunts of his captor.



9. All morning, Brazos paced back and forth in his cell. Then he heard a noise at the window and glanced up. A curious kid had sneaked around to take a look at him. Brazos asked the kid if he'd do him a favor, and the kid gladly agreed.



10. "Head fer the Rafter H, kid," Brazos had said, "an' tell 'em I'm in the hoosegow. I want ter see either Miss Barbara or her ol' man."

The kid raced away from the jail and busted the breeze for the ranch.

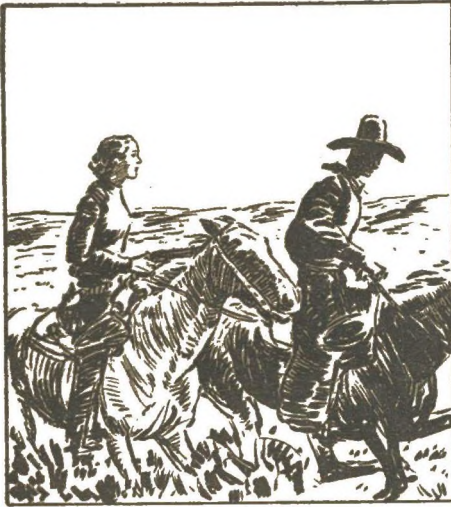


11. As he pounded into the ranch yard, Barbara Holmes came out to meet him. Breathlessly he delivered his message to the girl. She gasped, and then her pretty face hardened. Brazos in jail! She had to do something—and fast!



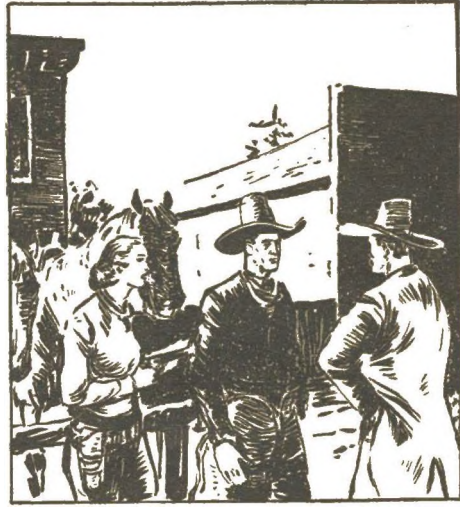
12. She was all alone on the ranch, but that didn't bother her. Grabbing a six-gun, she went down to the cellar where Idaho Jones, pard of Jake Slade's, was being kept prisoner. She covered him with the gun and ordered him to come out.





13. "What yuh goin' ter do with me?" snarled Idaho.

"I'm turnin' yuh over to the law," snapped Barbara. "Brazos Bell is in jail, and yo're goin' to help get him out!"



14. Keeping Idaho covered with her six-gun, Barbara got him safely into town. The marshal met them in front of the jail. "What's the charge agin' this man, miss?" he asked. "Kidnaping," said Barbara. "He kidnaped me, a few weeks ago."



15. The marshal's eyes glittered. "Come on you!" he growled to Idaho. He shoved Idaho inside and into a cell. Barbara followed. Suddenly she jabbed her gun against the marshal's back and shoved him in after Idaho.



16. The marshal was so surprised at Barbara's move that he dropped his keys and six-gun. Barbara picked them up. Then, ignoring the lawman's roaring threats, she calmly opened Brazos Bell's cell. He came out grinning—free again.

Next Week: "Brazos Bell's Rescue Ride."



# Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is maintained in an effort to preserve old cowboy songs and frontier ballads.

If you want to find the words to some Western 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 old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send copies of songs to individual readers, but we will tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you can find the one you want.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

I'M glad thet some of yuh folks are be-ginnin' tuh get the Song-Corral-Club idea. But I want tuh hear from more of yuh about it. I'd like tuh git goin' on this thing this fall; so that when the long winter evenin's set in we'll all have something extra interestin' tuh do. Come on, folks, one an' all! Let ol' Fiddlin' Joe initiate yuh intuh the ways of huntin' ol' songs!

Even if yo're not in a position tuh start a Song Corral Club, yuh kin git tuh work song-huntin'. As I've said afore, if yuh talk tuh the ol' folks in yore neighborhood, like as not thet'll start yuh on the trail tuh some right interestin' folklore. Every place has its own legends. So go to it, folks!

Jes' fer a change we'll start the session with a request tuh-day. John Malone, of Pennsylvania, sends this fragment in hope thet one of you folks kin give him the rest of the song:

## COLORADO TRAIL

Eyes like the morning star,  
Cheeks like the rose,  
She was sure a pretty girl  
Every trailer knows.  
Weep all ye little rains,  
Wail, winds, wail,  
All along, along, along,  
The Colorado Trail.

Any of yuh know it? Send it in if you do.

Carl Riggs, of Texas, sends in a song which he says was written at the time when nesters were first fencing range in Oklahoma.

## THE OLD COWMAN

I rode across a valley range  
I hadn't seen for years;  
The trail was all so spoilt and strange  
It nearly fetched the tears.



I had to let ten fences down—  
The fussy lanes ran wrong—  
And each new line would make me frown  
And hum a mourning song.

Oh, it's *squeak-squeak-squeak!*  
Hear 'em stretchin' of the wire!  
The nester brand is on the land;  
I reckon I'll retire.  
While progress toots her brassy horn  
And makes her motor buzz,  
I thank the Lord I wasn't born  
No later than I was!

'Twas good to live when all the sod  
Without no fence nor fuss  
Belonged in partnership to God,  
The government, and us.  
With skyline bounds from east to west  
And room to go and come,  
I loved my fellow man the best  
When he was scattered some.

Oh, it's *squeak-squeak-squeak!*  
Close and closer cramps the wire!  
There's hardly play to back away  
And call a man a liar.  
Their houses have locks on every door;  
Their land is in a crate,  
There ain't the plains of God no more,  
They're only real estate.

Waal, that's one disgusted ol' feller, all  
right! I reckon he had to hit the trail  
fer other plains tuh git some peace of  
mind.

That's one from Oklahoma; now hyar's

a song from Idaho. I ain't given up the  
idea yet of searchin' fer songs from all  
the different States, and I hope you ain't  
either. This one some of yuh might  
remember, bein' as I gave it once a long  
while back:

### TAKE ME BACK TO IDAHO

Ship me some place west of Denver  
Out across the Great Divide;  
Where they have no Easterners,  
And a girl can ride astride;  
To where the Salmon River flows,  
Back to Ketchum, Idaho.

For it's out in Idaho  
That the hills are white with snow  
And the valley fills with blossoms  
When the summer breezes blow.  
Oh, take me back to Glenna,  
Take me back to Idaho.

I can see the water sparkling  
Where the red fish loves to swim;  
I can hear the pine trees murmur  
In their forest pathways dim.  
I can see the starry heavens  
In their morning's happy glow.  
Oh, take me back to dear old Ketchum,  
Dear old Ketchum, Idaho.

Let's see how many other songs from  
Idaho an' Oklahoma, or about 'em will  
come in tuh the Corral.

So long, folks, an' good luck. I'll be  
with yuh come next week as per usual!





# 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.

**W**AAL, readin' hombres, here it is time fer another meetin' o' the 3W outfit. A plumb good many o' the riders has showed up, this week, too. Let's call the roll:

Buck Foster, Sing Lo, Joe Scott, and Billy West; Hungry Hawkins an' Rusty Bolivar; Risky McKee; Señor Red Mask; Brazos Bell. With all them buckaroos hangin' around, the ol' Corner looks like a gatherin' place fer a cowpokes' convention.

Fer quite a spell, the gang jest sets there, chinnin' about this an' thet, an' then about this ag'in. As usual, Buck Foster an' Joe Scott does most o' the gabbin'. Or rather, they does the loudest gabbin', which same makes it plumb impossible fer anybody else ter talk. So they does most of it.

We stands fer it jest about as long as we kin, then slips the wink ter Billy West. Billy grins an' nods, an' horns inter Buck an' Joe's argument.

"Say, you two mossyhorns," he says, "if yuh don't both throw a hobble around yore tongues, yo're plumb li'ble ter talk yoreselves out o' yore jobs."

The two rannies stop talkin' an' stare at their boss. "How come, Billy?" Buck Foster wants ter know.

"Yeah," Joe Scott says, "you wouldn't fire us fer arguin', would yuh, Boss?"

Billy grins. "No," he says, "I wouldn't fire yuh fer talkin'. The danger yuh two runs is in talkin' me ter death. No other owner o' the Circle J would ever be loco enough ter keep yuh on the pay roll."

"So be," puts in Sing Lo, the Circle J cook.

Thet "So be" from the chink was a mistake. Buck goes on the prod plumb sudden. He glares at the little Oriental.

"So be, huh?" he roars. "By heifers, yuh slant-eyed heathen, I'll 'so be' yuh! I'll shore——"

"Aw, fer Pete's sake, Buck, cut it out," snaps Billy. "Can't yuh see thet the rest o' the gang would rather hear letters from the readin' hombres than yore bellerin'?"

"SO BE!" roars every hombre at the meetin'—all together an' with volume enough ter almost blow off the roof.

Buck's homely face gits kind o' red, an' he shuts up. But he's glarin' an' mutterin' like a volcano that's about ter let go.

We grabs up the first letter thet comes ter hand an' starts readin' it out loud. This is what we reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is where I rein in and shoot off my mouth about the 3W. I think it is the best Western magazine on the stands.

I hope you don't mind my suggesting this, but why don't you start a society, or club, and call it the 3W Rangers, or something? Each member would be a steady reader of 3W and get a membership card and badge from you by sending in coupons. What do the rest of the readin' hombres think of that idea?

Bud Jones and Hungry and Rusty sure know how to clean up outlaws. The three Rangers ought to team up sometime.

Pete Rice and his deputies are coming along fine. Keep them around. Whizz Fargo

sure knows how to handle a Colt. He's the fastest gun-handler of all the waddies.

Say "Howdy" to Brazos Bell for me.

Well, I guess I'd better be drifting before Whizz uses me for target practice. Adios, amigos,

AL HALPERN.

McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

There's a new idea. Waal, mebbe not so new, at thet. But anyhow, let's see what the other readin' hombres has ter say about it. It would mean a lot o' work fer us, an' we're gettin' kind o' lazy in our old age. However, let's hear from yuh, readin' hombres.

Now here's another one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: What has happened to the 3W spread? Maybe you think that this is a strange question, but here are the questions I asked it:

1. Has Sing Lo quit Circle J and gone back to China? He's never in the stories any more.

2. Is Ward M. Stevens tired of writing about Kid Wolf and Sonny Tabor?

3. Will Tom Lovell paint any more pictures on the cover of the magazine?

4. Will Walker Tompkins and William A. Todd write any more of those swell mystery yarns like they used to?

5. Will we ever have such good plots to the stories as we did in "The Sheriff Killer," by Walker Tompkins, and "Dead Men's Cattle," by Cleve Endicott?

Let's have more combination stories like "The Bar U Twins At Circle J." I think a combination of Sonny Tabor and Johnny Forty-five ought to be pretty swell.

So long, everybody, JIM CIVIZZIO.  
Bristol, Connecticut.

Waal, the answer ter Jim Civizzio's first question is settin' right here at the Corner, grinnin' at us. Sing Lo shore ain't left Circle J.

The answer ter the second question is "no." The answer ter the third is "prob'ly." The answer ter the fourth is "shore." An' the answer ter the fifth is "o' course."

Here's the next one we draws out o' the sack:

GREETINGS, BOSS! This is my second letter to the Corner and if it isn't printed, I'll know that the Corner is strictly a fake.

By the way, Boss, ask Buck Foster if he remembers me. I herded sheep with him down in Wyoming nigh onto thirty years ago.

About the only worth-while hombre on the Circle J spread is Sing Lo. I don't know

what those sheep-herders, Foster and Scott, would do without him.

I'm not going to take the time to name my favorites, for I'd have to name the whole bunch. I'll make a suggestion instead: How about us 3W fans getting up a club? Huh? How about it?

Well, I guess this is all for this time. Yours till this letter hits the wastebasket.

GUESS WHO.

Cleveland, Ohio.

Needless ter say, thet letter causes Buck Foster ter come close ter explodin' inter little bits. But we gits him calmed down ag'in, after a while. Howsomever, it wouldn't be healthy fer Guess Who if the veteran ever got sight of him.

Now, here's the next we comes to:

DEAR BOSS: Jest the day afore yestiday, I come across an old back number of 3W, and in rereadin' The Wranglers Corner I come across a dim-witted letter thet must 'a' been written by a younker still a-usin' a swell-tree saddle.

The ding-danged critter thumbed down the idea of the waddies agoin' inter the movies. Now Boss, I think thet is one plumb good idea!

Think of the dinero you would make a-sellin' the movie rights to a producer. Also think of the increase of circulation it would get 3W.

And think how us fellers already readin' W.W.W. would like it! Here, I'll name some of the waddies and name the guy who would portray them if I had my way.

Kid Wolf.....Bill Boyd  
Bud Jones.....John Mack Brown  
Willie Wetherbee.....Buster Crabbe  
Shorty Stevens.....Hoot Gibson  
Calamity Bogs...Big Boy Williams

Now I got a kick to make at those durned fools who think they are doing some good by writing in and saying, So-and-so is punk; So-and-so could be better. If you look up those letters you will find that not one of them hardly tells what COULD be done or offers any suggestions!

Waal, thet's all. So long.

JERRY BLIXBY.

Lincoln, Nebraska.

"This next gent," we remarks, after glancing over the letter in our hand, "is what yuh'd call a durned good hater."

"A good friend, but a bad enemy," Brazos Bell suggests.

"That's about the size of it, Brazos," we admits and reads out the letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: All your waddies are my favorites. I don't know what you would do without some of them. What happened to Lum Yates?

I am about sick of them guys talking about your 3W waddies. Some day I am going to take a pot shot at one of them pot-bellied, blue-gummed, rubber-lipped, pie-faced, four-flushing sheep thieves. And that goes for all who talk about any 3W waddies.

Boss, I do sure think Brazos Bell is plumb O. K. So is Pete Rice. Well, so long,

SHOTGUN BILL.

Johnson Bayou, Louisiana.

"Gee, that hombre kin call names almost as good as Buck Foster," Risky McKee says, and everybody agrees with him.

We concludes the evenin's business by readin' out a couple o' letters that hit straight and hard—right to the button.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Here's hoping that the cook doesn't use this letter for the fire. My favorite 3W character is Bud Jones. I

guess he is so tough that bullets can't hurt him. I guess none of the cowboys could clean up Texas as well as Bud Jones. If I was the Oklahoma Kid, I'd fill Ed Sparks full of lead.

The best story I ever read was "Bear-hide," by J. Allan Dunn.

Port Jervis, New York.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: As all the others have their favorites, I have mine, too—Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, the Bar U twins—but I like the Circle J pards the best. And if that old mosshorn Buck Foster could try riding a sheep instead of a bronc, he might live a little longer.

Here's a magazine I've had for a long time. The date is August 11, 1928, and the name of the story, "Billy West's Mysterious Guest."

TEX AND PARD OF CIRCLE J.  
Chicago, Illinois.

Anybet's all we got e fer, this week. The 3W waddies will git together here at the Corner fer another meetin' next week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

### COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

#### THE SILVER KID'S GUN SONG

Novelette

By T. W. FORD

When the Silver Kid wakes up an' finds that his bunk mate o' the night before has lit a shuck, wearin' the Kid's silver-trimmed duds—waal, most all the singin' comes from six-guns.

#### DEAD-LINE FENCE

Novelette

By GEORGE W. RENDERSON

The hombre who puts it up means business, an' so does the hombre on the other side. Bullets have ter settle the argument.

#### SEÑOR RED MASK'S GUN-RUSTLER ROUND-UP

Novelette

By GUY L. MAYNARD

An' it ain't surprisin' ter learn that the boss gun-rustler is none other than Señor Red Mask's old enemy, the deadly border killer, El Tigre.

Also stories of Bud Jones of Texas, by J. Allan Dunn; the Bar U twins, by Charles E. Barnes; Brazos Bell—and other characters.

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

10 CENTS A COPY

ORDER IN ADVANCE FROM YOUR NEWS DEALER



**AW, QUIT IT,  
CAN'T YOU—just  
tell the fellows  
I'm staying home**

**- NED'S  
PIMPLY  
SKIN  
MADE  
HIM  
SHUN THE  
CROWD  
\*\*\*\*\*  
UNTIL**



**—clears the skin  
by clearing skin irritants  
out of the blood**

**Don't let Adolescent Pimples spoil  
YOUR chances for fun . . .**

**P**IMPLES can be real joy-killers to any boy or girl. Yet many young people have skin eruptions after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer.

During this time, important glands develop and final growth takes place. Disturbances occur throughout the entire body. The skin gets over-sensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin. Pimples result.

Fleischmann's fresh Yeast helps correct adolescent pimples. It clears these skin irritants out of the blood. Then, the pimples go.

Eat 3 cakes daily, one before each meal—plain, or in a little water—until your skin clears.



# *Luckies - a light smoke*

OF RICH, RIPE-BODIED TOBACCO — "IT'S TOASTED"



Never Dry...

Never too Moist

Tear the top off a Lucky package. We promise you'll find twenty firm, round, fully-packed Lucky Strikes, just moist enough for the highest kind of smoking pleasure. Moisture content in Luckies is precisely controlled. That is one of the secrets of a Light Smoke. Round and firm, fully packed with no loose ends. Smoke Luckies to your throat's content. Never dry, never too moist — a cigarette conditioned to your taste.

