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JULY
16,
1932

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BY

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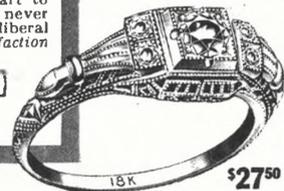
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EXCERPTS FROM THE DIARY OF A MAN WHO MISSED A JOB AND ALMOST LOST A BRIDE

January 10th

I HAD a bad break today. I expected to get that assistant foreman job but George Smith got it instead. George is all right but he hasn't been in the shop as long as I have and I honestly believe the men like me better. Oh well, it's life, I guess—but Dot's going to be disappointed when she hears the news. A lot depended on that job and the money it pays!



January 13th

Told Dot tonight about losing out on that new job. It made me feel mighty bad when she cried. I didn't expect that—but she said it would be foolish for us to get married on what I am making. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked. "What did the boss say?" When I told her he didn't say anything to me, she flared up and said, "Well, I'd ask him!" That was an idea.

January 17th

I wonder what's wrong with me! For three days I tried to get up enough nerve to ask the boss why he didn't give me that job, and every time I start towards his office I get cold feet. But I've got to do it! Dot is going to ask.



January 20th

I told Dot tonight I hadn't had a chance to talk with the boss. "Chances are scarce with you these days," she said, and there was a look in her face that made me realize I'd better do something.

January 22nd

Today I screwed up my courage and walked right into the boss' office. The boss sat there and looked at me until I had finished talking. There was a deadly pause. Then he leaned over his desk and said in the calmest tone: "Jack, I like you and wanted to give you that job. I thought about it a long time. But my own job depends on the men I pick—and in self-defense I promoted the best trained man in this shop. You've been here longer, it's true, but while you've been wasting your spare time, George Smith has been studying an I. C. S. course. He has learned the things a man on that job *must* know, and you might profit by his example. If you do, I have something in mind for you."



January 23rd

I told Dot what the boss said. "Well," she said, "there's only one thing left for you to do—enroll for an I. C. S. course right away." I nodded approval of her conclusion. (I had already mailed a coupon to Scranton!)

November 1st

This is the happiest day of my life! A new job—a new wife—a new outlook on life! Dot said she would marry me the very day I got my promotion—and Dot is a girl of her word, bless her heart! I owe a lot to her—and to I. C. S. training. *There is no substitute for either of them!*



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Vol. 68, No. 6

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Cover Picture—Scene from

“Johnny Forty-five’s Lay-off” . . . *H. W. Reussweig*

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But his six-guns don’t git much chance ter cool.
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He comes to grips with the River Wolf an’ hot lead flies.
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The old enemy o’ Circle J comes back—deadlier an’ meaner’n ever.

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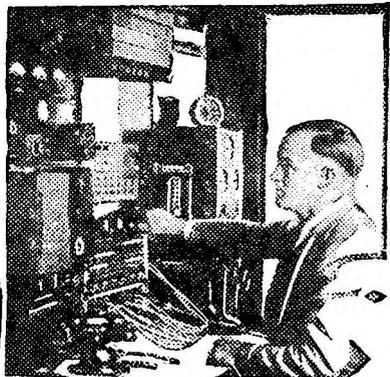
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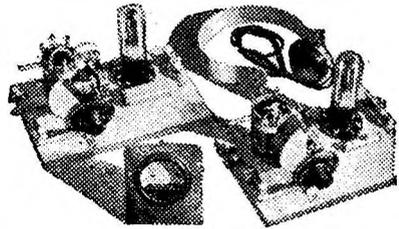
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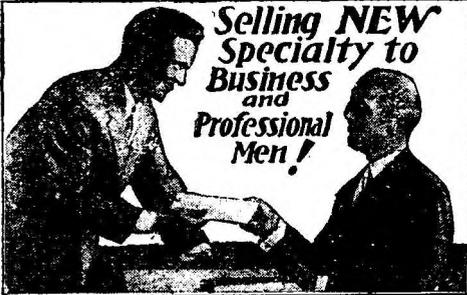
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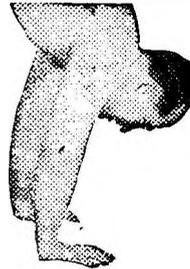
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Johnny Forty-five's Lay-off

By Andrew A. Griffin

Author of "Cottonwood Spring," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEAD MAN.

A BUCKBOARD drawn by two horses rattled and rumbled down a steep mountain trail in the western Rockies. There were two occupants. One—the driver—was smoking an uptilted cigar. On the left side of his loud-checkered vest was a United States deputy marshal's badge. His companion, much younger, and with a ruddy, impudent face, was dressed as an ordinary cowpoke.

WW-1F

"Did I tell yuh, Johnny," asked the fat deputy, as he removed the cigar from his mouth with one hand and joggled the reins with the other, "did I ever tell yuh about the big gun fight I had down on the Platte? It was afore me an' yuh was work-in' on cases together, and——"

A gay chant from the youthful waddy interrupted the story:

"Was that the time yuh fired one shot
And killed the Dalton brothers?
When the bullet went plumb through 'em
both
And killed two dozen others?"

George Krumm groaned in disgust, threw away his cigar and glared indignantly at his companion.

"Yo're allus spoutin' off thet fool poetry, and mostly it's to make fun o' me!" he exclaimed in an injured tone. "To hear yuh, one would think I liked to brag or somethin'. I'm a modest man, yes, siree! If I wasn't, yuh wouldn't get much credit fer the jobs we've been on together."

Johnny Forty-five's only reply to this was an impudent raising of one eyebrow. Reaching in his shirt pocket, he drew out his "makings" and rapidly rolled a cigarette with his right hand. Instead of smoking this, however, he threw it away, to join Deputy Krumm's cigar stub.

"Thet's another thing yuh do, Johnny, thet riles me," said the fat deputy earnestly. "I wish yuh'd quit it. I know yuh don't smoke, but why waste tobacco like thet?"

The answer came in the usual cheery warble:

"I've told yuh many times, George,
It's to keep my fingers quick,
If I didn't keep 'em nimble,
I couldn't shoot a lick."

Johnny Forty-five grinned and tapped the handles of the two Colt six-guns he wore low on his trim thighs. They looked as if they had seen much use.

"Yuh ain't as good as me with guns yet, Johnny," said Krumm, "but yuh'll learn—yuh'll learn. But say, ain't it nice to be on a vacation fer once? A whole week's lay-off, we've got, with nothin' to do but eat, sleep, and do nothin'. Thet's what I call *somethin'*!"

"By the way, George," chuckled Johnny, "I hope we haven't lost our lunch. We hit some hard bumps back there."

Krumm almost turned pale. He looked around in alarm, and then finding the lunch basket still in the rear of the buckboard, he gave a sigh of relief.

"Yuh had me worried fer a minute," he said. "If we had lost thet lunch—— Whew! And us twenty miles from no place. And I'm awful hungry. I'm so hungry I could eat a—a Gila monster's egg, by gosh! What do yuh say we stop an' eat, Johnny?"

"There'll be a better place to camp down toward the creek," the young marshal suggested. "We're gettin' close, because I can hear the roar of it."

Krumm nodded and turned the team off the narrow trail down across a grassy flat toward the water. He had some difficulty in avoiding the rocks and wild berry bushes, but finally, after nearly overturning the vehicle, came within sight of Whitewater Creek.

They were now in a deep gulch, walled in by great cliffs of granite. It would have been hard to find a more lonesome or desolate spot for their camp. The horses were unhitched at the edge of a grove of quaking aspens and at once began to feed on the high, thick grass. Just ahead was the creek, its waters booming and churning like a mill race.

"Great!" cried Krumm triumphantly. "See what a nice campin' place I picked out? This reminds me of a camp I made on the Little Colorado. I was alone, and a band o' Apache Injuns surrounded me, and——"

"Not changin' the subject," said Johnny sweetly, "yuh'd better tie those hosses up before they wander too far away. If they'd stray, we'd be in a bad fix."

"Oh, all right, but I want to eat

first," replied the fat deputy, as he removed the basket of lunch from the buckboard with loving care. "Here!" He handed an empty coffee can to the younger officer. "Take this and go down to the creek fer some water. Boy! This is shore great—nothin' to do fer a week but rest, and take it easy. How I'll snooze to-night with that White-water singin' me to sleep."

"Somethin' sang yuh to sleep years ago, George, and yuh never did wake up," chuckled Johnny Forty-five, as he took the can and went toward the foaming White-water.

The stream was only three or four feet in depth in its deepest pools, but the current was so swift that it would have been difficult for a man to keep his footing. The spray flew up like smoke over the boulders that here and there thrust themselves up from the surface.

Near by was a tiny cove where the water was less agitated, and Johnny knelt at the edge of it and reached out to dip up a canful.

But as he did so, he almost dropped the can. In his surprise, he almost stumbled headlong into the pool.

There, looking at him from beneath the surface of the water, with glazed eyes that seemed to be staring, fishlike, into his own, was the face of a dead man!

CHAPTER II.

ON THE TRAIL OF MURDER.

FOR a few moments, Johnny Forty-five was too much shocked to find his voice. It was a horrible spectacle, even if he had been prepared for it. The face was deathly white, and the head was rocked slowly from side to side by the motion of the current.

"Krumm!" shouted the young deputy, finally, over the roar of the water. "Oh, Krumm, come here! I've found something!"

Krumm was already munching at a sandwich he had taken from the basket, but he came with alacrity.

"What ish it? Gold?" he sang back, his mouth too full to talk distinctly. "I hope ish gold—we'll be rich!"

"Take a look," invited Johnny, as the fat deputy came up. "What do *you* think?"

Krumm took one look at the ghastly thing in the creek and gave a loud squawk of dismay. In his horror he almost lost his footing, then he floundered for a minute on the slippery grass and finally came to a stop at a safe distance away.

"This is t-t-terrible," he stuttered. "Awful! Is he dead?"

"Yore-mind shorely runs
In a very queer path.
Did yuh think fer a minute
He was takin' a bath?"

George Krumm's double chins quivered; so did his small brown mustache. "O' course not," he sputtered indignantly. "But—but what are we goin' to do about it?"

"Lend a hand and we'll pull him out," suggested Johnny. "I don't think it'll do any good, though, to try and bring him to. He wasn't drowned."

"What do yuh mean, wasn't drowned?"

Johnny pointed to a little crimson thread that was hanging through the clear water from the body. It was evident that the dead man had been shot first, and then thrown into the creek. Krumm's round face turned to an even paler shade.

"It's what I thought," muttered Johnny Forty-five, when the body

had been dragged, with some difficulty, to the bank of the creek. "He's been shot in the back."

The body was that of a man past middle age, clothed in a soaked brown shirt, black vest, and blue trousers. One of the boots was missing and had probably been torn off by the force of the water.

"How do yuh know he was shot in the back?" Krumm wanted to know as he pointed to a wound that gaped widely, just over the man's breastbone. "The bullet went clear through him, so how do yuh know? We can't have guesswork in our profession, yuh know."

"It's not guesswork," said Johnny. "The wound in the back here is the smaller—the bullet expanded on the way through as lead always does. Yuh can see that the back wound is only about the size of a dime. Another thing, amigo—he hasn't been dead very long. Just a few hours. See how limp he is?"

Krumm also looked limp, and he glanced around him uneasily.

"Well, I reckon there ain't anything we can do about it, is thar?" he asked hopefully.

Johnny made no reply, for he was examining something he hadn't seen before—a deputy sheriff's star, pinned to the under side of the dead hombre's vest.

"Whoever did this don't like officers," he muttered.

Johnny Forty-five was already angry, and now he set his jaw in a hard line. They weren't dealing, here, with a slain desperado, but with an officer of the law. It was murder, and Johnny had no sympathy with murder.

"This killin' took place somewhere above, and the body washed down," he said, as he got to his feet. "It couldn't have been more than a mile or two above, either, for it wouldn't

have been possible for it to float so far without gettin' caught in some snag, or backwashed into a cove like this one."

"I *told* yuh we shouldn't have come this a way fer our vacation, Johnny," Krumm almost wailed. "If we'd——"

"Our lay-off is over, George," said Johnny Forty-five quietly. His voice was very matter of fact. "We've got to get to work."

"What!" cried Krumm, highly indignant. "Why, we've got our official papers from the marshal's office givin' us a week's rest!"

"I know," nodded Johnny grimly. "But this is an emergency. I'm goin' to do my best to bring this man's killer—or killers—to justice or know the reason why."

"Only thing we can do," protested Krumm feebly, "is to bury this hombre, and report the crime later—after our vacation."

Johnny scratched his head, grinned, and then broke into song:

"It'll do us no harm
To go over the ground,
Let's walk up the creek
For a big look around."

Krumm shook his head and regarded Johnny as a cow would regard a locoed calf.

"I'm on a vacation," he snorted. "I'm takin' a lay-off, no matter what yuh do yoreself. O' course, if it would do any good it would be different. But we ain't goin' to find no murderers by goin' up the creek a-lookin'."

"Yo're not afraid, are yuh, George?" chuckled Johnny, as he adjusted his gun belts.

"Me?" snorted the fat deputy. "George Krumm afraid? I should say not! Thar ain't nothin' in this world or the next thet ol' George Krumm is afraid of. No, siree! I'm just hun-

gry, thet's all, and I'm goin' to eat my supper. See yuh later."

And with a dignified stride, his chest thrust out importantly, Deputy Marshal George Krumm turned his back on Johnny and headed for the lunch basket.

Johnny Forty-five mechanically rolled a cigarette, tossed it unsmoked into the creek and started up the Whitewater.

He knew the difficulty of the task that faced him. For all he knew he might, as Krumm had said, be on the wrong track and a wild-goose chase. But somehow, he didn't think so. The state of the body had proved that it hadn't been long in the water or long dead. Upstream were the killers—or killer—he was almost certain of it!

The going was not easy, due to the heavy growth of vines and small timber that came down to the very edge of the water. There were boulders of all sizes in his path, as well, and every few yards he had to crawl over dead tree trunks or push his way through thickets that scratched his face and hands.

"For all I know," he muttered, "I'll have to back-track, too, on the other side of the creek. There's no tellin' which side of the Whitewater the body o' thet pore hombre was thrown from."

He pushed his way along the creek for a quarter of a mile before finding what he sought. He gave an exclamation of satisfaction at the sight of freshly broken vines, and disturbed earth. It disappeared at the very edge of the water, and he saw the prints made by several pairs of boots, also.

It was at this spot that the gruesome burden had been thrown into the water. Now to follow the murder trail! He was sure now, that he wouldn't have far to go.

CHAPTER III.

BLACK KRUGGER'S GANG.

WARILY now, Johnny followed the dragging trail through the rank grass and vines. At this point, the course of Whitewater Creek took a sudden turn, and he was astonished to see a small mine building fifty yards ahead of him, a short distance above the level of the water.

By the looks of it, it had long been abandoned, for its coat of red paint was peeling off, the windows were glassless, and here and there boards were missing. A sign, much faded, had been printed along one side:

GOLDEN NUGGET TUNNEL.

Below it was an ancient dump of waste rock and ore, much weathered and grass-grown. The building was built tight against the cliff, and seemed to connect directly with the tunnel.

"This is queer," Johnny thought, and with attentive eyes he examined the scene, hoping to see some signs of human life. He saw none. As far as outward appearances went, nobody had been in the vicinity for twenty years.

Johnny, though, knew better. There were tracks of men and of horses, and very fresh ones, too. He started slowly toward the mine building, but as he did so, he happened to look down. At his feet was a splash of crimson!

It was here that the murdered deputy sheriff had met his fate! The scent was getting very warm. Johnny knelt to examine the stain on the ground.

At that moment, a harsh voice shouted out above the rushing of the creek:

"Up with yore mitts, kid! We got the sights lined on yuh!"

Taken by surprise, and off balance as he was, Johnny whirled about and jumped to his feet, his hands sliding with lightning speed toward his guns. But before he reached them, it flashed over him that to finish that draw would mean death. At least a half dozen hombres had their guns already drawn, and they had the drop!

A group of men who had been hiding within the mine shack just above, had suddenly come into view. They had seen his approach, had hid from sight, and now that he was easy prey they had "covered him plenty."

Johnny had never seen a tougher-looking bunch of desperadoes. Most of them were unshaven and some wore their hair nearly to their shoulders. All were heavily armed, some having Winchesters and sawed-off shotguns as well as six-guns.

The young deputy marshal raised his hands above his head, outwardly cool and as impudent looking as ever. But his heart was pounding—not with fear, although he knew he was in grave danger, but because he knew these were the treacherous killers he had been trying to trace.

His chant was as carefree as usual:

"My hands are up, as yuh can see,
They're up, as yuh demand it,
I hope yuh all won't shoot at once,
I really couldn't stand it."

"Blamed right, yuh couldn't stand it!" snarled the big, dark-complexioned hombre who had spoken first. "What do yuh mean by makin' thet loco rhyme? Are yuh crazy?"

"He's not one o' thet posse, Black, thet's shore," said another of the desperadoes.

"Looks like just a wanderin' cow-poke," grunted a third. "He's harmless—only a kid."

The swarthy face of the big desperado relaxed a trifle, but it was still cruel and ugly enough. Judging from appearances, he was the leader of this band of seven.

"I've a notion to ream him, at thet!" he growled, deep in his throat. "If I thought he was the law, I'd shore——"

"Aw, he can't be an officer," guffawed one of the other outlaws. "An officer would have more sense than what he has. Send him on his way, with a few slugs at his heels to hurry him up."

"Yuh know who I am, *mucha-cho?*" demanded the dark hombre, glaring at Johnny Forty-five with inflamed, piggish eyes. "I'm Black Krugger! Thet mean anything to yuh?"

It meant a great deal to Johnny, who was well posted on men wanted by the law—especially by Uncle Sam's law. Krugger had an evil record, was a murderer ten times over, and had repeatedly robbed government mail. So this was *his* gang!

But Johnny made no sign that this bit of information meant anything to him.

"What was yuh doin' yere?" rasped Krugger, still toying with the hammer of his Colt single-action.

"I was just lookin' at this stain on the ground here," Johnny drawled, with every appearance of innocence.

"Well, I just shot a rabbit. Anyway, it's none o' yore business!" snarled "Black" Krugger.

"The kid wasn't half bad on thet draw he almost made on us," whispered one of the outlaws in his chief's ear. "It was purty fast. He looks like he could handle his guns. Maybe we could use him, Black."

Johnny Forty-five had been taken for just an ordinary drifting waddy before. He looked it. And as he

seldom wore his little silver badge of authority where it could be seen, he seemed nothing other than a cowboy—and a not too bright one, at that.

Black Krugger pondered for a moment.

"Whar yuh work, kid?" he asked. "Who fer?"

"For a pretty big outfit," admitted Johnny, "but I'm on a vacation now."

"Then mebbe yuh'd like to throw in with us," suggested Krugger, his scowl fading to an unpleasant grin. "I'll put my cards face up on the table—we're dodgin' the law."

"It's always been a funny thing,
That those who do the dodgin'
Always wind up soon or late
With jail-house board an' lodgin'."

"It ain't so with us," grunted Krugger, with an oath, and the others exchanged amused glances. Yes, this *muchacho* was certainly full of loco!

"We don't do so bad," said Krugger, after he had recovered from Johnny's burst of poetry. "We crack down lots o' dinero in our leetle game. To-night, fer instance, we aire goin' to ride to Powder City and—— Wait a minute, afore I say too much. Are yuh in with us, or not?"

Johnny pushed back his battered Stetson and scratched his head. At least he could stall for time and find out as much as possible. He was getting valuable information, and although they still had their guns on him, he could see that they were anxious for him to join the gang.

"How do yuh get by the law so well?" he asked.

"Huh!" sneered Black Krugger scornfully. "It's blasted leetle we care fer the law. Why, a sheriff's posse is chasin' us this afternoon.

We ain't worryin'. Thar's reasons why they don't nab us. I allus got plenty o' fresh hosses cached at a ranch near yere. What do yuh say, kid? It's easy money."

Johnny seemed to be thinking it over. Then, carelessly, he reached for his makings, rolled a brown cigarette and to the outlaws' astonishment, flipped it away.

"I'll join the gang, hombre, and join it plenty," he drawled. "What's the raid to be at Powder City?"

"The Giant Gold Stamp Mill," leered Black Krugger. "Thar's a quarter million dollars in bullion waitin' thar fer the first hombres to come along with nerve enough!"

CHAPTER IV.

KRUMM'S BIG MISTAKE.

IN the meantime, George Krumm had been eating his supper. His appetite was tremendous. After eating all the sandwiches, half the roast meat, and finished with a half dozen hard-boiled eggs and a quart of hot coffee, he felt almost satisfied, and rose with a sigh of relief.

"Whew! I feel better," he said, as he lighted a long cigar. "It's a good thing I'm on a careful diet these days, or there wouldn't be much left for Johnny. Where is Johnny?"

He had thought that Johnny would be returning long before this, as the shadows were lengthening fast and the sun was low.

"Thet's what he gets for runnin' off on a wild-goose chase," he muttered to himself. Then he raised his voice in a loud shout: "Johnny! Oh, Johnny! Supper's ready!"

But Johnny was not in view, although Krumm went to the creek and looked up the tree-grown bank as far as he could.

"John Socrates Forty-five!" yelled the fat deputy. But there was no

answer except the continual rumble of the swift-running Whitewater Creek.

"Reckon I'll have to go after him," Krumm grumbled. "Havin' a lay-off with that youngster is worse than bein' on a case with him! Allus gettin' into mischief!"

Krumm found it even more difficult than Johnny to worm through the underbrush, because of his huge size. But by grunting and puffing he managed slowly to get over the ground. He was headed upstream.

After ten minutes or so, Krumm reached a sharp bend. As he did so, his eyes widened in surprise. There, in front of a small mine shack, was Johnny Forty-five, talking to six—no, seven hard-looking men!

It wasn't too late to beat a retreat, and Krumm thought seriously of it. But then, on second thought, he decided that everything was all right. Johnny wasn't a prisoner, and no fighting was going on. That meant, he was sure, that these hom-bres were friends.

"He's prob'ly met a bunch of miners and is askin' 'em about the murdered man," Krumm reasoned. "I'll just go on up thar, too. Johnny don't need to think he's the whole shootin'-match in this investigation I'm makin'!"

The fat deputy gave his checkered vest a hitch—so his United States deputy marshal's badge would be in full view—and walked boldly into view, his chest swelling with dignity.

"Hello, Johnny!" he sang out loudly.

Johnny turned, his heart sinking. Of all times for Krumm to appear. The black eyebrows of Black Krugger went up, and the others stared.

"Howdy, gents," Krumm greeted, with a dignified bow to the desperado gang. "I see thet yuh've already met Johnny."

Johnny tried to give Krumm a warning signal, but poor George plunged heedlessly on. He liked to talk, and here was his chance.

"I suppose he's been tellin' yuh all about the body of the murdered jasper I found in the creek," the fat deputy boasted. "Johnny is my assistant—helps me a good deal, though he's a lot to learn."

"Yeah?" snarled Black Krugger, showing his yellow fangs. His evil eyes were now glaring at George Krumm's deputy badge.

"Yes, thet's so," said Krumm, with dignity. "I happen to be Deputy Marshal George Krumm, of the United States marshal's office. Yuh've probably heard of me—the 'Terror of all Evildoers,' some call me. Others know me simply as 'Fearless Krumm.'"

The game was up as far as Johnny was concerned, and George, too, if he had only known it. But he did not, and kept on talking:

"Yes, siree, thet's me—ol' George Krumm. Why the other day the chief from Washington was tellin' me, 'George,' says he, 'George, I shore am proud of yuh. I wish my men were all Krumms.'"

"He said thet, did he?" sneered Krugger, in a tone of ice.

He was allowing Krumm to get very close, and the fat deputy was too busy talking to notice that they all had their guns drawn.

"Yes, and I——" began Krumm again.

"Thet's enough!" snapped out Krugger, with an oath. "Stick 'em up!"

And he jammed his six-gun barrel with such force into Krumm's ribs that the fat deputy reeled backward and flopped to the ground.

At the same instant, Johnny attempted to draw his own guns, knowing that the game was up. His

draw was bewilderingly fast, but several of the desperadoes had been watching him like hawks, and now they leaped at him, their guns streaking pencils of lurid flame!

Br-r-rang-bang! One of Johnny's Colts flared and then the other!

A long-haired outlaw crumpled in his tracks, just as he was in the act of firing. He fell with a smothered yell.

Johnny felt the deadly *whing-ping* of a .45 slug as it howled past his ear. He had ducked low or he would have been killed almost at once. As it was, four of the outlaws rushed him at close range, beating at his head with their guns. It was too close now to fire successfully.

Just as the young deputy marshal fired again, he felt his weapons seized and wrenched partly from his hands. At the same instant he was knocked flat by a terrific blow from a rifle butt!

"Thet's it—nab him! Brain the whelp!" snarled Black Krugger in a fury.

Johnny tried to fight, but he was too much outnumbered. He felt his hands grow so weak that he could no longer cling to his guns. He struggled to a sitting position, but was knocked down again. It was over.

"Now sing yore funny songs, blast yuh!" sneered Krugger, taking Johnny's guns and throwing them far to one side. He gave the fallen deputy a heavy kick in the ribs, using his heels in order to inflict more punishment.

As for Krumm, he was in the hands of two of the desperadoes. One of them held to each arm—not to prevent Krumm from fighting so much as to keep him from falling down.

The fat deputy was in a pitiful condition, although unharmed. He

was shaking so hard that his teeth rattled like Spanish castanets. His knees clicked together, and his double chin was quaking like two dabs of gooseberry jelly.

"D-d-don't!" he groaned. "D-d-don't kill m-m-me."

"Shut yore mouth, yuh fat slob!" growled one of the gang harshly. "If yuh don't, I'll plug yuh!"

Krumm had allowed his gun to be taken from him and thrown away without a struggle. His face had faded to a paper-white, and great drops of perspiration were dripping from his forehead.

Both prisoners were jerked to their feet and held there. Johnny was weak, but game. He could still grin, but there wasn't much humor in it.

"Look in thet kid's clothes and see if yuh can find a U. S. badge!" rasped Black Krugger.

One of them searched through Johnny's pockets. He gave a yell of triumph and brought forth a small silver shield. It was a death warrant for Johnny, and Johnny knew it.

"Thought yuh was smart, didn't yuh, *muchacho?*" leered Krugger, with his piggish eyes flaming. "I'll admit yuh had us fooled, and we talked too much, but what yuh heard is plumb safe with yuh. Dead hombres don't talk, see?"

Johnny Forty-five hadn't forgotten his old tune, but there was a chilly ring to it now:

"Have yore way, yuh killers,
But listen to this rhyme,
When the U. S. law gets hold of you,
Yuh won't be worth a dime!"

Black Krugger grinned mockingly. "Thet ain't goin' to happen, young feller," he taunted. "Yuh know what I'm goin' to do with yuh two? Yuh burned down Taggart, one o'

my best men, kid, and yo're goin' to get the same!"

He leveled his Colt .45 at Johnny's unprotected chest and cocked the hammer. At the same moment, one of the others lifted his revolver to shoot George Krumm.

CHAPTER V.

TRAPPED UNDERGROUND.

THERE was a moan of terror from Krumm. His words came in a sputter: "D-d-don't shoot! I'll leave the country. I—I'll never tell about seein' yuh. Just l-l-let me go. I didn't d-d-do nothin' to yuh!"

"I thought yuh was such a brave officer!" leered Krugger. "All right, let's give it to 'em, boys!"

It looked like the end for both of them! Johnny made a final, desperate struggle, for he wanted to go out fighting. But they were holding him too tightly. Already the gun hammers of destruction were about to fall!

"Wait!" cried one of the men suddenly. "Don't shoot—don't make a noise. Look, Black—look over thar!"

Krugger turned, and he stiffened in alarm. On the other side of the creek, not far away, had appeared a band of some twenty horsemen. The riders hadn't seen the group at the mine shack as yet, for they were half hidden by trees.

"Thet posse ag'in!" whispered the outlaw leader hoarsely. "They shore must've heard them shots, a while ago. Hurry—into the shack. Bring the two deputies with us, and drag Taggart out o' sight, too!"

They had only a few yards to go, and Krumm and Johnny Forty-five were forcibly jerked out of sight within the crumbling old mine building. The body of the dead bandit, too, was pulled out of sight.

"Don't either of yuh blasted officers yell out!" warned Krugger. "If yuh do, we'll blow yore heads off!"

Krumm was just at the point of giving vent to a mighty whoop, for the posse was close enough to hear it easily. His lungs were extended, and his mouth open for a great yell, when he felt the cold muzzle of a Colt against his temple!

His breath went out of him with a sputtering noise like a collapsing balloon.

"I wasn't g-g-goin' to say nothin'," he gurgled.

"Yuh'd better not, Fatty," was the grim warning.

For a moment, it looked as if the posse would cross the creek and investigate the old mine. They hesitated for a minute near the opposite bank. Then the hombre in the lead waved his arm, and they continued on up a ravine and out of sight.

"Thet was a close call!" ejaculated Black Krugger, after five minutes had elapsed with no sign of the sheriff's party returning. "Let's get the hosses we've got hid above the shack, fork 'em, and get gone from yere, pronto."

"We'll make it *bueno*," grinned another of the gang. "It's gettin' dark now, and we'll just have time to get to Powder City fer our leetle job afore moonrise."

"What'll we do with these deputies now?" demanded a whiskered desperado. "We don't dare shoot with thet posse so close. Who's got a sharp knife?"

"O-o-o-oh!" groaned Krumm.

"I got a better idea," grunted the leader. "See thet door?"

He pointed to a very thick and heavy wooden door which stood half ajar, and opened into the old mine tunnel. The floor of the shack itself was bare, except for the ruins of a forge, and a few old and rusted

drills. A dank, moldy smell came from the square, dark opening of the underground workings.

"Yeah?" nodded one of the bandits. "It'd be a slower death than knifin', anyways—they'd die by inches in thar from hunger and thirst. It'd serve 'em right, too, dang 'em! But we ain't got no lock fer thet door."

"We don't need no lock. Thar's a padlock," growled Black Krugger, "and once it's closed, nothin' will get 'em out. Put 'em in."

Hanging in the hasp was a massive, somewhat rusted padlock of iron and brass. As Krugger had said, if it could be closed, they would surely be trapped underground, and trapped horribly.

"No! No!" protested Krumm fearfully. "We——"

But the gang meant business. The two prisoners were roughly pushed and kicked in through the gloomy portal. Krumm nearly had his fingers chopped off by the door as it banged on them, leaving them in pitchy darkness.

Then they heard a click. The padlock had been closed. Both Johnny and Krumm put their shoulders to the door and pushed with all their strength. It did not yield an inch.

"Well, we're here, and I guess that's that," said Johnny Forty-five.

Not the slightest ray of light shone under the huge door; it fitted tightly. They could hear the muffled voices of the Krugger gang for a minute or two, then the sounds died away into silence. They were alone!

"Johnny, look what yuh got me into!" said the fat deputy with a deep groan. "We'll starve, shore."

"Speakin' of starvin'," returned Johnny, "that reminds me. I didn't get my supper. Did you?"

"Well, not much," sighed Krumm. "I ate a little."

"If the worst comes to the worst," chuckled Johnny, "we can eat each other, and that's where I've got it on yuh. Yuh'd be a bigger meal for me than I would for you."

"Don't josh," bleated the fat deputy. "It sounds awful in a hole like this. And another thing—don't sing any o' them songs o' yores, whatever yuh do. I couldn't bear it!"

"All right, George, I'll do my best,
And try to keep from singin'.
But can I help it if my voice
With music is a-ringin'?"

His voice, however, sounded hollow and strange in the narrow confines of the tunnel. Echoes seemed to come back mockingly—death chants from the tomb.

Johnny wasn't so cheerful as he was trying to make Krumm believe, but he knew he must keep up the fat deputy's courage, if he had any. Their plight looked far from hopeful.

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH THE DARK.

THEY had no means of measuring the passage of time. And as Johnny didn't smoke, and as Krumm had used his last on his cigar, they had no matches.

"I left the match box at our camp, Johnny," Krumm said sorrowfully. "We'll have to die in the dark."

Again and again, they tried the door, but in vain. Nothing short of a dynamite charge would bring it down, for it was six inches thick. Digging under or around it was impossible, for on all sides was granite and quartz rock.

Time after time, Krumm yelled at the top of his lungs. He shouted until he was almost exhausted and his voice sank to a whisper.

"No use to try and attract the posse's attention," Johnny Forty-five told him. "They're miles away, and they couldn't hear us if they were within twenty yards."

Johnny was sniffing the air. Was it possible that a current of air was circulating through the old tunnel? It was by no means fresh—it had a musty, damp smell, but Johnny was sure of a slight breeze.

"Let's go, Krumm, and investigate," he decided.

"Go!" wailed the fat deputy. "Where to? Gosh! How wouldn't I like to!"

"Well, there's only one way to go," chuckled the younger officer. "We can't walk through the door or through rock, so let's try goin' back through the tunnel?"

"Not me," grunted Krumm. "If I'm goin' to die, I'll do it right here by the door, in case help comes I won't be lost in no mine. Yuh savvy as well as I do thet tunnels end somewhar—up against a wall o' solid rock."

"Maybe not," said Johnny cheerily.

"Yuh don't think this dinky little mine could go clear through the mountain, do yuh, and out on the other side?"

"It won't do any harm to find out," said the chanting deputy. "Come on."

Krumm didn't want to go, but he certainly hated to be left alone in the dark. Grumbling, he followed his younger companion as Johnny edged his way along the dank sides of the inky black passage.

"The tunnel isn't timbered, Krumm," said Johnny, his voice coming back magnified and echoing weirdly. "If it was, we might get a timber loose and use it to batter down the door with. Maybe we'll come to a section that's timbered."

"Yuh think of everything," grunted Krumm, "thet won't work."

It was slow, nerve-racking walking. Now and again the roof became so low that they had to bend nearly double. In spite of Johnny's repeated warnings, Krumm bumped his head and had to sit down and rest.

"I'll bet we've gone ten miles," muttered Krumm, after five minutes had passed.

"Only about a hundred yards, George," replied Johnny, "but that brings us that much nearer to something."

"A wall of solid rock," said the fat deputy disgustedly. "O-o-oh! What's thet?"

"A bat," chuckled Johnny. "It's wings brushed my face as it sailed by."

On and on they walked, sometimes splashing through little pools of water. Then Johnny turned and gripped Krumm's arm. "Look!" he cried, excitedly.

"My nerves won't stand it. What is it?" moaned the fat deputy.

"Stars!"

Far ahead of them, several unmistakable stars glittered through an opening. They hadn't realized how much time they had spent underground and that it was now night. When Krumm saw them he gave a loud whoop of relief and joy.

"We're saved!" he yelled. "I told yuh all the time, Johnny, thet we'd get out this way!"

In his anxiety to be the first to reach open air, he brushed by Johnny Forty-five, nearly knocking him down. His running footsteps sounded like a herd of stampeding buffalo. Then, very suddenly, they ceased!

"Help!"

"Great Scott, Krumm, what's happened to yuh?" gasped Johnny.

A moment before, he had seen George's bulky form looming against the glimmer of starlight. Now it was gone! Then it dawned over the horrified young deputy. There was a shaft near the end of the tunnel and the fat deputy had fallen into it!

Johnny edged his way forward on his hands and knees, and in a moment was at the edge of the pit. He could see a little now, thanks to the stars.

"George!" he cried. "Are yuh hurt? Answer me, amigo?"

He was horrified at this disaster, for after all, George Krumm meant a lot to Johnny.

"I'm dead!" came Krumm's wailing voice. "I mean, I'm dyin'! My back's broke, and all my bones are crushed."

Then Johnny gave a great laugh. George's feet were protruding from the brink of the shaft. The hole George had tumbled into was only three or four feet deep!

"Heck! Yo're not hurt." Johnny grinned, and with a heave, he pulled the groaning Krumm to the surface. Aside from a few bruises, the fat deputy was as good as ever, though it took him some time to admit it.

"If I wasn't so tough and hard-muscled," said Krumm, "I reckon it *would've* killed me. Gosh! But this fresh air feels good."

They had stumbled out into the starlight now, and found themselves on a high rock dump. Below them was a shadow ravine filled with rustling aspen trees.

"We're on the other side of the mountain," Johnny decided, as he looked for landmarks. "It won't take us long to circle the hill and go back for the horses."

"That's what I say!" cried George Krumm fervently. "Let's get the hosses and vamore from this country, pronto."

"I mean get the hosses and ride 'em to Powder City!" said Johnny. "The moon doesn't come up till nine. It's early yet. We'll have time to get there and prevent that robbery."

"W-w-what?" stammered the fat deputy. "Y-yuh mean——"

"I've got a little business
With Blackie Krugger's gang,
They'll either choke, in powder smoke,
Or on a rope they'll hang."

"B-b-but, Johnny——"

Johnny, however, didn't stop to listen. At top speed, he picked his way over the boulders and through the trees. Krumm, much against his will, followed. It was either that or be left alone, which the big deputy didn't relish.

"There's somethin' we haven't seen before, George," said Johnny Forty-five, when they were on the other side of the hill and near the creek again. He pointed to several corrals and a small ranch building nestled down in a hollow a few hundred yards from the spot where they had camped.

They didn't halt, but kept on. Passing the bend in the Whitewater, they reached their camping spot. There was the buckboard, but the horses were gone!

"Oh! I forgot to tie 'em," muttered the fat deputy.

CHAPTER VII.

KRUMM SLIPS AGAIN.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE stopped to roll a cigarette and tried to decide what to do. Their saddles were still in the rear end of the buckboard, for they had taken them along in order to ride, when the vehicle couldn't be used. But saddles without horses weren't of much use.

"There's not much time to lose," snapped Johnny, flinging aside the unused smoke impatiently. "We can probably get hosses at that little ranch we saw back there. Run on ahead, and I'll carry the saddles."

"*Bueno, Johnny,*" agreed the fat deputy, glad that so much work was taken off his shoulders. "Carry the hulls over, and by the time yuh get thar, I'll have the hosses borried."

He crashed on through the underbrush as fast as his big legs could take him, and in a minute or two, he saw the square of lamplight that marked the little ranch house. Then he passed a corral.

"Thar's hosses yere, all right," he muttered. "A lot of 'em. Funny that a little ranch should keep so many on hand."

Reaching the clearing, he lumbered awkwardly to the door. Except for the light within, all seemed deserted.

"This is United States Deputy Marshal George Krumm knockin'!" he shouted authoritatively, as he rapped on the door with his beefy knuckles. "An officer of the law! Yes, siree. Let me in."

He heard a quick footstep inside, then a pause. Finally he heard the latch unfastened, and the door swung inward.

"Come in," invited a cold, metallic voice.

Krumm swelled his chest importantly and swaggered in. The rancher was staring at him through half-shut eyes.

"I've got to have a couple hosses," announced Krumm. "I'm known as 'Fearless Krumm'—expect yuh've heard o' me. I'm on a serious mission to-night—goin' to prevent a big gold bullion robbery at Powder City."

"Yuh are, huh?" grunted the rancher.

The ranchman was a huge, barrel-chested hombre of forty. A beard hid his face, except for his high cheek bones and narrow eyes. If the fat deputy had looked closer at those shifty, malevolent eyes he wouldn't have talked so fast—or so much.

"Yes," went on Deputy Krumm, "I'll show those fellers that they can't—"

It happened so quickly that poor George was dumfounded, and then terror-stricken. The rancher reached behind the opened door and pulled a sawed-off, double-barreled scattergun from a shelf. With a furious oath, he jammed it against the fat deputy's belt line!

"D-d-don't do that!" wailed Krumm, when he got his breath. His pudgy arms went toward the ceiling.

"I'm goin' to blow yuh apart, hombre, right yere and now!" snarled the rancher. "I hate officers, blast yuh all! And yere's whar yuh get it!"

Only the wall he had sagged against kept Krumm from toppling to the floor in his fear. He shut his eyes. Already the ranchman had pulled the hammers back! He was about to shoot!

Then, like a whirlwind, Johnny Forty-five burst into the room! He dived at the murderous rancher like a pouncing wild cat!

There was a yell of amazement and fear from the whiskered hombre as he whirled the shotgun away from Krumm and threw down on Johnny!

"What th—"

The rancher thought a hurricane had hit him. He did manage to shoot, and one barrel of the sawed-off exploded like a tremendous clap of thunder. There was a flash of red, and a gust of black smoke.

Buckshot rattled through the room like hail.

But none of them had gone through Johnny Forty-five. He had struck up the gun just in time, and now was hanging desperately to it with his right hand.

"Let go, dang yuh!" snarled the bearded hombre.

But to his surprise, he couldn't shake Johnny loose! He was a giant in size, but no match for the youthful deputy's wiry strength. Johnny still held to the gun, but now he whirled his weight to his right foot, and struck out at the rancher's jaw with all his power!

It was a tremendous, hooking punch, for all of Johnny's fighting weight went with it!

Smash! There was an echoing *smack* as the whiskered hombre crashed head-first into the opposite wall!

He collapsed into a heap like a broken sack of grain.

Johnny picked up the sawed-off gun that had dropped to the floor and turned to Krumm with a grin. He broke into his favorite chant:

"Wake up, George, it's over now,
So pull yore head from the sand,
Aren't yuh goin' to give me a cheer.
Or give me a nice big hand?"

The fat deputy opened his eyes, blinked, and opened them again. He staggered from the wall across the floor and steadied himself with an effort. In a minute, he was himself again.

"We shore whipped him, didn't we?" he chortled, with the color returning to his cheeks. "This reminds me of a battle I had down on the Rio, single-handed. Seventeen outlaws had me cornered, and I——"

"No time to talk now," chuckled Johnny. "Our amigo, here, is com-

in' to. I'd like to know what this is all about."

The whiskered rancher had managed to get to a sitting position, though his head was rolling groggily from side to side. There was a crestfallen, astonished look on his bruised face, when he saw Johnny Forty-five staring down at him.

"Wh-what hit me?" he muttered.

"That isn't so important as to tell me the whole truth, hombre," said Johnny grimly. "I want to know why yuh started the gun play. Talk freely—and fast! Are yuh in with the Black Krugger gang?"

There was a sullen silence from the rancher. He shook his head with a scowl.

"Try and find out," he sneered finally. "I ain't talkin' none."

Johnny took the double-barreled, double-triggered scattergun and deliberately poked it into the rancher's face. He put it so close that the still smoking muzzle touched the whiskered desperado right between the eyes.

The rancher flinched back, and then his lips twisted into a sneer behind his beard.

"Yuh can't bluff me," he mocked. "I know danged well yuh wouldn't shoot."

Johnny Forty-five's eyebrows went up. He smiled, and pulled the back trigger of the sawed-off!

But instead of an explosion there was only an empty click.

"Well, isn't that peculiar?
My nerves are all a-jigger,
I got in an awful hurry,
And pulled the wrong trigger!"

Cold sweat burst out on the rancher's forehead, and he gave a loud yell.

"Don't pull the other one!" he screeched. "I'll tell! I'll tell! I was in with Krugger's gang, all right.

Hyar's whar they hide their hosses. I'm guilty! I'm guilty!"

"*Bueno*, hombre, I thought yuh were," said Johnny cheerfully. "That little confession will put yuh in jail where yuh belong. Yuh know, fella, I knew which trigger to pull, all the time. I bluffed yuh, after all."

"I'm a fool," said the rancher, with an oath.

"Very freely admitted," laughed Johnny. "Krumm, tie him up good with that rope over there. We'll leave him here to think it over, while we catch a couple of the outlaws' own cayuses and trail 'em into Powder City."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN ROBBERS STRIKE.

THE moon was just an hour high when six riders walked their horses at a leisurely pace through the town of Powder City—a mining settlement at the forks of White-water and Ash creeks.

Strange to say, these horsemen did not stop at any of the numerous saloons along the well-lighted main street, but continued northward until they reached a dark and deserted alley, where they halted.

"Ain't no use to mask, boys," said their leader. "We won't leave nary one of 'em to tell the tale."

It was Black Krugger, his cold, hard face bleaker and more evil than ever. His men were heavily armed and eager for the raid.

"We've sure waited about long enough," grunted one of them. "When do we hit 'em, Black?"

"Right now, and not *poco tiempo!*" cried Krugger, with a harsh laugh. "Hyar's whar we collect a cool quarter million in gold bars. Thet bullion has been accumulatin' fer two months. Foller me."

Going into a twisted street, they neared a huge frame structure in which lights were burning in a few of the windows. It was the Giant Gold Stamp Mill, where most of the gold ore produced in the district was treated for the extraction of the precious metal. As the stamps were worked by water power, a great wooden flume led down to it from the near-by mountain. The stamps were not running at this hour, and all was quiet and peaceful.

At one spur of the big building a very tall, thin smokestack rose upward like a finger pointing at the moon. It was held by many guy wires. This marked the assay office and strong room of the plant, and it was toward this end of the building that the six marauders trotted.

In front was a long hitch rail. The robbers did not bother to tie their mounts, as they were well trained in such business, but merely threw the reins over the rail when they silently dismounted.

"Now fer it," said Krugger significantly. "We've only got five hombres to contend with—three strong-room guards, and two watchmen. Allus remember our motto—shoot first, while the other hombre's thinkin' what to do."

A flight of six steep steps led up to the door, and Krugger walked up these noisily. The others followed with guns ready, very silently and cautiously, giving the impression to any listener inside that only one man was calling.

Everywhere except here the moon was bright, but the other wing of the building cast a deep shadow.

Krugger tried the door gently. It was locked. Then, holding his revolver just out of the line of sight, but ready for instant use, he knocked sharply.

"Sorry!" exclaimed a voice inside.

"Yuh can't come in at this hour without a pass."

"But I've got a pass," Krugger said, in a pleasant voice—or a voice meant to be pleasant.

There was a brief hesitation, and then the door opened a foot or so. A man's body was thus brought partly into view. It was a gray-haired man with a bushy mustache. A gun was strapped around his waist, but there was no suspicion on his weather-beaten face, only curiosity.

"I'll have to see the pass," he began. "I can't——"

"Yuh can *feel* it!" snarled Krugger, showing his teeth like a mad coyote. And at the same instant, his gun flashed brilliantly against the dark background.

The old watchman, shot through the throat, pitched headlong past Krugger and down the steps, just missing some of the desperadoes in his fall. He landed in a motionless heap near the hitch rack.

"Let's go!" shouted Krugger.

In a flash he was in the building, and his men were trooping in after him. The Black Krugger gang had struck fast and well!

They were now within the stronghold, but the battle had just begun. One of the watchmen was accounted for, but another, and three guards armed with rifles, remained.

Taken by surprise as they were, the defenders put up a gallant resistance. The sound of the shot, and the trample of feet had alarmed them, and immediately they rushed into the fight.

At right angles to the main door, on the left, was the door of the bullion room, and the guards opened fire from there. The other watchman, who had been making the rounds of the rest of the building, was in the other wing near the

stamps and ore chutes, and he came running with a gun in his hand.

"Give it to 'em, blast 'em!" rasped Krugger.

It was six against four now, and the bandits knew just what they were doing, while the defenders didn't. One of the outlaws whirled to meet the oncoming watchman, while the others surged forward into the strong room, shooting as they went.

The watchman staggered to one side as first one slug and then another burned through his body. He fell and vainly tried to get up again. His gun flared redly, but the bullet droned wild.

"Take another one, dang yuh!" grinned his killer, and sent a third shot crashing through his head.

In the meantime, Krugger himself had dropped the first treasure guard, shooting him through the chest and then trampling over the body with his feet. The others were in the strong room now, their guns beating a grim *rat-a-tat-tat* that shook the walls, and filled the building with swirling clouds of blue smoke.

Krugger's men were all crack gunmen, deadly accurate and extremely fast. The remaining two brave fighters had no chance against them; all the advantage was with the attackers.

Only one guard remained on his feet now, and he had been hit in the leg. The other had dropped lifeless, pierced by a dozen bullets.

Thus far, not one of the bandits had been hit, but the last survivor, crippled as he was, and holding to the wall with one hand, sent a bullet into one of the killers, striking him between the eyes and killing him instantly.

He paid for it with his own life, for Krugger turned his barking gun

on him. It streamed flame, and with an unhappy cry, the last of the strong-room guards slid face downward to the floor. The others, in their frenzy of hate, continued to shoot slugs into him.

"Turn off yore Colts, men!" ordered Krugger, with a grin. "No use wastin' any more ammunition. Here's the bullion. Now all we got to do is get it out."

"Thet safe is locked, shore," grumbled one of the killers, walking forward through the thick smoke to inspect the huge strong box. It was of a very old-fashioned type, but very massive.

"Which one of yuh brought the sledge hammer?" Black Krugger demanded.

One of the men produced a short-handled, twelve-pound sledge and handed it to his chief.

"Watch," Krugger grunted.

With one mighty, well-placed blow he knocked off the combination knob. Another, and still another blow fell against the exposed mechanism. Suddenly the door swung outward. The bandits gasped. Their eyes brightened with greed.

"A quarter of a million," chuckled Krugger.

It was gold! The safe was stacked half full of it, all in heavy yellow bars in neat piles. The reflected lamplight shone brightly upon it and was reflected back in rich glints and gleams.

"Rake it up, boys," chuckled the bandit leader. "Grab the gold and let's go!"

But at that instant, just as they were rushing for the opened safe, a fresh, boyish voice chanted out like the jingle of steel on steel:

"I'm not very big,
And not very old,
But yuh'll get lead,
Instead of gold— *Stick 'em up!*"

CHAPTER IX.

THE BATTLE IN THE STAMP MILL.

WHIRLING, they were bewildered and amazed to see Johnny Forty-five, with a grim smile on his face, and two of his Colt namesakes in his hands, standing in the doorway.

And right behind him, but with a rather sickly smile, his eyes wide, was Deputy United States Marshal Krumm. His gun was shaking violently.

They had recovered their guns, found horses, and had galloped at top speed to Powder City, but hadn't reached the mill in time to save the guards. Johnny, however, was in plenty of time to fight!

Needless to say, Krugger's gang didn't stick 'em up. They were far too desperate for that. Not only was a huge fortune at stake, but they knew their punishment if they were caught—hanging, and in short order.

For a split second, they stared at Johnny and Krumm in utter amazement. If two ghosts had walked in from Boot Hill they couldn't have been more upset, for they believed them locked away safely in the abandoned tunnel.

But they lost no time in opening fire. Krugger, livid with rage, was the first to shoot. Johnny was his target.

But Johnny Forty-five knew a thing or two about gun fighting himself! He crouched low, and the slug from Krugger's flaming gun whistled over his head. At the same instant, the others rushed him and Krumm, shooting to kill!

Rat-a-tat! Winks of crimson fire winked on and off, and on again from Johnny's six-guns.

The smoke rolled up thicker than ever, and the fighters were only

moving shadows now. The impacts of the whizzing lead, and the mighty concussions of the guns made a terrific din.

"Drop that *muchacho!*" screeched Krugger insanely.

His men were trying, but that was all. Johnny, moving like a ghost in the seething powder fumes, wasn't easy to connect with, especially as his own hoglegs were clattering destruction.

First one of the robbers dropped, and then another, both shot cleanly through the heart. It was no time for half measures now! It was kill or be killed, with no time to pull any shots! Krugger missed again.

Br-r-ee! A bullet just missed Johnny's throat, and he felt the sharp sting as it grazed the skin.

He whirled to drop the hombre who had fired it. To his astonishment, it was Krumm!

"For Pete's sake, George——" yelled Johnny, but his words were lost in the booming of revolvers.

George Krumm wasn't shooting at Johnny on purpose. But his hand was shaking like an aspen, and although he was doing his best, he wasn't of much help to the law. One of his bullets screamed into the ceiling, another into the floor, almost missing Krumm's own foot, which was a large target.

Only Krugger, and two others remained on their feet now, but they still had the deputies outnumbered. Krugger, at heart the most cowardly of all his gang, tried to escape. Krumm blocked his path.

Krugger fired point-blank at the fat deputy's face! Just one thing saved Krumm—he had wilted, when he saw Krugger diving toward him, and he collapsed in a half faint. Krugger, unable to check himself in time, sprawled over Krumm's body and fell heavily, cracking his head

against the door. He rolled over, stunned.

"I got Black Krugger!" bleated Krumm triumphantly, when he realized what had happened. "I got him!"

One of the other bandits, finding his gun empty, also attempted to escape. He took George Krumm on the point of the chin and sent him down like a log!

He dashed for the outside door, the gold forgotten in his haste to escape. Johnny turned to follow him, but the remaining desperado headed him off. He jammed his gun into Johnny's side and pulled the trigger!

There was a dull click. His gun, too, was empty, for the desperadoes had fired many shots during the raid and there had been no time to reload.

Johnny could have killed the ruffian with ease, but he took no advantage. He sideswiped him with his gun barrel and sent him staggering back into the safe.

"I'll get yuh, blast yuh, yuh little whelp!" snarled the bandit, and he reached down and picked up the heavy sledge hammer.

Johnny, willing enough to have it out, seized one of the bars of gold bullion—the only thing he could lay his hands on.

There was a metallic clang as the two strange weapons met in mid-air. The skull-crushing blow of the hammer was deflected, although it almost took one of Johnny's ears with it as it swished by.

Again the desperado tried to land, but Johnny was too fast for him. The bar of gold thudded solidly against his head and with a grunt he folded up like a broken accordion and sagged to the floor.

"Who's next!" Johnny sang out.

Nobody, it seemed, was next. On

the floor near the doorway was Krumm, still in a daze and smiling a bit foolishly. Krugger, it appeared, was still in dreamland.

Remembering the hombre who had smashed Krumm down, and fled, Johnny followed at top speed, wondering if he had had time to make a get-away through the outer door.

As he reached it, however, he was surprised to see a group of excited men pouring in. For an instant, Johnny thought that more bandits had arrived, and he almost opened fire. Then he realized, seeing a sheriff's badge on the foremost man, that these were officers!

"Did any one get out this way?" Johnny gasped.

"Why, no, but—but who are yuh? Who in Sam Hill are yuh?" he stared at Johnny in amazement.

"No time—to talk now," cried Johnny as he raced past them into the big main room of the mill.

"If yo're a bandit——" began the sheriff, astonished. "Hey, stop!"

But Johnny Forty-five did not stop! His work wasn't quite finished yet!

As he rushed into the semidarkness of the big stamping room, he saw the last of the Krugger bandits trying to escape through an ore chute at the far end.

Johnny holstered his guns and was after him like a jack rabbit.

CHAPTER X.

END OF A PERFECT EVENING.

JOHNNY reached him just as he endeavored to plunge through head-first. Catching him by the ankles, Johnny chanted gayly:

"Come on up, yuh rascal,
No longer should yuh dangle,
Slide out with yore hands high up,
Or we will shorely tangle!"

The bandit wanted no more tangling—not with such a foe as Johnny Forty-five. With a disgusted oath, he let go, and Johnny dragged him up to the floor of the mill, where he deposited him, none too gently, in a sitting position.

"Sheriff," sang out the young deputy marshal, "here's a customer for yuh!"

The sheriff and his posse came up at a run, wide-eyed and bewildered. The sheriff himself was so excited that he fumbled for five minutes with the handcuffs before he could get them over the captured desperado's wrists.

Then he looked wonderingly at the cheerfully grinning, rather impudent young deputy.

"Say!" he gasped. "Who in heck are yuh? Seems to me like yuh've cleaned out the whole Black Krugger gang, from what I can see!"

"My name is John Socrates Forty-five," sighed Johnny. "Just a-workin', off and on, for Uncle Sam."

"Well, I want to shake yore hand, young man!" boomed the sheriff joyfully. "In cleanin' out the Krugger gang yuh've done my county a big service. Why, I've been chasin' 'em myself for months, and only today they killed one of my best under sheriffs."

Johnny nodded, and he told the posse about finding the dead man in the creek.

"That's what started it all." He grinned.

The conversation was interrupted by a great yell of dismay from Krumm, who was still too weak—or too fearful—to get out of the strong room.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Krugger's escapin'! He's come to, and he's gettin' away on his hoss!"

There was a wild trampling of

feet, but Johnny was in the lead. Krumm, too, it seemed, was joining in the chase.

"I'll get him!" he cried. "I'll get him! It was me thet knocked him out, and I ain't goin' to let him get away now!"

Krumm, with Johnny just behind, was the first to leap down the steps toward the hitch rack. Krugger had leaped into the saddle of the closest horse and was whirling him about for a get-away!

Johnny fired just once, his gun blazing from the level of his hip. Krugger's life was forfeit, and if he had ten lives he could not have returned those he had taken. The young deputy saw him lurch in the saddle. The bullet had ripped its way through his muscular chest.

At that minute, Krumm in his excitement, attempted to run under the hitch rail. He ducked low, but miscalculated, and there was a dull thump. With a wail, Krumm floundered into the ditch and rolled over on his back.

"I'm shot in the head," he moaned. "I'm goin' fast, Johnny. But tell 'em—tell 'em thet Fearless Krumm died brave."

Johnny touched the fat deputy with the toe of his boot in a sensitive place, and George leaped to his feet with startling rapidity. He looked sheepish.

"Anyway, I *thought* I was shot in the head," he grunted. "Dang such low hitch rails!"

But nobody was paying much attention to Krumm. They were all gathered about Black Krugger, who had toppled from his horse and was

now sprawled out motionless in the dust.

"A perfect shot, Mr. Forty-five," said the sheriff significantly.

Krugger had paid the price he had so long deserved to pay.

"Say, sheriff," said Krumm, after the dead man's face had been covered with a bandanna, "I want to introduce myself. My name is Krumm—doubtless yuh've heard of me and my record. U. S. Deputy Marshal George Krumm, thet's me!"

"Were *you* in on the fightin'?" asked the sheriff, in surprise.

"Was I in on it? Say!" cried Krumm, indignantly. "Take a look in thar—take a look at those dead hombres. And it was me thet knocked Krugger cold the first time. I hope yuh ain't lettin' Johnny hog all the credit. Why, if it wasn't fer me——"

"I think there's enough credit for both of yuh," said the sheriff warmly. "This has shore been a perfect finish to a great evenin'!"

"Yes, Johnny, he did fairly well," admitted Krumm, with dignity. "He's got a lot to learn, o' course, but if he sticks around with me, he'll soon learn this yere deputy business. Say, Johnny, by the way, when are yuh an' me goin' to finish our lay-off?"

Johnny twisted a brown paper into a cigarette with one hand and tossed it over the astonished sheriff's shoulder.

"Good-by, sheriff, our work is done, We've cleaned out all the yeggs, Now we'll run a race, to the nearest place, To clean up on some eggs."



Forty Feet Of Rawhide

By Stephen Payne

Author of "Sheep Death Chasm," etc.

THE wagon boss of the Diamond P outfit was taking a long shot in the dark, when he hired young "Bud" Lawton for the fall beef round-up. That slender youth, with lean, freckled face and unruly shock of carrot-red hair, lacked cow savvy and was "plenty green" in many respects. In others, he showed remarkable ability. All the waddies had to admit that the lanky youngster was mighty handy with a rope—mighty handy.

However, young Bud had prac-

ticed roping for three full years, before landing this job with a real cow outfit. Now, that practice stood him in good stead. When roping his circle pony in the dim light of early dawn, Bud could float his forty-foot rawhide lariat over the rumps and backs and heads of the crowding broncs in the rope corral and always have it land true.

Cavvy roping is an art, and the youth soon found himself in demand to catch ponies for less expert ropers. Then, because one day he

roped a slick dodger for big Ed Gillespie, without being told to do it, Bud got in bad with the bully.

"I'll thank yuh to mind your own business," growled big Ed, more surly than usual since he had missed the animal four times. "When I need a brat with fuzz on his cheeks to rope my hosses, I'll tell him so," he added angrily.

"I sure didn't mean no harm," Bud began, taken aback.

"Feller, you're too previous on short acquaintance," snarled the burly man, glaring at the loose-jointed redhead. "Think you're dang clever with a rope, don't yuh? I'll jus' challenge yuh to a ropin' match. When we get to a place where there's a pole corral, we'll try front-footin' brones. We'll see which one's the best roper, *my pronto*."

Bud's temper flared. "All right, big feller! I'll take you on any time you want," he retorted.

Soon after this, the round-up outfit camped one day near a range-branding corral, and Harry Tait, the wagon boss, rather reluctantly gave his consent to the roping match.

Bud Lawton roped first. He snared a green bronc by both front feet and threw it, single-handed, in record time. The cow-puncher audience applauded wildly.

Big Ed Gillespie fumbled his rope and failed to catch his wild horse until the third try. Then he couldn't throw the bronc. The cowboys hurrahed him unmercifully, and there might have been two or three fights had not Harry Tait intervened.

Harry was a young man for his responsible job, but he knew how to handle men, and how to get the work out of them. He had cottoned to young Bud, which made big Ed, who liked to think he was "top-dog" with the boss, all the madder.

"This outfit ain't big enough to hold both of us. I'll get yuh proper, some day," Big Ed told the kid meaningly.

"Meanin' you'll lick me?" asked Bud, cool as an undisturbed range bull. "No time like the present, Ed. Hop to it!"

"Naw, I won't fight yuh," big Ed retorted blusteringly. "The boys'd mob me if I was to pound yuh to a pulp."

The defeated bully shuffled away, and Bud thought the incident closed.

Three weeks of the beef round-up had passed, when old John Blair himself, owner of the Diamond P, arrived at camp one evening. Bud, who had never seen the big boss, now interestedly sized up the rancher, a medium-sized man with gray hair and closely clipped gray mustache. His weather-beaten fighting face had fine lines about the piercing blue eyes.

All the cowboys showed respectful deference to John Blair. Wized old "Tallow" Jones, the cook, who fried meat and potatoes and everything in beef tallow, hustled to fill a plate and a cup for the boss.

Blair gave a gruff, "Thanks!" Then threw this question at Harry Tait: "Got eight hundred beef steers gathered?"

"Eight hundred and fifty-four prime, three-year-old steers right out yonder on the bed ground tuh-night," replied the young wagon boss. "I counted 'em this mornin'."

Bud Lawton gazed northwest from the camp to where, on higher ground, riders were circling the herd. Faintly and in snatches down the soft wind came their songs. Even at that distance, Bud could see that the big steers were uneasy, for there was more than a hint of storm in

the twilight air. All that day, the clouds had been gathering, and the cattle had been harder to handle than usual.

"Eight hundred and fifty-four head, huh?" said old John Blair. "Good! We'll start 'em for the stockyards at Claybank to-morrow at crack of day. Only twenty miles. We can make it all jake."

The rancher's cold glance riveted itself upon young Bud Lawton.

"Hey, you kid," he called, "get me a fresh horse out o' the cavvy. A gentle horse as won't buck. Put my saddle on him. Hustle! I want to look at the steers, afore it gets dark."

Bud leaped up at once from his supper, and ran toward his pony, standing near, with bridle reins down. Just a little while ago, the cowboys had all caught fresh night horses and saddled them. Then the cavvy had been turned out on the range to graze.

As he swung to his mount, Bud heard Blair ask: "Where'd you pick up that yearlin', Tait? He don't look like a top hand to me. Since when did you start hirin' kids on this spread?"

A hot flush ran up Bud's long neck and spread over his face. Quickly he loped down the valley and with his usual skill roped a chunky brown horse that he knew to be gentle and reliable. Back at the camp, Bud turned loose the horse the rancher had ridden to the round-up and put Blair's saddle on the brown.

Then the kid strolled back to the fire to finish his supper. He did not see big Ed Gillespie stealthily approach the brown horse and occupy himself with the saddle, for a moment.

There was a triumphant gleam in big Ed's squinted eyes when he at

last moved away to his own mount and rode out to the bedded herd.

At the fire, John Blair was saying: "Listen, all you cowboys. I been explaining to Tait why we're going to stop the round-up for a few days and drive the herd to town. A cattle buyer, name of Pearson, is in Claybank. He sent word that if I could deliver eight hundred or more big steers to him there by to-morrow night, he'd pay considerable more than the open market price."

"Pearson buys on orders," Tait explained further. "He's got an order for eight hundred to a thousand beef steers and wants to get 'em on the cars in a hurry."

"Whoop!" shouted young "Boots" Smith. "So we'll get to town and paint 'er red."

"Yeah, I s'pose you will get your nose wet," said Blair dryly. "I won't mind, either, if this deal goes through. In fact, I'll give all you boys a bonus. There's one hitch, however. That hitch is—Pearson also sent word to Creager of the Two Bars Y outfit that he'd buy Creager's steers, if they got to Claybank ahead of mine."

"What? That's funny business, I'd say," Boots Smith observed. "Creager's kind o' tricky, ain't he?"

"Tricky?" snorted Blair. "Creager's so crooked he couldn't lie in a roundhouse. But he ain't got a show of beatin' us, this time. He ain't got eight hundred steers gathered yet on his round-up. Won't have, for another day or two. I made sure of that."

John Blair got to his feet and stamped toward the pony Bud had saddled for him. Young Bud, swallowing the last of his black coffee, thought:

"But if Creager was to manage somehow to delay us for a few days,

he'd sell his steers to Pearson and the Diamond P would be out o' luck."

Bud's thoughts ended abruptly. Blair had mounted the brown horse, and suddenly that gentle pony went mad. With a squeal of rage and pain, it leaped straight up in the air and landed pitching.

John Blair had never been a bronc rider. He was now much too old for such an ordeal. He made a frantic grab for the saddle horn and missed it. His deep voice boomed angrily:

"Catch this locoed hoss, somebody!"

One puncher sprang toward the wildly pitching animal. It wheeled away from the cowboy and lunged blindly through the fire. Pots and blazing logs were scattered to right and left. Dodging cowboys sprang away from the tornado of horseflesh. Then suddenly John Blair left the saddle, to hit the ground like a sack of grain, all the wind knocked from his body.

II.

Bud had bounded up to try to catch the horse. But Harry Tait already had the brown, which, now that it had thrown its rider, stood quietly enough.

"What on earth got into you, Brownny?" exclaimed Tait. "You cinched too tight or what?" He began to loosen the cinches.

Tallow Jones, muttering threats against the "dang loco hoss," began to straighten out his fire and pick up scattered pots and Dutch ovens. Two punchers helped John Blair to his feet. The rancher stood gasping and white of face.

"What touched off that hoss?" he panted. "What——"

"Couple of little sharp rocks under the saddle," snapped Harry Tait

grimly. He held up the two small stones for all to see.

"Rocks under the saddle!" Blair roared. "So *that* was it! Where's that kid who saddled the pony? Eragh!" The word was a growl. "There you are!" His flaming eyes bored young Bud. "You confounded young whipper-snapper! Thought you'd have some fun with the boss, did you? Put stones under the saddle so Brownny'd buck! Smart Aleck!"

"Smart Aleck!" At those two words Bud clenched his fists till the finger nails bit into his palms. No insult could have stung him worse.

"Why, I never——" he began, his homely, freckled face on fire.

"I'll break you of sucking eggs," the rancher bellowed furiously. "Get your own horse and get. You're fired! Beat it!"

Completely thunderstruck, Bud opened his lips to protest, but Blair was too wrought up to listen to reason. Besides, the case against Bud looked plenty black.

He had saddled Brownny. Therefore the cowboys, as well as Blair, and even Tait, believed Bud had put those stones under the saddle. He hadn't, but——

"Don't stand there like a wooden Indian, Bud," gritted the wagon boss. "To think *you'd* pull off this petty, rotten trick on the boss! Drag it!"

Tait resaddled the brown and mounted cautiously. The horse, however, made no attempt to pitch, this time.

"Brownny's all right now, sir," he said to Blair.

"Course he's all right now," snorted the rancher. "Give that smart-Aleck kid his check, Tait."

Bud Lawton rode once again to the grazing cavvy. Mechanically he roped his own pony and changed

his saddle to it. Never had the youth been so stung to the quick, so humiliated.

Fired! For something he hadn't done! Branded as a practical joker and smart-Aleck. Kicked off the round-up. Foreman Harry Tait, now mounted, loped up to Bud and thrust a slip of blue paper at him. The kid took it, saying:

"Harry, I didn't——" But Tait, without an answer, wheeled his mount and spurred away.

Darkness was coming with a rush. The sky was overcast with storm clouds and a chill wind was sweeping down from the north. Swinging to the back of his blue-gray pony, a scrubby nag of no particular value, Bud headed into the wind.

He had passed the beef herd when he heard a rider call to John Blair, who was now with the cattle:

"Looks like it's goin' to be one wild night, Mr. Blair."

"I've seen lots wilder nights than this," retorted the crusty old rancher. "Nights when there was plenty thunder and lightnin'."

"Gee-gosh! I'm glad forked lightnin' ain't a-zippin'," replied the cowboy. "As 'tis, it jus' wouldn't take nothin' to touch off these spooky steers an' set 'em afire. Hiah, dogies! Git back in the herd thar!"

Oh, Sam Bass was born in Indiana.
Twas his——

"Say, yuh dog-goned, big, white-faced he-cow critter! Try to run past me, and I'll curry yuh with a spur rowel!"

Something welled up in young Bud's throat. That cowboy, singing to the cattle one minute and jawing at them the next, reminded him that he, too, should be riding herd that night. He, too, should still belong to the old Diamond P.

Riding into the black night, the kid pondered on who could have put the sharp stones under Blair's saddle, and suddenly he found the answer. Only one man in the Diamond P crew *would* have played such a rotten trick on Bud and on the boss. That man was big Ed Gillespie!

"I'll go back!" gritted Bud fiercely. "I'll call that tricky snake, and I'll lick him."

He half turned his pony, then muttered, "Shucks! I ain't got a bit of proof. I could hammer the liver out o' the sneakin' cuss, but he'd never own up to what he did. Some day, his trail will cross mine again. Then——"

Bud rode over a low hill, and the Diamond P camp fire, the only bright and welcoming thing in this vast, dark world, passed from sight.

A few drops of rain struck the kid's hat. His pony tried to turn tail to the chilling wind. But Bud spurred it, forcing it ahead into an apparent black void. The kid didn't care where he went. He was just going somewhere. Leaving the country.

However, Bud hadn't ridden far when, upon reaching the top of another hill, he saw in a deep gulch ahead a camp-fire's beckoning light. Where there was a fire there would be men, who, of course, would allow a homeless wanderer to camp with them. When Bud could scarcely see his horse's ears it was plain foolishness trying to ride any farther.

Bud's blue-gray almost slid down into the gulch. The fire became plainer. Crouched by it were two men, wearing big, black hats and dark slickers.

"Hello the camp!" called the kid.

Instantly both men bounded out of the circle of firelight, vanishing into the darkness.

"Ride up to the fire, and we'll

look yuh over," came a gruff command.

"They're suspicious sort o' jiggers, thought Bud. "But I got no reason to be scared of 'em." He moved his blue-gray in close to the fire.

"Who are yuh?" demanded the same gruff voice.

"Name's Bud Lawton," said the kid. "Been workin' for the Diamond P. Got fired this evenin'. I was puttin' the dust o' this country behind me, till I saw your fire an'—"

"Yuh tellin' the truth?" interrupted the man who had so far done all the talking.

"I reckon he is," said the second fellow, in a voice high-pitched and shrill. "A younker like him ain't experienced enough to lie."

Bud could see nothing whatever of either man. To him they were just voices coming out of the dark night. It was sort of uncanny—awesome, too.

"Why'd Blair fire yuh?" rasped the harsh voice.

Resentment rose in Bud as he told exactly what had taken place. "I know who put the rocks under the saddle," he concluded. "If I had any proof—"

"I figure his yarn's straight goods," spoke he of the shrill voice. "But, younker, it's jus' too bad for yuh thet yuh seen our fire. I told my pard he shouldn't 'a' lit no fire. Jus' unbuckle your belt and let her slide to the ground, holstered gun an' all."

"Huh?" exclaimed Bud. "Is that an order?"

"Yep, and two smoke poles are coverin' yuh right now. Don't try nothin' funny."

Bud let his belt slide, and the two men in black hats and black slickers walked into the firelit circle. To the kid's amazement both now wore bandanna masks.

"Good golly, I've run into a couple of bandits," thought Bud.

"Get off," commanded the gruff-voiced fellow, now revealed as a thick-set hombre, broad of shoulders and short of neck. "Stand still. Arms up till I go over yuh."

Bud obeyed. The man searched him, finding nothing of consequence except the pay check which Harry Tait had given the youth. The searcher studied this by the flickering firelight.

"This check kind o' proves the kid's yarn," the fellow remarked. "Yet I'm still leery it's some trick an'—"

"Aw heck, Gus!" the taller man snorted. "Nobody could 'a' got wise to us."

"Hi, Muggy, yuh idiot! Don't be mentionin' my name," snarled the thick-set hombre.

"Dang yuh! You jus' made the same slip yourself," the other man retorted in his shrill voice. "Anyhow, the kid ain't seen our faces, nor our hosses."

"No, he ain't," growled Gus, the gruff-voiced. "But already he knows too much. We can't let him ride on, 'cause—"

"Wait!" the tall man broke in. "I got a scheme to use this boy."

Bud thought it high time to escape from this pair of toughs, bandits, or whatever they might be. But two six-guns kept him covered, so he made no move. He felt icy prickles along his back, as "Muggy" explained to Gus his plan for making use of him.

III.

Gus and Muggy were to stampede the Diamond P herd this night. Although they did not say so, Bud surmised they had been hired by Creager of the Two Bars Y for this dirty business.

Creager was the man to profit by such a maneuver. The beef steers would be scattered all over the range. It would take weeks to gather them again. Moreover, the animals would lose much flesh and therefore be in no condition to sell. Consequently, Creager would sell his steers to the cattle buyer waiting at Claybank.

However, Bud's appearance and capture by the two toughs had given Muggy the idea of forcing the lad to do the actual stampeding.

"We'll make the kid do the dirty work for us," explained Muggy. "So we won't take no chances o' bein' caught ourselves."

Chuckling with grim satisfaction, Gus approved of the plan.

"He may get grabbed by some rider," he said. "If he does, why them cowboys, and especially old John Blair, won't believe nothin' he says. They'll sure figure he stampeded the herd to get even with John Blair. They'll be so red-hot mad they'll probably string him up to the first tree they can find."

"Yeh, more'n likely they'll dangle the kid," agreed Muggy. "We'll wait long enough to see if the herd stampedes proper. Then we'll drag it. Goin' to rain mighty sudden. Spittin' some right now. Even if Harry Tait or some cowboy should believe what the kid's sure to try to tell 'em, they won't be able to find our tracks. Rain'll wash 'em out. We was goin' to wait till midnight, but now I reckon we don't need to."

Hearing this, Bud made a sudden dash for the darkness beyond the small firelit circle. Gus leaped after him, however, and grabbed him. Bud fought wildly, tearing the bandanna mask from the man's coarse, brutal face. Then Gus slammed Bud over the head with the barrel

of his six-gun, knocking the kid half silly.

After that, the two toughs put Bud on his blue roan, tied his hands to the saddle horn, and gagged him. The men got their own horses. Gus led Bud's pony. Muggy rode behind, dragging at the end of his rope an old, dried-out and rattly cowhide.

The three rode through the black, sinister night. Nothing could be seen either to right or left, ahead or behind. Clouds blotted out every star. A drizzling rain had set in, and the wind still blew fiercely.

Gus and Muggy, with their black slickers wrapped closely about them, and their hats pulled low, swore at the rain and wind and the black night.

"But we'll shore get well paid for this job," said Muggy.

In spite of the darkness, the Diamond P herd was not hard to find. The men and Bud could tell when they got near, by the songs and complaints of the night herders, by the rattle of horns and bellowing of the uneasy cattle, and by the white faces of the steers, which were dim spots in the black void.

Due to the wild night, the cattle were all on their feet, milling about restlessly. The night herders had their hands more than full. Any little thing would be enough to set those big, wild, range steers running—running like mad.

Bud knew this. He knew also what a terrible, terrible thing that would be. As surely as the herd stampeded, some rider, perhaps several, would be caught ahead of the surging wall of horns and hoofs and be trampled to death.

Worst of all, Bud was going to be used to start this catastrophe. White-hot rage surged through him. But he was utterly helpless.

A hundred and fifty yards or so from the cattle, Gus halted. He dismounted and held Bud's horse firmly by the bridle, while Muggy tied the cowhide to the tail of the blue-gray.

"Good thing this old crowbait is plumb gentle and has a fairly long tail," said Muggy in a guarded tone. "I got the hide tied fast, now, Gus. Fust move the nag makes that hide'll hit his heels. He'll run like a canned dog." He chuckled wickedly.

"I'll bust the bridle reins instead o' pullin' off the bridle," Gus replied, and Bud heard his flimsy bridle reins snap.

"Untie the kid's hands, Gus," ordered Muggy. "Take gag off him, too. If any Diamond P cowboys grab him, we don't want it to look like he was ever tied or gagged. We don't care if he yells now."

Bud did yell, too. He yelled at the top of his voice: "Look out, cowboys! Look out! This way! This way!"

He did not know whether or not his voice would carry to the ears of any Diamond P man above the constant rumble and rattle of sounds that swelled from the herd. He only hoped it might. He would have jumped off his horse, too, had not Gus, the moment he jerked away the gag, slapped the blue-gray and sent it leaping forward.

The bone-dry old hide tugged at the pony's tail and then thumped the animal on the heels. There was a sudden snort of terror. The horse lashed out with both hind legs. Then it jumped ahead. Nothing could have terrified it more than this hide which clung to its tail, and bounced and swayed and slammed against its flying heels.

Too frightened even to pitch or to kick a second time, the horse shot

like a thunderbolt toward the already seething beef herd. A hollow, all-gone, and horrible feeling gripped Bud and sickened him. He had never felt so utterly futile and helpless.

Then suddenly he snapped out of it. He must stop that horse before it got to the herd. *Must!* He bent far forward, grabbed the bridle by its cheek strap. He tried to bend the crazed animal's head and turn it. But the horse bowed its neck, lunging straight on.

Desperately Bud tugged at that cheek strap with his left hand. He jerked his right foot free of the stirrup and kicked the horse alongside its head to try to turn it. Ordinarily the horse would have obeyed. But now it was terrified by that unknown thing pounding at heels and rump. It had but one idea—to get away from the rattling hide which pursued it.

Suddenly the bridle broke in Bud's hand, so the kid was almost thrown. Only his quick, sure grab for the saddle horn and his marvelous agility saved him from falling. In an instant, he straightened in the saddle. The horse, now bridleless, was utterly out of control. Well, it had been so before.

The beef herd! Bud saw white faces looming up in the blackness ahead. In a matter of seconds, he and his horse would plunge into that herd. Then there would be the terrific, thundering rumble of stam pede. What could he do?

Ah! His rope was still on his saddle. Muggy and Gus had used pigging strings to tie the hide to the pony's tail. In the twinkling of an eye, Bud jerked loose the strap that held his forty-foot rawhide. A split second, and he flipped a tiny noose up over the pony's flaring nostrils. He yanked that noose taut; then

heaved on the rope, pulling with all his strength.

Strange gasping sounds came from the horse as its wind was cut off entirely, and just as Bud had hoped, it fell. It fell heavily, all in a heap, with the Diamond P beef herd still a few short rods distant.

Bud's leg was caught under the fallen animal. Desperately the kid strove to free himself. He must hold down his horse. He must get to its head, and keep its nose pointed up toward the black, black sky until help came. But the kid could not get his leg clear, and to his consternation, he felt the noose slip from the animal's muzzle. Dimly Bud saw cattle running away from the vicinity. Would they stampede in spite of all he could do?

The half-strangled pony sucked in a great breath of air and struggled to rise, just as a rider loomed up.

"Grab my horse! Hold 'im down!" Bud cried. The cowboy was off his mount in a jiffy and had grabbed Bud's pony by the head.

"I got 'im!" came the rider's voice. "Is your leg broke, feller?"

Relieved as he was that help had come, Bud nevertheless felt a fresh surge of rage. The voice was that of big Ed Gillespie! The horse was now struggling so violently that it half-raised itself, and Bud was able to jerk his leg free. He gained his feet.

"Hold the horse down, Ed," he called. Instantly then he began to untie knots to get the cowhide loose from the pony's tail.

"Who? What?" ejaculated big Ed. "Your voice? You're—why, you're the kid! Bud!"

Receiving no reply from Bud, the man gasped excitedly: "What were yuh doin' here? What's that behind the hoss?" He saw the cowhide which Bud had jerked free and now

dropped. "Oh, I savvy," the fellow plunged on. "You—you had somethin' tied behint your hoss! You was goin' to race into the herd and spook 'em, yuh was! But your horse fell, and I came along."

"My bridle's busted and lost," said Bud. He spoke with a sort of terrible coolness, although inwardly he was raging.

Big Ed, the man who had "jobbed" him and forced him to leave the round-up in disgrace, was jumping to conclusions that Bud had wanted to stampede the cattle.

"I want to make a rope hackamore on the hoss's head," he went on, "so I'll have somethin' to hold him with. Don't you let that hoss loose!"

But big Ed did release the pony, which sprang to its feet. However, Bud had his rope in hand and like a flash flipped a noose around the blue-gray's neck. The still terrified animal would have run had not the rope stopped it. Then, in a moment, it realized that its terrifying pursuer was no longer at its heels and became calm.

Meanwhile, big Ed had snarled: "You was goin' to get even with Blair for firin' yuh, wasn't yuh? I'm goin' to take yuh to Blair and tell him. Don't get funny! See this gun in my fist? Shouldn't wonder if Blair—he's sure hard-boiled—won't have the boys hang yuh for what you tried to do. If your horse hadn't done a wild cat——"

"Shut up!" snapped Bud, looking not toward big Ed but toward the cattle.

IV.

The herd in "roiling" about had moved away from the spot where Bud's horse had fallen. Now there seemed no danger that Bud and big Ed would scare the animals into a

stampede. It was so dark the cattle could not see them. Yet if they made too much noise, or if big Ed fired his Colt—

"I never did like your face," the kid went on, "and I'm goin' to build it over to suit me better, right now. You dirty cur! *You* put the rocks under John Blair's saddle."

"Did yuh see me do it?" Ed countered with a sneer.

"Put up your smoker!" commanded Bud, still with that same cool grimness. "If you fire a shot it'll be *you* the boys'll hang, savvy? I got no hogleg. I'm going to lick you with my fists, you snake in the grass."

Rain splashed on the kid's grim face. A violent gust of wind suddenly brought the sound of hoofs chudding against soggy earth. Riders were coming from the north. They would not be any of the Diamond P crew. Those men would come from the camp to the south of the herd.

Bud had been so intent upon fighting big Ed that for the moment he had forgotten Gus and Muggy. It was those toughs who were coming. Coming to stampede the herd themselves, having realized by now that somehow their ruse to force Bud to do their dirty work had failed. All this flashed through Bud's mind while big Ed was snarling:

"Aw, I won't shoot yuh. Yuh shore need pluggin', but I'll get John Blair and Harry Tait. Bring 'em 'round here and show 'em what yuh was up to. Maybe I'll fight yuh later and give yuh the wallopin' yo're askin' for."

He reached his horse, sprang to the saddle and was gone at a gallop, around the cattle, so dimly seen through the rain-splashed, wind-torn night. The kid was left alone;

alone, with no firearm, and two yellow scoundrels coming to stampede the herd.

"I got to stop those snakes!" exclaimed the kid. "Can't get any help—not in time to prevent—"

There was his horse, bridleless, with his rope around its neck. Bud could not guide that stupid, scrubby mustang without a bridle, but on foot he could use his rope.

Swiftly he took the lariat from the pony's neck. He ran away from the herd, north, into the teeth of the cutting wind and the driving rain. He coiled the forty-foot rawhide and built a big loop in the end of it.

He paused a moment. They were nearer, riding like mad, those two crooks. Although they no longer had the cowhide, popping six-shooters and waving slickers would do just as well to send the Diamond P herd into a wild run. Between those two men and their purpose was only a slender, freckled kid and his forty-foot rope.

Bud crouched in the scanty sagebrush, as the two riders appeared. Cavvy roping in the false dawn of frosty mornings stood the kid in good stead now. He needed to see only the dim outline of the horse at which he threw his rope to make a sure catch.

He stood erect. The loop left his hand in a beautiful underhanded throw. The noose flipped out like a thing alive, directly in front of one galloping horse. The horse planted both front feet in it. Bud felt rather than saw this as he jerked in the slack, planting his slender body against the suddenly singing rope, and the horse turned end for end.

"What the blazes?" gasped the second rider in an undertone.

His pony chudded to a halt and turned. Dimly Bud could see the glint of a six-gun in the rider's hand,

who, from his voice, he knew was Gus. The kid was running up along his rope to reach the fallen man and try to knock him cold, if he was not already senseless from the terrible spill.

"Muggy! Muggy!" Gus called. "Where are yuh? Hurt? Who's this?" catching sight of Bud.

Bud knew that in the darkness lay his only safety. Thinking fast in this desperate crisis, when his own life and the safety of the Diamond P herd hung in the balance, the kid was coiling his lariat as he ran. He no longer tried to hold that rope tight, knowing that if he left it slack the fallen horse would throw the noose from its front legs.

Yes, the struggling horse was already springing to its feet, riderless. The animal was between Bud and Gus—Gus with his ready gun. Yonder on the ground lay a dark object. It was Muggy, unmoving.

"Who are yuh? Answer me or I shoot!" Gus cried.

By now Bud had his rope coiled. He spun out a new loop in it. There was Gus coming around Muggy's horse, which was shaking itself and moving aside.

"Muggy? Muggy! That you? Why ain't yuh answerin' me?" Gus demanded. "Oh, yo're that kid!" with sudden recognition. "Get 'em up or I'll—"

Bud let fly his rope. This time it was an overhanded swing, the noose sailing high, to drop swift and sure around Gus's thick neck. Swift as light Bud jerked on the lariat. The darkness was split open by a flash of fire as Gus's gun roared. The heavy bullet hummed past Bud's left ear.

But the man did not fire again, for young Bud Lawton jerked him violently from his saddle. Even as he fell, Gus dropped his Colt to grab

at the torturing noose. Then Bud reached the choking man, threw him over onto his face, and sat on his head while he tied the fellow's hands behind him with his bandanna mask.

Next Bud ran to Muggy, who, to the kid's relief, had been knocked senseless by his fall. In the distance, Bud heard rattle of horns and frightened bellowings. But the herd was not running. Just a few of the steers had tried to break away when the shot rang out, and they were stopped by the expert Diamond P waddies.

Came a chudding slosh of many hoofs. Near at hand appeared several riders.

"What's goin' on here?" demanded John Blair's bull-like voice. "Who fired that shot?"

"Here's the cur that did it," called Bud. With the rancher, the kid recognized Harry Tait, Boots Smith and big Ed.

"Thar's the kid!" shouted Ed. "He was goin' to stampede the herd. He fired the shot himself, Blair."

"Hub? He had help then," said Blair. "See these horses? Saddled, but no riders. Where are the riders?"

"Tied up!" announced Bud. "Come take a squint at 'em."

Tait and Boots Smith swung off. Lighting matches, which they shielded with their hats, they looked at the two prisoners.

"Muggy Swan and Gus Lampman!" announced Tait tersely. "A couple of the crookedest hands on the Two Bars Y. They're the birds Creager uses for any dirty work he pulls. Bud, what were these snakes doing here?"

As Bud told the wagon boss everything, John Blair listened. At the end the rancher turned furiously upon big Ed Gillespie. "Feller, you

said this kid was tryin' to stampede the herd. Fact is, he stopped a couple of curs from doin' just that."

"Yes," added Tait. "But don't forget, boss, how Bud, usin' his head and his rope, stopped his own pony from racin' into the herd with that hide tied to its tail. Snakes of glory, men! What a stampede there would 'a' been if he hadn't stopped his hoss!"

"And he downed these two reptiles of Creager's," shouted Boots Smith. "I'll say he piled 'em up. Oh, you ropin' kid!"

While Harry Tait and Boots were speaking, Bud had stepped close to big Ed Gillespie's stirrup. "Pile off your horse, you snake in the grass!" the kid commanded. "I'm goin' to sop up some of this rain water with your carcass."

"Yo're askin' fer it!" snarled the bully, and jumped from his saddle. "I got yuh fired, all right," he hissed. "An' I thunk I was rid of yuh, but now yuh've come back and, dang yuh, I'll ram your head in the mud an' kick loose your teeth! I'll——" Like a bull he charged at young Bud.

Avoiding that charge, the lanky kid felt his fists hammer flesh and bone. He dodged and ducked big Ed's wild swings, and thrilled to the joy of battle. The fight was fast and furious.

Had Gillespie been able to grip and hold the kid, it might have been just too bad for Bud. But the youth was too swift and too wary. He kept out of the burly man's reach, all the time landing blow after blow himself.

A left-hand jab to the stomach

doubled up big Ed. A terrific smash to the jaw followed instantly and the man went down. Making no effort to rise, he lay gasping. "Enough!" he muttered thickly.

"Get on your horse and ramble," panted Bud. "'Twas you said this outfit wasn't big enough for both of us, and it ain't. Pull your freight."

Big Ed staggered to his feet and shuffled toward his mount, a beaten bully.

During the fight Blair, amazed, had asked Tait what it was all about.

"Well, kick me for a duffer!" Tait answered. "I'm only just savvyin' what I should have savvied when I found those stones under your saddle. It ain't like young Bud to do such a sneakin' trick, and big Ed had it in for the kid. So——"

"Meaning what?" the boss interrupted. "Didn't Bud play that trick on me?"

"No! Of course he didn't. 'Twas big Ed! That's why the kid——"

"Why the kid is licking the dirty walloper!" Blair cut in. "Ya, whoop! He has licked him! Some kid!"

"You know it, boss," shouted Boots Smith. "It's too dog-goned bad he don't belong to the Diamond P no more."

"You're all wrong, Boots. Bud does belong!" John Blair rumbled. "Hi, Harry, you and Boots tie that pair of Two Bars Y skunks on their nags and turn the nags loose. They'll go home to Creager's ranch. Gus and Muggy deserve a heap worse treatment, but I want Creager to see what happens to his curs when they tangle with the ropin', fightin' kid of the Diamond P!"



STIRRUP



Dinero Fer Tarantula

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Murder at the Rodeo," etc.

SWAYING on the seat as the freight wagons lurched through the dusk, "Shorty" Masters, M. D.—"Mule Driver"—tugged at a rawhide string hanging from his corduroys, and finally hauled out a shiny new watch.

"Five minutes to seven!" he announced. "Mules, yuh got to speed up, if we're goin' to keep on schedule. Yuh got just five minutes to reach that clump of live oaks where we're goin' to camp!"

The Sextet from Lucia, as the music-loving freighter called the six offspring of a mare named Lucy, snorted in disgust at such new-fangled things as schedules. Chopin,

the black leader, who was named, as were all the rest, for a famous composer, twisted his head to bite at a piece of rope that rubbed his side where the trace chain had parted.

Crack! The twenty-five-foot mule whip hissed and popped above Chopin's fear-flattened ears.

"Forget that rope splice, yuh black varmint!" warned the bow-legged little teamster. "Yore hide's tough, an' I reckon a little piece of rope won't hurt yuh none. I'll do some blacksmithin' to-night, and fix thet busted ring."

Shorty looked up suddenly. Two horsemen were rounding the bend in the road just ahead. The little

freighter's hand made a move toward his hip. Then he remembered that he had put his gun in the wagon seat that afternoon, when they were loading freight at Stockton. But suddenly, he recognized the two riders, and grinned.

They were Jerry Estes, cashier of the Tarantula bank, and Bill Myers, a clerk in the same institution. Shorty knew them both only slightly. Estes, a large man astride a small buckskin pony, waved cheerily to Shorty as he approached.

"Howdy, Masters!" he called. "How's freightin'?"

"Just pluggin' along," said Shorty. "In this business yuh always got a load on yore mind!"

Estes and Myers chuckled as they reined in close to the mules. Then the big man frowned, peering down the road behind the wagons.

"Seen anything of Earl Frazier—yuh know him, he works in the Stockton bank—since yuh been on the road?" he asked.

Shorty shook his head. "Nope. Saw him in town to-day, before I got loaded."

The two bank employees exchanged glances. "Maybe he was late gettin' started," Estes said. "Reckon we'll run across him up the road. Well, so long, Shorty!"

"Adios!" answered the freighter. He swung his whip again. "Mules, that's another minute off yore schedule. Yuh better make it up, or I'll take it out of yore eatin' time!"

The musical outfit took heed and dug into their traces. Shorty pulled a notebook from his pocket and squinted at a pencil-smudged page of figures headed:

Operating Schedule of Shorty Masters's
Transportation Lines.

"Eleven minutes to eat!" he mut-

tered. "That's one figure that's absolutely correct. I've timed 'em four times, and it don't vary none. It takes a mule jest exactly eleven minutes to chaw up two quarts of oats. That's how methodical and set in their ways the overgrown jack rabbits are! Whoa!"

He pulled the freight outfit off the road and halted beside the live oaks. Then he looked at the shiny new watched and grinned with pride as he talked to the mules.

"We made it, mules! I tell yuh, there ain't no reason why we can't run on schedule, just like a railroad. Eleven minutes for supper, then yuh can forget about time-tables till we hit the trail for Tarantula at six o'clock sharp in the mornin'!"

Shorty unhitched the mules and hobbled them, but before he started to feed the animals, he remembered the broken trace-chain ring. Kindling a fire at the side of the lead wagon, he placed the broken ring in it to heat. He would use the ax head for an anvil.

Suddenly he stood erect, listening. There was a horseman coming down the Stockton road, turning off toward Shorty's camp fire. Once more the little freighter reached for his hip, then glanced toward the gun in the wagon.

"Reckon it ain't nobody to be skeered of!" he muttered. "An enemy wouldn't make so much noise, ridin' up that way!"

The horseman loomed large in the outer circle of firelight, and pulled in his mount.

"Howdy, Shorty!" he called as he dismounted. "What's the chance of campin' with yuh for a while?"

Shorty recognized Earl Frazier—the man for whom Estes and Myers had been looking. "Shore, Earl!" he answered heartily, as the lanky rider swung to the ground. "Where yuh

headin'? Goin' south with the bank's money?"

Frazier dropped the reins over the horse's head and approached the fire. Shorty saw a worried look on his face.

"That's what, all right!" he said in a low tone. "The bank sent me. I'm takin' ten thousand dollars in greenbacks to the Tarantula bank!"

The newcomer patted a leather pouch slung around his shoulders. "They need it to meet the pay roll of the new railroad's construction crew, and the paymaster's drafts at the new cavalry post," he explained.

"Say, Earl!" Shorty said. "Estes and Myers was lookin' for you. Did yuh see 'em?"

Frazier shook his head, but an expression of great relief came over his face. "That's good!" he said. "I guess they'll be back along. I cut away from the road to keep from going through Dead Man's Pass back yonder, and that's probably how I missed 'em. They're going to escort me on into Tarantula tonight. Yuh see, Red Collins is supposed to be in these parts, and if he gets word of this money, it'll be adios!"

"Well, yuh better stay with me till Estes and Myers come back," Shorty invited. "Just in time for supper. I got to feed the mules and fix this here chain ring. I'll heat it again, after a while. It ain't every night that me and the Sextet gets to eat supper with ten thousand dollars in camp!"

He pulled the red-hot trace-chain ring from the coals with a pair of pliers and placed it on the flat of an ax blade. Then, drawing a half empty oat sack from the wagon, he reached for the six *morrals*, or feed bags. Frazier, stepping closer to the cheery fire, chuckled aloud.

"Them musical mules of yourn

would come first, even if yuh was starvin'!" he said. "Well, I like to see yuh that way, Shorty. Yuh take a man who's kind to his team, and——"

There was a queer, whistling sigh, a dull spat, and the roar of a rifle from the rim rock that had blotted out the twilight. Earl Frazier coughed, spun around from the fire on buckling legs, and dropped in a heap.

"Red Collins!" he gasped. "Got me, after all! Don't let him get the money, Shorty! Take it to the bank for me. Don't let him——"

The words ended in a strangled cry. Shorty Masters sprang forward, the *morrals* still in his hands, his eyes wide with horror at the sight of death striking out of the darkness.

Estes and Myers would be too late to save Frazier—maybe too late to save the money!

Shorty's form was outlined boldly against the fire.

Wham! A rifle slug clanged against the steel wagon tire nearest him, flattened and glanced.

It struck the little teamster a glancing blow on the side of the head, and Shorty hit the ground hard, with the night filled with flashing fireworks.

For a moment, he lay stunned, while the hobbled mules snorted and reared. Then he raised his head slowly. Two horses were descending from the rim rocks.

Shorty thought swiftly. The riders would have to drop out of sight in the draw that ran at the bottom of the hill before they reached his camp.

"Reckon they think they got *me*, too!" he muttered dazedly. "And I got to hide that money! Got to find some place where they'll never run onto it!"

He heard the riders reach the bottom of the hill, then he lifted himself to hands and knees and crawled to Frazier's side.

II.

Horses' hoofs crashed in the underbrush just beyond the rim of the firelight. Shorty sprang for the wagon where his gun lay.

Crack! A bullet nicked the wagon bow above his head.

He turned slowly, standing on the brake beam. The two killers, shadowy forms in the uncertain light, were reining in their horses.

"Git down offn that waggin, freighter!" ordered a gruff voice. "Next thing yuh know, you'll be haulin' harps through the pearly gates! I thought yuh got him, pardner?"

"So did I, Red!" answered the other man. "Well, I can purty quick finish him now!"

The fire glinted on the blued steel of a Winchester barrel. Shorty Masters set his jaw and waited for the sting of tearing lead.

"Wait a minute! Don't be a fool! Chances are he's hid the dinero by now! Where did yuh put it, freighter?"

Shorty stepped down, with his back against the wagon where his gun was hidden, and his hands in the air. All was quiet in the camp, except for the crackle of the fire and the *crunch-crunch* of the mules in their feed bags.

"What money yuh talkin' about?" he asked. "I ain't got no money to speak of, except mebbe ten dollars."

"Don't give me any o' that!" roared the first robber.

He stalked into the firelight—a burly man with a slicker draped over his shoulders. His Stetson was pulled low, and a bandanna was tied

tightly around his mouth and chin, muffling his gruff voice.

Shorty's heart sank. So this was "Red" Collins, one of the worst of the renegades who roamed the Big Bend and Pecos countries! The other man was similarly attired, and if the mule driver was lucky enough to escape with his life, he could never identify them.

"Keep him covered, pardner!" Collins ordered. "I'll see if the cash is gone!"

He stooped over Earl Frazier's body and felt inside the money pouch. Finding it empty, he straightened and ripped out an oath.

"Yuh better tell where that ten thousand is, and be quick about it!" he threatened, advancing a step toward Shorty.

His heavy boot came down on the ax blade and the hot chain ring. A smell of burning leather filled the camp.

"Ten thousand?" gasped Shorty. "There ain't that much money! Yuh mean to tell me this Frazier hombre had ten thousand bucks and was beggin' me fer a meal and a place ter sleep? Well, the ornery——"

"Owww!" yelled Collins, leaping into the air and stamping his smoking boot on the ground. "What's the idea, freighter? I ought ter fill yuh full of lead!"

"Gosh, I plumb forgot about that harness ring I was figurin' on weldin'!" mourned Shorty. "Good thing I didn't invite yuh two gents to have a seat, now, wasn't it?"

"Cut out the monkey business and come clean! Keep the gun on him, pardner! I'll search him, and I'll turn the waggins wrong side out, till I find that dough!"

Collins lighted Shorty's bull's-eye lantern and placed it on the wagon tongue. Then he felt in Shorty's

pockets, found nothing, and whirled to the bedding roll, scattering blankets right and left.

"I reckon it's in the waggin!" he growled. "Yuh better tell me which one, freighter! I'll dump out everything yuh got!"

"The last two are empty!" Shorty chuckled. "Freightin' business ain't so good. Say, mebbe Frazier was robbed before he got here! Now that I remember it, he was plumb excited over somethin'!"

The burly man faced his partner. "Reckon he's tellin' the truth?" he asked.

"Naw! He's got the dough hid somewheres, Red! Go on, look in the waggins!"

Groceries and other supplies for Pete Wilson's general store at Tarantula crashed to the ground as the searcher tore through the load, grunting and swearing. He found Shorty's gun and stuck it in his boot. The little freighter's arms grew tired as the minutes dragged.

"Say, can I put my hands down a spell, mister?" he asked the man with the Winchester. "I ain't got a gun. And I got to look at my watch. Yuh see, them mules is on schedule!"

"What do yuh mean, on schedule?" retorted the guard. "Far's I can see they're doin' nothin' but fillin' their bellies!"

"Yeah, but I got 'em on schedule, jest like a railroad runs. Eleven minutes fer dinner. If they ain't through, they go hungry. That learns 'em not to waste no time over the fodder!"

"Blamed fool idea!" grunted the outlaw. "All right—look at yore watch. And if yuh pull any tricks, yuh pass over the Great Divide with lead poisonin'!"

He watched narrowly as the mule driver pulled out his shiny timepiece.

The mules had been eating six minutes.

"Halfway to the bottom," Shorty muttered. "Hey, yuh long-eared jacks, yuh better git a move on. I ain't agoin' to let yuh chaw all night!"

He kept the watch in his hand. A case of canned goods crashed to the ground and shattered, spilling its contents. Collins climbed down from the first wagon and looked in the other two with the aid of the lantern. Both were empty.

The chuck box and Shorty's water keg yielded no clew to the missing ten thousand dollars. The burly man came back to the camp fire.

"Pull off yore boots!" he ordered. "I ain't seen in them yet. And if yuh got that money hid under a rock around here, yuh better dig it up!"

Shorty shook the boots out before Collins, then replaced them. The big man drew his partner aside, and they held a hurried consultation in whispers.

A glance at the watch showed the mule driver that his animals had been eating eight minutes.

"Say, I got to choke these starvin' mules off their oats!" Shorty announced. "I cain't spoil the schedule I'm trainin' 'em to, jest because yuh think there's ten thousand dollars in camp. I'll bet yuh the ten dollars I got, that Frazier was robbed before he come here!"

The freighter turned his back deliberately on the two outlaws, his heart pounding madly as he stepped to the hobbled Sextet and removed the *morrals*. Then he came back to the fire, and the burly Collins towered over him.

"Listen!" he growled. "We ought ter kill yuh, and I don't know why we don't! But I reckon we'll let yuh live—for a while. We're goin', now,

ter look for the hombres that *might* have done the robbin' before we saw Frazier. If we don't find 'em, I reckon we'll be back and yuh'd better be ready ter talk about where yuh hid the dough. If we don't come back, and yuh want ter stay healthy and do right well, yuh better fergit yuh ever saw us. Savvy?"

Shorty swallowed and nodded. "My memory," he said, "is plumb bad at times!"

"Come on, Red!" urged the man with the .30-30. "And if we find out that the mule prodder's lyin', I'll come all the way back to cut his tongue out and make him eat it!"

They backed into the darkness. Saddle leather squeaked as they mounted and turned their horses toward the Tarantula road. Shorty laid the feed bags on the wagon tongue and sat down beside them to wipe the cold sweat off his face.

"Dawg-gone it!" he muttered. "That was close! And they shore wrecked the load. It'll take me till midnight to get all that stuff back in the waggin!"

III.

A clatter of hoofs aroused him at dawn, and he sat erect in his blankets to see three horsemen turning off from the Tarantula road. Shorty jerked on his boots hurriedly. Red Collins had taken his gun the night before, and he was unarmed. Maybe Collins was coming back with another member of his gang!

Then the little freighter breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't Collins. It was Sheriff Jim Saunders of Tarantula, with Jerry Estes and Bill Myers.

"Howdy!" boomed the sheriff as he dismounted. "What's the matter, Shorty? Yuh act like yuh expected gun play! We're lookin' for Earl Frazier an'——"

Estes, tired and drooping in the saddle, spurred his horse forward. The tall bank employee freed his right toe from the stirrup and hooked his leg around the saddle horn, sitting sidewise.

"Mornin', Shorty!" he said. "We been on the go since we saw yuh last night. All the way to Stockton, all the way back to Tarantula, then back here with the sheriff. Did yuh see anything of that hombre?"

Shorty opened his mouth to speak, then, staring at Estes, he clamped it suddenly shut again. After all, Earl Frazier's last words had been a request to take the money to the bank itself.

"Well?" demanded Jim Saunders. "Have yuh seen Frazier?"

Shorty nodded silently and pointed to the saddle blankets drawn over a heap by the camp fire. The sheriff paled under his tan. He dropped his horse's reins and approached Frazier's body slowly.

Jerry Estes gasped and slid to the ground heavily. His mouth was agape with disbelief, his lips twitching. Myers slowly dismounted, his eyes fixed on the silent form covered by the blankets.

Sheriff Saunders cleared his throat. "Yuh mean this is—he was—that Frazier was——"

"He's murdered!" Shorty said. "Red Collins and one of his gang done it. Frazier rode up last night and asked me if he could camp a while. Seemed mighty worried about somethin'. And then—then they shot him from th' rim rocks!"

"Murdered!" exclaimed Jerry Estes. "And how about—how about the ten thousand dollars?"

"Did yuh search him?" demanded Saunders. "Who got the money?"

Shorty dropped the feed bags in well-simulated surprise.

"Ten thousand dollars?" he ex-

claimed. "Yuh mean to tell me that——"

Estes and the sheriff exchanged meaning glances. Bill Myers drew the blanket back from Earl Frazier's face, and hastily replaced it with a shudder.

Shorty picked up the *morrals* and began measuring oats. Saunders whirled on him suddenly.

"Look here, Shorty!" he said in a menacing tone. "Yuh know more about this than yuh told us! Yuh knew about the money, and yuh saw somebody take it. Who was it?"

"How d'ye know I seen somebody take it?" parried the mule driver, as he slipped the *morrals* over the heads of the Sextet and looked at his watch.

"Well, there's the pouch on th' ground!" answered the sheriff triumphantly. "This looked to me like mebbe yuh had more of a hand in it than I figured. Come clean! Where's the money?"

Shorty turned a blank look on the sheriff. "Yuh tryin' to hint that I killed Frazier and robbed him of ten thousand dollars? Yuh know better'n that, sheriff. I told yuh it was Collins and a pardner that did the killin'. As for the robbery, I reckon somebody had beat Collins to it. He didn't find no money!"

"Go up to the rim rocks and see if yuh can find any empty shells or any sign of somebody havin' shot from there!" Saunders directed Bill Myers.

The bank clerk nodded and crashed through the brush. Saunders turned to Estes.

"Yuh better look along the draw bed for some sign of the dinero!" he said. "I'll search the waggins and look Shorty over. Now, look here, freighter, the ground is all tore up, and yuh got a bullet crease on yore scalp. What's back o' that? Mebbe

Frazier slugged yuh, and yuh shot him tuh——"

"You're loco!" flared Shorty. "That came from a flattened .30-30 slug that bounced off a waggin tire. That was after they had killed Frazier. Yuh can see he was killed by a Winchester, and I ain't got a Winchester."

"Mebbe not now. But yuh could have had, and yuh could have walked a mile down the draw and throwed it into the brush."

"Yuh ought to be out huntin' Red Collins!" Shorty insisted. "Are yuh afraid of him, sheriff?"

Saunders whirled, red in the face. "Don't git smart, now, Shorty!" he warned. "I don't exactly doubt yore word about what went on here last night, but I ain't takin' any chances, either. Till the money's found, you're under suspicion. So I reckon I better take yuh to Tarantula."

"Well, let's get goin'!" interrupted Shorty, looking at his watch. "Gosh, I got to choke off these starvin' mules! I was headin' for Tarantula anyway, and I'm five minutes behind schedule already!"

"Schedule?" Saunders repeated.

"Yeah, schedule. I got the mules feedin', eatin', and workin' on schedule just like other big transportation outfits!"

Bill Myers stamped back into camp. "No sign of anybody havin' been on the rim rock, sheriff!" He eyed Shorty suspiciously. "I sure wouldn't 'a' thought it of Shorty, but—well, it looks bad!"

"Yeah?" drawled Shorty. "What did yuh expect to find on the rim rocks—somebody's initials carved? I could drive my mule team up there and not leave a scratch, they're that hard!"

"Well, cut the argument and harness them mules!" ordered Saunders. "I'll be lookin' through the

waggins. Come on, Estes, we're headin' back to town!"

Shorty threw his bedding roll into the wagon, picked up the broken trace-chain ring and put it in his pocket, and replaced the ax in its rack. Then he spliced the trace with new rope.

The other three men lifted Earl Frazier's body into the first wagon. Shorty mounted to his seat, when the mules were hitched, and cracked the whip.

Saunders and the two bank employees closed in on the flank of the mules as the outfit swung into the road and up the valley to the divide hill. Shorty Masters was thinking hard.

"Say, sheriff!" he called suddenly. "Yuh know Red Collins is just about yore size. Mebbe it wasn't Collins!"

The officer's face was red as he turned in the saddle. "Cut out the smart-Aleck stuff!" he ordered. "It ain't so funny for yuh, freighter. Mebbe they won't convict yuh of murder, but it shore looks bad on the robbery angle!"

The Sextet took the hill in a steady climb and struck a trot over the level stretch of the divide. When they passed Buckhorn Sink, Shorty leaned forward and saw the tents and houses of Tarantula in the valley beyond.

"There's the jail!" he sighed. "Giddap, mules! Looks to me like I'm always drivin' smack into somebody else's troubles!"

IV.

It was nearly noon, when the wagons clattered off the divide and into the little cow town to halt in front of the transportation office where the sign said: "Shorty Masters, M. D." The little driver

leaped to the ground and seized the six feed bags.

"Here!" interrupted Jim Saunders. "Yuh ain't got no time to feed them mules now! Jest walk on down to the bank buildin' where Judge Hope has his office, and I reckon we can kill two birds with one shot. Jerry Estes can appear as complainin' witness against yuh, and I'll ask the judge about layin' yore case before the grand jury!"

Shorty clung to the feed bags. "I got to feed the Sextet, sheriff!" he protested. "If I go to jail, they may not be fed again for a long time."

"Run along!" the sheriff ordered. "I'll attend to the mules!"

He reached from the saddle and seized Shorty's jumper. The little teamster held the *morral*s in a tight grasp as Estes grabbed his arm on the other side. Between them, the two riders half dragged Shorty across the dusty street to the frame bank building. A curious crowd straggled up to see what was going on.

Judge Hope, his little office fenced off by a railing in the bank lobby, was dozing in a chair, tobacco juice staining his white whiskers. He awoke with a start to stare at the four men as they entered.

"Job for yuh, judge!" called the sheriff. "Earl Frazier was killed last night in this hombre's freight camp. He was carryin' ten thousand dollars for the bank here, and it's gone. Masters, here, says Red Collins did it, but we couldn't find no sign of Red Collins around anywhere! It looks like an open-and-shut case as far as the robbery is concerned."

Judge Hope cleared his throat and adjusted steel-rimmed spectacles on his nose. He looked through them at Shorty.

"Mebbe the sheriff shot Frazier!"

said the mule driver. "He's got a .30-30. I haven't."

Jerry Estes, unshaven and haggard after his all-night ride, sank wearily into a chair near the judge's desk as Saunders spluttered with rage.

"I reckon I can sign a complaint regardin' the robbery," the bank cashier said. "Me and Myers met Shorty last night, before he made camp. We was lookin' for Frazier, to escort him here. That was just before dark. At that time, Frazier must have been alive and still in possession of the money."

"The money wasn't found on Masters's person?" asked Judge Hope.

"It wasn't found at all!" Saunders explained. "I'm goin' over the waggins again. Then I'm goin' back to that camp and look under the rocks and everywhere. He must have hid it."

Shorty Masters was watching Estes closely. The cashier, with a fine disregard for the dignity of a court hearing, was tilting his chair back with a weary sigh. He cocked his booted feet up on the judge's desk top.

"I never killed Frazier!" declared Shorty. "I never took the money. Last night I was settin'——"

He broke off abruptly, staring at the sole of Jerry Estes's right boot. Burned deep in the leather was the print of the broken harness ring—an unmistakable mark, a brand of murder!

"Frazier's body is in the waggin!" Saunders was saying. "I think the evidence warrants placin' this case before the grand jury."

Shorty gathered his compact body for a spring. The Sextet's feed bags were still over his arm. He cast a swift glance that showed him Sheriff Saunders was off guard, that Bill

Myers was slouching wearily against the window sill.

Then, with a catlike leap, the little freighter lunged at the bank cashier's throat. He bowled the tilted chair over backward with a crash. The two men struck the floor, Estes grunting with surprise and the force of the attack, Shorty astride his burly form, swinging choppy blows at Estes's jaw.

There was no time to fight it out. Every other man in the little railed inclosure would be coming to the aid of the cashier. The crowd was surging against the flimsy railing, craning necks to watch the fight. For a few precious seconds, the sheriff and the others were stunned into inactivity.

Shorty crashed a hefty punch to the cashier's chin, then whirled and grabbed the .45 from Estes's hip. He sprang erect and swung the gun on Sheriff Saunders just as the officer was reaching for his hip.

"Stick 'em up!" roared the mule driver. "You, too, Myers! And listen to what I've got to say, everybody!"

He backed against the wall, shifting the feed bags over his arm, a grim snarl across his youthful face.

"You're crazy, freighter!" spluttered Saunders. "Resistin' an officer! This'll keep yuh in jail a lot longer!"

"I ain't goin' to jail!" retorted Shorty. "Estes, pull off that right boot and put it on the judge's desk. Pronto! And you, Myers, keep yore itchin' palm away from that gun butt, or I'll shoot yore arm off. I said reach, and I mean high!"

Judge Hope was chewing tobacco frantically, his eyes wide behind the steel-rimmed glasses, his white whiskers bristling. Estes, sullenly swearing, looked into the yawning muzzle of his own gun and removed the

boot. As he laid it on the desk, Shorty stepped forward with the broken chain ring.

"I had this red-hot last night, judge!" he said. "I was goin' to fix it. Well, the hombre that pretended to be Collins stepped smack on it. Here he is! This mornin' when he rode up and hooked his right leg over the saddle horn to rest, I thought I seen the brand, but I couldn't make sure!"

"You're crazy!" shouted Estes. "I wasn't in yore camp. I was ridin' the trail, lookin' for Frazier!"

"Brands don't never lie!" retorted Shorty. "Yuh see, judge, him and Myers went out to escort the money—but not for the bank. I reckon they missed meetin' Frazier on purpose."

"Hm-m-m!" said Judge Hope. He looked at Saunders. The sheriff was alternately swallowing in amazement, and then standing with mouth agape as he looked from one man to the other.

"But — but — the — the money!" the sheriff said. "Who's got it?"

Shorty tilted the six *morrals* over the desk. Out of the feed bags poured a gallon or so of oats—and five packages of crisp, new green-backs!

The men in the room gasped again. Estes, his unshaven face white, and his features working nervously, started forward and began to lower his hands.

"Keep them flippers up!" barked Shorty.

Estes halted, a wild look in his eyes. The little freighter reached over the desk and picked up a bundle of the bills. It was frayed a little at one corner.

"That was Chopin!" he explained. "He's a fast mule. He walks faster, trots faster, sleeps faster, and eats faster than any other mule alive, I

reckon. Yuh see, it takes the average mule jest exactly eleven minutes to consume two quarts of oats, so I figured that the money would be safe at the bottom of the feed bags, if I cut the mules down to eight minutes fodder time. But that Chopin—he'd as soon eat two thousand dollars as he would a blade of grass!"

A cowboy thrust his head in the door. "Here's Myers's and Estes's saddle guns!" he announced. "One shell gone out of each!"

There was a sudden crash at the window. Bill Myers, jerking out his .45, had smashed the glass with his elbow. He pulled the trigger, and a bullet ripped through Shorty's jumper sleeve and buried itself in the wall across the room.

"You'll never send me to the pen!" snarled the bank clerk. "I'll kill yuh!"

The light of madness was in his eyes. His gun spouted red again. Shorty Masters ducked and pumped lead out of Estes's six-gun. Myers staggered and struck the floor hard. The gun clattered out of his limp fingers, and he lay coughing and swearing.

Jerry Estes made a desperate leap for the railing, but Saunders grabbed him and yanked him back, boring his own gun into the cashier's ribs. Judge Hope rapped for order, then rose and bent over Myers.

"It's true!" gasped the wounded man. "I—told Jerry—he couldn't—couldn't get away with it!"

He coughed again, and his head rolled limply against one shoulder. The judge straightened up. Shorty Masters shoved Estes's gun in his own holster, to replace the one the cashier had taken the night before.

"How about it, Estes?" demanded Judge Hope.

The cashier ceased struggling

suddenly, and shrugged weary shoulders.

"Yuh got me!" he said simply. "But I didn't kill Frazier. I fired the second shot—at the freighter, here."

Shorty touched his creased skull thoughtfully. Then he stacked the bills and handed them to Saunders.

"Here!" he said. "Yuh can turn 'em over to the bank trustees. Me,

I got to go feed my mules, or they'll be plumb off schedule!"

That shore was one close call fer the mule driver. A little bad break in the way things ran, an' he would 'a' been framed good an' proper. But by usin' his head fer somethin' besides a restin' place fer his hat, he was able ter turn the tables. Watch fer the next Shorty Masters story. It'll be in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



A TRAGEDY OF THE FAR NORTHWEST

IN the wastes of the Thelon River area within the arctic circle, two trappers, Edward Olson and Emanuel Bode, were found dead in their tent shack, a year after they had been murdered.

The two men had been killed in their bunks while they slept.

Another trapper of the silent Northwest, H. G. Price, who knew the men well, made the gruesome discovery. He was tramping through the section on snowshoes, and when he entered the shack, he was horrified to find that the trappers had been brutally hacked to death with an ax and a knife.

He got in touch with some Indians who made the long trek of over six hundred miles to Fort Reliance and informed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police of the tragedy.

Mushing with dog teams to the scene of the crime, Inspector Gagnon conducted an inquest with a jury of four white men, the only white men in the district.

The inquest showed that efforts had been made to hide the crime by setting fire to the tent shack, which was built with a roof of can-

vas and caribou skins. The walls and floor were made of logs.

The two rifles of the dead trappers were missing, and it was said that an Eskimo named Tetaluk had been seen with one of the rifles about forty miles from the shack.

The trappers originally had ten dogs. The bodies of seven of them were found chained to posts outside of the shack. The three others had broken away and were seen on several occasions in the district by trappers.

Throughout the far-flung territory, with its long nights and smarting cold, every member of the Northwest police force has been informed of the murder, and the search for Tetaluk is on.

The murder was committed about December 5, 1930, and the news of it did not reach Fort Reliance until December 23, 1931.

On account of the immense distances, and the rigors of the climate, it may be a long time before the Mounties get their man, but they will keep on his trail until they run him down, no matter how long it may take.



Señor Red Mask's Six-gun Fiesta

By Guy L. Maynard

Author of "Señor Red Mask's Secret Trail," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A RESCUE.

THE dull thunder of hoofs beyond the shoulder of a ridge ahead, came to the alert ears of "El Muchacho"—the Mexican for "Kid."

In the middle of a line of his favorite Mexican song, "La Paloma," the Muchacho stopped short. The battered old guitar upon which he had been strumming dangled loosely from the strap across his broad shoulders.

A grim look came to the brown, firm-jawed face of the young peon. His dark eyes gleamed.

Reining his buckskin pony into the thick chaparral beside the trail, El Muchacho awaited further developments.

He was in dangerous territory. On his way to an isolated spot in the Rattlesnake Mountains, which he often visited for a purpose known only to himself, the Muchacho had taken a short cut across the range of the big Slash C cattle spread. It was forbidden ground to the homeless young musician.

"If old Jim Corson's waddies was to ketch us here, it'd mean fight, Buck," the Muchacho muttered into the flagged ears of his pony.

It was no secret that Corson hated

Mexicans. He had reason to swear, as he always did, at the mere mention of the word. For his herds had been raided time and again by rustler gangs from across the border.

But logically, and in all fairness, he should likewise have hated all Americans. There were plenty of outlaws of his own nationality who had taken refuge below the international boundary, to prey on honest cowmen. Even the most notorious bandit leader of the whole border was a half-breed, "El Lobo del Rio"—the "River Wolf."

For El Muchacho—an apparently harmless, easy-going youth who spent much of his time singing and playing for the Americans in the little border town of Rio Vista—Jim Corson had a special dislike. Because in more than one run-in with the high-tempered cowman, the singing young Muchacho had come out victorious.

As a result, Corson had issued strict orders to his men to nab the young peon the first time they caught him on Slash C ground. Which meant a bullet or jail for El Muchacho.

The pounding of hoofs grew louder and louder. In a moment, those on-rushing horsemen would be passing the spot where El Muchacho was hidden in the brush.

Then the loud *bo-o-om* of a heavy six-gun rolled down the trail, to be echoed back from the barren slope of a near-by ridge.

"This here is gettin' interestin'," the Muchacho told himself. "While it ain't none of my business, I'm plumb curious to see what's goin' on."

Touching the buckskin in the flanks with spurless, sandaled feet, El Muchacho moved cautiously forward to the edge of the chaparral. He removed his high-peaked, palm-

fiber sombrero, baring his black-haired head to the afternoon sun. One glance through the screen of mesquite leaves was enough to send a cold chill down his spine.

It was not fear of what might happen to himself that caused the icy feeling, however. And it was followed instantly by a surge of white-hot anger.

"The murderin' skunks! They're tryin' to kill Joan—Joan Corson!" cried the Muchacho.

Slapping his big sombrero back on his head, he urged the buckskin clear of the obstructing brush.

It was a tragic scene that El Muchacho had looked upon as he peeped from his leafy cover—a pretty blond girl on a racing brown mare, and less than fifty yards behind her, two leather-clad Mexicans, each with a six-gun in hand, spurring their sweating bronchos.

As the Muchacho came out of the chaparral, the riders flashed past him. A second later, he saw the fleeing girl rein her pony abruptly out of the trail, evidently with the intention of trying to hide in the thick brush.

It was a fatal move. For in the brief moment that the little brown mare was broadside to the pursuing hombres, two shots rang out.

El Muchacho saw the pony stumble, then slump to the ground. Over its head pitched the girl, to fetch up with cruel force against the bole of a mesquite tree, there to lie limp and senseless.

"It was the pony they been shootin' at, not Joan," the brown-skinned youth told himself, as he jumped his buckskin in behind the Mexicans. "I see how it is now. They aim to capture her alive."

So intent were the two hombres on securing their prize that they were unaware of El Muchacho's

presence until they heard a sharp command.

"Halt, you *diablos!*" snapped the Muchacho in Spanish, at the same time reining his pony to a sliding stop a few yards behind the big-hatted hombres.

Taken completely by surprise, the two border ruffians jerked their mounts to an abrupt halt. The gloating expressions on their dark, evil faces died out. Doubtless they thought that snapping order came from some fighting, hard-bitten rider of the Slash C. As if fearing to face death, both hombres slowly turned their heads.

"Hah! It ees only a miserable peon!" gasped one of the Mexicans in amazement.

"And he has not even a gun!" exclaimed the other.

Both cutthroats whirled their mounts toward the youth who so boldly faced them.

"We weel make of your carcass food for the buzzards!" shouted one of the murderous pair.

"A buzzard would have to be starvin', afore he'd touch one of you skunks," blazed El Muchacho.

With snarled Spanish oaths, both hombres went for the six-guns which they had holstered in the moment of triumph following their victim's fall.

Then something unexpected happened. El Muchacho's right hand moved upward to the back of his neck with a swiftness that baffled the eye. Without a noticeable halt, it swept forward. There was a sudden glint of sunlight on naked steel.

"Ai-i-i!" The shrill cry that burst from the lips of one of the ruffians died away in a gurgling sound.

For an instant, the man stared with widening eyes at the brown-skinned youth who faced him. Then

a grimy hand fumbled at the hilt of a knife buried in his chest. With a sidewise lurch, he toppled out of the saddle.

Jumping his lively buckskin pony toward the remaining hombre, El Muchacho reached a hand to the green sash round his own waist.

The effect of this maneuver, on the outlaw, was all that the Muchacho had hoped for. With a grunt of alarm, the cowardly hombre jerked his hand away from his gun butt, wheeled his broncho, and spurred madly into the cover of the chaparral.

"Thet's one time a good strong bluff worked," grimly muttered El Muchacho. "I didn't have but one knife, but as long as thet border rat thought I had two, it's all the same."

Leaping from his saddle, the Muchacho left his buckskin standing ground-anchored with dropped reins while he ran to the still unconscious girl. As he passed the body of the Mexican cutthroat, he stooped and pulled the *cuchillo* from the man's chest.

It was a weapon he prized highly, of finest Spanish steel. And few men were a match for El Muchacho in its use.

Joan Corson opened blue eyes that still mirrored the horror she had felt when sudden unconsciousness overwhelmed her. For a long moment, she stared vacantly at the brown-skinned youth who was stroking disheveled golden hair back from her pale face.

A sudden twinge of pain, as the gently exploring fingers touched a rapidly swelling lump on her forehead, seemed to bring the girl to her full senses.

"Muchacho! Oh, what happened? Where——"

"There ees notheeng to be afraid

of, señorita," El Muchacho reassured the almost frantic girl.

"But those terrible men—they were shooting at me!"

"No, Mees Corson, you are mees-take about that. Those coyotes shoot to stop your *caballo*, to capture you. They no want to keel you."

"Then they killed my poor little Brownny?"

"The leetle pony ees all right now. She ees only creased on thee neck. You weel ride her again pretty soon."

"Muchacho, did you——"

"*Si, señorita*. Eet was necessary to keel that hombre," explained El Muchacho, following the questioning gaze of the girl toward the lifeless ladrone, or thief, lying at the edge of the chaparral.

"And the other hombre?"

"He ees ride ver' fast back to hees chief."

"What do you mean, Muchacho?"

Joan Corson's blue eyes again showed alarm, as she sensed what was back of the young peon's words.

"That El Lobo del Rio—the River Wolf—has send hees ladrones to kidnap you," said El Muchacho seriously. "El Lobo ees ver' cunning. He know that your padre ees ver' rich man, would pay *mucho dinero* for get you back safe."

"I hate to think of such a terrible thing, but it looks very much as though you're right," said Joan Corson, with a shudder.

"And now you weel go back to your *casa* and thank Heaven that you are safe," El Muchacho told the girl gravely.

Joan Corson clasped the strong brown hand that El Muchacho extended and rose dizzily to her feet.

"I thank *you*, Muchacho," she said warmly. "This isn't the first time you have saved me from an aw-

ful fate." Then she added with a wan smile: "You and Señor Red Mask."

"I theenk the Señor Red Mask like ver' much to be of service to the señorita," said El Muchacho, turning in some confusion to secure the brown pony—and to escape a situation that had suddenly become embarrassing.

A hasty examination showed that the little brown mare was not seriously injured. Doubtless the shot that brought her down had purposely been fired with the object of stunning her. A thin trickle of crimson which discolored the animal's glossy neck would soon check itself.

Joan Corson came up and caressed the velvety muzzle of her pet pony. She was plainly more concerned over the condition of Brownny than over the severe bump and shaking-up that she herself had received. After a moment, she gathered up the reins and swung lightly into the saddle.

El Muchacho's dark eyes lighted up as he noted the attractiveness of the girlish rider. A tan-colored Stetson now covered the disarranged golden ringlets of hair, except at the temples and where they clustered round her neck.

Her riding costume of blue flannel blouse, tan corduroy short skirt, and high-heeled, silver-spurred tan boots was very becoming. The natural healthy color of her cheeks had returned, heightened by the excitement of the tragic occasion.

El Muchacho didn't find Joan a bit hard to look at, but he refrained from any outward show of admiration.

"I hope you weel be ver' careful after thees, señorita," he told the girl earnestly. "As long as El Lobo ees alive, it weel be dangerous for you to ride far from the *casa*."

"I promise you I will not ride down this far again, Muchacho," answered Joan.

"And weel you please to have two-three waddies come here pronto and care for thees body?"

"Certainly. And you? Where are you——"

"I weel ride across the Rio Grande thees night, señorita," the Muchacho said firmly, as the heiress of the great Slash C hesitated in girlish confusion at showing such strong interest in the brown-skinned young Mexican.

"But if you should meet that terrible River Wolf——" Joan shuddered again at thought of the bandit chieftain.

"It ees heem that I go to seek," said El Muchacho, without a trace of boastfulness.

"Then please take ex-Sheriff Jackson and his vigilantes with you," pleaded Joan.

"No, señorita. Beel Jackson and those vigilantes are ver' brave fighters, but better it ees that I ride alone."

The girl was silent for a few moments, while El Muchacho quickly secured his own buckskin pony. As he swung up in the saddle, she said, with a little catch in her voice:

"I hope you have a safe trip, if—if you just must go."

"*Gracias, señorita!* Thanks for thee kind weesh." El Muchacho bowed politely, removing the huge sombrero of palm fiber that covered his dark head.

"Good-by and—good luck, Muchacho!" called Joan, reining her brown pony back up the trail.

"*Adios, señorita! Que vaya con Dios!*" El Muchacho gave the time-honored Spanish words of farewell as he watched the girl speed away in the direction of the Slash C Ranch headquarters.

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CHAPTER II.

A LONG TIME DEAD!

THE *clop-clop* of a horse's hoofs sounded on the dim, unused trail to the deserted Bar G Ranch. On the starlit crest of a low knoll, a horseman appeared, looming like some gigantic shadow against the sky line—a mysterious, red-masked caballero!

In a low-pitched tenor voice, he was singing in Spanish the sad words of "La Paloma":

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

Garbed in somber black, from huge, high-peaked sombrero to high-heeled kid boots, and riding a great black stallion, the night rider melted into the shadows of some tall cottonwoods and was lost to view. The singing ceased.

A hoot owl sent up its eerie cry from the crumbling adobe wall of a ruined ranch house on the knoll.

The masked rider reappeared in a little open glade among the cottonwoods. Starlight glistened faintly on the silver filigree and conchas that decorated his tight-fitting *charro* costume of black velvet and the massive black felt sombrero that covered his dark head.

The silver mounting of his hand-carved Mexican saddle and bridle gleamed. There was a musical tinkle of silver spurs as he swung down to the ground.

"Steady, Thunder!" The caballero spoke softly, patted the arched neck of the splendid sable stallion, as the great horse snorted and flinched at the startling swoop of some night bird.

Quickly the caballero stooped and placed bouquets of wild flowers—plucked before dusk in a glen of the mountains that rimmed Verde

Valley—on each of two graves. His sombrero was dropped on the grass at his feet.

"Mebbe this is the last time I'll come here," he murmured, as if to some invisible beings who heard and understood. "I'm ridin' the outlaw trails below the Rio, and I ain't comin' back until I get the murderin', kidnarin' ladrone thet did this job."

For a moment, sinewy brown fingers spelled by touch the words carved on two pine headboards—"Father. Mother."

Then the lone rider of the night rose to his feet, replaced the massive sombrero on his curly dark hair. Vaulting into the saddle, he rode away, past the ruined buildings which had been, but a few months before, the prosperous Bar G Ranch of old Tom Goodwin.

"Señor Red Mask"—for it was the famous masked rider of the justice trail—was grim and silent now. His youthful, broad-shouldered figure sat erect and defiant in the saddle. It was a long trail, and a dangerous one, but there would be no turning back.

A late-rising moon topped the gaunt peaks of the Mexican mountains. It sent long, slanting beams of ghostly light across a wide stretch of desolate, cactus-studded desert.

The bare, gnarled branches of a Joshua tree cast a weird shadow beside a water hole that gleamed like silver in the moonlight. The "devil's pitchfork," the peons call that tree, because of the limbs that branch upward from the trunk, giving it the appearance of a huge fork. It added to the desolate aspect of the spot.

As usual with desert water holes, many trails came together there.

They came from every quarter, worn by countless hoofs.

A tiny camp fire burned near the water hole. Close beside it squatted the lean form of a man wrapped in a frayed serape. Shaded by the wide brim of an immense sombrero, the hombre's face was scarcely visible. Only when he pulled on a corn-husk *cigarro* that glowed brightly, were his hard features to be seen.

With a skinny brown hand, the hombre threw some dry mesquite twigs on the fire. The momentary blaze revealed a rawboned dun broncho, saddled and bridled, cropping eagerly of the grass that sparsely fringed the water hole.

"*Infierno!*" growled the old peon, through the folds of the serape into which he had sunk his chin. "Will that *maldito caballero* of the *mascara roja* never appear? The desert night grows chilly for such old bones as mine. Ah! who comes?"

Abruptly ceasing his muttering, the old hombre lifted his head and listened intently. The faint thudding of hoofs on sand had come to his ears from somewhere out in the concealing chaparral.

Sometimes these riders of the dim night trails were dangerous. It was better to be safe than sorry, quickly decided the old man. He rose to his feet with surprising speed and darted like a hunted animal behind the Joshua tree.

The muffled *clop-clop* of the approaching horse grew more distinct. Then the swish of mesquite limbs against boots and saddle leather sounded close at hand. A moment later, a lone horseman bulked indistinctly just beyond the circle of firelight.

"*Buenas tardes, señor!*" called the rider.

The old hombre behind the Joshua

tree made no answer. But there was a cunning leer on his evil face. With a natural talent for acting, he intended to make the most of the part he was now playing.

"Come out from behind that tree, old one," sternly ordered the newcomer in Spanish. "I saw you scurry to cover like a frightened fox. Pronto, hombre! Don't you know that a bullet would pass through that soft wood as if it was paper? Step out! Quick!"

The peon muttered as he left his unreliable refuge. The leer on his seamed face was now craftily replaced by a timid look.

"Please do not shoot an old man who harms no one," he whined.

"Do not fear, uncle," said the strange rider, in a more kindly tone. "Who are you, and why do you hide from—"

"It is Senor Mascara Roja!" suddenly ejaculated the old peon, as he came close enough to make sure that his midnight visitor was the one he had been expecting.

"You guessed it the first time, *viejo*," said Señor Red Mask, for it was really the rider of the justice trail who had come seeking water for himself and the black stallion, Thunder. "But go on; tell me of yourself."

"My name is Juan de la Roca, señor. I am but an old man traveling to the home of my only son on a little ranch in the south of Chihuahua. Here I but make my camp for the night."

"Quién sabe? Maybe that is the truth," said the masked caballero, with a trace of suspicion in his voice. "But why are you not asleep at such a late hour? And what was your idea in hiding from me behind that devil's pitchfork?"

"But señor, my serape is worn thin, and of flesh on my bones there

is very little. Therefore, it is only by huddling close to the fire that I keep from freezing," whined the old peon. "And I hid in fear of *hombres malos* that ride the night trails."

A most reasonable liar was the gaunt-bodied old peon. Señor Red Mask found that not only were his suspicions allayed, but he was actually sympathizing with the old rascal who stood shivering in the chilly night breeze.

The trembling of the old man's knees was not entirely due to the raw night air, however. The truth was that he felt very nervous in the presence of this mysterious masked rider of whom he had heard such terrible tales.

Had not the Red Mask more than once whipped, single-handed, whole gangs of the most desperate bandits that infested the border? Old Juan quivered anew at the thought of what might happen to him if the black-clad caballero should detect him in the fiendish scheme that he was trying to put over.

"What of these bad men you speak of, hombre? Have you seen any of them to-night?" asked Señor Red Mask, swinging down from his saddle and stepping close to the little fire over which the old peon was now warming his gnarled and skinny fingers.

"Sí, señor," glibly lied old Juan. "Three of them passed this way, but a little while ago. I fear greatly for your safety, caballero."

"And why should I be in any danger from them?"

"Because, señor, they are your enemies. They had been drinking much tequila, those three hombres. It loosened their tongues, and they talked freely of their desire to kill Señor Red Mask, so much that it make my veins run cold."

"So? Their hatred must be great. And who were those hombres?"

Before answering, old Juan peered cautiously into the shadows beyond the firelight, as if fearful that the three drunken bandits might be listening to his talk.

"Señor," Juan de la Roca said in an awe-stricken half whisper, "they were none other than that scourge of the border, El Lobo del Rio, and two of his ladrones."

From the shadow of his huge sombrero, the crafty peon shyly watched that portion of his hearer's face which was not covered by the red silk half mask. He chuckled under his breath as he noted little knots of muscle tighten on the brown, fighting jaws of Señor Red Mask.

"Which way did those hombres go? Don't lie to me, old one! Speak up quick!" demanded the young caballero.

"Señor, I speak the truth," began old Juan, piously rolling his beady little eyes heavenward. "They spoke of riding swiftly to La Posada de los Ladrones (the Inn of the Thieves) where a great fiesta is being held on this anniversary day of Mexican independence."

"How long ago did they leave?"

"But a few minutes before the moon rose above the peaks yonder."

"*Gracias*, uncle!" said Señor Red Mask, appreciating the information he had received from the old peon. "I will ride, pronto."

Tossing the old man a gold coin, Señor Red Mask turned to his horse. Leading the great black stallion over to the water hole, the caballero left it to drink while he himself sought the source of the water supply—a tiny stream that trickled from an outcropping of sandstone—to quench his own thirst. Moments later, he was in the saddle.

"Adios, uncle!" called the youthful rider, whirling his mount into a moonlit trail which led away toward a high mesa that loomed darkly to the westward.

"But, señor, you ride the wrong way! It is in that direction that danger lies!" cried old Juan, rising to his feet apparently in alarm.

The answer was a grim laugh that floated back on the desert night breeze.

For several seconds, the wily peon stood listening as the thud of the black stallion's hoofs grew fainter in the distance. Then, with a wicked grin on his hawklike face, he squatted once more by the fire.

Holding up to the light the gold piece which Señor Red Mask had given him, he gloated over it in a miserly manner for a moment, before slipping it into a pocket of his greasy pantaloons.

"Ho-ho! What a trap the mighty Señor Red Mask is riding into!" chortled Juan de la Roca. "For this night's work will I receive many pesos from my master, El Lobo del Rio."

Throwing the last of the mesquite twigs on his tiny camp fire, old Juan huddled close to its grateful warmth.

"A good scheme," he muttered to himself. "A most excellent scheme which El Lobo has worked out for the capture of this red-masked hombre. The two hombres he sends after the Señorita Americana fail in their job. Only one comes back. But El Lobo knows that the hot-headed Red Mask will quickly take the vengeance trail.

"So he sends me here to await the coming of the caballero, to tell him where to find his enemy, El Lobo. And now the River Wolf awaits the coming of his guest. Adios, Señor Red Mask! You will be a long time dead!"

CHAPTER III.

A TRAP FOR SENOR RED MASK.

GRAY and sinister in the moonlight, La Posada de los Ladrones squatted on the rim of Sacaton Mesa.

Bandits, smugglers, thieves—all the murderous riffraff of the Mexican border—found refuge and entertainment within its thick adobe walls. Here crimes were planned. And here, also, were the proceeds of those crimes spent riotously.

In spite of the fact that many former members of the gangs led by El Lobo del Rio, notorious bandit chief, had been killed or captured, several of his worst cutthroats were in the cantina that night.

The fiesta of independence was in full swing. For many miles up and down the border, outlaws of every description had left their hide-outs and come riding to enjoy a wild night in their favorite resort.

The long, low-ceilinged room of the cantina was hazy with the smoke of many corn-husk *cigarros*. Rank fumes of tequila and aguardiente tainted the air. There was the unceasing sound of talk and laughter, plentifully mixed with Spanish oaths.

From his vantage point at the head of the long bar that filled one entire side of the room, El Lobo looked down the line of hilarious drinkers. There was a wide grin on his liquor-bloated face, which not even the huge black mustachios which covered his mouth could entirely conceal. For the River Wolf was in high good humor, from many drinks and in anticipation of the killing of his bitter enemy, Señor Red Mask.

"*Oyen, muchachos!*" (hear, boys!) The heavy voice of the bandit chief rumbled above the din.

Instantly the clamor subsided, and every eye was turned on the burly, leather-clad desperado who ruled the outlaws.

Spinning a gold piece on the bar, El Lobo ordered the sweating bartender to serve drinks to the crowd.

"Drink to the death of our enemy, the Red Mask!" cried El Lobo, filling his own glass to the brim with powerful liquor and lifting it high.

Shouts of "*Muerte al Mascara Roja!*" were followed by "*Viva El Lobo!*"

There was no doubt about the bandit leader's being in high favor with those hard-bitten *hombres*. Was he not generous with his money? And did he not promise to rid the border of the one man they feared and hated?

With the grin on his evil face wider than before, El Lobo turned to the *hombre* beside him, who was none other than the survivor of the villainous pair who had attempted to kidnap Joan Corson.

"*Mira, Panchito!*" ordered El Lobo. "Wait here for the *hombres* that I have sent to make way with that masked *diablo*, if he comes riding on the mesa to-night."

"*Si, señor.* There is no doubt of his coming, since it is said that he is very fond of that pretty daughter of Jeem Corson. And you? Are you not staying here for the pleasure of seeing Señor Red Mask's corpse?"

"I will not be far away," said El Lobo, with a rumbling chuckle and a wink of one of his beady black eyes. "I but go to the village below the *posada*. There will be pretty girls to dance away the time, with, while I wait for the Red Mask to fall into my trap."

"Then I shall go there seeking you when the word of his death comes?" asked the squat, pock-marked Panchito.

"Seguro," said El Lobo. "And be sure that the tequila does not put you to sleep before the good news arrives."

"I will not fail you, señor."

A lone horseman rode up the crooked trail that led to the top of Sacaton Mesa. On a narrow bench that reamed the face of the steep slope, he reined up his black stallion and sat at ease for several moments in the big, silver-trimmed saddle.

Sweat dripped from the stallion's belly. A white lather on its back and sides outlined the wide, black leather skirts of its saddle. It stamped a steel-shod hoof impatiently, flinging up its shapely head and champing its Spanish bit. The rider spoke softly to it, and put a caressing hand on its sweaty neck.

"Reckon we better figure this thing out afore we go any farther, Thunder," said the man in a low tone.

He glanced upward toward the rim of the mesa, and the moonlight showed the red silk mask that concealed his features.

"I got a powerful hunch that it ain't any too safe for us up yonder on the old Sacaton," added the masked rider.

Señor Red Mask had learned by costly experience to pay heed to such hunches as the one that he now felt. They were born of the constant danger in which he lived. And a considerable part of this seemingly uncanny warning of danger ahead was just plain caution.

"I'm goin' ter take a look-see among them sandstone boulders on the rim, old-timer," said Señor Red Mask, still speaking in an undertone to the stallion.

Slipping out of the saddle, he removed the jingling silver spurs from

his black kid boots. The massive sombrero and the short jacket of black velvet he also took off and laid carefully on a rock beside the trail.

Both were heavily decorated with silver ornaments. The caballero was taking no chances on a reflected moonbeam making him a target for bandit bullets.

Cautiously, now, he started climbing the steep trail. Like a shadow of the night, he flitted from boulder to boulder and went out of the trail to find cover in the sparse growth of stunted chaparral.

Within a few yards of the rim, the caballero started crawling on hands and knees. There was an outcropping of sandstone at the top of the trail, which would make a natural bulwark for his enemies if they chose to dry-gulch him.

"No tellin' what tricks that half-breed, El Lobo, is up to. He'd likely figure I'd come after him, soon as I got wind of him tryin' to steal Joan Corson," Señor Red Mask told himself, as he crept closer and closer to the rim of the mesa.

Instead of keeping to the trail, the caballero detoured just beneath the rim. His plan was to come up to the sandstone ledge from the rear, surprising any trail guards who might be in hiding there.

Drifting clouds obscured the waning moon from time to time. Señor Red Mask took advantage of these moments of darkness to advance more swiftly. Soon he was over the top and creeping across fairly level ground.

But it was far from being easy going. More than once he had to grit his teeth to stifle an outcry of pain as a needle-sharp cactus thorn pierced deeply into his flesh.

A cigarette glowed like a firefly in the shadow of the sandstone ledge.

Low voices came indistinctly to the masked youth hiding behind a tiny clump of chaparral.

"Two hombres are watchin' the trail," Señor Red Mask murmured under his breath.

He could make out their blurred forms in the deep shadows. They were close together, talking low. But something had apparently excited them. They gestured repeatedly down the slope of the mesa.

Señor Red Mask was in the rear of the hombres he was stalking, a scant ten yards away. Waiting till a cloud drifted across the face of the moon, he inched forward.

The slightest sound now would spoil everything. It would mean a gun fight. That would bring the crowd at the *posada* on a run.

One of the dry-gulchers spoke excitedly. Straining his ears, Red Mask caught the Spanish words.

"I tell you, compadre, that I was not mistaken. Plainly did I hear the pounding of his caballo's hoofs on the trail," insisted a voice.

"Yet, when you aroused me from my sleep, there was no sound," argued a second voice doubtfully.

True. That red-masked *diablo* is in league with the Evil One. With the cunning of a fox, he has stopped to spy out the trail ahead for a trap. Even now, he may be close upon us. Be ready to kill——"

"*Alzen las manos, hombres!* Hoist your hands!" the sudden command of Señor Red Mask cut in.

Wheeling in wide-eyed alarm, the two cutthroats looked squarely into the black muzzles of a pair of Colt .45s. The moonlight glinted coldly on the white pearl grips above the caballero's hands.

"Put 'em up, pronto! And don't give an alarm, or your filthy carcasses will feed the buzzards!" curtly added Señor Red Mask.

Stepping close to the badly frightened hombres, he took the heavy six-guns which each held in a shaking hand. After extracting the cartridges, he flung the guns far down the slope of the mesa.

"Now, hombres, lie flat on your yellow bellies while I hog-tie you, like a couple of dogies for the branding," ordered the caballero, sliding his own guns back into their holsters beneath his scarlet silk sash.

The reputation of Señor Red Mask for dealing out swift and deadly justice to border ruffians who crossed his trail was only too well known to the gunmen selected by El Lobo to dry-gulch the caballero. Desperate killers that they were, they had lost their nerve completely, when face to face with the sudden death which had seemed to leer at them from the snouts of Señor Red Mask's six-guns.

Without a moment's hesitation, both hombres dropped to the hard ground. Señor Red Mask quickly removed their gun belts and sashes. With these, he deftly bound them hand and foot.

"Reckon that'll keep you two skunks out of mischief for the rest of the night," snapped Señor Red Mask, as he finished, and rose to his feet. "Hate to leave you tied up in this chilly night air, but it ain't nothin' to what you aimed to do to me."

The sudden feel of something steely pressing into his back caused the young caballero to stiffen in his tracks. He knew it was the round, hard snout of a six-gun. He knew, too, that an itching trigger finger was ready to send a slug of hot lead tearing through his vitals at the slightest move he made.

A hand snaked the pearl-handled Colts from Señor Red Mask's holsters.

"So! Señor Mascara Roja finds the tables turned!" a mocking Spanish voice taunted the caballero. Then it added boastfully: "You may now face about and behold the one who has, single-handed, captured the mysterious masked terror of the outlaw trails."

Señor Red Mask turned slowly to face his captor. His dark eyes gleamed through the slits in his mask. Every muscle in his powerful body was tensed like a coiled steel spring, ready to take advantage of the slightest opportunity to get himself out of this terrible position.

With a little start of surprise, he recognized the hombre who had caught him unawares. The gesture was not lost on the newcomer.

"You know me, huh?" snarled Panchito—the squat ruffian whom El Lobo had intrusted with the duty of informing him of Señor Red Mask's death. "Then it is true that the peon *musico*, called 'El Muchacho,' is your spy. He must have told you of knifing my compadre to-day beyond the Rio Grande, and described me to you.

"But little good it will do you, for I shall quickly march you to El Lobo. He will reward me richly for this job. It is fortunate that I came prowling down here to see if these lazy trail guards had fallen asleep."

On the point of ordering Señor Red Mask to start walking toward the not-far-distant *posada*, curiosity overcame Panchito's discretion. An overpowering desire to see the face of his mysterious captive compelled him to step forward and reach for the red silk mask that concealed the caballero's identity.

This was the chance for which Señor Red Mask had been hoping. Swift as a flashing ray of light, his rocky right fist shot out. There was

an ugly crunching sound of hard, bare knuckles smashing against flesh and bone.

Panchito never had a chance to cry out an alarm. The blow caught him squarely on the point of the jaw. His knees buckled, and he dropped to the ground, completely out.

"Phew! That was a lucky break for me," the fighting young caballero told himself.

He pounced upon his fallen foe and bound him in record time, after which, he proceeded to gag each of his captives.

With his precious guns recovered and back in their holsters, Señor Red Mask was again ready to continue his hunt for El Lobo.

"Reckon you hombres can keep each other company till some of your amigos come along and untie you," he told the three ladrones on the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIGHT AT THE POSADA.

ONCE more in the saddle, Señor Red Mask rolled his silver spurs and sent the black stallion scrambling up the steep trail like a great cat. All was quiet as he topped out on the mesa. The way was apparently clear for a surprise attack on his enemy.

"I'm the last man El Lobo and his gang will be expectin' to see alive," the young caballero told himself. Then he added grimly: "And they better be enjoyin' theirselves while they can, 'cause I aim to turn this into a six-gun fiesta, pronto."

Instead of entering the great arched gateway to the patio of La Posada de los Ladrones, Señor Red Mask rode along the adobe walls till he had almost circled the place. He knew the exact location of the big

room occupied by the cantina. When he finally halted the black stallion, it was under a high window that faced the west.

Dismounting, Señor Red Mask dropped his bridle reins, loosened the twin six-guns in their holsters, leaving their gleaming pearl butts peeping above his scarlet sash, and strode swiftly to a side door. It was a convenient passageway for the people of the little town which was clustered near by on the sloping mesa top.

Flinging the door open, the caballero stepped quickly inside the cantina. For a few moments, no one noticed his entrance. The hard-bitten inmates of the resort were busy celebrating the fiesta. And why should they expect any one, save some thirsty peon from the village, to enter that door? Least of all, the man whose death they momentarily awaited—Señor Red Mask.

The flashing dark eyes that looked through the slits of the caballero's mask glanced swiftly from face to face. But the yellow rays of lamp-light that struggled through the haze of tobacco smoke revealed nowhere the ugly, black-mustached face of El Lobo del Rio.

"That's tough," muttered Señor Red Mask to himself. "That hombre must be around here somewhere."

There was an inner room, a sort of private drinking place for rich patrons who did not care to mix with the peons who frequented the cantina. Señor Red Mask started for the door, which was located at the extreme end of the long bar.

But hardly had he taken a second stride, when an hombre at the bar dropped his upraised glass with a crash.

"*Un espectro!*" (A ghost!) cried the half-drunken hombre.

"It is Señor Red Mask! Alive!" bawled a more sober hombre, as if hardly believing his own eyes.

"*Si, hombres!*" said the caballero, facing the gang of desperadoes with his hands hovering above the butts of his .45s. "I come hunting for that back-shooting coyote that calls himself 'El Lobo del Rio.' Where is he?"

No longer were they afraid, now that the first shock of surprise had passed. Hard-bitten killers who lived by their guns, the mob in the cantina knew that by sheer force of numbers they could destroy this masked hombre who dared to enter their hangout. They greeted his presence with a growl of hatred. Hands went to gun butts.

Br-a-ang! The roaring crash of a six-gun was followed by a sharp cry of pain and the clatter of a heavy weapon on the barroom floor.

With a flash of motion that baffled the watching eyes of the outlaws, Señor Red Mask had drawn his long Colts. One of them was smoking now. Its bullet had knocked the gun from a half-breed's hand.

A snarling murmur of wonder went up from the throng in the cantina at this exhibition of the young caballero's marvelous skill with a six-gun. But it held them back only for an instant.

Señor Red Mask's darting glance caught the snaky movement of a dozen brown hands toward tied-down holsters.

Bang! Bra-ang! There was a sharp clatter of glass and tin as the two big oil lamps that hung from the low ceiling came crashing to the barroom floor.

Instantly the place was a madhouse of scrambling, swearing hombres fighting to reach the doors and safety. Tables were upset in the

mêlée. Chairs were smashed over heads. Bottles hurtled through the darkness to land with sickening thuds on unprotected faces.

Orange flashes lanced the murky air as bellowing six-guns added their death song to the uproar.

"Time for me to make a get-away," Señor Red Mask told himself, starting to run for the door.

An hombre with the same thought collided violently with the caballero. He was a big fellow, powerful and heavy of build, as Señor Red Mask quickly discovered. For the outlaw's gorilla arms encircled him in a rib-breaking hug that threatened to squeeze the very life out of him.

"I got him! I kin feel them fancy silver gewgaws on his jacket! It's Red Mask!" bellowed the hombre.

It was a tough American border ruffian who had seized him, Señor Red Mask knew from the man's speech. Such hombres were expert in fist-and-skull, rough-and-tumble fighting. They neither asked nor gave quarter. Nothing was barred in their combats, not even chewing off ears or gouging out eyes.

But Señor Red Mask was no novice at the game that had been forced on him. He suddenly jerked his body downward, at the same time arching his back. This spread his assailant's arms, gave him room to smash in a series of short-arm jabs to the other's midriff that brought grunts of distress.

The big man gave ground for a few short backward steps before Señor Red Mask's onslaught. Then he lunged forward again, long arms spread wide, and, because of the darkness, the caballero was unable to avoid him.

Again those long, powerful arms were around Señor Red Mask's lithe body. They bent him backward until shafts of pain shot along his

spine. But with a desperate wrench and side-step, the fighting caballero broke the crushing hold.

A flicker of light pierced the gloom of the barroom. One of the trembling bartenders had lighted a piece of candle stuck in the neck of a tequila bottle.

By the dim light, Señor Red Mask measured his foe as the latter sprang at him with a snarled oath and flailing fists.

There was a quick duck of the head, followed by a clean-cut, driving blow that traveled straight from Señor Red Mask's powerful shoulder. It caught the incoming outlaw full in the pit of the stomach, on the great nerve center that is called the solar plexus.

Doubled like a jackknife, the gringo ruffian dropped in a writhing heap on the floor.

With a bound, Señor Red Mask was at the side door of the cantina, through which he had entered the place. His hand gripped the heavy iron latch and jerked. The door didn't budge. He jerked again, putting all his strength into the effort.

"It's barred on the outside," gritted Señor Red Mask.

The caballero turned, at bay. Seeing his trouble, the mob in the cantina surged forward. Those in front tried to hold back, fearful of the havoc they knew would follow the drawing of Señor Red Mask's lightning six-guns. But those in the rear hurled themselves onward, shoving the front rank ahead as living shields.

Now Señor Red Mask moved in a way to confuse his enemies. Before they had realized what he was doing, he leaped sidewise down the side of the long barroom. A half-breed bandit with drawn knife barred the way.

Señor Red Mask's foot flashed upward, the toe of his kid boot striking the hombre's knife hand. The naked blade spun through the air, while its owner clasped his broken hand with a howl of anguish.

Dodging a hurled chair, Señor Red Mask reached the spot for which he had headed, in a couple of long bounds. It was the high window under which he had left Thunder, the great black stallion. Once through that opening, he would be safe, for a time, at least.

But now guns were blazing. He had been an elusive target, dodging and running down the room. The light of the single candle in that big, smoke-filled room was little better than none at all.

"But when I start climbin' through that window, they got a target a blind man couldn't miss," swiftly thought the caballero.

He crouched low, whirling toward the bar. There was a blur of motion, the crashing roar of a .45 and—darkness. The tiny flame of the tallow candle had been snuffed out by the breeze of a flying bullet.

While his swearing foes were yelling for another light, Señor Red Mask sprang up on the wide casement of the window. For an instant, only he paused there, gathering himself, then leaped outward into the night.

It was a long drop to the ground, but he landed safely. Straightening to his feet, he glanced quickly around him. The pale half moon was veiled by a flying cloud, yet its dim light was sufficient to make objects of any size visible.

With a half-stifed exclamation of alarm, Señor Red Mask saw that the one thing he sought was missing. The black stallion was gone!

"Somethin's happened to him," the caballero told himself, with a

sinking of his heart. "Thunder wouldn't 'a' moved a foot without somebody forced him to leave."

What had happened, Señor Red Mask quickly decided, was that some hombre with more presence of mind than his companions, had slipped outside during the fracas in the bar-room and gone around the *posada* to bar the side door and trap him. Finding the black horse, the scoundrel had promptly seized the valuable prize and made away with it.

Without the faithful black, Señor Red Mask felt helpless and lost. But it wasn't for himself and the loss he suffered that the caballero was most concerned. Hot rage blazed up in him as he thought of the mistreatment the splendid animal would doubtless suffer at hands of the thief who had stolen him.

"I got to do somethin' to save him, and do it dog-goned quick," muttered Señor Red Mask.

But he was far from being out of danger himself. At any moment, that howling mob in the cantina might come boiling out in search of him. Afoot, he would have small chance of making his escape.

Darting along in the shadows of the wall, Señor Red Mask headed for the corral and stable which he knew were located at the rear of the courtyard of the *posada*.

A puzzling thought kept running through the masked youth's mind. It was nothing less than a recollection of the fact that Thunder, the black stallion, was a one-man horse.

Señor Red Mask had broken him to the saddle as a three-year-old, and no other rider had ever been on his back. Furthermore, it was dangerous for a stranger even to approach the stallion too closely.

As he turned a corner of the patio wall, intent on entering by the rear gate and making a search of the

stables, Señor Red Mask heard a sound that made his heart almost skip a beat. It was the shrill whistle of an enraged stallion, coming faintly across the mesa. And it ceased abruptly, as if the animal's wind had suddenly been choked off.

"That's old Thunder!" joyfully exclaimed Señor Red Mask, stopping a moment to listen for a repetition of the wild call. "And he's fightin' mad about somethin'."

There was no other sound to break the stillness of the barren, wind-swept mesa, but the caballero had marked well the direction from which that one angry blast had come. He lost no time heading toward the spot.

Dodging from one clump of chaparral to another, he succeeded in getting away from the vicinity of the *posada* without being seen.

He could hear shots and Spanish oaths as the gang piled out of the cantina and made a hasty search of the premises for him. But the uproar quickly died down. There was no reason for them to suspect that he had not escaped on the fleet-footed stallion which he was known to ride.

Looking back over his shoulder as he ran, Señor Red Mask saw several men ride out of the patio and head for the spot where the two bandits had tried to dry-gulch him.

"I'll bet them hombres I hog-tied will be plumb happy to welcome that investigatin' committee," chuckled Señor Red Mask. "They'll feel like takin' on a few drinks after what they've been through."

CHAPTER V.

FOR STEALING THUNDER.

IT was a wild section of the mesa into which the young caballero was pressing, a rough trip for a man afoot. Cactus and cat's-claw and

thorny mesquite tore his clothes and scratched his flesh.

But there was no slackening of his gait, no thought of turning back. Thunder, his gallant comrade of the long trails, was in trouble. That was enough.

The shrill whistle of the stallion had carried a considerable distance downwind. It seemed to the anxious caballero that he had traveled miles along the twisting cow trails that crisscrossed through the chaparral in every direction, before he finally came in sight of the camp which the horse thieves had made for the night. A tiny fire, built under an overhanging rock in a shallow coulee, first caught his watchful eyes.

Creeping along in the shadow of some stunted mesquite trees, Señor Red Mask came up to the edge of the coulee without his presence being detected. The moon gave enough light so that he could make out the forms of horses and men.

Huddled close to the fire, with serapes wrapped around their bodies, were two hombres. They were smoking *cigarros* made of strong tobacco, with a rank odor that carried to the watching caballero's nostrils. Occasionally they spoke in guarded tones, but he could not catch their words.

Two bronchos, stripped of riding gear, were picketed a short distance down the coulee.

But of greatest interest to Señor Red Mask was the sight of his black stallion, still saddled and bridled, not fifty yards from the camp fire.

"The dirty skunks!" gritted Red Mask under his breath.

His keen dark eyes had made out the manner in which the great stallion was secured. The loops of two long reatas were drawn taut around the horse's beautifully arched neck.

The ropes stretched out on either side, with the ends tied to stout mesquite trees on each bank of the coulee. The black stallion was helpless.

"They was likely tyin' him up when the reatas loosened on his neck and give him a chance to sound that fightin' whistle of his," reflected Señor Red Mask.

It was easy now for the caballero to picture in his mind how the stallion had been taken away from the *posada*. These two hombres had come riding up to join in the fiesta.

Seeing the magnificent horse with its silver-mounted saddle and bridle, standing outside, and hearing the battle in progress within the cantina, they had promptly seized upon the opportunity to make a rich haul. The stallion could be sold for a large sum to any rich rancher, not to mention the costly rigging.

Tossing their loops over the stallion's head, they had snubbed him tight to their saddle horns, choking him so severely that fighting back was almost impossible for the big horse. Then, a rider on each side holding a taut reata, they had half dragged the enraged black across the mesa till they found an apparently safe camping spot.

Señor Red Mask could easily have shot down both horse thieves without giving them a chance for their lives.

"And that would be doin' the country a favor," he muttered to himself grimly.

But the young masked rider never smoked his pearl-handled Colts except in a fair fight. Edging noiselessly along the bank of the coulee, he was soon directly above the two hombres. Then he rose silently to his feet.

"So you've stole yourselves a horse, huh?" said Señor Red Mask.

There was cold menace in his tones, and something of a sneer.

A sharp cry came from the lips of one thief, a husky exclamation of fear from the other, as they jerked to their feet, facing the man on the bank above. Without waiting for the order, they lifted their hands high, fingers spread wide.

The caballero stood watching the two thieves, his fingers hooked in his broad scarlet sash, close to the gleaming pearl grips of his six-guns. For a long moment, the hombres stared as if fascinated by the black-clad man of mystery who towered above them. Then one of them caught his breath with a little gasping sound that broke the spell.

"And now that you've had a good look at me, suppose you ease your left hands down and unbuckle your gun belts," ordered Señor Red Mask icily.

They obeyed him like men moving in the grip of some fearful nightmare.

"Now hit the trail!" snapped the red-masked caballero.

"But, señor, our caballos?" croaked both hombres in a dismayed chorus.

"You'd ought ter have thought about them when you stole *my* horse," said the caballero relentlessly. "Don't stop to argue! Get goin'!"

Señor Red Mask stood for a few moments, watching the pair of thieves disappear down the coulee. Then he leaped quickly down the bank and gathered up their weapons. A clump of prickly pear grew close to the coulee on the opposite bank. He tossed the two six-guns into the middle of it.

A few quick strides brought him to the black stallion. He threw off the choking reatas and stood for a long moment caressing the big horse.

With soft nickers of affection, the faithful animal showed its joy at being released from the torturing ropes.

"Only one thing more to do here, old-timer," muttered Señor Red Mask. "Then we're headin' back to take a hand again in that fiesta."

Swinging up into the saddle, Señor Red Mask rode down to where the two bronchos ridden by the horse thieves were picketed. He turned them loose and watched them go loping off across the moonlit mesa.

"Now back to the *posada* and another hunt for El Lobo," the caballero told his eager mount.

Wheeling the black out of the shallow coulee, Señor Red Mask rolled his silver spurs and sent the stallion plunging toward the squat adobe buildings of La Posada de los Ladrones.

CHAPTER VI.

A CAPTURE.

MIDNIGHT was long past, but still the revelry went on in the little town of Rosario on the slope below the *posada*.

The *tink-a-ling-ting* of stringed musical instruments, the shuffling of feet, and the gay voices of the revelers floated up the west slope of the mesa to Señor Red Mask as he reined his black stallion to a halt near the walls of the *posada*.

While he sat listening, a raucous, liquor-coarsened voice began bellying a lilting Mexican love song.

"Mexican girls are pretty as a flower, and talk so sweetly they enchant with love, huh?" murmured Señor Red Mask, while a grim smile bent the straight line of his firm mouth, below the red silk half mask. "Waal, Mr. Lobo, if they just keep you enchanted till I get down to that fandango, we'll have some fun."

There was no doubt in Señor Red Mask's mind that it was the voice of El Lobo del Rio which he had just heard singing. It was evident that the bandit chief was celebrating the fiesta with a vengeance. It accounted, too, for his not being in the cantina of La Posada de los Ladrones when the young caballero came hunting for him.

Neck-reining the stallion to the westward, Señor Red Mask touched it lightly with his spurs. The big black bounded away at a long, rolling lope down the easy slope of the mesa.

At the head of a narrow, winding street which cut through the little village, Señor Red Mask pulled his mount down to a running walk. This was dangerous going. In the light of the westerling moon, he was an easy target for any wandering gunmen who might happen along the street.

With the sounds of merrymaking to guide him, Señor Red Mask pressed steadily on down the dirty, twisting street.

Soon he came in sight of the place where the fandango was being held. It was a long, low adobe building, the home of the *alcalde* (mayor) of the village.

Turning a corner of the street, Señor Red Mask halted in the deep shadow of a darkened building. Leaping from the saddle, he left the black stallion standing with dropped reins.

With quick steps, the young caballero made his way through the shadowed *calle*. The musical tinkle of his silver spurs and the tap of his boot heels on the cobblestoned street were the only sounds to be heard outside the ballroom.

Apparently the whole village was attending the festivities at the *alcalde's* home. And from the looks

of the well-filled corral at one side of the house, many ranchers and their families had ridden in to enjoy the great fiesta. Saddle horses and mules, even yokes of oxen and great, lumbering carts with huge, solid wooden wheels, were much in evidence.

Going up to the door of the house, Señor Red Mask looked at the scene within the fandango room. The place was packed. A swaying mob of men and women milled hilariously on the big square of dance floor to the catchy music of many guitars and fiddles.

Village peons in cheap cotton clothes rubbed shoulders with leather-clad vaqueros from the surrounding cattle ranches. The wives, daughters, and sweethearts of the dancing hombres were decked out in their gayest finery.

So many were smoking corn-husk *cigarros* that a cloud of smoke hung just above the dancers' heads, dimming the hanging oil lamps. A cheap red wine called *vino tinto*, was being served by volunteer waiters along the edges of the crowd.

"Looks like the only way for me to ever find El Lobo in that mob is to mix in with 'em till I bump into him," observed Señor Red Mask to himself.

A pretty peon girl had just been released by her half-drunken dancing partner into the care of a fat old señora. They were close to the door.

The daring young caballero stepped quickly inside the room.

"Dance with me, pretty one?" he asked in flowery Spanish, bowing gallantly to the girl.

The girl gave Señor Red Mask a startled glance, caught her breath with a little gasp of alarmed surprise. But this was followed almost instantly by a coquettish smile,

while a becoming blush mantled her olive cheeks.

For the youthful caballero was a romantic and gallant figure. The lamplight glistened on the silver ornaments of his black velvet *charro* costume. His silver spurs tinkled musically. Touches of beauty and color were given by the scarlet sash round his slender waist and the gay red-white-and-green silk serape flung across his broad shoulders. Above all, the red silk half mask lent the caballero an air of mystery.

The fat señora was past the age of romance, however. She quickly interposed an emphatic objection to the proposed dance.

"But *si, mamacita!*" pleaded the girl. "Just one little *vals* with the señor. Listen! They are playing my favorite, 'La Paloma.'"

"And mine, señorita," said Señor Red Mask, boldly slipping an arm round the girl's waist and whirling her away, despite the voluble objections of the fat señora.

They were soon deep in the crowd, swaying in rhythm with the lilting cadences of the music. But always the gleaming dark eyes of the caballero were searching the room for the ferocious face of the River Wolf.

It was the pretty *muchacha*, however, who first caught sight of the burly bandit chief.

"Dance faster," she whispered up to Señor Red Mask, with a little shudder. "Yonder comes El Lobo del Rio. He is an *hombre malo*, a thief and killer. Don't you see how every one makes way for him?"

It was true. The half-drunken bandit chief had only to scowl fiercely at an hombre careless enough to cross his path. Instantly the way would be cleared for him.

"Some rep that coyote has got with these poor natives," Señor Red Mask muttered to himself.

Aloud he said to the girl: "*Gracias, señorita*, for the favor of dancing with me. And now let us turn back to your mother. I must leave you, pronto."

"You fear El Lobo? You are leaving the dance?" she asked, a curious note of unbelief in her voice.

"Watch me!" Señor Red Mask said in low tones, with a grim tightening of his jaw muscles that was not lost on the intelligent girl.

"Oh señor, you would not cross him!" she whispered anxiously. "He is terrible. He would kill you!"

"Maybe not," the caballero reassured her. "He and I are about due for a little six-gun fiesta of our own. But not in here where all these innocent people are enjoyin' themselves."

"He sees you! He's— Oh-h-h!" screamed the girl in sudden wild terror.

El Lobo's shifting glance had fallen on the conspicuous figure of the caballero, his mortal enemy. And utterly regardless of the safety of the dancers, secure in the knowledge that his own bulky body was protected by the crowd of dancers around him, he had whipped out a huge six-gun.

Señor Red Mask loosed the girl and sprang sidewise. There was an open door within a few feet of him. He darted through it, into a wall-enclosed patio.

"If that coward will follow me out here, away from that crowd, I'll dust his carcass with some hot lead," gritted Señor Red Mask, as he ran across the shadowed courtyard.

But there was no sound of pursuing feet behind him. Instead, after a few moments of waiting, he heard a commotion in the adjoining corral. There was a flurry of a horse's hoofs, followed by an angry Spanish oath.

"He's in the corral, trying to catch his horse," Señor Red Mask told himself. "He's likely aimin' to get his gang from the *posada* and come back after me."

The caballero had no idea of waiting there at the dance for his enemy to get reënforcements. Nor did he intend to let this chance to capture the murderous bandit chief slip from his grasp.

With a few running strides, he reached the base of the patio wall and leaped upward. His sinewy fingers caught on the ledge of the thick adobe. By sheer strength of his muscular arms, he drew himself up to the top of the wall.

Jumping down on the outside, Señor Red Mask found himself in the street through which he had walked to the dance. And in the same instant, he heard the clatter of hoofs on cobblestones.

El Lobo was escaping. Señor Red Mask caught a glimpse of him on a powerful roan stallion, tearing along the street.

The determined caballero ran at top speed to the building where he had left his own mount. The big black seemed to sense that a race was in prospect. It had heard the thudding of the roan's hoofs.

Señor Red Mask sprang into the saddle. He rolled his spurs, wheeling the black in pursuit of the racing roan.

The snorting stallion plunged up the street. Showers of sparks flew from his steel-shod hoofs as they spurned the cobblestones.

As Señor Red Mask cleared the village, he saw the bandit spurring furiously up the slope of the mesa. The latter had undoubtedly caught sight of his pursuer.

With a quick play of spurs on the black stallion's flanks, Señor Red Mask drove forward in such a burst

of speed that the gap was rapidly closing between him and his quarry.

El Lobo glanced back. He must have realized in that moment his desperate plight. His hand snaked downward to a big six-gun holstered on his thigh. There was a burst of orange flame, the loud *bro-o-m-m* of a black-powder cartridge.

Señor Red Mask ducked his head as a slug ripped through the brim of his big sombrero. Close shooting for a man on a running horse.

Crash! Bang! El Lobo was half turned in his saddle, frantically pumping lead at his grim pursuer. Bullets hummed their song of death in the caballero's ears.

Leaning low over the flying black stallion's withers, Señor Red Mask rolled his spurs for a last-minute flash of speed that would carry him abreast of his fleeing enemy. He had never shot a man in the back; he wouldn't do it now, no matter if the hombre was the most fiendish cutthroat that ever rode the border outlaw trails.

But now suddenly he was forced to shoot or be shot. El Lobo had drawn a second gun, fully loaded. The range was a scant ten yards, thanks to the racing black stallion.

Señor Red Mask's right hand streaked down and out with one lightning motion that ended in a blast of flame and lead.

El Lobo weaved uncertainly in his big Mexican saddle. As if he were stricken blind, his groping hands clutched at the horn. Then the roan plunged ahead in a frenzy of terror as its master toppled side-wise to the ground.

Señor Red Mask reined his black to a sliding stop. From up the slope, at La Posada de los Ladrones, came the sullen roar of six-guns. Sheets of flame burst from the wide windows of the thieves' hangout.

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"Looks like a fire and a battle had broke loose up there all at the same time," the caballero told himself. "Them hombres must 'a' had a fall-in' out among theirselves."

But just now he was most interested in the burly bandit who lay in a huddled heap beside a sagebush. Running to El Lobo's side, he bent over to make a hasty examination.

"The big yaller-bellied skunk won't have nothin' worse'n a headache when he comes to," muttered Señor Red Mask. "That bullet only parted his hair purty, just like I figured it would."

Rising to his feet to go for the rawhide reata strapped to the fork of his saddle, the caballero saw an amazing thing happen. In the glare of the burning *posada*, a swearing, shooting mob of horsemen suddenly broke through the big arched gateway of the patio. And right on their heels charged another group of wild riders, pouring a fusillade of six-gun shots into the fleeing hombres.

As Señor Red Mask watched, saddle after saddle was emptied. Then the fugitive mob scattered, what were left of them riding helter-skelter across the mesa.

"Good gosh!" exclaimed the astonished caballero. "That must be the——" He paused as a grizzled rider on a long-legged sorrel gelding suddenly wheeled his mount out of the pursuing group and came dashing up to him.

"Bill Jackson!" cried the delighted Señor Red Mask.

"Yuh bet it is, an' right glad tuh see yuh alive an' kickin', amigo," heartily answered ex-Sheriff Bill Jackson.

Since resigning his office, because it hampered him in crossing the border after outlaws, the former officer had become the leader of the Verde Valley vigilantes.

"How does eet happen that the veegilantes come riding jus' when they are mos' needed?" asked Señor Red Mask.

"Waal, thet's easy tuh answer," said Jackson, with a wide grin. "Yuh see, thet young hombre we calls 'El Muchacho' told Joan Corson that he was goin' tuh trail the River Wolf till he caught him.

"Joan, havin' considerable likin' fer the Muchacho, up an' rides tuh tell me, she bein' skeered the bandits would git the best of him. So us vigilantes comes high-tailin' it over here tuh save him."

There was a twinkle in the dark eyes that looked through the slits in the caballero's red mask.

"And did you find thees Muchacho?" he asked.

"Naw, we ain't seen hide nor hair of him. Nor either did we find thet ornery skunk of an El Lobo," said Jackson in disgust. "But we shore cleaned up on thet crook joint. What yuh doin' over here? Enjoyin' the fiesta?"

"Si, amigo, I am having much fun. It ees what you call a seex-gun fiesta."

"Who's thet hombre lyn' out there in the sage?" the ex-sheriff asked, suddenly catching sight of the bulky figure on the ground near by.

"You would be surprised, amigo," chuckled Señor Red Mask, motioning for the gray-mustached vigilante leader to follow him.

"Waal, I'll be ding-swiggled ef it ain't the old he-wolf, El Lobo, himself!" Jackson almost shouted in astonishment, as he bent over the now half-conscious bandit chief.

"I am ver' glad you have come, you and the veegilantes, because

now I weel geeve heem to you to put in the jail and——"

"An' after a danged short trial, we'll hang him higher'n a kite!" cut in Jackson emphatically.

The vigilantes returned after a brief chase of the panic-stricken outlaws. They found their leader, ex-Sheriff Jackson, jubilant over having the long-sought scourge of the border, El Lobo, securely bound in the saddle of a riderless horse that Bill had succeeded in roping.

"How did yuh ketch him, Bill?" they asked in amazement.

"Twa'n't me thet nabbed him," said Jackson. "Yonder goes the fightin' caballero thet turned the trick."

The wondering night riders looked across to the rim of the mesa. Outlined against the waning moon that was just sinking behind a distant peak, a lone horseman halted and seemed to be returning their gaze. Faintly they heard the sad words of "La Paloma":

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

"Señor Red Mask!" exclaimed a cowman in awed tones. "He allus sings thet mournful song."

"Uh-huh, it's him." Jackson nodded. "Queer sort of an hombre. Allus rides an' fights alone."

Thet looks like the end o' Señor Red Mask's justice trail. It don't seem no-ways possible thet El Lobo kin git away ag'in. But he's a tricky jasper, an' until he's plumb dead, by rope or bullet, Señor Red Mask an' Thunder will do well ter keep their eyes an' wits about them. Watch fer the next—an' last—adventure of the red-masked caballero. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



Dead Man's Drift

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of "Outlaws Of Secret Valley," etc.

THE man who came to the Thunder River ranger station toward the close of a hot summer day did not resemble a mountaineer. Jim Hazel, the curly-haired young forest ranger, realized that, the moment he set eyes upon his visitor.

The man was perched astride a bony red horse and peered at the ranger through the lenses of a pair of rimless eyeglasses, hooked over the bridge of a high, thin nose.

On his shoulders the stranger carried a black tin case, and in his right hand he held the brass-jointed handle of a net made of green silk. Behind him, a very dejected-looking pack horse stood with its head

hanging, as if in resentment of the slipshod manner in which its bulky pack had been lashed to the saddle.

"Are you the ranger?" asked the visitor in a thin, high-pitched voice. "If you are, I have a complaint to make—a most serious complaint, which will demand your immediate attention."

Jim Hazel's blue eyes twinkled as he mentioned his name and admitted that he was the district ranger. He glanced at the round red ball of the sun, that was just about to sink below the high cliffs which walled in Thunder River Canyon.

"Supper is about ready," he said. "So why not stay overnight with

me? After we've eaten, you can tell me who has been bothering you."

The stranger hesitated a moment, then he swung his long, thin legs to the ground. More than six feet in height, with a narrow, clean-shaven face, big ears, and a pointed chin, he stood looking curiously at Jim Hazel. Slowly he extended a big-knuckled hand.

"Dorffner is my name, ranger," he said. "I'm making a study of the butterflies of the Thunder Bird Mountains. I shall be delighted to accept your invitation to be your guest overnight."

"O. K.," said Jim Hazel. "Make yourself comfortable in the cabin. I'll look after your horses."

When Jim returned to the cabin, Dorffner was seated beside the table. Upon it lay the black tin box which he had carried on his shoulders.

"Look at that, ranger," he said. "Only luck saved me from being shot down, while I was making an effort to capture a papilio."

"A what?" inquired Jim Hazel, as he stared at a bullet hole which pierced the box from side to side.

"A swallowtail butterfly," explained Dorffner. "Before I could recover from my fright, a man armed with a revolver stepped up to me and told me to get out of there and never to show my face there again, unless I wished to be filled with lead."

"Out of where?" asked Jim Hazel.

Dorffner passed a hand through his straw-colored hair, then he consulted a notebook which he drew from his pocket.

"Narrow canyon on the south side of Dead Man's Mountain," he read aloud. "Walled with granite on both sides. Butterflies seen were the——"

"That answers the description of Dead Man's Drift," interrupted Jim Hazel smilingly. "I didn't know there was anybody living in the canyon."

"I'm surprised to hear you admit it, ranger," said Dorffner acidly. "A forest ranger is supposed to be familiar with every foot of his district. I am afraid I shall have to report you to your superiors."

"Go ahead," said Jim Hazel cheerfully. "That is your privilege. Now, what sort of a looking man was the fellow you say shot at you? What reason did he give for objecting to your presence in Dead Man's Drift?"

Once more Dorffner consulted his notebook, and read aloud in precise tones:

"Clothes ragged. Face bearded. Blue scar running from left temple to chin. Language vile. General appearance that of a desperate character, with little conception of the value of human life."

Jim Hazel sighed wearily, then suddenly he pricked up his ears with interest.

"Accused me," read Dorffner, "of searching for treasure in Dead Man's Drift."

"Ah!" exclaimed Jim Hazel, "it seems to me that old Zeke Bridger, the trapper, did tell me that, years ago, a gang of outlaws hid a treasure in jewels in Dead Man's Drift."

"Treasure!" echoed Max Dorffner scornfully. "As if there can be a greater treasure than a rare species of——"

"Apple sauce!" exclaimed Jim Hazel; then he added hastily: "With hot biscuits, fried trout, and coffee ought to make a pretty good supper for two hungry men."

Dorffner's pale eyes brightened at the mention of supper, but he made no attempt to help Jim Hazel either

to cook the meal or, later, to wash the dishes.

As utterly aloof as if he were alone, Dorffner spent most of the evening sticking pins through dead butterflies and arranging them on the sheets of cork with which his tin box was lined. Only when Jim Hazel hinted that it was time to go to bed did Dorffner show much sign of life.

"I'm going back with you in the morning to Dead Man's Drift, ranger," he announced. "You will place under arrest the man who shot at me and take him away to prison. I shall stay in the canyon until I have secured specimens of the butterfly I seek."

A grim smile creased the corners of Jim Hazel's lips, but his blue eyes glinted frostily.

"If you insist on going with me, Dorffner," said the ranger, "you may stay permanently in Dead Man's Drift."

"Do you mean"—Dorffner's pale eyes registered horror—"do you really think I might be murdered?" he asked. "Killed, while in company of a U. S. forest ranger?"

"It might be safer for you to stay at the ranger station," said Jim Hazel; "but that, of course, is up to you."

Dorffner fingered his narrow chin with thumb and forefinger as he thought it over; then some streak of stubbornness made him decide to see it through.

"I'm going with you, ranger," he said, "I'm convinced that you will protect me, should the need arise."

"Got a six-gun with you?" asked Jim Hazel.

"I never carry one," replied Dorffner. "I do not believe in destroying life. I am a man of peace."

"O. K.," said the ranger. "We'll start in the morning."

II.

Somebody shaking his shoulder awakened Dorffner to the fact that the night had passed. Opening his eyes, he saw Jim Hazel bending over him. Dawn was creeping through the open door of the cabin, but a lamp still burned on the table. Coffee was boiling on the stove.

"Breakfast is about ready, so you'd better climb out of there," said the tall young ranger. "We'll have to get an early start in order to reach Dead Man's Drift by sunset."

Grumbling at being made to get up so early, Dorffner swung his long legs over the edge of the bunk.

After breakfasting on a dozen hot cakes, six slices of bacon, and four cups of coffee, Jim Hazel's guest announced himself ready to go. With his black tin box hanging from a strap over his round shoulders, and his butterfly net in his hand, he followed the ranger out of the cabin. Sunrise was gilding the distant peaks.

Jim Hazel had already saddled and brought up the horses, and soon both men were in their saddles. Not a breath of air stirred the flag which drooped from a sixty-foot pole in front of the cabin, as Jim Hazel rode his blue roan at a walk across Lightning Flat.

Hour after hour, they rode deeper and deeper into the mountains. It was nearly noon, when Jim Hazel drew rein at the foot of a huge pine to which was attached a black metal box. Over it was nailed a sign which informed all travelers that they had reached a forest telephone.

Leaping from his saddle, Jim Hazel opened the door of the telephone box and rang up Bill Tigor—a mountaineer who lived with his two brothers at Gunsight Lake.

"Hello, Bill!" said the ranger, when a drawling voice reached him over the wire. "Jim Hazel speaking. Say, Bill, do you know if there is anybody living in Dead Man's Drift?"

Leaning sidewise from his saddle, Dorffner listened intently. Presently the ranger hung up the receiver and closed the door of the telephone box.

Swinging himself into his saddle, Jim Hazel glanced over his shoulder at his companion.

"O. K.," said the ranger. "Let's be on our way."

"To whom were you talking over the telephone?" asked Dorffner.

"Friend of mine named Bill Tigor," replied Jim Hazel. "He will join us, when we reach Dead Man's Drift, though he says he does not know of any one's living in the canyon."

Jim Hazel touched his horse with his heels. Riding behind him, Dorffner kept up a ceaseless chatter which grated on the ranger's nerves.

Slowly the long afternoon passed as they rode deeper and deeper into a wilderness of rocky canyons and timbered hills, which became more rugged with the passing of each mile.

Sunset found them entering the mouth of a narrow canyon, which was walled on both sides by high cliffs. The bottom of the canyon was covered with a tangled growth of willows, vine maples, and black currant bushes.

A white mountain torrent, dashing down the middle of the canyon, drowned out the sound of the horses' steel-shod hoofs as they struck the rocks lying loose in the trail.

Dusk followed swiftly on the heels of sunset, and still Jim Hazel pushed on up Dead Man's Drift. It was almost dark, when he drew rein on a

small flat which lay between the creek and the left-hand wall of the canyon.

Near the middle of the flat stood a grove of dead lodge-pole pines, killed years before by the ravages of bark-eating beetles. The ground around the grove of dead timber was covered with scattered bunches of coarse mountain grass, kept green by the dampness of the canyon.

"Dead Man's Flat, with wood, water, and grass in plenty," said Jim Hazel, as he swung himself out of his saddle. "We camp here to-night."

Dorffner clambered out of his saddle. Leaving his horse standing with the reins looped over the saddle horn, he stood with his butterfly net in one hand, peering into the dusk.

"Never leave your reins over the saddle horn," said Jim Hazel irritably, "or one of these days, you may find yourself left afoot with your horse hitting the trail for camp."

Stepping forward, Jim Hazel dropped the reins over the horse's head, then suddenly the ranger's hand swept to the six-gun holstered at his hip, as Dorffner uttered a hoarse shout:

"There he goes, ranger! Come on, quick! Help me keep him in sight."

Gun in hand, Jim Hazel followed on Dorffner's heels as he dashed toward the timber. Expecting at any moment to see his unarmed companion shot down, Jim Hazel was trying his best to keep up with him, when suddenly the ranger caught the toe of a boot beneath a trailing vine and pitched heels over head.

When he picked himself up, he saw Dorffner coming toward him, with a disappointed look on his long, lean face.

"He got away," muttered the butterfly hunter. "Disappeared just as

I was about to secure him. You should have seen his eyes, ranger! They gleamed like fire in the dusk."

"Do you mean to say you were going to tackle him barehanded?" asked Jim Hazel in amazement. "Why, man alive, you might have been shot dead in your tracks!"

"Shot dead?" echoed Dorffner. "Shot dead?" Then he grinned sheepishly. "Why, it wasn't a man I saw," he said. "It was a rare species of giant moth. If I could only have caught it, I——"

"Let's get the horses taken care of and a camp fire built," cut in Jim Hazel. "That isn't the only bug in these woods."

While they were eating supper, the moon rose slowly above the cliffs, and the bottom of Dead Man's Drift became carpeted with silver light that was crisscrossed with the long, slender shadows of the gently swaying pines.

Seated beside the fire after eating, Dorffner began to go into detail regarding the habits of a dozen different kinds of butterflies. Weary of his companion's ceaseless chatter, Jim Hazel at last rose to his feet.

"Guess I'll stroll up the creek a little way," said the ranger. "I'll be back after a while."

Hoping that Dorffner would be asleep when he returned, Jim Hazel strode up the trail until he reached a place where the canyon was filled with a jumble of huge boulders, which lay piled on top of one another as if cast by giant hands from the tops of the canyon walls.

Climbing on top of one of the larger boulders, Jim Hazel sat down. With his hands around his knees, he was listening to the howling of distant coyotes, when the sharp report of a shot echoed loudly from wall to wall of Dead Man's Drift.

A terrible fear clutched at Jim

Hazel's heart as he leaped to his feet and stood listening—fear not for himself, but for the unarmed man he had left alone.

The echoes of the shot died away and the coyotes ceased to howl. The only sound was the roar of the torrent pounding its way over its rocky bed.

Jumping down off his rock, Jim Hazel hurried back down the trail. He stopped suddenly as he saw a man stagger out of the timber and fall prone on his face beside the fire.

Breaking into a run, Jim Hazel reached the fallen man and turned him over. An icy hand seemed to clutch the ranger's heart as he looked into a pair of black eyes set above a big hooked nose, beneath which a drooping mustache almost concealed a determined chin.

"Bill Tigor!" exclaimed Jim Hazel. "Who shot you, Bill? Are you badly hurt?"

A fierce gleam crept into the eyes of the mountaineer, as they met the blue ones of Jim Hazel.

"I don't know who shot me, Jimmy, but whoever it was, he did a poor job, for the bullet only drilled my shoulder. I seen the light of yore fire, and was comin' toward it when the bullet hit me. That's all I know."

To prove that he was not badly wounded, Bill Tigor tried to sit up; but he fell back into Jim Hazel's arms, with a groan.

"Take it easy," said the ranger, as he eased the mountaineer to the ground. "I'll get my first-aid kit and have you fixed up in a minute."

Not until Bill Tigor's wound had been bandaged did Jim Hazel suddenly remember the man he had brought to Dead Man's Drift.

"I wonder what became of him," he said, and he told Bill Tigor about Dorffner.

"Probably got scairt out, when he heard the rifle shot," said Bill Tigor. "Or maybe it was him who done the shooting. Jimmy, I'll bet yore bug-huntin' friend ain't what he seems to be."

Before Jim Hazel could reply, a fearful scream rose above the roar of the creek—a scream that chilled the veins of the ranger and the wounded mountaineer, and left them staring at each other with fear in their eyes. Twice more the scream was repeated; then it died away, and the only sound was the roaring of the river.

"What was it?" asked Jim Hazel, in a husky voice.

Propping himself on one elbow, Bill Tigor raised his head and listened intently. Then suddenly he jerked his six-gun from its holster.

"Listen, Jimmy," he whispered. "Something is comin' down the trail."

Placing both arms beneath Bill Tigor's shoulders, Jim Hazel helped him to his feet, and half carried him, half dragged him behind a dead pine.

Drawing his six-gun, the ranger stood listening to the heavy breathing of something which seemed to be dragging itself along the trail which led toward Dead Man's Flat.

Nearer came the sound, nearer still. Suddenly Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor saw a man crawl on his hands and knees out of the timber—a long, lean man whose scalp had been torn away and whose face was a ghastly crimson smear. Jim Hazel recognized Dorffner.

III.

Leaving Bill Tigor behind the tree, Jim Hazel ran toward Dorffner. Dropping to one knee, he raised the wounded man's head.

"Where have you been! What

happened to you?" asked the ranger sharply. "Speak, man! Speak if you are able."

Dorffner's mouth opened, and he tried twice to speak. At last, he managed to say a few words which dropped slowly from his torn lips.

"I followed moth—to a hole in—cliff. Something leaped—listen for—rattle—of chain."

As the last word left his lips, he stiffened in every muscle; then, with a piercing scream, he fell back dead.

Footsteps behind him caused Jim Hazel to leap to his feet. Bill Tigor was standing a few yards away, with his six-gun in his left hand.

"It's the man who returned with me to Dead Man's Drift," explained Jim Hazel, and he repeated Dorffner's last words.

Bill Tigor holstered his six-gun. Then he drew a plug of tobacco from his pocket and tore off a chew. Working his jaws to and fro, he stood looking down at the horribly gashed head and face of the dead man.

"I'd say he was clawed to death," said Bill Tigor. "Thar's the marks of claws down one side of his face. And I've got a sort of an idea, Jimmy, that it was something more than bugs thet brought this hombre to Dead Man's Drift."

"What gives you that idea, Bill?" asked Jim Hazel.

Bill Tigor rubbed his chin with the back of a hand as he looked down at the dead man.

"Tain't nacheral for a bug hunter to act the way yuh say he acted," said the mountaineer. "If he was what he pretended to be, he'd have called at the ranger station on his way into the hills and introduced himself. It might be a good idea to go through his pockets, Jimmy. Maybe we can find out something more about him."

As Jim Hazel searched the dead man's clothing, he gave a sudden exclamation of surprise. For beneath Dorffner's left armpit, the ranger found an automatic pistol in a shoulder holster. The magazine held a clip of cartridges, and in one of Dorffner's coat pockets there were two more loaded clips.

"I don't understand it at all," said Jim Hazel thoughtfully. "He told me he was unarmed, and that a man shot at him and ordered him under pain of death never to return to Dead Man's Drift."

Bill Tigor took the automatic pistol from Jim Hazel's hand. Drawing the ammunition clip from the magazine, he ejected the cartridges one by one. Holding them in one hand he counted them, then he turned to the forest ranger.

"One cartridge short, Jimmy," he said. "I reckon Dorffner heard me comin' and shot me in mistake for somebody else he knew to be hyar in Dead Man's Drift."

Silently the ranger and the mountaineer looked at each other; then Jim Hazel nodded as a thought struck him.

"You may be right, Bill," he said. "It's possible that Dorffner thought he had killed his enemy, and then went to get the treasure which he knew to be hidden in Dead Man's Drift."

Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor were still discussing the situation when a piercing yell rose above the roar of the creek. As the echoes died away, Bill Tigor spoke one word, "Cougar!"

Jim Hazel glanced at the fire, then up at the waning moon.

"It'll be pitch dark in an hour," said the ranger. "If we stay beside the fire, we'll make fine targets for any one who objects to our presence in Dead Man's Drift. I think we'd

better spend the rest of the night among a jumble of boulders I found about a quarter of a mile up the canyon."

Taking a couple of blankets and their rifles with them, they strode up the trail until they reached the boulders. Before the moon sank below the cliffs, they found shelter beneath a great flat slab of rock which rested upon two others. With their blankets wrapped around them and their rifles handy, they sat waiting for the night to pass.

Weakened by his wound, Bill Tigor soon fell into a doze, but Jim Hazel found it impossible to sleep. Incident by incident, he went over all that had happened, but he could find no solution to the mystery of Dead Man's Drift.

Jim Hazel was becoming drowsy, when suddenly he caught a sound which caused him to tingle in every nerve. With his heart thumping against his ribs, he sat listening, wondering whether his ears had fooled him. For a moment, all he heard was the roar of the creek; then again he heard a sound which brought vividly to his mind Dorffner's last words.

Somewhere, not very far off, a chain was rattling in Dead Man's Drift!

Jim Hazel's first impulse was to awaken Bill Tigor, who was snoring heavily; but on second thought, the ranger decided that he could do no good by rousing the wounded mountaineer.

The rattling of the chain kept up for several minutes; then it ceased, but not before Jim Hazel had decided that the sound came from the cliff behind the mass of boulders among which he stood.

Striking a match, Jim Hazel glanced at his wrist watch and saw that it would soon be morning. Re-

alizing that he could do nothing until daylight, he sat down to wait.

The chain rattled now and again, so that Jim Hazel felt at last that when daylight came, he would have little difficulty in discovering the source of the noise.

Slowly the stars paled, and dawn crept over the high cliffs, but Bill Tigor slept on, groaning now and again with the pain of his wound.

Rising to his feet, Jim Hazel picked up his rifle, and cast a last glance at the sleeping mountaineer; then swiftly the ranger picked his way among the boulders in the direction from which he had heard the rattling of the chain.

Jim Hazel had almost reached the base of the cliff, when suddenly he heard the chain rattle again. The sound was followed by a savage growl. It seemed to come from behind a huge boulder which lay directly in the ranger's path.

With his rifle held ready, Jim Hazel slowly made his way around the boulder. Then suddenly he whipped his rifle to his shoulder and fired into the snarling face of a giant cougar which, with forepaws extended and claws outspread, was leaping straight at his throat!

Struck squarely between the eyes by the bullet, the cougar fell dead within three feet of where Jim Hazel stood, levering another cartridge into the chamber of his rifle.

With his nerves shaken by his narrow escape, Jim Hazel stepped forward and examined the dead cougar. A low whistle escaped the ranger's lips as he saw around the neck of the dead beast a heavy collar, to which was fastened a stout steel chain.

"A pet cougar!" exclaimed Jim Hazel, "I'll bet I made trouble for myself when I killed it."

Leaving the dead cougar lying

where it had fallen, Jim Hazel strode toward a great hole he could see in the base of the cliff. A ringbolt had been driven into the cliff at one side of the mouth of the cavern. To it was fastened one end of the twenty-foot chain that was attached to the cougar's collar. Scattered bones of deer and mountain sheep lying on the ground showed how the chained beast had been fed.

Jim Hazel had left his flashlight with the camp outfit and, unwilling to explore the cavern without a light, he was hesitating at the entrance when suddenly behind him he heard a harsh voice:

"Drop that rifle, and throw up your hands!"

Jim Hazel's rifle clattered among the rocks, and he raised his hands above his head. He felt something hard pressed against his back and his six-gun was jerked from its holster.

"Keep your hands up and turn around," ordered the voice. "Make one break to get away, and I'll drop you in your tracks."

Turning, Jim Hazel found himself covered by a .45 Colt in the hand of a powerfully built, bearded man, whose face was disfigured by a blue scar that reached from his left temple to his chin. The stranger's eyes were gleaming with anger as, over the barrel of his leveled six-gun he glared at the tall young forest ranger.

"What do you want in Dead Man's Drift?" he asked harshly. "Why did you kill my cougar that I raised from a kitten? Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm sorry," said Jim Hazel, "the cougar sprang at me, and I didn't know it was chained. I'll pay you for the loss of your pet."

"You bet you'll pay," growled "Blue-scar." "You'll pay me by be-

ing chained up and left to starve to death in Dead Man's Drift!"

He waved his six-gun angrily; then suddenly an idea seemed to strike him.

"Being a forest ranger, you'll have handcuffs on you. Throw 'em on the ground where I can reach 'em. Quick, now! I ain't foolin'!"

As the handcuffs struck the ground, Blue-scar stooped and snatched them up.

"March up to that cougar and take his collar off," he ordered.

Covered by the desperado's six-gun, Jim Hazel did as he was told.

"Now lock one of them bracelets around one of your ankles, and the other to the end of the chain," ordered Blue-scar. "Then you and me will have a little talk."

IV.

Expecting that Bill Tigor had been awakened by the rifle shot with which he had killed the cougar, Jim Hazel did as he was told. Then, chained by one ankle, he squatted on his heels and looked his captor in the face.

"Well, now that you've got me helpless," said the ranger, "perhaps you'll tell me what it's all about."

Seating himself on a boulder, Blue-scar holstered his six-gun and grinned wolfishly at Jim Hazel.

"Ever hear of the treasure of Dead Man's Drift?" he asked.

"I have heard that, years ago, a gang of outlaws hid some jewels in the canyon," admitted Jim Hazel. "Then, night before last, a man who called himself Dorffner and said he was a butterfly collector, came to the ranger station and complained that a man had shot at him and ordered him out of Dead Man's Drift. I came here to look into the matter."

Blue-scar's mouth fell open as he listened, and fear showed plainly in his eyes.

"That would be Bugs Dorffner!" he exclaimed. "He was one of the gang who hid the jewels. He told me about the cache, while we were in prison. I got out two years ago, and came here to try an' find them jewels. I ain't seen Bugs Dorffner since then."

"Do you expect me to believe that you didn't see Dorffner, while he was in Dead Man's Drift?" asked Jim Hazel. "He showed me a bullet hole through his collecting box, and said that you had shot at him with a rifle."

"I've not seen Bugs Dorffner since I left prison," insisted Blue-scar. "He must have discovered I was here, and plotted to have you arrest me, so's he could get away with the jewels. Bugs Dorffner never had nerve enough to kill a man. Where did you leave him, ranger? Is he still in Dead Man's Drift?"

"He is," replied Jim Hazel. "Dorffner is lying on Dead Man's Flat. Your chained cougar killed him."

Blue-scar stared a moment, then he shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"That's my good luck!" he exclaimed. "I found the cache of jewels a few days ago, and now I'll be leavin' Dead Man's Drift."

Turning, he disappeared within the cavern. A few minutes later, he returned. In his hands he carried a metal box not unlike the one carried by "Bugs" Dorffner. Throwing the lid back, he held the box just out of Jim Hazel's reach.

"Pretty, ain't they?" he asked. "A hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewels."

Jim Hazel caught his breath as he looked. The box was nearly filled with unset gems. Diamonds, rubies,

and sapphires gleamed like fire under the golden rays of the summer sun that rode high above the cliffs of Dead Man's Drift.

"You ought to turn the jewels over to the authorities," said Jim Hazel.

Blue-scar's lips parted in an evil grin as he closed the lid of the box.

"Just what I'd expect a ranger to say," he sneered. "By the way, throw the key of them handcuffs into the brush. I'm not taking any chances with you. You'll stay here in Dead Man's Drift, and I'll get away on your horse. Long before I'm out of the hills, the buzzards will be pickin' your bones."

Before leaving, Blue-scar smashed Jim Hazel's rifle across a rock, and cast the broken weapon aside. Then he thrust the ranger's six-gun into his own belt.

"So long, ranger," growled Blue-scar, as he strode away. "You sure did me a good turn, when you brought Bugs Dorffner to Dead Man's Drift."

As the desperado disappeared from sight, Jim Hazel thought of shouting to Bill Tigor.

Then he changed his mind as he reflected that Blue-scar would probably shoot Bill at sight. Jim Hazel could not understand why Bill Tigor had not come to help him, when he had heard the shot which had killed the cougar.

When the sound of Blue-scar's footsteps had died away, Jim Hazel began to tug at his chain; but he could not loosen it. He had almost made up his mind to shout for Bill Tigor, when suddenly he saw his broken rifle lying a few yards away. Forgetful of the length of the chain, Blue-scar had left the weapon within the ranger's reach.

Picking up the rifle, Jim Hazel inserted the steel barrel in the ring of

the bolt which had been driven into the base of the cliff. Exerting all his strength, the ranger twisted the steel barrel within the ring, and slowly the bolt turned and came loose from the rock.

Looping the chain around his shoulders, and carrying the broken rifle in one hand, Jim Hazel hurried back to where he had left Bill Tigor. To his surprise, the wounded mountaineer was still there; but his wound had become worse during the night, and he was muttering in high fever.

Snatching up Bill Tigor's six-gun, Jim Hazel hurried down the trail, for he knew he would have to have a horse to get Bill Tigor to a doctor as soon as possible.

Just as Jim reached Dead Man's Flat, he saw Blue-scar loading a pack horse. Instantly the ranger covered the desperado.

"Hands up," shouted Jim Hazel, "or I'll shoot to kill!"

Blue-scar's hand leaped to his six-gun as he turned. Two crashing reports echoed from wall to wall of Dead man's Drift.

The chain around Jim Hazel's shoulders clanked loudly as a bullet struck it, then the ranger fired again. Drilled through the heart by Jim Hazel's second bullet, Blue-scar pitched face forward to the ground, quivered a moment, then lay still.

When Jim Hazel returned to Bill Tigor, he decided not to move him for the present. For several days, the ranger camped in the canyon, doing what he could do for the wounded mountaineer.

At last, Bill Tigor's fever died down, and weak and dizzy, he was able to sit his horse. Jim Hazel had been unable to find the key of his handcuffs, and all his efforts to break the chain had been futile.

With the handcuff still fast to his ankle and the twenty-foot chain looped over his shoulders, he slowly rode his blue roan saddle horse down the trail. The steel links of the chain clanked against each other at every step the horse took.

Behind Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor, buzzards circled slowly above the

carcass of the cougar of Dead Man's Drift.

Waal, there are two more tough hombres who won't never bother the few peaceful citizens of the Thunder Bird Range. Jim Hazel's six-gun is a plumb powerful peacemaker. Watch fer the next story about the ranger an' his pards, the Tigor boys. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



MAROONED LUMBERJACKS RESCUED

A WORKING party of thirty lumberjacks, with several teams and sleighs had crossed from the mainland over the ice to an island in northern Canada. It was March, and the date set for spring was not far off, but the ice had shown no sign of breaking up, and seemed as firm and solid as in midwinter.

During the morning, however, a tremendous roar like a volley from many guns rose above the sound of the axes and told what had happened. The ice had burst its bonds! The men rushed to the river's edge and saw masses of floe ice milling around, preparatory to the rush downstream.

Knowing that the flows would make it impossible for a boat to reach the island at once, the foreman took quick action. Every man had his lunch with him for the day, and that was all. A guard was placed over the lunch boxes, and at the noon hour only a very small portion was served to each man.

They were then put to building rough shelters so that they would not be in danger of freezing during the night. After dark, signal fires were lighted along the shore.

A good quantity of oats had been taken along for the horses before, and a reserve stock was kept. This was fortunate both for the horses and the men.

The lunches had been doled out so stingily that they lasted into the fourth day. Then the men began tightening their belts.

A sort of thin gruel was made from the oats, which were boiled and reboiled daily and served hot. Spruce branches were cut up and boiled, and the liquid was called tea. At first this concoction didn't taste so good, but after some days it acquired great flavor.

It was on March 10th that the lumberjacks went to the island, and it was not until the 23rd that their signal fires were sighted. That night, an answering blaze was seen on the mainland, and a loud cheer went up from the marooned men when they saw it.

The following day a rescue party was organized and a boat started out, but the open reaches of the river were filled with swirling masses of ice, and for thirteen hours the relief expedition had to fight its way along before it reached the island.

Several of the men were taken off at once, and plenty of food was left for the others, who were very glad to change from their diet of oats to something more palatable. The next day, they were all taken off except one man who was left to take care of the horses. They were kept there until the river was clear of ice, when they swam to the mainland.



Devil Tripp's Square Deal

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "Bonanza On Lazy K," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW RIDER.

WITH a sudden whoop of delight, red-headed Joe Scott paused in the act of tying his cayuse to the hitch rail of the Oasis Saloon. His stubby forefinger suddenly stabbed out and pointed down the rutted main street of Twin Rivers. His blue eyes danced with impish mischief, and his freckled face was one broad grin. His bat ears fairly wiggled with the intensity of his joy.

"Look thar!" he shouted to the

grizzled waddy beside him. "Look thar, yuh wall-eyed ol' moss-horn!"

His companion, a weather-beaten ranny of about twice Joe's age—which was twenty—stared in the direction of the redhead's pointing finger. His bulging brown eyes strained under their bushy brows to see what the redhead had spotted.

Finally he gave a grunt of disgust. The nostrils of his bashed-in nose wrinkled in an expression of contempt.

"All I sees am a cloud o' dust," he growled. "An' thar ain't nothin' ter git excited about in that."

Joe finished tying his cayuse. "Look ag'in!" he advised.

"Buck" Foster once more stared in the direction Joe had indicated. He rubbed his eyes with a gnarled and calloused hand.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he exclaimed. "If it ain't one o' them shadder riders. He's shore stuck on hisself, ain't he?"

"Ain't he, though?" Joe echoed. "He jest can't keep his eyes off that shadder of his."

As the horseman came closer, he proved to be an hombre dressed in the finest of cowboy clothes, ornamented with lots of silver doofunies, bangles, and bits of fine stitching on chaps, boots, and gun belt, as well as on his saddle and tapaderos.

He was riding a powerful black mustang, and as he moved along, the sun reflected a hundred little points of light from his glittering attire. He kept turning his head to watch the pretty appearance of his shadow on the ground—a common practice among vain, dudish cow-punchers in a country where mirrors were few and far between.

Buck threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Haw-haw-haw! What in tarnation am thet dude a-doin' in Twin Rivers?"

"Mebbe we'll be findin' out pronto," Joe Scott answered, as the visitor, after a final backward glance at his shadow, pulled the black mustang to a sliding halt in front of the Oasis and turned in toward the hitch rail.

He swung out of the saddle, and the two watching waddies saw that his clothes were every bit as fine as they appeared to be from a distance.

"Ain't he the pretty hombre, though?" Joe muttered to the veteran, under his breath.

"He's too durned pretty ter be of any use in the world—let alone on a cow spread," Buck Foster growled, stroking the ends of his grizzled mustache thoughtfully. "I'd shore like ter see him go inter that horse trough!"

Joe Scott grinned. His freckled face wore a mischievous expression. He nodded as if in sympathy with Buck's idea, although as a rule he never agreed with the older waddy on any subject—if he was conscious.

"Why don't yuh put him thar?" he asked, in a taunting tone. "Yuh ain't afraid o' the dude, are yuh?"

Buck snorted. His pop eyes blazed under bushy brows. "Me—afraid!" he exclaimed. "Me afraid o' that tinhorn! Jest let him give me an excuse ter knock him inter that horse trough, an' I'll——"

"Shut yore trap! He'll hear yuh!" Joe warned.

But Buck Foster had made up his mind. And when that happened, there was little chance of his changing it. The Circle J veteran was a stubborn old ranny, and he stuck to his ideas like fleas to a hound dog.

So, as the stranger in the dandified cowboy garb led his big black horse to the hitch rail, Buck barred his way.

"Thar ain't no room fer yore cayuse hyar, hombre," he said, in a warlike tone.

The stranger halted and stared at Buck out of narrowed eyes. He had a lean, bronzed, rather good-looking face. A small mustache adorned his upper lip. He smiled, showing a row of even white teeth, but there was no mirth in the smile. It was more in the nature of a snarl. And his eyes took on the deadly glitter of a snake's, as he faced the hostile old buckaroo.

The horse trough was at the stranger's back. Buck Foster's purpose

had been to start a scrap with the fellow and have the satisfaction of knocking him head over heels into the slimy water it contained.

For the grizzled cow-puncher, although a middle-aged man, took a boy's delight in rough practical jokes. It would be his idea of the funniest thing in the world to see this dandified young waddy doused, with all his finery, in the dirty water.

The stranger appeared to be playing for time. He stood there, holding his horse's reins and looking Buck over, from battered old black Stetson to muddy, scarred boots.

"What was that yuh said, cow-boy?" he asked in a gentle tone, bringing a bandanna out of his hip pocket and flicking the dust off his boots with it. "I ain't sure that I heard yuh right."

Buck raised his voice. "Are yuh deaf or what?" he demanded. "I said—and yuh'd ought to 'a' heard me—that thar ain't room fer yore cayuse at this hitch rail. Is that plain now?"

The stranger put the bandanna away. Once more he gave his peculiar smile, which was more like a snarl. Then his eyes wandered to the hitch rail and looked over the horses tethered there.

"Thar's plenty room fer my hoss at the rail," he said suddenly. "Git out o' my way!" The last words were snapped out like the crack of a whiplash.

Buck's anger flared up. His leathery face flushed. He was just about ready to start something. His lean right arm drew back, the hand knotted into a fist. He was all set to knock this dressed-up, conceited young pup kicking into the horse trough a few feet behind him.

But the fist never came forward to complete the swing Buck had

started. The veteran suddenly stood stock-still, his jaw sagging, an expression of pained surprise spreading over his leathery face.

"Up in the air with them hands or I'll drill yuh!" The command came in a harsh, grating voice.

Buck Foster had not seen the dandified stranger draw his gun, so swiftly had he whipped it out of its holster. All the veteran knew was that the fellow had stepped clear of his horse and was leveling his Colt straight at the third button of Buck's shaggy old bearskin vest.

Muttering savagely to himself, Buck lifted his gnarled hands. The stranger had the drop on him. He might be a range dude and a shadow rider, but he sure knew how to handle his smoke wagon.

Buck found himself gazing at the man with a new respect. The grizzled waddy was conscious, too, that Joe Scott was grinning at him behind his back. It would be months before the redhead would let Buck hear the last of this.

Keeping the hot-headed old ranny covered, the stranger caught his horse's reins in his left hand and led the animal to the hitch rail.

He found a place for it and tied the reins to the cedar pole. Then he lowered his gun and spoke again in a sneering tone:

"The next time yuh think of startin' a fight, cowboy," he said, "better be careful to pick a gent who'll stand still for yuh."

"I kin lick a skunk like you with fists, guns, or anything," Buck shouted angrily. "Yuh drew on me without warnin'. I wasn't——"

A faint smile flitted over the dark face of the shadow rider, revealing a flash of white teeth under the small mustache.

"Yuh started somethin' yuh couldn't finish," he said, in a pleas-

ant tone. "I don't waste time fightin' with boastful old men!"

The words stung Buck to fury. "Why, yuh—yuh—yuh——"

He sputtered, unable to form his words, so great was his rage.

But his effort was a vain one anyhow. The stranger turned quickly on his heel, dropped his gun back into leather, and disappeared inside the Oasis.

Lowering his arms, Buck Foster looked for some one on whom to vent the anger which the shadow rider had aroused. And that some one was not hard to find. A few feet away, stood Joe Scott, his freckled face wearing a broad grin, his blue eyes dancing with merriment.

At once the full force of Buck's bottled-up wrath descended on Joe's head.

"Waal, so help me, Hannah, yuh brockle-faced loon!" he roared, shaking his fist at the redhead. "Yuh carrot-topped, long-eared young jackass! Yuh'd stand thar an' let me, yore pard, be stuck up by a dressed-up skunk that pulled his gun out when I wasn't expectin'——"

"What yuh kickin' about now, ol'-timer?" Joe interrupted Buck's flow of abuse.

"I'm sayin' yo're the kind o' jasper that won't stand by a pard," Buck complained. "Yuh wouldn't back my play——"

"Listen!" Joe pointed a stubby forefinger at the veteran. "Let me tell yuh somethin'."

Buck tugged at his grizzled mustache nervously. "Waal, I'm listenin', but I ain't goin' ter believe a word of what yuh tell me."

Joe scratched thoughtfully at one bat ear. "I don't care whether yuh believe it or not," he finally said. "But wif I'd 'a' made a move ter back

yore play, Mr. Foster, that hombre would 'a' drilled yuh clean through yore gizzard, just as shore as coyotes hev pups."

"But yuh didn't——" Buck started to argue.

"I didn't want ter see yuh with yore innards full o' lead," Joe snapped. "I was watchin' that gent's face, and I seen he meant business. He wasn't bluffin'. I saved yore life by keepin' my mouth shut—and durned small thanks I'm gettin' fer it."

But this explanation didn't satisfy Buck Foster. The fiery-tempered old ranny was burning up inside. He wanted to show that dressed-up cowpoke what was what. He knew he could lick the low-down polecat in any kind of fight. Just let him get at——

With these thoughts seething in his mind, the veteran started for the swinging green doors of the Oasis Saloon.

But Joe Scott barred his way. The redhead caught the veteran's right wrist in a grip of steel, tearing it away from a gun butt and forcing him backward.

"Jest git that notion out o' yore fool haid, yuh old fire-eater!" Joe warned, his freckled face serious for once. "Don't fergit we come to town ter find the chink—not ter git you shot full o' lead."

Buck Foster's leathery face suddenly went serious, at the mention of the chink. It was easy to see that he had entirely forgotten the errand that had brought him and Joe to Twin Rivers.

"Humph!" he grunted, puffing out his cheeks and blowing forth his breath in a great gust, so that the ends of his grizzled mustache fluttered out on either side of his face like bits of tumbleweed. His anger seemed to cool. "By jing!" he

gasped. "I plumb forgot about the heathen!"

"We got ter find him," Joe stated. "He's been missin' three days."

Buck moved toward the hitch rail. "Waal, when we find the chink, I'll come back and mop up the Oasis with that tinhorn!"

CHAPTER II.

A CLEW TO THE CHINK.

JOE SCOTT looked relieved. As a rule, Joe wasn't a cautious hombre. But before leaving the Circle J Ranch to search the near-by cow town of Twin Rivers for the Chinese cook, the boss of the spread, young Billy West, had warned Joe to keep himself and Buck Foster out of any trouble.

That was why Joe had suddenly appointed himself a guardian over Buck's conduct and had acted the part of soother of the veteran's hasty temper. Joe's own disposition was one that was ready to fly off the handle on the slightest excuse.

So he just nodded in answer to Buck's last remark and said: "Waal, let's find the chink first. Mebbe the sheriff's got him in the hoosegow fer bein' drunk an' disorderly."

In keeping with his new part of peacemaker, Joe untied his own cayuse from the Oasis hitch rail and swung into the saddle. Buck followed his example, grumbling to himself all the time.

The pair then headed down to the far end of the town's main street where stood the sheriff's office and jail.

They found the Twin Rivers law officer, Sheriff Jim Hawks, sitting outside his headquarters, his chair tilted back against the wall. The heavy-set, gray-haired sheriff was chewing on a straw and studying a handful of reward notices.

He brought his chair down on all four legs as the two Circle J cow-punchers reined their cayuses up suddenly in front of him.

"Waal, boys," he said in an easy-going drawl, "how's things out ter Circle J?"

"Everything's O. K.," Joe Scott told him, "except that Sing Lo's been missin' fer the last three days. Seen anything of him?"

"Yeah, that's so!" Buck Foster added his two cents' worth. "The yaller pot-wrastle must 'a' been gettin' himself pie-eyed on moon-shine. Yuh ain't got him in yore hoosegow as a drunk, have yuh?"

Sheriff Jim Hawks pushed back his old Stetson and scratched his grizzled head. "Naw, I ain't got him in the jail," he told the pair of punchers. "Now, let me see!"

He raised his hand and scratched his head some more, as if he were trying to make himself think better by so doing.

"Seems ter me I did see the chink, day before yesterday," he went on presently. "He was in the Punchers' Rest Saloon, come ter think of it." Jim Hawks paused and nodded his big head slowly several times as his memory improved. "Yeah! I remember now. He was playin' cards with about as cross-eyed a gent as I ever seen in my life."

"A cross-eyed hombre!" Buck repeated. "That must 'a' meant hard luck fer the chink."

"Cross-eyed gents ain't hard luck," Joe Scott said. "It's——"

"They are so," Buck insisted. "I ain't never knowed it ter fail. Every time I see a cross-eyed jasper, somethin' always happens."

"It's yore own foolishness thet makes things happen to you," Joe retorted. "If yuh wasn't so dumb, yuh——"

"I tell yuh some hard luck has

happened to the chink on account o' playin' cards with that cross-eyed skunk!" Buck shouted, his weather-beaten face flushing with anger.

Joe Scott turned his cayuse about and headed it toward the Punchers' Rest Saloon. "Let's see what we kin find out at the Punchers' Rest!"

A minute later, they were shouldering their way into an almost deserted saloon, for it was early in the afternoon, and the time for the saloon's big rush of business was still several hours distant.

Trailing their spurs across the floor to the long barroom, Buck and Joe greeted the bartender, a fat fellow with a red face and a constant smile and known as "Tubby" Bedor.

On questioning Tubby, they learned that Sing Lo had spent a lot of his time recently in the Punchers' Rest, and that he had been drinking and playing cards with a stranger of unusual appearance.

This stranger according to Tubby, was very badly cross-eyed.

"He was so durned cross-eyed," the bartender told the two Circle J waddies, "that if he wanted to look yuh straight in the eye, he'd hev to focus his lamps on the other side o' the room. And then only one eye'd be meetin' yores."

"And where'd the other eye be lookin'?" Buck Foster wanted to know.

"It'd be starin' at the ceilin', maybe," Tubby answered, smiling broadly.

"And what sort of a lookin' gent was he otherwise?" Joe Scott asked.

"He was a durned ornery-lookin' cuss, if yuh ask me," Tubby told the redhead. "He had a big hooky nose that yuh could see a mile off. And thar was a long scar along his right jaw. It looked like somebody'd knifed him—an' almost made a good job of it."

Buck and Joe looked at each other and nodded. This was getting interesting.

"Along the right side o' the jaw, yuh said?" Joe inquired.

"That's right," Tubby replied, leaning his elbows on the bar. "Yuh couldn't mistake it. It was a long scar startin' narrow close to the chin and runnin' right out wide toward the ear. Another scar run across it close to the ear. That made it look like a dagger."

"Where's this hombre now?" Buck asked.

Tubby shook his head. "I ain't seen him since night before last. Him and the chink was lappin' up liquor like they hadn't tasted a drink fer six months. They didn't come in yesterday at all. Nor to-day neither."

Buck Foster banged his horny fist down on the mahogany counter. He glared at Joe Scott from under bushy brows, and there was a gleam of triumph in his bulging brown eyes.

"Thar, stoopid, what did I tell yuh?" he said. "That cockeyed jasper has stole the chink. Havin' anythin' to do with a cross-eyed skunk is hard luck, and yuh can't tell me nothin' different!"

But the redhead waved aside Buck's argument. "Yo're locoed," he told the veteran. "Sing Lo's got tired o' the liquor here in the Punchers' Rest and is patronizin' some other saloon. Let's slope."

The pair left the Punchers' Rest and visited all the other saloons in Twin Rivers. But there was no sign of Sing Lo or his cross-eyed companion.

The Oasis was the last drinking place that Buck and Joe visited. They found that the dandified hombre, with whom Buck had had a run-in earlier in the afternoon, had gone.

This gave Buck a chance to brag a little—a chance which he was prompt to seize.

"Yuh see, carrot-top," he said to Joe, "thet skunk was scared ter stay in town till I got back ter the Oasis. He jest high-tailed it, afore I got the chance ter come back an'——"

"I'm thinkin' it's durned lucky fer you he left town," Joe interrupted, getting a little out of patience with the veteran's conceit.

"How is it lucky fer me?" Buck demanded.

"'Cause that hombre's plumb pizen on the draw," the redhead explained. "He'd have his smoke pole out and fill yore carcass as full o' holes as a Swiss cheese, afore yuh got yore gun out o' the leather."

"That's a lie!" Buck shouted, his temper flaring up. "That skunk couldn't touch my draw!"

"Yuh got a draw like an oxcart, when yuh match yoreself agin' that gent," Joe Scott told the grizzled puncher.

Buck sneered at his saddle pard. "Then it's durned funny he run out o' town, instead o' waitin' fer a show-down with yores truly, Buck Foster," he growled.

Buck and Joe searched the pool room, the restaurants, and all other hang-outs where Sing Lo might be found. But there was no trace of the little Circle J Chinaman.

One other bit of information, the pair did pick up in the course of their search. This was that the cross-eyed hombre with the scarred jaw spoke with a broad Scotch accent.

They finally gave up their trip to Twin Rivers as a failure and headed their cayuses along the road leading westward out of town, in the direction of their home ranch, the Circle J.

As they rode, the pair of rannies

argued back and forth. It was a habit they had. In spite of the fact that they hurled insults and abuse at each other, and that they never agreed on a single subject, Buck Foster and Joe Scott had a strong regard for each other—one of those rare friendships that exist only between men who have ridden the danger trails and risked their lives together.

They rode at an easy gait. They were in no hurry. They acted like a pair of cowpokes who had nothing in the world to do but take their time and shoot off their mouths as much as they pleased.

Once in a while, one or the other would turn aside from the road to explore some side trail in the hope of picking up a clew to the missing Chinaman.

It was while on one of these trips into a brush-filled ravine, that Joe Scott gave a loud shout to his companion.

"Come here, Buck! Here's somethin'!" he yelled. "The chink's been this way sure!"

Buck joined Joe. The redhead was pointing at a stretch of sandy ground which formed a pathway through the brush. "Look! Look thar! See that hoofprint! Don't yuh recognize it?"

There were the fresh marks of the hoofs of two horses. The one that Joe pointed out was oddly formed.

Buck stared at it. "I don't recognize nothin'," he stated stubbornly. "Them's just ordinary hoofprints. They don't mean——"

"Don't yuh recognize that funny hoof of Sing Lo's piebald—the right forehoof—the one with the gristly growth on it? That's what makes that mark." Joe leaped down and knelt on the ground, pointing eagerly at the peculiar hoofprint.

But Buck Foster would not admit the correctness of the redhead's reasoning, although he was as familiar as Joe with the growth that caused the Chinaman's horse to make a peculiar mark with its right forehoof.

Joe, however, refused to enter into any argument with the veteran. This time, the redhead was so sure that he was right that he headed his cayuse straight along the narrow trail through the brush.

As he started, he flung back a taunt over his shoulder. "The chink's rode this way recently, blockhead," he declared. "Yuh kin stay behind if yuh want to and talk to yoreself. Me, I'm goin' to find out whar he's gone."

That decided Buck Foster. He wasn't going to let Joe Scott get ahead of him. That carrot-topped waddy wasn't going to find Sing Lo and leave him behind.

So Buck whirled his cayuse and sent it racing after the redhead's until it caught up.

The trail was so narrow that they had to ride single file. But as they went deeper into the ravine, the trail widened out. More of the unmistakable hoofprints of Sing Lo's piebald cayuse were found in the sandy soil.

Joe Scott's blue eyes were snapping as he rode along. His big ears flapped under the brim of his shabby gray Stetson, like those of some wise old bloodhound following up a scent. He rode hunched down in the saddle, watching the trail closely.

Buck Foster, too, had caught the spirit of the man hunt, and was now just as deeply interested as Joe in what the trail would lead to. Curiosity played a big part in the hard-bitten old ranny's make-up.

He rode along, with his bulging brown eyes fixed on the trail, his mustache ends fluttering. He was

so eager to find some new trace of the missing Circle J cook—something that Joe Scott overlooked—that he did not notice his other surroundings.

Suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation, as Joe Scott's horse reared and backed into his own cayuse.

"Hyar, yuh——" he began.

But a stern voice cut in sharply: "Up with yore hands, the pair of yuh! Yo're covered from all sides!"

Buck's eyes examined the rocky walls of the ravine. It had narrowed, and was now nothing more than a dry creek bottom, with steep sides. But here and there, hidden behind boulders, Buck caught sight of the muzzles of rifles and shotguns, and they were pointing straight at him and Joe Scott.

But the sight, instead of putting fear into the grizzled waddy, threw him into a rage. His right hand darted down to his worn leather holster and came up with his smooth-handled old six-gun.

At the same time, he barked defiance at his hidden enemies.

"Come out o' thar, yuh sneakin' skunks!" he roared. "Or I'll smoke yuh out o' yore dens!"

Bang-bang-bang! Buck chopped down with his gun and blazed away in the direction of the rocks.

The move evidently took the enemy by surprise, for there was no answering fire for a moment. And then——

Crang! A rifle bullet whizzed through the air. It struck Buck's battered old black Stetson and sent it flying from his head.

The next instant, half a dozen more rifles barked. The air was full of singing lead.

One bullet caught Buck Foster across the top of the skull. With a groan, the veteran slumped from the

saddle and fell in a limp heap on the ground.

Joe Scott, nicked by two or three of the whistling missiles, saw that the fight was hopeless. It had been hopeless from the start. Two waddies out in the open had no chance against a half dozen or more men under cover of a rocky shelter.

As Buck was hurled out of the saddle, the same voice that had spoken before, called out:

"Will yuh lift them paws now, cowboy, or do we have to fill yuh with lead—like yore fool pard?"

With savage fury in his heart, Joe Scott gnashed his teeth. He was both angry and mortified because he had run into an ambush so easily. But there was nothing he could do about it just then, except raise his hands.

So Joe Scott put 'em up.

CHAPTER III.

THE CROSS-EYED HOMBRE.

IT was close to chow time at Circle J. Inside the cookshack, Mrs. Benson, wife of the foreman, was directing the preparation of the evening meal.

Anna Benson's good-natured face was flushed with her exertions, and she was quite out of temper.

Jim Benson, the slow-going foreman, had come into the cookshack to see how things were going. And his wife turned loose her pent-up feelings on him.

"Consarn and drat that pesky Chinaman, Jim!" she exclaimed. "He's a worthless, liquor-guzzling nuisance. He's never here to see to the cooking when he ought to be. Why don't yuh fire him?"

Jim Benson shook his grizzled head. He was a capable cowman, was Jim, even though he was slow both of speech and movement.

"I—er—the boss wouldn't let me fire him," he explained. "He's a plumb good chink in some ways," he added lamely.

"Yeah," his better half retorted. "Good for stayin' in town, getting drunk and——"

"Mebbe that's him now," Jim Benson interrupted, as the clatter of hoofbeats sounded outside.

The foreman ducked quickly out of the cookshack. He had enough to do bossing the cow work of the ranch without worrying over his wife's hard-luck stories, when Sing Lo failed to attend to his duties in the kitchen.

A horseman had just ridden up to the corral, but it was not the missing Chinaman.

The newcomer was a stranger. Jim Benson had never set eyes on him before. But for an all-round homely hombre, he would have been hard to beat anywhere.

Even slow-going Jim Benson could not suppress a smile of amusement as he looked the stranger over.

He was a lean fellow, of medium height, with a large hooked nose, and the most badly crossed eyes the Circle J foreman had ever seen. He was so cross-eyed that Jim hadn't the faintest idea whether the man was looking at him or at the corral, which lay in the opposite direction.

The visitor swung out of the saddle and walked slowly over toward the foreman.

Jim Benson gave him a friendly greeting. "Howdy, stranger!"

The other man nodded. "Howdy, meester!"

As he came close, Jim Benson saw that he had a long ugly scar along the right side of his jaw. It was in the form of a dagger, with the hilt just in front of the ear.

"This gent shore had a close call from havin' his throat slit with

somebody's knife," the Circle J foreman told himself. Aloud he said: "Anything I kin do for yuh, stranger? Or mebbe yuh was lookin' fer some one?"

The hook-nosed visitor shook his head. His lantern-jawed face wore a sad expression.

Jim Benson noticed that he was shabbily dressed. His boots were kicked almost through at the toes. He wore tattered overalls and a ragged flannel shirt. His hat was filled with holes, and he carried a six-gun in a worn leather holster on his right hip.

"I was wonderin', meester," he said in a broad Scotch accent, "if ye might be wantin' to hire a body?"

Jim Benson looked at the man with a puzzled expression. "Yuh mean yo're lookin' fer a job?" he asked.

The stranger nodded. "Aye, that's it, meester!"

Jim Benson looked the fellow over critically. What he saw did not impress him favorably. The man didn't have the appearance of a capable cowhand.

"What kin yuh do?" the foreman asked. "Do yuh savvy cow work?"

The stranger shook his head. "Nay, nay, friend," he answered. "I'm no a cowboy. But I'm right handy with tools or aboot the keetchen or——"

Jim Benson's heart leaped with joy. He did not wait to hear of the stranger's other qualifications.

"Yuh mean yuh kin wrestle pots and pans, chop wood, help the cook, make coffee, dish up grub?" he asked eagerly.

The stranger nodded, rubbing the side of his hook nose with a sly expression. "Aye, meester, that's my wurrk. I'm right handy as a keetchen helper!"

"Yo're hired, man!" Jim Benson

shouted gleefully. He jerked a big thumb over his shoulder toward the cookshack. "Git inside and start to work at once. What's yore name?"

"They ca' me Sandy McPherson," said the newly hired hash-slinger.

Jim Benson made a note of the name in his memo book. "All right, Sandy," he said. "Get busy! They're needin' yuh inside! Tell Mrs. Benson I sent yuh in to help her."

Jim Benson went away from the cookshack. He gave a deep sigh of relief at the thought that he had solved his wife's difficulties so easily and peacefully.

Other duties around the ranch kept the big foreman busy until the triangle was rung to announce that chow was ready.

When the meal was over, Jim went to the bunk house to smoke his pipe and chin with some of the hands. But after he had been whiling away the time in this manner for a little less than an hour, some one came to tell him that Billy West wanted him in his private office.

Jim Benson thereupon left and went to the main ranch house, where the Circle J boss's private office was situated.

He found Billy West with a worried frown on his tanned young forehead. There was a troubled look in the boss's clear gray eyes, too. He looked up from a pile of bills.

"Any sign o' those two loco top-hands of ours, Jim?" he asked.

"Yuh mean Buck and Joe?" the foreman asked.

"Who else would I mean?" Billy asked, with a slight touch of impatience in his tone. The foreman's slowness sometimes was annoying.

Jim Benson shook his gray head. "No, they ain't showed up, Billy."

"The Chinaman neither?" Billy questioned.

"The chink ain't been seen fer three days," Jim told his boss.

"How 'bout movin' that herd of 'threes' in Antelope Creek pasture to-morrer, Jim?" Billy asked. "I was countin' on Buck and Joe ter drive them to Mustang City."

"I reckon I kin spare Slim Madigan and a couple o' the boys," Jim Benson answered, "if them two scatter-brains don't show up by mornin'."

"Thar's eighty head," Billy said. "And they're promised ter be in Mustang City come sundown to-morrer!"

"I'll see they get thar," Jim Benson assured his boss.

The foreman left the office, shaking his big head and muttering to himself. His remarks were not complimentary either to Buck Foster or Joe Scott.

Jim Benson had his back to the window of the office all the time he was talking to Billy West. The latter, too, seated at his desk, was turned away from the window.

So it was that neither saw the face of a man pressed against the glass. Nor did they notice that the window was slightly open, so that their conversation could easily be heard by the listener outside.

The face of the listener had as its chief feature a very large, hooked nose. The eyes were crossed, and there was a long dagger-shaped scar along the prowler's right jaw.

As soon as Jim Benson had left the ranch office, "Sandy" McPherson dropped down from his post of vantage on a big barrel under the window.

A sly smile wreathed the fellow's ugly, lantern-jawed face. And he chuckled softly to himself.

"Aye, mon," he murmured, "'tis a rare good plan!"

Like a stealing shadow, he crept away toward the bunk house. He passed around to the rear of that building, avoiding the punchers who were still around the doorway.

He was heading for a clump of willows that grew at a little distance beyond the ranch buildings.

There his own cayuse was all ready and saddled.

Still chuckling quietly to himself, Sandy McPherson climbed aboard the animal and rode toward a low hill that rose up from the prairie about a mile to the northeast of the Circle J ranch buildings.

On reaching the top of this hill, he slipped out of the saddle, threw the reins over his cayuse's head, and stood gazing at the distant Bitterroot ridge as it loomed dimly against the sky line.

For several minutes, Sandy remained there, trying to focus the gaze of his crossed eyes. Then he turned away, shaking his head, and began to gather up bits of loose wood and brush from among the timber growth on the hill slope.

He finally got together a big heap of dry sticks and branches. His next move was to strike a match and set the mass ablaze. The tindery-dry stuff flared up in a great sheet of flame.

In less than a minute, a roaring fire was lighting up the hilltop and throwing long shadows down its slopes.

Sandy McPherson stood a little away from the fire, to avoid its intense heat. One eye seemed to be squinted at the blaze; the other was staring out into the darkness beyond, fixed on the notch that could be faintly seen in the high mountain ridge.

This notch marked the location of Mustang Pass—a secret passageway across the Bitterroots used chiefly

by outlaws, rustlers, and other gentry at odds with the law.

Mustang Pass had been a favorite route across the Bitterroots for the master rustler, "Devil" Tripp. It was a hiding place from which the scoundrelly Devil had defied the law and waged war on Billy West and Circle J.

And now, Sandy McPherson was watching Mustang Pass eagerly. He stood waiting there on the hilltop for a long time.

The flickering brushwood blaze threw strange lights and shadows over his face. He looked like some hideous carved image as he stood there with his big hook nose, crossed eyes, and the strange dagger-shaped scar along his jaw.

All the time, he chuckled to himself and rubbed his bony hands together. And then he suddenly gave a sharp exclamation:

"Aye! At last! Yon's the beacon light! They've caught my seegnal! I'll be ridin' for Mustang Pass!"

High up in the distant notch of Mustang Pass, an answering signal blaze had gone up in answer to Sandy McPherson's beacon fire.

With nervous haste, McPherson stamped out the remains of his dwindling brushwood fire. Then he got his cayuse, climbed clumsily into the saddle, and rode away, heading for the mountains.

CHAPTER IV.

DEVIL TRIPP'S PRISONER.

DEEP in the shadows of Mustang Pass, lights showed from the windows of a weather-beaten, bullet-scarred log cabin. For years, this cabin had been a refuge of the rustler, Devil Tripp. It had been the scene of many a desperate battle, as its lead-riddled walls bore silent testimony.

And now Devil Tripp was back at his old headquarters once more, laying new plans for the destruction of Billy West's control of the Circle J Ranch.

Already Devil Tripp had started a new campaign in motion against the boss of Circle J. The business of getting Sing Lo drunk and spiriting him away was the first step of the rustler chief's plan.

Even now, Sing Lo was in the cabin, as Devil Tripp's prisoner. The little Chinaman was in the center of the room. His hands were high above his head, the thumbs tied together by a strong cord and fastened to a beam that formed part of the support of the cabin's roof.

By stretching to his utmost height, standing on tiptoe, Sing Lo could just save himself from the agony of hanging with his full weight on his tortured thumbs.

The little Chinaman's yellow face had a sickly gray tinge. His slant eyes were bulging from his head with terror and pain. His jaw sagged. But the words that came from his lips were stubborn and defiant.

"Sing Lo no tell!" he declared, shaking his head. "Sing Lo no talkee! Sing Lo not know anytling! Sing Lo no—— Ouch!"

At a signal from Devil Tripp, who stood in front of the Chinaman, two ruffians on either side of Sing Lo had suddenly jerked on the cords, lifting the little man's body clean off the floor of the cabin.

Devil Tripp shook his big fist in Sing Lo's face. The master rustler's features were twisted with a terrible rage. His greenish eyes blazed with fury. His hawkish nose was spread wide at the nostrils.

"Yuh'll talk afore I'm through with yuh, yuh yaller scum!" he growled savagely. "Yuh'll tell all yuh know, or I'll burn it out of yuh!"

Sing Lo cowered before the hulking bully. The little Chinaman was mortally afraid. But he was game. He would die rather than tell anything that would help Devil Tripp's new campaign against Circle J.

Devil Tripp's face took on an expression of satisfaction. His lips parted in a wolfish grin. This was something he liked to do—bully a man smaller and weaker than himself, one who was completely at his mercy.

Devil was a coyote at heart—a skulking coward, who struck in the dark, knifed men in the back, shot them down from ambush. He was brave only when in no danger.

He stood, licking his lips, studying the unfortunate Chinaman. He was figuring out what to do next. His right hand slipped inside his long black broadcloth coat and touched the hidden gun that rested in a shoulder holster. His arching brows drew down over his greenish-hued eyes. There was murder in his evil face.

With his other hand, he fingered the small, grizzled goatee beard that helped to create his resemblance to pictures of the devil.

While Devil Tripp stood there, hesitating, a man stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the cabin. He was finely dressed in the best of cowboy clothes. There was a lot of silver stitching on his chaps, gun belt, and holster.

He was a good-looking young fellow, too, with a lean, bronzed face and straight features. A small mustache decorated his upper lip.

If Buck Foster and Joe Scott had been present, they would have recognized him as the dandified stranger—the shadow rider—with whom they had had the argument at the hitch rail of the Oasis Saloon in Twin Rivers.

"Say, Devil!" the shadow rider drawled.

Devil Tripp turned on the speaker sharply. "What is it, Newman?"

"Silk" Newman smiled easily. "Just this, Devil," he answered. "Yuh ain't gettin' nothin' out o' that chink. He jest won't talk."

"I'll make him talk," Devil gritted. "The yaller——"

"Yuh'd do a durned sight better with them two rannies Maloy took prisoners this afternoon," Silk Newman interrupted. "They kin be made ter talk easy. And they most likely know more than the fool chink anyway."

Devil Tripp removed his right hand from the butt of his hidden gun and scratched his thinning grizzled hair.

"Now that's an idea," he said slowly. He turned and snapped his fingers. "Maloy! Where's Bruiser Maloy?" he asked.

The door swung open, and a hulking hombre poked his head inside.

"Bruiser" Maloy had the build of a professional wrestler. He was huge in the shoulders, with long arms and powerful hands. But his legs were slim. His face was bashed and battered, as if he had been in many bar-room brawls.

There were marks where the calks of lumberjacks' boots had raked his forehead and plowed deep furrows across his cheeks. His nose was flattened, and both ears were cauliflowered. His eyes were small and set close to his squashed nose.

He gave a surly grunt as he looked into the cabin. "Who wants me?" he asked.

"I do!" Devil snapped. "Come in here, Bruiser!"

Bruiser Maloy stepped inside.

"Ride down to Crooked Canyon, where yuh left them two cow-punchers," Devil ordered. "Git a

couple o' the boys there to help yuh and bring them rannies back here. Git a move on yuh!"

Bruiser's big mouth gaped open. "Yuh mean—now?" he asked.

"That's what I said," Devil retorted, raising his voice.

"But—but it's too dark," Bruiser protested. "I ain't sure——"

Devil Tripp's face suddenly contorted into a terrible mask of rage. More than ever he looked like the Evil One, with his hawk-beaked nose, his arched black eyebrows, and his sinister pointed beard.

"I said ter git them cowboys and bring 'em here—now!" he said, in a voice that trembled with rage.

Bruiser Maloy quailed before his chief's terrible anger. He turned silently and left the shack.

A few minutes later, those inside heard the hoofbeats of his horse. He was riding to carry out Devil Tripp's order.

But hardly had the hoofbeats died away when the door of the cabin was again burst open. This time, a red-faced hombre stood there, blinking his eyes and stuttering with excitement.

"I—it—it's the signal fire, boss!" he told Devil. "There's a fire burnin' on top o' that hill——"

Devil Tripp sprang forward and shook the red-faced man by the shoulders.

"All right, yuh fool! It's only Sandy McPherson givin' us the sign he said he'd give, if he learned anything important. Start yore own fire blazin' and give him the signal to come up here!"

Devil pushed away the red-faced man, who had been acting as look-out. The latter left the cabin.

A few minutes later, a beacon fire was sending its flames skyward to blazon its message from Mustang Pass.

CHAPTER V.

A COUNTERMOVE.

THE skull of Buck Foster was a hard one. It had withstood many blows. It had often been creased by bullets. Time and time again, it had suffered dents and bruises, but its toughness withstood everything.

The bullet that grooved the grizzled cowpoke's skull when he and Joe Scott were ambushed in Crooked Canyon had knocked Buck unconscious. And the veteran remained in twilight land for a good long time.

When he finally came to, it was dark, and Buck's head felt as if there was a man with an ax inside it, trying to chop his way to the outside.

Buck found himself resting on a bed of brush covered with a blanket. Evidently some one had tried to make him comfortable. But his head! Ouch!

He moved a hand up and explored the top of his skull with gnarled fingers that had suddenly acquired the gentleness of a surgeon's.

"Ow!" He pulled them away as they came in contact with the groove made by the bullet. "Help me, Hannah, if my head ain't split clean open!"

It was dark. Buck strained his eyes through the gloom in an effort to see his surroundings. Ahead of him, he could make out a square opening, with a dimly lighted patch of sky showing.

He put out his hand and felt rough-hewn logs that formed the wall of a cabin.

He sat up, and his head ached worse than ever. So he lay down again.

"Ooo-h!" He gave a loud groan as his head touched the blanket.

There was a sound of footsteps

outside. Then a man's hand holding a lantern appeared at the window, and a bearded face looked into the cabin.

"Humph!" said the owner of the face. "So yuh've come to, eh? Well, it's about time. I thought yuh was playin' possum."

Both face and lantern disappeared. But a moment later, the door of the cabin was opened. The holder of the lantern stepped inside.

The man—a big, bearded fellow—set the lantern on a rough table, so that its rays fell on the veteran as he lay on his brush bed.

Buck started to get up, but he fell back again as soon as he got to his knees. His head ached sickeningly. The other man watched him.

"I reckon I got to tie yuh up now, cowboy," he said, "seein' yuh've come to."

He had a coil of rope with him, and he started to tie Buck's hands and legs securely. When he had completed the task, Buck was as thoroughly hog-tied as a dogie in a calf-roping contest.

All through the tying-up process, Buck had been growling and groaning, but he was too weak to offer any resistance.

The job had just about been finished, when there were hoofbeats outside the cabin.

At once, Buck's guard left him and went to the door.

"Who's there?" he challenged.

"It's Maloy," came the answer out of the darkness. "Devil sent me to take the prisoners up to Mustang Pass."

The bearded guard evidently recognized Maloy's voice. "O. K., Maloy," he said. "I'll be durned glad ter git rid of them. This old coot with the mustache has only just come to. I thought he was dead.

And the other one's been raisin' ructions ever since we caught him."

"Yuh mean the redhead?" Bruiser Maloy asked.

"That's the one," said the whiskered man.

"Devil wants them up at Mustang Pass," Bruiser Maloy explained. "You and Whitey are to help me take 'em there."

Maloy poked his head inside the cabin and looked around. "Where's my little pard, Sandy?" he asked in an anxious tone.

"Sandy?" the other man repeated in a puzzled tone. "Oh, yuh mean the little Scotchman! He ain't here. He was sent on to Circle J to take a look-see."

Bruiser grumbled. "I thought I'd find him here. Well, hurry up and let's git these jaspers to Mustang Pass."

Lying tied up on his bed of brush, Buck Foster heard all the conversation between the guard and Bruiser Maloy.

Rage filled the veteran's heart. He tugged at his bonds, but with no success.

"So this is that skunk, Devil Tripp's, doin'," he muttered, gnashing his few remaining teeth. "I might 'a' knowed he was at the bottom of a trick like this."

Buck Foster had good reason to remember Devil Tripp. In the many raids the boss rustler had made in the Bitterroot country, his chief object had been to possess himself of Circle J.

With Billy West's ranch for his own, Devil felt that he would be in complete control of cattle-stealing operations in that part of Montana.

Thus far, the young boss of Circle J and his pards had been too daring and quick-witted to let Devil Tripp get the best of them. But this time, the rustler chief was lay-

ing his plans with greater care than ever before.

With Sing Lo, as well as Buck and Joe in his power, he hoped to use them as decoys to trap their boss.

Buck's thoughts on the subject of Devil Tripp were interrupted by the entrance of Bruiser Maloy and the bearded guard.

"Come on, cowboy," said the latter. "Yo're ridin'."

"Where to?" Buck demanded.

"Wherever yo're taken," Bruiser Maloy told him.

"Waal, yuh ornery polecat!" Buck shouted, his temper flaring up suddenly. "I'll—"

Bruiser Maloy had suddenly leaned over, catching the veteran by the neck and the slack of his pants. With a swift movement, he swung the lean, lanky body of the Circle J puncher over his shoulder like a sack of oats.

Then he strode out of the cabin, flinging a sharp order to the guard.

"Git his hoss!"

Sputtering with helpless anger, Buck felt himself carried along on Bruiser Maloy's shoulder. Then the other man brought his horse.

Buck's feet were untied and he was set in the saddle. But his ankles were at once fastened together again by a length of rope that ran under the cayuse's body.

And then the veteran found that Joe Scott was close beside him. The redhead, too, had been tied to his horse, in the same manner as Buck. And was he sore about it?

He called his captors all the fighting names he could think of. He challenged them singly and in a bunch to fight it out with him with fists, guns, or anything they liked to suggest. Joe Scott was mad.

But Bruiser Maloy finally silenced him. "All right, yuh red-headed

firebrand," he said gruffly. "Either yuh close yore trap, or we knocks yuh cold with a Colt barrel. Now, do yuh want ter be gun-whipped?"

Joe Scott was sensible about the matter. He shut up. But the quick brain under his thatch of red hair was working hard as he and Buck rode off on the night journey to Mustang Pass.

The way to Devil Tripp's headquarters led through a long, twisting canyon, which finally came out onto a high plateau.

Joe Scott recognized his surroundings as he rode. There was enough light from the moon and stars to enable him to distinguish some familiar landmarks.

There was a butte in the shape of an Indian's head, for instance. It loomed up like a giant sentinel in the night, vaguely outlined by the faint glow from the sky.

As he rode, the redhead was busy in other ways, too. He was working hard with his feet, straining at the strips of rawhide that bound his ankles together under his mount's body.

Gradually he found that the bonds yielded—at least to the extent of enabling him to get one foot in front of the other. And this gave Joe just the break he needed. For his captors had left him his spurs, and he started to saw away at the rawhide with one of his spurred heels.

It was a slow task, and an awkward one. But Joe stuck to it, and at last he had the satisfaction of feeling the strands of rawhide part. His legs were free, but his hands were still tied together, and fastened to the saddle horn.

But Joe quickly threw up his right leg onto the horn and started to saw away with his spur at the lashing around his wrists. In the gloom of

the canyon, he felt sure that his captors did not see what he was doing.

At last, he got the bonds cut through. Now hands and feet were free. Buck Foster was close beside the redhead. There were two guards riding behind the Circle J punchers, and Bruiser Maloy himself was leading the way.

Joe leaned over and whispered to Buck. The latter grunted in reply.

Suddenly the redhead saw his chance—and took it.

The party had come to a point where Crooked Canyon ran into a larger gorge known as Twisted Canyon. This latter canyon was the approach to the plateau, which led to Mustang Pass.

Joe swung down in the saddle, reaching with his right hand and scooping up a handful of loose gravel.

Straightening in the saddle, Joe turned and flung the whole handful of loose stone and dirt squarely in the faces of the horses behind him.

The animals reared and squealed. Their riders tried to quiet them. For the time being, they had their hands full.

Then Buck and Joe suddenly whirled their cayuses and charged through the rear guards. Those hombres were too busy controlling their mounts to be able to attend to the escaping prisoners.

Bruiser Maloy discovered the ruse and turned to defeat it, but he got tangled up with the horses of his own men long enough to give the fleeing Circle J rannies a fair start.

And that was all they wanted.

Spurring their horses, they raced through the almost dark canyon at reckless speed.

Watching for the landmarks, Joe turned aside onto a narrow, twisting trail that was no more than a cow path. After following it for a short

distance, Buck and Joe were obliged to dismount and lead their horses. But the trail led over the rim of the canyon and down onto the other side. Once this journey was accomplished, it was an easy ride to Circle J across the prairie.

The pair of saddle pards raced into the Circle J ranch yard close on to midnight. They lost no time in arousing Billy West.

They found the Circle J boss sleeping on a cot in his private office on the ground floor of the ranch house.

"Come on, Billy," Buck Foster shouted. "We got ter git busy. That skunk, Devil Tripp's, on the warpath again. We got ter wipe him clean out this time."

"Yeah, Billy, Devil had us prisoners," Joe confirmed.

Billy made the pair of excited rannihans sit down and tell their story. When they had finished, they went out to mess shack and rustled up coffee and left-overs from the evening meal, for they were starving.

When they had satisfied their hunger, and Billy had looked at the ugly gash on Buck Foster's skull, they went outside again.

Billy's eyes turned toward the Bitterroot ridge—to the high notch that marked the location of Mustang Pass.

He touched Joe on the arm and pointed. "Look, Joe! Here, Buck, look!"

"What do yuh see, Billy?" Buck asked.

"Look! Up in Mustang Pass! It's died down now, but there's been a signal fire! Devil Tripp's at his old headquarters, and he's been sending messages by beacon flares. Something's afoot agin' Circle J."

Joe Scott's blue eyes were dancing with excitement. Buck Foster was fidgeting about like a dogie with

the screw worm. His head felt better now, though it still ached dully and throbbed all the time.

Billy was snapping out orders. "Git to the corral and snake yoreselves out fresh hosses! Don't lose a minute or——"

"But where yuh goin'? What's the idea?" Buck wanted to know.

"Yo're ridin' plumb square up ter Mustang Pass ter visit yore old pard, Devil Tripp," Billy explained. "It's a move that'll take him by surprise. 'Cause he shore ain't expectin' a call from Circle J ter-night!"

Buck Foster let out a wild cowboy yell. "Yip-pee!" he whooped. "Jest let me lay hands on that varmint, Devil Tripp, and I'll——"

"Yeah," Joe Scott cut in, "yuh'll git yoreself caught and tied up like yuh done once already."

"That wasn't my fault," Buck argued. "You was supposed ter be keepin' a lookout ter see nobody snuck up on us or ambushed us. Yuh wasn't onto yore job, Joe Scott. That's why we got held up."

"'Twasn't nothin' o' the kind," Joe Scott denied. "I'd 'a' got yuh out o' that mess only yuh had to go fer yore smoke pole and start blazin' away like the dumb-headed——"

"Save that fer breakfast in the mornin'!" Billy's voice cut the argument short. "It'll keep!"

Buck Foster gave a cheer. "Hooray! Hurry up and fork a fresh cayuse, carrot-top! We're ridin' ter Mustang Pass!"

CHAPTER VI.

TERROR IN MUSTANG PASS.

DEVIL TRIPP paced nervously up and down the small cabin in Mustang Pass. The others left a clear space all along the center of the single room.

In one corner, the shadow rider, Silk Newman, sat playing seven-up with a blond-headed gunman known as "Trigger" Olsen. In another corner, a group of three evil-faced galloways rats were matching coins.

Sing Lo had been cut down from his painful position of being strung up by the thumbs. He now lay on a bench, with his face turned toward the wall. He was securely bound hand and foot. He still wore the shiny black coat and pants, which were his favorite garments, but his small body was motionless. He might have been a dead man lying there.

With his arched eyebrows drawn together in an ugly scowl, Devil Tripp continued his restless pacing. Evil green lights flashed from his peculiar eyes, and he continually plucked at his pointed beard.

Every once in a while, an exclamation of disgust escaped him.

At last he turned toward the door and flung it open. He took a deep breath and drew in a lungful of the fresh mountain air. Inside the cabin, the atmosphere was heavy with tobacco smoke and the breathing of many men.

For several minutes, Devil stood there. Then he caught the movement of horses, and the lookout came rushing up to him.

"He's here!" whispered the red-faced sentinel excitedly. "Bruiser Maloy's come back."

"Good! Send him here at once!" Devil ordered.

Out from the gloom of the lower pass, came the figures of three horsemen. In the lead was Bruiser Maloy. He swung down from his cayuse and came boldly toward Devil. Bruiser's two companions hung back in the shadows, whispering together.

Devil stepped aside to let Bruiser

Maloy enter. The big ruffian's jaw was thrust out defiantly. His small eyes blazed. His fists were clenched.

"I told yuh it was a fool's errand, sendin' me after them rannies at night," he burst out.

Devil Tripp glared at him, his greenish eyes darting with evil lights.

"What do yuh mean?" he demanded.

"I mean that those rannies got away from us. They——"

A hoarse growl in the rustler chief's throat cut off Bruiser's words.

"Yuh fool!" he said in a terrible voice. "Yuh mean yuh let them two cowpokes escape?"

"They got away from us in the dark," Maloy explained lamely, his face paling with anger.

The great scars made by lumbermen's boots and other weapons showed as livid purple marks against the whiteness of his skin. The nostrils of his squashed nose spread wide—like an old war horse scenting the approaching battle. His big hands were clenching and unclenching.

"I want no yellow fools like you in my crew," Devil said. "Yuh've ruined all my plans, lettin' those rannies escape."

Bruiser Maloy shrugged his big shoulders. "Well, what yuh goin' ter do about it?" he asked, with a sneer.

Devil Tripp drew back a step. There was a gleam of murder in his green eyes. His hawkish nose came down, as his lips drew back in a snarl of fury. His right hand darted swiftly under his black broadcloth coat.

Bruiser Maloy was coming at him, his apelike arms outstretched. There was a low, growling roar in the big man's throat.

Devil took another step backward

to avoid those terrible reaching arms.

Boom! A gun roared in the close quarters of the cabin.

Devil Tripp had not waited to get his gun out from under his coat. There had been no time if he was to avoid Bruiser Maloy's crushing hands. The rustler chief had turned the muzzle of the hidden gun outward and fired as soon as he got the weapon free of its under-arm holster.

A sudden change came over Bruiser's hate-twisted features. His jaw fell. He clutched at his throat, choking, gasping.

For a moment he stood, tottering on his lean, powerful legs. It was a game effort. Then he fell forward flat on his face and lay still.

Devil Tripp looked around the room, his eyes seeking out each group of his followers in turn.

"Yuh see what happens to them that don't obey orders," he said in a low voice that trembled with rage. "Let it be a warnin' to all of yuh. This is a man's game—not child's play."

Silk Newman and Trigger Olsen gazed at their chief, spellbound. Then their horrified eyes turned on the still form of Bruiser Maloy. They looked at each other, shaking their heads. But neither answered Devil Tripp.

The gunmen who were matching pennies stared at the corpse, too, then turned their heads away with horror and fear in their eyes.

At last the deadly silence of the cabin was broken by the creaking of the rusty door hinge. The door swung open. A small man stood in the entrance—a queer-looking little fellow with a big hooked nose and the worst crossed eyes ever seen in that part of Montana.

It was the spy, Sandy McPherson.

He stood there, blinking and shifting from one foot to the other, as he gradually took in the scene. Then, as its full meaning came to his slow mind, he took a few steps forward to the side of the body of Bruiser Maloy.

He dropped to his knees and turned the big man over enough to make sure that it was Maloy. A sob shook his lean body as he saw the terrible wound that Devil Tripp's bullet had torn in Bruiser Maloy's throat.

He looked around at the crew of scoundrels in the cabin.

"Who—who killed my pard?" he asked in a broken voice.

Devil Tripp still held the smoking gun in his hand. Now he pointed it at little Sandy McPherson.

"He was killed for what amounted to mutiny in this outfit," Devil said with a meaning glare at McPherson. "Yuh look out yuh don't make no mistakes yoreself, hombre!"

Sandy McPherson rose to his feet. He shook his head sadly. It was easy to see that he was hard hit by the death of Bruiser Maloy. But there was nothing he could do about it. He could not take Devil Tripp to task for the brutal shooting of Maloy.

"I'll no be makin' meestakes, Meester Tripp," he said in a meek tone. "Ye can depend on Sandy McPherson. And what was it ye was wantin' with me the night, Meester Tripp?"

"What did yuh give us the signal fer?" Devil asked. "What did yuh find out at Circle J? Talk quick now! And don't make no mistakes, like yore pard there."

Sandy then told his boss what he had learned by listening to the conversation between Billy West and his foreman, Jim Benson.

Devil listened with interest.

"So the young fool is movin' a herd of prime stuff from Antelope Creek pasture at daybreak!" he said, when Sandy had finished. "It's too durned bad them two cowhands got away from Maloy."

He turned again to Sandy McPherson. "How many beeves did yuh say West is sendin' ter Mustang City?" he asked.

"Eighty was what they said," Sandy answered.

Devil Tripp grunted. "Humph! Eighty! And fat threes! A nice haul. Silk!" he turned toward the dudish young gunman over in the corner. "Yuh better take that job in charge. Hold up the drive where the road runs through Calico Gorge, about ten miles out of Twin Rivers—to the east. Better take at least six men. We can't afford any more mistakes!"

Silk Newman nodded lazily, his eyes narrowing. He stroked his small waxed mustache and then lit a fresh cigarette—a tailor-made.

"I don't make mistakes, Devil," he said, with meaning. "You know me."

Devil Tripp turned on Silk with a snarl. "I don't want back talk from a young whippersnapper like you!" he said angrily.

Silk Newman blew out a great cloud of cigarette smoke—right in Devil Tripp's face. There was contempt in the young gunman's eyes. He stared at his chief challengingly.

"I say what I please," he declared in a tone of defiance. "And I don't eat my words."

There was danger in the flashing eyes of the young shadow rider. In spite of his dandified appearance, this fellow was no bluff. He could use his guns. He had far more skill with them than Devil Tripp. And the master rustler knew it.

"Yuh heard what I said, Silk," Devil snapped, turning away and thrusting his gun back into its hidden holster.

He took a step forward. In so doing, he stumbled over the still body of Bruiser Maloy. He shoved it aside roughly with his foot.

"Take this carrion out o' here! Throw it to the buzzards!" he ordered.

But little Sandy McPherson stepped up and looked him straight in the eyes—as straight as he could look any one in the eye—and said:

"Ef ye please, Meester Tripp, Maloy was my pard. I'd like fer to geeve him a decent burial."

Devil Tripp looked at the little man. His evil face softened for a moment. He shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"All right, Sandy," he agreed. "Have your wish! But take him out o' here!"

With tears rolling down his cheeks, Sandy McPherson dragged the heavy body of Bruiser Maloy out of the cabin.

When he was gone, those remaining in the room breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad that's out o' the way," murmured one of the group of gunmen at the far end.

Devil Tripp pounded with his fist on the table in the center of the room.

"Let's git this business settled," he said, in a commanding tone. "We've got our plans to lay. You, Silk, will pick your men and take care o' that herd from Antelope Creek Pasture!"

Silk Newman nodded. "Yeah, that's all settled, Devil."

"Come over and sit here at the table—all of yuh," Devil ordered.

They moved out of the different corners of the room where they had

been sitting in huddled groups, whispering to one another of the horror they had just seen.

Some were white-faced, with trembling hands. Others were outwardly bold, but terror showed in the depths of their eyes.

Desperadoes, gunmen, thugs, hired killers, and gallows rats—the scum of the Montana ranges and cow towns—these were the men who had banded together under Devil Tripp, but they were chilled with dread at the ruthless murder of one of their number by their leader.

And not one of them dared utter a word of protest.

"Now then, men," Devil went on, when all were gathered in one large group, "fer our next move against Circle J. We——"

He stopped suddenly. His greenish eyes darted toward the door. From outside had come the sound of a muffled shot, then the sound of running feet.

A moment later, the door was hurled open. Excited voices shouted outside.

The figures of three men showed in the doorway. A little in front of the other two, stood Billy West, feet spread well apart, a six-gun held in each lean brown hand.

The Circle J boss's bronzed young face was drawn into hard lines. There was no smile in his gray eyes. They were dull as agates. He looked much older than his years.

Just behind him, Joe Scott's freckled face showed, with its big beak nose and dancing blue eyes. But Joe was no longer the grinning young imp of mischief. His jaw was set in a rigid line.

And on Billy's left was Buck Foster, his brown eyes blazing under their bushy brows; his jaw thrust out; his mustache ends quivering.

It was Buck who spoke first.

"Whar's that durn skunk, Devil Tripp?" he demanded. "Let me at—"

Bang-bang! Crash! Bang! Buck's words were cut short by a booming roar of six-guns that shook the log walls of the bullet-scarred cabin.

The outlaws had gone for their guns, with their hands under the table, as soon as they saw that their visitors were enemies.

CHAPTER VII.

DOCTORED SHELLS.

BILLY WEST had figured on taking Devil Tripp and his gang by surprise. A quick overpowering of the man doing sentry duty and a rush for the door of the cabin had enabled the three Circle J waddies to come upon Devil unexpectedly.

But now the saddle pads had a real gun fight on their hands. They had not expected to find so many of Devil's followers gathered in the cabin. A dozen guns started to blaze away at the door opening.

Billy and his companions escaped instant death only by a quick flop to the ground.

Before the battle had been under way a minute, the glass of the lamps was shattered, and both sides were firing at the gun flashes. There was only faint moonlight from the sky. This fact, too, probably saved the Circle J waddies from slaughter. They had run into a hornets' nest.

With the roar of their own and the enemies' six-guns thundering in their ears, neither of the rannies heard the thud of footsteps behind them.

But suddenly the firing ceased, and Devil Tripp's voice rang out:

"Take 'em alive! I want 'em alive!"

The next instant, a new group of Devil's men attacked from behind.

They threw themselves on the cow-punchers, hitting with the muzzles and butts of their guns.

Each waddy was attacked by at least three of the desperadoes—and from the rear. They didn't have a chance.

Buck Foster went limp, with a groan as a swinging gun butt caught him behind the ear. Joe Scott was clipped at the base of the skull by another gun. Billy half rose on one knee, but was borne down by weight of numbers.

Two men caught him by the ankles. Two more pinioned his arms, while another straddled his neck, locking his legs around the Circle J boss's throat in a cruel scissors hold.

Billy's head was bursting with the pressure. He figured that he had been outwitted on all sides. It was evident that Devil had more men hidden back in the pass, and that these had come to his assistance when they had heard the shooting.

If Billy could only break loose from this strangling hold of the man on his shoulders! If he could only shake off the others who clung to him, like coyotes pulling down a steer!

A hundred yards down the pass, hidden behind a group of boulders were three fast Circle J horses, including his own favorite, Danger.

Thoughts flashed through Billy's dazed brain with the speed of lightning. And then—

Wham! Some one brought down a gun muzzle with sickening force on top of his head. Everything whirled—faster and faster. Then there was a great blackness, and Billy knew no more.

It was still pitch dark when Billy regained consciousness. He felt stiff and cold. His head ached. His legs

and arms had shooting pains running through them.

He tried to move. There was a clank of chains. He realized suddenly that he was chained up somewhere, but he had no idea where.

This must be some secret dungeon prison of Devil Tripp's. There were walls of solid rock. Underfoot was rock, too.

Billy followed the chains and found that they were fastened to a big ring that had been cemented into the wall of his prison.

He explored farther. Gradually he came to the conclusion that he was in a cave, the entrance of which had been filled in with a wall to make a prison cell.

But he could find no gateway or other entrance. He had to learn everything by sense of touch, for he could see nothing. Nor could he search the entire cave, owing to the fact of being limited in his movements by the length of the chains.

"Whew!" Billy whistled softly to himself. "I shore did run into a nice trap. Devil couldn't 'a' caught me neater if he'd planned fer weeks."

He paused and tried to pierce the darkness, but without success.

"Humph!" he went on presently. "I wonder what happened to Buck and Joe. Mebbe they're— What's that?"

Clang! There was a ring of metal on stone.

The sound came from the far corner of the cave—one which Billy had been unable to reach—but he guessed that there must be a gateway there.

And now a man appeared, lantern in hand. Billy blinked his eyes at the light. He saw that his guess had been correct. He was in a cave, and there was an iron gate which went up and down.

The man who had come in to see

him was a big blond-headed fellow called Trigger Olsen.

"Well, I heard yuh movin' about, so I come in to see what you was doin'," Trigger stated, peering at Billy through narrowed lids that almost hid his small pale-blue eyes.

"Where have yuh got me? What place is this?" Billy asked.

A smile came over Trigger Olsen's broad face. "This is Devil Tripp's prison. It's where he keeps prisoners he's condemned to death!" And Trigger Olsen laughed loudly, as if this were a very funny joke.

Billy laughed, too, although he saw nothing comical in the situation. It was no laughing matter for him.

"How long yuh been workin' fer Devil Tripp?" Billy asked.

"Me?" Trigger Olsen answered. "I bane work for Devil two-three week."

"I suppose yuh figure on cleanin' up big money?"

Trigger nodded and then smiled broadly. "Oh, ah, sure! Sure, big money for every one!"

"I wouldn't be too sure," Billy said. "Devil's disappointed people like you before."

"Not dis time," Trigger insisted. "Devil sure make big money for all this time! Listen, I got somethin' to tell you. I got news for you!"

Billy looked at the big fellow curiously. He seemed nothing more than a huge simpleton, and yet he was dangerous. The pale blue eyes held a cunning expression. There was cruelty in the thin mouth.

"Well, I'm listenin'! Spill it!" Billy said carelessly.

"Look!" Trigger pointed to the roof of the cave.

Billy followed his pointing finger. There was a dark opening—probably a chimney with an outlet to the top of the rock or cliff in which the cave was hollowed out.

"When daylight shows through there," Trigger went on, "Devil Tripp is giving you your chance."

"My chance?" Billy repeated. "A chance for what?"

Trigger nodded his big head. "A chance to fight for your life."

"Fight? Who am I to fight?" Billy asked, puzzled.

"Devil Tripp himself," Trigger told him. "He says this time it's got to be you or him."

The Circle J boss was surprised. He knew Devil Tripp's cowardly nature. He was aware that the rustler chief hated to risk his own life. Time and time again, Devil had refused to shoot it out with Billy West. And now—

There must be some trick. But what was it?

Trigger was speaking again. "I come back for you at daybreak," he stated, speaking slowly in his labored English. "Then we will see who is the better man."

Billy paced up and down the rocky cell, dragging his chains. He was trying to figure the whole thing out.

One thing was certain: Devil Tripp certainly wasn't risking his life in this coming duel.

The hours dragged on. Billy lay down and tried to sleep, but the effort was in vain.

He kept gazing at the tiny opening in the roof of the cave. At last, he thought he could see a faint streak of gray there. Dawn must be at hand.

A few minutes later, the gate clanked open, and Trigger Olsen again entered with his lantern. He also carried with him a gun and belt, which Billy instantly recognized as his own.

Olsen's heavy face wore its most solemn expression. He looked like some sad-eyed old hound as he stood

gazing at Billy West by the dim light of the lantern's rays.

"Yoong fella," he said earnestly, "if I gif you your gun and unloose dose chains, do you put yourself on honor not to try to shoot your way out?"

"What's the idea?" Billy asked suspiciously.

"Yoost this," Trigger Olsen explained. "Devil Tripp wants to give you a square deal. Dere will be a fair and square show-down, once an' for all, between you and him."

"What happens if I win?" Billy asked.

"If you win, you go free! Devil Tripp won't be alive to bother you again." Olsen nodded importantly as he spoke. "Odderwise," he added, "you stays a prisoner. This way, you got a chance."

"All right!" Billy interrupted. "Take off these chains. Let me have that gun."

"You give your word of honor?" Olsen asked.

"I do!" Billy raised his manacled right hand.

From a pocket, Olsen produced a key. He unlocked the padlock that held Billy's wrists chained to an iron ring set firmly in the rock.

Then he handed the Circle J boss the gun and belt.

Billy put them on. It felt good to have his own gun on his hip, that trusty, smooth-handled old Colt that he could handle with such wizardry.

"Remember," Olsen warned, shaking a finger at him, "your word of honor not to use that gun."

"I don't forget such a thing," Billy answered coldly.

He passed out of the cave through the iron gate, and then he saw that two evil-faced guards with shotguns had held him covered all during his conversation with Olsen.

"I see that you're not trusting my

word anyhow," he remarked in a hard tone, with a nod toward the shotgun guards.

Olsen did not answer, but led the way in silence through a passageway leading to the outer air.

Billy drew a deep breath as he came out in the open. It felt good to inhale the fresh air after the dank prison in the cave. There was gray in the eastern sky. Dawn was at hand.

With Olsen leading and the two shotgun men bringing up the rear, Billy walked to a small log hut.

"Wait here," Olsen commanded, "until I find out if Devil Tripp's ready."

He thrust Billy inside the cabin and closed the door. The two shotgun guards posted themselves outside.

Wondering, Billy sat down on a rough wooden chair and fingered his favorite six-gun affectionately. He twirled the cylinder and examined the loads.

Something caught his eye on one of the shells—a knife scratch. He took it out of the cylinder and examined it more closely. Then he looked carefully at the other six shells in his gun. All bore similar knife scratches.

Billy's bronzed young face wore a serious expression. His gray eyes were dully thoughtful. His lips were pressed tightly together.

"I might 'a' known it was something like this," he murmured. "Devil Tripp would never risk his skin in a fair fight with me. I should 'a' known that."

He looked again at the scratched cartridges. He weighed them in his fingers. They were just a little lighter than they should be. And the knife scratches told the reason why.

"The dirty double-crosser!" Billy

gritted. "He's had the charges taken out o' these shells. There's no powder in them. The bullets have been put back in place! Let's see if I ain't right!"

Pointing the Colt at the floor, he pulled the trigger. The hammer clicked, but there was no report. It had fallen on a dead shell.

A feeling of bitterness rose up in the soul of the young Circle J boss. He saw through Devil Tripp's game now. The rustler chief was anxious to establish a reputation for himself as a man of courage. And this was how he intended to build up that reputation—by shooting down a man who had not the slightest chance against him.

He thrust the useless gun into its holster. They had left him no other shells in his belt. All the cards were stacked against him.

His bitter thoughts were cut short by the opening of the cabin door. Trigger Olsen stood there, an expectant look on his big face. His small blue eyes held an eager light; he licked his lips expectantly.

"Devil Tripp is waiting! Come!" he said.

Outside, a large group of Devil Tripp's men had crowded around the cabin, eager for a look at the prisoner. They jostled against Olsen and Billy, making coarse remarks, taunting the Circle J boss.

But Billy kept his temper until one man, rather smaller than the rest, pushed up against him.

Looking down at this fellow's face, Billy recognized the squinting eyes, scarred jaw, and hook nose of the man, Sandy McPherson, whom the Circle J foreman had hired to help out in the cookshack.

"Yuh sneakin' rat!" Billy snapped at McPherson. "So yo're one o' Devil Tripp's spies!"

But the little man's face was

twisted into an expression of terrible dread, as he pushed himself close against Billy, seized his hand, and thrust something into it.

The Circle J boss thrilled as he felt the small hard objects which Sandy McPherson had just given him.

"I'm verra sorry, Meester West," the little man whispered; "and I'm hopin' this'll be doin' ye a good turn which will make up for the bad one I done ye."

With that, the cross-eyed little Scot backed away and was lost in the crowd.

Billy West slipped the six fresh cartridges Sandy McPherson had just given him into his vest pocket. Now to find an opportunity to reload his gun!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MARCH OF DEATH.

IT seemed as if the opportunity would never come. With one fighting chance for life left to him, Billy seemed likely to be unable to slip the dud shells out of his gun and put in the fresh ones.

Trigger Olsen ordered the crowd of hangers-on to keep away from his prisoner. They obeyed, grumbling.

Then Billy, escorted by the two shotgun guards and Olsen, began his march to the scene of his duel with Devil Tripp.

The place chosen was the level floor of a narrow gulch leading out from the lower end of Mustang Pass. On either side, towering walls of craggy rock dimmed the gray dawn light which filtered in at either end and through the space overhead.

Olsen pointed the gorge out as they approached it.

"The idea is," he explained, "that you and Devil are to walk toward each other at a given signal."

"Who gives the signal?" Billy asked.

Trigger Olsen tapped his own broad chest. "I do," he said importantly.

"And what happens then?"

"You go forward ten paces," Olsen told him. "Then I gives the second signal. And then you starts shootin', and you keeps on shootin' till one or the other is dead. Dot's all! A good vay to settle de argument as to whether you or Devil is the best man. Ain't it?"

And Olsen laughed loudly at his own clumsy humor.

Billy West wasn't afraid. And yet he shuddered at the brutal coldness of Trigger Olsen's words. This big bullet-headed Swede must know that some one had tampered with the shells in Billy's gun. Quite possibly Olsen had done the job himself.

And yet the man could joke and laugh when he must have believed that he was leading a defenseless man to certain slaughter—to a fight in which Billy would be shot down without a chance for his life.

The cold rage that filled the young Circle J boss made him want to fly at Trigger Olsen and crash his fist into the fellow's broad face. But he controlled himself. It wouldn't do to lose his head now. There was too much at stake. He must keep a cool head.

His manner was careless as he walked along. His thumbs went to the pockets of his vest and hung there idly.

"I reckon I'll just see if my gun's workin'," he remarked.

His thumbs came out of the vest pockets. His right hand flipped the Colt out of its holster. He pretended to examine the mechanism. Then his hand covered the cylinder, and the six dud shells dropped into his

palm. Another skilled movement, and he slipped the six good shells into the chambers.

His eye swept the walls of the gulch, as he put the Colt back into his holster again. He breathed more freely.

And then he caught sight of something that chilled him as would an icy wind. Just around the edge of a boulder that jutted out from the cliff on one side of the gorge, he saw the corner of a hat brim.

Devil Tripp was playing his usual treacherous game. Not content with giving his enemy a gun loaded with useless cartridges, he was making sure of killing him by posting armed marksmen to shoot him down from cover, in case his own aim failed.

Billy gritted his teeth. He'd go down fighting, he told himself. But there was one thing he would try to do—that was to take Devil Tripp with him. Billy had one ace in his hand—an ace that Devil knew nothing about.

At the far end of the gulch was a small stone fort. Billy's eyes examined it curiously. As he looked, a yellow handkerchief fluttered at one of the small loopholes.

"That's Devil's signal that he's ready," Trigger Olsen said, pulling a whistle from his pocket and putting it to his lips. "Now, remember the rules. At the first signal, you start walking forward; at the second whistle, you start shootin'."

Whee-ing! The whistle sent forth its shrill blast.

Billy took a step forward.

At the same instant, a doorway in the fort opened, and a tall figure in black broadcloth, and wearing a wide-brimmed black hat stepped out, gun in hand.

"Dere's Devil now," Trigger Olsen told Billy. "Get goin'!"

The Circle J boss had left his Colt

in its holster, but seeing Devil Tripp with his weapon out, he drew and advanced, holding the .45 ready for action.

Billy counted his paces. One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine—ten!

Whee-ing! Again that shrill whistle blast.

Boom! Bang - bang - bang - bang! Both guns roared, the echoes thundering up and down the narrow walls of the gulch.

Billy felt a slug whistle past his ear. Another tore the shoulder of his shirt. Two of his bullets had missed. He steadied his aim. Now he was perfectly cool.

His third bullet hit its mark! He saw the tall figure in black spin around, the smoking gun dropping from his hand. Then the stricken man clutched his chest, toppled backward and lay still.

Billy had used three of his shells to finish his enemy. There were three left—and there were other enemies hidden behind that rampart of rock, ready to shoot him down like a rabid coyote.

There seemed just one hope of escape from the ambushed outlaws and from Trigger Olsen and his shotgun guards.

The idea flashed into Billy's mind suddenly, and he acted on it at once. He gave a sudden forward leap, crouching low, and ran at top speed for the little stone fort ahead of him. The chances were that nobody was in it—and that extra guns and a large supply of fresh shells were to be found there.

Billy zigzagged as he ran. It was well that he did so, for the outlaws on the cliff wall sensed his trick and opened fire at once.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! Guns now roared, and lead began to kick up the dust around Billy's flying feet.

But he offered a difficult target in the uncertain gray dawn light, as he ran swiftly, twisting this way and that with every leap.

He reached the fort and flung himself against the low wooden door. It opened before the force of his attack. Bending low, he crawled inside. Light filtered into the place only through this door and another at the rear, and through the narrow slits of loopholes.

A swift glance around the place failed to show any fresh supply of ammunition for his gun.

Bullets were thudding against the door of the fort. Billy thought quickly. A peep through one of the loopholes showed him that half a dozen of Devil Tripp's men were racing down from their hiding place on the cliff wall, and they were shooting as they came.

To stay where he was meant to be cornered and surrounded, starved into surrender.

Billy darted out through the rear door of the little fort.

Bending low, he raced for a group of boulders about thirty yards away. Hiding behind one of these, he turned and watched the outlaws. They had stopped at the fort and were surrounding it.

Then Billy caught sight of something else that made his heart jump. Racing as fast as their bowed legs could carry them through the narrow gulch, came two familiar figures.

Joe Scott was in the lead, hatless, his red hair standing on end with excitement.

A couple of feet behind him, laboring bravely to keep up with Joe's pace, came Buck Foster, his mustache ends fluttering in the breeze. He held a pair of six-guns in his hands, and he was shouting for all he was worth.

Billy, watching his two saddle pards coming on the scene, saw that here was a chance to surprise the enemy.

He leaped out from under cover as Buck and Joe got closer to the outlaws. He, too, raised his voice in a loud shout.

"Hands up, yuh polecats!" he yelled. "We got yuh from both sides. Stick 'em up!"

Devil Tripp's gunmen whirled in surprise. They looked first in the direction of Billy's voice. Then they caught sight of Buck Foster and Joe Scott.

Some of them started to put up a fight. But lead began to pour into their ranks with deadly effect. Two of them dropped, drilled by slugs from Billy's gun as they tried to bring their own Colts into play to shoot him down.

A bullet from Joe Scott's .45 downed another ruffian. This left three, and the odds were even—three against three. But even odds never appealed to Devil Tripp's gun-slingers. They preferred longer odds in their own favor.

Slowly the three remaining outlaws raised their hands in surrender. Circle J had won the fight.

Joe Scott promptly took the prisoners' guns. Then he turned to Billy.

"What'll I do with this here bunch o' skunks, Billy?" he asked. "Tie 'em up?"

"We can't bother with prisoners just now, Joe," Billy told the red-head. "Turn 'em loose. We'll have to go back to the ranch and git a posse to clean up this hornets' nest. Their leader's dead; so they won't be hard to break up."

Joe raised his foot and booted the three prisoners violently. "Git out o' here, yuh low-down varmints!" he ordered in a loud tone. "And if I

find yore ugly faces here when I git back, I'll salivate yuh!"

The three whipped gunmen slunk away.

But Buck Foster was all curiosity over Billy's speech. "Yuh say the leader o' them polecats is killed!" he said in a tone of wonder. "Yuh mean Devil Tripp?"

Billy pointed to the still form in the long black coat, lying about twenty yards away. The black hat had fallen over the face; the hands still clutched at the chest in a grip that had gone rigid in death.

"There's Devil!" he said, and explained how he had been drawn into the duel with his enemy.

Buck hurried over to the body. Joe Scott ran beside him. Billy followed more slowly.

The redhead stooped and picked up the black hat, uncovering the features of the corpse. A gasp of surprise escaped him. Buck Foster, too, let out an exclamation:

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!"

Billy quickened his pace until he stood beside his saddle pards, gazing down at the rigid features.

Then he, also, gave a cry of amazement.

For the face he was looking at was that of a young man, with regular, handsome features and a small, waxed mustache. The eyes that stared blankly at the sky were small; in life, they might have been snaky in expression. Even in death, the lips were drawn back in a snarl, showing even, white teeth.

Buck Foster and Joe Scott recognized the dead man at the same instant.

"The shadow rider!" they both exclaimed.

"Yeah," Buck added. "The jasper that run away from a fight with me in Twin Rivers."

"The gent that made yore draw

look like a prairie schooner," Joe Scott reminded the veteran.

Billy West looked down at the long black coat and at the black hat which lay beside the body. He started to try to figure out why Devil Tripp had sent this gunman to fight the duel in his place, when the result of that duel seemed such a sure thing.

Had Devil been too yellow to face Billy West, even when he knew that the latter's gun was loaded with dud cartridges? Or had Devil learned of Sandy McPherson's treachery in time and persuaded Silk Newman to face Billy West's supposed harmless gun?

Was there some enmity between Devil and this shadow rider? Was this another of Devil Tripp's fiendish ways of taking revenge on those who showed defiance of his authority? Or was it——

A sudden clatter of hoofbeats awoke the echoes in Mustang Pass. All three punchers whirled. They caught a glimpse of a black horse, ridden hard by a man whom they recognized at once as their enemy, Devil Tripp.

He was coatless and hatless. His hawkish nose and arched brows and grizzled goatee could be plainly seen. And he was burning leather through Mustang Pass, heading over the ridge into Idaho.

The three Circle J saddle pards followed. But they had to turn down to the other end of the pass to find their horses, which they had hidden among the boulders the night before.

They got their mounts and rode through the pass, but Devil Tripp was nowhere in sight.

They came to the cabin, with its bullet-scarred log walls. All Devil's men had joined their leader in flight. Both this cabin and the other one

farther back in the pass were deserted.

They found Sing Lo where he had been left by the outlaws—bound hand and foot and lying on a bench in the first cabin.

They cut him free and set him on his feet. He stood blinking and gulping, tottering on unsteady legs.

Buck Foster shook a gnarled finger under Sing Lo's nose.

"Listen, yuh heathen!" he said in a tone of great seriousness. "If I ever hear of you goin' out and gettin' cockeyed with a cockeyed hombre ag'in, I'll flay yuh alive and nail yore hide on the corral poles at Circle J. So help me, Hannah, I'll bust——"

Billy West and Joe Scott did not wait to hear the rest of Buck's threats. They went outside, leaving the pair together.

"Look, Billy," Joe said, pointing to a rough board set upright over a mound of freshly turned earth. "What do yuh make of that?"

"Let's take a look-see," Billy suggested.

They walked over to the spot. From a distance, it looked like a newly made grave.

But as they got close, their eyes widened with horror at what they saw. For behind the upright board which marked the grave of his pal, Bruiser Maloy, the lean body of little Sandy McPherson lay stretched out, a bullet hole squarely between his squinting eyes.

Billy West looked down at the ugly face, now strangely peaceful in death. The whole business was plain to Billy now. In some way, Devil Tripp had found out that

Sandy McPherson had slipped the Circle J boss a handful of good cartridges for his gun.

There must have been some feud between Devil and the shadow rider. And this was the way Devil had paid off both the traitorous Sandy and his rebellious gunman.

Billy shuddered at the fiendish cunning of the rustler chief, as he gazed at the still body of the little traitor.

"Yuh double-crossed Circle J," he murmured, as if talking to the dead man; "and yuh double-crossed Devil Tripp and yore own gang. But yuh shore did me a good turn. If it wasn't fer yuh, this plan of Devil's would 'a' worked out fine—fer him!"

"Devil must 'a' got wise to him slippin' yuh them shells," Joe said.

"It looks that way," Billy agreed. "An' he's paid the price of his treachery. But just the same, I'm kind o' sorry fer him. He tried to make up fer double-crossin' me. Devil said he was handin' out a square deal this time. But I reckon this is about as close to a square deal as he ever gave any one."

And then the three saddle pards found shovels and buried little Sandy McPherson beside his pal, big Bruiser Maloy.

Thet Devil Tripp hombre shore seems ter have a charmed life—allus manages ter git away, after one o' his ccwardly plays against Circle J. But some day the saddle pards will git him right where they want him. An' when thet day comes, Devil Tripp will find thet he's come ter the end of his rope, which same will be danglin' from a high, strong limb of a cottonwood tree. Watch fer the next adventure o' Billy West an' his pards in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

The Valley Of Gold

THE "Valley of Gold," in the wilderness of Alaska, gained its fame when that vast territory was occupied by the Russians. Ever since then, it has been the rainbow dream of gold-hunting prospectors, many of whom have lost their lives in the search for it.

Indians were the first to excite curiosity about the valley, when they brought great nuggets into the trading post at Sitka and sold them to the Russians. They spent their money freely and boasted of having an unlimited supply of the precious metal in the land where they came from.

After securing trinkets and provisions in exchange for the nuggets they would return to their valley. Some time later, they would return with more gold.

Tales of fabulous wealth reached the ears of the czar, who ordered that a thorough search be made for the source of the gold. The Indians were trailed by scouts on their return trips, but their tracks were always lost. Finally, however, it was reported that the Indians traveled up the Stikine River in canoes.

A detachment of Russian soldiers was detailed to search the headwaters of the Stikine, but they never returned. It was believed that they were ambushed and killed by the Indians, because the redskins did not show up again at the Sitka post, evidently being fearful of the white man's revenge. As time passed, and the Russians left Alaska, the memory of the famous valley faded, and it was gradually forgotten.

In 1898, a group of Indians came to the trading post on Wrangell

Island, with pouches full of gold nuggets. Tales of the mysterious Valley of Gold spread again, and on another trip the Indians were followed.

One white man learned the secret of the treasure valley's location and went there alone. He returned with a rich store of gold and organized an expedition to return and make an extensive search of the whole valley.

He set out with his party in high hopes of gaining possession of the whole valley and obtaining untold riches. But his party suffered the same fate as the Russian soldiers—they were never seen or heard of again.

Last summer, while in Alaska, Ansel Eckmann, of Seattle, was given a rough sketch by an aged Indian, who said it was a map of the famous Valley of Gold, with directions for reaching it. Eckmann lost no time in getting together a camping outfit and making a start by airplane.

He followed the Stikine many miles inland. He turned south and followed the river between towering cliffs until he reached a lake, which would have to be entered over the ice in winter. He believes he has found the lake where the wonderful valley lies, and another and more scientific flying expedition will be made there.

If they fail to find the gold a party may be landed on the lake during the winter and continue their search in the following spring. That gold exists there in large quantities is certain, and if the old Indian's plan is really that of the Valley of Gold, it is pretty certain that the American adventurers will find it.



Rustlers on the Hoof

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Texans Never Quit," etc.

BLAZE" MASON stood in the darkness beside a stack of green railroad ties in the yards at Rainbow. He was watching a long string of empties bang to a stop on the main line near by.

"It can't get any worse; so by the law o' averages, I'm due for an upward swing, an' a dizzy one at that."

Blaze was referring to his luck. Nearly broke, he had arrived in Rainbow only that afternoon, hopefully aiming to resume his regular occupation of cow-punching, if he could find a job. The baggage car on a local had furnished him transportation, but he had found no pot of gold in Rainbow. Neither had he found anything resembling a welcome.

Rainbow, in the person of its peace officer, had looked him over

as he meandered past the town jail, which was just across the way from the depot, and then had firmly given him twelve hours to drift. Blaze soon discovered that the officer had the solid backing of the town in that inhospitable attitude.

He was met with a stone wall of cold restraint and suspicion everywhere. Rainbow had something sticking in its craw, and Blaze had finally decided to drift. Such hostility was unnatural in a cow town, and it meant only one thing to any one who tried to buck it—trouble. And Blaze had spent most of his life trying to dodge trouble, though without much success.

But Blaze was wrong. His bad luck had not yet run out. With a final grating of brake shoes, the freight train came to rest. Blaze

had his eyes on a gondola, well equipped with rods. Two lengths of scantling were close at hand, ready to be tossed onto the rods as a bed for Blaze's seventy-two inches of bone and muscle, as soon as the train resumed its way westward.

But the tang of burning grease came to his nostrils, and he saw the red glow of fire in the wheelbox of a box car just ahead of the gondola. A hotbox had developed into life.

Blaze grumbled. That meant more delay. He heard a man swear down the line and knew that one of the "shacks" had seen the glare.

Brogans began grinding on the gravel, and a second and deeper voice joined in the swearing. Blaze tried to shrink farther back against the ties, for the glare of the burning waste threatened to reveal him.

"If I don't make this rattler, I'll be in the jug come daybreak," he groaned. "Maybe them cinder-eaters will have a heart."

The two "cinder-eaters" had arrived at the point of the trouble, voicing their innermost thoughts.

"It had tuh be *this* one," one of them complained. "Them critters will start bawlin' their heads off any minute, if—"

"Shut up, yuh numskull," the deeper voice quelled him.

"Aw there's nobody around here," the first whined.

"Pry her open, while I take a look around," the second ordered.

Before Blaze could formulate a plan to avoid discovery, the first brakeman had snapped open the door of the greasebox, and a five-foot tongue of fire licked out, lighting the scene for rods around.

It exposed Blaze as if a spotlight had been turned upon him. He straightened up warily, as the one of the deep voice saw him, and began advancing slowly toward him.

As the shack came to within arm's length, Blaze realized that he was up against a big, tough hombre. Muscularly big, he was—wide and heavy of shoulder, thick-necked, bullet-headed.

"Git out o' here, you dirty bum," the beefy shack rumbled, peering into Blaze's face. "Git goin'. Run!"

Blaze was red-headed, and he was no weakling. There had been times in the past when he had run from odds that were topheavy against him, and he probably would do so in the future. But one cinder-eater, no matter how broad of beam, did not tally as odds in Blaze's opinion.

"When yuh speak tuh me, say please," Blaze remarked pleasantly, releasing his grip on his blanket roll, and settling himself on his toes.

"I'll gave your skull in," the shack promised him balefully. "Git goin'!"

At that moment a mournful sound caused Blaze to turn his head in surprise. That sound was the bawl of a steer, and unless Blaze was badly mistaken, the steer was inside one of those supposedly empty box cars near by—probably the one that had developed the hot axle.

"Blast it!" the big shack gritted.

Blaze whirled to meet him, warned by the new, fierce note in his voice.

The shack had settled himself, and one malletlike fist was whizzing up from his knees. Blaze faded his jaw away from it, as it whistled past. Then the redhead stepped in, his own right driving flush to the heart, a short, jolting wallop behind which he had put all his weight.

The big man's breath gushed from him in one, sighing wheeze, and he staggered back, his muscles going suddenly flabby. Blaze, humanely, did not follow up, for the shack's hands had dropped to his sides.

"Git 'im, Denny," the big man

gasped. At the same time he was fumbling in his hip pocket.

Blaze instantly crouched slightly, his own hand speeding to his side. But he had forgotten that his gun was not there. It was wrapped in his blanket roll, for the sake of security while riding the rods.

The big man did not have a gun either. Instead, he produced an object that Blaze recognized with a chill—a sock, half-filled with sand, a formidable weapon in a hand-to-hand fight. Blaze launched himself forward in a long spring, hoping to overwhelm the big trainman before he could bring the sandbag into play.

But Blaze had overlooked the other shack. That hombre had already flanked him, and now he was upon Blaze from behind. Blaze found his arms pinned to his sides, just as the big man in front of him swung the sandbag in a vicious circle over his head.

Wham! The scene exploded before Blaze's eyes in a burst of blinding lights.

He slumped down, consciousness slipping away from him. As he passed out, the bawl of a steer again came drifting dreamily to him, as if from a great distance. Then blankness.

II.

"I thought yuh understood me last evenin', when I told yuh tuh best the breeze before mornin'?"

"I done my best." Blaze tried to grin.

He was addressing a lank, weather-beaten old-timer, whose black vest was adorned with the shield of a deputy sheriff. Blaze lay on a hard bunk, and the barred windows about him told him that he was in the Rainbow jail, evidently a hospital patient.

"What happened?" the lanky man asked. This was old Bill Lord, who was both town marshal and deputy sheriff of Rainbow. "Somebody found yuh layin' down in the railroad yards at daybreak this mornin', so I carted yuh up here. The sawbones allowed that yore skull was thick enough tuh save yuh from anything serious."

"I had an argument with a gent," Blaze said cautiously.

"That's mighty plain," the deputy grunted. "I reckon yuh tried tuh haze a ride on Skee Hammond's train. There's been others what have done the same thing. Skee is right hard on bu—on nonpayin' passengers."

"Thanks for not callin' me a bum," Blaze said. "I reckon that I'm due tuh be yore guest for thirty days or so, eh?"

"I'll give yuh another chance," the deputy offered. "But don't pick on another freight that Skee Hammond is workin' on."

"Where does this Hammond gent make his headquarters?"

"Down at Rio Blanco, the division point for this run," the deputy informed him. "Yuh ain't figurin' on interviewin' Skee, are yuh? Better not. He's right salty."

"Why are yuh so anxious tuh ship me out o' here?" Blaze wanted to know. "Any town with civic pride should welcome an addition tuh the population. Instead, I'm given a road brand before I get my feet on the ground. Ain't there any ranches in this valley that needs a cow-crammer? I'm busted, but I'm ready tuh sign up with anybody that will fork out fifty a month an' found."

"There's nothin' open around Rainbow right now," the officer said cautiously. "An' I reckon yuh better drift, for there's plenty o' rea-

sons for not wantin' any strangers around——"

The deputy did not finish, because the thud of boot heels sounded in the front office, and he left to meet the visitor. He failed to close the door serving the cell room, and Blaze could hear the conversation that ensued.

"Howdy, Al," the deputy was saying. "How's——"

"Blast it, Bill," the visitor snorted. "I've lost twenty more head-blooded stuff this time. Ain't this rustlin' never goin' tuh be stopped? What are yuh doin' tuh ketch 'em?"

"When?" the deputy snapped.

"Last night, or maybe night before," Al's voice boomed. "We trailed 'em tuh the lava beds, near the railroad, an' lost 'em there, as usual."

"I'll drag out there an' try tuh pick up some sign," the deputy offered, but Blaze read the note of hopelessness in his voice.

The cattleman visitor confirmed this emphatically.

"Sign?" he snorted. "Do yuh think yore eyes are better than all my riders put tuhgether? There ain't no sign. We circled the lava beds, an' if a steer stepped off, it sure didn't make no impression. I'm tellin' yuh, Bill, these rustlers must put wings on 'em."

"This has been goin' on for two years, an' it's runnin' intuh big money now. I've lost five hundred head, an' the Double B as many more. A thousand steers gone in little driblets at a time, an' not a blasted clew. An' now they're so cocky that they've started snatchin' my prize stuff, what I was fattenin' for the Los Angeles show this winter."

Blaze sat up suddenly, mastering the dizziness. His boots and clothes were beside his bunk, and he began

shoving his big frame into them. He tapped his blanket roll, but his gun was missing.

"By thunder, I'll tilt my end o' the reward money tuh fifteen hundred," Al was shouting furiously. "That'll total twenty-five hundred in all. Some of them rustlers ought tuh weaken, an' go for that. It's the only way we'll ever ketch 'em."

"It's a good idea," the deputy agreed. "I'm admittin' that I'm stumped. I've rode this valley until every time I see a horse I get sick at my stomach."

"Am I eligible for that reward?" a voice interrupted.

The two men whirled to stare at Blaze's tall figure. Blaze, still a trifle unsteady, stood there swaying, his head bandaged, and his jaws bristling with red whiskers, all in all not an impressive figure. But his blue eyes were steady and level, and Al Zimmerman, the rancher, noted that fact.

"Who the deuce are you?" he grunted.

"He's a chuck liner what came in yesterday on the rods," the deputy explained. "I gave him the Injun sign, but he had a ruckus with a train crew—Skee Hammond's I reckon—an' got his skull dented."

"Yo're a puncher, I take it?" Zimmerman inquired, noting Blaze's high-heeled boots, big hat, and range atmosphere. "Then what was yuh doin' ridin' around on freight trains?"

"It was better than walkin'." Blaze briefly went over his story of the hard luck that had set him afoot and almost penniless. Then: "How about that reward?" he asked.

"Shore, yo're eligible," Zimmerman said, casting a significant glance toward the deputy.

"Tuh collect, I might have need o' my gun," Blaze suggested.

Bill Lord, at a nod from Zimmerman, who in appearance, and fact, was the wealthiest and most important resident of Rainbow Valley, produced Blaze's belt and gun from the safe.

"Here she be," the deputy said. "But don't make no mistake about this. We're not keen about strangers. You know why."

"How far tuh Rio Blanco?" Blaze inquired blandly.

"Hun' red an' forty miles," Zimmerman put in.

"Reckon I'll be stretchin' out," Blaze declared, departing.

"Steer clear o' Skee Hammond," Lord called with a grin.

Zimmerman lighted a cigar, after Blaze had left.

"He don't look like a gent what would double-cross his pals," he observed doubtfully.

"If he was a rustler, what would be his object in driftin' intuh town?"

"Maybe tuh git an earful as to what yuh ain't doin' tuh ketch 'em," Zimmerman shot back.

III.

Blaze hovered in concealment among the pilings of a coal chute in the Rio Blanco railroad yards. It was dusk, and the switch lights gleamed like cold jewels among the maze of tracks. Two battered engines were thudding up and down, noisily banging together a long string of empties. Rio Blanco was the classification yard for the entire Southwestern division.

"I'm maybe takin' a cold ride for nothin'," Blaze reflected. "But then a gent can't pick up twenty-five hundred cart wheels without doin' a little work for it. Besides, I hanker tuh meet Skee Hammond once more. I won't let anybody get behind me the next time."

WW-8F

Truth to tell, Blaze was more interested in meeting "Skee" Hammond, than he was in collecting the reward. But even a dullard could have added two and two in this case. Blaze had heard the bellow of a steer issuing from a supposedly empty box car. And then he had learned that Rainbow Valley was being drained of range stock by rustlers who seemed to spirit beef on the hoof away into thin air.

"I hope my luck changes," Blaze thought, as he slapped his holster.

The night, west-bound freight was soon ready, and now a big locomotive came steaming down the yards from the roundhouse, with its crew riding the tender like buzzards on a limb.

Blaze grinned as he identified one broad-shouldered figure on the tender. The information he had gleaned at the yard office had been correct. Skee Hammond was on this run again.

Couplings banged, air hissed through the train, and the night freight was complete. The crew dropped from the engine and began moving down the line, making a survey of the yard gang's hook-up.

Blaze watched with interest as Skee Hammond came nearer. Hammond was accompanied by a smaller man that Blaze identified as Denny, the second of the pair that had sent him to wa-wa land back there in Rainbow some seventy-two hours previously.

"Here's one that'll do, Skee," Denny suddenly exclaimed, rapping the side of a battered box car.

"S-sh!" came Hammond's furious warning. "Keep your trap shut! Where's them planks?"

"Hid under the coal chute, o' course," Denny snapped.

They turned and headed for the chute, directly toward Blaze.

Blaze had luck this time. Perhaps the luck was on the other side, for the redhead was more than ready for battle, if it came to that. At any rate, the two shacks did not discover him, as they paused about not five feet away, and then departed, lugging a stack of heavy planks. Blaze breathed easier.

A grunt, a squeak of a car door, and the grating of the planks being shoved in. Then the door closed, and the pair went on.

"That clinches it," Blaze grinned. "They're providin' themselves with a loadin' chute. This is goin' tuh be easy."

It did not seem so easy as the freight steamed out of the yards, picking up speed. Blaze occupied the rods beneath a gondola, as usual, being only a car or two away from the one the shacks had opened. Blaze had not allowed himself the comfort of a plank bed this time, and he groaned as the train began to jostle him on the steel rods.

Blaze ignored the knowledge that he faced heavy odds. The entire train and engine crew probably were in on this deal. And then, too, there must be a range crew of riders to bring in the stock. And somewhere there was a distributing organization.

"Reckon I can't sack up the whole outfit at one sweep," Blaze muttered, trying to roll a cigarette and failing.

The thing was not easy—not by a whoop and a squal, as Blaze was forced to admit some two hours later.

The freight rolled into a siding somewhere out on the desert below the climb to Rainbow Valley. Somewhere, miles away, Blaze heard the mournful wail of a passenger whistle, and he settled down for a nap.

He had barely dozed, when he was

snapped back to full, rigid wakefulness. The pound of feet on gravel came to him from up ahead. A light cut through the darkness between the cars there. Overhead he heard the thump of heavy feet on the gondola floor.

"Find anything?" Skee Hammond's voice came rumbling to him.

The man above replied briefly in the negative. The feet approached nearer the car under which Blaze roosted. The beam of a bull's-eye lantern played on the bumpers and rods of the car ahead.

Blaze coiled his body and lowered himself silently between the rods to the hard roadbed, berating his carelessness. He might have reasoned that they would go over the train with a fine-toothed comb. They could not afford to have any witnesses to their rustling.

Hammond was so near, and the night was so still, that Blaze knew any movement on the gravel would betray him. So he reached up, as he lay flat on his back, grasped the rods above, lifted his body clear, like a bar performer, and swung ahead hand over hand, working his way to the end of the rods, and then dropping silently into the shadow of the forward trucks. He wormed in beside the brake beam and drew up his knees.

The light swept the rods a few seconds later, reaching almost to his huddled form, and then vanishing.

More steps crunched up from ahead.

"Ketch anybody?" Hammond asked, the arrival evidently being the third member of the freight crew.

"Nary a sign of a 'bo," chuckled the other.

"They're learnin' not to ride my trains," Hammond boasted.

A white light began to etch out

the rails of the main line near by, and the steel hummed softly.

"Here she comes," Hammond said. "We don't wait for nothin' else to-night. Give 'im the high-ball."

Blaze saw the reflection of a swaying lantern, and from ahead came the answering toot of the whistle. The roar of the oncoming express train grew to a shrill thunder, then it was smashing past.

Blaze heard the oncoming wave of movement as the freight engine began jerking its outdrag. He was in a tough spot, for Skee Hammond still stood beside his car, evidently watchful that no hobos dashed out of the darkness at the last minute.

Blaze did not relish lying there while the train pulled out above his body, for brake beams have a habit of raking the life out of a man. With a clang, the car above him jerked, leaped forward five feet, and settled back stubbornly. Blaze could hear the second and stronger wave of motion traveling down the line. The rods were above him once more, so he grasped them and raised his body.

The jerk nearly dislodged him, but he clung on as the car groaned into reluctant motion. Hammond's legs disappeared astern, and Blaze pulled himself up on the rods, panting, but safe.

IV.

He rode without alarm for another weary two hours during which the drag snaked up the long grade, topped the crest, and began the slide down the long grade toward the center of Rainbow Valley.

Blaze came alive and alert now. He expected action soon. But before it came, he began to despair. Another hour of rumbling passage went by, and he judged they could

be only some ten miles from the town of Rainbow, and that dawn was only an hour away.

Then, with a crash, the cars folded against the couplings, as the engineer shot on the brakes and sand. Blaze was nearly rolled from his perch by the unexpected move. He slipped partly through, before his outthrust arms found support. He drew himself back from the peril of those wide-shod steel wheels, slapped at his gun, found it still in his holster, and grinned.

With a shudder, the train came to a stop. Blaze looked out. Not far to the left, a flashlight winked from the darkness.

A signal! The light vanished. Then Blaze heard the thud of hoofs, and the creak of leather. Against the sky line appeared riders—one—two—three of them. And then the blocky heads of horned critters, snorting and protesting.

"All set," a voice called—Skee Hammond's voice.

Blaze heard the trainmen on the gravel again. A car door whined on dusty tracks as it was twirled open. Planks were being placed.

"One at a time. One at a time," one of the riders bawled, and there was the twang of the range in his voice. "There's only twenty of 'em. One at a time, an' we won't lose any."

A steer bawled. There was a pound of hoofs, oaths from anxious, nervous men, the snap of rope ends on hairy hides. Cloven hoofs tore into the gravel, and then rumbled on the planks. A moment of floundering and the grunts of pushing men, and Blaze heard the hollow tread of hoofs on a box-car floor. The first rustled steer had been loaded. Another was already being hazed at a dead run up to the crude gangplank.

Blaze crept from beneath the car, dropped on his stomach beside the rails and endeavored to lay out a plan of action. It was not easy, he admitted again, this thing of rounding up some half dozen armed and desperate men.

A third and fourth steer were poured into the car. Blaze finally crept through to the opposite side of the train, and then advancing at a run a dozen cars ahead, jerked loose the coupling pin between two reefers. Then he crept back.

The loading was completed with speed and efficiency that told of long practice, for it is quite a trick to force range steers up a steep gangway without the aid of a wing chute.

With equal speed the door was closed and the pin dropped home. Then lanterns began their code to the engineer. A hiss of steam, a blast from the stack, and the locomotive threw itself into the harness. The crash of cars came rolling down the line again.

Blaze stood beside the train, on the opposite side from the rustlers, wondering what would happen. He did not know much about the mechanical operation of a coupling pin. His hopes were realized. Somewhere ahead there was a jar, a hiss of air, and the train parted.

Explosive sounds came from Skee Hammond and his companions. The shacks all began footing it down to the scene of the trouble. The locomotive, bearing some dozen cars, had disappeared into the darkness ahead, but Blaze soon heard it roar into reverse.

Blaze had succeeded in separating the rustling outfit, so he squirmed beneath a car and peered out. He made out the outline of three cowponies near the tracks, and saw the glow of a cigarette.

The three range members of the

outfit were waiting there, evidently disturbed by the mishap to the train and probably alert.

Blaze arose boldly and began crunching through the gravel. His boldness succeeded. He walked right up to them.

"That you, Denny?" one asked. "What the heck's wrong? Say, where's yore lantern. What's—"

"Here's my lantern," Blaze said in a low voice that bit like the teeth of a saw. "It's got six lights, an' each one of 'em is plenty hot. Stick 'em up, all o' yuh."

Two of them complied, after an instant of shocked silence, but the third, a lean, tall-hatted individual, made a stab for his gun. Blaze did not dare shoot. Hammond and his trainmen were too near.

Instead, with a quick flip of his hand he brought the long barrel of his .45 down on the lean rider's forehead. The victim's weapon had not cleared the holster. He reeled back, sat down heavily, and then keeled over on his back.

The remaining two quivered, then froze, for Blaze's gun was upon them again. Blaze, stooping low, disarmed all three.

"Pick him up," Blaze whispered. "Not a sound, or I'll begin blastin'. Pick him up, I say."

Bearing their stunned comrade, they were prodded toward the train. Blaze could hear the grind of car axles and see the slow wheel of a lantern directing the recoupling.

They reached a box car, and Blaze flipped open the hasp. A shock ran through the cars as the hook-up ahead was made, and under the cover of the rumble, Blaze shot the door open two feet.

"Pile in," he said. "Lift yore friend in first. An' if any of yuh open yore faces, I'll begin slingin' lead through the sides o' the car."

They did as directed, and Blaze dropped the pin in the hasp, dove under the car and made sure that the opposite door was secured. Then he looked about. There was a delay in starting, and he heard the trainmen hurrying back down the opposite side of the track.

Blaze had forgotten the three cowponies. A moment later, Hammond and his comrades found them.

"Where'd them crazy cow-crammers go?" Denny's voice said querulously.

"Shut up," Hammond silenced him. "There's somethin' haywire here. I knew that train didn't bust apart just of its own free will. I'm bettin' a thin dime——"

Here Hammond lowered his voice, and Blaze could only imagine what was said. But he knew that Skee Hammond had grown more than suspicious. The big shack was convinced that something or some one was working against them.

"Well, let's highball," Hammond said, suddenly raising his voice. "I reckon the boys are jest scoutin' around."

But Blaze had a hunch that the words were for the benefit of any eavesdropper. The lanterns swung again, and the train started. With the first jerk, Blaze acted. The thunder of the banging wheels covered any sounds he made as he ran alongside the slowly moving cars, jerking open the doors on grease boxes.

Into each box he tossed a fistful of gravel. A dozen treatments of that kind he made, and then the train began rolling too fast for him to continue. So he swung aboard between two box cars, not far ahead of the caboose.

He scaled the ladder and peered down the swaying line. The occasional red glow from the firebox of

the locomotive flared into the dark sky, and against it the figures of the three members of the train crew were outlined up ahead.

Blaze, after a minute's observation, realized that Hammond was leading a new and quiet search of the train. The shacks were swinging bull's-eye lanterns down between all the cars. And they were only a dozen cars away, and approaching steadily.

There was no escape for Blaze. To try to move along the tops of the cars meant sure discovery. To remain, meant that he would be shot like a coyote in a trap.

V.

Blaze unlimbered his .45. He had been stumbling along blindly, and thus far he had been fortunate. He was still gambling that the upward swing of his luck would continue.

He saw the three gather on one car roof, and creep to the edge. Denny was lowered over the edge by his legs, and a moment later new heads began to appear on the roof. They had found the imprisoned punchers, evidently warned by shouts.

"Six to one, now," Blaze counted, for even the lean rustler seemed to have recovered. There was one consolation. The three riders had no hardware. But on the other hand, they had informed Hammond that only one man opposed them.

The six, with redoubled energy, began approaching again. Now they were only two car lengths away. Then they were advancing to peer down into the next gap in the drag.

Blaze decided that they had come close enough. He elevated his gun, and thumbed the hammer once. A

lance of red fingered up into the sky, and the gun gave tongue hollowly above the rumble of the train, which was doing forty miles an hour down the grade.

Blaze pulled his head down, just as three guns bellowed the overture to the return volley. Slugs began plowing splinters from the gangway on the car top. One glanced off the iron brake wheel above Blaze's head and another chipped the very lip of the ladder.

"What'll they do now?" he asked himself as more shots poured above him. He knew they wouldn't rush him. That would be suicide, because he could pick them off like bottles on a fence.

He soon learned. With a screech of brakes, the train once more began booming to an emergency stop. For a moment Blaze was puzzled. Then as the drag came to a halt with the usual shudder, he heard, in the sudden silence, the feet of running men somewhere off the roadbed on either side.

With an imprecation, Blaze fairly fell down the ladder to the bumper bars. From there he dived to the roadbed and rolled into the shelter of the trucks. And as he vanished, bullets began to storm between the cars. Two of his opponents had tried to flank him, and had come within an ace of succeeding.

Blaze peered between the wheels, caught the flash of a gun twenty yards to his right, and sent a bullet toward it. He heard a man cry out, and the gun spoke no more.

"One of 'em down!" Blaze grunted. He had a hunch that he had accounted for Denny.

He began worming ahead, staying beneath the train. Feet pounded on the car tops, and soon he heard yells indicating that his escape from the first trap had been discovered.

After traveling a few car lengths, he made more speed, and finally, taking a chance, emerged alongside the train, and raced toward the locomotive. He was within a car's length of it, when a gun blared from the gangway.

The bullet snapped at his cheek like the fangs of a mad dog. Blaze dived to shelter beneath the box car, firing one quick shot at the cab.

He began rolling toward the opposite side, when a sudden blast of steam from the locomotive chilled him. He was only a few feet in front of the rear trucks of the freight car, in an awkward position.

The car gave a bound, for the engineer had given the driving wheels full forward power, in a deliberate attempt to crush the lone hombre beneath the train.

He came within a breath of succeeding. Blaze gave one mighty twist, and a lunge, and rolled over the opposite rail to safety, just as a steel wheel seized the heel of his left boot and smashed it.

"Close!" Blaze panted, rising to his feet and swinging aboard the moving train.

A bullet from the cab told him that the engineer or fireman had spotted him again. He breathlessly clambered to the top again, and peered around. The tender was just ahead, and he glimpsed a form, dressed in dungarees, standing on the heaped up coal, a rifle at his shoulder.

Spat! The steel bullet flipped the brim of Blaze's hat.

Blaze raised his gun and thumbed the hammer. The slug knocked the fireman down into the gangway.

"That's two," Blaze remarked, shoving in a fresh shell.

The shooting brought up Hammond and his followers.

"I'm shore earnin' that twenty-

five hundred," Blaze commented to the wide world as he waited. "What's next?"

The next thing was speed—and plenty of it. The affair had otherwise reached a stalemate. The train crew did not dare approach Blaze, and neither could he move out into the open. The engineer was busy at the throttle, and Blaze did not dare attempt to capture the locomotive by a rush, for the fireman might still be able to use a gun, and be lying in wait for him.

The train picked up alarming speed in less than a mile. Blaze was soon clinging to the ladder, considerably worried, for it seemed that the engineer had decided to ditch the entire outfit.

Another mile—sixty per they were going now. Faster—faster—faster! The gentle grade helped build up the speed with each passing rod.

"I reckon my heirs will get that reward," Blaze said uneasily.

He glanced ahead. The twinkle of switch lights gleamed far down the track, and sprawling on either side were a few dots of light. Rainbow! They were nearing the town at breakneck speed.

Blaze realized the rustlers' plan in a flash. They were going to highball right through Rainbow without a stop. Probably their running orders did not call for a stop there anyway.

And dawn was near. Once out on the open range beyond, with daylight in their favor, the train could be halted, and he would be hunted down with ease.

But that peril loomed less in Blaze's mind right now than the possible results of this terrific speed. A new and still more disturbing thought came to him—that gravel he had put in the grease boxes!

He made his way down to the

bounding bumpers, and swung out from the side of the car, chancing a fall.

Then he groaned. Two—three—now there were half a dozen of little flickering dots of red fire, glowing back along the line of the swaying train.

That gravel was doing its duty now, aided by the high speed.

"What'll that do to a train?" Blaze asked himself in dismay.

It was doing plenty. Axles were glowing white hot here and there, and beginning to freeze.

The engineer felt the drag of locked wheels behind him as he shot his train over the first switch in the Rainbow yards.

He shut off power at once. He knew what had happened—and what *would* happen, unless he checked that eighty-mile speed in a hurry.

But there was too much weight in motion. The train thundered on, brakes flashing sparks, the speed dropping down to a mile a minute, then to fifty, then to forty.

The little depot of Rainbow, dark at that hour, standing at the foot of Rainbow's wide and dusty business street, was swinging past, when the crack-up came.

A frozen axle snapped in two on one of the cars back there in the center of the long train.

There was a lurch and the rend of snapping steel. The car seemed to hump its back and go up in the air as its trucks left the rails.

Blaze felt his own car going, too, for the rails had been spread under the entire train, by the smash-up.

He leaped wildly, struck, rolled over and kept rolling, for shuddering, crashing destruction was taking place all about him.

Somehow it missed him. He was on his knees, trying to see through

choking dust, when the train plowed past at his left. Dimly he saw the depot flying into the air in fragments, and had a glimpse of a string of freight cars, charging through the flimsy wreckage like enraged elephants.

Across the street plunged the cars, one of them turning over on its side and plowing along, the others somehow remaining upright, although they were shedding their wheels.

Another crash, a blast of dust, and a rumble of smashed stone, and the cars came to a halt, with the leader halfway through the front of the Rainbow jail building.

Blaze arose and ran toward the wreckage. Behind him the engine lay on its side in the ditch, with the dazed engineer and wounded fireman clambering weakly out of the upended cab. Freight cars lay scattered over the landscape like toys.

A lanky, shirtless man, chattering frenziedly, emerged from the ruins of the jail office, and Blaze recognized Deputy Bill Lord.

Another figure appeared from the débris of the wrecked cars—a big, broad-shouldered, burly figure. Skee Hammond! Nothing could kill Hammond it seemed. He had survived the smash, and already was beginning to run for liberty.

"No you don't!" Blaze shouted, racing after him.

Hammond saw him, and threw up his arm. A gun flamed, and the

bullet nicked Blaze's ribs. But Hammond did not fire again, for Blaze was upon him like a tornado. One sweep of a hard fist, and the gun was knocked from Hammond's grasp.

"Sandbagged me, hey!" Blaze panted, as he stepped in, both fists swinging like sledges.

Sock! Smash! Sock! Three times he hit the man, the second and third driving home as Hammond was toppling, for the first blow had been a knock-out.

Then Hammond was down, and Deputy Bill Lord, still jabbering meaninglessly, seized Blaze's shoulders and peered into his face.

"You?" he howled. "Back again?"

"Sure," Blaze said, reaching for his tobacco. "Here's the active members o' the rustlin' outfit delivered on the hoof, right tuh the jail for yuh. I reckon some of 'em are still alive in addition tuh this Hammond gent.

"Back there along the track about ten miles you'll find another with a bullet in him. Down on the engine are two more. In one of these derailed cars are some stolen beef, what ain't hurt much, by the noise they're makin'. Do I get that reward?"

"Blast yuh!" the marshal snorted. "We ought tuh send yuh a bill, instead. Yuh didn't have tuh bust the whole danged town apart, just tuh deliver 'em, did yuh?"



Ranches Raided By Mexican Bandits

FOR some time, bandits from Mexico have been terrorizing American ranchers. Bands of these outlaws, mounted on fast horses, sneak across the border, swoop down on some lonely ranch or village, rob and murder, then ride back into the wild country of northern Mexico before posses can get organized and catch up with them.

Mexican authorities claim that they cannot control these raids because the crimes are all committed in the United States. American peace officers are blocked in their chase of the bandits, because of the border and international law, which prevents American forces from following escaping outlaws into Mexico.

As the bandits get a good start and have their guards watching to give the alarm in case of danger, they are generally well over the line before the American posses can reach it.

Dark moonless nights are chosen for the raids, which usually take place after a rancher has made a good sale, and the bandits are pretty sure that a large sum of money is in the house. They find out about the sales through their spies who operate on the American side of the border and keep in touch with the bandit gangs to the south.

Only a few months ago, the big dairy ranch of Melquiadez Espinosa, near Berino, New Mexico, was raided by three bandits, who gained entrance to the house by posing as New Mexico officials.

Once inside they drew guns, and demanded five thousand dollars in cash. Espinosa had sold a herd of cattle a short time before, and the raiders believed that he had the money hidden in the ranch house. All ten members of the Espinosa

family were present, and when the rancher declared that he had no money in the house, the bandits opened fire on them without word.

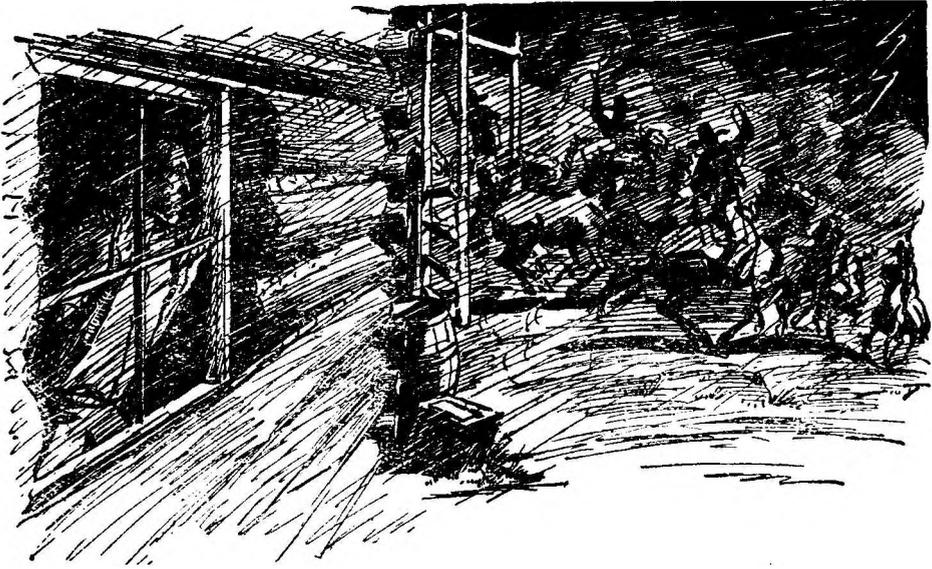
When they left, seven persons were dead. The rancher saved his life by lying still when he fell, after a bullet had grazed his head. His aged mother and his wife dropped to the floor when the firing began, and were saved by the bodies of their murdered relatives.

Señor Espinosa got in touch immediately with American authorities, and a searching party was formed. They took the trail of the bandits, but as was to be expected, it led to the international boundary, crossed it, and disappeared into the wilds of Mexico, where the Americans could not follow.

Only a week before the raid, Mayor Ravel, of Columbus, New Mexico, had appealed for protection against Mexican bandits, who were making life unsafe for Americans living within thirty miles or more of the border.

At Fort Bliss, at El Paso, 2,800 American soldiers are stationed under the command of General Short, who declared that all the troops could be moved to Columbus territory in a few hours, if they were needed. But the bandits come, kill, and vanish before an alarm can be given, and once over the border they are lost beyond any possibility of capture.

There seems to be no way by which the raiders can be successfully combated, even in these days of fast communication by radio and telephone, and fast transportation by airplane and automobile. The bandits strike and vanish in the dark, and without foreknowledge of their movements, the authorities are helpless.



Just A Dumb Cow Nurse

A "Lum Yates" Story

By Collins Hafford

Author of "The Sink Hole On North Fork," etc.

IN the teeth of a roaring storm, a half dozen bandanna-masked riders burst from the tangled sand dunes and charged down upon the Bar M corrals.

They counted upon the darkness of midnight, the crashing thunder, the driving rain, and the wailing wind to mask sound and sight of their coming. And they counted well—except for one thing.

"Sandy" McClure, the peppery old owner of the spread, and Benny Burnett, his foreman, were asleep up in the main house. The others, about five or six riders, slept just as soundly in the sprawling bunk house

fifty yards to the south. The corrals were another hundred yards farther south.

The raid of the rustlers would have been entirely successful, if Lum Yates, slim Missouri puncher, had not awakened suddenly and sat erect in his bunk.

For a moment, he was not sure what it was that had aroused him. He had a hazy recollection of some warning sound. A smile flicked across his face. Probably another of those nightmares that came to him occasionally.

He slumped as if to lie down again. But his back stiffened once

more. It had not been a dream, after all. That low growl from the far corner of the bunk house was real.

A gasp escaped Lum's throat. He slipped from his bunk, his bare feet thumping on the slab floor. Softly but insistently he called:

"Job! Job, feller! Come heah!"

The soft pad of feet came to his straining ears. Then a little form brushed his leg. He stooped, and his hand groped in the darkness. It found its mark—the head of a little dog.

Once more, the breath hissed from Lum's throat, for the hair stood bristling erect on the tiny animal's head. And its body fairly trembled with the ferocity of the growls.

"What's the matteh, Job? What yo' tryin' to tell me? Theah's dangeh, I know. Yo' ain't neveh fooled me in yore life. But wheah is it?"

Stiff-legged, Job took a few steps toward the door. Lum followed, still stooping to keep a guiding hand upon Job's head.

Then he stopped in his tracks, hissing Job to silence. He leaned forward, straining his ears for a repetition of the faint sound that reached him above the roar of the storm.

It came again in a split-second lull. It was the pound of racing hoofs. There could be no mistake. Such sounds were as familiar to him as the cry of a baby to its mother.

Nor was it the hoofbeats of a single horse. There must be at least twenty horses to make themselves heard through the storm.

Lum straightened swiftly. A half-fearful look spread across his face in the darkness. He raced for the window, the outline of which was just a shade lighter than the pitch blackness of the bunk house.

With his face pressed against the

glass, he strained his eyes out into the rain-swept darkness toward the corrals. Then came a brilliant flash of lightning.

In the brief fraction of a second, his eyes registered the image of a herd of horses headed from the corrals toward the sand dunes. He was almost sure, too, that he had made out the forms of two or three riders.

Once more, he waited. Another flash lighted up the scene. And this time he did not blink. One—two—three—four riders he counted, before blackness blotted them out.

He whirled to the interior of the bunk house. "Hi, Zeke! Billy! Sam!"

A series of grunts answered him. Then the pound of bare feet on the slab floor told him that one or two of the cowboys were awake, at least.

He raced toward the table in the corner where the oil lamp sat. And as he ran, he snapped out over his shoulder to the startled Bar M punchers:

"Somebody's runnin' off ouah remuda of saddle stock! Job woke me up, an' I saw 'em in a flash of light-nin'. Counted fo', but mebbe there's mo' than thet."

He scratched a match and touched it to the wick of the lamp. When the light flared up, he whirled to the row of bunks.

The Bar M riders sat, open-mouthed, with sleepy amazement written on their faces. Lum's face took on a grim expression.

"Drag on yore boots, yo' sleepy cow nurses! Get to movin'! Them rustlers is haidin' inter the hills. Yo', Billy Adair, high-tail it to the house an' rouse Sandy an' Benny. The rest of yo' buckle on yore gun belts!"

Scarcely five minutes passed, before Sandy McClure and Benny Burnett joined the other five or six

riders down near the corral. Benny swung a lighted lantern in his hand and held it up to look over the men.

Zeke Olroyd, Lum's gangly young buddy, had pulled on his boots and blue jean pants, but above the waist, he was clad only in a thin undershirt. Around his middle was the worn old belt and battered six-gun of which he was so proud.

The others were in just as informal a state of dress, but they scarcely noticed the cold, driving rain that beat down upon them, or the wind which whipped past their ears.

Then Benny Burnett whirled away from his men and strode toward the corral. He sped about the corner to the side that held the gate. Then he stopped, and a bitter oath came through tight-clenched teeth.

He turned to old Sandy McClure, who was at his heels. "We're cleaned, boss! They've took every single animal in the corral! Ain't even left us a spavined, flea-bitten nag to straddle!"

"Took—took every hoss?" Lum spoke in a queer, tense voice from behind Benny. "Then they got Snake! Snake was in the remuda."

"An' Lightnin', too!" blurted out Zeke Olroyd, from Lum's side. "Them blasted rustlers stole the two best hosses on the whole range!"

"Yo're right when yo're speakin' of thet blue outlaw Snake hoss, though yuh might be stretchin' a p'int callin' thet runty sorrel, Lightnin', one of the best," said Benny grimly.

"Them skunks shore timed it just right," rasped Sandy McClure. "Picked a night when the rain'll wipe out their tracks afore mornin', an' left us afoot until we can mebbe round up a hoss off the range, come mornin'."

"Looks like one mo' of Brandy

Lawson's tricks," gritted Benny. "I'd give a thousand dollars to get somethin' on thet slick hombre. Act-in' like an honest stock raiser in the daytime an' bein' an' ornery rustler by night."

"Yuh shouldn't say thet about Lawson, Benny," answered the old rancher. "We ain't got no proof thet he swings the long loop. No matter what we suspect, we got to have evidence, before we got any license to talk."

"But everybody knows he's made money hand over fist, in spite of not runnin' any more critters than we does. Lives in Richfield all the time, too, an' lets his hands run the Brandy-bottle spread. An' he's crooked. Yuh can tell thet by his beady little eyes an' smirkin' mouth."

"But jest the same, we cain't say it out loud," grunted Sandy McClure. "If he's the waddy thet's doin' all the dirty work, some day it'll come out on him."

"Yep, an' we'll be busted waitin'. But there ain't no use groanin' an' hollerin' to-night. We're stuck until mornin', an' thet remuda'll be hid plenty by then."

Grumbling and swearing, the Bar M waddies made their way back through the storm to the bunk house, while Sandy and Benny, still arguing, strode toward the main house.

After much excited talk, the hands finally got to sleep once more, all except Lum and Zeke. These two young punchers felt the loss of the remuda of horses much more keenly than the others.

For they had lost their personal mounts. Snake, the blue outlaw, was as dear to Lum's heart as Zeke or as Job, his little yellow dog. He had taken the beautiful animal as a killer and tamed and trained it,

until it was the fastest horse on the range.

Lightnin', the runty little sorrel, was just as firmly entrenched in Zeke's heart. He had patiently worked with Lightnin' until he had cured the stunted horse of the loco-weed habit and trained it to be a most efficient cow horse.

In the dim light of the smoky oil lamp, Lum slumped down in the heavy slab-pine chair and cupped his chin in his hands. Staring off into space, he remained almost motionless, minute after minute.

Zeke, from his place on his bunk, watched Lum, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. For he knew that some idea was turning itself over and over in Lum's mind. It might be a wild, involved idea, but it would work. In that, Zeke had the firmest faith.

As they sat through the hours of the night, the storm died down. Once Lum rose slowly and walked on tiptoe to the window. The stars were out, and the wind had faded to a mere breeze.

Again he slumped in his chair and he did not move until the first faint glimmer of dawn streaked the eastern sky. Then he rose and finished his dressing.

Without a word, Zeke followed Lum's example. And when the slim puncher strode to the door and swung it open, Zeke was at his heels.

Still wordless, the two young punchers made their way toward the horse shed. Halfway there, Lum halted. He faced Zeke, but his eyes seemed to see far beyond the gangly waddy.

As if he were talking to himself, he spoke in low, unhurried tones:

"We ain't entirely afoot. Ol' Joshua is in the hoss barn. While there's fasteh mounts on the range, there ain't none with mo' sense."

"But—but yuh can't foller them rustlers alone, Lum—not even if yuh can see their tracks."

"Ain't aimin' to foller 'em, Zeke. Figured that mebbe if I rode to Richfiel' an' tol' Brandy Lawson what a store we set by Snake an' Lightnin', he might give me a hint as to how we could get 'em back."

"Yuh wouldn't dare tell him we suspect him of rustlin', Lum." There was fear in Zeke's voice. "Why, he'd plug yuh, most likely!"

"Wasn't figurin' on tellin' him in so many words," answered Lum slowly. "Mebbe I can get at it without makin' him too proddy."

"But he'll never tell, Lum. Why, thet'd be practically admittin' thet he rustled 'em."

Lum only shook his head slowly and turned again to the horse barn. In a scant five minutes, Lum had thrown the hull on the indolent old dun mule and was headed for Richfield. Zeke watched him disappear in the dusk of dawn, a deadly fear in his heart.

But slowly it came to the gangly waddy that Lum had never got himself into a jam by talking too much, or jumping to conclusions too swiftly. He heaved a resigned sigh. He'd have to trust Lum to take care of himself.

II.

The sun was well up when Lum prodded the old dun mule up the dusty street of Richfield. The little cow town was just beginning to awaken. Dugan, bartender in the Pilgrim's Rest Saloon, lifted his hand in recognition as Lum neck-reined Joshua toward the hitch rack.

"Yo're gettin' to town right early, son, considerin' thet ol' Joshua ain't been out of a walk for a year."

A slow grin spread across Lum's

face. In spite of the joking, Dugan was a good friend of his and a stanch admirer of Joshua, the old dun mule.

Lum slipped from his saddle and stepped up onto the slab porch beside Dugan. The grin was gone from his face, and on it was a look of grim determination. Dugan's face became grave on the instant.

"What's the matter, son? Yuh look like yuh'd lost yore best pair of boots."

In short, terse sentences, Lum told the fat bartender of the events of the night before. Dugan's brow furrowed in a frown of worry and bewilderment. Then he glanced keenly at Lum.

"An' yuh come to town to get a posse on their trail?"

"Nope. Posse could neveh fin' their tracks. All washed out by the rain. Ain't got no idea wheah to look."

"Then yuh suspect some one, son. Thet's why yuh ride to Richfiel'. It ain't——"

Lum nodded. "Brandy Lawson. Ain't got no more proof than a rabbit, though."

"Lawson has made too much money, son, an' he's too blasted slinky to suit me. But we can't convict him on thet."

"Ain't goin' to try," said Lum shortly. "I jest come to taown to ask him could I have my Snake hoss back. Mebbe he'll have softenin' of the heart."

"More than likely he'll fill yore carcass with lead. He'd plumb resent bein' called a rustler." Dugan's voice was grim.

"Thet's what Zeke 'lowed, but I don't know. Aim to try, nohow. Do yo' know wheah at I might fin' him?"

"Stick around here a spell, son. He always comes down from the

hotel at eight o'clock for a snort of redevye. But I'm warnin' yuh——"

A smile flicked across Lum's face. "I ain't so ignorant thet I'll jes' walk right up an' call him a rustler to his face."

Now Lum followed the bartender into the gloomy interior of the Pilgrim's Rest and took his place at a little table in the corner. And there he waited patiently, for a full hour.

He didn't rise from his chair when the door opened to admit the slinky, pantherlike "Brandy" Lawson. But he did watch the man closely from between narrowed lids.

He noted the straggly black hair beneath the pushed-back gray Stetson. His eyes caught the crafty, cruel lines on either side of Lawson's nose. A shiver chased itself up his back at the glittering ruthlessness in the beady black eyes.

Lawson gave the slim puncher a searching look as he strode to the bar. Then he hunched his shoulders as if in dismissal of an unwelcome thought and turned to Dugan.

"The usual, Dugan! An' see thet yuh give me a clean glass this mornin'."

Without a word, Dugan turned to the back bar and lifted down a squat brown bottle. Then he chose a glass from the row on the bar. With great care, he polished it thoroughly. Then he slid it across to the glowering man.

With a rasping, ill-tempered oath, Lawson poured himself a drink from the bottle. As he lifted it to his lips, Lum rose from his chair and advanced toward the bar.

"I—I was kind o' lookin' fo' yo', Misteh Lawson," he began apologetically. "I was wantin' to ask a favor of yo', ifn yo' don't mind."

Lawson whirled to the slim puncher. His shaggy black brows drew down over his beady eyes. His

shoulders hunched forward, and his hands crooked like talons. But it seemed to Lum that he could detect an uncertain look on the man's face.

"What kind of a favor could yuh be askin' of me, hombre? An' what makes yuh think I'd grant yuh one?"

"I—I'd ratheh talk to yo' alone, Lawson. Dugan is a friend of mine, but what I'm honin' to ask yo' is right smaht important."

"Huh!" For a long moment, the slinky man glared at Lum.

A look of craftiness spread slowly across his face. Lum could almost read his thoughts. This young hombre might know something and be too dumb to keep it, Lawson was thinking.

Lawson turned on his heel and strowed toward the door. "If yuh want to talk to me private, yuh'll have to come to my room in the hotel."

Lum followed the pantherlike man up the dusty street of the little town. Three or four of Richfield's leading citizens passed, and each had a word of greeting for the slim puncher. But no one spoke to Lawson.

Lawson turned and mounted the half dozen steps that led to the porch of the Arlington hotel. Straight into the gloomy, dirty little office and across it to the stairs, Lum followed him.

The slim puncher's nerves were just a little shaky. A dozen doubts of the wisdom of his actions assailed him. What if Lawson should plug him, as Zeke feared he might?

But now Lawson jerked open the door of a room on the left of the long hall and entered, holding the door wide for Lum to follow. Lum set his teeth tightly and held his head high. It was too late to back out, even if he wanted to.

Lawson slumped in a big chair across a rickety table from Lum and motioned his visitor to the other on the opposite side.

"Set down, hombre! Let's hear what yuh got on yore mind. Make it snappy, because I got business to tend to."

For a short moment, Lum was silent, as if searching for words to frame his request. Then he looked squarely into Brandy Lawson's twisted, evil face.

"Las' night, an outfit of rustlers cleaned the Bar M corrals. Took all the remuda, includin' a blue outlaw hoss thet belongs to me, an' a runty sorrel thet's my buddy's."

"What yuh tellin' me about it for?" rasped Lawson.

"Them otheh hosses was jes' ordinary," continued Lum, as if he had not been interrupted. "But I'd sooner lose my right arm than thet Snake hoss of mine. Zeke feels the same way about thet sorrel, Lightnin'."

"Why, yuh blasted young polecat! Are yuh insinuatin' thet I had anything to do with——"

"No, suh, Misteh Lawson, not thet. But I did heah one of the boys say thet yo' knowed mo' about the crooked hombres in this paht of the range than all the sheriffs put togetheh. An' I thought mebbe if yo' jest kind o' mentioned thet them two hosses ought ter be returned, the waddies thet rustled 'em might be enough scared of yo' to bring 'em back."

"Did thet feller yo're talkin' about say thet the rustlers was scared of me?" grated Lawson. "He didn't say I was hooked up with 'em none, did he?"

Lum shook his head. "He didn't say, but yo' wouldn't be livin' in Richfiel', if yo' was a rustler. Thet wouldn't be reasonable."

A crafty smile flicked across Lawson's face. This skinny hombre was just plain dumb, after all. Then his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. For a moment he gazed at Lum.

"Mebbe—I could—find out some-
thin', hombre," he began slowly.
"Fact is, I reckon I could name the
hombre thet rustled yore hosses.
But he's a mean hombre—a killer.
It wouldn't make no difference to
him how much yuh thought of them
hosses."

"But—but ifn I'd pay him fo' 'em,
mebbe? Pay him mo' than——"

A cold grin spread across Law-
son's face. "Thet might make some
difference. I'm right certain thet if
I told him yuh'd bring five hundred
dollars out inter the hills, he'd be
willin' to swap them hosses for it."

"I'll do it!" blurted out Lum.
Then he hesitated. "But how am
I to know thet he won't jump me
an' take the money without givin'
me the hosses?"

"I'll tell yuh what. I'll see the
rustler to-day. I'll make arrange-
ments for him to meet yuh alone,
providin' yuh'll promise not to try
to bushwhack him."

"I won't bring nobody with me.
I'll come alone. But he'll have to
do the same. He'll have to meet me
at the foot of thet red bluff out nigh
the Cimarron, wheah nobody can't
sneak up on me from behind, an'
wheah I can see thet they don't
jump me from in front."

"Thet's a pretty big order, feller.
Mebbe thet rustler'd like to do a
little arrangin' hisself."

"I'm sho' he'll agree, when he
learns he can swap a pair of hosses
fo' five hundred dollahs," said Lum
evenly. "I'll be at the foot of the
bluff, jes' below thet overhangin'
ledge, at midnight, an' I'll have the
money."

"I'll tell the rustler, hombre. But

don't be disappointed, if nobody
shows up."

"I'll be lookin' for one rider—the
rustler hisself—leadin' two hosses.
If mo' than thet comes, I'll high-tail
it plenty fast with the money. It'll
be bright moonlight to-night, an'
I'll be able to see fo' a quarteh of a
mile."

Without another word, Lum rose
from the chair and left the room.
When he had clumped down the
stairs and out onto the slab walk,
Lawson still sat at the table. But
now a ruthless grin wreathed his evil
face.

III.

Back at the Bar M, Lum called
Zeke aside and told him of the con-
versation in the hotel room. Zeke
listened, his eyes wide with amaze-
ment.

"An' Lawson 'lowed he knowed
the rustler? 'Lowed he'd get word
to him? Wasn't thet the same as
admittin' thet he done it?"

Lum nodded slowly. "Yep. But
he figured I was dumb as a dogie.
Thet five hundred dollahs was too
good fo' him to pass up."

"But yuh ain't goin' out there
inter the hills alone, Lum—not with
five hundred dollahs onto yuh?"

"Jest thet, Zeke. I got a reputa-
tion in this heah range fo' neveh
tellin' a lie, an' Lawson knows it.
But if I should fail to meet him
with thet money, my reputation
would be sp'iled. An' I might need
it worse some othel time."

"Lawson can lie, though," burst
out Zeke. "Why, he'll have his
whole outfit with him. He won't
never give up Snake an' Lightnin',
but he will grab thet money."

"He'll have his outfit with him,
Zeke, but they'll be a quarteh of a
mile away. I tol' him I'd high-tail
it, if they showed up, an' he knows

I'll do it. Nope, he'll meet me alone, an' bring Snake an' Lightnin'. But the minute he gets his hands onto the money, the rest'll come a-tear-in'."

"An' they'll plug yuh, Lum, as shore as——"

Lum shook his head. "Not if things work right, Zeke. Yo' know thet red bluff. Yo' know how it stretches fo' a mile across the dunes. An' yo' know thet big hill thet cuts it off at the south."

Zeke nodded. He did know the bluff very well. But for the life of him, he could not see what Lum was driving at. But Lum leaned closer and whispered for a full five minutes.

Amazement was written on Zeke's face as he listened. And when Lum had finished, a wide grin split Zeke's countenance. He nodded emphatically.

"It'll work, Lum! But it'll have to be timed jest right."

"Thet's yore job, son."

Zeke turned eagerly to old Joshua and swung into the saddle. There was work for him to do, and he could not wait until the other cowboys had rounded up horses from the range.

The afternoon was one of the longest Lum had ever experienced. A thousand doubts assailed him during the dragging hours. Twice he was almost tempted to tell Sandy McClure of his plan for the night, but each time, he thought better of it.

Sandy would never hear of his going through with it; that much Lum knew. And he agreed, in his own heart, that it was risky in the extreme. There was a big chance of him losing his life, along with the money and the horses.

But as darkness began to creep over the prairies, Zeke came plod-

ding homeward astride the old dun mule. Lum met him a hundred yards from the house. He looked up, wordless, at the gangly young puncher.

A wide grin was the answer. "Nigh five hundred of 'em, Lum! Sho' was lucky in findin' 'em bunched on the other side of the hill."

Lum breathed a deep sigh of relief. Perhaps luck was with him. He'd need it plenty before the night was over.

Two hours after sundown, the big full moon rose in yellow splendor. The vast sweep of the prairie was almost as light as day, when the Bar M punchers blew out the light in the bunk house.

The moment that the loud snores of the tired men announced that they slept, Lum and Zeke slipped from the long, low building. Like shadows in the night, they made their way to the horse barn.

And in another ten minutes, they were astride a pair of half-broken horses from the range. As they headed toward the tumbled sand hills to the south, Lum repeated his instructions.

Two miles from the Bar M headquarters, the two parted company. Zeke circled to the west, and prodded his horse to a faster gait. Lum headed straight for the red bluff about five miles almost due south.

And as he rode, he kept his eyes alert for any movement that would warn him of danger. But he hardly expected to be jumped. It would be much easier for the rustler to secure the money down there by the bluff.

And true to his surmise, he reached the north end of the crag without seeing or hearing a warning sound. He pulled to a halt for a mo-

ment and let his keen eyes sweep over the whole mile-long face of the bluff.

It was a full fifty feet high, and almost straight up and down. At the south end, out of his sight in the half gloom of the moonlight, it ended in a towering sand hill at right angles to the face of the bluff.

At his end, it flattened down gradually until it leveled out on the prairie. Facing it on the east was a flat stretch of sand a full quarter of a mile wide, and beyond that, the tumbled dunes again.

Lum's eyes tried to pierce between those dunes, but the moonlight was tricky. All he could make out was the shadowy outline of the range of round-topped mounds.

He knew that somewhere in that tangle lurked the rustler and his outfit. He was practically certain that at the appointed time, the leader of the outfit would come straight across the flat, leading Snake and Lightnin'.

But he was just as certain that the moment the money changed hands, the rest of the rustlers would charge him. And if he put up any kind of fight, they'd plug him ruthlessly.

He buckled his belt a bit tighter about his middle, shifted the battered old six-gun on his hip farther to the front, drew a long breath and urged his horse along the face of the bluff.

When he had traveled half its length, the overhanging ledge above blotted out the light of the moon. And there he pulled to a stop. As nearly as he could tell, it lacked but a little of midnight. Tensely he waited, his eyes upon the moon-washed stretch of sand before him.

Then he stiffened. For he made out the shadowy forms of three horses at the farther edge. For a mo-

ment, he held his breath. Now they were out upon the flat, and he saw that there was only one rider. The other horses were led behind.

Anxiously he cast his eyes to the south, where the dim shadow of the towering hill loomed against the sky line. If only Zeke had not fallen down on him!

With exasperating slowness, the rustler approached the bluff. Lum's every nerve and muscle was as tense as spring steel. His breath came in gasps. The next ten minutes would tell the tale.

But now the single rider was near enough for Lum to make out the markings on the led horses. They were Snake and Lightnin', right enough. The rustler had held true to his word, after all.

But why shouldn't he? He would know that Lum could see any trickery in plenty of time to run—that playing square, up to a certain point, was the only chance he held of securing the five hundred dollars.

Now the rider approached Lum. The Bar M puncher saw, before the shadow of the ledge blotted out his vision, that the man was masked by a blue bandanna. That was proof that he feared recognition.

"Yo' come from Brandy Lawson? He tol' yo' my proposition?" asked Lum hesitantly, as the man pulled to a halt before him.

"Two hosses for five hundred dollars!" rasped the grim rider.

"Heah's the money," said Lum softly, pulling the sheaf of bills from his pocket. "It's in yore hands, the minute yo' pass me the halter ropes."

A harsh laugh came from the man's throat. "What's to keep me from takin' thet money, an' the hosses, too?" he snarled.

"Jes' thet I got my six-gun trained onto yore gizzard," answered Lum

evenly. "I didn't lie to Lawson. I brought the money to swap fo' Lightnin' an' Snake. But I'm takin' them hosses home with me."

"I—I was jest jokin' with yuh, hombre," said the rustler in an oily voice as he rode nearer. "Here's yore hosses. Now pass me the money."

As he reached for the ropes with his left hand, Lum held the six-gun in his right, its muzzle covering the rider. For a bare fraction of an instant, his gaze flicked toward the sand hill to the south.

A sigh escaped his lips. Zeke was on the job. Shadowy moving forms told him that. Then he cast a lightning glance across the sand.

The rustlers were on the job, too. For now he could see at least half a dozen horses edging from the gloom of the hills onto the moonlit sand.

Not a moment to lose! He passed the roll of bills to the rider, who grasped it eagerly. Then Lum pulled a match from his pocket.

"Yo' betteh count it, Misteh Rustler!" he said softly. "Mebbe thet money ain't no good."

He scratched the match on his saddle horn and held it high. He tried to pierce the rustler's disguise by the flickering light of the match, but the outlaw ducked, swearing.

And at that instant, as if at a signal, a wild whooping came from the direction of the towering hill to the south. Then the sound of racing cloven hoofs reached Lum's ears. The frightened bellowing of a terror-stricken herd of cattle split the air.

The rustler whirled in his saddle and thrust the rolls of bills hastily into his shirt front. An oath came from his twisted lips behind the mask, as he saw the shadowy forms of the stampeding cattle racing down the stretch of sand.

Then the meaning seemed to strike him. He half turned toward Lum, and his hand shot for his holster. But Lum's six-gun came up—and down. With a gurgling grunt, the rustler slumped in his saddle.

Lum leaped to the ground and caught the man before he fell. Swiftly he loosed the tie rope from the saddle and bound the rustler firmly in his seat.

Then he shot a swift glance across the sand. The others of the rustler outfit were halfway across, coming toward him at top speed.

But already a few straggling cattle were racing between them and their prey. And the rest of the herd were coming on fast.

Lum turned and swung swiftly back into his saddle. He loosed Snake and Lightnin'. There would be no trouble with them. They would make tracks for the Bar M.

Now the dense herd streamed past out there on the stretch of sand. Lum dallied the rustler's reins about his saddle horn and whirled his own horse.

Bending low in the saddle, he touched the animal with the rowels. Straight toward the bellowing cattle he raced. Fifty yards from them, he turned and ran with them.

Orange flashes of flame stabbed the night across the mass of cattle. Bullets whizzed over Lum's head. Evidently the rustlers knew now what was happening.

But they could not make out the slim puncher in the dim light. Their bullets were all wide of their marks. The rustlers pulled to a halt, apparently undecided just what to do.

But Lum kept abreast of the maddened herd. In five short minutes, he was out on the prairie beyond the end of the bluff. And there he turned abruptly to the left, racing

for a cleft in the range of sand dunes, while the cattle scattered.

Now he plunged down a steep slope and around another abrupt hill. Here, in the shadowy brush, he pulled to a halt. For five minutes, he waited tensely.

Then another rider appeared from around a shoulder of sand. Lum heaved a sigh of relief, for he recognized his gangly buddy. He whistled softly, and Zeke whirled toward him.

"Yuh—yuh got away safe an' sound, Lum?" he queried swiftly.

"Safe an' sound, an' with company!" grunted Lum.

Zeke came closer and peered through the shadows. Then his eyes widened, and a gasp hissed from his throat.

"Who—who is it, Lum?"

"Ain't had no chance to see—yet," muttered Lum. "But I got my suspicions. Come closer, an' we'll take a look. It's safe to light a match heah. Them rustlers will be chasin' the stampede yo' stahted, until they find out they've lost us complete."

By the flickering flame of the hat-shielded match, Lum pulled the masking bandanna from his prisoner's face. He looked down into the unconscious countenance of Brandy Lawson!

"It's him!" exclaimed Zeke. "It's Brandy Lawson hisself, Lum!"

Lum nodded. "Yep, he's who I figured would come fo' the money. Didn't 'low he'd trust any of his outfit. Was sho', too, thet I couldn't get the drop on him. He thought I was jes' a dumb, ignorant cow nurse."

"Shore did, Lum!" said Zeke admiringly. "But even a smarter man than Mr. Brandy Lawson wouldn't never look for no trick like usin' a stampede as a shield to a get-away." Then he drew a long breath. "What are we goin' to do now, Lum?"

"Head fo' the Bar M with Brandy Lawson," grunted Lum. "There ain't no dangeh of them otheh rustlers jumpin us. They're likely runnin' aroun' in circles. Brandy Lawson was the brains of the outfit. An' now thet we got him, an' Snake an' Lightnin' are headed fo' home, we might jes' as well high-tail it. Reckon the rustler gang'll be easy to round up, with their leader in the jail house."

A combination o' brains an' nerve like Lum Yates has got is shore a hard one ter beat. No ornery tinhorn crook like thet Brandy Lawson hombre kin put one over on the Missouri puncher, when he starts thet brain o' his ter workin'. Watch fer the next adventure o' Lum an' Zeke in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral



This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, mebbe yuh'll find it hard tuh believe, but I'm goin' tuh complain ag'in about the same ol' thing. Don't ask me, folks, please, tuh send yuh personal copies o' songs! I sure hate tuh refuse anything, but yuh got tuh realize thet I couldn't ever begin tuh send out songs tuh individual readers. I'd never be through makin' copies!

This hyar department is tuh help yuh all collect Western songs; but it takes time tuh do it, an' yuh have tuh wait till songs are printed an' then get 'em in the magazine. An' for those thet have been published already an' thet yuh want, yuh can refer tuh the list I published a while

back, an' send in for the magazines tuh the Subscription Department.

So now I hope thar won't be dozens o' letters still pourin' in an' askin' me tuh start makin' special copies for yuh.

Hyar's a right nice song sent in by Gerald Burnett, of Florida:

THE TRAIL TO YESTERDAY

By JAMES EDWARD HUNGERFORD

Here o' late I've got the notion
I got to hit the trail
Toward the old Pacific Ocean,
Out where life is never stale.
When the twilight starts to falling
I am full o' wild unrest;
I can hear the mountains calling
An' my heart is back out West!

I was raised in ol' Wyoming
 On a ranch near ol' Cheyenne;
 Then one day I took to roaming,
 And I ain't been back since then.
 Up and down the land I've traveled.
 In the North and South and East;
 But as the time has swift unraveled,
 Love o' Home, Sweet Home's, increased.

Makes no difference where I'm roaming,
 I can feel the ol' heartache
 For the ranges o' Wyoming
 Which my thoughts will not forsake.
 Makes no difference where I'm camping,
 All my dreams keep drifting back
 To the trail my youth was tramping,
 To the little home-ranch shack.

When a kid I used to fancy
 Greener fields far, far away,
 And in visions wild "romancy,"
 In far countries I would stray;
 Then one day I took to roaming,
 My adventure lust to quell,
 Bade good-by to ol' Wyoming,
 To the ol' home said farewell.

But the years have brought their changes,
 An' my heart is back to stay,
 'Mid the mountains and the ranges,
 O' the dim far yesterday.
 An' when the twilight starts to falling,
 There's a deep tug in my breast;
 Ol' Wyoming starts to calling
 Me back home out West.

I reckon that's a song all yuh ol'
 fellers will enjoy hearin'. I reckon
 we'd all like tuh git back home one
 o' these days!

Hyar's a song by Henry Herbert
 Knibbs, who must be pretty familiar
 tuh yuh folks by this time, seein' as
 how I've printed a lot o' dandy
 songs thet come from his pen:

THE RUSTLER

From the fading smoke of a branding fire
 in a mesquite hollow close and dim,
 We trailed a phantom pony track, over
 the range and down
 Into the cool, deep canyon gloom, then up
 to the mesa's ragged rim;
 And the foam clots flew from outswing-
 ing reins as we loped to the desert
 town.

Gray in the dusk, at the hitching rail
 loomed the shape of a lean cayuse,
 His gaunt flanks streaked with dust-dried
 sweat, in the doorway's golden glow,
 And the rider stood at the lamp-lit bar tug-
 ging the knot of a neck scarf loose,
 As some one sang to the silver strings
 in the moonlit patio.

He flung a coin as we shuffled in, and
 turned to meet us with no surprise;
 We had run him down and he faced us
 square, a fighter from hat to heel;
 The music stopped, and a Spanish girl came
 from the dusk; her wondering eyes
 Slowly filling with fearsome light; but his
 were as cool as steel.

Tense as a lion crouched to spring he poised
 on the midnight brink of fate;
 But she, with the smile of a child, stepped
 back, playing the woman's game;
 A crash—and the room was a pit of black;
 a whispered word, and we knew too
 late—
 As hell burned up in our hearts, we
 drew, and the black was streaked with
 flame.

We heard the thud of a pony's stride; we
 backed to the open air once more,
 Ringed by a sudden crowd that came,
 questioning, shuffling, till
 A light was made in the dobe bar; and
 there, in the shadows on the floor,
 We saw an arm and a woman's face, open-
 eyed, white, and still.

Gray in the dusk, at the hitching rail
 loomed the shape of a lean cayuse,
 His gaunt flanks streaked with dust-dried
 sweat in the doorway's golden glow;
 But no rider stood at the lamp-lit bar tug-
 ging the knot of a neck scarf loose;
 And no one sang to the silver strings in
 the moonlit patio.

Thar's plenty o' drama in thet
 ol' song !

Hyar's a coupla short songs sent
 in by Robert Rankin, o' Massachu-
 setts, who sure is a right helpful
 reader.

"All I know about this one," he
 says, "is that it seems to be a pio-
 neer farewell song. It was sung in
 the days when the Indian Territory

was the West, and the Far West was still unexplored except by miners. The pioneers were folks who had failed at ranching and were traveling to the frontier border to seek minerals. Here it is."

WAY OUT IN IDYHO

Remember what I promised you,
As we set side by side,
Beneath that old persimmon tree:
I said I'd be your bride.

Way out in Idyho,
We're comin' to Idyho
With a four-horse team,
We'll soon be seen.
Way out in Idyho.

Farewell, it's mother and child,
I'm off to stay for a while;
So won't you kiss me before I go,
And call me your darling child?

An' hyar's the other. Mr. Rankin
says as how it was given tuh him

by an ol' broncho-buster who used
tuh hear an ol' drunk sing it ev'ry
time he "wet up" his throat.

TEN THOUSAND CATTLE

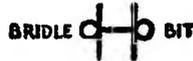
Ten thousand cattle, gone astray,
Left my range, and traveled away.
And the sons-of-guns, I'm here to say,
Have left me broke, dead broke, to-day.

In gambling halls delaying,
Ten thousand cattle straying.

And my gal has gone away,
Left my shack and traveled away,
With a son-of-a-gun from Ioway,
And left me a lone man, a lone man, to-day.

In gambling halls delaying,
Ten thousand cattle straying, straying.

Waal, I hope yuh like 'em all,
folks, an' come back for more next
week.



A WISE STEER

THE longhorn cattle that were abandoned when the East Texas Mission was deserted in 1693, lived in a wild state in Texas for over two hundred years, and became as wild as the country in which they roamed. The longhorn flourished where blooded cattle would have died of travel or thirst.

Their hoofs were tough, their legs were long and wiry, and their endurance was marvelous. They could go longer without water, could endure more hardships, and could take better care of themselves on the ranges or in stampedes than any other breed.

The longhorn lived to a good old age without becoming decrepit, or losing its teeth, and in every herd there trailed steers with personalities as marked and as individual as the cowboys who ran them. Some

of those steers are remembered by cowmen to this day.

There was one steer named Old Blue that led J A herds up the trail to Dodge for years, the clatter of the bell he wore directing the critters that trailed behind. Old Blue was a pet with every cowhand on the ranch, and was never sent to market.

He was always brought back with the remuda, and he saved the boys many a bad moment in crossing rivers and in holding a course. He was a born leader and was blessed with such a big share of cow sense that the boys used to talk to him as if he were one of themselves.

As long as any cowboy lives who went over the trails to Dodge with the J A herds in Old Blue's time, stories will be told of the wonderful qualities of the wise old steer.



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by Sam Wills - Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HYAR'S some more folks for yuh tuh find yore friends among, readers. Git in line an' take yore pick. Be sure tuh read the rules correctly, however, an' tuh follow 'em strict. That'll help matters a lot.

Now, hyar we go, an' hyar's luck tuh yuh!

JOBS AN' INFO

Hyar's a gal who offers info of the West. We'll give her a hearin' first, I reckon.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fifteen, and have brown wavy hair and gray eyes. I'm a cow-girl and love horses and cattle. I live on a ranch with my father and brother. I

will exchange some of my cowboy drawings and pictures with any one who writes to me.

CHICK, OF CALIFORNIA.

An' hyar's another Pal who offers a certain amount of information.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, from everywhere. I've just come back from the East, and I sure like it out here better. I can give quite a lot of information about both sections of the country. I can shoot a gun perfectly; love to swim, hike, travel, fish, and do all other sports, too. Will answer all letters without delay; so come on, all you Pen Pals, get busy and drop me a line. I'm twenty-one years old.

LYSTON E. SINCLAIR, OF NEBRASKA.

Hyar come the job-hunters.

DEAR SAM: I love nothing better than to live out West, and if I could get a job, I would start hiking to-morrow. Do you reckon it would be very hard to obtain work out there on some ranch? I was reared on a farm, but for the past four years have worked in the mills. I can weave and spool. I am twenty-five years old. So please let me know any tips you hear of, readers.

MYRTLE JORDAN, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'm looking for a job somewhere out West, preferably in Texas. I am twenty years old and have always lived on a farm. I expect to go to Texas this fall, so I would like to have some Pen Pals there. Come on, all you wild West fellows, and write.

FONZO CALHOUN, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of eighteen and am very much interested in the West. I want to be a Pen Pal and will answer all letters. I love horses and all outdoor sports. I want especially to hear from Pen Pals in Arizona. I plan soon to go out there and try to get work on a large ranch, so I would appreciate any info I can get. I can do housework; I love music; and I can give good references.

R. M. ANDERSON, OF IOWA.

DEAR WESTERN PEN PALS: I'm a boy of sixteen, and I would like to increase my knowledge of the West. I would like to get a job on a ranch, in a lumber camp, with

some forest ranger, or with any one who would take a boy on. I want a job so that I can finish my education. I have lived on a farm most of my life. I like all outdoor sports, like fishing, hunting, and trapping, et cetera. I know something about horses and cattle; so come on, Pen Pals, and get me a job. I sure will thank you, if you do. I'd like to hear from lots of you all over the Western States.

HOWARD KEELER, OF MISSOURI.

A COUPLE O' TRADERS

Anything tuh exchange, folks? Hyar's yore chance.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of ten and am much interested in the West and in old guns, holsters, et cetera. I would like to have some Pen Pals in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. I would like to trade pictures and small articles of modern times for old-time things.

ELBY PETTAWAY, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals, and would like to trade photographs and range songs with them.

ALVIN IVEY, OF CALIFORNIA.

LONESOME FOLKS

Help me tuh cheer these folks up by writin' tuh 'em, Pals!

DEAR SAM: I'm very lonesome, and I would like to have some one to write to. Please help me out. I am a girl, just twelve years old. I am sure there are some people who would like to write to a lonesome Pen Pal like me.

RITA MOUN, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I've been reading W. W. W. a heap, and I would like to have some Pen Pals from anywhere out West. I am a lonesome girl of twenty-one. I'd like to have some cowgirls and others write to me, and will answer all letters. I am interested in Western songs, and would like very much to have the words to some of the popular ones, as well as some snaps of ranches and cowboys. So come on, girls, shake the rust off your pens and write to me. MINNIE JOUDREY, OF NOVA SCOTIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a very lonesome girl looking for Pen Pals. I wish you would help me. I'm a married girl of seventeen.

Would like to hear from girls everywhere who would like to write to a lonesome girl; so come on, girls, young and old. Please don't disappoint me. I'm looking for some mail real soon.

MRS. THELMA SHOE,
OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young married woman of twenty-five, and I would like to have some friends from the West. I'm alone on the farm. My husband works in town, and I get very lonely. I'd like to hear from girls everywhere, young or old.

MRS. GRACE THIRRIEN,
OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR MR. WILLS: Won't you please get me some Pen Pals? I am lonesome. Please don't laugh when I tell you how old I am—I am twelve. I would love to have girls of about my own age write to me from Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, or most anywhere. I love horseback riding, swimming, and all other outdoor sports.

FERN ROBISON, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: If you knew how lonesome I am this lovely day, you'd print my letter. I'm a blond curlyhead with gray eyes. Please, some of you girls out on ranches, write to me. I love to read about the West.

BLOND BABY, OF TENNESSEE.

HELLO, SAM: Please let me have a small corner in the harbor, because I'm a lonesome girl of fifteen. I have blond wavy hair and gray eyes, and I love all sports. I play baseball and go on hikes, et cetera. But my hobby is writing letters. So come on, girls, and write to poor, lonesome me.

ADEAN BINKLEY, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of nineteen and am lonesome for some Pen Pals. I would love to hear from all over the world. I love all outdoor sports. I have red hair, brown eyes, and a fair skin. Write me, all of you; I will exchange snaps.

MARY GILLELAND, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

WESTERNERS IN DEMAND

Thar's always plenty o' demand for yuh Westerners tuh step up an' make friends. Come on an' do it!

DEAR SAM: This is my first letter to you. Will you get me some real cowgirls for Pen Pals?

MARGUERITE STONE, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of ten, and I like cowboys. I would like to have Pen Pals from Montana, Texas, and Arizona.

NICK STURM, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a small-city hombre whose heart is in the wide open spaces, and the great forests and prairies appeal to me the most. I'm eager to learn about the Indians and their lands, and would like to become the Pen Pal of some young men of the Cherokee tribe who are between the ages of twenty and thirty years. Will answer any letter from anywhere. I am three fourths Cherokee myself, and one fourth Irish. I'm twenty-four years old and fairly good at riding and shooting.

TWO-GUN KID, OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen and would like to have some cowboy Pen Pals from Texas, Montana, Mexico, and Nevada. I would like to have plenty of letters.

JOSEPH CEBULCI,
OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eleven and am in the fifth grade. I am very much interested in cowboys, and I want to know if some of them would write to me. I'd like to get hold of some cowboy pictures, too.

EUGENE UNDERWOOD, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen. I can ride a horse and shoot a rifle and pistol and rope a little. Will you please rope me a Pen Pal from Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, or Montana? I will answer all letters, and I hope I hear from some real cowboys.

RAY BECK, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I have chums here, but am tired of them and wish to have some Pen Pals. I'm a girl of sixteen and have dark-brown hair and blue eyes. I'm fond of all outdoor sports, but like hiking and horseback riding the best. I'd like to hear from Pals who are sixteen to twenty-one years of age, and I promise to answer every letter I get.

MARGARET MITKOSKI,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm fifteen years old and would like to hear from some cowgirls about my age or a little older. I would appreciate letters from them very much, and promise to answer all letters I receive, from any one. I love outdoor sports. They all appeal to me.

ELMA BARBI, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm an orphan girl of thirteen. I would like Pen Pals from Texas, California, and Montana. I'm crazy about outdoor sports and just love to ride horses. I ride fairly well and am crazy to learn how to shoot a .45.

MARY WHERREY, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: Try to scrape me up a few Western Pen Pals, won't you? Or any kind'll do, just so they're around my age, which is seventeen. I'm just a poor farmer boy who's lonesome and wants Pen Pals who'll be snappy and willing to listen to me tell of the glories of the old North State. I've always wanted to be a cowboy. Now I wonder if you could get me some Western Pen Pals who can write cowboy poems or who are cowboy aviators.

GLENN FULBRIGHT, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen. I want Pen Pals from the West—most of all, Arizona. I love horses and outdoor life. Come on, girls, and write to a lonesome girl. LUCILLE McCULLEY, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm just a seventeen-year-old girl. I like all outdoor sports, especially baseball. I would delight in having lots of Pen Pals. So jar loose, some of you cowgirls, and write to me.

RUTH HARRIS, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen, and some day I expect to roam the Western plains. So will you please get me some Western Pen Pals, especially some of those who know, and will send me, some cowboy songs? JOHN ZEDNIC, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fifteen and live in the country, and I would like to have Pen Pals from the West. I would like to go West, and if I had a friend out there, it would be nicer. I would like to learn to rope and shoot. Would like to learn these before I start out.

IRVIN YOUNG, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I would enjoy having some Pen Pals. I would like to know more about cowgirls. I hope some day that I may visit ranches in the Far West. I am fond of all outdoor sports, mostly horseback riding. I'm a little girl of ten and am in the sixth grade. Come on, Pen Pals, and write to a Southern girl. I will answer all letters.

GENEVA WARD, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm like all the others, seeking a few Pen Pals. I want to know more about cowgirls in the Far West. I am fond of all outdoor sports myself. I am fourteen years old and have black hair and dark-blue eyes. I will exchange snaps with any one who writes.

ALMA WARD, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from all over the United States. I am twenty-five years old and hope I hear from some cowboys around that age. I will answer all letters.

OTIS PHILLIPS, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm just a girl of fifteen and would love to hear from Western Pen Pals. I live in a small Mid-Western town and have never been out West or on a ranch. I'm especially interested in Pals between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, but am not really particular. Please write soon.

VIOLA RUTH REED, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen, and I am very much interested in cowboy life. I have always wanted to be a cowboy, and I still do, so please put me in touch with some cowboys or ranchers. I would like to hear from hombres in Montana, Texas, Wyoming, or any of the Western States. Will answer all letters received.

ROY H. LEAR, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fifteen, and I enjoy all outdoor sports. I would like to have some real cowboy Pen Pals. I'm especially interested in obtaining some information about New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, and Nevada.

JOE RYAN, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twenty-one, and I would like to hear from Pen Pals from the West, real cowgirls, and also girls from every other State. I love skating, dancing, tennis, and all sports. I will exchange snaps, so I hope you'll write to a lonely Pal.

THELMA, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of twelve. I would like to have some Pen Pals from all the Western States. I can ride and shoot any kind of gun. I am especially interested in horses and cows. I would like to have Pen Pals who will answer my letters promptly.

BAILEY WOTE, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young girl of sixteen and very much interested in the West.

I wonder if you have some cowgirls of my own age who would write to me. I'll answer all letters written to me and exchange snaps.

ESTHER HARTMAN,
OF PENNSYLVANIA.

OTHER GENERAL REQUESTS

Folks wantin' Pals from everywhere.

DEAR SAM: I would like to be listed as a willing Pen Pal. I will discuss actors, actresses, and different pictures by mail with girls from thirteen to twenty years old. Would like to hear especially from other parts of the world, along with letters from all over the United States.

OLIVE QUINN, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and have dark-brown hair and brown eyes. I am a junior in high school. I like to read about the West. I would like to have Pen Pals from all over the United States and foreign countries. I'll write to all who write to me, and will exchange snaps with them.

PATTIE HARLOWE,
OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a constant reader of the W. W. W., and I would love to have some Pen Pals. I'm a boy of fifteen and live in a town near the Ohio River. I am crazy about the outdoors. Would like Pals from everywhere.

SHEIK, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I would like to be a Pen Pal. I am thirteen years old and a regular tomboy. My mother has been in the hospital for six months, so the care of the house and three younger children falls on me. Won't some of you girls who are tomboys—and I know there are plenty of you—please write to a girl whose only wish is that her name was more boyish?

THE TOMBOY, FROM NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I would very much like to have some Pen Pals who will write to me

from all over the world. I am a girl of fourteen, and I will answer every letter I get.

JEAN, FROM PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Please find me some Pen Pals—some from here; some from there; some from everywhere. I am twelve and in the eighth grade. Have gray eyes and light-brown hair. Can give info of Pennsylvania and England. Come on, Pals.

DORIS, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fifteen years, and I want Pen Pals from all over the United States. I like horseback riding, and I ride every day. I have brown wavy hair and blue eyes. I will exchange snaps.

JACKIE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a sailor in the American merchant service. Have been to nearly all the countries in the world. Also, I'm twenty-three years old and am of German-American descent. I promise to answer all letters.

HENRY STACKS, OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: Here comes Doady with her reata, trying to rope a couple of Pen Pals. Sam, please help me by taking the other one on that there fence, will you? Thanks heaps. Now they'll all write to me, won't they? Gee! That's great! Oh, my description? All right, but where's the mirror? Thanks; that's better. Let's see. I'm of French descent, sixteen years old, a brunette with dark-brown eyes, fair complexion. More? Well, why not write for it? No limit in age, looks, or nationality.

DOADY, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I want to join the Pen Pals. I am very much interested in your department. I'm crazy to get some cowboy songs, too. My motto is: Slow but sure.

SIDNEY MEISTER, OF CONNECTICUT.

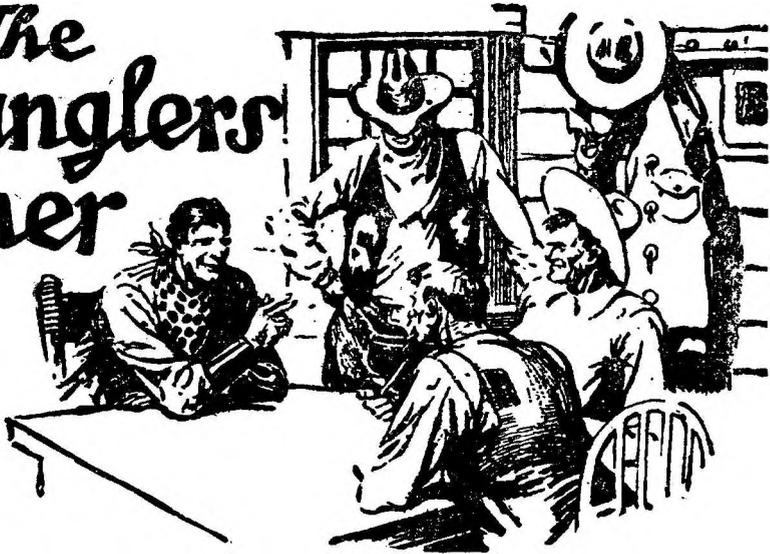
Waal, folks, so long till next week. Reckon yuh got enough tuh play with for a while, anyhow!

BLOCK



DIAMOND

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.

"Good evenin', Boss! How are yuh?
Yuh shore are lookin' fine.
We jest dropped in ter see yuh—
Me an' this fat ol' pard o' mine."

WE'VE jest stepped inter the Corner when some waddy greets us with thet bit o' po'try. We looks up quick, an' then grins. It's Johnny Socrates Forty-five, o' course, an' his pardner, George Krumm—the two deputy United States marshals.

"Waal, we'll be a son of a gun, Johnny!" we says, goin' over ter shake hands with the pair of 'em. "If yuh ain't a sight fer sore eyes! Where in tarnation 'a' yuh been keepin' yoreself all this time, anyhow?"

Johnny chuckles. "I reckon George kin tell yuh more about it than I kin, Boss," he says.

The rest of the waddies git a laugh out o' thet. An' George Krumm, who ain't been doin' nothin' else but talk since he got ter the Corner, looks kind o' puz-

zled. That's one thing about Krumm—he don't know that he's sech a powerful windbag.

Everybody listens ter him tell about some o' the things thet's been happenin' ter him an' Johnny since we seen 'em last. An' ter hear him, anybody'd think thet he jest takes Johnny along ter l'arn him the marshalin' business. We glances at Johnny, an' sees a twinkle in his eyes, as he says:

"Yuh see jest how it is, Boss;
When Ol' Man Trouble comes,
We'd have a better chance ter live
If all of us was Krumms."

George stops his talk right there, an' his big round face gets plenty red. Everybody gives him the laugh. He's stopped fer a minute, but we knows it won't be fer long. So we says:

"Thet fool po'try o' yores, Johnny, has give us an idea. It's about time fer another poets' night, round here. So what do yuh wad-

dies say if we reads some letters from the rhymin' readin' hombres?"

Shorty Masters, Jim Hazel, Lum Yates, Billy West, Joe Scott, an' Sing Lo are all for it. Buck Foster an' George Krumm are the only ones agin' it. George allows as how he hears enough po'try all the time, travelin' round with Johnny. But them two is plumb outvoted; so we starts proceedin's by readin' this:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have read 3W for about a year, and I think it the best Western magazine on the market.

My favorites are Johnny Forty-five and George Krumm, Hungry and Rusty, and Sonny Tabor. Circle J is pretty good, too.

I am sending you a poem with this letter, and if I don't see it in the Wranglers Corner, I won't believe there is a Corner.

GEORGE AND JOHNNY

George Krumm, the son of a gun,
With his wide, fast-wagglin' jaw,
Is a pain in the neck, I tell yuh, by heck,
Though he may have been dear to his maw!

But that Johnny man, who takes his stand,
And holds it with flame-tipped rods,
And battles through strife, without thought
of his life,
Is surely a son of the gods.

It's an awful mess; but, then, I guess
They have to be together,
Or the story would be like the seasons,
you see,
If we'd always the same kind of weather.

Yours till Billy West stops buying cattle,
JIM BREWER OF TEXAS.

An' thet one stops George ag'in.
He jest ain't got nothin' ter say,
while the rest o' the outfit sits
around an' laughs.

Johnny Forty-five gits a kick out
o' the po'try an' asks us ter tell Jim
Brewer thet he likes it fine, an' thet
them are his sentiments, too.

We picks up another letter,
handin' the po'try, this time, ter
Johnny, fer him ter read when we
finishes the first part. Here are both
parts:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am twelve years old and in the seventh grade. I enjoy reading your Wild West Weekly very much. This makes the second letter I have written to you, and I hope the poem I am sending in is good enough to be published. It is a poem about Sonny Tabor.

SONNY TABOR

Sonny Tabor's brave and strong;
He isn't very often wrong.
But when it's time to use his gun,
He's always ready for the fun.

He is a wanted outlaw
With money on his head;
They try to shoot him in the back,
But they always turn up dead.

And when it comes to riding,
I think he is the best
I think he can beat Buck or Joe,
And even Billy West.

Yours until you put gals in 3W,
RALPH McNEW.
Braymer, Missouri.

"Thet danged young kid outlaw,"
says Buck Foster, "is a good fella,
but I'll be a horned toad if I cain't
beat him at ridin'. I was bustin'
brons when we was knee-high ter a
prairie dog, by heifers!"

"Yeah," puts in Joe Scott.
"Thet's jest the trouble. Yuh was
doin' it sech a plumb long time ago
thet yuh've fergot pretty near all
there is ter fergit. Yo're so old any
greenhorn kin beat yuh now."

"Am thet so?" roars the veteran.
"Why, yuh mangy carrot-top, I kin
ride——"

We fishes out another letter,
hands the pome ter Lum Yates, an'
starts readin' in a voice loud enough
ter drown out the veteran:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been reading
W. W. W. for nigh onto three years, but
this is the first letter I have ever written
to the Corner.

I'm sending along a poem which I hope
will speak for itself in regard to what I
think of the magazine. I'm sorry I
couldn't get all of the characters in, and

I hope you'll be able to find room for it
in the Corner. Here it is:

PALS OF THE WEST

I like Sonny Tabor,
With smiling, bright-blue eyes,
I like the way he handles crooks,
With his great big .45s.

I like the way the Whistlin' Kid
Figures out the cattle brands,
And the way that young Jim Hazel
Always breaks up outlaw bands.

I'd like to see old Buck and Joe
Work together in a fight,
And quarrel when it's over,
'Cause it didn't last all night.

I like to read of Lum and Zeke,
Who both are somewhat shy.
When they start out on dangerous trails,
They kiss their fears good-by.

There's another one I like a lot;
It's the Kid of the Rio Grande.
There's nothing I'd like better
Than to shake young Kid Wolf's hand.

I'd also like to see Sing Lo
Playing a Chinese prank
On unsuspecting outlaws
Who have just robbed a bank.

There are others I could mention,
Such as Jones and Forty-five,
And also Señor Red Mask,
Who wants the River Wolf alive.

There are some in your fine magazine
Who haven't got their due,
Especially Billy and his Danger hoss,
Who, to me, are sure true blue.

But I have no special favorites—
I even like George Krumm—
And if I've left out any,
I'll kick myself, by gum!

Yours truly,
MARGUERITE WOOD.

Portland, Maine.

Pore George! He's sort o' gettin'
it in the neck, ter-night. Here's the
next one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Am sending you a
poem which I sure hope you will put in
the Wranglers Corner. It's about that
waddy, Buck Foster. Here it is:

BUCK FOSTER

Here's to Buck Foster!
When he horns in on a fight,
I hope that some hombre
Don't knock out his light.

Oh, he's sure one tough hombre,
And he always looks best
In that old shaggy bearskin
He wears for a vest.

Yours till the Whistlin' Kid changes his
tune,
KERMIT L. HAMMACK.
Cincinnati, Ohio.

Buck snorts an' starts tuggin' at
the ends o' his walrus mustache. He
ain't quite shore whether he ought
ter be mad or pleased at thet pome.
But we kind o' figures, from the
twinkle in his bulgin' brown eyes,
thet he likes it.

We picks up another one, then,
an' starts readin'. It's called "An
Open Letter To Ward M. Stevens,"
an' here it is:

Oh, how I wish I was out on the plains
ag'in,
Forkin' a broncho an' lookin' fer strays,
A-readin' yore yarns by the light of my
lamp ag'in,
A-talkin' with punchers 'bout ol' West-
ern ways!

Oh, how I wish thet the fences were gone
ag'in,
Clear from Chinook ter the border below,
An' thet I had time ter summer up high
ag'in—
Up where the cool, Western mountain
winds blow!

Oh, how I'm wishin' thet I could be young
ag'in,
Free as an eagle to wander my way—
A-kiddin' cow waddies around a camp fire
ag'in,
Eatin' hot biscuits an' drawin' my pay.

Oh, how I'm wishin' the times would git
good ag'in,
With ranchers in town ag'in lookin' fer
men.
When this panic is over, I hope it won't
come ag'in,
With gangsters an' bankers a-fillin' the
pen.

FRANK LEFFERTS.
Binghamton, New York.

After lookin' at the clock, when we finishes that, we sees we has time fer one more short one. Shufflin' through the stack o' mail, we comes ter this:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Here's a couple of little limericks that I made up about characters in W. W. W. I hope you can use them and that I'll see them in the Corner sometime.

There was an old waddy named Foster,
Who roped an old cow, but he lost her.

And then he did vow that he'd skin that
old cow,
If he ever again ran acrost her.

There's a wily and slant-eyed Chinee,
And a plenty-smart hombre is he.
He plays tricks on Buck, and at poker
has luck,
But most all he says is. "So be!"
Yours truly,

ED SANDERS.

Tucson, Arizona.

That uses up all our time. We starts puttin' away the letters that we ain't had time ter read, an' the waddies buckle on their gun belts an' head fer their broncs, ground-anchored outside.

The meetin' stands adjourned fer another week. THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

Trigger Trail

Novelette

By LEE BOND

A young waddy rides it with a pair o' low-slung Colts that he shore knows how ter handle. An' they git plenty hot at trail's end.

Sonny Tabor In Forbidden Valley

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

The most wanted young hombre in the West finds one place where he *ain't* wanted—till his six-guns clean out a nest o' skunks an' sidewinders.

Ghost of the Roaring Rebel

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

The saddle pards from Circle J tangle with a spook, but find out thet it ain't half so dangerous as a gun-slingin' crook who tries ter cheat 'em.

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Do not send me a single cent. Just send your name and address and I will send absolutely free, by return mail, postage prepaid, my book titled "The Thrill of Being Strong." I want you to have this book to read and to keep. I want you to see and read about the job I have done for others—I want you to read and know the job I can do for you. To learn all this costs you nothing but the 2c to mail me the coupon. If you act at once I will enclose a coupon worth \$1.00. This coupon has a genuine value of \$1.00 to every man who becomes one of my students. I will write you more about that after I hear from you.

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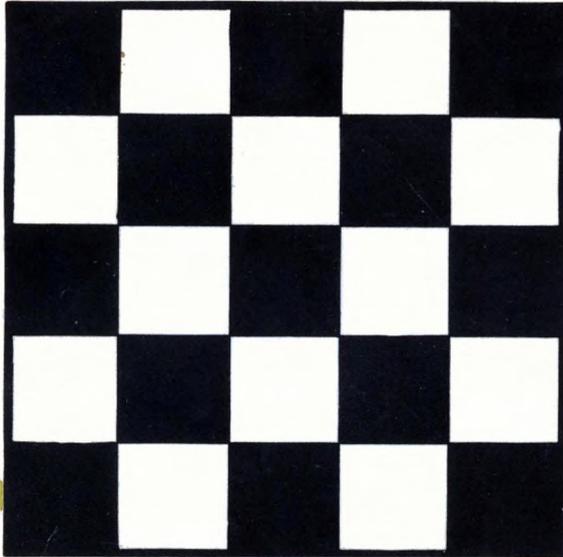
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