

STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST*

WEEKLY

NOV. 2, 1935

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

NOW
10¢

TRAIL BLAZER

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG



1725-1798
CASANOVA
Chevalier de Seingalt
 THE WORLD'S GREATEST
 LOVER



Take a tip from **CASANOVA**

HE left a trail of broken hearts from Warsaw to Naples and from Constantinople to Paris, this swashbuckling, diplomatic, engaging soldier of fortune known to history as Casanova. Women high and women low, women brilliant and women dull, all found him fascinating . . . And not the least of his charms was his astonishing fastidiousness. Centuries before halitosis was a household word, he realized that unpleasant breath was a fault that could not be forgiven even in him. Consequently, before he awooing went, it was his habit to chew the leaves of certain fragrant herbs that would quickly render his breath sweet and agreeable.

If halitosis (bad breath) were an uncommon condition, few would be concerned about it. Unfortunately, however, it is an ever-present threat. Everyone is likely to have it at some time or other for this reason: even in normal

mouths fermentation of tiny food particles constantly goes on. Unpleasant odors are released *without the victim knowing it*.

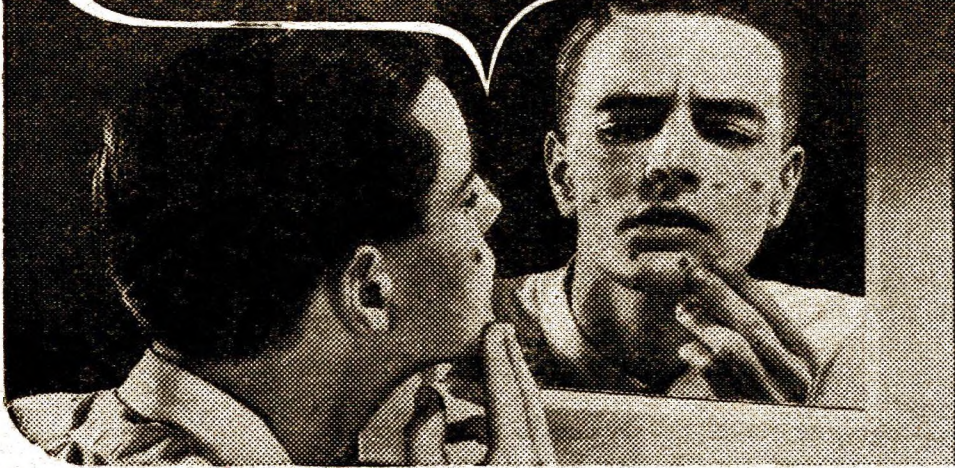
Don't take a chance

Since it is impossible to know when this condition is present, the wise course is to take sensible precautions against it. The quick, wholly delightful method is to use Listerine as a mouth rinse before any engagement at which you wish to appear your best. Because it is antiseptic, Listerine instantly halts fermentation. Then it overcomes the odors fermentation causes. The breath—indeed the entire mouth—becomes cleaner, purer and sweeter.

Keep a bottle of this delightful mouth wash handy at all times. It is your assurance that you will not offend others needlessly; that you will be welcome. Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, *St. Louis, Mo.*

Listerine puts your breath beyond offense
 QUICKLY CHECKS HALITOSIS

AND JUST WHEN I'VE MET THE SWELLEST GIRL



A new crop of pimples was always taking the joy out of things!



WHAT'S WRONG, TED? YOU LOOK ALL WASHED UP!

DON'T I KNOW IT! I WOULD HAVE TO GET A FLOCK OF CHIN BLOSSOMS JUST WHEN I WANT TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION ON SALLY!

IF THAT'S ALL—CHEER UP! I MEANT TO TELL YOU SIS SAID TO TRY FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST—3 CAKES A DAY AND PIMPLES VAMOOSE

HONESTLY? THEN ITS FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST FOR ME—IN A HURRY

2 WEEKS LATER



HELLO, TED—WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN THESE PAST TWO WEEKS?

OH, JUST OUT LOOKING TO MAKE SURE THERE WERE NO GIRLS AS PRETTY AS YOU—AND THERE AREN'T



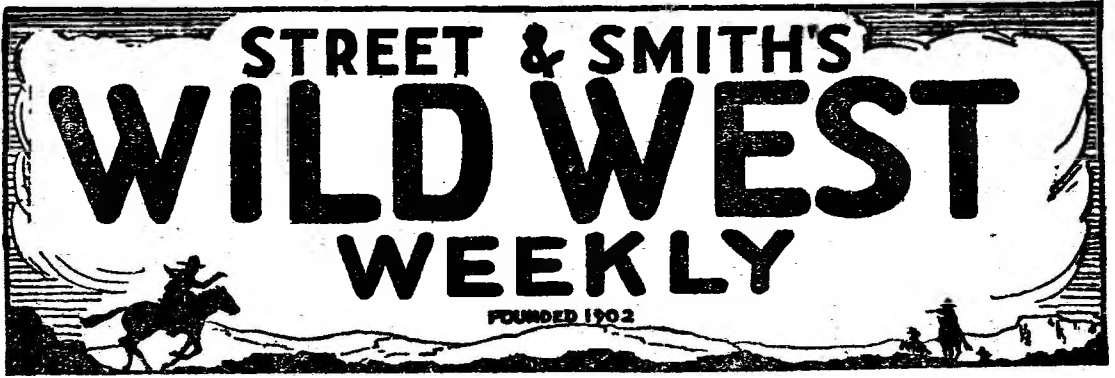
GREAT LADY-KILLER—NOW THAT HIS FACE IS ALL CLEARED UP—FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST SURE IS A PIMPLE CHASER

Don't let adolescent pimples spoil any of YOUR dates!

From about 13 to 25 years of age, important glands develop, causing disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons enter the blood. These irritate the skin, cause pimples. Doctors prescribe Fleischmann's Yeast for adolescent pimples. It clears skin irritants out of the blood—and pimples disappear. Eat 3 cakes a day until your skin clears.



—clears the skin
by clearing skin irritants out of the blood



Yearly Subscription, \$4.00 Six Months, \$2.00 Single Copies, 10 Cents

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Vol. 97, No. 4 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 2, 1935 Whole No. 1724

Cover Picture—Scene from
 "Trail Blazer" Painted by Rudolf Belarski

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Trail Blazer** *William F. Bragg* 10
 Startin' a rip-snortin' new series by the author o' Starr o' Wyoming'.
- Johnny Forty-five and the Border Imp** *Andrew A. Griffin* 64
 George Krumm still knows how ter make Johnny's troubles harder ter take.
- Gun Hawk** *Philip F. Deere* 97
 A driftin' waddy comes home—ter crooked work and gun play.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- The Bar U Twins Collect A Debt** *Charles E. Barnes* 39
 But afore they do, they have ter pay off some crooks with lead.
- Up on the Kansas Line** *Hal Davenport and
 Cole Collins* 50
 A young saddle tramp fights his way inter a good job.
- Captive Rangers** *Samuel H. Nickels* 85
 Keepin' Hungry an' Rusty captive is a tough—an' dangerous—job.
- Dogie Cantwell Saves The Pay Roll** 120
 The story is told in pictures and text.

BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

- Indians Fear Gold Miners** 63 **Roy Bean's Prisoners** 63
Bandit Loot Enriched Sheep-herder 119

DEPARTMENTS

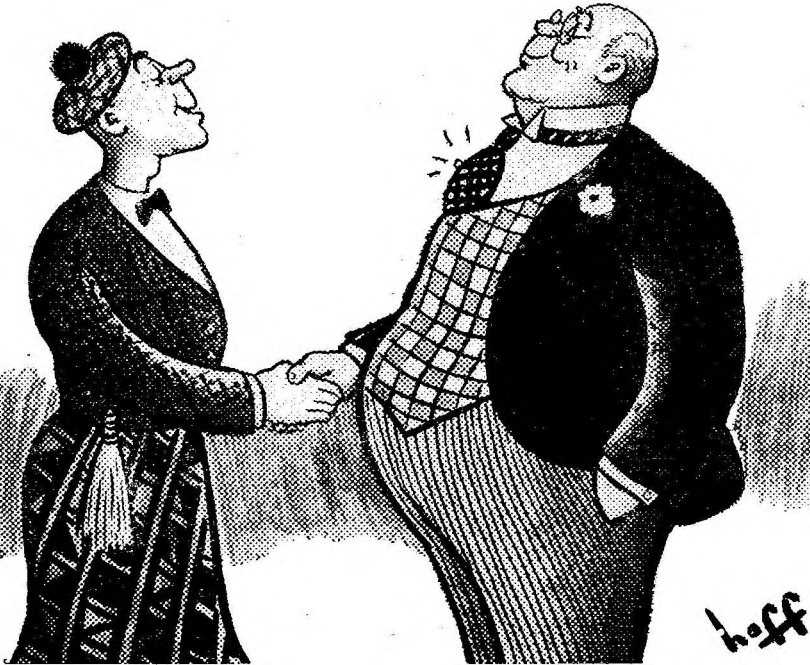
- Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral** 124
The Wranglers Corner 126

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“And only a dime”, says Sandy.

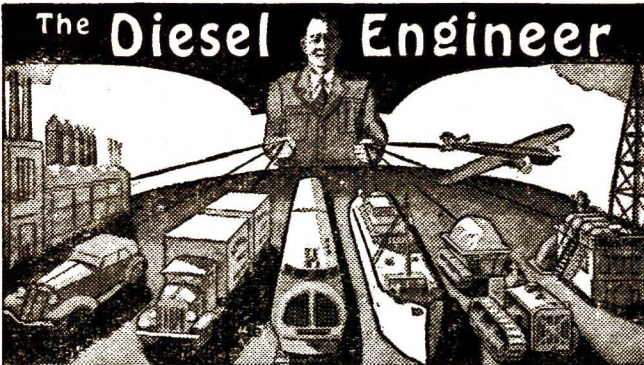
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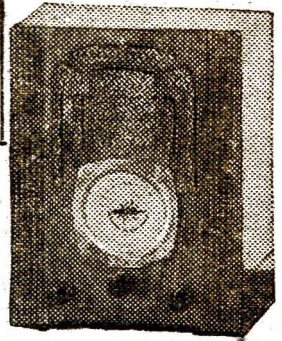


MOVIE GIVEN
BOYS, GIRLS

Big air cooled MOVIE, adjustable lamp neck, rewind and take up wheels. Uses 220 m, includes 275 cord, show bills, tickets, metal slide, and still pictures—11. Draw on slide a novelty, film and instructions. It's marvelous! *Leona & C. Harlow, N. H. says—'Big movie arrived O. K. We had a picture show all evening. Pictures were fine and clear. Want to earn more of your fine premiums.'* **STIMPLY GIVE AWAY FREE** beautifully colored art pictures suitable for framing with our famous White Cloverine Salve for cuts, burns, chaps, sores, etc., which you sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remit as per new premium plan book.
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OR BIG CASH COMMISSION

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NEWEST MODEL 5-TUBE RADIO
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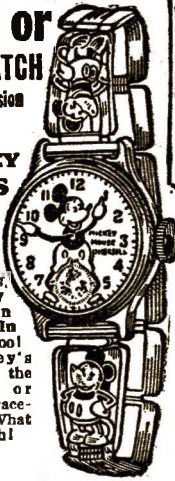


Big GUITAR or MICKEY MOUSE WATCH
Or Choice of Cash Commission
GIVEN

GIVEN

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Frank Telish, N. J., says—*'I am very much pleased with the beautiful Guitar.'*

Either Given

Simply Give Away FREE, pictures with famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE used for burns, chaps, etc., which you sell to friends at 25c a box (with picture FREE) and remit as per premium plan book.

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Or Choice of Cash Commission

HEADLIGHTS—BUMPERS—BRAKES
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BE FIRST! Frank George says—*'I didn't expect such an excellent wagon as the LINDY FLYER. Your company certainly gives good premiums. I am certainly pleased.'* **GIVEN** simply give away big colored art pictures with our famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE to friends at 25c a box (with beautiful picture FREE) and remit per premium plan book. MAIL COUPON NOW! WILSON CHEM CO., INC., Dept. SS-75, Tyrone, Pa.

MAIL COUPON NOW

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4.60-21	2.40	0.85
4.75-19	2.45	0.85
4.75-20	2.50	0.85
5.00-19	2.85	1.05
5.00-20	2.85	1.05
5.25-17	2.90	1.15
5.25-18	2.90	1.15
5.25-19	2.95	1.15
5.25-20	2.95	1.15
5.25-21	3.05	1.15
5.50-17	3.35	1.15
5.50-18	3.35	1.15
5.50-19	3.35	1.15
5.50-20	3.35	1.15
5.50-21	3.45	1.15

BALLOON TIRES

Sizes	Tires	Tubes
6.00-17	\$3.40	\$1.15
6.00-19	3.40	1.15
6.00-20	3.45	1.25
6.00-21	3.65	1.25
6.50-20	3.75	1.35
6.00-20	3.75	1.35
7.00-20	4.25	2.35
8.25-20	8.95	4.95

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Sizes	Tires	Tubes
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82x6	7.95	2.75
94x7	10.95	3.95
100x8	13.95	4.95

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

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Laxatives are only makeshifts. A mere bowel movement doesn't get at the cause. It takes those good, old Carter's Little Liver Pills to get these two pounds of bile flowing freely and make you feel "up and up." Harmless, gentle, yet amazing in making bile flow freely. Ask for Carter's Little Liver Pills by name. Stubbornly refuse anything else. 25c at all drug stores. © 1931, C.M.Co.

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HIGHWAY**

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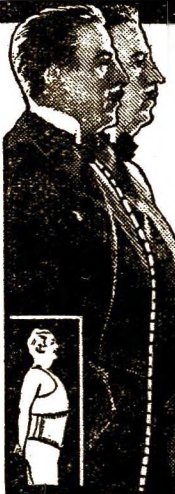
Name _____

Address _____

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

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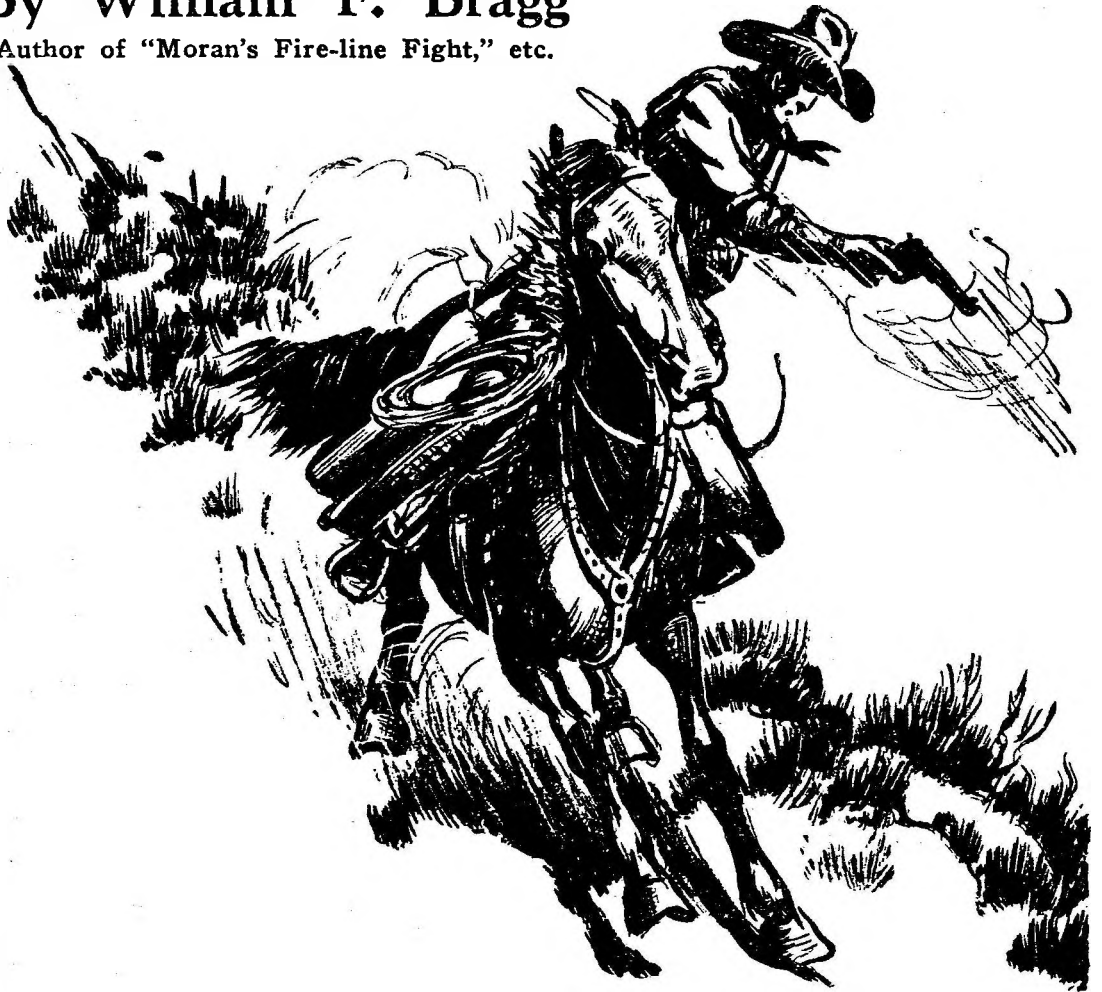
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CHAPTER I.

FOUR-LEGGED CYCLONE

AS Jeff Buckner topped the crest of the wind-swept divide that angled southward from the mighty rim of Wildcat Canyon, he checked his rangy gray pony with a sudden tug on rawhide bridle reins. There, plain to his sight in the damp soil, ran the trail of a horse.

Alone for a week in the solitude of the Broken Horn Mountains without sight or sign of mankind within forty miles, the tracks filled Jeff's mind with wonder, even a trace of

fear. For this was a wild land, and not long before, Indian war paths had ribboned through its black gorges and blue pine timber.

After the end of the Indian wars, Jeff had heard accounts of hard-eyed bandit gangs who hid among the peaks to plot their raids on scattered towns in the wide plains to the east or descended upon treasure coaches bound from Deadwood to the railroad at Cheyenne.

So it was the fear of a brave man, the knowledge that caution comes first in the mountains, that induced Jeff to loosen the long six-gun with

the white bone stock, in its holster, and then, before he spurred down the slope, to draw out and place his Winchester carbine across his saddle fork.

Jeff wasn't so old as years go. Down in Texas, not many months before, he had cast his first vote for president. But in the land of the Alamo, on its sun-baked cattle ranges, a man matures rapidly. He has to.

Jeff knew all the ins and outs of a longhorn's contrary nature. He had been put in his first saddle when only three years old, and horses were now his trusted friends.

Like many other young Texans, he had been furnished with firearms early, and his first hard-earned wages had gone to buy expensive

ammunition for practice. So when he took this strange trail, that cut down toward the broken ridges around Wildcat Canyon, he was preparing for trouble by putting his artillery where he could bring it into instant play.

Far below him, to the east, the spreading prairies, the mighty range of the buffalo grass, drowsed under the haze of summer heat. It was that drought, which had shortened the supply of water for cattle and horses, even men, that had sent Jeff up here among the timbered ranges on a quest for summer grass for the herds.

For a week, his solitary camp fires had gleamed beside sparkling trout streams that had never been looked on by white men. He had ridden along the margin of blue lakes fed by never-melting snow banks. He had looked upon a world of game animals—lordly elk, mule deer, even bighorn sheep high in the rims. And all so careless of the young rider from Texas that it indicated to



Jeff's range-trained senses that few men had ever come here.

Now, here high above the world where men dwelt and went about their daily labor, he struck the trail of a horse. And by the deep print of the tracks, and the fact that the animal had not turned aside to graze on the rich grass, he knew that this animal bore a rider.

The gray pony, although nervous in these rough hills because it had been bred and raised in a flat country, bore its tall master swiftly enough down the ridge. Years before, a forest fire had passed this way, and now it was a silent land of gray, scarred stumps and blackened down timber. But by following the strange pony's path, Jeff soon discovered that he could make rapid progress.

The thought came to him then that this was some secret trail known to a few of the mountaineers along the foot of the Broken Horns. This belief was confirmed when he reached a scattered growth of twisted jack pines at the bottom of the slope and found a dim blaze on one tree where years before, a war hatchet or pioneer's ax had bitten deeply into the trunk.

These blazes, through the ever-thickening timber which now became a heavy growth of tall, slim lodgepole pines, led him on toward narrow valleys and parks that broke away from the vast deep gorge of Wildcat Canyon.

He began to hear the hiss of swift water in the deeply cut channels of granite where creeks ran down to join the river. But all around him the forest was silent, and his pony's hoofs fell without sound on the carpet of golden pine needles.

Not even a deer broke away into the thickets. Nor did an excited hairy woodpecker with crest of red

give alarm to the wilderness of Jeff's coming.

But ever before him, where he could see the trail in damp ground, the tracks of the strange horse freshened. And Jeff knew that soon he would overtake the rider.

Where the timber finally ran out on the edge of a green meadow, he caught his first sight of the animal. Jeff had paused to scout out the way ahead before proceeding. Parks such as this were dangerous for lone riders. A bullet might come whistling from the opposite ridge, drop a rider off his horse as he jogged across the clearing.

So Jeff took his time. With tall, rawboned frame alert in the saddle, he narrowed his keen blue eyes and closely examined every clump of trees, each pile of broken granite that might conceal a hostile stranger.

Out of the timber across the park dashed a pony. A wildly excited cayuse, for it ran with a headlong gallop, careless of breast-high down logs and slippery rocks. It bolted down into the meadow, checked abruptly as trailing bridle reins whipped it around the knees.

Then it flung around and looked back with pointed ears. Jeff, watching closely, realized that here was a badly frightened horse. Even at this distance, it seemed to him that he could see the pony quiver from withers to flanks.

And more, it indicated to Jeff, that whatever had caused its terror, had also driven it to break away from its rider. Facing some mountain danger, a man afoot would be in hard luck.

Jeff threw in his spurs. As his gray raced across the meadow, swerving aside from patches of vivid green that denoted bottomless sourdough bogs, Jeff raised his Win-

chester breast-high, and with practiced skill, pumped a shell into the breech.

His gray passed the other pony without halting, but Jeff's swift glance told him the animal was a short-coupled black-and-white pinto, with a queer sort of saddle that consisted mostly of a glistening dark fur spread cinched on its back.

But alarmed that a man might be in danger of his life just over the hill, Jeff didn't pause now to look over the strange rigging. He put the gray up the dimly blazed trail, topped a rocky little ridge, and then abruptly halted.

Before, he had ridden through a land silent except for the distant boom of water and the moan of wind through high pines. But coming up from the valley below him was now a bellowing clamor like that of a sawmill running wild.

He heard the crash of wood as an undertone of this hair-raising roar. He didn't understand that terrible sound for he had never heard it before. But it informed him as to why the black-and-white pinto had stampeded from its master.

Jeff threw his own straight-shanked spurs into the ribs of his gray, but for the first time, since he had broken it to rein and saddle, the cayuse balked. It required the braided ends of Jeff's bridle reins to move it ahead.

Then it went catfooting down a slippery, brushy ridge, jumped a log, and sat back on its haunches. There it walled its eyes, snorted loudly, and Jeff felt under the saddle the snaklike writhings of muscles convulsed by terror.

Jeff was an honest youth. And he confessed afterward that what he saw in the bottom of the little basin frightened him as well as the horse.

A rude pen of logs had been built in a grove of stout pines. From this inclosure resounded the sawmill roar that deafened Jeff and drove his gray mad with fear.

For breaking from the pen where bottom logs had rotted away, a mighty brown beast with silvery tufts of hair on shoulders and chest had emerged like a giant from its prison. Before the strokes of huge forearms, chunks of wood six inches in diameter cracked like match stems. Rocks rolled and bounced from the animal's furious path, and inside the pen, the ground had been gouged up as if by a couple of gang plows.

Far down in the North Platte Valley, Jeff had seen one of these mighty animals at a distance as it feasted on the remains of a freshly killed longhorn steer from Jeff's own herd, the 7LX. It had fled before the gunfire of indignant punchers. But later, examining the carcass of the longhorn, Jeff and his puncher mates had marveled at the brutal strength of the brown raider. For it had broken the longhorn's stout neck with a single stroke of its paw.

This beast below him was the king of the mountains, one of the mightiest animals in all the world. Few lived that could face it. It was a silvertip grizzly.

It had entered the pen built among the trees to seize a chunk of meat hung at one end. At its first jerk on the bait, logs had tumbled down behind it. Trapped, the great bear had gone raging mad, and finding one weak underpinning, it had battered its way out.

The grizzly was a fearful enough sight to Jeff, but the glimpse of a man, apparently helpless on the ground, and only a few rods from the bear, sent cold chills racing up his spine.

He couldn't understand why the man was there, but he saw that the bear's victim was up on one knee and making preparations for a fight to the death. There was the glint of steel from a bared knife, the tensing of another strange weapon in the man's hand.

"I'm danged!" Jeff gasped. "That hombre looks to me like an Injun. An' what he's got in his hands is a bow. But how can he stop a grizzly with an arrow?"

Even the rifle that Jeff carried across his saddle, although it pitched a slug that would knock down a deer or an antelope, would have small effect on a grizzly unless the first bullet reached a vital spot. Jeff had heard of experienced hunters who turned aside from grizzlies unless they held all the advantage of ground in case their first shot failed to down the beast.

And here, while a silvertip clawed and roared its way out of an Indian bear trap, a red wanderer of the mountains, afoot, and hurt, hoped to save his life by driving an arrow.

Jeff hadn't hunted many bears. In fact, like plenty of cowpokes he had often remarked that he hadn't "lost any bears." But he had heard talk of hunters and trappers, and knew that the bear tribe is dim-eyed and depends largely on its sense of smell and hearing.

The Indian hunter knelt up the trail about forty horse lengths from the grizzly. The lay of the ground indicated that the animal, once clear of the pen, would retreat in that direction for back of the pen was a thick growth of timber and rock.

The Indian hadn't seen Jeff. The man's whole attention was centered on the grizzly. Easy enough, Jeff thought, to slip back over the ridge, try to forget that he had turned his

back on a man—even a red-skinned savage—in peril of his life.

But Jeff knew that if he rode away, he would never forget. Never again could he hold up his head before his mates, or assert that he was in all ways a man.

With a roar, the grizzly broke away the final restraining log. It reared up on its thick haunches for a moment, sniffing the breeze that blew strongly down the valley. It blinked its tiny, red-rimmed eyes, and Jeff saw the hackles of silvery gray on its thick neck rise stiffly. Then with a heart-shaking roar, it dropped to all fours, and with the speed of a galloping horse, lunged up the valley.

It had not seen the red bowman, but it had caught the hated man scent in the mountain wind. If a man tried to bar its way, then woe to that man.

But Texas in the saddle swept down the ridge on a frantic pony that sought to balk, but could not resist the ripping drive of expert spurs. Buckner had dropped his rifle. Here was no time for expert bullets. This was the hour and place for a roaring, flashing six-gun.

A man on foot made a small object. But the bear could easily enough see a horseman. It was Jeff's hope to attract the brute's attention, offer himself as quarry, draw the silvertip away from the man on the ground.

Blam! His six-gun roared like a cannon.

The taint of burning gunpowder stopped the bear in its tracks more than the flash of the Colt. It whirled around, and for its bulk of over half a ton, it moved with uncanny speed.

With red eyes on the mounted Texan, it came scrambling up the hill. Jeff saw that he had diverted

it from the original path of retreat that would have meant the battering to death of a man. But he was hard put to outrun the grizzly for his gray was crazed with terror and almost beyond control.

Jeff had cut down toward the bear, then turned on the space of a thin dime, and quartered back up the hill. He heard the sawmill roar, the crash and rattle of rocks, as the silvertip followed. He whirled in his saddle, lined the old bone-handled Colt, fired three quick shots.

Two went wild, but the third creased the grizzly's shoulder. The big slug stung it like a bald-faced hornet. It checked its gallop, reared up to slash with its paw at the injured shoulder.

On his panting pony, Jeff topped the ridge, put all his strength into a pull on the reins, and turned the bronc. That was to guide the cayuse down the hogback and so come into the wind as it blew from the grizzly. Thus the animal would have no scent of man to alarm it.

"An' I hope," Jeff gasped, "that the dang brute gits out o' the country. I've seen all the bear I want fer years to come."

Never would he forget that bristling, silvery-shouldered animal, with the bald face, that had almost dragged him off his horse as he raced up the hill. And sitting his shivering pony in a grove of trees, he was glad enough when he heard the receding crash of young trees in the forest that indicated the silvertip's wrathful retreat toward Wildcat Canyon.

Then Jeff patted his gray's wet neck, promised the little pony a week's rest for its nerves on good feed and water when he again reached the home ranch of the 7LX.

When he had got his mount under

fair control, he rode slowly down into the valley. And there he met the Indian he had saved.

The man still knelt on the ground. He wore beaded buckskin leggings, high moccasins that came almost to the knee and were worked in colored designs with porcupine quills. Around his straight black hair that was shoulder length was bound a fillet of red flannel in which was stuck a single hawk feather.

It was not until Jeff halted and looked down on this silent, savage wilderness specimen that he understood why the Indian had remained there in the path of a raging grizzly bear.

The Indian's right leg was twisted under him. And looking up at the young Texan through the coarse tangle of black hair, he said in a slow but plain-enough version of English:

"Pony, he scared of bear. Buck me off. Kick me in leg. Then run away."

Jeff could understand that even the best of horses will run wild when within sight or smell of a grizzly. His own faithful gray, his four-footed pal, Steeldust, had acted up some. So Jeff grinned all over his square-jawed, tanned face, and drawled:

"I reckon we *all* felt like runnin' away. But you was shore out o' luck, pardner."

CHAPTER II.

FIGHT FOR BUFFALO GRASS.

THERE was cold water in the valley. Jeff brought a hat full for the Indian. Then, riding cautiously so as to avoid the grizzly if the animal was still near, he crossed the ridge, roped the black-and-white pinto, and brought the stamper back to its master.

As he led the animal up the trail, he again examined the curious fur saddle and discovered that the hide was that of a wolf because of its bushy tail and blunt muzzled head, but it was buffalo-gray, a freak color, almost black.

"A fine saddle cover," he told the Indian, "but I never see a black wolf before."

The Indian had removed the moccasin from his injured right leg, and was applying a first-aid bandage of cold water and a pad manufactured from the tail of his red calico shirt. Before he answered the young Texan, he rolled down his leggin, strapped on his footgear, and then, although the effort made him grit his teeth with pain, stood up on his two legs.

They looked at each other for a long space, tanned young Texan in bullhide chaps, blue flannel shirt, slouch hat, and high boots. Young Indian—for the pinto's master was also young—in buckskin and calico, with a hawk's feather twisting in the wind.

Then the Indian said, tapping himself solemnly on the chest as he spoke:

"Me, Wolf Killer! You"—his keen dark eyes, almost veiled behind a forehead fringe of black hair, scanned the blue-eyed, lanky puncher—"you slow-elk herder."

The mountain Indians called the first white man's cattle "slow elk," and the term was familiar to Jeff for remnants of the various tribes that had once lorded it over the Powder River country still clung to lonely ranges like the Broken Horns.

"Heap slow elk," Jeff chuckled, and pounded his own chest with his right fist. "But not my name. Buckner. You sabe? Buckner."

The young Indian shook his head. "No," he said solemnly. "Buckner

for other men. To me—Wolf Killer—you are Trail Blazer. But for you, Wolf Killer would hunt no more. You have blazed his trail to safety."

Wolf Killer looked down toward the battered bear pen. And although not a ripple of fear broke the calm of his face, it was as if he reflected on the tragic fate that would have overtaken him if this stalwart herder of slow elk had not come riding into the fight.

Wolf Killer's leg was not broken, but the bad bruise caused by the half-broken pinto's hoof made it difficult for him to ride far. The two riders were glad enough to quit the bear-pen valley, but a mile on, where they found good horse feed and cold water in a tiny park on the rim of Wildcat Canyon, they made a night camp.

And there, sitting beside a small fire built in Indian fashion from quaking aspen sticks that gave out little smoke, Wolf Killer opened his heart to this new-found friend from Texas.

Jeff listened wide-eyed to Wolf Killer's story, wondered at this young brave's queer belief in good and bad spirits of the wild, of "medicine bags" that would prevent death in battle. And in slow, halting English, he then told Wolf Killer why he had come to far Wyoming from the Texas plains.

It was a simple enough reason. Jeff's parents were old. He had gone out as a mere boy to make his own way. The Southwest was settling up. He longed to provide a new home for his people. The Northwest offered new ranges.

So he had hired out as trail boss to the 7LX, a small cattle outfit owned by Major Bill Dawson which was moving north for permanent location. Dawson had offered Jeff a working partnership, if they should

come through the first summer and winter in good shape.

Another thing that Jeff didn't tell, but which had first aroused his interest in Wyoming, was the fact that his parents had once journeyed through this wild land in an early day when gold was first being mined in Alder Gulch and Virginia City in Montana.

The young married couple had worked hard, and finally started the long trip back to Texas with a store of raw gold in their strong box. They had hoped to buy a ranch on the Rio Grande and raise their children, for they had two infant sons, Jeff aged two years then, and his brother, Andy, a year older.

But on that long ride down the Bozeman Trail through the Powder River country, tragedy had overtaken the Buckner family and the others traveling with them.

The equipment consisted of a Concord coach drawn by four horses and driven by a mountain pilot called "Wild Hoss" Jones. In this coach had been stored a strong box containing the pokes of gold dust, and also the extra store of food.

The Buckners and another returning miner had followed the coach in a double-seated rig. Because Wild Hoss had taken a great liking to little Andy, the boy was riding this day with the old mountaineer.

Somewhere in the rough foothills east of these same Broken Horn Mountains, a savage attack had swept down from a gulch. Wild Hoss had turned his galloping teams toward the mountains. The Buckners and their miner friend had checked their horses, put up a brave defense.

They had beaten off the attack, but although they had then trailed the coach into the higher country, they had never again looked on their

son, the old driver, or their lost strong box filled with Montana gold.

Broken in heart and spirit, the old folks now lived down on the Rio Grande. It was young Jeff's hope that by settling in this country where his parents had lost a son and a fortune, he might find some clew to the fate of his brother Andy, and old Wild Hoss.

But it was a forlorn hope. Over twenty years had elapsed since that time. Even his father had been unable to furnish him with many clues outside of a rude map scrawled on a buckskin pouch by the wavering light of a camp fire.

Jeff's dad had drawn it to indicate the scene of the attack and the trail of the runaway coach into the Broken Horn Mountains. And at a trading post, far down the line, frontiersmen, when told of the battle, had charged it to the account of a raider known as "Red Hand," then watching the Bozeman Trail like an evil hawk.

But these same pioneers had not discovered whether this Red Hand was a painted Indian or a white man.

Jeff recalled this sorrowful story as he listened to Wolf Killer, for his father's buckskin map which was even then in Jeff's saddle pocket indicated a vast canyon like that of Wildcat River into which the coach had vanished. But he didn't tell all this to the young Indian for there were more important things just now than long-lost trails.

The 7LX needed water and grass for its cattle. The plains were burning up under the summer sun. Jeff's agreement with Major Bill Dawson provided for a partnership if he should successfully put the cattle through a year in new country. He must find grass to win out or

bleached bones would whiten the 7LX home range.

Wolf Killer listened intently to this talk of starving cattle. Then he drew out a small leather sack that was decorated with feathers, beads, and bits of the same dark wolf fur that adorned Wolf Killer's saddle.

"Trail Blazer," he told Jeff, "this is strong medicine. If my horse had not foolishly run away when he heard the grizzly's roar, and carried it with him, I would have driven a hunting arrow through the great beast's heart. I will go away from this fire and make medicine. And because you are my friend, it will show me the trail to much strong grass for your slow elk and your ponies."

So he withdrew into the shadows leaving Jeff by the flickering camp fire. Jeff had been told where the black-haired youth had won his name. He belonged to a wandering band of mountain Crows, and from boyhood he had devoted his life to trailing down the great wolves that killed colts.

All alone, he had trapped and taken the pelt of a famed black wolf. And so the aged chief, Striking Eagle, had bestowed on him an honored name, and the war drums had beaten and warriors had been told that Wolf Killer's medicine was strong.

"But it was kind o' weak around a grizzly," Jeff thought, with a grin. "Might work fer lobos, but not on bears."

He picked up Wolf Killer's bow and quiver of arrows. The bow was short, of a wood tough like osage orange, and braced with wrappings of deer sinew. The arrows had two varieties of heads—one of flint with jagged projections where it was

bound to the shaft, the other a more rounded head.

Jeff wondered at this difference, and Wolf Killer explained, when he returned, that the first with the jagged points was a war arrow, the second made for hunting purposes so that when driven into a game animal it could be withdrawn easily after the kill.

"But the war arrow," Wolf Killer said solemnly, "is for men alone. Like the porcupine quill it is hard to pull out. Warriors have carried such arrowheads in their bodies until they crossed the Big Divide. And on the battlefield, when warriors die, then those who kill them can claim scalps, because they know the arrows that stay in the bodies. Never is a war arrow used except to take scalps."

Jeff laughed. "Did you ever take one?"

Wolf Killer shook his head. "Those days are over. Striking Eagle and the old braves have told the young men of the days when the Crows fought the Sioux and Cheyennes. But now has come a new time with trading posts on the river and slow elk in the sagebrush. The buffalo are gone. The Crows to-day use only the hunting arrow to get their winter meat. Or pens like that where you saw the silver-tip."

"But you carry a gun," said Jeff.

Wolf Killer grunted scornfully. "Not mine," he said, "but one from Red Beard's trading post on the river. A trade musket, it is called, and it fires only one bullet at a time. It takes much powder and lead. I get my meat with the hunting bow, for Wolf Killer and his people are poor and Red Beard asks many furs for powder and lead."

Jeff, looking over the clumsy, brass-bound musket known on the

frontier as a trade gun, agreed with Wolf Killer. It was as awkward as a club, badly balanced, and when he looked through the barrel, he saw that it was a smooth-bore of the type deemed inefficient even in the days of Daniel Boone.

"Another fine trade by Beagler," he laughed, for Wolf Killer in referring to "Red Beard" on the river had indicated a veteran trader who had waxed wealthy through the years by cheating Indians and white trappers out of rich stores of beaver and buffalo pelts. Beagler's place was near the 7LX range at a spot on the river known as Wildcat Bend, and Jeff had once or twice encountered "Duke" Beagler.

"Now we will sleep," said Wolf Killer, "for my medicine has shown me the trail to grass for your slow elk."

The medicine had proved weak before a grizzly bear, but it did show a clear trail to Jeff Buckner. Shortly after dawn, he followed the Crow hunter down a sheep trail along the wall of Wildcat Canyon. He halted in a broad valley where grass grew knee-high to his horse and tall pines towered into the sky.

"There," Wolf Killer said simply, with a gesture of his bare, brown arm, "is your camp. May your people live here in peace."

"My slow elk will take on heap fat," Jeff said, as with sparkling eyes he looked over the broad pastures along the roaring river. Here he would win success, find a new home for his old father and mother.

From a thicket across the grassy flat, a gun cracked. A bullet tore past Jeff's head. He saw the young Crow swing his pinto, dash for cover.

But as Jeff reached for his rifle, a knot of riders emerged from the thicket. He saw the leader fling up

his right arm, and understood that the bullet had been fired as a signal for him to halt.

The riders came up on the run—four hard-eyed men in dusty hats, leather chaps, and spurred boots. Rifles were slung from their patched saddles in deerhide scabbards. Six-guns stocks glinted under the sun.

The chief, a rawboned man with a sandy growth of whiskers on his weather-beaten face, and a thin scar like the white welt of a healing brand running from his brow to the point of his right jaw, growled angrily:

"What's an Injun lover doin' here?"

Jeff wondered at the apparent desertion of Wolf Killer with his medicine that made him brave, but he wasn't the sort to ask sneering questions or back down before them.

"Down in Texas," he drawled, "we don't know much about Injuns. Not enough to claim we exactly love 'em."

"You was ridin' jest now with a feather duster."

"A young Crow named Wolf Killer."

The sandy-whiskered man snorted and his small, yellowish eyes flared with anger.

"Wolf Killer, hey? I've heard of him. A danged vagabond. A tramp of these hills."

Jeff laughed. "But his medicine is strong. He jest showed me all this summer feed for my cattle."

"Yore cattle? You figure to bring cattle down here?"

"If I can ever git 'em down that trail from the rim. Might have to put wings on 'em. But they need grass bad. An' I reckon when them ol' longhorns spot it down here, they'll shore come travelin'."

The sandy-haired man patted the

stock of his rifle, the gun that had fired the warning bullet.

"My name," he growled, "is Catamount Joe Rickins. Me an' my men here put in a month locatin' this grass. We've laid claim to it. We don't aim to have every dang Injun-lovin' nester jumpin' our range. So yuh don't *git* this grass, stranger."

"Why not?"

Rickins grinned, showing a line of broken yellow teeth. "Because," he said, "yo're not goin' back to pass the word. You will stay *right here*. An' when we finish with you, we'll take the hair off yore Injun friend."

CHAPTER III.

INTO WILDCAT RIVER.

HERE in this lonely canyon, a rider could die and men never know the cause. A murdered man could be thrown into the river or hurled from some rim into a black chasm where only wolves and coyotes prowled. Jeff Buckner, thinking of all this as he stared from the hard face of "Catamount Joe" Rickins to the equally stony faces of his three men, would not have bet a dollar against a thousand on his chances of living five more minutes.

But the strain of the Alamo ran in his veins. The time had not come when he would lay down his gun before superior force. He would fight until they dropped him.

But first, being a reasonable youth, he tried to talk things over with Rickins, discover whether the man held a just right to this grass before Jeff's arrival.

"No," Rickins snarled, "we're jest claimin' it, because we hold all the cards."

"Then you got no lease? You haven't homesteaded it?"

Rickins laughed harshly and

pounded his barrel chest with a caloused thumb. "Do I look like a blasted nester or sod-buster?" he asked. "They're the only sort that takes up land."

"Then, if yo're cattlemen, where are your cattle?"

Rickins opened his mouth and started to make a reply.

But a follower, a sharp-eyed man with a pointed face like a weasel, interrupted: "Joe, don't talk so much. Anyway we don't have tuh give a history of our life to that hombre. Let's not waste any more time."

"All right, Foxy," said Joe. "We won't."

And as Catamount's lean body tensed over the saddle, Jeff knew they had confirmed his death sentence. But they were not certain of this tall Texan's fighting quality.

Four men sat their horses in a rude half moon around him. Ahead, across the wide flat was an impassable river. At Jeff's back towered the grim walls of Wildcat Canyon. They had him, for while he downed a rider on one flank, he could be bored with a bullet from the other.

Catamount, being not over four paces in front of Jeff, held the post of greatest danger. It was likely that if Jeff threw down with a gun, he would fire first on the sandy-haired leader.

Four men had jumped one, but this did not mean they lacked courage. From their dress and equipment, Jeff made no mistake about that. One would have faced him as readily. But the job became easier with plenty of help.

"But one man or four," he whispered, and his lips felt dry and harsh, "they mean to kill me."

All along the Texas Trail, punchers told yarns about these fights to the death for grass. It

appeared that in this wild Western land, the right of a longhorn to live came before that of a man.

"But here and now," vowed Jeff Buckner, "I'm goin' to make a tall play to reverse that rulin'."

He couldn't get to the Winchester in his scabbard. But he packed a bone-handled Colt that held five lead-nosed shells. If he could rake it out in time, create some break-up in the gang's alignment, spur through, and find cover, then he might get to his rifle and make a stand-off. If the Indian hadn't quit him in the pinch——

Jeff grinned ruefully. Back in the hills, he hadn't hesitated to save Wolf Killer from a bear. But perhaps these experts on Indians were correct. It might be that Indians had different ideas from those of the whites when it came to saving their hides. At any rate, it appeared that Wolf Killer had fled with his bag of "strong war medicine."

Jeff lounged in his saddle. His appearance was deceptive. The men in front did not notice that his sinewy frame was ready for a spring into furious action. That counted in fast gun play—to deceive the opponent by apparent unreadiness, then get in the first bullet before the man could change his mind.

So Jeff lazed on his gait and as he drawled out a few words, he edged Steeldust around so that the horse stood almost broadside to Catamount Joe. The gang, eyes riveted on Jeff, assumed this was mere restlessness on the part of the pony. They had not noted the sly digs of Jeff's long spur shanks.

"Rickins," he said, "what you intend to do reminds me of a yarn told by my ol' dad down in Texas. Seems he was once passin' by these mountains, and he got sim'lar sort of reception. He didn't lose his life,

but he lost all he owned, and a boy to boot. Since that time he's never cared to come back here. He blamed it all on some dirty outlaw named 'Red Hand.' He never could find out whether Red Hand was an Injun or a paleface. But yore action to-day reminds me of how Red Hand would probably go to work. An' since I hate any skunk of that sort——"

Jeff was talking faster and edging his right hand down toward his holstered gun. The mention of Red Hand drew a startled grunt from Catamount, even a gasp from the sharp-eyed "Foxy," who watched from the left flank.

"Red Hand!" Catamount belated. "What more do yuh know about Red Hand?"

The question was not answered. At least not then in Wildcat Canyon.

Something whanged from the thicket behind Jeff. He heard a whiz past his right ear, and a long projectile cut the skin on the neck of Catamount's jug-headed roan. The animal bawled, bogged its head, broke into a spasm of wild pitching that threatened to bounce the big rider from his seat.

Catamount was taken by surprise, completely. He almost lost his gun. His reins were loose, and the horse had the best of it for many seconds as it pitched and bucked over a half acre of ground. It was mad with the pain of the arrowhead that had stung it.

Catamount yelled: "Git him, boys!"

But the boys were also amazed at their leader's plight. They could not plan new fighting strategy in the space of a split second. But Jeff Buckner, in peril of his life, could think as swiftly as does the drowning man who clutches a float-

ing straw. That whizzing arrow had given him his chance. He took it.

Even as a war whoop rang from the shadowy thicket, and Foxy whirled his horse to pitch a bullet, Jeff threw in his spurs. Steeldust, already standing with head turned down the valley, got under way.

This Steeldust had been noted in the Brazos country as one of the swiftest roping and cutting horses. The mere touch of steel, shake of reins, was sufficient to throw him into headlong gallop.

Steeldust started down Wildcat River. Jeff Buckner was half turned in the saddle. He had raked out his gun. One of Catamount's followers came to life, turned to trail the Texan.

Jeff's gun bellowed. The man pitched headlong off his pony, lit with a bounce in an old buffalo wallow.

"Spread out!" yelled Foxy, taking over the lead while Catamount fought things out with his roan. "Hold him agin' the wall whar he shows up plain."

Even as Jeff spurred Steeldust to greater speed, he gave Foxy credit for being a shrewder man than his rawboned chief. To the Texan's right towered the high straight canyon walls of gleaming granite.

There was little cover along the base. A man must gallop ahead with his body plainly outlined as a target. If he turned toward the river where rocks and trees offered shelter, then he would plunge straight into the gang's clutches.

"I got to stay on this trail," panted Jeff.

A bullet sang past him as the pursuit opened fire. The ground was rough, and on plunging, dodging horses, aim became uncertain. But this slug zipped past, close enough

to bring out the cold sweat on Jeff's brow.

He whipped around a second time in his saddle, pitched a return slug. His bullet dug up dirt ahead of Foxy's galloping pony. The man didn't turn. He came on, sharp face intent, trap mouth set like iron.

If he caught Jeff, the Texan could expect no mercy—and smaller time for life than Catamount Joe had given him.

The big leader had quieted his horse now. Filled with a rumbling rage, he was trailing his men. He knew that Wolf Killer had planted an arrow in his pony for he had drawn out the shaft from the animal's shoulder. But he believed that the young Indian, like most of his race, would have fled swiftly after bending the bow.

Catamount then heard with amazement a mighty war whoop, and tried to turn his contrary roan as a black-and-white pinto dashed straight down from the thicket. Wolf Killer sat lithely on the pony's back. His head was thrown back, and that yell like the savage cry of a big gray wolf rang back from the walls of Wildcat Canyon.

Catamount tried to turn his horse. But he was late. Wolf Killer didn't use his bow. He tilted the brass-bound trade gun. It boomed. Black-powder smoke burst forth. The heavy charge seemed to blow Catamount off his horse.

Jeff, turned in his saddle, saw the fall of the big leader. One moment Catamount Rickins was there, astride his plunging roan. Then he was down on the Wildcat flats with the kicking body of the horse across his legs.

The attack by Wolf Killer broke up the pursuit of Jeff. Foxy turned with a yell. His mate cut back. They went for the Indian, crazy

with rage at this bold move by a member of a race they considered inferior.

"Git that dang feather duster!" shouted the enraged Foxy.

But Wolf Killer didn't linger to be taken. He shot his pinto across the grassy flat, jumped it over the steep wall above the river, crashed into thin brush along the edge of the bullet-swift stream.

When Foxy and his comrade reached the edge, they checked and gazed down at the boiling current, white with foam where it struck black rocks like fangs above the surface.

"No man can live in there," said Foxy. "That Injun must 'a' lost his head. Tried to git away. Jumped his hoss in here. Got carried under."

His black-jowled mate broke in harshly: "Injuns are slick, Foxy. They know trails in this range we never found."

Foxy snapped: "If you think he got away, hunt fer tracks."

But there wasn't a horse track along the river's edge, only the prints left where the pinto had taken its death plunge.

Jeff Buckner, spurring at last into the shelter of gloomy pines at the end of the meadow where the flat narrowed down, also reflected sadly on Wolf Killer's apparent death. He had seen the youth's charge on Catamount, then witnessed the headlong gallop across the meadow, the leap over the river bank.

"He saved my bacon," Jeff said sorrowfully. "We are quits on lives. But I shore wish he hadn't tackled the river."

It made one impression on Jeff. He had heard for years that one white man could whip six Indians. It was the boast of his race, a dis-

regard of the fact that white men generally were better armed and with power behind them.

Well, Jeff decided, Wolf Killer had caused him to change his mind on Indians. They had their own peculiar methods of fighting. But when it came to the show-down, they packed plenty of pure-quill nerve.

He rested Steeldust in the thicket. And here he drew out his Winchester and sized up his back trail. Now, if Foxy and the remaining gang member wished to jump him, he would give them plenty action.

The timber around offered protection from bullets. He carried an extra supply of rifle ammunition in his saddle pocket along with the old map drawn on buckskin by his father.

"They'll have to come in here to git at me," he growled grimly, and hoped that they would try.

But far up the flat he saw the hostile riders grouped around Catamount and the roan. He began to wonder whether Wolf Killer had killed the rawboned leader with the awkward trade gun.

Time sped past as he waited. And then—at a harsh whisper from the shadows of the forest—Jeff almost jumped out of his boots. It was like a voice from the grave. For it was the voice of Wolf Killer. And had he not just witnessed with his own eyes the jump of Wolf Killer into a roaring river?

"Trail Blazer," the young Indian whispered. "You must not stay here. These men are bad, all the way through. They will follow your tracks. Lead fresh horses. Catch you and kill you before you can get out of the mountains. Come! Follow Wolf Killer."

"Wolf Killer!" Jeff gasped. "I—

I thought you had shore gone to the happy hunting grounds. I saw you jump into the river."

Wolf Killer showed himself in the gloom. He was on the pinto, and its sleek hide was wet. The brown skin of the young Indian glistened, too. But he wasted no time on explanations.

"If we get away," he said, "then there will be time for talk. Now we must ride. I know these men. They are bad of heart. They have forked tongues like the rattlesnake. But they are strong. And here and there in the mountains, they have scouts to touch off signal fires when strange riders pass."

By trails that looked possible only to mountain sheep, Wolf Killer piloted his friend down the black maw of Wildcat Canyon. They rode for long spaces not a foot from the edge of the driving river, booming its way down the dripping channel of black rock.

Then the trail began to mount the wall, and white marks showed to Jeff that it had been used before by horsemen. For iron shoes had scraped against the granite. But he said nothing for his whole attention was centered on guiding Steeldust along the perilous path.

Once Wolf Killer paused and looked back. They were high on a shelf, and through some freakish bend of the canyon walls, they had come within plain view of the big meadow.

"If they see us here," whispered the Indian, "they will try to reach us with bullets. Do not stop to fight back. For men are on our trail. I have heard the pound of hoofs on the rocks. They also know this trail for they have been in this land since the days when the Crows buried the hatchet with the Sioux and Cheyennes."

"Here that long? Almost twenty years?"

"So long," the Indian answered slowly, "has Red Hand ruled the mountains."

"Red Hand?"

Wolf Killer pointed to a mark that was not white on a smooth rock wall. It was a crude drawing of a human hand and colored red.

"That is his mark," whispered the Indian. "And where it stands, it is a sign to all men that he rules. Let us ride."

But Jeff proved contrary. He ranged Steeldust alongside the queer red emblem, mind afire to inspect this clew to the old mystery of the lost boy and the stagecoach filled with Montana gold.

Something spat against the rocks. Then, as Steeldust swerved back with a snort, Jeff heard the distant crack of a gun high above the rumble of the river.

"They have seen us!" cried Wolf Killer. "We must ride!"

Other bullets, pitched from a high-powered rifle, came near to Jeff and the Indian before they crossed the open stretch and turned a shoulder of the cliffs that blocked the fire.

It was difficult riding for Jeff. He burned with anger. He longed to turn and answer that fire. For he felt certain now that he had encountered some members of Red Hand's gang and thereby had proved that the attack on his parents had been staged by white bandits of the old days.

"If I don't do another thing," he vowed, as Wolf Killer led him over the last rim into the covering forest, "I'll bust up that gang an' plant this Red Hand under six foot of honest Wyomin' dirt."

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOSS OF WILDCAT BEND.

DUKE BEAGLER'S trading post on the first big bend of Wildcat River where the stream bursts from its canyon, looked as if it had grown into the brown gumbo soil. It was built of logs and for an acre around the cottonwood timber had been cleared away so that hostile Indians could not creep up to its walls under cover and fire their blazing arrows.

But that clearing had been done years before by other frontiersmen when Crook and Custer and Terry trailed the Little Big Horn and the Rosebud with their blue-clad troops. Now the tribes were safe on reservations or peaceful hunters of deer and elk in the shining mountains.

Duke Beagler lived here and waxed wealthy for he had the trade of the mountain Crows and also that of the newly arrived cattle outfits such as the 7LX and others that had driven thin longhorns up from Texas to get fat on the buffalo grass.

Beagler sat now in the main building of his post which years before had been the blockhouse. It was of logs and built in the shape of a square with an open court inside the walls. Here, in times of war, horses had been penned up, and water stored in barrels to put out any blaze caused by Sioux fire arrows.

But now Beagler sat on the porch of the north side of the square. Inside was his store with shelves lined with trade goods—bolts of red calico and boxes of beads for the Crows, cheap knives, condemned muskets from army sales, kegs of powder, demijohns of red whisky that wise men said was distilled by the Duke

himself from barbed wire and rattle-snake poison.

The Duke of Wildcat Bend was a huge-framed man with a great red-gold beard mantling his chest. His eyes were of a peculiar straw-green color and men who saw him in a rage said that his eyes then resembled those of a buffalo wolf in a fight. The green deepened, the black pupils expanded, and Beagler's hands, with coarse red hair on the backs, opened and closed like the jaws of a fighting wolf.

But it was seldom that men saw Duke Beagler in a rage. For the most part, he sat relaxed and lazily in his home-built armchair that was covered with elk skin and decorated with sawed-off antlers.

He wore a fancy buckskin shirt worked in pleasing designs by some Crow squaw who had probably been underpaid by Duke for her labor. For he had made his wealth by his horse-trading instinct, and it was seldom he ever paid full value for what he received.

This buckskin shirt, gorgeous with its fringe of leather and its belt worked in porcupine quills, fell almost to Duke's knees. He wore breeches of corduroy stuffed into high boots, and when he rode the range, a flat-crowned, wide-brimmed hat on his head. But most of the time he sat bareheaded. His long red hair fell to his mighty shoulders.

Unarmed, fair-spoken, lazy of eye, so Duke Beagler sat on his elk-skin throne and received his guests. For he had guests that day. He had ordered his man—a swarthy-faced hombre called "Gotch Ear"—to bring out extra chairs. Duke was all smiles for it was seldom that a woman—a white woman so young and pretty—came to Wildcat Bend.

"Major Dawson," drawled Duke, but his eyes were on the yellow-

haired girl with blue eyes who sat before him, "I'm glad you have settled on the river. I'm here to do all I can to help you."

Major Bill Dawson, late of Texas, and owner of the 7LX outfit, was a waspy sort of man, gray-bearded, sharply blue of eye, with a hatchet face, browned and beaten by years of sun and storm. He was dressed in cattlemen's rigging from slouch hat to spurred boots.

But because he had brought his daughter, Connie, with him, out of respect to the fair sex, Major Bill sported a long black frock coat, and a red necktie that he seldom wore because most of his shirts were of blue gingham and not made for standup collars. Also because of Connie, Major Bill had not strapped his trusty old gun belt around his scrawny middle.

"Mister Beagler," he answered, pawing the ends of his long gray handle-bar mustache, "I'm sort o' sorry I settled here. This dry spell has about got my critters starved out. If Jeff Buckner don't find summer feed——"

"You mean," Beagler asked, "that your range foreman is up in the mountains hunting grass?"

"Been gone a week. Hope the boy gits back all together. He ain't much acquainted with high mountains like them." And the major pointed through the open court entrance to the blue line of the western range glinting under the sinking sun.

"Dad," interrupted Connie, and she spoke with spirit for she was that sort of girl, "if Jeff didn't know much about mountains when he went there a week ago, you can bet he knows something now."

Duke stroked his red beard and smiled at the girl. She was a pretty one, he thought, and doubly so in

her neat costume of buckskin riding skirt, polished boots, and tan waist with white collar. She didn't wear a hat on her shining yellow curls for Connie had been raised under the hot sun of Texas as the clear brown of her face indicated. She loved the sun and the open range.

There were silver-mounted spurs on her boots, and not fashioned for ornament. Outside at the hitching rack stood a gray pony, own brother to Jeff's Steeldust. Connie had broken that horse to ride and she called it Matey.

But before the slim, cool-eyed Texas girl had made a saddler out of Matey, her father had worried and called the gray Brutey—and been much relieved when the job was over. But then he was always worrying about what Connie would try next.

Major Bill could outride a stampede, kill a rustler, or bet his life against a blizzard, and never miss a pull on the corn-cob pipe that he smoked most of his waking hours. But Connie was always making him forget the pipe and putting a cloud of worry in his eyes.

Now Connie began it again. She stripped off a glove, took a bit of paper from her pocket, and held it out to Beagler. Her blue eyes looked keen as daggers as she watched the trader's bland face.

"Read that," she said crisply. "It seems that other people beside ourselves are interested in Jeff's trip to the mountains. What do you think about that, Mr. Beagler?"

"Now, Connie," Major Bill protested, "Mr. Beagler wouldn't be interested in some fool writin'. It's jest meant as a joke on us."

But Duke Beagler smiled under his red beard and murmured it was a pleasure to help a lady. As he smoothed out the paper with his

strong white fingers, Connie noted that although Duke was not vain in dress except for his gorgeous buckskin shirt, he did wear a blazing diamond ring on the third finger of his left hand.

"Gracious," murmured Connie, and she smothered a laugh, "he must be engaged. No chance for me."

She didn't know that Duke was an old-time river gambler, and like many of his tribe, he wore that diamond as his last hole card. Many times, when his luck had run out, he had pawned the stone to gain a new bank roll. But for years, the diamond had remained on Duke's finger. He was too wise now to play with cards.

So he smoothed out the paper. And his green eyes narrowed as he read it. But his head was bent, and all the Dawsons saw was the quietly smiling face above a strange bit of writing. The note ran:

7LX. Stay out of the mountains. Or lose your stake.

The signature was in the form of a human hand painted red. Duke nodded and passed it back. He looked into Connie's clear eyes, then turned to her anxious father.

"I am glad you showed this to me," he said. "I understand things you don't, because I have been here for a quarter century. It's true the Indians have been sent to reservations. But they still hold onto the mountains as hunting ground. They hate to see the white man's cattle take the grass away from the elk and deer. In some ways, you can't much blame 'em."

Connie said shortly: "Those mountains are big enough to feed a half million cattle and leave plenty of grass for game."

"The Indians don't think so."

"Indians don't write notes like that."

"But some of the younger ones have gone to school. There is a mission school down the river. I know one young brave—they call him Wolf Killer. He talks and writes fair English. And he also"—Duke grinned and showed his white teeth—"he also understands all the Indian sign writing. Now a note like that might have been written by this Wolf Killer. Fair English. And signed with a red hand."

"Which means?" Connie asked.

"Which means sudden death in the sign writing. The red hand of the scalper, the brave who has just killed his man. *Red Hand.*"

"What you mean is that this Wolf Killer may be Red Hand or writing for such a man?"

"For years I have heard vague talk of an outlaw calling himself Red Hand. But that is all. This Wolf Killer is young. Red Hand has been in the mountains for at least twenty years."

Connie and her father became silent as they studied the note. They didn't know much about Indians. Duke's talk impressed them. If they drove their cattle into the mountains, for all they knew, angry tribesmen might stampede the herd, drive it over cliffs, ruin them.

"We're short on water and grass," whispered the old major, "but I'd rather take a chance on that than goin' busted in one night."

The major didn't care about himself. But he wished to give this daughter of his a good home, and then of course, he was thinking also of his young range boss who longed to do the same for his aged parents.

The Duke stood up grandly. And now he looked at Connie. She thought: "He is trying to impress me. He is quite handsome."

"Major Dawson," said Duke, "I have some influence with the Indians. I will try in all ways to keep them peaceful so that you can save your cattle. The Indians trust me."

A sinewy man in stained and faded buckskins stepped silently through the court entrance. The Dawsons gasped with surprise, for the newcomer had appeared without warning, and from the short bow, quiver of arrows, and the single hawk's feather above straight black hair, here was an Indian.

But the brave folded his arms, and gazed at Duke.

"Duke," he stated calmly, "the Indians do *not* trust you. You lie to these whites. My people do not trust you."

Duke Beagler's eyes took on that vivid green that denoted fiery wrath. He flung his right hand under the skirt of his long buckskin coat. The young Indian didn't move. He stood like a statue. But his eyes were wary.

"Few men know," he said, "that you carry a bowie knife there, or that you have a short pistol up your sleeve. They call you brave, Duke, because you walk unarmed in a dangerous country. But you are crafty like the wolf that I killed. You carry your weapons out of sight as does the wolf his fangs. But when you strike, it is like the wolf's sudden spring."

"Git out o' here, yuh dirty feather duster!" rasped Duke. "Git out o' here before I have yuh thrown out."

Wolf Killer laughed, which Miss Connie thought was peculiar in an Indian. Her reading had instructed her that Indians never laughed. But this one did, a real whole-souled laugh at glowering Duke Beagler. Then he looked at the girl and her father.

"Your young friend is at your

camp," he said. "He has found grass in Wildcat Canyon."

As silently as he had come the brave departed. Duke Beagler sank back in his chair. He sought to control his rage.

"That," he snarled, "is the Crow who sables fair English, an' also red sign paintin'. He's the one who might have writ yore note."

"You mean Wolf Killer?" Connie asked.

"Yeah. That was Wolf Killer."

"But he didn't look like the sort who would write threatening notes. He acted as though he would *talk straight* to a person's face." And Connie sniffed this last with a scornful look at Duke.

"Aw, that young bird's too smart fer a red," grunted Duke. "He's always tellin' his tribe—ol' Strikin' Eagle's band—that I don't give 'em a fair deal in a trade."

"Well——" Connie drawled.

"He's wrong. What would an ignorant savage know about business?"

"But you said he had been to mission school."

Duke shrugged and smiled. He had regained his temper. He saw the girl had taken up the Indian's cause. But then many paleface women were always showing sympathy for the tribes. Another time, he would talk her out of such ruinous ideas.

He stood up briskly. "You folks," he said genially, "must stay fer supper. A haunch of antelope, real potatoes that cost their weight in gold in Deadwood."

Major Dawson protested that they must return to the home ranch two miles down the river because of Jeff's return. But as they talked it over, a pound of hoofs outside the court checked them.

They turned. Two dusty riders

came in. One—a sandy-haired man—walked with a limp. A sharp-faced man supported him.

“Boss,” the sandy one growled hoarsely, “a hoss fell on my leg. Like to busted it.”

“He needs a big dose of linyment,” snapped the foxy-faced helper. “Have yuh got any medicine in stock?”

“Come in, gents,” Duke said smoothly. But his eyes didn’t look smooth as he excused himself to his guests and ushered this new trade into the store.

Connie and her father lingered to say their farewell to Duke. The major was worried about the queer message, and he hadn’t taken a fancy to Wolf Killer as had Connie.

“But dad,” she told him, “he must have helped Jeff. He told us we would find grass in Wildcat Canyon.”

“Suppose,” whispered the major, “that was jest a smooth plot to git us to drive our herd up into them mountains. Suppose they was run over a cliff. The Injuns could live all winter on the beef killed that way. An’ nobody to blame ’em.”

“But he knows Jeff.”

Major Bill snorted. “Jeff’s jest a kid like you, Connie. As Duke says, these Injuns are tricky. Mebbe this Wolf Killer pulled the wool over Jeff’s eyes. Git the herd up thar, kill ’em off. Two birds with one stone. Bust up a hated cattle outfit and git plenty winter meat at the same time.”

Connie had a snub nose and a firm mouth. She looked at her old dad and shook her head.

“You can’t fool me about that Indian,” she said, “any more than this smoothy, Duke Beagler, is fooling me. I don’t trust him, dad, any more than Wolf Killer does. Beag-

ler has been trading here for years. He’s not concerned with helping us. He only wants to make money.”

“He wants to help us because we’re white folks.”

Connie laughed. “Yeah?” she trilled. “Who was talking just now about having wool pulled over their eyes? And another thing, dad: Remember how the Indian called Beagler. Spoke about him being so tricky and hiding his knife and gun. That Indian knows a few things, dad.”

“How to write English an’ paint red hands,” grumbled her unconvinced father.

The argument might have gone on for hours. Sometimes Connie and her dad took a solid week to argue some question. It wasn’t settled ever until Connie got in the last word. She was that sort of girl. She put her hands on her hips now, faced her dad, and prepared to defend Wolf Killer to the last ditch.

But Jeff Buckner rode into the court on his gray. And Connie forgot about arguments. She turned toward him with a cry of delight. And her arms went out. Of course, she immediately withdrew this motion. But Jeff saw, and his eyes softened.

“Folks,” he began, “the boys told me I’d find you over here. I got good——”

Out of the store stepped two men. The sandy-whiskered one who carried a black bottle of horse liniment stopped in stupefied surprise at sight of the Texan on the gray pony.

His big hand opened, and the liniment bottle fell with a crash on the flagstones. His foxy-faced mate, swifter of action, tried to dodge back into the store. But Duke Beagler blocked the doorway.

There was an instant of sharp silence after the crash of glass. Then

Jeff Buckner shouted: "Connie! Out of line. Major——"

He had raked out his gun. He lined the barrel on the man who had dropped the bottle.

"Rickins!" he spat out. "Cata-mount Joe. You got nerve to come here. You an' yore friend, Foxy, after tryin' to kill me an' Wolf Killer in the canyon. You dirty coward! Go fer yore gun!"

Rickins, pale under his tan, fumbled with his holstered Colt. But Foxy shouted: "That man's locoed. We never saw him before."

Duke Beagler brushed past, flung himself between Jeff's gun and the two prospective targets.

"Hey!" Duke shouted. "You can't commit murder on my premises. Not unless thar's a dang good reason."

"Stand aside," rasped Jeff. "I see two coyotes that it wouldn't be murder to kill."

"There's a girl here. And her old dad. Don't fergit them."

That rattled Jeff, the thought that a stray bullet might drive into Connie or the major. In that short space, Foxy's gun roared. The bullet whanged past Steeldust. The pony snorted and reared.

Connie cried: "Go after 'em, Jeff."

But as Jeff leaned from his saddle to throw a return shot, the two dashed back into the store. Duke's form shielded them, although the big trader was making every effort to get out of bullet line.

There sounded a crash of glass. Jeff rode his gray ahead until Steeldust's head stuck into the store. He saw where Rickins and Foxy had jumped through a window. And Connie called to him that she could see two horsemen galloping away toward the river.

So Jeff arrived for supper. For

when he read the note signed with the red hand, he wouldn't return to the ranch. He remained to quiz Duke Beagler, for Duke knew all the past history of this wild region. Jeff even told a few snatches of his own experience in the mountains.

Beagler made no comments, only drawled once that he had known Rickins and the sharp-eyed man who was called Foxy Gull for several years. They had suffered losses of goods and cattle to thieving Indians. If they had made any gun play, they had mistaken Jeff for an Indian.

"Injun?" laughed the Texan. "Do I look like one?"

"Well, Foxy swore he'd never seen you before," Duke said.

"Do I look like a liar?"

Duke smiled affably. "Not much," he conceded. "But let's forget all that. Supper's about ready. New pertaters." He stopped, then he asked Jeff: "How did you find all that grass in the canyon?"

"Thet young Injun, Wolf Killer, showed it to me, after I saved him from the bear. Jest started ridin' across it, when—— *Bang!* Rickins or one of his pards took a shot at us. Then they allowed as how *they* were holdin' down the land fer another beef outfit."

"Did they tell yuh the name o' thet outfit?" asked Beagler.

Jeff shook his head. "Rickins started to," he said, "but Foxy shut him up."

It was after the evening meal where all had enjoyed new potatoes worth their weight in gold. Duke had been busy about his post. Connie, her dad, and Jeff were ready to ride to the home ranch.

Then horsemen, led by Duke's swarthy-faced henchman, rode into the post. They bore a silent burden wrapped in a blanket. Duke

barred Connie from the store. But the men saw by his upheld lantern that this burden consisted of Cata-mount Rickins.

"We found him down by the river," grated Gotch Ear, the henchman with shifty eyes darting from his chief to the grim Texans. "He's been murdered. Shot in the back."

Duke Beagler swore. "These reds are gittin' too dang bold. They hated Rickins. Look here. They shot him with a bow an' arrer. Druv it into his back."

He held up the shaft of the death-dealing arrow. Major Bill Dawson inspected it, wide-eyed. But Jeff Buckner watched in silence.

"This is a Crow arrow," said Duke. "I've seen it before." He frowned. "By gum! That wrap-pin' of red below the head. It's the sort carried by this Wolf Killer. He killed Rickins."

Jeff Buckner opened his mouth to speak. Then grimly he closed his lips. It wasn't until they were far on the homeward trail that he told Connie.

"Wolf Killer *didn't* kill Rickins. I'll bet no Injun killed him."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because he told me about the difference between war and hunting arrows. It seems a warrior uses an arrow with jagged shoulders to drop an enemy, and no other sort. But Rickins——"

"Yes."

"That arrow they pulled out o' Rickins's back blades was not a war arrow. It was a huntin' arrow."

CHAPTER V.

BLAZING THE TRAIL.

ON a green mountain meadow, a thousand gaunt longhorns were grazing slowly down toward the trail camp that had been set beside

a clear little creek. The old cook of the 7LX, a bow-legged fat man with jowls like a bloodhound and a hay-colored mustache drooping over his big mouth, was pounding out tough steak on the mess-box cover with a hammer, and pausing between blows to lecture the stubby, moon-faced horse wrangler who had just snaked up a pine log.

"Snapper," he boomed in the voice that could rouse forty sleeping punchers at daybreak for their breakfast, "thar's somethin' danged queer about this movin' to this canyon. How come our boss gits so all-fired friendly with Injuns that he trusts the hull outfit to 'em?"

"Snapper" Smith grinned as he coiled his rope. "You better ask Jeff. He's fond of provin' to you, Gus, that his judgment is good."

"Gloomy Gus" Grimes, the veteran cook, had put out beef and beans for Major Bill's outfit from the day the 7LX had been burned on the first longhorn. He would fight to the death for the outfit or any man on its pay roll. And when Gloomy went into action, he was a whiskered cyclone.

But he dearly loved to discuss the doings of other men, especially his superiors, and point out just where they had been wrong. He was one of the original "I told you so" lodge.

Snapper Smith, a younger, easy-going sort, thought the world of Jeff who was about his own age, and nothing pleased him better than to dispute old Gloomy's dire predictions.

"If the time ever comes," rumbled Gus, "when I figure Jeff Buckner has gone loco an' is pilotin' this outfit to ruin, I'll go right to Major Bill, and I'll shore tell him so. Even if Jeff and Connie happen tuh be standin' thar!"

"An' won't their faces turn red,"

chuckled Snapper. "I can see Connie breakin' into tears an' Jeff gittin' down on his marrer bones tuh pray fer pardon."

Gloomy sensed that Snapper was joshing him. He turned, flourishing his hammer.

"You young spriggins!" he roared. "Don't yuh git smart-Alecky with me. I ain't talkin' through my nose."

"Wouldn't be hard," murmured Snapper, looking at Gloomy's big sun-baked beak.

"I know what I've heard when I was buyin' a load of grub in Wildcat Bend. There was talk of some combine or big cattle company grabbin' up all the choice range in these parts. Seems they got plenty of money. They figure the cattle business is jest gittin' under way up here. If they can git control of all the land, run out small outfits like ours, then they'll be set to make big money."

"Where does that tie in with Jeff an' his Injun pals?"

"Injuns are pore as church mice. Suppose this big cattle combine wanted to git rid of our outfit without causin' a big row. They got plenty money. They could hire these Injuns to git us up here then stampede the hull herd over a cliff. We'd be out o' business in about thirty seconds."

Having delivered this big-gun broadside, Gloomy wiped his fat hands on his flour-sack apron and began to hurl steaks into the black Dutch oven. Snapper sat in silence for the cook had given him something to think about. Then the stocky horse wrangler showed his two gold front teeth in a wide grin and made answer:

"It's beyond me, all this talk of combines. I'm jest a simple-minded cowpoke."

"Yo're shore right on that."

"An' bein' jest wise enough to know that, I'm dependin' on Jeff Buckner to take us through. I don't figure to worry no more about it. If we git to grass, all right. If we don't, then at least I'll know this: Jeff went down with colors flyin' an' tryin' all the time."

With that, Snapper put on his hat, hitched up his chaps, and strode away toward his saddle pony to drive in the extra horses for night-guard mounts. The old cook watched him go, and his hard eyes softened.

"Faith," he whispered, "that would move mountains." For in spells between turning out flapjacks, old Gloomy had read a few books. "I wisht I was young enough tuh still have as much faith in men as young Snapper."

Punchers of the outfit came galloping up for their supper. There were eight riders in the bunch—lean, brown-faced Texans in leather chaps and boots. They didn't like this mountain riding, but they would go where Jeff directed.

Connie came out of her tent that had been erected near the mess wagon. She knew all these men, and they liked her. She got her tin plate, cup, and eating tools and speared a big slice of sizzling steak.

Her father came riding in from the herd. He had worried since the start of the trail from the home ranch down on Wildcat Bend. But Connie and Jeff had outargued him. Now the 7LX longhorns grazed not far from the wall of Wildcat Canyon.

Jeff's landmarks, as pointed out by Wolf Killer, had proved correct. At dawn, the herd would be drifted down game trails at the head of the canyon, trails known only to Wolf Killer and the mountain Indians.

"But that note of warnin' still has me guessin'," the old cattleman reflected, as he listened gloomily to the laughter around the camp fire.

The shadows lengthened. The horse cavvy rattled into the lariat corral with Snapper teasing the lag-gards with the popper on the end of his ten-foot bullwhip. That was why Snapper had received his nickname. He had once been a mule skinner and could handle the whip, with long lash and short stock, like any expert of the Santa Fe Trail.

"Fresh hosses!" Snapper called out. "You boys goin' to eat all night? Jeff an' Santone would like to eat."

Jeff and one of the punchers had stayed on guard. But it was a point of honor with punchers to hurry their eating and be first to relieve those who waited.

Plates banged into the round-up pan. Ropes whistled across the hunched backs of nervous ponies. Saddles were cinched on. But before the first man galloped away, Jeff Buckner came into camp. He gathered his crew around him, out of the earshot of Connie and her father.

"Boys," he half whispered, "I don't want you to talk about this. But every man jack's got to pack his guns to-night. I jest found somethin' tacked to a tree whar the herd is beddin'."

He passed the note around. It read:

The last warning. Turn back from the canyon.

It was signed by a sketch of a small human hand, colored red.

The men had heard enough of Red Hand to take some stock in this warning. They knew the old major was so worried that Jeff didn't wish to add to his anxiety. Also

they understood that Jeff blamed himself for allowing the girl to accompany the trail herd.

But all here were Texans, veteran cowpokes and warriors, and they believed themselves fully able to cope with any sneaking band of out-laws.

"You got any idea who this Red Hand is?" asked one lanky rider.

"If I had," Jeff said fiercely, "he wouldn't be able to write notes."

He didn't add that he had already pinned his suspicions on one man, a power in the land. That man had been too anxious to pin suspicion on Wolf Killer. The young Indian was now a fugitive, for evidence pointed to him as the killer of Catamount Rickins. Jeff had explained all about the difference between arrows, but other white men hadn't taken much stock in the story.

"If Wolf Killer was here," he told his men, "I wouldn't feel so uneasy. He knows all this range like a book. Not many men know about that secret way along the bank of the river. Seems there's a ledge jest under the water. If you stay on it, you can ride down the stream and leave no tracks. But it takes nerve. If yore hoss slips, you slide kerplunk into the foam. An' then it's good night."

He dismissed his men, then trotted into the camp. He turned out his mount and roped Steeldust. For this night, the critical night, he might need his best cayuse.

Old Gloomy and Snapper greeted him. Connie had gone to her tent. Her father was out with the herd. Gloomy was mixing up a great pan of sourdough bread for these 7LX punchers ate enough at each meal, he declared, to keep Stonewall Jackson's army fat for a month.

He gestured with his big mixing

spoon as Jeff ate. "Well, you decided to go down into that canyon?"

Jeff shrugged and speared another steak. He was hungry. If he had to fight, at least he would go into battle with a full stomach.

"I tell yuh," Gloomy went on, sinking his bared arms into the dough, "I'm plumb scairt to-night. I got a sort of seventh sense that tells me trouble is bankin' up like thunderclouds in front of the moon. It's time fer cowpokes to look to their guns and hosses, an' honest cooks like me to qut this range business and hike fer town whar we can git a nice easy job fryin' hamburgers fer a bunch o' generous drunks in some quiet saloon."

"I can see you enjoyin' a job like that," said Snapper. "Nothin' to worry about. Shucks, you'd be back on the range in twenty-four hours."

"Naw!" rumbled the old cook. "I tell yuh I'm plumb scairt tuh death. I'm as nervous——"

Blam! From black timber above the camp, a gun flashed.

The orange burst of fire lit up the pines. A heavy bullet banged kerplunk into the pan of dough. Flour and batter flew up. It covered Gloomy's face, dripped from the ends of his mustache. He jumped a foot in the air, then he began to claw the stuff out of his eyes.

But his angry rumble didn't denote fright. For Gloomy was doing a war dance and roaring: "Wipe out my eyes, so I kin shoot! The dad-blamed outlaw that ruined my bread——"

His sight cleared. He swooped under the wagon, jerked forth an ancient rifle that appeared to weigh about fifty pounds. He cocked the hammer, slammed the stock against his shoulder.

Snapper Smith, six-gun drawn, leaped just in time to knock down the barrel.

"Hold yore fire!" he shouted. "Yo're apt to jump the cattle!"

Jeff Buckner, after a hasty yell to Snapper to watch the camp, had drawn his Colt and rushed toward the timber. When he got there, he found another note pinned to a tree.

Carrying it to the fire, he scanned it by light from blazing pine knots. It read:

Talk's past. You are through.

It was signed by the red hand. As Jeff scowled over the threat, he heard a light step behind him. It was Connie. He tried to hide the note. But she took it from him, read it.

"I'm not a child," she told him. "This concerns my father, you know."

Gloomy Gus, raging over his ruined pan of dough, wished to go into the timber after this Red Hand coyote. Snapper Smith would have followed willingly. But Jeff told them to stay in camp.

As they stood by the fire, anxious of heart, two horsemen rode into the light. One was Major Bill. The man beside him, on a sorrel lathered from hard riding, was Duke Beagler. The two checked their plunging mounts.

"Beagler here," shouted Major Bill, "has made a hard ride to warn us of trouble. He says he has got word from his scouts that Wolf Killer an' his gang are out to stam-pede our critters."

"That's right," barked Duke. "I dang near killed this sorrel gittin' here."

"You didn't by any chance pack a rifle big enough to ruin a pan of sourdough?" Jeff Buckner rasped.

But his sharp eyes glimpsed no sign of a heavy rifle on Beagler's saddle.

"I'm here to help you," growled Beagler, and he stared at the young Texan with his glowing green eyes. "Don't git me wrong, hombre. I'm here to help you."

Night had fallen as they talked for mountain darkness comes swiftly after the sun has gone down. The big stars blazed like lanterns. Gloomy Gus threw another log on the fire. Sparks flew high.

"Be careful," Jeff warned. "The cattle are spooky. Anything might jump 'em!"

Even as he spoke, a shot cracked in the night. Then another. He heard a sudden booming yell that was cut off abruptly by the thud of cloven hoofs hitting hard ground. Every man there knew that sound. They had heard it before on the trail.

"The herd's jumped!" shouted Major Bill.

"I want a hoss!" rumbled Gloomy Gus.

"So do I!" cried Connie Dawson.

But Jeff Buckner seized Snapper Smith by the shoulder. "You stay here," he rapped out. "Don't let Connie quit camp. You an' Gloomy stay on guard!"

Then he was up on Steeldust and riding like the wind into a roaring night where gun flashes flickered like fireflies. But the crashing reports were drowned out by the mighty rumble and confusion of a thousand big longhorns running wild.

CHAPTER VI.

FIRE IN THE MOUNTAINS.

IN making camp that night, Jeff Buckner had used wisdom in selecting a bed ground where the ground rose toward the canyon rim. If the herd stampeded, in his judg-

ment, it would run down hill and away from danger.

"That is," he panted, as he galloped, "if it was a natcheral stampede."

But he knew, from the direction of the run, that the longhorns were galloping across the two-mile stretch between the bed ground and the high walls of Wildcat Canyon. If punchers didn't check them, the Indians would have plenty of winter meat.

As Jeff passed the ragged rear of the stampede where weaker animals ran with long horns clashing and eyes rolling in weird fashion, he caught up with a rider. Instantly his six-gun pitched into line. But the other's shout informed him this was "Santone Pete," one of his trusted men, and a cowpoke who acted as straw boss when Jeff was away from the herd.

"They shore tricked us!" Santone bellowed above the boom of hoofs and clash of horns. "Fired from timber back of the herd!"

Jeff dashed up on a little rise with Santone pounding at his heels.

"You see anybody?" he asked of the lanky, hard-eyed Texan.

"Caught one glimpse. Funny-lookin' hombre. Looked like he was wearin' feathers."

"Injuns?" Jeff asked, but his heart felt heavy.

Had he been tricked by Wolf Killer? So the major and Beagler would assert. But he couldn't believe that, although here was a trusted man offering evidence. Still, Jeff reflected, Rickins had been killed with an arrow.

"There's no reason," Jeff rapped out, "why a white outlaw shouldn't kill a man with an arrow or wear a war bonnet so he could throw all the blame on the Injuns."

"No reason," Santone Pete agreed

grimly, "but he shore must 'a' gone to lots of trouble."

"They been doin' a hull lot of note writin'."

"Yeah. Scarin' us."

Then Jeff and Santone forgot about the cause of the stampede. Their present duty was to check it. For that, they had ridden clear of the run to lay their plans. Plenty of fast and gallant riders, they knew, were ahead, firing in the blinking eyes of galloping longhorns, rattling their slickers to turn the lead and convert the run into a pinwheel mill before it plunged over the canyon rim.

"Git what men you can!" Jeff snapped. "Pick out a thin point halfway back. Try to split the herd."

"What fer?"

"That'll save half of 'em from goin' over the wall if the boys in front don't make a mill."

"But you?"

"I'm ridin' the rear."

Jeff didn't add that his reason for staying here was to fight off any further attacks. He had reasoned that the attackers would not start anything from the direction of the canyon for that would aid in checking the run. If Red Hand's gang tried a new move, it would be launched on this poorly protected rear.

Santone galloped away. Jeff spurred down to cut out stray bunches of longhorns on the flanks, head them back from the canyon. He had lost sight of the major and Beagler.

He regretted this. He had hoped to accuse Duke of being Red Hand or very closely connected with the outlaw. But Jeff possessed not one iota of proof against the Wildcat Bend boss—nothing except his in-born belief that Beagler was a sly

crook. And that was based solely on the man's accusation that Wolf Killer had murdered Rickins.

So far as Jeff knew, there wasn't a 7LX puncher near. All the crew had ridden instantly for the lead at the first bawl of the panicky lead steer. That was correct range custom. Cowpokes knew that a stampede couldn't be checked by staying in the dust of the rear.

"Yet here I ride," grumbled Jeff. "An' if they don't start a mill, an' we lose the herd, plenty of men will wonder why I was 'way back when it happened."

He refused to believe that he had lingered near camp because of Connie. That spirited girl would have been the first to reproach him, or any other man, for setting a guard over her. Connie considered herself capable of matching her wits or gun against any man or woman on this green footstool.

Jeff could look back toward the blaze of the camp fire. Its steady glow gave him comfort. For there would be two good men on watch.

"Ol' Gloomy an' Snapper!" he whispered.

Then a rattling roar shook the ground. Flames leaped high above the camp. There came a series of popping reports like a distant Fourth of July celebration.

"They've jumped the camp!" groaned Jeff. "We had two cases of ammunition in the wagon! It's explodin'!"

This then was the rear attack. At that great glare in the rear, and the explosion of cartridges, the rear of the stampede quickened its run, bunched up on the lead where a line of hard-riding men fought to cut through the middle of the herd and turn the leaders run.

In the great orange glow, created by the blazing mess wagon, Jeff saw

the forms of horsemen boldly outlined. They were tearing toward him. He groaned as he saw trailing feathered bonnets on the heads of these hostile riders.

"If they jumped the camp," he groaned, "they must 'a' got Snapper an' Gloomy. And that would mean Connie."

Alone, he turned to bar the way of the oncoming gang. They didn't know that a lone horseman had lingered in the rear. Nor could they spot Jeff easily. There was no fire behind to outline his tall figure.

Awaiting his chance, he sat with spurs ready to plunge into Steeldust. The hostile riders rattled up, turned to charge past the drags of the stampede.

Then Jeff Buckner threw in the steel, drove his pony down the steep slope. He hit the knot of galloping riders like a cyclone. His six-gun was out but he held his fire for some of the horsemen might be Snapper, Gloomy, or Connie.

A man's stirrup caught his own. In the light of the stars, he saw that this wasn't a friend. The man was bare-waisted. His face was painted black. He wore a hawk's feather in his hair.

A war ax flashed down toward Jeff's head. His coming had taken the hostiles off guard, but they had quickly rallied.

Jeff's left spur jumped Steeldust away from the sweep of the hatchet. The scalp yell shrilled in his ear. But he flashed his gun in a cross-armed drive and shot the painted rider off his horse.

High above the thunder of hoofs, he heard the high-pitched cry of Connie Dawson:

"Jeff!"

They were circling around her gray horse there in the gloom. But Buckner, fighting mad, cut straight

through the mass. He was locked for a moment in a press of shoving horses. Guns banged around him. A Colt barrel struck his right shoulder and almost knocked him off his horse. But before his six-gun dropped from numbed hand, he caught it with his left, went into blazing action.

"I'm comin'!" he shouted.

Riders crashed into the battle. A big gun was roaring like a cannon. Jeff, dazed with battle, believed it was Gloomy's old Henry rifle. He fancied he could hear the sharp yell of Snapper Smith.

Then he spurred Steeldust up a rise of ground and found Connie Dawson. Her wrists were tied to the saddle horn. She had been gagged but the bandanna had slipped off, allowing her to call to Jeff.

With a snarl, the painted gang turned on the girl and her defender. But a heavy gun was roaring from the rear. And two panting riders came up beside Connie and Jeff.

Far away in the lead of the stampede, a line of fire ran along the rim of Wildcat Canyon.

In the gloom below the slope, a man shouted: "Them longhorns will turn back!"

He spoke the truth. The cattle would not rush through that blaze that spread with incredible speed along the granite rim from pitch-soaked torches touched to dry jack pines.

The stampede came back. It crushed out the fire that had converted the 7LX mess wagon into a bonfire. But better to lose a wagon than a herd.

Back came the whole 7LX outfit; Major Dawson, even Duke Beagler.

Connie was sobbing that she had tried to escape the vigilant Snapper and Gloomy. She had slipped away

from camp on her gray mount. The gang had captured her. Gloomy and Snapper, pursuing, had left the camp unguarded. But Jeff was glad they hadn't turned back to put out the fire, but had come to his aid.

They close-herded the longhorns all night. There came no more attacks. Duke Beagler argued that the Indians had started the whole business. But old Santone disputed this. He had seen an Indian rider on the rim of the canyon, touching off jack pines with flaring torch to check the stampede.

At dawn, they checked up on the scene of battle where Jeff had rescued the girl. They found what remained of a man. He was painted and feathered.

"That's the man I shot off his hoss last night," said Jeff.

"An Injun," Duke Beagler said triumphantly.

But under the paint, they discovered the sharp features of Foxy Grull. In a quiver on his back they found a dozen hunting arrows but not one of the war type. Arrows, as all there recognized, of the type that had been used to kill a Cata-mount Rickins.

"I remember now," Jeff said slowly, "that Foxy did most of the bossin' down in the canyon. Cata-

mount was the fightin' man. But he talked too much. Mebbe that's why they killed him. He talked too much."

Santone, further examining the mauled body of Foxy, found a buckskin pouch hanging from the man's belt. Inside were paints made from mountain mineral and vegetable dyes of the sort used by Indians to decorate skins and sign paintings.

"Plenty of red," Beagler said slowly, and he stirred the form, that had been already trampled under a stampede, with his boot. "Do you reckon," and he looked squarely with his green eyes into Jeff's face, "that this here is the noted Red Hand?"

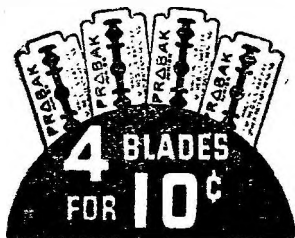
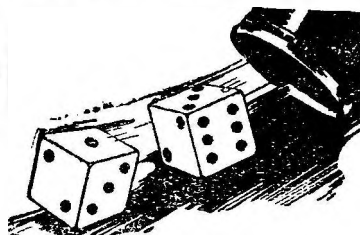
Jeff shook his head. He was thinking of a lost brother, of the coach filled with Montana gold. If this was Red Hand, then he would never unravel that mystery.

"I got reasons for hopin' it ain't," he answered.

Waal, Jeff Buckner shore is livin' up to that name Wolf Killer give him—Trail Blazer. He's blazin' the trail fer the 7LX outfit—blazin' it with gunpowder and lead. Watch fer his next adventure. Yuh'll find the story of it in next week's issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

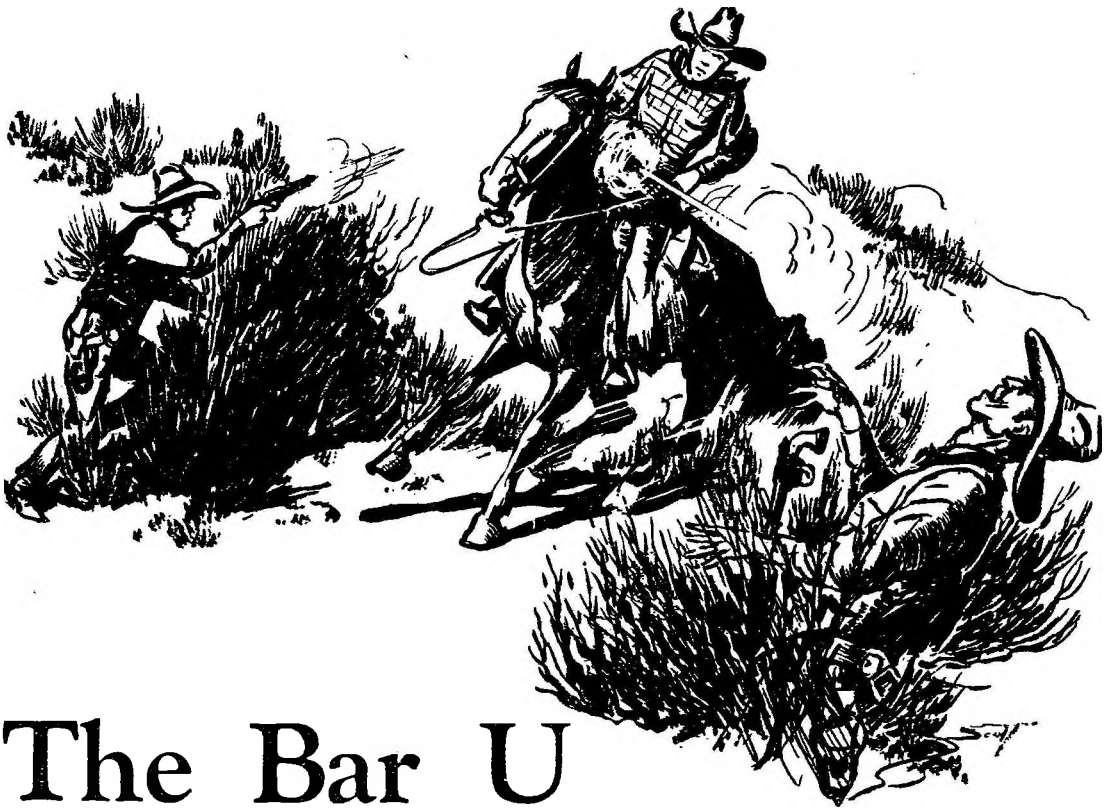
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PROBAK JUNIOR



The Bar U Twins Collect A Debt

By Charles E. Barnes

Author of "Utah Jack Meets The Bar U Twins," etc.

TWO hard-bitten hombres reined up and dismounted, on either side of the dim trail, and waited. Their narrowed eyes glinted evilly as they watched the approach of the lone rider on a blaze-faced sorrel bronc.

"He ain't nothin' but a slick-ear kid, Thug," contemptuously grunted a lanky, broken-nosed jasper.

"So was Billy the Kid," growled the squat cutthroat called "Thug." "Appearances is deceivin' sometimes, Lefty. I notice this hyar innercent-lookin' younker is sportin' a pair of .45s, tied down in gun-slinger style."

"He won't git no chance ter use 'em," sneered "Lefty" out of a cor-

ner of his catfish mouth. "The boss give us orders ter keep the range clear of prowlers till he makes a clean-up of this Slash L spread. I aim ter foller instructions."

"Waal, keep yore cutters shucked till we find out who he is," said Thug. "Mebbe he's a range dick."

"All the more reason for bumpin' him off," Lefty rejoined in low tones as the youth on the sorrel halted in easy-speaking distance.

"Hyah, Baby-face!" Thug called out with a sneer on his flat, scar-seamed countenance. "Whar does yuh think yo're goin', an' what might be yore name?"

Jerry Carter, for it was one of the

famous Bar U twins, stared solemnly at his questioner before replying. Despite the fact that he was of powerful build, and had square jaws and firm, clean-cut lips, there was something trustful and childlike in the expression of the blond, blue-eyed youth. That harmless look had fooled many a tough hombre.

"My name might be Jesse James, but it ain't," Jerry answered slowly. "An' where I'm goin' is my own business."

"Is thet so?" jeered Thug. "Waal, Mr. Smart Aleck, we'll make it our business ter see thet yuh go whar yuh cain't do no mischief."

Jerry Carter saw a swift glance pass between the two cutthroats who barred his passage. Whatever their object might be in getting rid of him, there could be little doubt of their murderous intentions. And the young waddy noted with a chill of dismay that they stood well apart on opposite sides of the narrow trail. They certainly had him at a heavy disadvantage.

"'Pears like yuh jaspers are hon-in' fer trouble," Jerry said, lowering his slim right hand till it hung close to the ivory butt of a six-gun. "What's goin' on down here, a rustlin' job?"

Snarls of rage warned Jerry Carter that his shrewd guess must have been close to the truth. These gunmen certainly looked like crooks. And if cattle were being stolen from this Slash L Ranch over which both Tom and Jerry Carter, the Bar U twins, were riding by separate routes that day, then it was their business to stop it. For old Jim Landers, owner of the outfit, owed considerable money to the twins' father, Sam Carter, and only by the sale of his cattle could Landers pay the debt.

Jerry Carter suddenly found himself wishing that his brother Tom was there to side him. He was in a tough spot. But Tom was swinging around several miles to the westward, aiming to approach the Slash L ranch house from the opposite side, and meet Jerry there.

Sensing that the set-up was perfect for their purpose, the two crooks were rapidly working themselves up to the killing point. Neither hombre seemed to feel any doubt of his ability to beat this harmless-appearing young waddy to the draw and the death shot. The ruffian called Thug growled a vicious oath as his blunt fingers closed over the black butts of a pair of long Colts.

At the same moment, Lefty's hand darted to the notched six-gun holstered on his lean left thigh.

"Git the dirty cow dick!" bawled Lefty.

Brang-bang-bang! Three gunshots blended in one terrific blast that shook the ground.

Jerry Carter slowly slumped in his saddle. As a black cloud settled over him, blotting out his senses, he caught a brief glimpse of a raw-boned ruffian balancing for an instant on wobbly knees, eyes staring, before pitching headlong to the ground. It was Lefty, and there was a blue-edged hole squarely between his wolfish eyes.

Then Jerry tumbled from his mount and lay in a crumpled heap in the trail.

Thug, the only one of the three now left on his feet, gazed around him in wide-eyed consternation. His big hairy hand shook as he fumbled a still smoking Colt back into its thonged-down holster.

"Blazes!" gasped Thug. "Thet baby-faced kid was a whiz. We had him dead ter rights, an' he downed Lefty afore he got his cutter clear

of leather. An' would 'a' got me if I'd been a foot closer ter Lefty. I jest barely plugged him in time ter make him miss."

Thug slogged slowly across the trail to the body of his ill-fated partner in crime. The latter's horse was standing close by, anchored by the loose-end bridle reins which Lefty had dropped to the ground when he had dismounted before the holdup.

"I'll load him on his hoss an' pack him down ter the house," Thug muttered to himself. "But I'll leave thet snoopin' kid hyar fer the buzzards."

II.

Tom Carter, the other Bar U twin, rode across a sage flat in the late afternoon. He was mounted on a blaze-faced sorrel bronc that was a dead ringer for the one that his brother Jerry had been riding that day when hard luck overtook him.

In fact, everything about Tom and his outfit was an exact copy of Jerry and his rig. A stranger would have found it impossible to detect the slightest difference in the solemn-faced twins. Even their own father, old Sam Carter, who owned the big Bar U Ranch, up in the Eagle River country of Wyoming, was often puzzled to tell them apart.

Besides Tom's wide-brimmed gray Stetson, checkered shirt, and black batwing chaps, which were a match for those Jerry wore, he had the same innocent expression, the same muscular build, and the same strong features as his brother. Frequently, however, a smile or a wide grin would quirk the corners of Tom's firm mouth.

And that grin of Tom's was the only way by which one Bar U twin could be told from the other. For Jerry never so much as cracked a

smile, but always looked as solemn as a graveyard owl.

At a light touch of Tom Carter's dulled spurs, his sorrel bronc quickened its pace from a running walk to an easy, ground-eating lope.

"The sun's slantin' down, an' Jerry will git ter the Slash L ranch house ahead of me an' wonder what's happened," Tom told himself.

But in spite of his hurry, the young waddy missed no detail of his surroundings. His keen blue eyes presently discovered a sizable herd of cattle being held in a shallow, bowl-shaped depression about a quarter of a mile to the southward of the course he was following.

"Looks as if old Jim Landers has done finished his round-up an' is holdin' the herd, waitin' fer a buyer," Tom reflected.

A few minutes later, a ranch house and outbuildings of weathered logs came in view as Tom rounded the shoulder of a low ridge. He pushed on, to halt at the open front door of the rambling old house.

"Hello the house!" Tom hailed, an uneasy feeling creeping over him as he waited for an answer.

Then the doorway was filled by a hulking figure in dirty range garb. A horse-faced hombre with shifty, close-set pale eyes and a reddish stubble of wirelike beard.

"What yuh want?" rasped the burly ruffian, bending an evil scowl on the newcomer.

"I got business with Jim Landers, owner of this spread," Tom Carter announced coolly. "Happen he's around here somewheres?"

"Naw, he ain't hyar, nor likely ter be," the big jasper replied with a sneer. "He's done sold this outfit ter me, lock, stock, an' bar'l, an' hit the trail yonderly. Got anything ter say about it, afore yuh start ramblin' on yore way?"

Tom Carter's blue eyes narrowed, glinting frostily.

"I got plenty ter say, fella," he retorted. "Landers owed the Bar U Ranch of Wyomin' fer a bunch of dogies thet he bought last spring an' agreed ter pay fer at round-up time, when he sold his prime critters. I'm here ter collect."

"Haw-haw, thet's a danged good joke on the Bar U," guffawed the horse-faced hombre.

"I don't see no point ter the joke," Tom Carter said solemnly. "Yuh still got the critters, an' they're security fer the debt."

"Like heck they are," blustered the self-styled new owner of the Slash L. "Yo're plumb loco if yuh think thet Brute Jiggers—thet's me—is payin' ary debt fer thet ol' codger of a Landers."

Tom Carter studied the tough hombre facing him for several moments. He was pretty well convinced that something was wrong at the Slash L. Such shady business as selling mortgaged cattle and skipping the country didn't fit old Jim Landers's character as Sam Carter, father of the Bar U twins, knew him.

"I'd like ter see the bill of sale thet Landers give yuh fer the stock yuh bought," Tom said evenly.

"I'll show yuh the business end of a .45, yuh dang slick-eared dude!" snarled "Brute" Jiggers, clawing at the heavy six-gun he wore in a tied-down holster.

But the husky cutthroat was in for the surprise of his evil life. Before his own gun was half clear of leather, he was staring in popeyed amazement and alarm at a long, ivory-stocked Colt that had almost magically appeared in Tom Carter's slim right hand.

"If yuh was thinkin' of drawin' thet hogleg all the way, yuh better

fergit it, Jiggers," advised the innocent-looking young waddy.

With a bitter oath, Jiggers opened his clawed fingers and allowed his weapon to slide back into its holster.

"Yuh'll never leave this ranch alive, blast yuh!" the beaten cowboy threatened hoarsely.

"Mebbe I ain't wantin' ter leave jest yet," retorted Tom Carter. "I rode a lot of trail to collect thet dinero Landers owes my fathèr. I aim ter take it with me when I go, or else cut thet herd I saw back yonder in a sink fer Bar U critters."

Before the argument could go further, a thudding of hoofs coming toward the ranch house from the opposite side caused both men to pause and listen. Brute Jiggers's little pale eyes brightened hopefully. It was evident that he expected the approaching riders to be members of his own gang.

But Tom Carter was less easy in his mind over the new arrivals. It was time for his brother Jerry to join him here at the Slash L headquarters, as they had agreed upon when they separated earlier in the day. This must be Jerry, now. But if it was, who could the other rider be? There were two horses, by the sound of the hoofbeats.

The approaching horsemen were already near at hand, however. And to make matters worse, Tom saw to his dismay that several cowboys were coming from the direction of the herd he had discovered a little while before. They were spurring their mounts in what was apparently a race to see who would reach the house first.

"If thet's Jerry comin' from tother direction, we'll have ter fight our way out of this mess," Tom muttered under his breath. "An' if it ain't him——"

Further doubt was cut short by

the sudden arrival of the hitherto unseen riders from the eastward. Not daring to take his eyes off Brute Jagers, Tom Carter couldn't turn to face the newcomers. But he read his fate in the sardonic jeer that came to Jagers's red-bristled face.

"Yo're jest in time, Thug!" bawled the burly jasper in the doorway. "Keep this smart kid covered. If he don't drop that .45 an' sky his paws, drill him!"

"I got him," growled Thug, who had whipped out a six-gun and aimed it at the middle of Tom Carter's broad back. "Who the heck is he, an' what's his game?"

"Says he come hyar ter collect fer some cows thet ol' Landers bought from his pa up in Wyomin'," Jagers replied. Then suddenly noticing the lead horse and its grisly burden, he snapped, "But who's thet corpse yuh got roped on Lefty's bronc, under the slicker? What's happened? It cain't be——"

"Yeah, it's Lefty," Thug cut in callously. "He stopped a slug o' hot lead. But I downed the young snooper thet killed him. Left him fer buzzard bait, back up the trail."

Tom Carter felt his heart almost stop beating as he heard Thug's cold-blooded account of the deadly battle. Could it have been Jerry that was killed and left for the scavengers of the range? With the color draining from his tanned, boyish face, Tom let his big Colt slip from his fingers. He was at the mercy of his enemies.

III.

An oath of satisfaction rumbled in Brute Jagers's corded throat as he slogged forward and snatched the second gun from his prisoner's holster. Thug had already swung down from his saddle and was pick-

ing up the weapon which Tom Carter had dropped on the ground.

"Git down offn thet bronc," rasped Brute.

As Tom Carter obeyed the order, half turning to dismount, he came face to face with the squat cutthroat called Thug. It was the first time that the latter had got a front view of the prisoner. The sight seemed to strike him dumb.

For a long moment, Thug stared with bulging eyes, like a man who suddenly sees a ghost. His heavy jaw slacked open. He gasped in utter amazement.

"It cain't—be him!" Thug exclaimed. "It—it jest ain't possible. I killed him myself less'n an hour ago."

Brute Jagers whirled on his henchman. "What's eatin' yuh?" he growled. "Yuh act plumb locoed. What yuh talkin' about, nohow?"

But Tom Carter understood. He had seen that expression on men's faces before. Thug, the killer, had mistaken him for Jerry. And that could mean but one thing—the young fellow that Thug had shot back yonder in the trail *was* Jerry.

Thug rubbed his weasel eyes with a grimy hand as if trying to brush away some fearsome apparition. He turned uncertainly toward the scowling Jagers.

"Why—why, thar's somethin' wrong hyar," he mumbled. "This hyar harmless-lookin' slick-ear is the spittin' image of the snooper thet killed Lefty. Must be the same jasper. But how kin he be, when I left him daid?"

Apparently, there was no doubt in Brute Jagers's mind as to what had happened. He shook an angry fist at the still perplexed Thug.

"Daid, nothin'!" he roared. "Yuh dumb fool, yuh only *thought* yuh

killed him. He played 'possum on yuh, an' high-tailed it down hyar by a diff'rent way soon as yuh left him. An' it's dang lucky fer us thet he came ter the house, 'stead of ridin' back ter town fer a sheriff."

"Mebbe yo're right," Thug agreed sullenly. "But now I aim ter fill him so full of lead he won't be able ter climb on a hoss an' ride."

Jaggers nodded, his little pale eyes glittering venomously.

"We'll git rid of him, an' anybody else that stands in the way of our cleaning up a big bunch of mazuma," he muttered.

"When do we start with the herd?" asked Thug.

"Come daylight ter-morrer," Brute said. "Yonder come the boys a-foggin' it ter the house fer grub. Thet means they done got the critters rounded up."

With his mouth half open to speak, Thug suddenly stiffened, listening. Leaving Jaggers to hold a gun on Tom Carter, he ran to a corner of the log shack and peered around it.

"Hombre comin' on a black hoss," Thug called out as he turned back after a moment of tense watching.

Brute Jaggers sprang into action. Grabbing a coiled rope off the saddle of Tom Carter's sorrel, he moved swiftly to the captive's side. A cocked six-gun in his right hand menaced the Bar U waddy with instant death if he made a wrong move.

"Git down on the ground, pronto!" Brute rapped savagely. "Now, Thug, hog tie him quick. We got ter git him under cover afore thet jasper gits hyar. No tellin' if it might be a John Law."

Thug leaped to obey the summons. Tom Carter found himself shoved roughly to the hard ground, his hands and feet bound. His blue-

dotted neckerchief was crammed into his mouth and securely tied in place as a gag.

"O. K. Grab a holt of his legs an' let's throw him inter the back room," Brute snapped as Thug deftly finished the roping job.

With the burly crook boss grasping his shoulders and Thug his feet, Tom was carried into the ranch house and dumped on the floor of a small inside room that opened off the main front room. The door was then shut and bolted behind the two hombres, who rushed back outside the house.

"Haze these hosses down ter the corral," Brute Jaggers panted. "Thar's the boys down there, now, unsaddlin' their brons. Git a couple of 'em ter help yuh strip the riggin' off these hosses an' carry Lefty's corpse inter the saddle shed. Make it look as if everythin' is all right round hyar."

Thug leaped into the saddle of his own mount and grabbed up the reins of Tom Carter's and the dead Lefty's horses. In a couple of minutes he was down at the corral, in the midst of several hard-bitten rannies who were jumping to help him.

Up at the house, Brute Jaggers leaned carelessly in the open front doorway, rolling a quirly, as the mysterious stranger rode up and halted.

"Howdy!" the newcomer greeted Jaggers in friendly manner. "Mr. Landers?"

Brute Jaggers merely grunted, neither claiming nor denying that he was the real owner of the ranch. But the shifty gaze of his pale eyes made a swift inspection of his visitor. No star was pinned to the man's calfskin vest, he noted with relief. A prosperous-looking, middle-aged rancher, from appearances. Had a

shrewd but honest face. Forked a rangy buckskin cayuse.

Curiosity as to the stranger's identity rode Brute Jagers hard, but he was cautious. He drew a match across a leg of his greasy overalls and lighted his quiry. No invitation to dismount was given the rider of the buckskin.

"Name of Scott—Dave Scott," the stranger announced. "I'm a cattle buyer. Dropped into the bank in Sageburg yesterday, and they told me you had sent word to have a buyer come down and look over some prime beef critters you was wantin' to sell. That right, Mr. Landers?"

The change that came over Brute Jagers as he heard this surprising news was nothing short of astonishing. The surly expression on his ugly, red-stubbed face was quickly wiped off by a leering grin that was meant to be cordial. Such luck as this seemed too good to be true.

Here was a buyer ready to pay over a big sum of cash for the herd that he had expected to be compelled to drive a long distance and sell for half its actual value on account of not daring to appear in any regular market with stolen cattle.

"Right you aire, Mr. Scott," Jagers cunningly agreed. "I was hopin' yuh'd come. Got the critters herded out on the range about a mile from hyar."

The cattle buyer glanced at the westering sun.

"Reckon we got time to go count them, if they're that close," he said. "I'd like to close the deal to-night, so I can ride on down to the Half Diamond Cross Ranch below here and pick up a bunch of cows. I'll hire some waddies here to drive both lots to the shippin' point for me, startin' in the morning."

"Thet suits me fine," Brute Jagers hastened to say. "Jest wait a minute till I saddle up a hoss an' I'll go right with yuh."

It was nearly an hour later that Brute Jagers, passing himself as Landers, rode back to the Slash L ranch house with the cattle buyer.

The burly crook was in high good humor. In his chaps pocket he had a roll of yellow-backed gold currency that was big enough to choke a cow. In return for all that dinero he had only needed to forge the name of Jim Landers, rightful owner of the ranch, to a bill of sale.

"I'll be leavin' you, now, Mr. Landers," Scott, the cattle buyer, said as the two riders reached the rambling old log house. "It's high onto sundown, and I got to push this buckskin bronc of mine plenty fast to reach the Half Diamond Cross by dark. So long!"

"Sorry yuh cain't wait an' have a bite ter eat with us," Jagers responded as the other wheeled his mount and started away. "But I'll be seein' yuh ter-morrer when yuh come by fer the critters."

Easing his bulky figure from the saddle, Brute Jagers dragged his spurs into the house. There was an evil grin on his whiskery face as he muttered to himself.

"Thar ain't nobody goin' ter see me round this dump ter-morrer nor no other day ag'in," the big crook said under his breath. "I aim ter put some jaspers thet know too much out of the way, then vamoze."

IV.

In the mouth of a brushy draw, less than a hundred yards from the Slash L ranch buildings, Jerry Carter dismounted and left his horse in

a clump of piñons. The sun had just slid behind a western peak, but the afterglow was still lighting the rugged range land.

"Tom must 'a' got here long afore this," Jerry muttered to himself, "but after what happened to me this afternoon, I reckon I better go careful."

The husky Bar U puncher was still suffering from "what had happened." His head ached as if it would split, from a scalp wound that had come within an ace of finishing him. But long after he had been left for dead by the murderous gunman, Thug, he had regained his senses and come searching for his brother Tom.

A fairly heavy growth of chamisa and greasewood made it possible for Jerry to approach a log shack without being seen. He figured it was the bunk house. If he could surprise a waddy or two in there, he might get a line on what was going on here before showing himself at the main ranch house.

Crouching low, Jerry crept up to a rear window of the shack. Peering cautiously through the dirty glass, he was unable for a moment to discover any sign of life in the place. Then a slight movement in a bunk on the opposite side, caught his keen eyes. The light was poor in the low, narrow room, but Jerry made out the outlines of a man's body, apparently bound. Could it be Tom?

Hastily sliding the window sash back, Jerry crawled through the opening. In a moment, he was beside the bunk, bending over a gray-haired man whose wrists and ankles were tightly bound.

"Who are yuh?" hopefully asked the elderly prisoner, as Jerry quickly slashed his bonds with a pocket-

knife. "I know yuh ain't one of the ornery gang thet's grabbed my ranch, else yuh wouldn't be comin' in through the window."

"I'm Jerry Carter——"

"Son of Sam Carter?" cut in the other, sitting up and gazing at Jerry's solemn face. "Then yuh come ter collect the money I owe yore pa."

Jerry nodded. "Thet's it, Mr. Landers," he said. "Me an'——"

"But I can't pay yuh," the Slash L owner again interrupted, dejectedly. "A murderin' cow thief by the name of Brute Jagers has done took possession. He dry-gulched a couple of my waddies an' scared off the other two. I reckon he aims ter kill me an' drive off all my critters soon as he gits 'em rounded up."

"Mebbe it ain't quite thet bad," Jerry said. "We'll see kin these rustlers be stopped, afore they do any more damage round here."

But a cold fear gripped Jerry as he thought of Tom and what his brother's fate might already be. Was the latter a prisoner in the house, or——

The sound of footsteps approaching the bunk house put an end to further discussion.

"Hide yoreself, quick!" Landers whispered excitedly. "It's one of them skunks comin' ter bring me some grub."

Jerry Carter shot a hasty glance around the bare room. Small chance to hide. He wanted to take the hombre by surprise, keep him from giving an alarm if possible.

"Lie down in yore bunk an' pretend yo're still tied," Jerry told the grizzled rancher.

As Landers dropped back on the soiled blankets, Jerry leaped to the door.

The man outside was fumbling at the lock. Then the door swung open on creaking hinges.

"Hey, yuh ol' coot! Hyar's coffee an' beans fer yuh," bawled a heavy voice as a dirty, unshaven hombre stepped into the room. "It's the last yuh'll ever git, so enjoy it all yuh kin."

Without looking around him, the unsuspecting ruffian slogged over to the bunk where the captive lay, and put down a tin cup of muddy coffee and a plate of unappetizing beans.

As the hombre turned to loosen the rope which he supposed was still on Landers's wrists, some sixth sense must have warned him of danger. He whirled to look behind him.

Smack! A rock-hard fist landed like the kick of a bronc on the crook's bristly jaw. He grunted, broke at the knees, and flopped face downward on the floor.

"Gosh, but thet was a hefty sock!" exclaimed Landers, sitting up again hurriedly. "Reckon he won't bother us fer a while."

Jerry leaned over the knock-out victim and relieved him of a six-gun.

"Take this, Mr. Landers, an' use it on the next rustler thet shows his ugly mug near yuh," the Bar U waddy said grimly, as he stepped over and handed the weapon to Landers.

"I'll shore use——"

A sudden scrambling on the floor behind Jerry Carter caused Landers to stop speaking and try to raise the gun with his rope-numbered hand. At the same time, Jerry whirled to see what was happening.

He was just in time to glimpse the rustler diving headlong out the open door. In an instant, he had vanished from sight.

Jerry shook his head ruefully.

"Gosh!" he said. "Thet jasper must 'a' had an iron jaw. He come to quicker'n I expected."

V.

"Tarp" Glick, the hombre who acted as cook for the rustler gang, broke all high-heeled-boot running records as he dashed across the fifty-yard space between the bunk house and the big log ranch dwelling. He burst through the front door of the latter building like a scared coyote taking to its den.

"He's loose!" shouted Tarp, bumping into the squat-bodied Thug before he could halt his mad rush.

"Who's loose—Landers?" demanded Brute Jagers, with a startled oath, as he glanced up from the pile of money he had been dividing among the members of his gang.

"Naw, not Landers—yeah, he's loose, too," panted the cook, getting his story tangled in his excitement. "I mean it's thet baby-faced waddy yuh had locked in the back room thet's loose!"

A vicious oath burst from Brute Jagers's thick lips. "Yuh locoed fool!" he snarled. "Tell thet yarn straight. Thet Carter kid couldn't escape. He's tied up an' locked in——"

"I'm tellin' yuh I jest seen him down in the bunk house," cut in Tarp Glick. "He knocked me kick-in' with a punch on the jaw. He took my——"

"Shet up!" roared Brute Jagers, leaping to his feet from the rough board table where he had the cattle money spread before him. "I'll bust yore haid, yuh lyin' pot-wrangler. Yuh been takin' dope."

Before the unlucky cook could dodge, a hamlike fist clubbed him

behind the ear with sledge-hammer force. He collapsed like a pole-axed steer, out for the second time in less than a couple of minutes.

But one of the crooks, not blinded with rage as his boss was, ran to the door of the back room. The cook's story had sounded too real, to be any dope dream. Drawing back the bolt, he jerked the door open and peered into the dim interior of the small, windowless room.

"Tarp was right! Thet waddy has gone!" shouted the rustler, stepping a couple of paces into the room and scanning it more closely.

"Then somebody in this gang let him out," rasped Jagers. "When I find out who——"

A wild yell from the front of the house brought all hands dashing to a window which looked toward the bunk house.

"Yonder he is! I seen him come ter the door an' look out jest now," chattered an excited gunman.

Brute Jagers snatched out his heavy Colts. His pale little eyes gleamed with a killing rage.

"Come on, yuh rannies!" he belated, rushing out the door. "We'll blast thet slick-eared kid an' ol' Landers ter blazes!"

But Jerry Carter, down in the bunk house, didn't mean to be blasted. Not if a busy pair of .45s could prevent it.

"Keep back from thet window, Mr. Landers," Jerry warned the old rancher. "I'll stop the ornery crooks afore they reach the door."

Crash! Bang-bang-bang! Six-guns roared and blazed.

A hail of bullets whizzed and rattled through door and window of the bunk house.

Jerry Carter flinched as a splinter from the door frame stung him in

the face. But a split second later, he was crouched in the open doorway, both ivory-handled Colts rocketing lead and flame.

Wham! Brang! A hot slug from one of the Bar U waddy's six-guns cut a rustler down in his tracks.

Another hombre let out a yell of pain when a bullet raked his short ribs.

Brute Jagers jerked to a sudden halt as flying lead fanned his ears. This was more fight than he had bargained for. That harmless-looking waddy from Wyoming was deadlier than a whole gang of gun-slinging crooks.

"Git back ter the house!" Brute hoarsely ordered his two remaining henchmen. "He'll kill us all afore we kin reach thet door. We got ter wait an' git him after dark."

But as the rustlers whirled back toward the ranch house they met a surprise that for the moment took all the fight out of them.

Crouched in the front doorway was a young cowboy. His slim hands held a pair of ivory-buttled six-guns, cocked and ready to hurl hot lead.

"Up with yore paws!" barked the waddy. "Elevate—all of yuh—or I'll drill yuh!"

Brute Jagers and his two cut-throats gasped oaths of mingled fear and amazement. Their eyes popped wide in shocked surprise as they gazed at the waddy who held the drop on them. Hadn't they just seen him in the bunk-house door, a moment before?

"Dang yuh, how did yuh git out of thet locked room?" rasped Jagers. "An' how come thar's two guns——"

"Yuh was fooled inter thinkin' I got out," Tom Carter said, grinning coldly. "I worked the rope loose

from my hands an' feet, an' climbed up on a rafter over the door. Soon as yuh all run out ter fight, I come out an' found my guns. Now, git up them hands!"

A surge of furious rage swept all caution from Brute Jagers's murderous mind.

"Blast him! Cut him down!" he howled at his companions, and whipped his own long Colts into action.

Brang! Wham! Bang! The ground trembled with the crashing of heavy guns.

Darting streaks of flame gashed the already fast falling dusk of evening.

Through a thick pall of drifting powder smoke, Tom Carter saw the burly rustler boss drop in his tracks.

The squat gunman, Thug, glanced down at his stricken leader, glimpsed the crimson-welling death wound in his corded throat.

"Brute's a goner!" he croaked, and whirled to run.

"Halt! Drop thet gun!" called a voice from the direction of the bunk house.

Frantic with fear, the yellow-hearted Thug stared wildly at another tall, blue-eyed waddy. But this one wasn't grinning. The face

behind his leveled six-guns was as solemn as an undertaker's.

Caught between two fires, Thug fought like a cornered rat. His hot Colt jerked up, blazed and roared. But even as he pulled trigger, a churning slug ripped through his evil heart.

The only surviving gunman of the killer bunch had dropped his smoking Colts and yelled for mercy. The fight was over.

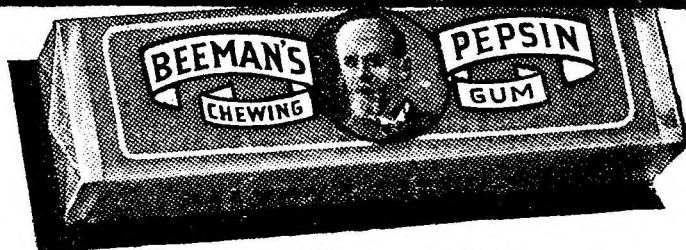
A few minutes after the smoke of battle had cleared away, three men stood around a table in the front room of the Slash L ranch house.

Grizzled Jim Landers finished counting out a big sheaf of paper money and handed it to Tom Carter, who stood nearest him.

"All right, Jerry, thar's the money fer yore pa," Landers said happily. "An' yuh tell ol' Sam fer me thet he's got a pair of collectors thet can't be beat 'tween Canady an' the Mex border."

It shore seems good ter see them gun-slingin' twins ag'in. An' like always, they're slingin' said guns ter help out some pore hombre who ain't able ter help himself. There'll be another story about Tom an' Jerry in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss it!

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Enjoy Beeman's Gum

... A I D S D I G E S T I O N



Up on the Kansas Line

By Hal Davenport and Cole Collins

Authors of "Bull Train," etc.

NO one saw the kid when he stole into the camp. Bare-foot in the darkness, after leaving his old butternut mule down under the bank of the creek, he'd eased warily over the low salt prairie, not at all certain of what he'd find when he reached this spot in the brush.

A single red wink of fire had guided him. Now that fire was all but out. For a moment longer, he crouched there, just above the ground, in his hand the old horse pistol that once had been his father's.

Every sense was strained, alert. Jim Calvert, Texas waif, half famished for what seemed ages, was taking a desperate chance.

Was this camp Comanches, or was it, as he hoped, whites?

"Know in a minute, Splinter," the half-grown youth told himself. Splinter was what folks had called him ever since "Pap's" old Civil War wound had taken its toll and the kid had had to hit out into the world on his own, a stray, like a dogie calf.

Well, he was comin' on a yearlin' now, and with half a chance, he'd fill out. He meant to have that chance. It wasn't hunger alone that had brought him here. Lips tight in his thin young face, he studied the darkness about him that was the silent camp.

Gradually ears and eyes attuned to the night located some eight or ten sleepers, each man off in the brush. Occasionally the stamp of a horse had sounded, the faint tink of a bridle bit.

The kid grinned, with a sigh of

relief, under his old straw hat. "Yes, suh, she's a cow crowd. Brush poppers a-waitin' fo' the moon. Ah reckon Ah'm in luck."

Whereupon, avoiding the dying embers, he slipped back into the brush, ran his hands over the ground and, using his hat for a pillow, settled down for contented sleep. There was food in the camp, of course. "Splinter" could have found it easily, but he reckoned he wasn't no thief.

He meant to make a hand, show what he could do, just as soon as the moon came up.

"They wouldn't let me mebbe, if they knowed that I was with 'em," he thought to himself.

This was mighty dangerous business, rounding up longhorns in the bush. The critters were untamed, savage. That was why you used moonlight.

For there are numerous ways of handling cattle, dependent on conditions. And at this Texas frontier time, just after the great old moss-horns had run free all during the war, they were nearly as wild as the wildest game, spending their days deep in the thickets, coming out to graze at night.

Then the small prairies were dotted with them, but at the first hint of dawn, they started grazing swiftly toward their hiding place. Full moon was the time to get 'em. It would be up now in about three hours. The kid went to sleep.

The first faint stir in the brush awoke him. Some one was shaking men's shoulders. The moon's top-most rim was still beneath the prairie, but a vague seep of light was beginning to touch the east.

Splinter slipped unseen under the thicket and hastened down to his mule at the creek.

"Sassafras, we're agoin' after

longhorns, and yo' sho' got to do yo' stuff," he told that ungainly yellow-brown beast. "This heah is our chance. We'll have to sort o' lag behind—yit we've got to be in at the rush. If we tie down four-five big uns, we'll sho' get us a job, and eat regular, at a ranch."

A heavy old gunny sack, held in place upon the mule by a stout leather strap, had served the kid for a saddle. He quickly pulled it loose from under its crude girth, and cut it into strips.

They would have to do for piggin' strings. Then he knotted one end of Pap's old hard-twist lariat firmly about the buckled girth. Down here in the cow camps, a man tied hard and fast.

"Keep yo' ears down, durn yo'!" he hissed at Sassafras, as, mounted now, he weaved warily back toward the fringe of camp. "I don't want nobody to see yo' ain't no hoss. Give us away, right off."

The vague light was growing stronger, but only the kid's hat, near enough in shape to a sombrero, showed above the darker brush. Already men had saddled and were moving slowly off. The kid fell in slightly behind them and to one side, riding with high hopes.

Half a mile after the start, they crossed a little hummock with scattered trees down its bushy slope. The moon's full face soared into view. A sea of white lay below.

Cattle were grazing everywhere—great gaunt longhorn beasts. The riders had the wind on them.

Splinter built a loop in his rope and eased old Sassafras somewhat forward, bare heels ready to thump flanks in a wild tattoo the instant the first shrill "yip-p-p!" should cut the night.

A low, sharp growl came from his right: "Careful, there! Wait for

the yell. Say-y, what's this—some stray brat?"

A rider had straightened, was wheeling toward him, face snarly in the moonlight.

The kid caught the gleam of whitish eyes; then a wild, high yell had rung down the line, and men and horses were away in a roll like thunder that crashed flat the last brief brush.

Splinter was off with the rest, past the snarly man in an instant, before the fellow could swerve his mount. Old Sassafras's long legs might be ungainly, but the big yellow mule could cover ground, at least for a short, hard burst.

Out on the moonlit prairie, great horned heads had shot up. White beams struck glints from immense needle-sharp spans, six feet from tip to tip.

Then, with mighty snorts and a thunder of their own, the fierce, ugly brutes tore for brush and timber, speeding riders in swift pursuit.

"Come on, Sassafras! Thet un's mine!" the slim kid yelled, picking out a flying beast.

His choice was a huge one, with horns like a tremendous scythe. But if a man meant to prove himself a hand, Splinter Jim Calvert reckoned, the tougher the brute, the better his chances to show 'em he had the stuff.

The old butternut mule's big splay hoofs laid to the ground in a pound and roll that swept them up on the beast. The youth's loop sang ever wider, for it would have to be enormous to clear that mighty span of horns and snap down on the ugly neck.

The farther brush was rushing at them when the eager youth made his cast. It cleared the horns by a fraction, settled deftly into place. Splinter heaved the slack to the big

brute's far side and charged past on the tear for the bust.

• But already thin brush was about them. A tree, hardly more than a sapling, seemed to leap from its midst. The longhorn was past on one side, old Sassafras on the other. The tightening rope hit the trunk.

Mule and mosshorn were snapped from their hoofs, and in together with a crash.

Splinter struck earth in a smashing roll, yet came to his feet with a single scrambling surge.

The huge old longhorn likewise was up. Red-eyed, it was at the youth.

Less stout than the rope tied to it, the mule's girth strap had snapped, letting the lariat length sing from the tree, leaving the longhorn unhampered in the fury of its rush.

Splinter's heart was in his mouth. He tried a diving leap into the air and to one side, to escape horn tips in their low, vicious sweep.

Something caught the leg of his tattered homespun jeans, ripped them like a knife. But the razor-edged horns had missed the skin. And now the brute was past.

"Dang him! He's got my rope!"

With a leap, Splinter grabbed it near its end. Whirling, the giant beast was coming back.

The kid ran for the tree for his life. He hurriedly snapped the lariat about it in a flying half-hitch, and went up the trunk like a monkey, hot breath, horns, and the critter's rush barely missing his feet.

The astonished beast, flying on, hit the end of the rope. This time, the bust was perfect. The huge old mosshorn was snatched into the air, to wham the earth with a stunning violence that rammed a horn into spongy turf. Before the dazed beast could recover, Splinter was on it

with a whoop, tying it fast, tying it tight.

"There, Ah knowed Ah'd get yo'!"

He hurriedly threw off his rope. The whole thing hadn't taken a minute. He had to catch some other brutes.

Brush broke in a crash. Another steer! He leaped aside, but even before it reached him, the big critter turned end for end in the air. A rider's bulletlike cast had snared it and slapped it hard to earth.

"Ah'll tie him fo' yo', mistah!" the kid cried, throwing himself at jerking hoofs.

He stood up, panting, a moment later. A trickle of red ran down his chin, where a struggling foot had banged him. The whole world seemed going round and round. Dang! He was weak, all to once.

"How—how was thet, fo' fast?" he heard himself gasping, dizzily, in a spinning haze. "Tied him—purty good—Ah guess. Do yo'-all reckon yo' could use—one mo'—good—hand——"

Somehow, his voice was trailing. Everything had turned black. Then, with something like a sigh, the half-famished kid crumpled, there in the night and brush.

II.

Dang! He sure hated to faint. But Splinter reckoned he'd done just that, when he came to, with men above him. A tall figure was chafing his wrists. The kid tried to struggle up.

"There, sonny, take it easy." The voice was kind of gruff. "Yuh'll be all right, I reckon, if yuh ain't busted a rib or wuss."

A swift, deft hand was running over the kid's thin ribs. The rough face above him said softly: "Say, when did yuh last eat?"

"Why, Ah don't rightly remem-

bah. Ah had some berries yister-day——"

"Well, we'll soon fix thet. .Start a fire, somebody! Who's got the coffeepot?" A typical Texan of the brush, he seemed in charge, this tall figure, in his early thirties, perhaps. "Then start leggin' up the cattle, men. I'll take care of our young friend, heah. Grub pile in a minute, sonny." He strode off toward his horse.

Splinter was sitting up when the other returned with strips of jerky from his saddlebags, an old canvas canteen, and a blackened coffeepot.

"This ain't much, fer a fact, but I guess it'll stop the gnawin', bub. My name's Reb Rawlins. Yuh jest pitch into this jerky, while I wrestle with the pot."

"Ah sho' will," the kid cried. "Dern! This heah is a feast. By golly, though, Ah cain't eat yit! Ah've got to see about Sassafras."

"Sassafras?"

"My ol' mule. The othah long-horn thet Ah roped and tied down knocked Sassafras a-windin'. Mebbe he's hurt."

Rawlins bent upon the half-grown kid a sudden keen, half-astonished look. "Yuh tied down another'n, when yuh couldn't hardly stand on yore feet? What's the idea, anyhow, mixin' in with this round-up?"

"Why, fo' to prove myself. Ah did it, too, didn't Ah, mistah?" Splinter's voice was eager. "Yo're the boss man, ain't yo'? Couldn't Ah work on yore ranch?"

The gray eyes in "Reb" Rawlins's lean, sun-bitten face held a quick tinge of admiration. "Go on with yore chow," he said, with a smile. "I'll see about Sassafras. Yuh'll shore make a hand, one o' these days. But this isn't a ranch outfit."

Splinter 'gulped in disappoint-

ment. "What—what is it, then?"

"We're gatherin' critters," Rawlins explained, "for the new market thet's openin' up. A Yank is down here buyin' 'em. These old moss-horns what run wild all durin' the war ain't worth over two-three dollars a head in Texas, but up in the North and East, they'll bring nearly five times thet."

It was Splinter's turn to look astonished. "Yo' mean yo're goin' to drive 'em plumb from heah up No'th?"

"Thet's the idea, sonny. Clean through the Injun Nation, into Kansas, to where railroads are pushin' west. Nobody ever dared try it till last year, when Jesse Chisholm got a herd through. This year, others are startin'. They're a-callin' it the Chisholm Trail. Texas beef is lookin' up."

"By golly! Ah'm agoin'!" the kid cried. "Ah sho' would like thet."

The other shook his head. "A heap too risky, I'm afraid." He strode off in search of Sassafras.

Splinter sat frowning, with his mouth full of jerky. What was so derved dangerous about thet? Injuns, of course, he reckoned, and likely rivers to cross. Maybe quicksands, too, for all he knew.

Shucks, though, he wasn't afraid. He could hold up his end with cattle. He was sixteen, he guessed.

"By dang!" said the determined kid. "If thet theah Chisholm Trail is new, then it won't be no mo' strange to me than to anybody else. Ah'll tell Reb Rawlins thet."

He found to his disappointment, however, that Rawlins could hardly help him, when that tall Texan returned with old Sassafras, unhurt.

"Yunker, I like yore spunk," Reb declared, "but I don't do the hirin'. I'm just a straw boss in charge o' this little bunch. The main herd is

bein' held nearly a day's drive from here. Here, the coffee's ready." He poured out two steaming cups. "Now, kid, what're you doin' here in the bush?"

When the kid had told him, Rawlins frowned into the hot black liquid he was raising to his lips. "Well, I shore cain't leave yuh here to starve. Yuh'll go with us as far as the herd. But I cain't promise more'n thet."

Splinter, the strengthening meal over, climbed on Sassafras. Already the other cowboys had the ringy longhorns ready for the trip to the main herd.

Splinter's glance went over the riders, most of whom looked on him kindly. He was remembering the snarly-faced hombre who, at the start of the rush for the cattle, had been wheeling toward him with queer whitish eyes and a rasped "Who's this—a brat?"

The fellow was tall and dish-faced, with ill nature stamped plainly on his face. He paid the kid little attention now, however. The others called him "Cotton-eye."

Dusk was settling when, at last, they reached the main camp.

Splinter's blue eyes fairly popped. He'd never seen so many longhorns gathered in a single herd—two or three thousand, at least. Men were finishing supper. The night guard was riding out.

The cavvy was off to one side, nearly a hundred wiry little Texas ponies, grazing in loose formation over the marsh grass.

The kid's eyes were suddenly shining. He plucked eagerly at Rawlins's sleeve, after edging close on Sassafras.

"Are all them hosses agoin', too?" he asked. "Ah'm a right pert hand with hosses. Ah could help take care of 'em. And wash dishes fo'

the cook. Ah'd work fo' nothin', Mistah Reb. Where is the boss man at?"

The other studied him long and earnestly. "Darn if yuh couldn't, at thet!" Reb had reached a sudden decision. "The trail's dangerous, o' course. But I don't believe yuh'd be a bit worse off than as a loose stray in the bush."

"Reckon not," said Splinter.

"Ed Pringle's in charge," Reb went on, "together with the Yank thet's buyin' 'em. Bald-headed buzzard, name o' Greer. There they are, over by the fire, with somebody I don't know. I'll put in a good word for yuh when the time is ripe. But right now, there's no rush. Greer's not half through buyin'. We won't start for a week."

Rawlins was wrong in his prediction, though. Even as he'd been talking, there'd come a change in the camp. Something was on foot. Money had changed hands there at the fire, between Greer and the third man.

Pringle was summoning punchers. Greer—a long, sharp-nosed individual—was striding in satisfaction toward a buggy in the brush.

The herd had been sold, then and there. But Splinter still knew nothing of it when, having staked out Sassafras to graze after finishing with the longhorns, he headed through the twilight toward the brush-fringed camp.

Bare feet made small sound. Suddenly low voices reached him, just as he saw a buggy top.

"Texas fever. I'm takin' no chances. Got the news in a letter this mornin'. And hooked me a sucker right away. Now, though, I'm seein' a double profit, if I work the thing jist right. I know how to use Jayhawks."

Splinter's ears pricked up at once.

He'd never heard of Texas fever. But Pap more'n once had spoken of "Jayhawks!"

Hard, fierce border raiders, fighting for the North, they'd done some right stiff battling along the Missouri-Kansas line. But after the war was over, outlaw ruffians, abusing the name, had used it to color their raids, it was said. And this herd was goin' up into Kansas!

Splinter shoved his face through the brush.

Seated in the buggy was a long, lank man in store clothes—the fellow Greer, his sharp face out over the wheel as he talked in lowered tones to somebody on the ground. It was the puncher, Cotton-eye.

The latter nodded, with a grunt. "Shore, I can do it—if the pay is right."

"Don't worry. It'll be right."

"Yeah? How much?"

"Dollar a head. Better hurry now and see Holt, about him makin' yuh boss. I've got Pringle out of the way by makin' him think I need him for another big round-up—"

Greer broke off with a start and sudden indrawn hiss. His close-set little eyes, in flicking up, had fallen upon the brush.

Splinter jerked his face back in a start of his own, but hardly quickly enough.

Cotton-eye had wheeled, with an oath. In a bound, he was in the thicket, had collared Splinter roughly, and whirled him savagely forth.

"Eavesdroppin', huh?" the fellow snarled. "It's thet brat Rawlins picked up."

Whitish eyes as vicious as an outlaw bronc's, he aimed a furious open-handed blow at the slim kid's head. But Splinter ducked with a suddenness that left only his old

straw hat there in the air to catch the brutal swipe.

Off it sailed in one direction, Splinter himself in the other, as a ripping sound of his tattered shirt told of his freedom from the fellow's clutch.

III.

The kid landed on his back from the violence of his own effort, but was up again so quickly that he almost seemed to bounce.

He backed against the brush, one hand thrust into his waistband to close about the grip of the old horse pistol that once had been his Pap's. His eyes and voice were hot, resolute. He cried:

"Don't yo' dast try thet again, yo' dirty polecat! Yo' ain't agoin' to skull-whip me! Ah'll defend masef!"

The other had caught the movement. "Huh! Got yore hands on a cutter, have yuh? Why, blast yuh, if thet's the thing yuh want——" The man's six-gun came leaping up.

"Here! Cut it out, yuh fool!" Greer's hoarse cry was filled with alarm. "I've got other work fer yuh. Do yuh want to get yoreself lynched?"

"Well, he overheard us, didn't he?" Cotton-eye snarled. "Some-thin's got to be done."

"I don't figure he heard much. Makes no difference, anyhow. He's not goin' with the herd. Git on now and see Holt.

"Sonny"—Greer turned to Splinter, with wheedling tones—"yuh oughtn't to sneak up on grown folks. Makes 'em mad every time. No harm done, though, except to yore shirt. Here, git in the buggy, and I'll ride yuh into town so's I kin buy yuh a new one."

The waif looked at him scornfully.

"I don't ride with no derved Yank." He darted off through the brush.

If that danged Cotton-eye was to be in charge of the drive, then the angry youth reckoned he himself was sure out of luck. The fellow would never hire him. And who was this man, Holt?

Splinter had heard just enough to puzzle him. Some sort of wrong was being planned, but he had no vaguest idea what, as he hastened on into the camp.

He meant to tell Reb what he had heard, but didn't find him at once. And when he did, Reb had such news of his own that Splinter, his heart thumping, got no chance to speak.

"Kid, yo're goin'," the tall, sun-bitten young Texan cried from the back of a horse he'd just pulled to a halt. "Nighthawk for the cavvy. And chore boy for the cock. The herd changed hands as we came in, to another Yank. I'm to be drive boss."

To Splinter, the next few hours seemed a dream—learning his duties, holding the cavvy, now it was night.

Dawn saw the big herd upon its way, the cattle being shoved fast to accustom them to steady driving and discourage any attempts to break back.

The cook and chuck wagon went on ahead, Splinter following with the horse herd, before the sun was up.

In the swift stir of departure, there'd been small chance to speak to any one, or even note just who was going. It wasn't until noon camp that Splinter saw that Cotton-eye, in some way, had managed to be included in the drovers' outfit.

The kid frowned. Holt had hired the man, although not making him boss. Holt was a round, short, jolly

little figure in his middle forties. In his inexperience, he had taken the punchers most anxious to go.

But at least he'd had the judgment to ask Pringle—the former boss—for advice as to a successor. Reb had been the immediate pick.

The drive went on now, up through Texas, across the Red River, deeper and deeper into the Nation along the trail that Chisholm, half-breed Indian trader, had had the hardihood to mark. Those huge old mosshorns were steppers. Everything seemed going right.

Days of dust and heat. Nights like the softest velvet, lighted by a million stars.

Splinter was in his glory. Good, solid food was filling him out.

Long since, he'd told Rawlins what had happened by the buggy. The face of the lean, sun-seared young trail boss had hardened more than a touch. He asked:

"Has Cotton-eye tried to lay his hands on yuh again?"

"No. Shucks! Ah wouldn't do no blabbin' if it had been jist thet. But Greer said he'd hooked a suckah. Ah think he meant Mistah Holt."

"Thet so?" Reb asked.

"And do yo' know, derned if Ah don't like thet fat little Yankee, somehow, the way he laughs and jokes with yo'. Pap would've had a fit to hear me say it. But I wouldn't want to see him beat."

"He won't be," Rawlins said firmly. "Not with this herd, at least. He gave a good price for them, but no more than they're worth. We'll keep an eye on Cotton-eye. But until he makes a move of some kind, you can't very well fire a man, this deep in the Nation. Be as much as his life was worth."

Cotton-eye made no move, however, as the herd went steadily

north. Occasionally, though, Splinter caught those queer, whitish eyes upon him in a look that made his flesh creep.

Yet both Splinter and Reb felt that the drive was going too smoothly. Such luck couldn't last. Quicksands on the Canadian River took their toll, even though by excellent management Reb got the herd across.

As they shoved steadily on through thick blackjack, days of rain swept the land, raising the Arkansas to fierce, ugly flood by the time they'd reached its banks.

Water-bound there for a week, they lost fifty head in a wild stampede. Cotton-eye, though, couldn't be blamed in any way. It had been caused by a lightning flash.

And the fellow, Splinter noted, had ridden with the same hard, fierce abandon as any of the rest.

"He sho' seemed dead set to save 'em," the kid muttered. "Could Ah been wrong about him?"

He could have been, but he wasn't. They were nearly at the Kansas line, almost out of the Nation, when the real trouble started.

Holt, who'd ridden on ahead as they were breaking noon camp, returned at a high lope, and beckoned Reb Rawlins to him. The red face of the round little Yankee was worried beyond a doubt.

Splinter was too far away to hear what was said, but soon the word came back:

"Quarantine of some kind on ahead. Hold the cattle off the trail. We may be here a few hours, and we may be here a month."

Rawlins and Holt were gone with that, riding away to the north.

"Quarantine?" said Splinter to a puncher who'd been near them. "What they mean by thet?"

"I wouldn't know," the other's

disgusted reply came. "These hyar cattle are healthy. I never saw a fitter bunch."

"They sho' are," the kid declared. "What's thet got to do with it?"

"Everything, looks like. Holt met a couple drovers jist this side the Kansas line, with bad news for Texas herds. We ain't allowed to cross. Kansas folks is claimin' all our cattle got ticks what causes a sort o' fever and kills northern stuff right off. Texas fever!" He snorted again. "They're crazy, these Jay-hawks."

Jayhawks and Texas fever! Splinter's mind leaped back to that day in the Texas brush when he'd overheard Greer and Cotton-eye. Greer had spoken of just such things. Yet this seemed none of the pair's doings, for the puncher now added:

"There's an official quarantine station up ahead, right on the line, the drovers said. Reb and Holt are goin' there, to find out just what's what."

Splinter, who'd been about to throw the remuda back on the trail when the halt order came, turned back toward the cavvy, grazing along a little creek. Something moved in the brush and timber there—a rider, just disappearing.

Cotton-eye, on a fresh horse!

"Slippin' away, too!" the kid exclaimed. "Now what's *he* up to?"

Using trees and bushes for cover, the fellow, holding his horse to a swift walk, had been headed north.

The suspicious kid followed, mounted on Sassafras. Already the man was out of sight, but his trail was plain enough along the creek bank, still miry from rain. Half a mile from camp, he'd broken his horse into a lope.

"Makin' time," Splinter growled, "The minute he was out of hearin'.

Well, he ain't agoin' to shake me." His heels thumped Sassafras.

Nearly half an hour later, the kid reined in where the timber broke. He had sighted the man, off to the left. On a little rise of ground, Cotton-eye Kearson's horse stood beneath a tall, lone tree. The fellow was up there signaling, with his hat, to some one farther north.

Then he shinned down from the tree, mounted his horse, and disappeared beyond the rise, toward the southwest.

"Sassafras, yo' stay heah," he said.

Bent low, he hastened up the rise as fast as he could, dropping to the muddy ground for the last few yards that brought him to the crest.

Cotton-eye, Splinter saw, appeared to be headed on a swing back toward the herd, nearly three miles now from this spot. Off toward the north, three saddled horses grazed.

A man, walking beyond them, suddenly seemed to be losing part of his legs, right out there in the open. Then he disappeared, into the earth.

IV.

Splinter blinked and rubbed his eyes. He'd never seen a dugout, with its perfect blend against the earth.

Now the figure reappeared, with another man, the two carrying something long between them as they grew into view up through the door trench.

Outside, they quickly unrolled it—a big cloth or canvas sign on two poles, the ends of which they thrust into the soft ground and hurriedly braced with rocks.

Splinter was much too far away to make out the tall letters flaring their announcement above that Kansas line dugout.

The two men had hardly disappeared through the door again, however, when a pair of riders hove into view at a steady lope, heading for the place. He recognized them at once—Reb Rawlins and round little Holt.

“By golly! Thet must be the quarantine station,” the kid exclaimed. “Thet sign and all—Say-y,” he interrupted himself, “thet derned thing’s a fake!”

The sign had been rushed out into place on signal from Cotton-eye. A sure-enough station would have had it up all the time. Maybe there wasn’t any real station, the whole thing just a trap laid for Reb and Holt.

Splinter’s gaze swept back toward Cotton-eye, at the edge of timber beyond the rise. Already the fellow was vanishing at a swift pace back toward camp.

Something sure looked mighty wrong. Cotton-eye apparently had been waiting for no other reason than to make certain the others approached that trap.

Splinter leaped to his feet. But Holt and Reb were swinging down at the distant dugout. Too late, he started to yell. They had entered the place.

“Ah’d sho’ lose time,” the kid muttered, “if Ah went back for Sas-safras.”

Slipping and sliding in the mud, he hurried down the slope as fast as he could toward the dugout.

He’d been right about the sign. It read:

**TEXAS CATTLE QUARANTINE
STATION**

All Herds Must Be Inspected
Before Allowed To Pass.

At the end of the dugout’s sloping trench, an old canvas tarp was hung to serve as a door. Voices

came from behind it, as Splinter now slipped close:

“Mighty sorry, gents, but we’ve got to protect our Kansas stock. If yore cattle is healthy, though, there won’t be a bit o’ trouble. Maw, git these fellers some coffee. We’ll have to wait fer the inspector to come back. He’s off to the east, checkin’ on another herd. Won’t be long, I guess.”

“How long?” asked Holt.

“Half an hour, mebbe. Jist take seats there at the table. Maw’ll be warmin’ the coffee. We ain’t got nothin’ to do with the quarantine. They jist use our place.”

Splinter slipped down the trench. There seemed nothing wrong with such talk, but just the same, he had his hand on his old horse pistol as he silently eased the tarp door an inch aside and peered cautiously into the place.

In the weak light coming from a greased-paper window close up under the roof, he could see a whiskered hombre gesturing toward a pair of chairs at a crude table near a second canvas curtain that cut the room in half.

A stove lid rattled beyond it. There was no woman in sight.

Holt was moving toward a chair at the table, while Reb’s eyes swept the place. The tall trail boss seemed slightly suspicious, but he moved to join Holt.

A faded sunbonnet stuck around the curtain, the depth of the garment all but concealing its wearer’s face. A quick look at the pair at the table, and the bonnet had drawn back.

Splinter, though, had caught a glimpse of a long, sharp nose. The next instant, he saw the bonnet wearer move dimly past back of the slit.

The figure was that of a man, be-

neath the masking headgear. He was tiptoeing up to the back of the curtain, a heavy something raised to strike. With a yell, Splinter was in the dugout:

"Duck quick! Reb! Mr. Holt!"

The back of their skulls within less than an inch of the hanging canvas, they heard him almost too late. Two mighty blows struck it from behind.

Holt, with a single groan, fell across the table on his face.

Reb, who'd been a fraction quicker, nevertheless went to his knees from a glancing blow as the canvas bellied hard against his head. He fumbled dazedly for his gun.

The whiskered man had whirled toward Splinter, at the kid's yell. The kid's old horse pistol was out.

"Hoist them paws, dern yo'!" shrilled from the kid. "Reb, they're comin' behind yo'! Two of the gosh-darned skunks!"

Reb slued about on his knees. The next instant, guns were roaring. A pair of men had burst from behind the curtain, one a low-browed, scar-faced brute; the other long and lanky, with the sunbonnet still on him.

The six-gun thunder was tremendous in that low, narrow place. Splinter's old horse pistol was the loudest. The dugout reeked with powder smoke.

The whiskered man who'd tried to draw as he whirled on the kid went down with a broken shoulder.

Splinter shot a hurried glance toward Reb, amid the scream of bullets and vivid flash of weapons there in the half dark.

The trail boss was swaying on his knees. But the scar-faced man was down and groaning. The hombre in the sunbonnet gave a yell as Reb's unsteady weapon blazed almost in his face.

The fellow reeled from the flash. An instant later, however, he was dashing for the door, with a howl of panic. The man's stampede was so sudden that Splinter was bowled from his feet.

The sunbonnet fell off as the hombre struck the door tarp and lifted it with the speed of his head-down rush. Splinter caught a glimpse of a bald head, a long, sharp nose—a face he knew. He jerked up the horse pistol with a cry:

"Halt, Greer, yo' polecat skunk!"

But the bald-headed schemer was already gone, out of the shelving door trench.

"Was thet Greer?" Reb cried in amazement.

"It sho' was. Are yo' bad hurt?"

"Just tagged in the ribs. Quick, 'fore he stampedes the horses! There may be more to this trap."

There was, the pair found, the moment they tumbled out. Off at the timber, where Cotton-eye Kearson had disappeared, riders were pouring into view, spurring to round the point of ridge and bear down on the dugout.

Greer had thrown himself into a saddle with a clawing leap. The other horses were wheeling, snorting. But he got no chance really to stampede them, for Reb blazed away with a hurried shot that sent the jasper flying off toward his men as fast as hoofs could carry him.

Greer's yell seemed a screech of fright:

"Hurry! Hurry, Jayhawks!"

"Grab our hosses quick!" Reb threw at Splinter. "If Holt's alive, I'll get him out!"

The Jayhawks were still nearly half a mile from the fake station when Rawlins, his lips set tight against the pain of his wound, lugged Holt from the dugout.

"He's comin' to," the trail boss panted, "but he can't ride alone."

Splinter had three horses by the reins, but let one go at once.

"Jist throw him across this heah saddle," the kid cried. "Ah'll ride behind and hold him on, while yo' sort o' beat 'em off. We cain't let ouahselves be penned up in the theah hole in the ground. They sho' could smoke us out."

It was going to be a race. Already rifles were reaching for them as they pounded off.

Holt had recovered enough to grasp the saddle horn, but couldn't yet sit up without aid. The little Yank was still befuddled as, with Splinter's arm about him and Jayhawk yells splitting the air, they strove to reach that other belt of timber which ran along the creek.

"What happened?" Holt gasped. "Who—who are those men? Why, they're shooting at us!"

"Yo' got cracked on the head through the curtain," Splinter explained. "The whole thing was a fake. They aimed to kill yo' and Mistah Reb. Cotton-eye was in with them. Ah think the skunk has gone back to the herd to claim yo'-all give him ordahs to head the cattle this way, so's them Jayhawks could jump ouah men, mebber from ambush."

"Think so myself," Reb clipped from close beside them. "We've got to beat 'em to the cattle. But with yuh two ridin' double, we've got a job to do it. Soon's we hit the timber, though, I can lag behind to throw some lead. By thet time, they'll be close."

"I've got Sassafras theah," the kid cried. "We kin make a good runnin' fight."

Slugs were plowing up ugly jets of mud not far behind as they sped past the ridge point and raced hard

for the brush. Revived by the swift rush of air, Holt was ready to ride unassisted by the time they hit the cover. They reined in for a moment, while Splinter piled on Sassafras.

It was touch and go after that. Bullets ripped twigs about them. Water flew in a blinding shower as they splashed across the creek.

"Make straight for the herd, you two!" Reb cried. "I'm goin' to lead-dose the skunks!"

V.

Spurring foes, a dozen strong, broke from the fringe of cover and hit the bank of the creek. Reb reined in and let them have it. Enemy ranks wavered, broke.

Greer's yell rose, from the rear:

"There ain't no need to cross! We kin beat 'em to the herd down this side. The others cain't see us fer the trees till we're right on the camp."

His men obeyed willingly.

Reb whirled his cayuse, and gave an exclamation as he saw Splinter there right behind, with the old horse pistol smoking.

"Thought I said to hit for the herd!"

"Ah stopped fo' a shot at the cuss. But dern it, Ah reckon Ah missed."

Once more, they were away. But the creek in its windings really gave the foe short cuts. By the time two muddy miles had rolled behind, it was plain that only Holt—who'd never slackened speed in his rush to give warning—had any chance to outrun the ruffians thundering along somewhere beyond the timbered stream's far bank.

Sassafras was doing his best, but Reb was having to slow a bit for

him now. Splinter tried to wave the other on.

"Go on! Hurry! Theah's the herd! Ah'll jist cross the creek myself and tear up on 'em from behind when the battle starts."

"Good thinkin'," exclaimed Reb. "Except thet I'll be the one to do it. Yuh've already done more'n yore share."

But the kid was right behind him when Reb Rawlins, riding hard, took the creek bank again. Even as they made the maneuver, Holt, nearly at the herd, hit the ground in a rolling fall from a stricken horse.

Shots had rung from the timber. Wondering cowboys were on guard at the herd. Some were spurring toward Holt as the Jayhawkers burst across the stream. The defenders were caught at a disadvantage, part of their forces split.

Success rode the ruffians in their charge. But conditions changed completely when Reb was on them like a whirlwind from the rear, giving the other punchers a chance to rally themselves.

Splinter's share, in those first few wild moments, consisted of ringing yells only, for old Sassafras, though straining his best, simply couldn't keep up.

Texas guns hurled lead into border ruffians confused by Reb's attack. Then Splinter, too, was at the battle fringe. A white-faced rider whirled to flee, and crashed his horse into Sassafras.

The old mule struck earth. Both riders rolled. Splinter scrambled to his knees, and found himself not a yard from Greer's mud-spattered face.

The shaken hombre still gripped his gun as he likewise lunged up. Terror-stricken, he tried to fire. But already Splinter's horse pistol was whistling down through the air to

take him a swipe across the skull that laid him flat.

"Dang yo'!" the kid panted. "Theah wasn't no dugout curtain fo' to ease thet crack!"

An oath rang above him. Another rider was almost on him. Whitish eyes gleamed with fury, as a six-gun rammed down at the kid before Splinter could throw himself aside.

Cotton-eye Kearson's words came with a vicious hiss:

"It was yuh thet blocked us, blast yuh!"

Splinter went over backward, his finger on the trigger hurling a desperate shot up. At the same time, Kearson's gun had blazed. But in the same split second that Cotton-eye Kearson fired, the man, with a throaty cry, seemed lifted from his horse.

The kid scrambled up. Reb reined in beside him, with smoking gun.

He cried: "Splinter, are yuh hurt? My heart was in my throat when I cut down on thet skunk."

"Why—why, Ah thought Ah shot him," the kid said. "Anyhow, Ah tried to. Say, the fight's ovah! By golly! We've whopped the rats!"

"Yes," said Rawlins grimly. "Now I reckon we'll tie Greer. Fat scheme of his, sellin' this herd, then figurin' to steal it back. From the looks of things, it wouldn't surprise me if he hadn't pulled thet quarantine stunt on drovers more'n once. Well, he's sure hit the end of his string—him and his fake Jayhawks."

"'Fake' is correct," declared the voice of Holt, who, not badly shaken by his fall, had come striding up. "There's honest folks in Kansas. A real Jayhawker couldn't wipe his feet on this cutthroat riffraff They'll

string 'em up, though, plenty high, when we turn 'em over to the law. We lost men in this fight."

The cattle had stampeded, but toward the northeast. They were expertly gathered. A wounded prisoner sullenly admitted that there'd been a real Texas-fever scare some time back, but it had long since abated. The herd wouldn't be molested as they shoved on toward Bartlett Station, the nearest point on the railroad, for sale and shipment East.

"My profit," Holt informed the men, "goes back into another herd,

and more and more after that. If any of you want to invest his wages for a share, I'll be mighty glad to have him. All of you know the Chisholm now. I never saw a finer bunch." A smile broke across his face as his glance fell on Splinter's shining eyes. "You're with me, aren't you, Splinter, on that short cut to ownership?"

"Yo're danged tootin'!" the kid cried. Then he grinned. "By golly! This heah trail's been good fo' me. Pap would've had a fit, but jist the same, Ah'm mighty proud to be in pardnership with a Yank."

INDIANS FEAR GOLD MINERS

ATTRACTED by reports of a gold strike near Beaver Lodge, Saskatchewan, last summer, prospectors flocked into that region, causing great alarm to the Indians there.

A meeting was held between Chief Dodo, of the Chipewyan band, and Doctor Lewis, the Indian agent, to argue for the protection of the Indians' hunting and trapping rights.

The Indians claim that the white man never knows when to stop, that he is greedy, and will clear out the fur and game, upon which the Indian depends for life.

These Indians live at Fond-du-

Lac, at the east end of Lake Athabasca.

Chief Dodo told of the growing poverty of his people, and of the fur catches that grow less and less with every passing year.

He spoke despairingly of the advance of the white men into the Athabasca country in their search for "good rock," and begged the agent to secure the protection of the government for the game grounds.

Doctor Lewis assured the chief that the rights of the natives would be protected, and that the government would give no hunting and trapping privileges to prospectors.



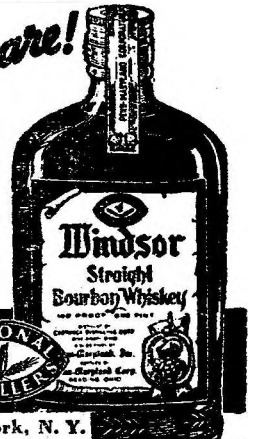
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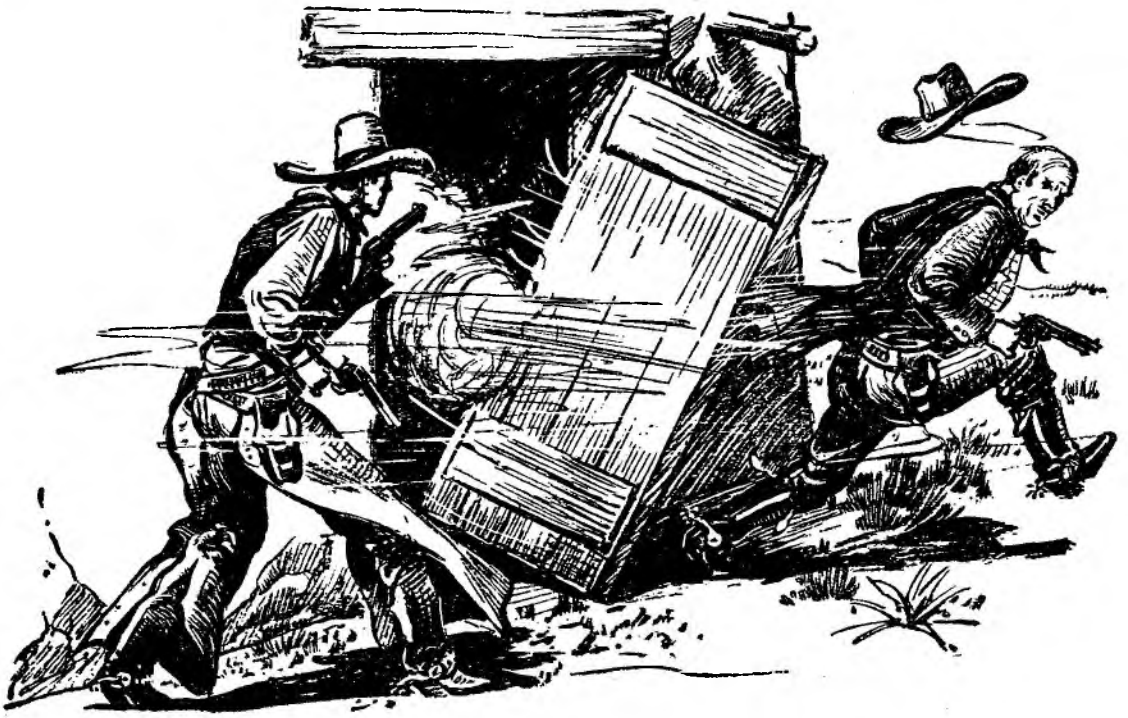
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Johnny Forty-five and the Border Imp

By Andrew A. Griffin

Author of "Johnny Forty-five Cleans House," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE STEEL HOOK.

IN the low-roofed, thick-walled adobe hut—the headquarters of the "Border Imp"—four men were eating, drinking, and carousing in the blazing heat of a South-western noonday. The odor of greasy, cooking food mingled with the smell of cheap whisky and fiery Mexican *sotol*, and they were paying far more attention to the latter than to the former.

Bottles and demijohns clinked, and big slugs of liquor splashed into tin cups. Yet they were not drunk.

They were hard, seasoned drinkers, and their drinks had only put them in an ugly and ferocious mood.

The "Imp," as he was known throughout the border country because of the terrible outrages he had committed, was drinking more than any two of his men put together, but he seemed more sober than his three henchmen. His hoarse guffaws made the walls shake, but his piggish little black eyes remained cold and wolfish. He seemed to have the capacity of a buffalo and the strength of a lion.

His companions called him "Hook," and there was a good rea-

son for the name. His left hand was off at the elbow, and on the stump there was a leather pad ending in a hook of heavy steel. This enabled the bandit to pick things up, and he was quite expert with it.

Also, in a fist fight, it made a frightful weapon. The Imp had killed many a man by a blow with it, according to what was said along the border, and he also made use of it in a peculiar way when using the big Colt six-gun that was strapped to his right thigh.

No one who set eyes on Hook could ever forget the man, for he was a monstrosity. Not in height, for he stood only five feet tall in his boots, but in his tremendous width. His hairy chest was like a barrel; he seemed as broad as he was tall. His arms hung loose and apelike to the level of his thick knees. Nature had made a mistake and had built Hook from side to side instead of straight up and down like normal men.

His face was more hideous, if possible, than his misshapen body. Tufts of coarse hairs met together in the center of his low forehead, and his nose was flat and with flaring nostrils. His teeth were like the long, yellowed fangs of a rabid coyote.

If ever savage brutality was stamped on human features, it was stamped on Hook's. Because of it, the superstitious Mexicans had given him the name "El Diablillo"—the Imp—and he had borne it ever since.

"What time is it, Bill?" he roared at one of his henchmen, taking a watch from his pocket and dangling it before the other bandit's eyes. "What time does it say?"

Bill Umber—a tall, hatchet-faced man in a bright-yellow shirt, who loomed a good foot and a half over

Hook's head—snickered at his chief's question.

"I knowed thet yuh couldn't read nor write, Hook," he laughed. "But dang me! I shore thought yuh could tell time."

With his good hand, Hook reached in the pocket of his greasy leather chaps and pulled out half a dozen more watches and chains, some of gold and others of silver. Leering, he jingled them triumphantly.

"Waal," he chortled, "I may not be able to tell time, but I've got more tickers than lots o' jaspers thet kin!"

The others shouted with mirth at Hook's joke. The fact that those watches had cost human lives didn't distract from the comedy of the sally; it made it all the more humorous.

"It's a leetle after one—a quarter past," said Bill Umber. "And time fer another drink, looks like to me. Pass thet jug this way, Thrasher!" he called to another of the evil quartet.

Thrasher and "Rat" Doleman were men of Umber's skunkish stripe—killers from the word "go." The former was a stringy but powerful man of forty, with jet-black hair and unkempt mustache; "Rat" resembled his namesake, even to the beady eyes and protruding teeth. Thrasher, Doleman, and Umber wore two Colt six-guns apiece—and they could use them!

The three men drank, but this time, their leader did not join them, but began to pace up and down across the littered flooring of the hut. His face had darkened with anger.

"Hank should 'a' showed up afore this," he growled. "I told him to be yere by noon, at least. When I say a thing, I mean it. What thet lughead needs is a tampin'."

Thrasher had gone to the carefully curtained window that faced the north and had pulled back the gunny sack that served for a shade.

"He must 'a' heard yuh, because I think this is him a-comin' now, Hook," he said as he turned.

"It had better be," rasped the Border Imp.

In this out-of-the-way hut, Hook felt as secure as a cougar in its lair. There was certainly nothing to fear, anyhow, from a lone rider, and Hook didn't even look out. The headquarters were in the center of a hundred miles of bitter desert and hard to reach.

More than anything, however, Hook trusted to his reputation. He knew how much he was feared; nobody would *dare* bother him. Besides, the hut was over the line in Mexico.

"It's Hank, all right," grunted Thrasher, after a pause, and in a few moments, the sound of hoofs was heard outside. Then they heard Hank Ostigan dismount and lead his two horses—he had been leading an extra mount—into the little corral alongside the house.

"If he's bringin' us good news about that bank job up at Dry Springs, are we goin' to tackle it now, Hook?" asked Rat Doleman.

The broad-bodied bandit chief shook his head. "Some other time. We've got another piece o' work to git through with fust. Thar's that rich chink that wants to be smuggled into the States. We're to meet him at sundown at the usual place."

The others grinned knowingly. This sort of business was not new to them. Smuggling Chinamen always paid well. And if this particular Oriental was rich enough—well, the yellow man would make a farther journey than into the States,

and more gold would be jingling in all their pockets.

The shack door opened, and in stepped the fifth member of the band, Hank Ostigan, covered with the dust of a three-day trip across the desert. He was a shift-eyed, loose-lipped hombre with a two weeks' growth of tobacco-stained beard on his evil face.

"Yo're late," snarled Hook, snagging the newcomer with his cold eyes. "I said at noon to-day, didn't I? We've got a job to do this evenin'."

"An hour late ain't bad fer a trip like——"

"Orders is orders, thet's all, and they've got to be carried out on the dot!" growled the one-handed Border Imp. "What did yuh find out about the bank layout?"

"Didn't wait to find out," exclaimed Ostigan excitedly. "I've got news fer yuh, Hook—not sech good news, either. Uncle Sam has set two depity marshals on our heels. They——"

"Marshals!" cried Hook, his thick body stiffening. "What do yuh mean, marshals? They cain't——"

"They've got permission to cross into Mexico fer us—got it from the Mex gover'ment!" Ostigan exploded. "I found out all about it. They've already headed down this way. I've seen both them officers, an'——"

There was a burst of jeering laughter from Thrasher, UMBER, and Doleman. The idea of two lone officers trying to buck against the Border Imp's outfit was a huge joke. Hook's beastlike face, however, was dark with anger—anger toward the hombre who had brought the news.

"So yuh seen 'em both, did yuh?" he said scratchily. "What are they like, these two fool gover'ment men?"

Ostigan stuffed a chew of tobacco into his cheek before replying.

"Not much, *I* don't think." He shrugged. "One was a big, fat feller, and the other was jist a kid—a kind of loco kid. I don't think he's got right good sense. We shouldn't have no trouble; they plumb——"

"O' course we won't!" thundered the Border Imp. "Thet ain't the point, blast yuh! Why didn't *you* git 'em? I've given yuh yore last chance, Hank. And now——"

"Now listen, Hook," pleaded Ostigan. His whiskery face had gone a sickly, pasty color. "I thought——"

"Men o' this gang," Hook rasped on, "are supposed to be a match fer any two law dawgs thet ever lived. Yuh don't belong, yuh yellar-bellied calf! Yuh've got two guns, ain't yuh? What are yuh wearin' 'em fer—to look at? Well, yo're goin' to draw 'em *now!*"

"Hook, fer the love o'——"

"Pull 'em!" yelled the Border Imp, his eyes glittering with fiendish fury.

It was over in an instant. There was a booming report like the crashing of heavy doors—a flash and a gust of hot powder smoke.

Ostigan, mouth open horribly, plunged to the floor, his dead hands still clutching at the butts of his Colts.

He had never had a chance. The Border Imp's queer method of using a gun had got him, as it had got many an hombre before him.

The bandit's crippled arm had crossed his body at the same time that his hairy right paw had whipped the gun from its holster. The steel hook at the end of the stump had caught the barrel firmly and leveled it as the trigger was squeezed.

That strange draw would have been clumsy if it had been executed at slower speed, but the Imp was lightning fast. Using that hand-and-hook grip gave the bandit a big advantage—at least, over any man he had ever met.

The Colt seemed clamped as if in a vise, unswerving and terrible. Holding the gun in that way, the Imp could shoot from the hip at long range with the accuracy of a rifle.

Hook kicked contemptuously at the body with his big boot as he holstered his smoking .44.

"Carry him out!" he roared at his three surviving henchmen. "Throw him into the gully and leave him to the coyotes!"

The others weren't shocked at what had just happened. Relief was on all their faces, for each man was glad *he* hadn't been the one to face Hook's awful wrath. They gathered up the limp body of the victim and took him out through the doorway in silence.

While they were gone, the Border Imp paced the floor impatiently, from time to time taking a drink of liquor. One of his black moods was upon him. Several times, he went to the north window and stared out, his steel hook rasping in irritation against the dobe wall. When his men finally returned, he began barking orders at them.

"But shorely we ain't goin' through with thet chink deal tonight," Thrasher said almost timidly, as if afraid of arousing his leader's rage again. "If them two depities is comin' this a way——"

"They ain't goin' to interfere with *my* plans," sneered Hook. "We're leavin' in an hour fer Matadero Valley. If they call at this empty shack—and I hope they will—they'll git a surprise, jist the same. Yes," he

added, baring his fangs in a mirthless laugh, "a mighty onpleasant surprise fer the two law dawgs!"

CHAPTER II.

THE LAW DAWGS.

UNDER the burning sun of mid-afternoon, riding southward at a steady pace and leading two pack horses, were two United States deputy marshals—Officers Krumm and Forty-five.

Deputy George Krumm, weighing all of two hundred pounds, was drooping over his saddle pommel like a top-heavy bag of grain. He was suffering from the heat, and from time to time, he wiped the dripping sweat from his round cheeks and fat double chins.

His little mustache, dusty now with alkali, was like a dab of dust on his twitching upper lip. At intervals, he emitted deep groans, testifying to his utter misery.

His companion—John Socrates Forty-five—was as unlike Krumm as could be imagined. He was hardly half the fat deputy's size, and seemed less than half his age. A continual grin was on his ruddy, impudent face, and his blue eyes twinkled slyly.

He didn't look like an officer. Krumm wore a checkered vest, a dignified black tailed coat, and his silver badge, but Johnny wore ordinary range clothes, and very shabby ones, at that. He never wore his badge, but always carried it in some pocket where he could never find it.

But while Johnny seemed just an average cowboy, he carried his twin namesakes—two .45 Colt six-guns—in a very businesslike way, thonged to his wiry thighs a few inches lower than was usual, both big, blued weapons reposing in well-oiled holsters of soft leather.

Krumm groaned again, for the fifth time in as many minutes, and this time more dolefully than ever. For several miles, a buzzard had been following them, swooping slowly over them and circling with lazy wings, and the fat deputy took this as a bad sign.

"I don't like it a-tall, Johnny!" he moaned. "No, I don't. Do yuh think it's *me* thet buzzard is watchin' so close?"

To Krumm's disgust, his partner's reply came in a gay, singsong chant:

"Yuh can't fool a buzzard, George,
Those birds are shorely sane,
It ain't yore corpse he's lookin' for,
He's attracted by yore brain!"

"Oh, is *thet* so?" snorted Krumm. "So yo're hintin' thet my brain is dead, are yuh? Well, let me tell you a thing or two, Johnny. It's this yere brain thet has taught *you* all yuh know to-day about the marshalin' business!" Krumm tapped his head impressively. "I'll admit," he added, "thet what yuh've learned ain't much. Whar would yuh be if yuh didn't have Fearless Krumm, the old masteroo, to learn yuh what's what?"

Johnny's only answer was to roll a cigarette with his left hand. Instead of lighting it, however, he flipped it carelessly away and then rolled another, with lightning rapidity, with his right hand. This followed the other into the mesquites.

"Now thar's another thing thet gits under my hide," the fat officer wailed. "It ain't enough thet yuh make up fool po'try, but yo're allus rollin' and wastin' cigaroots, when yuh've never as much as smoked one in yore life."

"And I've told yuh before, George," said the wiry little deputy, "that it's fine exercise for the trig-

ger fingers; keeps 'em quick and limber."

"Humph!" snorted the fat officer, as if he had an opinion—and a poor one—as to Johnny's shooting abilities. "Well, anyways, I don't think thar'll be much gun work fer us this trip."

"What makes yuh think so?" Johnny asked, lifting one eyebrow.

"This job's goin' to be plumb easy," Krumm said wisely. "It's one I could handle by myself alone without half tryin'. What's this Border Imp, anyhow? Don't 'imp' mean a *little* devil? I got him pictured as bein' a weaklin'. And he's a cripple, at thet—got only one hand, they tell me. Humph! You jist leave *him* to ol' George Krumm, Terror o' Evil-doers! Yes, siree, I'll eat thet Imp hombre up alive!"

"I think yo're mistaken, George, and, anyhow, he's got a gang," the younger deputy said grimly. "This won't be any chicken dinner for us."

"Gangs!" Krumm shrugged with a disdainful, breezy laugh. "What do I keer about gangs? Did I git the name o' Iron-man Krumm fer nothin'? No, siree! Why, I remember one time—I think it was when I was head o' the Texas Rangers; or was it when I was leadin' the vigilantes? Seems now thet it was when I was sheriff of El Paso, but it don't make so much difference. Anyway, I was jumped by six outlaws all at once."

"What did yuh do, amigo?" Johnny asked solemnly.

"I whupped 'em, thet's all," said Krumm loftily. "When I git agoin', Johnny, I'm like a wild animal!"

His companion's reply came in that same half-mocking chant:

"And I can well believe it,
You can do it when yo're tryin',
But I'll bet a nine-quart Stetson
That the animal's a lion."

It took a minute or two for this to sink in, but when it did, there was an indignant bellow from the fat deputy.

"Thar yuh go ag'in, hintin' thet I'm a liar!" he roared. "If yuh wasn't a friend o' mine and sech a little runt, sometimes I think I'd lose my temper with yuh."

For a while after that, he kept up a sulky silence, except to complain occasionally about the heat. The country they were traveling through was a harsh and forbidding waste of sand, stone, and alkali. Dim blue peaks rose in the far distance, lone outposts of the Sierra Madre mountain range, but they were in the heart of a flat desert, the monotony of which was broken only now and then by an arroyo or a weirdly shaped butte of red stone.

The saddle mounts and pack animals were showing signs of their long struggle through the mesquite. It was only Johnny, perhaps because of his lean and wiry build, who seemed high-spirited.

"What gits me," complained the fat deputy, "is why we're bein' sent down yere after thet Imp hombre, anyhow."

"He's a plumb bad egg," replied his partner, "and when he started smugglin' chinks into the States, then Uncle Sam got busy. We've got to get him, George, dead or alive. I'm hopin' that we can bring him back alive—for hangin'."

"Jist leave it to me," Krumm said importantly. "No criminal can outwit Fearless Krumm! No, siree! But do yuh think we'll ever find thet hide-out o' theirs? Seems to me it——"

"From what I've been able to find out," Johnny Forty-five drawled, "we should be gettin' close." His keen eyes searched the horizon. "Do yuh see that ridge ahead? Notice

that butte over to the west? Well, let's swing over that way."

Slowing the pace of the tired horses, they edged around to the right for a mile or so. Then Johnny drew up his dusty bronc.

"Look, amigo!" he said grimly.

Krumm blinked in the dazzling haze of sunlight. Not a half mile away, almost hidden by paloverde and smoke trees, there was a squat adobe hut, with an empty corral on one side of it.

"Do yuh think thet's it?" asked Krumm uneasily.

"I'm shore of it." The rhyming deputy nodded. "We'd better leave our hosses yere and slip up on foot. Come on!"

They hid their cayuses behind the ridge, tying them to the mesquites, and started to circle the house.

Krumm seemed nervous. His chest wasn't pushed out quite so far as it had been before, and he lagged behind as much as possible.

"Hadn't we better—er—wait a while—wait until dark, mebbe?" he quavered. "Haste makes waste, as the old sayin' is."

"Come on! I don't think there's anybody home, but there's only one way to find out."

"What makes yuh think the shack's empty?" asked Krumm more hopefully.

"No brons in that corral," snapped Johnny. "Of course, they might keep 'em somewhere else; anyway, we'll soon find out."

Krumm anxiously examined the stubby Colt he kept holstered under his coat tail, and followed his young partner—with caution.

After looking at the house from every angle, Johnny rose from the mesquites, deliberately entered the sun-baked little clearing and headed

for the door. He had seen tracks—fresh ones—and they led away from the hut.

It was pretty likely that their birds had flown, and he was disappointed. He hailed the house, ordering the occupants out, but there was no response.

Now that he himself was sure that the gang was absent, Krumm's bluster returned, and he strutted forward ahead of Johnny, brandishing his gun fiercely.

"Watch me bust in thet door, Johnny!" he roared. "I'll show those hombres thet the Terror of Evildoers is on the job! I'll——"

"Wait a minute! Don't get in front of that door!" cried Johnny, pushing the fat deputy aside. "Let me open it—this way."

The singsong deputy knew pretty nearly all the tricks used by outlaws, and he approached the pine door of the dobe from one side, keeping along the wall. Reaching it, he paused alongside, then—still keeping from the front of it—kicked it hard at the bottom.

The door flew inward, but as it did so, a bullet came tearing through the wood, and the loud explosion of a heavy six-gun shattered the stillness!

CHAPTER III.

DOUBLE TRAILS.

AT the sound of the shot, Deputy Krumm, in spite of his size and weight, leaped a good three feet in the air. He came down running. The mesquites crashed and crashed again as the fat officer went cycloning through them at express-train speed. Before Johnny could hardly turn around, he was fifty yards away and still going strong.

"George! Come back!" cried Johnny Forty-five, when he could control his laughter enough to yell.

"It's all right. It was only a spring gun!"

Krumm returned, much more slowly than he had gone. "Do yuh mean thet thar ain't nobody in the house?"

"Nobody at all," Johnny laughed. "Come and see."

The fat officer entered the hut, still puffing from his exertions. Johnny was right. In a cleverly constructed framework fastened to the inside of the door, there was a Colt .45. A wire was attached to the trigger, so that when the door was tampered with, it would explode instantly.

If Krumm had walked up to it, he would probably have been killed. He'd had a narrow escape.

"By the way, George," chuckled the rhyming deputy, his blue eyes twinkling, "what was yore big hurry, anyhow? Yuh weren't scared, were yuh?"

"Poof!" sniffed Krumm. "O' course I wasn't! I was jist agoin' fer the Winchester thet's on my cayuse. I thought thet thar was goin' to be a fight, and with a rifle, I'm even deadlier than I am with a Colt. Yes, siree, Johnny, it's a dang good thing fer the Border Imp thet he wasn't at home!"

To the fat deputy's deep pain, Johnny broke into a gay carol:

"There soon would be no outlaws, George,
Yuh'd kill 'em all with fist and gun,
Yuh'd fill every noose, and calaboose—
If you could fight like you can run!"

"So *you* say," said Krumm, with a disgusted snort.

There seemed to be quite a bit of loot inside the cabin, but Johnny didn't intend to go through it now. His object, first of all, was to find the Imp's gang, wherever it was.

Examining the ground about the corral more carefully, he discovered

that two sets of tracks led away from it. Both had been made at the same time, as far as he could judge, and two men seemed to have galloped west, while two others had ridden east.

"They may have done that to throw us off," he mused, "or maybe for some other reason, but I've got a hunch that all four of those hombres will come together again somewhere. George, we'll split up, too. I'll follow these tracks that lead off to the west, and you camp on the trail of the hombres that rode east."

Krumm nodded, and patting his holstered six-gun, looked his savagest.

"All right, Johnny!" he snapped. "And when I *do* catch——"

Johnny Forty-five shook his head. "No, whatever yuh do, don't show yoreself. Ride slow and careful, keep yore eyes peeled, and if yuh come within sight of 'em, or their camp, stop right there and wait for me. I'm shore that the two trails will come together, and when they do, we'll find our men. Understand?"

"I savvy the arrangements," said Krumm, swelling his chest, "but person'ly I'd like battle!"

They brought their horses down to the hut before starting, as there was a good spring there. They turned the pack animals into the outlaw corral. Then, after giving their mounts feed, water, and a short rest, they started out in opposite directions.

"Now remember, George," Johnny sang out, "don't show yoreself to *anybody*—no matter who. We're not shore yet just who's in that gang or what they're up to."

"I git yuh, pard. So long!" Krumm shouted back as he roweled his cayuse with his spurs.

The fat deputy rode along con-

fidently, finding no difficulty in following the sign left by the two shod horses of the bandits—if they *were* bandits. And Krumm was beginning to have his doubts.

“Another one o’ Johnny’s fool ideas.” He smiled. “I bet I’m fol-lerin’ a couple o’ Mex sheep-herders.”

For miles he rode, and the sun began to cast long shadows across the empty, lonely desert. It was not nearly so hot now, and Krumm felt better.

He noticed, but didn’t pay much attention to the fact, that the trail he was following had swung from due east to northward. Yawning, he stretched his arms and then dozed a little in his saddle.

Opening his eyes, he found that he’d lost the trail, and it was several minutes before he picked it up again. Soon after that, he noticed that he was entering a canyon.

The look of it rather alarmed the big deputy; there was something weird and ghostly about it, now that the sun was sinking. Steep walls towered on both sides of him, and strange-looking bushes grew thick between them.

Happening to glance down, Krumm blinked. Then he dismounted to blink even harder at the ground, for there were now the marks of four horses instead of two! As Johnny had thought, the trails had come together.

“Now when did thet happen?” the fat deputy gulped.

Remembering that Johnny had told him to wait for him, Krumm climbed into his saddle again. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard something up ahead, around a sharp bend in the canyon.

“Thet may be Johnny, now,” he muttered.

He walked his horse forward cau-

tiously until he reached a spot where he could see around the turn. When he did, he almost yelled out in dismay.

He’d almost blundered into somebody’s camp fire. He was so near it that he could almost have thrown a rock into it.

Then Krumm’s nerves calmed. There wasn’t anything to fear, after all. There was only one man at the little camp, and that was a Chinaman—an almond-eyed Oriental clad in a loose, flowing yellow gown, a harmless little man if ever there was one. He squatted near the fire, feeding the flames with little sticks.

“I’ll ask him if he’s seen Johnny or any hard-lookin’ jaspers yereabouts,” the fat officer decided as he urged his bronc forward. “Hey, chink!” he cried, lifting his voice loudly as he came up. “I’m an officer of the law. Deputy Marshal Krumm, savvy? I wonder if yuh could tell me——”

Krumm had no breath for any more. To his utter horror, the near-by brush snapped back, and four evil-faced men, with guns in their hands, leaped toward him.

“Git them arms up, you!” snarled the most vicious voice he’d ever heard in his life. “Git ’em up, or we’ll blow ’em off yore fat body!”

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAP.

K RUMM’S arms went above his head as fast and with so much force that they were almost dislocated from their sockets. His mouth had sagged open, and his face had gone gray with fright.

He was even more terrified when he got a good look at the quartet who had captured him. There were a tall, bleak-faced man with murderous eyes; an hombre with pro-

truding teeth like a rat's; a granite-jawed man with a black mustache; and one other.

The fourth man scared Krumm so badly that he fell from his horse into the arms of the other three. It was the Border Imp!

The fat lawman was violently disarmed and hurled to the ground. He was too numbed with fear to make even a feeble resistance.

"So yuh don't like my looks, hey, law dawg?" Hook laughed scratchily, opening his horrible, wolf-fanged mouth in a guffaw. "Yuh'll like 'em still less afore I'm done with yuh. Whar's yore pardner? Thar's two of yuh. We know thet, so don't lie!"

Krumm tried to speak, but no words came. He could only see the terrible form of the Imp hovering over him like some squat, hideous spider.

"I figured thet by splittin' our trails we'd git yuh one at a time," leered Hook. "Whar's yore pardner, blast yuh? Are yuh goin' to talk or not?"

He bent over, and Krumm felt something cold and sharp against his throat. It was the steel hook at the end of the desperado's maimed left arm.

"Speak up, or I'll tear yore head off!" screeched the outlaw chief.

Krumm's voice finally came, all at once, in one anguished yell. It sounded like the bleat of a lost sheep, combined with the bawl of a calf at the slaughter:

"I—I don't know whar Johnny is. He follered the other trail. D-d-don't kill me!"

"So yuh was too smart fer my spring gun, was yuh?" rasped Hook. "Well, you two will soon be sleepin' under the prickly pear! Doleman,"

he ordered, turning to the rat-faced desperado, "you keep a sharp lock-out back trail. The other one is liable to show up any time."

The Chinaman had sat squatting by the fire through it all. Apparently he hadn't so much as moved. He was looking over the scene with bland and innocent eyes, as if all this was a show put on for his benefit.

The Border Imp turned toward him, with a grunt. "We'll see to yore case purty soon now, Wing Foo," he said. "We've got a leetle business to attend to fust."

"All li'," replied the yellow man, in the pidgin English of the uneducated Chinese coolie. "You takee me acloss line pletty soon, Mistlee Hookie?"

"Well, we'll see about thet." Hook grinned, with a wink at Bill Umber.

Krumm was in an agony of terror. He still lay sprawled out on the ground, his teeth clicking together, his round, fat face of a sicklier yellow hue than that of Wing Foo, the Chinaman. Cold sweat dripped from his forehead, and his eyes were glassy with horror. The sight of Hook, the Border Imp, had paralyzed him.

"Are—are yuh goin' to shoot m-m-me?" he quavered.

"Why, no, o' course not," said Hook, with a smile that was about as pleasant as a mad coyote's. "I wouldn't think of it. It's too easy a death—fer law dawgs."

Krumm screeched as the Border Imp bent over him and put the point of that frightful steel hook against his windpipe.

But another thought came to the Imp, for he released his grip on his victim and called Thrasher and Bill Umber to him. They talked for a

moment, and then Hook turned to the squirming Krumm again.

"We kin git yore pardner easy, but we've decided on a way to make it easier," he leered. "We're all goin' to git out of sight in the brush, but we'll have yuh covered. You stay yere with the chink and act natural when the other law dawg shows himself. Tell him to come up to the fire, thet everything's *bueno*. If yuh try to warn him——"

The Border Imp made another move toward Krumm, and the fat deputy emitted a yell that was like the last squawk of a turkey gobbler.

"I—I'll do anything yuh s-s-s-say, only don't——"

"*'Sta bien,*" sneered Hook. "Git on yore feet, then. Stand yere by the fire like yuh was talkin' to Wing Foo. Yuh law dawgs is all alike. I'm bettin' thet yore pardner is yallerer than you are. Anyways, we'll soon——"

"Yere he comes, chief—the other one!" cried the rat-faced Doleman, who came running up.

The Border Imp laughed hoarsely. "All right, boys, let's duck into the brush. And if the fat law dawg makes a bad move, let *him* have it fust!"

The killers scurried into the near-by thicket like a pack of murderous weasels.

The Chinaman still poked at the fire with a stick, silent and blandly smiling, like an hombre too stupid to have any inkling of what was about to take place.

As for Krumm, he was wabbling on his feet, moaning to himself, waiting for whatever was about to happen. He didn't know what it would be—yet. But he did know that it looked mighty dark for him, and for Johnny Forty-five.

CHAPTER V.

THE GUN FIGHT.

DEPUTY JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE became uneasy for his fat partner's safety when he reached the point where the trails came together. He had expected to find Krumm waiting in the vicinity, but there was no sign of him. Then, examining the sign in the sands more attentively, he saw that Krumm had blundered on ahead.

"Good grief!" he muttered. "Poor ol' George!"

In spite of all of Krumm's failings and shortcomings, he liked the bragging, oversized deputy. In fact, his job would be dark and grim, indeed, if the "Terror of Evildoers" wasn't along to furnish him with snickers. And now it looked very much as if George had made a mess of things again—this time, in a big way.

He already knew quite a bit about the Border Imp, and he knew that neither he nor George could expect anything but death if they fell into that one-handed fiend's clutches.

But there was still hope; the worst might not have happened yet. There was a chance that he might overtake his hare-brained pard before it was too late.

Roweling his cayuse, he galloped forward and soon came to the entrance of a gloomy canyon. The sun had gone now, and it was becoming a little difficult to see. Already the evening star was bright in the west, and there would be only half an hour more of daylight.

He didn't like the looks of that canyon, but the tracks all led that way, and Krumm was in there somewhere—and so was the Border Imp and the three desperadoes who were with him. He would have liked to do some scouting, to come in from

the other direction, if possible, but there seemed no time for that.

Minutes were precious. So loosening his big blued Colts slightly in their low holsters, he urged his bronc ahead swiftly.

As the walls of the ravine closed upon him on each side, Johnny couldn't throw off a feeling of oppression, and for some reason, a cold chill passed down his spine. Death was abroad that night; he felt it in his very bones.

He was going more slowly now, proceeding cautiously, his blue eyes narrowed and alert. Suddenly, as he came to a bend, he was almost certain that he had heard something moving among the brush.

Halting, for a minute, he listened, but the sound was not repeated. The dismal canyon was as silent as the tomb, except for the calling of a far-off night bird. He edged on again.

As he abruptly rounded the turn, his lithe brown hands darted toward his holstered .45s—then came away again. His heart gave a little jump of relief. Everything was all right, so far.

There just ahead of him stood Krumm, talking at the edge of a little fire with what seemed to be a Chinaman. For once, George had been blessed with good luck.

For this was dangerous ground. The presence of the Oriental was enough to tell him that. The gang was surely close by.

"Hello, George!" he called out cautiously as he approached. "Everything all right?"

If it had been lighter, the sick expression on the fat officer's face would have told him all he needed to know, but it was twilight now, and when Johnny *did* understand, it was too late.

"Yes," quavered George Krumm. "I—I——"

"Git 'em up, pronto, kid!" roared a hoarse voice.

The gang had used the same tactics with Johnny as they had with their first victim. Out of the grass from behind the fire leaped a snarling hombre with ratlike teeth.

On Johnny's left, two others had emerged from the thicket, and the fourth hombre had bobbed up in the same instant on his right—a hideous, long-armed and apelike monster whom he knew instantly to be the Border Imp.

Johnny's mind worked swiftly, but as his horse reared in fright, he saw that he didn't have much chance. They had the drop on him, and his hands were on the way up when something amazing happened.

The Chinaman, who had been squatted so calmly by the fire, now leaped to his feet with the ferocity of a leopard. Whipping a long, glittering knife from the wide sleeve of his blouse, he drove it deep into the chest of the nearest outlaw—Rat Doleman!

This movement was as astonishing to the others as it was to Johnny Forty-five, and it gave the rhyming deputy just the split-second break he needed. In a flash, his big Colt six-guns were out and belching flame and smoke.

Br-r-r-rang! Bang! Whang!

The Border Imp and his gang opened up, too. Krumm and the chink flattened themselves to the ground, and there was good excuse for it now, for lead was squalling and howling across the width of the narrow ravine like mad hornets.

Mingled with the thunder of the guns was Rat Doleman's death yell. The Chinaman's knife had done its work, and he was writhing in his last throes.

Johnny had hurled himself from his cayuse, his guns firing while he was in mid-air. He landed on his toes, and the bronc whirled about and went racing down the canyon.

"Kill that young law dawg!" screeched Hook in a frenzy. "Fill him full——"

Br-r-r-rang, bang, bang!

Johnny was shifting and weaving with the science of a skilled boxer, and as it was half dark now, he wasn't so easy to hit. His own namesakes were roaring scorching destruction.

Already Thrasher had been hit twice. He was down on his knees, had dropped one gun, but was still shooting with the other.

The Border Imp had used that queer draw of his, and the barrel of his long Colt was supported in front of his body by the steel hook. He had fired twice. The first slug had droned under Johnny's armpit, and the second had missed altogether.

Hook's face was a mask of livid hatred and fury; his wolfish fangs were bared, and his eyes had narrowed to shining slits. Amazement was stamped on his features, too. Never had he seen a bobbing, dodging jumping jack like this grinning blue-eyed youth.

And to add to the Imp's bewilderment and rage, Johnny's voice rang out, between shots, in musical sing-song:

"Uncle Sam's a-wantin' you,
In yore plans he's put a crimp!
Without a doubt, we'll have it out,
Come on, you Border Imp!"

Z-z-z-zup! Z-z-zwoosh! Slugs ripped into the sand, against the canyon walls, sent sparks from the camp fire flying upward. The ravine was full of shrieking lead and exploding gunpowder.

Another shot finished Thrasher, smashing him between the eyes, just as he had emptied one gun and was fumbling for the one he had dropped.

Then Bill UMBER leaped skyward, with one of Johnny's bullets through his throat. He came down like a bundle of reddened rags.

A shot from Hook's six-gun streaked alongside Johnny's head, drilled his hat brim, and cut off a lock of hair. The impact of the slug turned him half around and sent him reeling.

The Imp thought he had Johnny then, and with an exulting yell, he leaped forward, his gun held in that queer double grip.

Br-r-r-rong!

Hook lurched sidewise, with a howl of agony. Johnny Forty-five wasn't through! He had sent a bullet through the bandit leader's right forearm.

Hook's gun slithered to the sand, and he didn't make any attempt to recover it. He'd had enough and to spare of this fighting singsong deputy of Uncle Sam's, and he jumped for the brush, running in a zigzag.

"Stop, or I'll shoot, yuh cutthroat!
Yo're the worst one in the crew!
The law has shorely called yore name,
And yore smugglin' days are through!"

But if Hook heard the rhyming marshal's warning, he gave no heed to it. He disappeared into the thicket.

Johnny raced after him, but the desperado had a horse there, and the deputy's own bronc had bolted. The bushes crashed violently as Hook roweled his mount in desperation. Johnny fired at the sound, but it was now too dark to see anything, and he knew that he had missed.

Hoofbeats echoed madly up the

canyon, finally dwindling away into silence.

Hook, the Border Imp, had made his escape!

CHAPTER VI.

DISCOVERIES.

DISGUSTED at having lost—at least, for the time—the biggest rascal of them all, Johnny strode back to the camp fire.

By this time, Krumm had recovered from his scare and was almost his old self again. He greeted his young pard with a chuckle of satisfaction.

“Well, Johnny, yuh done real well,” he approved. “About as good as I could have done myself, except that it was too bad that yuh didn’t get that hombre with the hook. He’s the Border Imp, I’ll bet yuh. I got it all figured out.”

“Yeah?” drawled Johnny Forty-five, lifting one eyebrow. “I’m glad yuh told me. By the way, George, why didn’t yuh stick to our agreement? Seems to me that yuh was in quite a mess just now.”

“Can I help it because I got mad and lost my head when I saw those cutthroats?” demanded Krumm in an aggrieved voice. “I charged right in yere on ’em, knowin’ that after I let ’em capture me——”

“Yuh let ’em capture yuh?” repeated Johnny mildly.

“Why, shore—so that you could slip up on ’em yere,” explained Krumm. “My scheme worked, too, didn’t it? It was a fine idea—me trappin’ the gang this a way.”

“I’m thinkin’ that both our geese would have been cooked to a frazzle, if it hadn’t been for that Chinaman,” said Johnny grimly. “Where is he? I want to——”

At that moment, Wing Foo himself, came up, blandly smiling. And to Krumm’s astonishment, he no

longer used pidgin English, but spoke in very good, if high-flown, language.

“The valueless Wing Foo humbly wishes to pour his congratulations upon the honorable poet and gun policeman who has so very effectively subdued the dishonorable gang of the Border Imp,” he said, with a low bow to Johnny Forty-five.

Johnny grinned, and then they exchanged introductions.

“Uncle Sam owes yuh a lot, Wing Foo,” drawled the young deputy marshal. “It was you that started the ball a-rollin’. But—but why did yuh do it? Didn’t yuh hire the gang to smuggle yuh into the States?”

“In their ignorance, the detestable gang presumed that I had done so, most admirable Forty-five,” crooned the Chinaman.

And then he went on to tell them his amazing story. Wing Foo’s brother had been a rich man and had come from China to Mexico with a small fortune in gold and silver coins. He had hired the Border Imp to take him across into the United States, but the gang had murdered him for his treasure.

Wing Foo had learned these facts during many weeks of investigation, after he had come from China in search of the missing brother.

“So yuh decided to do what yuh could to recover at least part of the dinero, or at least revenge yoreself on the murderers.” Johnny nodded. “I shore don’t blame yuh, Wing Foo. It’s shore too bad that the Imp got away from us, but I hope to get him yet.”

“If the honorable Forty-five should succeed in bringing to justice this most odious Border Imp,” said the Chinaman, “Wing Foo and his venerable ancestors will be eternally grateful.”

Deputy Krumm swelled up his chest and patted the Oriental on the back.

"Don't yuh worry, Wing Foo," he said grandly. "You jist leave it to ol' George Krumm, the Terror of Evildoers! When I get my hands on the Imp——"

"No more time for talkin', George," snapped Johnny, rolling and tossing away a couple of brown cigarettes. "We've got to get busy, pronto."

He had decided to return to the bandit hut and give it a thorough search. There was a chance, too, that the Imp might return there. At least, it would be as good a bet as any until daylight.

So catching up their broncs, after some difficulty, they started back trail.

Wing Foo had a horse and a pack mule. A bright moon had risen, and now that they knew their way, the trip would be an easy one.

They reached the gang's headquarters at about ten o'clock that night. It was still as they had left it, and after studying the tracks all about the place by lanternlight, Johnny decided that the border Imp hadn't been there. There was a chance, though, that he would come, and Johnny was very much on the alert.

"Now let's go through the shack and see what we can nose out," said Johnny crisply. "There's a chance, Wing Foo, that we might find yore brother's dinero, or what's left of it."

The cheap oil lamp was lighted, and the search began. The single long room of the hut was littered with all sorts of odds and ends—boxes of ammunition, kegs and bottles of liquor, dozens of guns, clothing, saddles and gear of all kinds, food supplies and what else not. Their hunt would take hours.

"If they had any valuable loot at all," reasoned Johnny Forty-five, "they'd probably hide it here, or close by, where they could keep their eyes on the spot."

Presently they came upon a collection of Chinese things—opium pipes, pieces of jade, carved boxes, and other articles, including many little Oriental statues that looked like silver.

Wing Foo examined them all eagerly, but recognized none of them. Evidently the Border Imp had made quite a business of robbing and murdering unfortunate yellow men, and Wing Foo's brother hadn't been the only victim.

When Johnny dragged out a richly embroidered silk robe, however, a bit later, there was a cry from their Chinese friend.

"Honorable Forty-five, that most unfortunate garment was the property of my much-lamented brother!"

The robe, which had a dragon stitched on the back in gold thread, had been partly ripped up for gun rags. It was covered with grease, but there were red stains on it, too.

After that, the search became feverish. Krumm worked himself into a sweat, but he never got very far away from the place where the liquor was kept.

"Yuh know, Johnny," he said, with a cough, "I've got quite a bad cold. I never drink, o' course, except fer my coughin' spells, but I was thinkin' that mebbe a good drink——"

"I wouldn't put anything past the Imp," said Johnny sternly. "Remember the trap gun? That liquor may be poisoned."

"Do yuh think so, Johnny?" gulped the fat deputy, turning pale. "Well—er—I reckon my cough ain't quite as bad as I thought it was."

Suddenly, to Krumm's amaze-

ment, Johnny began dancing up and down across the plank floor. His spurs jingled as merrily as if he'd been doing the fandango.

"Yuh find somethin'?" demanded the fat officer.

"Not yet." Johnny grinned.

"Then have yuh gone clean loco?" snorted Krumm. "I knowed yuh would some day, if yuh kept on makin' up them crazy pomes."

The young deputy stopped dancing, but his blue eyes were shining, and his grin was broader than ever.

"Let's rip up the floor right here," he said, stamping on a particular plank. "It shore sounds hollow. There's an ax in the corner yonder, George. Let's have it!"

"In the humble opinion of Wing Foo, the honorable Forty-five has ideas of rare excellence," murmured the Chinaman.

The next moment, they were pounding, chopping, and prying at the thick flooring. They were all excited now—even the yellow man—for they were sure that they would make a find of some sort.

And they did! Upon removing the plank, they found an oblong oaken box underneath, covered with cobwebs. Whatever its contents, it was heavy, for it took the combined efforts of Johnny and Krumm to lift it out. A blow of the ax opened it.

There was nothing inside but one large leather bag, on which Chinese characters were painted in black. At the sight of it, Wing Foo became so upset that he began jabbering in Chinese.

"It is my deceased brother's!" he gasped out finally in English.

"Golly! Thar's a jingle to it, anyhow, and it's shore weighty!" the fat deputy yelped as they lifted it out.

Johnny jerked at the rawhide draw string, and as he did so,

Krumm gave another yelp of wonderment.

The sack was chock-full of silver and gold coins of all sorts. The smoky light of the lamp fell upon it and was reflected as if by a mirror.

There were Mexican pesos, Spanish dollars, and big Chinese silver coins, money of the Argentine and Brazil, and through it all glistened gold pieces of all shapes and sizes. It was a small fortune, and one not so small, either!

Krumm gazed with bulging eyes, and Johnny found a little rhyme to celebrate the occasion, chanting it in a gay singsong:

"Too bad the gang ain't with us!
This cash their hearts would cheer;
They were savin' this for a rainy day,
But it rained—and they ain't here!"

CHAPTER VII.

KRUMM BUNGLES.

THE poetry of the honorable Forty-five," said the Chinaman, "reminds the reverent Wing Foo of the tinkling of temple bells in his native city of Peking."

"That's whar you and me is different," snorted the fat deputy, with a disdainful wiggle of his little mustache. "It reminds *me* of a hawg caught in a bob-wire fence."

"That's right kindly of yuh, George," said Johnny mildly. "But when were you ever caught in a bob-wire fence?"

"Now, listen," complained Krumm. "If yo're hintin' thet I'm a hawg——"

But it was no time for arguments, and Johnny was already busy. He lowered the lamp wick a little, made sure that the gunny-sack curtains were tightly drawn across the small windows of the hut, and fastened the door.

They would stay right in the

cabin for the rest of the night, for he was now more sure than ever that the Imp would return. The desperado wouldn't let that treasure escape him without making a try for it.

The hut would be the trap now, and the money the bait. The Border Imp had got a bullet through his right arm during the gun fight, but Johnny knew that he was far from helpless. As long as he had the use of that terrible steel hook, he would be as dangerous as dynamite.

They had brought in their own bed rolls and supplies with them, and they now cooked and ate a hearty supper, using the outlaws' stove, with the ripped-up plank for fuel. They ate like men famished, especially Krumm, and by the time they had finished, it was nearly three in the morning. The moon had gone behind clouds, and the desert outside was as black as pitch.

"We'd better take turns at gettin' some sleep; we'll have to have clear heads to-morrow," Johnny said.

"Well, I'll stand the first watch, and wake yuh up in a couple of hours," volunteered the fat deputy.

"*Sta bueno.*" Johnny nodded, but he gave Krumm a sharp look. "But see here, George, no snoozin'! We can't risk it. If yuh feel sleepy any time, yuh'd better brew yore-self some more coffee. Or better still, wake *me.*"

"Humph!" snorted the big officer. "Jist leave it to ol' Watchdog Krumm! Did I ever tell yuh about the time when I stood guard over some prisoners fer five days and nights without shuttin' an eye? It was when I was sheriff o' Brigham County, Utah. Yes, siree, Johnny, I had my eyes open fer so long thet finally, when it was all over, I couldn't shut 'em. I went to a

medico, and the doc had to put weights on my eyelids to pull 'em down. Yep, yuh don't have to worry about *me* fallin' asleep on the job!"

Johnny's response was a cheery singsong:

"I'll have to hand it to yuh, George,

That story was a pip;
But if I'd been the doc, I'd have hung
those weights
All on yore upper lip!"

"Hintin', I suppose, thet I talk too much, huh?" Krumm sniffed scornfully. "It's a good thing, Johnny, thet I've got such good control o' my temper."

When Johnny and the Chinaman had sprawled down on their blankets, a few minutes afterward, Krumm seated himself on one of the rickety chairs and began amusing himself with a soiled and tattered deck of playing cards that was on the greasy table.

After losing a couple of games of solitaire, he lost interest, and leaning back in his chair, he fished a cigar stump from his pocket and began to smoke.

Once an owl hooted mournfully from the paloverde trees outside the house, and gave the fat officer a nervous start. But, after that, all was still, except for the regular breathing of the sleepers and the sigh of the night wind across the desert.

Krumm yawned, looked at his watch, and settled down more comfortably in his chair.

"Dang it," he muttered. "The Border Imp wouldn't *dare* show up yere, after what Johnny and me did to him and his gang. I don't see why we can't *all* sleep. Ho, hum! I need rest, too, after all I done today."

His head slowly drooped, he began to nod, and then emitted a snore so loud that it awoke him. Blinking, he got to his feet. Then his glance fell on the door, and a brilliant idea came to him.

"Why didn't I think of it before!" he ejaculated. "Thet spring gun! If it worked once, it'll work ag'in. I'll jist set it, so's nobody can git in. Then I'll git some much-needed sleep. Yes, siree! It takes *me* to think o' things."

The framework of the trap gun was still attached to the inside of the door, and Krumm took his own six-gun and put it in the frame. Then he attached the wire to the trigger.

"All this ain't really necessary, nohow," he mumbled, "but, o' course, Johnny would do a lot o' beefin' if I went to sleep without takin' precautions. Well, I've got 'er fixed now. If that Border Imp tries to git in, it will shore be too bad fer him!"

His mind at ease, the fat deputy seated himself in his chair again, and tipping it back against the wall, was soon snoring soundly.

Whan-n-ng! *Z-z-z-zwoosh!* The trap gun exploded violently, and a bullet droned waspishly within an inch of Krumm's nose!

In his blundering sleepiness, the fat deputy had made one big mistake. He'd put the Colt in the framework hindside to!

And now the door came bursting open, and into the room, eyes glittering and fangs bared, the Border Imp charged like a maddened buffalo!

"Johnny!" Krumm screeched. "J-J-Johnny!"

Throwing himself to the floor, he crawled under the table.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FINISH FIGHT.

JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE had been sleeping the sleep of the healthily weary, and the sound of the shot came to his ears like a peal of thunder in a dream. The smashing of the door, however, brought him leaping to his feet.

He was still hardly half awake, and now he remembered that for comfort's sake he'd unbuckled his gun belts and wadded them up for a pillow. Before he could reach down for them, however, it was too late. The Border Imp was upon him like an avalanche!

And Hook was armed, too; he had a big Colt .45 gripped in his right hand. His wounded arm was crudely bound up with a bandanna, but he seemed to have enough strength in it to use a gun. That ugly steel hook had gripped the barrel, and it was swerving in line with Johnny Forty-five!

"I've got yuh *this* time, yuh leetle whelp——"

Br-r-r-rang! Another explosion shook the cabin, and there was a blaze of crimson flame and a furnace blast of acrid powder smoke.

But Johnny hadn't stopped that bullet. His toe had caught the rung of a chair, and he had kicked upward with all his force, sending that article of furniture flying into the hulking desperado just as he had squeezed the trigger.

And the smash of the chair not only spoiled the Imp's aim, but it knocked the Colt from the outlaw's already weakened grasp. The chair flew to fragments, and there was a snarl of pain from the Imp, for he hadn't taken the full force of it on the wound Johnny had dealt him the day before.

"Why, blast yuh, I'll——" He

rushed Johnny, seeing that he was unarmed, and swung at him with that fearful steel hook.

Johnny dodged, whirled, and sent a hard fist ripping in under the Imp's left eye. It was a straight, clean punch, lightning fast, and it checked the desperado's rush, in spite of his two hundred-odd pounds of beef.

"I'll tear yore head from yore body fer thet, yuh pore leetle law sneak!" rasped the Border Imp.

"Bueno then, hop to it!
I've been hopin' for this meetin',
And you can bet that one of us
Will shorely take a beatin'!"

Thud! Again that speedy fist of Johnny's flicked in, as he swung in rhythm to his chant, and landed on the Imp's wide nose.

If that nose hadn't been too flat already, it would certainly have been pancaked with that blow. As it was, it staggered the apelike desperado and set him back on his heels.

The outlaw's horrible face was purple now with fury. Yowling and yammering in his rage, he let drive mighty blows, rushing Johnny back by sheer weight and power. The Imp's right hand was badly hurt, but that awful, steel-tipped left more than made up for it.

It was all that Johnny could do, and more, to duck that left and keep ducking it. The Imp was forcing him into a corner. One blow with that iron hook, Johnny was fully aware, would crush his skull like a dropped egg. Weaving and dodging, Johnny just managed to side-step the Imp's charge.

"Honorable Forty-five!" cried the Chinaman, who had slept through the beginning of the fray. "Strike the most despicable and unworthy Border Imp with much display of strength!"

Johnny was certainly trying to, but the desperado was becoming more crafty. The Imp knew that he had a tremendous advantage as long as he didn't try to finish things too quickly, and he circled Johnny slowly, grinning cruelly, watching for a chance to send that steel hook slashing in.

"I'm goin' to pound yuh to a jelly, younker!" he rasped.

The singsong deputy had never faced an opponent such as this. The Imp was shorter than Johnny by several inches, but he seemed so wide that he filled the whole cabin.

It was like fighting a grizzly bear in hand-to-hand combat, and that hook of the Imp's was worse than any bear's claw. As the killer rushed him again, he tried to dodge, but didn't quite succeed.

The steel hook, coming like a cannon shell, struck him. It was only a grazing blow against his ribs, but the impact sent Johnny reeling helplessly against the wall. His lungs seemed paralyzed, and an agony like liquid fire drenched the left side of his body.

At that moment, the courageous little Chinaman came streaking in for the Border Imp, armed with his long knife!

But he had no chance. The Imp's monkeylike arms were too long. He parried the knife thrust with his steel hook, then smashed Wing Foo to the floor with a mighty swing of his wounded right arm. Wounded or not, there was enough power in it to knock the chink down—and out.

But the instant's interval had given Johnny the opening he wanted, and he came dancing in, swinging uppercuts that fairly whistled.

Thud! Smash! Whack! The punches landed against the Imp's face like exploding rockets.

The desperado wheezed, and

wabbling at the knees, he lurched over backward against the table, overturning it and knocking the lamp to the floor.

The lamp went out, but it was daylight now, and the light of the dawn came through the open door and illuminated the room with pale-gray light.

When the table fell, Krumm was exposed to view, cowering and shivering.

"Grab his legs, George!" Johnny yelled as he forced the Border Imp back and back. "No, not *my* legs! Let go——"

As the fat deputy seized one of Johnny's legs by mistake, the rhyming deputy half lost his balance and went careening against the wall. And with an exulting screech, the Imp drove that terrible hook full at his face!

Calling forth all of his wiry speed, Johnny ducked—and the hook rammed into the dobe with such force that it stuck there!

Then Johnny *did* have him! With all his strength, he hooked a scorching left hand into the side of the desperado's jaw. All the power of Johnny's lean and muscular shoulders was behind that pivoting haymaker, and it knocked the Border Imp as cold as an icicle.

Then, just for good measure, as the killer slumped down, Johnny handed him another—this time, a right. He wanted to make sure that the Imp would sleep until he could be properly secured.

Krumm had got to his feet just as the Imp left *his*. The fat deputy was beaming with satisfaction.

"Well, Johnny, it's shore a good thing I grabbed yuh the way I done and pulled yuh out of the way of thet punch he aimed at yuh!" he cried proudly.

"I reckon," said Johnny, when he'd had time to regain his breath, "that yuh was waitin' under that table all the time so's yuh could do that. Thanks a lot, pard."

His first thought now was to fix the Border Imp so that he could do no more harm. Taking a pair of handcuffs from the pocket of his Levis, he snapped one of them over the desperado's right wrist. Then he stopped and scratched his head for a moment in perplexity.

"Now thar's one fer yuh to figure out, Johnny," guffawed the fat deputy. "What yuh goin' to do when an hombre ain't got but one hand?"

"Where there's a will, there's a way." The younger officer grinned.

Going to the door, he jerked loose the wire of the trap gun. This he doubled, and then he threaded it through the cuff on his prisoner's right wrist. Drawing it through tightly, he wound it round and round the hook on the stump of the Imp's left arm.

While he was doing this, the desperado began to come to his senses. He was too thoroughly beaten, however, to put up any resistance, and when Johnny had finished winding the wire around his arms, he was as helpless as a trussed rooster.

"That'll hold yuh, Mr. Wide Pants, Now yo're ready for yore ride, Uncle Sam's a-waitin',
And the hangman's knot is tied."

When this had been attended to, Johnny hurried over to where Wing Foo still lay sprawled, and with a little water, he quickly brought him around. The little chink was uninjured, except for the loss of a tooth, and at the sight of the prisoner, he smiled gleefully.

"Wing Foo would cheerfully have

given all his valuable and highly useful teeth in exchange for the unexampled satisfaction of seeing the dishonorable Border Imp in the highly respected hands of the United States' most effective and severe law," he crooned.

A few hours later, Johnny and Krumm were ready to start northward with their prisoner. They had already helped Wing Foo load his "honorable brother's" treasure aboard the pack mule, and he was leaving the shack at the same time. The Chinaman was heading south, however, and their trails were parting.

Johnny Forty-five had had some misgivings, at first, about Wing Foo's safety with that fortune in silver and gold, but when he remembered the little yellow man's courage and ability with a knife, he was certain that he would be able to take care of himself.

Wing Foo had tried to force a big share of the money upon the two officers, and it had taken Johnny quite a while to make him understand that he and Krumm wished no part of it, and that the government

didn't allow them to accept payment for their services.

To the rhyming deputy's surprise, however, Krumm galloped back after they had gone a quarter of a mile or so, and didn't join Johnny again for nearly half an hour.

"Did yuh go back to say good-by to Wing Foo all over again?" Johnny grinned, as they started out once more with their sulky prisoner.

"Well—er—I'm runnin' short of expense dinero," explained the fat deputy marshal. "So I borried three of them silver dollars from him. I promised to send it back to him, and I asked him fer his address in China."

"George, yo're incurable," Johnny snickered, as he rolled a couple of cigarettes for finger exercise. "What did he say?"

"Johnny, I don't think he savvies English very well. He uses the wrong words sometimes, but I guess them chinks is all like that," Krumm grunted. "He called me an honorable and most admirable donkey."

"I think he savvies English very well, George," chuckled Johnny Forty-five. "Very, very well, indeed."





Captive Rangers

A "Hungry And Rusty" Novelette

By Samuel H. Nickels

Author of "The Kid and the Tenderfoot," etc.

THE thudding roar of hot guns had died to occasional scattering shots. The long line of Texas Rangers hugged the ground in the shelter of a deep arroyo.

They waited for their grizzled captain to give the order to charge across the rocky ground in a last effort to rout the outlaw pack from their hiding place and capture or kill them. Carbine levers clicked as the tired troopers hastily reloaded their weapons.

Out there in front and above them on top of the steep cliff, the Dal Lyman gang of outlaws crouched behind chunks and ledges and jeered sarcastically at the efforts of the

Rangers to reach them. They were the worst bunch of cutthroats, bank robbers, rustlers, and cattle thieves ever got together in the entire Big Bend country.

"Stop shootin', men!" came a sudden barked command from a big rawboned sergeant, and the word was passed swiftly along the Ranger line. "The captain says to hold yore fire. We're gittin' ready to try chargin' an' reachin' them hombres by climbin' the cliff. We——"

Bang! The flat, thudding blast of a heavy carbine drowned the sound of the sergeant's voice, and a whizzing bullet from one of the troopers kicked up a cloud of dust

beside an outlaw's face on top of the bluff.

"Who done thet?" the sergeant asked angrily. "Rusty Bolivar, thet was you! Yuh disobeyed orders! Yuh'll git court-martialed fer thet. Yuh——"

Down near the end of the Ranger line, "Rusty" Bolivar bounded to his feet, every freckle on his wizened face standing out like a danger signal. He shook his touseled mop of fiery hair back from his forehead and levered another cartridge into his smoking carbine.

"Yeah," he flared, raising his head in spite of the hail of outlaw bullets which instantly made the dust boil around him. "Says you, sarge, says you! Yuh ain't court-martialin' nobody, dog-gone yuh! When it gits so's I can't shoot at an outlaw when I see 'im stick his head up, I'm quitin' the blasted Ranger service. Stick thet in yore pipe an' smoke it! Rusty Bolivar has quit! Now I kin shoot as much as I danged please!"

"Rusty!" a drawling voice came from close beside him, and "Hungry" Hawkins grabbed him by the arm. "Shut up an' set down 'fore yuh git a tunnel blowed through yuh! Hold on thar, sarge! Steady!"

In spite of Rusty's protests, Hungry pulled him down beside him. The lanky, lantern-jawed young Ranger waited until the bellying roar of gunfire from the cliffs slackened. Then he spat out a stream of tobacco juice and smiled grimly.

"Now just you keep yore shirt on an' set hyar ontill I go augur the captain," he whispered to his scrappy partner. "I've just figured us out a jim-dandy scheme fer gittin' them hombres up thar. It'll beat tryin' to charge 'em all holler."

As Hungry uncoiled his lanky body and rose warily to his feet, an-

other burst of firing roared from the cliffs. With bullets cutting the air above his head, he hunched over and went running down the arroyo to where their captain was crouched.

"Waal," the old Ranger officer barked sharply as Hungry dropped down beside him, "what do yuh want, Hawkins?"

"A plenty," Hungry drawled lazily, and he spat another stream of tobacco juice against the bank beside him. "Cap, yuh can't do no good chargin' thet cliff. The whole company would git killed off 'fore they could climb it. I've got us a better scheme. Listen."

Rapidly and in as few words as possible, Hungry told him a plan he had in mind. It was extremely dangerous, but there was a slim chance that it might work.

As Hungry finished speaking, the old captain stared at him almost in awe. With a muttered remark, he suddenly rose on one knee.

"Of all the crazy, foolhardy stunts I ever heard of fer outwittin' a bunch of outlaws, thet's it," he growled. "Nobody but you or thet hot-headed leetle pard o' yores would've thought of such a trick. All right! If it'll work, it'll save gittin' a lot o' men killed. Git Rusty an' git started, while I pass out word to the company."

Hungry instantly whirled and ran back to where Rusty sat waiting. He nodded and snatched up his carbine, which he had left leaning against the bank.

"Come on!" he barked softly. "Git up an' foller me! We've got some runnin' to do."

"We what?" Rusty yelped angrily. "Not in this hot sun, I ain't! I wouldn't run from a whole tribe of Apaches in this heat. I——"

Before he could finish, Hungry leaned down and barked a few quick

words of instruction. The scowl instantly left Rusty's face and was replaced by a grin as he leaped to his feet and threw his carbine across his arm.

"Come on, then, yuh long-legged pelican!" he giggled. "Why didn't yuh say what yuh wanted in the first place? Let's git goin'!"

As they whirled and started at a trot down the arroyo, they could hear the captain barking orders to the other troopers. This was instantly followed by startled remarks and the click of rifle levers as the men got ready.

Just then, Hungry leaped from the arroyo. With Rusty bow-legging earnestly along at his heels, they headed at a dead run in the direction of their horses, which had been left behind an upended ledge fully three hundred yards away.

Like a flash, a stuttering bellow of outlaw guns from the cliff ringed them with a hail of shrieking bullets that tore up spurts of dust all around them and slashed through the mesquites beyond.

Rusty would have stopped to shoot back, but a quick warning from Hungry kept him going.

Suddenly a thundering blast of Ranger carbines was added to the uproar, and their whizzing bullets split the air above the two fleeing troopers' heads as they drew closer to their horses. The firing from the cliff stopped almost instantly.

Hungry darted one quick look over his shoulder, and saw several of the outlaws pop up from behind rocks. The ruffians were staring inquiringly, as if unable to grasp just what had happened among the Rangers.

Without a pause, Hungry and Rusty darted around the ledge and ran to where their well-trained cow horses stood ground-anchored.

Snatching their bridle reins, they swung hastily into their saddles and went spurring away.

A few scattering shots from the other Rangers struck the ground behind them as they hit the taller mesquites beyond the ledge and turned down into a deep draw out of sight.

"Now what?" Rusty yelped as Hungry reined sharply to the right. "Which way are we headed, an' what do we do next?"

"We keep goin'," Hungry grunted. "We've got them outlaws guessin' now, an' they've got spies an' scouts scattered thet'll keep tab on us. We'll head fer thet smuggler hole near the river an' let the captain catch up with us thar. Savvy?"

Spurring on at a steady road gait, they circled just out of rifle range of the cliff and headed swiftly toward the Rio Grande, which was only a few miles away.

As they sped on, Hungry watched the cliff closely. Whether it was the real hang-out of the huge outlaw band or not, he did not know. But he felt certain their secret hiding place must be somewhere back of those cliffs or in the rocky, almost unclimbable hills beyond. If this plan worked, he meant to not only find it, but to break up their band as well.

He and Rusty had just struck a chamisa-covered flat a couple of miles away, when they saw a small band of riders suddenly emerge from the hills and spur out of sight into some cedar brakes beyond.

Hungry grunted and stood on his toes in the stirrups. "Did yuh see them jaspers?" he barked to Rusty.

"Yuh bet yuh!" Rusty said quickly. "I'll say I seen 'em! If I ain't missed my guess, thet's some of them outlaws takin' a short cut to beat us to town. They'll slip in to scout around an' find out why we

was shot at by our company an' why we run away."

Hungry nodded and reached in his hip pocket for a fresh chew of tobacco. He bit off a huge mouthful and tongued it into his cheek, then smiled grimly.

"Yo're right as rain," he finally replied, his eyes still in the direction the hombres had gone. "Things is workin' out just as I meant fer 'em to. I hope the captain gives us plenty o' time to git thar an' git set 'fore he shows up an' makes his play."

Soon they turned down an old cattle trail into the canyon of the Rio Grande. There, just below them near the bank of the muddy river, they saw a huddle of adobe shacks and saloons, and they headed straight toward it.

II.

In a few minutes, they slowed their horses at the edge of town and came riding warily along its one trash-littered street. Both held their right hands close to gun butts as they saw little crowds of slit-eyed hombres who scowled at them as they jogged watchfully past.

"This is an awful good place to git a bullet in the back," Hungry drawled, his eyes now on the front of an old saloon, where several tough-looking riders had just dismounted. "These Ranger badges we're wearin' shore ain't popular none around hyar. Keep yore eyes peeled."

"Yeah," Rusty flared, glaring from under the down-pulled brim of his sombrero at the dusty riders. "Like I ain't already got 'em peeled. The first jasper thet makes a gun pass around here, I'm figurin' to drill 'im first an' ask how come afterwards."

Just then, Hungry reined his horse over to the hitch rack at the end of the saloon porch. He nodded to Rusty and winked. Then both swung to the ground and clumped up on the porch.

The crowd of hombres around the door eyed them silently and moved grudgingly aside to let them pass. Several hands slid treacherously to gun butts and stayed there until Hungry and Rusty pushed through into the old saloon. Then the hombres followed them inside.

Just inside the door, Hungry and Rusty stepped warily to one side and stood with thumbs hooked in their crisscrossed cartridge belts until their eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light in the smoke-laden room.

The hombres from the porch clumped past them and swaggered to the rough pine bar, where a puffy-faced bartender stood scowling suspiciously.

"Waal," the bartender suddenly bawled, when Hungry and Rusty strolled on toward a battered pool table where a tough-looking cowboy and a one-eyed Mexican were playing. "What do you two blasted Rangers want in hyar?"

"Wha-a-t?" Rusty snarled, his freckled hands streaking to his holsters in a swift draw that was so lightning fast that his twin Colts were out and cocked before a man in the crowd could make a move. "What's it to yuh, yuh splatter-faced booze jerker? Who wants to know?"

"Thet's the ticket, pard!" Hungry roared approvingly. "Part thet jasper's hair with a bullet fer 'im! Make 'im set 'em up to the crowd! Don't take nothin' offn nobody no more! We don't have to."

Bang-bang! With a wild cowboy yell, Rusty fired with both hands,

and his whizzing bullets chugged into the adobe wall just over the bartender's head.

"I couldn't part his hair, pard," he yelled, grinning. "He's too bald-headed. Set out the bottles, you! The drinks is now on the house. Up to the bar, everybody! Grab yore favorite pizen an' hop it down yuh! Common, boys, an' liquidate!"

With grins of sudden delight, the loafers at the back of the saloon surged forward and lined up at the bar. The one-eyed Mexican and the cowboy dropped their cues and joined them as Hungry let out a whoop and drew his right-hand Colt.

Bang! Bang-bang-bang! The lanky Ranger's big .45 flamed four times, and he shot the necks neatly from as many bottles on the back bar.

"Set 'em out thar, you!" he roared at the bartender. "Yuh heard what my leetle pard told yuh. Git busy 'fore I earmark yuh!"

With a hoarse bellow of baffled fury, the bartender ducked as Hungry's second gun swung to cover him. Mouthing oaths, he hastily slammed bottles and glasses on the bar.

"Thet's the ticket," Hungry whooped. "One o' you boys step to the door an' call in the rest o' the town. Everybody drinks free this evenin'. E-e-ya-hoo!"

Bang-bang! With another reckless cowboy yell, Hungry drove a pair of bullets through the saloon roof.

As he did this, Hungry noticed that the riders he and Rusty had noticed on the porch were now grinning and nudging one another. The rest of the crowd were laughing and shouting noisily, and all seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Every hombre in the saloon was

a lawbreaker of some kind, and Hungry and Rusty knew it. Any one of them would have been perfectly willing to shoot the Ranger partners down as they entered the saloon.

But there was now no more thought of gun play. The sight of two Texas Rangers going on the warpath and shooting up a saloon appealed to them, and free drinks suited them even more.

As more ruffians from outside rushed in and swarmed up to the bar, the bartender's puffy face twisted with murderous rage. He was gritting his teeth and wistfully eying the sawed-off shotgun which lay on a whisky barrel near him.

"Blast yuh!" he suddenly snarled, glaring around at Hungry and Rusty. "Who's payin' fer this booze these hombres is swillin'?"

"You aire, feller!" Rusty cackled shrilly. "Keep passin' it out!"

This brought shouts of raucous laughter from the crowd that was jostling for places at the bar. Some of them were now openly cheering the two cowboy Rangers, and the one-eyed Mexican even put an arm around Rusty's shoulders.

Suddenly the saloon door was hurled violently open and the old Ranger captain strode angrily inside. Close behind him, carbines and Colts gripped ready, came every trooper in Company B, and their weapons swung to cover Hungry and Rusty.

"Hands in the air, you two young rascalions!" the captain barked sternly. "We've finally caught up with yuh, have we? Stand whar yuh aire!"

As Hungry and Rusty dropped their guns back into their holsters and slowly raised their hands, their captain stamped closer. The crowd

stared in astonishment as the old frontier officer jerked the badges from the two Rangers' shirts and shoved them into his pocket.

"Now," the captain growled, stepping back, "bring handcuffs an' slap 'em on 'em! They're under arrest! I'll——"

That was as far as he got. The Ranger sergeant was just pulling some shiny handcuffs from his chaps pocket when Hungry and Rusty dived around the end of the bar. They crashed headlong through a window before a hand could be lifted to stop them, and went racing to their horses.

"After 'em, men!" the captain bawled. "Git 'em! Don't let 'em escape!"

An uproar of shouts and thudding feet sounded from the saloon, and there came the bark of a gun. The saloon door suddenly crashed open as Hungry and Rusty leaped into their saddles, and a hail of badly aimed bullets split the air above their heads as they spurred their horses around the nearest shack and went streaking away.

Hungry led the way between the ramshackle buildings at top speed until they reached the edge of town. There he reined aside behind some cottonwoods and pulled his mount to a rearing halt.

They were just in time to see their amigos of Company B throw themselves into their saddles and go streaking away in the opposite direction as if trying to hunt them down. The captain was in the lead, and he was angrily shouting orders right and left.

The Rangers had hardly left the saloon when several other hombres rushed out and leaped astride their horses. These instantly took the trail of Hungry's and Rusty's

mounts and came speeding after them.

Rusty grinned and reached jerkily for tobacco and papers. "Your trick's shore workin' out," he chuckled. "Here they come!"

Hungry smiled grimly as the oncoming riders spurred toward them. They were the same hombres he and Rusty had seen on the saloon porch when they entered town, and he had a hunch they were also the same riders he and Rusty had seen cut in ahead of them near the mesa.

Just then, the riders whirled their horses around the clump of cottonwoods. The hombres were grinning, but they held their hands close to their guns.

"Waal?" Hungry drawled inquiringly.

"Come on, you two ex-Rangers!" one of the riders barked. "Yo're goin' with us. What's up? What've you two jaspers done thet turned yore late amigos against yuh?"

"What's it to yuh, hombre?" Rusty flared. "Who give you leave to horn in on this?"

"Git 'em, men!" another of the riders snapped, and they pointed their guns at Hungry and Rusty. "Git their artillery, an' we'll take 'em to the boss. Lyman kin question 'em an' see what's been goin' on. Let's hurry!"

Hungry and Rusty allowed the ruffians to take their guns. They were then surrounded by the hombres and led away at a swift gallop.

The sun was nearly down when their captors turned sharply aside near the bluffs where they had been fighting earlier in the day. The ruffians stopped there for a few minutes and tied bandannas over Hungry's and Rusty's eyes. Then they rode on.

Soon the two Rangers felt their horses turn up a steep trail, and

knew that they were being taken up into those higher hills by some secret trail.

Hungry smiled when he reached out cautiously and felt rock walls on both sides of them.

After a short ride, the horses came out on level ground. Shouts and a sudden roar of laughter sounded near them. Then the horses were pulled to a halt.

"All right, men," a rasping voice came from almost beside them. "I see yuh got 'em. Take off them blindfolds an' let's have a look at 'em."

As the hombres jerked the bandannas from the Rangers' eyes, Hungry and Rusty glanced hastily around and found themselves surrounded by a big crowd of heavily armed ruffians. Just across a shallow gully, they saw some small cabins that had been made of piñon logs and poles, roofed with brush and dirt.

"Waal," the rasping voice came again, "what've yuh been into? What turned yore Ranger amigos against yuh? I figure yo're up to some swell trick, blast yuh! I'm a good mind to just bump yuh off!"

Rusty would have made a blistering reply, but Hungry shook his head warningly and managed to wink. He then glanced down at the hombre who had spoken.

He knew instantly that he was looking at Dal Lyman. There was no mistaking the tall, black-bearded gun fighter's villainous face. Pictures of the murderous outlaw leader had been shown in every Ranger camp along the border, and Hungry and Rusty recognized him at a glance.

"Yeah?" Hungry grunted dryly. "Worried about whether me an' my leetle pard has quit the Ranger service, huh?"

Dal Lyman glared wickedly. "Yuh bet yuh I am!" he snarled. "I wouldn't trust an hombre thet'd ever been a Ranger no farther than I could sling a bull by the tail. Savvy thet?"

Hungry smiled grimly and nodded. "Waal," he drawled, watching Lyman closely, "suppose I was to tell yuh how to turn the tables an' nab yuh some o' them Rangers. My company is the only one thet knows yuh've got this hide-out up hyar. If yuh had some of 'em to hold as prisoners, yuh might force the rest to stay away an' leave yuh alone."

At this, a chorus of startled oaths burst from the outlaw pack.

Dal Lyman darted a quick glance around at his men; then his close-set eyes hardened suspiciously, and he glared up at Hungry and Rusty.

"Git down offn them hosses!" he snarled. "We'll go to my shack an' talk this over. If yo're tryin' some slick trick on me, yuh ain't got many minutes to live. Come on!"

III.

Hungry and Rusty had just swung to the ground and dropped their bridle reins when they saw several more of the outlaw band coming down the draw. In all, the Rangers counted fully seventeen of the slit-eyed ruffians as they pushed through the crowd and followed Lyman to the largest of the cabins across the draw.

"Waal," the outlaw leader snapped, when they went inside and he had closed the door, "go on an' spill it. How're we to git our hands on some Rangers? I could hold 'em prisoners hyar an' use 'em to bluff other Rangers into lettin' us alone."

Hungry smiled grimly and seated himself on a hide-bottomed chair.

He winked again at Rusty, then spat a stream of tobacco juice into the corner.

Leaning forward, with his eyes on Lyman, he told him the plan he had in mind. As he talked, he saw the look of suspicion gradually fade from the outlaw leader's brutal face.

"Yuh see?" Hungry drawled lazily. "It's a hundred-to-one shot that the whole company will be camped at that water hole just beyond this mesa. They're shore tired, an' they'll be sleepin' sound. Thar won't be more'n one guard, an' yuh kin slip past him. Don't do no shootin' or knife work. Just cover a few with yore guns as yuh nab 'em, so's they won't holler. Then tie 'em an' bring 'em hyar."

Dal Lyman stared for a full minute without replying. Suddenly he slammed his fist down on the greasy table beside him and lunged to his feet.

"It may work!" he roared, his drink-reddened face twisted in a scowl of murderous satisfaction. "It's already gittin' dark. We'll try yore scheme, but remember this. If this is a trick to git me, I'm comin' straight back hyar an' slit yore throats fer yuh. Savvy?"

With a parting glare, Lyman hurried back outside. He bawled orders to his men and sent them rushing to get their horses. Then he growled an oath and went back into the cabin.

"I'm leavin' you two young jaspers tied up hyar," he snarled at Hungry and Rusty. "The cook'll be keepin' an eye on yuh, too, so don't try nothin'."

In a few minutes, there came the swift beat of hoofs and the shouts of the outlaw gang from beyond the draw.

Lyman called some of the ruffians

to the cabin, and Hungry and Rusty were securely tied.

It was entirely dark by the time the hombres had eaten a hurried supper and were ready to ride.

Lyman brought the half-breed cook in and left him to guard Hungry and Rusty. Then the outlaw leader and his heavily armed band mounted and galloped swiftly away into the night.

When the sound of their horses had died away in the distance, Hungry smiled grimly and winked at Rusty.

Rusty giggled. Then he leaned back as comfortably as his bound hands would permit and settled himself to wait.

The half-breed cook scowled down at them suspiciously and began thoughtfully rolling a cornhusk cigarette. He grunted sourly as he shoved the cigarette between his thick lips.

"You don't try eet no treecks," he growled warningly. "The boss, he say eef you make a move, I am to use thees knife. You savvy?"

"Yeah," Rusty flared. "Well, you won't need that sticker yet a while, hombre, so just keep it in yore pants. When yuh do need it, it's goin' to be too late. Now shut up an' don't bother me. I'm goin' to snatch me a few winks of sleep."

Hungry smiled grimly and began squirming as if unable to rest. He glanced through the open door at the rising moon. Then he began twisting again and moving his arms behind him, as if trying to lie down. His eyes were warily on the cook as he did so.

Hours passed. Rusty was snoring softly beside him, when he thought he heard a faint shout somewhere far out in the darkness. Soon there came another shout, and in a few

minutes, there came the rapid beat of hoofs.

The lanky Ranger instantly nudged his partner. Rusty squirmed drowsily, but did not open his eyes. Hungry waited until their guard glanced toward the door; then he nudged Rusty again.

"Hey!" Rusty mumbled thickly. "Wha-what aire——"

"Shhh!" Hungry hissed softly, and he nudged Rusty again.

Wide awake almost instantly, Rusty's eyes popped open. He darted a quick look at the guard's broad back and sat up just as the outlaw band galloped noisily up in the moonlight and pulled to a halt near the cabins.

"All right, men!" came a bellowing command that cut through the uproar of laughter and loud talking. "Unload these prisoners an' herd 'em into the dugout, whar they can't escape on us! We don't want any to git away."

Hungry and Rusty rose hastily on their elbows. There, in the pale moonlight just beyond the door, they saw seven angry troopers of Company B. Each Ranger's hands were lashed together behind him, and all were mounted on stolen troop horses.

"Yuh'll pay fer this, blast yuh!" a bearded corporal barked as the outlaws began dragging them from their saddles. "Yuh can't kidnap Texas Rangers an' git away with it! Yuh——"

"Yeah?" Dal Lyman snarled wickedly. "Waal, that's what *you* think, Ranger. We've got yuh, an' we're goin' to hold yuh prisoners to make other Rangers an' sheriffs let us alone. Savvy? Now shet up!"

Hungry chuckled and sat up as the outlaw band hustled the captured Rangers over to a big dugout that had been built in a slope of the

opposite side of the draw. He and Rusty watched until the last of their amigos had been driven inside and the door fastened behind them.

They were just starting to lean back against the wall when Lyman clumped into the cabin. The big outlaw leader's face twisted in a grimace of satisfaction as he pulled a blackened pipe from his pocket and seated himself heavily beside the table.

"Waal, I see yuh got 'em," Hungry drawled, looking up at him. "I reckon yo're goin' to turn me an' my leetle pard, hyar, loose now, ain't yuh?"

At this, Lyman gave a roaring laugh. He stopped tamping the tobacco in his pipe and leered down.

"Turn yuh loose?" he guffawed. "Like blazes I'm turnin' yuh loose! I've got a scheme to use yuh tomorrow on a bank-robbin' job, so I'm keepin' yuh tied right hyar, whar yuh'll be on hand when I need yuh."

With another leering laugh, Lyman got up and stalked out of the cabin.

A deadly greenish glint instantly blazed in Hungry's slitted eyes, but he said nothing until the big outlaw was well away. Then he glanced across at the cook.

"Say, you," he snapped, "why don't Lyman put us with them other prisoners, if he's goin' to keep us tied up?"

The cook sneered. "For a good reason, señores," he said. "He wants you where he can watch you an' see you do not try no treecks. He do not trust you, an' he ees going to see you get keel mañana."

"Huh!" Rusty grunted angrily. "So he's goin' to see we git killed to-morrow, is he? Well, that's what *he* thinks!"

Rusty would have said more, but

Hungry silenced him by a warning grunt. The lanky Ranger then looked over at the big cook and smiled.

"I wonder if yuh'd mind gittin' this gun out from inside my shirt," he said quietly. "It's slipped around so's I can't lay down without layin' on it."

"A gun!" the cook snarled suspiciously. "You have eet a gun heed een yore shirt? You bet I weel get eet!"

With a muttered remark, the half-breed hurled his half-smoked cigarette aside and sprang from his chair. With a sneering grin on his dark face, he crossed the room and stooped over the apparently helpless prisoner.

Hungry waited until the hombre started to reach inside his shirt. Then his hands suddenly flashed from behind him, and he grabbed the fellow by the throat. Before the breed could tear free, Hungry jerked him down and drove his head against the floor in a terrific smash and rolled on top of him.

Still keeping a grip on the fellow's throat so he could not yell for help, Hungry managed to snatch the knife from his belt. He instantly jammed the point of the razor-edged weapon against the cook's chest.

"Hold still, feller!" he barked softly. "Keep fightin', an' I'll drive this through yuh!"

"Say, how'd yuh git loose, yuh long-legged pelican?" Rusty asked sharply when Hungry had freed him and tied up their prisoner. "Yuh didn't break them piggin' strings just now, did yuh?"

Hungry chuckled and nodded toward a tiny pocketknife which lay on the floor against the wall. "I used thet to cut myself loose while we was waitin' fer Lyman an' his gang to git back," he explained hur-

riedly. "I expected to git tied up, an' I had that knife in the back o' my shirt above my belt. Let's gag this jasper as quick as we kin. We've got work to do, an' got to do it fast!"

As they hastily gagged the half-breed with a piece of his own filthy shirt, the two cowboy Rangers heard an uproar of shouts and jeers from beyond the cabin, where the outlaws had built a big camp fire. Hungry looked out and saw his bearded corporal in their midst.

The veteran Ranger's hands were still tied tightly behind him, and his shirt was almost ripped from his body, but he was staring gamely at Dal Lyman, who sat on a boulder in front of him.

"Waal, Ranger," Lyman said sneeringly, "it seems thet we turned the tables on yuh. We've got yuh right whar we want yuh. When news gits out o' how we captured yuh, yuh'll be laughed plumb out o' Texas."

"If such news gets out," the old corporal retorted grimly. "But it won't. Thar's an old sayin' thet if yuh give an hombre rope enough, he'll hang himself. Think thet over, Lyman. Yuh'll see the point later."

As another guffaw of coarse laughter from the crowd drowned the sound of the corporal's voice, Hungry grabbed Rusty's arm.

"Quick!" he barked sharply. "Now's the time to reach thet dug-out. Hyar! You take this knife an' tend to thet, while I hunt me some-thin' else to fight with."

IV.

As Rusty grabbed the big bowie and scooted away, Hungry began hastily searching the cabin. In a few minutes, he found a pair of

loaded Colts and a belt of cartridges on a shelf in the corner.

With a grunt of satisfaction, he hurriedly filled his chaps pocket with the cartridges. He then slipped the guns inside his shirt and adjusted them under his belt.

"Waal," he drawled, his eyes glinting dangerously, "I reckon business will shore start pickin' up from hyar on. I've got to reach the corporal 'fore he gits hurt."

Hungry paused and looked keenly on both sides of the door; then he stepped out and stalked warily toward the camp fire. He stopped just beyond the circle of light and pulled his heavy guns into position for lightning use as he heard Lyman begin talking again.

"Is thar any other Rangers thet knows I've got this hang-out up in these hills?" Lyman demanded harshly. "Yuh'll be talkin', if yuh know what's good fer yuh. Answer my question, an' answer it straight!"

The old corporal's face did not change expression. "My company is the only one thet knows about it," he replied quietly. "But they're enough, hombre. Rangers always get their men. Remember thet, an' what I told yuh about the rope."

With an angry snarl, Lyman lunged from the boulder. He glared murderously at the old Ranger for a moment; then he growled an oath and dropped his right hand to a gun butt.

"Hold it, Lyman!" Hungry barked grimly from behind him. "Steady with that gun!"

Dal Lyman and his men whirled as Hungry stalked lazily into view from the darkness. Both the big outlaw leader's hands were now gripping guns as Hungry stopped in front of him.

"You!" Lyman blazed angrily. "So it's you, is it? How'd you git

loose, an' whar's thet sorrel-topped partner o' yores?"

Hungry smiled and felt to make certain his shirt was unbuttoned so that nothing would hamper his draw. He then looked over the heads of the crowd and chuckled grimly.

"You've asked plenty o' questions, Lyman," he drawled, a deadly greenish glint again creeping into his slitted eyes. "Now I'll ask one. I'm askin' yuh to surrender quietlike. Ranger talkin'. Look behind yuh 'fore yuh answer."

With a startled snarl, Lyman and his men jerked around. There, just at the edge of the circle of firelight, stood Rusty and the men of Company B, and every trooper was holding a pair of cocked Colts pointed at the outlaw pack!

With a bellow of murderous fury, Lyman stepped back, his hands still gripping his guns. He glared and licked his dry lips like a trapped coyote. Then he whirled savagely toward Hungry.

"Blast yuh!" he roared, his lips writhing back from his yellowed teeth. "Yuh tricked us!"

"I'll say we did!" Rusty cackled from across the fire. "Our whole company was playing asleep an' waitin' fer us to send you to capture some of 'em an' bring 'em here, where they could help nab yuh. It'd have paid yuh to look in these hombres' boots. Thet's where they had these guns hid. Hands in the air, everybody! The rest of the company has follered, an' they can't be far away."

Lyman leaped back, snarling, as he saw the hands of every member of his big band hastily lifted in token of surrender. With a hoarse oath, he threw himself into a fighting crouch and glared at Hungry.

"Yuh—yo're to blame fer this!" he choked murderously. "They may

git me, but I'm 'killin' you f'er what yuh've done, an' I'm doin' it now! I'm one hombre thet won't surrender!"

Lyman's hands were already on his guns.

Hungry's right thumb was hooked in his chaps belt, but he was watching the rage-crazed ruffian's every move with the keen alertness of a cougar about to spring.

"Better not try it, Lyman," he cautioned calmly. "Better not risk it. I've got a gun hyar, an' I'll git yuh if yuh try to draw."

"Then git me!" Lyman screamed, hurling himself aside and ripping his guns from his holsters in one lightning movement.

Bang-bang-bang-bang! The roaring blast of guns bellowed like a clap of thunder in the narrow draw as Hungry ducked, leaped aside, and snatched a Colt from inside his shirt.

One bullet almost parted the lanky Ranger's hair. A second numbed his left arm as he ducked again and fired.

Bang-bang-bang! Three more roaring shots jarred the watchers' eardrums as Hungry's and Lyman's .45s blasted at the same instant.

With a choking grunt, Lyman jerked upright. The guns slid from his fingers, and he tottered for a

moment. Suddenly he took a staggering step and went to his knees. Then he gave a hoarse groan and pitched over on his face. His legs jerked a few times. Then he lay still.

"Aire yuh hurt bad, Hawkins?" the old corporal called as Rusty rushed forward and threw an arm about his lanky partner's swaying figure.

"Only my arm, sir," Hungry drawled. "My gun hung in my shirt, or he wouldn't have touched me. This shore beats chargin' thet cliff. We got 'em all, an' we didn't have to kill but one."

"I'll say we got 'em all!" Rusty yelped as he began swiftly cutting off Hungry's sleeve to get at his wounded arm. "It's like the corporal says. All yuh've got to do is give 'em rope enough, an' they'll hang theirselves. These would-be bad men always does."

Thar's many a slip twixt the handcuffs an' the noose. An' thet slip is plumb apt ter be a blazin' six-gun, when the Rangers are on the job, with the trigger fingers o' Hungry an' Rusty doin' the slippin'. Them two wild cowboys is peaceful enough till they git riled. An' then— But watch ter see what scrape they'll git inter in the next story about 'em. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly pronto.





Gun Hawk

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "The Border Eagle Unmasks The Terror," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BARBED BARRIER.

THE big, clean-limbed sorrel stopped, snorting softly. Jim Christy was dozing in the saddle. He opened his slate-blue eyes, muttering sleepily as he gazed into the bright moonlight.

"What's the matter, huh?" he grunted wearily. "Hoss, get a move on. It shore can't be much farther to——"

Jim Christy's voice trailed off in a hoarse gasp. The sleepiness left his slate-colored eyes instantly, and his slim, wiry body snapped erect in the saddle. Jim Christy lifted slim, strong hands, rubbed at his eyes, then looked again.

No, it was no trick of moonlight and dew-wet grama. There was a

fence there before him—a three-wire fence that certainly had not been there six months before, when he rode south from his uncle's C Bar spread to prowl around the border country a spell.

"What in blue blazes has happened?" Jim Christy asked the moonlit night sharply. "Uncle Wade is about the best-natured gent I ever met. But if there's one thing that'll rile him, it's a mention o' bob wire gettin' strung acrost cow range. An' here's a fence, right on C Bar!"

Jim Christy got down, stepped to the fence, and tapped at one taut strand of the barbed wire. He looked along the fence to his left to where it disappeared over a knoll.

His head turned slowly while his puckering eyes looked to his right. As far as he could see from oak and

scrub cedar, the fence marched in that direction, a glittering thing in the moonlight.

Jim Christy stood there for a long time, trying to figure the thing out. Like most ranchmen in those days, Jim Christy did not know the exact boundary line between his uncle Wade Christy's C Bar and shriveled, kindly old Joe Baffert's 44 range.

There had never been any reason to determine an exact boundary, for the C Bar and the 44 owners had come up the trail from Texas many years before—a pair of harum-scarum young saddle pards who had settled here, started separate spreads, and prospered by backing each other in whatever came up.

Both those old hombres hated barbed wire like poison. Yet here was the stuff, strung on what must, Jim reasoned, be the boundary line between their ranches.

Puzzled, a grim foreboding taking root in his agile brain, Jim went back to his horse, swung aboard, and turned the animal along the fence to the right, since that would be taking him toward the wagon road which led from his uncle's C Bar to Canyon City, the nearest town.

Jim Christy was wide awake now, lean-jawed, blunt-chinned face set, lips jerked into a hard line. Something was wrong, no question of that.

Jim let his hands drop to the butts of the twin guns that were holstered at his lean thighs. From beneath the slanted brim of his black Stetson, his eyes began probing the moonlight ahead, following that grim line of fence.

He topped a little knoll, and stopped for a moment, growling deep in his lean throat. The cedars gave way for over half a mile before him, and he could see the fence running on and on, straight across

the wagon road that was in the shallow valley below him.

"Danged if I like the looks o' this," Jim growled. "Come on, hoss! There'll be a gate in that blasted wire down yonder where the road is. I want to get on to the place an' ask Uncle Wade what's took place up here."

The sorrel and Jim Christy were both weary, for they had traveled steadily for three whole days. Instead of camping at dusk, Jim had shoved on, figuring to reach his uncle's spread by ten o'clock at the latest. He was more anxious than ever to reach the C Bar now, for this fence business had him plenty worried.

He sent the sorrel down the slope at a gallop, eyes riveted on the fence ahead. He saw where the road snaked under the wire, then lost sight of the fence and road as he struck the willow thickets along a little stream that meandered down the shallow valley. He splashed across the stream, bored through more willows, and came out at the edge of the road.

Jim took one look at the fence—and yelped as if gouged by some of the bristling barbs on the new wire before him. There was no gate. The road to town had been fenced off!

"Well, I'll be teetotally danged!" Jim cried loudly. "This road is fenced off, which means——"

"Which means it ain't open ter travel, cowboy! Steady, feller, or I'll give yuh a stummick full o' blue whistlers! Elevate, an' do it quick!" The harsh, snarling voice came from the willows where the fence disappeared into the thicket along the stream.

Jim Christy felt anger flare through him, but checked the impulse to stab for his guns. That

hidden jasper had the advantage, and Jim Christy was wise enough to realize that making a gun play might mean sudden death.

Jim lifted his hands, hipped over slowly in the saddle, and stared toward the willow thicket. The twin muzzles of a double-barreled shotgun yawned at him, and he could see a thin, bony hand resting on the forearm of the old scattergun. Jim shivered a little, for the worst shot in Arizona Territory could not have missed him at that range with such a weapon.

"Steady, feller!" that gritty voice came. "Yuh ain't one o' them yaller-backed C Bar punchers, or I would 'a' blowed yuh offn that bronc. But I aim to have a look at yore brand, nohow."

Jim Christy was too much surprised to be very angry at the moment. But it made his rage rise to hear C Bar men called names, and he almost said so before he realized what that might bring.

The gent behind that scattergun certainly had no love for C Bar, and Jim realized suddenly that he was in luck to be riding a horse that he had bought down on the Sonora-Arizona line. The sorrel was branded with Diamond 8, which might help Jim Christy out of a mighty ticklish situation.

The willows were parting now, and out into the moonlight stalked a bony, rat-faced little jasper who wore the fancy clothes of a range dude.

Jim Christy's teeth ground at sight of the duded-up little jasper's sneering face. But the dandified little hombre still held the drop with that scattergun, and Jim fought for control of his temper. There was something in the quick, beady eyes of that little walloper that warned Jim Christy to expect the worst.

"Fine-lookin' hoss, feller," the flashily dressed runt hummed. "Diamond 8. That's down on the border, ain't it?"

"Uh-huh," Jim grunted slowly. "But what's the idea in stickin' me up, feller? Am I trespassin' or somethin'?"

"Two guns, eh?" the man with the shotgun grated as if he had not heard Jim's questions. "Slung like yuh knowed how to use 'em, too. Where was yuh figurin' on headin', feller?"

Jim Christy was fighting mad now. The insolent, sneering manner of that duded-up little runt made Jim itch for the feel of the fellow's scrawny neck in his lean fingers.

But Jim Christy had been in too many tight corners to let his temper run wild now. That rat-faced, big-toothed little walloper with the shotgun would do murder and lose no sleep over it, if Jim read his brand correctly.

Instead of saying the things he wanted to, Jim fidgeted uneasily, glancing about as if alarmed.

"Yuh—yuh an officer?" he asked, forcing a hoarse note into his voice.

The runty little jasper stiffened, looked sharply up at Jim's lean face, then laughed cacklingly.

"Ho-ho!" he sneered. "So that's it. Owl-hooter, hey? An' mistakin' me fer a officer! Jigger Trask don't need no badge ter hide behind, hombre. Pile offn that hoss!"

Jim Christy saw red, for "Jigger" Trask was swearing at him now, calling him names that no man would take.

"What's the idea?" Jim snarled through locked teeth. "I've got no time to lose here."

"No?" Jigger Trask sneered. "Yuh'll lose more than time if yuh don't pile offn that hoss, feller. I work fer the 44, an' yo're on 44

range now. How do I know yuh ain't some gun slinger that ol' Wade Christy has hired?"

"Nobody named Wade Christy has hired me to do any gun-slingin'," Jim snapped, and truthfully enough. "Yuh must be——"

"Yuh must be tired o' livin'!" Jigger Trask snarled, stepping in closer to the right shoulder of Jim's sorrel. "Out o' that saddle, or I'll blow yuh out! Yuh act suspicious, like a couple of other fellers that I've drug home fer Baffert ter look over."

Jigger Trask meant to do murder, that was plain. He had stepped close enough to grab the sorrel's bit, knowing the animal would rear and plunge most likely when the old scattergun exploded.

Jim Christy saw the look in Trask's eyes, knew that the dandified little killer was already tightening his bony fingers on the gun's twin triggers.

"All right," Jim growled. "If yuh insist on makin' me dismount, looks like I'll have to."

Jim kicked his right foot out of the stirrup, lifted the foot up and back toward the cantle of the saddle, as if intending to swing down in a natural manner. But that booted foot suddenly streaked out and up, and Jigger Trask's old scattergun bellowed a mighty protest.

CHAPTER II.

NEWS FOR JIM.

JIM CHRISTY felt the hissing swarm of buckshot rip past his head a split second after his boot toe had kicked the twin barrels of the shotgun up. And as the double charge of blue whistlers sped past, Jim quit his saddle like an expert bulldogger.

His lean arms found Jigger Trask's thin form. They locked as

he bore the snarling, kicking little killer back and down with terrific force.

Jim Christy sensed rather than saw Jigger Trask's hand fumbling at holstered guns. Jim let loose all holds, sat up astride the squirming little killer, and crashed a fist into the snarling, hate-distorted face.

Trask gurgled an oath, but kept tugging at those twin guns he wore in fancy tied-down holsters. Jim Christy struck again, and Jigger became too groggy to think of getting those guns he had drawn up to aim.

Jim took the guns, noticing that they were perfectly matched, ornate weapons. There was fine inlay work of gold and silver along the barrels and cylinders of the big .45s.

But what made Jim's hard lips twist in a sneer of disgust was the notches filed on the backstrap of each gun. Four notches on one gun, three on the other.

"So yo're the kind of a braggin' coyote that files a notch for each man he shoots, eh?" Jim rasped. "I'll bet yuh filed part o' them notches there just for show, yuh mangy little stink lizard. If yuh ever killed a man, yuh shot him in the back."

"Let me loose, an' I'll show yuh!" the runty gunman snarled harshly. "Blast yore hide! I should 'a' kilt yuh on sight. Yuh—yuh——"

Jim's right hand fell, open-palmed, across Trask's sharp-featured face. The little gunman swore a choked oath, and tried to sink his big, crooked teeth into Jim's hand.

"Yuh called me a few names when yuh had the drop, yuh skunk!" Jim warned. "Try any more o' that, an' I'll slap that ugly face o' yores clean around to the back o' yore unwashed neck."

Jim got up, hefted Trask's fancy

guns a moment, then tossed them whirling into the brush.

Jigger Trask leaped to his feet, snarling like a bobcat as he brushed at his fancy striped trousers and soft leather jacket that was decorated with beaded designs along the front.

Jim watched absently, mind racing at top speed. He paid little attention to Jigger Trask—and almost lost his life.

There was a sudden, blinding flash, and Jim Christy felt as if a bronc had kicked in the side of his skull. But even as he fell, his hands whipped down, and the twin Colt .45s skinned from his pliant holsters to rip the moonlight with pale tongues of powder blaze. Jim heard a screamed oath, but was much too groggy to know whether he had scored a hit or simply frightened Jigger Trask.

Jim struck the ground, bounced limply, and lay panting. His mind reeled crazily, and it seemed that a cloud was gathering over the moon. But Jim hung grimly to consciousness, forcing his leaden arms to pry his numbed body upward as he shoved the ground with Colt-filled hands.

He shook his head, felt sticky moisture along his left cheek and jaw. Then pain hammered through his left temple, and his numbed nerves awakened.

He was deathly sick for a moment, and dropped back to the earth despite his stubborn will. But the numbness was leaving him, and as the terrific pain in his head lessened, he heard sobbing oaths somewhere close to him.

Jim Christy sat up then, guns still gripped, the glazed look leaving his eyes. He saw Jigger Trask wallowing around like a stuck pig, claw-

ing at his face with hands that were a ghastly red in the moonlight.

"Sprung a hide-out an' tried to beef me, did yuh?" Jim called harshly. "Quit bellerin' like a bogged dogie, yuh skunk!"

"I'm blind!" Jigger Trask wailed. "Blast yuh! That slug ripped both o' my eyes clean out!"

Jim Christy hastily replaced the spent shell in each of his guns, then got to his feet and burrowed through the thicket to the little stream. He lay down flat, ducked his throbbing head several times, then loosened the neckerchief from about his throat.

His probing fingers found the deep gash across his temple. He winced as he touched the opened wound, but kept probing until he was satisfied that the slug had done no lasting damage.

"Serves me right," he growled as he tightened the neckerchief about the gash. "I should 'a' knowed an ornery snake like that would be packin' a hide-out o' some sort. My skull feels like Ol' Nick was after me with a sledge hammer."

The cold water had helped soothe the pain, however, and Jim got to his feet and walked back through the brush. Jigger Trask was on his feet, and in the very act of gathering up a wicked little double-action .38.

"Drop that!" Jim Christy snarled, and a Colt seemed actually to plop into each of his hands out of thin air.

Jigger Trask yelped an oath, dropped the double-action gun, and tripped over his huge Mexican spurs. He sat down with a loud thump, and began whining for mercy as Jim advanced.

Straight across Jigger Trask's forehead, just above his dark, knotty eyebrows, there was a shallow gash

where Jim's slug had creased him. Crimson had flowed from the gash to blind the ratty eyes of the killer—and scare him out of his wits. The gash was still flowing, and Jigger Trask swore weakly as he mopped crimson from his eyes with a soggy handkerchief.

"Yuh—yuh'll pay fer this!" he whined. "Baffert has got men enough ter trail yuh down, feller. He prizes me as one o' his best men, too. He——"

"Baffert is gettin' danged careless o' what he prizes," Jim Christy said sourly. "But let that pass. What I want to know is who put this fence up an' why it was put up."

"Jist what I thought," Jigger Trask moaned. "Dang it! Yo're a new hand that ol' Wade Christy has hired. But yuh'll git yore needin's, like them others has. Baffert put this hyar fence up, an' it stays up!"

"There's somethin' danged queer about this whole business," Jim Christy grated more to himself than to the snarling little gunman before him. "Even if Baffert did decide to fence, he had no business closin' this road."

"A man kin fence his private range if he wants to," Jigger Trask sneered. "An' if yo're smart, feller, yuh'll head back ter the border where yuh come from. Others like yuh has tried buckin' us an' got tickets ter Boot Hill."

Jim Christy's hands flicked, and the guns he had let slant toward the ground whipped up like the heads of aroused rattlers. Jigger Trask screamed in terror, flattening himself on the ground as the guns roared deafeningly.

But Jim Christy was not shooting at the frightened killer. When his guns quit booming, the three strands of barbed wire were lying kinked

and curled across the road, broken off close to one post.

Jim Christy stepped forward, kicked the kinky wire well out of the way, then reloaded and holstered his guns.

Jigger Trask sat up again, mumbling oaths in an uneasy tone.

"Yuh—yuh'll pay fer that!" he snarled thinly. "Baffert will——"

"Baffert must 'a' gone loco," Jim growled. "But in case he wants to get proddy, tell the old rooster that he can——"

"Old rooster?" Jigger Trask cut in harshly. "Sa-aa-y, yuh've been up this way before, ain't yuh?"

"Mebbe." Jim nodded. "Why?"

"Shore yuh have!" the little killer cried excitedly. "Yuh spoke o' Baffert like he was old, which means that yuh think Joe Baffert still owns the 44."

"What are yuh drivin' at?" Jim clipped, suddenly excited. "Don't old Joe Baffert still own the 44?"

"You!" Jigger Trask almost screamed, leaping to his feet. "I've got yuh pegged now. Yo're Jim Christy, an' I missed a thousand bucks by not drillin' yuh while I had the chance!"

Before the dumfounded Jim could think of a reply, Jigger Trask was gone into the brush, squealing oaths as he crashed through the heavy growth. A horse snorted somewhere in the thicket, and a moment later, Jim was watching Jigger Trask race away down the valley.

CHAPTER III.

JIM LISTENS IN.

JIM CHRISTY rode through the gap his slugs had cut in the fence, more puzzled than ever. But he was in the well-worn road now, and the sorrel could make good time.

He spoke to the horse, adding a

jab of dull rowels. The sorrel snorted and leveled out at a mile-eating pace.

Two hours later, Jim Christy was reining in at the great arched gateway before the long, rambling log ranch house that had been his home since he was five years old. It was midnight, or maybe a little after, Jim reckoned, yet a light burned in one wing of the big house.

"Uncle Wade's office," Jim muttered as he swung stiffly down. "Wonder what's keepin' him up so late."

He patted the sorrel's sweaty shoulder, then opened the great yard gate and strode through. He had expected to come romping home in a joyous mood instead of the troubled, uneasy feeling that now rode him.

His boots clicked down the path, however, and rattled over the wide old porch. He stalked to a door near where the lighted window showed, and was reaching for the knob when hoarse voices came to his ears.

He realized that the window to his uncle's little office was up, and that there was some one in there with the old fellow. The fact that the voices he heard sounded angry caused him to hesitate, hand still on the door-knob.

"I tell yuh I'll not do it!" that thick, coarse voice was coming through the window. "Christy, yo're out o' luck, like yuh say. But I'll not let yuh go rampin' acrost my land with yore blasted herds."

"But why not?" Old Wade Christy's voice was patient, calm. "I've drove over that land for a good many years, young feller. Fact is, I've got to drive south acrost yore land if I git to Canyon City an' the railroad to ship my stuff."

"That's yore tough luck," the

thick voice sneered. "That fence is jist inside my boundary, so it's plumb legal. Yuh could drive up acrost the mountains to the north, if yuh wanted to ship any stuff."

"That's out o' the question." Wade Christy's voice sharpened the least bit. "Them mountains north o' here are too steep to be shovin' cattle acrost. If a man started prime stuff an' crossed them mountains from here, what few he got over the hump would be worse than canners."

"Then use yore head, old man, an' sell me this place," the hoarse voice answered. "I'll give yuh——"

Jim Christy waited to hear no more. He turned the doorknob softly, swung the portal back, and stepped into the little office room. His slate eyes were puckered, hot slits as they raked the room swiftly.

There were three men before him, staring up at him in surprise. His uncle, old Wade Christy, lifted his lean body halfway out of the scarred chair before the old oak desk, then dropped back, silver-white head shaking slowly from side to side. Wade Christy's gray eyes tried to send Jim a message, but the youth's hot glance had shifted.

Beside his uncle's desk sat a short, powerfully built man, whose great, massive head looked neckless above his huge, knotty shoulders. The squat man's hair was coarse and rumpled, and his big, hard jaws looked blue-black in the lamplight. The fellow raked Jim up and down with glittery, red-rimmed black eyes, and his thick lips screwed into a snarl of rage.

Across the room, draped loosely in a chair that was tip-tilted against the wall, sat the third man. That jasper was gawky, bony-looking, and had straw-colored hair and pale eyes that were as chill and unfriendly as the eyes of some savage animal.

"Well, what in blazes do yuh mean by rompin' in hyar like this?" the squat man beside Wade Christy's desk snarled, and Jim recognized the voice he had heard through the window a moment before.

Jim flicked a glance down into the blue-jowled face, heeled the door shut behind him, and edged along the wall to stand where he could see both men who were glaring at him.

"Hello, Uncle Wade," Jim called, yet he did not take his eyes from the two unquestionably tough customers before him. "I thought I smelt skunk as I come into the room. From the looks o' yore two visitors, I reckon I was right."

"'Uncle!'" the squat man gulped, coming suddenly to his feet. "Say, Chip, yuh hear that?" he went on, shooting a glance at the cold-eyed fellow against the wall. "This blasted younker that just busted in is——"

"Is mighty apt to toss yuh out on one o' yore ears if yuh ain't careful!" Jim Christy lashed out hotly. "Feller, watch yore tongue."

"Jim!" Wade Christy cried sharply. "Don't—don't go losin' yore temper, son. This is Rufe Baffert, owner o' the 44 since ol' Joe passed on four months ago. An'—an' the gent over yonder agin' the wall is Chip Craddock, Rufe's ramrod."

"Oh, so that's it, eh?" Jim Christy's voice was low, purring, as he looked at Rufe Baffert. "Yo're owner o' the 44 now?"

"I am," Rufe Baffert snarled thickly, mistaking Jim's low voice and calm manner for sudden meekness, "an' I don't take sass offn no man."

"Yuh'd 'a' done good to have stayed down where you were, son," Wade Christy said wearily. "Things

have—have changed a heap since yuh been away. With Joe gone, it ain't the same. Fact is, I been thinkin' o' sellin' out lately."

"Yeah, an' it's the wise thing," Rufe Baffert snarled, without taking his glittering eyes from Jim Christy's face. "But if yuh let this nevv'y o' yores shoot off his mouth ter me any more, old man, I'll lower the price I been offerin' fer this wuthless lay-out o' yores."

"I heard what was bein' said as I come up to the door." Jim Christy's voice was even milder, softer now. "What's to keep yuh from drivin' out acrost the hills west o' here, Uncle Wade, then circlin' past Baffert's fence an' down to Canyon City?"

"I been told by a lot o' fellers that yuh'd likely horn into things if yuh come nosin' back this way," Rufe Baffert answered hoarsely. "Yore uncle tried drivin' out acrost them hills two months ago, smart-Aleck."

"Uh-huh, an' rustlers jumped his herd," bony "Chip" Craddock put in, with an evil laugh. "The ol' man lost two hundred head o' prime four-year-old steers an' three cow-boys. Rustlers is shore bad in them roughs over west o' here."

"An' to the east, too," Rufe Baffert chuckled hoarsely. "Nope, it jist don't pay ter try goin' any direction except south."

"An' yuh strung a three-wire fence down that way, hired yoreself a pack o' mangy heel dogs like that one agin' the wall yonder, an' Jigger Trask." Jim Christy's voice was still low, but it held the dreary sound of cold wind through tall pines. "Baffert, yuh offered a thousand dollars for my scalp, in case I came back to this country. Want to try savin' that dinero by drillin' me yore own self?"

Rufe Baffert's jaws were sagging. Across the room, Chip Craddock had come slowly to his feet, cold eyes slitted, clawlike hands hanging poised above twin guns that rode his thighs in thonged-down holsters.

"Take to him, Rufe!" Craddock snarled. "Me, I'll be drawin' a bead on the old coyote. Shet that kid's mouth with a slug, Rufe!"

CHAPTER IV.

BUSHWHACKER.

RUFE BAFFERT seemed utterly unaware that he had two six-guns handy at his great, bent thighs. He closed his slack jaws slowly, breath whistling through the flaring nostrils of his broad, fleshy nose. Across the room, Chip Craddock began swearing thinly, hard eyes watching his boss narrowly.

Jim Christy grinned mirthlessly, eyes watching both those tough jaspers in the room. He reached out his left hand with the speed of shooting light, and the palm smacked loudly against Rufe Baffert's hairy, unwashed left ear.

Baffert snarled hoarsely, slapped his hands to the butts of his guns. But his face went a sickly gray, causing the blue-black beard along his jaws to stand out more darkly than ever.

"Say, yuh takin' that, Rufe?" Chip Craddock rasped. "By gosh! No slick-eared kid could slap my ear an' git by with it. I'd——"

"Yuh'd reach for hardware, an' wake up with a cinder fork an' a scoot rake in yore lap," Jim Christy cut in coldly. "Craddock, this mangy specimen yuh call a boss is rememberin' a certain night about five months ago when him an' five others figured to sack a little border town. Ask him about it."

"I—I dunno what yo're talkin'

'about," Rufe Baffert wheezed. "I never even seen yuh before."

"No?" Jim grinned tightly. "Roll up yore shirt sleeves, an' let's see if there ain't a couple o' bullet scars acrost yore forearms."

Rufe Baffert glanced about like a trapped animal, hate and fear in his evil eyes. He licked at his thick lips with a huge, flat tongue, and backed up slowly.

"Say, what is this?" Chip Craddock growled thinly. "Rufe, yuh scairt o' that danged kid?"

"I was wearin' a deputy sheriff's badge down yonder in the town I mentioned," Jim drawled bitingly. "Baffert an' his friends figured to make a monkey out o' me an' loot the dinky burg. But they wound up in the jail house with some sores to lick."

"Yuh—yuh jumped me when I wasn't lookin'!" Rufe Baffert snarled, and backed to the wall beside his ramrod. "Besides, blast yuh, I ain't huntin' trouble."

"No, yo're too yellow!" Jim snarled. "Get, Baffert, an' take yore pet skunk with yuh! Craddock, I'll give yuh a ticket to Boot Hill if yuh lift them guns any higher."

Jim Christy's hands seemed not to have moved at all. Yet each of his brown hands held a cocked Colt, and Chip Craddock swore in honest surprise.

"Get!" Jim snapped. "Drag yore spurs, skunks, an' don't stop as long as yo're on C Bar range!"

Rufe Baffert and his foreman edged across the room and out of the door. Jim followed them, stalking grimly along behind them until they were out of the yard and turning toward the corrals.

Jim mounted his sorrel and rode along behind the pair, eyes keenly watchful, right hand hovering near his gun. But the evil pair seemed

out of the notion of fighting. They untied their mounts from the corral fence, swung aboard, and went hammering away, neither of them glancing back.

Jim stripped gear from his weary sorrel, turned it into the corral where there was feed and water, then hurried back to the ranch house. His uncle still sat there in his office, staring dazedly into space. The old fellow roused himself slowly, however, and stood up, lean right hand outstretched, a feeble smile on his lips.

"Son, I'm glad to see yuh, o' course," he said wearily. "But—but I sort o' wisht yuh had stuck to the border country a spell. Yuh've already had trouble, judgin' from that soaked cloth showin' under yore hat."

Jim dropped into a chair, fished tobacco and papers from a shirt pocket, and twisted a smoke. He talked as he smoked, telling briefly of his trouble that night at the fence. His uncle looked strangely pale and upset, but did not interrupt.

"I know I'll sell out now," the old fellow thundered. "Jim, yuh've allus been like Dode, yore daddy. Me an' him was brothers, but where he got that temper o' his, I dunno. Yuh'll git yoreself kilt if yuh don't skin out o' here pronto."

"Shucks, Uncle Wade, I just got home." Jim shrugged. "I'm too tired to ride away right soon. Besides, I'm plumb curious about things up here. I didn't know Joe Baffert had any relatives, did yuh?"

"I didn't know it ontill pore ol' Joe got down sick an' savvied that he couldn't git well no more," the old ranchman answered slowly. "I stayed with Joe day an' night, an' he got to talkin' about this Rufe Baffert, the only livin' kin he had."

"So yuh got hold o' Rufe, eh?" Jim prompted, when his uncle's voice trailed off.

"I done that, son, shore," the old fellow answered. "Seems Joe had never mentioned Rufe, 'cause Rufe had got into a scrape or two. Rufe is barely kin to Joe, anyhow, bein' a fourth cousin."

"Yeah, that jasper looks like he might 'a' been into plenty o' scrapes," Jim snapped. "Unless I miss a guess, he's been shovin' stolen stock down across the border already."

"Him an' the tough gang he hired in place o' Joe's old hands do disappear now an' then." Jim's uncle nodded his white head. "Son, I've done a heap o' thinkin' over the hull thing. Looks like bad trouble comin', if yuh ask me."

"Where's our men?" Jim asked suddenly. "Where's Larry, Matt, an Nelse? How do they like this new neighbor an' the fence?"

Jim was smiling ever so faintly, for the three men he mentioned were tough old hombres who had been on the spread since he could remember. Jim knew about how those three snorty old punchers would be oiling their ancient but serviceable guns and muttering among themselves.

"Larry Stokes, Matt Cotter, an' Nelse Raymond are dead, Jim!"

Jim Christy came out of his chair as if it had burned him, the smile suddenly gone from his lips, face going dead white beneath his tan.

"Dead?" he echoed hoarsely. "Uncle Wade, yuh ain't jokin', are yuh?"

"Wisht I was jokin'," the old fellow groaned. "I couldn't do nothin' toward makin' them three old cow dogs listen to reason when the herd we was drivin' through the rough country west o' hyar got jumped."

"But——" Jim began.

"Larry, Matt, Nelse, an' me put up a fight, but it was no use," the C Bar owner went on, after a brief, tense moment. "There must 'a' been twenty o' them blasted rustlers. Larry, Matt, an' Nelse was shot to ribbons, an' I was left fer dead. See this?"

The old fellow parted his silvery hair, and Jim saw a great twisted scar across his uncle's scalp. Jim growled under his breath, slate eyes suddenly slitted and hot.

"Yuh didn't recognize any o' them rustlers?" he asked hopefully.

"Nope," his uncle sighed wearily. "The raid was pulled off at night, right after second guard. We got some o' them men; I know that. But the unhurt ones lugged off the dead an' cripples, I reckon, fer when I come to, after sunup, there was only Larry, Matt, an' Nelse left."

"But yuh must have found some clew to the snakes that pulled the raid!" Jim cried fiercely. "Uncle Wade, are yuh *sure* yuh didn't know at least some o' the men who raided yuh an' killed the punchers?"

Jim had seen the old fellow fidgeting, as if he wanted to say as little as possible. His uncle looked up at him now, a pleading, hurt look in his eyes.

"I—I can't lie to yuh, son," he said hoarsely. "An' on the other hand, I know yuh'll blow up an' start riskin' yore neck to run down the men who kilt the boys. Just don't ask me questions, Jim."

"Listen, Uncle Wade, yo're wastin' time," Jim almost snapped. "Rufe Baffert an' his hired gunnies pulled that raid, didn't they?"

"I never said that!" the old fellow gasped. "Jim, yuh don't know what yo're talkin' about."

"Think I'm too dumb to savvy that Rufe Baffert aims to freeze yuh

out an' take this spread?" the youth countered. "Why, guessin' that it was him behind that raid is shore easy. I aim to start checkin' up on the snake, so yuh may as well tell me what yuh know."

"Yeah, I may as well," the old fellow sighed again. "Which ain't much. I couldn't swear that Rufe or any of his men was in that bunch. Like I said, it was dark, an' yuh couldn't see a full-grown hoss twenty feet."

"Then mebbe yuh recognized some raider's voice?" Jim prompted.

"When guns is spittin' thunder, an' men is dyin' around yuh, voices is liable to all sound alike," the old ranchman answered. "But—there was two dead hosses there in the hills where we was raided. Them dead hosses wore the 44 brand."

"Then that settles it!" Jim Christy cried. "I'll——"

He got no further. There came the splintering crash of the window being smashed to bits.

Jim saw a six-gun barrel snap to aim in the room—saw that gun barrel suddenly tipped with a lance of flame. He heard that peculiar *plop* of lead striking flesh, and saw his uncle reeling sidewise from the chair.

CHAPTER V.

BUCK LANE TALKS

JIM CHRISTY'S actions were mechanical, yet speedy. The Colt muzzle at the window was shifting, its smoking bore now centering on him. Jim's hands had blurred, struck down to the butts of his own guns. Those guns were out now, roaring as he launched himself toward the door.

He heard a muffled yelp from the splintered window, and knew that he had scored a hit. But just how

much damage his slug had done, he did not know.

A bullet slicked past his face, struck the door facing as he got the portal open. Then he was outside, guns leveled from his hips as he leaped across and off the porch.

A gun blazed from the corner of the house, but he had seen the tell-tale movement of the skulker in time to dodge. He growled angrily as his own guns spat two chunks of lead into the corner of the house.

Boots thumped the ground. Jim leaped at the corner of the building. He rounded it just in time to see a man darting toward a clump of shrubbery some distance away. The unknown man twisted to fire back. Jim could have killed him, but, somehow, he wanted that hombre alive.

He charged on, ducking as a bullet screamed bare inches above his hatless head. The man reached the fringe of thick shrubbery that grew along an old fence, wheeled, and leveled his gun for a steady shot.

Jim Christy put every ounce of his wiry strength into a leap that carried him forward and sidewise. He was close now, mighty close. The gun of the hombre he wanted bounced, tipped with flame, breathing a smoke fog into the moonlight.

The man swore loudly, leaped away from the fog of black powder, and leveled his gun for a close-range shot.

The big spiked hammer fell on a dead shell. The man swore wildly, whirled, and dived into the thicket.

Jim Christy's white teeth flashed in a mirthless grin. He holstered his own guns and leaped into the shrubbery. Ahead of him, he heard the sudden protesting squeal of rusty wire and a man's voice lifted in wild profanity.

Jim charged the sounds, and

found the gunman struggling madly in the old fence that had been hidden by the shrubs. Jim leaped, driving a hard brown fist at a snarling face that showed white in the moonlight.

His fist connected solidly, the shock running up along his lean arm to the elbow. The man who had snared himself in the fence went limp, draped between two of the rusty wires.

Jim Christy grasped the collar of the man's coarse woolen shirt, then turned and stalked away. His victim's clothing ripped and hissed as rusty barbs tried to hold. Then Jim was beyond the shrubs in the open moonlight, looking down into the crimson-spattered face of the gangly man he had dragged from the fence.

The hombre was making whimpering sounds, trying to sit up. Jim yanked the fellow to his feet, took a good grip on trousers seat and shirt collar, and sent the gangly jasper scooting toward the house.

Jim's face was white and working as he boosted his now-snarling captive up the steps and onto the porch. Jim fully expected to find his uncle lying dead there on the office floor. But as he neared the open door, he saw the old fellow sitting there in his chair, gripping his left shoulder.

"Gosh, Uncle Wade, I thought yuh were a goner!" Jim cried. "Know this?" He sent the gangly man sprawling into the room.

Wade Christy looked up at Jim, trying to grin. "Creased my shoulder, son," he said slowly. "I seen the gun in time to sort o' dodge, I reckon." He turned then and looked down at the captive, who had sat up and was mopping crimson from a long-jawed face.

"Yeah, I know this feller." The old ranchman nodded, and there was anger in his usually mild voice.

"Name's Lane—Buck Lane. Works fer Rufe Baffert."

Buck Lane got slowly to his feet, thin lips snarling, muddy eyes glittering fiercely. He wiped a shirt sleeve across his face, swearing as the garment touched his bashed and still-flowing nose.

"Shore I work fer Baffert," Lane sneered. "An' if yuh two jaspers is smart, yuh'll leave me be. I— Good gosh! You, is it?"

Buck Lane had got a good look at Jim Christy for the first time. He backed swiftly now until the wall stopped him, face paling until the crimson stood out more prominently than ever.

"Yeah, me!" Jim Christy snarled. "Yuh was with Baffert down yonder on the border that night I slung yuh sports in the cooler. How come yuh tryin' to pot Uncle Wade through the window?"

Buck Lane flinched as if a lash had fallen across his back. He swore uneasily, muddy eyes rolling right and left.

"I—I couldn't help it, feller!" he gasped. "I met Rufe an' Chip down the trail, an' they told me ter come hyar, an'—"

The fellow broke off, again wiping his face with a torn shirt sleeve.

"They sent yuh here to do murder," Jim Christy said coldly.

Lane flinched again, rolling his eyes toward the shattered window. "Yuh—yo're a blasted lawman!" he charged. "But yuh ain't got nothin' on me, feller."

"I'm not a lawman," Jim clipped. "Down yonder on the border, I acted as deputy sheriff while the regular deputy got married an' took a honeymoon trip. He come back on the job, an' I handed over the star."

"Yuh can't buck Baffert!" Buck Lane snarled, evidently heartened at

learning that his captor was not an officer.

"Baffert is keepin' spies posted close to this place, eh?" Jim drawled. "It'll do yuh no good to lie, Lane. Yuh couldn't 'a' been far away, because Baffert an' that other skunk haven't been gone long."

"Shore, son, Baffert has had men hangin' around close to this place fer weeks," old Wade Christy spoke up. "I dunno why, either."

"I do," Jim snapped. "The skunk didn't want me to show up here. Fact is, he told his hired heel dogs that he'd pay the man that drilled me a thousand dollars."

"Yuh—yo're Jim Christy!" Buck Lane croaked.

"I am," the slate-eyed youth snarled. "An' yuh missed a chance to collect that thousand-dollar bounty on my scalp."

"L-listen, Christy. I ain't done nothin'," Buck Lane stuttered. "Y-yuh leave me go free, hombre, if yuh know what's good for yuh. I'll drift yonderly; honest, I will."

"Uh-huh, reckon so." Jim drew his words out slowly. "Only it might be just yore soul that does the driftin'. There's some good-sized cottonwoods out back o' the corral. An' I've got a rope that'd wrap into a hang knot right easy."

"Yuh—yuh don't dast string me up!" Buck Lane bawled. "Christy, yuh'd have the hull 44 spread ter deal with if yuh done that."

"Yuh'd already be too dead to know what the 44 done about it," Jim pointed out grimly. "Besides, I've got that mess o' skunks to deal with, anyhow. An' yuh shore are overdue for a good hangin', yuh back-shootin' vinegarroon!"

"I ain't done nothin'," Buck Lane croaked, feeling his throat with long, bony fingers. "All I've done is stand guard over this place. If—if I seen

any strangers show up, I was to fog ter the 44 an' tell Rufe."

Jim had been purposely throwing a scare into the tough hombre. He had expected to experience much more trouble scaring Buck Lane than he had. But no elation showed on his hard face or in his glinting eyes.

"Oh, no, yuh ain't done nothin'," he rasped. "Yuh just tried to murder my uncle, that's all. An' not long ago, yuh helped the other 44 skunks murder three cowboys an' steal two hundred C Bar beeves over in the hills west o' here. Yore neck needs stretchin'!"

Buck Lane's face had begun working nervously as Jim talked. The lank rascal crouched like a trapped animal, muddy eyes rolling again toward the shattered window as if he meant to try escaping. Jim Christy stepped forward as he finished speaking. Buck Lane slid into a corner of the room, trembling noticeably.

"I wasn't with them others the night they raided yore uncle's drive," Lane croaked. "I was in town that night, Christy, an' I kin prove it. Rufe, Chip, an' the rest pulled that raid."

"Then where are the cattle?" Jim snapped, fearing that Lane might get over his scare and close up.

"Back yonder at Mud Springs camp, on 44 range," Buck Lane answered promptly. "Rufe aims ter take them to the border right soon, like he does other stole stuff. He — Say, blast yuh, I didn't mean ter do this blabbin'! Rufe will kill me fer this!"

"Blabbin' was about the best thing yuh could 'a' done, Lane," Jim said coldly. "An' don't worry about what Rufe Baffert will do. Yuh'll be out o' his reach right pronto."

"Then—then yuh aim to let me

go?" the lank killer croaked hopefully.

"I'll take a little ride with yuh," Jim grated. "Yo're goin' to the hoosegow in Canyon City, feller. But get this through yore head. If yo're smart, yuh'll not let the 44 crowd know where yuh are."

"They'll pull that blasted jail apart!" Buck Lane yelled angrily. "Dang yuh! Rufe an' the boys will git me out o' that coop."

"Uh-huh, they likely will." Jim nodded. "They'll shore be honin' to see yuh, feller, for I aim to let it be known that yuh've told me who killed those three C Bar men that night."

As the meaning of that soaked through Buck Lane's brain, he shivered, moaning hoarsely. Jim Christy laughed coldly at him, strode forward, and grasped the killer's collar.

"Come on, snake!" Jim rasped. "We're headin' for the jail house. An' if yo're smart, yuh'll not let yore skunk-scented friends know where to find yuh."

CHAPTER VI.

JIM'S PLANS.

IT was just breaking daylight when Jim Christy and his uncle reined to a halt behind the log building that was combination jail and office for the deputy sheriff who was stationed in Canyon City. Buck Lane was between the two Christys, bound securely to the saddle, a thick gag between his jaws.

"I hear sounds in the jail, so I reckon the deputy is there," Jim Christy spoke wearily. "Bob Perry's still the deputy here, I reckon."

"He is," old Wade Christy answered. "But right now, we'd better not waste any time talkin'. It's git-tin' light, an' somebody might see us chousin' this jigger into the jail."

Jim nodded, stepped over to Buck Lane's side, and loosened the ropes that had held the killer's feet to the stirrups. Lane was yanked from the saddle, then marched around the building and through the front door.

A quick glance along the town's one wide, travel-scarred street showed Jim Christy that no one was abroad yet, although smoke was pouring from stovepipes here and there. Then Jim was in the small office space where Deputy Bob Perry stood blinking owlishly.

The deputy was a short young hombre, with a round, fat face and blue eyes that were beginning to widen as he saw his visitors more clearly. Deputy Perry had just rolled from a bunk in one of the cells, where he often slept. He combed hastily at badly tousled yellow hair and tried to look dignified.

"What's the meanin' o' this?" he demanded. "Jim Christy, yuh been up to some devilment?"

"Hello, yuh overfed, underworked cuss!" Jim snapped, grinning faintly. "Shore, I've been misbehavin' scandalous. Here's a prisoner for yuh."

The deputy scowled, strode closer, and suddenly let out a yelp of surprise as he recognized the prisoner.

"S-say, Jim, yuh better let this gent alone!" the deputy cried. "Know who he is?"

"Yeah, I know who he is," Jim clipped. "I also know what he is. Which is a back-shootin' coward."

Swiftly, voice harsh and cold, Jim told of the happenings of the night before. The pudgy deputy was fairly dancing about, face mirroring both excitement and uneasiness.

"My gosh!" Bob Perry cried when Jim had finished. "I dunno what to do; honest, I don't. Them 44 hombres have got a bad rep, Jim.

If I lock this one up, the rest is liable ter bust the town wide open."

"Calm down, Bob, an' slap this critter in the tightest cell yuh've got," Jim advised. "An' don't worry about him bellerin' for help. Baffert an' the rest would hang him for tellin' what he told if they located him."

"Danged right I'll jail him!" the pudgy deputy growled. "Larry Stokes, Matt Cotter, an' Nelse Raymond was danged fine men. This snake was likely lyin' when he told yuh he wasn't with the others the night them three men was kilt."

"Yuh may be right, at that." Jim shrugged. "But I repeated just what this jasper said. Chuck him in a cell, then come back up here. I've got a plan that yuh can help me work."

The deputy seized the sullen, glowering prisoner, and marched him toward the rear of the room. A steel door clanged loudly a moment later, and the deputy soon reappeared in the office, moon face scowling, eyes gleaming angrily.

"I'll organize a posse, an' we'll go see if yore cattle are at Mud Springs, Mr. Christy." The deputy spoke directly to old Wade Christy. "An' if they are, we'll make it hot fer Rufe Baffert an' his outfit."

"Not so fast, Bob," Jim put in calmly. "Just where would yuh get a posse that we could trust?"

The deputy opened his lips to speak, but no words came. He shrugged helplessly, realizing that organizing a posse to fight the 44 outfit would be hard, indeed.

"Jim an' me done a lot o' figurin' on the way in from our place, Bob," Wade Christy said slowly. "Best thing we could think of was for yuh to come along with us an' have a look at Mud Springs."

"I'm satisfied the cattle are there,

for Buck Lane was too scared to lie," Jim pointed out. "An' if we could snag whoever is guardin' the cattle, then move the beeves back to C Bar range, Rufe Baffert would do some tall wonderin'."

"An' Jim figured that if yuh let drop here an' there that yuh've got a line on the gents that have been rustlin' an' killin' around here, it would help, too," Wade Christy put in. "Jim figures that if we can throw a scare into Rufe Baffert, it might force him to make some fool play that would be his undoin'."

"Yuh see, Bob," Jim said in a tone that would not carry to the back part of the building, "this Buck Lane has told the truth. But it would be almighty hard to convict Baffert on Lane's say-so. Besides, Lane might get stubborn an' refuse to talk at the trial."

"We can send the snake up fer attempted murder, anyway," the fat deputy snarled.

"But Rufe Baffert an' whoever helped him murder those three C Bar men are the ones we want," Jim grated. "I tell yuh——"

Jim broke off, whirling. The door had jerked open, and now two men were entering the room. Pale dawn had brightened into daylight now, and Jim Christy stiffened as he recognized those two men.

One of them was runty, dandified little Jigger Trask, whose face looked swollen beneath a bandage that was about his head. The other man was Chip Craddock, 44 ramrod.

The two 44 men stopped in their tracks at sight of Jim and his uncle. Chip Craddock swore thickly, bony hands slapping gun grips. Jigger Trask snarled a profane word, leaped sidewise, and struck down at his holstered guns.

"They beat us to it, Chip!" Jigger

squealed. "Best thing we kin do is gun them two Christys an' that fool of a depity. They——"

"Say, what's eatin' yuh two?" Jim demanded sharply.

"Plenty!" Chip Craddock snarled. "Yuh an' that uncle o' yores has double-crossed us, that's what."

Jim Christy's own hands were hovering above his guns, ready to rip the weapons out. He was blazing angry, yet realized that a fight now would unquestionably spoil all the plans he had so carefully laid.

On the other hand, if he could get these two cutthroats out of the deputy's office without a fight, they would high-tail it for the 44 with a yarn that would throw Rufe Baffert into a sweat of worry. Jim forced his anger down, watching the two cutthroats narrowly.

"Yuh two act like mebbe yuh had bad consciences," he snapped. "What's wrong with my uncle an' me comin' in to palaver with Perry?"

"Mebbe a whole lot is wrong with it," Chip Craddock grated. "Jist what was the subject o' yore palaver?"

Jim swallowed hard. It was all he could do to take such insolence, yet he felt that holding his temper now might reward him later.

"Why, Uncle Wade an' me wanted to talk to the deputy about makin' it safe for us to drive our cattle to town," Jim answered grimly. "We figure that if the snakes that jumped the last C Bar drive could be rounded up, it would help a lot."

"Yeah, an' I've just about got a line on them rustlin', murderin' snakes, too," the deputy put in quickly. "With a little more work on the case, looks like I'll be able to name the men that pulled that raid."

Chip Craddock and Jigger Trask started nervously. They both went red, then a little pale. Jim Christy knew then that he was face to face with two of the men who had helped kill those three loyal old C Bar hands.

His own face paled with rage, and he was glad when the two 44 men spun toward the door and leaped outside. Jim Christy could not have held his temper much longer.

"Hey, what did yuh jaspers want?" Deputy Bob Perry yelled after the 44 gunmen.

"Nothin'. Nothin' a-tall," Chip Craddock called back. "Besides, we've got somethin' important ter do right now."

The evil pair were gone along the street then, actually running toward a pair of saddled horses that stood up the street a few rods.

"Yuh shore played yore part well, Bob," Jim Christy said grittily. "Fact is, yuh let yoreself in for a good killin'."

"Huh?" the deputy grunted. "W-what do yuh mean, Jim?"

"Rufe Baffert will be faunchin' for yore scalp, feller," Jim answered tensely. "He'll want to shut yore mouth plenty quick. But it's too late to worry over that now. Waltz down the street an' let it be known that yo're gettin' a line on the jaspers that raided the C Bar herd an' killed those three men."

"Shore, I'll do it," the deputy snorted. "But—but what'll yuh be doin'?"

"Uncle Wade an' me will get some grub under our belts," Jim snapped. "Go spread yore news, an' meet us at the chink's café. We'll all be sniffin' powder smoke afore sun-down, if I know straight up from sidewise."

WW—8D

CHAPTER VII.

BULLET VERDICT.

DEPUTY BOB PERRY did a mighty good job spreading the news that he was getting a line on the men who had murdered three C Bar men and stolen two hundred prime beeves. By the time Jim Christy and his uncle finished eating and went for their horses, the whole town was buzzing.

Jim grinned thinly, slate eyes glowing behind lids that were swollen and red-rimmed from loss of sleep. The squabby little deputy came waddling toward them, mopping at his flushed and sweating face.

"Gosh!" he croaked as he fell in beside Jim. "This town is a beehive. What's yore idea in wantin' things stirred up like this?"

"Baffert an' his bunch will come foggin' to town, ears pinned back an' hands close to guns," Jim grated. "While the snakes are tryin' to find out just how much gossip is out, us three will go snag whoever is guardin' that stolen herd o' C Bar stuff at Mud Springs."

The three men were soon mounted and riding out of town, the sun lifting huge and red before them as they cut out across open country. And that same sun was three hours high when Jim Christy called a halt far back in the hills. He had called the halt atop a cedar-clad ridge, where dense growth hid horses and men.

"Mud Springs is up that canyon yonder, mebbe a quarter mile," Jim grunted as his uncle and the deputy drew in beside him. "We'd better take it on foot from here."

The three of them swung down, removed spurs, and tested holstered guns. Without further talk, they moved along the timbered ridge,

peering now and then into the deep canyon to their right. They traveled with the stealth of flitting shadows, passing quickly from clump to clump of heavy cedar.

Jim stopped after two hundred yards, pointing silently to a trail that dipped through a cleft of rim rock to pitch steeply down into the heavily timbered valley. The deputy and Wade Christy nodded.

Jim turned into the trail, leading the way down a slope that required careful placing of feet. Below them, sycamores and huge cottonwoods grew along a stream that showed here and there in silvery patches. The three men were sweating from the nerve strain of trying to move without dislodging loose rocks.

They made the descent at last, and stood resting in a screening thicket of willow near the little creek. Jim stiffened suddenly, head cocked.

From up the deep canyon that looked gloomy beneath the big trees, there came the uneasy bawling of a steer. And at the same moment, the wind quickened, sighing dismally through the big trees, bringing with it a pungent odor of wood smoke.

"Somebody at the old line camp, all right," Jim whispered. "We'll have to hold to the creek an' keep low."

He led on then, eyes and ears straining. The odor of smoke became stronger as the three men moved forward. And now they could hear the uneasy grunts and snorts of close-penned cattle.

Jim stopped once, to stand listening intently for several seconds.

"Thought I heard hosses up yonder somewhere," he whispered to his uncle and the deputy. "Sounded like a lot o' riders. But mebbe it was the cattle."

Jim was uneasy, however, and crept forward more stealthily than ever. He stopped short when he came at last to the edge of a little clearing, in which a rather long, low-roofed log cabin sat. The deputy sheriff and old Wade Christy joined Jim, their guns out and ready for action.

Smoke curled lazily up from the rusty stovepipe that stuck above the slate roof of the cabin. The door was closed, yet Jim had the uneasy feeling that he was being watched.

He forgot that, however, as his eyes caught sight of a four-wire fence that had been stretched from bluff to bluff across the canyon just behind the cabin. Crowding that fence were cattle that milled and sniffed, trying to reach the green grass beyond the barbed wire.

Since the cattle were only a few rods from where Jim stood, his keen eyes could easily enough pick out the C Bar brands as the beeves moved restlessly about.

"That's our stuff yonder, Uncle Wade!" Jim rasped. "Now if we can only snag whoever is in that cabin——"

Jim's voice trailed off shortly. The cabin door swung open, and out onto the flat stone step stalked a frowzy-looking cowboy who glanced about lazily, yawned, and slogged over to where a log had been left lying. The puncher seated himself, drew out a stock knife, and began whittling lazily at the old log.

"Hey, Perk," the fellow called, without looking up, "come on out an' sun yore ornery hide a spell. Gosh! I wish some o' the boys would ride over. This is lonesome business."

Another man appeared in the doorway now—a fat, greasy-looking little hombre with a round, hairless head that glistened in the sunlight.

"Perk" yawned as the other man had, then waddled to the log and straddled it.

"Shore is lonesome, stickin' it out hyar, Snoozer," Perk grunted hoarsely. "Bet the rest o' the bunch don't show up fer another week."

For some reason he could not understand, uneasiness crept over Jim Christy, causing his hands to drop to his guns. His slitted eyes shuttled right and left, swinging around the clearing, studying the heavy fringe of timber such as he and his two companions stood in.

Those two men who sat on the log looked and acted like a couple of jaspers who were plenty bored with their job of guarding stolen cattle. But there was one false note that would have escaped most people. And that false note was the fact that Perk and "Snoozer" had raised their voices more than seemed necessary.

"I may be wrong," Jim began in a low voice, "but it seems to me that——"

He got no further. With an angry yell, Deputy Bob Perry leaped into the clearing, six-gun jutting before him, moon face crimson with anger.

"Hoist 'em, yuh two mangy snakes!" the deputy bawled. "Start grabbin' at the sky, or I'll let daylight through yuh!"

Perk and Snoozer jumped to their feet, arms lifting high.

Jim Christy had the feeling that the pair did not show so much surprise as they should have shown. Perk and Snoozer were uneasy; that was plain. Yet they certainly did not act like a couple of rustlers who had just been caught red-handed.

But Jim had little time to try analyzing his feelings just then. Deputy Perry was charging those two rustlers angrily, and paying

little attention to where he pointed his cocked six-gun.

Jim stepped from the timber, his own guns still holstered. His uncle was beside him, and Jim noticed that the old fellow held his Colt at an angle that meant trouble for whoever bucked him. Like most easy-going men, Wade Christy could be bad medicine when pushed into a fight.

Those things flitted through Jim's mind as he hurried to Deputy Perry, who was snarling angrily at the pair of rustlers he had come up to.

"No fight in yuh, huh?" the officer barked at the 44 hirelings.

"What could we do?" the bald-headed, white-eyed Perk sneered. "Yuh had the drop afore we knowed it. Looks like we're ketched, don't it?"

"I'll say yo're ketched!" the deputy snorted. "Yuh two are under arrest fer murder, rustlin', an' general cussedness. I'll—— Hey, what the—— Halp!"

Jim Christy reached out suddenly with both hands. His left hand fastened in the collar of his uncle's woolen shirt. His right grabbed the green neckerchief about the deputy's thick neck. Then Jim went over backward, jerking with all his might.

His uncle and the deputy came down almost on top of him, just as the whole cabin before them seemed to explode. A leaden sleet screamed through the air, and Jim saw Perk and Snoozer leaping away, snatching at guns.

"Keep down!" Jim bawled. "Wiggle to that log, or we're sunk!"

His hands whipped down, came up with his twin guns. Those guns boomed now, and the gawky Snoozer crashed sidewise and down, screaming an oath. Jim rolled swiftly, facing the cabin.

Men were pouring through the

doorway, swearing and fighting one another for standing room, as they whipped smoking guns into aim.

Jim saw that his uncle and the deputy were regaining their wits enough to understand what had happened. Then he turned his full attention on those men at the cabin door.

There in the van were Rufe Baffert, Jigger Trask, and Chip Craddock. Jim recognized those three even as he steadied his elbows on the ground and thumb-flicked his gun hammers.

A slug left a fiery welt across his right jaw, and two more passed dangerously close to his body. But Jigger Trask twisted half around, clawed at his chest, and fell against Rufe Baffert, who was taking aim. Jim thumb-fanned the hammers of his guns again, and saw a man next to Chip Craddock fold up.

"Charge the skunks!" he roared suddenly. "It's our only chance. Give 'em fits!"

He was on his own feet now, weaving and dodging behind a pair of six-guns that beat a steady, deadly tattoo. And beside him came his uncle and the squabby deputy, firing coolly, evenly.

Chip Craddock and one other man went toppling. Then Rufe Baffert bawled a hoarse oath, wheeled, and lunged toward the cabin door. His men had already started crowding inside, however, and Rufe Baffert found the doorway blocked by squirming bodies.

He swore like a madman, clubbed right and left until his gun barrels were crimson-smearred. Then he was charging into the cabin, tramping over the twitching bodies of three hirelings he had knocked unconscious.

Two more were down on the ground, groaning and weak, heads

battered by the man who had hired them. But Jim Christy saw those things only briefly as he made that mad charge.

From the tail of his eye, he saw his uncle and the deputy hot-footing it after four men who had dodged around the corner of the cabin. But Jim was at the door now, launching his body into the cabin in one pantherish spring.

A gun boomed so close to his face that he felt the singeing breath of powder. Across the room from him, twin streamers of powder blaze licked out from behind an overturned table.

Jim hit the floor, rolled half over, and slammed a shot at the shadowy form of a man who had stood beside the doorway. He saw the man leap, heard him yelp in pain. Then the fellow was gone out through the door, left arm dangling limply as he moved.

Jim rolled swiftly, came to his knees. But something struck him a terrific blow along the ribs, driving him back to the floor. He lay gasping weakly, trying to gather his reeling senses. A harsh laugh came from behind the overturned table.

"Tagged yuh that time, didn't I?" Rufe Baffert taunted. "Blast yuh! If them yaller-hearted men o' mine had charged like I said, this would 'a' been over now. But I've got yuh, Christy!"

Jim had lifted his left-hand Colt, glazed eyes focused on the upper edge of the overturned table. He saw coarse black hair lift slowly, and squeezed the trigger. From behind the table came a yowl of pain, then sizzling oaths.

"Still able ter fight, are yuh?" Rufe Baffert yelled. "Well, blast yuh, I'll put a slug through yore carcass this time!"

Jim tensed, both guns ready now

to blast Rufe Baffert down. But Baffert did not show himself immediately, despite his threat. Jim could hear him snarling oaths, and kept his guns ready.

A lot of swearing came from outside, and an occasional shot that sounded strangely far away.

"Yo're licked, Baffert," Jim called grimly. "Come out, yuh crawlin' coward, or I'll smoke yuh out!"

"Licked, am I?" Rufe Baffert sneered. "It's yuh that's licked, yuh fool. The minute Chip an' Jigger got out ter the place an' told me that yuh an' yore blasted uncle was talkin' ter that fool depity sheriff, I knowed what had happened."

"Regular wizard, ain't yuh, yaller-belly?" Jim taunted.

"I knowed yuh had snagged Buck Lane last night an' made him talk, anyhow," Rufe Baffert snarled. "An' I figured that yuh'd made Buck tell where these C Bar cattle was bein' held afore yuh shot him or strung him up."

"So yuh fogged right on over here with yore gang, an' set a nice trap," Jim snarled. "It worked—almost."

"Shore it worked—an' no 'almost' to it," Baffert yelled. "Some o' my men will git over the wallops I handed the fools an' drill yuh from the door in a minute."

Baffert had lifted his voice, undoubtedly hoping some of his hirelings would hear. And they did, for Jim heard a snarling oath, and glanced around to see a crimson-smeared head and face framed in the doorway.

"Easy, Christy, or I'll blow yuh in two!" the crimson-smeared man snarled over a leveled gun. "I don't want to kill yuh, for yo're a whiter man than that snake yo're tryin' to smoke out."

The man broke off, wiping crimson from his face with his left hand.

"Baffert, Chip Craddock, an' Jigger Trask done the shootin' at yore uncle an' them three C Bar punchers the night us fellers stole yore cattle, Christy," the battered tough in the doorway went on. "The rest of us boys was agin' that sort o' thing, for it wasn't necessary a-tall."

"Say, what's the idea?" Rufe Baffert wailed from behind his barricade. "So yuh snakes are takin' water, are yuh?"

"Yuh gun-whupped me an' some o' the others ter git yore mangy hide safe inside," the battered jasper in the doorway yelled. "Christy, take to that skunk. An' I'm wishin' yuh luck. These other boys an' me are hittin' the trail yonderly, an' I hope yuh give Baffert a slug in the middle, so's he'll live to——"

With a hoarse bellow of insane rage, Rufe Baffert leaped from behind his barricade, squat, powerful body hunched over a pair of spitting six-guns.

Jim Christy felt slugs ripping past his face, and squeezed the triggers of his guns just as Baffert leaped at him with driving boot heels. Those boot heels landed squarely in Jim Christy's back, wrenching a groan from his lips.

He writhed sidewise, smoking guns coming over and around as he gasped for breath. But his twin slugs had found that hurtling mark a split second before Baffert's boot heels gouged his back. Jim sat up slowly, gasping for breath.

There was a movement in the doorway behind him. He spun as swiftly as possible, guns ready to flame. But he eased the spiked hammers down gently, for there in the doorway were his uncle and the pudgy deputy.

Jim took one look at the lifeless form of Rufe Baffert, then crawled to his feet and reeled outside. There

in the yard were Snoozer and four others who had gone down with lead in their bodies.

Snoozer and two of the others were still alive, but too sick to think of fighting. Jigger Trask and Chip Craddock were out for keeps, staring with unseeing eyes up at the bright sun.

"Them others got away!" Deputy Bob Perry wailed. "Dang it, Jim, we lost 'em in the heavy timber down the canyon! An' there was five others beat it as we come back here."

"Let 'em go!" Jim grinned tightly. "Chip Craddock, Rufe Baffert, an' Jigger Trask were the ones who killed Larry, Matt, an' Nelse. An' them three won't kill anybody else."

"Kin yuh prove Rufe Baffert had a hand in killin' an' robbin', Jim?" the dumpy little deputy asked sharply.

Jim started, blinking his heavy-lidded eyes. He started to speak, but stepped out of the door instead, walked to where the gawky tough known as Snoozer lay groaning, and motioned the deputy to follow.

"Snoozer," Jim said grimly, when his uncle and the deputy stood beside him, "yo're hit in the shoulder, but I can see that it's high. Yuh'll live. Which means that mebbe yuh an' these other two will be charged with murder after what happened the night yuh scum raided my uncle's herd."

"Steve Black told the truth when he yelled through the doorway a while ago that—that us fellers refused to do any killin' that night," Snoozer croaked. "Stealin' cattle is one thing, Christy. Doin' murder is

somethin' else. Rufe Baffert, Chip Craddock, an' that swell-headed Jigger Trask didn't have to do them killin's that night."

"But are yuh shore Rufe Baffert done any o' the killin'?" the pudgy deputy asked quickly.

"I am!" Snoozer growled. "Dang him! He set his hoss close ter camp an' waited until the first C Bar man rolled out at the sound o' the herd stampedin'. Rufe filled that pore feller plumb full o' lead. I was tryin' ter make him stop all the time."

"Yuh win, Jim!" the deputy whooped loudly. "This feller will tell that in court, an' yuh win!"

"Win what?" Jim asked blankly. "Seems like Uncle Wade an' me won when this shootin' was over. We'll have peace now, an'——"

"There's a clause in ol' Joe Baffert's will"—the deputy grinned broadly—"which names a second-choice heir in case Rufe Baffert does any onnecessary killin' within a year after he takes charge o' the 44 spread. I know, 'cause Lawyer Willard, at Canyon City, told me about it."

"What's that?" Wade Christy cried. "Perry, fer gosh sakes, quit grinnin' an' tell us a few! If we draw another neighbor as ornery as Rufe Baffert was, I'll be plumb licked."

"I don't think yore new neighbor will be so ornery, Mr. Christy." The pudgy deputy's grin broadened. "That bob-wire fence is the same as tore down right now. Because, Wade, the gent who now inherits the 44 is—accordin' to the will Joe Baffert made—Jim Christy!"

Bandit Loot Enriched Sheep-herder

A GOOD many years ago, a bandit known as "Broncho Bill," built up a big reputation in New Mexico for himself and his partner, Billy Johnson.

The two men, after robbing the Santa Fe train near Grant, rode leisurely on southward. They had sent word to the Mexican sheriff that if he wanted to get them, he would find them at the I & M Ranch.

They arrived in due time, but when they told the boss, Johnny Payne, of their message to the sheriff, he refused to let them stop. He knew that the sheriff and posse were likely to show up at any moment, and Johnny didn't want to have a shooting match at the ranch. So the train robbers went on about six miles up Alamosa Creek, where they camped.

The next morning, they walked some distance to get their horses, and when they were returning to their camp, the Mexican sheriff and three deputies sprang from cover, with their rifles at shoulder, and called on them to surrender.

Broncho Bill and his pardner replied by drawing their six-guns with lightning speed and dashing toward the posse, firing as they ran.

When they stopped, there was a dead sheriff and two mortally wounded deputies. The fourth man was so dazed at the sudden turn of events, that there was no fight left in him.

Tying the dead sheriff on to his horse, and the two wounded deputies on to their respective mounts,

Broncho Bill ordered the one unhurt Mexican to take them back to Grant.

Then he put a thousand dollars of the loot from the train into a sack, and fastened it to the sheriff's saddle. He wrote on a piece of leather, "For burial expenses," and attached it to the sack with a piece of wire.

The Mexican, with his gruesome charge, set out at once. When night came, he made camp at the foot of Putney Mesa. By this time, the two wounded deputies were dead, and it was a relief to the survivor when a young man named Baca came along and joined him.

Baca was herding sheep near by. The Mexican knew him and didn't hesitate to tell him of the fight with the bandits and of the money that was in the sack.

Before daylight, Baca arose quietly and slipped away, taking with him the sack containing the thousand dollars. He went to Arizona and was not seen again for years. When he did come back, he brought a large herd of sheep, and started a sheep ranch.

In time, Baca became very rich. Sheep ranching became popular and his herds grew.

One time, a friend of Broncho Bill's came to see him, and, in speaking of his success in raising sheep, Baca said with a mysterious smile:

"One thousand dollars invested in sheep many years ago would account for all the wealth which I now possess."

Dogie Cantwell



1. When the Bar 6 trail herd reached the railroad, an Eastern buyer was on hand to meet them. His men counted the herd. Dogie Cantwell and Tex were near by when a tally man reported to the buyer.



2. Tex Mellen swung down to complete the deal. Very few critters had been lost in the drive, and the price offered was satisfactory to Tex. Dogie watched the buyer hand over the cash to Tex.



3. Tex and Dogie rode from the shipping pens to the cow-town hotel. There the rest of the Bar 6 crew met them to get their wages. Tex paid the men, and Dogie checked off their names in a record book.



4. Dogie and Tex and the dog, Pard, started back toward the home ranch almost at once. The rest of the crew remained behind to blow their wages and celebrate. Dogie was glad to get out of town again.

Saves The Pay Roll



5. At noon they stopped at a water hole to rest and eat. Dogie, however, was worried about the rest of the beef money. Tex laughed at his fears. He wore a money belt and allowed the cash was safe.



6. The two waddies made their night camp beside a river. After the hot day's ride, they decided on a swim. Tex beat Dogie to the water. Dogie busied himself around their packs.



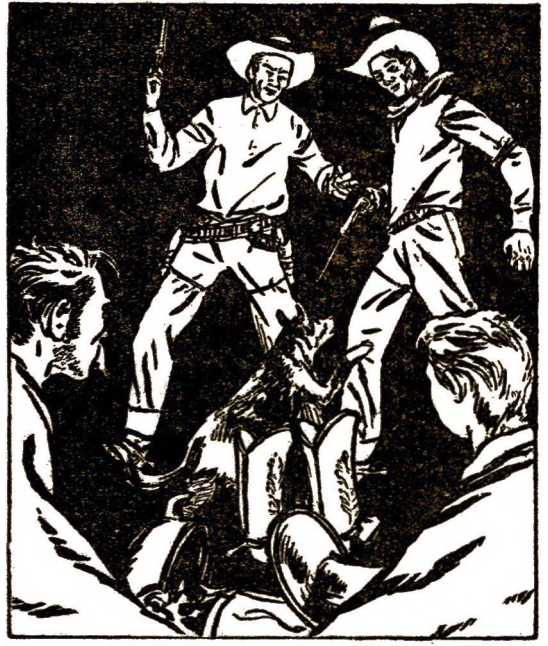
7. Tex fell asleep almost as soon as he turned in, that night. But Dogie Cantwell remained awake, staring up at the stars. Soon loud snores from Tex told him that the older waddy was dead to the world.



8. Dogie crawled quietly from his blankets. He pulled out the saddle he had been using for a pillow and bent over it. Pard watched him curiously. He couldn't figure what Dogie was doing.

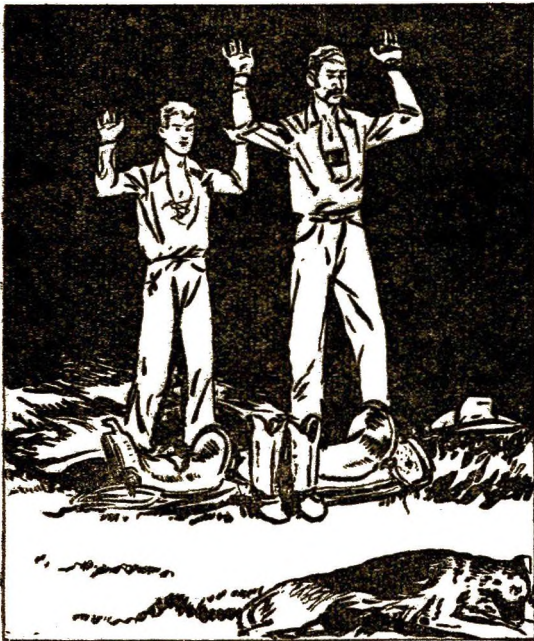


9. In a few minutes, Dogie rolled up in his soogans again. This time, he fell asleep immediately. Hours passed. Then past midnight, two stealthy figures came stalking silently toward the camp.



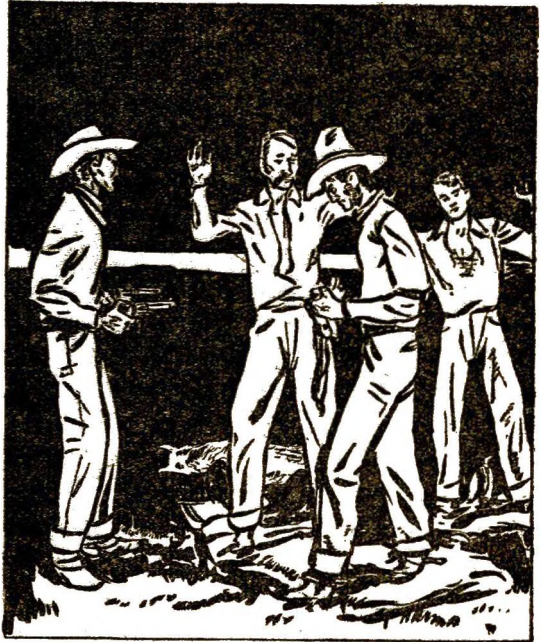
10. Pard had keener ears than either Dogie or Tex. He awoke and saw the skulkers. Snarling, he leaped at them.

Bram! One intruder fired at Pard, just as Dogie and Tex awakened.

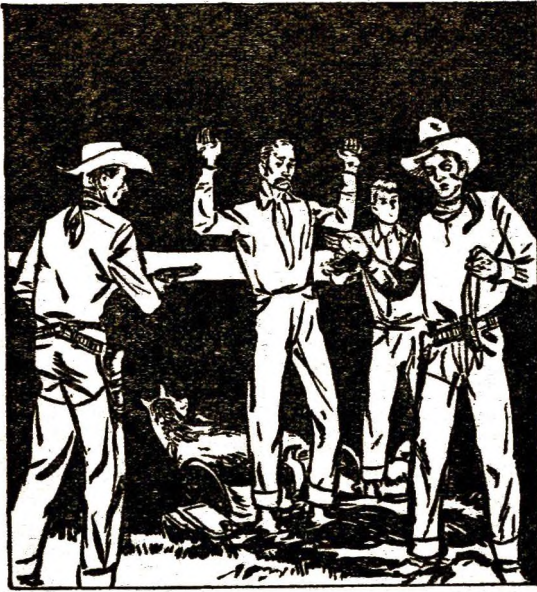


11. "Git 'em up, gents!" snarled a voice. "We want thet beef money yore totin'."

Dogie and Tex "got 'em up." Dogie felt almost sick as he saw Pard's limp body on the ground.



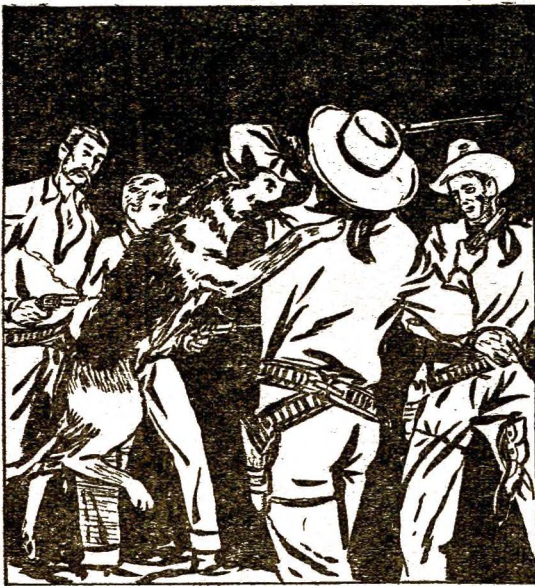
12. While his companion kept the two waddies covered, one of the holdup men stepped close to Tex and removed the money belt from the lanky waddy's waist. Tex growled an oath, but was helpless.



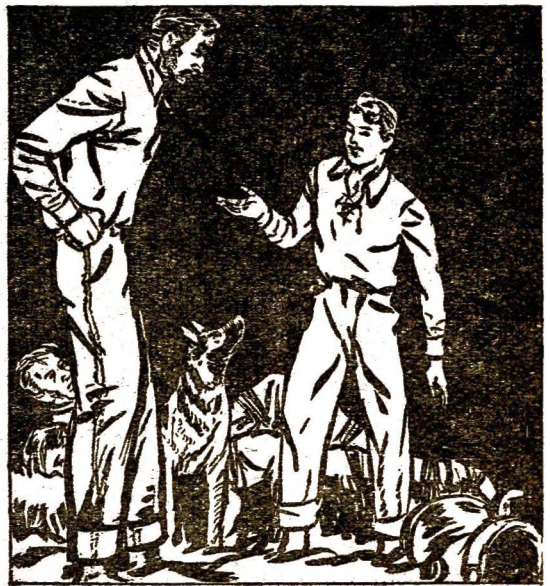
13. Dogie Cantwell watched closely as the bandit opened the money belt. He was so intent on the scene that he didn't see Pard stir. Then the man swore raspily. The belt was filled with grass!



14. The man covering Dogie and Tex turned at his companion's exclamation. Dogie and Tex stooped to get their guns. But the man swung back and swore savagely. Then Dogie heard a snarl and—



15. *Crash!* Pard came hurtling out of the darkness and struck the man in the chest. The dog had been merely creased. Dogie and Tex snatched up their guns and covered the bandits.



16. The bandits were soon hog-tied. "But whar," demanded Tex, "is thet durned dinero?"

Dogie laughed: "I put it in my saddlebag. I was scairt you'd lose it."

Next Week: "Dogie Cantwell Busts A Bad Man."



Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is maintained in an effort to preserve old cowboy songs and frontier ballads.

If you want to find the words to some Western song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send copies of songs to individual readers, but we will tell you in what issue of *Wild West Weekly* you can find the one you want.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's *Wild West Weekly*, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, I reckon we'll pitch right in tuh-day with a song that was sent tuh us by Mrs. Whitaker, of Arizona, who says it's an ol' song that she has known a long time from memory.

It's a song that tells a story that must've happened plenty of times out West when thar was few women out thar. Two fellas fall in love with the same gal. One has tuh go. I kin jest imagine the old cowboy who wrote this song, tired an' weary from wanderin' around, wonderin' if he couldn't go back, now that so many years is gone. But yuh kin see for yoreself:

MY OLD PAL, FIDDLIN' BILLY

My old pal, Fiddlin' Billy,
 I wonder where you are at,
 With your old brown bow and fiddle
 And your old white floppy hat.
 Been a long time since we parted
 Down by the old shack door;
 We swore we would meet again some place,
 But I ha'n't seen you no more.

Bill, to-night, I'm lonesome for you
 And the tunes you used to play.
 Do you play them still, I wonder,
 Or have you gone away
 From the old shack in the coulee
 With the spring beside the door!
 I'm longing for it, Billy,
 To see it just once more.

I'm figgerin, Bill, on coming back.
 Will you meet me there, ol' pal?
 And play for me "The Devil's Dream"
 Or maybe "The Buffalo Gals";
 Or if you wish, I'll sing for you,
 Or maybe a piece I'd say
 Just like we used to do
 Before I went away.

Just like I used to do
 So many years ago,
 When you were young and so was I,
 And so was she, you know.
 Is her black eyes still a-shinin'?
 Is her pink cheeks all a-glow?
 Is she tall and slim an' purty?
 Yes, Bill, I'd like to know.

I'd like to know you are happy
 No matter where you be,
 You always was a good old scout
 And sure a pal to me.
 No, Bill, I wa'n't feeling hard
 'Cause you got the girl we loved;
 But I couldn't stick around no more
 So from the range I shoved—

To see what lay behind the hill,
 And then I found the valley.
 I've pranced along the highroad, Bill,
 And I've tottered down the alley,
 But now, dear Bill, I'm getting old,
 And the highroad's left behind,
 And my heart turns back to the old days,
 And the pal I'd like to find.

What with the fiddle an' all, thet one
 kind o' makes me think of an ol' pal of
 mine. We used tuh have plenty good
 times tuhgether, an' now he's wanderin'
 over some far range.

McKay Phillips, of North Carolina,
 writes: "I got my grandmother to sing
 me some old ballads, and here's one of
 them she sang to me.

"She said that an old man who lived
 on a ridge near Linville River sang this
 song about Jack of Diamonds, and
 claimed his uncle learned it from a rebel
 soldier.

"He also told her that his uncle used
 to keep a bucket of brandy setting on
 the back porch with a gourd in it, and
 everybody was free to help theirselves.
 She said that she cannot say that this is
 true, but that it seemed as though the
 bucket of brandy would have been a
 natural gesture."

Well, you folks have had different ver-
 sions of "Jack of Diamonds" and of the
 original Civil War song from which it
 came, but this is a different one from
 those yuh've had, so hyar it is:

JACK OF DIAMONDS

Jack of Diamonds in my coffin
 And little cards a-layin' all around.
 I eat when I am hongry
 And drink when I am dry.
 If the Yankees don't kill me
 I will fight until I die.

There's a bottle of corn liquor
 A glass of good wine.
 You can drink to your love
 And I can drink to mine.

I am a rebel soldier
 And a long way from home.
 The Union and the Yankees
 Has caused me for to roam.

As yuh kin see, this version is still
 from the Civil War period before it was
 taken over by the cowboys. My main
 pleasure in givin' yuh this song, folks,
 is in thet first sentence of McKay Phil-
 lips' letter. He has done what I hope
 every single reader o' this Corral will
 do. He got his grandma to sing him the
 old songs she knows an' tell him the cus-
 toms of her times, an' then he reported
 'em to me. Thet's good work, an' I'm
 proud of it!

Comin' back tuh fiddles, hyar's a little
 piece thet an ol' Texan sent in tuh the
 "Frontier Times," called:

TURKEY IN THE STRAW *

I knew an old fiddle man, so lame he couldn't
 walk,
 But he had an old fiddle that could almost
 talk;
 You could see mighty quick when he gave the
 bow a draw,
 What we both liked best was "Turkey in the
 Straw."

So swing your pardners an' all promenade,
 Listen to that fiddle, jes' listen what it sayed.
 The best piece of music that I ever heard or
 saw
 Is the jolly old shuffle called "Turkey in the
 Straw."

The tune called "Turkey in the Straw"
 is one of the oldest an' most American
 tunes thar is. Specially 'long about this
 time of the year, when the harvest is in,
 an' the folks is rejoicin' an' gittin' ready
 fer Thanksgivin' yuh'll hear the tune all
 through the West, an' the Middle West
 farmlands.

Thar's plenty of songs called "Turkey
 in the Straw." I'll let yuh have another
 one, one of these days.

I reckon thet's all fer tuh-day, but
 don't forget tuh take McKay Phillips'
 example! Yuh'll find it's plenty worth
 while. Good luck to yuh!

* Reprinted, by kind permission of the editor, from
 "Frontier Times," Bandera, Texas.



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.

WE'LL be a horned toad, if it seems like a hull week since the last time the bunch got tergether here at the Wranglers Corner! In fact, it don't seem like more'n a couple o' days. But here's the gang, waitin' fer us, as we pulls in with this week's crop o' letters from the readin' hombres.

"Hi, yuh, waddies!" we shouts. "What's the good word with yuh-all ter-day?"

Tom Carter—one o' the Bar U twins—grins at us. That's how we knows it's Tom. Jerry don't never grin.

"Jest fine, Boss," he says. "An' how's it with yuh?"

"Can't kick, Tom," we answers—an' chuckles ter see that Tom is plumb s'prised at havin' us tag him right. "O' course, we ain't got nothin' ter brag about, exactly, but we can't kick."

Johnny Forty-five breaks inter one o' his locoed rhymes at that:

"I shore am glad, ol'-timer,
 - To hear yuh spout them words,
 Fer I'm fed up with kill-joys
 An' other gloomy birds."

George Krumm looks kind o' pained as he listens ter Johnny's singsong chatter. But the rest o' the outfit laughs. The rest o' the outfit, o' course, is the Bar U twins, Dogie Cantwell and Tex Mellen, and Hungry and Rusty, Rangers.

"I see there's no sense in askin' how the mail's holdin' up," drawls Jerry Car-

ter, pointin' ter the bulgin' sack we jest chucked onter the table.

"Yeah, she's holdin' up plumb well," we admits. "The only thing we kin see is that there ain't so many artist hombres among the 3W readers. We hardly ever gits any good pitchers, any more. We'd like ter have an artists' night, sometime, too."

"Waal," allows Johnny Forty-five, "mebbe now some one will come through."

"Hope so," we answers. "We also hopes that they makes their drawin's on plain white paper an' with black—India—ink. If they don't, we won't be able ter reperdooc 'em in the Corner."

An' now it looks like it was time ter git down ter business an' start readin' the mail. Here's the first letter we pulls out o' the sack:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: "The Oklahoma Kid's Loco Trick," by Lee Bond, was the best story of the Kid that I have ever read. I had to laugh so much over it that it took me about three times as long to read it as it usually does.

Reducin' the price of the 3W was the best thing you ever did. Thanks a lot. It has sure helped my pocket.

Why don't you bring back Tex Carnochen? He was the best hombre who ever rode for your spread. Bring him back, by all means.

Tell Buck Foster not to worry about those hombres who kick about him. As one readin'

hombre once said, Circle J would go bust if it wasn't for Buck. I should say so. Not only that, but W. W. W. would probably go bust, too, without the veteran.

I guess you're getting tired of this letter. I'll sign off. Here's hoping that you bring back Tex Carnochen.

TARZAN.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

It's shore too bad that Buck ain't here ter git a load o' that one! We kin jest see the ol' coot puffin' up like a pouter pigeon, glarin' down his crooked nose at Joe Scott, an' preenin' his long grizzled mustache. Likewise we kin almost hear the ruckus thet'd be startin' about now. Fer Joe would never let sech remarks git by without some comment—an' said comment wouldn't be flatterin' ter Buck, we're thinkin'.

Here's another letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to you, and I hope it gets printed in the Corner.

You shouldn't print letters from people who are always finding fault with 3W. Your magazine is O. K., and you couldn't make it any better.

I think that Ward M. Stevens, author of Sonny Tabor and Kid Wolf, is the best author of the lot. Then comes Charles E. Barnes, who writes about the Bar U twins.

But what is the matter with Kid Wolf? He only comes around about once every two months.

Yours till Jerry Carter cracks a smile.

THE 3W KID.

Valparaiso, Indiana.

Say, Kid, this shore would be an interestin' an' valuable Corner if we didn't never print no letters from folks who wanted ter find fault. We like letters from hombres who has a *real* kick ter make.

Take this here letter, fer instance:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have read the 3W for a long time and consider it the best of all Western magazines. All the stories are good, with the exception of those about Shorty Masters, M. D.

I don't see why a story about mules should appear in a Western magazine. Can't Allan R. Bosworth think of another character to write about instead of a mule driver and mules?

I have noticed that the Wranglers Corner has been sort of short, ever since you reduced the price to ten cents. And speaking of the

Corner, I don't see any sense in sending in childish poems. And less sense in reading them in the Corner. Cut out the poets' nights. They're silly.

By the way, what has happened to my amigo, Señor Red Mask? Is he going to come back to 3W soon? He is a favorite of mine—along with Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Whistlin' Kid, Hungry and Rusty, and the Circle J pards.

One of your authors ought to create a Mexican character, something like Señor Red Mask, and put him in a series.

Apache and Wagonwheel are a swell pair. Keep bringing them back, too.

Yours till they hang Sonny Tabor.

JOE SZUMYLO.

Chicago, Illinois.

"What the blazes does that hombre mean, sayin' he can't see how mules an' mule drivers fit in a Western magazine?" snorts Rusty Bolivar. "Why, fer Pete's sakes, there ain't nothin' more Western than a mule skinner. If it hadn't been fer them hombres, there jest wouldn't be no West."

"Yeah," drawls one o' the Bar U twins, "an' if it wasn't fer freighters, how does that hombre figure us cowpokes, depity marshals, range dicks, sheriffs, outlaws, sheep-herders, bad men, an' all would eat?"

"An' don't fergit," says George Krumm, "thet whisky is very good fer a bad cold. O' course, I don't use it fer nothin' else. But if it wa'n't fer mules an' freighters, most o' the West would be dyin' of infloozny an' no tellin' what else, on account o' there not bein' no whisky."

When the laugh thet starts has died down, Johnny Forty-five has ter have the last word. This is it:

I reckon that we all kin be
Right grateful ter the freighters,
Fer if it wa'n't fer them, we'd have
No bullets or pertaters."

No, there ain't no doubt but what freighters an' mules is part o' the West. A readin' hombre can dislike Shorty Masters, if he pleases, but he can't git us ter admit thet long-eared critters like the Sextet don't belong there, like the prairie schooner, the chuck wagon, the buffalo, and the bronc.

Here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I surely like the Dogie Cantwell stories. I am saving them and mak-

ing a scrapbook of them. So far, I haven't missed one. All the waddies are my favorites, but Dogie Cantwell tops them all.

Girls won't ruin your magazine as some people seem to think. That is, they won't if they are the kind who don't faint whenever trouble comes along.

I guess I've said enough for the first time—except to agree with those who are asking for a cowboys' vocabulary.

Phoenix, Arizona.

RUTH N.

Needless ter say, there's one hombre at the Corner who's wearin' a grin a yard wide when we lays thet letter down. Thet hombre 'is Dogie Cantwell. The kid gits a big kick out o' his fan mail.

"Kin—kin I have thet letter ter keep, Boss?" he asks.

"Shore," we answers, an' hands it over.

We winks at Tex Mellen, who likewise is grinnin' as if thet letter had been about him. O' course, it is, in a way, since him an' Dogie is pard.

We're jest about ready ter start another letter when we gits a look at the clock. Jumpin' jupiter! It's 'way past adjournin' time. The waddies has got ter be high-tailin' it.

So long, readin' hombres. Don't fergit ter drop around next week fer another meetin' with

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

GUNMAN'S GHOST

Novelette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

Tommy Rockford—the cowboy detective—is ridin' toward a job of investigatin', when he runs smack-dab inter trouble. It's the kind o' trouble thet takes bullets ter bust.

BUSCADERO BUSTER

Novelette

By LEE BOND

He's a rip-snortin' bullet-slingin' young rannihan, plumb pizen in a scrap. Tharfore, when he gits inter a real important ruckus, there's plenty excitement.

TRAIL BLAZER'S SNAKE HUNT

Novelette

By WILLIAM F. BRAGG

There's all kinds o' snakes along Wild Cat River, but not all of 'em crawl on their bellies. Some stand up an' sling lead, an' Trail Blazer—Jeff Buckner—r'ars back an' slings some right back at 'em.

Also stories of Bud Jones of Texas, by J. Allan Dunn; the Whistlin' Kid, by Emery Jackson; Dogie Cantwell—and other stories.

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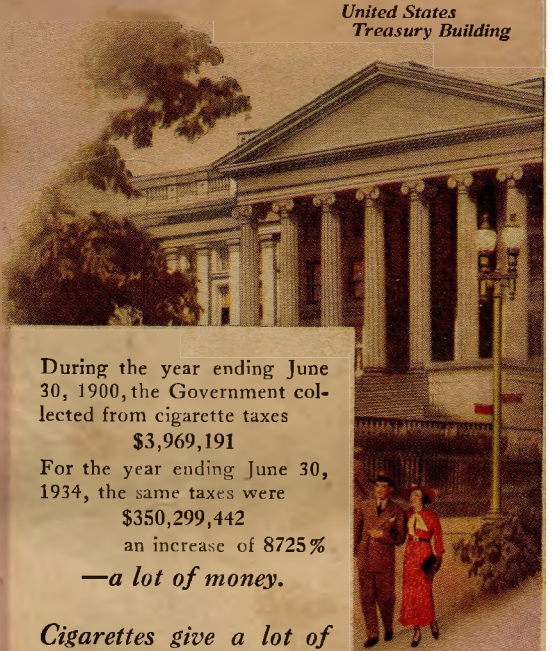
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