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STREET & SMITH'S

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# WILD WEST WEEKLY

CONTENTS NOVEMBER 23, 1940 VOL. 141, No. 4 Whole No. 1988

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 When the Silver Kid plummeted into that gun storm of hatred, he was sided by a weird shootin' hombre!

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- THE DEAD HOMBRE IN LOST GULCH Cleve Endicott . . . . 9**  
 The corpse didn't prove to be the hombre that Buck Foster thought it was—but the old Circle J ranny had a plumb good reason for Thanksgiving.

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 "There oughta be a law against it," Surcingle snorted. And you'll second the thought when you read this yarn.
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 —And it's a heap hard to hold onto when tenderfoot odds are stacked against you.
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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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## A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

HERE it is around about Thanksgiving Day—in *some* States, anyway. I reckon the most hoggish and sensible way to solve the puzzling problem of when-is-Thanksgiving? is to eat turkey on both days until you nigh founder. That's the way I solved it last year.

Yore favorite magazine solves it by handing you a Thanksgiving story this week and another one next week. In the current issue the Circle J pards feel the influence of the season, and next week Hal Dunning shows you how "White Wolf Talks Turkey" in our complete novel of that title.

Regardless of the date, I reckon we can all find plenty for which to be thankful in these troublous times. Free speech, a free press, the right to criticise anybody out loud, the right to live pretty much as you wish so long as you don't do anything criminal—these are things you wouldn't have in many another country. These United States were founded and developed in the same spirit that was used to conquer the West, which is the largest and most colorful part. Seems to me that spirit

can be best described as the heads-up pioneer spirit—the will to be free, in the most liberal meaning of the word. Nobody claims ours is a perfect government or system—but it's beyond doubt the best there is on this earth. It's the kind we've been raised to appreciate and respect. Any foreign *ism* goes against the grain. Our courageous and strong-willed ancestors faced all manner of danger and hardship to build a civilization for us on a basis of liberty and justice. Now is the time for us all to keep that fact foremost in our minds and spirits.

One of the more famous Western lawmen was Wild Bill Hickok. Ben Conlon, celebrated Western author, has written a first-class yarn, involving Wild Bill, for this number. Which reminds me I have a note from Señor Conlon.

OUR BOSS: "Pard of Wild Bill Hickok" is based partly on fact. When I was working in Pueblo, Colorado, years ago, there was at my hotel a white porter who was so old and feeble that he could scarcely get around, but who was kept on by the proprietor because, the story ran out there, he had once saved the proprietor's life during a brawl in a saloon on Northern Avenue in the Bessemer section of the city.

This old porter, an ex-cowboy named Kelly, had discovered gold while punching cattle as a young man. I don't think he ever worked the claim, but he sold it at a good price. Possibly what he did then was not the best judgment in the world, but it gave him something to talk about for the balance of his life: He hired a special train, piled in all his old cowpoke and roustabout friends, and took them to Chicago on an historic binge. Men who had never seen champagne practically bathed in it. They put up at the best hotels and took horse-drawn cabs wherever they went. Kelly's generosity brought him down to the job of a hotel porter in his sunset days, but he seemed to be able to take it.

It was this same Kelly who told me that as a youth in Abilene he had known Wild Bill Hickok; that Hickok took a shine to him and later got him a job in the Black Hills region of South Dakota. And

Kelly claimed he was in that section when Hickok, during a card game, was shot in the back of the head by a roustabout and killed. Kelly had a score or more yarns about Wild Bill Hickok that I never came across in the books, and "Pard of Wild Bill Hickok" was born from one of them.

Yorn,  
BEN CONLON.

It isn't often we receive a note from a real princess, so when we do it seems only right to pass same on to you.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Just a few lines to introduce myself. I was born in Blackwell, Oklahoma. You have perhaps heard of me—as I was once a trick rider and sharpshooter for Zack Miller's Rodeo. I've been out of the rodeo game for nine years now. But I still ride a lot.

My maiden name is Princess Winona Dare. I'm the granddaughter of Chief White Horse, Cherokee tribe. My father's name is John William Dare. I'm married to a gent whom many of you know by his rodeo name of Frank Bart. He's a champion bulldogger and broncbuster.

I've read Western stories all my life. Some of 'em are a little exaggerated, maybe, but I like 'em.

What I want to ask you is—what happened to Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral? I am a piano player and have an orchestra of my own, known as Princess Winona and Her Ramblers. Inclosed is one of my professional cards.

Well, hasta la vista, señor!

Respectfully and truly your friend,  
PRINCESS WINONA.  
(MRS. E. C. COLBY.)

Okanogan, Wash.

Mighty glad to hear from you, princess. First time you're around thisaway, give us a serenade. Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral will appear occasionally. Joe ran the department so many years that he just about ran out of new songs for us to print—and we didn't want to go to repeatin' 'em in large quantities. That's why the department is absent most of the time recently. I know that you musicians (I'm a bad musician myself—no neighbor ever stays a neighbor more'n two or three

nights) all took a particular interest in the old songs Joe dug up. But, after all, those songs *are* limited in number. I don't claim that Joe has dug up every one of the old songs—but he's certainly included all the better creations at one time or another, as well as many which were valuable chiefly as curiosities from the early days.

Next week, as I've already told you, Hal Dunning hands us a great complete novel entitled "White Wolf Talks Turkey." Señor Dunning doesn't write many White Wolf stories and when we get one we always figure it as an event. You'll likely consider it appropriate to Thanksgiving Day number two (the old-fashioned one which was celebrated prior to the New Deal epoch).

"Luck To The Lobos!" is a plumb excitin' short story by Shoshone Gwinn. This yarn has an unusual Irish cowpuncher hero and some neat and surprising twists, plus salty action and characters. You'll see a picture of that fightin' Irish puncher on the cover.

"Gold On The Hoof" is a great new yarn by Ed Moore, another top-hand writer. It's a thrillin' tale of the early California days and of the way lobo gamblers and town bosses in San Francisco cornered the beef market, bulldozing cattlemen, charging outrageous prices to residents of the roaring town while paying the cattle raisers off in hot lead! It's a yarn you'll remember for years.

And those are only the beginnin'. The Whistlin' Kid will be back in a zingeroo short story. So will Dapper Donnelly. And others.

While eatin' that big dinner there's one thing for which we can *all* be thankful: That we're humans instead of turkeys!

But don't founder yoreselves.  
THE RANGE BOSS.

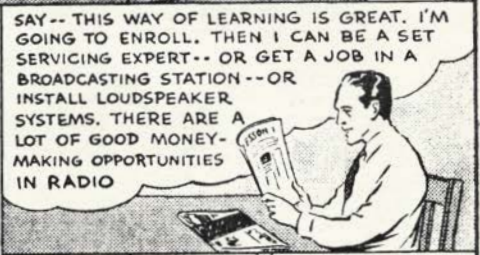


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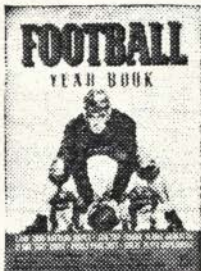
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# THE DEAD HOMBRE IN LOST GULCH

by CLEVE ENDICOTT

*The corpse didn't turn out to be the hombre Buck Foster thought it was, but the old rannihan got a plumb savory reward just the same!*

## CHAPTER I.

### THREE ORNERY SONS.

A CHILL wind blew down from the north, wafting the sour odors from the town dump of Twin Rivers to Buck Foster's bashed nose, and caus-

ing him to hurry his lagging footsteps. He'd be glad to get back to the Oasis Saloon, where he'd left his horse. He'd been a durned fool, he told himself, to spend so much time with old Crusty Williams, a prospector friend, who lived alone in a little

shack on the edge of the town.

An object came flying through the air from the direction of the dump. It sailed as if hurled from a catapult, till it struck Buck's bullet-nicked right ear with a squashy thud, then dropped to the ground at his feet.

Buck turned the object over with the toe of his worn boot, and saw that it was a large dead rat.

"Now, who the hell threw that?" he growled, and turned to look in the direction of the dump.

Another flying missile, pitched with unerring aim, caught him squarely in the middle of the face. He felt an explosion of soft vegetable matter; juice spurted all over, getting into his hair and his bushy gray eyebrows, running down the furrows of his leathery cheeks, dripping off the ends of his cowhorn mustache.

This time, it was an overripe tomato!

Raging so that he was speechless, unable even to curse, Buck started in the direction of the dump, determined to see who was bombarding him. He hadn't taken two steps, when an old boot hit him in the head, knocking off his low-crowned black Stetson, and sending it flying into the dust of the road.

Buck stopped and picked the hat up, brushing it off. Then he put it tightly on his head, pulling it down low over his hairy ears. His saddle-bowed legs churned up the alkali, as he ran across the street and approached the dump.

An empty whiskey bottle whizzed past his head, struck a wooden post, and broke into a thousand fragments.

"Yuh murderin' polecats!" Buck yelled. "I'll flay the hide offn yore ornery carcasses!" He slid his hand down to his hip and eased his smooth-handled Colt in the leather.

"I'll shoot you as full of holes as a hobo's sock. I'll—"

He stopped, gasping with amazement as he caught sight of the objects of his anger.

Three faces were grinning at him from behind the sagging wooden fence that surrounded the town dump. They were small, freckled, impudent faces, all of the same cast—brothers, obviously. The oldest looked about fourteen; the youngest wasn't more than ten! Each face was topped by a shock of red-brown hair, and a small thumb was pressed against the tip of each button nose, while its owner wiggled his fingers in the traditional gesture of derision at Buck Foster.

A yell of delight broke from the throats of the three youngsters.

"Hi-yah, funny-face!" the oldest one called out.

"How d'ja like them apples?" shouted the youngest of the trio.

Buck let his Colt slide back into the holster. The three kids suddenly ducked down behind the protection of the fence. He could hear the sound of their running feet.

"Goldurn it!" he muttered. "Them brats need cloutin'! I got a notion to—"

He saw the three boys running toward a tumble-down shack on the outskirts of the town, a shack that had been empty for a long time because its last occupant had died of smallpox; and it had the added disadvantage of being too close to the town dump. But these kids looked healthy enough, Buck noticed, and with enough deviltry in them!

He turned and ran in the direction of the shack, his moth-eaten old bearskin vest flapping loosely on either side of his lean body. But the speed in his saddle-bowed legs, hampered by their woolly chaps, wasn't



equal to overtaking the three nimble boys.

When Buck reached the house, the boys were already inside, and as he came closer, the door was flung open, and he found himself confronted by a wide-shouldered woman of about thirty-five, with a double-barreled shotgun in her hands—pointed straight at his stomach!

The woman had reddish-brown hair and a button nose, and a square-jawed face, covered with freckles. There was no mistaking the tie of maternal relationship between her and the three boys. Buck noticed, too, that her calico house dress, with sleeves rolled up above the elbows, revealed a pair of well-muscled arms.

No dame to trifle with, Buck decided, as he sized her up!"

"What'n hell 'n'arnation d'you mean by chasin' my boys, you gray-headed ol' stinker?" she demanded, in a voice that had the rasp of a file in it.

"Yore boys was peltin' me with refuse from the dump—" Buck began.

"You look like somethin' that was picked offn the dump yoreself!" she cut his explanation short.

"Them brats of yores need a good rawhidin'!" Buck shouted. "They ain't bein' brought up right—"

The woman took a step forward, her eyes blazing, her cheeks flushing. Buck could see the nostrils of her short nose flaring, as she breathed.

"Git outa here, afore I blow the gizzard outa you, you ol' buzzard!" she yelled at him, bringing the weapon up to her shoulder and training it on the buttons of Buck's flannel shirt. "Who're *you* to be tellin' Molly Shane she don't know how to bring up her children?"

Buck turned and retreated slowly, muttering under his breath.

"Git!" Molly Shane called after him. "Vamoose! Shake yore hocks and rattle yore bones, gran'pa!"

Buck Foster wasn't afraid of the toughest gunman in the whole State of Montana. He was hell on wheels in a barroom rough-and-tumble, or a bunkhouse brawl. He had a quick draw and was a swift shot with the walnut-handled Colt on his hip. But when it came to an argument with a woman, he knew enough to pull in his horns; and this, he decided, was one of those times.

He tried to put on an air of dignity, as he strode away, but a quick glance over his shoulder at the window of the shack showed him the faces of the three Shane boys, grinning and thumbing their noses at him.

The anger that boiled up inside Buck urged him to make a final effort to give these fresh kids a good rawhiding, and he half turned, as if to carry out his plan. But a sudden roar from the shotgun reminded him that those urchins had an ally.

Buck felt shotgun slugs tear at his woolly chaps and rip into the portion of his pants which the opening at the upper part of the chaps left exposed. Something like red-hot nails stung his flesh.

Then the shrill voices of the Shane kids came to his ears!

"Go to it, maw! Give the old coot the other barrel!"

The words put wings on Buck Foster's feet. He put aside all consideration of the shame and mortification he would endure, if there should be an eyewitness of his defeat—and if said eyewitness should tell Buck's bunkie and saddle partner, Joe Scott!

Before Molly Shane could again squeeze trigger, Buck was high-tailing it on flying legs, his breath coming in hoarse gasps from his la-

boring lungs, his bearskin vest flapping like a pair of wings on either side of his lean body.

He didn't stop running till he reached the first saloon on the single street of Twin Rivers—the Oasis. There he hurled himself through the door and staggered to the bar.

"Gimme a drink—quick, Charley!" he bawled hoarsely.

The bartender of the Oasis, an old acquaintance of Buck's, eyed him with a sly twinkle in his fishy eyes.

"What's eatin' you, Buck?" he asked, as he slid a bottle and glass along the bar.

"I . . . I jest escaped bein' chawed to death by a fee-male catamount!" Buck gasped.

## CHAPTER II.

### A SOREHEAD COWPUNCHER.

**B**UCK helped himself to a drink and let the hot liquor trickle down his leathery throat. It felt pleasant as it gurgled down and made a warm spot right in the pit of his lean stomach.

It had been cold outside—freezing cold—an early arctic snap, forerunner of the first snows of winter to come to the Bitterroot foothill country. Buck had been shivering when he came into the Oasis. Now, he felt warm, comfortable, full of hope and courage.

"'Twon't be long now," he confided to the bartender, "afore me an' my boss, Billy West, will be takin' that carrot-head, Joe Scott, and the chink cook along and headin' fer the Rio Grande country, where there's sunshine and señoritas—" Buck stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest and gave the bartender a sly wink.

"So you go fer the señoritas when yo're down by the Rio, huh, Buck?" Charley said. "And yo're supposed

to be a woman-hater in these parts!"

Buck shook his head violently. "No, Charley, I was only foolin' about the señoritas. I'm a woman-hater wherever I go—fust, last, and all the time! Gimme another drink!"

Charley served the drink. Buck leaned his elbows on the bar and beckoned the bartender to come close for more intimate conversation.

"Tell me, Charley," he said, "what d'yuh know about this spitfire who calls herself Molly Shane—the one with the three freckled, red-headed brats, that's livin' down in the ol' smallpox shack?"

Charley's fat face wrinkled into a serious frown for a minute, as he thought.

"I got it," he decided finally. "She's the widder of a miner—Barney Shane, who went away and left her!"

"Which same ain't to be wondered at!" Buck said, with feeling.

"Molly's all right, I guess," Charley added. "But me and her don't git on! She come in here one day and shot up the Oasis, just 'cause I served a slug of whiskey to that oldest boy of hers! She's a hell cat when her dander's up!"

"Did her husband run off with another woman?" Buck asked.

Charley shrugged his shoulders. "Either that, or he got killed while out prospectin'. The story was goin' the rounds a couple of years ago that he struck a gold pocket somewhere in the hills and cleaned up big, but he never come back to his wife and kids."

"But nobody found out why, huh?" Buck asked.

Charley spat on the floor behind the bar. "Folks said Molly Shane was good enough to mend his clothes and cook his meals and put up with his bad temper when he was poor;



but when he got money, he wanted some dance-hall skirt that—”

Buck's attention to the bartender's gossip was cut short, as a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and he was swung around to face a man who had just taken his place at the Oasis bar.

“What are you doin' here, mossy-horn?” demanded a stern voice. “Why aren't you on the job with the rest of the boys, getting in the hospital stuff for winter feeding?”

Buck stared blankly at his boss. “I thought you had plenty hands without me! There's Joe Scott and that new hombre, Dick Haley—”

“Haley's sick. He hasn't been able to work for two days,” Billy interrupted.

There was a kind of tough look about the Circle J boss. He wasn't fooling. Buck could tell that from the hard set of his square jaw and the stern glint in his gray eyes.

There were times when Buck could get away with his bluffing and shirking with Billy, and there were other times when Billy wouldn't stand for any of the old mossyhorn's shenanigans. This, Buck could see, was one of those harder times.

“I think Haley's a fake and a loafer,” Buck complained. “He ain't at Circle J fer no good. There's no reason fer me doin' the work he's gettin' paid fer doin'!”

“Look here, Buck!” Billy's voice had a ring of iron in it. “When I decide, or when Jim Benson decides a man's dogging it, he gets fired. Your job is punchin' cattle—doing ranch chores. You're not the boss nor the foreman. Savvy?”

Buck nodded, with a sulky expression on his leathery face. “Yeah, so yo're tellin' me!”

“So,” Billy went on, “I want you to get back to Circle J and stay there and get yourself a good night's rest,

and be on the job with Joe Scott roundin' up the leppies out of the draws and gullies along Snowshoe Canyon, come daybreak tomorrow!”

Buck was silent, gnawing sulkily on his mustache. He knew better than to answer his boss back when he was in his present tough frame of mind. He followed Billy out into the cold grayness of the November afternoon.

Mountainous masses of snow clouds were scudding across the sky, and a harsh wind was blowing down from the distant Bitterroot ridge.

Buck shivered and buttoned his shaggy vest tightly around him, as he went with Billy to the hitch rail.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE WHITE DEATH.

SOMEONE was prodding Buck Foster in the ribs, poking him in the stomach, dragging the blankets off his bunk, and letting an icy blast blow on his underwear-clad body through the open door of the Circle J bunkhouse.

Opening his eyes, Buck recognized the grinning, freckled face of his saddle mate, Joe Scott, in the gray dawnlight.

“Time to roll out o' the hay, mossyhorn!” Joe jeered, slapping the old ranny across the soles of his bare feet with a rawhide thong. “Everybody else's puttin' on the feedbag!”

Buck crawled out of his bunk, grumbling and cursing. He drew on his socks and pants, his shirt and vest. Then he climbed into a heavy canvas jacket, lined with blanketing and combed sheep's wool, and buttoned it high up under his chin. He pulled the collar of the coat around his ears, then got into his boots and ran a comb through his thatch of shaggy gray hair and his long mustache ends. Then he clapped on his

battered old black sombrero, dragging it down till it met the top of his coat collar.

He took a final glance around the bunkhouse. It was empty, save for one bunk—the one occupied by the new cowhand, Dick Haley. Buck saw that Haley was still rolled up in his blankets, snoring gently, dead to the world.

"Tain't fair—" Buck began, jerking his thumb at the slumbering form.

But Joe Scott dragged him outside. "Come on! We're late now, and the boss is on the warpath!"

As they crossed the ranch yard to the mess shack, Joe pointed to the clouds. "There'll be snow before long!" he declared. "And we got a lot of weak stuff to round up and bring in!"

"It's too early fer a big snow," Buck argued, and followed the red-head into the cook shack.

The chink cook, Sing Lo, had hot grub—bacon and beans—and coffee ready. Buck packed his lean belly, wolfing down the food with enjoyment.

When he got up from the pine-plank table, bacon grease and coffee were dripping from the ends of his mustache. He wiped them off with the sleeve of his jacket and patted his belly.

"Plumb good grub, Sing Lo!" he called out to the little Chinaman. "You got somethin' fer us to eat on the job?"

"So be," Sing Lo answered, and came hurrying out of his cook shack with a sack of grub for the punchers to take along on their trip.

Outside, an icy blast from the north almost carried Buck off his feet, as he headed toward the corral. He found his favorite gray, got the saddle on its back, and cinched up. The gray was in an ornery temper,

and started bucking the moment it felt the rider in the saddle. But Buck gentled the animal firmly, and made it settle down to an easy lope.

Joe rode alongside Buck on a chunky little roan, and the two talked as they crossed the wind-swept acres of Antelope Creek pasture, till they were sheltered by the line of rugged cliffs that formed the northern boundary of the range—a mass of broken country, with countless draws, canyons and gullies where stray stock easily got lost and was hard to find.

Snow was whipping down from the leaden skies, as Buck and Joe rode into the wide break in the cliffs that marked the entrance to Snowshoe Canyon. The two buckaroos bent their heads against the stinging lash of the sleet as they urged their horses into the teeth of the storm.

They drew rein behind the shelter of a huge shoulder of rock that jutted out into the canyon, and gave their mounts a breathing spell.

"How far up this canyon you figure on goin', carrot-top?" Buck wanted to know.

"About halfway," Joe said.

Buck blew out his leathery cheeks and brushed snow off the ends of his mustache. "Not me, young-un! I'm goin' as far up to the head o' this canyon as hossflesh'll take me!"

"What good'll that do yuh?" Joe demanded, ready for an argument.

"Then I'll round up every head of stock that's hid away there," Buck explained. "If we only go halfway, we'll miss some of the stuff that's got theirselves holed up in this damn canyon!"

Joe stuck out his chin at that and argued heatedly with his saddle mate. But he might as well have argued with the huge mass of rock behind which they had taken shelter.

"If yo're afraid of a mite of snow





*Molly Shane squeezed trigger as Buck hightailed it.*

like this," Buck finally shouted at the redhead, "you kin stay here!"

With these words, he spurred out from behind the rocky shelter and again faced the blizzard. A backward glance showed him that Joe was following; and Buck grinned to himself.

Ahead of him, the canyon narrowed and twisted, branched off into side trails that were little more than fissures in the rocky walls. Snow was beginning to drift, to pile up in hollows and sheltered spots, while the more exposed places were swept bare.

A trail led up to the rimrock, and Buck followed it, urging his bronc into the teeth of the blizzard. He came out on a high plateau, studded

with brush-filled hollows and piled-up boulders that offered many hiding places for stray cattle.

Buck caught sight of a spotty-brown leppy, huddled under a boulder, and raced after it. In a nearby hollow, he found a skinny cow with a starved-looking dogie. He drove the spotty-brown orphan calf into the hollow and left it there, while he explored a craterlike depression in the center of the plateau. Here, Buck found three more strays.

He heard a shout and saw Joe Scott riding toward him.

"Come on and git to work, yuh lazy young gopher!" Buck shouted at his saddle mate. "We ain't got no time to lose!" He pointed in the direction of a trail that led off the

plateau, on the opposite side. "Go an' see what you can find down thataway!"

Joe rode to the spot Buck had indicated. Buck drove the three newest orphan calves into the hollow with the mother and dogie, and the one stray leppy. Then he followed Joe.

The trail led down to a basin where they explored brush-filled gullies and draws, searched nests of boulders, and climbed ledges to rout out strays taking refuge from the blizzard.

After hours of exhausting search, the two waddies had rounded up an additional twenty head of weakling stock. They drove the animals up the trail to the plateau and herded them into the hollow with the rest.

Buck tallied the stock and found a total of twenty-six head. Then he insisted on exploring another trail.

"Thar's a big lot of cattle hidin' in the malpi over thataway," Buck told the redhead.

But Joe was stubborn. "I ain't aimin' to spend the whole winter snowed up here!" he protested.

They argued back and forth for a while. Joe wanted to leave the bunch of weak stock on the plateau and come back for them when the storm cleared—as he was sure it would do, being too early in the season to last long. But Buck insisted on getting the herd back to Circle J.

He rode around the sick-looking critters, tailing them up when they tried to lie down, lashing them with his quirt, shouting at them—till he got them moving.

He noted, with satisfaction, that Joe was helping. The redhead was leading the way along the rimrock trail, followed by the twenty-six head of weak stock, plodding along in single file, while Buck rode at drag.

One cow missed her footing and went hurtling over the ledge into the whiteness of the blizzard, to vanish in the drifts below.

Buck cursed. "The ongrateful critter! Here I go an' save her from starvin', and she ain't got savvy enough to keep on her feet. Goldurn fee-males anyhow!"

A few minutes later, he saw a skinny dogie plunge into the depths after having floundered on the edge of the trail for a few seconds. It, too, was swallowed in the silent, whirling softness of the white terror that held the canyon in its grip.

From under the brim of his sombrero, Buck could see Joe Scott far ahead, waving his hand. Joe was shouting something, but Buck couldn't hear a word.

Joe did some more wigwagging and sign-language stuff—and Buck understood. The trail was blocked!

He made his way ahead, through the frightened herd of strays. Finally he reached Joe's side, and then he saw what had happened.

At this point, the trail curved around a huge buttress of the cliff, then dipped, forming a hollow, and the wind had drifted the snow so heavily that it was impossible for man or beast to go forward another foot.

Joe looked at Buck and shook his head solemnly. "Looks like we got to wait here a spell—till this blizzard blows itself out, and the snow melts a bit."

Buck looked at the huge snow drift. He'd have liked to argue with Joe, but he was forced to admit that Joe was right.

So the two rannies settled down to wait, under the shelter of the cliff, which was hollow at the base and protected them from the full fury of the storm.



They had no wood or other material with which to make a fire, so they couldn't boil up coffee, but they ate some of the food Sing Lo had given them, and ate snow which melted in their mouths.

Buck finished the last mouthful of his sandwich, took a handful of the snow, and rose to his feet.

"I'm goin' to find a trail out o' this, carrot-top!" he declared. "When we was chasin' that killer, Blackie Shelton, somewheres around here, we run across an old-line shack; and from there I'll find a trail!"

"'Twasn't nowheres near here we was huntin' Blackie Shelton," Joe said. "You'll git yourself lost for keeps."

"I *can't* git meself lost in these mountains," Buck insisted. "I know every foot of 'em. I've been in—"

"A blizzard makes places look different," Joe argued.

"Not to me," Buck retorted.

Joe grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Awright. Have it your way! You're always right!"

"O' course I am!" Buck admitted.

He wiped his mouth with his hand and brushed the crumbs of the sandwich out of his mustache.

"So long, redhead!" he added. "You just wait here and see that no more o' them critters go over the cliff!"

Buck led his horse back over the trail, heading toward the plateau where they had rounded up the bunch of scrawny critters.

In the hours that followed, he wandered through a boundless wilderness of snow. Cliffs loomed on all sides of him. He had to admit that the blizzard *did* make things look different.

His horse stumbled and almost fell. Buck pulled it up, soothed it with gentle words, let it rest a while. Then he pushed on, taking a new

direction. He was like a blind man wandering through unknown places.

Around him, the blizzard raged, drowning out all sound save its own whipping against his hat and his clothing; blotting out all vision save the curtain of swirling snow that enveloped him like a mantle of fleecy death.

Buck's eyes were smarting. They didn't focus properly. He wondered if snow-blindness was coming on. He'd had it once before when caught in a blizzard.

Again his horse stumbled, went to its knees. Buck climbed out of the saddle and tried to get the spent animal to rise. But it was too exhausted. He decided to explore a little way on foot, and then return.

"Damn that ol' shack!" he muttered. "It ought to be here somewhere!"

He took a few steps through the deep snow, lifting his legs high. Each leg seemed to be weighted with lead. He plodded forward. His eyes smarted. His vision was dimming. He took a step—and found himself in midair. He was like the calves that had plunged off the rimrock trail.

One moment, he had solid ground—deep-drifted with snow—under his feet. The next, he was flying through space. He felt a rush of air coming up to meet him. Snow whipped against his face. He had a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach, as he shot into the depths, with clouds of fleecy-white death eddying and whirling all around him.

#### CHAPTER IV.

IN THE COTTONWOOD.

SOMETHING broke Buck Foster's fall through space—something that gave under his weight and sprang back—as if he'd fallen onto

a bedspring and bounced. At first, he didn't know what had caught him, for everything was a mass of soft whiteness, cold to the touch, yielding to the weight.

Then his hand clutched a small branch, and he realized that he had fallen into the branches of a tree.

All through that storm-racked night, Buck remained there, too weakened by the fall to move. Sometimes he dozed off, as cold and exhaustion overpowered him, sometimes he was awake and watchful—wondering when daylight would come and what he would see when it did come.

Arousing himself from one of his naps, he was aware of gray light in the east. He noticed that the snow had ceased, and that sunrise was coloring the sky.

"Hooraw!" he muttered under his breath. "I knowed that blizzard was a freak. 'Twon't be no time now afore—"

He stopped, his jaw slack, as he looked about him, and his eyes rested on an object caught in the tree, an old cottonwood that flung its strong bare branches out in all directions.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he exclaimed.

The thing caught in the cottonwood's branches was unmistakably human—the body of a man clad in blue flannel shirt and brown woolen pants, patched with a piece of blue-and-red plaid cloth, and wearing heavy leather boots, laced high up over his calves.

Buck looked down. Below him, snow had drifted in the bottom of the chasm to a depth of ten or twelve feet in some places, but the wind had swept other spots bare, revealing a mass of stony rubble that had fallen from the surrounding cliffs.

His limbs felt stiff. At first he

couldn't move them at all. So he stayed in the tree. His perch wasn't uncomfortable, as he dozed there and thought things over.

After a while the sun came out strong, and the snow began to melt and form icicles on the cottonwood branches. The warm rays felt good on Buck's stiffened limbs. Gradually, he felt himself loosening up, and he made a fresh effort to get going.

This time, the effort was successful. Moving with the utmost caution, Buck climbed along a limb and got his foot into the fork of the branch higher up. Then, crawling along this branch, he reached the body of the other man. There was a chance, he thought, that life might be present.

Buck reached out and clutched the man's boot. He tugged, but the body was tightly held in the crotch of the tree. So Buck was forced to do a little more climbing. He finally got to the place where the man's shoulders were wedged between two forking branches and worked the body loose. Then he got it onto his shoulder and began to climb down. It was tough going, but Buck made it, with a final jump of about eight feet into a snowdrift.

Buck's next move was to carry the dead hombre to a clear space and examine him.

The man's hair was white, and his face had been burned and dried by the action of sun and wind and weather, till the skin clung to the bones in tight, shriveled folds, like that of a mummy.

The clothing was rotted, and it ripped as Buck touched it.

"That hombre," he told himself, "didn't die last night—nor the night before! It must be a year—or mebbe two year—since he got hung



up in that tree. Mebbe his hair turned white while he was there, waitin' to die."

Buck straightened up from his stooping position and stood gazing down at the shriveled face.

"By ganny!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if this is the bandit me an' Joe was chasin' out here in the hills nigh on two year ago—the one they called Blackie Shelton. I might've plugged him, and he wandered offn the cliff yonder."

Buck dropped to his knees and began to search the dead man.

"If this *is* Blackie Shelton," he went on, "he'd oughta have a slug or two from yores truly, Buck Foster, to remember him by, 'cause I sure throwed a lot o' lead at the varmint, the time me an' the redhead was chasin' him hereabouts. And come to think of it—" Buck stopped and scratched his ear as he remembered something else— "Come to think of it, there's a ree-ward of five hundred dollars for the capture of this Blackie Shelton—dead or alive!"

Buck's hands went over the body, searched the pockets, but found nothing of importance—just the odds and ends to be found in any man's pockets, jackknife, chewing tobacco, a small amount of change.

And then Buck opened the dead hombre's shirt and heavy underwear, revealing a lean body mummified like the face, the skin drawn tight over the fleshless skeleton.

A gasp of surprise escaped the old cowpuncher, as his eyes lighted on something which had made a bulge under his shirt.

It was a buckskin poke—a small bag with a rawhide draw string, and it was heavy.

He loosened the string and looked inside. His hands trembled and his throat was dry as he peered at the

contents of the poke. For it was filled with raw gold dust and nuggets!

Buck's mind drifted back to the stories about this Blackie Shelton. He recalled that the crime for which the man had been wanted was the murder of three prospectors, whom he had crept up on in their mountain cabin, as they sat around a table counting their store of gold.

According to the stories, Blackie had shot them in cold blood and fled with the gold. It was after this murder, Buck remembered, that he and Joe heard that Blackie was hiding out in the broken canyon country north of Circle J and set out on one of their typical wild-goose chases—as much for the excitement and adventure, as with the idea of collecting the reward.

Buck slipped the poke into the pocket of his own coat and went on with his search. Around the dead man's waist was a belt, with a leather pouch attached, and this, too, was filled with raw virgin gold, such as prospectors might find in a pocket in the hills or along the banks of a creek.

There was no doubt in Buck's mind now. This dead hombre *must* be Blackie Shelton! The poke and the pouch contained the gold stolen from the prospectors whom Blackie had murdered.

Then Buck's mind took a more practical turn. Whose money was this? Did it belong to the dead bandit's family? Not much! To the families of the dead prospectors? They hadn't been family men!

"Thar's no doubt," Buck told himself, "that the ree-ward belongs to me. And most likely the gold does, too. The dinero'll buy me a new silver-mounted saddle, when I'm down in Arizony, and mebbe a pair o' hand-tooled boots, an'—"

A loud shout from above cut Buck's musings short. He raised his head and stared at the rim of the cliff. The faces of his saddle mates, Billy West and Joe Scott, were grinning down at him.

"How ya, Buck!" his boss shouted. "Joe left the sick critters behind and got through the drifts in Snowshoe Canyon and made it to Circle J to tell me you was lost."

"Where's my hoss?" Buck asked. "Is he—"

"We found him plumb tuckered out, but he'll get over it," Billy told him. "We brought along a fresh horse for you!"

"How did ya get down in that hole, mossyhorn?" Joe Scott yelled. "Was you sleep-walkin'?"

"Keep your shirt on, Buck!" Billy West called down. "We'll throw you a rope and get you out of there in no time at all."

Billy and Joe disappeared for a few minutes, then reappeared with lariats, which they tied together and dallied around a tree stump before letting the loose end down to Buck.

There was a lot of scrambling and grunting and cussing, while Buck and the dead hombre were being hauled up to the rimrock.

On the ride back to Circle J, Buck stated his opinions about the body he had found.

"That thar corpse," he said, "is Blackie Shelton. Last seen of him, carrot-top, you an' me was chasin' him through them mountains, and I must 'a' plugged him—"

"But this jasper's hair's white," Joe pointed out. "And Blackie Shelton's was—"

"I ain't arguin' with a stoopid like you!" Buck interrupted. "Don't you know hair kin turn white in no time a-tall?"

The battle was still raging, as they rode into the Circle J ranch yard, and dismounted and unsaddled at the corral.

Buck and Joe, between them, carried the dead man into the barn and left him there. Buck insisted on keeping the buckskin poke and the pouch containing the dust and nuggets. Then the old ranny got himself some grub at the cook shack and went to the bunkhouse to tell his story to some of his cronies.

He was full of big talk for a short time, but he hadn't figured on the fatigue that comes to a gent getting on in years after a hard day and night. His head suddenly slumped forward onto his arms, as he sat at the table, and he fell into a heavy sleep.

Joe Scott and a couple of the others lifted the exhausted Buck into his bunk, took his clothes off, and rolled him in his blankets. Joe noticed that Buck was clutching the buckskin poke and the leather pouch with a grip that defied the redhead's efforts to take them for safekeeping.

Joe glanced around the bunkhouse. Jim Benson, the Circle J foreman, was playing cards at a table with another old cowhand whom everyone called Baldy. Then Joe's eyes wandered to the bunk belonging to the new man, Dick Haley. It was empty.

"Hi, Jim," Joe called out to the Circle J foreman. "Did Haley get better? Where is he?"

Jim glanced toward the empty bunk. "By gimps! He was there a few minutes ago—sleepin' like a hibernatin' grizzly!"

"He must 'a' got better all of a sudden and vomosed," Baldy put in.

"Of all the good-fer-nothin' range bums I ever seen," Jim Benson said,



nodding his gray head slowly, "he was the orneriest. He took sick the first day he come here, and ain't done a lick o' work, and he eats like a starved coyote!"

Joe stood gazing at the empty bunk with a puzzled frown on his freckled forehead and a worried expression in his blue eyes. He rubbed his big beak of a nose thoughtfully. Then he pulled up a chair beside Buck's bunk and sat down.

"Reckon I'll stand watch while old mossyhorn's catchin' himself some shut-eye," Joe decided. "I don't trust that sneakin' tramp Haley no farther than I can throw a hoss by the tail!"

## CHAPTER V.

### DEATH ON THE TRAIL.

THE Oasis Saloon in Twin Rivers was crowded with its usual riff-raff of owlhooters, gents on the dodge, holdup men, all-around no-good range scum. And the mob lined up at the bar included the sly-faced cowhand from Circle J known as Dick Haley.

Although Haley had been in his bunk, suffering from some unknown illness, ever since he had drifted into the Circle J and talked Foreman Jim Benson into giving him a job, he looked in perfect health tonight. His eyes were sparkling and eager, and a flush glowed in his lean cheeks as he spoke to his four drinking companions.

"Now this old coot Buck Foster'll be bringin' in a body, which he claims is good fer five hundred reward," Haley was telling his partners, "and he'll have dust and nuggets too, which he found on the dead man!"

"When'll he bring it in?" asked the man beside him, a tall, white-faced hombre with a red nose, who drank

sarsaparilla and belched frequently.

"He was sleepin' when I left the ranch, Parrot," Haley answered. "But he's sure to come to town tonight—after he's rested up and fed himself—so's to collect the reward."

"How can you be so sure he'll come to town tonight?" asked an hombre known as Piegan Joe, whose coppery skin, flat nose and high cheekbones told of the Indian strain in him.

"'Cause Foster's that kind of gent," Haley explained. "He ain't got no patience a-tall. He never waits for nothin' or nobody."

A silent, blank-faced man in the group was nudging another and making signs with his fingers.

The other man nodded and turned to Haley. "The Dummy wants to know what the deal is."

"You tell him, Snake," Haley said. "You can talk his sign language."

The man known as Snake began talking finger language with the Dummy, who nodded several times, gulped down his liquor, and then started more finger talking.

Snake had to question Haley again. "Hey, Dick, the Dummy wants to know how you can be sure the old jasper's goin' to have all the dinero on him—the dust and nuggets he claims to've found."

Dick Haley spat on the sawdust-covered floor, and his thin face took on an expression of annoyance. "Tell the Dummy the old buzzard don't trust nobody but himself. So he wouldn't let the money out of his sight or out of his own hands."

"All right!" Snake said, and turned to make more sign talk with the deaf-mute gunman of the party.

The Dummy finally seemed satisfied. He grunted and made signs with his hands. Then the five had

another drink, Parrot sticking to his sarsaparilla, while the other four drank white mule.

The five left the saloon, got their horses from the hitch rail, and rode out of town, taking the west road that led past the Circle J Ranch.

About a mile away from Twin Rivers, they reined in their mounts at a point where the trail narrowed and was lined by brush and boulders on either side.

They divided up, Haley, Parrot and Piegan Joe hiding among a group of boulders on one side of the trail, while Snake and Dummy took up positions on the other side.

Drifted snow, only partly melted by the sun of the day, gave added chill to the air, as an icy breeze sweeping down from the distant Bitterroots made the waiting bandits shiver.

A wagon loaded with supplies for one of the ranches went rumbling by; then came a couple of cowboys on their way home. Haley had a watch, and he looked at it, holding it up so that the faint moonlight slanted across its face. It was almost eight o'clock.

The effect of the liquor he had consumed was beginning to wear off. He was chilled to the bone—and wondering if he'd led his companions on a wild-goose chase. A sudden fear struck him as he thought that there might be a quarrel over the division of the loot. Beside him, the dyspeptic Parrot was belching from discomfort within.

"Why the hell don't you take a man's drink, instead o' that damned sas-parilla?" Dick asked.

"Booze is bad fer my stummick," Parrot said. "I can't—"

"It don't hurt you no worse'n that stuff you pour into your belly!" Haley cut him short impatiently.

And yet, in his own heart, Dick Haley knew that this Parrot had the cold nerve and the hard courage of a gun fighter—a courage which he himself lacked.

Piegan Joe, squatting behind an adjoining boulder, had overheard the conversation.

"Um? Whiskey no good for some folks!" he muttered. "Good for others!"

"It's no good fer Injuns—" Dick Haley began.

Then he stopped short and listened, for a distant *clip-clop* of a horse's hoofs was coming along the trail from the west.

Haley cautioned the others to silence, then crept out toward the road and kept his eyes fixed on the top of the rise.

A dark figure appeared, sky-lighted by the pale radiance of the moon, a perfect target for the holdup crew. Dick Haley recognized the flat-crowned old black Stetson and the gray mustache ends floating in the chilly breeze. Then he saw the bulky canvas-covered object behind the rider's saddle cantle.

He called out softly to Snake—hidden across the road: "Here's Foster comin'. Tell the Dummy and do like we planned!"

He turned to Parrot. He needed the dyspeptic gunman now, and the others—Snake and Piegan and the Dummy, for their nerve and courage—to do the things he was afraid to do himself.

"Go ahead, Parrot! Now!" he whispered, after a brief wait, during which the holdup victim came within a dozen yards of the spot where the ambushing party lay hidden.

He hung back, keeping under cover, while Parrot stepped out into



the road, his Colts gripped in his hands.

"Stop right there an' elevate them, cowboy!" Parrot shouted.

Dick Haley saw, with a twinge of dismay, that Buck Foster didn't stop, and he didn't put up his hands. Instead, he dug the spurs into his cayuse and sent it charging right at Parrot.

Buck's shout of defiance rang out on the air: "You ain't holdin' *me* up, you dirty scum!"

In the seconds that followed, Dick Haley found himself in the midst of a hell of flaming guns and whining bullets.

From both sides of the road, he saw the flashes of Colts, as his partners poured lead at the lone Circle J buckaroo.

Buck's horse went down and rolled over at the first burst of gunfire. But he got free of the mortally stricken animal and darted into the shelter of the brush and boulders.

The old ranny was making a fight of it. Lead came spitting against the rocks behind which Haley and Piegan and Parrot were hidden. Buck's gun flashes showed his position, and the bandits concentrated their fire on that spot.

Haley saw that Parrot and Piegan were taking chances, getting from under cover when they triggered their guns at their foe. But Haley himself crouched behind a boulder, shooting blindly in the general direction of Buck's hiding place, not venturing to risk showing any part of his body.

Hoofbeats were thundering along the road—again from the west. These newcomers would ride right into the fusillade. The holdup would be spoiled, unless—

The thought suddenly flashed into Dick Haley's crooked mind: Per-

haps they could cover up their crime by killing these men, too.

Two horsemen appeared on top of the rise of the road. Haley recognized them, as they drew rein for a moment. He knew the big chestnut horse, Danger, the favorite mount of the Circle J boss, Billy West. And there was no mistaking the battered, big-nosed face of Joe Scott under his battered hat, even though it was only a shadowy outline.

Buck's two saddle mates were racing to his rescue. They came down the slope at a gallop, their lead crashing through the bare branches of scrub oak and willow thickets.

Haley heard a sudden cry of pain from Piegan Joe; saw the half-breed's body thrashing about in the undergrowth. A feeling of panic gripped him as he noticed that the pair of Circle J rannies had taken up a position farther down the trail—from which they could pour a withering fire into the hiding places of the bandits. At the same time, Buck Foster's guns were spitting flame and lead from his vantage point higher up the slope.

Dick Haley and his men were caught in a deadly crossfire from Circle J guns.

From the opposite side of the road, Haley heard a loud, pitiful scream—a scream without words—and he knew that the Dummy had been stricken.

In the next instant, he saw the guns drop from Parrot's hands; and the lanky gunman fell back, with a bloody froth on his lips, quivered for a few seconds, and lay still.

Dick Haley was shaking with fear now. He threw himself flat on the ground and snaked his way through the undergrowth to where the bandits had left their horses. Once or twice, in the course of his journey,

he plunged into deep snow, which chilled him to the bone. He found his own mount and led it into the timber, until he came to a shallow gully. There he remained in hiding until the gunfire ceased.

Then he heard the voices of Billy West and Buck Foster and Joe Scott, talking in low tones. He couldn't make out what they were saying. He didn't dare to move closer to them, for fear of making his presence known.

With terror in his soul, and shivering with the cold, Dick Haley remained in his hiding place till he heard the hoofbeats of the Circle J horses pounding along the road to Twin Rivers.

He waited several minutes longer before venturing to come out. At last he did so, leading his horse by the reins. His boots crunched over the hard snow, as he moved toward the road. On the way, he stumbled over something soft and heavy. He struck a match, cupped it in his hands to shelter the flame, and looked.

The bloodied face of the half-breed, Piegan Joe, stared up at him, the jaw half shot away. But there was no light in Piegan's beady eyes. They were blank, sightless.

A few feet farther on, another flickering match showed Haley the body of Parrot, lying flat on his face, a red stream crimsoning the snow all around his head.

"Poor ol' Parrot!" he murmured, a hard smile spreading over his lean face. "He won't hev no more indigestion to complain of!"

He crossed the road and entered the brush on the opposite side. Another dark object lay in his path. He lighted a fresh match. Snake's lanky body lay in a contorted heap, the front of his shirt a mess of blood.

"Snake must've suffered afore he cashed in!" Dick murmured. "Poor bum! I might be where he is, only fer—"

A fresh chill went through his body at the thought that, but for his caution, he might have been similarly shattered by the guns of the three Circle J buckaroos.

A small clearing showed ahead of him—a patch of white snow under the moonlight, with a human form, arms outstretched as if Crucified, in the center of it.

Dick went closer. He didn't need a match this time. The moonlight showed him the contorted face of the Dummy—a crimson ruin beneath a forehead drilled with bullet holes.

With a low gasp of horror, Dick Haley turned away, fear clutching at his heart—fear for his own safety. There was no remorse or regret over the death of these men who had been his tools, whom his plot of murder and robbery had brought to their deaths.

He turned loose the horses of his gunnie partners and sent them headlong back to town. Then he mounted his own cow pony and rode to Circle J.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A CALL ON THE SHERIFF.

**S**HERIFF JIM HAWKS was playing cards with his deputy when the door of his office was flung open and three bedraggled cow-punchers blew in with the wintry blast. The visitors stood and warmed themselves front and rear at the sheriff's potbellied stove for a full minute, paying no attention to Jim Hawks' pleas to shut the door.

"Hello, you good-fer-nothin' range tramps!" the sheriff greeted them.



"Shut that door! You hear me? Shut that door!"

The deputy, a lanky youth known as Splinter, finally got up to close the door, but Buck Foster stopped him.

"Hold on thar, sonny! Thar's another hombre outside, but the cold don't bother him none!"

"Waal, bring him in and get that damn door shut!" Sheriff Hawks bel-  
lowed.

Buck stomped outside and presently returned with the body of the supposed Blackie Shelton cradled in his arms. He laid it carefully on the desk, letting the lower portion of the legs dangle over the edge.

"There y'are, Jim Hawks!" Buck exclaimed, with a note of triumph in his voice.

The sheriff's frosty blue eyes held a puzzled expression. It was evident that the wrinkled face of the long-dead man struck no chord in the sheriff's memory.

"Well?" he said. "Who is it?"

Buck Foster loosened his sheep-lined coat and threw out his chest. "This hyar corpse is the long-wanted outlaw, Blackie Shelton, fer whom thar's a ree-ward o' five hundred iron men—dead or alive!"

Sheriff Hawks looked from the parchmentlike face of the dead man to Buck Foster. Then he shifted his glance to Billy West, whose lips were twitching in an effort to hold their serious expression.

"Will you vouch for the fact that this is Blackie Shelton, West?" the lawman asked.

"I got no opinion neither way," Billy said.

"How about you, Scott?" the sheriff asked the redhead.

"You can't prove nothin' by me," Joe answered, with a grin.

Buck stomped his foot on the floor with such violence that the whole

building shook. "This hyar's Blackie Shelton, and I kin prove it!"

Sheriff Hawks picked up his pipe and began to fill it. "Well, let's have yore proof!"

"Get out the reward notice fer Blackie!" Buck said.

Sheriff Hawks pulled open a bottom drawer of his desk. "I dunno as I've kept it."

He fumbled through stack after stack of yellowed slips of paper bearing the faces of tough citizens, whom sheriffs in various Western States were eager to find.

Finally, he picked out one faded notice, smoothed it out, and laid it flat on the desk.

"That ain't Blackie Shelton," he decided, after comparing the description in the notice with the dead man. "Fer one thing, Blackie didn't have white hair."

"Anybody's hair'd turn white from the scare this hombre had afore he cashed in," Buck explained.

"And he ain't tall enough to be Blackie," the sheriff argued. "This hombre ain't no more'n five feet six, and Blackie was five eleven!"

Buck had his answer ready. "A gent that's left hangin' in a tree for a year dries up an' shrinks," and he told the Twin Rivers lawman how he had found the body.

But Sheriff Jim Hawks shook his head. "You got to give me a better story'n that, Foster, to collect yore reward!" He packed more tobacco into his pipe, then turned to Billy West, who was now standing over the corpse, studying the wizened features and dried-up skin closely. "What d'you think, West?"

Billy did not answer. He turned away and drew the skinny Deputy Splinter into a corner of the office, whispered earnestly into his ear, then pushed the youth toward the door.

Splinter went out.

The sheriff repeated his question. "What d'you think, West?"

Billy's face wore a puzzled expression. "I don't know what to think. It's true Blackie Shelton was last heard of up in those badlands north of Snowshoe Canyon. I remember the time Buck and Joe told me about chasing him and losing him somewhere up there. But I'm not sure. I never saw Blackie that I know of."

"Thar ain't no doubt this is Shelton," Buck declared.

"What did you find in his pockets?" the sheriff wanted to know.

Buck pulled out a bandanna, in which he had wrapped the things taken from the body.

The sheriff pawed the stuff over—a pocket knife, tobacco, bits of string, a few silver coins, other odds and ends.

"Them things don't prove nothin'," he said, and folded them up in the handkerchief again.

Buck Foster glared at the sheriff. "Look here, Jim Hawks," he said, "you an' me ain't been good friends fer a long time, and I ain't never accused you of bein' downright crooked. But when you say there ain't no proof this corpse is Blackie Shelton, you're no more'n a damn liar!"

The sheriff gulped, in an effort to swallow his wrath.

Buck's gnarled hands suddenly plunged inside his bearskin vest and dragged out two bags, which he dumped onto the sheriff's desk.

"Thar and thar!" he shouted, shaking his fist at Hawks. "Thar's your proof—a poke an' a pouch—the gold dust and nuggets which this skunk stole from the three miners he murdered!"

A draft of ice-cold air on Buck's back made him look toward the door.

His jaw suddenly went slack, and his hands fell limp at his sides. For he found himself looking into the angry eyes of red-headed Widow Shane, as she stood framed in the doorway, with her three freckle-faced youngsters at her heels.

"Who're *you* callin' a skunk and a murderer?" she demanded, striding swiftly into the room and going over to the desk on which the body lay.

She stood gazing at it for several seconds. Then a low sob broke from her, and tears began coursing down her cheeks. Her hands moved quickly, searching the dead man's clothing, tearing open the flannel shirt and revealing the well-patched underwear.

She took a step toward Buck Foster. "You're a dirty ol' liar!" she spat at him. "That's my husband, Barney Shane—the best man ever lived. I'd hardly know his face, but his underwear's been darned by these hands." She held out her hands, red with scrubbing and washing and other household chores. "These darns are made with wool me own mother sent me from the old country. I can swear to it! And his pants is patched with a piece of an old plaid skirt I've still got at home. I can prove this is my Barney by matchin' the piece I cut from that skirt with the patch in his pants!"

Buck Foster took a step backward before the fury in the woman's eyes. Then he saw Molly Shane pick up the buckskin poke and the leather pouch that lay on the sheriff's desk.

"These were Barney's. He always used them for to carry his dust and nuggets," she said. "The boys can tell you that!"

"Sure, mom!" said the eldest Shane boy Tim, with an angry glance at Buck.

And the other two—Pat and

Terry—chorused: "Sure, mom, them's pa's bags!"

Then Sheriff Jim Hawks was holding up a slip of yellow paper. "Here's more proof that this gent ain't Blackie Shelton. It's a telegram from a Wyoming sheriff, askin' me to arrest Blackie—who's now goin' by the name o' Dick Haley!"

Billy West took the telegram from the sheriff and read it quickly.

"I reckon 'twon't be hard to find Dick Haley," he said. "He's been eatin' and sleepin' regular at Circle J lately!"

Something in Buck Foster's mind collapsed like a house of cards. His visions of being a moneyed buckaroo vanished. Then Buck realized that Billy was trying to take the sting out of his disappointment. That was like Billy. His hand was on Buck's shoulder.

"You're wrong about this dead hombre being Blackie Shelton," Billy said. "I thought he looked somethin' like Barney Shane, but I couldn't be sure. That's why I sent Splinter to bring Mrs. Shane here."

He turned for a swift glance at the Widow Shane and then looked at Buck again.

"I think Mrs. Shane wants to thank you, Buck!" he added.

Molly Shane came forward and took Buck's hand. Her eyes were shining, as they looked up into the old waddy's hard-bitten face.

"Buck Foster," she said, in a gentle voice. "I want to apologize for the bad conduct of my boys the other day. And I want to thank you for all you've done for me. You've cleared my Barney's name of a lot of ugly rumors, and you've found the money which he gave his life to earn—for me and the boys! You've been a real friend to us, Buck!"

Buck felt moisture coming into his eyes. He tried to answer the courageous widow, but there was a big lump in his throat, and no words would come.

Then he saw that Molly Shane was standing on tiptoe, with her hands on his shoulders, pulling him down to her, and he felt her lips pressed against his grizzled mustache.

"I'd like you to come and eat Thanksgiving dinner with us, Buck!" she added.

Buck could feel his face burning. Joe Scott was grinning impishly at him. What a story Joe would have to tell the boys in the Circle J bunkhouse!

"Yeah! Do come to Thanksgivin' dinner with us, Mr. Foster," the three Shane boys chorused.

Something was melting inside Buck. It wasn't often that women and kids craved his company. He made a low bow to the Widow Shane.

"I'd shore admire for to accept yore invite to spend Thanksgivin' with you and them three orphans of yours, ma'am!"

"We'll only be havin' Irish turkey," Molly Shane said, "'cause—"

"I don't care what kind o' turkey it is!" Buck declared.

And he always said afterward, that his Thanksgiving dinner with Molly Shane and her three kids was the finest he'd ever eaten—even though the Irish turkey did prove to be corned beef and cabbage!

Well, amigos, we sure hope you like this Thanksgiving yarn—but, just to make sure that we celebrate with our stories at the right time, there's going to be another plumb exciting Thanksgiving adventure for those folks whose holiday has been moved ahead. It's "White Wolf Talks Turkey," coming next week. Don't miss it!



# BOLONEY ON THE HOOF

**"There ought to be a law agin' it!" Surcingle snorted. And you'll plumb agree when you read this Lefty-Surcingle yarn.**

by LYNN WESTLAND

LEFTY FELTON sang heartily:  
*"Oh, the sun shines bright on my  
 old Kaintucky home—"*

He sang awhile, then broke off to mutter:

"Wonder how Surcingle's comin' along with the new schoolmarm?"

A sharp, angry bellow, vaguely like Surcingle's snores but some louder, put an abrupt period to Lefty's meditations and warblings. The next instant, bursting out of a clump of dogwood like a nightmare on the loose, came a red steer with a twisted horn and a warped nature and the light of battle in both reddened eyes.

Lefty had just time for one startled glimpse, but one look was plenty. Old Sinbad had been a bad dogie from the time when, as a calf, he had been roped for branding and had emerged from that ordeal with a deep-burnt sense of injury and red-hot animosity toward all two-legged critters.

That feeling had grown as he had, Sinbad becoming an ornery outlaw, and seeming to be proud of it. Since then, on various occasions, the Star Dust partners had intended him for beef, or at least for sausage—all of which was boloney in Sinbad's opinion. He had evaded more than one roundup, goring a horse or so and injuring men, keeping to the far ranges most of the time. At intervals he would be sighted, wild as a deer and dangerous as a wounded grizzly, but always he had eluded capture. And

now here he was, coming just when Lefty didn't want to see him.

Lefty's cayuse acted on instinct, with a strong hunch that a horny invasion would not be friendly. Surprising not only itself but also Sinbad and Lefty by the size of its sideways jump, it landed among what looked deceptively like a growth of ground cedar, but which was really the top of a stunted pine trying to lift its head above a twenty-foot ledge to get a better eyeful of what was going on.

The tree ducked, and Lefty, a moment later, found himself dumped unceremoniously into the middle of a very briery rosebush near the foot of the tree, while his cayuse scrambled to his feet again with a feeling of having been let down at a critical time. Up above, Sinbad had come to a sliding stop at the brink.

With a yell, Lefty soared straight upward again for several feet, to discover that the steer was circling around and down a path, heading his way again. His horse was running wildly in another direction, but with perverse single-mindedness, Sinbad didn't even cast a second glance that way.

Viewed from below, the pine tree wasn't much of a thing to brag about, but Lefty was in no position to be choosey. He reached it two jumps ahead of Sinbad and felt the hot breath of the meadowlands blowing on the back of his neck as he jumped,



fairly lifting himself by his bootstraps. Sinbad hit the tree head-on, the shock of that meeting all but jarring Lefty loose from an insecure perch and rattling his gold tooth like a prospector's pick.

A moment later, perched as high as any twittering bird, and understanding why they twittered, Lefty looked down, to meet the baleful glare of old Sinbad, gazing up. For a moment, Lefty tried to outstare the steer, but the effect of the human eye didn't seem to quell the savage orb to any marked degree.

"Whoever talked of that starin' stuff sure give a bum steer," he grunted. "Though I'd say, just lookin' at yuh, Sinbad, that yuh're loco, along with all yore other failings, which are plumb too numerous to enoomerate. Hey, doggone it, can't yuh take a joke?"

Sinbad seemed to resent the remark as being a bit personal. He was bawling again, butting and horning into the tree in an effort to shake Lefty loose, forcing him to cling wildly. Clutching with one hand, Lefty grabbed for his gun with the other, to discover a clammy emptiness in the holster. Then he saw it, gleaming in the sun, only some twenty feet away from the foot of the tree, looking, right then, about a million miles too far.

"Doggone," Lefty sighed, as the attack subsided a little. "If it ain't one thing, it's danged sure to be two of them. But I'm warnin' yuh, Sinbad, I'm getting a mite peeved about all this. It ain't either fair nor sporting. Keep it up, and yuh'll be beef if I have to make hash of yuh myself."

The threat merely brought a fresh

attack on the tree. Lefty gazed longingly upward. If he could get up just a little higher, he could reach the top of the cliff and, once up there, he might be able to get to where his horse now grazed unconcernedly, a little way off. The trouble was that the top of the tree was too flimsy to climb any higher.

"Always somethin' lackin'," he grumbled. "Only way this here could be much worse would be for some of them misguided hombraes from the Northern to find me now—speak of the devils," he added, "and they shore shoves their mugs forward hopeful."

This was Star Dust range, and punchers from the neighboring Northern outfit had no more business to be ranging hereabouts than a mosquito on the nose of a wooden Indian. But there they were—Stumpy and Mulligan, inseparable cronies, riding closer now as they discovered what was going on, and cackling like a hen over a China egg at sight of Lefty up a tree.

"Stumpy," Mulligan demanded, pulling his horse to a stop and shading his eyes with one hand. "Are my eyes deceivin' me, or is that a buzzard roostin' over in that tree? Course, it's a little far north for buzzards, but it shore looks like one—only I always thought they was better-lookin' birds."

"A buzzard *is* a better-lookin' bird." Stumpy nodded solemnly. "Aside from bein' bald-headed and long-necked, with big feet and bow-legs, and few other little things like that, a buzzard's got some claims to beauty—providin' it could ever prove up on 'em. Nope, you're some mistook, but not much. Me, I'd say that there was a coot—one of these here birds that's too homely even to look at, too tough for a starvin'

coyote to eat, and too dumb to even perch where it ought to."

"Well, mebbe yuh're right," Mulligan admitted. "Though I misdoubt, on second thought, that it's a bird at all. Offhand, I'd say it was skunk, only that there steer has got it treed, and them polecats can't climb, can they?"

"Naw, they ain't supposed to. But it ain't one of that sort of critters, either. Can't yuh see that the poor steer has been sort of charmed by it, and can't get away? It has to be, for it shore wouldn't keep lookin', otherwise. Which is a right mean trick, I calls it."

"Golly, yuh're 'right," Mulligan agreed. "This here's a plain case of croolty to animals, way it looks to me, that pore dogie havin' to keep on lookin' at what it's done treed."

Stumpy slapped his thigh suddenly.

"Mulligan, danged if we ain't both wrong! Know what that is? That's this here Lefty Felton, one of these here Star Dusters."

"That so?" Mulligan squinted again, unimpressed. "Does look kind of halfway hooman. But I still think we was right before, Stumpy."

Lefty, clinging precariously to his perch, swore under his breath. Sinbad was remaining under the tree with a singleness of purpose which was beginning to be a bit trying, and he hardly gave a glance toward the two punchers from the Northern, where they kept discreetly in the background. It was increasingly plain that they didn't intend to drive the outlaw steer away and give Lefty a chance to get down. And if they told this joke on him—Lefty squirmed.

He could, of course, appeal to them for help, but besides harboring doubts that it would be forth-



coming, Lefty preferred taking his chances with the steer to asking those hombres for anything.

"Me, I just thunk a thought," Stumpy proclaimed solemnly.

"Yuh did?" Mulligan grabbed his saddlehorn with both hands. "It's shore the age o' miracles—always assomin' that yuh ain't deludin' yoreself as usual."

"What I was thinkin' of, Mulligan, was that this hombre is shore sittin' pretty. Like these little birds that go cheep-cheep, three for a nickel. But come to think of it, he's got a pardner, yuh know."

"Seems like some things always goes in twos," Mulligan mourned. "Like Noah takin' two bedbugs into the ark."

"Yeah. But this here Surcingle, he's gone off with a team and buggy to meet that new schoolmarm that's comin' in on the stage. And he'll be bringin' her home. It just occurred to me that, since Lefty has turned into such a songbird that he's taken to perchin' in trees, there ought to be somebody else for a reception committee."

Mulligan gazed admiringly at his side-kick.

"Stumpy, yuh did hatch a idea," he conceded. "It's even sproutin' feathers. We'll be that reception committee!"

"We shore will. That'll be our good turn for the day."

"We'd ought to have a good turn apiece," Mulligan mused. "A flapjack ain't perfect 'less yuh flop it. Talkin' about croolty to animals gives me the idee—look at that horse, over there, left to run around with saddle and bridle to cumber it. Why, it might take months for 'em to rot off."

"That's so," Stumpy agreed. "Cruel is the word. We'll just pull them things off it so it can enjoy

life, same as its owner, which may be up a tree but still sings like a shoat under a barbed-wire fence."

Lefty choked, but there was nothing that he could do about it as they circled, careful not to disturb old Sinbad, caught his horse and removed the saddle and bridle. Free of the dragging reins, it promptly trotted away. The two dropped the bridle and saddle on the ground and swung onto their own horses again.

"That's shore a thoughtful turn we done, all right. Now we'll be going to meet Surcingle and his schoolmarm."

"I hates it that we can't help that poor steer," Stumpy mourned. "But when they get charmed by something ugly, thataway, yuh just have to kind of let 'em wear it out by plenty lookin'."

"Yeah. See how red its eyes are gettin' from the strain. But two-three days ought to do the trick, I guess."

Lefty gazed after them, more in sorrow than in anger. He hadn't expected anything from these Northern rannihans, though to set him afoot out here was mean. Then, as he reflected on their remarks concerning Surcingle, he began to get mad.

"Doggone, Surcingle's my partner, and they's such a thing as carryin' a joke too far," he growled. "Reckon mebby I better see about this."

Already, Surcingle and the new schoolmarm were becoming a neighborhood joke. They needed a new teacher, since the last one had gone and committed matrimony. And Surcingle, reflecting on that method of getting a wife, hopeful that the lightning might strike twice in the same way, if not in the same place, had had his say

about who the new pedagogue should be. From a list of a dozen applicants, he had selected June Pettibone, because he liked the name.

"June's a right pretty moniker for any girl," he declared. "Course, this here Pettibone, now, ain't so much, but it don't matter much compared with first names."

"Last names can be changed, eh?" someone had suggested slyly. "But, suppose she turns out to be an old maid, and homelier'n a hedge fence?"

Surcingle had declined to suppose. June was due on the stage today, and he had taken it upon himself to represent the school board and meet the new teacher, and to that end he had driven off in the buggy, hours before. He had even gone so far as to leave his hardware at home. There would be no moonlight to help with first impressions, but Lefty didn't intend that Surcingle should face any other handicaps.

By getting rid of his cayuse, however, the Northerners had added a second obstacle to old Sinbad. Even if he got away from the steer, he couldn't beat them to the road, walking.

A fresh snort of the meadow-laden grass of which poets like to sing, blasted down into Lefty's face. He turned with a start, to discover that Sinbad had circled around to the top of the ledge again and, sticking his neck out, was trying to reach Lefty with a horn, and just about doing it.

Startled, Lefty almost lost his balance. He clutched wildly for a handhold, and found he had the horn. Then, as the steer overbalanced with this weight on his neck, the two of them were headed for the ground below again.

This was carrying things too far. Aroused, Lefty grabbed for the other horn, swinging up. Sinbad struck, bellowing, went to his knees, came up running, bucking and twisting. Holding on, Lefty spurred hard.

"Who started this here, anyway?" he panted. "Doggone, there's a limit to good nature. I've rode worse critters than you, and I'll do it again."

Sinbad was terrified. Finding it impossible to shake his rider, pricked by the spurs, he set out running, forced to head as Lefty directed by the horns. Presently he lined out in the direction taken by Mulligan and Stumpy, and he was making four jumps to every one for them.

By the time they finally neared the road, Sinbad was tamed. With the road not far ahead, Lefty slid off, and without even a glance toward him, the big steer tottered a few steps, sank to his knees, and lay exhausted. Lefty grinned.

"Mebby that'll teach yuh a lesson, who yuh go pickin' on next time," he declared.

A thirty-foot ledge rose above the road and the valley floor. Lefty could see the thin line of road, and, coming along that, a buggy. Closer at hand, masked by a clump of chokeberries, were the Northern punchers, waiting. A big cottonwood reared above them, reaching out across the ledge top.

Lefty reached it, looked down. Then he frowned in pained surprise. The reception committee was just springing out with a yell, but it looked a bit puzzled as well. That was Surcingle's team and buggy, all right, but the hombre in the driver's seat was a big, tough-looking bird, and where was Sur-

cingle? The big bird scowled at Stumpy and Mulligan as the team stopped.

"Yuh lookin' for somebody?" he demanded.

Mulligan gulped, his Adam's apple playing leapfrog in his neck.

"We . . . we was aimin' to meet this Surcingle and sort o' tender him a reception," he admitted. "And I . . . we thought—"

The driver nodded, his scowl relaxing a little. He leaned back, twitched aside a blanket, to disclose a limp form behind the seat—Surcingle, looking very much knocked out.

"If yuh mean this little wart, you're welcome to him." The driver nodded. "He's just been a headache ever since I met him. You can't do this, and you can't do that—"

"But you done it, looks like." Stumpy looked reverent. "Sure, we'll take him offa yore hands—"

Just what it was all about, Lefty wasn't entirely sure, but something hadn't gone according to schedule. And he'd come off without his gun. He sighed, then his eyes brightened.

A moment later he had grabbed the overhanging branch, swung out into the tree. The three were preparing to lift Surcingle's limp form as Lefty clutched the tip of another branch and dropped.

By calculating it nicely, it was easy to land with one boot on the head of each of the Northern punchers, and, as this insecure perch gave way beneath his weight, to land on the buggy seat, long arms reaching out for the driver. As he did so, Lefty let go the branch, allowing it to whip back violently.

One heavy blow sent the driver tumbling. The element of surprise was with Lefty, and he wasn't standing on ceremony any longer

than on three hard-boiled hambres. With the buggy cleared he grabbed the reins, flipping the blanket back across the recumbent Surcingle. Surcingle might need protection. Already, with no urging from Lefty, the horses were on a dead run.

There had been a hornets' nest at the halfway point along that limb, and it had been violently shaken up when Lefty had let the limb whip back. He grinned crookedly.

"Seems like it must have stung 'em to action, thataway," he ruminated. "Golly gumdrops, the way they're headin' for them three hambres, yuh'd almost think they was expectin' to find somethin' sweet about 'em. Which'd shore be a disappointment to any bee critter. And them boys are headin' in three directions, sort of dividin' the enemy's forces. And not leavin' none to pester us."

At the crest of a hill beyond, Lefty pulled up to look back admiringly. Amid a fluttering of coat tails and a chorus like tomcats on the back fence, the hombre who had been driving the buggy was vanishing over the far horizon, heading toward town with a single-ness of purpose which argued that he aimed to overtake the stage he'd deserted a few hours back.

Mulligan was racing east, pursued by a hard-working line of hornets, and as a startled jackrabbit hopped from the brush and tried to join it, it was promptly overtaken and kicked aside.

Only Stumpy had reached his horse, and Lefty's last view of him seemed to indicate that he needed no assistance from a traveler's aid society. Grinning contentedly, Lefty chirped to the horses and raised his voice in song.

*"There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight—"*



The blanket heaved, then Surcingle emerged, blinking.

"What happened?" Lefty demanded. "Where's the schoolmarm? What's happened to June?"

"June, did yuh say?" Surcingle straightened. "Why, that low-down, knock-kneed, slab-sided—"

Lefty listened, admiration struggling with horror, while Surcingle exhausted a fluent vocabulary.

"Surcingle," he reproved. "Is that a nice way to talk about a lady?"

"Lady!" Surcingle snorted. "That June Pettibone was a man—yuh saw him! The ornery hombre said he had a contract, and he'd teach or know why not! And me without no hardware! He pulled a gun when my back was turned and knocked me over the head with it. June! Ain't *that* a name for a man! They'd ought to be a law agin' it!"

Write and tell the Range Boss how you like this yarn.

## ¿QUIEN SABE?

(Who Knows?)



1. When was New Mexico organized as a Territory? What area did it include?
2. In cowboy parlance, what is a "brain tablet"?
3. When was Arizona organized as a Territory? Why and when did it refuse to enter the Union as a State?
4. What is a Texas norther?
5. What held back the development of Arizona?
6. When is a Westerner in a "'fraid hole"?
7. What is the most common variety of fish caught in Great Salt Lake?
8. When is a Texan "down in the skillet"?
9. What is the difference between a box canyon and a blind canyon?
10. What animal is called a "hard tail"? What animal is called a "jug head"?

Answers on page 107



## GOLD'S WHERE YOU FIND IT!

*—And it's a heap hard to keep when tenderfoot odds are stacked against you!*

by J. ALLAN DUNN

HE was a big man. Big and bold and brawny. With a beard that waved like a dark flame over the barrel of his chest.

He was proud of that beard. He had no other vanities. He knew his own strength and respected it. But the beard—often stained with desert dust and sweat—he took inordinate care of, teasing it out with a comb of native silver which a Navaho had made for him.

Many women had admired that beard, but Shawn had small use for women, that anyone in Aurum County could see.

Shawn was the name he signed  
WW—3D

and answered to. When he was mellow, as drunk as he ever got, when he came in to Tesoro with the gold he gathered from the desert reefs, he would tell you, if he liked you, that his true name was Shaugnessy, but that it was too long and tiresome a handle for a man who used a pick better than a pen.

So he had made it Shawn. U and W were all the same. One was twice the other and that was all there was to it. So he'd smile at you, with his eyes soft, and comb his auburn beard with the comb of native silver.

His beard was to him, in a vague way, the token of his strength. A

Samson touch. He kept it trimmed and fine. A habit that no man scoffed at because of the strength of Shawn.

There were tenderfeet coming in all the time to Tesoro. It seemed to them that it should not be hard to find an ounce or so of gold a week in Aurum County, where bonanzas had been frequent in the old days.

Shawn came from his supper at the chink's to Mexican Joe's cantina, and found Hank Perry baiting a pilgrim. That was the way of Perry, as big a man as Shawn, almost as strong, but a shifter. Lazy, and a bully.

Perry was clever with cards. He had no use for tenderfeet because, though they might be simple, they never had much of a stake when they came in, less when they were going out, disillusioned.

Perry picked up the white-faced, puny youngster by the elbows as if he were a two-handed crock, and sat him down on the bar. Perry had been drinking aguardiente and he was in a nasty mood.

"Come on," he said, "speak a piece. Tell us all about 'Mary's little lamb.'"

"I don't know it."

"Sure you know it. You musta learned it to school—or you should have. Out with it."

The kid was pretty pitiful, in a way, but he had guts. The loafers hanging round the cantina did not have the sense to recognize it. They were all afraid of Perry, who sometimes bought them drinks.

Shawn was not. He came in as Perry slapped the kid's face, rocked him. The cheek flamed from Perry's swipe.

"I *won't*," the kid said. "I don't know it, and I wouldn't, anyway."

Then Perry hit him on the other side of his face.

"Hold on!" said Shawn. "That's no way to do it."

Shawn had been in from the desert for a week. His gold was still holding out. He had downed plenty of liquor, but he was a long way from drunk. And he was as good-natured as a bear with a belly full of wild honey.

"What's it to *you*?" jeered Perry.

"Aw, let up on the jasper," said Shawn. "Let's you an' me have a drink. Git off the bar, sonny, we need the room."

The kid slid to the ground. Perry made no move, the ugly look still on his face, until the bartender set up the liquor, with beer chasers. Then Hank Perry filled his glass to the brim and chucked it into Shawn's face. The strong stuff stung in his eyes and stank in his beard.

Shawn wiped out his eyes. He turned to Perry quietly.

"Now it's between the two of us," he said.

It was a whale of a go, while it lasted. The crowd gave them plenty of room. Perry was tricky, as he was at cards. He was handy with his knees and his thumbs, and he figured on dirty work in the clinches. There were no rounds, no referee, no seconds.

When he found Shawn was easy to reach, but hard to hurt, Perry discovered about the same time that aguardiente was poor stuff to keep a man in shape. He was soft in the belly, and his wind was bad. Shawn hit him once over the heart with a blow that left him hanging on to Shawn like a drowning man, with his face a pasty gray.

Shawn let Perry rest up, and when Perry got his heart and lungs to work again, he grabbed Shawn's beard with his right hand, twisted his fingers in it; and he sank his left thumb into the corner of Shawn's



eye, trying to gouge it out.

Despite the pain, Shawn clamped Perry's left wrist with his own right hand. He set Perry's left arm out from his body, full length. Their reach was about equal. Then, while Perry yanked at his beard, with blood trickling down from the corner of Shawn's eye, he twisted Perry's arm from the wrist up to the socket of the armpit. He crunched the small bones of the wrist.

You could *hear* them crunch and grate, and snap, before Perry howled like a trapped coyote. He let go of Shawn's beard. He let go of everything. Shawn smacked him with a long left to his jaw, and he went down like a length of chain—out.

"I hit him a bit hard," said Shawn, as if he wanted to justify himself, "but it'll hold him quiet while he gets his arm fixed. One of you git Doc Siddall, if he's sober. Bring him, anyway."

Siddall was tolerably sober. He was a good practical man, fine with cuts or bullet wounds. He could set most bones, and he said something now about Perry's bones, and that he might have a stiff wrist.

Perry had more than that. A stiff arm, up to and above the elbow, for keeps. It spoiled him as a card-sharp. He drifted out of Tesoro as soon as he was able.

Doc swabbed out Shawn's eye, and gave him some stuff to use against infection. Shawn started combing his beard. That may sound funny, but nobody was laughing at him. They knew now that he could have killed Perry, any time he wanted to.

He started talking to the kid.

"Lookin' fer gold, son?"

"It's here, ain't it?"

"It's hereabouts. Gold is where you find it, but it's apt to be plumb hard to find."

"I've *got* to find it," said the kid fiercely, with a sort of catch in his voice. "I *got* to."

"Sure," said Shawn, "sure. You an' me'll have a drink to it. Here's wishin' you luck, son. Here's hop-in'."

The kid downed the slug, coughing. He set one up for Shawn.

"What outfit have you got, son; an' where might you be headin' fer?"

"Out to the malpais." He didn't know how to pronounce it but nobody laughed. Shawn didn't, and he was sort of sponsoring the kid, it seemed. The kid went on. "I've got a burro, an' grub an' tools. Traded my flivver for 'em, the car I came in from Iowa. I'm startin' out first thing in the morning."

"From Iowa? That's a long ways to travel, son."

None of them knew then that Shawn hailed from Des Moines. They thought he had grown up in Aurum County, like the sagebrush.

"Well, I wish you luck, son. I sure wish you luck."

The kid was gone next day, but Shawn didn't pull out for almost two weeks, when his credit ran out with the chink and Mexican Joe.

He always bought what he wanted in the way of grubstake when he first came to town, before he started to spend.

So he left Tesoro in the afternoon, walking behind his two burros, Fanny and Fury, combing his beard with the native silver comb the Navaho had made for him.

## II.

There are three waterholes in the malpais. Coyote Spring, so named because Joe Blaine once found a dead coyote half in and half out of the water, and not improving it any. That water has arsenates

in it, sometimes more than others, or so it seems. It's green and tastes coppery. A man has to be damned thirsty to tackle it, and wise burros leave it alone, even if their tongues are hanging out.

There's Poco Dinero, called by way of describing it as pretty small change in the way of refreshment. It's bitter with alkali and you've got to be an old-timer to use it freely, even after it's boiled.

Then there's Agua Dulce. That's a small-sized miracle in the desert. It's not a big spring. A man and his beasts will empty all that's there and have to wait for three or four hours before it rises again to its staple level. It must be siphoned some mysterious way from far-off hills, because it's sweet and as cold as ice.

Shawn, with Fanny and Fury, were heading for Agua Dulce toward sunset. Fury was a good deal of a bluff. She'd set back her jackrabbit ears and show her discolored teeth as if she'd take a chunk right out of you, but she was really all right. The three of them, man and beasts, were parads. The burros drank his coffee, ate his flapjacks, his sowbelly bacon, and his beans.

They were all thinking about the sweet water. Luck hadn't been with Shawn, so far, this trip. He had gone after a couple of prospects he had in mind. The first he couldn't find again. The sand had shifted and buried the fin of weathered rock so that it looked like all the other dunes.

There were no bearings. You can't get dependable bearings when the notches and peaks of the burned-out mountains go crazy on you in the heat, seeming to change shape while you look at them, to run together like a film developed in too warm water. Sometimes they are upside down. It's the heat haze,

setting up a continual mirage all day.

That's how the big strikes get to be "lost mines," when the prospector hits back to rediscover them. No true bearings. And the sand— It's never still. Soft stuff, tiny grains like flour, always shifting. In the night you can hear it rustling. The wind that comes at night, when the temperature that was better than a hundred at noon sinks down to forty or below, moves it, leaves it in ripples. Sometimes it covers a lava dyke, sometimes it uncovers it. And a real sandstorm leaves the whole landscape altered.

The malpais looks level from a little distance, but it's not. There are arroyos and sandhills, outcrops of rock, salt sinks and depressions, ridges and valleys.

Shawn found the second fin, and it wasn't so much.

He was close to Agua Dulce when he ran across a third. He had trailed that way plenty and never seen it before. In the same way he had once run across an old-time wagon that had been buried for fifty, maybe seventy-five years—one of the old, wide-tired schooners. That was near Coyote Spring.

Shawn tested the rock mechanically. It was getting close to twilight, the time when the malpais turns to pastel shades with opalescent shadows—beautiful.

The rock ridge was decomposed stuff, something like molasses candy to look at.

Shawn crumbled the stuff with his strong fingers. He was going to smell it, to wet it with spittle and set his tongue to it, when he saw he didn't have to. It was filled with free gold. It doesn't glitter, as tenderfeet think. It's the color of butter, often dull and sometimes rusty-looking.

Part of the dyke was quartz, all ready to fall apart, and that was specked and threaded, pitted and pocketed with virgin gold.

Shawn had hit it, struck it rich!

He had never had wild dreams of the time when he would do that. His own fires had died down a bit, perhaps. He had seen desert rats go crazy over their finds, spend it, give it away, have it stolen from them, have nothing to show at the end of a month or so.

Shawn meant to put away enough to go to the Miners' Institute, in Pleasant Valley, up in the hills, where you could hear the streams running night and day, and look at green trees. Where there was pasture for an old-timer's burros. That place had been endowed by a hard-rock miner in memory of his wife. It was all right, even if you were broke. But if you had some money to spend on yourself, and the others who didn't have any, why, it was Paradise to a man.

Now Shawn knew he could be a paying guest at the institute any time he was ready for it. He might even go back to Des Moines and look up his people, if he could find any of them, after so long. He rather doubted that.

After the sun beds down beyond the Esquelitos, it gets dark swiftly. The afterglow dies like the flush on the side of a newly landed rainbow trout. The stars rush out and then burn steadily as candles on an altar.

Shawn thought of seeing a star, as he had often done, reflected in the sweet water of Agua Dulce.

When he got there there *was* no water. It had gone dry, or somebody had been ahead of him. It turned out to be the latter, for the sand of the spring was moist, the precious flow was oozing up with little whorls and stirrings.

Shawn had some water in the barrel on Fury's back, covered with canvas he kept wet from his canteen. He could use that if he had to. But he was patient, as malpais men are, or learn to be. The burros were placid and long-enduring, as they always are. They stood as Shawn threw off the diamond-hitches and unloaded them. They rolled, and then watched Shawn get supper.

Fuel is a problem in the malpais, but Shawn always managed it. He could make a tiny fire and waste no spark of it, cooking all he wanted. Blankets did against the cold, and Fanny and Fury had good shaggy hides of their own. Shawn could make a dry-cold camp without thinking of grumbling, but he liked his grub hot at the end of the day, when he could get it.

It was calm, getting cool, and peaceful. The gold was there within biscuit-pitch, to give him pleasant dreams tonight and rich realization on the morrow.

Suddenly Fury stretched out her neck, rolled back her loose lips, wagged her ears and brayed, loud and hideously, like the blare from a badly battered bugle by a tone-deaf player. Fanny followed suit. The discordance meant only one thing. Shawn knew the music of his desert canaries.

There was another burro, heading that way.

Shawn started to cut extra strips of sowbelly, to put more coffee in the pot. A malpais man is an instinctive host. The sweet water was filtering into the spring.

The stranger was not long in arriving. Shawn got a notion he had not been heading directly for the spring, might not know how to find it.

Pretty sure to be a tenderfoot.



It was the kid! The kid Perry had bullied in the cantina.

Fanny and Fury semaphored with their ears against the star-seeded sky, that he was coming in. Shawn started his frugal, efficient fire. It was glowing brightly when the boy arrived, staggering, his galled burro shuffling after.

He almost dragged himself toward the fire. He was burned and blistered, lame and inarticulate, with a mouth like a dry sponge and hideous lips that worked convulsively when Shawn hailed him.

"Take it easy, son. Did you get lost? Shucks, we all do, even us old-timers. You *made* it, anyways. Grub's nigh ready. There's ice-water in the spring. I can stiffen it."

Shawn never drank on prospect, but he toted a quart. Mexican Joe always gave him a bottle for an "adios" gift.

Despite the scientists and their serums, Shawn believed in whiskey, for snakebite. It gave a man kick enough to make for somewhere and reach it. It was good for other emergencies, and this was one of them. The kid was broken, body and soul.

He had camped at Poco Dinero and lived mostly off cold canned beans. He had bean fever and dysentery from the alkali in the water. He did not know how to get the friendship of his burro or how to feed it scraps. Or how to pack it. It was a wonder it had not deserted him. Those bugle calls of Fanny and Fury must have flagged its weary spirit. It could not have scented water from the empty spring.

### III.

Shawn gave the boy water dippered from the slowly rising flow. He gave the worn burro some, in

the crown of his hat, from the barrel. And then he gave the kid a second drink, with a slug in it. That stopped his hysteria, helped him to eat hot grub.

"I'm licked," he said after a while. "I'm licked."

"No you ain't, son. A he-man ain't never licked. You're up against a new game, that's all. It's hard to win without chips—that means experience, in your case. Take some more coffee."

"I had to come," said the kid. "I couldn't see anything else. This ain't my racket. I'm a car mechanic. I know cars. But so do plenty more. There ain't enough jobs to go round. But if a chap had some money, he could make out on his own. So, I took the chance, with the flivver I reconditioned. But—"

Shawn got his story out of him. He was an orphan, with a crippled brother who was in some sort of an institution and didn't like it. There was a girl, Anne, who had a mother, both of them on relief because Anne couldn't get a job. He and the girl's mother got along fine. Anne was a swell cook, taught by her mother. So if they could get a service station on a good route, with a lunchroom—it would be better still if he could raise the money for a machine shop for auto repairs—they could make a go of it, get married, live in the country, raise kids of their own. But—

"Sure," said Shawn. "I sabe. You say you ain't got no folks of your own, outside this brother of yours?"

"No. Shamus is the only one. If I could get him out of that institution—"

"Shamus, you say. 'Tis a good name, but you don't so often hear it."

"He was named after my father,

Shamus Riordan. Mother was ailing after he was born, and once when she fainted she dropped him. She never forgave herself for that. His spine was hurt. But he's clever, Shamus is, he can do lots of things, like painting and modeling. But there's no chance for him where he is."

Shawn was quiet for so long the kid wondered. Then Shawn spoke, very gently.

"What was your mother's name?"

"Mary—Mary Shaugnassy. I guess my father didn't do all he should. He was away a lot, and he drank. I tried to make it up to my mother, but I was just a kid. We got a letter saying my father had got killed in an accident. She had trouble with her lungs. I didn't rightly know about that until . . . until it was too late. If she could have come out West—"

"Your dad wouldn't send her?"

It was the kid's turn to be silent for a spell. "He got mixed up with some other woman. Mother never told me, but I found out. He left us. And I was the one to come West, looking for gold. Mother's been dead five years, but there's Shamus and Anne and Anne's mother. But I don't know where to look, I guess. I must have been crazy. How can you find gold in a desert like this? They say it's here, but—"

"Sometimes you can find it—sometimes it finds you. You want to look where the rock shows, fins and dykes an' ridges of volcanic rock. It's luck, sure, mostly, but you never know when your luck is in. Sometimes it hits you when your grub's low, when you've got no dinero to buy more, when you're ready to quit. My luck ain't always so good, but I make out. Always will, I reckon."

"But you know where to look," the kid said bitterly. "You've got the experience."

"Shucks! Gold is where you find it, I tell you. Lots of tenderfeet have stumbled on it, or their burro's hoofs uncovered it." Shawn looked around vaguely. He stabbed at the skyline with his thumb.

"Look here, I come in after dark," he said. "See that ridge out there, dark against the sand. You try that in the mornin'. I've got another place in mind. You try your luck, son, an' I'll try mine. We'll pardner along fer a spell. I'll put you on to a few things, like you would me, if I had a car, say, an' she wouldn't run right."

Shawn was late starting out. He sat going through his beard with the silver comb after the kid left for the uncovered fin of rock. He had told the kid he had some pack gear to mend, but it lay beside him, untouched.

His mind was a long way off.

Iowa? Mary Shaugnassy—and Shamus Riordan! It was a small world. Riordan, the handsome ne'er-do-well, the drifter after women. Shawn had warned Mary, his sister, told her she could never reform such a man. And she had flashed back at him with her nimble tongue that it was *he* who needed the reforming. They had broken, in anger. And he had not answered her letters.

She had not told him of Riordan leaving her, only asked for a loan. It would have saved her. She had died for the lack of it. She had said nothing of her lung trouble, but her death was on Shawn, just the same.

And now here was her son, his own nephew, and the girl Anne and his other nephew, the cripple who could paint, and the girl's mother.

He wondered how much it would

take to start a lunchroom and a machine shop. A small world and a hard one! He could never bring Mary back. God rest her soul! Riordan, the scum, was dead.

The kid came running back with rock samples, his eyes bewildered.

"This dull-yellow stuff. Is it gold?"

Shawn examined deliberately. He wetted, he tasted, he crumbled up the rock.

"You got beginner's luck, son. You've *struck it!*"

"Come over and see it. It's half yours. You showed it to me."

"I was jest pointin' in the dark, son. It's your strike. Go to it. I told you I had a place of my own in mind. Liable to beat yourn. You work it. Peck away at the rock so long as you see the gold. I'll be back for supper."

Shawn came back at sunset no richer than he had left. The kid was waiting for him, exhibiting his find, still insistent that Shawn split with him.

Shawn laughed him off. "Thet ain't the way we do on the malpais," he said. "As fer sluggin' Perry, I'd been itchin' fer the chance. My prospect looks plenty good, but it'll take developin'. Hop to it, son."

"I'm goin' to ask a favor of you, son," Shawn said when the kid believed he had exhausted the reef, wild to get back to Iowa, a returning hero. "Thet burro of yourn is kinder gant yit. So I'll pack in with you a ways. When we sight Tesoro, we'll shift the load."

"You don't have to ask any favors of me," he said excitedly. "Say, you don't know what this means—to Anne and me, to my kid brother. And Anne's mother. You've got to

come and visit us. We're going to be set for life."

Shawn was combing his beard with the silver comb the Navaho had made for him. He smiled, and his eyes were soft.

"I'd like for you not to mention you'd met up with me," he said. "It ain't thet I'm grudgin' you your strike—I've got a fine prospect of my own. But I don't like to have them kid me, thet all the time I was settin' here blind, like a hen on an addled egg, you made the strike."

"But it was *your* strike."

"Shucks, I jest stabbed out in the dark. I come clean across thet dyke myself. It was waitin' fer *you*, kid. Fer you, an' Anne, an' the others."

They did not jeer at Shawn when he came in to Tesoro, saw Fury and Fanny cared for, and walked into the cantina. Shawn was not to be taken lightly. They did not know about the meeting at Agua Dulce. The kid had kept faith.

Shawn had a pokeful, gleanings from what the kid had reaped. He laid it on the bar, called for all to have a drink.

It was Mexican Joe who spoke.

"That tenderfoot, the one you fought Perry for, he comes een weeth plenty pay rock. Free gold, he find. Stein, give heem check, certify check, for thirteen thousan' dollar. Si! He take then the train, go East."

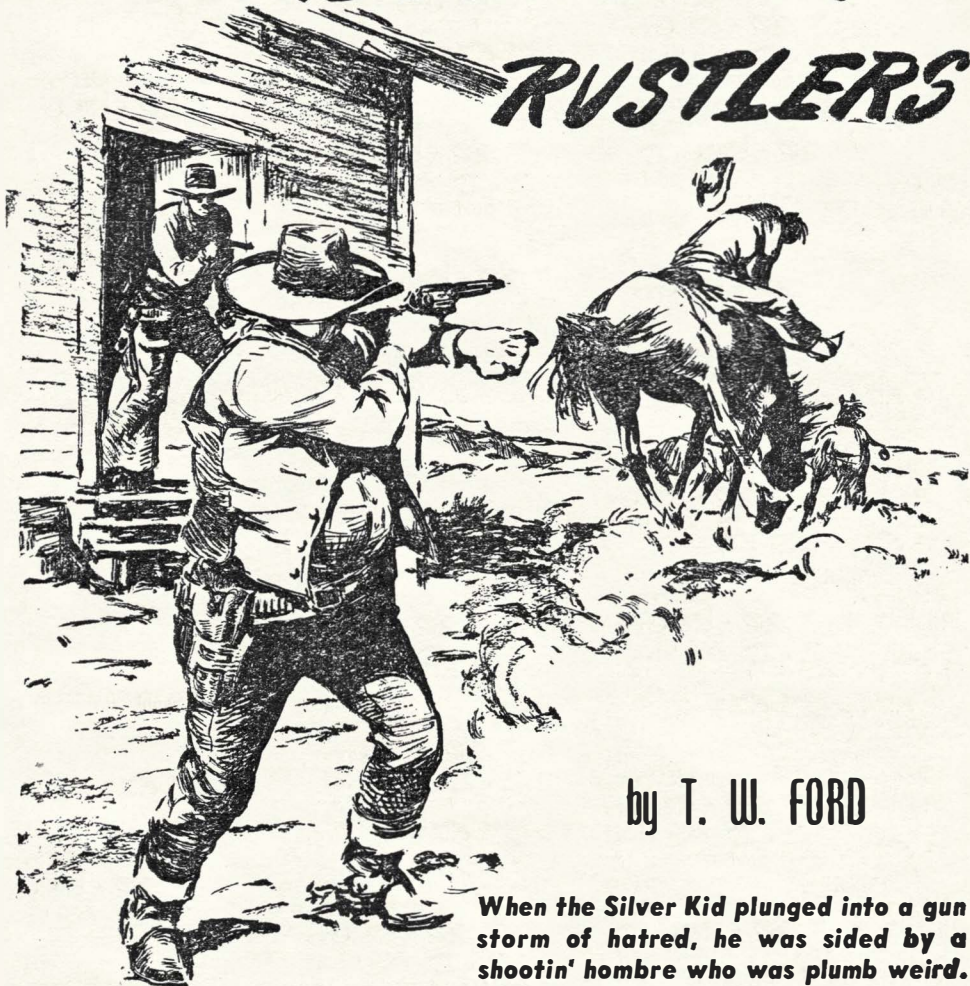
"Beginner's luck," said Shawn. "Gold is where you find it." He began to ravel out his tawny beard with the comb of native silver the Navaho had made for him. His eyes were mild as he downed his redeye.

"He comes from Iowa, he told me," said Shawn. "So do I. From Des Moines. I might be goin' back there some day."

THE END.



# THE MAVERICK RUSTLERS



by T. W. FORD

*When the Silver Kid plunged into a gun storm of hatred, he was sided by a shootin' hombre who was plumb weird.*

## CHAPTER I.

### THE BRAND OF DEATH.

FROM the tumble-down shack on the edge of the willow-bordered stream, an agonized groan seemed to drift. Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, jerked around in the saddle as his paint pony lapped the shallow water on the mud flat. His hand struck across his body to a silver-butted gun.

It was a scene of serenity, the sun

shimmering on the alkali crust of the trail, the peaceful purling of the water, a sage hen rustling in the brush. The Kid had taken it for granted the cabin was deserted with its broken-down stovepipe and weed-grown path. Then there was another moan.

"Let me die quick—pronto," a muffled voice said from the dimness of the sagging door.

"Sounds like a human critter in

misery, pard," the Kid said to his pony as he swung down. A moment after, he came to the house, booted aside a ball of tumbleweed and stepped in the rotting doorway.

Steel flashed dully in the dim interior. A gun barrel arched downward, smashing the brim of the Kid's sombrero. He twisted backward just in time, tried to draw. But a savage kick in the leg from a half-seen boot sent the surprised Solo staggering. And a squat body hurled itself desperately upon him, clamping his arms to his sides with an apelike embrace. The Kid was swept against the wall so hard that the shack rattled.

Enraged at being tricked, the Kid fought like an animal, wrenching his wire-tough body, thrashing with spur-shod heels. But even luck was against him. A clod from the shaken roof struck him in the eyes, momentarily blinding him. He dug for a gun as he was thrown across the room. Dazed, he got his eyes open just in time to see the squat figure in the pale light of the doorway, to see a bearded, kindly face, now grim with resolve, and a broad body in a patched jumper. Then a chunk of old wood swept down in the man's grip.

In vain, the Kid rolled and threw up his arm. It was beaten down and the rough club bounced glancingly off his head. He slumped across a mildewed saddle in the corner.

It was just seconds before he struggled back to his dazed senses. Instinct sent his hands to his holsters, only to find them empty. He wondered why the gent hadn't already gunned him when the latter spoke.

"Fella, I'm real sorry to larrup y' like that," he said sadly. "But I just got to borry your cayuse." The man turned, as he talked, and was gone!

Head reeling, Solo pushed himself up and moved drunkenly to the door. Outside, his assistant was running to the ground-anchored paint pony, Sorghum. A gun spanged. Lead whistled in the foliage.

"Here he is, boys!" a man bellowed from across the creek. "Down at ol' Lige's cabin! He—" The gun barked again, then a third time.

One slug spurted dirt beside the pony's forefeet. Another sent a small limb whipping past the animal's head. Boogery, the horse sidled and crow-hopped into deeper water as the squat man leaped for the kak. Missing, he clawed frantically for a stirrup and plunged into the yellow creek.

Two men smashed through the brush on the other bank, yelling. The tall one triggered once before his gun clicked hollowly on an empty shell. A third reared over the hummock of the trail, his sheriff's badge glittering as he neck-reined a bay.

"Throw out your gun an' give up, Poke Hafey!" he called. "Give up or—"

For answer, Hafey's stub of beard jerked around, and his gun spat lead beneath it. A bullet made the lawman slam down flat over his saddlehorn. Farther away, a fourth man had appeared and was silently wading the creek. Hafey wheeled and began to duck backward from tree to tree, doggedly.

In the cabin's doorway, the Kid scoured the ground for his guns, but in vain. He only had seconds; with bearlike speed, the hunted man was back-tracking. And it was plain he was wolfishly desperate. A wanted lobo or bad man, the Kid figured as he moved back into the gloom of the hovel, eyes searching. Probably try to use him either as a shield or a hostage. Then the Kid spied the

tiny, rude loft under the roof at one end of the shack.

Dragging an old box over, the Kid leaped for it. But the box crumbled just as he stretched. A slug slammed off the door, and Hafey's boots came slogging through the weeds as Solo's fingers hooked on the edge of the loft. The blood thundered in his aching head.

"Hey, you!" Hafey cried, plunging in, weapon cocked as he peered in the dimness for his prisoner. "Get up! I'm a-going to—"

There wasn't time for Solo to haul himself onto the little platform. Swinging his body like a pendulum, using his boots as a butt, the Kid smashed Hafey full in the chest. The latter was catapulted right back out the doorway, hogleg flying. Gasping and clawing, he stumbled backward. And the Kid, dropping back to the floor, reeled out and was on him.

Two slugs whistled by as Hafey tried to battle back. But the Kid was a punching, ripping catamount, an old hand at the tricks of barroom fights. Twisting away and snorting like a corralled bronc, Hafey whipped a knife from his jeans. But the Kid, swarming over him like a one-man stampede, pinioned that arm with a knee and pounded at Hafey's head. The other, ignoring the blows as if they were pestering bottle flies, rolled half up and clasped the Kid in a crushing hug.

Solo went ashen. He struggled vainly in Hafey's bearlike embrace, managed to get his hands around Hafey's throat and squeezed. Seconds ebbed. Then the hunted man half strangled and rolled back limp. Rising, the Kid staggered to a stump, sat down heavily, and saw his prized Colts behind it.

"Sure took a heap o' nerve, stranger, to jump a gent without an iron yourself," the sheriff said, swinging

up. "Either you're as plumb locoed as Hafey's gone or—"

Poke Hafey was just recovering on the ground. He swore, mouthing thickly. "I ain't locoed, I tell—"

"Hey!" a deputy cried, pointing at Solo. "Looka that silver skull at his throat! He's the Silver Kid himself!"

The Kid nodded, sleepy-eyed again as he holstered his twin guns. More than once hombres who'd never seen him before recognized him by that tiny skull of silver suspended from his sombrero strings, so real it seemed to be an actual bit of skeleton. Through a swirl of gun smoke, it had served as more than one coyote's introduction to a boothill bunk.

It fitted strangely with the rest of his rig, his worn, cracked boots, the brush-scarred batwing chaps, the patched black shirt and weather-warped black sombrero. He was just a half pint of a waddy, sleepy eyes set in a boyish face, with black hair straggling from beneath the sombrero. A wasp waist girded by the double shell belts and a soft drawling voice completed the rest of the picture, so unlike a deadly lead-slinger.

But the silver skull was the tip-off, that and the rest of the silver trappings of his trail-worn outfit. The rowels of his dull spurs were hammered from Mex silver dollars. The flaps of his chaps were buttoned with conchas of the same metal. A double line of buttons on his shirt front glittered in silver too. The band of his Stetson was likewise adorned. And those guns at his hips, slung butts foremost for the lethal cross-arm draw, boasted stocks of palm-worn silver.

"Solo Strant—the Silver Kid him—" the sheriff began.

Poke Hafey suddenly sprang from the ground, bowled over one man and grabbed for his gun as he tried to



crash his way free. But, with a gliding ease that was eye-defying in its speed, the Kid swung into his path and confronted him with the muzzles of his whipped-out weapons. Hafey halted, bloodied face falling, and a deputy stuck a gun against his back.

"This gunny's a killer or a lobo, eh?" the Kid asked.

Hafey's bearded head jerked negatively as his powerful hands clasped and unclasped helplessly at his sides. "I ain't—"

"Started a gun fight up at the schoolhouse," the sheriff explained gruffly, "endangerin' the life o' them younkens an'—"

The dogged Hafey spat a heavy oath. "That gent was there to try and rustle off my boy, Davy! Them polecats—"

He tried to break loose again. But the sheriff had his gun in the hombre's side. Hafey's arms were quickly lashed in front of him, and he was hoisted up to ride double with a deputy. Mounted, the bunch crossed the creek and moved up the trail as the lawman told the Kid the story.

Hafey had a small outfit down the creek, running a couple of hundred cow critters and minding his own business—up till the present anyway. Then he'd seemed to go haywire. For the last couple of days, he'd been noticed lurking around the schoolhouse. Then, today, at noontime, he'd leaped from a bunch of scrub cedar and thrown down on two horsemen who'd turned in at the school.

"Plumb strangers, they was," the sheriff said as they topped the rise and moved at a lope across scrubby flats. "Just looking for the way. An' the children coming outa school. Poke put lead into one of 'em. Then we happened along."

It had been a running fight. His pony shot under him, Hafey had cut

for the wooded country, got to the cabin, then decoyed the Kid inside.

"Plumb locoed," the sheriff finished. "Davey's a little six-year-ol' maverick he adopted and is raisin'. It's just a plain windy about those two gents aiming to rustle him off!"

Glum and smoldering-eyed, Hafey said nothing, merely staring straight down the trail. When the sheriff mentioned that Hafey'd get the rope if that stranger died, the bearded man gave no sign. But when they rounded a cut bank and sighted the school, his eyes riveted to it.

As they pulled up before the scuffed stoop, a fat gent with fancy gold teeth in the front of his mouth came out. He was one of the pair Hafey had shot. He greeted the law, then shook his head.

"Cashing his chips—poor Jim. Poor ol' Jim," he said with a voice that slid like slow oil from his thick lips. He lowered his eyes piously.

They all got down except the prisoner, went inside. It was a strange scene—the children's desks, the odor of old textbooks and chalk dust, the map on the side wall, the arithmetic example on the blackboard. And a dying man!

He lay stretched on the teacher's table, beard-stubbed, clawing feebly at the red-stained compress on his chest. Something rattled in his throat and he stirred, head rolling. The ear on one side was missing.

"John . . . J-John Sabbath," he croaked to his partner. Then a wheezy string of oaths followed.

The sheriff tried to quiet him as the schoolmarm came in the back door with a water bucket. "Right sorry, ma'am, Miss Clatterbee. He—"

With fresh rags, she began to bathe the wounded man's face efficiently. "If there's one time a man has the right to say what he pleases, it's when he's departing this sphere of pain and

misery," she stated, voice reedy and dry as a handful of alkali. Her pale eyes snapped behind spectacles as if defying contradiction.

"Sure, that's right, ma'am, and—" the sheriff began.

"Take off your hat in the presence of death," the schoolmarm cut in shortly. "Got Mr. Hafey there, I see. Can't understand his doing this."

A froth bubbled to the wounded man's mouth. She wiped it away calmly, without a tremor in her flat frame. Sarah Clatterbee was tall and big-boned, homely as a mud fence, and just as practical. She reminded the Kid of a tree so gaunt that a starving crow bait would pass it up for post hay. But as the final death agony racked the prone figure, her big hands were sure and capable while she eased him as much as possible. Then it was over.

Solo suddenly became aware of something as he tried to figure out the mystery of this habitually peaceful Hafey slinging lead at a pair of strangers. No school children were in sight. He asked, and Sarah Clatterbee bent those stern eyes on him.

"Sent them home, of course," she snapped. "Gunpowder and geography don't mix. I have some sense around here if you men haven't! Always strutting around with your guns." Her eyes had shifted to those silver-stocked ones of the Kid, then were noting each detail of his silver trappings too.

Hafey bellowed from outside, wanting to know where his boy, Davy, was. It was the dead hombre's partner, John Sabbath, who answered. He said Davy had ridden off on his burro, and pointed southward down the trail. Solo galvanized, though his sphinxlike face showed nothing. But he eased the gold-toothed hombre as the latter

went to the door and told the posseman there to help the sheriff inside with the corpse. The other obeyed.

It happened in a flash. Yanking his gun, John Sabbath drew a nail from his vest pocket and ran down the steps. The next instant, he had stabbed the nail into the rump of the animal on which the prisoner dolefully sat. Then he leaped out of sight of the doorway as his gun flipped up.

One thing went amiss. That deputy's cayuse was an ornery hammerhead, a wall-eyed horse so vicious it had to be handled with a spade bit. Stung, it lashed out with its rear legs. The fat man had to leap back desperately. Then the animal reared, striking at the other ponies with its hoofs as Poke Hafey grabbed at the saddlehorn with his lashed hands. Neighing fiercely, the cayuse came down to earth, sunfished once, took a mean nip at another of the horses, crow-hopped around, lashed out rearward some more. The next moment it was bolting wildly after having sent the rest in full stampede.

The Kid leaped into the doorway, hands cross-slashing for his Colts, smelling the set-up. It was the old "Law of Flight" trick, luring a captive into a doomed attempt to escape. Even as he got outside, Sabbath was coolly leveling his six-gun across a steady forearm. Another moment, and Poke Hafey would be sprouting a bullet between his shoulder blades.

True, the prisoner was apparently escaping but— One of the Kid's deadly smokepoles jerked up and bit out a chunk of smoking lead. John Sabbath's howl of fury rose through the report of his gun plunked to the earth. And across the back of the hand that had clasped the gun was a welling arrow of red. It was the track of Solo's bullet.

Sabbath turned, face a mask of such frozen fury that his lips were pinched from sight. Up the trail, Hafey had the horse under control and was turning him off toward the haven of a long stretch of mesquite jungle.

The sheriff and his bunch came bursting out. The Kid spun, backing, to cover them, aware he put himself in a position where he had to buck the whole game.

"Easy, amigos," he began. "Me, I hate killing an'—"

"That damned murderer tried to escape an' this snake gunned me when I tried to stop Hafey," John Sabbath lied.

"Pick clouds with your claws mister!" one of the possemen barked from behind. He'd hopped through a window to come around the corner of the schoolhouse on Solo's rear. "Hoist your hands—or they'll be squeezing dirt!"

The Kid had to obey. He tried to tell what this John Sabbath had actually done. But the sheriff, seeing the posse ponies scattered and Hafey already plunging into the mesquite jungle up the line, cursed loudly, livid-faced.

"Sure," he blasted. "This Sabbath fella tried to help the hombre who killed his pard! Yeah—like a rabbit bedding down with a sidewinder. Kid, I heard o' times when you've bucked the law afore and—"

"Mistuh, I rod my own law when I see the badge brand nosing up the wrong trail," Solo said, voice a pur as he sensed his jeopardy.

He started about how Sabbath had pulled the "Law of Flight" trick. But the sheriff had already seized his guns and was ordering him trussed up. Shortly after, Solo was headed for Lanby with a deputy who rode behind with a drawn gun. The

Kid was going to jail for helping a killer to escape.

Glancing back with his sphinxlike face, he saw John Sabbath dabbing at the gun crease on his shooting hand that still bled. It was Solo's bullet sign. A death brand that had never failed to portend a soon and sudden end for the wearer.

## CHAPTER II.

### A TALE TO CONJURE WITH.

THROUGH the doorway of the Burnt Canyon Saloon, an hombre named Toby could see the mud-yellow river that meandered south to the Lanby range. His eyes were bloodshot from the redevye he'd been guzzling, fear-shot from the craven conscience he'd tried to flee in vain.

"It's about King Mantee," he croaked suddenly. "Mantee—him what hit it rich in that big silver strike. He's dead— Yep. An' he had all that dinero he made, too, when he died. Savvy, Tarp?"

The slouching hulk of a man across the table leaned closer, brushing ashes from his sloppy rig. He nodded lazily and poured Toby a fresh slug from the bottle.

"Yeah. They tell me Mantee had a heap, too," he said with a guarded glance around. Tarp Deppa was a two-bit lobo, lazy as all-get-out, and faster than a striking hawk's talons when he pulled hardware from a holster. He shambled down the trail of life, taking luck as he found it, behind the muzzle of a Colt when necessary.

Toby nodded too. "Well, Mantee left ever'thing in his will—to his kid. *Ever'thing*. 'At's your chance. How 'bout another bottle?"

Drawling a curse, the outlaw heaved to his feet. "Y" boogered-down fool, I ain't his son, an' I don't



know where the hombre holes up and—”

Toby leered crookedly. “That’s just it. King Mantee himself didn’t know—even the day he died—where his son was either. But there’re certain gents who do—know.”

Deppa slid back into his seat and waved the barkeep for a bottle. Toby waited until he had his drink in his palsied hand and had gulped it down. Then he sleeved whiskey from his beard stubble.

“What I aim to tell you is worth dinero forty ways from the jack, Tarp. An’—and I need a grubstake. Savvy?”

Deppa shrugged, then said O. K.” Unhurriedly, punctuating it well with snorts from the bottle, Toby told his story.

He’d been with King Mantee on his way to the ranch in the Big Sow country that King had bought. The place where, afterward, he’d lived, but never worked, in his bitterness. For Mantee, with his girl wife and her year-old baby, had been trapped in that human stampede in Jackson Gulch the night the Pinto Dam went out in the spring freshet.

King had been almost killed himself, after seeing his wife swept to her doom in the swirling flood that wiped out the town. For two whole days, he’d lain between life and death in a squatter’s cabin up on the slope. And when he had come around, they’d told him his baby son was gone too.

“But he weren’t,” Toby whispered thinly as he leaned closer. “He weren’t. That was Curly Mantee—King’s brother—Curly’s idea. Curly never figured King would live and want to inherit the dinero. It was like this.” And Toby told the story:

Curly had left the year-old baby with a down-at-the-heel cowman on the edge of one of the refugee camps.

He had found out the hombre’s name and where he came from, then told him the babe was a waif and said he’d be back for him. Only Curly hadn’t gone back. He waited for King Mantee to die. But King hadn’t. Still, Curly had figured King would leave him his money, as his only living relative, when he did cash his chips.

But that hadn’t worked either. Bitter-hearted and lonely, King Mantee had gone up to his outfit. And, for some strange reason, he clung to the belief his son still lived somewhere. Nothing could shake that hunch. King just kept saying he had a feeling in his bones—and that was that.

Now, he was dead. And he’d left that will with the judge in the gulch. The will that said his fortune should be held for ten years in escrow just in case his son should be found. At the end of that time, or if the son should be found and then die, the fortune passed to Curly, his brother.

Toby gazed owlishly out from his caving shoulders. “Ha, ha. Only Curly Mantee’s one damn impatient fella. He don’t mean to wait ten years. He—”

“Wait!” Tarp put the bottle to his face and gulped noisily. Tarp didn’t ask much of living; he liked to warm his belly with plenty of redeye and liked a snug spot for a good dose of shut-eye. “Look! Ain’t nothing to stop me borrowin’ a six-year younker some place an’ going to Jackson Gulch and—”

Toby shook his head. Mantee’s son had a birthmark, he explained. Same mark King himself had borne. A rough, star-shaped spot under the left armpit. No mistaking it. And, even now, Curly with his hands is down Lanby way to rustle off the real son from the two-bit cowman

who'd been practically forced into adopting him.

Tarp Deppa was no fool. He tongued his lip lazily, the while he petted his six-gun butt, and asked: "How come, fella, y' ain't with 'em?"

A wince crossed Toby's weak face and twisted it into a maze of wrinkles. "They'll bring the boy back an' claim the fortune for him. Then—what'll happen? Curly's next in line to inherit. Tarp, I killed a coupla men in my life. An' I done time. But . . . but I ain't having a hand in the murder of a half-growed boy!"

Deppa was shrewd. "Curly Mantee run you out, huh?"

"He called me yella an' hoss-whipped me with his quirt an'—" Toby broke off and took a long sip of his drink to hide his shame. He was yellow. And this was his way of striking back. When an infuriated man slammed a handful of chips to the floor in a stud game in the rear, Toby cringed, shaking.

Tarp Deppa guffawed at him. Deppa was thinking fast. "How many gun hands has this Curly Mantee got riding under him?" If that boy heir should be taken from this Curly, a nice price could be demanded for his return. That much dinero would buy a heap of redeye and—

Toby grinned slyly. This was what he wanted. "They's three others. Four altogether, 'cludin' Curly. Coupla gun-passers who used to be King's bodyguards. One-ear Jim and Singer Frayne. Then there's Sabbath, John Sabbath. It's a nice name—for a devil. He ain't got blood in his veins, that Sabbath. Lotta gold teeth. Watch him. He's got a trick of havin' a smokepole 'most any place. A reg'lar hide-out artist!"

Tarp Deppa nodded, blinking

lazily. "Him what gets the gun *first* is the one who lives. An' Curly Mantee, huh?"

Hate curled Toby's lips, then sent them quivering. "If John Sabbath's afraid of anything that walks—Curly Mantee's it," he said flatly, stopped as if nothing more were needed. Then: "You'll know him by his mouth. It seems like to run right around to one ear. A knife did that."

His eyes darted to the door nervously as a couple of strange men came in, one with a knife scar on his long jaw. Toby rose.

"Curly and his bunch—they'll be coming back through here with the boy. Agreed to meet in Burnt Gulch here if they got split up," he finished hurriedly. "'Bout tomorrow night. That's all. Y' said you'd give—"

Deppa dug into a money belt inside his disreputable shirt and shoved some greasy bills across the table. Toby snatched at them, then began to complain and whine about the amount. Deppa's long arm grabbed him by the front of his coat.

"When I see Curly—want me to tell him who tipped me off, y' pack rat?" he asked with good-natured scorn.

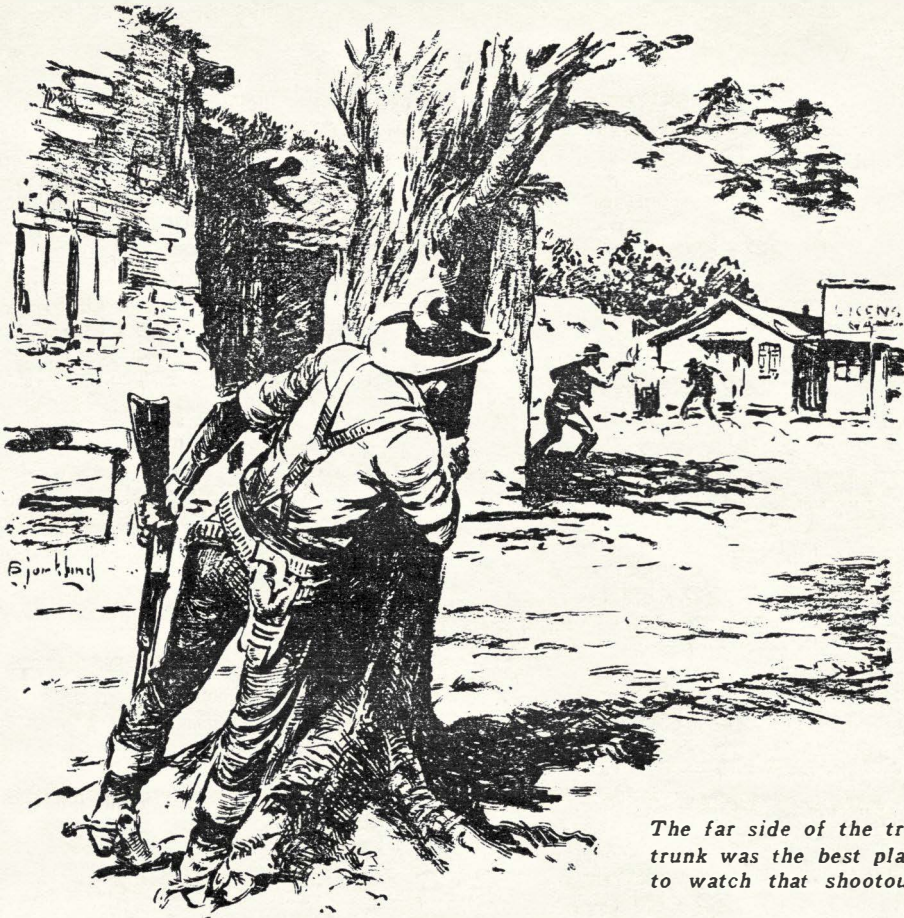
"N-no . . . no. Don't tell . . . all right . . . all right—"

"I thought so," Deppa said, rising. "Pull stakes fast." He motioned to three men lounging at the bar and strode out, grinning knowingly. Tarp Deppa had it all planned how he was going to do some man rustling.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE GIRL AND THE GUARD.

THE waning sun glow had already faded to a mere crimson haze in Solo Strant's cell in the Lanby jail. He felt like an outlaw pony anchored to a snubbing post. Sucking down quiry after quiry, he paced the floor.



*The far side of the tree trunk was the best place to watch that shootout!*

Here he was, hogtied completely, and due to stay until they brought Poke Hafey back in at least. And the Kid ached to buy chips in Hafey's game himself.

For Solo had a hair-trigger brain behind those snaking smokepoles of his. He hadn't forgotten how, when Hafey had called into the schoolhouse to ask about his boy, Davy, it had been Sabbath who'd answered. Sabbath who'd told which direction he'd taken. Sabbath who apparently had known who Davy was. Sabbath—a stranger!

"Maybe Poke Hafey's story about rustling the boy wasn't such a wild-cat claim," the Kid mused.

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Still, he had to admit that he was mighty helpless to do anything about it. Bleak-eyed, he watched darkness come upon the town like a slow-dropping blanket. This *cárcel* had nothing leaky about it. Walls of solid, fresh-set dobie. A big door of heavy bars from top to bottom so that a prisoner was visible at a glance. A mere slit of a window overlooking the road, too narrow for even his half-pint form. And a cold-eyed guard downstairs who was watchful as a hawk. An hombre didn't have a shepherd's chance of bolting this man corral.

Cold despair settled on him as he gazed out wearily, thinking of his



silver-stocked Colts he'd seen put in the desk downstairs.

Without interest, he watched a brassy-haired dance-hall girl come along and engage the guard in conversation, leaning provocatively close to him in the gay Mex serape which she'd draped around her body.

They came inside. Their voices rose from downstairs. Then Solo could hear the rattle of a bottle against a glass. Several times. The girl's laugh jangled and the guard's guffaws rose more frequently. Then they were coming up the stairs.

"I ought to search you for weapons," the guard snickered as he bent over her.

"Hey," she giggled, "your beard scratches worse'n a cactus! Give me the key. I ain't seen Red in a long time. You'll be right here with your gun if I was to try anything! Gee, quit squeezin' me so hard!"

High heels tapping, she breezed by the Kid's cell, painted face betraying nothing, swaying as if intoxicated. But the prisoner she addressed as "Red" in the next cell seemed puzzled, answering vaguely to the girl's chatter. A few minutes later, she started to laugh shrilly and, retracing her steps, reeled and rested against Solo's door a moment. Then, in the wan light from the lantern at the end of the hall, the Kid spotted her pale hand wiggling the key between the bars.

"Quick," she whispered. "Unlock your door and throw the key back out—then . . . wait . . . wait." And her brassy laughter rang out again.

Then she was back with the guard at the stairs, babbling away about all the trouble she'd gone to to see a lowdown hombre who didn't even remember a gal. She suggested another drink.

"Awright . . . well . . . yeah,"

the guard agreed slowly. "Give me the key first and—"

With a little squeal, she said she must have dropped it. In a flash, the jailer shoved her onto the stairs, drew his six-gun and came striding suspiciously along with his lantern. But his fears were allayed when he saw the key on the floor. Solo had already unlocked himself as per instructions.

The girl and the guard went downstairs and the click of bottle on glasses came again. The tensed, ear-straining Kid heard the girl shrill loudly that she'd brought a second bottle. Solo took it as a signal. With ghostly stillness, he was easing around the unlocked door and down the hall. His hands fluttered uneasily over his empty gun sheaths, then one went to the silver skull strung at his throat. That last was a sure-fire omen of trouble coming pronto.

A stair tread creaked loudly under him but it was covered by the boisterous song the girl broke into. He was almost at the first floor, wondering what his next move was going to be. Then the back door, juzzle ahead, edged open and a gun muzzle slid through to cover him. The figure behind it was masked in the night.

"This way," a command came in a faint whisper.

Dumfounded, the Kid obeyed. It looked as if he was jumping from jail simply to be somebody else's prisoner. John Sabbath shot into his mind. Perhaps the oily-voiced hombre really had meant to gun Poke Hafey in vengeance for his pard's killing. Then he was out in the night, and the unseen hombre with the gun was poking it into his back and closing the jail door behind them.

A prod told the Kid to start walk-

ing and another dig with the muzzle of the weapon warned him to keep his hands elevated. With the racket of the town's merriment waning behind them, they marched across a backyard, in the shadows of a horse shed, through the sage into a scrawny stand of cottonwoods. A stolen glance over his shoulder had given the Kid no glimpse of his captor. His keen ears had been unable to catch the scuff of boots or rattle of spurs other than his own.

There was a familiar whinny just ahead. And the Kid made out his paint pony, Sorghum.

"Here!" the hushed voice behind commanded. They stopped. "Strant, if I let you go now, will you ride to Piñon Butte and follow the orders of the rider you meet there?"

The wind soughed in the cottonwood tops as the Kid figured fast. It looked as if he were in a neat trap. He was ready to bet a hundred dollars to a sheepherder's sock the gunman behind him was a hand of John Sabbath's. Yet if he failed to comply—

"You swear to obey the . . . the rider at the Butte, Kid—or I trigger now!" the faint whisper from behind prodded. "Do you?"

The Kid's head turned and picked out Piñon Butte down the valley side from Lanby, a small, piñon-crested chimney poking up in the moonlight. "Well, if you'd tell me who this rider is—" he stalled.

Doubling at the waist, he whirled to grapple. The figure behind danced back. The next instant, the yellow slash of a speaking gun licked past the Kid's head. And—he was staring at another dance-hall girl.

"Oh-h . . . I . . . didn't mean to shoot. The gun went off and—" She stood trembling in her scant, low-cut gown on the absurdly high heels

of gilded slippers, face aghast beneath coppery hair.

Solo was as stunned as if he'd cornered a sidewinder, only to find it an unweaned, bawling calf. Then he was beside her, snapping the smoky hogleg from her hands, whipping an arm around her pliant waist.

"Go . . . go quick," she begged. "Your guns are with your saddle and—"

But the Kid didn't stampede easy. "Why did you snake me outa that *cárcel*? Who's behind you?"

Her bold eyes met his squarely, close to him. "No. I can't tell you. I promised not—"

The back door of the jail slammed open to outline the guard in a frame of lamplight. Reluctantly the Kid stepped away, then went for his pony on the run. As he hooked his gun belts from the saddlehorn, the dance-hall girl cried softly:

"You will go to meet the rider at the Butte and—"

Solo nodded once before he sent Sorghum out the far side of the cottonwoods. Yeah, he'd go to the butte. But he had to make the play in his own way. He was plumb certain now that Poke Hafey's locoed story was right. The high grass swished at the pony's belly as he moved down the long slope. Back in the town, some drunken waddy began to pop off a Colt in the street. Then Lanby's clamor died, and its lights grew fainter.

Awhile later, he reined in to listen as he belted on his guns, breaking them open to be certain they hadn't been unloaded. But no drumming of pursuing hoofbeats came. The Kid felt fairly safe as he dropped into the bed of a shallow stream. In the shadow of the butte itself, he advanced warily, eyes stabbing for the glint of a bushwhacker's gun steel, ears attuned for the hiss of a rope

that might bind his arms. He was still thinking of John Sabbath.

A night bird chirped. And the Kid detected a furtive movement in the brush at the butte's foot. Sensing a trap, the Kid had his drawn smokepole leveled and cocked. Then he squeezed trigger. A scared cry pierced the reverberations of the Kid's high shot. And a gaunt hombre, somehow awkward in a cowman's garb, came stumbling out, white-gauntleted hands half raised.

"Dad-burn your blasted hide, Kid!" the other cried, clumping in boots miles too big. "I'm the rider you came to meet! You galoots, always a-popping away with your guns!"

The words dumfounded the Kid. There was something right familiar about the other's voice, too. But Solo couldn't place it then. That crack about guns had him sort of woozy.

"I got you out of that jail, Kid," the other went on in a dry, strained voice. "And now you try to blast my head off!"

"Well, I—" the Kid began.

"Be quiet, Strant! I'll do the talking. Where were we? Oh, yes. You can call me . . . er . . . Bee, Trigger Bee. I'm Poke Hafey's friend and—"

"Where's Hafey?" the Kid asked, eager to get at the pay dirt.

"I'm telling you . . . uh . . . pard," the tall one said crustily. "He escaped. Met him out on the range. His boy's burro came in empty-saddled. And Hafey's headed north toward Burnt Canyon after the low-down devils who kidnaped the boy!"

Solo whistled softly. Far from locoed. Poke Hafey had been right after all.

"Poke will need help—g-guns—against that outfit," the other went on, peering up at the Kid.

Solo noticed then the red bandanna bound around the other's head beneath the sombrero, completely covering the hair. Again he had that sensation of having crossed the gunny's trail before.

Tapping the silver butts of his Colts, he answered: "I helped turn Hafey over to the law. Looks like I gotta square things. He's got my irons behind his play. 'Sides, coyotes that rustle off a half-growed doggie git my trigger fingers plumb proddy! Know the trail to Burnt Canyon?"

A grin of pure relief lit the other's face. Solo thought he saw a tear rolling down the cheek in the uncertain light. Then the other wheeled, mumbling something about getting the pony back in the brush, and vanished among the saplings.

A rent appeared in the cloud rack above and the moonlight waxed. Solo was outlined in the silver light. Even as the Kid sensed the danger of it, the paint pony threw up its head to whinny.

"Pick a star with your paws, Strant!" the sheriff, with a deputy, rounded the right side of the butte behind leveled guns. "Seems like you plumb don't appreciate our nice jail, Mr. Strant. Hoist 'em!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### GUN-TRAPPED.

SOLO'S far hand started to inch underneath the other arm for his holster. Simultaneously, he exerted knee pressure on the well-trained Sorghum, then jerked his leg. Like a flash, the paint whirled in the other direction, chest cords bunching to bolt away at the next signal.

"Easy . . . easy, Strant!" warned the first of two other deputies coming from the other side of the butte. His gun hammer snapped back with an ugly click.



The Kid was neatly trapped. En route back to town after a vain attempt to track down Poke Hafey, the sheriff and his posse had been drawn by the Kid's single shot. It had been a simple matter for them to slip up on the butte as Solo and Trigger Bee parleyed. The lawman sidled his horse around to relieve the Kid of his smokepoles.

And then, suddenly, all the fury of hell itself erupted from the brush at the foot of the butte. There was a screech like a catamount with its tail caught in a wolf trap, then a howling as though dozens of humans were being tortured. The powder flashes of a spitting gun painted livid, red-yellow gashes on the night.

"Let 'em have it, boys! Blast them law varmints out from under their hats, men! Give 'em—"

And the gun from the bushes was blasting away again. The Kid had a split-second glimpse of Bee as the wind ruffled foliage. It seemed as if Trigger Bee was clutching that six-gun in both hands. Maybe he was fanning it, the Kid figured as he ducked low and spurred.

A slug slapped through the brim of his hat not an inch from his ear. Another whacked off a boulder a full twenty feet ahead. There was more shrill, crazed-sounding yelling. And the sheriff with his deputies, routed by surprise, were hightailing it up the long slope toward Lanby.

Trigger Bee popped out of the sapling stand, fumbling with two guns, sombrero askew, trembling strangely. As the Kid wheeled back, one of the guns went off and almost shot Bee through the foot.

"Careful, Trigger!" the Kid yelled. "I get plumb n-nervous when I start . . . start t-triggering." Bee stammered. "I get . . . I get so dangd m-mad!"

Then Bee dragged a bay mare from



THE SILVER KID

cover, and they spurred away and put the butte between themselves and the scattered posse. They swung down the wooded, broken-bottomed valley. After a few miles, the bell tower of the schoolhouse showed up in the moonlight. Bee swung toward the mouth of a little, brush-masked arroyo and reined in.

From the rear the dull drum of hoofs came. It was the posse.

The Kid started to speak but Trigger Bee broke in breathlessly, sagging in the kak after the short gallop. "Up this arroyo here. Poke told me—in case of trouble. It runs into a dead-end defile. But there's a hidden trail up the wall that leads over the ridge toward Burnt Canyon."

Solo nodded, impatient to get to Burnt Canyon and buy chips in this strange game of rustling a half-grown younker. "All right, Trigger. But hadn't you better reload your cutters first?"

Bee grabbed at the guns in a clumsy way, swallowed hard, then shoved them at the Kid. "Here! You load 'em for me. I . . . I . . . every time I get a gun in my hand,

I—well, I . . . I want to kill somebody!

The Kid took them, dumfounded, still puzzled when they swung up the arroyo at a hard gallop. For an hombre bucking the law, Trigger Bee was one strange critter.

Up in Burnt Canyon, John Sabbath had arrived. Noontime of the next day, he'd forked a jaded pony up the canyon road and headed into the barroom to wash the trail dust from his throat. The watching Tarp Deppa and his gun hands had spotted him. And Deppa had recognized him right off by his gold teeth. The boy wasn't with him. But Deppa remembered how that Toby fellow had said the others would meet up here. He kept watch.

Inside, Sabbath hoisted another slug of redevye and congratulated himself. He'd slipped away from that posse hunting Hafey. Come straight through without trying to pick up the trail of Curly and Singer Frayne with the boy, Davy. They'd swing in a loop to throw off pursuit. Old Hafey was nothing to worry about. And that Kid fellow was penned in jail. That little bullet scrape he'd put on the back of his shooting hand was nothing.

The afternoon wore away. Sabbath indolently played solitaire in a shadowy corner. He cheated twice. Deppa and his men missed nothing. Then, with the yellowish river that meandered down the far side of the canyon dulling in the fading sunlight, another stranger loped in. He was a slab of a tall gent with a high-crowned Stetson and lips that seemed to overlap. Humming, he ambled into the Burnt Canyon Saloon too.

"Dum-diddy-dum-dum" hummed the stranger through the mouth that looked as if it never opened as he

hooked elbows over the bar. "Dum-diddy-dum-dum— Dum-diddy—"

Tarp Deppa got himself right beside him at the bar that had begun to fill up with the ragtag and riffraff of the trail that was always drifting through isolated little Burnt Canyon. For the alert outlaw had seen Sabbath stiffen in the corner at the newcomer's entrance.

Ambling up to the bar, John Sabbath inserted himself beside the newcomer and absently spun a coin. "Howdy, Singer. Well?"

"Dum-diddy-dum-dum," went Singer. Dum— Curly's down the trail. We got the kid, Davy, all right. Dum-diddy-dum—"

Sabbath sent the coin spinning again. "Ain't cut no sign of trouble on this range. Meet me at the edge of town by the blacksmith shop in ten minutes. Gotta get saddled up. Hey, bar boss, how 'bout a stogie?"

When the pair rejoined down by the saddle-backed barn of the blacksmith shop, Deppa and his gun hands were watching them from a stand of scrub pine on one of the low, dome-like mounds that dotted the waste of the canyon floor. When they headed down the road at a handlope, Deppa's bunch paralleled their progress, ducking from knob to knob on the soundless sandhill trails.

Sabbath and Singer Frayne came to the ford where, beyond a narrow cut bank, the turgid creek looped across the trail. They didn't cross it, though. Instead, they turned upstream and went beneath the overhanging foliage of the cut bank. Reining in, Deppa gave the word to one of his men and a few minutes later the latter was perched in the crotch of a huge, blackened, charred tree left like a black ghost of the famous fire that had guttered the canyon years back. From there he could peer down at the stream.

He called the facts to those waiting beneath. The two riders had met a third there. A third with a little boy.

"That'll be Curly Mantee himself," Deppa said, eying the red haze of the sunset that was fast surrendering to the canyon shadows.

A few moments later, the lookout called down that they were moving, heading for the town. The slouching Deppa grinned crookedly, then proceeded to knot his neckerchief mask-fashion over his face. The others followed suit.

"We'll take 'em by the pine where the trail twists around that rock elbow," Deppa told them. "An' watch out for the boy! He ain't going to be no good to anybody dead. I'll do the parleying."

They swung out behind the scrub-crested mound and moved ahead of the bunch who were climbing back to the trail with the boy riding in front of Curly Mantee himself. Winding among the hillocks, with the sough of the rising wind masking all sound under the baleful wall of the canyon, they cut across to the far side of the outcropping ledge of rock. Deppa bit off a chaw of plug tobacco and assigned one of his men, afoot, to jump them from behind when they held them up.

They waited a few minutes. Then Sabbath's voice came.

"No need to worry none 'bout that lunkhead, Hafey. The posse'll run him to his hole!"

The soft *squish* of pony hoofs in the sandy road. The faint humming of Singer Frayne's "dum-diddy-dum-dum." Then they were rounding the point of the rock elbow. The masked Deppa sent his cayuse leaping out onto the trail from one side, big Colt cocked in his paw. From the other side, two men jumped, their guns ready, too.

"Elevate 'em—or get salivated!"

Deppa roared in his lazy rumble of a voice. "Your dinero ain't worth dyin' for! Hoist 'em high—" He broke off as his hogleg thundered to blast a hole through the crown of Sabbath's hat. Sabbath had started for a shoulder hide-out.

Singer Frayne's humming broke off for a moment as he half hoisted his hands. The scar, that seemed to pull Curly Mantee's mouth half around to his right ear, jerked and went livid. He was a thin-limbed man with a head that perched on his shoulders like an apple. He snaked that head around for a look behind. But Deppa's third man had come out from the rock elbow in back of them, two Colts leveled. Curly's hands climbed.

"We ain't got no dinero! What're you aiming—" he began.

"Outa the saddles!" Deppa growled, waving his gun.

Sabbath was the first down. He stood leaning against his saddle like a disinterested spectator, smoking. Frayne hopped to the ground, humming his "dum-diddy-dum-dum." With a flowing motion that was breath-taking because there was no hint of a start in it, Curly Mantee rolled out of the kak and lit on his feet. Was about to lift the tired, sleepy-eyed boy, Davy, down. Then Deppa had spurred over in a flash and swung the child onto the saddle in front of himself.

"Uncle . . . uncle—" Davy cried, struggling like a little wild cat in his patched jumper as he beat at Deppa's chest and face. "Uncle Curly! Dang you! When my dad, Poke, gets hold o' you, he'll gun whip you half to death!" he threatened Tarp Deppa.

Deppa merely grinned and tucked him under his free arm, gun barrel steady as a rock meanwhile. He nodded and one of his men advanced



to haze off the ponies of the held-up hombres. And John Sabbath had a gun in his hand and was triggering.

He'd slipped it from a hidden pocket in the saddle flap. It's muzzle blared flame in the dusk. The first shot took Deppa in the shoulder. Then he jerked sideward and was caught on the same side where he clasped little Davy. Howling an oath of pain, the lobo released the boy, jumped his horse off the trail, and got his own hogleg up again.

Frayne and Curly Mantee were already whipping up Colts. A shaft of reflected sunlight broke through the gathering clouds, was refracted from one of the ruddy canyon walls, and bathed the whole scene by the rock elbow in golden light. Little Davy's yellow hair glinted as he picked himself up courageously, without a cry, and instinctively ran to his uncle, Curly Mantee. Lead whistled all around him.

Sabbath had already wheeled, dropping to one knee, and sent slugs burning past the rear guard, Deppa's third gun hand. The latter went limping, wounded, back into the brush. And Sabbath was digging for the weapon in his hip holster. It had erupted so abruptly that the triggering was in blind haste, men simply slamming lead into a vortex of rearing horses. Powder flashes criss-crossed and exploded dazzlingly. Nobody could get set for a calculated shot.

Singer Frayne was winged, dropped and rolled behind a boulder across the road to shift his cutter in his other hand. One of Deppa's men doubled over the saddlehorn and wheeled his horse to get out of it as hot lead seared his side. And out of the crazy maelstrom, Curly Mantee came zigzagging back, dragging Davy with him. He ducked into the protection of the rear side of the jut-

ting rock elbow and crouched with the boy clasped before him as a shield.

Deppa spotted Mantee through the curling gunsmoke as he ducked from sight. The outlaw chief fought down his rearing horse, curveted, then went driving past as Sabbath ducked behind a tree with both guns going, plunging after Mantee.

Topping the little hump back down the trail, whence Curly and his party had come, the Silver Kid reined in quickly, his sleepy-seeming eyes taking in the scene. Farther back down the trail, Deppa's first gunshot through John Sabbath's hat had warned him something was amiss. Down in the sunbeam-dyed arena, he saw the swirling gun fight, the tow-headed boy, then the man who was Curly Mantee dragging him back behind the rock. The next moment, Poke Hafey himself swung up the rise beside him. Solo and Trigger Bee had overtaken Poke on the trail up from Lanby, Poke plodding along discouragedly with a cayuse that had gone lame on him in the hill country where he'd tried to track the gents who'd rustled off Davy.

Now, Poke Hafey's mouth quivered and he pointed frantically. "It's Davy—there! Davy! And there's the gent what left Davy with me when he was a baby at the flood camp. I 'member him an' his scar mouth! You couldn't forget it. It was him I seen 'round Lanby an' a-prowling 'round the schoolhouse the last few days—an' that made me suspicious! He's got Davy now!"

## CHAPTER V.

"I LOST HIM."

SOLO STRANT waited to hear no more. As his hand flipped across to one of his silver-stocked six-guns, he was sending the paint horse leap-

ing with his dull-roweled spurs. He didn't know the why-for of it. But he'd already guessed the party with the boy, Davy, had been held up. And he saw the leader of the holdup bunch, the big man who was Tarp Deppa, throwing his horse through to get at the man back of the rock ridge with the boy. The quick-witted Kid realized it would be a hair-trigger showdown with lead smoking when those two sighted each other. And with that child there—

Behind, Poke Hafey tried to whip up his lamed pony in vain. Trigger Bee topped the rise, let out a squawk, then went plunging headlong after the Kid. But the next moment, Trigger was tumbling from the kak like a greenhorn tenderfoot as the horse slipped and stumbled on loose shale. Unnoticed by those below in the throes of the gun duel, Solo rushed on.

Then he saw he was going to be too late. Neck-reining hard, Solo hit the ground on sliding boot heels. He steadied his Colt across a forearm, drawing bead on the rider below. But Tarp Deppa, fighting his horse, which had been seared by a stray slug, passed into the lee of a tree hanging low over the road. The Kid's gun swiveled over an inch. Now the only part of Curly Mantee he could risk firing at was his gun arm. Otherwise he would almost certainly hit little Davy.

Down by the elbow of rock, Deppa slowed suddenly as he rounded the end of it. Another split second and—

The thunderbolt of the Kid's shot reverberated in a moment's lull in the battle. Already Curly Mantee had gone rigid as if paralyzed, staring at his extended gun hand. His unfired Colt was slipping from nerveless fingers. His arm remained outstretched as if he feared to move it. And across the back of his hand was



**CURLY MANTEE**

a crimson slash, bullet-carved. Solo Strant, the gun wizard, had put his gun sign on him in a desperate gamble to disarm him and save Davy from being caught in the middle of a bullet melee.

It worked. Seeing his enemy miraculously struck gunless, Deppa threw his horse right at him. Stretching from the saddle, he slashed at him with his gun barrel. Tarp Deppa had his reasons for not wanting to slay the leader of the band with the boy. Mantee was scrambling desperately up the rocky shoulder. One of the blows glanced off his head and he came rolling limply down. Wheeling his horse, Deppa reached down and seized the game little Davy who was doggedly trying to scoop up Mantee's fallen gun. Again the outlaw leader had him under his arm.

Then he blew a piercing whistle and went bolting into the scrub growth. He was signaling his bunch to hightail it.

Up the little slope, the Kid wheeled and leaped back into the saddle himself as he saw Davy being rustled off for a second time. Behind him, Poke Hafey bellowed an oath of anguish and turned his limping horse straight off into the brush to try to intercept the rider fleeing with his adopted son. But the Kid hurtled on down, knowing the one way to pick up the trail in that broken, mound-dotted country was to hit it at its start.

Deppa's rear guard, that fourth man Sabbath had wounded in the beginning of the battle, came hobbling out of the trees to get his horse and escape. At sight of the charging Kid, the man took him for an enemy and swung around with his gun. Lead horneted past the Kid's warped hat. Solo's Colt snarled in reply, and the outlaw twisted with a gashed gun arm, six-gun flying from his fingers.

It was a break for Curly Mantee. He had been only slightly dazed when Deppa knocked him from the rock shoulder. Now, crouched on hands and knees just a yard from his own dropped gun, he watched the Kid swing into the swath Tarp Deppa's horse had cut through the underbrush. The next moment he had scrambled to his Colt and seized it. Solo had already vanished. Mantee rose slowly, covering the now twice-wounded rear guard of the Deppa bunch.

By means of beaten-down brush and bruised foliage, the Kid was able to trail the kidnaper for a short distance in the final stray ray of refracted sunshine. Then the tracks led out into a sandy space, around one of the little, domelike hills: It ran into a maze of other, older hoof-prints there that led off in three directions. And the last light was suddenly snuffed out.

Solo reined in. The next moment, the soft crunch of steps in the sand

came through the rising wind. From back on the road slow, methodical gun reports sounded. The Kid had his second gun snaked clear of leather, both hammers cocked, as he sidled his paint toward a stand of alders. Then, leading his limping cayuse, Poke Hafey trudged around the side of the mound, throwing up his gun hastily before he recognized the Kid.

Hafey shook his grizzled head wearily. "Figured I had the snake that grabbed off Davy. But he angled around these bumps—and I lost him."

There was nothing to do but to make their way back to the road. The steady shooting kept on. When they worked their way cautiously out from the trees, they saw it was Trigger Bee, midway down the slope, firing into the darkness at the rock shoulder.

"They're still there—that Sabbath sidewinder and his polecat friends?" the Kid cried hopefully.

Bee paused in the shooting, head with the red bandanna beneath the now awry sombrero shaking. "I was just gunning away to make sure they don't come back," Trigger explained with a sheepish smile. "I saw them ride off. And they took one of the holdup bunch a prisoner with them."

Eyes sleepier-looking than ever, Solo Strant peered down the trail in the darkness. Unconsciously his fingers went to that tiny silver skull slung under his jaw and rubbed it. It was a dead-sure omen of roaring guns soon to come. He was thinking of how he'd seen two bands of men ready to take a chance on boothill to get possession of Davy. It was plain to him that the boy, Poke's adopted son, had some mysterious value.

And now the second man—that one with the scarred mouth—bore



his own death warrant, carried it with him every living second. For he bore the Kid's gun sign, bullet-branded, that slug crease across the back of his hand. No man with it had ever worn out a pair of boots before death claimed him.

## CHAPTER VI.

### HUNDRED-DOLLAR DEATH.

**B**URNT CANYON was boiling, and the focal point of the shabby little town's turmoil was the raucous, man-jammed Burnt Canyon Saloon. A festering sore on the hem of the range country, the town was too poor even to maintain the pretense of a peace officer. A passing point of bushwhackers and saddle bums and law dodgers. A mangy little excrescence of the dregs of humanity.

Yet now it seethed and rocked with angry indignation at the idea of a child being rustled off. For Curly Mantee and his party had come in with the prisoner and the story. And the talkative Sabbath, gold teeth flashing, kept telling and retelling the story at the bar. Oh, it was a sad tale all right. Vicious gun wolves who'd taken a half-grown youngster because they didn't have any dinero in their pokes. A tale that made the coldest-blooded killer itch to take the law in his own hands for once.

Singer Frayne stood on one side of Sabbath, arm bandaged, humming monotonously. On the other side was Curly Mantee, silent, planning. His sombrero was pushed back; and he kept mopping sweat from his forehead. His eyes kept drifting over the crowd. But he looked right at Solo Strant and failed to recognize him.

There was good reason. The Kid had stripped off that silver skull from

the chin strings of his sombrero. And over the silver buttons of his shirt and his silver-stocked Colts was a worn gray frock coat which hung to his knees and made him look much shorter than he actually was. He'd bought it at the General Store first thing they'd loped into the town.

Beside him, Poke Hafey also passed the inspection of Mantee's shifting gaze. The grief-racked man had mumbled barely a word of protest when the Kid herded him into the town barber shop and ordered his spade of beard shaven off. He stood sad-eyed and woebegone with a small, retreating chin that belied his dogged, determined character. Behind him stood Trigger Bee, a stranger to Sabbath and his pards.

"Taking a poor, helpless little fella—grabbing him outa his uncle's arms—an' who knows what'll happen to him now?" John Sabbath was going on.

"Gents like that ain't fitten to bed down with a sidewinder!" somebody snorted. There were oaths in agreement all around the room.

"What're we waiting for?" a bandy-legged, alleged horse trader ranted, pounding a table top with his drawn gun butt. "We got one o' them lowdown varmints locked up down the road here! An' we got rope!"

The rough ceiling seemed to rattle with the uproar then. Solo looked around, jerking his hat brim lower over his face, thinking fast. Beside him, Hafey's hand twitched over his gun. He'd wanted to ride right in after the battle on the trail and smoke it out with Sabbath and his bunch. But the Kid had talked him out of it. Putting lead in those polecats now wouldn't help to find little Davy. And while Solo's own trigger fingers itched to deal some gun-barrel poisoning to those trail rats, he real-

ized locating the twice rustled boy was the first problem.

His fingers went to where that silver skull customarily hung at his neck. The half-drunken mob was beginning to mill toward the door, primed to deal some lynch law. Then Mantee came to life, pounding a bottle on the bar and crying out, shrewdly molding the mob fury to his own ends.

"Listen, you gents! Hold her there—an' listen! Me, Curly Mantee, I'm offering a hundred dollars—a hundred dollars—to the hombre who can trail down that holdup bunch to their hide-out, come morning! A hundred dollars—and another hundred to the man or men who helps me git him back—my poor little Davy."

A fresh roar went up. Mantee shot a look at John Sabbath and winked. Sabbath nodded assent. It was a smart plan. And a hundred dollars in Burnt Canyon with its cheap rotgut whiskey was a heap of dinero. You could get a man killed for less. Mantee turned and ordered drinks for the house. And the outcasts of the canyon swarmed around him, promising how they'd be on that trail at daylight and combing the country down to the last prairie dog's hole.

The Kid's mouth jerked grimly, and he signed to Poke Hafey and Bee, then led the way out a side door into the alley.

"Every last man jack in these parts'll be out scouring the trails come sunup," he said. "For a hundred dollars, that Mantee has bought himself scores of gun hands who'll burn down *anybody* to git the boy back to him."

Hafey dashed sweat from his forehead and yanked his gun from leather. Both Trigger Bee and the Kid had to collar him to keep him

from wading back in there and calling Sabbath and Curly Mantee.

"Thing for us to do," suggested Bee shrewdly in that dry voice, "is to get on the trail first. Now if that captured member of the holdup bunch was to be set free—"

The Kid nodded. That was exactly his idea. From the front of the alley, they could look up the road to where one of the barroom's housemen stood guard in front of a little, sod-roofed shack. The broad limb of an eucalytus tree overhung the roof. Inside the rude cabin, they'd locked up the captured member of the holdup bunch.

Solo built himself a quirk with deft fingers. "Poke, if I was to bring Davy back here when I find him—"

Hafey broke in. "Here? You're locoed! Why this—"

"This place is the last place Mantee'd look for him or expect him," Solo finished for him. "The trails'll be stampeded with men from here; and to make a running fight with the boy—well, if I brought him in, is there any place we could hide him?"

Hafey said he could trust old Dutchman Peffer who owned the general store. He and Peffer had worked in the same spread down in the Panhandle years back.

"But you can't get the prisoner out with that guard watching," Bee put in. "The slightest noise and—"

The Kid smiled bleakly, that deadly gambling light coming into his sleepy eyes. He knew the odds were stacked against him and that he was bucking the whole game. Also, he knew that he might run into a cold deck before the last fresh shell had been thumbed into this devil's jackpot. But he was actually happy now that he was finally drawing cards for the showdown.

"There'll be plenty of noise to keep that guard busy," he murmured in

that soft voice. "Trigger, you an' Poke here're going to stage one danged, sky-busting, ring-tailed gun fight."

"'Gainst Mantee an' his spread?" asked Poke hopefully.

"Nope. 'Tween you an' Trigger yourselves! Yep. You'll be running a windy, faking it, o' course. But you two're to get out in that road when the time comes, act as orey-eyed as a coupla locoed bulls a-drooping a horn, and spray lead plenty. Then—"

Trigger Bee's mouth jerked nervously in a suddenly blanched face. "I couldn't do that!" Trigger cried shrilly.

Puzzled, the Kid stared at this Bee who was supposed to be such an all-fired gun-slinger. "Why you lily-livered tinhorn! You back-crawling, yella, shepherding lunkhead of a—"

Trigger Bee's eyes jerked wide with astonishment. "See here, you little whippersnapper," Bee began, voice high and quavering, then stopped short, swallowing hard. "I'll do it! I just go wild when I grab a gun and—all right!"

Trigger's head turned away quickly so that the Kid couldn't be certain about seeing something like tears welling in the other's eyes. Quickly he devised the plans. A few moments later, he slid out into the straggling single street and made his way down to the feed lot. The livery-stable man was nowhere about, doubtless down in the saloon with the mob that was shouting about how it was going to hit the trail for that hundred dollars reward come dawn.

The Kid saddled up his sturdy little paint, then Bee's bay mare. Leading both of them, he let down some bars in the rear of the lot and swung up behind the ramshackle buildings lining that side of the road.

He came abreast of the gaunt eucalyptus rearing against the dim sky by the building that was serving as a jail. Ground-anchoring the ponies in a stand of stunted cottonwoods, he cat-footed it forward until he saw the figure of the patrolling guard come out past the front corner of the building.

Pushing his coiled rope higher on his shoulder, the Kid gave the owl-hoot call twice. From some place down the road, a tinny piano banged out. Moonlight seeped through the leaden clouds, then was quickly blacked out. Twice more the Kid hooted. A second later, Poke Hafey's heavy voice boomed from down the road in a curse.

"I'll run you outa town, y' low-down buzzard!"

"Get your hardware out, mister! I aim to burn a brand on you and stamp you with a bullet that'll . . . that will . . . er—" That was Trigger Bee. Then a gun smashed.

In a flash, the Kid darted forward, crouched under the eucalyptus, had his rope snaked over a bough. Up and down the road, doors and windows slammed open. Boot heels rattled as men came running. A horse whinnied in terror. And two guns from opposite sides of the street were shattering the semiquiet of the night as Hafey and Trigger Bee faked their orey-eyed gun duel. The guard in front of the temporary jail ran down and got behind a tree for a better look. And the Kid promptly swarmed up the rope and dropped lightly atop the sod roof of the shanty.

As men eddied from doors to watch the two apparently drunken strangers smoke it out, the Kid went to work. Using a spur as a tool, he tore at the sod layer of the roof, crouched, shooting an occasional glance to the bullet-whipped street. But every-





JOHN SABBATH

body else's eyes were on the shooting fray as they ducked in and out of doorways, swearing and egging on the gunning pair.

The Kid's spur raked on a wooden pole. He reached down and ripped aside a loose board, almost sprawling backward as that too long frock coat caught his heel. Then he was peering down into the upturned face of the prisoner below.

"What's goin' on, fella?" the latter cried.

"You're going out of a plumb leaky jail," Solo answered ambiguously as he lowered the free end of his rope.

One arm in a sling and with a wounded leg, the outlaw was unable to snake up the rope alone. After he got it looped around him, the half-pint Kid was forced to hoist him. The strain was too much for the roof of the old place. It trembled, sagged in the center, then cracked inward with a snapping and the thud of falling sod clods just as the Kid got the prisoner up. Crouched behind a horse trough a few yards off, the guard half heard, turned, and started to come back.

"Y' yella polecat, come out in

the open where I can—" Poke Hafey bawled as he came backing along. A shot cut him short. And he went down, rolling in the dirt, groaning as if with the agony of a wound.

"Pretty play-acting, Poke, amigo," the Kid purred up on the roof.

For the sudden turn in the battle caught the jail guard's attention. He didn't want to miss the payoff. Death was too fascinating. He turned away from the shack again. Grabbing the bewildered prisoner, Solo swung him over the side by his good arm, dropped him. Whipping out his bowie, he lashed off the rope up near the bough, then jumped down beside the other.

"Fella," the latter husked. "Did Tarp send you to—"

Half dragging him, the deadly cool Kid hustled him rearward and out to where the ponies were ground-anchored. He'd left his own paint horse on the far side of the cottonwood clump, out of sight of the bay mare. He pushed the Deppa man up into the kak of the latter.

"Tarp wants to see you right away *pronto prontito*," the Kid bluffed. "He's waiting—you know where. So fog it!" And he cut the mare across the rump with the looped-up rope he held. The animal bolted off toward the river at the other side of the canyon. The stage was set.

## CHAPTER VII.

### RANSOM HIDE-OUT.

GRINNING at how smart Poke had been in going down as if wounded to make the gun fight look desperate, the Kid threaded his way through the tree trunks to his paint horse. He swung up as he heard somebody back on the road bawl at another hombre to get a doctor. Then he was spurring after the departing outlaw.

Moonglow, dim and unsteady, filtered through the sailing clouds above, and Solo saw the escaped prisoner's sombrero drop out of sight into a shallow gully ahead. Forced to ride cautiously lest the man ahead hear him, the Kid crossed the gully and moved through a sparse stand of pine. Farther on, the sandy dome-like mounds stood. Cursing bitterly, Solo reined in, afraid he'd lost his man. But he heard the splash of pony hoofs in water. Advancing, he caught the other limned in a sudden flow of moonlight on the far bank.

The outlaw had turned left, up the canyon instead of down toward the mouth where the holdup had been staged. Solo guessed at once that the wily outlaw leader had zigzagged among the hummocks and passed around the town with the kidnaped boy. Forging the sluggish stream, the Kid smiled tightly. This made it perfect. For the southing, gusty wind was blowing down the canyon, blanketing all sounds of pursuit from the rider ahead.

Solo settled to the grim, watchful trailing. The lights of the town vanished behind. A dog came out from the shed of a squatter's cabin and barked wearily. The trail the fleeing hombre had swung onto was little more than a faint track winding between scrawny sage and equally scrawny scrub and stunted pine, meandering around the scattered mounds. The latter bumped up more frequently and the brush became thicker.

One hand ever near one of his silver gun butts, the Kid pressed on as the canyon grew shallower, never knowing when he'd round one of those humps into a stream of spitting lead. He'd already shed the clumsy gray frock coat. Once he reined in just in the nick of time at the fringe of some black-charred

trunks to see the outlaw watering his horse at a spring in the hollow below.

The canyon didn't spread toward its head but branched off into irregular, half-hidden shoots and slashes that gutted its ragged walls. And as the night's blackness thinned into a jaundiced film, the former prisoner urged his horse out of a huge pot hole and into another. Watching from behind a huge boulder, Solo saw him quirt his mare into a hard gallop. Evidently the hide-out was close.

Wind-whipped rain peppered into the Kid's face as he urged his own paint pony ahead recklessly. A sheet of it wiped out sight of the man ahead for precious moments. The Kid discovered himself in another hump-studded waste. Then, behind one of those mounds, he saw a fresh-cut swath through the brush and trees where a horse had forced its way. Snapping a Colt up, he plunged through the drizzle into it. Beneath the close-knitted branches, the trail twisted and dropped away abruptly. And Solo found himself staring down into a tiny, foliage-roofed hollow at the outlaw camp.

A rough, three-sided lean-to was rigged between a couple of trees. Smoke from a little fire feathered upward and the aroma of frying meat and java drifted up to the hungry Kid. And his eyes popped momentarily at the picture below. For the big slouch of a gent he remembered from the holdup battle, Tarp Deppa himself, was on his knees, chuckling away, before the kidnaped youngster, Davy. And Davy held Deppa's big six-gun in both his chubby hands as he pointed it in play at the outlaw leader himself.

"Ha!" Deppa's voice floated up to the Kid. "You're sure one tough little fella! Sure. You'll be one

reg'lar rip-roaring gun fighter yet. I bet. Ha, ha, ha! Looka him try to cock the hammer. Him, he ain't afraid of nothing. He ain't bawled once yet," he told his two hands.

Then the escaped prisoner cried out as he swung into sight through the trees below. Forked the mare in among them. Even as they gathered around, throwing questions. Solo had yanked his second weapon and was moving down on them.

"Who let you out, y' danged lunk-head?" Deppa cried loudly. "Maybe-so it was a trick to—"

The Kid bolted right smack into the camp from around a gnarled tree trunk, both guns leveled. "Claw sky, gents! I got a plumb itchy trigger finger hangin' on both hands so don't prod me!" he drawled in a low voice.

The man Deppa had just ordered to scout back on the trail froze as he got halfway to the Kid. Deppa snorted and spat. The ex-prisoner slapped hands downward, then remembered his holsters were empty.

"I plumb hate making coyote chow outa any human critter," the Kid began again, face pale with cold fury as he surveyed the bunch of full-grown hombres who'd taken a half-grown child. "But—"

The third man, who'd been doing the cooking, suddenly swooped around with his arm and gathered little Davy in front of him against his chest. Then, dropping the coffee pot in a scalding cloud of steam over the embers, he grabbed out his hog-leg. It glinted dully in the half light.

The Kid almost triggered. But he couldn't take the chance with that child being used as a shield. It looked as if he held a busted flush. But, in the next split second, snarling a curse, Tarp Deppa had shot a paw inside his ragged shirt to a knife sheath. Faster than the eye, it came

out and the steel of a blade was flashing through the air.

The knife nailed the man claspng Davy in the side of the neck. Crimson spurted, and he keeled over from his still hunkered-down position like a stuck pig. And Davy, gripping the chief's gun, bravely ran over behind a tree and pointed it unsteadily out at the other lobos.

The man who'd been headed for the picket line tried for his hip holster. But the Kid sent a slug horneting past his ear. And the jasper lifted his hands then, the former prisoner pushing up his one unwounded arm.

"You want the boy too, eh?" Deppa demanded coolly. "Well, let me tell you one thing! You ain't a-going to take the younker and—"

"I'm going to take him back to his pa," the Kid said.

Deppa's eyebrows shot up. "His . . . his father's dead," he said, dropping his voice so the boy wouldn't hear.

"To the only father he knows," the Kid replied.

Deppa stared. "Well—I don't know. But if you hurt him even a little bit—I'll trail you plumb into Hell to cut out your heart!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE SILVER SKULL.

THEY were headed back toward Burnt Canyon, Davy, Solo Strant, and Deppa, the outlaw riding with his hands lashed and hooked to the saddlehorn before him. The Kid had decided to take him along as a hostage lest his men try to double around and dry-gulch him.

The one with the bowie blade in the side of his neck had died in a matter of seconds, without a quiver, face waxing in the thin drizzle. Solo had disarmed the other two but left



them their ponies, warning the former prisoner he'd be lynched on sight if he turned up in the town.

The latter had stood rigid, narrow face twisting viciously as he cursed out Deppa in a thin, tight voice. "Now we'll never get the ransom for the danged boy," he hurled as they'd pulled out. "If we'd killed him in the beginning, like I said—"

Now, as the three moved along at a handlope, little Davy clinging to the saddle of Trigger Bee's bay mare which the escaping prisoner had used, the Kid asked Deppa about that ransom talk. For half a mile, the outlaw rode in silence. Then he began to talk as he watched Davy's yellow head up front.

He told the story that Toby, once of Mantee's band, had related to him. Then how they'd held up Mantee and his man and taken the boy.

"We were going to hold him for ransom," Deppa admitted slowly as he shook water from the brim of his sombrero. "Yes-s. We were going to send a note into Mantee this morning telling him we wanted a thousand dollars for the boy. But—I didn't send it."

The Kid eyed him curiously as he passed over a quirky he'd built. "Why not?"

Deppa shrugged and grinned crookedly. "I—well, hell, I got to like him, I reckon. He's dead game. And I got to thinking how that Mantee'd probably kill him once Davy got his paw's dinero and—well, I didn't send the note. Match, fella?"

They pulled up at the spring the fleeing prisoner had used in the night. And the Kid came to a decision in the slanting drizzle. He told how Mantee had offered a reward, how gun snakes would be scouring the country.

Deppa spat his disgust. "Them two-bit buzzards? They'd dry-gulch

a gent for a dobie dollar! Look. Swing over to the river. We'll follow that down and be hid by the banks some of the time, anyway."

They went that way. When, from the far side of the canyon they sighted the town, the rain, that had been a little more than a heavy mist down there, had ceased entirely. A wan sun peeked through. And drifting layers of vapor beclouded the land like low-lying wraiths of mist.

Drawing his silver skull from his shirt pocket, the Kid fingered it happily. The set-up was perfect. Once they got little Davy in and hidden, it would be a cinch. All they had to do was to wait until Mantee and his hands gave up and left, then escort the boy to claim his inheritance. After that, and he tongued his lips at the thought, it would be his turn to settle with those human coyotes who dealt in human flesh.

They got to the lightning-scarred tree on the river bank where he'd agreed to meet Poke and Trigger Bee on his return. Trigger emerged from the overhanging bank at the base of the pine and rushed over to the tired child nodding in the saddle. Making suspicious choking noises, Bee clasped the boy in a great hug like a mother greeting its offspring. Outlaw Deppa blinked, then guffawed strangely.

"We got to slope," the Kid cried impatiently as he saw a pair of riders appear on a rise on the downtrail through an avenue in the dissolving mist. "Where's Poke?"

"I want Poke," Davy said firmly as he lifted his weary head. "I want Poke, Miss—"

Trigger Bee spoke up harshly and hurriedly, eyes shifting in sheepish fashion. "I shot—him."

"What?" the Kid blurted.

"Last night in the gun battle we staged," Bee explained. "I didn't

mean to . . . but . . . well, a bullet just went wild! I was aiming at the tree across the street from him and . . . well, he's upstairs in the Dutchman's store with a wound in his shoulder and . . . and—"

The Kid snorted sneeringly as Deppa guffawed again. "For a hell-raring gun fighter, Bee," the Kid flung coldly, "you act like a drunken Injun with his allotment money! We got to hustle. The mist is going fast."

Deppa spoke up. "You aim to slip the boy into town and hide him?" Solo nodded. Deppa gestured with his manacled hands. "We'll have to ride hell-for-leather to get in quick. Untie me—and I can carry the boy. He can't ride that fast."

The Kid hesitated, knowing he'd want his own gun hands free in case of trouble. He thought of letting Bee take care of the boy. But then he recalled how Deppa had cut down his own man, using the boy as a shield. You couldn't depend on the strange-acting Trigger.

Whipping out his knife, the Kid cut the outlaw free, and Deppa swung Davy over in front of him on the saddle. Then they spurred through the yellow water and pounded through the writhing steam at a dead gallop.

Almost before the Kid realized it, they were mounting the little slope to where Dutchman Peffer's horse shed stood behind his store. Pushing their ponies in, they hurried on foot to the back door. It was unlatched. Entering the storeroom in the rear, redolent of pork and flour and Manila rope, Bee called softly to the Dutchman. There was no answer.

Gun jutting before him, Solo edged open the door into the rear of the store. There was no sign of anybody. A half-filled bag of sugar stood be-

side the barrel at the counter, and a cold cigar stub rested by the bag. The Kid motioned to the stairs up the rear wall as he watched the front doors and the street beyond.

Tarp Deppa went leaping up silently with the boy in his arms, Bee after him, the Kid last and backing up with cocked Colts. The outlaw seized the latch of the door of the room tucked under the eaves. Too late, as it started to swing open, he heard it.

"Dum-diddy-dum-dum—"

The humming of Singer Frayne, Mantee's gun hand. Deppa remembered that humming from the time Singer had met John Sabbath at the barroom. With the boy in his arms, he couldn't draw. It was too late anyway as the widening aperture of the door revealed him. He simply whirled in his tracks to put his back between the boy and the gun-slinger.

"Dum-diddy—" And Singer Frayne's drawn gun, with which he'd been threatening the wounded Poke Hafey on his pallet in a corner, spurted a flame flash.

Creased across the side of the head by the slug, Deppa tumbled toward the stairs, a foolish, set grin on his big face. His hulk crushed down the advancing Trigger Bee in a heap. With a catlike leap, the Kid scrambled over them as Bee grabbed for the boy. Lead droned past his head. Diving flat, he jerked involuntarily as lead raked the upper length of his left arm.

Then, with that iron-nerved determination that had carried him through more than one tight, he got his right elbow propped up and triggered twice. Inside, Singer Frayne staggered back against the wall and slid to a sitting position like a wooden puppet, looking down sightlessly at the froth-fringed holes in his chest.



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After a moment, he rolled over on his face, gasped, and died.

The Kid rushed in. Over where the eaves met the floor, Dutchman Peffer the storekeeper lay, dead too, skull crushed like an eggshell by a gun-butt blow. The wounded Poke tried in vain to sit up with his stiffened body as he sighted the Kid. But Solo was already past him and peering out the small, round, dust-dulled window overlooking the wooden awning of the store. If those gunshots were heard—

Down the road, in front of the saloon, he made out a familiar figure, a man with his arm in a sling. He was staring from side to side, as if to locate the muffled gunshots, when a bunch of riders pounded in from the upper end, their horses' hoofs dulling the firing reports. That man was the prisoner, one of Deppa's band, that he'd helped escape.

The Kid sensed the set-up in a flash. Roiled at losing the ransom money, that snake had forked his cayuse straight down the trail to tip off Mantee that the boy had been stolen again and that his captor had headed back to Burnt Gulch.

That explained why Singer Frayne had entered the store on a tour of inspection. Curly Mantee and Sabbath knew Davy was back!

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE GUN TIGER'S BITE.

**M**ANTEE'S next move? That was the question as the four waited under the now sun-broiled roof of the store. Blankets had been tossed over the two dead figures. Little Davy sat solemn-faced beside Poke, holding his adopted father's big paw and telling him not to worry. Deppa, a rude bandage on his bullet-gouged head, swayed with dizziness even as he sat in the single chair. And Trig-

ger Bee strode up and down, gnawing at the fingertips of white gauntlets like a woman biting her nails.

Heeling out another quirky, the impatient Kid moved to the rear of the loft and peered out through the ventilation hole at that end. He saw a figure come scurrying out from between two buildings up a little from the store, run hurriedly through a couple of back yards, then turn to stroll with exaggerated nonchalance out toward the street. It was Mantee.

Solo wondered what the hairpin was up to. Sooner or later, the Kid figured, Mantee would have to try to blast his way up the stairs to the store loft. When he did— The Kid sniffed as he turned away. The breeze carried an odor like a campfire.

Minutes crept by. The Kid thought he caught a crackling sound, and Trigger Bee stopped walking abruptly. Then there was screaming out in the road. From the blurred window, the Kid saw a woman dash out of a house down from the store, a girl clasped in her arms. And the woman's hat smoked with burning embers.

"Fire! Fire!" the blended screams of many people came dully through the pound of boots to him even as sparks flew past the window out which he stared.

He felt Trigger Bee's panting beside him. Their eyes met. They knew. Mantee had started a fire on that side of the street on the windward side of the store. They'd be driven out like so many pack rats.

Trigger spoke with a strange calm the Kid had never noted before. "The one thing to do is save Davy."

The Kid nodded, grim-eyed. Stiffening himself against the throb of that bullet-lanced left arm, he took a blanket and immersed it in the

bucket of water beside Hafey. That would be for Davy. Then he and Trigger helped Poke to his feet. Deppa looked up from his chair, a little locoed from the shock of the slug against his skull.

"Trying to burn us out, huh?" he guessed though. He swayed to his feet, hauling at a holster. "We gotta get out. I won't fry to death, damn 'em! Let 'em gun me, but—"

Poke Hafey started to shove the boy forward. "They won't dare kill a child—and he can't burn! We gotta—"

But the Kid had glided to the head of the stairs, his own gun barrel threatening. "No. We stay as long as we can. They *can't* let the boy burn—without losing everything. We wait until they figure they got to get in at us to save him—the boy!"

Four pair of eyes stared bitterly into his, rebelling at the grim verdict. Then little Davy sat down on the up-turned water bucket as calmly as if waiting for the school bell to go home. Deppa lowered the gun that shook unsteadily in his hand. Trigger Bee nodded.

They didn't have long to wait. The flames literally raced through the dried-up timber of the shacks of the two-bit settlement, jumping from roof to roof. Staring from the window, Bee called that they had crossed the street above. Also that Mantee was waiting up the line with a bunch around him. The gun wolves of the canyon were still hungry for that reward. From the air hole in back, the Kid could see another bunch waiting out of gunshot and away from the searing heat back in the brush behind the town. The trap was closing.

Smoke began to eddy from the store below. The crackling grew louder, sharper-pitched. Soon they were choking for air, their eyes

smarting agonizingly. Staring through the haze. Solo spotted a little red snake of flame eating through the roof boards. From outside, there was a dull rumble as the inhabitants of the canyon fled with hastily assembled belongings while Mantee and his gun-slingers waited up beyond the flames.

"All right," the Kid cried chokingly at last. He saw Bee swathe Davy in the wet blanket; saw Poke, gripping a gun awkwardly in his left hand, stumble over to help the swaying Deppa. Then he spun around and began to fight his way down the smoke-thick stairs. He was going to be alone, single-handed against Sabbath and Curly Mantee and their hired guns.

He caught voices. Faintly, from the front of the store, broken snatches of words came to him. He recognized the flat voice of Mantee.

"Go in there—Sabbath! Go in an' gunsmoke 'em out—drive 'em down—er I'll— Want to shoot it out with me, instead? Wanta? Go in—then!"

And John Sabbath, with that strange, unholy fear of Mantee of which Toby had told Tarp Deppa, came storming in the front doors like a wild horse. In the satanic light of the licking flames that had penetrated one wall, his gold teeth glittered like the fangs of some hound from hell. Crouched near the foot of the stairs, the Kid threw up one gun. He was half strangled by the smoke fumes.

The draft from the opened front door sent streamers of flames flashing right at him. A shelf collapsed, and packages cascaded over his head as he involuntarily recoiled. Half out, he stumbled drunkenly and Sabbath's slugs went smashing into the wall beside his rocking head.

The plain, savage instinct of a gun

tiger ruled the blinded Solo then. He rushed straight at Sabbath, rather toward the spot where he'd last seen him. And his Colt roared even as a chunk of lead in his already wounded left arm half spun him. But he triggered twice. And dimly, through seared eyeballs, he saw Sabbath crumple, hot slugs in his belly.

Solo tried to rush past him but went to hands and knees from weakness. Framed in the fire glow outside, Curly Mantee let out a howl as he saw him and ran forward a few steps. His sombrero flew off, exposing his hair to the firelight. Driven by the blistering heat, the Kid was forced to advance toward the open air on his hands and knees.

Then a shower of sparks seemed to explode right in front of his eyes, and he could see nothing. And Mantee was advancing calmly, one arm shielding his head against the heat, to finish him. Solo's head lowered to the floor, one ear down. He heard Mantee's boot hit the first step, then the second. And the icy-nerved Kid lifted his gun and emptied it, three shots, at the spot whence the sound came.

Faintly, a howl of pain reached him. Somehow he reared and staggered out under the wooden awning. The air cleared his eyes some and he could just distinguish Mantee seated out in the road with a broken leg. The Kid's own bullet brand on his outstretched hand stood marked plainly in the glow of the flaming town.

The Kid realized Bee and the others were beside him. Trigger's gun pointed at those reward-hungry coyotes up the road. "Come on, you lowdown snakes!" Bee was howling shrilly. "Try and collect your reward from a dying man! Come on!"

But instead, they were backing

like whipped curs now that they saw Mantee, the hombre who'd bought them, at the mercy of his enemies. And Bee turned to herd the three men and the boy down the canyon away from the holocaust.

The reeling Solo turned back toward Mantee. "We can't let him burn to death—even if he is a snake," he muttered. "He—"

There was an inhuman screaming from the flaming doorway of the store. In it, John Sabbath reared on his knees. Shakily but determinedly, he pulled off his hat.

"You—Mantee—" he shrieked out through the noise of the crackling flames.

Then he drew a light .25, which was rigged in his hat crown, and leveled it, drilling Mantee, the man who'd held him in the thrall of fear, squarely through the chest. The next moment, the mortally wounded Sabbath was pinned under a burning beam, his bullet-scarred hand, also branded by the Kid, moving from under it for a brief moment and then dropping to the ground.

Down the trail, the battered Kid turned and clapped Trigger Bee's back with all the strength he had left. "Pardner, I called y' a heap of mean things. But I take 'em all back. I couldn't have handled them hired gunners of Mantee's—but you sure run a tough bluff on 'em. Yes-siree, amigo."

"A mighty tough one for a woman," Deppa said as he still gasped from the smoke. Then he pushed back Bee's sombrero and jerked off the red bandanna that bound her head.

Woman's brown hair tumbled down. And Solo recognized Sarah Clatterbee, the schoolmarm. Things came back to him then. "But that dance-hall girl who got me outa jail for you—" he began.







## PARD OF WILD BILL HICKOK

*Wild Bill Hickok could defend his  
amigos—even when he was dead!*

by BEN CONLON

THEY rode saddle to saddle along the narrow river trail that led to Red Pass, and the odd thing about them was this: Bill Perry, who had an eagle-swoop draw, wore no hardware at all; while Clem Okey, too old and too rheumatic and nearsighted to mix in a gun fight, packed

a holstered .45. Old Clem always had packed a six-gun, and always would. It was an emblem of great days long past.

"Wonder what time it is," Old Clem said. "We better make town before the gunsmith closes up, so's you can get yore Colt." The oldster

took out his watch, held the ancient key-winder a couple of inches from his hawkbeak of a nose, and snorted. "Be damned! It's stopped ag'in!"

"Told you not to open it last night when those sand eddies were blowing. You got some sand in the works, the way you did a couple times before." Bill Perry smiled tolerantly. "I wonder if you ever went a full day without looking at that inscription and staring at Wild Bill's picture inside? Here. Let me see it. If the main spring's not busted, and if there's not too much sand, maybe I can get it going again and set it by my one-bucker."

Old Clem blinked, squinted, handed the prized watch carefully to his young pard by its fancy carved four-inch leather fob. Old Clem always yanked out that watch on the slightest provocation. For on it was inscribed:

*To my young pard Clem Okey  
From James B. (Wild Bill) Hickok  
Deadwood, S. D., Aug. 1, 1876.*

Old Clem Okey had carried that watch ever since he had been Young Clem Okey—since the date of the inscription. He had slept with it under his pillow, when he had a pillow. In the lean years between Wild Bill Hickok's death and Clem's ownership of the present run-down little cattle spread in southern Arizona, Clem had gone without liquor and food, had stayed out of poker games, had stretched his blankets under the sky in chilly weather, when the sale of the watch would have meant chuck and shelter. To Clem Okey, Wild Bill Hickok was almost a religion. It was because Perry, slightly above saddle-tramp scale, was named Bill, and looked as Wild Bill Hickok had looked when a young man—tall, lath-lean, blue-

eyed, brownish blond—that he had been given a job on Clem Okey's two-bit spread in a poor season.

Bill Perry opened the watch as his horse slowed to an easy walk. A faded picture of Wild Bill was glued into the heavy silver back. Perry squinted into the works of the massive timepiece. As expected, some sand had blown into the mechanism when Clem had opened it last night.

"We'll tear into a brace of thick steaks at the White Front Rest'rant when we get into Red Pass," Old Clem said. "Matter of fact, steaks is what we were eatin'—Wild Bill an' me—when he give me this here timepiece."

Bill Perry grinned. He had heard the story many times, would hear it many more—he thought. Old Clem was warming up. He'd tell about the presentation of the watch. The story would veer around, probably, to go back to Abilene, in the summer of '71, when Clem was a youngster and Wild Bill was town marshal. He'd tell about the Novelty Theater and the Alamo Saloon, the hard-bitten trail-herd gangs, the fights, and the time that Wild Bill killed two road agents running in opposite directions along Texas Street—both in the same second.

"We were eatin' the steaks," Clem continued, "when Wild Bill lays down his knife and fork an' puts his hand in his pocket, brings out the watch and says: 'Clem,' he says, 'since we been pards and're certain to be pards for years, as we both got nine lives like all chaw-eared bobcats, I'm presentin' you this little trinket as a token o' my esteem.'"

Bill Perry squinted into the mechanism.

"Hell-roarin' days, those," Old Clem said. His craglike face sobered. "Seemed like fate that the next day—the very next day after



*he give me the watch*—Wild Bill was shot in the back by McCall. Seemed like fate, too, that I was ten-twelve mile away on the Black Hills Stage when that skunk McCall—”

*Wham!*

The rifle thwack came from the willows at the bend of the river—less than the length of a stake rope ahead. The heavy slug caught Old Clem squarely on the point of his breastbone, and he back-ended clear off his saddle. He hit the ground with his back torn half away. Old Clem Okey's ninth and last life had come to an end.

Bill Perry froze rigidly in his saddle for a moment from the shock of it. Then his right hand instinctively swept down toward his hip—the hip which carried no gun this day. Also by instinct, Bill Perry dropped the watch down inside his boot, and flung sidewise from the saddle as a long-necked rider roweled his cayuse out of a big willow clump ahead, rifle barrel still curling smoke.

Bill hit the ground, lunged for the six-gun in Old Clem's belt. And the swinging barrel of the bushwhacker's rifle clubbed him on the head just as Bill's fingertips brushed the cedar butt of Clem's .45. He keeled over, dazed.

The killer prodded him for a hide-out weapon, moved swiftly over to Clem's body, and removed the oldster's .45, wallet, and the scatter of silver in his pockets.

Through a haze of hate and pain, Bill Perry noted the long neck, the odd hair like the coat of a certain type of roan mustang, the light-agate eyes—killer's eyes—that looked so weird set in that sun-darkened face. Somewhere, he had seen that face.

“Know me, eh?” the agate-eyed killer rasped, ramming the rifle muzzle against Bill's chest. “Well, I

wanted the old buzzard's horse, an' now I got it.”

Roan Goucher! The name clicked in Bill's brain now. He had seen that face, with the name under it, on reward posters all through Pima, Santa Cruz and Cochise counties. Roan Goucher, who had escaped from the State Pen over at Florence months before. This was the rattler who had held up the Red Pass Stage, killed the driver and shotgun guard, and then hightailed it over the border with a fortune in gold from the stage.

Goucher had written letters to Clem, offering big prices for the horse that was the pride of Clem's life, next to that watch. There wasn't a better horse in the Southwest. In his last letter, Roan Goucher had gone so far as to promise that the money for the horse would be posted with the *alcalde ordinario*, or municipal judge, of the Sonora town where Goucher had his hide-out. In that scrawled letter there had been, too, a veiled threat that made dauntless Old Clem Okey laugh.

“The old buzzard had his chance,” Goucher snarled. “He didn't take it. That was *his* hard luck. Move my saddle onto his horse, fast!”

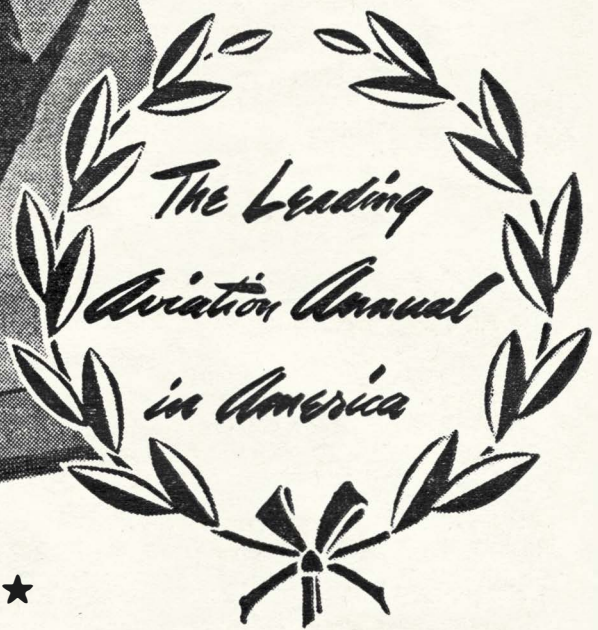
Bill Perry arose slowly, weak as a day-old calf, and dazed. His eyes narrowed slightly. “You killed my pard,” he said. “*You.*”

“I'd salivated yuh, too, except yuh wasn't packin' iron, an' I need yuh for a chore,” Goucher said, sneering. “Shove leather on my new horse—pronto!”

Silently, Bill Perry stripped the shabby hull from the back of Clem's horse. This horse, the watch and memories, were about all Old Clem had left in life. In corral or on the trail, the horse's glossy black coat never roughed up, but always lay



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sleek and prime. Its four white stockings were of an even length. The star on its forehead was five-pointed and almost perfect; not just the irregular blotch so often called a star by horsemen.

The rifle spoke suddenly behind Bill. He whirled sharply. But he wasn't the target of the big .45-70 cartridge. The blowing, sweat-streaked dun of the cold-blooded killer slewed around, collapsed from the bullet's terrific impact.

Goucher backed away, agate eyes cold and hard. The rifle spat again. This time Bill's cayuse dropped. The little claybank kicked convulsively just once, then stiffened out.

"Yuh figure to chase me, yuh'll do it afoot," the bushwhacker said.

Bill Perry looked at the rifle, said nothing.

"You go see Ed Cameron of the Cross C spread an' tell him I ain't waitin' no longer," Goucher ordered. "I wrote him to send me five thousand simoleons. He knows where to send it. Tell him if he don't come through pronto"—he laughed harshly and glared at Old Clem's body—"yuh see what *this* old buzzard got for not follerin' orders."

Bill Perry leaped like a cougar, tried to get out of line from the gun muzzle—which reared like a rattler's head, and struck just about as fast.

Lightning crackled inside Bill Perry's skull. He felt himself falling—

## II.

Wheels creaked. There was the rhythmic thud of horses' hoofs on grass-sheathed turf. Bill Perry opened his eyes. Dusk was falling. He was lying in some sort of wagon. He had been found unconscious and picked up by some trail-herd crew, plainly enough. Through the rear of the vehicle he could make out a

remuda of horses and, farther back, in a froth of dust, many cattle, and cowmen with bandannas over their heads, riding in trail positions.

Bill's Stetson was missing, his shirt bloody, and the pockets of his blue Levis had been turned inside out. Evidently Goucher had gone through the pockets as he lay unconscious. But the boots hadn't been disturbed. In the right boot was Old Clem's watch, which Bill retrieved and put into the pocket of his checkered shirt, buttoning the flap—and in the toe of each woolen sock the currency and gold pieces remained: thirty-odd dollars in all. The experienced Clem Okey had shown Bill Perry that handy little trick of safeguarding rock-bottom money.

The puncher swiveled his glance presently, made out a long dim form on the other side of the wagon. It was covered by a stained blanket.

"Clem!" Bill Perry muttered. His jaw tightened.

The way led along the Little Yellow River for a time, then cut east over a grassy bench, and turned into Red Pass Road. Dimly, to the southwest, Bill could see the tree-covered slopes.

Sudden rage welled within him. The wagon was rolling too slowly to the town of Red Pass. It would reach town safely with old Clem's body, but meanwhile Roan Goucher was getting away toward the border.

Mexico—that was Goucher's haven. That was where he would live like a wealthy ranchero, swilling liquor, eating the best, cavorting with his Mexican *dulces*, forking Old Clem's prize horse—all in perfect safety. Badajos, Sonora—that was the postmark on Goucher's letters to Old Clem. Badajos, fifty miles or so below the border. Goucher had made a number of quick profita-



ble raids into United States territory, and darted back to safety.

Bill Perry's blue eyes gleamed. It was dark now, and to the southwest the young ranch hand could see a flicker of light. That was Pablo Moreno's cabin. Pablo was friendly, had a small spread, might lend him a horse and a gun.

Quietly, Bill Perry slipped out through the rear of the wagon, crouched in the shadows. The wagon creaked on. It would reach Red Pass with Old Clem's body.

It was full midnight when Perry reached the humble little shelter with its drunken chimney. The smell of Pablo's sheep was strong, but in the circumstances he didn't mind it. Though sheepmen usually hit the blankets early, Pablo evidently was still up, for yellow lamp-light spilled through the doorway.

Pablo Moreno came to the door as he heard the stomp of booted feet across the mesquite-railed gallery. He peered through the semigloom.

"Beel!" he exclaimed. "Come een, amigo! I—what 'as 'appen? The blood! You 'ave no sombrero!"

"I'm in one hell of a hurry," Bill said. "I want—"

He broke off, gazed inside. Pablo had a visitor. Buck Marley, a roustabout grub-line puncher who'd been in jail for dry-elking, who sponged on the hospitality of men like Pablo.

"Howdy, Perry," Marley said as Bill came in. "Got anything on yore hip?"

"Only an empty holster," Bill told him. He turned to Pablo. "I'd like to get a horse and a six-gun, Pablo. I'll pay you what dinero I've got."

Pablo was distressed. "I 'ave only the shotgun, Beel. And the *caballo*, she die from the bite of the rattler. I 'ave the mule, though. But—first you must eat."

"Yes," Bill said. "And eat fast."

Pablo dished up mutton, frijoles and coffee; then he went out to saddle the mule.

Bill Perry didn't favor shotguns for this kind of excursion. As he ate, his eyes flickered toward the holstered six-gun on Buck Marley.

Shrewdly, Marley pulled his gun and laid it on the table. "This piece of iron's for sale. Ten bucks," he said.

"Fine." Bill pulled his boots off, took the money from his socks. He put the boots back on, tossed a golden eagle on the table.

Marley bit his lip when he saw the rest of the money.

"That is—the price'll be twenty," he amended.

Bill Perry's eyes narrowed slightly as he tossed another gold eagle onto the table.

"Listen, pard," Marley wheezed, "yuh seem to need a lead-chucker right bad. I've changed my mind. For this hogleg and the shells in it, it'll be thirty bucks." He leered.

Bill Perry arose, took a couple of steps forward, jerked Marley toward him and slammed a rock-hard right to the jaw. Marley grunted, fell on his face—out cold.

"That's *my* price, in part," Bill said. He picked up one gold eagle, left the other.

"*'Sta bueno, Beel!*" Pablo said approvingly from the doorway. "I give you a sombrero."

Bill took the sombrero, strode out the door. He saw Buck Marley's horse ground-anchored in the darkness. He could use it, but he'd never stolen yet, even from a coyote like Marley.

"Adios, Pablo," Bill said, stepping up onto the mule. "I'm owin' you plenty, and I won't forget."

"Eet ees *nada*—nothing. *Vaya con Dios, amigo!*"

## III.

Bill Perry headed for the road that led to the Mexican border town of Jubilo. There was a strong possibility that Goucher would stop there overnight on his way to Badajos, which was more than a half day's ride farther down into Sonora. Minutes counted. Bill took short cuts.

It was close to dawn when he saw the lights of Jubilo ahead. It was what cowmen called a jamboree town. Bill recalled the time when Old Clem, on his seventieth birthday, had danced briskly with a lively señorita to prove that there was life in the old boy yet. Bill's face went grim.

He put the mule into a lope as he reached the tablet that marked the international boundary line.

But he had gone no farther than the dirty northern outskirts of the town when he sensed something strange in the air, something menacing. There was no genial greeting of "*Buenas días, señor!*" from the old Mexican who passed him on a burro. Instead, the old Mexican shot him a black look, and Bill thought he heard the fighting word "gringo" snarled under the Mex's breath.

The black looks of hatred continued as he forked the mule down Main Street, dismounted before the first cantina and entered the place. On account of the hour, only two men, both Mexicans, were drinking there. But these two glared at Bill, suddenly began a whispered conversation in sibilant Spanish, left their drinks and slipped out.

One of the dancing girls ran over to the American. "Beel!" she exclaimed in a low tone. "Are you loco, coming into thees town at such a time? Go back over the border. You weel be keeled! Go! Queeck!"

Then she burst into a rapid Span-

ish explanation. Shortly after midnight, a gang of American cowpokes had loped into town, liquored up, danced and fought—and killed! The rurales had come into the cantina. In the gun fight, one of the Americanos had been killed, but the cowpokes had drilled three of the rurales—and two of these had died. Then, when the whole town turned out to mob them, the punchers had high-tailed it back over the border.

The girl lapsed back into broken English: "You must go queeck! No Americano ees safe! Even that Americano who spend so much dinero here—the one ees call Roan Goucher, the one the cowboys start the argument weeth—even he could not be safe here, because he ees Americano. To save hees life from the loco crowd, he 'ave to ride back over the border!"

"Back over the border? Roan Goucher?" Bill Perry cursed under his breath. If he hadn't taken those short cuts he might have run into Goucher!

Loud shouts sounded in the street. The girl pushed him toward the door and the chance for escape. Bill heard the thud of horses' hoofs, saw several riders speeding toward him—one of them, in rurale uniform, was far in the lead. Those two Mexicans had left the cantina to rouse out their townsmen!

The Mexican in the lead raised his carbine, fired. The slug sheared through the high crown of Bill's steeple sombrero. He knew it was too late to escape now—on a mule, at any rate. As the mounted Mex raised his rifle again, Bill reached for his six-gun, flung himself flat on the sidewalk. The bullet whined overhead. Then Bill aimed, squeezed trigger. The Mexican sagged in his saddle, slid to the ground, and writhed there with a shot through

the shoulder. His spirited horse continued to gallop along.

Bill headed the animal off for just an instant, caused it to rear back scarily. And in that broken second the American puncher caught the reins and sprang into the saddle. Bill had no spurs. He used the romal—a quirt braided to the end of the reins—to put the horse into high speed.

There were wild shouts from the mob of Mexicans only a few rods to the rear. Lead whined and whistled as he bent low and lashed his mount with the romal. He sent a couple of quick shots back over their heads. It didn't stop them. Lead nicked the heel of his right boot. Then—

Bill rounded a corner, and the horse settled into a fleet smooth run. Bill looked back, saw a Mex leveling a rifle from the door of an adobe hut. The Americano triggered twice, and the Mex folded.

He was across the border in a few short moments. Looking back, he saw the other horsemen pull up, out-distanced. Bill kept his horse on at the run. Some night, if he lived, he'd send it back to Jubilo. But now—it came to him suddenly that he had but one shell left in his gun. Marley hadn't offered his belt for sale, so Bill hadn't taken it. There'd been only a couple of spares in the belt anyway.

Fifty to one, Goucher would try to get back into Mexico as soon as possible. And since he couldn't go back through Jubilo, he would cut eastward at the trail that angled out from Steeple Butte, then swing to the southeast to escape the hostile town. He would be safe enough back in Badajos, which was too far south to be visited by American punchers full of redeye, and where there was no anti-American feeling.

Accordingly, Bill Perry swung his horse eastward at Steeple Butte. He

knew every slope, draw, back trail and *canoncita* of this wild, rugged country. Sooner or later he'd pick up Goucher's trail.

He read trail sign like an Apache. And his blood pounded with savage exultation when he cut Goucher's sign a few minutes later. He quirted the horse and his jaw tightened.

#### IV.

Dusk was near when he caught his first sight of the killer. From a high crest, well screened by trees, Bill could discern the rider in the deep-cut canyon trail far below. He could not actually tell that it was Goucher, but the easy, elastic, tireless lope of that black horse seemed almost certainly to be that of Clem's prize animal. Bill knew that deep canyon trail. Knew it better, probably, than Goucher did. It curved around like a horseshoe. And by taking the top trail, which was almost a straight line, he could gain miles on Goucher; could be waiting at the mouth of the canyon, in fact, before Goucher reached it.

Bill Perry slapped his horse with the romal. It sped on.

As he reached the south end of the curving canyon and dismounted, Bill could hear the speedy click of hoofs along the stone bottom and, later, the clicks in slower tempo. Goucher must be leading his horse up the hill at the canyon mouth.

Bill Perry eased the six-gun from under the belt of his Levis, put it back so it wouldn't catch when he went for it. He was at a slight disadvantage there—it was easier to draw from a low-slung holster.

Seconds ticked by. A minute. Two. Three. The slow, measured click of steel against stone grew louder, nearer. Then Roan Goucher and the black horse came into view,



Bill Perry walked forward slowly, on the balls of his feet.

Goucher stopped abruptly, peered through the first faint tinges of dusk.

"Howdy, amigo," Goucher said uncertainly, not recognizing Bill in the Mex sombrero.

"Did you say amigo?" Bill Perry asked icily.

Roan Gouched stiffened.

"You shot the guard and the driver on that Red Pass Stage from ambush—and you shot an old man the same way yesterday," Bill Perry said. "Well, you can't bushwhack this time."

"So—so it's *you!*" There was a quaver in Goucher's voice, and the lump moved in his long turkey neck.

"It's me," Bill Perry said. "I'm giving you a chance you never gave anybody. Go for it, Goucher."

"Aw, hell," Goucher whined. "You can take me in. I'll take my chances on standin' tria—"

Goucher's hand was as fast as his voice was treacherous. His right hand flashed down to pearl-handled .45 with the speed of a rattlesnake's head. And his treacherous pretense of surrendering had given him a split-second advantage. His gun cleared leather with that split-second margin, roared the split second ahead of Bill Perry's gun—for Bill was slower than his usual whiplash speed because of the high awkward position of the gun in his pants belt.

As Bill pulled trigger, there was a great roar in his ears—the roar of Goucher's gun, aimed squarely at Bill's heart. Bill keeled over backward, with the feeling that John L. Sullivan had smashed a right to his blood pump, and he hit the ground hard! There was a roaring in his ears—but this time it was a roar as of the distant pounding of a sea. The ground seemed to reel under him

drunkenly, in sickening waves.

After a minute or more of this, Bill's dazed head cleared somewhat, and he sat up, slowly. He blinked, stared down at himself. Then, slowly, he arose, an awed look in his eyes, and staggered over to Goucher. The renegade was sprawled on his back, dead, a great gory hole in the left side of his chest from Bill's slug.

Quietly, Bill Perry looked up at the night sky. For long moments he looked. Then he gazed down at the left side of his own chest and, slowly, removed the heavy silver watch from his shirt pocket. Except that it didn't look so much like a watch any more. Its massive silver back was spread, badly mushroomed—as was the lead from Goucher's .45—and the works were crushed beyond all recognition. And the crystal was broken—against Bill's ribs. Those ribs were sore, bruised, maybe broken—but Bill Perry was alive, thanks to—

Bill struck a match, looked at the back of the badly spread case. Some of the inscription remained. Just the two words: *Hickok* and *Deadw*, with the *w* barely discernible.

"Dead, Wild Bill—yes," Bill Perry muttered. "Dead—but you . . . you've lost one pard and you've made a new one. Even dead, you fight for your pards—if only on the defense. You backed my play, you saved my life, Wild Bill. *Gracias, señor.*"

Quietly, Bill Perry moved over to the great black horse.

"We'll move on to town now, *caballo*. A friend of ours is due to be buried with a splayed watch by his side, and I've an idea he'd like to have you, me, and the ghost of his first pard all attending."

Like it? Want more? Write and ask the Range Boss.

THE END.

# STEEVILLE'S THANKSGIVING SQUABBLE

by E. A. BRININSTOOL

Come a question here in Steerville that caused worry in our ranks,  
And it all concerned Thanksgivin'—that 'ere day we all give thanks.  
For the Big Chief of this nation had decreed by printed word  
That the twenty-first was proper to consume the festive bird.  
But Slim Bates he up and argued that the time WE'D celebrate  
Was a week beyond what Roosevelt had decreed the proper date.

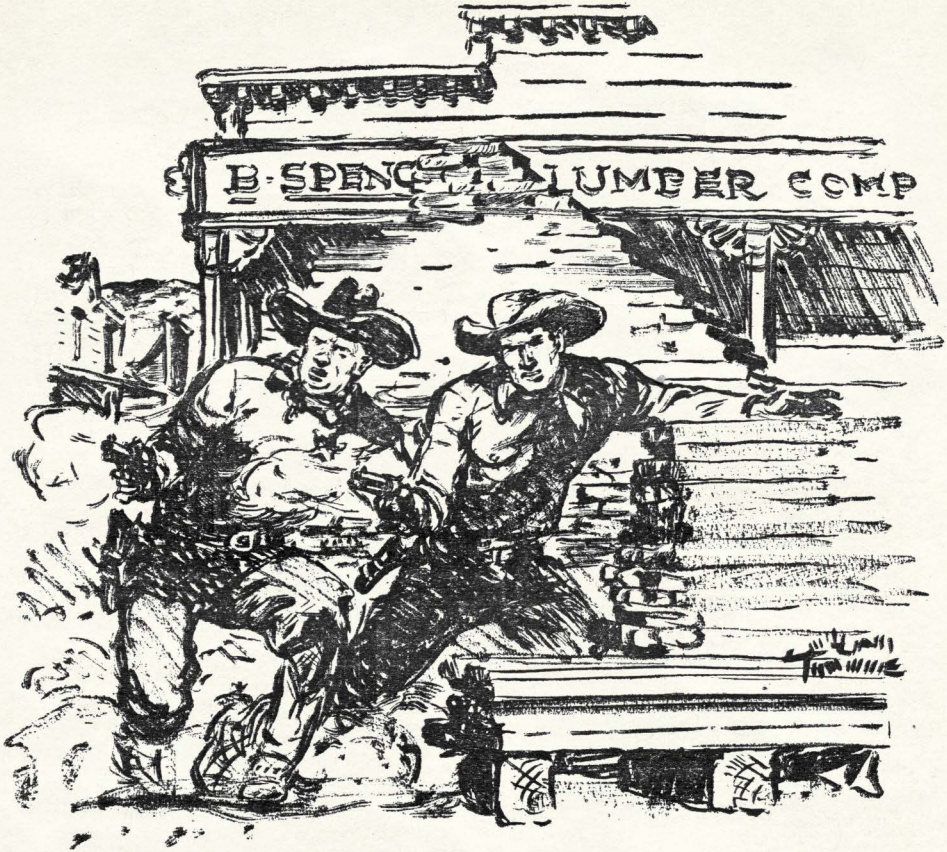
We had jawed about the matter, and debated pro and con,  
There was lively argumentin', but no shootin' had been done.  
Smoky Thomson up and hollered, "Changin' dates is jest a crime!"  
And our skulemarm kept a-yelpin' for the old Thanksgivin' time.  
Peg-leg Pete and Split-lip Hawkins was a-straddle of the fence,  
While the Bear Flat delegation, one and all, was in suspense.

Old Backsaddle Pat sed nothin' till the others all got through,  
Then he yawned, "I tell you, fellers, all this scrappin' jest won't do.  
We hev argued on this question till our throats is raw and sore,  
And we ain't a-gittin' nowhere, but are scrappin' more and more!  
Now I love Thanksgivin' dinners—but the date don't bother me,  
But this dern thing must be settled with no gunplay here, by gee!"

Parson Simpson smiled: "Beloved, let there be no worldly strife;  
We can surely get this settled without usin' gun or knife.  
I am mighty fond of turkey—both the dark meat and the light,  
And I'll make a proposition that will end this foolish fight.  
Let us celebrate BOTH Thursdays—let us have two eatin' sprees—  
Everybody who's in favor, holler 'I' right pronto, please!"

Waal, it only took a minnit for the votin' of the crowd,  
And they backed the proposition, and in langwidge good and loud!  
Even old Two-fingered Williams—him from down on Poker Flat,  
Shouted, "Bully fer the parson! On that deal I'm standin' pat!"  
So we're havin' two Thanksgivin's, though it means a lot of work,  
But we're thinkin', here in Steerville, 'twill be harder on the turk!

And that's the way the Range Boss feels, too. So we're having *two* Thanksgiving numbers this year. Don't miss "White Wolf Talks Turkey," by Hal Dunning, in next week's issue.



## SIX-GUN LEGACY

### PART V

**Hap Kingman, heir to hatred and vengeance, finds the answers to his trouble—and faces boothill.**

by **WALKER TOMPKINS**

#### *The Story So Far:*

After being framed and sentenced to hang for his apparent revenge killing of an honest rancher named Siebert, **HAP KINGMAN** is rescued from jail by his surly and worthless foster brother, **EVERETT KINGMAN**.

Everett makes Hap go to the interior of Mexico and bring back several saddlebags full of drugs from the hunch-backed Señor Giboso. Delivering the drugs to a Mexican named Fernandez in the Mexican half of Mexitex town, Hap reveals to some of the Mexican's guests that Fernandez is a smuggler. To throw suspicion from himself, Fernandez captures Hap and delivers him to the U. S. Border Patrol officers.

A hang mob, goaded by **RUSS MELROSE**, crooked Mexitex lawyer, is about to string Hap up when he is snatched away by some mysterious masked riders. His deliverer this time is **ANNA SIEBERT**, daughter of the slain rancher. She tells Hap she knows he is innocent of murder, but that he's still a dirty smuggler. She lets him go on his promise to get out of the country and stay out.

But Everett again captures Hap, takes him back to the cavern below the Rio. Señor Giboso appears. There is a fight. Giboso's mask is torn away, as well as his hunched back—which really consists of packs of drugs—and Giboso is revealed as Lawyer Russ Melrose.



*Hap escapes, takes one of Melrose's boots with him, takes it to Anna Siebert's ranch and fits it in the clay-hardened track of the real killer. The boot fits. It proves Melrose is the real killer of Anna Siebert's father.*

*Hap has heard that Melrose intends to rob Joe Ashfield, Anna's trail boss, who is returning from a cattle drive with a large sum of money. Anna will use that money—if she gets it—to pay off a mortgage Melrose holds on her ranch.*

*Hap goes to meet Ashfield at a distant town and act as his bodyguard; Hap is armed with the six-gun left him by Dev Hewett, an outlaw Melrose has previously told him was Hap's real father.*

*On the way, Melrose, dressed in Mex garb, ambushes the two punchers. Ashfield is killed and Melrose steals Anna's money from Ashfield's saddlebag.*

*Then Melrose shoots Hap's horse out from under him. Hap is pinned under the horse. His leg is broken and he is unconscious. Melrose leaves him there for dead and rides away.*

*A hungry buzzard is poised to attack Hap as he regains consciousness.*

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### SIERRA SECO PROSPECTOR.

DIMLY, above the steady tomtomming of blood in his eardrums, Hap Kingman heard the muffled report of a shot.

With the crash of sound, the pain-racked cowboy was aware of the fact that the gaunt buzzard astride his shoulder had been miraculously snatched away.

Twisting his head about so that one cheek ground against the hot rubble under his head, Hap Kingman saw the black *zopilote* bouncing wildly amid a flutter of bloody feathers, a few feet away. Like a chicken beheaded on a chopping block.

Only then did the half-dazed puncher realize that it had been a bullet, smashing through the scrawny body of the bird of prey, that had knocked the buzzard to one side.

Uttering harsh squawks, the buzzard finally flopped over on its back, blood guttering from a wound that had torn through its entrails. The huge wings beat feebly, and then the buzzard relaxed, its long-clawed talons slowly opening and closing like human fingers as death relaxed tendons.

The sound of the shot filled the air with a dozen or more of the shrieking buzzards, who had been clawing at the hide of the dead horse which pinioned Hap Kingman to the ground.

Grating boots on gravel made the cowboy turn his head the opposite direction.

Physical and nervous exhaustion were bogging at the cowboy's senses, but his dimming vision made out the form of a gaunt, bony man stalking toward him, a smoking six-gun in one bony fist, a flop-eared burro following him at the end of a rope.

The hombre's shadow fell across Kingman's face, as the stranger thrust his Colt into a worn half-breed holster buckled low on a bowed thigh.

"You're in a hell of a fix, ain't you, cowboy?" greeted the newcomer, in a high-pitched voice like a clarinet with a squeaky reed. "I figgered you for daid, when I seen that turkey buzzard fixin' to tear into you. I was figgerin' to bury you."

Hap Kingman tried to find his voice, but it was impossible. He had difficulty in focusing his eyes on the stoop-shouldered old codger standing beside him.

His last conscious memory was a picture of the old-timer—a kindly face, brown as leather and adorned with a stringy waterfall mustache, under a flop-brimmed Stetson; a caved-in chest, arms with whipcord muscles, and warped legs clad in patched and faded blue Levis.

Then all went black, as the man tried to reassure him:

"Don't worry, son. You're safe as in God's pocket, now that I've found you—"

The hombre was a prospector, as evidenced by the pickax and shovel and pair of canteens which hung on the outside of a canvas-wrapped, diamond-hitched pack on his burro.

The prospector was one-eyed, his left eye socket being a screwed-up, empty slit under a craggy brow. But the hardrock miner's left eye was blue as chipped turquoise, and it was busy.

The prospector, bred to reading sign, had no difficulty in sizing up what had happened here. And, in the habit of men who live alone in the desert with no one to talk to but themselves or their animal companions, the wizened old hombre vouchsafed his opinion to the inattentive burro:

"Gertrude, offhand I'd say this here hoss sot foot in a prairie-dawg hole an' stumbled. This here cowpoke was prob'ly dozin' in the saddle, an' got pinned down by one laig so he couldn't move."

The prospector squatted down, squinting at the horse's withers. Flies were swarming around the bullet wound which had killed the horse.

"Reckon this cowboy figgered his hoss' leg was broke, so he shot the hoss," deduced the prospector, stepping over Kingman's inert body. "That left him out o' luck, not bein' able to pull out from under the— Oh-oh!"

The oldster broke off with an oath as he saw that Hap Kingman's arms were tied behind his back.

"Gertrude, I'm thinkin' that somebody *else* must've shot this feller's hoss," he told the burro. "Now, you suppose this Jasper was an outlaw?

Else why'd he be tied up thisaway? Mebbe some sheriff lost him—"

With a pocketknife, the prospector cut loose Kingman's bonds. Then, salvaging the longest end of the lariat, he tied it to the horn of Kingman's saddle.

The other end of the lariat he tied to the packsaddle of the burro.

"Now, Gertrude, it's up to you to shift that hoss' carcass so I can pull that cowboy out from under," instructed the old man. "Wouldn't be surprised ifn his laig's broke, or badly bruised. An' he's been lyin' thar two, three days mebbe."

It took the combined strength of the sturdy little jenny and the prospector's wiry muscles to shift the dead weight of the pony so that Hap Kingman's trapped leg could be freed.

The prospector made a clucking sound with his tongue as he unbuckled Kingman's chaps, slit his overall leg and inspected the discolored shin.

"Broke a bone, sure as hell," muttered the prospector soberly. "An' he's about tuckered out from thirst. Reckon he needs water, much as anything."

From his own canteen, the old desert rat sloshed a quantity of brackish water over the cowboy's head.

As soon as Kingman had revived sufficiently for the oldster to cradle his head on his lap, the prospector let him sip several swallows of water.

"That's all for now," said the desert-wise oldster. "Cain't risk you gettin' sick from overloadin' your stummick with *agua*. First off, I got to rustle a splint an' set that laig o' yourn."

Hap Kingman was fully conscious by the time the oldster had returned from a brief hunt on the surrounding hillside, carrying with him some mes-

quite limbs which he had chopped off with an ax.

Dusk was falling, and the cool breeze of the desert was soothing to the cowboy's flushed temples and the raw, swollen wrists where Melrose's ropes had chafed the flesh.

"Reckon I owe my life to you, stranger," the cowboy said gratefully. "What you fixin' to do? Set my leg?"

The prospector nodded.

"Call me Allen, busky. One-eyed Allen. Lost one lamp in a minin' accident when I was a kid, an' I been called One-eye ever since."

Allen chuckled as he saw Kingman eying the mesquite splints he was flattening with his jackknife.

"Son, if you think I can't doctor you, you're mistaken. I sot my own busted laig onct, by myself, with not even whiskey to sooth my nerves. That laig's gone too long without attention now, an' it's a two-day trip to Marfa with you the shape you're in. I got to fix that laig hyar an' now."

Merciful unconsciousness spared Hap Kingman untold agony as the fractured bone was pulled into place. When he recovered consciousness once more, it was to find that night had enveloped the badlands, and his leg was firmly bound with strips of rag and firmly splinted.

"I'm loadin' you on my burro, son," One-eye Allen told him, as he lifted the cowboy's hundred and eighty pounds with a lithe ease that belied his scrawny frame. "I got a shack over in the Sierra Secos, about ten mile from hyar. I got whiskey an' a good soft bed for yuh."

Hap Kingman had little recollection of the long night's journey back into the trackless wilderness.

Lashed with rope to Gertrude's back, the cowboy made the trip with

as much comfort as he could have expected under the circumstances.

A fever had set in by the time One-eye Allen reached the tiny rock shack which he had built at the far end of a shadowy canyon, well off the faint Mexitex trail.

The cowboy was dimly aware of his benefactor lifting him off the burro, jackknifing him over one scrawny shoulder, and carrying him into the shack.

There, on a buffalo hide stretched over a straw-tick mattress, Hap Kingman lapsed into a stupor, his brow burning with fever.

After stabling his burro, One-eye Allen busied himself with necessary preparations for taking care of his patient.

He forced a few swallows of whiskey down the cowboy's throat, to fortify him against the grueling ordeal of the fever. Then, after heating water in a blackened kettle at his fireplace, Allen carefully stripped off the cowboy's clothing and bathed the puncher's chafed muscles.

It was while hanging up Kingman's shirt that One-eye Allen dropped the nickel-plated star contained in the pocket. The old prospector studied the star's inscription by lamplight, and nodded with satisfaction.

"A deputy sheriff, eh?" he grunted. "Somethin' went wrong, son, for you to have been tied up an' left to die out there on the Mexitex trail."

Covering the slumbering cowboy with a faded army blanket, One-eye Allen stretched himself out on a pile of gunny sacks on the floor, and fell asleep—

Throughout the following day the cowboy babbled in delirium, his fever raging.

But One-eye Allen, making a closer inspection of the puncher's in-



jured leg, was relieved to find that no infection had set in. The fever was due to exhaustion and exposure, and one look at Kingman's splendidly muscled torso told Allen that the cowpuncher was in no immediate danger. Around midnight the fever broke.

It was noon the second day after his removal to Allen's shack that Hap Kingman was able to partake of nourishment.

"You don't have to tell me what happened out there on the desert, Hap," said the old prospector, stoking his corn cob pipe and seating himself beside the cowboy's bedside. "What happened was yore business. Only I'm glad I happened to be prospectin' in yore neighborhood. That buzzard was fixin' to spile yore face for keeps, when I drifted up to investigate."

The cowboy grinned. For the first time, his head was free of the dull, splitting ache which had accompanied the period of fever.

"I can't ever repay you for this, Allen," he said gratefully. "How long I been here?"

"Two days, Hap." The oldster lit his pipe with a coal from the fireplace, and returned to the bedside. "An' I hope you ain't in any hurry to be dustin' yonderward, son, because it'll take six weeks at least before you can walk on that laig—let alone fork a bronc."

Kingman shrugged. Waiting for a broken leg was nothing, when he realized that only by a lucky break of providence was he alive.

"So you know my name's Hap! I didn't realize I introduced myself. Was I ravin' loco durin' them two days?"

Squinting through blue tobacco smoke at the puncher, One-eye Allen shook his head.

"You didn't interdooce yoreself,

Hap. I called you Hap because I figgered mebbe that was yore name."

The cowboy eyed his benefactor with sharp interest.

"But it's an unusual name," he said. "Funny you'd strike on that name to call me."

One-eye Allen chuckled.

"I've met you before, Hap. That is, if you're the man I got you ticketed for. As a matter o' fact, Hap, if I ain't mistaken, I'm related to you. I figger I'm yore uncle."

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### SECRET OF THE PAST.

KINGMAN'S eyes widened in startled wonder.

"You . . . my uncle?"

The desert rat nodded, his single blue eye twinkling.

"Is yore name Allen—Hap Allen?"

The cowboy shook his head negatively. The thought struck him that this bald-headed oldster was slightly on the loco side. It was not unusual for prospectors to be lunatics. But the coincidence of Allen's having called him "Hap" was difficult to understand.

"Afraid you got me wrong, Allen. My name's Kingman. Or—as a matter of fact—my real name is Hap Hewett. My dad's name was Dev Hewett."

A look of disappointment crossed the desert rat's face.

"If yo're dead shore yore name's Hewett, then my hunch is wrong," admitted the prospector. "But you shore as hell have got Warren's hair an' eyes an' jaw."

"Warren?"

One-eye Allen puffed energetically at his pipe.

"Warren Allen. My brother. You're the spittin' image o' my brother, whom I ain't seen in nearly twenty years. Same build, same ex-

pression when you grin. As much like my brother Warren as if you was both poured into the same mold an' left to set."

Strange emotions tugged at the cowboy's heart.

"I go by the name of Hap Kingman," he said slowly, "because I was adopted by old Les Kingman, who was sheriff of Uvalde County for thirty-odd years. But I got evidence to prove that my real father was named Dev Hewett."

One-eye Allen stared out the open doorway of his shack at the heat-shimmering canyon walls opposite.

"How old are you, son?" he asked.

"Around twenty-one. I was about three years old when Mr. and Mrs. Kingman adopted me. My father and mother were killed—when I was three."

The prospector's single eye gleamed with a strange light.

"Meanin' you was orphaned about eighteen year ago?"

"That's right."

Allen turned, cocking his head as he scanned the cowboy's emaciated face in the half light of the cabin.

"Answer me one question, Hap," requested the oldster. "Are you dead *certain* yore father was named Hewett?"

Hap Kingman started to voice his positiveness of his ancestry, and then checked himself.

He realized, with a start, that the "proof" of his birth rested solely on the word of the Mexitex lawyer, Russ Melrose. And, in the light of what he now knew about Melrose, he saw that he could not necessarily accept the lawyer's word as gospel.

"Why . . . no. I . . . I'm not sure at all. The . . . the lawyer who read Mrs. Kingman's will to me—he told me about my father."

Allen tapped his corn-cob sharply on a bony knee.

"Then you ain't a Hewett, no more than you are a Kingman. You're Warren Allen's kid—the baby son that was born to him over in San Antone, twenty-one years ago come August 10th. Nobody but Warren Allen's whelp could look as much like my brother as you do."

A far-away look came into the prospector's single eye, as he leaned back in his chair and hooked thumbs in armpits.

"I'm goin' to tell you a little story, Hap," began the prospector. "Twenty-one years ago, my brother Warren an' me was prospectin' in the Sierra Secos. His wife was livin' in a covered wagon, movin' wherever Warren took her—Fort Stockton, Marfa, Presidio. Their little kid was so cheerful an' gay all the time that his uncle—that's me, One-eyed Allen—nicknamed him Happy. We got to callin' the little tike Hap for short."

There was silence in the little shack for a moment, a silence broken only by Gertrude's raucous bray somewhere down in the canyon.

"Well, me an' Warren discovered a gold strike," went on One-eye Allen, his voice vibrant with a long-forgotten excitement. "It was in these Sierra Secos, somewhere. We cleaned out a small fortune in nuggets an' yaller dust, but we didn't have the equipment to develop the vein we discovered. It was a bonanza."

One-eye scratched his leathery dome to summon up almost-forgotten memories.

"Me an' Warren decided to record our claim," the oldster continued. "I headed for Fort Stockton to buy supplies, while Warren went down to Presidio, on the Rio Grande, to get his wife an' little son, Hap."

With careful detail, One-eyed Allen explained that his brother War-

ren had drawn a map of the terrain where they had discovered their gold strike, with a red-hot needle on a strip of soft sheepskin.

"Just in case we couldn't trace our way back into the badlands and find it again—gold mines are easy to lose, in a country as big as this," Allen said. "Well, to make a long story short, I was supposed to meet Warren an' his wife Eleanor an' his kid, Hap, when they got to Marfa. But they never came back, an' I ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em to this day."

"Why didn't you go down to Presidio, if that's where your brother went to get his family?" inquired Hap.

"I did," responded the prospector. "I found out that a smallpox epidemic had busted out among the Mexicans, an' Eleanor decided to move out so Hap wouldn't catch the damned plague. She left word for Warren where she'd be, with a hotelkeeper there."

"Did your brother know where they'd gone to?"

"I reckon so. The hotelkeeper gave Eleanor's letter to my brother, when he got to Presidio an' found his family gone. But where they went to, I never found out. Nor did I get another trace of Warren."

Kingman nodded thoughtfully, following Allen's narrative with tense interest.

"And he never showed up at the gold mine?"

One-eye Allen spread his leathery palms in a Mexican gesture expressing ignorance.

"*Quien sabe?* You see, I didn't have a map, figgerin' I could never lose that claim. One reason Warren drew it was to have a map to file with the recorder. If Warren went back to the gold mine, instead of meetin' me in Marfa like he agreed,

I don't know. As I said, he vanished like the earth had swallowed him. An' I been huntin' that lost gold strike ever since."

Hap Kingman whistled with awe. "You mean you never located—"

One-eye Allen chuckled at Kingman's incredulity.

"It's easy enough to lose a thing like a gold claim, out in the Sierra Secos, son." The prospector grinned ruefully. "All the ridges look alike. A man could wander a lifetime an' never cover half the arroyos an' dry creek beds. I been at it eighteen years, now, with nary a glimpse of the canyon we located. Mebbe I been within a stone's throw of it—*quien sabe?*"

Hap Kingman was conscious of a strange pounding in his chest, as old memories stirred there.

"This was eighteen years ago?"

"Si. An' now you turn up, Hap. The spittin' image o' Warren Allen. I'd stake my bottom dollar you're the son of Warren an' Eleanor. That'd make me yore uncle—not that I expect you to whoop with delight at findin' that out. I ain't worth a red cent."

Hap Kingman inhaled deeply.

"Allen," he whispered tensely, "what memories I have of my babyhood are plenty thin, by now. But my mother's name was Eleanor—that I do know. I can remember my dad callin' her that. The night they were murdered by a masked hombre. It was in Mexitex town, up the river from Presidio. That must have been where my mother went in her wagon, after that smallpox broke out."

Speaking swiftly, excitedly, Hap Kingman told One-eye Allen what little he knew of his own past—the past that lay before that unforgettable night of horror eighteen years ago, when he had been orphaned by a killer's gun.



"As soon as this busted leg is well, Allen, you an' I are headin' back to Mexitex town," vowed the cowboy. "I got a hunch we're goin' to get to the bottom of what made your brother vanish off the face of the earth, why he never kept his date with you at Marfa. Things are too tangled up and complicated for me to figger out the savvy of it now, but I got a hunch we'll be able to prove that Warren Allen *was* my father—and I think I know the hombre who did the mixin' up of my destiny."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### SYNDICATE FORECLOSURE.

**A** LITTLE GROUP of bareheaded men and women filed out of the cemetery on the outskirts of Mexitex town, situated on the crest of a bluff overlooking the sluggish Rio Grande.

Dan Kendelhardt, the deputy coroner of Uvalde County and now the only undertaker in the cow town, had just finished tamping the clods over an oblong mound of freshly dug earth.

At the head of the cemetery's latest grave was a simple granite slab bearing chiseled words:

JOSEPH ASHFIELD

Ambushed

Anna Siebert and the Triangle S cowboys had paid for Joe Ashfield's burial. Gloom had reined throughout the rangeland ever since a posse under Bob Reynolds had returned from the Sierra Secos, bearing Ashfield's bullet-riddled corpse shrouded in an old blanket.

Ashfield had met with foul play on the little-used short-cut trail from Marfa. His horse had been found grazing with a herd of wild fuzztails many miles away, by a drifting cowpoke who had recognized

the Triangle S brand and brought the saddler to Mexitex the day the sheriff returned with Ashfield's body.

Anna Siebert was the last to leave the boothill graveyard, after her Triangle S cowhands had moved off to the main street to drown their grief with liquor.

With her was Sheriff Reynolds. The old lawman put on his sombrero as they left the cemetery gate, and he took her arm as they headed toward the sheriff's home on the outskirts of town.

There, with Mrs. Reynolds bustling about to provide a noontime meal for the young mistress of the Triangle S spread, the kindly old sheriff tried to find words to comfort the girl. In Joe Ashfield, she had lost the most valuable man on her outfit.

She had counted heavily on Ashfield to help her shoulder the numerous burdens of her father's Mexitex Land & Cattle Syndicate. Now, with Ashfield dead—

"I can't see how he missed Hap Kingman," the girl said heavily. "I must send a messenger up to Marfa, Bob. Hap is probably still waiting at the Drover's Hotel, wondering why Joe doesn't show up."

The sheriff avoided Anna's gaze, and for the first time she knew that the lawman had not told her all he had found out at the time he had discovered Ashfield's mutilated corpse.

"Bob! Bob!" cried the girl, her eyes lighting with tragic dread. "Don't . . . don't tell me . . . that you found Hap's body along with Joe's . . . don't tell me they were both killed in that ambush—"

Sheriff Kingman swallowed hard. He had dreaded this moment, but he knew the girl must know the worst.

"I . . . I got deppities investigatin' the badlands," he faltered. "But

... I can't say for shore that Hap Kingman was drygulched along with yore ramrod, Anna."

The girl went white.

"Then . . . then Hap did . . . did meet Joe at the Marfa hotel?"

The sheriff inhaled deeply, and then plunged into the hard business of telling what he knew.

"Anna, I do know that Hap an' Joe were ridin' together at the time Joe was killed. But . . . I haven't found Hap Kingman's body, nor any trace of it."

"Then how do you know he met Joe at Marfa?"

"The pony you loaned him, Anna. It was found about a mile away from where we found Joe's body. The hoss was almost eaten up by coyotes. There was Hap's saddle an' pack, Joe Ashfield's .45-70 rifle, an' some distance away was one of the two six-guns that Hap Kingman was packin' at the time he left us to go to Marfa."

"But no trace of Hap himself?"

Reynolds shook his head in the negative.

"It's queer as hell—er, almighty queer, Anna. Mebbe the ambusher shot Kingman's horse an' set him afoot. But why would Hap leave his guns behind?"

The girl's eyes dulled with an agony of dread.

"Melrose killed them both," she whispered huskily. "He got the money belt that Joe Ashfield was wearing—either he did, or some gunhawk Melrose hired."

The sheriff groaned his sympathy.

"We haven't got a smatterin' o' actual proof against Melrose," he pointed out. "Hap Kingman is the only man livin' who can prove anything against Melrose—or that Melrose was fixin' to have Joe Ashfield ambushed so he could waylay that syndicate cattle money. But until

we can locate Hap, Melrose will just laugh at us."

Anna pressed a handkerchief to her brimming eyes.

"You're sure Hap Kingman's body isn't lying out there somewhere? Could your posses have missed it?"

"A pretty slim chance, Anna. We combed that country for a mile in all directions. If Hap was lyin' dead or hurt anywhere around we'd have found him. As I say, I still got a couple deppities scoutin' the country on the off chance they may locate Hap."

They consumed Mrs. Reynold's meal in moody silence. Anna Siebert, more than at any time since she had recovered from the shock of her father's brutal murder, felt the weight of overwhelming responsibility upon her.

Besides the crushing loss of her father and, close upon the heels of George Siebert's murder, the tragic death of her homeward-bound foreman, Anna Siebert had to worry about the theft of the thirty thousand dollars belonging to her father's syndicate.

Two thirds of that money belonged to other ranchers belonging to the syndicate. Unless it was recovered, Uvalde County's stockmen were faced with bankruptcy.

Meal finished, Anna Siebert mounted her saddle pony and, with Sheriff Reynolds riding at her stirrup, proceeded down town. The sheriff rounded up the Triangle S cowboys, who accompanied their boss back to the home ranch.

The afternoon of the day following Joe Ashfield's funeral, Anna Siebert was roused out of an after-lunch nap by a Mexican servant woman.

"El señor *sheriffe* ees out at the gate, señora," the *cocinera* told her. "There are other hombres weeth heem, *tambien*."

Hurriedly adjusting her hair, Anna Siebert went to the door in time to see Sheriff Bob Reynolds striding up the path, with six burly, gun-hung men clanking their spurs behind him.

Looking past her lawman friend, Anna Siebert recognized the frock-coated figure of the lawyer, Russ Melrose, with Everett Kingman at his heels. The other four men were ugly half-breeds, and strangers to the girl.

Anna's heart leaped, thinking that perhaps the strangers were deputy sheriffs and that Everett Kingman and Melrose were under arrest.

But one look at Bob Reynold's gray, twisting face, and the girl knew that the sheriff of Uvalde County was bringing evil tidings.

"Brace up, girl," whispered the sheriff, as she stood aside to admit them into the living room of the Triangle S ranchhouse. "I'm takin' this on the chin as bad as you'll have to, Anna—even though I haven't anything personal at stake."

Anna Siebert's eyes flashed with hate as she returned Russ Melrose's insolent stare. Everett Kingman, his dissolute, haggard face twisted in a smirk of triumph, saw the lawyer flush under her stinging glance.

"I'm not so sure I want these men in my home, sheriff!" snapped the girl, her tone ringing with defiance. "In fact, Mr. Melrose, I am asking you to get out before I have the sheriff throw you out. And the same goes for that drunken sot beside you, Everett Kingman!"

Russ Melrose seated himself indolently in the chair that had been George Siebert's favorite, hooked his spurred boot heels on a table edge, and proceeded to light a cigar.

"Before you go throwing anybody out of this house, you better consult with your friend the sheriff, Miss Siebert," taunted the lawyer. "If

you don't treat me more hospitably, I may be forced to throw *you* out of here. It isn't *your* home any longer."

Anna Siebert turned to the sheriff, eyes wide with concern.

"What does he mean, Bob?"

The sheriff dropped his gaze. He fumbled with trembling hands inside his chaps pocket to draw forth a legal-looking document. The paper rattled noisily in the ghastly silence of the room.

"Melrose has got the court to issue dispossession notice, Anna," whispered the sheriff, his face mottled with fury. "As sheriff, there's nothin' I can do but serve 'em."

Russ Melrose puffed twin jets of cigar smoke through his beaklike nostrils, and laughed harshly.

"Of course, if you can pay me the sum of ten thousand dollars, plus eight months' accrued interest at six percent, those dispossession papers won't mean a thing, Miss Siebert," jeered the lawyer. "Pay that mortgage, and I get out."

The girl turned to the sheriff, a sickish feeling attacking her stomach.

"But I . . . I couldn't raise *one* thousand dollars, Bob," she told the lawman in a panicked voice. "You know that. The only money I had was in Joe Ashfield's possession, and he . . . he was ambushed by these . . . these—"

The sheriff's sharp glance made her break off. She was conscious of the fact that the four gunmen who had accompanied Melrose and Everett Kingman were fingering their six-gun butts and glancing at the lawyer, as if waiting for orders.

"The . . . the mortgage Melrose holds is several days overdue," the sheriff said huskily. "These . . . these papers here—the court has granted Melrose possession of the Triangle S Ranch and the controllin'



interest of the Mexitex Land & Cattle Syndicate. If you can't pay up—"

Anna Siebert controlled her mounting panic with a visible effort. A look of understanding and sympathy, mixed with helplessness, came from Sheriff Bob Reynolds.

"How . . . how soon . . . do I have to get out?"

Russ Melrose answered the question she had directed to her sheriff friend.

"Today. Pronto. From now on, Miss Siebert, I'm living here in the Triangle S *casa*. And I won't be needing your men. Rustle 'em together and have 'em pack up your personal possessions. If you aren't off this spread by sundown, my men here will help you move off."

Anna saw knots of muscle playing on the sheriff's jaws, but she saw the bleak light of defeat in Reynold's eyes. She knew the sheriff would like nothing better than to swing into action with blazing guns.

But Russ Melrose had anticipated trouble, and had brought along his greased-lightning gunhawks to forestall any loss of temper which the sheriff might suffer, or to combat any show of resistance on the part of Anna Siebert's loyal Triangle S cowboys.

"I've figgered it out from all angles, Anna," said the Mexitex sheriff heavily. "You'll have to move out, an' surrender the syndicate books to Melrose. But yo're welcome to live at my place with Mrs. Reynolds an' me as long as you see fit."

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### HAP KINGMAN RETURNS.

**F**ORTY long, endless, dragging days had been checked off on One-eye Allen's calendar before Hap Kingman was able to move about on his

injured leg. But years of clean living, plus the wholesome food and expert care of One-eye Allen, had enabled the broken shin to knit together without the danger of a lifetime of limping.

One-eye Allen had left his patient alone only once during the six weeks of his convalescence. That had been on a trip to Marfa, where Allen had purchased a mild-tempered cow pony for Hap to use when the time came for him to return to Mexitex.

On his return with the horse, Allen brought word that Hap's saddle and the .45-70 rifle, which Allen had left behind at the scene of Hap's misfortune, were no longer there.

"Some damned saddle tramp prob'ly picked 'em up," the old prospector said. "If there'd been room on Gertrude's back I'd have packed your belongin's an' that Winchester along with me that night."

Kingman shrugged.

"Forget it, unk. I can ride bare-back to Mexitex, and I can pick up some artillery from friends."

One-eye Allen beamed with pleasure whenever he heard the cowpoke address him as "unk."

As Allen recalled more details of his last association with Warren Allen, Hap Kingman became more and more convinced that he, through some quirk of fate which was as yet a riddle, was really the orphaned son of Warren and Eleanor Allen.

The two were able to see hereditary resemblance between themselves, as time went on. They had the same mannerisms and skull structure and general build—resemblances of blood relationship which were too numerous, Hap figured, to be coincidental.

But the crowning proof that they were nephew and uncle was provided by an old-time tintype photograph taken nineteen years before in San



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Antonio, and which One-eye Allen had among his few personal trinkets.

The tintype showed a young couple and a child of about two years. The father's picture was almost the mirrored image of Hap Kingman, differing only in the outmoded style of hairdress, the ram's horn mustache which men wore in that period.

"That's my brother Warren, an' his wife Eleanor—an' *you*, when you were knee-high to the loadin' gate of a rifle, Hap!" One-eye Allen had said. "See that cowlick on the little tike's scalp? A dead ringer for the cowlick on yore noggin."

Hap, conscious of strange, tugging emotions in his heart, had stared long and hard at the photograph of the couple he knew must have been his parents.

"I'm not doubtin' it, unk," the cowboy had said. "And just as soon as my leg is well enough for me to get around, I reckon we can find the proof we want over in Mexitex."

It was seven weeks to the day since One-eye Allen's chance discovery of the trapped cowboy—a trek which the prospector had made to investigate the focal point of soaring flocks of buzzards—that the two men set out from the prospector's stone shack, and picked up the Mexitex trail once more.

Hap was still limping, but it was due to the natural weakness of his leg muscles and not to any maladjustment of his mended shin bone. If One-eye Allen had been a doctor, his bone-setting could not have been more expert.

Two days later, when they were leaving the Sierra Secos foothills and the dim line of the Rio Grande's course was once more visible on the southwestern horizon, the two made camp at a little-known waterhole deep in the recesses of an arroyo.

"I've got a hunch that there'll be

men who'll start gunnin' for me when I show up," said Hap Kingman gravely, after they had picketed their mounts and rolled up in blankets for the night.

"I been thinkin' o' that," replied One-eye Allen. "I been wonderin' if it wouldn't be a good idea for me to hole up here in camp while you look up your friend the sheriff an' see what can be done about corralin' this Russ Melrose jigger?"

Kingman pondered this suggestion for several minutes.

"*Bueno*," he said. "And if I'm not back here to report by day after tomorrow, unk, you better light a shuck to Mexitex and tell Bob Reynolds that I returned from the dead. Even if Melrose's gunnies are on the prowl, they won't recognize you as havin' any connection with me."

Feeling better for thus having an ace in the hole in the event that he ran into bad luck, Hap Kingman borrowed Allen's saddle for his own mount the next morning.

"Reckon I'll sashay over to Anna Siebert's first," he decided, "and get an idea about what's happened durin' the past two months. Then I'll get my head together with the sheriff and see what can be done about smokin' Melrose out of his den."

He spurred his pony into a trot as he approached Manzanita Hill and knew that beyond it he would find Anna Siebert's Triangle S ranch-house. The chestnut-haired girl had been constantly in his thoughts during his long period of enforced idleness, and he had worried many times over what the loss of her syndicate money might mean to the girl.

Topping the crest of Manzanita Hill, the cowboy looked down on the red-tiled Spanish-type hacienda which had been George Siebert's home.

A number of horses were tied to



the hitch rack in front of the ranch-house yard, and the thought flashed through Kingman's head that the syndicate might be having a meeting today at Anna's home.

And then, when he was midway down the slope, he suddenly reined up with a start.

The front door of the Triangle S house opened, and two men strode out, busily engaged in conversation.

Kingman's right hand dropped to the butt of the six-gun which One-eye Allen had loaned him, as he recognized those two hombres as Russ Melrose and his foster brother, Everett.

"What in hell are they doin' here at the Tri—"

Then, like a thunderbolt out of the blue, the truth struck Hap Kingman.

Anna Siebert was no longer owner of the Triangle S. Her home now served as the headquarters of the man who had slain Joe Ashfield and stolen the cattle syndicate's money.

Failing to notice the lone cowboy midway up Manzanita Hill, Russ Melrose and Everett Kingman disappeared from view around the white stucco walls of the ranchhouse, headed for the nearby barns and corrals.

Grimly, Hap debated whether to ride down onto the ranch grounds and force a showdown with the two outlaws. Then, realizing that the Triangle S probably swarmed with Melrose's gun-hung henchmen, the cowboy headed back over Manzanita Hill and galloped in the direction of Mexitex town.

But if Kingman believed his near-approach to Melrose's new stronghold had gone unnoticed, he was mistaken.

Hardly had the cowboy returned over the skyline of Manzanita Hill than an excited Mexican cook dashed out of the Triangle S kitchen, yelling

and waving his arms as he sprinted toward Melrose and Everett Kingman.

The cook was Juan Fernandez, who until recently had been a member of Señor Giboso's smuggling ring. But Melrose, having taken over the control of the Mexitex Land & Cattle Syndicate, had forsaken the dangerous game of contraband shipments over the border, to give his full energies to the profitable career of running Uvalde County's cattle range.

Most of Melrose's cattlemen were ex-members of the smuggling outfit he had ramrodded in the disguise of Señor Giboso. And the job of ranch cook had gone to Juan Fernandez, the peon who had been forced to turn over Hap Kingman and a shipment of narcotics to the border patrol.

"Señor! Señor!" babbled Fernandez, skidding to a halt alongside a corral fence where Everett Kingman and the syndicate boss were inspecting some new breeding stock. "I see a ghost, señor, but eet was not a ghost."

Melrose jerked his cigar from his teeth and said impatiently, "You've been hitting the mescal too heavy, Juan. Get back to peelin' spuds!"

The Mexican shook his head wildly.

"No, no, Señor Melrose! It is Señor Hap Kingman—I see him again, weeth my own eyes, *es verdad!* Husking corn I was, in the *cocina*. I saw Hap Kingman ride his *caballo* down Manzanita Hill, *es seguro*—and then he turned and rode away!"

A muscle twitched in Melrose's cheek. Cold dread kindled in his slitted eyes.

"You must be loco, Juan. Hap Kingman is dead—"

Everett Kingman gulped audibly and reminded his chief:

"Don't forget that Hap's carcass wasn't discovered along with his hoss, when the sheriff come back with Joe Ashfield. There's a chance Hap pulled through, chief. An' first thing he'd do would be to come back an' try to look up Anna—"

Melrose turned grimly to Everett Kingman.

"Rustle up some of the boys and ride to Mexitex," he rasped. "If you spot Hap Kingman, gun him down and light a shuck for the Rio. Hide out in Maduro until I send for you—but *don't let Hap Kingman escape alive!*"

## CHAPTER XXX.

### THUNDERING GUNS.

**H**AP KINGMAN arrived in Mexitex during the siesta hour, so that his return "from the dead" occasioned no excitement, the sun-baked streets being empty.

He dismounted in front of the jail-house, but found the sheriff's office locked.

Accordingly, the cowboy made his way to the outskirts of town, in the direction of the public cemetery. There, in a little white cottage where Bob Reynolds and his wife had lived ever since the days when Reynolds was a deputy under Les Kingman, the cowboy presented himself at the sheriff's door.

To his surprise, it was opened by Anna Siebert.

"It's me, Anna." Hap grinned as he saw the girl blanch and cling to the door jamb for support. "I'm no ghost—"

He was not prepared for what happened next.

With a sudden burst of tears, Anna Siebert flung herself into his arms, clinging to him as she might her own father. And the cow-

puncher, whose busy life on the Kingman Ranch had brought little opportunity for the companionship of women, found his heart stirring with a strange thrill as he rubbed his jaw against the soft clusters of chestnut hair.

"Hap . . . Hap . . . we had given you up . . . long ago . . . for dead," whispered the girl in a hysteria of relief. "And now you've come back . . . you've come back—"

A moment later the sheriff and his gray-haired wife were rushing to the door to greet the supposedly dead cowboy. Bob Reynolds was quick to note the lines which pain had stamped on Hap Kingman's sun-browned face, and knew that those lines could tell a grim story.

While his trio of friends hung on his every word, Hap Kingman haltingly outlined what had happened to him from the morning he and Joe Ashfield had set out from Marfa, bound for the Triangle S spread with the syndicate money from El Paso.

Sheriff Reynolds nodded understandingly as the cowboy outlined his long stay at the badlands home of One-eye Allen, and the probability of their blood relationship.

"All I know is that there are a pair of graves out in boothill, marked Warren and Eleanor Allen," said the sheriff's wife when the cowboy had completed his narrative. "I saw your foster mother, Florence Kingman, puttin' flowers on them mounds many the time. But I never knew who those graves belonged to."

Kingman turned to Anna Siebert, who had clung to his hand throughout his long discourse.

"Anna," said the cowboy, completely oblivious to the presence of the sheriff and his wife, "I'd have told you I was fond of you before this, I reckon, only I figgered I was an outlaw, the son of an outlaw, Dev

Hewett. But now I reckon there's nothin' to stop me. I—"

Kingman broke off in conclusion, aware of the kindly grins of Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds. He leaned back, conscious of the fact that Anna Siebert's eyes glowed with a strange light as they followed every changing expression on his face.

"And what's gone on durin' the past seven weeks here in Mexitex?" he asked his three listeners. "I darn near blundered into a hornet's nest this mornin', over at the Triangle S. Saw Melrose and my brother Everett over there—"

Cold despair quenched the love which had glistened unashamed in Anna Siebert's eyes.

"Melrose moved in with legal possession papers," blurted the sheriff. "Anna's been livin' with us. An' we been powerless to do anything against that lawyer. All the evidence we got against him is circumstantial."

Anna Siebert spoke heavily:

"And Melrose is powerful, now. He's crowded out all the honest men that used to be in dad's syndicate. He controls all the best grazing land, all the waterholes. He's got the whip hand, and he's using it. Honest men don't dare buck him, because Melrose has surrounded himself with killers."

The sheriff stood up, hitching his gun belts.

"Hap, you come over to the county prosecutor's office with me," said the lawman briskly. "We'll lay our cards on the table, an' see if I can't get a warrant to arrest Melrose for the murder of Joe Ashfield. If we can make that charge stick, maybe we can put the cattle syndicate back in Anna's control, where it belongs."

The two men left the house and headed for the courthouse building,

restraining a desire to break into a run.

Both realized that events were rapidly shaping themselves toward a climax. Hap Kingman's return would give the county prosecutor and the sheriff some tangible basis for starting proceedings against Russ Melrose, before the latter became unshakeably entrenched as the ramrod of the county's beef range.

"I'll rustle up a good posse and deputize 'em before we go out to force a showdown with Melrose," chuckled the sheriff excitedly. "It'll turn into a damned range war if Melrose once gets wind of what's—*look out!*"

Sheriff Reynolds bawled the warning, even as they were crossing a side street on their way toward the courthouse.

At the same time the sheriff flung out an arm to pull Hap Kingman to the ground with him.

*Brrrrrrrang!* A hail of bullets whistled overhead, as the two men dropped.

Fifty yards up the street, a close-bunched group of horsemen were triggering six-guns in their direction, their quarry caught in the open.

Horses trumpeted with alarm as their riders sent a third burst of shots at Reynolds and Hap Kingman, as the two began scuttling for the shelter of a nearby lumber yard.

"It's my brother Everett!" panted Hap, as they gained the refuge of the lumber pile. "And he's sided by Melrose's greasers, or I'm a loco leppie!"

The sudden and totally unexpected fusillade had filled the air with gunsmoke above the mounted group of horsemen. Now, seeing that their bullets had failed to find a target, Everett Kingman and his henchmen from the Triangle S spread



turned and spurred wildly in the direction of the Rio Grande.

"We'll trail them skunks to hell an' back, Hap!" yelled the sheriff, as the two men emerged from hiding with six-guns drawn. "If they cross into Chihuahua we'll cross, too, boundary or no boundary!"

Men were running out of saloons and other buildings as Sheriff Bob Reynolds sprinted down the street, Hap Kingman at his side.

Yelling for men to saddle their horses to form a posse, Reynolds suddenly broke off as he saw Hap Kingman crumple and sprawl headlong, like a man who has stopped a bullet.

Instantly Reynolds was at the cowboy's side, noting that Hap's face was gray with pain as the sheriff assisted him to his feet.

"It's my leg," gritted the cowboy. "Haven't exercised it enough. I'm afraid I won't be able to go with the posse, Bob. But don't wait for me—"

Ten minutes later, Hap Kingman leaned against a saloon wall and muttered disappointed oaths as he saw Sheriff Reynolds head toward the Rio Grande, with a score or more of townspeople riding with him, all armed to the teeth.

Everett Kingman and his would-be ambushers, dashing past the startled border patrol officials, had crossed the international bridge across the Rio Grande and were riding hard for the security of the Chihuahua hills.

But the sheriff and his hastily organized posse, with an outlaw trail to follow, were disregarding political boundaries to swarm over onto Mexican soil in hot pursuit of Everett Kingman and his Mexican killers from the Triangle S.

Hap Kingman, sick with disappointment and half nauseated by the

pain of wrenched tendons in his leg, hobbled his way painfully to the coroner's office across the street.

There he greeted the deputy coroner, Dan Kendelhardt, who was among the few witnesses of the attempted murder of the two men by Everett Kingman and his horsemen.

"Gripes me to think I can't be in on the shootout," said Hap Kingman, as he saw the sheriff's posse disappear into the cactus-dotted Mexican hills beyond the river. "Reynolds has got that drygulchin' gang outnumbered, and I don't reckon he'll come back until he's draggin' those owlhooters with him."

The deputy coroner nodded glumly.

"If those skunks are workin' for Russ Melrose, I hope they get caught," agreed Kendelhardt. "Me an' the sheriff have been doin' some thinkin' about Doc Hanson's disappearance, an' I wouldn't be surprised if Russ Melrose don't know the answer to that one, too."

Through the doorway of the coroner's office, Hap Kingman scanned the Purple Hawk Saloon, across the street.

Painted on the office windows of the upper story was a sign that twisted Kingman's lips in a bitter grin:

RUSSELL MELROSE  
Attorney-at-law

"There's no need of me stickin' around doin' nothin' while the sheriff is out chasin' those skunks who tried to kill me just now," said Hap Kingman. "I think there's a little business I can attend to very handily, myself!"

While the deputy coroner looked on wonderingly, the cowboy limped his way across the street and headed up the stairs leading to Russ Melrose's business office.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

INSIDE MELROSE'S SAFE.

HAP KINGMAN had a definite reason for what he was about to do. Hap figured that inside Melrose's office he might be able to recover the contents of the money belt which the crooked lawyer had stolen from Joe Ashfield's body.

It was a fifty-fifty chance, but a lot would hinge on the recovery of that money. He knew that Melrose would not dare to deposit the stolen funds in the Mexitex bank. And, since the lawyer still maintained his business offices, it was probable that his safe might contain the missing cash.

He entered Melrose's office without the formality of a knock, and grinned as he recognized the scrawny figure of Nathan Rachelly, the law clerk who handled Melrose's routine office business for as long as Kingman could remember.

The rawboned clerk had just turned from the window as Kingman entered, his face bleak.

"I reckon you saw what happened out on the street just now," Kingman rasped, his eyes darting to the huge black safe in one corner of the room.

Rachelly gulped, and his hands shook nervously as he adjusted the green eyeshade perched over his furrowed brow.

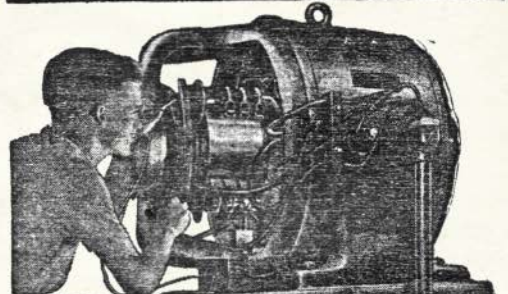
"I . . . I heard shooting," confessed Melrose's assistant. "But what . . . what do you want?"

Kingman grinned crookedly. He paused in midroom, thumb hooked in cartridge belt.

"That shooting was done under orders of your boss, Russ Melrose," snapped the cowboy. "And I'm here on business that concerns Melrose. Rachelly, I'm orderin' you to unlock that safe of Melrose's, and do it pronto without arguin' with me."

Rachelly sagged into a swivel

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chair, his face draining to the dirty yellow color of banana meat.

"I . . . I can't open that safe without orders from Melrose," he protested weakly. "I . . . I don't know the combination—"

Kingman slid his Colt .45 from holster.

"Maybe a dose of lead poisonin' would refresh yore memory, Rachelly. I got plumb urgent business regardin' the contents of that safe."

Rachelly stared at the black bore of Kingman's .45 and shook his head in panic.

"It ain't legal . . . it's robbery!" squawked the law clerk. "I can't do it!"

The sound of Kingman's Colt coming to full cock made the law clerk forget the technicalities of the moment. He scuttled crablike to the safe, spun the polished combination dial, and then yanked the black handle to operate the tumblers.

As the door of the vault opened, Hap Kingman stepped forward swiftly in time to see Nathan Rachelly reach into the opened safe and turn with a black-muzzled six-gun in his own palsied hand.

With a swift outward blow of his own gun barrel, Kingman dropped Melrose's office assistant before Rachelly could trigger a bullet in his direction.

Rolling the unconscious clerk to one side, Hap Kingman holstered his gun and squatted down to begin pulling out steel drawers from the safe.

He rifled swiftly through filed legal papers. One compartment yielded a canvas sack bearing the name of the local bank. It contained upward of a hundred dollars in loose change and packages of dollar bills.

He had gone through the contents of Melrose's safe for the third time before he was forced to admit failure. There was no sign of Joe Ashfield's money belt inside the vault, nor money which could conceivably be



traced to the loot which Melrose had taken from the Triangle S foreman's corpse out in the Sierra Secos almost two months past.

"He must have it cached somewhere over at Siebert's ranchhouse, then," decided Kingman, his voice tinged with disappointment. "I reckon I bashed Rachelly on the noggin for no good purpose, after all."

A heavy brown envelope was in a compartment marked "Personal," and it contained an object which Kingman had not yet examined—an object too light in bulk to be Ashfield's money belt.

Nevertheless, the cowboy opened the envelope.

Into his waiting palm dropped a small silver snuffbox, the metal tarnished with age.

Curiously, Hap Kingman opened the lid of the snuffbox, and then squatted there motionless, eyes staring at the tintype photograph which was glued on the inner side of the lid.

It was almost an exact duplicate of the tintype which One-eye Allen had showed him—a picture of Warren and Eleanor Allen with their baby son. Costumes and background were identical to the picture which One-eye Allen had said was taken nineteen years before by a San Antonio photographer.

With fingers which suddenly shook, Hap Kingman lifted the contents of the snuffbox into the light. It was a tightly folded bit of soft sheepskin, and covering one side of the leather was some sort of map, traced onto the sheepskin with a hot needle that had left fine lines like a pen dipped in brownish-black ink.

"My father's gold-mine map—"

A shiver coursed down Hap Kingman's spine as he realized the significance of what he had found in Russ Melrose's safe. This, beyond a

shadow of a doubt, was the map to the lost gold claim which One-eye Allen had said was the possession of his missing brother, Warren.

How could it have come into Russ Melrose's hands?

There was but one answer to that, and that realization left Hap Kingman limp.

"Melrose was the red-masked killer who shot my father and mother—the hombre I been wantin' to get revenge on all these years!"

Parts of the weird jigsaw puzzle fell into place, now.

Melrose had told him that he was the son of Dev Hewlett, a long-dead outlaw. That outlaw had left in trust with Melrose a notched six-gun as his only legacy—that, and a dying request that his son kill George Siebert to avenge his death.

"I can see it all, now," whispered Hap Kingman, clamping his father's sheepskin treasure map in a damp fist. "Melrose knew that Everett was really Hewett's son, and that I was Warren Allen's son. Les Kingman adopted the two of us—and when we came of age, and I told Melrose I was honin' to avenge my father's death—"

It was crystal clear, now, in the light of this evidence which had lain through the years in Melrose's private safe.

Melrose, seeking to obtain control of the cattle syndicate headed by George Siebert, had deliberately led Hap to believe that George Siebert was the rightful target for all the festering hate that had burned in the cowboy's heart as a result of his terrible babyhood memories—

A slight noise behind him snapped Hap Kingman back to earth. He turned his head, expecting to see that the law clerk, Nathan Rachelly, had returned to his senses.

Then Kingman froze as he saw a

sombrero-clad man standing in the doorway, almost out of the range of his vision.

*"Hold it, Kingman!"*

It was the voice of Russ Melrose that snarled the low-voiced order, as Kingman reached instinctively for his gun butt.

The leering Mexitex lawyer came into the room and closed the door. A cocked .45 six-gun was in his fist, its black bore leveled unwaveringly at Kingman's body.

"Doing a little private investigation among my private papers?" leered Melrose, halting a few steps away. "Well, get your arms up. One booger move, and I blast you to hell!"

Hap Kingman dropped the tarnished sterling snuffbox and the sweat-moist sheepskin map. He elevated his hands to the level of his shoulders and then stood slowly erect.

"You're going to shoot me down like a rat, Melrose," said the cowboy, his voice registering bleakly. "But before you shoot—answer me this: Dev Hewett is Everett's real father, isn't he? My real name is Allen?"

Melrose's eyes slitted warily. Then he nodded.

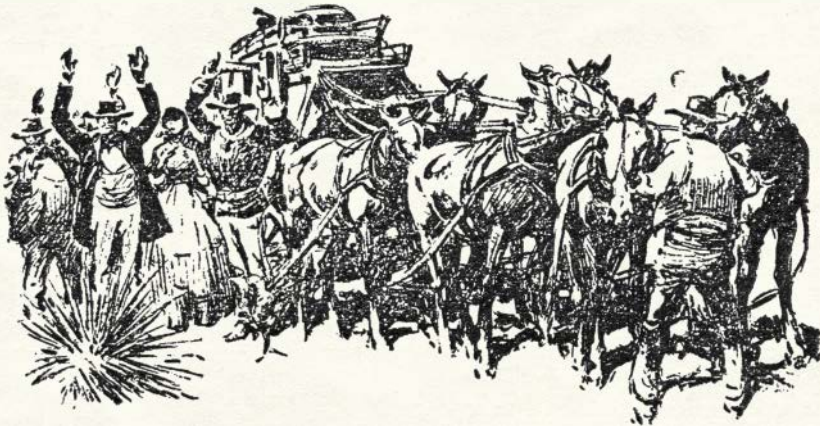
"It won't hurt for you to know it, now. Yeah—I switched yore identities. I figgered to use you to wipe out George Siebert, so I could move in on his syndicate. I admit things didn't run so smooth—but they led to the right end. I'm sittin' pretty in Uvalde County—and you've drawn a one-way ticket to hell."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by Racheilly's moans. Melrose moved closer, the knuckle of his trigger finger turning white under slowly increasing pressure.

"If you got any prayers to say, hop to it, Kingman!" whispered Melrose. "I'm killing you, and making it look as if you and Racheilly there had a shootout while you were robbing my safe. My own hide isn't secure as long as you're above ground, Kingman."

Hap's muscles stiffened before the anticipated shock of the bullet that would blast him into eternity with a whit more pressure of Melrose's trigger finger!

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magazine making. In its records since that era you'll find the names of many authors who later gained prominence, but who got their start within the paper covers of the 3W that most of your grandfathers knew.

So isn't it durned fitting and proper that 3W should encourage amateur writers, seeing that there never was a time in its history when it didn't do it. Our Corner, though, is given over entirely to your amateur contributions, whereas the main part of the magazine is the range of the professionals, with slim chances of amateurs breaking in for some time. We're proud that we're identified with such a program.

And we're sure proud of the true Western experiences you readers have cottoned to and are pasting into your scrapbooks. Here's one by an amigo who's told 'em in our Corner before:

### TOWN TAMER

By Jack Tanner—Age 26  
Denver, Colorado

It was dusk when Hoop Watkins rode into Manitou. Without hesitation he headed for the town's only saloon. He had ridden far since morning, and his throat was dry and dust filled. Entering the door of The Pines, he waddled up to the bar. He was of less than average height and his saddle-warped legs assisted in creating an impression of stunted growth.

While drinking, he looked the crowd over. It consisted chiefly of cowpokes and miners from the surrounding ranches and from the huge Ladron Mine. Outside, three riders pounded up with loud shouts. Noisily they burst through the door and swaggered inside. Hoop cocked an inquisitive eye at the bartender and asked, "Who is the boys that is havin' such a good time?"

The barkeep lowered his voice. "Them's the Thomas brothers," he said. "They practically run this town, and they're plenty tough. I'd advise, as a friend, stranger, that you stay outn their way."

"Thanks," grunted Hoop disinterestedly. "Gimme 'nother shot of that redeye."

As his fingers closed around the glass, he heard the sound of boots clumping up behind him. The Thomas boys were also in quest of refreshment. The largest of the three, a towering, bearded giant, no-

ticed Hoop. His beady eyes traveled from the little man's Stetson on down to his freckled, sun-reddened countenance, then to his extremely bowed legs. Suddenly he guffawed loudly.

"Whatsa matter, Fred?" asked one of the brothers.

The big man pointed to Hoop's legs. "Ever see anythin' like 'em?" he asked. "The runt must 'a' learned to ride stradlin' a barrel."

"Betcha he could cut a fancy pigeon wing," suggested the remaining member of the clan with a sly wink.

"Let's see if 'e can," cried the big one, pulling out his six-shooter. He fired into the floor at Hoop's feet. "Dance, damn yuh," he commanded.

"I only dance when I feel like it," replied Hoop.

"Wh-why . . ." sputtered Big Thomas, "yuh little sawed off hunk of buzzard bait, who in hell do yuh think yuh're talkin' to? I said dance, dammit, and I means dance." He fired another shot which nicked the sole of Hoop's boot. When he again pulled the trigger, it clicked on an empty cylinder. He reached for his other gun.

"Hold it!" snapped Hoop. "You've played enough, Thomas. Put up the gun before I get sore."

With fury in his eyes, Big Thomas tugged at his weapon. Before he could clear it, Hoop's AAs had magically appeared in his hands. "Now, you dance," he ordered, whanging a bullet into the floor at the feet

of the largest brother. His next slug took away Thomas' right rowel as he jumped back.

"Git 'im, boys," he shouted to his brothers.

They were already streaking for their Colts. Hoop drilled one of them before he could clear leather. The other he sent crashing to the boards as the man's gun leveled. A slug screamed across Hoop's cheek. Big Thomas had got his other gun into action. Hoop fired twice, rapidly. A look of incredulity passed over the face of Big Thomas, then he slumped down in a heap.

Hoop looked the crowd over for trouble from possible supporters of the Thomas brothers. Satisfied, he holstered his guns and spoke:

"Sheriff Williams sent me down to tame this town, and I'm aimin' to do it. You might pass that word around so that any of the boys that's got objections can make 'em known, but—tell 'em they'd better be a darn sight faster than the Thomas boys if they got objections!"

It's dangerous to catalogue the hero's garb and physical appearance, but there should be a few hints of what he looks like. This story lacks these, so the reader has to imagine a Western type as he reads. Even with this fault, the characters are

## ¿QUIEN SABE?

*Continued from page 34*

### *Answers*

1. In 1859. It included New Mexico, Arizona and portions of Colorado and Nevada.
2. A cigarette.
3. In 1863. It refused admission to the Union in 1904 because New Mexico would be included in the State.
4. It is a driving gale from the north which meets the warm Gulf breezes, thereby causing a sharp drop in temperature.
5. Raids by Apaches and other hostile tribes of Indians.
6. When he takes refuge in a cyclone cellar.
7. There are no fish in Great Salt Lake.
8. When he's in the Panhandle.
9. There isn't any. Both are gorges with one end open and the other end a solid wall of rock.
10. Both are mules.

well-handled, with character conflict developing as the story progresses. The plot could be stronger, but the writing is so good, minor defects can be overlooked. On the whole, it's a good yarn.

In your next, use more elbow grease on characters and plot, pard, particularly in giving flash pictures of the actors. Read plenty and write a heap more.

Here's another:

### COYOTE CATCHER

By Charles N. Hodge—Age 21  
Keener, Alabama

RED ALTON strode into the Bar Seven Ranch office. The grizzled old ranch owner turned in his chair as the lanky cowpuncher entered.

"Howdy, Red," he greeted. "Want to ride into town?"

"Yes, sir," Red answered.

The rancher gave him a large envelope. "Take this in to the bank for me. Flip says he don't want to risk taking it."

"I'll deliver it," Red promised. He mounted his horse and rode southeast at an easy canter.

Five miles out on the trail he was rounding a bend when a harsh voice grated:

"Grab a cloud, feller!"

Red gritted his teeth as he slowly raised his hands. He asked in an angry voice: "What's the joke, mister?"

"This ain't a joke. Fall off the hoss—and don't look back!"

The cowboy slid from the saddle, though he was so angry his blood boiled. As he hit the ground he whirled and grabbed for his gun.

*Bang!*

A thousand lights burst in his brain and he floated into a black void.

He found himself sitting up with a roaring in his ears. His legs were shaky when he was able to stand. Red guessed he had been there on the ground three hours.

"Left me for dead," he muttered grimly, and he saw that his horse was fifty yards up the trail. Soon Red caught him, mounted and rode toward the ranch. There was a score to settle with a certain gent!

Flip Elders sat in the office with Bill Todd. "I'm worried about Red," he said.

"Red can take care of himself," Bill snorted. He was looking out the window.

Flip grinned slyly.

Suddenly old Bill jumped from his chair. "Here he comes!"

Red slid from the saddle and was in the room all in one motion.

"What happened, Red?" asked Bill quickly.

Red didn't answer, but turned his blazing eyes on Flip.

"What's the reason you didn't make the trip to town for the boss?" he snapped.

"I was scared to go alone," Elders whined.

"You couldn't steal the money that way!" Red spat. "So you let me carry it and rode on ahead of me. You waited at the bend of the trail, shot me in the head, then took the money. But you didn't shoot low enough!"

Elders' face had gone pale and he was breathing heavily.

Red said softly: "There's blood on your finger."

"It's a lie!" Flip screamed hoarsely and went for his gun.

*Wham!*

Red's gun was smoking, and Elders held a bleeding shoulder. He had dropped the gun from nerveless fingers.

Red rammed his six-shooter against Flip's stomach, ripped open his shirt and pulled the envelope out.

"You're goin' to jail, Elders," he said. "You see, I recognized your voice out on the trail."

"Thanks, Red," old Bill said with a smile. "Yuh shore can catch dirty coyotes!"

Some plumb good writing and a fair plot put this story over. Then, too, the dialogue is well-handled, and the suspense holds through the climax. Again, our main criticism is that the characters are mere names, with no color and distinctiveness to make them real people. It's a common fault among authors who ought to know better; but their stories are often so good otherwise, they get by. Just like this one.

Your stories will be a heap better, pard, if you work on your characters more. Try to do it in your next. Luck to you!



## FIGHTING COW

By W. O. Snook—Age 44  
Long Beach, California

You can't tell about a fighting cow. You can pull one out of a bog, thereby saving her life, and she'll likely as not chase you clear off the landscape for your trouble. You sure want to be ready to leave when said cow gets her feet on solid ground.

However, the fighting cow I tangled with had no reason to be grateful to me. Maybe that was why she went to extremes.

It was some twenty-five years ago, down in the White Sands country in New Mexico. Those sandhills, which looked for all the world like drifted snow, lay a few miles to the westward, the San Andres Mountains loomed darkly beyond them. It was a dry, arid country, and there was only enough water at the ranch for the stock that belonged there.

A herd of Mexican cattle had been driven through, and a number had drifted in to the ranch. The Old Man told me to take them away so fast that they wouldn't come back. Those cows were spooky, half-wild critters. They ran like antelope.

Yeah! So long as they ran the right direction it was O. K.

There was a half-mile-long lane leading away from the ranch. I headed the strays out that lane. I was crowding them, whooping, yelling, lashing their tails with the end of my rope. One old cow lagged behind, dodged from one side of the lane to the other. She carried a set of horns that looked capable of ripping a horse apart in short order. Her eyes were like twin moons in harvest time. You didn't have to be an expert on cow savvy to know that this old cow didn't like the setup none at all.

I was riding a little pony that could "turn on a dime and leave nine cents change." But, mister, he just wasn't quick enough for that old cow! That critter changed ends so quick that it seemed as if she'd suddenly grown horns in the rear.

I had charged her, full speed ahead. And then there she was, twelve hundred pounds of fighting cow, coming straight at me, head lowered, nostrils distended, horns like curved bayonets. Straight is the exact word, because, if she'd been a few inches off center, it would have been a different story. One horn went neatly on either side of my

# DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

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horse's breast, stopped him as if he'd hit a tree. My horse whirled and was in the clear before that old cow could rip side-wise or up and down.

That should have been enough for me. A fighting cow is a dang poor animal to try to drive. But I was young, reckless, and I had vanity—plus a cowboy's pride in being able to carry out orders. Besides, how would I have looked with that old cow taking me back to the ranch? I would never have been able to live that down! And that old cow seemed hell-bent on doing just that very thing. Her horns toward me, she never gave an inch of ground. And when I came close she took me toward the ranch mighty fast.

But I never thought she'd connect up with me again—now that I was on my guard. Yet, in spite of my confidence she blame near scored a bull's-eye. I guess it was because my horse just couldn't savvy running away from a cow. It was when he whirled that the old she-demon caught us. She made an upward slash with her left horn at my pony's right side. And if it hadn't been for the heavy leather fender on my stirrup she'd have ripped my horse wide open. As it was, she hooked that horn between my leg and the horse and tossed me up in the air as high— Well, I won't say how high, but it was way too high!

I must have been a pretty sight away up there in the atmosphere, spread-eagled, reaching for everything on the saddle. I made it, but that sure showed me that I was on the wrong side of that cow if I ever expected to get her away from the ranch. And I knew I'd crowded my luck far enough.

Well, sir, I got on the opposite side of that cow from the ranch, kept fighting at her with my rope, and I'm a bare-faced liar if that critter didn't chase me right out on the open range!

That sure was a close call, hombre, and one that would razzle-dazzle

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a top-hand, let alone a younker. Those horny longhorn critters sure can make things warm for a gent when he tangles with them. I bet many an old-timer has had similar experiences and will get a big kick out of this one.

Thanks for sending this one in, pard. We sure hope you've got more on tap for us.

The poems:

#### OUTLAW'S EPITAPH

By Lynn Eliot

San Antonio, Texas

Here lies One-eye, he lost his lamp  
A-teamin' up with a knife-throwin' scamp;

His gun hand wa'n't no good when he died  
On account of his pardner found out he lied;

He had some good teeth, but he up and hollered  
When he got in a tight, and his teeth got swallered.

His legs was good till he started gunnin',  
A faster slick, then he broke 'em runnin';

His hair's been creased in so many places  
The back of his head is as bare as his face is;

He had some ears, but the tops was shot off;  
Likewise his hide, lead took a lot off.

He had a gold cache till his pal traced him to it,  
But the gold was spent when they had their gun duet.

He played draw poker with money he stole,  
Till a smarter gent parted him from his roll.

His freedom vamoosed when the sheriff nabbed him;  
He lost his life when the mob up and grabbed him.

Ain't very much left that was once One-eye's,  
But what there is of it—here it lies.

#### WYOMIN' WADDY

By Slim Davis—Age 32

Kannapolis, North Carolina

I'm ridin' the range in Wyomin',  
Listenin' to a coyote's lone wail,  
I'm ridin' alone in the gloamin',  
Hummin' a song of the trail.

Gently the night winds sigh,  
Softly caressin' my cheeks;  
Silvery the moon sails high,  
Shinin' on snow-mantled peaks.

Rivers of moonlight are gleamin',  
On creeks an' murmurin' rills,  
The cattle are bedded an' dreamin',  
An' peace has come to the hills.

Stars in the sky are twinklin',  
Lightin' a pathway for me;  
Dew from above me is sprinklin',  
Manna for each thirsty tree.

I'm ridin' alone in the gloamin',  
Hummin' a song of the trail,  
I'm ridin' night guard in Wyomin',  
Where the lonely coyotes wail.

#### FAVORITES

By Grace E. Parr—Age 24

Wellington, Nevada

Some hombres like a Western song,  
A rolling, lilting tune;  
A famous ballad sung out strong  
Against a magic moon.

Some hombres like a yodeling sound,  
Melodic notes and trills;  
A cry that travels far around  
And echoes back from hills.

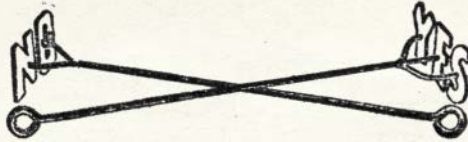
Some hombres like a tale to tell  
Upon the wintry nights,  
To hold their listeners in spell  
Of victory and plights.

Some hombres like a poem or two  
Recited at the camp,  
Among the smoke-filled air of blue  
Around a cheering lamp.

I like the song of hoofs for mine,  
A sound the spirit stirs.  
I like a story told in sign—  
A poem from jingling spurs.

Well, *hasta la vista*, pards, until  
next week. THE RANGE BOSS.





## READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West Weekly, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.



### ENTHUSIASM

DEAR EDITOR: Your magazine gets better with each issue, in my opinion.

"Circle J Fights For Sonny Tabor" was an extra fine story. The Circle J pard and Tabor are close to my top favorites, if not the top. Let's have them together again sometime soon.

Just once I'd like to see you gather the following favorites in one story: Circle J pards, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Oklahoma Kid, Tommy Rockford, Bar U twins, Blacky Solone and others. Let 'em be friends, of course—not enemies. That array should be able to clean up any amount of trouble.

Let's have more stories of Blacky Solone solo. He struck me as a very good character in his first appearance—"Texas Trouble Hunter."

And keep the Bar U twins stories rolling. They are always good. Wish they could be put in the movies for a series of pictures or in a serial. And above all I wish some company would produce a series of pictures with a good actor in the role of Sonny Tabor—and with a good actress in the role of Rita Meredith. I wish you could put Rita and Tabor on the cover of your magazine sometime—in those good colors you use. I'd frame that one!

Your continued novels are always good.

Best wishes and success to all connected with your excellent magazine.

Sincerely,

MRS. R. L. YENNEY.

Lexington, S. C.



### PLUMB SULTRY

DEAR EDITOR: Just finished reading the September 28th issue and figured it was time to make a few remarks about Wild West Weekly. As I have told you in previous letters, I have been reading 3W for a long time and think it is tops. It seems to me that you print stories that are just a little different from the general

run of Western stories. Also they are better written than most.

T. W. Ford's tales about Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, are far and away the best, in my opinion. There should be more of them; however, it seems that he appears the least of the 3W regulars. Solo Strant makes Sonny Tabor look like a sissy. Tommy Rockford is a second-rate gunman alongside of him—and the Oklahoma Kid or Kid Wolf compared to Solo couldn't even be called second-raters.

Now, mind you, I've compared them to the Silver Kid. They're all right by themselves. I don't mind saying I've thoroughly enjoyed the stories in which these hombres have appeared. The only kick I have is against Sonny Tabor. Why make him an outlaw again? I liked him best as a Ranger. (He still is a lawman, pard—a lawman working under cover, and only pretending to be an outlaw. He's a sort of personal lawman, working for the governor.—Ed.) Don't take Rita out of the stories. She's pretty good—and I don't like girls in Western stories as a rule. The Whistlin' Kid is good as he is, but have him meet that girl of his more often in his stories. (I'll bet you're in love, pard!—Ed.) Hungry and Rusty are good. Bring them back. (They'll be back this winter, I reckon.—Ed.)

The ones I don't like—up to the end of September, anyway—are the Circle J bunch and the Bar U twins. Billy West is too good to be human. He has almost no faults. There just ain't no such critter. Buck Foster is too dumb to have lived as long as he has. Anyone as dumb as Buck don't deserve to live. Joe Scott is fair, as is Sing Lo—but I don't care much for them, either. Now for the Bar U twins. There is only one word to describe them. That word is: Stinks. I hope the Bar U twins and the Circle J are all herded together and run over a cliff.

Another thing: I don't like serials, or continued novels.

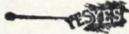
Those are the only complaints I have against the 3W spread. As I said before, it's tops—it can't be beat. I don't think enough praise is given to the cover artists. They turn out some

darn good jobs. What has happened to the picture stories? They were good. Blacky Solone is good, and so is Shorty Masters.  
Yours very truly,

AUBREY H. WILLIAMS.

Langley Field, Va.

Much obliged, soldier. A shot of cayenne pepper always adds tang to mashed potatoes.



**CONSTANT**

DEAR EDITOR: I have been a constant reader of Wild West Weekly for the last six years. I like all your characters but I like the following ones best: Sonny Tabor, Circle J, Johnny 45, Kid Wolf and Pole Pickett.

What became of King Kolt and Mart Connelly? I liked them very much. (Mart will be back, and maybe King will.—Ed.)

I have just finished reading the story starring Major Bill King—"Gun-slammin' Gambler," by Shoshone Gwinn. I liked it. Give us more. Also give us more Blacky Solone stories.

Yores,

AL MARTIN.

De Ridder, La.



**CAROLINA MOON, SHINE ON!**

DEAR EDITOR: If King Kolt is dead, may Kid Wolf give him a decent six-gun funeralizing? I have read your magazine since "The Oklahoma Kid's Powdersmoke Pardon" four or five years ago.

Emery Jackson is trying hard to make the Whistlin' Kid my favorite.

The best double feature I've read was the combination Pete Rice and Circle J story. Next best was "Johnny Forty-five Rides Herd On Sonny Tabor."

I don't like such silly, senseless characters as Jeff and Bugeye, Hinges Hollister, Dreamy Dorkin or others of their accord.

I have decided that Tabor was afraid of Old Ugly. If so, Kid Wolf could be added to the mix-up for extra flavor.

Bring back Firebrand and Alamo Kimber.

Yours till the Silver Kid gun-signs Buck Foster.

Yores,

L. M. ALFORD.

Conway, S. C.



**PERT SUGGESTIONS**

DEAR EDITOR: I liked the six-part story "Colt Empire" better than any other story I ever read in Wild West Weekly.

My advice is to keep such hands as the Oklahoma Kid, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Circle J pards, Tommy Rockford, Bud Jones, Hungry and Rusty, Blacky Solone, the Devil's Deputy, Rowdy Lang, Rawhide Runyan, Pete Rice and the Bar U twins on the 3W spread as main hands.

I like the idea of having Sonny Tabor, Oklahoma Kid and Kid Wolf in a long story to-

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gether. I also think that Blacky Solone would be a fine pard for Sonny Tabor or Jack Reese.

Tell the Gallopin' Ghost to gallop off and jump in the lake with his bad opinion of Rawhide Runyan, because them that don't like him is plumb loco.

Best regards,

BARRY BRONC RANDALL.

R. F. D. No. 3, Wytherville, Va.



## MOANIN' LOW

DEAR EDITOR: It was with great surprise that I read a letter from Mr. C. L. Westover of Waynesboro, Mass., and to note that he had heard oxen moan. I had begun to think that I was alone in stating that such a thing was possible.

When I was in Arkansas last Christmas—at Westover Landing on the banks of the Mississippi about ten miles south of Helena, Ark.—I saw two yoke of oxen hitched to slip scrapers making repairs on the levee. In the town of Helena I saw an ox and a mule hitched up to a wagon on which was a load of cotton seed, topped by a five-hundred-pound bale of cotton—and still above this an old darky singing as loud as he could.

Do you know, I often get called a liar just because I have been in places where few other men have been. I once walked on a hunting trip from Canal Zone to Arizona. It took me eight months and I lived mostly off the country. I also went through the remains of some of the Mayan villages in Yucatan—but when I told of the ruins I was called a liar, until Lindbergh flew over them and made people sit up and take notice. You see, I had not placed my name before the public as a notable person.

I have read Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly and Western Story magazine for many years and while I know that some of the stories may be a little far-fetched (I lived in that West of long ago) they are nevertheless good clean stories, picturing a time that has faded somewhat in our history, and for that reason all the more interesting to old or young.

Very truly yours,

C. C. WILLIAMS.

Davenport, Iowa.



## DEMAND AND SUPPLY

DEAR EDITOR: Can't you give us more stories that are new and different, such as "Blood Over The Rio," by Gary Barton? Chuck Martin's Dapper Donnelly stories aren't so bad, either. Let's have more of him. And anytime you spread your loop for Sonny Tabor you have my whole attention.

But my favorite is Lee Larabee of "Give A Texan Rope!" by Shoshone Gwinn.

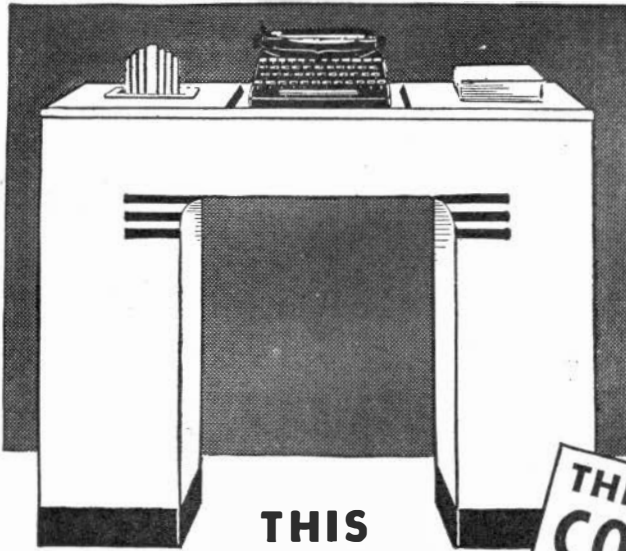
Sincerely,

A. G. COLLINS.

Bartow, Fla.

There'll be more stories of all your favorite characters, or by your favorite authors, señor. Meanwhile, don't get et by an alligator down thar.





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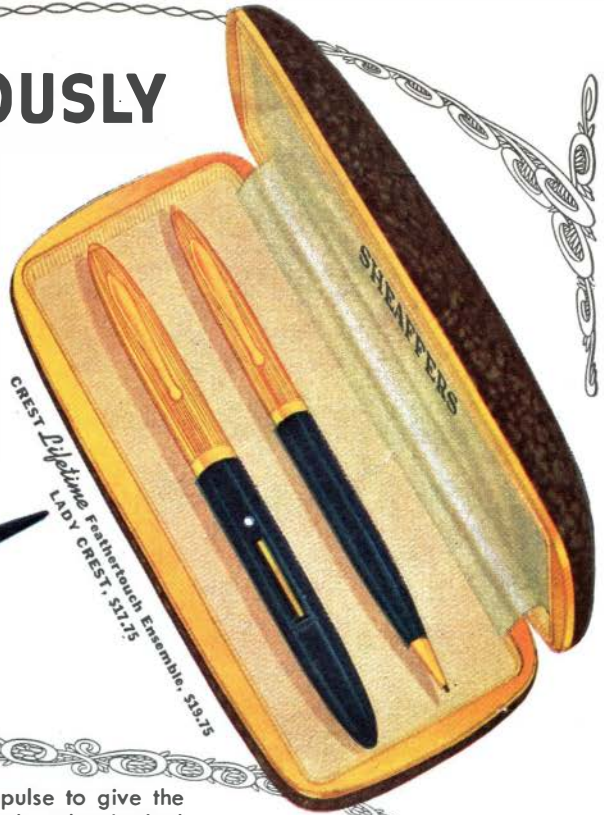
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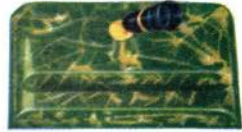
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