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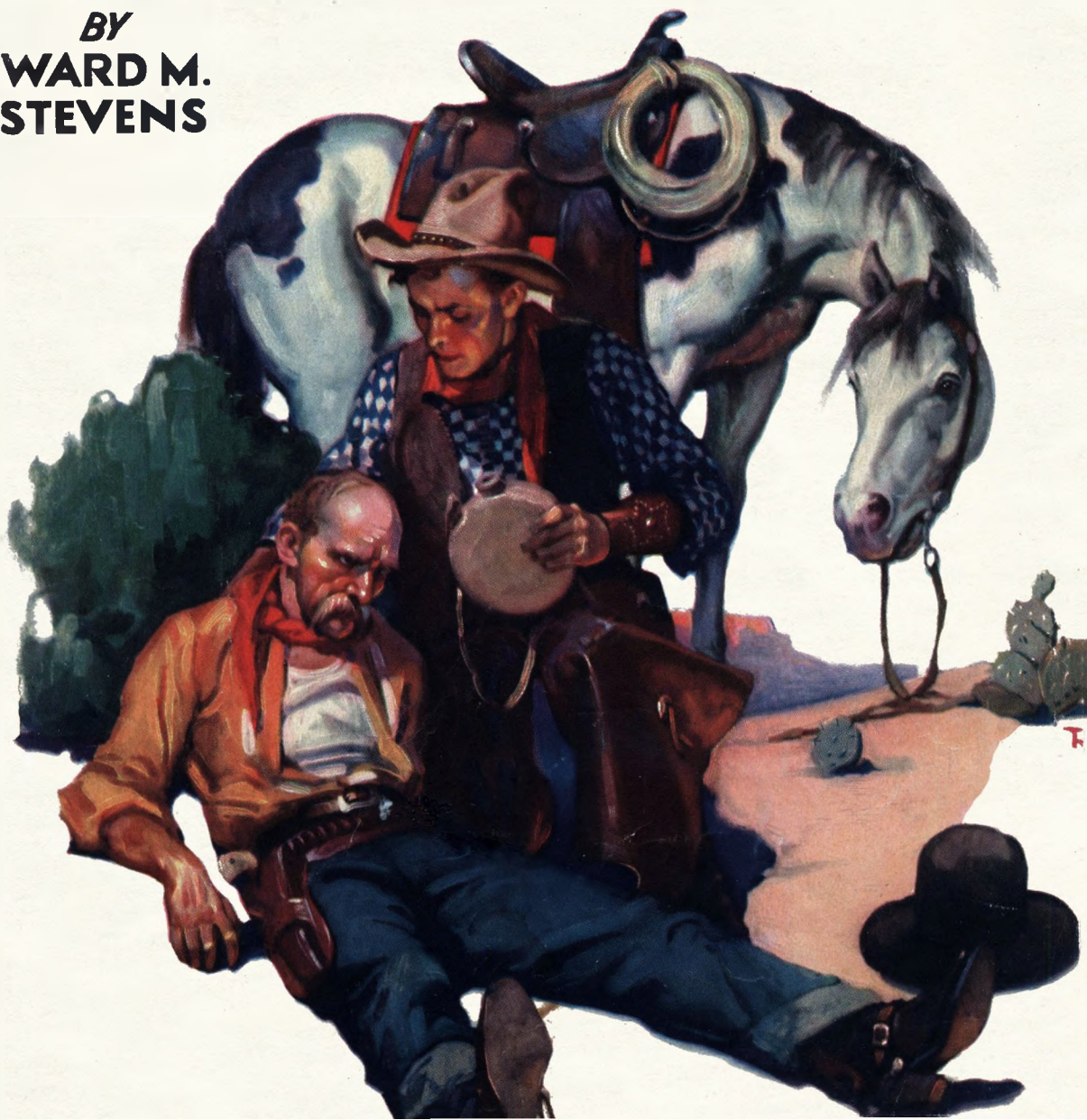
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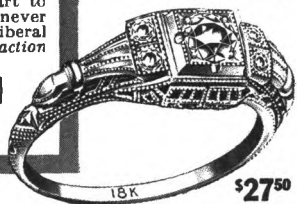
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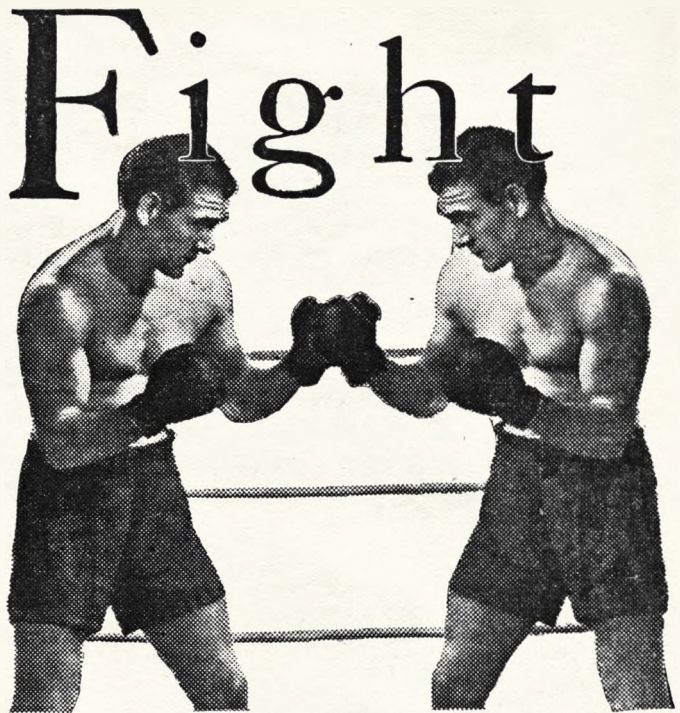
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Cover Picture—Scene from  
 "Sonny Tabor—Dead Or Alive" . . . *H. W. Reussweig*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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<i>An' gittin' it back with bullet interest.</i>			
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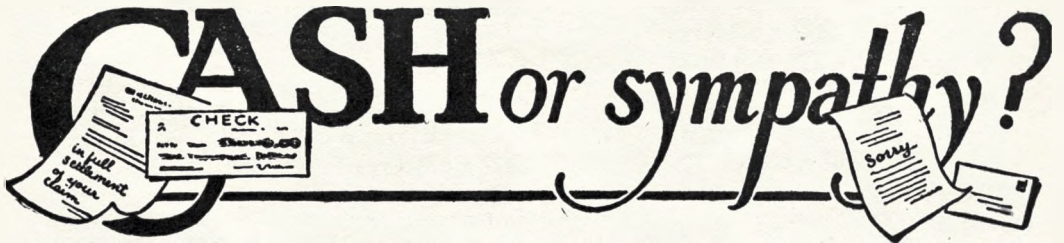
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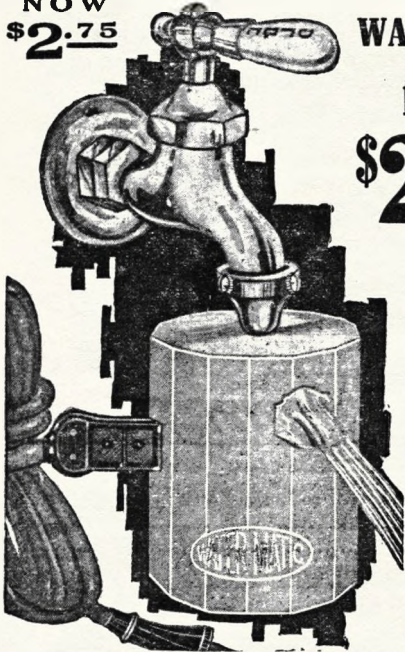
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# Sonny Tabor— Dead Or Alive

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Kid Wolf Smokes 'Em Up," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### BUZZARD'S MONEY.

**S**ONNY TABOR, outcast and fugitive from the law, halted his paint cayuse for some reason which he himself couldn't have explained. It was probably one of those hunches that so often come to men outside the pale.

He rubbed the alkali dust from his boyish blue eyes and stared southward along the waterless twist of the arroyo that followed the

mountain. Above, looking like the ribs of some prehistoric monster was a treeless cliff, the gaunt backbone of one of Arizona's nameless mountains. Nothing stirred. All was as hot and lifeless as the inside of a blast furnace.

Then came a puff of wind—hardly a hatful, scarcely enough to stir the uneven sand. The beautiful but cruel wand of a devil's coachwhip bent a little, and that was all.

That is, at first Sonny Tabor thought it was all. Then something

went whirling over a bare patch—something that seemed to be only a bit of green and yellow paper. The outlaw's eyes narrowed. There is something about money not easily imitated, even at a distance.

Bending low in his saddle with practiced skill, he picked it up with the tips of his fingers. It was a twenty-dollar bill!

"Are we dreamin', Paint?" he muttered, with a low whistle.

The black-and-white-spotted pinto twitched its sensitive ears. Unless it was a daydream, induced by the steady white glare of the sun, there wasn't much chance of that. The bank note was real enough.

The youthful outlaw looked keenly about him. The wilderness seemed as desolate as ever, yet not twenty yards from him, caught in a bunch of prickly pear, yellow side out, was another bill.

It was a fifty this time! Sonny raked back his dusty Stetson and scratched his curly head reflectively. This was beginning to look like real money. A new sort of gold mine!

Yet, although the outlaw didn't have two thin dimes in his pocket to rub together, he felt a strange feeling of panic. This wasn't his money. It didn't belong to him.

This might seem a queer worry for an outlaw and wanted man to entertain. But Sonny Tabor, although his life was already forfeit through fights where lead had proved a bit too deadly for the other hombre, was not a thief. He had been always careful, too, with his branding irons.

Almost every sheriff in the Southwest had called him a killer, but few had ever called him a rustler. Even the wolves of his kind, running in death-dealing packs, had snapped at his heels with contempt for being a "good outlaw."

Seventy dollars was quite a stake for a homeless wanderer in search of an honest range job. It was a temptation, too, for he was only human, and hadn't the desert given it to him? Hadn't the wind blown it from nowhere into his hand?

Before going another fifty yards Sonny had collected two hundred and thirty dollars in all. The bills seemed everywhere—in every out-of-the-way place. He found one twenty half buried in the sand, one corner sticking up. Another was tumbling through *sasuista* grass.

Gradually the "dinero trail" was leading him toward the bottom of the smooth granite precipice. He was still wondering—and occasionally picking up a ten or a five—when he saw a buzzard suddenly rise ahead of him like a flying bald-headed old man.

"That doesn't mean anybody any good," the outlaw thought, as he pressed forward.

But he was hardly prepared for the scene of horror that met his eyes a few moments later!

At the bottom of the cliff, where they had fallen together to their deaths, were the bodies of a man and the horse he had been riding. As Sonny watched, a second buzzard, larger and more sinister than the first, rose from the head of the dead man and swooped upward, its naked skull and crimsoned beak gleaming in the sun!

That in itself was terrible enough, but Sonny Tabor's eyes widened when he saw that the man was almost a counterpart for himself.

He had the same kind of outfit—brown leather chaps and a shirt of blue-and-white, laced single-breasted at the neck. Even the dead horse was much the same as Paint, being a spotted pinto, although of larger size and coarser of bone. Also



it had a pure white head and neck and white stockings.

At second glance, Sonny saw that the dead man, who had doubtless been killed by the terrible plunge from the thousand-foot precipice above, was more than a dozen years older than Sonny himself, being past thirty.

He had been riding, it appeared, with his blue bandanna pulled up over the lower part of his face, but the fatal fall had loosened it, disclosing a hard, evil face that even death couldn't soften. His guns were still in their holsters, although the impact had been enough to break almost every bone in his body as well as in that of his unfortunate pony.

"At first, I thought it was me!" Sonny muttered aloud, with a feeling of awe, not stopping to think how loco the observation sounded.

It was peculiar, though, how near his outfit was like that of the dead man. About the only difference was in the saddles—Sonny Tabor's was well cared for and trimmed with silver, while the other hull was broken and shabby, although the fall might have done that.

All about the scene of the tragedy were bills of the same denominations, showing where the money had come from. There were many twenties and fifties, and even a few one-hundred-dollar bills.

This was due, apparently, to the awful force of the tumble from the heights, for the dead hombre's elk-hide vest had been ripped from top to bottom, and it had been here he had been carrying the small fortune in bills. Sonny counted what he picked up, and discovered that it amounted to an even four thousand dollars. This seemed to be all of it.

The outcast looked thoughtfully

at the ruin of what had once been a living, breathing man. Somehow, he didn't believe that this money belonged to the dead hombre—probably it was the scowling, unpleasant appearance of the now stiffened face that led him to think it. Had retribution overtaken this unknown? Had destiny stepped in to even crooked accounts?

"Well, Paint, let's be hittin' the trail," the outlaw said softly. "We'll never know by standin' here lookin' at it. Maybe some day we can return this buzzard dinero where it belongs. In the meantime, we're not goin' to touch one centavo of it!"

And Sonny Tabor shut his clean-cut mouth with a firm snap.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE WATER-HOLE TRAP.

LIZARD SINK is one of the hottest stretches of desert between the Nueces and the Gila, which is saying a lot. In all its forty-two miles of sun-tormented heat and fury there is but one water hole, and that is often only a muddy, half dry shambles, trodden down by the hoofs of famished cattle and poor starved beasts of a wilder and crueller range.

Wild mustangs trample it. Coyotes lap at the bitter water, when there is water, and howl plaintively by night.

It was now ten in the morning. The distant blue hills were lost in the glaze of flickering horizons. The desert was as silent as a tomb. Not even a raven was in the yellow, copper-colored sky.

But by the water hole, a group of a dozen horsemen were waiting. The heads of their mounts were down as they gazed eagerly at the six-by-twenty-foot pool of stagnant water

that occupied a little depression among the baking rocks. Their masters held them back, sawing at their reins with an occasional oath.

"It's hotter'n seven hundred dollars and two bits change!" growled Sheriff McGrew disgustedly. "If we're goin' to chase wild geese, let's chase 'em up whar it's cooler!"

"But yuh was so danged sartain thet this wasn't goin' to be no wild-goose chase!" objected "Brownny" Setler, his best deputy.

The sheriff sighed. His face looked exactly like cooking beef-steak—even those pepper-and-salt whiskers carried out the illusion.

"I still think we'll ketch the *muchacho* we're after," he admitted. "Hang it all, Tabor has got to come this way fer water. Nobody and nothin' can live long without water in this sink!"

"I reckon yuh know how hard it's goin' to be to catch this Tabor kid," put in another of the deputies, with an air of gloom. "Thar's been a dead-or-alive offer on thet outlaw fer a long time, chief. One peso to two bits we don't nab him."

"I'll take the bet," said the sheriff. "Sooner or later, no matter how lucky or how clever he is, an outlaw rides plumb to a fall! Thet's what's goin' to happen to-day. What do yuh think, Brophy?"

"We've got to get him!" Brophy's words came in a sob that was almost a prayer. "I can't afford to lose thet four thousand dollars! If I do, I'm ruined! Times is hard; I'll lose my ranch and the work of years!"

"The coyote!" snarled one of the other men.

"Never yuh mind, dad, we'll get him!" spoke up young Bob Brophy. "We'll get him! I don't know whether it'll be dead or alive, but we'll make him pay fer what he done." He spoke with all the im-

petuous fierceness of youth. He was only twenty-five, but with his long lower jaw, his bleak gray eyes and overhanging lock of colorless hair, he looked almost the picture of his father, Owens Brophy, the owner of the Box YB.

"We'll get him alive," announced Sheriff McGrew firmly, "unless he puts up a whale of a fight. Killin's *bueno* only when it's necessary, and I'm an officer of the law."

It was easy to see that McGrew was square. He was not, however, weak. He had the dogged stick-to-itiveness of an Indian, who never forgets. The fact that McGrew had a generous portion of Osage stock in his make-up had much to do with that. Right now, his jaw was thrust out until his massive underjaw was even with the end of his stubby nose.

"O' course," said a new voice, with an easy chuckle, "I'm not personally interested in the case like the Brophys yere—as far as thet goes, if I was a business man fust of all and a man afterward—I wouldn't care if thet four thousand never did show up."

The speaker was Tyler Pascall, one of the most influential land owners in the La Osa Basin country. He was tall, broad-shouldered and dark. Rumor had it that he was a fighter, and that he had broken a half-breed's back with his bare hands once in the Tin Palace Saloon in La Osa. His slightly upturned mustaches, always carefully trimmed, gave him an expression that seemed a continual, half-mocking grimace.

Every one in the district, though, respected Tyler Pascall. He had that thing that brings power, if it does not always bring happiness and peace of mind—money.

"Thet's right, Pascall," agreed the elder Brophy, turning to him, "if I



lose thet dinero yuh come into the Box YB. I needed every cent of thet stolen money to pay off the mortgage."

"I'm not worryin', Owens Brophy, yuh old rascal!" cried Pascall, showing his pointed teeth jokingly. "Yo're ranch is wuth more'n four thousand, and I know it."

"Thanks, amigo," sighed Brophy, extending his arm to shake Pascall's hand heartily. "Yo're a real friend! The fact thet yo're yere helpin' proves thet."

Pascall had donated four of his men to the man hunt. All were reputed the best and deadliest shots in La Osa. Sheriff McGrew had three of his usual deputies, and one posse man who had been sworn in for the day's job.

Brophy and his son Bob made up the rest of the formidable party. It would be a clever and wise fugitive indeed who could hope to escape such a set of gunmen.

"Twelve of us," muttered the sheriff. "When Tabor comes yere fer water, he'll have his last drink."

"Hadn't we better scatter out some, and sort of hide out among these rocks around the water hole?" was Deputy Brownny's suggestion.

The sheriff drew the "makin's" from his breast pocket, rolled a brown cigarette, and applied a match. The result, in that heated air was so far from cooling and satisfying that McGrew gave a grunt of disgust and spat it out unsmoked, leaving the round tag of his makin's sack to dangle from his shirt.

"I reckon thet'd be *muy bueno*," he approved, "though Tabor ain't goin' to get away, if he heaves in sight."

"Remember thet big peso against them two little bits we don't nab him," reminded the gloomy deputy.

"It's still a bet," grinned Sheriff

McGrew. "All right, fellers, let's scatter out some."

They dismounted, some taking positions near the muddy water hole, and others stationing themselves behind boulders and slabs of the lava rock that littered the desert. The sheriff lined out his force with such care that soon two wild horses came down to the little pool to quench their thirst without even sensing the presence of enemies.

Then a period of careful, nerve-racking waiting began. Hours seemed to pass—hours that were really only minutes.

Then from one of the deputies came a little faint call like that of a desert bird. A rider was approaching from the west at a swinging pace. Already they could see the powdery dust he was raising.

"A black-and-white-spotted caballo!" whispered Sheriff McGrew, at length. "Don't anybody move, until I sing out!"

Another ten minutes passed. It was evident that the outlaw was coming straight for the water hole. A dozen guns came quickly and noiselessly from their holsters. The steady *clop-clop* of hoofs became louder, closer.

Suddenly the sheriff, and half a dozen of the others jumped from their hiding places. Gun hammers clicked back like the machinery of doom.

"Stick up yore hands, yuh thief!" McGrew bellowed. "We've got yuh, Sonny Tabor, and we've got the drop!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### JUST PLAIN SLIPPERY!

**S**ONNY TABOR found himself covered by a dozen relentless guns. Ordinarily careful, he hadn't expected to be waylaid that way and at such a place.

It was bitter medicine to be trapped like an animal at the only life-giving spot on Lizard Sink. Quietly, and because there was nothing else for him to do, he thrust his empty hands aloft.

There was an elated cry from the man hunters. Tyler Pascall, guns in hand, was the first to jump from cover. Then the sheriff, then his deputies.

"Well, we've got him, just as I said we would," McGrew chuckled. "How about payin' me thet silver peso, Dundee?"

A faint smile dispelled the gloom from the lanky deputy's face for a moment, as a silver coin was flipped to the sheriff. The others, menacing and unfriendly, crowded about.

"A great day fer the Box YB," said old man Brophy, happily. "Search him, sheriff, and see if he's got it."

"Of course he's got it," McGrew said sternly. "Keep yore paws right whar they are, *muchacho*."

For the first time, Sonny Tabor began to think of the four thousand dollars in bills he had picked off the desert. Was this the explanation of the trap? In spite of the baking heat he felt beads of icy perspiration forming on his forehead. That money might be hard to account for!

He hadn't been made to dismount, so far. Things had happened too quickly. But his hands were in the air, far from his low-slung, single-action Colt .45s! He had to submit to the search.

The sheriff's exploring fingers quickly found the thick roll of bills. His crimson face went hard and grim.

"It's yere," he announced briefly, and he handed the wad of money to the delighted Brophy. "Yere, count it, and see if it's all there."

The old rancher ruffled the roll off on a moistened thumb. "Twenty-six hundred, thirty-two, thirty-six, thirty-eight, four thousand dollars," he said quickly. Then he turned accusingly to Sonny Tabor. "What do yuh mean by comin' to my ranch when I wasn't home, yuh little sneak, and robbin' my wife?" he demanded with indignant contempt.

"But I didn't," said Sonny calmly. He was feeling the toils closing around him, but the feeling that he was innocent brought him quiet courage. "I found this money in a wash, about fifteen miles back. The wind——"

There was a burst of disdainful laughter from the others. Old Brophy and his son did not join in, probably because they were too angry.

"Found it!" repeated Pascall with a hoarse, jeering guffaw. "Can't yuh think of a better one than thet? I suppose the leetle birds gave it to yuh!"

"That isn't far from wrong," Sonny said. "The birds were buzzards. I'll tell yuh just how it happened. I was intendin' to return this dinero to its rightful owner, if I could."

"Yuh needn't waste yore breath tellin' how it happened," Pascall leered. "Yuh'll need all the breath yuh have, an' more, when yuh start swingin' from the sheriff's rope."

"Tabor, an hombre answerin' yore description robbed my ranch," said Owens Brophy coldly. "Add to thet, the fact thet we found the money on yuh, what more needs to be said? Sheriff, he's yore man, and I'm turnin' him over to yuh."

Sonny saw that he was in a tight hole. Convincing these men of his innocence would be impossible, unless he could induce them to accompany him back to the far distant ar-



royo, and that, he knew, was out of the question. He had been convicted before he opened his mouth. His own reputation was against him.

Capture, for him, meant hanging, anyway!

"Somebody wore an outfit just like mine, to throw the law off the scent," he said. "That's all I can tell yuh, sheriff."

Owens Brophy handed the thick sheaf of greenbacks to his son.

"Yere, Bill, ride to La Osa with the money until to-night, when the time comes to pay the cash over to friend Pascall yere," he ordered. "Put it all in the bank," he added. "I ain't trustin' these wool-sock exchanges any more."

"O. K., dad," said Bill Brophy, and with a final dark look at Sonny Tabor, he wheeled his pony and clattered off through the sandy wastes in the direction of the town.

Sheriff McGrew's dry lips cracked into one of his rare grins.

"All right, Tabor," he grunted. "Me and yuh is headed in the same direction. Ol' John Law has got yuh at last."

"Won't yuh let my paint cayuse have a drink of water first?" Sonny pleaded. "He's been over a lot of ground, and he needs it bad."

Ordinarily, the sheriff would have granted this request. Now, however, he was in a hurry and in no pleasant frame of mind. Why grant an outlaw anything?

"Thet caballo," he said gruffly, "is on the dodge the same as yuh. I ain't likin' him none—he's *too* good. If it hadn't been fer thet pinto yuh'd have been nabbed long afore this, Tabor. He'll last to La Osa. He ain't sufferin' none."

Sonny hid the frosty gleam that came into his boyish blue eyes. He had been about to go peaceably, but now——

"*Bueno*," he said carelessly. "I'll take a cigarette, sheriff, and smoke it on the way, if yuh don't mind."

Reaching for a smoke is just about the most natural thing in the world. And as Sonny seemed to have no makings of his own, he lowered one hand and reached toward the sheriff's shirt, where the tobacco-sack tag still dangled in plain view. The motion appeared to be purely automatic, and McGrew didn't think to stop him.

But instead of pulling out the bag of makings, Sonny's hand closed with lightning sureness over the slack of McGrew's shirt, and grasped him with such force that he pulled him abruptly forward, and off his horse. It was the work of a split second!

"I'll——" began the startled officer, but his words ended in a loud and amazed grunt.

Sonny whipped him half around, and before the others could bat an eyelash, he had wrenched free McGrew's big six-gun.

"Stick 'em up, and drop yore guns afterward!" Sonny's cool voice rang out crisply.

The faces of the posse were as blank as half-starved statues. Tyler Pascall swore roundly under his breath. But one by one, the heavy revolvers thudded to the ground. The posse's hands went up.

Paint, guided by its master's knee, took several slow steps forward and lowered its sleek head.

"Right's right, Paint," Sonny approved. "Drink, an' drink hearty! We're goin' places from here, and pronto!"

While the faithful little animal drank its fill a smile appeared on the bronzed face of the outlaw. His blue eyes twinkled, and it was easy to see now, why they called this bad man "Sonny" Tabor. The bullet

scar that marked his rounded cheek looked exactly like a dimple.

"Now *adios, caballeros*," Sonny sang out as he backed his pony.

He backed for ten, twenty, thirty yards, then whirled like a flash, his head down and his piebald cayuse running like a cloud shadow before the wind. In a moment, before the amazed posse could recover its poise, he was gone, swallowed up in the dancing, shimmering waves of desert heat!

"Thunderation!" gasped Sheriff McGrew. "Get yore hawg legs and light out after him! String out! He can't get far!"

"Thank Heaven, I recovered the money he stole, anyway!" cried Owens Brophy, as he scrambled from his heavy roan horse and pawed for his Colt.

The gloomy deputy heaved a sigh as he turned to his angry chief.

"How about returnin' thet silver peso, McGrew?" he asked mournfully.

McGrew, muttering dire things under his breath, tossed it back to him.

"But I'll win it back, yuh lunk-head!" he bellowed. "I'll get thet Sonny Tabor *muchacho* if it takes me the rest of my life!"

Fan-shaped, and scattering more and more as they galloped, the sheriff's posse raced in grim pursuit!

## CHAPTER IV.

### TOLL OF THE DESERT.

**SONNY TABOR** didn't have much trouble shaking off the posse, thanks to Paint's nimble heels, but in ridding himself of that enemy he found another—the desert, waterless, unconquerable, and without pity.

In April, Lizard Sink is hot and desolate, in May, dangerous, but in

June, when the desert sun is at its full fury, it is frightful. By noon, the horizons are obscured by a haze like that from a griddle. The very air seemed to curdle in waves.

Mirages filled the alkali emptiness of lower ground for many miles—shining and blue with a mocking coolness. Overhead was the sun, a vast, seething ball that seared the eyes and cooked the flesh. The few lizards took shelter. It became hotter and hotter with each passing hour.

A thermometer would have stood at a hundred twenty-five in the shade, and the cruel lava ground underfoot was burning to the touch. A grayness enveloped every shrinking cactus clump. Here and there, far away a dust devil smudged the sky, scarcely moving.

There was no water for miles, and Sonny, for all his desert experience, began to be worried. His own supply was pitifully inadequate, and although Paint could get him through if any cayuse could, there is a limit to all endurance. From time to time, the wind blew, making it seem warmer than ever, and then the sand hissed and whirled like finely powdered emery dust.

How many hours or how many miles went by, after that scorching noon, Sonny was never sure, but suddenly he was positive that he saw something huddled in the sand a quarter mile from him—something that he took at first for a cast-off bundle of clothing.

But as he came nearer he increased his pace to Paint's best. The huddled bundle of clothes was the motionless body of a man.

"It's—it's the hombre they called old Brophy!" the outlaw muttered. "The jasper whose dinero they say I stole!"

There was no doubt of it, for the



aged rancher's face was upturned—blackened now by the sun, and with a swollen and protruding tongue, but still recognizable. Sonny slid from his horse with an exclamation of pity.

Somehow, it seemed, the ranchman had become separated from the rest of the posse and, weakened by exposure to the heat, had been thrown from his horse. That was the whole grim story as far as Sonny could learn, for a hasty examination disclosed no wound of any kind.

Sonny poured most of his own water supply between the teeth of the dying man, and pulled the heavily breathing figure into the meager shade of a paloverde. Brophy was still alive, though he couldn't have lasted many minutes more without water. His glazed eyes opened, a few minutes after the life-giving draft, but he failed to recognize the young hombre who had saved his life.

"Thanks—thanks!" he gasped thickly. "I—I don't know who yuh are, but I'm glad yo're not thet Tabor jasper. He's a thief—a robber. The sheriff said he's killed thirty men. He——"

"Shh!" Sonny told him, gently. "Yuh mustn't talk any more now. Drink the rest of this, not too fast now."

Brophy had been engaged in the task of hunting him down, but that didn't make any difference to Sonny Tabor. He wouldn't have thought of leaving the old rancher there to die in the desert.

"Come on, old-timer," he said. "Paint can carry double, for a while, even in this heat. Won't yuh tell me where yuh live? We've got to have water."

"All right," whispered Brophy deliriously, "if you'll promise not ever to tell Sonny Tabor."

Sick as he was, he managed to give directions for finding his ranch. The outlaw was relieved to know that it wasn't far, only a matter of five miles. Pulling the wabbling sufferer up beside him, he made the distance in something over an hour.

"There it is again—the old YB," Brophy muttered. "It's the ranch thet Tabor nearly cheated me out of by taking my mortgage dinero from me."

Just ahead were a few weathered ranch buildings, some of rock, and others of frame and crumbling adobe. A scattering of cottonwood trees grew here and Sonny caught the welcome glint of pure water rippling over the sand below the house.

It was just at this point that a glimmering of sanity began to appear in Owens Brophy's gray eyes. He shook his head from side to side, then suddenly tried to jump from Paint's back. Sonny held him firmly.

"It's yuh—Tabor!" the old man gasped. "The outlaw—we——"

"Sit steady, pop, I'm a friend," the outlaw told him cheerfully. He held him to the cayuse's back by sheer force, for they were close to water now, and life.

"A friend!" repeated the rancher, scathingly. "Yuh say thet——" But his struggles were in vain.

Sonny bore him on resolutely toward the house, the rear of which was shaded by thick trees. Just before he reached it he heard the horrified scream of a woman. A lady in a gingham sun bonnet, whom he took to be Owens Brophy's wife and Bill's mother, came out on the porch wringing her hands.

"Owens!" she sobbed. "What's the matter?"

"He's all right, ma'am, or will be in a few minutes," said Sonny, bashfully removing his battered Stetson.

"He's badly in need of water, that's all."

"Don't—let this—young coyote cub in!" shouted old Brophy. "He's the one who took our money, maw! I reckon he's been a-tryin' to kill me!"

To Sonny's bewildered pain, the old woman recoiled from him as if he had been some poisonous reptile.

"It isn't true, ma'am, and I hope yuh'll believe me," said the outlaw earnestly. "I found your husband out on the desert, an'——"

For an old woman, Mrs. Brophy had marvelously shrewd eyes. They were deep set, almost the same gray as her husband's, and were surrounded by humorous, kindly wrinkles. But Sonny's heart sank when he saw nothing kind in them now.

"The same clothes," she said in a dry, even tone. "He's riding the same horse, too, it seems to me, and also—— But wait!"

For the first time she had caught a good glimpse of Sonny's frank and straightforward face. It was as if she suddenly read the honesty and innocence there.

"Tell your story again, my boy," she invited, in a more kindly tone.

What a detective she would have made, Sonny thought. Never once did she take her eyes from Sonny's lips, while he repeated what he had just said.

"Not the same man who robbed the house," she said, suddenly and emphatically. "Did yuh hear that, Owens? Now no more back talk. The robber was lots older, and his voice was different. He had a handkerchief tied over his mouth, but you can't fool me."

"But this is the worst outlaw in——" began the old rancher feebly.

"I don't care if he is or not!" Mrs. Brophy cried defiantly. "It's not the

man! Now both of you get off that horse and come into the house out of the sun! If you don't, I'll be right out there after you! And if I do, Owens Brophy, it'll be the worse for you!"

A great load seemed suddenly to lift from Sonny Tabor's heart. It was seldom that any one spoke kindly to him—seldom that any one believed him!

If the rest of the posse had come swooping in, he would have fought them with a laugh on his face.

## CHAPTER V.

### TYLER PASCALL TAKES A HAND.

**A**LTHOUGH the Tin Palace Saloon in La Osa was probably the warmest spot in the town, the drinks it served, and the crooked cards that were sometimes shuffled there made it one of the most popular resorts. It was rumored that Tyler Pascall owned the controlling interest.

Be that as it may, Pascall was usually there, if not at the bar, tossing down numberless drinks of tequila sour, he was behind one of the round tables playing his favorite game—poker.

"I hear Sheriff McGrew's men have come in, and have gone again, after a few shots of liquor," chuckled Pascall's bar-swamper, "Mex" Tuxillo. "Goin' with 'em this time?"

Pascall shrugged slightly, and the corners of his insolent mouth curled upward.

"I've done my bit," he answered. "Why overdo things? If Red Bartlett and the others is in the back room send 'em in. I want to talk to 'em."

Tuxillo obediently left the bar and returned in a few minutes followed by three husky, heavily armed desperadoes. The three of them had



been in the posse, kindly lent to the man hunt by Tyler Pascall.

The first was "Red" Bartlett—a giant in stature who walked like a gorilla, arms nearly to his knees, but with a certain swinging, animal gait. He wore two guns, both .44s, and so low that the tips of the scabbards nearly touched the tops of his high black boots. His face rather than his hair gave him his name, for it was reddened to a deep, angry scarlet by the desert sun.

Ansett and Lem Drummer made up the other two of this unwholesome trio. All were professional handlers of the Colt.

"Has De Vani showed up yet?" demanded Pascall, as he idly riffled the blue-backed deck of playing cards he held in his long, nervous hands.

"Nope, he ain't reported. Didn't yuh tell him to keep an eye on young Bill Brophy?"

The saloon man nodded unsmilingly. There was no expression on his swarthy face.

"Go git him!" he said meaningly. "I want him yere in five minutes."

Red Bartlett put his mouth close to his leader's ear and whispered confidentially. "De Vani says thet Bill Brophy's about to bank thet dinero like his old man said," he breathed. "But he ain't done it yet. He stopped for a couple o' drinks over at Peg-leg's."

Pascall gave the cards a vicious shuffle that made them fairly pop. His yellowish eyes glinted under his smooth black brows.

"Then tell De Vani to bring Bill with him," he muttered. "Don't let anybody hear the talk, savvy? This business can't wait! I stand a chance to lose the best water 'tween yere and the Colorado!"

The three desperadoes went slinking off like disreputable shadows.

They were gone but a short time, when they returned with two other men—one was Bill Brophy, far from intoxicated, but showing in his gray eyes the drink or two that he had taken at his journey's end.

The other hombre was a small, undersized hombre called De Vani. He, too, was a past master with Samuel Colt's invention, and the ivory handles of his two guns were carefully notched at least seven times by means of a file.

Fawning, easy to laugh, he was well known in La Osa as an easy hombre with whom to drink or to make a joke. Few guessed the blackness of his real reputation, or that he received a hundred dollars a week from Tyler Pascall "just to stick around."

"Oh, hello, Brophy!" greeted Pascall, with what he intended to be a friendly smile. "Have a chair."

"Thanks, I will, Tyler," said young Brophy soberly. "Any friend o' dad's is a friend o' mine. Heard any news from Tabor? Have they caught him yet?"

"Not yet, I believe," smiled Pascall easily, "but they will. Yuh don't know how glad I was that the missing money was recovered."

"Yuh could have foreclosed on our property, if it had been lost," said Brophy, lighting a white paper cigarette from the match that Pascall tendered him.

"Oh, yuh shorely know me well enough, Bill, thet I wouldn't do thet," said Pascall. "Was yuh aimin' to go to the bank to deposit thet dinero?"

"Yeah, the four thousand ain't due to yuh until late to-night, dad said, accordin' to the agreement," explained young Brophy, "and I figured I'd go by his orders. I'll make arrangements to draw the money out again on demand."

"Yuh can just give me the dinero now, lad, and I'll give yuh a receipt," chuckled the saloon and land owner. "I'm allus willin' to help out when I can."

"No, thanks, I reckon I'll do strictly what dad 'lowed I'd better do," said the youthful rancher, getting up from his chair. "I'll go right over and bank it now, and get it done with. I ain't used to goin' round with so much money in my jeans."

A tension somewhat like an electric spark passed between Pascall and his four henchmen. Aside from them and the barkeeper, there was nobody in the saloon. Red Bartlett's face became a drawn mask; De Vani bared his teeth, and Ansett took a deep breath. Drummer's rangy body stiffened and he seemed to brace himself at the knees.

All five men fired at almost the same instant. Five little spurts of dust flew from Brophy's clothing. Some of the slugs struck the young puncher at the belt line, others ripped through his chest and throat. The very air of the Tin Palace shook as though in a thunderstorm; red flashes whipped out like streamers.

Brophy never had time to reach for his own weapon—it was all too unexpected. He hardly knew what had hit him. Death came to him on rushing wings!

His bulky, awkward body seemed to fold up, first at the knees, then a hinge seemed to form at his waist. With hardly a sound, he pitched forward toward Pascall's round poker table, just missed it, and landed in a crumpled heap on the floor, his legs trembling a little.

"I'll go through him fer the dinero," Pascall breathed, as he bent over the tragic figure. He had hardly stopped to holster his smoking gun.

"Shot him five times," chuckled

Bartlett. "Thar ain't nothin' like thet to hush an hombre's tongue!"

Pascall came up with a great sheaf of greenbacks, which he quickly counted. "It's all yere—four thousand even," he announced in a tone of satisfaction.

"*Sta muy bueno*," grinned Drummer, snapping open the loading gate of his .44 single-action and sliding in a fresh cartridge.

"This will need some explainin' later, even if the sheriff ain't in town," pointed out De Vani.

"What I see, I do not know anytheeng," said the barkeeper, as he poured fresh drinks for the murderers.

"It'll need no explainin' a-tall," said Pascall, with a knowing wink. He carefully bit the end from a cigar and thrust it between his strong teeth. "Who got the blame fer the other job? Savvy what I'm gettin' at?"

"Tabor did, but I still don't see —" Bartlett began.

"Yuh don't see what become o' Stan Eldrood, and how Tabor happened to have the money when he was caught?" asked Tyler Pascall. "Neither do I—yet. Mebbe Tabor was tellin' the truth when he told the sheriff he found our man dead at the bottom of a cliff. Anyway, the main thing is, we've got the money, and Brophy loses his ranch to me forever! Thet kid outlaw will get the blame fer this killin', too. We'll all swear to it. *Compre?*"

The others nodded gleefully. Removing the young rancher's boots with mock ceremony, they picked the body up roughly and carried it out into the hot, dusty, and deserted street of La Osa.

"Now what?" De Vani demanded. "Will we wait for the sheriff?"

"No," snapped Pascall. "The reason I've got so fer in the world is

because I've believed in takin' the bull by the horns. I've figured thet the sheriff will hole up to-night at the YB, whether he happens to catch Tabor or not. Well, we'll take young Brophy thar to give him somethin' to think about. And thet ain't all."

"Ain't all?" repeated Bartlett, in admiration for his leader's sagacity.

"Nope, we'll just take Judge Carter with us," Tyler Pascall leered. "He's a judge of the superior court, and if Tabor's caught we can hold trial. Carter's a judge of the justice court, too, yuh see; so——"

"Well?"

"Don't yuh get me?" exclaimed Pascall triumphantly. "With him along, he'll have to do his duty, and if old Owens Brophy can't pay off his mortgage—well, the YB Ranch will be mine in two shakes of a lamb's tail! Come on, yuh *tontos!*"

## CHAPTER VI.

### WHEN THE SHERIFF CAME.

WITH Paint watered and cared for, and with a good drink of the sweet spring water himself, along with a much needed wash, Sonny Tabor felt like a different man. He almost felt like a free one, instead of a badly wanted fugitive from justice. Mrs. Brophy, and her husband, too, now that he knew the truth, certainly had a way of making an hombre feel at home.

Then, just as twilight was easing the heat, and when the skies had become painted with the soft, amazing colors of another Arizona sunset, came supper. And what a meal Mrs. Brophy cooked!

There was corn pone, creamy potatoes, home-baked bread, rich slices of meat, and marvelous gravy. The side dishes were Mexican style—frijoles, chili con carne, and tacos.

Sonny very nearly foundered himself, and the thought that his cayuse, too, was making a luxurious meal outside, added to his appetite.

"I don't know when I've enjoyed such a supper, ma'am," he told his hostess. "I wish I could stay!"

"Why, couldn't you?" Brophy demanded heartily. "I'd be more than glad to give yuh a job. I know I could trust yuh with my right arm!"

The youthful outlaw blushed under all this praise, especially when Mrs. Brophy chimed in. But he shook his head.

"I'm afraid the law wouldn't leave me alone long enough for me to brand a maverick for yuh," he smiled. "Every officer in Arizona wants me—dead or alive. I'd just bring yuh trouble, but thanks just the same. When supper's over I'd better slope and put the mountains between me and John Law."

"It's been a happy day for us," said Mrs. Brophy. "We'd have lost the ranch if yuh hadn't found the money that robber took. I can hardly wait for Bill to come back—he'll be glad to know you, Sonny, when he knows all the truth."

"Oh, we wouldn't have lost the ranch anyway, maw," disagreed Owens Brophy, with his mouth full of food. "I hardly think that Tyler Pascall would have taken it from us, just because the money happened to be stolen!"

Mrs. Brophy's eyes flashed. She thrust her chin out defiantly.

"Well, they say there's no fool like an old fool, Owens Brophy!" she cried scathingly. "That Pascall man doesn't fool me a bit! He'd take our ranch in a minute, if he could do it legally. I know snakes when I see 'em, even if they do go disguised with two legs sometimes. He's no good, that man! And I'm glad we're not in his power."



"Well, mebbe yo're right," chuckled the old rancher sheepishly. "I know better than to try and argy with womenfolks. Anyway, I'll feel a heap better when Bill shows up with the bank's receipt for that money!"

Sonny thought it wise to be on his way again as soon as possible. It was a great surprise, though, when Brophy, who was nearest to the kitchen window, gave a cry of alarm:

"Yere comes some men—looks like it might be part of the posse!"

Sonny Tabor's rest and food, it seemed, had cost him dear. This probably meant capture. And capture, for him, meant only one thing—lynching! Quickly he jumped to his feet. There might still be time to reach Paint and get away.

But he quickly saw that that was impossible! One glance was enough. Sheriff McGrew—already so close that he could be recognized—was pounding in at the head of four deputies, most of whom carried short and high-powered Winchester carbines. They were within two hundred yards of the house and coming fast.

"It's no use, folks!" The youthful outlaw smiled with grim resignation. "I'll have to give myself up. They've got me flat-footed."

"They wouldn't have," boomed Brophy, "if yuh hadn't risked yore own skin to save mine from the desert this afternoon. It was white of yuh, lad, and by cracky, they won't have yuh! Martha, run into my bedroom and fetch the shotgun!"

But Sonny wouldn't listen to it. "I won't have yuh riskin' yoreself for me, Mr. Brophy," he said quietly. "There's no chance, anyway, and yuh'd only get yoreself shot up."

"But——"

"But think of Mrs. Brophy," Sonny reminded him grimly. "Where there's a woman, and lead flyin'——"

"Now don't mind me, Sonny," said Mrs. Brophy, just as firmly. "I'd just as soon give up my own son!"

"I'll settle this, folks," said Sonny, his eyes suddenly misty with unaccustomed tears.

He couldn't have these people risking their all for the sake of a wanted man. Before they could stop him, he stepped coolly from the kitchen door into the open with his hands over his head!

"Hands up, kid!" shouted Sheriff McGrew at the top of his lungs, as he slid his horse to a stop. He dismounted with his right hand locked inside the lever of a .30-30 Winchester. The sights were in line. The others, too, lost no time in getting the drop and getting it fast!

"We've got yuh covered, Tabor!" called out the gloomy deputy.

"I ain't disputin' it," Sonny drawled, allowing his own .45s to remain in their holsters. His hands were up.

"Wait a minute, dang yuh all!" roared Brophy. "I'm a meanin' yuh, Sheriff McGrew!"

"How'd this kid get yere?" the sheriff wanted to know, breathlessly.

"I ain't goin' to let yuh take him until I tell yuh he's innocent o' the charges I pressed again' him!" the rancher exploded. "Come on into the house while I explain. If it wasn't fer Tabor I'd be dead!"

The sheriff and his men were very cool as they came up on the porch and took Sonny in charge. This time McGrew was careful to take Sonny's two six-guns.

"Yuh won't bum no cigarette from me *this* time, young feller!" he frowned.

Sonny chuckled. "I never smoke, sheriff," he said. "That's why yuh should have been on yore guard this mornin'. I won't pull *that* again."

"No, and yuh won't pull any other tricks, either," said McGrew decisively. "Don't take yore eyes offn him, men."

When they were back inside the kitchen the men, with drawn guns, ranged themselves up against one wall. Brophy told his story quickly—convincingly, too—but the sheriff wasn't much impressed.

"Well, Owens," McGrew announced, when he had heard it all, "I'll admit thet Tabor did a very commendable thing. I admit there's good in him. But thet don't hardly alter matters, see? Thar's been a dead-or-alive reward a-hangin' over young Tabor fer many a moon. He's a gunman, and he's got to pay the extreme penalty. But—hey! Who's this comin'?"

"Four—five fellers! Why, it's Tyler Pascall and his men!" Deputy Brownny exclaimed. "They're carryin' somebody with 'em on an extry hoss. Whoever he is, he looks like he's stoved up bad. Why—why, it's yore boy, Bill, Mr. Brophy," he blurted.

It was hardly a tactful thing to say. The old rancher's moonlike face turned three shades whiter under its layer of sunburn. His lips moved, but for a moment no sound came.

"Bill?" he repeated. "Not—Bill!"

As for Mrs. Brophy, the boy's mother, she took it with all the stoicism of a frontierswoman. They saw her take a step backward, one hand twisting at her apron. Aside from that she did not yet betray the emotion within.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," said the sheriff, in his blundering sympathetic way. "I hope it ain't nothin' seri-

ous. Mebbe he fell off his hoss or somethin'." He blinked out of the doorway, one eye on his prisoner. "Who is thet with 'em?" he demanded, as another rider swung into view—a far from expert horseman who seemed to have some difficulty in staying on his horse. Even at that distance they could see that his hair and beard were white.

"Looks like Judge Carter—it is Judge Carter," sang out one of the other deputies wonderingly. "Wonder what *he's* yere fer."

"I'm afraid something dreadful—has happened," said Mrs. Brophy in a voice that appeared calm and steady. It was the first thing she had said, and somehow betrayed the turmoil within.

The little party dismounted outside, and slowly—almost like pallbearers at a boot-hill funeral—the four Pascall henchmen carried their motionless burden toward the house. Owens Brophy passed a large, trembling hand over his face.

"I see yuh've got Tabor!" came Tyler Pascall's exulting voice. He had evidently seen Sonny's paint pony outside and recognized it.

"Never mind about Tabor!" cried the old rancher almost fiercely. His voice seemed to come from a point deep underground and far away. "Bill! Thet's Bill, ain't it? Is he—is he dead?"

Pascall's upturned mustache ends turned down in a mock expression of grief. He shook his head sadly.

"Yes, I'm afraid he is," he said, with a nod toward Mrs. Brophy.

Brophy slumped back against the oilcloth-covered table and clutched it to keep from staggering. Mrs. Brophy gave one low moan, but did not faint, although her face became ashen in hue.

Sonny's heart went out to both of them. Already he had learned to

think of this splendid old couple as toward his own mother and father, whom he did not remember. So few people had been good to him.

"Who—did it?" old Brophy gasped.

Then Sonny got one of the most unpleasant starts in his life. Pascall, showing his pointed teeth in a coyote smile, pointed a long and accusing finger.

"The kid yo're feedin' and makin' up to," he leered. "Sonny Tabor!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### COURT.

**T**HERE was a silence that must have lasted nearly a minute, broken only by the old rancher's heavy breathing. Then he flared:

"I don't believe it!"

"We have witnesses," chuckled Pascall. "He did it, all right, shot Bill five times—stole the money, every cent of it."

"But we—I mean he's been yere fer supper—most of the afternoon," blurted Brophy. "He saved——"

"This happened right afore noon," grinned Pascall, giving Sonny a wolfish stare. "He had plenty o' time afore he even come this a way. He's got no alibi! Why, the thing happened right in my saloon. I seen it with my own eyes. I tried to drop Tabor, but he was too fast fer me."

"I saw it, too," chimed in Red Bartlett. "Tabor, he done it—held us all off with his guns, while he took the four thousand in dinero."

The rancher shook his head in bewilderment and turned to Judge Carter, who had just entered the room. There was an appealing look in his eyes.

There was even more than that in Sonny's heart. To be accused of such a thing, and so brazenly, made him physically sick. There was just

one bright ray of light in all the gloom that had enveloped his soul, and that was the fact that Brophy didn't believe him a murderer. Half turning, he faced the dead boy's mother.

"And you, ma'am," he asked falteringly, "do yuh think I——"

Mrs. Brophy gave Sonny one look, and after that he would have cheerfully met whatever fate had been prepared for him, however cruel.

"I don't believe it," she said.

"Well, I do," said the sheriff. "How about it, judge?"

Judge Carter cleared his throat impressively and adjusted his black string tie. Childish, Carter had been called, but nobody in La Osa would have admitted that he was ignorant of law. He had served once, it was said, in Washington—a congressman.

There was little of the former dignity left. He was shriveled, flabby, thin in spots, and bloated in others. He liked whisky not wisely, but too well. Still, in spite of it all, there was something in him that commanded respect. They listened for what he had to say.

"I wasn't there—wasn't a witness, neither *in facto* nor *pro tem*, so to speak, so I couldn't speak without the benefit of *habeas corpus*. Nevertheless, my friends, the evidence sounds to me pretty conclusive. Tyler Pascall and Red Bartlett, parties of the first part, will yuh raise yore right hands and solemnly swear that yuh saw Sonny Tabor, the present prisoner yuh see before yuh, willfully shoot, murder, and otherwise kill the said——"

"Please cut it short, judge," pleaded the old ranchman.

Carter ignored the interruption. "Will yuh solemnly swear that yuh saw Sonny Tabor fire upon and kill Bill Brophy?"



"We swear," said Pascall and his red-faced henchman, raising their right paws.

"And we swear, too!" added De Vani and Drummer.

As the judge said, it looked conclusive. Already, the sheriff was exchanging meaning glances with his men and Deputy Brown was coiling a long section of lariat rope—not aimlessly, either, for in the end he had carefully made a hangman's noose.

"Yuh have a nice stand o' cotton-wood trees yere, ain't yuh, Brophy?" McGrew said pointedly.

The rancher lifted his suffering, seamed face from his son's dead face to Sonny's horrified one, and then back to the sheriff. "Yuh ain't goin' to hang Tabor on my place without a decent trial," he thundered. "And mebbe not then."

"Then," said Pascall icily, "how about hangin' him yere on *mine*?"

"Yores?" Brophy repeated mechanically.

"Yeah," nodded Tyler Pascall, twisting his lip mockingly. "The mortgage is past due this minute. Have yuh got the dinero to pay it? Interest and all, it amounts to four thousand even."

"So thet's it?" blared the rancher. "Yuh'd rob me of my place?"

"Call it robbery if yuh like, I'll leave it to the judge," returned Pascall with a slight shrug. "Yuh should have thought of thet when yuh signed this yere mortgage paper"—and from his breast pocket he took a document and laid it face up on the table, under Judge Carter's nose.

The judge adjusted his glasses and examined the date.

"I don't see anything wrong with this, or why Tyler shouldn't fore-close," decided the legal light of La Osa. "Can yuh pay up, Owens?"

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"Of course I can't," said the rancher, turning purple.

"Luckily, I've got my stamper with me," said Carter, fumbling in the pocket of his black alpaca coat and taking out an official seal. "I'll just make over the ranch to Pascall while I'm yere—just to be fair and legal, *pro tem*."

"*Bueno*," laughed Pascall loudly. He was in great good humor now, "but how about havin' Tabor's trial fust? It won't take long. The fust thing I want to do after the ranch is mine, is to hang Tabor from one of my choice trees."

Sonny looked at the Brophys, filled with an infinite pity. He was not sorry for himself. His had been a hard and dangerous life, and his own plight didn't shake his nerve. But to have these two old people lose their little rancho, just after losing what they loved most—their son—that was too much.

He felt his breath coming in long angry gasps, felt his nails biting deep into the palms of his hands. If only he had his guns—or one tiny chance to right what he believed to be a wrong—

"What have yuh to say fer yoreself, Tabor?" Judge Carter demanded. "The circumstances are a little unusual, but I'm a duly recognized authority of this State, and superior court is now in session. Quiet, please!"

"The only thing I have to say is that I'm innocent," said the outlaw, looking the judge steadily in the face. "This isn't much of a trial, sir."

Carter smiled wryly, as if something hurt him. He was never a pleasant man. Carefully, he wiped his steel-rimmed glasses.

"As far as that goes, Tabor, yo're not entitled to a trial, at all. Sentence of death, if I remember the

legal papers rightly, have been passed on yuh at Tucson, Globe, Flagstaff, Nogales——”

“An hombre has a right to clear his name, before he dies,” said Sonny Tabor quietly. He was watching Deputy Brownly coiling and uncoiling the lynching rope. “Is that right, yore honor?”

“Correct, accordin’ to the law of *ex post facto*,” admitted the learned judge.

“Very well then,” said the outlaw coolly. “It’s been claimed that Bill Brophy was shot five times. Did yuh see the bullets personally, judge?”

“See ’em?” snorted Carter. “I’ve got ’em! I happen to be coroner o’ La Osa as well as judge. I removed them there slugs as evidence.”

Carter carefully took a red bandanna from his pocket and unrolled it. Inside were five leaden objects, most of them quite smooth, but some bent and battered a little. The murdered boy’s mother took away her eyes, and Brophy swore softly under his breath.

Without touching them, Sonny bent forward and took one look.

“Those are all .44s,” he said quietly. “Three Colts and two S. & W.”

“Admitted,” said the judge, with dignity.

“Seems to me,” Sonny drawled, his youthful face a mask, “that Señor Pascall and all his men use that caliber. *Muy estrano*, isn’t it? I always use .45s—always have.”

There was a muttered oath from Pascall, and the sheriff’s eyes went round and wide with unbelief.

“Why, kid, thet ain’t so!” he accused. “Yuh use .44s. Them’s the guns I——”

“Let me show yuh I’m right,” Sonny smiled.

Unthinking, McGrew passed over

first one of the outlaw’s six-guns to Sonny, and then the other. And he was so obliging as to hand them out butts first.

“Now yuh see,” Sonny chuckled, “that this is a .45. And so’s this, an’—— Put ’em up, all of yuh! Stand right where yuh are!”

## CHAPTER VIII.

### SADDLE STAKES!

THE sheriff’s mouth came open wide, he blinked like an owl caught out at noon. Sonny had promised not to use the cigarette trick on him, but he had used another. And he was caught flat-footed.

“Don’t—shoot, Tabor,” McGrew wheezed.

The others, too, had no time to reach for their hardware. They hadn’t expected such a boner from McGrew, nor had they expected Sonny to be so quick to take advantage of it. One by one, their empty hands went toward the low ceiling. For the first time a slow grin had dawned on Owens Brophy’s face.

“I reckon I’ve proved I didn’t kill Bill Brophy,” said Sonny easily. “Any arguments?”

Nobody spoke. Pascall’s face was black with fury, but he lacked the nerve to start the fire flying. His henchmen swore and wilted.

Already it was almost dark outside. Sonny slowly backed toward the door, his twin gun muzzles seeming to cover each man alike.

Suddenly, Sonny blew out the oil lamp that had been lighted just a few minutes before. It plunged the room in semidarkness.

“Don’t be in a hurry to follow me, amigos,” Sonny warned pleasantly, “or they’ll be some more slugs for the judge to put in that red bandanna of his!”

The door slammed shut with such force that every man jumped almost out of his boots, thinking a gun had exploded. Then they all blinked. Sonny Tabor had gone!

"After the little whelp!" snarled Tyler Pascall. "Five hundred cash to the hombre thet reams him!"

They rushed outside, or most of them did, but there was little to be seen. A black-and-white pinto moved through the gloom—gray and indistinct now in the dark—that was all.

*Br-r-rang! Bang! Crack!* Several six-guns and a Winchester cracked, but as far as results went, they might have been shooting at the stars overhead.

Then some one lighted the lamp again and there was an amazed yell from Judge Carter:

"The paper—the mortgage paper—gone!" he shrieked.

"What!" squalled Tyler Pascall, turning in a rage.

There was no doubt about it. A few moments before, the official-looking document had been reposing on the kitchen table. Now it had vanished, without a trace!

"Why, the thief!" screamed Pascall, in a fuming passion. "The sneakin' little thief! I'll double thet reward! I'll tripe it!"

There were more shouts without effect.

"He's down by Brophy's old bunk house!" shouted Deputy Brownny breaking into a run. "Stopped thar!"

"Yo're loco!" howled the sheriff. "What in thunder would he want thar?"

They investigated, all the same, but they were slow and cautious. None were overanxious to face Sonny's guns if it came to an abrupt show-down. When they reached the old bunk house, they found nobody,

but one of the deputies was positive that he saw a rapidly moving shape just running away from it—Sonny's pinto. They fired at it, but only succeeded in wasting good ammunition.

"It's no go," grumbled the sheriff. "I feel like kickin' myself from yere to Phoenix! Twice I had him, and he's gone! No moon to-night, and we'll have to wait and track him in the mornin'."

Morning came, however, with no sign of the outlaw or his spotted cayuse. Hating to face another scorch in the desert, the sheriff disconsolately returned to La Osa, leaving his three deputies to carry on the search.

At noon, McGrew went to Peg-leg's bar for a drink, staying longer than he intended, and returned to his tiny, white-painted office at a quarter to four.

He found two letters waiting for him. The first didn't add anything to McGrew's cheerfulness. It was from the gloomy deputy, and read as follows:

"DEAR SHERIFF: Still no sign of Tabor and the piebald jack rabbit he's ridin'. Remember the silver peso I bet against two bits? Pay me. Two bits is worth a shot of Cascade, and if yore a sport yo'll throw in a dime seegar.

Yrs. Resp., BROWNNY.

"Aw, thunderation!" growled the sheriff, adding something not quite polite.

Then he opened the second letter. Who had brought it he had no way of knowing, but the writing was in an unfamiliar, boyish scrawl. He read it thoughtfully:

"Come to the Tin Palace this evening at nine for a poker game. Lead chips might be used, so it might be best for yuh to stay out, keep yore hands empty, and yore eyes and ears open.

(Signed) MUCHACHO."



"Now I wonder what the devil *thet* means!" McGrew ejaculated, scratching his head and half closing his eyes. "I know *thet* Pascall is great on poker, but—well, I'm goin' to be on hand, anyway!"

Seven o'clock came—then eight. Things began to be more lively at the Tin Palace Saloon. The scrapings of a fiddle were heard; glasses began to clink against the bottles on the long bar.

And mingled with the talk of booted men came the soft rattle of chips and the pur of a roulette ball as it whizzed over the wheel of chance. Pascall might have lost the YB rancho, but he certainly intended to recoup his fortunes.

"Look what I found in the desert, chief," whispered De Vani, coming close to his leader's chair, just as the games were opening up. "Yo're sunk as far as Brophy's ranch is concerned."

He handed Tyler Pascall a tiny bit of paper—a piece no larger than the end of the gambler's thumb. Pascall scowled at it. On it the words could just barely be made out:

"Twelve months after date, we, the und——"

"It's all *thet's* left of the promisory note o' Brophy's," the desperado breathed in Pascall's ear. "Tabor burned it, tearin' it up fust. This is all of it now; yuh'll never collect!"

Pascall ground his teeth together with anger. The veins stood out in his forehead like swollen cords.

"What business was it of his?" he snarled, half aloud. "Cheated me out o'—— If I ever catch *thet* fresh kid, I'll——"

He didn't finish, but the master gambler's hard face was expressive enough.

At that moment, the wide saloon doors swung open, and a newcomer entered, lugging a handsome saddle mounted with conchas and silver butterflies—a beautiful specimen of the saddler's art. Pascall glanced at him and his brows lowered somewhat.

"It's only a Mex kid," grinned De Vani. "Stole the hull, more'n likely."

Pascall grinned, nodded, and shuffled his cards invitingly. He was alone at his round table, and he wasn't averse to receiving stolen goods occasionally, if it were profitable enough.

The Mexican with the saddle seemed hardly more than a boy. His swarthy face was rather pleasing, especially when he smiled and showed his white teeth, which he was doing now as he advanced straight toward Pascall's table.

He wore two guns, but no white man of Pascall's type thought anything of that. He knew that few hombres south of the Rio know how to use a Colt.

The Mexican came on through the crowd, still carrying the saddle. He was dressed in a rough brown shirt, open at the throat, and a very battered black sombrero.

"Where have I seen *thet* greaser afore?" muttered Tyler Pascall.

De Vani, Red Bartlett, Drummer, and Ansett were standing close to their chief's chair. They laughed contemptuously.

"More fodder fer yore mill, *thet's* all," chuckled Red. "Yuh ain't never seen the Mex kid afore. They all look alike, anyway."

"What do yuh want, greaser?" demanded Pascall insultingly, as the Mexican lad halted with his saddle.

"Me play poke—like play poke ver' mooch," was the smiling reply.

The four gunmen burst into guffaws, while Pascall gave his chair a hitch and surveyed his victim with a businesslike smirk.

"*Por que?*" he asked smoothly.

"Me, I have not mooch money," admitted the youth. "But thees saddle, I play heem—no?"

The gambler looked at the saddle, taking care not to display too much interest. But he could hardly help it. The hull was easily worth a couple of hundred, secondhand. It was literally incrustated with silver.

"Yuh steal 'em, huh?" sneered Pascall "I no play with *ladrons*."

"*Silla*—eet mine," was the cool reply. "I play you *ciento peso*."

"A hundred dollars fer thet wreck?" jeered Pascall, with a sly wink at his henchmen behind him. "Tell yuh what I'll do, greaser, I'll play yuh fifty—one hand."

"I play," said the youthful Mexican, and the poker game—the game that was to become history in La Osa—began!

## CHAPTER IX.

### RAISE AND RERAISE.

POKER with Tyler Pascall was more than a business—it was an art, a passion. He sincerely thought himself unbeatable. Not that he was an honest gambler. Pascall was honest, only when it was policy to be on the square, and that was seldom.

Confidently, he shuffled the cards and extended the deck to the young Mexican, who dropped his saddle to the floor beside his chair and regarded his opponent with a quiet smile.

"Low card deals—*bueno?*" queried the owner of the Tin Palace.

"*'Sta my bueno, señor,*" agreed the youth from below the border, and promptly cut a king.

Pascall laughed and cut a four spot. He dealt. The game was draw—jacks or better to open, and the first winning hand took the saddle, or the fifty dollars.

The Mexican scarcely glanced at his cards and then passed, as did Pascall. The deal went around again, then Pascall passed and the unknown Mexican opened the pot. He drew three cards. The gambler took one.

"Aces up," chuckled Tyler Pascall, when the deal was over.

"What you call *dos*, no, *tres* queen. Three queen," said the brown-skinned young man, and the fifty dollars was his.

"Lucky!" snarled Pascall between his pursed lips. "Yuh won't last long, my friend. Better lose and have it over."

But the young Mexican didn't lose. He won the next hand, and then with the stakes doubled, the next. Soon, he had six hundred dollars in a neat pile before him, all in green and yellow bills, some tens, some twenties, and several fifties.

"Hello, sheriff," called Pascall, looking up as a new arrival quietly took a seat near the table.

"Howdy," grunted McGrew, rolling a cigarette with his eyes on the riffing cards. "How's the game?"

"Oh, it's about over," laughed Pascall, and at the very next hand he opened, and when the Mexican stayed, raised him two hundred dollars. To his amazement, the swarthy youth thrust in a big sheaf of bills.

"Me reraise," he said cheerfully. "Me like to play poke."

And that Mexican lad could certainly play "poke"! A crowd had formed about the table, and for the first time Pascall was looking worried. This was getting to be a big game, even for the Tin Palace!

In a very little while, the brown youth had two thousand dollars before him, all in bank notes. Pascall's face was wet with sweat under his green eye shade, and his smile was forced. He licked his lips frequently. The four gunmen behind his chair edged closer, their faces hard.

"I'm layin' down there. Show yore openers and win!" snapped Pascall savagely, a minute later. "I've only got three little treys."

"One pair jacks, me," said the Mexican softly, and Pascall stiffened with suppressed rage. Beaten again, and all the time he had held the best hand!

The sheriff bent forward interestedly, some of the time watching the cards, and sometimes the players. His face was blank with astonishment.

Then came the time when the Mexican lad had three thousand dollars in bills neatly stacked at his elbow. Once again the cards were dealt, and Pascall's hand was shaking a little. Twice he almost bobbed.

"I open thees pot," announced the swarthy youth without changing expression.

Pascall smiled quietly to himself. He had meant it that way. In spite of his nervousness he had placed the pasteboards where he wanted them. With studied carelessness he looked at his own hand, examining the cards one at a time between his long and sensitive fingers.

"I guess I'll stay with yuh if yuh crack 'er, Mex," he replied, his voice deliberate and without a tremor. "How many cards yuh takin'?"

"I play theese, señor," drawled the young Mexican.

The newly lighted cigar almost fell from Pascall's mouth. The

muscles of his face twitched. With one hand he rubbed the cold perspiration from his eyes, then looked again at his own cards. Red Bartlett, Ansett, Drummer and De Vani looked over his shoulder. He had three aces.

But the Mexican, it seemed, had a pat hand. A thousand more was in the pot now. If the Mexican won, he'd have four thousand American dollars. And how could Pascall hope to win—bucking a pat hand, a hand that needed no additional cards, with just three aces?

Tyler Pascall studied, swore, studied again, and then flung his hand to the floor with an exclamation that made the rafters ring.

"Yuh blasted lucky greaser, take the dinero! I'm out! What have yuh got—straight or a flush?"

Unsmilingly, the Mexican turned just two kings face up on the table. He had won, with a stupendous bluff!

Pascall glared at the cards and went a sickly white. He bit his lip and seemed to sag down in his chair, his eye shade going crooked over one ear. He looked across at the Mexican's four thousand dollars and fairly gnashed his teeth.

Then he felt the slight pressure of a knee at his back. It was Red Bartlett, and he knew what that signal meant. It wasn't often that a stranger—and a Mexican, at that—was allowed to get out of the Tin Palace with four thousand in real winnings. Men had been killed for less than that.

Tyler took a deep breath and turned his head toward Tuxillo, the bartender, behind him. He made his voice steady. He knew what was coming—or thought he did.

"Bring us some hot ones," he said casually.

It was the long-agreed-upon coun-



tersign. It meant gun play! Almost at the same instant, De Vani, Bartlett, Drummer, and Ansett reached for their six-guns!

## CHAPTER X.

### SQUARE!

THE crowd, even the sheriff, dropped low, for they saw the storm coming even before the lightnings of death and the thunders of destruction began to crackle.

Already the big, oversized .44s of the murderous quartet were flashing from their well-greased holsters. Even Pascall's twitching white hand went for the gun at his belt!

But none of them dreamed that the Mexican youth could be so fast—so bewilderingly quick. Even before the signal for the fight had been given he had thrust the money safely away. As Pascall cried out, he leaped forward like a catapult, overturning the round poker table and sending Pascall sprawling like a roped maverick.

*Br-r-r-rang!* Ansett's blued six-gun streaked crimson flame.

So close was the range that it seemed to lick at the front of the Mex lad's shirt. Strange to say, though, that shot had been too slow. Even as he fired it, the Mexican's twin .45s came ripping from the leather, barking almost before the muzzles were clear.

Ansett's chin went toward his knees, and he seemed to fold up into an absurd ball, rolling to the floor head-first, gun clattering from his nerveless hand. The bullet that had stricken him had ranged upward from his midriff and emerged from his shoulder blades!

And almost before the deafening roar of the explosion shook the Tin Palace, Red Bartlett dropped. He had been in the act of firing, and

the Mexican's slug had torn through his gun hand into his side, penetrating his heart.

The red-faced giant never knew what had hit him. As if jerked upward by an invisible rope, he seemed for a brief instant to be trying to crawl into the ceiling. His flushed head was back, his mouth open. Then, as if the spell had been broken, he fell with a jar that shook the building and rattled the bottles on the bar!

Then, and not until both men had sagged down, were the spectators conscious of the smoke. It had rolled up in a thick blue cloud, motionless, and greasy like cigar smoke. The echoes of the shots came together like the splitting thunder of an avalanche.

"Look out, he's——"

"Burn the Mex up!"

"He's no Mex!"

Drummer's gun spat yellow flame, sending sparks flying as if from an emery wheel! But the target had moved on—considerably. Leaping nimbly to one side, the swarthy-faced youth fired twice, while Drummer's bullet crashed violently through the nearest window.

Drummer seemed to laugh. That laugh, though, was only the hole left by a .45 slug. That horrible, crimson grin was still on his evil features when he went staggering forward on his face, arms outstretched!

That Mexican had blue eyes! Nobody had noticed it before, but they were shining now with a fighting light.

"Yuh coyotes!" he said, and there was no hint of Spanish in his voice now, as it rang over the pounding of the guns.

It was De Vani's chance for glory. He had won many a gun fight, had this smart, swart, black-

haired hombre. From El Paso to Yuma his name was feared. Already his carved ivory-butted Colts were out, and he had dropped back at a crouch to sweep the unknown Mexican with fire and lead.

But vivid streaks of orange-red danced then from the twin bores of the Mex youth's .45s! De Vani turned half around as the lead played in a molten tattoo across the front of his gay cowboy shirt.

He coughed, and his face became distorted and gray with agony. Without a word he went careening into the wall, striking it with one shoulder and the side of his face. Then he fell into a quivering heap, his clothing literally smoking!

"Drop it!" the Mex lad snapped, as Pascall whirled up to face him with a drawn pearl-handled, short-barreled pistol in his shaking fingers.

*Smash!* Instead of firing on Tyler Pascall, the swarthy youth hit him with his right hand, gun and all!

It was a terrific blow, and the saloon man went down like a chopped tree. His chair crashed to smithereens, the table broke in bits, and cards flew everywhere—like dry leaves blowing through the smoke!

Pascall landed with a thud, his head sloping over on one side and a thin drool of scarlet appearing beneath the trim corners of his mustache. His eyes remained half open, the look of amazed fear still in them.

"Do yuh know me now, hombre?" drawled the Mex youth. "I seldom play cards, and when I do it's for a purpose, savvy?"

There was a ring in that voice that Pascall had heard before. Now, even in his half delirium it floated into his brain. That voice—that boyish smile!

"Sonny Tabor!" he spat out through swollen lips.

"*Bueno,*" nodded the youngster. "Those clothes I borrowed at the YB bunk house, plus a little walnut juice on my face and hands worked wonders, didn't it? I reckon now, that I've won back the dinero that rightfully belongs to Pa and Ma Brophy!"

Pascall stared in unbelief. His eyes looked like two cigarette holes in a horse blanket.

"But yuh——"

"I'm a poor poker player," said Sonny cheerily, "and that's how I beat yuh. An honest hombre can sometimes beat a shark. All I did was to lay 'em down when yuh dealt me good ones, and to play the pore hands strong. That's what crossed yuh up—yuh thought yuh was wrong, and I had yuh guessin' all the time."

There was an oath from Tyler Pascall. It brought another fiery gleam to Sonny's clear-blue eyes.

"And yo're goin' to tell the sheriff, here, who killed Bill Brophy!" he cried.

Pascall clicked his jaws shut.

"I won't—I——"

Sonny stepped forward and made a swift pass with the sight of one of his Colt single-actions. A crimson welt appeared at the gambler's throat. He emitted a piercing scream.

"He's killed me—cut my throat!" he gurgled. "I'm a goin' to die! I'll tell! I'll tell! I had it framed all along. I had one of my men dressed like Tabor to rob the YB. When that failed, I had Bill killed—helped kill him. He——"

"That's enough," Sonny drawled, turning half to the amazed Sheriff McGrew with his two six-guns still in his brown hands. "Heard it, didn't yuh, hombre? Well, I'm

turnin' him over to yuh. His throat isn't cut—just sore. If yuh'll adjust the knot just a half inch higher he won't even notice it. I'll have some-thin' interestin' for yuh at yore office a little later, sheriff. In the meantime—adios!"

A gasp went up from the fearful spectators at the Tin Palace. Sonny Tabor had picked up his silver-mounted saddle and was out of the big room at one bound.

Sheriff McGrew's nerves were still crawling a little when he entered his office ten minutes later after jailing Tyler Pascall for murder. Gingerly, he opened the door half ajar. The inside was dark. He listened, but heard nothing.

"Is any one—th-th-there?" he stuttered.

He almost jumped entirely off the sidewalk, when he heard footsteps behind him. Then he heaved a sigh of relief, and fumbled for the reassuring comfort of a roll-your-own cigarette.

"Thet yuh, Brownny?" he blurted.

"Yep," admitted the deputy who had just come into view behind him. "Say, I just heard all about it. Wish I'd been thar! Talk about smokin' 'em up! Say!"

"Yes, I wish yuh'd been thar, too," admitted the sheriff, as he mopped the icy perspiration from his forehead. "Come on into the office with me, will yuh, Brownny. I'm still jumpy."

The two men went in, a match was struck, and Brownny held the flame to the wick of an old oil lamp. He drew back with a jump.

"Looky yere!" he cried. "It's money, McGrew—piles of it! And

—and yere's a note with it. Looks like its been writ with the lead end of a bullet. What does she say?"

"I'll—s-s-see," stammered McGrew, holding the letter, which had been boyishly scrawled on the back of an old envelope, to the light. McGrew noted with a start that it was the same writing he had seen earlier in the evening. This time, though, it wasn't signed "*Muchacho*."

The scrawl read as follows:

"FRIEND SHERIFF: This money (four thousand even) belongs to Brophy of the YB Ranch. See that he gets it pronto or I'll chase the Law some instead of havin' it chase me. SONNY TABOR."

"Well, I'll be——" began Deputy Brownny. "Thet's what I call a queer kind o' outlaw. But—— Say, what are yuh doin', McGrew?"

Sheriff McGrew had gone to the wall and was looking over the long line of reward posters that decorated it. He halted in front of one of the largest of them. It bore this heading in large, black letters:

WANTED—SONNY TABOR—  
DEAD OR ALIVE

The sheriff took a pencil and deliberately crossed out the fourth and fifth words. He crossed them out and kept crossing them out until nothing could be seen of them. Then, deliberately and with a heavy hand, he printed, before the final word:

STILL

"And I ain't sayin' I'm sorry, either," he grunted, as he looked over his handiwork.





# Grizzly on the Prod

By Hal Davenport

Author of "A Pal In Bearskin," etc.

**W**ITH his heavy .45-90 rifle cradled in the crook of one arm, young Cleve Barstow set out from "Old Dad" Papen's cabin up the long, rugged mountain saddle known in that region as Bull Horn Gap.

In the dim light of dawn, the first real snow of the season lay thick a'out his feet.

"Now you be keerful, boy," Old Dad called from the doorway after

the lean, mackinawed young woodsman who had been his guest overnight. "Thet grizzly is a killer o' men as well as stock. It ain't been a week since Long Jim Watkins was brung in from the Gap."

"Careful it is," Cleve shouted back at the anxious-eyed little old prospector. Yes, he meant to be careful, but the main thing right now was to bring down that savage brute.

The grizzly was bad, all bad—a huge, murderous silvertip. Three times in the past four years men had been killed by it. Watkins, foreman for the Double Diamond, had been the last to lose his life.

A single blow—a ripping, tearing smash—from the great brute's paw had simply caved him in. The foreman hadn't even had a chance to draw. Beneath that slashing stroke, his six-gun, shell-studded cartridge belt, and holster had all been jammed together into a frightful mass.

"Worst thing I ever saw," Cleve muttered to himself.

Although Cleve usually ran a line of traps in winter, he punched cows for the Double Diamond each summer. "Long Jim" had been his boss.

He'd been down at the ranch when the body was brought in. Immediately then he'd been commissioned to clear the Bull Horn country of the silvertip.

Now, with this snow ideal for tracking, Cleve had ridden long hours to reach Old Dad's in time for an early start.

Resolutely he shook the picture of Watkins's death from his mind. The big grizzly would be holing up soon for winter. Cleve knew he had to work fast.

Behind him the seamed little old prospector raised a shout:

"Don't you git too close to him, Clevey. Even if you killed him, a swipe from that paw could break a leg. And you mightn't be found for weeks."

Cleve, already swinging up the Gap with that curious half walk, half dogtrot of the seasoned woodsman, waved a cheerful hand.

"Don't worry," he shouted. "This'll be long-range stuff. Anyhow, if I didn't show up in a day or two, you'd be out on the hunt."

"Hunt nothin'!" Old Dad snorted. "I'm goin' out with my clean-up."

Cleve grinned. Old Dad, who wintered far down the mountains at Aspen, would still be there, he knew, when he got back. The mild-eyed old-timer thought a heap of Cleve. Until this hunt was over, he wouldn't think of going out.

The rough Gap was thick with timber, but Cleve made good time up its course. Several times throughout the fall he had come upon the great, long, slender footprints of the grizzly in a bit of marshy ground where it leveled out near the top. The bear was almost certain to be somewhere close about.

By noon he neared the spot. Spruce and lodgepole pine clothed the little knolls and hillocks that jutted in from both sides of the rugged mountain pass. Beneath the trees the snow was gloomy. Then, in a patch of sunlight, he came upon the tracks.

"Fresh," Cleve noted with satisfaction.

The imprints led through the pines, along the base of a good-sized knoll. Their course seemed down the Gap.

Cleve followed the trail for a short distance only, until he was sure of the great beast's general direction. Then, wise in the ways of bear hunting, he struck up a higher, timbered slope.

Once under cover there, he swung back parallel with the tracks, his object being to stay above the grizzly until he had a chance to glimpse the huge killer unobserved.

On rounding the hill, however, he failed to cut the trail, and so kept on circling until he had come back to his own starting point.

"He's in that circle, then," Cleve grunted to himself. "Probably lay-

in' down for a while. It'll have to be straight trailin' after all, I guess."

Rifle ready, he took out along the tracks. He had swung along through the snow for perhaps half a mile, when he caught sight of something that gave him sudden pause.

At the fringe of a thick, low clump of spruce, their boughs weighted by the snow mass until they almost draped the ground, fresh dirt lay scattered plainly upon the surface white.

"He's there—dug in!" Cleve knew in an instant. The young woodsman's sharp gray eyes probed intently into the darkness of the clump.

Then he and the great gray grizzly seemed to see each other almost at once.

Lying with its nose resting on outstretched forepaws and pointing straight back up the trail, the bear had suddenly raised its head, caught sight of the hunter, and emitted a startled grunt.

The youth's .45-90 whipped up.

But the huge silvertip had turned with amazing quickness—so quickly, in fact, that to Cleve it seemed as if the grizzly had simply flipped over backward and was running down the hill. The bear, startled and as yet uninjured, wasn't yet ready to fight.

But the grizzly was a man-killer, and Cleve knew that he might never again have such a chance. It was headed for a lower mass of pines now, going like an avalanche.

Cleve had never seen such size and speed, as he threw down for his first shot.

So big and furry was the brute that the long, tawny hair above and beneath its shoulders seemed to wave and jerk like tall grass in a windstorm as Cleve tried to line his sights. Four times he blazed away

with the old black-powder weapon. One shot, he knew, had hit.

The grizzly dug in its claws and slid for thirty feet. Then the beast turned with a vicious whirl and seemed on the point of coming back.

Cleve's magazine held three shells now. Slowly he dropped to one knee, to steady the rifle against a savage onslaught.

But the huge brute was evidently sorely hit. Again the grizzly turned and fled. The heavy timber through which it sped kept Cleve from getting in another shot.

"Tagged him, anyhow," he grunted. "Not so good, at that."

He took his time about going forward. A badly wounded grizzly is about the most dangerous thing on earth.

The bear had distanced him already. Cleve followed its trail with caution. It would never do to come to close quarters with the savage killer before he was aware of the fact.

On reaching a tangled deadfall, he got some idea of the bear's stark fury. It had slammed on through, smashing small down-trees right and left.

"Mean and bad and ragin'," Cleve muttered to himself. "And from this time on, you can bet that baby's got me marked."

How seriously the huge beast was hurt the lean youth couldn't tell, but he was far too wary to run chances. Twice in the long, steady trailing that followed, he saw where the great man-killer had lain down to rest.

The indentations of the massive body in the snow, together with the location of wound stains, gave him the impression that he had shot the grizzly through and through.

But even then, he knew, he might not have pierced a vital spot.



## II.

The afternoon wore on, with a high, clear winter sun that threatened to melt the snow in a day or two at most. Cleve was high up beneath the rims on the south slope of the lower Gap, when twilight closed in almost before he knew it. He sighed. He had no wish to blunder upon that grizzly in the darkness.

"Guess I better strike out for Dad's," he decided. The cabin was only about five or six miles below him now. "I can be back here long before daylight in the mornin'."

Taking a short cut, he headed downward. Starless night shut in about him. The woods lay thick and black.

Down-timber, boulders, and snow-hidden ledges continually blocked his path. But Cleve Barstow was a woodsman. He'd set his route by instinct. Aside from minor twistings, he held steadily to that course.

Suddenly he paused. He'd just become aware of a faint, tiny red glow tingeing the pines, slightly below and to his right. The lift and lull of voices came to him, almost straight up from his feet.

"Huh, a camp!" he thought. It might be a chance to find blankets and a chance to spend the night.

Nevertheless, he knew of no reason why any one should be up here. This was a wild, rough region. Men didn't barge in upon others unannounced.

With that thought in mind, he decided to scout round. Faintly outlined in the tinge of glow, bushes lay at his front.

Parting them with a cautious hand, Cleve stepped forward, but the next instant his feet shot from beneath him. He had slipped on a snow-slick rock.

Down he plunged through the branches with a startling crash. To his consternation, he kept on falling. The thicket had lined a ledge rim. With wild raspberry clawing his features, he dropped nearly twenty feet.

His rifle was gone when he landed, rolling, on his back. Luckily, he'd just missed a boulder. He sat up in a smother of snow. Men were springing at him. A snarling voice rasped:

"Quick! Git that gun he dropped!"

A fierce hand seized his shoulder. A .45 loomed in his face.

"Now, feller, what're yuh doin' here?" The words were a savage roar.

Cleve blinked. Clotted snow clung to his eyelashes. He brushed it aside, and got his first clear view of the camp.

The small fire burned well back in beneath the ledge. The blaze had evidently been there for some time, for the rocky floor around it was dry for nearly thirty feet.

Saddles and war bags lay about, also a small supply of provisions. Bed rolls were back in the warmest corner. It looked like a snug retreat.

Save for the fact that all cow work was over, it might have seemed a puncher's camp site. The men, though, didn't stack up like punchers. There were three of them, all with gleaming, fire-shot eyes, each with a six-gun out.

Slowly Cleve thrust aside the weapon that gaped full in his face.

"Don't be previous, pardner," he grunted coolly. "That thing might go off."

"It will," the other rasped, "if yuh don't answer my question! Come on, hombre, speak up!"

"I'll get up first," said Cleve.

But the other—a hawk-eyed,

dark-faced jasper with a thin and slitted mouth—gave the young woodsman no chance. The cocked gun rammed in against his upturned mackinaw collar.

"I reckon yuh won't," the fellow snapped. "Yuh'll do just one thing! Talk!"

Cleve's eyes flashed at the reception. Then they narrowed as they flicked across the other two men. And suddenly he decided that perhaps he'd better talk.

Totally apart from their hostile actions, there was something hard about the trio—a certain taut, deadly readiness in every line of their bodies, in the very stamp of each fire-tinged face.

The one nearest the leader was a broad, squat man with a heavy, unkempt black beard, surmounted by a mustache that failed entirely to conceal an ugly harelip.

The third, who now held Cleve's rifle, was lean and slant-faced, quick. His body was bent at the middle in a practiced gunman's crouch.

"Tough, all of them," Cleve thought to himself.

Well, they evidently had some reason for their action. Experienced in the ways of the West, he decided that, under the circumstances, it would hardly pay to ask questions himself.

"I don't mind tellin' you who I am," he clipped, "if you'll lay off that proddy stuff. I'm Cleve Barstow, from the Double Diamond. Up here on a hunt."

As the last words issued from him, he thought he saw "Harelip" give a start.

But already the hawk-eyed leader had snapped Cleve Barstow up.

"Thet so, is it? Well, just what kind of a hunt?"

Cleve told him, in some detail. There was more than a bit of mys-

tery here. The youth strung out his story, to give himself more time to try to figure this out.

The leader stood back slightly. Over his shoulder, he barked:

"Gila, Harelip, what d' yuh think of this story?"

The lean, slant-featured hombre called "Gila" gave vent to a grunt. "I don't think he's lyin'. I saw thet bear this afternoon. I was higher up, but the grizzly looked like he was hit."

Harelip nodded. He hooked a hand in his beard and spat through the cleft in his lip.

"Might ath well let him go. We don't want him around." He spoke in a hard, fierce lisp.

Cleve got to his feet. The leader, addressed now as "Hawk" by the others, seemed as satisfied as the rest. He put up his gun with a snappy movement.

Cleve had come to a positive conclusion. These men must be hiding out.

"Now," he snapped, "why so dog-goned tough?"

They had him at every disadvantage, but a bold course, he decided, was best. It was a natural thing to show resentment, demand some explanation.

If he had left without a word, it might have set them to thinking. So far as he could see, they had no business up here in the heights of Bull Horn Gap.

"Not tough," Hawk Bentley retorted, with a tight-lipped grin. "Just seein' thet toughs stay out."

"Feller," he continued, "we're up here guardin' range. Last winter lots o' stock was stole and never missed till spring. We've been hired to git them rustlers by the ranchers across the Gap."

The words came easily—a bit too easily, Cleve thought. If these

three were cow dicks, they'd have kept that fact to themselves.

More than ever he was sure that this dangerous bunch were outlaws of some sort. And suddenly he thought of Old Dad Papen, who still lingered in the mountains after a season's unusually good clean-up.

"You don't look like punchers to me," Cleve growled. "But I reckon you ought to know."

"I ain't," said Harelip promptly. "I'm the killer for the bunch."

The others laughed. "Thet fits us all," said Hawk. "Six hundred dollars a head fer rustlers. They're willin' to pay well, back there across the Gap."

Again Cleve knew the man was lying. There really had been some stock losses last winter, and the ranchers on the far side might quite possibly have employed cow dicks to keep watch.

But the cowmen over there were the kind who did their own fighting, once the game was caught.

Cleve grunted coolly: "Luck to you—about that rustlin'. Well, I'll take my gun."

Gila, he'd seen out of the corner of his eye, had quietly slipped all shells from the magazine. The man handed it over. As Cleve turned to go, the hawkish leader rasped:

"Keep quiet about us, fellah! Yuh know our business now. No word must go out."

The man was clever. He talked well, and hardly like a crook. "The brains of the outfit," Cleve said to himself.

That tale was just the kind to make a real puncher keep a close hobble on his lip.

"I'll bet they've done something already. I'll check up, when I get back to the ranch."

First, though, he meant to warn Old Dad. Plodding on through the

snow, he at length reached the little cabin. For the last two miles he'd seen its cheerful light.

### III.

Old Dad's face beamed with relief and pleasure when Cleve pushed in through the door, stamping wet snow from his feet.

"Dang, son, I'm glad to see you! You're gittin' in kind o' late. How about thet grizzly? Yuh see the killer cuss?"

"Yes, and almost got him." Cleve told of the hunt.

Old Dad's mild blue eyes took on a look of worry. "Wounded him, huh? Now he will be bad! Dern it, Clevey, why don't you fergit the huntin' part and depend on traps?"

"Not until I have to. Time is gettin' short. He might den up for the winter without goin' near a single set."

"It's safer, anyhow," the grizzled little old prospector contended. "Course I know you're hot to follow him while he's wounded, but dang it, son, I like you! You take an ol'-timer's advice—depend on traps."

Cleve laughed and shook his head. "Kind o' like you myself."

Then his voice grew serious. "Dad, you oughtn't to stay here any longer." Briefly he told about his encounter with the three toughs. "They're a bunch o' bad ones. And you've got a good clean-up."

"Who says so?" Dad demanded.

Like all prospectors, he was secretive about such things. In reality, he had about twenty-eight hundred dollars in dust and nuggets taken from his placer operations and a couple of pot holes he'd found by sinking short shafts to bed rock.

It was the existence of these shafts, together with Old Dad's crude flume and cradle, that had



Cleve Barstow worried now. They stamped the old man as a prospector to any spying eyes.

And the very fact that Dad was staying on into approaching winter, would seem to be a sign that he was working a good thing to the last minute. Out here all alone throughout the day, he offered the thieves a set-up.

But when Cleve pointed these things out, Old Dad merely grunted:

"Got my six-gun. She's a good barker. I ain't goin' out."

For an hour they argued back and forth. Old Dad was stubborn. He insisted that the men Cleve had encountered must be just what they claimed. Anyway, he contended he had to stay a while longer in order to leave things all shipshape.

Thus the matter stood when Cleve set out again before daylight. "Hard-headed ol' pelican," he grumbled. "He's stickin' just because he's afraid I may get hurt."

The weather had grown warmer overnight. Finding the grizzly's trail was easy, but under the warm sun the snow was melting fast.

Cleve's progress was slow around rock slides and other stony going. Also he lost time by trying to keep Dad's cabin in sight.

As a result, he lost the grizzly. Heading back for the cabin by mid-afternoon, he contrived to pass the camp of the three dangerous-looking strangers. It didn't help his fears any to find that they had moved. They were on the dodge, all right.

Nor was he further reassured, when after two more days of unsuccessful hunting over now snowless ground, he went down to the Double Diamond to get his four big, fifty-pound bear traps.

Since the grizzly had escaped him, Cleve was going to make some sets. The return of mild weather

meant that the huge man-killer wouldn't den up for a while. That the bear still lived he knew, for he'd come on occasional tracks.

"Heard about the robbery?" was the first thing asked him by "Doughy," the ranch cook.

"What robbery?"

"Bank at Aspen. Three men. Shot Briggs, the cashier. But he'll live. They didn't get much."

"What did they look like?" Cleve asked anxiously, although he felt he knew the answer. He'd been right about those crooks.

"Don't know exactly," Doughy said. "They was masked. One seemed to have a beard, though. Another was kind o' tall. Third man, the leader, they say, moved jest like a hawk."

"It's them," Cleve growled, and told about the strangers.

Unfortunately, no one but Doughy was at the ranch. The rest were out with a posse on a wild swing—now five days old—reported to have taken them far around the Gap.

The young woodsman hurried back to the cabin, his heart in his throat. But Old Dad, stubborn as ever, waved aside his fears.

"They've done gone," he insisted. "I'm glad you got them traps."

Cleve snorted. "Traps! You're settin' here in a trap yourself! With a big poke of gold dust for bait!"

"Money ain't everything, boy," Old Dad said promptly. Then, as Cleve slammed the door he quavered: "Be keerful about thet silvertip."

Another day, and Cleve had his sets made, the great steel jaws carefully covered, the stout chains secured about logs and down-timber at the end of their hidden course.

The traps lay in spots which, a while back at least, had been the man-killer's favorite haunts.

Baiting with parts of sheep carcass he'd brought along, Cleve spent most of the rest of the day trying to relocate the three crooks. He seemed to have failed, however. They were hidden well unless, as Old Dad insisted, they had indeed left the Gap country.

But Hawk Bentley, Gila, and Harelip hadn't yet pulled out. They had planned well, those three. That first snow had hid their trail, after the Aspen holdup. Now, with the posse probably disgusted, the three were again at work.

Up toward the rims they rode, a prisoner in their midst. Old Dad had stayed too long. He'd taken a terrific beating before they found the gold. The old man, bound astride a pack horse, was still alive merely because Hawk Bentley planned all his crimes in advance.

"That crack we found in the rim rock will do to throw him in," the slit-mouthed leader growled. "The next snow'll cover him past all finding. We left the cabin like it was. Nobody can pin any proof on us for this."

"The heck they can't," Old Dad sputtered through bruised and swollen lips. "Cleve Barstow'll run you down, you low-lived, torturin' skunks!"

"If he tries it," Bentley snarled, "he'll go down himself. Hey, look out, Harelip, yuh nitwit! Don't cross that open space."

The bearded outlaw, Harelip, had started across an angling arm of a little mountain park hemmed in by pine and aspen. He turned back, with a growl.

"Won't nobody see us. It's still a long way to the rims. We ought to take short cuts."

"But not fool chances," Bentley clipped.

WW-3D

They rode on, circling the clearing, but that one slip had been quite enough. Cleve Barstow, miles away, was still on the hunt.

He was much higher now, on the point of turning back to the cabin, when he caught the brief movement of man and horse. Almost at once he lost them, but that one glimpse had aroused his interest.

No one had any reason to be up here, he felt, but himself and the crooks.

Woodsman that he was, he saw them the next time they broke cover for a moment. They had to wind along a ledge. Cleve's keen eyes narrowed, then grew wide, while a pang of dread tugged at his heart.

There were four horsemen, instead of three! Could Dad be in that bunch?

"I got to see!" he cried. He bemoaned his lack of glasses. The distance was too great to make identity clear. But Cleve Barstow knew those heights.

As he had done with the silver-tip, he got the general direction of the plodding group. Then he struck out, heading down at a long mountain angle that he hoped would cut their course.

Through boulders, around down-timber, down sharp ravines he went at a swift dogtrot. The day still lacked about two hours of sunset. With luck, he could get ahead of the bunch.

"If I don't," he almost groaned, "I'll miss 'em in the night."

Time and again now he saw them. He was cutting in closer, closer. Then he knew the worst.

That was Old Dad, a prisoner. But they were less than half a mile away now. He'd beat the swift sunset.

Panting heavily, Cleve went on

at his woodsman's trot. In his hurry he let his rifle strike against a jutting rock. The weapon flew from his hand, leaped off down the bouldered slope.

Bushes kept him from finding it at once. When at length he recovered it, he stared in consternation. Its firing mechanism had been badly damaged in the fall from rock to rock.

Anxiously he tried the lever. It also was bent and jammed. The rifle wouldn't work!

"Take a gunsmith to fix it!"

But the heavy old .45-90 might still serve him as a club. The lean youth pounded onward. He'd have to risk their guns.

"This danged bear hunt o' mine," he grunted, "has got Dad into this!"

#### IV.

Down below Cleve, hidden by trees, the group of men had stopped. Or rather their horses had. Ears pricked in sudden alarm, the animals were sawing back.

Hawk Bentley jabbed in spurs, but the horses still showed fright. They snorted now and reared. A snarl broke from the man. It was answered by a sound that made Bentley's hair stand rigid for an instant—the furious, deep-throated roar of a raging beast.

Down-slope the bushes threshed.

"A grizzly!" Hawk's .45 jumped forth.

The other two outlaws had drawn as their eyes leaped toward the spot.

But Hawk Bentley's quick voice stayed any bullets. He'd realized the true situation in a flash.

"Don't shoot! No shots!" he barked. "That wild silvertip is trapped."

Sure enough the grizzly, caught by the first set Cleve had made that

morning, was held by jaws of steel. Aroused by the presence of men, it had lunged out with all its might. But one mighty, captured forepaw, gripped about four inches above the claws, kept the ferocious man-killer fast.

Again and again it lunged, with a ferocity now that whipped it from its feet.

It was snapped almost end over end as it hit the end of the chain length that anchored it to a heavy log. Old Dad Papen knew the strength of that trap, but he couldn't help a gasp.

Hawk Bentley noted it and grinned. His eyes turned on the old man with a sudden cruel, calculating light.

The grizzly continued to rage. A man within reach of it would have died on the spot.

Bentley rapped at the others: "Say, this thing was made for us! Yank that ol' coot off his horse, Harelip. We'll throw him to the bear—make his death look like an accident.

"He was out podderin' around after his friend, Clevey," Hawk chuckled evilly, "and got too close to a grizzly in a trap."

The thing was fiendish planning. Old Dad shuddered. But the slant-faced Gila had protested, with his thoughts upon himself:

"What? Us git thet close?"

"No danger," Bentley grunted. "We'll stand off and sling him by the feet and shoulders. All right, git him off."

The instant his bonds were cut, Old Dad tried to fight. He was no weakling for his years, but he was being handled by three ruffians in the prime of savage life.

His blows rained on hands and faces. Then they had him down. Swiftly they dragged him toward



the bear, again hitting the end of its chain in those raging lunges. The beast roared at the sight.

Hands gripped wrists and ankles. A heave and they swung Old Dad back.

*Crash!* Something came hurtling toward them—a spinning thing of wood and metal that struck Gila on the chest.

The man went down, dropping Dad's ankles. The others whirled. Cleve Barstow, his face taut and white with dread and fury, was charging down the slope.

He had hurled his rifle, just in the nick of time, while a wild yell ripped from his throat. Bare-handed, he made at them. Hawk snarled, with an oath:

"Gun him!"

Six-guns leaped out. But Cleve was on the nearest ruffian—Harelip. A bunched fist lashed out with all the strength of fierce, hard, desperate muscles. The bearded tough's head snapped back.

Cleve grabbed the fellow's gun wrist. The .45 roared as they struggled. Then they were down, rolling over and over. The wild shot had raked the grizzly.

Muscles bunched like mountain ridges, the great beast hit the end of its chain. Then—unexplainable in the excitement—the huge man-killer was free.

Cleve came upright. Harelip's gun in his grasp by a lightning twist.

A scream had ripped the tumult. The outlaw Gila was dead beneath one steel-clawed forepaw's vicious sweep.

Everything was in a whirl. But two things, to Cleve, stood out clearly.

Bentley, some yards from the grizzly, was throwing down on Cleve. The man didn't seem to know of the bear's escape. And Old

Dad, just scrambling up, was right in the path of the savage brute.

Cleve had time for one shot only. Hawk Bentley, or the bear? Cleve's own life or Dad's?

He didn't hesitate. His weapon spat its flame. The mighty grizzly rocked.

Then the great brute fell with a shudder, pierced through its little brain by way of its open mouth.

Cleve felt a surge of thankfulness sweep him, even as he expected to reel back in another split second from the shock of Bentley's shot.

But the outlaw hadn't fired. He had heard the grizzly's howl of rage and jerked himself about.

Now with the bear dead, that danger ended, he swung back at Cleve. The whole thing had happened in a moment. But it gave Cleve a chance for an even break.

That was all he needed. The two guns roared in unison. Bentley collapsed at the middle. Cleve felt a bullet's breath.

The slit-eyed outlaw was dead. Only Harelip was left.

"Hey, stop him!" Old Dad yelled. "Thet varmint's got my poke!"

Harelip, up, had tried to run. With a dive, Old Dad caught an ankle. They fell beside the bear. Cleve sprang in. His gun barrel rose and fell. Harelip groaned, passed out.

Old Dad sat down heavily. Gnarled fingers trembled as they wiped his brow.

"Boy," he exclaimed, "thet Hawk feller like to shot you. I was plumb scared to death."

Cleve grinned. "And so was I—about you, you ol' coot! Well, I've got my grizzly. I guess now, dern you, you'll go out!"

"Shore. Let's bring our prisoner. They'll be glad to see him down at Aspen. Say, how'd the bear git

loose, though? Clevey, I always thought a man could depend on them big traps."

Cleve examined the grizzly. "You can," he said. "They're powerful. So powerful, in fact, that this one broke every bone in that forepaw. Only two small tendons held it. The

bear's own charge tore him loose. I've seen grizzlies on the prod," he added, "but never one like that."

"Huh," Old Dad snorted. "Yuh didn't see nothin', boy. Thet was left for my own old eyes. The way yuh jumped thet gang, yuh was kind of on the prod yoreself."



### A POST-HOLE BANK

BEFORE banks were opened in southern Texas, a rancher whose spread was near the line between Karnes and Goliad counties, had a large amount of money on hand and decided to bury it for safety.

Choosing a very dark night he went down to the cowpen, removed one of the fence posts, and dropped his bag of gold in the hole.

He then replaced the post and went to bed, satisfied that he had put his treasure in a safe hiding place.

A couple of years passed by, and a time came when he needed the money. He had not marked the post under which it was buried, and time and the elements had removed all traces of his work.

All the posts looked alike to him, and try as he would, he could not remember the position of his post-hole bank.

As he needed the money badly there was only one thing for him to do, and he did it. He dug up post after post until he came to the right one, and there was his bag of money intact. He was overjoyed at the success of his labors, but half his pen was down, and it was no small job to put it back again.

Every ranch home in those days had more or less money stowed

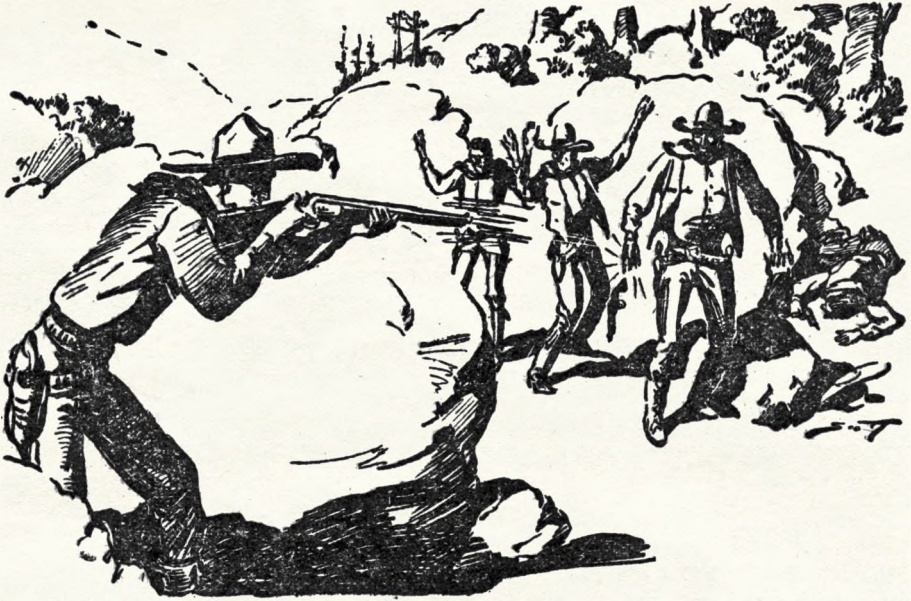
away. Sometimes it was packed under the roof, and sometimes a plank was loosened in the flooring, and a box placed beneath, where it could be reached as occasion required.

When robbers came to ranches with the intention of securing the hidden money, they often resorted to torture to make the "old man" reveal the hiding place of his wealth.

In buying live stock, the buyers usually brought the money in gold and silver to the place where the animals were to be handed over, and there paid it out, dollar by dollar. They generally carried the gold in leather belts, buckled around their waists, but the silver, being more bulky, was carried in sacks on a pack horse or mule.

When a herd was sold, the news spread quickly, and the bandits were on the alert for easy money, so that it had to be put in a safe place without delay.

Sometimes the ranchers met with an unexpected death that was too sudden for them to tell where the money was hidden, and it is believed that, to this day, there is a good quantity of gold and silver buried on the sites of old ranches, waiting for some lucky accident to bring it to the light.



# The Ambush On Rattle Creek Mountain

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of "Valley Of Bearded Men," etc.

**P**ERCHED on the high seat of the stagecoach that plies between the Idaho State capital and the old mining camp of Thunderbolt, "Six-horse" Martin sent his long lash hissing over the backs of the team. There was the suspicion of a smile in his faded blue eyes as he shot a sidelong glance at the ratty-eyed young fellow sitting beside him.

"I take it yuh ain't been out West long, buddy," said the old stage driver, "or yuh wouldn't ask sech fool questions."

"But do you really have gunmen

in the Thunder Bird Range?" asked Sim York. "Is it true that sometimes stagecoaches are held up and robbed?"

"They shore are, buddy," replied Six-horse. "But the outlaws always get ketched. I ain't never yet met up with one of 'em that had the sense of a jack rabbit."

Sim York let his gaze wander over the vast range of mountains through which the stage was passing. For hours, he had seen nobody, and it seemed to him that it would be very easy to get away with rob-



bery, if not with murder itself, in such a wild and apparently uninhabited region.

Only three months had elapsed since Sim York had fled from a great city, leaving behind him a policeman with a hole in his head, which had been caused by a bullet from the automatic pistol that now nestled in a shoulder holster beneath his left armpit.

His whole attention taken up with watching the team, Six-horse Martin did not notice the glitter which had crept into the eyes of his only passenger, whom he had sized up as "jest another of them fool Eastern tenderfeet."

"Take this trip, for instance," went on the old stage driver. "If ever thar was a chanct for an outlaw to make a stake, it's right now. Here's you and me all alone on the stage with ten thousand dollars in currency, which same I'm takin' to the bank at Thunderbolt."

"If I was an outlaw—which I ain't—instead of being a stage driver," he went on, "I could get away with that thar currency so slick and clean that all the sheriffs and forest rangers in the mountains wouldn't ketch me in ten year' o' Sundays. No, sirree! Not even Jim Hazel could ketch me, and he knows these hyar hills like I know the road to Thunderbolt."

Sim York took a silver cigarette case from his pocket and lighted a smoke with steady fingers, then he flicked the match into the dusty road and glanced sidewise at the old driver.

"Talk is cheap," he said easily. "Anybody can talk."

"Talk is it!" exclaimed Six-horse Martin angrily, as he swung the lead horses around the great curve which meets the mouth of Thunderbolt Canyon. "Why, buddy, if yuh was

an outlaw, yuh could get away with the money yoreself. All yuh'd have to do would be to shoot me through the head. Then yuh could hide the money, load me into the stage, and drive it to Thunderbolt City.

"Yuh could swear I'd been murdered by holdup men, and yuh could come back and get the gold when the hue and cry had died down. No, buddy, thar never was an outlaw who had the sense of a jack rabbit."

Blue tobacco smoke trailed past Sim York's head as, rocking and swaying on its springs, the stage-coach thundered along between the high walls of Thunderbolt Canyon.

"Sounds fine," said the gangster in his thin voice. "Only I can't drive one horse, let alone six of 'em."

"Which same would make it seem more natural, buddy," said Six-horse Martin. "Nobody would suspect yuh of bein' an outlaw."

Silence followed the stage driver's last words—silence that was broken only by the rumbling of the wheels and the clattering of the horses' hoofs against loose rocks.

"Ten grand to be had for the taking," was the thought running through the gangster's head. "Too bad I can't drive a team."

"Yeah, yuh could do it," said Six-horse Martin, after ten minutes or so had passed. "This hyar team knows the road to Thunderbolt as well as I do. All yuh'd have to do would be to give the leaders their heads."

"Ten grand! Ten grand to be had for the taking," the clatter of the big coach wheels seemed to be saying.

Easily, as if reaching for his cigarette case, the gangster's white fingers slid within his coat and gripped the butt of the automatic pistol beneath his left arm. It was halfway out of the holster, when suddenly

Six-horse Martin drew back hard on the lines and slammed down the brake.

Jolted almost out of his seat by the sudden stop, Sim York released his hold on his gun to keep from pitching over the backs of the wheel horses. Vaguely he stared, without understanding, at a log which lay across the road a few yards ahead of the team.

At the same instant, four riders spurred their horses into the road and leveled rifles at the two men on the driver's seat.

"Wind yore lines around the brake standard, driver. Then both of yuh climb down, with yore hands high," ordered a bullet-headed desperado who seemed to be the leader. "Don't try no funny work, onless yuh want to get filled full of lead."

Sim York, city gangster, knew death when he saw it, and no thought of resistance occurred to him as he awkwardly clambered down over the wheel into the dusty road. Only by the glitter of the black eyes in his chalk-white face might one have guessed at the rage that was consuming him.

Hands above their heads, Six-horse Martin and Sim York stared into the muzzles of two rifles, while a third outlaw searched them for weapons. The fourth desperado had climbed into the stagecoach, from which he returned in a few minutes, carrying a strong box in his arms.

"Tenderfoot, huh?" he exclaimed, as he set down the steel box. "Jest out from the East, huh? Reckon yo're seein' yore first holdup, ain't yuh, buddy?"

Sim York passed the tip of his tongue over his lips, and his white teeth showed in an ugly snarl.

"Aw, go chase yourself, you big gorilla!" he yapped, much to the astonishment of the stage driver. "If

I'd got hold o' my rod, I'd have smoked up all four of you."

"He's a furriner, chief," drawled a bow-legged little desperado with a wide mouth. "I never heard no sech talk in all my life."

"Look at the autymatic pistol I found under his arm," said another outlaw. "We'd ought to plug the li'le rat for carryin' concealed weapons."

"Pardner," said the leader of the desperadoes to Six-horse Martin, whose mouth had fallen open beneath his drooping gray mustache, "seems like we arrived jest in time to save yore life. If this white-faced little snake is a tenderfoot, then I'm a Sunday-school teacher."

Extending a huge hand, the big desperado caught Sim York by the collar and shook him as a terrier might shake a rat.

"Come clean!" he roared. "Ain't yuh one of them city gunmen what shoots men down from runnin' autymobiles? If yuh ain't, how come yuh've got an autymatic pistol under yore left arm? How come yuh talk like one of them gangsters I've read about in the newspapers?"

"I ain't no gangster, honest I ain't," babbled Sim York. "I come West for my health. Thought maybe I could get a job in the mountains."

A bearded desperado laughed harshly as he handed the outlaw leader a wallet and an expensive gold watch he had taken off Sim York's person.

"Thar's close to a thousand bucks in this wallet, and the watch must be worth two hundred more, chief," said the man. "It don't look like a guy would be huntin' work with that much in his jeans."

The outlaw chief snatched the wallet and the watch out of the fellow's hand. Then he gave the trem-

bling gangster a shove which sent him reeling.

"Climb into the stage, yuh rat!" he roared. "And you, driver, get back up on yore seat and be on yore way, afore we change our minds and plug both of yuh."

As the two victims of the holdup obeyed, the outlaw turned to his men.

"Two of yuh throw that log out of the road," he ordered. "Then we'll be on our way."

Speechless with baffled rage, Sim York sat huddled on his seat inside the stagecoach as it rattled down the canyon.

## II.

For the first time in his life, the gangster knew how it felt to be robbed of every cent he possessed. He swore bitterly to exact vengeance on the men who had left him penniless in a strange and, as he thought, an inhospitable region.

It was hot inside the curtained stagecoach—so hot that Sim York fell asleep after a while. The next thing he knew, the stage driver was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Thunderbolt City!" shouted Sixhorse Martin. "We're at Cheerful Johnny's hotel."

Rubbing his eyes, Sim York clambered out of the stage and found himself standing in front of a white-painted two-story frame building. A porch ran the full length of the front of the hotel. On the porch stood a curly-haired, blue-eyed young fellow wearing the khaki uniform of the forest service. A holstered six-gun swung ready for quick use at his right hip.

"He's some kind of a cop," thought the gangster, as, carrying a small suitcase in his hand, he crossed the porch and entered the office of the hotel. "I hope he nabs

those four gorillas who swiped my jack."

Inside the office, a huge bald-headed man heaved his bulk out of a rocking-chair and lumbered toward the desk.

"Howdy!" he rumbled. "Reckon you'll be wantin' a room, won't yuh?"

Sim York picked up a pen and leaned over the dog-eared register that lay on the desk, but he paused before signing his name. He had suddenly remembered that he was entirely without funds.

"I don't know about that," he said. "Fact is, I ain't got no jack. The stage was robbed by a gang of gunmen. They took every last cent I had."

"I 'lowed the stage might be held up," said "Cheerful Johnny," without any show of surprise. "Old Zeke Bridger was sayin', not so long ago, that Black Rance and his gang was back in the Thunder Bird Range."

Seeing that his guest still hesitated, the fat hotel keeper nodded toward the register.

"Set down your name, stranger," he boomed. "You're welcome to stick around until you can pay your bill."

Just as Sim York finished scrawling his name, the door opened to admit the khaki-clad young fellow whom the gangster had taken for a policeman. He hurried over to the telephone, rang three longs and a short, and stood waiting with the receiver to his ear. A moment later, he began to talk:

"That you, Bill? O. K. Jim Hazel speaking. Say, Bill, Black Rance and three men held up and robbed the stage and a passenger in Thunderbolt Canyon. I wish you and your brothers, Curt and Gabe, would watch out for the bandits.



You can phone me at the Thunder River ranger station. I'll be back there by noon to-morrow."

He hung the receiver back on its hook and, coming from behind the desk, glanced at the register. Then he held out a brown hand to the uneasy gangster.

"My name is Jim Hazel," said the young fellow. "I am the district forest ranger. I take it that you're the passenger who was robbed by the bandits who held up the stage. How much did you lose?"

"Close to a grand in cash," mumbled Sim York. "And a ticker that set me back two hundred iron men. Think you'll ever catch the bozos who pulled off the job, officer?"

The corners of Jim Hazel's lips twitched at being addressed as "officer," but he had noted the underworld slang used by Sim York, and the smile did not reach the ranger's eyes.

"I think there's a chance that the bandits will be caught," replied Jim Hazel. "I'm leaving for Thunder River ranger station in the morning. I hope to receive word of the outlaws when I get there. By the way," added Jim Hazel, "I'd rather you'd call me anything but 'officer.' Folks around here call me 'ranger' most of the time."

Leaving Sim York gaping at him, Jim Hazel left the hotel, and the gangster threw himself into a chair beside one occupied by Cheerful Johnny.

"Snuff?" rumbled the fat hotel keeper, offering his guest a kidney-shaped tortoise-shell snuffbox. "Better take a snifter; it's good for the nerves."

"Ain't got no nerves," snarled Sim York. "Say, tell me, Fatty, do you think they'll ever catch those birds who robbed me o' my jack?"

"Jim Hazel will ketch 'em,"

yawned Cheerful Johnny. "Jimmy knows 'most every trail in the hills."

"Do you mean that uniformed bozo who calls himself a ranger?" asked Sim York. "He don't look so hot to me."

Cheerful Johnny sat up straight in his chair. His fingers closed around Sim York's knee with a grip that made the gangster squirm.

"Listen, buddy," rumbled Cheerful Johnny. "You ain't used to our ways out here, but if you aim to bed and board at my hotel, don't say nothing against Jim Hazel."

After helping himself to a pinch of snuff which caused him to sneeze violently, Cheerful Johnny clasped his hands across his bulging stomach and leaned back in his chair. In a few moments, he was sound asleep, as if there hadn't been a stage robbery in a hundred years.

Left without any one to talk to, Sim York fidgeted in his chair for a few minutes. Then, rising to his feet, he set forth to see the town.

Used to the night life of a great city, the gangster found nothing to interest him in the old mining camp, so presently he drifted into the store run by "Pennywise" Wanderby, a little old man, with a bald-topped skull surrounded by a fringe of thin gray hair. He carried a pencil behind his left ear.

"Something I can do for you?" inquired the storekeeper, peering through his glasses at Sim York.

"Nope," replied the gangster. "I was just giving the town the once-over."

"Figurin' on stayin' with us, son?" asked Pennywise, as he sized up the newcomer's business suit, flashy tie, and soft felt hat. "If you are aimin' to work in the mines, you'll need a different outfit."

"I'll have to get some kind of a job," growled Sim York. "Those

gunmen who robbed the stage took every cent I had. Ain't there no other kind of work 'cept in the mines?"

"You might ask Jim Hazel, the ranger, for a job, son," said the storekeeper. "He told me he needed a man to help him build a trail."

Just then, the ranger stepped into the store. With a nod to Sim York, he leaned over the counter and gave an order for some supplies. Jim Hazel was turning away, when the gangster laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, ranger," he said. "Pop, here, was sayin' you needed a man to work for you. Seein' as I've got to hang around until you catch those fellows who robbed me, how about giving me a job?"

Half a head taller than the rat-eyed, blue-jowled gangster, Jim Hazel looked down at him with a twinkle in his eyes. Then he shook his head.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't be much use to me," he said. "You don't look as if you had ever done a day's hard work in your life."

"Aw, give me a chance," pleaded Sim York. "I got to eat, ain't I?"

Jim Hazel hesitated a moment; then he laughed good-naturedly.

"All right," said the ranger. "But you can't work on a trail in city clothes. Got any others with you?"

"Just another suit like this one," replied Sim York. "And I ain't got no money to buy anything else."

Pennywise Wanderby, anxious to make an honest dollar, spoke to the ranger:

"If you'll stand good for the bill, Jimmy, I'll fix him so's he can go to work for you. Seems like this is one of them times when a fellow needs a friend."

"O. K.," said Jim Hazel. "Give Mr. York a pair of overalls, a flan-

nel shirt, a pair of hobnailed boots, and some kind of a hat. I'll charge the cost against his wages."

### III.

Shortly after sunrise, Jim Hazel led the way out of Thunderbolt on his blue roan saddle horse. A pack animal followed behind the mounted ranger. Sim York brought up the rear on a horse hired by Jim Hazel from the livery stable.

It was the first time the gangster had ever ridden a horse, and when he reached Thunder River ranger station, at noon, he was so saddle-galled that he could hardly stand.

"Go into the cabin and rest yourself," said Jim Hazel kindly. "I'll take care of the horses."

When the ranger entered the cabin a little later, he found Sim York lying sound asleep in a bunk. Without disturbing him, Jim Hazel lighted a fire in the stove and started to cook a meal.

He was just about to awaken Sim York, when the ringing of the telephone saved him the trouble.

Startled into wakefulness, Sim York tried to sit up; then he sank back with a groan of pain as his clothes chafed the saddle galls on his thighs. With his head propped on one hand, he watched Jim Hazel step to the telephone and take down the receiver.

"Good work, Bill," said the ranger, after a moment. "O. K. I'll pick up the trail sometime between now and night. You and your brothers had better join me at the mouth of Rattle Creek Canyon."

After hanging up the receiver, Jim Hazel turned to Sim York.

"Here's some news that may interest you," he said. "Three mountaineer friends of mine have picked up the trail of Black Rance and his

gang. Bill Tigor says that the bandits seem to be headed for Rattle Creek Mountain."

Vaguely understanding that the outlaws might be caught, Sim York inquired just how the ranger expected to accomplish the capture of the gang.

"Follow their trail and try to come up with them," replied Jim Hazel. "Then arrest them and turn them over to the sheriff."

The gangster's eyes grew hard as he remembered the desperadoes whose sudden appearance had kept him from murdering Six-horse Martin and robbing the stage.

"Those gunmen will smoke you up, if you corner 'em, won't they?" he asked.

"They may show fight," admitted Jim Hazel. "Most bandits do."

"You'd better sneak up on 'em and shoot 'em down without giving 'em a chance," advised the gangster. "Don't never give a tough guy a break."

Sim York gave Jim Hazel a lot more advice, to which the ranger listened in silence which concealed the growing dislike he felt for the man to whom he had offered work.

"I guess the Tigor boys and myself will be able to handle the bandits if we come up with them," said the ranger at last. "I'll leave right after we've eaten. You can stay here until I come back."

An hour later, Sim York stood watching Jim Hazel ride away. When the ranger had disappeared in the timber, the gangster returned inside the cabin. Lighting a cigarette, he sat down and did some thinking.

Presently he rose to his feet and made a thorough search of the ranger station. His eyes glittered snakily when, beneath Jim Hazel's mattress, he found the loaded six-

gun and belt of ammunition which the ranger always kept in reserve.

No thought of following Jim Hazel entered the gangster's mind as he buckled the gun belt around his waist, for he knew himself to be quite incapable of finding a trail. His intention was to await Jim Hazel's return with the gold from the stage, and then deliberately to murder him.

Little suspecting that his cabin sheltered a ruthless killer, Jim Hazel rode through the mountains all that afternoon. At dusk, he reached the mouth of Rattle Creek, where he had told the Tigor boys to await him.

To Jim Hazel's surprise, the mountaineers were not there. His surprise changed to anger when he found a note sticking in a split stick which had been driven into the middle of the trail where he could not have helped finding it. The note read:

Jimmy—

We was scairt them outlaws might escape, so we aire follerin their trail up Rattle Creek Canyon.

Bill, Curt and Gabe Tigor.

"I ought to have known the Tigor boys would do just that," grumbled Jim Hazel. "The next time I phone them about an outlaw trail, it'll be a warm day in the Thunder Bird Range!"

Realizing that it would soon be dark, Jim Hazel loosened the cinch of his saddle and removed the blue roan's bridle, so that the horse might graze until moonrise. Then the ranger built a small fire, over which he fried bacon and boiled coffee.

Rattle Creek Canyon being walled on both sides by high cliffs, Jim Hazel knew that neither the outlaws nor the Tigor boys could leave the



trail until they reached the head of the canyon.

For three hours, Jim Hazel lay resting beside his fire. Not until the yellow light of the rising moon stole over the tops of the cliffs did the ranger mount his horse and turn its head up the narrow trail which followed a stream toward Rattle Creek Mountain.

From moonrise to moonset, Jim Hazel rode slowly up the canyon toward Rattle Creek Mountain, so named from the loose rocks which constantly rattle down its steep sides. An hour before dawn, the ranger's keen nostrils caught the odor of wood smoke drifting down from the heights. There was no mistaking that scent.

With the setting of the moon, it had grown so dark that Jim Hazel could go no farther until daylight. So he tied his horse to a tree, before building a fire a few feet from a huge boulder. Seating himself with his back against the rock and his feet toward the fire, Jim Hazel fell into a light doze, from which he was suddenly awakened by the sound of a shot.

Leaping to his feet, Jim Hazel stood listening as another shot rang out. It was followed by a volley which started a slide of loose stones that rattled down the mountainside and bounced off into the underbrush within a few yards of where the ranger stood.

The volley was followed by silence that was broken only by the snorting of Jim Hazel's frightened horse.

A glance at the sky showed the ranger that dawn was breaking. Taking his rifle from the saddle scabbard and leaving his horse tied to the tree, he began to pick his way up the steep side of Rattle Creek Mountain.

Loose stones rolled beneath Jim Hazel's feet at almost every step as he slowly made his way upward in the direction of the shooting he had heard. Fear entered the ranger's heart that he might find the Tigor boys had been killed by "Black Rance" and his gang.

Jim Hazel had climbed about a thousand feet up the mountain, when suddenly he saw the glare of a fire. It was about a hundred yards above him and seemed to come from among a cluster of huge granite pinnacles which rose like gray ghosts in the dawn.

Taking advantage of every bit of cover, the ranger stole slowly up the side of the mountain. Presently, while peering around a huge crag, he saw three men crouched among some scattered boulders. A fire burned in an open space among the rocks. Beside it, a dead man lay flat on his back, with his hand still gripping a rifle.

Entirely unaware that the ranger was watching them, the three men crouched among the rocks were talking among themselves.

"We ain't got a chance to get away," said a bearded man, whose face Jim Hazel could see quite plainly. "Them fellers who killed Blister McGee are hidden among the rocks above us."

As he spoke, the outlaw stared straight at the crag behind which Jim Hazel stood, and, for a moment, the ranger thought that he was seen. But his suspicions died as the outlaw leader spoke:

"Drop to your bellies, boys, and we'll crawl behind that thar rock below us and sneak around on them fool hill-billies from the other side."

As he spoke, he extended a hand and pointed at the rock which sheltered Jim Hazel!

Jim Hazel's first thought was to shoot it out with the desperadoes, but he knew he would almost certainly be killed. So, dropping to his hands and knees, he crawled toward another rock, with the hope of getting a better opportunity to capture the outlaw gang.

Ten yards of open space lay between the two rocks, and Jim Hazel was about halfway across it, when suddenly three rifle shots cracked sharply higher up the mountain.

With lead spattering the loose rocks around him, Jim Hazel crossed the last five yards in two leaps, while, mistaking him for an outlaw in the dim light, the Tigor boys blazed away at him with their rifles.

A bullet tore through Jim Hazel's mackinaw, and another one clipped the tip off one ear as he reached the shelter of the second rock. There he stood panting, and calling down unspoken vengeance on the heads of the Tigor boys.

Meanwhile, the three men had gained the shelter of the first rock behind which Jim Hazel had crouched. Black Rance was chuckling over what he thought to be the poor shooting of the mountaineers.

"The first thing those hill-billies know, they'll run out of cartridges," growled the outlaw leader, "then we'll wipe 'em out."

Jim Hazel could plainly see the three outlaws through a crack in the rock behind which he stood; but they could not have seen him, even had they suspected his presence.

Afraid to move from their position lest they draw the fire of the Tigor boys, the desperadoes stood talking in low tones. Then suddenly Black Rance removed his hat. Putting the hat on the end of his rifle barrel, he extended it beyond the rock behind which he stood.

Taking the bait, the Tigor boys all fired at once, and the outlaw leader's Stetson dropped to the ground, with three holes in the crown.

"That's more cartridges gone," growled Black Rance. "Them hill-billies can't keep that up forever."

#### IV.

The sun rose above Rattle Creek Mountain, and still the outlaws and Jim Hazel remained behind the two great rocks that were only ten yards apart. Black Rance and his two men were afraid to move for fear of being shot down by the Tigor boys, Jim Hazel couldn't change his position for fear of being shot at by both the outlaws and the ambushed mountaineers.

As the sun climbed higher into the heavens, the air grew so hot that the desperadoes and the ranger began to feel the pangs of thirst. But there was nothing they could do about it, for there was no water on the mountainside.

Becoming tired of standing, the outlaws sat down in a patch of shade cast by the rock behind which they were sheltered.

"May as well take it easy, boys," said Black Rance. "We'll have to wait for night before we can get out of hyar."

Overhead, a black speck appeared in the sky. It was followed by another and another as, from afar, the buzzards gathered above the body of the outlaw shot down by the Tigor boys.

For the next half hour, the outlaws talked in low tones, then they stretched themselves at full length on the ground, as if intending to sleep.

Jim Hazel watched them a few minutes. Then suddenly a thought struck him.

Taking a silk handkerchief from around his neck, he stepped around his rock so that it was still between him and the drowsing outlaws. Raising the handkerchief above his head, Jim Hazel wigwagged a signal which he knew would be understood by the Tigor boys, if they saw it.

After waiting a moment, the ranger saw the signal answered from a point higher up the mountain.

Having made the Tigor boys aware of his presence, Jim Hazel picked up the rifle which he had leaned against the rock. Holding it at full cock, he tiptoed around the rock. Then he whipped the rifle to his shoulder and covered the three desperadoes lying in the shade.

"Up with your hands, men!" ordered the ranger. "You haven't a chance to fight it out."

Two of the outlaws raised their hands above their heads, but Black Rance whipped a six-gun from his hip and fired at Jim Hazel, just as the ranger's rifle cracked.

Torn from his hand by the bullet from Jim Hazel's rifle, the outlaw's six-gun spun through the air and dropped to the ground several yards away. Then Black Rance raised his hands high above his head in surrender.

Keeping the three desperadoes covered with his six-gun, Jim Hazel raised his voice in a shout which was answered by a howl from the Tigor boys. A little later, they slouched out of the rocks—three tall, hook-nosed men, who carried rifles in the crooks of their left arms and wore six-guns at their hips.

"Hello, Jimmy!" drawled Bill Tigor. "We got them bandits cornered for yuh and was jest waitin' until yuh came."

"You came mighty near shooting me in mistake for one of them," said Jim Hazel, as he tossed Bill Tigor a

pair of handcuffs. "Put the bracelets on Black Rance," ordered the ranger. "Tie the wrists of the others behind their backs. You'll probably find a rope among their things."

Two hours later, Jim Hazel led the way back toward Thunder River ranger station. The three captured bandits rode their horses behind the ranger. The wrists of Black Rance were handcuffed, and those of his men were tied. The outlaw shot by the Tigor boys had been buried where he had fallen. The rear of the little procession was brought up by the Tigor boys.

When they made camp at noon to eat, Jim Hazel told the Tigor boys they might return to their cabin.

"I can take the prisoners to Thunder River ranger station," said Jim Hazel. "Then I'll phone the sheriff to come and get 'em."

Bill Tigor tore a chew off his plug of tobacco and spat into the fire.

"I don't like to leave yuh alone with them outlaws, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "But yo're the boss, as the blacksmith remarked when he shod the mule."

Once alone with the captured outlaws, Jim Hazel compelled them to ride ahead of him.

"Don't try to escape, or I'll have to stop you with a bullet," warned the ranger.

"We ain't going to make no break," growled Black Rance. "After all, we ain't killed nobody, so yuh can't get us for that."

Jim Hazel made no reply, and the four men rode slowly down Rattle Creek Canyon. At dusk, they came in sight of the Thunder River ranger station.

Calling a halt on the edge of Lightning Flat, Jim Hazel untied the ankles of his prisoners and told them to dismount.



"You can go to the cabin and wait for me," said the ranger. "I'll turn the horses loose."

Led by Black Rance, with their wrists bound, the three desperadoes slouched away toward the ranger station.

Black Rance reached the door first. Pushing it open, he was about to step across the threshold, when a six-gun blazed almost in his face. Before the echo of the shot had died away, the outlaw leader toppled backward to the ground, with a bullet hole in his forehead.

Startled at the unexpected shot, Jim Hazel snatched up his rifle. As he turned, he saw the two surviving outlaws running toward him. Then suddenly one of them flung his bound wrists out in front of him and pitched headlong to the ground.

Standing in the doorway of the ranger station, Sim York was taking aim at the third outlaw, when Jim Hazel squeezed the trigger of his rifle.

As the bullet smashed through Sim York's shoulder, he fell face forward across the threshold of the ranger station, where he lay strug-

gling vainly to reach the six-gun which had dropped from his hand.

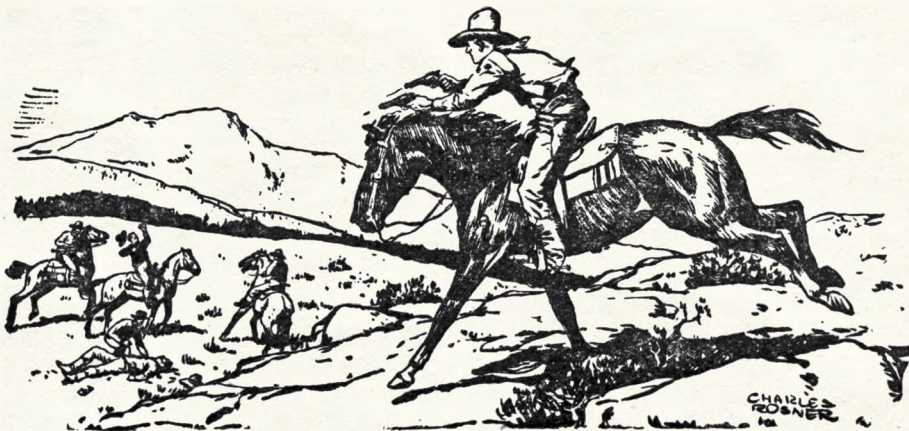
Running forward, Jim Hazel kicked the weapon out of the gangster's reach, then he removed the handcuffs from the dead outlaw chief and clicked them shut on Sim York's wrists.

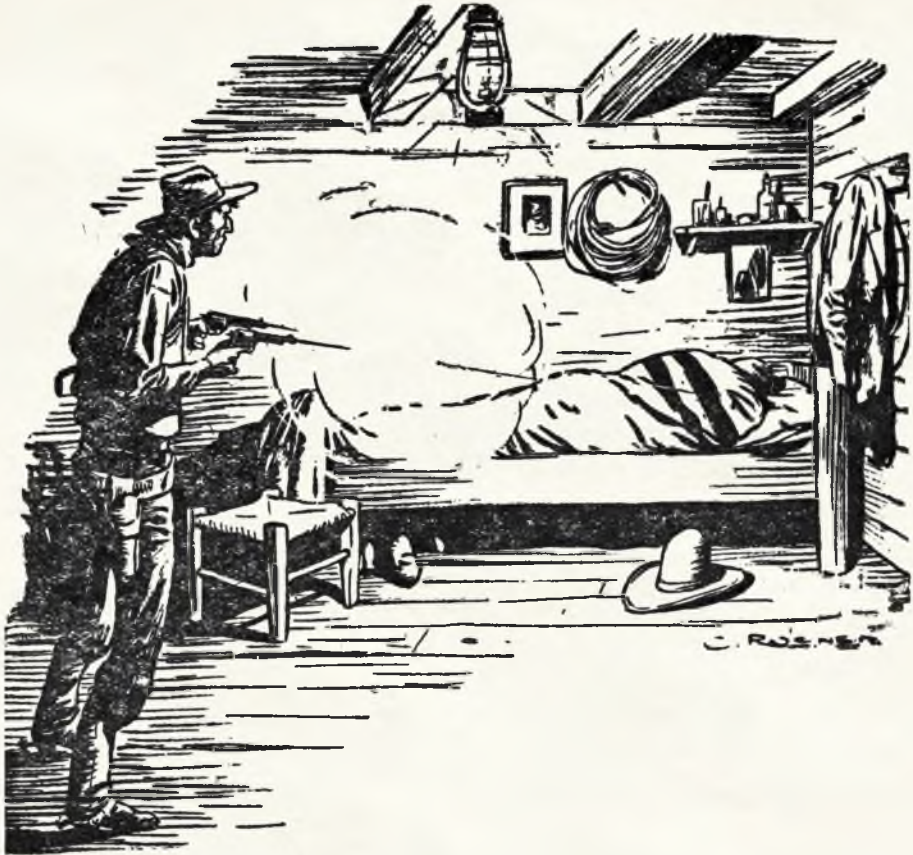
"What you tryin' to do?" snarled Sim York. "Them was the gunmen who robbed me of my jack. I had a right to smoke 'em up, didn't I?"

Picking up the groaning little gangster in his arms, Jim Hazel carried him into the cabin and laid him in a bunk.

"No," replied Jim Hazel. "For shooting down two unarmed and bound men, you will probably be hanged. Excuse me a moment while I telephone the sheriff. Then I'll fix up that hole in your shoulder."

That was right snappy work on Jim Hazel's part—no waste o' time or effort. He had a job ter do an' went an' done it in his usual straight-shootin' way. Him an' the Tigor boys is shore bad fer mountain crooks. But city gangsters— Watch fer the next story about Jimmy in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.





# Carryin' Trouble To Storm King

By Galen C. Colin

Author of "Storm King Rides With Death," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### HAWK'S DECISION.

**F**OUR men squatted before the mouth of a cave, high up in the jumbled country that was overlooked by the massive Fernando peak. They were all who were left of "Hawk" Dumbrell's outlaw band. "Me, I'm for foggin' it out o'

these hills, pronto!" stated "Weasel" flatly. "We got Brad King, didn't we? That's what we started out to do."

"So yo're gettin' cold feet, too, huh?" rasped Hawk Dumbrell. "I wasn't surprised at Pancho, but I never figured yuh'd show a yaller streak!"

Weasel's hand stole toward his

gun butt. But the coldly glittering eyes of the outlaw leader stayed him. He looked down at the toe of his boot, but there was a dogged, determined look on his thin, twisted face.

When Weasel did not reply, Hawk Dumbrell turned to the others of his outfit. "Humpy" sat on a flat rock, his coarse face expressionless. "Rumpler's" countenance was grim and deadly.

"There ain't no blasted son of a tenderfoot pilgrim goin' to chase me out o' these hills, when good pickin's are waitin' to be grabbed," barked Hawk Dumbrell. "He's been lucky, so far, but there's other times comin'."

"Lucky—mebbe!" grunted Weasel. "I'll admit he was lucky, when he caught us unawares in thet cabin up on Fernando Peak. He might have been lucky, when he plugged Slats, thet night."

"Yeah, an' he was lucky thet it was Caddo thet faced him down in the canyon," grated Hawk Dumbrell. "For Caddo had a slug in his arm. His draw was slowed up."

"But yuh got to remember, Hawk, thet Brad King trained thet yaller-haired cyclone. An' Brad King was about the fastest hombre with a six-gun in the whole cow country."

"There ain't no use arguin'," snapped Hawk Dumbrell. "There's pickin's in the hills, an' I ain't goin' to be chased out."

"Like the pickin's we've already scooped up, huh?" broke in Humpy sarcastically. "Pickin' the lead out of our hides. I'm leanin' toward Weasel's argument."

"The trouble is," said Hawk, "we've waited for thet stormy-eyed hombre to bring the fight to us. Now it's time to carry it to him. We'll do a little huntin' on our own account."

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"Yuh mean foggin' down to the Flyin' M again?" queried Rumpler, startled.

Hawk Dumbrell shook his head. "Thet yaller-haired hombre ain't wastin' no time on the Flyin' M. He ain't leavin' our trail, unless he leaves it with his toes turned up."

"Then——"

"We are back-trackin'. We are headin' down the trail toward the Flyin' M, but we're goin' soft an' easy. We'll jump him, when he leaves thet girl an' starts back."

"Me, I don't no ways like it," grunted Weasel. "I'm plenty skit-tish of thet stormy-eyed whirlwind thet calls hisself Storm King. He's bad medicine."

And, in truth, Weasel had reason to fear. A week before, he would have laughed at the possibility of one man—no matter how skilled with six-gun and rope, no matter how cunning—cutting down the Hawk Dumbrell outfit from seven to four.

A week before, it had looked like easy sailing for these hard-bitten ruffians. Their twenty-year prison sentences were at an end, and revenge was within their grasp. Once free, they had headed like lobos on the meat trail, straight for the San Fernandos, and their revenge.

It made little difference that this vengeance was mistaken. They did not give Brad King a split second to explain, to tell them that he had not betrayed them to the law twenty years ago.

Brad King, once a member of their outfit, had deserted them, hadn't he? He had left them cold, when Hawk Dumbrell brutally murdered Anse Hatton and his wife, Sarah, orphaning a tiny baby boy with the bullets.

And less than a week later, the law had tripped them up. It had



looked as if some one had tipped off the sheriff. What was more natural than that it had been Brad King?

The idea of vengeance upon the slender, dark-haired man had stewed in the brains of these seven killers during the whole twenty years in prison.

Their sentence finished, they had swooped down upon Brad King. Twenty minutes of barking six-guns and singing bullets, and Brad King lay dead, in his own Chain Lightning ranch house. The outlaws rode into the hills, brutal laughter on their lips.

But they did not know that Brad King had raised the boy, orphaned by their bullets, as his own. They might have hesitated, had they known the bond of affection between the stormy-eyed, yellow-haired young cow-puncher and his foster father.

They were soon to realize it, though. For when Storm King found the old rancher dead, and had read his own life history in the red-backed diary, he swore to revenge the death of Brad King.

In spite of the pleading of Jack Merton, father of the lovely girl who held his heart in her tiny hand, Storm had buckled Brad King's six-guns about his waist and headed for Hawk Dumbrell's hideout.

He thundered down upon the killers, on the wings of a roaring mountain storm. He surprised them, unarmed. And when one of them, hidden in a lean-to, had attempted to cut down on him, he left the outlaw dead.

As the others escaped in the darkness, he drew a thick line through the name of "Slats," in the list in the little red-backed diary.

Caddo's name was erased, when the killer attempted to stop Storm King from rescuing Teresa Merton,

after the outlaw outfit had kidnaped her.

And now, not many hours before, Hawk Dumbrell himself had plugged the swarthy half-breed, Pancho, thinking he was drawing down on Storm King.

Then Hawk Dumbrell showed his yellow streak, for he turned and fled at Storm King's challenge. The yellow-haired puncher might have pursued the ruffian, if it had not been for lovely Teresa Merton.

But she had rescued him from the canyon and the bullets of the killers. And his own personal inclination would have to wait until he had taken her within sight of the Flying M spread.

Hawk Dumbrell had judged Storm King rightly, as he argued with his reluctant followers. For the broad-shouldered youth did not intend to spend any time at the Flying M. In fact, he planned to turn off five miles from Merton's ranch house and stop for a few hours' rest at the Chain Lightning spread.

After that, he would strike the trail of the killers again. For four of them were left, and he had sworn to get the last one of them.

## CHAPTER II.

### SKULKERS IN THE BRUSH.

**S**TORM KING and Teresa Merton drew their horses to a halt beside the great flat rock that overlooked a brawling, ice-cold mountain stream. Here, halfway between the Flying M and the Chain Lightning, they had spent many happy hours.

Here it was that they had met almost daily, after Brad King had left the Flying M to set up for himself on the Chain Lightning. It was upon this rock that the first words

of affection had passed between them.

But that day, there was grim business ahead. Storm King's square, handsome face was as firm as chiseled granite. The fire in his deep-set, stormy eyes burned brightly.

"I'm leavin' yuh here, Teresa. There's four of Hawk Dumbrell's outfit left, an' my—my father won't rest in peace, as long as they're alive an' free."

"I—I had hoped—— But it's no use, Storm. I know you won't leave the trail as long as they live. And—and I would not care for you as much, if you did. It's bitter, Storm, but there's no other way."

"Yo're a brave an' wonderful girl, Teresa, said Storm softly. "An' with yuh backin' me, no harm can touch me. But now I'll be sayin' good-by. I'll rest a few hours at the home place, then take the trail again."

As he neck-reined his black and prodded it into the trail toward the Chain Lightning spread, Teresa Merton watched him through misty eyes. She bit her lips to stop their quivering.

But other eyes—four pairs of glittering, killers' eyes—also watched the broad back of the young puncher. Four pair of eyes, whose owners were hidden deep in a thicket of juniper bush.

And it was a tribute to Storm King's ability as a fighter that these killers did not charge down upon him, six-guns in hands. But even Hawk Dumbrell, ruthless ruffian that he was, did not care to face Storm King's weapons when they blasted flame and bullets.

When he disappeared around the first bend in the trail, the killers slipped from their cover and followed slowly. From a safe distance, they watched him stable his horse

and stride to the back door of the Chain Lightning headquarters.

But still they did not approach nearer. Instead, they dismounted well back in the tangle of rocks and scrub spruce. Here they settled themselves to wait for darkness, or for their prey to take to the trail again.

Watching by turns, the weary outlaws dozed the long afternoon through. It was a welcome respite for them, for Storm King had kept them on edge for days.

Inside the Chain Lightning ranch house, Storm King slept fitfully upon the bunk. The sight of the crude table, the rusty stove, the weathered saddles, and spare clothing brought back a flood of memories of Brad King.

And these memories kindled afresh the bitterness in his heart. Brad King, the gruff but tender man who had raised him from babyhood, was dead from the bullets of a heartless killer.

The same hand had snuffed out the lives of both of Storm King's real parents. But the yellow-haired waddy had no memory of them. Brad King had been both father and mother to him.

Reason told him that the cut-throats were still back in the hills. It hardly seemed likely that they would venture out into the open.

But blind instinct warned him not to be too sure of that. Hawk Dumbrell was cunning and ruthless, even if he had proved himself devoid of cold courage.

And that was why Storm King rose at intervals and peered through the bullet-riddled window, out into the tangle of rocks and brush.

And it was upon one of those occasions that his keen eyes caught the flicker of sunlight on blued metal,

deep in the thicket. Just a single flicker it was—no more. Although he gazed, with eyes fixed unblinkingly for a full ten minutes, he caught no other sign.

But when he returned to his bunk, his face was more grim than ever, and fire blazed with increased intensity in his deep-set eyes.

That was Hawk Dumbrell and his ruffians, out there in the thicket. There was not the faintest doubt of that. Nothing but sunlight on the barrel of a gun could have made that single flicker.

The killers had seen him enter the house, and they were waiting for him—waiting to cut him down from ambush. Or if he did not leave the house before darkness fell, they would get him there in the house.

"Four to one," muttered Storm King.

But they had been seven to one, when that outfit had downed Brad King here in this very room. Still, Brad King died—proof that the odds were too great.

For a full ten minutes, Storm King sat on the edge of the bunk, his square chin in his hands and his deep-set blue eyes peering off into space.

Beneath the thatch of yellow hair, a keen brain was turning the problem over and over. And gradually a plan began to take shape. A grim smile flicked across Storm King's face as he followed it through.

"It'll work!" he muttered. "It'll give me a fightin' chance, at least."

He rose and strode to the lantern that hung on the wall. He lighted it and swung it from the peg on the beamed ceiling. In the light of day, its flame was hardly visible, but in the darkness, it would cast a steady beam out through the window.

Now he rolled a half dozen saddle blankets into a rough shape of a

human body upon the bunk. He covered the bundle with another blanket. He stepped back a pace to view the effect.

It might fool a man, peering through a window from the darkness. Once more beside the bunk, he laid his broad Stetson at the head of the bed beside the rough bundle. That strangely heightened the effect of a sleeping man.

"The't'll help 'em believe what they'd like to believe," he muttered. "They'll be hopin' to find me plumb asleep, an' they'll fool themselves into thinkin' I am."

From behind a curtain he lifted another blanket from its shelf and hung it over his arm. In the kitchen, behind the four-hole monkey stove, he found a ring of iron, embedded in the floor. He lifted it, opening wide a trapdoor.

A puff of musty air came up from the yawning hole and struck him in the face. He wrinkled his nose. It wouldn't be any too pleasant, down there. But it was a heap better than facing a hail of bullets.

His feet found the rickety stairs, and he felt his way down into the gloom. The cellar was hardly more than eight feet square. But fortunately, only two or three empty boxes cluttered the floor.

He piled them into a corner. Then, in the thick and musty darkness, he spread his blanket upon the floor. With the trapdoor closed above him, he stretched himself out.

With the faint hint of a smile upon his square face, he dropped off to sleep almost instantly. He knew that any undue noise, such as a foot-step upon the floor above, would bring him awake instantly.

There was nothing to do but rest, until such a sound did come. Nothing to do but wait for the killers to bring the fight to him.



## CHAPTER III.

## THE OWL-HOOT SIGNAL.

OUT in the depths of the brush tangle, Hawk Dumbrell and his three hard-bitten ruffians waited for darkness to fall. When the afternoon was half over, they had given up expecting Storm King to emerge from the house before nightfall.

It was flat-faced, cold-eyed Rumpler who grumbled most at the delay.

"He's got sand, or else his brains are lackin'," he grunted, when the first beam of light from the Chain Lightning window streaked out into the gathering dusk. "Thet light inside the house gives us all the odds. We can see him, but he can't see us."

Hawk Dumbrell shook his head slowly. "I ain't so shore. Thet yaller-haired gun slinger is plenty slick. He's done showed us thet. An' he ain't figgerin' on takin' no more chances than he has to. Somehow, I'm a little skittish. Kind o' wish thet light wasn't flickerin'."

But as the darkness thickened, and no further sign came from the Chain Lightning headquarters, Hawk Dumbrell gave his men their final orders:

"Humpy an' me will take the house. If thet waddy ain't on guard, I'll slip into the front door, while Humpy is gettin' in from the back. Yuh, Weasel, watch the window on this side. An' Rumpler, yuh keep yore eyes peeled on the other side. Don't hesitate to cut down on him, the minute he shows his head."

The four killers faded into the darkness, and each made his silent way toward the house. Hawk Dumbrell stole with Apache cunning to the window through which the light shone.

Slowly, cautiously he rose out of the shadows. With his head well back from the glass, he looked into the room with narrowed, glittering eyes.

A ruthless smile flicked across his dead-white face, as he caught sight of the motionless form on the bunk. For a full minute, he watched, and not once did the form stir.

Hawk Dumbrell dropped to the ground again and scuttled back into the darkness. He made his way around the house, to see that each of his men had taken his station. He stopped for a moment to give a final word of instruction to Humpy:

"I'm goin' in, Humpy. Wait for the owl-hoot signal. When yuh hear it, it's time for yuh to slip into the back door. Make yore way to the main room, but leave thet yaller-haired hombre to me, unless I'm needin' help."

Then the outlaw leader cat-footed off into the darkness. He circled the house, taking another last squint into the lighted room. The form on the bunk had not moved an inch.

"He's shore sawin' wood," grunted Hawk Dumbrell. "Reckon he's plannin' on catchin' up on enough sleep to last him a spell. But he's goin' into a longer sleep than he imagines."

He inched across the slab gallery of the ranch house. At the door, he hesitated a moment, while he examined his six-gun once more.

Then he pursed his lips, and a perfect imitation of an owl hoot sounded. He listened intently. The signal was answered from the back of the house.

Hawk Dumbrell set his teeth grimly. In spite of the fact that it looked as if the odds were all in his favor, the white-faced outlaw leader was more than a little fearful. For he had tasted Storm King's

wrath—had seen the fires burning in the yellow-haired hombre's eyes.

He shook his head as if to clear such fears from his brain. His left hand went out and lifted the latch softly. The door swung open without a sound.

For a brief moment, Hawk Dumbrell faced the interior from out of the darkness. Then, six-gun in hand, he edged into the room. He slowly took a long step toward the bunk, his eyes fixed intently upon it.

His gun came up slowly. With the muzzle trained upon the motionless form, his finger began to contract against the trigger. A ruthless, brutal grin split the dead-white face.

But the grin was wiped out as if by magic—wiped out by the sound of a high, shrill scream from the back room. There was terror in that shriek—terror wiped out abruptly by a gasping gurgle.

For a moment, the startling sound held Hawk Dumbrell paralyzed. Then an oath rasped from his tense lips. He squeezed the trigger swiftly.

Two bullets thudded into the motionless bundle on the bunk. Hawk Dumbrell knew he had sent the leaden pellets dead center into the form he thought was Storm King.

He did not waste a further glance upon the bunk. Instead, he spun on his heel and hurtled toward the door leading into the other room. No other sound followed the shriek.

The outlaw leader hesitated but a second. Then he crashed the door open with his booted foot. The muzzle of his six-gun swept the dimly lighted room.

But he did not squeeze the trigger, for there was nothing upon which to train his sights. As far as his narrowed eyes could see, the room was empty of any living being.

Hawk Dumbrell's mouth dropped open, and a startled oath came from his lips. Hunched low, his gun ready for instant use, he slipped into the kitchen.

He swiftly made the round of the room. No one was there. No sign of Humpy—not the slightest sound to break the uncanny silence. He opened his mouth and spoke softly.

"Humpy! Humpy! Where are yuh?"

He listened intently, but there was no answer. He stepped toward the opened back door and peered out. No movement met his eyes, out there in the gloom.

Then cold terror began to take hold of Hawk Dumbrell. He whirled on his heel and streaked for the front room. He wanted to be where it was light—wanted to see whatever it was that had caused the strange disappearance of Humpy.

His wide eyes strayed to the bunk. That form still lay in the same position. It had not jerked—had not twitched in the slightest. A dawning suspicion began to invade Hawk Dumbrell's brain.

Half fearfully, half eagerly, he strode toward the bunk. His left hand went out to the bundle, while his right still clutched the six-gun. He jerked the blanket back.

A rasping oath came from his trembling lips, when he saw a rolled-up bundle of saddle blankets, instead of the dead form of Storm King, as he had expected.

"Tricked, blast his hide!" he snarled.

He whirled and leaped toward the front door. He stamped out upon the slab gallery, and his eyes swept the darkness.

"Rumpler! Weasel!" he called sharply. "Come a-runnin'!"

From each side of the house, a

low-bent man came tearing. They leaped upon the gallery, facing Hawk Dumbrell.

"Yuh got him, Hawk? I heerd yuh shoot. He shore yelled plenty, blast him!"

"Thet yaller-haired hombre has tricked us, burn his dirty hide—tricked us with a bundle of blankets! An' thet wasn't him thet screamed. Must have been Humpy, for Humpy's gone. Disappeared cleaner than a whistle."

"Gone?" gasped Weasel. "Yuh mean——"

"I don't mean nothin'!" snarled Hawk Dumbrell. "I don't know no more about it than yuh do. But Humpy ain't here. Yuh can explain it any way yuh want to."

"But he's got to be somewhere around," snapped Rumpler. "Weasel an' me ain't moved from our places. An' there hasn't been a soul left the house. Did yuh look good?"

"I searched the kitchen, where he ought ter be. An' I was in the front room when the scream came. This here shack has only got them two rooms."

"Mebbe yuh didn't look good," declared Rumpler. "Mebbe thet yaller-haired cyclone downed him, an' is hidin' somewhere yuh didn't search."

"They ain't in the house," answered Hawk Dumbrell doggedly. "But we'll take another squint."

With Rumpler in the lead, the three outlaws sped into the house. They gave but a scant glance at the pile of blankets upon the bunk. But a low oath came from Hawk Dumbrell's lips, as the bitter thought of being tricked came home to him again.

Weasel lifted down the lantern from its peg on the beamed ceiling. With it in his hand, the three hard-

bitten ruffians edged into the kitchen.

Then a startled oath came from Rumpler's lips. "Look there! Thet cellar door is open! Thet's where he was hidin'!"

He leaped toward the opened trapdoor, but Hawk Dumbrell stopped him with:

"Wait a second, yuh blasted idiot! Mebbe he's still there. Mebbe he's waitin' to draw down on us!"

Then he turned toward the yawning, gloomy hole in the floor. His voice was as raspy as a file on rusty iron:

"Come out of it, blast yuh! Come out, or we're smokin' yuh up an' leavin' yuh down there to rot."

No answer came. Hawk Dumbrell's six-gun rose up. And with it held before him, he advanced, stiff-legged, upon the cellar door.

Weasel was right behind him, the lantern held high. As the dim light flickered down into the gloomy hole, Hawk Dumbrell leaned forward and peered into the depths.

His glittering eyes caught the outspread blanket. They swept to the boxes, heaped in the far corner. There was no one there—no place where a man could hide.

He holstered his gun abruptly and turned to his followers. There was baffled rage on his dead-white face, as he spoke between tight-clenched teeth:

"He was there, but he's gone. He must have grabbed——"

He stopped short, for the beat of hoofs on the rocks out in the darkness came sharply. With one accord, the three ruffians raced for the door. But only the sound of a cold, mirthless laugh floated back to them.

Then the sound of hoofs died. The killers stood speechless for a



moment. Weasel was the first to speak:

"He's gone, an' likely he's got Humpy with him. I'm for high-tailin' it to the hideout, as fast as these broncs can go. Thet yaller-haired hombre has got me scared, an' I don't care who knows it."

Hawk Dumbrell spoke like a man in a trance. "Thet's—the best thing—to do, I—reckon. He's tricked us again, but there's always another time comin'."

"An' I hope I'm safe behind a boulder when it comes," grunted Weasel to himself, as the three killers raced for their horses, back in the thicket.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A TRAP FOR KILLERS.

**S**TORM KING slept deeply, there in the gloomy cellar. But he awakened like a shot, when the sound of an owl hoot outside penetrated down into the black depths.

He sat bolt upright on the blanket, his ears attuned for any further sound. It did not occur to him that the hoot might have been made by a real owl. He knew that any natural sound would not have awakened him.

Then the answer from the back door. Storm King leaped to his feet. Softly he climbed the half dozen steps, and listened with his ear against the floor.

The click of the front door opening reached him. Then the slightly plainer sound of the back door's hinges. He caught the stealthy steps on the kitchen floor.

Softly, silently he raised the trapdoor an inch. He peered out. Compared with the gloom of the cellar, the kitchen was almost clearly lighted.

He repressed a gasp, as he saw,

not a foot in front of his face, the outline of a big booted foot and the ankle above it. He pushed the cellar door up two feet more and held it with his head.

Both hands streaked out and clutched the ankle in a grip of steel. He jerked with all his might, and the owner of the ankle crashed to the floor. A shrill, high scream of terror split the air.

Then the startled man tried to scramble to his feet again. But Storm King was out of the cellar. The yellow-haired waddy's teeth clicked shut. Little as he liked to do it, there was only one thing to be done.

His granite-hard fist streaked out and caught the other squarely on the point of the chin. The man went down like a pole-axed steer.

Storm King leaped for the cellar, dragging the unconscious form after him. He let the trapdoor down softly above him and his prisoner. Nor was he a moment too soon.

For the two reports from the front room cracked sharply. Feet pounded on the slab floor. Then the connecting door swung open.

Stealthy footsteps sounded above him, as Hawk Dumbrell made the rounds of the kitchen. Storm King could hear the low oaths tumbling from the outlaw's lips.

Then Hawk Dumbrell raced for the front door. As he called loudly for his other two followers, Storm King lifted the trapdoor once more.

The pound of feet as Rimpler and Weasel leaped to the gallery told him that the way was clear. He hoisted the burly form of Humpy to his shoulder as if it was a sack of flour.

With swift but cautious steps, he sped from the back door and headed for the horse barn. His black horse threw up its head at the strange bur-

den its master carried, but did not protest when Storm King swung Humpy's unconscious form to the saddle.

The yellow-haired rider vaulted up behind and touched the black with dulled rowels. As he neck-reined to circle the house and make for the hill trail, he saw the three killers on the gallery, as they stood in the circle of lantern light.

He saw them look up when the sound of hoofs reached them. He even caught the startled look on Hawk Dumbrell's face. And it was then that the mirthless laugh rippled from his lips.

"I'm headin' for yore den, yuh skunks!" he muttered. "An' I'm hopin' yuh foller—pronto!"

The gallant black seemed to know Storm King's destination, for only an occasional touch of the reins was necessary. Straight toward the hidden canyon, taking the shortest but most rugged trail, Storm King urged the animal at breath-taking speed.

A little more than half the distance was covered before Humpy began to show signs of returning consciousness. And at the first movement, Storm King jerked the man upright in the saddle.

Then, with the short tie rope, he bound Humpy's hands tightly at his back. Muttered oaths came from the man's twisted lips, even before he realized what had happened.

But when Storm King's cold voice came from behind him, he trembled in the saddle.

"Yuh don't need to be scared—yet," rasped the yellow-haired rider. "I ain't never smoked up an hombre, even a bushwhackin' killer like yuh, without givin' him an even break. When yore time comes, yuh'll be on yore feet, with yore smoke pole in yore fist."

"But—but what are——" began Humpy.

"Yuh an' me are headin' for Hawk Dumbrell's hideout," said Storm King evenly. "I'm kind of expectin' thet we will have comp'ny soon. Mebbe Hawk Dumbrell an' them other two snakes'll be droppin' in."

"But when Hawk Dumbrell sees me—when he knows I let yuh trick me—he'll sling lead at me plenty," whimpered Humpy. "If yuh'll let me loose, I'll promise to head for the line an' never come back. I didn't kill yore father an' mother. I didn't smoke up Brad King."

"Yore word is no good with me," snapped the stormy-eyed young puncher. "Every one of the Hawk Dumbrell outfit is due to taste lead—or rope. Yo're lucky. I'll hog tie an' gag yuh in the cave. An' when the scrap is over, I'll ride herd on yuh to the jail house. Yuh'll have a few days to live, anyhow."

During the rest of the grim ride, Humpy continued to beg and promise. But Storm King only laughed coldly. He knew the twisted brain of the man—knew that the killer would turn on him at the first opportunity.

And when he drew up at last in the canyon below the cavern, he jerked the whining outlaw from the saddle. At the point of his six-gun, he prodded Humpy up the slope and into the yawning, black mouth of the cave.

By the dim flicker of lighted matches, he found the ropes that had bound Teresa not so long ago. A cold smile flicked across Storm King's square face, as he thought of the grim justice of it—that Humpy should be trussed up with the same bonds that had held the girl.

But he would not have felt so secure, had he known the real craftiness that lurked behind Humpy's

glittering eyes. He might even have been tempted to draw down on the evil ruffian, had he known of the long-bladed knife that the killer always carried in his boot.

And it is certain that he would not have tied the man's wrists beneath his knees, had he known that the clawing fingers could reach the haft of the knife and draw it from the boot top.

But he did not know those things. He felt perfectly secure from danger behind, when he left Humpy tied and gagged against the wall of the cavern. He strode to the mouth of the cave and crouched behind a boulder.

There he would wait for Hawk Dumbrell, Weasel, and Rumpier. They would not be expecting him there. Perhaps they would ride right into his trap. The odds were with him this time.

## CHAPTER V.

### A PRISONER ESCAPES.

**STORM KING** did not have long to wait. Hardly a half hour passed, after Storm King crouched behind the boulder, before the click of hoofs on the rocks and the creak of saddles reached his ears.

Storm King's face was an expressionless mask—all except his stormy eyes, in which fires of anger burned. The hands that drew the six-guns from oiled holsters were as steady as granite.

Silently he squatted in the darkness, his eyes and ears strained for every sound and movement. The creaking of leather became plainer, the click of hoofs louder. Now the three riders in the canyon were no more than fifty yards from where the path led up the slope to the mouth of the cavern.

Storm King's muscles tensed as if

for a spring. His teeth set grimly. He'd give them another three minutes, then the fireworks would start.

Then suddenly he jerked erect. He whirled to face the cavern. For a wild yell burst out of the yawning hole of darkness.

"Hawk! Back! That yaller-haired cyclone is waitin' for yuh up here!"

Answering shouts came from below. Even as he tried to pierce the gloom of the cavern, Storm King heard the three horses slide to a stiff-legged stop.

He knew that his only chance to surprise the killers was gone. Humpy had upset his whole plan—Humpy, who should be bound and gagged, back there in the darkness.

A wave of searing wrath swept over the stormy-eyed puncher. And part of its withering flame was directed toward himself. Carelessness—nothing else! Humpy was free of his bonds. Storm King knew that, for the man could not have rid himself of the gag otherwise.

Now he caught the stamp of feet racing up the slope. That would be Hawk Dumbrell and his two killers, and they would be waiting for him to show himself. Hot lead would mow him down.

He whirled and raced into the cavern. For a moment, his mind was intent upon catching Humpy, in making the flat-faced man pay for his trickery. But instantly he knew that it would be impossible to find the killer in the darkness.

Now he stopped and half turned toward the cavern mouth. The sound of cautiously approaching men was clearer. He crouched low, ready to send a bullet in their direction the moment they topped the slope.

But a slight sound behind him brought him around sharply. He



lifted his six-gun and trained it toward the spot from where the sound had seemed to come.

That would be Humpy, trying to stalk him in the gloom. All right, let him come. He would find a red-hot reception awaiting him.

Once more, the slithering sound reached him. He swung his gun a fraction to the left. Then he squeezed the trigger.

*Crack! Spat!* The bullet crashed into the rock and sang off into space.

Instantly Storm King knew he had laid himself open to attack. The orange spurt of flame had shown Humpy just where his enemy stood.

Storm King dropped to the floor of the cavern and wriggled aside. Nor was he a moment too soon. For the wicked whisper of a swift-flung knife came from the very spot his body had occupied a moment before.

"Yuh missed, Humpy!" grated Storm King. "An' now I'm comin' after yuh!"

Flying heels clicked on the rocks. Once the thud of a body crashing into a projecting shoulder of rock brought a frightened oath. Then the sounds died abruptly.

In spite of his threat, Storm King knew that there was no chance of finding Humpy now. The man could crouch behind some upthrust rock or flatten himself in a niche in the cavern wall and be perfectly safe from discovery.

No time to search for the killer, either. The others were already up the slope. They would have the mouth of the cavern covered with ready six-guns. But they wouldn't stay there long.

In a few short minutes, they would get up the courage to enter the cave in search of their enemy. He might cut down one or two of them, with great good luck. But

three to one in the darkness were odds too great to face.

Reluctantly he made up his mind that retreat was the only thing left. It seared him to the heart, but there was no other way. This time, victory was with Hawk Dumbrell. But it was a negative victory, at that.

Bending low and feeling his way along the wall, Storm King raced for the tunnel that led to the rim of the canyon. He knew just where it opened, for he had made the difficult climb twice within the last two days.

Once out on the canyon rim, he would circle and recover his horse. This defeat was only a delay. As long as life was in him, he'd keep to Hawk Dumbrell's trail.

## CHAPTER VI.

### DEATH IN THE TUNNEL.

STORM KING holstered his six-guns as he entered the low mouth of the tunnel. For fifty yards, it sloped gently back and upward, and for that distance, he had to crawl on his hands and knees.

Then the yawning hole widened as the slope became steeper. In another twenty yards, the chimney was almost straight up and down. From there, he would be forced to use elbows and knees, as well as his hands and feet.

Another ten feet, then something dangling in the tunnel brushed his face. He risked falling as his hand swept out to catch it.

"The rope thet I left when I came after Teresa," he grunted. "Mighty lucky it's still here."

By the aid of the dangling rope, he made much better time. Ten minutes of muscle-cracking climbing brought him within fifty feet of the canyon rim.

In a shallow niche in the wall, he

paused for a minute's breathing spell. And it was well that he was flattened against the wall.

For at that instant, a head-sized rock hurtled down from above, crashing back and forth from the sides of the tunnel. He gasped and held his breath, clutching the smooth wall with desperate fingers.

*Wham!* The missile crashed into the side of the tunnel, not a dozen inches from his face. Then it careened on down, leaving the air filled with choking dust in its wake.

Until that moment, he had not the slightest inkling that a killer lurked on the canyon rim above him. Even then, he was not sure. That single rock might have been an accident.

But he did not risk moving just then. If there was a man above, he would send another rock crashing.

*Wham!* There it came!

Once more, the deadly missile roared past his face. And with it came realization. Humpty was not hiding back there in the cavern. Instead, the killer had sensed that Storm King would retreat by this tunnel.

The flat-faced man had beaten him to it. He had scrambled up the twisting chimney and was sending down crashing death upon the man who followed.

Storm King faced the most deadly danger since he had taken the trail of Hawk Dumbrell. He knew it—did not try to fool himself. The chances were many to one that he would never leave the tunnel alive.

But as long as he lived, he would fight back. As long as there was breath in his body, there was a faint hope. Grimly he drove the panic from his brain. And the faint hint of a plan came to take its place.

It might work. It was the only chance. Every nerve and muscle

tensed, as he waited for the next hurtling rock.

Then it came. He could hear it crashing above him. It roared past.

He opened his mouth. A wild, shrill yell came from his lips. He strove to fill the shriek with agony and terror, and he succeeded. The sound fairly deafened him, there in the narrow tunnel.

He waited a scant minute for another crashing rock, but it did not come. Then he edged out of the niche and grasped the rope again. There was not a moment to lose. He must make the remaining fifty feet at top speed.

If he reasoned correctly, Humpty had streaked for the rim of the canyon, fifty yards away, when the shriek of agony reached him. Storm King could picture the killer, flattened on the edge of the abyss and yelling the good new down to the others below.

A cold smile flicked across his face. "If thet's what yo're doin', yo're shootin' off yore mouth a little too soon," he grunted breathlessly, as he scrambled up the tunnel.

Now the faint light of the opening was not more than three feet above him. He paused a moment, listening intently. Not a sound reached him. Clenching his teeth, he heaved himself the last remaining inches.

If Humpty still lurked there, if the killer was waiting to make absolutely certain, it was the end. But it would have come just as certainly, had he waited in the tunnel depths.

Then his head thrust above the mouth of the tunnel. With narrowed eyes, he swept the flat space about the yawning hole. There was no shadow, no movement that would indicate a man.

He drew a long, quivering breath, as he dragged himself out and flat-

tened himself on the rocks. For ten seconds, he remained there, breathless and weak from his exertion.

But ten seconds were all the time allowed him to recover from twenty minutes of muscle-cracking labor. Then he leaped to his feet, and his hands streaked to his holsters. For the sound of an exulting voice reached him. It seemed to come from the direction of the canyon, fifty yards away.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE WHISPER OF DOOM.

I'VE got him! I cracked his skull with a rock! I heard him beller like a catamount when thet pebble hit him. He's in the tunnel, unless he's tumbled on down!"

It was Humpy, calling down into the canyon to Hawk Dumbrell. Storm King raised his six-gun and trained it upon the shadowy figure there on the rim.

But he did not squeeze the trigger. For an answering hail came from below. He made out the words, although they reached him faintly:

"Good work, Humpy! Yuh start down the tunnel from up there. We'll head toward yuh from this end."

Storm King stepped silently back to the cover of an upthrust boulder, ten feet from the mouth of the tunnel. And he crouched here, as the shadowy form rose from the canyon rim and moved toward him.

As the sound of booted feet clicked on the rocks, Storm King tensed like tightly strung piano wire. He lifted his six-gun, but did not shoot.

A report would warn the men below that all was not well up there on the rim. No, he'd have to jump Humpy, bare-handed. He'd enjoy that, though—enjoy feeling the

ruthless man's neck between his two hands.

Now Humpy was beside the mouth of the tunnel. His back was toward Storm King, when the yellow-haired man leaped forward, his six-gun raised like a club.

But the squat, flat-faced killer must have sensed Storm King's presence. Or perhaps it was some almost unnoticeable click of heel on rock.

For 'as the stormy-eyed young puncher landed behind the outlaw, Humpy ducked and whirled. The six-gun barrel lashed down, but missed the killer's head. Instead, it crashed into his shoulder.

A rasping oath of startled pain and anger came from Humpy's lips. He dodged the second blow as it descended, and hurtled his squat, powerful body upon Storm King.

In spite of whipcord muscles that were a match for the huskiest yearling steer on the range, Storm King sensed that this grim killer was even stronger.

He grunted as Humpy's cordlike arms circled his body. His breath hissed from his lungs when the killer tensed his muscles and squeezed like a python.

Back and forth across the small flat beside the tunnel mouth they stamped. Humpy's heavy chin bored into Storm King's neck. His arms tightened with every tense second.

The yellow-haired puncher felt his breath leaving him. Black spots danced before his eyes. His hands groped for Humpy's throat, but the killer's head was sunk down into his shoulder.

"Yuh slicked me, blast yuh! But yore time has come!" grunted the bearlike killer. "I'll squeeze the breath from yore carcass an' heave yuh over the canyon!"

Storm King knew that this was



no idle boast. He knew that even his sinewy strength could not break Humpy's deadly squeeze. But his mind was still clear, and it worked at lightning speed.

There was one way to break that deadly hold. He had seen it done in rough-and-tumble range fights, but he had never been called upon to use it.

Swiftly he pictured every maneuver. Then he tensed himself for the trial that would mean life or death. He drew in a great lungful of air. His chest expanded to its full extent.

He threw his shoulders back, to expand their muscles, too. He gripped his hands together tightly between his own chest and Humpy's burly body, until they formed a granite-hard knob.

Then suddenly, he expelled the air in a great breath. For a split second, the killer's arms were loose about him. Humpy lifted his head and heaved forward to tighten his hold.

But at that instant, Storm King's doubled fists shot up, as if they were on the end of a coiled spring.

*Crack!* They caught the killer on the point of the chin.

He grunted, and his head flew back for a fraction of a second. Once more, the fists snapped up. Humpy's hands loosed their interlocking grip at Storm King's back.

The killer staggered a step backward and shook his head as if to clear it of the daze the double blows had brought. Just for a second—no longer—his hands were at his sides.

But a second was enough. Storm King lowered his head and rammed forward like a charging bull. The impact caught Humpy squarely in his too-fat middle. His breath left him in a great heaving grunt.

He slumped to the rocky ground, clawing the air. Storm King whirled to deliver another stunning blow. He leaned forward toward the writhing man. But Humpy was not entirely out, yet.

A pair of groping hands shot out. They caught the yellow-haired puncher's ankles in a deathlike grip. With all the strength in his half-paralyzed muscles, Humpy jerked.

Storm King, taken unawares, toppled backward. His head struck an upthrust rock, stunning him for a few dangerous seconds. With a hoarse oath, forced from his heaving lungs, Humpy got staggeringly to his feet.

He shook his head to clear his blurring eyes. He took a wavering step to Storm King's side. He stooped, and a twisted grin split his flat face as he grasped Storm King's collar.

By main force, he dragged the only half-conscious man toward the mouth of the tunnel.

"I said yuh—was in the—tunnel, an', blast yuh—thet's where yo're—goin'!" he panted.

Storm King knew what was happening. He strove with all his might to gain control over his twitching muscles. Slowly he began to come out of his daze. But now he was on the very lip of the yawning opening.

Then his groping fingers found an outcropping rock. He clutched it with dragging hands. He gritted his teeth as he held tightly.

Humpy swore and tugged, but the yellow-haired waddy held on like grim death. Then the killer dashed Storm King's head down wickedly upon the rocks and loosed his hold upon the desperate man's collar.

He took a half step backward and lifted a booted foot to crunch down upon Storm King's clutching fingers.

The foot crashed down, but it met only the jagged rock. For the stormy-eyed young puncher loosed his hold swiftly.

Then his hands streaked out and caught Humpy's ankle. He heaved and twisted. Humpy staggered forward, and his own hands went down to catch himself.

Suddenly Storm King loosed his ankle hold and clutched the flat-faced man's hair with both hands. As he pulled Humpy down toward him, his legs doubled up like a jack-knife.

Then they shot out. His heels caught the killer in the middle. Pulling with both hands and heaving with both legs, Storm King whirled Humpy through the air over his head.

A fear-filled shriek left the squat man's lips. For instead of landing on his back in the rocks, he shot head-first into the tunnel!

A crash came plainly to Storm King, as the killer struck the first bend in the tunnel. Another choking scream followed. The yellow-haired man clambered painfully to his feet.

As he crouched over the tunnel mouth, rubbing his throbbing head, he heard other and fainter sounds from down in the dark chimney of rocks. Then all was silent.

He drew a long breath as he straightened. Every nerve and muscle trembled from the reaction. He squatted down on the rocks for his strength to return.

There was little doubt in his mind, as he waited there, that Humpy was dead. Only the rarest of luck could end such a drop with life still left in the killer.

In spite of the deadly intensity of the fight on the lip of the tunnel, Storm King was sure that the battle had been almost silent. There was

not a sound that could have reached the outlaws below.

They would still be searching the tunnel for the body of their enemy. They would find Humpy in the darkness. But they would not know, until the body was back down in the cavern, that it was not Storm King.

But there was no time to lose. His horse was down there in the canyon. Dangerous as the task would be, he'd have to reach it. For a foot in the high country, he'd have no chance against the killers.

He searched swiftly for the six-gun that had been in his hand, and luckily he found it. With a grunt of satisfaction, he thrust it into its holster. Then he whirled and raced for the rim of the canyon.

Storm King's only chance was that all three of the outlaws—Hawk Dumbrell, Rumpler, and Weasel—had raced to the tunnel to drag out the body of their enemy. And that was what he hoped had happened.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### WARNING FROM THE TUNNEL.

**H**AWK DUMBRELL had a healthy respect for Storm King's cunning. He could not believe that Storm King was dead until he saw the six-foot body stretched out in front of him. And even then, he thought, he'd be tempted to empty a six-gun into it to be sure.

So, when Humpy's excited hail came down from the rim of the canyon, Hawk Dumbrell was not entirely certain. Humpy sounded as if there could be no doubt, but Hawk Dumbrell was taking no chances.

He whirled to his men, after he had answered Humpy's call. Swift orders crackled from his thin lips. His glittering eyes blazed in his dead-white face.

"Yuh, Weasel, stay near the horses. Keep yore eyes skinned. Yuh, Rumppler, stick in the mouth of the cavern, where yo're in earshot of both me an' Weasel. I'll go inter the tunnel."

"Then yuh ain't shore Humpy's in——" began Weasel.

But Hawk Dumbrell cut him short: "Can't be shore of anything, where that yaller-haired cyclone is concerned. I *hope* Humpy's got him—but I shore ain't takin' no chances."

Then he whirled on his heel and raced into the cavern. While Rumppler squatted in the opening, Weasel scuttled back toward the spot where the horses were tethered.

And, although he did not know it then, he was within a dozen yards of Storm King's black mount, when he halted beside a great twisted tree.

Hawk Dumbrell hesitated a moment, where the unlighted lantern swung on the low roof of the cavern. But he shook his head. If Storm King should be alive, up there in the tunnel, a light would give the stormy-eyed hombre all the best of it.

"I'll hunt for him in the dark," muttered the outlaw leader. "Then, if he ain't plumb dead, it'll be me an' him for it."

He felt his way to the mouth of the tunnel. Stooping, he entered the yawning hole. For fifty yards, he crawled silently on hands and knees. Then, where the twisting chimney became wider and steeper, he straightened.

Still with all the caution of a stalking catamount, he stole forward. He wanted to hold his six-gun in ready hand, but he needed both hands for his climbing. He thrust the weapon into its holster.

Another twenty yards he crawled. Only a few feet ahead was the spot

where the ascent became almost perpendicular. If Storm King was really dead, his body should be there. Nothing could stop its fall before it crashed down on this place.

Hawk Dumbrell stopped to listen. At first, only the sound of his labored breathing came to his ears. A cold grin began to cross his face. After all, Humpy had been——

He drew a sharp, startled breath. His knees braced against the walls of the tunnel, and his right hand streaked to his holster. His six-gun snapped out.

For directly ahead of him, and no more than a dozen feet, an agonized groan echoed from the walls of the tunnel.

For a second, Hawk Dumbrell listened. Once more, the groan came. He trained his six-gun on the spot, as well as he could judge by the sound. Slowly he squeezed the trigger.

The report of the heavy gun almost burst his eardrums, there in the confines of the narrow chimney. Slivers of rock cascaded down about his head. The smoke choked him, until a rasping cough burst from his throat.

But upon the heels of the dying six-gun roar, another and even more startling sound came to him. For a split second, he did not recognize the voice of Humpy. But the words were plain enough:

"Hawk! Don't shoot! It's Humpy!"

"Humpy? It can't be! Humpy tol' me——"

"But he wasn't dead, Hawk! He clawed his way out o' the tunnel an' jumped me! He tricked me an' heaved me inter the tunnel. The fall busted my leg an' like enough cracked a rib or two!"

"But Storm King! Where is he?"



But even as he spoke, Hawk Dumbrell knew.

He began to scuttle back down the tunnel, calling to Humpy as he went.

"Yuh stay put, Humpy! I ain't got time to drag yuh out now. Thet yaller-haired hombre'll be makin' for the hosses. We'll get him an' come back after yuh!"

"Don't go away an' leave me here, Hawk!" pleaded Humpy frantically. "I'm—I'm scared here! Mebbe he'll be comin' back down!"

But he choked off his words. He knew there was no use to talk to Hawk. The outlaw leader did not care whether Humpy lived or died—just so he got Storm King.

And if Hawk Dumbrell had made time coming up the tunnel, he fairly flew on the down slope. For through his mind ran the picture of Storm King charging down upon the little cavy of horses, loosing them and racing to safety.

He shot out of the mouth of the tunnel and straightened up in the cavern. He lifted his voice in a wild yell.

"Yuh, Rumpler! Thet yaller-haired catamount ain't dead! Humpy's in the tunnel! Thet hombre'll be streakin' for the horses! Tell Weasel——"

But Rumpler had already caught the full meaning of Hawk Dumbrell's words. He whirled and raised his voice in an excited yell:

"Weasel! Watch them hosses! Thet yaller-haired cyclone is loose! Humpy's in the tunnel, an' Storm King ain't nowhere in sight. Humpy said he got away!"

Then he leaped forward and raced down the slope. Hawk Dumbrell was right at his heels. And Weasel's answer came to them—an answer that was drowned by the roar of a six-gun.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### OVER THE CANYON'S RIM.

AS Storm King raced for the rim of the canyon, he knew he had little time to waste. And the descent into the depths below should be taken carefully and slowly.

"I may break my neck," he muttered, "but thet's better than bein' plugged or left afoot, here in the high country."

Two hundred yards along the twisting rim of the canyon brought him to the mouth of a narrow, torrent-cut slash. This was the only way down.

He had made it twice before, once in the company of Teresa Merton. But neither time was speed so necessary. He set his teeth grimly as he let himself down into the slash.

For the first few yards, the going was fairly easy. In the bright light of day, he would have laughed at the thought of its slight danger. But in the dim starlight, it was something entirely different.

Then the gentle slope ended abruptly in a drop of five feet. Storm King let himself over this first obstacle. His feet rested upon a tiny ledge, about a foot wide.

He paused for a scant ten seconds, as he pictured the path in his memory. He shook his head. If he had plenty of time, it would be different.

But he gritted his teeth and started down. The face of the canyon wall was almost perpendicular. If it wasn't for the shallow slash cut by the downpour of some forgotten torrent, not even a mountain goat could have made it.

Feeling with feet and hands for every outcropping rock, every narrow ledge, he scrambled down. More than once, his fingers slipped, and he drew a sharp breath, thinking the end had come.

But always he inched downward. And at the end of five breathless minutes, the shadowy treetops below told him he was nearing the end. Another hundred feet would make it.

Almost unconsciously he hurried his movements. And that added speed was almost his undoing. For an outthrust rock that appeared to be solid to his groping foot gave way.

With the breath hissing from his throat, he slid down the slope. At every foot, his speed increased. He closed his eyes and held his breath.

In the swift-moving curtain of his memory, he pictured the sharp twist in the slash twenty feet below. And he knew that he could never make it, at the speed he was moving.

He knew that he would pitch right on over. And a full fifty-foot drop to the rocks below would most certainly mean the end. Funny how clearly he could think, with this deadly danger ahead.

His hands, raw from contact with the razor-sharp rocks, clutched at every tiny hump and sliver. Twice it seemed that he would make it, but each time, his hold was torn loose.

Now the bend in the slash was directly ahead. If ever he stopped his wild downward rush, it would have to be at this point. He dug his heels onto the hard rocks, but they did not slow his rushing slide.

Then he reached the bend. With a last frantic effort to stay his fall, he pitched over the edge and out into space. Down, down, down he hurtled!

And even in this breath-taking fall, his mind was clear. A dozen thoughts rushed through his head, as he steeled himself for the crash that would mean his death.

And then the crash came. But

strangely, it was not a contact with rocks. Instead, it seemed that he had struck a cushion—a hard, needle-filled, clutching, clawing cushion, but a cushion, nevertheless.

Then he began to sink into this cushion. And jagged fingers appeared to be grasping at his hands, his body, his face.

Slowly his hurtling fall began to slow. And then a sharp realization came to Storm King. By rare good fortune, he had crashed squarely into the top of a thick spruce tree.

His torn hands began to clutch at the branches as they streaked by. Twice he almost caught them. And even that attempt seemed to slow his drop.

Then he was through the cushioning branches. Once more, he dropped free. But this fall was only fifteen feet, and a thick carpet of leaf-and-spruce-needle mold deadened it.

Storm King could hardly believe that he was still alive, as he carefully stretched his legs and arms there on the ground. But it was true.

And still more unbelievable, there did not appear to be a broken bone in his body. There were bruises in plenty and tears and scratches, but both legs and arms moved.

For a breathless thirty seconds, he lay stretched on the cushioning leaf mold. Then he arose staggeringly. His head whirled in dizzy circles, but after a moment, his brain cleared.

"Yo're a lucky hombre, Storm King!" he breathed. "By all thet's right, yuh'd ought ter be deader'n a blizzard-ketched dogie."

Now his hands shot to his holsters. He breathed a sigh of relief. The clutching branches had not dragged his guns from the leather.

He whirled toward the spot where he had left his black horse. It was

a full hundred yards away. He listened intently, but no sound of the outlaws reached him. Perhaps they were still searching for his dead body in the tunnel.

A twisted grin spread across his scratched face. He could picture their amazement and wrath when they discovered Humpy's dead form instead of his.

But this was no time to gloat. He was still far from free of the canyon. He crouched low to avoid low-hanging branches and sped down the canyon floor.

Although it was almost pitch dark down there, his sense of direction guided him unerringly toward the thicket of juniper brush that sheltered his mount.

His feet made hardly a sound as he raced toward the tethered black. Shadowy tree trunks raced by him. By instinct, he circled to avoid boulders and cracks in the rocks.

Now the still deeper shadow that marked the thicket loomed squarely in front of him. He stopped for a second, his ears strained for any strange sound.

For an instant, there was silence, then the lazy stamp of horses' hoofs. Then a muttered oath in the darkness. Storm King straightened, and a shiver chased itself up and down his spine.

If it had not been for that uneasy horse, he would have rammed squarely into the outlaws' cavvy and the man who guarded it. The warning had come just in the nick of time.

His six-guns snapped into his hands, and he stalked forward, as silent as a prowling bobcat. Five yards—ten yards— The man should be no more than a dozen feet in front of him now.

Then came the yell from up at the mouth of the cavern:

"Weasel! Watch them hosses! Thet yaller-haired cyclone is loose! Humpy's in the tunnel, an' Storm King ain't nowhere in sight. Humpy said he got away!"

Storm King drew a sharp breath. That was Rumpler's voice. Probably Hawk Dumbrell was up there, too, and Humpy! Humpy hadn't been killed, after all.

Not a second to lose now. The sound of clattering feet on the rocks told him that Rumpler and Hawk Dumbrell were racing down the slope. In less than three minutes, they would be with Weasel.

As he leaped forward, Weasel yelled his answer up the slope:

"I'm watchin', an' he ain't showed up yet! But if he does, I'll——"

But now the outlaw seemed to sense Storm King's presence. For he whirled on his heel, a rasping oath coming from his throat.

And at that instant, the yellow-haired hurricane was before him. The deadly, steel-toned voice spoke evenly.

"What are yuh figurin' on doin', Weasel, now thet I'm here?"

"I'm drillin' yuh, blast yore yaller hide!" barked the slinky outlaw. But Storm King could read fear in that raspy voice.

"Then drag yore iron, hombre!" *Crack!* Weasel's six-gun spoke.

But he was shooting at a shadow that moved suddenly as he squeezed the trigger. The bullet thudded into the trunk of a tree behind the spot where Storm King had stood.

But the orange streak of flame made a perfect target for Storm King's gun. He shot slowly and deliberately. Now was no time to miss—no time to think of mercy. For Hawk Dumbrell and Rumpler were tearing across the canyon floor toward him.

He knew, as he squeezed the trig-



ger, that his bullet was going true. He did not need the scream, cut short by a rasping gurgle, to tell him that Weasel was drilled.

He slammed his guns back into the leather. He whirled and raced to the right, where his own horse was tethered, twenty yards away.

The black was stamping impatiently, as Storm King slid to a stop beside it. He jerked the reins loose from the bush and tossed them over the horse's head.

He grasped the saddle horn and vaulted to the seat. The crash of bodies through the brush and the pound of feet on the rocks told him that Hawk Dumbrell and Rumpler had reached Weasel's side.

Then a string of lurid oaths came from Rumpler's lips, and he discovered that Weasel was dead.

As Storm King's black leaped forward, Hawk Dumbrell's voice cut the darkness:

"There he goes, Rumpler! Cut him down! Yuh can't help Weasel now, but yuh can make the yaller-haired lobo pay."

Two six-guns bellowed. The bullets whispered through the leaves and brush. But Hawk Dumbrell and his follower were shooting in the dark, and their bullets went wide of their mark.

"I'm goin' now, but I'm comin' back after yuh!" Storm King's steel-hard voice carried back to the two men beside their fallen companion.

Hawk Dumbrell's oaths increased in fury, but beneath them was a tone that carried more than a little fear.

But gradually the sound of six-guns and oaths faded behind Storm King. He swept out of the canyon and into the trail that led downward and out of the San Fernando Range.

An hour later, he neck-reined the black from the trail. A half hundred yards to the left, a great ledge overhung a stretch of smooth rock at the foot of the crag.

A short distance up the slope loomed a cairn of stones. Beneath this man-made mound rested the bones of Storm King's real father, cut down, twenty years ago, by Hawk Dumbrell's bullets.

Storm King slipped from his saddle and made his slow way to this cairn. He squatted beside it and pulled a little red-backed book from his pocket.

By the light of a flickering match, he turned to a page that held a list of seven names. With the stub of a pencil, he drew a thick line through that of "Weasel."

"Slats, Caddo, Pancho, an' now Weasel!" he muttered. "Jest three left. Rumpler, Hawk Dumbrell, an' what's left of Humpy."

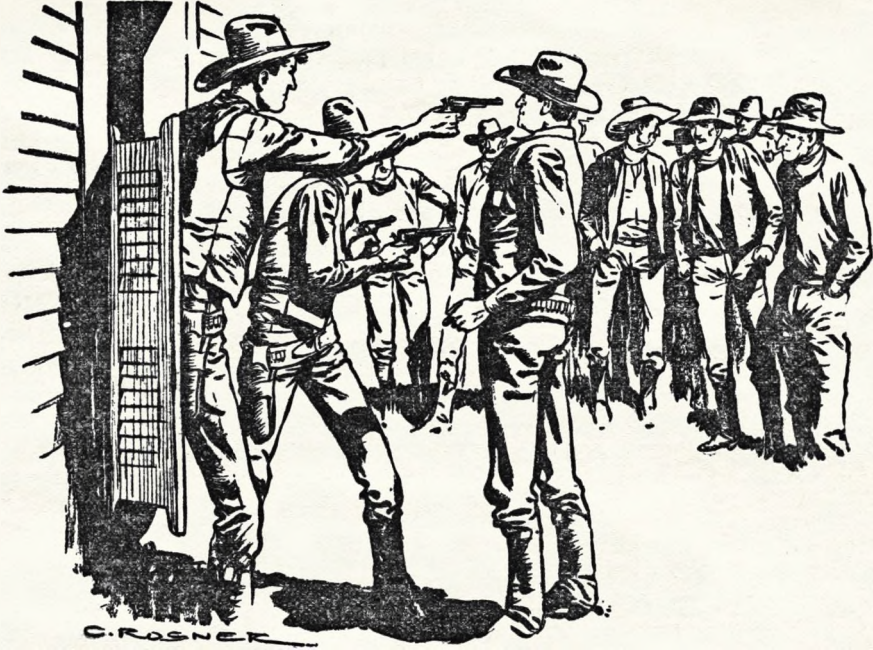
Then he rose and replaced the book in his pocket, buttoning the flap tightly over it. For a moment, he spoke, as if addressing the silent form beneath the stones:

"They killed yuh, father. But one by one, they're payin'. Soon yuh'll be able to rest in peace."

He turned slowly to his horse and swung into the saddle. He headed down the trail. Before another hour rolled by, he would be back at the Chain Lightning spread.

A few hours' rest, then a note left on the flat rock for Teresa Merton. After that, the trail of Hawk.

Waal, that's another one o' Hawk Dumbrell's gang gone fer good, an' another one put purty near out o' the fight. Still, by this time, Hawk's gittin' a good idea o' what kind of an hombre Storm King is; so the rest of the yaller-haired waddy's justice trail will be plenty hard. Watch fer the next story about him in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right pronto.



# Bandit Busters

A "Calamity Boggs" Story

By Lee Bond

Author of "Long-rider Law," etc.

**T**WO cow-punchers swung into the west end of Rillito's one street. They slanted their sweaty mounts into a long hitch rail where other ponies stood, hip-shot and dozing.

"Calamity" Boggs slid to the dusty street, looped his dun's reins loosely over the pole bar, and looked slowly up and down the double row of sun-cured adobe buildings that faced the dusty street.

He was a big, powerfully built hombre, with a pair of keen black eyes looking steadily out of a face that was always masked by an expression of deepest gloom. If

Calamity ever had a thought that was more cheerful than the expression on his face, he failed to utter it.

He sighed heavily now, removed his big gray Stetson, and ran tapering fingers through a mop of curly black hair.

"This here town's too quiet, Shorty," he all but groaned, in a deep, sad-sounding voice. "Some-thin' turrible is about to happen, I bet. But whatever awful thing it is, will happen to me. The signs is agin' me, pard. I——"

With a snort that would have shamed even a boogered longhorn, "Shorty" Stevens hit the ground.

He was a runty, bantam-legged little waddy, with a blocky, sun-bronzed face and a pair of sharp gray eyes that were snapping angrily as he faced his gloomy pard. He shoved a broad-brimmed black Stetson back with a quick motion, showing a mop of reddish-brown hair.

"That's right, yuh big moose!" he snapped. "Start bellyachin', the minute we hit town. Yore blasted gloom is a reg'lar hoodoo. Don't yuh ever think o' cheerful things?"

"What's the use of a feller tryin' to be cheerful, when he has sech turrible luck as I do?" Calamity asked. "There's allus somethin' to——"

Calamity broke off as a high-pitched yell shattered the town's lazy quietness. Now both the saddle pards turned sharply, to watch a big white bronc come thundering into the west end of Rillito's one street, bearing a whooping, tall rider.

All along the street, doors were popping open, heads poking out inquiringly. Not a few muttered oaths were heard by Calamity and Shorty, for this was early afternoon—siesta hour for the folks in Rillito.

But their naps were spoiled now, for that hombre on the white horse was yelling like a fiend, goading his mount with spurs and quirt until the big white animal bucked and bawled savagely.

"It's that ornery Squint Simpson jasper!" some one yelled. "He knows depity Joe Dewey is out o' town, or he'd not come bustin' in hyar like this. Blast his ornery hide!"

The speaker's voice died in a gasp, for suddenly another rider had appeared on the scene. This second horseman was making a short cut toward the main street by riding across a weed-grown vacant lot.

He crossed the lot without mishap, but he shot his rangy sorrel out into the street just in time to ram solidly into the sunfishing white bronc. There came a sharp *smack* as the two horses collided, then they were squatted on their haunches, pawing the air with flinty forehoofs and snorting in fright.

The two riders seemed to stare at each other for a moment, then the air fairly sizzled with oaths and threats.

"What do yuh mean, rammin' intuh me like that, Ed Tomlin?" the lanky jasper on the white horse yelled. "Why don't yuh look out where yo're——"

The man addressed as Ed Tomlin had reined his sorrel back and leaped to the ground. He was a broad-shouldered, powerfully built man, with a coarse-featured, brutal face and a pair of piggish, red-rimmed, black eyes that glowed like live coals. He took two purposeful steps forward, then halted, thick, hairy hands hovering over the black butts of twin .45s.

"Don't give me any o' yore lip, Simpson!" he roared. "Ef yuh don't like what happened an' think it was my fault, crawl offn that hoss an' then——"

"Squint" Simpson was already crawling. He hit the ground on widespread boots, bony face livid with emotion, gash of a mouth twisted into an evil leer, squinty green eyes blazing hotly. He, too, wore twin six-guns, and his bony, long-fingered hands were hovering mere inches from the ivory grips.

Calamity and Shorty hurried toward the scene of trouble, a steadily growing crowd at their heels.

"A tough-lookin' pair, them two," Shorty clipped as he halted a short distance from the two quarrelsome jaspers who stood glaring and hurl-



ing insults at each other. "If they go for their cutters——"

"I hopes to gosh they kills each other off!" growled a dough-faced little fellow who wore a white bartender's apron. "Them two sons o' snakes have started brawls in my Wide Loop Saloon nearly every night since they hit town, which was two weeks ago. I hope——"

"Yuh mean," Shorty asked the saloon man, "that these two hombres are allus fightin' each other?"

"Naw, I don't mean that. Simpson an' Tomlin are both danged bullies, allus jumpin' some feller jist fer cussedness. They showed up hyar a couple days apart, an' never have seemed to like each other. But this is the fust time they've tangled, an' I hopes they butcher each other. They——"

Indeed it did look as if the two hombres in the street would butcher each other. Standing almost toe to toe, they were snarling savage oaths, although they had not drawn their guns as yet.

"Yo're yaller!" Squint Simpson bawled between oaths. "Yuh ain't got sand enough ter drag iron, yuh flea-bit——"

"Yaller, am I?" Ed Tomlin boomed. "We'll see who's yaller, blast yuh! I got a bowie in my boot, an' so have you. Suppose we finish this here squabble with our stickers?"

Squint Simpson stepped back, grinning evilly. He bent swiftly, rammed a hand into the top of his right boot, and straightened up, gripping an eight-inch bowie, its thick blade whetted to razor sharpness.

With a flourish of his left hand, he swept off his stiff gray Stetson, sent it spinning aside. He shook a lock of stringy blond hair from his sloping forehead, then slid forward,

grinning wolfishly, wicked blade ready.

But Ed Tomlin was not to be taken unawares. He, too, had cast off his Stetson, and stood shaking his shaggy, black-thatched head like an angry bull. In his powerful right hand was gripped a knife exactly like his foe's, and his thick lips were drawn into a contemptuous sneer.

"All right, blast yuh!" he snarled thickly, "hyar's where I learn yuh somethin' 'bout handlin' knives."

With a sudden rush, the two big men met, wicked blades flashing blindingly in the bright sun. There was the grinding scream of steel biting steel, then Squint Simpson and Ed Tomlin stood chest to chest, knives locked above their heads, muscles bulging and straining as they rocked slowly to and fro. It was easily enough seen that neither of these hombres was a novice at knife fighting.

## II.

Not a single citizen of Rillito was missing that knife fight. Faces tense, some of them even pale, they swayed as the combatants swayed, gasped when the flashing knives slithered in wicked thrusts, groaned whenever one of the fighters seemed slow or staggered as if he were slipping in the loose dust.

A tense, awe-stricken silence had gripped the crowd—an oppressive silence that was broken only by the labored breathing of the fighters and the constant scraping and shuffling of their boots.

But there was one hombre in the crowd who was not taking the fight so seriously, and that hombre was Calamity Boggs. Keen black eyes narrowed slightly, he lost not the slightest movement of the two fighters as they struggled.

Calamity watched for several

minutes, then shot out one long arm, grabbed Shorty Stevens by the shoulder and pulled the little puncher swiftly to one side. Shorty sputtered in surprise, then let out a growl of anger as he yanked loose from his big pard.

"Yuh locoed bonehead! What's the idea?" Shorty blazed. "I can't see a thing from here, blast it! I'm shore——"

"There's somethin' fishy about that fight," Calamity whispered hoarsely. "Fact is, it ain't a fight. Them fellers is jest stallin', pard. They coudler 'a' slit each other's gullets a dozen times, but didn't even come close tuh doin' it. O' course I'm likely wrong, as I allus am, an' yuh'll git sore at me fer draggin' yuh away. I'm allus blunderin' somethin' awful."

Shorty had been much too excited to notice anything wrong with the fight. But he knew his gloomy pard well enough to realize that Calamity must have some reason for thinking as he did.

His blocky face clouded, and the sparkle of excitement left his eyes to be instantly replaced by a thoughtful look. He twisted his head, glanced back to see the bared heads of the knife wielders over the hats of the crowd, then fixed Calamity with a hard stare. He opened his lips to demand further explanations, but broke off sharply as Calamity tugged at his sleeve, pulling him away from the crowd.

Calamity did not stop until they were through the brown swinging doors of the Wide Loop Saloon, a half block away. Even then Calamity glanced about the long room suspiciously, even looking behind the big bar to make sure that the place was deserted.

"What's bitin' yuh?" Shorty demanded, peeved at his pard's mys-

terious actions. "What's the idea in goin'——"

"We got tuh keep away from that fake squabble," Calamity rumbled. "Them two buzzards are jest stallin', I tell yuh. They're up tuh somethin', pard, an' I'll git blamed fer the——"

"Yuh gloomy, nitwitted maverick!" Shorty cut in hotly. "I thought at first that mebber yuh knew somethin'. But I was fooled, that's what! Here I'm missin' a good scrap, all because——"

Shorty broke off, head cocked sidewise to listen. There were loud yells coming from the street now, and boots clattering on the hard-packed dirt walk. Shorty and Calamity both rushed to the saloon door, stepped outside, and halted in their tracks.

Coming down the middle of the street were Squint Simpson and Ed Tomlin, sweaty faces snarling masks, oaths and threats ripping from their throats. But the two tough-looking jaspers held no knives now, for riding behind them on a leg-weary bay horse was a chunky, red-faced little hombre who had a cocked six-gun trained on the backs of the snarling pair.

A sudden gust of hot wind flipped the rider's open vest back, to show a nickel star pinned to his shirt front.

"Now, dang it," Shorty growled, "yuh've made me miss that fight, Calamity! That depity sheriff has rode back into town an' snagged them two wampus cats afore they whittled each other up. I wish we'd——"

Several men came up to Shorty and Calamity, swung around them, and shoved through the saloon doors. The dough-faced little hombre who wore the bar apron stopped before the two pards, showing a

double row of gold teeth in a broad grin.

"I seen yuh two rannies high-tail it," he chuckled, "an' I reckon I savvies why. Knife fightin' is not fer weak-nerved hombres to watch, a-tall. But yuh didn't need ter be in sech a rush. Depity Joe Dewey came lopin' up, afore any harm was done, an' arrested both o' them fools fer disturbin' the peace. I——"

"Say, you," Shorty Stevens cut in hotly, "where did yuh git the idea that we're afraid to watch a fight. Yuh——"

"It was my fault," Calamity drawled mournfully. "Fights make me plumb skittish, pardner. I'll die horrible with a nervous breakdown, one o' these days. Or mebbe I'll git crippled up real bad an'——"

"Say," the aproned jasper interrupted hastily, watching the peppery Shorty uneasily, "I—I jist noticed that yuh boys is strangers. Come on in my saloon, hyar, an' I'll set 'em up. My name's Pudge Carson, an' I didn't mean nothin' by what I said, boys. Come on!"

Shorty declined Carson's offer to "set 'em up," for neither of the saddle pards cared for liquor. But Shorty's anger had vanished now, and he was grinning broadly.

Calamity Boggs skittish of fights? That big moose was a holy terror with those huge fists of his. And when it came to guns, Calamity was an expert with either six-gun or rifle.

"Go ahead an' groan!" Shorty grinned at his pard. "But I know we're——"

From just across the street came a wild, almost hysterical screech, and a wild-eyed, thin-bodied little hombre dashed out of a doorway, yelling at the top of his lungs.

"Help! Help! I've been robbed!" the thin hombre wailed, and

stomped up a cloud of alkali dust that settled over his neat black clothes in a white fog. "Get Deputy Dewey, some one, hurry!"

A crowd formed quickly, hemming in the pale-faced, black-clad man.

Calamity glanced sharply at the excited fellow, then looked toward the building from which he had come yelling. Calamity's mournful face seemed to go gloomier than ever as he read the words, "Cattlemen's Bank," that were lettered on the plate glass window. He bent over just as Deputy Joe Dewey came puffing through the crowd.

"I knowed it!" Calamity whispered in Shorty's ear. "Now the bank has been robbed, an' we'll git blamed. Leastwise I will. The signs is agin' me pard."

### III.

Banker James J. Carter calmed down as he found himself facing chunky, red-faced Joe Dewey, the deputy sheriff. The officer's level gray eyes bored into the frightened blue ones of the banker, and he spoke in soothing tones.

"Calm down, Mr. Carter," the officer said steadily. "Quit yellin' an' tell me what happened. Hurry up, now. Time's valuable."

Carter licked his dry lips, glanced almost wildly about, then began talking rapidly. He had been in his private office, at the back of the bank, when he heard shouts in the street and went out the back door, then around to the main street to see Squint Simpson and Ed Tomlin lock horns.

"And Tom, thinking that I was in my office, rushed out the front door to see what the noise was about," he finished. "We did not see each other there in the crowd



that had gathered to watch those two roughnecks fight with knives. We stood there, each thinking that the other was at the bank, while some one cleaned it of over fifteen thousand dollars in gold and currency."

Gasps went up from the crowd—gasps and groans. The bank was ruined, and so were a good many depositors who ran businesses in town or had ranches near by. On the doorstep of the bank young Tom Wilson stood, white-faced and shaken, wide brown eyes running nervously over the crowd. But it was the young cashier who first noticed the two strangers in the crowd, and pointed a trembling finger toward them.

"W—who are those two men there?" he asked shrilly. "They are strangers to me. Maybe—maybe they——"

All eyes were instantly turned on Calamity and Shorty. The two saddle pards exchanged quick glances, then edged apart ever so slightly. Shorty wore two big .45s holstered low on his thighs. Calamity wore only one Colt, but his big right hand was already swinging close to the curving black butt.

"Say!" "Pudge" Carson yipped suddenly. "Mebbe Tom ain't so wrong at that. These two jaspers snuck away from the crowd that was watchin' that fight. I wonder——"

"I seen 'em whisperin', too, jist afore they left," another voice cut in. "It was a good while afore you come along an' broke up that knife fight, Joe. They'd 'a' had plenty time ter——"

"Say, are yuh flea-bit wallopers tryin' to accuse me an' my pard o' robbin' this bank?" Shorty yelled angrily, stubby hands dropping to gun butts. "I'll make yuh wish yuh'd——"

The crowd scattered hastily—all but Deputy Joe Dewey, who strode purposefully forward, a frown creasing his brow.

"This thing's awful," Calamity groaned. "Now we'll git hung, Shorty, or sent to prison fer a long time. I'm hoodooed, that's what, an' my turrible luck has got you in bad, too. No tellin'——"

"Well, who are you two rannies?" the deputy sheriff snapped, keeping his eyes on Shorty. "What do you know about this robbery?"

"They know plenty!" came a loud yell. "Search 'em, Joe, an' git back that money, or us fellers is goin' ter take matters into our hands."

The crowd had collected again and was now standing closely bunched and muttering darkly. A good many of the more excitable hombres had already drawn guns, and were pointing them toward Calamity and Shorty.

The big, chunky deputy sheriff frowned deeply, casting nervous glances toward the crowd. Those jaspers would be plenty hard to handle if they got started, no doubt of that. The loss of their money had made them wild, and it was only natural that they should suspect the two strangers.

The deputy knew from past experiences that a hot-headed mob could not be reasoned with; so he stepped toward Shorty and Calamity. The fact that these strange waddies had been seen to hold a whispered conversation, then leave the scene of an exciting knife fight did look suspicious.

"Pass me yore guns, yuh two!" the deputy snapped at Calamity and Shorty. "I'll have to hold yuh fer investigation, I guess. Yuh——"

"Search us, if yuh want to," Shorty rapped, eyes beginning to blaze angrily. "Yuh kin frisk us all

yuh please, mister. But yo're not takin' our guns an' chuckin' us into no hoosegow jest 'cause we're strangers. Come on, search us! Then we'll——"

"They've hid the money some place, that's what," Pudge Carson yelled. "Don't let 'em bluff yuh, Joe. We're backin' yuh. They're guilty, or they'd pass over their guns like yuh ast 'em to. But we've got the drop——"

"This gun is awful old, an' the barrel is some wore out an' bent," Calamity Boggs rumbled suddenly. "But I reckon it'll still shoot, Mr. Dewey. O' course I'd miss yuh, an' this mob'd kill me pronto. But I'll ~~sure~~ try my luck, if yuh don't lift them paws an' stand real still."

Calamity's move had been so sudden, so unlooked-for, that the pudgy deputy sheriff was sniffing the muzzle of a cocked six-gun before he could even try to leap back. And that gun was in the best of working order, despite its owner's remarks.

"Stand hitched, yuh ringy jaspers!" Shorty Stevens grinned impudently at the surprised mob. "Make ary fool move an' my pard'll blow yore depity intuh the middle o' next winter. Jest stand hitched, boys, an' nobody'll get hurt. Start somethin', an' yuh'll hub plenty trouble."

Shorty's guns were out now, swinging in menacing half circles. The knot of angry men seemed on the point of rushing heedlessly forward, but a sharp order from Deputy Joe Dewey halted them.

"Stand hitched, yuh fools!" the officer rapped, arms high over his head. "Yuh'll only make a mess o' things by jumpin' these two strangers. Stand back, an' put up them guns."

With growls, the crowd obeyed.

Shorty watched them narrowly until he was certain that they had decided to calm down, then glanced at Calamity, a questioning look in his eyes.

"We'll be goin' now, an' we're takin' this here depity along for company," Calamity drawled, eying the crowd over the short deputy's gray Stetson crown. "I'll bet yuh hombres never see yore dinero ag'in, an' likely yore families will starve tuh death, 'cause yuh've got nothin' tuh buy grub with. Unless me an' my pard return that money——"

Calamity broke off, prodded the deputy around the corner of the bank, then halted him, making sure that the crowd could still see what was taking place.

"Now, Shorty," Calamity Boggs drawled, "yuh keep yore shootin' tools lookin' at this hombre, whilst I git our broncs from acrost the street. But I'll bet I git shot, or else them hombres will surround me an' stretch my neck with a rope. The signs is agin' me, that's what. I'll never git out o' this town alive."

#### IV.

But Calamity was very much alive when, about ten minutes later, he halted his dun horse and made the red-faced and very angry deputy sheriff crawl off and start hoofing it back toward town. Calamity had pulled a slick stunt, for he had ridden into the very bottom of a steep-walled dry wash before he set the officer afoot. It would take Deputy Joe Dewey at least five minutes to scramble up that steep bank and wave to the men who would undoubtedly be watching from the edge of Rillito.

"I hates tuh make yuh walk, depity," Calamity drawled as he settled himself in the saddle and

grabbed the reins. "Yuh'll likely git bit by a rattler afore yuh reach town, an' I'll be tuh blame fer the horrible way yuh'll die. That'll make me a murderer, an' a posse will——"

"Dry up, an' le's amble," Shorty barked, eyes darting toward the rim of the dry wash. "Them jaspers will be forkin' leather an' hittin' our trail by now. Stop yore jawin' an' come on."

"I'll round yuh two crooks up, if it takes ten years!" Joe Dewey gritted savagely. "At first, I thought yuh jaspers were just bein' picked on by a hot-headed crowd, mebbe. But yore actions prove yo're guilty o' that bank job. I'll——"

But the angry officer found himself talking to a fog of dust that had been kicked up by a couple of scooting broncs. He swore roundly, looked at the steep bank ahead, and chose a place that looked as if it might be scalable.

"We're in for it now!" Shorty whooped as he and his pard pounded down the dry wash. "Why didn't yuh keep that fool depity, bone-head? An' why did yuh go jumpin' him in the first place?"

"Jest some more o' my blunderin'," Calamity yelled above the roar of wind and pound of hoofs. "What I done will git us hung. Or mebbe we'll be shot, an' left out in these hills tuh die horrible. But I had tuh git us away, Shorty, 'cause nobody'd believe it, if I tol' what I know."

"Huh?" Shorty grunted, reining in to a slower pace. "What—what yuh talkin' 'bout, fella? What do yuh know about——"

Calamity had slowed down, too, and was leaning from the saddle, looking intently at the gravelly bed of a little side draw that lifted sharply toward barren, heat-blasted

hills off to the left. Now Calamity straightened up, a rare smile tugging at the corners of his wide mouth. But the smile was gone as he faced his pard, and he looked, if possible, glummer than usual.

"I knowed it!" he groaned. "Them two bank bandits turned up this steep draw hyar, an' hit fer them hills over yonder. But we'll never ketch 'em now. Our hosses is stove up, an'——"

Calamity's dun and Shorty's roan were top horses, both of them fast and toughened by constant travel. But Shorty was not calling his pard on that score right now. Gray eyes fairly bulging, the little waddy turned on his pard in surprise.

"Bank bandits?" he gasped. "Fer gosh sakes, Calamity, if yuh know somethin' tell me what it is. What makes yuh think——"

"When them two fellers was puttin' on that phony knife fight, I happened tuh look back up the street an' seen two fellers dodge around behind the bank buildin' real quick," Calamity explained. "On'y I didn't know it was a bank, then. I thought them two hombres I glimpsed was masked, but my eyes is failin' awful fast, an' I wasn't shore. But I got tuh figurin' why two jaspers would pretend tuh fight with——"

Calamity broke off as faint yells came from somewhere up the draw. That would be Deputy Joe Dewey and a posse, fogging along on the trail of the two pards. Calamity glanced swiftly about, then rammed the hooks home and sent his dun rocketing up the steep side draw, riding over rocks that would hide his trail from all but the keenest eyes.

Shorty Stevens grinned broadly, shot his spurs home, and was right on his pard's heels. Shorty savvied



plenty now. No wonder Calamity had dragged him away from that knife fight.

The big walloper had meant to see what those two masked men were dodging around the streets for, but the fight had been broken up by Deputy Joe Dewey's arrival, and Calamity had had no time to investigate.

The big moose claimed his eyesight was poor, yet Shorty knew better than that. If Calamity even hinted that the two men he had seen wore masks, then Shorty was ready to bet his last dollar that they had worn them.

And Shorty could easily enough understand why his pard had got the drop and escaped rather than try explaining the situation. The story sounded thin at best and would never be believed by a bunch of excited hombres who had just been robbed of their life's hard-worn savings.

Shorty reined in barely in time to keep his horse from crashing head-on into Calamity's mount. The big puncher had halted behind a wall of snaggly red rock, and was looking gloomily out toward a chain of ugly hills that were made grotesque by the shimmering heat waves that cloaked their base.

From behind came the yells of the posse, but neither Shorty nor Calamity paid any attention to that. They were out of sight of whoever rode the canyon they had just quit, and there was no danger from that quarter, for the posse had already thundered past this draw. Of course they might turn back later, but by then——

"We're whupped, pard," Calamity said gloomily. "We'll be kilt by rifles, if we tries crossin' this flat before us. Soon as we rode away from Rillito, luggin' that deputy, I

knowed right off that them two bandits had come down that canyon we follered, for it was the only cover in miles. But we're licked now, an' will have tuh give ourselves up fer hangin'. My luck——"

"Yore luck," Shorty growled, "is goin' ter git worse, if yuh don't stop that fool complainin'. Lead on or else——"

The sharp click of shod hoofs on stony earth reached his ears, causing him to break off. Now a low command came from Calamity, and Shorty dug his rowels into his mount's sweaty flanks, following Calamity toward a thicket of good-sized mesquite trees that grew several yards ahead.

Shorty and his pard were barely in the brush clump when two riders spurred blowing horses into view from the head of the steep draw up which Calamity had climbed only a few minutes before. Shorty's eyes fairly popped out as the two riders spurred past the brush clump, chuckling and grinning as if they had just heard a good joke.

"Squint Simpson an' Ed Tomlin!" Shorty gasped as the riders galloped away toward the hills. "I—I reckon yuh was right, Calamity. Yuh—— Say! Where is that big ox? I thought——"

Shorty glanced quickly in every direction, but the brush that hemmed him in prevented his seeing more than a few feet. Grumbling, the peppery little waddy rode out into the open, and his face paled a little as he realized that his pard had given him the slip.

## V.

Surprised at first, Shorty sat staring about. Then his blocky face grew red with anger as he realized that Calamity had ridden straight

through that thicket instead of stopping.

Calamity Boggs was an expert at stalking, and could, despite his bulk, move with the silence of a shadow. He had also trained that dun horse to mince along in short, cat-footed steps when silence was needed.

"Calamity thought he could do better by hisself," Shorty gritted bitterly, "so he sneaked off an' left us, hoss. But we'll show 'im. Wants bank bandits, does he? Well—come alive, bronc!"

Shorty was fully aware, now, that Squint Simpson and Ed Tomlin were in on that bank job, for they had deliberately staged a fight to hold the attention of every one in Rillito while two other men did the actual robbing. But Squint Simpson and Ed Tomlin were just as guilty as the other two crooks, and Shorty meant to run them down before they reached those hills ahead. He'd show Calamity Boggs a thing or two.

"What the——" Shorty yelled suddenly, and brought his strawberry roan skidding to a halt.

Not fifty yards ahead he saw his quarry, sitting stiffly erect in their saddles, hands high over their heads. Shorty stared for several seconds, then loosened his horse's reins and went loping forward, knowing very well what to expect. He drew rein only a few feet behind the two hombres who had apparently tried to gouge the life from each other with knives not so long ago.

"O' course I can't shoot straight," Shorty heard a rumbling and very familiar voice coming from a clump of bushes off to one side and in front of Simpson and Tomlin. "But yuh better roll offn them nags an' lay on yore stummicks, like I told yuh. There'll be scorpeens an' mebbe a sidewinder or two in that sand

where yuh'll have tuh lay down. But hurry up, or my pard, behind yuh there——"

Squint Simpson and Ed Tomlin had heard Shorty come up. Now they twisted their heads around and swore vilely as they saw the little waddy's eyes glinting behind a pair of cocked guns.

Hastily, the two toughs slid to the ground and flopped face down in the hot sand, arms stretched out before them. Calamity strolled from the brush, a shiny Winchester in the crook of his left arm. He laid the rifle carefully aside, then ripped a rope from Tomlin's saddle and bound the two crooks in just about nothing flat.

He stood looking soberly down at the pair for a moment, then stepped over to Simpson's saddle, took down the lariat rope that hung there, and made one end fast to the saddle horn. Then he walked back to the two hard-case rascals who lay glaring and snarling oaths, stooped over, and shook the free end of the rope at them.

"I'm gittin' a bit deaf," Calamity moaned, "an' my mem'ry is turrible. But if yuh two prize skunks was tuh tell me where yore pards will be holed up with that bank loot, I might be able tuh hear yuh. If yuh don't—waal, if I was tuh tie this rope onto yuh, then shoot my rifle off under that white hoss's feet——"

"What yuh talkin' 'bout?" Ed Tomlin snarled. "Me an' Squint don't know a thing about that bank robbery. We was busy fightin' when them two fellers pulled that job. The sheriff let us out on bail a while ago!"

"How'd yuh know it was only two hombres thet pulled the robbery?" Calamity drawled, and deftly looped the loose end of the rope he held over the heads of the two snarling

toughs. "Yuh'll likely git loose an' kill me, but——"

Stepping over to where he had put his rifle, Calamity picked the weapon up, lifted the flat hammer with one thumb, and took aim at the ground beneath Squint Simpson's white horse's belly. Shorty holstered his own guns, and a grin spread over his lips.

He knew that Calamity would never shoot under that horse and cause two men, regardless of how ornery they might be, such a death as being dragged by their necks over the cholla-infested ground. But Ed Tomlin and Squint Simpson did not know that Calamity was bluffing.

Yelling hoarsely, they both talked at once, giving directions to a certain board shack that sat in a twisting canyon that slashed down among the hills ahead.

Calamity grinned, lowered his rifle, and strode over to the two white-faced rascals. He gagged them with their own neckerchiefs, rolled them into the meager shade of a stunted mesquite, and strode to where his own dun was hidden.

Shorty spurred up beside his pard as they loped toward the hills, and laid it into Calamity for pulling a sneak. But Calamity only grunted, nor would he speak until they were riding into the mouth of a certain canyon that twisted away like a deep gash through the brown hills.

"Now, pard," he rumbled, "we'll have tuh make it on foot from hyar. That shack is jest around the next bend, accordin' tuh what them skunks said. But we'll never reach it alive, 'cause they'll spot us or somethin'. I never have nothin' but the worst luck. I'll bet I git kilt when——"

With a snort of disgust, Shorty hit the ground, tested his guns to see that they were not wedged in their

holsters, and went creeping carefully toward the bend in the canyon. Calamity sighed heavily, drew the carbine from the saddle scabbard, and followed Shorty.

The cabin was just around that bend all right—a miserable little shack built of thin boards and perched on a little bench twenty feet above the dry water course. Smoke trickled from the empty stovepipe, but there was no sign of any one about the place.

Shorty and Calamity whispered a moment, then crept to within thirty yards of the shack. Now they heard voices, and an occasional guffaw as some hombre laughed.

"Sounds like three or four o' the skunks," Shorty whispered. "I thought that there'd be only two. But we can rush 'em, kick that door open and get the drop afore——"

"Likely twenty or thirty gun slingers in there, laughin' over the way I'll groan an' holler when my back gits broke by a bullet," Calamity croaked. "But if we kin sneak up closer, git between that shack an' the bluff——"

The little house had been built very close to a tall bluff that towered frowningly above it now like a watchful giant. But it did look as if a man might squeeze between the stone wall and the tiny shack. If he could——

Calamity and Shorty were both up, running at a crouch, making for an end of the shack where no windows showed. They were within twenty feet of their goal when the sagging door was suddenly swung open, and a huge hombre with a matted red beard stepped into view.

"Red-beard" stared wildly for a split second. Then his huge hands swooped toward a pair of holstered guns, as his booming voice bawled a warning.



His guns sent a regular hail of blazing lead at the two dodging cowpokes who were streaking frantically for the protection of the closest corner. Calamity faltered, staggered for a step or two, then plunged around the corner of the shack.

"Got me!" he gasped. "Drilled me plumb center! I'm a goner, pard. Muh lungs is punctured, shore as shootin'! I'm done fer."

## VI.

From inside the shack came loud oaths, and the scrape of boots over a board floor. Shorty grinned at Calamity, who had opened his woolen shirt and was blowing gently on an ugly red welt that ran along his muscle-padded chest.

"I know who that red feller is, Shorty," Calamity grunted. "Name's Buck Orr—one o' the toughest road agents what ever was. He'll git me next time, I bet."

*Wham!* A six-gun blazed almost in Calamity's ear, and his hat went spinning.

From a wide crack in the board shack came a wisp of powder smoke, and as Calamity and Shorty ducked wildly a gloating chuckle came to them from inside the shack. But that chuckle died in a scream of pain, for as Calamity rolled away the rifle he still gripped flipped up, steadied for a fraction of a second, and crashed loudly.

"Yuh got that jigger!" Shorty gritted. "Now slant yore gun low, an' begin——"

But Calamity had figured that out, too. Holding his rifle at an angle that would send slugs whizzing into the little shack at about knee-high level, he was working the lever swiftly, moving the muzzle a few inches between shots.

Shorty was thumbing both six-guns instantly, and from inside that shack came bawls of pain and anger. Furniture crashed, pots and pans rattled wildly as some jasper screeched in terror.

Calamity and Shorty grinned thinly, shifted their position just as slugs came tearing through the thin boards in answer to their shots. Calamity went to the front, Shorty took up a stand at one end of the flimsy structure. Then, holding their guns down low again, they sent another scorching volley into the robber's roost.

More yells of alarm, then a hoarse voice howled profane surrender. Calamity reloaded his rifle, backed cautiously to where a big boulder reared up out of the yard and crouched, gun ready. Shorty reloaded his hot guns, grinned at Calamity, and scooted to a clump of mesquite bushes off to his right.

"All right, Buck Orr," Calamity yelled. "Waltz out o' there with yore hands up. An' bring that loot yuh got out o' the Rillito bank along, too."

"He'll trick us somehow an' git clean away," Calamity called to Shorty. "It's too quiet in there. It'd be jest my luck to——"

The front door swung open, then Buck Orr, a canvas bag in each hand, came into the yard, limping painfully, swearing in a rumbling, snarling voice. Orr's squinty, gray-green eyes spotted Calamity, and he halted abruptly.

"Lower yore rifle, blast yuh!" the bandit snarled. "Hyar's that loot me an' Wash Turner took out o' that bank. Yuh kilt Wash the fust time yuh opened up with that rifle. Two other boys in thar, crippled like me. They've give up."

Calamity let his rifle slide out of sight behind the rock and stood up,

left hand reaching out as if to take the two canvas sacks that Orr held. And as Calamity's hand stretched out, Buck Orr's bearded lips jerked back in a snarl of bitter hate, and the two canvas sacks he held suddenly snapped up to hip level.

*Wham! Bra-aa-ng!* Calamity's right hand suddenly whipped into view, gripping a cocked .45 Colt that roared twice with startling rapidity.

Buck Orr screamed an oath, staggered back a step, then crumpled limply, crimson spouting from two round holes in his sloping forehead. From the flimsy shack two pale, wild-eyed rakes crawled, each of them dragging a leg that had been smashed below the knee by blazing lead.

"I—tol'—Buck—he'd get kilt," one gasped. "Tol' him—one o' yuh bandit busters—would savvy——"

"We give up, feller!" the other crippled bandit groaned. "Loot—is thar on the bunk—every cent o' it. We left our hardware——"

Shorty came striding up, blocky face almost white, a look of fear in his eyes.

"Calamity," he said thickly, "I—I reckon it's none o' my business, but, somehow, I don't like the way yuh shot Buck Orr down. He—he had give up, feller. Bandit or no bandit, yuh had no call——"

Calamity looked keenly at Shorty, and there was a twinkle in his black eyes. But his face was frozen into a solemn mask as he spoke.

"I knowed yuh'd find me out-sometime, Shorty," he groaned. "I'm jest a plumb skunk that a way. Let me ketch a feller I don't like off guard, an' I'll drill him every time. I'm jest a plumb skunk, that's what!"

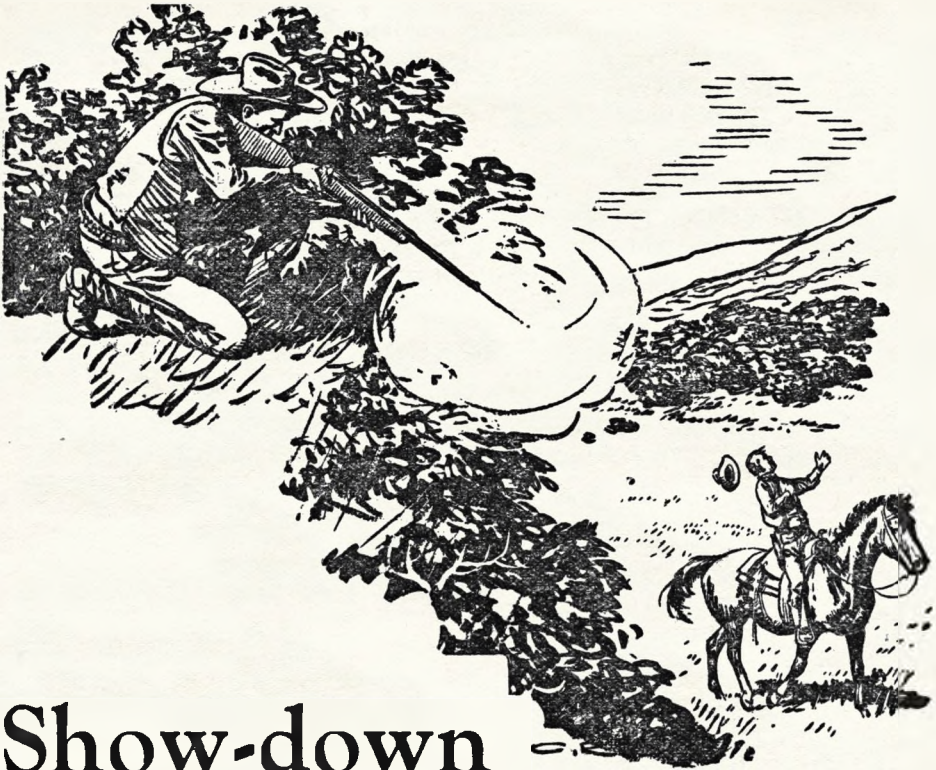
Calamity shuffled away, bent down, and grasped the sacks that seemed to be clutched in Buck Orr's stiffening fingers. But when Calamity gave a sudden yank, Shorty gasped as if he had been kicked in the middle by a mule.

Those sacks had been drawn over Orr's hands. And now Shorty saw that the red-bearded bandit still gripped two short-barreled six-guns, their hammers at full cock.

"I shot the pore feller down jest fer fun," Calamity sniffed, as he shuffled away toward the shack. "O' course the tricky skunk aimed tuh drill me, but that don't count. My pard is sore at me, 'cause I wouldn't let a bandit drill me. The signs is jest agin' me, that's all."

Shorty turned the color of a ripe tomato and grinned sheepishly at Calamity's broad back. He'd hear about that doubting business for some time.





# Show-down At Sweetwater Gulch

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "The Mystery Of Flying V," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### AMBUSH MURDER.

**A**RIFLE barrel parted the leafy chaparral growing on the lip of the chalky bluff overlooking Sweetwater Gulch. It lined squarely on the chest of the lone horseman who had just entered the sun-baked draw below.

Peering through the sights of the .30-30 were a pair of eyes as hard as steel and as bright as chipped quartz.

"Fag" Staley had been squatting

here in the brush all morning, his flinty eyes trained on the winding trail which snaked through Whetstone Basin, on its way to the sleepy little cow town of Latigo. Sight of this approaching horseman made him tense with excitement.

The rider was a good hundred yards distant from the ambush, but through the rifle sights Staley saw the slanting rays of the morning sun glint off a six-pointed nickel star on the man's chest.

"Terry Ballard!" whispered the hidden man to himself, as he cud-



dled the walnut stock of the Winchester against his cheek. "He's done his last sheriffin', by gosh!"

Fag Staley's rifle barrel was steady as he raised it, drawing a straight bead on that glistening spark of fire which glowed on the approaching lawman's vest front.

The man on the horse had his eyes on the twisting, rubble-carpeted trail. His face was shaded by a broad, flop-brimmed Stetson. He had no warning of a dry-gulcher in the brush, eighty yards ahead.

*Spang!* The juniper-dotted ridges crashed back the spiteful report of Fag Staley's carbine.

The dry-gulcher peered down the draw through slitted eyelids, as he lowered the smoking rifle to his knees. Through the cloud of blue gun smoke which lay in the sweltering air before him, he saw the form of the officer jerk erect in the saddle, under the impact of the heavy slug which had drilled his heart.

The roan horse shied violently against the shelving bank of the gulch, its rider swaying top-heavily, hands faltering away from the pommel to clutch at his chest.

Then, suddenly seeming to crumple, the sombreroed figure toppled from the saddle.

Deprived of the weight of its rider, the horse plunged backward, nostrils flaring with terrified snorts. The sparkle of sunshine on the brass studs which decorated the fallen rider's leather sleeve cuffs caught the animal's eye, and it arched its back, bucking away frantically.

Fag Staley's jaw dropped open in horror as he saw the rider's spur catch in the stirrup. For mad seconds, he saw the form of the dead lawman being jerked about like a sack of excelsior, under the dust of the fear-crazed roan's hoofs.

Then steel shoes clattered over

the rocks as the horse galloped down the draw, reins flinging, white eyes rolling. The limp body of the rider wedged between two rocks, then jerked free from the clinging stirrup with a sickening pop of snapping bone.

*Crack!* Once more, Fag Staley's rifle blasted the silence, and this time it was the riderless horse which pitched forward, a bullet hole drilled through the center of its forehead.

"Cain't take no chances o' Ballard's hoss gittin' ter Latigo ahead o' Roke's gang," muttered the dry-gulcher to himself, standing erect.

## CHAPTER II.

### OUTLAW SIGNALS.

A NERVOUS grin split Staley's face as he pumped a fresh cartridge into his carbine. It had been easy enough for the dry-gulcher to keep a steady nerve, as long as he was secure in the safety of his ambush. But now he stood revealed in the hot Wyoming sunlight, the smoke fuming from his rifle barrel.

A star, similar to the one on the chest of the man he had just killed, gleamed from the pocket of Fag Staley's sweat-stained shirt. For Staley was a deputy sheriff in the town of Latigo.

He was a tall, stoop-shouldered man, with a face as swart and seamed as a Mexican's. A putty-white scar was scribbled from the corner of his drooping mouth to one ear—a relic of some saloon brawl in the past.

A cartridge bandolier crossed his narrow chest, while double gun belts encircled his waist. Well forward on either thigh, a shiny holster with a big-butted .45 was held down by buckskin thongs.

He wore Cheyenne-style chaps

and high-heeled boots with butterfly inlays. Sharp-roweled spurs jangled as he walked.

A born killer was Fag Staley. But not one of the thirteen notches he wore on his guns was earned in fair fight. Staley was a dry-gulcher. Farther south, they would call him a cutbanker—a killer from ambush.

Yellow light glowed in Staley's eyes as he peered off down the draw, where he had been lying in wait for Sheriff Terry Ballard since early dawn. He had known that Ballard would be in this part of the country, for that day was the day he was going to collect license fees from the scattered trappers who lived in this section of the Thundergust foothills.

As Terry Ballard's only deputy, he had been ordered to remain in Latigo to take care of what office business might come in.

He saw the dead man's form, wedged between two rocks and pulled oddly out of shape by the horse which now lay, legs stretched out stiffly from its still body, a little farther down the gulch.

"A danged good job," Staley told himself, writhing his supple body out of the brush and making his way toward the mouth of a rocky defile some distance away. "I bet Monte Roke'll give me a good slice o' the cash fer this little trick."

Staley felt a thrill surge through his skinny body, even as the name of Monte Roke crossed his thin, tobacco-stained lips.

Monte Roke was the unchallenged leader of Western outlawry. His deeds on the owl-hoot trail ranged from cattle rustling in Texas to train robbery in the Sierra Nevadas.

Gradually Roke had assembled a crew of case-hardened gunmen about him. He took only the most desperate—crack gunmen from

south of the Rio, badly wanted criminals from the States.

He knew that in union there was power. With a leader like Monte Roke, this daring band of outlaws had spread a reign of terror over the entire West.

Finally the Texas Rangers had started a drive against Roke and his gang, south of Amarillo. So they had fled to Chihuahua, only to be beaten off by the Mexican rurales. After heavy losses, Roke had retreated to New Mexico.

But hard-boiled United States marshals cooperated with local sheriffs and deputies in carrying on war against the operations of Monte Roke. Miners and prospectors, enraged by the tales of torture and death which had been inflicted upon their mates by Roke's outlaws, drove them from the mountains.

Sure death awaited them on the cattle ranges. Railroads posted extra guards, armed to the teeth, on their express and mail cars.

Finally Monte Roke had brought what was left of his band to Wyoming and vanished in the rugged, canyon-torn upheaval of malpais or bad lands known as Whetstone Basin. He had denned up with his gang somewhere in the sun-scorched Thundergust Mountains.

Roke made it a point to visit the near-by towns, for he was a stranger in Wyoming and knew he would not be recognized. No lawman had ever dropped his loop on Monte Roke; no sheriff's dodger or rurales' poster had carried his picture under a reward sign.

It was on one of these trips to the little town of Latigo that Monte Roke had spotted Fag Staley. The outlaw was a shrewd judge of human nature; so instantly he had marked the shifty-eyed deputy as a traitor. And as such, he would be

a valuable ally for Roke and his outlaw band—if he weren't trusted too far.

Roke had made Staley's acquaintance over a crap table. He had wedged in his acquaintance with frequent bottles of whisky. And it had pleased the big outlaw when he had seen the deputy's face go pasty gray when he found out who his drinking companion was—Monte Roke, the most wanted crook in the West.

Roke had made Staley a proposition—a deal that promised rich reward.

"We're holed up in the hills an' short o' cash," Roke had said. "We want to rob this bank in Latigo, but we ain't a-tacklin' the job so long as this wild cat, Terry Ballard, is sheriffin'. You git rid o' Ballard, an' let us know. It'll be worth a third o' the swag—an' Monte Roke's word ain't been questioned yit."

Had Staley refused or shown even the slightest signs of reluctance, Roke was prepared to silence him forever with the bowie knife he carried in a sheath back of his collar. But Roke always figured men rightly. He knew Staley's breed.

Staley had accepted eagerly. It meant that he would be a trusty in the great Roke gang—living a double life. A deputy, generally believed to be a harmless coward, in Latigo, but a spy, a traitor in the employ of Monte Roke, at the same time. It was a job to Staley's cowardly liking.

A week had passed, while the craven deputy bided his time. He feared the young, clean-cut sheriff even more than he feared Monte Roke. And his chance had come that day.

Staley found his black-and-white pinto were he had left it, back in the shelter of the rock-ribbed defile. He removed rawhide hobbles, thrust his

smoking .30-30 back into the brush-scarred saddle boot, and mounted.

An hour later, he paused on the crest of a boulder-piled divide, and glanced back over the country behind him. Nothing moved on that dreary, aspen-dotted expanse. The distant peaks of the Big Horns danced like purple veils in a breeze, under the heat waves. A cruising buzzard wheeled on motionless wings up in the burnished-pewter sky.

No one was following him. No one had seen him. Fag Staley had done his work well.

He turned in his saddle, legs heaving as the sweat-plastered horse panted heavily. Reaching in a saddlebag, the treacherous deputy lifted a brand-new tin pie plate to view.

His black eyes roved across the greasewood flats before him. A mile away, a gigantic upthrust of nature's masonry jutted heavenward, a mighty skyscraper of red stone. It was Poker Table Butte, the rocky summit of which was a thousand feet above the basin floor.

Staley fumbled in his shirt pocket and drew forth a folded cigarette paper. Holding it in the shade of his sombrero brim, he read the penciled words which had been scrawled on the paper by the fingers of Monte Roke, the outlaw, and passed to him a week ago in a Latigo saloon:

When you kill Ballard, ride to Circle Ridge and flash a light three times, then two times. Wait for an answer from Butte. We will ride at once—horses always ready.  
M. R.

Staley reached in his chaps pocket for a match, lighted it, and touched the flame to one corner of the paper. It wilted into a film of ash, and floated to the earth, unmoved by the slightest tug of wind.



Then he lifted the shiny pie tin, twisting it between his thumbs until the bright surface caught the blinding rays of the sun. For several minutes, he moved the pie plate, repeating Roke's mystic signal in his mind.

And then, from a shadowy niche far up the shoulder of Poker Table Butte's frowning heights, a spot of dazzling brilliance gleamed like a star. The bandits' signal!

### CHAPTER III.

#### RIFLE SHOTS.

THE distant crack of a rifle caused Sheriff Terry Ballard to draw rein on the crest of a knoll that was covered with dwarf piñon and juniper. Moments later, a second shot wafted faintly to his ears.

"Sim must 'a' kilt a wolf in one o' his traps," grunted the clean-cut young sheriff, scanning the shimmering horizon. "He——"

The sheriff broke off suddenly, his eyes widening. In a flash, he remembered that when he had left Sim Barba, a few minutes before, the half-breed trapper did not have a gun with him!

For a full minute, the young sheriff sat his horse, there in the midst of the chaparral. He was taking a short-cut to Latigo, instead of following the regular trail across Whetstone Basin.

Terry Ballard was new to Wyoming, but his reputation had been well known before the citizens of Basin County had sent for him and elected him sheriff the instant he was eligible.

He had been a fighting deputy, down in Colorado. Latigo had been overrun with bandits who preyed on the cattlemen of the ranges. No man would take the job of sheriff, for a death warrant went with it.

Things had been different since blue-eyed, smiling Terry Ballard had pinned on the badge which made him sheriff of Basin County. Rustling had stopped almost overnight.

The first four posses organized by Sheriff Ballard had come back from the Big Horns with riderless horses and a nice batch of prisoners, some of whom were hanged by the law.

Ballard had heard rumors that Monte Roke and his gang of crooks were supposed to be holed up back in the jagged Thundergust range. But the mountains were outside his jurisdiction. He would have to wait for Monte Roke to make the trouble.

Things had been quiet in Whetstone Basin for several weeks. And so that day, he had come up into the Thundergust foothills, apparently to collect license fees from the scattered trappers who lived in huts along the rim of the basin.

But he had had another purpose in looking up old Sim Barba—the Arapahoe half-breed who was seen in Latigo only on rare occasions, when he came in for supplies or to trade his wolf hides for whisky money.

Barba had the shrewdness of an Indian and the dependability of his Yankee father. He knew the tumbled Big Horns from spike-toothed ridge to sandy bottomlands.

Because of these qualities, Terry Ballard knew that Sim Barba would be a valuable deputy to have in this sector of Whetstone Basin. If it was true that Monte Roke was in hiding somewhere near, a trusty deputy or two posted about the outskirts of the basin, which marked the boundaries of Basin County, might come in handy.

Terry Ballard had found Fag Staley in office, when he came to Wyo-

ming. Although the stoop-shouldered deputy did nothing more important than collect saloon taxes in Latigo, Terry Ballard had no confidence in him.

While he had no open evidence to use against Staley, he felt that the scar-faced deputy was as crooked as a coiled diamond-back. But for various reasons—mainly because Staley was fairly dependable for watching after the office business while Ballard was away—he had not been dismissed.

An hour before, Terry Ballard had pinned a star on Sim Barba's vest, and patted the brawny half-breed on the shoulder as the trapper climbed into his saddle.

"This won't incur any hard work, Sim," the sheriff had told his new deputy. "Keep this under your hat, an' if you see Monte Roke or his gang, let me know. I'll do the rest."

Barba had grinned and pointed to his empty knife belt. Not even a holster hung there. He was on his way to set new traps for the timber wolves that roamed the Thundergust Mountains. On such trips, he never even carried his ancient Sharps rifle.

"Dang it! I wonder who fired them shots," muttered the young sheriff, as the echoes of the last report died out on the hot, stifling air. "It's a cinch Barba didn't have a gun, an' nobody else lives up in this forsaken country, outside o' horned toads an' crooks."

Terry Ballard's good-looking face knitted in a frown. It was a two-hour ride back to Latigo, and he had attended to all the business he had out in these bad lands. Yet somehow, a hunch told him to investigate the mysterious shots which had wafted to his ears out of the distance.

"Dang it, hoss! We're goin' back

along the trail an' take a look-see, anyways," the sheriff grunted, wheeling his roan horse about. "If we don't play our hunches, we'll never git nowheres in this country."

Terry Ballard was a striking figure in any kind of surroundings. Even now, with the trail dust lying thick on his hand-tooled chaps and black shirt with its white trim, he looked fresh and fit. His face was bronzed and ruddy, neck corded and pulsing under the loosely knotted orange neckerchief at his throat.

A beaver-colored Stetson, white where the alkali dust had clung to the sweat, was pushed back on his head, to display sweat-plastered brown locks over his forehead.

Two Frontier model Colts rode at his hips, their bone stocks slick and worn from much use. The holsters were open and swivel-mounted—a trick he had picked up once in Arizona.

Ballard kept his eyes on the sky line as he rode, one hand swinging free near the butt of a .45. Somehow, those shots that had pierced the hot atmosphere had struck a cold chill in his veins, which he could not shake off.

He reached the trail where Sim Barba, the trapper, had worn his way along the base of a brushy ridge. He followed it, retracing his steps to the water hole at Sweetwater Gulch, near where he had pinned the deputy's badge on Sim Barba's vest.

He kept his eyes on the upflung maze of canyons and arroyos, brushy peaks, and naked, rocky slopes. Quaking aspen and willow dotted the country about him, turning to jack pine and juniper, piñon and cedar as his eyes lifted farther up the distant blue slopes. The landscape was as still as Boot Hill at midnight.

He felt his horse suddenly tense,

then shy to one side as he entered a long, juniper-flanked draw. And as he jerked his eyes from the upland, he saw the reason.

Sprawled horribly between two granite cusps in the pit of the draw, lay the crumpled figure of Sim Barba, the wolf trapper!

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### GALLOPING HORSEMEN.

**B**ALLARD'S spur rowels made a flashing arc of light as he vaulted from the saddle to bury himself in chaparral on one side. He was far too wary to expose himself to the same ambush that had cut down his trapper friend.

One bone-handled .45 was in a lean brown hand, barrel prodding aside the bramble, as he peered out on the death scene.

"I'll be danged!" he whispered slowly. "Some skunk's went an' dry-gulched pore ol' Sim!"

Ballard had seen much of death, violent death, during his years as a law officer in the West. But the killing of his new deputy, less than ten minutes after he had become an officer of the law, brought a shock that left his face dripping with an ooze of oily sweat. Scant minutes ago, he had watched the glow of pride in the half-breed's eyes as he put the nickeled emblem of the law on his vest.

Carefully, searching every inch of the surrounding country, the sheriff viewed the scene. No sign of life did he see; no shaking juniper branch, no puff of dust. The world was as empty as a tomb, save for that dead man lying out there.

Gun jutting forth before him, Terry Ballard crept from his hiding place. A moment later, he was at the torn body of his friend, kneeling beside it. An inch below the nick-

eled star on the half-breed's vest was a ghastly bullet wound.

Ballard suddenly gasped, as a flood of realization came upon him.

"Dang!" he breathed. "They kilt Sim because they thought it was *me!* This star—they mistook him fer me!"

Ballard's eyes misted, as he covered the half-breed's contorted face with a Stetson which lay near by. That sombrero was almost the same as the one Ballard himself wore. And the shirt, with its spreading stain of crimson over the front, was black, like his own.

The sheriff strode over to the trapper's horse. Bluebottle flies buzzed angrily away, as the officer stooped to examine the bullet hole in the animal's head, from which oozed a trickle of thick scarlet.

All too plainly the sheriff's expert, range-bred eyes read the details of Barba's murder by the marks in the dirt.

He saw where the dead man had been dragged over the rubble, saw where the spur had caught in one stirrup. Still lashed to the saddle was the gunny sack full of traps which Barba had been planning to set that morning. A hunk of raw liver lay near by, bound with a string, which Barba had been dragging to lure timber wolves to his traps.

Ballard set to work, the details of the killing clearly fixed in his mind. It was a matter of five minutes to find the place, up in the chaparral on the bank farther up the draw, where Barba's killer had lain in the brush that overlooked Sweetwater Gulch.

A few moments later, the sheriff's sharp gaze had spotted the killer's tracks, heading for the mouth of a near-by defile.

"Cached his hoss here, while he



was waitin' fer me to ride by," grunted the sheriff. "An' pore ol' Barba come along, settin' his traps, an' wearin' a star. They plugs him, thinkin' it was me. Question is, who did it?"

He whistled to his horse. A minute later, he was mounted and following the trail of the ambusher's mount along the slope which headed toward the summit of the Thundergusts.

Two hours later found Sheriff Terry Ballard riding through the dense brush which choked the channel of a gypsum-walled slit in the great cliff which fenced in Whetstone Basin.

Carefully, foot by foot, he had traced the hoofprints which marked the flight of the dry-gulcher who had slain his deputy. Rocky stretches and dry stream beds had baffled him at times, but with the unerring accuracy of a range-bred tracker, he had recovered the trail, following it onward as it pushed higher into the Wyoming uplands.

Suddenly, with an agonized squeal, Ballard's roan slumped forward, recovered its footing, then came to a halt, eyes rolling in agony.

Instantly the sheriff knew what had happened. The horse had stepped on a turning rock and plunged its hoof into a hole. In so doing, it had wrenched its shoulder.

Ballard dismounted and shook his head sorrowfully as he inspected the animal's injury.

"No more travelin' fer you tuh-day, hoss," he muttered, rubbing the animal's nose tenderly. "We'll have tuh——"

A sudden thunder of approaching hoofbeats arrested the sheriff's attention. Instantly he became alert. Seizing his mount by the bridle, he forced it under the shelter of the

heavy growth which choked the canyon through which he had been riding.

He was not an instant too soon. Even as he jammed his own body back into the tangle of brush, a band of horsemen swept around a bend in the blue-gypsum-walled canyon and flooded past with a deafening thunder of hoofbeats which drowned the whimpering of Ballard's injured pony.

Long after the horsemen had disappeared, there flashed before Ballard's winking eyes the blinding glitter of sun rays on the barrels of many rifles, and shell-studded belts.

There could be but one explanation for this gang of heavily armed horsemen riding down out of the mountains toward Latigo. Monte Roke and his gang!

But that was not the reason the young sheriff of Basin County felt his body suddenly turn to ice. For among those galloping horsemen who had fled past, Terry Ballard had recognized one man.

That one was Fag Staley, his deputy!

## CHAPTER V.

### THE HOLD-UP.

SEVEN horsemen rode past the crossroads which marked the center of Latigo, and dismounted in front of the pole hitch rack before the Bald Eagle Saloon.

Monte Roke stood with one high-heeled boot on the ground, the other in the stirrup. His black eyes roved like a cougar's over the seat of his saddle.

Like a camera, his glance photographed every detail of the scene—the crowd of sleepy loafers who sat in the shade of the Elkhorn Hotel, the cow ponies which gathered in one corner of the near-by livery

barn's pole corral, the false-fronted bank building across the street.

It was shortly after noon, and Latigo was taking its siesta. Blue-bottle flies droned against the grimy windowpanes of the Bald Eagle bar-room. The half-hearted tapping of a blacksmith's hammer on an anvil came from somewhere.

Roke stepped away from his horse and dusted his chaps. He was a tall, straight man, whose eyes gleamed like ebony. A sleek mustache curved over a mouth that wore a perpetual droop.

He wore his Stetson at a rakish angle on his head. The unbuttoned vest was much too short, exposing several inches of salmon-colored shirt which disappeared under twin gun belts.

His looks were not striking. But there was a firm outthrust to his jaw that showed authority.

The rest of his gang were a motley lot of gun slingers, stamped with the unmistakable marks of hunted men—shifty eyes, tied-down guns, nervous hands always hovering near six-gun butts.

Roke ducked under the hitch rack and strode up the steps of the Bald Eagle, his spurs jangling as he crossed the rough plank flooring of the porch. His arms swung carelessly as he went into the open bar-room of the saloon and stopped before the mahogany counter. His men followed him, lining up along the brass rail.

Roke's brow knitted in deep thought, as the barkeep served the gang with liquor. He felt that he had everything planned out.

There were not too many people in town. His horses were not clustered about the bank, with a man or two holding them, the way more than one slower-witted bandit had made his fatal error, by brazenly ad-

vertising the fact that a bank was being robbed.

Sheriff Terry Ballard, according to Fag Staley's signal, was out of the way. They had met Staley on Circle Ridge, but had left the deputy back in the hills, to await their return. That left the town unprotected, as far as the law was concerned. And the residents of Latigo were too sleepy at this time of day to note what was going on.

Having gulped down a stiff drink, Roke twisted on his heel and sauntered casually outside. Not a breath of air stirred. Dust, kicked up by his restless horses, lay thick on the sultry air.

Out of the corner of his eye, Roke noted that his men had left the bar and were grouping themselves at the gambling tables. There was a clear view of the bank from where they sat.

The outlaw chief jerked his head. Out of the group came two men.

"Pecos" Stallcup was a great ape-like gunman who had blazed a red trail of crime through Texas. Juan Soliz was a Mexican, with a broken nose splattered across his ugly features. Together, they were a pair of the fastest gun aces who ever fanned a hammer.

The three men sauntered slowly down the length of the Bald Eagle porch. Loafers eyed them from under tilted hat brims. Some paused in their whittling, to glance at the big outlaw's stag-handled guns. But they were not notched. Monte Roke was too crafty to advertise the fact that he was a gunman.

The outlaw smiled grimly to himself. Not a suspicious glance had been cast their way. The town had accepted them for what they appeared to be—a party of cattlemen, stopping in town for a few minutes to rest their horses and swallow a

gulp of redeye. Many such paused at Latigo, before going on into the Big Horn Basin.

Roke fumbled in his salmon-colored shirt for the "makings." He shook tobacco into a brown paper as he walked slowly across the wheel-rutted crossroads. Little puffs of dust eddied behind him. At his heels, like faithful dogs, marched grim-faced Stallcup and the plodding, brown-skinned Mexican.

The Cattleman's Bank was a false-fronted structure with small street windows. Its front door opened on a small lobby, which masked the bank from the outside.

Roke paused at the door of the bank to scratch a match on his trousers leg and light his quirly. A quick glance through sun-puckered eyelids showed him that no one was taking any particular notice of his presence in town.

He knew that inside the Bald Eagle, his men, apparently interested in card games, would be watching him. They would be ready for any trouble that might occur. But he was expecting no hitch. Things went smoothly when Monte Roke planned a robbery.

Roke opened the door and crossed the lobby. Stallcup and Soliz remained outside, leaning carelessly against the building, thumbs hooked in gun belts.

The outlaw noted, with a quick gleam of satisfaction in his eyes, that there were no customers in the bank at this hour. Only a bald-headed clerk, toiling over a ledger. And a wrinkled old banker, standing behind the teller's cage, absorbed in his work.

"Howdy!" Roke exchanged the curt greeting of the cow country, as he paused before the teller's window. A thin stream of blue smoke filtered from the cigarette plastered on his

tongue, as he fumbled in a pocket for a bit of paper.

"Got a check I'd like ter cash," grunted the outlaw, thrusting forward a folded bit of soiled paper. "Aim ter buy some stock feed in town ter-day."

The teller picked up the check, his eyes searching Roke's sun-tanned face as he unfolded the paper.

"You're a stranger in town, ain't you?" the banker asked. "If you can get some one to identify——"

He broke off, his face suddenly paling. For there, printed in heavy black letters on the blank check, were two words, which rose to smack the banker in the face:

#### MONTE ROKE

A metallic click sounded, and the teller glanced up, to see the black eye of a .45 barrel lying over the marble counter in front of him.

"This'll identify me," the bandit said, between motionless lips. His eyes bored past the teller, to fasten on the form of the clerk, busy at his desk. The bandit's voice dropped to a hissing whisper:

"Get me currency, lots of it—quick!"

The teller gulped. Sweat burst from his wrinkled old face. Then he nodded, and reached a gnarled hand toward his cash box.

Under the marble counter before him, the teller had an arrangement for just such an emergency as this. His bank had never been robbed, but Terry Ballard, the new sheriff, had suggested a clever device for his protection, which he had installed.

It was a Colt .45, clamped under the desk on a swivel. Its trigger had been removed, so that the mere flick of a thumb on the knurled hammer would send a bullet pounding through the thin wooden panels into the body of a bank robber.



That gun, hidden from Roke's sight by the table, was pointing squarely at the big outlaw's midriff!

The teller's hand trembled as he reached in the cash drawer beneath the level of the desk. He tossed a fat bundle of greenbacks on the counter, saw Roke's salmon-pink sleeve rake in the money. Again he reached down, this time to produce a roll of twenty-dollar gold pieces.

For a third time, the banker's hand vanished beneath the edge of the counter. But this time, his trembling thumb snapped the hammer of that clamped-down six-gun.

*Brrang!* The marble-topped counter trembled under the explosion of the gun, and the teller saw the steely-eyed bandit wince as the bullet tore into him.

"Blast yuh!" screamed the outlaw, his lips peeling back from clamped, gritting teeth. "Blast——"

*Boom!* Roke twisted aside, at the same instant triggering his huge six-gun, point-blank at the staring teller's face.

With a moan, the banker's head snapped back, as the bullet punched a blue hole in the middle of his forehead. The teller's body was knocked backward, and he collapsed under the plunging cloud of blue smoke which fumed from the swivel-mounted gun under the counter.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ESCAPE.

**R**OKE swayed on his feet, caught his balance, and swung his smoking six-gun barrel in the direction of the clerk. He pulled the trigger, heard the bullet clang against the barred grating which extended along the teller's cage, then thud into an opposite wall.

The bandit dropped as he saw the clerk turn about, snaking up the barrel of a stubby-nosed shotgun.

*Brrrom!* A swarm of buckshot blasted through the bars of the cage, and sliced the air over Roke's head, before streaking across the empty bank and knocking a thick-paned window to powder.

As the window cascaded outward in a tumble of glass and lead, the wounded outlaw snapped erect. The clerk's hands dropped the now empty shotgun, and started ceilingward.

*Brrrang!* An instant later, a big-bore slug smashed the clerk full in the face, and he went down like a sledged steer.

Roke twisted about to peer through the lobby. Outside, the members of his gang were boiling from the Bald Eagle Saloon, guns thundering a frenzied chatter.

Rifle shots crashed out, and the bank trembled under a hail of lead. Through staring eyes, Monte Roke saw big Pecos Stallcup dumped on his back by a .30-30 slug. Pecos picked himself up and fired blindly with his six-gun, then reeled back, stone-dead, against the bank, riddled with bullets.

Everything had gone wrong. Roke swore at himself for letting the cashier get away with a stunt like that. He hadn't counted on such bull-headed resistance.

He rubbed aside the crimson stain which oozed from a bullet slash across his hip. It was a flesh wound; the teller, in his excitement, had joggled the barrel of that swiveled gun. The bullet which had been intended for the bandit's stomach had ripped inches to one side, inflicting a mere scratch.

Roke had owed his life to such narrow escapes many a time. He knew that outside the bank, his

henchmen were shooting it out with a town that had been roused from its midday stupor, like a poked hornets' nest, by that single burst of gunfire from the interior of the bank.

Little did Roke know that Sheriff Terry Ballard had trained every citizen in town what to do, in case of such an emergency—trained them with the thorough care of a fire chief training his crew in the city.

Roke knew he should be streaking it for the street, for his horse. But Monte Roke was made of different stuff. He would not admit defeat.

He sprang across the room, wound forgotten, leaving a trail of spattered crimson on the floor. A steel door clanged as he charged through.

It was but the matter of a few seconds for the outlaw to scoop the contents of the cash drawer into a silk bag, which he produced from inside his pink shirt.

Leaping over the dead clerk's body, he disappeared in the open safety vault. Papers crackled and drawers grated as he ransacked the place. Locks broke under the butt of his Colt, deposit drawers smashed under his furious kicks.

He emerged through the door of the vault with hat jammed down over his white, twisted face. A big Colt was in one hand as he ran to the wall, edging himself along the wainscoting until he came to a window.

Peering cautiously through the lower pane, he was in time to see the last of his gang fall in the dust, out in front of the Bald Eagle Saloon.

Angry-faced townsmen were now squatting behind the mahogany bar inside the saloon, pumping bullets at the bandits who had gone into action at the instant the shot had rung out in the bank. Terry Ballard's training had worked well under fire.

Roused by the noise, idlers had charged from the hotel building across the street, the porch rumbling beneath the thud of their booted feet. One man had dropped dead over the threshold as Juan Soliz had triggered his gun. That had directed a flood of lead toward the bank door, which even a ghost could not have escaped.

Stallcup and the Mexican had gone down, with the thunder of their own guns in their ears, shot before they could get inside the bank lobby.

It was the first time that Monte Roke had tasted defeat, and he realized that the show-down might cost him his own life before he could get out of town. He realized that it would be suicide to try to get to his horse now.

Somewhere back in his consciousness, a sixth sense buzzed him a warning like a diamond-back's whirring rattle.

The livery stable! Like a flood of hot fire in his brain, Monte Roke remembered the corral of horses a few feet from the bank, farther down the street. Again as had happened so often before, the bandit's faculty for registering every detail of the landscape, before going into action, provided a means of escape from a tight hole.

*Bam!* The front door of the bank crashed open, boots thundering on the lobby floor.

The citizens of Latigo, wild with excitement, were storming the bank!

Roke glanced frantically about, stuffing the silk bag with its precious load of greenbacks and gold coin inside his shirt front.

He spotted a small door leading into a back room. Stooping, keeping his running body out of sight under the bank counter, he streaked across the floor.

*Brram! Bang!* Bullet holes ap-

peared like magic in the thin panels of the door, as the outlaw hooked a spur over the doorstop and backed across the threshold.

He triggered his six-gun desperately, and saw two men fall as they attempted to enter the bank. He backed inside, closing the door behind him.

The outlaw found himself in a supply closet. Shelves filled with ledger paper, cartons of check-book fillers, ink, and janitor's supplies lined both walls. At the far end was a window, but it was heavily barred!

His heart sank as he heard the mob surging into the bank. He knew others would be surrounding the building from the outside. Here he was, trapped in a narrow closet! It looked like the finish for the glamorous career of Monte Roke.

And then his alert eyes caught sight of a heavy steel bar which served as a fastening for the grille of ironwork that protected the window. It fastened from the inside!

His fingers were steady as he slid back the bolt, threw open the bars. Bullets crashed through the door and mowed down a row of quart ink bottles. Roke's mustache slanted across his face, as his lips drew tight in a smile. They were trying to shoot him out like a rat in a box.

The hot sunlight struck him like a raw flame, as he wriggled his body through the narrow opening. He dropped to the ground outside with a grunt, to find himself standing in a narrow alley between the bank and a blacksmith shop.

Rusty cans scattered beneath his boots as he slipped like a cat for the nearest corner of the shop. He wriggled through the opening and stepped out in an area filled with broken wagons and piles of rusty junk iron. Twenty yards away was

the corner post of the livery-stable corral.

Footsteps thudded around the corner of the bank, and a running cowpuncher appeared, waving a big six-gun. A second later, the cowboy dropped in his tracks as Roke threw down his big Colt in a flaming arc.

Spur-rowels twinkled as the desperate bandit fled for the corral bars, feeding shells to his six-gun. He jerked a bit of rope from a snubbing post, and headed for the group of horses in the opposite side of the corral. His actions were masked from the milling crowd in front of the bank by the blacksmith building.

Screams of rage and hate issued from the mob two minutes later as some one glanced down the street to see a horseman, riding bareback, gallop through an open corral gate near the livery barn, and vanish over a brush-dotted rise.

Rifles chattered and a leaden hail sped after the fugitive, but they were wild. Monte Roke, the man with nine lives, had escaped.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE TRAITOR.

**T**ERRY BALLARD, leading a horse that was limping more with each passing mile, suddenly stopped, throwing a hand back to halt his injured mount.

He was standing on the crest of a great divide overlooking Whetstone Basin. In the distance, the town of Latigo huddled like a brown blot against a drab hillside.

It was the form of a galloping horse that attracted Terry Ballard's attention. So far away that it appeared to be only a black dot crawling along the basin floor, the sheriff knew instantly that it was a horseman.

For several minutes, he lost sight



of the horse and rider, in the willow-splashed lowlands. Then he caught a faint glimpse of the running horse again, as it headed into the rolling foothills. At the same instant, Ballard's keen eye detected a closely bunched mass of those dots, streaming over the flats from the direction of Latigo.

"Looks like that gang o' Roke's, or somethin'!" gasped the sheriff. "Either that or a posse. I wonder if they're chasin' that hombre who's out front there."

Turning to his exhausted horse, the sheriff opened a leather case which was tied to the hull with saddle strings. He drew forth a pair of powerful field glasses.

Putting them to his eyes, he focused carefully, until every bush and rock in the entire basin stood out in bold relief.

Carefully, with the skill of long experience, Terry Ballard raked the country below him with the field glasses.

The group of horsemen were too far away to distinguish individual riders; but Ballard could clearly make out the glint of sunbeams off rifle barrels, and the puffs of white dust under pounding hoofs.

He dropped the glasses, scanning every inch of the foreground with care. Suddenly his face tensed, and he lifted both hands to the glasses, steadying them carefully.

Inside the circle of vision afforded by the powerful glasses, he saw the form of the lone horseman, several miles distant. And as he watched the horse toiling up a steep slope, he suddenly noted that the animal was without a saddle. The rider was astride Indian style!

Ballard studied the rider carefully. Every few seconds, the fleeing man would twist his head, as if looking back at the pursuing horse-

men. Then he would slap his mount with a bit of rope, and spur viciously.

The horse was white with lather, its sides streaked with pink under the man's cruel roweling.

"Well, I'll be danged!" suddenly exclaimed the sheriff, his jaw dropping in amazement. "What's this?"

Riding out suddenly into the field of vision taken in by Ballard's glasses, came the form of Fag Staley, astride his familiar white-and-black paint horse! Even at this distance, there was no doubting the little deputy's stooped figure or his steeple-peaked hat.

And then the meaning of Staley's appearance forced itself upon the young sheriff's mind. His deputy was riding out to meet the fleeing man.

Ballard watched the figure of his deputy ride out to meet the bare-back rider, whose mount was staggering up the ridge on which Staley was standing, hidden from the posse by a thicket of brush.

He saw Staley spur his mount aside and bend about to look as the panting horseman pointed back toward the basin, his lips jabbering wildly.

And then, to Ballard's amazement, he saw the fugitive reach in his salmon-colored shirt and pass Fag Staley a black bag.

Studying the pair under his field glasses, Terry Ballard saw the deputy talk rapidly, with many gestures. A moment later, the fugitive wheeled his saddleless horse and disappeared in the direction of the Thundergust horizon line, at right angles to the course taken by the pursuing posse.

"I'll be jiggered!" said the sheriff, scratching his head in bewilderment. "I wonder what that bag was that that jasper handed to Staley."

He put the glasses to his eyes again. This time, he saw the deputy hiding the bag under his slicker roll. A couple of minutes later, the sheriff watched Staley ride off into the brush-dotted country and disappear.

The larger group of horsemen had scattered, spreading fanwise over the slopes. By now, most of them were lost in the brushy country, weaving their way in and out through the gray chaparral.

Ballard returned the glasses to their case, and started off down the gumbo slope, shaking his head in bewilderment. He found himself wondering what connection Fag Staley's meeting with the mysterious horseman might have with the murder of Sim Barba. He pondered on the identity of that horseman who seemed to be pursued by so many men.

"I'll just ask Staley what he knows about all this," Ballard told himself, a half hour later, as he led his limping pony across a brushy table-land, bound for the water hole at Sweet-water Gulch. "He shouldn't 'a' been away from town, in the first place. Danged if I won't make him talk turkey, when we git home, pony boy!"

But the young sheriff of Basin County did not have to wait until he arrived in Latigo to meet Fag Staley. For even as he finished speaking, a sudden creak of saddle leather reached the sheriff's ears, coming from near at hand through the light forest of jack pine and juniper which covered the table of earth which he was crossing.

Rounding a heavy clump of stunted pine growth, Ballard saw the form of Fag Staley spur into a small clearing and fling himself from the saddle. Dropping the reins over his horse's head, the evil-faced deputy

clawed under his slicker roll, to produce the black silk bag which the stranger had given him.

So far, Staley had not seen the form of the sheriff, a few feet away. He imagined himself alone in a vast wilderness of stunted pine growth.

The deputy's back was to the sheriff, as he dropped to his knees and pried a large block of granite loose from the earth. In the cavity thus exposed, Staley dropped the silk bag, then carefully replaced the boulder.

A shadow fell across the ground as the deputy rose. His fanglike teeth were exposed in a snarl as he whirled about. Fag Staley found himself looking into the curious blue eyes of his boss, Terry Ballard!

"What yuh got there, Fag?" asked the sheriff coolly, eyes darting from the boulder at Staley's feet to meet the deputy's popped-open, staring eyes.

For one full second, Fag Staley swayed on his feet, eyes gazing wildly at the form of the man he thought he had shot through the heart, earlier that morning.

Then, with a frantic scream on his lips, the treacherous deputy's hand streaked to his holster, and sun rays glinted off darting steel as Staley's six-gun blasted lead and smoke.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE PASSWORD.

ONE instant, the lithe figure of Terry Ballard was standing beside the stoop-shouldered deputy. The next, he had leaped back, palm slapping the butt of the .45 at his right hip.

The two men fired at the same instant, but Staley's bullet pounded the dirt at his feet.

Ballard had used his swivel holster at point-blank range, tilting the

barrel of his six-gun without wasting the precious fraction of a second that means life or death in a gun duel at close quarters.

Staley's wiry body was knocked spinning by the big slug that crashed through his chest. He reeled away, six-gun dropping from his nerveless grasp, to sprawl in a quivering heap ten feet from the spot where he had gone for his gun.

Choking, a crimson foam flecking his lips, the deputy staggered to his feet, eyes blurring dizzily as he picked out the form of the grim sheriff, standing there with the smoke of his .45 spiraling up to meet his sombrero brim.

"Dang yuh! I'll git yuh!" croaked the wounded deputy, clawing at his hip for the second gun. "I'll——"

*Bang!* A scream of agony blended with the savage bark of Ballard's gun, and holster and weapon were jerked from Fag's belt as his fingers groped for the six-gun.

Staley's knees suddenly buckled. He slumped earthward. His fingers shoved in the sand. Then he pitched face downward, limp and bullet-torn.

"Yuh forced me to it, Fag!" Ballard was at the man's side, rolling him over.

Strong fingers ripped open the deputy's shirt under the cartridge bandolier.

Ballard shook his head as he saw the great wound which the bullet had torn. It had pierced Staley's left lung a couple of inches above the heart and shattered against the shoulder blade before passing completely through the traitor's body.

The deputy's eyelids flickered. He blew red foam off his lips, tried to speak.

Ballard ran to the deputy's horse and unlooped a canteen from the saddle. He worked the lip of the

water can into Staley's lips, forcing some of the cool liquid down the dying man's twitching throat.

"What in blazes did yuh go fer yer gun for, Fag?" asked the sheriff, as the wounded man thanked him with his eyes. "If I hadn't 'a' shot, you'd 'a' drilled me plumb dead."

Staley nodded. The pulse beats in his neck were growing feebler. The livid scar on his face seemed a yellow streak in the midst of a deathlike pallor.

"I thought—I kilt yuh—this mornin'," whispered the deputy, his head rolling as Ballard pillowed it on his arm, getting the dying man's face in shadow. "I had—this—comin', I reckon."

Ballard bent his ear to catch the man's whispered words.

"You allus—been mighty white—tuh me, Terry," went on Staley, choking. "Under that rock—is—gold—gold from—the bank at Latico. Monte Roke—jest held up the place."

A shiver racked Staley's body. Ballard felt part of that spasmodic chill transmitted to him. Monte Roke! So his deputy was an ally of the bandit chief!

"Yore system—got all his men, like I—warned him it would," Staley went on. "Posse—lookin' for him—now. I was goin' to—hide the cash—an' meet 'im. To-night I was supposed—ter take the money to Roke an' split. I thought——"

Staley's words faded. A few gulps of water from the canteen, and his strength seemed to revive. But Ballard could hardly catch the next words.

"If you want—to catch Roke," said the deputy, "you'll find him—at Poker Table Butte. North—shoulder. There's a—niche in the rocks—where they camp. Sort o'—cave."



Ballard was bathing the man's face with the tip of his orange neckerchief, dipped in water. He nodded.

"I'll get him, Fag," the sheriff said tenderly. "If he's holed up at Poker Table Butte, I'll get him."

Staley was panting heavily. Ballard knew that death was but a matter of heartbeats away.

"If you—go," Staley said, "go to-night. Listen, Terry. I want ter do somethin'—fore I die—ter atone fer the way I been doin', Terry. I tried tuh—kill yuh. Now I'm—goin' ter—save yore life. Listen, Terry. Roke's up there—only two of his men—left now. He'll think yo're me—bringin' the gold back ter-night—like I—prom-promised. But listen! You got tuh have—the password—before you can get in—the cave. Then you can—git the drop on 'em."

Ballard felt his heart pounding furiously. What was this about a cave—a password? He bent closer, to get the next words.

"When the—sentry—challenges yuh," gasped the deputy faintly, "say '*cuidado*.' It means—'honor'—in Spanish. It's Roke's password. He talks—Mex. It'll git yuh in—Terry. Let me hear yuh say it, Terry. So's I'll—die knowin'—yuh got it right. Otherwise, he'll shoot yuh—in the dark. Say it, Terry—'*cuidado*'—"

Ballard gulped. "*Cuidado*," he replied huskily. His voice caught with emotion, tongue tripping over the foreign word. "Thanks, Fag! We'll call our score square—fer this."

"*Cuidado*," whispered the deputy, his eyes gleaming like red coals under the fluttering lids. "That's—right—"

A series of awful coughs shook the deputy's frame, and when they had

finished, Terry Ballard rose to lower a dead form to the sand.

"Poor guy," muttered the sheriff, as he gazed at the man who had tried to kill him twice that day. "Tried to atone fer his crookedness."

Silently the sheriff went over to the stone where the deputy had hidden the silk bag. He rolled it over, and in a few moments, was handling the packets of greenbacks and rolls of coin which Monte Roke had taken from the Cattleman's Bank.

Knottting the sack, Ballard went to the deputy's waiting horse. It was fresh, and would do to carry him to Poker Table Butte, if he wished. The sheriff tied the treasure sack around the horn.

He unsaddled his limping roan and hobbled it. He would need to know where it was, so a veterinary could come after it, once he reached town again.

Ballard emptied the contents of the dead man's canteen into the crown of his sombrero, and let the jaded horse drink. That done, he mounted Staley's paint horse and spurred off through the chaparral.

Coming to the edge of the tableland, he slid the animal down a cut-bank and found himself near the willow-grown water hole called Sweetwater Gulch. Just around the bend, he knew the body of Sim Barba lay in the sand.

"Hm-m-m. If I'm goin' to smoke Monte Roke out of his own nest, I mustn't let that posse come along with me, or we'd lose him sure," he decided. "An' it'll take me until after sundown to get to Poker Table Butte."

The ashes of several dead camp fires caught his attention. He remembered that this was a favorite camping place of Sim Barba, being sheltered from the night winds and close to a water hole.

Sight of the piles of gray ashes and charred sticks gave Terry Ballard an idea.

Swinging from the saddle, he took the sack of gold and currency, and buried it in the heart of the nearest ash heap. He covered it over with dead embers and charcoal. Then he fanned the ashes with his hat brim, obliterating all marks of fingers or boots.

He would not want to take such a valuable object along with him on the trail to Poker Table Butte. And he could not wait to deliver it to the posse men, should he encounter them out in the malpais. Securely buried here, it would never be discovered.

Terry Ballard climbed back in the saddle and jabbed spurs into the pinto's flanks. They were heading toward the point where Poker Table Butte reared its majestic height into the red gleam of the sinking sun. Somewhere under those frowning rocks was an outlaw's den.

He had a dying man's word for the key to that snake nest of outlawry—"cuidado," the word that Staley said meant "honor." Smiling grimly, the young sheriff wondered how much the dead deputy had known about honor.

Horse and rider set off across the rolling divides, as the sun dipped beneath the far-distant rim of the horizon.

## CHAPTER IX.

### ROKE'S OUTLAW DEN.

**M**OONRISE found Terry Ballard seated astride his blowing horse, looking up at the towering walls of Poker Table Butte.

Straight up it climbed, a sheer wall of rock that seemed to support the star-dusted sky. The moon peeped around one shoulder of the great butte, like a flake of silver ly-

ing on the cloud-wisped roof of the world.

He was near the north shoulder of the great outcrop of rock, mentioned by Staley as death had stared him in the face. It was a wild, desolate country, too rough for anything but bighorn goats, and too barren to sustain even them.

An ideal place for an outlaw den, Ballard concluded, shivering in spite of himself.

At any second, he knew he might be challenged by the sentinel whom Staley said the outlaw band kept posted outside the entrance of Roke's hole-up.

The sheriff had made his plans carefully. He knew he had but three men to face; that is, if Staley's word could be trusted. And he believed that a dying man would not be likely to lie.

Riding up through the moonlight, aboard Staley's pinto horse, he would be accepted until he got within close range. Roke was expecting him, with the gold, at about this hour.

He had left his sheriff's star on his vest—they could not tell it from a deputy's badge, without reading it. And Ballard did not intend to get that close to the trio of outlaws, without being in full command of the situation.

As he rode along under the dense shadow of the mighty butte, he hunched his shoulders, in imitation of the dead Staley. They supposed that Terry Ballard, the sheriff, was lying out there in Sweetwater Gulch, buzzard-picked and stiff as a board by now.

"Hi, fella!" The pinto shied violently, as a deep voice called softly from an inky blot of stone, inches to one side.

Ballard felt his pulses thrill, as he drew close rein, wheeling the horse.

His sombrero was clamped tightly over his head, throwing his grim face in shadow.

"Hi!" returned the sheriff in a muffled voice, jerking the pinto's bits slightly, so as to make it appear that he was having his hands full with the horse.

He did not know if he was supposed to give the password now or wait for an invitation. He could feel the sentry's eyes boring through him in the gloom.

"Password, Fag!" grunted the voice, and Ballard saw a tall figure emerge from the gloom, carrying a rifle. "Reckon it ain't necessary, bein's it's you, but the chief is a sticker fer form, yuh know."

"Sure," grunted Ballard, loosening the .45 in its holster with a hand that was hidden from view. "*Cuidado!*"

The sentry halted, as Ballard spoke the Spanish word with soft distinctness. The sheriff was so close he could almost touch the man's sombrero crown. He saw the sentinel's muscles tense, there in the darkness.

Ballard chilled. What had he done? Had he mispronounced the strange Spanish word? He felt his spine turn into an ice pole as the sentry opened his mouth to speak.

"What? Whar'd—— *Dang!*" The sentry leaped back, lifting his rifle barrel swiftly.

*Thud!* There sounded a dull thwack of metal against bone, and the sentry flopped in his tracks like a split sack.

In one vicious sweep, Terry had clubbed the sentry into unconsciousness. The rifle made no sound as it fell back against the man's body.

The cruising moon poked through its nest of filmy clouds, to bathe Ballard's taut face in a soft glow of light as he dismounted. His skin

dripped with sweat as he stepped into the shadow of the butte wall.

Handcuffs clinked faintly as he shackled the senseless man's wrists.

Terry Ballard thought bitterly of Fag Staley, the double-crossing deputy who had given him a false password, even with death's icy fingers about his throat. Honor, indeed!

Leaving the pinto to stand guard over the unconscious sentry's body, Ballard stepped quickly along the base of the cliff wall, gun in hand.

Moving with great caution, he rounded the first shoulder of rock. The wind fanned his face as he edged his way around the granite, boots making no noise in the rubble. What lay around the corner?

His heart pumped faster as he saw firelight dancing on a near-by boulder. A second later, he peered about, to see a camp fire blazing inside a low cave, painting the arch-roofed cavern with vivid red.

And squatted about the flickering blaze, backs to the entrance, were the forms of two sombreroed men.

A savage thrill surged through the sheriff's body as he drew his other gun and stepped cautiously out into the open. There they were—the remaining two outlaws.

The two men by the fire had no inkling of Ballard's approach, as he crept stealthily forward across the smooth rock floor leading toward the mouth of the cave.

*Snap!* A twig snapped beneath the sheriff's boot heel, barely audible above the crackling of the camp fire.

But at the sound, the men at the fire started nervously. One of them twisted about on his heels, an exclamation rising from his lips.

"Stick 'em up high, Roke!" Like the high-pitched snarl of a mountain cougar, Terry Ballard's voice cut the air, echoing angrily from the granite walls of the cavern.



Speechless with amazement, the two outlaws leaped to their feet, hands hovering toward gun butts. Ballard strode forward, his face glowing red in the dancing light of the fire flickering off the leveled barrels of two heavy six-guns.

The bandits took one look at the unwavering bores of the sheriff's .45s, and their hands climbed above the level of their hat brims. They were caught, powerless to make so much as a single move toward the heavy guns belted at their hips.

Ballard holstered one of his Colts. The other, balanced firmly in a big lean hand, wavered between the two men, weaving like a snake's head. Yet both outlaws knew that a single false move would bring bullets.

"Keep 'em high!" warned the young sheriff, reaching in a hip pocket. The light flashed off another pair of glittering handcuffs. "We'll talk business after I've——"

*Brrang!* Like a blast of a ton of dynamite under his very eardrums, Ballard heard the crash of a six-gun at his side.

The pungent fumes of gunpowder burned his nostrils as he jerked back, one hand battered where a .45 slug had torn the six-gun from his fingers.

Then a Colt muzzle punched him in the side, and he turned to face the leering visage of Monte Roke at his very elbow.

## CHAPTER X.

### CAPTURED.

**DIZZY** with pain, the sheriff's hands groped upward. The handcuffs clanged on the rocky floor as the sheriff dropped them.

A wave of sickness mounted in Ballard's body as he felt the outlaw king reach forward swiftly and lift his remaining six-gun from its holster, to toss it aside in the darkness.

"Thought yuh'd pull a fast one on us, hey?" snarled Monte Roke, his voice as cruel as the hiss of a viper. "Waal, Mr. Tin-badge, this time ter-morrer yer carcass is goin' tuh be buzzard bait, savvy?"

The two outlaws by the fire rushed forward, swearing with delight. One of them picked up the handcuffs which the sheriff had dropped. A moment later, Ballard's hands were locked securely by the cold steel manacles. His dizziness passed, and he realized, for the first time, the peril of his situation.

"Dang me! I thought we was done fer!" exclaimed one of the bandits, wiping an ooze of damp sweat off his face with a bandanna. "But when I heard him say, 'Stick 'em up, Roke' I knowed he didn't see you out there in the dark."

White teeth flashed in the camp-fire light as the outlaw chief turned once more to his victim. Reaching out, he frisked the sheriff thoroughly, and produced from a chaps pocket the officer's keys.

"Take these an' unbutton the hobbles on Louie's hands, Ruskin," the outlaw said. "Drag him in. He's knocked colder'n a nit by this salty tin-star."

The two outlaws departed to get their senseless lookout. Monte Roke turned to the helpless sheriff, with a cruel grin.

"Short o' stoves the wind out o' yore bellows, don't it?" he chuckled. "If yuh'd 'a' come five minutes sooner, yuh'd 'a' got away with it, busky, but I had just got up ter go out an' look ter see if Fag Staley was comin' yit. I gits out there just in time tuh hear yuh say '*cuidado*,' an' see yuh gun-whip Louie Gould. Then I had tuh wait fer yuh tuh git around this rock, where I could git the drop on yuh without showin' myself."

Ballard was silent. He was looking about frantically. But no possible chance of escape did he see. Fag Staley, seconds before he had died, had tricked him twice—once with the fake password, again by telling him that only *two* of Roke's men remained out of the gang.

"Why didn't yuh salivate me, then?" demanded the officer, his eyes like twin chunks of blue ice.

Roke chuckled. "I didn't plug yuh fer a danged good reason," he replied. "I wanted to find out where that gold and greenbacks is, that I got out o' the bank ter-day. I got brains enough ter know it ain't on yore hoss. We lost six men on that job; so I ain't a-leavin' without the loot, too."

A sigh of relief heaved Ballard's chest. He had been expecting a knife balde or a bullet from these human vipers. But now he held something over them—the knowledge of where the loot was buried.

The two outlaws came back, carrying the limp form of Louie Gould, now released from his handcuffs. The bandit named Ruskin handed the keys to Roke.

"I thought Ballard was supposed ter be dead!" grunted the outlaw, as the two lowered Louie's body on a pile of blankets back in the shadows. "Here he is in person. Dang it, boss! It looks like Fag Staley's double-crossed us, don't it?"

The outlaw chief shook his head.

"No, he didn't," Roke said. "In the first place, I held too much over Staley; he wouldn't have dared double-cross me. No, I think Fag Staley is the one who's dead, not Terry Ballard. Because the sheriff gave us the fake password to-night. I told Staley to use that in case of a show-down, an' he did."

Ballard felt his veins turn to ice. So, even with death staring him in

the face, Fag Staley had been afraid to go against the orders of Monte Roke!

As he looked into the bandit's cruel, wide-set eyes, Terry Ballard felt the power that the great bandit held over men. A leader had to be hard to ramrod a gang as rough as his had been.

"Ballard, I'm going to kill you." Roke's voice was quiet as he pronounced the death sentence on his helpless victim. "But before you die, I'm going to ask you one thing—do you know what '*cuidado*' means?"

Ballard shook his head, numb with rage.

"'*Cuidado*' is Spanish for 'be-ware!'" Roke explained, in a soft, cold voice. "You warned us, with your own lips, when you rode up on Staley's hoss to-night. Tell me, Ballard—where did you put the gold you got from Staley?"

Ballard's lips bared in a sneer. He was in great pain—his injured hand was dribbling a crimson stream, from flesh wounds where the trigger guard had sliced his fingers. His wrists ached under the heavy manacles, pressed too tightly about them. But he shook his head scornfully.

"It'll take a danged sight more'n a rat-faced crook like you, tuh git that out o' me, Roke."

The bandit grinned, rubbing his face with a salmon-colored sleeve. His eyes roved over to the camp fire, where the outlaw, Ruskin, was throwing on chunks.

"Talk kind o' salty fer a jasper that's handcuffed an' unheeled, don't yuh, Ballard?" asked the outlaw. "Well, I'll say this—I admires bravery in a man when he's a shoe string from Boot Hill.

"I've met men o' yore stripe before, Ballard. Nothin' short o' fire

itself would make 'em talk. An' that, Ballard"—the sheriff trembled at the man's chill tone—"an' that is just whut I'm goin' to use, to make you talk. *Fire!*"

Ballard tensed, his flesh already wincing. He tried to speak, but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth like a wad of dry cotton.

Roke threw off his light-hearted mask. He became suddenly stern, cruel, terrible. Stepping back, he turned to his men.

"Ruskin! Clark!" The outlaw's voice rang like a quirt lash. "Grab tin-star an' show him how we heats our Robber's Roost hyar! It's the fust time we've been honored with such a guest, way out hyar."

Ballard jerked back, head twisting into the darkness as he searched for a place to run. But Ruskin's huge body hurtled through the air and great arms like steel bands encircled his knees. Like a poleaxed steer, the captive's body crashed to the granite floor of the cavern.

Squirming, kicking, twisting, the sheriff fought. His shirt was torn to ribbons. The handcuffs thudded metallicly on the rock. Clark joined the fray, grunted with pain as a spur rowel sliced open his thigh.

A moment later, they jerked the struggling officer erect. Clark's great hands locked behind Ballard's neck, the elbows making a strangle hold on the sheriff's throat. Ruskin's arms clamped themselves, locking Ballard's knees like the grip of a steel-jawed vise.

His throbbing ears dimly caught the sound of footsteps as the two outlaws carried him to the camp fire. Then, one man on either side of the raging flames, they swung the sheriff's body like a living bridge over the fire.

Screams of agony ripped from Ballard's throat as the fire ate

through his shredded clothing to blister the raw skin of his back. Weak and helpless from his beating at the hands of the two giants, his struggles were useless.

"Tell us where the bank loot is, an' we'll stop!" came Monte Roke's voice, from one side.

The big outlaw was standing by, watching the fiendish torture with no more mercy than he would have shown at seeing a spider thrown into the seething coals.

Fire smote the sheriff's bare arms, sizzled the crimson which had clotted his injured hand. The heat against the fresh wound was unbearable, filling his whole body with agony.

And then, like a shaft of lightning to his tortured brain, an idea came to Terry Ballard's mind—an idea which, if he could carry it out, might turn the tables in spite of the odds.

"I—I'll tell yuh!" he gasped, sweat dropping like hot wax off his contorted face.

"Tell us first, before you get off the fire!" Monte Roke had leaped forward, face lighted by a devilish grin. "Hold him, men, till he tells!"

The flames were cooking the raw wound on Ballard's hands. Fire was wrapping singeing coils about his skin, turning his shirt to ashes. In a few seconds, those deadly flames would be inhaled through his nostrils, and it would be all over.

"Down in—Whetstone Basin—camp-fire—ashes!" screamed the tortured sheriff, body thrashing wildly over the leaping flames. "I'd have—ter—take yuh there—ter show yuh——"

Roke nodded to his men. Clark and Ruskin tossed the tortured body of the sheriff into the cavern, like a sack of grain.

Delirious and fevered, screaming



and twisting with pain, the sheriff's body was rolled back into the cool shadows, to await the morning.

## CHAPTER XI.

### A LOST CHANCE.

**A** SHARP, throbbing sensation played over Terry Ballard's body the next morning, when the first pink rays of dawn streaked the Big Horn horizon.

All night long he had lain on the cold floor of the bandit lair, hidden deep around the shoulder of Poker Table Butte.

At sunup, the outlaws bestirred themselves. During the night, they had taken turns at sentry duty, always alert for the posse they knew to be combing the range land.

But Monte Roke himself climbed into an ingenious basket made of leather straps, and was hoisted to the very top of the butte, by means of a horse dragging a long rope. When he came down, he reported seeing no signs of the Latigo posse.

Ballard knew there was scant hope of being rescued by the residents of Latigo. Without the leadership of the sheriff, they would do little. They had probably found the body of Sim Barba, the trapper, and possibly the corpse of Fag Staley. But there was not a man in Latigo who would have braved the desolate wilderness between Whetstone Basin and the region about Poker Table Butte.

The outlaws had breakfasted over the camp fire which had been the scene of the lawman's torture the night before. Terry Ballard had received nothing, save hard glances from the bandits, and once a kick from Louie Gould—the outlaw sentinel who had been dragged into camp and revived, the night before.

Famished from want of food, the

fire-seared body of the sheriff was placed in the saddle of the paint horse he had ridden to the butte. The others mounted, and the weary journey across the bad lands commenced.

The sun had climbed high in the heavens before Monte Roke, his prisoner, and two men had reached the floor of Whetstone Basin. Very cautiously they had gone, pausing many minutes at the top of every high ridge to scan the country beyond for possible traces of the Latigo posse. Roke was taking no chances on capture.

A grim, silent band it was. Roke was in front, leading the way over the torturous, rock-strewn divides, through cool canyons, pushing through brush-matted flats, rounding rocky buttes.

Ballard next, wrists still handcuffed and aching so painfully because of the steel bands that he could hardly hold the reins of his horse.

Louie Gould had remained at Poker Table Butte, still dazed from the effects of the sheriff's blow. But bringing up the rear were the two husky outlaws, Clark and Ruskin. They were gloating like vultures about to alight on a carcass.

Not for a minute did Roke fool Terry Ballard. He knew that the instant the outlaws had their hands on the stolen loot, he would be slain.

The wild, helpless look of a doomed man lurked in the depths of Terry Ballard's pain-filled eyes, as the men reached the chaparral-splotched table-land which led to the gulch where the loot was buried.

But beneath the haggard face and the drooping, dog-tired shoulders, burned a spark of hope. It was a flimsy scheme, with chances a thousand to one against him, but Ballard was hopeful. Not until his last chip

had been played did he intend to give up hope.

Such was the code of real men throughout the wild West. Several times during his adventurous life, Terry Ballard's grit and dogged determination had pulled him out of holes. But none, he admitted to himself, as hopeless as this one.

The sheriff knew that with each passing yard, death was coming closer. Once Monte Roke got his fingers on that black silk pouch, Ballard knew that a bullet would bring death swift and sure. On the other hand, death by torture would be his reward, if he refused to tell.

With his three men, Roke would flee the country, and the sheriff's bones would join those of Sim Barba and Fag Staley, out here beneath a pitiless sun.

Even as he blinked his sun-scalded eyes, the sheriff saw Roke stop. They were on the rim of the chalky bluff overlooking the spot where Sim Barba had camped so often, while on his wolf-trapping expeditions.

"Hyar we are at Sweetwater Gulch, where yuh said," came the voice of Monte Roke, purring with evil satisfaction. "Whar's the gold hid, sheriff?"

The sheriff's burning vision took in those piles of gray ashes near the willow-fringed water hole. Under one of them, the loot was buried.

"I'll lead yuh to it," grunted the prisoner, the words rasping painfully from his parched throat. "'Tain't far."

Ballard grunted with pain as he swung from his horse. His wrists were swollen and caked with crimson. The steel bands of his handcuffs were completely covered by the swollen flesh. But not once had Monte Roke offered to loosen the manacles and spare him the agony the tight bands were causing.

The sheriff shot a desperate glance about the horizon, as he dragged himself stiffly out of the saddle. The faint possibility that a posse might be near was ever-present in his mind.

Luckily for Ballard, he did not know that not a single posse man was within miles of Sweetwater Gulch. They were following a false clew, trailing Sim Barba's tracks far, far back in the mountains, in the opposite direction, thinking them to be the trail of Monte Roke.

The sheriff's mind was alert, but he sagged to his knees as his hand left the saddle horn, shaking his head as if almost dead from fatigue and starvation. He gasped as Roke planted a hard-driven toe against his side.

"Prod along, yuh danged tin-star!" snarled the outlaw. "Show us where that swag is cached an' make it pronto."

Reeling dizzily, Ballard started for the rim. The bandits followed suit, lowering their boots over the ledge of dirt. Together, they dropped into the draw below.

The four men slid to a stop together, a cloud of dust showering behind them. As they pulled themselves to their feet, Terry Ballard saw a slight chance of escape, for one fleeting instant.

*Wham!* Ballard's steel-clad wrists shot upward, and the handcuffs crashed against the side of Clark's head, clubbing a vicious blow against the outlaw's ear. With a startled grunt, the bandit sagged forward.

The hot steel of a six-gun barrel brushed the sheriff's hands as he dived on the bandit's falling body. An instant later, the checked stock of Clark's six-gun was between his swollen palms. He spun about, eyes groping through the whirling dust to where Ruskin was going for his gun.

*Brrang!* A bullet sliced the air and thudded into the pit of Ruskin's stomach, to be followed by two more which brought spurts of crimson from the falling bandit's chest. Ruskin pitched forward at Ballard's feet, stone dead.

His ears ringing with the crash of shots, both hands gripping the smoking pistol, the sheriff dropped to his knees and twisted around, swinging the gun barrel as he came.

*Crash!* Ten thousand colored lights danced crazily before Ballard's vision, and he dropped to the ground, scalp laid open by a vicious blow coming from Monte Roke's gun barrel.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE BURIED LOOT.

HE felt the gun being jerked from his grasp, but his muscles were powerless to resist. Then Roke's fingers seized his black shirt in a grip like a goshawk's talons, and his body was dragged out into the gulch, away from the swimming pall of dust caused by their slide down the chalky bluff.

It had all happened in ten seconds. In the time of ten heartbeats, death had swooped down and gone. Clark, knocked cold by the sheriff's unexpected punch, lay under the stiffening corpse of Ruskin. And a few feet away, Monte Roke was dragging the quivering form of Terry Ballard.

A stab of pain, as if a red-hot iron was being punched through his breastbone, dragged Ballard to his senses. He opened his eyes, to find himself propped up against the sun-drenched bank of Sweetwater Gulch.

Monte Roke was squatting before him, an evil grin on his features. In his hands he held a heavy knife made of a file, the point thrust against the sheriff's stomach.

"Yuh notice I had sense enough not tuh kill yuh, when yuh got ringy!" grated the outlaw, leering like a panther. "An' the reason I didn't kill yuh, was this—yo're goin' tuh take me right tuh the spot where that gold is cached, see?"

The knife-point was slicing into his body, bit by bit, like a needle being pushed slowly through the skin. Ballard knew now what was coming—the cruel outlaw was planning to stab him, let him die by slow degrees.

"Whar's the gold?" snarled Roke, adding pressure to the knife-blade which made Terry Ballard go faint with pain. "I'll slash yuh tuh ribbons, if yuh don't tell!"

Ballard lifted his manacled hands, the effort taking his last ounce of strength. With one crimson-flecked finger, he pointed toward the spot where Sim Barba's camp fires made a ring of pasty gray ashes, out in the draw.

"I—I buried it—under one o' them camp fires!" screamed the tortured man, collapsing in a trembling heap under Roke's razor-edged knife.

A taunting laugh blew from Roke's lips as he leaped erect, sliding the knife into its sheath. The sun glinted off the barrel of his .45 as he drew it from its holster.

"Under one o' them piles o' ashes, huh?" he taunted, hefting the gun in his hand. "Waal, Ballard—now yore time has come. Thought I'd let yuh free, soon as I knowed where it was, did yuh? Waal, I'm blowin' yore brains out—*now!*"

Ballard felt his heart sink. He opened his eyes, returning Roke's cold, level stare as the outlaw lifted the gun, to point it inches from his forehead. He gritted his teeth, determined to meet death with a firm heart.



*Tick!* The hammer clicked back to half cock, as the bandit stooped forward to press the cold muzzle against his head. The sheriff struggled desperately to bring up his hands, but the blow on his skull had dazed him, and he could not move.

*Snap!* The gun was at full cock now.

Ballard's eyes protruded from their sockets, staring at the ugly blunt noses of the bullets in the cylinder. He saw Roke's trigger finger whiten at the joint, as he squeezed tighter on the trigger.

"Dang it!" Roke stepped back, lowering his gun. "I better wait a minute—till I gits my mitts on that gold!" snarled the outlaw. "'Cause after I croak yuh, there ain't no way o' knowin' whar it is. Mebbe yuh was lyin' to me!"

Sweat poured from Ballard's face as he relaxed. Great beads rolled down his dust-caked neck. His staring eyes followed the big outlaw as Monte Roke strode out to the nearest pile of ashes, spurs clanking dully in the hot atmosphere.

A yellow light sprang in the outlaw's eyes as he saw fresh hoofprints near the pile of ashes. He knew Ballard had been telling the truth, then. He could see where a sombrero had fanned the ashes in place, hiding the marks!

An insane laugh tumbled from Roke's lips as he dropped to his knees, reaching both hands into the feathery ashes, shoving aside the charred sticks as he plunged into the dead remains of Sim Barba's camp fire, fingers tingling to the expected feel of soft silk cloth.

*Crash!* The metallic clank of a springing wolf-trap sliced the air, a split second before a soul-chilling scream of agony burst from the bandit's lips.

He sprang to his feet, both hands

jerking from the ashes. Clinging to Roke's salmon-sleeved forearms, like the jaws of a grizzly bear, was a huge, galvanized wolf-trap, with ugly, notched teeth sinking through flesh to crush bones!

Roke's scream broke off as his jerking body brought the trap free from a geyser of leaping ashes, and a case-hardened chain snapped taut to its stake, driven deep in the ground. Like a dogie at the end of a rope, the form of Monte Roke flopped to the ground.

Strength surged into Terry Ballard's muscles as he sprang to his feet and ran forward. He did not feel the pain as he leaped to the threshing outlaw's side and jerked the man's guns from their holsters.

But Roke could not have gone for his irons. Ballard knew that both arms were broken under that vicious, clinging wolf-trap which would have held a powerful brute helpless in its steel grasp.

Pity gleamed from Ballard's eyes as he fumbled through Roke's pockets for the keys to his handcuffs. Obtaining them, he clamped the key in his teeth. A second later the steel bands which had cut the circulation from his hands, fell to the ground. He was free!

His hands tingled with life as he reached over, and snapped the cuffs about Roke's wrists, under the jaws of the trap. Then, with the barrel of a six-gun, he pried the trap open and shoved the screaming outlaw to one side with his knee.

For several minutes, Terry Ballard stood panting with exhaustion. Then he dragged the outlaw chieftain to a shady spot, and climbed the short bank to obtain a canteen of water from one of the horses.

"Yuh dirty, lyin' snake!" screamed the bandit, as the sheriff bathed his mangled wrists with water, after

giving Roke a drink of the cool, reviving fluid. "Yuh lyin' polecat!"

Ballard shook his head. Getting to his feet, he crossed the draw, to stop before another pile of ashes, five feet from the one where Monte Roke had met his capture.

He scraped in the charred remains of the fire, to produce an ash-covered silken bag, which rustled with the crisp greenbacks and money rolls it contained.

"I guess you never knew before," the sheriff said, returning to the outlaw's side, "that one o' the best places a man can set his traps is under ashes. A coyote er a wolf'll dig in a dead camp fire any time. That's why Sim Barba, yesterday mornin', set one o' his traps under them ashes you prodded. I happened to be here, an' saw him set the trap—a

few minutes before Fag Staley dry-gulched Barba, thinkin' he was me."

Monte Roke's taut body collapsed. The hopeless despair which floods a long rider's soul when he realizes the noose is ahead, gleamed dully from the famous outlaw's red-shot eyes.

"An' I didn't lie to yuh," the sheriff said, glancing toward the spot where the horses awaited their trek back to Latigo. "I pointed toward the right camp fire, but I knew you'd dig in the first one yuh came to, an' that was where Sim Barba planted his wolf trap yesterday mornin'. It was that little trick o' his that gave me the idea where to bury the loot. Poor old Barba! He didn't realize at the time what kind of a wolf his last trap was goin' to catch!"



#### NOTED INDIAN FIGHTER HAS PASSED ON

SEVENTY-FIVE years ago, Benjamin Franklin Gholson was fighting Indians in the Western borderland. He died recently at his home in Gholson's Cove, near Evant, Texas, at the age of eighty-nine years.

Captain Gholson served as a Texas Ranger for several years, and was with Sul Ross in the memorable Pease River fight, on December 18, 1860, against the Quahada Comanches, who had made murderous raids in Jack and Palo Pinto counties. Captain Sul Ross had taken twenty Rangers to pick up their trail.

In this battle the famous chief, Peta Nocona, was killed, and his white wife, Cynthia Ann Parker, was returned to the relatives from whom she had been stolen twenty-five years before, when she was four years old.

Her son, Quannah, rose to be the head chief of the Quahadas, and waged a hopeless war against the whites for a long time. Finally he surrendered his tribe to General MacKenzie, and became a stanch friend of the whites who had been his enemies.

Captain Gholson was born in Robinson Colony, in the Republic of Texas. He engaged in the cattle business on a ranch in Gholson's Cove, where he lived since 1855, when he was not away on fighting business.

He served in the Confederate Army in the Civil War and fought in the famous battle of Galveston Island. He died, after a long life of activity, on April 3rd, of this year, and friends all over Texas and the Southwest mourn the passing of this brave old-timer of the West.

# The End of a Man Hunt

Two notorious outlaws, the Espinosa brothers, came from Mexico and rode into the Colorado Territory in the early '60s, where they began a series of killings that angered the whole nation.

Such indignation was aroused by their murders that the Federal government took a hand and offered a reward of fifteen hundred dollars for the capture of the Mexicans dead or alive.

They shot their victims from ambush and passed on their way unseen and unheard, like angels of death, and they moved so fast on their tough Mexican ponies that the tales of their deeds came long after them.

They committed their first murder on the headquarters of Hardscrabble Creek, in the Wet Mountains, where they shot an elderly man named William Bruce, from the shelter of some brush, as he stood at the door of his sawmill. It was a cold, deliberate killing.

Their next victim was Henry Harkness, whom they shot and hacked with an ax in what is now known as Dead Man's Canyon, some miles south of Colorado Springs.

From there, they went on their way, killing and robbing, still unseen, until they fired upon a teamster, whose life was saved by a copy of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which he carried in his pocket. He saw the men and was able to describe them quite thoroughly.

After that, they went to California Gulch, where they killed two miners. This enraged the whole camp, and a posse set out to hunt down the murderers.

After much scouting and trailing they cornered the two men in a gulch near what is now known as Espinosa Peak. They killed the older brother, but the other one escaped.

Several months later, the younger bandit returned to Colorado with the son of his dead brother, a lad in his teens, and the man hunt was on again.

Tom Tobin, a famous scout, a veteran of the fur-trading days and an all-round frontiersman of note, set out alone to capture the pair of bandits.

After a long hunt, Tobin one day saw smoke rising from a clump of trees. He was sure that a meal was being prepared, and he crept up cautiously to look the place over and see who was there.

At the fire, toasting deer meat, he saw the men he was hunting. He fired at the older one and killed him. The youth made an effort to escape, and when called upon to surrender, he tried to pull his gun and was shot down.

A few days later, Tom Tobin appeared at Fort Garland and claimed the reward. When asked to give proof of Espinosa's death, he took a sack from under his arm and rolled out upon the table before the astonished officers the head of the elder bandit. Needless to say, he collected the money.

What motive prompted the Espinosa brothers to murder ruthlessly is a matter of doubt. By some it is believed to have been revenge for losses incurred during the Mexican War, as the men they killed were mostly in poor circumstance, and the loot they obtained was of little value.





# Shorty Masters's Treasure Hunt

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "Shorty's Iron-jawed Mule," etc.

SOMEWHERE out beyond the circle of firelight that shone waveringly on the water-hole live oaks, a dry stick snapped. "Shorty" Masters, M. D.—Mule Driver—whirled from where he squatted by the blaze, turning bacon in a skillet.

Willie Wetherbee, the pint-size freighter's partner, who was hunted all over west Texas as the "Sonora Kid," a Del Rio bank robber,

dropped the bridle he was mending and sprang from the bedding roll. His lean, dark face was grim as he let his right hand drop to the butt of his .45.

Then all seemed to be silent again in the darkness. Shorty cautiously set the skillet down and edged over to his partner's side. He plucked Willie's sleeve and jerked his head toward the three freight wagons that stood near by.

"Come on out of the light!" he whispered. "Mebbe it's Vargas or El Bandido Blanco!"

Wetherbee nodded and backed slowly toward the wagons. If there was gun play, it would be poor strategy to be caught in the blinding light of the fire, unable to see the attackers in the darkness beyond.

Both Shorty and the tall cowboy knew that a battle was certain to come. They were camped in the wilds of the Big Bend, hoping to capture the blond-haired border outlaw known as "El Bandido Blanco"—(the White Bandit).

In some mysterious manner which the silent Willie Wetherbee had not revealed, not even to his sawed-off, bow-legged partner, El Bandido Blanco was connected with that Del Rio bank holdup that had sent Wetherbee fleeing from the law.

Twice in the past few weeks, the partners had swapped bullets with the blond outlaw and his chief, the notorious Pedro Vargas. Twice they had won, but each time Willie had refused to shoot his man, explaining he had to get him "on the hoof."

And it was certain that Vargas and his gang would return to the Big Bend, to continue stealing horses. He needed them for a revolution he planned in the Mexican State of Coahuila.

The pair crouched tensely behind the lead wagon, out of the revealing firelight. Their guns were drawn and ready. For a long minute, there was no sound except from the little freighter's six mules—the "Sextet from Lucia," as he had named them, because he had an ear for classical music and because they were all offsprings of a mare called Lucy.

But the hobbled mules were grazing on the opposite side of the camp from where the noise had come, and

Wetherbee's sorrel cow pony, Tumbleweed, was there, too. The dry stick had been snapped by an intruder.

Then came the sudden sound of a boot heel slipping on a round stone. There was a gasp as if of pain, and a body crashed to the ground. The clank of an empty canteen came to Shorty Masters above the pounding of his heart between his ribs.

It was only one man—perhaps a spy for Vargas. Willie Wetherbee nudged the little mule driver and grinned.

"Mebbe it's a trick, or mebbe somebody's hurt!" whispered the tall cowboy. "Stay here and keep yore gun ready. I'll find out!"

Willie stepped over the wagon tongue and warily circled the firelight. Shorty watched him vanish, then heard an exclamation.

"Come on, Shorty! It's an old man, and he's tuckered out!"

The freighter tuckered to his partner's side, holstering his .45. Together they lifted the prostrate figure and bore him to Willie's bedding roll. The firelight showed them the brown, emaciated face of an old Mexican. His left arm was limp and his sleeve was stiff with dried crimson.

"*Agual!*" his cracked lips framed. "Water!"

Shorty sprang to the keg on the side of his first wagon and filled a tin cup. He poured a few drops through the old man's lips, and the Mexican clutched greedily at the cup with his good hand.

"Take it easy!" warned the freighter. "Not too much to start with!"

A faint smile crossed the old man's face. His eyelids fluttered open. "*Gracias, señores!*" he said huskily. "Thank you, my friends."

"Are yuh hungry?" demanded

Willie Wetherbee sympathetically. "Frijoles quiero?"

The Mexican lifted himself painfully to a sitting posture. "I speak the English well," he said. "Yes. It has been two days. But it is nothing, señores. I must not stay in your camp. To do so would bring danger upon you. Pedro Vargas—*maldiciones* upon him—is trailing me!"

The partners exchanged significant glances. Willie Wetherbee grinned.

"That's all right, señor!" he said. "Pedro Vargas has been kind o' trailin' us, and we been trailin' him. In fact, we're right anxious to meet the hombre again. Did he do this?"

He pointed to the Mexican's stiffened sleeve, and the old man nodded.

"This morning, as I escaped," he explained, and there was a fire in his old eyes. "Vargas had tortured me to try and force me to lead him to Padres' Cave. For, my friends, I shall tell you. There is treasure in Padres' Cave!"

"Mebbe," said Shorty Masters. "I've heard lots of yarns about the old Spanish gold and silver buried in Texas, but I ain't never seen any. Fix up his arm, Willie, while I get him some beans and coffee."

"But I swear it!" exclaimed the old man. "I have a *derrotero*—the map! Vargas did not find it. You are kind, and I will need help. I will show you the map, and we shall share the treasure!"

Willie Wetherbee rolled up the stained sleeve. "All right. Let's don't worry about it now. *Mañana, señor*. To-night you must rest. Here, take another drink."

There was a bullet wound through the fleshy part of the old man's forearm. Willie washed it clean with water, then swabbed it with kerosene from the can Shorty carried

for his bull's-eye lantern. He bandaged the arm with strips from a clean flour sack.

"Gracias again!" said the old Mexican, as the three sat down to supper. "I have come far to find friends. Felipe Martinez does not forget. Look!"

He rose to his feet and stepped toward the edge of the firelight, listening intently. There was still no sound of pursuit. Felipe came back to the bedding roll and produced a pocketknife. With it, he slit the lining inside the waistband of his trousers and drew out a folded parchment, yellow and old.

## II.

Shorty gasped and leaned forward. Of course, it was only a myth such as men of the Southwest have followed for two hundred years—since the Spanish *carretas* creaked over trails that were new. But the lure of buried treasure is one that few men can withstand. Willie Wetherbee moved closer to peer at the ancient chart.

"Here!" said Felipe Martinez. "Here, amigos, is a trail that once led out of Mexico, to turn toward the chain of missions the good padres had established. And here, not three miles from where we sit, is Padres' Cave. It is related that Comanches attacked a party from Mexico, and refuge was taken in the cave."

Once more the old man looked around him. In his eyes was the reflection of the firelight and the blaze of golden hopes near realization. He pointed a skinny forefinger to neat Spanish writing in the legend of the map.

"I will read it for you, *amigos mio*, then you may judge whether I am wrong. This was recorded by one



Padre Juan in—oh, it has been two hundred years. Listen!”

The two partners leaned toward him, forgetting that the camp fire needed wood, not hearing the lonely call of a coyote on the rim rocks. Felipe Martinez finished translating:

“In the cave of the Padres countless workers for many years have been storing their yellow treasure. It is there for him who can take it away.”

The old Mexican lifted his head and folded the chart. Shorty woke as from a dream. He half expected to see their polite old visitor gone. But no, Felipe was still sitting there, caught fast in the spell of gold he himself had woven. Finally he sighed and turned to Shorty:

“It is there, of a surety! But one thing I wonder at. There is no sign of the half moon drawn above this Padres' Cave. As everybody knows, the half moon is a sign of treasure. However, the map is plain enough.”

“It shore is!” agreed Shorty. “Where did yuh run acrost it?”

A shadow crept over the brow of Felipe Martinez. “Three years ago, from a friend who was stabbed,” he said. “He, too, received it from a dying man. Superstitious men have said the gold must be accursed. But I—well, amigos, it has brought me luck in finding you!”

The little freighter and his tall partner sat for a moment, staring into the coals of the camp fire. Then Shorty drew out his nickel-plated watch.

“Well, if the gold has been there two hundred years, I reckon it'll wait till mornin'!” he said with a smile. “We better hit the hay. We can get an early start to-morrer.”

“Mebbe we'll need one,” Willie Wetherbee answered. “If Vargas really thinks the old man has got

the treasure map, he'll be hot on the trail, and he'll be tyin' into us again. That suits me fine. Mebbe I'll get a chance to toss a loop on El Bandido Blanco!”

“El Bandido Blanco!” exclaimed the old Mexican. “Ah! There is a very dog, señor! It was he who tried torture to make me tell of the chart!”

“Dog is too good a name for him!” Willie growled. “I've been after that hombre for a long time, Felipe. Some day I'll put the twine on him. Now yuh can take part of my beddin' roll, an' we'll turn in.”

Quiet fell over the camp at the water hole. Chopin, Mozart, and the other four mules of the Sextet, which Shorty had named in honor of great music masters, contentedly cropped mesquite grass near by, and Wetherbee's sorrel stayed with them.

An owl hooted in the live oaks. The moon rode down the western sky and paled under the rosy flush of dawn. Shorty Masters awoke from a dream of loading pirate treasure into his freight wagons.

Willie stirred as the little freighter pulled on his boots, but the old Mexican, near exhaustion from his ordeal of the past two days, slept on.

Shorty raked live coals out of the ashes and added fresh wood. Then he filled the *morrals* with oats, fed the mules and Tumbleweed, and came back to the wagons to find his partner getting breakfast and the fragrant smell of coffee in the camp.

“Old Felipe's plumb tuckered out!” said Willie Wetherbee, with a jerk of his head toward the sleeping man. “Reckon there's no use roustin' him out yet. As yuh say, the gold has been there a couple of hundred years. That is, if it's there at all.”

Shorty shook his head. “I don't

know, Willie. Mebbe there's somethin' to it. All my life I've heard of the Lost Nigger Mine somewhere in the Big Bend. Nobody ain't never found it. Mebbe nobody ever will."

The partners ate breakfast and sat around camp for a while. The sun climbed over the rim rocks. Finally, Shorty rose and stretched. The waiting was getting on his nerves.

"Might as well wake him now, hadn't we?" he asked. "He figured on an early start, an' mebbe Vargas and his outfit will be comin' along."

Willie nodded. The bow-legged little freighter strode over to Felipe's bed and shook the old man's shoulder. There was no response. Shorty pulled down the tarp the Mexican had drawn over his head to keep out the heavy dew.

"Willie!" gasped the little teamster. "Willie! He's—he's dead!"

The tall cowboy leaped to his partner's side. They stared at Felipe Martinez. Yes, he was still sleeping. He would never awaken in this world.

"Pore old hombre!" muttered Wetherbee. "The strain was jest too much for him. Vargas killed him jest as shore as if that bullet had gone through his heart instead of his arm."

For a few minutes, the two partners stood staring at the dead man. Felipe had been willing to share with them a treasure that he was certain existed, he had shown them the map.

"The map!" Shorty exclaimed. "He got it from a dyin' man, who got it from a dyin' man. Are yuh superstitious, Willie?"

The tall cowboy's lean jaw set hard. "Not me!" he declared. "I don't take much truck in lost-treasure stories. But Vargas is after the map; so it's up to us to take it. An'

while we're waitin' here for a chance to capture El Bandido Blanco, we might as well see if we can find that cave."

"I'm with yuh!" Shorty answered. "First thing to do is bury Felipe, I reckon. I'll get the shovel out of the waggin an' dig a grave under that big oak tree."

### III.

It was nearly noon when Shorty Masters reined in Chopin, the black mule he was riding, swung to the ground, and spread the map out on a flat rock. Willie Wetherbee looked anxiously at the mesquite and cat's-claw-dotted flat below the hill, then climbed down from Tumbleweed.

"Here's the water hole," said the little freighter. "And then yuh turn up this way into the canyon and foller the rim rock around to the next canyon. That's right over there, Willie. And we couldn't be off the trail—rim rocks don't change."

"Yep, the openin' o' Padres' Cave ought to be over in that header," Wetherbee agreed. "Must 'a' been a mine around here, if what old Felipe translated offn the map was true. It said somethin' about 'countless workers storin' their treasure—yeller treasure.' Gold mine, I reckon. Come on! I'm gettin' all het up about this thing, even if I don't believe in it."

He forked the sorrel again, and the bow-legged teamster clambered astride Chopin. Once more they took up the trail, following the winding rim rock. No, as Shorty had said, the rim rock had not changed since the days of the *conquistadores* and the *padres*. And a thousand years hence, it would be the same.

"There's the header!" exclaimed

Shorty. "And as shore as I'm settin' here, I can see the openin' of the cave, right by the side of that clump of cat's-claw! Come on!"

He started to pile off the mule, but Willie Wetherbee, made cautious from long months of dodging the law, laid his hand on his partner's arm.

"Ride on up on the hill," he urged. "Get the hoss an' mule out of sight. If Vargas comes ridin' on Felipe's trail, which he will, there ain't no use tippin' him off on the location of the cave by lettin' him see the cayuses standin' at the front of it."

Shorty nodded. He kicked his boot heels against Chopin's ribs impatiently as they began the climb over the rocky surface.

A hundred yards along the top of the hill, they halted and dropped the reins over the heads of their oddly mated mounts. Shorty lifted a canteen of water, a rope, and his bull's-eye lantern from his saddle. He had explored caves before and knew what was needed.

"Lucky we brought the mules and the freight waggins on this here bandit-huntin' expedition, now, ain't it?" he demanded. "If we find a lot of gold, I reckon we can drive the waggins up into the canyon below and pack it down to 'em mule back."

Willie grinned, his white teeth flashing. Shorty was inseparable from the Sextet from Lucia.

"Yeah, that's right," the tall cowboy agreed. "Only don't count yore gold till yuh got yore hands on it, pard. I'd shore hate to be disappointed."

They turned and walked to the head of the narrow, winding canyon. Here the waters drained from the top of the hill when it rained. For ages it had been cutting its way through the soft limestone forma-

tion, hewing out the underground chamber.

There was no telling how deep the cave was, or how far back into the hill it extended. The opening was an unimpressive gash in the rocky cliff, half hidden by cat's-claw and clumps of coarse, strawlike *sacaguista*.

Willie Wetherbee halted suddenly and raised his hand. Shorty stopped beside him, holding his breath. A queer, low roaring sound seemed to come from the entrance to Padres' Cave.

"What's that noise?" demanded Wetherbee. "Sounds like runnin' water—like a waterfall. And yuh know there couldn't be any stream nearer than the Rio Grande!"

Shorty strained his ears. The sound was unmistakable. It never diminished, never grew in volume. It sang against his eardrums, insistent, ceaseless. There was something uncanny about it that sent thrills chasing along the little freighter's spine and raised goose pimples on his arms. Padres' Cave! Gold that Felipe Martinez feared was accursed!

Then, above the droning noise, sharp and clear, came the whine of a bullet that glanced from a nearby boulder, and in its wake the crack of a rifle rolled across the canyon.

Both men ducked instinctively and then whirled to look toward the south. Crossing the point of the hill that formed one side of the canyon, less than a half mile distant, was a party of horsemen.

"Pedro Vargas!" exclaimed the freighter. "And look at the reinforcements he's got this time!"

*Zzzzit! Bang!* Another shot, chipping dust from the rim rock at their feet.

With one bound, the partners took



cover behind the boulder the first bullet had struck. Then they peered cautiously from its shelter.

Yes, Vargas had reinforcements—fifteen or sixteen men, all mounted. After the gold of Padres' Cave—enough, no doubt, to finance a dozen revolutions in Coahuila.

"Quick!" Wetherbee exclaimed. "They're too many fer us this time, Shorty. We got to get to the cayuses!"

"Wait!" the little freighter replied. "If we run up there, they'll shore pick us off before we can get off the hill—they got .30-30s, and yuh cain't run a hoss or a mule down-hill where it's so rocky. Besides, look at that! Vargas and El Bandido Blanco are looking through field glasses."

They could see the sun glinting on the lenses as the two men in the lead surveyed the canyon. From their vantage point, the opening of Padres' Cave would be plain.

"Yeah, I reckon they trailed Felipe to our camp, and now they know we got the map," agreed Willie. "They saw the grave an'—"

*Zzzzit! Bang!* The shot glanced off the boulder.

Vargas's men were getting the range. Then a yell floated across the canyon and the bandits spurred their horses down the slope toward its twisting floor. They were heading for Padres' Cave.

Wetherbee's jaw clamped hard. "Come on!" he urged. "We got water, and our .45s. The old Spaniards stood off the Injuns in that cave, and if there *is* any gold there, I'd rather stop a bullet than let Pedro Vargas and that blond-headed skunk have it! Let's go!"

He sprang from behind the boulder, with Shorty at his heels. Bullets crashed into a cactus near by as they half slid, half fell off the

rim rock and landed on the rocky canyon bed.

Up from the winding reaches of the narrow gulch came the yells of men and the clatter of hoofs, though the bend just below the head of the canyon shut the attackers from their sight. The two partners halted for an instant and then drew a long breath.

Above the approaching noise, they could hear the steady roar from the interior of the cave—an ominous, mysterious sound that might be anything.

It was too late to clamber back up the rim rock. Death was clattering up the canyon. The two men rounded the huge clump of cat's-claw and entered Padres' Cave.

#### IV.

Now the droning sound was loud enough to fill the rocky tunnel in which they found themselves. It beat against the walls like surf that never stopped. Thirty feet along a fairly level, damp floor, and the light that filtered through the entrance dimmed and was gone.

The partners halted again, standing close to each other for fear they might become separated. Shorty strained his eyes toward the ceiling, but could see nothing. A current of fresh, cool air seemed to be blowing.

He struck a match, and the flame wavered toward the entrance. Willie Wetherbee, his face pale and weird in its fitful glow, gave a sudden exclamation.

"Wind blowin'!" he said. "There's another openin' somewhere, Shorty! Light the lantern, and let's make tracks. If we don't run acrost the gold, we can give Vargas the slip, anyway. Then if we can get out, it wouldn't be hard to pick off some

of them hombres, when they come out of the cave!"

His voice echoed hollowly along the rocky chamber. Shorty slung the lantern from his shoulder and raised its globe. He struck another match, and the oil light shed a welcome glow around them. As yet, there was no sound at the entrance. If the bandits had arrived, they were cautious about entering, when they might be met by a spray of lead from the two Americans' six-guns.

"Come on around the turn!" Willie urged. "Yuh don't want 'em spottin' the lantern. And keep yore eyes peeled for gold."

They moved ahead cautiously. Now the chamber widened, opening until the rays of the lantern would not reach its farther wall. The ground underfoot was firm, but damp with last winter's rains. On the grayish-white wall at their right, the light showed nothing but a blank surface, etched and patterned by water ages ago.

"I don't see no minerals of any kind," Shorty said. "But I don't reckon they'd put gold right in the front of a cave. Mebbe we'll run acrost it farther back! Let's go an' find out!"

Their boots rang ghostly echoes from the lofty ceiling. Now and then a drop of water fell upon the brims of their Stetsons as they pressed forward, deeper into the cave.

The roar was louder than ever. Shorty's heart was pounding hollowly between his ribs, almost seeming to echo from the walls. Then, when they had gone a hundred yards, they heard muffled shouts from the entrance. Vargas had arrived!

"Wait a minute!" the little freighter whispered. "We got to see

which way the wind is comin' from!"

He moistened his forefinger and held it up. It was cool on the side away from the canyon opening. They were still headed toward the other mysterious cavern doorway.

They started on, with the bobbing circle of lantern light spreading beyond them. From behind came the faint crackle of flames. Both partners could guess what the bandits had done—they were using dried sotol leaves, hastily tied together, for torches.

"Look!" Willie gasped. "Is that the end?"

The lantern showed a wall in front of them, towering high. Frantically they pressed along it, and then, as the light showed the blackness of another narrow tunnel, the current of air struck harder than before. Shorty lifted the lantern and entered the passageway.

It was straight and short, opening into a chamber where the echoes of their boots told of vastness and a lofty roof. Then the little freighter grabbed his partner's arm and pointed up.

A thin, indirect ray of sunshine was splashed along the ceiling fully sixty feet above them. Somewhere along the top of the hill there was a hole in the piles of massive rocks, an opening that let daylight penetrate when the sun was high.

Now both men exclaimed together as the little freighter turned his lantern toward the wall. Both saw the explanation of the insistent drone they had heard even outside the cave.

"Bees!" gasped Willie Wetherbee. "Honey bees!"

There were millions of them, swarming through the mysterious crevice above. Myriad wings, humming in the stillness of the cave,

countless busy insects hovering against the roof and a part of the higher walls.

For half a minute, the two men forgot their pursuers and forgot the gold they and Pedro Vargas were seeking. They stood with open mouths, listening to the roar that was no longer a mystery, watching the darting of tiny bodies that seemed to be weaving an endless, intricate pattern against the vaulted roof.

"Gosh!" Shorty said breathlessly. "Never saw so much honeycomb in my life! Look at it in all them cracks and over all the rough spots. Must be tons and tons of it."

"'Yeller treasure!'" quoted Willie Wetherbee in an awed tone. "'Countless workers!' Get th' idea? The old padre didn't come right out and say there was gold in this here cave. He jest said it was here for whoever wanted to take it away. The old Spaniards was poetic kind of hombres. I reckon he meant honey all the time, and everybody thought he was talkin' about gold."

"That's it!" Shorty marveled. "There goes our treasure hunt!"

The rush of feet and crackle of flame came from beyond the narrow passage that led to the big chamber. Shorty hastily lifted the lantern, burned his hand grabbing at the lever that raised the hot globe, and blew out the light.

"*Andale!*" he whispered. "Let's move on! They'll be here in no time!"

The ray of sunshine from above lighted their way with a ghostly dimness as the partners half ran across the damp cavern floor. The little freighter strained his eyes for a likely place among the boulders that had fallen from the roof. It might be necessary to make a last stand behind the rocks.

Willie grunted as he ran almost against the face of the wall before he saw it. Once more it appeared as if they had reached the end of the cavern. Shorty halted beside him, breathing hard.

## V.

Light glimmered into the big room as the two fugitives looked back. The first of the bandits were making their way cautiously through the narrow passage. Shorty could hear the deep voice of Pedro Vargas, the thick-chested leader, urging his men on.

"The big spik!" muttered the little freighter. "He sends somebody else ahead, 'cause he ain't hankerin' to run into any lead. I reckon now's the time, Willie!"

He shifted the lantern to his left hand and jerked his .45 from its holster. Wetherbee reached behind him and laid a hand on the mule driver's arm.

"Wait a minute!" he urged. "There ain't any cover here, and when yuh shoot, they can locate yuh right away by the gun flash. Next thing that would happen, they'd be a dozen bullets comin' yore way. Let's sneak along the wall. There must be another openin'. I don't see how a little hole in the roof could cause such a draft to come blowin' through!"

"Go ahead!"

There was no light at all against the blank rock that towered above them. They felt each step cautiously with the toes of their boots, moving with hands outstretched, stumbling along blindly, while they watched the farther end.

Suddenly a blaze emerged from the tunnel they had come through, a few minutes before. It was a sotol torch, burning fast in the draft,



showing the swarthy features and the big sombrero of the Mexican who held it aloft. Other men crowded after him. They were using only one torch at a time to save them.

There were startled exclamations in Spanish. The burly form of Pedro Vargas appeared. Shorty felt his partner's muscles grow tense as the pair halted against the damp limestone wall. The last of the bandits seemed to have appeared, and El Bandido Blanco was not among them.

The little freighter guessed that the blond American, with one or two other men, was standing guard outside the cavern. It was just as well. Willie Wetherbee wanted to get his loop on the outlaw or see him reaching high over the muzzle of his .45. There was slim chance of capturing his man against such numbers. There was slim chance of getting out alive.

"Come on!" whispered Willie. "They'll be spreadin' out to look for us!"

Once more they resumed their cautious journey. The bandits were marveling at the horde of bees, just as Shorty and Willie had done a few minutes before. They were examining the rocky walls and the boulder-strewn floor, still looking for treasure.

Shorty chuckled. Maybe they had never seen or heard the text written on the old parchment he carried in his jumper pocket.

Willie Wetherbee halted suddenly with a half-suppressed exclamation. The wall had ended. He reached out with his hand into a dark void and found nothing. It was another tunnel, but where it led he could not tell.

Shorty crowded in beside him and cautiously extended his right foot.

It struck the edge of a rock that dropped away, perhaps into a chasm, perhaps only into a ditch or a portion of the floor that was only a couple of feet lower than that on which they stood.

He dared not light a match. For a hesitant minute the partners stood pondering the situation. Then Willie stepped to one side, found footing and started cautiously on.

"I can feel the wind!" he whispered over his shoulder. "This tunnel probably leads out, but yuh may have to be a bird to get over the chasm!"

*Crash!* His right foot, feeling the way, toppled over a rock, the base of which had been worn and weakened by water that flowed through the cave in the wintertime. It fell heavily on the tall cowboy's foot, and he yelled with pain.

In the next instant, a chorus of triumphant shouts and a half dozen scattered gun shots came from the farther side of the big chamber! Vargas had now surely located his prey.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* Echo piled on echo from the rocky walls and the vaulted roof of Padres' Cave.

Vicious orange jets of flame licked out of the darkness like the tongues of serpents. Lead hammered into the limestone near the two men. Shorty flung himself flat and jerked Willie down beside him.

They lay still, while bullets sang above and showered them with crumbling rock from the wall. Then for a half minute, the guns were still.

The little freighter warily raised his head. He could see the torch blazing from behind a boulder. The rest of the bandits had taken cover, too, and were waiting to see the results of their fire.

Now the drone of the bees had

swelled into an angry roar, more than ever like a waterfall. An idea flashed into Shorty's danger-sharpened brain.

He swung his legs around and let them down into the hole that might be a pit hundreds of feet deep and yards across. He found nothing. Then he fumbled in his pocket for a match, held it down below the rim of the chasm so its light would not show, and scratched it sharply on his boot.

The flame flared warm against his palm. For an instant, he held it, then turned it loose. The match fell for ten feet or more before its blaze expired, then the glowing point of red dropped down and down.

"Say!" whispered Willie. "That's a jumpin'-off place, all right, but yuh don't have to be a bird to sail over it! I saw the other side—it ain't more'n six feet acrost!"

Shorty shuddered as he watched the red point of fire fade into the void. Then he heard Vargas calling orders to his men. The bandits began a cautious advance, from boulder to boulder, the torch lighting their way.

## VI.

"Listen to the bees, Willie!" the sawed-off mule driver whispered. "They're gettin' riled up, and I got an idee. Draw yore gun, do jest like I do, then jump and be shore yuh make it acrost into the tunnel on the other side of this pit!"

"I savvy!" the cowboy answered. "I don't know what yore plan is, but I'm with yuh!"

Shorty Masters lifted his .45 in reply. Straight toward the rift of sunlight in the center of the high roof he pointed it, then pulled the trigger.

The roar filled the cave and caromed from roof to walls. Willie

Wetherbee's gun followed suit. The bullets glanced along the ceiling and thudded into honeycombs.

"Duck!" warned Shorty. "And move on!"

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* A veritable volley rang out from the advancing men, who were aiming at the gun flashes. Lead whammed into the wall above the spot the partners had hastily quitted. Then there was another tense wait on the part of the bandits.

But the outraged bees darted into action. By the thousands they zipped down from the roof, heading for the nearest living, moving thing that had invaded Padres' Cave—Pedro Vargas and his bandits! The buzzing sound swelled angrily to a pitch higher than it had reached after the bandits' first shots.

Loud yells of pain rang out in the cave. The torch went down and was trampled underfoot. Men collided with each other as they made for the tunnel. Shorty could see dim forms rolling on the floor, clawing and fighting.

Pedro Vargas's bass voice rolled out above the din to give an order, then changed suddenly to a bellow of pain as a hundred bees swarmed under the brim of his gaudy sombrero.

A stampede started for the tunnel entrance. Shorty and his partner, shouting with laughter that was lost in the din, sprang to their feet. The little freighter whipped up his revolver and added to the mêlée by four shots in the general direction of the struggling mass.

"Whoopee!" yelled Willie. "Here's some more stings for yuh!"

He cracked down and emptied his gun. The last of the border outlaws were swearing and screaming as they crowded through the tunnel.

"Hey!" shouted Shorty. "They're

comin' our way, too! It's time to haul our freight! Vamose!"

He took a step backward, ran, and gave a jump. For a breath-taking instant he was above the deep chasm, then his boots struck solid ground and Willie was landing beside him. Hastily they made their way along the newly discovered passageway, with a fresh current of air striking them in their faces.

The tunnel turned to the right, and Shorty, running blindly to escape the angry bees, halted abruptly.

"Better light the lantern!" he said. "I reckon them 'countless workers' ain't goin' to bother us now!"

"Wait a minute!" answered Willie. "Yuh don't need the lantern. I can see daylight around the turn, and yuh can smell the outside air!"

Sure enough daylight and sunshine lay ahead of them. Fifty yards farther, and they emerged, stooping through a hole that opened under the rim rock, half hidden by a boulder that stood in front and by the thorny growth of a large bush.

Shorty looked around in the dazling light, like a being from another world.

"Dawg-gone if I can tell jest where we are!" he said. "I reckon this is the same hill, though. We'd better climb up on top to see if Chopin's all right!"

"And Tumbleweed," chuckled Willie Wetherbee. "Say, there's one of our friends, the bees, gettin' honey out of that prickly-pear blossom. The way they scattered them hombres was a sight. Let's hurry and see what become of 'em!"

They scrambled breathlessly up the rim rock and climbed the rounded top of the hill. Four hundred yards away, Chopin and the sorrel cow pony looked up wonderingly at their owners appearing

from a different canyon from where they descended. Shorty and his partner ran toward them, and hastily mounted.

Willie reloaded his gun as they rode toward the canyon where Padres' Cave opened. Then the little freighter slapped his saddle and roared with laughter as he pointed toward the mesquite flat below.

There were the outlaws, straggling out through the low brush, with two saddles empty. The partners' guns had taken their toll in the cave. And every one of the men except the tall, black-hatted El Bandido Blanco, who rode in the lead, was rubbing at his face.

They were out of the range of a .45, and making tracks for the Rio Grande. Willie Wetherbee regarded them grimly for a moment, then joined his partner in a hearty burst of mirth.

"Yuh know why that blond-headed coyote is leadin'?" he demanded, gasping for breath. "It's because the eyes of most o' the rest of 'em are about swollen shut, that's why! If they wasn't in such a hurry, I might overtake that skunk and lay my rope on him. I'll get him yet, one o' these days!"

"Shore! An' I'll help yuh hog tie him!" Shorty rejoined. "And some day we'll come back down here and start a bee ranch. I reckon I could punch bees. But the way they act when they get riled up—well, I'd rather stick to molasses and let all that honey stay in Padres' Cave!"

Shorty an' Willie shore owe them bees a big vote o' thanks fer what they done fer 'em thet time. Thet would 'a' been one plenty tough jam, if Shorty hadn't 'a' thought o' the "countless workers" thet the ol' padre wrote about. Watch fer the next story about Shorty an' Willie. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



# Cattlemen's Feud

NEXT to the Taylor-Sutton feud, which caused some of the deadliest clashes in Texas, the Horrell-Higgins feud in Lampasas County, made the loudest noise throughout the whole of Texas.

The Horrells were cattlemen, and were held in great esteem by the people of their community.

There were six of them, Sam, Mart, John, Tom, Merrit, and Ben, all likely boys and as devoted as brothers should be.

When they were sober, they formed a peaceful sextet, but they were hard drinkers, and when they went to town they made things too lively, and shot up too much glass to please their neighbors.

Finally, a body of State police, under the command of Captain Williams, went to Lampasas to tame the Horrell boys.

The police force was very unpopular in the State, and when Captain Williams led his men into the Jerry Scott saloon to arrest the Horrells, they were wiped out in less than a minute.

The Horrells went boldly home, gathered up their belongings, and went to the Hondo River in Lincoln County, New Mexico. Here they soon got into trouble at a dance where some natives were killed.

Sheriff Gillam, his deputy Martinez, and some citizens tried to arrest the Texans as they were dashing out of Lincoln.

In the pitched battle that followed, the sheriff, his deputy, one citizen, and Ben Horrell were killed.

Several fights followed this battle, and a number of murders resulted. Then the Horrells returned to

Texas. They were tried for killing the State troopers, but were acquitted.

Shortly afterward, Merrit Horrell accused Pink Higgins of rustling Horrell stock, and Higgins shot Merrit down in a saloon, while the boy was unarmed.

The Horrells came galloping to town on fast horses, but they were waylaid by the Higgins faction, and Mart Horrell was fatally wounded.

For some time pitched battles between the Horrells and the Higginses kept things lively. Other adventurers joined up with one faction or the other, and pitched battles became so frequent that the peaceable ones became weary of the constant killings, and decided to put an end to the feud by wiping out the Horrells.

Lieutenant Reynolds of the Rangers undertook the risky job of arresting the Horrells. He trapped them while they were asleep, but their friends later secured their release.

Later, they were arrested again and were placed in the Bosque County jail, and in order to make sure of them this time, a mob of citizens stormed the jail and lynched them.

Strange to say, their passing was regretted by many who looked upon their vices as the wildness of youth. They were known to be brave and generous and loyal to one another and to their partisans.

To this day they are spoken of in Texas as good boys who "went bad" on account of the dangerous conditions of frontier life, where law was lax and where the six-gun was a man's best friend.



# Wolves Of Lobo Range

By Frank J. Litchfield

Author of "The Rattler Strikes," etc.

**K**EN WARRICK'S steel-glinted eyes did not blink nor shift their gaze from the swarthy, leering face of José Moreno y Perez above him. His thin-lipped mouth held its taut, expressionless line, in spite of the agony that racked his prone body.

"Yuh'd finish me, if yuh had the sand, yuh half-breed skunk!" The words were low and even.

For a split second, the leering grin faded from José Moreno's face. In its place came a twisted snarl. He shot a swift glance over his shoulder.

None of his dozen hard-bitten followers had heard the taunt. It was just as well. For if they had, he would be forced to kill this man on

the ground. Otherwise, they might doubt his courage.

When he looked back at Ken Warrick, the evil grin had returned. And there was a light of cunning in his black, piggish eyes.

"Me, I don' keel my so good provider of beef. You shall live—an' raise more steers, no? An' once more José Moreno y Perez shall come an' collect. Adios, Señor Ken Warrick."

The swarthy rider thrust rowels deep into his horse's flanks. He whirled the pawing animal on two hind hoofs. Ken Warrick clawed the stinging gravel from his eyes—gravel that the spurning hoofs had showered upon him.

From his thin lips slid a threat—

low and monotonously even. Deadly wrath whitened the lines about his mouth and brought a surge of red to his high cheek bones.

He swore at his luck, that had made Moreno's first shot smash the cylinder of his six-gun, and the second crash into his left shoulder, hurling him headlong from his saddle.

He blamed fortune that his half dozen riders should have been clear up to the north end of his range, when José Moreno struck from across the Rio Grande.

It was like Ken Warrick. Not once did he consider himself fortunate to come through this encounter alive. He expected that. But it seared his pride that he had been beaten by José Moreno—the murderous, thieving half-breed outlaw from across the river.

He watched the cloud of dust from the hoofs of his hundred fat yearlings, kicked up on the river trail. He muttered a deadly threat, as the dozen raiders hazed the cattle into the shallow, yellow stream.

Not once did he shift his gaze, until the last moving speck disappeared into the rocky, barren hills on the other side of the river. Then he hoisted himself weakly to his feet and staggered toward the sprawling adobe ranch house a quarter of a mile north.

And here it was that his riders found him, when they drifted in, as dusk was settling over the mesquite and sagebrush. No words were needed to tell them what had happened.

The roughly bandaged shoulder, the stern face, and the catlike pacing back and forth across the slab-floored main room of the ranch house spoke more plainly than words.

"José Moreno!" It was a state-

ment, rather than a question, that came from "Stub" Gard's lips.

Ken Warrick nodded an answer to his foreman. "Yes! An' the last time. I'm through foolin'. The Rangers can't cross the Rio. But us——"

Strength-sapping heat and strangling dust. Blistering sun, and sullen, hot shadow. Heat waves that shimmered across a vast, barren expanse. A broken, distorted range of serried hills, fifteen miles to the south, that men called Lobo Range.

And it was into this searing, waterless stretch that Ken Warrick and his six grim riders prodded their mounts. The trail of the hundred yearlings was not hard to follow. José Moreno did not expect to be trailed, but he did not care if he was.

For José Moreno was monarch of Lobo Range. He knew those tumbled, tangled miles of hills. And he was ready for any one who dared follow him there—yes, even for the loco gringo, Ken Warrick.

But there was no look of fear on Warrick's face, nor on the faces of any of his six riders, as they left the flat plain and headed into the hills.

They entered the Lobo Range through a boulder-littered arroyo. It was hard going and dangerous. But the trail of the yearlings pointed the way.

For almost a mile they followed the twisting, turning bed of the arroyo. As the floor became rockier, the tracks faded. And there came a time when they could no longer be seen.

Ken Warrick pulled to a halt, and his men stopped beside him. He shot a swift glance at the sun. It was dropping low in the west. At best, only another hour of daylight



remained. Then he turned his gaze to the tangled trail ahead.

"The arroyo seems to be gettin' deeper all the time, Stub," he grunted to his foreman. "An' we ain't seen no tracks for quite a spell. Looks like mebbe thet half-breed skunk turned them yearlin's off, up some draw."

## II.

It was true, what Warrick said. The arroyo was now almost a full-fledged canyon. Its sides were sheer, with only an occasional gash where torrents that came only at rare intervals, cut through the soft red sandstone.

Stub Gard shook his head, and there were worry furrows on his brow. "We ain't seen no draw thet looks passable. But we got to remember the country's new to us. He might have knowed——"

*Crack! Zip-p-p! Whee-e-e!* Like a buzzing hornet, the bullet sang out of nowhere, and whispered its death message in Ken Warrick's ear.

He swung low in his saddle and shot a lightning glance backward.

"Tricked! Bushwhacked! They was layin' for us!" Then he straightened with a jerk.

"Prod them broomtails, waddies!" he snapped to his startled men. "José Moreno an' his gang are on the rim behind us!"

Low over the necks of their horses, the seven Box B riders thundered up the floor of the rock-strewn canyon. Lead rained about them. "Slim" Hagan, red-headed Box B man, toppled from his saddle.

Ken Warrick jerked his roan to a sliding stop. He whirled, grasped the wounded man with his right arm and pulled him up across the saddle. In a dozen strides the roan was abreast the others.

In that tense moment, Warrick

had seen a dozen riders prodding their mounts down the twisting gash of a draw, and out onto the canyon's floor.

Around a bend in the canyon, the hard-pressed seven swept. And then, with startling suddenness, it came to Ken Warrick just what a noose they had thrust their heads into.

Only a hundred yards ahead the canyon ended in a sheer wall. They were pocketed, with José Moreno and his cutthroat outfit at their heels.

"Hole up behind them rocks, hombres!" he rasped. "We can hold 'em off for a spell—make 'em sick of their bargain."

But in his heart, he knew that José Moreno was too cunning to wade into these straight-shooting punchers in cover. There was a much better way than that. A few hours—a day at most—in this waterless blind canyon would mean the end of the Box B.

The grim riders hurtled from their saddles, snatching rifles from their scabbards. They took to the cover of the rocks, as their mounts milled to one side.

Just out of rifle range, the dozen outlaws pulled up. Ken Warrick, from behind his boulder, could make out Moreno plainly in the fading light. Might be one chance to make them charge—make José Moreno forget his cunning, in blind rage.

He laid his rifle barrel across an outjutting sliver of rock. He elevated the muzzle to give his bullet the last possible inch. Slowly he squeezed the trigger.

The bullet fell short, but only by inches. Moreno howled an oath as his men scattered. But the swarthy leader gave the order Ken Warrick had hoped for.

"They're a-comin', Stub! Make every bullet count. We'll cut down the lobo pack to our size, an' meet 'em in the open."

Then the half-breeds attacked—half-breeds with Yaqui cunning in their brains. They streaked from boulder to boulder, always toward the grim punchers behind the rocks.

Bullets whined among the boulders. A sliver of metal raked Ken Warrick's cheek. Another split Stub Gard's boot and gouged his calf. Slim Hagan, with a bullet through his upper arm, and "Tiny" Ferguson with a nicked ear, kept their rifles hot.

Ken Warrick fired coolly and carefully at every streaking form. Stub Gard beside him swore steadily, but his hands did not tremble or his eyes waver.

Two outlaws were dead, that much Ken Warrick knew, for their forms were stretched stark and still among the rocks. How many others had been hit, he had no way of knowing.

It was a race with darkness. And darkness, aided by the blistering rifles of the Box B men, won. As dusk gave way to velvety, star-sprinkled blackness, José Moreno's voice called his men back.

Ken Warrick watched silently, his right hand still grasping the stock of his rifle. Perhaps a skulking outlaw, with more boldness than the rest, might still be lurking among the rocks.

But when a half dozen camp fires blazed, well out of rifle range, he heaved a sigh of relief. His tense muscles and nerves relaxed a bit. And once more he was conscious of the dull ache of his bandaged shoulder.

"We're safe for to-night, Stub."

"Safe, yes, but blasted thirsty," grunted the foreman.

"Yuh'll be thirstier than thet before yuh put yore lip over a gourd of water," answered Ken Warrick grimly.

Now he made the rounds of his men, checking up on the damage that had been done. To each he gave an encouraging word. But he knew that their plight was well-nigh hopeless.

Back beside Stub Gard, he lay motionless for a long ten minutes. Over and over in his mind, he turned the problem. He blamed himself for leading his men into this trap. So it was up to him to find a way out.

But each line of reasoning butted up against the sheer wall of the canyon. His eyes strayed up to the rim above, which divided the dark depths from the slightly lighter sky.

If he was only up there, he could circle the outlaw camp. Perhaps he could stampede their horses. Then, when morning came, the Box B men could charge through the horseless raiders.

It was a wild idea, but his mind played with it until it seemed almost a reality. At last he straightened, and turned to Stub Gard.

"Thet canyon wall—mebbe a waddy could climb it, huh? Sort o' pick his way, feelin' for hand an' footholds."

"Meanin' what?" asked Gard.

"Meanin' thet I'm a-goin' to try for it," answered Ken Warrick evenly.

"Yo're a plain idiot, Ken! Why, with two good arms, yuh couldn't make it. If there's any climbin' to be done, I'll——"

"I'm still runnin' the Box B, Stub. I led yuh here, an' I've got to find a way out."

Stub Gard shook his head at the foolhardiness of it. Ken Warrick did not see the gesture, in the dark-

ness. Not that it would have made any difference.

"When yuh hear a pebble drop, down here among the rocks, yuh'll know I've reached the rim." Ken Warrick faded like a shadow into the gloom.

### III.

That mad climb up the wall of the canyon was one Ken Warrick would always remember. Outthrust rocks that had appeared close together from below, had a way of being just out of reach. Footholds were heartbreakingly few.

Handicapped by the darkness, Ken Warrick was breathless and almost exhausted when he had covered half the upward distance. A half hour, to make a hundred feet. And had he not found a narrow ledge where he could rest a bit, it would probably have been his last half hour.

He allowed himself only five short minutes, then he was on his way again. His fingers were raw from the rough rocks. His wounded shoulder ached with a dull throb.

His toes felt as if they were broken from supporting his weight in tiny crevices. Ken Warrick was not a mountain climber. His home was astride a horse. But he did have sinews of steel and a great purpose.

But even then, it was a panting, exhausted man who dragged himself to the canyon's rim. For a full fifteen minutes he stretched his limp body on the flat that overlooked the dark depths.

From this point, he could look almost straight down on José Moreno's camp. The movements of the raiders were plain in the reflected light of the camp fires. The strutting form of the leader overshadowed the other slinking outlaws.

Ken Warrick grunted, as he arose

staggeringly. A tossed pebble, that landed among the Box B men below, told them that he had reached safety.

He tightened the thongs that held his two holsters to his legs. He tried the guns in the leather, to be sure they worked like greased lightning. Then he stole off into the night.

The descent into the canyon was easier. He found the trail the raiders had used. It was twisting and steep, just the path of a torrent-cut draw. But it led downward.

In fifteen minutes he was in the canyon. He could hear the stamp of picketed horses just around the bend. He redoubled his caution as he slipped from boulder to boulder. Then the camp burst into view.

For a full five minutes, he crouched behind a rock, his ears strained to catch any sound that might mean outposts. He hardly expected José Moreno would think it necessary to guard the rear, but chance-taking was for fools.

Then he stole forward again. The horses were but a few yards ahead. If only he could reach them, without raising an alarm! He tensed for the attempt.

Five yards—ten yards— Suddenly he flattened and fairly held his breath. For just beyond a huge boulder, a light flickered up for a split second.

"Some skunk lightin' a quirly. Lucky for me he was honin' for a smoke."

Inch by inch, he wriggled forward. He reached the boulder. With agonizing patience, he crawled up its side. Not a whisper of sound broke the silence.

As he lay flat on top of the rock, he peered down on the other side. Just below him the shadowy form of a man squatted with his back to



the rock. A glowing cigarette marked the man's face.

Silently, Ken Warrick's right six-gun slipped from its holster. The barrel rose and crashed down upon the head below. A gasping grunt, a soft thud. Ken Warrick lay breathless, hugging the smooth rock.

But the boisterous sounds of the camp kept up without interruption. The first obstacle was removed. Ken Warrick slipped from his perch and inched around the rock. He hoisted the inert form and carried it behind the boulder.

He shucked out of his own buckskin vest and replaced it with the half-breed's concho-spangled bolero. The broad, fringed sombrero took the place of his own gray Stetson. Again a quiet, squatting form leaned against the rock.

Ken Warrick restrained his impatience for a full quarter of an hour. But at last he was satisfied that his encounter with the guard had gone unnoticed. He arose slowly, stretched his arms, and yawned gustily.

He took a single shuffling step toward the huddle of horses between him and the fires. Then he halted in his tracks. For a bulky form loomed in his path. The faint light gleamed on silver conchos that decorated the gaudy costume of the approaching man.

"My caballo, Panchito. The black stallion an' the saddle with the silver pesos. Pronto, hombre! I ride for Dos Toros. To-morrow we keel the gringos, but to-night I make celebration weeth the señoritas an' the aguardiente."

Ken Warrick tensed, for he recognized the oily voice. Too many times he had heard José Moreno speak. His hand stole to the butt of his six-gun, but he fought off the impulse to burn down the raider.

Instantly he regained his self-control. He managed a clumsy bow. "*Si, señor.*" The words were a low mumble.

He turned and shuffled toward the cavvy of horses. "Lucky he told me which hoss an' saddle," he muttered softly.

His keen eyes picked out the black horse and the silver-mounted saddle. And as he hoisted the hull to the animal's back, a grim determination swept over him.

He led the fiery horse to José Moreno, and held the bridle while the swaggering bully climbed into the saddle. The half-breed jabbed the long rowels home.

While the thundering hoofbeats were fading down the floor of the canyon, Ken Warrick was selecting another saddle and a cayuse from the remuda.

Then a second horse detached itself from the cavvy. Ken Warrick led it carefully around the bend in the canyon. Here he swung into the saddle and headed on José Moreno's trail.

#### IV.

The flickering lights gave the dingy little town of Dos Toros (Two Bulls) a romantic, glamorous air. But Ken Warrick, as he entered the sink hole of evil, knew just how much wickedness was hidden in the darkness.

He made straight for the most brilliantly lighted building. That was El Toro Rojo (the Red Bull). Here, he knew, he would find José Moreno.

He pulled up at the hitch rack before the saloon. For a moment, he sat silently in his saddle, listening. The tinpany tinkle of a rickety piano came from inside. And a husky tenor was trying to drown out the peals of riotous laughter.

A celebration was in full swing. José Moreno, the wolf from the Lobo Range, was spending. A surge of wrath blazed in Ken Warrick's heart.

"He's spendin' money thet ought ter be mine," he grated through set teeth.

He swung from the saddle and flung the reins over the rail. His hands half lifted the six-guns from their holsters. They slid easily. He pulled them a bit farther around in front.

Then he stepped up on the wooden sidewalk. With catlike tread, he made for the door of the saloon. His left hand swung it open, and his right hovered near the butt of his gun.

A haze of blue smoke and the reek of fiery tequila stung his eyes and rasped his nostrils. For a second, he blinked. Then his gaze swept the crowd of milling breeds and the sprinkling of hard-bitten gringos. The riffraff of the border.

Ken Warrick's entrance meant nothing to those nearest the door. Just another stranger—perhaps a fugitive from the law across the river.

But to one of four who sat around a table at the back, the newcomer was intensely interesting. For this one was José Moreno. The outlaw's hand stopped halfway down. The card he was about to play fluttered from his fingers. A snarl twisted his swarthy face.

The others drew back, frightened. Their chairs crashed to the floor. In a split second, a lane was cleared between Ken Warrick and the snarling outlaw.

José Moreno crouched behind the table, his hands upon its edge. His eyes glared their hate—and a little fear. Slowly his right hand stole backward and down.

WW—9D

Ken Warrick, his feet wide apart and his head thrust forward, stood silently in the center of the room. His thumbs hooked themselves on his belt above the twin holsters.

"Yo're celebratin' to-night, for tomorrow yuh wipe out the Box B gringos, huh?" The tone was monotonously even—the same tone that had once advised José Moreno to kill when he had the chance. "They ain't no half-breed lobo ever whelped who kin——"

But Ken Warrick broke his words off short. Something in José Moreno's expression warned him—the faint flicker of an eyelid. The scrape of a booted sole to the left added to this warning.

Then the click of a six-gun hammer drawn back. With lightning swiftness, Ken Warrick hurled himself sidewise. His guns leaped to his hands. The right gun spoke—once—twice—three times. A gurgling scream, and the crash of a falling body answered it. One less of José Moreno's lobos.

But now the leader was in action. Twice his guns barked. A slug pierced the crown on Ken Warrick's borrowed sombrero. The second was lower. His legs shot from beneath him. But the bullet had only plowed through his boot heel.

His darting glance took in the whole room. The startled patrons of the *cantina* lined the walls. José Moreno stood snarling at the far end. The smoky oil lamp swung slowly above. And powder smoke dimmed the scene.

Once more Ken Warrick's smoke wagon coughed. A crash of glass answered. El Toro Rojo was plunged into total darkness.

Pounding feet sounded on the slab floor. A gurgling oath in border Spanish came but a split second before the thud of a fist on flesh.

The back door swung open. For an instant, a form stood out against the oblong of dim starlight. The sound of something dragging broke the deathly silence that had followed the crash of glass. Then the door swung shut.

Then a roar broke out inside the saloon. Stamping feet and swearing voices jarred the rickety building. The door crashed, and a half dozen forms leaped through. In a moment, the pound of hoofs on the trail echoed among the shacks.

Now from behind the door, which swung outward against the wall, a grim form stepped. A flickering glance at the interior of El Toro Rojo. In the light of the hastily lighted candle, Ken Warrick could see the fat-paunched bartender and two or three tequila-stupefied men. The rest were on the trail.

"They'll give us a start, before they find they're chasin' shadows," grunted Ken Warrick.

He sped around the building to the hitch rack. He hoisted the unconscious José Moreno to the saddle of his black, and bound him tightly. Then he swung into his own saddle.

In less than ten minutes after he had entered the *cantina*, Ken Warrick was back on the trail to the canyon. And this time he was not alone.

The jolting brought José Moreno to his senses before a mile had unwound. But Ken Warrick had bound him tightly. The swarthy raider vowed vengeance upon Warrick and the whole Box B outfit.

But Ken Warrick rode, grimly silent. Let the outlaw lobo howl. He was good at that. Soon José Moreno tired. For a moment, there was silence. Then the outlaw whimpered to the man who rode ahead.

"Thees ropes—they cut my ankles an' wrists. The greengo, he does not torture hees prisoner. Loose the ropes, an' I weel ride weethout thought of escape."

"Yo're tied, an' yuh'll stay tied, blast yore mangy hide! I hope them ropes rub yuh raw!" rasped Ken Warrick.

## V.

For an hour they rode, Ken Warrick grimly silent, and José Moreno swearing and sulking by turns. But now they neared the canyon. Ken Warrick turned aside and led the way along the rim of the chasm.

For a moment, he halted. With the big blue bandanna about his neck, he fashioned a gag. José Moreno spluttered and raved, but the gag silenced him.

"Takin' no chances on yore yelpin' to yore lobo pack," grunted Ken Warrick.

On the rim of the canyon, directly above the outlaw camp, Warrick pulled up. He turned to José Moreno.

"We're stickin' here a spell, hombre. Dawn'll soon be comin'. An' then I'll relieve yuh of thet gag."

As he sat his saddle, grimly and silently, a breakfast fire burst into flame in the camp below. The first light of day was beginning to pink the eastern sky. But not until the disk of the sun appeared above the hills did he speak.

Then he leaned over and jerked the gag from José Moreno's mouth.

"I'm sendin' a bullet down into yore outfit. When they look up, yuh'll give 'em the order to high-tail it pronto, unless yuh want a slug in yore gizzard."

"Me, I weel tell them to fight to the death!" snarled José Moreno.

"Then yuh'll never live to see it!" Ken Warrick's gun snapped from



its holster. Slowly it came up. Moreno blanched to a sickly yellow.

"I'll talk as you say!"

A cold smile flicked across Warrick's face. He swept the muzzle downward. A bullet whistled down into the canyon. It struck a rock, and glanced whiningly off into space.

At the roar of the gun, Ken Warrick's horse side-stepped, until it rubbed against Moreno's black stallion. Warrick's words rasped in Moreno's ear.

"Thet woke 'em up, hombre! Get yore lobo howl to workin'."

But this was the moment José Moreno had waited for. His slender hands had worked free of the ropes, an hour ago. Now the brown hands moved like chain lightning. The rope flung free.

His right hand streaked back. A razor-sharp knife slithered from its sheath between his shoulder blades. But fast as the movement was, Ken Warrick caught the flash of the blade.

The point swished past his side as he swung low. But it met flesh, at that—the hip of Ken Warrick's horse. The animal screamed in startled pain. Then it leaped ahead.

Too late, Warrick saw what had happened. He flung himself desperately from his saddle. But already the horse was struggling to keep from toppling over the rim of the canyon. The added weight of a rider would have made the fall certain.

Ken Warrick's fingers clutched at the rough rock of the canyon rim. For a moment they held—then the crumbling rock gave way. Warrick dropped like a rock. Ten feet—twenty—

Twice he raked an outjutting rock that stayed his fall for an instant, but the rocks did not hold.

Above him, José Moreno sliced

the ropes that bound his ankles. Then he hurled himself from the saddle, and threw himself flat on the rim. His glittering black eyes peered down.

Still Ken Warrick dropped. His fingers clutched at every sliver of rock, at every crack in the canyon's wall. Then he struck a ledge with stunning impact.

He heard José Moreno's wicked, leering laugh above. He saw the hombre's snarling face over the rim of the canyon. Then Moreno drew back from the edge. Clenching his teeth against the agony of his hurts, Ken Warrick looked about him.

The two-foot ledge on which he lay was more than half the distance to the floor of the canyon. Scarcely forty feet remained. Nor was the rest of the way quite so steep.

But below, José Moreno's outfit were gathered. He could hear their yells plainly. Little good it would do him, even if he could make the rest of the downward way.

His glance shot to the rocks behind which the Box B men were hidden. They were moving out now, grimly silent. Then the rattle of a pebble from above drew his gaze back.

His throat tightened. For José Moreno stood on the very rim of the canyon. And high over his head he held a fifty-pound rock. In a second, that rock would drop, and its weight would crush any living thing it struck.

Ken Warrick hoisted his bruised body to a sitting position, his eyes glued on the deadly rock. Moreno was taking plenty of time for careful aim, Warrick reflected grimly. Then the hazy mist swept from his brain.

His left fist streaked for the holster. The six-gun snapped out. Only a second more, just a split sec-

ond— Moreno's hand began to drop.

Then Ken Warrick's gun roared—just as the rock hurtled from Moreno's hands. A cloud of rock dust and splinters seemed to explode where the missile struck the ledge.

Then another object, a twisting, ungainly form, followed the rock. It, too, struck the ledge and bounced off into space. But José Moreno never knew of his fall, for Ken Warrick's bullet had drilled him center.

Nor was Warrick sure of the hit, until the twisting, turning body swept past him. For he had flung his body from the ledge the instant he had squeezed the trigger.

And he was slipping, sliding down the rough, almost perpendicular wall, when rock and body hurtled past. He attempted to slow his descent, and succeeded the least bit. But even then, his speed was breathtaking.

José Moreno fell squarely in the center of his outfit, on the canyon floor. The outlaws scuttled apart like a flock of sage hens, as the missiles roared down.

Then Ken Warrick struck with a grunt, but was on his feet in a second. His head reeled, and black spots danced before his eyes.

He strained his uncertain vision

toward the band of raiders. His right hand rubbed his eyes swiftly to clear them of the red haze.

It looked as if the outlaw wolves were running. That couldn't be! But it was—they were on the stampede! Right on past their mounts they scuttled.

Then the rattle of rifle fire split the air. Wisps of smoke curled up from Box B guns. Stub Gard and the Box B riders were on the prod.

Ken Warrick stood with trembling legs wide apart, as his men charged up to him. His torn right hand, upheld, halted them. His voice held them.

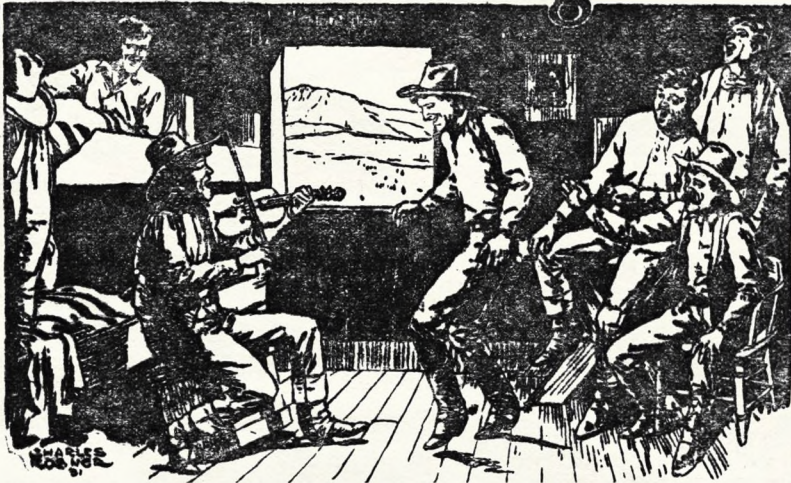
"Let the buzzards go, hombres. They're afoot in the Lobo Range, an' it's a long way to water. Moreno's dead, an' his outfit'll never gather again."

"An' there's water an' tortillas in their camp," added Stub Gard. "If we only had them yearlin's—"

"With rest, food, an' water to strengthen us, we'll haze 'em across the river to the Box B," stated Ken Warrick. "They're not far from here. The little valley they're grazin' in is in plain sight from the rim. José Moreno never figured we'd live to see 'em, an' he didn't take no great pains to hide 'em. But now let's eat an' drink. Reckon we've all earned it."



# Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral



This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**H**OWDY, thar, folks! How're things comin' yore way? As good as mine, I hope! Been findin' any good songs? Waal, even if yuh haven't, hyar some fer yuh tuh l'arn.

I had a letter recent that suggested that I should print these hyar songs only on one side o' the paper, so's how yuh could save 'em in yore scrapbooks easier. Waal, if I had more space, I'd be glad tuh do thet. But, on the other hand, yuh kin always copy the song thet would have tuh be underneath. In other

words, yore scrapbook will be half copied an' half from clippin's. It happens many times thet I publish somethin' a second time—after a long period—an' then yuh kin patch it in, perhaps.

But yuh know space, when it's tuh be filled with printed words, is a valuable thing. Which reminds me thet it would be a good idee tuh git on tuh the songs for tuh-day.

Hyar's a humdinger tuh start with. An' we have tuh thank Mr. J. Frank Dobie an' the Texas Folklore Society for it.



## THE COWBOY'S LIFE\*

The cowboy's life is a dreary old life,  
 All out in the sleet and snow.  
 When wintertime comes he begins to think  
 Where his summer wages go.

When the shipping is all over  
 And the work is all done,  
 He hangs up his Frazier saddle  
 And starts looking for some fun.

He steps up to the boss  
 And draws his pay in full.  
 He says, "Be sure and come back, boy."  
 Then he thinks he has a pull.

He went into the barroom;  
 His little roll he did pull.  
 He called for drinks for the house,  
 And he got pretty full.

He told the boys that he had quit  
 And that he'd work no more,  
 And then they got him in a poker game  
 And took him to the floor.

He got up and looked around.  
 He said that he was just that kind:  
 He'd lose his money in a poker game  
 And he never did mind.

Now he's on his way back to the rancho,  
 The one he's just quit.  
 He hits the boss for another job,  
 The one he'd made a hit.

Like it? Waal, yuh ought tuh!

Hyar's a song thet was printed a  
 right long while ago in the Wrang-  
 lers Corner. Yuh've had versions  
 of it in the Corral, too. For in-  
 stance, "Beware of the Cowboy Who  
 Wears the White Hat" is somethin'  
 like it. Yuh remember I gave yuh  
 a song about the queen of the des-  
 peradoes recent? Waal, Belle Starr  
 is supposed tuh have writ the origi-  
 nal of all the versions of it:

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\*Printed by courteous permission of the  
 Texas Folklore Society, from an article en-  
 titled, "Ballads and Songs of the Frontier  
 Folk," by J. Frank Dobie, appearing in  
 their Publications No. VII, called "Foller  
 De Drinkin' Gou'd."

## BUCKING BRONCHO

My love is a rider, wild bronchos he breaks,  
 Though he's promised to quit it, just for  
 my sake.

He ties up one foot, the saddle puts on,  
 With a swing and a jump, he's mounted  
 and gone.

The first time I met him, 'twas early one  
 spring,

Riding a broncho, a high-headed thing.  
 He tipped me a wink as he gayly did go,  
 For he wished me to look at his bucking  
 broncho.

The next I saw him 'twas late in the fall,  
 Swinging the girls at Tomlinson's ball.  
 He laughed and he talked as we danced  
 to and fro,  
 Promised never to ride on another broncho.

He made me some presents, among them  
 a ring;  
 The return that I made him was a far  
 better thing;  
 'Twas a young maiden's heart, I'd have  
 you all know.

He's won it by riding his bucking broncho.

My love has a gun, and that gun he can  
 use,  
 But he's quit his gun fighting as well as  
 his booze;  
 And he's sold his saddle, his spurs, and  
 his rope,  
 And there's no more cow-punching, and  
 that's what I hope.

My love has a gun that has gone to the  
 bad,  
 Which makes poor old Jimmy feel pretty  
 damn sad;  
 For the gun it shoots high and the gun it  
 shoots low,  
 And it wabbles about like a bucking  
 broncho.

Now, all you young maidens, where'er you  
 reside,  
 Beware of the cowboy who swings the  
 rawhide;  
 He'll court you and pet you and leave you  
 and go  
 In the spring up the trail on his bucking  
 broncho.

I reckon thet's one o' the most  
 pop'lar cowboy songs goin'; an' it  
 ought tuh be, too.

Waal, let's see what else we have.

Here's a dandy one! A reg'lar bad  
man's wail:

**THE DRUNKEN DESPERADO\***

By Baird Boyd

I'm wild and woolly and full of fleas,  
I'm hard to curry below the knees,  
I'm a she-wolf from Shamon Creek,  
For I was dropped from a lightning streak  
And it's my night to holler—whoo-pee!

I stayed in Texas till they runned me out,  
Then in Bull Frog they chased me about;  
I walked a little and rode some more,  
For I've shot up a town before,  
And it's my night to holler—whoo-pee!

Give me room and turn me loose;  
I'm peaceable without excuse.  
I never killed for profit or fun;  
But, riled, I'm a regular son of a gun,  
And it's my night to holler—whoo-poo!

Good-eye Jim will serve the crowd;  
The rule goes here, no sweetin' 'lowed.  
And we'll drink now the Nixon kid,  
For I rode to town and lifted the lid,  
And it's my night to holler—whoo-pee!

You can guess how quick a man must be,  
For I killed eleven and wounded three;  
And brothers and daddies aren't makin' a  
sound,  
Though they know where the kid is found,  
And it's my night to holler—whoo-pee!

When I get old and my aim ain't true,  
And it's three to one, and wounded, too,  
I won't beg and claw the ground;  
For I'll be dead before I'm found,  
When it's my night to holler—whoo-pee!

\*Reprinted by courteous permission of  
MacMillan Company, from the book enti-  
tled "Songs of Cattle Trail and Cow  
Camp," by John A. Lomax, published by  
them.

Hyar's a bit o' description o' land  
out West—fiery-hot land:

**THE DESERT\***

By E. A. Brininstool

Sun—silence—sand—and dreary solitude!  
Vast stretches—white—beneath a glar-  
ing sky!  
Where only those stout-hearted may in-  
trude,  
With death to harass them and terrify!

A vast expanse of endless, treeless plain,  
Where sluggish rattlers crawl and brown  
swifts run;  
Where all the parched earth gasps and  
pants for rain,  
And overhead a maddening, molten sun!

Dry, powdery, sagebrush seas, and cactus  
beds,  
And yuccas—snow-white sentinels—  
which gleam,  
While here and there the ocatilla spreads,  
And waters glimmer from a phantom  
stream.

Like withering blasts from furnaces white-  
hot,  
The noonday sun glares pitilessly down  
Upon a land the hand of God forgot—  
Scorched, lifeless, shriveled, arid, bare,  
and brown!

Only the awful stillness day by day  
O'er wastes swept by the hot sun's burn-  
ing breath!  
A treacherous, deceptive Great White Way,  
A land of desolation and of death!

Waal, folks, do yuh think yuh'd  
like tuh be out thar now? I wonder!

Reckon yuh've got enough tuh  
keep yuh busy till next week. So  
long an' good luck till then. Hope  
yuh find a lot o' songs—an' I'll be  
lookin' hard, too!

\*Taken by special permission from his  
book, entitled "Trail Dust of a Maverick."



SCISSORS



# Western Pen Pals

Conducted by Sam Wills - Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**B**EIN' as how thar's plenty o' letters hyar waitin' for publication, folks, I won't take any o' this space tuh chat with yuh, except tuh repeat that it would be a fine thing if yuh all read the above rules an' obeyed 'em, an' if none of yuh would write for Pen Pals unless yuh aim tuh answer thar letters.

#### OFFERIN' INFO

Some mighty interestin' info is offered in these letters, about all sorts o' places an' things:

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen and would like to have some Pen Pals, especially from Texas. I will be glad to tell all about Honolulu.

FRECKLES, OF HONOLULU.



DEAR SAM: I have lived out West all my life, and my native State is Arizona. I am nineteen years old and weigh one hundred and twenty-five pounds, and have brown hair and green eyes. My occupation is riding. I have ridden broncs and done plenty of trick riding. I won three cups and several cash prizes doing it. I represented my State at the Chicago Soldiers' Field in 1927. I have lived on a ranch all my life, and own a small outfit myself now. I have about thirty head of horses. I'd like to hear from some fellows. In a way, I'm lonesome, for my folks are all dead. I will send snaps and information about anything the Pals want to know regarding ranch life.

TEXAS WILSON, OF ARIZONA.

DEAR SAM: Being a constant reader of the W. W. W., I have noticed many inquiries concerning homesteads. I put some thirty-one thousand miles on my car between July, 1931, and June, 1932, and was in the following States: Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and I had the pleasure of viewing some of the greatest home sites a man could ask for.

And one thing I wish to make clear is that the government bulletins are all wrong in their description of some two million acres I looked over. And I want to say that those wishing to homestead in the aforementioned States would need at least two hundred and fifty dollars cash to carry one through, regardless of its location.

I shall be very glad to give readers the following info: Types of land, kinds of equipment necessary, kinds of game obtainable, and the kind of crops to cultivate. I'll be glad to give this info free to any one who'll send a stamped envelope for reply.

Also, would be glad to tell prospective ranchers or homesteaders an earful about some million acres of fine range bunch grass. I certainly would like to team up with some person or group of persons, and take on a combine in cattle in this hidden paradise.

Laugh this one off: Think of going fishing where the average black bass weighs from five to eleven pounds! Think of bear meat and turkey on Thanksgiving, and venison on New Year's. Wild ducks, greese, water turkeys, coons, possums, and lots of otter abound. Well, it's time I closed. I sure am going back down there myself one of these days!

TRAILBUSTER, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals in Massachusetts who would like to know how to rope, ride, and shoot. I live in the Big Bend of Texas, and our ranch is twenty-five miles from the Rio Grande. We have lots of rough country here. I'd like some Pen Pals who can play the fiddle; also, I would like to trade pictures. I am twelve years old and have ridden ever since I was three. I'd like a few friends who would write now and then.

ROY STILLWELL, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm just a fourteen-year-old girl who is very lonely. I would like some Pen Pals from anywhere for my friends. I could tell them all about the State of Arizona, and would like them to be between the ages of fourteen and twenty. I can trade Western songs and poems. Don't forget me!

VIRGINIA LEE PERRY, OF ARIZONA.

### HUNTIN' JOBS

Do yuh think yuh kin help out some o' these folks tuh find work? Read thar letters an' see if yuh kin give 'em the right tips:

DEAR SAM WILLS: I'm a boy of sixteen and would like to get a job on a ranch somewhere in Colorado, Wyoming, California, Arizona, or in Oklahoma. I will be going out West next summer, so please have some of the Pen Pals out there write me soon. I would be glad to answer all letters. I'll work for fifty cents a day and board, room, and washing. I can ride and shoot well and am strong and healthy. Please answer soon. I'm in my last year of school.

ALBERT MARCOUX, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twenty years and want work of some kind on a ranch where I can work hard and perhaps regain my health. I am very fond of the West and would like to collect some pictures for painting later on. So if there is some kind woman who needs the help of a girl, I hope she'll write to me, and I'll do everything in my power to please her.

NAREE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I was born out West myself, and had to come East on account of my dad's health. He is a horse trader, and he hasn't had a horse that I couldn't ride. I have a Bar Three horse now, and she's as quiet as a lamb. I am eighteen years

old and would like to get work on a cattle ranch in Alberta or Saskatchewan. I hope I'll hear from a rancher soon.

PETER WYGIERA, OF ONTARIO, CANADA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get a job out West. I am seventeen and am used to hard work. Although I have had some experience, I'd be willing to work for no pay, just board and grub. I would like Pen Pals from Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, and Colorado. I can draw and shoot very well, and I can even draw an automatic fast.

ROBERT CAREY, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: Going over so many letters from the Pen Pals as you do, I wonder if you came across any one, by chance, who needs a young girl's help. I would like a job in any of the Western States. I wouldn't want any wages, just board and clothing—and I wouldn't need much of the latter. I'd like to get a job on a ranch. I can rope fairly well and shoot a gun, too. I'm hoping you'll put me in touch with some ranches. I'm quite strong and am fourteen years old.

JANET WIJTWLEWICZ, OF NEW YORK.

#### LONESOME FOLKS

An' these need a few cheerin' words tuh put 'em right with the world. Thet ought tuh be an easy order tuh fill, folks!

DEAR MR. WILLS: We are two lonely girls of fifteen and seventeen years of age. We live in the country and will give all the information wanted of this neighborhood. We want Pen Pals from all over the world. We'll answer all the letters we receive. So please don't pass by and leave us two sad and lonely girls.

THE UNDERWOOD GIRLS, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and would like to exchange letters with some one who lives in the Western States. I'm interested mostly in Texas, Colorado, and Arizona. I'm a lonesome gal in a big city and would like Pen Pals, so pick up your pens, girls, and don't fail me.

MARIE CASAZZA, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a lonely girl of Texas and am thirteen years old. I lived on a farm all my life, up until four years ago, when we moved to the city. My mother died when I was a little baby, so I have

been lonely all my life. I used to own a saddle horse, when we lived on the farm. I love them and all outdoor sports. I would like to hear from some cowgirls and Pen Pals of the West, for I know they could tell me some very interesting stories of ranch life. I can imagine myself on a wide prairie with a bunch of cowgirls. Please tell them to write to me! I'll answer all letters. MYRTLE TRIBBLE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am nineteen years old and have dark-brown hair and eyes. I want Pen Pals of all nations; so make up your minds, fellows, and write to a lonely English boy, and hear from the home country of Shakespeare. I promise to answer all letters. J. C. PERRY, OF ENGLAND.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am eighteen years old and would like to correspond with a smart cowboy of about twenty years. I want to know a few facts about roping horses and about how to handle them generally. It is lonesome in this country, when one does not have corresponding friends to tell about events in other parts. I hope I'll hear from some of you fellows soon. GEORGE MOORE, OF AUSTRALIA.

#### COLLECTIN' AN' HOBBIES

All yuh traders better step up hyar an' see whether yuh kin do some business. Collectin' things seems tuh amuse plenty o' folks; mebbe yuh'd like tuh try yore hand at it, too.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen and have brown hair and blue eyes. I love guitar music. I have two guitars at home and would like to hear from girls out West who can play a guitar and who know a lot of cowboy songs.

BETTY, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I'm thirteen years old and would like some Pen Pals from Texas, Montana, and Wyoming, and, also, I'd like to get some Western songs. I'd also like to exchange souvenirs with some Pen Pals. Please write soon.

BOB CURRAN, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I'd like to be counted in as one of the Pen Pals. I want to receive a post card from every reader, and in return I'll send them one also. That's a good way to put some of Uncle Sam's

stamps in circulation. I sure would like to get post cards from every State in the Union.

POST-CARD JACK, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eleven and would like to have some Western Pen Pals. I like all outdoor sports and am a stamp collector. I love to write letters, for I have nothing else to do; and I am rather lonesome. Please exchange stamps with me.

JOHN RUZYCKI, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm thirteen years old and in the eighth grade. I love horses and am very sad because my saddle horse died last week. I am looking for Pen Pals from thirteen to sixteen years of age. I would be pleased if some who have a lot of back issues of the W. W. W. that they don't want would send them to me. I'm collecting them. I've been reading the W. W. W. for two years. I live on a farm, and I can teach Pen Pals the proper ways to hold a lariat.

JACK MEYER, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and would be very glad to have some Pen Pals from anywhere and everywhere. I would like some of the girls to send me some Western songs. I'll answer every letter I receive and will not forget anybody.

KATHERINE STETTER, OF MICHIGAN.

#### WESTERN PEN PALS

Lots of 'em are in demand, as usual. Step up, Westerners, an' take yore pick among these folks who are dyin' tuh have words with yuh:

DEAR PEN PALS: I would like to have some of you from Texas or Utah write to me. I am a girl of fifteen and have blue eyes and dark-brown hair. Would like some cowgirls around fifteen years old to write to me. I'll do my best to answer all letters. Please tell me all you can about the States I've mentioned, especially Texas, as I am very much interested in that State.

FLORA MAY STARKS,  
OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of ten and would like some cowboy Pen Pals, especially some who have some Western togs to spare and will exchange things for them. I would also like some Western songs. I will answer all letters.

EDWARD McDANIEL, OF ARIZONA.

DEAR SAM: I have been reading the Pen Pals column for some time now, and I sort of got the idea that I would like to communicate with some cowboys. So I thought I would write and ask you to please get me some cowboy Pen Pals.

IRVIN BUSH, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a fellow of twenty-two and have dark-brown hair and eyes, and don't know much more about the golden West than what I read. I live in quite a big city, but that doesn't keep me from loving the great open spaces. I'd like to hear from Pen Pals of fifteen years on up. Will gladly exchange snaps and answer every letter.

HUSKY CHET, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen, and I am longing to be a cowboy. I play cowboy very much. I would be very glad to have a cowboy Pen Pal who would be willing to exchange some Western souvenirs with me.

STANLEY SMITH, OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of ten. I love the West and can shoot and rope and do all outdoor sports. I would like to have some Pen Pals of my age on up to fifteen. I came from Texas myself. I first learned to ride on an old nag. I had fun herding cattle. Send me some snapshots of yourselves, Pen Pals, and I will send some of me. I love the West very much. I want Pen Pals from Texas, Arizona, Montana, and any other ranch States.

BURK BARHITE, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm just another reader of the W. W. W. who is longing for some Pen Pals. I am ten years of age and hope some day to go out West. Won't some one answer my plea for Pen Pals? I'd like best to hear from boys of the West in Arizona, Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada.

JUNIOR NELMS, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm in search of Pen Pals and sure would like to have lots of them. I am a girl of seventeen and have dark hair and eyes. I like all sorts of sports and swimming the best. I have traveled ever since I was two years old. I'll be glad to swap all the info I have about traveling and camping out. I would like Pen Pals from all over the West.

MARGUERITE PARADAY, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen and would like some Pen Pals from Texas, Mon-



tana, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. I like to read cowboy books and see cowboy shows. I would like some cowboy songs, too. I will answer all letters.

PAUL HOLT, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of ten. I have a pony and would like very much to live on a ranch. I have light hair and blue eyes. I would like a girl friend of about my age who lives in the West.

REBA GUILLETT, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen and would like to have a place among your Pen Pals. I'd like to have some Pen Pals from anywhere west of Oklahoma. I like camping and other outdoor sports, and I can shoot and ride fairly well. I'll gladly exchange snaps and information of this part of the country with any one who writes from the Western ranges.

THE OKLAHOMA KID, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I am very much interested in exchanging letters and information with some Western Pen Pals. I'd be glad to give news of the East in exchange for info of the West.

EVA SANDERSON, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I would like Pen Pals from Arizona and Texas. I am a boy of nine, and I read the W. W. W. as often as I can get it. I like guns, but never had one. I would like some Pen Pals of around my age.

OSCAR BRUBAKER, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and would like to have some Pen Pals from every State in the West, especially from Montana, Texas, New Mexico, and Wyoming. I am interested in all sports, movies, and writing letters. Come on, everybody, cram my mail box with letters.

MARJORIE STOUGHTON, OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eleven. I'm very much interested in cowboys. I would like to have some Pen Pals from Montana, Wyoming, and Mexico. I would like to hear from some real cowboys. I would like to learn to ride, rope, and shoot.

J. FRANK WITCHER, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have a couple of Pen Pals from the West. I am a woman of thirty-six and have a son nineteen years old. I was divorced when I was seventeen years old. I would like to hear from other women of my age.

MRS. FLORENCE PAPANTONIO,  
OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eleven, and I would like to hear from boys out West who like to ride, hunt, fish, play ball, and do all kinds of outdoor sports. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

QUINN, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fifteen years, and I would like to have a few Pen Pals from somewhere out West. I love all outdoor sports. I'd like to hear from girls of my own age.

SOPHIE RUZYCKI, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen, and I am poor. We play cowboy all the time. A friend of mine takes the W. W. W. and lets me read it. I'd like some Western Pen Pals who have old ranch clothes to give away.

CECIL THOMPSON, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I crave the West. I'd like to have some Pen Pals from Montana, Arizona, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, California—or any other States, for that matter. I'll write to anybody who'll write to me.

TAWELL HOPPER, OF KENTUCKY.

#### OTHER REQUESTS

Still a few more, folks, waitin' tuh see print:

DEAR SAM WILLS: I wish you would put a request for Pen Pals in the W. W. W. for me. I'm a seventeen-year-old girl and enjoy corresponding, exchanging snaps, dancing, swimming, riding horses, et cetera. All of you girls, of seventeen to twenty, write to me—especially those of you from the West.

GERT, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twelve and would like to have some Pen Pals from all over, but especially from Iowa and New Jersey. I don't care what ages they are, but please write, everybody. I'm very much interested in outdoor games. As I live in one of the principal cities of Oregon, I could give lots of information of Oregon. I'll gladly exchange snaps and other things.

JACKLYN BYRNE, OF OREGON.

An' I reckon thet's sufficient for tuh-day, folks. I hope yuh found the kind of Pen Pal yuh've been lookin' for all yore life! So long!

# The Wranglers Corner



All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**S**AY, Boss," asks Sonny Tabor, at this week's meetin' o' the Corner, "what's happened ter the Circle J outfit ter-night?"

We laughs a bit. "Nothin' a-tall, Sonny," we says. "They're jest restin' up fer a spell. Had a letter from Billy jest ter-day. He says as how they'll all be back next week."

As we says that, there's a sigh of relief from all the waddies who are on hand fer the meetin'. It's funny, but every time Circle J don't show up, the hombres git worried 'bout 'em.

We looks around the room ter sort o' count noses an' see who's here. Besides Sonny Tabor, the most wanted young hombre in the Southwest, we sees Jim Hazel, the forest ranger, an' Shorty Masters, the mule driver, along with his lanky pard, Willie Wetherbee.

An' settin' way off in a dark corner we sees somebody else. Lookin' closer, we discovers that it's Calamity Boggs an' Shorty Stevens.

"How're yuh, Calamity?" we asks.

The big cowpoke groans. "Jest turrible, Boss," he says. "I'm agoin' ter die right pronto, I reckon, o' hydrophoby or somethin'."

"Yuh been bit by a mad dawg?" we asks, feelin' real worried.

"Not yet, I ain't," says Calamity, "but I'm agoin' ter be on my way home ter-night. Somethin' turrible's goin' ter happen, anyhow."

We laughs. "Waal, afore yuh cash in, Calamity, we'll read a few letters from the readin' hombres."

Fishin' inter the sack, we pulls out a letter. Here it is:

**DEAR RANGE BOSS:** This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, and here's hoping you don't overlook it.

All the W. W. W. stories are good, but some are better than others. It's hard to pick a favorite, but I especially like Shorty Masters and his mules, as well as that pard of the little freighter—Willie Wetherbee, or the Sonora Kid, or whoever he is. I hope he gets that Del Rio bank robbery straightened out, so the sheriffs will leave him alone.

Hungry and Rusty are all right, and Buck Foster—well, by heifers, one of these days, he will be a horned toad, if he doesn't quit saying that!

Yours till the Shootin' Fool gets a tan.  
F. R. WASHBURN.  
Annapolis, Maryland.

"Thet jasper don't wish I'd git thet Del Rio business straightened out any worse'n I do," says Willie Wetherbee. "Some day, I'll catch that blond bandit, an' then—" The tall cowpoke shrugs his shoulders an' don't finish.

Then we pulls out another letter, which same is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the second time I have written to you. I sure hope that it will find its way into print.

All the waddies on your spread are favorites of mine. I don't see how Sonny Tabor has the nerve to come in for the meetings, though. There are so many lawmen around, I should think he'd be afraid they'd arrest him.

The two Texas Rangers, Hungry and Rusty, are great. So are Calamity Boggs and Shorty Stevens. Keep them coming.

I could keep right on writing about all of them—Shorty Masters, Kid Wolf, Circle J, and all the rest. But it would take up too much space.

I don't think that Buck Foster will ever quit Circle J, even though he is always threatening to.

I wish you would put Circle J, Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, and Lum Yates in every week. But Lum ought to get himself a pair of sixes. He'd look more like a real cowboy, then.

Reckon I've said enough, now. Yours till Buck Foster really quits the Circle J spread.  
JOHN ROBERTS.

Charleston, Illinois.

An' after readin' thet, we draws this one out o' the bag:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: If you don't print this letter, I won't believe there is a Wranglers Corner.

I have been reading 3W for a little over a year, and I think it is the best magazine ever printed. My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Señor Red Mask, Circle J, Hungry and Rusty, Shorty Masters and his pard, Jim Hazel, and all the rest.

How about printing some more stories about Smoky Langdon and the Ranny Kid? Also, let's see a lot more of Johnny Forty-five and fat old George Krumm.

That O. B. Joyful hombre ought to be shot for saying that you can't shoot from the hip. Anybody who says that Lum Yates is yellow ought to be hung. Any one saying that any of the 3W waddies are yellow ought to be knifed.

Yours till Buck Foster gets a new vest.  
DONALD VELSOR.  
West Hempstead, New York.

"Thet O. B. Joyful gent shore starts somethin', every time he writes in, don't he, Boss?" chuckles Sonny Tabor.

"He shore does, Sonny," we agrees. "An' he shore has started a flood o' letters sayin' thet an hombre *kin* shoot from the hip. We'll probably git another letter from him right soon now."

"He'll prob'ly say, next time, thet a waddy cain't rope from the back of a runnin' bronc," says Willie Wetherbee, laughin'.

We goes on, then ter the next letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: How are you and all the waddies? I hope you're well. Some people don't believe that there is a Wranglers Corner, but you can put me down as one who does.

Well, I guess I'll begin telling you what I think of all the waddies on the 3W spread. I think they are just great. I howl so much over Buck Foster's and Joe Scott's arguments that I am always in danger of getting the hiccups.

My favorites—well, I guess they are *all* my favorites. Are you going to stop the Señor Red Mask and the Ranny Kid stories? Don't do it! You'll lose a lot of friends.

The hombres who tell you to leave out Circle J are loco. The magazine would be a total loss without them.

I call for more Kid Wolf stories, more Johnny Forty-five, and more Sonny Tabor.

I guess it's time to say, "Adios." Yours till W. W. W. goes bankrupt—and may that day never come.  
MARY KENT.

Brooklyn, New York.



Then we comes ter this one:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I've been a W. W. W. reader fer nearly three years now, and haven't got to express my opinion of the waddies.

I think thet Forty-five feller shore lives up ter his name, an' thet pard of his shore makes a Krumm of hisself.

I don't see why thet Billy West don't l'arn thet Buck Foster ter speak a better language than he does, so maybe he and thet carrot-top can get along better. Sing Lo, him gets velly smart sometimes, but he seems ter get along with them all.

Thet soldier o' misfortune is some guy. He gets right into one mess, and no more'n gets out, when he is right into another one. But he shore cleans the tough hombre's hides out with a dose of Wolf lead.

Sonny Tabor shore has a tough time with the law. He can't go nowheres, but what he runs right inter trouble. But he is always on the good side, and I think that's why he don't get killed so easy. And, boy! Can he shoot? He can even beat Buck Foster in riding horses. He could outride Buck any ol' day.

I think you had better put Johnny and George in a little more often, because all the W. W. W. readers have nearly forgotten them—especially the ones around here in Oklahoma.

I'd like ter hear that Whistlin' Kid whistle. I bet he is a crackajack. But I think he ought ter change his tune, because he might wear out the "Cowboy's Lament."

Yours till Buck Foster yanks his mustache out.

CRAIG CAMPBELL.

Welch, Oklahoma.

An' thet, we figures, is a purty nice letter. The other waddies agree. We picks out another letter, then, an' reads.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is the first time I have ever written to the Corner. My favorites are Kid Wolf, Circle J, Sonny Tabor, Lum Yates, the Bar U twins, Hungry and Rusty, and all the rest.

I read one of the stories about Calamity Boggs and Shorty Stevens a little while ago, and I think they're *bueno*. Put in more stories about them.

I would like to hear of the Matchless Waddy again. He was *bueno*, too.

Like a lot of others, I would like to drown the hombres who call Lum Yates yellow. They must be plumb loco.

Buck Foster's and Joe Scott's arguing is

great. But I can't pay for a new vest for Buck, if his old one bursts after hearin' this. I think Buck Foster is the best waddy on the spread!

Yours till some one beats Kid Wolf to the draw.

ARTHUR J. LING.

New York, New York.

"The readin' hombres are shore stickin' up fer Lum, ain't they?" asks Shorty Masters. "Must make the young waddy feel purty good, huh?"

"He allows as how he don't care what folks says 'bout him," we says. "But we know he does. Reckon letters like thet do make him feel good."

Here's the next letter we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a boy of ten, and my opinion is that the 3W is the best magazine I have ever read, bar none.

My favorite is Sonny Tabor. Tell Mr. Stevens to keep on writing about him.

My other favorites are Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf, Circle J, the Bar U twins, Jim Hazel, and Lum Yates. I've heard something about taking Circle J out of the magazine. If you do, you will lose one subscriber.

The Jim Hazel stories are getting a bit dull. Tell Mr. Harrington to pep them up a bit.

Keep Hungry and Rusty going. They are getting good.

I will always be ready for a Bud Jones or a Whistlin' Kid story.

"The Fightin' Brand" was a good tale. The Señor Red Mask stories were punk. They were the worst stories you have ever had in 3W.

The Shorty Masters stories are getting better and better. But how about sending out a few Ranny Kid stories again?

Yours till Jim Hazel turns outlaw.

ALFRED LASHER, JR.

New York, New York.

"Reckon he'll stay ours fer quite a spell, then, eh, Jimmy?" we laughs.

"Yuh can't tell," chuckles Sonny Tabor.

Jim Hazel laughs. "I hope so, Boss," he says. "But as Sonny says, you can never tell. I *might* go hay-wire sometime and shoot somebody or raid a gold mine or something."

"Well," we says, after a minute, "we reckon we got time enough left fer another letter, pervidin' we kin find a short one. It's gittin' sort o' late."

The waddies look at the clock, an' some of 'em begin ter fidgit. We draws out another letter, though, an' here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have already sent in three letters to the Corner. None of them has been printed. If you don't use this one, I'll know the Corner is a fake.

Tell Jim Hazel to keep his new dog. The stories I like best are Kid Wolf, Circle J, Johnny Forty-five, the Bar U twins, and Hungry and Rusty.

Tell Buck Foster to stick his head in a bucket of water and cool off. Also tell Lum to pack a gun and take a shot at some of his enemies.

Adios, hombres,

BILLY THE KID BARRETT.

"Reckon that's all fer ter-night, gents," we says. "If yo're goin' ter git back ter yore home ranges, yuh'd better git started."

They all stand up an' trail their spurs out inter the cool night. In a minute, their cayuses' hoofs are drummin' away, an' the Corner gits closed up fer another week.

THE RANGE BOSS.

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