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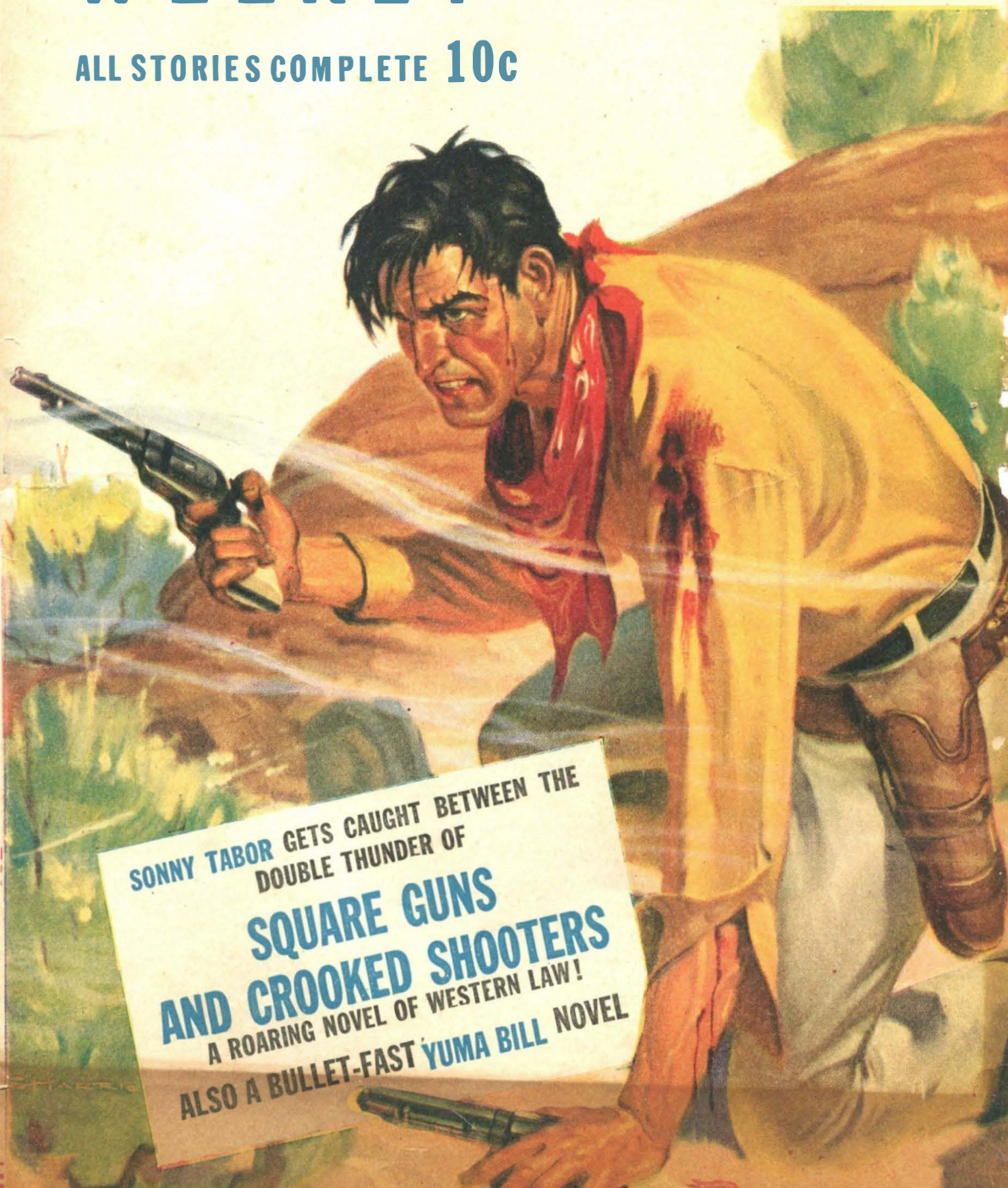
# WILD WEST

JAN. 9, '43

WEEKLY

JANUARY 9, 1943

ALL STORIES COMPLETE 10c



SONNY TABOR GETS CAUGHT BETWEEN THE  
DOUBLE THUNDER OF  
**SQUARE GUNS  
AND CROOKED SHOOTERS**  
A ROARING NOVEL OF WESTERN LAW!  
ALSO A BULLET-FAST YUMA BILL NOVEL



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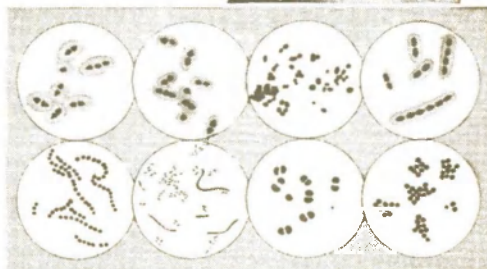
The more of these germs Listerine Antiseptic destroys, the less chance there is of a "mass invasion" of the tissue, followed by the discomfort of a cold and sore throat.

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TOP ROW, left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus Viridans, Friedlander's Bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus hemolyticus, Bacillus influenzae, Micrococcus Catarrhalis, Staphylococcus Aureus.

**The "Secondary Invaders"**

Above are some types of "secondary invaders", millions of which may exist on the mouth and throat surfaces. They may cause no harm until body resistance is lowered when they may invade the tissue and set up or aggravate the troublesome aspects of the infection you call a cold. You can see how important it is to attack them before they get the upper hand.





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# WILD WEST WEEKLY

CONTENTS JANUARY 9, 1943 VOL. 160, No. 1 Whole No. 2099

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## SONNY TABOR IN A BIG NOVEL OF—

### **SQUARE GUNS AND CROOKED SHOOTERS** Ward M. Stevens 9

His secret job as an undercover lawman lay behind him and a three-pronged boothill bushwhack trap lay ahead as Sonny Tabor plunged onto the outlaw trail once more!

## SMASHING YUMA BILL NOVEL

### **REDWOOD RENEGADES** . . . . . Ed Earl Repp . . . . . 55

"Eurekanose!" that livid-mouthed parrot screeched—and Yuma Bill and Beanpole Badger, overhearing the strange word, found themselves owners of a key to Hades!

## DRAMATIC NOVELETTE OF THE COLT CLAN

### **HALF BROTHER TO THE OWLHOOT** George Michener . . . 86

Johnny Coin learned the hard-case way that rescuing an owl-hoot relative from the wild-cat bunch is a tough assignment—especially if the kin doesn't want to be rescued!

## SHORT STORIES

### **RED JACK MISSING** . . . . . Hapsburg Liebe . . . 39

—and that wasn't all that was gone from that killer-stacked deck. There was also a vicious trigger ace to be accounted for!

### **KILLER CLUE** . . . . . Guy L. Maynard . . . 44

All Dal Strong had siding him in that rustler-and-dry-gulch show-down was a ketch pup who persisted in barking at the wrong time!

### **HORSE TALK** . . . . . Stephen Payne . . . 81

"Cayuses can't speak!" that thief protested—then proceeded to find out different in one plumb uneasy lesson!

## WESTERN FEATURES

### **A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS** . . . . . 6

### **¿QUIEN SABE? (Western Quiz)** . . . . . 80

### **READERS' BRANDING IRONS** . . . . . 112

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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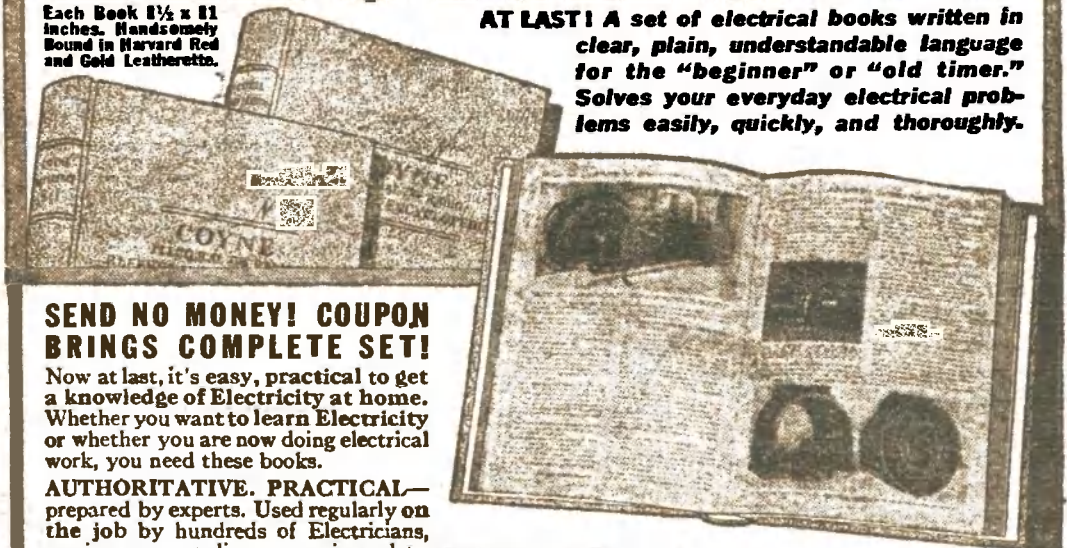
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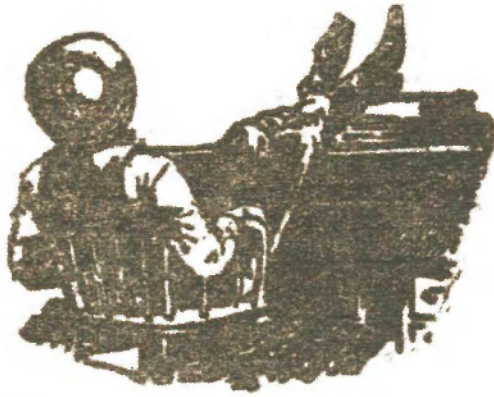
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## A CHAT WITH THE RANGE BOSS

MANY of our readers take a personal interest in the adventures and personal situations of their favorite fiction characters. This is understandable, for some of the characters seem mighty real. When characters seem real, that fact is owing to the skill of the authors.

One favorite character whose particular set-up has been criticized by a few readers is Sonny Tabor. A few of our customers have complained about Tabor's role as an undercover lawman. He's been hamstrung in that undercover set-up, some readers say.

So Author Ward M. Stevens decided it was time to give Tabor a change of spiritual scenery, sort of. You'll read the result in this issue's grippin' complete novel. Here's a note on the subject from the author.

DEAR RANGE BOSS: The new Tabor novel, "Square Guns and Crooked Shooters," is dedicated to those readers who have objected to the undercover role that Sonny played while trying to smash the desperado gangs who were overrunning his native Arizona. And it's especially dedicated to that

D. W. Boggs hombre, who has been one of 3W's "best friends and severest critics." And what a severe one he can be sometimes! Ouch! Let's hope we can keep him as a friend, anyhow.

Sonny Tabor's job turned out to be a thankless one. But now he's out of it—with the lawmen of the Southwest hotter than ever on his trail. Politics sometimes upsets the apple cart, and when the higher-ups get the boot so, usually, do the higher-ups' friends.

Well, the story, I hope, will explain what's happened. Sonny isn't as sorry about it as he might be; he's pretty much accustomed to dodging posses and breaking jails.

Yores,

WARD M. STEVENS.

P. S.—And I honestly believe that Paint, Sonny's ornery pinto, is glad to be really on the dodge again. The little cayuse was beginning to fatten up!

Waal, Ward, we'll see how the readers like the change. This is an invitation for them to let us know.

And, by cracky, it turns out that yore Soldier of Misfortune, the colorful, buckskin-clad Kid Wolf, is the star of next week's thrillin' complete novel. The title is "Skull Riders of Panamint," and it has one of yore best plots, Ward, in case you don't know. I'm right sure the Kid'll add to his fame in this adventure, and he already is one of the best-known Western characters.

Another famous Kid, who's different in looks and character and general situation, will hold down the starred but mighty dangerous spot in the top novelette. He's the Oklahoma Kid and the title of the story is "Noose Dodger's Nemesis," by Lee Bond. Plenty excitin' happenin's in this one, take it from me.

There'll be also an unusual novelette by Charles N. Heckelmann, "Desert Road to Ruin," and a flock of top-hand short stories. *Adios.*

THE RANGE BOSS.



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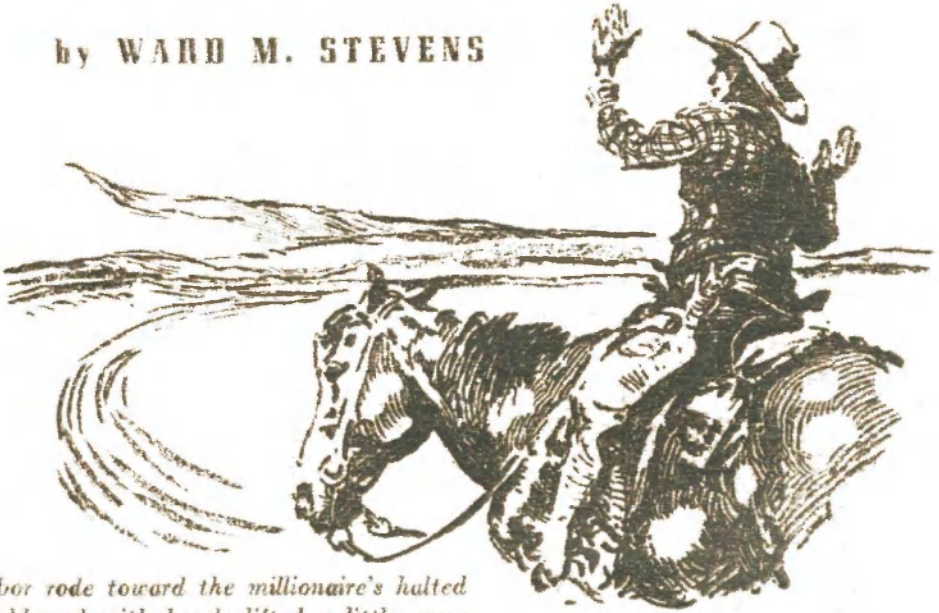
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# SQUARE GUNS AND CROOKED SROOTERS

by WARD M. STEVENS



*Tabor rode toward the millionaire's halted backboard with hands lifted a little more than shoulder-high.*

**That new governor sent Sonny Tabor back to the outlaw trails—and into a three-way bushwhack frame-up which would put the ex-undercover man deeper into trouble or deep into boothill!**

## CHAPTER I.

### A TRUCE IS FINISHED.

It was a bitter dose for the lawmen of Phoenix to swallow, but they had to do it. The city marshal and four of his under officers stood on the main stem with several Maricopa County deputy sheriffs and angrily but helplessly watched the most wanted outlaw in Arizona ride leisurely by them. He was Sonny Tabor!

The lawmen fairly bristled with guns; it was broad daylight, too, but

there wasn't a thing they could do about it. Tabor even had the impudence to wave a careless hand at them as he rode by! And the lawmen could only gnaw their lips and swear.

The marshal reached—not for his gun, but for his watch. "Four o'clock," he growled. "And we can't lay a hand on that insolent young pup until midnight."

"And then where'll he be?" One of the others shrugged. "Unless, of course, he makes a deal. Do you think he'll come to terms?"

"I sort of think he will," the marshal replied. "He's human like anyone else, and he'll want to live. He ought to know it's death he's choosing if he refuses."

"Sometimes I think he *ain't* human," a deputy said, watching the young outlaw on the black-and-white pinto until he had passed from their line of sight. "That smilin' killer has downed more men than a centipede has got legs. And the way he's busted out of jails and cheated the rope—"

"He'll slip up sometime—for keeps," was the wishful statement from another of the marshal's men. "When he does, I'd like to be in on it—sixty-five hundred dollars, dead or alive, is a nice piece of reward money."

Except for the lawmen, who had been notified of Tabor's visit, there were few on the crowded streets of Phoenix who paid the notorious fugitive more than a casual glance, for he looked very little different from the dozens of other riders who thronged the town. He might have been a cowhand temporarily out of a job; broke, probably, but not caring much. Tabor was a little under average height and, except for his powerful arms and wide shoulders, was lightly built. His range clothes—batwing chaps of brown leather, blue denims, flannel shirt and big cream-colored Stetson—were neat, but had seen hard use. Just a dime-a-dozen cowboy, thought nearly everyone who glanced his way. Arizona was full of them.

It was rather a special day in the capital, and although the banks and some of the business houses were closed, the saloons were doing a rushing business. The newsboys, too, were doing well, and on their papers were large black headlines:

## NEW GOVERNOR TAKES OFFICE TODAY!

SAM FRAZER BEGINS TERM IN  
GUBERNATORIAL CHANGE

Having defeated former Governor John Meredith by a narrow margin in the recent election, Samuel B. Frazer, ex-rancher and stockman, today takes over reins of Arizona's government.

The public ceremonies were long since over, but there were still quite a number of buggies, carriages, and saddle horses standing near the State House when Tabor reached it. He found an empty space at one of the ornate iron hitch rails and stepped from the stirrup, brushing the worst of the alkali dust from his clothes. For this wasn't any ordinary call he was making.

"I'm goin' up among the bigwigs, Paint," he said, giving his pinto a slap of affection. "I'll be back soon—I think."

He ran lightly up the steps that led into the big, gray building, his spurs chiming. Inside the high doorway an official stopped him brusquely.

"You can't go in there, puncher. The new governor is holding a private session in his office. You've got to have an appointment."

The man was looking the visitor over disdainfully. Sonny seemed even younger than his years, hence his nickname. His ready smile and his innocent blue eyes, even the dimple that marked one bronzed cheek, contributed to his appearance of harmless boyishness. The State House flunky would have been surprised if he had guessed what was going on behind those mild eyes, or if he had known that the "dimple" was the old scar of a bullet.

"Governor Frazer made an appointment with me," said the out-



law quietly. "My name is Tabor."

The dignitary gulped, his swallow sticking in his throat. Paling, he hastily stepped back out of the visitor's way. He seemed to see Tabor's deadly armament for the first time—the perfectly matched blue-black guns glistening in low, tied-down holsters; the twin belts, shining with the brass of cartridges, that were rattle-snake-coiled around Tabor's lean hips. When the man recovered his voice, his politeness was almost overdone.

"Excuse me, sir, I . . . I didn't know," he stammered. "You'll find his excellency upstairs in Room 17. Go right on up, sir."

Sonny Tabor thanked him pleasantly, then ascended the curving stairs. His steps lagged a little as he gained the stately corridor above, for his spirits were heavy. The last time he had been here it was to see another governor, a man who had been his friend. Now a new chief executive had summoned him here, granting him a twenty-four hour immunity from arrest. For what purpose?

He could only guess—with a feeling of foreboding. He had a hunch that he hadn't been called here to listen to good news. He hesitated as he came to the correctly numbered transom. Then he turned the heavy bronze knob, opened the door and stepped inside.

It was a large room, well-lighted and with immaculate white-plastered walls. Seated at a long table in the center were the governor and several of his advisers, most of them smoking cigars. It was a solemn, stern-faced group, and the new governor was especially severe. Sonny picked him out at once—a narrow-jawed man with a bulging forehead, clear and cold of eye.

The fugitive announced himself briefly. "My name's Tabor. You gentlemen wanted to talk to me?"

The governor's friends were staring hard—as if expecting to see the outlaw wearing horns and a tail—but Governor Frazer calmly motioned him to an empty chair opposite him. Then he picked up a sheaf of papers and began thumbing them through.

"Yes, I've granted you this short amnesty in order to reach some kind of an understanding. Yours is the worst criminal record in the history of the Territory, young man, but I believe in a fair deal even for such as you."

"Thank you, sir," said the outlaw dryly. "I'm listening."

"You had a chance once, Tabor, and you threw it away." Frazer frowned, glancing at the papers again. "The former governor was unwise enough to grant you a pardon, even appointing you to the Arizona Rangers. You betrayed your trust by turning coyote again."

A flush darkened Tabor's sun-burned face. There was no reason now why he should keep silent. "I was working undercover, all the time, for Governor Meredith. Not even the Rangers knew that I've been working on the law's side, but it's true, just the same."

Frazer's jaw hardened. "There's no evidence of that in the records—and as Meredith's taking a long rest in California, I can't check on it." He and the others were sneering incredulously. "Even if what you say is true, Tabor," Governor Frazer went on, "it would make no difference now. This new administration won't do business that way! You've been convicted of murder several times over and if justice was done, you'd hang. But I asked you here to make you a proposition, and this is it. If you'll surrender to the law

without further trouble, I'll see that the death penalty won't be applied. It will be life in the penitentiary."

Sonny Tabor was silent. It was his turn to stare in amazement. Did Frazer think he would give himself up under such conditions? If he had to make a choice like that, it would be better to be hanged and have done with it.

It was true that Sonny had been forced to kill many times since he was first outlawed, through no fault of his own, when he was in his early teens. But whenever he had taken life it had been in desperate defense of his own, or to protect others from death. Although he could have done so, dozens of times, he had never killed an officer of the law to escape capture.

"If you're going to give me a life term in the pen," he said slowly, "you'll have to catch me first."

Frazer's cigar had gone out and he relighted it. "Unless you accept my offer, Tabor, you'll hang if you're taken alive; you won't get off with a life term in that case. I'll tell you what I'll do, just to show that I'll go more than halfway. If you will surrender today I'll see that you don't get a sentence of more than fifteen years."

At this "leniency" on the governor's part, there was a snort of indignation from one of his advisers. He was an immense fat man, expensively dressed. His round face, pink and perspiring, shook like a blob of jelly as he protested against Frazer's new offer. Sonny had seen the man's picture in the papers, and he recognized him as the very wealthy Lorenzo Greene, financier and politician, the owner of a chain of banks throughout the Southwest.

"Sam, I object to your offer of fifteen years for this . . . this criminal and killer!" sputtered Greene. "A

light sentence like that won't discourage the plague of bandits who have robbed my banks of thousands of dollars! Arizona is the crossroads for the murderers of six States and two nations, and such men can't be handled with kid gloves. If a man so notorious as Tabor gets off so easy—"

"Maybe you're right, Greene," Frazer said. "But I made the offer of fifteen years, and I'll stand by it. Well, Tabor, what's your decision?"

Sonny got slowly to his feet and put his Stetson firmly in place. For many months he had been risking his life for justice, and the cause he had believed to be right. And now he was offered his reward—the penitentiary. None of this was ex-Governor Meredith's fault, for Meredith had always treated him squarely. It wasn't even Frazer's fault, especially. For Sonny's record was, after all, red and black with blood and smoke. But he had done nothing of which he was ashamed.

"Well, speak up!" commanded Governor Frazer impatiently as Sonny still did not speak. "I want an answer, yes or no. One that I can understand."

Something happened then! Tabor's two Colt .45s came jumping from their holsters as if jerked by invisible strings, for the movement of the outlaw's hands was too fast for the eye to catch. And they came spitting fire and smoke! The room rocked under the blending of many explosions coming so swiftly upon each other that they were one continuous thunder crash. Before the governor and his friends could dive under the table, the shooting was over. And Sonny Tabor had calmly walked out.

"For the love o'— He—he didn't hit any of us, did he?" Lorenzo Greene gasped, his face less pink than



it had been. "What did that loco outlaw mean by—"

"Look at the wall," Frazer said dazedly.

Tabor's twelve bullets had left this pattern on the white plaster of the governor's office: NO.

The bullet-written word was quite plain and readable.

Frazer had his answer. One that he could understand!

CONSCIOUS that his every move was watched, and that the Phoenix lawmen would try to keep him in sight until after the midnight deadline, Sonny Tabor ate his supper, then rode out of town, headed south.

An attempt was made to follow him, but in the mountainous desert-land it was not difficult to throw off pursuit. As soon as it was dark, he turned back again, straight into Phoenix. He was a firm believer in the policy of doing the unexpected.

"We're owlhooters again, sure enough, Paint," he said gamely. "But I reckon we're used to it."

He was a little sheepish over the shooting-up of the governor's office, for it was seldom that he made grandstand displays. He had simply lost his temper; and that was a rare thing for him, too.

"And I haven't any cartridges to waste, either," he thought ruefully as the lights of the city began to show up ahead of him again.

Taking the side streets, he rode to the railroad yards. A noisy locomotive was switching back and forth, and a freight train was being made up. Waiting until he was sure he was unseen, the fugitive hid Paint behind the water tank, then walked down to the stockyards in search of a grain door. Finding one, he nailed some wooden boards across it for cleats, using the butt of one of his guns as a hammer.

Then he cautiously approached the train on the side away from the depot, leading Paint through the darkness. He forced open the door of a box car, and as it was loaded only with some boxes at one end, he led his cayuse into it, up the grain door he used as a loading ramp. This wasn't the first time he and his bronc had traveled this way—it was one of the reasons why the law officers were often so confused. No wonder, after having it reported that the outlaw had apparently traveled several hundred miles in a day, they swore that either Sonny or Paint—or both—were possessed of the devil!

Sonny had hardly closed the sliding door of the box car when, with a jerk and snort from the engine, the train began to get under way, the couplings rattling like a long line of toppled dominoes.

Suddenly the outlaw's hair tightened on his scalp. From somewhere in the pitch blackness of the moving car came a loud and ringing laugh. He was not alone!

## CHAPTER II.

### JAILBIRD.

TABOR'S hand moved away from his gun holster, for the laughing continued and there was genuine merriment in it. It came from behind the stack of boxes.

"Now that's what I call hoboing in style!" said his unseen fellow traveler. "It's the first time I ever saw a tramp bumming a ride for his hoss! I call it pretty good. Side-door Pullman for man and beast. But wait until I strike a light."

A match flared up and the speaker crawled out of his hiding place, lighting a stub of candle and gluing it to the top of a box with its own hot grease. He was a tall man of about twenty-six, but his pronounced stoop

and hair that was white at the temples caused him to seem much older. He wore a cheap, shoddy suit of clothes, but in spite of his pallor, Sonny saw that he was no Easterner. The man hadn't got those rainbow legs by hairpinning rocking chairs!

"Welcome to my private car," the stranger said, still chuckling. "And that goes for your hoss, too. Mighty likely-lookin' bronc, ain't he?" He stopped laughing and his eyes grew somber. "It's been five years since I've sat in a saddle, and it seems like fifty! I'm sure lookin' forward to ridin' again."

Sonny knew there was only one thing that would keep a cowboy off a horse for five years. The man caught his eye and nodded slightly.

"Yes, I'm just out of prison," he said sharply. "You can tell by this free suit that I didn't escape. I served my time. Manslaughter. My name is Harry Stone. Now you won't have to ask so many questions."

"I don't ask questions. My name's Tabor."

Understanding dawned on Stone's gray face, and his expression became bitter and sardonic. "I happen to kill a man in a fight and serve time. You've killed dozens, from what I hear, and you're free."

"If you've squared your debt with the law, you're freer than I am," Tabor said quietly. "I'll be free when I'm in boothill."

Harry Stone blinked at him for a moment and he seemed to be thinking. "Sorry, Tabor," he said, extending his hand. "I've always heard from the boys at the Iron Corral that you're a square shooter. You haven't got anything to eat, have you?" He grinned. "I've had no chuck since morning."

Sonny had some provisions in his

saddle pocket, and soon Stone was gratefully knawing a huge piece of jerked venison. By this time, the rumbling freight train had left Phoenix far behind and was creeping steadily northwestward through the starlit desert.

"Two of those boxes yonder are marked *canned sardines*, said Stone between mouthfuls. "I got so hungry I pried one open. Take a look at it."

Curiously, Sonny examined the opened box by the light of the flickering candle. "Why, it's full of ammunition—.45 and .30-30 cartridges," he said in surprise. "Not very nourishing grub. But how come they're marked like this, I wonder?"

"You'll notice that they're consigned to William Lashly, 7Y7 Ranch, Mountain Springs," growled Stone. "He's a neighbor of mine—owns a big spread near my little place. It's because of him that I went to the pen. I had to down one of his gunnies. Coincidence, ain't it?"

"He must be quite a joker, having the shipment marked this way."

"Lashly's humor is on the practical side," said Harry Stone. "It's just that he doesn't want folks to know how much ammunition his crowd burns."

"So you have a ranch," Tabor mused. "You won't be needing a top hand, will you? But wait a minute; that's out. You want to stay out of trouble, and if you hired me you'd be guilty of harboring an outlaw. Think no more about it."

Harry Stone thought for a while, and then he grinned. "I'll take a chance. They can't prove I know who you are, I reckon. To the public, you'll be—well, Frank Johnson is as good a name as any." He hesitated for a moment, giving the out-



law a steady look. "You savvy, don't you, that it isn't as a gunman I'm hiring you? You really want to do honest range work?"

Sonny told him that was exactly what he wanted.

THE outlaw had intended to leave the freight train at its last stop before dawn, but now he changed his plans to fit Harry Stone's. This was just the opportunity he had hoped for. According to Harry, his little Circle X Ranch was in a lonely, out-of-the-way spot. With luck, he might be able to lie low there indefinitely doing the work he loved, riding the range.

Harry had inherited the ranch from his dead parents, and he had been making a go of things when tragedy had struck. Lashly, owner of the 7Y7, had wanted to buy him out at a fraction of the little spread's real value. He had finally sent his foreman over to see Harry, and in the fight that followed, Harry had killed the man in self-defense. Lashly had seen to it, however, that the Circle X owner was convicted of manslaughter. He had even tried to make the charge one of first-degree murder.

"But I don't hold any grudge, especially—leastways, I try not to," said Harry Stone. "All I want now is to be let alone."

He told Sonny that his ranch had been unoccupied while he was in prison, for he had refused to lease it to anyone. He had sold off his stock and had left enough money in the Mountain Springs bank to take care of taxes. So he and Sonny would be starting from scratch.

For most of the following day they stuck to the slowly laboring freight. There were many short stops, but no trainman happened to look into their car. Harry said it would not be

necessary for them to go as far as Mountain Springs; they would leave the train at Chico, a tiny settlement ten miles from it. Meanwhile, the character of the landscape had changed. From a crack in the door, Sonny watched the magnificent scenery unroll, saw the vast oceans of yucca, cholla, and mesquite give way



to cedar and scrub pine. Since the night before, they had climbed thousands of feet above dry arid wastes of the desert.

"It's time to get my grain-door ramp ready for Paint's exit, I guess," Sonny said, as the train slowed for the Chico station.

Five minutes later the brakeman, walking up toward the engine from the caboose, suddenly stopped and dabbed at his cinder-reddened eyes. From a box car he thought he saw two men *and a horse* nonchalantly emerging. The vision seemed to vanish into the brush alongside.

"Jumpin' brownies!" the brakie groaned, breaking a whiskey flask against a car wheel. "I'm seein' things! Never again! This is the last time I'll do any drinkin' on the job!"

## CHAPTER III.

## THE HAUNTED RANCH.

AT the little store in Chico, Harry Stone bought some groceries, using some of the ten dollars that had been handed him upon his discharge from the penitentiary. Then they set out for the Circle X, taking turns at riding and walking up the steep and treacherous trails. By the time they sighted the ranchhouse it was growing dark, the sun having set behind a bank of lurid scarlet clouds.

Splendid grazing land surrounded the Circle X headquarters, but there was something gloomy and depressing about the house. Time and the weather hadn't treated it kindly; its paint was peeling, and rank weeds grew in the yard around it. Against the fiery red background of the sunset the place looked sinister and strangely lonesome.

"It'll look a lot better in a few days, after we've fixed things up," said Harry Stone, trying to be cheerful.

Paint was watered and fed and lodged in the small, sagging stable. Then the two men entered the house, Harry unlocking it with the corroded key he had hidden under the porch five years before. They went in through an inclosed side porch, or gallery, then the Circle X owner found some kerosene still in a jar and he filled and lighted the lamp. Everything smelled of dust and long disuse, and they opened the windows to air it out.

"It's just as I left it—there was nothin' here worth breakin' in to steal," Harry Stone said, after a tour of inspection. "I got a good gun hid under the flooring."

They made a fire in the rusty kitchen stove, and after a hot meal they both felt better. Harry pulled up a loose board in the floor and

took the oiled silk wrappings from an ivory-handled Colt .45. It was in perfect condition.

"I hope I'll never have to use this," the ex-convict muttered. "I've never shot anyone. No," he said, seeing Sonny's look, "that man-slaughter, as they called it, I did it with a butcher knife."

Tabor must have looked rather shocked, for he hurried to explain. "It happened there in the gallery. I had a ham hung up out there, and I was cuttin' off a slice just before I turned in for the night. I was only half-dressed, wasn't wearin' my gun, when that Haggerty hombre jumped me. When he pulled his guns I struck out with my knife and got him." Harry's bleached face jerked nervously at the recollection. "I'll never forget it—it was horrible. He was dead in five minutes in spite of all I could do."

"There's some things a man had better *try* to forget, and a thing like that is one of 'em," advised Sonny Tabor, and to get his friend's mind on other matters he began talking about the ranch and plans for the future.

Harry lighted a cigarette and soon felt better. He wound the old wooden clock, brought out a dusty deck of cards, and they passed several hours playing "pitch." Finally they turned in. There were several bunks in the bedroom, and Sonny spread his soogans on one by the window.

Tired as he was, he didn't find it easy to fall asleep. Harry Stone, too, was restless, for Sonny could hear him tossing and moving about. It was very dark outside, with no moon and only a dim glimmer of stars. Somewhere in the distance a coyote complained of its hunger, and it was answered by another whose lot in life was even worse. The



melancholy duet finally died away, but the tune was taken up by an owl in the trees near the house. Under the house were gnawing and scratching sounds. Rats, probably. Sonny usually didn't allow such noises to disturb him, but he knew that Harry was awake, and his restlessness seemed contagious.

When the clock struck an even dozen times, he heard Harry say, "Wish I hadn't wound up that thing—it was just at midnight, Sonny, when I stabbed Haggerty. I know I'm loco to be talkin' like this, but—"

Tabor was about to agree that he *would* be loco if he didn't settle down. Then Sonny heard a mysterious sound on the gallery outside. It was a prolonged, wheezing grunt, followed by a loud groan.

The outlaw had no belief in the supernatural; his nerves, too, had been tested by a thousand perils and not found wanting. But now an icy tingle went thrilling down his spine and he felt his heart hammering hard.

Following the groan came strangled, coughing noises and a frightful splattering sound, the unmistakable splashing of fluid on the floor of the gallery.

"It's Haggerty!" Harry Stone gasped. "It's him, I tell you, Tabor! It's the ghost of that man I killed!"

"Take it easy, Harry," Tabor said, grabbing up one of his guns and a handful of matches. His friend got up and followed him as Sonny groped his way out through the kitchen toward the gallery. That took great courage on Stone's part, for his teeth were chattering with awful dread.

Sonny struck a light as he pushed open the door of the porch. There was nobody there. But mottling the boards of the gallery floor were pud-

dles and rivulets of dark and shining red.

Harry Stone gave a queer cry, and he would have fallen if Sonny hadn't thrown an arm around him for support. The face of the Circle X owner was cold and sweating with horror.

"It's like it was *that night!*" he babbled. "It's Haggerty's blood again!"

"It's blood, all right, but it's not Haggerty's," the outlaw said calmly. "You've got enemies, Harry, and I've got a hunch that they want to scare you away from your ranch. Don't let 'em break your nerve by a fool trick like this, amigo."

Stone pointed downward with a shaking finger. "But how . . . how do you explain that?"

Sonny examined the evidence by the light of the lamp he brought from the kitchen. It was the blood from a recently killed cow or calf, as the texture of some coarse red hairs he discovered in it conclusively proved. When he explained this to Stone, the nervous rancher soon recovered from his fright.

"It's a good thing I wasn't here alone. I'd be runnin' yet." He sighed in huge relief.

"Whoever did it probably thought you *were* alone. They knew you were about to be freed from the pen, and they got ready for you. When they saw the lamplight here tonight they thought it was time to start pulling their tricks. Now let's hit the alfalfa and get some shut-eye!"

**B**y the next morning Harry Stone was all right again. He was raging mad, too, and that was a good sign. He was sure that he knew who was behind the night's excitement. The only man who had ever wanted the Circle X enough to do such a thing was Bill Lashly of the 7Y7, and Sonny agreed that all the evi-

dence pointed in that direction. The unscrupulous ranchman had probably counted upon Harry being a little "stir-crazy" from his term in prison, and the 7Y7 owner had hoped to frighten Stone away forever.

After breakfast they explored the Circle X pretty thoroughly, and Harry's suspicions were confirmed. Lashly was using this small but well-watered ranch as a holding ground for much of his stock. They saw plenty of the 7Y7 cattle and horses, and at Harry's suggestion Sonny Tabor put his rope on one of the latter, a frosty-faced roan.

The animal bore the Circle X brand in two places, one of them a false vent to denote change of ownership, and it was also marked with the 7Y7 burn. Harry said that he had missed this horse when he had rounded up and sold his stock. He now angrily took possession of his property again, slapping on an old saddle that he had kept. At least he had a horse to ride now!

The next couple of days were spent in working around ranch headquarters, repairing and straightening up, and a vast improvement was made. There were no further visits by the "ghost," nor by anyone else. They had discovered that their midnight visitor had come and gone on a very-much-alive cayuse, and had left "sign" pointed to the Lashly ranch!

"It'll be quite a while before you get any pay, Sonny," said Harry Stone, after doing some figuring. "I've got less than fifty dollars in the bank."

"I'm not worrying." The outlaw chuckled. "I just wish I could help you, but I'm down to my last six bits."

"This ranch has got to be restocked," mused the Circle X owner. "I won't have any trouble in getting

a bank loan. The place is easily worth ten or twelve thousand dollars, and I'll put a mortgage on it for as much money as I need. Tomorrow we'll ride to Mountain Springs and see to it."

So at dawn the next morning, the two friends saddled up their horses and cantered away from the ranch-house to see what they could do to put the long-abandoned Circle X on its financial feet again.

## CHAPTER IV.

### SURPRISES AT MOUNTAIN SPRINGS.

IT still lacked three hours until noon when they came in sight of the town, after passing through some of the wildest, most beautiful stretches of wilderness country that Sonny had ever seen. Mountain Springs, of perhaps two thousand population, was sprawled near the foot of a spur of shattered, almost naked mountains. They were entering it by a little-traveled wagon road.

"Maybe you had better not go any farther, Sonny—I just thought of the risk you'd be running," Stone said uneasily. "The Springs is the county seat, and there's a sheriff here."

"I'll stick with you." The outlaw shrugged. "If the law here is *going* to recognize me, it will sooner or later anyhow, and it might as well be now. But I don't think I'll be spotted. Don't waste any worries on me, Harry; you've plenty of your own."

Few paid any attention to either of them as they drummed briskly down Main Street and past the square where the red stone courthouse stood. Harry had been away so long that he was almost a stranger, and the outlaw attracted no notice at all. But when they were dismounting near the Breeders' & Stock-



men's Bank, Sonny was quietly nudged by his companion.

"That's some of the 7Y7 bunch coming up the street with the wagon," Stone said low-toned. "The big fellow ridin' alongside is Bull Travis—he was made foreman after I killed Haggerty. I know a few of the others, but some are new."

The party had evidently been to the depot to pick up their shipment of "sardines," for Sonny recognized the packing cases among the other supplies that were piled upon the new Studebaker wagon. There were several men in the wagon and some on horseback bringing up the rear. All were well-armed, and Sonny was enough of a judge of humankind to know that this was a tough crew of gunmen, case-hardened and dangerous. They moved on by the two at the hitch rail, apparently without seeing them.

"And there's Bill Lashly himself—comin' out of the bank," Stone muttered.

Interested, Sonny gave the 7Y7 owner a swift and keen appraisal. He was hardly the type of man Tabor had expected—Lashly was in his middle thirties, blue-eyed and light-haired, not unhandsome. His close-clipped blond mustache failed to hide the cruel ruthlessness of his thin mouth, however, and his chin was outthrust like a bulldog's. Carefully dressed, he wore expensive boots and chaparajos, and a diamond glittered in his black string tie. His two six-guns were pearl-handled, but it was easy to see that he wasn't wearing them for ornamental purposes.

Recognizing Stone, he came up to him and extended his hand. "Well, Harry. How are you? Glad to see you back." Bill Lashly smiled, showing even teeth.

Stone hesitated, then shook hands

without much enthusiasm. "Howdy, Lashly," he said briefly.

He would have turned away, but the 7Y7 man seemed to want to talk. "Figuring on ranching again? I wouldn't advise it, Harry. Times are bad just now."

"I'm goin' to run some cattle, yes," Stone said. Then seeing that Lashly was looking curiously at Sonny Tabor, Stone introduced him. "This is Frank Johnson. I've hired him to help me on the ranch."

Lashly laughed heartily. "I don't think you'll be needing many cowhands at the Circle X. I'll tell you what I'll do, Harry. I'll give you two thousand dollars cash for your place."

"Two thousand?" repeated Stone blankly. "I wouldn't take *ten*."

Lashly grinned, then with a wave of his hand he left them to mount a coal-black horse that stood at the rail. When he had galloped off to join his men with the wagon, Stone spat disgustedly and started into the bank. Sonny followed, noticing from the lettering on the window that the Breeders' & Stockmen's Bank was one of the many institutions controlled by the Phoenix bank magnate, Lorenzo Greene.

It was a bustling, prosperous-looking bank, with several tellers working behind a bronze grille. The manager was busy at a desk inside a low railing that ran along one side, and Stone entered this compartment through a small gate. Sonny remained standing just inside the door, but he was able to see and hear his pard's interview with the boss banker.

The manager greeted Stone cordially, and motioned him to a seat opposite. The banker was a thin, dark man with a suave manner, and somehow he reminded Sonny of a

gambler he had once seen dealing faro. He had the same smooth manner—outwardly smooth, but like an iron fist in a silken glove.

After Stone had made his proposition, the manager began shaking his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, Stone, but the money situation is very tight just at this time. I can't see my way clear to make any loans now. Perhaps next year—"

"But I've got to start right now, Mr. Trottman," Harry Stone protested. "As you know, my place is clear, and all I want is a few thousand. You'll have a mortgage at high interest—"

Trottman's ingratiating manner changed at once. "You've heard what I had to say, and it's final, Stone. I can't lend you a cent." He thumbed through some papers on his desk and selected a slip. "You still have some money deposited here—\$41.65. Want it?"

Stone got up, his pale face whiter than ever now with fury. Without a word he accepted the paper, took it over to one of the tellers and drew out the last remnant of his account.

While Sonny waited he happened to glance out at the street. Approaching the bank and carrying a valise was a large, fat man that he instantly identified as one of the men he had seen in the office of Governor Frazer in Phoenix. It was Lorenzo Greene. He was strutting along with two burly bodyguards, one on either side of him.

As Greene and his guards entered the Breeders' & Stockmen's Bank, Sonny pulled the slanted brim of his Stetson lower over his eyes and sauntered out.

He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw Greene give an astonished start as he passed by. Uneasily, Sonny wondered if he had been recognized.

HARRY STONE, looking hurt and indignant, joined Sonny on the sidewalk and the two went to their horses and got aboard. The outlaw took a last look inside the bank as they drew away, but everything seemed as usual, and Greene was talking to Trottman. Sonny's pulse rate returned to normal. Quite likely Greene had failed to recognize him as the outlaw who had shot up Frazer's sanctum just a few days ago! Maybe, he thought, his luck had taken a turn for the better. But it had been a close call!

"I got turned down, pard, and I can't savvy the reason," muttered Harry Stone, rolling a cigarette with shaking fingers. "I think it's because I've served time. I'm an ex-con and everyone's against me."

"Get that idea out of your noggin, amigo," the outlaw advised. "The world isn't against you—but Bill Lashly is. I think that's why you didn't get your loan."

Stone let the match go out without lighting his quiry. "What makes you think so?"

"That slip of paper with your bank balance on it," Tabor said. "He had it right there at his fingertips. Think he kept it on his desk all the time you were in the pen? And wasn't Lashly just coming out of the bank?"

"Thunderation! I believe you're right!" Stone barked.

They talked it over in the little restaurant where they ate before starting back to the Circle X. Harry was satisfied now that the 7Y7 would stop at nothing to drive him off his property, and Sonny was inclined to agree with him. There would have to be a showdown with Bill Lashly sooner or later, but the 7Y7 held all the cards. Or at least it seemed so to Stone.

It was about two o'clock in the

afternoon when they came in sight of Circle X headquarters again. The place looked better, now that the weeds and rubbish had been cleaned away, but without livestock it was as lonesome and quiet as a tomb.

The two might have been slightly

until now, the almost face-to-face meeting he'd had with Lorenzo Greene

"I've got a halfway hunch that he might have spotted me—he sure had plenty of time to study me that day in the governor's office," Tabor said.



*"All right, Paint! Let's go!" Tabor sang out as he ran from Lashly's headquarters. "And we've got to go plenty!"*

nervous if they had circled the house before riding in, and had seen the three saddled horses that were hidden in the willow thicket!

## CHAPTER V.

### FIREWORKS.

STONE put his horse away in the stable, but Sonny Tabor didn't unsaddle Paint and he told his friend his reasons. He hadn't mentioned,

"Anyway, I want my cayuse handy in case I have to light out for the tall tules. I think Paint has a hunch, too. See how uneasy he's actin'? Steady, boy."

The pinto was stamping restlessly, its twitching ears flattened, as if it were trying to warn its master that all was not well. Sonny knew Paint well enough to know that there might be a good reason for the animal's nervousness.



Stone examined the back trail and the country over which they had come; it was empty of life, without even as much as a moving bird.

"I don't think we were followed," he decided. "Of course, you've got to look out for Sheriff Ed Fuller—he's the same one that held office when I was in trouble five years ago, and he's a regular bloodhound once he gets on a man's track. Well, shall we go up to the house?"

Stone led the way up the walk and he mounted the steps slowly, his shoulders sagging in discouragement. When he opened the door of the screened porch, Sonny was right behind him. Stone was inside, and the outlaw was crossing the threshold, before either of them realized that they had stepped into an ambush.

"Don't make a move, Stone! Both of you freeze! We've got the drop!" grated a rasping voice.

Sonny understood his pony's uneasiness now! On the inclosed porch were three men covering them with drawn revolvers, grinning with triumph at their success. From Harry's exclamation of rage Sonny knew that they were 7Y7 hirelings, though this trio hadn't been among the men they had seen in town.

Stone made a half move toward drawing his weapon, but the suit coat he was wearing prevented any quick reach for the gun that was belted at his waist, and he lifted his hands. At the same time, he took an involuntary step backward, bumping into Sonny and interfering with any effort Tabor might have made.

"What do you hombres want here?" Harry demanded hotly. "What's the meaning of trespassing—"

"Shut your blasted mouth, Stone!" bellowed a thick-necked desperado, prodding the Circle X owner in the

midriff with the barrel of his Colt. "You're through! I've been wantin' to do this for a long time, but I didn't get orders until today. The man you stabbed was a paid of mine!"

"You know why I had to kill him, Stanton," Harry said steadily. "And what do you mean by 'orders'? Did Bill Lashly—"

"This time something's going to be spilled here besides calf's blood," sneered a narrow-jawed hombre whose evil mouth, like a steel trap, was filled with jagged teeth.

"It's just too bad for you, Stone, and the kid that's with you," growled the third man, who had but one eye. The gun hammers of all three assassins were eared back, and the very air was electric with murder.

It was like Harry that his first thought was of his friend. "Let my hired hand go, anyway," he snapped. "This isn't his quarrel."

"Think we'd leave a witness?" jeered the one-eyed gunman. "He's with you, and that's enough. It's his misfortune and none of our own, as the song goes. All right, boys!"

Then, as the killers telegraphed their intentions to their tightening trigger fingers, Sonny Tabor went into action!

As his hands streaked downward for his guns, he struck Harry with his shoulder, bowling him out of his way and out of the line of fire. At the same time he crouched, bending at the waist and knees.

"Why, you crazy—" roared the thickset Stetson as his big six-shooter belched lead and flame.

But as he fired, Sonny had slid sidewise, and the shot ripped above him to his left. Before Stanton could thumb the hammer again, Tabor had sent a slug crashing through his stocky body. With a series of little

grunts, Stanton slumped down like a stuck pig.

Harry Stone proved to be no slouch with a gun. Still staggering from Tabor's violent shove, he yanked out his Colt and fired at the narrow-faced intruder at a range of six feet. The shot took effect, for Sonny saw the man whirl crazily and go down with a gush of crimson at his temple. He rolled toward Tabor, nearly upsetting him, then straightened and lay still.

Tabor traded shots with the one-eyed gunman. The 7Y7 man fired twice in quick succession; the first shot clanging into a tin washtub that was hung on the wall, the second perforating one of the wings of Tabor's chaparajos. Then the dry-gulcher's other eye, too, went blind as a bullet crashed through his skull. He plunged downward through the smoke.

**H**ARRY STONE'S gray face twitched spasmodically before he could recover his voice enough to speak. He blinked at the three motionless forms on the gallery floor, rubbed his eyes, then looked up at Sonny and managed a slow grin.

"You know, kid, until now I thought as a gunman you'd been maybe overestimated a little," he stated. "But I know different now! These hombres were as good as any trigger pullers on Lashly's spread. You sure saved my hide."

"I thought I was savin' mine," said the outlaw whimsically. He punched the empties from the cylinders of his Colts and thumbed fresh shells into the loading gates. "That Lashly coyote is sure taking no chances with you, Harry. After stopping your credit, he must have finally decided the only sure way was to bed you down for good and all."

Harry was at the gallery door, listening and peering at something in the distance. "Here comes another bunch of riders from the direction of town!" he gasped out.

"More 7Y7 entertainers?"

"No. Wait a second! I think it's the law!" exclaimed the Circle X owner. "Yes, I recognize Sheriff Ed Fuller. Maybe you were right when you thought you were recognized!"

"I was *plenty* right," Tabor snapped, as he sprinted into the kitchen and scrambled through a window on the opposite side of the ranchhouse. Before Harry Stone could say anything, Sonny had whistled shrilly for Paint. The pinto raced toward him, and the fugitive mounted "on the fly." Churning earth, horse and rider vanished in the scrub pines that bordered the yard.

Less than a minute later, seven horsemen pulled to a halt near the steps of the gallery, headed by a stern, lantern-chinned man wearing steel-rimmed spectacles and a sheriff's star-shaped badge. He jumped hurriedly to the ground and led his posse up the steps to the porch. A sawed-off shotgun was in his hands, and the rest of the party fairly bristled with Colts and Winchesters. The men were wide-eyed and nervous.

**W**HERE'S that hired hand of yours, Stone?" the sheriff demanded excitedly, seeing Harry in the doorway.

"What do you want with him, Sheriff Fuller?" Stone stalled. Then, feeling that he should say something more: "There's been trouble here—some shooting."

"We *thought* we heard shots a while back," Fuller snapped. "The reason we want to see your cowhand is that he's— Hey! For the love o'— He had opened the gallery

door and had glimpsed the three bodies. "Holy smoke! Quick, men! Some of you surround the house while I search the rooms. This sure looks like Tabor's work!"

"Tabor?" Stone questioned, his pale face a mask.

"Sure! That man you hired is none other than Tabor, the outlaw murderer!"

For five minutes the posse stampeded through the house and around it, searching the outbuildings and even the cellar. Then Sheriff Fuller started questioning Stone in earnest.

"Where did he go? Which way, Stone?"

"I couldn't tell," said Harry truthfully, "but he did jump through the window when he sighted you. No matter who he is, sheriff, he saved me just now. Those men on the porch out there tried to kill me. They're 7Y7 men."

Fuller glared at the Circle X rancher. The lawman was much excited, but his men seemed more relieved than otherwise, at not finding Tabor there!

"I'm not interested, at present, in hearing about any feud you might have with your neighbor!" the sheriff barked. "But I do know that you were giving aid and comfort to a fugitive from justice, whether knowingly or not! It could go hard with you, Stone, in view of your past record. Why, you haven't been a week out of the penitentiary!"

Harry's worry-lined face flushed with angry humiliation. "That's true," he said huskily, "but you don't know *all* the truth, and sometimes that's worse than not knowing *any*. If I'm to be arrested again for defending myself—"

"I'm afraid I must, under the circumstances," Fuller hesitated. "So if you'll hand me your gun—"

"Look out!" yammered a badly

scared member of the posse as a shadow fell across the doorway. "It's—"

"Raise your hands," drawled the boyish, blue-eyed youth who was covering them all with a brace of .45s, held at the level of his hips. He was smiling, but the bullet scar "dimple" in his cheek made it a little twisted and sardonic. Hands went high, and several guns clattered heavily to the floor. All were too shocked and terrorized to say anything.

"I thought I'd better duck back in and straighten things out, Mr. Sheriff," said Sonny Tabor deliberately, as if weighing his words. "Stone signed me on as 'Frank Johnson,' so you can't get him for harboring an outlaw. And those men out there—I killed *all three* of them. Savvy? Now, gentlemen—*adios!*"

With his guns still leveled, he backed quickly out of the house, then from the top of the gallery steps he leaped aboard the waiting Paint. He was away again like a comet, with the pinto weaving from side to side like a speeding cottontail! The sheriff finally got outside, and fired several impetuous revolver shots that missed by many yards, and then the fugitive had vanished in the timber again.

"Come on, men! After him! We'll get him dead or alive!" shouted Sheriff Fuller as he clambered aboard his horse. His posse, not quite so eager as their leader, mounted more slowly. They hammered off in the general direction that Tabor had taken, making plenty of noise and dust.

Harry Stone left the house and anxiously made his way to a rocky ridge a quarter of a mile away. After climbing it, he had a good view of the surrounding country, and he could see the posse scattering and fanning out. Tabor and his black-



and-white pinto were not visible to Stone. And judging from the way the sheriff's men were riding, Tabor and his mount weren't visible to the posse, either!

Stone watched for a while, then smilingly climbed down from his perch and went back to the house. When he opened the door of the gallery, however, his grin vanished.

"What the devil!" he blurted.

There should have been three dead men sprawled on the porch, but now there were only two. One of the bodies—that of the narrow-jawed man whom Stone himself had apparently shot through the head—was gone!

## CHAPTER VI.

AT THE 7Y7.

**B**EFORE two miles had whirled under Paint's fleet hoofs, the outlaw had shaken off Fuller's posse, literally riding circles around them and leaving them "cussing and confused." Even without its master's guiding hand, the pinto would have out-guessed and outdistanced the minions of the law, for the wiry, fast-stepping animal had had plenty of practice at this exciting, dangerous game. Sometimes Sonny thought Paint actually enjoyed it, even when the bullets were whistling close!

Sonny led the posse to the northward into a rugged, broken wilderness of rock and cedar. Then, when he had the Mountain Springs men milling about in a mystic maze of canyons and arroyos, he made a wide swing to the south, this time picking his way slowly and carefully to hide his tracks.

"Nice work, Paint." He chuckled. "You needed a work-out, anyway; you were getting lazy."

It had been risky to the point of recklessness, returning to the hornets' nest at Circle X the way he had.

But he was glad he had taken the chance. He had confessed to killing all three men in order to clear his friend. In view of Harry's unlucky record, it might go hard with him if he became involved in any kind of a slaying case. With Tabor it didn't make much difference, for his record was already black. Stone had killed that gunman of the thin jaws—in fair fight, of course; but Sonny was glad that he himself had taken the blame.

"If I believed in spooks," he thought, as Paint carried him southward, "I'd say that the Circle X ranchhouse would be haunted *now*, sure enough."

He was traveling south for a good reason: Harry had told him that the 7Y7 lay in that direction, and he had explained the route to take in reaching it. Sonny wanted to have a look at that spread!

A blazing and balefully red sun slid over the horizon in a violent scramble of colors, and twilight came on with the planet Venus for an evening star. Sonny knew that he was safe for the time being, as far as the sheriff was concerned. By morning he could be out of reach, clear out of Fuller's bailiwick. Fast going would do it, and Paint *could* do it. But first, he wanted to help straighten out the Circle X troubles. After all, he had nothing to lose, except his life, and that was already forfeit!

Before darkness closed in he came to a well-beaten wagon road, and he followed it until he came within sight of the 7Y7 headquarters. Then he left it to approach the buildings from another side.

The place seemed prosperous, and it would have made half a dozen of the size of the poor little Circle X. Its many buildings were scattered through a grove of immense cotton-

woods, there were several big corrals, smaller stock pens, and a tall wooden windmill and pond.

**N**OT until it became really dark did Tabor approach nearer. Then he left Paint in a timbered draw, where the horse would be within reach of a whistled signal, and went cautiously forward on foot. Lamplight already marked out the ranchhouse with yellow squares, and he had a hunch that something unusually interesting might be taking place inside. Drawn up near the implement shed was a horse and buggy that didn't seem to belong to the ranch. Lashly, it seemed, had a visitor.

Tabor, who was the *other* visitor that the 7Y7 didn't know about, edged along to the side of the long, white-painted ranchhouse and up to one of the partly opened windows. From this vantage point he could see and hear what was going on in the big room beyond.

At first he was dazzled a bit by the brightly lighted room itself, and noted only the luxuriousness of its fittings, the row of mounted deer heads, the pelts, skin rugs, and other trophies, the immense fireplace. On a table in the center was a wicker-covered demijohn of whiskey and a tray of glasses.

Bill Lashly was sitting near the window, so close that Sonny could have reached an arm through and touched his shoulder. The smoke of his cigar kept drifting into the outlaw's face, and Sonny had to guard himself against coughing.

"It's too bad if you're short, but I don't see what I can do to help," Lashly was saying.

To the outlaw's surprise he recognized the other man in the room as Trottman, the smooth-talking manager of the Breeders' & Stockmen's Bank at Mountain Springs. He was

pacing the floor with long, restless strides.

"Lorenzo Greene, blast him, will audit my books in a day or two, and I'm sixteen thousand dollars in the red," Trottman stated in an anguished voice. "I wasn't expecting him for months, and by that time I could have juggled some things around. As it is, unless you help me I'll go to the pen."

"I haven't got anything like sixteen thousand in cash," the 7Y7 owner said coldly. "I might give you some paper—promissory notes that you could show Greene and destroy later."

"I've already got a stack of your notes, Bill," Trottman said. "And the amounts on 'em total more than this ranch of yours is worth. Greene wasn't born yesterday, or the day before, either! Even if my books balanced, I'd have a tough time explaining why the Breeders' & Stockmen's Bank has let you have so many loans. We're in this hole together, Bill, because when Greene sees all that paper he'll foreclose on you quick."

Lashly got up and poured himself a stiff drink. "How does it happen that Greene hasn't already examined your books?"

"The fat old fool thought he spotted the outlaw Tabor in town," the bank manager said. "He got Sheriff Fuller to call up a posse to follow him. Seems that Harry Stone's hired hand looks a lot like this Tabor galoot."

Lashly burst out laughing. "Bosh!" He sniffed scornfully. "That baby-faced kid the outlaw who's outgunned all Arizona? I saw that younker with Stone today. Greene must've been loco."

"Well, I was glad for the excitement it caused, anyway," Trottman said, mopping his face with a silk

handkerchief. "Then afterward I persuaded Lorenzo to check over that little bank at Rio Tinto before he examines mine. Tomorrow he's riding there with his bodyguards. Now listen, Bill, this is important—"

"Wait a minute," growled Lashly, and Sonny ducked back farther from the window as the rancher arose. But Lashly went to a door that communicated with another part of the house, opened it, and called in his foreman.

AS Bull Travis barged in, his wide shoulders filling the doorway, Lashly demanded sharply: "Aren't Stanton and the others back yet?"

The huge 7Y7 ramrod wagged his apelike head from side to side. "No they ain't," he rumbled. "You reckon they could have bungled it? I should've gone myself." He nodded at the Mountain Springs banker, then helped himself to a brimming glass of the amber liquor, swallowing it at one quick gulp—like a toad capturing a fly.

Lashly swore disgustedly. "I sent three of my men to Stone's place," he explained to Trottman. "They should've been back long ago."

"I turned him down for a loan this morning, as you asked me to," Trottman said. "You don't mean to say"—he lowered his voice—"you're havin' him *killed*?"

"He's as dead right now," Lashly said confidently, "as his namesake—a stone. It should have been done five years ago."

The bank manager began walking the carpet again. "I always knew you had sand, Bill. And if you've got sand enough for that, you've got enough to go fifty-fifty on a scheme of mine. I told you, didn't I, that Greene will be going to Rio Tinto tomorrow?"

"With two bodyguards, yes. What about it?"

"There's a reason for the guards—Greene is carrying forty thousand dollars in a valise," Trottman said.

Lashly and his big foreman shot glances at each other. Bull Travis gave a low, admiring whistle. Then the 7Y7 owner turned back to Trottman, his nostrils dilated like a bloodhound's. He thrust quick questions, asking the bank manager if he were sure. Trottman was certain.

"He'll have the money with him, all right, and if you and your men really have nerve," the town man said, "forty thousand will be only the beginning. Fat Lorenzo Greene is worth a couple of million. We might as well have a piece of it."

"I like your proposition, Trottman," Lashly grinned wolfishly. "A lot of my deals have fallen through lately, and I need dinero, lots of it. Will Greene be taking the old Copper Bell Road?" The kidnaping suggestion had pleased him.

"That's the way he's going—he aims to be at Tinto by noon," the bank manager said eagerly. "Will you try it?"

"Try it? We'll *do* it!" Lashly chuckled. "Now you just go back to that bank of yours and sit tight until you hear from us. Your troubles about the audit ought to be over."

Banker Trottman was delighted. He accepted a last drink, and a cigar, then took leave of his host. Sonny Tabor saw him leave the room, then heard him driving away with his horse and buggy.

Lashly and Bull Travis remained in the room, talking and making plans. Outside, Sonny Tabor, too, was making some. What he had learned was very interesting. Men like Harry Stone went to prison, he thought ironically, while buzzards



like Lashly and Trotman were respected, looked up to. The world seemed full of crooked shooters.

Suddenly a terrific, clubbing blow landed on the back of Tabor's head!

With his arms and legs gone powerless, the outlaw hit the ground with fiery stars, comets and pin wheels dancing before his eyes. In the dim light he saw, or thought he saw, the man with the narrow jaws standing over him, the gunman who should have been sprawled out dead at Circle X.

For a fleeting moment the outlaw thought the menacing figure to be a fantastic vision, something imagined by his hurt brain. But the man was real enough! He began kicking his victim about the head with his heavy boots. Tabor tried desperately to roll over, to get his guns from their holsters, but the telegraph wires between hands and mind were down somewhere. Other blows landed, and he lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER VII.

### BUNKHOUSE BATTLE.

"I WAS only creased, and I tell you, boss, that the sheriff and his men was there when I came to. I heard plenty. This kid really *is* Tabor! He's the outlaw, all right, and he can handle a pair of sixes like the devil himself!"

Sonny's captor, the gunman with the deformed jaws, was doing the talking when the badly battered outlaw recovered his senses in the 7Y7 ranchhouse. In the big room were the owner and the foreman, and the entire Lashly outfit, seven men in all. Sonny was stretched out on the floor, and they were grouped around him like a wolf pack in for the kill.

Tabor was not seriously hurt, except for a bruised and swollen face, and a ferocious headache. He didn't

know how long he'd been "out," but judging from the blood that had stiffened around one eye it had been for a considerable time.

"Are you really Tabor, the gunman?" rasped Lashly, seeing that the outlaw was conscious. When Sonny didn't answer immediately, the rancher stepped forward with an oath and dealt the helpless, unarmed youth a rib-jolting kick.

"That's right," Tabor admitted, when he could catch his breath.

"Stone sent you here to murder me, didn't he? Well, I'll take care of Stone as soon as some other little business is out of the way," Bill Lashly snarled. "You say the sheriff was at Circle X, Snag?" he asked the desperado with the ugly chin.

"Yeah, there's a hunt under way for Tabor," Snag grunted, nursing the side of his head where it had been bullet-clipped.

"*Bueno!* That's fine!" Lashly chortled. "While the law is busy lookin' for this kid, we'll get *our* job done! Everything works out fine! And as for Tabor here—" Deliberately he drew one of his pearl-handled revolvers from its elaborately carved leather scabbard.

"You know, don't you, that there's sixty-five hundred dollars in rewards out-standin' for this *muchacho*?" Snag said.

Lashly's eyes took on a greedy look. "As much as that? It's dead-or-alive, too, I've heard. Well, I'll cash in on him—dead. But it had better be after the Lorenzo Greene job blows over. We'll just keep Tabor awhile. He's valuable."

THE ensuing few hours weren't pleasant ones for the captured fugitive. He expected—and received—more rough treatment. Because he refused to discuss Stone's affairs, he was beaten again, with

Snag doing most of the fist work. Sonny wasn't vindictive by nature, but he was human enough to be glad that Harry Stone's shot hadn't killed this brute with the jagged teeth—Sonny looked forward to doing *that* himself.

But his chances to do anything at all seemed slim. The gang wolfed down a breakfast long before daylight, and prepared to make an early start for their highjacking operations on Copper Bell Road. Tabor was to be left at the 7Y7 with Snag to guard him. Having already lost two of his men, Lashly couldn't spare more.

As Tabor to them was the same as a man already dead, they discussed their plans in his hearing. The wealthy Phoenix man, Lorenzo Greene, was to be surprised and captured at a place called Lizard Rock. His two-man escort would be killed outright, and Greene—with his valise of money—was to be brought to the 7Y7. Then Lashly would decide whether or not to risk extorting even greater sums from him by means of torture. In any case, the desperate business would have to end up with the death of Lorenzo Greene, for as Lashly said: "Dead men ain't long on palaver."

"Bull Travis will be in command, because I won't be with you," Tabor overheard Lashly telling his men. "I'm riding right now to Mountain Springs, so the whole town can see me. It'll be the best of alibis, in case I'm suspected and need one."

"Right, boss. It'll help if you're seen in town today." Bull Travis grinned. "We'll get the job done. But are you really goin' to give Trotman half the proceeds?"

"He thinks so, anyway." Lashly laughed as he mounted his black cayuse.

After the 7Y7 owner had gone, the

five others made ready for their murder foray. Looking them over, Sonny decided that it was going to be just too bad for Lorenzo Greene. These cutthroats were about as merciful as a bunch of rattlers. And unlike rattlesnakes, they weren't going to rattle before striking!

Most dangerous besides Bull Travis, probably, was Blacky Coffin, a gimlet-eyed gunhawk who had doubtless filled many a box of the same name! As were most of the others, he was a two-gun man, incredibly profane and vicious.

The other strays from the rogues' gallery were Cut-nose Kay, a Mexican half-breed named Pancho Fernandez and a man they called Pumphandle Pressler. The latter was angular and rawboned, and his jerky way of moving had probably given him his nickname. Sonny had no doubt that as killers they were perfectly competent.

He didn't wonder now at that shipment of ammunition marked "sardines," for this outfit seemed to use plenty of it. He saw them load carbines and fill cartridge belts, and Pancho even looped one belt over his shoulder *bandarillo* fashion, as they made preparations. When they left, hooting sarcastic good-bys at Sonny, the sun was just rising.

"All right, Tabor," Snag barked, "into the bunkhouse! It'll be you and me for the rest of the day."

Sonny was herded into the men's quarters, a flat-roofed pine-and-tar-paper house that adjoined the larger one. It was a roomy, comfortable shack, furnished with more than a dozen double-decked bunks. Snag kicked his prisoner down to the far end of it and took up a position near the door.

"I'm tellin' you in advance," Snag said, with a display of his jagged teeth, "that I'd like nothin' better

than spillin' your brains over the floor in here. Just remember that, if you feel lucky! I'm a right good shot."

"You weren't so good yesterday," Sonny couldn't help reminding Snag as Tabor perched himself on a bunk.



Snag cursed him sulphurously, then got out a deck of greasy cards and began dealing himself a game of solitaire. He kept one eye on his prisoner meanwhile, and Sonny knew that he would continue to do so. Snag was sharp; he wouldn't be easy to fool.

But Tabor knew that this gunman *had* to be either overpowered or got

around. Except for Snag's big Colt revolver, the odds were even, and they wouldn't be so favorable later on. It would have to be soon. The kidnaping murderers were already on the way.

There was still a "seven" on Sonny's dice, if he could roll it! The 7Y7 gang hadn't discovered Paint, and he knew that his faithful, patient little mount was still waiting for him in the ravine within earshot.

Except for a small bench near the stove, there was no furniture in the place other than the sour-smelling bunks. As it had been unseasonably warm the past week, most of the windows were open a little. These were too small, however, for even a desperate man to jump through.

Sonny got up and took a step toward his captor. "Got the makin's?" he asked mildly.

He didn't smoke, but he thought maybe he could approach Snag close enough for a leap. The 7Y7 desperado, though, wouldn't allow it.

"Get back! I'll shoot if you come any closer to me, Tabor! You ain't goin' to live long, and you might as well swear off tobacco," Snag rasped sardonically.

Tabor's bruised face hurt him when he grinned. "An hombre never can tell how long he'll live, Snag," he said. "You don't look so healthy, yourself. You had a close call yesterday when that bullet scraped your skull. I knew a man once, down Nogales way, who went crazy after being creased like that. I think you're a little loco now."

Snag's evil face took on a worried, startled look for a moment. Then he muttered an oath and went on with his game of solitaire.

"For instance, if you wasn't a little crazy, you'd probably be on the lookout for Harry Stone," Tabor



insinuated gently. "You don't think I came here all alone, do you?"

"What you drivin' at?"

Sonny was near the window, and his whistle sounded, ringing loud and clear. Snag jumped up, the cards fluttering all around him. Hoofbeats drummed, approaching rapidly.

Snag clawed out his gun and lurched toward the nearest window. "If that's Stone, I'll kill—"

Before the 7Y7 desperado realized that the pinto that was hammering up had an empty saddle and swinging stirrups, Sonny Tabor was upon him like a tiger! His left hand closed around Snag's right wrist, and at the same split instant he rocked the desperado's head back with a smashing chop to the side of his crooked jaw.

"Why, you—" The tall and powerfully built gunman snarled, and from that time onward he fought furiously for his life. His Colt six-gun had thudded to the bunkhouse floor, and the two men struggled furiously for its possession. Sonny was paying Snag back now for the punishment he had himself received when helpless; circling the taller man, his hard fists darted in like the flashing thrusts of a rapier. And his punches carried a terrific head of steam!

Several times the long legs of Snag buckled under him as smash after smash connected, but Sonny was unable to land the punch that would knock him out. Then, after missing his bobbing, weaving opponent at least a dozen times, Snag got in a good punch of his own and Sonny caromed backward against the wall.

With an encrimsoned grin of triumph, Snag stooped to recover his revolver. At the same time, Sonny seized the small, heavy bench for use as a weapon.

"It's fastened down, you fool!"

Snag yelped, but his grin was wiped off as Sonny wrenched up the bench, screws and all, and hurled it at the desperado's head. Snag was hit only a glancing blow, but he was knocked off-balance, and his shot went wild. Before he could shoot again, Tabor was swarming all over him. Down between the rows of bunks they floundered, both with a drowning man's grip on the six-shooter.

It was a double-action gun, and it must have been hair-triggered, for in the scuffle it exploded with a deafening bang. Sonny felt a searing pain at his throat, and for a moment he thought the bullet had got him. But he had only been powder-burned.

The slug had ranged upward through Snag's chest, and the struggle was over. The 7Y7 man rolled over on his side with a convulsive shiver. Then his face stiffened in a final, jagged-toothed grin of death.

**HURRIEDLY** exploring the ranch-house, Tabor found his own belts and guns coiled on the mantle above the fireplace. He buckled them on, then raided the kitchen, finding some bread and meat. While munching at this—for he felt famished—he helped himself to some extra .45 cartridges. These came from a familiar-looking box marked "Sardines." Little lead-and-brass fishes that could bite!

"All right, Paint! Let's go!" Tabor sang out as he ran from Lashly's headquarters. "And we've got to go plenty!"

Paint whickered joyously as the horse felt its master's weight settling into the saddle. The animal didn't know, maybe, that it had played a decisive part in Sonny's fight with Snag, but Paint did savvy that it was time to go places! With swift-hammering hoofs churning sand and gravel, the little piebald went streaking northward toward the Circle X.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## DEATH AT LIZARD ROCK.

SONNY gave the Stone headquarters a sharp looking over before he galloped in, but there was no sign of any undesirable company being present, and the way seemed clear. He didn't want to run into Sheriff Fuller's posse again if he could help it—there was such a thing as pushing one's luck too far. True, there was plenty of work on hand for a sheriff, but it was a job that Tabor wanted to attend to himself!

Harry Stone was digging post holes for an extension of his corral—more to keep busy than for any other reason, for he still had no stock for his pens, nor any prospects for any. At the sight of Tabor he threw aside his tools.

"Sonny! I thought you'd be clear to Grand Canyon by this time! Don't you know how risky it is, in broad daylight, to—"

"Get your horse, *compadre!*" was all the outlaw said just then.

Harry grinned and began saddling his cayuse without question, for he could tell from Sonny's manner that extraordinary business was afoot. While the Circle X owner was slapping his hull onto the roan, Sonny looked toward the house and saw that the bodies of the two slain desperadoes lay in the yard, under a canvas tarpaulin.

"You weren't visited by any spooks last night were you, Harry?" Tabor asked as he helped his friend with the saddle cinches.

"No, but I thought I would be—I didn't sleep a wink!" Stone sputtered. "You know what? One of them corpses got up and walked off! He wasn't dead, I reckon."

"He's pretty dead now," Sonny said laconically. "I've just come from the 7Y7." And while Harry

made ready, Tabor told him briefly of everything he had learned at the Lashly spread, outlining the plot for waylaying Greene. Harry listened, wide-eyed.

"Sure, I know where Lizard Rock is—it's not far from here to the Copper Bell Road," Stone gasped. "But are you goin' to risk your life to save that rich Phoenix cuss?"

"He's rich and he's a cuss," the outlaw admitted, "but I'd help *anybody* against that Lashly combine. How about you?"

"Let's ride," Harry said grimly. "You're doggone right. We'll have it out with that crowd, and one way or another, it'll be for keeps!"

Harry knew of a way to cut off three or four miles in reaching the dry-gulch ambush, but he warned that the going would be tough; he knew enough of Paint to be confident of the pinto's making it, but he wasn't so sure of his own horse. However, they decided to chance it, for minutes were precious. Climbing the ridge where Harry had watched the posse the day before, they cut straight into the rugged mountain wilderness. Their troubles began, then, for there were no trails, and everything was a wild tangle of cedar, brush, loose rock, and prickly pear.

Paint was as agile and certain of foot as a mountain goat, but after a few miles Harry's cayuse began to lag more and more.

"You'd better ride on, Sonny, if you expect to overhaul that Greene hombre before he gets to Lizard Rock," Stone said. "I'll come along as fast as this crowbait will bring me." He told the outlaw exactly how to reach the Copper Bell Road, and of the lay of the land about Lizard Rock. Tabor nodded and Paint raced on ahead. When Sonny finally came within view of the

wagon trail he sought. Harry and his roan were out of sight and hearing.

From the mountainside Sonny was able to survey several miles of the narrow, twisting road, and he could also see the tip of Lizard Rock, though several timbered hills were intervening. He was beginning to wonder if he had arrived in time when he spotted a rig moving along like a dark beetle, just below him. It was a buckboard flanked by a couple of men on horseback.

With Paint taking the cutbanks stiff-legged in a shower of dust, the outlaw reached the trail in less than a minute. In the meantime, the rig had proceeded another furlong, and Sonny gave chase, overhauling it rapidly.

"Hello there!" he shouted, waving his Stetson. "Pull up!"

Sonny realized—when he saw the bodyguards turn and reach toward their guns—that he was running a risk of being shot down before he could explain. But it had to be chanced, and he rode toward the halted buckboard with his hands lifted a little more than shoulder-high.

"You mustn't go any farther, Mr. Greene!" he called out.

The ponderous man on the seat of the buckboard had hastily kicked a lap robe over the valise at his feet. Now his round, pink face whitened as he recognized the youth on the pinto.

"Shoot him, McDowel! Jones! Fire on him! It's Tabor, I tell you!" Greene's voice took on a bleating, hysterical note. "Don't let him come closer! Why don't you men shoot?"

But the two burly guards, seeing that the newcomer's hands were empty, and deciding that he was alone, made no move yet to begin hostilities.

IN his agitation, Greene had neglected his team and the vehicle was turned half around in the road. The banking magnate made a move toward his hip pocket, then changed his mind—probably remembering a certain exhibition of revolver shooting that he had witnessed, in the governor's office, not many days before!

"You're going to be robbed, and maybe murdered—" Sonny began in warning.

"Jones! McDowel! You hear him?" bleated Lorenzo Greene. "Why don't you *do* something before Tabor's gang gets here? I suspected what he was up to when I saw him hangin' around the Breeders' & Stockmen's Bank yesterday. He was sizin' up the bank—what they call 'casing' it—and now he's after *me*!"

"Shut up, Greene, and let me talk a while," Sonny said abruptly, and the bullet scar in his cheek was pitted too deeply now to be a dimple. His blue eyes were frosty. This fat, shaking millionaire was the man who thought fifteen years was much too light a prison sentence!

In as few words as possible, Tabor put the situation squarely before Greene and his guards. When he explained how Trottman, the trusted bank manager, had framed the robbery and kidnaping, Lorenzo Greene snorted with disgust and unbelief. But Tabor's words were convincing to McDowel and Jones, at least.

"What he says listens straight, boss," Jones rumbled. "How else would Tabor know the exact amount you've got with you—forty thousand cash?"

Greene looked startled. "Tabor's up to some trick. Watch him—watch his hands, men! And keep an eye out for any other bandits he might have lurking around!" His voice trailed away as the full signifi-

cance of Jones' remark struck him. "Queer, though. Only Trotman and you guards knew what was in this valise. But I don't think—"

"No, you sure don't," Sonny agreed crisply. "But here comes my friend Harry Stone, and maybe you'll believe *him*. Stone's a rancher hereabouts, so don't shoot at him."

Harry came up on his roan in a couple of minutes, and when he backed Tabor's story of the Lashly-Trotman plot, Greene was suddenly convinced.

"Out of the way, quick, and let me turn the buckboard around!" he shrilled nervously. "I'm goin' back to town! The sheriff—"

"You sent the sheriff after *me*," Sonny reminded him, "and I think he's still looking for me. Anyway, if your two guards are willing, we'll have it out with the Lashly crowd, and the surprise will all be the other way. There's only five of 'em. Seems to me that now's the time to snap off the heads of those rattlers."

"Young fellow, I think you're right," McDowel approved, and he was echoed by Jones. "We'll fight."

"I'm not going an inch farther!" quavered Lorenzo Greene. "You others can go on and get yourselves shot to pieces if you want to, but I'm staying right here." And taking his precious valise, he descended gingerly from the vehicle and crawled into a clump of cedars alongside the trail. "I'll be right here when you come back—if any of you *do* come back," he moaned.

Sonny Tabor couldn't help chuckling. "I'm going to leave my pinto here to guard you, Greene," he said as he stepped from his stirrup. "Harry, you put on Greene's hat and coat and drive the buckboard. I'm going to stretch out, easylike, in the back. One of your throw that lap

robe over me. 'Sta bueno! Now let's get goin'."

[It was less than two miles to Lizard Rock, and the yellow-wheeled buckboard, with its escort of two horsemen, covered it at a pace that was neither slow enough nor fast enough to cause suspicion. Harry Stone handled the leather ribbons, and in Greene's black frock coat and hat he could easily pass for Greene at a distance. At Sonny's suggestion, Jones and McDowel rode close to the vehicle, on the side *away* from the ambush. These two men had been selected for death, and the outlaw wanted to protect them as much as possible. But he knew he could count on this pair to put up a fight; the Phoenix millionaire had been wise in hiring such men as his protectors.

"We'll have to shoot to kill the instant they jump us," Sonny said. "If we wait for *them* to show their intentions, we're sunk. We already know their intentions."

"We'll warm it up for them jaspers," McDowel said bleakly.

In the rear of the buckboard, Sonny had arranged the robe so that it could be thrown off in an instant. He had left a space to see through, and as the rig approached the crooked, eroded spire of lava known as Lizard Rock, his nerves tightened. It wouldn't be long, now!

"I don't see a thing, Sonny," muttered Harry Stone. "Are you sure it was here—"

"Take it easy, amigo—I just saw a cayuse's ears and the top of a man's hat," the outlaw replied.

Alongside Lizard Rock was a shallow draw that came down next to the trail, a brush thicket screening it, and just as the outlaw expected, it was from this natural ambush that the attack came.



The branches whipped violently as two riders came crashing from cover to seize the buckboard horses by the heads. They were Fernandez and Cut-nose Kay, working with the expertness that comes only from long practice. At almost the same instant Pumphandle Pressler and Blacky Coffin charged, flourishing drawn six-guns and yelling, "Hands up!" Behind this second pair rode Bull Travis on a huge steeldust. Gripped in his big red hands was a .30-30 carbine.

"All right, men!" Sonny sang out as he threw off the robe, and opened up with both his Colts. "Let 'em have it!"

At the sight of Tabor the amazed gang faltered, unable to believe their eyes. But it was too late for them to draw back now, even if they had been so-minded. Bullets were zipping and whining like mad hornets!

"Give us the money!" Pressler hammered, as his horse almost collided with the vehicle. He was given something—but not a valise of greenbacks! Harry Stone fired at him point-blank, and the slug caught Pressler under the chin and emerged from the top of his head. The dead man slid forward over his pommel, then fell limply against the wheel of the buckboard.

The bodyguards, Jones and McDowel, had also let go with roaring six-guns, and by this time the 7Y7 gunmen knew that something had gone horribly wrong. Here was no helpless millionaire, but Stone of the Circle X, and Tabor, the deadliest shot in Arizona! And Jones and McDowel, too, meant business!

Tabor, while still on his knees and scrambling upward, tipped the satin-blue barrels of his guns toward Blacky Coffin. They whipped out streamers of fire, and Coffin, in the act of firing at Sonny, was smashed

with lead above the belt line. He went backward over his horse's crupper as though swept off by an invisible hand. And Coffin's last slug skimmed the top of Tabor's shoulder.

"McDowel's killed, I guess," was Sonny's thought as he saw the burly guard go down, his horse with him.

Things were happening so rapidly that time seemed to be standing still, as in a nightmare; men and mounts moved in an absurdly slow motion. One of the 7Y7 horses, too, had been slain by a stray pellet, and Pancho Fernandez was on the ground, trying to extricate himself from the pinned stirrups. He still held his gun, and it blazed at the buckboard. Straw flew from the stuffing of the seat cushion as it missed Harry Stone by inches. Then a shot from Jones finished Fernandez; the Mexican flopped backward over the carcass of his cayuse.

The 7Y7 foreman, Bull Travis, had jumped from his horse in order to use his carbine more effectively. He was farther away than the others, about thirty yards, and Harry Stone fired at him but missed. In the meantime, Sonny's attention was taken up by Cut-nose Kay, who had left the heads of the buckboard team to close in with the vehicle's occupants.

Kay's ugly face, a bodiless specter in the swirling powder smoke, was hardly an arm's length away when Sonny's left-hand .45 roared destruction and death. Kay's face seemed to waver, like the face of a corpse seen through water, then it vanished in an even thicker smoke cloud. Sonny knew that it would not bob up again; Cut-nose Kay had a bullet in his brain.

Bull Travis was churning his .30-30 with frantic desperation, holding the carbine at his hip, but he was

sacrificing accuracy for a blind fire power that so far had done little except break spokes in the wheels of the buckboard and knock splinters from its bed. And his hourglass was running out of sand! Both Sonny Tabor and Harry Stone now favored the 7Y7 foreman with their attention, and from the buckboard came stabbing lances of flame. Geysers of dust and gravel splattered up all around Travis. The team was struggling in fright, and Stone was trying to hold them with one hand, which made it difficult to take aim. The shots had missed.

Their next volley found the target. Bull Travis had been crouching, but now he leaped to his feet, either to retreat or attack, and bullets from Stone and Tabor caught him just as he straightened. With a weird yell, Travis whirled, and they could see dust puffs flying from his clothing. For a moment he leaned crazily on his carbine, as if it were a crutch; then he went tumbling, and the last of the dry-gulchers was finished.

"Are you . . . you hit, Sonny?" Harry blurted, his voice thin and high with excitement.

"Not any. But I think McDowel was hit."

The dust and smoke was clearing now, and they heard the big body-guard's voice reassuring them. "Not me—I fell when my hoss was killed, and I got only a sprained ankle out of it. Where's Jones?"

Jones' horse, crazed with fear, had carried him a hundred yards away from the scene, but the animal quieted when the shooting ceased and he came back at a trot. Curiously enough, Jones was the only one of Tabor's party to be seriously hurt. He had received a bad wound in the thigh, and they gave him first aid and put him into the back of the buckboard.

"Now let's go back and pick up Lorenzo." Sonny chuckled grimly. "He probably wants to do some business at his own bank in Mountain Springs. We've got things to do there, anyway."

## CHAPTER IX.

### LASHLY COLLECTS.

IN the Breeders' & Stockmen's Bank it was nearly closing time; the last customers had gone, and the hard-worked tellers were checking up behind the bronze grille. At his desk inside the low wooden railing Manager Trottman was talking in a low voice to Bill Lashly, who was leaning back on his chair, one immaculately booted leg across his knee. Both were smoking cigars.

"As soon as you close, we'll go over to the casino and play some cards," Lashly was saying.

Trottman's eyes took on an eager look. "All right." Then his expression altered a little. "I've sure had a long run of bad luck. That's why," he almost whispered, "that's why I got so deep in the hole."

"Your luck has changed, Trottman." Lashly chortled. "And it's changed plenty. By this time," he said softly, "your fat friend is safe at my ranch, along with his valise of dinero. We're right on top of the world, you and me. My alibi is good—I've been here in town all day. And the sheriff"—he laughed—"is still out lookin' for Tabor."

The bank manager's sallow face darkened with anger. "So he was eavesdroppin' outside your window while I was there, was he? I wish you'd killed him! Isn't it risky, holdin' him prisoner?"

Lashly flicked the ash from his cigar. "As soon as the other thing blows over, I'll turn him in to the law—dead—for the reward money."

he confided. "He's nothin' like he's cracked up to be, Tabor ain't. About as dangerous as a rabbit!"

"When are you going to finish up with Stone?" Trottman asked in a low tone. "Wait—we'll discuss it later; here comes one of the tellers."

The bank employees were about to call it a day. They were putting on their hats, and one of them was at the front door, pulling down the green shade marked "closed." But there seemed to be some difficulty about it. The sad-faced teller was trying to keep a late patron from entering.

"Sorry, but banking hours are over," Lashly and Trottman heard him say. Then they saw him pushing at the glass-paneled door—vainly—as a stalwart youth edged his shoulders through. There seemed to be a couple of other men behind him.

"Banking hours might be over," drawled a familiar voice, "but there's still a few minutes of fightin' time. Now stand out of the way, hombre. If there's a back door, you clerks better hunt it."

"Holdup!" piped the scared teller. "Help!"

"No. We just want a few words with the manager—and Lashly," said Sonny Tabor.

He sauntered in, and behind him were Harry Stone and Lorenzo Greene.

"How about that loan, Mr. Trottman?" Harry asked ironically.

Bill Lashly and Trottman stuck rigidly in their chairs as if petrified. The tellers had taken Tabor's advice and fled through the rear.

Lorenzo Greene was a far more impressive figure than he had been when hiding in the cedars with his valise. His massive face was red with anger, and he shook a flabby fist in Trottman's face.

"I know everything, Trottman!" he squealed. "Thanks to . . . er . . . Mr. Tabor, I've found you out. Shortages, eh? And you planned to have me robbed, kidnaped, maybe murdered! Why, I'll . . . I'll—"

"One side, Greene! Look out!" Sonny barked, as his hands snapped toward his guns with the beautiful precision of a machine. "So you want to collect, do you, Lashly?"

The 7Y7 owner had jumped up, overturning his chair, and his pearl-butted six-guns were already in his hands.

"Yes, blast you, I *will* collect that reward for you, you killer!" he shouted.

Lorenzo Greene plumped his fat body down behind the railing with an agility surprising in a man of his size and bulk. Harry Stone simply moved to one side. His own gun was holstered; he had learned to have confidence in this smiling, blue-eyed friend of his.

Sonny fired one shot. From the blue-black barrel of his right-hand gun a thin javelin of flame spurted, and it was followed by a slow-curling serpent of blue smoke. The shot had skimmed across the top of the desk and reamed through Bill Lashly at the dollar-sized spot, dead-center below the breastbone, that the medicos call the solar plexus.

The rancher's guns spun over aimlessly in his hands, then rattled to the floor.

Not dead, but dying, fully conscious, but with every nerve numbed and paralyzed, Lashly teetered and rocked for a long, sickening moment, then twisted to the floor.

"And no, *you* don't!" Sonny rapped out, as the white and trembling Trottman snatched a tiny vial from a drawer and tried to get it to his lips. "Grab him, Harry!"

**H**IS suicide by cyanide frustrated, the bank manager collapsed onto his desk, sobbing hysterically.

"I'll confess to everything," he moaned. "I planned it with Lashly. I was in debt and goin' to prison, anyway, Greene, and I thought—"

"Well, you'll have lots of time to think now, Trotman!" bellowed Lorenzo Greene. "I'll see that you get life for what you've done. I know your—"

Sonny interrupted him gently. "Seems I've heard something like that before from you, Mr. Greene," he said. "Why don't you let him off with, say, fifteen years?"

Greene looked foolish, remembering a certain session in the office of the governor. He floundered for words and couldn't find any, but he finally managed to sputter something apologetic.

"I . . . I misjudged you, Tabor. Guess I'm not the first one to do that. If there's anything I can do for you—"

"You can do it for my friend Harry Stone," said the outlaw crisply. "He's got a ranch and he needs five thousand to stock it. How about lending him the dinero?"

"I'll be glad to," said Lorenzo Greene. And he added something that would have amazed the financial circles of Phoenix. "I'll lend him

whatever he needs—without interest."

Sonny took the pleasantly stunned Harry out of the bank and into the street, for he heard a commotion a few blocks away and he had guessed what it was. Paint was waiting at the tie rail and it was time to travel, and pronto! A cloud of dust, stirred by many hoofs, was rapidly approaching.

"Sheriff Fuller and his posse are back in town." Tabor smiled. "That means my adios has to be a fast one. So long, Harry, and good luck!" He shook hands quickly and vaulted aboard his pinto.

"*Hasta la vista!*" choked Harry Stone, and he tried to hide the moisture in his eyes by cheering and waving his Stetson as the outlaw's pinto broke away from the rail.

And down the main street of Mountain Springs, leading the posse and gaining at every jump, sped Sonny Tabor and Paint. They were fugitives again, hunted like wild beasts.

But they had all of Arizona to hide in, and life itself, hard and clean, to fight for to the finish.

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Even with all Arizona to hide in, there's bound to be barter with boot-hill in the near future for Sonny Tabor. Watch for another of his dramatic adventures in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly!







# RED JACK MISSING

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

*In any poker game, the gamblers will tell you, there's sure to be trouble when one of the cards disappears—especially if a gun ace disappears along with it!*

EVEN cowboy Tom Allison's best friends admitted that he was mighty young for a sheriff job. Yet he was far ahead at the finish of the race. A mean grouch that had developed in his opponent, elderly Sheriff Joab Sellars, was much in Tom's favor.

Also much in his favor was the fact that the county's ace desperado had made a monkey of Sellars many times during his two years in office.

"Congratulations, kid. You're likable and you're a scrapper, and I'm for you," a gambler named

Blankenship told Allison soon after he'd pinned on his star. "Now remember that you've got a head as well as a gun, and use same."

The new young sheriff's grin was friendly. Blankenship, tall and thin and reddish, nicknamed Red Jack, had given the law little trouble. A lone man, he was, a fairly educated man, and as meticulous as an old maid; everything had to be just so.

"I don't feel very proud over this, Jack," Allison said. "You see, the folks who put me in was votin' against Joab Sellars more than they was votin' for me. All the same, though, it's up to me to deliver. Jack, do you happen to be purty well acquainted with Gudge Hendry?"

Gudge was the ace bad hombre. Blankenship answered:

"I play cards with him sometimes. He's good, too—but crooked as the devil if you don't watch him. You figured I'd know where you could find him? Don't worry about that; he'll find you. He's nearly sure to ride in and shoot things up with the idea of putting the well-known old kibosh on you at the start!"

Hendry was big, dark and stubbly-bearded, and he rode a big roan horse. The young cowboy law dog had been in office three days when Hendry showed up.

**D**USK was becoming darkness, most of the town was at the evening meal. Down the main street galloped the desperado, rein in his teeth, a howling big six-shooter in either hand. The roan was fast. Even if Tom Allison's spurs hadn't tripped him as he rose from the hotel supper table, he wouldn't have had a chance for a fair shot at Gudge Hendry.

He rushed across the street for his horse but it was gone. Hastily he visited more hitch places, found

more cut reins dangling. Hendry had done some fast work preparatory to his wild, shooting ride!

People were lining the sidewalks now, watching. There was only a little comment, but it was enough to turn Allison red, then pale, under his deep range sunburn.

"Blankenship!" he called. If Red Jack knew the location of Hendry's favorite hide-out, he'd have to tell now. "Blankenship!"

No response. Allison hurried into the leading saloon and asked the barman: "Know where Red Jack is?"

"Haven't seen him since yesterday, Tom."

"Funny," the young lawman said.

"Not so funny," barked a cowboy who had come running into the saloon in time to overhear. His name was Joe Brand, and he had just ridden in from the nearest range to the southward. "Because Red Jack Blankenship is dead—shot—in a line shanty on the border edge o' the ranch I'm workin' for. The boss sent me to bring you, Tom."

"Dead!" somehow it was hard for Allison to get that.

He notified the coroner, left a deputy in charge of his office and the jail, and went to the liveryman's for a saddled horse. There he mounted and rode fast southward in the thickening darkness with Joe Brand.

"I know this shack, Tom," Brand said as they drew rein near the closed door. "They's candles in there, and I'll go in and light one if you say so."

"Don't touch anything else," Allison said. "You didn't before, did you?"

"No; the boss saw to that," Brand answered. "You see, Tom, I had a run-in with Jack Blankenship over at Rocky Wells last week, and I shot my fool mouth and made threats. The boss thought you might suspicion me of this, and I think that's

one reason why he sent me after you."

Joe Brand had a reputation as a tough stick.

In the yellow glow of a candle on a shelf the new sheriff saw a lean human form lying face up on the rough floor, near a small homemade table and two homemade chairs. On the table, a litter of playing cards made it look as if the killing had been the outcome of a poker game.

"I notice," said Joe Brand, "all them cards scattered on the table are facin' up. That's sorta odd, ain't it?"

Allison, too, had noticed this. Looked like somebody had been in a hurry to find one particular card. Tom thought backward to the advice that Red Jack Blankenship had given him: "Use your head as well as your gun." With a forefinger he moved the cards, counting them. There was one missing.

It was the jack of diamonds.

Mighty queer!

**B**UT Tom Allison kept that to himself. "Joe," he muttered, "your rep and that threat could easy play tough with you in court. Anything you can tell me that might help in nailin' the jigger who done this?"

"No," Joe Brand said.

"Blankenship played cards with Gudge Hendry at times. Gudge hung out in this border country a good deal, I've heard. Is that right?"

"That's right," Joe Brand replied.

"But he's slick, Tom. You'll hafta be smart to pin anything big on him. Everybody knows he's robbed and killed plenty, but they's never been any proof. Sheriff Sellars used to grumble that even if he ketched Gudge they couldn't convict him o' anything but disturbin' the peace and the like."

Allison said nothing. He was trying to figure out the why of that missing red jack. His gaze went to the corpse on the floor, riveted there.

Even in death, Blankenship had been meticulous, had done things just so. He lay straight, not sprawled. One slim hand covered most of an unsightly red spot on his silk-brocade vest; the other hand lay extended outward, with the index finger seeming to point to a crack in the floor. On his lean waxen face lingered the ghost of a bold smile.

Allison got the impression that Blankenship had met his judgment with sufficient regret but hadn't wanted anyone to know it.

The coroner was also the undertaker. When he came he had with him a few other townsmen for a jury, and the man who owned the ranch.

Presently the coroner set his lighted lantern on the floor beside the dust that had been Jack Blankenship, knelt and began the examination. Soon he was telling the silent men around him that the gambler hadn't been dead for more than three hours. There wasn't any money in Blankenship's pockets. Both stubby barrels of Red Jack's derringer—he had carried no other weapon—were loaded, and not the faintest scent of burned powder clung to the muzzles.

"This and the fact that the little gun was snug in his pocket means that he wasn't shot in self-defense, and the lack of money means that he was robbed," coroner and jury decided.

Young Sheriff Tom Allison, keeping his own counsel, still had not mentioned the missing red jack. He wheeled to face Joe Brand, and snatched the wild cowboy's six-shooter out of its leather.

"You're under arrest, Joe!"

"Hell, Tom," Joe Brand cried, "you ain't got a single thing on me ---what y'think you're doin', anyhow?"

"Usin' my head, cowboy," Allison told him, and ironed his wrists. "Don't make trouble for me, Joe; you'll be sorry if you do. Even if you're innocent, you ought to stay behind bars long enough to think over this thing of threatenin' to kill people. Let's go!"

He took Joe Brand to town and jailed him.

**T**HAT night Tom Allison dreamed that he was trying to play poker with a deck made up wholly of red jacks. He woke feeling a little foolish, and again tackled his problem. The one missing card was an important clue. He had no doubt of that.

Going over the scene of the shooting in the dim light of tallow dip and lantern hadn't satisfied this new young lawman. He rode back to the shanty early in the morning.

Finished there, having found what he wanted, after a very thorough search, he got into the saddle again and—still using his head—rode for a border town that was much used by outlaws as a place of refuge.

At a hitch rail in front of a cantina on the Mexican side, Allison spied a big roan horse. He dismounted near the animal, dropped rein and entered the cantina with the air of one who hasn't a care in the world.

Instantly there was a gruff hail from a big, dark stubby-bearded man who sat at a table in the rear of the long room: "Hi, kid sheriff! How you doin'?"

"Plumb perfect, Gudge," Tom Allison answered, grinning.

He walked back. Gudge Hendry, ace desperado, former thorn in the side of Joab Sellars, finished his bot-

tle of beer and flung the bottle to the floor.

"You're outa your territory here, kid sheriff. Or do you already know that?"

"Sure, I know," Allison said. He sat down across the table from Hendry and pulled his holstered old range six-shooter into his lap. "This is a good place to spend the heat o' the day, Gudge, ain't it?"

"Zackly what I'm doin' here," Hendry replied, "if it's anybody else's business—which it ain't."

Again the cowboy sheriff grinned.

He could see better in the deep shade now. A sweeping glance showed him only Mexicans who, plainly, were not interested in either him or Gudge Hendry. Then the outlaw said:

"I heard you'd nailed a cowpoke named Joe Brand for killin' Jack Blankenship. Jack was the best carder I ever seen. That was too bad, wasn't it?"

"Sure was," Allison said, his countenance suddenly hard. "Red Jack was all right, and I aim to pleasure myself a heap by hangin' the low-down, sneakin', slimy, belly-crawlin' rattlesnake son who murdered him."

Gudge Hendry allowed quick anger to drain his dark and heavy face of its color. "If you got Joe Brand, what you doin' down here?" he snarled.

Anger gripped Tom Allison, too. He spoke rapidly: "Like you know, Gudge, I can't arrest you on this side o' the border. I'm wonderin', though, if the law-abidin' public wouldn't be served just as well and with a lot less expense if I was to make you draw on me first and then beat you to the trigger defendin' myself."

"You ain't got nowhere nigh that much nerve, law dog!"

"You feel like tryin' me out?"

Craft or curiosity, or both, mixed



with cold rage in Gudge Hendry's slitted dark eyes. "Arrest me, you said. Arrest me for what?"

Allison replied promptly. "The robbery and killin' of Jack Blankenship in a line shanty, that's what. You was afraid to come into town for a game with Red Jack, so you fixed it up to play in that shanty. Soon after you'd shot Blankenship—likely he'd won all you had and you wanted it back—you rode to town and shot things up, which was as much for a near alibi as to throw a scare into the law!"

Gudge snarled. "Then what'd you jail that Brand cowpoke for?"

"I figured that the killer, whoever he was, wouldn't plumb leave the country if somebody else was jailed for it."

Hendry's purring tones were fraught with deadly menace: "You didn't know it was me then, but now you do. How?"

The cowboy sheriff tried to curb his youthful anger, tried to think wisely. He saw a way. It was dangerous; his chance was slim. The worked-up desperado would reach for black walnut and steel if Tom moved. Yet Tom did move—swiftly.

He sprang up with his old range Colt blurring in an arc across the table. Gudge Hendry's best gun hand was too late by the infinitesimal part of a second. The six-shooter barrel crashing against Gudge's temple drove him heavily to the cantina floor.

THE stubby-bearded outlaw was a long time coming to. He opened his eyes to find himself lying on a narrow bed in a jail cell, with his throbbing shaggy head bandaged. He sat up blinking, stared at the iron-latticed door.

Memory served him, and he belled a volley of oaths. At the iron door appeared Tom Allison and Joe Brand.

"You hadn't no right a-tall to arrest me on Mexican soil, kid!" Hendry cried.

"But I didn't," Allison said. "I toted you over to this side o' the border, and then arrested you!"

Joe Brand grinned.

Allison pursued: "One playin' card, Gudge, a jack o' diamonds, is goin' to hang you. Blankenship musta lived a few minutes after you shot him. Musta thought you'd come back to make sure you'd left no sign—which likely you did—for he stuck the red jack through a crack in the floor where it would be found only by somebody who used his head as well as his gun."

Hendry began fuming. The young sheriff interrupted him.

"You know how particular Red Jack was, Gudge. He picked the jack o' diamonds as the most fittin' card to write his little message on; also, it saved him writin' two words, signin' his name. But nobody could mistake his careful handwriting, even though it was dim pencil. He wrote that it was you, Gudge, and not Brand here, who killed him."

THE END.

\* \* \* \* \*

*We can't all man the tanks and planes that  
are smashing the Axis. But we can all  
BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS!*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Lee apparently had come  
on the rustlers at their  
work.*



**Nobody denied that ketch dog of Dal Strong's was smart—  
but even Dal himself never thought the pup would trace a**

## KILLER CLUE

by GUY L. MAYNARD

WITH an angry toss of its long horns, the steer flung loose the bulldog which had been hanging to its ear. Micky, ketch dog for Dal Strong, hurtled into the topmost branches of a scrubby mesquite, his traplike teeth still gripping a piece of ear, while the steer plunged through thorny thickets of the *brasada*.

Micky tumbled down through the spiky limbs, landing on the ground with a jarring thud as Dal's little smoke-roan horse threaded its way

into the chaparral to the spot where the wild steer had been bushed up.

Dal Strong grinned when he saw that the heavy-jawed ketch dog was unhurt. "That mossy-horned critter give you the old heave-ho, Micky boy," he jeered. "But you ain't no quitter. Go on—go ketch him!"

Dal Strong's sharp command galvanized the fifty-pound bulldog into frantic action. Bowlegged as any cowboy, Micky tore off through the chaparral like a stampeded yearling, heading in a beeline for the runaway

steer. The blocky-built ketch dog savvied cows like a top hand. He and his master, husky, red-headed Dal Strong, made a team that couldn't be beaten when it came to combing bushed-up stray critters out of the thorny-brush country.

No less eager than his four-footed helper, Dal Strong spurred forward in the chase, his gray Stetson pulled low to protect his steel-gray eyes and lean, freckled face. A blue denim brush jacket, Levis, chaps and scuffed boots, completed his serviceable rig.

Twenty yards behind his ketch dog, Dal Strong glimpsed Micky suddenly sheering off at a sharp angle from the path of the fugitive steer.

"Hey! What's the idea?" yelled the surprised Dal.

It wasn't like Micky to allow anything to turn him from his course, once he had started in pursuit of a cow critter. Such unusual behavior on the part of his ketch dog caused Dal Strong to ride warily. Rounding a clump of spiky bush, the cowboy came suddenly on the dog. The panting bulldog was standing wide-legged, pink tongue lolling over out-thrust jaw, plainly perplexed by something he saw.

Dal Strong slid his horse to a stop and stared wide-eyed. The body of a man, tied hand and foot, lay face downward beneath a mesquite bush. And then, like an electric shock, something familiar-looking about that rope-bound figure stiffened the cowboy in his saddle. The next moment, he hit the earth with a clatter of big-roweled spurs.

"It's Lee Morton!" The words rasped between Dal Strong's taut lips as he bent over the man on the ground.

Lee Morton, top hand of the Broken Arrow spread, the same out-

fit that Dal Strong was riding for, had mysteriously disappeared a week previous; had ridden away from the home ranch in search of strayed or rustled stock and had never returned.

A feeling of dread chilled Dal Strong as he turned the body over. One touch was enough to tell him that he had found Lee Morton too late. The body was rigid, the parched skin that of a corpse.

"He's dead—murdered!" cried Dal, too stunned for the moment to do more than stare in gape-jawed horror.

With shaking hands, Strong untied the knotted rope that held Lee Morton's stiffened wrists and ankles together. In the bright sunlight, the wasted features of the dead man showed a ghastly distortion wrought by terrible suffering. But there was no mark of injury about the head. Nor did Dal Strong find a wound of any kind when he examined the entire body.

Gray-faced, Dal turned to his ketch dog. "Micky, there ain't a sign of a bullet hole on that corpse," he announced grimly. "What do you make of that?"

Talking to his brindle bulldog was a habit of Dal Strong's. It kept him from getting lonesome while on these one-man jobs of chousing bushed-up stray critters.

Micky squirmed uneasily at his master's stern tone and manner. Then the animal cocked his head, as if to question the disturbed cowboy.

"I'll tell you what!" Dal Strong answered his own question in a voice hoarse with emotion. "Lee was tied up an' left to starve! An' you an' me are goin' to track down the skunks that did it an' make 'em pay plenty, Micky boy!"

**A**FTER covering the body of the murdered cowboy with brush and rocks as temporary protection, Dal Strong started looking for sign of the killers.

"Come on, dog, let's go take a pasear around here an' see what we can stir up," Dal called to the brindie ketch dog who was behind a bush, playfully shaking and tossing some object.

Reluctantly, Micky bowlegged around the death cairn his master had built. He had been enjoying himself, dog fashion, and evidently hated to stop.

"What's that you've got?" Dal demanded reprovingly.

Shame-faced, Micky opened his protruding jaws and dropped his plaything at Dal Strong's feet. It was the piece of rope used by the killers to bind Lee Morton. Cut from the end of a lariat, it had been handled constantly by its owner, and that man flavor had made the bit of maguey savory mouthing for Micky.

At the moment of untying his dead saddlemate, Dal Strong had been too wrought up to pay particular attention to the rope. Now, having recovered from the shock of his grisly discovery, the cowboy was quick to notice something out of the ordinary about that severed lariat end. He picked it up and examined it curiously. Between three and four feet long, the rope was of the usual thickness, but most unusual as to material. It was made from strands of blue maguey fiber twisted alternately with the common gray stuff, giving it a queer mottled appearance that is known in the range country as a Tom Horn pattern.

"Huh! You don't see one of these fancy ropes once in a coon's age," granted Dal Strong. "What I'd call a clue. So all we got to do is find the hombre that owns the rest of

this twine an' we got our killer, Micky."

Micky wriggled approval, pleased to note that Dal Strong had regained his normal composure. Now, perhaps the dog could have his plaything back again.

But Strong had a different idea. "I'm keepin' this for future reference, pup," decided the cowboy, cramming the rope end into a big pocket of his chaps.

Stepping up into the saddle of his horse, Smoky, Dal Strong started circling the spot where he had found Lee Morton. He cut sign before he had gone fifty feet. Tracks of shod horses showed dimly in the tangle of thorny brush, the trail leading westward from the scene of the crime.

With Micky following closely on his horse's heels, Dal rode cautiously along the twisting course of the hoof-prints. Although they were several days old, they might lead to a nearby outlaw camp. Just as likely, the killers had ridden clear out of the country—perhaps across the Mexican border.

What Dal Strong actually found, when the tracks led him to where the brush thinned out into a fairly open space of several acres, was no surprise.

Standing up in his stirrups, scanning the opening with keen, knowing eyes, Dal Strong could picture the scene that Lee Morton had ridden into with such a tragic result. It was a story as old as the business of raising cattle on the open range—that of a lone cowboy interrupting a gang of rustlers at work blotting brands.

"By the looks of the sign they must've been workin' a sizable bunch of critters," Dal muttered as he glanced at the ashes of a dead brand fire. "They probably had a lookout hidin' alongside the trail, an'



when Lee rode up the feller dabbed his rope on him."

In such an isolated spot, the chances were all against anyone discovering evidence of the rustlers' crime for many months, if ever. The *brasada* guarded its secrets well. Only the smartness of his ketch dog had enabled Dal Strong to solve the mystery of Lee Morton's disappearance.

Slumping at ease in his saddle, Dal rolled a quiry while he considered his next move. "Micky, I reckon we better make tracks after them rustlers," he finally remarked to the bulldog, which had sprawled in the shade of a bush. "We'd lose two or three days goin' for help an' likewise lose the rustlers."

Micky cocked his cropped ears and wagged a stump of tail as he rose up on bandy legs, plainly ready for any adventure.

"Well, come on then, let's go!" clipped Dal, neck-reining his smoke roan into the broad trail left by the rustlers and their stolen herd. And Micky obediently trotted along in the rear.

**T**WO hours of steady jogging under a hot Texas sun brought Dal Strong to the edge of a section of badlands known as Eagle Breaks. He was still following the cattle tracks, although there had been stretches of rough going where it took all of Dal's expert trailing skill to read the sign.

"From here on in, it's goin' to be plumb dangerous prowlin'," the waddy told himself as he rounded the shoulder of a gaunt ridge to enter the Breaks.

The jumble of rocky hills, canyons and brush, gashed by countless coulees, made a perfect hide-out for renegades on the dodge. Without showing themselves, they could

bushwhack an enemy or escape a posse. Obscure box canyons offered concealment for rustled cattle or horses.

Riding warily, Dal Strong sang a few lines of a cowboy song:

"I never had no mammy,  
I never went to school.  
I'm just a poor young waddy  
Ridin' for the Pitchfork Pool."

In the middle of a second verse of his tune, Dal broke off with an oath. Micky had suddenly dashed into a thicket beside the trail. Brush crackled noisily as a cow critter lumbered away through the mesquite.

Dal Strong whistled a shrill signal call that his ketch dog had been taught to obey.

"Micky, you're noisier than a Fourth of July celebration," scolded the cowboy as Micky came reluctantly to heel. "You've done gone an' advertised to them rustlers that company's comin'."

Micky groveled in the dust as if ashamed of his conduct, refusing to look the frowning Dal in the eye.

On second thought, Dal swore softly as he moved on down the trail. "I wish I'd chased that critter an' got a look at its brand," he muttered regretfully. "Mebbe it was a Broken Arrow worked over with a runnin' iron into a Diamond Q. Could be done."

The Diamond Q was a big spread owned by an arrogant, mean-tempered cowman named Pete Quall. Its range lay between the Broken Arrow and Eagle Breaks. In fact, Dal Strong had been riding over a section of it for the last hour.

He had not ridden a hundred yards farther when Dal suddenly found himself facing a pair of tough hombres who jumped their horses out of the brush and covered him with six-guns.

"Just sit tight an' put 'em up!" said the foremost rider, who was small and stubby, with little shoe-button eyes and a bullet scar that made his hard mouth sag.

The other man was larger, and his shifty, pale-blue eyes contrasted oddly with the dark stubble that covered his lantern jaw.

Dal Strong raised his hands to the wide brim of his dusty Stetson. And a moment later, the pale-eyed rider reined his horse close and lifted Dal's cedar-butted Colt .45.

"Who are you, hombre?" the squat renegade demanded, still keeping Dal Strong covered with his Colt. "What you doin' down here in the roughs?"

"Name of Dal Strong," answered Dal, "an' I'm huntin' Broken Arrow strays."

"An' rustlers," added the renegade, beady little eyes glittering viciously. "You're a blasted spy—mebbe a range dick."

Dal Strong grinned disarmingly. "Shucks, you jaspers have got me wrong," he drawled. "I'm just a plain, everyday cowpoke."

"You ain't foolin' us none," put in the big, pale-eyed rustler, turning to his smaller companion. "Stub, keep him covered while I rope his hands, an' we'll take him over to the shack."

"O. K., Turk," growled Stub. "But we better have a good story fixed up, in case we run acrost that blasted sheriff from Tularosa. He's been prowlin' the range for a week huntin' evidence agin' us."

"That's right," grunted Turk, indecisively. "It'd be less bother just to hogtie him an' leave him here in the brush."

Dal Strong felt his veins chill. A picture of Lee Morton's starvation-tortured body flashed through his mind.

"Kind of a habit you jaspers have got, ain't it?" Dal sneered.

"What's that?" Stub rasped suspiciously. "Say, ranny, you know too much to keep on livin'. Reckon you found somethin' over in the *brasada* that started you on this spyin' visit to the Eagle Breaks."

Dal Strong clamped down on further speech. Too late he realized that his sarcastic remark had got him into a desperate tight.

THE surly cowboy, Turk, dismounted and took down the rope coiled at Dal Strong's saddlehorn. "We'll take you to camp," he said. "The boss will likely show up in a day or so, an' he'll want to talk to you. Put out your hands."

Dal Strong lowered his hands and held them behind him for tying. But as Turk roughly jerked the rope taut around Dal's wrists, a fierce growl from Micky sent Turk stumbling backward in alarm.

The ketch dog lunged out of some bushes and was bounding forward to attack the outlaw when a sharp command from Dal Strong halted him. The cowboy had seen Turk's hand clawing at the butt of a six-gun.

"Don't shoot him, feller!" Dal called out anxiously. "I'll see that he don't bother you no more."

Turk growled an oath. "I'll plug the blasted cur next time he makes a move in my direction," warned the outlaw.

At a word from Dal, the brindle bulldog moved back into the brush. Strong thought a lot of his faithful ketch dog and wouldn't risk having him killed if there was any way to prevent it.

"Hit leather an' let's go," Stub snapped impatiently at his companion. "It's grub time an' I'm hungrier'n a starvin' lobo."

With Turk leading Dal's horse and Stub riding rear guard, the captive cowboy was taken to an old line camp located a short distance up the canyon. Once inside the log shack, he was forced to lie down in a corner and have his legs bound. While both the outlaws had their attention on Dal, Micky slipped in and hid under a bunk near his master.

For the next few minutes, Stub and Turk were busy frying bacon, warming up a pot of beans and making coffee. A rough board table, built into the wall near the door, was set for the meal. Both outlaws shed their heavy cartridge belts and six-guns and hung them on wall pegs. The long Colt taken from Dal Strong was tossed in one of the bunks that lined the walls.

An idea struck Dal as he watched his captors preparing their grub. He bit back a chuckle as he considered its possibilities.

"Them rustlers don't know Micky is hidin' in here," the cowboy told himself, "an' mebbe we can spring a surprise on 'em."

Tensing anxiously as he waited for a chance to pull off his little scheme, Dal watched every movement of the two outlaws. He wanted them as far from their six-guns as possible before he sprang that surprise.

Stub started to drag a bench up to the table. That took him within a few feet of the front door. The pegs, where the gun belts were hung, were on the opposite side of the room. At the same time, Turk slogged over to the open door and surveyed the cleared space in front of the shack.

"Wonder what become of that ornery bulldog," growled Turk. "We don't want him bustin' in—"

"Sick 'em, Mickey!" Dal Strong suddenly snapped. "Ketch 'em!"

With a hair-raising snarl, the brin-

dle ketch dog scrambled from under a low bunk and darted across the room.

Stub and Turk whirled at the first sound. Seeing the ferocious Micky lunging at them with teeth bared in his massive jaws, both rustlers let out wild yells and leaped through the doorway.

Luckily for the outlaws, their saddled horses were ground-tied within a couple of jumps of the cabin door. But their frantic efforts to mount before Micky caught them almost resulted in disaster. The alarmed horses jerked back, making necessary some extra moves by Turk and Stub.

Pale with terror, Stub clutched his saddlehorn and clambered up to safety a split second before the rampaging ketch dog could grab him. Turk was not so fortunate. The panicked cutthroat was just swinging a lanky leg up from the ground when Micky whirled and sprang at him savagely.

Venting a terrible growl, Micky clamped his teeth on the only part of his enemy in reach—the heel of a frantically jerked boot.

Turk howled frightened oaths while he clung to his saddle with both hands. His spooky horse reared and plunged. Micky clung grimly to the boot, although swept off his feet and held dangling in dangerous proximity to the horse's hoofs.

Something had to give way. It was Turk's boot. Despite its tight fit, the fifty-pound weight and strength of the struggling bulldog pulled it off. As the horse whirled away, Micky was flung a dozen feet, taking the boot with him.

Dal Strong glimpsed only brief flashes of the one-sided encounter in the open, but it was enough to make him whoop with delight.

"Good dog, Micky!" the cowboy cried as he caught sight of the brindle bulldog posing triumphantly with a spurred boot in his mouth.

While he tucked a sock-clad foot up out of danger, Turk roared curses at Dal Strong. "We'll be back, cowboy!" he yelled. "We got a pard ridin' herd on some critters back in the Breaks. We'll borry his guns an' come back here an' kill you an' yore blasted dog both!"

With that ominous threat, Turk and Stub jabbed steel to their mounts and dashed away up the canyon.

"They'll sure make buzzard bait out of us, lessn I git loose pronto," Dal Strong said as Micky bowlegged into the shack.

**T**UGGING at his bonds would never effect his release, the cowboy soon decided. The stout rope had been expertly tied. Nor did a hasty survey of the room disclose any object in reach with which he might cut the rope.

"Doggone if this ain't tough!" muttered Dal, while Micky licked a moist tongue across his master's sweaty cheek. "If I only had somethin' sharp—"

Cudgeling his brain, the cowboy strove desperately to figure out some means of getting loose. Finally he thought of his spurs. But they were blunted, even if he could contort his body into position to use them as a saw. About to discard that idea, Dal suddenly remembered the spurred boot Micky had captured. Turk's rowel points, Dal had noticed, were long and filed to needle sharpness.

"Go fetch, Micky!" the cowboy ordered. "Out! Git out an' fetch!"

Micky barked with delight and dashed out the door. To retrieve articles was one of the accomplish-

ments Dal had taught him, and it always pleased the ketch dog to be of service to his master.

In a moment, Micky returned with a bit of broken strap in his mouth. Not knowing what was wanted, he had picked up the first object he saw.

Dal Strong groaned. The minutes were flying. "No, Micky! Drop it!" cried the cowboy. "Go fetch!"

Micky wriggled sheepishly and dropped the piece of strap. Then he bounced out the door again, evidently bent on getting something worth the while this time. And he did.

"Good ol' dog! Bring it here, Micky," Dal exclaimed joyously as the ketch dog appeared in the doorway mouthing the boot.

Micky obediently carried his prize to Dal. At a word from the cowboy, he dropped it beside his master.

Hastily rolling over so his body pinned down the top of the boot, Dal Strong began sawing the rope that bound his wrists against the spur rowel.

"This is sure slow work!" the cowboy groaned after several minutes of tedious work that tried his patience to the limit.

Cold sweat beaded Dal Strong's forehead as he continued the desperate struggle to free himself. At any moment, he expected the two outlaws to return, hot with murderous rage.

His steady rasping with the steel rowel caused the hard-twisted maguey rope to part slowly, but Dal was not yet free when he heard the faint drumming of hoofs.

"They're comin'," gritted the cowboy, frantically sawing the rope without regard for the sharp steel that cruelly spiked his wrists.

The frayed strands of fiber began to part more rapidly. Dal felt the rope give a little. He tore at it



madly with the spur. The hoofbeats were pounding louder every second.

With his heart in his throat, Dal Strong suddenly stopped sawing on the rope. Exerting every ounce of strength in his muscular body, he tugged to break the bond on his wrists. There was a snap as the last stubborn strand parted.

Dal hastily jerked loose the rope on his ankles and leaped to his feet. Thundering hoofs told him the outlaws were nearly to the shack. He darted to a bunk and snatched up his own six-gun.

Turk and Stub were swinging out of their saddles in front of the cabin. Sunlight glinted on the heavy Colts in their hands—weapons that had apparently been borrowed from the partner they had mentioned.

"Drop them guns, hombres!" Dal Strong's voice rang out, harsh and cold, from the doorway.

The two outlaws gaped, petrified in their tracks by the stunning surprise. Then their staring eyes noted the fact that Dal Strong's right hand, gripping a six-gun, was hanging at his side. He didn't actually have them covered.

But what Turk and Stub didn't know, or they would have thought

twice before they acted, was that Dal Strong was the fastest man in the *brasada* country with a six-gun. His hand could move like the dart of a lizard's tongue. He shot from the hip, and what he shot at he hit.

As one man, Turk and Stub started to whip up their drawn Colts. But the .45 in Dal Strong's hand spurted red flame twice before either outlaw could pull trigger.

The beaten renegades jerked back, dropping their six-guns in the dust as each man clutched a right hand that was numbed by the terrific impact of a bullet against steel.

Dal Strong's gray eyes glinted coldly as he holstered his smoking Colt. Stepping outside, he picked up the fallen weapons and tossed them far into the brush behind the shack.

"I don't aim to fool with you skunks," Dal snapped at the two rustlers who stood near their mounts, swearing. "Soon as I tie your hands, you're goin' to take a pasear with me right down to the Tularosa jail."

THE westering sun indicated mid-afternoon when Dal Strong hazed his captives along the base of a rocky, brush-clad butte. He was deep in the Diamond Q range, across which he had to travel in



order to reach the little cow town of Tularosa.

Turk and Stub were savage-tempered as caged lobos. Slumped in their saddles, they alternately cursed Dal Strong and his ketch dog, Micky. They reminded the cowboy that he had no actual evidence to convict them of any crime. And Dal had to admit his lack of proof that they had murdered Lee Morton or rustled any cattle. Even the rope-end clue failed him. The ropes on the renegades' saddles were plain maguey.

"With you hombres locked up, me an' the sheriff can soon dig up plenty evidence," Dal stubbornly told his captives. "We'll raise a posse an' comb the Breaks for rustled cows."

The trail Dal Strong was following would take him within sight of the Diamond Q ranch headquarters. But when certain landmarks told him he was nearing the place, Dal cautiously started a detour that would swing him and his prisoners wide of the Diamond Q house. He wasn't taking any unnecessary chances on having a bunch of tough hands take Turk and Stub away from him.

The detour proved to be a fortunate move. For it soon brought him face to face with a couple of riders who wore the stars of law officers on their open vests.

"Howdy, sheriff!" Dal greeted a thickset, grayish man on a bay horse, then nodded to the tall deputy who sided him.

"Howdy, Dal!" The sheriff stared at the two captives. "Who're these mavericks you got roped up?"

"Couple of hombres who tried to stop me from trailin' a bunch of rustled cows over in Eagle Breaks," said Dal Strong.

"Sounds right interestin'," rejoined the officer. "Me an' my dep-

uty are scoutin' around right now for rustler sign. Been a lot of cow-stealin'—"

"He's a blasted liar!" Turk cut in savagely. "We caught this jasper blottin' the brand on a Diamond Q steer an'—"

"Wait a minute," the sheriff interrupted firmly. "We'll ride over to the Diamond Q ranchhouse. I want Pete Quall to hear this."

"Suits me," muttered Turk, while Stub nodded and grinned slyly. "Pete'll square us."

"Mebbe he will an' mebbe he won't," retorted the sheriff, sternly.

Dal Strong's heart sank. Pete Quall was rich and influential and without any scruples as to how he used his influence. He would bring much pressure to bear on the law.

"Why bring Quall into it?" Dal asked bitterly.

But the sheriff was already reining his bay horse in the direction of the Diamond Q house. Dal Strong and his prisoners followed, with the tall deputy riding in the rear.

**D**AL STRONG'S nose wrinkled with disgust as he rode up to the Diamond Q headquarters. The old adobe house was scabby with peeled whitewash, the sheds and stable dilapidated.

But the glimpse Dal got of the inside of the house, after he and the officers had dismounted and stepped up on the gallery, was the finishing touch. The front room resembled a junk shop. Riding gear, both new and discarded, was strewn over the floor. A battered desk filled one corner. Clothes, slickers and boots lay in unkempt heaps or draped over chairs.

"An' Pete Quall's a big shot," Dal Strong told himself silently, with a sniff of contempt. "Why, he's too danged ornery to have a wife who

would keep the place clean."

Just then a man came to the door—filling it from side to side, so huge he was. A man whose beefy face was curtained with a long, bushy black mustache.

"Howdy, Mr. Quall!" the sheriff said, showing plainly a certain deference for the wealth and position of the man he addressed.

"What you want, Gleason?" Pete Quall growled surlily. Then his close-set black eyes sighted the bound wrists of Turk and Stub.

"What's this?" the burly cowman bawled in sudden rage before the flustered sheriff could reply to his first question.

The pale-eyed renegade, Turk, had a ready answer. "Me an' Stub was over in the Breaks huntin' strays when we run onto this red-headed jasper blottin' the brand on one of your steers," Turk blurted out his lying accusation.

"He got the drop on us when his man-eatin' bulldog jumped us," added Stub. "That dog mighty near killed Turk."

All eyes naturally turned to the spot where Micky had been lying in the shade, panting gustily, a moment before. But the ketch dog had disappeared during the wordy encounter.

Quall turned angrily to the sheriff. "Gleason, I'm chargin' this red-headed hombre with rustlin' an' attemptin' to murder my cowhands," blustered the cowman. "I got two witnesses to prove the charges. Now, do your duty!"

Sheriff Gleason glanced dubiously from the raging Diamond Q owner to Dal Strong. "Sounds right serious, young feller," he told the cold-eyed cowboy. "Reckon I'll have to take you in for trial. Hand over that Colt."

"Afore you break up the party,

let me tell *my* story." Dal Strong demanded as he handed the sheriff his six-gun.

"It's my duty to inform you that anything you say can be used agin' you in court," Gleason warned.

"I'll take a chance," Dal said, glancing around to see if Micky had returned to the shady gallery—which he hadn't. "What I'm wantin' to say, is that I found Lee Morton—"

"You—you found Lee?" the sheriff broke in with a gasp. "Dead?"

"Murdered!" declared Dal Strong, grimly. "He'd been hogtied an' left to starve. I kin lead you right to the spot where I covered his body with brush this mornin'."

"That's hangin' for the skunks that did it," Gleason said with ominous conviction. "Did you find any sign of the killers?"

"I found where Lee had come on some rustlers workin' over the brands of a herd of cows," Dal Strong said. "They must have took him by surprise an' captured him. I trailed the rustled critters over to Eagle Breaks an' had a run-in with these two hombres I nabbed. Then I was—"

"What's all this wild yarn got to do with the charge I'm makin' agin' this ranny?" Quall interrupted with a brow-beating glare at the sheriff. "Even if it's true, it don't concern any of us. Take Strong to jail an' *then* do your investigatin'."

"Just a minute, Mr. Quall," Gleason interposed firmly. "Strong, did you run onto any clue that might identify Lee Morton's murderer?"

Dal Strong reached in his chap-pocket and pulled out the piece of blue-mottled rope he had been careful to save. "Nothin' but this rope Lee was tied with," the cowboy replied.

Gleason took the bit of rope curiously. "Huh! A Tom Horn pattern," he grunted. "They're scarcer'n hen teeth. If we could find the rope this piece was cut off from we'd have the deadwood on the owner of it."

Pete Quall made a pretense of examining the rope end, but his hand was suddenly shaky. "Some detectin'," he sneered. "Nobody around here ever owned a fancy twine like that."

"I'll take charge of that piece of evidence," announced the sheriff, "an' now I reckon we better be high-tailin' back to town. I'm goin' to raise a posse an' comb Eagle Breaks for them rustlers."

Dal Strong glanced around again for Micky. Not seeing him, he whistled the recall signal the ketch dog had been taught.

In the silence that followed, there was a sound of paws padding across the ranchhouse floor. All eyes turned toward the open doorway, where the missing Micky promptly appeared. In his massive jaws was a coiled rope—a rope with blue strands mixed with gray. The killer's rope!

Left to his own devices, the brindle ketch dog had evidently wandered into the front room of the house and rummaged around among the odds and ends of rigging till he found something to chew on very much to his liking—the mate to that piece of rope he had reluctantly given up to his master that morning.

"There's your evidence, sheriff!" Dal Strong's voice rang out clear and cold as cracking ice.

Sheriff Gleason reached swiftly for his holstered six-gun. But Pete Quall was quicker. His Colt .45 was covering the officer and his deputy

as he started backing toward the gallery steps.

Unarmed, Dal Strong realized that Quall was about to make a getaway. Once in the saddle, the desperate cowman would make for the Eagle Breaks, where he could easily hide till the time was ripe for a dash to Mexico.

"Don't make a move or I'll plug you!" snarled Quall, swerving his six-gun in a short arc from the sheriff to his deputy.

Dal Strong measured the short distance between him and the cowman. Quall was groping with one foot for the gallery steps, his eyes fixed on the two officers. In a moment, he would step down and fling himself on one of the horses standing with dropped reins near the gallery.

"Ketch him, Micky!" Dal Strong rapped out sharply.

With a rumbling growl, the brindle ketch dog dropped the coiled rope he was mouthing and sprang open-jawed at Pete Quall.

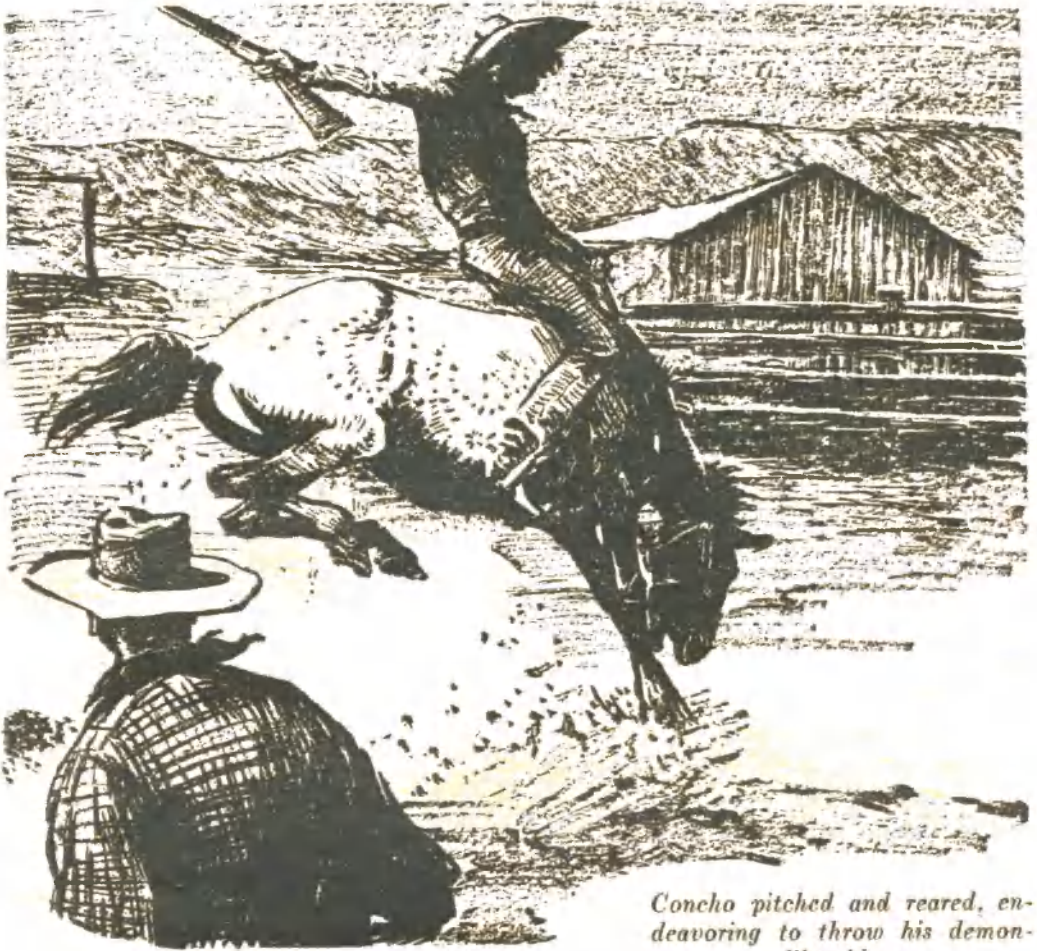
The cowman whirled, trying to aim his gun for a quick shot at the bulldog. And in that same instant, Dal Strong leaped and struck. His rock-hard right fist thudded against Quall's jaw and the cowman dropped as though kicked by a bronc.

While his tall deputy watched Turk and Stub, Sheriff Gleason bent over the half-stunned Quall and bound his wrists with the piece of blue-mottled maguay.

"Looks like Quall has reached the end of his rope," Dal Strong drawled as he patted Micky's ugly head. "Thanks to my pard, here."

The sheriff nodded grim approval of Dal's and Micky's detective work. "If I owned that ol' brindle pup I wouldn't trade him for a hull posse when it comes to ketchin' killers," he said.





*Concho pitched and reared, endeavoring to throw his demon-like rider.*

# REDWOOD RENEGADES

by ED EARL REPP

***The coyote kingpin of those lumberjack lobos had a brutal party planned for Yuma Bill and his pards—but the vicious chief forgot that one wolf turn deserves another!***

## CHAPTER I.

### OLD PARDS HANG HIGH.

It was a weird, raucous scream, followed by shrill cursing in some foreign tongue, that brought Yuma Bill Storms spilling off the top rail of a cutting pen in San Francisco's Central Stockyards.

A few feet away the lanky figure

of Beanpole Badger likewise came tumbling from the corral poles. The leather-faced old rock buster stared blankly at his red-headed young pard.

"What in tarnation kind of racket was that, Bill? And where'd it come from?"

"Sounded like the ghost of some

heathen horse thief that got lynched and is still complaining about his luck. Listen!" Yuma Bill dug his fingers into the rawhide-muscled forearm of his string-bean friend as the unearthly, cursing shrieks again lifted in the quiet evening air. The sound was enough to start a rash of icy gooseflesh down the stocky Arizonan's spine, while the hair on his neck tingled queerly.

"Comes from the front of that old feed barn. Let's take a pasear!" Yuma barked.

Beanpole followed him in a pounding run toward a huge, ramshackle building that flanked this section of the stockyards. It was a gray, almost windowless barn, used now as a warehouse for hay and grain. The ear-shattering noises the two had heard seemed to issue from a small office near the front. Save for animal sounds that were familiar and pleasant to the two wealthy wanderers, the stockyards were deserted and quiet at this time of day. The day's bustling activity was over, and Yuma Bill had figured he and Beanpole were the only men around. Everybody else was either at supper somewhere or headed for town and the evening's round of revelry.

As they pelted toward the doorway of the office, the wedge-built redhead's wide mouth broadened in a reckless grin, and his pale eyes lit up with a kindling fire of anticipation.

As a matter of fact, both Yuma and Beanpole had just about had their fill of San Francisco. They had spent several weeks in the teeming California metropolis, seeing the sights and resting up, now and then running across some old friend of Beanpole Badger's rock-buster days, since San Francisco was still the mecca of prospectors who had made lucky strikes.

Of late the two pards, themselves well-to-do from the gold that came steadily from their big mine in the Chiricahuas near Tombstone, Arizona, had been hanging around the Central Stockyards taking in the brawling, lusty activity that spelled life to any cowman. A welcome relief to their own quiet had been the arrival of three carloads of prime steers from the pards' Rancho Plateau in New Mexico. But deals for disposal of the beef had now been completed, and the two companions, though richer by several thousand dollars, were again chafing at monotony.

The legendary gun swift of Yuma Bill was well known both to men who wore the law badge and to renegade factions over a wide spread of territory. The former liked and respected the ex-puncher, while the latter felt for him a deep and abiding fear and hatred. Having once been framed in a cruel trap that sent him to the pen at Yuma—which experience had won him his somber title—the redhead had since devoted a large slice of his life to aiding other unfortunate victims of the outlaw element.

Hence, as Yuma Bill now plunged through the doorway of the dusty warehouse office with Beanpole Badger, it was only natural that a deep growl of rage welled in his throat at the sight that met his gaze.

**INSTINCTIVELY** the redhead's fingers reached for the walnut handle of his Peacemaker .45, while beside him Beanpole's breath drew in with a startled gasp. Both pards were gazing at the sprawled figure of a man who was spread-eagled on the floor near a battered old desk. A wet, red circle was still ominously spreading on the back of the dead man's faded shirt.

"That's Tomlins, the bookkeeper

and caretaker at this place," Beanpole rasped thickly.

Yuma nodded bleakly as his glance speared around the little office. He had had some dealings recently with Tomlins, in regard to buying feed for his beef before it was sold.

"Why would anybody shoot this jigger?" Beanpole muttered. Then his black eyes popped open and he grasped Yuma's sleeve. "Say! We didn't hear no gunshot—"

"We didn't—because Tomlins wasn't shot," Yuma Bill answered, going down on one knee beside the little clerk's body. "He was hit on the back of the head with something that just about chopped his head off. The blood has soaked down onto his shirt. And look—he wasn't robbed either!"

Yuma's finger pointed to an open cash drawer that was fitted into the desk. Checks and considerable currency were still in the drawer. Beanpole Badger was peering around helplessly when an ear-splitting shriek again broke the silence, welling spookily out of nowhere. Beanpole let out a startled bellow and leaped away from the desk so rapidly he collided with Yuma Bill, who had sprung hastily to his feet. The two of them tumbled into a heap.

It was from this position on the floor that Yuma Bill spotted the source of all the racket. His arm speared out to drag from under the desk itself a strange object. It was a parrot cage, with a shrieking, green-plumaged bird still in it.

The cage had apparently been knocked off the desk and kicked under it during the ensuing struggle when the clerk, Tomlins, was killed. Now, when Yuma righted the cage and set it on the desk, the bright-eyed parrot stopped its molten flow of screams and foreign-sounding talk and cocked its head at the two pard

in quizzical fashion. Then abruptly it uttered a single explosive word that sounded like American.

"What'd he say?" Beanpole inquired, staring over Yuma's wide shoulders.

"Didn't catch it exactly," Yuma Bill answered. "Sounded like 'Eurekanose.' We're wasting time here, Beanpole. We didn't see anybody come dashing out of the office when the commotion broke out, so that argues that whoever done this cold-blooded job went the other way."

"Into the warehouse?" Beanpole queried. He stared hesitantly through a doorway that led into the musty, gloomy interior of the warehouse, his thin neck jerking in a gulping swallow. "Jumpin' snakes, Yuma, if the killer's hidin' in there, we might walk smack into a cylinder of hot lead!"

But as usual, the oldster's jumpy talk didn't suit his actions, because a second later he had disappeared through the doorway. Yuma had to hustle to catch up to him. Then together the two reckless pards made their way through the dusky aisles between huge stacks of baled hay and sacked grain. Loose hay on the plank floor muffled their footsteps, making the silence ghostly.

Both men pulled out their guns as they went along, and when a huge rat scuttled across their path, both of them jumped. A minute later they rounded a corner of stacked hay and abruptly hauled up short, their heels digging the floor and horror flooding over them.

In a dusty shaft of light that filtered through some crack in the wall was the swaying, kicking form of a hanging man!

**B**EANPOLE BADGER'S foghorn bellow broke the ghostly silence. "Good goshamighty! The poor devil ain't even dead yet!"

But Yuma Bill was already leaping forward, hand clawing in his pocket for a knife. It took only seconds to jump onto a bale of hay that he hastily tumbled into place, and to reach up and slice the rope in two. The hang-noose victim dropped to the floor, writhing and choking, gasping in great lungfuls of life-giving air.

In the dim light the pards stared down at the man who, in another few minutes, would have surely been a candidate for a boothill grave. He was apparently about the same age as Beanpole Badger, but of medium height and husky build. He had shaggy black brows and a coal-black walrus mustache which made his gleaming bald head seem even more barren. Right now the hombre's face had a distinct purple hue, but it was gradually returning to a healthy, reddish tan.

Abruptly Beanpole Badger let out a startled snort. "By gravy, Bill!" he exclaimed. "I know this poor jigger, though I ain't seen him for nigh onto ten years. Name's Eureka Jones. I an' him usta—"

"So that's what the parrot was saying!" Yuma Bill broke in on the oldster. "Not Eureka nose—but Eureka Jones. Beanpole, I hate to say this about an old friend of yours, but it looks like Jones bashed Tomlins on the head, then come in here to commit suicide."

The man on the floor choked some more and glared at Yuma Bill with bloodshot blue eyes. He tried to blurt something, but his tortured throat made speech impossible as yet.

"You've backslid a lot in ten years, Eureka," Beanpole rasped huskily. "You wouldn't never have done a thing like this in them days. In fact I remember you as a mighty square shooter— For gosh sakes, Yuma!"

The slat-built oldster's exclama-

tion was caused by Yuma Bill's sudden, unexpected action. Bill had suddenly leaped forward with a hoarse cry and jammed his thick shoulder against Beanpole, spilling him over a bale of hay. And even as he did so, the gloomy old warehouse suddenly erupted to the clamorous thunder of six-guns.

Thin pencils of flame pierced the gloom from three distinct directions, and deadly slugs of lead ripped the air close around the two pards and the man they had rescued.

## CHAPTER II.

### MYSTERY HOMBRE.

It didn't take Yuma and Beanpole long to get their own battle-scarred weapons into action. Yuma's Peacemaker coughed flatly, and Badger's old Frontier model roared like a cannon as the pards hastily ducked behind a tier of hay bales. Beanpole stopped triggering his six-gun just long enough to grab Jones by the boots and jerk him to safety. Now abruptly the hang-noose victim sat up and croaked hoarsely:

"Salivate 'em! They killed Tomlins . . . hung me—" He wrapped his hands around his throat again, choking, eyes bulging. "Redwood!" he whispered. "Timber!"

But the two pards were busy. Spying a fringe of black hair spearing up over a grain sack, Yuma triggered carefully. A bulky figure spilled out grotesquely and crashed to the plank floor. Beanpole's gun accounted for a second lurking ambusher a moment later, when the busky raised up to send lead burning toward them. The man lurched into view and rolled down heavily from a nest high in the piled hay.

Abruptly there was silence again. "There was three of 'em," Jones sputtered. "Where—"



Muffled footsteps pounded softly around back of the hay pile, headed for the office door. Yuma pelted toward a long aisle that disclosed the door at the far end. The fleeing hombre darted into the opening, and Yuma jerked up his gun. But his finger halted on the trigger—the man's back was toward him. A second later the man would be gone, but still Yuma hesitated, reluctant to shoot even a ruthless dry-gulcher in the back.

Now suddenly the decision was rendered unnecessary. The racing busky jerked back on his heels, and a terrified bleat ripped from his throat. "No! Mike—*don't!*"

A gun blasted out loudly in the office, and the hombre in the doorway abruptly crashed backward, arms flung wide. A blocky figure filled the doorway, a smoking gun in his hand.

The stranger stepped coolly over the dead man's still twitching body and came down the aisle. He nodded to Yuma and looked around casually at the others. He spoke in a booming tone that sent vibrant echoes into the dusky recesses of the warehouse.

"Having a bit of trouble, gentlemen? Or is the shooting over—"

"That depends," Yuma bit out sharply. His .45 was leveled at the stranger's belt line. The newcomer swiveled to stare at the waddy, and Yuma met his gaze bleakly. Yuma Bill had never seen a man more calm and composed while the tang of burning gunpowder was still strong in the nostrils. The fellow had a dark, almost swarthy complexion, full curling lips, jet-black hair and eyes. He was tall and well-built, and Yuma sensed that his expensive clothes hid a muscular frame of tremendous power.

"What's the matter, Bill?" Beanpole barked wonderingly. "This hom-

bre's friendly—didn't he just salivate one o' them buskies?"

"Yeah," Yuma answered. "I'd just like to know how come the dead gent called you by name, like he knew you. Explain that, mister!"

"I don't know why I should explain anything—but I will. It just happens the man I shot down was playing poker at the same table with me last night. Otherwise I never saw him before. Satisfied?"

Yuma Bill shrugged and stuck his Peacemaker back in its holster. After all, this strange dark man had only been trying to help them out.

"I reckon as how we got some introducin' to do—all the way around," spoke up the dark-browed Eureka Jones. He stuck a toil-hardened paw out to Beanpole, who shook it heartily. "Glad to see you again, Badger," Jones went on. "If you and your young friend hadn't come in here when you did, I wouldn't never 'a' seen *nobody* again."

"This red-headed hairpin is Yuma Bill Storms," Beanpole introduced gravely. The swarthy stranger stepped forward and put his hand forward after Yuma had shaken with Jones.

"So this is the famous capturer of renegade clans, eh? I'm deeply honored to have happened into a meeting with such well-known men. May I introduce myself to you all? Mike Zoristo, gentlemen. At your service. I suggest you all have a drink with me, to discuss the cause of this little affray. It would seem that Mr. Jones had a miraculous escape."

The parrot in the warehouse office now giving voice to another of his unearthly screams, old Eureka Jones exclaimed: "Doggone if I hadn't plumb forgot about Snake Poison. The poor bird musta worried himself to a shadow when them fellers

drug me away from him—”

“Snake Poison!” Beanpole Badger snorted the name disgustedly. “So that palaverin’ pinto hawk belongs to you, huh, Eureka? You always was a peculiar cuss in your tastes.”

A FEW moments later the men from Arizona were seated at a table in the bar of the Stockmen’s Hotel with their new-found companions. The blue eyes of Eureka Jones glinted in grim anger as he gave his terse explanation of the vicious attack that had so nearly proved fatal.

“Matter of fact, this is the second time somebody’s tried to dust me off in the three months I been loafin’ around Frisco. First time, some lurkin’ jasper just took a pot shot at me down a dark alley one night. Pinked me here—” Jones’ black walrus mustache bristled as he yanked up a sleeve and displayed a half-healed wound on his upper arm.

Yuma Bill gave a low whistle. “Plenty close, hombre! But where’d them three gunnies come from this afternoon, and how come they didn’t just bat you one on the head like they did Tomlins?”

“They was goin’ to do that, but one of ‘em thought it’d be more fun to watch me kick at the end of a rope!” Jones growled. “They jest barged in there like swoopin’ buzzards, killed Tomlins and grabbed me. I figure they just got that poor warehouse hombre as the quickest way to keep him quiet. But it was me they was after.”

“But why this murder lust against you, amigo?” Mike asked curiously, his nostrils flaring oddly over his flashing white teeth. “You do not look like a man of many enemies, Señor Jones.”

Eureka’s shaggy black brows lowered. “I ain’t sure what it’s all about. But I’m makin’ a guess.

You see, I got me a nice little ranch on the Eel River about a hundred and fifty miles north of Frisco. Tall Timbers—that’s what I call my place—is right in the middle of the Redwood empire, and I got a dang fine stand of prime timber. I’ve had lots of chances to sell off the timber rights, but me I’d ruther see a tree standing up on its hind legs the way nature made it than sawed up into boards. The last outfit that tried to dicker with me struck me as nothin’ but a tough bunch of timber thieves. The feller I talked to, Pike Muldoon, said he represented somebody else, but he wouldn’t say who. Offered me such a low price for my trees that I got plumb mad and run him and his pards clean off the place with a double-barreled shotgun!”

“I’da salted ‘em down good with a fifty-fifty mixture of bird shot and rock salt, if it’d been me,” Beanpole bit out, his dark eyes snapping. “You think it’s some of the same outfit that’s been after you here, huh?”

“I ain’t sure,” Jones admitted. “I figured if I hung around down here, ‘stead of goin’ home, Muldoon’d get tired trying to deal and go some-where else.”

“Very wise,” Zoristo murmured over the rim of his glass.

“Personally, I think you ought to get on home,” Yuma Bill put in bluntly, ignoring the quick glance of Mike. “You’re takin’ a long chance leaving your ranch unguarded.”

“Why, I got a younker on the place, kind of a roustabout. Young kid named Sammy Van. Sharp and clever, Sammy is. Matter of fact, though, I ain’t heard from him for most a month now. I figgered on headin’ north pronto. If you fellers ain’t in no rush to head back to Arizona or New Mex, I’d admire to have you put in a week or two at Tall Timbers—with me an’ Snake

Poison here—" The oldster broke off to shove a pretzel through the wire bars of the parrot's cage, which was setting on the table at his elbow. The bird emitted a rasping clatter of sound and bit viciously at Jones' stubby finger by way of appreciation.

"We'll take you up on that invite," Yuma said quickly, aware that Zoristo was giving him a curiously covert glance.

"Then we shall be traveling companions, for a way, at least," the swarthy man said, hooding his stare. "I, too, am heading up the coast on business."

"Then it's settled. We can pull out tomorrow," Jones rose and shook hands gravely with the pards. The worried lines on his face had given place to obvious relief. He grinned. "I got to admit I'll be glad I don't hafta ride down from the railhead to my place on the Eel by my lonesome!"

Before the four men parted, however, they spent a hectic hour explaining the feed-barn killing, or what they knew of it, to two local policemen and a deputy sheriff. When Yuma Bill Storms' identity was proved, their word was accepted at face value, though all of them had to give their word to submit to further questioning necessary. They gave their present address, at Eureka Jones' suggestion, as Tall Timbers Ranch.

The deputy sheriff seemed to know Mike slightly, and made some mention of Zoristo's timber business.

When the lawmen had gone and the friends were about to separate for the night, Yuma swung questioning, pale eyes toward Zoristo. His sandy brows were raised curiously. "So you're in the timber business, eh?" Bill inquired blandly.

Zoristo's dark face was unsmiling

for the first time since he had barged unbidden into their little gun war in the feed barn. Again Yuma noticed that odd flaring of the swarthy man's nostrils, as though he was controlling anger with a supreme effort.

"The deputy sheriff mistakes," he said smoothly at last. "It is true that I have certain . . . er . . . holdings in the Redwood country. But in timber, as a business, I have small interest. *Buenas noches, amigos!* Tomorrow we shall meet again, eh?"

For a long moment Yuma felt those black, smoky orbs burning into his own, and his own gaze locked unflinchingly with Zoristo's. Then abruptly, Zoristo wheeled and strode from the bar.

"Phew!" Beanpole muttered staring after Mike Zoristo's imposing figure. "There's somethin' about that hombre—"

"There sure is!" Yuma agreed.

## CHAPTER III.

### HELL BUSTS THE HINGES.

THE town of Maldito, railhead of a small spur line, nestled in a timbered valley of the rugged coast ranges. As the three friends stepped from the train into the clear, sparkling air, Eureka Jones heaved a sigh of relief.

"I was half-scared that silky-lookin' hombre aimed to swap lies with us clear on to the Tall Timbers ranchhouse."

"Yeah, I'm glad Zoristo got off at the last stop. Them snake-gleamin' eyes of his was beginnin' to get me skittered," Beanpole commented gustily.

Yuma Bill joined his slat-built pard in staring with keen appreciation out over the rising, green-hued slopes of the surrounding mountains.

"It ain't more than twelve or fifteen miles to my place from here,"

Jones informed them. "But we'll hafta be makin' tracks. If you gents will see to gettin' your ridin' critters outa that freight car up front, I'll be roustin' up my own pony. Feller at the livery stable has been lookin' after him for me."

When Yuma Bill had saddled his sturdy claybank, Concho, and led him down the ramp from the freight car, many an admiring and curious glance was thrown the cowboy's way. With his wide, powerful shoulders, tapering torso and clear pale eyes in a deeply tanned, open face, Yuma Bill Storms was naturally a focal center in any group of men. Mounted on the beautiful claybank that had borne him loyally through many a blazing gun fray, he was a vivid picture of a man.

Beanpole Badger, in turn, drew more than one good-natured chuckle from townsmen who had collected to see the weekly train come in, as the lank oldster heaved up into the saddle of his hammer-nosed calico mule, Jughead. Their chuckles increased to guffaws of merriment as the mule suddenly balked and reared, nearly dumping the sweating and muttering Beanpole.

"When you gonna get yourself a honest-to-gosh saddle horse?" Yuma inquired with a broad grin as they rode up the street to join Eureka Jones. "That half-breed jackrabbit is as trigger-tempered as a cow-camp coosie that's fresh out of drinking vanilla."

"Aw, old Jughead jest don't cotton to railroad travel—specially in a freight car. He figures he's refined enough to set up in the coach and see that the conductor don't make no mistake in punchin' out his ticket. Besides," Beanpole rasped grumpily, "there ain't no common horse west of the Pecos or north of the Gila that

can hold a candle to Jughead for straight ridin'."

"Sometimes I think you'd ought to hold a candle *under* him," Yuma retorted. "And if you figure some of the sunfishing twists that critter has put himself through is straight ridin', I'll take mine on a wild buffalo any time—"

The loud and braying retort that sputtered on Beanpole's lips was cut short by a halloo from Eureka Jones, who was riding out of the wide doorway of a livery barn on a chunky little sad-faced sorrel with a swivel-hipped gait that looked tricky to Yuma Bill's experienced judgment. A few minutes later the trio were heading across the cleared meadows that surrounded the mountain town.

**A**N hour and a half ride brought the friends down a long, twisting decline into the rolling, timbered valley of the Eel. They were following a wagon road now that seemed chopped and rutted by much recent travel.

"I don't savvy where all this heavy wagon traffic's been goin'," Jones told the pards wonderingly. "This road just wanders off into the hills yonder across the river to a few small ranches."

They came in sight of the river itself now, following a broad channel at this particular point.

"We got to ford here," Jones said, stooping in the saddle to roll up his pants legs. They were close to the sloping bank when Yuma suddenly pointed out into the current.

"Two or three big cut logs floating yonder, Eureka," he stated curiously. "Is there some lumbering going on up above here?"

"Why there's plenty logging between here and the coast, but there ain't much prime stuff up above for a long ways except on my place,



which is acrost the river and four or five miles above. Them floaters must be runaways from some place way up."

They had pulled up their mounts to gaze out at the huge, bobbing logs that were sweeping by slowly, when

anger at having been caught off guard so easily.

Eureka Jones swung slowly, and his blue eyes held surprise and mild disappointment. "Now look here, Sammy," he began quietly. "What kind of—"



*Beanpole and Yuma hightailed it for the better shelter of the cordwood.*

a thin voice spat out behind them: "Put 'em up, you two gents with Jones. Reach yourselves a redwood branch—a hundred feet up!"

Cold tingles chased up and down Yuma's backbone. The voice sounded like that of a mere youth, yet there was undeniable deadly command in the tone. Slowly he raised his hands, saw Jones and Beanpole Badger do likewise. Beanpole's quivering mustache and beet-red face showed his

A lean, tanned youth stepped past Yuma and Beanpole and moved up beside Jones' horse. He was an open-faced youngster of eighteen or so, brown-eyed and sober and dressed in the ordinary workaday garb of the California rancher. He glanced up at Jones and grinned briefly, then swung his gaze quickly back to the pards.

"I didn't ask *you* to put your grub filchers up, Eureka," he spoke coolly.

"But I ain't takin' no chances with these other two hombres. Are they with you, Eureka—or are you with them?" He was covering them with an ancient shotgun.

"What's the difference, son?" Yuma inquired, with a twinkle in his pale-blue eyes. He liked this lad's clean-cut appearance and had surmised that he was Sammy Van, Jones' hired hand. The green parrot screeched in his cage and the kid stared.

"There might be plenty difference," the kid stated bleakly. His hands held the shotgun steady, though he still eyed the strange pet Jones had brought from Frisco.

"Put up your smokepole, Sammy," Jones said, laughing. "An' make the acquaintance of Yuma Bill Storms and Beanpole Badger. I've brung 'em up from Frisco for a siesta."

"Glad to meet you hombres," young Van admitted, relief showing in the strained lines of his features as he lowered the gun. "But Tall Timbers ain't no place to rest up, not any more. *The ranch is plumb over-run with Pike Muldoon's loggers!*"

At a braying yelp of indignation from Jones, Sammy Van quickly explained how Muldoon had returned about a month ago and, finding only the kid on guard, had simply moved in with his crew of tough ax and saw men. Sammy himself, fighting like a cub bear to hold the place, had managed to shoot down two burly loggers who came at him like charging grizzlies, but after that he had to make a break for the woods. He spent several days lurking around the ranch, watching the loggers. He was dismayed to find they had confidently moved into the ranch buildings as their central camp and that they had started in slashing ruthlessly into Tall Timbers' finest stands of giant redwoods.

"From the way Muldoon acted, I was plumb scary they'd already killed you, and from some things they said, I figured the job must 'a' been done in Frisco, where Pike mentioned his big boss was directin' things. But on the off chance Pike was makin' a big mistake, I been hidin' out in a old trapper's cabin near here, watchin' the trail every day to see if you come along. But I had about give up hope, Eureka."

The kid's lips began to tremble as he finished, and Yuma felt rage sweep over him. This youth had been through Hades in the past month, but he had showed only the stanchest kind of loyalty for his boss, even though he figured Jones was most likely dead. The ruthless gang of timber thieves and their mysteriously absent boss represented just the type of renegade faction Yuma Bill Storms had dedicated his life to fighting. A deep-throated growl came from the cowboy now.

"It looks like Pike Muldoon has got the upper hand for the moment, men," Yuma said gruffly, unconsciously assuming the leadership. "But if Eureka Jones is set on raising timber beef instead of turning his place into a lumber camp, then it's up to us to find a way to drive the loggers out."

"When I think of them logs floatin' out there as being all that's left of some of my trees, it makes me fightin' mad," Jones rumbled.

"What we going to do, Bill? Barge right up there tonight and give 'em a taste of cow-country gun-smoke justice?" Beanpole Badger's jutting chin, gleaming eyes and tight features showed his harsh feelings about the rash plot that had been planned against his old friend of prospecting days. "My old Frontier hogleg is already twitchin' and palpitatin' so

hard I can't hardly keep it in leather."

Yuma shook his head. "I don't figure there's anything to gain by acting rashly. They've already been established almost a month, Sammy says. My suggestion is to lay low in the cabin where Sammy's been hiding out, and wait till daylight tomorrow for our first look-see up at the ranch. Meantime, Sammy can be giving us a pretty good picture of what we're up against, and how much damage they've already done to the timber."

The old shack Sammy had been using as a hiding place was in a small clearing, close to the river bank yet screened by tall trees. Sammy had cleaned the place of rat nests and other debris and made it fairly comfortable. A rusty sheet-iron stove formed the cooking arrangements, though Sammy said he had cooked only at night when the smoke would not be visible from across the river.

It was a mournful foursome that sat about the makeshift table after dark that night. Sammy had taken such a shine to the waterfront parrot that Jones promptly made him a present of it.

Deciding to put off making definite plans for battle until they had a chance to look over the land the next day, they made up their beds on the floor and turned in early.

They were eating a glum and silent breakfast the next morning when suddenly Snake Poison, whose cage had been set on a window ledge, let out a raucous, piercing cry and began stringing curses together as fast as his glib tongue could get them out. While the men sent startled looks toward each other, a rifle cracked abruptly outside. The slug hit the parrot cage with a snarling twang

and sent the bird crashing to the cabin floor.

Drowning out the bird's unearthly clamor, a roaring voice lifted from the underbrush. "Roll out, there, hombres, afore I turn my loggers loose to make toothpicks out of the shack and hamburger out of the men! There's forty rifles trained on the place!"

"That bull bellow don't belong to nobody but Pike Muldoon!" Jones rasped, his face pale.

"We're surrounded!" the kid blurted, darting to scoop up the parrot cage and jam it under the stove. "They musta had me spotted all the time!"

"Thanks to gosh we brought our guns inside," Yuma bit out grimly. "Grab yourselves a chink in the logs, men. Right here's a good spot for the first skirmish!"

Beanpole Badger was the first one to unlimber his .45 and take a cautious peek from the window. Instantly the rifle outside roared again and chips of wood flew into the oldster's face. With a wild, rolling howl that would have done credit to a battling Comanche, Badger cracked down with his six-gun and triggered a snap shot through the window before ducking down. The instant gurgling, choked cry of a logger brought a tight grin to the oldster's lips.

"Turn your loggers loose and be done with it, Muldoon," Badger howled. "There's a fair sample of the kind of cow-country shootin' they'll get!"

"You're wastin' time, Pike!" old Eureka Jones shouted, as he flopped on his belly beside a narrow chink close to the floor. "There's eleven of us in here, an' ever' one a dead shot."

He punctuated his remark with a blaring shot that brought another

startled oath and a rapid, crashing scamper in the brush outside. Then Muldoon's heavy, sneering laugh sounded.

"Did the pinto mule out here carry nine men? There's only two ridin' critters tied out here besides the mule. Matter of fact, we happen to know who's in there. There's young Van an' Jones—and a couple hombra named Storms and Badger. Want to bet?"

A sinking feeling made Yuma gasp as he peered through a crack between logs and saw at least a dozen brawny loggers lurking in the undergrowth. Most of them had rifles. And Muldoon knew whom he had cornered! Now how in—

His wonder was cut short by a veritable barrage of gunfire. Lead hammered into the cabin walls, some of it spitting dangerously through. One slug hit with a loud spang on the sheet iron stove, puncturing through and sending a shower of hot ashes over the floor. Sammy Van quickly sloshed a bucket of spring water over the smoking wood. The youth's face was white, but he shot a game grin toward Yuma Bill.

Yuma Bill was pouring hot lead through his own chink, and a yelp of pain from a pair of leather lungs outside was satisfying music to his ears. More lead smacked into the logs as Beanpole again cautiously poked up his head to the level of the window sill. Lead ricocheted with a lusty whine from the sill, and a long white sliver peeled up close to Beanpole's ear. The oldster jerked and grunted.

"Belly down to a crack, you old billy goat," Yuma called, grinning. "You want to lose one of those bat ears of yours?"

Beanpole only grunted again and leveled off his Frontier model Colt to send two snarling shots into the

brush. Yuma put his eye to his niche in time to see a burly lumberman pitch forward and roll into the pine needles that carpeted the ground.

"You call me loco for exposin' my hard cranium, huh?" Beanpole rasped, his eyes crinkling in cool humor. "That jasper was aimin' to bounce a chunk of lead off your eyeball as you peeked through, Bill."

Yuma's answer was a hasty shot with his own gun toward another log hopper who was chopping down with his rifle toward the top of Beanpole's head. At the savage bark of Yuma Bill's gun the man spilled grotesquely backward, tossing the rifle twenty feet from him as he fell.

"That makes you and me even, compadre," he told his lanky pard as another barrage from outside made them all jerk their bodies to safety.

The brawling *whoomp* of Sammy Van's ancient shotgun opened up the next moment's flurry of action, but Yuma knew by now they were hopelessly outnumbered.

Even as old Eureka Jones gasped in sudden pain when a bullet grazed his shoulder a few moments later, the door of the shack was suddenly crammed open, nearly ripped from the rusty hinges. Three burly men barged through the opening, guns held menacingly so as to sweep the huddled foursome in the small room. Two more rifles, poked hastily through the window by other loggers, showed Yuma Bill that they had come to the end of their rope with an abrupt jerk. He refused to risk Sammy's life.

Slowly the four laid down their guns, at the barked, deadly command of the loggers. The biggest hombre grinned nastily.

"If I had my say, it'd be an Eel River coffin for all of you, right here

and now. But the boss wants you brung into camp. Reckon he wants to get his money's worth of fun out of the deal."

"So your boss is up at my place too, is he, Pike?" Jones rumbled.

"He would be," Yuma put in, eyes narrowed. "And I'm betting the jasper's calling name is Mike Zoristo!"

A gusty groan escaped Beanpole Badger's lips. "Well, I'll be— I knew there was somethin' fishy about that hombre. But how'd you guess, Bill?"

"Who else could name our party so exact?" the waddy grunted. But there was little satisfaction in the knowledge now, which Pike Muldoon affirmed as his tough lumberjacks herded them all outside, where they already had the horses saddled. Most of the log hoppers also had horses, all with the Double T brand and all badly ganted.

"We're gettin' soft." Muldoon laughed expansively. "With all them fine horses of Jones' in the pasture, the boys are gettin' so they expect to ride the logs down the river this fall a-settin' on horseback."

Jones looked grim at the condition of his pampered riding stock, but he kept a dogged silence as they were forced to climb aboard their own mounts. Yuma had been quietly sizing up the logger foreman. Pike Muldoon was six feet or more, heavy and muscular. He had a square, flat face that was red as a turkey's neck. The green woolen shirt he wore looked as though it had not been washed in months. His yellowish eyes were glittering, and cruel lights danced in them as he surveyed his captives with heavy satisfaction.

A grinning lumberman tied the hands of the other prisoners to their saddlehorns. When he approached Yuma Bill, a wild plan careened

through the cowboy's racing mind. Without hesitation he acted on it.

Pike Muldoon was on Yuma's opposite side as the logger approached with a rope in his hands. With a desperate lunge, Yuma Bill threw himself from the saddle straight at Muldoon. The big man was not an expert rider and, as the waddy's weight hit him and hard fists battered at his face, Muldoon toppled sideways. His horse bolted abruptly, and the two men landed on the ground in a thrashing tangle of flailing limbs.

As the steel-thewed body of the logger squirmed under him with incredible power, Yuma knew instantly that he had taken on a sizable order for himself. He smashed sledgelike blows into the beefy face and felt the bones in his hands tingle with the impact. A knee jerked upward like a driving timber, cramming into the puncher's midriff with jolting force. His hold loosened, and Muldoon rolled clear.

A second later the two were on their feet, eying each other like giant fighting cocks. By now the stunned lumbermen were rushing forward toward Yuma, but Pike Muldoon waved them back imperiously.

"Stand clear, you ax slingers. I'm a match for any sand-and-cactus cowboy seven days of the week." His yellowish eyes lit up with an unholy glee as his gaze swept the trim, compact figure of the waddy. Suddenly he laughed, long and loud. "You asked for it, redhead! I'll pick your legs off like a fly's and cram them down your throat. Here we go!"

With a bellow that ripped gustily from his huge throat, Muldoon charged. But the logger's step faltered, telegraphing a warning to Yuma's brain that the big man was expecting him to leap aside and was



deliberately checking his rush to see which way Yuma jumped. Instead, the cowboy met the charge head on, with a driving surge of his own into which he put every ounce of strength. They smacked into each other and exchanged punishing blows.

"Rowel the varmint cow-camp fashion, Bill," Beanpole Badger yelped. "Cram home the spurs and ride him to a finish!"

"Pound him into tallow, and we'll use the carcass for soap," crowed Sammy Van. The youth's eyes were nearly popping from his head as he craned his neck for a better view.

The loggers yelled encouragement to their foreman, punctuating it with lurid epithets against the rash stranger from Arizona.

But Yuma Bill had little time to listen to either cheers or curses from the onlookers. He had undertaken this wild chore with a definite purpose in mind, and the way Pike Muldoon was dishing out the punishment it looked as though Bill might never hang and rattle long enough to carry out his desperate plan. He had figured on milling around in this brawl until he got a chance either to snatch a gun from somebody or to make a break for the woods. But it didn't look as though that chance was going to come, the way the loggers were pressing in close to the scrapping men.

But his chance for an escape did come, sooner than he had expected—and in a way he was totally unprepared for.

He had Pike Muldoon panting now, saw the towering lumberman drenched with sweat, settling down to fighting in deadly earnest. Yuma rocked to a hay-maker to Pike's jutting chin that would have finished him if it had landed solidly. Then Bill followed with a swift, dynamiting tattoo over Pike's heart, each

blow driving gusty breath from the logger's massive chest.

Pike's eyes glinted murderously, and a canny look came into them. Straight boxing was not in his line. He was more used to kicking his victims in the belly, then leaping onto them with his heavily calked boots. But this dancing, grinning waddy gave him no opportunity for that kind of tactic, though his men were now yelling loudly for blood.

The two had gradually circled half around the cabin, and now the thirty-foot embankment, that dropped sheer to the water, loomed suddenly behind Yuma Bill's weaving figure. Pike rushed, faked, rushed again, then suddenly lunged forward. Yuma, unaware of the danger looming close, stepped back quickly. He tripped over a jutting root, reeled and abruptly plunged headlong over the bank!

Beanpole Badger, giving tongue to a belated, yelping warning, felt his eyes bug out strainingly, and horror swept through his bony frame. For the river was here a churning, foaming torrent! A few seconds later a hat swept into view, then the bobbing head of the struggling waddy. Yuma Bill disappeared then in a swirl of white foam as the river swept around a bend behind towering trees. The hollow groan of old Eureka Jones sounded loud in the abrupt silence.

"There's four hundred yards of rapids down there that no Injun in the woods can even drive a canoe through. You're pard's a goner, Badger!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### GUN-GHOST MASQUERADE.

**A**ROUND the bend, Yuma Bill grimly fought the murderously swirling currents. Hurling through the air from the cliff top, he had been

lucky enough to land boots first in the churning river. That first icy plunge had come near to ending his struggles for good. Striking the water with a tremendous force that drove the last bit of air from his frantically pumping lungs, he had come up gasping, only to be immediately drawn under again.

His body felt as though it were being wrenched and jerked to a pulp as he was carried over submerged boulders and swept downstream with incredible speed. The white waters leaped and smashed over him like huge, driving breakers on a storm-whipped ocean beach. His strength was as powerless against the madly racing rapids as a feather in a prairie gale. The world was gone, and there was nothing but this eternity of rushing, punishing water.

Without warning he was swept into calmer water below the rapids, flung bodily into a swirling, sheltered pool. Half-drowned, his senses battered and reeling, he felt firm ground beneath his feet and realized with a sort of dull half-consciousness that he was alive, that he had lived through that pounding, churning course.

Staggering ashore, still not aware which side of the Eel he was on, he crawled painfully up a sloping embankment. He flopped down on his belly on the muddy, weed-grown shore, a feeble, twisted grin on his battered lips.

"I wanted to escape from Pike Muldoon's crew," he muttered gaspingly. "I sure did!"

He heaved to his knees as quarts of river water emptied retchingly from his belly. Violent nausea swept him sickeningly, and he sagged slowly forward onto his face again as blackness closed in like a ghostly shroud of death.

EUREKA JONES had said the road the timber thieves were using led to a few small ranches up in the flanking hills. It was a shabby, muddy figure that trudged warily up that road past noon of that same day. Yuma Bill Storms had evolved a grim and desperate plan, a plan on which he would need help. It was that help he was after now.

"If I can make 'em see the danger of these ruthless logger renegades to themselves, I might get action," he thought now, as he sighted the first isolated ranchhouse nestled among towering redwoods.

After resting for several hours on the muddy bank of the river, Yuma had begun a tour of exploration. The first thing he discovered was that he was on the same side of the river as Jones' cow spread, that is, the east side. He had done enough cruising on the lower reaches of the ranch to realize with bleak anger the heedless destruction the timber thieves had already wrought. Beginning at the river's edge, a great slash had already been cut over. Beautiful trees, that had stood in silent grandeur for uncounted centuries, now were stretched along the ground.

He saw further signs of destruction of Eureka Jones' property. In wide, grassy meadows scattered groups of fat cattle grazed. And in several of these meadows Yuma had seen where steers had been slaughtered on the spot, the loin and rear quarters taken and the rest left for wolves and lions to maul. Such waste of prime beef made the cowboy boil. It was like Zoristo's cold murder of his own gunman in that Frisco brawl.

No wonder Jones had driven Muldoon and his men from the ranch at the point of his scattergun! But Mike Zoristo had sent them back to take for nothing what his stingy money offer could not buy. With

Beanpole and Jones and young Sammy Van as his prisoners, Zoristo would now be gloating that he held the upper hand. But he would be reckoning without Yuma Bill, whom Pike Muldoon would surely report as dead.

"At that, Pike'll come close to being right," Yuma muttered.

The first rancher he talked with seemed impressed with the wide-shouldered, earnest stranger, but when Yuma mentioned Eureka Jones, the man bristled.

"Jones was a fool! He sold his timber rights to some Frisco outfit and there's a crew in there now, massacring the finest redwood stands anywhere along the Eel. Pike Muldoon has made offers to some of the rest of us in here, but his price is like stealing. Anyway, I wouldn't sell to those timber butchers for a thousand dollars a tree."

Yuma sized up this rancher and liked what he saw: a tall, rawboned Kansan who had settled in here a few years back and who had the pioneer's abiding love of his particular slice of wilderness. There would be others like him around here. Briefly then, in terse, dramatic terms inspired by his strong feeling, Yuma Bill gave the oldster a true picture of the situation.

"And don't think Zoristo and Muldoon will stop down there at Tall Timbers, mister. Their kind never stop hogging, once they get a toe hold. They'll work out the best stands down there, then they'll want to spread out. You may be next," he told the rancher.

The man growled and nodded bleakly. Slowly his hand came out, his piercing eyes locking with those of Yuma. They gripped hands. "You're right, Storms. I can see that now that you've given me the whole picture. And from the way

you talk I know you want us to help stop the renegades before they go any further. Want me to round up some others so you can talk to them? It may be an all-day job—"

Yuma shook his head. "That'll be your job. With my own pard in danger, I've got to be ridin' pronto."

The rancher, who said his name was Ad Merritt, insisted that the Arizonan sit in on a fine meal his wife was preparing. After his recent exposure and near drowning, Yuma could hardly turn down this offer.

AN hour later, with dry, clean clothes and plenty of good food inside him, he returned to the valley, trusting Merritt to carry out the plan suggested. Yuma had no definite plan of action for himself, but would take his chances where he found them.

"If I find them," the reckless red-head murmured as he hit the road running up to Tall Timbers. "In the event I don't have that kind of luck—well, I've made my chances before, without much to work on. And I ain't dead yet, not so's you could notice."

The chance that came had a heap more dare than common sense, as Yuma was afterward to remark to Beanpole Badger. The clothes that Ad Merritt had given him had given rise to some vague notion of walking in to the lumberjack's camp, taking the dare that no one would recognize him until he had a chance to do something. But now, coming suddenly on a logger at work, he had a better if more daring idea.

The woodsman was working alone, driving a team of big work horses which were hitched to a sled made of two logs crossed with stout planks. The driver seemed very near to Yuma Bill's own build, which gave rise to the idea that flickered crazily.

Yuma stood behind a low-growing bush while he watched the logger swing the sled off the road and head for a small, stout-looking building set in a nearby clearing. The isolation of that little structure, plus several squarish boxes that were piled on the sled, gave Yuma the answer. It was the powder house, and this teamster was bringing in a supply of dynamite. In fact, Yuma could see the warning sign now.

The waddy stepped into the trail now and strode boldly toward the teamster. He hailed the fellow cheerily. "Howdy. I'm looking for your foreman, Muldoon. Is he around the woods somewhere?"

The stocky man looked at him suspiciously, seemed to take him for a neighboring rancher. He had jerked open the powder-house door in preparation for unloading his boxes. Yuma noticed the man held his neck stiffly and cocked to one side. A moment later he saw the square bandage that was taped over a swelling on the side of the logger's neck. Apparently a boil, which might account for the fellow's impatient snarling:

"Pike's up at camp. So's everybody else, or soon will be. Ain't you got sense enough to know it's supper time? Everybody quits on time but the powder monkey, and it seems like I ain't never done."

Yuma came around the team's head and leaned against the open door, grinning in genial fashion as the powder man lifted two heavy boxes of powder at once. He clucked his tongue in sympathy. "Got a boil, huh? Gosh, that's tough. What's your name, fella?"

"What's it to you—" the fellow sputtered, teetering on his heels to balance his load. But at Yuma's apparent friendliness, he softened a little. "This boil's got me edgy as

a double-bitted ax. Name's Blacky Weaver. You a stranger around these woods, or— Hey! What in—"

His surprised ejaculation was cut short as Yuma Bill's fist zoomed up to crack sharply just under the left ear. Blacky Weaver went to his knees, then sagged over sideways against the door jamb with a sigh. Yuma's lips tightened grimly as he dragged the inert powder monkey into the shack. It was harsh treatment to deal an unprepared man a rabbit punch like that, but this, the waddy told himself, was a harsh business. At any rate, the man would come out of it.

Swiftly he divested Blacky of clothing, peeling off a red plaid woolen shirt, heavy jeans and high-topped boots that were heavily calked. He took note of the rugged features, which were roughly similar to his own, except for the logger's jet-black hair and brows. He exchanged his own range garb for Blacky's, beginning to feel hurried.

A few moments later he had put the dynamite boxes and the unconscious woodsman inside and closed the thick log door with a soft and final *whoosh*. Then he straddled the sled and started up the team. The big animals responded willingly, pricking their ears in curiosity at the strange driver.

"If you plugs are already wise to me," he told them with a fleeting grin, "I might have considerable of a time convincing Zoristo and Muldoon!"

A half mile or so up the road the perpetually twilighted woods broke suddenly into a broad clearing with a number of substantial log buildings. Beyond lay open, richly grassed pasture, with a majestic, sweeping view of the river and the distant green hills. The great trees that surrounded the house site towered up-

ward toward the blue sky like huge cathedral columns.

Many loggers were milling about in the yard, most of them going toward a long low building from which cooking odors drifted. Closer at hand were corrals and barns. Yuma swung toward them, keeping his head down so that the battered felt hat, which was a part of his stolen rig, partially hid his face.

With practiced fingers he unharnessed his team, turning them into the corral with other stock. A soft nicker broke out, and hoofs padded through the corral dust toward him. Quickly the waddy ducked, but a broad grin was on his face. Good old Concho had instantly recognized him!

He pondered his next move carefully. His red hair! "Ought to be a harness an' gear room somewhere," he murmured, gazing around. He spotted what he was looking for then, and entered a small room built off the stable. The clean pungent odor of leather and harness soap penetrated his nostrils.

It didn't take long to dig up what most gear rooms held—a can of lamp-black powder and a gallon of neat's-foot oil. In an empty tomato can he mixed a coal-black, sticky mess and with his fingers carefully worked the stuff into his hair. Getting it on to look like anything nature could grow was pure guesswork, though from his grotesque reflection in the side of the gallon bottle, it looked all right. He worked some more into his sandy eyebrows, then cleaned his hands with kerosene.

On a sudden inspiration, he dashed from the gear room into the stable, found his own saddle without difficulty. In the time-worn *alforjas* tied on behind, he found what he wanted—a small first-aid kit. With a square of gauze folded thick and bunchy

and two thin strips of adhesive tape, he managed to stick a very authentic-looking bandage on the side of his neck.

"If I remember to holler when some jasper bumps it, she'll do for a boil," he reflected with a grin.

The melodious clang of a triangular bar suspended from a post near the kitchen door sounded now, as the waddy started up the hill. He had Blacky's felt hat yanked down low, and strands of greasy black hair dangled from underneath it. A quick glance showed him the loggers were going in to their meal. They jostled each other in the doorway as they crowded through, joshing and hoorawing each other roughly. They were a tough-looking bunch, Yuma thought glumly, as he plunked himself down on a bench outside. Mike Zoristo brushed past him, dressed now in new work clothes.

Yuma sat there, hunched over, staring at his boots. The last logger to jam through the door of the dining room called out to him loudly:

"Whatsa matter, Blacky—smell too much powder smoke?"

"This damn boil—makin' me sick," Bill grunted, trying to ape Weaver's tone. Apparently he succeeded, for the logger rolled on toward the table, roaring with mirth. A moment later he heard several of them getting a big laugh because the powder monkey was letting a boil keep him from chuck.

Yuma let his covert gaze sweep the ranch yard, getting the lay of the land. Logging gear lay scattered everywhere, and what had obviously been a neatly kept ranch was now a shambles. Keen agony roweled him as he saw no sign of Beanpole Badger and the others. Maybe they were already dead! Suddenly the cold, smooth tones of Mike Zoristo drifted from the dining room.



"I'm docking you on your cut, Muldoon, for allowing that redhead, Storms, to get away from you."

"I tell you he's nothin' but salmon bait now," Pike Muldoon growled. "A swim through those rapids is sure death."

"Yes-s?" Zoristo hissed nastily. "Can you show me his body? That cowpoke is dangerous. These two old men and the boy—bah!" The lumberman spoke contemptuously, spitting out the words as though they tasted bad in his mouth. "Tonight I turn them loose!"

Outside, Yuma Bill clutched the edge of the bench as a measure of relief surged over him. They were alive then! But what— Pike Muldoon's amazed gasp lifted sharply. "Turn 'em loose? Have you gone loco?"

Zoristo laughed with sneering, sadistic mirth. "Only in a manner of speaking, amigo. Rather, I shall give them a choice of two freedoms. And I think I know which they will select. It should be great sport for the crew, a fine show."

"I get it!" Muldoon barked. "A celebration, huh? We got complete control here now, and half a million dollars worth of timber."

"Right!" Zoristo's voice held keen satisfaction. "So tonight we have entertainment. I furnish plenty

whiskey for ever'body, and big show of the kind all loggers love. Fights—to the death!"

## CHAPTER V.

### BOOTHILL MUSIC BOX.

YUMA BILL speared up to his feet, swaying dizzily. What kind of devil's game did the mad-brained Zoristo plan for his prisoners? It was plain that his talk of freeing them was only a cruel mockery. Grimly Yuma determined to try to find his friends. Prowling around would be risky business, but Yuma had no choice.

"Hey Blacky, don't go driftin' off!" Pike Muldoon's bellow lifted suddenly. "You gotta drag out that accordion of yours right after supper. The boss is plannin' a big party. Music'll liven things up."

"Yeah, you can't get out of that, Blacky," another logger bawled loudly. "You don't play no acco'deen with your neck!"

Yuma shrugged, the picture of gloomy resignation. As Blacky Weaver, there was nothing he could do but ride along and trust to luck that some chance for action would open up.

Darkness was sweeping over the valley swiftly now, and a little later his masquerade could be carried off



more easily. In the meantime, if he had to do any suspicious fumbling in locating an instrument that was supposed to be his own, it had better be right now. Without turning or answering Muldoon, he swung his steps toward a new, rough log structure that must be a bunkhouse.

His guess was right, and a moment later he had discovered Blacky's buak, by the accordion case shoved under it. He dragged out the instrument and looked it over, grinning thinly as he heard the heavy pounding steps of the loggers coming out from their meal. It was a long time since the waddy had tried to tickle a tune from a squeeze box. He knew he'd be rusty, but maybe he could cover it up with plenty of noise.

"After all," he muttered, "I'm not gambling much—just my life!"

Darkness had closed in by the time Muldoon's tough logger crew had gathered in the ranch yard. A big fire was built in the middle of a great circle and the men gathered around it. Yuma Bill Storms had to admit he had never seen a more hard-case bunch of apish, cruel-faced renegades. Mike Zoristo certainly knew what it took to make a gang of timber thieves who were willing to work or fight or steal—or take their fun where they found it, as they were prepared to do now.

Yuma sat to one side of the crowd, on the end of a log that had been rolled up for a bench. He clutched his neck and stared at the ground in apparent surliness, but his mind was keenly alert and his body tense as a bundle of coiled springs. Zoristo had broken out a supply of whiskey, and the men were already getting drunk, their hot tempers flaring with impatience.

"C'mon!" somebody bawled. "Drag out them two old roosters, and

we'll see can they fight. Where's Mike?"

Pike Muldoon's heavy hand smacked Yuma on the shoulder now. The foreman, feeling good, was beginning to strut. "Hit up a tune, kid," he ordered. "This ain't gonna be a fight, it's just goin' to be a dance. Here comes the boss now!"

Yuma glanced up carefully from under the brim of his hat as he opened up his instrument. Zoristo came from a small, comfortable-looking log cabin that had probably been Eureka's home. That's where the guns and bullets will be, Yuma thought.

A moment later Zoristo had unlocked the door of a small building nearby. He and Muldoon led out two blinking oldsters—Beanpole Badger and Eureka Jones! The loggers let out a bellowing, mocking cheer. Zoristo slammed the door again and went around to the side and opened a heavy shutter. The white face of young Sammy Van appeared at the barred opening. Yuma began to play softly, feeling clumsily for the keys.

Beanpole Badger glared around the circle like a gray-headed old eagle, his black eyes snapping in the firelight. "All right, Zoristo," he spoke hoarsely. "What's this big proposition you're makin' us?"

Zoristo grinned, white teeth flashing. "My friends, I give you a chance for freedom. In fact, to show you the heart is right—two chances! The first is simple. I shall kill the youth, Sammy Van, who deserves death because he murdered two of my men. You two men walk away from here free as the beasts of the forest—and I kill Van. You like this—or shall I name the alternative?"

"You dang well know what we'll choose," Beanpole barked, while Yuma Bill suppressed an involun-

tary angry snort with a sob of music from the accordion. "I'll take your second deal—sight unseen!"

"Me too!" Eureka Jones yelled. "Consider it settled. Now what is it?"

Pike Muldoon roared with laughter, and Zoristo purred like a mountain lion with a full belly.

Zoristo shrugged. "You may regret," he mocked, his eyes gleaming in cruel anticipation. "But my men will be glad. You will both strip to the waist and fight, lumberjack fashion, to the death! Muldoon takes Jones—I take Badger—"

"And if one or both of us wins?" Beanpole insisted somberly.

"In that event, another of my men takes our places. You are bound to lose in time! In fact, I do not think you will kill *me*, friend Badger."

Mike, as he finished, peeled off his woolen shirt to disclose the biggest chest Yuma Bill had ever seen. It was like a bronze statue, with great corded muscles banding it in rippling bunches, and thickly matted with black hair. Even the big torso of Pike Muldoon, now bared, seemed small beside that magnificent figure. No wonder this suave, smiling man commanded the respect of his loggers, Yuma thought bleakly. But Beanpole Badger just grinned.

"Then what're we waitin' for? I only wisht Yuma Bill coulda died this way too."

"Don't do it!" Sammy Van sobbed at the window of the shack. "Let 'em kill me."

But already the two graybeards had peeled and were pairing off with the lumbermen. Again a hand slapped Yuma on the shoulder, and he remembered to wince and mutter a curse. "Get that music to goin', Blacky," a logger bawled. "The boss likes music when he fights, 'cause it's

just plain partying for him. Hit 'er up!"

As the fighters charged toward each other in a sudden rush, Yuma obediently rolled into "La Cucaracha," the strident fighting song of Mexico. As the first savage smack of hard fists on bared torsos blended with the rollicking melody, a burly logger seated near Yuma turned and stared.

"Holy mackerel!" he muttered. "That don't sound like none of them other French tunes you rap out, Blacky. You musta been practicing!"

Yuma grunted and stooped over the instrument as he slowly increased the tempo to keep up to the brawling battle that was beginning to unfold there in the weird light of the fire. Yuma's spearing, frantic gaze went



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past the fighters to where Zoristo had dumped his shorn clothing. Then abruptly the waddy came to his feet and began a slow, weaving gait toward the far side of the circle. As he moved, the fighters spurred into it furiously.

Already the two burly logging men had realized these oldsters could make a fair showing for themselves. The battering, deadly blows both Beanpole and Jones were dealing out proved that. But Pike Muldoon only growled and barged in with redoubled fury, while Zoristo calmly smiled, his dark eyes lighting up in sheer enjoyment.

Beanpole crashed a half-dozen rapid-fire blows against that heaving, granitelike chest, each one sounding like a pistol shot. Suddenly Zoristo looped out a flailing arm and hooked Beanpole's neck in a grizzly grip. With his other hand the logger hammered in smashing punches into the old prospector's unprotected face. Yuma watched in twisting horror. Then abruptly Beanpole wrenched free, danced away.

"Do your worst, Zoristo," he howled, swiping at his bleeding nose. "That wasn't nothin'!"

**W**HILE they tangled again to the cheering, screaming encouragement of the watching loggers, Yuma had reached Zoristo's shirt. He kicked the woolen garment with his boot, sending it flying to the wall of the shack. Then, still playing wildly, he backed up to the window where Sammy Van's straining face peered. A second later he had grabbed up the shirt and stuffed it into the window. No one noticed the short break in the playing.

"Yuma Bill talkin', Sammy," he rasped hoarsely, while he watched the crowd carefully. "Key's in that

shirt, kid. Guns in the house—bring three—and ammunition. Hurry!"

Then he pranced away from the window and stood with his back to the door. A second later the door opened a narrow space. Sammy whispered behind him. "I been prayin' you was still alive, Yuma! Hang an' rattle awhile, cause I'll be back with some hardware pronto!"

The button's wiry figure became a darting shadow in the gloom. Yuma swung away from the doorway, breaking into another boisterous tune. But his fingers were fumbling on the keys, and it took all his iron control to keep from throwing himself into that pitiful, savage fray before him. To charge in now would only mean short satisfaction at best, with twenty whiskey-crazed logger-boning to join in. Suddenly old Eureka Jones went down under one of Pike Muldoon's flailing haymakers. Instantly the loggers were screaming for blood. "Tromp 'im, Pike," they screamed. "Give the cow feller a taste of lumberjack's currycomb—"

Muldoon leaped in toward the fallen rancher, grinning in triumph. Yuma Bill jerked forward instinctively, his wild, crazy playing stilled as rage choked him. But Beanpole Badger now whirled backward from Zoristo's pounding fists. The oldster sent his own boot arcing up to catch the crouching Pike Muldoon full under the jutting chin. The foreman jerked, eyes glazing, and a second later rolled over, out cold.

Zoristo's smiling arrogance was gone now. Dark eyes burning with fury, he endeavored to clinch with his dancing, dodging adversary. Beanpole was fighting now with sheer, desperate fury, determined to smash the cruel tyrant once before he died. The two battled toe to toe, while Eureka Jones climbed slowly

to his feet, shaking his head groggily.

With a grinning roar of anticipation another bull-necked logger crashed from the yelling circle. "Jones is my meat now!" he belted. Corded arms driving like pistons, he rushed the weary oldster. With a tired gasp Jones swung to meet the newcomer, leaden arms sagging.

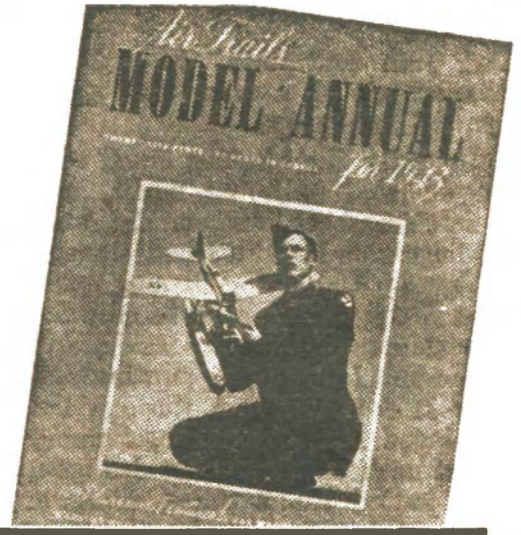
Yuma's control snapped. With a wild Apache yell that made Beanpole Badger jump in amazed disbelief, the waddy surged forward, swinging the accordion. He bashed several loggers in the head with the sharp-cornered instrument, clearing a pathway into the fray. As Eureka Jones wavered before the fresh strength of the second man, Yuma swung the instrument full into the startled faces of four crouching loggers in the circle and smashed a balled fist at the bulging nose of Jones' foe. The man howled and wheeled, and Yuma clipped him again, in three rapid blows that drove him to his knees. Another well-placed punch stretched the logger on the ground.

Zoristo and Beanpole had separated now, both staring. Yuma Bill's pale eyes locked for a brief second with those of his pard. Abruptly a broad grin swept the oldtimer's seamed countenance. Eureka Jones was already grinning like a fool.

Muldoon was just weaving up to his feet. His hoarse whisper sounded loud in the brief second's silence. "That—that ain't Blacky Weaver!"

Zoristo snarled in rage. "No, you fool. It's Storms!" His voice rose to a shrill, maddened yell. "Get these men—use pikes, clubs, knives, anything. But kill them all!"

Zoristo's own brawny arm reached for a peavey that leaned against one of the log seats. He swung it up,



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dark face contorted. Around the doomed trio of cowmen the loggers growled ominously.

Suddenly the blasting crack of a six-gun shattered the night, and Zoristo's clubbed weapon slid from his fingers as lead smashed through his hand. Under the flaming spurt from Sammy Van's gun the crowded loggers sprawled hastily aside, and Yuma Bill led the two panting oldsters in a pelting run through the opening. As they came, Sammy tossed each of them a loaded gun, then patted his battered shotgun. The youth's eyes were gleaming.

"I'll use this, men. Stand aside!" The youth leveled the murderous weapon straight toward the bunched loggers, who were already diving for peaveys and cant hooks.

Yuma batted the youth's shotgun up with a flailing side sweep. "Can't blast 'em that way when they've got no guns, Sammy."

With the two graybeards siding him he faced the renegade loggers. He knew they would fight regardless of odds, drunk as they were, with the mad Zoristo to drive them. But the Arizonan was reluctant to blast down unarmed men. Yet even as he hesitated the roaring crack of rifles came from the far side of the circle, and lead whistled close. Two men had raced to the house, unseen, and returned with rifles. Other loggers clawed for the extra weapons, and a second later the ranch yard was filled with darting figures and orange spurts of triggered guns.

With Sammy and Jones in tow, Beanpole and Yuma hightailed to a great stack of cordwood, and the war was on in earnest. It was six-guns against rifles and peaveys, calk-booted lumberjacks against tough cow-country veterans. A roar went up from the loggers, who had scat-

tered across the ranch yard in groups, taking any cover offered.

**B**EANPOLE BADGER'S gangling frame reared upward to burn two swift shots at a pair of kneeling riflemen. Then he dropped back beside Yuma Bill. He grabbed his pard's hand and pumped it energetically, his dangling mustache jerking above his wide, joyous grin.

"Thunderation, Bill! I'm so dang glad to see you, I feel plumb rejuvenated. One more go at that Mike, and I'd really chop him down to my size."

"I didn't do no wonders with my fists," Eureka Jones put in, hammering Yuma Bill enthusiastically on the shoulder. "But I'll sure give 'em several brands of Hades with this .45!"

"You were both doing all right from where I sat," Yuma said dryly. Thankfulness poured over him. To be siding his pards again in a real shooting chance—that was something!

Abruptly Sammy Van's scattergun *whoomped* from atop a tier of cordwood. "Look out, amigos," the youth warned, thumbing a fresh shell into the breech. "They're charging!"

The pards sided each other now in grimly businesslike fashion, keeping their weapons reloaded from the boxes of cartridges Sammy had filched from Zoristo's headquarters. Two burly woodsmen clawed over the barrier, using peaveys like bayonets. One of the murderous weapons knifed a painful gash in Yuma Bill's left arm, before the redhead could swing his hogleg. A second later, however, Beanpole's .45 blasted beside him, and the logger pitched to the ground dead. Jones was knocked sprawling by a blow from the other's upraised peavey even as leaden death

from Yuma's gun met the hombre in midair.

A barrage of rifle fire now caused the foursome to belly down for a few tense seconds, and Yuma Bill knew a moment's wrenching fear that their stand was hopeless. Sweat was pouring down the waddy's face, streaking it with black grease from his hair.

Suddenly a wild yell lifted from the standing timber east of the yard! Horses' hoofs drummed on pine needles as new gun voices tuned into that deadly chorus. The loggers turned desperately toward this new front, hoarse cries ripping from their throats.

"What the—" Pike Muldoon roared incredulously.

"It's those damn hill ranchers!" Zoristo's insane scream lifted. "Blast 'em!"

A tall, rawboned figure broke from the woods on a racing cayuse, a blaring rifle in his hands. Others rode behind him. "Ad Merritt!" came Eureka's wondering shout. "Now how in—"

But Yuma Bill was not stopping for long-winded explanations. His spearing glance had noticed a stocky figure sneaking toward the corrals. Mike Zoristo was pulling out, leaving his men to face the music! Ignoring the hail of bullets that followed him, Yuma Bill hurtled toward the barn after Zoristo and rounded the gear room in time to see the lumberman thunder from the corral on the bare back of a big claybank. Zoristo was astride Yuma's own horse, Concho.

A fleeting grin crossed the waddy's face as Concho pitched and reared, endeavoring to throw his demonlike rider. But Zoristo clung with superb horsemanship, even managing to hang on to his rifle. He smacked Concho in the side of the head to line him out toward the river.

Other racing animals pelted past Yuma Bill, through the open gate. Frantically Yuma clutched a bridle and swung aboard an arcing backbone that nearly sliced him in two. He realized with grim humor that the lurching critter under him was Beanpole's calico mule, Jughead! He'd never live this down with the old-timer—

The race was lively, but short. Reaching the river bank, Concho gave a final violent, sunfishing twist that sent Zoristo sailing. The stocky man hit the ground rolling, tilted to his feet and leaped to a floating log three feet from the bank. As Yuma yanked Jughead to a sliding halt and spilled to the ground, Zoristo whirled, snarling, to send a rifle slug smashing into a tree a scant foot from the cowboy's head.

Yuma dropped to one knee and fired twice deliberately, but Zoristo's leap to a bobbing log farther out saved him for the moment. He was no doubt planning for a desperate ride to freedom when he reached the current. This quiet, pondlike eddy was jammed with floating logs, and the lumberman went over them with practiced agility. Abruptly he whirled again, jerking the rifle up for another shot at Yuma Bill. But the log Zoristo was riding whirled into a spin, throwing him off balance. He leaped desperately for another log, but the distance was too great.

Yuma saw the splash, heard one lurid scream as the two great logs were swept together by the current with a dull, crunching thud. Yuma drew in a long breath, then shook his head slowly. His hand, holding his own smoking weapon, dropped to his side.

"The redwood forest itself claims the last moment of vengeance!" he whispered jerkily.

A moment later he was turning to

meet a grimy, triumphant crew of ranchers led by Beanpole Badger and Eureka Jones. Ad Merritt was beside them. "Muldoon's dead, and what's left of the others hit for tall timber," the hill man reported solemnly. "I'm thinking there'll be no more timber stealing in these parts."

Yuma Bill Storms ran his hands absently through his hair. "Then I guess that just about—" He broke off to stare at his greasy black hands. Then a wide grin lit up his blocky face. "That doggone lampblack! So help me, Beanpole, for a minute I thought my scalp was bullet-split and my blood was carbonized or something! And that reminds me,"

he added. "There's still one powder monkey sweltering in a powder house down in the woods a piece."

Suddenly Sammy Van crowed down at them from atop a wide redwood stump. The youth was holding a parrot cage in his lap. "Looka here, Yuma. Snake Poison's done learned himself some more words. Show 'em, Snake Poison!"

"Eurekanose," the green bird rasped dutifully. "Bang! Bang!"

"You croaked a beak full that time, parrot!" Beanpole Badger muttered.

---

The gun-fast adventures of Yuma Bill and Beanpole Badger appear regularly in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Watch for another blazing story soon!

## ¿QUIEN SABE?

### *Who Knows?*

1. *Why is Pendleton, Oregon, famous?*
2. *Is bulldogging more dangerous for the steers or the bulldoggers?*
3. *How many events are listed on a rodeo program, and what are some of them?*
4. *How often does a bull elk shed his antlers, and how long does it take him to grow new ones?*
5. *What is a cowboy's side line when he uses a brain spoon, scalpel and arsenic soap?*
6. *Where is El Camino Real, what does it mean and who built it?*
7. *What is the highest-shooting geyser in Yellowstone National Park?*
8. *How did Old Faithful Geyser get its name?*
9. *Where is the famous tree through which an automobile can be driven?*
10. *What and where is the Dragon's Mouth?*

*Answers on page 111*



*Thinking he had nothing to fear, Ab turned his back on the sheriff*

## HORSE TALK by STEPHEN PAYNE

***Cayuses conversin'! That's what an owlhooter swore had happened out on that cow-pony range!***

AB ALTIERS shook his fist at the hot sun and cursed the barren, desolate country across which he was traveling—for once on his own feet. He cursed it for its lack of water and of habitations. Where there were no settlements, no ranches, not even sheep camps, how the devil was he to get a horse?

Ab was willing, even eager, to do murder if it would get him a horse—any kind of a horse that he could ride. He wasn't accustomed to using his own hoofs to take him places, and he hated walking as much as he

hated square-shooting cowpunchers, sturdy ranchers and all lawmen. It was only grim necessity which had compelled him to take to his own legs after the wild fracas of last night.

Dark though it had been, the sheriff of Pointers had somehow managed to plug two rifle bullets into Ab's mount, and quite soon afterward the horse had played Ab dirt by dropping dead in its tracks. Thereupon Ab had peeled saddle and blanket and bridle from the lifeless animal and had lit out—first of all with the idea of making himself hard to

find, secondly, to rustle himself another mount. But his luck had turned out tough. There just wasn't a ranch in this blankety-blank country.

However, it did seem as if he'd outfoxed the posse and the sheriff. Since daylight had come, long, long hours ago, he hadn't once sighted them. The lawdog probably figured Ab was lying low in the brushy country where his horse had fallen. The posse must be putting their efforts on combing that area.

Ab reckoned he had made about thirty miles, though he felt as if it was three hundred. Sore feet, weary shoulders, screaming muscles and gnawing hunger and thirst would force him to stop pretty soon. He'd curl up in the stunted sage and probably pass out entirely.

Yet he'd been in tight spots before this and had always squirmed out somehow. An old owlhooter, tough as they come, Ab swore this blasted desert wasn't going to get him. Over the next little rise there might be—

**H**E'D been thinking that same thing all day, and all day he'd known only bitter disappointment. But now, as he gained the top of a small hill, he stopped and his swollen lips parted and from them came a hoarse cry of joy.

Yonder lay an open valley, with a jack-pine ridge on its north rim, and in the valley a cabin, a corral and a small, fenced pasture. A covetous gleam brightened Ab's bloodshot eyes and stayed there, for in that pasture were five horses!

They held his gaze for at least three minutes. His hope reborn, weariness dropped from the tough old owlhooter. On the far hills beyond the valley he saw grazing cattle and, being somewhat familiar with range conditions, became aware

that he had stumbled not upon a ranch but merely a range cow camp.

Ab wet his cracked, dry lips and hurried forward. Holding to the scrubby jack pines on the low ridge, he came abreast of the little cabin. No smoke lifted from its stovepipe; about it was no sign of life. The range rider who made this place his home was doubtless absent at this time. Nonetheless, Ab approached the shack with the caution of a wild animal approaching a bait. He laid down the saddle, bridle and blanket which had burdened him all these trying hours, and his gun was in his hand as he pushed open the door.

A stove, a bunk, a table and a big cupboard, two benches, several wooden boxes and some duffel met his eyes. But there was no human occupant. Ab's crooked grin expressed his relief. He holstered his Colt, moved all the way inside the room. Suddenly a scrap of paper held down by the coal-oil lamp on the table caught his gaze. He read a penciled scrawl:

Gone to the Cross L home ranch. Back Tuesday.

Boa.

Tuesday? And this was Sunday! "Yip!" croaked Ab. "I don't have to worry about that Bob gent bein' right back."

Hunger was tying knots in Ab's stomach. He gulped a dipperful of stale water from a pail on one of the benches and then prowled the cupboard for grub. He wolfed three cold biscuits and a can of beans, and then, instantly feeling better, clumped out. This time he would get a horse.

Quite jauntily now he carried his saddle, bridle and blanket to the corral, took the rope from his saddle and went on out into the pasture. To his profane disappointment, how-



ever, the five horses adroitly evaded all of his attempts to walk up to them. They were infuriatingly wary, cocking their ears at the desperate man as if they were winking and laughing in horse language, keeping just out of range of his rope. Ab's edgy temper boiled over. He cursed them one and all, and then, panting and sweating, he tried to corral them.

But the canny old cow ponies were wise to the ways of man. A man on foot was utterly helpless to drive them into a corral unless they permitted him to do it. Again they seemed to laugh at Ab, deftly avoiding him, circling around him and kicking up their heels.

Ab cursed himself hoarse and gave up. He was much too angry to pay attention to the great beauty of sunset, or to enjoy the soft hush of twilight as it crept across the vast, lonely world. He was still afoot.

That rider, Bob, wouldn't be back till Tuesday. Must Ab wait until the stranger appeared before he could get a mount? Or must he hike out again on his own sore feet? Hike out because, although he had seen no sign of pursuers, it was dangerous for him to stay here.

**O**R was it so dangerous? He scratched gnat bites on the back of his neck and thought about that angle. He was unknown in Pointers, and when he had pulled his holdup of the Placer Saloon there at night, he had worn a mask. Not one of the posse had seen him clearly enough to identify him, should he ever meet them face to face. Nor had the sheriff seen him at close range.

The cowboy who belonged at this camp was absent. If anyone should come, Ab might get away with impersonating that cowboy!

Back to the cabin he rushed, built

a fire, set on water to heat, then went through the cowpuncher's war sack. A change of underwear, a clean shirt and a new pair of overalls transformed Ab's appearance. In the fast-fading light he made good use of the rider's shaving outfit. After this he patted himself on the back.

"Why, you look almost civilized," he said to his reflection.

He burned the note Bob had left, put the puncher's stuff back in order, rolled his own filthy clothing in a wad and cached it under the bunk. But the cash he had stolen last night, amounting to almost a thousand dollars, he kept on his person.

By the light of a smoky lamp he went about cooking a meal. But he did not forget to keep looking out every few minutes, and thus it was he saw the lone horseman coming in from the south on a leg-weary gray mount.

Ab squinted his wicked eyes and drew his chapped lips to a thin, tight line. He'd seen that same gent last night, and he'd seen the horse even more clearly than its rider. Now he recognized both—the lawman of Pointers was about to pay a call.

Ab fingered his gun. He had no qualms about sending a couple of slugs through the law hawk. But suddenly he remembered the role he had decided to play. An ironic sense of humor prompted him to go ahead. Ab reckoned he could tell instantly if the sheriff smelled a rat.

"Hello there in camp!" called the lawman.

"Come on in," Ab answered.

**W**ITH well-assumed carelessness he carried the butcher knife with him as he stepped to the open door. Ab was almost as handy with a knife as with a gun. He reckoned that if it was necessary he could send

the blade into the old coot before he could snake his Colt.

But the sheriff's mild gray eyes looked Ab over with no hint of suspicion in their depths. He swung stiffly and wearily down from his leggy mount and entered the cabin. "I smell grub cookin', cowboy. I sure can use a feed about now."

"Yeah?" said Ab. "It'll be mighty good to have company." He tried to make the words sound cordial. "Lawman, ain't you?"

"Jed Powell, from Pointers. Lost the trail of a tolerable ornery bandit last night. Posse turned back. But I sorta kept on prowlin'. Hate to give up, since this buzzard shot a couple of good fellers. You the Cross L. range rider in this neck of the woods?"

"Yep," Ab declared. He sidled to the stove and stirred potatoes frying in a pan. He was keeping one eye on the lawman. "You're workin' alone, eh?" This was a point upon which he wanted just a bit more assurance.

The sheriff answered wearily: "I already said the posse turned back. Reckon I'll stay all night, cowhand, if you got room."

"Oh, sure! Just you turn your hoss—no, picket him, so we'll have one hoss caught up to wrangle my string."

They went outside.

"You generally wrangle 'em afoot?" Sheriff Powell inquired, speaking over his shoulder as he loosened the cinches of his saddle.

Ab thought fast. "Wrangle afoot? Heck, no," he said. "But this evenin' when I jogged in off my circle I figured to picket the hoss I was usin', and do you know, I slipped the bridle offn that foxy bronc afore I got a rope tied 'round his neck. He slipped away from me quicker'n a squirrel flicks its tail."

"I savvy." Powell chuckled. "Done plenty cowpunchin' myself one time. You sighted ary suspicious-lookin' or actin' jigger on your circle today, ranny?"

"We-ell, no. Meanin' this bandit? You got any description?"

"None worth mentionin'. Drat the luck!" The sheriff took the rifle from his saddle and leaned it against the cabin wall. "This here hoss of mine ain't never been picketed. He'd fight a rope and maybe burn himself bad. I want him to get a rest and a full belly, too. How'd it be if I'd wrangle them ponies of yours, Bill or Jake or Bob, and stake out one of 'em?"

"Wh— Call me Bob. That'd suit me dandy, law hawk. But hustle. This grub's ready. I throwed plenty steaks in the pan when I seen you comin'."

"I'll hustle, Bob." Powell tightened his cinches, swung up and rode through the little corral and on into the pasture—

**W**ATCHING the old hand wrangle the small cavy, Ab Altiers could not help chuckling with sardonic amusement. The old fool hadn't the least suspicion about him! Playing right into the lawbreaker's hands. A fresh horse caught up and staked out might come in mighty handy for Ab.

He didn't go out to help the lawman rope a horse and picket it; but as soon as this was done Powell unsaddled his own mount and turned it loose in the pasture with the other horses. Then, with shoulders sagging, the lawman plodded to the cabin. He washed his face and hands while Ab dished up the grub.

He now believed he had nothing to fear and so believing at last turned his back to the sheriff. Nothing could have equalled his astonish-

ment, therefore, at hearing Powell say:

"Just lie flat on your face, killer, and put your hands behind your back!" The gentleness was quite gone from that tired old voice. It snapped like a lash.

Ab Altiers started. Then he whirled like a trapped wolf and crouched. But he faced a leveled gun. Cold sweat moistened his forehead and his face and his neck. He could not even entirely control his voice as he stammered, "You gone loco, law hawk?"

"Nope! Do as I told you or I'll kill you!"

Altiers looked at the steady gun, backed by an implacable, granite face behind it, and obeyed the command. A moment later he felt the cold clasp of steel about his wrists.

"You can sit up now," Powell said, taking Altiers' gun belt and putting it on a high shelf. "I could have held off a while longer, but I just didn't relish eatin' with a skunk."

Ab sat on the bunk, glowering darkly. "Look here," he protested, "you're makin' a bad mistake. Sure, I heard you say you were huntin' a bandit, but what reason you got to suppose I'm that hombre?"

"If you don't know, guess."

"Guess?" echoed the trapped man. His thoughts ran fast. Maybe Sheriff Powell was acquainted with the cowpuncher who belonged here! But Ab wasn't sunk yet.

"Just a couple of days ago I took the place of the rider who was on the job here," Ab declared.

"Come again," drawled the sheriff. "I wasn't acquainted with the cow-

puncher who held down this camp."

"You weren't!" Altiers' mouth opened. "Then mebbe you found some hombre's trail and tracked him here, eh?"

"Wrong guess," drawled the sheriff, and at last his leathery face cracked in a grin. "Them five hosses in the pasture told me somethin' was all haywire."

"Horses can't talk!" Fury boiled around in Altiers. "What makes you sure that I—"

"I notice little things," Powell returned in his maddeningly deliberate way. "Killer, I wasn't one bit suspicious till I rode through the corral on my way to the pasture. You hadn't just recently had a horse slip away from you after you pulled off its bridle, as you'd said, for there were no fresh horse tracks in that corral! But I didn't stop to look closer. I knew all at once that if I hesitated and scouted 'round you'd get suspicious and my life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel. For I'd left my rifle at the cabin."

Ab broke out in sputtered oaths, which the sheriff checked with a sharp: "Wait till I finish! Even if I hadn't noticed there were no fresh tracks, killer, the five horses in the pasture would have told me you lied. You know what you overlooked and forgot? There were no fresh cinch or bridle or saddle impressions on any of those horses. Not one had been ridden today!

"That's all. I reckon your appetite's pretty well gone, but I'll really enjoy the grub you've cooked, even though it's gettin' a mite cold."

THE END.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

*"Help us by buying War Bonds and Stamps!" urges Marine Staff Sergeant Gerald C. Downer of Denver, Colorado, who saw action at Pearl Harbor. Top that ten percent!*

# HALF BROTHER TO THE OWLHOOT

by GEORGE MICHENER



*With silent, animal ferocity,  
Sam charged headfirst.*

**Johnny Coin had a fine code of honor all right  
—but it sure sat him on a powder keg when it  
forced a showdown with his renegade relatives!**

WHEN Johnny Coin left the big Coin ranch on the Upper Quassapulta he took along an extra saddle horse complete with gear, a half dozen large blank keys, a file, a lump of wax and a deputy sheriff's law badge. The badge he had borrowed from a desk drawer without the owner's consent.

Early in the morning, the fifth day after he had set out from the Quassa-

pulta, Johnny picketed the spare horse in the bottom of a brush-choked canyon and left it. Previously Johnny had chosen devious and seldom-traveled back trails. Now he was far enough from home so that there was small chance he would be recognized. He struck out boldly for the main road to the town of Combine.

It was ten o'clock that morning

when Johnny dismounted by a hitch rack and sauntered along the wooden walk of Combine's main street, both hands in his pockets—one hand holding the lump of wax and warming it and the other hand nervously fingering the borrowed law badge. He turned in at the town jail.

The law badge was to be Johnny's hole card in the way of credentials. As it happened, though, he didn't need it.

He found the sheriff at Combine to be a paunchy, ruddy-faced man, filled with a good breakfast and trustingly disposed. Without question the sheriff accepted Johnny's statement that he was from the Adams Creek country and wanted to put up bail for his ruckus-raisin' partner. His partner's name, said Johnny, was Sid Cotter.

The sheriff regretfully shook his head. "Ain't no one by that name in this jug."

Johnny sighed. "I guess I'll have to try Pine City. Sid's in jail somewhere. He always is when he turns up missing."

"You might telegraph," suggested the sheriff. He studied Johnny Coin's spare, shape, his strong, big hands, his tanned, cleanly sharp features. "You ain't," murmured the sheriff, "in the notion for a job, are you? The CB here could use a top rider, and the—"

"No," said Johnny, "I got to locate Sid. Maybe, now that I think of it, he didn't give you his right name. He's medium tall and has sort of brownish hair that might look reddish. He—"

"Come on," interrupted the sheriff. "We'll look at the menagerie. Then you'll be satisfied."

The sheriff took a key ring with a number of keys on it from his desk drawer and went to the back door of the office. The ring and most of the

keys were a lot oversize, almost heavy enough to knock down a man. Johnny followed the sheriff and kept his gaze on the keys. His left hand, in his pocket, was busy shaping the lump of wax into a flat, smooth plaque.

The sheriff selected the smallest of his keys to open the office door. Beyond, Johnny Coin saw the cell block, the wide corridor between the two rows of cells still damp from a recent scrubbing. A single barred window set in the back wall was the only source of light in this gloomy place.

The sheriff nodded to Johnny. "Go ahead. Look 'em over."

There were four prisoners in the jail. In the left hand row of cells were a burly gent with a three-week beard, a Mexican, and a dejected-looking young cowhand with a black eye. In No. 6 cell on the opposite side was a thin-faced man lying on his cot. The thin-faced man raised himself, peered sharply and coughed.

Johnny Coin returned to the sheriff and said moodily: "I guess I'll have to try Pine City."

The sheriff nodded. "There's better chances. Pine City's wilder. A bigger jug, too. This one used to be a store buildin'. Still, it ain't so bad." The sheriff stamped his feet. "Hear that? Solid oak! Put in special. The ceilin', too! There's a loft up there. That's what that trapdoor above you is. You have to use a ladder. It's full of junk—sort of a storeroom."

Johnny Coin stared upward with a show of interest. He could feel the keys, dangling from the ring in the sheriff's hand, pressing against his leg. Stealthily he slipped the wax from his pocket.

Turning abruptly, the sheriff led the way back into the office, locked



the door and tossed his keys to the desk top. Johnny Coin, still holding the wax in his cupped hand, hooked a leg over the desk corner and idly swung his foot. "Who's the big fellow?" he asked. "The one with the whiskers?"

"That's Hank Ditson. He's kind of a horse trader. He always lands here every time he hits town."

Johnny watched the keys out of the corner of his eye. It occurred to him that if he should happen to brush them to the floor, he could then pick them up—with the hand that held the wax.

The sheriff settled himself in the desk chair. "There's only one really bad one in there," he continued conversationally. "Sutler, in No. 6. He killed a feller in a card game."

"Cheating?" Johnny edged closer to the keys.

"Sutler was. They caught him at it, and he pulled his gun." The sheriff reached out, swept the keys into the open desk drawer and closed the drawer with a bang. "They'll hang him sure," he said. He leaned back and yawned.

Johnny sighed. "Guess I better be traveling—"

**J**OHNNY COIN headed out of Combine at a leisurely pace. Beyond the town limits, he tossed the wax into the brush. The blank keys followed—and finally the file.

His luck, Johnny decided, had been neither good nor bad. He would have liked to have gotten a wax impression of some of the sheriff's keys—and he had failed. On the other hand he had had a chance to examine the jail.

From the outside the building, with its false front, shingle roof and windowless sides, looked like what it had been originally—a store. From the inside the place looked like a

good, tight jail. So it looked to the sheriff, and so for a while it had looked to Johnny Coin.

Later, recalling each detail of his visit, Johnny realized suddenly that the jail was not quite so formidable as it seemed. A weakness was there—a structural defect—that a determined man might be able to make use of.

So Johnny Coin jogged along, his plan forming and his expression thoughtful. He wished now that the sheriff had been a little less friendly and likable. For the sheriff, he thought regretfully, was in for a surprise—a sad one!

**T**HAT night, an hour after dark, Johnny Coin returned to Combine. This time he brought both his horses.

He avoided the road and approached the sprawling little town from the prairie side. He tied the horses in the deep shadow by a deserted shack behind the shipping pens and proceeded on foot. An alley opened before him and he ducked into its darkness. The alley paralleled the main street, and Johnny Coin followed it until he came to the rear of the jail. Here he halted.

For a time he studied the slope of the shingle roof and the blank walls of the building. It was the roof which interested him the most, but he saw no direct way of reaching it. He transferred his scrutiny to the next building to his left. This building was a restaurant, with a passageway of perhaps six feet separating it from the jail.

A lean-to had been added to the rear of the restaurant, and by the corner of the lean-to was a rain barrel. Johnny's gaze traveled from the roof of the restaurant to the jail roof. The jail roof was two feet higher. Six feet across and two feet

up—that was a pretty good jump from a slanting roof. Johnny wondered if he could do it. He *hoped* he could. He took off his boots and stepped up on the edge of the rain barrel.

From the barrel he made his silent way to the lean-to and then upward to the higher roof beyond. He squatted there atop the restaurant building, gripping with his stocking feet while he stared down at the wide, empty gap between him and the jail.

The longer Johnny Coin stared, the wider and more desperate the distance seemed to grow. He took a heavy clasp knife from his pocket and opened it. He stood up, balancing for a moment, and then he rushed forward and sprang into the air.

His toes struck the edge of the jail roof and he fell flatly. Immediately he began to slide. His hand flashed down, driving the heavy clasp knife into the soft pine shingles. His slide was checked, his feet and ankles dangling over empty space.

Johnny drew up his feet and lay quiet, his heart pounding. He wondered if anyone could have heard him. He was close to the street, and from where he lay he could see a strip of the wooden sidewalk. He watched two men pass by, and neither of them paused or looked up.

With a sigh of relief Johnny pulled out the knife. On hands and knees he crawled forward along the slanting roof until he was directly behind the false front that faced the street. Here, concealed from view, he quietly set to work on the shingles with his knife.

An hour later Johnny lowered himself through the hole he had made in the roof and dropped into the loft above the jail cells.

Through the blackness Johnny

groped along the dusty flooring until he found the trapdoor the sheriff had showed him. Careful prying proved that the trapdoor was loose. Johnny stood up and removed the trap and set it aside.

Below him, dimly lighted by a lamp on a shelf, Johnny could see a portion of the corridor between the cells and the shut door to the sheriff's office. Sometime during the night, Johnny reasoned, the jailer in charge would open the office door to have a look at the prisoners. Johnny prepared to wait.

One of the prisoners was snoring, and for a while that was the only sound Johnny heard. Then he heard movement in the office and the rattle of a key in the lock. The office door opened.

Yawning and rubbing his eyes, a pudgy, bald-headed man emerged from the darkened office and passed beneath the trapdoor. At once Johnny launched himself downward. His stockinged feet struck the jailer, and the two thumped to the floor.

Stunned by the fall, the jailer never made an outcry. Johnny whipped out a bandanna and gagged him, took some pigging strings from his belt and trussed him completely. The keys were dangling from the office door. Johnny got them and moved toward the cells.

## CHAPTER II.

### NEW LOBO.

THE thin-faced prisoner in No. 6. The man the sheriff had called Sutler, was at his cell door. Johnny began fitting keys until he found the right one, and the cell door opened. The thin-faced man came out, boots in his hand. On tiptoe the two made their way to the sheriff's office, and Johnny locked the door.

The thin-faced man sighed.

"Nice," he said. "I knew I could depend on you—brother."

"Don't call me that!"

"Half brother then," said the other mockingly. "The same father and the same name. Johnny and Vern—the good Coin and the bad one! Does the old man know I'm alive?"

"No," replied Johnny. Fiercely he added: "Vern, I ought to kill you! If dad ever found out what a crooked, mur—"

"But he won't find out—not from you, Johnny. You won't *let* him find out! That's why you're helpin' me now."

Laughing softly, Vern Coin went to the sheriff's desk and began fumbling in the darkness. "I want my gun," he murmured. Then he grunted. "Got it! Wait now till I slip on my boots."

He returned to Johnny's side. "All right," he said. "I got gun and hat both. Let's go!"

Johnny unlocked the street door and looked out. At the moment the street was clear. The two men left the office and ducked into the opening between the jail and the restaurant.

By the rear of the restaurant Johnny retrieved his own boots. He pointed upward. "I got in by the roof. Cut a hole through."

"Yeah?" Vern lifted his gaze. "I knew you'd get me out somehow. When I sent you that note, I—" His speech ended abruptly.

The rear door of the restaurant had opened, throwing a shaft of light upon Vern's upturned face. A man in an apron, holding a pail, stood in the doorway. He stared, then dropped the pail and slammed the door. Heavy-footed, Johnny heard him racing through the restaurant.

"The cook! He saw me!" Vern seized Johnny's arm. "You got

horses? Where are they? *Hurry!*"

Johnny stamped into his boots. Together, he and Vern fled along the alley darkness. Behind them a man's voice broke into a hoarse shouting. Doors banged, boots thudded on wooden planking, and the sound of pursuit swelled in savage volume.

Johnny and Vern burst from the alley and sprinted toward the shipping pens. From the direction of the main street a gun banged harmlessly and someone gave bellowing alarm: "There they go! This way! There's two of 'em! This way!"

Panting, legs pumping, Johnny led the way behind the pens and across the spur track. The horses were by the deserted shack where Johnny had left them, and the two men flung themselves into the saddles. They roared off into the night.

A mile from town they paused to listen. They heard no pursuit.

Vern spoke curtly: "I know the country. Follow me."

"Think they're still after us?"

"Turk Hamlin will be."

"The sheriff?"

Vern shook his head. "The sheriff nothin'. Hamlin's his deputy, and he's tough! He's the one that threw me in the jug."

They moved on, more slowly now, Johnny trailing after Vern. They left the lowland ranges and climbed into the hills, winding among patches of scrub timber and along the bottoms of shallow gullies. At dawn Vern called a halt.

"We'll camp here," he said. "Tonight we'll move on."

Silent, Johnny Coin dismounted. They picketed the horses in a grassy canyon bottom and then stretched out their legs, backs to a boulder, and rolled smokes.

Vern studied Johnny through narrowed eyes. They were half brothers, but there was little resemblance be-

tween the two. Vern was the slight, wiry type of man who seldom shows his age. Actually, he was thirty-eight, fourteen years older than Johnny, and the son of Tom Coin by his first wife. Later, when Vern's mother died, Tom Coin married again. Johnny was Tom Coin's son by his second marriage.

Vern spoke abruptly: "When did you get my note?"

"Monday." Johnny took a grimy piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. The message it contained was brief:

If you want me to stay dead get me out.  
I'm at Combine jail. JACK SUTLER.

Vern grinned. "You knew who Sutler was?"

"It wasn't hard to guess. Besides, I know your writing. I've had other letters from you."

"And none of 'em welcome."

"No," said Johnny, "none of 'em. Each time I hope that somehow you really will be killed. But you never are." He tore the note into fine pieces and scattered them. "Well, you're out!"

"Yeah, I'm out—till the next time." Vern grinned again.

Johnny Coin's eyes were stony. "I think this is going to be the last time."

"It won't work, Johnny." Vern shook his head. "I know what's in your mind. Maybe you've been figurin' on it, but when the showdown comes, you won't do it. There's a legal name for it when a man kills his brother, and—"

"Half brother."

"You can't do it, Johnny."

Johnny Coin leaned his head on his arms. "Damn you!" he said in a choked voice. "Damn you, Vern! What makes you such a—"

"I was born that way," said Vern. "I'm a thief and a liar and anything



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else you want to name. Don't try to work on my conscience, Johnny, because I don't have any." Vern stood up and moved around. "How's the old man?" he asked suddenly.

"Fine," said Johnny bitterly. "That's because he thinks you're dead. If he knew you were alive and what a polecat you are—"

paused to grin. "Well, they were my friends once. That was before I pulled out with their share of a haul in a stage robbery. After that I wasn't so anxious to see them. I needed more money in a hurry, and I got in a card game in Combine. There were—but didn't the sheriff tell you?"



*Johnny saw the outlaw leader fall from the saddle.*

"The disgrace would kill him," finished Vern. "Yeah, I know. He always was a proud old gent. Proud and honest as a new dollar! Too honest for my stomach!"

Johnny lifted his head. He clenched his fists and slowly opened them again. He said drearily: "Anything decent and honest would turn your stomach. What happened in Combine?"

"I had bad luck," replied Vern. "I landed there broke and had a couple friends on my trail." Vern

"He said you were caught cheating and killed a man."

Vern shrugged. "I slipped. It's the first time I've been caught in a card game in five years." He stared at Johnny's stony eyes and tight-pressed lips. "You hate me, don't you?" he said. "I reckon there never was a man hated me as bad as you do."

"I guess not. There couldn't be."

"Did you ever stop to think," asked Vern, "how bad I might hate you? You stayin' home around the



old man so when he kicks off you'll come into the spread and all his money! And me ridin' the owlhoot, not knowin' where I'm goin' to hang my hat next, not knowin' what minute the law's goin' to catch up with me and—" Vern Coin's thin face twisted suddenly into an expression of unutterable fury. "When I think of it all! When I think of you livin' soft and—"

"Shut up!" Johnny Coin sprang to his feet.

For a long moment the two glared at each other. Then Vern's face smoothed. He thrust his hands in his pockets and turned his back. He began whistling, softly and tunelessly.

Johnny Coin slowly let out his pent breath. He wheeled and started off up the canyon.

Vern stopped whistling. "Where you goin'?" he cried.

"I've had enough of your polecat company. I'm leaving!"

"Not now! Wait till dark!" There was a note of alarm in Vern's voice. "D'you think Turk Hamlin's given up the chase yet? Not much! There's no tellin' where you'll meet him!"

"What of it? No one knows I helped you get out. The jailer didn't see my face, and neither did that cook. I've been lucky so far. I'm not going to press my luck by stayin' around you."

"Yeah," agreed Vern thoughtfully, "you have been lucky. If you'd been caught with me, you'd be tarred with the same brush I am. You couldn't go back home again. You'd be another Coin on the owlhoot—another son to break the old man's heart."

"I've thought of that," said Johnny grimly. "I haven't thought of much else. That's the risk I took. Now I'm leaving."

"And takin' a bigger risk," Vern warned. "Turk Hamlin's around somewhere. If he meets up with you, he'll ask questions, and he'll make 'em stick! Turk's tough! He'll back-track to find where you came from. Then he'll have me and you both. What's the good of getting me out of the jug if you throw us both back in?"

Johnny Coin hesitated. There was truth in what Vern said.

"Better wait till night," said Vern gently. "We're safe here. You can stand my company that long."

Johnny Coin returned slowly and sat down. He tilted his hat over his eyes and pretended to sleep.

Vern was restless. He moved back and forth, watching Johnny with sly, sidelong glances. Suddenly he paused and threw up his head. "You hear somethin'?" he demanded.

"No," said Johnny.

Vern's nostrils flared and he stood absolutely still for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Nothin', I guess. I'll take a look." He sauntered around a bend in the canyon and out of sight.

Johnny Coin leaned back, impatiently gauging the sun's progress. He was anxious now for nightfall when he could part company with his half brother and head for home. He wondered what Vern's plans were. Probably he had none. Vern was like a killer wolf, ranging the country and striking as opportunity offered.

There never had been any friendship between Johnny and Vern. Johnny's earliest recollection of his half brother was the memory of a swaggering young man who took pleasure in twisting a button's arms and who had frequent, loud-voiced quarrels with his father. It was after

one of these quarrels with Tom Coin that Vern left home.

Occasionally Vern would return for a brief visit, his arrival and departure always sudden and unannounced. Vern's visits invariably left Tom Coin remote and thoughtful, the mark of worry etching deep into his ruddy face. As Johnny grew older he heard tales of Vern's wild doings, and he understood better the meaning of his father's worry.

When Johnny Coin was sixteen there came word of Vern's death.

Johnny wouldn't forget that day. His father called him into his office. There was an open letter on Tom Coin's desk, and his eyes had a strange blank look. He spoke without really seeming to see Johnny at all.

"Johnny," he said, "you're almost a man now. Some day you're going to own this ranch and you're going to have a lot of power here—more power, maybe, than you think. Do you think you can use it wisely and honestly?"

"I—I think so—I'll do my best," said Johnny.

"Some of us Coins have been smart, and some haven't. But we've all been honest! There's never yet been a thief in the family. I'm not sure about your wisdom, Johnny, but I know about your honesty. That's because you're a Coin. If ever the time came when I had any doubts about it—why, then, Johnny, I think I'd rather see you dead."

Tom Coin came around to Johnny and put his hand on his shoulder, and the oldster's eyes, so blank a moment before, were now fiercely intent. "I'm counting on you, Johnny," he said. "Our name has been handed down to us clean. It's up to us to keep it that way. Remember that, Johnny."

Johnny nodded, feeling the weight

of his father's hand and knowing the deep earnestness of this moment. For the first time he realized fully Tom Coin's great pride in name and family. And in his own heart there was swelling response. "I'll remember, dad," he answered hoarsely. "Always!"

Tom Coin's hand fell away, and his eyes were blank once more. He spoke quietly: "Son, Vern is dead."

Johnny started. "Dead! Vern? When did you hear? How—"

Tom pointed to the letter on his desk. "That came this morning. It's from a—a sheriff in Arizona. Some rustlers stole cattle from the place Vern was working, and he was killed trying to stop them. That was a month ago. They just found Vern's body in a gully in the mountains—"

Tom turned from Johnny and stared out the window. "He was my son, Johnny," he said slowly. "He had a different mother from you, and he was different in other ways. But he was a Coin like you—and he died like a Coin."

The body that was discovered in the mountains wasn't Vern's body at all. Johnny Coin found that out two years later. Old Tom Coin never did find out.

Johnny was eighteen when he received his first letter from Vern and knew that he was still alive. Vern had taken a different name, and he was in trouble and needed money—

Johnny sent the money.

Later there was more letters and more demands for money. Several times there were secret meetings between the half brothers. Always Vern backed up his demands with a threat to declare his rightful name, to bring shame and dishonor to old Tom Coin. And always Vern had been able to work his will with

Johnny. So it had been for six years, and so it was now.

AS ever, when thinking of Vern, Johnny Coin was filled with a sense of bafflement. It was almost impossible to believe that any man could be totally bad, totally without the instinct of decency. Yet Vern seemed to be just that. How a son of Tom Coin could—

A gun report rang out, sharp and clear in the still air, and Johnny Coin's thoughts went scattering. He sprang to his feet. The gun sounded again, and there was a man's shout. Hoofs drummed, and a rider thundered around the bend in the canyon.

At sudden sight of Johnny the strange rider swerved in his flight. He whipped out his gun and fired point-blank, and Johnny flung himself headlong into the dirt. With no pause the rider clattered on down the canyon and out of view, the noise of his going fading in the distance.

Grim-faced, Johnny climbed to his feet and brushed himself. He moved up the canyon in the direction Vern had gone earlier and, around the bend in the walls, he saw Vern running toward him. Vern halted and waited for Johnny's approach.

"You get him?" Vern asked.

Johnny shook his head wrathfully. "He almost got me! Who was he?"

"I told you I heard somethin'! Ride the owlhoot as long as I have and your ears get sharp. Come along, and I'll show you somethin'."

Johnny followed Vern up the canyon. Behind a patch of brush there was a saddled horse and a dead man who lay flat on his back, jaw slack, two reddening holes showing in his shirt front. Vern ejected two empty shells from his gun and reloaded.

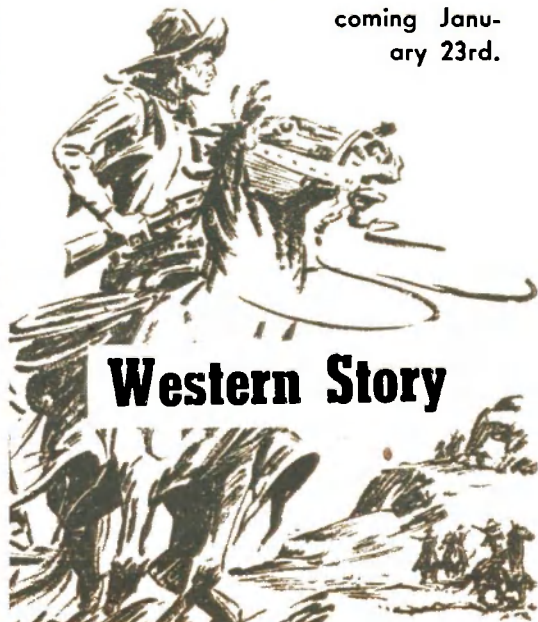
Johnny stared at his half brother with horrified eyes. He cried hoarsely: "Damn you, Vern! I get

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you out of jail, and the first thing you do is start murdering and—"

"Not murder—not this time! It was him or me. What'd you expect?"

"Who is he? Not a—" Johnny looked quickly for a law badge, but saw none. "Not a lawman—"

Vern shook his head. "Not exactly. His name's Cullen. He rides with Turk Hamlin a lot. Sort of partners, I guess."

"Who was the other one—the one that shot at me?"

"That was Turk Hamlin himself, the deputy. Did he get a good look at you? Would he know you again?"

Johnny nodded and suddenly understood the disastrous results of this meeting.

Vern understood, too. Gently he said: "That's tough. I wouldn't have had this happen, Johnny."

"He'll know I was with you—that I helped you!"

"I'm afraid so, Johnny." Vern motioned to the dead man. "That don't make it easier. The law'll count you in on that, too."

"But Hamlin don't know who I am!" Johnny cried desperately. "He won't know where to look for me!"

"Not now," said Vern. "But Turk never forgets a face. And he gets around a lot. Some day he'll wander over onto the Quassapulta. Somebody'll point out old Tom Coin's son to him." Vern paused. He had no need to say more; his meaning was clear.

Johnny made a despairing gesture. "I can't go back home," he said dully. "I can never go back—"

"Tough, Johnny! It's a bad break."

"If I don't go back, dad will never know. No one will ever know. I'll have to take another name. I'll have to—"

"I'll saddle the horses," said Vern quietly. "Hamlin knows where we are now. We've got to be movin'."

### CHAPTER III.

#### HADES HIDE-OUT.

ALL that day they rode, Johnny and Vern Coin, pushing along through the foothills, following the dim trails of canyons and gully bottoms. Before sunset they came out on a timbered ridge and saw below them a small log house with a corral and outbuildings.

For a time Vern studied the buildings, nostrils flaring and eyes sharp and rapacious. A figure emerged from the barn and went toward the house.

"A woman," Vern observed. "A nester family, more'n likely. Not much danger there. Come on! We got to eat sometime." He rode boldly out from the concealment of the timber, and Johnny followed him.

There were men at the ranch—more men than was needful for a place of this size—and Johnny Coin read the breed of them in their sullen intentness, their ready gun hands, and he knew Vern had made a mistake. Vern knew it, too.

Through motionless lips Vern spoke his harsh whisper of caution: "You stay shut! I'll handle this."

They rode into the ranch yard and halted, and Johnny watched Vern's lips twist into their characteristic grin of mirthless assurance.

"Gentlemen!" Vern said.

It was the wrong greeting. They weren't gentlemen—they were renegades, rigidly set in the mold of evil. They stared at Johnny and Vern with suspicion and hostility.

One of them spoke: "Lookin' for someone?"

"No," answered Vern. "We're

travelin'—light!" His grin came again. "Maybe," he continued easily, "someone is lookin' for us! It's possible, stranger."

There was no answer to Vern's grin. The men gathered about Johnny and Vern, hard-eyed and with no relaxing of suspicion. One, fox-featured and with great, splotching freckles, pointed to their horses. "I know that brand," he said. "That's the big Coin outfit over on the Quassapulita."

"The horses," Vern informed him, "are borrowed."

The fox-faced man looked toward the house. "Dut!" he called. "We've got somethin'. See if you can name it."

A tall, thin man lounged into the doorway. He had a flat, triangular face without seam or line of expression anywhere.

Vern let out a gasp of relief. "Dut Bricker!" he cried. "Don't you know me, Dut?"

Dut viewed him blankly. "Yeah," he said without expression. "I know you."

Vern dismounted and came forward with outstretched hand.

Dut ignored the hand and looked at Johnny. "Who's that?" he asked.

"He's travelin' with me," said Vern. His grin came on again. "Answers to the name of Smith."

"Get down, Smith," said Dut woodenly. "Sam, get those horses under cover."

Johnny dismounted, and Sam, a husky, tough-looking young man of about Johnny's age, led the two horses toward the barn.

Dut and Vern had disappeared into the house. Johnny hesitated a moment, then squatted on his heels in the shade and rolled a cigarette. The interest his and Vern's arrival had created seemed to have evaporated. The men who had gathered

in the ranch yard drifted away, and Johnny was left alone, smoking and pondering his black thoughts.

He had helped Vern once too often. Now he was caught in a trap of his own making, and he could never go home again. Like Vern he must join the legion of nameless men, where fear would be his constant companion—fear of the law, fear that by the very fact of his continued living he might bring to old Tom Coin the shame and disgrace from which he had sought to shield him.

In his mind Johnny Coin was hearing again those long-ago words of his father:

*"I'm counting on you, Johnny. Our name has been handed down to us clean. It's up to us to keep it that way. Remember that, Johnny."*

Well, he'd remembered! He hadn't forgotten. He remembered, too, his father's reaction to the false news of Vern's death. There was no shame in old Tom Coin's bearing then. There was only sorrow and a quiet pride.

For Vern had died like a Coin—

So Tom Coin had spoken Vern's epitaph. Perhaps, unwittingly, his words had been a prophecy as well—a stern choice offered two sons who, living, had lost the right to their name.

Die like a Coin—a coldness ran through Johnny as he saw the way his thoughts were leading him. His cigarette went out between his fingers, and he squatted there in the shade as quiet as a man of stone, his eyes wide and staring.

**T**HERE was the smell of frying meat in the air, and someone yelled: "Come and get it!"

Vern came from the house and shook Johnny by the shoulder. He said loudly: "Are you dreamin',



Smith? We eat! Come on and take the wrinkles out! Smith! Can't you hear?"

"Sure," said Johnny. "I hear you." He stood up and ground out his cigarette with his boot heel. He followed Vern into the house.

There were six men on the place besides Vern and Johnny. Five of them, with Dut Bricker at the head, were seated about the kitchen table. The sixth man, gaunt and gray-haired, stood with folded arms by the stove, his expression placid and supremely aloof.

There was another person in the crowded kitchen: the woman Vern and Johnny had discerned from the ridge top. She was young, Johnny saw now, and tall and fair. Her blue eyes appraised Johnny with scornful indifference. Tight-lipped, she went on about her work of setting food upon the table.

There was little speech during the meal. Afterward a jug was passed around, and tongues began to wag.

Johnny pushed back his chair and moved toward the door. But Dut Bricker's flat voice stopped him: "Smith!"

Conversation ceased, and there was silence broken only by the quick steps of the girl and the clatter of her dishes.

Dut Bricker's pale eyes were as expressionless as his voice. "Your horses have been taken care of," he said. "Stay away from the barn."

Vern said quickly: "He ain't goin' to pull out! Smith's all right! I told you that, Dut!"

Dut continued to look at Johnny. "Stay away from the barn," he said again. "And don't try wanderin' off. I want you where we can keep an eye on you. Understand?"

"Yeah," said Johnny. "I understand." Then he left the house and went as far as the corral. He

perched there on the top pole, his chin resting on his hand and his unfocused eyes peering into the gathering darkness.

Presently footsteps sounded behind him, and a hand was placed on his shoulder. Vern's voice spoke softly:

"There's better men than you have hit the owlhoot, Johnny. It ain't such a bad life at times."

Johnny moved his shoulder. "Take your hand off me!"

Vern leaned against the poles, his angry face close. "Watch yourself!" he said furiously. "You're sittin' on a powder keg, and you don't know it! Where d'you think you'd be now if it wasn't for me? If I hadn't known Dut Bricker—"

"I *know* where I'd be now, if it wasn't for you! I'd be home on the Quassapulta. My name would still be Coin. What is it now? Smith? Jones? Brown?"

Vern was silent a moment. Then he said gently: "No use quarrelin', Johnny. You know what kind of a hornets' nest we've stumbled into? Know who these jaspers are?"

Johnny nodded grimly. "I can guess."

"It was luck," said Vern, "that I happened to know Dut Bricker. I was with him down South a couple years ago. I never saw the others before."

"Bricker the boss?"

"Yeah, and a dang tough one! And he ain't so satisfied about us. We've both got to walk a chalk line— I can tell you that much!"

"What are they doing here?"

Vern shook his head. "I don't know, not for sure. There's somethin' in the wind, but I don't know what. Dut didn't tell me. You saw the old man by the stove? That's Hank Elston. He owns this spread."

"He's one of Bricker's gang too?"

"He is now. He *has* to be!" Vern laughed softly. "The part about Hank is funny. Accordin' to Dut, he and the others happened on this spread by chance. They were goin' to lift some of Hank's horses and ride on. Then, all at once, Dut recognized Hank. Hank's an old-timer with a record as long as your arm. He'd bought this place back here in the hills and had been livin' here for years, tryin' to go straight."

"So?"

"Soon as Dut recognized him, of course, Hank's game was up. Dut and the others just moved in on him. This place makes a good hide-out. They've been here a month already. When they need supplies, they send old Hank into town for 'em."

"Aren't they afraid Hank will bring the law down on them?"

"No! I told you Hank had a record. He knows if he makes one false move, Dut'll bring the law down. Besides, Hank has his niece to think of."

"The girl that did the cooking?"

Vern nodded. "Name's Ann Elston. A looker, ain't she? Orphan, I guess. Dut says Hank has been takin' care of her for the past five years. Maybe that's why he's been tryin' to go straight—on account of her. Anyway, Hank knows what would happen to her, if he double-crossed Dut. Dut's made that plain!" Vern laughed again. "Smart, eh? Dut don't miss many tricks!"

Johnny regarded his half brother and looked away. He felt physically sick. Thickly he said: "You should have been strangled when you were born. Dad should have done it then."

Vern cursed. "Maybe you're right. Sometimes, Johnny, I wish—" Then he straightened and his voice was suddenly sharp and angry. "To hell with that! I'll still be alive and

kickin' when you and the old man are both underground! There's a card game startin'. Want to set in?"

Johnny said nothing. He seemed not to have heard.

Vern shrugged and strolled back toward the house.

## CHAPTER IV.

### POWDER-SMOKE PLAN.

THE card game had gotten started, Johnny guessed. The shades were drawn in the house, and light seeped around their edges. Occasionally, a door opened and closed again. Johnny remained quiet, perched on the corral pole.

Sam, the youngest of Bricker's gang and the one who had taken care of the horses, passed Johnny on his way to the barn. On his return he paused.

"Those are nice horses—Smith." He spoke the name with elaborate emphasis.

Johnny nodded.

"You can pick 'em. Well, stick to horses!" He came closer so that Johnny could see the toughness of his square-jawed face, the hard glint of his eyes through the night gloom. "Understand what I mean?"

"No," answered Johnny wearily.

Sam's jaw tightened. For a minute, slow-thoughted, he seemed to be searching for words. Then ominously he repeated: "Stick to horses! Don't try pickin' anything else. I've given you your warnin'!" He turned his back and strode off.

Puzzled, Johnny watched Sam's broad shoulders recede into the shadows. Then, belatedly, he remembered the girl—Ann Elston. He guessed he knew now what Sam had meant.

The house door opened again, sending out a quick shift of lamp glow, and closed softly. Hurrying

footsteps sounded along the trail to the barn.

Johnny got out his papers and tobacco and started to roll a smoke. Then he paused, listening. The sound of footsteps had ceased. There was a scuffling noise and a low cry of alarm, muffled, ending suddenly.

Johnny left the corral pole in one long leap. Swift striding, he raced toward the house. Beyond the corral two silently struggling figures blocked his way—Sam and Ann Elston!

The man had one hand over the girl's mouth and was bending her head back. With her free hand the girl was striking out desperately but futilely.

Johnny dug his fingers into the back of Sam's neck, and the owl-hooter gave a grunt of surprise. He flung the girl from him and whirled out of Johnny's grasp. He stood for an instant, neck bowed and shoulders hunched; then, with silent, animal ferocity, he charged head-first.

Having surprised Johnny with the first blow, Sam then backed away for another attack. But it failed. Johnny's fist cracked sharp and clean on Sam's jaw, and the outlaw's head was jolted back. He staggered, threw both arms about Johnny and hung on. Johnny tried to jerk free, but Sam's arms tightened, slipped down to the small of Johnny's back.

The renegade was strong—stronger even than Johnny would have guessed. His thick arms were like clamps of steel, pulling inexorably, bending the lighter man backward. Sam drove his head in under Johnny's chin and pressed upward.

Johnny's breath wheezed in his faint and constricted throat. He braced his legs wide, tried to stiffen his back.

And then Sam pumped his knee into Johnny's stomach.

A deep groan was wrenched from Johnny. Pain, intolerable and paralyzing, washed through him. Writhing, he dropped to the ground.

He saw Sam take a step back and slide out his gun. And a little beyond Sam he saw the girl, immobile, her eyes wide with horror.

"I warned you!" snarled Sam, and leveled his gun.

Johnny pawed at his own holster. Gun sound crashed in his ears, and he heard Ann Elston's quick indraw of breath.

Johnny's first thought was that Sam had fired and missed. Then, amazingly, he saw Sam crumple and pitch forward.

The kitchen door slammed open, men rushed forth and surrounded Johnny while he got shakily to his feet.

Dut Bricker asked in his dull voice: "What happened?"

Ann answered. "I came out of the house, and he grabbed me." She pointed to Sam's sprawled form, a shudder running through her. "He had his hand over my mouth. I couldn't make a sound. If it hadn't been for Smith—" Her voice faltered, and she was silent.

"I see," said Bricker. His expressionless eyes swept the men about him. "Sam had orders to leave the girl alone. A man that can't take orders gets what's comin' to him. That's my idea."

The freckled, fox-featured man nodded. "And mine, too! Sam's head was gettin' too big for his Stetson!"

"Hank!" said Bricker. "Where's Hank Elston?"

As the old man came forward out of the shadows behind Johnny, Dut

*Continued on page 102*

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Continued from page 100

indicated the dead man. "Get a shovel and bury that."

Hank nodded and placidly shuffled off into the shadows again.

Dut picked up Sam's gun and stuck it in his belt. He stared fixedly at Johnny. "Smith," he said, "you're lucky. We figured on gettin' rid of Sam anyway. You saved us the trouble. But don't try your luck again."

Johnny nodded without answering. His luck was even better than Dut Bricker imagined. Bricker thought Johnny had killed Sam, but Bricker was wrong. Johnny hadn't fired a shot—he hadn't had a chance. He didn't know who had killed Sam. He wished he did.

THAT night Johnny and Vern bunked together in a tiny loft at the front of the house. Johnny turned in while the card game was still in progress in the room below him.

When Vern came to bed later, he carried news of Bricker's plans. Bricker was intending to rob a bank. The bank was in Pretzman, a small town just the other side of the hills. Tomorrow Bricker was going to ride that way and look over the ground.

Even in the pitch blackness of the loft Johnny could detect the quick nervousness of Vern's movements. His voice was a hoarse, tight whisper: "I told you somethin' was in the wind! Didn't I tell you, Johnny? I figured Bricker wasn't layin' around here for nothin'!"

Johnny was rigid on his blanket, not speaking.

Vern moved closer, his whisper was confidential: "We'll hit the bank just at openin' time. Dut and me will go in, and Fogel—he's the one with the freckles—will stay out front. Rip Stassy and Bull—that's the other two—will keep the street clear. We figured to give you the



easiest part. All you got to do is stay with the horses and watch 'em. How's that sound?"

Still Johnny remained silent.

"Of course," murmured Vern, "we may have to change our plans around a bit after Dut looks things over. You can see that."

"Yeah," said Johnny. "I understand."

"Did you know you made a rep for yourself killin' Sam?"

"No," said Johnny. "I hadn't thought."

Vern laughed softly. "You're shapin' up, kid. You'll be a real owlhooter before you know it."

**T**HE next morning Dut Bricker rode off alone into the hills. In the afternoon the card game got under way. Johnny wandered out into the yard and sat on an old hay sled. Thoughtfully his hand moved to his pants pocket, feeling the sharp contours of the deputy's badge he had "borrowed" back on the Quassapulta.

Johnny hadn't needed the badge to gain the confidence of the sheriff at Combine. But now another and grimmer use for the badge occurred to him.

For a while he pondered. Then he arose and sauntered with seeming aimlessness about the ranch yard. When he returned to the house his pocket was empty—the badge was gone.

Johnny had difficulty eating the evening meal. His mouth was dry and his stomach was a contracted ball. When he lifted his arms he could feel sweat roll along his ribs.

The card game was not immediately resumed. The men drifted into the yard, smoking and watching for Dut Bricker's return. A little after dark Bricker came in, and the men trailed him to the house.

Johnny intercepted Vern and drew him aside.

"Somethin' on your mind, kid?" Vern asked. They paused in the shadow of the wagon shed, and Vern's eyes were sharp. "You're nervous, kid," he murmured. "I noticed that earlier. This bank job—"

"It's not the bank I'm thinking about." Johnny gripped Vern's arm. "I dropped that deputy's badge," he said slowly.

Vern stiffened. "What deputy's badge?"

"One I had. I was going to pretend to be a lawman so I could get in to see you at the Combine jail. This afternoon I dropped it outside the house. It's gone now. Someone has picked it up. I don't know who."

"They'll tell Dut! They'll think you really are a lawman! And because I came here with you, Dut'll think we're both tryin' to give him the double cross!" Sudden fury twisted Vern's thin face. "You fool! D'you see what you've got us into? Our lives won't be—"

"I see," said Johnny, and he held his grip on Vern's arm. "I know what our lives are worth now. I figured they'd wait till Dut got back before they did anything about it. I figured I'd have this much time before I warned you."

"You figured on it!" whispered Vern. His eyes widened. "You mean you dropped that badge on purpose?"

"That's it, Vern."

"Are you crazy?"

"Maybe. Pretty near, I guess. But it's the only way I could think of. I can't kill you—you said that yourself. But someone's got to!" Johnny smiled gently. "We'll rob no bank, Vern—neither of us! We're in this together, and we'll go out together."

"Let me go!" Vern struggled furi-

ously to break Johnny's grip.

Johnny was bigger than Vern and stronger, and he held him easily. He spoke softly. "No," he said. "I won't let you go. We're going into the house, Vern. Eight years ago I made a promise to dad, and I'm going to keep it. I can't live like a Coin any longer, but I can *die* like one! We both can! You ready, Vern?"

Vern was suddenly quiet.

Hank Elston had plodded silently out of the darkness behind them and opened his hand, showing a glittering object—the deputy's badge!

"I found it this afternoon," said Hank. "I knowed one of you men must have dropped it. I've been waitin' a chance to give it back to you."

Johnny stood rooted, his grip on Vern relaxing.

Vern snatched the badge, thrust it deep in his pocket. "Who did you tell?"

"No one!" said the old man. "I hate Bricker's guts—he knows that! If it wasn't for Ann—" Hank's voice trailed off, and he remained silent, looking questioningly at the two.

"You're smart, Hank. Keep your mouth shut and you won't be sorry." Vern moved away, and his teeth made a quick, white line in the gloom. "I'm goin' in and see what news Dut has. Comin', *Smith?*"

Johnny gave no reply. He had envisioned their entrance into the house as being the signal for a gun fight and their death. But his plan had miscarried! Dull-eyed, he watched Vern open the door and go into the kitchen, smilingly triumphant and unafraid—

Old Hank Elston was speaking again: "I want you to know, Mister Lawman, that whatever you two fellers are plannin', you can count on me. It ain't for myself I'm scared of Bricker; it's because of Ann." His

hands gestured slowly and earnestly. "Remember that, won't you? Whatever happens, we've got to see that no hurt comes to the girl."

Johnny nodded, scarcely hearing.

Old Hank plucked at his sleeve. "There's somethin' else I want to tell you, Mister Lawman. I got two horses hid in a corral in the woods about a mile north. I told Ann about 'em yesterday. They're just work horses, but I hoped Ann and me could sneak—"

"Smith! Hank! Come here!" Dut Bricker had appeared in the kitchen doorway and was peering fixedly toward the two.

"Comin'," Hank responded. He trudged along beside Johnny and went on: "Dut brought someone with him when he came in tonight. The other feller left Dut at the barn and circled around the house and went in at the front. I don't know what it means, but I thought I'd tell you."

Johnny nodded absently. "I'll remember. Thanks—Hank."

## CHAPTER V.

PAID—TO SATAN.

SOMETHING was wrong. Johnny sensed it the moment he entered the kitchen. Tension, like an impalpable weight, pressed down in the silent, lamp-lit room. The faces turned to him were a brooding evil—sullen and hostile as they had been the night he and Vern came here.

Johnny's first thought was that somehow Bricker had found out about the badge, and he glanced swiftly to Hank Elston who already had taken his favorite stance by the stove. But the old man's expression was tranquil, his eyes remote and without hint of trickery.

Ann Elston wasn't present. She

had been sent to her room, Johnny guessed, and for this he had a moment of thankfulness. For he knew now of a certainty that something was going to happen—and it would be quick and violent!

His gaze flicked to Bricker's seamless, inscrutable features, the freckled Fogel, to Bull and Rip Stassy and to Vern, with the doorway to the darkened front room behind him. Vern's smile was still in place, rigidly set, and his eyes shifted constantly, so that Johnny was reminded of the grimace of a cornered rat.

Abruptly Dut Bricker spoke. "Today," he said, "I had the luck to meet up with an old pardner—Stew Porter. Smith, do you know Porter?"

Puzzled, Johnny shook his head. "Your friend does," observed Bricker.

Vern's smile was so taut that his

lips were turning white. His gaze was shifting no longer, but was fixed with terrified intensity upon Bricker. Bricker now had a gun in his hand, and the gun was pointed at Vern. Fogel, too, had slipped out a gun—and it was pointing at Johnny!

Bricker's voice droned on. "Stew Porter had a yarn to tell. He and Chuck Cullen and another gent stuck up a stage down South. This third gent gave Cullen and Porter the double cross. Stole their share of the haul and came North with it. Cullen and Porter followed him. When they caught up with him, the double crosser killed Chuck Cullen and got away again."

Bricker looked hard at Vern. "You would know who this double-crossin' gent was, would you?"

Vern licked his lips. "It's a lie!" he cried. "I—"

"Cullen," said Bricker relentlessly,

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"was a cousin of mine. You didn't know that, did you?"

"Dut! Wait!" Vern threw up a shaking hand. "I'll tell you how it happened! I'll—"

"Look behind you," said Bricker. "You tell *him* how it happened!"

Vern turned slowly, stiffly. A man had appeared in the doorway behind him—the man who had taken the shot at Johnny in the canyon bottom, the one Vern had told him was Deputy Turk Hamlin. Vern gave a muffled cry: "Stew Porter!"

"Yes," said Bricker, "Stew Porter. He came along with me tonight. We thought it'd be a surprise for you. We—"

"Don't move! None of you! Stand quiet!"

It was Hank Elston who had spoken, and Johnny's head jerked around. From somewhere the old man had produced a short-barrel gun. His pose of aloofness was gone, his eyes glittered and his nostrils quivered fiercely; his voice was the snap of a whip: "Drop that gun, Bricker! Drop it!"

Bricker was a frozen image of surprise. Then his fingers opened, and his gun thumped on the floor.

Vern's breath went out noisily, and he cried: "Get him, Hank! Plug Dut!" His hand flashed to his holster.

Fogel whirled, and his gun spat flame. Johnny saw Vern lurch sideways, and he saw Bricker drop flat, fumbling for his fallen gun.

Johnny leaped back, palming his own gun. There was a crash of glass, and the lamp went out. Immediately in the pitch-black room rose a din of plunging men, overturning furniture and the stabbing flash and roar of guns.

Headfirst, Johnny dived for the spot where he had last seen Bricker. His elbows hit the bare floor, and a gun went off almost in his face. Johnny rolled quickly out of the

way, holding his own fire lest he shoot Vern or old Hank.

On hands and knees he made his progress to the doorway between the kitchen and the front room. He paused here and sent out his voice softly: "Vern! Hank! This way! Ver—"

Lead slapped into the door jamb above his head. Then he saw the outer door fly open and struggling figures erupt into the yard beyond. Guns sounded out there, and he heard Hank Elston's shout.

Dut Bricker's voice spoke from the sudden quiet of the kitchen: "The other one's in there—in the front room somewhere."

Lead from three guns spurting in Johnny's direction, and he slammed the door between the kitchen and front room. Then there was a movement beside him, and Ann Elston put her hand on his arm.

"Smith?" she murmured. "Here! Through my room!"

The girl's hand was trembling, but her voice was steady. She hustled Johnny through her room and to an open window.

Johnny looked out cautiously along the side of the house. No one was in sight. The racket of guns now was somewhere about the barn. He vaulted over the sill and lifted the girl down to the ground. He gave her a quick look. "Run!" he cried fiercely.

Dut Bricker already had charged into the unlighted front room, and Johnny could hear pounding feet turn toward Ann's room. Johnny snapped two shots back through the open window, then raced after the girl. A bullet whistled by his head—and another. Long-striding, he overtook the girl, caught her hand and hurried her onward. Their distance from the house increased, they were hidden in the night shadows, and the

firing in their direction ceased.

Johnny slowed the pace. "Your uncle's got two horses out in the woods somewhere—you know where?"

The girl nodded. "Where is he?" she cried. "My uncle."

Johnny shook his head ruefully. "He got out of the house all right. I don't know where he is now. Maybe at the barn. Hear the shooting there? You get one of the horses he hid, and *ride!*"

"But we can't leave Uncle Hank! He needs help and—"

"I'll tend to that! You hurry!"

The girl went off reluctantly and Johnny left her, sprinting along the hillside. The moon, just rising, touched his fast-moving figure with blurred light. Behind him he heard again the banging of Dut Bricker's gun.

Running desperately now, Johnny swerved downhill, heading for the stark, black outline of the barn and the sounds of conflict there. Too late he caught sight of the crouched man waiting to intercept him. There was lancing gun flame, the tearing shock of a slug across his ribs, and Johnny was whirled half around.

Jolted, weaving to keep his balance, Johnny snapped three return shots and saw the crouching man drop. Into his stride again, Johnny plunged grimly on. Then he stopped—

Two horsemen, coming from the direction of the barn and pursued by shouts and the rattle of gunfire, were racing toward him. The escaping two roared by Johnny without seeing him, sped on up the hillside and dodged out of sight among the brush clumps.

Johnny hadn't more than a glimpse of the fleeing men, but that glimpse was enough. One of the riders was



gaunt old Hank Elston, the other was Vern.

Immediately Johnny turned and retraced his steps along the hillside. He paused for a moment by the man his gun had dropped. It was the same man Vern successively had called Turk Hamlin, then Stew Porter, and he was dead. A chill gripped Johnny Coin. He had killed one of two men—Porter the outlaw, or Hamlin the lawman—and he didn't know which.

He bent swiftly, running his hand over the dead man's shirt and vest, hunting for a law badge. There was no badge, and Johnny straightened with a gasp of relief. Wearily he made his way up the hill slope and away from the house.

A HALF mile farther on Johnny met Ann Elston with two horses. "I've got them!" she cried excitedly. "There's bridles, but no saddles. You'll have to ride bareback." Half angrily he said: "I told you to leave!"

"And leave you on foot? Get on! The horses aren't much, but they'll do. Where's Uncle Hank? Not—not dead?"

Johnny shook his head. "Naw. He got away clean."

He climbed onto the bony work horse, and they rode on. The trail dipped into a long strip of grassland, and distantly ahead Johnny saw two riders. He shouted, and the riders halted.

The girl uttered a quick cry. "It's Uncle Hank!"

Vern was with Hank, and both stared unbelievably as Ann and Johnny came up.

"I figured Ann would take the chance to slip off and get to the nags," Hank told Johnny. "But I can't figure how *you* got out of that mess!"

Johnny shrugged. "I was lucky. How'd you two make it?"

"Easy enough once we was clear of the kitchen." Hank nodded toward Vern. "He held 'em off while I saddled up."

Vern awkwardly dismounted. He said to Ann: "If you'll change to this horse, ma'am, you'll find it better ridin' with a saddle."

Silently the girl changed horses, and she and Hank rode off.

Johnny's gaze was on Vern. "You're hurt," he said.

"A mite." Vern sat down slowly, stiff-backed and smiling.

"Vern!" Johnny sprang to the ground.

"Let me alone, Johnny! Don't touch me! I just want to rest!"

"Bricker'll be coming! You can't stay here!"

"Can't I?" Vern was still smiling. His gaze wandered and his voice was almost a whisper: "Remember, Johnny, when I told you that rider in the canyon was Turk Hamlin, a lawman? Well, that was a lie. It was only an owlhooter name of Porter. Porter and Cullen were the two I told you about bein' on my trail."

"I've guessed that by now. Why did you lie, Vern?"

"Because I hated you. I wanted to drive you onto the owlhoot same as me. I wanted to—" Vern paused, then he said drearily: "No matter what I wanted then. All I want you to know now is that you can go back home again. No lawman has seen you with me. You're safe! D'you understand? Your name is Johnny Coin again. You—"

"I understand," said Johnny. "How bad are you hurt?"

Vern dragged his hand across his moist forehead. "Plenty bad! Low down by my belly. It don't hurt—not much. But I'm done for, Johnny. I know— I—I'll lie here behind

this sagebrush and wait till Bricker comes along. If he don't see the horses, he won't notice me lyin' here. Take the horses away, Johnny."

Johnny stared along the back trail. As yet there was no sign of pursuit. Bricker, he guessed, had made a wrong turning.

"Get goin'!" ordered Vern impatiently. "And when you get home don't worry about ever hearin' from me again!"

Johnny mounted and rode off, leading the second horse. There was a brush patch not far distant, and Johnny tied the horses there and returned to Vern on foot.

Vern greeted him with sardonic eyes. "You're a fool," he said. "You'd never do on the owlhoot. I should have known that."

Johnny made no reply. Words didn't mean much now—not his or Vern's. He squatted beside Vern and watched the back trail.

"I know why you're stayin'!" Vern cried. "You think you got to be-cause we're both Coins. Well, I'm not a Coin! Not a real one. I—" Vern paused and slowly pressed both hands to his belly. "I'm dyin', Johnny," he said in a frightened whisper. "There's no feelin' down there. It's like cold water creepin' up. And I can't see so good—There's a—" He stared straight ahead, following Johnny's gaze along the back trail. "Is that—someone comin'—Johnny? Bricker?"

Johnny nodded. "They're comin'."

Vern pushed himself forward, full length on the ground. "Lie down!" he said hoarsely. "Don't—move! Not—till he's almost—on us."

They lay there motionless, Vern and Johnny, and the riders came on—four of them—traveling quickly through the silvering moonlight.

Bricker, Fogel and Bull and Rip Stassy, the four bore down upon the waiting two, so close that Johnny



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could see the dirt clods flirt from drumming hoofs. And then Vern's gun spoke.

Johnny saw the dark splotch of the slug appear on Bricker's face, and he saw the outlaw leader tumbling from the saddle.

Horses reared, men shouted, and guns crashed. Vern's gun emptied in a thundering roll and was silent. Bullets plowed the ground, and dirt particles stung Johnny's neck and cheek. Fogel's snarling fox face was before him, and dimly Johnny was aware of the hammering of his own gun, as he saw Fogel clutch his throat and sway backward.

He saw Bull charging, open-mouthed and with flaming gun, and Johnny had time to snap one quick shot before he flung himself sideways from under trampling hoofs. Bull thudded to the ground twenty feet beyond and came up on one elbow, gun pointing. Deliberately, Johnny fired again, and Bull's gun hand dropped and the man tipped over on his back.

Swiftly Johnny jerked his attention to the front. He rose to one knee, staring and holding his fire.

Rip Stassy was the only one of the four outlaws left on his horse. Shoulders hunched and motionless, Rip was clinging with both hands to the saddlehorn. As Johnny watched, Rip's hold began to loosen. Slowly at first he slid downward. Then his hold was gone, and he fell and lay soddenly, one foot hung up in the stirrup.

Wearily Johnny arose and went and freed Rip's foot. For a moment he paused to peer down at Fogel and Bricker. Then he returned and knelt by Vern's side.

Vern was lying prone, his forehead resting on his folded arms so that Johnny couldn't see his face. Johnny put his hand on Vern's shoulder, and Vern stirred and whispered, "Johnny?"

"Here," said Johnny, and his tongue felt dry and thick.

A tremor shook the stricken man, and he spoke out with sudden strength. "The Coins," he said, "don't die on the owlhoot. The old man—mustn't know. Promise—Johnny—"

"I promise," said Johnny. "No one will know."

**H**ANK and Ann Elston came up and dismounted by Johnny. "We waited," said Hank. "Then we heard the shootin', and we came back. Your partner dead?"

Johnny nodded.

"And you've been hit yourself!"

Johnny glanced down at his side. "Only a scratch. It happened at the ranch." He stared at Hank. "Who

killed Sam the other night? Was it you?"

Hank nodded. "None of 'em knew I had a gun under my shirt. I saw Sam grab Ann. Then I saw you tackle Sam. I didn't know then you were a lawman, but—"

"I'm not. I'm Tom Coin's son, from the Quassapuluta."

"The devil you say!" Old Hank opened his eyes.

Johnny looked at Ann. "The Quassapuluta's not so far," he said. "A man could ride this way often—if he had a reason."

She considered gravely. "It shouldn't be so far," she agreed. "Not for a riding man."

Old Hank was watching the two and saying nothing, but he was smiling gently.

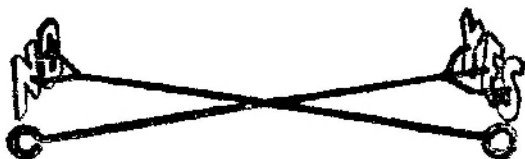
THE END.

## ¿QUIEN SABE?

*Continued from page 80*

### *Answers*

- 1. It is famous for its rodeo, which is one of the foremost annual exhibitions of riding and roping held in the United States.*
- 2. It is far more dangerous for the bulldogger, who can easily be killed if he misses his hold on the steer's horns and the steer tramples him. The worst that a steer usually gets from a bulldogging encounter is to be thrown harmlessly and to roll over on the ground once or twice before getting up.*
- 3. There are ten to twenty different events, including the opening parade, bronc-busting, calf-roping, goat-roping, bulldogging, horse-racing, fancy riding and exhibitions by Indians.*
- 4. Like all deer, elk shed their antlers each year around the beginning of spring. In five or six months, all deer grow complete new ones.*
- 5. He would be a taxidermist, mounting animals and preserving their skins for pleasure or profit. His outfit would*
- also include scissors, tow, twine, needle and thread, wire, and glass eyes.*
- 6. It is in southern California, one of the world's greatest highways, originally laid out by early Spanish priests. It means "The King's Highway."*
- 7. It is the Giant Geyser, which erupts to a height of two hundred and fifty feet, an hour at a time.*
- 8. It erupts with uncanny regularity at intervals of about sixty minutes, each eruption lasting forty minutes. If it erupted all day, it would supply a city the size of Denver with water.*
- 9. It is the Wawona Tree in Yosemite National Park. The passage and roadway through its trunk were cut in 1881. It is a Sequoia or giant redwood.*
- 10. It is a hole five feet wide in the side of a mountain in Yellowstone National Park. Every two minutes it suddenly barks or roars and spits out a barrellful of boiling water.*



## READERS' BRANDING IRONS

The editor is always glad to receive letters from readers commenting on the magazine, or any part of it. He will appreciate your writing them in moderate length. Address them: To the Editor, Wild West Weekly, Street & Smith Publications, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Owing to our advance make-up of the magazine, it may be some time before letters appear in print.



### GREATEST DISCOVERY

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Last June, while looking over the vast variety of magazines at a local newsstand, my eye fell upon Wild West Weekly. I must say that it was the greatest discovery I have ever made. Reading it is my main source of enjoyment. I read many different kinds of magazines, but Westerns are my favorite—and Wild West Weekly is my favorite Western.

I also read to some extent your pard Street & Smith magazines, *Western Story* and *Western Adventures*.

Yours till I stop reading.

C. B. LAMB.

Nashville, Tenn.



### FOR A SAILOR SOLONE

DEAR BOSS: Just a short note to comment on Paul S. Powers' novel, "The Fightin' Three of the Rockin' T," which appeared in the October 24th issue of the navy's favorite Western magazine—Wild West Weekly. Please give us more stories of Steve Tustin, Toot Smith and Beautiful Bill Barbee. They have the makings of real favorites to add to your countless number of good characters.

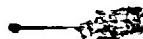
Say, Boss, if we had a few Blacky Solones in this navy, we wouldn't need any destroyers, heavy cruisers and even battleships! Put Solone and Rowdy Lang together and we soon wouldn't have any Japs to fight!

Your faithful reader,

G. B. P., Seaman 2nd Class.

U. S. navy.

Waal, sailor, it makes us plumb proud to know that this is the favorite Western magazine in the navy! You're in our favorite navy, too!



### TEXAN AND THE COLD

DEAR RANGE BOSS: The reason for this letter is the letter in your October 10th issue of Wild West Weekly written by Lawrence McGregor of New Rockford, North Dakota. He says there that Texans couldn't stay up North where it is cold and that they have to be tough to live this far North. Well, I am from Texas, along with several hundred more boys up here in Idaho and it gets plenty cold here, but none of us has frozen yet. Just let Mr. McGregor get up at 5:30 every morning and go out in the cold snow and take exercises, and see if he doesn't get plenty cold! We Texans can live just as well up North as we can down in Texas. He should go to Texas and see how cold it can get down there. I'll wager he would be surprised.

Now that I have gotten that off my chest, I hope you print this so that Mr. McGregor can see a Texan's viewpoint. We are just as tough up North as the Northerners are.

I like your magazine as well as ever and I try to get a copy every week, but sometimes I don't manage it.

My favorite characters are Sonny Tabor, Oklahoma Kid, Rowdy Lang, Blacky Solone, Kid Wolf and most of the old characters. But you can let the Silver Kid stay on his vacation permanent, for my part. However, I would appreciate it if you could get Sleepy Sloane back.

I'd better stop now, since I've gotten this off my chest. I hope Mr. McGregor reads it.



So until those Germans get frozen to death in Russia, I'll say adios.

W. H.

U. S. navy.



**THROUGH OKLAHOMA**

DEAR RANGE BOSS: In your October 31st issue *Quien Sabe?* asked the question: Why didn't the Santa Fe Trail go through Oklahoma?

Well, me being an Oklahoman. I know that the Santa Fe Trail *did* go through Oklahoma. If you want proof, read the history of Oklahoma.

Yours till Risky McKee takes too many risks,

HOWARD BOYDSTON.

Carter, Okla.

Much obliged for the correction. The *Quien Sabe?* man is greatly mortified at his mistake.



**FIRST WITH HIM**

DEAR SENOR EDITOR: I've read many Western magazines, but I think *Wild West Weekly* is the best of them. The characters I like best are Rowdy Lang, Flash Moran, Kid Wolf, Oklahoma Kid, White Wolf, Freckles Malone, Sonny Tabor and the Silver Kid. I also like many of the others—but these rank first with me.

Adios,

JOE FRAZIER.

Asheboro, N. C.



**BET A BOTTOM PESO**

SENIOR RANGE BOSS: This is my very first letter to you, but it won't be the last—and you can bet your bottom peso on that.

My favorite characters in your swell magazine are, in order: Kid Wolf, Senior Red Mask, Sonny Tabor, Blacky Salone and the Circle J pards.

By the way, can't you have Kid Wolf do a little more knife work in his next story? If I remember correctly, in his past stories he used to handle his bowie knife a lot, but lately it seems it's just carried behind his collar as an ornament. What say?

Hasta la vista,

GEORGE ROGERS.

Baltimore, Md.

Why, Senior Rogers! Tsk! You sound almost bloodthirsty, cravin' knife work thataway! However, we'll talk to the Kid about it.

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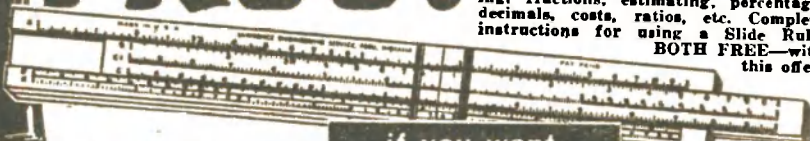
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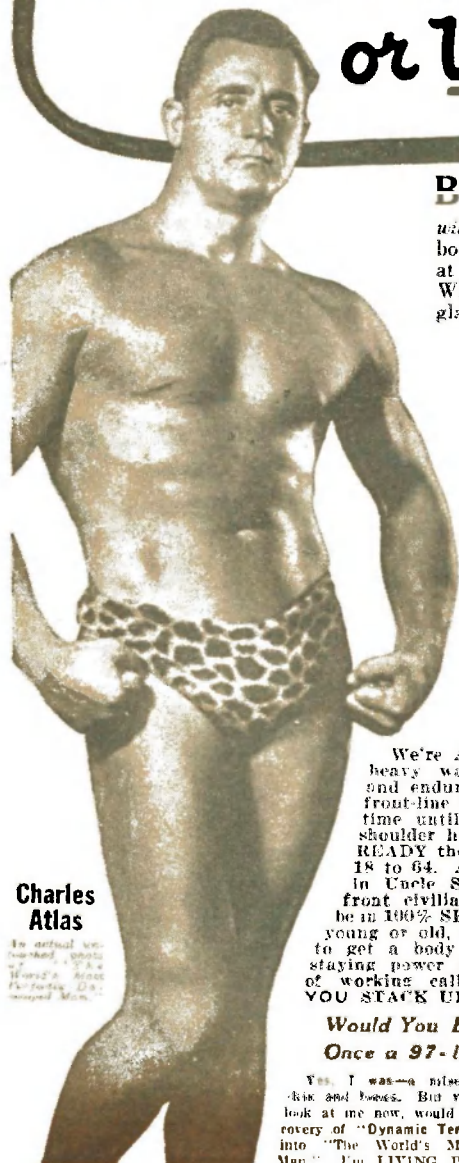


# Behind Your Back--

WHAT IS SHE CALLING YOU--

# HE-MAN

## or Weakling ?



**B**ELIEVE it or not—the girls are sizing you up *all day long!* Whether they look at you **TWICE** is up to **YOU!** They *will* if you have a rugged, healthy, big-muscled **HE-MAN** body, glowing with strength and vigor, but they'll just snicker at you behind your back if you're a skinny, no-muscle **WEAKLING!** If **YOU**, too, want to feel those admiring glances right through your back then listen to this:

**Let Me Prove I Can Make**

**YOU a NEW MAN—** *Charles Atlas*

Will you give me just 15 minutes a day of your spare time? That's all I need to **PROVE**—regardless of how old or young you are, or how ashamed you may be of your present physique—that I can give you a body men envy and women admire. Biceps that can desk it out, and a muscle-rigged stomach that can take it. A full, deep barrel chest. Legs that never tire. A tough, sinewy back. An all-around physique that can laugh at **ANY** kind of rough going.

"Dynamic Tension" can perform—right in the privacy of your home! **NOW**—will you give me method 15 minutes a day to get the kind of **HE-MAN** build you have always longed to have?

**FREE BOOK**

*"Everlasting Health and Strength"*

Just a postage stamp will bring you your copy of my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," absolutely free. No wonder nearly 2,000,000 men have sent for this big 48 page story of "Dynamic Tension" illustrated with action photos of myself and some of my pupils. You'll not only

my secret of "Dynamic Tension"—but you **SEE PROOF** of it! **CHARLES A T L A S**, Dept. 621, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.



**Charles Atlas**

In actual weight-lifted, photo of World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man, Chicago, Ill.

We're **ALL** in the Army today! The heavy war-time demands on strength and endurance are no longer limited to front-line trenches. It's only a matter of time until **EVERY** citizen is called to shoulder his full share of the load. **ALREADY** the Army has enrolled men from 18 to 64. And whether you do your part in Uncle Sam's Services or as a home-front civilian, you've **GOT** to be in **100% SHAPE**. Every man, young or old, owes it to himself to get a body with the bulldog staying power that double shifts of working call for. **HOW DO YOU STACK UP?**

**Would You Believe I Was Once a 97-lb. Weakling?**

Yes, I was—a miserable 97-pound man of skin and bones. But you'd never believe it to look at me now, would you? Through my discovery of "Dynamic Tension" I changed myself into "The World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man." The **LIVING PROOF** of the miracles

**CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 621,

115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name

Please print in block letters

Address

City  State



This year  
**BE WISE!**

Clear Heads Choose

# Calvert

The whiskey with the  
"Happy Blending"



Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY Calvert "Reserve": 86.8 Proof—65% Grain Neutral Spirits . . . Calvert "Special": 86.8 Proof—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits.