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BLACK SOMBREROS

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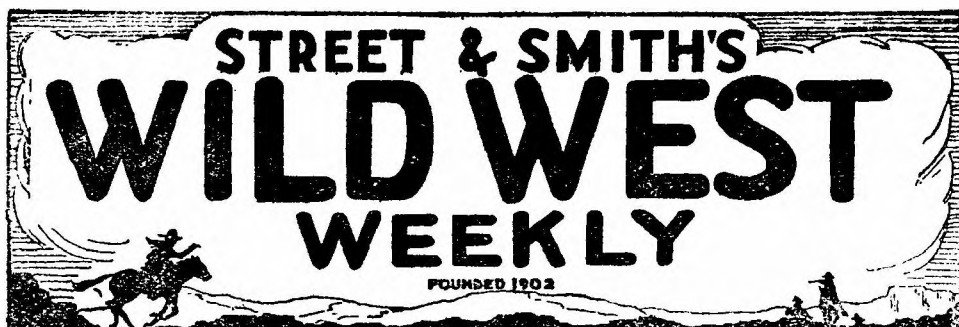
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Vol. 103, No. 4 CONTENTS FOR JULY 11, 1936 Whole No. 1760

Cover Picture—Scene from "Whizz Fargo
and the Black Sombreros" . . . Painted by Alvin Henning

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Whizz Fargo and the Black Sombreros** . *George C. Henderson* . . . 6
Startin' a new series about a two-gun, fightin' waddy.
- Gun Ghosts Of Cougar Gulch** . . . *Lee Bond* . . . 57
No kind o' spook kin scare the Oklahoma Kid.
- Pay Dirt In Piute** . . . *William F. Bragg* . . . 91
There's crooks there, too, which makes plenty o' trouble for Flash Moran.

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Bud Jones of Texas nails it to the fence.
- Vengeance Stampede** . . . *Philip F. Deere* . . . 46
It backfires on the outlaws, thanks to a loyal cowpoke.
- Fog on the Flyin' T** . . . *Allan R. Bosworth* . . . 79
Shorty Masters an' the Sonora Kid add a little gun smoke to it.
- Gun Nerve** . . . *Forbes Parkhill* . . . 112
That's the kind o' nerve that counts when yo're dealin' with a killer.
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A story in pictures about the gun-slingin' young outlaw.

BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

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DEPARTMENTS

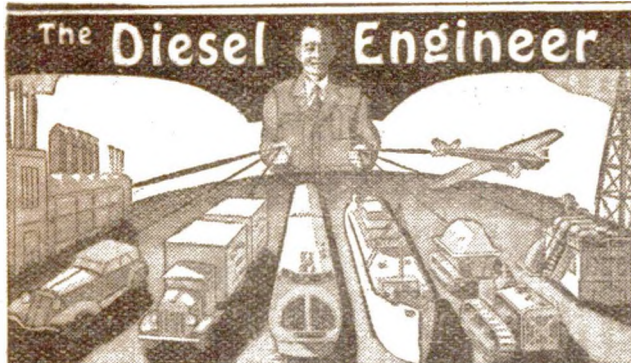
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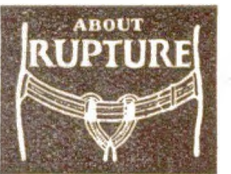
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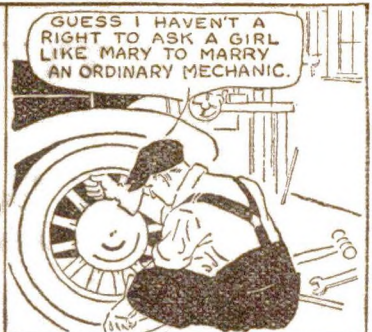
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Author of "Slick-ear Branders," etc.



CHAPTER I.

THE FLYING DRAGON.

IT looked like a great red Chinese dragon, wings outspread, jaws agape, ready to take flight from the projecting sandstone ledge into the slanting rays of the Western sun. Its claws were open as if ready to grab its prey. A stubby alligator-like tail tilted upward from the sandstone spur that protruded out over the cattle trail. An eye seemed to wink.

So startling was the dragon re-

semblance that it was a moment before "Whizz" Fargo realized that this flying monster was only a huge stone outcropping, an offshoot of the weather-carved-and-sculptured Fort Cajun Rock, his destination. And that what looked like a winking eye was the moving figure of a man.

At that instant Whizz made one of those streak-lightning, quick-trigger moves which had earned him his reputation—and his nickname—as a whizzer.

One moment he was slouching,

the Black Sombros



loose-limbed and smiling-eyed, in his cowhide stock saddle, Stetson pulled low, lazily taking in the scenery of his new stamping grounds. Then as if the threat of watching eyes had run a cold-steel chill along his spine, he was gone.

A jackknife convulsion of his long legs catapulted him into a wild-cherry thicket where he became suddenly as still and alert as a hound pointing a quail. His gaze was fixed on the head of the huge stone dragon, where the distance-dwarfed figure of the man seemed to lurk like an evil thing in the gloom.

Whizz's fighting instinct warned him that something was wrong here. It wasn't just the spooky appearance of the ruined blockhouse walls, tumble-down buildings, and ghostly caves of the old fort. It was not even the jerky movements of the figure high up on the flying-dragon rock, nor the memories of the Indian massacres that had taken place

here. Rather it was the mysterious sixth sense of danger which a gun fighter gradually develops and which was sharpened to dagger-point keenness in Whizz Fargo.

The cowboy's well-trained clay-bank bronc had stopped stock-still. Whizz had taught it to do that when he made one of his nimble get-aways. A motionless horse is hard to see.

Back along the ratty, weed-grown wagon trail, bordered by yellow pine, hackberry, and juniper, a clanking camp wagon lumbered to a creaking halt, and high up on the seat "Hopdoodle" O'Day dragged out a rifle and craned his leathery neck to see what was wrong.

Hopdoodle, dish-faced and bald-headed, was Whizz's stuttering pard.

There was good reason for Whizz and Hopdoodle exercising all this caution. They were carrying with them more than thirty thousand dollars in gold taken from their mine, the Scissorbill, which they had sold.

This strange country was dangerous. If they did not watch carefully, they would probably be killed and robbed.

For long minutes, Hopdoodle waited with his finger on the rifle trigger. Meanwhile Whizz Fargo became a slinking, gliding panther in the thickets. The figure up on Flying Dragon had vanished. Silence, ghostly and chilling, seemed to settle over the countryside like a blanket.

Hopdoodle's leathery cheeks, wrinkled in folds and layers of weather-toughened skin, moved like the bellows of an accordion as he slowly chewed on his hunk of plug cut.

Suddenly he whirled to one side, cocked rifle ready to fire. A shadowy figure loomed at the side of the wagon, as if it came from nowhere. It was Whizz Fargo, tall, lanky, grinning, juggling a big blue-steel Colt, which he kept tossing into the air and catching by the grips as it came spinning down. Whizz was an expert gun juggler.

Beneath the brim of his gray Stetson, Whizz's ruddy face split in a grin that seemed to emphasize the jaunty fitness of his bright clothes—orange-colored shirt, woolly yellow goatskin chaps, spotted calfskin vest, and color-stitched boots.

"S-s-see here," stammered the old driver. "Why don't yuh scare me to *death*?"

"Yo're scairt of them Fort Cajun spooks," jibed Whizz. "After sundown, ghosts of massacred whites dance on the walls, wavin' their own crimson scalps in the air."

"Shut yore t-t-trap," retorted Hopdoodle. "I'm steering clear of this place, where the Injuns massacred all them folks years ago."

"Yo' just think yo' are," retorted Whizz. "We camp here. There ahead of us is the corrals we rented

from Alvin Jimson in Santa Fe. Yo'-all drive the wagon. I'll wrangle the stock into the pens."

The pards' traveling outfit, a small one, consisted of a single wagon, a little herd of whiteface bulls, and a cavvy of eight horses.

As Whizz worked the stock into the corrals, there was an eager smile on his ruddy, square-jawed face, that had nothing to do with fighting ambushers. This was his great adventure. He was going to have a ranch of his own, boss a crew of men, build up a big outfit, and make cattlemen call him "Mister" before he was through with it.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—his youth, Whizz was ambitious. His parents were dead, but he had three brothers—Ham, Ted, and Bill—wandering somewhere on the Western plains.

All three had treated Whizz as if he were a helpless weaner. Now he was going to show them a thing or two. What a laugh he would get if they had to come to him asking for a job! Whizz could picture their faces when they found that their youngest brother was boss and owner.

Sometimes Whizz had to reach back and touch the saddlebags which bulged with gold to convince himself that it was not just a dream. Those saddlebags, specially made and strongly reinforced, each held twenty-five pounds of nuggets, bar gold, eagles, and double eagles. Hopdoodle carried a like amount.

All during the journey they had not let the money out of their sight. At the roadside *posadas* and stores they had paid for their purchases with silver, knowing how sight of the yellow metal always started trouble.

Strange noises kept coming to Whizz and Hopdoodle from the direction of old Fort Cajun as they

worked fencing in the stock and throwing baled hay to the animals. Hopdoodle craned his long neck, made queer gurgling sounds in his throat, and kept casting uneasy glances in that direction.

Even Whizz Fargo shrugged his shoulders as if icy fingers were touching the skin of his back. He had not wanted to use Fort Cajun as a camp site. Too many wild tales were told about this desolate, decaying, frontier ruin to brand them all as lies. He could feel that it was evil, sinister, menacing.

Suddenly a man appeared on the very tip of Flying Dragon Rock. Whizz and Hopdoodle were not more than a hundred yards from him. He was a mere flitting shadow on the rocky bulge that protruded out over the road.

"L-I-look at that!" stuttered Hopdoodle O'Day. "A man! And the crazy jigger's goin' to jump!"

The ghost shape high up in the air on the point of rock, waved both hands in the air and uttered an unearthly, ear-piercing screech. Whizz's horse threw up its head with a snort and started to whirl. The four broncs hitched to the wagon jerked and plunged in terror.

For a moment, the pards were too busy trying to prevent a stampede to see what was happening up there on the rock.

In spite of his steely nerve, Whizz Fargo had to admit that shivers were creeping up his spine. This was the spookiest place he had ever seen. No wonder people believed the wild stories about ghosts who danced along the rocky corridors waving their own scalps in the air.

All around the spectral Cajun Hill lay the decaying, tumble-down wreckage of loop-holed log walls, sheds, buildings, and barracks. This fortress had been an important trad-

ing center and pony-express station in the old days.

Another wild, nerve-curdling shriek burst from the mysterious man who crouched among the boulders on the very tip of the flying dragon's nose.

Whizz saw the fellow turn on his dizzy perch. Then he seemed to slip and fall over the brink to destruction. His clawing fingers caught on a root or a rocky knob for an instant, leaving him swinging in mid-air, a hundred feet above the roadway.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER!

THE man's choking cries galvanized Whizz Fargo into action. He lashed the rear wheeler of the wagon with his quirt and yelled a command at the startled Hopdoodle.

"Whip up that team!" he whooped. "Drive the load of hay under that man for him to drop on! Get goin', cowboy!"

The frightened broncs broke into a mad gallop. The big wagon lurched and swayed from side to side. Hopdoodle up on the high seat, clinging to the reins, saw what Whizz had in mind and he steered straight for a spot in the road directly beneath the flying dragon. If they could spot the hay beneath the doomed man it might break his fall and save his life.

A howl of terror burst from the stranger's lips. One hand had slipped off the rock. Then his clawing fingers released their hold and he plummeted to the ground. His body hit so hard on the stony soil that it seemed actually to bounce.

By the time Whizz and Hopdoodle controlled their terrified horses and

reached the crumpled figure, the man was already dead.

"It ain't no g-g-ghost!" burst out Hopdoodle O'Day. "It's a real man, all battered to pieces by his fall. A crazy man."

"He don't look crazy to me," growled Whizz, who was kneeling beside the crushed and battered body, staring at the glassy, sightless eyes and gaping mouth of the dead man. "He's well fed and well dressed. Had a haircut and a shave recent, too. Funny if he was goin' to kill himself, that he would go an' git himself a fresh haircut."

Hopdoodle studied the fallen figure in the growing dusk before replying. The stranger was dressed in a good dark suit, clean woolen shirt and high-heeled cattleman's boots. A shiny, worn circle around his waist showed that he was accustomed to wearing gun belts, but he was unarmed now. His iron-gray head was bare. It was crimson-stained, badly crushed by the fall.

Hopdoodle had stooped and picked up a black hat from the brush where it had fallen. Now he handed it to Whizz Fargo. The tall, lean cowboy took the object, hefted it, and looked inside. The sweat band had been torn out. It was a fine, expensive range rider's Stetson, practically new. Whizz started to toss it aside. Then suddenly a thought struck him and he jammed the hat down on the dead man's head. It dropped down over his ears.

"Too big for him!" burst out Whizz. "This ain't his lid. Look around for another feller."

Hopdoodle twisted his dish face into a wry expression.

"I've l-l-looked," he stuttered. "There ain't another soul in sight."

Whizz Fargo's shock of carrot-colored hair seemed to bristle like a

brush as he searched his surroundings with hot eyes. Long-legged, lean-faced and slouching, he stood there in the gathering dusk, blocky jaw outthrust.

He scented trouble. This dead man was a person of importance. He looked as if he had had money. Whizz thought of robbery, but put it aside. Robbers would certainly knock a man out or shoot him. They wouldn't take him out on a point of land and make him jump off.

"And if it was suicide," said Whizz aloud, "what was this other feller doin' around heah? The owner of the black hat. I believe this is murder."

The pards covered the body over with a tarpaulin, piled brush over it to protect it from prowling coyotes and proceeded to the camp ground just around the corner of the fort.

Strange noises were still coming from the tumble-down ruins. A black cloud, that looked like smoke, rose from one of the caverns at the summit of the towering rock. They were bats, literally thousands of them, pouring from their nest.

A party of horsemen came into view, galloping toward them. There were fully a dozen armed men in the group. They glowered at the pards as they circled in around them, hands on their guns. Only one was smiling. This was the leader, whose eyes glittered oddly behind thick-lensed glasses.

"How are yuh, boys," he said with a lift of his hand. "I'm Ed Slocum of the Bullfrog Ranch. I reckon you're Whizz Fargo and Hopdoodle O'Day," he added as he dismounted.

"Sho' enough," said Whizz Fargo. "But how did yo' know?"

Slocum reached inside his pocket and pulled out a copy of the *Cattle-men's Gazette* published in Volcano,

the nearest cow town. It was dark and he had to scratch a match for the pards to read the printed words. Slocum's long finger nail indicated an advertisement. It said:

RANCH WANTED.

Will pay \$30,000 cash for best ranch we can get. Apply to Whizz Fargo and Hopdoodle O'Day at Fort Cajun.

All the time that Hopdoodle had been reading this, Whizz had been studying the faces of Ed Slocum and his men. Ed was dressed like any prosperous rancher. He wore a dark suit with holstered guns under his coat. Those weapons were very businesslike.

He had a rather wide face, which the thick-lensed glasses made appear even wider. Behind those glasses his eyes seemed to glisten.

A swarthy, dark-browed gunman kept constantly at Slocum's side. His Colts were triggerless, indicating that he was a fanner. Whizz knew what that meant. A gun-fanner was always a deadly foe. Scars on his forehead, his face and his neck showed that he had seen plenty of action.

The fanner's colorless eyes clashed with Whizz's cool hazel ones. His thick lips drew back from pearly-white teeth in a sneer. This jigger was primed for trouble. It was plain that only the presence of Ed Slocum held him back.

"I don't know n-n-nothing about this ad," stammered Hopdoodle.

"I put that in," said Whizz. "I didn't say nothing to yo' about it, because yo' are such an old granny about ghosts and haunted ruins. I figured that once we got to Fort Cajun, and you seen what it was, that you wouldn't believe all them things about spooks."

"You d-d-d-goned pup," burst

out Hopdoodle. "You worked a shenanigan on me. Now we got to stay here till we meet the fellers that come to sell us a ranch."

"Hold up a minute, boys," interrupted Ed Slocum with a laugh. "Mebbe I can settle this. Are you ready to do business?"

"Sure," said both pards at once.

"All right," beamed Slocum. "I've got just the place you want. I came out here just as quick as I got the paper, to be ahead of every one else. I can take yuh to look at the property right to-night."

"Well, hold up here a bit, yo'self," retorted Whizz. "We're tired from travelin' all day. We ain't lookin' at no places until to-morrow."

"Wait until you hear this, mebbe you'll change yore mind," insisted Ed Slocum. "There ain't no time to lose. Others is figurin' on this same buy. More than a thousand acres of fine meadow next to open range. Plenty of water, good buildings, barns and corrals. Only thirty miles to the railroad and stocked with about four hundred head of cattle."

Whizz and Hopdoodle looked at each other, their eyes brightening. This certainly sounded like a good thing.

"It listens good," said Whizz. "Where is this place?"

"Well, it's quite a ways from here," admitted Ed Slocum. "More than a hundred miles. But if you fellers are tired, you can sleep in yore waggins and my men will handle the drivin' and everything."

"Nothin' doin'," said Whizz. "We picked out this Thunder River country because we like it better than anything we've ever seen. There's mountains, pine trees, running water, fine air, and plenty of bunch grass and blue grama. No, Mr. Slocum, we're buying a place on Thunder

River and your ranch a hundred miles from here don't interest us."

Ed Slocum's head hunched abruptly forward. His large eyes, behind his thick-lensed glasses, suddenly blazed, but his teeth were still bared in a grin that was almost wolfish.

"Well you might as well forget about a ranch in Thunder River Valley," said Slocum slowly. "I'm takin' over this range. I practically control it now. I'm the kingpin here. Strangers ain't wanted and I'm givin' you yore orders now to get out."

CHAPTER III.

"GRAB THEM JASPERS!"

ED SLOCUM'S menacing words seemed to be a signal for his men to crowd in around Whizz and Hopdoodle, fingering their guns. The horsemen ringed the pards about. Everywhere Whizz looked he met the challenge of hard eyes and twisted lips. The gun-fanner slid over until he was in front of Whizz and squared off as if anxious to be in on the kill.

"Hey!" burst out Hopdoodle O'Day. "What is this? A holdup?" He did not stutter now. He never did when he was on the prod. "You can't gang up on us like this."

"Don't beller, Hopdoodle," advised Whizz. "It won't do no good. Slocum's scared he can't handle us himself so he has to call on a big mob of men. I've knowed yaller skunks like that befo'. I can lick any two of them."

Whizz's words stung Ed Slocum's pride. In the darkness all the cowboy could see was the glitter of Slocum's glasses until the Bullfrog boss stepped forward from among his gunmen.

"Wait a minute," rapped out Slo-

cum. "What's this talk about me? Who says I'm scared?"

"I do," said Whizz boldly. "Any man's a coward that will set a whole pack of gunmen upon two lone fellers. Do yo' let other folks fight yore battles for you or are yo' a man?"

A choking growl issued from Ed Slocum's throat. He was about to utter a challenge when the gun-fanner interrupted him.

"Let me handle him, boss," said the fanner. "I'm honin' to roll my irons. Clear a space, an' I'll take him on if he don't git scairt an' back out."

"Hold up!" bellowed Hopdoodle. "Hold up there! Let me take on this swarthy gent. He ain't good enough for you to bother about, Whizz."

A dark shadow fell on the ground. Every one looked up to see a black cloud pouring from the peak of Fort Cajun Rock. Thousands of bats were issuing forth from their nest. They made scarcely any sound at all, only a sort of faint vibration in the air.

It was such a ghostly sight that many of the superstitious cowboys turned pale with fear. Ed Slocum appeared to think of something. He turned to a pair of punchers and muttered an order. A moment later, the cowboys shoved into the circle, leading Whizz Fargo's claybank and Hopdoodle's old roan, which had been tied behind the wagon.

"Here's their broncs, boss," said one of the punchers. "They really got something in their saddlebags, whether it's gold I don't know."

With an angry roar, Hopdoodle tried to lunge forward.

"Don't you touch that money!" he cried. "That's ours! You ain't got no right to even open them saddlebags!"

"That's right!" barked Whizz Fargo. "Yo're a rancher heah, Mr. Slocum. Yo' can't afford to do anything crooked, especially in front of all these men. Too many would know about it. In all this bunch, somebody is bound to squeal on yo' sometime or approach you for black-mail. Better think twice about this!"

Slocum hesitated a moment. Then he stepped forward and undid the strap fastenings of one of the saddlebags. Moonlight glinted on shining gold nuggets and revealed yellow coins and sacks of dust that made the leather containers bulge out.

A murmur passed over the crew. Not in a long time had they seen so much gold as this. The other three saddlebags contained a like amount.

Sight of all this wealth seemed to give Ed Slocum a new respect for Whizz and Hopdoodle. Men always respect wealth.

After all, what Whizz Fargo had said was true. A man as rich as Ed Slocum could not risk his reputation by brazenly robbing two helpless strangers. Even if he were to split the loot up among his men, it would not guarantee their silence. Some of them would be bound to get drunk and talk. Or else they would use this thing as a club over the Bullfrog owner's head.

Slocum's brain worked fast. He was greedy. He wanted this money. He knew plenty of ways to get it without using force.

"Stand back, Fanner," ordered Slocum sharply. "Step away from there and git yore hands offn yore guns. These two jaspers ain't fakes, after all. They've really got the thirty thousand dollars they advertise. Boys," he continued, turning on Whizz and Hopdoodle, "I want to apologize for my suspicions. I

began to think that you were pulling off some kind of a swindle. Where did yuh git all this gold?"

"We sold the Scissorbill Mine," explained Whizz Fargo, "and brung along what nuggets and dust we took out. There's a mite more than thirty thousand dollars, and we're putting most of it into the best Thunder Valley ranch that we can buy."

Ed Slocum burst out laughing. "You just think you are," he chuckled. "Go ahead and try it, then when you see what yo're up agin', drop in at the Bullfrog and see me. I still may have a deal for you—a hundred miles from here."

Slocum barked a sharp command to his men, many of whom had dismounted. The Bullfrog cowboys popped into their saddles, leaving only the gun-fanner facing Whizz Fargo.

"We'll meet again," threatened the swarthy man.

"I don't doubt it," admitted Whizz Fargo. "I ain't runnin' away."

Ed Slocum rammed his horse in between "Fanner" Dixon and Whizz, preventing further argument. All the horsemen surrounded Slocum, who began to issue orders in a low tone. Instead of riding away toward their home ranch, the men scattered and began to circle around Fort Cajun.

"B-b-blast it!" stammered Hopdoodle O'Day. "I wanted to bend a gun on that black-browed jasper with the triggerless Colts. He shore got me riled. What do yuh make of that outfit, anyhow? I think they're all crooked."

Before Whizz could answer an excited shout burst from a party of Bullfrog riders.

"Hey, Mr. Slocum!" yipped a cowboy. "Here's a dead feller! Murdered! Covered over with a

tarp an' some branches! Grab them jaspers! Grab 'em afore they kin git away!"

Whizz had been watching Slocum's men and had seen what was going to happen. He suddenly did one of his disappearing acts. One moment he was standing there beside Hopdoodle O'Day, and the next instant he had vanished.

Guns flashed in the hands of the Bullfrog buckaroos as they spurred their horses toward where the pards had stood. Men leaped down, grabbed Hopdoodle and disarmed him. A howl went up when they found that Whizz was gone.

Slocum was off his horse, bellowing commands. "Git out after him. Lafe, take three men and circle the place. Search everywhere. Don't let him git away. Fanner, help me with these horses. I'll take these saddlebags full of gold!"

The horsemen scattered like a bevy of frightened quail. Ed Slocum was about to lift one of the weighted saddlebags from Fargo's claybank when he heard a low voice behind him and whirled.

Whizz Fargo was standing there in the darkness grinning at him. The quick-trigger hombre had merely slipped away in the gloom and had circled around to come up behind the Bullfrog boss. The gun in Whizz's hand looked like a black club.

CHAPTER IV.

FANNER SHOOTS.

ONLY Fanner Dixon saw Slocum's position. All the rest of the cowboys were either guarding Hopdoodle O'Day or were out in the hills, in the thick brush, looking for the man they thought had escaped. In Fanner's dirty, swarthy paw was a triggerless gun all ready to fire. He had an even break with Whizz.

Both men seemed to shoot together. Accurate target work in the darkness was impossible, and their slugs missed. Fanner Dixon was hunched forward, screaming with rage as the palm of his left hand raked across the hammer of his Colt.

Whizz stood tall and straight and cool as a cucumber. His big hogleg jerked and jumped in his hand as it streaked the darkness with its orange flashes.

He felt a slug clip through his hat. Another bullet seared the flesh along his waist, carrying with it a piece of his belt. The powder flashes sprayed a weird light over the scene of battle.

Slocum, not ten feet in front of Whizz Fargo, had flung himself to the ground to get out of the line of fire. Whizz had to keep one eye on the Bullfrog boss to make sure that he did not draw.

Wild yells sounded from the hills all around them. One of the men guarding Hopdoodle also unlimbered his Colt and got into the fray, but he was too far away in the gloom to make his shots tell.

Fanner Dixon stumbled toward Whizz Fargo. He threw out both hands and pitched forward on his face.

Whizz suddenly stooped and jerked El Slocum to his feet just as the camp grounds became filled with angry, excited riders.

"Tell 'em, Slocum!" ordered Whizz, prodding the Bullfrog boss in the back with his gun. "Order yo' men to stop wheah they are, or I'll plug yo' shore as Satan."

A croaking sound came from Ed Slocum's throat. Never had he been treated like this. Rich and powerful as he was, he had always had others to fight his battles for him, and he had won them all. Now one impudent carrot-topped cowboy was

humiliating him, shaming him before all his crew.

"I'll see yuh burn first!" cried Slocum defiantly. "You cain't git away with this! You——"

Whizz's gun clicked menacingly as he cocked it and jabbed it harder against Slocum's spine. The move caused the Bullfrog boss to change his mind suddenly. He cleared his throat huskily and shouted orders at his crew.

"All right, boys!" he roared. "Come over here! Whizz Fargo's with me. Don't do no more shoot-in'. Fargo's got me. He'll kill me if you don't obey."

Excited riders came galloping up and halted in front of Whizz Fargo and his prisoner. All of them stared down at Fanner Dixon's prostrate body. Even Hopdoodle O'Day did not fully understand what had happened, although he knew that Whizz had pulled one of his streak-lightning moves.

Two of the men who came up were carrying the mysterious dead man who had fallen from Flying Dragon Rock. They placed the body beside Fanner on the ground and tossed the black hat on it.

"A black sombrero," muttered one of the cowboys. "Where did you git that?"

"Never mind that," interrupted Ed Slocum sharply. "I've got to deal with these two high-handed ruffians. Fargo's got a gun in my back. He thinks he kin take the deal on that, but he's a fool. I'm givin' in now, but we'll be back later. You boys release Hopdoodle and give him back his irons."

The Bullfrog cowboys grumbled, but obeyed. As soon as Hopdoodle felt his six-guns shoved back in their holsters he stepped quickly to Whizz Fargo's side. Whizz lowered his gun and gave Slocum a shove.

"All right," he said. "Yo' kin go. I don't want no trouble with yo', Mr. Slocum. I guess yo' kin see that now. If I was a killer I could have plugged yo' and finished this fight pronto. I'm not lookin' fo' a fight, but I'm not runnin' from one either."

Slocum stepped swiftly over to his horse and swung into the saddle. His courage returned as he found himself among his men, a crew of ten hard hombres against two strangers.

"Yo're in plenty of trouble, both of you," he growled. "I'm sendin' one of my men for the sheriff to arrest you for murder. You killed that jasper we found under the tarpaulin. My men read yore sign over there. You shot down Fanner Dixon as he was tryin' to arrest you for that crime. I promised to stop this fight, and I've done it, but me and my crew are goin' to stay right here and see that you don't git away until the sheriff comes."

Whizz and Hopdoodle exchanged glances. One of Ed Slocum's cowboys left the group and galloped away toward town. Whizz felt his heart sink. Only a few hours ago, he had been the happiest cowpuncher in the world. His mind had been filled with the thoughts of establishing a big ranch and stocking it up with fine cattle.

Now all these air castles were tumbling around him in ruins. Slocum was too powerful. He held the winning hand. Even if Whizz and Hopdoodle were to escape, they would be hunted down by the law and charged with murders of which they were innocent. Being strangers, a jury would believe Slocum and his men quicker than they would the pards.

"Yo're too big a man to stoop to a frame-up like this, Slocum," said Whizz. "You can't afford to do it. We didn't kill that jasper you

found. He fell off Flying Dragon Rock just as we came up."

Ed Slocum laughed harshly. "And I suppose he covered himself over with a tarp and crawled under that pile of branches after he fell," jeered the Bullfrog boss. "That's a tall story for you! Do yuh hear that, boys? They claim this man fell off the Flying Dragon. Ain't that likely?"

The Bullfrog cowboys joined in the laughter.

Whizz felt it was useless, but he was not willing to give up yet. If only he could convince Ed Slocum that he was making a mistake! In swift, earnest words he told their story, how he and Hopdoodle had made a big gold strike, had got all this money together and had come here simply to go in the cattle business. They didn't want trouble with any one.

The Bullfrog cowboys laughed and jeered as Whizz kept on talking. Finally Hopdoodle O'Day could stand it no longer.

"Don't talk to the blasted coyotes!" burst out Hopdoodle. "If they want a fight we'll give it to 'em. Let 'em start slingin' lead right now and git it over. They'll lick us, but Ed Slocum won't live to enjoy the victory. I'll let him have the fust lead that's fired."

Hopdoodle's wild challenge was like throwing a stick of lighted dynamite into a powder magazine. Half a dozen Bullfrog punchers reached for their guns at the same instant. Then they suddenly stiffened in their saddles, their eyes fixed on a fringe of stunted pines.

"The Black Sombremos!" gasped one of Slocum's men.

Whizz Fargo stared at the pine grove in amazement. A file of mounted men came out of the woods like soldiers on parade and swung

into company formation with military precision. There were fully fifteen riders, all wearing black hats pulled low, with bandannas wrapped around the lower parts of their faces to conceal them.

There was a sharp barked command. Like a cavalry troop the black-hatted riders came to a halt, every man in line. Fifteen rifles were thrust forward ready to fire.

"What is this, Slocum?" asked Whizz. "What does it mean?"

"It's the Black Sombremos," snarled Ed Slocum. "A bunch of night-ridin' vigilantes. Don't make a false move, or they'll shoot us all down. They're worse than the Apaches ever were, blast 'em!"

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK SOMBREROS.

WHIZZ FARGO'S brain whirled. Never had so many things happened to him in one night. And now this was the strangest of all. The black-hatted riders had appeared like magic and now they were lined up within two hundred feet of the camp like a crack cavalry troop on inspection. There was something grim and determined about those silent, motionless horsemen.

Each sat erect in the saddle, eyes to the front, both hands gripping Winchester rifles ready to snap them to the shoulder and fire at an instant's notice. Every one of them wore a big black sombrero with a plain band. Those hats made them look as if they were uniformed.

The horses seemed as well-trained as the men. None of them fidgeted or tried to get out of line. Whizz knew that only long practice and training could accomplish that. This was no hastily gathered crew of vigilantes. It was a company of

disciplined riflemen who seemed to know exactly what they wanted and how to get it.

There was no leader out in front of them. Some one in the ranks issued the commands.

"Hello the camp!" came a stentorian cry from the intruders. "The Black Sombreros are here. Are you friend or enemy?"

Ed Slocum moved quickly forward, lifting his hand in the air in the traditional Indian sign of friendship.

"We're friends!" he shouted. "Don't shoot! This is the Bullfrog outfit! I am Ed Slocum. What do you want?"

"We've come for an enemy of our secret order," said the same sharp voice from among the black-hatted men. "Sleepy Hammond, step forward and surrender."

The Bullfrog cowboys all turned to gape at one of their number, a sleepy-looking jasper, who had been slowly edging to the rear. "Sleepy" Hammond was a new man in the outfit. None of the punchers were very well acquainted with him. But now horror and fear came into their eyes as they realized what that call meant.

It was a sentence of death for the "Black Sombreros" to single a man out like that.

Sleepy Hammond suddenly darted across an open space toward the dark shadows of the hills. Fifteen rifles came up as one. A volley of shots rang out. An orange-red flame played along the line of mounted men. Sleepy Hammond crumpled up in a riddled, sodden heap.

In the dead silence that followed, the *click-click-click* of Winchester levers was the only sound. With businesslike precision, the Black Sombreros levered fresh shells into gun chambers and lowered their

smoking rifles to the ready again. Not a horse had moved out of position. They still formed a perfect company front, silent, erect, motionless.

"Adios, amigos!" the stentorian voice sang out. "The sentence of death was passed on Sleepy Hammond for murder. He has been executed."

Some one barked the command of "right face." The Black Sombreros executed a perfect formation and started deliberately away.

Ed Slocum's men had not lifted a hand against them. All the cowboys seemed terrified. They feared the Black Sombreros. Never had anything like this been seen on the range before. It was almost like going up against regular troops.

Hopdoodle O'Day suddenly let out a bellow that could be heard for miles around.

"W-w-wait!" he howled. "There's two dead men over here. You better look into this."

"Shut up, you fool!" growled Slocum in a low voice. "Don't talk to them. Didn't I tell yo' they were black-hearted killers. You just saw them shoot down pore Sleepy Hammond. It was plain murder. Sleepy hadn't done nothin'."

The Black Sombreros had halted. Now they wheeled and came back, riding in a wide skirmish line.

"Who spoke, then?" demanded the leader from the ranks.

"I did," said Hopdoodle hotly. "Y-y-you tell 'em, Whizz. Mebbe them Black Sombreros will give us a square deal. Slocum shore won't."

Whizz Fargo stepped forward and quickly told what had happened. He could not tell who was the leader of the Black Sombreros so he had to address his remarks to the whole line.

The night riders heard him in si-

lence. Then they formed a circle and talked it over. Presently one of their number rode forward and stared down at the faces of the dead men on the ground. He returned to his place and the others took their turn at inspecting the slain hombres.

When the Black Sombreros were all lined up again a voice announced that court was in session.

"Witnesses step forward and testify," came the order. "You will consider yoreselves under oath. If you swear falsely, you will be punished."

"G-g-gosh!" stammered Hopdoodle O'Day. "Be shore yuh tell it straight, Whizz. I'd hate to have them gents catch me in a lie."

The trial was a grim and sinister affair. Many times in the frontier West, men had got together and held kangaroo court to decide an issue of life and death. Always there was something rough and violent about these executions of justice and this was no exception.

If the Black Sombreros caught a man in a lie, it went hard with him. Their decisions on guilt were swift and sudden, and their executions as instantaneous as had been the shooting of Sleepy Hammond.

Tree trunks and brush were piled up to make a camp fire. Ed Slocum's men gathered around it. The mountain night was cold and a biting wind swept in from the canyon. But the Black Sombreros did not break ranks and they kept far enough away from the others to prevent recognition.

Once more that evening Whizz told his story and Hopdoodle O'Day backed him up. When they had finished, Ed Slocum strode forward to testify.

"Don't believe a word these strangers tell yuh," growled Ed.

"The killin' of Fanner Dixon was fair enough, but they murdered this other gent, shore as fate. I read their sign and it proves it. Worse than that, they tossed that black hat on the body to make it look like a Black Sombrero execution. That's the sign of a Black Sombrero killin', ain't it?"

"We do not answer questions," said the black-hatted leader curtly. "The Black Sombreros did not execute this man. From the testimony of Whizz Fargo and Hopdoodle O'Day it is evident that he was either murdered or committed suicide. The finding of the black hat makes it look like murder. Of course you know who the slain man is, Mr. Slocum. We know also. The Black Sombreros will take charge of the body. We will remain here till the Bullfrog riders disperse."

CHAPTER VI.

A WOMAN SCREAMS.

WHIZZ FARGO never felt more helpless than when he stood there before the Black Sombrero troop and watched Ed Slocum's men ride away with the slain Fanner Dixon and Sleepy Hammond. If the night riders could scare as powerful a man as Slocum, then they must really be deadly.

The night air was getting colder. All around them rose the black ramparts of mountain ranges, towering to the sky. In the distance sounded the mournful wail of a coyote.

"D-d-do you reckon they'll shoot us?" stuttered Hopdoodle O'Day. He was looking at the stern ranks of black-hatted riders who were drawn up in company formation.

"They bettah not try," replied Whizz Fargo tersely. "They'll stop plenty of lead if they do."

Strangely enough the night riders paid no further attention to the pards. They took the dead man's body and rode away, leaving Whizz and Hopdoodle alone on the ghostly camp grounds.

Both men had been holding the bridles of their horses which bore the gold-laden saddlebags. Their four-horse team was still fastened to the wagon. The cowboys got busy unhitching the fagged mustangs which they drove down to the corral, returning with two fresh saddlers.

Not until this camp work was done did they realize that they hadn't eaten.

"I'm hungry as a horse," said Hopdoodle, as he sliced off a thick steak and put it sizzling into a pan over the fire. "You get busy and make the flapjacks."

When Hopdoodle looked around, Whizz was nowhere in sight. For a moment, his pard thought that Fargo had done one of his vanishing stunts again. Then Whizz suddenly appeared and got busy with the flapjack batter.

"I hid the money," he said. "We can't take no chances. By morning every jiggah in the country will know that we have our saddlebags full of gold. It will draw outlaws and robbers like jelly draws flies."

"L-l-let 'em come," bawled Hopdoodle. "The more the merrier. I'm beginning to like this place."

Hopdoodle was a great hand to complain and to pretend that he was scared, but in reality he liked nothing better than a good fight.

As they ate supper, the two pards talked over the exciting happenings of the last few hours. It was all a brain-racking puzzle to them. The queer sights and sounds of Fort Cajun Rock had been bad enough. The man falling to death off the Fly-

ing Dragon had startled them. But all that was nothing compared to their experience with the Black Sombreros and Ed Slocum.

"We're in a tight fix," admitted Whizz Fargo, after they had finished eating, and he was leaning back smoking a cigarette. "If Ed Slocum doesn't run us out, the sheriff is likely to get us for murder, and if we miss that, it's hard tellin' when that Black Sombrero outfit may send its execution squad over. If yo' feel squeamish, Hopdoodle, it ain't too late to back out."

Hopdoodle lay flat on his back on his blankets looking up at the sky. "I d-d-don't know how I ever missed this place," he chuckled. "I never really lived until I come to Thunder River Valley. Just think of the chores we got to do."

"Now don't sta't that," protested Whizz Fargo, who was studying the ghostly outlines of the ruined fort and the ghostly rock through drifting tobacco smoke. "We ain't buttin' in on nobody else's business."

Both cowboys seemed careless, but in reality they were alert for trouble. They lay back in the dark shadows among the trees with their six-guns beside them where they could see without being seen. Their fresh horses, with saddle girths loosened, were staked out not far away.

Yet in spite of the danger, both Whizz and Hopdoodle were light-hearted. They thrived on excitement and adventure. Already they were looking forward to solving the mystery of that man who had either committed suicide or been thrown off Cajun Rock. The Black Sombreros and Ed Slocum's men had both known who the fellow was, but for some reason they had not once mentioned his name.

As for the Black Sombreros, Whizz

did not know what to make of them, whether they were good or bad.

He had seen the black-hatted riflemen shoot down Sleepy Hammond as if he were nothing more than a running jack rabbit. On the other hand, they had let Whizz and Hopdoodle go free.

Hopdoodle took the first watch and Whizz dozed off to sleep. Shortly after midnight Hopdoodle awakened his pard, who relieved him. The queer noises over in the old fort had ceased.

It was along toward the hour of sunrise, but still quite dark, when a wild howl burst from among the ruined loopholed walls, followed by nerve-chilling laughter. Hopdoodle was on his feet in an instant, eyes still blind with sleep.

"What was that?" he demanded. "Sounded like a woman screaming."

"It was ovah at the fort," said Whizz in a low voice. "Pull on yo' boots and come on."

Both men broke into a run as they neared the fort. Fallen logs blocked their paths. All about them were ruin and decay. Inside the walls in the shadow of the huge rock it was darker than ever.

"B-b-blast it," muttered Hopdoodle, "can't see my hand before my face. Do you reckon that really was a g-g-ghost?"

"Ghost, yore grandmother," snorted Whizz Fargo. "It was a human being. Heah that? Listen!"

A tinkling of musical laughter reached their ears. Spurs jingling and high-heeled boots thumping on the ground. The two men raced in that direction. As they made a sudden turn around the block house they came upon a girl calmly sitting on a log, striking at her boot with a quirt.

Her hat was off, revealing hair that was like spun silver. In this

part of the fort it was lighter. Whizz could see that her eyes were sky-blue, with a touch of hazel in them. She was dressed in a becoming riding outfit. A coal-black mare stood near her.

The girl looked from their astonished faces to their drooping guns which had been drawn ready for fight, and she laughed again, a merry, tinkling laugh.

"I thought that would bring you," she chuckled, "but I didn't think you would scare me to death with those big Colts."

Whizz sheepishly holstered his gun and stepped forward. "So yo're the ghost," he growled. "Yo' did all that moaning and screeching last night."

"Last night?" The girl's eyebrows lifted. "I wasn't here last night. I only just rode up. I take it you're Whizz Fargo and Hopdoodle O'Day."

"Don't tell me yo'-all got a ranch for sale," said Whizz.

"That's it exactly," replied the girl. "I'm Caroline Darmody. I'm boss of the ranch while my father is back in Kansas City on business. I have his authority to sell the place."

Whizz and Hopdoodle drew closer. Hopdoodle kept casting uneasy glances around him. Whizz had eyes only for the girl. He had not seen anything so beautiful in a long time. Her face was a laughing one, touched with a hint of bitterness and sorrow. He caught shadows in her eyes and a frown on her white brow. The color ebbed and flowed in her apple-red cheeks.

"Why didn't yo ride right into camp?" asked Whizz. "Do you usually try to scare a man to death by those tricks befo' you do business with him?"

Caroline Darmody's face sobered. "I don't want every one to know

that the Crescent Dot is for sale," she explained. "That's why I came so early. By sun-up there'll be a dozen people out here trying to sell you property."

"What's the matter with this valley?" chuckled Whizz. "Ain't it healthy around here?"

"Let us talk about the Crescent Dot," said Caroline. "But first tell me, have you really got thirty thousand dollars?"

"Do I look like a swindler?" countered Whizz.

Caroline stood up to her full height and studied Whizz Fargo frankly, impudently. She saw before her a young six-foot cowboy who had the longest legs she had ever seen. Carroty hair stuck out beneath his slouch hat, and his ruddy face seemed always ready to burst into a smile.

His features were inclined to be sharp, hawklike, with full cheek bones, a bulky jaw and chin. He was as flat-hammed as a desert mustang and his shoulders were broad in proportion to the rest of his body. His sinewy arms were like his legs. They gave the impression of being elongated.

Whizz wore ordinary range clothes—a ten-gallon hat, red kerchief about his throat, faded blue shirt with tobacco-sack strings hanging from a pocket, filled holsters attached to crisscross belts and denim pants, the legs of which dropped over the tops of his cowboy boots. His chaps were of yellow goatskin.

"I guess you'll do," said the girl. "I'll take the thirty thousand dollars for granted. Now let me tell you about my ranch. A river runs across it. I have broad acres of fenced alfalfa, big silos, the largest barn in the valley and a big log ranch house that has everything in it that you could want. We have

two thousand head of whiteface cattle and a cavvy of twenty-seven horses, all of which goes with the ranch."

"Hey," protested Whizz, "wait a minute. I got thirty thousand dollars, not three hundred thousand. Yo' wouldn't sell all that for what I have."

"No, of course not," admitted the girl, "but a twenty-five thousand down payment would handle it and you could pay the rest as you made it."

Whizz and Hopdoodle sat down on the log beside the girl and talked business. Young Fargo could not understand why Caroline Darmody insisted on such secrecy. The girl seemed frightened, and as it began to grow light, she was anxious to get away. Her eyes kept darting this way and that. A pulse drummed in her throat.

"Yo're in trouble, lady," said Whizz Fargo abruptly. "Yo're plumb scairt. Tell me and Hopdoodle about it—let us help yo'."

Words of denial were on the girl's lips. Instead of uttering them she suddenly buried her head in her hands and burst into tears. Between sobs, the pards got her story. She feared Ed Slocum and the Black Sombreros.

"Slocum is trying to run us out," she declared. "He wants to own everything. I thought I could unload on you and get out, but I can't go through with it. It would be cheating. I'd be selling to you under false pretenses. I hope you won't hate me for——"

"Shucks," muttered Whizz Fargo, "yo' ain't done nothin'. We're both up against the same thing. Ed Slocum has o'dered me and Hopdoodle out of the country, too. Maybe we can jine forces and give that coyote a battle."

Caroline jumped to her feet, a smile flashing through her tears. "Would you do that?" she burst out. "My father would surely thank you. I can't trust our ranch hands. Dad has gone back to Kansas City to try to raise money to carry on this fight. When he gets home things will be different."

A sudden thought struck Whizz Fargo. He was wondering if Ed Slocum would let Caroline's father reach Thunder Valley alive. Then he remembered something else. "I wonder if I know your dad," he drawled. "Was he a tall, blond man?"

"No," replied Caroline. "He is dark and has iron-gray hair. You'd know him if you'd ever met him. He has a cross slash on his hand."

Hopdoodle made a sucking sound as he drew his breath in sharply. Whizz kicked him hard on the shins to warn him not to speak. The man who had fallen to his death off Flying Dragon Rock had a cross slash on his hand. That dead man was Caroline Darmody's father. The enemy had already struck.

CHAPTER VII.

RANCHES FOR SALE.

WHILE the cowboys and the girl talked, purple dawn had begun to flow across the eastern sky above the jagged mountains. In this country the day came quickly. A red-crowned woodpecker began to hammer on a runty spruce. A huge goshawk suddenly appeared to perch upon the topmost dome of Fort Cajun Rock.

A hail sounded from the pards' camp. "Hello, there!" roared a voice.

Whizz and Hopdoodle both turned in that direction. Caroline Darmody suddenly darted to her

black thoroughbred, swung into the saddle and spurred away. She was gone into the fringe of junipers and pines before Whizz could utter a protest.

"N-n-now, what do yuh make of that?" blurted Hopdoodle O'Day. "She run like she was scairt."

"She's got good reason to be scairt," growled Whizz Fargo. "With Ed Slocum gunning for her, she shows lots of nerve even stayin' in this country. We got to find some way to help her."

"What did I h-h-hear you say a while back about mindin' our own business?" jeered Hopdoodle. "Seems to me you've changed yore tune."

Whizz did not answer. He had turned and was striding across the log-strewn ground toward the other side of the fort. He stopped behind a tumble-down, loopholed wall and peered through a crack at their camp. Hopdoodle was right beside him.

A man on horseback was prowling around their wagon, and two more parties were approaching, one of them being a man and woman in a wagon.

"Them's folks with ranches to sell," said Whizz. "Miss Darmody shore called the turn. It ain't hardly daylight yet and the customers are crowdin' the place. You go on and talk to 'em, Hopdoodle. I'm goin' up on Flying Dragon Rock and read sign. If somebody throwed Mr. Darmody off o' theah, I'm goin' to find out who done it."

Hopdoodle puffed out his chest, straightened up his battered old hat, and strutted out importantly to talk business with their visitors.

Turning swiftly, Whizz Fargo hurried toward the winding stone trail that led up onto towering Fort Cajun Rock. In the early morning

light, the caves and grottos, the dark corridors and lofty galleries cut in the red sandstone, did not look quite so mysterious.

Three hundred feet up in the air was the bats' nest. Nothing moved there now. With the coming of dawn the bats had all fled back to their gloomy cavern.

This great mass of stone covered fully a half acre and was irregular in shape. All of it was inside the wide-spreading walls of the old fort except that single tongue of sandstone which stuck out over the cattle trail.

From the road, the Flying Dragon had not looked very big but as Whizz moved along its rough surface he saw that the dragon snout was fully twenty feet across and twice as thick. Deep cuts and corrugations in the rock made it possible for one to move along the ledge without being seen from below.

As Whizz Fargo explored this strangest of all freak formations, he remembered the tales that people told about the ghostly place. This had been the scene of one of the most terrible Indian massacres of the early days. A whole caravan of Californians, going East from the gold fields with the treasure that they had dug from the earth, had been trapped here by Apaches.

The fort had been considered so impregnable that its defenders grew careless. Riflemen, hidden on the huge rock, had always been able to pour a deadly fire down upon attackers before they got close enough to do any harm.

But this time the redskins had resorted to a trick. A dozen of them had hidden in a load of hay and had been hauled through the gates of the fort. Once inside, they dropped down off the wagon, killed the gate guard, and got possession of the rock itself.

Most of the men were killed in the fighting. Those that remained alive had been driven out on Flying Dragon Rock, with jabbing knives and tomahawks, and had been forced to jump to their deaths. The women and children were thrown over the walls.

"They say that's why this sandstone is redder than in most places," muttered Whizz Fargo. "No wonder folks is scairt of this place."

Whizz's legs were extra long and they carried him over the ground with surprising speed. As he moved along a gash in the protruding tongue of rock, he studied the ground carefully.

There was some vegetation. It had been recently trampled.

At last Whizz reached the dragon's nose and looked down. Right below him was the spot where they had found Mr. Darmody's dead body.

The slanting sun rays glinted on something bright at his feet. It was a knife. The shiny blade was smeared with brown stains, but it was not rust.

An angry growl burst from Whizz Fargo's lips. He picked the knife up and stuck it in his belt.

"This proves it's murder," he muttered. "The killin' fiend forced Darmody to jump by stabbing him with this knife. He knowed we was watchin', so he kept down out of sight to make it look like suicide. If them Black Sombreros examine Darmody's body, they'll find the stab marks in his hide and will know it wa'n't suicide."

Dropping down on his hands and knees, Whizz redoubled his efforts. At one place, the rock had been cracked across, leaving a fissure in the path. A boot heel was wedged in this split.

Whizz felt a thrill shoot through

him. This was real evidence. The killer had caught his heel here and in trying to pull away, had torn it off. It was an ordinary heel, worn, dirty, and run over.

Thrusting this new evidence into his pocket, Whizz Fargo hurried back to join Hopdoodle.

"Things is workin' out fine," he exulted. "All I got to do now is to spot a feller that's put on a new boot heel recent or has got himself a new pair of boots. Then we'll have somethin' to go on."

When Whizz reached the camp he found Hopdoodle O'Day engaged in a loud argument with four strangers, all of whom were trying to sell him their property at once. Two of them had ranches, but the other pair were trying to get rid of a quicksilver mine and a herd of sheep.

Whizz looked at the visitors' boots, but saw none that had lost their heels. A bewhiskered old rancher buttonholed him and put on a hot sales talk for a ranch that he owned out in the desert. He followed Whizz over to the mustangs and rode down to the corral with the cowboy, when Fargo went to get fresh horses and to look after the stock down there.

Whizz spent half his time pitching hay to the thoroughbred bulls and the other half trying to convince "Chin-whiskers" that he didn't want a desert ranch.

That sort of thing kept up all day. When Whizz and Hopdoodle finally managed to sit down to eat, half a dozen people were grouped around them, trying to talk and wheedle them out of their thirty thousand dollars on some deal.

"G-g-gosh!" blurted Hopdoodle when they were alone for a moment. "I never knowed money could make a feller so popular. These gents even call me 'Mister.'"

"That's because they don't know yo'," said Whizz gravely. "But wait till I tell yo' what I've found." He fished out the knife and the broken boot heel and showed them to the dish-faced buckaroo. "Here's the murderer's *cuchillo*, and this is a heel off his boot."

Hopdoodle suddenly burst out laughing. "Now I know wh-wh-why you been goin' around lookin' at all these fellers f-f-feet," guffawed the wrinkled wagoner. "I thought m-mebbe you'd got a bad case of the Fort Cajun jitters, like most of the natives around here. Every one of these b-buzzards that I've talked to is scairt of this old f-fort."

"They got a right to be," declared Whizz Fargo. "Theah's somethin' evil about the place. It even smells of decay an' death an' ruin. Them caves high up on that stone mountain look like great hollow eyes starin' down at you. I git the feelin' that there's somebody up there watchin' me all the time."

"L-l-looky here," stuttered Hopdoodle in alarm. "You know I'm superstitious. Yo're tryin' to scare me again. I'll fight any live critter that walks, but I don't hanker to tangle with no s-s-speerits."

Whizz did not answer. He was not worried about ghosts. At any moment, he expected the sheriff to appear to arrest both of them. Those Black Sombreros had certainly taken Darmody's dead body away to examine it. When they found those knife wounds they'd know for sure it was murder and if they didn't come for the pards, the sheriff would.

If the sheriff or the night riders didn't appear to ruin their plans, Ed Slocum certainly would. Anyway he figured it, they were bound to lose.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BADGE-TOTER.

HOPDOODLE was the first to see the man with the star on his vest. He let out a yell that caused Whizz to spin around in his tracks and reach for his gun. The star-toter was riding toward them across the camp grounds, which for the moment were deserted.

It was late afternoon. The sun was setting. Whizz had talked to more than twenty people, but none of them had any property that he wanted, and none had lost a boot heel.

"Hi, there!" roared the newcomer. "This is Monk Dundas, deputy sheriff. I'm comin' over to talk to you fellers, and I don't want no trouble."

Whizz Fargo could see where "Monk" Dundas got his nickname. The man's face reminded him of a gorilla. Buckteeth protruded between whiskered lips, which were twisted now in a smile that was meant to be friendly.

Dundas's squatty body was built so low to the ground that it seemed that his fingers would drag as he walked along if he extended them. Double guns flapped against his legs as he dismounted and strode toward Whizz and Hopdoodle.

"What made yo' think we might give you some trouble, Mr. Dundas?" demanded Whizz.

"You never kin tell," grumbled Monk. "Three men have been killed in this camp, already, since you came. You boys seem to be in the clear as regards to Sleepy Hammond and Fanner Dixon. But I ain't so sure about Darmody."

"Have yuh c-c-come to put us under arrest?" asked Hopdoodle. "Gosh, I knowed our good luck couldn't last. Man is born to

trouble. We'll never git out of this place alive."

"Quit yo' caterwaulin', Hopdoodle," growled Whizz. "Deputy Sheriff Dundas ain't said we was arrested yet. I kin prove that we ah innocent of this Darmody killing."

Monk Dundas cleared his throat harshly and ran a hand through his shaggy hair.

"Never mind about that," he grunted. "Somebody else is handlin' that killin'. My job is to see that you fellers ain't pullin' off a swindle. The sheriff won't stand for anybody workin' tricks on Thunder River folks."

"Oh, so that's it," said Whizz with a sigh of relief. "You think we ain't got the money."

Monk Dundas looked Whizz up and down. The cowboy in his soiled, work-worn clothes certainly did not look as if he was rich.

"You got to prove it," growled the bestarred hombre, "or else cut out all this business. If you got the money, show it to me. Where is it?"

"Do you see that clump of trees over there by the fort?" asked Whizz.

Monk Dundas turned and looked toward the shadowy grove. When he twisted around again Whizz Fargo was gone and only Hopdoodle stood there grinning at him. An angry roar burst from Monk's lips.

"Say!" he bellowed. "What's comin' off here? Where did that feller go? This settles it. Yo're under arrest. If I don't git you, some other deputy will. If Fargo was innocent, he wouldn't 'a' run off like that."

Whizz Fargo stepped out of the edge of the woods and came forward carrying the saddlebags. Monk Dundas could not repress a surprised oath when Whizz pulled back the covers, revealing the glistening gold.

Monk picked up the bags and hefted them. At last he seemed satisfied.

"All right, boys," he said in a different tone. "You take the jack pot. Let's shake on it." They shook hands and Monk went on speaking, a grin on his face. "I think I've got just the place that you want if yo're buyin' a ranch. Another feller owns it. Suppose I bring him around to-night?"

Hopdoodle O'Day beamed on the monkey-faced man. "F-f-fine and dandy," he stuttered. "See here, Whizz, you better tell Mr. Dundas about——"

Hopdoodle suddenly broke off and began jumping up and down on one leg, bawling with pain. Whizz had stepped on his pet corn.

As soon as Monk Dundas had ridden away, Hopdoodle turned on his pard with an angry snarl.

"That hurt," he growled. "I was just goin' to tell that deputy about the knife and the boot heel!"

"I wish I'd tromped yore blamed corn into the ground," retorted Whizz. "Yo' dang near sunk us. That feller had a new heel on his right boot! Monk Dundas ain't no deputy sheriff. He's the murderer of Dave Darmody!"

Hopdoodle gaped in amazement for a moment, then he leaped toward his saddled mustang which was tethered near by. Whizz had to stop him by leaping at him, holding him.

"Where yo' goin'?" he panted as he finally got the leathery-faced old jasper under control.

"Uh—uh—after Monk Dundas, you idjit!" blatted Hopdoodle. "That dirty killer is gittin' away."

"Take it easy!" chuckled Whizz. "He's comin' back here later to-night. All we got to do is prepare a nice reception for him. Tighten the girths, load on them saddlebags, and git the broncs. Just foller me."

CHAPTER IX.

RUSTLER SIGN!

NEITHER Whizz nor Hopdoodle had eaten supper nor had they made their usual night inspection of their stock. But hunger and cattle were forgotten now in the thrill of a man hunt. They had got a lucky break. A murder suspect had walked right into their hands.

Both Whizz and Hopdoodle were certain that Monk Dundas was the killer of Caroline's father. Through him they might get to the bottom of all the crookedness in the valley.

Carrying the precious gold, Hopdoodle ran to the spot where the fresh horses stood, tied on the saddlebags, mounted his own bronc and leading the other mustang, spurred toward Fort Cajun, into which Whizz had vanished.

Hopdoodle craned his leathery neck and gaped all around, trying to catch sight of his pard. Whizz was always pulling off some crazy quick-trigger stunt like this. Half the time, Hopdoodle never knew what was going on.

Presently he saw Whizz climbing up the winding stone path that led to the top of Cajun Rock. The tall, carrot-topped puncher was moving with the speed of an antelope. His very long legs seemed to twinkle.

Whizz leaped across a deep chasm, then had to crowd between huge blocks that would have crushed him if they had suddenly moved. The trail rose so sharply that his boot heels slipped and slid, and he had to get down on his hands and knees and paw his way along. An animal darted out of a cave in front of him. Frightened birds took flight from their nests.

From this eagle's perch he could scan the country for miles around. Almost at once he picked up Monk

Dundas from his white hat and spotted calico pony that he rode. Monk was headed for Coyote Pass. In a few minutes, he disappeared through it.

Whizz squatted down on the rock and waited. He was playing a hunch. He felt sure that Monk had gone for help. Monk had heard of Whizz's quick-trigger shooting of Fanner Dixon, and he did not intend to tackle the pard alone.

Far beneath him on the ground, Fargo could see Hopdoodle walking back and forth, batting his hands against his clothes to keep himself warm and occasionally stopping to shake his fist angrily at his high-roosting sidekick.

Whizz laughed softly. Hopdoodle liked to shoot off his face and pretend to be a grumbler, but in reality he was the salt of the earth. The two pards had fought side by side ever since Whizz had been able to handle a gun.

Night settled over the range land. Far off toward Coyote Pass four moving dots appeared. Presently they became bobbing horsemen, led by a white-hatted rider on a pinto bronc—Monk Dundas.

Whizz skinned down off of that high rock and ran over to his waiting pard.

"Come on, Hopdoodle!" he barked, before his pardner could sputter out his pentup anger. "Roll them spurs! Here comes the robbers."

Side by side, Whizz and Hopdoodle rode out of the fort and headed toward Coyote Pass. When they reached the main trail, they stopped in a grove of juniper and nut pine.

Four dark figures came galloping around a turn in the trail, headed toward them. Hopdoodle O'Day sucked in a deep breath and reached

for his guns. Whizz stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Wait!" ordered Whizz. "Don't shoot. I got a better plan."

Silently the two cowboys sat their horses in the darkness among the trees and watched Monk and his men ride by. Not until they saw Monk and the three gunmen dismount and start creeping forward on foot did Whizz move.

"See, they're sneakin' up to ambush us!" he said. "I wasn't sure before, but this proves they're crooks. Come on, Hopdoodle, we're headin' for Coyote Pass."

Hopdoodle held back stubbornly. The folds of his wrinkled face seemed to flap up and down as he opened his mouth four or five times without uttering a word.

Whizz Fargo rode close to Hopdoodle O'Day. "Listen, Hop," he said. "I want to wipe out Monk's whole crew. So we're ridin' to his hide-out. We got to learn which outfit Monk's tied up with—the Black Sombreros or Ed Slocum. Our lives ain't wuth a plugged nickel in this valley until we git hold of the head crook hisself and finish him off. Let's ride!"

Hopdoodle said no more but followed Whizz toward Coyote Pass. It was much farther across the plain than it appeared to be. It was near midnight when they went through the pass and dismounted in a damp, green-clover meadow.

The marks in the soft, marshy ground were plain. Whizz lighted matches and studied the hoofprints carefully before they went on.

A gate loomed up in front of them. On it was a sign:

CRESCENT DOT RANCH.

"Jumpin' wildcats!" growled Whizz Fargo. "Monk and his men

has come from Caroline Darmody's ranch. What does this mean?"

For long minutes, the pards sat their horses in a cluster of birch, alder, and narrow-leaf cottonwood, looking off toward the brightly lighted Crescent Dot ranch buildings and talking about their discovery. There was no mistaking the sign. Monk and the other three hombres had ridden boldly from this ranch. That meant they belonged here.

A herd of cattle was coming toward the two pards. It was a big bunch of steers driven by steeple-hatted vaqueros.

"Wh-wh-what does this mean?" whispered Hopdoodle. "See them swarthy jaspers? Every one of them has got a rifle. It's blamed funny they'd be movin' a big herd this time of night."

"It's rustlers," growled Whizz. "Unlimber yore smoke-poles. We'll stop this business."

Three men riding point, halted at the gate. One dismounted and started to open it. Whizz heard the Mexicans repeat a name several times, "*Cañon de los Lagrimas*" ("Canyon of Tears").

"All right, Hopdoodle," said Whizz in a low voice. "Throw down on 'em!"

But before either man could move, Caroline Darmody rode into view. She gave several orders to the men, and then galloped back to the Crescent Dot. Whizz Fargo wiped cold sweat from his forehead.

"Gosh, Hopdoodle," he muttered, "we danged near put our foot in it that time."

As soon as the herd of steers had passed, Whizz and Hopdoodle passed boldly through the gate and rode toward the ranch. A thick fringe of cottonwoods, bordering the creek, hid them from view.

Dismounting in the creek bed, they hid their broncs and started forward on foot. Whizz was waiting for the breaks now. He didn't know what would happen. He heard the drumming of hoofs and saw Monk Dundas and three men dash up the lane and into the ranch yard.

The place was alive with activity. Down by the horse corral, shadowy figures were moving about. Whizz couldn't understand that.

Caroline Darmody came out onto the lighted porch of the big log ranch house and began giving orders to Monk Dundas. Monk was apparently her foreman. They were talking about driving the big cattle herd to a pasture near Volcano cow town where it would be safe from raiders. The girl was expecting gun play—trouble.

"Gosh!" growled Whizz. "What a mess! Monk Dundas, the feller that murdered Caroline's father, is her foreman."

"The dirty skunk!" snarled Hopdoodle O'Day. "Come on, let's blast him to kingdom come! I'll bet them Mexes was rustlers, after all, in Monk Dundas's pay."

"All right," said Whizz, "it's time to start shootin'. Monk's double-crossed that girl for the last time. She thinks they're driving her cattle to Volcano where the herd will be safe. Them vaqueros was sayin' something about the Canyon of Tears. That's where they're really going."

Whizz ran to his horse, mounted, and spurred out into the open, but he was headed for the horse corrals and not in the direction of Monk Dundas. Slinking, swarthy figures had thrown the corral bars down and the cavvy of horses came pouring through.

Fargo knew what it meant now.

Monk Dundas knew that the jig was up. He and his treacherous crew were robbing Caroline Darmody and were running off all the night horses so that the honest punchers could not pursue them.

CHAPTER X.

"YOU LYING CROOK!"

A STAB of flame split the darkness. A yell of alarm burst from one of the outlaw sentries who had spotted Whizz and his pard.

Leaning forward in the saddle, Whizz spurred his long-legged claybank to a dead run. He fired at three men who came tearing toward him. Bullets sizzled all around. Close behind, Whizz could hear the roar of Hopdoodle's Colts.

One of the Mexes fell from the saddle. The other two turned and fled. Other vaqueros were shooting at the pards from a dozen different places.

Over toward the house, Whizz heard women screaming and heard the bellowing voice of Monk Dundas. The swarthy, steeple-hatted men began to scatter. Hopdoodle was yelling with triumph as he pursued a frightened *ladrone*.

"Hey, come back here!" yelled Whizz. "We got to fight Monk!"

The horse thieves were still turning in their saddles and firing with their rifles as they fled. Whizz saw Hopdoodle's horse plunge forward and roll over. Hopdoodle was flung hard against a rock. He did not get up.

Whizz swung his claybank toward his fallen pard and leaped down beside him. Then suddenly he felt something crash against his head. He was swimming in a sea of darkness. Bright lights flashed before his eyes. Then he knew no more.

When Whizz Fargo awoke all he could see was faces—faces that seemed to shiver and vibrate in the air. Slowly his sight returned to him. He could make out Caroline Darmody's pale features among the stern angry countenances of the men. All the others were strangers to him.

Suddenly he remembered what had happened, and he tried to sit up. A burning pain stabbed through his brain, and he sank back to the ground again.

He realized that some one had slipped a rope around his neck, that others stood by with pigging strings ready to tie his hands and feet. He was a prisoner. He had been knocked out, and Monk Dundas had captured him. He found himself vaguely wondering why Monk was not here.

"We kin hang him now," growled a harsh voice. "The dirty rustler is awake enough to know what's happening to him."

Danger signals, flashing through Whizz Fargo's mind, steeled him to a terrific effort. He sat up in spite of the pain that it gave him. One whole side of his face was crimson-stained. He judged that he had been creased by a bullet.

"The cattle herd," he gasped. "They're stealing it. Don't let them get away with it."

A roar of laughter burst from the Crescent Dot cowboys.

"Listen to the slick crook," jeered one of them. "He thinks he can talk himself out of this. Come on! What are we waitin' for? String him up."

Whizz Fargo lurched to his feet. He was as tough as rawhide and as hard as nails. His strength was coming back rapidly. But when two men grabbed him by the arms, he pretended weakness and leaned against them.

"You lying crook!" said Caroline Darmody, looking at him bitterly. "You fooled me completely, pretending to want to buy a ranch. Now I know you for what you are—a hireling of Ed Slocum's. A man who takes money to shoot down innocent ranchers and nesters."

Whizz's brain was in a whirl. His heart sank as he thought of Hopdoodle. Had his pard been killed? He wanted to ask about him, but was afraid to. It was just a chance that Hopdoodle might have escaped.

"I'm innocent, Miss Darmody," he said. "Monk Dundas is the crook. He's been selling you out, robbing you blind. We were coming to the ranch house to warn you against him when the fighting started."

A man lunged through the group and smashed a hard fist into Whizz's face. Whizz staggered, but did not go down.

"Don't listen to him, Miss Darmody!" cried the cowboy. "He's lyin' about Monk to save his own hide. Yore foreman's honest. He's taking the big herd now to Volcano where it will be safe from other raids."

The rattle of wheels caused every one to turn around. The yard seemed suddenly filled with black-hatted riders. In their midst was a spring wagon completely draped in dark cloth. In this wagon was a casket covered over with flowers.

A sharp command rang out. Like trained soldiers the Black Sombreros swung into line. They had their rifles with the butts reversed. It was the ceremony they went through when one of their number had died.

Instantly Whizz Fargo knew what this was. He understood also that Darmody had been a member of the Black Sombreros, the local vigilante band. The riders had brought the

body of Caroline's father home to its last resting place.

Caroline seemed to understand, too. Although not a word had been uttered, she started running toward the coffin at a staggering gait.

"It's my father," she sobbed. "I know it. I've had such a terrible feeling about him. They've killed him. They've murdered my father."

Whizz Fargo sagged until he was a dead weight in the arms of the men that held him. These cowboys were gaping with their mouths open at the troop of black-hatted riders. It was not often that any one witnessed a funeral ceremony of the Black Sombreros. Only members of the secret order were allowed to attend.

Not ten feet from Whizz stood his long-legged claybank. If he could once get in the saddle he knew he could get away. But then there was Hopdoodle O'Day to think about.

Keenly Whizz searched the faces of the shadowy figures who were crowding forward in the ranch yard. Hopdoodle would be just foolhardy enough to mingle with them if he thought he could rescue Whizz. But there was not a sign of the dish-faced buckaroo.

Then Whizz saw fire burst out in an old haystack, and he knew that Hopdoodle was pulling some kind of a trick.

With a sudden heave, Whizz threw off one of his captors. His left hand was yanking a gun from a holster, while the other was smashing against the hombre's jaw. Then the Crescent Dot Ranch witnessed one of those rocketing, cannonball moves that had earned Whizz his nickname. He was literally a whizzing shape, shooting through space like a thunderbolt, propelled by long legs that drove like pistons.

He bounced off one man, knocked another spinning with a sledge-hammer blow, and then catapulted into the saddle in one nimble leap without touching leather. A shot blasted past his head, but already the claybank was shooting around a corner of the house out of sight.

Whizz's bronc was sixteen hands high and had Kentucky blood in its veins. The cowboy had selected it for its speed and jumping ability. Straight toward a five-foot fence he rode.

Behind him voices sounded in an angry roar. He put the claybank to the jump, and it went over without even clicking its hoofs against the top rail. The desert air was blasted with a volley of shots that whistled harmlessly over his head.

Off to the left, Whizz saw another rider spurring toward the same forest of hackberry, mountain mahogany, and yellow pine. It was Hopdoodle O'Day.

No word was spoken as the two men fell in together. There was no time for words now. They had been fighting together long enough to know that there was only one thing to do, only one possible way to clear themselves of this rustling charge.

Straight through the woods they galloped and out onto a broad mesa covered with Colorado blue stem, wild oats, and spear grass. They were pushing their horses hard, but they dared not slacken their pace. Behind them, beyond the woods, they could hear loud yells and the firing of guns as the pursuers took up the hunt.

Those yells grew to a mighty roar as the Crescent Dot men and the Black Sombremos broke through a fringe of trees and caught sight of the fugitives. Rifles began to spit, but the shots all fell short.

A moment later, Whizz and Hop-

doodle entered a winding canyon that cut through low, wooded hills. They had to slow their pace somewhat as they rode up a steep mountainside and then back-tracked.

Two hours later, they found themselves at the entrance to the Canyon of Tears. This was the name that the vaqueros had muttered. Whizz had been sure that the stolen cattle would be driven here, yet there was no sign of them.

"Looks like we played a long shot and lost, Hopdoodle," said Whizz gloomily. "I'd have sworn that them fellers intended to bring them stolen critters over here. I hate to give up, but I reckon we better git out of the country if we can. We'll just have to lose our outfit. Lucky we still got our saddlebags filled with gold."

"L-I-listen!" burst out Hopdoodle. "I hear somethin'. It's a big bunch of cattle comin', shore as fate. Let's duck for cover."

Whizz and Hopdoodle swung their broncs down into a dry wash just as the point man, leading a big herd of whitefaces, came into view. The lead rider was Monk Dundas. Close behind him at the flank positions were four evil-looking Mexicans.

Suddenly two flame-spitting demons appeared in front of the approaching herd and charged straight at Monk and his men. In the lead rode Whizz Fargo. At his side, and slightly behind him, was Hopdoodle O'Day. Both had a jumping, fire-spurting gun in each hand.

The frightened cattle broke into a stampede that carried many of the herders along with it. Three of the Mexicans stuck by Monk and elected to shoot it out. It was two to one against the pards, but they did not halt their mad charge.

Whizz felt a bullet cut through his

woolly yellow chaps. Another shrieked past his ear.

One of the Mexicans fell out of his saddle and began rolling around on the ground, screaming.

Monk Dundas started to run for it, then changed his mind and spurred straight toward Whizz Fargo. Whizz had reined in and was reloading. An exultant yell burst from Monk as he saw that the cowboy had an empty gun. He whipped forward his big Colt and triggered sizzling lead at his helpless foe.

Hopdoodle O'Day could offer Whizz no assistance. He was tangling with two rustlers, who were trying to catch him in a cross fire.

Far up the valley, Whizz Fargo saw a forest of rifles and a whole field of black hats moving toward him. It was the Black Sombreros, who evidently had picked up his trail. They also were too far away to be of any assistance.

"You murderin' hound!" yelled Whizz Fargo. "You killed Dave Darmody, and you been stealin' his daughter blind."

"What of it?" sneered Monk. "You'll never live to tell about it. See, the Black Sombreros are comin'. I'm goin' to claim that you brung these cattle here, that these rustlers were yore men and that me an' my hands killed 'em."

Whizz had the cylinder of his Colt filled with shiny yellow shells and was just about to snap the loading gate into place.

Wham! Something hit him a terrific blow on the arm.

The loaded gun fell from his numb fingers to the ground. A shriek of triumph burst from Monk Dundas.

Whizz flung himself off his horse and groped around for the lost gun cylinder. Dundas was only a hundred feet from him now. His lips were drawn back from his shining

buckteeth and his huge mouth was wide open as he howled his song of victory.

Whizz had the gun in his hand. A bullet clipped through his hat. He knocked the Colt against his chap-clad leg to free it of sand and eared back the big hammer.

His every movement was cool and deliberate now. Yet when he fired, it was with deadly swiftness. Monk Dundas's triumphant howl changed into a death shriek. He hit the ground almost at Whizz's feet.

The earth shook with the thunder of galloping horses. Whizz dropped his gun and slowly lifted his hands in the air as the Black Sombreros swept around him. A moment later, Caroline Darmody pushed forward to stare in amazement and horror at the body of her slain foreman.

"What does this mean?" she cried. "You've killed Monk Dundas. What is he doing here?"

"He was running off yore cattle herd just like I told yo'," drawled Whizz Fargo. "I knowed my only chance to prove my innocence was to catch him in the act. Lucky for me an' Hopdoodle, we heard them Mexes talkin' about the Canyon of Tears."

Hopdoodle was shoved forward by a party of armed vigilantes who also held a couple of jabbering rustlers. The latter were stammering out confessions and pleading for mercy.

Not until Whizz and Hopdoodle had attended the funeral of David Darmody did they have a chance to sit down with Caroline and tell her the whole story.

"I reckon yore place won't be for sale now, ma'am," said Whizz. "I don't guess you'll have no more trouble, now that Dundas is dead."

Caroline smiled and nodded. "Thanks to you two boys, I guess you're right, Whizz. I don't know how to thank you—honestly. I—I wish I could——"

"Sh-sh-shore," stuttered Hopdoodle O'Day, his face flushed with embarrassment. "But when do we eat? I'm so hungry my innards is

doin' flip-flops against my Adam's apple."

Whizz Fargo an' Hopdoodle still ain't got their ranch. An' a pair of buckaroos with thirty thousand iron men jinglin' around in their saddlebags are plumb shore ter be Ol' Man Trouble's favorite sons till they git rid of it. Read about what happens to 'em in next week's issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



THE TRAPPER CAME BACK

A GRIZZLED trapper, who has spent many years of his long life in the snowy wastes of the far North, was due in Churchill from Caribou on his last trip of the winter with his pack of furs. When he did not show up on time, fear was felt for his safety. Bill Mackenzie is seventy-six years old, and it was thought that he might have been overcome by the cold, or held up by a storm, and had probably died from exposure, or been frozen to death.

Bill is a popular character in the Northwest, and several search parties set out in different directions to look for him. But they all returned without him, disappointed.

Two weeks went by, during which temperatures that ranged from forty to fifty-five below zero, accompanied by blizzards, had visited the area.

All hope of ever seeing him again was abandoned, and "pore Bill," was deeply mourned by his many friends.

Then, early in April, to the surprise and joy of every one, in came Bill. He explained that he had been held up by a blizzard that caused him to miss the trail. But he had supplies for himself and his dogs, so he just made camp, built good fires, and made himself comfortable and waited until the weather cleared.

Then he found the trail again, and completed his routine dog-sled trip, none the worse for the delay. He was greatly surprised that any one should have thought that harm could come to him.

All he said was: "Pooh-pooh! What's a blizzard more or less in the North? Such things don't bother me. They're all in the day's work."

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Bear Hide

A "Bud Jones Of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Road Agent," etc.

IT was the roughest sort of wrestling, with no holds barred, throttling and slugging and gouging being accepted as part of the crude sport. It suited the men who had crowded into the *cantina* and now stood jammed against the walls, some seated on the bar, yelling their delight when a man was hurt. They cheered for the man whom the Mexies called "*El Oso*," and the others, "Bear" Giddings.

He looked like a bear. His massive body was coarse-haired on arms and chest, on his shoulders. He was shaggy with it from head to foot. He

had a heavy beard that he kept trimmed into two points. He had hardly any neck, his head was bullet-shaped, his forehead like that of a cave man, his eyes like those of a pig—pale-blue, icy, and cruel.

They were all bullies, but Bear was the biggest of them all. This was his joy, to challenge all comers, sure he could down them, subdue them, master them for all time. If they got maimed in the battle, that was their hard luck. It gave them something to remember him by.

He offered fifty dollars in gold to any one he could not toss and pin

down "three points"—two shoulders and one hip, or two hips and one shoulder—inside of fifteen minutes. To any one able to do the same to him, he would pay five hundred. Up till now he had never had to pay.

Whether he had the five hundred was a question. There were times when he was flush, but money never lasted with Bear. He spent it on liquor and gambling, exhibiting his own weakness.

How he got it was not discussed. That he was an owl-hooter of some kind was certain. Not certain whether he specialized in highway robbery, bank robbery, or stock stealing. It might be all three of them.

Those who claimed his friendship, those who made up the small band who shared his prosperity and his poverty, were sure he was an outlaw. So were most of them, wanted by John Law, none of them sure that any day a Ranger might not round them up and take them in.

The greatest thing in their favor was the fact that there were hundreds of outlaws, and only thirty-odd Rangers in the long narrow strip that harbored fugitives from justice in the Lone Star State—the wild region between El Paso and Presidio Rio Grande, between the border river itself and the Sierra Diablo range of mountains.

The man whom Bear had taunted into challenging him was fighting desperately, too well aware of Bear's tremendous strength. It was like wrestling a machine made up of hard rubber and steel coils and springs; but a machine filled with a finnish intelligence.

Bear was playing with him, pretty full of hard liquor but good-natured enough—for him. He put a half nelson on the man who grabbed his

beard, and yanked it hard enough to bring tears to Bear's piggy eyes, and a bellow of rage from his hairy throat.

He got a different hold on the other, raised him up over one shoulder, flung him down, and fell upon him, his left knee ramming the chest as the prone man feebly caught at Bear's throat. He let go as the wind was knocked out of him. He was fairly down, both hips, both shoulders—down and helpless.

Bear let go his hold, and slugged him left and right with sledge hammer blows that crushed his lips, knocked out teeth, and broke his jaw. He kicked him savagely and cracked two ribs. All Bear's good humor was gone. He spat on the fallen man as he lay there unconscious.

"Who's next?" he asked with a jeering laugh.

There was no answer. Some shuffled their feet and coughed. The exhibition of brutal savagery had been a bit thick, even for them, but none of them wanted to say anything about it to Bear.

The door opened, and a young man came through the crowd. He seemed little more than a lad, wide of shoulders and slim of hips, tall and supple. In contrast with Bear he was like a sapling pine, capable of warring and winning against the wind, compared with an oak.

He was as straight as a lance and tanned the hue of saddle leather.

He seemed a country youth, clad in rough homespun with cheap shoes. The clothes were clean and new. He appeared very much out of place in the *cantina*.

"I might take you on," he said quietly.

They stared at him. Bear guffawed.

None of them dreamed they were looking at a Ranger. "Bud" Jones was corporal of Company F, the youngest corporal in the service, though the Texas Rangers was recruited mostly from young men in their teens.

This was Cedartown, a county seat at the foot of the mountains, a prosperous frontier town of some five thousand inhabitants, center for trading and hunting. It had, in common with all western Texas communities, a large number of Mexican inhabitants, most of whom claimed to be American citizens, but were all purely Mexican in language and customs.

They hated *gringos*. They felt that Texas should still belong to them, they were against American law and order. Most of all *gringos*, they feared and hated a Texas Ranger.

Bud Jones had ridden into town on his big roan troop horse, Pepper. The young Ranger was clad in soft-tanned buckskin, with the seams fringed, his carbine was sheathed under his left knee, and he wore double cartridge belts, for the rifle and his six-gun. There was a bowie knife on his left hip, his silver star of authority glittered on his chest.

He had dismounted in front of the bank, and walked in with clinking spurs to the private office of the banker who had written the Rangers headquarters that the town needed the presence of a trooper. The banker came swiftly to his subject, though his eyebrows went up as he noticed Bud's youth. But there was an air of efficiency about Bud that offset that.

"There is a man named Giddings, known as Bear Giddings, who has made this town his headquarters," said the banker, "and a hangout for

others of his sort. He seems to have a band that holds him as their leader. We have nothing definite against him, but plenty of suspicion. It is certain he is not a good citizen, and I believe he is a menace."

Bud listened attentively. He had a hunch that Bear Giddings might once have borne another name, under which he could be found in the Rangers' famous book, "A List of Fugitives from Justice."

"He is on a spree, spending money recklessly, challenging all comers to wrestle with him. I understand he is to be found at a certain *cantina* on the outskirts of the town, run by a Mexican. It's frequented by Mexies and the rougher element."

Bud considered. He meant to get at the source of Bear's income, to study the man at close range. And he saw a way. In the Rangers' camp, the troopers often wrestled with one another, partly for sport, but also for training. Each showed the others the tricks he knew.

It was a valuable thing to know. All could ride and rope and shoot, but there were times when hand-to-hand conflicts could not be avoided.

Bud had learned all that the others knew. And he had some ideas of his own.

He did not tell the banker of his plan, but went to a store where he bought clothes, such as a country lad might wear. Then he saw Pepper taken good care of in a livery stable, hired a room and changed his clothes. He was going to get close to the Bear, try to join his band.

The banker had told him where to find the *cantina*, and Bud started for the Mexie quarter.

He did not immediately go into the *cantina*, but looked through the window and witnessed the final man-handling of the man who lay on the

floor, slowly coming back to consciousness as Bud entered, and made his challenge.

"I'd break you in half over my knee, sonny," said Bear.

"If you ever *got* me there," Bud replied. "I'll take a chance, mister."

The big bulk of Bear did not dismay him. He had skill to offset weight and brute strength.

"I won't break you, kid, I'll spank you instead," Bear told him. He was almost good-humored once more.

"Suits me," Bud came back, "I ain't been spanked fer a heck of a time. My maw used to say it did me a world of good."

They laughed at his naïve talk. Bear grinned.

"It's ketch-as-ketch-kin, sonny. Nothin' barred. Come an' git licked. Some of you drag that chunk of punkwood out of the way. Fifty dollars, kid, if you last fifteen minnits. I'll make it *five* minnits fer you. Five hundred if you put *me* down. Ha-ha!"

Bud gravely took off his coat, folded it carefully and gave it to the barman to hold for him.

"I sure could use five hundred dollars," he said quaintly, and they all roared at him, holding their sides as they laughed.

For a big man, Bear was agile, as a real bear is. He could move with astounding swiftness, cuff, as a bear strikes, so fast you could not see the blow.

But Bud was faster. Time and time again he eluded Bear's grapple. When at last the exasperated wrestler swung at him, Bud caught the extended wrist with one hand, set his left arm across Bear's chest, and stepping back, used that arm as lever, the chest as fulcrum, and bent back the other's limb, threatening to

break it at the elbow, circling, and forcing Bear to follow, wincing with pain and humiliation.

Bear saw sly grins as he wheeled, handled by the youth as if he were a child. If once he got hold of Bud, he meant to crush his ribs until they splintered in the flesh.

Bud freed his own arm, clutched Bear's right biceps in a grip a Chinaman had once shown a Ranger sergeant. It numbed the limb, and hurt as if stabbed by a red-hot dagger. It made Bear forget he had another arm, made him bellow like a range bull challenging a rival.

Then Bud let go the wrist, and struck Bear shrewdly with the edge of his hand on the side of the short, thick neck, where the veins showed swollen from liquor, exertion and rage.

Now Bear broke clear, and rushed with his arms wide open to gather in the young Ranger, to crush him. He came in roaring, not to be dodged.

Bud ducked under and inside the mighty arms, took hold of Bear's broad shoulders, set one foot in the pit of the other's stomach, and threw himself backward to the floor.

Bud put out the full force of his thigh and loin muscles. He kept his arms rigid as iron bars. Bear's big body rose, poised, made a looping dive to the floor. He landed cold, knocked out by his own weight and the swinging force of the fall.

Swiftly the young Ranger rose, turned Bear over with deft leverage, let him lie, staring sightless at the low ceiling, four points down.

The room shook with the cheering. It was spontaneous, forced from them. There were some glad to see Bear get what he had handed out to others, but it was the country lad's swift, clever triumph that gripped them all.

Bear rolled his head. His neck hurt, one arm was still numb. And he was down. Rage surged through him, then remembrance came. He got up, and rolled baleful piggy eyes at the crowd. Then he looked at Bud.

It was like Goliath looking at David, if that giant had been able to see, after his downfall.

"Looks like you figure to collect five hundred dollars," he said slowly.

"Not me," said Bud. "You must have slipped. I kind of thought I could dodge 'round fer five minnits, mebbe. I'm sort of spry, in a way. But it wasn't fair. You don't owe me a cent."

Bud was right. It had *not* been fair, but Bear did not know that. And Bud saw Bear's face glow and grin. He had won his way to the bully's heart. Bear could have paid fifty dollars, but not five hundred. He was getting short of money. It was a way out to pretend he had slipped.

He looked at Bud, took in his physique.

"You're a sport, sonny," he said. "I'd like to do somethin' fer you."

"You sure kin," Bud replied. "I'd like to talk with you about things in private."

Bud had won his main point. He had shown Bear he was something more than a gawky country youth, he had refused to take the money he had fairly won, and he had given Bear an out by which the man could save his face, explain his defeat.

Bear might secretly resent Bud's victory, probably would. He might take the first chance to prove himself the better man.

But they could get together. Bud was willing to take the risks so as to get into Bear's confidence. Once a member of the band, it should be

easy to find out who and what Bear Giddings really was, what he was up to, and defeat those plans.

II.

The secret hide-out of Bear and his followers was well suited to their needs. It was a cave in the mountains behind Cedartown, a sort of natural cellar of dirt and rock in a side ravine, reached by a lonely, rocky pass, seldom used, and then only by smugglers.

The roof of the cave was an enormous slab of stone that would never be suspected of covering such a chamber, much less of furnishing a way of reaching it.

The slab was split by natural forces. The crack was barely wide enough to admit a man. Out of it grew the stem of a wild grape vine, as strong as a hemp rope. The leaves concealed the split, except in winter.

At its best it was not inviting. It looked like the den of a wild beast. Bear explained to Bud, with chuckles, that it was a true bear's lair, that it had been discovered years before by a hunter whose dogs had chased the bear to the cave.

The animal had fought with the pack long enough for the hunter to come up and shoot it. Wounded, it had dived for the split, and disappeared. The hunter had been bold enough to follow and discover that the bear had really used the place as its den.

Later, smugglers used it for the storing of contraband, but it was too hard to get in and out of, the interior too damp for good storage. Once again a bear, this time a two-legged one, El Oso, had taken possession, made it his headquarters, sure it would not be given away.

There were torches of pitch pine, and plenty of firewood below, together with several lanterns, two of which were lighted by the first man to go down, using the grapevine stem like a rope.

The descent, Bud figured, was not so hard as getting out again. He wondered if there was another exit. The cool air was stirring, waving the torch flames.

Off the main chamber were many smaller ones, all of them apparently shallow. The sound of dripping water sounded like the ticking of a hundred clocks, and there was a pool in the middle of the floor, part dirt, part stone, in which bubbles rose almost continually.

They burst with a faint smell of sulphur, the water was milky and warm. But there were other smaller basins where the water was cold and clear, filtered through the limestone.

There were kegs and cases for seats, a rough table, rough bedsteads of split wood to keep bedding off the damp floor.

It was hard to say where the smoke went. It drifted out, not only through the entry split, but wandered under the roof in a dozen directions, sucked up by natural chimneys that caused the drafts. The fire, the lanterns and the torches failed even to begin to light up the vast place, which was filled with shadows and curious sounds.

"You an' me'll git erlong fine," Bear said to Bud, after he had shown off his cavern. "You're young, an' you're quick. You don't drink, an' I need somebody I kin trust. Any of these guerillas would cut your throat fer ten dollars or a keg of moonshine. They'd give you away to the Rangers fer reward money in a jiffy, if they thought they'd save their own necks by doin' so. Only I'm too slick fer 'em, they're feared

I'll catch 'em at it, an' they know what the Bear would do to 'em then. You ain't told me your name."

Bud hesitated. "You kin call me Jim Jones," he said at last. "It's as good as any other."

Bear grinned. He thought he understood why Bud was on the loose, wanting to join up with him. It was not merely adventure, but some scrape Bud had got into, and which he would not talk about.

"You could sort of be my lieutenant," Bear went on.

He had drawn Bud apart. The rest were busy drinking. Bear swigged from a private jug. As he squatted there his figure made him look more like a bear than ever, his eyes caught the light of the fire and showed red and cunning, as he talked to the young Ranger.

Bud did not trust him. But Bear nceded him. He did not need or trust his other men. And it soon became clear he was planning to leave them out of his immediate plans.

At first he talked to Bud telling him what a wonderful time he could have in Mexico City, with Bear to show him the ropes and money to spend. Bear talked of beautiful girls, of dances and feasts, fine clothes, everything he thought might tempt the other. And Bud appeared to grow more and more interested.

But he had a sure hunch, from the way in which Bear kept referring to Bud's prowess in having thrown him, the mighty Bear, that El Oso figured the Ranger might be used, or tolerated, but that the thought rankled.

Bear would use him—yes—and then he would get rid of him.

As the liquor in Bear's jug grew lower, he began to boast.

"If you knew who I really was," he said, "you'd wonder what I was doin' here, with *ladrones* like these.

I had a band of bully boys once, and I'll have one ag'in. You stick with me, Jones, and you'll see. But first I aim to have me a good time. I've got one coup to pull off, and then you an' me'll skip ercross the Rio Grande, leave these rabbits behind, and have our fling."

"Couldn't you have a good time without goin' inter Mexico?" asked Bud. "You got to speak a different language there."

"The gals'll teach you, my son. Besides, it ain't too safe fer me this side the river. I've heard the Rangers are lookin' fer me, not fer El Oso, the Bear, because they ain't got nothin' on Oso, yit, but they might find out that El Oso was the same as——"

He lowered his voice to a whisper, spoke into Bud's ear, with his drunken breath foul on Bud's face.

"Chaparral Charley. Did you ever hear of him?"

A page in the Rangers' famous secret volume—"List of Fugitives from Justice"—came into Bud's mind as clearly as if he was reading it. He know its contents by heart, as did every Ranger. But to tie up "Chaparral Charley" with El Oso, the Bear, seemed too great a stretch of the imagination.

Bud knew Chaparral Charley had been a gay blade, a man who danced fandangos, flung gold about like water. Those who lived with him knew him to be an outlaw, probably a highwayman, but the time came when it was shown that the gay *bravo* was a cold-hearted murderer.

He was hunted, betrayed by a girl he had deserted, rounded up by a local sheriff and deputies in a thick clump of the growth that gave him his nickname. He was badly wounded. None wanted to go in after him, three were wounded and two killed in the first attempts.

They went away to get dogs, leaving two men on watch. When they came back with the hounds, the two swore Charley was still in the brush, without water or food, desperately hurt.

Somehow the dry brush got fired. It raged for hours in flame and smoke. When all cooled there was something in the middle of it that had once been flesh and bones, a living man. The remains of two six-guns some said were Charley's, some said were not.

"They give me up fer dead," chuckled El Oso to Bud. "I would have been, if I'd stayed there. I found a body in there, an old one. I was out of shells, so I left my guns, an' crawled out under their noses. If I hadn't been so weak, I'd hev' strangled that depitty bare-handed. The fool was asleep."

"Was thet long ago?" asked Bud.

"Quite a spell. I've let my beard grow, I've put on a lot of weight, but I could show you two places I have to comb the hair over where the slug went in an' out my lower jaw. Sort of sp'iled my looks. But it covered me. I stayed with an old woman who looked out fer me. She knowed who I was. She was dyin' when I left her. She sent fer a priest by a boy. He couldn't find one but brought a doctor. She thought him a priest, an' she tells all she knows, includin' who I am."

Bud knew this, but he looked impressed.

"So they're watchin' out fer me. That's why I'm goin' to pull off this one coup, an' scoot across the Rio Grande. I need only one man along to finish the job, but those fools don't savvy thet. Will you go in with me, Jones?"

"I reckon I might go along," said Bud, "if I knew what it was—an' what there might be in it fer me."

"Good. Now listen. You might not think it if you didn't know the facts, but at this time of year, the bank at Cedartown calls in the loans they've made the farmers at seedin' time. Crops are sold an' they was good this year. Money comes in fast all this week. They'll ship most of it, to Austin later, but fer a couple o' weeks you kin find all the way from forty to sixty thousand dollars in their vault."

"If you kin git at it," said Bud, "I wanted to git a bill changed the day I come to town. I went in there. Looked like to me it was a mighty powerful safe. Ain't they got it guarded? Seems to me I saw two men with guns hangin' round. One of 'em asked me what I wanted, an' where I come from."

"It's mighty powerful-lookin' in front, son. An' it's guarded, night an' day. Two guards in the front office, allus. At night they sort o' take it easy. Lay down on two cots, bound to wake up if any one tries to force the doors or winders. But I know how they build them safes, son. All front, like the mean curmudgeon that runs the bank. He told folks I should be run out of town, that I was a menace to a decent community."

El Oso chuckled, emptied his jug, set it down.

"I am a menace," he said. "They'll find out, come mornin'. I'll drink no more now. Let those fools git spiffled. Jones, the bottom of the vault is jest cement, none too thick at that. So what? We tunnel up under it. We *have* tunneled, eighty yards or more from an old ruined stone warehouse back of the bank, no one goes nigh. If they did they wouldn't find much."

Bud let out a low "Phew!" that sounded like admiration. There *was*

a certain amount of appreciation in it.

"You got through so you kin finish ter-night?" he asked.

Bear looked round the cavern. His men were very drunk, some already asleep.

"Ter-night, but them fools don't know it. They're too dumb. They think we're still thirty feet away. I told 'em so, an' they believe it. They don't know no more'n that many sheep. They think we finish up in the next two nights, countin' from ter-morrer. We've not worked every night, so's not to make folks wonder where we was. I fixed their licker ter-night. They'll be dead to the world once they drop off. Then you an' me'll go through the last skin of dirt, drill a short hole or two in the cement, set in a blast, tech 'er off, loot the vault, an' skip."

"Won't they hear it?"

"Let 'em, son. They can't git to us. That's a time lock. Even the old grouch who owns the place can't git into the vault before eight in the mornin'. They won't know about the tunnel or where to look. I've got two hawsses waitin', good ones. I hope you kin ride. We'll have to hit the river pronto."

"You wasn't countin' on me when you planted the hawsses," said Bud.

"Ah, you're smart, Jones. No. I was figurin' on usin' ernother man, but when you come along, I changed my mind. So, it's you an' me. An' you git a full quarter share. How about it?"

Bud knew the other was lying. He had *one* horse, for himself. None for Bud or for any of his men who would have listened to him. A man who would use his band to dig the tunnel, and then desert them, was not going to hand over a quarter of the loot to anybody else.

The very fact that he had told Bud who he really was was a sinister touch. If Bud went with him, he was going to his death, so far as Bear's intentions ran.

"I'll go with you," Bud said. "I kin ride."

Bear did not know how well, nor what a horse the Ranger owned.

He needed a helper and here was one who was strong and sober and intelligent.

One by one the members of the band fell into drugged sleep.

Bear took a final swig from his own stock.

"Come with me," he said. "I'll show you another trick the rest don't know."

III.

The exit which Bud had suspected was cunningly concealed with old boxes. It was also a narrow slit that sloped gently, twisting and turning in a narrow fissure up which fresh air blew steadily. Both of them carried lanterns.

It seemed almost an hour before they finally came out, below the pass, on the side of the mountain. They could see the night lights of Cedartown shining below them.

"Seems like I ought to have a gun," Bud said.

Bear laughed. "You won't need no gun, son. Git you one when we're across the river. I'll do the shootin'."

Bud did not doubt it. That laugh had not been a pleasant one.

He trailed the villain who had once been Chaparral Charley, the gay rover and murderer. Now, as El Oso, the man was doubly dangerous.

Bud had not dared to wear a gun when he had posed as a country lad.

It would surely have been discovered while he was wrestling, if he had hidden it. He would have been suspected. The same danger would hold with any weapon.

Now he sorely missed his .45, even his bowie knife. Bear had a holstered Colt.

Had he been armed, Bud might have arrested Bear as Chaparral Charley. There was plenty that would hang him, but it was not always easy to dig up old evidence, find old witnesses. The Ranger wanted to have a clear case. He followed his man.

They came to the abandoned stone warehouse with their lanterns unlit, creeping through the dark woods. Once inside the building they lighted them again, and Bear shoved aside some planks that seemed part of the ruined flooring, and disclosed the mouth of a slanting shaft.

It had been well dug, part of it was timbered. It was the height of a man.

"I've got a good miner in my band. We left him behind in the cave ter-night. His work was finished," said Bear. "It'd be foolish to share this loot with a lot of fools who'd git rid of it in a week. You an' me, Jones, we'll know what to do with it."

He made Bud go ahead. At the end of the tunnel, space had been stoped out. There were drills, mucking spoons, sledges. Also giant powder and fuses.

"I'll drive, you hold the drill," said Bear. "They won't hardly hear it through the cement and the heavy door. Likely they'll be nappin'. Couldn't do much, anyways. But we got to work quick. Now, first, help me strip off what's left of the dirt."

It did not take long to expose the cement floor of the vault. Bear tapped it with a drill. It gave off a hollow sound.

"Look at it," he said. "It's old, an' it's brittle. The fools put too much sand in it. This'll be like goin' through cheese."

It was not as easy as that, but it was amazing how the drills bit in under Bear's powerful strokes, driven uphanded. Sweat poured off him as he made progress. The first drill hole broke through. Bud did not think the guards had been alarmed.

Bear set four holes at the corners of a square space. Only the one went through but the rest were almost as deep. He placed four sticks of giant powder, capped and fused. He lighted the fuses, and they started to sputter.

"We'll go back a ways," said Bear. "Fumes are likely to be bad."

He led the way, Bud following, between Bear and the sputtering fuses, both carrying lanterns.

"That's fur enough, I reckon," said Bear at last.

They stopped. The fuses were like sparks now, but Bud could see they were close to the detonating caps in the giant powder.

Bud had his back turned to Bear, who was close behind him. The Ranger was on the alert but there was nothing much he could do at present, and he did not figure that Bear would try and do anything to him until after he was sure the way to the loot was open.

"Might as well give you your share right now," said Bear. There was a tone to his words that warned Bud of double meaning. "Now" meant that instant, and his share would be——

He started to turn in the narrow

tunnel, but he was too late. A frightful blow struck the back of his head, partly diverted by his instinctive lifting of his hand and arm. Then there came a terrific roaring, a fierce light before darkness rushed upon him with unconsciousness.

He could not tell if the roar, the blaze, were results of the blow or the explosion of the giant powder. The last thing his senses seemed to register was a heavy body trampling him, as El Oso, the Bear, rushed over him.

Bud came back to consciousness with his head pounding, seeming to open and close. He felt with his hand and found that was bruised and cut. The back of his head was sticky. He thought for a while his skull had been split, his brains oozing.

The tunnel was dark. Bear would have taken one lantern, he might have taken both of them. And he might long ago have got away with the money from the looted safe, leaving Bud in the tunnel, dead or dying, to be found later, held for the robbery, while Bear scooted for the Rio Grande, and his followers stayed, drugged, in the hide-out cavern.

Bud felt about to see if he could find the second lantern. A groan came to his lips with every motion. He could not find it. But he could see a faint light at the far end of the tunnel, where the fuses had sputtered.

He managed to get to his feet, though he had to support himself against the walls because of weakness. Bear must have slugged him with the barrel of his .45, not troubling to waste powder and lead.

The blast had done a good job. Débris had fallen, blocks of the cement flooring. They formed a sort

of clumsy ladder up which Bear must have climbed, and the Ranger followed.

He wondered just what had happened—whether the explosion had been too muffled to be heard through the safe front, or whether they were turning out the town marshal and the bank officials, only to find themselves blocked by the time lock.

It was hard to think clearly after that blow that had crashed where spine met skull.

There was light inside the ruined vault. Why had Bear not taken the lanterns along to light his way out the tunnel? Why—

There was shadow, and a sheet of metal between Bud and the light. The inner door of the safe that Bear must have wrenched open. Its protection was slight compared to the outer door.

It shut off most of the space just inside the latter.

It began to swing back. Another shadow appeared, a squat, moving shadow, like that of a bear, flung against the outer door.

It was Bear. His piggish eyes flamed with triumph. His hands were filled with bank notes, his pockets were stuffed with gold. His face above the shaggy beard was lighted up evilly as he stooped to pick up one of the two lanterns, stowing the bills away into his inner clothing.

He did not see Bud. He did not see anything but a vision of himself, resurrected as another Chaparral Charley, spending this fortune across the Rio Grande. He had made his coup. He was getting away with all of it, leaving the fools behind, including the young country lad who had made a fool of him—once—in the *cantina*.

Bear pushed the inner door farther back.

The pain left Bud's head, it ceased to throb as he went into action. He shot out of a crouch and tackled Bear just above the knees. He drove his head into the pit of Bear's belly and knocked most of the wind out of him.

They went down in the narrow space like two wild beasts fighting in a den. Bear was short of breath, but not of strength, compared with Bud. But the Ranger's was coming back, surcharged by his righteous rage.

The blow had weakened him, and he might not last long. While he did, he fought with terrific, dynamic bursts of fury, striving to get at Bear's gun.

They had smashed one lantern in their fall. The stink of oil mingled with burning cloth. Then the flame went out. Bear had hung the second lantern on the handle of the inner door, and its light illumined the savage combat, too savage to last long.

The air still reeked with the gas from the giant powder. Both of them began to cough as they spent their power.

Bear got his hands about Bud's throat, and Bud tore loose the hold. Then he got a scissors with his legs about Bear's middle and put out all he had.

His legs were stronger than his arms. The blow on the spine seemed to have robbed his arms of their strength, but his leg muscles were like sinews of steel.

Bear grunted as Bud clamped his thighs together, grunted, and heaved in anguish. Bud reached up and set the heel of his left palm to the jaw, against the shaggy beard. He slugged for the point with all his might.

Bear jerked his head and the blow landed off target. But with it Bear gasped, went limp.

That blow had struck the old scar of Chaparral Charley, where the slug had gone in, where the jaw was weakened by the exit of the same bullet. It was Bear's most sensitive spot. The fight was ended.

Breathing hard, Bud got to his feet. He felt dizzy and leaned against the outer door, with its intricate array of levers and bolts. He could hear nothing. It seemed incredible that the guards could be asleep.

But there was no time to speculate. Bear was coming to his senses, twisting his head from side to side, moaning.

Bud took his six-gun. He hauled Bear out through the gap in the floor, none too gently, then mounted again and secured the lantern. Bear blinked up at him, at the shining star Bud had taken from his boot and pinned on his chest.

"Who are you?" Bear grunted.

"Ranger. Git up, you. I'm turnin' you over to the jail here. If it don't look strong enough to me, I may move you on. Now go ahead, slow, or I'll perforate your hide plenty, El Oso, or Chaparral

Charley, or whatever else you like to call yourself. You've pulled your last coup. Git goin'! Wait, set your hands behind you. I ain't trustin' you overmuch, Mr. Bear."

The Ranger was an expert at tying. He used Bear's own neckerchief, making a one-handed loop and twist, hauling all-taut with one hand. The barrel of the six-gun was still set against Bear's spine.

Then he marched his prisoner through the tunnel, out to the warehouse, through the woods to the main street of town.

There were lanterns moving there, lights in upper windows, men calling to each other.

"'Pears like they must have heard you, after all," said Bud. "Looks like they're lookin' fer you, Mr. Bear. You're lucky I got you first. If I didn't protect you, they'd likely skin you, tan your hide, an' nail it up inside the bank."

"I've got thousands in my pockets, Ranger. Take it, take it all, an' turn me loose."

"You're offerin' me what I could help myself to," said Bud. "Listen, Mr. Bear, all the money in the world couldn't stop me from landin' you where your last move'll be to the gallows."

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TUNE IN THE NATIONAL BARN DANCE SATURDAY NIGHT NBC NETWORK



Vengeance Stampede

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "The Sombrero Killer," etc.

AS black-browed "Slick" Arada looked into the round bore of the .45 Colt barrel, he flashed his pearly teeth in a quick grin. Above the blued-steel cylinder and the cocked hammer of the short gun, Slick saw a flushed, boyish face, smooth, almost beardless cheeks, the determined jaw and fearless hazel eyes of young Bill Cottrell.

Slick's grin widened. Then he laughed right in Bill Cottrell's face, laughed until his swarthy, pock-marked features were twisted in a mass of wrinkles that made folds of flesh around his piggish, jet-black eyes, closing them to mere slits.

"Don't be a fool, young feller!"

chuckled Slick. "You cain't beat me—not even when yuh got the drop. Better pouch that hardware afore it explodes and hurts yuh."

The flush on Bill Cottrell's youthful features deepened, but he still held the six-gun covering Slick Arada in a rock-steady grip. Instinctively he threw his chest out, thus pulling in his stomach and straightening his long frame to its full six feet two of bean pole altitude.

Bill was not filled out yet, but his very lankiness seemed fitted to his long-shanked cowboy outfit, the wide-brimmed, floppy Stetson, red bandanna flapping in the breeze, the wet shirt clinging to his rippling

muscles, the gun belt around his trim waist and the blue denims that reached down over the tops of his spurred boots.

"Git them hands up, Slick," warned Bill. "I ain't askin' yuh again. Yo're caught in the act. If I shoot yuh in yore tracks, nobody will blame me. H'ist 'em, pronto!"

Slick Arada wiped the smile from his face and hunched his head forward as if he were going to bite the young cowboy.

"This has gone far enough!" he barked. "I been easy with yuh, account o' yo're a younker and don't know any better. Put up that hog-leg now, or I'll kill yuh."

For a moment, Bill Cottrell thought Slick would make good his threat and try to draw his gun. And in that thrilling moment, Bill was swept by a surge of mingled emotions—anger, excitement and a tinge of fear.

He had a right to be a little afraid of Slick Arada, even when he had the drop. The pock-marked jasper was a quick-trigger killer. He had a half dozen notches on his guns and people said that accounted for only half of his victims.

Bill, on the other hand, had never shot a man. This was the first time he had ever thrown down on a human being, except in fun. When a jasper goes up against big game for the first time, he is apt to get what is known as "buck fever," which sets his gun to wabbling and his body to trembling.

Young Cottrell didn't get buck fever, but instead his finger tightened on the trigger and slammed a bullet right past Slick's dirty slouch hat. Almost the instant that firing prong touched the cartridge, Bill had thumbed the hammer back again for another shot.

"Raise yore hands, or I'll kill yuh, the next time!" he yelled. "Don't force me to shoot yuh down in yore tracks."

Deafened by the explosion and stung by the flash of powder in his face, Slick Arada snapped his hands upward with a yelp of fear.

"Don't!" he bawled. "I surrender. Don't shoot again!"

"All right then," grumbled Bill. "Turn yore back to me so's I can skin yuh of them Colt guns. I mean business. Hurry it up."

Slowly, sullenly Slick turned to face away from Bill Cottrell. Bill took a step forward, jabbed his gun in Slick's back and held it there while he yanked Arada's .45s out of their holsters and tossed them aside.

He heard horses snorting and plunging against their tie ropes just back of him, and he turned quickly in that direction to make sure that none of them had got away.

A strange sight greeted him. Here were three wild-eyed Triangle 7 mustangs, all decked out as he had never seen horses before. Fancy-colored cloth had been braided into their manes and tails, leaving long ends flying like confetti in the breeze.

They looked like ponies that had been decorated by some woman for a kid's party. One of the cayuses wore a bull rigging to which was attached little flag poles, to the ends of which were tied flying banners.

All three horses were fastened to one master stake rope, which when loosened would free the entire bunch.

Plunging and jerking in terror, they threatened to pull up the stake which held them.

Bill Cottrell saw the danger, and he uttered a sharp command.

"Grab that rope, Arada!" he rapped out. "If yuh let them ponies get away, I'll shoot yuh like a dawg. Snap into it!"

Slick Arada cast an evil, sidelong glance at the young cowboy, but he did as he was ordered. He caught hold of the stake rope and pushed the stick deeper into the ground, before he turned to face Bill Cottrell.

"Yo're barkin' up the wrong tree, Bill," said Slick in a different tone of voice. "I never done this."

"Yuh lie!" Bill retorted. "I been watching yuh from just over that ridge for an hour. I seen yuh bring them three Triangle 7 hosses in here. I seen yuh tie all them ribbons on 'em. I almost busted out laughin' until I realized what yuh aimed to do."

Slick Arada twisted his swarthy, pitted features into an expression of great distress and spread his hands in appeal.

"Yuh got me, Cottrell," he whined. "It's in yore power to ruin me—mebbe get me strung up. I've allus treated yuh right, ain't I? I was *segundo* on the Triangle 7 long afore you came, but I never tried to get bossy with you, did I? Then give me a break."

Bill was young and his sympathies were easily appealed to. Slick Arada spoke the truth in one way. As *segundo* on the ranch, he had been kind to Bill when the youngster first started punching cows for Bob Zimmerman's Triangle 7.

"But why are yuh doin' this, Slick?" asked Bill Cottrell. "You know what it means—death and destruction. Mebbe the lives of some of the cow-punchers. Who is payin' yuh to sell Bob Zimmerman out?"

Slick Arada watched Bill Cottrell keenly out of narrow snake eyes. He quickly saw the advantage he had gained and decided not to throw it away by denying his guilt. Bill had caught him in the very act.

Suddenly Slick buried his head in his hands.

"I don't know what made me do it!" he sobbed. "I must 'a' gone crazy. I reckon it's the drink, Kid. Stay away from the booze. It drives yuh bughouse, sooner or later. Let me go this time, Bill, and I'll never do anything crooked again."

Bill Cottrell found himself torn between sympathy and suspicion. Slick Arada was really sobbing. His body shook with emotion. It was not a nice thing to see a grown man act like that.

"Tell me what yuh figured to do, Slick," insisted Bill. "Are yuh mad at Zimmerman about something? Or did yuh aim to make some money out of yore sneakin' trick?"

Bill Cottrell had shifted to a little knoll as he spoke, so that he could look down the slope at the big herd of cattle, held there on the gorge-bound mesa by a cordon of horsemen. Through air so hot that it seemed to sizzle he saw the circle men slowly riding around the sea of red hide and tossing horns, saw also the chuck and hoodlum wagons with a few men grouped about them near the spring in a little gully.

Probably Bob Zimmerman, the boss, would be in that last group. They must have heard his shot, but their paid no attention to it, probably thinking he was a hunter.

It was the hour of the noonday siesta, when the Mexican vaqueros always insisted on stopping to rest, no matter where they might be. No amount of harsh language had been able to budge them from making this stop.

It was not an accident that Bill Cottrell had detected Slick Arada's strange actions and had followed him here. Slick had been acting queerly. When he rode away from the camp without waiting to eat, Bill had trailed him.

Then he had witnessed the star-

ting sight of Slick Arada decorating three of Zimmerman's broncs with flying ribbons, and had stuck him up.

The instant Bill looked away, Slick Arada slid noiselessly nearer to the bunch of ropes that held the broncs to that one stake. Suddenly he lunged forward and grabbed them, yelling for aid at the same instant.

"Help!" he bawled. "These broncs are pullin' up the stake. They're gettin' away."

Bill leaped forward, gun jabbing at Slick Arada. Too late he saw that Slick had a knife in his hand. Bill's gun roared a split second after that keen-edged blade bit through the bunched ropes.

Like shots out of a gun, the terrified mustangs stampeded down the gully in the only direction they could go—straight at the cattle herd.

II.

Slick, his left arm drilled by Bill's bullet, dropped to the ground, doubled up with pain. The crimson-stained knife clattered from his fingers to the rocks.

Bill Cottrell took one look at him, then sprang onto his own horse and raced away in pursuit of the decorated ponies, firing his gun in the air as he rode. Instantly he saw that he was too late.

The longhorn cattle glimpsed the strange creatures bearing down upon them, ribbons and banners flying in the wind, and in a moment they broke into a mad stampede. Bawling and tossing their horns, they surged in all directions.

Bill, sick at heart, filled with a sense of defeat and despair, drew his other gun and kept firing it, punctuating each shot with warning yells.

WW—4D

His shooting and yelling only caused greater panic among the cattle. One bunch charged the chuck wagon. Bill saw men scatter, running for dear life. Then the wagon was knocked over and its contents dumped across the ground. Other cattle headed for the steep cliffs that hemmed in the table mountain. Cowboys, riding like mad, waving hats, ropes and guns in the air, tried to head them off.

Bill saw one puncher go down. A stampeding horde of cattle swept over him, leaving only a dark, lifeless shape huddled there among the grama grass and cactus.

Big steers reached the edge of a precipice and tried to stop, but others behind pushed them over. Bill Cottrell groaned as he saw cows, steers, and calves go tumbling down over the rim rock to form a pile of dead and dying critters among the rocks at the base of the cliff. He knew that the loss was terrific. Half of the Triangle 7 herd already was dead and many more were widely scattered.

B-r-r-ree! A bullet zipped past Bill Cottrell's shoulder.

It was followed by another and still a third slug. Some one was shooting at him. Some one in the Zimmerman camp.

"Hey, don't shoot!" bellowed Bill, trying to make himself heard above the thunderous drum of hoofs and the bellowing of the maddened cattle. "Don't fire on me. I'm Bill Cottrell."

Crackety-crack-crack! More shots came his way, all of them fired from camp. One, dangerously close, cut the chin strap that held his hat on his head.

Reining up in a cloud of dust, Bill rose in his stirrups and waved his hat over his head. A slug cut through the hat and another stung his bronc.

The pony snorted and started away. Bill, instead of stopping his mustang, headed back up the gorge to where he had left the wounded Slick Arada.

A deafening din of gunfire greeted this move. Bullets shrieked and zinged off the rocks on both sides. One backward glance told Bill Cottrell that he was being pursued. Three riders were coming after him, with huge, blond-haired Bob Zimmerman in the lead.

The Triangle 7 boss had a rifle and was firing at Bill as he rode. A low oath burst from Bill's lips.

"Blast it all!" he cried. "The fools think I done this. Why don't they stop shootin' and give me a chance to explain?"

The gorge became more and more narrow as Bill neared the top of the rise, down which the three decorated horses had charged. These broncs were out of sight now, but the trouble they had caused would not be soon forgotten.

Bill's bronc was already staggy-legged and heaving from the steep climb and the breakneck speed. Just ahead of him there was a turn in the ravine. If he could only make that, he could dodge out of sight and would be safe from the Triangle 7 gunfire.

He felt a bullet burn across his ribs. Another stung his neck. Then he heard Bob Zimmerman's bellowing voice far below him on the slope.

"Stop, yuh murderin' hound!" roared Bob. "Stop, or I'll plug yuh square between the shoulder blades."

At that instant Bill reached the summit and made a quick turn that brought him behind a huge pile of boulders. With a gasp he sucked fresh air into his lungs and uttered a thankful prayer of relief. He halted his fagged, hipshot pony and dismounted. He had made it just

in the nick of time. The bronc was almost ready to drop.

Bill cast a glance toward the spot where he had left Slick Arada. The death-dealing skunk was gone. He had fled, leaving Bill Cottrell to take the blame for his murderous stamper's trick.

Bill was sorry he hadn't finished Slick now. He still didn't know why Slick had pulled this off. Certainly he couldn't have intended to run off any of the cattle himself. He must have done it for revenge, Bill thought, to get even with Bob Zimmerman, Triangle 7 owner. That trick of decorating the three horses with ribbons had been almost the work of a crazy man! Or of a fiend.

Bill stuck his hat around a rock into plain view. *Zipee*. A slug knocked dust from the hat brim.

"Hey there," yelled Bill. "I ain't runnin' away. This is Bill Cottrell. I'm innocent. I never stampered them hosses. Can yuh hear me, Mr. Zimmerman?"

"I hear yuh," roared Bob Zimmerman. "Yo're trapped and now yo're bawlin' for mercy. But yuh don't get none from me. I'm killing yuh. I seen what you done. It was you chased them stampered broncs down on my herd. You even yelled and shot off yore gun to make sure the steers would break."

"That ain't so," said Bill pleadingly. "I never fired my gun until the stampede broke. I done it then to warn yuh. I'm no outlaw, Mr. Zimmerman. I couldn't stand it to become a fugitive. Listen to me. Let me tell yuh the truth."

Loud, derisive yells and a blast of gunfire was Bill's answer. Suddenly from the rocks near by came the sharp crack of a rifle. One of Bob Zimmerman's men pitched out of his saddle.

Crack! Bang! Zimmerman's big

horse went down, throwing the Triangle 7 boss.

Instantly the charge was halted. The other cowboy jerked his bronc into the cover of some brush and began howling loudly for help from the camp. Bob Zimmerman, thrown from his saddle, rolled down into a little hollow and lay there, stunned.

From the direction of the ruined camp came more horsemen, four in all, to bolster up Bob's attack. But they did not ride up the gorge in the face of that firing. Instead, they separated and began a flanking movement, designed to come at Bill Cottrell from both sides. In order to ascend the steep cliffs, they had to make a wide detour.

Bill Cottrell heard a low chuckle come from a ledge above his head. Then he saw a rifle poking through a natural loophole to cover him.

Mad with rage and grief, Bill lifted his right-hand Colt and emptied it at the spot. No answering blast came from the rifle. Nor could he get a glimpse of the dry-gulcher.

"Take it easy, kid," chortled Slick Arada's voice. "We're both in the same boat now. In fact, I could git in good with Bob Zimmerman by shootin' yuh or takin' yuh prisoner. Think that over."

At once Bill saw that he was in a trap. Slick could fire down on him from the ledge above, without showing himself. Bill didn't have a chance to escape or even to make a decent fight for his life.

"Go ahead and kill me," said Bill bitterly. "I'm ruined. They'll think I shot 'em. I'll never be able to make Mr. Zimmerman believe me. Plug me and get it over with."

"He-he-he!" snickered Slick Arada. "Who's whining now? I reckon the tables is turned. I got you begging. I ain't shootin' yuh.

I need yuh purty bad. Shuck them guns. Then mount that crowbait and let's get going."

"Get goin'!" cried Bill. "Do you think I'd go anywhere with a murderin' skunk like you?"

Slick's answer was a .30-30 bullet that ripped through Bill Cottrell's pants leg and made a livid gushing scar above the knee.

"Drop them irons, I tell yuh!" he growled. "Yo're my prisoner. Yo're goin' with me, whether yuh want to or not. My left arm is shot up bad. I need you to bandage it fer me and help me with the camp work. I reckon you'll come to yore senses when you realize that yo're an outlaw now, with a price on yore head. But I ain't. And I could kill yuh right now, without gettin' in no trouble. Don't crowd yore luck, Kid Cottrell."

III.

A haunting silence settled over the parched sand dunes and porous lava rock. It was so quiet that Bob Zimmerman could hear the thudding of his own heart. Alkali dust, swept by a swirling wind, mingled with the sweat that streamed over his face.

And in that moment Bob Cottrell felt more utterly alone than he had ever been in his life. Tragedy had struck swiftly and surely. Fate had stretched out her hands and with one gesture had ruined him.

Above him he could see the muzzle of a rifle, aimed at him point-blank. At any minute, Slick Arada might take a notion to squeeze the trigger.

Down below in the gorge lay Bob Zimmerman, Triangle 7 owner, his boss, and near by was a dead cowboy. Off to his right and left, other Triangle 7 punchers were closing in, hunting Bill down as if he was a wild beast.

A price was on his head, now. That shooting had convinced Zimmerman that Bill Cottrell was one of the stampeders. Bill knew that he could never talk himself out of this mess.

In his nostrils was the lemon smell of crushed creosote bush, the dry odor of desert plants ground to powder. In his ears was the gentle murmur of the wind through the brush, the whisking wings of a bird flying low, the rustling sound made by a jerky, mottled brown lizard. All about him lay the freedom of the wild country and yet he was a prisoner, who dared not even move for fear of death.

Bill's thoughts were in a turmoil. Every feeling within him cried out for a savage resistance against Slick Arada, yet his common sense warned him it would be useless, even fatal.

Six-guns wouldn't do him any good now. He couldn't even see Slick to shoot at. He must find some other way out.

Loud yells and the firing of signal shots from the direction of the ruined cattle camp told him that there was no time to lose.

Very deliberately Bill unloaded his guns, holstered them, and then lifted his hands in token of surrender.

"Yuh got me, Slick," he said. "I cain't fight you and the whole Triangle 7 crew at the same time. What do yuh want of me?"

"Now yo're talkin'," exulted Slick Arada. "Climb aboard yore old skate and come along. We'll find a hide-out first. Then we'll have heap big medicine talk."

Bill led his fagged bronc up the steeper portion of the slope, before he mounted and started down the other side ahead of Slick Arada. Slick had sheathed his rifle and now covered Bill with a six-gun. The

outlaw's roughly bandaged left arm wasn't much use to him.

Young Cottrell did not know the country very well, but Slick seemed to savvy every trail and crossroads.

In front of them loomed an impassable barrier of rocky cliffs, shining with purple quartz, fused fluorite crystals, and brilliant sky-blue azurite. As far as eye could reach on both sides of them, this mountain of stone blocked their paths.

"We're trapped," said Bill Cottrell. "You've got yourself into a blind draw. I reckon I should have given myself up in the first place."

On their back trail Bill could hear the yells of their pursuers and the drum of many hoofs. Zimmerman's men had cut their sign and were hot after them on fresh broncs. Young Cottrell's fagged cayuse never could get away from them.

"Keep goin'," snarled Slick Arada. "Foller that windin' deer path up the slope."

Slick's evil face was twisted with pain from the wound in his arm. He had to grit his teeth to repress an agonized groan. But his eyes held a grim determined look and he seemed to know what he was doing.

Suddenly the deer path brought them to a cleft in a limestone wall, that here and there had been changed into marble by the ravages of time and weather. The footing was bad, round stones, sharp rock slivers. Bill eased his horse through the cleft slowly, with Slick following right behind him.

Abruptly they emerged onto a wide prairie, that stretched in rolling swells clear to the distant horizon.

Slick dismounted in the shade of an overhanging rock and motioned with his gun for Bill to do likewise. Spring water trickling down over the rim rock formed a clear pool at the base of the cliff.

Slick dashed cold water into his swollen eyes and over his swarthy, sweat-streaked face. Then began to rip the temporary bandages off his crimson-stained arm. Bill Cottrell drank deeply before he gave his attention to Slick's ragged, gory wound.

Slick held a cocked gun almost against Bill's body as young Cottrell washed out the oozing red gash in the flesh and made a new bandage with a piece ripped off his under-shirt.

"What's yore game, Slick?" asked Bill, when he had finished and had loosened the saddle cinches and staked out the broncs. "Why did yuh do it?"

"Shut yore trap," growled Slick, whose lip trembled from pain and shock. "I ain't answerin' no questions. Lay face down on the ground."

A thrill of fear shot through Bill Cottrell. What was Slick going to do to him? Would Arada kill him now that he had bandaged that arm?

Keenly Bill's hazel eyes bored into Slick's narrowed black ones. He straightened up defiantly.

"I ain't layin' down," he growled. "I doctored yore wound. You promised to help me get away. If you aim to kill me, go ahead and shoot. I'll take it standin' up."

"I ain't killin' yuh," grumbled Slick, "not unless yuh force me to it. I'm purty bad hit. I figure to need yuh for a while, until we get out of danger country. Then yuh kin go your way, and I'll go mine. Until then, I got to keep yuh tied up. Now will you lay down there, or do I have to knock yuh out?"

Bill protested and argued, sparing for time. Not until he saw a mad, savage light begin to burn in Slick's eyes did he obey and let the

outlaw tie him. It was either that or be killed.

Slick left Bill lying on his blankets at the entrance to the narrow pass, where the young puncher could hear any one who entered the rocky cleft from the other end.

Then weakly the outlaw piled down on his own bedding, stretched out, closed his eyes, and groaned.

"My arm's burnin' up," he moaned. "I got to get to a doctor quick, or blood pizenin' will set in. We'll start again as soon as me and the hosses is rested. You stay awake and listen for trouble, Cottrell. That's yore job."

Bill Cottrell did not answer. Already his brain was working in a plan for escape. If he could only capture Slick and get a confession out of him, he still might have a chance of squaring himself with Bob Zimmerman. It was his only chance.

The blazing sun beat down squarely on Bill's head, but he made no effort to shift into the shade. His whole attention was fixed on Slick Arada.

The black-browed killer lay on his back, eyes closed, arms outflung, one hand gripping a gun that was already cocked and ready to fire. Bill had plenty of time to study the treacherous Triangle 7 *segundo*, and the more he looked, the more puzzled he became.

Slick was swarthy and evil-eyed, but he also had been a hard-working range waddy, a good cattleman, and an expert straw boss. Bob Zimmerman had been paying Slick sixty dollars a month, which was better than top wages. Why had Slick turned against Zimmerman?

Finally he gave up trying to solve the puzzle and began rubbing the rope around his wrists against a sharp rock. Slick kept opening his

eyes and peering at Bill from underneath his hat brim. Young Cottrell had to watch the outlaw closely to keep from behind caught.

He felt his wrists pull free and his heart leaped. Now he had a fighting chance. His legs were tied with a slip-knot. He had only to reach down and yank that rope, and he was free.

Slick Arada suddenly sat up and swung his gun around on Bill Cottrell. Bill, keeping his hands behind him, froze motionless.

But Slick did not shoot. Instead, he got painfully to his feet and limped around a promontory of rock, out of sight. Just as he vanished from view, Bill saw him reach into his pocket and take out something wrapped in leather.

Instantly Bill Cottrell reached down and yanked the ropes from his legs. Then he was on his feet, speeding noiselessly over to where both rifles lay on Slick's bed.

A man moved out into plain view in front of him. Slick Arada, teeth bared in a snarl, flaming gun jiggling in his hand! Bill felt powder sting his face. The blast of exploding shells rocked his senses. Blinding pain stabbed through him from hair to toe, and then his head seemed to swell up and burst in a thousand pieces.

IV.

Voices dinned in Bill Cottrell's ears. It was the first thing he was conscious of as his senses slowly returned. His head still throbbed. A gory gash in the side of his skull burned like fire.

He opened his eyes, but closed them quickly again against the burning brightness of the sun. But in that brief glimpse he saw men all around him and knew that it was the Triangle 7 crew. At first the

talk was just a jumble. Then he made out Slick Arada's husky voice and Bob Zimmerman's rumbling comments.

"I was lucky to nail him after he'd wounded me," Slick was saying. "He headed right fer this slit in the rocks. I guess he knowed the country purty well and had his get-away all planned out."

"But why did he do it?" growled Bob Zimmerman. "Bill Cottrell seemed like a nice kid. I still can hardly believe he'd kill off my cattle and my cowboys like he done. The lad must have gone crazy. Didn't he say nothin' as to why he started the stampede?"

"Nary a word," grunted Slick. "Yuh see I follered him here. Then he seed me and plugged my arm. But my bullet creased him, and so there he lays."

"That's a lie!"

The words came like a thunder-clap to the astonished cattlemen. Every one turned toward Bill Cottrell, who was struggling up to a sitting position. Bill's youthful features were almost completely masked by a mixture of mud and gore. His head kept lolling on his neck, and he had to use all his will power to keep his chin from dropping on his chest.

Half a dozen guns covered young Cottrell. Slick Arada yanked out his own hogleg, cocked it, and brought it down toward the youthful puncher.

"Don't shoot!" barked Bob Zimmerman. "I'll plug the first man that fires. I ain't satisfied with this yet."

The huge Triangle 7 boss reached Bill Cottrell in three long strides and stood spraddle-legged, staring down at him.

"Yuh double-crossin' pup!" he snarled. "I oughter let them plug

yuh. Yore lies won't do no good. I seen yuh stampede my stock. I seen yuh shoot down one of my men and kill my horse under me. Yo're goin' to die. Don't go to meet yore Maker with a lie on yore lips. I'm givin' yuh a chance to tell the truth. Why did yuh do this thing to me?"

There was almost a choking sob in Bob Zimmerman's voice as he spoke the last words. The death of one of his hands hit him hard. And the loss of the stock was a terrible blow.

Bill Cottrell lowered his head and buried it in his hands.

"I'm innocent," he vowed. "Slick Arada done this. I caught him with them stampede hosses. I shot him to try to stop him from sendin' them down on yore herd. It was him plugged yore cowboy and shot yore hoss. I swear it's the truth."

A loud roar burst from Bob Zimmerman's throat.

"Lies!" he bellowed. "Whinin', snivelin' lies! Make a hang noose, boys. We're stringin' him up here and now, from that rock up there."

Some one produced a noosed rope. Two cowboys dragged Bill roughly to his feet and started yanking him up a steep path to the top of an overhanging rock. There were no trees for miles around.

Bill felt his strength returning, but he was still not husky enough to break the grip of the lynchers. The rest of the cowpunchers followed, as his pair of captors hauled him out onto the finger of stone. One of them covered young Cottrell with a gun while the other fastened the loose end of the hang rope over a quartz nubbin.

Bill's thoughts were flaming. He threw his whole weight on his captor, as if he were about to faint. They hadn't tied his hands. He must stop them from doing that.

A sudden hope had sparked in his mind. He remembered about Slick Arada going around the rock to hide that leather-wrapped package. Did it contain evidence against Slick?

Bill turned toward Bob Zimmerman to speak up. Then he saw Slick Arada right down below him, grinning up at him and a new idea came to him.

His captor loosened his hold slightly as the other cowboy reached out with the noose to slip it around Bill's neck.

Suddenly Bill Cottrell became a kicking, clawing bobcat. One fist knocked a puncher backward. A hard kick caused the other hangman to stumble.

Grabbing the rope, Bill slid down it, heedless of how it burned his hands. Ten feet from the ground he dropped squarely on Slick Arada, just as the outlaw started to flee. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

Br-r-rang! A bullet plugged into the ground only inches from Bill's foot.

Bang! Crash! Bang! A hail of lead followed the first shot.

But already Bill had rolled over, close up against the cliff where he was protected by a slight overhang of the rock. He saw Slick Arada stagger drunkenly erect, pawing wildly for a gun, and he put on speed to reach the tip of the promontory.

Bang! Slick's first shot hit high on the rim rock.

Then Bill dodged out of sight around the point. By instinct he knew where Slick had hidden his package. There was a little cove, its floor studded with boulders.

Leaping in among them, Bill darted a swift glance around. He saw broken-down brush, a scooped-up pile of sand and he quickly dug into it with his fingers.

His hands closed over a holstered gun just as Slick Arada's evil, swarthy face popped into sight like a jack-in-the-box. Slick flung a quick shot that missed.

Bill jerked the newly found gun from the leather, cocked it and fired, praying that the weapon was loaded. It roared and kicked back. Slick Arada dropped to one knee and almost fell on his face.

"Surrender!" yelled Bill. "Give up, or I'll plug yuh again."

"To blazes with yuh!" shrieked Slick. "I got you, yuh outlaw skunk!" He lifted his gun and triggered hot slugs as he spoke.

Steady as a rock, Bill Cottrell answered him, shot for shot. Slick slumped forward on his face, but still he kept shooting.

"Yo're a goner, Slick!" cried Bill. "Give yoreself up and confess. Don't die condemning an honest man. You know I'm innocent."

Slick's answer was a shot that dug into the flesh of Bill's hip. Bill Cottrell's bullet knocked a tiny spray of alkali from Slick's shirt front, and it was all over. Slick was dead.

Over beyond the barrier of boulders Bill heard the tramp of running feet and the shouts of the Triangle 7 men as they charged down on him.

"Get the murderin' coyote!" Bob Zimmerman was yelling. "Shoot him down. Don't give him no quarter."

Bill heard the words with a sinking heart. Hopelessly he fumbled cartridges from his belt and plugged them into the hot gun. He had hoped to find evidence. All he had got was a gun. Well at least it would help him to sell his life dearly.

"Don't show yore heads!" he rapped out. "I'll kill yuh. I'm innocent and I ain't lettin' nobody hang me."

A sudden thought struck him and he scooped up the mound of sand again where he had found the gun. His fingers closed over a package wrapped in leather.

Quickly he tossed it over the rocks to the Triangle 7 men. There was no time to lose. No time to open it and see what it contained. He had to trust to luck that here was evidence against Slick Arada.

"There's the goods on Slick Arada," he shouted boldly. "Look it over before yuh risk yore lives tryin' to capture me."

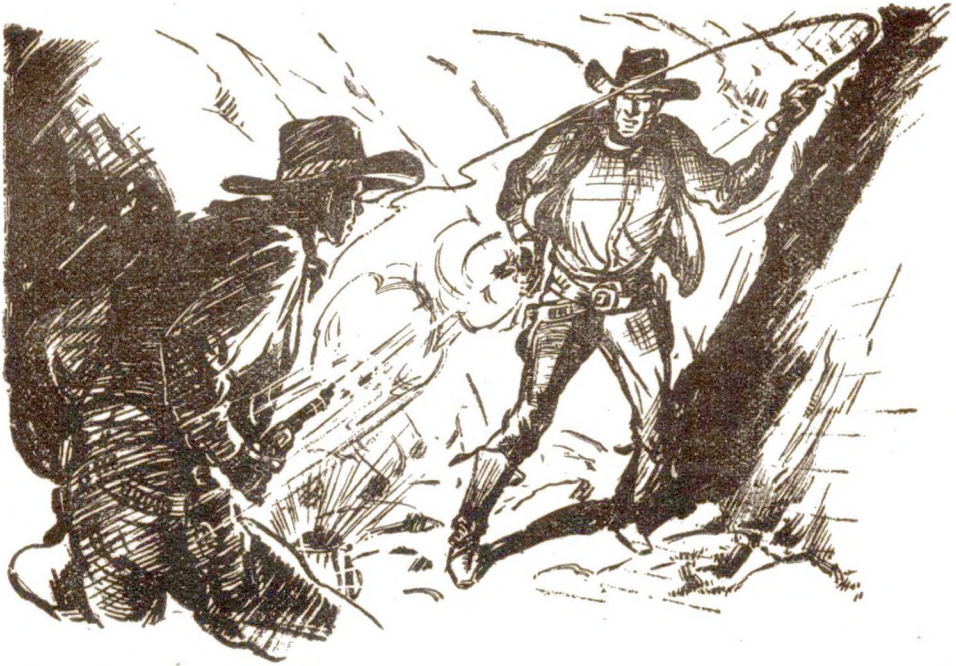
There was a long moment of silence. Bill's heart drummed like a trip hammer. His throat was dry. Would the thing pan out? Was there really evidence in that package?

"Hey, Bill!" shouted Bob Zimmerman. "Come on out. Yo're right. Yuh ketched the dirty man-killing dawg. Holster yore gun and come on out here."

Suddenly Bill felt weak. He almost staggered out, to be greeted by cowboys crowding around to shake his hand. Bob Zimmerman patted him on his back and held up a "wanted" circular in front of his eyes. On it was the picture of Slick Arada, only his real name was Arturo Bustamente.

"But still I don't understand why he done it?" said Bill, who was happy enough to yell out loud.

"That's because yo're a new-comer," Bob Zimmerman explained. "It was before yore time that we busted up the Bustamente rustler gang. I killed Zongo Bustamente personal. This jasper, known as Slick Arada, got on with me and watched his chance to get revenge. Zongo must 'a' been his brother. Son, yuh done a good job wipin' out this quick-trigger killer, and I won't forget it."



Gun Ghosts Of Cougar Gulch

An "Oklahoma Kid" Novelette

By Lee Bond

Author of "Calamity Pays A Visit," etc.

CHAPTER I.

GHOST TOWN TROUBLE.

THE nerves of Jack Reese, who was more commonly called the "Oklahoma Kid," were the case-hardened nerves of a man who faced constant danger. Reward posters dotted the Arizona Territory's length and breadth—posters with the Kid's picture on them and the information that he was wanted dead or alive. Those posters offered

a small fortune in rewards for the Kid's apprehension, and charged him with almost every foul crime known to mankind.

The wiry little outlaw was used to seeing those posters, just as he had grown used to being mighty careful about giving some bounty-hunting citizen or a lawman a chance to plug him. The snarl of bullets and the burn of them in his flesh had never struck any real terror to the Kid's heart. Yet he stood now, shaking

in the grip of a nameless dread which hammered at him until his nerves were taut and raw-edged.

The Kid was standing inside what had once been a big saloon. Moonlight filtered through the dusty windowpane, striking into the Kid's lean face. The outlaw's beady, close-set black eyes were straining out along a weed-grown plot that had once been a street. In each slim hand the Kid gripped an ivory-butt .45 Colt, and his thumbs were hooked over the knurled hammers, ready to pull them back.

His keen eyes raked swiftly along the overgrown street, searched the long unused buildings which flanked it on the opposite side. The outlaw shivered a little, pressed his face closer to the dusty window pane. His thin, cruelly down-curving lips were pressed into a hard line, and the nostrils of his long, crooked nose flared and quivered.

From somewhere came the sounds that had brought the Oklahoma Kid bounding out of his blankets behind the ancient bar. And those sounds were the steady, unmistakable *tramp-tramp-tramp* of slow-moving feet, accompanied by the *clink-clank, clink-clank* of heavy chains.

"That's men walkin' in leg irons, sure as shootin'," the Kid breathed hoarsely. "But where are they?"

His own whispering startled him. Then he grinned at his own foolishness, and the grin, strangely enough, made him look meaner, more cruel, than ever.

This huddle of weather-beaten adobe buildings with their warped and broken false fronts had once been the boom mining town of Cougar Gulch. But the gold which had brought the town to roaring life had played out ten years before, and since that time Cougar Gulch had been forgotten by most men.

The Oklahoma Kid had drifted into the deep, red-walled gulch three days before, hunting some safe place where he might hide out and rest for a while. Deputy Sheriff Ed Sparks from Two Forks had given the Kid a lot of trouble lately, and the ugly little outlaw felt the need of a rest.

Playing tag through the hills with gawky, bug-eyed Deputy Sparks for a day or so at a time was not so bad. But when the rattle-headed deputy kept at it for over a week, the Kid felt that it was time to hide out and let Ed Sparks cool off.

And the Kid had been more than pleased when he discovered this long-forgotten town. There was a little stream through the center of the gulch, and plenty of tough grass grew along the stream to keep the Kid's chunky bay horse well fed. Then, too, these old adobe buildings offered the Kid excellent shelter, and he could live here in peace. Or so he had thought on discovering the ghost town.

The Kid had had little rest, however. On the very first night, he had barely bedded down in the old saloon when he heard the eerie clanking of those chains and the shuffling, unsteady steps of men. Ghostly sounds, in a ghost town!

The Kid had been uneasy at first, then baffled, and finally amazed. For on that first night, as on this night, he had stood staring out the dusty window without seeing a single thing move along the street. The second night had been the same, and now, the third night, the Kid's nerves were raw, his eyes looked bloodshot and sunken, and there was an unnatural tightness about his thin, hard mouth.

As had been the case on the other two nights, the sounds of those shuffling steps and clanking chains faded gradually to a whisper, then

died. But the Kid knew that each hour the sounds would come again. That would keep up until daylight, when the shuffling steps and clanking chains would fade, not to return until the day waned into night once more.

During the daylight hours, the Oklahoma Kid had searched every nook and cranny of the town. But nowhere had he found so much as a single boot print or a single trampled weed to tell him that men had passed in the night. Yet men were passing somewhere close to him each night, for there was no mistaking that shuffling tread of heavily shod feet. And whoever those men were, they moved about shackled together.

The Kid was not superstitious, otherwise he would have attributed the strange sounds to ghosts and quit the town at a high lope. Those sounds were made by living, breathing human beings, of that the Kid held no doubt.

On the second night, he had heard a jangling of chains, as if some man had fallen. There came a sharp, clapping sound after that, then a thin eerie scream. The Kid had stood bathed in cold sweat for an hour after that scream had died and the shuffle of feet and clank of chains had continued.

"It's got me," he breathed now, moving back from the window. "Out there somewhere men in chains are walkin'. But where are they?"

The Kid holstered his ivory-butted guns, stalked back to the long unused bar and went behind it. He sank down on his blankets which he had spread there, and tried to reason this thing out. He struck a match, carefully concealing the flame, and looked at his watch.

"Quarter past eight," he muttered. "And about a quarter past nine, the sounds of them chains and shufflin'

feet will come again. But where in blazes are the hombres who make such sounds?"

The Kid blew out the match, pocketed the big silver watch. He was weary in every fiber of his hard young body, for he had slept very little since arriving in the old town. Yet sleep refused to come now as he stretched out on his blankets, fully clad.

The Kid tried for nearly half an hour to stop his whirling thoughts and go to sleep. But he saw that it was useless, and was getting to his feet when a sound throbbled through the night to jar his ragged nerves. The sound increased steadily, and the Kid knew that somewhere shod hoofs were approaching the old town at a stiff clip.

The outlaw rushed down the long room to the front window, fully expecting to stare at the empty old street without seeing a single living thing, while the sounds faded as the clump of feet and rattle of chains had faded hour after hour through the past few nights. But the Kid's eyes made only one sweep along the street when his body went tense, and his lean hands dropped instinctively to the butts of his guns.

Riders were pouring into the upper end of that street, and the Kid could see that they carried rifles gripped for instant action. Then the Kid's eyes focused on the leader of those oncoming riders, and his lips skinned back from big, crooked teeth in a silent snarl. That lanky hombre in the lead carried a huge scattergun, and was craning his long neck right and left as he slowed his horse to a walk.

"Ed Sparks!" the Oklahoma Kid breathed softly. "And the bug-eyed, jug-headed cuss has gathered him a big posse. Must be fifteen or more o' them fellers. An' I'm caught,

with my hoss a half mile, or mebbe more, away!"

CHAPTER II.

ED SPOTS THE KID.

DEPUTY ED SPARKS halted his horse directly before the old saloon. The lank deputy was swearing angrily, one hand lifted as he jerked at the ends of his ragged brown mustache.

"This hyar hoss o' mine won't go no further out towards the middle o' thet weedy street," the deputy called.

"Our brones is scairt o' them weeds, too," some hombre called. "Ed, we better take it easy. I'll bet they's a den o' rattlers in them weeds."

"Say, yo're likely right, Jim." The big deputy's hat bobbed in the bright moonlight as he nodded. "Rattlesnakes is likely ter den in a ghost town like this. But the rattler we want is the Oklahomy Kid an' them hired gunnies o' his."

"This would shore be a good place fer the Kid an' his gang to hole up," some hombre growled. "Even if the coyotes couldn't spend any o' the six thousand dollars they took offn the stage they robbed ten days ago."

"What we want to do is git them under our guns," another voice put in. "They murdered that stage driver, the guard, an' them two drummers that was passengers colder than ary murder was ever done before."

"To say nothin' of what they done to the express messenger, the fireman an' the engineer o' that train the skunks stuck up this side o' Benson jist afore noon to-day," a third voice lifted angrily. "I heard how them outlaws stuffed the fireman an' the engineer in the firebox alive, then gouged out the express messenger's

eyes an' finally cut his throat. Such men ought to be——"

"Stop such brainless jabber, the lot o' yuh!" a grim voice cut in.

The Oklahoma Kid recognized that voice instantly as belonging to lank old Al Tapper, Two Forks sheriff. And the Kid saw the sheriff spurring his snorting, uneasy bronc forward now. The ugly little outlaw could well imagine that the peppery old sheriff was scowling plenty as he turned his horse about to face the posse.

"Them blasted bandits did burn the engineer an' fireman to death, an' yuh don't need to take my head off about it, Al Tapper," an angry voice called. "I heard——"

"Yuh heard!" the lean old sheriff snorted. "Sim, yuh an' the rest shore make a fine posse. Yuh set here chatterin' like a bunch o' barnyard guinea hens, instead o' surroundin' this town like I told yuh. The fireman an' engineer were murdered cold to-day when the train was stuck up. But they wasn't burned a-tall. An' the express messenger on the train was shot through the heart when he opened the door."

"Yeah, yo're stickin' up fer thet Oklahomy Kid ag'in!" Deputy Ed Sparks charged. "Yo're scairt us boys has him cornered at last, thet's what."

"Ed," the old sheriff's voice came dangerously calm, "I'll bend a gun on that thick head o' yores one o' these days. Regardless o' how bad a name he's got, the Oklahoma Kid never stole a dime's worth of anything in his life."

"Then how come the law wants him to the tune o' several thousand dollars?" a thick voice countered.

"Because o' rattleheads like yuh jaspers!" the sheriff flung at them hotly. "Every time a low-down crime is committed, folks start yap-

pin' the Kid's name, accusin' him o' the devilment. An' while fellers like yuh try gunnin' the Kid down fer scalp money, he's playin' a game that takes real nerve."

"Such as what, Al?" a calm-voiced man asked.

"If yuh'd been in the country long, Gregg, yuh'd know that the Oklahoma Kid makes a business of huntin' down other outlaws," the sheriff snapped. "An' the Kid has brought more owl-hooters to justice than any dozen peace officers have. It's a danged shame we ain't got *more* outlaws like the Kid."

"Suppose you're right about this Kid not bein' mixed in these two jobs lately," the calm-voiced Gregg said. "In case the Oklahoma Kid didn't help pull them two robberies an' the murders, who did?"

"I never knowed but one bunch that done the sort o' useless, cold killin' that was done when the stage was robbed the other day an' when the train was robbed this mornin'," the lean old sheriff answered after a long pause.

"Ever since the Oklahomy Kid hit these parts jist sich ornery things has been did," Deputy Ed Sparks snorted through his bulb of a nose. "An' I'll bet yo're jist tryin' ter perfect ol' Ugly right now, Al Tapper."

"When this old town of Cougar Gulch was boomin', over ten years ago, a gun hawk named Satan Thorn bossed it," the sheriff went on as if he had not heard his deputy's words. "Satan Thorn had two cronies—a stocky, thick-built feller named Limpy Doak an' a lean gun wolf named Vic Quade. Them three used to do the kind of jobs that was done on the stage an' on the train. Them three was the kind that killed for the fun of killin'."

For a full minute the only sounds were the squeak of leather as horses

breathed and the occasional stamp of shod hoofs. Then a man laughed grittily, and the spell was broken.

"So that's why yuh wanted to come all the way to this deserted town, eh?" a voice called sarcastically. "Al, I never thought I'd see the day when yuh'd git so batty yuh'd go chasin' gun ghosts in a ghost town. Satan Thorn an' them two pals o' his was kilt down acrost the line after they ransacked this town an' made a run fer it."

"So I heard," the old sheriff said wearily. "But somehow, boys, I had to have a look around here. That stage job an' the train job had all the earmarks o' Satan Thorn's work."

"Thet ornery Satan Thorn an' his two pals got theirs ten year ago," Deputy Sparks snorted. "Al, yuh've fetched us on a wild-goose chase, that's what. When we ketch ol' Ugly, we'll have the brains o' thet robber gang."

"Hit the ground, an' spread out over the town," Sheriff Tapper ordered. "If any one has camped around here, we can find it out quick enough. But we've set here gabbin' so blamed long that an army could have pulled a sneak-out on us by now."

The Oklahoma Kid moved softly back away from the window, hands trembling from excitement as he unconsciously eased his guns in their holsters.

"Gosh, a stage and a train robbed, with seven hombres murdered," the Kid gasped. "An' that posse has got me hemmed in. If I could make it out the back——"

Crash! In his nervousness the Kid bumped into a dusty old chair, sent it sprawling. And from the street outside came yelps, harsh voices.

"In thar!" Ed Sparks roared. "Head fer the back, men, whilst I

take the front. Some feller made a fuss in the old saloon buildin' thar."

Boots hammered along each wall of the old saloon, and the Kid saw Ed Sparks plant himself in the yawning doorway, scattergun cocked and leveled.

"I see yuh, hombre!" the deputy's voice boomed. "Claw ceilin' an' come towards me slow an' keerful, or I'll blast yuh with a double dose o' blue whistlers!"

CHAPTER III.

DEATH PLUNGE?

THE Oklahoma Kid stood perfectly still, beady eyes glued to the deputy's lanky form. The deputy was trying to run a bluff, of course, for he certainly could not see anything within the gloomy old saloon. But the Kid's hands felt clammy, and prickles of dread ran along his spine.

Ed Sparks might be rattle-headed and somewhat thick-witted, but he did not know the meaning of the word "fear." The deputy would be charging into the room before long, and the Oklahoma Kid was trying desperately to think of some way out of this trap.

If he moved Ed would hear him, no question of that. Even the slightest scrape of boots over the dusty old floor would reach the officer's ears instantly. And the Kid knew from bitter experience that Ed Sparks was *not* bluffing about using that scattergun.

The Kid could think of but one trick which might work. He felt around until he found the chair he had overturned, lifted it with the utmost caution. He had to move slowly, for even in the gloom of the old building a swift motion might be seen by keen eyes.

Fortunately, the wide wooden

awning which protected the front of the saloon building was not completely down. The roof of the awning was full of holes, which let bright patches of moonlight stream through. But the old awning kept moonlight from straining into the doorway, which would have made the interior of the big saloon exceedingly dangerous grounds for the Kid at the moment.

Knowing the goggle-eyed deputy's habit of plunging into things without thinking, the Oklahoma Kid had lifted the old chair, intending to hurl it far across the room. If Ed Sparks ran true to form, he would empty both barrels of his wicked scattergun toward the sound. And that would give the Kid a chance to make a run for it.

Ed Sparks and the others would probably shoot at the sounds of his hammering feet with six-guns and rifles. But the Kid was willing to risk that, since the men would be unable to take any aim at all. That scattergun needed little aiming, however, and the Kid knew it would be suicide to run for it so long as Ed Sparks had that buckshot gun ready for action.

All those thoughts hammered through the Kid's agile brain as he lifted the old chair, tensed his shoulder and arm muscles. But the Kid never flung that chair.

A quick mutter of voices came from the possemen who were out there in the weedy street. Then a thick silence settled, and through that silence came the tramp of heavily shot feet and the rattle of chains.

The Oklahoma Kid heard those sounds, and his skin felt suddenly clammy as he lowered the chair quietly to the floor. Up in the doorway Deputy Ed Sparks made a gasping sound, whirled on one heel.

"Surround 'em, men!" The deputy's braying bellow brought startled oaths from possemen out in the street. "Hear them chains an' them feet?" the deputy was howling. "Locate the snakes, boys, an' surround 'em. Quick, afore they escape."

The Oklahoma Kid heard other men shouting, heard the slapping of feet as possemen raced along each side of the old saloon building to head for the front. And now the Kid went into action.

He knew well enough that the sounds of those feet and the clinking of chains would cease within a few moments. Ed Sparks and the others would be baffled, no question of that.

They would spend some little time trying to figure the thing out. But Ed would remember having heard that chair crash in the old saloon, and come back to investigate before long.

The Oklahoma Kid knew that he had a chance now which might never present itself again. He rushed down the long room, passed the old bar, and came to the back door. He listened a moment, then opened the back door and stepped swiftly out into the moonlight.

The Kid's flesh crawled, and he caught himself tensing, as if he fully expected to feel the burn of a bullet. But the weed-grown alley was empty of life, and the Kid darted along it at top speed.

He raced along behind the buildings for two hundred yards, then swerved sharply into a thicket of mesquite which slanted down to the edge of the little stream.

When they searched the old saloon back there they would find his bed. The posse would also find his meager supply of clothing and food there beside the big fireplace in a back

room which had once been the living quarters of the proprietor.

The Kid had not slept in that back room with its dusty furniture for fear of being trapped since the thick walls would permit little sound to reach him from the outside. But he had cooked his food and eaten back there, which the posse would soon discover.

Such things were not worrying the Kid a great deal at the moment, however. His main concern right now was locating Shorty, his chunky little bald-faced bay bronc. The Kid had sighted Shorty just before sunset, well up the gulch, grazing in a pocket where the grass was thickest. Knowing that he might have to make just such an exit from the ghost town as he was now making, the Kid had left his riding gear swinging in a mesquite tree.

He came to the tree now, panting heavily. He rested a moment, listening to the shouts which came from the town. The Kid grinned faintly when he detected a note of baffled anger in that shouting.

"So yuh jaspers can't find where them chained men are walkin', eh?" the outlaw muttered. "Well, dang it, I reckon I could 'a' figured it out sooner or later, if I'd been left alone."

The Kid took his saddle from the tree, looped the bridle over the horn and tucked the saddle blanket under one arm. He worked up along the stream through the brush, grunting under the weight of the saddle, ears straining for sounds that would lead him to his grazing horse.

The Kid came into the pocket where Shorty had been before sunset, and stood listening for several moments. He heard his bronc now, and started on up the canyon. But he halted, whirled into the dark shadows at the base of a tall red

bluff, and crouched close to the rocky ground. Hoofs were roaring down the gulch behind him, coming his direction.

The Kid left his saddle, darted into a thick clump of brush, and crouched close to the ground. Peering out through the branches he saw Ed Sparks leading the posse at a breakneck speed.

"He was a little feller, Ed, an' had on a yaller shirt, buckskin trousers an' a grayish-lookin' John B.," a shrill-voiced hombre was yelling above the pound of hoofs. "I seen him plain fer a minute when he quit the town an' headed fer that bresh."

"Ol' Ugly, shore as sin!" Ed Sparks roared. "Thet was the Oklahomy Kid, Gus. An' yuh'll git half the reward if I snag him. Spread out, boys, an' comb this gulch. He couldn't 'a' got past hyar on foot in this short a time."

The Kid snarled under his breath, slid through the brush, and went racing back the way he had come, hugging the deep shadows at the base of the cliff. The Kid had not counted the possemen, yet he thought they were all stringing after Ed Sparks.

"My best bet now is to cut back through town an' get on that thin ridge at the other side," the Kid panted.

He forced his aching legs to carry him over brush and boulders at top speed. Those possemen would come riding back once they had thrown their gun net across the canyon, and the Kid knew he had to be out of the gulch before they jumped him like a rabbit.

He was staggering when he reached the fringe of brush which had sheltered him as he quit the town and headed for the little creek. But the Kid kept going, and held to the brush as long as possible. He

could hear the possemen yelling back up the gulch, and realized that they were sweeping along brush patches and the bluffs, trying to rout him out.

The Kid set his teeth against the pain of overtaxed lungs, forced his numbed legs to keep propelling him forward. He quit the brush at last, angled for the weed-grown front street.

He was fifty yards along the old street before he saw the horse which still stood before the old saloon where he had camped. The Kid dropped as if shot, trying to stifle the hoarse gasping of his breathing.

He lay for several moments, heart thudding from the hard running he had done, ears straining for sounds. Had one of the posse men stayed behind to spot him in case he came back?

That thought brought a grim quirk to the Kid's thin mouth. He did not dare turn back to the gulch, for that meant running smack into Ed Sparks and the others.

"But I can crawl plumb through this town if I'm careful," the Kid muttered softly. "These weeds will hide me, an' I can sneak down the street if I watch what I'm doin'."

The Kid's breath was coming easier now, and he began a cautious crawling. The Kid was watching the tops of the tall weeds, trying to see just how much he was causing them to wiggle. He felt the sudden cold blast of air on his hot face, but before the meaning of that could become clear he felt the earth give suddenly under his hands and knees.

The Kid glanced down—into a yawning black hole! He croaked in fright, clawed frantically at the edge of that ominous black slit in the ground. But the side of his head struck hard against the dirt, and he felt himself hurtling down and down.

But even as the Kid tumbled through cold space, he heard a hoarse babble of voices, the sudden shifting of feet, and the metallic *clank-clank* of chains!

CHAPTER IV.

MEN IN CHAINS.

THE Oklahoma Kid landed on solid stone. The fall jarred him so that his breath choked off, and weird lights danced before his eyes. But the Kid was not unconscious.

The ghost men of Cougar Gulch were about him, babbling words the Kid was too dazed to hear. Their feet scraped over stone, and chains clattered noisily. Then a cold something clutched at the Kid's heart, brought his reeling senses back to an even keel.

Hands were reaching out of nowhere, clutching at him, feeling of his arms, his face and head. The Kid could see those clawlike hands. They seemed fastened to half arms only, for the Kid could see nothing more.

Then the last of the fog left his brain, and he felt strangely shaken. He saw now that there were men standing just beyond a thin slice of moonlight. Half-naked men they were, with sunken, burning eyes that shone queerly from bearded faces.

The Oklahoma Kid glanced up, saw a long, yawning slit eight or ten feet over his head. Through that slit he could see up into the moonlit sky. He remembered that sudden breaking of the earth under him as he crawled along the weed-grown street.

The Kid remembered, too, how the horses of the posse men had refused to go out into the street. Those horses had smelled the dank air which came up from this underground dungeon and had known

danger lurked in the weeds. And, too, the Oklahoma Kid was remembering the long hours he had spent trying to see the men whose feet he could hear tramping along to the tune of chains.

The ugly little outlaw realized now that these staring men before him had been moving about here under the ground, and that the sounds they made had come up through that great crack. No wonder he had thought the sounds came from the street, yet could not see the men.

Those thoughts poured through the Oklahoma Kid's mind in the brief moment it took him to scoot back until solid stone stopped him. Away from those reaching hands and arms that showed in the strip of moonlight, he got to his feet, hands dropping to make sure that his guns were still in their holsters.

"We mean yuh no harm, stranger," a choked voice called from before the Kid. "Are yuh hurt any?"

The Kid stood silent, shivering in spite of himself. That voice! Those dimly seen faces, gaunt, half-clad bodies. The outlaw shook his head sharply, as if trying to prove to himself that such things were only the result of his imagination.

But those men were really there. He counted them—six. And he could see the rise and fall of a hair-matted chest as one man stepped a little forward. Chains clanked, and there was the gritty sound of heavy soles over rough stone as the man moved.

"I-I'm all right, hombres," the Kid called a little hoarsely. "But where in tarnation am I? And who are you men?"

"There, Bob!" a voice half sobbed. "I told you he wasn't one o' Satan Thorn's killers. I told you——"

"Satan Thorn?" the Kid cut in.

"Yes, cowboy," came the choked

voice of that first speaker. "I am Bob Colbert, freighter from Two Forks. I——"

"Bob Colbert!" the Kid gasped, stepping suddenly forward. He reached out, laid a hand on one huge, bare shoulder. But the Kid's hand jerked away, and he stared in amazement at the crimson smear on his fingers.

The Kid had never met Colbert, but he had seen the big, smiling man along the trails with his loaded wagons and his sleek, stout mule teams.

"Yes, I'm Bob Colbert," that croaking voice came again. "With me are Joe Breen, Dad Hume, Carl Wayne, Tony Morales, and Gus Gillan. We're in leg irons, cowboy, and not a man among us can keep his feet much longer. We're bein' killed by inches."

The Kid shivered, for there was the hint of a sob in the big man's croaking voice.

"These men have worked for me, cowboy, for many a year," the voice of Colbert went on. "It's my fault that they are here."

"But no, Señor Colbert," came the soft voice of a Mexican. "We do not know that the two great loads of supplies we are hire to haul would be for those Satan Thorn hombre. Nor did you know that we would be made prisoners, whipped an' starved an'——"

"Whipped? Starved?" The Kid gasped the words, hardly believing his own ears.

"Yes, and even worse than that," Bob Colbert croaked. "We were hired to haul two big loads of provisions. A man was to meet us out on the desert, show us where to take the stuff."

"Yeah?" the Kid prompted when the voice choked off.

"Satan Thorn, Limpy Doak, an' Vic Quade met us," the freighter

panted. "Them three were supposed to be dead. But they ain't."

"They brought yuh here?" the Kid prompted again.

"They did," Colbert answered. "They put us in leg irons, and for four nights now we've marched up and down this tunnel, packin' the supplies we hauled. Thorn is layin' plans to sack this whole country. I've heard him say that he'll have fifty men under him—fifty o' the worst killers in the country."

"But where is this stuff yuh men have been packin' stored?" the Kid asked. "And how does Thorn get it into this pit?"

"This ain't a pit," Colbert answered. "It's a cave thet runs clean through that old ghost town an' on through the sharp ridge beyond."

"Yuh mean this tunnel runs plumb through the ridge west o' Cougar Gulch?" the Kid gasped.

"It does," came a thin voice. "The blasted thing opens out in a brushy canyon on yonder side o' that ridge. There in that canyon Satan Thorn and his two pals kilt our mules, burned the wagons. And they've made us carry the supplies into this hide-out."

"There's a big pocket or chamber back a hundred yards or so where this cave ends," Bob Colbert explained. "The supplies are bein' stored there and Thorn aims to drill a doorway which will open from the chamber out into Cougar Gulch."

"Where's Thorn now?" the Kid gritted.

"He took Limpy Doak an' Vic Quade an' went out on top to see who was doin' a lot o' yellin' up there," Colbert croaked. "Butch Roper an' Woolly Carson, the other two cutthroats that are helpin' Thorn, are back in the storeroom, arrangin' the stuff as us men fetch it in."

"A lantern is showin' down yonder!" a voice hissed. "Bob, we better grab up the stuff we dropped when this feller fell in hyar or we'll feel the whip again. Hurry, men. I can't stand another whippin'."

Chains clanked, booted feet moved. Then six men were filing slowly forward.

The Oklahoma Kid's breath whistled through his big, crooked teeth, and his beady black eyes bulged out slowly. As the men passed through the thin stream of moonlight he saw bent and straining backs that were sore with raw gashes and welts, plastered with black patches of dried crimson. But the work these men were doing was keeping the raw cuts open, and fresh crimson gleamed on sweaty skins.

"Cowboy, watch that lantern yuh see bobbin' down yonder," the dull, hopeless voice of Bob Colbert drifted back to the Kid. "When us men get there with our load, the lantern will bob out o' sight when Butch Roper an' Woolly Carson go back into the big chamber. When that happens yuh find that case o' canned stuff I left there."

"What are yuh drivin' at, Colbert?" the Kid asked, stepping down along the tunnel.

"Don't be a fool!" the big man called. "Go back there, up-end that case when the time comes an' get out o' here. Go for help if yuh want, but I figure it'll be too late. This is the last load o' stuff, an' Satan Thorn will end the sufferin' o' me an' these others afore mornin'. He aims to kill us."

"Does he?" the Oklahoma Kid asked, between locked teeth, as he stepped forward more briskly.

"He does!" came a hoarse, snarling voice from a few feet down the dark tunnel. "Stand hitched, whoever yuh are, hombre. Yuh ain't in

the chain gang, I can see that. An' I don't know yore voice."

"No?" the Kid snarled back.

"No!" came the harsh reply. "An' what's more, feller, I'll kill yuh if yuh wiggle a whisker. This is Butch Roper oratin'. That mean anything to yuh?"

"Plenty!" the Oklahoma Kid grated, and leaped as if hurled by great springs.

CHAPTER V.

SATAN THORN STEPS IN.

THE Kid's sudden leap was not as foolhardy as Bob Colbert and the other prisoners thought. The Kid's keen ears would have heard the cocking of guns there in the tunnel, yet he had heard no such sounds. He knew, therefore, that "Butch" Roper had eased up the tunnel without cocking whatever weapon he was holding in his hands.

And the Kid was betting his very life that he could leap across the few feet of space and down Butch Roper with a gun barrel before the tough could cock and fire a weapon.

The Kid heard the sudden clicking of hammer dogs as he sailed through the air, and his muscles tensed, for he realized in that moment that if he missed his first swing slugs would come tearing into his body.

But the Kid did not miss that first swing. Dimly outlined before him was a crouching figure. The Kid could see a hatless, shaggy-looking head above the dark outline of shoulders.

The ugly little hombre's right-hand gun chopped down even as his boots touched the stone floor. There was the dull *splat* of a solid blow, a sighing grunt. Then two guns struck the stone, and a heavy body thudded limply after them.

The Kid stooped, rolled Butch

Roper over. The Kid found the two fallen guns after holstering his own weapons. He shuddered a little when he discovered that both the six-guns were fully cocked.

"Danged good thing Roper wasn't a fanner," the Kid gritted. "But at that, he come close to gettin' me."

"Cowboy!" came the hoarse, frightened voice of big Bob Colbert. "Did—did yuh down Roper?"

"And how!" the Kid called in a low, grim voice. "He's plenty cold for the time bein', men."

The Kid stooped, found criss-crossed belts about Roper's middle that were studded with shells. The Kid ripped the belts off, straightened with them in his hands. He slid back to Bob Colbert and the others.

"Drop the stuff yo're carryin', men," the Kid whispered. "An' Colbert, here's a pair o' six-guns an' two belts loaded with shells."

"Guns!" a creaky voice came hissing. "Bob, we kin perfect ourselves now. Give me one o' them smoke-poles. I want a shot at them——"

"Hey, Butch!" a thin yell shrilled along the gloomy corridor. "What's wrong up thar?"

"Woolly Carson!" Bob Colbert snarled, and the Kid felt the big man trembling beside him. "Blast his skinny carcass, he's the one that's whipped our backs raw. I'm goin' down there an'——"

"Steady!" the Kid snarled. "Yuh men are chained together an' can't move fast. Flatten out on the floor, an' leave that hombre to me."

"Woolly" Carson was yelling again, and the lantern he carried was beginning to bob as he rushed along the cavern floor. "Butch, can't yuh hear me?" his thin voice wailed eerily in the tunnel. "Blast it, what's wrong with yuh?"

"Nothin'," the Kid called back,

making his voice hoarse. "I'm comin', Woolly."

The jiggling blob of light that was the lantern stopped. Woolly Carson sat the lantern down, used both hands to lower the hammer of the cocked six-gun he had been carrying.

The Oklahoma Kid's boots beat a grim tattoo along the cavern floor. The Kid could see the tall, stoop-shouldered Carson now, and could see his hatchet face twisting into a sneering grin.

"So them sore-backed skunks was loafin', was they?" Woolly shrilled. "Waal, jist wait until they git down hyar. I'll feed 'em some more whip ter pep 'em up." He laughed a mean, cackling laugh, dropped a grimy hand to the pliant coils of a rawhide whip which was looped under his belt.

The Oklahoma Kid's beady eyes slitted, and over his face came that twisted, unnerving grin. He paced straight into the circle of lantern light, hands swinging at his sides. One hand lifted briefly, to shove the Stetson far back on his black hair.

Then the Kid's unnerving grin widened, for Woolly Carson had glanced up, was staring in slack-jawed amazement. The skinny rascal's grimy left hand still clung to the pliant coils of the rawhide whip as if he were unable to loosen his crooked fingers. His right hand crooked, poised above the butt of the gun he had holstered not long ago.

"Who—who in blazes are yuh?" Carson gasped. But before the Kid could answer, the bony cutthroat was shuttling backward, face suddenly white and snarling.

"I know yuh!" Carson half screamed. "Yo're the Oklahomy Kid, that's who! An' yo're allus pokin' that crooked nose into other folks's business."

"I'm apt to draw chips in the kind of a game Satan Thorn an' yuh other skunks are hatchin' here, if that's what yuh mean," the Kid rasped. "Leave that gun alone, Carson, or I'll ream yuh."

"Like heck yuh will," Woolly Carson sneered. "Kid, this is trail's end fer yuh. I never seen the man yet I couldn't outshoot. An' what a reward I'll git fer sunnin' yore moccasins!"

Woolly Carson did two things at once, and did them fast. His left hand yanked the pliant whip loose from his belt. A flick of his wrist whirled the whip back over his shoulder, then brought it whistling forward and out. And at the same time, his bony right hand was ripping the gun from the holster at his thigh.

Even in that split second of death-laden time, the Oklahoma Kid found himself admiring Woolly Carson's headwork. Ninety-nine men out of a hundred would dodge from that licking whiplash, try to avoid it. And regardless of how fast a man might be on the draw, that moment when he was concerned with dodging the whiplash would spell his doom. For Woolly Carson was fast, blindingly fast.

Those things ripped through the Oklahoma Kid's brain like stabs of lightning. And at the same moment, the Kid's lean hands were dipping to the ivory butts of those famous guns.

The ugly little outlaw tensed, knowing that he must take the whiplash full in the face without so much as rocking his head sidewise. And even as he made that resolve, the Kid's guns were out.

The whip bit into the flesh under his right eye, blinding him with pain at the moment. But the Kid's lean thumbs had slipped from knurled

gun hammers just as the whip struck. The Kid felt the wind of a bullet past his ear, and knew that Woolly had fired, too.

But that was the last time that Woolly would ever fire a gun. The bony rascal stood swaying, whip and smoking gun hanging limply at his sides. There was a dazed, unbelieving expression on his ugly face, and his slack lips were beginning to turn crimson. Then he shuddered, pitched silently forward, dead before his long body smacked the stone floor.

The Oklahoma Kid shrugged, reloaded a chamber in each of his guns, and holstered the weapons. With a corner of his red neckerchief he wiped crimson from the swollen gash under his eye. Booted feet and the clank of chains close behind him told him that Bob Colbert and the other freighters had not hugged the floor as he had asked them to.

The Kid turned, gasping a little as the six men shuffled into the circle of lantern light. Their gaunt faces and sunken eyes looked like the faces of dead men, and the Kid felt a new flaring of raw rage when he saw the badly cut and swollen backs and arms of the men. But Bob Colbert and his five friends were staring as much as the Kid.

"By glory, it's that outlaw, the Oklahoma Kid!" Bob Colbert boomed hoarsely.

The big freighter reeled back, and his right hand whipped up, gripping a cocked Colt.

"The Oklahoma Kid, worst killer an' thief in the country!" Colbert boomed. "Feller, yuh wiggle a finger an' I'll let a slug cut through yuh."

"Bob!" a shriveled, white-haired old man who seemed barely able to stand called shrilly. "Bob Colbert, what's eatin' yuh?"

The old fellow lunged forward, laid a clawlike hand on the big freighter's arm.

"Nothin' is eatin' me!" Bob Colbert snarled. "Get back, Dad Hume. This feller is the Oklahoma Kid, I tell yuh. I've seen his picture on reward posters along the trail too many times to be mistook."

"He jumped our two guards, put guns in our hands," old "Dad" Hume snarled thinly. "Bob Colbert, aire yuh crazy? What if this boy is the Oklahomy Kid? He risked his own neck to save us, didn't he? If the Kid hadn't horned in, we'd all have been kilt afore mornin'."

Bob Colbert shuddered, lowered the cocked gun, and dragged a hair-matted forearm across his eyes. His big shoulders sagged, and there was a hangdog look on his sunken, bearded face when he looked up at the Kid.

"I—I'm sorry," he said thickly. "Dang it, Dad is right. Yuh've saved us from death, an' I was ornery enough to——"

The Kid shrugged wearily. "Forget it, amigo. What we've got to think about right now is——"

"Is gettin' them hands high!" a cold, dangerously calm voice cut in. "So yo're the Oklahoma Kid I've been hearin' about, eh? Well, now, that's fine. Glad to welcome you to my hide-out, Kid."

"Satan Thorn!" old Dad Hume sobbed. "It's his voice, men."

"Right you are, ol'-timer," came that calm, cold voice. "Limpy and Vic are here, too. You fellows are out in the light, while we have the shadows to stand in. I think the Oklahoma Kid will advise you, Colbert, to put down those guns. Right, Kid?"

White to the lips, the Oklahoma Kid stood staring into the shadows

beyond the lantern light. He could see the dim shapes of three men, and knew that "Satan" Thorn was not bluffing.

The Kid knew, too, that unless he and the prisoners surrendered they would be shot down mercilessly. Something in that cold, emotionless voice told him that.

Big Bob Colbert was crouched and panting, eyes rolling, lips back in a snarl of hate.

"No, Bob!" the Kid said levelly. "Steady, amigo. Thorn is right. A bad move now means old Dad Hume and the other unarmed men gettin' killed same as yuh and me. We're—licked."

Alone, the Oklahoma Kid would have taken his chances on a shoot-out. But he was thinking of those six men there before him, who were shackled ankle to ankle with heavy chains. Around the left ankle of each man had been locked huge steel bands. And from loop eyes in those steel bands chains ran along the line, separating the men only about three feet.

The Kid saw that, and realized how helpless those prisoners were to move out of danger's way. With a bitter smile on his thin lips, the Oklahoma Kid raised his lean hands, palms out.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KID SPRINGS AN ACE.

COLD, gritty laughter came from the shadows beyond the circle of lantern light. Bob Colbert and the short, grim-eyed little Mexican directly behind him had dropped the guns which the Kid had taken from Butch Roper.

From the shadows stepped the three outlaws now, and the Kid could not suppress a sudden start as he got a good look at them.

One man loomed a head taller than his two companions, and the Kid knew after one brief look at the big, rawboned man that he was Satan Thorn. The man looked like a devil, at that, as he stood grinning coldly, sky-blue eyes appraising the Kid swiftly.

Thorn's red slit of a mouth was slowly losing its grin, however, and his long, hard jaws showed ridges of muscle as his white teeth locked. From the tip of his chin jutted a spiked black beard, which made his face look long and gaunt-cheeked. Above those bright, murderous eyes were thin black brows which slanted sharply up from the base of a thin, pointed nose. From boots to Stetson Satan Thorn was dressed in black.

The Oklahoma Kid knew that he was facing one of the coldest killers he had ever met. And something in the unwinking stare of Thorn's bright blue eyes made the Kid want to twist sidewise, dig for his guns.

But he knew that such a move would mean instant death, for Thorn's long, soft-looking hands gripped a pair of silver-inlaid six-guns that were fully cocked.

The Kid twisted his gaze to the right, stared at a short, knotty-shouldered man who had a seamed, vicious-looking face from which two small green eyes glared murderously. That green-eyed walloper stood awkwardly, for his left leg was twisted badly at the knee. That hombre, the Kid guessed easily enough, would be "Limpy" Doak.

Then the Kid shot his glance to the third member of the cutthroat trio, who was a lean, lantern-jawed specimen, with eyes the color of freshly honed steel. The chill-eyed one smiled a death's-head smile as he met the Kid's gaze.

"So yo're the ugly little snake they

call the Oklahoma Kid, eh?" he asked in a mocking voice. "I've heard o' yuh, Kid. I've heard that yuh——"

"Shut up, Vic!" Satan Thorn ordered sharply. "There'll be time enough to talk after we've herded the Kid and these other prisoners back into the storeroom. You and Limpy go fetch Butch."

"We ort to drill the mess o' these snakes here an' now," Limpy Doak snarled. "Look at Woolly layin' thar. He's deader'n a nit, boss. An' the Oklahomy Kid kilt him."

"Kid, lower your left hand and unbuckle your gun belts," Thorn ordered grimly. "Make a wrong move, and I'll let you have a slug through the belly. That clear?"

It was much too clear. The Kid knew that Satan Thorn would shoot without hesitancy. The ugly little outlaw nodded, lowered his left hand, and carefully unbuckled his gun belts. Without being bidden he turned his back, moved a pace away from the fallen six-guns and the shell-studded belts.

"All right, Kid, start moving slow, straight ahead," Satan Thorn ordered. "You and the others, too, Colbert. I'll have the pleasure of usin' Woolly's whip on the lot of you after a bit. Move, there!"

The Kid moved, pacing slowly. He heard a half-sobbed oath from Bob Colbert, then the shuffling of feet and clank of chains.

Ten minutes later, the Oklahoma Kid sat on the floor of a great, high-domed chamber that was cluttered with great heaps of cased goods. Three lanterns lighted the room, and Satan Thorn stood before the Kid, grinning that vicious grin.

Across the room from the Kid were Bob Colbert and the other freighters, crouched on the floor and staring hopelessly about them.

Limpy Doak and Vic Quade staggered through the door now, supporting a stocky man whose shaggy head was matted with crimson. The stocky jasper pushed his assistants aside, stood on wide-planted boots to stare blinkingly about the room.

Then a roaring snarl came from his thick, scarred lips, and he dived toward the Oklahoma Kid. Satan Thorn grabbed the crimson-smeared jasper, however, and flung him roughly aside.

"That's enough of that, Butch!" the bandit leader growled. "Want me to work you over?"

"He—he hit me when I wasn't lookin' fer it, chief," Butch Roper gulped, but kept his distance.

Satan Thorn snarled an oath at the battered Butch, then faced the Oklahoma Kid. "Well, Kid, I suppose you'll say you got in my stronghold by accident?" he asked coldly.

"I did, an' that's the truth," the Kid answered quietly. "I fell through that crack which has come in the old street up there."

"The crack was always there," Satan Thorn shrugged. "When this town was built, carpenters filled that crevice with a wooden framework, then piled dirt and rock in on the framework until the street was safe for travel. I was a fool not to replace that framework before this."

"What if that blasted sheriff an' his posse that's millin' around up there find that open slit?" Limpy snarled. "Blast it, they may have heard this ugly little sidewinder shootin' Carson down."

"Sure, that tin-badge and his bunch may have heard the shots," Satan Thorn snarled in a sudden rage. "And if it wasn't for runnin' still more risks, we'd gun this Oklahoma Kid and these other whimperin' fools."

The Oklahoma Kid felt his nerves

grow taut. So these jaspers were afraid to make any more noise right now. The Kid hunched his knees up toward his chin, locked his lean hands across his shanks.

"So yuh aim to kill me, eh, Thorn?" the Kid drawled. "Yuh an' these other snake-brained sons aim to shoot me an' these other prisoners down cold. Like yuh shot the stage guard an' driver, as well as the two drummer passengers ten days ago. An' like yuh shot down the fireman, engineer, and express messenger when yuh robbed that train this mornin' down toward Benson."

For a moment, Satan Thorn's calm was stripped from him. He became almost purple-faced, and there was a mixture of fright and amazement in his ugly eyes. "How—how did you know?" he demanded hoarsely.

Limpy, Butch, and Vic were swearing in alarm, their hands clamped to gun butts as they stared at the Kid.

"That proves what we've heard about this snake, boss!" Vic Quade cried. "Dang it, we've been told that he's a skunk that goes around killin' other outlaws fer the money on their heads."

The Kid grinned his unnerving grin, but made no comment.

"I asked you where you found out such things," Satan Thorn snarled, and lifted a booted foot. "Answer," he spat, "or I'll kick that ugly face o' yours."

"I heard Sheriff Al Tapper an' his posse talkin' when they rode into town," the Kid said quietly. "Al Tapper said that the two robberies—an' the murders—had the sign of a man named Satan Thorn. Tapper brought his posse here on that hunch, knowin' that this used to be yore stampin' grounds."

Satan Thorn swore until his face

looked almost as black as his spiked beard. His evil eyes became blood-shot, and the Kid saw his hands shaking as he stamped up and down, cursing the sheriff wildly.

"Limpy, you and Vic come with me," the bandit chief snarled finally. "Butch, stay here and guard the prisoners. Your guns are over yonder on that box. Keep out of the Oklahoma Kid's reach, and there'll be no trouble. He can't hurt you with his bare hands."

"I wish he'd try tacklin' me bare-handed!" Butch Roper snarled, and leaped over to scoop up his guns.

"Me and my men kept out of that deserted town, not wantin' to leave sign that would show that somebody was around," Satan Thorn growled at the Kid. "But Al Tapper has done some mighty good guessin', if what you say is true. The fool might stumble onto this hide-out, at that."

Satan Thorn and his two cronies were gone then, rushing down the dark corridor at a stumbling trot. The Kid waited fully five minutes after they had gone before he turned his attention to Butch Roper, who stood glowering at him. The Kid let his hands slide down until they were touching his boot tops, grinned at Roper.

"So yo're the goat, eh?" the Kid drawled.

Roper blinked his small, mean eyes, scarred lips twisting into an ugly snarl. "What do yuh mean, I'm the goat?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Al Tapper knows this country like a book," the Kid chuckled. "Think he'd forget to look in this cave before he rides on?"

Butch Roper stiffened, fear paling his face. "What—what yuh drivin' at?" he croaked.

"Satan Thorn an' them other two

have high-tailed it," the Kid chuckled. "An' if the sheriff does remember this cave an' throws a bunch o' men around its mouth, yuh'll be trapped, Roper. Yuh'll hang for that stage job and the train job, while Satan Thorn and the other two quit the country with all the loot."

"So they took the loot, did they?" Butch Roper squalled, and leaped toward a big old leather-covered trunk which sat a few paces to his left. He began tearing at the straps which held the trunk shut, swearing in a frenzy of rage and uneasiness.

The Oklahoma Kid's right hand made a flickering motion. That hand dipped into the top of his right boot, came out with a stubby little four-barreled Remington pistol which had been in a specially constructed holster inside the boot top. The Kid's lean finger flicked the ring trigger, jammed through.

"Cheat me out o' my share o' that dinero, then leave me ter hang, will they?" Butch Roper was howling. "Blast their— Huh!"

The lid of the trunk whipped back. Butch Roper stared down at a great stack of gold and packs of crisp, new currency.

"Say!" he snarled, whirling. "Yuh coyote, yuh tried— Awk!"

Butch saw the wicked little four-barreled pistol pointing at him from the Kid's lean hand. But Butch Roper made the mistake of considering that pistol nothing more than a toy. With a snarl of rage he ripped his own .45s free, started tilting them up.

The Oklahoma Kid's tiny hide-out gun snapped once, its voice a small, crackling sound in the big chamber. In the hands of most cowboys, that small gun would have been almost harmless. But in the expert hands

of the Oklahoma Kid it was as deadly as any gun could be.

Butch Roper rocked slowly forward, mouth gaping foolishly. He had murdered his last man, for there was a pea-sized hunk of lead lodged in his crooked brain.

The Oklahoma Kid lurched to his feet, returned the hide-out gun to his boot, and leaped to where his ivory-butted six-guns lay on a packing case.

"Get Butch Roper's guns, Colbert," the Kid called harshly. "Then yuh an' the others barricade yoreselves in here. An' don't come out until Al Tapper or some Two Forks man yuh know calls yuh."

"Where yuh headin', Kid?" Colbert asked sharply, as the Kid raced toward the tunnel's mouth.

"After Satan Thorn!" the Oklahoma Kid snapped, and leaped out into the narrow tunnel.

But a few moments later, he skidded to a dead stop, hands ripping down to snare at his guns. Ahead was that wide slit in the cave's ceiling. And down through that slit came a clawing, squalling man.

Something lit with a clattering bang, then the falling man struck beside it. But the Oklahoma Kid had already recognized that hombre's voice.

"Ed Sparks!" the Kid growled. "That rattlehead would have to blunder down here right at the wrong time!"

CHAPTER VII.

GUN WOLVES AT BAY.

DEPUTY ED SPARKS was gasping from the shock of his fall. The lanky officer rolled slowly over, dazed and only half comprehending things at the moment. And in that moment the Oklahoma Kid pressed

close to the opposite wall, darted past the wallowing, grunting deputy.

"I've fell in a well, or a old mine shaft!" the big deputy wheezed loudly. "By gosh, somebody must 'a' shoved me, thet's what."

The deputy was saying more, yet the Kid did not stay to listen. The ugly little outlaw was past the deputy, and was beginning to grin a little.

It would take Ed Sparks a few minutes to figure out that he was in a tunnel instead of a shaft. The goggle-eyed star-toter was just as apt to travel one direction as another once he did discover that he was in a tunnel.

But the Kid figured on being well out of the lawman's reach, for he had a good start, and felt sure that he could locate the mouth of the tunnel and get outside.

The Kid's luck was due for another bad turn, however. He had traveled only fifty yards or so when from somewhere ahead of him came the hollow pounding of booted feet.

Then a pale smudge of lantern light painted stone walls, and the Kid realized that there was a sharp turn in the tunnel down there, and that some one was approaching that turn with a lighted lantern. Then the Kid was skidding to a halt, flattening himself against the cavern wall.

Three men rounded that sharp curve, and the Kid's unnerving grin stretched his thin lips as he recognized Satan Thorn, Vic Quade and Limpy Doak. The three were only a few rods ahead, and the Kid could hear them panting hoarsely as they halted just around the turn.

Quade put down the lantern he had been carrying, and the three cut-throats leaped back to the sharp turn, to crouch there, peering around.

"I was afraid of this!" Thorn's voice came in a snarling gasp. "That was Al Tapper out at the mouth o' the cave, all right. And I'll bet the old coyote fetches that posse in here."

The Oklahoma Kid eased his guns in their holsters, started moving cautiously forward, beady eyes slitted and cold.

"We better sift on, chief, an' git Butch an' that swag," Limpy panted loudly. "We kin take the dinero an' git up through that crack in the ceilin' afore the sheriff an' his men bottle us up complete."

"We'll make shore, first, that Tapper is nosin' in here," Satan Thorn rasped. "If he does come in, he'll be movin' slow and careful. We'll have plenty o' time to——"

"Hey, who are yuh fellers? Jist don't move sudden until I read yore brands!"

The Oklahoma Kid almost jumped out of his boots as the hoarse voice roared from behind him. Deputy Ed Sparks was doing that yelling. And now the lanky jasper was clumping hurriedly down the corridor.

The Kid dropped flat on his stomach, hugging in close to the wall. Up ahead of him, Satan Thorn and his two cutthroat companions leaped as if sprayed with scalding water. The Oklahoma Kid saw their hands rip down, saw naked steel gleam in lantern light as their guns came out to level along the tunnel.

"Who are you?" Satan Thorn roared.

"Deputy Ed Sparks, thet's who!" came the prompt answer. "An' yuh fellers behave, or I'll let ol' Bandit-tamer talk ter yuh."

"Old Bandit-tamer," the Kid knew only too well, was the big scattergun Ed Sparks carried. And the

Kid went cold all over now, for the lank officer was within a few paces of him. But the Kid was thinking of Ed Sparks, and not himself.

As usual, the rattle-headed deputy was bungling by crashing head-on into things. And this time, Ed was headed for certain death unless he could be stopped.

The deputy hated the Oklahoma Kid like poison, and would trigger buckshot into the little outlaw any time he got the chance. The Kid was fully aware of that. Yet somehow he could not lie there and see the deputy blunder straight into the yawning jaws of death.

"Drop, Ed!" the Kid yelled sharply. "Down! Them jaspers up yonder are——"

"Ugly!" the deputy roared. "So I've ketched yuh at last, huh? Hyar's some blue whistlers ter chaw, yuh ornery——"

The deputy's voice was drowned out by a sudden, dull booming of guns. The Oklahoma Kid heard bullets screaming eerily from the stone walls, heard them snarl and snap above him. And he heard, too, the sodden impact of a slug hitting flesh.

The Kid twisted, heard the clattering thump of the deputy's big scattergun striking the floor. Then the Kid saw Ed Sparks's long shadow weaving, saw that long, shadowy figure crumple slowly into a still, dark heap.

"Got 'im!" Satan Thorn's voice roared. "We got that blasted deputy, boys, for I heard him drop a gun."

"An' somebody is comin' this way from the cave's mouth!" Vic Quade shrilled. "Quick, men. We've got ter work fast if we git Butch an' escape with all that swag."

Vic Quade leaped toward the lan-

tern, stooped to grab at the wire bail.

"I wouldn't!" the Oklahoma Kid called grimly. "Thorn, if yuh think I'd hesitate to shoot snakes like yuh an' them other two, just start somethin'."

"The Oklahoma Kid!" Satan Thorn yelled. "Men, that feller escaped, somehow."

"The law is closin' in on yuh from behind, killers, ready to fit a noose around yore necks," the Kid called grimly.

Satan Thorn and his two wolf-eyed companions stood crouched, their guns jutting from steady hands. Capture meant hanging, no question of that.

Turning back down the cave meant meeting a posse. Rushing ahead meant swapping lead with the Oklahoma Kid. But the Oklahoma Kid was, they guessed, alone. And as if at a prearranged signal, the trio of killers began shooting at the Kid's voice.

The ugly little hombre came to his feet, grinning that unnerving grin. Guns out, he walked straight forward, holding his fire for several seconds. He was touched by the rim of lantern light now, and hoarse oaths lifted as the three outlaws saw his grinning, twisted face and cold, squinted eyes.

Limpy Doak settled himself, lifted both guns for a sure, steady shot. The Oklahoma Kid fired for the first time, but did not halt in that steady, grim march. Limpy Doak shuddered, dropped his guns, and pitched over on his face, his murderous career ended.

The Oklahoma Kid lurched in mid-stride, crimson pouring from a bullet gash across his cheek. The Kid caught his balance, brought his guns into line.

But a split second before he triggered another bullet caught him through the thigh, causing his right leg to buckle under him. His slugs went wide of their mark, and the Kid fell heavily.

Still another bullet found his flesh, tearing across the top of his right shoulder. The yellow cloth of his shirt turned red, yet the Kid's arm did not go numb. He grunted in pain, slanted his guns up, and flicked their hammers.

Vic Quade screamed in agony, dropped his right-hand Colt, and began clawing at his face. Quade ran straight past the Kid down the tunnel, yelling oaths at every jump, blind from the pain of a bullet-torn cheek bone.

But the Kid had no time to try stopping Quade. Satan Thorn was leaping back toward that sharp bend, face white above his jutting beard, cold eyes bulging now in terror. Satan Thorn's guns flamed, and the Kid felt the wind of death on his face as the slugs hummed past.

Then the Kid's guns hammered a reply, and Satan Thorn jerked out of his crouch, dropped both guns, and flung a hand to brace himself against the wall. The murderous bandit chief's mouth dropped open, and trickles of crimson spilled over his lips to stand out stark and clear against his pale flesh. He gasped one choked, terrible oath, then leaned forward to sprawl across the murderous guns he would use no more.

The Oklahoma Kid got to his feet, dizzy and sick from the throbbing of his wounds. He hastily reloaded hot guns, turned at a sound behind him.

"Ha-aa-It!" Ed Sparks's bellowing roar filled the tunnel. "I've got yuh this time, Ugly. An' hyar's a dose o' blue whistlers!"

The blasting roar of a shotgun filled the cavern, and a man's scream lifted. A six-gun spat, then the deputy's big shotgun roared once more. A body thudded to the stone floor, and Ed Sparks whooped a wild, savage note of triumph.

"Got yuh at last, Ugly!" the deputy roared. "I allus knowed I'd do it some day. Yuh should 'a' shot center, instead o' jist creasin' my head."

The Oklahoma Kid stood crouched against the cavern wall, shaking from head to foot, body bathed in cold sweat. He heard the deputy charge down the corridor, heard him cackling delightedly after a moment.

"My gosh, old Ed drilled that Vic Quade jigger an' thinks he got me!" the Kid gasped, understanding at last what had happened.

And now boots were hammering beyond that sharp turn, and the Kid heard Sheriff Al Tapper's familiar voice calling orders to the posse men. The ugly little outlaw sheathed his guns, darted back along the corridor until he reached the wide crevice in the ceiling.

Looking up he saw that the night had faded, and that a sun he could not see was throwing pink banners across the sky. Now that daylight had come, it was not nearly so gloomy there in the cave.

The Oklahoma Kid saw Ed Sparks, standing crouched over a huddled figure, scattergun ready for instant use. Sparks was not moving, and was not saying a word. The Oklahoma Kid had outwitted him more than once and escaped.

The big deputy was evidently taking no chances now, for he still thought the man he had downed was the outlaw he hated. But the Kid knew that Ed Sparks might discover his mistake at any moment.

The Kid found the packing case Bob Colbert had left, climbed up on it, and managed to reach the lip of the wide crevice by jumping. He set his teeth against the pain of bullet-torn flesh, drew himself swiftly yet silently up through the opening.

He rolled out into the weeds on top, and lay panting and sick for several minutes, too weak to move. Then voices coming from the cavern below roused him, brought his mind back into focus.

"I got 'im, Al!" Ed Sparks was chortling. "See him layin' yonder? I finally got ol' Ugly. An' he's stone dead this time."

"Yuh killed the Oklahoma Kid?" Al Tapper asked, and his voice was choked, frightened.

"I did!" Ed Sparks cackled. "An' now I kin retire, after I collect that big reward."

"Yuh fool!" Al Tapper snarled. "I know now how come Satan Thorn an' Limpy Doak lay dead back yonder. The Kid got 'em, like he's got other murderin' coyotes. And *you*—you've killed the Kid, yuh rattle-headed galoot."

A babble of voices lifted now, and many booted feet moved over the stone flooring.

"Here, some o' yuh fellers give me a hand," the sheriff's voice came faintly. "Help me carry the Kid over into that strip o' light. Mebbe if we get to a doctor in time the pore cuss—"

Boots shifted again, a man grunted. After that came a sort of roaring sound as many men spoke at once. Then Sheriff Tapper's voice lifted, shrill with joy.

"It ain't the Kid!" the grizzled officer shouted. "Look, men. This dead hombre is Vic Quade, one o' Satan Thorn's gang!"

Deputy Ed Sparks started swear-

ing wildly, ordering the men to scatter out, and help hunt the Kid. But Al Tapper's grim voice silenced the deputy.

"I'll give the orders, Ed," the sheriff thundered. "An' my orders are to——"

"To march straight on down the cave until yuh come to a big chamber," the Oklahoma Kid called from above. "Yuh'll find Bob Colbert, the freighter, an' five o' his men in that chamber. Sing out to Colbert, Al, for him an' his men have been abused bad an' have now got guns that I gave 'em."

"Thar he is!" Ed Sparks roared. "Up above, men. Boost me up, quick, afore he escapes. Halt, Ugly!"

"An' yuh'll find the loot from the stage an' from the train in a leather trunk there in that big chamber at the end of the cave, Al," the Kid went on quietly. "Colbert an' his men will explain things. Adios, Al."

"Halt!" Ed Sparks roared, and his voice was close. "Ugly, yuh're under arrest fer—— Halp!"

After that shrill yell for help there came a clattering, thudding noise, followed by laughter.

"Who pushed that box out from

under me?" Ed Sparks roared. "Blast it, who done that?"

"Shucks, Ed, yuh must 'a' slipped, that's all," Al Tapper called in a voice that was entirely too innocent. "Too bad, but I've got to have this box to set on a spell."

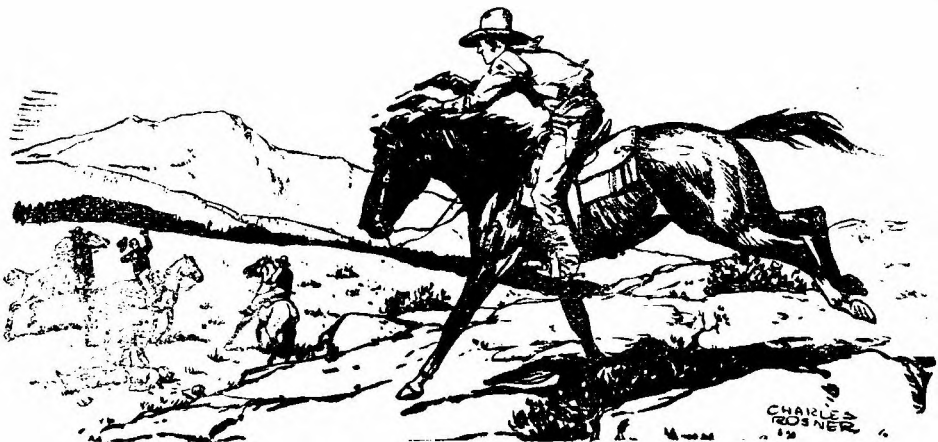
"Ugly, yuh sky them paws, hear?" the deputy choked.

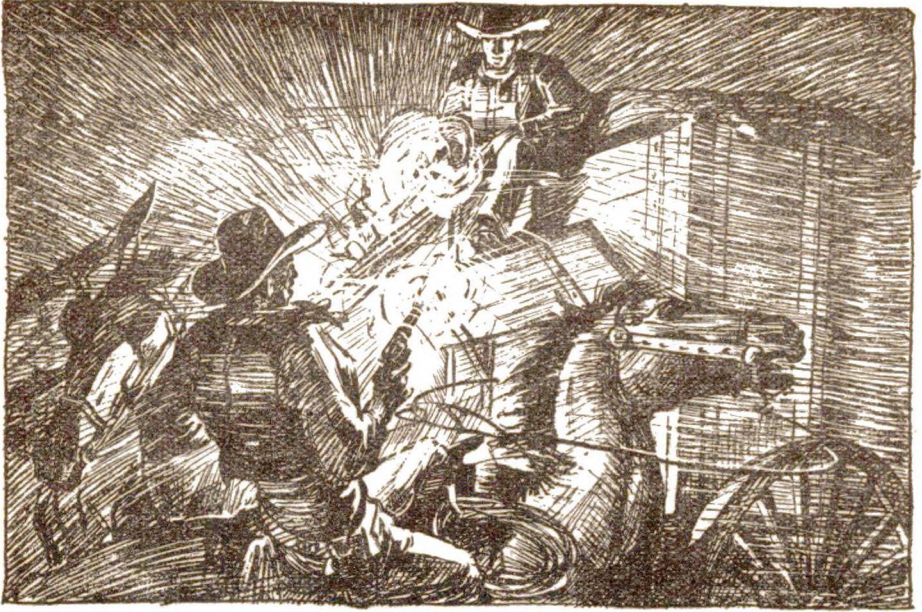
"Adios, stupid!" the Kid laughed grimly. "Yuh finally done a good deed with that scattergun o' yores. Vic Quade needed just what yuh handed him. But don't run an' hide next time yuh see me. I won't hurt yuh, honest."

"Why, yuh——" the deputy began, but choked on his rage.

"So long, Al," the Kid called, "I reckon yore posse men don't feel so much like ribbin' yuh about comin' to this ghost town to hunt gun ghosts now, do they? Yore hunch was a solid one, an' them ghosts turned out to be right lively hombres."

The Kid whirled then, and limped away through the weed-grown street. He would have to get his bronc, bandage his throbbing wounds, then drift yonderly. For Ed Sparks would get out of that tunnel, and come fogging after him before much longer.





Fog on the Flyin' T

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "A Hoss for the Rockin' R." etc.

NIGHT wind whipped a ghostly gray swirl into the freckled face of the young hombre who dozed on the swaying wagon seat. Vaguely conscious of the clammy dampness that touched his cheeks, he stirred restlessly, and then slept again.

The six sleek mules, heads lowered and suspicious ears pointed into the blowing curtain of mist, plodded onward. Jingling trace chains tightened as they came to a climb, and then clap rock, made slippery and treacherous by the fog, clattered under their shod hoofs.

"Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), awoke with the hollow rum-

ble of the steel wagon tires dinning in his ears. Yanking sudden leather on the team, he jerked erect and swept his right hand toward the black-butted .45 holstered on his hip.

Then he grinned sheepishly, brushed the dampness from his eyes with the back of his hand, and stared into the fog.

"Sufferin' sidewinders!" exclaimed the little freighter. "Looks like the whole Gulf o' Mexico was floatin' over the Pecos country! This here is the first time I ever run into fog so dawg-goned thick yuh couldn't see more'n the behind half of the wheel mules!"

Half-hitching his reins around the

brake handle, Shorty descended stiffly, wondering what had awakened him. The instant his boot soles touched the rocks, he knew.

"Off the trail—if yuh could call that cow track a trail!" he muttered in disgust. "That's what I git fer fallin' asleep and leavin' things to a passell o' lop-sided, lunk-headed long-ears! Hey, Willie! Willie!"

"Yeah—I'm comin'!"

The answer of Shorty's tall cowboy pard, christened Willie Wetherbee, but more widely known on Texas cattle ranges as the "Sonora Kid," came floating down the wind. Shorty breathed a sigh of relief. If there was trouble within a hundred miles, the lanky puncher was certain to run into it.

"Come here a minute! I reckon we've strayed plumb off the trail to the Flyin' T. I cain't see my hand before my face, but it looks like we're up on the side of a hill somewheres!"

Brush crashed ahead of Shorty and to his right. The Sonora Kid called something that was lost in the noise of his sorrel's hoofs, and then the sound came nearer.

"Which side o' this dang brush fence are yuh on?" demanded the tall waddy from somewhere in the gloom. "Uphill, or down?"

"Brush fence?" Shorty repeated. "I ain't seen none! Wait a minute—here it is! We're uphill."

The teamster almost bumped into the waist-high barrier before he could see it. A puzzled frown wrinkled his face as he reached out to touch the rustling leaves of live-oak and cedar branches that apparently had been piled there for several weeks.

"Reckon Si Tolliver has been catchin' some of the wild hosses roamin' this range!" he muttered. "Probably runs 'em into a brush 'Y'

that leads 'em into a corral or box canyon where he can pile the twine on 'em. I reckon me and the mules will have to turn around and git down on the other side o' this. Dawg-gone the luck! I'm shore tired and sleepy!"

Shorty aimed an annoyed kick at an unoffending clump of *sacaguista*, and then a tall figure loomed in the mist.

It was Wetherbee, astride the sorrel he called Tumbleweed. "Found the start of that brush fence down there a couple o' hundred yards," he drawled softly. "Cain't figure what it's used fer. What's the matter with yuh and them mules with the furrin names?"

"Nothin'!" Shorty retorted in a disgusted tone. "Nothin' a-tall, except that with all the mesquite flats north of the Rio to wander in, this misguided flock o' flea-bit, flop-eared bray factories had to pick theirselves out a hill and climb it! Jest like I told yuh, we're off the trail. And, bein' up since daylight, I'm tired. I reckon we might as well camp, right here!"

The soft-voiced Sonora Kid chuckled at hearing Shorty call his beloved mules by ordinary names. The six animals were all progeny of a range mare which had been known as Lucy. Shorty, who loved classical music, called the aggregation the "Sextet from Lucia," and in addition had given the individual mules the names of famous composers.

Wetherbee was struggling with one of those unpronounceable names now, and it sounded as if he was about to sneeze.

"Tsch — Tsch — Tschai—Shucks!" he exclaimed. "I started to say that if I was a mule with a name like Tsch—Tsch——"

"Tschaikowsky?" Shorty inquired mildly, unbuckling his cartridge belt

and hanging it on a standard of the first wagon.

"Yep, that's it. Well, if I was a mule named that, I'd climb a hill, too. Then I'd jump off a bluff!"

The tall waddy swung gracefully from his saddle and ground-reined the sorrel. Then he followed Shorty's example of removing the heavy, black-butted .45 that hung low on his hip.

"Well, it wasn't Tschaikowsky's fault," Shorty explained with a yawn. "He's next to the wheel, and at least I've seen him durin' the evenin'. But Chopin and Mozart, up there in the lead—gosh, since this fog come rollin' in, I ain't seen hide nor hair of 'em!"

The Sonora Kid stretched and reached into the wagon for his bedding roll. Then he turned to Shorty.

"Listen—mebbe we're campin' too soon," he protested. "If we could spot the moon, we might git our bearin'. I've been ridin' along behind the waggins, asleep half the time, so I don't know how long we've been off the trail. But yuh still got Tolliver's letter, haven't yuh?"

Shorty nodded, and reached into the pocket of his corduroys. Wetherbee struck a match and cupped the flame in his hands. Together they looked at the penciled message that had brought them on the haul toward the Rio Grande—a distress message sent to Pete Wilson's General Store in Tarantula:

MR. PETE WILSON

DEAR SIR:

Please send me pronto two cases .45 and two cases .30-30 ammunition as we are plumb out and haveing plenty trubbel with Monterey Martin and his pack of russlers, also one wagon cottonsead cake for cattle, one sack frijoles, one sack flour, side bacon, gal. molasses, two boxes matches.

Tell the freighter there aint no trail after

WW-6D

he leaves Owens' ranch but to head dew south and he will see the Flying T 20 miles farther.

Hurry or I will be foarced to sell this outfit lock stock and barrell to an eastern firm which is sending an hombre out here and oblige.

Y'rs. truely

SILAS TOLLIVER.

The match flickered and died. Shorty looked up at the fog and decided it was thicker than before.

"We stand a fine chanct of tellin' what's due south!" he lamented. "Let's camp!"

"Well, if we was to hoof it up this hill, we might git above the fog and be able to see the moon!" the Sonora Kid suggested. "Come on, it might be worth tryin'!"

Shorty shook his head doubtfully, but followed his long-legged pard. The pair ascended slowly and cautiously, through cedar scrub, over rocky ledges that were fringed with prickly pear and the treacherous daggers of the *lecheguilla* plant.

The hill grew steeper. Shorty was on Flying T range for the first time, but he was familiar with the general topography of the region. This hill would be capped by a crown of rim rock, like hundreds of others down in the Big Bend.

Blowing hard with exertion, they came to the rim rock and pulled themselves up by the aid of shrubs in its crevices. Then they stood erect and looked around.

"Looks jest like the inside of a slicker sleeve on a dark night!" panted Wetherbee. "If I didn't know yuh was here, I'd——"

"Listen!"

From the opposite side of the hill from the wagons, floating up through the fog, came the sound of cattle on the move, intermingled with the shouts of riders who were urging them onward!

II.

"I reckon our troubles are over!" said the mule skinner. "That there is probably Tolliver and his hands, drivin' that bunch o' stock. I'll yell to him!"

Shorty cupped his hands like a megaphone. But before he could utter a sound, a man's voice floated up through the swirl of gray mist:

"Here come my men with th' herd, Mr. Simmons. I reckon we could take a runnin' count right here, and save a lot o' trouble."

"A running count?" answered another voice, from a slightly different direction. "What kind of count is that, Tolliver?"

Shorty and his cowboy pard noticed the accent of the last speaker, in contrast to Tolliver's Texas drawl. The other man was from the North or East, the freighter decided. Probably the hombre to whom Tolliver had referred in the letter.

"Why, we jest string the stock by, and then yore two men can make the tally with me and my foreman. That a way, we can count out two thousand head purty straight, and it saves drivin' 'em into the corral, and out the other gate. I'll throw in twenty-five head, jest to make shore yuh ain't losin' none."

For a moment, the man addressed as Simmons hesitated, and there was only the mingled bellow of the herd. Suspicion flared in Shorty's mind for an instant, but he dismissed it. This business of counting herds at night was none of his affair; perhaps Simmons was in a hurry to close the deal and return east.

Then the buyer's answer came, but was indistinguishable to the men at the hilltop. Tolliver's hearty response, however, boomed clearly above the bedlam:

"O. K., Mr. Simmons! All right,

boys—string 'em out and hold 'em thin when they come between the live oaks and this here big pile o' boulders. Concho, you and Boyle take 'em after we count 'em, and keep 'em movin' on down into the flat. Savvy? Let's go!"

Shorty Masters's blood stirred to the old, familiar sounds of cattle on the move—the impatient yells of riders, the slap of quirts and reata ends against leather chaps and saddle skirts, the clack of horns and thud of hoofs. There were times when the little teamster longed to get out of the freighting business and return to the cattle ranges.

"Wait a minute, Shorty!" the Sonora Kid urged in a tense undertone. "How many steers did that Tolliver hombre say they was goin' to count?"

"Two thousand," answered the mule skinner.

"Then somebody's loco! If there's two thousand steers in this here bunch, I'll eat 'em all!"

"Yuh mean——"

"I mean Tolliver is workin' a dodge on the pilgrims from the East. Listen—see if yuh can hear 'em countin'!"

Shorty strained his ears. Tolliver's voice raised about that time:

"Not so fast, boys! Slow 'em down a little! Three hundred—one—two—three—four—— Hold 'em a minute!"

"What's this?" demanded Simmons's voice. "Mules? I didn't want any mules! And a wagon—three wagons!"

Shorty stiffened. The Sonora Kid dropped his hand to the place where his .45 usually hung—and remembered it was on the wagon.

"Why—— Oh, them mules?" Tolliver was explaining hastily. "Why, I'm throwin' them in. That's a chuck outfit. Good mule team—

cain't be beat! And that there cow hoss—that goes with the outfit, too. The *cocinero* rides that there bronc!"

Shorty sucked in a quick breath and turned to stare at his tall pard. Wetherbee's face was grim, his jaw set.

"What did I tell yuh?" demanded the tall puncher. "There wasn't no two thousand head in that herd. I'll bet yuh there ain't five hundred. Them high-binders are workin' that old trick—stringin' the herd around the hill and runnin' the same cows past five or six times."

The freighter nodded. "Yep!" he said. "And when they strung the leaders around past the waggins, why the Sextet and Tumbleweed jest natcherally fell in with 'em, bein' trained with trail-herdin'."

They listened again. Tolliver's booming voice went ahead with the counting. He was past four hundred now, and the rumble of the wagon wheels died around the rocky point.

Shorty leaned forward and peered into the fog. He could see only a few yards—not far enough to make out his wagons, or locate any of the men who were riding with the cattle down there at the base of the rocky slopes.

Hot rage boiled within him. The fog made a perfect setting for this unscrupulous trick being worked on the unsuspecting Easterners.

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" growled the hot-headed Sonora Kid. "Let's horn in on this here skin game and fill Tolliver's measly hide full o' lead. That is, pervidin' I can git a gun."

Shorty laid a restraining hand on his pard's arm. "Wait jest a minute!" he said. "Strikes me it would be kind o' funny if this hombre named Simmons got wise to what's goin' on. Besides, we ought to let the bunch circle th' hill a couple o'

times so's we can git an idea how many men are ridin' fer th' Flyin' T spread!"

Wetherbee subsided reluctantly, his empty right hand itching for the cool feel of a gun butt. Experience had taught him that Shorty's cool-headed strategy and generalship worked things out for the best, and now the little freighter was thinking hard.

"Sounds like about a dozen o' 'em!" drawled the tall puncher. "Yuh can hear 'em scattered out all around the hill!"

"Yeah," agreed Shorty. "Let's see, now. If I was pullin' this trick, I'd jerk that freight outfit and that hoss with the empty saddle out o' line right away, and hold 'em down in the flat. Because they're too conspicuous. So we'll find 'em down there, probably, with this hombre named Concho and the other ranny named Boyle standin' guard on 'em. That makes one apiece."

"They ain't got any ammunition!" exclaimed the Sonora Kid. "Don't yuh remember what Tolliver said in that letter?"

Shorty grunted. "Mebbe. And mebbe they've already opened them cases in the waggins. Yuh got to remember that we are on foot, and also that we cain't see more'n twelve feet."

"Yuh shore make it sound hard!" sighed the tall puncher. "I am in favor of bustin' down there and grabbin' ourselves a handful o' bridle reins, first, then bustin' somebody in the mouth and grabbin' a handful o' gun, second. Then, third, ridin'——"

"Say, that's the same horse, isn't it?" demanded Simmons's voice. "That animal is a high-stepper!"

Tolliver tried to count and explain at the same time. "Forty-two—yes—forty-three—he's a trained cow

hoss — forty-four — forty-five—
 forty-six—yuh cain't keep him away
 from the herd—forty-seven—forty-
 eight—*Concho!* Keep this bronc
 out, he's messin' up the count!
 Forty-nine—fifty!"

The Sonora Kid chuckled. "Con-
 cho has got hisself a surprise com-
 in!" he said. "Tumbleweed's a one-
 man hoss. What are we waitin' for
 now?"

The sawed-off mule skinner
 hitched up his corduroys. "Noth-
 in!" he said. "Let's go. Better pick
 up a couple o' rocks before he git
 down in the flat where there ain't
 any. We got to have somethin' to
 fight with!"

He slid down over the rim rock.
 The long-legged cowboy grabbed a
 cedar limb and hit the slope beside
 his pard. Together, they groped
 their way down toward the point of
 the hill and the mesquite flat where
 the wagons might be found.

III.

Now the scattered bellowing of
 steers that were strung out in a long
 line of twos and threes that encircled
 the hill came nearer to the trail
 pards. Shorty laid a hand on Wether-
 bee's arm and slowed his descent.

There was a gantlet of danger to
 be run, here. Not only were range
 steers suspicious of any man afoot,
 but the pards were likely to bump
 into one of the scattered riders who
 were keeping the herd on the run
 around the hill.

The mule skinner crouched behind
 a clump of cedar and strained his
 eyes into the gloom. He was unable
 to see more than the vague shapes
 of cattle which almost brushed
 against his place of hiding, but he
 could hear.

"Git along, thar!" barked a gruff
 voice, so near at hand that Shorty

jumped. "Move on! *Yip! Yip!*
Yi-yi!"

A coiled reata swished and slapped
 cowhide chaps. The Sonora Kid's
 muscles tightened.

"I can jump out and pull that
 hombre out of his saddle, jest like
 ——" he whispered.

"Stay set, jest where yuh are!"
 Shorty growled. "I got an idea. We
 can have ourselves some fun, and
 mebbe find out whether they got the
 ammunition. Wait till he gits by!"

They waited, crouching tensely,
 holding their breath while the wet
 fog swirled past in a current of wind
 caused by the moving cattle. The
 rider's voice diminished around the
 slope, and Shorty knew there would
 be a space before another puncher
 came along.

Suddenly he leaped out of the
 cedar, throwing his arms high and
 moaning as loudly as he dared. The
 Sonora Kid stared in surprise.

There was a terrified snort from
 the steers which were passing, obedi-
 ently trailing their fellows. Several
 broke away from the string, hoofs
 clattered on the rocky slope, and
 there was a miniature stampede
 spreading down the line.

"I savvy!" grinned Wetherbee.
 "Come on—together, now!"

They sprang from opposite sides
 of the brush. More steers broke
 away, and the bellow of alarm went
 down the line.

"Watch 'em, there!" yelled some-
 body, back down the herd. "They're
 skeerin' at somethin'! Turn 'em,
 José!"

José yelled, slapped his quirt on
 saddle leather, and sent his horse
 plunging within six feet of where
 the partners crouched against drip-
 ping cedar branches.

Braang! Bang! Gun flame glowed
 dimly through the fog.

Around the hill, Si Tolliver would

be explaining to Simmons that it was sometimes necessary to fire shots across the faces of stampeding steers to turn them.

"Thought so!" Shorty muttered. "They got cartridges, all right. Let's go!"

There was a break in the line, caused by the unexpected speed the frightened animals had put on. Through the gap the mule skinner and his cowboy side-kick dashed and brought up short against a portion of the brush fence Tolliver had built.

"And I thought he threwed this fence up here to catch wild hosses!" drawled the freighter. "It's more like a trap fer a helpless animal. I reckon we jest have to feel our way through this here fog, and when we bump into a wheel or a mule, we'll know where we are!"

They climbed cautiously over the brush barrier. Now the going was less rocky, and the ground flattened out into a stragglin' growth of mesquite. A wet branch raked the Stetson from Wetherbee's head, and he growled something as he stooped to pick it up.

"Who's there?"

The challenge came out of the murk that lay ahead of them. Shorty and the Sonora Kid froze in their tracks. As the tall waddy recovered his hat, he groped on the ground and found a mesquite limb.

"Did yuh hear somethin', Boyle?" the same voice asked.

"Nothin' but these here mules breathin'!" was the jocular answer. "They are snorin' jest like six saw-mills. I wonder where the hombre that was drivin' 'em went to? Dang funny, how a freight outfit and a hoss suddenly show up in a trail herd!"

Shorty held his breath and heard the loud pounding of his heart

against his ribs. Saddle leather creaked as Concho slouched sidewise and rolled a cigarette. The match flame was a dimly luminous spot in the gray swirl, thirty feet away and to the right.

"Well, I got an idea about that!" Concho said as he puffed at his smoke. "That hoss was probably rode by an hombre who held up the hombre that drove the waggins. Savvy? Mebbe they plugged each other. The freight-team driver fell out of this seat, and the mules got skeered and kept goin'. Or mebbe they jest strayed in this here fog. Howsomever, it shouldn't worry us none. The boss will have the dinero fer two thousand head purty soon, then we can high-tail it!"

Shorty turned and reached for the Sonora Kid. Then his heart skipped a beat.

Wetherbee had vanished, like a specter of the mist. And the bow-legged mule skinner knew where his pard had headed—for the nearest trouble.

That trouble wasn't far away, Shorty told himself as he stooped low and moved in cautiously toward the hombre who had lighted the match. Not yet could he see the tiny point of light from the glowing cigarette—not until he rounded the thick clump of cat's-claw that barred his way.

"Owww!"

A startled yell out of the fog brought the freighter to his feet, and he found himself instinctively clapping his hand to his hip before he remembered his gun was gone.

Then a heavy body hit the ground hard, a horse snorted and whirled, threshing the ground with cutting hoofs, and a six-gun roared loud in the swirling mist.

Shorty Masters ducked and heard the bullet scream overhead. Boyle

whirled his horse and came around the dim bulk of the wagons, spurring hard toward the sound of scuffle.

"What's the matter, Concho? What's the matter?"

Concho did not answer. Boyle reined in his horse on sliding hoofs, and leaned forward in the saddle. The tall figure of the Sonora Kid was straightening triumphantly from the ground where Concho lay. Shorty could see his partner dimly, and he saw Boyle's arm whipping up.

The thick-set, powerfully built little teamster sprang like a panther, throwing both arms around the waist of the man in the saddle. There was a grunt as the breath was knocked from Boyle's body by the force of the savage attack; the gun blazed twice harmlessly, and then Shorty was on the ground with his larger adversary on top of him.

They clawed and struggled in a short, sharp battle. The freighter seized Boyle's right wrist with his left hand, managed to wrench his right arm free of the pinioning weight that had fallen upon him, and lashed out with clubbed knuckles. The blow took Boyle on the chin, snapped his head back and knocked him almost clear of the freighter's body.

The big man went limp. Shorty crawled out from beneath his weight to see the Sonora Kid tossing the mesquite limb to one side.

"Reckon we don't need that no more!" drawled Willie, a highly pleased note in his soft voice. "We got hosses now—and guns. Wish I had Tumbleweed."

"Mebbe we'll find him on the way around the hill!" Shorty panted. "Look—they never did find our smoke-poles, hangin' here on the waggin! I reckon the fog has its

advantages, after all. Here's yore own gun. How about these hombres?"

"Boyle won't be comin' to fer a while," the Sonora Kid answered. "As fer the other hombre—well, his hoss slapped him in the face jest once with a hoss shoe. Shore spoiled his good looks, whatever they may have been. Are yuh ready?"

"Yeah, and r'arin' to go!" said Shorty, buckling his cartridge belt. "Now listen: You take yore pick of the hosses. Me, I'm drivin' my mules. We're goin' around the hill again."

IV.

Swinging the sleepy Sextet around through the fog-shrouded mesquites, Shorty turned the wagons back toward the point of the hill. The herd was still being driven past Simmons and Tolliver and their men. The teamster figured that nobody on the hill had been able to hear the gun shots above the din of hoofs and bellowing.

"Or, if they did, mebbe they figured it was somebody shootin' to head off a stray!" he told himself with a grin. "It looks like everything is goin' to work out fine!"

The Sonora Kid rode in close beside the wheel mules. "How is this here strategy of yourn figured out, now?" he wanted to know. "We'll meet some hombres as we join the herd, probably!"

Shorty nodded. "Yeah, reckon we will. I'll cut up to the left, here, and try to find a break in the brush fence. Must be one, because they took the waggins down through it. But we'll be far enough around the hill so that Tolliver won't be payin' much attention to a little ruckus on the other side. Jest take it easy, and we'll git around all right!"

Wetherbee chuckled, and scouted

ahead. Shorty watched him vanish in the fog with misgivings. The tall waddy might bump into several of the riders.

"Reckon he can take care o' himself, though!" muttered the freighter. "He shore gits into more tight places and shoots his way out of 'em than any ranny this side o' the Sabine. I never—— Hey! Look out!"

He took his hand away from his .45 and grinned sheepishly as he recognized Wetherbee again.

"Jest come back to tell yuh the break in the brush is right up here," reported the tall rider. "Give yore mules their heads, and I'll lead 'em through. Then yuh turn to the left, and yuh will be right in with the herd."

He rode off again. Shorty gripped the wet reins tightly, reached over in the wagon seat and assured himself that the gun which had belonged to Boyle was lying there, and set his jaw hard.

Mules' hoofs slipped and clattered on the wet rocks, steel wagon tires struck sparks in the gloom. The freight outfit swung through the gap in Si Tolliver's brush fence, and fell in with a string of weary long-horns that had already been around the hill three or four times.

For a hundred yards the outfit went its way unmolested, then Shorty heard the clatter of steel-shod hoofs behind the wagons. Crouching low on the seat, he waited.

The rider came alongside, peering questioningly up at the driver.

"Hey, Concho!" he called. "What's the idea o' bringin' this outfit back into the herd? Didn't the boss tell yuh—— Hey! Reach fer the sky, hombre! Yuh ain't Concho!"

His gun hand was sweeping up.

Shorty's trigger finger squeezed on the gun that was lying in the seat.

"Stop where yuh are!" he barked. "I ain't Concho, and you ain't as smart as yuh figured, either. I've had yuh covered, all the time, and now——"

The rider ripped out an explosive oath, and Shorty saw a six-gun swinging toward him. He squeezed harder on the trigger. Roaring flame hissed into the wet fog, and the man coughed and pitched sidewise from the saddle.

A frightened horse plunged forward with empty stirrups banging. Shorty frowned. Tolliver might suspect something had happened. Until the herd had been counted, however, the crooked ranchman would probably explain it away by saying that one of his riders had been thrown.

The wagons turned around the hill. Somewhere up there, the Sonora Kid would be having troubles of his own. A little farther, now, and they'd be on the home stretch, nearing the counting point.

"Yip-ee! Ti-yi! Git along little dogies!"

That was Willie Wetherbee, singing up ahead, glorying in the presence of danger. Shorty growled to himself about the recklessness of his pard, and then he heard the Sonora Kid's horse turning down toward the base of the hill, at breakneck speed!

"Dang fool!" Shorty muttered. "If trouble don't come halfway to meet him, he chouses it all over the flat till he can sling a loop on it! I hope he gits back in time fer the show-down!"

The show-down was coming soon, now. Ahead of him, Shorty suddenly heard Tolliver's voice bellowing down the fog:

"Jest a hundred and fifty to go, boys! Choke 'em off and hold the

main herd! Fifty-one—fifty-two—fifty-three!”

A rider loomed in the fog—a horseman who acted as relay between the counting point and the riders who kept the steers on the move as they approached it. Shorty saw him rein in his cayuse as he sighted the wagons, and then he spurred the animal toward the freight outfit.

One challenge now might spoil everything. Quickly securing the slack reins to the seat, the little mule skinner scrambled back under the arched canvas and flattened himself on the bedding rolls that lay there.

“Here—what in tarnation’s this outfit doin’ here again?” demanded the rider. “Who’s comin’, there?”

“This is Buck!” another voice said, toward the rear. Shorty heard spurs jingle as “Buck” rode up to meet the other man. “I don’t know nothin’ about it. I cain’t find José, and all of a sudden I see this here rig again, and——”

“Well, we better keep our traps shut. Let Simmons think it’s another outfit entirely. That’s it—the supply waggins, bringin’ up the rear. Haw-haw! Git on back, now, and choke off the herd!”

Buck went clattering back past Shorty’s hiding place. The teamster raised his head cautiously. He could see the dark blur of the live oaks where Tolliver and the buyer sat their horses—the counting point.

“Ninety-four — ninety-five—ninety-six — seven — ninety-eight—ninety——”

“Great Jupiter!” exclaimed Simmons. “Is this the same chuck-wagon outfit, or a new one?”

Tolliver coughed. “Why this—this is——”

“This here’s the supply train, Mr. Simmons!” broke in the voice of the man who had given Buck his orders.

“Haulin’ feed. We’ve been feedin’ these cattle—that’s why they’re in such fine shape.”

“Great Jupiter!” Simmons marveled again. “I didn’t know it required so many outfits to run a ranch. Why, this is like a circus parade!”

The mules were going past between the boulders and the live oaks. Shorty Masters grabbed his .45 and yanked hard on the reins.

“This is a circus parade, and here come the elephants!” he shouted. “Stick ’em up, Tolliver!”

“Why—what—who——” sputtered the big man, who straddled a wiry black cow horse. “I’ll show you how to horn in on my business!”

Shorty strained his eyes into the fog. So far he had only heard the voice of the cattle swindler—now he was afraid he might sling lead at the wrong man.

Braang! Bang! Twin daggers of flame leaped out at him from the hands of the big hombre, and burned away the last vestige of doubt in the freighter’s mind.

He heard bullets slash through the canvas over his head, he triggered once with his own gun and raked Boyle’s .45 from the seat with his other hand.

V.

Now the foggy night was lurid with flame from smoking barrels, and the gun smoke whipped down and hung in an acrid pall close to the ground where horses reared and plunged excitedly under yelling, shooting riders.

Bullets hammered into the wagon and ripped at the bedding rolls that Shorty jerked upright for protection. Crouching behind them, he fired back. The big hombre threw his hands high and twisted out of his

saddle. Buck came galloping up from the rear to send lead hammering into the freight outfit, and the wheel mules shied and squealed as a bullet splashed on a steel tire and stung their legs with tiny fragments of lead.

"Great Jupiter!" yelled a voice above the din. "Great Jupiter!"

Hoofs were hammering around the hill, coming up in the face of the scattering herd as the rest of the swindler's riders heard the furious popping of guns. Shorty's heart sank as he realized he could expect no help from the Easterners.

"*Yip-ee! Ti-pi!* Stick with 'em, Shorty!"

In the rear of the wagons came a new clatter of hoofs and a fresh blast of gun thunder. The little mule skinner heard that yell and a joyous grin split his freckled face. Willie Wetherbee was on time, after all.

Braang! Bang! Bang!

Shorty saw a long streak of flame shoot past the damp tarpaulin at the side of the wagon, realized it was really a series of streaks from the barrel of the Sonora Kid's gun, and then scrambled out from behind the protecting bedding rolls in time to see the tall waddy drop the hombre named "Buck" from his horse.

The Sonora Kid reined his horse in and turned the animal on sliding hoofs to pursue a fleeing rider up the hill. Shorty cracked down on the man who had explained about the "supply train," heard a yell of pain, and saw him vanish in the fog.

Then another pounding of hoofs broke behind the wagons, and the mule skinner whirled, leaping to the seat to repel a new attack.

"Hey! Don't shoot!" shouted the Sonora Kid, bursting back into the limited circle of visibility. "That's Tolliver! Don't shoot him!"

Shorty halted his .45 in its downward swing, hammer half raised.

"Tolliver?" he gasped. "Why—I—I already plugged that skunk!"

"No, yuh didn't!" Wetherbee retorted. "This here is the real Si Tolliver—him and his cowboys. They ain't got no ammunition, except fer that in the gun I took offn Concho. Don't yuh savvy—the hombre yuh plugged was Monterey Martin. He had Mr. Simmons, here, buffaloed into thinkin' he was Si Tolliver. Mr. Simmons thought—Hey, where is Mr. Simmons?"

"Great Jupiter!" said a weak voice, and a man who wore riding breeches and a stiffly new Stetson pulled his horse out of the shelter of the live oak. "What's all this? What does all this violence mean, anyway? I was about to close a cattle deal, with the aid of my book-keeper and secretary, and—"

"Mr. Simmons, I'm powerful glad to meet yuh!" announced a heavy-set man on a big bay cayuse. He rode over and shook hands. "My name's Tolliver—Silas Tolliver. That coyote yuh was about to do business with was Monterey Martin—a rustler. Been havin' lots o' trouble with him. Used up all my ammunition shootin' at him. Reckon I got some in these waggins, though."

Shorty Masters sat down on the driver's seat and let his head whirl for a minute.

"I reckon yuh have, Tolliver, now that yuh ain't got any use fer it. Willie, what happened, nohow? I shore thought yuh had busted out into the mesquites and got plugged, or somethin'!"

The Sonora Kid grinned. "I found Tumbleweed!" he said, patting the horse's neck.

"Yeah. I knowed yuh did, the

minute I seen yuh turn on a dime, even though I didn't have time to look at the color of the hoss that done the turnin'."

"Well, I spotted Tumbleweed jest outside the brush fence, with an hombre tryin' to pile the twine on him. So I jumped my borrowed cayuse over the fence and chased that coyote down into the flat and ventilated him somewhat. Si and the boys, here, heard the shootin' and come ridin' up on me. I told 'em how Si Tolliver was givin' Mr. Simmons what yuh would call the run-around, up here on the hill, and then they interduced theirselves proper, and we come sashayin' back to help yuh. Savvy, now?"

Shorty rubbed his hand across his forehead. "Things has happened too fast!" he declared. "But I savvy that real fog ain't nothin' compared to gun fog when about six hombres are blazin' away at yuh! I'll bet yuh my mules are deaf fer a month, and it's a cinch their hides are goin' to smell like burnt powder!"

"Great Jupiter!" exclaimed Mr. Simmons. "We'll have to do that counting all over again!"

Thet shore was a slick scheme o' the rustlers', but it didn't work. Rustlers' tricks have a habit o' not workin' whenever Shorty Masters, M. D., an' the Sonora Kid horn in on the deal. Watch fer another story about the two pardns in an early issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



DUMBELL

DANGER ON THE ATHABASCA

IN the early spring of this year, three trappers, Joe Donaldson, William Lee, and George Cinnamon, were sleeping in Donaldson's cabin, on the bank of the Athabasca River. They had worked hard all winter with their trap lines and slept soundly as outdoor men do.

Suddenly, they were awakened by the sound of rushing water, and on jumping from their bunks, found that the floor of the cabin was covered by the flood to the depth of two feet. Then they knew that the Athabasca was on the rampage.

Grabbing their clothes, the three men rushed out to escape from the rapidly rising waters. They had had to flee from floods before, and they well knew that the only means of safety was to climb up trees.

They made a dash for the nearest ones. Lee and Cinnamon each scrambled up a tree, but the one that Donaldson grasped was a sapling. It bent under his weight.

A wall of water came roaring along as Joe clung to the sapling. The night was pitch dark, but the other two could see their companion dragged away by the rushing torrent and engulfed in the black, swirling flood.

Donaldson was a veteran trapper of the Northwest, where he had been a familiar figure for years. He had passed through many sub-zero winters, howling blizzards, and mountain-high snowdrifts, and had survived many spring floods.

But this last winter the snowfall was unusually heavy, and sudden thaws sent thousands of tons of it into the rivers, causing them to rise to the highest levels ever known.

The trappers were taken quite by surprise, and Joe Donaldson lost his life at the end of a successful trapping season, just at a time when it was thought that all danger was over.



Pay Dirt In Piute

A "Flash Moran" Novelette

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Ridin' Herd On Roarin' Fork," etc.

CHAPTER I.

AMBUSHED.

WHERE the dusty mountain trail runs down the steep Buckskin Creek Valley, "Flash" Moran came into sight of his home town, Piute, four miles below on the hazy plains. The red-haired, snub-nosed deputy, youngest officer on the staff of Sheriff Hank Horn, had been away for six weeks taking a noted killer back to Texas.

He was glad to get home. Piute wouldn't turn out any brass bands, but everybody would give Moran a welcoming hand. He'd shove his knees under the dinner table in

"Maw" Striker's restaurant, feed his blaze-faced buckskin at the Fat Cayuse Barn, sit again on the worn old bench outside the town calaboose.

"Home sweet home," sighed Moran, and he shoved back his slouch hat and scratched his red topknot. "Nothin' fancy. Hogs in the streets. Log shacks an' dobes. Chinee laundries an' sich. Plank walks all dug up by pony hoofs an' cowpokes' spurs. But home sweet——"

Wham! From a willow patch down on the creek a gun roared, and a huge slug whistled past Flash.

If he hadn't bent his head to take off his hat, the bullet would have cut him from leather.

Startled, his buckskin bogged its jughead, snorted, and broke down the hill in a pinwheeling series of high jumps that threw Flash off balance. His hat flew high. His red hair stood on end. He clawed for balance, dug in his goose-neck spurs, and anchored deeply in the hair cinch.

Wham! The hidden rifleman tried a second time.

This slug threw dirt right under the buckskin's nose. The pony bawled and went high, fanning the air with both front feet.

Moran, knowing that he had come under a dry-gulcher's front sight, was seeking to rake out a six-gun while he hung to his frantic pony.

Bewildered, half-crazed, the cayuse tore straight down the hill toward the grove that hid death.

Moran's bullhide chaps cracked and the fringe brushed the tips of spiny sagebrush as the pony weaved and bobbed in sunfishing, swapping ends, and all the varieties of pitching that a broncho knows.

This horse was a marked animal in Piute County both for the toughness that would carry it a hundred miles between dawn and dark and for a mean streak in its nature that made it apt to blow up under a rider at any moment.

This horse, Pieface, was blowing up here and now. Blowing as high as a kite in a March wind. And Moran, caught off guard, had his spurs tangled up and his six-gun caught by the trigger in his tied-down holster.

Shortening his reins, he almost tore off the pony's lower jaw, got tight in leather, and went roaring straight toward the ambush.

Flash was just starting. With a savage jab of spurs, the red-haired deputy shot the buckskin straight into the willows. The saplings, lim-

ber as whips, slashed and cut his freckled face. He didn't care. He crashed ahead. His six-gun was clear and swinging. He passed the spot where a horse had been tied and the flash of empty brass shells on the black ground informed him that here the ambusher had lain in wait.

The creek ran just ahead. Moran heard its pleasant gurgle where clear water curled into ripples under the low-hanging brush. But Moran wasn't caring just now about beauty spots of nature. He wanted to overtake the coyote who had tried twice to kill him with a buffalo gun.

As the buckskin struck the creek with a splash that threw water high like a geyser, a rider drove into sight on the opposite slope. Buckskin Creek ran through a narrow valley, almost a canyon, and Flash knew that he could never overtake the ambusher, for the man had evidently departed in a hurry after unlimbering those two big slugs.

Flash reined down in a little park across Buckskin Creek, slanted his six-gun and ripped out a cylinderful of lead. But his target was two hundred yards away and riding like the wind for the saw-toothed rim of Buckskin Valley. Moran's bullets kicked up dust in a rising string, but the man, mounted on a bald-faced black, dug in his steel, and went over the top without once looking back.

All that Flash could remember at that distance was that the rider wore black chaps with silver conchas that gleamed under the sun, a tall black hat with a Mexican style crown, and appeared hump-shouldered and long-legged in the saddle. That wasn't much to satisfy the law.

Moran turned back knowing that it was useless to follow the ambusher into the big country of box canyons and breaks beyond the rim known

as the Buckskin Bad Lands. Here trails were easily hidden.

He was as mad as a bald-faced hornet, not because he had been fired on, but because he couldn't understand the reason. Any Piute deputy took gun work as a matter of course. But Flash had been away six weeks, was returning, as he thought, to a peaceful home town. And here a stranger in black chaps zipped two big slugs his way.

Passing through the willows where the dry-gulcher had hidden, Flash picked up two empty cartridge shells. He saw they were not from Sharps or Henry weapons, but were .44 Winchesters. He understood the reason. A man who carried both six-gun and rifle of this size could carry spare ammunition for both in the same belt and thus get rid of excess weight.

Moran preferred a .45 as a hand-gun caliber, but that of course was merely personal choice. But he figured that it would be easy to find an ambusher who packed six-gun and carbine of the .44 size.

As he reached the trail junction, he heard the thud of hoofs up where the pathway made a turn. Then a string of heavily laden pack mules came into sight with an old man in the lead astride a gray horse.

Moran grinned. Here rode a friend. It was "Missouri" Suggs, mountaineer mule skinner. But at sight of Moran, Suggs flung up a rifle and burned a bullet past Moran's head.

Missouri Suggs wasn't welcoming any prodigals.

"Stand hitched!" yelled Missouri. "Yuh bow-legged, knot-headed high-grader! Yuh don't hold up my ore train!"

Amazed that an old friend should greet him with hostile lead, Moran reined back, flung up his right hand

in the plains signal of peace and shouted:

"I'm Flash Moran."

Missouri blinked his watery blue eyes, lowered his old gun, and blew smoke out of it before he snapped another shell into the barrel. Then spurring his gray horse forward he confronted the red-haired deputy.

"I didn't know yuh," he growled, surveying the checkerboard style shirt and new leather chaps that Moran had bought in San Antone. "Yuh got to talk fast an' early on the Buckskin trail these days."

"What's up?"

Missouri whirled his horse and shouted: "Come an' see."

His forty mules were stretched out along the winding trail, half asleep under the afternoon sun. Missouri rolled off his pony, unfastened a pack sack and took out a chunk of black rock that crumbled up in his horny hands like a baked potato.

"That's what's up!" the mountaineer rasped. "High-grade gold! A new strike at the head of Buckskin Crick! Pay dirt found four weeks ago! Gold at the grass roots, by Jasper, this rock's wuth a dollar a pound. An' I got forty mules here each carrying two hundred pounds of the stuff!"

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW DEPUTY.

MORAN almost fell off his horse. His blue eyes popped, and he whistled between his buck teeth.

"Rock wuth a dollar a pound!" he gasped. "I—I can't believe it."

"You ain't no miner. Yuh know about punchin' cows an' trackin' hoss thieves. But it's the truth. An' with rich rock goin' down this trail, high-graders are workin'. They hold up the mule trains, carry off the ore, an' git it ground up in stamp

mills over in the Black Hills where no questions are asked."

Moran frowned and turning in his saddle looked toward the rim across the creek where a dry-gulcher had vanished after trying twice to cut him down with a buffalo gun.

"They must 'a' been waitin' for me," he rapped out. "Somebody tipped 'em off I was comin' home. Home sweet home!"

He bit that last off viciously, for so far it hadn't been much of a welcome.

Well, if gold thieves were working, it was time a deputy reported to his boss and got on the job.

"Sheriff ain't in town," explained Missouri. "He went up the trail this mornin'. Been a half dozen these holdups lately. An' Piute's crazy wild about gold. You won't know the ol' place now."

"Other boys in the office, I reckon?"

Missouri's face fell. "Chief Deputy Bill Pitts got bumped off at this very spot, three weeks ago. Johnny Hatch had his gun arm dang near shot off later. Ol' sheriff has had tuh hire a hull new force. They'll be glad to see you, Flash."

But Moran wasn't waiting. With spurs rolling, he pelted down the trail, hit the gumbo flats and cracked into town with Pieface making ten feet at every jump. Two of his best friends killed or wounded by high-graders, his old boss forced to hire strange officers! Moran vowed as he struck the tin-can-littered outskirts of Piute that Pieface wouldn't get much rest until the outlaws had been tracked down.

Even in his wrath, Moran couldn't but wonder over the changes that had come to his home town in six weeks. New buildings were being run up out of raw pine planking. The hogs and dogs had been cleared

off the main street. A glistening new two-story adobe with a sign reading, "The Miners' Bank," stood across the corner from Maw Striker's little café where Flash always ate his stack of wheats in the morning.

Even the laundry of Wun Lung, the Chinese pioneer of Piute, had taken on a new front of sky-blue paint the same color as Wun Lung's blouse and pants.

Booted and bearded men crowded the plank walks as Flash galloped past. Not one raised a hand or yelled a greeting. As Flash galloped across the intersection between the café and the bank, a lanky man wearing a star as big as a coffeepot lid rushed out and yelled for the red-haired deputy to slow down.

"Yo're ridin' a hoss over ten miles an hour!" this stranger shouted.

Moran set his jaw, rode the faster.

"Name of the law!" he barked.

He rolled off his pony in front of the calaboose, saw that a new cell house had been added with plenty of gleaming steel bars. He stamped up the steps, trailed spurs into the familiar hall, stopped in front of the sheriff's office door.

Sheriff Horn's door had always swung open to friend or foe. Hank was that sort of a man. He was a pioneer and for thirty years he had worn the law's star in Piute. Flash Moran loved the old man like a father.

But now this door stood closed and on the glass was printed in cold black letters:

Knock before you enter. This means YOU

Moran flushed brick-red. So this was home sweet home! He twisted the knob, almost kicked in a lower panel as he surged into the office.

He hadn't picked up his hat. So

there he stood, red hair on end, freckles showing brown against the red of his rage. His chaps were dusty, his shirt dingy from a long trail, and his guns were tied down.

One thing he had forgotten. That was to pin his star on his shirt front.

A half dozen lanky, hard-eyed men sat around the room. A big-boned man with dead black eyes, hair, and mustache, sat back of the sheriff's desk.

He glared at Flash and opened a trap mouth.

"Can't yuh read?" he snarled.

"You dang right I can read!" rasped Moran.

"Then, dang you, go out an' knock!"

"Who are you to tell me that?"

"Burk Groner, chief deputy under the sheriff."

Moran's eyes blazed. He strode forward, right hand dipping toward his gun.

"I never heard of you before!" he snarled. "I've worn the star three years. My name's Moran."

Groner leaped up, a thin-chested, hump-shouldered hombre. As he rammed a hand under his loose calf-skin vest, Moran saw a sawed-off Colt emerge. He drew and lined his six-gun.

"Grab this locoed fool!" yelled Groner. "Throw him out!"

From all four walls, men rushed Moran with swinging fists and hammering boots.

Bang! He retreated toward the door, smashed a bullet across the top of the desk so that splinters curled up and blinded Groner as the latter dived for shelter.

Groner's men got between their boss and the red-haired warrior. They cut off his line of fire.

Moran didn't wish to kill anybody at this hour of the afternoon. But no black-eyed stranger could throw

him out of an office he had known for three years.

Nor could six men like Groner do it. They broke over Moran like a stampede of range horses getting away from a round-up corral.

He swung his six-gun like a hammer, cracking at heads, at any target that came into sight.

A big fist smashed his lean cheek. He went to his knees. Two men grabbed him and tried to kick in his ribs. But Moran lashed out furiously, dragged them under, and came up fighting. The door crashed open under the weight of bodies. The entire bunch fell sprawling into the hall.

Burk Groner rushed out, swearing through his black mustache, flourishing his gun, hoping he could drive a bullet into this defiant battler.

The front door opened. Men lurched into the hall. They were carrying a stretcher. On it lay an old man with gray hair and whiskers. His arms trailed limply.

The sight broke up the fight. Moran fairly reared up and bucked three men the length of the hall as he saw that white face and gray hair.

"Hank!" he cried. "Ol' boss! What—what happened?"

One of the stretcher bearers said curtly: "High-graders put a slug through him at noon on the Buckskin Trail."

CHAPTER III.

MORE HOT LEAD.

THE corridor filled with a furious crowd while the wounded sheriff was carried to a cot in the rear room. Three fourths of them were unknown to Moran, for most were miners attracted by the big strike on the head of Buckskin.

Burk Groner and his followers attempted to bar many from the jail,

but several hard-eyed Piuters broke past. Among them strode Missouri Suggs, fresh off the trail, and Doc Watts, Piute physician.

"Git out o' my way," snarled Missouri. "I've knowed Hank Horn fer thirty years. I y'arn tuh find out who drilled him."

Doc Watts, iron-jawed and cold-eyed behind his gleaming spectacles, snapped impatiently:

"I'm county physician. The sheriff needs care. Stand aside."

Burk Groner snarled to his men. "Let the doctor pass, but keep out all these ol' prairie dogs. This jail ain't a public place."

Flash Moran, trailing the stretcher bearers, heard the argument as he reached the far end of the corridor. His recent fight was now the last thing on Moran's mind. He was filled with worry over the suffering of Sheriff Horn.

But Groner's harsh commands to bar out men like Missouri reminded Moran that he had a score to settle with this strange chief deputy. Whirling on spike-heeled boots, Moran came back on the half run.

He flung two of Groner's lank men back so swiftly that their heads spun. Then, as Burk Groner switched around to meet him, Flash grabbed Groner's shirt front and half tore it off.

"Just where you buy in here," snapped Flash, "is more than I savvy. Never seen yuh before. But I know Missouri an' Doc Watts. The sheriff needs 'em. Git out o' the way."

Groner, reeling back with shirt torn so that it exposed the spring six-gun holster carried high under his left arm, struck savagely at Flash with clenched right hand.

"And who are you," he raged, "tuh give orders in the Piute jail?"

Moran ducked the haymaker,

heard Groner's fist pass his right ear. Then Flash jolted an uppercut from hip level that popped off Burk's bristling chin and stretched him out on the jail floor.

Two of Groner's deputies went for guns, but Missouri Suggs whipped out a long-barreled .45 and Doc Watts snatched a short, but efficient-looking life preserver—a double-barreled derringer—from his side pocket.

Bullets would have cut down Moran there and then, but for his friends' covering guns. Groner lay on the battered floor. His narrow-eyed men shoved back against the corridor walls as Flash and his friends at last fought their way into the room where the sheriff lay.

This room, overlooking the back country, had long been used as a bunk room by the sheriffs' force. A doorway also led out to the stable where officers kept their grain-fed running horses. For in Piute, the law required stout mounts to overtake the rustlers and killers of the high mountain country.

Doc Watts rolled up his sleeves and went to work. The two stretcher bearers who were dusty trailers known to Moran, blurted out what they knew of the attempted murder. It was just such another dry-gulch as Flash had ridden into.

"One of us boys," the informant explained, "was not fur behind Hank when he got plugged. It was just outside the Buckskin' diggin's."

"Did you see the killer?" Flash asked.

"Yeah. He went over the rim on the jump. Ridin' a black hoss. Sun was high. I could see silver conchas on his black chaps."

Moran whirled on Missouri. "Dollars to doughnuts," he snapped, "that it was the same gent that tried

fer me. Used a .44 gun. Rifle or six."

One of the men passed over an empty shell that matched those found by Moran in the willows.

"Picked this up," he confirmed. "It is a .44."

Doc Watts looked up from his work. "Sheriff will live," he said, "but he'll be off the job for weeks. Bullet went in high."

"Can he talk?" Flash asked.

"A little," said the physician.

The old sheriff grinned feebly as Flash bent over and whispered his name.

"Glad yore back," croaked Horn. "High-graders workin'. A big clean-up comin' in from the Buckskin. Forty thousand in dust an' nuggets."

Flash yearned to ask the old man why strangers had been given jobs on his staff, but he saw that Horn was weakening. It was up to Flash to discover things for himself.

At least, he had two clues to the high-graders. He knew that one of the gang rode a tall black horse, wore silver-decorated chaps of the same color, and used six-gun and rifle of the same caliber.

Now the sheriff spoke of pay dirt coming to Piute. Forty thousand dollars' worth of gold dust and nuggets in addition to sacks of high-grade rock like the black stuff in Missouri's packs.

"It's time," Flash told Doc Watts and Missouri, "that the ol' home town got cleaned up. Piute can't stand too much pay dirt."

"What'll you do about it?" asked Missouri. "They've packed the sheriff's office with rats."

"Who's this Burk Groner?"

Doc Watts answered curtly: "An imported killer from the Black Hills. When Pitts got killed, and Johnny Hatch hurt, the boss of the Miners'

Bank and some other citizens required the sheriff to hire Groner to protect these rich ore shipments. Groner claimed to know all the inside on ore holdups."

"Pore ol' Hank surrounded by strangers. No wonder he got hurt."

Doc Watts growled. "You forget that he lost his two best men before that. And you were away."

Moran's jaw clicked like a steel trap. His eyes gleamed.

"I'm back!" he grated.

He went out the rear door. He had to inspect the old home town without half the citizens checking his movements. He was halfway between the jail and the stable when he heard the soft creak of boots behind him. He whirled, six-gun rattling free. A tall man answered his challenge:

"It's me—Missouri. Don't git so jumpy."

"You ought ter be back with Watts," said Flash.

The old trail driver strode up, shaking his head.

"Flash," he whispered, "you are bumpin' into the biggest cold-deck game on record. The high-graders have taken over Piute. So many strangers are around that us ol'-timers don't know friend from enemy. Big money has got everybody razzle-dazzled. That's why I'm with you, Flash. They might shoot you through the back anywhar'. Now you walk ahead through the alley. I'll stay behind and——"

But Flash was angry. They had taken over his home town, these rats and vultures of the mining camps! He stumped past the stable, dark under the stars, for dusk had come.

"Stay with me," he told Missouri. "They might shoot you to come up on me from behind."

"Now listen, Flash——" Missouri began, protesting.

Bang! From the alley a gun flashed.

The muzzle flare burned a yellow glare in the gloom. The bullet smashed past Moran's head. He dropped to his knees. Missouri was tugging at his six-gun. But Flash already had cleared a Colt.

Out from behind the stable broke a swarm of men. The darkness half obscured their forms. They were difficult targets.

Wham! Moran pitched three shots into the mass, heard a sharp yell of agony.

Bang! A return fire burned over him as he dropped flat on the ground.

He heard Missouri grunt and all the old man's artillery rattle as the trailer struck grit like a tired ammunition mule lying down.

"Are you hit, Missouri?" Flash yelled.

"Naw," grunted Missouri. "Jest knocked out my wind when I dropped."

The gunners in the alley, believing they had cut down their targets, bunched and charged through the big gate. Moran and Missouri propped up their gun arms, blazed away. The charge broke, went back with two men piled up in the entrance.

But Flash perceived that, caught here in the open, superior force would overcome him.

He punched Missouri in the short ribs.

"Make for the barn," he whispered. "I'll keep up a fire until yuh yell. Then I'll make the break."

The dark stable offered bullet cover.

"You go fust," snapped Missouri. "I'd like tuh win me another high-grader."

Flash punched harder. "Git!" he snapped.

Bang! Missouri slanted a farewell slug.

Then he leaped up, and bent double, broke for the barn.

Moran's two guns—for now he had drawn his left-flank cannon—were roaring. The alley gang went out of sight again.

But the rear door of the jail burst open, throwing a broad glare of light across the dark back yard. Moran lay there, plainly exposed as if under a searchlight. A gun cracked. From the rear. A bullet tore up gravel not six inches from his body.

He leaped up, knowing he was trapped between two hostile lines of fire. He started for the stable where Missouri was fanning a fast gun. He had no hope of reaching it.

"Home sweet home!" snarled Flash Moran as a bullet cut an earmark in the flapping right wing of his bullhide chaps.

CHAPTER IV.

MAW'S STAND-OFF.

OIL lamps gleamed in a small room that smelled of hot coffee, wheat cakes, and ham and eggs. Back of the counter that had been scrubbed as white as snow stood a scrawny old woman with gray hair tightly knotted behind her head and steel-rimmed spectacles shading her sharp eyes. A half dozen men filled the room, but they were wary of Maw Striker, who had dished out grub for Piute for many years.

"This here's my café," snapped maw, "and I like it. I don't aim to rent, sell, lease, git out now, to-night, to-morrow, next week, or within ten years. I'm here to stay."

The man she addressed—a slim old fellow in dark, well-cut garments, and with carefully brushed pepper-and-salt side whiskers—held up a

long, white hand on which gleamed a fine ruby ring.

"But madam," he protested, "I have just laid down a hundred dollars to rent your place for a week. It is right across the street from my bank. I have a large store of gold dust in the vault. Deputy Groner has said guards would stay here and watch every night until I can get this pay dirt safely out of town."

A hundred dollars in gold lay there on the counter, but Maw sniffed and turned up her sharp nose.

"Burk Groner!" she jeered. "He's a fine one to watch a bank. I seen him last in Deadwood. A drunk and a gambler. In for any skin game. No Burk Groner can make a fool out o' Maw Striker."

The banker snarled: "You think he's making a fool out of me?"

"Mr. Baldwin," said Maw, "what happens to you is none of my concern. But if you trust this Groner like yo're doin', then good-by pay dirt."

Blam! A volley of gunfire rattled somewhere in town.

The banker grabbed for his hundred dollars. The men with him, most of them attired in the quiet clothing of merchants and business men, squirmed and looked uneasy.

"Madam," Baldwin snapped, "you hear that? The town's uneasy tonight. Since the sheriff got dry-gulched on the trail, we citizens have organized this safety committee."

Maw barked: "Quit callin' me 'modom,' dang yuh! Flash Moran an' the rest have been callin' me 'Maw' since I started——"

Blam! Nearer rolled the guns.

The safety committee drew six-guns, began to spin cartridge-laden cylinders. A man nervously shifted a shotgun just taken off a hardware-

store rack—a gun so new that the grease clung to the metal.

"Pick up yore money!" cried Maw. "Git out an' pertect yore town, if you got the nerve. Hidin' in here——"

Up on the plank walk boomed the iron-shod hoofs of a galloping horse. Maw glanced through the wide front window, made out a blaze-faced buckskin under the street lamp. She knew that horse.

"Moran's back!" she cried triumphantly. "The kid's on the job! He'll pertect yore dang bank."

But the man who strode into the café wasn't Moran. It was Burk Groner. His clothing was torn and mauled as if he had just emerged from a thrashing machine. One eye had swollen shut, and his drooping mustache slanted at an awkward angle, because Burk had lost an eye-tooth.

"In the name of the law," Groner snarled, his hard eyes on the old woman, "I'm takin' over yore place."

Maw, her triumphant smile fading, reeled away from the counter.

"Where's Moran?" she half-whispered.

"Runnin' wild!" roared Groner. "He's been away six weeks. I figure he's had time to wise up this high-grader bunch on the pay dirt. He's got his men planted for quick killin'. He tried to murder me not a half hour ago. He was on the Buckskin Trail when the sheriff was nearly killed. Moran, I swear, is the high-grader chief."

Maw Striker reached behind her for a thick china plate. She hurled it instantly. Groner dodged and the plate smashed against the farther wall. But Maw, caring nothing for her dishes, only angry because this man had accused a firm friend of attempted murder and robbery, seized the entire stack. She began heaving

plates, sailing them as a boy skips flat stones across a creek.

The safety committee began to dodge and hunt cover under tables and chairs. Plates were breaking all around them. Burk Groner, missing one throw by a split half second, got a plate squarely in the mouth and hit the floor.

Baldwin, the neat banker, lost a large section of his side whiskers when he ran into the heating stove in the rear of the room. The pipe gave away and the entire structure came down with a loud crash, covering Baldwin and half the committeemen with black soot.

Over the wreck presided Maw Striker, hurling plates and shouting her war cry:

"Callin' Flash Moran a high-grader! Yuh low-livin' skunks!"

Horses crashed up on the walk. Men burst into the café. They carried guns.

Groner propped up and roared: "Grab that old woman! She's gone loco!"

A big deputy with a beefy face tried to vault the high counter. Maw had run out of plates, but just behind her was a coconut pie so freshly baked that it still smoked. She used the pie for reserve ammunition.

The custard top blinded the deputy as if he were all lathered up for a shave. He went sliding off the counter, clawing at his eyes and mouth.

But Groner was up and didn't intend to submit to Maw's plate-and-pie throwing. He hunched over, kicked the soot-covered banker aside, and started around the counter.

Maw, at bay, reached for the only weapon left which was the dull-bladed pie knife. She brandished it

as Groner started around the counter.

"A foot nearer," she warned, "and I'll trim off yore dang mustache."

"Lay down that knife," shouted Groner, "or I'll send yuh to State prison for interferin' with the law!"

A safety committeeman—the one who carried the greasy shotgun—bawled: "And we'll back him up."

For an instant, the room was quiet. There stood Maw, neat hair in disarray now, eyes snapping behind her specs, knife upheld like a saber.

Groner faced her, reluctant to draw a gun. The town committee stood or sat in various attitudes. The Miners' Bank chief was picking soot out of his whiskers. The pie-plastered deputy sat on the floor snapping coconut frosting off his mottled face.

"If Flash Moran was here," groaned Maw, "you wouldn't bully an ol' lady."

The banker said: "Madam, we need this place to guard my bank."

"Quit callin' me 'modom'!"

Wham! In the rear of the café there broke out a vicious smash of gunfire.

Horses' hoofs drummed on the hardpan. Groner whirled away, shouted to his men:

"Look out!"

Then he ducked his head and rushed Maw.

Into the room, smashing through the rear door, drove two horsemen. They had ducked their heads to avoid the low ceilings. The one in the lead who poised a six-gun was Flash Moran.

Right at his heels rode Missouri Suggs.

The citizen with the greasy shotgun flipped up his gun and tried to fire.

Moran reached from his saddle, grabbed the barrel, tilted it up.

Braang! Both barrels let go into the ceiling. Plaster fell.

The slippery barrel twisted out of Moran's hands as he jerked it away from the nervous gunman. The weapon hurtled through the air, hit the pie-faced deputy as he leaped up to bend a six-gun on the red-haired warrior. With a grunt like that of a stuck hog, the deputy went down. And not—this time—from coconut pie.

Halfway to Maw, Groner heard the shotgun's roar, turned and fired. Moran saw that if he cut loose, his bullets might kill or injure Maw.

"Git to cover, Maw!" he shouted. "I got to throw these haws out!"

Groner burned another bullet at a range of six feet. It stung Moran's pony along the right shoulder. The cayuse tried to pitch there in that cramped space. Flash was exposed to hostile fire while he tightened his rein grip.

Missouri Suggs slashed the deputy's frantic pony with his quirt.

"Straight ahead!" he shouted.

CHAPTER V.

A KILLER WINS.

BUT riding a snorting pony straight ahead through a room jammed with excited men, an overturned stove, and across a floor slippery with shattered china and pie frosting proved more of a job than Flash could accomplish.

The gang in the café, regaining nerve, clawed at his leather chaps and stirrups like a pack of wolves. The pony—a black that he had taken from the stable to make a dash for life through the bunch holding the alley—lashed out with its front feet, bawled, and tried to bog its head.

Burk Groner, seeing that Flash was up against it, forgot Maw Striker. She had dodged to the floor in response to Moran's warning, but the red-haired deputy had no time now to buzz a bullet at Groner.

The black-eyed killer from Deadwood, seeing this turn in the game, came scuttling down the counter, whirled the corner where he could get a flank bullet into Moran.

The beefy-faced deputy, recovering from the blow given him by the shotgun, wobbled up and flung himself at the black pony's bridle. He was a big man and when he had seized the leather down near the bit, he hung like an anchor.

A half dozen men had their hands on Moran's legs. With his free arm—the left—he sought to slash them with his six-gun.

Old Missouri, barred from the fight by Moran's horse, still shouted entreaties, struck out with his quirt.

"Git out o' here!" Flash managed to shout above the noise. "Go fer help!"

"I'm stayin' here!" howled Missouri. "The dirty high-gradin' skunks—"

Burk Groner turned his six-gun on the old trailer, thumbed the hammer. The slug missed Missouri, but cut across the top of his pony's neck. The pony went down as if it had been hit between the eyes with an ax.

Missouri, hurled from leather, jumped clear of his stirrups, cast one wild look into the café, then backed out of the building.

Several of Groner's men tried to pursue him, but the body of Missouri's horse blocked the entrance. While they pawed and swore, seeking to remove the limp carcass, Missouri disappeared into the night.

Meanwhile, as if Missouri's flight had given new courage to them,

Groner's gang went for Moran. Even then he might have cut through, cleared the room, and somehow chased the whole bunch out of Maw's place.

But his dancing black stepped on a joint of stove-pipe, rammed a front foot into it, and stumbled. Moran was almost thrown from his saddle.

With a howl, the gang finished the job. They jerked him to the floor. A half dozen men jumped on his prostrate form. He felt blunt boots hammering against his ribs, horny fists pounding until his whole body became a blur of pain.

He tried to fight, to get up, to use his gun. But although Burk Groner's gang lacked nerve, they possessed weight. It was as if Flash lay under a ton of brick. He *couldn't* get up.

The end came when a six-gun butt cracked him across the top of his head and he reeled back with a groan. He wasn't out, but his strength drained away like water.

With Moran's defeat, the fight had not yet ended. Maw Striker, always gallant, came to life with her pie knife. She jumped up and ran the counter length toward Groner, who had forgotten her, so great was his interest in defeating Flash.

But Baldwin, the banker, dancing around the edges of the scuffle, sighted Maw and yelled a warning.

Groner spun around, flung up his left arm, warded off the slash of the knife. The old woman had come within his reach. He didn't wield his gun, but he dropped his left hand, gripped her right wrist, and by superior strength twisted the knife out of her hand.

The beefy-faced deputy whose brute strength had overcome the black pony by that constant drag on the bridle bit turned the horse over to a panting mate.

Then he stamped past the horse, rounded the counter, and at Groner's command assumed guard over the sullen Maw.

So the situation stood there in the café when a crowd of Piute citizens, alarmed by the gunfire and confusion in the place, tried to jam in the front door.

With bulging eyes they saw the wreckage, the quivering horse held tightly in the center of the room, three men astride the form of Flash Moran, the body of another horse sprawled through the rear door, Baldwin and his safety committee jammed against the walls, Groner and his big follower by the counter, facing Maw Striker.

Groner strode out, a cold smile on his bruised face. He had undergone considerable battering, but he believed that at last he held high cards. He must now quiet the alarmed citizens.

"Gents," he said, "this looks like a wreck. But it's all the fault of the man we jest arrested. He's Flash Moran, a former officer of Hank Horn. He has turned high-grader and to-night he come to town ready to pull a big raid on the gold dust that Mr. Baldwin has stored in his vault across the street."

Maw Striker, a prisoner but never afraid to talk, spat out:

"It's all a dirty lie. Flash Moran come here to help me out when these hoodlums tried to take away my café."

"Madam," interrupted Baldwin, "we are not hood—"

"Quit callin' me 'modom,'" she snarled. "If yuh ain't hoodlums, yo're fools! If you had been in Piute long as I have, yo'd know Moran is a squar' shooter."

Baldwin stepped out alongside Groner. Here was his man, the one he had hired to protect pay dirt

when he became certain that old Hank Horn was fighting a losing battle against clever ore thieves.

"Gents," said Baldwin, "I came here five weeks ago and invested my capital in the almost defunct Miners' Bank. I believed the big strike on Buckskin would make this place a city. I invited my friends to come and invest their money. They did. They stand here with me to-night. To guard that money, we hired Burk Groner, an expert on high-grading from the Black Hills, to protect our investments. The sheriff was reluctant to accept him, but because he was short-handed, he did. Now to-night——"

Groner cut in: "To-night there is forty thousand in gold dust and nuggets in the Miners' Bank. I am certain that in capturing Moran we have taken the high-grader boss. But the gang is still running loose. I want you men to do what I say, or Piute is a blowed-up camp."

Of the crowd in the street, hardly a man was an old-time Piuter. Although Moran didn't know it, at word of the rich strike on Buckskin, his former friends had grabbed picks and shovels and stampeded to stake out claims.

So strangers now inhabited Piute, men like the friends of Groner, and those of Baldwin, who were clever enough to know that real riches in a boom camp came from buying and selling and not from digging.

Groner had a reputation. Or so they all believed. He was a noted Black Hills killer and peace officer, so Baldwin had declared. They trusted Baldwin because he had enough money to buy a bank.

They listened eagerly as Burk Groner gave his orders. They were to go across the street, throw a cord around the Miners' Bank.

Other parties were to ride the river

trail, for it was believed that some of the high-grader gang were camped out there. This was in the opposite direction from the Buckskin diggings.

"With my deputies," Groner concluded, "I'll stay here and keep an eye on things. If the gang tries to jump the bank, we'll be set for them. Now get going. This here is headquarters."

All of Baldwin's friends went outside. One of the deputies led out the nervous black horse. But there was no time to move the animal blocking the rear door.

"You stay with me," said Groner to Baldwin. "I'll need yore advice."

So the café was at last cleared except for the two prisoners, Groner and his men, Baldwin, and Missouri Suggs's apparently dead horse.

While Groner had been making his talk, Moran's wits had cleared. He lay on the floor, crushed down by his guards. But he made no move.

He was listening. And this did Flash a world of good. It was about the first time since arriving home that he had had time to think.

"There is times," he told himself, "when usin' yore head beats usin' yore six-gun."

Hank Horn was always advising Flash to do that. But most of the jobs Flash bumped into required gun work and fast fists. Just the same, as he lay there listening to Groner's bold orders, he realized that tricky work was afoot here in Maw Striker's café.

"If I can jest keep from takin' a punch at this Groner," he vowed, "I may win out yet."

Groner said to Baldwin, very politely: "You are tired. Go over and sit down in that corner." He looked at the beefy guard. "Bring

the old woman out and seat her alongside the banker."

Then the guards pulled Moran to his feet. He stood there, weak-kneed and feeling as if a locomotive had run over him. But his blue eyes glinted and he could even grin with his swollen lips.

"You," growled Burk Groner, "ought ter be killed. But I'm savin' you, yuh red-headed chipmunk, for a bigger play."

Then the guard took Flash over and planted him in a chair beside Maw. So the three sat there against the wall opposite the counter. Flash was on the left, Maw in the center, the banker on the right.

Groner spoke to three men who had bent their six-guns on Flash and Maw: "If either of 'em moves, give 'em the works." He turned to his remaining followers. "Give the signal. Start things movin'."

Baldwin, the banker, asked: "Start what movin'?"

Groner grinned, showing all his teeth. "We got a tunnel drilled across the street and under your vault. The stuff we start movin' is that forty thousand in gold."

CHAPTER VI.

LOOTING THE BANK.

THE banker sprang up. A guard tilted his gun and laughed as he commanded: "Sit down, little man. Sit down an' jest stay plenty quiet. Or else——"

Groner now became busy as he ranged between the main room and the rear where his followers had disappeared. They had not taken time to remove Suggs's horse. They merely crawled over the prostrate body. Moran could hear the drive of picks, the rasp of shovels.

Maw whispered. "I understand now. The reason they wanted my

place was to store the dust until they had cleaned out the bank vault. That's why Groner got this fool safety committee to offer me that rent."

Baldwin heard and groaned. "Madam," he said, "I assure you I was entirely taken in by this man, Groner. I believed him a true-blue peace officer and detective."

"Yeah," she snarled. "You thought ol' Hank Horn was behind the times, that he couldn't bust up this high-grade gang. So, dang it, yuh let the real high-grade chief pull the wool over yore eyes. An' now, as a result——"

"I lose forty thousand in pay dirt, madam."

"Quit callin' me——"

"All right," groaned Baldwin. "I'll make it 'Maw.'"

Maw smiled. "Now," she said, "yo're gittin' human."

But Flash Moran wasn't listening to this talk. He was watching the movements of Groner and his men. His mind dwelt on events since he had quit the jail.

He had succeeded in reaching the stable. There he had found two horses in the stalls. With Missouri, he had mounted, opened the rear stable door, crashed through the bunched gang in the alley.

Riding past the café, they had heard the confusion within, entered to rescue Maw. And here he sat, a prisoner, with Burk and his bunch tunneling into the bank.

There were sheds back of the café. Moran assumed that for days the gang had been using such buildings to hide the entrance to the tunnel. They had wanted the café on the big night to guard against any interruption.

He had to admit, also, that Groner had shown cleverness in stationing Piuters all around the

doomed bank and sending many out of town. Thus no alarmed citizens would enter the bank to interfere with the cleaning out of the vault.

"If the ol' home-town gang was here," muttered Flash, "things might be different."

He wondered what had become of Missouri Suggs. He knew the old trailer wouldn't run away. Missouri would seek the nearest aid and bring it on the run. But Groner and the forty thousand in pay dirt might be gone into the Buckskin Bad Lands before that aid arrived.

The sheriff lay wounded and helpless. Doc Watts was busy with him. If Piute maintained a clean record to-night, then somehow Flash Moran must ride the storm and pilot to a safe harbor.

He laughed grimly. A lanky guard, with a black eye put there by Moran, grunted and snarled that he'd like to get in on the joke.

"No joke," Flash admitted, "except on me."

"What do yuh mean?"

Flash gestured around the wrecked café. "It's about supper time," he said. "A few hours ago, I was ridin' the trail picturin' how I'd eat my next meal with Maw. An' here I sit with a gun on me an' the café wrecked. Home sweet home!"

Then he stopped talking and his eyes went to the horse in the doorway. The animal's head was in plain sight. The hindquarters were in the back room where Groner was issuing sharp orders.

What struck Moran as strange was that the horse's eyes were closed. He had assumed the animal to be dead. But the eyes of the dead stay open. The guard saw Moran's shift of vision and whirled. But he paid no attention to the small detail of a horse's eyes being closed.

"What yuh lookin' at?" he rasped. "Nothin'," said Flash, "jest wonderin' how I ever got a hoss through that doorway without bumpin' my head."

Through Moran's mind was running the thought that Missouri's pony had been creased across the neck. He knew that on the range, clever marksmen used this method to stop wild horses that they couldn't run down.

A horse thus creased will drop, lie as if dead for some time, then get up on its feet slightly dazed but otherwise uninjured. Now if a man could get to the horse as it arose, ride clear of the café, arouse the fools who were guarding a bank while it was being robbed, then Groner's game might be spiked.

But what about Maw and the banker? If another fight started, bullets would certainly drill them. It was Moran's job to chance death, but he didn't wish to put an old lady up against gunfire—or even a banker for the sake of forty thousand in pay dirt.

The three guards alone remained in the room with the prisoners. Groner was out with his men. He had appeared once in the doorway with a small buckskin sack which he shook triumphantly.

"A thousand in pay dirt here," he shouted. "The boys are busy totin' out the rest. Another half hour an' we'll have it."

Then he had disappeared.

Moran turned to Maw and said. "You look like yo're sick—about to faint."

Maw started to answer indignantly that she had never fainted. Until she saw Flash wink the eye farthest from the guards. It was then that Maw Striker became very ill.

"Lawks!" she moaned faintly, and

clutched her throat. "I—I feel like I'm about to keel." Her eyes rolled back, and she reeled in the chair.

The three guards, accustomed to everything except swooning women, frowned and looked useless. Flash turned to seize Maw's fainting form. He shouted for the guards to get cold water, do something, or she would die before their eyes. Baldwin fluttered his hands and jumped up from his seat.

Maw sprawled down in her chair. Her feet tangled with those of a guard who stepped nearer and the man stumbled. His two mates had rushed across the room, hunting for water.

For an instant the stumbling man's eyes were off Flash Moran. His gun hung downward.

Flash dived from his chair, clamped that gun with both hands, and twisted it out of the guard's grip before the latter could get into action.

"Look out!" the disarmed guard yelled.

His two mates flung around, lined their guns. But Moran rammed the body of the disarmed man between himself and the two Colts.

Baldwin dived to the floor. Maw came surprisingly out of her faint.

"Get that banker!" Flash snapped at Maw. "Head for the door! Git out o' here! Spread the alarm!"

Maw grabbed Baldwin's coat collar. "Come on!" she snapped, and started for the door.

One of the guards by the counter swung his gun to drive a bullet as Maw started across the room.

Moran's six-gun barked. The bullet struck the gunman by the counter between the eyes. He went down in a heap.

Without a backward look, Maw

went out the front door, still dragging Baldwin.

So Moran was left to hold the fort with one guard disarmed, another dead, and a third exceedingly dangerous.

For this third man, seeing that the red-haired deputy now held an advantage, had vaulted across the counter and hidden behind it. Only the form of his friend shielding Flash made him hold his fire.

"Home sweet home!" muttered Moran.

The guard he had overcome stood facing him, not a yard distant. The fellow's face had turned a chalky white under its range tan. He knew that the least movement against orders would mean death.

He might draw the bullet from his own Colt that Flash held. Or his friend behind the counter might lose his head and drive a slug into the small of his back.

Even for a hardened outlaw, it was a hot spot. And licking his dry lips, the prisoner tried to plead with Flash.

"Aw, let's talk turkey. We'll let you foller the old woman."

Flash, bent at the knees, gun held ready for a snap shot if a head appeared above the counter, grinned and said: "Yeah. If I walked out on the street before Maw spread the word, that bunch of nitwits would hang me."

"If you stay *here*, Groner will kill yuh."

Flash laughed. "Don't forget, ol' boy, that if he does, you die first. Jest remember that. And don't move a step without my order."

The gunman back of the counter, deciding that he couldn't get Flash without harming his own pard, had crawled on hands and knees under the shelving toward the rear door where the horse lay. As he rounded

the counter, something happened that nobody but Flash had expected.

Missouri Suggs's pony came to life. It shuddered the length of its frame. Then it wiggled its ears. Finally its eyes opened and the effects of the bullet that had numbed its brain died away. The pony pulled its front feet under its body, gave a lurch and heave, and came up on all fours.

This occurred just as the crawling gunman started out that same rear door, hoping to escape Moran's gun.

The pony snorted at sight of the crouching man there on the floor under its nose. He, startled also by this horse that had come so suddenly to life, stiffened with fear.

The pony bawled, struck out with an iron-shod hoof. The crouching man yelled hoarsely, attempted to dodge that flashing foot. But the iron struck him a glancing blow along the head, knocked him across the floor.

He brought up with a crash against the front of the counter alongside the sprawled form of the man who had stopped Moran's bullet.

Flash jumped for the pony's bridle. For now the panicky animal was attempting to charge clear of the doorway. An iron stirrup, caught on the frame, delayed it until the wood gave way with a rending crash.

The man who had lost his gun sought to tackle Flash, but the deputy hit him with a side-arm drive of the barrel and knocked him cold.

With his left hand tight on the bridle reins, his right filled with a .45 Colt, Flash Moran figured he had won this last deal—until high-graders jammed the rear doorway.

And through the front came Burk Groner, backed by a half dozen armed followers.

CHAPTER VII.

SHOW-DOWN.

UP on the Buckskin Trail, under cold stars, an old man checked his panting pony as he heard the thud of approaching hoofs. Men were coming, and Missouri Suggs, who had rushed from the café, found a loose horse ranging the street, and ridden for help, hoped he had bumped into friends.

For all the old-timers of Piute had gone mining, weeks before, when word came of the rich strike. They had turned their town over to strangers because gold had beckoned. As a result, bandits now ruled the roost, the real law was helpless. At this moment, only a red-haired youth named Moran stood for the right in Piute.

"An' Flash is up agin' an organized gang," groaned Missouri. "He can never make it."

Missouri's last glimpse of Flash had been the latter fighting off men who were dragging him from leather. Suggs hadn't run because he was a coward, but because he hoped that old-timers, hearing their sheriff had been dry-gulched, would be riding the trail.

On came the riders. Missouri, wise as a barn owl, drew off the road, cleared his gun, and allowed that he'd look them over as they went past.

It was then that he noted under the starlight that he had caught a blaze-faced buckskin horse. And strangest of all, he discovered that in the scabbard of the saddle was a rifle.

Missouri had quit town so swiftly, ridden this two miles with his thoughts on possible help, that he hadn't investigated saddle or rigging.

Nor did Missouri know that he

was riding Moran's horse that Groner had taken from the hitch rack in front of the jail and that this rifle had been shoved into the scabbard by Burk Groner.

When he jerked the rifle, he saw that it was a .44 Winchester. And he recalled that a .44 had been used by the Buckskin ambusher against the sheriff and Flash Moran.

"By the livin'," Missouri snapped, "I'll bet that somehow I picked up that ambusher's hoss."

Preferring his six-gun to this strange rifle, he slid the weapon back into its sheath. He was ready for action when a knot of hard-riding men rounded the hill and thundered down the broad trail.

It was difficult to make out form or features. Missouri would have been puzzled as to whether these were friends or foes if he hadn't sighted a strangely hunched figure on a long-eared mule.

Everybody in the Buckskin camp knew that man and mule. There rode Wun Lung, the former Piute washerman, who had quit his tubs to find a million in raw gold.

"It's Piuters!" barked Missouri. "The ol' home-town bunch!"

He spurred out across the trail. They were fifty feet away. Guns flashed up, centered on Missouri.

"It's Suggs!" he yelled. "Hold yore fire!"

A brown-bearded man spurred his cayuse ahead. He packed a carbine across his saddle fork. Missouri knew him as Jake Jones, who had formerly run the Piute Bank when the town needed money. Jake had sold out to Baldwin and gone to hunt gold.

"What yuh doin' here?" snarled Jake. "Why ain't yuh helpin' to hunt the hounds that shot our sheriff?"

"Whar you been lookin'?" Missouri rapped out.

Jake said wearily: "Me an' the boys followed what looked like a hot trail into the Buckskin Bad Lands. It turned out tuh be a fake. We was headin' fer town to git fresh hosses."

"I've found yore gang," said Missouri. "They've taken over the ol' home town. An' Flash Moran is makin' the stand-off."

Jake swung on his men, including the Chinaman.

"That's what we git," he said bitterly, "fer tryin' a game we don't savvy—this gold-huntin' stuff. Our job is punchin' cows, sellin' oats an' hay, loanin' a few dollars when a cattleman needs credit. That's what we located Piute fer. Tuh thunder with this pay dirt in the ol' home town!"

"Come on!" rasped Missouri, "or yore ol' home town will be as dead as a longhorn bogged down in the Cimarron River."

When Groner blocked the front door of the café, Flash Moran believed the game was up. The high-grader chief, hearing gunfire inside, had sent his scouts to bar all ways of retreat. But even Groner was amazed when he saw the horse that had come to life, his three guards on the floor, and the fighting deputy ready to hit leather.

But amazement didn't rattle Groner. If the gang was to get away with the buckskin bags of gold dust, then this deputy must here and now be stopped before he spread word.

"Kill Moran!" shouted Groner.

That became the gang's war cry: "Kill Moran!" Stop him on the spot. Riddle his rawboned frame with hot lead. Kill him for the sake of a fortune in raw gold.

Out by the bank, Maw and the banker were pleading with iron-jawed guards placed there by Groner, befuddled by the clever crook's orders. It seemed hours before even the banker could convince them how Groner had outwitted the town.

Moran stood poised on the balls of his feet alongside the snorting, kicking pony. His eyes were hard on Burk Groner who stood planted in the doorway.

The redhead was figuring all chances. He knew that his only hope lay in getting out that front door. He could never swing the horse in this small, littered room. And even if the pony succeeded in reaching the front, bullets might snap into Flash as he swung into the saddle. Bullets from the rear.

He freed his grip on the reins. He reached up, took a choke hold on the saddle horn. Then he slashed the horse down the withers with the front sight of his six-gun.

It was as if a spur had been dragged across that sensitive surface. This pony, like most Western cayuses, would never stand for scratching along the neck.

With a bawl and a lunge, the pony charged the front door. It jerked Moran off his feet.

A half dozen guns thundered an iron chorus. Lead zipped past Moran, but the fire was high, for the gunmen in the rear knew Groner and the rest of the gang stood in front.

It was difficult to hit the body of a man rattling there from the saddle of a lunging horse, hanging with a grip like death, using the pony for a shield from fire, betting his life that Groner and his gunmen would dodge aside to avoid the rush of the stampeding horse.

Groner flashed a bullet at Moran.

Then he leaped clear as the horse burst through the front door.

The pony's front feet hit the plank walk. It skidded to the edge, went over the foot-high drop, almost on its nose. Moran was thrown to the ground. But he came up on his haunches still gripping his six-gun.

Groner and his men darted around the building, heading back to where horses packed with pokes of gold awaited. The plot had broken down. They must get out of town.

They hadn't cleaned out all the high value in the bank, but they had brought at least twenty thousand dollars in dust back through the tunnel.

Wham-wham-wham! Moran's six-gun stabbed three quick flashes of fire.

He was trying for Groner, but it was the last trailer of the gang who saved his chief. He turned to fight off Moran and got those three slugs liberally spaced through his body. He went down against the wall of the café and stayed there.

Moran jumped up. The pony was on its feet. He hit leather. With spurs rolling, he whipped the cayuse around the corner of the café, bent on rushing the gang off its feet before escape could be made with the gold.

No time now for Moran to use his wits. He knew, but didn't care, that Groner had plenty of gunmen back of the café—gunmen who would fight like cornered rats to get away with pay dirt.

"Old home town!" shouted Flash Moran. "Yuh dang rats!"

Out of the alley came the charge of horsemen, quiring their gold-laden horses, riding for their lives and fortunes. Burk Groner held the lead.

Moran fronted them on his wall-

eyed horse. It was dark in this alley. Even the starlight seemed to have died away. It was a place where men would die like rats.

Craang! The thunder of guns roared above the stormy shouts of the crowd that rushed across the street led by old Maw and Baldwin. It boomed above the drumming of iron hoofs galloping down the Buckskin Trail.

In a struggling mass, the riders blocked the alley. For Flash Moran held the opening that meant escape. He held it with a blazing gun that dealt death and destruction.

The very size of the gang operated in Moran's favor. For these warriors could not guide their horses easily. And Flash had ridden in so close that his body had almost merged with the twisting forms of the men in the lead.

There was a grin on Moran's bruised face, a flare to his red hair. For he was happily at work. He was at close quarters with the enemy, well armed to boot, and if his bullets ran out, then he could crack heads with his front sight.

"Home sweet home!" yelled Flash.

A gun blazed. By its light he saw the dead-black eyes and the dead-

black mustache of Burk Groner. The high-grader chief had spurred clear of his tangled men. He had sought out Moran and tried to kill him. But his bullet cut a lock off Moran's red hair.

Blam! Moran fired, ruining Groner's black mustache with the last bullet in his gun.

As he flipped the hammer, he was remembering how this cold-eyed bandit had ruined a good town, killed and wounded honest officers, mocked the law, wrecked Maw's place.

Piuters, assembled by Maw, broke the last desperate charge of the gang. Missouri Suggs and the old-timers caught what fugitives were left as they tried for the Buckskin Bad Lands.

Old Baldwin shook Moran's hand as men carried Burk Groner away to Boot Hill on a splintered door from Maw's place.

"You saved the pay dirt, son," he said. "Two thousand-dollar sacks go to you."

"Give 'em to Maw," laughed Flash. "An' tell her to start up business ag'in by cookin' me a double order of ham an' eggs. I'm shore glad to git back home."



THE FIRST BORDER RANGERS

WHEN Captain McNelly, in March, 1875, recruited his army of forty-two men to contend with an amazing bandit organization of Mexicans, many people laughed at the idea, while the wiser ones shook their heads in dismay.

The desperadoes, cattle and horse thieves, murderers and outlaws of every description, numbered over three thousand, all under the protection of General Cortina, and licensed by him as honest-to-goodness cattle raiders.

Cortina had gained great prestige on the south bank of the Rio Grande by capturing American settlements, including Brownsville. After this feat, he became mayor of Matamoros, governor of Tamaulipas, and was given absolute control of a large section of the border country.

To handle his enormous traffic in raided herds, Cortina had seized control of some twenty ranches in Tamaulipas, where he held the stock, as any big ranching outfit would do.

To dispose of the animals, he had a fleet of steamers that were often anchored off the bar at Port Isabel. Runways were built out to the boats, through which cattle were driven and loaded by thousands.

Cortina's raiders would enter Texas in bands of from fifty to a hundred, gather large herds of stock, and cross them over to the Rio Grande openly. The law-abiding element was afraid to give any information. Any man who dared to do so was signing his own death warrant.

But when Captain McNelly undertook to clean up the border, he first organized a band of spies, the leader of which was Herman Rock, who was considered the best informed man along the Rio Grande.

He knew most of the bandits by sight, and was familiar with all their trails.

In the morning of June 11, one of McNelly's scouts, named Sandoval, rode into camp and reported that a raiding band of one hundred men were due to return the following day from a raid.

The captain had only fifteen men with him, but in a few minutes after the arrival of Sandoval, he was leading them in a hard ride to the coast to cut off the bandits, who had several miles' start.

McNelly finally overtook them, but they had evidently been warned, as they had abandoned the stolen cattle, and had turned to give battle. Their rallying point was a slope, known to history as Pital Hill.

Orders had been given to the Rangers not to shoot until the captain gave the signal. When it was given, they were within ten paces of the bandits.

Immediately, every Ranger drew his bead on the darting, startled rustlers, and every shot counted.

One Ranger was killed. "Sonny" Smith had downed his man, and ran forward to capture him. But the wounded man had just enough strength left to roll over and thumb his six-gun.

The battle lasted about fifteen minutes, and when it was over, all the raiders, sixteen in number, were disposed of.

McNelly had his scouts gather up the bodies and drag them in.

The next day, they were sent to Brownsville in wagons, and were stacked in the public market place, where they were left for two days, so that all who needed a warning would have a good chance of getting it, and might take heed.



Gun Nerve

By Forbes Parkhill

Author of "Six-gun Gantlet," etc.

THE bullet intended for Deputy Sheriff "Speck" Sampson screeched past his freckled cheek and nailed the posseman galloping along behind him. Speck's blue eyes snapped angrily as, bending low over his saddle horn, he glanced back at the wounded rider.

The posseman dropped his reins and clawed at his chest. Slowly he began toppling sidewise. He slid to the ground, bringing up against a clump of sagebrush in an inert heap.

"Another notch on Killer Corbett's gun!" the young deputy cried angrily, as he fed his mount the steel. "Whambo! I'd give a leg to be a bull's-eye gun-slinger like him!"

Speck didn't realize that the bullet that had winged his companion had

been intended for Speck himself. But the knowledge would not have kept him from leading the posse. For it had been his reckless courage and dogged determination that had won Speck the job as assistant to Sheriff "Socko" Byland, grim, grizzled old lawman.

Riding his stirrups to steady his aim, Speck fired at the bandit leader, "Killer" Corbett, who had murdered the Wells-Fargo agent at Hackamore.

The first bullet went wild. Sheriff Byland, close behind, was shouting out profane demands to Corbett to surrender. Killer peered back over his shoulder, pointed his six-gun backward under his left elbow, and blazed away again.

As he fired, the horse ridden by a posseman crashed to the ground, catapulting its rider over its head. A cry of anger burst from Speck's lips as he emptied his gun at the three fleeing outlaws. Killer's weapon had dropped two of the four possemen Speck and his chief had picked up on the streets of Hackamore immediately after the gang's raid.

Speck was wild with eagerness to capture Corbett. For one reason, he had known the bandit's latest victim, a friendly, easy-going fellow, and he bitterly resented the wanton murder. Moreover, this was his first big case, and his whole future depended on the outcome.

Sheriff Byland was growing old and expected to retire at the end of his term. If Speck could show his worth, he had every chance of being elected the next sheriff. If he failed—well, he might as well abandon all hope of ever advancing beyond his present job.

Again the bandit leader's six-gun cracked. Speck heard another of the possemen cry out. He turned, and saw the rider rein in suddenly and clutch his thigh, squeezing with both thumbs.

The remaining posseman abruptly lost his enthusiasm for the chase and drew rein, apparently to help his wounded comrade. With a snort of disdain, Speck turned back and started stuffing fresh shells into the chambers of his six-gun.

Now that Corbett had whittled his pursuers down from six to two, Speck half expected him to make a stand and battle it out. But the boss outlaw was shouting harsh commands at his two comrades. One veered off to either side, heading for the protection of the sparse growth of lodgepole pine that covered the hilltops.

Two officers could not pursue

three scattered outlaws. By common consent, Sheriff Byland and Speck stuck to the trail of the leader. Speck kept blazing away, but Corbett was making no effort to return the fire. Speck wondered if he had emptied his six-gun and was now having difficulty in reloading it.

Just before the outlaw reached a cluster of boulders Speck cut loose again. A shout exploded from his lips as he saw Corbett's horse suddenly go lame.

"I winged his hoss!" he cried out. "Here's where I get a chance to tangle with him, gun to gun!"

Killer Corbett must have realized he couldn't keep ahead of his pursuers now, for he leaped from the saddle and turned to face the sheriff and his deputy. His gun blazed.

But Speck knew better than to throw his life away by riding straight up to the muzzle of the bandit's deadly weapon. He was courageous, but not foolish. He swung his right leg over the horn and hit the ground in a running dismount that ended in a headlong dive for the protection of a long slab of slide rock.

At the instant Speck slid to a halt, Corbett fired again. His slug glanced from the slab and whined off into space. Panting, Speck glanced back over his shoulder. He saw the sheriff, dismounted also, diving for a boulder just as Corbett's gun barked.

Speck peered around the end of the slab and banged away at the bandit. He jerked his head back the instant he fired, but a bullet from the outlaw's deadly gun sizzled past so close its hot breath fanned his cheek.

The panting sheriff was crawling toward Speck, hidden from Corbett's view by a swell of ground. In another moment, he snaked himself up alongside his deputy.

"We got to finish him off, quick,

'fore his pals hear the shooting and close in on us from behind," Byland said breathlessly. "You get at that end of the slab, Speck, and I'll get at this, and when I give the word we'll both shower down on him. Ready? Blaze away!"

As Speck cautiously poked his head from behind the rock, he saw the bandit leader's hawklike face twisted into a contemptuous sneer. Speck squeezed the trigger as swiftly as he could get his six-gun beyond the edge of the slab, and so did Sheriff Byland.

But Killer Corbett was as swift as greased lightning. Speck heard his gun crack and heard the sheriff cry out in pain. As he dodged back behind the rock, he saw the officer's six-gun go spinning from his bullet-mangled hand.

"Blazes!" gasped the sheriff, gripping his wrist to stanch the wound. "I'll never be able to fire another shot with *that* hand! And a sheriff who can't wrangle a six-gun just ain't no sheriff a-tall!"

He irritably refused Speck's proffered help. "Maybe we better let Corbett take one of our hosses and go, Speck, before——"

"Not so yuh can notice it!" interrupted Speck hotly. "I aim to nab him alive—or die a-tryin'!"

A bullet zipped through the carelessly exposed crown of Sheriff Byland's hat, and he ducked suddenly. Speck snatched off his own Stetson and shoved it cautiously around the end of the slab.

As Killer's gun rang out again, Speck leaped up in full view of the bandit and yelled:

"Surrender, yuh polecat, in the name of the law!"

Corbett leveled his six-gun at the audacious deputy, his thin lip curling contemptuously above yellow teeth. Sheriff Byland uttered a

frantic command for his deputy to duck to safety. But Speck leaped over the slab and started straight toward the waiting killer.

"Yuh asked for it, yuh sap!" snarled the outlaw, and he squeezed the trigger.

II.

But this time Killer's Colt spat no lead and fire. An exclamation of dismay burst from his lips. Again and yet again the hammer snapped, each time on an empty shell. His color changed to a sickly yellow as he realized he had "shot his six-gun dry."

"Don't shoot!" he croaked as Speck rushed toward him. "Don't shoot! I surrender!"

The gun dropped from his finger as he raised his hands above his head. A moment later, the grinning Speck was clicking handcuffs on the wrists of the fuming slayer. Sheriff Byland emerged from hiding, squeezing the arteries just above his dripping wound.

"Of all the dog-gone fool luck!" he roared admiringly at his deputy. "Yuh gambled on a million-to-one shot—and won. Yuh'd be dead as an empty bottle if Corbett's gun hadn't happened to be empty!"

Speck grinned happily as he picked up Corbett's fallen gun and thrust it inside his own belt. "'Twa'n't luck, sheriff. 'Twas judgment. I figured it out in advance. I couldn't outshoot Corbett, so I outsmarted him. I counted his shots after he reloaded. When I counted six, I knowed I was safe in stepping out and putting the collar on him."

Speck's prisoner glared at him, muttering oaths. Speck grinned.

"Corbett, me and you use exactly the same kind of gun, I see, which is a compliment to my gun judgment. Sheriff, set down on that rock whilst I examine yore hand."

"I'll never be able to hold a gun again," mourned Byland. "The forefinger is shot clean away, and the thumb is hanging by just a shred o' flesh. Bandage it up for me, Speck, and then I'll head over that a way to the Grasshopper Ranch whilst you take the prisoner back to town. No arguing, now—their's orders!"

Speck shrugged as he twisted a tourniquet about Byland's wrist. It wouldn't be much trouble for him to ride to the Grasshopper Ranch with his superior, and make certain Byland didn't suffer a dizzy spell and slip from the saddle. But he knew the stubborn officer too well to argue. When he had dressed the wound he helped the grizzled law veteran into the saddle.

"Son," remarked Byland in parting, "this wound means I got to step out of office, right now. Yo're the man to succeed me, Speck. Yuh proved it by nabbing Corbett."

"He ain't in jail yet," drawled Speck as he bade the sheriff good-by.

Then he ordered Corbett to swing into the saddle of the remaining unwounded horse, for there was nothing else to do except to ride double, unless they could pick up a horse ridden by one of the wounded possemen. When Corbett had mounted, Speck swung up behind. He dared not ride in front of Killer, and thus give him a chance to snatch his gun from his holster.

"Fella," Speck remarked as they headed back toward Hackamore, "yo're plenty tough when yuh got a gun in yore hand. But when yore holster's empty, yore courage dreens all out. Yo're nothing but a four-flusher, Corbett. Brave when the breaks are in yore favor, but a coward when the breaks are even."

Killer swore at him, and for a long time they rode in silence. Dusk found them still far from Hackamore,

for the double-laden horse could make no speed. Speck suddenly gave a violent start as he made out a lone horseman outlined against the dying sunset on the crest of a nearby hill. Killer Corbett let out a joyful cry and raised his shackled wrists above his head.

The skylighted rider waved an acknowledgment of the bandit leader's signal. Speck whipped out his six-gun and sent a .45 slug whistling toward the stranger. It was merely a warning, for the rider was out of range.

Corbett sneered triumphantly: "Yuh'll never get me to jail, young fella, now that my pals are wise. By midnight, yuh'll be coyote bait."

Killer Corbett's aid followed them, just beyond six-gun range, like a timber wolf stalking a calf. Presently he was joined by his companion, and the two of them were trailing the deputy and the prisoner.

"Depity," remarked Corbett over his shoulder gleefully, "yuh ain't got a chance now. But I'm willing to give yuh a break. Unlock these cuffs, and gimme my gun and this hoss, and I'll promise yuh'll get away alive."

Speck spat grimly. "Either you'll be locked in a cell by midnight, or the two of us will be layin' in the sagebrush with the coyotes gnawing the meat off our bones. I'm ridin' with this six-gun pointed at yore back, Corbett. Yore pals may get me, but before they do I'll blow yore stuffin's out."

Speck glanced back and saw the two horsemen separate, one moving toward either flank. He was uneasy. He kept to the low ground, avoiding ridges where he and his prisoner might be skylighted.

Half a mile ahead the trail wound through a stand of thick timber that Speck eyed with foreboding. It

would permit the enemy to get to close quarters, unseen—and Speck's main hope of success lay in keeping them at a distance.

Of course, he could kill Corbett before the gunmen killed him. But Speck wanted, above all things, to get his prisoner safe in jail. Not only because it was his duty, but because his whole future depended on it.

If he brought the notorious gunman in alive, he would be certain to succeed the disabled Byland as sheriff. If he lost him now, after capturing him, he'd never dare show his face in Hackamore again.

As he neared the timber he hit upon a plan and veered off to one side, following a course that would bring him out on the rim of the bluff above Kinnikinnick Creek a mile below the regular ford.

Immediately a shout of anger and disappointment came from the timber, where the ambushers were waiting to waylay him. A dismounted man started out of the shadows, yelling.

Speck kicked his horse into a joggling lope. In a moment, he was swallowed by the black shadows of the timber. But presently his heart sank as he heard the underbrush crashing beneath the hoofs of pursuing horses. A six-gun barked behind him. His heart was thumping as he roweled the laboring pony. Just as he was about to abandon hope, the horse broke into the open, heading for the rim of the bluff.

Behind him, the outlaws reined in at the edge of the pines, for now they were no better off than before. Speck's heart leaped as he reached the rim and heard a distant shout:

"Hi yuh! That you, Sheriff Byland? We done reorganized the posse!"

On the opposite bank of the Kinnikinnick he could see dimly an ex-

cited group of riders. A bitter oath came from Corbett's lips.

Speck yelled: "The sheriff's wounded! This is Speck. I've captured Killer Corbett. His pals are trying to take him back! Help!"

To make certain the possemen saw him he waved his six-gun high above his head. He was unaware that, from where they stood, he and his prisoner were clearly skylighted on the rim of the bluff.

The instant Speck's .45 no longer was pressing against Corbett's back, the prisoner played his last card. With a vicious kick, he sank his spurs into the flanks of the pony.

The startled animal leaped forward, quivering with pain. A second time the cruel rowels scored its sides. Maddened by pain, the animal began to pitch. Speck felt himself being catapulted into the air. He pinwheeled over and over and crashed head-first into the projecting rim rock. Then everything went blank.

III.

At the second explosive leap of the pitching pony, Killer Corbett was flung from the saddle. He, of course, had expected to be thrown. He had everything to gain and nothing to lose by this sudden break. He stretched forth his handcuffed hands like a diver, to break his fall.

The members of the posse plunged into the water just as the two riders were piled by the pony. But here the Kinnikinnick was not to be crossed as easily as at the ford, for the main channel was so deep the horses would be forced to swim.

Meanwhile Corbett's two pals, halted uncertainly at the edge of the timber, could not see the deputy and his prisoner, but could hear the possemen splashing into the stream.

Killer scrambled to his feet the

instant after he struck the ground. He flung himself straight at Speck, who lay crumpled against the rim rock. He found the deputy limp and senseless.

With an impatient oath he began going through Speck's pockets. In a moment, he fished out the officer's keys. Another minute, and fingers trembling with impatience were trying to fit keys to the locks of the handcuffs. Finally with a glad cry he found the right key and the shackles dropped from his wrists.

"With a six-gun, I could pick off the possemen one at a time as they cross the Kinnikinnick!" he panted, bending down to roll Speck's limp body over so he could get at his holster. Then a disappointed oath ripped from his lips.

Of course, the holster was empty, for Speck had carried his gun in his hand for the last hour. Quite evidently it had been jarred from his grasp as he crashed to earth. Likewise, Corbett's own gun had fallen from the waistband of the deputy's trousers.

Killer Corbett angrily kicked the unconscious officer and whirled about, searching for either of the fallen weapons.

"And the first thing I do," he snarled venomously, "is put a slug through this freckled-face jasper!"

Part of the sky was overcast with clouds. There was no moon. What starlight there was, was insufficient to reveal anything on the ground more than a few feet away. Swearing, Corbett bent low, kicking at loose rocks and groping about as he searched for one of the six-guns.

Killer's kick had sent a spasm of pain coursing through Speck's body, and the pang stung his consciousness awake. As he came to his senses, he rolled to his hands and knees and

shook his head like a diver emerging from the depths.

As his mind cleared, he suddenly remembered what had happened. He had no way of knowing how long he had been "out." He saw Killer Corbett, noted his wrists were free of the shackles, saw him searching, and immediately guessed what he was seeking.

Speck, though conscious, was still weak and dizzy. He wanted to stretch out on his back and breathe in the cool night air in deep gasps. But he had aroused just in time to hear Corbett's threat to put a bullet through him.

He knew his life depended on swift and decisive action. At all costs, he must keep Killer from laying hands on a weapon. If possible he must find a gun himself, but at all costs he must keep Corbett unarmed, hold him for the posse.

He staggered to his feet and lurched toward the boss bandit. Underfoot sand grated against the rock. Killer Corbett whirled about as he heard the sound. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a wolfish snarl.

At Speck's first violent movement, a spasm of pain shot through him. Corbett's savage kick had fractured a rib, and now every motion brought a torturing pang. Regardless of the torture, he charged at the crouching killer.

Corbett met his charge with a crushing wallop to the face. Speck saw it coming and tried to fend it off. But his weak and quivering muscles failed to respond swiftly to the urge of his will.

The bandit's fist caught him squarely in the mouth. It stopped his charge as abruptly as if it had been the kick of a mule. It snapped his head back violently, and turned his charge into a backward reel.

Had Killer Corbett followed up his advantage, he might then and there have knocked the freckled deputy cold. But he didn't want to knock him cold. He wanted to kill him. So he turned back swiftly toward the spot where he had been groping for the gun.

For an instant, Speck stood weaving, legs braced far apart and arms hanging, limp. His swelling lips were dripping crimson. He spat out the splintered fragment of a front tooth.

Down below, the possemen were just entering the main channel of the Kinnikinnick, splashing and yelling as their horses breasted the swift current.

Again Speck rushed. Again Killer Corbett turned to face him. Again the bandit's fist lashed out.

This time Speck shouldered the blow off. At the same time, he swung wildly at Corbett's head.

"Whambo!" he gasped, as his fist landed. "That ought to hold yuh for a while!"

But strangely enough it seemed scarcely to trouble the outlaw, who snarled crookedly and spat an oath at the deputy. All at once Speck realized that he was fearfully weak—the punch that normally would have knocked Corbett cold had been woefully lacking in steam.

And now Killer temporarily abandoned his search for the gun. He came boring in with fists flying. Sheer grit led Speck to meet the charge solidly, despite his weakness and despite the agonizing pain that stabbed him at every breath.

But at the first rush the outlaw battered down his guard. He drove in blow after smashing blow, until Speck's mind was reeling dizzily again, and he felt himself on the sickening verge of losing consciousness.

He gave ground, staggering back-

ward, striving for an instant's respite from Corbett's vicious hammering. He felt his nose battered into a shapeless smear against his cheeks. He felt an eye swelling shut. He felt Killer's sharp knuckles open a bleeding gash across his jaw.

Speck was taking a terrible beating. But there was a chance for victory yet, if he could endure the torture long enough. If he could only stall for a sufficient length of time, the posse might arrive and nab Killer.

But even this last-chance hope went glimmering as Corbett cried out with savage joy and suddenly abandoned the punishing attack to dart out into the darkness.

Speck weaved and tottered and stared stupidly. Then he saw the glint of starlight on metal, and knew Killer Corbett had spotted one of the guns. It lay at the edge of the rim rock dyke.

The Killer was twenty feet nearer the weapon. Nevertheless Speck tottered forward in a desperately futile effort to beat his foe to it.

Then to cap the climax of his misfortune, there was a metallic clink beneath his foot, his ankle turned beneath him, and he crashed to the earth at the edge of the bluff!

With a wolfish cry, Killer Corbett pounced upon the weapon and spun about to finish off the deputy. They were on the rim of the bluff, but now that Speck was prone, a bulge in the sandstone hid him.

"Step out and take it like a man!" Killer challenged.

"Just a second, Corbett," came the gasping, pain-racked voice of the young deputy. "I'm giving yuh one last chance to surrender!" Speck paused a second. From the outlaw came a raucous laugh.

"Killer Corbett," gasped Speck, "I pegged yuh right when I said yuh

were plenty tough when yuh had the gun leverage on somebody, but a four-flushing coward when the odds were reversed. Now I aim to see what yuh do when the odds are dead even!"

"Even?" roared Corbett doubtfully. "What d'yuh mean?"

"I mean, yuh never figured thet the thing I turned my ankle on was tother gun, did yuh, Corbett? Well, now each of us has a six-gun. Yore's and mine, exactly alike—only one is empty!"

"Yuh don't know whether you found the empty one or the loaded one—and neither do I. But I'm willing to find out by stepping out in the open and duelling it to a finish with yuh, Corbett."

"We're so close that neither can miss. One of us is absolutely shore to die. Are yuh willing to accept an even break like that? If yuh ain't, yuh can surrender, and I won't shoot! No time to think it over—Killer, here I come!"

Speck leaped from behind the bulge. Almost instantly, Corbett showed his true colors. Speck had pegged him right—he was tough enough when he had the gun leverage, but was a miserable coward when he thought he must take an even break with certain death.

"I surrender!" he screamed franti-

cally. He dropped his gun and raised his hands high above his head.

And thus the possemen found them, a moment later, when the horsemen reached the brink of the bluff. The leaders had heard Speck's challenge as he put it up to Killer, cold turkey, to fight a duel in which one seemed certain to die.

The first rider flung himself from the saddle, snatched up the gun Corbett had dropped, and examined it.

"Blazes!" he cried out excitedly. "This is the loaded gun! If Corbett had had nerve enough to shoot it out with yuh, he'd have killed yuh, Speck! Man alive, did yuh know the gun yuh held was empty?"

"Empty?" repeated Speck through bruised lips. "I learned I couldn't outshoot Killer. And in the shape I was, I couldn't outfight him. But I could still outsmart him."

The next sheriff of Hackamore County paused an instant to wipe the crimson smears from his freckled face before he concluded:

"Boys, the empty gun that had been in my waistband must 'a' gone over the bluff when the hoss piled us. The thing I turned my ankle on was the handcuffs. I didn't have *any* gun when I rose up on my hind legs and bluffed him into surrendering!"



A Friend For



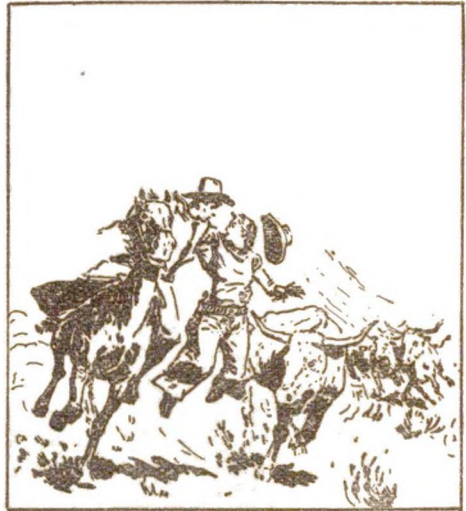
1. Brazos Bell was still on the dodge. One afternoon, riding across the range, he heard a shot. Heading in the direction of the sound, he saw a figure standing by a down horse. He also saw several longhorns heading for the solitary figure.



2. He yanked one of his six-guns, pointed it toward the sky, and slammed out three warning shots. Then he jabbed in his spurs and went rocketing down the slope. He realized the danger to the person on foot. He had to save him.



3. The figure on foot also realized the danger. It looked like a young cowboy to Brazos Bell. Brazos went charging in. The steers were not far away now—almost on the running figure. Brazos wondered if he could make it.



4. He did—just ahead of a wild-eyed old longhorn that was plenty on the prod. As Brazos leaned down and swept up the running figure, he got the shock of his life. Here was no cowboy, but a girl—and a plumb good-looking one, at that.

Brazos Bell



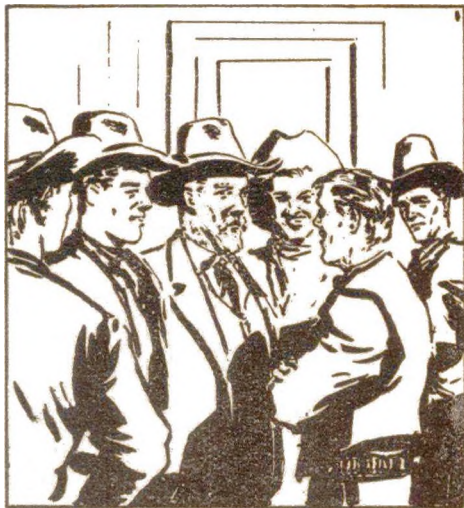
5. She was no softy, Brazos soon discovered. She was as calm as if getting rescued from charging steers was an everyday occurrence for her. She'd had to shoot her horse, she explained, when it broke a leg. Her father, she said, was a rancher.



6. She showed Brazos the way to her father's big ranch house, and they came in together. Brazos didn't give his name, but learned that the girl was Barbara Holmes and that her father owned one of the biggest spreads in the West.



7. Her father, "Old Man" Holmes met them in front of the ranch house. Barbara calmly told him what had happened, how Brazos had saved her life. The Old Man, a Southerner, was profuse in his thanks. Brazos, embarrassed, asked for a job.



8. The Old Man signed him on immediately. Brazos used his given name of Henry, letting them believe that it was his last name. He said that some folks had nicknamed him "Drifter." The Old Man introduced him to the rest of the waddies.



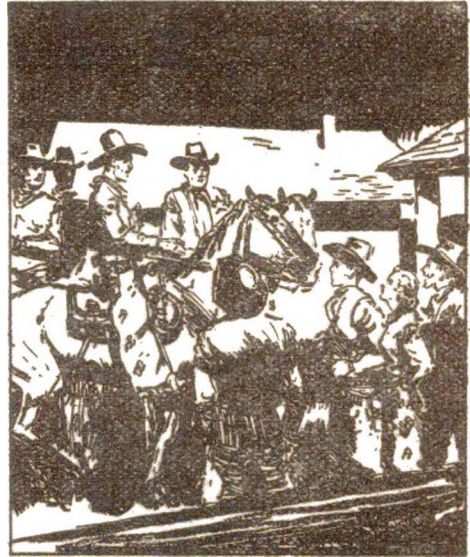
9. Brazos didn't notice it, but one of the waddies avoided meeting him. He was far too busy to notice that. Grub pile was soon called, and Brazos sat down with the Old Man and Barbara to his first real meal since being forced on the dodge.



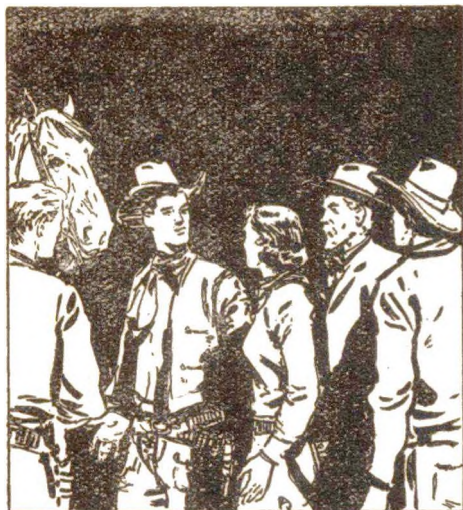
10. The young outlaw would have been plenty interested in the waddy who, when he saw Brazos, ducked out, saddled a horse, and headed for town. He was the "injured man"—one of the hombres responsible for the murder of Brazos's foster-father.



11. The "injured man"—his moniker was "Idaho" Jones—high-tailed it for town where he called on the sheriff, telling him that the law could find the much-wanted Brazos Bell out at the Holmes ranch. A posse immediately set out on the trail.



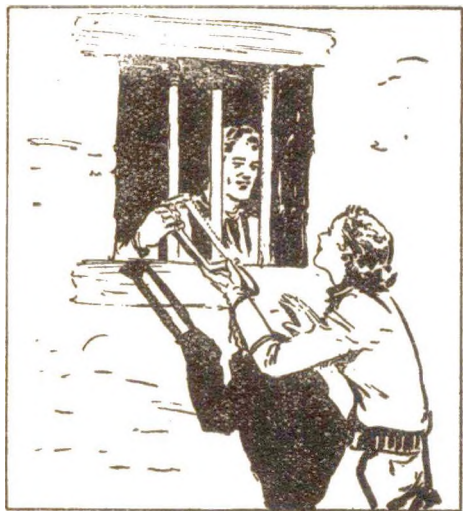
12. It was dark by the time they got there. They drew up with ready guns, called loudly for Brazos to surrender. He had to admit his identity in front of Barbara. She said nothing. Brazos figured she hated him as an outlaw.



13. "Good-by, Miss Barbara," he said, just as the posse prodded him toward his horse. "I hope yuh kin believe me when I say that I'm not as bad as people make out. I'm innocent, but can't prove it." Barbara smiled, and Brazos saw her wink



14. When the posse had left and most of the ranch waddies had turned in, Barbara saddled her pet bronc, made a mysterious visit to the ranch tool shed, and then spurred swiftly away. She rode toward town—and rode plenty fast.



15. No one was in sight when she got to town. She went by a back route to the little stone jail where she knew Brazos would be. In her hands, she carried a hack saw. Brazos heard her when she called and took the saw from her.



16. It didn't take long for him to saw through a couple of the window bars. Two were enough. Soon he was free. Meanwhile, Barbara had got his horse for him. He swung aboard. "I'll see yuh ag'in, Barbara," he said, and then galloped away.

Next Week: "Brazos Bell Saves A Ranch."



Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is maintained in an effort to preserve old cowboy songs and frontier ballads.

If you want to find the words to some Western song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send copies of songs to individual readers, but we will tell you in what issue of *Wild West Weekly* you can find the one you want.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's *Wild West Weekly*, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, folks, are yuh still cudgelin' yore brains over my Song Corral Clubs idea? I'm surprised at yuh! I thought the replies would just roll in—thet yuh folks all over the country would jump at the idea o' startin' somethin' as sociable an' jolly an' *worth while* as this sort of club. But I ain't agoin' tuh git discouraged as yet. Takes a long time fer somethin' like this tuh really git movin'. So I'm just bidin' my time.

But remember that as soon as yo're ready tuh start a club in yore neighborhood an' start searchin' fer songs in yore own locality, ol' Joe will be r'arin' tuh help yuh. I'll help yuh tuh exchange songs, an' tuh find out the origin of the songs thet yuh find; an' help yuh tuh find any special songs yo're lookin' fer. Jest remember thet I've got this song-collectin' bug in my heart, an' I'm ready tuh help yuh all I can. By the great horn spoon, we ought tuh git somewhere if we all pull together!

I reckon yo're always glad tuh have some of the ol' dance calls. Heaven knows thar's plenty of 'em thet've been used tuh the merry scrapin' of an' ol' fiddle an' the vigorous shufflin' of many feet. Hyar's one thet our ol' friend Frank Morris, of Minnesota, sends in:

DANCE CALLS

Honor to your pardners
 And gents to the right,
 Balance and swing
 And we'll dance all night:
 Pass right on with a highland fling,
 Balance to the left—cheat or swing.
 Balance to the next and ladies keep house—
 Swing that lady, then your spouse.

Alamande left—an' don't be slow.
 Grab a lady, an' round you go—
 First couple lead, and everybody mix—
 Pass right through an' right an' left six.

Now to the next, with a little more speed,
Around that couple with the lady in the lead.
Gents fall through—but watch your step
And lead to the next—with a little more pep.

Alamande left and everybody whirl;
Forward six and chase the squirrel.
Second couple now lead out to the right,
Four hands across—and don't you fight.

Right and left here, and ladies change there.
Look out, big boy! You're spoiling her hair!
We're runnin' this dance 'cording to the law—
Come on, musician—"Turkey in the Straw!"

All join paddies—circle to the left,
Pick 'em right up an' don't mind the heft!
Pass your pardner—balance to the next,
Swing 'em hard, boys, they won't be vexed.

Don't spit on the floor; we have no broom—
If you want to do that, go rent a room!
Come, now, fiddlers—we like that sound.
Ladies in the center, and seven hands around.

Promenade all and do your best—
Throw out that man without a vest.
We don't want men half-dressed in here—
Promenade all, an' get your beer!

By this time yuh folks who have been
savin' up the songs that appear in this
hyar Corral ought tuh have a right
nice collection o' dance calls. That was
a mighty fine lot John Lomax gave us a
while back—an' I gave yuh others, too.

Mr. Morris is right anxious tuh git hold
of a special dance call thet goes by the
name of "Leather Breeches." Any of yuh
know it? We'd sure appreciate it if yuh
send it in tuh the Corral.

While we're talkin' about dances, an'
such, hyar's a song thet William Clements,
of Arkansas, sent in:

**COME TO THE HARRINGTON
BARN DANCE**

Come, all you woolly waddies,
Let's go to Harrington's Ranch.
The fiddlers are a-comin'
An' we're gonna have a dance.

George has roped his old piano
An' drug it in the barn,
An' to-night we're gonna pay
The little mortgage off the farm.

Such a dance as we're havin'
Has never been had yet.
Tom Kenyon is a-comin'
An' he's gonna call the sets.

Mat Miller plays the fiddle,
An' his brother plays the drums.
So slick up in yore war paint
An' get ready fer the fun.

Jim Gilliland, the sheriff,
Will represent the law.
You should see the waddies step
To "Turkey in the Straw."

But yuh needn't fear that Jim
Will try to stop yer fun,
If you are decent with yore likker
An' leaves yer shootin' iron at home.

Charley Summers is a-comin',
An' them bloomin' feet o' his
Can do the ol'-time schottische
Like nobody's biz.

"Footer Mac" will do the Charleston
An' the gals will come from town.
George is gonna build a new barn,
So we'll tear the old 'un down.

So long, an' good luck, folks!





The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, here 'tis meetin' night, an' the 3W gang is on hand fer another git tergether. They comes troopin' in, plumb on schedule, an' we're durned glad ter see 'em.

The first ter breeze in is Bud Jones o' Texas, lookin' as fit as a couple o' fiddles, in spite of his tanglin' with the Bear hombre, this week.

Then in comes the Oklahoma Kid, Shorty Masters, M. D., an' his pard the Sonora Kid, an' Flash Moran, depity sheriff from Piute. We waits for a few minutes whilst they all sets an' talks. Then we hears hoofs outside. A second later, Brazos Bell rolls in.

There's a lot o' plumb interestin' letters in the sack this week. So we won't waste no time in gabbin', but git right down ter business. We hands the first one ter Bud Jones ter read, an' this is it:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the W. W. W. for the last two years, and I think it's one of the finest Western magazines ever printed.

Of all the waddies on the 3W spread, I like Sonny Tabor best. He's O. K. There's only one thing wrong with him: He never gets hurt in a gun battle.

The same thing goes for Bud Jones—he's impossible. Even Billy the Kid couldn't clean up gangs as Bud Jones of Texas does.

I think you have an all-around favorite in Sheriff Pete Rice. Brazos Bell looks pretty good, too.

My other favorites come in the following order: Ace Hart, the Circle J bunch, the Bar U twins, and Solo Strant, the Silver Kid.

Yours until the Silver Kid quits wearing silver ornaments,
BILL,
Jefferson, Ohio.

Bud grins as he puts the letter down after readin' it. He don't mind a bit, bein' called impossible.

"I reckon I've been pretty lucky, is all," says Bud.

We laughs. "Don't fool yoreself, Bud," we answers. "Luck ain't the secret o' yore success."

We hands the next letter ter Brazos Bell, an' here's what the young outlaw reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Flame Burns has been in the W. W. W. at least five times, but has never come around to the Wranglers Corner. Bring him around sometime, and let him meet the boys.

Two of the reasons why I think 3W is the best magazine on the stands are: It has regular waddies and the cover is always a scene from the first story.

My favorites are, first, Trigger Trenton, Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, and Flame Burns; second, Tommy Rockford, Rio Rand, and Deo Daley, and last, Bullwhip Adams, Johnny Forty-five, the Silver Kid, and the Bar U twins.

The best stories I have ever read were

the Border Eagle series, by Philip F. Deere, "Flame of the Border," by Guy L. Maynard, and "Terror Trail," by Walker Tompkins.

Yours till Kid Wolf stops being a rolling stone,
Rio.
Denver, Colorado.

Shorty Masters reads this here letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading your magazine ever since Deputy Death was on the spread and have been enjoying it ever since. It only costs a dime to see a movie, but I buy a W. W. W. and spend the afternoon at home.

I made a book report, in school, on the Rio Rand series and got an "A" for it.

I think Buck Foster is a Chinaman-lover. Why don't you have some Northwest Mounted stories? Bring back Señor Red Mask and have another Bar U twins story soon.

George Krumm tells too many fibs and doesn't get Johnny Forty-five any place.

I think I already know who framed Brazos Bell.

The Sheriff Pete Rice stories are swell.

Yours till Buck Foster marries Ruth Dawc and quits Circle J,
Las Vegas, Nevada. WYLIE TAYLOR.

Brazos Bell scratches his head. "Gosh," he says, "thet Wylie Taylor must be smart; I'd shore admire ter know who framed me. Wish he'd 'a' named 'im in thet letter."

The next letter goes ter Shorty's pard, Willie Wetherbee, better known around the Pecos country as the Sonora Kid:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am thirteen years old and have been reading 3W for over a year. It is the best magazine I have ever read or ever hope to read. I have no favorites among the waddies. They're all fine.

The first and best story I have ever read or ever hope to read was "The Mark Of Rawhide Riley," by William A. Todd. My favorite author is Lee Bond.

Here's hoping that this letter escapes the scrap basket,
BILLY THE KID.
Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

"Say," exclaims Shorty Masters, "it's shore too bad thet Billy don't even hope ter read a better story than "The Mark Of Rawhide Riley." Not thet thet wasn't a plumb *bueno* yarn, but an hombre might jest as well hope thet he may find a better one, some day."

The gang laughs at thet. We joins in. Don't give up hope, Billy! Still, as the

ol' sayin' goes, "Blessed is he who expects nothin'—an' gets disap'inted."

Flash Moran takes a crack at the next one. Here's what the red-headed depity reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I sure do like your swell magazine. I've been reading it for about four years. All the waddies, with the exception of the Circle J bunch, are swell. Sonny Tabor is the best of all. One of his best stories was "Sonny Tabor and the Fight-in' Sheriff."

Boss, you sure have improved 3W in the last year. Here are the improvements as I rate them: (1) Reduction in price from fifteen to ten cents, (2) letting Bjorklund illustrate a few stories instead of having Scott do them all, (3) getting Brazos Bell on the spread, and (4) putting in some poems now and then like "Cowboy Breed," by S. Omar Barker.

There is one more improvement you ought to make—kick that Circle J outfit off the spread.

Yours forever.

RED.

Wilmington, North Carolina.

We gives the next one ter the Oklahoma Kid. Here it is:

BUENAS NOCHES, BOSS! I have written several times before, but I guess the cook has only been given some more paper for his fire. However, that isn't going to stop me from trying again.

I just want to tell you how swell your magazine is. Any hombre who says it isn't any good will just have to come with six-guns smoking, because I am not going to stand for such a thing.

In the June 6th issue an hombre who called himself Storm King, from Texas, said that Sonny Tabor did not get shot up enough. Sonny is all right. He's a modern Robin Hood. If it wasn't for him, the magazine would be no good at all.

If that sheep-herder, Buck Foster, wasn't on the spread, Joe Scott wouldn't have any one to pick on, and there wouldn't be as much "light stuff"—humor—in the magazine. And we need more of said "light stuff," instead of so much seriousness.

The first magazine I bought contained the start of the Apache and Wagonwheel series. I have been reading it steadily ever since.

The Whispering Rider, the Border Eagle and Smoky Joe were the best of the series stories.

I have read stories about Pete Rice before.

So I know what to expect from him—a plumb exciting time.

Well, if I don't say "adios" now, I'll never get this letter printed. Yours till Sonny Tabor kills an honest man—or a lawman,

JOHNNY POTTS.

Petersburg, Virginia.

That one gits a laugh from the two lawmen at the meetin'. Apparently, Johnny don't class lawmen as honest men. Howsomever, we get the idea.

There's time fer one more. We reads it ourself, as follers:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Corner, and I want to tell you who my favorites are. The Circle J pards top the

list. Then come Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Silver Jack Steele, the Silver Kid, and Calamity Boggs.

I think that most of the people who say such mean things about Buck Foster do so just to tease him. They feel the same way about him as Joe Scott does.

Ace Hart was swell. So is Brazos Bell. "Kid Wolf Rides With Sonny Tabor" was the best story I have ever read.

Yours till Buck and Joe stop arguing,

GLEN KEENAN.

San Bernardino, California.

Reckon that's all there's time fer, this week. The waddies will all be ridin' in ag'in next week, though. So long, everybody!

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

TOMMY ROCKFORD'S COFFIN CLEW

Novellette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

It leads the young cowboy detective inter a peck o' trouble in a plumb tough town where there's plenty o' chances fer gun play.

DEATH RIDERS OF DODGE

Novellette

By GUY L. MAYNARD

They try to take Flame Burns to a cleanin', but he don't take easy—'specially not when he's backed up by Bat Masterson an' Calamity Jane.

WHIZZ FARGO SPRINGS A MURDER TRAP

Novellette

By GEORGE C. HENDERSON

It comes close to catchin' Whizz an' his pard, Hopdoodle O'Day, but them two rannies are fightin' fools, so the trap kind o' backfires on the trappers.

Also stories of Hungry and Rusty, by Samuel H. Nickels;
Brazos Bell—and other characters.

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ALBERT MILLS, Route Manager
1884 Monmouth Avenue Cincinnati, Ohio

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To encourage prompt service to their customers, I give Ford Cars to producers as a bonus over and above their regular cash profits. The same opportunity to get a brand-new Ford Car is offered to you the moment you start. The car becomes your personal property with no strings attached.

that I will now send you. You read it; then if you see the possibilities, I'll help you start without asking you to risk a penny of your own money.

I Send Everything

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nationwide Tea and Coffee Route Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to service your route to make money every week. The way I plan it for you, you give only 5 days a week to your route, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I give you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds who needed money.

FREE—WITHOUT OBLIGATION

Don't send me a cent. Just rush me your name and address on the Free Offer Coupon printed below. I will mail you all the facts free, and even prepay the postage. Then you can decide for yourself. There is no charge for these plans now or at any other time and you positively will not be obligated to go ahead unless you see big possibilities for money making, fast. Send me your name on the coupon or a penny postcard. By this time next week you can be on your way to big money. Don't waste a minute—send this coupon at once.



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Can you make money with a Tea and Coffee Route? Yes. Here's a way to make it, FAST! If only three or four people had made money as fast as this, you might call it an accident. But scores have done it! Here are only a few—if space permitted, I could print HUNDREDS of exceptional earnings. Wouldn't money like this give you a thrill? Cash every week to spend—more where that came from—ample money for the necessities of life and still some left over for the luxuries.

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Clara C. Wallman	N. J.	96.00
Geo. W. Wright	Maine	63.75
A. Pardini	Calif.	69.09
Norman Gelsler	Mich.	129.00
Albert Becker	Mich.	100.00
Gunson R. Wood	N. Y.	65.00
Lamar C. Cooper	Mich.	90.00
Helen V. Woolmington	Pa.	45.00
*Ruby Hannan	W. Va.	73.00
Hans Coordes	Neb.	96.40
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W. J. Wray	Kan.	78.15

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1884 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

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