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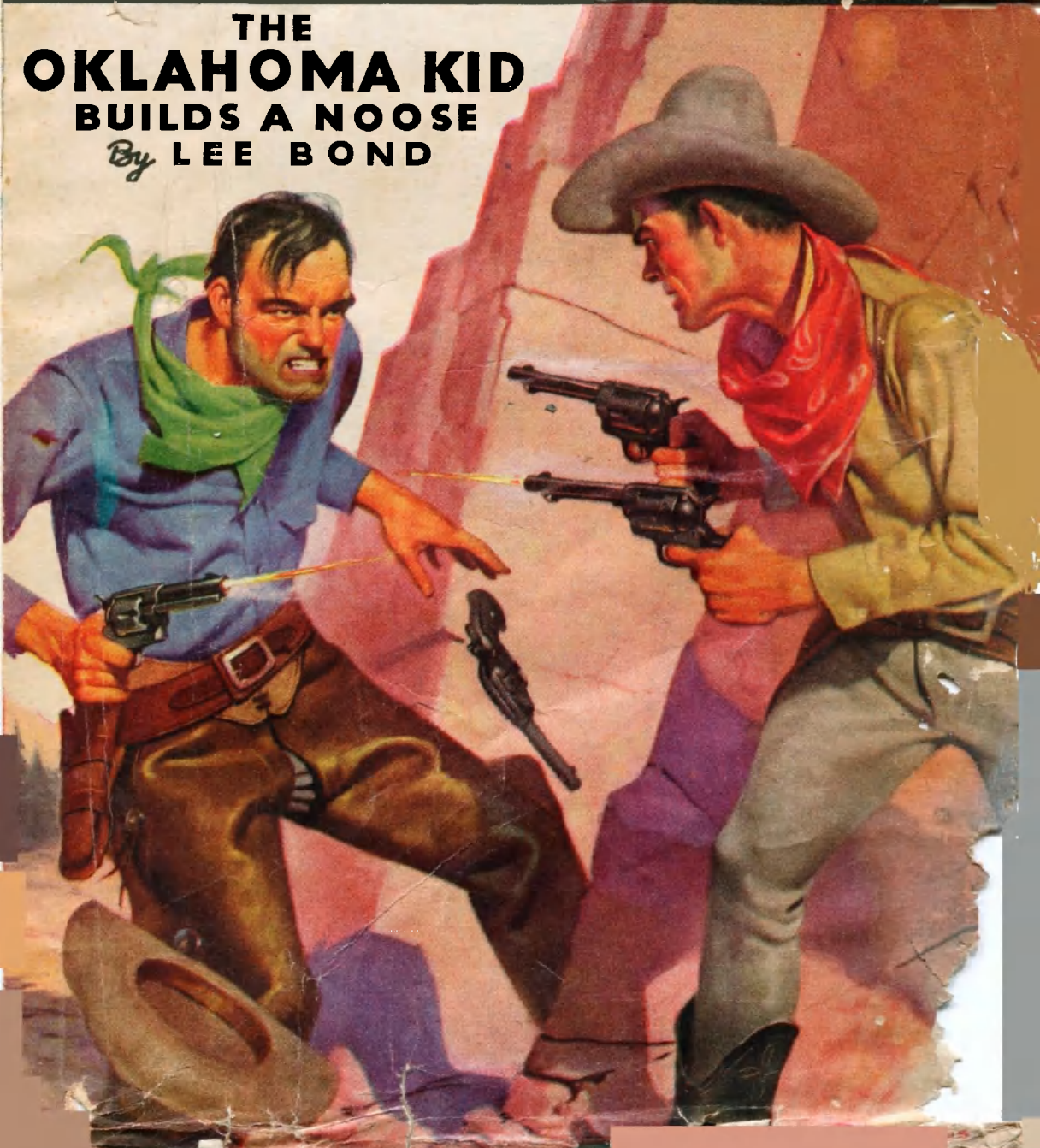
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WEEKLY

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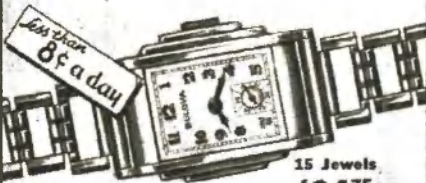
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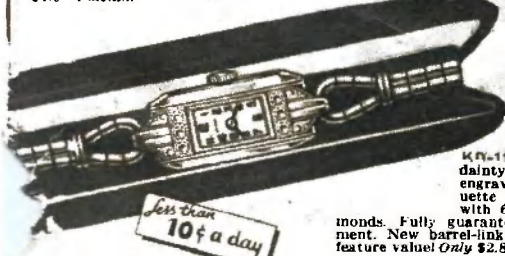
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Vol. 94, No. 6      CONTENTS FOR JULY 13, 1935      Whole No. 1708

Cover Picture—Scene from  
 "The Oklahoma Kid Builds A Noose" Painted by R. G. Harris

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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It's a plumb fittin' decoration fer the gent he puts it on, too.		
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Their raidin' days are numbered when Circle J hits their trail.		
Phantom of the Flames . . . . .	Walker Tompkins . . . . .	101
Nothin' kin stop Bearcat Barry when he's ridin' a justice trail.		

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Provin' thet there's a whole lot—an' nothin'—in a name.		

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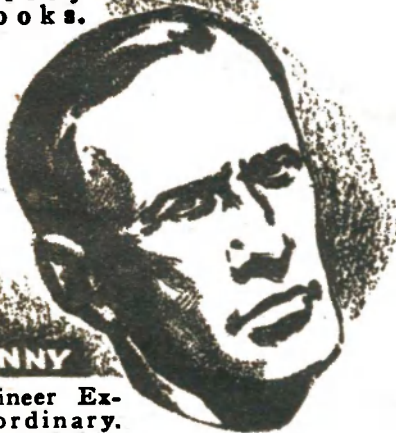
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Next Week!

# Gunman Not Wanted

A "Silver Kid" Novelette

By T. W. FORD

Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, drifts into a strange cow town and sees a sign sayin' that some hombre thereabouts needs a gunman. Plumb curious by nature an' inclination, the Kid looks into the proposition an' winds up by hirin' out as a gun hawk.

On the job, he rides his Sorghum hoss to another town. It's night. As he passes a lighted saloon——

*"Crang!* A shot rang out.

"In a flash, the Silver Kid was out of the saddle and spread-legged in the road. His half-pint, hair-trigger body quivered, tensing for action.

"His small, lightning-fast hands crisscrossed his body. His slender fingers coiled around the silver-butted .45s on either hip.

"Solo Strant, the Silver Kid, was primed for trouble."

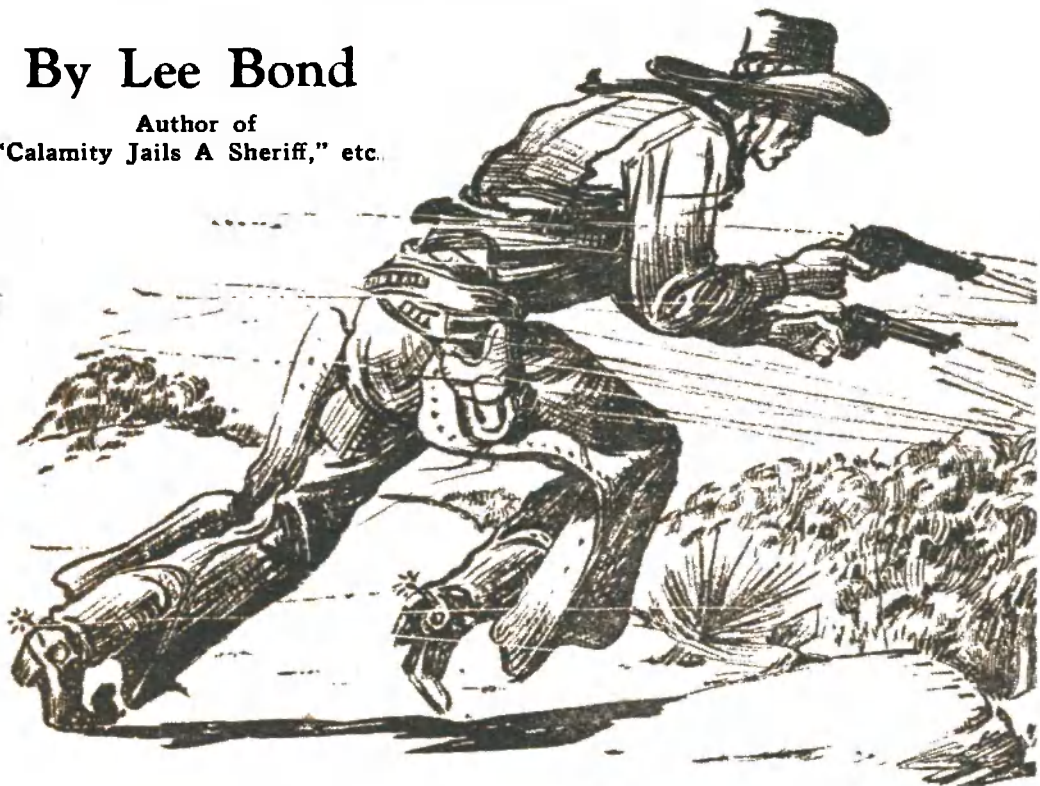
An' he got it—plenty of it. But before he finishes his job, a lot of tough hombres git some too—more'n their share.

Don't miss this great story. It's in next week's 3W—on sale at your news stand on July 17th.

# The Oklahoma Kid Builds A Noose

By Lee Bond

Author of  
"Calamity Jails A Sheriff," etc.



## CHAPTER I.

### MASKED HANGMEN.

SIX riders moved like wraiths along the canyon floor. In the half light of coming dawn they were indistinct, shapeless things that moved with the cold jingle of bit chains and spur rowels. They rode into the blotchy shadows cast by a grove of cottonwoods that grew about a small spring.

Watching through beady eyes that were puckered and hot, Jack Reese, better known, perhaps, as the "Oklahoma Kid," chuckled softly when he heard hoarse oaths and the excited babbling of nervous men.

The Kid could no longer see those six horsemen, for the shadows were deep beneath the heavy trees. But he imagined them stirring about his camp site, there beside the spring.

From years spent on the dodge, the Kid's senses had developed much more than the average man's would under normal conditions. There was a small fortune in rewards on the Kid's scalp, and he had to be mighty careful about letting men ride up on him by day or night.

He had been sound asleep there beside the spring when the earth that was his bed telegraphed the sound of shod hoofs. The Kid had



slid from his bed with the silence of a shadow and gone up the slope to crouch behind the big boulder where he now lay listening.

His thin, down-curving lips were drawn back from huge buckteeth in a silent snarl. In each brown

below him. Yet he held his fire, although he firmly believed that those men were seeking him.

"Somebody likely spotted me campin' here at sundown yesterday," he gritted softly. "An' I'll bet that them gents yonder are a pack



hand he gripped a big ivory-buffed six-gun.

The nostrils of his long, crooked nose flared and quivered as he listened to those excited voices. There were hot lights in his beady black eyes, and his guns came swiftly into aim as he caught the indistinct moving of those men beneath the trees.

But the Kid was no wanton killer, despite the fact that those big "wanted" posters which dotted the Southwest with his name and picture on them accused him of practically every sort of lowly crime. The ugly little outlaw could have blasted the life from those men who were moving about beneath the trees

o' mangy scalp hunters instead o' regular officers."

The Kid had noted something evil in the way those six men rode bunched and tense. Therefore, he was guessing them to be scalp hunters—the sort of men who would murder him while he slept for the reward on his hide. The Kid had little use for that breed, and there was a smoldering sort of rage creeping through him.

But seconds sped into a full minute, and still there was no outcry of disappointment from there in the shadows. The Kid's anger gave way to curiosity, and he was about to lift his black-thatched head a little

higher, when he heard a sharp slapping sound that was followed by the snort of a horse and a muffled, horrible cry of fear from a human throat.

The Kid jerked erect, mind racing, thumbs hooking at the hammers of his guns. Too long he had rubbed elbows with death not to know the meaning of that sharp slap, the snort of a horse and the strangled scream of a man.

Down there a man was being hanged, and the Oklahoma Kid needed no one to tell him that the hanging was being done without the sanction of organized law.

From the Oklahoma Kid's lean throat came a nerve-jarring squall, and the big six-guns bucked and thundered in the first light of a new day.

The Kid's lead screamed and snapped through the brush to right and left of those trees, for he was taking no chances on drilling the poor jasper who was even now hanging by the neck and choking to death.

There came hoarse-voiced yells of alarm as the Kid hurtled down the rocky slope, a gun spitting from either hand, his harsh features twisted into a bleak scowl.

Five riders bobbed into view now hugging saddle pommels and spurring frantically. The Kid could have dropped those men from leather easily, yet he could not bring himself to do it.

He hurtled on down the hillside yelling angrily at the fleeing hombres who were too rattled even to shoot at him. Then the five were hidden by mesquite thickets down the canyon, and the Kid was swarming down the last few yards of the slope.

He darted in beneath the trees, saw the slowly swinging form of a

man almost over his head, and lifted his guns. Those beady black eyes picked out the smudgy light streak that was the rope running from the man's neck up to a big cottonwood limb.

Never in his life had he taken swifter, yet more careful aim. The six-guns in his hands crashed, and the hangman's rope parted where it had been biting into the cottonwood limb.

The Kid leaped forward as the hanged man dropped down. The Kid was over the fallen man instantly, ripping the rough, new rope loose from the scorched neck, feeling quickly for heartbeats. The ugly little outlaw nodded, for the man there on the ground drew a hoarse, jerky breath and moved slightly.

The Kid rocked back on his boot heels, hot eyes puckered and thoughtful as he studied the lanky, gray-haired man whose life he had just saved.

The Kid's hands dropped down to his holsters, lifted his smoke-blackened guns. He reloaded without looking once at those famous weapons, then shoved them back into their smooth holsters.

The gray-haired man stirred, opened bloodshot eyes to stare dazedly up at the cottonwoods through which the first rays of a rising sun were sending red shafts of light. The man was struggling slowly back to consciousness. But it might take the man long minutes to regain his full senses, and the Kid knew better than to remain here longer than was absolutely necessary.

The outlaw came to his feet with a lithe movement, his small wiry body a little tense as he cocked his head in an attitude of listening. From somewhere down the canyon had come the faint clatter of a stone



rolling over other stones. A small sound to be sure, and one that would have escaped the notice of most men. Yet the sound sent the Oklahoma Kid darting away through the cottonwoods, anxiety in his beady eyes.

He ran past the grove and into thick mesquite beyond. From the mesquite he came out into a clearing where a short-coupled cow pony with blazed face and stockinged legs stood whistling through quivering nostrils.

"Whoa, Shorty!" the Kid called, as he trotted toward the bay.

He grasped the bronc by the foretop, led it back through the mesquite and to the pile of crumpled blankets that were spread where a saddle could be used as a pillow. The Kid snatched bridle and saddle blanket, glancing anxiously down the draw as he worked. He had the bay saddled within a short time, and quickly made a slim roll of his meager camp tools and blankets.

He was lashing the roll behind his saddle when again his keen ears caught the clatter of a small stone rolling. The Kid finished lashing his roll, whirled to where the grizzled man whose life he had saved was beginning to stir and groan again.

The Kid stooped, grasped the man beneath the armpits, and was straightening when something struck savagely across his arched back. The Kid dropped across the man he had been lifting as the *spang* of a rifle filled the canyon with sharp echoes.

## CHAPTER II.

### RYAN'S MISTAKE.

THE Oklahoma Kid had felt the burning pain of bullets in his flesh many times. There had been times when he had lain for days in

some hidden retreat, while fever from gunshot wounds seared his flesh, weakened him. The Kid had known fear at such times, for there was always the specter of death from blood poisoning to torture him.

But never had the outlaw known the horrible sort of fear that gripped him now as he lay sprawled across that unconscious man whose life he had saved. The Kid felt no pain, yet his face was white beneath the tan, and his beady eyes seemed bulging from his head.

He had tried to move, and could not! He had tried to draw his legs up under him, roll away from the man he had fallen on. But his legs were dead things, and felt strangely cold.

The Kid knew that a bullet had struck him somewhere in the back, and his mind leaped instantly to cases he had heard of where men had been paralyzed for life from such a wound.

He groaned without realizing it, eyes turning slowly to the slope beyond the cottonwood grove. He realized slowly that it was the lower half of his body that was paralyzed, and began dragging himself from the grizzled man he had fallen across.

Sharp stones brought crimson from his fingers as he clawed the earth, pulling himself forward. He was panting as if he had run a hard race. Cold, clammy moisture beaded his brow, stood on his upper lip.

But he kept dragging himself across the rocky earth until he was behind a cottonwood tree. Instinct alone was driving him to cover.

A bullet snapped past his head once. Another barked the tree as he got behind it. The sounds made by those bullets and the coughing report of the rifle on the slope above him penetrated his horror-numbered brain only dimly.

He twisted his head to look back at his dragging legs. A groan escaped him, and his hand shook as he reached back.

He found that his yellow shirt was soggy with moisture across the small of his back. He found, too, that the shirt was torn. He probed through the rent, almost gouging at the deep cut across his back.

But gouge and probe as he would, there was no pain in that wound, and the horror that was numbing the Kid mounted by leaps.

There was something like a sob in the outlaw's lean throat as he brought his hand back to stare at the crimson-smearred fingers. He felt sick, and wanted to press his face against the cool earth and rest. But that rifleman up the slope was still firing, and the bullets seemed to whine a dirge in the outlaw's ears.

He turned his head slightly to one side, peering out from behind the cottonwood bole. He saw a pale wreath of smoke lifting from a rifle barrel that was poked out through a clump of thorny brush.

The Oklahoma Kid gazed almost absently at the smoking rifle barrel. He saw it shift, felt as if the thing were staring gloatingly at him with its one ominous eye.

Barely in time the Kid realized that there *was* something ominous in the way that rifle barrel stared at him. He jerked his head back, and a bullet spat past with an ugly sound. That slug would have ripped his skull if he had not moved.

The meaning of that jarred the Kid's numbed brain into activity. He felt anger for the first time, and slapped his lean hands back to the smooth ivory butts of those guns at his thighs.

"Busted his back!" a voice lifted from the slope where the rifleman was hiding behind the clump of

brush. "Yuh fellers close in careful, though. The buzzard is scroockin' behind a tree. An' Joe Ryan ain't dead, fer I kin see him movin'."

Joe Ryan would be that grizzled hombre whose life he had saved. The Kid glanced back, and saw the lank old man staring at him out of glazed, wondering eyes. Joe Ryan was evidently getting his wits gathered.

But the Kid had other things to think of at the moment. His thin, down-curving lips twisted into a snarl, and the horrible thought of being permanently crippled left his mind.

He had his .45s out now, and was peering around the bole of the cottonwood again. He saw the rifle barrel poking through the same clump of brush.

That jasper was close, the Kid noted, as his beady eyes began to pucker. He saw the dim shape of a man's head and shoulders through the thorny brush.

The rifle barrel was jiggling now, no doubt coming to aim. The Kid showed his big teeth in a widening snarl, deliberately waiting until that hidden rifleman had his sights lined. The Kid could tell when the hidden jasper was ready to shoot, for the rifle barrel became rock-steady.

And when that happened the Kid jammed his twin guns past the tree and began thumbing the big spiked hammers with a deadly calm. He felt the stinging spray of bullet-blasted bark on his cheek, and heard the puny, whiplike snap of the rifle through the thunder of his ivory-butted six-guns.

Up there on the slope that clump of thorny brush was trembling violently. The rifle had disappeared, and now a masked man came butting through the brush screen to sprawl headlong down the steep



## CHAPTER III.

## MORE TROUBLE FOR THE KID.

slope. That jasper would bushwhack no one else, and the Oklahoma Kid brought his guns around at a hoarse yell from down canyon.

Just beyond the grove of cottonwoods three masked men were whirling, leaping back toward a patch of brush. The Kid's guns flamed, and those three jaspers put on a burst of speed. They dived headlong into heavy cover, swearing loudly.

The Kid sent the last of his slugs snapping twigs above the three rascals who had been trying to close in on him when he whirled on them. He let one gun fall, lifted shells from his crisscrossed belts, and was trying to reload the guns he still held when there came the dull sound of hammer dogs clicking as a gun was cocked. The Kid turned as fast as possible, for the sound had come from behind him.

He was staring wide-eyed now, for the man who had been called Joe Ryan was sitting up, glowering balefully down the barrel of a cocked six-gun.

"Got one o' yuh snakes, anyhow!" the grizzled man snarled thickly. "An' I don't aim to give yuh much chance, feller."

"Steady, amigo!" the Kid called sharply. "Ease up on that trigger, man. I'm yore friend, Ryan."

"Friend!" the grizzled man croaked, and clamped down on the trigger.

The Oklahoma Kid's head jerked sidewise, bounced against the cottonwood that had protected him from rifle fire before he drilled the bushwhacker who had put that slug into his back. The Kid groaned once, then lay still.

"Got 'im!" old Joe Ryan whooped. "Blasted snake was tryin' to reload his gun so's he could kill me. But I beat him to it."

THE Oklahoma Kid tried to peer through a vast path of shooting stars that swam before his eyes. He heard sounds in a dim sort of fashion, but could attach no importance to them.

He lost sight of the shooting stars and whirling lights at times, to sink down and down into a sort of cool darkness that seemed to creep about him. But at other times he would be seeing those horrible bright lights that flickered and danced.

He felt, too, as if he were being constantly jerked and mauled. Something bit into the flesh across his arms and shoulders, and once he came so close to consciousness that he felt sickening pains throb mad-deningly through his head.

But the Oklahoma Kid did not actually regain consciousness until something hot and bitter trickled down his throat, strangling him. He coughed, opened his eyes, and blinked uncertainly up into several weary-looking brown faces. One face there he recognized—Joe Ryan's.

The Kid tried to move, and discovered that coarse rope held his arms close to his sides. He remembered then that a bullet had paralyzed his legs, and tore his eyes from the faces above him to glance down. He tried instinctively to move his feet and legs—and succeeded! A yelp of joy started welling up in his throat, but died before passing his lips.

The paralysis caused by that wound in his back had gone, yet the Kid saw little to cheer about. He was bound hand and foot, and was stretched full length on a stout cowhide couch.

About him were long walls,

broken here and there by windows that were letting sunlight into the room along one side. And above him were those tired-looking men who watched him in a grim silence that was somehow more threatening than leveled guns.

"It's him, all right," a big, red-headed cowboy with somber brown eyes growled hoarsely. "I've seen that face on too many posters to be mistaken. What a chunk o' reward money yuh'll get for this capture, boss!"

Old Joe Ryan jerked around, facing the red-headed puncher. Ryan had been stooping over the Kid, and there was a big white coffee cup in his gnarled right hand. There was the bitter taste of strong coffee on the Kid's tongue to tell him that some of the liquid had been poured down his throat.

"I didn't fetch this younker in fer what reward there is on his scalp, Sam Nash!" grizzled Joe Ryan barked testily. "Yuh've ramrodded my Rockin' R for nearly five years now. Ever know me to turn a man over to the law, jist because there happened to be a price on his head?"

"Gosh, boss, don't take a man's head off," Sam Nash protested mildly. "Yo're jumpy, I know, after comin' as close to death as yuh did."

"We're all jumpy," a short, moonfaced cowboy growled uneasily. "None o' us has slept fer three nights, an' our nerves is plumb bad from expectin' them blasted night raiders to light on us any minute."

"Lot o' good it done us to lose sleep by standin' guard," a tall, bony-faced man said in a voice that was strangely deep for such a thin-chested hombre. "Them raiders snagged Joe right out from under our noses. An' one o' my own punchers is missin'."

"What?" came a chorus of voices.

"It's a fact," the bony-faced hombre said gravely. "Kirt Ollard an' me lit a shuck after them night raiders when we heard 'em poundin' away from here jist afore daylight."

The Oklahoma Kid was watching that tall, bony-faced man out of narrowed eyes, wondering vaguely why the fellow's voice sounded familiar. The Kid did not like the looks of the jasper's sunken, cold-blue eyes or the slant of his crooked gashlike mouth. But the Kid did not feel exactly friendly to any of these men, for they were holding him prisoner.

"Say, Colter, why didn't yuh say somethin' about one o' yore men bein' gone sooner?" Joe Ryan demanded.

"I was hopin' Kirt would come back," the bony-faced man answered slowly. "But it's plain now that somethin' happened ter pore Kirt."

The Kid saw uneasy glances pass among the men, and wondered at their tense, strained attitude.

"Then—then yuh figger Kirt run afoul o' them blasted raiders?" a lean cowboy asked uneasily.

Colter shrugged his bony shoulders ever so slightly. "Looks like it. Kirt an' me split up when we lost the sounds o' them fellers, figurin' mebbe we'd run onto 'em quicker that way. But Kirt ain't showed up yet, an'—"

"Monk Colter, yuh should 'a' told us about this sooner," a scrawny, sharp-featured little hombre cut in shrilly. "Yo're my boss an' kin fire me fer sayin' it. But I think yuh done wrong in not tellin' us that Kirt was gone."

"Shet yore face, Zeb Hawley!" "Monk" Colter rasped. "Yuh better watch yore tongue, feller, or I shore will send yuh down the road talkin' ter yoreself. When my



Box C hands think they kin tell me where ter head in——”

“Hold on, Monk,” Joe Ryan interrupted. “Zeb’s like the rest o’ us, keyed up to the breakin’ point. We can’t start scrappin’ among ourselves, men.”

“Gosh, no!” Sam Nash said wearily. “We’ve got all the fightin’ we can do, tryin’ to keep these night raiders from killin’ us off one at a time.”

“Mebbe their luck is goin’ sour on ‘em,” Monk Colter grunted. “Ryan escaped, which is the first time them night-ridin’ gents has failed. Yuh didn’t—didn’t git a good look at any o’ the fellers that had yuh, I reckon?”

“No,” Joe Ryan growled. “They was dressed in gray, every one o’ ‘em. An’ they all wore gray masks. They talked in hoarse voices, an’ I was too blamed scared to even wonder who they was.”

The Oklahoma Kid was still gazing intently at Monk Colter, a curious excitement beginning to course through him. He had seen something that left him wondering if he had gone loco from that pain that was hammering through his head.

Monk Colter and the evil-looking little jasper called Zeb Hawley had seemed to quarrel, yet the Kid caught Colter and Zeb winking slyly at each other.

“If I was shore I did escape,” Joe Ryan was saying thickly. “Some-how I can’t figure how I got out o’ that noose by my lonesome.”

“Yuh said the rope looked like it had busted where it went around the limb o’ that cottonwood,” Sam Nash reminded. “I reckon that’s how yuh got loose, boss.”

“The rope broke where it crossed the limb, yeah,” the Oklahoma Kid snapped suddenly. “But the rope

didn’t break until I slammed a couple o’ slugs through it.”

All eyes whipped to the Kid now, and he saw the men frowning slowly.

“What are yuh tryin’ to do, yuh ugly little snake, josh us?” Colter demanded sneeringly. “If yuh ask me, I think yo’re one o’ the night riders that has been givin’ us Green Mesa ranchers so much grief lately.”

“Yeah?” the Kid gritted. “Waal, nobody asked yuh anything, yuh squinch-eyed son of a snake! An’ yuh ain’t quite as smooth as yuh think yuh are.”

The Kid did not exactly know just why he said that. Nor could he understand why Monk Colter and the wizened Zeb Hawley looked so thunderstruck.

Monk Colter staggered back a half step, eyes widening. But he caught himself an instant later, swore raspingly, and sent long, bony hands flashing down to the twin guns that rode his thighs in tied-down holsters.

Bound hand and foot, the Oklahoma Kid could only stare as Monk Colter’s guns leaped up, spiked hammers rolling back.

## CHAPTER IV.

### BAD NEWS.

IT was Sam Nash who leaped, crashed a brawny shoulder into Monk Colter. Colter’s guns roared, and the Oklahoma Kid felt the stinging caress of a bullet that skinned his neck before thumping into the couch.

“Hold it, feller!” Sam Nash yelled loudly. “Colter, what’s eatin’ yuh? That owl-hooter is hog-tied an’ plumb helpless!”

Monk Colter blinked his evil eyes, stared from face to face as if just awakening from deep slumber. His

bony face was white and twitching, and there were murderous lights glinting in his cold, sunken eyes.

"Shootin' a man like yuh just tried to is murder, Colter," Sam Nash gritted. "Put up them guns, yuh hear?"

Sam Nash's voice was not loud, yet it made Colter flinch.

"I—I didn't know what I was doin'," Colter muttered, and holstered his guns with a jerky motion.

"No?" The Oklahoma Kid laughed mirthlessly. "So yuh didn't know what yuh was doin', eh?"

Monk Colter snarled an oath, hands shooting back to the guns he had just holstered. But Sam Nash grabbed him, spinning him about.

"Outside, Monk, ontill yuh cool off!" the red-headed cowboy grunted. "How come yuh so proddy toward that outlaw, huh?"

Colter was marched from the room, and men breathed easier as the door banged behind him. Old Joe Ryan mopped at his brow with a shaky hand, blue eyes searching the Oklahoma Kid's crimson-streaked face.

"Feller, yuh just about shot off yore gab once too often," Zeb Hawley cried thinly as he shook a skinny fist at the Kid. "The boss will git yuh yet, if yuh don't keep that lip o' yore buttoned. Yuh savvy what I mean?"

The Kid savvied that he was being warned to keep his mouth shut. But why? What did he know that Monk Colter feared he would tell?

Puzzled, the Kid lay watching while Zeb Hawley and four other men left the room. The Kid and Joe Ryan were alone now, and the outlaw turned his beady eyes on the old cattleman's leathery face.

"This is a swell way to thank a gent for savin' yore life, Ryan," the outlaw rapped angrily.

"Did yuh save my life, Kid?" the old ranchman asked slowly.

The Kid snorted angrily, then in swift, terse sentences, explained fully how he had routed those masked hangmen.

"But yuh won't believe me," he finished hotly. "Because I've got a bad rep, Ryan, yuh'll likely accuse me o' bein' in cahoots with them snakes that run like coyotes. But one didn't run any!"

"What do yuh mean by sayin' one didn't run?" Joe Ryan asked quickly.

"Why, the feller that put this wound in my back," the outlaw grunted. "I handed that buzzard his lead ticket yonderly. He was layin' up the slope apiece an' yuh must 'a' seen him after yuh tried to blow my head off."

Old Joe Ryan was flushed, and his eyes wavered under the Kid's steady, angry stare.

"I—I think yo're tellin' the truth, Kid," Ryan said huskily. "It does seem that I remember hearin' a lot o' shootin' while I was—was hangin' there, chokin' to death."

"Then why in tarnation did yuh try to murder me, then bring me here when yuh seen that yuh'd failed?" the outlaw clipped.

Joe Ryan flinched, face paling. "I—I was so dazed I didn't know what I was doin'," he said thickly. "Kid, I didn't know yore guns was empty, honest. I seen yuh reloadin', an' must 'a' figured that yuh aimed to drill me. I didn't know what I was doin' ontill I got almost home with yuh."

"What's this all about, anyhow?" the Kid demanded. "I heard that there was trouble over this way, Ryan, an' poked over to have a look-see. I heard that ranchmen on some place called Green Mesa was losin' stock fast, an' that a band o'



riders that travel at night was terrorizin' the whole country. That right?"

"It is." Joe Ryan nodded grimly. "There have been six men drug from their beds at night an' hung by them night riders in the last four months, son. I was the seventh feller."

"How'd they get yuh?" the outlaw asked, working silently at the ropes which were about his wrists.

Since his hands were behind him, and he was lying on them, Joe Ryan could not see that the outlaw was struggling to free his hands. And the Kid was about to succeed, for Joe Ryan had done a poor job of tying him up.

"Since my place is located in the middle o' this Green Mesa country, it's become a sort of fort, yuh might say," the ranchman growled.

"Fort?" the Kid prompted, tugging silently to slip his hands from the ropes that were about his wrists.

"Yeah, fort." Joe Ryan nodded his gray head. "Every night, ranchmen an' their families come here, an' we throw a heavy guard about the place. It—it's unbelievable, but them night-ridin' snakes got me out o' bed early this mornin' an' got me away with a dozen men guardin' this house!"

"Huh?" the Kid grunted sharply, so interested he stopped tugging at his bonds for the moment. "Yuh mean them masked jiggers snuck in past guards, then snuck out again, luggin' yuh?"

"That's what they done!" Ryan shrugged. "But Monk Colter an' one o' his punchers heard hosses leavin' the yard fence, an' follered. If they hadn't——"

"Who is this Colter jasper?" the Kid cut in.

"Owns the Box C spread, which is the biggest ranch around here, out-

side o' this Rockin' R, which is mine," Ryan answered, a grim note in his voice. "Yuh made a bad enemy when yuh crossed Colter, Kid."

"Seems like I did, the outlaw grunted, again tugging at his bonds. "Colter sets his self up as a salty customer, don't he?"

"He does, an' he kin back it up," the Rocking R owner answered. "Him an' Bronc Vernon, his foreman, is the two fastest gun-slingers in this country. They're tough, shore. But they're good neighbors an' plumb honest. I——" The old fellow's voice broke off.

The Kid had his hands loose now, and felt his heart hammering sharply at his ribs. Had he moved too much and made Joe Ryan suspicious?

The Rocking R owner took a half step forward, frowning darkly. "Kid, I'm sorry, somehow, that I brought yuh here," he said stiffly. "But yo're an outlaw—a plumb hardened killer, from what folks say, so I reckon I'm a fool to waste sympathy on yuh. Colter may be right. Yuh may be one o' them night riders."

"Then why would I have bothered to save yore life?" the outlaw asked pointedly. "If I was one o' the night riders, would I help take yuh out for a hangin', then turn on my own men?"

"I don't know what to think," the Rocking R owner groaned. "I was too dazed to know who was doin' that shootin' when I was hangin' by the neck. If yuh done it——"

"I did, but can't prove it," the Kid gritted. "Just the same, Ryan, if I was one o' them night riders I would 'a' been wearin' gray clothes an' a gray mask like the others, wouldn't I?"

"I mentioned that, but Monk

Colter claims yuh likely stripped off them gray clothes an' the gray mask when yuh seen that yuh was wounded." Joe Ryan was pacing the floor now, frowning wearily.

"But if I was one o' them murderin' snakes that go traipsin' around masked at night who would 'a' shot me?" the Kid cried triumphantly. "Fetch that ornery-lookin' Colter in here an' let him give an answer to that one."

"I thought o' that, too," Joe Ryan shrugged, looking grimly down at the Kid. "Colter figures that it was Kirt Ollard, his cow-puncher that's missin', who come bustin' down there an' saved my life."

"I see," the Kid snarled. "Colter figures that Ollard drilled me, an' that I took off my mask an' gray clothes. But where would I have got these clothes I'm wearin'?"

"The gray duds them snakes wear are made out o' cheap cloth an' slip on over other clothes," Joe Ryan answered. "I found out that much this mornin' while I was bein' lugged off. Colter figures yuh yanked off them gray things an' hid 'em."

"Then go look around that cottonwood grove!" the Kid barked angrily. "Also look over that masked jigger that I drilled. Mebbe if yuh know him yuh'll get a line on the others. That Colter hombre gives me a pain."

"Yuh better keep yore lip buttoned around Monk," the Rocking R man warned grimly. "Monk is upset an' proddier than ever because him an' that Ollard puncher o' his was standin' guard at the wing o' the house where I was sleepin' when them night riders taken me out to——"

"Yuh mean *Colter* was standin' guard when yuh was taken?" the Kid cried. "Good grief, man, don't yuh——"

The Kid broke off, for from outside came excited yells and the pound of horses galloping over hard earth.

Old Joe Ryan rushed to the door, looked out, and yelled a lusty greeting. He turned back, a grin on his leathery face.

"Listen, Ryan," the Kid called. "I've tumbled to somethin', shore as yuh're a foot high. If yuh'll listen——"

"Do yore talkin' ter the sheriff, feller!" Joe Ryan cut in harshly.

"The—the *sheriff*?" echoed the Kid. "Why, it's a day's ride from here to Two Forks, the county seat. Yuh don't figure on cartin' me all the way there, do yuh?"

"Hardly!" Joe Ryan snapped. "I sent fer Sheriff Tapper two days ago, young feller. Him an' Deputy Ed Sparks jist rode up. From now on, I'll let the law ride herd on yuh."

Before the Kid could reply old Joe Ryan was gone through the door.

## CHAPTER V.

"WE'RE SUNK, PONY!"

THE Oklahoma Kid jerked erect on the couch the moment the Rocking R boss was gone. The outlaw's hands were free, and it was but a moment's work to untie the ropes that held his ankles.

Pain stabbed the Kid's back, causing him to wince. There was a dull ache in his temple, too, that made him feel giddy.

But there was something much more important than aches and pains to occupy the outlaw's mind at the moment. Out there in the yard he could hear some one yelling, and recognized the voice instantly.

"Deputy Ed Sparks!" the Kid growled as he leaped to his feet.



"I'd know that fog-horn beller o' his any place."

The Kid had good reason to recognize that voice. Deputy Ed Sparks had but one ambition, it seemed, and that was either to pour the contents of a wicked old scattergun he always carried into the Kid's flesh or else lodge him behind bars.

The gangly, bug-eyed deputy had captured the outlaw several times, only to have the Kid outwit him and escape. The Kid razzed the deputy whenever he had the chance, yet he was fully aware of the fact that he had a dangerous enemy in Ed Sparks.

"That bug-eyed jasper will be frothin' at the mouth, the minute he hears I'm supposed to be a captive," the outlaw gritted, as he leaped to a center table which held his guns, Stetson, and belts.

He drew the Stetson on carefully, then snapped the belts about his lean waist. The Kid's beady eyes flashed toward the open door as a wild yell came drifting in. He ran stiffly down the long room, flattened beside a window, and peered out.

Lean, grizzled Sheriff Al Tapper and Deputy Ed Sparks were just breaking through a ring of excited-looking men and were starting toward the house. The sheriff was frowning darkly, and the watching outlaw could see that he was trying to talk to his rattle-headed deputy.

But Ed Sparks was beyond listening to any one just now. He had just heard that the Oklahoma Kid was a captive in the ranch house, and was legging it toward the door in rapidly increasing strides.

"I knowed ol' Ugly was mixed up in this, soon as I heard they was killin's an' other misdoin's goin' on up hyar!" the deputy yowled. "By gollies, Mr. Ryan, I'll bet it was that

Oklahomy Kid that tried ter hang yuh."

The deputy was nearing the porch now, straggly brown mustache bristling beneath a blunt nose, wicked-looking scattergun clutched in horny hands.

The Kid snarled silently, turned from the window, and dived through a door that put him out into a long hallway. He raced down the hall, turned into a bedroom, and went swiftly to a window. This, he discovered, was toward the back of the ranch house. He could see the corrals and barns beyond, down a little slope.

The Kid could see no one, yet there might be men in the bunk house which was directly behind the ranch house proper. Or there might be men in the barns or about the corrals. Those were things the Kid had to risk, however, for he certainly did not dare stay here in the ranch house.

He heard boots thumping loudly even now, and knew that the hot-headed deputy sheriff had come up onto the front porch.

Without waiting to hear more, the Kid seized the window, raised it with a jerk, and ducked through. He dropped the few feet to the ground, lean hands instinctively whipping to the butts of his guns at the noise of his fall. But there was no yell of alarm or crash of gun to stop him, and he went toward the bunk house in swift strides, despite the gnawing pain in his back and the throbbing of his wounded temple.

He reached a corner of the bunk house, darted around it, and ran along the wall. But at the back corner the Kid hesitated, peering out toward the corrals before showing himself. And his caution saved him, as it had many times in the past.

Two cowboys were just coming through the corral gate, Winchester rifles cradled in their arms. They came swiftly down the trail, wisps of hay dropping from their woolen shirts as they walked.

"Uh-huh, been holed up in the haymow, standin' guard," the outlaw breathed tensely. "They would 'a' riddled me if I'd bulged out there."

The two punchers came on, and the Kid could hear them talking as they went along the opposite side of the bunk house.

"The boss told us to stay hid up in that hay in the barn loft, Sam," one waddy was saying uneasily. "I'll bet we get bawled out fer not doin' it, too."

"Aw, what's the sense in holin' up like coyotes all day?" Sam growled testily. "Night is the time ter watch fer them raiders, Tony. Besides, I want ter know what the sheriff thinks about this hull business."

The two punchers were gone, and the Kid heaved a sigh of relief. He stepped past the corner of the bunk house and raced on to the corral, knowing that at any moment men would come running from the ranch house to hunt him.

As he neared the corral, he heard a horse snorting loudly, and saw Shorty, his chunky bay, trotting around inside the inclosure, still saddled and bridled. The Kid grinned faintly as he yanked the gate open and darted inside.

It was no mark of cruelty or carelessness on the part of Joe Ryan and the Rocking R punchers that Shorty was still saddled and bridled. Shorty would have taken a chunk out of the hide of the first hombre who tried to unsaddle him or slip the bridle from his head. But the blaze-faced bronc whinnied a welcome

at sight of his master, and came trotting forward eagerly.

"Good boy!" the Kid spoke as he swung into the saddle. "I'm glad yuh wouldn't let those gents on-saddle yuh. If I had to take time to pile gear onto yuh now——"

The Kid broke off, for there came a roar of voices and the loud banging of doors. The outlaw's beady eyes puckered as he leaned over Shorty's withers and spoke sharply. The bay lunged forward in a mighty leap, hit the ground running. Out through the gate, horse and rider charged, just as men swarmed around the bunk house.

"Thar he goes!" a leather-lunged waddy bawled. "The snake has got that hoss we couldn't onsaddle, boys, an' is gittin' away!"

Shorty swerved sharply to the Kid's reining, whirled along the corral fence.

"Ha-a-alt!" came a wild yell. "Stop, Ugly, or I'll blow yuh in two!"

The Kid hipped over in the saddle, glancing back. He saw Deputy Ed Sparks well ahead of the others, pet scattergun lifted to aim. But the outlaw was not alarmed, for he was well out of range.

He thumbed his nose at the bug-eyed deputy, which brought a yowl of anger and the *boom-boom* of the deputy's shotgun. Sparks staggered back two steps, for that old scattergun packed a wallop.

"Look out, Stupid!" the Kid yelled shrilly. "That old scattergun will make yuh splay-footed an' sway-backed if yuh keep monkeyin' with it."

The Kid twisted around in the saddle then to glance hopefully at the country ahead of him. Shorty had stormed past the corral, and was tearing over level ground. In fact, that ground was so level that

the Kid became instantly very uneasy.

As far as he could see in every direction lay level, unbroken country. There were scattered clumps of scrub oak here and there, and shallow coulees.

But those scattered clumps of trees and the shallow depressions in the earth would not hide a man, and the Oklahoma Kid knew that he would need cover and need it badly before much longer. There would be almost instant pursuit, for he had had no time to drive the Rocking R horses from the corral.

Pain was tearing madly at the Kid's back, and the throbbing of the wound in his temple was like so many sharp blows against his skull. He knew that he could not sit the saddle long, for already there was a sickish feeling in the pit of his stomach, and it was all he could do to keep from reining his horse into a gait that would not deal him such misery.

"This is mesa country, all right," the outlaw rasped through locked teeth. "But that looks like a rim over yonder, Shorty. If we can keep goin' a while, mebber—"

The Kid broke off, for something whizzed with an angry sputter past his head. A small geyser of dirt lifted several rods ahead of Shorty's nose. The bay snorted, changed courses slightly.

"A bullet!" the Kid growled. "How in blazes did them waddies get hosses rigged so soon. They— Huh!"

The Kid had twisted to glance back even as he spoke. He had the answer to his question now, for bearing swiftly down upon him came a lone pursuer who was mounted bareback on a great white horse that seemed actually to skim over the green mesa.

"A thoroughbred!" the Kid gasped. "Gosh, Shorty, yuh can't outrun a brone like that! We're sunk, pony."

## CHAPTER VI.

### BRONC VERNON SPILLS THE BEANS.

THE Oklahoma Kid was sunk, so far as winning a race against that magnificent white racer was concerned.

The Kid's Shorty horse was a tough little mustang, with speed enough for his kind and more endurance, thanks to constant travel, than the average cow pony. Shorty could, in all likelihood, wear that pursuing white horse out in a case of traveling in rough, mountainous country.

But this mesa was almost perfectly smooth. Even the coulees were so shallow that their sloping sides could be taken at any speed a horse could make without the slightest danger of a spill.

In such country, Shorty had no ghost of a show against that rapidly approaching white horse. This was a case of the white bronc bringing its rider within gun range of the Kid rather than an endurance race, and the outlaw saw the outcome clearly enough.

The white was skimming closer and closer, while the man who rode hunched over its silvery mane held a carbine at ready.

"Waitin' for a close shot, eh?" the Kid rasped grimly. "If I was as ornery as most folks think I am, feller, I could hand yuh a big surprise right here."

The Kid was thinking how easy it would be to rein in, leap from his saddle, and kill both that white horse and the man who rode it as they swarmed toward him. A man standing on the ground could shoot



accurately and have the job done before the white's rider realized his mistake of crowding up too close.

But the Oklahoma Kid had no intention of doing such a thing. In the first place, he loved good horses too well to put a bullet into one. And in the second place, he figured that the man astride that big white racer would be some Rocking R waddy who had the idea that he was about to overhaul and kill a murderer and thief.

The Kid could not blame people for thinking of him as a murderer and thief, for didn't those posters that were tacked up all over the country brand him as such?

On the other hand, however, the Oklahoma Kid had a perfectly natural desire to keep on living. He gazed back past the charging white racer long enough to determine that no one else had as yet started after him from the Rocking R corral. The Kid twisted to look ahead then, and found that the blue, dim line of sky against earth he had seen a few minutes earlier really was a rim of this Green Mesa.

The Kid felt new hope, for the rim was not so far away now. If he could only keep ahead of that lone pursuer another half mile or so, he would be dipping over that rim to ride down into broken, choppy hills. In such a country Shorty would have at least an even break, for the white bronc would have to be slowed up somewhat. But could the sturdy little bay keep ahead of that white racer long enough to reach that rim yonder?

The Kid leaned over, spoke encouragingly to his mount. Shorty stretched his neck out a little straighter, tapping some hidden reservoir of strength that enabled him to run a little faster.

A moment later, a bullet whis-

pered past to plow up dirt ahead. The Kid grinned suddenly, his hopes actually soaring for the first time. That white was doing all it could, otherwise the rider would not have fired when he saw that Shorty was speeding up.

The white horse had, no doubt, been yanked from a stall and put into a run while it was cold. Had it been given time to warm up first, the race would already have been over!

But that white bronc could run, and the Kid glanced back to see if Shorty had started holding his own. The outlaw saw that the white had gained very little if any. He was about to face forward again when the white's rider flipped up the rifle and fired. The Kid snarled savagely, for the bullet sang past rather low.

"Careful, yuh danged fool!" the Kid yelled, without realizing he did so. "That slug come closer to my hoss than it did to me. Watch—Hey, you!"

The second slug whipped past, missing Shorty's churning hind legs by mere inches. Then the third came, and the Kid knew that the rider astride the white was actually shooting at Shorty, trying to bowl the game little bronc over with a bullet.

Rage gripped the Kid instantly, and his right hand flashed to a rifle that was scabbarded butt toward his horse's tail after the fashion of men who know how to ride through brushy country without breaking the stock from a rifle by carrying it butt forward on a saddle.

Shorty dipped into one of the shallow coulees at the moment, however, and the Kid had a chance to cool off a little before he got his rifle out and sighted his pursuer again.

The rifle came quickly to his shoulder, and his beady eyes—both open—flashed along the gun barrel, lining the sights. The Kid was careful in his aiming, and did not squeeze the trigger until he was pretty sure that his slug would do no real damage.

Of course, aiming from the hurricane deck of a racing horse was not the easiest thing to do. But the Kid had practiced shooting from a running horse a great deal, and could put slugs fairly close to where he wanted them. He wanted one to blast dirt under that white bronc's nose right now, and took his time about aiming.

When the rifle jarred back against his shoulder in recoil he knew that he had put his slug where he wanted it. The white racer swerved sharply, and a shrill whoop came from the Kid's lean throat.

Caught unawares, and with no saddle to assist him, the man astride that white went sailing sidewise, arms and legs fanning the breeze. That hombre hit on his neck and shoulders, rolled end over end for several feet, and wound up in a clump of bear grass.

Grinning, the Oklahoma Kid reined Shorty in. And grinning, the Kid's face became harsher, more cruel-looking than ever.

"Well, now, I shore never expected to have any such luck as that!" the outlaw chuckled. "Shorty, I think I'll go back an' wait until that jasper wakes up. He needs some manners knocked into him for tryin' to drill a hoss."

The Kid did not ride back immediately, however, for the white racer was bearing down upon him at a long lope. The Kid snatched the lariat rope from the pommel of his saddle, snapped out a small loop, and angled in front of the white

horse. Those racers were usually high-strung animals, and sometimes proved hard to catch if left loose.

The Kid snapped his loop out, took his dallies, and let Shorty settle his haunches for the expected shock. But the white snorted, evidently wise to the rope. It dug trim hoofs into the soft earth, stopping without putting the least strain on the lariat.

"Good boy!" the Kid called, edging Shorty closer. "Glad yuh didn't — Say, look at that!"

The Kid's last words came in an angry yelp. He saw a mass of long welts along the white bronc's satiny sides—welts that oozed ugly crimson.

"Spur marks!" the outlaw snarled. "That jasper back yonder shore needs a lesson!"

Leading the blowing white racer, the Kid galloped back to where the hombre was just crawling dazedly to his feet. The hombre was a big, thickset fellow, with coarse black hair and piggish little green eyes that turned dazedly on the Kid.

The outlaw's hot glance ran over the burly man from head to foot in a slow, measuring glance that was filled with anger. That big hombre's flat, seamed face and shapeless nose bore mute testimony of many rough-and-tumble fights.

The Kid noted, too, that the jasper's twin holsters were thonged well forward on thick thighs, in the way professional killers usually wore their hardware. Those holsters were empty now, however, for the man's end-over-end spill had shucked the heavy guns from the soft leather.

"Feelin' a mite sick, yuh green-eyed, yaller-bellied snake?" the Kid barked coldly as he slid from his mount. "Take yore time, skunk, an' get yore bearin's. When yo're feelin'

fit again I aim to hammer some sense into that thick head o' yores."

"Huh?" the burly jasper blinked owlishly. "Wh-what's that yo're sayin'?" He shook his shaggy head sharply, ran a grimy-looking palm over his low, crinkled forehead.

"I said," the Kid snarled, "that I aim to hammer some sense into that thick head o' yores. Shoot at my hoss, will yuh? An' nobody but a hydraphoby skunk would spur-mark a hoss like yuh marked that white one."

The big hombre laughed suddenly, and the sound was little more than a murderous rumble that welled up from his great, arching chest. His numbed brain was clear now, and those evil little green eyes became two bright pin-points of light in his saddle-colored face.

"So yuh aim ter whup me, huh?" the big jasper snarled. "Waal, now, a lot o' fellers has tried that an' found out that Bronc Vernon wasn't no school kid when it come ter scrappin'."

"Bronc Vernon?" the Kid echoed. "Seems I heard somebody say yuh was ramrod o' Monk Colter's Box C."

"I am, yuh snake, an' hyar's where I git even with yuh fer hornin' into our play this mornin'!" roared "Bronc" Vernon.

The Kid stiffened, realizing suddenly that Bronc Vernon had spoken out plainly, without thinking.

"So yo're one o' the jaspers that tried to hang old Joe Ryan this mornin'!" the Kid cried. "I kind o' had a hunch Monk Colter was behind that, for he was on guard when the gang——"

The Kid got no further. Bronc Vernon leaped, mighty arms encircling the outlaw before the Kid could dodge. "Yuh'll not live to tell

what yuh know!" he roared. "I'll have yuh stone dead by the time them other fools git hyar!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### KNUCKLE SOUP.

THE Oklahoma Kid was blinded by the pain that ripped like claws along his wounded back. Bronc Vernon was laughing in his face, green eyes bleak with murder as he tightened those powerfully muscled arms.

The breath was slowly forced from the Kid's lungs. His brain was beginning to reel. But the outlaw kept his head despite the pain that was making him sick.

He simply *had* to best this burly killer somehow and see that Monk Colter and the rest of those night raiders were brought to justice. The Kid had suspected Colter when he learned that the Box C owner and one of his hirelings were supposed to be on guard when old Joe Ryan had been taken away from the ranch that morning. Then the Kid had seen Colter and that mangy-looking little Zeb Hawley passing signs to each other after pretending to quarrel.

And on top of that there had been something familiar about Monk Colter's voice. The Kid knew now why that voice had sounded familiar. He had heard it that morning, when those five masked men had taken old Joe Ryan beneath the cottonwoods to hang him.

Those things passed through the Kid's mind like the stabbing flashes of heat lightning on a far horizon. He was twisting one arm free while Bronc Vernon bent him slowly backward.

"I'll bust yore back, blast yuh!" the Box C ramrod panted gloatingly. "I'll make yuh beg plenty,



afore I put yore blasted light out fer keeps."

The Kid had his right arm and hand free now. Bronc Vernon's breath was hot in the Kid's nostrils, and those beady green eyes were staring with murderous intentness into his own. The Kid steadied himself as best he could, and put every ounce of strength he could muster into a hooking blow.

His fist plopped fairly into one of those evil green eyes. The blow wrenched a yell of pain from Bronc Vernon, and for a moment his deadly grip was relaxed.

The Oklahoma Kid sucked a deep gulp of cool air into his aching lungs, and struck again. His fist found Bronc Vernon's bloated lips this time, smashing and cutting them against the man's broad, tobacco-stained teeth. Vernon rocked back, bawled a sizzling oath, and struck a swiping blow that sent the Kid flipping backward as if a horse had kicked him.

But now that the killing pressure of those mighty arms was removed, other pains seemed small things to the Kid. He rolled swiftly, dodged a flying boot as Bronc Vernon charged, and was on his feet before the Box C ramrod could land a telling blow.

"So yo're one o' the dirty cowards that has been paradin' around masked in gray an' hangin' honest men?" the Kid taunted. "What's Monk Colter's game, Vernon?"

"None o' yore blasted business!" the burly rascal bawled. "Dang yore ugly hide, I've got ter shet yore fool mouth. I was a fool ter say what I did when I was mad."

Despite the stiffness and soreness of his wounded back, the Oklahoma Kid came in with the darting speed of an aroused hornet. His hard brown fists ripped three snapping

blows into the big, coarse face of Bronc Vernon.

The Box C foreman hardly staggered, for he was many pounds heavier than the wiry little outlaw. But the Kid did not expect his blows to down the burly killer. All he could hope to do was batter that hulking jasper half senseless, then fork Shorty, and get going.

The Kid had already wasted precious moments, and those hombres from the Rocking R were tearing across the mesa toward him. The Kid could see them from the tail of his eye as he circled warily away from Bronc Vernon's clawing, reaching hands.

The Kid got another opening, darted in, and slammed two punishing blows to Vernon's glittering eyes. But he took a wallop on the jaw that, had it landed squarely, would have stretched him out cold. As it was the Kid's knees sagged under him as he lurched back and sidewise.

Had Bronc Vernon followed up his punch, he could have finished the Kid then and there. But Bronc Vernon's eyes were almost closed, and becoming swiftly ringed with black.

The Kid kept away until his spinning brain cleared a little, then stepped in, buried his left fist in Vernon's waist, and landed a whizzing uppercut on the jasper's chin.

The Kid took a blow on the cheek that split the skin, but was backing up at the time, which saved him from the worst of the shock. He saw now that his time was up, for that bunch of riders had drawn dangerously close.

"Sorry I can't stay an' finish the job, yuh snake!" the outlaw gritted. "But just remember this: I know who the night raiders are! Tell Monk Colter I'll be lookin' him up."

The Kid whirled, trotted to

Shorty, and went up into the saddle as fast as he could. A glance showed him Deputy Ed Sparks and Sheriff Al Tapper leading the oncoming riders.

The Kid would have liked it very much had the sheriff been alone, for in Sheriff Al Tapper he had a stanch friend. But there was Deputy Ed Sparks and his scattergun—a combination the Kid dared not trust.

Growling angrily, he flipped his lariat from the white bronc's head, coiled it swiftly, and spun Shorty.

"I'll git yuh fer this!" Bronc Vernon roared. "If I only had me a gun——"

The Kid heard no more, for he was racing away toward the rim of the mesa. Bronc Vernon swore wildly, running with all his might toward one of his six-guns which lay glinting in the sunlight.

The big jasper got the gun, lifted it, and tried to take careful aim. But the swelling about his eyes robbed them of their usual quickness, and the Kid dipped into a coulee before Bronc Vernon could fire.

When the Kid came out of the coulee again the range was too long for six-gun work! But Bronc Vernon began firing in his rage, and was kneeling there snapping an empty gun when riders boiled around him.

Among those riders were Monk Colter, Sheriff Al Tapper, and Joe Ryan. Deputy Ed Sparks, Sam Nash, and several other cowboys swarmed on past, riding hard after the Kid.

"Cut out yore fool bellerin' an' talk sense, Bronc!" Monk Colter roared throatily. "Git up from thar, yuh idiot, an' tell us what happened."

"We've got ter ketch him, Monk!" the Box C ramrod wailed, lurching to his feet. "He knows it was us that took old——"

Monk Colter went white beneath his heavy tan. He lashed out viciously with a booted foot. The blow caught Bronc Vernon in the chest, staggering him.

"What are yuh tryin' ter say, yuh fool?" Colter demanded hoarsely. "Bronc, git hold o' yoreself."

Lean old Sheriff Tapper had watched and listened intently. The old officer's cheeks flushed slightly, and there was a gleam in his keen eyes now as he turned to look levelly at Monk Colter.

"Why didn't yuh let him finish what he was sayin', Colter?" the sheriff asked coldly. "Yore foreman was about to tell us somethin', I believe."

"He—he's daffy!" Colter rasped in his thick, hoarse voice.

"The Kid roped that white hoss, turned around, an' rode back to give this jasper a beatin'," Sheriff Al Tapper mused aloud. "We seen that much as we rode this way."

"If I was ten years younger, I'd pile offn this hoss an' give yuh another beatin', Vernon," old Joe Ryan growled hoarsely. "Look at the spur marks yuh put on that Chief hoss o' mine! Who give yuh permission to take Chief out o' his stall anyhow?"

"Say, who do yuh think yo're talkin' to, yuh stove-up old goat?" Bronc Vernon snarled at the Rocking R boss. "Open that mouth o' yores again, an' I'll wring yore blasted neck."

"Yuh've said too much, feller!" a husky cowboy growled, and quit his saddle in a single leap. "If yo're wantin' any more marks put on that face o' yores, I reckon Rockin' R kin do it."

The Rocking R waddy was all set to charge the Box C ramrod when Sheriff Al Tapper took a hand. The lean old officer was off his horse and

between the two men before they could get at each other.

"Steady, yuh two!" the sheriff barked. "There'll be no more scrap-pin', so smooth yore bristles down, boys!"

The Rocking R waddy shrugged, grinned at the sheriff, and turned back to mount his horse. But Bronc Vernon began growling oaths at the sheriff and the Rocking R waddy.

"Better call it a day, Bronc," the sheriff advised grimly. "The Oklahoma Kid had a reason for givin' yuh that lickin'. Mebbe yuh'd like to tell me what that reason was?"

"He—he tried ter murder me!" Bronc Vernon snarled. "An' say, sheriff, that ugly cuss bragged that he was the leader o' them night raiders when he was tryin' ter kill me, too. Yes, sir, he shore did!"

Gasps lifted from Joe Ryan and the three Rocking R punchers who had stayed beside him.

Before the sheriff could answer Bronc Vernon, a thin yell attracted his attention. A rider who had followed Ed Sparks after the Kid was racing back now, waving his hat and yelling.

"Come on, men!" that waddy called loudly. "We've got that Oklahoma Kid bottled up in a blind draw. It's trail's end for that skunk now!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ZEB HAWLEY GETS THE DROP.

**S**ICK and weak from his wounds, the Oklahoma Kid made a bad mistake when he reached the rim of Green Mesa and went rocketing down into broken, ragged hills.

The Kid took the easiest-looking route, too sick from his wounds to pay a lot of attention to where he rode. And he found himself suddenly pocketed above a thirty-foot

lip of granite over which water gushed in the rainy seasons.

The Kid heard the posse coming behind him, and knew that he could never turn back up the sheer-walled gorge down which he had ridden. He knew, too, that his horse could never climb those walls.

A man on foot might make it, provided that man was physically fit. But the Kid was far from fit, and a grim anger burned within him as he realized his predicament.

He dismounted, reeled to the very lip of the drop, and looked down. There was a small pool of water below him, out of which reared the battered crowns of big rocks.

"Trapped!" the outlaw breathed hoarsely. "Shorty, mebbe this is trail's end, ol' pard. If Ed Sparks gets in range of us with that scatter-gun——"

The Kid did not finish. From up the canyon came the thunderous pound of shod hoofs and the excited yells of men. There was a sharp bend in the canyon fifty yards above the outlaw, and he knew that those oncoming riders would soon swarm around that bend at full tilt.

His hand dipped down, came up with those ivory-buffed guns. His peril was steadying him, setting his keen brain into smooth motion. Now that he was no longer astride a plunging horse, the pain in his back and head was lessening.

The Kid's lean thumbs eared back the hammers of his guns. There was a grim set to his lips as he saw the first horseman turn that curve.

The outlaw's guns roared, and the rider brought his horse around so rapidly the bronc almost fell. The outlaw's guns roared again, and the hombre who had spun around that bend in the canyon spurred back, yelling wildly.

The Kid heard a lot of racket



then, and realized that the posse was halted for the moment, at least. But he knew that he had precious little time. Those jaspers would be scaling the steep walls of the canyon on foot, to get above him.

The Kid growled uneasily, turned to glance down the canyon, looking out and beyond the sheer drop that had halted his flight. Far away, dwarfed by the distance, he could see the sprawling buildings of a ranch house where the steep hills gave way to more level ground.

The Kid jerked around to slam lead at the curve in the canyon, letting his slugs scream and whine from the bold granite boulders. But his mind was on that ranch far below him.

"I shore can't get out o' this trap with my hoss," the Kid gritted aloud. "But I can take my rope, tie it to a rock, and slide down over this blasted cliff. On foot, I might make that ranch yonder an' get another hoss.

"Yo're trapped, Ugly!" a voice roared from beyond the curve. "Come out with yore hands up, or I'll come after yuh."

The Kid had no trouble recognizing that voice, for it belonged to Deputy Ed Sparks. And the outlaw knew that the rattle-headed jasper *would* come charging around that bend in the canyon with his pet scattergun if he got proddy enough.

"Stick that head o' yores around here, an' I'll skin it with a bullet, Sparks!" the Kid warned. "Yuh jaspers keep yore distance if yuh want to stay healthy."

But even as he yelled, the outlaw was beside Shorty, stripping his lariat from the saddle pommel. He ran to where a sizable log had washed in among jagged boulders and lodged solidly. It took the Kid

but a moment to tie his rope hard and fast to the wedged log. He flung the free end down over the cliff, then turned back to Shorty.

He took his rifle from the saddle boot, fished shells from a saddle pocket. Then the Kid hastily stripped saddle and bridle from the chunky bay.

"In case they get me, old-timer, yuh can take to yore heels," the outlaw spoke softly to his faithful mount.

The Kid walked to the rim of the bluff, then flattened out on the slick granite, working his feet over the rim. He got his legs hooked around the rope, then, rifle gripped in his left hand, began sliding down.

The rope scorched his palm, and he could feel it burning through his trousers. But he shot down swiftly, knowing that his escape would soon be discovered. He would have some time to get under cover, he figured, for Ed Sparks and the others would have to ride back up the canyon until they found a way out, then follow some ridge down until they were past this sheer drop.

The Kid was thinking of that when he came to the end of his rope. He felt it whip from his scorched palm, and a second later he was floundering waist-deep in cold water. The Kid was out of the water in a moment, slogging up a sandy bank.

He heard yells drifting down from above, and ducked hastily into thick willows that grew along the canyon floor. He stopped there long enough to draw his six-guns and wipe them dry on his red neckerchief. He poured the water from his boots, tugged them back on, and got to his feet.

From the sounds above him he knew now that his escape had been discovered. He crept softly into a

dense growth of the willow, eyes troubled as he crouched there, listening.

"Gone!" came Ed Sparks's loud voice. "Look, men! The snake tied his rope onto this log an' slid down the bluff. But that's a game two kin play."

"What do yuh mean, Ed?" some hombra asked.

"Rest o' yuh jaspers git yore brones an' fog back up this canyon," the deputy directed. "Me, I'm goin' down this rope. That snake can't be far away."

"I savvy, Ed," a voice cried. "Yuh'll stay on his trail, while the rest o' us get out o' this blamed canyon an' cut down them ridges across yonder."

The Kid started nervously, for he certainly had not expected such a rotten bit of luck. He glanced through the thick brush wildly, realizing that Ed Sparks could easily enough follow the dripping trail he had left from the water hole to this thicket.

"All right, Nash, take the others an' git goin'," Ed Sparks ordered. "Fetch my hoss around below this bluff soon as yuh can. I'll see or hear yuh if yuh stick close ter this canyon."

The Kid heard boots slogging, and lifted his head for a peek. Ed Sparks was belly down on the lip of the bluff, easing himself over. The lanky deputy was gripping his wicked shotgun in one hand, and trying to get his long legs wrapped in the dangling rope. He skidded down swiftly for several feet before he succeeded in gripping the rope properly.

The outlaw knew that his only chance of getting out of that thicket without discovery would be while the deputy was sliding down the rope and wading from the pool. He

began moving away, making as little noise as possible.

He heard a loud splash and some sizzling oaths, and knew that Deputy Sparks had come to the end of the rope and taken a plunge.

The Kid darted forward through the thicket now, hoping that the sputtering deputy would be too busy at the moment to hear the crackle of twigs.

The willows gave out suddenly, and the Kid found himself at an open space that was the bed of the canyon. He darted across the open spot and gained other brush, teeth clenched against the pain that was again tearing at his wounded back.

The outlaw knew that he could never stand much of this rough going on foot, and glanced about desperately for some hiding place.

He swerved from the bed of the canyon to hug one sheer wall, eyes searching for some crack or cave that would offer shelter.

There were cracks, to be sure. And once the Kid saw a dark opening that looked like a cave. But the opening proved to be little more than a shallow pocket, and none of the cracks were deep and wide enough to hide him.

He trotted on and on, breath coming in sobbing gasps. The bluffs were becoming less sheer, and the outlaw felt that if he could last for another mile or so he was bound to find some way out of the canyon.

The Kid fell on<sup>ce</sup>, and lay for a moment as if too stunned to crawl back to his feet and run any more. But he could hear brush crackling behind him, and the realization that the deputy was getting much too close prodded him up, sent him staggering on.

And then he saw the first break in that grim bluff. He staggered toward it, a hoarse cry in his aching

throat. The opening proved to be a narrow passage that sliced twistingly back through the granite walls.

From a distance that opening would have escaped the keenest of eyes, for its twistings gave no chance for light to show beyond.

The Oklahoma Kid reeled into the passage, hoping desperately that it would lead him to some safe hiding place. But he had gone only a few rods when a horse snorted somewhere beyond him, and he heard the faint but unmistakable jingle of bit chains.

He slowed his pace instantly, hugging close to one stone wall. A glance at the smooth stone floor of the passage showed him that it had been used considerably, for there were many scars left by shod horses.

Tensely alert now, the outlaw crept forward foot by foot, rifle held ready for instant use. He saw a V-shaped patch of light sky ahead, and realized that he was nearing the end of the pass. He crept toward it with the silence of a shadow.

He could see out into a bowl-like little basin now, where trees and grass grew among boulders that had tumbled down from ragged rims high above. The Kid caught the tangy odor of wood smoke, and flattened close to the wall of the passage as human voices reached his ears.

"Hurry, yuh fools!" a hoarse, croaking voice ordered angrily. "We've got ter move fast, I tell yuh. Git into them gray outfits afore that blasted sheriff pokes over here. He'll miss Bronc an' me after a bit, shore as shootin'."

"Monk Colter!" the Oklahoma Kid breathed softly. "An' the skunk is up to somethin'."

"We'll hang this old goat where the posse will be shore ter find him," came another voice. "Then we'd

better drill them two blasted lawmen, Monk. That sheriff acted like he savvied a few things, if yuh ask me."

The Kid's down-curving lips tugged into a faint grin. He recognized that second voice as Bronc Vernon's, and was about to risk peering around the edge of the stone that hid him when a gritty sound behind him caused him to whirl.

The Kid became as stiff as the stone beside him, for he was almost sniffing the barrel of a cocked six-gun. Behind that leveled gun was scrawny-looking little Zeb Hawley, the Box C puncher who had been at the Rocking R with Monk Colter.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE KID SETTLES SCORES.

**T**HERE were five other tight-lipped, hard-eyed hombres in the hidden bowl besides Monk Colter and Bronc Vernon. The seven cut-throats were in the very act of donning gray masks when the Oklahoma Kid was prodded from the mouth of the narrow passageway.

"Look what I ketched spyin' on yuh fellers!" Zeb Hawley called sharply.

Monk Colter ripped the gray mask from his face to stand staring, evil eyes wide in their deep sockets. Hoarse oaths ran among the men behind Colter and other masks were ripped from harsh faces.

The seven men were already clad in dirty-looking gray garments that were poorly cut from some cheap, flimsy cloth. The Oklahoma Kid eyed the men hotly as he was shoved forward by Zeb Hawley's gun.

"Now I'll settle with this snake!" big Bronc Vernon roared, balling his mighty fists. His battered features turned an ugly purple color as he



started forward menacingly toward the Kid.

"Hold it, Bronc!" Zeb Hawley cried. "An' fer gosh sakes, feller, keep yore voice down. That pop-eyed Deputy Sparks is prowlin' around out in the main canyon. He—he might hear yuh bellerin' like that."

"What?" Monk Colter cried. "Zeb, are yuh shore that deputy is out yonder in the main canyon?"

"O' course I am, boss!" the wizened little gunman rasped from behind the Kid. "Dang it, I was with the bunch that chased the Kid down the canyon."

Hawley explained swiftly how the Kid had escaped by using his lariat rope, and how the hot-headed deputy had followed him by going down that same rope.

But the Oklahoma Kid was not listening to Hawley's account. The outlaw's beady eyes were fixed on the gray, pain-twisted face of old Joe Ryan, who lay there beside a big boulder, hog-tied and gagged. The Rocking R owner's eyes turned pleadingly on the outlaw, and the old fellow tried to speak through his gag.

"Say, yuh pack o' mangy coyotes better straddle the breeze an' leave Ryan alone," the Kid barked suddenly. "Colter, yuh can't get by with this."

The Kid was remembering that he had heard one of these cutthroats say something about hanging some one. He realized now that old Joe Ryan was that some one.

Anger gripped the Kid, and his eyes raked those seven men before him. The Kid's rifle and ivory-butted six-guns had been taken away from him, and he was faced with the impossible odds of eight to one.

"Listen, yuh ugly snake!" Monk

Colter stabbed a long finger at the Kid as he talked. "We're hangin' Joe Ryan like we was tryin' to do this mornin' when yuh horned in."

"An' yuh'll git worse than hangin', blast yuh!" Bronc Vernon snarled. "No two-bit jasper like yuh kin jump me when I ain't lookin' an' maul me. I'll——"

"Listen ter me, yuh fellers!" Zeb Hawley cut in angrily. "That posse has cut around the falls in the canyon, an' will be swarmin' all over the country. We better do somethin' besides chaw the rag."

"Zeb's right," a tawny-eyed man with a ropy yellow mustache snarled. "Monk, we better sift out o' hyar, hadn't we?"

There was a small fire burning near the base of the tall cliff. A big blackened coffeepot had been set off to cool, and the Kid saw tin plates and cups piled atop a big rock near by.

Monk Colter leaped at that fire now, as if fully awakening to his danger for the first time.

"Git out o' them gray duds, men, an' hide 'em under the bluff yonder!" he called as he scraped dirt over the fire. "If the blasted law was to ride up on us right now——"

Monk Colter left his sentence unfinished for his gang was already busy. Those ill-fitting gray clothes were hastily stripped off, and the Kid saw that the outlaws had worn them over their regular clothing.

"No blasted owl-hooter kin cheat me out o' what's mine!" Monk Colter rasped as he skinned out of his gray garb.

"What have I tried to cheat yuh out of?" the Oklahoma Kid asked sharply.

"Green Mesa, yuh snake!" the Box C owner flung at him savagely. "With old Ryan, thar, out o' the way, I could control this whole

country. An' if yuh hadn't butted in this mornin', Ryan would 'a' been out o' the way by now."

"Yeah, an' don't fergit that this ugly little buzzard kilt Kirt Ollard, boss," Bronc Vernon growled. "Zeb an' me snuck back after Ryan carted this Oklahomy Kid off an' took them gray duds offn Kirt."

"Shore, that's what I told yuh to do," Monk Colter nodded, cold eyes flashing uneasy glances toward the entrance to the hidden valley. "If Kirt is found now, we'll make folks think the night raiders killed him off while he was tryin' ter save old Ryan's neck."

"Say, do yuh think I kin stand hyar an' hold the drop on this snake all day?" Zeb Hawley demanded peevishly. "Git a rope an' tie him if yuh want. Better gag him, too, for he might holler if he heard that posse ridin' past."

"Say, don't be a fool!" Monk Colter grinned wolfishly. "This ugly little whelp ain't no more anxious ter see the law than we are. Make him set down over yonder on that rock. We kin watch that jasper without botherin' to tie him."

"But—but we better clear out o' hyar," Zeb Hawley stuttered uneasily. "If that blasted posse o' Rockin' R waddies was to find us hyar with all them Rockin' R cattle up the valley yonder we'd be in a sweet pickle."

Monk Colter said nothing. He chuckled deep in his throat, his bony face suddenly wreathed in evil smiles as he strode to where old Joe Ryan lay.

The Oklahoma Kid had marched obediently to a big rock near Joe Ryan, and now sat watching narrowly while Monk Colter deliberately drew a keen-bladed stock knife and ripped the bonds from Ryan's wrists and ankles.

"Say, Monk, have yuh went loco?" Bronc Vernon asked in amazement. "That ol' buzzard will holler shore as he hears them blasted lawmen ridin' past this place."

"Uh-huh, that's what I figure on him doin'," Monk Colter chuckled fiendishly. "An' when he does, we start pumpin' lead into him an' that blasted Kid."

"By gosh, yuh've gone plumb crazy!" the tough-looking jasper with the ropy yellow mustache gulped. "We'd git caught shore, if we started bombardin' these two with a bunch o' snoopy lawmen close ter us."

"The posse would come bustin' in here," Monk Colter leered, "which would be just what we'd want."

"I'm ridin' yonderly!" Zeb Hawley growled thinly. "By gosh, boss, yuh ain't gittin' me into no sich mix-up. Yo're slick, but not slick enough ter git by with a stunt like that."

"I'm ridin', too!"

"Count me in!"

"Same here!"

Monk Colter surveyed the speakers out of glittering eyes. But instead of snarling oaths at them, he was grinning broadly.

"Boogery, hey?" he laughed at his uneasy gang. "Well, boys, don't rush off too soon. If we drill these two we'll have all o' Green Mesa to ourselves."

"Yeah, an' a noose around our necks!" Zeb Hawley spat.

"We'd have a big reward from that ugly Kid's hide an' the respect o' the hull country," Monk Colter sneered. "When them lawmen come bustin' in we can say that we was helpin' Joe Ryan corner this outlaw."

"But—but what about them Rockin' R cattle we've got penned

along them bluffs up yonder?" Bronc Vernon demanded.

"We'll claim that this Kid was the leader o' them night riders, yuh fools!" Colter barked impatiently. "We'll tell it scary about how we chased the rest of his gang out the back entrance ter this hide-out. Part o' us will be up that way, shootin' at the sky an' hollerin' plenty."

"By glory, boys, the boss is right!" Bronc Vernon twisted his battered face into a grin. "With Ryan out o' the way we'll run this hull country the way we please."

"Mebbe," the Oklahoma Kid drawled slowly, "but Al Tapper ain't a fool, Colter. He'll smell skunk oil an' start checkin' up on yuh if I know him."

"Them night riders that will git away kin take care o' that," the Box C owner leered. "Ter-night there'll be a raid on my place, where the sheriff an' that deputy will be stayin'."

"Looks like yuh've thought out all the angles," the Kid drawled. "It would be easy for yuh skunks to murder the sheriff an' his deputy while they slept, then claim yore place was raided."

"An' that's what I'll do," Monk Colter cackled hoarsely. "Yuh— Say, what in blazes yuh doin'?"

The Oklahoma Kid had found a lariat rope lying beside the rock upon which he sat. One end of the rope had been cut, and the Kid guessed that the piece taken had been used to bind old Joe Ryan. But there was a long length of the rope left, and the outlaw's nimble fingers had been busy with it as he listened to his captors talk.

He grinned his harsh, unnerving grin now, and held up a perfect hangman's noose, which he had fashioned from the rope. He

chuckled grimly, for those cut-throats fell back, swearing in hoarse voices at sight of the grimly dangling noose with its thirteen coils above the slip loop.

"I'll help yore little scheme out, likely enough, Colter," the Kid spoke calmly. "I'll stuff this noose inside my shirt, an' if I'm found dead with it there it'll look like me an' the gang yuh aim to claim I had helpin' me *was* set to hang Joe Ryan."

"Don't do it, Kid!" Joe Ryan spoke for the first time. "Yuh— yuh've been blamed too much now for the doin's o' these dirty skunks."

"Say, just what's the idea, feller?" Monk Colter demanded of the Kid. "Why should yuh try ter help a scheme that will make things look bad fer yuh?"

"If I'm killed this noose will clinch the lies yuh aim to tell, Colter," the Kid said calmly. "But if yore plans backfire, this noose is built to fit yore won neck."

Monk Colter opened his lips to reply, but no words came. From somewhere beyond the narrow pass that led into the hidden pocket came the ringing of shod horses traveling over stones. A voice lifted in a shout, and the outlaws jerked around, momentarily forgetting their two prisoners.

In that moment the Oklahoma Kid's lean right hand dipped into the top of his right boot, came out with a wicked-looking little four-barreled pistol that had pulled him out of more than one tight corner. The gun was of small caliber. But in the expert hands of the Kid it could prove as deadly as a .45.

The Kid winked at old Joe Ryan, who was sitting up, feeling dazedly of a cut behind one ear where a gun barrel had landed when he was

taken prisoner by men he thought his friends.

The Kid palmed the gun neatly, stuffed the grim hangman's noose inside his shirt. He saw his own .45s and Winchester lying several feet away.

"It's that posse, all right!" Bronc Vernon cried hoarsely. "But they're goin' on past. We better——"

"Lefty, take Red, Jerry, an' Shorty an' hit fer the far end o' this bowl!" Monk Colter cried savagely. "Bob, yuh stay here with Monk, Zeb, an' me."

"Shore, boss, I'll stay," the tawny-eyed man with the drooping yellow mustache clipped. "But what's up?"

"Soon as Lefty an' the others git up yonder we'll start drillin' these two. When yuh boys hear us shootin', Lefty, yuh all cut loose an' holler like yuh was chasin' somebody."

"Shore, I savvy," a burly, thick-necked jasper who was undoubtedly "Lefty" rumbled.

The four went trotting away, heading up the bowl. The Oklahoma Kid watched until they were lost in brush and rocks, then turned his attention on the four hombres who were left.

Monk Colter and Bronc Vernon had raced to the narrow pass, and were standing there listening. Wizen little Zeb Hawley was grinning wolfishly down at old Joe Ryan. The tawny-eyed Bob was watching the Kid, a faint grin on his gashlike mouth.

"All right, start smokin' them two!" Monk Colter bawled suddenly. "Pour the lead into——"

The Oklahoma Kid saw Zeb Hawley drawing, heard the skinny killer's fiendish chuckle as old Joe Ryan tried feebly to lurch up and fight him with his bare hands. The

tawny-eyed Bob was drawing, too, but taking his time about it.

The Oklahoma Kid flipped his right hand over, and there came a puny *spat* that was drowned in the roar of Zeb Hawley's guns. But the Kid had fired a fraction of a second sooner, and Zeb Hawley was staggering sidewise, clawing at his chin as the big guns fell from his hands.

The Kid saw that much, then slid sidewise off the rock, firing as he moved. The tawny-eyed Bob squalled an oath, but sent two slugs screaming after the Kid. The outlaw felt the wind of these two bullets.

Then his little gun coughed again, and a black dot appeared between the gangly Bob's tawny eyes. Monk Colter and Bronc Vernon had whirled and were shooting now, swearing crazily above the roar of their guns.

The Oklahoma Kid grinned coldly, darting toward his own .45s. He had but one shell left in his wicked little hide-out, and burned that as he caught a glimpse of Bronc Vernon's battered face in the mouth of the narrow passage.

Bronc Vernon dodged, but his guns hammered, and the Kid felt blazing death pass his body by scant inches. Then he was snatching his ivory-butted .45s, lips back in that unnerving grin.

Those ivory-butted sixes blasted a steady stream of lead into the mouth of the narrow passage, and the Kid advanced grimly, calmly. He saw Bronc Vernon staggering drunkenly within the passage, and waited until Vernon's guns came up and around.

The Kid fired then, sending a slug from each gun that caught Bronc Vernon, lifting him up and back. From the far end of the pass came



a sudden clamor of voices and the snorting of nervous horses.

"Watch Monk Colter, sheriff!" the Kid yelled shrilly. "He's the leader o' them night raiders."

"I hear yuh, son, an' Monk Colter better not try gettin' out this end o' the pass!" Sheriff Al Tapper yelled back.

The Kid heard no more. From the mouth of that pass leaped Monk Colter, face twisted in insane rage, his twin guns running streamers of flame-split thunder as he charged the Kid in a mad rush.

The Kid felt a slug rip the skin along his thigh, felt another hiss through his shirt. The outlaw could have killed Monk Colter easily. But the Kid remembered that noose he had built, and sardonic mirth quirked his lips.

He fired two shots—fired them coolly. Monk Colter toppled backward, screaming in rage and pain. His arms flopped limply at his sides, broken below the shoulders. The outlaw stepped forward, jerked the noose from inside his shirt, and slipped it over Monk Colter's ill-shaped head.

"Told yuh that noose would fit yore neck," the outlaw chuckled grimly. "Adios, skunk!"

The Kid whirled to where old Joe Ryan was just getting to his feet. "Tell Al Tapper what yuh know, Ryan," he barked. "An' tell him an' the others to round up them four snakes that are up yonder, doin' that shootin'."

"Wait, Kid!" Joe Ryan called. "Son, I want to thank yuh, an' tell yuh how sorry I——"

"Git out o' my way, Al Tapper!" a hoarse voice came through the narrow pass. "I heard ol' Ugly bellerin' in thar, an' I aim ter snag him."

"Adios, Ryan!" the Kid clipped. "I hear my old friend, Deputy Ed Sparks, faunchin' to meet up with me. I'll be droppin' past the Rockin' R one o' these days to say howdy. That is, if yuh want me to."

"Yo're welcome at the Rockin' R any time, Kid!" Joe Ryan began. "If yuh'll come, I'll try to make up fer the way I treated yuh. If yuh hadn't——"

But the Kid heard no more. He had spotted a game trail leading up out of the basin, and was scrambling along the narrow run with all possible speed. He looked back and saw men pouring into the basin from the pass. He rested there a moment, watching while old Joe Ryan talked and waved excitedly.

The Kid saw Sheriff Al Tapper turn, stalk over to Monk Colter, and grasp the free end of the hangman's noose that was about the murderous rascal's neck. Deputy Ed Sparks was charging this way and that, yelling excitedly.

The Kid grinned suddenly, cupped his hands to his mouth, and was ready to yell a taunt at the deputy when he saw the four Box C killers who had gone up the round valley come racing back.

Those four rascals evidently sensed nothing wrong, for they trotted on to where the sheriff and the Rocking R waddies were bunched. As the Kid watched he saw those four jaspers stripped of their guns and herded together against the tall bluff.

"But whar's that ugly buzzard of a Oklahomy Kid?" Deputy Sparks's voice came faintly up the long slope to where the Kid crouched. "Dang it, he's around hyar some place. I'll find——"

"Hey, Stupid!" the Kid called

shrilly. "Fetch yore scattergun an' come up this way. I'll bet there's a passell o' rabbits in this brush."

"Halt!" Deputy Sparks bawled, and lunged toward the steep slope.

The Kid chuckled grimly, and began climbing on up the narrow game trail which was heavily screened with brush. He would, he knew,

have plenty of time to dodge the faunching deputy, circle along the rims above, and work his way back to where his horse would be loafing around the saddle.

The Kid glanced back once more, and had the grim satisfaction of seeing that Monk Colter still wore the noose he had built.

### AS GOOD AS AN INJUN

A MILITARY detachment, out to round up bands of raiding Indians, had made camp a few miles from the Clear Fork River. One day there strolled into the camp a Mexican whose queer appearance caused roars of laughter.

He was very short and wore a gay dressing gown that was much too big for his skinny little body. His loose pants had been turned up and tied at the knees to suit his height. His hair hung long and loose and greasy over his shoulders, and looked as if a comb had not been near it for years.

The captain of the troop recognized the visitor as a man he had seen in an Indian camp on Red River. He asked him why he stayed with Indians so long instead of going to his own people.

The little Mexican gave a knowing grin, and his eyes puckered up

until they were mere slits as he replied with an evil smirk:

"Me good as Injun now. Me bin so long 'mong Wichitas, me lie, me beg, me steal horse, me take scalp, me big rascal same as Wichita."

The "big rascal" seemed to enjoy making this open confession, for he swelled with pride as he watched its effect upon his listeners.

Some members of the detachment left the camp later in the day, and the Mexican rode with them.

After he had gone, it was found that a number of small articles from the camp were missing—shirts, handkerchiefs, socks, suspenders, belts, and other things that he could hide in his loose clothes.

No doubt he would present these to his Wichita friends as proof that he could steal, not only horses, but anything that he could pick up just as well as any Injun could.

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# A Proper Hangin'

By George C. Henderson

Author of "Ca'tridges—An' Colts," etc.

**H**ALTING his big, foam-flecked calico bronc in the shade of the rambling O Bar O ranch house, Deputy Sheriff Brad Dunning twisted his range-hardened body in the saddle. Through steely eyes, squinted against the rays of the brassy sun, he intently watched a swiftly moving plume of yellow dust that traveled along the base of the distant purple hills. The faint tattoo of hoofs came to his ears.

"Riders," mused Brad. "An' they're shore foggin' the trail."

Sliding from the saddle, he trailed the reins and moved around a corner of the ranch house. Thick grama grass deadened his footsteps. On the other side of the building he saw fancy-dressed, pale-faced Luke Casson, who stood with a pair of field glasses fixed to his

eyes, studying that vanishing dust cloud. Brad's spurs dragged on a rock.

The sound caused Luke to whirl. The field glasses plunked to the ground and the kid's hand streaked for a gun. Then he saw the tall, rawboned figure of Brad Dunning.

"Oh, it's you," he sneered.

"What's up?" growled Brad. "I got the message yore rider brung an' come quick as I could." He wheeled around and glanced at that faint alkali haze. "Who was them horsemen?"

"That's yore business to find out," snarled Luke, his lips curling scornfully. "I don't see why Sheriff Dunning ever appointed you last month."

"I got appointed 'cause the sheriff is fifty miles away in Pine Bluff an' needs a good man," drawled Brad.

"An' fer the second time, what's up?"

Luke picked up the fallen field glasses.

"Hammer Jafe an' his crew has been hangin' out on this spread up in Panther Canyon," flared the kid, his thin face working in rage. "I found their sign an' sent a feller to fetch yuh."

Brad built a quirly and flipped it into one corner of his big mouth.

"Next you'll be tellin' me them riders was Hammer's jaspers," said the deputy.

"How should I know?" snarled Luke Casson. "But Hammer's been butcherin' my beef——"

"Yuh mean my beef!"

The screen door opened and banged shut. Spurs clanked on the board porch as a tall, gray-bearded old rancher strode forward. It was Dan Casson, Luke's foster father, and owner of the O Bar O, the richest spread in Mendocino County. Anger smoldered in the old man's faded eyes. He faced Luke.

"Jist because I took yuh an' raised yuh from a brat ain't no sign yuh run the O Bar O," he growled. "Time enough fer that when I rate a tombstone in Boot Hill."

Luke stammered something under his breath, shot a surly glance in Brad Dunning's direction, and swung into the saddle.

"I got business in town," he said. "Go to Panther Canyon an' yuh'll see I ain't lyin'."

Spur-raking his cayuse he galloped off.

"I'd cut off my right arm fer that kid," muttered old Dan. "But he shore gits under my hide sometimes."

"I'm havin' a look at that outlaw sign," said Brad, mounting.

"I'm goin' with yuh," snapped Casson. And before Brad could

protest, Dan had mounted and reined-in beside him. "If they're hangin' around, we kin spot 'em from the cliffs."

Brad wondered about the hard-riding horsemen he had glimpsed in the distance, over by Eagle Basin. But when old Dan mentioned that all his riders were working in that direction, Brad thought no more about it.

An hour's ride brought Brad Dunning and old Dan Casson to the high cliffs that bordered Panther Canyon. Tying their broncs in a deep thicket, the two men crept cautiously forward on foot until they were at the edge of the rock walls. They studied the ground below in silence.

Brad was puzzled as to why "Hammer" Jafe should hide out on the O Bar O. It was much safer in Gunsmoke. There wasn't a rock or tree in Panther Canyon to offer shelter.

Jafe, notorious killer and bandit leader earned his moniker when he beat a guard to death with a hammer in a prison break. For six months, he had terrorized Mendocino County, always evading capture by retreating to Gunsmoke town in the lava-cap wilderness of the Big Hole country.

Many lawmen had tried to get to Gunsmoke. Months later, their bullet-smashed skeletons were found in the desert with only dusty badges to identify them.

"Ain't nobody around," said Brad. "But I see what looks like a camp. An' there's a wide trail sign leading toward Mendocino."

Dan Casson leaned over, peering downward at the plain hoof marks on the soil. Droppings told him it was a fresh trail.

"Why would they be goin' to Mendocino?" he mused. "Ain't



nothin' there that's big enough fer Hammer Jafe to bother with."

"I got it!" snapped Brad Dunning. "There's the five-thousand-dollar El Cortez Mine pay roll at the Wells Fargo office. I sent guards to watch it. But that ain't goin' to stop Hammer if he's on the prod. We're ridin'!"

With one bound, Brad Dunning was in the saddle and galloping across the rocky uneven ground. Old Dan raced after him.

Brad realized those riders he had seen must have been Hammer and his crew. Panther Canyon was not visible from the ranch house. When the racing outlaws had galloped by Eagle Basin, a ridge of hills had hidden them from the O Bar O punchers working there.

Brad had never laid eyes on Hammer Jafe or his crew, but he knew the ruthless killer by reputation. The last deputy of Mendocino had been killed by Jafe's gang.

The sun tinted the peaks of the Snakehead Mountains in rainbow colors, then dipped suddenly from view, spreading black night over the countryside. Stars gleamed and a pale moon came out.

There was a short cut to Mendocino from the Big Hole country and the O Bar O, that saved miles of mountainous travel. That trail led through the deserted Gold Acre Mine tunnel. The Gold Acre Mine had long been abandoned, but cowmen used the bore as an underground short cut.

The sky ahead was tinged with red. Even the moon seemed cherry-colored. Brad's gray eyes slitted, as he pointed at the crimson heavens with a rope-seared forefinger. Something was burning over there. Old Dan saw the flaming sky and nodded.

Roweling their mustangs down a

long slope, they swirled around a shoulder of rock and came face to face with a blazing inferno.

Flames shot high into the sky, sending embers spurting upward like myriads of fireflies.

"It's the Gold Acre tunnel!" yelled old Dan.

Brad Dunning was already out of the saddle. Big-roweled spurs chimed as Brad's long legs fairly flew over the hard ground. His vest flapped in the breeze. Low-slung holstered .45s thudded against his bullhide chaps at each movement.

The strong odor of kerosene hung heavy in the hot, stifling air. Brad's spine chilled. The wind shifted suddenly, and he had a brief glimpse of a man's body in the flaming tunnel mouth.

The fire was eating into the rotten timbers as if they were match wood.

"Stay back!" howled old Dan, coming to a sliding halt.

The words were drowned out by the roar of the flames. Brad saw the prostrate fellow move his legs. He was still alive. Now the body was shut off from Brad's view by a cloud of black, swirling smoke that enveloped him like a shroud.

Choking and gasping, the tall buckaroo fought forward. Red tongues of fire licked out at him. A flaming ember lit on his shirt and set it afire. Brad slapped out the tiny blaze and charged on. His boots thudded against something soft and he nearly spilled into the fire. He bent down. His hand felt the outline of a man's head.

Groping blindly, Brad sank his fingers into the hombre's coat collar and dragged the limp form toward safety. Smoke burned Brad's eyes. Sweat oozed from every pore of his body.

There was a crashing roar behind. Flames and smoke blasted out of

the entrance, as part of the tunnel caved in. Brad's skin felt as if it was about to crack open from the furnacelike heat.

Staggering weakly, he hauled the body into the cool night air. Old Dan bounded out of the shadows and together they carried the man to a nest of sheltering boulders and laid him on the ground.

Gasping air into his tortured lungs, Brad wiped a hand across his grimy, smoke-blackened features. Old Dan bent over the rescued hombre. Suddenly he whirled.

"It's Sam Morrison, the Wells Fargo agent in Mendocino!" he barked.

Instantly Brad forgot his reeling brain and burning eyes. He dropped to both knees. The smoky tunnel had kept him from recognizing the man before. Sam was badly wounded. His shirt front was crimson-stained.

Sam's leathery face was twisted in pain. He told his story in short, jerky sentences as Brad and Dan Casson bandaged the wound.

Luke Casson had been in the Wells Fargo office arranging for the O Bar O pay roll for the following week. Hammer Jafe and his crew had come, killed two guards, and got the five-thousand-dollar mine pay roll.

They had brought Morrison along as a shield, plugged him and left him to die. Jafe had thrown kerosene on the tunnel timbers and set them afire to foil the posse that had trailed him.

"What happened to Luke?" demanded old Dan breathlessly. "Did they hurt him?"

"Jafe kidnaped him! Holdin' him for ten thousand dollars ransom," gasped Morrison weakly.

"What?" cried old Dan Casson. "Kidnaped my boy—Luke?"

Morrison nodded. "Jafe left word in town—ten thousand or he kills Luke. Jafe headed for Gunsmoke with the kid."

Brad jerked erect. There was a grim, stern cast to his sandstone-colored features. His big mouth was compressed into a firm line, as he whirled on Dan Casson.

"Take Morrison to town an' git him to a sawbones," he rapped out. "I'm goin' to Gunsmoke—alone."

## II.

Old Dan Casson's seamed and wrinkled face whitened. His faded eyes blazed as he grabbed Brad Dunning by the arm.

"I'm goin', too!" he barked. "Luke is up there. He ain't my real son, but I think the world of him. I don't want nothin' to happen to the kid. I'm——"

"Morrison'll die if yuh don't git him to town," growled Brad. "Don't send a posse. This is a one-man job. If riders try to git to Gunsmoke they'll be picked off like flies from the rocks. One man has more of a chance."

Vaulting into the saddle, Brad wheeled his bronc around and dashed away in the direction of the Big Hole country and Gunsmoke.

"I'm payin' the ten thousand and——"

Old Dan Casson's words were lost to the cowboy's ears as his big horse lengthened out in a mile-eating gallop.

For three hours, Brad Dunning hit the trail. His tired mustang kept doggedly on. Brad halted and washed the smoke streaks from his face in a pool of brackish water. After hiding his deputy badge under a rock, he forked the cayuse and pounded leather once more.

No badge-toter had ever entered

Gunsmoke and lived. But Brad was prepared. In his saddlebag he carried something which he hoped would help him turn the trick.

The sun had been up an hour when he came upon a towering rock-walled barrier and saw the narrow gulch that marked the entrance to Gunsmoke.

Brad was glad he hadn't been a deputy long enough for Jafe to know him. If only Hammer fell for the thing he toted.

Looking up, the buckaroo saw a thin column of black smoke spurt up twice and then vanish.

"Signals," growled Brad. "The lookout's sendin' Hammer word that a hard-ridin' hombre is headin' fer Gunsmoke."

Minutes later, Brad entered the rocky pass. Every nerve in his body was keyed to the danger that he knew lurked somewhere before him. Through alert gray eyes he watched for signs of ambush. His rope-burned right hand was crooked over the butt of his big Colt. Any instant a rifle bullet might slam into him.

Towering boulders partly blocked the trail, allowing only enough room for a horse and rider to squeeze through.

Brad was just urging his bronc around a rocky bend in the trail, when he suddenly found himself staring into the gaping muzzles of two Colts. He saw a lump-jawed hombre, with a narrow, knifelike face sitting in the saddle of an iron gray. The fellow's lips peeled back in a sneer of triumph.

Brad wasn't startled. He had been expecting something like this. Knowing he had to bluff and bluff desperately, he relaxed into a lazy, indifferent manner.

"Insultin' way to greet an' hombre I calls it," he drawled. "How

come Hammer ain't here with a brass band?"

The gunman's cold, lifeless eyes narrowed. He spurred his cayuse within two feet of the deputy.

"Save yore lip," he snarled. "I got orders to plug yuh, whether yore a lawman or an owl-hooter. It don't make no difference. Say yore prayers!"

Brad's pulse quickened, but the lazy smile never left his tanned features. His gray eyes turned as hard as the granite walls which surrounded them. He saw the killer's calloused thumbs snap back the gun hammers and heard the *click-click* as the weapons came to full cock.

Driving in the spurs, Brad ducked low in the saddle. The calico snorted and crashed into the iron gray. Screaming lead sizzled over the spot where the buckaroo had just been.

The canyon rumbled with gun-blast echoes. Brad's right hand came up, Colt-filled. The deputy saw the startled look on the hombre's thin face. Both horses were rearing and plunging in fright. The outlaw swung around to level his Colts again.

*Wham!* Brad's six-gun roared.

Lead and smoke leaped from the muzzle. The bandit's body jolted from the impact of the slug. He weaved drunkenly, then plunged head-first into the dusty trail, arms outflung. Crimson from a bullet hole in his forehead, dyed the alakali where he lay.

As his Colt exploded, Brad ducked the calico behind high boulders and waited. Minutes passed by. No one appeared. Evidently the dead jasper had been the only lookout.

Dismounting, Brad reloaded his hot gun and walked to the body. A quick search revealed nothing. Hoisting the dead bandit over the

saddle of the iron gray, Brad tied it with a lariat. Then he forked his cayuse and continued on his way, leading the other mustang and its gruesome burden.

He could have hidden the body, but the lookout would be missed. Being a stranger, Brad would be suspected and shot down without a chance. By riding boldly into Gunsmoke with the dead man, he might be able to bluff his way through and rescue Luke Casson.

"By them smoke signals, Hammer knew somebody was comin'," said the deputy to himself. "If he heard the shots he probably figures his guard kilt the feller."

Two miles of tortuous, twisting trail brought Brad Dunning to a little knoll. Down the slope in front of him nestled Gunsmoke town—a cluster of broad shacks. There was one two-story building. Brad guessed this to be the saloon.

Straight up the main street trotted Brad Dunning. The body on the trailing mustang jolted with every movement. There was a heavy, deathlike silence in the air. Saddled mustangs, at the hitch racks, switched bothersome flies with broomy tails.

Brad Dunning's faded blue shirt was ringing wet with sweat. Alkali dust coated his bronzed features. He took a last look at the pale sky and hitched his .45s forward to a better position.

If he could pass himself off as an outlaw and get into Hammer Jafe's confidence, he would stand a chance of freeing Luke and breaking up the gang, once and for all.

As Brad came abreast of the two-story wooden building, he heard a shout. Booted feet thundered on the board floor. Hard-faced, double-gunned men poured through the

batwings and down the rickety steps like a wave.

Sunlight glinted on naked Colt muzzles. A hulking giant, with a matted beard that dribbled down over a greasy shirt, led the pack. Little pig eyes gleamed on either side of a huge lumpy nose. His dirty clothes flapped in the breeze as he moved with the lumbering gait of a grizzly. Brad knew him to be Hammer Jafe.

Like wolves surrounding a steer, the killers swirled around Brad Dunning. Some of them tore at the ropes that bound the dead lookout's body to his mustang.

Apparently unmoved, Brad eyed the circle of leering faces that peered at him over gun sights. He was running the desperate chance that one of them might recognize him.

Making no move to draw, Brad saw the gunmen flop the dead body down in the alkali dust. Hammer Jafe took one look at the crimson face of the hombre and whirled on Brad.

"Yuh shot Mitch down without a chance!" he boomed. "Mitch signaled me yuh was comin'. He's fast enough on the trigger to take care o' you. But yuh bushwhacked him, yuh snoopin' coyote!" He turned to a runty, bow-legged gent. "Lafe, go over and take Mitch's place."

Hammer Jafe's round face twisted in a snarl. He jerked a thumb at Brad Dunning.

"Git out o' that saddle," he growled.

### III.

Brad Dunning's granite features relaxed into a grin, as he dropped to the dusty ground. His nimble brain was working like lightning.

"If I dry-gulched Mitch," he drawled. "How come I was close enough to plug him in the forehead



an' scorch his hide with powder burns?"

Hammer wheeled around and glanced at the dead hombre. He saw the gaping hole and noted the blue powder marks on the lookout's face. The outlaws looked from Mitch to the buckaroo, unbelief written on their dirty faces.

A tall, bean-pole jasper with a silver-banded Stetson pulled low over pin-point eyes, edged through the crowd. He fingered his long nose thoughtfully as he glared at Brad.

"Exceptin' me an' you, Hammer, Mitch was the fastest gunman in our outfit," he grumbled. "This gent is pizen with a smoke-pole to be able to beat him."

"Yo're right, Spade," agreed Hammer turning to Brad. "What's yore name? Where do yuh hail from?"

Brad tilted his Stetson back from sun-tinged brown hair.

"Where I come from it ain't healthy to ask them questions," he said softly.

Hammer Jafe's little eyes flipped open in surprise, then narrowed again. The long-nosed "Spade" stepped to Hammer's side.

"Better plug him," he snapped. "Might be a lawman."

"Keep out o' this, Trent!" flared Hammer. "I'm boss around here! If he's a lawman, we'll danged soon find out! Search him!"

Hands seized Brad from behind and his guns were taken. One bandit searched his pockets. There was nothing there but a roll of greenbacks. Brad jerked them out of the hombre's hands and calmly stuck them back in his pants.

An outlaw, fumbling through Brad's saddlebags gave a whoop of surprise. He held a circular in his hand.

"Look here!" he cried, as he ran from Brad's horse to Hammer. "This hombre's wanted! I found this in his bag!"

Hammer slowly read the paper.

"Wanted fer murder, Gunner Mexton, six feet tall, gray eyes, brown hair——" Hammer squinted at Brad Dunning. "So yo're Gunner Mexton, eh? This description fits yuh all right, feller. Where'd yuh do yore killin'?"

"I told yuh I don't answer questions," Brad informed him crisply. "If yo're as tough as folks say, me an' you kin do business."

Hammer allowed a grin to cross his broken-nosed face. He took another look at the wanted notice and passed it among his crew. Hammer didn't know that Brad had gone through a pile of circulars in the sheriff's office, two days before, until he found one that fitted him.

Hammer turned as if to walk away, then whirled, both hands gun-filled.

"Gunner Mexton or Sandy Claus, I don't give a hoot!" he flashed. "I'm killin' yuh!"

Staring calmly into the muzzles of those deadly weapons, Brad tugged the makin's from his vest pocket and rolled a quiry. His hands were steady as rocks, as his gray eyes bored into Hammer's agate ones.

The buckaroo could almost feel those tearing slugs from Hammer's Colts smash into his body. Any instant, there would be a gun roar and life would be blasted from his body. But there was a tantalizing grin on his granite face.

Then Brad saw Hammer throw back his head and roar with laughter. Jafe's twin six-guns slid back into leather.

"I was testin' yuh out!" he chortled. "Yo're a man! Give him

back his irons, boys. Come on, have a drink!"

"I don't drink," drawled Brad, "but I don't mind watchin' you."

Boots thumped on the board steps, as the gun hawks trooped into the saloon.

It was a low-ceilinged place. Tables and chairs were scattered over the warped floor. A scarred and dusty bar ran along one end of the room. The mirror over the backbar had been shattered by bullets. Stairs at the rear went to the upper floor.

"I wonder if Luke Casson's held prisoner up there," Brad thought. "If I kin git to him, between the two of us, we'll be able to blast our way out. Providin' we're lucky."

Hammer plopped his heavy body into a chair and beckoned for Brad to sit down. With his Colts back in their holsters, Brad was more confident. He sat opposite Hammer. The bandit boss called for whisky. One of the outlaws brought a deck of greasy cards and some poker chips.

Brad Dunning hauled out his roll of greenbacks and bought into the game. His ears were alert to catch some carelessly dropped word that might give him a clew to Luke's prison.

Gunsmoke was a ghost town, uninhabited for years, only recently taken over by Hammer Jafe and his crew.

The killers ringed around the table, watching the two men play. Hammer and the rest were sizing Brad up. They liked him. Every one did.

But Brad Dunning felt as if the close-packed bandits were the steel jaws of a huge trap, ready to snap closed on him if he made one false move.

The game went on for two hours.

Brad had been losing steadily, letting Hammer win to get him in a good humor. The hulking leader emptied one whisky bottle and a half of another.

"How about jinin' up?" asked Hammer thickly.

Brad Dunning leaned back in his squeaky chair and eyed the killer over the tops of his cards. His gray eyes bored into Hammer's liquor-flushed features.

"Naw. Yuh don't pull enough jobs fer me," he said finally. "I need *dinero*—big money."

Hammer roared with laughter and slapped his heavy hand on the table so hard that the poker chips spilled to the floor. Fishing in his pocket he brought out a huge roll of currency and shoved it toward the buckaroo.

"Let's see yuh match that," he rumbled. "I didn't git it punchin' cattle at thirty dollars per."

Brad felt a thrill of triumph. This was the Mendocino loot. He still had a chance to get it back.

Spade Trent nudged Hammer and growled something in a low voice.

"Shut up!" bawled Hammer drunkenly, half rising out of his chair. "I do the talkin' fer this outfit! If this hombre's a double-crosser, he won't git out o' Gunsmoke. Don't think I'm fool enough to give him free rein till we know more about him."

Boots sounded overhead. Hammer's attention shifted in that direction.

"Spade, go tell our *guest* that I want him down here," he ordered. "He's been sleepin' long enough. That little canter we took yesterday plumb tuckered him out. Git him down here, pronto!"

Spade Trent's little eyes glowed angrily.

"Careful boss," he objected. "This Gunner Mexton ain't proved himself yet."

With a savage snarl, Hammer Jafe made a move toward his guns. Spade hastily turned around and walked up the stairs.

Brad wondered if he was going to get Luke Casson. Who else could be the "guest" Hammer referred to?

Spurs dragged on the floor above. Brad sat tensed as a coiled spring. His pulse raced wildly. He waited as boots rapped on the wooden steps. Two men descended. The young deputy prayed that Luke wouldn't show surprise when they met. Their lives depended on it.

A pale-faced, flashy-dressed hombre turned from the stairway and walked toward the poker table. Spade Trent was by his side.

Brad sat as if rooted to his chair seat. He saw Luke's sleepy black eyes sweep the faces of the killers. He must tip him off not to show his hand. Brad caught Luke's glance, winked knowingly, and shook his head slightly.

Luke's features turned crimson. His mouth popped open as he pointed a skinny finger straight at Brad Dunning.

"Cover that gent!" he yelled. "He's a lawman!"

Utter amazement and momentary disbelief at Luke's words slowed Brad down. But only for an instant. Chairs crashed to the floor. Lunging backward, Brad pawed both Colts from their holsters. Bullets screamed across the saloon, smashing bottles and splintering into woodwork as the killers opened up.

Brad triggered his .45s. Through a haze of powder smoke, the cowboy saw two bandits take his slugs. One hombre wheeled around and

jackknifed to the floor. The other clutched at his throat and spilled over a table.

Above the roar of his six-guns, sounded Hammer Jafe's bellowing oaths.

Brad was swinging his smoking weapons around to level on the hulking hombre. He heard a sound behind. Before the deputy could turn, something smashed against his head.

Partially stunned, Brad went to his knees. He felt his guns yanked from his hands. The weight of bodies bore him to the floor. Then with a killer hanging onto each arm and gun muzzles prodding him in the back, he was yanked roughly to his feet.

Crimson fluid ran down over Brad's neck from the wound on his head. Then his brain cleared and he saw Luke Casson.

"I'm killin' yuh, Dunning," Luke snarled. "I'll teach yuh to bust up my game!"

Brad felt Casson's Colt barrel ram against his stomach. Hammer Jafe shoved forward.

"Wait a minute," he growled. "Afore yuh plug him, we got to find out what he knows. Mebbe yore plan's gone haywire. Mebbe yore old man got wise to our scheme."

Brad shook himself free of the jaspers who held his arms. There was a cold, deadly light in his gray eyes, as he faced old Dan Casson's adopted son.

"I know plenty," he rapped out. "Yuh got yoreself kidnaped by Hammer so's yuh could bleed old Dan out of ten thousand dollars. Alongside you, Hammer Jafe is a angel sportin' ten-foot wings an' a gold harp, yuh dirty snake!"

Luke's open left hand cracked against the side of Brad's jaw. The blow stung, but the cowboy didn't

flinch. Hot rage consumed him, but he had to hold his temper. He was in a tight fix. Luke's gun jabbed against his belt buckle.

Hammer did not offer to interfere. The killer boss glanced from the two dead bandits on the floor to Brad Dunning. Then he turned on Luke Casson.

"Yuh blunderin' fool!" he raged. "Why didn't yuh tell me about this deputy?"

"I didn't think he'd bother us," asserted Luke hotly. "I sent him away to Panther Canyon on a wild-goose chase. He seen me watchin' yuh ride over by Eagle Basin, but I didn't think he got wise."

Boots pounded on the saloon porch. A panting outlaw burst through the batwing doors.

"Lafe jist sent signals!" he yelled. "Dan Casson's leadin' a posse in from Mendocino!"

The frame building shook as the bandits charged across the big room. A packing box filled with Winchesters, Colts and ammunition was on the floor in one corner. All was confusion as the killers yanked out weapons, loaded them and barged outside. Spade remained.

A thrill of hope shot through Brad, then quickly died. Ten possemen. The deputy groaned. They would be gun fodder for Hammer's crew.

Brad saw Hammer approaching with a pair of rusty handcuffs. He knocked Luke Casson aside and clicked the manacles on Brad's wrists.

"I took these offn the last badgetoter that come to Gunsmoke," he jeered. "I ain't killin' yuh now. I'm usin' yuh fer a decoy when we rob the El Cortez Mine after we bullet-riddle yore pards." He turned to a tall, sandy-whiskered

hombre. "Jess, you guard this jasper. Come on!"

Luke Casson, his thin lips twitching, grabbed Hammer's arm.

"Yuh ain't killin' old Dan, are yuh?" he cried. "Jist scare 'em away. We'll be tossin' ten thousand dollars out o' the window if yuh don't."

Hammer's ugly features twisted in a snarl of anger.

"I've had enough of you!" he flared. "Yo're plan's gone haywire now. Yuh ain't no good to me no more! I'm thinkin' of our hides now! To blazes with the ten thousand!"

Luke dropped a hand to his gun, as Hammer turned his back. He didn't see Spade Trent flip out his Colt. There was a deafening roar. Brad's warning cry came too late.

Luke screamed, took a few staggery steps and dropped like a sack of meal. Without a second glance at the dead man, Spade and Hammer raced outside.

Brad listened for sounds of the bandits mounting. He heard them running on foot up the road. He knew they had not gone far.

Brad's brain was groping desperately for some plan of escape. He had to save old Dan and the posse from death. Dropping into a chair, Brad glanced at the dead body of Luke.

"The old man's riskin' his hide to save that rat!" he growled.

#### IV.

Brad drew his chair to the poker table and picked up the deck of cards. Jess, the red-bearded guard watched him suspiciously, then walked over and sat across the table from the rannihan, holding a cocked Colt in his hand.



"I'll split yore skull with a .45 slug if yuh try anything," he rapped out.

Brad only grinned and dealt himself a solitaire hand. He played in silence. He knew it would be several minutes before Casson and the posse came under Hammer's guns. Jess became interested in the game.

"Hey, play yore black queen on yore red king!" he said.

Brad looked up at the killer's whiskery face. The deputy's eyes slitted.

"I played this game afore you got out o' short pants," he growled.

Jess's thin mouth twisted in a snarl, but said nothing. He watched every play that Brad made.

A scheme was forming in the buckaroo's brain. Deliberately he misplayed, time after time. Finally Jess could stand it no longer.

"Yuh lunkhead!" he jeered. "Yore cranium's packed with sawdust." He pointed toward a card. "Play that black three on the red four."

Brad glanced up, apparent astonishment written on his tanned face.

"Huh?" he blurted.

"There!" snapped Jess, reaching across the table top.

His grimy hand picked up the black three.

Brad's manacled hands seized the bandit's wrist in a grip of steel and yanked him over the table top. Poker chips spilled to the floor. The table crashed and both men fell to the boards in a tangled heap.

*Wham!* Jess's Colt exploded.

The hot slug nicked Brad's ear. The fall had broken Brad's grip. Like a springing cougar he dived on the red-bearded gunman. Again the weapon roared, but this time the bullet plunked into the ceiling as

Brad kicked the gun out of the killer's hand.

Fighting desperately, Brad suddenly released all holds. His hands came up over his head and crashed down. The metal links of the manacles crunched against Jess's skull. The killer groaned and slumped over, unconscious.

Brad had no key to unfasten the handcuffs. There was no time. Men's lives hung in the balance. Sprinting across the floor, he reached the big packing box. He hauled out six-guns and Winchesters. Quickly he loaded them.

Sticking the short guns into his waistband, he gathered the rifles in his manacled arms and raced through the doors, out onto the dusty street.

At a lumbering run Brad moved toward a rocky ridge. Sweat poured from his body. His arms ached from the heavy load. It was tough going in his high-heeled boots.

He reached the high spot and halted. Looking down the rocky pass he saw Dan Casson leading the little band of grim-faced possemen. Above him, Brad could see Hammer Jafe's killers lurking behind boulders and trees. A steep dirt bank sloped off behind him.

Suddenly Spade Trent spotted the deputy. He yelled a sharp warning and squeezed trigger.

Brad felt the slug zip through his hair. The killers were opening up. Bullets droned dangerously close to him. Steadying a .30-30 awkwardly against a rock, Brad fired.

Crimson bubbled over Spade's shirt front. He tried to grab at a rock for support, then with an agonizing scream plunged down into the pass below.

Dan Casson and his men broke for shelter and blasted a withering

bullet hail at the bandits, but the owl-hooters were protected by rocks.

As fast as he emptied a rifle, Brad cast it aside and used another. Slug after slug he poured at Hammer's killers. 30-30 death churned into the outlaw ranks. Like dry grass before a fire, they wilted under Brad's accurate fire.

Men dropped in death; others grabbed wounded limbs and rolled on the ground, howling in pain.

Through the gun fog, Brad saw Hammer Jafe suddenly appear before him. The killer boss had worked around behind in the confusion.

Whirling, Brad tried to bring a rifle into play. His foot slipped on the loose ground. Desperately Brad tried to regain his balance, then fell down the dirt bank.

His body bounded like a rolling log. Over and over he turned. With a sickening thud he came to a stop against a rock. The breath was knocked from his body. Through aching eyes, he looked upward.

Hammer Jafe's black-bearded face leered down at him triumphantly from the edge of the bank. Two smoking Colts were gripped in his hands.

"Yuh busted my gang, but yuh didn't git me!" he jeered. "I'm killin' yuh!"

Brad Dunning's calloused right hand flew to one of the six-guns in

his belt. The trigger caught on his shirt. Hammer fired. Brad jerked aside. Slugs dug into the dirt all around.

Brad got painfully to his knees. A bullet smashed his left shoulder knocking him flat again. His manacled hands hampered him. After age-long seconds, he ripped the Colt out. He thumbed the .45.

Hammer was still shooting wildly, yelling at every shot. Brad's slug caught him in the throat.

Dimly Brad had a glimpse of Hammer staggering on the edge of the bank. The killer boss tried to pull up his Colts for a finishing shot. Then the life seemed to go out of his legs. Slowly he crumpled up and plunged end over end down the slope.

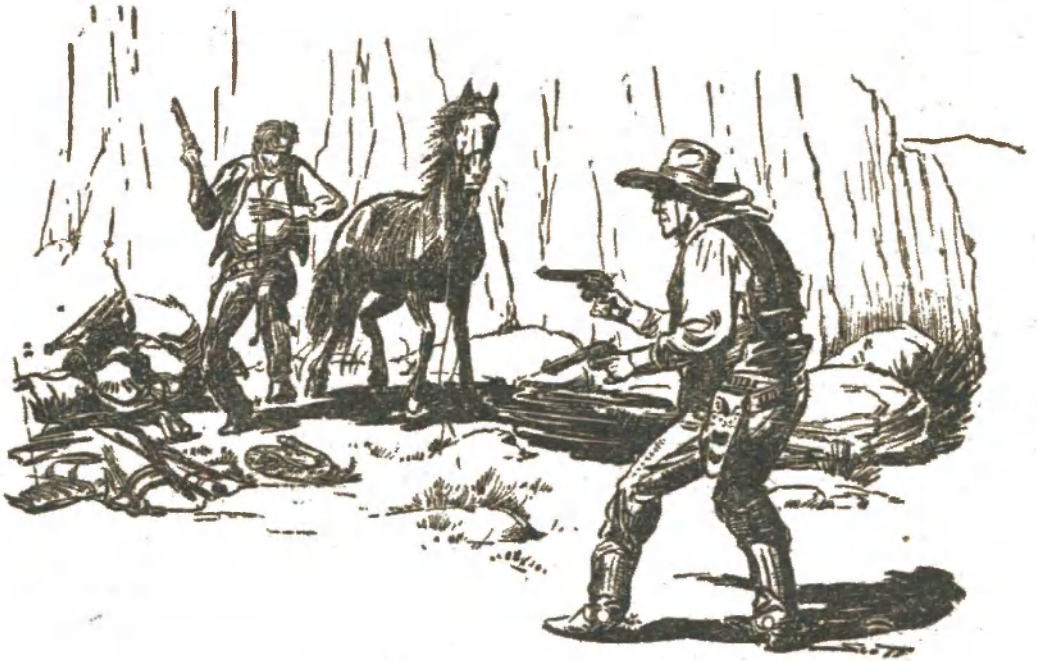
Then Brad knew no more.

When he came to, he found Dan Casson bending over him. The O Bar O owner was bandaging his wound. The cowboy looked up.

"I—I'm shore sorry about Luke," he said. "I——"

"One of the outlaws confessed everything," interrupted old Dan. "There wa'n't no good in Luke, but I was too blind to see it. But now I got to git yuh patched up. Yo're the deputy sheriff. There's five bandicks tied up down there a ways. It's yore job to see they git a fittin' an' proper hangin'."





# The Law Trails Jimmy Quick

By Frank J. Litchfield

Author of "Jimmy-Quick Horns In," etc.

**S**LATS" LITTLE hurriedly laid aside a dog-eared book entitled "One Thousand Things a Detective Should Know," and peered out at a rider who came into Agua Frio from the south.

The stranger might have attracted more notice had not most of the half hundred inhabitants of this little town on the rim of the Painted Desert been at siesta. But Deputy Sheriff Little, who had worn his new badge only three days, was wasting no time in mere slumber.

He strode to the dusty sidewalk in front of his flat-topped ten-by-ten office and energetically paced up and down, suspiciously eying the new arrival.

WW-4F

The big slim-barreled strawberry roan was single-footing proudly. Its coat gleamed like satin, and its white feet were unblemished by travel.

In contrast, its rider looked as if he had been rolled in the red dust of this region. His ragged jeans and old shirt were coated with it. It lay in ridges in the seams of his squashy, old boots.

His enormous hat had once been a violent shade of blue, but it was tattered and faded now. The gun belt that supported a brace of black-handled .45s pinched into a rather round stomach.

The rider seemed on the verge of sound sleep, for his short body was hunched and swaying drowsily. But

as he noted Deputy Little, his innocent blue eyes popped wide open.

He cuffed back his hat on his flame-red head and allowed his gaze to wander over the deputy's length a second time.

That was quite a trip. Counting three-inch boot heels, and a nine-inch hat crown, Slats Little soared exactly seven and a half feet above the dusty sidewalk. His skin-tight trousers, with broad vertical stripes of yellow, and his glaring red shirt, made him seem even taller. But he did not cast much of a shadow. Slats was thin and bony.

"Hi, yuh, Shorty," the arrival said in awe. "I bet it's cooler up there, huh?"

Deputy Little took a stride, arriving squarely in the path of the handsome horse. The animal reared and snorted.

"Steady, Socks," the rider said. "His ma must have kept him in out of the rain as a boy tuh avoid shrinkin'. He's human."

"A comedian, hey," Slats snarled in a squeaky, slender voice. He strode up and down, his long arms flapping. "Purty good hoss for a saddle bum, ain't it?"

The redhead sobered, and his eyes wandered on to the only livery corral in this shabby settlement. Among the half dozen animals yarded there, he marked a big, hog-backed dun, rangy and powerful.

For two weeks Jimmy Quick, a sergeant in the Arizona Rangers, had been dogging the wandering path of that dun horse over most of the territory.

He yawned widely. "Stand still a minute, so I can focus my eyes on yuh," he advised the pacing deputy. "Oh, yeah! I spot your badge now. You're the law here, I reckon."

Deputy Little's lean chest expanded somewhat. "Correct. Dep-

uty Simpson Sylvester Little. That's my handle."

"Simp for short, I take it," Jimmy drawled.

"Slats to my friends, dog-gone it," the deputy gurgled, his Adam's apple scaling up and down his lengthy windpipe. "Let's see yore bill o' sale for that horse."

Now there were urgent reasons why Jimmy did not want to be seen talking with a lawman, even such a greenhorn as this human windmill. Two months before, five men had looted a bank in Bisbee, a copper town near the border, of thirty thousand dollars. The major part of the haul had been new ten-dollar bills, whose serial numbers were known to the Rangers.

Some of this stolen money had finally appeared in circulation, and Jimmy had picked up the trail of the rider of the dun horse, who was cashing the bills as he wandered from town to town.

Jimmy had been following patiently, refraining from making an arrest because he believed his quarry would eventually lead him to the other four members of the gang.

Even now he saw his man—stocky, roughly clad, wearing a stubble of black beard—appear from the door of a dobe barroom a short distance away and stand watching.

"You don't figure I stole this horse, do yuh, deputy?" Jimmy whined surlily, his hands sliding nearer his guns. "You got any proof? Where's yore warrant?"

Slats Little was somewhat awed by the mention of a warrant. He had been reading law books, too, and was impressed by the frequent mention of constitutional rights. He considered a moment. Then he fixed the redhead with what he believed was a piercing gaze.

"I ain't accusin' you yet," he said

darkly. "But I'm keepin' an eye on you. Savvy? Agua Frio is goin' to be a hot spot for hombres that skate outside the law from now on."

Then he stepped aside. Deputy Little had not been in the least awed by the redhead's pair of guns, for he packed two sixes himself, ornate, nickel-plated .45s of enormous size. But he had decided that this redhead was no ordinary horse thief.

No doubt he was heading into the Painted Desert to join up with some of the outlaw bands that hid out there. The long deputy made up his mind to trail this suspicious-looking cuss.

Puzzled by Deputy Little's change of front, but relieved, Jimmy rode on to the corral and put up his horse. He decided that the animated beanpole had wilted at the prospect of gun play. The redhead sniffed contemptuously.

"All height an' no brains or nerve," he tagged the tall one. "They must have made him deputy here to git rid of him. This town ain't big enough tuh rate a deputy's office."

Jimmy lugged his war sack to the ramshackle, single-story hotel, which was propped with cedar poles on the east side to avoid total collapse. He discovered that his quarry was also a guest here, registered under the name of Jack Allen.

Once in his room, Jimmy drew out a money belt and hid it under the mattress on the sagging bed. It contained a dozen of the bills stolen from the Bisbee bank. The redhead had collected them as evidence along the route after 'Jack Allen' cashed them. Jimmy did not want them on him in case Deputy Little took it into his head to arrest him as a horse thief.

He washed up, changed to a clean

shirt, and went out to find a meal in a dingy beanery. Darkness came while he ate.

Later, he toured the four shabby little bars, discovering Jack Allen in one. He watched his man closely, but Allen only gave him a measuring glance and showed no further interest.

Satisfied that Allen was unaware of pursuit, Jimmy wandered back to his room, a real yawn opening a gap in his round face.

"That pelican is headin' into the Painted Desert to-morrow," he told himself grimly. "His bunch likely is holed out in there. If so, it means I got to stick closer than a leech to him from now on, or I'll lose him in that maze."

He wearily dragged off his boots. Then he thought to look for his money belt. He peeled back the mattress, bent closer, and his red shock of hair nearly stood on end.

"Gone!" he said dazedly.

His first thought was that Jack Allen had suspected him after all. Jimmy went taut, his guns streaking into his hands. But, after peering around and listening, his fears subsided.

"If Allen was hep to me, I'd have been plugged from the dark," he decided. "It must have been some sneak thief. Well, he'll run into misery when he tries to spend that hot money."

## H.

Jimmy was still disgruntled as he went to breakfast shortly after sun-up. He met Deputy Slats Little in the beanery.

Slats seemed bright and lively. He was not even quiet while sitting at the counter. His long fingers drummed the counter, and his head bobbed continually on his thin neck like a nervous bird.



"Don't yuh ever sleep, or can't you find room tuh lay down?" Jimmy observed sourly.

"Sleep wastes time," Deputy Little said meaningly, as he ran a sleeve over his star, removing an imperceptible speck of dust.

While Jimmy was eating, he saw Jack Allen stride to the corral with his bed roll and saddle the big dun. Jimmy bolted his breakfast as his quarry headed out the dim trail which skirted the southern rim of the Painted Desert. Then the redhead arose, hitching up his belt for the task ahead.

"You pullin' out?" Deputy Little squeaked. "I hope yo're a long time gone."

Jimmy did not want to lose sight of his man now that he believed the final leg of the chase was at hand. He yawned, but his boots scuffed dust as he made for the hotel, where he rolled his tarp and hustled to the corral. Soon he was riding the rude trail that swung among junipers beyond town.

After a mile, he emerged from the trees, and sighted his man, a mere dot ahead. Jimmy groaned. His fears were confirmed. The outlaw had left the trail and was striking northward toward the mangled region that rolled endlessly away to the horizon.

Jimmy had never been in that stretch of desolation which, for want of a better name, was called the Painted Desert, but other Rangers had spun tales of men who had gone into it and never found their way back.

This was no flat desert of sand, cactus, and mesquite, such as Jimmy had often been in in southern Arizona. It looked like mountains had been squashed and torn asunder. It was a billowing chaos of shattered rock and tremendous distances, of

lava mountains and red-walled gorges, of mineral-colored hills, bare of vegetation, and of gullies choked with thorned thickets.

"We're in for it, Socks!" Jimmy gritted, as he turned the roan toward that menacing land. "If he spots us, he'll stake out and coulee us. There are a hundred spots every mile where he can do it. But we got to keep him in sight, or we'll lose him. This ain't a desert. It's a jig-saw puzzle."

The first two hours gave the redhead a taste of what he was in for. The outlaw followed a long, crooked draw between ridges of shattered red rock.

By staying below the opposite north rim, the redhead kept him in sight. But it was fearful going. Within an hour, sweat streaked both horse and man. Half the time, Jimmy labored on foot, helping the animal.

But that was easy, compared to what followed. The outlaw finally crossed a ridge of lava. When the redhead reached the summit he groaned. Ahead lay a gloomy, gray-blue sea of gorges and wind-carved ridges. His man had vanished, leaving no trail on the flinty lava slant that led down to it.

The redhead toiled on, keeping to the ragged ridges in the hope he would sight his man again. He delved for miles into the gorges. At last, with the sun halfway down the western sky, he paused and looked around, realizing his true peril.

"I wonder if I can find my way out o' this?" he muttered.

Already his canteen was low. Though the sun did not seem to have the power of the lower desert, yet its reflection from these barren surfaces had parched his body.

He stood there grimly debating whether to turn back. Then he saw

a flight of buzzards rise a mile away in an air line and wheel excitedly in the sky. Jimmy's freckled face lighted. He even yawned elatedly. Something had startled those black birds from their carrion.

He marked the spot and toiled to it. That required an hour of fearful exertion. But he was rewarded. In a gorge where lay the carcass of a starved coyote, he found tracks of the dun in sand that had weathered from the walls.

Toward dusk, from a ridge, he spotted a camp fire far ahead.

"He's spread his tarp for the night," he told Socks grimly. "We was lucky, thanks to the buzzards. But we can't go another day like this. We'd lose him sure. We got to think of something better than sight trailin'."

The shrill buzz of a rattlesnake sounded near by, and the horse instinctively reared. That sinister warning had sounded in their ears often during the day. Rattlesnakes, buzzards. These were the trademarks of this land.

Jimmy killed the snake with a rock and rode on. Then, he abruptly stopped the horse, and sat frowning a moment. Finally he came back. Despite Socks's objections he bent from the saddle, and tossed the three-foot carcass of the diamond-back over the horn.

"I got an idea that rattler might save us plenty of trouble to-morrow," he told the horse.

After another mile, he sighted the fire again. The outlaw had camped at the base of a high cliff. Socks muzzled the breeze, scenting water. Evidently the outlaw had bedded down near a spring.

Jimmy gave the horse all that remained in the canteen.

"That'll have to hold you till day-break," he said regretfully. "Then

we'll move in on him, us an' the dead rattler. Right now we're makin' a dry camp."

Gray dawn stole down the face of the cliff, glinted on the little pool of cold water that seeped from its base, and revealed the sleeping outlaw. As the light strengthened he began to stir and hunch deeper into his soogans. He fumbled to draw the tarp back over the saddle which he had placed at his head as a wind-breaker.

Then a six-gun roared, the report smashing heavily against the cliff. The outlaw came from his bed with a snort, his hard eyes glittering and fully awake, a Colt already in his hand.

He crouched. First, he saw a cold, mottled coil almost at his feet. He leaped back with a gasp of horror. Then he discovered a stocky figure twenty feet away, six-guns aimed at him.

"Steady, amigo!" Jimmy Quick said harshly. "You had a bunk mate that was gettin' riled up as you moved around. I don't like to see anybody die that way—not even a sneakin' law Johnny."

The outlaw stared from Jimmy to the snake, then back again. Relief and gratitude glinted in his hard eyes.

"I'm shore obliged to yuh, stranger," he growled. "What was that you said about a law Johnny? I ain't no——"

"Lay thet gun down slow an' easy," Jimmy spat. "Then back away. You hear me?"

The outlaw obeyed willingly. "Say, yo're the hombre that made that long-legged dep'ty back water in Agua Frio," he said. "Now, listen——"

"Shut up!" Jimmy spat. "Turn around! I aim to frisk you."

Jimmy explored his pockets. The only thing of interest was a wallet. It contained a thick wad of money. A few of the bills were ten-dollar notes that had been taken from the Bisbee bank. The remainder were ones and fives.

"Hm-m-m," Jimmy muttered. "I never knew a badge-toter that carried dinero of this size. Who are yuh, feller?"

The outlaw grinned, exposing sharp teeth. "Maybe you an' me are followin' the same line," he said. "You can call me Jack Allen."

Their eyes met meaningly. "You mean you're hidin' out?" Jimmy grinned a little.

The outlaw guffawed. "Waal, I might be," he admitted.

Jimmy tossed the wallet back. "I ain't takin' anything from you, then," he said. "Fact is, I had a hunch you really wasn't an officer, or I might not have popped that rattler."

"Shake, stranger!" the outlaw cried. "I shore owe you somethin'. Need grub? Water? You look peaked."

"I been wanderin' like a squirrel in a cage," Jimmy admitted, going to the pool and drinking heartily. "I'm new to this country. The Painted Desert, huh? The devil must 'a' painted it."

The grateful outlaw eyed him shrewdly. "How'd you like to hole up in a nice, comfortable camp where no John Law will ever bother yuh?" he asked.

"Keep talkin'," Jimmy chuckled. "You interest me."

Jack Allen waved northward. "By to-night, I'll be with some other good men that you'd cotton to," he explained. "Ever hear of Curly Yingling?"

Jimmy stared. "I sure have."

"Me an' Curly are jest like that,"

the outlaw said, holding up two fingers close together. "How'd you like to throw in with Curly?"

"That's been one of my biggest ambitions," Jimmy exclaimed.

"Shake ag'in," the outlaw grinned. "I'm Curly's best pal. Nevada Briggs is my real handle. Go get your bronc. You made a ten-strike when you saved my life, feller. You'll be rich one of these days. What's your name?"

"Call me Smitty." Jimmy winked.

### III.

Toward sundown they crossed a plateau where tracks of mountain lions, deer, and big grizzlies were numerous. Far to the northwest, Jimmy glimpsed a great, ragged gash in the land. The Grand Canyon of the Colorado. This was wild country, more awesome than even the Painted Desert which they had left behind.

"Nevada" Briggs led the way confidently over a rim and down ledge trails that overlooked blue depths. Then the horses corkscrewed a final rocky descent and came out on a narrow plateau that had not even been visible from the rim above. There they came on a camp of two rude shacks in the shade of shaggy cedar trees.

Their coming already was known, for four grim-eyed men stood with hands on hips, staring at them.

"Howdy, Nevada!" one, a heavy-bodied, big-jowled ruffian with a mop of black, greasy hair growled. "Who's this hombre?"

"Curly, this is Smitty," Nevada explained. "A good man. Wants to ride with us. He saved my life tuh-day."

"Curly" Yingling drew Nevada aside and they whispered for a time. Then the leader came back and

looked over Jimmy with a hard, dark gaze.

"What makes you think you can hold up your end, Smitty?" he asked suavely. "Yuh look like a sleepy kid to me."

Jimmy yawned. Then Curly Yingling blinked. In the redhead's freckled hands two guns had appeared. Jimmy grinned drowsily and sheathed the guns.

"I savvy," Yingling said with grudging admiration. "You ain't as sleepy as yuh look. All right. If Nevada speaks for yuh, that suits me. Stretch your picket line, feller."

But Jimmy knew that Curly Yingling was not accepting him so readily as he pretended. The outlaw leader was crafty and had intelligence. His granite face never revealed his thoughts, but Jimmy was aware of his close scrutiny during the evening while he sat with the outlaws around the dying cook fire.

After they turned in, Jimmy pretended to sleep, but remained wide awake for hours. He was elated by his success thus far. Now it was up to him to get the drop on them. That would not be easy, unless he managed to do it while they were separated.

One thing troubled him. Around his neck hung a buckskin sack containing a collection of law badges that he had gathered during half a dozen years of riding dangerous trails.

The redhead had grown somewhat superstitious about those badges. He figured that they brought him luck, and had been unable to leave them behind—even on this precarious venture. If Yingling decided to search him—

Well, there was no chance to cache the sack now. He lay there until midnight. Then, convinced that

Yingling was really asleep, he finally closed his eyes also, and slumbered soundly.

They were eating a breakfast of venison, biscuits, and coffee when suddenly every man came to his feet, looking at each other with hard, questioning eyes.

Far in the distance had sounded the bell-like bay of a dog. Yingling swore.

"Sneak up to the rim, Buzz," he ordered a runted, sharp-eyed ruffian. "Thet might only be some Navajo trailin' a bear. Then, ag'in'—"

His gaze shifted balefully to Jimmy. But he said no more.

"Buzz" scrambled up the trail to the rim on foot. They waited in silence. Then came a low whistle.

"Lone rider," Buzz called down. "With a hound on a lead rope. Half a mile away, an' workin' this way through the cedars. An' for Pete's sakes, he looks like a giraffe! Tallest jigger I ever seen in a saddle."

Jimmy had nearly forgotten Deputy Sheriff Simpson Sylvester Little. Recollection was a shock to him now. He gulped, then covered his dismay with a yawn, for Yingling was watching him.

"It's thet greenhorn deputy from Agua Frio, I bet my stack!" Nevada Briggs snarled. "How'd he track us here?"

"Do I salivate him?" the lookout above asked eagerly.

"Let him come in if he's alone," Yingling growled. "Keep out o' sight, Buzz. Take cover everybody."

Yingling crouched behind the same boulder that sheltered Jimmy. Nevada, near by, was still grumbling his amazement. After a time, the dog bayed on the rim above. Soon shod hoofs sounded on the ledge trail. Jimmy groaned inwardly.

"The jughead!" he thought bitterly. "Ridin' right into their hands, with a yammerin' dog to advertise him."

Then Deputy Little appeared. He rode a knobby-kneed horse of enormous height at the shoulders. The horse was as thin and lengthy as its rider. A mangy, flop-eared bear hound loped twenty feet ahead at the end of a whale line.

Sighting the camp, the dog sat down and lifted his voice in a mournful bay. The horse planted its feet, and Deputy Little suddenly fumbled frantically but clumsily for his shining pair of guns.

But Curly Yingling stepped out, .45s in his big fists. "Reach, yuh long-legged June bug," he spat, "for the sky!"

Slats Little scowled as every boulder seemed to disgorge whiskery men, who were grinning cheerlessly. Slowly his thin arms lifted.

"I'd have beat yuh to the draw if it had been an even break," he declared. "But you already had yore gun out, feller."

"Pile down!" Yingling rumbled. "How'd you git here? Talk while you've got a chance."

Slats's eyes fell on Jimmy. "Aha!" he squeaked triumphantly. "I had you tabbed right. I knowed you was an outlaw. You didn't realize you was dealin' with an officer what has plenty savvy, did yuh? Figured nobody could trail yuh across the Painted Desert. I showed you it could be done, didn't I?"

Jimmy was curious. "How'd you do it, Shorty?" he asked.

"My name is Little, Deputy Simpson S. Little," Slats reminded him with pride. "How'd I do it? Easy. I daubed bear grease on the hoofs of yore horse the other night in the Agua Frio corral. I had thought of that stunt long ago, but

never had a chance to use it before. Old Dynamite here can foller a bear-grease trail after a week. I trained him tuh do it."

"Well, I'm a pink-an'-purple gopher!" Jimmy said.

"Why did you trail him?" Curly Yingling demanded. "We're honest hunters."

Slats snorted derisively. "I know yuh, Yingling! Yore description is on file in my office. You an' your buddies stuck up a bank in Bisbee a couple months ago. I got the numbers of some of the bills you took. I found some of that hot money in this sleepy maverick's room in Agua Frio the other night. I——"

Curly Yingling had whirled, and now his gun muzzles were jammed against Jimmy. "What were *you* doin' with that money, Smitty—or whatever your name is?" he growled.

Jimmy yawned to cover the inner chill that gripped him. So that was who had robbed his room that night. This thick-witted greenhorn, who did not seem to realize his deadly peril.

"Can't think of a ready answer, eh?" Yingling scowled, stepping back a pace. "Search him, boys."

Nevada Briggs, his face black with sudden distrust, frisked Jimmy thoroughly. And out came the buckskin sack.

#### IV.

Yingling dumped the glittering contents on the ground. "Law badges!" he exclaimed.

After a moment, he looked up, his eyes glittering. He had been reading the inscription on a diamond-studded marshal's bar—a gift to Jimmy from grateful citizens of a town far away in Texas.

Yingling laughed sardonically. "Boys, meet Jimmy Quick!" he



grated. "Who'd ever have thought that the Ranger they call the 'Gun Hawk' would turn out to be a dumb, sleepy lout crazy enough tuh carry a bunch of tin badges when he comes to join up with us?"

Slats Little uttered a squeak of astonishment and stared at the redhead with bugging eyes.

"Jimmy Quick?" he exclaimed. "I've heerd of you. Why dag-gone yuh for a rattle-brained idiot. Why didn't yuh tell me in Agua Frio? You an' me, workin' together, would 'a' caught——"

"Aw, shut up!" Jimmy growled.

"He sure made a sucker out of me," Nevada Briggs snarled. "I bet he was trailin' me. Why, dern it, I bet that rattler was dead, an' he put it on my tarp the other day."

"Go to the head of the class, Nevada," Jimmy said sourly.

Briggs lifted his gun, swearing. But Yingling pushed it aside.

"Not now, Nevada," the leader said evilly. "We'll keep 'em alive a little while. Quick might have blazed his trail with somethin' besides bear grease. Maybe some more Rangers might drop in."

"What good are they alive?" Briggs objected.

"No posse is goin' to throw much lead our way if we have Quick with us, not to mention this other pelican," Yingling explained impatiently. "Now, tie 'em up! What are them things the giraffe has stickin' from his hip pocket—handcuffs? Cuff 'em together around a cedar tree where they can play ring-around-the-rosy."

The two prisoners were prodded to a cedar on the edge of camp. Using the two pairs of handcuffs the outlaws linked their wrists together on either side of the shaggy trunk, then backed away sneering and guffawing.

In that position, Jimmy and Slats Little stood face to face, with just enough leeway to move around and around the tree in a sidling position.

Jimmy jerked Slats toward him, then kicked him heartily.

"Yuh long drink of clabbered water!" he said. "I knew you was a jinx, the minute I saw yuh."

He backed away to the limit of the handcuffs. But he discovered he was not out of range of those long legs. Deputy Little curved a boot around the tree, and it almost lifted the redhead off his feet.

"Keep your fat feet to yourself!" Slats snarled. "If it wasn't for you I wouldn't be here."

That line of reasoning silenced Jimmy. He lapsed into sullen quiet. The sun hit them for a while, and they tugged and hauled for possession of the shade cast by the trunk. As the day advanced, the foliage protected them. But then came the gnats and flies. Also a few stray ants. Jimmy suffered in silence, but Slats continually gave voice to his discomfort.

Jimmy had racked his brain until it was numb, but no possible hope of escape from the handcuffs occurred to him.

The outlaws lolled around camp. From snatches of conversation, Jimmy gathered that they were preparing another foray on a bank in Lordsburg, New Mexico, in about a week.

"We got a week to live," Jimmy told his companion in misery. "But that's too long."

"If you hadn't been so durned dumb as tuh keep them badges——" Slats began.

Once more Jimmy kicked him. And once more he failed to evade the long reach of the boot that thudded on him in return.

Jimmy was forced to concede that

Slats Little, whatever his mental shortcomings, did not lack courage. The lengthy deputy snarled defiance at his captors, and returned taunt for taunt.

In fact, he was so lively with his everlasting energy, that Jimmy was unable to nap, though he tried valiantly, by bracing himself in a leaning position against the trunk.

"Stand still, darn yuh!" Jimmy finally snarled. "Can't you see I'm tryin' to ketch up on lost sleep?"

"You do the sleepin', and I'll do the thinkin'," Slats said biting. "Somebody has got to figure a way out o' this trap."

Darkness came. They were fed, eating awkwardly from plates that were placed on the ground within reach. That took practice, for they had to use their hands in unison.

It now dawned on Jimmy that they faced a death more horrible than that of a merciful bullet. A few days of this, and they would be driven mad.

Slats's long arms were of great advantage now, for they contrived to sit down and lean against the tree after darkness came. Thus they dozed through the night, awakening at regular intervals to scramble into new postures as stiffening muscles made protest.

At dawn, after what seemed a lifetime, Jimmy awakened from a troubled nap to find one of his companion's boots almost in his face. He indignantly began to shove it away. Then his fingers noted something hard, apparently imbedded in the soft top of the boot.

He delved, found a little pocket inside the boot, and drew out a key. A handcuff key!

"What's this?" he breathed, fiercely shaking Slats into wakefulness.

"What's what? Quit rattlin' me!"

"Keep your voice down, you ivory-head!" Jimmy whispered savagely. "This key? Does it fit either of these sets?"

"Dern me!" Slats said, snapping his fingers loudly. "In the excitement, I plumb forgot about that key. I learned that stunt from a book on how to be a detective. Give me that key. We'll be loose pronto. It'll open all these cuffs."

"I'll keep the key," Jimmy said in a choked voice, rearing erect. "You'd likely swaller it."

But at that moment, Curly Yingling awoke, sat up, glaring at them. Jimmy grunted a warning at Slats and relaxed, yawning. Yingling arose, approached and inspected the handcuffs suspiciously. But he missed the little key between Jimmy's short fingers.

Yingling went back and kicked the others out of their tarps. Jimmy groaned. It looked like they were in for another day of torture. If only he had found that key a few minutes sooner, they could have captured the outlaws in their beds.

But the redhead saw his chance while they were eating breakfast. Slats pushed his long arms around the tree, and Jimmy had room to use the key. The steel bands fell open.

"Stand quiet!" Jimmy warned. "Let the bracelets hang on. Wait until at least two of 'em are near us. Then we'll pile 'em, grab their hardware, an' shoot it out."

They waited an hour, and none of the outlaws approached. Nevada Briggs finally wandered toward them, grinning evilly.

"I'm goin' to scout around for a hornets' nest to-day, boys," he said. "I'll hang it right between yuh. Won't that be cute?"

Jimmy yawned and cast a warning glance at Slats to wait for a

better chance. Nevada packed only one gun.

But at that moment, a hairy, red, tree spider chose to come scaling down an invisible strand and make a landing on the tall deputy's forehead. Slats stood stock-still, fighting for composure, though Jimmy could see the repulsion in his eyes.

The spider, a harmless insect, but big and hideous, explored his eyebrows, then started on his nose.

Suddenly Slats's nerves cracked. "Wow!" he howled, and leaped back, the handcuffs falling to the ground. He cuffed the spider from his face with a wild swing.

Nevada stood petrified for a split second. In that instant, Jimmy leaped desperately at him. Nevada started a startled backward step with an oath, reaching for his gun.

*Wham!* Jimmy's fist buried itself in Nevada's paunch.

The blow doubled the outlaw like a rag doll, and he went down, wheezing in agony.

Jimmy's freckled hand jerked the .45 from the holster as its owner fell.

The four outlaws in camp had come to their feet. Curly Yingling's brace of six-guns were already in his hands.

Jimmy dropped flat, firing as he did so. Yingling's body jerked, and one arm flopped wildly, a gun falling. But he was tough and remained on his feet. His other gun bellowed a flaming stream of lead at the redhead.

Jimmy fired through the dirt the bullets kicked into his face. His bullet drove deep and hard into Curly Yingling's body and the outlaw pitched over limply.

The other three had come into action, but their flattened target was hard to hit. Jimmy rocked the hammer again, and a second outlaw

reeled, fell to his knees, then slowly sagged flat.

Jimmy heard something whistle over his head. A third killer reeled as a rock bounced off his skull. He stumbled over a log and sat down wearily, a blank expression on his face. Slats Little's long arm had propelled that rock.

The last outlaw, finding himself alone only seconds after the battle had opened, turned and leaped desperately for a near-by boulder.

But the gun in the redhead's hand spat again, and the running man stumbled and went down as a leg crumpled under him.

Jimmy arose. It was over.

"Pretty good shootin'!" Slats squeaked. "Four slugs an' every one found meat."

Jimmy felt more kindly toward the deputy now. "That rock yuh chucked sure come in handy," he admitted.

"Shucks!" Slats assured him. "I'm a fence-buster in any kind of a fight. Say, do yuh know I'm quittin' as deputy sheriff at Agua Frio. I just made up my mind."

"Good idea!" Jimmy approved as he handcuffed the stunned outlaws together and prepared to care for the wounded. "Some men ain't cut out for that sort o' thing."

"Correct," Slats agreed. "Agua Frio's too small for me. I figure I'll join the Rangers. My uncle got me made deputy, an' he swings enough drag to put me in with the Rangers. With my brains an' your shootin' we'll shore make it rough on criminals in Arizony. Won't we, pardner?"

Jimmy arose, his eyes wild, and headed for his horse.

"Where yuh goin'?" Slats asked in amazement.

"Tuh hand in my resignation," Jimmy howled back.



# Raiders From Long S

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Looting Of Twin Rivers," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### RUSTLER SIGN.

**T**OO many Circle J cattle were drifting down into this timbered valley that stretched far back into the Bitterroot Mountains. The sign was plain. Billy West, the young boss of the Circle J spread, had been following it for hours.

Rustlers were at work again, running off Circle J stock. And that meant war—gun trouble—for the Circle J boss and his saddle pards.

With those two pards, "Buck" Foster and Joe Scott, Billy had ridden to the farthest boundary of Circle J range to see if his cattle

were drifting off into the great, silent Bitterroots.

He had expected to find some stragglers wandering off toward the mountains. But there were more than just a few stragglers missing from the range.

Billy's uneasiness had grown as he followed the sign toward this big valley.

The missing cattle had not been bunched and driven off; that was plain. Billy had seen horse tracks liberally sprinkled with the cattle sign, although none of the horses had worn shoes.

"Looks like some jaspers are pullin' a slick rustlin' trick, by ridin' unshod brones and driftin' off

mighty small bunches o' Circle J stuff from time to time," Billy spoke his thoughts aloud. "But who could be doin' such a trick?"

Old Charley Darrel's D Bar spread lay up the big valley two or three miles. Billy had known the Darrels for years, and quickly dropped them as possible suspects. Old Charley and Ma Darrel were mighty fine, honest folks.

Young Roy Darrel, their only child, was as honest a buckaroo as Montana had ever known. No, Billy reasoned, the Darrels certainly would not be mixed up in any sort of rustling deal.

There was only one other spread in this neck of the woods, which was Gaff Stinton's Long S outfit. Burly, hook-nosed Gaff Stinton and his mean-eyed, tight-lipped crew were rated as mighty salty jaspers, yet no one had ever accused them of anything crooked.

Billy lifted his big clear-beaver Stetson to comb lean, strong fingers nervously through crisp brown hair. His wide-set gray eyes were puckered thoughtfully, and there was a grim set to his wide mouth.

Something, Billy realized, was wrong. But he was not the sort to act hastily.

He gazed down into the valley for a long time, then shrugged his husky shoulders. His medium-sized, well-muscled body straightened.

"We'll go down an' have a look, Danger," he decided. "If we don't find our missing dogies, I'll ride back an' see if Buck an' Joe have run onto anything like this."

He sent Danger down the long slope, weaving in and out of cedar clumps, following the sign of cattle that had gone down perhaps the day before. He struck the rich, fertile valley floor, and rode into the

heavy timber, eyes searching as far ahead as the growth permitted.

He saw something moving ahead now, and grinned a little sheepishly as his right hand darted toward the .45 that was holstered at his right thigh.

"Shucks, Danger, I'm gettin' boogery," Billy chuckled. "Now that's nothin' but a big roan steer up yonder, yet I go pawin' for a smoke pole like I was expectin' trouble."

He watched the brindle steer take cover in a clump of cedar at the base of the slope, but rode on past as if uninterested. Once past the clump, however, he wheeled Danger and charged back, moving so that the steer would head back toward Circle J range.

If the critter wore some other man's iron, then Billy could turn his horse back up the canyon and let it alone. But if it happened to be a Circle J beef, then he would have it headed down the canyon, which opened out onto Circle J range, miles below in the foothills.

Danger reached the cedar thicket, ears flattened, great yellow teeth ready to snap at the bushed-up steer in case it acted sulky. But that brindle critter was plenty boogery, and came crashing out of the thicket with a bawl of fright.

Billy saw the Circle J iron on the steer's left ribs, and sent Danger rocketing in pursuit. The steer bawled again, then headed down the canyon, covering ground rapidly, despite its ungainly stride.

Billy knew by the critter's appearance that it had traveled most of the night before, and the knowledge brought a gleam to his gray eyes.

"Steers don't travel at night o' their own accord—not long distances, anyhow," Billy spoke into the wind that beat his face. "Looks



like somebody is tryin' to rustle Circle J beef, all right"

He let Danger crowd the steer until the critter was well started on the homeward journey, then reined in. Billy watched it out of sight, then turned to ride back up the canyon again.

He was somewhat encouraged by having found one of the missing steers, and began carefully combing the thickly wooded valley for more. But outside of a small bunch of cattle that wore Charley Darrel's D Bar iron, he found nothing.

He was turning down the canyon once more, intending to hurry back and look up his two cowboys, when a crashing of brush caused him to rein in abruptly. Billy stared, blinked rapidly, and stared again.

There was that brindle steer, lumbering toward him, trying to go up the valley.

"Hey, yuh wall-eyed hunk o' orneriness, what's the idea?" Billy yelled, charging toward the steer. "Roll yore tail for home, fella. Git!"

The brindle steer bawled, whirled clumsily, and shambled back down the canyon.

"Am I loco, or what?" Billy said as he rode after the steer. "That critter wants to go home, which is plain. Then how come the brindle cuss to turn back?"

There'd be no turning back this time, he decided angrily, as he closed in on the trotting steer. He meant to shove that critter all the way back to its home range, then go hunt Buck and Joe to see if they had found cattle sign leading away from Circle J.

But Billy had driven the steer less than a mile when he saw it stop, look forward uneasily, then turn to regard him in bug-eyed alarm. The steer bawled, and went scrambling up the slope toward the crest.

Billy yelled, spurring forward. He reached the spot where the steer had turned, and was about to follow it up the steep embankment, when something down the canyon caught his eye.

Billy forgot the brindle steer instantly. For there in a little clearing lay a man, face down in the green grass, a six-gun clutched loosely in one hand!

Even as he spurred forward, Billy saw the huge red smear between the man's shoulders.

Billy reined Danger in, dismounted, and stalked to the prone figure, batwing chaps flapping noisily at each hasty stride. He knelt, rolled the man over, then sat back on spurred heels, brow creased in a heavy frown.

The dumpy, moon-faced man was stone dead, yet he was still warm and limp. There was a small fire just beyond the man, beside which a running iron lay. And beside the fire was a tangle of piggin' strings that had been hastily slashed by a sharp blade.

Billy West got slowly to his feet and started forward. But he stopped very suddenly. For something snarled dangerously close to his body, and the bang of a rifle echoed sharply up and down the canyon.

"Stand where yuh are, West, an' keep them hands o' yores in sight!" a harsh, angry voice came. "Looks like yuh've just killed pore Nate Parr, an' I aim to find out why. Keep him covered, boys!"

Billy turned slowly toward the sound of the voice, hands lifted shoulder-high, palms outward. This, he realized, looked bad for him, and he was not particularly angry at the man who had sent a warning slug close to him.

Billy saw brush moving now, and

Gaff Stinton stalked out into the open, a six-gun in each big hand. Stinton's big, powerfully muscled body was leaning slightly forward as he walked, and there was a murderous rage burning deep in his unwinking yellow eyes.

Billy West found himself suddenly tense, for beyond a doubt Gaff Stinton was in a murderous frame of mind.

Billy shuttled a quick glance along the line of brush from which Stinton had come, saw two Winchester barrels poking through the foliage. He weighed his chances swiftly, and found them mighty slim.

"Better leave me put a slug through that West snake, Gaff!" a thick voice came from behind one of the rifle barrels. "Looked ter me like he was bendin' over Nate Parr, listenin' ter last words or somethin'."

Gaff Stinton halted, and there was suddenly a fiendish grin on his gash-like mouth. He moved a little to one side, then nodded his head sharply. From one of those out-thrust rifle barrels came a crimson spurt, and Billy West toppled backward!

## CHAPTER II.

### NEWS FOR BILLY.

**BILLY WEST** was not hit, although he had heard a rifle bullet screech bare inches past his body. Billy had seen Gaff Stinton nod, and knew that the Long S owner was giving a signal for those bushed-up riflemen to fire.

Billy had instantly thrown himself back and down. His action unquestionably saved his life, for that whistling bullet would have drilled him center if he had stood still. Those things hammered through Billy's mind even as he struck the

earth, rolled swiftly, and clawed at his holstered Colt

And even as he moved, he knew that there was something wrong. Gaff Stinton and his men were yelling wildly, and Billy heard the distant, flat sound of a rifle being fired swiftly. The Circle J boss lurched to a sitting position, snapped his Colt out and up.

He stared, unable at first to believe his eyes. Gaff Stinton and two other hombres were lying flat on the ground, their hands outstretched and empty.

"D-don't shoot, West!" Stinton called in a choked voice. "Yuh fellers have got us. We surrender!"

Even as Stinton spoke, there came the angry plop of a bullet striking soft earth. A tuft of moist earth spurted before the outstretched trio, and from somewhere above and behind Billy, there came the flat bark of a Winchester.

Billy realized that the rifleman was somewhere on the slope above him, no doubt hidden in the heavy cedars. Billy was as much surprised as Gaff Stinton and the other two Long S men, for he certainly had no idea who that hombre was, up on the slope behind him.

He thought of his two pards, Buck Foster and Joe Scott. Buck and Joe could have followed the sign of missing Circle J cattle here to the valley, true enough.

But neither grizzled, hot-eyed Buck nor beak-nosed young Joe Scott would bush up and sling lead from cover. Those two harum-scarum waddies would have come charging down the slope like wild men, for they liked nothing better than a good, hot scrap.

But those things went through Billy West's mind only fleetingly. He got to his feet, six-gun swinging slowly from one to the other of

those three prone jaspers who were cowering close to the grassy earth and muttering uneasily.

"Yell ter yore puncher up yonder on the slope ter quit shootin', West!" Gaff Stinton growled. "Dang it! Us fellers ain't offerin' no resistance, are we?"

Billy did not answer immediately, for the sounds of a man moving somewhere above and behind him came to his keen ears.

He heard a rock roll, heard brush popping. Then a horse snorted, and iron shoes thudded against the ground.

Billy glanced around, fully expecting to see the unknown rifleman coming down the slope. But what he saw was the briefest glimpse of a man topping the high slope, riding away from the valley.

Billy whirled, gray eyes blazing. Gaff Stinton and his two men had seen that rider leaving, and were in the very act of reaching for fallen guns when Billy whirled on them.

"Steady, yuh three!" the Circle J boss snapped. "I don't savvy this deal none, Stinton. But I'm not givin' yuh three another chance to sling lead at me."

Gaff Stinton came slowly to his feet, murderous lights flaming in his ugly eyes. The other two Long S men gained their feet now, growling sullenly as they eyed Billy.

One of them was a squat, flat-featured hombre, who stood pawing coarse black hair out of a pair of greenish eyes that were cold and glittery. That jasper, Billy knew, was Dick Waldo, Long S ramrod and a man who bragged that he was the fastest gun slinger in Montana.

Billy recognized the third Long S man as Ben Newsome, a slim, dark-faced hombre with quick black eyes

and slender hands that were seldom still.

Billy instantly recognized in Ben Newsome the sort of hombre who would be bad medicine with either a knife or a gun. Newsome had a pair of pearl-handled .45s at his thighs, and Billy saw him inching those slim, quick hands down toward the guns.

"I wouldn't try it, Newsome," the Circle J boss warned coldly. "I've got no fight with yuh hombres that I know of. But let those cutters alone, fella."

Newsome swore softly, but lifted his hands away from the guns.

"Yuh—yuh plugged Nate Parr, yonder, didn't yuh?" Gaff Stinton countered, jerking a big hand toward the squabby dead man Billy had come upon when he first reached the scene.

"Nope, I didn't shoot that gent yonder," Billy snapped. "One o' yore men, was he?"

"Shore he was!" Dick Waldo snarled thickly. "An' it'll do yuh no good ter try crawfishin', West. Yuh kilt Nate, so——"

"I'm not in the habit o' lyin', Waldo," Billy cut in sharply. "If I had plugged that gent, I'd say so, because I'd have a reason before I drilled any man."

Gaff Stinton spoke a few low words from one corner of his mouth. His two men looked surprised, then greatly relieved.

"Say, West, it looks like we've made a mistake," the Long S owner smirked, stepping boldly forward. "We—we thought yuh had drilled Nate. But if yuh say yuh didn't, I reckon yuh didn't, that's all."

"Reckon I can even prove I didn't shoot that hombre." Billy shrugged. "Here, Stinton, look this Colt over. Yuh'll find that it ain't been fired. An' yuh can also find out that the

rifle on my saddle yonder ain't been fired recently."

Gaff Stinton accepted the proffered Colt, sniffed at the barrel, and handed it back.

"West is tellin' it straight, boys," the Long S owner called to his pair of sullen men. "This Colt shore ain't been fired recent."

Billy took the Colt, dropped it into his holster, and turned his back on the trio. He strode to Danger, pulled a Winchester carbine from a saddle scabbard, and walked back to hand it, butt first, to Gaff Stinton.

Billy's mind was racing at top speed, piecing together certain little facts that were forming a rather puzzling problem. But his face was blank as he watched Gaff Stinton sniff the rifle barrel.

Stinton handed the gun back, straw-colored brows arching as he turned his tawny eyes on his dead puncher.

"Sorry we jumped yuh, West," he growled. "Yore guns ain't been fired, which means yuh never drilled Nate. But who did? An' who was doin' that shootin' from the ridge?"

"I've got no more idea than yuh have about who killed yore puncher," Billy snapped. "An' I don't know who that gent was that slung a few slugs down from the ridge yonder. But whoever he was, he saved some lives."

Dick Waldo and the thin-faced Ben Newsome savvied what Billy meant. For they both sneered openly, hands tapping holstered guns.

"Saved a life, yuh mean," the apish Long S ramrod grunted. "If slugs hadn't come squallin' around us, West, we would 'a' made a corpse out o' yuh in another jiffy."

"Kind of off yore range, ain't yuh, West?" Ben Newsome sneered.

"Yuh might git lost over in this neck o' the woods, feller."

Billy flushed, angry at the open sneering of those two jaspers.

"Smooth yore bristles down, yuh two!" he snapped sharply. "I've got no fight with yuh, that's true. But I don't like yore mouthin'."

Gaff Stinton swung before either of his men could reply, and fairly blistered the air with oaths.

"Shut up and keep shut up!" he finished hotly. "Yuh two ain't got brains enough ter know when yo're well off."

The pair snarled and glared, but held their tongues.

"West," Gaff Stinton growled, turning to face Billy again, "I think I know who kilt Nate Parr. An' unless my eyes is goin' bad, the killer was up yonder on that ridge, slingin' lead at us."

"Who?" Billy asked quickly.

"Roy Darrel!" Stinton snarled. "Blast it! He's been rustlin' our Long S cattle lately. An' last night, the ornery young skunk shot one o' my men through the back when he jumped a herd. I——"

"Whoa, fella!" Billy West cut in. "Do yuh know what yo're talkin' about? I've known the Darrels a long time, an' I never knowed 'em to do anything crooked."

"The ol' man is likely square enough," Gaff Stinton said. "But that Roy is a snake, I tell yuh. Me an' my men was here ter-day, tryin' ter ketch sight of him. Dick, thar, an' Ben, too, recognized him last night when he jumped the herd."

"Shore I recognized the young cuss!" Dick Waldo rasped. "I was right beside pore Tom Smith when he was shot through the back."

"Dick an' me charged the brush clump where the shot that kilt Tom come from," Ben Newsome put in. "We smoked a gent out. We seen

him plan as he jumped onto his hoss. It was Roy Darrel, all right, for we found his Stetson thar in the bresh where one of our slugs knocked it off his head."

"We've trailed a lot of our cattle hyar ter this end o' the valley lately." Gaff Stinton swore. "An' we've almost ketched Roy Darrel workin' over the brands a few times, too. Yuh—yuh been missin' stock, West?"

Billy had listened tensely, every nerve in his body tingling. These men spoke as if they trusted him, and were simply explaining why they had been so proddy. But Billy West saw them exchanging swift, uneasy glances from time to time, and knew that the trio were lying, trying to hide something.

Billy realized that he had to play dumb unless he wanted a scrap on his hands. He sensed instantly that the three Long S men were waiting tensely for him to speak, and was racking his brain for some sort of reply that would put them at ease without telling them anything, when hoofs clattered noisily up the long slope behind them.

"Duck!" Gaff Stinton squalled. "That's Roy Darrel, an' the snake has shore got help. Take cover, men!"

### CHAPTER III.

#### BUCK REPORTS.

**A** LONG cowboy yell rang through the deep valley. Then two riders were coming down the slope at a reckless pace, guns out and held high.

Billy West took one look at those reckless riders, and whirled toward the brush where Gaff Stinton and his two gun-swift hirelings had hidden themselves.

"Hold it, Stinton!" Billy called

sharply. "Those hombres yonder are a couple o' my punchers."

"Thought yuh didn't have any men with yuh," Dick Waldo's voice came angrily from the brush. "Yuh been lyin' ter us, West!"

"I'll settle that with yuh later, hombre," Billy growled. "I didn't say that none o' my men were with me. I said none o' my men done that shootin' from the slope, a while ago."

"But they did!" Ben Newsome snarled. "West, I'm thinkin' like Dick does. Yuh've been tryin' ter fool us."

"Those rannies comin' yonder are Buck Foster an' Joe Scott," Billy said slowly. "Neither one o' them hotheads would hole up an' sling lead, Newsome. If they wanted yuh or any other man, they'd come after yuh on the jump, even if yuh had an army to back yuh up."

"We'd better knock 'em over with slugs afore they git too close!" Dick Waldo yelled. "Start pumpin' lead at them two fools! If we don't——"

"Hold it!" Gaff Stinton yelled wildly. "Dick, yuh an' Ben watch yore step, hear? These Circle J fellers ain't botherin' us none, yuh fools!"

Gaff Stinton crawled from the brush, snarling oaths at his two hirelings, who followed closely.

The three jaspers looked pale around the gills, and Billy saw that Stinton was talking swiftly to his men, although the Circle J boss could not hear what was being said.

Billy's eyes were puckered a little, and there was a white ring about his firm mouth that would have warned men who knew him well. Billy was fighting mad, and wanted to tear into those three Long S jaspers just on general principles.

But he was much too level-headed to pull such a stunt. Be-



sides, he wanted to get away from Stinton and the other two Long S men as quickly as possible and ride to the Darrel ranch.

Billy West did not believe what he had heard about young Roy Darrel. He knew Roy to be an honest, hard-working young fellow who certainly would not be foolish enough to turn rustler.

But there was something wrong. Otherwise, Gaff Stinton and his two tough hirelings would not have said what they had about Roy Darrel being a thief and murderer.

Billy turned now to Buck Foster and Joe Scott, who were racing down the last few yards of the slope. Buck Foster was in the lead and yelling wildly for his chunky black cow horse to show more speed.

Buck was a lanky old cowpoke, with fierce brown eyes and a grizzled mustache that was now whipping back across his leathery cheeks. A mangy-looking bearskin vest was flapping crazily about Buck's scrawny chest as he made that last mad dash, six-gun held high.

Joe Scott was crowding close behind Buck, letting his gray cayuse thunder madly down the slope. Joe's gray drew alongside Buck's black now, and the pair thundered forward, to rein in before Billy West and the three Long S men.

"What in tarnation did yuh plug that gent for, Billy?" Buck Foster roared, waving his gun excitedly toward the dead man. "Joe an' me was trailin' a passell o' rustlers when we heard shootin' an' come foggin' this way."

"I didn't plug that hombre," Billy snapped testily. "Too many gents have accused me o' that already."

Buck blinked his stormy eyes, then began glowering at the Long S men.

"What are yuh fellers lookin' so

danged proddy about?" the veteran demanded bluntly. "If yuh jaspers have been botherin' Billy, I'll learn yuh better."

Under any other circumstances, Billy West would have got a laugh out of Buck's protective manner. The old ranny was building trouble, however—which certainly was nothing unusual for him to do.

Billy saw Gaff Stinton and the other two Long S men redden, and saw them inching their hands toward holsters.

"Pipe down, Buck!" Billy called. "These men are sore, sure. The dead gent yonder is one o' Stinton's men."

Billy half turned as he spoke, and winked at Joe Scott. Joe was a red-headed young ranny, with a big beak of a nose and huge freckles sprinkled more than liberally over his face.

The redhead was quick-witted, and Billy West was depending on Joe now to help him get rid of these Long S men. Joe's keen blue eyes puckered ever so slightly, but he said nothing.

"So yuh fellers was trailin' rustlers, hey?" Gaff Stinton demanded of Buck. "Yuh—yuh shore o' that, Foster?"

"Of course I'm shore!" Buck snarled hotly. "Some pack o' pizen, ornery snakes has been whittlin' Circle J herds. Joe an' me——"

"I found where cattle had drifted this way," Billy cut in quickly. "But I didn't notice where any big bunch had been driven, like rustlers usually do."

Billy winked again at Joe, before turning fully to face the Long S men.

Joe's keen eyes puckered a little more, and his head nodded ever so slightly.

"Aw, Buck is jest makin' chin

music," the redhead jeered. "We found where cattle had drifted this way, shore. But like yuh say, Billy, there was no sign of any big bunch bein' drove off."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster yelled, holstering his gun with a savage thrust. "Yuh spotty-faced, lop-eared young sage purp, I'll learn yuh ter call me a liar! I said Circle J beefs had been rustled, Joe Scott."

"If they was, yuh likely done the rustlin'," Joe came back, holstering his own gun.

Buck roared wildly and brought his horse in close, to shake a knobby fist under Joe's beak nose.

Gaff Stinton and his two men stared, fully expecting to see Buck and Joe start hammering each other from the saddle.

But Billy paid no attention to his two pards. The rannicky pair wrangled constantly, despite the fact that they were the firmest of friends when it came to the show-down.

"Say, them two galoots is liable ter start smokin' each other up," Dick Waldo rumbled. "Yuh'd better part 'em, West, afore they kill each other off."

"Let 'em rave." Billy shrugged. "What I want to know, Stinton, is how much yuh've actually got on Roy Darrel."

Gaff Stinton shot Billy a searching glance, trying to read what lay behind the Circle J boss's gray gaze. But Stinton learned nothing of Billy's thoughts, and turned slightly to dart a look at his two hirelings.

"We've got enough on that young snake ter hang him!" the Long S owner spat as he faced Billy West again. "An' I'm doin' it legal, too."

"Legal?" Billy echoed, suddenly uneasy.

"Shore!" Gaff Stinton snarled. "I sent one o' my men ter Twin Rivers

early this mornin' fer Sheriff Hawks. I'm puttin' the law on Roy Darrel an' seein' that he hangs plumb legal."

"An' we'll be with the sheriff when he goes ter the Darrel ranch, jist in case that young snake tries any gun play." Dick Waldo grinned evilly.

"Yeah, us three aim ter be thar." Ben Newsome sneered coldly at Billy as he spoke. "Yuh see, West, it ain't healthy fer a gent ter fool with the Long S."

"Meanin'?" Billy drawled coldly, gray eyes thinned as he met Newsome's glittering gaze.

"We've got ter be goin' if we aim ter meet the sheriff on the trail, men," Gaff Stinton called sharply. "Come on, yuh two!"

## CHAPTER IV.

### ROY DARREL TALKS.

**B**ILLY WEST did not take his eyes from the three Long S men until they were out of sight in the thick brush from which they had first come. Nor did he stop watching the brush until he heard the snorting of horses, and the popping of brush as those snorting horses hammered away at a stiff run.

"So danged interested in gettin' to the sheriff that they never give their dead pard a thought," Billy mused. "Now I wonder."

He turned on Buck and Joe, who were snarling like two bulldogs and glaring at each other. He snapped an order that silenced the pair, then hastily explained what had happened.

"I found a lot o' cattle sign leadin' this way from Circle J an' followed it," Billy finished. "That's how I happened to be here an' run into this mix-up."

"Rustlers, by granny!" Buck Foster roared. "An' this carrot-topped

nuisance claims them cattle jist drifted!"

"I don't either claim them cattle just up an' drifted," Joe barked. "Shore, rustlers took 'em. An' danged slick rustlers they are, for they rode unshod bronses an' drove only a few critters off at a time."

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck exploded. "One minute yuh say it was rustlers, an' the next yuh say it wasn't. Yuh addle-brained young — Hey, where yuh goin'?"

Joe had leaped from his horse and was trotting toward the fire near the sprawling body of Nate Parr. Joe was an expert at sign-reading, and Billy waited patiently while the red-head circled slowly about the little branding fire. Joe stooped now and then to examine carefully some bit of sign.

"Yuh make me sick, Joe Scott!" Buck called derisively. "Dang it! Nobody could see anything in all thet grass."

But neither Billy nor Joe paid any attention to Buck's scoffing. When Joe finally came striding away from the fire, his face was a little flushed, and his blue eyes held an angry glint.

"There was a calf tied down there by the fire," he reported to Billy. "That dead gent had tromped around the calf plenty while he earmarked an' branded it."

"Haw-haw-haw!" Buck Foster laughed loudly. "Fer onct, carrot-top, yuh've said somethin' yuh can't prove. How in tunket do yuh know the dead man walked around a critter that was tied down?"

"Because, yuh brayin' ol' burro, that dead hombre has a metal patch on his left boot heel to keep it from runnin' over on the outside," Joe snapped. "The metal patch is still on the boot, as yuh kin see, if yuh look. It left plumb plain marks in

the dirt around the fire an' around where the calf was tied."

"Huh!" Buck snorted, somewhat taken aback. "Jist the same, yuh couldn't tell that the calf had been earmarked, yuh windy young galoot?"

"No?" Joe drawled, and held out one hand.

Two grisly chunks of hairy flesh were in his palm. Both Billy and Buck instantly recognized them as pieces of some calf's ears. And both Billy and Buck growled loudly, for there were old earmarks in those two bits of ear.

"Say, that's an underbit an' a swallow-fork—old Charley Darrel's earmark!" Billy exclaimed. "Them old marks, I mean. Some gent cut 'em out, leavin' the calf with new earmarks."

"Right." Joe Scott nodded. "Looks to me like some o' Darrel's D Bar outfit ketched that fat skunk layin' yonder plumb red-handed, an' give him what he had comin'."

"I think Gaff Stinton figured somethin' like that, too," Billy said slowly. "That jasper was plenty uneasy, an' is aimin' to get Roy Darrel hung, if he can."

Billy explained swiftly what Gaff Stinton had said about Roy Darrel.

Buck and Joe both growled protests. Like Billy, they knew that Roy Darrel was not the sort who would stoop to rustling.

"I knowed all along Gaff Stinton an' them two snakes with him was up ter somethin'," Buck proclaimed loudly. "By heifers! We'd better light a shuck after them three skunks an' smoke 'em up some."

"For once, ol' gourdhead, yo're talkin' sense!" Joe Scott clipped. "Roy Darrel ain't no more a thief than we are."

"Of course Roy ain't a thief an' murderer," Billy West put in an-

grily. "But unless we get to the D Bar an' tell Roy to lay low a while, Gaff Stinton will make the law hang Roy on that trumped-up charge o' murderin' some gent called Tom Smith last night."

"Thanks, amigos. It's mighty good to have friends like yuh Circle J men," a voice spoke.

Billy and his two pards looked up quickly, startled by that calm voice. A slender young ranny was coming toward them from a clump of thick cedar. He carried a Winchester in one lean hand.

The youth was bareheaded, and the Circle J pards saw crimson trickling down from his mop of sandy hair, to form ugly streaks along his lean-cheeked face.

"Gosh, Roy, then it was yuh slingin' lead from that ridge up yonder!" Billy called as he strode to meet the youth. "Yo're wounded, too, judgin' from the stains on yore face."

Roy Darrel grinned tightly, lifted a hand, and brushed absently at the half-dry crimson along one cheek and jaw.

"Scalp laid open where that Nate Parr rustler banged me over the head with that runnin' iron he was usin' on a D Bar calf," Roy snapped, dark eyes flaming. "I had the skunk under my gun, an' aimed to hog tie him along with the calf."

"But he bested yuh, eh?" Billy prompted, when Roy broke off.

"It was my own fault," Roy growled. "A big brindle steer came lopin' down the valley, an' I glanced around to see what the racket was. Parr bent his runnin' iron acrost my noggin quicker than scat."

"Good gosh!" Billy gasped. "Roy, that was my fault, for I choused that blamed steer down this way, since he wears my brand. No wonder he come foggm' back up the valley."

"Nate Parr made the mistake o' not finishin' me off when he had the chance," Roy clipped. "The skunk started cuttin' the calf loose, which give me time to get a hold on my wits."

"By heifers, Roy, yuh didn't plug him in the back while he was busy loosenin' the dogie, did yuh?" Buck Foster blurted.

"Heck, no!" Darrel answered sharply. "I set up, clawed my gun out o' the grass, an' told the fat snake to lift 'em. He whirled—with a gun in his fist. I let him have it, for it was him or me."

"An' a good riddance." Billy West nodded. "But yore troubles are just beginnin', looks like. Gaff Stinton aims to have yuh hung for drillin' some gent named Tom Smith when yuh raided a Long S herd last night."

Roy's jaw dropped in amazement, and not until Billy explained fully did understanding come to him.

The youth flushed crimson, then went white with rage.

"That lyin' coyote!" he almost yelled. "Billy, that Long S outfit is on the rustle, shore as shootin'. I've seen 'em drivin' Circle J cattle through here twice in the last three days. I was on my way to tell yuh about it this mornin', when I stumbled onto Nate Parr earmarkin' one o' dad's calves."

"I had it figured that way," Billy shrugged. "But provin' it may be another story, Roy. Besides, the main thing is to get yuh hid out where Sheriff Hawks can't find yuh for a few days."

"I'll not coyote!" Roy snarled. "Dang it! Gaff Stinton is framin' me, that's all. He's sore because dad won't sell him the D Bar."

"Oh, so Stinton has been tryin' to buy yore dad out, eh?" Billy prompted quickly.

"I'll say he has!" Roy grated. "He's offered a mite better than top prices, too. But the D Bar is home to ma an' dad. They settled there when they wasn't much more than kids themselves, Billy, an' built the place up to what it is."

"Yeah, I know." Billy nodded. "There's more than just a money value in the place to them, Roy. But what yuh've said sort o' clears things up."

"What do yuh mean?" Buck and Joe both asked, as if Billy had been talking to them.

"Why, Stinton aims to get Roy, here, hung," Billy said grimly. "Stinton knows that such a thing would—would go mighty hard with Roy's folks. Fact is, Stinton likely savvies that Roy's folks would be more than willin' to sell out if their only child was hung in disgrace."

"By gosh, Billy, yuh've hit it!" Roy cried tensely. "But Stinton will not git by with it. I'll put a slug through his mangy heart as shore as I can find him."

The hot-eyed youth started to whirl. But Billy caught him, holding him firmly in check.

"Steady, amigo," the Circle J boss spoke calmly. "Don't go wild an' play right into Stinton's dirty hands."

"But he needs killin', Billy!" Roy panted. "Dang him! Ma an' dad would die o' disgrace if I was hung fer murder an' rustlin'."

Billy had thought that same thing, but had not been cold-hearted enough to say so in Roy's presence.

"Shucks, Roy, we can lick Stinton easy if we use our heads." Billy still spoke in a calm, steady manner.

"This is my fight, Billy," the youth said. "I appreciate yore offer, but there's no use in yuh gettin' yoreself mixed into the powder-burnin' that's bound to come."

"Shucks, Roy!" Billy laughed dryly, flashing Buck and Joe a quick look. "I reckon Circle J can help out a neighbor. Besides— Listen!"

Faint but unmistakable, the sound of galloping horses came.

"Down canyon!" Billy snapped. "Which means that it'll be the sheriff an' them Long S snakes comin'. Quick, Roy! Head for yore hoss! We'll have to hustle if we get out o' sight in time!"

## CHAPTER V.

### "REACH HIGH!"

BILLY WEST knew that the sheriff would stop and spend some time examining the Long S man, Nate Parr. Billy began laying plans accordingly, even as he raced to Danger and leaped into the saddle.

Roy Darrel trotted back into the thick cedars near the base of the ridge, and began scrambling up swiftly. Billy spurred toward him, Buck and Joe following.

Billy kicked a foot out of a stirrup, and called sharply to Roy. The youth understood what was expected, and shifted his rifle in readiness.

As Danger lunged past, Roy grabbed the saddle horn, popped a foot into the free stirrup, and was hurled up and back of the saddle by the chestnut's powerful lunge. Danger snorted, walled his eyes back, and began arching his mighty back.

"None o' that, yuh snorty cuss!" Billy called sharply, letting the chestnut feel spur rowels quickly. "No time for yore ornery temper to show itself now, hoss."

Danger snorted softly, and lunged on up the steep slope. But there was still an arch to his back, and he kept rolling his eyes and snorting. Danger was strictly a one-man



horse, and would have unwound in a hurry but for his beloved master's voice.

Billy kept a tight rein, and twisted to gaze back down into the valley. He certainly had nothing to fear from Sheriff Jim Hawks. The sheriff was a mighty good friend of Circle J.

Yet Billy realized that, for the time being, the best thing he could do was get out of the sheriff's sight. Roy Darrel was hot-headed, and would blow up if the sheriff tried to arrest him.

Billy realized that the sheriff could not do much else except arrest Roy, in the face of the evidence Gaff Stinton was offering against the youth. Knowing that he would have no chance to explain things to the sheriff while Gaff Stinton was around, Billy meant to get Roy away, and head for the Darrel ranch as soon as possible.

"Yonder's my bronc, Billy," Roy called.

Billy glanced around, and saw that they were cresting the long slope.

A big sorrel horse stood ahead of him, and he urged Danger toward it. Billy had seen nothing of the sheriff and the Long S men, but knew that they were bound to be very close.

"Hop astraddle o' that bronc, Roy, an' let's go!" he called sharply. "An' we'd better ride at a walk for aways, if we don't want the sheriff an' them Long S snakes after us."

Roy slid down, ran to his horse, and jumped aboard, jamming his rifle into a saddle scabbard.

"I don't like this coyotin', Billy," he growled. "Dang it! I've done nothin' wrong. Why should I run?"

"To keep yore neck out of a noose, mostly," Billy answered grimly as they walked their horses

away. "Besides, Roy, there's no sense in buckin' the sheriff. That'd make things look all the worse for yuh."

"Shucks! I didn't aim to buck Jim Hawks none," Roy growled. "He's a fine feller, an' I'll bet he'd not arrest me if I told him how things stand."

"Mebbe Jim wouldn't *want* to arrest yuh, Roy," Billy pointed out. "But he's likely packin' a bench warrant for yuh, an' would be duty-bound to serve it if he sighted yuh."

"I never thought o' that," Roy admitted slowly. His face paled a little, and he glanced about uneasily, right hand dropping to caress the butt of a .45 that was holstered against his right thigh.

Billy West frowned, wondering just what he could do to keep Roy out of trouble for a while. The youth was nervous, and dangerously angry.

Given the least excuse, Roy Darrel would jump the whole Long S single-handed. And that, Billy reckoned grimly, would be just about what Gaff Stinton and his men wanted.

They would have an excuse for shooting Roy down if they could get him proddy enough to start trouble.

"How many men has Stinton got workin' for him, Roy?" Billy asked suddenly.

The youth started, evidently brought out of deep thought.

"Eh?" he jerked out. "Oh, I'd say eight or ten, countin' himself. Why?"

"Just wondered," Billy hummed. "I'll bet they're all salty hands, too. Didn't happen to know this Tom Smith that was killed last night, did yuh?"

"Shore I knowed him," Roy answered promptly. "Funny thing is, Billy, that Tom Smith waddy

seemed like a plumb decent feller. He wasn't like them other snakes Gaff Stinton hires."

"What do yuh mean?" Billy pressed further.

"Oh, Tom was a good-natured sort of feller." Roy frowned. "He was a young jasper, an' didn't have a lot to say. Allus grinning, too, like he was happy. But he was shore sudden with them twin six-guns he packed.

"How do yuh know he was fast with guns?" Billy asked.

"Why, I've seen him draw an' fire at hill cats an' coyotes." Roy shrugged. "He was shore fast, Billy, an' I guess he was mebbe on the dodge. Leastwise, he mentioned a time or so that a feller outside the law usually made more dinero than the gent who stuck to the straight an' narrow."

"Hm-m-m!" Billy hummed, but said nothing more. He felt suddenly interested in Tom Smith, but did not say as much.

The ridge down which they had ridden now was butting up against a shaggy-crowned hill that overlooked the upper part of the great valley. Billy knew that watchers could look down from the top of the hill upon the Darrel ranch, which lay in the valley just below.

Billy had purposely come along this ridge that he might reach that very hill. And he was nervous now, anxious to get down into the valley and have a talk with Roy's parents.

"Buck, yuh an' Joe stay here with Roy," Billy spoke now, as they reined in at the base of the shaggy-crowned hill. "I'm goin' down to have a talk with Roy's folks."

"Look here, Billy, I'm goin' with yuh!" Roy cried angrily. "Dang it! Dad an' ma will think I'm guilty, if I start hidin' out in the brush like this."

"They'll think nothin' o' the sort, amigo," Billy began. "I'll tell 'em not to worry over yuh a few days, an' explain about this frame-up business."

"Yuh'll be explainin' things ter Saint Peter, if yuh don't sky them paws! Lift 'em, yuh four snakes! I've got the drop!" a voice barked.

Billy jerked around, eyes widening in surprise. That voice had come from the crown of the bushy hill, and he had to tilt his head far back to look up the very steep slope. Billy heard Buck and Joe snarling hotly, and heard Roy Darrel rasping angry words, too.

But Billy was too busy at the moment to pay much attention to his three companions. High up that steep slope he saw Ben Newsome's thin face peering down at him over the barrel of a leveled Winchester.

"The sheriff an' us fellers sighted yuh snakes makin' a git-away up the slope back yonder," Newsome snarled now. "We scattered, an' I cut around this way, figurin' ter head yuh skunks off."

"Newsome," Billy said calmly, "I've had about all o' yore lip I can stummick. I'll——"

"Yuh'll butt a bullet if yuh sass me any more!" the beady-eyed Newsome cut in savagely. "West, the boss figured yuh was over this way nosin' around where yuh had no business, soon as he seen yuh this mornin'. I reckon Dick Waldo an' me kin swear that yuh an' them two punchers with yuh was helpin' Roy Darrel last night."

"So that's it, eh?" Billy snapped. "Yuh sports think yuh can frame me an' my men like yuh've framed Roy, here. Try it, yuh tinhorn sport, an' see what it gets yuh!"

"Shore, try it, yuh skunk!" Buck Foster bawled angrily. "Sheriff Hawks will give yuh the hoss laugh

if yuh start sayin' Circle J is crooks."

"So the boss figured," Ben Newsome laughed evilly. "That's why I'm marchin' yuh wallopers to where yuh'll be held prisoners until the boss can figure out some way o' fixin' yore clocks. Shed yore hardware, snakes, or I'll shoot yuh loose from it!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### TROUBLE AT THE D BAR.

**B**ILLY WEST jerked around barely in time. Buck and Joe were both settling forward over saddle pommels, hands hooking toward their holstered guns.

"Hold it, yuh two!" Billy ripped the words out almost savagely. "Stand pat, boys. That jasper up there is hidin' behind a rock."

"Smart boy!" Ben Newsome sneered derisively. "West, I see yuh've got sense enough ter know when yuh're bested. Pile off yore bronc, an' start tyin' yore two pards an' Roy Darrel to their hosses!"

"Shore, I'll tie 'em." Billy shrugged. "What else can I do, with yuh holdin' that rifle on me?"

Ben Newsome chuckled, and showed a little more of his body from behind the slanted rock over which he was leveling the rifle.

Billy West smiled inwardly, for he had purposely led Newsome to believe that he was completely cowed.

Joe Scott saw Billy's play, and settled down in the saddle, blue eyes keenly alert. But Buck Foster missed the point entirely.

"Help me, Hannah!" the old ranny bawled. "Billy, yuh ain't lettin' thet snake-eyed skunk git by with this, am yuh?"

Billy hurried to Buck's side and hastily lifted the old ranny's six-gun from its holster. Buck yowled more

loudly than ever, face flushed to a deep crimson.

"So yuh am helpin' thet skunk up yonder snag me, huh?" the veteran Circle J waddy snarled at Billy. "By heifers! I'll quit Circle J right now. I'll not work—— Hey, what the——"

Knowing Buck as he did, Billy was working with all possible speed. He stripped Buck's lariat from the saddle, and had the old fellow's feet lashed beneath the black's belly before Buck fully understood what was happening.

Now Billy grabbed the tied reins that lay across the black's neck. He swung them forward and down, where Buck could not reach them.

"Steady, yuh old wart hog!" Billy hissed.

"Blast it, Billy, have yuh went loco?" Buck roared. "Tyin' me up like this is——"

But Billy had moved on to Joe Scott now. He lifted the redhead's six-gun, then leaned forward, unfastening Joe's lariat.

"I'll leave yore left foot in a loose loop," Billy hissed. "I'm takin' a shot at that snake up yonder, in a minute. If I miss an' he holes up, yuh'll have time to kick yore feet free an' let Buck loose."

Joe dared not reply, for Ben Newsome could have seen his lips moving.

Billy got the rope loose, shook out a loop, and reached for Joe's right foot. He secured that foot in the loop, then reached under the bronc's belly for Joe's other boot.

In stooping to reach under, Billy turned slightly to one side, hiding his right hand and arm, for a moment, from Ben Newsome. And in that brief instant, Billy drew his Colt. He looped the rope over Joe's left boot toe, then began straightening up.

He seemed to trip, and staggered sidewise, stopping halfway between Joe's mount and Buck's black horse. And as he stopped, Billy whirled, flame-split thunder leaping from his right hand.

He knew that he could not hope to hit his target with such a hasty shot. But Billy also knew that the shot would rattle Ben Newsome, or any other man, for that matter.

He saw Newsome's face briefly, and thumb flicked the gun hammer again just as the rifle squalled defiance down at him. Billy felt the breath of the bullet along his jaw, flinching in spite of himself.

Then he fired the third time, and Ben Newsome jerked straight up, the rifle falling from his hands. The evil-eyed rascal teetered there a moment, then pitched forward across the stone that had protected him, hands hanging down limply.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster cried. "Billy, I knowed all along yuh was jist waitin' fer a chance ter drill that snake."

Crimson was pouring from Ben Newsome's dark hair, to paint the grass there at the base of the rock.

"Oh, yuh knowed Billy was just kiddin' about really tyin' us, did yuh?" Joe Scott sneered. "But yuh quit Circle J, an' I'm shore glad."

"Am thet so?" Buck yelled. "Dang yore speckled hide! I never quit Circle J. I——"

"Pipe down, yuh two!" Billy clipped, hastily reloading his hot gun.

He leaped to Buck's side, loosened the rope from the old ranny's feet, and handed it up to him. Billy also grabbed up the guns which he had taken from Buck and Joe, and handed them back to his pards.

Roy Darrel sat looking a little dazedly at Billy, then up at the limp figure draped over the upslanted

rock. Roy licked his lips, tried to grin.

"Gosh, Billy, I'd hate to try buckin' yuh!" Roy gulped. "Yuh made that skunk think yuh was scart o' him, an' outfoxed him right neat. Yuh put him out fer keeps, too."

"Nope, I only creased the buzzard." Billy shrugged as he mounted. "I never put a fatal bullet into any man, Roy, unless it was me or him. Come on! We've got to make tracks now, afore the rest o' them Long S skunks show up."

Billy sent Danger leaping forward, keeping to the thickest cover he could find. His two pards and Roy Darrel strung out behind him, Buck and Joe still arguing.

For the better part of two hours, Billy led the way through the timbered slopes of the Bitterroots, keeping always below sky line, never riding into open places. He had circled somewhat, and stopped now to look down upon the head of the big valley where the trouble had started.

He studied the great valley for several minutes, his three companions holding silent. Then Billy shrugged, jabbed Danger with dull rowels, and led the way down the steep slope.

An hour later, he was drawing rein in a clump of pine timber that feathered the crest of a low ridge. Directly below him, the sprawling buildings and corrals of a ranch lay—the Darrel ranch.

"Roy, yuh stay put up here, savvy?" Billy growled. "I'm goin' down there to have a talk with yore folks. If—— What in blazes!"

Billy reined Danger hastily back into the pines, crouching in the saddle. The whole ranch below him seemed suddenly to explode in a deafening blast of gunfire.

Billy realized, however, that he

would have heard bullets long before the explosions if those guns had been aimed at him and his three companions.

"Dad an' ma will be killed!" Roy Darrel cried hoarsely. "Billy, them Long S snakes have jumped our spread. I'm goin'—"

Billy whirled Danger, reached out, and grasped barely in time one of the reins Roy Darrel held.

"Steady, amigo!" Billy snapped. "Go bustin' down there, an' they'll see yuh long before yuh get a chance at 'em. Here, follow me!"

Billy sent Danger rocketing toward the far slope of the ridge, Buck and Joe crowding close to him. The ridge nosed down to a gentle slope just behind the Darrel ranch house, and Billy held a mental picture of the lay of the buildings and corrals.

He led the way now at a reckless pace, for the sounds of those many guns were swelling again, booming thunder that rolled lazily from hill to slope in the rugged country.

Then the shooting died as swiftly as it had commenced, and Billy felt his heart hammering his ribs as he wondered if old Charley Darrel and whoever had been with him at the D Bar had lost the fight.

Billy yelled into Danger's flattened ears, pointing now straight toward the long slope that was the abrupt end of the ridge. He rounded the slope and reined in, eyes swinging toward a flash of movement far ahead and beyond the corrals. He had a brief glimpse of riders swarming into the heavy timber of the valley.

He raked Danger's flanks, and started in quick pursuit. But as he whirled past the back of the big ranch house, something near the back door caught his eyes. He glanced that way, yelled in alarm, and reined Danger to a rearing halt.

There at the back door, an overturned water bucket near one thin hand, "Ma" Darrel lay.

Billy quit his mount in a single leap, fear gripping his heart as he raced toward the gray-haired little woman who lay there in the yard.

## CHAPTER VII.

### STINTON GETS THE DROP.

BILLY WEST gathered the limp form of Ma Darrel in his strong arms, and stepped through the kitchen door, which stood ajar. He tripped over something, and glanced down.

There on the floor lay a stubby, bald-headed man, a flour-sack apron about his round middle. The man's eyes were open and staring sightlessly up at the ceiling.

That hombre was, Billy remembered, old "Tub" Barton—a D Bar cowboy who had been crippled in a stampede years ago and had stayed on as general roustabout. There was a bullet hole in Tub's forehead; another just over his heart.

Billy shuddered, stalked on through the kitchen, out into a big dining room, then into the great low-ceilinged living room. He laid Ma gently down on a red sofa, and whirled as something made a scraping sound down the room.

Billy's gun was half out before he recognized the red-smearred face of old Charley Darrel peering at him from beneath a bullet-shattered window.

"Ma!" Charley Darrel was croaking hoarsely. "Billy, where'd yuh come from? What—what's wrong with Ma?"

Hoofs rattled outside, and Billy lunged down the room. He poked his head through the bullet-torn window above Charley Darrel, yelled lustily at Buck, Joe, and Roy



Darrel, as the three tore into the back yard. Billy bobbed back inside, and knelt beside the old ranchman.

"I found Ma layin' out in the back yard, Charley," the Circle J boss said grimly. "She's out cold, but I can't see any signs of a wound."

"It—it's her heart!" the old ranchman gasped thickly. "Git that brown bottle on the mantel yonder; give her a teaspoonful o' the stuff in a little water! Since she was sick last year, her heart——"

Billy waited to hear no more. He leaped at the mantel, snatched the squat little brown bottle, and raced to the kitchen, just as Buck, Joe, and Roy ran in through the back door.

The three began shouting questions, but Billy only motioned them to follow as he snatched up a glass, dipped water into it from a bucket, then grabbed a spoon and hurried back toward the living room.

"Dad! Ma!" Roy Darrel cried in a stricken voice.

Old Charley Darrel had crawled out to the center of the floor, but he lay face down now, hands out-flung.

Billy saw that one of the old fellow's legs was twisted queerly beneath him, and knew that Charley Darrel had stopped lead with that leg.

Billy rushed to Ma, lifted her head gently, and held the glass which now contained water and medicine to her lips. She stirred a little, opened her eyes slowly, and looked blankly up at Billy.

"Drink this, Ma," Billy said.

She nodded her gray head, and sipped at the contents of the glass. She wallowed slowly until the glass was drained, then lay back, with a tired sigh.

Billy lowered her head to the cushioned couch, and turned to where Roy Darrel was standing white-faced and dazed.

Buck and Joe were already kneeling beside old Charley Darrel, slowly straightening out that twisted leg.

"Come alive, Roy!" Billy snapped. "Get some thin boards—shingles or anything—for splints. Hurry, man! We can set yore dad's leg now before he wakes up, which will save him a lot o' sufferin'."

"Stinton done this!" Roy cried through white lips. "Blast his ornery soul, Billy! I'll——"

"Get them splints!" Billy snapped sharply, giving Roy a shove. "Move! Get goin'!"

Roy seemed to understand, for he nodded, and went racing away.

Billy strode to where Buck and Joe were working over the D Bar owner.

Joe had slit the left leg of Charley Darrel's trousers from hip to ankle, and had cut the boot top away. There was an ugly wound just above the old fellow's knee, and Billy saw Joe Scott take hold of the lower leg, twist and pull until the limb was in line.

Billy dropped to his knees, lean fingers probing.

"Good work, Joe!" he approved. "Yuh've got the bone back in place, all right. Not such a bad break for the work of a bullet, at that."

"Shattered some, but nothin' serious, best I can tell," Joe grated. "What happened here, yuh reckon?"

Billy got no chance to reply just then. Roy Darrel came back into the room, carrying a steaming tea-kettle, washbasin, a folded sheet, and several long, thin pieces of board. He placed the kettle and basin on the floor, unfolded the sheet, and began hastily tearing it to pieces.

He stopped suddenly, dived a hand into a jacket pocket, and drew out a round black bottle.

"Disinfectant," he said, handing the bottle to Billy.

The Circle J boss nodded, uncorked the bottle, and spilled part of its contents into the washbasin. He dumped hot water into the basin next, and a pungent odor filled the room.

He probed and cleansed that ugly wound in Charley Darrel's leg, then hastily placed splints and bound them into place with wide strips which Roy Darrel had torn from the sheet.

Billy finished his task and glanced at an ugly gash along the old fellow's temple, which Joe Scott had already cleansed and was getting ready to bandage.

"Yore dad will have to be taken to town, Roy," Billy said grimly. "He's not fatally hurt. But that leg needs the attention of a sawbones. It will have to be put in one o' them plaster casts."

"Charley!" The cry brought the Circle J pards and Roy Darrel around quickly.

Ma Darrel was sitting on the edge of the sofa, white face quivering as she stared at her husband. She got to her feet and came forward, reeling weakly, brushing at her swimming eyes.

Roy caught her in strong arms. He spoke soothingly to her.

"Calm down, Ma," Roy spoke with forced quiet. "Dad's got a busted leg, but nothin' worse. The Circle J boys have fixed him up, too."

"Yeab, an' I'd as soon be worked on by a flock o' club-footed broncs!" old Charley Darrel snorted suddenly. "Wow, but this Joe Scott cowprod is about as gentle as a stampedin' dogie!"

The old fellow was conscious now, smiling wanly up at the circle of faces above him.

"Say, yuh wasn't awake when we worked on that leg," Billy said quickly. "Lay still, now, Charley. The splints I put on might slip if yuh don't. What happened here?"

"I don't rightly know, Billy, what did happen," Charley Darrel said wearily. "Ma, Tub, an' me was all out in the kitchen, gabbin' while Ma showed Tub how to singe and cut up a chicken for fryin'. Bullets come from every direction, an'—an' pore Tub keeled over, plumb dead."

"I grabbed the water bucket out of the way and tried to shut the kitchen door," Ma put in. "But—but I was scared bad, and things went black. I don't remember what happened."

"Yuh fell out the back door." Billy nodded. "I found yuh layin' there, an' brought yuh in here."

"Gaff Stinton will pay for this!" Roy snarled savagely. "I'm goin' over there an' blast that skunk out of his boots, that's what. I——"

"Yuh'll git blasted out o' yore boots if yuh don't elevate!" a voice rasped. "That goes fer yuh Circle J skunks, too. Lift 'em, blast yore hides! An' jist remember that the sheriff is backin' my play!"

Billy whirled, rage hammering at his brain. The front door had bulged silently open, and now Gaff Stinton came stalking into the room, murderous lights showing in his ugly eyes.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### BILLY WEST PLANS.

**B**ILLY WEST got a firm hold on Roy Darrel, just as the youth would have lunged down the room at Gaff Stinton. The Long S owner snarled an oath at Billy, lips twisting into an ugly sneer.

"Turn the young fool loose, West," Stinton rasped. "I'll put a slug through him if he gits ringy."

"No!" Ma Darrel cried thinly. "Roy, d-don't make trouble for yourself!"

The little old woman came hurriedly to her son, gripping his strong arms in her thin hands.

White-faced and shaking, Roy glared at Gaff Stinton, who came slogging on down the room, yellow eyes slitted and hot.

Stinton's big body was hunched forward, and Billy saw that the jasper's fingers were curling almost tightly enough against the triggers of his twin guns to send blazing death at Roy and Ma Darrel.

Billy realized suddenly that Stinton was bent on killing Roy Darrel, regardless of who else got hurt.

"Git away from yore whelp, old woman!" Stinton's voice rang out coldly. "Step back away from that young snake, yuh hear me? If yuh don't——"

Billy West's heart seemed to swell and hammer at his ribs in rapidly increasing beats. He felt cold all over, yet there was clammy moisture on his brow, and his whole body was as tense as a coiled spring.

But what could he do? A single false move on his part would cause the yellow-eyed killer to trip those triggers and send blazing lead into Ma and Roy Darrel.

"Stinton, yuh can't get by with it." Billy's voice was almost a croak. "If yuh shoot that boy down, the rest of us will get yuh, sure."

The fact that Stinton paid not the slightest attention to Billy was more alarming than anything else could have been. The Long S owner came on and on, treading with a certain lithe grace, despite his great bulk.

Billy saw veins swell out along Stinton's red neck—saw those tawny eyes dilate slowly, horribly.

Then Billy saw the first ray of hope, and felt as if he could shout wildly in relief from the awful nerve strain. The one purpose in Gaff Stinton's evil brain, at the moment, was to do a cold, ruthless killing. And Stinton was so absorbed with that idea that he made the grave mistake of stalking past Buck Foster and Joe Scott.

Joe Scott's freckled right fist made a stabbing motion toward his holstered gun. Buck saw, and followed suit by snatching at his own weapon.

Billy's breath caught in his lungs, held as if a steel band had been drawn about his throat. Would Buck and Joe make the mistake of yelling at Stinton? Any sudden sound would cause that tawny-eyed man to trip those triggers, and Billy tried desperately to catch the eyes of his two pard.

And now the relief he had felt a moment ago turned to new horror, for Buck Foster was reaching for the hammer of his Colt, mouth opening. Buck meant to yell, and Billy knew what that meant.

But Joe Scott was a much cooler thinker than Buck. Joe stepped forward. He laid the muzzle of his gun against the back of Stinton's corded neck.

"Steady!" Joe said in a calm, slow voice. "I'd have to kill yuh, Stinton, if yuh was to hang onto them guns much longer. Better drop 'em."

Gaff Stinton stopped like a man butting a wall. He became rigid, the color slowly draining from his cruel face. The evil murder rage faded from his eyes, and left him staring almost foolishly at Roy and Ma Darrel.

"I said drop yore cutters, Stinton!" Joe Scott snapped harshly, now that the danger was nearly past. "Let go——"

Stinton started to whirl, an oath ripping past his twisting lips. But Billy West had seen it coming, and was prepared to give Joe a hand.

Billy leaped, and there came the sharp, slapping sound of flesh striking flesh.

Gaff Stinton grunted. He spilled sidewise past Joe. Billy followed the falling man, and kicked the guns from his fingers.

Stinton sat up, pawing crimson from his nose, blinking his yellow eyes uncertainly.

Now that Ma and Roy Darrel were out of death's clutches, Billy West felt weak and a little dizzy. He breathed heavily, anger swelling slowly within him as he looked down at the dazed Long S owner.

Billy glanced out through the open door at a sound, then whirled quickly to Roy Darrel.

"Sheriff comin'," the Circle J boss clipped. "Roy, yuh skin out the back way an' get around the point while I keep Jim busy. Wait for me up in the pines where we were when we first heard the shootin' down here."

"But——" Roy began.

"Get!" Billy hissed sharply. "An' don't leave them pines until I come for yuh."

Roy caught the excitement in Billy's voice. He nodded. He turned suddenly, and ran jerkily out into the dining room.

"Yuh—yuh'll pay fer this, West!" Gaff Stinton bawled. "Lettin' that killer escape will——"

"Gag that snake, boys!" Billy hissed at Buck and Joe.

The pair grinned, and fell onto Stinton quickly. Billy hurried toward the door, just as a big grizzled

man stepped up onto the porch. The big man stopped, keen eyes widening a little.

"Why, hello, Jim!" Billy greeted, rushing out to meet the sheriff at the edge of the porch. "Yuh look some worried. What's the trouble?"

The sheriff scowled. He glanced past Billy.

"What in tarnation is goin' on here, son?" he asked sharply. "What was all that shootin' I heard? Yuh—— What's that?"

The sheriff half crouched, one big, powerful hand dropping to his holstered Colt. A smothered yell came from within the ranch house, and then sounds of scuffling.

Billy's pulse raced. He simply *had* to keep the sheriff busy out here until Roy Darrel had a chance to get clear.

"Oh, that fuss?" Billy tried his best to laugh naturally. "Why, Buck an' Joe are behind that racket, Jim. Yuh know how the sage hounds are."

"Uh-huh," the big sheriff grunted. "I also know that yo're as nervous as a frog in a hailstorm. What are yuh tryin' to hide from me, Billy?"

Billy shrugged, realizing the mistake of trying to hoodwink his old friend. He growled angrily, and flung a lean hand toward bullet-shattered windows along the wall of the D Bar ranch house.

"A bunch o' jaspers raided this place a while ago, Jim," Billy snapped. "Old Charley Darrel is layin' in there with a busted leg."

Billy told swiftly all that had happened since he reached the valley that morning. He omitted nothing. Nor did he lay particular stress on any part of the story.

The big sheriff listened attentively, seamed face growing dark with anger as Billy finished with his account of finding Ma Darrel

outside the back door and Tub Barton's body on the kitchen floor.

"Jim, I just sent Roy Darrel away from here," Billy said grimly. "The boy ain't guilty o' murder, like yuh've been told he is. If yuh ask me, Gaff Stinton or some of his bunch killed that Tom Smith waddy last night."

"What makes yuh think that?" the sheriff demanded sharply.

Billy frowned, really puzzled. "I don't know, Jim," he answered slowly. "But Roy Darrel knew this Tom Smith, an' said Tom was not like the other Long S gun slingers. Mebbe Stinton got afraid o' Smith, an' decided to get rid of him an' Roy all in one trick."

"Listen, Billy," the big sheriff growled. "Helpin' a criminal escape the law is a serious offense. Did yuh think o' that when yuh let Roy leave here?"

"Roy's no criminal," Billy flared. "Dang it, Jim, can't yuh see what's up? Stinton wants this place, an' aims to get Roy hung. When it looks like that might fail, he sends his ornery killers here to shoot up two old people an' a crippled cowboy."

"Why, yuh reckon?" the sheriff grunted, studying Billy's face intently.

"Because the snake wants this spread," the Circle J boss growled. "He's on the rustle, sheriff. Roy wouldn't lie about seein' Stinton an' his outfit drivin' Circle J beefs up this way."

"No, reckon not," the grizzled sheriff hummed. "Still, why would Stinton want this place so bad he'd do murder to get it?"

"Because it'd make him a sort of a king—the only ranchman for miles," Billy clipped. "It'd give him free rein here in the broken country. He'd have a rustler's paradise,

Jim, if he could get control o' this country up here."

"That's about the way I had it doped out, son," came the sheriff's surprising reply.

Billy showed the surprise he felt. "Eh?" he asked tensely. "Then yuh didn't fall for this stuff about Roy Darrel bein' a murderer an' thief?"

"Hardly!" the sheriff snorted. "I've known Roy since he was born. He's no more apt to turn thief an' killer than yuh or me, Billy."

"Gosh! I'm glad yuh look at it that way," Billy said honestly. "But, Jim, we'll have to prove that Roy had nothin' to do with that killin' last night. Or was this Tom Smith ranny killed?"

"Sure, the man them Long S snakes knowed as Tom Smith got drilled; otherwise, Stinton wouldn't have made this play at gittin' Roy Darrel hung," the sheriff snarled. "Tom Smith was a deputy U. S. marshal, Billy. He come to me before he ever got this job up here on the Long S, an' I give him what information I could."

"Then Smith let them Long S snakes get wise to him, an' they shut his mouth permanent!" Billy cried. "But what would a government man be after Stinton an' his bunch for, Jim?"

"Tom Smith—or Cole Richards, to call him by his right name—figured Gaff Stinton, Dick Waldo, an' Ben Newsome was three of a gang that wrecked an' robbed a mail train down in Wyomin'," the sheriff answered. "An' the last time I talked to Richards, he told me that he was about to pin the job on Gaff Stinton an' them other two."

"Gosh! If we could only prove that!" Billy clipped. "Stinton is tough, an' smart. But mebbe a little scare would make him pull a boner or two."



Billy talked swiftly for a minute, while the sheriff nodded swift agreement. When they turned to walk into the house, the sheriff was smiling grimly.

"If this works, Billy, yuh've saved me an' other officers a heap o' trouble," the sheriff said in a low tone. "But if it don't work, I'll look like a monkey when Stinton gits through spreadin' the news."

## CHAPTER IX.

### SURPRISE ATTACK.

**S**HERIFF JIM HAWKS went first to old Charley Darrel, and squatted beside the wounded man for a few moments, talking to him.

Darrel was sick, and the sheriff realized that the old fellow was teetering on the brink of unconsciousness.

Ma Darrel was there beside her husband, trying bravely to fight back the tears that rolled down her pale cheeks.

The sheriff swallowed at the lump in his throat, muttered a few words to Ma, then got to his feet. He strode down the room to where Buck Foster and Joe Scott were standing over Gaff Stinton.

Stinton was gagged with his own neckerchief, but his hands and feet were not bound, since there had been no rope handy. Stinton's yellow eyes turned pleadingly to the sheriff, and he made muffled sounds through the gag.

"Buck, yuh an' Joe can let that snake alone now," Billy called. "Buck, light out for that pine ridge an' fetch Roy back here. Joe, go see if yuh can find a team. Harness it up, if yuh can, an' hook it to the lightest wagon on the place."

"Dang it! What about this snake?" Buck Foster protested, jerking a horny thumb at Gaff Stin-

ton. "Yuh might need me hyar, Billy, in case——"

"Rattle yore hocks an' fetch Roy back here!" Billy cut in sharply. "Charley Darrel has got to get to town as quick as possible. Roy can take him, while the rest of us attend to Gaff Stinton."

"Mebbe I'd better not take Stinton into town an' lock him in jail, Billy." The sheriff frowned heavily, acting out the part Billy had assigned him. "I'll put these on him until I make up my mind, though."

Gaff Stinton had lifted his hands, ready to paw the gag from his jaws.

The sheriff seized those upflung wrists, twisted them behind Stinton's back, and snapped home a pair of steel handcuffs.

Gaff Stinton's yellow eyes fairly bulged out. He made a strangled sound through the gag, his face a dirty gray color as he stared up at the sheriff.

"Yeah, takin' him to town might be dangerous, at that." Billy West nodded gravely. "There were women an' children killed an' crippled when that Wyomin' train was wrecked. If a mob found out one o' the snakes that helped wreck that train was in jail——"

Billy was moving away, the sheriff at his side. They went on down the room, still talking.

Gaff Stinton looked after them, mingled horror, surprise, and savage anger in his yellow eyes. He got his thick legs under him, and flung his body up from the floor in a quick heave.

The sheriff spun at the sound, gun out in a single, quick motion.

"Set down over yonder in that corner, Stinton, or I'll shoot a leg out from under yuh," the officer ordered.

Gaff Stinton made strangled

sounds, shaking his head violently in an effort to rid himself of the gag. But when the sheriff very deliberately cocked his six-gun, Stinton slogged to the corner of the room and slid down the wall, trembling noticeably as his eyes roved wildly right and left.

He thumped the floor with his booted feet to attract attention, and kept trying to talk through the gag. But neither Billy West nor the sheriff gave him more than cold glances.

Sweat beaded Gaff Stinton's sloping forehead. The rage and doubt died slowly in his evil eyes, to be replaced by a stark fear that turned his skin still whiter.

Billy West saw, and nudged the sheriff, who nodded slightly. But not until Roy Darrel had shown up, and old Charley Darrel had been carried from the room on a mattress and bed springs, did Billy and the sheriff turn their full attention on Stinton again.

The dull *clack-clack-clack* of wagon hubs came from the ranch yard. Now the heavy wagon passed the front door, Ma and Roy Darrel on the spring seat.

In the wagon box, riding comfortably on mattress and springs, old Charley Darrel lay, gamely waving a thin hand at Buck and Joe, who stood on the porch.

The wagon left the yard, starting its long, slow trip to Twin Rivers, the nearest town.

Buck and Joe came inside, looking questioningly at Billy and the grim-eyed sheriff.

"By hokies, Jim Hawks, yuh am a smart hombre, even if yuh are a tin-star!" Buck Foster boomed, preening his long mustache. "I see yuh handcuffed thet skunk yonder instead of arrestin' Roy Darrel."

"Shore, he arrested Gaff Stinton,"

Joe Scott snapped. "What did yuh think he'd do, bonehead?"

But Joe was mighty curious to know just why the sheriff had handcuffed Gaff Stinton. He glanced at Billy, then at the sheriff.

"What—er—what charges yuh lodgin' agin' that skunk, sheriff?" Joe finally asked.

"Oh, nebbe quite a few," the sheriff said grimly. "Wreckin' an' robbin' a train is bad business. To say nothin' o' murderin' a U. S. marshal's depity."

Gaff Stinton made groaning sounds now, and slid down until he looked slumped and weary. His eyes, wide and staring, clung to the sheriff and Billy West, following them wherever they moved.

"Huh!" Buck Foster gasped. "So thet yaller-eyed snake has been up ter all them things, has he? Dang it, Jim, we ought ter string him up pronto!"

Billy and the sheriff could not have hoped for a better outburst.

Gaff Stinton shivered. He tried to yell through his gag. But his words were only blurred mutterings, which seemed to worry him considerably.

"Yuh see, boys, Tom Smith was a deputy U. S. marshal," Billy explained to Buck and Joe. "Stinton an' his outfit got wise that Smith was checkin' up on 'em, and—well, what would any gang do in a case like that?"

"Murder!" Joe Scott snarled. "So that's why that Smith ranny was killed, eh?"

"Mostly, I reckon." Billy nodded. "An' Stinton wanted this D Bar, so he got the bright idea o' framin' Roy Darrel for Smith's murder."

"The skunk didn't know that I savvied who Smith was an' what he was doin' up here," the sheriff put in. "When Stinton's man come

rompin' in to Twin Rivers this mornin' with that yarn about Roy Darrel raidin' an' killin' last night, I knowed what had happened."

Billy stole a sidelong glance at Gaff Stinton. The burly jasper was quivering from head to foot. And there was guilt in those bulging yellow eyes!

But it would take more than just appearances to convict Gaff Stinton. Billy reminded himself of that rather grimly, and began telling Buck and Joe how Stinton and his gang probably headed straight for the Montana country after their train job.

"They picked this spot, an' holed up like badgers, looks like," Billy finished, never stating anything sure. "Stinton aimed to get rid o' the Darrels, who were his only neighbors."

"Uh-huh." The sheriff nodded. "That way, him an' his gang would have the run o' this whole hunk o' mountain country. They could 'a' rustled an' robbed all over the State, with such a hide-out as this to come an' hole up in."

Buck and Joe became excited, and started asking questions. Billy and the sheriff answered, neither of them ever stating that Gaff Stinton was under arrest, or that he had done any of the crimes mentioned.

Minutes dragged into hours, and still the Circle J pards and the sheriff talked.

Joe Scott savvied what was taking place, and began stealing glances at the shivering Long S owner.

Buck didn't tumble to the fact that Gaff Stinton was simply being grilled.

Buck blew up every so often, loudly advising that the Long S man be hanged immediately.

Billy and the sheriff were silently thankful for those outbursts, and

did all they could to fan Buck's explosive temper. But both Billy and the sheriff were wearily glad when the sun set, and dusk began creeping over the mountains.

"We'll have to go tend to our broncs now," Billy said at last. "Buck, yuh stay here an' guard that jasper."

Billy found and lighted a lamp before leaving, then led the way outside as dusk was changing swiftly to darkness.

"Boy, but is that Stinton snake scared stiff!" Joe Scott exclaimed, the minute they were away from the ranch house. "I'll bet that skunk is ready to talk plenty. That's what yuh an' Jim figured to do, wasn't it?"

"Shore, we aimed to scare Stinton into talkin'," the sheriff rumbled. "An' it looks like we've done it. That jasper—— What in blazes!"

The sheriff, Billy, and Joe were halfway to the big corral, leading their horses as well as Buck's and Stinton's. They dropped those reins now, however, and whirled back toward the house.

A shot had ripped the silence, followed by a hoarse cry of pain or alarm. Another shot boomed out now, and the light in the ranch house winked out.

"Hurry!" Billy West yelled, and put on a burst of speed that carried him ahead of Joe Scott. Billy angled toward the back of the big ranch house, gun palmed, heart hammering in uneasiness.

A flash of burning powder speared at him from the kitchen door as he drew close. He fired at the flash, and swerved past the corner of the house. He raced down along the wall. He came to one end of the wide front porch, and leaped up on it.

Dark forms moved swiftly ahead

of him. Then a gun blared thunder and flame, and Billy felt a numbing blow in his side. He lost his balance, and toppled back just in time to knock Joe Scott sprawling.

There were shots, yells, and the strangely muffled sounds of shod hoofs somewhere beyond.

Billy tried wearily to sit up, but his muscles were leaden things. He heard some one shouting his name, and tried to answer.

But the pain in his left side sickened him; it made him groan through locked teeth. He lay back on the ground, and slipped into the black maw of unconsciousness as guns roared all around him.

## CHAPTER X.

### BILLY CALLS SHOW-DOWN.

**VOICES** and the blare of guns hammered at last through the fog that had settled over Billy West's brain. The guns were some distance away, but the voices were quite close.

Billy lay still for a full minute, listening while the last streamers of unconsciousness crept from his brain.

He remembered things slowly now, and began trying to locate those voices that hummed. He recalled the dash from the corral—a gun spitting death at him from the back door of the ranch house—another gun spitting at him as he leaped up onto the porch. He seemed to remember crashing back off the porch and falling against Joe Scott.

Where was Joe? Where were Buck Foster and the sheriff? Those voices—

Billy snapped to sudden attention. A spur rowel tinkled within a foot of his face!

"They're wise to us, shore!" It

was Gaff Stinton's voice, and the ornery buzzard was standing almost over Billy! "But we've got ter git 'em all, Dick. Yuh hear?"

"Yeah, I hear," Dick Waldo's hoarse voice replied sullenly. "I also hear healthier climates callin' me. Gaff, we ought ter be straddlin' the breeze fer the Southwest right now!"

"An' leave that Scott snake ter set a posse onto our trail!" Gaff Stinton sneered. "Yuh drilled Foster when yuh boys busted in there ter git me loose. Ben, here, says he knocked the sheriff over with a slug from the back door. An' Curt Fulton swears he dropped West offn the porch with a slug."

"Which leaves one man—Joe Scott," Ben Newsome said. "But where did West an' the sheriff go? They ain't where they fell, that's certain."

"Lon Ellis an' Ed Regan claim they seen Scott jump out the back door an' drag the sheriff inside," Gaff Stinton growled. "An' I'll bet the red-headed young fool come out here an' got West, too."

"There's six of us," Ben Newsome rasped. "Why don't we bust in thar an' smoke that Scott snake out? We could do it easy, then fog down the road an' overtake them Darrels. We've got ter drill them three Darrels, if we stay in this country."

"Bustin' into a dark house on a gent that's got a gun is bad business," Gaff Stinton snarled. "But there's other ways. This log house will burn, won't it?"

There was a moment of silence, in which Billy West held his breath lest those three cutthroats locate him. Billy's hand had already gone to his holster, and found it empty.

He remembered that he had had his gun in his hand when that slug knocked him off the porch. He

would have dropped the gun, of course.

Billy saw that he had rolled in under one end of the porch, and that there were three pairs of booted feet within arm's reach of him. He ground his teeth in savage anger, wishing mightily that he had his Colt.

So Buck and the sheriff had been killed, had they? Billy trembled with the rage that was urging him to leap out barehanded at those three killers.

Yet he had better sense than to do such a thing. His only hope was to slip away, get into the house, and aid Joe Scott.

"By gosh! Yuh've hit it. Gaff!" Dick Waldo's hoarse voice boomed. "While us boys was hidin' in that shed over yonder an' waitin' fer dark so's we could find out what was wrong with yuh, we found a big can o' coal oil. With that——"

The trio were moving away now, all talking at once.

Billy West waited until they were well away from the spot, then dragged himself slowly from beneath the porch.

His outflung hand struck something, and a moment later, he was gripping his own gun, snarling to think that the weapon had been so close without his knowing it. But he had it now, and the wild rage that possessed him brought him lurching to his feet.

He whirled to the porch and leaped upon the end of it. Terrific pain tore at his left side, causing him to stagger. He reeled sidewise—caught the wall with an outflung hand.

And that reeling saved his life. For a hoarse voice called to him; then a gun spat orange flame from down the porch.

Billy West thumbed the hammer

of his own gun, snarling angrily through the roar that followed the fall of the spiked hammer.

He heard a muffled oath—saw a man scooting hastily off the porch into the yard.

Billy raced along the wall then, teeth locked against the pain in his wounded side. He sent another shot screaming after the scuttling shadow, then dropped to hands and knees beside the front door.

The jasper who had gone down into the yard was shooting again. But his slugs were thumping the log wall three feet above Billy's head.

The Circle J boss got the door open, flattened out, and snaked inside. Flame ripped the dark room ahead of him, and he heard the squall of a bullet glancing from the slanted door.

"Joe!" Billy yelled frantically. "Hold yore fire an' keep low! It's me—Billy!"

Boots thumped the floor somewhere in the room. Then Joe Scott's voice came in a fear-choked gasp.

"Billy!" Joe called. "Did—did my slug——"

"Went a yard over me!" Billy put in quickly, kicking the heavy door shut behind him and getting to his feet. "Where's Buck an' Jim?"

"In the kitchen," Joe rasped. Billy stood there for a moment, breathing heavily, dreading to ask the question that he could not help asking. "They're—done for?" he gasped out at last.

"Huh?" Joe blurted. "Oh, heck no, Billy! Buck's got a busted collar bone from a slug that almost finished him. Jim has got a slug through his left hip, but the bone ain't—— Smoke!" The last word came in a strangled shout.

Billy smelled the acrid smoke now—smoke that was heavy with the odor of burning kerosene. A weird

red light flared from beyond the end window of the house. It grew stronger by the moment. Billy remembered what he had heard as he lay under the porch, and swiftly explained to Joe.

"Then we're licked!" the redhead snarled grimly. "When we pile out o' here, they'll blow us out o' our boots. Buck an' the sheriff can't travel fast enough to get away, if we make a break."

"Not if we wait too long," Billy rasped. "But mebbe, Joe, yuh an' me could sort o' clear a path for Buck an' Jim. If we waltzed out there now——"

"Git waltzin'!" Joe chuckled grimly. "I've got a nicked left arm, but my gun hand is still workin'. Come on!"

Billy whirled, jerked the door open. He spoke a low word to Joe as the redhead came to his side. Then they were out of the door, leaping across the porch, bent low.

A form loomed before them, and a man's voice lifted in what would have been a yell.

Joe Scott lunged forward, Colt chopping down. The form wilted, and the two Circle J punchers swarmed off the porch and toward a corner of the house.

"One!" Joe tallied grimly.

They rounded the corner of the house and swung wide into the yard. A few moments later, they were coming toward the back of the ranch house, where three fires roared along the wall.

Billy nudged Joe, and they laughed silently, grimly. There, clearly outlined against the leaping flames, were Gaff Stinton, Dick Waldo, and Ben Newsome, watching the back door and the windows. The puny sound of a six-gun came from inside the kitchen.

"Come out!" Gaff Stinton roared.

"Waltz out o' thar, Scott, with yore hands up! If yuh don't——"

"I'm already out, skunk!" Joe Scott yipped. "What do yuh aim to do about it?"

Stinton and his two men spun, crouching over palmed guns. They must have realized their plight, for they yelled savage oaths as they spied the two Circle J punchers walking grimly toward them.

"Yo're caught in yore own fire trap, Stinton!" Billy West yelled. "Better drop yore guns an'——"

"Gun 'em!" Gaff Stinton wailed. "Drop them snakes, boys, or we'll swing fer that Wyomin' job! That snoopy Tom Smith lawman we kilt last night has talked, blast his——"

Guns roared then—guns that were gripped by men whose only chance was to shoot their way out of this trap.

Billy and Joe advanced more swiftly now, weaving, dodging, shooting calmly. Joe Scott seemed to stumble—fell to his knees. But he kept shooting. His wild battle cry came above the blast of his gun.

"Yip-ee-e-e-e!" Joe screeched. "Lead an' smoke from Circle J!"

Three other figures scuttled around the corner of the house, took one look at the scene, and began shooting. But before those three cutthroats could become accustomed to the glaring light, the back door of the ranch house ripped open almost behind them, and two reeling old-timers waltzed out behind blazing guns.

Buck Foster and the sheriff came out side by side, their guns spitting death into the suddenly confused killers. Two of the three who had just come around the house fell kicking, almost in the fire they had helped start.

Billy saw, and began yelling the Circle J battle cry, letting the sher-



iff and Buck know his position. A bullet ripped past Billy's face; another plopped through the leather of his flapping calfskin vest.

Then Billy caught a fair target over his sights, and sent a hunk of blazing lead through Ben Newsome's snarling face.

Dick Waldo and Gaff Stinton were scooting for safety now, firing wildly as they edged along the wall.

Billy swung out to head them, but flopped forward on his face as a slug tore the flesh across his ribs.

Breathless, a little dazed, he propped himself up in time to see Dick Waldo and Gaff Stinton rushing at him, their faces savage in the red glare of the burning ranch house. Their guns were up, searching for a target.

Billy centered his gun muzzle, squeezed the trigger.

Dick Waldo rocked back, arms windmilling, mouth hanging open. There was a bullet hole just under Dick Waldo's left eye that sent a thin finger of red tracing down his face before he crashed forward in death.

But Billy had little time to see such things. A slug hissed through his hair, leaving a hot streak across his scalp. Another blasted dirt into his face. Billy rolled swiftly and twisted his gun muzzle.

Gaff Stinton was leaping at him now with spiked boot heels, face a twisted, savage thing in the red light of the fire. Billy's gun boomed, yet Stinton came on, and landed atop him with terrific force.

Billy twisted under the weight, brought his Colt out and up, ready to strike. But he realized suddenly that Gaff Stinton was limp, unmoving.

Billy wriggled out from under the heavy weight and sat up slowly. Buck and Joe were beside him, their

faces drawn, guns ready to blaze at Gaff Stinton. Sheriff Jim Hawks stood yonder by the burning house, keeping two wounded, snarling Long S men under a steady gun.

"Billy, Jim an' me heard these snakes talkin' while we was hunkered down in the kitchen," Buck Foster growled hoarsely. "There's a bunch o' Circle J cattle hid out up hyar some place thet these coyotes stole. An' the hull Long S outfit was in on that train job down in Wyomin'."

Billy got slowly to his feet. He limped painfully toward the sheriff, who was herding his prisoners away from the terrific heat of the burning ranch house.

"These two jaspers is ready to talk, Billy," the sheriff called exultantly. "They'll show us where Circle J an' D Bar cattle are hid out in the mountains. Pore ol' Charley Darrel is losin' his house, but he'll git his stock back, anyhow."

"An' we'll git ourn back, too," Buck Foster growled. "These Long S snakes will talk if I have ter whittle their blasted carcasses with a dull butcher knife!"

"An' yuh boys will git a fat reward, Billy, for this day's work," the sheriff chuckled grimly. "There's plenty dinero offered for the capture o' this train-robbin' gang."

"Reward?" Billy asked sharply. "Jim, yuh know Circle J never accepts reward money. But I reckon Charley Darrel can use it. Yep, that's the ticket, Jim! Charley Darrel gets that reward money, savvy?"

"Gosh, Billy, I can make it that way, if yuh say so," the sheriff gasped. "But there's a heap o' dinero on the heads o' these snakes. Yuh an' Buck an' Joe come over here——"

"An' helped a neighbor that needed help," Billy cut in. "Charley Darrel will be laid up for months, an' will have to have a new house built. That reward money goes to him, sheriff."

"That's white o' yuh, son," the sheriff said a little thickly. "I happen to know that Charley has been hard run, what with his cattle bein' stole like they have."

The sheriff cleared his throat noisily, then turned on his two prisoners.

"Git along, yuh two noose-bound jaspers!" he shouted. "Yuh'll show

us where them stolen cattle are held, then take a little ride ter town with me. I've got a couple o' cells in my jail house that'll just fit yuh snakes."

Them Long S snakes thought they had easy pickin's when they tackled the D Bar. But they didn't reckon on Circle J gittin' inter the party. An' when Billy West an' his pards take a hand, thar's bound ter be only one kind o' party—a surprise party, with six-gun music an' hot lead fer refreshments. Watch fer 'em ter be back pronto in another quick-draw an' fast-ridin' story. Shore, it'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



### A SPORTING CATTLEMAN

AT Fort Valley, in northern Arizona, a large barn with a dozen box stalls that had provided comfortable quarters for a string of Kentucky thoroughbreds, was all that was left of the most famous cattle ranch in the old Southwest, and even that may have disappeared by now.

The ranch was owned by Captain B. B. Bullwinkle, field manager of the Arizona Cattle Company. He was a lover of fast horses, and his pets could not be matched for speed in all Arizona. Some of their wonderful records are still told and retold, and remain among the legends of range days.

The captain was also fond of playing poker. No stakes were too high, and no man was too good a player for him to match his skill with. One Saturday night in May, 1887, he played a game with Frank Vanderlip in "Sandy" Donahue's saloon in Flagstaff.

Vanderlip's sporting spirit was just as strong as Bullwinkle's, but

on this occasion it so happened that he had no money.

Bullwinkle solved the difficulty by suggesting that they make steers legal tender, with the herds the limit. And the game began.

It caused great excitement among the onlookers who crowded around the table. When it was over, Captain Bullwinkle held three aces, and walked out with a mixed herd of steers, cows, bulls, and heifers, and a big stock ranch in his pocket.

In 1888, the popular ranchman met a tragic death. He was riding out to keep an appointment with the Hashknife foreman, and was a short distance from Flagstaff when his horse stumbled and fell, throwing its rider so violently that he was killed instantly.

Captain Bullwinkle remains to this day one of the best remembered men in the northern Arizona cattle business, not only for his fair dealings and his sportsmanship, but also for his kind heart and his generous nature.



# Gun Smoke Fer Skunks

A "Shorty Masters" Story

By Allan R. Bosworth

Author of "The Kidnaped Mule," etc.

**D**ISTANT six-guns rumbled on the still, hot air and rolled growling echoes down the tumbled wastes of Ladino Canyon. A hawk spread startled wings from a lightning-blasted cedar. The six freight mules, standing on the trail that skirted the steep cliff, threw nervous ears forward.

"Shorty" Masters, M. D. (Mule Driver), twisted a valve and shut off the roaring flame of the kerosene prickly-pear burner with which he was searing the spines of cactus so live stock could eat it. The bow-legged, freckle-faced little freighter turned slowly toward his wagons, listening intently.

It sounded as if the "Sonora Kid" was in trouble again. Whenever

guns blazed within miles of the tall cowboy who was Shorty's pard, it was practically a cinch that the Sonora Kid was involved.

*Crash! Crash!* Canyon walls muffled the shots and made them sound like the falling of huge masses of rock from the rim of the winding gulch.

There were two more explosions in quick succession. Echoes rolled down the canyon, became a single, confused disturbance, and died. The silence was strained and eloquent.

Shorty compressed his lips in a tight, grim line, and started back to the wagons. Willie Wetherbee, the Sonora Kid, had ridden up the canyon to scout for thickets of

prickly pear. He hadn't been gone an hour.

"And now I reckon he's gone and done it again!" Shorty addressed the six sleek mules. "If he's got in a scrap with somebody on the Bar O, our contract to burn pears fer Bob Owens will jest go up in powder smoke!"

The sawed-off mule skinner unstrapped the small kerosene tank from his back and hoisted it and the slender length of pipe and hose into the wagon. Hauling was slack between the cow town of Tarantula and the railroad at Stockton, and Shorty had been quick to see the possibilities in this new device which sprayed burning kerosene on prickly pears and left the leaves fit for cattle to eat. There was drought in the Big Bend, and feed was scarce.

"The hombre that invented this dingus will make a lot o' dinero," muttered the teamster. "And Willie and me can make as much as we'd make freightin'—if he'd jest stay out o' trouble."

He shifted a black-butted .45 around within easier reach and listened again. All was quiet, now, up the canyon.

Then the *slog-slog* of trotting horses drifted around the turn. Shorty leaped to the driver's seat and seized the reins. He stood tense and waiting, ready to go for his gun.

Two horsemen loomed in the brush and bore down toward the freight outfit. Shorty sank back to the seat with a feeling of relief. One of the riders was the tall, dark-faced Sonora Kid, and he wasn't hurt.

The other man, astride a dark bay cayuse, was a big, powerfully built hombre who rode slightly to the rear of Wetherbee and scanned the road from beneath a dusty black Stetson. Shorty saw his hand flash to his

holster as he approached. And then, for the first time, the little freighter could see Willie's face.

What he saw under the brim of the Sonora Kid's hat made him gasp with surprise. Willie was wearing a black mask! No, it wasn't a mask—it was a black smudge across his eyes. Soot, from the smoke-grimed nozzle of the pear burner, Shorty decided. A grin split the mule-skinner's freckled face.

"Howdy, *bandido!*" he called. "What yuh been doin'—robbin' a bank?"

The two riders reined in, and the big man jerked his head toward Shorty Masters.

"Know this hombre?" he asked.

Shorty's grin faded. The Sonora Kid lifted his hands to rub his chin and leave another smudge there, and Shorty saw handcuffs gleaming on his partner's wrists.

He gasped again and was about to demand the reason for Willie's arrest when the tall waddy shook his head meaningly. Willie wanted him to keep quiet.

"I asked yuh if yuh knew this here mule prodder!"

The Sonora Kid nodded. "Shore, I've seen him around Tarantula," he drawled. "I've heard about them mules, too. They're kind o' famous in the Big Bend."

Shorty's eyes widened with incomprehension, and he opened his mouth. Wetherbee winked and again flashed that mysterious warning.

"Famous mules?" snorted the big man. He glared at the six freight animals, and scratched his head. As he raised his arm, the badge of a Texas Ranger glittered underneath his vest. "How could mules ever be famous?"

The Sonora Kid chuckled. "Well, I heard about these long-eared

jacks. It seems they was all foaled by a mare named Lucy, and this here freighter is a musical gent. So he named 'em the 'Sextet from Lucia.' It don't make sense, but mule, skimmers is loco, anyhow. Say, Sanders, if yuh got to take me to town, there ain't no use wastin' time here!"

Sanders switched his glare to Shorty. "I jest wanted to make shore yuh wasn't in cahoots with each other," he said. "Freighter, yuh know this hombre?"

"I've heard o' him, too," Shorty said truthfully. "They call him the Sonora Kid, and he's got a reputation fer bein' fast with his gun."

The Ranger eyed him narrowly. "Yeah, he shore has. Well, he robbed a stage and killed the driver—him and five other waddies. The rest got away, but I captured the ringleader. If yuh don't know him, what made yuh ask if he'd been robbin' a bank?"

"I saw that—that black stuff on his face and thought it was a mask."

"That's what he was usin' it fer," Sanders said. "All right, Sonora. Let's git movin'!"

Wetherbee hesitated before starting Tumbleweed, his glossy sorrel cow pony. "What yuh haulin', Masters?" he asked. "That's yore name, ain't it—Masters?"

Shorty nodded, still a little dazed. "I ain't haulin' anything. I'm doin' a job of burnin' the stickers off of prickly pears so cows can eat 'em. I got one of them new-fangled kerosene oil burners."

"Oh, burnin' pears, eh?" The Sonora Kid pressed his knees against Tumbleweed and started on down the canyon. He looked back over his shoulder. "Say, there are shore a lot of prickly pears up toward the head of the canyon—at a place called Devil's Den!"

He flashed Shorty another meaning glance, and the little freighter nodded to show he understood. But he didn't—he was far from understanding.

Devil's Den—he had heard of the place. Somehow, it was tied up with this mystery of a stage robbery and a killing—a mystery in which the tall Sonora Kid had become strangely involved and was doing nothing to clear himself!

## II.

Shorty watched the pair over the back of his wagons. They put their horses into a trot and vanished around another turn down the canyon, headed for Tarantula.

"I'll be dawg-goned!" muttered the freighter weakly as he sat down. "I cain't figure this out a-tall! I know Willie didn't rob no stage. I reckon he jest happened to wipe his hand across his eyes and made it look like he was wearin' a mask, and then he happened onto this stage robbery, and Sanders thought he was one of the gang!"

Whatever it was, the Sonora Kid expected his partner to go to Devil's Den. There, perhaps, Shorty would find the answer. But why didn't Willie tell the Ranger? Why had he pretended the two sidekicks were strangers?

"I don't savvy a-tall, mules!" Shorty lamented. "But we're aheadin' fer Devil's Den, and we'll be ready to sling lead! Giddap!"

Wagon wheels rumbled over the rocky trail as the freight outfit climbed around the twisting road which clung to the canyon wall. Swaying on the lurching seat, the little teamster kept his eyes peeled on both sides. If there had been a gang of five men, as the Ranger said,

some of them might still be in the vicinity of Ladino Canyon.

Bandits could scarcely have chosen a more fitting place for a holdup. Wind-twisted cedars and scrub-oak trees reared a ragged screen at one side of the road. The canyon wall rose sheer on the other side. The Sextet from Lucia rounded a turn—and Chopin and Mozart, the lead mules, reared suddenly.

"Whoa!" Shorty yelled.

Here was the holdup scene. The stage had been shied to the side of the road, and the four-horse team was tethered to a tree trunk. At first glance, everything was peaceful—and then Shorty saw the driver, sprawled on the seat, arms dangling over the side. The very position of the man was expressive of sudden death.

For a half minute, Shorty sat surveying the grim evidence of tragedy. Then he shook the reins over the Sextet, drove past the abandoned stage, and pulled the wagons over to the side of the trail.

"Whoa!" he ordered. "This is about eight miles from town, and Devil's Den ain't more than a mile up there, farther on. I reckon there would be some tracks, if that's the way they went. Here's where I borrow myself a hoss!"

There was a saddle in the wagons—the saddle Shorty had used as a cow-puncher, before he went into the freighting business. He unhitched a powerful, deep-chested roan from the stage harness, and cinched the saddle on the horse.

"You and me are goin' places!" he told the animal. "When it comes to pullin', yuh couldn't hold a candle to one o' my mules. But fer fast travelin', I got to use a hoss."

He led the roan to the steep bank that slanted, through brush,

boulders and prickly pear, toward the bottom of Ladino Canyon. The hoofprints were plain in the soft soil. The gang had ridden down this way to cross toward Devil's Den, on the opposite side.

Shorty hitched his .45 around and put his boot toe in the stirrup. Then he hesitated.

"Mebbe I ought to take that pear-burner along," he told himself. "Anybody seem' me comin' would be a little less suspicious!"

He went back to the wagons and lifted out the contraption with its hose-and-pump attachment which put air pressure on the kerosene tank. Slipping the strap over his shoulder, he returned and forked the borrowed cayuse.

"If they ain't there, mebbe I can burn off some pears fer the Bar O stock real quick," the freighter thought. "Then I'll high-tail it fer town, and——"

"Stick 'em up!" roared a voice.

Shorty sucked in a sharp breath. He whipped his hand toward the butt of his six-gun, but he was too late. A thunderous clamor filled the canyon. The freighter's Stetson jerked on his head as if somebody had struck it smartly with a whip, and a bullet splashed against the cliff farther up the hill.

There was a tall man moving steadily into the open space just ahead of the mule skinner, a smoking gun in his hand. He wore a greasy jumper, and he had not shaved for weeks.

"Climb down off that hoss, hombre!" he ordered harshly. "The next bullet won't be through yore hat—savvy?"

"What's the idea?" Shorty demanded hotly. "I'm jest goin' acrost here to burn some prickly pears, and——"

"Yuh ain't goin' nowhere, runt!"



growled the tall man. "Climb down. And keep yore hands away from yore sides. Pronto!"

Shorty sighed, and swung his leg over the saddle, giving a slight tug on the roan's bridle as he did so. The horse turned. For an instant, the cayuse was between Shorty and the man with the gun.

That split second was loud, and crowded with flaming action. Shorty suddenly ducked under the roan's head and came up with his gun blazing. The outlaw shouted wildly and leaped forward, firing his own weapon.

*Braang!* Dirt kicked up over the leaf mold at Shorty's feet.

The tall man was lurching toward him on dragging feet and buckling knees, his bearded face twitching as he tried to lift the heavy gun for another shot. Then he sagged and sprawled face downward, his hands twitching convulsively.

Shorty leaped behind the shelter of a boulder and made ready for an attack from the other stage robbers. But there was only silence in Ladino Canyon. The sawed-off freighter holstered his gun and crossed to the side of the slain outlaw.

"Now *he* cain't tell me anything about this here mystery!" Shorty muttered, turning the man over. "I wonder who he is!"

He searched the pockets of the greasy jumper, and found a piece of plug tobacco, some loose cartridges, and a soiled envelope which was addressed to Jack Beale, Tarantula.

After some hesitation, Shorty read the penciled message within, while his eyes widened with amazement:

Be ready for a job Thurs. Meet at mouth Ladino canon befoar noon. \$10,000 going out eather on Stockton or Golondrina stage. I have took care of that Smart

Alick Ranger who was gotten too nosie and ever thing is clear agin. Pass the word to Willie and the rest.

The note was not signed. Shorty read it for a second time, and the words swam before his eyes. "Pass the word to Willie——"

"If Willie shore-enough was here when they robbed the stage, he was tricked into it!" announced the little freighter defiantly. "And the Ranger—I wonder if Sanders was captured and got away or some-thin'? This letter sounds like they killed the Ranger. I reckon I ought to take this letter to town and show it to the sheriff. I'll bet the Sextet against a flop-eared burro that the rest of the gang is over holdin' up the Golondrina stage right now!"

He unslung the pear burner and left it under a cat's-claw bush. The Golondrina road, over beyond Ladino Canyon, was not more than six miles. If the outlaws were using Devil's Den for a headquarters, they'd probably be back before any posse could come from town.

Shorty turned the roan out on the road, then hit it with the spurs.

"Lay yore belly in the sand, hoss!" he ordered. "Yuh ain't pullin' a hack, now. *Andale!*"

### III.

A cloud of alkali dust boiled off the flat and swept into Tarantula to the accompaniment of drumming hoofs. The roan cayuse was proving its endurance and speed.

A few idle whittlers looked up in surprise as the mule skinner pulled the horse to a sliding halt in front of the adobe jail.

Shorty's boots hammered the wooden sidewalk and missed the steps entirely as he bounded into the sheriff's office.

"Jim Morgan!" he yelled. "Jim Morgan!"

The grizzled sheriff came from the rear, jamming a battered Stetson on his shock of white hair.

"What's the matter, here? What's happened now? Oh, howdy, Shorty! Yuh want to see the Sonora Kid, I reckon."

"I want yuh to turn him loose!" Shorty panted. "He didn't have nothin' to do with that stage holdup. Where's Sanders?"

"Yuh mean that Ranger? He hit it back down the Golondrina road, lookin' fer the rest of the bandits. He sent a posse under one of my deputies out west o' town, and asked me to stay here and watch Sonora."

Shorty frowned. "West o' town? They wouldn't be headin' west! They'll high-tail it toward the Rio!"

"Well, I dunno, son. Sanders seemed to have some information about the plans of the outlaws."

"Let's talk to Willie, sheriff! There's somethin' crooked here, and mebbe we can straighten it out!"

Morgan obliged by leading the way back to the cell at the rear of the dim corridor. The Sonora Kid flashed a likable smile at his pard.

"Howdy, Shorty! Did yuh go to the Devil's Den, like I told yuh to?"

"I didn't git that far!" Shorty told them about the outlaw he had killed, and produced the letter. Jim Morgan's bushy white eyebrows drew together in a frown as he read the note.

"It says here they took care of the Ranger!" he said. "That would mean they killed him or captured him. Sanders didn't say nothin' about bein' captured, and it's a cinch he wasn't killed! And the letter from Austin said they was sendin' *one* Ranger out here to look into the stage-robbery situation!"

"That's what I'm tryin' to tell yuh, sheriff!" declared Wetherbee. "That hombre ain't a Ranger. If he was, he could have killed a couple of the robbers. He didn't even swap shots with 'em!"

"What happened?" Shorty asked.

"Well, I was ridin' along the canyon, lookin' fer prickly pear and findin' plenty of it, when I heard somebody comin' through the brush. I pulled Tumbleweed behind a cedar and listened. They come right by me, and I heard 'em say somethin' about Devil's Den, and about the Stockton stage. One of 'em spoke up and wanted to bet somebody else that the dinero wasn't on the Stockton stage at all, but would be on the Golondrina stage."

"That's right!" exclaimed Morgan. "The ten thousand dollars was bein' sent to Stockton, all right, but the bank figured it would be safer to send it in a roundabout way!"

"Well, I follered 'em up to the road. I heard the shot that killed the stage driver, and I busted in on 'em and started shootin'. Then this hombre Sanders rode up from behind and grabbed me, pinnin' my arms. He didn't fire a shot—and the outlaws didn't shoot at him. So I reckon he's in cahoots with the gang."

Sheriff Morgan's keys jingled. "Sonora," he said, "I'm goin' to parole yuh temporarylike. Yuh can go with Shorty and me. We'll hit fer Devil's Den and see if we can smoke them skunks out!"

Shorty grinned. "That's the stuff, sheriff! It looks to me like Sanders got the posse out on the wrong trail so there wouldn't be nobody left to bother him. He figures *I'm* dead by now. Willie told me to go on to Devil's Den to burn some prickly pear and—— Say, that gives me an idee! Let's git our hosses!"

Morgan led Tumbleweed and his own cayuse, a wiry chestnut mustang, from the stable at the rear of the jail. He was still frowning in perplexity.

"Ain't but one thing that looks kind o' bad fer you, Sonora," he said as they swung into their saddles. "That letter mentions Willie."

"Well, that's a purty common name!" Shorty defended. "How many Willies do *you* know?"

Jim Morgan reflected. "Five—or mebbe six. I'll take a chance. Come on, we'll have to ride fast to git to Devil's Den before dark! The place is tough enough in daylight. There ain't but one trail in, and I reckon one man could stand off twenty from them rocks. Me and Bob Owens trailed a panther in there once. The prickly pear is neck high, and so close yuh need a suit of this here armor to go through anywhere but on the trail!"

Shorty grinned. "Leave that to me!" he said. "I got an idea. See if yuh can git a lope out o' that cayuse!"

They rode swiftly, saying nothing. Shorty shot a sidelong glance at the Sonora Kid, and saw his lean, dark face was set grimly. If Sanders *did* prove to be a Ranger, it would be difficult for Willie to clear himself.

Saddle leather squeaked, and the hoofs of the three horses beat a steady, mile-eating tattoo on the dusty trail. The sun dropped toward the ragged rim rocks, lengthening the shadows from the ghostly mesquites. The three riders came to the mouth of Ladino Canyon, and swept into its cool gloom.

"The Golondrina stage didn't leave town until late—jest before Sanders come in with Sonora!" Morgan said. "If it was held up, and I reckon it was, the outlaws will jest

about be comin' back to Devil's Den along about this time."

"Yeah, and they'll wait till it's dark, then strike out for the border!" Shorty surmised. "Here's my freight outfit. Let me see if the Sextet is all right."

The mules were resting in the cool shade of the trees. Shorty looked them over with pride, then led the way down the canyon side to where he had hidden the pear burner. Here he dismounted and slipped the strap over his shoulder.

"What's the use loadin' yoreself down with that?" demanded Morgan. "Yuh may have to move fast to dodge bullets!"

"Yuh said there ain't but one trail, didn't yuh?" Shorty countered. "Well, we'll make our own! We can burn a path through them prickly pears, from any direction! And if the outlaws try to come down the trail, we can burn *them* with hot lead!"

"Gosh, that's a swell idea!" chuckled the Sonora Kid. "Shorty is always figurin' out strategy of some kind!"

"Mebbe so," Morgan admitted. "But it's goin' to take plenty of plain and fancy gun-slingin', too. Come on!"

They rode more slowly, now, picking a trail through the brush that clung to the steep wall of the canyon on its farther side. The sun was setting as they topped the rim. Ahead of them, in a wild upheaval of rock and veritable forest of cactus, was Devil's Den.

The thicket of spiny growth was about a quarter of a mile square, covering a hill that sloped upward from all sides to an apex of tumbled boulders which towered forbiddingly above the prickly pear. Devil's Den was well named, Shorty thought.

There was no sound to indicate

that any of the outlaws were in the place. Morgan lifted his hand and shaded his eyes against the sunset.

"Leave the hosses here!" he ordered. "I reckon they must have took their cayuses in with them—if they're here, yet. Mebbe we're kind of early. If we could git up to the rocks before they——"

*Zzzzit! Bang!*

A bullet ripped dust from a near-by rock and whined over Ladino Canyon with an eerie, high-pitched squeal. The clean, sharp crack of a .30-30 Winchester came from the summit of boulders.

Shorty slid to the ground and led the roan to safety behind a pile of boulders. The others followed.

"They're here," Wetherbee said grimly. "Where's the trail?"

The sheriff pointed to the right. "Over there. We might be able to go up it a little ways. But after it makes a turn, we would be right in plain sight from the rocks!"

"Yuh can show us where that turn is!" Shorty said.

#### IV.

Advancing cautiously along a rocky, narrow path, with prickly pear towering above them in some places, the trio entered Devil's Den. Now and then the rifle barked, and its slugs ripped through the leaves of the cactus with a spatting sound that sent shivers running along Shorty's spine. That was how a bullet sounded when it struck human flesh.

There seemed to be only one rifle. But there would be plenty of six-guns, when they came within range. Shorty stooped low, although the cactus was well above his head. Here and there a side path opened to go only a few yards, and then narrow to a point where passage

would have been impossible except, as Morgan had said, for a man wearing armor.

The sheriff halted suddenly, breathing hard from the steady climb. Shorty bumped into him, and the kerosene tank slung from his shoulder rattled with a tinny sound.

"Here's the turn!" whispered Morgan. "She goes up that way fer a hundred feet, then twists again, where yuh can see them boulders stickin' up. When yuh git there, yuh ain't more than seventy-five feet from the center!"

"Here's where we begin' blazin' a trail, then!" Shorty retorted, fumbling for a match.

He set the tank on the ground and gave the pump a few strokes, then turned the valve and applied the match to the nozzle.

The pear burner's flame licked out, a bright jet in the gathering gloom. Shorty swung it toward the prickly pear. There was a crackling, sizzling sound. The spines of the cactus flamed brightly and vanished.

"See how she works?" Shorty grinned. "Jest foller me, now, and be ready to shoot. We'll cut our way over to them rocks!"

He advanced, a step at a time, swinging the length of pipe from side to side. The hot leaves of prickly pear, denuded of their protective thorns and dripping with juice as the heat split the smooth skin, brushed against his jumper and corduroys.

*Braang! Br-oom!* That was no rifle, but a .45.

Heavy lead ripped into the cactus. A slug tore the sheriff's jumper sleeve. He drew his own six-gun and kept moving, closely behind Shorty and the tall Sonora Kid.

"Hey, Willie!" came a shout from

the rocky citadel of Devil's Den. "Willie! They're burnin' the pears!"

Shorty turned to flash Morgan a significant glance. "There's yore Willie!" he said. "Yuh see?"

"Shore, I knowed yuh was right, all the time!" Morgan answered. "Move on—you're doin' fine!"

The mule skinner moved, painting the trail with lurid flame. Guns clamored above the hissing, crackling noise of the burner. Bullets glanced from rocks and screamed by their heads. The Sonora Kid, always cool in the face of danger, chuckled.

"They're shore wastin' their ammunition! But it would be better if we strung out a little. Let me take that pear burner a while, Shorty! About all they can see to shoot at is the reflection of the blaze!"

"I'll keep it!" Shorty retorted. "I'm not as tall as either of yuh, and they cain't hit me as easy!"

*Braang! Bang! Br-raang!* The firing grew to a stragglng volley.

There was no doubt now, in the minds of the advancing men, but that all of the outlaws were in Devil's Den. A bullet burned the Sonora Kid's right arm, and he dropped his gun, only to recover it in an instant.

"I'm all right!" he said, as Shorty turned anxiously. "I'm jest gittin' itchy to do some shootin' myself, that's all!"

Shorty nodded grimly and peered ahead. They were within a few feet of the boulders Morgan had pointed out. He heard a stamping of hoofs and a frightened snort over beyond the trail. Morgan straightened and looked in the direction of the sound.

"Their hosses are over there!" the sheriff exclaimed. "We'll be between them and the nags, if we can go a little farther. Then, if we can

run 'em out, we'll have 'em where we——"

A gun thundered, and the sharp, spating sound that followed was not from a prickly pear. Morgan gasped and clutched his shoulder as his .45 slipped to the rocky ground.

"Set down!" Wetherbee ordered. "You're out o' this!"

The grizzled officer shook his head in protest, but his legs gave way, and he collapsed. The Sonora Kid propped him up against a boulder. Now the odds were greater than ever.

Shorty saw the flash of gunfire through a break in the wall of cactus. He whipped up his .45 and triggered. The bullet screamed from a rock, and the Sonora Kid pressed to his side with a gun in each hand.

"Morgan won't be able to use this," he muttered. "Jest give me a chance!"

"Hey, yuh mangy mule-prodder!" bellowed a voice from the boulders. "Yuh better stop where yuh are, before we kill yuh! There are six of us—savvy?"

It was Sanders's voice. Shorty reached the shelter of the boulders that reared beside the narrow trail, peered around them and sent a bullet crashing into the stronghold for answer.

"All right!" roared the big man. "Let 'em have it proper, boys!"

*Braang! Bang! Br-room!* Guns began roaring in earnest.

A whining sheet of lead howled and screamed above the heads of the partners. Back of them the sheriff groaned and attempted to drag himself toward the battle.

Shorty unslung the kerosene tank from his shoulder and set it down, flinging the length of pipe and hose

out before him. The nozzle fell squarely in the trail and flamed brightly across the rocks.

The freighter cracked down at a flash of flame from the outlaws' position, and heard a yell of pain. Then lead hammered the rock near him and stung his face with particles of granite. He moved back, blinded.

Come around this way!" he whispered to Wetherbee. "They may think we're still holdin' that pear burner!"

They crept on hands and knees through a jumble of rock and prickly pear. This time there was no flame to clear a path of the stinging, jabbing spines. The partners set their teeth against the pain and fought their way on through.

Things were working out the way Shorty had planned. The lead from the bandits' guns clattered into the rocks at the spot they had left the pear burner flaming. Now the partners were twenty feet back of the trail, nearer the center of Devil's Den.

"They've shut off the fire!" announced one of the outlaws triumphantly. "I reckon we got 'em!"

The Sonora Kid lifted his gun. Shorty pushed it down.

"Wait a minute!" whispered the mule skinner. "I got a hunch they're goin' to make a break fer their hosses!"

He was right. Sanders ordered the firing to cease. There was an anxious, strained minute of silence, then.

"Grab that box of dinero, and follow me!" Sanders called. "I reckon we was fools to hole up here—we never thought of anybody usin' a pear burner! They may have that posse comin' up!"

Boots scraped on the rocks. Shorty lifted his head cautiously

and saw shadowy forms moving in the thickening dusk. The outlaws were starting down the trail, crouching low.

"Git down, there!" ordered the man who had posed as a Ranger. "On yore hands and knees! And come on!"

The rustling sound of men crawling along the trail came to the partners' ears. Wetherbee was getting anxious. The gang could get past them and reach their horses before they had a chance to shoot. Again he moved to fire into the trail, and once more Shorty restrained him.

"Wait!" cautioned the freighter. "Yuh see that break in the boulders, where we left the pear burner? Well, keep yore gun aimed right there, and be ready!"

He did not finish. There was a sudden cry of pain from the big man in the lead. He lurched to his feet, swearing and wringing his hands, and Shorty's gun spat roaring flame.

Sanders's body crashed heavily into the prickly pear. Another outlaw was jumping up, now, a plain target for the partners. The Sonora Kid's itchy trigger finger jerked, and the robber went down with a cough choking his yell of pain.

Lead whistled around the two men who crouched in the rocks. Their guns flamed in answer, splitting the dusk. An outlaw threw his hands high and toppled backward against a huge cactus, not feeling the spines that pierced his flesh.

"Hurry up—git out o' my way! Ouch!"

The impatient man leaped from his hands and knees as the other two had done, and Shorty and Willie fired in unison to drop him. Then the little freighter jumped up. It was time to charge.



With the tall Sonora Kid at his heels, Shorty rushed through the trail they had partly cleared a few minutes before, slinging lead before him. A box crashed to the ground with its bearer sprawling over it.

One outlaw flashed past the range of the partners' guns, and reached the horses. They heard him pounding down the trail in full flight, and they came into the open space to see the other men's bodies sprawled in the shadows.

Shorty stooped to retrieve the strong box. "This here dinero is all in bills, I reckon!" he drawled. "It ain't very heavy."

"Say!" exclaimed the Sonora Kid. "What was eatin' them hombres, the way they jumped up like that? If they had stayed down on their hands and knees, most of 'em could 'a' got by!"

Shorty chuckled. "Come here!" he said, and led his partner to the spot where the pear burner lay. "Feel that rock!"

Wetherbee put his hand against the flat surface of the big limestone that was buried in the trail. Instantly, he jerked his arm away.

"Still hot, eh?" Shorty grinned. "I figured with that flame playin' on it a while, nobody was goin' to crawl over it. Sanders was hollerin' fer 'em to keep down, and——"

"Listen!" interrupted Wetherbee. "Somebody's still up there. Mebbe it's a wounded man!"

Shorty listened. A thrashing sound came to their ears. Somebody was hammering boot heels against a rock. The mule skinner reloaded his gun and led the way up the narrow path.

A camp fire's dying coals dimly lighted the cleared space in a circle of boulders. Over against one of the rocks lay a man, busily kicking the nearest rock as best he could with

both legs tied securely and his hands bound beneath him. He strained to turn his head toward the partners, and they saw he was gagged.

"Jest a minute, pard!" Shorty said, reaching for his pocketknife. He severed the rope and the man sat up to jerk the bandanna from his mouth and spit out a chip of wood.

"I—I——" he began.

"Yeah, you're the Ranger, I reckon!" Shorty said. "It's a good thing yuh could beat yore heels against that rock. What's yore name?"

"Sanders!" announced the Ranger, getting painfully to his feet.

"Sanders?" Shorty exclaimed. "Oh, I savvy. The buzzard we killed jest took yore name!"

"Yes, and my badge and papers!" the officer said bitterly. "I learned this hombre's gang—his name was Red Peters—was holed up here. I reckon I was a fool, because I walked in on Devil's Den all by myself. Peters jumped out and pinned my arms from behind. That's all there was to it."

"That's plenty!" Shorty declared. "He caught my pard, here, the same way. And he fooled the sheriff. He was a first-class skunk, that hombre, and there ain't but one way to git a skunk when he holes up in a place like this. Yuh got to smoke 'em out—and yuh can combine business with pleasure by burnin' a few prickly pears fer starvin' cattle at the same time!"

Dog-gone it, but thet Shorty Masters jigger shore kin use his head fer somethin' besides a hat rack! Give him a couple o' clews an' a clipped second ter think, an' he'll cook up a scheme thet'll trap the slickest outlaw thet ever fired a gun. Watch fer another story about him an' his pard, the Sonora Kid, in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



# Phantom of the Flames

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "Deputy Desert Phantom," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### INTO AN AMBUSH.

A HUNCH that they were heading straight for trouble was sending chills up and down the "Desert Phantom's" spine as he rode with his father, the sheriff, and a posse down Coffin Canyon.

"I tell yuh, dad, we're headin' straight intuh an ambush!" repeated the handsome young deputy sheriff for the tenth time, as his uneasy gaze scanned the fluted granite cliffs from base to rim rock. "Them outlaws always kept guards posted here in Coffin Canyon tuh keep people from gittin' tuh Deathville. What makes yuh think they've cleared out already?"

There were a dozen horsemen in the posse which Sheriff Lew Barry was bringing from Stirrup City to investigate the ghost town of Death-

ville. During the past two weeks, he and his daring son, the Desert Phantom, had succeeded in cleaning out the huge nest of bandits who used the abandoned mining town as a lair. But the Phantom believed there were several members of the gang who had not been captured as yet, since they were on sentinel duty at the time.

"Pull the bur out from under yore cinch, Bearcat!" giped the old lawman good-naturedly. "After all, the reason this posse is goin' tuh Deathville this mornin' is tuh make shore it's safe fer the citizens o' Concha County tuh come hyar an' take up their gold minin' ag'in. As fer yore sentinel hombres, they'd be afraid tuh hang around. They'd know the law was comin', pronto!"

"Bearcat Barry"—the Phantom—removed his pearl-white Stetson, smoothed the crease in the high

crown, and replaced it on his wavy black hair. His clean-cut, sun-tanned features were clouded with trouble.

He was a striking figure, mounted astride his big blue roan saddle horse, Blue Blazes. His broad chest was clothed in a green shirt with yellow crescent-shaped pockets and cuffs. On the beaded Indian vest he wore a nickeled star, proving him to be a deputy sheriff—Concha County's youngest.

His legs were incased in batwing chaps of a chocolate color, decorated with nickel studs and Mexican dollars for conchas. His feet were fitted with kangaroo-leather boots on which were chained silver spurs with rowels like stars.

During the months when young Bearcat Barry had been carving his reputation for being the most daring justice rider on the border—when he had earned the nickname of "The Desert Phantom"—the thing that had been most famous about his outfit was the artillery strapped about his waist.

The holsters were of a kind never before seen on the frontier. They were of steamed and scraped steer-horn, molded to fit the big cedar-butted .45s as closely as a glove fits the hand. The gun belts which held them were of oak-tanned leather and bristled with brass cartridges.

"Purty soon we'll be in there, anyways!" spoke up Mort Kimzey, Stirrup City's banker and one of the possemen. "Then mebbe yore fears'll quiet down, Bearcat."

The Phantom started to make a sarcastic reply to the banker's slurring remark regarding "fear," when his eye was caught by a flash of light up on the spindled rim of the cliff, a hundred yards down the canyon.

Instantly, the young deputy was tense. That might have been the

sun reflecting off a shiny rock formation. But what if it was the metal of a gun barrel?

Without showing any sign of excitement, the Phantom thrust a boot into his horse's ribs, wedging the toe between the foreleg joint and Blue Blazes's body. This forced the animal into a limp, but without causing the horse any actual pain or discomfort.

"Hey, fellers!" spoke up the Phantom. "Rein up behind this chaparral, won't yuh? Blue Blazes acts like he's got a rock in his frog. Won't take but a minute tuh look an' see."

Grateful for a moment's rest, the possemen reined into the shade of a chaparral growth bordering the canyon trail, while the Phantom dismounted. But instead of inspecting his mount's forehoof, he unslung the powerful field glasses which hung in a case around his saddle horn.

Uncasing the glasses and focusing them swiftly, the Phantom peered through the screen of junglelike chaparral, raking every inch of the rim rock down the canyon under a probing scrutiny.

A gasp came from the young deputy's lips at what he saw in the glasses. Seemingly close enough to reach out and touch, was a prostrate Mexican, lying up there on the rim rock behind a shrub of wild-tobacco bush. A sweating, scar-penciled face, shoe-button eyes, silky mustache.

The brown sombrero with its tasseled brim, the brown velvet jacket and black shirt, the tight-fitting trousers and high-heeled boots—all were distinctly visible in the glasses. But to a naked eye, the ambushed Mexican blended with his surroundings like a rock rabbit or a Gila monster, absolutely invisible against the tannish rock background.

The Mexican had his scarred

brown cheek nestled against the walnut stock of a .30-30. A dry-gulcher, lying in wait!

"What's this tomfoolery, son?" demanded the impatient voice of Sheriff Lew Barry. "If yore cayuse is lame——"

For reply, the Desert Phantom cased the field glasses and then snaked his Winchester rifle from its saddle boot. The faces of the possemen went ashen pale as they saw the grim look on the youthful deputy's features.

"Pedro Soldo, that killer from Sonora with the question-mark scar on his face," whispered the Phantom, "is lyin' on his belly up thar on the rim rock. Keep under cover while I——"

A pebble rattled down out of the sky to hit the trail beside the chaparral. Quick as a rattler's strike, the Desert Phantom looked straight up at the cliff-crest overhead, his rifle barrel swinging up at the same instant.

For the briefest instant he peered at the six-gun barrel and gray-sleeved arm that projected from an ignota hedge, up there on the brink of the cliff. Then he was lining his rifle sights for a shot.

*Brrang! Bang!* The six-gun up in the bushes puffed smoke clouds, and a slug tore a smoking slot in the Phantom's hat brim and glanced off a granite boulder underfoot. Then the rifle bucked and roared in Bearcat's grasp.

A wild scream of agony rang out on the sky line overhead. The possemen's horses reared and snorted in frenzy as the figure of an outlaw leaped to his feet in the ignota bushes, clutched at the widening stain of crimson on his chest, and then toppled headfirst into space.

*Crrunch!* The body of the ambusher hit the trail like a sack of

meat and bounced under the dancing hoofs of Blue Blazes.

Without a second look at the outlaw he had killed, the deputy leaped into his saddle.

From that elevation, he could peer over the chaparral top to the spot where Pedro Soldo, the brown-clad Mexican outlaw, was hiding among the rocks.

*Brram! Bang-bang-bang!* A rain of lead flew from the Phantom's long-range carbine.

And a moment later, the startled possemen saw a sombreroed figure leap up from his hiding place and dive over the horizon line to safety.

"Soldo's run tuh cover!" yelled the Phantom. "Quick! We got tuh vamore pronto."

*Brram! Bang!* Shots rang out.

Peering up, tracing the sound with his ears, the Phantom saw a rifle barrel projecting over the cliff. He could not see the man at the trigger, but he saw that the rifle was aimed across the chasm of Coffin Canyon. And instantly, the Phantom guessed what that hidden gunman was shooting at.

"Quick, men! Out o' here! They got a dynamite cache planted on the mountainside up there! If that rifle sends a bullet intuh the stuff, it'll start a avalanche an' bury us alive!"

Out into the trail the bewildered posse spurred. But to their dismay, the Desert Phantom was riding down the canyon toward Soldo's ambush, instead of back up the canyon toward Catclaw Desert.

"This way! The dynamite trap is behind us! We got tuh go toward Deathville!" screamed the Phantom wildly, wheeling his blue roan in the trail as he saw the sheriff and his posse hesitate.

"But we'll be ridin' intuh——" The old sheriff's cry was cut short by a resounding explosion that swal-

lowed the crack of the rifle overhead.

Looking above them, the possemen were appalled to see a great Niagara of brown earth and stone plunging over the rim of the cliff above their very heads!

## CHAPTER II.

### FLAG OF TRUCE.

**E**LEVEN pairs of spurs jabbed deep into the flanks of rearing horses already frenzied from the thunder of crashing gunshots. And thanks to the Desert Phantom's foresight, they were headed in the proper direction.

Only that and the amazing speed of horses crazed with fright, accounted for the miracle that happened next in Coffin Canyon.

Out from under the very whistling breath of the avalanche sped the terrorized possemen. The first of the sliding earth and boulders crashed to the trail with a weight that seemed to rock the earth to its very foundations, but the last horseman was free.

"Keep ridin'! Don't stop till we gits tuh Deathville!"

The Phantom's ringing shout went unheard under the ear-riving crash of rocks falling over the cliff from the mountain above, and raining like a black waterfall to the pit of the gorge.

But the possemen, plastered low over their saddles and spurring for their lives as the avalanche exploded behind their backs, read the meaning in the Phantom's gestures.

The horse of Bearcat Barry was rearing in the trail, wheeling to begin the mad race against ambush lead until the safety of Deathville Basin was reached. The Phantom's beckoning arm, still gripping a Winchester that gave off wisps of smoke

from its muzzle, told them to defy the dry-gulchers and ride as they had never ridden before.

And thus Pedro Soldo and his henchman, who had sighted the approaching posse in Catclaw Desert an hour before, and who had carefully lain in wait to destroy them, saw their victims escaping.

Before the guards could run to a point on the rim rock which would command the sweep of Coffin Canyon, Bearcat Barry and Blue Blazes had led the file of speeding horsemen around a curve in the canyon and so out of range of outlaw bullets.

Riding in a jockey's crouch, wind batting down the brim of his Stetson, the Desert Phantom relaxed and grinned into the breeze. The horse under him seemed to be flying over the rock-strewn trail. Close behind, but unable to keep up with Blue Blazes, thundered the posse led by Sheriff Lew Barry.

Not until he had galloped out of Coffin Canyon and into the basin in the Kiona Mountains which sheltered Deathville from the outside world, did the Phantom draw rein.

"Whew! That was the closest call I ever hope tuh have, Blue!" panted the young deputy, wiping sweat from his face and neck with the red bandanna which he kept knotted loosely about his throat. "Soldo danged near got the whole passell of us, that time."

The other possemen galloped to a dusty halt at the Phantom's side, and peered back at the grim walls of Coffin Canyon with relief at having been snatched from the very jaws of death.

The dust of the avalanche was a billowing pillar of black, mushrooming off at the top to dim the sun's rays. The echoes of the sliding tons of rock still rumbled among the far-



off peaks which girdled Deathville Basin.

"My boy——" Sheriff Lew Barry's long waterfall mustaches were quivering and moisture seeped down his leathery cheeks. "Bearcat, son, it was yore quick thinkin' that saved our lives, that time. We would 'a' run backward up the canyon toward the outside—an' right intuh their avalanche trap. We wouldn't 'a' thought o' runnin' right intuh Soldo's teeth, that a way. But it was the only chance. I reckon we're all plumb indebted——"

The Phantom waved his father off. One thing the young waddy hated, and that was praise. Hero-worship was something from which the young waddy always flinched, especially from his own father.

"Fergit it, all of yuh. The facts are now that we're here in Deathville, an' we're here tuh see if it's safe fer the respectable citizens o' Concha County tuh return an' start workin' the gold diggin's again. And so long as Soldo an' his rats are on the loose, we can't go back tuh Stirrup City an' tell 'em that Deathville is safe for 'em tuh bring their families to."

The posse fell silent, pondering the Phantom's statement. Their eyes were taking in the ghost mining camp of Deathville, stretched out in the mountain basin before them.

Two decades before, it had been a boom town. But the gold veins had petered out and for twenty years, now, the street and buildings of Deathville had been deserted, save for coyotes, owls, and bats.

Outlaws, using the ancient buildings as a robber's roost, had thrown a guard upon the only entrance to Deathville Basin—the rockbound corridor of Coffin Canyon. And, by accident, they had discovered where

an earth-fault had revealed a new gold vein.

For months, they had been mining precious metal out of Deathville's surrounding mountains. And all of those mines were the legal property of people living in Concha County.

"See that yore Colts is ready, an' we'll ride down intuh town," instructed the sheriff. "Mebbe some more crooks is hidin' down at the Bonanza Hotel, or at the Gold Coin Saloon, whar they hung out last week."

Before the possemen could gather their reins up and start for the ghost town's main street, a cry went up from "Pecos" Pendrill, Stirrup City liveryman and member of the group.

"Hey, men! Brand me fer a loco yearlin', if that ain't Pedro Soldo comin' out o' Coffin Canyon behind us!"

Of one accord the men wheeled their horses about, every hand on the butt of a six-gun.

The Desert Phantom's eyes slitted as he recognized the brown-sombreroed figure of Pedro Soldo, making his way on foot down the steep mountain slope bordering the mouth of Coffin Canyon.

"It's Soldo, all right!" grated Bearcat Barry, loosening his Colts in their steerhorn holsters. "I'll ride out an' cover 'im. The rest of yuh stand by fer trouble. It might be a trap."

Roweling Blue Blazes gently, the Phantom rode out to meet the Mexican killer. His left hand held the bridle reins, the right balanced a long-barreled Colt, thumb on hammer. He knew Soldo's reputation, and would trust the Mexican no more than he would a rattlesnake.

As he approached at a canter, the Phantom saw the outlaw stop. Alert for treachery, the deputy relaxed as



he saw Pedro Soldo hold both arms above his head. In the right hand was a square of white handkerchief.

"Flag o' truce, huh?" grunted the Desert Phantom, his ice-blue eyes scanning the mountain above for possible dry-gulchers. "I'll see what the skunk wants, anyhow."

Blue Blazes came to a halt a few feet from where the Mexican was standing. The outlaw had two gun belts about his waist, from which projected the black butts of .45s. But he kept his arms aloft, and the anxiety in his tea-colored eyes showed the young lawman that Soldo had a healthy respect for the gun in Barry's hand.

"*Hola!*" rasped the Phantom. "What kind of a play are you ribbin' up, Soldo? Don't try no dry-gulcher's tricks, or yore fish'll be fried fer shore. The posse back there's got yuh covered."

The Mexican's mustached upper lip lifted to expose yellowish teeth leering in a smirk.

"Pedro Soldo, he ees licked. Señor Desert Phantom wins. Pedro an' hees amigos weesh to make bargain for our freedom."

The sheriff rode up before the Phantom could make reply. Briefly, Bearcat explained the Mexican's mission.

"I don't make bargains with murderers o' yore stripe, Soldo," shot back the sheriff. "What was the terms you wanted tuh offer?"

The outlaw made no move to resist when the Phantom dismounted and relieved him of his six-guns. Disarmed, he was permitted to lower his arms. Then the Mexican spoke:

"There ees a gold mine which we have been working, *si*," Soldo pointed out. "Also, there ees much gold which we hide. Perhaps you find thees new gold mine, *si*—but the gold cache, no."

"You mean, you'll show up whar yuh cached the gold yuh been grubbin' durin' the past few months, as yore part o' the deal. An' what do we have tuh give you?"

The Mexican shrugged and touched the question-mark scar on his left cheek.

"You geeve Pedro Soldo an' hees amigos permission to ride across Concha County to the border. That ees all."

The sheriff shook his head. "No dice, Soldo. We got yuh dead tuh rights, an' I'm handcuffin' yuh right now. The best I kin promise yuh is a fair trial down at Stirrup City. But yore record is so black yuh'll hang shore."

But as the sheriff took out his handcuffs, Bearcat cried out:

"'Tain't fair tuh arrest Soldo this a way, dad. He come down hyar under a flag o' truce. We got tuh respect it, even if he is a two-laigged polecat."

Regretfully, the sheriff put his manacles away. True to the code of honor he had instilled in his son, Lew Barry could not violate the white flag which Pedro Soldo had carried.

"I agree to your terms, Señor Sheriff"—the tall Mexican's words startled both lawmen—"I show you these gold cache, then I satisfied to be arrest' an' go to your *calabozo*. Come."

Ten minutes later, the Mexican, disarmed but not under arrest as yet, was leading the dismounted posse up the mountainside toward one of the many mine tunnels which dotted the surrounding cliffs. All of the possemen were jubilant, with the exception of one. And that was the Desert Phantom.

"Soldo was too all-fired anxious tuh agree tuh dad's terms," ran the thought through the young deputy's head. "That danged killer has a

scheme in his black heart, or I'm a locoed lizard!"

"The gold ees here," stated Soldo, pointing into the black maw of a long-abandoned mine, half overgrown with weeds. "Light torches an' I lead you to heem, *si*."

Sheriff Lew Barry and the other possemen were only too eager to get a bundle of mesquite fagots blazing, to use as a light in exploring the ghostly tunnel. But the uneasy feeling still persisted in the Phantom's brain. His hunches were usually correct, too, as that morning's adventure in Coffin Canyon had proved.

"Still, if Soldo's goin' with us, it can't be very dangerous," the cowboy deputy reasoned to himself. "He wouldn't walk intuh a trap. His kind thinks too much o' their hides fer that."

A torch lighted, the party headed into the cavern. For a space of fifty yards they walked, climbing over wet piles of gravel, moving along between wooden posts which were mossy and rotten. The posts held aloft the planks bracing the rock ceiling.

"You crooks chose an all-fired dangerous place tuh cache yore gold, Soldo," commented the Phantom, eying the time-rotted wooden timbers with anxiety. "If one o' them busted down, the whole cave would collapse an' bury us alive."

Soldo merely shrugged, and carried the smoking torch along ahead of him. Lew Barry and the other possemen followed close behind, eyes probing the shadowy grotto ahead, as if expecting to see the gleam of yellow gold at every turn of the cave.

"I'm goin' back tuh the head o' the tunnel," suddenly announced the Desert Phantom. "Just playin' a hunch, dad. If yuh hear a shot,

come runnin'. Soldo may have his other killers sneak up behind us an' try tuh gun us down from the dark."

Soldo's eyes glittered evilly as he saw the young deputy vanish into the sooty gloom of the cavern behind. In the musty-smelling cave, with water dripping from the rock ceiling, the men found their nerves taut as wire.

"The Desert Phantom, he ees loco!" chuckled the Mexican, holding the firebrand aloft. "Come, the gold ees ver' close, now."

But before the men could get under way again, they were knocked flat on their faces by a terrific tidal wave of air. On the heels of the blast came an explosion from back down the cavern, followed by a blinding flash of pink light reflected around a bend in the tunnel. Then the earth shook as wooden timbers splintered and rock fell thunderously.

Red flames glimmered. The sheriff, bounding around the bend, saw the appalling sight of the cave behind them, completely plugged up with falling rock—hundreds of tons of it.

Blasting powder had exploded in the rotten timbers, sealing them alive in this awful tomb. But that was not what put icy fingers on Lew Barry's heart.

The Desert Phantom was probably under the very middle of that collapsed mine, crushed by hundreds of tons of rock!

### CHAPTER III.

#### MURDER IN THE DARK.

THE eleven posse members groped their way through the foglike smoke caused by the exploded black powder, and by the wagging light of the flames which smoldered on splintered timbers jutting from the

caved-in rocks, took in their situation.

Stark horror was graven on every face. To be entombed alive in a forgotten mine tunnel was a fate ten times more grisly than death before blazing guns.

Sweat broke out on foreheads. Jaws worked as strong men tried to say something, fought against an impulse to scream out. Only the sheriff stood motionless, eyes staring at the settling rocks which blocked their passage.

Great slabs of stone, jarred loose by the explosion, dropped from the ceiling now and then. Luckily, none of them fell on the spot at the cavern's bend where the little knot of paralyzed men stood huddled in the dying glow of the fire.

"We—we can't breathe them powder fumes!" choked out Pecos Pendrill, his voice husky. "Come on, let's git goin' up the tunnel away from this."

The possemen did not hesitate. There was no doubt but that the explosion had completely blocked the tunnel. In fact, the ceiling rocks were now crushed into the floor, where the timbers had been blasted away. Robbed of their support, the entire mountain had fallen in, it seemed.

The old sheriff found his voice at last.

"I cain't figure how it happened, unless Bearcat lit a match tuh see his way out," whispered the old lawman, eyes glistening with grief. "They prob'ly had some blastin' powder stored back thar, an' he dropped the match in it by accident."

Trying to console himself that his son had met with a swift and merciful death, Sheriff Lew Barry staggered back to join his fellows. Slowly, groping through almost ut-

ter darkness, the men from Stirrup City made their way back through the gloom to the spot where they had been when the explosion occurred.

Their heads and ears were ringing from the blast. Their senses were numbed from the jarring grind of falling rocks. The thought of the doom they were facing made every man sick with fear. Perhaps that was why an interval of a full minute elapsed before Lew Barry, standing stock-still among his men, suddenly squawked out:

"Where's Pedro Soldo?"

If they had expected an answering cry, they received none. With hands that trembled, the sheriff extracted matches from his sombrero band, lighted one.

His eyes crawled in their sockets, and his lips moved soundlessly as he took a count. All ten possemen were there, but there was no sign of the Mexican.

"Why—why—he was carryin' the mesquite torch!" panted out Mert Kimzey, the banker. "That means he's vamosed on us! Left us tuh die in the dark!"

The match burned until it scorched Barry's fingers before he dropped it. He lighted another, and holding it out, perceived something lying on the water-soaked floor of the mine. The remains of the mesquite torch, stamped out by a boot heel.

Lew Barry dropped the match. It sizzled on the damp floor and went out, leaving them in blackness thick enough to touch with the fingers. The sheriff's hands were gripping his gunstocks.

"One satisfaction—my son's accidental wreckin' o' this mine will make Pedro Soldo die, too!" panted the lawman, his voice like hissing

steam in the gloom. "We'll all die—like rats."

Death by starvation—probably by suffocation first, though. Through the minds of every man ran the same agonizing thoughts. They could visualize themselves, turning into raving madmen, beating the rock walls with raw knuckles, choking as the air grew more and more stale, until, finally, one by one, they began to drop off, dead.

"Cain't stand hyar!" breathed the sheriff, gathering his wits again. "We got tuh do like the Mex done—move farther away from the powder fumes, afore them an' the rock dust chokes our lungs. An' mebbe thar's a open end tuh this tunnel."

But it was Mert Kimzey, the banker, who erased that hope.

"Yuh fergit that this mine is old No. 7—the one my bank owns most o' the stock of," Kimzey said. "I happen tuh know this mine like a book. It follered a vein fer mebbe sixty feet more, an' then it petered out. We're trapped. Bottled up."

One of the possemen, a lanky cowpoke under twenty, began sobbing. The older men held a close grip on themselves, to keep from losing control of their iron nerves.

"Come on! If we have tuh die, we might as well find that Mex," panted the sheriff. "If the mine ends inside o' sixty feet like Mert says, then we'll find 'im."

And then, out of the blackness, came a voice that turned their veins to strings of ice:

"You weel find Pedro Soldo, *si*. But Pedro has wan-two beeg guns een hees han's. Up weeth yore hands!"

And to prove his words, the hidden Mexican fired twice, sending bullets whining over their heads and thudding into the rocks beyond. Aside from red winks of light from

two six-gun bores, the possemen could see nothing of the Mexican.

Where had Pedro Soldo obtained his guns? The same thought was in the mind of every man in the tense, panting group. But it was Pecos Pendrill's nerve which cracked first.

Burning like twin dots before Pendrill's eyes, was the held-over image of Soldo's two gun flashes. Behind and between those flashes, reasoned Pendrill, must be their enemy.

Pendrill's knotted fingers stole for the butt of his .44. He removed the gun from its holster without a scrape of betraying metal. Then he lifted the weapon, aiming at the spot from which the Mexican had fired. Tense, he pulled trigger.

A long finger of flame streaked from Pendrill's gun, lighting up the big liveryman's form for a second. And in that split fragment of time, the ambushed Mexican saw his target.

*Brrang!* Soldo's two guns flashed at the same instant—from a different location than before.

Sheriff Lew Barry, standing at Pecos's shoulder, could hear the soft *chug* of slugs drilling through Pendrill's body.

Then the dead man was toppling over against him. In mute horror, Barry lowered his murdered friend to the ground.

"An' now, my amigos weel bring lights," went on the Mexican's calm voice. "Eef you weesh to leeve long, raise your arms. I weel keel the first hombre——"

The possemen gasped in amazement as they saw a match strike. An oil-soaked torch formed of rags wrapped on a stick, suddenly flared. And it made the posse throw up their arms.

For there, exposed under the smoky rays of the torch, stood—not

Pedro Soldo alone—but four other gun-hung outlaws, the light glinting off cougarlike grins and slitted eyes!

"An' now I weel explain," chuckled the Mexican, hefting his fuming guns in his hands and stepping forward. "The explosion was no accident, my amigos. *Caramba*, no! Thees was the trap Pedro Soldo prepare for you, een case hees plans go wrong up een Coffin Canyon."

The sheriff, his Adam's apple working in dismay, barked a question at the Mexican who stopped in front of him.

"Yuh mean my son Bearcat didn't set off some blastin' powder by mistake? Yuh mean he ain't crushed under them rocks?"

The Mexican pursed his lips and chewed at a silky mustache.

"He ees crushed by thees rocks, *si*. But, Señor Sheriff, wan of my amigos lighted the fuse. He followed behind us as we came eento thees mine—an' fired the blast. We weeshed to bottle you up hyar."

The Mexican was moving among the possemen, deftly emptying their holsters and frisking them for knives. When the posse was completely disarmed, he stepped back in front of them, arms skimbo.

"But what did it git yuh?" roared the sheriff. "Yuh trapped us, shore. But yo're trapped the same as we are, Soldo. You an' them four skunks who was waitin' fer us."

The other outlaws grinned. They appeared not to be worried.

"As I say, I weel explain," went on the Mexican softly. "You see, thees mine, eet ees where we find, by the accident, some more gold. Earthquake show up vein. Green-gos say, earth fault, *no est verdad?*"

Mort Kimzey gasped. Had his mine, long since supposed to be worthless, suddenly developed a paying lode again?

"Señor Keemzey say the mine end in sixty more feet. He ees wrong! We have made new tunnel, connect to old mine No. 6. We are not trapped. We weel not starve."

The Mexican paused a moment, then jerked his head in a signal to his four henchmen. They came forward, guns in hand, coils of rope looped about their elbows. One handed the torch to Soldo, who stood by while the ten possemen were bound with arms behind their backs.

"*'Sta bueno!*" said the Mexican, rubbing his scar in a habitual gesture of satisfaction. "An' now, we return to Deathville. An' you, Señor Sheriff—you weel weesh that you had died weeth yore son, the Desert Phantom, under the rocks. All of you weel theenk the Phantom was very lucky, after all. For Pedro Soldo, he plan a good revenge upon thees posse—*si!*"

## CHAPTER IV.

### TALK OR DIE!

WHEN the Desert Phantom had left the posse, acting on his sudden hunch that danger was stalking them, he was not taken by complete surprise at the sight that greeted him as he made the bend in the tunnel.

He had not gone twenty yards before he heard a crunching of boot heels on gravel. They were being followed! Stopping in his tracks in the darkness, Bearcat removed a six-gun from its holster and waited. A single move on his part would betray his position to the approaching enemy.

Then he heard the scratch of a match on a boot sole. A tiny flame glowed, and by its flare, the Phantom saw the face of a red-bearded outlaw, in the act of stooping. Un-

doubtedly it was the outlaw who had remained out by Coffin Canyon—the same who had fired off the avalanche blast.

Heavy timbers masked the outlaw's operations from view; so the Phantom didn't see the red-bearded crook touch the match to a fuse leading to a heavy charge of black powder, hidden back among the timbers.

The Phantom could have snuffed the crook's life out with a single shot. But he could not shoot a man down without giving him a chance to defend his life. Sheriff Lew Barry had taught his son the elements of fair play, ever since he had been a baby.

Barry opened his mouth to shout for the kneeling crook to throw up his hands. But before he could make a sound, the outlaw leaped from his position like a sprinter on a race track and bolted off into the gloom, heading for the cavern mouth!

In the blackness, the Phantom was helpless to shoot, even if he would have permitted himself to kill a man from behind. So he leaped forward in pursuit, narrowly missing dashing his brains out on heavy wooden pillars as he threaded his way under the wooden ceiling.

So intent was the Desert Phantom upon the fleeing outlaw ahead that he did not notice the pink worm of sputtering fuse which "Redbeard" had lighted. Instead, he dashed madly on until he saw the spot of sunlight marking the tunnel entrance.

At that instant, the explosion rang out behind. The outrush of air spilled him off his feet and sent him sprawling, his face ramming into the gravel.

Behind him, the ceiling of the cavern was collapsing. But the Phantom's sprint had carried him

well out of the danger zone, away from that portion of the old mine which was supported by wooden timbers.

Getting to his feet, ears throbbing and numb from shock, the young deputy sheriff staggered through the smoke toward the mine entrance. Just as he reached the outside air, he saw the red-bearded outlaw, panting with exertion, coming back to look inside.

The outlaw caught sight of the Phantom staggering through the smoke a fraction of an instant before the half-blinded deputy spotted Redbeard.

With a gulp of amazement at the realization that anybody was alive to follow him out of the cavern, the outlaw whipped out a six-gun and fired at five yards' range.

The bullet was wild, and Redbeard's haste in shooting without aiming proved fatal. With smooth, practiced skill the Desert Phantom brought up and aimed the gun he was carrying.

Before the red-whiskered ruffian could cock his gun for another shot, two bullets had smashed through his heart. The outlaw reeled backward and flopped motionless. The Phantom staggered out into pure air and sat down on a boulder to collect his senses.

It was many minutes before the Phantom's ears stopped ringing. It took longer than that for his head to cease its spinning, so that he could think.

And when he did collect his wits, it was only to have stark horror lay its icy fingers on his heart.

"That Mex was leadin' us intuh a trap, jest like my hunch warned me!" panted the youthful deputy, getting shakily to his feet. "They've blasted down the roof o' the mine



tuh trap 'em. The whole thing was Soldo's scheme."

And then the Phantom began to reason things out logically, and he was quick to see a truth which the trapped possemen had overlooked: A clever outlaw like Pedro Soldo would certainly not commit suicide, just to have the satisfaction of taking a posse along to death with him.

"If I know crooks, there's a deeper scheme than that back o' this," grunted the Phantom, his eyes regarding the corpse of the red-whiskered outlaw who had set off the powder blast. "No, Soldo must have some way of escapin'. An' that bein' the case, there may be a chance tuh rescue dad an' the posse yet."

At that moment, the sound of human voices came to the Phantom's ears. In the nick of time, he leaped forward, dragged Redbeard's body back into the smoky mine tunnel, and hid himself from view.

Peering around a corner of the tunnel mouth, the Desert Phantom saw Pedro Soldo stride out of the near-by mouth of another gold mine. Behind him marched Sheriff Lew Barry and the other members of the Stirrup City posse—all tightly bound with ropes and herded by four brawny outlaws with drawn six-guns.

"Gosh, there's only ten of 'em!" gasped the deputy, counting. "That means—le's see—Pecos Pendrill is missin'! He must 'a' got kilt by a fallin' rock, an' they left his carcass inside the mine."

Helpless to do anything against such odds, the Phantom remained in hiding and watched Soldo lead the way down the slope into the main street of Deathville.

Past the false-fronted saloons and store buildings, out of sight around the corner of the Bonanza Hotel, then into view again over by the old blacksmith shop, the Phantom

watched the Mexican bandit lead the prisoners.

"They're leadin' 'em tuh the old Hangman's Tree!" cried Barry, straining his eyes in sudden alarm. "That's jest like Pedro Soldo!"

Standing on a small knoll in the center of the town was a massive dead cottonwood. Once it had served as the hanging tree for vigilantes. Many a crook had dangled by the neck from those dead, gnarled branches.

Soldo was certainly heading toward that small hill. And the Phantom could not stand by and watch his father and friends go to their deaths. Even if it meant suicide for himself, the Phantom was determined to account for a few crooks with his six-guns, before the necktie party began.

He scrambled down the mountain-side in feverish haste, handicapped by his high-heeled riding boots. When he gained the level of the street, he whistled for his bronc which he had left grazing in a vacant lot.

Knowing that he would be a more elusive target if he was mounted on his speedy, well-trained horse, the Phantom swung into the saddle, and then rode by a short cut for the Hangman's Tree.

A large livery barn, fallen into decay and little more than a ruin, provided something to hide behind until he got the lay of Soldo's plans. Running Blue Blazes inside and trailing the reins, the Phantom ran to the corner of the building and looked through a knot hole. What he saw was a pleasant surprise.

Soldo was not leading the procession of men to the summit of the hill where stood the grim Hangman's Tree. Instead, he was busily engaged in front of a steel door which

opened into a sort of cellar dug into the hillside.

"The old Deathville jail!" gasped the Phantom in astonishment. "It's blasted out o' solid rock an' is the only prison in Arizona they used tuh boast couldn't be busted out of!"

The big door opened, to reveal a jet-black interior. The front of the jail building was made of huge granite blocks, three feet thick. The other three walls were the granite of the cliff from which the jail had been blasted.

Roughly, jostled by cruel hands, the ten members of the Stirrup City posse were kicked and shoved into the cellarlike prison. Then Soldo swung shut the massive, rust-red steel door. He strained at a huge key and locked the door securely.

"You have my terms—perhaps you make bargain weeth a killer, after all," yelled out Soldo to the prisoners within. "I happen to know that you, Señor Sheriff, know of a secret way to get eenside Deathville Basin—not the way of Coffin Canyon. Eesn't that right?"

The Phantom nodded grimly to himself. There *was* a secret entrance to Deathville Basin—a mine shaft tunneling the Kiona cliffs and connecting with the old Horseshoe Mine on the opposite side of the mountains.

The outlaws had tried hard to discover this secret passage. But it was worse than hunting for a needle in a haystack, among the maze of tunnels which honeycombed the surrounding cliffs.

"You know the secret, *si!*" went on Soldo. "Tell Pedro the secret, an' you all go free—I swear eet! Do not tell—an' eet ees a hangin' bee for all of you. The corpses of ten possemen weel sweeng from thees Hangman's Tree at sunup to-morrow. We geeve you to-night to theenk. No

food, no drink—nothing but theenk eet over. To-morrow morning, Pedro Soldo weel come for hees answer. Talk eet over weeth yore amigos, Señor Sheriff. *Hasta luego!*"

Talk or die! The Phantom knew that his father would probably be willing to give the bandits the secret they wanted. It meant turning Deathville Basin into a robber's roost which would flourish like a beehive with outlawry, once they knew how to protect themselves from invasion by the secret exit.

Yes, the sheriff would be willing to tell the secret, if he thought it would mean the lives of his fellow citizens. But only too well did the Desert Phantom know the treachery that was simmering inside Soldo's evil brain.

Even if the sheriff gave that secret, ten men would still swing from the limbs of Hangman's Tree on the morrow.

## CHAPTER V.

### PLANNING RESCUE.

**F**ROM his place in the ruined stable, Bearcat Barry watched the outlaws leave the jail and head back toward the main street of Deathville.

They passed within a few feet of his hiding place inside the barn, so that the Phantom was able to pick up a few scraps of conversation.

Apparently Pedro Soldo had no doubt but that a night of imprisonment in the pitch-dark confines of Deathville's cellar of a jail, would produce the results he wanted.

The Phantom was quick to realize the Mexican's cunning. By leaving the sheriff in the jail with his friends, who for the first time had heard of the secret entrance to Deathville which might prove the key to their freedom—well, Soldo was depending

upon the panic-stricken possemen to persuade Lew Barry to talk.

From what he could pick up from the bandits' conversation in passing down the street, the Phantom was under the impression that the outlaws were heading for the Bonanza Hotel, which they used as headquarters. They intended to eat and get a night's sleep. He wondered if they would leave a guard at the jail, after nightfall.

"Huh! Not much need of a guard fer *that* fortress!" grunted the Phantom to himself, in despair. "It's just as impossible for me to bust intuh that jail as it is fer them tuh git out."

The Phantom sat down on a cobweb-hung oat bin, to think. Sometime during the night, he must make an effort to rescue his father and the posse, that was certain. But he was equally positive that there was only one way to get into the jail, and that was by means of the same key which Pedro Soldo had used.

"But how in blazes am I goin' tuh git that key, when the Mex prob'ly keeps it right in his pocket?" the deputy asked himself. He stood up, stretched his muscles. "Well, it's a cinch there's no use o' sittin' around here. I got tuh git goin'."

He paused to hide Blue Blazes inside the barn, where he would not be discovered. Then he cautiously made his way outside, alert for possible prowling outlaws.

The mountain basin was pooled with shadows. It was almost sunset out in Catclaw Desert, by now, but the huge notched peaks which shut off Deathville from the outer world brought on an early twilight.

The Phantom made his way down the ghostlike streets, confident that no bandits would be roaming this deserted and ruined section of the town. Most of the shacks which

once had been miners' homes, were now fallen into ruin. Here and there stood a sturdier building. But most of Deathville's history had been written on the main street, and therefore the outlaws had chosen the Bonanza Hotel for their living quarters.

But the Phantom, who had visited Deathville on two previous occasions which had netted him breathless, throbbing adventure, knew that the outlaws were in the habit of using the Gold Coin Saloon as their storehouse.

Therefore, he made his way to this structure and was relieved to find it deserted. From the near-by hotel he could hear the revelry of the crooks, enjoying a few drinks of liquor before their evening meal.

Climbing a window on the far side of the saloon, the Phantom made his way into the dusky barroom.

His reflected figure moved like an evil spirit across the clouded, fly-speckled mirror behind the bar. Wind rustled the moldy sawdust on the floor planks, and filled the barroom with ugly whisperings.

Waiting until his eyes were accustomed to the eerie half light, the Desert Phantom began inspecting the outlaw stores which were piled inside the barroom. Huge stacks of groceries showed how the bandit gang lived; they raided desert trading posts and packed huge amounts of supplies into Deathville by horseback.

Spare saddles and bridle-mending gear occupied one corner. Clothing supplies—boxes filled with shirts, overalls, even leather chaps—told of a looted store in some Concha County town.

But it was in the cupboard shelves behind the mahogany bar that the Phantom found what he was looking for—the outlaw gang's arsenal. Guns

and ammunition were the very life of Pedro Soldo's band, and they had plenty of extra equipment.

A whisky case was filled with Colt six-guns, many of them new, others plainly taken off the belts of dead victims. One shelf was lined with Winchester rifles. And case after case of .30-30 and .45 caliber ammunition were stored in another spot.

"Things is shore goin' fine so far!" panted the Desert Phantom, as he set to work. "We'll hand them crooks a surprise yet."

It was no small task, testing each six-gun to make sure its spring was in working order, and then filling the chambers of each cylinder with ammunition. He wanted to get twenty Colts—two for each posseman—but there were not enough to go round. So he selected several Winchesters, loaded the magazine with fresh cartridges, and was ready.

He searched for and found a gunny sack. Dumping several handfuls of spare shells into the sack, he loaded it with the six-guns and rifles, and shouldered his burden. It was almost too heavy to carry.

He made his way out of the saloon by a back way, to find that night had blotted out all detail of Deathville. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and he was able to make his way toward the jail where his friends were awaiting doom.

Hangman's Tree was a gaunt, white hand up on its knoll as the Phantom made his cautious approach toward the jail door. Satisfied that no guard was about, the young waddy made his swift way to the granite-blocked wall of the jail.

"Hey, in thar!" whispered the Phantom. "It's me, Bearcat Barry. I've got enough guns tuh fit you out like a army!"

Startled oaths came from within

the black prison, and faces crowded the barred window. Rummaging inside the gunny sack, Bearcat started passing in the guns to trussed-up hands. At the same time, he explained his seemingly miraculous escape from death.

"But—but what good will these guns do us, son?" came the anxious voice of his father. "We're tied up, an' can't git out."

"Here's a knife tuh saw on each other's ropes with. Don't worry, I'll be back with that key, *my pronto!*"

The last of the guns passed to the men inside the jail together with his pocketknife, Bearcat stuffed the gunny sack with its extra ammunition through the bars, and then spun about as he heard voices approaching. Up the street came three outlaws, their cigarettes glowing in the darkness.

"I got tuh dust out o' hyar—they're comin' tuh see if yuh'll talk. Don't let 'em know yo're armed. It'd spoil my plans."

Like a shadow, the Phantom melted into the darkness. Back across the town he fled, making for the Bonanza Hotel. Perhaps he would find Soldo alone, could get the jail key at the points of his guns.

But Fate chose to frown upon the Desert Phantom. Reaching the hotel and skirting the shadowed wall, he peered through a lighted window to see two crooks playing cards inside, and neither one was Pedro Soldo, the Mexican chief of the band.

The Phantom checked an impulse to smash his six-guns through the glass and cover both crooks. Now was no time to reveal himself. It might spoil everything.

He decided to hide himself among the foundation timbers under the hotel and await developments.

They were not slow in coming. He

could hear the footsteps of Soldo and his henchmen rumbling across the porch floor and entering the hotel.

"If Soldo's got the key on him, I'll just wait until they've all gone tuh bed!" the Phantom muttered to himself. "They all has separate rooms an' bunks, seein' as this is a hotel. Then I kin have a show-down with Soldo alone."

With a plan of attack in his head, the Phantom settled down to wait. Agonizing hours went by, before the faint sounds of revelry among the outlaws began to abate. It was nearly midnight before the bandits trudged upstairs to their sleeping quarters.

Then, after a half-hour's wait, the Phantom crawled out from his hiding place under the hotel and cautiously stalked his way around the building, up the porch steps, and to the front doorway.

Entering, he made his way into the ramshackle lobby of the once-popular hostelry. To his surprise, he saw light shining through cracks in a door. Apparently one of the outlaws had not yet gone upstairs to bed.

Tiptoeing across the lobby, one six-gun held alert in his hand, the Phantom stooped to peer through the keyhole of the door behind which the light was shining.

What he saw made a low exclamation of surprise and joy rise in his throat.

This was Pedro Soldo's bedroom! The outlaw leader had chosen to sleep downstairs. Even now, he was in the act of turning in for the night, his evil mind filled with satisfaction that on the morrow, he would wrest a secret from Sheriff Lew Barry which would make him, Pedro Soldo, the king of border states outlawry.

With a lair like Deathville Basin, he would be supreme against the forces of law and order!

Watching, the Desert Phantom saw the Mexican remove his brown sombrero to reveal greasy, coarse hair, black as harness thread. Then Soldo unbuckled his twin gun belts and hung them over a post of the creaky old bed on which he was seated.

A coal-oil lantern was standing on a rickety table near the bed. And lying on that table, full in the glare of lantern light, lay the massive key to the Deathville jail.

Soldo was tugging off his high-heeled boots. The moment had come.

Drawing a deep breath, the Desert Phantom straightened up. He cocked his six-gun silently. Then, with a sudden motion of one chap-clad knee, he kicked the bedroom door wide open and stood revealed before Pedro Soldo, deadliest outlaw in Arizona.

"Stick 'em up, Soldo! Yo're under arrest!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### BURNING ALIVE.

**PEDRO SOLDO** reminded the Phantom of a trapped timber wolf, as the big Mexican stiffened in the act of tugging off a boot.

The hard, glittering eyes did not flinch as they saw death down the bores of Bearcat Barry's leveled .45s. The drooping lips hardened into a line as rigid as a seam in a rock. Then, slowly, the outlaw relaxed. His shoe-button eyes flicked once toward his guns, hanging in their holsters on the bedpost at his elbow.

"I know what yo're thinkin', Soldo!" came Barry's tense whisper, as he took a step across the threshold. "But don't. One move fer them hog-legs, an' I'd have tuh

drill yuh pronto. I ain't honin' tuh kill."

The Mexican's mustache twitched. The question-mark scar on his saddle-brown cheek was flaming livid. The Phantom could not but admire the outlaw's marvelous control. Here was a foe who was as courageous as they came. And therefore deadly.

"Señor Desert Phantom ees clever," commented the Mexican. "I had theenk, when Red Hanson is found shot in gold mine, that you shot heem just as powder explode, an' he drag himself to daylight, then die. I see my meestake, señor."

The Phantom strode across the room, picked up the heavy iron jail key, and slipped it in one of the crescent-shaped pockets of his green shirt. The lamplight gleamed on the deputy's badge which in turn reflected two tiny stars in Soldo's hard eyes.

"So you weesh to rescue thees posse," grunted the Mexican. "*Bueno!* Señor, you win thees pot."

Though he had been watching the Mexican for a swift, snakelike dart for his guns, the Phantom was not expecting Soldo's next move. With one leg, the Mexican kicked the tiny table away from the bed, and sent it crashing against the Phantom's shins.

The young deputy whipped up his guns. But the Mexican, heedless of death, was leaping forward. One arm shot out to seize the lantern, then swung it aloft.

"Drop that, or I'll fire!"

Bearcat's unwillingness to shoot down a man who was not armed held his trigger finger. But Pedro Soldo was mad with desperation. He brought his arm down, and the lantern whizzed like a cannon ball toward the deputy's head.

Bearcat twisted aside, but the lan-

tern caught him with stunning force on one shoulder. Then it bounced away to crash with a jangle of glass against the wall.

*Whoosh!* A pink wall of flame shot up from the splashing oil of the lantern.

But the Phantom was thumbing a bullet past Soldo's face, to check the Mexican's mad leap for his six-guns hanging from the bedpost.

The Mexican spun like a bayed wolf, his hands snatching the Colts from their holsters. But before he could get finger to trigger, the Phantom had leaped in to smash a gun barrel on the Mexican's skull.

Soldo flopped, white bones exposed from the split scalp. The blow had put him out of commission for the time being.

A hot breath of air stung the Phantom's neck. He turned, and gasped as he saw that the entire corner of the room, from floor to ceiling, was in flames. The smashed lantern had sprayed the floor with blazing oil, the peeled and tattered wall paper was bursting into flame like shavings.

And then hoarse shouts, slogging footsteps down the hotel stairs told the Phantom that Soldo's henchmen had heard the uproar and were thundering down to his rescue. One glimpse of the Phantom inside the bedroom of their chieftain, and they would riddle him with lead.

The outlaws had already reached the lobby. Any instant, they would appear in the doorway, and the Phantom would be sharply visible in the angry, dancing flames.

Vaulting over the crumpled form of Pedro Soldo, the Phantom bounced off the bed mattress in a springboard leap that carried him to the room's single window.

He tugged at the sash. It was stuck fast after twenty years of dis-



use. With a snarl of impatience, the young deputy leaped back, thrust out a shoulder, and took a running dive at the window.

Glass exploded outward. Brittle putty and wooden framing cascaded to the ground as the Phantom crashed through and landed on his feet, running. From the startled bellows in his ears, he knew that the bandits had discovered the fire and their unconscious leader.

Across the street and into a dark alley between two saloons the Phantom raced. He holstered his Colts as he ran, and then felt in his shirt pocket for the jail key. Its presence made the Phantom lose some of his disgust at having roused the outlaw camp.

"I'd planned tuh hog tie Soldo an' gag him," the Phantom gritted through clenched teeth, "an' then go upstairs from room tuh room an' hog tie them other crooks. Now I got ter——"

Blue Blazes whinnied from the ruined barn as he heard his master running past. But the Phantom went straight to the Hangman's Tree hill and skidded to a stop in front of the jail building.

"Hey, thar! Who goes?" A sharp demand rocked the air, bringing dew to the Phantom's face. Out of the shadows lurched a drowsy figure, obviously awakened from sleep. An outlaw guard!

The burly crook recognized the Desert Phantom instantly. Standing spread-legged in the moonlight, jaw dropped in surprise, the young deputy seemed a sure target for the sawed-off shotgun in the guard's hands.

More than once, the Phantom's lightning draw had saved his life. But never had his fingers sped more swiftly or truly to his .45s than now.

The guard was bringing his scat-

tergun up to blow Bearcat into mincemeat at point-blank range. But for the second time in Deathville, the Phantom relied upon that risky stunt good only for close-range fighting—a shot from the hip.

Without drawing his .45 from its holster, the Phantom pulled trigger. The bullet tore a gaping hole in the guard's temple, staying the hand that was about to discharge the shotgun.

But even in death, the muscles tensed. The short-barreled gun roared, and the charge of buckshot whistled harmlessly past the Phantom's shoulder. Then the outlaw thudded to the dust, kicked feebly, and was still.

"Yuh safe, Bearcat?" came an anxious cry from within the jail. "If we'd knowed yuh was comin' jest now, we'd 'a' warned yuh. The danged guard stayed out o' range so's we couldn't plug 'im with our guns."

Nerves shaken at his narrow escape, Bearcat Barry merely grinned. He left his smoking gun in its holster, and leaped for the jail door. A moment later, he had the big key inside the rusty lock.

"I'm all right. But we'll have tuh hurry. Them crooks is fightin' a fire over at the hotel, I reckon. It's a slim chance we'll have o' capturin' 'em."

The heavy lock stuck, but using a six-gun barrel as a lever, the Phantom got the massive iron door open. The possemen trooped out, each one bathed with sweat and panting with relief at their delivery from what had seemed certain death. Of one accord, they glanced up toward the gaunt branches of Hangman's Tree, and shuddered.

"Why—why—where's my dad?" gasped out the Phantom, leaping to the door and peering within as he

noted the sheriff had not yet appeared. "Dad! Come on out!"

The possemen turned startled faces toward the Desert Phantom.

"Why, didn't you know?" they demanded in chorus. "Soldo an' his pards come an' got yore dad, early this evenin', jest after you'd smuggled us these smoke-poles. We was askeered they'd shoot us down like rats if we opened fire, so the sheriff agreed tuh leave his guns an' go out tuh see what they wanted with 'im."

Bearcat Barry felt the earth swaying about him.

"You mean them crooks took my dad away from this jail? Why in blazes didn't yuh shoot——"

"Because the other crooks stayed out o' range while Soldo unlocked the door an' told the sheriff tuh come out," explained Mert Kimzey, horror-stricken. "Otherwise they'd 'a' slaughtered us or left all of us tuh die in thar."

With a yell, the Phantom turned and sped off through the night. A rising pink glow back of the gaunt black buildings of Deathville told him that the Bonanza Hotel was doomed. The outlaws had not been able to stamp out the fire.

Arriving at the main street, he was appalled to see the entire lower floor of the building a roaring furnace, with flames shooting like red tongues from doors and windows.

Heedless of peril, the young deputy sped across the street, in the blinding glare of the flames. Braving the man-killing heat, he dashed up the porch steps. And what he saw inside the lobby of the building froze his veins with horror.

Bound and gagged, the form of Sheriff Lew Barry was writhing at a wooden pillar in the middle of the lobby. He had been there when the

Desert Phantom had stolen into the dark room only a few moments before, on his search for Pedro Soldo.

The sheriff was trapped behind four walls of solid, roaring flames. A matter of minutes, and he would be burning alive!

## CHAPTER VII.

### INTO THE FLAMES.

ONLY for a second did the Desert Phantom hesitate, there on the threshold of the seething furnace that had once been a hotel lobby.

The members of the posse, just arriving on the scene, screamed out their warning as they saw the deputy pull his pearl-white Stetson brim down over his face, and head through the door. But their shouts were in vain. The Phantom had plunged through the wall of fire into the lobby.

He paused a moment, breath sapped from his lungs by the sheer heat of the air, eyes blinded by rolling smoke. Instinct made him drop on his stomach to the floor, his nostrils breathing pure air that seeped up through the cracks in the planks.

The fire had spread by means of the wall paper, which was like confetti in the teeth of the flames. Ancient carpeting, dry as tinder, covered part of the floor. It had carried the fire to opposite walls, so that the Phantom was now fenced in on four sides by living flame.

Choking for breath, he got to his feet and staggered on toward the spot where he knew his father was lashed to the supporting pillar of the ceiling, in the middle of the lobby.

He tripped over a chair, fell sprawling into a pool of waving yellow fire. He recoiled with a cry of pain, the heat having shaved off his eyebrows and lashes. Swatting

flame from his shirt sleeves, he lurched on through the smoke.

Flaming carpet tried to ignite his kangaroo boots, but the Phantom's legs were well protected by footgear and thick, batwing chaps of tough cowhide.

"Dad! Dad!" The cry was lost in the crackling roar of the flames.

Had he known it, the old sheriff had managed to chew and swallow his gag, and was even now bellowing for his son to save his own life while he had the chance, not attempt a rescue.

The young cowboy lifted his red bandanna over his face, knotting it. His shirt was smoldering; sparks had landed on his sombrero, singeing the beaver.

"Dad! There yuh are—don't worry!"

Reeling like a drunken man through the clouds of smoke, the Phantom staggered to his father's side. A bowie-knife blade cast off red reflections of the fire, as the Desert Phantom slashed at the rawhide lariats which bound his father to the pillar.

The old sheriff, his waterfall mustache singed off, sagged forward unsteadily, the Phantom supporting him.

"Reckon I kin make it—tuh the door, Bearcat!" wheezed the old lawman. "Let's git goin'—pronto!"

The Phantom shot a look into the bedroom, from which the fire had started. It was a roaring volcano, and the deputy saw that Pedro Soldo's body was gone. Evidently the outlaws had carried their leader to safety.

"Quick, dad! This way tuh the door!"

*Crrash!* The two men fell back against each other in the center of the lobby floor, as they saw the en-

tire ceiling collapse at the front end of the room, blocking escape.

Fire-eaten supporting timbers, stripped of their wall boards, stood revealed like pink teeth in a comb, against the smoke-swirling blackness of the outer night.

Blazing coals and timber were piled up in a mountain before them, making escape impossible through the front door!

"Don't worry, dad—there's the windows an' the back way."

Dazedly, the two men looked about, their faeces lobster-red from the heat. Both saw it was impossible to get to the windows of the lobby, however.

In many places the flames had eaten through the floor, and the walls themselves were solid curtains of flame. They could never live to reach them.

"We'll take the stairs to the second floor, then!" yelled the Phantom reassuringly, the roar of the inferno muffling his words. "Otherwise this place'll be cavin' in on our heads!"

Moving like two men in a nightmare, they danced through the flames with hands linked together so that they would not become lost in the smoke. Once the floor gave way under the sheriff's weight, and he went down, one leg caught to the knee in a hole.

But the Phantom pulled him free with a mighty effort, and a moment later a rift cleared in the sweltered air to show them the wide stairway before them, a pathway to safety.

But it was a ladder of fire. A carpet of raw flame shimmered on every tread. Unless it took them upstairs, they were doomed.

Up the stairs they went, sheer torture from the blaze making them bound up the steps like acrobats. A section of fourteen steps collapsed like blazing cardboard behind them

an instant after their passage, leaving a geyser of fire like the vent hole of a forge.

"We made it—we're saved!" yelled the Phantom. "There's a stairway goin' down the back, out-doors—a fire escape."

They were in the upper hallway. Flames were just beginning to eat through the floor to attack the upper story of the hotel, but they had only to run a hundred feet, to a rear door opening on the coolness of the outer air, and a fire-escape stairway to the ground and safety.

Galloping along like broken-down horses, swatting at flames on their clothing, father and son raced wildly for the safety promised by that fire-escape door.

"Soldo brung me tuh the hotel last night," the sheriff was explaining, "tryin' tuh make me tell whar the secret entrance tuh Deathville Basin was. But yuh kin bet yore boots he didn't git a——"

Then Sheriff Lew Barry slid to a halt. A squall of fear rasped from his throat.

Bearcat Barry, hands dropping instinctively to the butts of his .45s, peered down the hallway toward the door leading outside. And what he saw there made a film of cold sweat coat his skin.

Blocking their exit to safety was the leering, brown-suited figure of the Mexican outlaw, Pedro Soldo. And in each of his hands was a cocked six-gun!

## CHAPTER VIII.

### PHANTOM JUSTICE.

**S**HEER instinct made the Desert Phantom seize his father by one wrist and jerk him violently out of the path of the streaking lead which roared from Soldo's guns.

Even as the leering Mexican

bandit swung the .45s about to drill the deputy, Bearcat leaped sidewise into an open bedroom door at his elbow, yanking his father with him.

"That dirty crook's been lyin' in wait for us, in case we couldn't get out downstairs!" rasped the sheriff despairingly. "He knowed this was the only way of escapin' the fire."

But the Phantom had crossed the room to the single window. It had long since lost its glass and frame, so that the young deputy could lean out.

"If we're quick enough, we kin git out o' here before Soldo catches on!" rasped the deputy hopefully. "But we'll have to climb down. We'd bust our necks if we tried to jump."

As the sheriff arrived at the window, both men froze stock-still. Out in the glare of the burning hotel, a drama was unfolding in the main street of Deathville.

The three remaining outlaws of Soldo's gang had sneaked through the darkness to some broken-down wreck of a building where they kept their horses. They had saddled, and even now were spurring madly out of a side alley into the main street, making in the direction of Coffin Canyon.

This exposed them, for a brief interval, to the raking fire of the ambushed possemen from Stirrup City, hiding on the opposite side of the street. But even as Bearcat and his grizzled father watched, agape with interest, from the second-story window of the blazing hotel, they saw the outlaws make good their escape and vanish into the outer darkness.

A moment later, the Stirrup City men were dashing from their hiding places and running for their own horses, hitched to racks farther down the street.

"Mebbe I better show Soldo we're still in this room, before he gits sus-

picious an' runs outside," decided the Phantom, crossing back to the doorway. "He could gun us down as we climbed out."

"Don't go out there!" yelled the sheriff. "He'll kill yuh!"

But the young cowboy deputy was not being so foolhardy. Instead, he planned to hold one gun in his right hand, stick it around the edge of the door casing, and then "fan" the hammer with the heel of his left palm.

This, he figured, would not expose him to Soldo's fire but at the same time would send a spray of bullets at the door where the Mexican stood. One of them, if he were lucky, might cut his enemy down.

But hardly had he thrust out his gun, than a shot rang out and the Desert Phantom had the painful experience of having a .45 slug tear the Colt from his fingers. The gun glanced off the opposite door jamb and bounced into the room.

White-faced with pain, the Phantom wiped crimson off his bruised fingers and growled with rage.

"Hah-hah!" came the derisive laughter of the Mexican outside. "Thees ees one very good game, si! I wait here until fire drive you out. Zen I keel you both—you cannot stay in there long."

Thundering crashes of falling timber told the Phantom that the hotel would soon collapse. Already sway-roofed and about to tumble down from disrepair, the entire lower story was being destroyed by flames.

The Phantom picked up his gun and ran back to where his father stood by the window.

Lifting his voice, the Phantom shouted to the Mexican outside: "We'll fry afore we'll come out thar, Soldo, an' let you have the fun o' gunnin' us down!"

Then, turning to his father, he said in a low tone: "Come on, dad. We got tuh skin out o' here afore Soldo gets wise to us."

So saying, the Phantom swung a leg out over the sill. Holding on with his fingers to the bottom of the window, he lowered himself until his boots were resting on the top of the window frame just below.

Like a human fly perched on the side of a building, the Phantom slowly lowered himself, clinging to knot holes and large cracks for support.

Reaching the lower window, he dropped his body slowly until his feet were on the sill. Then he looked up, ready to render aid in case the sheriff, not being as young and active as his athletic son, should slip and fall.

But Lew Barry was made of whang leather. His wiry muscles, sapped though they were by his long night's ordeal, had the strength to lower him as had his son, to the bottom window.

From here, it was only a five-foot jump to the ground.

"That's a whole lot better than jumpin' an' bustin' a laig," panted the sheriff, as both of them landed on the ground below the window. "Whew! We better run—the hotel's done for——"

An ear-shattering thunder of sound made the two men flee for their lives. Timbers were splintering like toothpicks as the roof started caving in.

And just as the Phantom and his father got out of the danger zone, they saw the famous old Bonanza Hotel collapsing like a monstrous house of cards.

"Well, I reckon that spells finish fer Pedro Soldo," panted the veteran sheriff. "I reckon——"

The two men, arms lifted to shield their faces from the heat of the blaze, walked along the side of the adjoining building toward the rear. As they did so, they were astounded to see a human figure dart like a shadow into a back street.

And both men instantly recognized the brown caballero costume of that fleeing figure.

"Soldo's escaped!" gasped the Phantom, pulling his father back into shadow. "He must 'a' felt the hotel startin' tuh tremble, an' he ran down the back steps an' got away before the crash!"

For a moment, the young waddy stood still, thoughts churning wildly in his brain.

"Listen, dad!" exclaimed the Phantom, turning to his father suddenly. "Soldo figures *we* died in that fire, savvy? An' now he's runnin' tuh whatever shack the outlaws has stabled their broncs in. Thinks he can git out o' Deathville afore the possemen come back from chasin' them other skunks. Well, I'm goin' an' arrest that skunk—capture him alive!"

Before the sheriff could answer, the Desert Phantom sped off into the shadows, making in the general direction of the spot where the other outlaws had obtained their horses.

The grizzled old veteran tried to follow, but his weary muscles had reached the limit. With a groan of fatigue, he sat down on a packing case and swabbed sweat off his face.

The fact that he was unarmed rendered it useless for him to follow and try to aid his son. And he realized that it was very necessary that Pedro Soldo be captured alive, for the outlaw band had a large cache of gold hidden somewhere, and Soldo, alive, might break down and tell where that cache was located.

Out in the darkness, the Desert Phantom was slipping from building to building, cocking his head to listen every ten feet.

Suddenly, to his straining ears, came the unmistakable sounds of a man roping a horse in a near-by corral, by the light of the burning hotel.

Soldo, believing that Deathville Basin was deserted of possemen and that the Desert Phantom and the sheriff had perished in the flames, was taking no precautions as he prepared to make his own escape from the ghost town.

Eyes wide in the dark, the Phantom crept toward the corral on noiseless feet. Back in the gloom he could hear the Mexican swearing impatiently, as the horse pitched its head while he sought to buckle on the bridle. Finally the rasp of bit on teeth told the cowboy deputy that Soldo had accomplished the job.

The Phantom drew his guns and followed the corral fence to the barn. Then he skirted the building until he rounded the corner. The ground in front of the barn was littered with straw, which crackled underfoot unless he moved with extreme caution.

The black maw of the barn door appeared in the rough board wall, dimly outlined in the pink glow from the fire. Treading with catlike stillness through the straw, the Phantom slipped inside the barn and pressed back against a wall draped with old harness. He held his breath, waiting to get Soldo's location.

Saddle leather was squeaking. Mentally, Bearcat could picture the Mexican bandit back in the barn, putting a saddle aboard his mount, pulling the girth tight, then jerking the stirrups off the saddle horn.

A moment passed, electric with suspense. He was not sure of the Mexican's position, yet.



Then hoofbeats thudded on the hard earth floor of the barn, and the Phantom realized that Soldo had mounted and was planning to leave the barn at a dead gallop.

He had only a heartbeat's time to think. And the decision was a hard one, for it involved his code of sportsmanship.

He could easily shoot down horse or rider in the dark, as they rushed past him out of the barn. But the Phantom had never killed a horse to get his man. On the Western ranges, a horse is revered almost at the level of human life itself.

And as for slaying a man without warning—even a skunk of Pedro's stripe, who would leave a helpless man to burn alive—went contrary to the grain of the Phantom's ideas of fair play.

Hoofbeats thundered up out of the gloom almost on top of him as Soldo, bent low in his saddle to escape hitting the top of the door with his head, was spurring into a gallop to leave the barn.

Acting with lightning-swift skill, the Phantom jabbed his twin .45s into their glassy holsters. Then he jerked a set of heavy work harness off the wall peg behind him.

As Soldo's mount sped over the threshold, the Phantom tossed the heavy harness under the flying hoofs.

The brittle leather straps wrapped themselves about the forelegs of the speeding animal, sent it sprawling into the loose straw scattered about the ground. But as the horse went down, the Phantom saw that Soldo had kept to the saddle, instead of being dumped off as he had anticipated.

With an oath of surprise and rage, Pedro Soldo was trying to disentangle the straps from his horse's feet, not knowing how they had come to be in the doorway.

Out of the darkness of the barn door came the Desert Phantom, springing like a panther. In the gloom, the startled Soldo did not see the young deputy until he had hurtled through the air upon his very shoulders.

The two men locked in two-fisted combat on the horse's back, as Soldo struggled to get at his guns. At the same moment, the panic-stricken horse struggled to its feet, broke free of the entangling harness, and bolted.

Fighting like wild cats, clinging to the pitching saddle with each man having one foot in the stirrups, Pedro Soldo and the Desert Phantom went galloping off up the side street toward the blazing hotel, staging their show-down on the back of a speeding horse!

Sheriff Lew Barry jumped out of the shadows in alarm, as he saw the double-laden horse gallop madly out into the broad main street of Deathville, the two men in the saddle pummeling each other savagely with bruising fists.

And then the veteran lawman of Concha County witnessed the most thrilling battle which had ever been staged on Deathville's street.

Soldo's left hand had a .45 free of the holster, but the Phantom's hand was clamped on its wrist. Then, aiming with cold deliberation at his horse's neck, Soldo pulled the trigger.

The animal went down, shot dead in mid-gallop. And the shock of their crash hurled both men free of the horse and on opposite sides of the somersaulting carcass.

As the dust cleared away, the sheriff saw his son picking himself up dizzily, his breath knocked out by the impact. But the Mexican was throwing himself flat on his stomach, using the horse as a shield

between him and the Phantom's guns.

Soldo, himself slightly dazed by the tumble, had his .45s blazing their death song. Only the fact that Soldo's aim was wobbly from the battering he had received from the Phantom's fists during their wild ride was making the bullets go wild.

"Hey! Stick 'em up, Soldo!" Out into the street the old sheriff sprinted, yelling at the top of his lungs. He was not armed, but he was staking his life on the bluff of directing the Mexican's attention.

Soldo looked about, raised his guns to cut the sheriff down. But the interval of a clipped second gave the Phantom his chance to jerk out his own cedar-butted Colts.

*Brram!* The Phantom's gun blazed as Soldo fired at the oncoming sheriff.

The Mexican's bullets went harmlessly past Lew Barry's shoulder. For the Phantom's bullet had been deadly true.

With a choked scream of hate, Pedro Soldo slumped dead behind the carcass of the horse he had killed.

The possemen from Stirrup City galloped back into Deathville to re-

port having successfully routed the three crooks down Coffin Canyon, which had not been completely blocked by the dynamite blast, just as the sheriff and his son were stooping over the corpse of Pedro Soldo.

"Deathville's safe fer the citizens tuh come to, now," the possemen were saying. "They kin come back an' mine their gold in peace, what with Soldo gittin' his."

The Desert Phantom's lips bent in a weary smile. He was gazing down at the limp corpse of the Mexican.

There had been a question-mark scar on Pedro's brown face—a question mark complete, except for the dot under the hook-shaped sign. But now there was a dot under the question mark.

It marked the passage of the Desert Phantom's bullet through the outlaw's brain!

As it turned out, it's too bad the dynamite blast didn't block Coffin Canyon total an' complete. Then the rest o' the outlaws couldn't 'a' got away from the posse a-tall. As 'tis, a few of 'em are still on the loose, an' thet spells future trouble fer the Desert Phantom an' his father, the sheriff. There'll be another story about him in the next issue o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Don't miss it.





# A Cowpoke Named Archibald

By Victor Kaufman

**T**HAT glum-lookin' buckaroo meant trouble to me from the first minute I saw him. I don't know why, exactly, but that's how I figured it—an' believe me, I was right!

He rode up to our trail camp as we was havin' chow on the third night of our fall drive to the railroad at Sweetwater. He reined up, squinted at us through the dusk, an' croaked: "Howdy."

We returned the compliment. Then "Big Pete," our foreman, got up an' invited: "Have chow?"

"Don't mind if I do," mumbled the stranger.

He got out of the saddle an' wiggled his short legs up to the fire.

Cooky dished him a plate of beans. The stranger took 'em an' squatted down near Big Pete. An' I'm tellin' you, he was the first buckaroo I ever saw who looked plumb sorrowful while he was eatin'.

Actually, he seemed sorry he'd ever seen food. I'll admit cooky's grub ain't so wonderful. But heck! It sure ain't *that* bad!

He gulped down the last of his beans an' looked at Big Pete. "Need a hand?" he inquired.

Big Pete seemed to consider, rollin' his eatin'-tobacco around on his tongue an' lookin' up at the stars. But I knew he was just stallin'. We *did* need a hand.

The second day out, "Skinny" was

pitched off a jittery horse an' broke his arm. Course, he had to go back to the Square D. So we needed a hand, all right.

This stranger, though, didn't know about that. An' when Big Pete kind o' hesitated, the runty buckaroo seemed to think he ought to say somethin'. He did! He said a mighty big mouthful!

"My name," he offered, without crackin' a smile, "is Jones—Archibald H. Jones."

Big Pete's eyes popped open. He swallered his Adam's apple so hard that I swear I heard it clink against his boot heel. "Archi—" he gasped. Then he remembered his manners. "Sure," he choked. "Sure. Of course. Ab-so-lutely!"

But I heard a snicker from behind. It didn't take three guesses to know who it was, either. Owen Hugg—a new hand with us an' kind of ornery. He laughed right out.

"Archibald!" he bellered. "Archibald. Whaw-whaw-whaw!"

I ducked. It was an insult. Here was that trouble I'd been expectin', all hogtied an' ready fer the iron. Yes, sir! I could almost hear the lead sing right then.

But Archibald Jones just nodded an' sat still. I looked at him. Big Pete looked at him. Every one else looked at him. Owen kept right on laughin'. But Archibald didn't move.

That was a shock! Heck! A man's name is his name. It's personal, even if it is a sheep-herder tag like Archibald. An' I'll admit I was hopin' to see a fight. I like a good fight, an' they're powerfully scarce on the range these days.

But Archibald just sat there like a toad on a rock an' looked glum.

Finally Big Pete looked hard at Owen. When Big Pete looks, he

looks! Owen shut up. Then Big Pete turned to Archibald.

"Yeah." There wasn't much enthusiasm in his voice. "Yeah, I need a hand. I'll take yuh on for the rest of the drive."

This just about soured my stomach. I sure hate to have a spineless mutt like Archibald seemed to be hangin' around. He's all right, as a general rule, until there's trouble. But in a jam, a yellow buckaroo is about as useful as a sand pile in Death Valley. I told Big Pete as much when we were ridin' night herd later on.

Big Pete mumbled cuss words through his mustache. "Yeah. But heck, this Archibald is a gift from heaven. I need a hand an' need one bad," Big Pete grunted. "He's like most gifts, though—a little seedy at the edges."

Next day, I kept my eye on Archibald. I was jittery. I knew Owen well enough to realize that he'd found just what he wanted—a hand he could buffalo.

An' sure enough, I noticed Owen ridin' close to Archibald every time he got a chance. I was back on the drag an' dang near smothered with dust, but I could see that Owen would throw a few words in Archibald's direction every now an' then.

I didn't need to hear what he said. I knew. Owen was ridin' Archibald somethin' fierce.

But that night, after we got the cattle bedded down an' had gathered round the chuck wagon, Owen started prospectin' for *real* trouble.

Yep, it sure seemed that this guy Archibald rubbed Owen's fur the wrong way. An' for no reason at all, as far as I could see. Archibald was as meek as a lamb. But Owen would keep growlin' out remarks about



"sheep-herder handles" an' such stuff.

Whenever he did, Archibald would just look glum an' move away. It got to be a regular game. Owen tried everythin' he knew of to get Archibald stirred up, but Archibald was harder to stir than molasses in zero weather. An' the less he noticed Owen, the more Owen seemed to bristle.

Finally Archibald ankleed over to the fire an' dished himself some chow. On the way back to the circle, Owen took special pains to crowd Archibald. He bumped him an' bumped him hard. Archibald's grub slipped out of his plate an' made a splotch in the sand.

Owen growled like a bear full of porcupine quills. "Watch where yo're goin', yuh blamed pilgrim!" He kind o' stepped back like he wanted to fight.

The whole outfit stopped eatin' an' watched, wonderin' what this Archibald would do. Owen was out for trouble. He wanted to mix with Archibald, that was plain. But Archibald just sighed an' said, meek-like:

"You run into *me*."

"The blazes I did!" Owen snarled. "Tryin' to get hard about it, eh? No skunk with a handle like yores can call *me* a liar! Yuh run into *me*—understand?"

Archibald shrugged an' looked like he wanted to say somethin', but was scared. I felt kind o' sorry for him, even if he was yellower'n Slim's Sunday shirt. Heck, Owen was goin' too danged far out o' his way to pick a fight.

Why he'd taken a notion to pester Archibald, I hadn't yet decided. I just figured that Owen liked to play curly wolf an' had at last found some one he could howl at without fear of gettin' skinned.

"Come on!" Owen yelled, gettin' red in the face. "Call me a liar again! I'll match guns with yuh any time, *Archibald!*"

But when Owen mentioned guns, Archibald turned his back an' went over to the fire again to get more grub. I snorted to myself an' attacked my plate of beans. This was gettin' to be too danged much. Believe me, if any jasper brushed me like Owen did Archibald, he'd eat his words so fast he'd contract acute gas pains.

Well, the crowd kind o' relaxed after that. Owen stood for a minute, grumblin', then sat down. Big Pete sighed an' squinted up at the sky.

"Looks like uneasy weather," he opined. "We'll have to watch the herd close to-night."

Then he goes on to give us our shifts—three riders on each shift of three hours. I was slated for the after-midnight crew with Owen an' Slim. So as soon as the last of my beans slipped down I curled up to sleep.

## II.

I'd no sooner got to snorin' than some one woke me up. I squinted through the dark an' saw Archibald leanin' over me.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, right apologetic, "but I want to ask a favor of you."

I blinked a couple o' times, then said: "Shoot!"

"It's this way," Archibald explained. "I know you fellers think I'm yellow. But the fact is, I don't want to mix with Owen while we're on drive. I've always learned to tend to business until the herd's delivered. But after that——"

"Hm-m-m!" I grunted. "You mean you aim to skin that curly wolf when we get to Sweetwater?"

"Of course!" Archibald answered, kind o' like he meant it.

This sounded like good cow-puncher sense to me. I looked at Archibald an' asked:

"An' what's the favor?"

Archibald squatted down beside me an' whispered: "Get Big Pete to let me ride night-herd with you an' Owen. Slim won't mind if I take his shift. He'll be glad, more'n likely."

I gulped. Gosh! Playin' night nurse to a bunch of loco cows was bad enough, but ridin' herd on a pair like Owen an' Archibald was just plain poison. Besides, the whole thing sounded fishy, an' I told him so.

"It's like this," he argued. "I want to give Owen plenty of chance to devil me, see? Ridin' herd together will allow for a lot of howlin' on his part. All the time I'll just sit back an' say nothin' a-tall. An' then——"

I grinned. "An' then," I supplied, "when he's plenty certain you wouldn't even quarrel with a one-winged mosquito, why you'll just r'ar up an' tan his hide. By gosh, that's a good idea!"

"Sure, it is!" Archibald insisted, all enthusiasm. "Sure it is. But you got to help me. I can't ask Big Pete myself, 'cause he hates me too much. But you can ask him for me."

I crawled out an' told Archibald to get back under his sougans before he caught chilblains.

Big Pete was stretched out over by the wagon, rippin' off somethin' that sounded like one of these symphony things. I shook him until his nose quit squealin', an' he opened one eye to glare at me.

"Yuh loco polecat——"

"Sh!" I interrupted. "Shh!"

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Big Pete batted his eyes. "Huh! What's up?"

"Pete," I began. "I want to make a study in human nature. Let Archibald ride with Owen an' me to-night in place of Slim."

"What?" Big Pete exploded. "Are yuh plumb empty in the head? That combination would worry the devil himself. Why invite trouble?"

I argued for a long time an' finally had to end up by tellin' Big Pete about Archibald's plan to bait Owen. Pete grinned like a canyon.

"Not bad!" he chuckled. "Not bad at all! Maybe this jasper Archibald has more brains than I figured. Yeah! Let him ride with yuh. Yuh tell Slim an' arrange it." Then Big Pete glared at me. "But if there's trouble out there, I'm holdin' yuh responsible!"

This danged near took the ginger out o' my enthusiasm. But I was powerful anxious to see Archibald put Owen in his place, so I agreed to keep away any cyclones.

Well, after I got to ridin', I got uneasy. I saw right away that the cattle were restless an' jumpy. Before I'd been in the saddle two minutes, I was sorry I'd granted Archibald his little favor.

I couldn't just tell why I felt jittery, but I'm danged if I didn't feel like I was settin' on a keg of powder with a cigarette stub burnin' my fingers.

I rode around the herd, singin' to the blasted cows. Owen was off to my right, swearin' at a misguided critter that wanted to be every place but the bed ground. Archibald was away over on the far side of the circle, bellerin' "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie." It gave me the creeps.

But after a while I sort o' calmed down. An' then, no sooner had I



figured all was well, when trouble rode in with a roar.

*Brang! Crack! Wham!* Three shots! Comin' from the far side of the herd!

"Blazes!" I muttered, dang near fallin' out o' my chaps. "There goes Archibald!"

An' right then, my thinkin' was snapped off pronto. Them shots was all the excuse the cows needed. Up they come, their tails rollin', an' their throats bellerin'. They were down on me faster'n lightnin' slip-pin' down a greased pole. In three seconds, it sounded like Brandy Bilyeu's saloon on the Saturday night after pay day.

Them critters swept my horse with them, headin' for New York as the crow flies—only faster. I tried to steer my pony out of the mess, all the time thinkin' that I had to turn the stampede all by myself. Archibald an' Owen had shot each other up, judgin' from the sound of things. I figured Archibald's temper had run hog-wild on him before he meant it to. Anyway, they weren't any use to me.

An' I couldn't count on much help from the rest of the boys, either. By the time they got into the saddle the herd would be halfway to the Rockies. Fact is, I expected to tear through New York most any minute an' end up in the Atlantic Ocean.

I rode. An' what I mean, I *rode!* That roarin' bunch of beef was travelin' like a six-gun slug behind schedule. But finally I got my horse clear an' skirted up toward the leaders. I shot in their faces, cussed, waved my hat an' yelled.

I might just as well've saved my energy. I would've, too, if I'd known how bad I was goin' to need it later on. Yes, sir!

Then, all at once, my ears collected a sound that didn't come from

the cattle. A shot! Then another—an' another! I twisted around in the saddle an' looked back.

*Brang!* Flame licked out, makin' a streak in the darkness.

*Zipp!* I heard a slug buzz past my ear, an' it gave me a chronic case of jumps.

I cussed an' reined around, ready for trouble. A rider loomed up an' streaked past. Archibald, by gosh!

I could barely see him, but I saw enough to give me a jolt like a mustang's kick. Archibald, with his gun out an' ridin' hell-for-leather! I jerked up my gun an' laid a shot in his direction.

So *he* was the skunk who'd been shootin' at me, eh? I pulled my horse around an' started after him, cussin' like a mule skinner.

*Crack!* Another shot.

The lead fanned my nose so close I could feel the heat. An' this time it wasn't Archibald. No, sir. Some one else was pottin' at me. I was mighty popular, it seemed. Kind o' the star of the show.

Then I saw a bunch of other riders around me, makin' dark blots against the night. That gave me a whole paragraph of disturbin' thoughts. Rustlers! That was the answer. They'd started the stampede an' was cuttin' away with a lot of our stock.

What's more, this Archibald was in on the deal. I saw it plenty plain. That was the reason he'd wanted to ride with Owen an' me—so he could be out when the gang struck.

Yes, sir, I thought I'd sure figured him right, the first time I saw him. Trouble was his name—not Archibald.

I started to cuss. The more I cussed, the madder I got. An' the madder I got, the faster I rode. Seemed like my horse was peeved, too, 'cause he sure covered ground.

I couldn't see much. I didn't know where the herd was—probably scattered all over Oregon by this time. I'd lost 'em when the shootin' started. But I didn't care. Right now, I was lookin' for a double-crossin', lyin' coyote that called himself Archibald.

Then—so sudden I almost lost a tonsil in a heart string—a voice cracked out at me from the dark: "Draw in! Put 'em up!"

I did both, pronto. That voice sounded businesslike. Ready guns an' businesslike voices make a bad combination, especially when they've got the drop.

"Git off yore hoss an' pull back in this gully!" The voice was givin' orders. "An' don't go for that cannon of yores, neither!"

I follered directions. I couldn't see the hombre who had me covered, an' I didn't recognize the voice. But I heard him chuckle, meanlike.

"Smart, ain't yuh? Yeah, too smart. But yuh ain't spoilin' our little deal, see?"

I squinted into the dark an' saw a spot that seemed blacker than the rest. I figured that must be the rustler.

"Reckon I won't hinder yuh much, stranger," I told him.

Always treat a guy with a gun very courteous. It's a heap safer.

He laughed. An' his laugh chilled me worse'n a forty-mile blizzard. "No," he gritted. "No, yuh won't. 'Cause in about three seconds, cowboy, yo're goin' to be dead!"

That made me powerfully happy. I saw the black spot twist sidewise. "Hey!" he yelled. "Yuh boys got them cows ready to go?"

"Yeah," came back a voice. "They're all herded in the gully here. Plug 'im an' let's travel."

Pleasant bunch of boys. Very pleasant. But right then I decided

that I wasn't checkin' out without a mighty strong kick. The hombre with the gun was danged near invisible, back in the shadows, while I was out in plain sight. I figured he could see me plenty.

But I didn't care. I hunched my shoulders an' went for my gun!

*Bam!* A shot roared out, an' I reckon it scared every jack rabbit clean over into Idaho.

I saw the rustler's form stumble, an' I blinked. That shot hadn't come from his gun—an' it hadn't come from mine either! No, sir. It came from somewhere off to the side.

However, I didn't do much thinkin' about that right then. I ducked sidewise as a shot licked out at me from back in the gully. I threw some lead toward the flash an' somebody yelled like he was hit.

Then, suddenlike, I heard a voice: "Up! All of you skunks! Throw 'em up an' keep 'em high! I got yuh covered like a blanket!"

There was a lot of cussin' from that gully. Then the voice yelled again: "You all right?"

I figured he was talkin' to me, so I gasped: "Yeah. Where are you?"

"Up here," answered the voice, soundin' more familiar. "Up on the bank."

I scrambled up the side of the gully, thinkin' plenty. At the top, I squinted into the dark an' cursed. Yes, sir. You guessed it. There was Archibald, perched on a rock, with a .45 in each hand. Down below, in the gully, I could see a lot of hands stickin' up into the air.

Archibald sighed, glumlike. "I got 'em," he said.

I didn't say nothin'. Heck! What was there to say?

"Rustlers," Archibald went on, not battin' an eye. "They started the stampede back there an' cut away with some cows. Or rather

Owen started it. You see, he was with the gang. I knew it. That was why I couldn't rip him apart like I wanted to. I'm a range detective for the Cattlemen's Association."

"A—a range de-detective!" I squeaked.

"Yes," Archibald agreed. "I've been trailin' this gang for months. Found out that Owen was on the Square D pay roll, so I ambled over this way. I think Owen suspected me all along. That's why he tried so hard to make me fight." Archibald sighed an' waved his guns toward the gang huddled in the gully. "They've got about a hundred head of cows down there. We can round up the rest easy enough soon as it gets daylight." He coughed, embarrassedlike. "Sorry I plugged you back there. I didn't see who it was until too late."

I cussed, kind o' feeble. "Next time," I advised. "Look first."

"Sure," Archibald nodded. "Sure. Well, let's get goin'. We'll take these jaspers into Sweetwater with us."

But in Sweetwater, Big Pete handed me the biggest jolt of the whole shebang. It was after we turned the gang over to the sheriff an' had the cows in the railroad pens. I met Big Pete comin' out of Brandy Bilyeu's saloon.

"Just imagine it!" I grumbled.

"Imagine a guy with a name like Archibald turnin' out to be a regular wolf in sheep's clothin'. That just shows. The jasper who said 'What's in a name?' sure knew his brands!"

Big Pete spat at a tin can. The can shivered, 'cause when Big Pete spits, he spits! "Shakespeare or some other long-haired writer feller said that," Big Pete informed me. "An' he was dead wrong. Yes, sir. There's lots in a name. More'n you figure."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Big Pete. "Yuh know, I got to thinkin' about this name business to-day. So when we hit town I went up to the school marm an' looked in a book she has. It's got all kinds of names in it. Where they come from an' what they mean. All such stuff. An' what do you think?"

"Gosh," I muttered. "I *can't* think!"

"Archibald," explained Big Pete, "is an old German name, 'cordin' to this book. An' it sure fits that jasper! Yes, sir! It means 'extremely bold!'"

"Well I'll be hanged!" I commented.

"That ain't all." Big Peae grinned. "Take that skunk Owen for instance. He sure figured he was a curly wolf. An' yuh know—danged if *his* name don't mean 'lamb!'"







# Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of *Wild West Weekly* you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's *Wild West Weekly*, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

I'D like to have more music to pass on to the readers of the Song Corral. Don't forget that it's important fer us tuh locate the music as well as the verses an' the story of each song.

I'll grant yuh that's a tough job, but don't git discouraged. Jes' be sure tuh give me every single thing yuh kin find out about a song. Even if yuh don't know anything

about music yoreself, it's easy enough tuh copy it off.

Now let's see what we got fer tuh-day. A number o' short songs, it seems. First hyar's one thet I found in an ol' paper called the *Frontier Times*, published down in Texas. The editor o' this paper is doin' his best tuh collect all the frontier lore thet kin be recalled by the ol' scouts an' cowboys, an' such.

The paper's plumb full of excitin' episodes in the lives of this an' thet historic figure o' the West. Not only stories, but old relics of the West have been collected—ol' manuscripts, Injun trophies, an' all. An' now thar's a museum in Banderera, Texas—the Frontier Times Museum.

This song was written by an ol' cowboy, C. E. Johnson, an' recited by him at the Old Trail Drivers' Reunion, in 1925, at San Antonio, Texas. It's a little gloomy, but I reckon yuh kin stand thet.

### THE OLD COWBOY \*

By C. E. Johnson

I rode a line on the open range  
When cow-punchin' wasn't slow;  
I've turned the long-horned cow one way,  
And the other the buffalo.

I went up the trail in the '80s—  
Oh, the hardships I have stood!  
I've drank water from a cow track, boys,  
When you bet it tasted good.

I've stood night guard many a night  
In the face of driving storm,  
And sang to them a doleful song,  
While they rattled their hocks and horns.

I've been in many a stampede, too;  
I've heard the rumbling noise;  
And the light we had to turn them by  
Was the lightning on them horns.

But many a boy I worked with then  
Is sleeping on old Boot Hill,  
For his last cow drive was made to Dodge  
Over the Jones and Plummer Trail.

They're building towns and railroads now,  
Where we used to bed our cows;  
And the men with the mule, the plow, and  
the hoe  
Arc digging up our old bed grounds.

The old cowboy has watched the change  
Has seen the good times come and go—  
But the old cowboy will soon be gone  
Just like the buffalo.

But thar's still plenty o' young  
uns tuh take the old cowboys' place!

Waal now, hyar's a song about a  
Western bad man, called Smoky  
Mountain Bill.

### SMOKY MOUNTAIN BILL

This is for a spell, a story I will tell,  
A tale about a man called "Smoky Moun-  
tain Bill."

He was tall and thin, drunk a lot of gin,  
That's what caused him all the trouble he  
got in.

He had a whisky still, away upon a hill,  
He would kill a quart, just to drive away a  
chill.

It took about a kag to get him on the jag,  
Then he starts to singin' this song:  
"Yodel-ady-olady-olady."

A revenue man known as "Shootin' Dan"  
Loaded up his gun, and he went to get his  
man.

He never found the still, and now he never  
will,

A buckshot stopped him when he started  
up the hill.

A month had rolled around when Bill came  
in the town,

The sheriff got behind him, and he knocked  
him to the ground.

They put him in the jail, and wouldn't give  
him bail,

Then he starts to singin' this song:  
"Yodel-ady-oiady-olady."

He busted down the door and grabbed a  
.44,

Knocked the jailer down, and he left him  
on the floor.

He stole a horse and run, shootin' off his  
gun,

Yellin', "Come and get me if you want to  
have some fun."

He headed down the line, left the town  
behind;

The sheriff turned around when he heard a  
bullet whine

And away upon the hill, they heard from  
Smoky Bill

When he started singin' this song:  
"Yodel-ady-olady-olady."

Smoky Mountain Bill away upon the hill,  
They never brought him down, and I bet  
they never will.

He is gettin' old and thin with whiskers on  
his chin,

But there is a lot of tunes in his old violin.  
There is notches on his gun, shows him  
what he's done;

He counts them every night, and he reaches  
for the rum.

\*Reprinted by courteous permission of J. Marvin Hunter, editor of the *Frontier Times*.

He takes a little snort, maybe 'bout a quart,  
Then he starts to singin' this song:  
"Yodel-ady-olady-olady."

Thar, folks, thet song was sent in by Virgil Sams, of Arizona. Bein' as how he didn't send any info along with it, I don't know who wrote it, but whoever did, it's a good un.

Now, tuh finish off, we'll have a song thet some of yuh may remember from way back over three years ago. It's one thet all of yuh ought tuh have—one o' the best known songs written by Herbert Knibbs, about the very old days of the West.

**PONY EXPRESS**

By Henry Herbert Knibbs

The moon was drawing pictures of the mesquite on the sand

Round the old adobe station, the last of the long relay,

When I slid from a bronc of Fargo's—the wave of a friendly hand—

And I lit in another saddle and headed for Santa Fe.

That ride I carried some papers that didn't have time to wait;

Government stamp was on 'em, so the company turned us loose,

Picked from our relay riders, and started us two hours late.

It was up to me and the pony to make it—and no excuse.

The moon was riding the mountains, and Toby was in his stride,

When we came to the ford—like silver with the black of the rocks between.

He nosed his hocks for a minute, splashed water to cool his hide;

Then he laid to work like a major, running it strong and clean.

The stars grew dim on the sky line, for the morning was taking toll,

Calling 'em back to heaven, counting 'em one by one,

When sudden and blind, like thunder, we lunged in a gopher hole—

Leg snapped short at the ankle—I tried—but the job was done.

It was one of my own, not Toby's—and for that I was mighty glad.

His luck, it had turned him over; but he trotted to where I lay,

And his eyes were big as he sniffed me; I grinned, for he sure looked sad.

"And now what's next on this program?" that Toby hoss seemed to say.

I got a grip on the stirrup, hung the reins on the horn, and took

That packet of government papers and tied 'em where folks could see;

I opened a saddle pocket and slipped in my record book,

While Toby, with head turned sidewise, was staring surprise at me.

The desert whirled for a minute, then stopped, and my head grew clear,

For I cinched to that one idea, and I put it to Toby straight:

"You got to carry the papers, and maybe you think it's queer;

But vamose! and don't be forgetting they started us two hours late."

I knew him. Now, lots of hosses would have trailed to the brush and grazed,

Left me to chew the bullet, for I sure wasn't feeling strong;

But Toby and I were pardners, the both of us being raised

In the high, dry mesa country where quitters don't last for long.

I swung my hat and I hit him; the muscles along his flank

Rippled and bunched—and the raw, red sun came over the eastern range.

I drew in a breath of morning, then down on the sand I sank.

I heard him crossing a coulee; then—everything still and strange.

They told me they tried to catch him 'way out on the edge of town,

How he kept on agoing steady, like a lone night herder's rhyme,

Till he stopped himself at the stable. They wondered where I was down.

He couldn't talk or he'd told 'em, but the papers arrived on time.

'Twas a pardon for some poor hombre—I don't recollect his name.

Me? Oh, my leg it mended, and the company gave me pay

For the time I was off. And Toby? That little hoss, wise and game?

Why, he's doing his regular running—from this station to Santa Fe.

How did yuh like thet one?

Now don't fergit what I said in the beginnin' o' this department. Lend a hand in the search fer ol' song, folks. Thanks—an' so long.





# Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS—Postmaster

Some day you're going out West yourself to the Western outdoors. It will be a nice thing to have friends out West when that time comes—friends who'll extend a hand o' welcome and put you onto things.

You can make these friends through this department of Wild West Weekly. The idea is to exchange information about different parts of the West—about ranches and camps, getting work, prospecting, and learning to rope and ride.

Letters are exchanged only between men and men, and between women and women. Let's get together and make this department a real help to readers of Wild West Weekly. I'll do my part by forwarding letters between parties likely to be interested in writing to one another. You do yours by always printing your whole name and address carefully on every letter you send to this department; and by giving the name and State of the Pen Pal you choose, as it appears in the magazine, as well as the date of the magazine in which you find him or her.

Address your letters to Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**I**T surely pleases me to see the heap o' letters that came in this week. Thar's many frien'ships in the making; so jest step up an' take yore pick.

O' course, *new* Pen Pals are more apt tuh answer quickly and that is the reason why I'm advisin' yuh tuh

select names always from the latest issue o' the W. W. W.

Now for the letters:

## SONG LOVERS AN' SPECIALS

I reckon that's the division o' the Pen Pal corner that is o' greatest interest, an' I hardly think it needs

any urgin' on my part for yuh tuh read every one o' these letters.

DEAR SAM: I am a song lover and collector, and I would like to get Pen Pals with whom I could exchange. My collection numbers about three thousand and almost every sort of song is represented. I would not mind getting as many as twenty-five Pen Pals and each of their letters would be promptly answered.

WALTER SMITH, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen. Although I am fond of outdoor sports, I am also interested in music, and I am taking singing lessons. Of course, I love cowboy songs, and I hope that I can get in touch with Pen Pals all through the U. S. A. with whom I can exchange songs.

ANNA BELLE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am an old-time song collector, and I think I have the largest list in the West. I hope that you will publish this, because I want Pen Pals everywhere who will exchange songs. I am especially interested in getting State or district folk songs of descriptive character—songs concerning either people or incidents.

FRANK MORRIS, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to you, because I am looking for songs and Pen Pals. The songs I desire to get now are "Mother, Queen of My Heart" and "Yellow Rose of Texas." If some Pen Pals would send these to me I would gladly send others in exchange, especially cowboy songs of which I have two hundred and forty. I am a girl of sixteen, and I would like to correspond with girls as old or older than I.

FRANCES JACKSON, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve. Although I have lots of friends, I want to get Pen Pals from the West, because that part of our country interests me very much. Besides, as I am collecting cowboy songs I feel that I can find friends with whom I can exchange songs. Right now, I am looking for "The Cowboy's Lament."

VIRGINIA SIGMAN, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, sixteen years old. My pastimes are outdoor sports, singing, and collecting cowboy songs as well as pictures. I would like very much to hear from girls in the West, especially in Montana, Arizona, and Texas. I assure every

one that I shall promptly answer letters and exchange snaps and songs.

SYLVIA L., OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I am looking for Pen Pals from anywhere who are interested in flowers. I have ten colens and my twin window offers the prettiest sight one can imagine. If Pen Pals will send me slips of any kind whatever, I will gladly reciprocate with others, although I may not be able to get any from the colens before the fall. However, write to me, no matter whether or not you are a flower fan.

MRS. J. W. C., OF MARYLAND.

DEAR SAM: I would be very glad to hear from Pen Pals anywhere in the U. S. A. I am a bronc rider, twenty-one years old and just now getting over a bad fall. I will gladly answer all letters. Having traveled quite a lot, I think I can write interestingly. BUCK JAMISON, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young man of twenty-seven and I would like to hear from Pen Pals of around my own age—fellows who are broad-minded and who like a steady correspondent. I would especially enjoy hearing from New York City, because that was my home town until a few years ago.

CYCLONE BILL, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen. I would like to find a few more Pen Pals, especially in foreign countries. As I shall travel soon to Arizona and New Mexico, I will have plenty of interesting things to write about, and I hope that I will be kept busy answering letters.

PATRICIA P., OF ILLINOIS.

#### FROM FOREIGN SHORES

Jest a few letters this week, but don't disappoint these folks in thar search fer Pen Pals.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, twelve years old and as the chances are very slim that I ever shall visit the West, I would like you to find some Pen Pals there for me. Boys of my own age who live on ranches and who are willing to write about the West, please favor this plea.

ALEX CARGILL, OF AUSTRALIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty. Having been interested by a friend in the Pen Pal department, I venture to

ask that you try to make a contact for me with some one in Texas of around my own age. I work in an office, but I am interested in all sports.

O. HAUPT, OF SOUTH AFRICA.

DEAR SAM: May I try my luck at getting a Pen Pal of about my own age? I am especially interested in hearing from the West and would be very glad if some real cowboys would answer this request. I am a young man, twenty-one years old.

D. K. M., OF AUSTRALIA.

### CHEER WANTED

An S O S from lonesome folks that should be heeded promptly. That's nothin' worse than feelin' lonely an' forgotten, an' Pen Pals should take it as a duty tuh send some cheerin' letters.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twelve and very lonesome. I can play the piano and guitar and am especially fond of cowboy songs. This, of course, means also that I am interested in the West, and in asking you for Pen Pals, I express the hope that you will find some Western friends for me.

V. W., OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonely ex-cowgirl of nineteen. I would like to hear from any one who is interested in Western life as I certainly can tell of it. I am an expert with the rope and a good rider, having been thrown only once since I learned to ride. Girls between fifteen and twenty, please write.

AIDA C., OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow of twenty-one, a member of the CCC, an existence that I don't especially care for, so that I feel very lonesome. I hope to receive some Pen Pals through you, because correspondence would be a welcome change. I would be thankful to you if you could induce some Westerners to write to me.

W. W., OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: I am a nurse, thirty-seven years old, far away from my people and, therefore, very lonesome. I really believe that there is no one as lonesome as I am, and I hope for that reason that this plea will be promptly answered.

ETHEL MAE, OF OREGON.

DEAR SAM: Will you please help two lonely girls of fifteen by inviting some cowgirls out West to write to them? We prefer to hear from Oklahoma, Texas, or Wyoming, but we promise to answer all letters, no matter where they come from.

H. AND M., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Here is a little girl of eleven, so lonely that she wishes you to get her some Pen Pals. I love the West and would be very glad if my Pen Pals lived on ranches out there, so that they could tell me all about it.

DOROTHY J., OF OHIO.

### GENERAL REQUESTS

Letters askin' fer nothin' in particular but Pen Pals. They call for gals an' boys anywhere in the world who'll answer an' keep writin'.

DEAR SAM: Will you please find some Pen Pals for me? I don't care where they live or how old they are. All I want is to receive and answer letters. I am a girl in my teens.

MARTHA E., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a young girl of eighteen, and I would like to get Pen Pals in the United States, as well as in foreign countries. Please do the best you can for me and you may be sure that I will be grateful.

PEGGY, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen. I am greatly interested in finding Pen Pals, and I would be greatly obliged to you if you would assist me. I do not make any conditions as to age or place of residence, so it should be easy for you to make contacts.

TOOTS B., OF NEBRASKA.

DEAR SAM: We are two girls in our teens, asking that you get some Pen Pals for us. Please don't disappoint us.

BABY AND JERRY, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: May I invite all the Pen Pals to help fill my mail box? I am a young fellow of twenty-four, very much interested in the Pen Pal idea. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snaps.

A. B., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: As a reader of the W. W. W., I take the liberty to ask that you print a request for me also. I am a young woman of twenty-one, will gladly answer all letters, no matter from whom or from where.

DOROTHY H., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: Just a boy of twelve, anxious to get a few Pen Pals. My interests concern hunting, fishing, and camping, and I will be glad to tell about that.

ANDREW LAF., OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a young married woman of twenty. I would like to have some Pen Pals, because with my husband working late at night. I have plenty of time on my hands, and I like to correspond.

FRENCHY, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen. I would like to get some Pen Pals from all over the world. I promise to answer every letter I receive. Please do some ink-slinging in my direction.

RAY GENLEY, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am writing to you in the hope that through you I will get letters from Pen Pals. I am a girl, thirteen years of age, fond of reading and hiking. I would especially like to hear from girls of about my own age who love horses as I do. All letters will be answered and snaps exchanged when wanted.

ETHEL GREENE, OF IDAHO.

### WESTERNERS WANTED

I hope a lot o' real Western gals an' boys will come forward with offers tuh tell about their part o' the country. Anyhow, I hope, thet thar'll be enough so thet each o' these letters will be promptly answered.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of twenty. I like to read about the West in magazines and romances, but somehow I feel that it would be even more interesting to have some Pen Pals out West with whom to correspond. Will you try and find a few for me?

EUNICE BROWN, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to join your Pen Pals. I am a girl of fifteen, fond of outdoor sports, with a preference for horseback riding. If there is no limit as to the number of Pen Pals one can have, I hope there will be many answers to this request, because I enjoy reading and writing letters, and I will be prompt in replying. I am especially interested in hearing from Western girls.

CATHERINE B., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen, writing to ask for Pen Pals. I live in a small town where there is little to be done, and I think writing letters will be a nice distraction for me. I hope I will get many letters especially from girls in Arizona and Wyoming, although letters from anywhere in the West will be answered.

MARILYN, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Here I am, a girl of eighteen, in love with the West. I have no brighter dream than that some time I shall visit the West myself. In the meantime, I am looking for Pen Pals who will write and tell me about things Western. I am real anxious to hear from Texas, Wyoming, and Montana. My hobbies are outdoor sports and playing the guitar.

JUANITA, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get in touch with Western Pen Pals. I am a boy of fifteen, and I should like to hear from boys of about the same age.

W. W., OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of sixteen, a real farm girl who can do any of the work required. I am very much interested in the West and would love to have some Pen Pals in Arizona, Wyoming, and Texas who could tell me about farm and ranch life in their States. Here's hoping I get some letters soon.

MABEL MOORE, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I like to read the W. W. W. and enjoy the Pen Pal letters. I would indeed be glad if some Pen Pals would write to me, especially Western girls in their teens, which is also my age.

AGNES P., OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: Please find some Pen Pals for me in Arizona and Colorado. I am a boy of sixteen, and I promise to answer all letters I receive.

ELVEN GIDDENS, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, eleven years old, very much interested in the West. That is the reason I am writing to you. I hope you will be good enough to get some Pen Pals for me. I promise to answer all letters and will exchange snaps.

WILLA MAE, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am greatly interested in the West and would like to get Pen Pals in Western States who are willing to tell me

all about how they work and how they live there. I am a boy of eleven and want Pen Pals of about the same age.

EVERETT REYNOLDS, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of ten. Since I am very much interested in the West, I would like to have Pen Pals there with whom I could exchange letters. All letters will be answered. My hobbies are sports like horseback riding, flying, and collecting stamps.

MARY O'C., OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, fourteen years old. I am writing to you because I would like to get some Pen Pals, and I think that you will be good enough to help me find a few. Because I love the West so much, I am anxious to have some real cowpokes write to me. How about it, fellows?

MAX FOWLER, OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve. I am planning to go West when I am older and before I go, I would like to have Pen Pals among the cowboys.

GLENN BOYD, OF TENNESSEE.

#### OTHER LETTERS

From writers who do not make any special request as to what kind o' Pen Pals they want. Anybody is welcome to answer, an' I'm sure that the frien'ships made will be jest as interestin' as any others. The letters are easy tuh answer, because they don't ask for somethin' out o' the ordinary. I hope each one will be answered promptly.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man, twenty-six years old. I wish you would give me a chance to make friends with other readers of your column. I may say that I would love to hear from any one, no matter how old or where they live. All letters will be answered. Note that I have served in the Marine Corps and that I have boxed for about five years.

VINCENT P., OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: If you have any room left in your column, please print this request for me. I am a girl, fourteen years old, and I am longing to have some Pen Pals of around my own age in Western States. I am especially anxious to hear from girls who live on ranches, because I am inter-

ested in outdoor life, but if any one else writes, no matter from where, I shall also answer.

ELDIE MAE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: If it is not asking too much of you, I would like you to print this letter for me. I am a boy of fourteen, and I would like to get Pen Pals of about my own age in any part of the world. Camping and hiking are my hobbies, and whoever is interested in that, too, please write.

A. M., OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: We are brother and sister, Walter around fifteen, Betty around twenty-five. But age is of no consequence. Each of us wants Pen Pals, and we do not care how old they are, what they do, or where they live, as long as they will write long letters often.

WALTER AND BETTY, OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: Please find some Pen Pals for me. I am a girl of thirteen, anxious to make new friends through correspondence anywhere in the wide world. Write to me, girls, and be sure of a prompt reply.

BERNICE KRUEGER, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: Having been a constant reader of the W. W. W., I am now writing in the hope that you can persuade some Pen Pals to write to me. I am a young fellow of twenty-two, interested in many things, but favoring the indoor sport of letter writing. Correspondents from foreign countries as well as from anywhere in the U. S. A. are welcome, and all may be sure of a speedy reply.

NUGIE, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a young man of twenty, interested in sports, especially trapping and wrestling. I am employed at nights and have to work every night of the year, so that there is not much time left for me to enjoy myself except possibly by corresponding with friends. I can write interesting letters and hope that I will be given a chance to prove it. Pen Pals anywhere are welcome and especially fellows from the South and Southwest, which parts of the country I expect to visit some time.

TIGER RO, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

That's the lot fer this week. I hope every writer will get satisfaction in full measure and promptly. So long.





# The Wranglers Corner

All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

**D**OG-GONED if it seems like a hull week's gone by since we called last week's meetin' ter order," we exclaims, as we looks around the Corner ter see who's on hand. "Don't it beat all, gents, how time do fly?"

"Gosh, Boss," chuckles Joe Scott, the redhead from Circle J, "thet must mean thet yo're gittin' old, like the walrus here. He's allus moanin' around about how fast time flies an' how it won't be long afore he'll have ter quit doin' reg'lar work around the spread. The other day, he allowed as how he'd soon have ter be askin' Billy ter pension——"

Fer a couple o' minutes, Buck doesn't git the drift o' what Joe's sayin'. When he does, Joe can't make hissself heard above the uproar.

"Yuh durned young gopher!" yells

Buck. "What yuh mean spreadin' them windies about me? I'll be a horned toad, if I don't l'arn yuh some sense! What d'yuh mean, sayin' I'm too old?"

"Heck!" says Joe. "Yuh been too old fer a long time. If it wasn't fer the fact thet Billy an' me has got big hearts, yuh'd 'a' been fired long ago."

"Am thet so?" roars the veteran, on the prod in a second. "An' since when, yuh spotty-faced leppy, has you had anythin' ter do with hirin' an' firin' on Circle J?"

"Good fer you, Buck!" laughs Billy West, an' then turns ter Joe. "Yeah," he says, "how come, Joe, thet yore big heart has got anythin' ter do with the Circle J pay roll?"

At thet, the redhead gits plumb flustered, an' his freckled face turns the color of a well-worn ol' saddle.



An' Buck—waal, the veteran's as tickled as kin be at havin' his boss stick up fer him. So, like allus, he puts his big foot inter things, by bustin' out with:

"Thet's the way ter talk, Billy! By heifers, yuh an' me ought ter fire thet redhead. He's allus talkin' out o' turn an'——"

"An' thet's jest what yo're doin' now, Buck," the Circle J boss cuts in. "'Cordin' ter thet, I mebbe ought ter fire the pair o' yuh. Circle J would be hull lot quieter, thet's a cinch."

"So be, Mistle Billy," pipes up Sing Lo. "Lanch allee samee lun plenty good if Mistle Floster an' Mistle Scott they be file. Sing Lo an' Mistle Billy, allee samee plenty good——"

"Good night!" laughs Billy West. "I reckon there ain't nothin' fer it but ter fire yuh *all*. Either thet or——"

"Or what, boss?" asks Buck, as the young rancher pauses.

"Or keep yuh an' try my durnest ter fergit yore shortcomin's. If yuh ain't good fer nothin' else, yuh kin allus hand a gent a laugh."

Waal, the three pards don't quite know whether Billy's foolin' 'em or not. But he's grinnin' at 'em, so they figure he is.

Then we looks around ter see who else is on hand. We sees the Oklahoma Kid, Jimmy Quick, an' Shorty Masters, M.D., with his pard, Willie Wetherbee. An' then, seein' as how it's gittin' a little late, we starts right out with the first letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: You know, I've been reading 3W for so long that I'm beginning to think I can't get along without it. I can't find any fault with it. No other Western magazine can compare with it.

Like everybody else, I have my favorites. Here they are: the Whistlin' Kid, Hungry

and Rusty, Bud Jones, the Silver Kid, and Circle J. That's about all my *real* favorites, although I like the others, too.

You certainly had one fine idea, Boss, when you thought up that scheme for us to get pictures of the waddies. I sure hope you have pictures of all my favorites.

All those hombres who say that Buck Foster is no good are loco. He's all right—almost as good as the rest.

Yours till Joe Scott's hair turns white,

RICHARD L. GAINES.

Hot Springs, Arkansas.

O' course, thet letter starts another argument between Buck an' Joe. Any kind o' statement thet makes out thet Buck is any good is shore ter start trouble. Fer as soon as Buck hears it, he starts preenin' his mustache an' glarin' around like he was jest elected president o' the Trail Drivers' Association.

An' o' course, when Joe sees Buck gittin' up on his high horse thet a way, he has ter chip in his two cents. Thet makes Buck mad, an' afore an hombre kin say "knife"—even if he wanted ter—they're at it, hammer 'n' tongs.

Howsomever, it don't last long, fer everybody starts yellin' at 'em ter pipe down an' give us a chance ter git on with the meetin'. The roar o' voices surprises 'em so danged much they don't say another word all night.

Here's the next letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for a long time and don't think it can be beat.

A while back, Charles Weaver mentioned that he thought it would be good to have a cowboys' vocabulary in the W. W. W. I also think that's a swell idea.

Of course, I have my favorites. They are Sonny Tabor, the Bar U twins, the Shootin' Fool, Johnny Forty-five, the Silver Kid, the Whistlin' Kid, and Tom Terry, sometimes known as the "77 Maverick."

I think the best writers are Charles E. Barnes, Lee Bond, Ward M. Stevens, and Emery Jackson.

I think it would make a great story if Sonny Tabor and the Oklahoma Kid got

together. It ought to be easy. They're both in Arizona.

Yours till Sonny Tabor gets hanged by the law,  
 LEROY ERLWEIN.  
 Chicago, Illinois.

Here's the next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my second letter to the Corner. Being as how the first one never got printed, I thought I'd try again. I have been reading 3W for eight or nine months, and I think there is none better on the market.

Boss, you sure do one fine job of running the spread. I don't care what any one else has to say about it, either.

The pictures of Sonny Tabor, the Circle J pards, and Kid Wolf are just fine. I hope that you have them of all the waddies.

Boss, the old W. W. W. just ain't complete without Circle J in it. I think they should be in every week and not every other week. I think that Circle J comes first on my list of favorites.

But Buck Foster ain't worth two whoops in no place. If he'd take off that mangy sheepskin vest, I might like him better. Furthermore, if he'd shave off that sheepherder's mustache he sports and dress up like somebody, he'd look twenty years younger. Some pretty girl might fall for him, then.

Here is the way I rate the rest of your waddies: Sonny Tabor, the Oklahoma Kid, Kid Wolf, Billy the Kid, the Bar U twins, Hungry and Rusty, Silver Jack Steele, Johnny Forty-five, the Silver Kid, and the Whistlin' Kid.

Heek, I almost forgot Shorty Masters and Willie Wetherbee. They sure have a way of gettin' out of trouble, no matter how bad that trouble may be. The answer most always comes out of their six-guns.

I've saved all the covers from your magazine and have made a book of them. I sure get a lot of pleasure from taking that book out and looking at all the gun-slinging waddies whom I like to read about.

Well, Boss, I'm afraid this letter is too long already. But here's hoping it gets printed, anyhow. Yours truly,

LEWIS HASH.

Tiskilwa, Illinois.

Thet one should 'a' started an argument. But the two Circle J waddies take one look at the grim faces o' the rest o' the outfit an' figure as how they mæbbe better not

say nothin'. So here's the next letter we hauls out o' the sack:

DEAR BOSS: This is my first letter to the Corner, and I hope it gets printed. I am thirteen years old, and I think 3W is a durned fine magazine.

Like most of the other reading hombres, I like all the characters. But I have a few favorites, and they are Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Circle J pards, and the Whistlin' Kid.

I think you ought to appoint Buck Foster sergeant at arms at your meetings. He'd be durned good. Nobody could get away with anything, then.

I liked the pictures you gave away. But why did you leave Sing Lo out of the Circle J pards' picture? You don't ever give the chink the credit he deserves. If it wasn't for him, the Circle J outfit would have been dead, long ago.

That's all for this time.

BUCK FOSTER, JR.

Flaxville, Montana.

"Reckon we better explain leavin' Sing Lo out o' the picture," we says. "There's been a heap o' questions about it. Waal, we're plumb sorry, but there was a plumb good reason fer Sing Lo's not bein' included—Sing Lo hisself. He jest up an' refused ter pose, didn't yuh, feller?"

"So be," says the little Oriental. "China boy no likee pitchel. In China nobody makee pitchel. Pitchel velly bad. I die, mebbeso, leave behind pitchel. Allee samee never see hon'able ancestels in happy hunting glound."

Fer the benefit o' the readin' hombres who can't git what Sing Lo's drivin' at, we'll say thet no Chinaman likes to have a pitcher made of him. He figures the pitcher is part of him—somethin' he can't take with him when he cashes in. If he leaves a pitcher of hisself, he can't ever join his ancestors in heaven, because part of him—the pitcher—is still on earth.

Which same, we reckon, is a durned good reason, at thet.

Waal, let's git goin' on another one:

DEAR BOSS: I have been reading W. W. W. for about a year. But it didn't take that long to convince me that it was the best magazine on the stands. The first copy did that.

There are reasons for all things. One reason your magazine is the best is that all the stories are complete, even if some of them are based on a series idea.

Then, too, you have the same waddies appearing week after week. You don't have any bad language. And the stories are all he-man stories with plenty of action.

Like all the other readers, I have my favorites. But I group them into three classes. Sonny Tabor is alone in the first class. He is way ahead of all the rest.

In the second class are Circle J, Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, Hungry and Rusty, Freckles Malone, Silver Jack Steele, and the Silver Kid.

All the others are in the third class—all except Bud Jones. I don't like him at all.

The idea of having a cowboys' vocabulary is great. I have an idea to go with it. Some of us don't understand all the Spanish words that are in some of the stories. A page of translations would be fine.

Yours till Sonny Tabor quits riding the 3W range,  
FLOYD DAWSON.  
LaGrange, North Carolina.

Waal, thet's a plumb fine letter—the kind we like ter git from the readin' hombres. It's a little different from the usual run, an' it shore deserves a place in the Corner. Drop in an' see us ag'in, sometime, Floyd. Hope 3W keeps right on pleasin' yuh.

An' now, accordin' ter the clock, it's time ter lock up fer another week. The waddies troop out, fork their broncs, an' hit fer home. We gits ready fer another flock o' mail from the readin' hombres.

THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

## GUNMAN NOT WANTED

*Novelette*

By T. W. FORD

Some hombres *do* want a gunman, but not a gunman like Solo Strant, Silver Kid. He buys inter their game an' shoots it up plumb complete.

## JOHNNY FORTY-FIVE CLEANS HOUSE

*Novelette*

By ANDREW A. GRIFFIN

They say thet a new broom sweeps clean, but fer a job like Johnny an' his fat pard tackle, a pair o' six-guns sweep a hull lot cleaner—an' the dirt don't come back.

## FOES OF THE PHANTOM

*Novelette*

By WALKER TOMPKINS

They got plenty o' reason ter be sore at him, but they shore make a bad mistake when they try ter put him out o' the way. He kind o' turns the tables on 'em.

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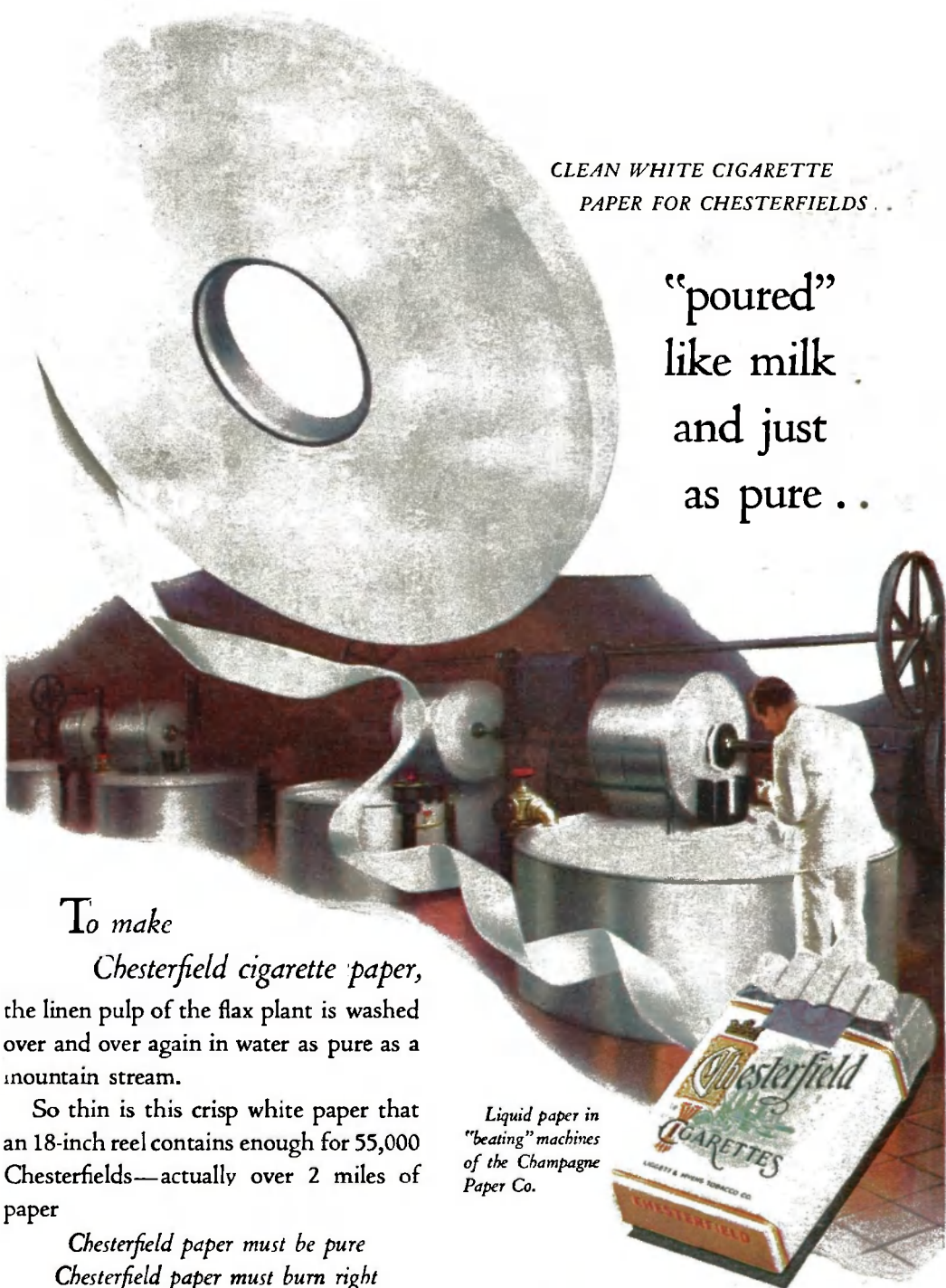
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