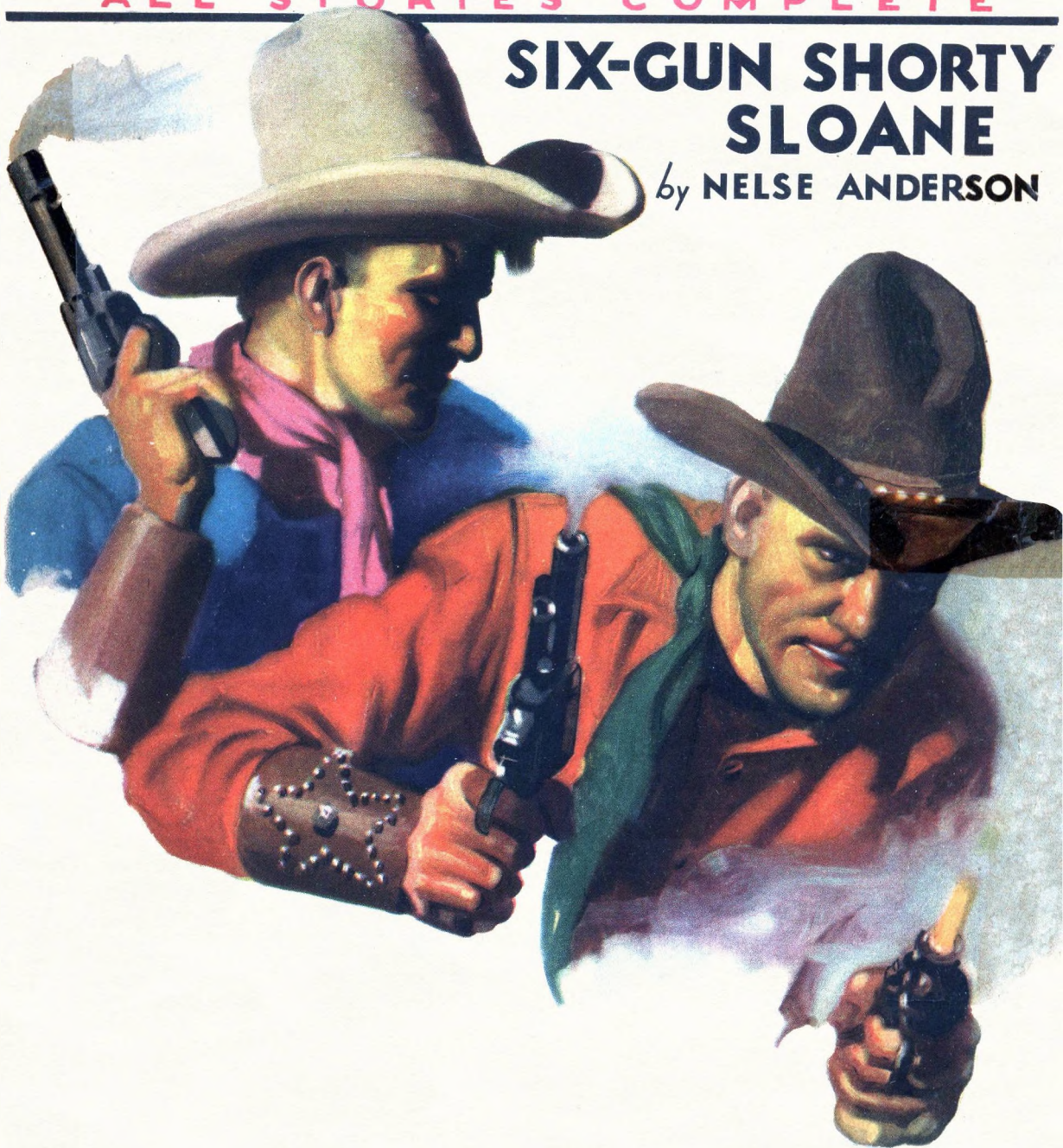


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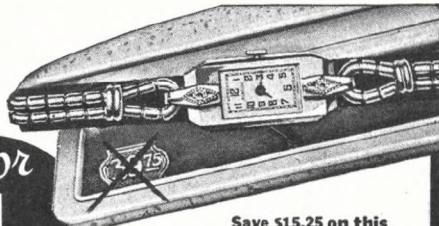
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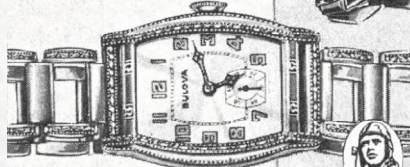
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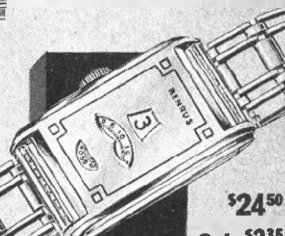
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Vol. 73, No. 2 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 14, 1933 Whole No. 1578

Cover Picture--Scene from
 "Six-gun Shorty Sloane" *H. W. Reussweig*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

- Six-gun Shorty Sloane *Nelse Anderson* 1
 He's a hard-fightin' young law Johnny who shore lives up ter his name.
- The Holdup At Sioux Springs . . . *Houston Irvine* 52
 The boss of the Pony Express gets a job when Smoke Walsh forces a slow down.
- Fast Guns At Alkali *Cleve Endicott* 88
 An' who kin sling 'em any faster than the four pards from Circle 40.

FOUR COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

- The Whistlin' Kid Cuts A Herd . . . *Emery Jackson* 27
 Which some shore puts a bad crimp in an ornery rustler's game.
- That Redhead From Arizona *Hal Davenport* 39
 He's settin' pretty, till he tangles with some outlaws. Then--
- Claim Jumpers Of Growling Mountain *Lee Harrington* 77
 They lub plenty trouble when they try jumpin' Jim Hazel.
- One Use fer a Squirrel Gun *Collins Hafford* 122
 With Lum Yates doin' the usin', it jest can't fail.

BRIEF WESTERN FACT STORIES

- Fur Traders' Mishap 26 Real Cowboys 38
 Warriors' Secret Tunnel Found 87

DEPARTMENTS

- Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral 134
 Western Pen Pals *Conducted by Sam Wills* . 137
 The Wranglers Corner 141

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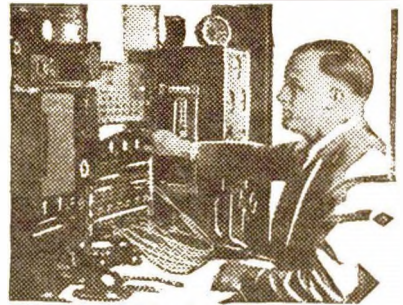
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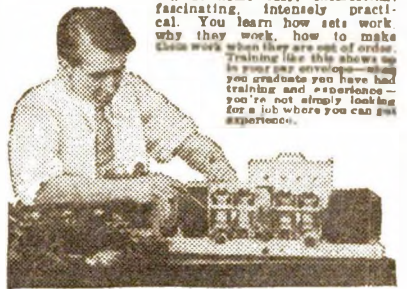
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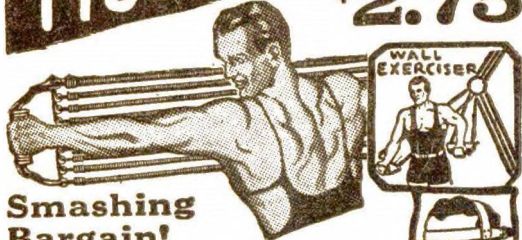
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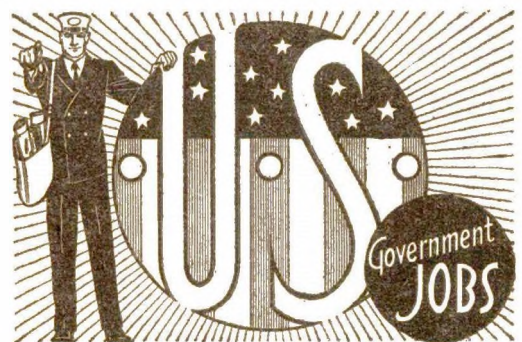
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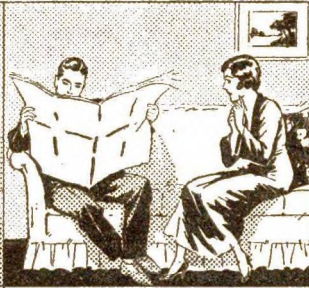
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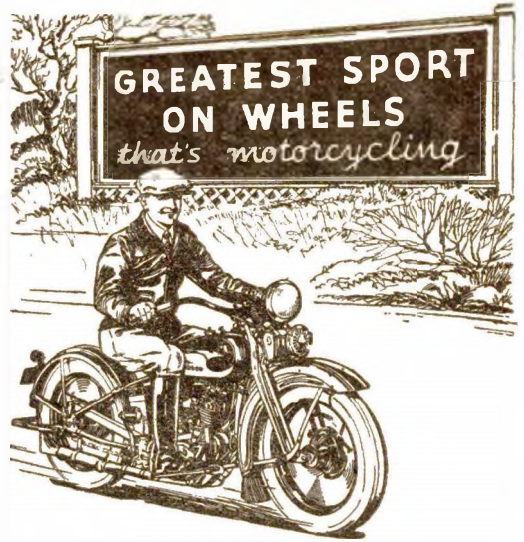
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Six-gun Shorty Sloane

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "The Friendly Deputy," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BACK TRAIL.

YOUNG Sheriff Sloane had done it again. He had gone out after a killer—a poisonous, sneering hombre who had vowed he'd never be taken—and now was bringing the criminal back to justice and such civilization as the town of Palo Grande afforded.

It was night, or rather, early morning. But there was a good moon, and the sheriff and his roan had been along this way before. Sloane knew every mesa and valley, every

coulce and hogback and water hole and back trail in the county. It was cooler, too, traveling by night, and anyhow he wanted to make Palo Grande by morning.

There was a Winchester rifle in Sloane's saddle scabbard, but that belonged to the murderer, or at least, it had belonged to him, before that battle of bullets and wits out on the desert in which the murderer had come out second best.

Sheriff Sloane never made a practice of packing a rifle. His entire arsenal consisted at all times of a cartridge belt and a six-gun. This

and the fact that Sloane was just about the width of a .45 slug below five feet seven had been enough to christen him in a land where nicknames were the rule instead of the exception. He wasn't likely to be taken for any of the other Sloanes. Palo Grande folks had given him a distinctive handle. They called him "Six-gun Shorty" Sloane.

His prisoner rode about a length and a half ahead of him on a wiry little paint pony. Six-gun Shorty's eyes were trained upon him always, for no one could tell what "Hole-card" Tilson might try to do.

Tilson was a gambler by nature and profession. He had punched cattle in his time, and occasionally tended bar during the winter months, but for years, his living had been obtained from what most folks called games of chance—stud poker, mainly.

His experience, deftness of fingers, natural trickery, bluff and bluster, took most of the chance out of it. The only chance his fellow players had, as a rule, was the chance to get up from the table broke.

If Tilson had stuck to that sort of thing, he wouldn't have been in his present position. But one rival at the poker table—a hard young man who had reached town with a traveling carnival—had made bold to challenge Tilson's bluster with some of his own, and Tilson had shot him dead. Then, for once, Tilson had left the stakes on the table, hustled out to the hitch rack, and escaped into the desert. Now he was riding back from the desert—in charge of Sheriff Sloane.

Sloane kept watching him carefully. He knew the signs—knew when a prisoner was planning to escape. He had disarmed Tilson, of course, but he hadn't manacled him, as Tilson had been shot through the

right wrist in the desert battle, and even a coyote shouldn't be tortured, according to Sloane's code.

But the youthful sheriff's keen eye for horseflesh told him that the killer's paint pony was fast—perhaps equally as fast as Bill, his own roan.

Well, if Tilson chose to ride for it—if he took a chance on escaping—it would just mean that the county would be saved the expense of a trial.

Six-gun's eyes grew hard as quartz. The prisoner was charged with murder, and there was no doubt of his guilt. The penalty for murder was death. It was a matter of small concern to Six-gun Shorty Sloane whether that death was caused by lead or rope.

That was Six-gun Shorty Sloane's way. No mercy for cold killers; next to none for horse thieves; a little more for unfortunates who got into the toils through liquor, although Sloane never touched it himself; but plenty of sympathy, warmth and aid for minor offenders who found themselves in the *calabosa* through excess of high spirits or just plumb foolishness.

A queer mixture was this Six-gun Shorty Sloane. A sentimental ballad or a hard-luck story from a regular hombre could make his eyes grow soft and moist. He could forget all about chuck-time while he bandaged up a cayuse that had caught itself in barbed wire; but he could get a certain mad delight in shooting the head off a rattler.

Born in the East, a motherless boy brought to Arizona by his father, when Palo Grande had been a boom town, and men had washed raw, red gold from the bed of Palo Grande Creek; an orphan at eight, when his father had been dry-gulched; raised by old "Pop" Weath-

erbee, who now kept the general store; a deputy at twenty-one; sheriff at twenty-three. So much for his history.

His dark hair was as straight as a Navajo's. His features were reasonably regular. The nose, though not large, had a slightly hawkish crook at the tip—often a mark of a born man-hunter. His face looked rather small under his big sheriff's hat, but the steel-gray eyes removed any expression of boyishness.

He didn't look much like a sheriff, but he had planned to be one ever since he had been old enough to observe certain exciting happenings in a tough town like Palo Grande. The danger might have kept some men away. But that part, too, attracted Sloane as salt attracts cattle.

Dawn broke as the trail of sheriff and prisoner led out of the fringe of desert and wound through a boulder-strewn stretch. Ahead were the tumbled mountains which separated Palo Grande from the desert.

The sun was just topping the eastern buttes and picking out the streaks of color in the slopes, clothed with dark jackpine and juniper. Six-gun Shorty Sloane recalled that it was Monday. That night was the night for his weekly seven-up game with old Pop Weatherbee.

Old Pop liked to win, and Shorty generally saw to it that Pop did win. They'd have a great time that night. Pop would be wanting him to repeat over and over again how he had outwitted and captured the killer out on the desert.

He knew he'd never have been elected to the office of sheriff if it hadn't been for the whirlwind campaign that Pop had put on for him. Pop had talked, argued, and pleaded over at the placer diggings, at barbecues, at saloons, and at half the

cattle outfits in the county. He had crammed arguments back into the mouths of those who gave them.

"He's too dang'd small, Pop," some folks had said.

"Yuh reckon so?" had been Pop's answer to that. "I'm tellin' yuh thet this younker's six-gun adds about two feet to his height. Shorty handles a Colt gun like a gambler handles cards, 'ceptin' thet he never deals from the bottom."

"An' he ain't from our neck o' the woods, nohow," some one else had complained. "He's from the East."

"Yup," had been old Pop's reply to that. "But Shorty's a younker thet's upholdin' the best traditions o' the West. Ever see him ride? Ever see him rope? Ever see him thumb thet belt ornament o' hisn?"

"But I cain't see why yuh want him in such a dangerous job, Pop," still another had objected.

"It's true thet I ain't so all-fired keen on it, in some ways," Pop had admitted. "But laws! He's a deputy now, ain't he? Bein' sheriff ain't no more dangerouser. An' he's got his heart sot on bein' sheriff, an' he don't know no more 'bout fear than a buzzard does 'bout smellin' nice. I'm tellin' yuh, Shorty's the man fer the job."

Perhaps old Pop's eloquence had rolled up Shorty's majority. But Shorty's own popularity and known courage doubtless had something to do with it. Anyhow, Shorty was sheriff now, and was doing the best job in the office that the county had ever seen. He was a perfect peace officer in everything but appearance. His star-shaped silver badge was at once a defiance and a warning to evil-doers.

Some folks didn't like him—law-breaking folks, mostly. But all folks respected him and the cedar-handled six-gun he always wore.

Shorty's hand wasn't very far from that six-gun at any time as he herded Tilson, the killer, on toward Palo Grande. A dash to left or right at almost any point in this boulder-strewn country would lead to canyons and tricky, twisted trails where it would be hard to keep a man from getting away.

Tilson knew this. It showed in the tense way he sat his saddle, and in the expression of studied innocence in his eyes, every time he turned to ask a question of his captor.

Suddenly Tilson's paint pony reared and wheeled. The sheriff looked down at the trail.

Bang! The rattlesnake, now headless, that had scared the paint pony was in a death writhe.

Six-gun Shorty reholstered his .45. "Circle aroun' thet reptile an' quiet thet hoss down," he commanded crisply. "An' then keep on goin' at the same gait."

Tilson followed instructions. But his entire attitude had changed. No longer did he sit his saddle tensely. His big body sagged hopelessly. He didn't force any more questions, aiming to take the sheriff off guard. There wasn't any use trying to escape from an hombre who could shoot as fast and true as this little runt behind him.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER.

THE pair rounded a bend in the trail, skirted a low hogback, and then the town of Palo Grande could be seen. Six-gun Shorty felt a sense of pride. That was his town. That was where Pop Weatherbee had brought him up, taught him to rope and ride and shoot and play the game straight.

There were still a good many

things wrong with Palo Grande, everybody had to admit that. But as he rode on toward it, Six-gun Shorty Sloane made a solemn vow that he'd clean up the place so that killers, horse thieves, crooked gamblers, and others of that gentry would ride completely around the town rather than come into it and risk its jail.

He'd devote every waking minute to doing the job right. He'd make Pop Weatherbee as proud of him as he was proud of Pop Weatherbee.

Old Pop! There was an hombre that made a man blush at the very thought of doing a crooked deed.

"I'd crawl across the desert, ef I had to, jest to fill thet pipe o' his fer him!" the young sheriff exclaimed fervently.

The killer on the paint pony turned in his saddle. "Talkin' to me?" he asked a little sullenly.

Shorty's eyes were quartz-hard again. "No. Jest keep facin' thet hoss's neck an' keep goin'. I ain't got nothin' to talk about—to you."

"Kin I say jest one thing, sher'f?"

"Say ahead! Spill it out," was the crisp command.

Tilson's face showed the hopelessness he had felt since seeing the rattlesnake killed. His voice had a nervous pitch in it.

"I was thinkin', sher'f, thet we're gittin' sort o' close to Palo Grande, an' I reckon folks don't keer fer me any too much in thet town."

"Y'ain't none too pop'lar, thet's a fact," Six-gun Shorty admitted dryly. "D'y'expect, after what *you* done, thet the admirin' citizens'll be invitin' yuh to slide yore belly agin' the bar an' have the best in the house? Or d'yuh reckon they'll be holdin' a barbecue in yore honor?"

"What was passin' through my noodle," Tilson said, "is thet they might try an' take me away from

yuh. I know I'm jest buzzard meat," he admitted dolefully. "But I want to be drunk when thet rope necktie's put aroun' my Adam's apple. I don't want to be lynched by no mob."

Six-gun Shorty eyed the killer with contempt. Most of these bad houbres thought nothing of life, unless it was their own life, and then values changed. As worthless as this snaky-eyed jasper was, he wanted to preserve his hide as long as possible.

"Don't worry yoreself inter no gray hairs over thet," Shorty advised. "Them carnival fellers has left town—except the one yuh shot, an' he won't never leave nowhar. An' the town folks has never took a prisoner from me yet, an' they won't now. Yuh'll be guarded properly, as long as yuh need guardin'—which won't be long, ef I can help it," he added frankly.

"Thar's enough deputies at thet jail in case any trouble starts, ain't thar?" the nervous killer asked.

"Yeah, two good men on, night an' day. An' I live right down the road at Pop Weatherbee's place. Ef thar was any excitement at the jail, I'd know it in two shakes. So don't worry none; it might spoil yore complexion. The county'll string yuh up, all legal an' proper. An' now sling yoreself aroun' in yore hull an' git lopin'. I ain't aimin' to miss breakfast with Pop, to jaw with a no-count like you."

Tilson put his wiry paint into a lope, and Six-gun Shorty saw to it that his sleek roan kept just a length and a half to the rear. Shorty could almost smell the tantalizing odor of breakfast. On the chance that his young pard might return this morning, Pop would have bacon and eggs and flapjacks and right good things to eat.

Shorty's moods were as changeable as those of a child. The gray eyes were soft now. Old Pop! There was a pard, even if he did happen to be forty years older than Shorty.

A great day! Bringing in his man! Seven-up with old Pop that night, and a long talk till the coal-oil lamp began to smoke, and the embers in the fireplace grew pale.

But this was destined to be the blackest day in Six-gun Shorty Sloane's life.

Six-gun Shorty lodged his prisoner in the jail, gave instructions to his deputies, and took care of the tired horses. Then he started up toward the little dobe house he shared with old Pop Weatherbee.

It was set quite a distance back from the road, and a clump of cottonwoods hid the little garden, but Six-gun Shorty could smell the flowers. In his early days, Pop Weatherbee had been a cow-puncher and later a prospector, but since opening up the Palo Grande store, he went in for beauty and comfort.

Shorty was struck by the stillness of the place this morning. Usually at this hour, old Pop was busy in the midst of a cheerful rattling of dishes and clank of pans, preparing breakfast before going down the dusty street to open his general store for the day.

This morning, however, there was no sign of him anywhere about.

Shorty reached the house, opened the door, and crossed the threshold. Huh! Not even any evidence that Pop had breakfasted; nor had his bed been slept in.

That was queer. Two thin lines of concern appeared between Six-gun Shorty's brows.

His keen eyes noted that old Pop's Sunday pipe was resting undisturbed on the window-sill, just

where it had been when Shorty set forth on the trail of the killer; and an industrious spider had spun a web from stem to window sash.

The cabinet was dusty, too, as were the highly polished pieces of rock on the shelves. Pop had brought these specimens all the way from the petrified forest in the northeastern part of the State, and he thought a lot of them. He dusted them every Sunday night. Except *this* Sunday night, the night before. Why?

It looked very much as if old Pop hadn't spent Sunday here at all; looked as if he hadn't returned from the store on Saturday night.

Six-gun Shorty was worried. He started directly for the store. He passed two or three saloons, which swampers were mopping out. He passed the livery stable. He passed Carberry's store, where a dandified figure in a big sugar-loaf hat and cream-colored shirt was pulling up the shutters from the windows. Six-gun Shorty didn't bother to ask the man anything about Pop Weatherbee. Shorty didn't care much for this loudly dressed man. He spoke to "Bull" Carberry as little as possible.

There was no proof that Carberry was an actual criminal, but there was little doubt that he associated with criminals and sided with them rather than with the law. And—even a greater offense from Shorty's point of view—Carberry was about the only man in town who disliked and criticized Pop Weatherbee.

Shorty continued along, but met no one who could give him any information about Pop Weatherbee. The town was hardly awake yet.

What could have kept Pop from sleeping at home last night? Beads of sweat sprang out on the forehead of Six-gun Shorty Sloane. He re-

called now that Pop had mentioned some money deal.

Pop was always helping out folks. He had staked a rancher who had a tough season the year before. Shorty understood that the money was to have been returned this week.

But even if it had, Pop would have put it in the town's one bank. If he had received it after the bank closed Saturday, he would have put it in his store safe.

That might be it! Pop might have chosen to sleep at the store till the money was banked. There was no bed at the store, but he could take a blanket from the supply he had on hand for desert rats and bunk on the floor. There were some pans there, too, and Pop could cook his meals on the little pot-bellied stove there.

Six-gun Shorty told himself all these things, but he had a hard time believing them. Walking wasn't fast enough. He broke into a run.

The door of the store was locked. Shorty knocked. No sound. He walked around to the side, where there was a platform, overlooked by one small window. Shorty peered through the pane. And then a sharp cry escaped from him.

There was a form on the floor. But there was no blanket around the form. It was Pop Weatherbee, all right, but Pop was lying face down. The door of the old-fashioned safe was wide open. The floor was littered with pieces of paper and the remains of a smashed straight-backed chair.

With a sweep of his gun-barrel, Shorty crashed the window, sash, glass and all. Less than a minute later, he was kneeling beside Pop. He turned the old man over gently. He noticed the dark stain on the scalp beneath the thin white hair.

"Aw, Pop!" Shorty gulped. His voice was a low, choking moan. "Aw, Pop! Speak to me, ol'-timer. It's Shorty."

Pop didn't answer. He wasn't dead, but he was in a mighty bad way. He had not been shot, but had been mercilessly clubbed—slugged with the chair, doubtless, and beaten cruelly with the barrel of a Colt. The metal sight of the weapon had dug cruel crimson pockmarks in his forehead and broken the bridge of his strong nose.

He had probably alternated between a conscious and a half-conscious state for hours, and those hours had aged him more than years of a hard, laborious life.

His actual age was sixty-three. Now, with the day-old stubble of white on his chin, the ghastly color of his face, the spark of life gone from his eyes, he looked very old, broken, pitiable.

The wonder of it was that he was not dead. Courage alone—and Pop always had plenty of that—must have kept him alive.

With his eyes blinded by tears, Shorty put his ear down against the storekeeper's old flannel shirt. There was a faint—a very faint—heart-beat.

Old Pop always kept a bottle of good-will whisky under the counter, and as Shorty hurried for the liquor, he felt his veins running cold in terror. He got the whisky, leaped over the counter and ran back to the unconscious man. He poured a little of the liquor between Pop's teeth.

The burn of it brought a tremor to Pop's thin frame and a gasp to his lips. He opened his eyes. At first they were cloudily vacant. But after a swallow or two of the whisky, recognition lighted them.

"Shorty!" It was a weak, gaspy whisper. "I'm—hurt—bad."

"Aw, Pop!" The room was a haze in front of Shorty's eyes. But he'd have to get Pop to talk. Shorty had seen death before. Death was coming into this room soon. Old Pop was going out.

Shorty tried to control himself. He sat on the dirty floor and pillowed Pop's white head in a crotch of his arm.

"Who done it, Pop?" he asked. "Tell me. What-all happened?"

Pop stared droopily, like a very drunken man. His mind was none too steady.

"Huh? Yeah, hurt, I reckon—hurt bad. What yuh doin' here, hombre? Where'm I sleepin', anyhow?"

"Listen, Pop. This is Shorty. Shorty! Yuh know me, don't yuh, Pop, ol'-timer? Tell me—anybody yuh reco'nized? Who was it, Pop?"

Pop seemed to be trying to gather his strength to talk. Shorty let another spoonful of liquor trickle down the old man's throat. Pop coughed and gasped, almost sat up.

"The money, Shorty! The safe! Is it——"

"The safe is plumb open. Who did——"

Old Pop groaned, sagged as if the realization brought to him by Shorty's words had been a terrible blow. Shorty ran over to the pan of cold water on the pot-bellied stove, grabbed a clean towel from the stock piled behind the counter. He hustled back and started to bathe Pop's stained face.

"Mebbe I'll be all right," Pop said faintly. "Anyhow, I want to tell yuh this, boy—in case I ain't all right."

"Wait a second, Pop. Jest a second."

Shorty cased the old man's head to the floor; then ran to the locked door. He always carried a key to

the front door of Pop's place. Now he took the key, unlocked the door, and opened it. The street was still almost deserted.

He ran diagonally across the road to the Longhorn Saloon. The first man he met was the swamper, who was throwing a bucketful of sudsy water into the road. The swamper was an old town character called "Sandy" Doolittle.

Sandy looked up blearily. "Yo're back, Shorty, huh? Did yuh git the skunk out on the desert?"

"Yeah, but never mind thet now," Shorty snapped. "Set down thet bucket an' run up to Doc Willett's. Make it fast, Sandy. Fast, d'yuh hear?"

He shoved his hand into his pocket, drew out the first coins that came to his palm, heedless as to whether they were of gold or copper. "Here! This is so yuh'll make it fast. Tell Doc it's life or death. Tell him to hustle down t' Pop Weatherbee's store. Git goin' now."

Sandy departed, but Shorty did not have too much confidence in him. Sandy was a lazy roustabout. There had been a good deal of joking in town over that suitable last name of his. Sandy Doolittle would have to pass three or four saloons. He might stop for a talk or a drink. So Shorty went into the Longhorn, found that its only customer at this hour was a cowpoke taking an eye-opener.

Shorty gave him the same message that he had given Sandy Doolittle. The cowpoke nodded, ran out and leaped on his horse at the hitch rack. "I'll have thet doc back hyah in two shakes, sher't," he promised.

"Make it fast!" Shorty called after him. Then he ran back across to the store.

Pop was lying in the same posi-

tion. His eyes were open. They seemed dimmer than before. Shorty stripped off his coat, pillowed it under Pop's head and administered another trickle of whisky.

"Now, swaller this, ol' boy," he said. "Then see ef yuh can't talk jest a little."

Pop cleared his throat, and after a moment began to talk, weakly at first, then in a stronger voice.

Occasionally Shorty cut in, trying to get at the real point of the story. But Pop was methodical in this as in everything. He wanted to tell his story in regular order from first to last.

Slowly, faltering, he laid down the story for the impatient Six-gun Shorty Sloane.

The day before—Sunday noon—he had taken a buggy out to the home of the rancher who had said he'd have the money ready for him. It was an even thousand dollars. The rancher had sold a cut of cattle the evening before, and had told Pop to come out early Sunday afternoon.

Pop had got the money, driven back to town, locked the money in his store safe. Then he had gone home. It was night by that time.

"Dawg-gone ef I could git my mind on sleep, though," Pop said. "Thet's a power o' money, Shorty—a full thousan' dollars is. I didn't even git to bed. Money's a nuisance! I had a smoke, but I kept bein' fretted over all thet dinero in the safe."

Pop coughed, paused a moment, then continued:

"An' after a spell I tucked my smoke-pole inter my breeches an' took a little *pasear* back down here fer them yellahbacks—reckoned I'd snooze easier with 'em under my haid while I slept."

He had found the door unlocked,

and had entered the store. The moon on the windows gave a faint light. He saw two shadowy figures.

"Could yuh reco'nize 'em?" Shorty asked anxiously.

"Nope, not entire. But one was a tall feller—'bout my height—an' tother wa'n't so tall, but thickset. Might 'a' been nearer yore size, only mebber forty-fifty pound more on the hoof."

It was a vague, unsatisfactory description. "Couldn't yuh see thar face a-tall, Pop?" Shorty asked.

"Not rightly. The store was full o' dark shadders. I was pullin' out the ol' hawglaig when it seemed like a mule kicked me over the haid. I see one o' the pieces o' the chair break, but I—I didn't—go down—not then."

Old Pop's voice weakened. His words came more slowly.

"I fit—like a dawg-gone wildcat," he said.

"I know thet. I know thet, ol'-timer," Shorty assured him. "Take it easy now, Pop. The doc'll be here in no time. He'll fix yuh up. Yuh'll be as spry as a yearlin'. We're goin' have some great ol' times together, you an' me, Pop."

Six-gun Shorty Sloane's words were hopeful, but his heart was sad. Pop was going to die, and Six-gun Shorty knew it.

"I fit like a wildcat," Pop repeated. His mind was about gone now. His words trailed away into a whisper, then into silence. He lay so still, with closed eyes, that for a moment Shorty thought he had died. But after a moment, Pop's eyes opened again. He started to ramble along on how hard he had "fit."

His mind was back-trailing down the years. "Haze thet bunch-quit-tin' red critter back inter the herd thar, young feller," he commanded.

And a few seconds later: "I was sorry fer the feller. Greenest-lookin' tenderfoot y' ever did see. It made me right sad to have ter tell him it was only pyrites—fool's gold. Reckon the pore ol' hyena thought he had a fortune."

"Come now, Pop," Shorty pleaded. "Git this, now. Yuh was talkin' about them two coyotes thet jumped yuh here in the store. How was they dressed? Did they talk a-tall? Had yuh told anybody 'bout the thousan' dollars yuh was goin' to git?"

Old Pop stared, then nodded weakly. His voice seemed very far away. "I got—got—a—" He started all over again. "I got—a—hunch they—was from—the—k—k—"

The words choked in his throat. Pop was making a last brave effort. "Ka—k—k—"

"Clark's Saloon?" Shorty asked hopefully. "The Cowboy's Rest!" Then an idea shot through his brain. "Carberry's store?" he asked eagerly. "Short feller didn't look like he might be Bull Carberry, did he?"

He hung on Pop's answer. Carberry was a business rival—mean, unprincipled, a man who'd know what was going on around town; probably knew about Pop's getting the money. And his name began with a "C." That might have been the name Pop was trying to get out.

But the old storekeeper shook his head from side to side. He seemed to know he could not speak any more, and didn't try. His big hand went out, found Shorty's. There was a flabby grasp, not at all like Pop's usual bone-crushing hand-shake. Pop was bidding Six-gun Shorty good-by.

Shorty kept hold of the calloused old hand. Shorty was crying openly now—Six-gun Shorty Sloane, hard-

est hombre of the trails, who once had had a broken leg set with no whisky and no whimpering. But he was crying now.

He wanted to say "Good-by," but could not bring the particular word to his lips. "Aw, Pop!" was all he could utter. "Aw, Pop!"

Sitting there on the dirty floor, hatless, tearful, broken, he looked almost like a small boy. He heard a queer rattle come from the back of Pop's throat. Pop relaxed, fell heavily into Shorty's arms.

The cattle-trails and the dry, shimmering desert would never call old Pop Weatherbee again.

No longer would there be gay joking and soft bargaining at Weatherbee's General Store. Stamping steers and outlaw horses and rattlers and poisonous lizards had failed to kill this pioneer who had gambled his wits against them.

A creature of his own two-legged kind—or rather a pair of such creatures—had done for him. Old Pop Weatherbee was dead.

CHAPTER III.

BULL CARRBERRY.

SIX-GUN SHORTY SLOANE sat there in a daze. His mind ran back across the years to the day when Pop Weatherbee had taken him into that little dove house and handed him an enormous stick of red-and-white peppermint candy.

Since then, no big nugget of gold, no month's wages had ever held a thrill equal to the thrill held by that penny sweetmeat, tendered by a hard-faced, soft-hearted man to a homeless boy.

There had been evenings, too, when Shorty, as a child, had climbed into Pop's lap and listened wide-eyed to tales of danger and daring on the trail, or played with the big

silver watch chain that lay across Pop's vest. He'd never forget the feel of those big, square silver links under his childish fingers.

His mind skipped on to the time Pop had got him the job out on the Clover Leaf Ranch to make a man out of him, and to those nights, every time he loped into town, when the two played seven-up together or cribbage, using matches for pegs. All that was gone now.

Shorty wiped his eyes with the fringe of his neckerchief. He got to his feet. His lean face was hard and grim now. The gray eyes looked like bright pieces of agate as Shorty stood there.

"Pop, ol' feller," he said, his voice shaking just a little in spite of himself, "yuh steered me inter the right job to do what I'm goin' to do. Mebbe I'll live as long as you lived, an' if them killers ain't tracked down by then, I'll be still after 'em. I'll never stop, Pop—never stop."

There was a scrape on the door-sill. Shorty turned. Doc Willett and the cowboy and old Sandy Doo-little, the saloon hanger-on, were shuffling into the store.

Without a word, Doctor Willett knelt beside the still form on the floor. In a few seconds he stood up again. "Yep, he's gone on ahead, all right, Shorty," he said.

Shorty nodded.

Doc Willett's big, round face was very sober. "Who do you reckon could have done it, Shorty? Nobody that knew Pop would ever lift a hand against him."

"Thet's what I aim to find out," Shorty said grimly. "All I know so fur is thet thar was two coyotes—one a tall feller, 'nother more my height, only heavier."

"Hm-m-m! Not much to go on," Doc Willett said in his matter-of-fact way.

"Not much, doc," Shorty conceded. "Yuh got to make out some papers or somethin', ain't yuh, doc?"

"Yes. Won't take me long, though, since I'm coroner, too. I'll mosey up home an' attend to 'em."

"All right, doc." Shorty turned to Sandy Doolittle and the cow-puncher. "I'm thankin' yuh men fer goin' after the doc. I'll ask yuh to step along uow. This news'll spread aroun' the town like wildfire, an' I'm goin' to lock this door. Folks might stampede in here, an' I ain't aimin' to have pore Pop furnish a peep-show to a passel o' nosey jaspers. I——"

Suddenly he thought of something. "See yuh later, fellers," he said, and closed the door after them.

The word "peep-show" had given him an idea. The tragedy he had run into on his return to Palo Grande had caused him to forget for the time being that a carnival had been in town.

"Carnival!" That might have been what old Pop had been trying to say. Anyhow, it was some word or name that began with a "K" or a "C."

Shorty snapped his fingers. "That's what he was tryin' to say, I bet!" he exclaimed. "He was tryin' to tell me them rattlers thet done him up was from the carnival. Sounds like it might be right!"

He recalled seeing some tough hombres with the carnival, which had come to Palo Grande on the previous Thursday.

Palo Grande itself would have been a poor stand for any kind of a show for more than a night. But entertainment of this sort was seen here very seldom; accordingly it never failed to draw in ranchers and cow-hands and prospectors from miles around, and mule skinnors

from the construction gang working ten miles down the line.

Shorty understood that the carnival folks had planned to pull out of Palo Grande Sunday night.

In that case, two of the carnival roustabouts might have done this dastardly job just before leaving. It was a skimpy enough crew, but it was better than nothing.

Shorty went behind the counter again, and inspected the safe. It had been neatly opened, without force, and thoroughly cleaned out. Not a penny remained in the cash drawer, either.

Shorty went back to the safe, and opened a little drawer where Pop had kept some possessions cherished more for their associations than for their real value.

The old tintype photograph of Pop's wife, dead over twenty years, was there, as well as a few pieces of quartz and a yellowed marriage certificate.

The tintype was bent, the marriage certificate torn. They had been left behind because they were of no value to the thieves, and the pieces of quartz, too, would have brought practically nothing.

But some small nuggets were gone, and also Pop's old watch and chain. The inner workings of that old-fashioned key-winder had long since ceased to function, but Pop had held onto it and kept it in his safe.

Shorty's eyes grew bright. Most men who knew the lonely trails talk to themselves, and Six-gun Shorty Sloane did.

"Thet safe was opened by an hombre as was mighty clever with his fingers," he said. "Combination was worked, an' only Pop an' me knowed what it was. It wasn't even writ on paper anywhere."

He walked over to the door and

examined the old-fashioned house lock. "Yup," he said. "'Twouldn't take much of a professional to have a key in his bunch thet 'ud open *thet*—no, sir! They locked it behind 'em when they went."

He looked up. Doc Willett was in front of the door again. With him was a tall, lean man in black clothes—Palo Grande's undertaker and furniture dealer, Philo Hatch.

Six-gun Shorty let them in, and addressed the undertaker. "Jest take keer o' Pop, Philo," he said softly. "I want the best respectable funeral yuh got in yore shop. Simple, though, sech as Pop'd like."

"I'll take charge of everything, Shorty," Philo Hatch said. He had an official bearing, and yet his voice showed that there were many men besides Pop Weatherbee he would prefer to be laying out. "I un'erstand, Shorty, ol' feller." He drew nearer, lowered his tone. "They kilt him fer the money he got from the ranch, I reckon?"

"Thet's right, Philo." Six-gun Shorty was all attention now. "Thet business was knowed about in town?" he asked.

"It shore were."

"Who knowed about it?"

"Well, Bull Carberry, fer one. I went into his store Sunday—first time I been there fer months. I had thet carnival feller laid out—the one Tilson killed. Some o' the carnival men was roomin' up over Bull's place, an' I reckoned they might admire to take a last look at their pard 'fore he was tucked away fer good."

The undertaker wrinkled his forehead. "I seen Bull Carberry lookin' out the window an' remarkin' thet Pop Weatherbee was gittin' mighty high-toned, a-ridin' in a side-bar buggy. Some one answered up thet Pop was goin' out to the Clover Leaf Ranch to collect some dinero."

"Hear anything else, Philo?"

"Nope. I had to leave then. Mebbe yuh'd better jest mosey along now till I git Pop up to the place."

Six-gun Shorty nodded, and left the store. There was still a look of pain in his eyes, but his face was as hard as flint. He crossed the street diagonally, and made for Bull Carberry's store.

The tight-faced young sheriff halted at a low building with a sagging verandah, or gallery. The door of the place was open, and he walked up and into the gloomy interior. There was a close, clothy smell, blended with the odors of strong lye soap, kerosene, molasses, coffee, and whisky.

Shorty walked to the rear of the store, where a man of about thirty was combing his wet hair before a small mirror and who now finished flaring out his "bartender's bang" and turned to the visitor. He scowled when he saw who it was.

"Mornin', Bull," Shorty offered.

Bull Carberry nodded. "Howdy." His tone was just a little sullen. He put on his big sugar-loaf hat.

"Yuh've heard the news, I reckon."

"Yup. I heerd it. Who kilt him?"

"Thet's what I aim to find out?"

Bull Carberry's black eyes hardened. "Well, what yuh doin' here?" he challenged. "Yuh can't find out nothin' here."

"Mebbe not."

"No 'mebbe' about it!"

Six-gun Shorty Sloane hesitated. Things were not starting out so well. He knew that Carberry was tricky and mean—knew that here was one man who wouldn't mourn Pop Weatherbee's death.

Carberry had long been jealous of

the line of side-bar buggies, buckboards, Canestota wagons, and saddle horses in front of Pop Weatherbee's store on Saturdays. Bull would have to be handled very carefully, if any information was to be got out of him.

"Bull," Shorty said, with as much courtesy as he could muster under the conditions, "yuh had some folks from that wagon show a-sleepin' up-stairs in yore rooms, didn't yuh?"

"An' what ef I did?"

"I ain't askin' yuh what ef yuh did," said Shorty, a little sharply. "I'm askin' yuh ef yuh did."

Bull considered a reply, and for some reason decided to be halfway decent. "I had two double beds an' two cots up thar," he said. "They was all full up. All big muckymucks o' the show. The common sort o' roustabouts slept up on the lot whar the show played. Hotel was full up."

Six-gun Shorty sat down on a keg. For a while, conversation proceeded with reasonable friendliness. Bull was curt, short with his answers, but at least he gave them.

Shorty learned that four of the performers had stayed there, as well as a couple of gamblers who probably decided that they could make as much in the town's saloons as at the carnival lot.

Shorty looked very young and eager as he asked the next question. "All o' them fellers knowed that Pop collected some dinero out at the Clover Leaf yestiddy, didn't they?" he asked.

Bull gave a loud guffaw. "What yuh tryin' to do? Be a detective?" he asked jeeringly. "Reckon yuh'd better give up that sheriff's job an' git one snoopin' aroun' the county fer the Cattle Association."

Shorty held his temper—until Bull's next remark. Bull had mis-

taken peacefulness for weakness. "Don't fergit I got a few jobs o' work to do here in the store," he said. "All of us cain't lay down an' die jest 'cause an ol' foggy gits kilt. Reckon thar's jest as good men out in Boot Hill as thet ol' foggy was."

"What's thet?" Shorty demanded. He got to his feet. His tone was low—dangerously low. "Take thet back, Carberry!"

Carberry took a step forward. He was about an inch taller than the young sheriff, and perhaps thirty pounds heavier. "I ain't takin' nothin' back fer a runt like you. You ain't got no right to come in here an' bullyrag me."

He wore no gun; he had Six-gun Shorty Sloane at a disadvantage.

"Take it back!"

"Not fer you!" Bull Carberry thrust out a heavy hand, half-punched, half-shoved the smaller man toward the door. "Git out o' here. Y' ain't got no official business with me."

"I'm tellin' yuh to take that remark back or——"

"Git out!" Thoroughly enraged, Bull Carberry struck. His blow landed on the sheriff's jaw, forced him back a step. Bull followed up his advantage. He stepped in, flailing rights and lefts.

They may have been hard blows, but Six-gun Shorty Sloane felt no pain; rather he felt a sense of satisfaction that this surly ex-business rival of old Pop's had struck the first blow.

Six-gun's right shot out like a lizard's tongue. It bounced off of Bull's bulbous nose, and Bull's shirt was spattered with crimson.

Bull Carberry was a vain man; that hair-comb could have belonged to no other. He looked down at his spoiled shirt and sailed in like a tornado.

If there was anything in the world Six-gun Shorty Sloane did not suggest, it was a snake of any kind. But now, in his speed, in his fury, in his ability to take blows, he brought to mind a king snake subduing a rattler.

He struck with the quickness of light. His hands flashed back and forth. His arms went around Bull to move him out of the unhandy corner, and seemingly squeezed with more power than there could be in that hundred and forty pounds of Six-gun Shorty Sloane.

Somehow there was little doubt, from the first, about the outcome of this fight.

Shorty crowded Carberry. He swung hard and often. He took some blows, but he gave more. He was breathing easily, and Carberry was puffing—ready enough to quit, too, even before Shorty's right, with all of the force of his body, crashed against his mouth.

Bull sat down on the floor in the immediate vicinity of a sand-filled spitbox and toppled it over.

"Git up!" Shorty gritted.

Bull sat there. "You ain't got no right to come in my place an' pick a fight with me," he said in a whiney, complaining tone. "I didn't refuse ter answer yore questions. I'm willin' to answer 'em, ain't I?"

"Yuh better!" Shorty said, with more of the bully in his tone than was usual with him.

He knew men well enough, and particularly this man, to realize that this was no time to let up on him. With an audience in the store, Bull Carberry might fight to save his pride, but there was little real fight in this dandified hombre when he was on the losing end.

Bull got up, took out a bandanna and mopped his face before the small mirror. He answered Six-gun

Shorty's questions quickly enough now. His information, though, was disappointing. He could not tell the names of the carnival men who had roomed above his store for no such thing as a hotel register was used at Carberry's. He described them in a general way.

The carnival show was scheduled to open in the town of Bitter Gulch Tuesday night. He supposed the men who had roomed over his store were still with the show. That was all he could offer, and Six-gun Shorty Sloane had to be content with that.

CHAPTER IV.

ENJ'Y YORESELF, STRANGER.

IT was nearing the hour of ten o'clock on the following Tuesday night when Shorty rode Bill, his roan, up the main street of the town of Bitter Gulch. He stabled his horse at once, had it watered and fed.

Bitter Gulch was in the next county to Palo Grande. Shorty's fame did not extend this far. If he was lucky, he might be able to wander among the carnival crowds without running up against a single person who would identify him.

It was only a short walk to the sage flat at the edge of town, where Macklin's Mammoth Wagon Carnival of Mirth, Magic, and Merriement was in full swing.

Shorty had his sheriff's star concealed in the rear pocket of his breeches. He wore a blue shirt, a purple neckerchief and his usual tan Stetson. He was a small, almost insignificant figure among the crowds, and might have been a young waddy out to make a night of it.

The crowds were the best kind of protection for him. He was posing as a sucker—played a couple of

quarters on the shell game and learned that the trickster's hand was quicker than the eye. He saw a pickpocket ease a coin from a drunkard's breeches, but he made no outcry against it.

After all, it was the Ace-spot Saloon, near the show grounds, that was being cheated, and not the drunkard. And Six-gun Shorty Sloane was out for bigger game than pickpockets to-night.

The carnival show had lured many for miles around. Shows of any sort came too seldom to Bitter Gulch not to get a big play when they did come.

Hombres who could shoot from the hip paid money to see "Lone Star Luke, the Revolver King," smash four glass balls in the air before one of them could fall to the ground. Men who could play them close to the vest in draw poker were willing victims for three-card monte and shell-game men.

Punchers who were part of their horses when they rode marched in to view Caballo, "the greatest freak in the universe—half man, half horse, a sight to see, folks, an' tell your children an' grandchildren about."

Shorty followed the crowd, became part of it, listened with the others to the pompous spiels of the barkers who drew attention to the painted wonders on the midway signs.

He was looking the whole show over; he visited all the attractions. There was Kickapoo, the mule that had even thrown broncho-busters, and there was Harry, the "High School" horse, and there was Professor, the dog that could count, that barked twice when the trainer said "two," and half a dozen times when the trainer said "six."

There were freaks—Jo-jo, the

dog-faced boy, and Barbara, the bearded lady, and the Wild Man—"cap-tured in the jun-gells of Borneo and brought to this coun-tree at tee-rif-fic expense." There were dice games; sweatboards, wheels of fortune.

For the children there were Punch-and-Judy shows, and peanuts, and peppermint candy colored red, and lemonade made from sugar and an acid mixture, and sticky popcorn balls. A weak, tawdry, not altogether wagon-show, but a Paradise in its way and perhaps doing as much good as it did harm.

Shorty kept looking for two men—one tall, and one shorter, but thickset. That had been Pop Weatherbee's rather unsatisfactory description. Not so much to go on. But if he found two men answering this description and working together, this would at least be some clew.

Then he could soon investigate and learn whether they had roomed over Bull Carberry's place and had known about Pop Weatherbee's money.

He felt almost certain that somewhere in this wagon show were the murderers of Pop Weatherbee, and he looked over every pair of men working together—the wild man and his spieler; the two wheel-of-fortune men; the ticket-wagon man and his assistant. Somehow they didn't answer Pop's description of relative size or Bull Carberry's general description—if Bull had told the truth.

Shorty continued along, came to the cook tent where some of the off-duty performers were having a late lunch. He listened outside, and peered through the opening.

Evidently one of those hombres in there was the fire-eater of the show—just now eating some frijoles and Mexican tortillas and, from his

remarks, finding them a little too hot for his taste.

A little later he saw the "Wild Man" sneak in, take a pair of false tusks out of his mouth and demand—in English, with no Borneo accent—"some of them beans, an' make it snappy; I got to go right back."

As Shorty waited there, two other performers came out. His heart began to speed up a little. These two jaspers *could* be the pair. One was rather tall, the other thickset. And over the right eye of the latter was a slight scar, such as Bull Carberry had mentioned.

Furthermore, it was evident that these two birds worked together in the show, judging from their talk.

"Git that fool kid," one of them was saying to the other, "an' we'll put on our act once more to-night, 'fore these suckers thin out."

Six-gun Shorty Sloane came out from the shadowy corner behind the cook tent and followed them.

He saw them joined by a thin, tired-looking boy, who evidently helped in their act, and noted that they went into one of the midway tents between the tents of the fire-eater and the Wild Man from Borneo.

When they reappeared a few moments later, they were already in the costume of their act. The taller man had on a shabby dress coat and a silk hat, and the shorter, heavier man was stripped to the waist. He had a pair of handcuffs, connected by a heavy chain, on his wrists.

"Likely 'tain't the fust time he's had them on, either," Six-gun Shorty remarked to himself.

The taller man, who was the announcer, soon attracted a crowd.

"Step up, folks!" he yelled. "Step up! The wonder o' the age! You see here Lodi—Lodi the Great. He sheds chains and handcuffs like a

snake sheds its skin! No lock has ever been invented to baffle him! He'll prove it on the inside! On the inside, folks, for the insignificant sum of two bits."

The barker on the platform looked down at Six-gun Shorty, standing in the front row of the curious crowd.

"Come on enj'y yourself, stranger," he said. "Here's the biggest attraction o' the show. Only two bits! Why not step in?"

Shorty looked up at him. "Reckon I will," he said.

On the inside, Six-gun Shorty watched the thickset fellow escape from twenty feet of chain, saw him ease out of the handcuffs, and perform other feats of particular interest.

Following this—the pair still working together—there was a display of hypnotism—"for the insignificant extry sum of ten cents, a small dime."

The tall, thin fellow did the hypnotising, while the short, stocky man doubled as announcer, and the thin, tired-looking boy acted as the subject to be hypnotized.

The "hypnotist" induced the desired vacancy of mind by waving before the subject's eyes the gleaming bowl of a bright silver spoon. He interspersed his patter with coarse, cheap, crowd-pleasing jokes that made the frail youngster squirm and blush.

Six-gun Shorty felt sorry for the boy—about eleven years old, he reckoned—and his steel-gray eyes gleamed contemptuously as he watched the hypnotist, self-styled "The Great Boscanini." There was a restlessness about the man's long, fallow fingers that made Shorty think of snakes.

Shorty tried to sidle over and peer

through a flap into a smaller adjoining tent. That smaller tent, he believed, was where the two "Greats," Lodi and Boscanini, must sleep, and the personal belongings of those two snaky-eyed jaspers might be worth investigating.

The brief, fake show was over, though, before he could get a chance to take a satisfactory look into the smaller tent.

"This way out, folks!" came the brazen-voiced announcement of Boscanini. "Stick around outside for the *big* show! The *big* show! Lodi the Great will puff-form his newest act of Her-cu-lee-an stren'th, never before presented except for the Crowned Heads of Yurruup!"

Six-gun Shorty passed up the new act that had thrilled the Crowned Heads of Europe, and slipped gently around to the rear of the sleep-tent. But there was no back entrance. He rolled a wheatstraw cigarette, got it going, and stood there thoughtfully in the star-shot darkness.

He was considering the advisability of crawling in under the tent flap while the loek wizard was out in front drawing a new crowd of suckers. But then his small, hawk-nosed face dropped into lines of disappointment. The sleep-tent was not vacant, after all; he could hear the voice of Boscanini, the hypnotist, in there. Boscanini's tone was like a low snarl.

Six-gun Shorty couldn't make out the words, but he could hear the higher-pitched pleading of the small boy:

"I can't do it, Jim. I just can't do another turn to-night. Gee! I'm awful tired—I was up 'most all night."

Then Boscanini's harsh voice:

"What of it? Think I'm lettin' yuh lay down on the job right when

I got the suckers comin' so good? Guess again!"

"Aw, but yuh said before we'd do only one more show," the boy said wearily. "I ain't never begged off before, but he kep' me awake 'most all night—waitin' on him—an' to-day I had to work around the lot. I want to go back to the wagon. I'm almost fallin' asleep on my feet."

"Now, cut that, kid! You git out there in the crowd an' be ready when I call yuh to the platform!"

"But I tell yuh, Jim—*Ouch!* Leg-go me, Jim! Yo're pinchin' my arm. *Ow!* I——"

The sharp smack of an open-handed blow cut short the boy's protest. There was a thin, high-pitched cry of pain. And then Six-gun Shorty Sloane found himself slipping under the flap of the sleep-tent. He could never stand by while an under-dog suffered; and, anyhow, he had wanted to see the inside of that tent.

CHAPTER V.

QUICKER THAN THE EYE.

BOSCANINI and the boy were alone. Boscanini's fingers were clamped on the youngster's frail arm. The boy's cheek bore the white imprint of the man's palm and fingers. Boscanini's free hand was drawn back for another blow.

The sound Shorty made getting to his feet, after crawling under, stayed the blow and caused Boscanini to glance across his shoulder. He released the boy, whirled sharply.

"What yuh doin' in this tent?" he snarled. His hands came up and balled into fists. He advanced threateningly.

"I jest been farnin' around this show thet the hand is quicker'n the eye," Six-gun Shorty retorted. "An' now I reckon I'll prove it."

He ducked Boscanini's blow and uncorked a sizzling right that started somewhere in the region of his gun belt and ended on the point of Boscanini's dark-stubbed jaw. The fellow crumpled as if he had been hit by a sledge.

The boy stared wide-eyed at Six-gun Shorty. Admiration replaced the scared look on his face.

"Say! Yuh don't *look* so big an' strong!" he said. And then the gray eyes in his pinched face grew scary again.

"Yuh better git out o' here," he advised. "He'll come to in a few seconds, an' yuh don't know this feller, mister. He's—well, he's ugly!"

Six-gun Shorty grinned. "Oh, I reckon he'll lay a spell—leastways long enough fer yuh to git wherever it was yuh figured on goin'."

The boy hesitated, and Six-gun Shorty swept the tent with a swift and curious glance. There was a painted screen in the corner, and behind this Shorty could see two cots.

Beneath one of them was a gray wooden box with a stapled padlock on it. The box bore in black letters the name of Lodi the Great. Under the second cot was a battered rawhide trunk initialed J. B.—doubtless the property of the Great Boscanini.

Six-gun's gray eyes gleamed. Here was where his two suspects slept, sharing the same tent! He could see that the leather trunk cover was not pressed down; the trunk was unlocked. But that gray box—the one that was locked—pulled at his curiosity like a magnet drawing steel.

Circus and show people were not bad folks, as a rule. They were like waddies and miners and everybody else—bad ones among them, but plenty of good ones. In most of the

other tents he had seen baggage, guarded by roustabouts, and much of it unlocked. Then why was this gray box locked?

But there was no opportunity now for him to investigate the contents. The boy was tugging persistently at his sleeve.

"He's movin', mister! We better git out!"

Six-gun Shorty decided that the gray box could wait a while. He nodded to the boy, and together they crawled out under the tent skirt, leaving Boscanini groaning behind them.

When Shorty got to his feet in the starlight he noticed that the boy was trembling. Impulsively he put his arm across the youngster's thin shoulders.

"I'd admire to talk a spell with yuh, son," he said quietly. "Where was it yuh figured on headin' fer?"

"Back to the wagon—over there."

The boy pointed toward a spot where the big wagons were drawn up and roped together to form a corral for the horses on the edge of the carnival grounds.

"All right; let's walk thet way." Shorty fell into step beside the boy. "Thet jasper back in the tent—is he folks to you?"

"Naw!" The little fellow's voice reflected his contempt. "My name's Walter Macklin. I ain't got no folks."

"Sho!" Shorty's tone was sympathetic. "Didn't I overhear yuh say somethin' about bein' up all night with somebody?"

"That's old Macklin. He owns the show. I stay with him in the wagon. He's drunk most o' the time, an' I got to wait on him."

"But Macklin—same name; he must be kin to yuh, ain't he, son?"

"Naw. He jes' gave me his name when he got me out of an orphans'

home. He don't pay me nothin', an' he tans me whenever he takes the notion. Jim's the worst, though. Macklin makes me work with him. He's awful ugly. Jim," he explained, "is the feller thet calls himself the Great Boscanini. Cheap old faker!"

"Ain't thar nothin' to thet hypnotism business?"

"Naw! It's all a big fake!" confessed the boy with sudden bitterness. And then with quick consternation: "Gee! If Jim ever finds out I told anybody that, he'll hide me good an' proper!"

"He ain't never goin' to know, Walt," Shorty reassured him.

The boy drew a sharp breath of relief, and Shorty went on carelessly:

"I reckon he makes plenty money with thet show he puts on. A jasper like him had ought ter be packin' a few yallerbacks on his roll. I bet he is. Ain't he?" he asked hopefully.

"Aw, he makes a lot o' money, all right," the boy told him. "But I ain't never seen anybody have any o' them big, yellow bills 'ceptin' old Macklin. He had one, couple o' months back. First one I ever seen. Fifty dollars, it was. That's a lot o' money all in one place, ain't it?"

"Shore is," agreed Shorty. He was disappointed. But the boy had excited his interest and pity. "Buy a hull mountain o' pep'mint candy with thet, I reckon, couldn't yuh, Walt?"

"If I ever had any money," said the boy gravely, "I wouldn't spend it for candy. I'd buy me a jackknife. I always wanted one."

Shorty recalled keenly his own boyish longing for a knife—recalled also his joy when old Pop had presented him with the best one in Palo Grande. He was going to do something now that old Pop would

like him to do. His hand went impulsively into his pocket, came out with a big bone-handled jackknife.

Shorty noticed the boy's eyes glow as he opened the big blade and the little blade, and the file and the corkscrew and the small pair of shears.

"Here's one fer yuh, Walt," Shorty said softly. "It was give to me, when I was about yore size—give to me by the best man in the hull world, an' I shore want yuh to take good care of it. Thet big blade's a dandy, ain't it?"

"Gee!" was all the boy could manage to say. "Aw, gee!"

He held the knife as if it were a treasure. He seemed to be swallowing hard. This may have been the first gift he had ever received. He started to snifle a little.

"I'll never forget yuh, boss," he said. "I'll hide it. No un'il take it away from me," he added, a bit fiercely. "I'll take good care of it, too. I'll oil the blades ev'ry week. Thanks, mister, a hull lot."

"Aw, thet's all right," Shorty told him carelessly.

They were nearing the group of big wagons. Shorty felt guilty. He had given the boy the knife as an act of kindness, but as a duty to old Pop, he'd have to pump the boy all he could.

"Them fellers Lodi an' Boscanini sleep in thet tent ev'ry night, Walt?" he asked.

"Most ev'ry night. Sometimes in bad weather, or when they take in a lot o' money, they flop some place in the town we play. They slept over in town the two-three nights we was in Palo Grande; thet's the last town we played fore this," he explained.

"Oh!" Shorty said. They had reached the wagons now. "Walt, I wonder ef yuh could do me a little

favor. Could yuh git me a hammer—one with a claw on the end of it?" Shorty was thinking of that staple in the gray box owned by Lodi the Great.

"I sure could!" the boy answered eagerly. "I'll jest slip one out o' the stake-an'-chain wagon over here. You wait here, mister."

He disappeared in the gloom, returning in a surprisingly short time with a claw-hammer.

"Thanks," Shorty acknowledged. "Ef things turns out right, Walt, melbe I'll have some good news to tell yuh later on. I'll chuck this hammer under thet big wagon ag'in when I git through with it. An' now, good night, Walt."

"Good night, mister. Thanks ag'in for the knife. Yo're—gee! Yo're all right!"

The boy looked a little embarrassed and retreated toward the biggest wagon, where light shone dimly from a small window in its rear door.

Six-gun Shorty heard a rumble of oaths through the paneling and an order to the boy to run to the Ace-spot Saloon and get a bottle of whisky.

Shorty rolled a thoughtful cigarette. "Pore little maverick!" he reflected. "What a sweet life he must have—workin' fer a buzzard an' ridin' night-herd on a drunk! This is the dangedest world I ever hope to be in!"

Instead of returning to the center of the carnival grounds, Six-gun Shorty moved a little way along the string of wagons and sat down in the dark with his back against a big rear wheel. No telling—maybe Boscanini would come looking for the boy.

However, that wallop on the jaw must have been an effective damper, for the swarthy hypnotist did not appear.

An hour passed. The noises on the carnival grounds lessened. One by one, the flares were extinguished. Silence and darkness held the place, except for the faintly luminous blotches in various sleep-tents and spots of light where grifters and gamblers were still holding festive cowboys with games of one sort or another.

Occasionally some punchers or townsmen passed within a few feet of Shorty. They were moseying about from one game to another. A show didn't come to Bitter Gulch often, and these straggling patrons seemed to hate to leave the grounds, while anything unusual could be seen.

Six-gun Shorty's keen gray eyes were trained almost continuously on the luminous blotch in Boscanini's tent. His eyes gleamed when, after another hour, that tent, too, became dark.

Shorty waited another nervous half hour. Then he rose silently. He noticed that there was still a light in the big wagon. He shook his head, troubled by the thought of the boy as he made his way quietly toward Boscanini's tent.

Shorty was going to take a long chance. Failure would mean disaster. He'd be discovered, and probably ganged by a good many of the carnival roustabouts. He couldn't even shoot unless he was sure of his ground.

He might be shot *at!* But a bullet in the spine wasn't so much to risk if it meant a chance to get old Pop Weatherbee's murderers.

He paused when he came to the dark spot at the rear of Boscanini's tent. He got down on the ground and listened. A duet of heavy snoring came from within. Lodi the Great and The Great Boscanini were sleeping just like ordinary folks.

"Pop, ol' boy," Shorty said. "Here we go! But ef I don't git 'em this time, ol' feller, I'm goin' to keep goin' on—goin' on till I ain't got the spunk to herd sheep."

Then he started to worm his way beneath the tent flap.

CHAPTER VI.

SIX-GUN SHOW-DOWN.

THE interior was black. But Six-gun Shorty Sloane had a clear mental picture of the layout. It wasn't the first time he had found his way in the darkness; there had been some inky hours on night-herd out on the Clover Leaf spread.

Slowly, slowly, taking unnecessary time rather than making the slightest noise, he crawled toward the corner where Boscanini and the apelike Lodi lay soundly sleeping.

It was easy finding his way to the corner. His hand inched out in the darkness, touched one of the cots, then touched the box under it. Leather! No, that wasn't the one. But the right one—the gray wooden box—would be just opposite, under the other cot.

He found it, let his fingers travel lightly across its painted surface.

Now he waited. His heart was beating wildly. He timed the snores of the sleeping carnival men. Every time they snored, he drew the box out an inch or so—carefully, ever so carefully. Sweat began to trickle down his face. But he finally got the small box out from under the cot.

Now for getting out the staple. He drew the hammer from his pocket. That staple hadn't seemed to be in there any too tight. If he could once get it out, once discover that his hunch had been right, he didn't care what happened.

He put one claw of the hammer

under the staple; listened again. Both men still sleeping soundly. There had been no noise to awaken them. No Indian stalking his prey could have worked more quietly.

Shorty started to pry gently. Yes! He was sure that staple was easing out quietly. Then there was a slight screeching sound as the steel tore out of the wood. Shorty froze where he was. He thought Boscanini's snoring was a little irregular now.

But Boscanini went back into his even snore again. After a long moment Shorty judged it safe to pry again. There was another slight screechy sound, but the staple was out! Shorty's eyes were smarting with sweat now. His hair was as wet as if he had doused his head in a water hole.

Slowly, very slowly, Shorty raised the lid of the box. At last it was open far enough to admit a hand. Shorty put down the hammer, kept the lid open with his left hand; and his right hand went exploring within.

The box was filled with clothing, carelessly folded. Shorty's fingers searched painstakingly among it. One minute. Two. Did he just imagine it, or had Lodi, a few inches away from him, stopped snoring so loudly?

But then Shorty's pulse quickened. Dawg-gone! Jumpin' coyotes! Shorty's heart seemed to leap out of his chest. It couldn't be! But then—then it couldn't be anything *else!* Hadn't he handled that watch chain when he had been a kid hardly knee-high to a grasshopper? Yes—no doubt about it! He recognized under his fingers the well-remembered feel of old Pop's square-linked silver watch chain!

And at that same instant of discovery, Lodi's cot creaked, and a

heavy weight landed on top of Six-gun Shorty Sloan with all the fury of a mountain cat dropping from a tree limb.

The box cover fell, catching his wrist and scraping viciously the skin of his hand as he yanked it free. He fought to throw off his assailant—fought to get his hand down to his gun. But he couldn't accomplish it in the darkness. And he had no doubt of the identity of that man on his back—Lodi the Great, who was at least great in poundage, and freakishly strong.

Then he heard Lodi's voice yelling for Boscanini's help—yelling for Boscanini to make a light.

There came a crashing blow on Shorty's head. It seemed to fill it with wheeling stars.

In a half-conscious state, Six-gun Shorty Sloane was dragged out from behind that screened space. He was only vaguely aware that there was a light in the tent now, and by the time the fog lifted from his brain he discovered that his hands were bound behind his back; his feet, too, were tied, a little more loosely, but effectively. And his own .45 was stuck in the waistband of a pair of trousers that Boscanini must have hastily pulled on.

He must have been out for minutes, he thought, for the place was rapidly filling with excited, hastily dressed show folks who had been awakened by the yells. Questions were buzzing.

"He's a thief," explained Boscanini tersely. "We caught him goin' through one of our trunks!"

An ominous muttering ran through the crowd. "Shoot the rat!" some one yelled. "Or string him up. That's the game out in this part o' the country."

"We'll do both!" Boscanini said

grimly. "But not here, where some hook-nosed sheriff might be smellin' around. We'll stow him in a wagon until we git out o' town. But first I got a little personal matter to settle with him. You guys keep quiet. We don't want no more audience. Stand him up, Lodi!"

Lodi jerked the half-conscious Shorty to his feet and stood him in a corner of the tent. Boscanini planted himself in front of Shorty. There was an evil gleam in the hypnotist's black eyes.

Shorty started to say something, but the sudden fist of Boscanini drove the word back between his teeth. Again the sallow fist crashed home on Shorty's face. Shorty reeled back against the springy canvas of the tent wall. Boscanini's hand drew back for another blow.

But before he could deliver it, a thin little bundle of fury had him by that arm. It was Walt.

"You stop that, you big coward!" Walt was saying. "You stop——"

The long fingers of Boscanini's left hand caught the boy's throat, choking back the words. He shook the thin youngster like a terrier shaking a rat.

The sight kept Shorty conscious. "Ef I could git my hands on yuh fer a minute!" he raged. "Yuh——"

But Boscanini now had shoved the boy violently away from him and swung on Shorty. The latter just had time to throw a word of caution to the boy, to tell him to get out, before the fist of Boscanini caught him again—this time a bruising blow on the right cheek-bone.

The boy scrambled to his feet. His face was chalky, and he was trembling. For a second he stared at Shorty; then he turned tail and ran through the callous crowd and out of the tent.

Boscanini's face danced before

Shorty's vision like a dark mask of evil. The brutal hypnotist was taking revenge in full measure for that punch on the jaw Shorty had handed him in defense of the boy.

Shorty was young and tough, but no man could have stood up long under the brand of gruel Boscanini was ladling out. And Shorty was helpless. His knees began to sag; his body was pressed hard back against the canvas wall of the tent for support.

He was about ready to fold, when the canvas suddenly gave way for a short space directly behind his bound hands. They went through the clean-cut slit, and Shorty felt thin, trembling fingers working at his bonds.

Shorty threw every ounce of his will into the effort to keep his legs under him and not betray what was happening. The bonds, neatly severed by the sharp blade of a jack-knife, fell away from his wrists. Leering, Boscanini stepped closer and swung.

The leer froze foolishly on his face as a sudden uppercut took him under the chin and snapped his head back. Then Shorty's hands went out, and were grabbing the half-woozy hypnotist. And in less than the tick of a second, Shorty's .45 was out of the hypnotist's belt and in his own right hand.

Boscanini's hand flashed to his belt hysterically, but he was a full second too late.

"An' now, git 'em up!" Six-gun Shorty roared. "Git 'em up!" he snarled. The feel of that cedar-handled six-gun of his seemed to be forcing new life into him. His knees felt better under him. His head was clearer.

Boscanini's hands went up as if they had been jerked by a taut rope. His loose mouth was open.

Lodi's hand went into the pocket of a tattered dressing gown.

Bang! It came out of the pocket again as Shorty's gun roared. It fell limp at Lodi's side. There was a look of pain on Lodi's face.

"Keep thet hand out o' yore pocket!" Six-gun Shorty gritted. "Keep thet other hand up!" He kept the smoking six-gun leveled for a moment, then reholstered it.

The sound of the shot caused the group of spectators in the tent to scatter like water sprayed from a hose—all except Boscanini and Lodi, who stood there motionless. Their hands were in the air. Lodi's face was in a grimace of pain, Boscanini's queerly distorted with amazement.

And the sound of the shot was also drawing more people toward the tent. "Thar's a wild man loose in thar!" some one shouted. "C'mon, fellers. We need a little more entertainment; we're like to see a necktie party yit ter-night."

A moment later, a dozen men stampeded in, tearing down the canvas, pulling it out of the way. At the head of them was an hombre Six-gun Shorty had seen once before to-night—the mustached man known as Lone Star Luke, the Revolver King.

Shorty stood there, his feet still tied. His gun was back in his holster, and of all that crowd only he knew how quickly he could draw it, if the occasion demanded. He seemed to be in no position to match shooting speed with a circus expert like Lone Star Luke. The latter had his hand in the right pocket of his woolly-collared coat. If he had a gun in that pocket, the gun was as good as drawn.

"What yuh mean, comin' inter this show an' breakin' things up?" he stormed at Shorty. "Drop thet

gun! Drop it, or I'll put a slug through yuh 'fore yuh kin wink an eye. Drop that gun!"

"I reckon not," Shorty said calmly. "These two hombres—Lodi an' Boscaini—is a pair o' murderers. I'm holdin' 'em here. I reckon some deputy or other'll hear the shots an' come an' git explanations an'——"

But now Lodi's face had turned the color of a toad's belly. "Let him have it, Luke!" he shrieked. "He's a thief! He'll git yuh! Let him have it. Plug him plenty!"

Six-gun Shorty grinned. Lodi's game was clear. He wanted Lone Star Luke to plug him, before the story came out. It would get Lodi and Boscaini out of a bad hole to have him killed here before any authorities arrived.

"I'm explainin' to you," said Shorty, directing his words to Lone Star Luke, "thet these men is——"

There must have been a meaning nod from Lodi. For Lone Star Luke's gun came out of his pocket with the speed of light. There was a shot. There were two shots, for Shorty's .45 had whipped out of his holster a split-second before Luke's gun flamed.

Lone Star Luke's bullet went into the earthen floor of the tent. His gun dropped to the ground. He raised his wounded right forearm to his mouth and began to suck at the wound.

"String him up!" yelled some one outside again. "He's gone crazy! He's——"

There was a movement in the crowd, and a big, heavy-faced man in a red shirt, dark-brown Stetson and star-figured gauntlets pushed his way unceremoniously through the crowd and into the tent.

"Thet'll do about the stringin'-up talk!" he warned sternly. "What's

goin' on here? What's this shootin' thet I heerd——"

His big, heavy jaw dropped as he stared at Shorty, who stood there calmly, his ankles still tied, his gun in his right hand.

"Sheriff Sloane!" he exclaimed.

"Thet's right, Tom!" Shorty said. He recognized the newcomer as a veteran deputy who had once ridden on a desert posse with him. "I reckon if we kin quiet thet crowd down now, I'll be explainin' plenty to yuh."

But the crowd outside was far from quiet. Some of the men were drunk, others half drunk; still others, town folks mostly, were excited from an evening spent among flaring lights, calliope music, shooting and unusual sights.

All of them knew the heavy-faced deputy, but they had not heard him address Shorty. They were still restless, mystified, and just a little eager to see some more excitement.

Shorty and Deputy Tom Breed stood there shoulder to shoulder. Shorty's gun was still held with the muzzle pointing over his shoulder. The deputy had drawn two ugly-looking .45s, and had them pointed straight at the crowd. There were guns in that crowd.

But no one chose to use the guns right now. Maybe it was the sight they had seen when the little hombre had disarmed Lone Star Luke with a single shot; maybe the bristling attitude of Deputy Tom Breed had something to do with it.

"Quiet, folks!" Deputy Tom Breed barked. "This man is Sheriff Sloane, from Palo Grande. He'll explain what this is all about."

Shorty grinned. "I reckon thar won't be any explainin' needed," he announced. "Not from me, nohow. We'll let these two rattlers do the explainin'." He nodded at Lodi and

Boscanini. And now he lowered his gun to the level of Boscanini's waistline. Shorty's face was hard now.

"Listen, yuh coyote!" he said sharply. "Yuh heard who I am. An' I ain't usin' no little spoon to make yuh talk. I got somethin' here a lot more persuasive—an' final! Talk fast an' straight, Boscanini! Where's them yallerbacks o' Pop Weatherbee's?"

Boscanini's tongue ran nervously along his lower lip, but he didn't speak.

"Yuh better spill it out, Boscanini!" Shorty's voice fairly crackled. "Or mebhe *you'd* like to tell the story, Lodi. I had my hands on a dead man's watch chain in yore trunk!"

Boscanini's face turned a sickly gray. He swallowed with a visible effort, as if already the square links of that silver chain were tightening about his throat. He knew that proof of his guilt was a few feet away from him, that a second or two could bring it out. Then he cracked.

"Lodi done it!" he yelled. "That's why you found it in his trunk. He done it. I can't open a safe. I don't know how!"

Snarling like a beast, the thick fingers of his left hand working toward Boscanini's throat, Lodi leaped forward. But Shorty's gun cracked down between the two like a whiplash.

"Back up thar, Lodi! I said jest to talk."

"The yaller rat!" Lodi snarled. "He's tryin' to save his own skin, huh?" He whirled on Boscanini. "Who planned the job? Who asked me to open the safe? Who was with me when I done it? Who's got half the money stuffed in his pillow. Why, yuh yaller stob! I opened the safe, yes! But I didn't want no kill-

in'. *He* was the one that smashed the old geezer with the chair! An' now——"

"That's enough!" Shorty snapped. He grinned at the crowd and then turned to Deputy Breed. "Take 'em in hand, Tom. I'll be with yuh in jest a second, when I git these feet o' mine untied."

He broke off. He had seen a pale little face in the front of the crowd. It was Walt. Shorty beckoned to him. The boy came forward eagerly.

"I reckon," Shorty said gravely, "thet a youngster like you might have a jackknife somewheres about him, ain't yuh?"

The boy smiled. "Sure have," he said, taking out his new gift.

"Then jest take a slice at them windin's on my laigs."

Bright-eyed, flushed with boyish importance, the boy freed Shorty from his remaining bonds.

Already Deputy Tom Breed was handcuffing the prisoners, while the crowd cheered.

Shorty looked at them. The uninjured left wrist of Lodi was shackled to the right wrist of Boscanini. "I reckon," Shorty observed, "thet you two buzzards'll never expert yoreselves out o' *this* jam!"

Deputy Breed was curtly ordering the tent cleared. The boy started to go with the rest. Shorty called him back. He walked with the boy as the two prisoners were herded toward the Bitter Gulch *calabosa*.

The boy was happy. "I don't care what ol' Macklin does to me," he said to Six-gun Shorty, as they walked along at the edge of the cheering crowd. "I'm goin' to be jest like you to-night—jest like a reg'lar sheriff. That's what I always wanted to be—a sheriff."

Six-gun Shorty looked down at him with renewed interest. "Oh, yuh do, do yuh?" he asked. "Well, it's a good job. It means more to me to-night than a million dollars."

He proceeded to tell young Walt briefly about Pop Weatherbee—told him how kind Pop had been to him, ever since the day he'd become a maverick like Walt himself. And once more he put his arm across the boy's thin shoulders.

"I reckon, Walt, it'll be mighty lonesome fer me, livin' alone in that little dobe now. An' I reckon ol' Pop'd be right pleased, if I should do fer somebody like he done fer me. Walt, how'd yuh like to ride back with me to Palo Grande an' live at that dobe house an' mebbe some day git to wear a sheriff's star o' yore own? By golly! Yuh'd make a good un—way yuh acted to-night!"

Walt's gray eyes were shining. "Aw, gee!" was all he could say at first.

"When yuh got older, Walt, I'll git yuh a job out on the Clover Leaf spread, jest like Pop got me. An' yuh'll l'arn to rope an' ride, an'——"

"An' mebbe to be a man like you?" Walt broke in.

"Well, yuh'd shore l'arn to be a man; 'tain't no doubt about that part."

Walt was swallowing hard. "I'll never forgit this night," he said. "An' I'll work hard to be a man an make yuh proud o' me."

He looked up a little bashfully. "Yuh know, I ain't very big fer my age," he said. "I'm 'leven, goin' on twelve. Folks calls me a runt. Mebbe I won't never be very big. An' if I don't—if I don't—well, Macklin ain't my real name, yuh know. I guess maybe I ain't got no real name. But when I'm growed up, I'd jest like folks to call me what I heerd that depity feller say yore name was to-night—Six-gun Shorty Sloanc."



FUR TRADERS' MISHAP

A FEW weeks ago, two fur traders were returning by boat to civilization from the far north of Canada. The boat was packed to the gun-wales with pelts that had been bought from Indians.

A fierce storm broke loose in the night, and the fur-laden craft was carried to the rocky shore of a small uninhabited island.

The provisions, camp equipment, and furs were swamped by the swirling waters and disappeared, but the two men managed to cling to the boat until it struck the rocks. Then they scrambled for dry land.

The blizzard raged for three days and the men, Joe Ellas and Mike Cody, had to wait on the barren

island without fire or food until the storm abated, when they were able to put off in a craft which they had made from the remains of the boat.

Using planks as paddles, they made their way to the mainland at Kewanas, where they set off through the bush, shouting as they went in the hope of finding some sign of life.

Finally they were heard by some hunters who took them to a cabin, where they were fed and made comfortable.

They are none the worse for their exposure to the storm and snow, and are now on the hunt for the lost pack, which is a very valuable one, and which they hope will turn up sometime, somewhere.



The Whistlin' Kid Cuts A Herd

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Speeds Up," etc.

THE dark eyes of the "Whistlin' Kid" narrowed as he pushed through the swinging door of the *posada*. He had not expected to find customers there so early in the day, except such townfolk as might drop in for a morning drink.

But there stood three hard-bitten rannies, gulping down the fiery raw liquor that passed as whisky in such tough border joints as the *Posada del Gato* (Wild Cat Inn).

As the three hombres turned to see who was entering the place the Kid gave them a quick sizing-up "Some of Bull Morgan's gang," the Kid told himself, noting a small

Wagon Wheel brand burned on the pocket of each ranny's chaps.

Whistling a few bars of the doleful "Cowboy's Lament," a habit which had gained him his nickname, the Kid strolled over to the bar.

Despite his apparent youth, Pete Prentiss—which was the Kid's real name—was a crack range detective for the Cattlemen's Association. Arriving during the night at a cattle-shipping station on the railroad, about fifteen miles north of the little cow town of La Borda where he was now, the Kid had started south at daybreak.

He was seeking information con-

cerning the rustling of some prime beef steers from a herd that had been trailed to the railroad for shipment, a few days before. And because the same thing had happened several times previously on the Wagon Wheel range, "Bull" Morgan was suspected of doing the rustling.

It was an old game which Morgan, owner of the Wagon Wheel spread, was playing. Since the days of the old Chisholm Trail, cattle had been rustled from herds being driven to market. Yet Morgan had added some touches which made the case the Kid was working on decidedly unusual. It was the necessity of getting a line on the situation, which had brought him hurrying down to La Borda that morning.

"I'll wash the trail dust out o' my throat with a bottle of ginger ale," the Kid told the one-eyed Mexican bartender who shuffled up to take his order.

While the *pasadero* (innkeeper) was searching under his bar for the seldom-called-for beverage, one of the Wagon Wheel bunch spoke up.

"It's all right, Pedro, if yuh can't find that yaller bellywash," sneered the hombre, "jest give the younker a lile goat's milk in a nursin' bottle."

A dark coat of tan hid the angry color which flooded the Kid's hawk-beaked, high-check-boned face. The fact that he never drank hard liquor was his own business. Such an insult was uncalled for.

His dark eyes gleaming, and with a quickened pulse that made his sinewy fingers tingle, the young range dick slowly turned to face his tormentors, all three of whom were openly guffawing over what they evidently thought was a huge joke.

For a moment, the Kid's cold gaze went from one to another of the toughs. It met sneers on their

vicious faces, which were scarred and marred by many a gun, knife, and fist fight. Their red-rimmed eyes and booze-bloated features told plainly of an all-night carousal. Their mean tempers were on edge. And they were gun fighters, judging by the manner in which they wore their weapons.

Slowly but steadily, the Kid stalked along the bar toward the Wagon Wheel rannies. It was a surprise move on his part. It was plain on their faces that his enemies did not understand it. Their hands went down, clawlike, to hover near the polished butts of their six-guns. Yet they could see that the young trail rider they had insulted was unarmed.

Contrary to his usual custom, the Kid had left his .45 Colt and cartridge belt in a saddlebag on the big buckskin gelding which he had tied to the hitch rail. He was only seeking information at the present moment.

It was better, he reasoned, to appear as an easy-going waddy, down here to locate the cows lost from his employer's herd. The absence of his six-gun from its usual place, hung low on his thigh, would allay any suspicion on the part of townspeople that he was other than he claimed to be.

As the Kid drew close to the Wagon Wheel hombres, the ruffian who had wisecracked about him, turned away from the bar to face him. The Kid had already noted the fact that the fellow carried his six-gun holstered on the left side, well to the front and butt forward. It meant only one thing—that he used the deadly cross-arm draw.

His dark eyes holding the snaky gaze of the gunman, the Kid came to a halt at arm's length from his enemy. The low notes of the melan-

choly "Cowboy's Lament," which he had been whistling as he walked, ceased.

"Fella, you done spoke out o' turn when you made thet crack about my soft drink," said the Kid coldly. "A joke's a joke between friends, but you and me ain't friends. I'm *tell-in'* you ter take it back, pronto!"

"Huh!" the surprised grunt which escaped through the half-open, tobacco-stained mouth of the burly Wagon Wheel gunman changed in a flash to a snarl of savage fury. His right hand darted across with lightning swiftness to the .45 which was holstered on his left side.

But the gunman's hand closed on empty air. His well-worn holster was as empty as a last year's bird's nest. With a startled oath, he clutched wildly at his sagging cartridge belt, as if he thought that the gun had somehow eluded his grasp.

"Wake up, hombre! Yo're out of the picture fer a minute, sort o' like Samson sheared of his hair," said the Kid sarcastically.

In the young range dick's right hand was a six-gun, and its weaving black snout was covering the three thunderstruck hombres.

"Git yore hands up an' keep 'em up!" snapped the Kid. "Purty quick I aims ter show you yellow-streaked coyotes a li'lle sample of my shootin'. But meanwhile I'm givin' you some advice:

"Don't try no gun foolishness on me ag'in. I'm aimin' ter ride the range around here ter-day, and I don't want no more truck with you hombres. The next time I throw down on you, I'm cuttin' loose. Now, git!"

Purple-faced with rage and snarling threats and oaths, the three hombres turned and dragged their spurs toward the door of the *posada*.

The Kid still held the gunman's .45 in his hand. As the Wagon Wheel rannies trailed each other across the barroom, the weapon suddenly roared.

Brang! Bang-bang! Three shots crashed out, and three panic-stricken hombres leaped toward the heavy-beamed ceiling.

As the yelling trio came back to the floor, each man seemed to be badly crippled. They walked as a man does who has one leg shorter than the other. And when they scrambled through the door, they stumbled and fell over one another.

The Kid followed his victims to the door. As they made for their horses, he called to the burly leader:

"Hey, you big skunk! You kin git yore gun from the *posadero*, next time you drop in!"

The Kid was chuckling as he watched the raving ruffians mount their brones and ride down the dusty street of La Borda.

"Haw-haw-haw!" Ho-ho-ho!" came roars of laughter from several townsmen who had apparently been watching the whole proceedings through a couple of windows that opened on the porch in front of the Wild Cat Inn.

"Thet was the funniest thing I ever see!" howled a lanky hombre with a scraggly gray beard. "An' likewise, the best shootin'. Three shots an' three boot heels! Haw-haw!"

"Did yuh see thet draw?" piped up a wizened, bow-legged man. "Durned if the younker didn't beat thet ornery Cross-arm Cadgett to the draw, with his own gun!"

The Kid stepped back to the bar, more to get out of hearing of the praise which came from all sides than for the refreshing soft drink which awaited him.

He was followed by the lanky

graybeard, who appeared to be a man of some importance in the little cow town.

"Yuh shore gave them wallopers jest what was comin' tuh 'em," said the lanky citizen, as he stepped up to the bar beside the Kid. "I ain't had sich a good laugh in a coon's age. But jest the same, I'd hate ter be in yore boots ifn yuh stays round hyar long."

"Take somethin' on me," invited the Kid, turning to face the La Borda man. "What makes you think I ought ter be high-tailin' it out o' yore nice little town so sudden?"

"Waal, I been watchin' Bull Morgan's rannies pull their rough stuff, ever since Bull started the Wagon Wheel spread, an' I ain't never seen nobody tangle with 'em yet an' git away with it," said the gray-bearded man.

"They don't 'pear to me to be hankerin' fer any more trouble," observed the Kid.

"Take my word fer it, they'll gang up on yuh, or mebbe try ter dry-gulch yuh," said the La Borda man earnestly.

The Kid whistled a few low notes of the sad "Lament" before he spoke again. Then it was in a quiet but very firm manner.

"I reckon they'll have a chance to try out some of their stunts," said the young range dick. "I come down here representin' Jim Orson, owner of the Slash O outfit, about fifty miles west of here.

"Orson had a trail herd stampeded, while he was crossin' Bull Morgan's range a couple o' days ago. Lost a hundred head of prime beef critters. Sent me down to try an' locate 'em."

"Yuh figure Bull had anythin' to do with them missin' cows?" asked the graybeard.

"Ain't he been known to pick up stock that a way plenty times before?" countered the Kid.

"Waal, I wouldn't say he's been *known* ter stampede trail herds an' rustle what he could, but thar's been cowmen as claimed he did," cautiously observed the townsman.

"Meanin' thet they couldn't ketch him at it," said the Kid, reaching in a pocket of his spotted calfskin vest for the "makin's."

"Thet's it," admitted the Kid's new acquaintance, glancing around as if fearful of being overheard.

"There's a way of provin' thet Bull rustled them Slash O critters, without ketchin' him in the act," went on the Kid, after lighting the quiry he had rolled.

"Yeah, I git what yuh mean." Graybeard nodded knowingly. "It's been tried afore. The last trail herd ter cross the Wagon Wheel range, exceptin' this one of Orson's which yuh mention, was Tim Connor's. Tim lost fifty head. So he rides out an' demands ter be allowed ter cut a herd of cows Bull Morgan was holdin' ready fer market."

"Don't stop," said the Kid coolly. "What happened?"

"Tim's dead."

"Jest the same, I'm ridin' out to the Wagon Wheel home ranch today," said the Kid. "I aim to get any Slash O critters thet Bull Morgan is holdin'."

II.

Less than a half hour from the time of the Whistlin' Kid's arrival in La Borda, he was swinging up in the saddle of his tough and fast-gaited buckskin, Speed, in front of the Posada del Gato.

"Jest a minute, young feller!" called a voice from the sidewalk.

The Kid turned in his saddle. It was the graybearded man, evi-

dently back for another argument. Half smiling, though his lips were puckered in a soundless whistle of the "Cowboy's Lament," the Kid waited.

"Bein' as I didn't mention it before, I'm Sam Kinney, mayor of this hyar town of La Borda," went on the graybeard. "I was jest thinkin' that mebbe yuh'd like ter leave a message fer yore kin folks, case anythin' was ter happen tuh you."

"Pears like yo're plumb determined to git me killed, Mr. Kinney," rejoined the Kid good-naturedly.

"Waal, yo're mighty young, an' I done took a likin' ter yuh," anxiously explained the mayor. "I wisht yuh'd think twict, afore headin' fer the Wagon Wheel. Don't let yore vict'ry over Cross-arm Cadgett an' his ornery pals mislead yuh. Them birds ain't in the same class with Bull Morgan, when it comes ter gun-slingin'."

"Mebbe Bull will listen ter reason, and there won't be no trouble," remarked the Kid.

"Thar ain't no chanct." The mayor shook his grizzled head, then added hopefully: "But mebbe yuh got an ace in the hole. Mebbe yuh got a bunch of waddies hid out on the range, waitin' ter jine up with yuh."

"No, I'm ridin' solo—playin' the game single-handed," said the Kid. "But don't worry none about me, I'll be seein' you again."

"Waal, so long, an' luck to yuh!" called the mayor, as the Kid urged his buckskin down the dusty street.

It took the Kid only a few minutes to ride clear of the little town. He had received from the *posadero* full directions for reaching the Wagon Wheel ranch headquarters.

In a pocket of his big stock saddle was a small package of cold

meat and biscuits. A bag containing enough oats for one good feed for his horse was tied behind the cante. The Kid wasn't taking any chances on Bull Morgan's hospitality.

"Step along, Speed, old-timer," the Kid told his lively buckskin, with a caressing pat on the animal's glossy neck. There was a bond of affection between the two, born of their close companionship on the long trails.

As he rode, the young range dick's eyes were on the plain trail he was following. There were the fresh hoofprints of three horses, going the same direction he was. But when those tracks suddenly turned out of the beaten trail and disappeared in the chaparral, the Kid was not surprised.

"Them Wagon Wheel wallopers took me at my word," chuckled the Kid. "I told 'em I was goin' ter scout around the range ter-day, and they aims ter make things lively fer me. But it 'pears like they never thought I'd be headin' out to their own spread."

Apparently, there was no longer any reason to fear an ambush by the three toughs he had bested in the *posada*. The Kid's simple ruse to keep them from going home, and backing up their mean-dispositioned boss when the Kid called his hand, had worked successfully. Whistling the melancholy "Lament," the Kid urged his tireless mount to a ground-eating lope that should carry him to Bull Morgan's place in less than an hour.

But farther along, the trail grew rough. There were coulees, deep and steep-banked, which had to be skirted for considerable distances before a crossing place could be found. The sun was high overhead when the Kid finally drew rein in

front of weather-beaten adobe ranch house.

From the description which had been given him in La Borda, the Kid knew this must be the Wagon Wheel headquarters. It was a run-down, ill-looking place. The roof sagged. The whitewash had peeled off the walls. No decent rancher would have put up with such conditions.

"A reg'lar buzzard roost," was the fitting description which came to the Kid's mind.

And the hombre who slouched up to the front door in answer to the Kid's hail, was a fit occupant of such a den. Heavy of body and thick-necked, it was easy to see how he got his nickname. But the man's ugly, hoglike face, with its wicked little eyes, caught and held the Kid's attention.

"Morgan, of the Wagon Wheel?" asked the Kid, crooking his right leg comfortably around the horn of his saddle.

"That's me," grunted the rancher. "An' don't waste none o' yore valuable time askin' me fer a job. I hires nothin' but full-grown hombres with ha'r on their chests."

"Uh-huh, I seen a sample of 'em in La Borda this mornin'," said the Kid, half grinning as he thought of the funny figures which the boot-crippled Wagon Wheel rannies had made.

"Waal, what's so danged funny about that?" rumbled Bull, frowning so hard that his shaggy black eyebrows almost hid his pig eyes.

"Oh, nothin' much," said the Kid. "But it so happens that I ain't lookin' fer a job. Already got one."

"Then what's yore business 'roun' hyar?" demanded Bull.

"I'm representin' the Slash O spread, an' I been sent here to locate a bunch of cows that was lost on

yore range, when a trail herd stampeded, a couple o' nights ago," coolly stated the Kid.

"None of my waddies has reported seein' any strays," growled the squat rancher.

It was apparent to the Kid that Bull Morgan had drawn in his horns a little, on hearing his youthful visitor's business stated. The Slash O was one of the largest outfits along the border. It was capable of making a lot of trouble for any one suspected of rustling its stock. And although the surly Wagon Wheel owner was no stranger to trouble, there was a cunning streak in his make-up which told him that this was a good time to avoid it.

"Mebbe yore rannies didn't look real close fer Slash O critters," rejoined the Kid.

"Waal, what yuh goin' ter do about it?" asked Bull peevishly. "Yuh cain't pull off no one-man round-up on my hull spread so's ter find a few head o' strays."

"I figure that won't be necessary," said the Kid. "I kin see from here that you got a big bunch of cows bein' loose-herded up yonder on the sage flats."

Bull Morgan glared savagely at the Kid, who was pointing a sinewy finger northward, where a large herd was being held on the grazing ground by a couple of waddies.

"That ain't all the cows I got," snapped Morgan. "That's plenty more back up in the hills. An' yuh ain't fool 'nough ter think yuh could cut a herd that size by yoreself, aire yuh?"

"It ain't no job fer one lone waddy, that's a fact," admitted the Kid evenly. "How about givin' me a little help?"

The squat Wagon Wheel boss considered a moment, covering up the fact that he was doing some hur-

ried scheming by gnawing off a huge chew of tobacco from a plug he took from his overalls pocket. There was a crafty gleam in the cowman's piggish little eyes when he spoke.

"I'll do better'n that," rumbled Bull Morgan, settling the quid of tobacco in his cheek and spitting a stream of amber juice at a scurrying lizard. "I'll cut the herd fer yuh!"

"Right now?" asked the Kid, surprised at Morgan's change of attitude.

"Naw, course not!" growled the cowman. "I'm short-handed ter-day, 'count of them three waddies bein' in town on a spree. But yuh come back in a couple o' days, an' I'll have all my stock rounded up. Then we'll cut the herd, while yuh keep watch fer Slash O strays. At the same time, I'll have my neighbors send reps over tuh watch fer their strays. I'll make a clean sweep of the job."

"Thet shore sounds like you was aimin' to do the square thing," said the Kid.

"Yeah, but thet ain't all I aims ter do," rasped Morgan, his temper flaring. "Yo're puttin' me tuh a lot of expense an' trouble 'count of a few strays. After that herd's been cut, yuh an' me is goin' ter have a show-down!"

"Suits me," the Kid coolly retorted.

Without further argument, the young cow dick wheeled his buckskin and sent it loping back on the trail to La Borda. He was unaware that two tough hombres had joined Bull Morgan in the wide, arched doorway of the old adobe ranch house.

"Yuh ain't aimin' tuh shore 'nough cut the herd fer thet slick-ear rep from the Slash O, is yuh, boss?" asked one of the hard-bitten rannies doubtfully.

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"Waal, yuh an' Scar was sittin' back thar in the house listenin' ter the confab. What do yuh figure I aims ter do?" grunted the thickset cowman, with a cunning leer at his henchmen.

"I figures yuh got somethin' up yore sleeve," put in the hombre called "Scar."

"What I got up my sleeve won't do the Slash O no good," boasted Morgan. "I aims ter cut the herd, like I said I would. But thar won't be more'n three-four strays in it by that time. Which'll make it look like I got good reason fer gunnin' that danged snoopin' slick-ear."

III.

On the alert for any danger that might lurk in the rough country through which he was riding, the Whistlin' Kid held steadily to the back trail to La Borda.

There was nothing else to do, for the time being, he figured. He might take a desperate chance and try to get a close look at the cattle in the Wagon Wheel herd. But those cattle, he reflected, were on an open sage flat. And they were guarded by watchful herders. There was little hope of his being able to inspect the brands without getting into a gun fight.

"Shucks! There ain't no use of me lookin' them critters over, anyway," the Kid muttered to himself. "From the way thet ornery Bull Morgan acted, I'm downright sure thet he's the bird thet got away with the Slash O cows.

"And he's pulled a smart trick, at thet. He couldn't 'a' hid them rustled critters in a safer place than right out there on the open flat, all mixed up with his own stock. With the reputation Bull and his gunnies has got around here, nobody would

dare try to cut his herd without permission."

Rolling a quiry without checking the steady pace of his rangy buckskin, the Kid smoked, and whistled the doleful "Lament." It was a sure sign that he was in deep thought. For it was, indeed, a knotty problem that the young range dick had to solve—nothing less than finding a way to cut the herd, to get those Slash O cows out of the Wagon Wheel bunch before it was too late.

Bull Morgan's offer to round up his cattle and cut the herd himself didn't deceive the Kid. He felt positive that the cunning rustler cowman was scheming to outwit him in the matter.

Riding along the twisting trail, with nothing but his own low whistling and the click of the buckskin's shod hoofs to break the hot afternoon silence, the Kid suddenly slapped his open hand on a chaparajo-clad thigh.

"That's the idea!" he exclaimed, a grin replacing the frown on his hawkish face.

Speed tossed his head in momentary alarm over such boisterous conduct on the part of his usually quiet master.

Relaxing his vigilance for a moment, in quick thought over a scheme had popped into his mind, for getting the best of Bull Morgan, the Kid rode past a clump of scrubby piñons and suddenly found himself in bad company.

"Git 'em up, pronto!" snarled a voice which the Kid would have recognized without seeing its owner's ugly face.

"Cross-arm" Cadgett, sitting on a hammerheaded dun broncho in the cover of the piñons, held a long-barreled .45 pointed full at the Kid's chest.

One swift glance told the Kid

that there was no chance of getting his own gun in action. For the trap which he had ridden into was cunningly set. Instead of being closely bunched, so they could be easily covered in case their victim should make a fast draw, the three Wagon Wheel gunmen were several yards apart. While the Kid was engaged with one ruffian, the other two would be pouring hot lead into him.

"They're up!" coolly responded the Kid, lifting his hands above his dusty gray Stetson. "What's the next thing on yore program?"

"Yuh'll find out danged quick, without askin' no fool questions!" snapped Cross-arm. "Lift his gun, Pug!"

A beefy cutthroat urged his horse out of the brush at the command, and riding close to the Kid, he took the .45 Colt which was holstered low on the cow dick's thigh.

"All right, Squint, toss a loop over his head an' tie his hands. We got ter be ramblin' along!" was Cross-arm's next order.

What the Kid's fate was going to be, was not left long in doubt. Bound and helpless, and with the ornery "Squint" holding the end of the lass-ropc that was noosed round his neck, the Kid was hustled down into the depths of a near-by arroyo.

There he was quickly bound with his back against a jack pine.

"Now I aims ter show yuh a sample of my shootin'." growled Cross-arm, drawing a six-gun and backing off ten paces from his victim. "Thet heel-shootin' stunt o' yores ain't nothin' ter what I kin do."

The Kid felt a cold chill run down his spine. That murderous cutthroat facing him was in a killing mood, it was plain to be seen. But the young range dick gave no sign of worry. His hawklike face was

grim. The defiant gaze of his dark eyes never wavered from his enemies.

"I'm callin' my shots, feller," announced Cross-arm, throwing his gun down on the Kid. "The fust bullet will kind o' tickle yore left ear."

Brang-g! roared the .45.

The Kid felt the wind of the hot slug as it zipped past his ear, so close that a lock of his dark hair, straying from beneath his Stetson, was snipped off as cleanly as a barber's shears could have done it.

"The next shot will come a mite closer," said Cross-arm, with a leer at his loudly applauding companions.

Crash! Again the arroyo echoed to the bellow of the big Colt.

In spite of his iron nerve, the Kid flinched. His ear felt as if it had been touched with a hot iron. A little trickle of crimson dripped from the lobe.

"Attaboy, Cross-arm! Touch him up ag'in!" shouted Squint.

"Give me a jolt out o' yore bottle fust," said Cross-arm. "This hyar is goin' ter be a fancy shot. I aims ter part his hair fer him!"

The Kid felt the color drain from his face. The shot the torturing fiend was going to attempt was one to test the skill of the most expert marksman. And as he watched Cross-arm Cadgett drain the bottle of raw moonshine, he read his doom.

The ruffian was suffering from the effects of a riotous spree. His gun hand was unsteady. And the evil glint in his greenish eyes made the Kid shudder, against his will.

As Cross-arm raised his gun for the fatal shot, amid tense silence, something seemed to click in the desperate Kid's brain.

The Whistlin' Kid had not lost his nerve or his usual quick wit,

even in the terrible ordeal which he was undergoing. And now, like a drowning man grasping at a straw, he caught an idea which seemed to offer faint hope of escape.

"Hombre, I want to ask you a question afore you pull thet trigger," said the Kid.

"Ask it an' be danged!" growled Cross-arm. "But don't go stallin' fer time."

"Did you notice where I was comin' from, when you stopped me back yonder on the trail?" asked the Kid.

"Huh? Why, come ter think about it, yuh 'peared ter be comin' from the Wagon Wheel spread," answered the gunman, in surprise.

"Correct," said the Kid, quick to follow up his advantage. "And what do you reckon I was doin' there?"

"I dunno. What was yuh doin'?" asked Cross-arm, his curiosity aroused.

"I ain't tellin'!" snapped the Kid, with icy firmness. "But I'm warnin' you three jaspers thet yuh better see Bull Morgan, afore yuh bump me off."

"Reckon he's right, at thet, Cross-arm," spoke up the squint-eyed hombre. "Yuh never kin tell what Bull's up ter."

"Waal, dang it, come on, then!" said Cross-arm, snarling like a beast deprived of its prey. "But I aims ter plug him plumb center, if he tries ter git away."

With a deep breath of relief, the Kid saw himself released from the tree. And in so doing, his hands were freed for a moment.

That moment of freedom was enough for the quick-acting Kid. He lashed out with a full swing of his muscular right arm. His range-hardened fist caught the surprised Cross-arm flush on the button.

Even as the ruffian was falling from the brain-jarring jolt of the Kid's mighty wallop, the young range dick jerked the six-gun from his enemy's nerveless hand.

The other two cutthroats had been in the act of mounting their horses. Hearing the thud of the blow, they whirled to face the black muzzle of a .45!

"Fer the second time ter-day, I'm tellin' you two skunks to put up yore mitts!"

The Kid's words were as sharp-edged as a knife. Without an instant's hesitation, both hombres jerked their hands high above their heads.

Striding over to the frightened pair, the Kid lifted their six-guns and hurled the weapons far away into a hackberry thicket. He covered them with the bully's Colt.

"I ought ter gun the three of you, scain' as yo're worse'n hydrophoby skunks!" snapped the Kid. "But I'm givin' you one more chanet. Help this punch-drunk walloper on his bronc, and then high-tail it to yore boss, pronto!"

Squint and his companion hastily boosted the glassy-eyed, half-conscious Cross-arm into his saddle. Then, riding one on each side of the gunman, they kept him from falling while they spurred away out of the arroyo.

"And that's thet!" muttered the Kid.

He holstered his own six-gun, which he had taken from one of the murderous bunch, and slipped the weapon he had taken from Cross-arm into a pocket of his saddle. Then he swung up in the middle of his big buckskin.

The scheme which he had figured out to get possession of those rustled Slash O cows was urging the Kid to action.

IV.

An hour before dawn of the following day, the Whistlin' Kid slipped from his room in the Posada dei Gato where he had grabbed a few hours of much-needed sleep and rest. A few minutes later, he had saddled Speed and was clip-clopping down the dark, deserted main street of La Borda.

Instead of heading northward, as he had done the preceding day, the Kid reined his horse's head to the southwest, toward the Mexican border.

By the faint light of a waning moon, the young range dick made his way across mile after mile of desolate range. Giant cactus loomed ghostlike along the unmarked course which the Kid followed. The cery cry of bull bats and the yapping of coyotes broke the silence.

Then the moon slipped down behind a distant peak, and the Kid rode on in the dimmer glow of the morning stars. He was approaching the Mescalero Crossing of the Rio Grande—the only safe fording place for cattle for many miles up and down the border.

In the black shadow of a cottonwood grove on the bank of the river, the Kid drew rein. A beaten cattle trail skirted the trees, leading down to the water. It was a trail which rustlers had used ever since cattle had been raised on the ranges to the northward.

With the cottonwoods at his back, the Kid could not be seen against the sky line. But there was nothing to prevent his keen eyes from picking out any object moving down from the north. And the Kid felt sure that the sky line would soon be blurred with many moving objects.

Whistling low notes of the mournful "Cowboy's Lament," the Kid

sat patiently in his saddle, waiting for developments.

It was a lurch that he was following, but such a powerful one that he felt he could not be wrong. His fingers tingled with expectancy.

As usual, it was the buckskin that got the alarm first. Speed could see better at night than the Kid could; his senses of smell and hearing were far better. As the horse moved slightly under him, the Kid saw its ears flick forward, its head turned upwind.

Then the faint drum of hoofs came to the Kid's ears. He eased the six-gun in its holster on his thigh, leaned forward in his saddle. His pulse quickened as the moment for action drew near.

Suddenly he saw the sky line crowded with black, hurrying forms. There was a louder thudding of hoofs, the moaning bellows of cattle forced at a rapid pace.

The Kid quickly picked out the taller figures of horsemen riding the swing and drag of the oncoming herd.

Cutting short the "Lament," the Kid whipped out his .45. The leaders of the herd were abreast of him now. Their labored breathing sounded like the exhaust of a steam engine. With a pressure of his knees, he sent the buckskin bounding out of the shadow of the tall cottonwoods. Already the dawn light was breaking, making cattle and horsemen dimly visible at close range.

"Halt and hoist!" shouted the Kid.

With a sharp cry of surprise and fear, the hombre nearest the Kid went for his gun. It was Cross-arm Cadgett!

Broo-om! Boom! The roar of the big .45s was ear-splitting.

Lances of orange flame pierced

the gloom, lighting the evil face of the Wagon Wheel gunman as he pitched out of his saddle.

The Kid had given his enemy time to draw his weapon clear and then beaten him to the shot.

Swearing and yelling, the other three night riders spurred to the attack. Cattle bellowed in fright.

"It's that danged slick-car rep fer Slash O!" roared a voice.

By the bull-like tone and the squat, burly form in the saddle of the onrushing black horse, the Kid knew he was coming to grips with the Wagon Wheel boss, Bull Morgan.

Wham! Bang-bang-bang! Six-guns crashed and rocketed flame.

Speed leaped and whirled under the pressure of the Kid's knees. He was trained to obey that signal. It made him and his master elusive targets in the faint light. They escaped the bullets that zipped around them.

But the thickset rustler cowman did not fare so well. Caught in the shoulder by a .45 slug, he clung desperately to his saddle horn. The black horse stopped short as its bridle reins dropped from Morgan's hands.

"Yo're through, hombre!" shouted the Kid grimly, as he spurred past the reeling cowman.

"Don't shoot! We quits!" yelled the two remaining rustlers, who had dashed up just in time to see their boss put out of the fight.

The Kid quickly stripped his prisoners of their guns. Then he turned his attention to bringing some order out of the havoc he had worked.

Cross-arm Cadgett was dead. Under persuasion of the Kid's .45, the unwounded hombres agreed to help the young range dick haze the recovered Slash O cattle up to a railroad shipping point.

Turning to Bull Morgan, the Kid gave the badly hurt cowman such first aid as he could.

"Yo're on yore way to a doctor and a jail, fella," said the Kid. "And at that, it's better'n you deserve. You was aimin' to show me a herd to-morrow which you'd already cut, then make the lack of Slash O strays an excuse for murderin' me.

"I figgered a low-life like you

would try to pull jest this kind of a stunt. And I've done some cuttin', too—cut a herd o' two-legged skunks!"

An hombre shore makes a powerful bad mistake, when he figures he can out-smart that young range dick. The kid is too danged slick ter be beat by any jasper dumb enough ter be a rustler. Watch fer another thrillin' story about him in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

ACE OF CLUBS

REAL COWBOYS

SOME old-timers are apt to think that the cowboys who went up the trail in the '70s and '80s were the only real and worth-while cowboys, and that they all vanished with the longhorns.

Because the cowboys of to-day don't have to spend from three to six months on the trail, and dodge Indians every time they ride a mile from the ranch house, many people think they have an easy time and are not the real thing. But as long as people eat beef, the cowboy and his job will be there.

Wearing a ten-gallon sombrero and jingling spurs doesn't make a cowhand by a long way, and no tenderfoot could hold down the job for a week. A cowboy's average day is anything but romantic. He sees no romance in rolling out at four in the morning, rain or shine. He does it because his boss says so, and because he may have to ride anywhere from two to twenty miles to that part of the range where his work is. And long hours in the saddle, eating alkali, is no joke.

Every time a hoof drops, puffs of dust float up and into his throat. When he ropes a steer, no audience is looking on to clap and cheer his skill. When he takes a crack at a wolf or a coyote that has been an-

noying the dogies, no one is on hand to praise his shooting. It is all in the day's work, and the cowboy is usually alone, when he does his finest stunts.

It is true that Indians don't rise out of the grass and shoot solitary herders in the back as they did in the old days, but the rustlers are still on the job, and to keep an eye on them and foil their plans keeps an hombre busy, when he is working alone.

Only a few weeks ago, Jake Duffy, out on the range alone in Texas, herding over two thousand cattle, spotted a long low truck, moving slowly in the distance, slip into the herd where it was hidden among the critters.

Spurring his horse, Jake raced toward the spot where he believed it to be stationed. As he approached, the truck darted out at another point, and drove off at a furious pace.

Eight fat yearlings went with it, and Jake Duffy's language when he saw that truck disappear in a cloud of dust, was just as expressive as that of any old-timer. This is a trick of the present-day rustler, where the range is big and wide, and the herder has to keep a constant lookout for him.



That Redhead From Arizona

By Hal Davenport

Author of "Soap And Bullets," etc.

THE smell of snow was in the air as young Gil Hardy, rifle cradled at the ready, halted within the black shelter of the pines.

Downslope ahead of the red-headed youth's well-knit six feet of frame and sinew, the deer path he had been following now wound to the left to skirt a narrow deadfall.

The tall young trapper's keen, powder-blue eyes ranged across the littered open. The dainty, curving tracks at his feet were those of a doe—illegal to kill, but a possible guide to the larger, more sharply pointed imprints of a buck. And it was a buck Gil wanted.

"Can't winter up here," he remarked with a grin, "without some sidchill salmon."

The redhead was new to Colorado, but he knew the slang of the mountain country. He also knew that the doe's trail would probably swing around the tangle of down timber.

With easy stride he stepped out into the narrow deadfall. Fifty yards away, where the bare tops of grayish-white aspens rose into wintry sky, the undergrowth was suddenly rent with a violent crashing.

Gil's Winchester whipped to his shoulder. That was a buck—a big

one! His swift glance had caught a whirling, dun-colored form and a glimpse of widespread antlers.

Gill fired; fired again as the buck leaped high. Then, with the deer down, he ran forward.

Both shots had reached a vital spot—expert marksmanship, for a swiftly zigzagging buck is one of the most difficult of targets. The deer was venison now. Gil was glad for that. He hated a clumsy hunter who merely wounded a deer.

This way he'd dropped his meat with a neatness and dispatch that caused the buck no suffering.

Meat had to be had, of course. Gil was working on a shoestring. What little money he had was down in the bank at Red Gulch City. Planning for the future, Gil didn't want to touch it.

A week before, he'd discovered an excellent site for a homestead down in the rolling foothills. He meant to file on it in the spring, build him up a little cow spread. Meanwhile, a good winter's catch of fur would go a long way toward helping him stock it.

Bending over the deer, he gave a sudden exclamation. He saw three wounds, not two.

The third was a deep slash along the right flank. Gil had fired from the left. Some one had cut down on the buck earlier that day and failed miserably to stop it.

The redhead growled to himself. Of course, some men were better shots than others. Then, knife out, he found the other slug where it had torn in behind the ribs. It was a six-gun bullet.

"Well, of all the thick-headed skunks!" he flared. "Tryin' to drop a buck with a short-range gun! Bound to just wound it, unless he was close. I'd like to get both hands on such a dumb-bell!"

"You would, huh? Well, you won't!" a harsh voice snarled from the brush. "What you're goin' to do with them hands, hombre, is raise 'em!"

Gil jumped at the sound. He hadn't heard the man approach. But there the fellow stood, heavy, black-nosed .45 in hand, its hammer eared back viciously, its muzzle on the redhead.

The face above was equally as ugly as the six-gun. It was broad and big-boned, flat, with thick, sneering lips lifted in ugly, cruel fashion.

The man's little eyes were green. Small ears, pointed like an animal's, lay tight along his skull.

"Raise 'em, I said!" the fellow rasped.

Gil's eyes had shot toward his rifle, standing against an aspen trunk where he had set it down on hurrying to the deer. The Winchester was a dozen feet away. A quick jump couldn't get it.

That is, not if this hombre chose to shoot. But why should he? The man looked evil, mean, but certainly not crazy.

Gil raised his hands. He might have thrown his knife, but he could see no sense in a desperate battle over nothing. He said coolly:

"What's catin' you, friend? If you're the jasper that shot that deer, I've got my opinion of you. But that's no cause for gun play."

"A lot you know," the other snarled. "Yes, I shot that buck. Been trailin' him for hours. I'm takin' him, too, savvy? We need meat before this storm——"

The big-boned hombre checked himself, as if he had said too much. Gil, quick anger flooding tanned checks, snapped:

"You just think you are! I dropped that deer. He's mine! The

redhead's jaw had hardened. "If you've got any real need for meat," he went on curtly, "you could have it, provided you asked for it regular. But not otherwise. Now, fella, just who are you?"

A swift flare of suspicion gleamed in the other's eyes. The man's snarl was suddenly wolfish.

"Makes no difference who I am. Who're you?" he rasped. "And what're you doin' up hyar?"

"That's my business," the tall young redhead clipped. He was growing tired of this. And he, too, was suddenly suspicious.

At first he had thought this was merely some ruffian trying to hog another's kill. But now he had his doubts. Why should the man dodge questions?

"Mebbe," the fellow growled, "you're a deputy sheriff?"

"Well, what of it?"

Gil wasn't a deputy, of course, but he wanted to see the other's reaction. This thing, queer from the start, was each moment growing queerer.

"Plenty!" the burly brute rasped in reply. "I ain't takin' no chances!"

He was a criminal, Gil knew then. Probably wanted by the law. The fellow's green eyes had drawn to slits. The gun muzzle lifted slightly, his finger tightening on the trigger.

The tall young trapper tensed. The man was about to shoot! Gil had dropped the knife when he raised his hands, but now, with the sinewy suddenness of a timber wolf, he launched himself at the other.

The youth's balled right fist whistled for the heavy jaw while his left hand grabbed for the gun barrel. Quick as he was, though, he wasn't quite fast enough. The .45 spoke with a crashing, flame-tipped roar. Gil, still in mid-leap, was spun around and backward.

He fell, sick from pain and shock. His whole left arm seemed gone. A giddy glance, however, showed him that the bullet had just whipped through the fleshy part. Then the stranger was on him.

The man's gun rammed into his throat with savage force. Gil, head still swimming, his ears roaring, heard a vicious voice, as if from a distance:

"Hold still, yuh! Not a move! I meant that slug for your heart! But I've changed my mind some. Hombre, I'm goin' to use you!"

The wounded youth lay back. There was nothing he could do. He was far too weak for effective movement.

II.

Gradually strength began to return as the shock subsided. His captor stood back, gun in hand, watching him with green-tinged eyes that glittered. Then, when he saw that Gil could sit up, he rasped:

"You got a horse back somewhere?"

The young trapper shook his head. The man looked disappointed.

"You'll have to pack it yourself, then," he growled. "Git busy and draw that deer. Cut off a hind quarter. And don't try no quick stunts with that knife," he warned harshly. "Me and this gun will be right behind you."

Gil stumbled toward the deer, cold, hard rage in his heart, but small strength in his muscles. His first move was a start toward binding up his wounded arm. The other snarled:

"Let that go! I don't care what happens to you!"

"Yo're quite a man," said Gil, fine scorn in his voice.

"I'm a wolf." The thick lips grinned. "Wolf Larsen."

The name meant nothing to Gil; at least, not for a moment. Then abruptly his heart went sliding downward.

Whoever "Wolf" Larsen was, the man was clearly on the dodge. He'd guarded his name a short time before. But now he'd spat it out readily enough.

With a sudden chill feeling along his spine, Gil Hardy knew the answer. The fellow meant to use him first, then just as coolly kill him. He must be wanted for murder, then. The thought gave the youth small comfort.

He dressed the deer, removed a quarter. He longed to whirl and hurl the knife, but Larsen's cocked .45 covered him too closely.

Well, he'd have to wait for a better chance. How far, he wondered, were they going?

The first thin flakes of snow were sifting down as Wolf made him shoulder the meat and set out through the aspens. The man had Gil's knife and rifle now. They turned left, up a gully.

The snowfall increased, with a faint, almost indefinable little slither and rustle. Gil's eyes swept the sky. A blizzard, he hoped, was coming.

In it he might find an opportunity to escape. But the wind held off, although the flakes continued whirling downward.

On and on they went, up one ridge, across another. An hour passed, and two.

The gray day crept toward its close. Gil's wound had broken out afresh. Spent and worn, he was weakening fast. But now, from higher peaks, a chill, knife-edged wind cut down with a rising howl and whistle.

The blizzard would soon be here—in minutes now, at most. Wolf rammed his gun into Gil's back.

"Up that ridge. Step lively!"

The redhead stumbled on, weary but seeking to hold his strength for the desperate struggle he planned. The blast of the storm whipped about his ears. In another quarter of an hour—

The ridge side leveled out into a little mountain meadow. A cabin stood at the edge, with saddled horses behind it.

Wolf Larsen raised a whoop: "Come out hyar, men. I shore brung meat! And a skunk of a deputy sheriff!"

Gil spun about, a fierce sob in his throat. It was now or never!

A snarl, a crash, and he went down, his feet swept from beneath him. He'd had no chance. A burly fist rocked his head like a vicious sledge. Yells broke from the cabin.

He fought back, grabbed for the gun. But it was never used. A rush of boots and other men had him. He was dragged into the cabin and hurled into a corner.

"Tie him up!" Wolf snapped. "We'll decide about him after supper."

"No rope hyar," an hombre growled. He was a thin man, furtive, wiry.

"Use saddle strings, then," Larsen rapped. "At his wrists and ankles."

The redhead was trussed up like a helpless dogie. The storm was howling now with shrill blasts that shook the windows. The hut was dark inside, save for a crackling fire in a rough stone fireplace.

"Put blankets over them windows," the burly leader grunted. "This storm'll hide all tracks in a couple of hours. I hated to hole up hyar, but we could never make the gap. We're safe enough, I reckon."

"We'd better be," the thin man growled. "The Red Owl would

throw a fit if anything happened now, and us with twenty thousand."

"He weel anyhow," the third hombre said in a soft voice that sounded Spanish. "He ees going to have the angaire when we tell heem about his brothaire."

Wolf snarled: "Well, we couldn't help that. When a man's shot, he's shot. He was dead, anyhow, when we threw him in the river."

By this time the cabin windows had been draped. The flickering glow from the fire seemed stronger. Gil, lying trussed on his side, could take some stock of his surroundings.

Under a rough pine table a single pair of saddlebags lay upon the floor. Two crude bunks occupied the walls. Weapons stood in the corners.

The three men busied themselves with crude cooking at the fireplace. The furtive hombre with the thin, weasel face seemed to go by the name of Stiner. The third member of the group, a dark, squat, pock-marked hombre, was undoubtedly Mexican or Spanish.

He spoke in the softest of tones, this Ramon Martinez, yet his darting little black eyes held a cold, hard gleam and glitter. His long-bladed knife turned a hunk of meat. The weapon looked razor sharp, wicked.

Once he turned his head to stare at Gil. "You are certain," he said to Wolf, "that he ees deputy sheriff?"

The other grunted. "Nope, but he didn't deny it. Makes no difference, anyhow. He was prowlin' around up hyar and bumped into me. He's seen us all, heard our names. Ain't but one thing to do now."

Gil shuddered. It meant his death. Martinez had nodded.

"Si," the pock-marked fellow murmured. "We have laid tongue also

to the Red Owl's name. The big, red, sleepy-eyed one would ordaire heem killed for that. Eet is the knife, eh, friends? I do eet when you are ready."

Stiner growled. "We'll eat first. I've seen yuh do those jobs before."

They went on preparing the meal. Gil lay, thinking desperately.

A robbery had been committed, he knew—probably a bank or a mine pay roll, to have netted twenty thousand. Some one, the "Red Owl's" brother, had been shot—shot and thrown in the river. Why, Gil couldn't know. But he felt that he could guess.

The man, undoubtedly one of the gang, must have got his in the holdup. Dying on the others' hands in their get-away, he'd been disposed of quickly.

The robbery had been staged before the storm. Probably they hoped the man's body, carried downstream, would be found far enough away to confuse pursuers as to their real course across the mountains.

Who the Red Owl was, Gil, a newcomer in the district, didn't know. But the others plainly feared him. What the trussed-up young trapper had to fear right now, though, was not the Red Owl, but the others.

"I've got no time to lose," he thought, with the fireglow flickering at him. That meal was cooking far too fast. Soon they'd be at table.

The redhead tugged at his bonds. They were knotted hard and tight. The stout rawhide saddle strings cut painfully into his wrists. He kept on, gritting his teeth. He'd tried a stunt when they had tied him up. He was hoping it would help him.

As they bound him, he'd tensed and bulged the sinews of his wrists and forearms. That had made his wrists larger. Nevertheless, but lit-

tle free play had resulted when he relaxed his muscles.

The trick in itself couldn't free him. His strong, work-toughened hands were far too bulky to slip back through the rawhide. But now, to his surprise, he felt the thongs giving slightly.

Not much, but a little. Not in the hard, tight knots, but in the well-cured strips of stout saddle strings themselves. And suddenly he knew the reason.

Snow had fallen on him for hours—big, damp, heavy flakes, which had clung to his clothes, dampened his face and neck, chilled his up-turned hands and wrists as they held the deer quarter on his shoulder.

And rawhide stretches when wet!

Quick hope shot through the youth. His wrists were drying fast. The rawhide wasn't damp enough to stretch very much.

But Gil Hardy had got his idea now. He put it in execution. Watching his chance, he inched his hands to his mouth, wet the bonds with his tongue.

The ebb and flow of firelight and quick, flickering shadow helped him. The men paid him little attention. Bearing their crudely cooked meal, they took it to the table.

III.

Time and again Gil wet his bonds, and each time they stretched a trifle. Given unlimited time to work, he knew he could get free.

But the bandits were wolfing down their food. That meal would soon be over. Martinez's knife glittered and gleamed as he deftly speared meat or bread. Occasionally the man's fire-tinged little eyes shot swift glances at the prisoner.

"Got to hurry," Gil gritted.

But his mouth seemed as dry as beef in the sun. Again and again he had to wait. But he used all such intervals to keep on with his tugging. The tightness of the bonds was lessening with a slow but steady sureness. Would he have time enough? The three men rose from the table.

The squat pock-marked knifeman wiped his blade. "I do eet now," he murmured.

He glided toward the youth. For a moment the man's thick form shut off all firelight from the corner. Gil threw all his strength against the rawhide bonds. Even if he got his hands free, his legs still were bound. The rawhide gave, but not enough. Martinez bent over him.

"Drag him outside for it," the ruffian Stiner growled. "Yuh two have got the bunks. I aim to sleep in thet corner."

"Outside? In thees storm?" The other's voice was quick with protest. "Not so. I do eet here—say ovaire by the fire." He glanced across his shoulder.

Again Gil tried a mighty yank. His muscles stood out like ridges. And then—his hands were free!

But Martinez had spun with an oath—not toward Gil, but toward the door. Upon its rough pine panels had sounded a furious pounding.

"Open up in there! Open for the law! We've trailed you dirty killers!"

The bandits dived for guns. Wolf Larsen roared:

"Come and take us!"

The man was shooting as he snarled. His lead ripped through the door panels.

Outside there was a groan. Then a windowpane crashed in. A form came hurtling through.

Gil rolled to his knees. The cabin shook and shuddered to the heavy

crash of gunfire. The nearest foe was Martinez. Gil shot out a hand, snared him by the ankle.

The fellow yelled and tried to turn, but already he was falling. The knife flew from his hand, a red flash in the firelight.

Gil swept it up, slashed his ankle bonds. The door gave with a splintering crash. Fierce wind tore through the hut. The fire leaped high with a vivid glow. Gil saw things distinctly.

Two officers were in. Martinez was rolling. The crafty Stiner had grabbed up a bucket and jerked it back to hurl water on the flames. Wolf Larsen, with an animal howl, was throwing his gun down on a law man.

"Look out!" Gil shouted a warning.

Water had killed the flames with a hiss and sputter.

Wolf's gun blazed, a vicious red streak, as darkness seized the cabin.

The freed trapper leaped for the burly crook. From out of the darkness came a swishing sound! A terrific blow took Gil on the head. His skull seemed to burst asunder.

Wild rockets filled his brain with a painful rip and flare. Then the youth knew nothing.

When Gil came to at last, the battle seemed to be still going on, but it wasn't all inside the cabin. Some one was firing from a window. Answering shots chugged back into the walls. A dim light filled the place. The fire was out, however.

Gil turned his aching head. He had been unconscious far longer than he knew. Outside the wind had dropped. The fierceness of the storm had passed.

Weak moonlight had found the snow. The blankets were down from windows. In the faint light

the youth saw another man on the floor. Gil sat up, raised his hands to his head. Something at his wrists rattled.

He glanced down in dull surprise and realized he was handcuffed!

"Come out of it, have you?" the man on the floor said in a cold, harsh voice. "Well, you just lay quiet, hombre. I'm too bad shot to stand up, but this gun has got you covered."

Gil saw the dull gleam of a ready six-gun. Befuddled, he didn't understand. Once more he raised his manacled wrists.

"But you're officers. These handcuffs——"

"Sure we're officers," the other snapped. "Got you, too! And we'd have had your pals if they hadn't broke out in the dark. Get 'em yet, we will, if they stick around and try to keep us penned up here much longer!"

"Say," the young redhead cried, "you don't think I'm in with 'em? Why, I was helpin' you when somebody knocked me out——"

"Tell it to the wind!" the man at the window rasped. "If you think you're not goin' to hang for this day's work, you're mighty much mistaken!"

He raised his gun and fired, then ducked back as a bullet whipped in through the paneless window. The slug hummed around the room. A moment later Gil was asking:

"But who do you think I am? Why should I be in with those crooks? Just what have they done, those hombres?"

"As if you didn't know!" the crouching officer snarled. "Held up the Red Gulch City bank! Killed two men, includin' the sheriff! Oh, you'll dangle, all right! We're takin' him in, eh, Hoooley?"

"Yes, if I live," said the man on

the floor. "You'll do it, anyhow, Tack. Can't you pick off some more o' them varmints?"

Deputy Sheriff "Tack" Wilson grunted: "Tryin' to. But they're down behind trees. Two of them, that is. I think the third has slipped off with the loot. Or to catch their scattered horses."

A sudden gun burst kept him down. Gil Hardy drew a long breath. He had to make this grim pair understand. Quickly, in short, terse sentences, he told the high lights of his story.

"It's a good yarn," grunted the wounded man called Hooley. "Remarkable, in fact, made up that suddenlike. But it won't do, fella. You all were masked, of course. But your hat slipped in that holdup."

"My hat? Why, I wasn't even there!" Gil burst out in anger. "I tell you, I'm Gil Hardy—a stranger up here, it's true, but they can tell you all about me back home in Arizona!"

"Forget it," Tack Wilson snapped. He was a lean man, quick and wiry. "When your hat worked up, your red hair showed. Furthermore, the banker wounded you. You're wounded now, and you shore can't deny it."

Deputy Hooley growled: "There was four of you here in this cabin, and four men in that robbery!"

But suddenly Gil was recalling the fellow who'd been shot—the Red Owl's brother, Martinez had said; the man whose body had cunningly been tossed into the river.

But the thing sounded wild, he knew, when hurriedly he told it. The deputies grunted in disbelief. Gil felt desperation grip him. The thing was a hanging case if he couldn't convince them.

And unconvinced they remained, though he launched now into full

details. Tack's firing at the foe filled the account with interruptions.

"If you don't believe me," Gil snarled, "just unlock these bracelets. The marks o' that rawhide will show on my wrists. I've told you the names of those crooks. Give me a gun and——"

"Dry up," Wilson rapped. "We're undoin' no handcuffs! You're a slippery snake! And a yellow one, too—tellin' the names of your pals." He fired through the window.

Gil glared at the deputy. Wilson was cool but bullheaded. Still, the youth couldn't blame him much. Every appearance was against the redhead from Arizona.

The foe's firing had dropped off now. For the last half hour it had been droning. Suddenly Wilson turned with a grunt:

"They're gone, I think. Hooley, I'm takin' their trail! They've still got that twenty thousand."

"Sure, Tack. But be careful. Them skunks'll lay an ambush sure."

"Careful it is," said the other. "I'm takin' this red-headed hombre what claims he's from Arizona. He'll ride on my horse with me."

Deputy Hooley nodded. "Good stuff. That may make 'em hold their fire."

But Gil, of course, knew better. Wolf Larsen and the others had plenty of reason to cut him down. He lay back, thinking hard. Something ground against his hip, something there in the shadow.

His hands slid toward the object. It was Martinez's knife—a wicked weapon, but one that the youth couldn't use against law officers.

"Wish these handcuffs were rope," he thought. Wilson had bent over Hooley, readjusting bandages on a wounded side and leg. Quietly Gil slipped the knife inside his shirt front.

IV.

Half an hour later the start was made. Gil had readily enough built up a heavy fire in the cabin at the deputies' orders. Hooley had a broken leg, but seemed likely to pull through. They left him near the hearth, with plenty of firewood stacked near him.

The bandits' trail was clear. That made Gil fear an ambush all the more. He rode with his manacled hands bound to the saddle horn and his feet tied beneath the pony's belly. Wilson's gun was at his back. The land was white with snow and moonlight.

The bank robbers, mounted, had headed north, toward the distant gap. Deputy Wilson grunted:

"You told part of the truth, at least. They're makin' toward the big boss up there at the Mud House."

"Mud House?" said Gil. "I tell you I'm a stranger in this country."

"Yeah? But you knew about the Red Owl. We've been tryin' to get somethin' on that big crook for years. Runs that road ranch of his and snickers in his sleeve while he plans all these robberies."

After that they rode in silence. Mile after mile went by. To Gil's surprise, there was no ambush.

The tall mountains seemed light as day now. Once Gil hipped about.

"Who," he asked the lean deputy, "was the Red Owl's brother? If the man was known, his body found and——"

"You are, I guess," the other said coldly. "We don't know him up here. I've heard"—he drawled the words—"that he was from Arizona."

They came at length to the gap, but not until almost midnight. The place was a long, tortuous mountain pass, thick with rock and timber.

Gloom held it, despite the moon. Far ahead a light burned faintly.

"The Mud House," Wilson said. "We'll change our course, I reckon. First, though, you get a gag. You might screech to your brother, Red."

A big bandanna did the work. The horse was turned up a pine-dark slope. An hour later they had circled up above the Mud House, notorious mountain saloon and gambling den of the Red Owl, long suspected as the brains of the outlaw gang.

Wilson tied the horse to a tree. "This is as far as you go, Red." Gil was left behind, gagged, handcuffed, bound to the saddle.

Tack Wilson had used him as a shield against possible bushwhackers, but the deputy was the kind who fought his own battles when things came to a show-down. Six-gun in hand now, Wilson stole down through the timber.

The Mud House, long, dark, and rambling, held a lone light in the barroom. Tack knew the place of old—a thick-walled adobe structure, like none other in these mountains, built years ago by the Owl when he'd come up from Arizona.

Deputies had searched the place more than once for loot on suspicion—searched it without result. The great Red Owl was wily.

Tack slipped first to the stables. Inside he found three horses. Hoofs and fetlocks were wet with snow damp, the signs of recent riding on them.

That was all he wanted here—to make sure the crooks had halted. He crept now to the house, worked along its walls in the shadow they cut from the moonlight.

He reached a barroom window. A quick glance showed the place empty. The heavy storm doors were closed beyond the batwing

lattices that stood within the entrance. Tack frowned and crept on forward.

He slid around the corner—and gasped. The Red Owl sat on the stoop before him.

The surprise meeting may have been mutual, but the Red Owl didn't show it. He was a huge man, great of girth, with a neck that rolled in fat. His head was bullet-shaped, bristly red hair cropped close upon it.

Even then the color was vivid, vivid almost in the moonlight. His heavy face was red-veined, florid. A rifle lay across his knees, its muzzle pointed down the trail. He looked up at Tack from thin green eyes.

"'Lo, Wilson," he said. His words were slow, unhurried. "Wilson—with a six-gun." He sighed from his vast depths. "On the prowl again, I guess." The Owl laid aside his rifle.

"Yes," the other snapped. "And you with a gun watchin' that trail! All right, Owl—where are they?"

The big man got to his feet. He must have weighed three hundred.

"Yep, me with a gun," he said. "Out tuh kill some of my namesakes. Screech owls are right bad here. Sometimes I can't sleep hardly."

"Yeah? At this time o' year?"

"This time o' year," the other nodded. "Well, officer, what's yore wishes? Yuh'll have a drink or something?"

Tack growled: "Yes, and have you leave that gun outside. Also, I'll pick my bottle."

The deputy, with no chance to surprise the crooks now, thought it best to go in boldly. The Red Owl, by some slip, might tip him off as to where they were. Wilson expected them to be in hiding.

The Red Owl shrugged, a heavy, placid movement. "Always the suspicious one," he said. His voice, his eyes, seemed sleepy.

But behind their drooping lids his green orbs hid a vicious glint as the pair passed into the barroom. The Red Owl waddled behind the bar. Tack's glance swept the place, dim in the light of a single bracket lamp. The room seemed empty.

"Now," snapped Tack, while his left hand toyed with the brimming glass of whisky the Owl had poured from a freshly opened bottle of case goods, "where's Wolf Larsen, Martinez, and Stiner?"

His right hand still held the six-gun. As he barked out the names of the three holdup men, he watched the Red Owl narrowly.

But if he expected the ponderous saloonkeeper to exhibit surprise at this revelation that their identity was known, he was disappointed.

The Owl's sleepy lids still held their droop. "Them? I don't know," he said. "Ain't seen 'em in a coon's age."

"Well, their horses are in the barn. They're here, with twenty thousand in loot from the Red Gulch bank!" The deputy had raised his gun. "You're goin' with me, Owl," he gritted, "while we find 'em!"

Tack Wilson's eyes were cold. He was one man against four, he knew. And three of those four were in hiding. Where, he didn't know. Bumping unexpectedly into the Owl had upset his plans. Over the great Mud House, thick silence hung, threatening, creepy.

The big Owl all but yawned into the leveled gun. "Anything yuh say," he grunted. "They ain't hyar, though. And they ain't holdups."

He'd picked up a wadded bar cloth, was slowly mopping off the bar. Tack thought he was playing

for time. The deputy sheriff barked harshly:

"Put that thing down! And come with me!"

The Red Owl shrugged and turned away, bar cloth still in hand.

Tack whirled toward the rear. From beyond an inner door he thought a step had sounded.

The Red Owl's eyes held a vicious gleam. His hand snapped up. From the front door a voice rang sharply:

"Duck, Wilson, duck! He's got a gun wrapped up in that bar rag!"

The startled deputy dropped, but a trifle slowly. Twin gun roars filled the place. Thin flame ripped from the rag. But the wadded cloth itself had suddenly jumped wildly.

The Red Owl's bullet sang to the left. With a snarl he spun to face the door.

The cloth was crimson-stained as he furiously blazed away at a sinewy form there.

Gil Hardy leaped aside. Desperately his handcuffed hands were trying to lever another shell into a smoking rifle. Cut rope dangled from the bracelets, cut rope from his ankles.

The inner door burst in. Tack Wilson whammed away. The squat form of Martinez tottered, a Spanish oath coming from writhing lips. Over the ruffian's shoulder, though, two more guns were blazing.

"It's that danged red-headed deputy!" Wolf Larsen howled in rage.

Gil, struggling with the lever, was diving for a stove. Fierce slugs struck the iron, ripped the floor, chugged into mud walls about him.

Tack Wilson, rolling, gave a groan. Out there on the floor the deputy made a ready target.

But Gil, rifle across his knee, had rammed the lever down, got a fresh shell in the chamber. A snapshot from the hip crashed into the one

wall lamp. The room was plunged in darkness.

But the darkness was slashed with red. Wolf and Stiner, at least, were in through the rear doorway.

Gil crouched behind the stove. Bullets rained about him. His return fire was slow, hampered as he was with his wounded arm and the handcuffs.

Then all shots had ceased. The foe were playing a waiting game. Unless Martinez was dead, they had double odds to face. Gil waited for a movement, heard it, near the rear door. His rifle hammer clicked upon an empty chamber.

No more shells! The magazine was empty! A faint slithering sound was at his left. Slowly it crept closer.

He rammed the barrel out, found flesh.

"Don't! It's me!" Tack Wilson groaned before Gil could snap an order.

Vicious guns blazed hard on the words. With a leap, Gil dragged the other behind the stove. Grunts of pain came from both their lips—Wilson's from his previous wound, Gil's own involuntary gasp from a fresh bullet burn along his short ribs.

"Fella," the deputy muttered, "I shore had you wrong! But how the heck did you get here?"

"Cut the ropes with Martinez's knife. Found this rifle on the stoop. It's empty, though, now. I need a gun. Quick, unlock these handcuffs!"

Gil's words came in whispers, suddenly interrupted by another savage rip and burst of gunfire. Bullets rang from the stove, glanced, splintering, about them.

"Can't," Wilson almost groaned. "Them are Hooley's cuffs. The key's with him in the cabin. My

gun's gone, too, Red. Lost it out there somewhere."

Gil felt his heart go sliding for his boot heels. Here the pair were, trapped!

And the stove was hardly large enough to give them both protection.

At any moment a whining slug might glance off from a joint or elbow, whirl down with a snarling hum, and rip into them. A flattened bullet made a frightful wound. He had to do something quickly.

"Can't wait here for a charge," he said. "Are you wounded bad?"

"Naw," the other muttered grittily. "Just nicked up good and plenty."

"Good! Here's the play," Gil whispered.

A hurried exchange of low-voiced words and he was slipping along the wall. Wilson, wounded worse than Gil knew, was due to inch away soon in an opposite direction.

Once again a tense, deadly silence held the rambling Mud House. Gil meant to have a gun, take it from a foe.

And he'd spotted the last flash and roar from a point just above the floor, well down the long bar front.

With the soft, soundless tread of some creeping lynx, the young trapper stole along, bent low in a springy crouch, manacled hands before him. The bandanna with which Wilson had gagged him was around the handcuffs' chain now, to muffle any clinking.

Gil's fingers touched the bar. He halted, listened for breathing. None seemed to come, however. Of course, the foe ahead might have moved. He slipped on, the bar above him.

Suddenly he stopped. His boot toe had just grazed an unseen cuspidor. The faintest kind of a tiny metallic rattle sounded.

Gil flattened lower, holding his breath. But the harsh rip and crash of vicious guns failed to follow the small mishap. He let his breath slip out, started to move on.

Again he stopped, sniffed silently. Something above him was burning.

It smelled like the scorch of cloth. His quick gaze darted up. Sliding down over the bar top was a faint little ring of red—the size of a six-gun muzzle.

"The Red Owl's gun!" Gil knew in a flash. Still wrapped in the bar cloth, it had set that damp rag afire with a glow so dim that the Red Owl hadn't noticed.

But the Owl had heard the youth. In a second that gun would blaze. Gil's hands shot up in a lightning grab, caught a heavy wrist. With a fierce yank he heaved downward with all his strength.

The Red Owl came over the bar with a startled grunt and yell. Already leaning far over for his shot, he'd been easily whipped off balance. He struck the floor with a thud, then he and Gil were rolling.

Furiously they battled for the gun. It blazed once, ripped a shot above them.

"In on him quick!" the Red Owl screeched. "I'll have him in a minute!"

"Have me, nothin'!" the redhead growled. But the other was far stronger.

The great Red Owl, a savage mountain of flesh and bone and power, was forcing the muzzle around on Gil despite the sinewy youth's straining muscles.

The burning bar rag came close to Gil's face. He ducked. The weapon thundered.

The bullet screamed just above his ear. The six-gun leaped in recoil.

The jumping muzzle never came

down. Gil's last desperate lunge rammed it back. With a vicious snarl, the Red Owl had shot again—and died from the gun turned on himself!

A rush of feet crossed the floor. Gil tore the weapon free. The first foe to drop was Martinez, although the fighting redhead didn't know it. He merely knew a man was down as the gun charge flamed about him.

"Get heem, Wolf!" the ruffian gasped.

Wolf tried—shot and failed. Gil's veering gun had dropped him.

Crash-h! That wasn't a shot, but a mighty, brassy rattle.

Two things struck the floor—a man and a cuspidor. Some one groaned. Then all was still.

Gil crouched in the silence.

"How'd you make it, lad?" The straining voice was Wilson's.

"Fine, I think. And you?"

"Got in in time to crown somebody."

Gil struck a match. Wolf Larsen was dead, beside the Owl. Stiner was out from that tap on the head. Martinez was badly wounded.

"Good clean-up," growled Wilson. "A fine night's work. Hardy, you're a wonder."

"We ain't through yet," the trapper said. "We got to find that loot. Dang it, the Red Guleh City bank held every cent I had! It's broke, I guess, if we don't find it."

"Right enough."

They searched the place. The two captives would never talk. They'd want that loot when free of the pen.

But the hunt failed to reveal a dollar.

Gil growled: "Mighty funny! You sure those rooms you went through didn't hold it anywhere?"

"Nary a where. They've ditched it, somehow."

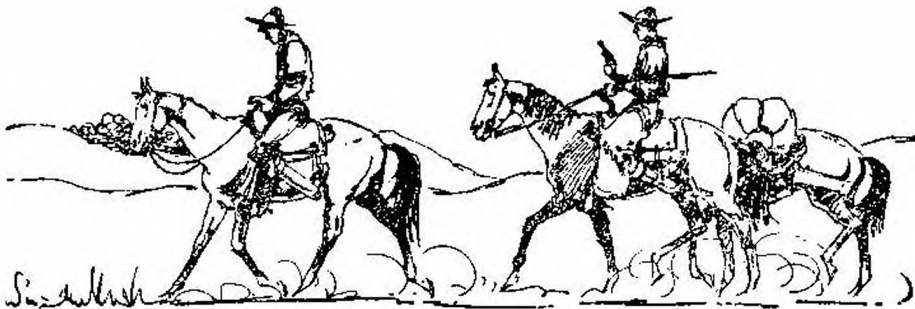
But the redhead wasn't satisfied. "You stay here," he said, "and watch those crooks. I've got a hunch."

He went back through the inner door, was gone a long time, showed up, at length, grinning.

In his handcuffed hands was a canvas sack. Like his hands, the sack was muddy.

"Found it in the wall," he said, "where the earth was mighty damp. That was what they were doin' when you first come in, I guess. Thought a mud house up here was plenty queer. It's an old stunt, though, back home in Arizona."

Tack Wilson grinned. "Red," he said with a chuckling drawl, "I guess you've proved your story. Let's start these skunks on their way to jail. I want to see Hooley's face when we pick him up. There'll be a reward for this night's work. And plenty cattle on your new homestead."





The Holdup At Sioux Springs

A "Pony Express" Novelette

By Houston Irvine

Author of "The Ride To Lone Pine," etc.

CHAPTER I.

SAVE THE MAIL!

HOOFs pounded furiously on the hard-packed ledge trail. Rocks, kicked loose by the horse, showered into the canyon below.

In a second, the Pony Express rider raced into sight. He was bent low over the pommel of his light saddle. His lithe body swayed to every movement of his cayuse as if he were a part of the animal.

The horse, lathered and panting, galloped onto a stretch where the trail ran fairly level for a quarter of a mile. That was the pass over Mule Mountain.

To the right of the narrow ledge, a hundred-foot cliff dropped almost straight down. To the left, a steep, broken slope was liberally sprinkled with scrub pines.

It was an ideal spot for an ambush. But a little farther on the trail dipped down into Dynamite Canyon, which was an even worse

spot, "Smoke" Walsh, the rider, thought.

"I'll show the pesky redskins a thing or two, if they start anythin'," he growled.

If he had care to admit it, he was more than a little worried, however. Back at the last station, he had been told that Indians were waiting along the trail to Julesburg.

Still, the mail had to go through. Smoke could not take time to find a roundabout route. And it was unthinkable to stop, as the attendants at the station had suggested.

The waddy's narrowed brown eyes swept the clumps of pine and boulders carefully, searching for enemies. His bronzed features set grimly. A jagged, lightninglike scar, itself the result of an Indian raid, grew more livid on his forehead.

His thick, glossy, blue-black hair whipped about his ears as he raced along. He jerked the broad brim of his hat a little lower over his eyes.

Smoke Walsh was taller than the average Pony Express rider. But on account of his boyish slimness, his weight did not exceed the hundred-and-twenty-pound limit set by the company. In other respects, not all the riders were so well fitted for their jobs as Smoke.

He could handle a rifle and the twin .45s he had inherited from his father as well as any man. He could trail better than most. And he knew most of the dialects and peculiarities of the various Indian tribes.

Even such training as he had could not save him from ambush on that narrow trail, however. As his running cayuse suddenly shied from a clump of pines to the left of the ledge, the rider had to pull leather violently to prevent being hurled over the cliff.

Almost at the same instant came a hideous cry from the trees:

"Yip-yip-yipee!"

The Pony Express rider gasped. His brown face paled. His eyes started to pop, then narrowed quickly. The scar across his forehead leaped out more boldly.

Gripping his reins in his left hand, he reached for the six-gun holstered on his right thigh.

Smoke knew the meaning of that human coyote yell. As a boy, he had seen his father reach for a rifle when the same howl resounded around the Walsh's tiny frontier cabin. And later—just a few weeks before, in fact—the cry had heralded the raid on the Flying W horse ranch, when the elder Walsh had been killed.

"Injuns!" The rider's lips tightened to a thin line as his chin pushed forward doggedly. "No pesky redskins are goin' to stop Uncle Sam's mail while I'm carryin' it," he declared.

His narrowed eyes searched the pines. He saw his enemies, a dozen of them, gaudy in paint and feathers.

The leader appeared to be a tall, bulky brave, with bedaubed face and wolfish yellow teeth. Smoke gave a start in his saddle at sight of the man.

"I believe that's the feller who was leadin' the bunch that killed dad," muttered the young rider.

Memory of the past attack swept quickly across his mind.

The son of a successful horse raiser who supplied many of the fleet animals that the Pony Express was using, Smoke had seen the entire Flying W cavvy driven off in a raid of supposed Indians. And his father had come home from looking for the ponies with three feathered arrows sticking out of his back.

It had been in the same raid that the son had suffered the long, deep cut on his forehead. But the wound

had meant nothing to him in comparison with the shock of his father's death.

His first impulse had been to set out on the trail to bring the slayers of the elder Walsh to justice. But then had come the realization that, with the Flying W horses stolen, his first thought must be for the support of his mother and younger brother, Jimmy.

Consequently, he got the Pony Express job, which he had won over the opposition of "Shade" Durant, the superintendent of the Julesburg division.

On his first ride for the Pony Express, a few weeks before, Smoke had been held up by a strange half-breed named "Snake" Dixon. This hombre, thinking that he had Smoke at his mercy, had admitted that he was the murderer of Smoke's father.

The admission had so angered Smoke that he had drawn his Colts against the half-breed's cold drop and killed the man in a desperate shoot-out on the trail.

Smoke soon regretted the killing, for with the man dead, the young rider had no way of finding out the identities of the other members of the murdering band of horse thieves. And the Flying W cavvy was still missing.

Now, protected by the trees, the ambushers were waving rifles as well as bows and arrows.

"Dang that big leader! He's the Injun who creased me across the forehead, all right," Smoke growled. "Now's my chance to make him an' his pals pay fer that an' the Flyin' W cavvy."

The Pony Express rider might have thought he had a chance, but in the next few seconds, it did not look like it.

It was plain what simple plan the painted ambushers had employed to

trap their victim. They had left their horses down in Dynamite Canyon and sneaked back on foot to the clump of trees beside the ledge. As Smoke looked, they were leaping out, blocking the narrow trail in both directions.

The trapped waddy whipped up the gun in his right hand, trying to aim it. But his panic-stricken horse was dancing about too wildly. With his knees clamped along the critter's sides, he had all he could do to stick in his saddle.

Crash-crash! Bullets screamed about his head as the attackers opened fire.

Because of the way in which Smoke's cayuse was leaping, the first volley missed him.

"Yip-yip-yipee!" From the corded throats of the ambushers rose the Indian cry again.

But the next instant, Smoke heard something that sounded very strange in the middle of such an attack. It was a command in English, shouted to the others by the burly hombre with the yellow teeth.

"Aim lower!" the fellow ordered. "If yuh can't hit his stummick, plug his hoss."

The rider did not have time, just then, to puzzle over how the leader of an Indian war party happened to be yelling his commands in English. For, obeying the order, the other attackers were lowering the muzzles of their rifles. One with a bow let loose an arrow that buried its stone head in the leather of the *mochila*, or mail pouch, beside Smoke's left knee.

Wham! The horse leaped more wildly as a bullet raked its neck.

Smoke felt a dozen leaden slugs rip through his clothing. And not all of them completely missed his hide.

His right hand tightened on his

six-gun. He wanted to let go his reins and grab for the .45 holstered on his left hip also. With a weapon in each hand, he might hope to blast a path through the ranks of his circling enemies more easily.

But his horse was pitching too violently. If Smoke dropped his reins, he was almost certain to be hurled from his saddle. Or the cayuse might throw itself over the cliff.

The rider's bronzed face was set grimly. If he could get the leader, he knew he might have a chance of driving off the others.

Crash! The single .45 in his right hand roared.

At the same instant, the panicky cayuse gave another wild jump in the air.

The bullet passed only close enough to the leader to let him know that he had been shot at.

"Hurry up an' kill thet kid, yuh fools!" he bellowed angrily at his men.

Smoke Walsh saw one chance for life. He could dive from his saddle and possibly climb down the cliff before any of his foes' bullets or arrows could catch him.

The climb down the steep face of rock would be a dangerous feat under any conditions. And there would be slim chance of the Pony Express rider's accomplishing it, if he was burdened with the *mochila*.

Should he abandon the precious mail for the attempt to save his own life?

The waddy's jaw thrust out doggedly.

"I don't reckon my life'd be wuth savin', if I was to consider sech a thing," he muttered quickly. "The rule is thet the mail's got to git through at any cost. Thet means I got to die to save it, maybe."

"Aim lower, like I told yuh!"

snarled the big leader, when his men's shots still went wild.

Dropping the rifle that he had been carrying, he wrenched a notched six-gun from a holster on his hip.

"I never seen a gang waste so much lead killin' one fool kid," he growled. "Iyar, I'll show yuh how ter git him myself."

With his .45 gripped in his big hand, he sprang forward, directly in front of the young Pony Express rider's horse. His thick lips drew back over his big teeth like those of a killer wolf.

"Git ready ter die!" he shouted, whipping the muzzle of the gun toward the heart of the ambushed rider and thumbing back the hammer.

CHAPTER II.

WHITE INDIANS.

SMOKE WALSH had looked at death before, but seemingly never more certainly than he did at that instant down the muzzle of the bandit leader's notched six-gun.

One of his own weapons was in his hand. But his cayuse was still plunging too violently for him to aim with any accuracy. The gunman on the ground might be handicapped by the horse's leaping about, too. But if there was any advantage on either side, the burly leader of the ambushers held it.

Crash! The notched .45 roared.

The Pony Express rider felt a searing pain shoot through his left arm. He almost dropped the gun he held in his right hand. But he clung to it by sheer will.

That one was close. A little closer, and it would have got him in the heart.

His weapon thundered. But his shooting was wild, his horse was plunging so badly.

The man on the ground only sneered and moved a step closer.

"I got yuh," he boasted.

The thought flashed across Smoke's mind that he might leap from his saddle and fight it out on the ground. But that could gain him little in the long run. All of his attackers would gang him.

The leader's finger was tightening on the trigger of his .45 again. The wolfish grin widened across his heavy, painted features.

In a split second, lead would leap from the gun. And at that range, with the muzzle almost pressing against the body of its intended victim—

Suddenly the Pony Express rider saw his lone chance—a slim one. Kicking his heels violently, he jabbed his spurs deep into his cayuse's flanks.

The critter, already terrorized by the yelling and shooting, snorted and bolted ahead so wildly that Smoke had all he could do to stick in his saddle. The painted gunman was directly in the path of the plunging animal.

Smack! Crash! The sound of hoofs upon flesh blended with the roar of the six-gun.

Looking down, the rider saw his large enemy hurled out of the way by the frightened horse. The notched six-gun, knocked from its owner's hand, was hurtling over the cliff at the moment it exploded.

In falling, the leader struck his head against a jagged rock and lay still. Crimson gushed from the gash in his scalp. His gun arm was twisted under his body, too, as if it might have been broken by a hoof.

In spite of having recognized the leader as one of the supposed Indians who had raided the Flying W, Smoke Walsh was unprepared for the further identification of the

man, that he got in the shout of one of the other attackers.

"Butch! Are yuh dead?" yelled the ambusher excitedly, racing toward his fallen chief.

For the moment, the Pony Express rider was forgotten in the excitement over what had happened to the leader. Reining his horse out of range, the waddy stopped, with an amazed frown wrinkling his scarred forehead.

"Butch! Butch! Butch!" he muttered, over and over again, as if trying to remember where he had heard the name before.

The ambushers crowded about their chief so that Smoke could scarcely see the prone figure.

But suddenly he gave a start in his saddle. A look of remembrance swept across his bronzed face. But he still scowled.

He stared toward the hombre who had almost killed him, and nodded quickly.

"Butch Ambler! That's who yuh are, all right. I might 'a' guessed the Splitrock gang would be in on any crookedness, Injun or otherwise." Smoke bit his lip fiercely.

For a few seconds, he thumbed the hammer of his gun in grim silence. He debated whether to go back and tackle the entire bunch then and there.

The idea of white men masquerading as Indians and preying upon other white men so enraged the young waddy that he almost lost his head for a few moments.

Even without the knowledge that that was part of the outfit's terrible game, Smoke Walsh had reason enough to hate the Splitrock gang. These were the men who, a few weeks before, had kidnaped him in Julesburg to prevent his going to work for the Pony Express.

At least, he was quite sure that

was the reason. At any rate, he had been taken to the gang's headquarters and had escaped only by killing a couple of his captors.

The hideout of the crooks was in the Splitrock, a giant twin butte from which they took their name. The only route to the door of their cabin was through the pass between the two halves of the butte, which could be guarded by one man with a rifle.

Smoke suspected Shade Durant, the Pony Express superintendent at Julesburg, of plotting with the gang to get him out of the way. The rider had angered the local boss when he had gone over the latter's head to get his job from "Big Tim" Flanagan, the genial and square-shooting general manager of the system.

Smoke suspected that Shade was also capable of being in on any other activities of the gang. But he did not have one shred of proof against the superintendent, any more than, until that day, he had had evidence that the Splitrock gang and the raiding Arapahoes who had stolen the Flying W horses were one and the same outfit.

"I know now whar to find them hoss thieves," thought the young waddy. "But I reckon it'd jest be crazy suicide to go back thar an' tackle 'em all at once now," he added sensibly.

The crooks were beginning to spread out from around Butch Ambler. Evidently not hurt badly, the leader was sitting up, tenderly feeling his head.

"Did yuh stop the kid?" he snarled at his men.

"No," one of them admitted after a pause. "Yuh see——" He started to add an explanation, but an oath from Butch cut him off.

"Go git thet rider!" the leader

shouted angrily. "What the blazes do yuh mean, lettin' him escape?"

"But, boss, yuh were hurt an' ——" one of the men started defensively.

"Shut up! Git the kid now!" belted Butch.

Even though wounded and unarmed, the burly outlaw seemed to maintain his power over his followers. Shifting their weapons in their hands, they turned and started running toward Smoke Walsh.

The rider had another moment of temptation, when he saw them coming. He wanted to meet them with his guns blazing. But then he realized the impossibility of that.

The mail must go on without delay. It already had been held up long enough to throw off the schedules all along the line that stretched from the Missouri River to the Pacific coast.

"I'll git every one o' them hoss thieves in my own time," declared the rider. "White Injuns, bah! White coyotes are what they are."

The crooks were running into rifle range. Smoke could not yet use his six-guns.

Zip! Bullets began to whiz by his head as the gang opened fire.

Some of the shots came uncomfortably close, although the ambushers were too excited for expert marksmanship. Another slug raked the rump of the horse, making the animal plunge away faster than its master could have, even by the use of spurs.

Smoke let the critter go. His only thought then was to save the mail. But even that soon appeared to be impossible.

Almost out of range of the rifles, the horse suddenly halted and reared up on its hind legs. The rider heard the dull thud of a bullet as it plowed into the deep chest of the animal.

A wild, high-pitched scream of pain broke from the cayuse's throat. Its forehoofs pawed the air frantically.

As abruptly as it started, the scream stopped. Kicking in a spasm of terror, the horse dropped, simply wilting on the trail.

Smoke Walsh was almost caught. Kicking his feet out of his stirrups, he slipped from his saddle just as the cayuse rolled over on its side.

The ambushers shouted excitedly. They were running toward their victim. Bullets began to shriek around the Pony Express rider again.

"The danged killers!" Smoke looked at his horse.

Its neck was stretched out strangely on the ground. It tried vainly to raise its head. Its eyes stared widely at its saddened master. A crimson-tinted froth bubbled from its distended nostrils.

A tremor shook the poor animal. With a low, sighing moan, it died.

Smoke's teeth ground together savagely. Again he was tempted. Once more, he wanted to face the bandits with flaming guns—make them pay for the death and suffering they had caused.

But there was the mail. His first duty was to get that through.

Jabbing the one .45 that he had drawn into its holster, so he would have both hands free, he stooped quickly and snatched the precious *mochila* from the saddle. Flinging the light leather sack over his left shoulder, he leaped over the rim of the ledge and began climbing swiftly down the sheer face of the cliff.

Handholds were few and far between. An occasional shrub or a crevice in the rocks helped Smoke. But even if he had had plenty of time, the task that he had set himself would have been almost im-

possible. His left arm, wounded by a bullet a little while before, was practically useless. And he had to grit his teeth against the pain.

The bandits ran to the edge of the trail above and started shooting down at the waddy. The bullets flattened themselves on the rocks, hurling chips and dust into Smoke's eyes. Letting go the precarious handhold he had, but clinging grimly to the pouch of mail, he let himself drop and slide recklessly down the steep cliff.

When he reached the bottom, his clothes were nearly torn off. His breath was knocked out, and he lay still for several seconds, with bullets from above crashing about him.

Then he sprang to his feet, stared quickly about him and raced down the canyon into which he had dropped. A sharp turn put him out of view of his enemies. No more bullets came from the ledge.

"Whew! That was kind o' close!" the waddy exclaimed, shifting the *mochila* from one shoulder to the other.

Within a few hundred yards, the gorge opened into Dynamite Canyon, and Smoke got back on the trail that dropped down from the treacherous ledge. Dynamite Canyon was a narrow, twisting defile, where the rock walls towered five hundred feet above rock-strewn floor.

Feeling the need of a moment's rest, if he was to carry the mail on to Julesburg afoot, Smoke halted to lean against the cliff, listening for sounds of pursuit from the direction of the ledge on Mule Mountain.

Wham! A surprise bullet smashed against the stone cliff a few feet to his right.

Chips of rock rained into his face and eyes. His hand leaped toward one of his holstered .45s.

"Is it another ambush?" he thought, in the instant before he saw his newest enemy.

A single gunman, made up like the others in paint and feathers, leaped into the trail ahead of Smoke. He was the guard whom the outlaws had left with their horses.

The bandit was short and squat. A beak nose stood out prominently on his daubed face, and his black eyes were beady and set close together.

He stood in the half crouch of the professional gunman—arm crooked at the elbow away from his body, shoulders hunched slightly, head and neck craning forward, thumb holding back the hammer of his out-thrust .45.

"I'll——" He started to make a threat.

Wham! The roar of a single six-gun interrupted the outlaw's words.

But the shot was not from the weapon in his own hand. Smoke Walsh's .45 flamed as its muzzle cleared the rim of the holster on his right hip.

An expression of blank amazement swept over the painted face of the bandit. With a crimson spot spreading over his chest, he straightened up for a moment, staring glassily at the Pony Express rider.

The dying hombre attempted to raise his six-gun for a dying shot. But his strength was slipping away too rapidly. The hand that held his .45 dropped to his side. The weapon slipped from his fingers and fell to the ground.

With a choking cry in his throat, the gunman took two staggering steps in Smoke's direction, then pitched forward on his face. After a few spasmodic kicks, he lay still.

The young waddy blinked through the smoke of his six-gun at the body. The scar on his forehead

leaped out boldly as his bronzed face paled.

In spite of the fact that he was dealing with back-shooting skunks and murderers, Smoke Walsh did not like to kill a man.

"But I reckon yuh had it comin' to yuh, feller," he muttered. "Any white man who'd paint himself up like an Injun an' go out killin' folks ought to figure he's lucky to die by a bullet instid of a rope."

Setting his jaw grimly, the Pony Express rider shoved his .45 back into its holster and stepped carefully over the bandit's body. Smoke hastened only a few yards farther on, around a turn in the canyon trail, when he came to another abrupt halt.

His eyes popped. His set face relaxed with joy. There were the horses of the Splitrock gang that the lone outlaw had been guarding!

Smoke's first thought was one of thankfulness that he would not have to walk to Julesburg. With a good horse beneath him, he might make up some of the time he had lost in his battle with the bandits. He might even get the mail to the division point nearly on schedule.

The rider sprang toward the nearest cayuse, a racy, sleek black animal. He suddenly stopped, however, and stared at the critter strangely.

"Waal, I'll be dog-goned!"

His brown eyes popped in intense surprise. He looked from one of the dozen horses to another.

"They're the critters that was stole from the Flyin' W, the day dad was killed," he muttered. "I'd recognize our own hosses anywhar. I couldn't be mistaken."

If there had been need of any more proof against the Splitrock gang, Smoke had it in the discovery of the horses.

"Ma won't be so hard up, when I take the cayuses back home," thought Smoke thankfully.

Hurriedly leaping into a saddle, he rounded up the recovered animals and hazed them ahead of him down the canyon.

CHAPTER III.

JULESBURG.

WAVING his hat and yelling, Smoke Walsh hazed the dozen half-wild cayuses through the main street of the little frontier town.

Julesburg, where the Pikes Peak-ers split off from the Overland Trail, was accustomed to strange and thrilling sights. Nevertheless, at the sound of so many hoofs, men dashed to the doors of saloons and gambling halls. After a quick glimpse at the cloud of dust kicked up by the horses, the curious turned hurriedly back into the buildings.

The town, one of the most important on the Overland Stage and Pony Express systems, was little more than a huddle of unpainted shacks. From it the South Platte led on toward Denver and the new gold camps, while the Oregon Trail and Overland Mail continued up Lodgepole Creek to the Northwest.

The population of Julesburg was as mixed as that of any place in the West. And most of its residents were drifters—miners, mule skinners, homesteaders, and ranchers. Blanketed Indians and gaunt, leathery-skinned army scouts mingled with the crowd. Gamblers were everywhere.

Smoke Walsh hurried his horses along without paying much attention to the squat frame buildings, until he came to the Stage and Pony Express office, a square structure at the end of the street.

Since Julesburg was a division

point or home station for both of the Overland services, the office was as imposing a building as there was in town.

Smoke figured he might be a few minutes late in his arrival. Two men and an impatient, saddled cayuse stood in front of the station, waiting for the young rider. One of the men was the slim, wiry rider who would take the mail on. The other was Bill Calkins, the local agent.

Calkins blinked near-sightedly at Smoke and his horses through a pair of heavy, steel-rimmed glasses, which he wore hooked over his flap ears. He could not see the rider well enough to recognize him, until he was within a few feet.

The agent was short and slender. His face was small and pinched and red, with a wrinkled forehead sloping up into a white dome of baldness. The thin hair fringing the sides and back of his head was a drab, dusty color.

Bill Calkins looked like a misfit in such a job. He did not wear a six-gun, having no need for one, in his purely clerical job.

Smoke spurred his cayuse alongside the waiting, saddled animal and leaped from his saddle. In a second, the other rider had transferred the *mochila* to his critter. Vaulting into his stirrups, he was galloping away before Smoke Walsh even had time to pass the time of day.

Smoke turned toward the agent.

"Yo're late," Bill Calkins growled, scowling through the thick lenses of his spectacles.

"Yeah? How much?" The rider smiled.

"Hm-m-m!" Calkins pulled a giant nickel-plated watch from the pocket of his pants and stared at it importantly. "Eight minutes," he reported.

Smoke Walsh laughed.

"Is thet all?" he retorted. "Yo're lucky I'm not eight hours late, or thet I got hyar at all."

The agent was about to say something else. No doubt he would have given Smoke an official bawling-out and allowed the matter to drop. But a harsh laugh sounded from the doorway of the station.

"I don't allow the Pony Express'd figure it much of a loss, if the Injuns had got yuh," came a snarling voice.

Smoke's bronzed face flushed a deeper hue. His jaw tightened. His brown eyes grew narrow.

Almost tempted to reach for his six-guns, he sprang around to face the speaker. Shade Durant stood in the office doorway, rocking back and forth on his heels, with his thumbs hooked over his belt, close to the mouths of his holsters.

The division superintendent of the Pony Express was a tall man, with a wiry slimness like that of a rattlesnake. He was one of the most deadly gunmen of his day, although he looked more like an ordinary range-town dandy.

He wore black trousers stuffed into the tops of polished boots, a yellow shirt and crimson neckerchief. Over his left brow, a giant gray beaver hat was slanted rakishly.

Shade's face was bronzed, but unhealthily splotched from too much liquor. His features were thin and sharp, his nose resembling the beak of a hawk. When his thin lips drew back in a snarl, two rows of large, uneven teeth were bared.

A pair of slitted greenish-gray eyes stared out from under the broad brim of the beaver hat. Those eyes gleamed with hatred, as they swept Smoke Walsh from the toes of his high-heeled boots to the tip of his old sombrero.

"What yuh doin' with them hosses?" demanded the superintendent, glaring from the waddy to the bunch of loose animals that were now milling in the street.

"Why, I——" the rider started to explain truthfully.

"What do yuh think yuh are—a hoss hunter?" Shade's growl cut the younger man off. "No wonder it's so hard fer us ter keep the mail on schedule. When a young upstart figures he kin stop whenever he pleases an' waste the company's time, it's a wonder the Pony Express kin operate at all."

Smoke's bronzed cheeks flushed at the unfair criticism. His finger nails dug into the calloused palms of his hands with his desire to lash out at the sneering, hawklike face of the boss.

"Do yuh call fightin' off a gang of ambushers wastin' the company's time?" The waddy held his voice steady. "Them hosses are the ones the crooks rode. It didn't take me anywhere near as long to round up the critters an' haze 'em on ahead o' me than it would have to hoof it in hyar after my own hoss was killed."

The superintendent scowled, remembering perhaps that Smoke had obtained his job directly from Big Tim Flanagan, the general manager.

The rider would not have been surprised if Shade had pounced upon the fact of his few minutes' late arrival as an excuse to fire him. But the superintendent had other and more lasting ways of getting rid of persons he did not like.

"Waal, since yuh got the cayuses, what do yuh think yo're goin' ter do with 'em?" asked the beak-nosed man.

Smoke shrugged. "Seein' as how they're the critters stolen from the Flyin' W Ranch," he said, "I 'low

I'll take 'em home whar they belong. My mother an' li'le brother, Jimmy, will be mighty glad to see them hosses."

"Oh, so thet's yore plan!" Shade's greenish eyes flashed. "I reckon I got somethin' ter say 'bout thet."

The rider's mouth dropped open, and his brown eyes popped in blank amazement. For a long moment, he was speechless. Then the words seemed to tumble from his lips.

"I don't see how yuh figure yuh got any say about the cayuses. Unless——" He stopped.

"Unless what?" the superintendent moved a step closer, his shoulders suddenly hunched, his elbows crooking away from his sides.

Smoke Walsh had seen enough to recognize that position. He knew Shade Durant's reputation as a wizard on the draw. And he guessed that the superintendent would welcome any excuse to shoot him.

But the Flying W waddy also remembered his suspicion that Shade was tied up with the Splitrock gang. In such a case, the quicker he and the superintendent settled it, the better it would be.

Smoke did not want to kill the other man. But he realized there was practically only one way of settling an issue in Julesburg. That was in gun smoke.

"What interest could yuh have in them hosses"—the rider's voice was very low, with each syllable chopped off clear and sharp—"unless yo're tied up some way with the skunks what stole 'em?"

"Arc yuh hintin'——" Shade Durant's face grew purple. "Why, dang yore measly hide, I'll kill yuh fer them words!" he shouted.

Both of his hands moved so fast that their motions were just blurs. With his muscles already tensed for a quick draw, the superintendent

reached the handles of his guns in a small fraction of a second. In another fraction, almost as small, those notched .45s would have leaped out of their tied-down holsters, flaming as they came.

But Smoke Walsh had not been ignorant of the effect his words might cause. His face a little paler than usual, so that the scar on his forehead stood out more lividly, his right hand moved with the speed of lightning. Since his left arm still pained from the bullet wound he had received in the hold-up on Mule Mountain, he did not try to draw his second weapon.

He did not need it. Down and up! His right hand tore the one six-gun from its holster.

With a long leap, he jabbed the muzzle of the weapon into the superintendent's midriff. A click sounded, as he jerked back the hammer.

"Drop yore guns!" The young rider's tones were suddenly harsh, as his finger curled about the trigger of his .45.

Shade gave a surprised grunt. He had not imagined that a kid like Smoke could beat him at the draw. And the .45 jabbing him in the stomach was not only dangerous—it hurt.

The superintendent knew when he was defeated. Even with his fingers gripping the notched handles of his twin guns, he could not raise their barrels and fire before the Flying W waddy could squeeze the trigger.

Letting go of his weapons, Shade raised his empty hands above his head. His guns did not fall to the ground, but merely settled back into the holsters, from which they had not been completely drawn.

Smoke stepped back a yard, still keeping his finger on the trigger of his gun, and the muzzle pointed toward his enemy's waist line.

"Don't think yuh kin put anything over on me, jest 'cause yuh happen to be runnin' this division o' the Pony Express," snapped Smoke.

"I'll git yuh fer this," snarled the superintendent. "Nobody kin insult Shade Durant an' git away with it. Hintin' I might be mixed up with a bunch o' hoss thieves, huh?"

"Waal"—the Flying W waddy smiled thinly—"if yuh ain't mixed up with 'em, why'd yuh git so mad?"

Shade looked for an instant as if he were going to try to grab for his guns again. Instead, his hawklike face purplish with rage, he chose to bluster.

"Since yuh caught them hosses on company time, they belong ter the Pony Express," he said.

"Huh? Is thet yore claim?" The rider frowned thoughtfully.

"Thet's my claim," the superintendent sneered. "An' I kin make it stick."

"Supposin' I don't agree to it." Smoke thumbed the hammer of the six-gun in his hand.

"Yo're fired!" Shade snapped.

The waddy gave a start. For a second, the .45 wavered in his fingers. To Smoke Walsh, the job with the Pony Express meant more than a livelihood for himself alone. To lose the position might mean suffering for his mother and brother.

But he could not back down before Shade Durant now. His jaw tightened. His brown eyes hardened.

"Mebbe I'll keep on ridin'," he retorted grimly.

"Teacher's pet, huh?" the division boss jeered. "If yuh aim ter go over my head again, like yuh did ter git yore job, I'll spike thet pronto. Big Tim Planagan has got ter listen ter me about some things. I reckon, even if he is the general manager."

Smoke bit his lip. "In the meantime," he said slowly, "I'll take thet bunch o' cayuses out home whar they belong."

"Yo'll be sorry yuh ever seen a hoss in yore life." Shade laughed meaningly, and started backing toward the office door, his arms still cautiously raised above his head.

In a moment, the superintendent disappeared within the building. The Flying W waddy stood, with gun in hand, staring ruefully at vacant space.

Things had not turned out quite as he had hoped they might. He had no more proof of any crookedness on the part of Shade Durant than he had ever had. For the time being, the superintendent held the upper hand.

Even the recovery of the dozen Flying W horses could not make up for the loss of Smoke's Pony Express job.

A movement at his left elbow pulled him out of his dazed thoughtfulness. Turning with his six-gun in his hand, he looked down at the small, worried face of Bill Calkins.

"Yuh—yuh shouldn't 'a' crossed Shade," declared the little local agent, blinking through his thick glasses. "I wouldn't want to have him agin' me."

"Aw!" Smoke Walsh holstered his six-gun and grinned with a confidence that he did not entirely feel. "I ain't worried. I'm goin' to take them hosses out home now like I said."

"S-s-so long." Calkins said it as if he never expected to see the waddy again.

"Don't yuh worry, old-timer," the younger man told him. "Shade might 'a' fired me, but I'll be ridin' fer the Pony Express again."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away. He had to get his

own horse—a sleek, long-winded, speedy animal, named Raven—out of the stable.

Then, springing into his saddle, yelling and waving his hat, he hazed the recovered Flying W cayuses out of Julesburg at a run. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the scowling Shade Durant, standing in the office doorway, watching his departure.

CHAPTER IV.

SHADE'S REVENGE.

WITH cruel jabs of his spurs, the superintendent forced his big roan cayuse up the steep trail in the Splitrock.

Like an enormous pair of mule ears, the twin buttes reared out of the plain north of Julesburg. Farther north lay the wild, broken country where the outlaws ranged their rustled stock. No honest man had ever penetrated beyond the Splitrock.

The pass up which Shade Durant was riding was one that a single man with a rifle could guard against the strongest posse. But the Pony Express superintendent hurried upward with an assurance that could mean only one thing—he had traveled the same path many times before.

About five hundred yards up from the foot of the trail, Shade met the outlaw on guard and passed the time of day with him.

"Is the gang at the shack?" asked the superintendent, jerking his horse to a halt.

"Yeah." The sentinel of the pass laughed. "An' yuh never seen a sicker-lookin' bunch o' hombraes in yore life. Somebody grabbed their hosses over on Mule Mountain, an' they had ter walk all the way home."

Shade laughed grimly and rode on. Gouged by its master's spurs,

the roan cayuse reached the summit of the trail between the rocks in a few seconds.

The path dropped less steeply into a large, round valley, walled by cliffs. The grass was long and the water abundant down there in the natural corral of the Splitrock gang, where nearly five hundred stolen horses moved like tiny specks against the green.

The Pony Express superintendent gave a thin smile of satisfaction and spurred his roan down a short way. To the right of the trail, a large cabin, built of rough-hewn logs, hung dizzily on the side of the butte.

That was the hang-out of the gang. Shade scowled at the unusual quiet of the place.

Dismounting, the visitor left his cayuse with the reins thrown over its head and swaggered into the cabin. The reason for the strange quietness about the place was at once apparent.

Worn out by their walk home from Mule Mountain, the bandits were stretched out on bunks built along the walls. Most of them were snoring. Not more than half a dozen had taken the trouble to remove their Indian paint and disguises before tumbling into their bunks.

Shade Durant sneered. Then he let out a loud yell:

"Pile out, yuh rannies! A heck of a time this is fer yuh ter be catchin' up on yore beauty sleep."

With startled grunts, the outlaws sprang awake, grabbing for six-guns beneath their pillows.

"Cut it out!" shouted the visitor. "I come up ter talk ter Butch."

A tall, broad-shouldered hombre, with a crimson-stained rag tied about his bullet-shaped head, climbed out of his bunk and came forward.

Butch Ambler, the leader of the

gang that had attacked Smoke Walsh, was one of the few who had taken the trouble to wash the Indian paint from his face.

Thick-necked and heavy-featured, he stared at Shade out of small, deep-set black eyes. When he forced a grin of welcome, his thick lips drew back over snaggly yellow teeth.

"Howdy, boss." He raked his heavy hand through his coarse black hair.

"A fine job yuh did of ambushin' thet rider, Smoke Walsh," snarled the Pony Express superintendent. "I never 'lowed yo'd let a kid like thet beat yuh so bad."

Butch Ambler scowled. Before he answered, he returned to his bunk, pulled a quart bottle of whisky from beneath the blankets, unstopped it and drank deeply.

"Want a swig?" He offered the bottle to Shade.

The superintendent took a drink. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

"Butch," he growled, "I got another job fer yuh ter do. An' I don't want it messed up, neither."

"Do yuh want us ter do somethin' right away?" The lieutenant looked longingly at the bunk from which he had been routed. "The boys is tired. I got a powerful headache. An', yuh know, we lost Pete Feeney. He was guardin' the hosses, an' Smoke Walsh shot him."

"I didn't know thet." Shade's greenish eyes narrowed. "But it don't make no difference. I got word thet a special stagecoach, due in Julesburg from Denver to-morrer mornin', is bringin' an awful big heap o' gold."

"How much?" The tiredness seemed to drop from the brawny Butch.

"Seventy thousand dollars," the superintendent replied. "It's a spe-

cial shipment, bound fer the East. The stagecoach won't be carryin' no passengers—jest the driver an' two guards."

"An' yuh want us ter grab off the gold?" The other grinned. "I don't reckon the gang is too tired fer a big job like thet."

"Certainly I want yuh ter grab the gold," Shade snorted. "Be shore yuh kill the two guards, too. But let the driver escape off inter the woods some place."

"Huh!" Butch wrinkled his low brow, puzzled. "If yuh don't want no witnesses ter what happened, why do yuh want the driver left alive? Don't yuh think he'll talk?"

The superintendent laughed craftily and helped himself to another swig out of the whisky bottle.

"I know he'll talk," he retorted. "But he'll say jest what I want him to. The driver will be Joe Dolliver. I've already got it fixed with him ter tell a certain story fer a little share o' the gold."

"Thet ain't so dumb," praised the lieutenant. "What's the story Dolliver's s'posed ter tell?"

"Waal"—Shade hesitated, as if uncertain how much of the plot to let his follower in on—"after the holdup, bein' the only survivin' witness, the driver is goin' ter say he recognized Smoke Walsh as the hombre who killed the guards an' stole the gold."

Butch Ambler's jaw dropped in surprise.

"But thet kid ain't likely ter be anywhar nigh the scene o' the robbery," he said.

"I know he ain't, yuh fool," Shade sneered. "But nobody will be able ter disprove what Dolliver says, as long as you an' me an' the rest o' the gang keeps our mouths shut."

"I see." Butch Ambler nodded. "Yo're framin' Smoke Walsh."

"Yeah." Shade Durant's beak-nosed face flushed angrily. "I'll show the upstart thar's more than one way ter git a man. He thinks he's gein' ter git back on as a Pony Express rider. But by the time I git through outlavin' him, he won't even dare ride a lonesome trail on a cloudy night."

Butch did not say anything, but took a drink.

"Yuh fellers better git busy," said the superintendent. "Yuh got a long ride south o' Julesburg."

"Don't worry," replied Butch. "Us fellers'll be waitin' fer the stagecoach when it comes along. An' nobody but the driver will live ter tell about it."

Shade Durant did not worry. He knew that the greed for gold alone would practically insure the gang's carrying out the holdup as planned.

But it was not the thought of the loot that twisted the superintendent's hawkish face in a cruel grin. He was visioning Smoke Walsh, the hated youth who had beaten him again and again, riding the outlaw trails.

With a feeling of satisfaction, Shade strode out of the cabin and mounted his roan horse. In a few moments, he was spurring the poor critter at a fast pace down the pass through the Splitrock and toward Julesburg.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOLDUP.

JOE DOLLIVER was an insignificant-looking little hombre, with a face that reminded one of a rat. Watery blue eyes stared shiftily out from under the sloppy brim of his gray slouch hat. A stubble of sandy beard covered his hollow, leathery cheeks and weak chin.

He was a good driver, however, especially when he had a six-horse

team as good as the one he was driving on that particular day. In order to haul the heavy shipment of gold to Julesburg, the stage officials at Denver had supplied the best cayuses that they could obtain—critters almost as good as those used in the Pony Express service.

Beside Joe on the driver's seat, rode one tall, lanky guard, with a rifle lying across his buckskin-clad knees. The second guard, an older, bullet-scarred man, sat on the swaying top of the stagecoach, behind the others, gripping a big-barreled shotgun in his horny hands.

In addition to their long weapons, each of the guards wore a pair of .45s strapped on their hips. And there was small doubt that they knew how to use the guns.

Both of the guards were dressed in the style of the veteran scouts and trappers, in fringed buckskin shirts and trousers, with homemade beaverskin caps on their heads. Moccasins, instead of boots, covered their feet.

At Sioux Springs, south of Julesburg a dozen miles, the driver halted to water his horses. He was beginning to wonder if the holdup he had planned with Shade Durant was going to occur, after all. Joe Dolliver had been watching for the bandits all the way from Denver.

While the driver was busy watering the tired and thirsty cayuses, the two guards climbed down from their seats and walked around the stagecoach, warily watching for enemies. One of them inspected the fastenings of the "boot" on the back of the heavy coach, where the precious shipment of gold from the Colorado mines was concealed.

"Plenty o' fellers would like to have thet yaller stuff," observed the tall guard who had been riding beside the driver.

His name was Al Saunders. And he talked with a nasal twang that reminded one of the New England hills rather than the mountains of Colorado.

"Yeah." Jim Burns, the other guard, bit off a chew of tobacco from a thick black plug and worked his jaws vigorously for several seconds. "I reckon thar's plenty of hombres thet would give their right arms fer the dinero we got to-day. But wouldn't yuh jest like to see any of 'em try an' git it?" he continued, punctuating his question by spitting a brown stream of tobacco juice against the hub of the stagecoach's right rear wheel.

Saunders swept the trees surrounding Sioux Springs with experienced brown eyes. He shifted his rifle a little in his hands. His weather-beaten face hardened.

"Nobody likes a good fight better than I do," he admitted.

"Don't I know thet?" Burns laughed. "Do yuh remember the time we was scoutin' fer the army down around Santa Fe an' ran inter thet big bunch o' redskins? I recollect yuh was shootin' so fast, the heat of yore rifle barrel almost blistered yore paws. If it hadn't been fer yuh——"

The old frontiersman would have gone on recalling incidents of an exciting life, but his partner interrupted him.

"I was goin' to say," said Saunders, "thet, while I do enj'y a good fight as well as the next man, I prefer to have 'em on the level. I'd rather have the odds about even. An' I don't hanker none fer an am-bush."

"Do yuh think anybody would dare try to steal this gold, while me an' yuh are on the stagecoach?" Burns patted the stock of his heavy shotgun affectionately.

"This spot right hyar would be fine fer a holdup," Saunders replied, sweeping the muzzle of his rifle around to point at the trees.

He was right about the spot being a fine one for a holdup. Sioux Springs were located at the bottom of one of the small, round basins that are common in the plains country east of the Rocky Mountains. A brook, fed by the springs, flowed through a gap to the south. Cottonwoods and aspens choked the gently sloping walls of the little valley to the rim.

Coming up from the south, the trail of the stagecoach followed along the tiny creek. But northward, the road climbed straight over the edge of the basin—a hard pull for a team, even though it was not very steep.

Jim Burns scoffed at the idea of a robbery, however.

"Pshaw!" he laughed. "Do yuh think the three of us couldn't stand off any gang o' coyotes thet wanted the gold?"

"Three of us?" Saunders frowned. "Who else yuh countin' on besides us two, pard?"

"Why, the driver, of course." The other looked surprised.

"I wouldn't count too much on him, if I was yuh." The tall guard lowered his voice. "Somehow I don't trust him none too much."

"Huh!" Burns nearly swallowed his chew of tobacco. "Do yuh mean yuh think he might be a crook?"

The question went unanswered. Before Saunders could say anything, the subject of the discussion came around the back of the stage.

"Waal," he announced, with a crooked grin, "the hosses have finished drinkin'. I'm ready ter pull out, if yuh are."

"Can't git movin' any too quick to suit us," Saunders growled.

Joe Dolliver climbed to his seat, picked up his lines and his whip. The guards quickly took their positions. The stage coach lurched as the driver cracked his lash over the backs of the cayuses.

For a short distance, the horses went at a run. Then the hill out of the basin was reached. Gradually the pace slowed to a trot, then to a walk.

Al Saunders's glance darted from tree to tree on the hillside, his brown eyes narrow and hard. His lean, leathery face was grim with the expectation of trouble.

Burns was not so worried, and consequently less cautious. Holding his heavy shotgun loosely across his knees, he chewed tobacco steadily.

Joe Dolliver grinned. He brought his whip down in a stinging blow across the backs of the horses.

Thud! The dull sound of a bullet striking into human flesh was almost smothered by the rumbling of the stagecoach.

But Saunders suddenly sprang from his seat beside the driver. For a second, the tall, lanky form of the frontiersman swayed there. From the trees to the left of the trail came the belated report of a rifle.

Saunders struggled to lift his own weapon. But it slipped from his gnarled hands and clattered down under the wheels of the stagecoach.

With a sighing cry, the guard slumped forward. An instant more, and he would have followed his rifle, plunging down behind the cayuses.

But Jim Burns had recognized the meaning of the first thud of the bullet. For a second, the smaller guard sat paralyzed by surprise.

His eyes popped. His weather-beaten features sharpened with amazement. He coughed violently to prevent swallowing his mouthful of tobacco.

Al Saunders was pitching off the stagecoach. With a quick, darting clutch, old Jim seized the buckskin-clad shoulders of his friend. He pulled him back on top of the stagecoach. But Saunders slumped down there like an empty feed sack.

It took no more than a glance to see that he was already dead. A crimson stain, as broad as a man's hand, spread over the left side of his chest.

"Al!" Jim's wailing cry was that of a person who has lost his best friend.

The smaller guard's jaws clamped grimly over his quid of tobacco. He and Saunders had been pals for years, had faced death many times together.

No doubt, the first thought of the remaining friend was to stop and battle the murderer, or murderers, right then. But he realized the gold must be got to safety first.

Al Saunders was already dead. Nothing could be done for him. Propping the body against the back of the driver's box, so that it would not fall off, Jim Burns took on the entire job of guarding the precious gold.

Joe Dolliver jerked back on his lines, almost bringing the stagecoach to a complete stop. He was looking back over his shoulder at the body of Saunders, with a peculiar, excited expression on his ratlike face.

"Keep goin'!" old Jim snapped. "Whup yore hosses, yuh fool! Git to the open prairie, whar we got a chance fer a runnin' fight."

The driver did not obey. He looked as if he wanted to leap from his seat and run for the cover of the trees.

Another gun roared. Another. And another.

Jim Burns heard the bullets hum-

ming around his head. One leaden slug plucked at his buckskin shirt, grazing his left shoulder. One picked off his beaver cap and sent it whirling across the trail.

The veteran fighter swung the muzzle of his shotgun around in a circle. But he could not see the attackers. Puffs of smoke showed where the muzzles of guns were thrust around trees. But the ambushers themselves were well hidden.

Dolliver perched on the edge of his seat, like a small animal ready to jump and run for it at any instant. In spite of their fear of the shooting, the horses had halted.

Bullets were coming thicker around Burns. He could not stay where he was, exposed on top of the motionless stagecoach, more than a few seconds longer, without meeting the same fate as Al Saunders.

"Whup them hosses!" he shouted to Dolliver again.

The driver still did not move, however. With an angry yell at the startled cayuses, the guard seized the whip from Dolliver's hand and brought it down furiously across the backs of the critters.

The stagecoach lurched ahead violently. Dolliver was almost hurled from his seat. But if he had wanted to leap, he must have lost the desire suddenly, because the vehicle was moving at a terrific speed.

White-faced and pop-eyed, he made no attempt to stop Burns, as the latter lashed the horses again. The driver held the lines, but he was powerless to use them.

"I'll show the skunks how to fight," shouted the guard, kneeling beside the body of his slain pal and dropping the whip to snatch up his shotgun again.

The skin of his face looked like an

old piece of saddle leather in the bright sunlight. The scars of several old bullet wounds criss-crossed his cheeks and forehead. His eyes blazed fiercely through a lock of iron-gray hair that tumbled down over his brows. Thumbing the hammers of his heavy shotgun, he spat a brown stream of tobacco juice over the side of the stagecoach.

Old Jim, who had fought Indians and bandits from the tops of speeding, swaying stagecoaches before, was using the right plan in making the horses race. But in this case, the run was a short one.

Halfway to the top of the hill, two of the bandits showed themselves. Leaping in front of the madly plunging cayuses, they commenced shooting and yelling to frighten the team.

With snorts of fear, the leading horses swerved aside against the trees that hemmed the narrow trail. The barrier stopped the terrorized animals effectively. The stagecoach lurched violently, skidded around on two wheels, nearly overturning, then righted itself and came to a standstill.

In an instant, the stage was surrounded by bandits. Jim Burns's eye fell on Butch Ambler and several other members of the Splitrock gang. Feeling that there was no need to disguise themselves, since the only witnesses they feared were to be killed, the crooks had not resorted to their usual Indian paint and feathers for the stage holdup.

"Yuh skunk!" Burns jerked the muzzle of his shotgun toward the leader of the gang. "I'll make yuh pay fer killin' my pal!"

At that instant, one of the other outlaws fired at the guard with a six-gun. The bullet laid open a crimson gash across Burns's left cheek.

With an angry yell, the guard swerved the muzzle of his shotgun toward his attacker and squeezed the trigger. The explosion sounded like a blast of dynamite, in comparison with the sharper reports of the rifles and six-guns.

The gunman did not even gasp. With nearly the whole front of his chest torn away by the heavy charge of buckshot from the shotgun, the robber pitched over on his back, glassy-eyed.

"I'll show yuh how to fight, yuh coyotes!" Burns yelled, shifting the muzzle of his heavy weapon toward another of his enemies.

Crash! The explosion of the second barrel of the shotgun shook the basin.

Another member of the gang dropped as the first hombre had done. The other outlaws looked paralyzed by fear for a moment.

"Git the guard!" Butch Ambler's snarling voice thundered. "Arc yuh goin' ter stand thar like a bunch o' ninnies, waitin' fer him ter shoot yuh?"

At the words of their leader, the bandits sprang forward over the bodies of their two fallen pards. A volley of shots rang from the muzzles of the gang's guns.

Strangely, none of the bullets flew near enough to Joe Dolliver to endanger him. All of them were aimed at the guard.

Old Jim dropped flat beside the body of his murdered partner just in time to dodge the leaden hail. With his weather-beaten face flushed in anger, he let go of his empty shotgun and reached for the twin .45s on his hips.

Crash! Wham! As fast as his knotty fingers could squeeze the triggers, he fired at the crooks.

Another one of the outlaws went down, wounded through his right

leg. For a few moments, the guard's fierce shooting drove the rest of the gang back. But then they settled down to shooting in return.

Chips flew off the wooden top of the stagecoach as bullets felt for Jim Burns. Stretched flat on the roof, he was somewhat protected from direct fire. Nevertheless, it was only a matter of seconds until he was wounded severely in a dozen places.

His own six-guns clicked, empty. Tossing his gray hair back out of his eyes, he tore the .45s out of Al Saunders's holsters and began firing them.

For hours, it seemed, although it could only have been a matter of minutes, the battle raged, with neither side seeming to gain. It was beginning to look as if the lone guard might stand off the gang, after all.

"Git him! Rush him!" Butch Ambler shouted, mixing in violent oaths over the failure of his men to finish off one lone hombre.

"Yo'll never take me!" Jim Burns yelled, cramming new cartridges into the cylinders of his empty guns.

The bandits started forward, but hesitated in the face of a new burst of fire from the guard. Joe Dolliver must have decided that the holdup was doomed to failure.

Although he had made no move to help the guard fight off the gang, the driver suddenly leaped to his feet and grabbed a six-gun from his hip. Whirling toward Burns, Dolliver jabbed his weapon at the veteran battler and thumbed back the hammer.

"I'll kill yuh, then!" the driver grunted.

"Huh?" The guard, who had been too busy to pay any attention to the other, jerked about. Dolliver had the drop on him. The fi-

ger of the driver already was tightening on the trigger of his .45.

Behind the gun, the ratlike face of the little hombre was twisted in a cruel grin. His watery blue eyes were narrowed.

Jim Burns tried to jerk his weapons toward Dolliver.

"Yuh rat!"

Wham! The old guard did not have time to protect himself, as flame suddenly burst from the muzzle of the driver's .45.

CHAPTER VI.

SMOKE SQUARES ACCOUNTS.

HAZING the bunch of recovered Flying W cayuses out of the corral and toward the long, rich grass at the big bend of Coyote Creek, Smoke Walsh's feelings were strangely mixed that morning.

It was great to be home, wonderful to see his mother and brother again. But the loss of his Pony Express job still worried the rider. Even with the return of a few of the stolen horses to the Flying W Ranch, it would be difficult for the Walsh family to eke out a living without Smoke's salary.

The waddy realized that he might be able to go to Big Tim Flanagan, the general manager of the Pony Express, and get his job back. But he did not want to do that.

"If I can't hold down the place on my own merits, or show up Shade Durant as the crook I think he is, I reckon I'll have to starve," he muttered soberly, as he loped along.

His face reflected his thoughts. His brown eyes were clouded, but his square jaw set doggedly. The jagged scar across his forehead gleamed brightly in the sunshine.

Suddenly his whole attitude changed, however. He jerked more erect in his saddle. His eyes wid-

ened and brightened. He drew his black horse, Raven, to a sliding stop.

"What was that?" he cried, turning his head as if better to listen for the repetition of some distant sound.

Boom! There it was repeated.

With his cayuse halted, Smoke's keen ears caught the sound plainer than they had a few seconds before. Instantly the rider's mind sought to interpret the meaning of the explosion.

"It sounded like a shotgun," he said. "It don't seem hardly possible that anybody could be huntin' with a shotgun this fur from town."

His ears strained. And as the loose Flying W horses raced on ahead, further sounds reached Smoke above the beating of the animals' hoofs.

"Rifles an' six-guns!" cried the waddy. "It sounds more like a huntin' party."

For another moment, he sat motionless, straining his ears to the sounds. Then his face flushed a shade darker. His brown eyes narrowed. The scar on his brow twisted as he frowned.

"The shootin' is over toward Sioux Springs," he muttered. "The stagecoach from Denver comes up that way. I wonder——"

He did not bother to complete his thought. With a sudden, quick jab of his spurs, he sent his surprised horse flying across the prairie in the direction of the shooting.

And that cayuse, Raven, could travel. Better even than any of the Pony Express animals, its white-stockinged legs moved with the ease of a well-oiled machine. Its hoofs seemed barely to skim the tops of the grass.

It was several miles from the Flying W Ranch to Sioux Springs. But Raven did not slow his pace.

Bending low over the whipping mane of the horse, Smoke heard the sounds of the shots growing louder.

"If it's a holdup, the Splitrock gang must be in on it. An' I'll give 'em a big surprise, maybe," he said, but the wind swept his words behind him.

His jaw clamped grimly. His lips pressed into a thin, hard line. Looping his reins over the horns of his saddle, he gripped the handles of the twin six-guns holstered on his hips.

Although Raven was running at breakneck speed, it seemed to the Flying W waddy as if he never was going to reach his goal. Finally, however, he raced over the northern rim of the basin in which Sioux Springs was located. What he saw happening on the trail halfway up from the floor of the valley caused him to drag his cayuse to a sliding halt.

A stagecoach was wedged against the trees on one side of the road, its horses plunging wildly, but tangled in their harness and powerless to move the heavy vehicle. Surrounding the coach were members of the Splitrock gang.

On top of the stage, the body of one dead man was stretched. But another hombre was standing off the bandits bravely with a pair of smoking .45s. The driver, a rat-faced little fellow, was seated on his box, taking no part in the battle.

"What's the matter with him?" Smoke growled. "Don't he keer if a bunch o' coyotes rob the stagecoach?"

The waddy's questions were answered partially at once. He saw the driver suddenly leap to his feet, jerk out his six-gun and whirl toward the guard.

"I got yuh!" The shout of the rat-faced hombre floated upward to the Flying W waddy.

The latter was too paralyzed by surprise to act for an instant.

Wham! The driver's .45 cracked viciously.

Smoke saw the guard spring suddenly upright on top of the stagecoach. A gaping crimson hole was in his chest.

For an instant, he tried to raise the muzzles of his hot six-guns toward his slayer. But life was ebbing too rapidly.

Without a sound, Jim Burns seemed simply to wilt. Still gripping his .45s, he plunged head-first over the side of the stagecoach. There on the trail, he lay still.

Smoke Walsh's face was drawn and white with horror. He saw Butch Ambler and the rest of the Splitrock gang swarming forward toward the stagecoach. Suddenly all the fury of justice was unleashed in the heart of the Flying W waddy.

"Thieves! Murderers!" Smoke shouted, kicking his spurs into the flanks of his horse.

Face grim, six-guns gripped in his hands, he bolted down the hill toward the holdup at reckless speed. If Raven should stumble——

But Raven was too sure-footed to stumble. Tearing down madly, he carried his master within easy six-gun range as the startled bandits jerked around from the richly loaded stagecoach.

Several of the outlaws gave cries of fear. The driver of the stagecoach whirled about, with his .45 in his hand. His weak face paled. His watery blue eyes nearly popped from his head.

From his position, Joe Dolliver could have done as much as any of the bandits to stop Smoke. But the hombre with the face and spirit of a rat did not have that much courage. With a whining cry of fear, he let his murderous six-gun drop from

his nerveless fingers, while he himself dived head first into the thicket at the side of the stagecoach.

Smoke Walsh knew, of course, that the driver had played a part in the holdup plot. But he could not do anything to halt the fleeing man then. At least one of the Splitrock gang was recovering from his surprise rapidly.

"It's that danged young Walsh hombre!" Butch Ambler bellowed at his men. "We got ter kill him now or——"

The rest of the words were drowned out by the explosion of the notched .45 in the hand of the burly gang leader. Smoke winced slightly as the bullet burned across his ribs, a few inches below his heart.

The young waddy did not even slacken the speed of his horse, however. Guiding the animal by the pressure of his knees, he raced straight toward his foes with his six-guns held steady in his hands.

Butch Ambler's heavy face twisted in fury. His small black eyes gleamed.

"What yuh doin' hyar?" he snarled, jerking up the muzzle of his .45 as the rider came nearer.

Smoke Walsh's face was flushed now. When he spoke, the words came between clenched teeth.

"Yo're goin' to pay fer some o' the crimes yo've done, yuh skunk!"

Butch was squeezing the trigger of his .45. Smoke's guns jabbed forward.

Crash! Wham! Two shots rang out, so close together as to sound almost like one.

In reality, the Colt in Smoke Walsh's right hand flamed just a fraction of a second before Butch Ambler. And that brief interval of time was sufficient.

Butch Ambler lurched backward violently, jerking the muzzle of his

.45 upward, just as it exploded. The bullet whistled away harmlessly, several feet above the Flying W waddy's head.

With a blank expression sweeping over his heavy features, Butch rocked on his feet for a moment. Then, with a crimson stain spreading over the left side of his shirt, he flopped backward to the ground. His eyes stared unseeingly at the blue sky.

"The rest o' yuh rannies, hoist 'em!" Smoke snapped at the other bandits.

One of them, less paralyzed by surprise than his pards, chopped down his Colt at the young waddy.

Wham! Smoke squeezed the trigger of his left-hand six-gun.

The outlaw dropped as his leader had done, a few moments earlier, with his unfired .45 gripped in his dead hand.

That was too much for the remaining bandits. With shouts of fear, they broke for the timber. In a few seconds, before Smoke could halt them, they had disappeared.

With his bronzed face grim, the waddy sat motionless, listening to the crashing of the brush as the outlaws fled. His hands gripped his six-guns tightly. He wanted to chase the fugitives—round them all up. But then he shrugged.

"I don't reckon they'll trouble this part o' the country much more," he said. "The only feller I ought to bother with now is the stagecoach driver, the murderin' rat. I'll trail him and make him tell me what the plot was. And then, I reckon, Shade Durant won't be surprised, maybe, to see me comin' back to Julesburg."

Shade Durant had a visitor. Across the desk from the superintendent sat a massive man, well over

six feet in height, and broad in proportion. He was not fat, but hard as iron, with muscles bulging beneath his silk shirt and expensive clothing.

His face was wide, red, and good-natured. But the manner in which he wore a .45 tied down low on his right thigh indicated that he would be a dangerous man to cross, whether he chose to use that weapon or his big, knotted fists.

He was Big Tim Flanagan, the fighting Irishman who had been mainly responsible for making the Pony Express the success that it was. His inspection visit to Julesburg was as unexpected as it was unwelcome to Shade Durant.

"Yuh won't find nothin' wrong on this divsion, boss," Shade stated, in an oily tone.

"No?" The manager stared out of the window to the street, where night was falling. "Yo've shore been losin' enough hosses recently, Shade. An' I don't mind tellin' yuh, I figure yuh could have avoided some o' the holdups yuh been havin' lately."

"Can I help it, if Injuns run off the company's stock, now an' then?" the superintendent asked. "I can't be everywhar at once, yuh know."

"What about thet stagecoach thet was due in from Denver to-day with the heavy shipment o' gold?" demanded Big Tim.

"Why, I ain't seen it yet," replied Shade. "Been expectin' it ter pull up every minute."

"Yuh ought to 'a' started out lookin' fer it long 'fore this," growled the big boss, drumming his knuckles on the desk thoughtfully.

The superintendent dodged a reply by busying himself with lighting a kerosene lamp, suspended from the ceiling. He was almost sorry that he had framed the holdup for that day.

If Big Tim even so much as suspected that Shade was in on the plot, the superintendent would fire him immediately. And the seventy thousand dollars that the stagecoach carried was only a tiny sum in comparison with the loot Shade expected to get, if he held his position a while longer.

"What became o' thet kid, Smoke Walsh, I told yuh to put on as a rider?" asked the manager suddenly as the superintendent finished lighting the lamp and sat down.

"Huh!" Shade was surprised that the other's interest was so great in young Walsh. "Why—er—I found thet the kid wasn't worth a hang ter us—allus wastin' time on the trail, an' ridin' inter more trouble than any feller yuh ever seen. So I fired him, jest yesterday mornin'."

Big Tim frowned and shook his head, puzzled.

"I'm sorry to hear thet about Smoke," he said. "The only time I ever seen him, I figured he was a square-shooter if thar ever was one. Course, I reckon I might be wrong about my jedgment o' folks, once in a while."

The tall superintendent grinned craftily. His greenish eyes gleamed. The manager would be plenty surprised, when he learned that the Flying W waddy had been identified as a stage robber and murderer.

"But to come back to thet stagecoach thet's bringin' the gold," Big Tim growled. "Don't yuh 'low yuh better hurry out an' sec if anything has happened to it? If robbers git seventy thousand dollars in gold off us in one haul, it'll cripple our business."

"Waal——" Shade was about to say that he would go at once, since he did not want to arouse the manager's suspicions.

But the sudden clatter of hoofs and the rattle of wheels on the street outside the office jerked both men to their feet.

"I reckon that's the stagecoach now," cried Shade Durant, leaping toward the doorway.

"We kin thank our lucky stars if it's got the gold safe," grunted Big Tim, a step behind the superintendent.

They saw the anxiously awaited vehicle pull out of the shadows and come to a stop in the path of yellow lamplight in front of the doorway. But Shade Durant's greenish eyes popped at sight of the driver.

The hombre on the box was Smoke Walsh, his scarred young face set in an expression of grim determination. On top of the coach behind the waddy perched Joe Dolliver and a member of the Splitrock gang.

Both of these hombres were securely bound with leather saddle strings. The bandit was groaning from the pain of a bullet wound in his leg.

The superintendent was dumb with surprise, for a few seconds. Then he stepped blusteringly toward the stagecoach.

"What are yuh doin'?" he growled at Smoke Walsh. "I thought I fired yuh."

"Yuh did." The waddy grinned mirthlessly. "But I 'lowed yuh might hanker to see me again, on account o' the load I got inside the coach."

"The load yuh got?" Shade grunted.

"I don't mean the gold." Smoke's brown eyes narrowed. "It's safe in the boot on the back end o' the stagecoach. Yuh might open the door at the side, though, an' see what else I brought."

Mechanically, without the faint-

est idea what to expect, the superintendent sprang forward. Grasping the handle, he jerked the stagecoach door open violently.

The body of Butch Ambler rolled out and dropped at Shade's feet. The superintendent could see five other dead men—three Splitrock bandits and the two murdered stage guards—inside the coach.

Shade's hawkish face paled. His greenish eyes almost jumped from his head. His jaw sagged for an instant.

Without Smoke Walsh's words, the crooked superintendent realized what must have happened. He knew that he had to kill the waddy quickly, or the entire game would be up.

"Yuh purty nigh framed one o' yore crooked plots on me," gritted Smoke Walsh from the top of the coach. "But I was lucky, even if I couldn't save the two pore guards yore pals murdered. Dolliver, the little rat, told me everything about how yuh planned to steal the gold shipment, after I caught him in the brush out thar at Sioux Springs."

Shade Durant gulped in sudden fear.

"Yo'll be lucky if yuh don't hang on the same limb as him," added the Flying W waddy.

The superintendent's sharp face twisted with terror. His narrow green eyes gleamed.

"Yuh won't tell anything, yuh danged upstart!" he snarled, his hands suddenly dropping toward the notched .45s on his hips.

Shade tore his weapons from his tied-down holsters with lightning speed.

Crash! The two reports sounded as one, when the superintendent squeezed the triggers.

Smoke escaped death by suddenly leaping to his feet on top of the

stagecoach. Even as Shade's bullets sped by him, his hands darted toward the holsters at his slim waist.

His bronzed face was tense and set. The scar upon his forehead stood out white in the lamp light.

Down and up! His fingers tore six-guns from their leather holsters.

Wham! Crash! The twin weapons flamed as their muzzles cleared the leather.

A wild scream burst from the superintendent's throat. He almost fell as the two bullets plowed into his chest. The notched .45s dropped from his hands.

He started to stoop and snatch for them. But he straightened up, his hands empty. Staring glassily at Smoke for a second, he stood reeling. Then nearly falling at every step, he staggered backward into the black shadows at the corner of the stage station.

Smoke Walsh sprang from the stagecoach and started in pursuit. But a gruff voice from the doorway of the station halted the young waddy.

"Let the skunk go," said Big Tim Flanagan, stepping out of the building where he had watched and heard everything. "I don't allow we'll have to worry about Shade Durant around Julesburg any longer."

"I didn't want to kill him," explained Smoke. "He was one hombre I aimed to save fer a noose, the dirty, double-crossin' coyote!"

The manager came closer and laid a friendly hand upon the waddy's shoulder.

"Don't yuh worry about thet," advised the big man. "Fellers like thet allus end up the same way. Yo've done enough fer justice in one day."

Smoke Walsh's brown eyes clouded at the thought of the killing he had been forced to do. He jabbed his six-guns into his holsters.

"Thet's all right," he said. "But how about my ridin' fer the Pony Express? Yuh see, Shade fired me yesterday."

"Fired yuh, eh!" Big Tim Flanagan laughed heartily. "Now listen hyar, son. Shade Durant ain't workin' fer the company any more. But you are. Yuh got a lifetime job if yuh want it."

Even though Shade Durant is out o' the way, we got a hunch that Smoke's job with the Pony Express ain't goin' ter be no cinch. Carryin' Uncle Sam's mail across wild frontier country is plumb dangerous. A waddy's lib'le ter find plenty of excitement doin' it. Watch fer more Pony Express stories in comin' issues o' Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





Claim Jumpers Of Growling Mountain

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of "Outcasts of the Thunder Bird," etc.

JOCK" YANCY dropped to his knees in the prospect hole that he and his partner had dug in the side of Growling Mountain, which is one of the more lonely peaks of the mighty Thunder Bird Range.

In his gnarled right hand, the gray-mustached little prospector held an open pocketknife, with which he proceeded to split the ends of three fuses which stuck out of the dynamite-loaded holes drilled in the rock. After a moment, he rose from his knees and blinked at a tall, bony scarecrow of a man, who leaned on

a long-handled shovel, watching him.

"Better set the tools away, Mac," said Yancy. "She's all ready to go."

Angus McGonigal, called "Mac" for short, moved with the slow deliberation of a man to whom time meant nothing at all. One by one, he picked up the tools—a half dozen lengths of drill steel, two three-and-a-half-pound hammers, as many picks, and an iron "spoon" used for cleaning rock dust out of the holes drilled in the rock, and two shovels.

Carefully he placed the tools be-

hind a fallen log, which lay at some distance from the prospect hole. Then he slouched back to his partner.

"Ye can light the fuses, Jock, me boy," he said, "though I misdoubt 'tis a waste of good powder."

Yancy struck a match on the seat of his ragged blue overalls, stooped and held the flame to the end of a fuse. With a sharp hiss a pencil-sized streak of blue flame struck at the prospector's hand.

When the three fuses had been lighted, the partners unhurriedly took safe positions behind two great pines.

A minute passed, with tiny wreaths of blue smoke curling upward from the sputtering fuses, the minute became ninety seconds, then the first charge of dynamite exploded with a thunderous roar which caused a blue jay to shriek in terror.

Before the sound of the first explosion had died away, it was followed by two more in quick succession. Rocks and dirt shot skyward in a great yellow cloud; then rattled earthward between the branches of the trembling pines.

When the last fragment of rock had struck the ground, Jock Yancy stepped from behind his tree and walked leisurely toward the log behind which the tools had been hidden. He picked up a shovel and a pick and stood waiting for McGonigal to join him.

When a minute had passed without any sign of his partner, Yancy called him by name. Receiving no answer, he walked over to the tree behind which McGonigal had taken shelter.

McGonigal lay huddled on the ground, groaning with the pain of an arm which had been struck and broken by a fragment of falling rock.

Yancy stood staring a moment, then with a hoarse cry, he dropped to his knees beside the injured man.

"Don't tell me that yo're hurt bad, Mac," said the little old prospector huskily. "You wouldn't die and leave me, Mac—not after bein' partners for a matter of twenty years."

McGonigal raised a face twisted with pain, and tried to smile into his partner's fear-stricken eyes.

"My left arm is busted," he said shakily. "You'll have to take me down to the ranger station, Jock."

Yancy glared at the rock which had struck his partner down. Then suddenly he uttered a startled shout. Rising to his feet, he stooped over the fragment of quartz.

"We've struck it rich, Mac!" shouted Yancy excitedly. "The chunk of rock that busted yore arm is rich with gold!"

Picking up the fragment of quartz, he held it out for his partner to see.

"That rock will go a dollar a pound in gold—two thousand dollars to the ton," said McGonigal, forgetful for the moment of his pain. "That's a lot o' siller, Jock. Go see if there's more like it."

There was more like it—several tons of rock which was worth thousands of dollars a ton. At last, after twenty years of prospecting, the partners had suddenly struck it rich.

"You'd better fill a couple of sacks with the high-grade stuff," said McGonigal. "We'll take it into town with us and trade it for enough grub and powder to go ahead with the work."

"I hate to leave the claim, Mac," protested Yancy. "Maybe somebody will jump it while we're away."

"Not on your life, partner," said McGonigal. "There is nobody but us on Growling Mountain."

An hour later, the partners were on their way to Thunderbolt. McGonigal with his left arm bound tightly to his side led the way on an old brown horse. Behind him followed a pack animal loaded with two sacks of rich ore. Jock Yancy brought up the rear on an old black mule that flopped its ears to and fro at every step.

The prospectors had been gone a couple of hours when five heavily armed men rode up to the prospect hole. Flinging themselves from their horses, they examined the great pile of rock broken out by the blast. Eagerly they passed chunks of the rich ore from hand to hand.

"Lucky for us we heard the blast," said a powerfully built man with an egg-shaped head. "This is the richest strike that has been made since Growling Mountain was an ant hill."

"Let's see if we can find the cabin of the fellers who made the strike," suggested a weasel-faced little man with no chin. "We'll move in and jump the claim."

Leaving their horses standing with trailing reins, the five rascals searched until they found a floppy old tent, containing some blankets and a few provisions.

"Them fellers must have been pretty near broke when they struck it," said "Egg-head." "I'll bet a dollar the claim ain't been recorded."

"That don't need to make no difference," said another man. "There's enough of us to hold the claim. If any one shows up, we'll fill him full of lead before he has time to ask too many questions. Ain't I right, Kruger?"

"Scar-face" Kruger, leader of the gang of outlaws who for years had had a hangout on Growling Moun-

tain, thumbed his red-stubbed chin thoughtfully.

"I wonder what became of the fellers who made the strike," he growled. "It seems queer that they'd go off and leave it."

"Probably got all excited and went to Thunderbolt to tell everybody the news," said Egg-head. "There'll be a stampede in here, the first thing we know."

"Let's see if we can find any location stakes," suggested another desperado. "If there ain't any, the claim is just as much ours as anybody else's."

They found no location stakes, for McGonigal and Yancy hadn't thought it necessary to stake the claim until they found out whether it was worth while to do so.

"Tell you what we'll do," said Scar-face Kruger. "Two of yuh spend the rest of the day staking the claim accordin' to law. You, Egg-head, had better hit the trail for Thunderbolt City and record the claim. The other two of us will pick up all the rich ore broken out by the blast and take it over to our hangout on the other side of the mountain."

"Suppose I run across the fellers who struck it rich," objected Egg-head. "They're likely to kick up a stink, if they learn that I've recorded their claim."

"Tain't their claim any more than it's ours," said Scar-face Kruger. "The claim will belong to the feller who records it first. Anyway, yuh can stop overnight at the Thunder River ranger station and inquire if any prospectors have lately passed that way."

"I ain't got any likin' for rangers," said Egg-head doubtfully. "Besides, the ranger might ask a lot of questions I'd find it hard to answer."

"Yuh won't need to answer 'em."

said Scar-face. "Keep yore mouth shut and yore ears open. Let the ranger do the talkin'."

II.

It was after dark when Egg-head reached the Thunder River ranger station, but a light shining through the little four-paned window of the cabin showed that somebody was at home.

Dismounting from his horse, the outlaw stood looking at the lighted window, wondering what kind of reception he might expect. Though he was unknown to Jim Hazel, the forest ranger, Egg-head felt very much afraid, for he had committed more than one crime before he had come to Growling Mountain.

Twice he took a step forward, and twice he stopped. Then, with his right hand resting on the butt of his holstered six-gun, he summoned courage enough to stride forward and knock at the cabin door.

Shuffling footsteps sounded inside the cabin, then the door opened. Framed against a background of yellow light stood a little old man with a gray mustache and near-sighted, peering eyes.

Taken aback at the sight of an old man where he had expected a stalwart khaki-clad ranger, Egg-head fell back a step.

"I—I'm lookin' for the ranger," he stammered. "Thought maybe he'd let me stay overnight."

"The ranger ain't hyar, pardner," said the old man in the doorway. "But I reckon it'll be all right for you to stay. My name is Jock Yancy."

Egg-head stepped into the cabin, closed the door behind him and sank into a chair. Yancy set a coffee-pot on the stove and thrust a stick of wood into the fire box.

"On your way to town, I reckon," said the old prospector. "Too bad you didn't get hyar sooner. Jim Hazel, the ranger, left a few hours ago with my partner."

Remembering the advice given him by Scar-face Kruger, the desperado merely nodded.

"Yes, sir," went on Jock Yancy, "my partner and me was prospectin' on Growling Mountain, and a rock fell on Mac's left arm and broke the bone. It'll be months afore he can swing a pick."

Egg-head sat up straighter in his chair at the mention of Growling Mountain. Undoubtedly, he thought, Yancy was one of the men who had struck it rich. But all the outlaw said was:

"A busted arm is bad medicine."

"Ain't it?" agreed Yancy. "I'll have to hold down the claim alone until Mac gets back. Fact is, I'm returnin' to Growling Mountain in the mornin'."

Egg-head ate the supper prepared for him by the old man, then he filled and lighted a corn-cob pipe and seated himself near the stove.

"Strike anything?" he asked, in what he thought to be a casual tone of voice.

Jock Yancy was about to admit that he had struck it rich, but he thought better of it as he remembered that the claim was not recorded.

"Nothing to speak of," he said. "We're just prospectin'."

Egg-head tried in vain to get the old man to admit that he had struck it rich. All the desperado's questions received only evasive replies. At last Jock Yancy suggested that it was time for bed.

Lying in his bunk, listening to the old prospector's snoring, Egg-head wondered what Yancy would do when he found that the outlaw gang

had jumped his claim. Show fight, probably, thought the desperado, and that would mean the end of him.

For Egg-head knew Scar-face Kruger well enough to be sure that he would not hesitate to murder the old prospector. Having come to that conclusion, the outlaw fell asleep.

He was awakened shortly after daylight by Jock Yancy, who had breakfast ready. An hour later, they both left the cabin.

"If you should ever find yourself on Growling Mountain," said Yancy in parting, "it might be a good idea to prospect around a little. You might find something worth while."

Egg-head arrived in Thunderbolt City a few minutes before the county recorder's office closed for the day. After tying his horse to the wooden rail in front of the courthouse, he hitched up his sagging belt and swaggered into the office.

"I want to record a minin' claim," said Egg-head. "It's on Growlin' Mountain."

Joe Shanahan—the white-shirted, narrow-shouldered, gray-haired recorder—glanced up from his books.

"Got a copy of your location notice with you?" he asked.

Egg-head admitted that he had overlooked the matter, but said that he could describe the claim by landmarks.

"O. K.," said the recorder. "Fill out one of those blank forms you'll find on the desk behind you."

When Egg-head presented the filled-out form, the recorder read it with a swift glance. Then he examined his book of records.

"You're out of luck," he said at last. "The claim was recorded a year ago by the three Tigor boys, of Gunsight Lake."

"It can't have been," said Egg-

head. "The assessment work was only finished yesterday."

Joe Shanahan's eyes grew cold, and he closed his book.

"Sure you are not trying to jump somebody else's claim, stranger?" he asked. "You are the second man who has tried to record that claim during the past twenty-four hours."

"Huh?" said Egg-head. "What are yuh gettin' at?"

"Man by the name of McGonigal tried yesterday to record the same claim in the names of himself and a fellow called Yancy," said the recorder. "It looks to me as if it needs a forest ranger to straighten things out: so I told Jim Hazel about it. He has promised to look into the matter."

"But I don't see——" began Egg-head.

The recorder came out from around the counter and started toward the door of the office.

"It's closing time," he said. "Sorry I can't do any more for you. You'd better go talk to the Tigor brothers and the ranger. You'll find them over at Cheerful Johnny's hotel."

In the office of "Cheerful Johnny's" hotel, Egg-head found a group of men gathered around a heap of golden quartz which lay on the desk. Among them was a tall, blue-eyed young fellow wearing the uniform of a forest ranger. Standing beside him was Angus McGonigal. His left arm was in splints and rested in a sling made from a black silk handkerchief.

Elbowing his way through the crowd, Egg-head picked up a piece of quartz and examined it. Then he took from his pocket another piece of quartz, which he had brought with him, and compared the two. Undoubtedly they had both been broken off the same vein.

Turning to the ranger, Egg-head laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Looks like somebody has been stealing ore from my claim on Growling Mountain," said the outlaw. "Know anything about it?"

Talk ceased among the crowd, and like one man, they eyed the speaker.

Then a tall, hook-nosed mountaineer stepped forward and shook a fist beneath Egg-head's nose.

"I'm Bill Tigor," he drawled, "and that heap of high-grade on the desk, as well as that chunk of quartz in yore hand, came off a claim on Growlin' Mountain that belongs to me and my brothers, Curt and young Gabe. We located the claim, and it's on record in the recorder's office.

"We never was able to find the vein, but we done the assessment work accordin' to law," he went on. "If yuh didn't find our stakes and the location notice we left on the claim, that's too bad, stranger."

Angus McGonigal nodded agreement.

"I guess me and my partner, Jock Yancy, are out of luck, too," he said soberly. "We started diggin' in the first likely place we found, without troublin' to find out if we was on anybody else's claim."

Maddened at the thought that he and his companions would be thrown off the rich claim they had jumped, Egg-head lost his head completely.

"Yuh just try to take our claim away from us, yuh hook-nosed old buzzard!" he shouted at Bill Tigor. "We'll fill yuh so danged full of lead that——"

Biff! Bill Tigor's fist smashed Egg-head's nose to a pulp, and with a hoarse cry, the outlaw staggered backward, with his right hand reaching for his gun.

Bang! Missing Bill Tigor's head by a scant inch, the desperado's bullet struck another man squarely between the eyes.

Before the miner's body reached the floor, before Egg-head could fire another shot, Jim Hazel had knocked the six-gun out of his hand, twisted the outlaw's arms behind his back and snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

"Lynch him! Get a rope!"

"Fill the dirty skunk full of lead!"

"He killed pore Mike Tierncy!"

These and other shouts rose from the enraged miners as they tried to tear the handcuffed desperado out of Jim Hazel's grip.

They might have succeeded, but the three Tigor boys stepped in front of the ranger and his prisoner, with six-guns leveled at the crowd.

"Go easy, boys," drawled Bill Tigor. "Necktie parties is out of date up hyar in the Thunder Bird Range."

III.

Muttering threats, the miners fell back before the leveled guns of the three mountaineers. And then the door opened, and the sheriff, who had heard the shooting, hurried into the office, with a drawn six-gun in his hand.

"What's all the shootin' about?" he demanded. Then his face grew stern as he saw the dead man on the floor, the scowling prisoner, and the Tigor boys facing the angry crowd.

Jim Hazel explained what had happened, and the sheriff grasped Egg-head by a shoulder.

"Come along, you," said the officer. "I arrest you on a charge of murder!"

Curious to see the outlaw thrown into jail, the crowd followed, leaving

Jim Hazel, the three Tigor boys, Angus McGonigal, and Cheerful Johnny gathered around the body of the man who had been killed.

A few minutes later, the coroner, assisted by two men, removed the man's body. Then Cheerful Johnny mopped up the crimson stains on the floor.

"Waal, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor, "thar's one claim jumper less in the Thunder Bird Range, as the bobcat remarked when it killed the hawk."

"How about me and my partner? What are you going to do about us?" asked McGonigal. "If we hadn't struck it rich, you might never have found the vein."

"I wouldn't worry none about that, pardner," said Bill Tigor. "Tain't yore fault that yuh struck it rich on our ground. We'll give yuh both an interest in the claim."

"Bet yuli, we will," said Curt Tigor.

"That goes for me," said young Gabe.

"Such being the case," said Jim Hazel to the Tigor boys, "you'd better load up your pack horses with supplies and join McGonigal's partner on Growling Mountain."

The ranger's suggestion proving agreeable to all concerned, that afternoon, the three Tigor boys left for Growling Mountain. Jim Hazel, who had several matters to attend to, could not leave town until the following day.

Arriving at the Thunder River ranger station the next evening, Jim Hazel unsaddled his horse and turned it loose to graze. Then he entered his cabin and began to cook his supper.

The ranger had been home only a short time, when he heard a horse coming toward the cabin.

Jim Hazel stepped outside just in

time to see old Jock Yancy clamber out of his saddle.

"Back already!" exclaimed the ranger. "Didn't you meet the Tigor boys? Did they tell you what happened in Thunderbolt City?"

"They did," replied Yancy. "And I told 'em that a gang of tough hombres have jumped the claim."

"What's that?" asked Jim Hazel, who was hearing for the first time of the outlaw gang.

"I seen the gang, but they didn't see me," chattered old Jock Yancy. "An' not bein' a fightin' man, I high-tailed it away from thar, figurin' that I was lucky to get away with a whole hide."

"What did the Tigor boys say, when you told them about the claim jumpers?" asked Jim Hazel.

"The Tigor boys was hoppin' mad," replied the old man. "They 'lowed they'd go clean up the gang. Tried to get me to go along. But, shucks, ranger, I'm no fighter."

"There'll sure be plenty of fighting if the claim jumpers try to make trouble with the Tigor boys," said Jim Hazel. "I'll have to start for Growling Mountain in the morning."

Jim Hazel would have started that night, but he had ridden forty miles that day, and he knew that his horse needed food and rest.

Leaving Thunder River at dawn, the ranger reached Growling Mountain shortly after noon of the next day.

Before leaving Thunderbolt City, the Tigor boys had told Jim Hazel exactly how to find the claim, which was on a level bench of land. At the back of the level land, a steep slope ran upward to the base of a thousand-foot cliff that was gashed by fissures and narrow defiles, among which grew thickets of scrubby fir and cedar.

Reaching the claim, Jim Hazel dismounted and stood looking around him and listening. But he heard no sound save the singing of a bird. He saw no sign of either the Tigor boys or the claim jumpers.

Puzzled at not seeing anybody, the ranger walked over to a pile of broken rock which he saw about a hundred yards from where he stood. In a couple of minutes, he reached the prospect hole blasted out by McGonigal and Yancy.

A hasty examination showed Jim Hazel that the dynamite had only blown out a pocket of rich ore, which evidently had been gathered together and removed by the claim jumpers. For nowhere could Jim Hazel find a piece of rock which contained gold. It seemed evident that having stolen the high-grade, the outlaws had decided to abandon the claim.

Leaving the prospect hole, Jim Hazel searched until he found the spot on which had stood the tent belonging to Yancy and McGonigal. All that remained of it was a patch of ashes, among which were a few tin cans.

Puzzled as to what had become of the Tigor boys, Jim Hazel was about to return to his horse when a sudden clatter of rolling rocks caused him to glance toward the cliff at the back of the claim.

Hundreds of feet above where the ranger stood, four horsemen were slowly riding along what seemed to be a wide ledge of rock which wound its way around the face of the cliff. With the riders were a dozen loaded pack animals. It was evident that the outlaws were leaving the mountains with the high-grade gold ore, which they had stolen from the claim.

Glancing downward, an outlaw caught sight of the ranger. Before

Jim Hazel could draw his six-gun, a shot crashed out from the face of the cliff hundreds of feet above his head. It was followed by another and another. Then a bullet plowed a furrow through the ranger's scalp. His brain seemed to explode in a burst of crimson flame, and he pitched face forward to the ground.

The ranger's fall was greeted by a burst of mocking laughter from the outlaws high up on the face of the cliff. Then it died to silence, as they slowly rode around a great curve in the trail.

Drops of water falling on Jim Hazel's face restored him to consciousness. Opening his eyes, he saw that it was beginning to rain. The sky had clouded over, and thunder was muttering in the distance. It seemed as if Growling Mountain was trying to act up to its name.

Scrambling to his feet, Jim Hazel stood swaying dizzily, one hand held to his aching head. While he stood there, the clouds above him were split by a flash of lightning, and a streak of blue flame zigzagged down the face of the cliff. It was followed by a tremendous clap of thunder which echoed and reëchoed from peak to peak. Then the clouds opened, and a perfect deluge of ice-cold rain helped to relieve Jim Hazel's dizziness.

As Jim Hazel's glance roved across the flat, he saw his horse coming toward him. Frightened by the thunder and lightning, the intelligent animal was seeking the comfort of human companionship.

Picking up the bridle reins, Jim Hazel started toward a great defile, hoping there to find some kind of shelter from the storm. To his surprise, there was a well-worn trail leading up the gorge.

"Guess there must be a cabin somewhere around, Barney," said the ranger to the blue roan. "Let's see if we can find it."

Climbing into the saddle, Jim Hazel rode slowly up the trail, while around horse and rider lightning played unceasingly, and above them mighty thunder rumbled and growled.

Presently the trail left the bottom of the gorge and began to wind its way upward. An hour after leaving the spot where he had been shot, Jim Hazel found himself riding along the wide ledge over which the outlaw gang had passed. Following it, the ranger at last reached the summit of Growling Mountain.

Already the rain had grown less. The lightning had ceased to flash, and with low growls, the thunderclouds were drifting westward.

Sitting his horse, Jim Hazel gazed around and below him, but he could not see very far, for the canyons that ran downward from the summit were covered with blankets of mist.

Puzzled as to which way to turn, Jim Hazel was listening intently when suddenly he heard voices drifting upward out of the fog.

Dismounting from his horse, the ranger strode across the summit until he found himself stopped by what seemed like a sheer drop-off into space that was filled with a sea of mist, out of which the tops of rocky crags rose like tiny tree-covered islands.

Somewhere beneath that sea of mist, men were talking, but in tones too low for Jim Hazel to catch the words.

Returning to his horse, the ranger drew his rifle out of its saddle scabbard.

"Guess I'll have to picket you, Barney," he said to the animal.

"You might lose your footing and break your neck, if I tried to take you with me."

Leaving the blue roan picketed by a thirty-five-foot rope, Jim Hazel dropped over the rim of the mountain onto a narrow ledge, which scarcely afforded foothold.

Foot by foot, the ranger worked his way down the cliff until he found himself beneath the fog. Clinging to the side of the cliff, like a fly to a wall, he looked downward.

Far beneath him, he saw a large log building, in front of which stood four saddle horses and a dozen pack animals. Four men were busily unloading the pack horses and carrying what seemed to be sacks of rock into the building.

Jim Hazel had found the hang-out of the outlaws of Growling Mountain.

IV.

Waiting until the last outlaw had disappeared within the building, Jim Hazel dropped from ledge to ledge until he reached the bottom of the canyon. There he took a crouching position behind a boulder.

A few minutes passed, then a man came out of the building and began to unsaddle the horses. When he had unsaddled all but one animal, he mounted it and began to drive the loose stock toward a fenced pasture which Jim Hazel could see about a quarter of a mile above the outlaw hangout.

Rifle in hand, Jim Hazel dodged from boulder to boulder as he followed the desperado who was riding behind the loose horses. Presently, reaching a set of wooden bars in the pasture fence, the man dismounted to take them down. He had removed the two top bars and was stooping over to remove the bottom one, when Jim Hazel

stepped out from behind a jumble of rocks twenty yards away.

"Throw up your hands!" ordered the ranger. "You are under arrest!"

Instead of obeying, the outlaw whirled in his tracks. His right hand darted to his hip, came up with the speed of a striking snake, and to the crashing report of the .45, a slug drilled Jim Hazel's hat.

Mingling with the echoes of the shot came the sharp report of the ranger's rifle, and, shot through the heart, the desperado pitched backward across the lowest bar in the fence.

Frightened by the sudden burst of gunfire, some of the horses leaped over the dead man and galloped down the pasture. The saddled horse tried to follow, but stepped upon its rein and stumbled.

As the animal regained its balance, Jim Hazel leaped into the saddle and reined the beast around so that it was facing the outlaw hangout.

Alarmed by the two shots they had heard, the three remaining outlaws charged out of the building. Howling with fury, they sent a volley of lead toward the mounted ranger thundering down upon them.

Crouched over his horse's neck, Jim Hazel drew his six-gun and answered shot for shot as, yelling like fiends, the three desperadoes tried to bring him down.

A bullet tore through Jim Hazel's mackinaw. Another one splintered one of the wooden stirrups. A third knocked the ranger's Stetson from his head. Then an outlaw dropped to one knee, with a slug through his left shoulder.

"Scatter for the rocks, boys!" he howled, as he took deliberate aim at Jim Hazel. "It's yore only chance."

Running toward the rocks, two men fired over their shoulders at Jim

Hazel, but both bullets missed the ranger as he reined his horse sharply around. Then a slug from the six-gun of the wounded desperado struck Jim Hazel's horse squarely between the eyes.

Out of the saddle in an instant, Jim Hazel saw the horse fall on the desperado who had killed it. Crushed beneath the weight of the dead animal, the outlaw never knew what struck him.

Seeing the ranger afoot, Scar-face Kruger and the surviving outlaw charged toward him, with six-guns blazing, just as Jim Hazel threw himself down behind the body of the dead horse. Lying at full length behind the carcass, Jim Hazel leveled his six-gun at the oncoming desperadoes.

"Throw up your hands!" shouted the ranger. "I'm telling you for the last time."

Two crashing reports answered him, and two bullets sang their hymn of hate as they passed within an inch of Jim Hazel's head. Then the ranger's weapon spoke—once—twice!

Shot through the head, one outlaw spun around in his tracks and dropped on his face, while Scar-face Kruger screamed with the pain of a bullet-shattered knee and rolled over and over on the ground.

Striding up to the wounded outlaw, Jim Hazel knocked a six-gun out of the desperado's hand as, supporting himself on one elbow, he was about to squeeze the trigger. Then the ranger jerked a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and snapped them shut on the outlaw's wrists.

Leaving the wounded outlaw chief lying on the ground swearing at him, Jim Hazel entered the hangout. There he found the three Tigor boys lying bound hand and foot. After releasing them, Jim Hazel asked

them to explain how they had let themselves be captured.

"We was ambushed, before we reached the claim," said Bill Tigor. "We didn't have a chance to resist."

"Scar-face Kruger was goin' to hold us as hostages in case a sheriff's posse cornered him and his gang," explained Curt Tigor.

"What's a hostage, Jimmy?" asked young Gabe. "I don't know as ever I heard the word before."

"A hostage is a sort of security," explained Jim Hazel, "held to insure the return of a valuable object. In this case, the outlaws evidently thought they would hold you three boys as security for their own lives and freedom."

Bill Tigor looked at the two dead outlaws, the dead horse, and Scar-face Kruger groaning with the pain of his wound. Then the tall mountaineer turned to Jim Hazel, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Do yuh mean, Jimmy," he asked. "that these hombres would have shot us to death, afore they'd have let themselves be captured by a sheriff?"

"I guess that's what they thought they'd do," said Jim Hazel. "But they'd probably have weakened, if it had come to a showdown."

"Jest the same, Jimmy," drawled Bill Tigor, as he tore a chew of tobacco off his plug and spat at a wandering beetle, "I'm shore glad yuh ain't a sheriff, as the rustler remarked when he met the hoss thief."

It shore was tough luck fer those two old prospectors thet they had ter file on the Tigor boys claim. But the way the Tigor boys acted about it jest goes ter show the kind o' gents they are. No wonder Jim Hazel is a good friend o' theirs! Watch fer another Jim Hazel story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly right soon.



WARRIORS' SECRET TUNNEL FOUND

OVER five hundred years ago, before the natives of Mexico and America had to fight white armies, they fought among themselves, and battles between enemy tribes were frequent and furious. The control of certain areas was the cause of continual warfare.

The Zapotec warriors, when hard pressed, often disappeared as if by magic, and would reappear in a more favorable position for attack on their foe, who believed that the Zapotecs possessed the miraculous power of making themselves invisible at will.

An ancient tunnel under Monte Alban, in old Mexico, which was discovered recently, seems to solve the mystery. Many battles were fought around Monte Alban, and

two smaller tunnels near the same place were discovered some time ago, but the one just explored is the most important and the most interesting of them all.

It was found on examination to have been used at a later period as a tomb for warriors. Skeletons were unearthed and small quantities of gold, red and white onyx beads were found near by.

The openings are very small and extremely difficult to find. The interiors of all three tunnels are small near the entrances, but are much larger under the mountainside, so that a good-sized army could be sheltered there quite comfortably.

It is believed that Monte Alban is honeycombed with these engineering works of a vanished race of Indians.



Fast Guns At Alkali

A "Circle J" Novelette

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Hideout At Mystery Mesa," etc.

CHAPTER I.

HOLDUP.

MOTH-EATEN bearskin vest flapping wildly and grizzled mustache streaming back flat against leathery cheeks, "Buck" Foster rode along the top of a rocky ridge at a fast gallop.

From beneath bushy brows, Buck's popping brown eyes glared fiercely, and the tip of his thrice-broken and poorly mended nose twitched as he lifted one gnarled hand to feel a blue welt that slanted across his stubborn chin. But as Buck's fingers probed the long bruise, he grinned suddenly, showing a double row of snaggy teeth.

Buck was remembering the perfectly grand scrap he had had in the

little Arizona cow town of Alkali less than an hour ago. Buck had been coming out of a general store, lugging the gunny sack full of bundles that now rode behind his saddle, when a burly jasper had crashed head-on into him, then started calling him ornery names. But bumping into Buck Foster and calling him names was just about as healthy as whipping a fly-worried range bull across the nose with a red saddle blanket.

The burly hombre who had tried it soon found himself sprawled in the dust of the street, one ugly little red-rimmed eye swollen shut, and most of the liquor-laden breath thumped from his body by a pair of horny fists.

"But the coyote shore handed me

chin one wallop, anyhow," Buck growled as he galloped on into the desert. "Jist the same, I licked him. I wish Billy, Joe, an' the heathen could 'a' seen me lick the cuss. Mebbe——"

Buck spotted a well-defined trail for which he had been watching, swung his mount into it, and headed off at right angles into a steep-walled draw. As the trail twisted in and out among tall clumps of mesquite and sturdy cat's-claw, the veteran range rider slowed his mount to a jog trot and began fishing for a stubby black pipe and tobacco.

He was just cupping a match between calloused palms, ready to light the black bowl of tobacco, when his mount snorted nervously, shied, then came to a stiff-legged halt, ears pricking sharply forward. Buck burned his fingers on the match, yowling angrily.

"What's catin' yuh, hoss?" he growled, stuffing his unlighted pipe back into a pocket of his woolly vest. "Ef yuh stops every time yuh ketches scent o' a coyote, we'll never git back ter camp. Come alive, or by heifers, I'll——"

"Hands up, mister! Lift them hands plumb high an' set still!"

Through the thorny limbs of a mesquite clump ten paces ahead came a long and very shiny tube that even a tenderfoot would have recognized as the barrel of a large-caliber rifle. Buck Foster's lean jaws sagged wide open, and his eyes grew as round as dollars.

Then, as he realized that some one was trying to hold him up, the surprise left his leathery face, to be replaced quickly by a slow flush of anger. Headstrong, and possessing a temper that was hooked to a hair trigger, Buck Foster never stopped to figure the odds against him in any sort of scrap.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he bawled. "Tryin' ter hold me up, huh? I'll l'arn yuh——"

Buck's heels cupped in, and his lanky body dropped flat over the saddle horn. His mount, gouged sharply by spur rowels, shot sideways in a twisting leap, even as Buck's gnarled right hand flashed down to his thigh and came up with a big single-action .45 Colt neatly palmed.

Now that old six-gun chopped down, and suddenly the desert's silence was shattered by the heavy roar of exploding shells. Buck kept his horse leaping and prancing, yet the slugs from his gun were crashing accurately into the clump of mesquite where the hidden rifleman crouched.

At Buck's fourth shot the rifle barrel nosed sharply upward, then slid from view, never having belched the flaming death it threatened. From the bushes came a thin yell, then low moans of pain.

"Come out o' thar, yuh skunk!" Buck challenged, smoking gun poised for instant action. "Yuh can't pull the wool over me eyes, so stop yore groanin' an' stand up."

But there was no reply, and even the groans had ceased before Buck finished speaking. Many an hombre would have rammed the hooks to his bronc and gone on away from there, content to let well enough alone.

But not Buck Foster. He was entirely too curious to ride away without having a look at the would-be highwayman, though he realized that at any moment a bullet might come crashing at him from behind the leafy branches.

Dismounting, careful to keep his gun trained on the mesquite at all times, the veteran puncher circled warily to the left, calling repeatedly

for the hombre behind the bushes to come out or get smoked out. But as no more sounds reached his ears, Buck decided that he must have drilled the rifleman dead center.

"If he's jist wounded, he'll show fight, like as not," Buck growled to himself, "an' I don't want to plug a wounded jasper 'less I have to. But if the skunk don't come out o' thar——"

Buck ran into a thick chaparral of cat's-claw and had to retrace his steps. Now he tried circling the other way, only to come up hard against a steep cutbank that he could not scale. And by now his patience had given out completely.

"Come out o' thar, feller!" he bawled. "Come out, or, by heifers, I'm comin' after yuh! Hear me?"

Buck's twisted nose twitched at the tip, and from beneath the slanting brim of his battered black Stetson his eyes blazed like twin coals. Throwing all caution to the winds, he stalked straight toward the mesquite clump, smoke-blackened gun jutting out from a rock-steady hand, ready to blaze at the first sign of trouble.

But nothing happened as Buck lunged through the brush and came out into a tiny clear space. He glanced swiftly about and grunted suddenly as he saw a crumpled form lying half hidden under thorny mesquite branches.

"Got 'im center, I'll bet a hoss!" the veteran growled, shoving his gun into leather. "But it serves the skunk right fer tryin' ter hold me up. Wonder who——"

Buck strode over, grasped the rusty, worn-out boot that was showing, and tugged heavily. Then a rasping, choked shout squeezed from his throat, and he staggered, leathery face suddenly pale beneath the sun tan. Buck reeled like a drunken

man, then dropped to his knees and reached out a pair of hands that shook.

There on the ground lay the thin, ragged form he had dragged from the bushes—that of a boy of twelve or fourteen. Buck stared in horror at the pinched white face—and at the great crimson stain high in the lad's right temple.

CHAPTER II.

BUCK ON THE PROD.

ONTO a flat-topped rock that was used as a table, a small Chinaman piled tin plates and tin cups, then began placing them hastily. The little chink's loose-fitting black coat and pants flapped about his skinny body as he moved swiftly about, giving him an almost spooky appearance. But there was certainly nothing spooky in the smiles that crinkled his yellow face, or in the twinkle of his almond-shaped eyes.

"Mistlee Buck no getee dinna if he don' hully come back," the little chink called. "Him gone too long now. Mistlee Billy an' Mistlee Joe come eat. So be."

The little Chinaman hurried over to a fire, where he had several smoke-blackened pots and pans nested in glowing coals. But neither of the two cowboys sprawled in the shade of a little cliff made an attempt to rise. One of them—a lanky, big-eared, beak-nosed, freckle-faced waddy with a thatch of flaming-red hair—grinned broadly and looked toward the little Chinese cook.

"We ought to eat up every scrap o' grub in sight," the redhead chuckled, "an' leave o' Buck wait ontill supper time. But if we did——"

"If we did," the second cowboy cut in, "this camp would not be big enough for you, Buck, an' Sing Lo.

Nope, Joe, we're waitin' for Buck. An' yuh two better not have any fool prank cooked up to play on him when he gets back."

The red-headed waddy, whose name was Joe Scott, grinned more broadly than ever, winking slyly at the chink cook, Sing Lo. But neither of them had an argument to offer, for the man who had spoken was Billy West, their boss.

Billy was a medium-sized, husky-shouldered young waddy whose firm mouth, rugged features, and keen gray eye branded him as a man used to giving rather than taking orders. Dressed in flaring tan batwing chaps of fine leather, gray silk shirt, and expensive clear beaver Stetson, he looked like just what he was—a prosperous young ranchman.

But Billy's Circle J spread was a long way north of this arid desert, for it lay in the foothills of the Bitterroots, up in western Montana. However, Billy's presence in Arizona was easily enough explained. For each year, after the fall round-up in Montana, he usually came down into the Southwest to buy up feeder cattle that he would ship home to Montana for fattening in the spring and summer months. And Billy never made those trips without his three pards—Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and Sing Lo, the outfit's cook and handy man.

Those three gave Billy no end of trouble, for they wrangled and flung insults at one another almost constantly. Sing Lo and the red-headed Joe usually teamed up against Buck, prodding the veteran until he went wild with anger.

But at heart Billy knew that the quarrelsome three were the firmest of friends and would go to any length to aid one another in time of danger.

But there was one thing that gave

Billy real cause for worry, and that was Buck Foster's ability to get into trouble that usually involved the rest of the Circle J saddle pards. Billy was thinking of that very thing now, and wondering if he had acted wisely in sending Buck to Alkali after supplies that morning.

Buck should have been back at least an hour before, for Alkali was no more than five miles distant. Still, the veteran could have run into some talkative puncher and spent more time in town than he had meant to. On the other hand he—

"Yonder comes the ol' gopher!" Joe Scott sang out, pointing a freckled hand. "An' he's shore makin' his bronc step lively. Looks like he might—"

Billy and Joe both got to their feet and walked down the draw in which they were camped to where a well-defined trail crossed it. They stood tensely watching a bend in the draw—a bend around which a horseman would soon appear. Neither of them spoke, for they had caught but a brief glimpse of Buck as he dipped over a low ridge and entered the draw up which he was now bound to be riding. Yet in that brief glimpse, both Billy and Joe had seen the limp form cradled in Buck's arms.

"Mistlee Buck, him bling somebody?" Sing Lo queried from behind Billy and Joe. "China boy not suah, but mebbe so—"

Around that bend in the draw lunged a sweat-lathered horse, nostrils red and flaring, eyes rolling. In the saddle sat Buck Foster, a limp form in the crook of his strong right arm, the bridle reins gripped in his left hand.

Buck yelled something as his horse shot past, and Billy and Joe caught the terrified look in his bulg-

ing eyes. But Buck had reined to a halt by the camp fire now, and his three pards came racing up just as he dismounted and gently lowered the boy to the ground.

"Good grief, Buck!" Billy cried as he bent over the unmoving form. "Where'd yuh find this youngster? An' this looks like a bullet hole."

"I—I shot 'im, Billy," Buck managed to gulp, and told how the lad had tried to hold him up on the trail from Alkali.

Billy and Joe exchanged swift glances, then quickly spread blankets on the ground and lifted the boy onto them. Sing Lo, dragging several small packages from a capacious pocket inside his loose-fitting black coat, ran swiftly to the fire, lifted off a pan of hot water that he had meant to use for making coffee, and poured part of it into a clean tin pan.

Now he dumped certain chemicals into the hot water, produced clean rags from a war bag, and hurried back to the boy, carrying the pan of chemically treated water. Billy and Joe immediately stepped back, for the little Chinaman was an expert at dressing wounds.

"Ho!" Sing Lo cried after what seemed an hour to the tensely waiting punchers. "Lis boy, him no hurt by Mistlec Buck's bullet. Him no eat in long time."

A thin voice lifted in protest, then two pitifully thin hands came up to shove feebly at Sing Lo. Now the boy sat up, felt the tight bandage that had been drawn about his head to protect the shallow scalp wound, and shrank hastily back with a cry of fright as he caught sight of the four men about him.

"Yuh—yuh hambres are some o' Blue Cronan's skunky crew!" the youngster choked. "B-but yuh better leave me be. Dad'll come back

from the desert some day, an' the hull lot o' yuh'll be sorry that yuh've treated me an' maw like yuh have.

"Yuh'll all wish yuh hadn't stole our cows an' hosses, burnt our home, an'—an' starved us like yuh have," he went on. "Maw's awful sick now, yuh coyotes! That's why I tried to hold the old feller, thar, up. If I could get some dinero an' buy maw some grub——"

"Just a moment, pard," Billy West spoke, and found it mighty hard to keep his voice at a natural pitch. "I reckon yuh've sort o' misread our brands. Me an' these hambres with me don't know any one named Blue Cronan, an' we shore haven't been out stealin' from people an' burnin' their houses. Just who is this Cronan jasper?"

"Blue Cronan owns the Gila Saloon an' gamblin' hall in Alkali," the boy answered swiftly. "But yuh already know that, o' course. Yo're jist stringin' me—gettin' ready to play some trick. Or maybe yuh aim ter——"

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck Foster bellowed. "Thet Blue Cronan skunk owns the Gila Saloon in Alkali, huh? By heifers! He's the cause o' me nearly pluggin' this pore kid, an' I'm shore goin' ter take the snake apart!"

And before either Billy or Joe could grab the ranty veteran, he had landed astride his sweaty horse and gone clattering back down the trail toward Alkali, gnarled right hand clawing out a smoke-blackened .45 that needed reloading.

CHAPTER III.

JIMMY TALKS.

BILLY and Joe both made a dash for their own horses, tethered over by a little pool of water that was shaded by sizable mesquites.

But before they had taken more than a dozen paces, the young boss of Circle J called a halt and turned back toward where the pale-faced boy sat watching them in wide-eyed amazement.

"Buck'll have to paddle his own canoe for a while, at least," Billy gritted. "Come on, Joe, an' we'll try to get this thing straightened out."

But getting the thing straight was not so hard, for that haggard youngster there on the blankets was nobody's fool. Sipping a steaming bowl of strength-giving herb medicine given him by the grinning Sing Lo, the lad told a story that made Billy and Joe grind their teeth in silent anger, and more than once their hands dropped to the curving butts of the guns that swung against their right thighs.

The boy's name, he told them, was Jimmy Martin, and his father, Tom Martin, had once owned a small but reasonably successful ranch farther back in the desert hills. Then Tom Martin had stumbled upon a rich gold strike, and the trouble had started.

It seemed that Tom Martin had been foolish enough to show some of his gold in Alkali and dropped the hint that he knew where there was more of it for the taking. But Martin had quickly realized his error when a gambler and killer by the name of "Blue" Cronan had tried to get him drunk. But he had managed to sneak out of town and return to his mine.

"He told me an' maw that he'd come back soon as he had a lot o' gold," Jimmy finished wearily. "But that's been over a year now, an' Blue Cronan has shore give us fits. The dirty coyote keeps tryin' to make maw say where dad went to get that gold. Maw says if she tells,

Cronan an' his gun slingers will go rob dad an' kill him. But—but we're starvin', maw an' me are, Mr. West. That's why I—I tried——"

"Yo' eatec lis, boy," Sing Lo's voice cut in, and Billy was silently thankful for the break. "Lis velly good flo yo'. So be."

The little Chinaman held out a large dish of some sort of soft food that he had prepared, and Jimmy Martin's sunken blue eyes glowed eagerly as he took it in both hands. But instead of offering to eat it, he clutched it close to his thin chest and started to his feet.

"Mr. West," Jimmy asked suddenly, voice trembling noticeably, "will yuh loan me a hoss? I want to go now."

Billy had, of course, told Jimmy who he was, and why the Circle J pards were in the country. So it couldn't be a sudden return of fear that was making Jimmy Martin want to leave so quickly. For if there had been doubt in the lad's mind, he never would have told Billy and Joe the story of his struggles.

"Why, sure, Jimmy." Billy smiled. "I'll see that yuh get a ride when yo're ready to go. But sit down, amigo, an' eat that chow. Sing Lo is shore a mighty good cook, an' yuh'll like that stuff he's fixed."

"Like it?" Jimmy cried. "Mr. West, it smells so good, I—I could eat it all in one bite, seems like. But maw is sick, an' a heap hungrier than me, 'cause she made me eat when she didn't. I'm takin' this to her, if yuh'll loan me a hoss."

"Oh, gosh!" Joe Scott exclaimed hoarsely, and strode swiftly away, muttering things about a jasper named Blue Cronan.

Billy's lips tightened until a white ring formed about his mouth. But he forced himself to smile and laid a hand on Jimmy's shoulder.

"Eat that, sonny," Billy said quietly. "Sing Lo has fixed a whole pot of it that we'll take to your mother. Sit down now an' eat that stuff. Then——"

"Gee, Mr. West!" Jimmy cried. "Yuh—yuh mean yuh an' Mr. Scott are goin' ter really take maw somethin' to eat?"

"Shore, we're goin' ter see that yore mother gets food," Billy said quickly. "An' we'll get at it right now, too. So you eat that, savvy?"

But Jimmy shook his head until sandy-brown locks of hair tumbled down over the white bandage. Nor could Billy persuade him to touch the food, though his eyes fairly burned as he looked down at it.

"All right, Jimmy," Billy finally said. "Yo're man, sonny—all man. Just take it easy an' we'll soon be on our way."

Joe Scott came up leading two horses—a rangy, long-legged gray that was his own mount, and a beautiful chestnut stallion that belonged to Billy. The young boss of Circle J stepped up to the chestnut, stroking its silky neck as he reached for the loosened cinch.

"Looks like trouble ahead, Danger hoss," Billy spoke almost softly to the chestnut stallion as he tightened the cinch. "But I reckon we can't help it. That half-starved boy an' his maw must be in a shore tough fix."

Billy finished with his cinching and turned toward camp, where Joe and Sing Lo were swiftly forming a pack that was soon securely placed on a sturdy bay pack horse. Now Sing Lo climbed aboard a sleepy-looking little piebald cayuse, hunched jockey fashion over the saddle horn, and kept a wary eye on the pack horse lest the animal dodge off into a thicket.

"Do yuh reckon this younker is

mebbe mistaken in some o' the things he told us, Billy?" Joe Scott whispered, coming alongside the Circle J boss. "It don't seem reasonable that that Blue Cronan Jasper would be ornery enough to starve a woman an' kid. I wonder——"

"I'm wonderin', too," Billy whispered back. "But the way to find out is go see Jimmy's mother."

Billy strode over to where the pale youth sat on a rock, the blankets having been put into the pack. Jimmy had put the food Sing Lo had given him back into the pot, and watched with shining eyes while the little chink emptied the contents of that pot into a vessel which had a lid that would fit tightly enough to prevent any spilling. The vessel of prepared food was now in the pack on the bay's back, ready for use the moment the heavy lid was pried off.

"Well, Jimmy"—Billy tried to grin cheerfully as he spoke—"yuh can just hop up in front o' me now. Danger—that's my hoss's name—will carry us both without any fuss. Here, I'll give yuh a boost, an' then yuh can tell us which way to head. Is it far to your house?"

Jimmy Martin was pitifully light, Billy thought as he boosted him up into the saddle, then mounted, holding the youngster steady with one arm. But Jimmy was smiling happily now and pointing one skinny hand off across the hills.

"It ain't far to where maw is," he replied to Billy's question. "But the house ain't ours—ain't nobody's, I reckon. It's jist a old deserted dobe—no good a-tall. But it was the only place we've been able to get hid out in where Blue Cronan an' his gang couldn't find us. Jist head over that ridge yonder an' we'll be there in no time."

This proved to be the case, for as soon as Billy and Joe, riding side by side, topped the hill to which Jimmy had pointed, they saw a miserable little adobe shack in a gulch below them—a shack that was half hidden by mesquite and cat's-claw bushes. But not until the Circle J pards had sent their horses down the steep slope and dismounted before the place did they discover that it had practically no roof and was doorless.

"Maw!" Jimmy Martin cried as Billy lowered him to the ground. "Hey, maw, we've got some friends, after all. Come on out, maw, an' see——"

There had been no sound from within the house. Jimmy broke off suddenly, and the color drained completely from his already pale face.

He darted to the door, leaped into the shack. Billy and Joe exchanged grim glances and strode forward.

But before they could enter, Jimmy staggered back into the yard, white lips moving stiffly, one hand repeatedly brushing at his staring eyes, as if he would brush aside some terrible sight.

"Maw!" the boy gasped hoarsely. "She—she's layin' so awful still, Mr. West. I—I reckon she must be—daid!"

CHAPTER IV.

TOUGH LUCK.

BUCK FOSTER cantered into Alkali, bulging eyes raking swiftly up and down the double row of scaly looking adobes. Now he spotted a big saloon, reined his lathered cayuse to a spraddle-legged halt, bit the ground, and strode swiftly toward the green swinging doors of the saloon.

Buck's leathery face was mottled with anger, and his gnarled right

hand hovered over the butt of his .45 as he crashed into the slat doors with more than a little force. Nor did Buck pay any attention to the dozen or more hard-bitten hombres who whirled swiftly from the long bar at his noisy entrance. Buck was on the prod and running true to form.

According to his way of thinking, there was due to be a skunk named Blue Cronan hanging out in the Gila, and Buck had a crow or two to pick with the jasper. If Jimmy Martin and his mother hadn't been starving, the lad never would have tried to hold up a man on the trail which led out of Alkali.

And since that man had been Buck, and he had come within an ace of killing Jimmy, he figured that he would just naturally mop up the town of Alkali with Blue Cronan. For it was Cronan's fault that Jimmy Martin and his mother were starving. So Buck had reasoned as he galloped madly into town.

He was still reasoning along such lines as he clattered up to the bar, elbowed a leering jasper out of his way, and glared hotly at a squat, flat-faced bartender who was slipping one thick hand beneath his soiled apron.

"Give me a shot o' nose paint, feller," Buck growled, "so's I kin git this alkali out o' me gullet. Then, by heifers, I aim ter ast yuh some questions that yuh'd better answer pronto!"

The burly bartender opened his thick lips as if to speak, an angry flush darkening his scowling face. But he seemed to think better of saying whatever he was thinking, and turned to the back bar, picking up a bottle and glass, which he shoved across the polished mahogany at Buck.

The Circle J veteran never drank

himself drunk, though he did like a nip now and then. He squinted suspiciously at the tall bottle, uncorked it and sniffed, then poured himself a stiff drink, gulped it, and fished a coin from the pocket of his mangy bearskin vest.

"Now, feller," the barkeeper growled, scooping up Buck's money, "what was that yuh shot off 'bout questions? Yuh better watch that tongue o' yores, or yuh'll hub trouble aplenty."

"Am thet so?" Buck flared, grizzled mustache fairly bristling. "No monkey-faced swill splasher kin threaten me an' git by with it. But right now I'm lookin' fer a cow-hocked, four-flushin' skunk what calls hisself Blue Cronan. Whar kin I find the varmint?"

Hoarse yells lifted, boots pounded loudly over the floor, and suddenly the swinging doors were rattling and groaning as a knot of men jammed through to the dirt walk outside. There were only two men left standing in front of the bar—a pair of slit-eyed, unshaven hombres who stared at Buck in blank amazement.

The squat barkeep dropped a bottle and swore luridly as it bounced off one of his feet. He swayed against the back bar, face paling as he stared at the veteran puncher.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck roared through the strained silence. "Some o' yuh skunks better start talkin', or I'll work the hull bunch o' yuh over. Whar am thet Cronan snake, huh?"

The unshaven pair of toughs before the bar edged slowly apart, black scowls coming over their faces. The bartender snarled an ugly oath, lunged forward, and made a grab at a sawed-off shotgun which lay on a specially built shelf beneath the mahogany top.

"Say, yuh ol' coot," the drink dis-

penser snarled thickly, pudgy hands closing over the murderous weapons, "no locoed geezer is goin' ter come in hyar callin' the boss names an' git by with it. I'll learn yuh manners, yuh ol'—"

Smack! Buck had seen the barkeep reaching under the bar top—guessed what was up.

The lanky veteran lunged forward, gnarled right hand balled into a knotty fist. And that fist whizzed out suddenly. It caught the bartender squarely between his piggish eyes.

Mr. Barkeep crashed backward against the back bar, yanked both triggers on the double-barreled gun, and folded up in a gasping heap as the butt of the weapon rammed him squarely in the stomach.

But the two tough jaspers who had remained before the bar were getting into action now. One of them drew a long-barreled Colt, leaped forward, and brought the gun down in a chopping motion.

Buck howled in pained surprise as the gun barrel whizzed past his temple, then crashed into his shoulder. He spun, swung a haymaker at the gun wielder's face, and measured his length on the floor as the second tough sent a hard fist into his jaw.

"Tromp his haid off, blast his hide!" one of the hard-case hombres snarled. "We better not plug him, 'cause Blue'll want ter know what it's all about. But we kin shore beat the soup out o' the ol' sheep-herder."

Sheep-herder! Nothing under the sun could have revived the groggy Circle J veteran more quickly than hearing some one call him a sheep-herder.

Bawling insults, he came to his knees, swayed far enough to dodge a flashing boot toe, then gained his

feet, horny fists working like pistons. He got the rascally pair on the move, drove them back against the bar, and had them so rattled they could do no more than duck and dodge.

Then the swinging doors crashed open and half a dozen mean-looking jaspers charged into the room, swearing at Buck as they came. Winded, the veteran whirled to meet his new foes, snaggly teeth showing in a fighting snarl.

"Come on, skunks!" he invited. "I kin lick the hull kit an' caboodle o' yuh. Then, by dogies, some o' yuh am goin' ter tell me whar yore flea-bit boss is. Come on!"

Crash! Buck staggered, clutched at the bar, then sank slowly down to the floor, eyes glazed and staring.

Behind the bar the flat-faced bartender stood grinning evilly, a heavy bung starter gripped in one thick hand.

"Thar's yore tough guy, all laid out cold," the barkeep sneered at the scowling toughs who had boiled into the room. "Any time I smacks a feller with this hyar auger, he's out cold."

"What's goin' on?" a slab-sided, lantern-jawed hombre demanded of the barkeep. "Who is this ol' wampus, Tubby? Me an' these boys was over to the restaurant, waitin' fer the boss ter show up when in romps a feller who tells us that some locoed coot is over hyar makin' fight talk an' huntin' the boss. Who the blazes is he?"

"Danged if I know, Walt Turner, who the ol' billy goat is," "Tubby," the barkeep, growled. "But I wish yuh'd stay around hyar more. blast it! Ain't yuh drawin' gun wages jist ter smoke down whoever comes lookin' fer Blue with gun talk? I'll bet this ol' buzzard is some sort o' law."

WW-7B

Hoarse growls greeted that remark, and several hard-faced jaspers stepped toward Buck, intending to go through his clothing for signs of the hated law badge. But there was a sudden step inside the swinging doors, and a cold voice jerked the mob of toughs around as if they were moving as one man.

"Lay a hand on my pard an' I'll drill yuh! Sky them paws, gunniea. If Buck's hurt, it'll be yore own funeral."

Just inside the door stood Joe Scott, a cocked .45 in his freckled right hand, blue eyes blazing as he watched the snarling pack move slowly apart, hands inching toward holstered guns rather than lifting. In the next split second the Gila Saloon would have become a roaring inferno of exploding guns, for those tough jaspers had no intentions of surrendering.

But at that moment the back door shoved softly open, and Billy West stepped over the threshold, six-gun cocked and gripped at his hip.

"Better reach, gents," Billy's voice crackled coldly. "We've shore got yuh hombres covered. Want to get caught in a crossfire?"

The thoroughly surprised gun slingers in the room snarled bitter oaths, then began lifting their hands. But Billy had barely relaxed when the round, hard muzzles of two guns rammed solidly against his back, and a cold, well-controlled voice carried plainly into the room.

"You happen to be covered, too, stranger," that voice said. "Now drop your gun or I'll blow you loose from it. And tell your red-headed friend up front to let go that cutter he's holding."

"The boss!" Tubby, the barkeep, whooped, and savage grins of delight spread over the faces of Blue Cron-

an's gunnies as Billy and Joe slowly lowered their guns, then dropped them to the floor.

CHAPTER V.

BUCK USES HIS HEAD.

THERE in that miserable little tumbledown shack from which Jimmy Martin had stumbled, saying that his mother was dead. Billy and Joe found a woman lying huddled on a few old grain sacks in one corner. But Jimmy's mother was alive, though in a critical condition.

Leaving Sing Lo to attend to the boy and the woman, Billy and Joe had hit a lope for Alkali, intending to hunt up a doctor and hustle him out to the miserable little shack where the sick woman lay. Not knowing where the doctor might be found, Billy and Joe had headed for the nearest saloon, intending to ask the barkeep.

And they had gone to the Gila Saloon, peered over the swinging doors just in time to see the burly barkeep clout Buck with the bung starter. Billy and Joe had naturally tried to come to the rescue of their pard—and hubbed what looked like disaster.

They stood there now, Joe at the front and Billy at the rear, hands above their heads, eyes glaring hate at the grinning, swaggering men who occupied the barroom.

"Waal, Blue, yuh shore saved our hides that time," the flat-featured barkeep chuckled hoarsely. "I figure these jaspers is——"

"I'll do the figuring, Tubby," the cold voice came again from directly behind Billy. "Just gather up your shotgun and watch this young cub a minute."

Tubby flushed at the sharpness of that voice, then quickly gathered up the fallen shotgun, fished a couple

of fat shells from a cardboard box on the back bar, and reloaded the murderous weapon. Billy watched the barkeep line the gun, grinning evilly over the twin tubes. But now Billy's attention was taken by a man who stepped easily past him, then turned.

"Yuh'd be Blue Cronan, I reckon," Billy drawled, fighting to keep his voice level as he eyed the big, well-built hombre who stood grinning coldly at him.

Blue Cronan shoved an expensive gray Stetson far back on his black hair, fastened a pair of glinting black eyes on Billy's face, and let his almost lipless mouth quirk into a sarcastic grin. He deliberately holstered a pair of silver-inlaid, pearl-gripped six-guns in shoulder holsters that were swung beneath the lapels of his neat gray coat, then laughed almost in Billy's face.

"Yes, I'm Blue Cronan," the gambler said in that same flat, cold voice. "And just who are you, and why are you meddling into this affair?"

Billy was fighting mad now, for there was something so coldly dangerous in the gray-clad gambler's very manner that it amounted to an evil threat. Yet the young boss of Circle J was too wise in the ways of danger to fight Blue Cronan at the moment.

Billy realized that he was up against a man who was capable of thinking and acting with swift precision—an intelligent hombre who had, for no telling what reason, set his keen mind to crime rather than honorable things. Such a man as Blue Cronan would be not only dangerous, but mighty hard to beat in any way.

But it took Billy West only a very few moments to do that thinking. Now he shrugged, forced a

calm smile to his lips, and quietly told Blue Cronan who he was, who Buck and Joe were, and what they were doing in Arizona. Nor did Billy hesitate to say that he had come to Alkali for a doctor who would be willing to care for Mrs. Martin, Jimmy's mother.

"So yuh see, Cronan, Joe an' me were doin' the natural thing—tryin' to get our pard out of a jack pot." Billy finished. "Is there too much snake in yore veins to let us take Buck an' go on about our business? If what Jimmy Martin tells is half-way true, I reckon yo're too yaller-bellied to let us go get a doctor for Mrs. Martin."

A cheaper type of crook would have blown up at Billy's insulting remarks. But not Blue Cronan. The barbs stuck, for a slow flush crept over his rather sallow, lean face, and the nostrils of his thin, hooked nose flared slightly. Yet Blue Cronan managed to smile, though that smile was far from pleasant to see.

"You are meddling, West," he said, with no apparent anger. "Meddling in my affairs. Tom Martin's wife deserves what she is getting. If she would only give me the information for which I have repeatedly asked, I'd see that she was not molested further."

"An' yuh'd also see that her husband, Tom, was shot down for the rich mine he's supposed to have discovered," Billy growled, angered more than ever by the gambler's cold self-assurance. "What yuh need, hombre, is a good hemp necktie."

Blue Cronan laughed unpleasantly, turned on one heel of his highly polished boots, and strode almost leisurely to the bar.

"You, Scott," he flung at the scowling redhead, "march down the

room and join West. Tubby can watch you two better if you are closer together."

Joe Scott glanced swiftly to right and left, as if seeking some avenue of escape. But the leering gunmen before him were watching narrowly, and the redhead strode stiffly down the room to stand beside Billy.

"Walt," Blue Cronan addressed the slab-sided Walt Turner sharply, "you and a couple of the others take these two young gentlemen up toward the old Crazy Man Mine. If they should get to some law Johnny and do a bit of talking——"

The lanky Walt Turner and the rest of the hard-faced crew swore almost wildly as they glared at the Circle J pards. Those jaspers knew only too well what would happen if those two cowboys got to an officer and told what they knew. But Blue Cronan had said to take them up toward the old Crazy Man Mine.

"We better make a break for it, pard," Joe Scott whispered hoarsely from one corner of his mouth. "That Cronan jigger meant for his gunnies to take us out an' plug us, or I'm loco. We better——"

Joe glanced sidewise at Billy—and broke off in mid-sentence. Billy's face was tense, slowly flushing with excitement that showed in his carefully squinted eyes. And Joe almost gunned the deal by quickly following Billy's gaze.

Over by the bar, Blue Cronan stood grinning his cold grin, thin lips parting to show a double row of even white teeth. The gambler's head was slightly inclined, as if he were trying hard to hear what Joe had been saying. But neither Billy nor Joe was paying any particular attention to the murderous boss of the ugly crew of men who were arguing as to who should go with Walt and the two Circle J pards.

What Billy and Joe were watching was a gnarled hand inching slowly across the saloon floor as Buck Foster reached with unaccustomed stealth toward his holster. Blue Cronan seemed to sense that something was about to happen, for he let his own long, thin-fingered hands drift swiftly up to the lapels of his coat.

Joe Scott's glance had warned him, and he was on the very point of stepping farther back when the whole house seemed to tremble as a hoarse voice lifted in a triumphant yell.

"Freeze, yuh two-bit cross betwix' a skunk an' a buzzard!" Buck Foster roared wildly, coming to his knees. "I come hyar lookin' fer yuh, Cronan, an', by heifers, I've nabbed yuh! Lift them paws an' tell yore flea-bit flunkies ter leave me pards alone, or it'll be yore funeral!"

And, to the utter amazement of both Billy and Joe, Buck had the good sense to remain crouched out of sight of the barkeep while he rammed the muzzle of his gun into Blue Cronan's side with force.

Buck Foster had really used his head that time. For Cronan's snarling killers dared not make a hostile move lest their boss suffer the consequences.

CHAPTER VI.

A PLUMB ORNERY HORSE.

BILLY WEST stooped swiftly and scooped up his fallen gun. Joe Scott walked quickly behind the bar, snatched the sawed-off scatter-gun from Tubby's shaking hands, and swung the twin muzzles toward the closely grouped killers who had been arguing over who would accompany Walt Turner. Turner and the rest squawked in genuine alarm at sight of the shotgun, and they lifted their hands with haste.

"Shed yore artillery, yuh buzzards!" Joe snapped, settling the walnut butt of the shotgun firmly against his shoulder. "Climb outer them gun belts, or I'll pull these triggers!"

Joe was only bluffing, for he had no intention of pulling the triggers of that murderous weapon unless absolutely forced to. But Cronan's hirelings did not know that. They shed their gun belts as hastily as if the things had suddenly become red-hot about their waists. Joe prodded the burly Tubby and sent him lumbering over to join the rest in the center of the floor.

"You, Blue Cronan," Billy West snapped, striding toward the glaring cutthroat, "I reckon we'll be takin' yuh for a little trip with us. If yuh so much as make a fuss——"

"This mangy coyote is my prisoner, Billy," Buck Foster growled, coming slowly to his feet. "But yuh kin guard him a minute while I whup the tar out o' thet monkey-faced barkeep. It was thet swill splasher what walloped me over the haid when I wa'n't lookin', an' I'm gonna——"

Billy had been afraid that Buck would not be willing to let well enough alone and get out while the getting was good. And trying to argue with Buck was worse than useless. When the veteran puncher got his head set on a thing, there was little hope of changing his mind for him.

But Billy felt that he had to do something—had to get clear of this saloon with his pards as soon as possible. No telling when some of Blue Cronan's friends might sneak up to the front or back door and open fire without warning.

It stood to reason that Cronan would have friends besides those snarling jaspers who were trembling

under the threat of the scattergun in Joe's hands. And if Buck prolonged escape by starting a fist fight with——

"Listen, pard," Billy called, grasping Buck's arm with his free hand. "We've got to get out o' here pronto an' take this Cronan snake with us. Yuh come on now an' keep an eye on this tricky cuss. He might get away if me or Joe tries to guard him."

A bit of flattery would do more with Buck than a whole day's argument. He stopped, glanced suspiciously at Billy, then poked out his chest importantly, turning to glare at Joe Scott. Though stanch friends at heart, Buck and Joe argued almost without let-up, flinging insults galore at each other.

Buck fully expected some taunting remark from the redhead now. But when none came, he strode stiffly up to Blue Cronan, rammed his left hand beneath the gambler's coat lapels, and dragged forth those silver-inlaid .45s one at a time.

"Now, skunk," Buck growled, shoving the captured guns into the waistband of his trousers, "yuh start rattlin' yore hocks fer thet back door thar. An' show some speed, too."

Blue Cronan shrugged his broad shoulders, flashed a hard glance over his huddled, white-faced hirelings, and strode toward the back door, Buck prodding him with a cocked six-gun. But Blue Cronan seemed far from worried, for there was that hard smile still tugging at his thin lips.

Billy noticed the almost gloating smile, and a frown creased his brow. He had the uncomfortable feeling that the cold-eyed gambler was not beaten yet—felt almost sure that Cronan had some trick up his sleeve.

Yet what could it be? How could

the gambler escape with Buck stalking along behind him, six-gun ready to flame or chop down in a flashing second?

"Root the floor, yuh hombres!" Joe Scott's voice snapped harshly through the dead silence that had fallen over the room. "Flatten out on your stumnicks, faces on the floor. Or do yuh want a dose o' buckshot to knock yuh flat?"

Blue Cronan's hirelings evidently had no desire to be flattened by buckshot, for they very promptly dropped to the floor, faces pressed close to the boards. Now Joe slid from behind the bar, joining Billy, who had stood waiting for him.

Together they moved hastily down the room, then stepped out into the littered alley behind the saloon, where Buck was guarding the still grinning gambler. But just as Billy and Joe stepped outside, the young boss of Circle J tugged at Joe's red jersey, halting him.

"Trouble is shore to pop now," Billy whispered fiercely, "an' we've got to act plenty fast. Yuh an' Buck take that grinnin' cuss on out to where Jimmy an' Mrs. Martin are. Hold him prisoner, whatever yuh do. That's the only way we can keep that pack inside there from jumpin' us."

"Say," Joe asked sharply, seeing that Billy was turning away, "where yuh goin'? Yuh better——"

"I'm huntin' up that doctor we came after," Billy snapped. "Yuh an' Buck get movin'."

And before the redhead could offer further argument, Billy was gone at a stiff run toward where Danger stood beside a small shed. Joe would have called out, only at that moment Buck Foster growled disgustedly, fixing the redhead with what was meant to be a withering stare.

"Billy knows what he's doin', yuh brockle-faced nuisance!" the veteran snorted. "Yuh hoof it round front an' fetch me my hoss. An' yuh kin rustle one fer this skunk I ketches, too. Git a move on, yuh lazy critter!"

Joe Scott's freckled face turned beet-red, and his eyes fairly popped out. But for once he had to take Buck's orders, because there were already sounds coming from inside the saloon which told Joe that Cronan's hired gunmen were getting over their scare.

The redhead glared over one shoulder at the puffed-up Buck, then darted around the corner of the saloon, to return very quickly, leading Buck's sweaty mount and a knobby-kneed little sorrel that he had found at a hitch rail.

Blue Cronan squinted at the sorry mount which was to carry him, then swung his eyes over to where Joe's horse stood, near where Danger had been not long ago. Joe's eyes followed the gambler's gaze, then his freckled face pulled into a tight grin.

"Yeah," he drawled, reading the gambler's thoughts correctly, "my hoss is a heap faster than this here sorrel skate, feller. So if yuh had any notion about lightin' a shuck soon as yuh hit leather, git over it. Try to run an' I'll rope yuh out o' the saddle. Now——"

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck roared, lean jaw poking out savagely. "Who's tendin' ter this prisoner, yuh carrot-topped sage hound?"

"Crawl thet fleabit nag, skunk." He turned sharply back to Blue Cronan. "An' if yuh try any funny business, yuh'll git shot, not roped. Git a move on!"

Blue Cronan glanced once toward the back door of the saloon, where a grimy, hate-contorted face was showing around the jamb. But

those hombres in there could do nothing, and Cronan realized it.

He stepped up to the sorry-looking sorrel and poked a booted toe into a stirrup to swing up, a baffled, angry look on his cold face for the first time. Then something happened that was as much of a surprise to the gambler as it was to the Circle J waddies.

Blue Cronan had barely settled himself in the saddle when that sorry-looking sorrel squealed shrilly, bogged its hammer head, and went into a fit of bucking that would have drawn whoops of delight from any rodeo crowd. And the bronc had barely taken the second jump when savage-faced men came hurtling from the saloon back door, guns chopping down to fling a withering sheet of blazing lead at Buck and Joe.

Blue Cronan was out of line now, and his gunnies could take a hand.

CHAPTER VII.

BILLY PLAYS DEAD.

THE moment that Billy West was astride his big stallion, he shook out the reins and quartered toward the main street at a fast gallop. His last glance back showed Joe Scott hurrying toward the front of the saloon, and Billy knew that the redhead would be going after Buck's horse, as well as one for Cronan to ride.

After that Billy turned his attention to the rutted street, glanced at a big feed barn directly opposite the point where he had entered the wheel-rutted road, and tickled Danger's flanks with dull rowels.

There was a slovenly clad, rat-faced little jasper standing slouched in the wide doorway of the barn, and Billy headed straight toward him, letting his hand drop comfort-

ably close to the butt of his six-gun. But as the Montana waddy reined to a halt, the slouching figure came forward, and Billy found himself looking down into a pair of squinty, evil-looking eyes that were set in a pinched, mean face.

"Stable yore hoss, stranger?" the rat-faced little hombre asked, showing a double row of snaggly, tobacco-stained teeth in a smile that was far from pleasant to see. "Thet's shore a mighty good-lookin' hunk o' hossflesh yo're forkin'. Wouldn't sell him, would yuh?"

Billy shook his head, eyes puckering suspiciously. There was something so thoroughly mean-looking about the stableman that he felt his anger rising instantly. But Billy got hold of his temper and told himself that he had no fight with this ornery-looking little hombre.

"I'm not stablin' my hoss right now, an' I shore wouldn't think o' sellin' him," Billy replied almost sharply. "All I want to know is where can I find a sawbones? I reckon there's one around this town some place."

"Somebody sick, huh?" the ugly little jasper piped a bit shrilly. "Waal, now, yuh jist take thet long ridge yonder, stranger, and ride smack up the top o' it. Two-three mile back yuh'll come ter a fork in a trail. Take the right-hand one, swing off inter a deep wash, an' yuh'll see a house settin' thar. Thet'll be Doc Carter's place. If he ain't ter home, jist wait——"

But Billy was already leaving there at a hard gallop, heading for a tall ridge that had been pointed out by the stable keeper. Billy was far from pleased at the prospect of having to ride several miles after a doctor, for he wanted to get the medico to Mrs. Martin as soon as possible.

He wondered bitterly why a doctor would go so far out in the hills to live. Once, as Danger carried him down into a deep arroyo that sliced along beside the tall ridge, he thought that he heard yells coming from the town behind him. Then, only a moment later, he heard the unmistakable roar of guns, and he tightened the bridle reins, bringing Danger to a halt.

That would, he figured, be Buck and Joe hubbing some sort of trouble in getting out of town with Blue Cronan. Naturally, Billy had no way of knowing that knobby-kneed sorrel brone was throwing a big hitch in things.

"I reckon Buck an' Joe can handle the deal, all right," he muttered aloud, again sending Danger forward at a lope. "Cronan's bunch would naturally do some shootin'—try to bluff Buck an' Joe. But as long as their boss is a prisoner, they won't do too much shootin'. Still I——"

Billy's voice trailed off, and he was on the point of turning back again. But the memory of seeing a pale, sunken-eyed woman huddled on a pile of old rags out in a tumble-down shack sent him on. For Mrs. Martin was sadly in need of a doctor's attention. Nevertheless, those crashing guns made him decidedly uneasy, and he had a hard time resisting the temptation to whirl Danger and gallop back to make sure that his pards were all right.

Then the wash up which he had been riding narrowed suddenly, and Billy found himself more than a little baffled. There was no sign of a trail, yet that barnman had said there would be. Still, Billy reasoned, he could have ridden past the place where the trail slanted up to the ridge crest.

"Come on, Danger hoss," he

urged, reining toward a rocky, brush-grown hillside. "We've got to get up on top o' that ridge, pard. Mebbe so that sawbones will know a better trail away from this place."

Danger took the steep incline, snorting and scrambling as treacherous rocks rolled beneath his feet. Then Billy was frowning more than ever as he crested what proved to be a long divide in a range of hills, for there was no sign of a trail. And the sharp ridge line that led away before him was so grown with mesquite and humped with outcroppings of jagged boulders that it looked completely blocked.

"That rat-faced skunk lied to me!" the Montana waddy cried suddenly. "He's told me to come this way, thinkin' it was a good joke. Just wait, Danger hoss, until I get hold o' the little cuss! Now, if we can only spot the real trail——"

But search as he would, Billy could locate no winding white scar that would be a trail running through the hills which stretched away below him. What he did not know was that the barnman had done worse than just lie about the location of the trail.

The evil-eyed little jasper had stood just outside the back door of the Gila Saloon, one unwashed ear cocked to catch everything that had been said when Blue Cronan had got the drop on Billy. So it was that the ugly barnman knew who Billy was, and why he had come to Alkali looking for a doctor. But when Buck Foster had turned the tables by getting the drop on Cronan, the craven-hearted stableman had slunk away, too cowardly even to take a pot shot at the Montanans from behind.

But his warped brain had conceived a cowardly scheme when Billy had come asking the where-

about of the doctor. Billy, however, did not discover that trick until he had spent two slow hours crossing the ridge, then dropped off into a canyon where a dim trail forked—and come upon a sheepherder's camp.

The herder proved to be a gnarled old fellow who called a friendly greeting but kept a wary eye on Billy as he brought Danger to a sliding halt before the small but neat-appearing cabin.

"Where—where's Doctor Carter?" Billy asked, and felt his face flush, for the question sounded almost silly, since this was a sheepman's house, and not that of a doctor.

But Billy felt that he had to say something, and the question was all that he seemed capable of uttering at the moment.

"Doc Carter?" the gnarled old fellow echoed, getting slowly to his feet from a seat on clean stone steps. "What yuh tryin' tuh do, son—string me along?"

Billy saw the old man's level gray eyes flashing, and one of those knotty hands was creeping slowly toward his worn but clean blue denim trousers.

"Nope, amigo," Billy said quietly, "I'm not tryin' to be funny."

As quickly as possible, he told how he had been sent to this lonely little cabin. And by the time Billy finished, the old sheepman was growling angrily deep in his leathery throat.

"Doc Carter lives right thar in Alkali, son," the sheepman growled. "That rat-faced Ed Doak, the barn keeper who sent yuh out hyar, is up to somethin' crooked. He's one o' Blue Cronan's gang, so I'll bet—When I shoot, fall off that hoss like yuh was hit!"

Wham! The sheepman's big ce-

dar-butted Colt slid swiftly out and filled the little valley with its roaring blast.

Billy heard a bullet hum somewhere over his head, then reeled from the saddle and dropped limply to the ground.

"Now move yore hand real careful an' snake yore cutter out, son," came the sheepman's low voice. "Some riders is comin', an' they may aim to make shore yo're daid."

CHAPTER VIII.

BUCK GETS A SPILL.

JOE SCOTT leaped sidewise, crashing solidly into Buck Foster just as the swearing, snarling gunmen ran out of the saloon back door and pulled out their guns. Buck roared mightily at the redhead, lost his footing, and went down, Joe on top of him.

But a moment later the roar of guns and whine of lead cut short Buck's ranting, and he began squirming around, gun ready for action. Twenty yards down the littered alley, Blue Cronan was picking himself up hastily, his usually calm face twisted into a mask of bitter hate as he watched the two Circle J cowboys whirl on the over-anxious gunmen who had come plunging from the saloon.

Buck and Joe were both firing now, and two of Cronan's men were already down, screaming in pain. The rest were milling, trying to get to cover. But Blue Cronan was staying to see no more. Remembering the sawed-off shotgun that Joe Scott had left leaning against one end of the bar, Cronan darted swiftly between two buildings, heading for the main street. Buck Foster happened to see him, and let out a war whoop.

"Stop, yuh skunk!" the veteran

howled. "Come back hyar, yuh ornery—— Ow!"

Buck had leaped up from behind the two old empty beer kegs that had protected him and Joe from the snarling slugs fired by Cronan's men. But the moment the ranty veteran showed himself, one of those paid gunmen steadied a smoking weapon against one corner of the saloon and fired carefully.

Buck staggered, tried to whirl, and dropped flat to the ground, leathery face pale and drawn.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" he muttered thickly. "Thet coyote must 'a' busted me leg. If I ketches sight o' the polecat, I'll drill him so full o' holes—— Hey, what yuh tryin' ter do, yuh flop-cared nuisance?"

Joe Scott had suddenly leaped over those two beer kegs, gun spitting a stream of smoking lead toward the corner of the building from which the hidden jasper had shot Buck. The two wounded men crouched close to the wall, too sick to offer fight, as Joe drove the last of their friends out of sight.

Now the redhead jammed his smoking gun into leather, stooped and lifted Buck Foster, slinging him over one shoulder. Buck howled protests and squirmed as Joe made for the Circle J horse that had trotted out of gun range.

"Help me, Hannah!" Buck Foster snarled. "Yuh stop it, Joe Scott, or, by heifers, I'll bend me gun on yore hard haid! Any time yuh has ter carry me around—— Huh!"

Buck found himself astride his own horse before he knew just what was happening. He still clutched his powder-warmed gun, and was trying to hip around to get a look at the saloon when Joe grabbed the pony's reins and led it swiftly to where his own mount stood.

"I see yo're hit in the leg, pard," the redhead panted, as he climbed quickly into his own saddle. "Kin yuh ride? Reckon yuh kin stand it if we have to run these hosses?"

Buck's face was still pale and drawn from the pain in his left hip, but he scowled fiercely, showing his snaggly teeth in a snarl of anger. He glanced down at the swiftly widening crimson stain on his leg, then snorted in disgust.

"Shore I kin ride, yuh carrot-topped pest!" he growled. "An' I'm ridin' right smack intuh the back door o' that saloon yonder. Thar's where thet Cronan varmint will be holed up, an' I'm goin' ter smoke him out. No danged crook kin give me the slip. I'm goin'——"

"Listen, fathead," Joe cut in hotly. "We've got to git out o' this town while the gittin' is good. Jimmy Martin an' his mother are out in the hills yonder, needin' somebody to see that such jaspers as Cronan an' his gang don't bother 'em any more. So we're goin'——"

Buck cut in hotly at that point, and the argument might have lasted no telling how long, if Tubby, the barkeep, hadn't taken a hand just then. Tubby had evidently been peering out of the back door, waiting for a chance to get in a cowardly shot at the two Circle J waddies. Now the burly drink dispenser stepped into view, his sawed-off shotgun whipping up.

The swinging doors at the front of the building crashed at the same moment, and Blue Cronan's voice lifted in a profane order for the barkeep to wait. But the gambler's voice speeded up rather than checked Tubby's already nervous fingers, and the double-barreled shotgun roared deafeningly as both barrels went off.

But Tubby had failed to take into

consideration the fact that the shotgun had been ruined for distance when its barrels had been sawed off. Joe Scott felt the scaring burn of a big shot that laid his cheek open, then he and Buck were both more than busy trying to control their squealing, lunging mounts.

Those horses had felt the sting of shot, however, and now they were bolting madly, bits locked in strong teeth, eyes rolling in terror. Buck yelled and sawed frantically at the reins, almost unseated by his mount's sudden antics.

Joe tried to swing his own horse over, hoping to slow Buck's mount by grabbing the bridle bit. The redhead knew that that pounding run was sending scaring pains through the veteran's wounded leg, and he tried desperately to come to his pard's aid.

But those shot-stung horses were running wild, and would keep at it until fatigue overrode their fear. Joe gave up the idea of reining his mount, and glanced back. He was just in time to see three or four riders rocket around the side of the saloon, Winchesters in their hands.

The redhead had guessed that Cronan's men would give chase, yet he had hardly expected to see them coming so soon. But coming they were, and at a dead run. Joe ground his teeth in anger, tried once more to check the headlong flight of his horse. He was headed for the hills, all right, but at sharp right angles from the course he wished to take.

Joe's aim had been to get back to that tumbledown shack where Jimmy Martin and his mother were, for he feared that Blue Cronan's hirelings might discover the woman and boy and do them further harm. And now Joe's worst fears were coming true, for his runaway horse was

bearing him steadily off the course he should have been taking.

"I'll kill this critter ef he don't let go the bit!" Buck Foster's voice lifted above the squealing creak of straining saddle leather and pound of shod hoofs. "This fool hoss am locoed, thet's what. Ef he don't behave— Hey, what the—"

Buck's voice ended in a frightened wail as his horse squealed in sudden fear, at the same time catapulting headlong through the air. Then the frightened cayuse landed in a kicking heap, for its pounding forehoofs had crashed into a rabbit burrow.

Over one shoulder Joe Scott saw what was happening—saw his pard go down in a cloud of reddish-brown dust that rose from the ground. But Joe's horse still had the bit in its teeth and was running wild.

He yanked savagely on the oiled leather reins, felt one tear loose from the bit ring. From behind came thin yells of triumph as Blue Cronan's killer pack closed in on the luckless Buck. And Joe, white with baffled rage, had to sit the hurricane deck of a runaway horse and hear those killers close in on his already crippled pard.

CHAPTER IX.

BILLY'S RETURN.

FEAR to the ground, Billy West caught the drum of hoofs—heard the rattle of dislodged stones as riders came tearing down the slope behind him. Billy had his gun out now, gray eyes squinting toward the gnarled old sheepman, who stood a pace or two in front of him, smoking Colt still in hand.

The old fellow's face was turned toward the slope that slanted down from that rocky ridge above the little valley, and Billy thought that

he could see anger glinting in those puckered eyes as the beat of hoofs grew steadily nearer. And he was sure that the Colt in the old man's hand grew tense at hip level, smoke-blackened muzzle slanting up on an angle that would be in line with a man on horseback.

Billy had a lot to wonder about in those few swift moments as he lay there, tensely gripping his own cocked Colt. That old fellow before him had acted queerly, to be sure. Yet there was something in the sheepman's steady eyes, something in his tanned, honest face that had won Billy's admiration from the very first.

So when the old man had hauled out that cedar-butted hogleg and called his strange request for Billy to drop at the gun's report, the young boss of Circle J had obeyed without asking a lot of silly questions. Billy was a good enough judge of human nature to know that the leathery old sheepman was not the sort to pull a low-down trick, so he had complied with the old fellow's wishes without wasting valuable time.

And he was beginning to get the drift of things now, for three riders had stopped directly behind him and were addressing the owner of the sheep camp.

"Waal, Sam Hazen, looks like yuh got ketched cold turkey this time," some jasper was saying in a thoroughly unpleasant voice. "Me an' these two hombres hyar was watchin' when yuh plugged this here cow-poke. I reckon yuh aims ter shoot any punchers what comes nigh yore place, huh?"

Sam Hazen, the leathery old sheepman, spat disgustedly, and Billy saw his knuckles whiten as he gripped the cedar-butted Colt more tightly.

"Listen, yuh three sons o' Satan," Hazen rasped sharply. "Trot on back to Alkali an' mind yore own business. If I taken a shot at this here stranger feller, that's *my* business. Yuh coyotes clear out afore I adds two-three o' yore pelts to my gun tally."

Strong talk for a sheepman. But to Billy's surprise, there came no violent reply. True enough, there were muttered oaths, and a saddle squeaked, as if some jasper was dropping far to one side. But presently three horses were stamping and turning under tugging reins.

"Don't git huffy, Hazen," some fellow called in a surly tone. "Happens we don't give a dang if yuh did kill that stranger. Fact is, we aimed ter do it ourselves. Ed Doak sent 'im off out hyar, then routed us boys out o' the hayloft where we was sleepin' off a jag. Yuh saved us the trouble o' pluggin' this younker, so we're goin' on back. But keep a civil tongue in yore haid, ol' feller, or yuh'll be sorry."

Hoofs pounded, then the sound gradually faded and died. Sam Hazen's keen eyes watched the last horseman disappear over the ridge, then swung down to Billy's prone figure.

"All right, son," the old fellow said, calmly shoving his Colt back beneath the waistband of his trousers. "Blue Cronan's playmates have gone, so I reckon yuh better be huntin' a trail out o' here. If yuh still want to find Doc——"

Billy got up, holstered his gun, and swiftly explained who he was and just why he was so anxious to find the doctor. Old Sam Hazen was swearing like a pirate by the time Billy had finished, and glaring angrily toward the ridge where Cronan's three hirelings had vanished not long ago.

"Tom Martin's wife an' kid have been sufferin', have they?" he growled thickly. "Wish yuh had told me that sooner, West. Them three skunk-scented sons that was just here need a dose o' hot lead fer tryin' to stop yuh. Blue Cronan needs wuss than killin'. I'll ride with yuh."

But Billy was already swinging aboard Danger, an angry set to his jaws. It hadn't been easy, lying there and letting peppery old Sam Hazen handle those three human vultures who rode on a murder mission.

But Billy had had the common sense to realize that mixing in a gun fight with the three jaspers would net him exactly nothing. Of course, he would have gone to Hazen's aid if the three rascals had started a fight. Now, however, the three killers were fogging it back to Alkali, thinking Billy dead.

That would help him get back into the ugly little town and hunt up the doctor without trouble. But Billy was fighting mad now, and he silently resolved to teach Blue Cronan's hired gunmen a much-needed lesson as soon as he had Mrs. Martin safely in the hands of a doctor.

"Adios, Hazen," he called, whirling Danger toward the hills again. "An' thanks for bein' a friend. I reckon the trail that slants through that saddle yonder leads to Alkali, eh?"

The sheepman nodded vigorously, said something about "the shortest cut." But Billy was already heading for the low pass, or saddle, that cut through the tall ridge, letting Danger strike out at a long lope. Nor did Billy check his powerful mount until the squatty buildings of Alkali hove into view.

This return trip had been much easier, however, and Danger was

not tired at all when Billy left him in a thicket of mesquite and approached the little town on foot. The young Montana waddy approached with the utmost caution, keeping to a dry gully that slanted alongside the first buildings.

He was surprised at the quietness of the town, and wondered why there were no horses at the hitch racks as he gained a view of the one main street. Then Billy saw Ed Doak, the rat-faced little stableman who had sent him on a wild-goose chase out into the hills.

Billy's brown hands balled into hard fists as he watched the stable owner saunter along the dirt walk, then head for the livery barn.

"Just to teach that ornery little badger a lesson, I think I'll go collar him," Billy muttered, and slid into the shadowed passageway that led between two buildings.

But just as Billy West was preparing for a dash across the main street, a sound reached his ears that caused him to dodge quickly back into the shadows. That sound was the clatter of shod hoofs, and as Billy watched, he saw a dozen or more horsemen swing into the far end of the street.

Then a sight met his eyes that left him gasping. For on the foremost horse, slung crosswise and bobbing limply, was Buck Foster!

CHAPTER X.

COLD STEEL.

IN the midst of a flame of many colors, the great round sun slipped slowly down behind the jagged rim of rugged hills, leaving a trail of crimson light to stain the western edge of the huge blue dome of sky. Billy West watched that sun go down—watched the many bright colors fade slowly into a purple

mistiness that slowly enveloped the rugged landscape.

Clumps of the wicked white cholla—or jumping cactus, as some call it—look on a deceptive soft look there in the last glow of fading daylight. Off in a deep arroyo, blue quail cried wailingly as they hunted a perch in some leafy bush. A ground owl set up its chuckling call, and the yapping "Ya-ya-ya-e-e-e!" of a coyote came from somewhere out in that now purple waste land.

But Billy West gave little heed to the burst of colors in the west or the call of bird and animal. He sat there beneath a spreading cat's-claw, gray eyes slitted and watchful, a cocked .45 Colt balanced across his right knee.

For nearly two hours now Billy had sat there, watching the shapes of the adobe buildings in Alkali grow dim, then fade to the color of the surrounding soil. But from those adobes, great yellow eyes were now beginning to wink, and Billy got slowly to his feet. He flexed his muscles, swung his arms sharply to drive the chill of the desert night from his body. Now, gliding like the shadows that were gradually deepening, he slid away toward those lighted buildings, moving with the stealth of an Indian. He had left spurs and batwing chaps hooked over the horn of Danger's saddle so that he would make no noise in his moving.

Billy knew that there were a dozen or more killers stationed about the town, for he had watched them placed on their post shortly after he had seen Buck Foster hauled in nearly two hours earlier.

In fact, Billy had barely had time to dodge into the brush that grew within a few rods of the buildings before those guards had been placed. He had seen Blue Cronan strutting

about the street, even heard the gambler calling orders as the guards were placed.

So Billy had taken his stand there in the cat's-claw, waiting for the dusk that was now settling down. Buck had been carried into the Gila Saloon, which informed Billy that the veteran was not dead, else the Cronan pack would not have fooled with him.

But what had happened to Joe Scott? How had Blue Cronan managed to best Buck and Joe, take the veteran captive? Had Joe been left somewhere out in the desert, killed, or seriously wounded?

Billy West thought of those things as he stole silently up to the rear of the Gila Saloon, flattened against the gritty wall. From within came harsh laughter, the clink of glasses, and a constant hum of voices. Billy edged closer to the back door, reached out and grasped the knob silently.

He twisted the iron knob slowly, pushed gently. The door gave silently, and suddenly a thin slice of yellow lamplight cut the darkness around Billy's feet. He moved swiftly aside, then pressed an eye to the crack in the door.

The long barroom seemed full of men who smoked and laughed and drank. Billy gritted his teeth as he caught sight of Blue Cronan, standing at one end of the bar, a filled glass in one long-fingered hand, a slim cigar stuck in one corner of his mouth. Billy remembered having seen a partitioned-off room just to the left of this back door through which he now peered. If he could get to that private room—

A booted foot struck noisily against a tin can, and a man grunted raspily. Billy whirled, ducked half over. His gun jutted out, hammer rolling back under thumb pres-

sure. Now a tall form came from the shadows, stumbling forward. Billy held his breath, waited until the shadowy figure drew abreast.

"Reach, hombre! One squawk an' I'll pull this trigger. Make a fuss an' Blue Cronan loses a heel dawg!"

The shadow seemed to lengthen, grow suddenly stiff. Then a low chuckle reached Billy, and he lowered his gun with a gasp of amazement as a familiar voice sounded in a whisper.

"Easy, pard," that voice called. "I been lookin' all over for yuh. Figured yuh'd show up here sooner or later."

"Joe!" Billy whispered hoarsely. "Gosh, amigo! I've done some tall stewin' for a couple hours. What happened? How'd Cronan an' his crowd get Buck? Where yuh been?"

Joe explained hastily how Blue Cronan had escaped on the bucking horse, then told how the barkeep had stampeded his and Buck's mounts with the sawed-off shotgun.

"When Buck's hoss piled up, Cronan an' his gang nabbed him afore I could get my nag under control," the redhead finished. "Then I trailed 'em back here, found Doc Carter an' sent him out to see Mrs. Martin, an' have been stickin' around, waitin' for a chance to ketch sight o' yuh. Now, if we work careful, mebbe so we kin git Buck out o' this saloon."

"Knowin' that the doc has gone out to see Mrs. Martin shore is a relief," Billy sighed almost wearily. "Now we'll try gettin' Buck. I wonder—"

Billy Broke off, for there came the pound of hoofs from out in the main street, then a loud yell. Billy pressed his eye to the crack he had opened in the door, Joe following

suit by dropping to hands and knees and peering in just over the back-door step.

Now the Circle J pards saw the swinging doors fling open at the front of the room, and a squat, evil-faced hombre charged up to the bar, yelling something that instantly hushed all other noises. Blue Cronan's voice cut sharply through the silence. "If you are trying to make a grand-stand play——"

"I'm tellin' 'er straight, boss," the fellow addressed as Norton answered quickly. "I jist stumbled up on that ol' shack, that's all. But when I looked in a winder, I seen that Martin kid, Jimmy, an' his maw. Doc Carter an' a funny-lookin' little feller that I figure was a Chinee was in thar, too. If we hurry——"

"Hurry?" Blue Cronan laughed thinly. "That Martin woman and her son have succeeded in staying hidden for the past three weeks. But now that you've stumbled upon their hiding place, Norton, I shall pay them a little call. And it's going to be something besides pleading and coaxing this time. I imagine Mrs. Martin will talk rather than watch her son's toes roasted. Get horses, you fellows. We're paying the Martins a little call."

Billy whirled away from the door, pulling Joe Scott to his feet with a quick tug.

"Get yore hoss, Joe." Billy gritted, "an' get out to that shack as fast as yuh can ride. Yuh an' Sing Lo can take Mrs. Martin an' Jimmy back into the hills some place. Move! I'll look after Buck."

Without a word of protest, Joe turned and merged swiftly into the darkness. Billy waited until he heard the creak of a saddle, then the pound of hoofs. He turned now, slid along the saloon wall, and en-

tered a pitch-black passage that led between two buildings. He took two steps—then came to a rigid halt as something cold and dangerously sharp pressed against his throat.

"Make one more move," came a hissing voice, "an' I weel have the great extreme pleasure of cutting open the throat. I, Pablo Corillo, can see by the darkness like a cat, señor."

CHAPTER XI.

TUBBY GETS A JOB.

SHIVERS of dread coursed through Billy West's suddenly taut body, causing nerves to crawl beneath his skin. But he had the good sense to make no sudden movement, for the deadly, cold blade of a knife was pressed against his throat.

He could make out the dim outline of a man there before him—saw the extended shadow of the arm that was reaching out and holding that threatening knife. Could that man who called himself Pablo Corillo really see in the night like a cat? Billy wondered swiftly about that as he tensed his muscles, easing back from the pressure of the keen blade.

But as he moved back slowly, the shadow of the man before him advanced, and the cold steel blade remained touching his flesh.

From somewhere out in front of the saloon came laughter, then the snort of horses as half-drunken men swung up to saddles. Billy gritted his teeth, realizing that Blue Cronan and his heartless pack of killers were preparing to ride out to that little shack in the desert where Mrs. Martin lay suffering from the ravages of hunger and exposure.

But at the same time those thoughts pounded through Billy's mind, others came—cool, dangerous

thoughts that had to do with that man there before him. Forcing a grating laugh from his throat, he seemed to stagger back a half step.

"Pablo!" he growled, making his voice unusually thick. "Put up that knife, yuh locoed fool. What's the idee in tryin' ter butcher your friends? If the boss ketches yuh stoppin' me——"

A Spanish oath hissed through the night, and the knife moved slightly away from Billy's throat. Evidently Pablo could not see in the night like a cat, for he leaned forward, snarling something in his native tongue.

As the circular shadow of a great hat came forward, Billy West's right fist whizzed up and out with his whole muscular weight behind it. If he missed the Mexican's chin or face——

Crack! Billy's right forearm went numb almost to his elbow, and he staggered slightly from the solid impact of a blow that had landed squarely.

There came a pained grunt from the Mexican, then a limp form toppled against Billy as he stepped forward, left fist smashing out. Now the toppling form lurched crazily, scraped down a gritty wall, and became a shapeless mound at Billy's feet.

He grinned mirthlessly into the darkness, blew gently on skinned knuckles, and strode on down the dark passageway, gun out and ready to answer the next hombre who called a halt. But there was no one else there in the darkness, and Billy soon came out onto the hard dirt sidewalk.

He heard the muffled pound of shod hoofs, and glanced down the street just in time to see a shadowy group of riders whirl past lighted windows and head into the desert.

"Blue Cronan an' his skunky crew," Billy snarled softly. "I've got to get Buck an' make tracks from here. I wonder where——"

The Gila Saloon's swinging doors burst open, and a gangly jasper who was much the worse for liquor came reeling out. The fellow collided with Billy and started suarling insults, one hand yanking frantically at a holstered six-gun.

But the young boss of Circle J was taking no chances on having a fuss raised now. He whipped his already-drawn gun up, brought it down in a short, chopping motion. The drunk grunted gustily, then sprawled forward, landing with a dull thump.

"Too bad, señor," Billy muttered. "But yuh asked for it. Now yuh'll have a headache from somethin' besides booze."

Billy slid forward now, cocking his gun. In the brief instant when those swinging doors had been flung back a moment before, he had had a good chance to glimpse the interior of the saloon. And what he had seen was Tubby, the barkeep, waddling up and down behind the long bar, serving six or eight ratty-looking jaspers who looked like sheep-herders.

Billy shrewdly guessed that Blue Cronan had taken most of his gun slingers with him—taken them out there in the scarred desert hills to frighten and perhaps abuse Mrs. Martin and her son, Jimmy. And as Billy thought of that, he leaped against the swinging doors with such violence that one of them lost a hinge and sagged dejectedly.

"Reach!" Billy yelled, gun weaving swiftly from side to side. "Grab a rafter, hombres, or yuh'll be drawin' hot-lead tickets to Boot Hill. Lift 'em!"

Tubby squawked as if some one

had doused him with live coals, dropped a quart of liquor and two glasses, then moved as if to dive his pudgy hands beneath the bar top. But Tubby changed his mind when Billy's .45 spat flame-split thunder. Now the burly barkeep leaned weakly against the back bar, one hairy ear dribbling crimson, a look of genuine alarm on his evil face.

"Make another fool move like that, barkeep," Billy drawled unpleasantly, "an' yuh'll wake up with a harp in yore hands 'stead o' that scattergun yuh was reachin' for. Where's Buck Foster bein' held?"

The ragged-looking customers had cowered against a far wall, hands high in mute testimony that they had no fight with this cold-eyed young stranger who could bullet-lop a man's ear at ten or more paces. Billy gave the cowering men a swift glance, smiled coldly at them, and jerked his eyes back to the shaken Tubby.

Now Billy's gun roared the second time, and Tubby yelled in alarm as he felt a chunk of scorching hot lead comb through his greasy hair.

"Where's Buck Foster?" Billy snapped. "Yuh aim to talk, or do I notch that other ear?"

Tubby swallowed hard, wiggled his thick jaws a moment, then managed to get his tongue jerked loose from the roof of his mouth.

"Th-that ol' Foster gent is in the boss's private office yonder," he gulped. "But honest ter gosh, West, I can't git him out. That door is awful stout, an' the boss taken the key with him. I—I never had nothin' ter do with——"

"Yuh never had nothin' to do with honest work in yore misspent life, likely," Billy cut in. "But here's where yuh mend yore ways, fella. Waltz out from behind that bar and start buttin' that door. I

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reckon yore head must be harder than any ordinary wood."

Tubby stared, fidgeted uneasily, then came reluctantly around the end of the bar, casting a baleful look toward the thick door which led into Blue Cronan's private office.

"Yo're crazy, dang the luck!" he snarled at Billy. "I told yuh I can't git inter that room. An' if I did——"

"Try it," Billy advised. "Take a good run and ram yore shoulder into that door. Husky as yuh are, yuh can bust that door plumb down."

Tubby sniffed angrily, glared venomous hate at Billy, and moved down the room at a shuffling walk, insolently showing that he had no intention of launching a real attack on the solid-looking door. But just as the squat jasper was leaning forward, ready to lay his shoulder to the door, Billy's Colt crashed loudly. Tubby screeched wildly, then landed against that door with a wallop that jarred the whole house.

Billy's bullet had cut the slack of Tubby's trousers, barely missing skin. Now the burly hombre was picking himself up from the floor, eyes glazed from the jolt he had got by butting the door head on, oaths dribbling past writhing lips.

The ragged customers who had crouched against the wall were laughing loudly, though they were careful to keep their hands up.

"I—I'll kill yuh fer this, West!" Tubby snarled, feeling his bullet-torn hip pockets. "Jist wait——"

"Wait, nothin'," Billy snapped, cocking his gun deliberately. "I seen that door shake when yuh hit it. Now butt it some more, or get blistered with a bullet. Honest labor won't hurt yuh, so get busy, or I'll——"

Billy lifted his gun—and Tubby

lunged toward the door. But this time he stopped short, jammed one hand deep into a trousers pocket, and hauled out a big iron key. He poked the key into the lock, turned it, and flung the door back with a terrible oath.

But the next instant Tubby was flat on his back, a dazed expression on his face. Out of that windowless room, Buck Foster had leaped like a catamount, horny fists working like well-oiled pistons.

"Wa-hoo-o-o!" the Circle J veteran roared. "Thar's yore needin's, yuh swill-splashin' coyote! 'Now, by heifers, I'll whup the rest o' the gang. Where am the buzzards, Billy?"

"This way," Billy called, wheeling toward the back door. "An' get a gun offn that barkeep if he's got one. We're lockin' horns with Blue Cronan an' his hull bunch—unless they've already wiped out Joe an' Shige Lo. Shake a leg, Buck!"

CHAPTER XII.

DYNAMITE.

NEARLY twenty men fogged down a slope and reined sweaty horses to a halt there before a tumbledown little shack that showed many streamers of yellow light from its broken wall. Blue Cronan smiled wolfishly as he left his horse and stepped forward, a six-gun gripped in each sinewy hand.

A grizzled head had shown around the crumbling door frame for a moment, then disappeared hastily. Blue Cronan laughed gloatingly and cocked his guns. Cronan had recaptured those silver-inlaid weapons when he had taken Buck Foster prisoner earlier in the day. Now he held hem ready to deal instant death as he edged toward the ramshackle house in mincing steps.

"Come out of there, Doc Carter," Cronan called harshly. "I saw you peek out, and I know that you can hear me. I'm giving you a chance. Come out and you'll not be harmed."

Silence answered Cronan's harsh voice. He swore raspily and advanced until he was flat against a solid slab of the old house wall. His hirelings, snarling and milling nervously, started circling the place.

One of them, made bold by too much raw whisky, strode up to a window and poked a gun inside, thumb raking at the knurled hammer. But before that jasper could trigger, there came a shrill yelp of terror, then the crash of a gun.

The hombre who had poked his gun through the window tumbled backward with a gurgling screech, legs thrashing wildly as he struck the ground.

"That, Cronan, is our answer to your demand that I come out," came a level voice from within the old adobe. "Tom Martin's wife is in here, sick from exposure and starvation—thanks to your cowardly dealings. Why don't you show *your* head in one of the windows, you four-flushing snake?"

Blue Cronan stiffened there against the gritty wall, and bitter oaths dribbled past his suddenly white lips. He saw his hireling die beneath that window, recognized the deadly calm voice of lean old Doctor Carter.

But the cold-eyed gambler was not to be buffaloed into losing his temper. Forcing a contemptuous laugh, he slid farther along the wall until he could call through the door without exposing himself.

"There are twenty or so of us out here, Carter," he called sharply. "You know what we can do if we have to. But I'm a reasonable man.

Just have your patient tell us where her husband went to get that gold and we'll be on our way. I'll give you three minutes. Then——"

"Then," echoed Joe Scott's voice from inside the adobe, "yuh'll tell yore men to rush the place. My chink friend, Sing Lo, jist now tallied off one o' yore crew. How many more men will yuh send to their death before yuh git up nerve enough to show yore own head?"

Joe Scott had beaten Cronan and his men to the old adobe by no more than three minutes. Now the redhead crouched there inside the door, a cocked six-gun gripped and ready for instant action.

Sing Lo, almond-shaped eyes wide, face a sickly color, was across the room from Joe, gripping a short-barreled .44 that still trickled smoke. Doctor Carter, lean face set in grim lines, was keeping an eye on Mrs. Martin and Jimmy, seeing that they stayed in the best protected corner of the house.

"Gosh, Mr. Scott!" Jimmy Martin called excitedly. "Do yuh reckon there are really a lot o' hombres out there, or is Cronan jist lyin'? If I had a gun, mebbe I could sort o' help out. I wish——"

Mrs. Martin was a thin little woman whose sunken eyes held a strangely haunted look as she gazed first at the gray-haired doctor beside her, then at her son. But Mary Martin was a woman of true pioneer stock—one who did not frighten easily. She smiled wanly now at her son, reached out a pale hand, and patted his shoulder.

"Never mind, Jimmy," she said quietly enough. "Mr. Scott and Sing Lo can take care of those men outside. If Tom were only here, he——"

"You have about one minute left," Blue Cronan's voice drifted

inside the old adobe. "Just to show you that I mean business, I'm giving you a chance to look this over. The next one will be placed against this wall—with a fuse burning."

Plop! Almost at Joe Scott's feet the oblong yellow thing landed with a soft thud.

The redhead stared in genuine horror, a gasp passing his lips as he looked. Doctor Carter groaned in alarm. Sing Lo yelped. For there on the floor lay a fat, greasy cylinder—a stick of dynamite!

Joe grabbed the thing, hurled it back outside, shivering as if he was chilling. Then Blue Cronan's voice sounded again, and the gambler was laughing gratingly.

"Don't like the looks of that powder, eh?" he called. "I don't blame you. This old shack will crumble easily. Ready to talk, Mrs. Martin?"

Joe Scott snarled something and leaped to his feet. But Doctor Carter grabbed him and pulled him back. Mrs. Martin cried out once, then became deathly white as she realized the meaning of the threat.

"Jimmy!" she gasped. "If they set off dynamite against these walls, doctor, my son will be—be killed! Surely they would not dare do such a thing. Perhaps I had better——"

"Time's up," Blue Cronan yelled fiendishly. "I'm lighting this fuse right now. You can't say that you didn't have fair warning. If any of you try to run outside, my men will——"

"Wait, yuh skunk!" Jimmy Martin screeched shrilly. "Yuh can't kill maw like this. I'll tell where dad's mine is. Go ten miles north—find the ol' Yellow Bird Mine. Then four-five miles south to a range o' black hills. There——"

From outside came a gloating chuckle, then Blue Cronan's voice

ordering his men to mount. Horses plunged and snorted about the yard for a moment. Then something came whizzing through an end window and rolled smoking and hissing across the floor.

Joe Scott leaped for that smoking bundle, grabbed it up and heaved it straight through the open door with all his might. A moment later, the whole earth seemed to rock and roll under a mighty explosion.

CHAPTER XIII.

GUN TRAP.

THE first red rays of the rising sun showed three grim-faced, heavy-eyed cowboys squatting on a high ridge that overlooked a range of black lava hills. Billy West rubbed at his smarting eyes and turned to Buck and Joe, who were both nodding as they sat shivering in the early daylight.

"This must be the place, Joe," Billy gritted. "Those hills yonder, I mean. Now's yore chance to do some trailin'. If Cronan an' his pack have found Tom Martin by now——"

Billy shrugged, turning toward Danger and the other two horses that stood in a little hollow below the rim of the ridge. Billy and Buck had arrived at the tumble-down adobe less than five minutes after Blue Cronan had tried to blow Mrs. Martin, Jimmy, Sing Lo, Doctor Carter, and Joe Scott to smithereens with dynamite the night before.

The doctor and Sing Lo had been left to take Mrs. Martin and Jimmy to some safe place, while Billy, Buck, and Joe took the trail of the cowardly Cronan gang.

Now the three Circle J saddle pards were studying the rugged landscape through bloodshot eyes,

trying to pick out certain landmarks that had been described to them by Jimmy Martin and his mother.

But those tumbled black hills down there all looked alike, and Billy lost little time in wondering what to do next. Joe Scott was an expert at reading sign, and he could save the Circle J waddies much time by following Cronan's trail into those black hills.

It was not necessary for Joe even so much as to look for sign. Billy was just turning away from the crest of the ridge when his eyes caught a movement on a flat a good half mile to the south. Now the young boss of Circle J stood rigidly erect, watching that moving dot with the utmost care.

"That looks like a man on foot—sort o' crawlin' along, in fact," he said, pointing. "Or am I goin' loco? What an hombre would be crawlin' out there in that cholla for is somethin' I can't savvy. I wonder——"

"Huh!" Buck Foster snorted. "I'll bet that's one o' Cronan's gang tryin' ter sneak up on us. Or meb-be it's one o' the skunks I crippled yesterday, him havin' no better sense than ter try ridin' out hyar with the rest."

"All yuh crippled was yoreself, yuh walrus," Joe snapped. "An' what in thunder would an hombre be crawlin' out in plain sight for, if he was tryin' to sneak up on us? Yore brains, if any, are shore gittin' rusty."

"Am thet so?" Buck came back, eyes beginning to snap. "Yuh brockle-faced pest, I savvies ketchin' crooks a heap better than yuh does. If it wa'n't fer me, Cronan an' his hull gang would git away. Now I'm goin' down thar an' nab thet walloper what's tryin' ter sneak up on us."

Buck turned as if to go, but a

sharp word from Billy halted him. The boss of Circle J had been watching that crawling figure below them, and something in the man's painfully slow progress told Billy that there was something decidedly amiss.

Yet he realized that the fellow down there in the cholla flats might be crawling simply to attract attention while the rest of Blue Cronan's gang crept up within shooting distance unobserved. And Billy had barely thought of that possibility when the sharp blast of a heavy-caliber rifle split the morning silence, waking echoes from the scarred hills.

Billy and his pards ducked, though they would have felt or heard the bullet before the echoes of the gun could have reached their ears.

"Skunk!" Buck Foster snarled, clawing out his gun and glaring about. "I knowed thet jasper was up ter somethin'."

Now came the roaring bellow of many guns, and the Circle J pards were suddenly on their feet, racing down the steep hillside as fast as they dared. That hombre who had been crawling across the flat ground below was suddenly dodging and squirming about crazily, while spouts of sand and dirt lifted all about him.

Once the fellow dropped flat, lay still for a moment, then began that slow crawling again, headed this time toward a shallow gully that twisted across the flat.

"Somebody is tryin' ter kill that poor feller," Joe Scott gritted. "I'll bet a hoss Blue Cronan an' his men are handlin' them rifles, the low-down skunks!"

"Jist—a trick," Buck panted, trying to keep up with Billy and Joe. "Thet skunk will open up on us in

a minute. An' when he does, I'm pluggin' him center. I'll l'arn the varmint——"

Faint yells lifted from somewhere beyond the cholla flat, then slugs of hot lead were snarling and humming about the Circle J pards. Now Billy saw a band of horsemen charging out of the mouth of a little canyon three hundred yards away.

In the lead, rolling cruel spurs down the sides of his straining mount, came Blue Cronan, a six-gun gripped in each hand. Behind Cronan came twelve or fourteen riders, several of them levering Winchester as they rode.

"Quick, yuh two!" Billy yelled to his pards. "We'll get to that hombre yonder—try to help him to that big ditch yonder. If that gang gets us surrounded here in the open——"

Now the three Circle J waddies redoubled their efforts and soon reached the man who had been crawling so painfully over the bur-carpeted ground. The man was crouched in the shallow ditch—a stockily built fellow, who turned hate-filled blue eyes on the Circle J pards as they raced to his side.

Crimson trickled from a fresh wound on the man's left cheek, and his legs were stretched stiffly behind him, bound to the knees in wide strips of heavy canvas.

"Plug me, yuh varmints, an' git it over with!" came a rasping voice as Billy and Joe dropped to the fellow's side. "I spotted yuh and yore mangy boss, Blue Cronan, snoopin' towards my cabin jist at daylight. Thought mebbe I could crawl off an' hide, but looks like——"

The fellow reached out a big, hardened hand, and Joe Scott groaned in pain as thick fingers wrenched and bit into his shoulder muscles. The redhead tumbled back, tried to pull free. But that

hand held like the grim jaws of a bear trap.

"Easy, fella!" Billy West snapped sharply. "Let go Joe's shoulder. Hear me? We're friends, and we're shore not any o' Blue Cronan's buz-zard crew. I've got a hunch that yo're Jimmy Martin's dad. An' if yuh are——"

Plop! Dust flew from the side of Billy's shirt, and he staggered, dropped to his knees.

Through glazed eyes he saw riders whirling to the right and left—heard Blue Cronan's voice lift in a gloating shout.

Billy's hand lifted to his side, came away stained with crimson. He saw Joe wrench loose from the crippled man—saw the redhead claw out his gun and thumb back the hammer. Buck Foster was already in action, hurling blazing lead and insults at the riders who were beginning to circle Indian fashion.

Now Billy's own hand dropped and came up gripping his gun. He set his teeth against the pain in his side, and fired at a rider who had stopped suddenly to aim a rifle. The rifleman cried out shrilly, folded at the middle and tumbled to the ground as his horse leaped in alarm. Billy grinned mirthlessly and deliberately cocked his smoking gun.

"They've—got us—in a tough spot," he gritted through pain-whitened lips. "But I reckon—we can blister a few hides, anyway. Plug Cronan—if yuh see—the snaky cuss!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A BULLET SHOW-DOWN.

JOE SCOTT turned angry eyes on the crippled man who lay there in the ditch. The redhead poked out spent shells and reloaded a powder-heated Colt.

"If yuh hadn't grabbed me an'

started actin' the fool," Joe growled, "we'd 'a' had time to get yuh over to that big ditch yonder. Do yuh still figure that me an' my pards, here, are Cronan's friends?"

"I—I'm shore sorry, boys," the blocky man said thickly, genuine sorrow in his eyes. "I've shore messed things up, I reckon. When yuh mentioned my boy, Jimmy, I begun to savvy right then——"

"Then yuh *are* Tom Martin, eh?" Joe asked, sorry now that he had spoken so sharply to the cripple. And to cover up his embarrassment, Joe told who he and his pards were and how they happened to be out there in the hills. At the news of how his wife and son had suffered Tom Martin groaned as if he had received a physical blow, and great beads of moisture dampened his pale face.

"I'll kill Blue Cronan fer what he's done!" Martin snarled. "The dirty, sidewindin' thief needs to be staked in the sun until he cooks. I busted both my ankles three months ago, or I'd 'a' been home, puttin' a stop to Cronan's devilin' my family. Got my legs caught in a boulder slide—smashed both ankles bad."

Tom Martin had seen a bit too much of suffering and the silence of the lava hills. He babbled almost childishly—talked of the fortune in raw gold he had cached—called to his wife and son as if he expected them to come striding to his side.

Billy and Joe let the man ramble on, realizing that he would be all right as soon as he had had a few days with his family.

But would Tom Martin see his family again? Billy gritted his teeth as he realized anew the almost hopeless task before him. He could take Buck and Joe, make a run for cover, and in all probability they would escape from this gun trap in which

they now found themselves. But doing that meant leaving Tom Martin—a helpless cripple and unarmed—to the savage human wolves who were even now creeping stealthily through the desert growth there on the little flat.

Two of Cronan's men were now motionless heaps out there in the bright sun, and at least two more had carried Circle J lead back from that first mad charge. Now Cronan and his gunnies were off there in the cholla and greasewood clumps, trying, perhaps, to figure out just how three cowboys had sent them scotting for cover so quickly.

Joe Scott had drawn a hasty but effective bandage of knotted neck-kerchiefs about the flesh wound in Billy's side. Buck Foster, growling and fuming at the sudden quiet after the brief but hot battle, was peering suspiciously toward clumps of cholla and greasewood, A5 cocked and ready to flame at short notice.

"If we'd had sense enough to ride down here, 'stead o' comin' on foot," Billy grated, "we'd have at least an even break o' gettin' Martin out o' here. But as it is——"

"Say, why can't I go git our hosses?" Joe Scott asked quickly. "By golly, Billy! I could drop over into that big ditch there, work up to the hills yonder an' have our broncs down here in no time. I'll start now, too."

"Thar yuh go, swipin' me ideas, yuh flop-cared pest!" Buck Foster yelled. "I was jist gittin' ready ter start after them hosses myself. I kin do it a heap better—— Ow!"

A waspish something tugged at Buck's mangy bearskin vest, plucking out a tuft of hair that settled lazily down in the still air. Now there came the crack of a rifle from a clump of cholla off to the left, and Buck's six-gun bounced into flaming

life. From behind the cactus came a squall of alarm, and the rifleman was seen to go scotting for a healthier spot.

"Hey, West!" came a hail from somewhere out in the whitish-gray choila forest. "This is Cronan speaking. Can you hear?"

"Shore kin hear," Buck Foster roared before Billy could answer the gambler. "An', by heifers, hyar's where I takes yuh prisoner ag'in! I'm comin'!"

Billy made a motion with his left hand, and Joe Scott pounced on Buck, dragging the ranty veteran quickly down into the shallow ditch. Now Billy squatted on his heels, most of his body protected from bullets by the rim of the gully.

"I'm listenin', Cronan," he called. "What's on yore mind?"

"Take your two punchers and get out of there," came the brittle reply. "My men and I have the advantage of odds, and we'll soon settle all of you. But I'll give you and your punchers a chance to save your scalps. Get out of there as fast as you can, and I'll kill the man who tries to stop you. Martin is the man I want, not you Montanans. What's your answer?"

Buck and Joe had been glaring and snarling insults at each other, Buck still insisting that he was going out and drill Blue Cronan. But the two punchers forgot their private quarrel now, and were both turning to Billy, fully expecting him to tell Blue Cronan a few things for suggesting that Circle J run out on a helpless man.

And then Buck and Joe got the surprise of their lives. For Billy West stood up suddenly, jamming his gun into its holster.

"Yo're right, Cronan," Billy called, and his two pards gasped like fish out of water. "Yuh hon-

bres shore have got us outnumbered bad, so I reckon I'll take yore advice about doin' some movin'. This Martin hombre is unarmed, so I'll just leave him lyin' here in the ditch."

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster croaked hoarsely. "Am yuh loco, Billy? Shorely yuh don't aim—— By heifers! I'll not go an' leave Martin hyar fer them buzzards. Yuh an' Joe Scott kin go, if yuh wants to, but I'm stayin' right hyar."

Tom Martin turned a stricken face toward Billy. Then a look of utter contempt crept slowly into his eyes.

"I couldn't blame yuh, West, if yuh went on an' left me fight this out alone," he said steadily. "But if yuh was half a man, yuh'd leave me a gun or two an' some shells. If Cronan lays his hands on me, I—I'm a goner."

"I'll be hyar," Buck Foster began, face still mirroring surprised anger at Billy's decision. "An' Cronan will git a bullet if he tries—— Hey, what the—— Ouch!"

Billy had stepped swiftly forward, grabbed Buck's gun wrist and forced the veteran's hand back and up in a secure lock. Now Billy plucked Buck's gun from numbing fingers and tucked it inside his own shirt.

And with a sharp, sudden shove, Billy was taking the veteran out of the ditch and heading him toward the larger and deeper ditch about seventy yards away. Joe Scott strode beside Billy, a puzzled, questioning look in his blue eyes. Buck roared and faunched, but he dared not try escaping, lest he wrench his shoulder and arm.

"Lively! Step along!" Billy hissed, and forced Buck into a stumbling run.

"This settles it," the veteran

growled. "I'm drawin' me time pronto. I ain't workin' fer nobody—— Awk!"

Billy had shoved suddenly, then released his hold on Buck's arm. The fuming old ranny cried out in alarm, then landed feet-first in a ditch that hid him completely. Now Billy and Joe leaped into the ditch, and the young boss of Circle J turned to Buck with a friendly smile.

"Buck," he chuckled, "yuh shore are a good actor. We fooled Cronan an' his gang easy. An' I'll bet Joe didn't even savvy the play."

Buck looked thunderstruck. He didn't savvy at all, and was on the point of saying so in no uncertain terms when he happened to glance suspiciously at Joe Scott. The red-head was staring blankly, as if he were completely taken by surprise.

But in reality, Joe was doing a bit of acting for Buck's benefit. The red-head had never believed for an instant that Billy West would go away and leave crippled Tom Martin to Blue Cronan and his killers. And Joe had gumption enough to see that Billy was simply smoothing troubled waters by pretending that Buck had been in on some bit of teamwork.

"I didn't have time out there to tell yuh rannies all my plan." Billy smiled thinly, passing over Buck's gun. "If we'd stood there jawin' for even a minute, Cronan an' his gang would have been suspicious of us. But I thought mebbe by grabbin' Buck an' havin' him act us, we could fool 'em."

"Shore we fooled the coyotes, Billy." Buck nodded, giving Joe Scott a withering look. "I savvied right off what yuh was doin'. Thet's why I set up a holler. But it's a wonder this flop-eared pest didn't gum the works by——"

"Now," Billy gritted, "we'll give Cronan an' his gunnies a taste o' their own medicine. Look at 'em fall for our trick!"

Buck and Joe leaped to Billy's side, peering cautiously over the rim of the ditch. And what they saw set them growling in anger. For Blue Cronan and his gunmen were swarming toward Tom Martin like wolves making for a hamstrung moose.

Billy watched until the evil gang had bunched around the floundering cripple, then gave a low-voiced command. Like three shadows, he and his two pards rose above the rim of the ditch and darted forward at a hard run. Nor did Blue Cronan and his ugly crew sense their danger until the Circle J pards were within twenty yards of them, cocked guns out and gripped for action.

Then an undersized little jasper looked up, yelled wildly—and set into motion a rearing cyclone of blazing guns and shouting men. Cronan's pack did the natural thing—tried to run. But they crashed into one another and fought among themselves in sheer panic.

Billy and his two saddle pards advanced into the very muzzles of flaming guns, their own weapons hurling flame-lanced replies to the bullets that sang about them. Then, coming from almost the center of that milling mass of swearing, yelling men, Billy saw Blue Cronan.

Billy's lips jerked into a hard line as he halted, guns whipping down. He had counted his shots, knew that he had only one unfired cartridge left. And if he missed, or only wounded Cronan slightly—

"I'm killing you, West!" Blue Cronan's harsh shout lifted above the turmoil. "Yuh tricked me, made a fool of me. So——"

Cronan came to a halt, silver-inlaid guns whipping down in a chopping motion. Billy West crouched, snapped a thumb to his own hammer. One shell—

Wham! Bra-aa-ug! Bang! Three shots blended as one.

Billy staggered back, an ugly red welt appearing along his neck as if by magic. But his one shell had been plenty.

Blue Cronan swayed dizzily for a moment, then crashed over sideways, a red-edged hole squarely between his evil eyes. Billy laughed a bit shakily, turned on one heel—then stared in amazement.

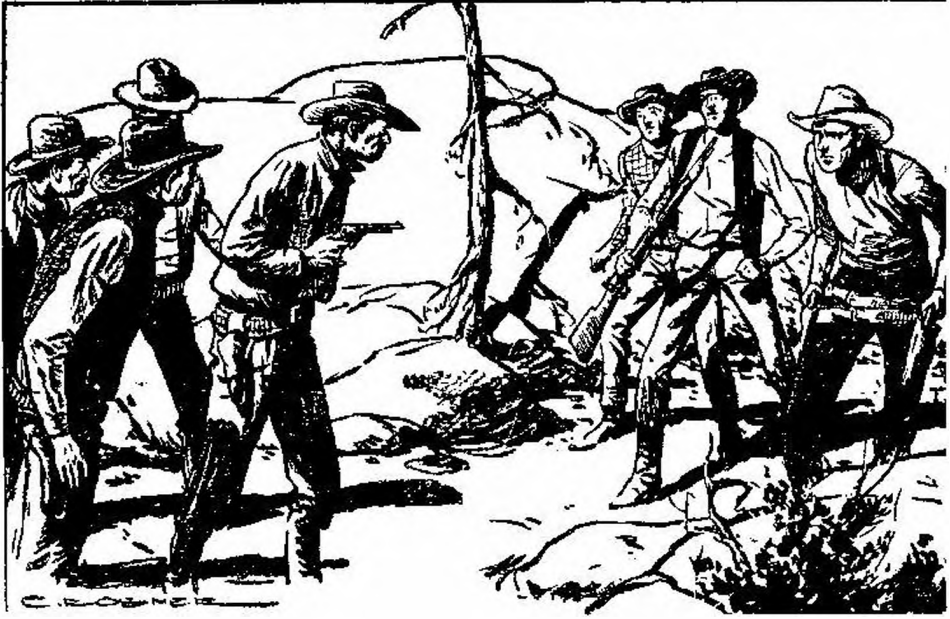
He hadn't noticed until now how still it had grown. But a single glance told him why. Those of Blue Cronan's men who were still able to stand were reaching grimy hands skyward, their evil faces pale with fear.

Before the surviving killers stood Joe Scott and Buck Foster, both showing signs of slight wounds, but both able to hold steady guns.

"West, I shore want to apologize to yuh, amigo," Tom Martin called in a happy voice. "I thought—thought yuh turned yaller, took out an' left me without a gun tuh save yore own hide. But now——"

"But now," Billy laughed, "I'll help my pards tie up these polecats they've got bayed, an' we'll soon be headin' back for Alkali. Mebbeso there won't be quite so many skunk tracks around that town after this."

Buck Foster may be a hot-headed ol' gopher, but his courage an' gun savvy shore come in handy when his Circle J pards are in a pinch. An' nothin' sets him on the prod quicker than a crooked deal handed out ter folks thet can't defend theirselves proper. An' Billy West, Joe Scott, an' Sing Lo are right with him in battlin' fer the under dawg. Watch fer 'em ter be back soon in another thrillin' Circle J story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



One Use fer a Squirrel Gun

A "Lum Yates" Story

By Collins Hafford

Author of "Two Bags Of Christmas Grub," etc.

THE hoarse bellow of a six-gun followed the sharper bark of a rifle. Once—twice—three times the heavy-caliber short gun roared its challenge. And the biting answer of the rifle followed swiftly.

It sounded as if an important argument was being settled in gun smoke, there across the abrupt, rocky hill, beyond the deep-cut arroyo. And in truth, that very thing was happening.

Lum Yates—slim and dark-haired puncher from the Bar M—held the stock of his long-barreled squirrel

rifle tight against his shoulder as he squeezed the trigger.

And "Spot" Herndon—freckle-faced, stocky Montana rider—cuddled the butts of his six-guns in his stubby-fingered hands. His usually smiling face was grave as he made the short guns talk.

Zeke Olroyd, gangly range buddy of both young punchers, was the referee of the argument, and a real job it was. For the argument was one of a hundred years' standing, and it had never been settled yet.

Spot Herndon, a newcomer to the

Bar M, contended that six-guns were much more efficient than a rifle. Lum Yates, the slim Missouri puncher, took exception. They were settling it, here in the foothills.

But they were not going at it in the regular manner of training their weapons on each other. The argument was friendly. The cowpokes had unbounded respect and affection for each other.

For ten minutes, the guns had been barking and roaring. At last Spot Herndon holstered his six-guns, and Lum dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground.

"I've done used them twenty cartridges I brought from camp, Lum. An' I reckon yo're runnin' short, too." Spot Herndon turned to Zeke. "What d'yuh say, Zeke? Which would yuh rather face—Lum's rifle, or my smoke wagons?"

Zeke shook his head slowly. "Thet all depends, Spot. Anywhere farther than twenty yards, I wouldn't be much scared of yore guns, and Lum can drill yore hat at a full two hundred. But right close, yo're plenty pizen."

"Thet's jes' what I always 'lowed," said Lum, with a grin. "There ain't no comparison. Both is right smaht handy—in their place. We've been tryin' to settle somethin' thet's been argued ever since ol' Colonel Colt whacked the end off a gun bar'l, an' put a one-hand grip onto it."

Spot Herndon answered the grin. "Yuh keep yore pea-shooter, Lum, an' I'll keep these here smoke wagons. We'll get 'em, goin' an' comin'."

"Yep. But right naow, we'd betteh be haidin' back fo' thet herd of cow critters. We've done been neglectin' 'em, while we was holdin' this heah shootin' match."

The three Bar M punchers would

not have been so carefree and happy, had they seen the stocky, hard-eyed man who sprawled on the flat top of a huge rock, fifty yards away.

They would have been even more worried, had they caught the evil smirk of the broad, flat face. And they would have raced at top speed back to their little camp, had they known that their words had carried to the man's ears and brought a great satisfaction to his evil, twisted mind.

But there was no reason to suspect the presence of evil, out there where the foothills began to give way to the higher peaks, piled wave upon wave, as far as the eye could see to the west.

Six days ago, they had left the Bar M, down on the flat country. They were heading for Paradise Valley, hazing fifty grass-fat steers ahead of them. The Bar M range was just a little crowded, and "Sandy" McClure, the peppery old owner of the spread, remembered the snug little valley.

He had bought it several years ago and had used it often to finish for market those steers that he was sure he could sell up in the high country.

The young punchers were taking their time. Five or six hours a day were as long as they pushed the steers. They planned on getting them to Paradise Valley in as good condition as when they left the Bar M range.

That day, they had stopped in the middle of the afternoon. A little valley, green with lush grass and watered by a swift mountain stream, offered a perfect place to graze the steers for the night.

And that was when they decided to settle the argument between squirrel rifle and six-gun. And that

was when danger and evil stalked them, unknown and unannounced.

Four pairs of keen eyes had been watching them, from the very minute they entered the foothills. Four men wanted that herd of fat steers.

Three of the evil skulkers were willing even to commit murder to secure the animals. They had discussed it the night before. But "Faro" Gunther, the leader of the hard-bitten outfit, had voted down the suggestion.

"Rustlin' cow stuff is all right, hombres," he had rasped. "But killin' is somethin' else again. If we'd plug them young cowpokes, we'd have the whole range onto our necks. We'll jest trail along an' wait for somethin' to happen."

"Why not jest ride down onto 'em an' bluff 'em out?" growled "Black Jack" Riggs. "They ain't nothin' but kids."

"Which shows yuh ain't up on yore history," grunted Faro Gunther. "Thet thar slim, black-haired ranny is Lum Yates, from the Bar M. He's the waddy thet downed Slash Lukey, a couple of years ago. Plenty smart an' a heap of sand, thet Yates hombre."

Then that afternoon had brought the chance Faro Gunther was waiting for. He had spied on the Bar M riders for two days, but it was worth it.

As Lum and his two companions headed back for camp, Faro Gunther was speeding toward the hide-out not a hundred yards from where the Bar M punchers were camped.

Breathless, Faro Gunther raced up to his three men. The words fairly tumbled over one another as he barked his orders:

"Grab yore smoke wagons, hombres! We're goin' after them steers! Those cowpokes are a half mile from camp—an' out of ammunition!"

They leaped to their feet. There was no further explanation necessary. This was the opportunity they had waited for. A chance to run off the stock, without the necessity of swapping lead with the Bar M punchers.

When Lum, Zeke, and Spot Herndon topped the last ridge and looked down into the green little valley, there was nothing to tell them of danger ahead.

The cattle grazed, well bunched and perfectly contented. Their horses stood lazily, cropping an occasional mouthful of grass. Their bed rolls were just as they had left them.

No sign of danger—except the strange behavior of the little yellow dog that trotted at Lum's heels. But Lum and Zeke knew what those deep-throated growls meant. And Spot Herndon had heard them once before.

The tiny animal had been a bit nervous for three days. But Lum had laid it to the strange surroundings. Nothing but danger, very close, indeed, would bring these warning growls from Job's throat, however.

Lum halted abruptly and dropped to his knees beside the little dog. His hand rested on Job's head, and he felt the hair rise erect beneath his fingers.

"Yo're smellin' dangeh, Job," he breathed. "Yo' ain't nevch give me a false warnin'."

Job's growls became deeper and still more ferocious. He stood, stiff-legged, on the crest of the hill. His usually soft brown eyes fairly blazed his wrath.

Lum got slowly to his feet. He looked at Zeke, now round-eyed and tense. His gaze swept to Spot Herndon. The freckle-faced young waddy was caressing the butts of

his six-guns, and his blue eyes were bright with excitement.

Lum shook his head slowly. His own face was grave, and his brow was furrowed with thought.

"Theah's dangelh mighty close, waddies. But fo' the life of me, I don't know wheah. It looks peaceable an' quiet, down theah in the valley. An' we ain't seen a soul since we left the Bar M."

"Mc, I wouldn't mind a little excitement, jest to break the monotony," chuckled Spot Herndon.

"Yo're liable to get it," said Lum evenly. "But I'd be a heap happier, ifn I knowed which direction it was comin' from."

"An' I'd feel better, if I was where I could get thet Lightnin' hoss between my knees," said Zeke softly.

"You're right, son," answered Lum. "Let's make tracks fo' camp, pronto."

They raced down the slope and out onto the flat floor of the little valley. Nothing had happened yet. Everything looked just as it had two hours ago. Lum's roving eyes had not discovered a movement to mark the presence of danger.

They sped for their bed rolls, seventy yards down the valley. With Lum in the lead, they circled a huge boulder that barred their path.

Then they stopped short, as a hoarse voice barked an order:

"Stay put, hombres—an' hoist yore hands!"

II.

A deep breath hissed from Lum's lips, as he looked into the glittering, evil eyes of Faro Gunther. As he slowly raised his hands, his gaze swept the other three. They were just as hard-bitten and evil as their leader.

But odds seemed to make little difference to fire-eating Spot Her-

ndon. He relied on the speed of his draw and his accuracy with his six-guns. More than once he had faced as many fairly good gunmen and come out victorious.

Of these four, only Faro Gunther really had guns drawn and ready. And the leader seemed to direct his whole attention to Lum.

Spot Herndon's hands darted to his holsters. And at the moment of the draw, he crouched low. His guns snapped into his hands with lightning speed. His lips writhed in killing wrath as he squeezed the triggers.

Click! The hammers clicked on empty chambers. And Faro Gunther's hoarse laugh echoed in the hills.

"Yuh draw mighty pretty, hombre. But speed don't count when yore guns are empty." Then his laugh died, and his voice held deadly menace. "Now yuh better grab for a cloud, like yore pardners, unless yuh're honin' to stop a slug!"

Spot Herndon jammed his useless guns bitterly into their holsters. Wrath at his own carelessness, as well as at the rustlers, flared up in his brain. Then his hands went high.

Lum, Zeke, and Spot Herndon were forced to stand helplessly by as the rustlers looted their bed rolls. Spot Herndon grunted bitterly as he watched Faro Gunther cram his store of cartridges into his own pockets.

When the outlaws had taken everything of value, Faro Gunther turned to Lum.

"Yo're lucky, after all," he rasped. "Mebbe yore guns bein' empty saved yore lives. We didn't want to plug yuh, but we'd have done it, rather than lose them steers."

"Yo'—yo' ain't rustlin' ouah herd,

are yo'?" queried Lum, his heart sinking.

"What did yuh think we jumped yuh for? Just for the few things yuh had in yore bed rolls? O' course we're takin' the steers. Know where we can get thirty dollars a head for 'em. Them hosses—they look right good. Reckon we'll keep them for ourselves."

"Not—not the hosses, too!" gasped Lum. "Yo' ain't aimin' to set us afoot, way out heah in the hills!"

Faro Gunther grinned wickedly. "Reckon yuh can make it back in time. We're honin' for a good, long start, anyway."

"But thet blue hoss of mine—he's an outlaw. There cain't nobody but me ride him. He'll kill yuh, sho'."

Once more Faro Gunther grinned. "I'll take my chances on tamin' thet critter. I've rode 'em as bad as they come."

Now he turned to his men. "Hustle them hosses of ours from behind the rocks, hombres. Let's get goin'. Each one of us will lead one of these Bar M hosses, after we get the steers started."

Helpless, and stricken, the three Bar M waddies watched the outlaws haze the steers out of the little valley and head them into the hill trail. Lum fairly boiled with wrath when the leader himself dallied the blue horse's halter rope around his saddle horn.

"Yo' can take him," he muttered beneath his breath. "But yo' cain't keep him—much less ride him! There ain't no picket rope thet can hol' Snake, once he heahs my whistle."

As they topped the notch in the ridge, Faro Gunther turned in his saddle and yelled back derisively:

"When yuh get back to the Bar M, give ol' Sandy McClure

Faro Gunther's compliments! An' tell him he'd better send *men*—plenty of 'em—next time!"

Then the outlaws dropped down the other slope and were gone. Lum turned to his two companions. His words were low and even, but a thread of steel ran through his voice:

"Thet's what we get fo' actin' like two-year-ol's—out shootin' at a mark an' usin' all ouah ammunition! If they hadn't knowed yore guns was empty, Spot, they'd neveh have jumped us."

"But how about yore gun, Lum? Yuh used all yore cartridges, too!"

Lum shook his head. "Not thet it makes any difference, but there's still one bullet in thet ol' rifle. My pap used to say thet a smaht man always saves one shot. But it wasn't smahtness with me—jes' habit."

"Yuh got one bullet left?" barked Spot Herndon. "Then why didn't yuh let 'em have it? Why didn't yuh plug thet ugly Faro Gunther?"

"Thet'd been plenty foolish, Spot. Likely got us all plugged. They didn't want to shoot us, else they wouldn't have hung aroun' as long as they did, waitin' to get us dead to rights. But they'd have done it ifn we'd have pushed 'em."

Spot Herndon nodded slowly. He realized the wisdom of Lum's words, even though his fiery temper would have forced him to shoot if he had held a loaded rifle.

"Reckon there ain't nothin' to do but head back toward the Bar M," said Spot Herndon wearily.

"Thet's what them rustlers think, an' thet's jes' why we ain't goin' to do it," answered Lum slowly. "We're follerin' 'em an' waitin' fo' a chance, jes' like they did. Sandy McClure tol' us to haze them steers to Paradise Valley, an' we've got to do it."

"But they got guns, Lum, an' all we've got is jes' one bullet in yore —" Zeke stopped his words abruptly. His eyes widened as he saw the expression on Lum's face.

A dozen times or more, Zeke had seen the same far-away expression in Lum's eyes, had noted the out-thrust lower lip, and the furrows of thought on his brow. And he knew exactly what it meant.

Lum's keen brain was busy on some plan to turn the tables upon the four outlaws. And Zeke had perfect faith in Lum's ability—faith founded on experience.

Spot Herndon opened his mouth to speak, but Zeke stopped him, with a finger to his lips. The two young punchers stood silent, until Lum began to talk slowly, as if speaking his thoughts aloud:

"Them hombies'll suppose, of course, that we're headin' back fo' the Bar M. They're watchin' from some ridge right now. I don't doubt, an' we'll have to make out like we're takin' the back trail.

"But aftch we start, they'll fo'get about us. Likely they've got a hideout wheah they keep their stolen cattle until they fin' a good market fo' 'em, an' they'll make fo' it.

"We'll give 'em a full day's staht, an' then we'll trail 'em. It's right curious how much odds a surprise gives yuh. Them rustlers proved that when they jumped us. Now mebbe we can surprise them."

"But won't we lose track of them in the rocks ifn we wait a day?" queried Spot Herndon impatiently.

Lum shook his head. "We can track 'em jes' as well a week from now as we could to-morrer nawn-in'—which ain't any at all. But we've got the bes' tracker on the range." His gaze dropped to the little yellow dog at his feet.

"That's right! I never thought of Job," answered Spot. "I'm willin' to foller yore lead."

"All right. Then make up a pack of what yo' can carry right comfortable. We'll leave the rest until we get back—with the steers an' ouah hosses."

In a scant ten minutes, the three Bar M punchers were ready to take the trail. As Lum hoisted the fifty-pound pack to his shoulders, he grinned at Spot Herndon.

"If things work out, Spot, mebbe we'll be able to prove which is best—my rifle-gun or yore smoke wag-ons."

"Yuh—yuh mean——"

"Mebbe we'll each get to do a little trick shootin', if we're lucky."

"But I ain't got no cartridges, Lum," answered Spot, bewildered.

"That's a fac', Spot. But we'll have to tend to that. I'm mos' sho' I read that theah Faro Gunther right, an' I know he packs a .45. I've looked into enough six-gun muzzles to tell."

"But mine are .44s, Lum. His cartridges wouldn't fit my gun, no more than mine would fit his."

"That's what I was thinkin' of," said Lum slowly.

But as much as Spot Herndon questioned Lum on the meaning of his words, Lum did not explain further. "I might have guessed wrong, Spot, an' then yo'd laugh at me."

The Bar M punchers took the back trail. They walked slowly and more than a little awkwardly. They were not accustomed to this mode of travel, and high boot heels were not made for walking.

Although Spot Herndon complained at the distance Lum led them back toward the flat country, Lum continued doggedly.

"We don't know how long they'll be watchin', Spot, an' we cain't af-

ford to take chances. Ouah whole chance rests on surprise."

But when a half dozen ridges and as many valleys had unreeled behind their lagging steps, Lum turned from the trail and began circling. Spot's and Zeke's spirits rose. The tiresome back-tracking was finished.

When night finally dropped over the jagged peaks to the west, the Bar M punchers were back even with the little valley where they had camped. But it was a full mile to their right and hidden behind a saw-tooth granite ridge.

Another mile, and they circled to the right to pick up the trail of the stolen cattle. So far, Lum had been guided by his sense of direction and distance. But now he could trust those senses no further.

He called the little yellow dog to his side. "Go fin' the herd, Job! Fin' 'em, feller!"

In the deepening dusk, Job circled, nose to the ground. Lum was sure they must be very close to the path the rustlers had taken, nor was he mistaken.

In a scant five minutes, Job's deep-throated growl told Lum that the little animal had picked up the trail. The slim puncher heaved a sigh of relief.

"We'll bed down fo' the night, waddies," he said softly. "An' come sunup, we'll take to the trail. I got a hunch it won't be a long one, an' we'll need ouah rest when we come to its end."

The young punchers could hardly wait to spread their blankets. The miles of trudging afoot over the hills and valleys had almost exhausted them. Hardly had they sprawled beneath their tarps when they fell sound asleep.

But Lum was wide awake as the first faint streaks of pink painted the eastern foothills. He prodded

Zeke and Spot Herndon into heavy-eyed wakefulness.

"Time to be movin', hombres, an' I hope yore feet ain't as tendeh as mine."

Zeke and Spot grunted and groaned as they pulled on their boots. Their feet were swollen and blistered with the tough going of the day before. And it looked like still harder going on the present day.

III.

"Gosh, I hope it ain't much farther," groaned Spot. "My feet are big enough for three-four pairs, an' they feel like I'd walked barefoot through a cactus bed."

"Fo'get yore feet." Lum grinned wryly. "Keep yore min' on that next shootin' match we'll have."

Spot shook his head. "I might be able to do that, Lum, if I had any cartridges. But a shootin' match with empty guns——" He looked questioningly at Lum, but the dark-haired puncher did not offer to explain.

Mile after weary mile unrolled beneath the three pairs of swollen feet. Job trotted ahead, his nose to the hard, rocky ground. Sometimes the young punchers could make out the tracks of the cattle. But more often they had to trust to the little dog's nose.

The hills became higher and steeper, and the tumbled rocks grew in size. It seemed almost impossible that a herd of steers could have come through this rough country.

But gradually it grew on Lum that the rustlers had followed a dim but plainly marked path. Probably they had driven many hundred stolen cattle to the same hideout.

The sun was a full two hours high when they came to a halt beside the

dead embers of a camp fire. Beyond, not more than a hundred yards, a tiny, rock-inclosed valley revealed trampled and close-cropped grass.

"They camped heah las' night," said Lum evenly. "An' now I'll see whethch my guess was right."

Slowly he circled the heap of ashes, his eyes on the ground. When the circle had widened to twenty feet or more, he stopped uncertainly. A baffled look came into his eyes.

For a long moment, he stood in silent thought, as the other two punchers watched him. Then a grin split his face. He whirled and strode back toward the ashes.

He examined the ground near them closely. He stooped, where there was a clear imprint of a man's body on the soft earth.

"This heah is the softest place, an' I reckon Faro Gunther took it fo' himself," he muttered, half to himself.

Slowly he traced the imprint where the bed roll had lain. He reached the spot where the rustler's head had been. A little clump of grass marked the spot.

"A man used to the trail uses his pants, rolled up, fo' a pillow," he muttered.

He stooped beside the grass clump, and his fingers threaded into it. Then he drew a long breath as he pulled out a half dozen .44 cartridges. He held them up for Spot Herndon to see.

With a yelp of joy, Spot reached for them. "How in the world did yuh find them?" he asked.

As the freckle-faced puncher filled the cylinder of his right-hand six-gun, Lum explained:

"I knowed that them cartridges wouldn't fit Faro Gunther's .45. An' I figgered that if he used his pants fo' a pillow, he'd take them out of

his pockets. I was hopin' he'd leave 'em close, an' he did."

"Yeah, he did!" said Spot admiringly. "But it took a heap smarter brains than mine to figure it out! If yuh've done as good a job on figurin' out a plan to get the best of them rustlers, they ain't got a chance!"

Lum shook his head. "We'll have to wait an' see when the time comes. Mebbe what I've got kind o' worked out won't be worth a cent."

The three young punchers took to the trail once more. Since Lum had discovered the dim path, they made faster time. Job still sped ahead of them, his nose to the ground, and they followed as fast as their aching muscles would allow.

Lum hoped that the rustlers' hideout was not far away, but he knew that it was only a hope. The country was entirely new to him, for the Paradise Valley trail had branched off clear back where the rustlers had jumped them.

There was no telling when they would come upon the hideout. It might be only a mile ahead, or it might be two or three days' journey. Lum was inclined to believe that it was close, for otherwise the outlaws wouldn't have been down near the Paradise Valley trail.

And now, as the rugged hills became steeper, as they piled higher and higher to the west, Lum kept his keen eyes alert. Every ridge meant a careful scouting beyond, nor did the Bar M punchers appear upon the sky line, until they were sure there were no enemies in sight.

And this caution proved its worth before three miles were behind them. If they had not been so alert, they might have stumbled right down upon the hidden cabin before they knew it was anywhere near.

It was the sight of a half dozen

grazing steers that first told Lum they were near their destination. And it was almost an accident that these half dozen caught his gaze.

Ordinarily the thick scrub spruce that almost choked the tiny valley below would have hidden any stock that grazed on the lush grass. But these few had wandered well up the farther slope, where the trees were not so plentiful.

"Theah's six-seven steers in the valley, Spot!" breathed Lum, as the three punchers lay sprawled upon the crest of the ridge. "An' I'd bet my last dime they're Bar M stock. But I don't see hide nor hair of a cabin."

Zeke's nose had been crinkling at a pungent odor, ever since he crawled up beside Lum. But now it dawned upon him what the scent was.

"I smell pine smoke, Lum!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Seems like it's kind o' driftin' up from below the overhangin' ledge. I've got a hunch thet the cabin is out o' sight beneath it."

Lum leaned forward eagerly, but he could not see the foot of the almost sheer drop. The ledge that Zeke had pointed out hid it most effectually. He nodded swiftly.

"Thet's it, an' a right smaht good place fo' it! Yo' waddies stick heah, while I do a little scoutin'!"

Spot Herndon pleaded to go along, but Lum would not listen to it. It was a one-man job, and he knew he was the best scout of the three.

"Then take my six-gun, Lum," said Spot at last.

"No guns," said Lum evenly. "Theah's fo' of them, an' no matteh if I could shoot as fas' an' true as yo', Spot, they'd down me. This time, I'm huntin' from coveh."

He slipped down the slope and

disappeared to the left. For a full half hour, the two punchers lay sprawled on the ridge, waiting for Lum's return.

Their patience was almost worn out, when the dark-haired Bar M waddy appeared out of the rocks beside them. They eyed him, their mouths open with startled amazement.

Lum grinned at them. "If I had been them rustlers, I'd sho' had the drop on yo' hombres."

"But there ain't no other waddy on the range or in the high country thet can Injun-prowl like yuh!" exclaimed Zeke. "We would have heard them come."

"Mebbe—mebbe," said Lum Yates evenly. "But we ain't got time to argue thet p'int. We got a job ahead of us. Thet shootin' match we was talkin' about is ready to take place. An' I reckon Zeke can have a hand in it, usin' a saddle rope fo' his weapon."

"Huh?" Spot and Zeke gave this startled exclamation together.

Once more Lum allowed a smile to flick across his face. In spite of his calm, excitement boiled through his veins. But it was like him to face immediate danger with iron nerves and steady brain.

"Thet cabin is built right against the wall of rock, jes' like yo' guessed, Zeke. Square below us, it is, an' this heah ledge shelters it from above. But theah's a path thet a couple of steel-nerved waddies can take thet'll bring 'em to a shelf jes' fifteen-twenty feet above the roof."

"An' yuh want me an' Zeke to take thet path?" broke in Spot, excitement shining in his eyes.

Lum nodded. "Thet's it." He talked swiftly for a full ten minutes, explaining the plan he had worked out. And the two listeners nodded their excited agreement.

IV.

With his rifle over the crook of his arm, Lum Yates started back down the slope. His last words softly came to Spot and Zeke:

"Remembah, I've got only one bullet in my rifle gun. Aftah it's gone, I'll be dependin' on yo' fo' my life."

Then he was gone. His path took him in a wide circle of the overhanging ledge. And after fifteen minutes of the most careful stalking, he crouched behind a thick clump of brush, a full hundred yards in front of the squat log cabin.

He watched for ten minutes or more. All four of the rustlers had been inside when he had scouted the cabin a little while before, but he must be sure they were still there. At last he grunted to himself:

"Celebratin', most like. Probably lappin' up a heap of bad liquor. Betteh for us, though, if their brains are kind o' fuddled."

Now he lifted his wide Stetson from his head. With it on the end of his gun barrel, he thrust it high above the brush. For only a scant minute did he leave it there—just long enough for Zeke and Spot to see it.

Then he crouched low again and kept his alert gaze on the face of the rock wall. Hardly had a minute passed, when he saw the two Bar M punchers inch over the crest.

Cautiously but swiftly they made their way down the winding path he had described to them. After ten breathless minutes, they lay side by side on the narrow shelf, twenty feet above the roof.

Now, after a moment's pause, Lum saw the end of a rope slither down the steep drop. It touched the roof and stopped. Then the slim form of Zeke appeared.

Hand over hand, he made his way downward. His feet touched the slab roof. Now he uncoiled the rope that hung over his shoulder and flipped out a loop. Then, treading as lightly as a panther, he inched toward the edge of the roof.

When he was directly above the window, he halted. His hand lifted in a signal to Lum that all was ready. Spot thrust the hand that held the six-gun over the edge of the shelf. Then he signaled, too.

Lum drew a deep breath. The test had come. He stood erect behind the clump of brush. Slowly he walked around it. Now there was no cover anywhere in the hundred yards that separated him from the cabin.

He lifted the rifle and cuddled the stock against his cheek. He trained the sights on a spot at the very top of the door. Slowly, carefully, he squeezed the trigger.

Crack! The rifle barked sharply.

Spat! The bullet bored its way through the half-inch slab, to bury itself in the ceiling of the cabin.

The next minute was one of the tensest that Lum had ever experienced. Would the rustlers do what he had expected or were they too far gone with liquor?

Then he saw the door open a crack. He could almost make out the glittering eyes that looked out at him from the narrow opening. That was the signal for Lum's second act.

"Yo', Faro Gunther! I've come fo' yo'!" he called loudly. "Come out an' swap lead with me!"

Another pause of ten seconds. Then he raised his rifle to his shoulder again. He leveled it at the door. Once more he pulled the trigger, but the hammer dropped on the empty chamber.

As if startled, he opened the

breech hurriedly. Then he thrust his hand in his pocket, as if searching for another cartridge. He crouched in a frightened attitude. He tossed the gun aside, as if he knew it was entirely useless. Unarmed, he stood in plain sight of the cabin.

And Faro Gunther took the bait! The door crashed open, and the ruffian leaped out, six-gun in hand. Lum felt a shiver of fear chase itself up and down his spine, although he knew it would be only the wildest kind of accident if the rustler could get him across that distance.

"Stay put, blast yore skinny hide!" bellowed Faro Gunther. "Move an inch, an' I'll fill yuh full of lead!"

Lum's hands went high, and he stood motionless. A hoarse laugh came from Faro Gunther's throat. He knew, as well as Lum, that a bullet could not reach the slim puncher. But he believed the waddy was too frightened to realize it.

He raced toward Lum, calling to his men as he ran. But he had covered no more than a dozen feet, when the roar of a six-gun split the air.

Faro Gunther's gun whirled from his numbed and torn fingers. He bellowed in pain, as he grasped his injured hand with the other.

But already his three men were well outside the cabin. And apparently they were startled out of their wits by the shot. They stood motionless and undecided for a split second.

Then Black Jack Riggs, the most intelligent of the three, seemed to realize that they had been tricked. He snatched his six-gun from its holster and whirled to face the new danger.

Once more a six-gun barked, and

Riggs's weapon hurtled from his hand. With a bullet through his wrist, Black Jack sat down on the ground, dazed and shocked.

The other two had more than they could stand. They turned and raced for cover. One, a gangly, lantern-jawed hombre, made for the cabin door. He reached it and slammed it behind him.

The other sped around the cabin, hugging its wall. He seemed to know that there he would be out of range of that hidden six-gun.

But what he did not know about was the danger above him. For he stopped directly beneath the slim Bar M puncher who crouched on the roof. A rope hissed down, but the rustler was too amazed to sense it, until it dropped about his body and tightened, pinning his arms at his sides.

And now Lum raced toward the cabin. His plan had worked perfectly, with one exception. That was the single ruffian who had sped into the cabin.

And as Lum ran, he shot a glance at the shelf of rock. Already Spot Herndon was clambering down the rope that was still fastened to a rock above the shelf.

Lum halted a split second beside Faro Gunther, who was still too intent upon his hurts to realize what had happened. Lum stooped and snatched the ruffian's second six-gun from its holster.

Now he made straight for the cabin. He caught a glimpse of Zeke, throwing a hitch in the rope about a projection on the roof to hold the rustler prisoner. And he saw Spot Herndon drop beside Zeke.

Then he reached the cabin door. He did not hesitate a second. The advantage of startled surprise was his at this instant, but he did not know how long it would last.

He smashed the door open and hurtled inside. For a second, he could hardly see in the half gloom. Then his eyes became accustomed to it. A swift glance revealed the form of the fourth rustler, cowering in the corner.

But like a cornered rat, the man was desperate. He lifted his six-gun waveringly and pulled the trigger. But Lum had thrown himself aside at the first movement. The bullet zipped past, missing him by a foot.

Like the rock from a catapult, Lum hurled his sinewy body straight at the man. The ruffian straightened to meet the charge. There was no time for gun play now. It would have to be hand to hand.

The man's arms curled to meet Lum. But the slender puncher ducked low and came up beneath the rustler's guard. His granite-hard fist streaked up and landed with a thud on the outlaw's chin.

The man grunted as his head jerked back from the impact. Then his knees gave way beneath him. Slowly he slumped to the floor. Lum knew he was out, and would be for a long time.

He whirled to the door again. He knew the other three were not badly hurt, and Spot and Zeke might be needing help. But out in the bright light again, he stopped. And a triumphant smile crossed his face.

For Spot and Zeke had already tied the man beside the cabin. And Spot was standing guard with ready six-gun over Faro Gunther and Black Jack Riggs as Zeke bound them expertly.

Spot Herndon shot a lightning glance at Lum. Then he drew a long breath.

"Gosh! I'm glad to see yuh, Lum! When I heard that shot, I was afeard yuh'd got yoreself plugged. That other hombre——"

"He's waitin' fo' the rest of yore rope, when yo' finish with Gunther an' Riggs," Lum said evenly. "But there ain't no hurry. He's dreamin' pleasant dreams, an' won't mind waitin'."

And when the four ruffians were tied with knots that would baffle their best efforts to escape, Zeke turned to Lum.

"Now we've got these here rustlers, reckon we'll have to back-track with 'em to the Bar M. An' I was shore honin' to see Paradise Valley again."

Lum shook his head, with a grin. "Nope. We ain't goin' to let Sandy McClure know nothin' about it until we return. We'll leave these here hombres beah in their own cabin. An' while yo' an' Spot gather them steers an' haze 'em onto the Paradise Valley trail, I'll ride ahead to Lamey an' tell the sheriff where he can fin' 'em. Lamey ain't more'n twenty miles."

Spot Herndon turned his freckled face to Lum, and a wide grin spread across it. He shook his head slowly.

"What gets me, Lum, is why a waddy with yore brains wastes his time proddin' cow critters. Me, I'll give up. That rifle of yores, backed by yore set of brains, is worth a dozen six-guns in the hands of waddies like these here rustlers—or like me."

Lum smiled. "But yo' won the shootin' match, Spot. An' even Zeke, with his rope, bested my rifle. For both of yo' got yore men, while I had to use my fist on mine. All I hit with the rifle was the door."

That is mebbe so, but—if Lum hadn't 'a' hit that door with his rifle, thereby bringin' the rustlers out inter the open, Spot an' Zeke would 'a' had plenty trouble. An' did Lum's trick take nerve! Watch fer another thrillin' story about the three friends in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.

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.

WAAL, folks, have yuh been findin' any gems durin' the week? I hope so! Anyway, hyar's some tuh add tuh yore collection.

By this time yuh must have pretty thick scrapbooks, or else be makin' second volumes! Some readers have complained that with songs printed on both sides o' the paper, some always have tuh be lost in pastin' 'em in yore books. But the thing tuh do is tuh paste the inner edge of the whole W. W. W. page to yore scrapbook, leavin' the rest of it free an' clear, so that yuh kin turn it an' read it like in the magazine.

Waal, let's begin with this song thet's full o' the feelin' o' the West. It's by our ol' friend E. A. Brininstool, who has given us permission tuh publish some o' the songs from his book called "Trail Dust of a Maverick."

THE SHORT-GRASS COUNTRY.

By E. A. BRININSTOOL

Out in the short-grass country,
Out where the greasewood grows,
Out where the coyote hollers,
Out where the blizzard blows!
That is the place I'm seekin'
That is the land for me!
Ridin' a-straddle
A cow-punch saddle,
Over the sagebrush sea!

Out in the short-grass country,
 Out on the mesas brown,
 Far from the rush and worry,
 Far from the haunts of town;
 Where it's serene and quiet,
 Restful and ca'm and free,
 Ridin' a-straddle
 A cow-punch saddle,
 Over the sagebrush sea!

Out in the short-grass country,
 Out where your pals are true;
 Drinkin' the glorious sunshine
 Under the skies of blue!
 Out of your tarp at daylight
 Frisky as you can be!
 Ridin' a-straddle
 A cow-punch saddle,
 Over the sagebrush sea.

Out in the short-grass country,
 Out where there's room to spare,
 Out where no smoke's pollutin'
 The fresh-blown prairie air!
 Out where no street cars bother,
 Out where you're safe, by gee!
 Ridin' a-straddle
 A cow-punch saddle,
 Over the sagebrush sea!

Out in the short-grass country!
 Partner—say, ain't it fine?
 Livin' in perfect freedom
 Out where the air's like wine;
 Nothin' you bet can't beat it!
 Life is a jubilee
 Ridin' a-straddle
 A cow-punch saddle,
 Over the sagebrush sea!

I reckon anybody who's been
 out in the real West will speak a
 hearty second tuh that one!

Hyar's a famous ol' song that I've
 been gettin' a lot of requests for re-
 cently. Way back in the first issue
 o' the Song Corral, I published it;
 but I reckon many of yuh weren't
 readin' the magazine then, an' will
 be glad tuh have it now.

"The Chisholm Trail" is one o' the
 oldest an' most popular songs o' the
 West. I reckon it has as many
 verses as thar are cowboys. Every-
 body made up thar own little bit
 tuh add tuh it. I can't possibly give

'em all tuh yuh because it would be
 too long. It's a song that kin take
 the rhythm of a hoss trottin' peace-
 fully along, night-herdin'; an' it's
 usually sort o' crooned:

THE OLD CHISHOLM TRAIL.

Come along, boys, and listen to my tale,
 I'll tell you of my trouble on the old Chis-
 holm Trail.

*Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya
 Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya.*

I started up the trail October twenty-third
 I started up the trail with the 2 U herd.

Oh, a ten-dollar hoss and a forty-dollar sad-
 dle—
 And I'm goin' to quit punchin' Texas cattle

I wake up in the mornin' afore daylight
 And afore I sleep the moon shines bright

Old Ben Bolt was a blamed good hoss,
 But he'd go to see the girls on a sore-
 backed hoss.

Old Ben Bolt was a fine old man,
 And you'd know there was whisky wherever
 he'd land.

My hoss throwed me off at the creek called
 Mud,
 My hoss throwed me off around the 2 U
 herd.

Last time I saw him, he was goin' cross
 the level
 A-kickin' up his heels and a-runnin' like the
 devil.

It's cloudy in the West, a-lookin' like rain,
 And my danged old slicker's in the wagon
 again.

Crippled my hoss, I don't know how,
 Ropin' at the horns of a 2 U cow.

We hit Caldwell and we hit her on the fly,
 We bedded down the cattle on the hill
 close by.

No chaps, no slicker, and it's pouring down
 rain,
 And I swear, by gum, I'll never night herd
 again.

Feet in the stirrups and seat in the saddle,
I hung and rattled with them longhorn
cattle.

Last night I was on guard and the leader
broke the ranks,
I hit my horse down the shoulders and I
spurred him in the flanks.

The wind commenced to blow and the rain
began to fall,
It looked, by grab, like we was goin' to
lose 'em all.

I jumped in the saddle and grabbed holt the
horn,
Best blamed cow-puncher ever was horn.

I don't give a dang if they never do stop;
I'll ride as long as an eight-day clock.

Foot in the stirrup and hand on the horn,
Best blamed cowhoy ever was horn.

Stray in the herd, and the boss said to
kill it,
So I shot him in the rump with the handle
of the skillet.

We rounded 'em up and put 'em on the
cars,
And that was the last of the old Two Bars.

Oh, it's bacon and beans 'most every day,
I'd as soon be eatin' prairie hay.

I'm on my horse and I'm goin' at a run,
I'm the quickest-shootin' cowboy that ever
pulled a gun.

I went to the wagon to get my roll,
To come back to Texas, dad-burn my soul.

I went to the boss to draw my roll;
He had figgered me out nine dollars in
the hole.

I'll sell my outfit just as soon as I can,
I won't punch cattle for no danged man.

Goin' back to town to draw my money,
Goin' back home to see my honey.

With my knees in the saddle and my seat
in the sky,
I'll quit punchin' cows in the sweet by
and by.

*Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya, youpy ya,
Coma ti yi youpy, youpy ya.*

When the West was first bein' set-
tled, thar was a continuous war goin'
on between the grangers, or farmers,
an' the cattlemen. Hyar's a parody
on the subject, written a long time
ago by an author who didn't give
his name:

THE GRANGER'S CONQUEST.

Up from the South comes every day,
Bringing to stockmen fresh dismay,
The terrible rumble and grumble and roar,
Telling the battle is on once more,
And the granger but twenty miles away.

And wider still these billows of war
Thunder along the horizon's bar;
And louder still, to our ears hath rolled
The roar of the settler uncontrolled,
Making the blood of the stockmen cold,
As he thinks of the stake in this awful fray,
And the granger but fifteen miles away.

And there's the trail from fair Dodge town,
A good broad highway, leading down;
And there in one flash of the morning light,
Goes the roar of the granger black and
white,
As on to the Mecca they take their flight,
As if they feel their terrible need,
They push their mule to his utmost speed;
And the longhorn bawls by night and day,
With the granger only five miles away.

And the next will come the groups
Of grangers like an army of troops.
What is done? What to do? A glance tells
both,
Up into the saddle with scowl and oath;
And we stumble o'er plows and harrows and
hoes,
As the roar of the granger still louder grows,
And closer draws, by night and by day,
With his cabin a quarter section away.

And when under the Kansas sky,
We strike a year or two that is dry,
The granger, who thinks he's awful fly,
Away to the kin of his wife will lie;
And then, again, o'er the Kansas plains,
Uncontrolled, our cattle will range,
As we laugh at the granger who came to
stay
But now is one thousand miles away!

Waal, folks, thet's all I kin give
yuh tuh-day. 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.

HI, thar, folks! Hyar we are with plenty o' letters waitin' tuh see daylight, as per usual. Step up an' take yore pick among these. All kinds o' folks tuh suit all kinds o' readers. I reckon yuh each ought tuh succeed in findin' jest the right kind o' real friend in this batch.

Don't forget the rules, however. They're right important, folks. Otherwise I wouldn't be takin' the time each week tuh repeat 'em tuh yuh, see?

Don't forget tuh write yore full name an' address plainly on every letter yuh send tuh a Pen Pal or tuh this department; an' don't for-

get that if yuh ask me tuh publish a letter for yuh, I'm naturally expectin' yuh tuh answer any letters that the Pen Pals write tuh yuh. Seems tuh me that's a good bargain, ain't it?

Now let's git down tuh business! Tuh begin with, hyar's a letter

OFFERIN' INFO

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen and live on one of the largest cattle ranches in Wyoming. I follow the calf round-ups and beef round-ups every year. I have blond hair and blue eyes. I can tell all about life on a cattle ranch the year round.

F. S., OF WYOMING.

HUNTIN' JOBS

I sure hope yuh kin give these folks a few helpful tips about workin' conditions out West an' elsewhere. Tips from people who live right on the premises, so tuh speak, is the most valuable sort for any one lookin' for work:

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a boy of eighteen years and would like to get a job on a ranch in New Mexico or Arizona, if possible. I can ride a horse pretty well, but I'm not quite a pro at it. I guess I had better give you a little info about myself. I am six feet tall, weigh one hundred and forty-eight pounds, and have black, curly hair and blue eyes. I hope I'm enough of a waddy to be having a letter telling me of a job right soon.

HARMON BURNS, OF TEXAS.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I am a girl of twenty-two years and am willing to do any kind of work. I would like to get a job in California or any part of the West. I would like to work on a ranch or with a family, as I am very fond of children. I would work for small wages, as I need the money and am very far away from home.

JOSEPHINE BURKE, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a boy of eighteen and live on a farm, but I like all kinds of sports, such as fishing, hunting, and trapping, and would like some Pen Pals from the West. I am interested in securing employment on a ranch anywhere between

Texas and Oregon. I am five feet ten inches tall and weigh a hundred and forty-five pounds. I'm in good health and am a hard worker, if I do say so myself. Will positively answer all letters that are sent to me. I can furnish full references as to my character and ability. So, Sam, help me to get a job, doing something.

SAM YOUNG, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

HOBBIES

I reckon practically every one has some special interest in his life, stamps or coins, or songs, or quilts, or relics, or somethin'. An' it's a good thing, too. It's a good way tuh spend hours that might be lonesome or borin' otherwise. Hyar some letters from folks who are collectin' things and would like tuh exchange with Pen Pals, an' folks who'd like tuh share thar interests:

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fourteen summers, and I read cowboy and Indian stories all the time. My hobby is collecting cowboy songs, and studying animals. I like to read and write about lions, tigers, and snakes. My favorite sports are football, swimming, hunting, and fishing. I would like to get some letters from all over the world, and especially in Texas, Colorado, and Montana. So come on, Pen Pals of the 3W, and write to me. I'll answer all letters as fast as they come in.

BOOTS, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere. I am a married man, and I have been down for several months with my leg broken in several places, and sure would like some letters to help fill in my time. I will trade an electric, greaseless, doughnut machine in A-1 condition for an electric combination hot-dog-and-bun-warmer machine in as good condition.

L. E. THACKER, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I have read a good many of your W. W. W.'s, and I sure do enjoy them. I would like to have some Pen Pals. I am especially interested in hearing from the Lone Star State, if possible. I also want to get hold of some cowboy songs—for example, Kid Wolf's song, "The Rio." I sure would like to have a Pen Pal who knows a lot of songs—cow-

boy, camp-fire, round-up, and all other kinds of songs. I am fourteen years old.

EDWARD COSTELLO, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR WESTERN PEN PALS: Many hobbies I've had these twenty-five years. Stamps, coins, view cards, curios, pets. Now I'm riding a new one. Please help me out. I'll swap yarns, poetry, books, magazines, stamps, coins, Indian relics, cards, letters—anything, in fact—for curious plants, especially cactus plants. Many of you desert dwellers live within spitting distance of a spiny denizen. I need quite a number to nestle down between these thousands of rocks I've lugged for my new desert garden. At present I've only fifteen cactus plants. Tired I am of fat phloxes, silly sunflowers, and pretty petunias. I want prickly plants of all kinds, and hen-and-chickens, aloes, sedums, et cetera. Whether you live in Australia, Argentina, or Arizona, Mexico, Missouri, or Mars—please dig me up a strange plant and send it on. Or tell me what I'm to do in order to receive it. And let me know your favorite hobby, and I'll bust a—something to contribute to it.

MAX GOODLEY, OF GEORGIA.

WANTIN' WESTERN PALS

All yuh folks from the West, prick up yore ears an' see whether some o' these letters don't appeal tuh yuh:

DEAR SAM: I sure would like to join your Pen Pal group. I am a blonde and sixteen years old. I like all sports, and I'd love to be a cowgirl. Come on, lonesome girls, from the West, write and tell me all about it.

HELEN LOVELAND, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm looking for some Pen Pals from Montana, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps. My age is something over twenty, and I have light-brown eyes and brown hair, so come on, cowgirls, and write to me pronto!

GARRIE, FROM SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world, and especially from Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. I'm twenty-one years old and have dark-brown hair and eyes. I'm five feet tall and weigh a hundred and twenty-six pounds. I'm fond of all outdoor sports,

especially horseback riding. I promise a speedy reply to all letters, and will exchange snaps. Come on, you Western girls, fill my mail box with letters.

BETTY, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: We are eighteen years old. We would like to hear from some Pen Pals in Arizona. We can ride, rope, and brand. We have some friends who wrote to the Pen Pals and didn't have any luck. So we hope we'll have a better time of it.

HOMER REYNOLDS AND J. C. TIEMANN.

OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen and am in the eighth grade. I would like some Pen Pals who work on ranches in Colorado, Texas, Arizona, and Wyoming. I am fond of roping, shooting, and riding broncs. I would be glad to answer all letters and exchange snaps with any one.

ULYSSES LYON, OF WASHINGTON, D. C.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen and would like very much to get in touch with some boys between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, who live in Montana, Colorado, Arizona, Wyoming, and other States around there. I would like to hear from fellas living on ranches. I am a lover of outdoor sports, such as swimming, horseback riding, football, camping, and especially hunting and fishing. Will answer all letters and exchange photos.

OTIS DRAKE, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like some Pen Pals from Iowa and Missouri. I'd like some one who lives on a ranch and can tell me all about it. I am a fellow of twenty-one, and I would like to know the life of a cowboy. I have always wanted to be one myself. I will try to answer all letters, so I hope the Pen Pals will write.

ANDREW ERHARDT, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am a young girl of eighteen years, and have brown hair and hazel eyes. I would like to have some Pen Pals from the Western States, as I would like to know more about that part of the country. I'd also like to get hold of some cowboy songs. Anybody, write!

ADELCEY HUNKINS, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, and I am in the sixth grade. I would like some real cowboys to write to me. I like horseback riding, and I play in our school band. I

will answer all letters that I get. I would like to exchange cowboy songs and relics.

BILLY KUENZL, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I would like to become a Pen Pal of some one out West. I know a great deal about Indiana, but would like to know about the Far West. I like sports of all kinds. Would you please tell a lot of the girls out West to write to me?

OLIVE HELDERMAN, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: We are two sisters, aged fourteen and twelve, and we would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere. We like all kinds of sports, and are wild about Western cowgirls. So please write us soon.

SIS AND WHITEY, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from anywhere out West. I am a girl going on twelve. Will gladly send my picture to any Pen Pals who want it; and will answer all letters.

ADA HOLLENBECK, OF KANSAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve years, and I wish you would send me some snapshots of the West. I will answer every letter I get. I like to go horseback riding, and I live on a farm.

EDWARD VOLLENWEIDER, OF WISCONSIN.

LONESOME FOLKS

See what yuh kin do tuh cheer 'em up, readers. Jest a few lines now an' then, will probably do the trick!

DEAR SAM: I wonder if you couldn't find the right Pen Pal for me? I'm from the South and lonely. I'm nineteen years old, five feet one inch tall. I have long brown hair and brown eyes. I will exchange snapshots and promise to answer all letters I receive. I'm fond of all outdoor sports, music and dancing, horseback riding, et cetera. I would like to know something about ranch life.

JUNE, OF TENNESSEE.

DEAR SAM: Have you got room for another tenderfoot? Thanks! This is the first time that I've been lonely in the fifteen years of my life. A few months ago, we moved to a different part of the city, and there is about as much action here as there is in a graveyard. All I've been doing the last few weeks is playing solitaire; and since I prefer writing letters to playing solitaire,

I'm asking your help in gathering some Pen Pals. As for myself, I'm five feet eight inches tall and have black hair and blue eyes.

SAM O'CONNOR, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I am lonesome—and how!—and crave letters from Pals all over our grand United States and Mexico or other foreign countries. I am a boy of fifteen years and interested in swimming, shooting, drawing, cartooning, stamp collecting. I have studied Spanish in school and would like to have some Spanish Pen Pals, too.

PINKY MILLER, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: Would you let a blue-eyed lassie put in a word for Pen Pals? I'm five feet two and have black hair and blue eyes. I'm sixteen years old and a senior in high school. I live in a big city and could tell lots of interesting things. I like lots of sports, so please write to a lonesome

TEXAS LASSIE, OF TEXAS.

OTHER REQUESTS

They're still comin', folks, but we've almost reached the end of this week's batch; so if yuh haven't already found a Pen Pal, I hope yuh do among these:

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere, especially out West. I am seventeen years old and have dark-brown eyes and auburn hair. I like all kinds of sports. Come on, girls from everywhere, and write to

PEGGY, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am an Australian girl of eighteen and am a brunette. I would love to correspond with some girls who live in New York, California, or anywhere. I live in the country myself. Will answer all letters, and hope I get many of them.

BETTE SAUNDERS, OF AUSTRALIA.

DEAR SAM: I put in my call for Pen Pals once before, but didn't receive very many, so please put in my call again. I am a young married girl with a darling baby boy; but still find time to write. I wish you luck.

MRS. DOROTHY HARMON, OF ILLINOIS.

Waal, folks, I reckon thet's all for tuh-day. I'll be seein' yuh next week an' wish yuh luck till then. 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.

WHAT'S the matter with you, Boss?" asks Jim Hazel, the forest ranger, as we comes inter the Corner fer this week's meetin'. "You look as if you were about frozen to death."

"We are, Jimmy," we says. "We are! There's no sense in denyin' it—we don't like such derved cold weather."

"Yuh must be gittin' old, Boss," laughs Billy West. "There was a time when yuh didn't mind a little touch of cold weather."

"A fine one yuh are ter talk, Billy," we answers. "We notice that yuh go down ter Arizony or New Mexico every winter. That don't look like yuh was exactly fond o' Northern winters."

Billy laughs. He knows that we know that he don't go South ter git away from cold weather. But before we kin argue about it, Buck Foster an' Joe Scott start jawin' about who's the best hand with a six-gun. An' from then till Billy

stops 'em, nobody else in the Corner kin make hisself heard.

We takes advantage o' their chin music ter look around an' see who else is here fer the meetin'. We notices the Whistlin' Kid, the Tigor boys—pards o' Jim Hazel's—an' the three young waddies from Bar M—Lum Yates, Zeke Olroyd, an' Spot Herndon.

Finally, after Buck an' Joe has sort o' quieted down, we starts in on the business o' the meetin'—the readin' o' some letters from the readin' hombres. Here's the first one we comes ter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I think that the W. W. W. is the best magazine Street & Smith puts out—as well as the best magazine on the stands. I don't think it can be beat.

Every Wednesday, my brother used to buy a 3W and bring it home. I would never read it. But one day, when I didn't have anything else to do, I picked one up and started in to read it.

You can guess what happened. I didn't stop reading until I had finished the whole

thing. The first story was "Sonny Tabor's Empty Guns." Sonny is now my favorite waddy.

I haven't missed a copy of 3W since that day. And I don't intend to miss one if I can help it. If you don't print this letter, though, I'll come down there and smoke you all up.

Not yours until you publish this letter,

RALPH PONTE.

Richmond Hill, New York.

Here's another note which we reads right away:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner. I have been reading W. W. W. for about two months, and I think it is the best magazine on the stands.

My favorites are Kid Wolf, Señor Red Mask, Circle J, Sonny Tabor, the Bar U twins, the Whistlin' Kid, and most of the others.

How about another Señor Red Mask story? I enjoyed him a lot, and hope to have the chance of reading about him again.

Tell Buck Foster that if he doesn't stop arguing with that carrot-topped kid who works on the same spread with him, he will surely turn into one of those horned toads of his. Tell Billy West that his Danger boss is the best piece of horseflesh on the spread.

I hope that Kid Wolf keeps appearing. Yours till he is beaten on the draw,

RALPH ALLEN, JR.

San Antonio, Texas.

"Help me, Hannah!" growls Buck Foster. "Where do all these here now readin' hombres git the idea thet it's allus me what starts the arguments with the carrot-top? By heifers, I ain't——"

"Yes, yuh are!" shouts Joe Scott. "Yo're allus the one who starts 'em."

"I'll be a horned toad if I am!" yowls Buck. "Yuh mangy sage hound, yuh cain't set thar an' call yores truly Buck Fos——"

"The heck I cain't!" snaps Joe. "I kin——"

"Yuh kin both pipe down, pronto!" says Billy West, right then. "Go on with the meetin',

Boss. I'll try ter keep these two quiet."

"Thanks, Billy," we chuckles, an' then picks up another letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading W. W. W. for nearly five years, and I think that it gets worse every week. Why don't you publish some halfway decent stories?

My favorites are Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, the Whistlin' Kid, and Señor Red Mask. That Circle J outfit gives me a pain in the neck. And I don't mean maybe!

Why don't you have a little romance in your stories? Bring Señor Red Mask back, after he's married Joan Corson, and then he'll have plenty of troubles.

Here's hoping that this will take some of the conceit out of Billy West and his drug-store friends—especially that half-witted old moron, Buck Foster.

Please publish this letter—or do you dare?

RALPH S. TRIM.

Pripet, Maine.

"Wah!" Buck Foster lets out a bellow like a calf thet's been scorched by a brandin' iron. He comes ter his feet, eyes blazin', mustache fairly quiverin' with rage. "Help me, Hannah! Jest let me git me hands on thet Trim hombre, an' by heifers, I'll trim him! Nobody kin call me a half-witted old m-m-mor—— What did he call me, no-how, an' what do it mean?"

The gang busts out laughin'. Nobody kin help it, watchin' Buck when he goes on the prod. Compared ter the veteran, a locoed range bull is a reg'lar broke-down ol' poodle dawg. He's shore a r'arin' ter go. 'The only trouble is, he don't know which way ter head.

"Why do yo' reckon thet hombre has been readin' about us fer five years, if he don't like us?" chuckles Lum Yates.

We joins in the laugh, then picks up another letter an' starts ter read:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: How are you? Fine, I hope. And how are all the waddies at the Corner?

My favorites are Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Jim Hazel, Circle J, and—well, I guess I like them all. But if you don't print this letter, I'll not believe there is a Wranglers Corner where they all get together every week.

Say, Buck, why in Sam Hill don't you knock that carrot-topped, locoed Scott hombre's red hatrack off? I'll be a horned toad, if I wouldn't be glad to help you, if I could. He is plumb ornery, ought to be ashamed of himself. He must eat loco weed.

I don't see why Billy doesn't make Buck foreman of Circle J. He ought to be something better than just top hand.

When Hungry Hawkins gets one of his heavy thinking spells, little Rusty ought to hit him with a brick or something.

And where does Bill Tigor get all those wisecracks that he is always springing? And why isn't the Shootin' Fool ever in 3W any more?

I think the W. W. W. is the best magazine on the market. Please keep it on the market for a long time to come.

Here's hoping that you don't throw this in the wastebasket. EUGENE BOWNE.

Hot Springs, Arkansas.

P. S. I will quit reading 3W when Buck Foster loses his shrubbery.

An' here's another one:

DEAR BOSS: You sure have a swell magazine and a lot of ace-high cowpokes riding the 3W range. I always read the Circle J novelette first thing, when I buy a copy.

I have no particular favorites among the waddies, except maybe that red-headed, smoke-eating rannihan, Joe Scott. He's one swell puncher, and I hope Buck Foster, the walrus, gets mad at this.

I'd like to see some of the old 3W waddies come riding back to the spread sometime—men like Joe Bates, Ted Marsh of the Mounted, Vincente the Yaqui, Alf Chase, Freckles Malone, and Bud Jones.

Where is the Shootin' Fool nowadays? I suppose he has to take care of Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers and the rest of Cotulla.

Give my best regards to Billy West and Sing Lo. Here's hoping that Joe continues to get the best of Buck Foster in all their arguments. Adios, hombres,

TOMMY.

Buck don't like that letter so much, but we grabs another one

right quick an' starts readin' it. So he don't git a chance ter say nothin'. Here's what we reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Corner, and here's hoping that you don't overlook it. I have been reading the 3W for a plumb long time.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Johnny Forty-five, and George Krumm, Jim Hazel, Circle J, Kid Wolf, and Hungry and Rusty.

Sonny Tabor is sure one fast young hombre on the draw. It doesn't pay for tough hombres like some of the skunks he tangles with to prod him too far.

Johnny Forty-five ought to find some other way to keep his trigger fingers nimble. In these hard times, it's wasteful for him to roll and throw away without smoking so many cigarettes.

Tell George Krumm not to brag so much. Still, if he didn't, I don't suppose he would be George Krumm.

Billy West is all right. But tell him to let Buck and Joe fight it out to a finish some day. Joe Scott is just what Buck Foster says he is, but he is all right with a six-gun.

Buck is a walrus-faced old sheep-herder, but he is all right, too, when it comes to rough-and-tumble fighting.

Jim Hazel is fine. Keep him in the magazine. The same goes for Kid Wolf and Hungry and Rusty.

Well, I reckon I better be driftin'. Yours till Sonny Tabor gets hanged,

KID BARTELT.

Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

That one sort of evens things up between Buck an' Joe, even though it did call Buck a sheep-herder. So there ain't no trouble poppin' when we stops readin'.

We looks at the clock an' sees that we got time fer one more letter, afore the waddies has ter start fer home. So, fishin' down inter the mail sack, we pulls out this:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Wranglers Corner, and I hope to see it printed there sometime soon. I think that 3W is the best magazine out.

Kid Wolf and Sonny Tabor are my favorites. After them come Señor Red Mask, Johnny Forty-five, Hungry and Rusty, the

Circle J, pards, and Jim Hazel. I don't like the Lum Yates stories so much.

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral and Western Pen Pals are very interesting departments. I always read them.

You'd better warn Buck to be careful of his mustache or Sing Lo will cut it off some night when Buck is asleep.

Tell George Krumm to take the army, navy, and marines with him when he goes out after bandits. He might get hurt.

Print more stories of Sonny Tabor, Johnny Forty-five, Kid Wolf, and Señor Red Mask. Put Kid Wolf's picture on the cover. I want to see what he looks like.

If you don't print this in the Corner, I'll come after you with my twin six-guns blazing.

STANLEY BOGDON.

Plymouth, Pennsylvania.

"Ain't Kid Wolf's pitcher been on the coveh lots o' times, Boss?" asks Lum Yates.

"Shore," we answers. "He's been on thar plumb often. But now, we reckon it's time fer yuh waddies ter be hittin' the trails home. Meetin's hereby adjourned. See yuh all next week."

"So long, Boss!" sing out the waddies, as one by one they fork their broncs and bust the breeze away from the Corner.

We locks up the shack an' goes home. THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

The Horse Hunter Of Cholla Sink

Novelette

By WILLIAM A. TODD

But wild cayuses ain't all that a gun-wise young ranny hunts, when he rides inter the sink. He's huntin' trouble an' don't have ter look hard ter find it.

Circle J on the Owl Hoot Trail

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

An' like everythin' else that the pards turn their hands ter, they turn out ter be plumb good outlaws—an' bad medicine fer skunks.

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Novelette

By PHILIP F. DEERE

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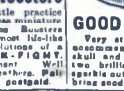
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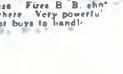
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