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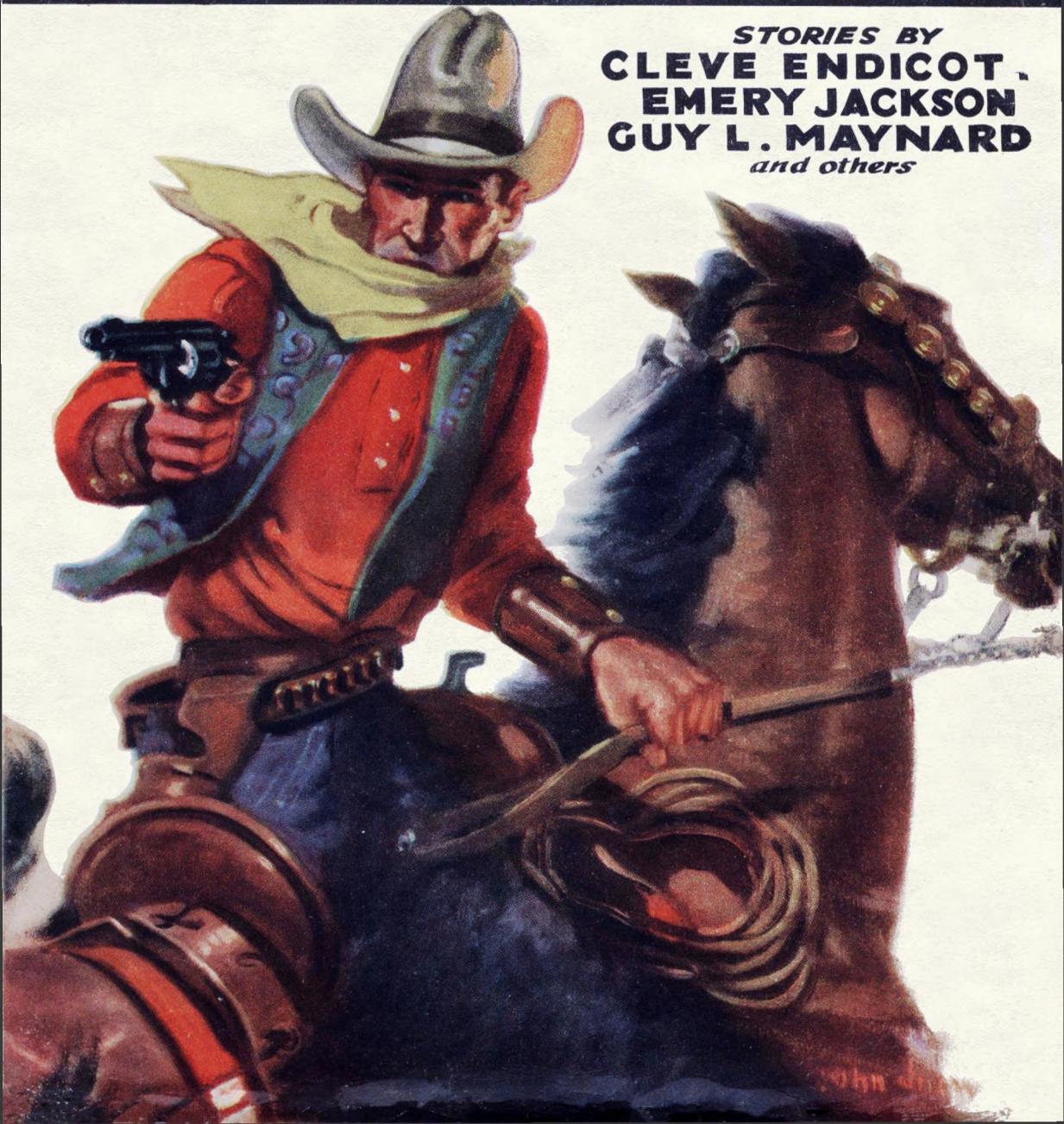
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Vol. 67, No. 3

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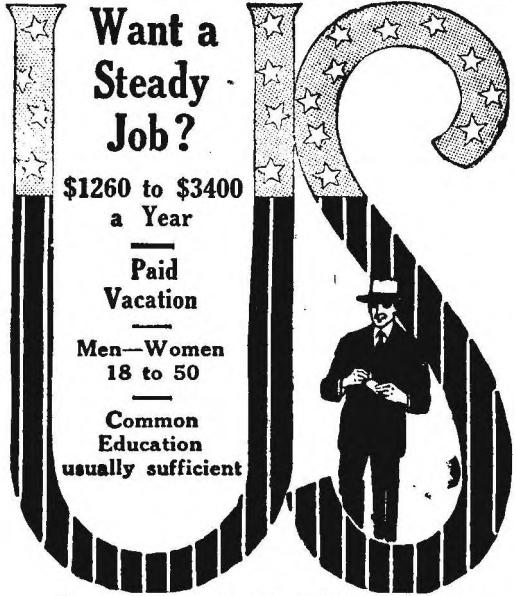
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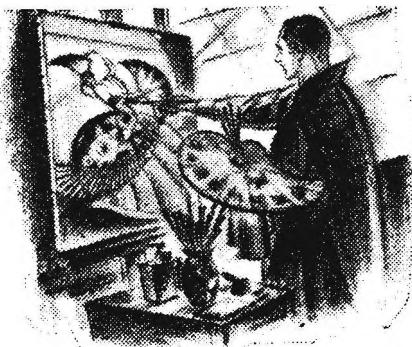
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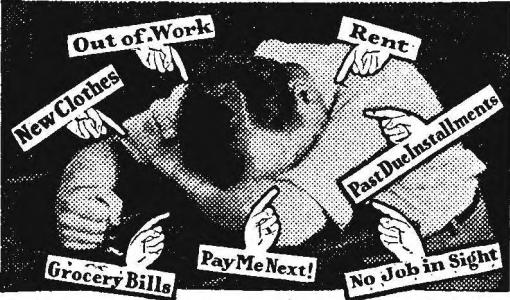
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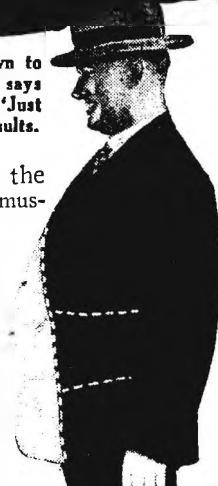
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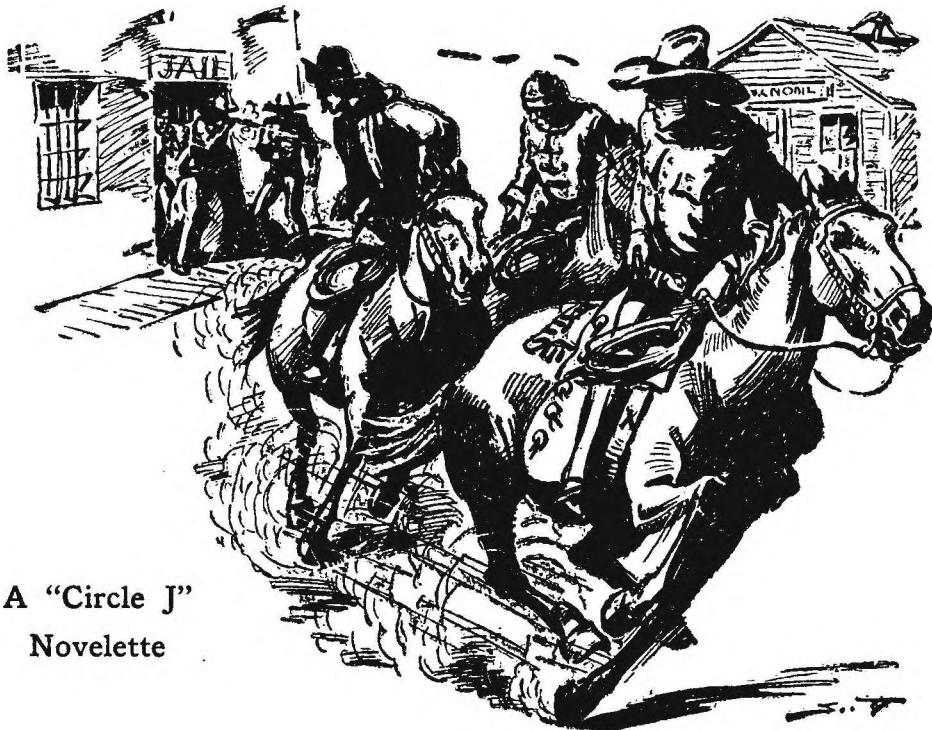
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A "Circle J"
Novelette

Wolves of the Bad Lands

By Cleve Endicott

Author of "The Black Saddle," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A WADDY IN A MESS.

JOE SCOTT was taking just about the wildest ride in that red-headed young ranny's life. Hunkered down on the pilot of the dizzily swaying locomotive, he clung grimly to slanting iron rods at his sides, as the narrow-gauge mountain train roared down through the night.

The ancient roadbed beneath was
WW-1C

crooked, rough. The lightweight engine whipped about like a bucking broncho. Its brilliant white glare of headlight cut around sweeping curves at a speed that made the waddy gasp.

"Thet engineer shore has got orders ter make time," the redhead growled to himself. "Thet hard-jawed sheriff he's a-packin' must be in one heck of a rush ter nab onter Billy West."

Joe Scott's lips shut tight. An

unseen, last-minute passenger, he wasn't perched behind that wildly lurching cow catcher for the mere fun of the thing. He had to warn his boss.

For two hours, he'd hunkered there, staring down that dazzling path of white. There was nothing else to do but sit and clutch and stare, while bouldered slopes, canyon walls, spruce and pine leaped at him from the dark.

The wind shrieked in his ears—big bat ears that caught the full force of the mighty blast, born of the train's own rush.

Joe's hat was off, down beneath him, for he'd had to sit upon the battered old Stetson to keep it from sailing off along the track. The cowboy's flaming hair was full of cinders.

Smoke grime blackened his freckled face. His huge beak of a nose snorted with disgust as night insects were plastered against his nostrils, into his ears and mouth.

Nevertheless, the thrill of the ride was getting into his nerves. That engineer knew his stuff, knew just how fast he could make the pounding drivers roll without hurling the three-car train from the uncertain track.

Gorge and slant and dizzy curve reeled back through the mountain night.

"Go to it, hombre!" the sorrel-top chuckled. "I'm fifty feet ahead o' thet thar sheriff, and I means ter hold my lead."

He'd have to do more than that, though, he knew, when the train reached Malpais City, miles away down in the little valley at the foot of the Bitterroots. His boss—young Billy West, of the Circle J—was just about reaching that place now, with a small herd of live stock.

That stock was stolen. Joe knew

it now, but not so, Billy West. Only by a stroke of luck had the redhead learned of the shady trick which had been pulled on his boss.

Left behind because his cayuse had thrown a shoe, Joe had ridden slowly into the town of Granite, near where Billy had bought the cattle. The Circle J was unknown here, as the home ranch was much farther north in the Bitterroots.

Eating supper in the town's one restaurant while his horse was being shod, the sorrel-top had looked up in surprise as an excited, red-faced hombre rushed into the place.

"Whar's the sheriff?" this jasper had yelled. "Dang Long John Cassidy! Don't he ever stay in the courthouse? Somebody's stole my cattle!"

The rancher was mad enough to chew iron. The hot words he spat out told the listening Joe that the Circle J was in a mess. An explosive description of the cattle exactly fitted the white-faces, branded Running M, that Billy West had bought.

"Why, dern! Thet slick son of a gun we got 'em from must've been a rustler in broad daylight!" the Circle J readhead grunted.

The cattle had been bought in a field, just as if the hombre owned the place.

Rising from his stool, Joe had been about to attempt to explain, when the rancher who'd lost the stuff snarled out:

"A bunch o' birds ridin' Circle J hosses took 'em! The Peters boys saw 'em, when they passed their ranch. Headed toward Malpais City, they was. I'm goin' to jail them skunks!"

With that, the fellow was gone, before Joe could open his mouth. Half a block away, the narrow-gauge train had just rolled into the

Granite depot. The excited rancher gave a yell, as he saw a pair of figures swing down from the steps:

"Wait a minute, sheriff—yuh and yore dipity thar! Git right back on thet train! We're goin' ter Malpais City jist as fast as thet thing kin snort!"

The hombre had legged it for the depot, caught the officers and hustled them back aboard. Already the train was pulling out.

Joe had no time to buy a ticket. It was all that he could do to speed across through the twilight, dodge around a coal shed and swing up on the pilot as the engine chugged away from beneath the water tank.

"I'm danged glad I didn't try ter git on the cars," he grunted to himself now, as he thought back on the scene. "That turkey-red ol' cowman was so derned worked up, he'd had me clapped in jail in no time if I'd told him what was what."

No, sir, Joe had long since decided, the best thing, under the circumstances, was to beat the officers and the rancher to his unsuspecting boss. Billy was lots better at smoothing out things than Joe. Maybe the young boss of Circle J could make these jaspers see sense.

Joe wasn't anywhere near positive of it, though. That cattle deal had been a slick one. The hombre who'd claimed to own 'em—a big, bold-eyed jasper with thick, curly black hair and a huge ten-gallon white Stetson—was probably miles away already.

Of course, Billy held a bill of sale, but the officers were sure to think it a fake. The Circle J men were in bad—Billy, and Joe, Buck Foster, and Sing Lo, the Chinese cook.

"Dang!" the redhead growled. "I wish ter goodness we'd stayed at home and hadn't come pokin' down hyar on thet fishin' trip."

With spring round-up work over, the Circle J pards had set out for a bit of fun. The cattle deal had been unexpected, Billy buying the stuff just because the price seemed right.

Joe's fingers bit into the iron rods at his side, as the train whipped around a sharper curve. The engine lurched violently, the white finger of its searchlight showing a rock-ing wall on the left, a long, dizzy drop to the right.

A black canyon lurked below, but the track was better here. The train—combination express, mail, and baggage car, a smoker, and a coach—picked up greater speed as the curve straightened out.

Another bend. The engine roared at it. The headlight stabbed the night in a sweeping slash. Again rock wall and canyon met Joe's gaze—and a sight that froze his face with horror.

A great heap of ties lay piled high on the track!

Two hundred yards away they were, ordinarily ample space to let the engineer bring the train to a stop. But Joe realized in a sickening instant that the train's speed was too great. Roaring down grade at such a clip, it was flying straight to a wreck.

The headlight glare showed him other things, all in a second's flash. The mountain shelf to which the track clung, had widened near the tie pile. Bushes grew there; great boulders stood up.

And hidden farther along behind them, he now saw crouching forms, guns drawn, faces masked.

"A holdup!" he gasped.

He didn't know what the train held that the hombres wanted, but he did know it held Joe Scott.

Amid the shrieking grind of brake shoes slammed on by the engineer, Joe sprang to his feet to jump. But

the canyon lay on one hand, towering granite on the other.

Death awaited on either side, and an appalling smash-up in front.

"Gosh, I'm a goner!" Joe gritted, as screaming wheels streaked at the ties.

Those brakes would never hold. The outlaws knew it now. They were swiftly scuttling back.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN IN THE BIG WHITE HAT.

I'VE got a second to live!" flashed through the desperate waddy's head. But while there was life, there was hope.

His muscles bunched. He sprang. The rocky wall would have smashed him to pieces. He took a chance on the canyon to his right.

A second earlier, he would have died, a whirling thing plunging through space. But the mountain shelf had widened. He struck earth, gravel, cinders—went scooting on his face.

The impact was terrific. The breath was slammed from his body. Every bone seemed to rattle. But Joe Scott was range-wiry, tough.

A great crash, and he lay stunned! Wild pain filled the night. Great noise, also, as if the whole world had collapsed.

Red light burst to the heavens. The doomed train had piled up.

All this reached Joe through a haze, for the battered waddy was all but out. His senses reeled.

Dazed and groggy, he lay groaning in the heavy tangle of brush which had stopped him just short of boulders. Beyond lay the canyon drop.

Gradually his senses cleared. The red glare had gone from the heavens. The night was full of shouts and yells.

Joe sat up, his head aching, splitting. For a moment, he thought that his left arm was broken. Then he found that he could move it. He lurched up to his feet.

The engine lay, a twisted mass of wreckage, across the torn-up track. The lurid light had come from its shattered fire box. The express-and-baggage car was jammed up across the tender.

Day coach and smoker, by some miracle, seemed to have held the track.

Passengers were down, herded into a huddle beneath a scared train-man's light. The guns of two outlaws kept them there. Joe saw the tall sheriff, arms uplifted, his face grim, furious, helpless, above his gleaming star.

A scream came from the engine. Two men were pinioned there. Dim forms scrambled into the express car—bandits after loot.

Joe grabbed down for his six-gun. The weapon wasn't in the holster torn almost from his belt.

"Lost it—in thet fall!"

He whirled back with the words, toward the brush where his leap for life had flung him. He patted the ground swiftly, groping for the gun.

Dang those murderous fiends! Wreck a train—maim or kill the engineer and fireman! If only he could locate that .45—

The weapon eluded his search. No one had seen him here in the dark. A fierce grunt of satisfaction left the dirt-grimed redhead. His hand had closed on steel.

The waddy had his six-gun now. He went dashing toward the express car. Outlaws were on the ground there.

"Raise 'em, yuh skunks!" Joe barked in a furious voice. "I've got yuh covered—for the law! We'll just hang yuh hombres, I reckon."

Men jerked about. A weapon roared. Joe fired back on the instant.

The sound of his shot was drowned in a far greater explosion. The shuddering explosion burst from the express car. The safe there had been dynamited.

The next second, the fierce slash of guns blared out into the night from back where the passengers stood. The sheriff and his deputy—seizing their chance as the startled bandit guards whirled about—had gone into action.

Joe dropped to the ground with a little gasp. A shot from the rear had nearly got him.

Caught between two fires, he whammed away at the dodging forms near the express car. Bullets whipped overhead. Men yelled. The night was in a tumult.

Feet pounded the ground, before him, behind. The outlaws were in flight; officers and train crew were charging. Joe rolled, came upright.

A squat form had leaped from the express-car door—an hombre carrying a sack. He had the loot, Joe reckoned.

The man was shooting as he leaped. A screeching bullet cut through the loose neck folds of the old red sweater Joe Scott always wore. The waddy's gun snapped up. There was a pantherish spring behind him.

Crash-h!

Too late, the sorrel-top had tried to whirl, his instinct keen to danger. A snarling voice, a huge white hat, the heavy barrel of a six-gun—all had leaped from the dark.

The blow smashed home with tremendous force. Joe sagged, like a sack half emptied.

His assailant sped on by, roaring hoarsely to stop the outlaws. The next moment, though, he seemed to

stumble. He went to his knees, his white hat flying.

Men fell over him in a tangle—the sheriff, his deputy, and others. Wildly they threshed about, in a swift roll of confusion.

"White-hat" was on top now. He took his time about getting up. From boulders down the track, the pound of horses' hoofs sounded.

"Git up! Git off!" the sheriff yelled. "Them jaspers are escapin'!"

"Soon's I kin, sheriff!" the big hombre growled. "My leg's caught, or somethin'."

Heaving and bucking, he pulled to his feet. But his action tangled the others further.

By the time the mass unrolled, the outlaws were merely a drumming of sound playing out down the cinder roadbed.

"No chance ter stop 'em now," "Long John" Cassidy, the sheriff, panted. "Thar's a mountain meadow they kin cut across, whar the rails swing off from the canyon. What the heck got inter yuh, White-hat, and made yuh pile us up thet a way?"

"Couldn't help it," the other rasped. "I stumbled over a rock. Don't be blamin' me fer yore failures, Cassidy. I knocked one o' them bandits out, which was more'n yuh done, I reckon."

For a moment, the two men glared, for the last words had been sneering, cutting. Long John Cassidy and White-hat Harg bore no love for each other. Each had his reasons.

Cassidy—tall, rawboned, efficient—would be up for election soon. And White-hat was his opponent.

"Kind o' think I dropped one o' them guards," the sheriff snapped. "If he ain't dead, he's goin' to talk and name the rest of this gang, as

shore as thunder!" Cassidy's voice was fierce, determined.

The face of White-hat Harg twisted slightly in the darkness.

"Talk!" he grunted. "Thet's all yuh go on. Yuh better see how much money them crooks got away with."

"They didn't get much," the sheriff clipped. "This train was due to haul the regular monthly shipment o' gold from the Lone Pine Mine, at Granite. But it didn't go out. It's still back in the express office. When it does go, it'll be guarded," he snapped flatly.

"It—didn't—go?" Harg gasped. "Then—then what was yuh on the train for?"

"To arrest a bunch o' cow thieves. Now I'll jest talk to that skunk I shot, after we've done what we can for those two pore trainmen, folks is hollerin' are caught beneath the engine."

The sheriff, giving orders that the unconscious Joe Scott be guarded, hastened toward the cracked-up locomotive. Harg picked up his huge, ten-gallon white sombrero and stole hurriedly toward the bandit, shot by the sheriff.

Soon White-hat came striding back toward the engine, a smug look on his bold-and-oily features. In the dim light of lanterns, the engineer and fireman had both been found dead, one crushed, the other scalded.

Long John Cassidy's face was grim and stern.

"It was murder—plumb murder!" he ground out. "Waal, I'm danged glad we got one or two of the skunks, anyhow. Are yuh dead shore, Harg, that jasper yuh knocked out was one o' the varmints?"

"Yo're danged right!" the other rapped. "He was shootin' at us. Tried ter kill me when I whammed

him. Oh, I done more'n my part as an honest citizen! I ain't no bungler, Cassidy."

"Hintin' that I am, eh?"

Again the two were clashing. The sheriff knew that Harg—bold-eyed, clever, brazen—was trying to create the impression that the veteran officer had handled the situation badly.

Later, White-hat would probably twist things even worse. The fellow, running for sheriff himself, needed every vote he could get, by hook or crook. There were hundreds of folks who neither trusted nor liked him.

Harg grunted sourly: "Meanin' that a lot o' holdups and other robberies has took place hyar lately, and yuh ain't done nothin' except run around and paw yore head. Folks is danged tired of it."

"We'll see," the sheriff rapped, "come election."

Striding along, he shoved through a knot of passengers ringed now about a dark form beside the railroad embankment. The bandit, shot through the throat, was dead. Cassidy's first snap shot of the battle had got the desperado.

Harg's burly figure stood at the sheriff's shoulder, smirking.

"Waal, why don't yuh talk ter him?" he gibed. "Make him tell yuh who that gang was."

"Heck! No need fer that," an hombre growled. "It was that Malpais gang, o' course. Them skunks what hole up down hyar in the bad lands."

"Yep, and run some kinds o' law officers ragged," White-hat slid in evilly. "We all knows thar's such a gang, but the law don't never ketch 'em."

"Dry up!" the badgered sheriff snapped. "This ain't no time to try cheap electioneerin'."

"Time fer yuh ter do somethin'," White-hat growled. "I nabbed a bandit fer yuh. Talk ter him. But I'll bet yuh don't learn nothin'."

The crowd surged back to Joe, guarded now by Cassidy's sawed-off deputy—a pug-nosed little Irishman named "Rim" O'Reilly. The dazed redhead was just sitting up. Already handcuffs were on him.

"Why, how—or what—what's happened?" he mumbled confusedly. "Whar am I?"

The cowboy's voice was thick, his brain still woozy, from the double battering that the smash-up and Harg's six-gun blow had brought him.

"Yo're caught, thet's what!" White-hat said loudly. "Yo're one o' thet gang, and yuh needn't try ter lie out of it. I got yuh, jasper, with the deadwood on yuh!"

A murmur of approval came from some of the rougher passengers, despite Harg's bragging manner. Joe stared with dizzy eyes up at the fellow. The waddy's mind was in a maze. Where had he seen that husky hombre?

Then an inkling of memory came. It leaped to recognition. This was the jasper who'd attacked him from behind as he fought the bandits! Not only that, but Joe had seen him once before, in connection with that cattle deal of Billy's.

"Why, say," the redhead cried, "I know yuh! Yo're the crooked son of a gun what sold us them——"

"Shut up!" Harg's words came with a roar that drowned out the accusation. "Stalls won't do yuh no good. If I was sheriff hyar, we'd string yuh up in no time."

"Hang 'im, anyhow!" somebody shouted. "The dirty skunk! They killed good ol' Matt and his fireman!"

The dead engineer, a citizen of

Granite, evidently had been mighty popular. A throaty growl ran through the crowd.

"Git a rope!" a jasper yelled. "The engine's bell cord!"

"Shore! Ol' Matt's own cord! Thet'll be fittin'! Hang the varmint!"

Mob spirit gripped the angry men. The bell rope was swiftly torn from the engine wreckage. White-hat, who'd started all this, stood back, grinning in the darkness.

Joe rose unsteadily to his feet. Why—why the danged fools meant to lynch him!

CHAPTER III.

DESPERATE CHANCES.

HIS handcuffs clanked. His gun was gone. Rough hands grabbed at him.

But the jaspers had reckoned without the law.

Crash! Wham! Six-gun barrels rose and thudded.

Long John Cassidy, the sheriff, and Rim O'Reilly, his fighting little Irish deputy, knew how to meet a charge. A pair of hombres tumbled.

Six-guns faced the rest. They stopped, then back-tracked hastily, as the sheriff thundered:

"Blast yuh! Git back! Git back, I say, before I lose my temper! I'll show yuh who's the law hyar—and it ain't White-hat Harg, yuh brainless hot-heads!"

"Let 'em come on!" O'Reilly yelled, his square-jawed, pug-nosed face torn with fierce eagerness for battle. "We ain't never lost no prisoner yet. Come on, Harg! Take him!"

The deputy's sharp little blue eyes blazed. Rough-stuff suited his Irish heart immensely. Crouched into a ball-like knot, he wove a ready six-gun across the men before him.

"Easy, Rim," the sheriff cautioned. "They jist lost their heads. Harg's tryin' to start a row, get us to shoot somebody, so's he kin make a big holler about it. He ain't doin' nothin' himself, yuh notice."

Indeed, the big jasper wasn't, except snarling. His play had gone amiss. He had, however, cut off Joe's charge about those stolen cattle. And anything the ranny might say about Harg's jumping him from behind during the fight, would hardly have any weight now.

White-hat, who lived by his wits, had many irons in the fire. He hadn't been on that train for nothing.

The crowd stood, growling. Rough, honest men they were, in the main. Hot-headed, of course, and easily swayed, but just as easily made to see reason when the right man talked to them.

That right man was the sheriff. Long John lit into them now, with a tongue that lashed and stung. He spared nobody's hide.

Inside of two minutes, he had them ashamed, feet shuffling. That is, all but a few—about half a dozen natural thickheads and rough-necks.

These growled sullenly under their breaths, but the sheriff didn't notice. He finished by announcing:

"The law will take its course hyar. This red-headed jasper is guilty. He'll hang when he comes to trial, but until then——"

"Now wait a minute!" Joe spoke up quickly. His brain had cleared by this time; he realized what a dirty trick fate and White-hat had played him. "Yuh all got the wrong hoss by the ears. I didn't have nothin' ter do with that holdup. Yuh see, it was this way——"

He started to explain, but no one was in a mood to listen.

Angry jeers cut into his words. In the confusion of the battle, nobody had seen the real part he had played. His whole tale sounded unreal—a desperate yarn thought up by a tough young crook when the law had nabbed him.

Joe looked tough enough. Anybody would, after what the redhead had just gone through. His old red sweater was torn; his hat was gone; the bibless blue jean overalls, or Levis, which he wore in place of chaps, now seemed as if they had never been washed.

And the cindery grime on his face looked as if he had smeared it there to disguise him. White-hat Harg was quick to point this out. Even the sheriff nodded.

"No go, fellas," Long John grunted at Joe's story. "Yuh look like a crook to me. And nobody could've jumped from that cow ketcher an' lived, like yuh claim yuh done."

"Crook? Of course, he's a crook!" The angry words leaped from the old rancher who'd been responsible for the officers being on the train—the turkey-red cattleman whose stock White-hat had sold to Billy West.

"Now that I git a good look at him," the rancher snapped, "I sees that he fits the descriptions o' one of them Circle J thieves the Peters boys saw drivin' off my cattle. By golly, sheriff! Them hombres what stole my stuff must 've pulled this train wreck, too! They belong ter the Malpais gang, as shore as shootin' in!"

"Shore they do!" Harg cried. "This hombre needs a lynchin'."

"Waal, he won't get it!" the sheriff rapped. "One more word out o' yuh, and I'll throw yuh in the hoosegow!"

White-hat blustered back, but

shut up quickly when the officer started toward him. Long John stopped, satisfied. By far the greater portion of the crowd, he saw, had given up any idea of a lynching.

Turning to Rim O'Reilly, the officer instructed his deputy:

"We've got two things to do—git the prisoner to jail, and git hot on the trail o' the rest of them varmints. I'm hikin' out to the nearest ranch house for a hoss. Do yuh think yuh kin take care o' the prisoner?"

"Kin a wild cat claw?" The sawed-off Irishman grinned. He tapped his gun and glared at White-hat. "Try me."

"I'll have to," the sheriff said. "We've lost time enough already. But don't start no rough-stuff yoreself, Rim." He faced the crowd. "If yuh want action, come with me. We're runnin' down them wreckers!"

A good half of the jaspers eagerly fell in beside Long John. The sheriff gave terse orders. They were to hurry to a ranch, get horses, and fog on for Malpais City. There, a bigger posse would form—three or four posses, in fact—to scour all the country.

Joe, listening in dismay, learned enough to tell him quite a bit about local conditions and the lay of the country. Undoubtedly, the gang, that had sought to hold up the train, had been committing a long series of crimes lately.

Who they were, nobody seemed to know, beyond the fact that they were reputed to hole up after each murderous raid in a wild bad-lands region, a great stretch of lava beds from an extinct volcano, known locally as the *malpais*.

Malpais City lay near the place, and the sheriff seemed to be under the impression that some of the

gang might probably hang out there under cover, using the bad lands only when hard-pressed. For that reason, he hoped to get some clew there.

"And find Billy West," Joe groaned.

The redhead was in bad enough as it was, but he wasn't thinking of himself. Billy, Buck Foster, and Sing Lo would be nabbed by the sheriff the instant he saw them. To the cattle-stealing charge would be added that of murder.

"Thet danged White-hat is in with the gang," the redhead growled. "Thet's why he laid me out, the treacherous hound, when I was tearin' inter them polecats. It wouldn't do me no good ter try ter explain, though. These thickheads won't believe."

White-hat, he noticed, wasn't going with the posse. That fact told the sorrel-top much. The man must be so sure that the bandits would escape the law, that he saw no need to trail along and try to lead the officers astray. The hideout in the *malpais*, then, must be mighty safely hidden.

"The two-faced snake!" the waddy muttered. "And thet's the kind of a bird thet's got the nerve ter put himself up fer sheriff!"

What a crooks' holiday that would be then, if the hombre was elected!

"Come on!" Rim O'Reilly grunted to Joe. "I'm takin' yuh into the day coach, till a switch engine kin run out from Granite and pull us back. And if yuh make one crooked move, fella, I'll just bust yuh!"

The little Irishman, cocky and ready for a fight, swaggered along with his prisoners. Sheriff Cassidy would send word back to the county seat from the ranch house. An engine would be out in two or three hours.

As for clearing up the mess of the wreck and repairing the track, that would take days. But Joe wasn't thinking about anything but himself and his pards. If only he could escape, warn Buck, Sing Lo, and Billy!

Little O'Reilly seemed to read his thoughts. The square-jawed bantam snapped:

"Forget it, hombre. I've got yuh, and I aims ter keep yuh."

Furthermore, he herded the manacled waddy into a seat well up in the middle of the coach. A break for liberty, with each door plenty far away, offered small promise of success.

The night air was chill outside. The passengers who hadn't gone with the posse, crowded into the train to wait. Hard glances were shot at Joe and his captor, especially by the train crew, White-hat, and the roughnecks.

Little O'Reilly grinned mirthlessly in the dim light of the one unbroken overhead lamp in the coach. He had turned a seat so that he now faced Joe, his legs between the redhead and the window. His six-gun was in his hand; his blue eyes shone with sharp, quick glints.

"Relax, feller," he grunted to Joe. "Yuh won't be hung—to-night. Nobody's goin' to jump yuh—and yuh ain't goin' to jump me, neither. I'm so dog-goned little that I kin be counted on to shoot."

Joe felt certain of it. The pint-sized Irishman, proud of his job, wouldn't hesitate to cut opponents down to his size, with six-gun slugs or anything else that came handy. Joe was his prisoner; the law was on his side.

He watched the doors, and he watched the redhead. Time dragged on. The night outside was black.

Finally, a switch engine came

puffing up and coupled on. The two undamaged cars went rolling back toward Granite. White-hat Harg had disappeared. The train wheels clattered through the night.

Rock walls and gaping gorges slipped past, unseen, but plainly sensed. The train pounded over trestles, swung around long slopes.

Suddenly the front door of the car slammed inward. White-hat stepped through, gun in hand. The man's smooth voice crackled:

"Lift 'em, Rim, yuh runt! I ain't waitin' to be elected. We aim to have that crook!"

O'Reilly snarled and swung about, his big Colt up like a streak. White-hat ducked back to the platform, quickly out of sight. From the rear end of the coach, men had charged the deputy with a rush.

O'Reilly whirled, but the swarm was on him. A big-shouldered hombre lunged from the opposite seat. Upset, the Irishman's first shot crashed into the ceiling. Men yelled with their success.

Fierce arms grabbed at Joe. The waddy had come to his feet. His freckled face was grim, his blue eyes flashing lights.

His fettered hands shot up—and down. The steel manacles took a jasper hard upon the skull top. The fellow dropped like a stricken sheep.

But others were right behind him. The train took a sharp curve, with a mighty lurch.

It threw Joe toward the window. He was quick to seize up the desperate chance.

"Look out!" White-hat yelled from the door. "Stop him! He's goin' to jump!"

Already Joe was diving, arms bunched before his head, at the black square of glass.

What lay outside, he didn't know, but he had to take the chance.

O'Reilly was down, still fighting, but sure to be overpowered. The red-head hit the window with a fierce, shattering crash.

A huge, hairy paw just missed closing on his ankle. Bullets whipped overhead, as the waddy shot down through the night.

CHAPTER IV.

SIX-GUN SURPRISE.

THE two waddies lounging against the porch rail of the Morning Glory Hotel, in Malpais City, looked up in surprise at the small figure scurrying swiftly toward them down the dimly lighted street.

"Waal, help me, Hannah, if it ain't the chink!" the lankier of the pair ejaculated. "High-tailin' it like all git-out! Look at him come, boss!"

The speaker's fierce brown eyes stared. He was a grizzled veteran, with a face so badly scarred and battered that it looked like a battle map.

One ear had been clipped by a bullet, at some time in the past. His nose was dished and broken, above his sweeping mustache.

The other—trim, lithe, broad-shouldered, youthful—was clean-cut of range-tanned features. Only a strong, rugged cast kept his face from being handsome. His gray eyes were keen and level beneath his big ranch hat.

"Yo're right, Buck," he said crisply. "From the way Sing Lo's ramblin', somethin' must be up."

He vaulted quickly from the porch rail to the ground. Billy West—the young owner of Circle J—took a live interest in his men. Buck Foster's long, saddle-bowed legs followed suit.

"By heifers! Thar ain't nobody a-chasin' the yaller heathen," the

battle-scarred veteran grunted. "I think he's got ketched at some o' his card tricks, playin' poker. Thet chink am too derned slick."

"Too slick to be caught," Billy chuckled. "Here he is now, all out of breath."

Sing Lo panted up, his slant eyes showing fright. The little Oriental, cook for the Circle J, could hardly get his words out.

"Mistlee Billy," he gasped, "me gotee bad news! Mistlee Joe—him get—allested! Me find out—about it—down the stleet!"

"What's thet?" his bronzed young employer snapped. "Arrested? Joe? Where? What for?"

"Back up in the mountains. Folks say he tly to wleck a tlain. They say him pull a holdup."

"What?" Buck Foster roared. "Joe mixed up in a holdup? Them jaspers am plain loco!"

"So be." The little Chinaman nodded vigorously. "Them hom-blays is heap much clazy. But Mistlee Joe, him in bad trouble. They tly to lynchee him, 'cause two men be killed in tlain wleck."

He was wringing his hands and twisting them in the long shiny black garment he used as a coat. His almond eyes rolled with anxiety, as he cried to Billy:

"What we bettlah do, boss?"

"Find out the truth of this, at once," Billy West said tersely. He grabbed Sing Lo by the shoulder. "Yuh ain't been drinkin', chink?"

The little Chinaman shook his head. "Sing Lo heap sober."

Liquor, or "tanglefoot," as he called it, was one of his two big weaknesses, but Billy could see now that he hadn't been drinking. The young boss of Circle J quickly got Sing Lo's story.

It was brief enough, the facts badly garbled.

Sing Lo didn't even know that Sheriff Cassidy and a posse had just reached town. All he had was a wild barroom report about the affair, including a description of the prisoner, which could fit no one but Joe. Undoubtedly the big-beaked, bat-eared redhead had been mixed up in the thing somehow.

But that he was guilty was a thought his pards couldn't entertain for a moment. They knew Joe Scott too well.

Buck Foster clawed at his mustache, growling:

"Thet derned carrot-top must've seen the real holdup and pitched inter the crooks. Mebbe he got hurt so's he couldn't talk, and the fools on the train didn't have no more sense than ter think he was a robber."

Buck, a rather simple-minded old rannihan, wasn't usually very keen in his reasoning; but for once, he'd come near the truth. The guess wasn't half bad, Billy hoped. If so, there'd be some easy explanation.

He turned back to Sing Lo, his voice anxious: "Did yuh hear anything about—about Joe bein' shot, or anything like that?"

"Nope. Him just getee ketched. Then folks tly to lynchee."

"Say-y," Buck Foster roared, "if they've done anything ter that redhead——"

"They no do," Sing Lo informed him. "The sheliff, he stand 'em off. Now Mistlee Joe, him be takee back to jail, to Glanite."

"Well," said Billy West, "the thing for us to do is go see that sheriff."

"Yeah," growled Buck, "and ram some gumption inter that lizard's numbskull. But what'll we do with the cattle, boss, what we bought from the big white-hatted hombre?"

"Leave 'em hyar. They're safe enough in thet stockyards corral where we put 'em."

His decision made, Billy led the way quickly to the stable in the rear of the hotel. Slapping saddles on their mounts, the three were soon drumming out of town.

Granite lay a good night's ride away. Day would be breaking when they got there.

Billy West said little. His brain was busy studying all known angles of the situation. Two trainmen dead! Joe charged with murder! A lynching narrowly avoided!

Billy knew the rough, raw men of the West. There might be another attempt at mob rule.

Unaware of the real circumstances, the bronzed young rancher figured that the sheriff had Joe, under gun guard, at Granite. The thing to do was to get there in a rush, before the whole country became wrought by news of the crime. The Circle J men could vouch for Joe. And if another mob had formed——

Billy's square jaw set grimly. He touched up his speeding cayuse—a powerful chestnut stallion of mixed mustang and racing strain. Billy's batwing chaps popped like a pistol with their speed. His gray silk shirt bulged with the breeze of their own fast going.

Buck Foster pounded along behind, a mangy old bearskin vest keeping his shirt from bulging. A six-gun slapped at his thigh. The homely, hard-bitten veteran, constantly primed for trouble, already had his holster flap open.

Sing Lo brought up the rear, hunched in jockey fashion over the scrawny withers of a sleepy-looking piebald. Soon, climbing foothills began to cut down their speed. Then they were in the mountains.

Strangers to that section, they didn't strike the railroad. Instead, they followed the route they'd used in coming from near Granite to Malpais City. It was a bit longer that way. Saddle-worn and weary, they reached the county seat about an hour before sunrise.

Billy's eyes anxiously shot down the town's straggling main street. No one seemed to be about in the wan, gray light of nearing dawn. Tired horses stood with drooping heads before the hitch rack of a little stone jail.

"Huh! Looks like somebody's rode all night," Buck growled. "Out after them real crooks, mebbe."

"We'll soon see," said Billy. "There's a light in thet jail. Somebody's up. We'll tell 'em who we are, and get Joe turned loose in two-three hours, at most."

"Heck! We'll make 'em turn him loose now!" Buck rasped. "I'll be a horned toad if I'm goin' ter put up with no monkeyshines from no nitwit sheriff."

"Keep yore shirt on," Billy snapped. "I'll handle this."

He knew the veteran's crusty temper. Inside of two words, Buck was likely to make any sheriff, no matter how decent, plumb bullheaded.

Easing his chestnut, Danger, in among the horses, Billy swung to the ground and left his reins dangling. His pards rolled off, also. Spurs jingling, Billy West stole into the jail, the others right behind him.

The light they had seen came from a small cubby-hole up front—an office. Billy pushed inside and found eight or ten heavily armed, dust-stained men there before him.

Tired, red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes turned toward the Circle J men. Coffee was bubbling to a boil on a pot-bellied little stove. Evidently

these hombres had just come back from hard riding.

"Say-y, whar's my pard?" Buck blurted fiercely at a sawed-off, red-faced little Irishman who wore a deputy's badge pinned on a dusty vest. "Whar's Joe Scott? We done come ter git him out, or—"

"Shut up!"

Billy's hand fell on the cowpoke's shoulder and shoved him back. Buck subsided, grumbling in his throat.

From beneath his bushy brows, the battle-scarred veteran's big pop-eyes glowered at the crowd. Rim O'Reilly, the deputy, glared back with instant wrath.

"Don't mind him," said Billy. "I understand, officer, that yuh have one of my men here. There's been a bad mistake made. I can vouch for Joe Scott as an honest, straightforward, all-around—"

"Yeah, and who might yuh be?" Little O'Reilly's interruption came with a crisp, hard crackle.

His sharp blue eyes swept the pards, then narrowed to dangerous lights. Buck Foster—hard-boiled, thick-headed—had dropped a hand to a gun butt. The Irish deputy's pug-nosed face was suddenly like a bulldog's.

Rim O'Reilly was dead-tired, raw of nerves, and worn of body. He had beaten about the country for hours, furious at Joe's escape. If these hombres thought they could waltz in here and pull any slick shenanigan over on him—

"I'm Billy West, from Circle J," that young rancher answered promptly. "These are two of my men. Our reputation's good and we—"

"Good enough to hang yuh!" The wiry little deputy's wrist moved with the swiftness of a spring. His six-gun came leaping forth. "Hands

up, yuh dirty crooks! Git behind 'em, men! Circle J, huh? Thet suits me! Yo're under arrest—for cattle theft, train-wreckin', murder! Of all the gall," he rasped, "comin' straight to me!"

Armed posse men had sprung to the door, had the pards cut off, surrounded.

CHAPTER V. INTO THE MALPAIS.

BRUISED and battered, his freckled face cut in a dozen places, a handcuffed waddy stumbled through the night. Joe Scott's turn of luck still held with him.

Shattering glass had nicked him a little, wild bullets not at all, as he dived through the day-coach window. The train was roaring around a fill. The high embankment was soft. Joe had rolled unhurt to the bottom.

He had legged it swiftly then off into the dark, long before the train could be halted. Lanterns bobbed about in frantic search. The redhead kept on going.

Timber and slope, rough gulch and brush-grown boulders were soon between him and White-hat's mob. He had eluded them without much difficulty.

"And thet danged fightin' Irish deputy, too." The sorrel top grinned to himself now as, hours later, he found himself working down into the foothills. "Derned game little rooster; I sort o' liked him, too. But I shore wasn't goin' ter wait fer him ter collect a posse."

Joe's handcuffs annoyed him. They cramped his arms, interfered with his stride. And he was having trouble enough stumbling along in the darkness.

The stars were out now, though. By them, he had got his bearings. Malpais City lay to the east. Joe

still meant to get there and warn Billy.

"The boss'll straighten this mess out," he growled. "Them stolen cattle, thet train holdup, an' everythin'." The redhead had full confidence in Billy.

Of course, the sheriff might have reached Malpais City already. Still, Joe hoped that Long John and his posse might have stumbled on sign of the real outlaws and gone fogging off in some other direction. Even a false clew would gain him time.

What Joe longed for most right now was a cayuse. He'd spotted no ranches, however, where he might have "borrowed" a horse, leaving enough money behind to pay for the animal, in case the owner should later prove not to be understanding.

Folks didn't burn lights in the wee, small hours. If Joe had passed any ranch houses, he had failed to see them.

On he pushed, hour after hour. Dawn broke. The sun climbed high. Joe kept warily to the timber.

It wouldn't do to get nabbed again, by either mob or posse.

And then, at last, the unarmed waddy sighted a distant ranch house. He was down in the lower foothills now, looking out across plains country. Dangerous to cross, of course—but there, well ahead, lay the ranch house.

"I'll take a chance," the redhead growled. "They cain't hang me but once, nohow."

A drink of water from a mountain stream, and he was hurrying onward. How far away the ranch was, he couldn't tell. The sweep of the eye across flat plains country is deceptive.

"Cain't be so derned far, though," he grunted. "Thar's a big blue

cloud shadow on the ground jist this side o' it. If it was a long ways off, I couldn't see thet shadow."

Nevertheless, the redhead was wrong. As he hurried on and on, the ranch seemed to get no nearer.

The shadow, though, grew bigger, wider, longer.

"Waal, I'll be derned!" the puzzled waddy muttered. "What the heck is thet thing?"

He reached it, at length, and knew. What he had taken for a huge dark blot cast by a cloud across the sun was in reality an immense stretch of gray-black rock—upflung, weird fantastic.

Lava rock it was, hurled ages ago from the heated mouth of a flat, low-shouldered volcanic cone he could now make out toward the center. Why, then, this was—the *malpais*.

Joe could size its extent up fairly accurately, now that he was right on it. Twenty to thirty miles long, it seemed, and four to five across, in the narrowest places.

A wild, grim, contorted land, clinkerlike, harsh, forbidding. The lava flow had cooled in immense whorls and ragged pits, in huge craters, broken ridges.

Gaping pockets and shallow caves showed on every hand. No trail led through, of course. An ideal hideout for outlaws!

"By gosh! If this is the *malpais*," the redhead muttered, "I wonder why I ain't seen no posses."

Reason answered him at once, however. A hundred men could be scouring that jagged, pit-marked region without being visible in the slightest. Half the craters seemed blocked off from the next, with no means of connection.

The general coloring was dull; the whole weird stretch offered no background. If any hombre kept below the sky line, he could never be seen.

A jasper thirty feet away, in another freakish pit or twist, would be as invisible as if in the next county.

"No wonder thet gang holes up hyar," Joe growled. "I'd shore like ter find 'em."

Unarmed as he was, though, he knew that would never do. He'd merely be committing suicide, darned quick and sudden.

He looked about, considering shifting his course to carry him around the immense stretch of *malpais*. But that meant twenty or thirty extra miles. A day's walk! And Joe Scott was hungry, famished.

"Heck!" he snorted. "I won't do it. Cain't help Billy thet way, no-how. I'm goin' ter thet ranch house."

His mind made up, Joe plunged ahead—straight into the *malpais*.

If he couldn't see posses or outlaws, they couldn't see him, he reckoned.

Inside of half an hour, his boots were cut to ribbons. That lava rock might look pitted, porous, but it was as harsh as saw teeth. Joe was in too far to turn back now, though. He kept working forward.

Writhing ridges reared and twisted fifty, sixty feet above his head. Ragged boulders strewed the sides and cluttered up the floor hollows. No, not boulders, but great cindery chunks broken off sometime through the ages.

Joe picked one up—a small one the size of his two fists. It seemed to weigh twenty pounds. The unexpected drag of weight jerked the waddy's steel-bound arms downward.

"Heavy as a cannon ball!" he exclaimed. "This thing would do as a weapon."

Nevertheless, it was too heavy to

carry. The going was difficult enough, at best. Joe dropped the clinker and pushed on. If he bumped into any foes, he could grab up another.

To right and left, he wound, but ever onward. Slow miles went by. His feet were cut. He was limping. The way was blocked by sheer dips into craters with no outlet. He frequently had to retrace part of his course. He must have been about halfway in, he felt, when suddenly there came the realization that the dimmest kind of path lay before him.

It was winding, twisting, and all but clogged in places, Joe found as he hurried along it. It veered off at crazy angles, took him around hidden turns. But generally it led east—the way he was going.

"I mustn't keep to it too long," he muttered. "It probably is used by thet gang. I'll jest try ter fix its location so's I kin find it again, then I——"

The redhead broke off and sniffed. A pungent odor he knew well had drifted to his nostrils.

Wood smoke! He shot sharp eyes about. The path had carried him into a long, fairly deep and weirdly twisting crater.

The sides were pitted, broken. Long ledges, masking dense black shadows beneath, flanged out near the clinker-cluttered bottom.

Joe reached for a rock. A fire meant but one thing—the outlaws.

But before his fettered hand could close on a heavy missile, a human form had suddenly popped out before the waddy.

The man, thirty feet away, seemed to have stepped from the heart of the great pit's gray-black walls. Sunlight struck upon greasy white hair, a pair of glittering green eyes, the barrel of a rifle.

"Leave thet rock be!" the fellow

shrilled. "Don't yuh make nary a move! Try ter slip in hyar, huh? By grub pile! Ol' Ben has shore got ye!"

The voice was queer and cracked. The green eyes blazed with a wild, half-crazy light. Behind the stringy jasper, Joe saw that a crude door had swung open.

The door was a dull gray-black, a perfect blend with its surroundings. Charred wood, it was, on the outside—charred wood, a clever mask of concealment.

And now Joe, helpless beneath the leveled gun, saw in the dark recesses other similarly disguised doors. He was trapped in the den of the outlaws!

CHAPTER VI.

THE BROCKLE-FACED KID.

PUT up them hands!" the hombre who'd called himself "Ol' Ben" snapped, for Joe Scott still stood motionless.

Grudgingly the waddy obeyed, furious at himself for having blundered in there. Yet the hidden nature of the gang's hangout was almost perfect.

The short links of chain between the cowpoke's steel fetters rattled as his arms went up. Ol' Ben's queer green eyes stared. His gray-stubbled jaw fell slightly.

"Why—why," he blurted, "who am yuh, hombre? Whar'd yuh git them handcuffs?"

"Got 'em in thet train holdup yore danged gang tried ter pull," the angry redhead snarled. Joe was glaring now. "A fine mess thet was!"

The stringy old man behind the gun, still stared. His eyes were examining the freckled cowboy intently.

"Well, do somethin'," the sorrel-top snapped. He wanted to learn

the worst. "If yo're goin' ter take me ter them others——"

"By grub pile!" the greasy old fellow cackled, eyes on Joe's flaming hair and huge spattering of freckles. "Yuh—yuh must be thet red-headed Brockle-faced Kid what the boss was expectin' ter help out with the job! The rest ain't back yet, Kid. Did —did they git caught, too—like yuh was?"

The wiry old man had lowered his gun. Joe Scott could hardly believe his eyes and ears. But he was quick to take advantage of the other's mistake. Whoever the "Brockle-faced Kid" was—undoubtedly freckled, too, from the nickname—Joe meant at once to play up to the situation.

"Nobody got caught but me," he snarled. "The rest turned tail like a pack o' coyotes. A fine gang, if yuh ask me!"

"And yuh—how did yuh git away?" The old fellow's green eyes were alive with interest. "Did yuh kill a sheriff, or somethin', Kid? They say thet down in the Tetons, whar yuh come from, yuh are a holy terror."

"One man's dead," Joe said shortly, and left the other to draw his own wrong conclusion. "What I want now is ter be cut loose from these handcuffs. Yuh got an ax around somewhars, I reckon."

Ol' Ben cackled. "Me, I uses a hatchet. I'm cock fer the outfit, Kid. Have been ever since I got throwed and hurt my head. I was a cowboy, onct," he said vaguely. "White-hat's been good ter me. He gives me my grub fer nothin'."

White-hat, huh? The man's tie-up with the gang was complete now, Joe savvied. Thet smooth jasper was probably the leader. And they hadn't got back yet. Maybe the sheriff had caught them.

The red-headed young waddy
WW-2C

grinned thinly. Well, even if they hadn't been taken already, he knew where they holed up now. These hidden huts or half caves likely held lots of loot. And probably the money Billy had paid for the stolen cattle, too.

He'd just get this half-baked old cook to turn him loose, Joe figured, and then beat it for the sheriff.

Ol' Ben stepped through the low door, his long rifle trailing.

Joe followed at his heels. A soot-blackened lantern burned dingly on a crude table. A rusty stove, some boxes for chairs, and a pole bunk completed the furnishings.

Coffee and pots of food were on the stove, being kept warm by the old fellow. He rubbed his hands and grinned at Joe.

"I'm a good cook, I am," he chuckled. "The best the gang ever had. I always has grub when they gets in. They ought ter be along any time now. Sometimes, when they is chased, they cuts the other way fer a while, ter throw off any posse."

"Waal, get me free o' these bracelets," the waddy growled, anxious to be well away from there before the bandits showed up. "Thar's thet hatchet."

"All right, Brockle-face; all right!" Ol' Ben hurried to obey. "Jist stretch thet piece of chain across this wood block hyar. All my wood comes in short lengths. Thar ain't none hyarabouts. The fellers has ter bring it in on hossback."

"Yuh mean a hoss kin get in hyar?" Joe asked in surprise. "Through all thet piled-up mess of cinders?"

"Shore, by follerin' the trail close. They're trained to it. Say, by grub pile! Yuh must be purty good yoreself, ter find it without never seein' it afore. How did yuh do it?"

"I ain't bad at findin' trails," Joe grunted shortly. "Now start that ax work."

Whack! Whack! Whack! The short-handled instrument rose and fell.

The handcuff links were stout. The hatchet, none too sharp, chewed instead of cut.

"Put some weight behind it," Joe growled.

Ol' Ben nodded. The thuds increased in vigor.

A good five minutes passed before the tough chain parted.

"There, that's better." Joe got to his feet.

Suddenly he tensed. Outside, he heard sounds, previously hidden by the pounding.

The jingle of spurs. The creak of saddle leather. A voice snarled: White-hat's.

"Git out hyar, Ben, and take these nags. Whar the heck are yuh?"

"In hyar, boss—with the Brockle-faced Kid. He done beat yuh back. I'm comin'!"

"The Brockle-faced Kid?" The words were a roar. "What the——"

The rest was lost in a quick rush of feet toward the crude hut door. Joe sprang desperately across the room, toward the rifle Ol' Ben had propped in a far corner. Ten to one the odds would be, but if he got that gun——

Crash-h! The waddy was down on the floor, amid a splintering of smashing wood.

In the half darkness of the place, he had tripped over one of the pine boxes used for chairs. He scrambled up hurriedly, but a spurred heel had caught in the wreckage.

Joe went down again. This time, he got no chance to rise. Men pinned him down, like a hungry wolf pack.

"Lift him up! Let's see who it

is!" White-hat's angry voice was a furiously grating snarl. "Say, Ben, how'd he git in hyar?"

"Why—why, it's the Brockle-faced Kid," the old man stammered. "Yuh see, he showed up and——"

"Showed up, yore eyebrow!" A brutal oath—a thud! Ol' Ben dropped from the savage blow.

"The Kid's with us!" White-hat raged. "Has been, since an hour before the holdup! If yuh've let a law man in hyar—— Oh, it's yuh again, huh?" His gleaming eyes had recognized Joe.

"Yeah, me," Joe rapped, "yuh dirty two-faced cur!" He had been dragged upright now, and stood glaring back at the gang boss, eye to eye.

Ol' Ben rose drunkenly to his feet, his head in his hands.

"But, boss," the old chap mumbled, "he—he said he was Brockle-face. At least, he——"

"Claimed ter be me, huh?" The words were a throaty snarl, as another jasper rammed forward.

He was lean, hatchet-faced, with tawny-red hair and splotchy freckles that looked like coarse bran lumps. His amber eyes held a killer light. The Brockle-faced Kid was deadly.

Kid he might have been at one time, but he was certainly no youngster now. The stamp of evil years was plain upon his face. Every line was marked with crime.

His movements were quick and vicious, like the death snap of a rattler. His snaky brown hand twitched. A low-holstered gun flashed out. His eyes a cruel gleam, he grated at the captive waddy:

"Passin' yoreself off as me, huh? No hombre does that and lives ter brag about it. Fella"—his gun hammer flicked back—"yuh make the tenth dead man fer the real Brockle!"

CHAPTER VII.

A FIENDISH PROPOSAL.

THE quick, stinging slash of Joe's voice was all that staved off death on the instant. But the cowboy had read his man. He had no mean knowledge of professional gun hounds.

"Thet's right!" he taunted. "Shoot an hombre that's held! It's about yore class and speed, I reckon."

Brockle-face's cruel features twisted. Joe had struck straight at the weakness so common to a certain type of killer—a sort of pride in ability with a six-gun.

His mouth a wolf-lipped snarl, the fellow hesitated on the trigger. Joe followed up the taunt by sneering:

"So yuh've killed nine men, huh, yuh coyote? Probably shot 'em in the back. Man to man, yuh'd turn and run, if yuh didn't have every advantage. I know yore kind. Give me half a chance, and I'd show yuh up fer the yellowest kind of a coward!"

"Yeah? What kind of a chance yuh want?" The other's amber eyes glowed with seething fury.

"A six-gun, face to face!" the Circle J redhead snapped. "I'll let yuh make the first move, and then bust yore yellow streak plumb wide open!"

"Why, yuh—yuh—" The Brockle-faced Kid could hardly get the words out for his anger. "Thet's a go with me! Give him a gun, somebody! We'll stand off across the room—that's light enough in hyar—and I'll blow that smirk offn his fool face forever!"

No one moved. Eyes went to White-hat. With a snarl, the Brockle-faced Kid acted.

His left hand shot out and plucked a gun from the holster of the near-

est hombre. Barrel first, he rammed it at Joe.

But White-hat was too quick. The gang leader leaped with the Kid's movement.

A sweep of Harg's hand knocked the other's wrist high. The gun flew from Brockle-face's fingers. Across the room it spun. White-hat rasped in cold fury at the gunman:

"They told me yuh had sense—and yuh fall for a play like that! If he'd got his hand on thet hog leg, he'd been tryin' to shoot his way out o' hyar the next second!"

"Think so?" Joe said coolly.

The waddy was highly disappointed. He had fully meant to carry through that duel.

But he'd made no promises about what would happen next, in case he lived and Brockle-face went sprawling.

That hatchet-faced killer had whirled on White-hat.

"Say, yuh," he hissed, "don't never try anything like thet again! These jaspers may call yuh boss, but I don't!"

"Aw, keep yore shirt on," Harg growled. "Yuh touchy gun hands give me a pain in the neck. I kin import yore kind by the hundred. It takes brains to handle things right. While yuh've been flarin' up, I've got us a thousand-dollar idea."

"Yeah? Well, I can't say thet yuh look it," Brockle-face sneered. The gun dog didn't like to back down too easily.

Harg fixed him with one of those bold stares. "Get yore sputterin' over with," he grunted. "Now, if yo're ready to listen to sense, hyar's thet idea. I was wrong, though. A slip of the tongue. The thing's worth an easy five thousand."

The gang crowded close at this mention of spoils. Joe was still held, however.

In fact, Harg delayed long enough to rap out orders to have the waddy tied. Tensing his muscles, Joe lunged desperately to break free. A quick sweep of a husky boot knocked his legs from beneath him.

"No, yuh don't!" an outlaw gritted, as once more the weight of the pack pinned the struggling redhead. Joe struck out blindly, furiously, with the strength of desperation.

His hard-balled fist snapped a jasper's head back. But the next instant, Joe's wrist was caught and twisted violently behind him.

Knees rammed down upon his neck. The odds were far too great. Despite his heaving and kicking, his feet and hands were bound.

Jerked to his knees, helpless, he was flung into a corner.

"Thinks he's a wild cat, huh?" Harg's cool laugh was indifferent. "Let him lay and get some rest. He's ridin' with us, on this idea."

"Waal," Brockle-face growled, "what's the idea?"

"Just this. We've been plannin' on raidin' the express office at Granite to-night, knowin' thet the Lone Pine Mine's gold shipment is still thar, since thet railroad track's torn up too bad ter runs trains over. We take this redhead along. Then, when yuh ride away with the loot, I stays behind and shoots him."

"Uh-huh, but what for? Why not do it now?" a gang member grunted.

White-hat smirked at his own cleverness. "Thar's more money in it this way. Ol' Ben took him for the Brockle-faced Kid. Others can be made to do the same. And thar's a five-thousand-dollar reward out for the Kid, dead or alive, down in the Teton country."

The Brockle-faced Kid growled. "What of it? I ain't makin' no play at passin' out, jist ter let a

bunch o' two-bit crooks split up no reward. Me, I got a reputation!" He swaggered proudly.

"Yeah," Harg pointed out, "a tough one. One thet's got every gun hand, anxious to make a name for hisself, jest honin' to shoot it out with yuh. And law officers, too. Some day, yuh'll die from a slug, front or back. So yuh might as well——"

"I'll take my chances," Brockle-face sneered, "with yuh or anybody."

The gang chief ignored the implied challenge. White-hat still had excellent, if crooked, reasons to advance. He spoke them:

"We ain't dividin' the reward money with the gang. Jest between me an' yuh. Yuh git half; I git half. Later, yuh kin show up again as yore ownself, and have the laugh on them Teton birds thet paid out yore own head money to yuh."

The suggestion quieted Brockle-face at once. In fact, the idea pleased him. He grinned crookedly.

A great joke on the Teton law, and one to give him more of a reputation among crooks than ever!

"Suits me," he growled.

What mattered it if the plan called for the cold slaying of a helpless waddy? Human life meant nothing to those cutthroats and killers.

White-hat smiled. More of the scheme was now unfolded. The fake identification of Joe as Brockle-face would be bolstered up by papers which the Teton desperado carried.

Among them was a note White-hat had had Ol' Ben write, in cautious words, inviting the Kid to take part in the attempted train robbery.

The Kid had brought it along, out of sheer contempt for the law and also to let White-hat know he was the man expected.

"Thet'll fix things proper," White-hat grunted, "when it's found on the other redhead. Some of the rest of the boys what ain't knowed as gang members can swear they've seen him before, as Brockle-face. Thinkin' him dead, the Teton folks'll be glad to send the money."

"Yeah," Joe Scott growled to himself, "but I ain't dead yet, yuh crook!"

How he'd spoil White-hat's fiendish scheme, the trussed-up cowhand had no idea. But he'd have several hours to think things out. Maybe some plan would come to him.

It didn't, however, while the long hours dragged by, as the gang waited for the approach of darkness. Joe was fed grudgingly. Otherwise, the outlaws of the *malpais* paid him little attention.

He'd soon found that he was so securely bound that escape from the ropes was impossible. Ol' Ben looked at him kindly. The poor, half-cracked cook, Joe felt certain, was no real criminal.

Nevertheless, the Circle J cowpoke knew that he could expect no aid from that quarter. The queer old chap would probably have been afraid, in the first place. In the second, two or three of the gang were always there in the hut with him.

No, the waddy would have to make out for himself. But cudgel his brain as he would, he could hit upon no glimmering of a plan.

All that he could see was that, if found dead on the scene of another robbery, the fact that he was tied up with Circle J would simply make appearances far worse for his partners.

"And White-hat will swagger around, claimin' ter be a terror ter crooks, and maybe git hisself elected sheriff." That angle, Joe knew, un-

doubtedly had a part in the wily ruffian's plan. White-hat was as slick as he was ruthless.

Dusk wasn't far off when a hard-faced hombre, who evidently had been stationed at the edge of the *malpais* as a lookout, slipped into the secret camp. The fellow was grinning.

"All O. K., boss," he informed White-hat. "Them posses what've been prowling around in hyar has give up hope of findin' anything. They've rode back off toward the north, where we fust headed after the robbery."

"Good! We'll go, then," Harg grunted. "Brockle-face, plant yore papers on thet thar tied-up hunk o' reward bait. Fix 'em so's they can't fall out of his shirt. I want everything jest right, when I kill him."

Scant minutes later, Joe Scott, hands lashed to the saddle horn, was astride a cayuse. A lariat anchored the animal to another horse. Thickly hemmed in by outlaws, the redhead rode through the gathering twilight.

CHAPTER VIII.

JAIL BATTLE.

COVERED by guns front and rear, Billy West, Buck, and Sing Lo reacted in entirely different ways as Rim O'Reilly's men ringed them in, there in the jail office at Granite.

Billy, as yet unaware that the Running M cattle he had bought, had been stolen, could make only the blindest kind of guess at the reason for the little deputy's action. Nevertheless, it hit part of the truth, at least.

Joe was from Circle J. So were these waddies. Joe was suspected of the holdup. Therefore, so were his partners.

As this swift train of reasoning flashed through his head, the

bronzed young rancher shot a quick glance at Buck and Sing Lo. The whole mistake could be cleared up, somehow, he felt confident—unless Buck hastened worse trouble by going hot-headedly for his six-gun.

That lanky veteran, however, was still too amazed by the deputy's accusation to do anything except stare, with his grizzled jaw sagging. Sing Lo had emitted a little squeal of fright as he beheld leveled weapons bristling all about him.

"Deputy," Billy rapped, "I said yuh'd made a mistake. Now yuh've made another. Mebbe it's natural enough, but—"

"My one mistake," the square-jawed little officer snapped, "was in lettin' that red-headed pal of yores escape. I'll get him yet, with my handcuffs still on him. Now, yuh, hoist them arms, like I said, or this six-guns starts talkin'."

Billy's arms went up. There seemed little else that he could do.

So Joe had escaped. That was fine! The rest of the Circle J men could wiggle out of this mess some way.

Sing Lo obeyed, also. But not so Buck Foster. Things were just beginning to sift through that hard-boiled old-timer's skull. Why, that danged deputy, he fumed, had called him a train robber!

Buck's homely face twisted with rage. A roar broke from him.

"Yuh sawed-off, pug-nosed runt!" he howled. "I'll show yuh how ter insult honest cowpokes! Dern ye! I'm comin' at yuh!"

The angry bellow was still leaping from his lips, as Buck sprang fiercely forward.

So sudden was his charge, that Billy West and Sing Lo, on either side of him, were knocked spinning. Gun-covered or not, the furious waddy meant to show O'Reilly what

was what. The little Irishman's official position meant nothing to the riled-up cowpoke.

O'Reilly himself was taken by surprise. He had watched the Circle J pards' hands to see that none dug desperately for a gun. But a rush straight at him was totally unexpected.

He didn't fire for a second. Then his weapon roared.

But in that short span of time, Buck's lunging form had hit him. A bullet's hot breath burned the waddy's cheek. Bullheaded luck was with him.

He and the deputy went down, rolling over and over. The room was in an uproar. Posse men had dived aside as O'Reilly's slug screamed through the place. Then they were up, charging in, gun barrels raised as clubs, for fear of shooting one another.

"Whup 'em, Billy! Whup 'em!" Buck yelled. "I got this terrier!"

The veteran, however, was far from correct. Little O'Reilly was already squirming from his grasp. The deputy's gun was gone, but he, like Buck, delighted in physical combat.

Up to their feet they surged, their fists balled and swinging. Buck's furious haymaker whistled over the sinewy little Irishman's head. O'Reilly's straighter punch smashed home to the veteran's broken nose. Buck howled like an Apache Indian.

Billy meanwhile had found his hands full. Four or five men were springing at him with clubbed guns. He'd made no move to draw his own .45. He didn't want to use bullets against these honest, if mistaken, men.

Instead, he braced himself against their rush. He had to defend himself.

Crack! Thud! Smack-k! His

snappy, sharp-shooting blows smashed into heads and bodies.

An hombre went down, out in mid-air, as a sizzling uppercut lifted him backward. Another crumpled from a jolt to the jaw. But there were others to take their places.

"Lookee out, bloss!" Sing Lo shrilled in terror. The little chink cook, dodging wildly about the room, had seen an hombre grab up a chair to crash it down on Billy.

Warned barely in time, Billy whirled and ducked. The chair sang above his head and flattened men leaping at him.

"Blast huh! I'll l'arn huh how ter bust me in the snoot!" The angry yell was from Buck, still battling with O'Reilly.

The wiry little fighting Irishman had socked him six times to Buck's one, but that one had knocked Rim O'Reilly sprawling. Buck howled his delight. Then O'Reilly was up and flying at him.

Buck caught him as he charged. A shot rang through the room. Some fool had gone to shooting.

The bullet nipped Buck's side with a searing pain. He roared like a trap-caught grizzly.

The furious veteran was more stunned than injured. Snapping the small deputy up as he'd flank a calf, he lifted O'Reilly above his head and hurled him at the jasper with the six-gun.

The weapon screamed again as the man went down. Its wild discharge was upward.

But O'Reilly had been slammed hard around the hombre's neck. The shot tore along the deputy's skull. He struck the floor with a single moan, jerked once, then lay, eyes wide, unseeing.

"Great guns! He's dead, Buck! We've got to get out of here!" The cry came from Billy.

This meant hanging, he felt, even if that train robbery didn't. The furious crowd—the whole town, for that matter—would blame them for the slaying.

Seizing the broken chair which had been smashed in that furious swipe at his head, Billy West laid about him. Men tumbled like ninepins. But bullets were crashing now. Billy cleared a path to a window.

"Out, Buck! Sing Lo!" he yelled. "I'll cover yore get-away!"

A swift smash of one booted foot had sent glass panels flying. The little chink went through with the speed of a frightened rabbit.

Buck, though, had stayed to fight. Billy flung his chair, grabbed the veteran by the collar and spun him from his feet with a yank that snapped him sprawling through the window.

The Circle J boss was out beside him in another instant. Yells, shots, amazed oaths rang from the room. Billy was limping slightly as he jerked Buck up from the dust. A slug had furrowed a gash along one thigh. The dawn was breaking.

"Quick!" Billy yelled, drawing his gun for the first time in all that mêlée. "Pile on yore hoss! Sing Lo's up already!"

Bent low, as he and Buck sprinted for their mounts at the near-by hitch rack, the grim-lipped young boss of Circle J sprayed lead in a splintering stream around the sides and bottom of the window.

The fusillade kept the posse inside and prevented any more shots until the pards were in the saddle. Down the street they tore in a thunder of hoofs, a fogging dust cloud behind them.

The posse's horses were bolting, too, cut loose by Sing Lo, notwithstanding the little Chinaman's ter-

ror. A few early risers ran out from houses—stood popeyed, staring.

Then the pards were by and out of town, making for the mountains.

"Good work, chink!" Billy called. "Thet shore was a nifty stunt! It leaves 'em afoot for a little while. They'll never overtake us!"

"Heck, no!" Buck growled. "But what good'll thet do? We is plumb outlaws now, I reckon."

"It looks thet way." Billy groaned. Then his clean-cut, fighting jaw set. "But I don't mean to be in this shape long. We've got two things to do, danged sudden."

"What am they," asked Buck, "except ter fight? By heifers! I shore done thet back at the jail. I'll be a horned toad if I didn't whup twenty men!" he bragged. "I give them varmints fits, I did."

"And gotee a deputy killed," Sing Lo moaned. "So be, maybe they hang us."

"Help me, Hannah! I clean fer-got about thet, fer a minute," Buck cried, his face blank with fresh fear. "By gosh! He ought ter knowed he'd git hurt if he jumped me. What kin we do now, Billy?"

"Find Joe, first. He's out here—a fugitive—some place. Handcuffed, thet deputy said. And at the mercy of any fool posse man thet tries to cut down on him!"

"They'd better not," the veteran rasped, yanking furiously at his mustache.

"And after thet," Billy clipped grimly, "we've got a still harder job. If we're goin' to clear ourselves, we've got to run those real outlaws down, and tie thet holdup on 'em."

Sing Lo showed a sickly grin. The mountains would be alive with posses.

Buck seemed to realize it, too. He looked at Billy and mumbled:

"Great guns, boss! This is a mess! We got ter do somethin' quick, and fight the hull blamed country while we does it!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE FACE IN THE CORNER.

ON muffled hoofs, a group of horsemen rode single file into Granite. The thick blackness of night covered the town. Twelve, midnight, had long since come and gone. The place was hushed and silent.

"Them dumb posses are still beatin' the country, or else worn out and poundin' their ears, dead to the world," the burly leader grunted. "Slip ahead thar, Snake River, and see if thet express office is unguarded."

One rider detached himself from the group, while the rest reined up behind the stockyards set across the tracks from the little depot. No trains were running yet on that torn-up spur line. The station was dark, deserted.

The men sat in silence, save for faint tinkle of bridle bits or the low creak of saddle leather as some hombre shifted position. Masks were on every face—gunny-sack masks that, cut the right size, hid all features completely.

"Waal, red-head," the leader grunted at length, "take a few last long, deep breaths." He was addressing a bound waddy at his side. "Better gulp air while yuh kin. I hear Snake River comin' back. Yuh won't be livin' much longer."

"I ain't dead yet," the other gritted.

"The heck yuh ain't!" White-hat Harg scoffed. "Just as good as, yuh are. Thet job won't take us ten minutes. Then the boys rides away, and I drills yuh."

Joe Scott shuddered in spite of himself. He had faced death more than once before, but never had he seen it close in on him so coldly, so relentlessly.

All through that long ride, he had tugged hopelessly at his bonds. The ropes still held like iron. His raw wrists were lashed tightly to the saddle.

The voice of "Snake River," returning, sent across a low, hoarse whisper:

"It's all right, boss. All jake. Nary a soul around. This thing's goin' to be easy."

"Jest the same, get yore guns out," White-hat ordered.

They moved, with Joe in the center, toward the express office—a low frame building at the far end of the street on which the depot was situated.

A vague, shadowy procession, they rode with scarcely a sound. Men were mere dark blotches, White-hat no different from the rest, for his showy white sombrero had long since been stowed in a saddlebag. He now wore a big black Stetson.

Terse orders, and the gang split. Men were dispatched to each end of the street to stand guard. The rest surrounded the little office.

"I'll go in," said White-hat, "and the Brockle-faced Kid. Keep this Circle J redhead close to the door. I aims ter leave him layin' just inside the place, his ropes gone, like I'd blowed him up when he tried ter run out. If my slug messes his face up some, it'll be easier ter claim he's Brockle."

"Don't yuh bother about killin' him," that close-eyed killer growled. "I'll do it myself. He got gay with me, back thar at the hideout."

"Makes no difference who downs him," White-hat grunted, "jest so I

git the credit. We're both usin' .45s. But if yuh shoot him, yuh want ter ramble."

"Waal, I've done it before." Brockle-face's grin was wolflike. "Hyar, give me thet jimmy, so's I kin work on this door. Thar! It's worked in now. All set?" He heaved expertly.

The lock snapped. The door swung inward.

White-hat was the first inside, flashing about him the rays of a dark lantern he carried.

The beam of light cut across the room, circled, and swept over the face of an old-fashioned, single-case safe, easy for cracking.

The swinging light slid on past before White-hat could stay the arc of his wrist. A startled gasp broke from him.

The circular ray had touched a human face—pug-nosed, bulldogish, fighting.

A bandage swathed this crouching hombre's head. Raised six-guns gleamed in each hand of the wiry figure.

"O'Reilly!" burst from White-hat, before he could check his voice.

"And waitin'! Claw stars, yuh polecats! I been hopin' yuh'd show up hyar!"

The little Irishman had sprung from the ray of light the instant it touched him. The bandits' answer was a savage roar of guns.

Both White-hat and Brockle-face were shooting, in vicious, crashing gun roars.

Bullets hummed about the room, spattered off the safe, rang from the old iron stove behind which the deputy had leaped. His flaming guns stabbed and sliced the darkness. The din was terrific.

White-hat yelped in pain as a bullet hit him. He yelled wildly for reinforcements.

Feet swept into the room. The dark lantern's sharp beam played full upon the stove, gleaming along the floor from the spot where the gang leader had dropped it.

Cornered, picked out by the light, O'Reilly whammed away; but bullets, glancing from iron and wood, were hissing all about him.

Over he went, with a cry. A whirling slug had got him.

"Blast him! Kill him!" White-hat raged. "Then git thet safe open!"

Brockle-face sprang to the old iron box, other outlaws with him.

White-hat rushed outside. The whole town would be coming soon! He had to kill thet Joe Scott redhead!

The fierce rip and smash of gunfire filled the night as he emerged. Fear swept the crook. His guards were being driven back upon the little office!

From down the street there came the thunderous charges of yelling, shooting horsemen.

"Ey-yow-w! Gangway fer Circle J! Git loose, Joe! Git loose! Me an' Billy's comin'!"

The red-headed waddy thrilled to the words. Good old Buck Foster and Billy!

How they'd got here at just the right moment, he had no idea. Right now, he didn't care! His horse was whirling with fright. A hard drive of his heels sent the animal lunging forward.

He hoped that the sudden plunge might snap the lariat that fastened his mount to the heavier horse of a swearing, dismayed bandit. The stout reata held, however.

Joe's pony was jerked from its feet. The cowboy was pinned beneath it. From beyond the dust cloud that enveloped him, he could hear White-hat raving:

"Whar's thet redhead? Quick! Fight back them jaspers, yuh fools! We'll have thet safe blowed in a minute!"

"Thar he is, boss—at the end of my rope! His hoss is down!"

Crash! Wham! Bam! The speaker had gone to firing.

White-hat ducked beneath the roaring slash of lead that the fellow was hurling down the street. Straight at Joe, the gang leader leaped.

Then from the express office there came a terrific explosion.

Windowpanes showered from their frames. The walls shook; the building rocked. The safe had been dynamited!

CHAPTER X.

WHITE-HAT GETS HIS WISH.

WITH bullets screaming about them, two waddies tore into the fight with spur and six-gun. It wasn't blind luck that had brought Billy and Buck there. The Circle J leader had used his eyes to good advantage at the end of a day divided between scouring the country and dodging posses.

He knew full well that Joe was a prisoner of the gang, now. Why they had brought the redhead along on this robbery, he could only guess. The thoughts were far from pleasant.

"Drive 'em back, Buck!" he yelled, an instant after the dynamite explosion. "Get down there to Joe quick, before he gets hurt! There went the safe! This thing's almost over!"

"The heck it is!" the veteran roared. "I ain't even got started yet!"

The pair were going like the wind. The express office and fighting men leaped up before them.

"Joe," Billy yelled against the

tremendous crash of gunfire, "where are yuh?"

"Hyar!" the redhead shrilled. "On my feet, but my hands are tied to a saddle! Blast yuh!" to a springing, snarling form. "Take that, yuh varmint!"

The sorrel-top, jerking clear of the fallen horse, had found that the saddle girth had broken. He was still bound to the forty-pound hull and the lariat that ran to an outlaw's mount. That jasper, though, was too busy to pay him any attention.

It was White-hat at whom Joe had just snarled. Gun thumbed back to fire, the burly gang leader was on him.

The weapon spat orange-red flame—a vivid flash, for the waddy's face. Billy and Buck had no chance to grasp full significance of the blurred swirl of figures there in the dark. But Joe Scott had realized that death was swooping down upon him.

His wrists had snapped up desperately, the big stock saddle with them. White-hat's bullet plowed into wooden trees, thick woolen skirt lining, leather. The missile whirred off into space. A steel stirrup caught the outlaw on the chin point.

He reeled and toppled backward from the saddle.

Billy West, out of the saddle with a throaty cry as the gun flash flamed at Joe, reached his partner in a leap. The weight of the swinging saddle had the waddy staggering, off balance.

"Yuh hit? Are yuh hurt, Joe?" Billy cried, his voice torn with fear for the lurching redhead.

"Heck, no! I blocked that bullet clean. Cut me loose quick, Billy! That was White-hat there, boss. I want him!"

"I want him myself," Billy

growled. "Yuh grab a gun from some skunk that's down."

A swift slash of his knife had severed the bonds. With Joe free, Billy whirled toward the gang leader.

But White-hat, dizzy, had ducked away. The bellow of Buck Foster's voice filled the air. Gang toughs, with the loot, were dashing from the building.

"Drop it!" Buck thundered.

The vicious answer was a slug which whipped past so close that it all but clipped off one end of the fierce-eyed range hand's long mustache.

Buck whammed away in hot return. An hombre slumped, with a choking cry. Joe Scott swept up the fallen six-gun.

Out of the door rushed the Brockle-faced Kid, his identification plain to Joe by the gun hound's oath-filled voice. The redhead blocked his way. Joe's words were a hiss:

"Now, yuh yellow dog, hyar's yore chance for that gun duel!"

Brockle-face spun aside with a snarl. Two weapons flamed, their spurt and roar seeming almost to blend in a single terrific explosion.

Joe Scott moaned. His lips were set. His gun was gone from a bullet-bitten hand. But Brockle-face was down, a slug through his mask-covered forehead.

The Teton killer had collected his reward—the final, sure wages of a gun dog.

Townsfolk were pouring from houses and ducking back inside. Wooden sidewalks resounded to the thud of running feet. A restaurant front broke into light as some harder soul applied a match to a great overhead lamp. Through the path of illumination that fell outside, dashed a pair of figures.

"Halt! Game's up!" thundered Billy West.

But White-hat Harg kept on going.

Billy West had the jasper covered, but he couldn't bring himself to shoot a fleeing man. Calling on all his speed, he sprinted to overtake the other.

He was close on White-hat's heels, when the big man suddenly shot off into the black mouth of an alley.

Billy whirled after, a bare stride behind. A fierce tongue of flame licked, roaring, at his face. But instinct warned him. He had rolled his head to one side. The next instant, he and the gang chief were grappling.

A vicious knee drove into his groin. Billy went sick all over. But he had the desperate brute by the gun wrist. He held on grimly, his breath whistling between his teeth.

Save for the hard, quick shuffle of feet and the thud of blows, they fought in silence. Billy wanted to take this crook alive, make him do some explaining.

White-hat tore loose by a powerful heave. A cry of triumph left him. His gun muzzle rammed in at Billy's throat.

Crack-k! The man went sailing backward.

So swiftly had Billy struck, that the gun was never fired. The cowboy's whole arm ached from fist to elbow. But White-hat was a stricken heap, unconscious.

Billy dragged him out into the street and down before the restaurant. Across the way, people surged into the express office. Surly jaspers stood, with arms raised. Guns covered what remained of the outlaws of the *malpais*.

White-hat came to, wild-eyed, and tried to spring up in panic. But Billy's stern grip held him.

"No, yuh don't!" the waddy gritted. "I've got yuh, crook, and yo're goin' to talk! Not that it makes much difference in yore case, though. This crime's shore pinned on yuh."

"Who? Me?" the hombre snarled, his throat tight with desperation. "Why, I—I didn't have a thing ter do with this! I was the first one out hyar ter fight them outlaws. I killed two and——"

"White-hat Harg, the truth's not in yuh! Yuh can stop that stallin'. I'm hyar, still on my feet, to tell the folks what happened!"

Supported by friendly arms, little Rim O'Reilly had appeared from the door of the express office. The fighting Irish deputy was hit hard, but not fatally. His blue eyes were flashing.

"Waal, I'll be a horned toad!" Buck Foster gasped. "What am that—a ghost? I done shot that feller this mornin'!"

"It takes more'n one bullet to down this bird. Or two," O'Reilly gritted. "I'm pullin' through, all right. White-hat, I recognized yore voice when yuh tried to crack down on me before that safe. A fine sheriff yuh'd make! Yo're caught—for hangin'!"

By the time the deputy had finished rapping out his account, a fresh burst of horses' hoofs had sounded down the street. Tired men came galloping up—Long John Cassidy, the sheriff, and a weary posse.

Long John grinned when he got the news. The Circle J's part in the fight had shown everybody just what kind of hombres they were. There was no question about them now. Rim O'Reilly apologized to Joe for ever doubting that redhead's story.

He even forgave Buck for causing

him to get shot at the jail. The little Irishman held no man's fighting ability against him.

"It shore was fine work," the sheriff said. "We got the gang, and the loot. Say"—he looked around—"whar is thet gold shipment?"

Eyes swept the ground about the express-office door. In the excitement, everybody had forgotten the loot. It was nowhere to be seen. Faces went blank with alarm.

"Why—why," Buck roared, "them hombres dropped it! Whar in thunder kin it be? It couldn't jest have vanished."

"Him pleddy near vanish, though," a voice piped from around the building. "It be here alongside Sing Lo. Me gotee it."

"Why, yuh danged little pot-wrastler!" Joe Scott cried. "Whar'd yuh come from?"

"Me be behind Mistlee Billy and Bluck. Sing Lo, him afraid to jump into fight, but chinkee run behind building. Bad homblay duck around corner with gold sacks. Sing Lo tlip him."

Billy chuckled. "Yuh yaller heathen, yo're good! Did as much as any of us, in yore way. But where's thet crook yuh upended?"

"Him dead now. He jump up, light into path of wild bullet."

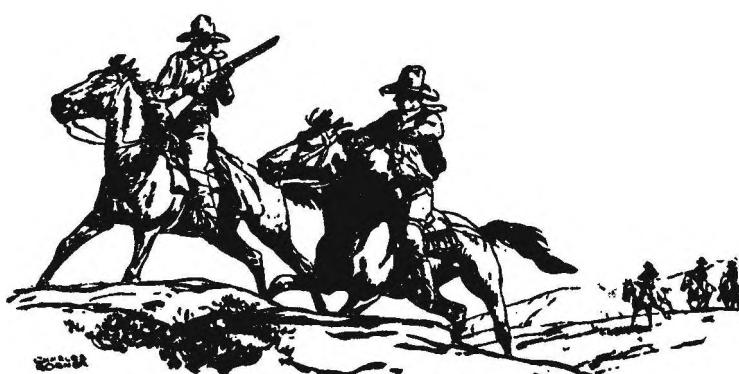
Nothing seemed left to be explained now, except the Circle J's appearance on the scene. Billy covered it quickly:

"Spent the day lookin' for Joe, and dodgin' the law. Just before dark, my field glasses picked up a bunch o' riders. They were makin' toward town, with Joe a prisoner. We thought 'em a posse, but trailed along, hopin' to do somethin'."

"And yuh shore did, when yuh found out the truth," the sheriff cried. "I'll jest look up these birds now—White-hat and the rest—" The officer broke off. "White-hat! Whar is he?"

It was Joe Scott's turn to smile now, a bit grimly. "The folks is tendin' to him. I saw half a dozen hustlin' him off toward a telegraph pole down by the depot. He's finally got his wish, what he's been hollerin' for—a lynchin'."

Circle J gen'rally sees thet bad hombres git what they're askin' fer. An' thet's a dose o' hot lead. Buck Foster furnishes the noise, but Billy an' Joe do most o' the real actin'. An' Sing Lo always bobs up whar he's least expected, with jest what's needed most at thet moment. Them pards shore work ter-gether plumb fine. An' they'd shore better in the next story about 'em, if they want ter come out with whole hides. Watch fer it pronto in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.





The Whistlin' Kid Plays His Hand

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Blots A Brand," etc.

LOUD shouts and the pounding of horses' hoofs came faintly down the curving trail. The "Whistlin' Kid" listened and wondered. But he did not check the easy fox-trot of his rangy buckskin gelding. Nor did he cease whistling his favorite tune, "The Cowboy's Lament," until he had finished the last bar of the chorus.

"Them sounds seem ter be kind of out of place, Speed," the Kid finally remarked into the flagged ears of his mount. "Comin' as they do from the headquarters of an easy-goin' outfit like I been told this Open-book Ranch is."

Curious to know what was happening, the Kid urged his horse around the foot of the tall, cone-shaped butte that was a landmark for the Red Mesa country and in the shadow of which nestled the Open-book Ranch.

It was a little past noon of a late-summer day. Since daybreak, the Kid had been riding over the sage flats that stretched away endlessly toward the north. It was an urgent errand that brought him here to the Open-book Ranch.

The big buckskin's ground-eating gait quickly took the Kid to a position from which he could view the

ranch buildings and corrals. And what a sight met his astonished gaze!

"Waal, I'll be durned! What in the name of sense does them hombres think they're doin'?" gasped the Kid.

He reined up the buckskin and sat watching the scene spread before him.

On a level, bare plot of ground, between the whitewashed adobe ranch house and the stables and corrals, eight horsemen were riding furiously. Their cow ponies dodged and twisted as if they were cutting cows out of a herd. But no cows were in evidence.

Finally one rider broke clear of the welter of sweating horses and yelling waddies, and went racing across the open field. He was swinging a long-handled mallet in his right hand.

"Fer gosh sake! They're playin' ball on horseback!" exclaimed the Kid, catching sight of a ball that was being knocked along ahead of the rider.

Riding up to the edge of the little field, the Kid drew rein. His dark-tanned, hawkish face showed no sign of friendly interest in what he was witnessing. Through slightly narrowed lids, his dark eyes gazed out coldly at a foppishly dressed, light-complexioned man who rode toward him after the game had apparently come to an end.

"I've heard tell of an old codger named Nero who set out on his front porch and fiddled while Rome burned up, but dog-goned if I ever expected to see a cowman get all his waddies together and play ball with 'em, when half the cow critters on his range had been rustled," muttered the Kid under his breath.

"You got here just too late to watch a very interesting game of

polo, my man," said the fellow in knickers and Eastern riding boots, as he rode up to the waiting Kid.

The condescending air and patronizing "my man" of this dude rancher was far from pleasing to the Kid.

"So that's what you call it, huh," he said sarcastically. "Thought mebbe you was jest exercisin' your hawsses, 'count of not havin' any cows left to ride after."

"What's that? What do you know about the loss of my live stock?" demanded the man, who was plainly an Eastern tenderfoot.

"All I know is what you wrote to the Cattlemen's Association, Mr. Courtney," said the Kid evenly. "To look at this layout, nobody would think you had lost a thousand head of cows."

"How did you find out about that letter?" asked Courtney.

"I'm Pete Prentiss, range detective fer the association," explained the Kid, fishing the "makings" out of the pocket of his blue flannel shirt and starting to roll a quirly. "I been nicknamed the 'Whistlin' Kid,' and I reckon most folks don't know me by any other name."

"I can easily see how you got that nickname. You look like an inexperienced young fellow," said Courtney, glancing contemptuously at the Kid's unlined, beardless face.

"We'll let that go as it is," coolly answered the young range dick. "I'm here on business. Let's get down to brass tacks. When did you start missin' them rustled critters?"

"Why, not until we finished round-up last week," said Mr. Courtney, squelched, for the moment, by the Kid's crisp words.

"How long you owned this spread?"

"I bought it a year ago, at round-up, from the Atlantic Cattle Co., of New York."

"How many head?"

"Two thousand head of mixed stock."

"Mean to say thet you've had all this bunch of waddies ridin' fer you, and they couldn't tell whether half your cows was missin' without waitin' fer a general round-up?" asked the Kid.

"Why—ah—you see there wasn't really any need of the boys spending all their time riding aimlessly over the range," stammered Courtney, flushing with embarrassment.

"Yeah, I see," said the Kid. "'Stead of runnin' this cow spread, you let it run itself, while you kept these boys busy playin' polo with you. Mighty expensive entertainment, I'd say."

The crew of cow-punchers had by this time ridden up close behind their boss. One look at the Kid's plain but serviceable range outfit, both clothes and saddle rig, told them that here was one of their own kind.

And they were right, for the Kid had been a top hand for more than one big outfit before he became a cow dick. Under the somewhat scornful glance of his keen dark eyes, they squirmed unhappily in their saddles. They were like a group of schoolboys caught playing truant.

"Who was roddin' the spread for the company, when you bought it?" went on the Kid.

"If you mean who was foreman or manager, it was a very capable man by the name of Denning—Jack Denning," said Courtney.

"Where's he now?"

"Why, he and his crew left the ranch as soon as the cattle were delivered. And I understand they started a ranch of their own called the Checkerboard, about fifty miles west of here."

"Uh-huh," said the Kid, while a queer expression crossed his bold, hawklike countenance. "I reckon some of their relations back East died about thet time and remembered 'em in their wills. Thet would account fer 'em havin' the money to start in the cow business with."

"If you're insinuating that Mr. Denning might be responsible for the loss of my live stock, I'll inform you that he seemed to be a very honest, efficient man," said Courtney.

"Mebbe. But I'm not insinuatin' nothin'. I'm jest wonderin' at the luck some folks has. And are you right sure that the whole two thousand head of cows you paid fer was here on the range?" asked the Kid.

"I certainly am," haughtily declared the dudish owner of the Open-book Ranch. "I'm too smart a business man to be taken in by any fraudulent scheme. Mr. Denning and I sat on our horses beside the trail there at the foot of the butte and counted every head of stock as they were driven past us."

"Pears like you must have got all you paid fer, then," admitted the Kid. "You got a bill of sale?"

"Certainly. Denning had full authority to close the deal. I paid him and took his receipt."

"And then the whole bunch of cowhands quit, huh?"

"Well, a few of the boys stayed until I could secure a new crew, then they all left."

"And a year later, you wake up and discover thet half your cows has been rustled," observed the Kid, taking a last drag on his quirly and dropping the butt into the dust at his horse's feet. "Waal, I must say you take it easylike. A little thing like losin' a thousand head of critters don't stop you from playin' games."

"I'll have you to understand, young man, that I have taken all necessary steps to protect my interests," said Courtney, tartly. "The sheriff has been notified and is on the lookout for the stolen stock. And I had counted on the association to put a man of mature years and experience on the job. You might as well drop the case and return to headquarters."

"Yeah, I might, but I ain't goin' to," coolly retorted the Kid. "I was sent here to sit in this game, and I aim to draw cards and play out my hand. But it ain't goin' to be easy, 'count of you givin' the rustlers all the time they needed to cover their tracks, while you was playin'."

Wheeling the buckskin, the Kid started back down the wide curving trail that skirted the foot of the lone butte. He was whistling the doleful "Cowboy's Lament" as he passed from sight of the highly offended Open-book owner and his crestfallen waddies.

"Thet young jasper don't mind sayin' what he thinks. He shore made me feel cheaper'n a plugged nickel, talkin' about us playin' this here dude's game," sheepishly remarked a walrus-mustached waddy to the rider nearest him.

"He's got a fightin' face, an' that hog leg he's wearin' has been used aplenty," added the other Open-book waddy. "I'mbettin' this outfit ain't heard the last of him."

II.

Although the Kid had counted on the hospitality of the Open-book owner to provide quarters for himself and horse, while he was investigating the case, he was too independent to hang around the ranch after the clash he had had with Courtney.

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Whistling and thinking over the case, he rode across the sun-baked open range, till he reached a small stream fringed with cottonwoods. There was plenty of grass for Speed, the buckskin. In his saddle pocket, there was a tin of corned beef which the Kid carried for an emergency ration. He was used to rough fare. He stripped his riding gear from the buckskin, rubbed it down and picketed it.

After his frugal lunch, the Kid sat for many minutes, studying over the situation which faced him.

"Pears to be a cinch that Denning and his bunch got away with them missin' cows," the young range dick told himself. "Else how could they have started up in business so pronto?"

The Kid picked up a cottonwood twig and drew the Open-book brand in the soft dirt of the creek bank.



Then, with a few strokes, he changed it to the Checkerboard iron mark.



The thing was so ridiculously easy, that a grin loosened the firm line of the Kid's wide mouth as he gazed at the crude drawing.

"The next thing is to try and tag Mr. Denning," the Kid reflected, "which is a heap easier said than done. Thet hombre must be plenty smart, and he's had a whole year to get set in."

A couple of days later, the Whistlin' Kid was riding his buckskin along a dusty trail that led to the Checkerboard Ranch. As a last resort, he was going to tackle the gang

he believed responsible for the loss of the Open-book cows, on their own stamping ground. This meant plenty of trouble, as the Kid well knew from past experience in dealing with rustlers.

Those last two days, since he met Courtney, the tenderfoot owner of the Open-book Ranch, had been busy ones for the Kid. Every clew that might have led to evidence against Denning and his gang had been carefully run down. And now, as the Kid rode westward over the sage flats, whistling the doleful "Cowboy's Lament" and smoking quirlies, he thought with disgust of how barren of results his work had been.

It seemed as if Denning had an air-tight alibi. Investigation showed that he had *bought* a thousand head of cows from neighboring ranchers immediately after leaving the Open-book. This spoiled the Kid's theory that Denning had rustled Open-book critters, with which to stock his new ranch.

For many miles in every direction, the country was comparatively level. There was no *malpais* or bad lands suitable for a hideout for rustled cattle. Likewise, it would practically be impossible to haze large numbers of stolen cows across such open range without detection.

The Kid's final step had been to ride to the nearest railroad town and telegraph to the former owners of the Open-book, in New York. That had quickly brought proof of crime against Denning. The cattle company wired back that their foreman had sold *one thousand* head of stock to the tenderfoot, Courtney.

"Which means that Denning fooled them Eastern owners into thinkin' they only had half as many cows as he really rounded up," the Kid told himself. "And then he sold

the whole two thousand head to Courtney, sent half the money to the owners, and pocketed the other half. A right slick hombre!"

Although he now had evidence that would send Denning to prison for embezzlement, the Kid had no idea of pressing any such charge. If he did, the Eastern company would promptly seize Denning's Checkerboard outfit to reimburse themselves for the money he had apparently stolen from them.

That would leave Courtney with no means of recovering his rustled cattle or the money for which they had been sold, if Denning was the thief. And the Kid was sent there by the Cattlemen's Association to protect the interests of their member, Courtney.

"I got to put this rustlin' job on Denning, somehow," muttered the young range dick. "Then the poor sap of a Courtney can grab the Checkerboard spread hisself."

Mile after dusty mile passed under the quick-stepping buckskin's hoofs, while the Kid endlessly whistled the melancholy "Lament," and cudgled his brains for an answer to his difficult problem,

"Shucks! I jest go round and round and don't get nowhere with this dog-goned case," complained the Kid to himself, reining up Speed on the crest of a rise, to get his bearings. "I jest go around in circles an'—"

Suddenly the Kid checked his grumbling. An idea had flashed into his mind as to how Denning had robbed Courtney. For a moment, the very daring of the scheme held the Kid almost breathless. Then the thought of the slick trick by which the tall, haughty tenderfoot, Courtney, had been taken in by Denning, brought such a hearty chuckle of appreciation, that the big

buckskin tossed its head and lay back its ears in startled wonder.

"Reckon I'd ought ter let you in on the secret, Speed, so's you could give thet tenderfoot, Courtney, the hawss laugh," chuckled the Kid.

He was about to confide his idea to the buckskin, as he often talked to the faithful animal when riding lonely trails, when his searching eyes caught sight of a distant ranch house, half hidden in a clump of cottonwoods.

"Yonder's Denning's Checkerboard spread," the young range dick told himself, with a quick return to his usual serious manner. "I'm goin' to ride down there and get acquainted with thet crook, Denning, and his gang."

A few minutes later, the Kid reined up in front of the long, low adobe building that evidently served the Checkerboard outfit as a combination cook and bunk house.

"Howdy, boys!" the Kid cordially hailed two ornery-looking, slit-eyed hombres who were lazily engaged in a game of cards under a shady cottonwood in front of the house.

Both players grunted a surly response and went on playing, without looking up at their visitor.

"Pleasant sort o' jaspers," muttered the Kid under his breath.

A movement in the doorway caught his eyes, and he half turned his head to look at a rawboned, scowling hombre with a harelip which was partly concealed by a long sandy mustache.

"What yuh want?" growled the man who had appeared in the open doorway.

"First thing would be a drink of water for my hawss and myself, if it ain't askin' too much of you," coolly replied the Kid.

The touch of sarcasm in the young range dick's voice wasn't lost on the

harelipped hombre. He bristled at it like a dog whose possession of a bone is disputed.

"Don't try no smart cracks round here, fella," snarled the man in the door. "Git yore drink down at the horse trough an' be on yore way."

"Is this here the Checkerboard spread?" asked the Kid, paying no apparent heed to the other's surly manner.

The harelipped man spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust outside the door. "It shore is. What else d'yuh want ter know?" he said.

The Kid slid out of his saddle and dropped the buckskin's reins to the ground. He had no intention of letting this cantankerous hombre drive him away before he had a chance to get certain evidence he sought.

"I got business with Denning. Happen he's here?" the Kid asked.

Before the hombre could answer the Kid's question, he was pushed aside by a big, burly man with the scarred face of a rough-and-tumble fighter.

"Who's this slick-ear thet's askin' fer Denning, Lippy?" demanded the big man.

"I dunno who he is, Scar," said "Lippy," peering out past the scar-faced hombre. "He rode up hyar like he was too danged important tuh talk tuh common folks."

"Have it your own way," retorted the Kid. "Anyhow, you didn't 'pear to care who I am nor what my business is. You told me to drink out o' the horse trough and hit the trail."

"Waal, who the heck are yuh, fella?" snarled Lippy. "Cut out yore smart gab, or yuh'll——"

"Close yore own trap, Lippy!" cut in the hombre called "Scar," who seemed to be foreman of the outfit. "I'll 'tend tuh this hawk-beaked young smart-Aleck."

The burly Scar strode threateningly over to the calmly waiting Kid. His little red-rimmed black eyes glanced over the young range dick's lithe, muscular figure, not missing any detail of the well-worn range outfit from dusty, gray Stetson to high-heeled, spurred boots. He sneered openly at the long-barreled Colt .45 which the Kid carried in a holster thonged to his thigh.

"Tryin' tuh run a bluff with that hog leg, huh," sneered Scar. "Waal, yuh better keep the sights filed offn it, 'cause somebody will be rammin' it down yore throat one o' these days. Now, talk fast an' tuh the point. Who are yuh, an' what do yuh want?"

III.

The Kid met the big hombre's ugly gaze without the quiver of an eyelash. With provoking unconcern, he even whistled a few low notes of "The Cowboy's Lament." Although never one to seek trouble unnecessarily, the Kid could be as stubborn as a mule, when it came to backing down before any hombre who tried to force trouble on him.

He not only resented the uncalled-for insults to which he had been subjected here at the Checkerboard headquarters, but he was more determined than ever to remain until he had met the big boss, Denning.

"I've done asked this here snapin' turtle yuh call Lippy, if Denning is here," coldly stated the Kid. "Thet's all the infermation I aim ter give you. And as fer filin' the sights off my gun, I ain't figgerin' to have any sore throat from bein' rammed with 'em."

"Yuh'll fork thath long-legged bronc of yores, pronto, an' high-tail it offn Checkerboard range, or I'll run yuh off!" snarled Scar furiously.

"Somethin' tells me thath mebbe

you're goin' to need help to carry out thath threat, fella," said the Kid, standing his ground.

The big foreman's scarred face turned purple with rage.

"Yo're goin' to git the lickin' of yore life right now!" he bellowed hoarsely, at the same time stepping forward and starting a hamlike fist swinging toward the Kid's dark-tanned face.

The blow never reached its destination. While it was still in mid-air, the Kid's right arm lashed out with the power and swiftness of a bronc's kick. His range-hardened fist connected with the foreman's ugly out-thrust jaw. It dropped Scar as if he had been poleaxed.

"Dang-blast yuh! I'll kill yuh fer thath!" yelled Lippy from the position he had resumed in the doorway.

With the words, his hand jerked downward to the butt of his six-gun.

Before the harelipped hombre could get his gun clear of leather, he was looking squarely into the muzzle of a .45, which the Kid seemed to have plucked out of thin air, so fast was his draw.

Brang-g! A streaking bullet neatly clipped one end of the Checkerboard gunman's long mustache and ripped through the doorframe at his side.

"Drop thath hog leg and reach high, hombre!" snapped the Kid.

Lippy's six-gun was still falling to the ground, when the Kid flipped the muzzle of his .45 in a half circle to cover the two card players under the cottonwood tree. So quickly had it all happened, that neither had as yet got to his feet. They were still gazing in wide-eyed amazement, when the Kid barked his next order:

"Keep your hands up, and back

over ag'in thet wall, you two jaspers! And you, too, Lippy, step out o' the door and line up!"

The three Checkerboard waddies sullenly obeyed the Kid's command.

Without for an instant taking his keen dark eyes from the snarling trio, the Kid stooped and secured a heavy Colt from the holster of the burly foreman, who was still unconscious at his feet. He tossed the weapon onto the low and slightly pitched roof of the adobe ranch house.

Then he stepped quickly over to the men lined up against the wall. Relieving the two former card players of their six-guns, he sent the weapons spinning after the foreman's gun. A moment later, Lippy's Colt had been picked up out of the dust by the door and had gone to join the other smoke wagons on top of the house.

"Now, hombres, you can pull down your mitts," ordered the Kid, enjoying the discomfort of his captives. "Thet was a lesson to never start nothin' you can't finish. See thet you don't do nothin' thet'll call fer lesson No. 2. It'll be a heap harder to take."

"And you two jaspers thet was so busy playin' seven-up thet you couldn't speak civil to me when I rode up, you go drag Mr. Scar-face into the shade. 'Pears like he must have one of them glass chins I've heard about."

"You, Lippy, step over yonder to the horse trough and dip up a handful of water and see what effect it'll have on your playful li'l foreman."

Under the stern eye of the Whistlin' Kid, the orders were carried out, with many oaths and evil prophecies of what would happen to the Kid when Denning found out what had taken place. Soon the burly, scar-faced foreman had come to and

was sitting up, rubbing his jaw and gazing around in blank bewilderment.

"Thet's fine," commented the Kid, holstering his gun and squatting on one boot heel to roll a brown paper quirly. "Now, while we wait here in the shade of the old cottonwood tree fer Mr. Denning to come home, I'll entertain you gents by whistlin' a tune thet's right appropriate fer the occasion."

Whereupon the young range dick proceeded to whistle the doleful air of "The Cowboy's Lament."

The Kid was still whistling, a half hour later, when a thickset, black-bearded man on a powerful roan horse rode up to the ranch house. Dismounting and leaving his horse standing near Speed, he approached the group under the cottonwood with a shuffling, bearlike tread.

His little deep-set eyes glinted from under shaggy black brows. It was plain to the watching Kid that this hombre had a quick, cunning mind. Already he had sensed something wrong.

"What's goin' on here, Scar?" demanded the newcomer in a tone of authority that instantly identified him to the Kid as Denning. "Whar's yore guns?"

As the four hard-bitten hombres got to their feet, each man with an empty holster, the squat owner of the Checkerboard bent a withering glare on them.

"Shut yore mouths afore yuh start, yuh pore misfit, no'-count, orter-be sheep-herders!" bawled Denning. "I kin see what's happened. Yo're supposed tuh be tough gun slingers, an' yuh let a young ranney thet cain't grow a beard, ride in here an' clean the bunch of yuh. Too dang bad he didn't finish yuh, while he was at it."

Turning to the Kid, who had also risen to his feet and was coolly watching the proceedings, the irate cowman crook gazed at him for a moment with eyes that seemed to bore clear through him.

"What's the idea of makin' fools out o' my waddies this a way?" Denning snapped. "Who are yuh, an' what's yore business?"

"Answerin' your last questions first, I'm mostly called the 'Kid,' and I was aimin' to see if you needed another cowhand," stated the Kid briefly. "Fur as these hombres is concerned, they got sort o' fretful, and I figgered they needed coolin' off. Their guns is up on the roof."

"Huh!" Denning grunted explosively. "I ain't exactly needin' another rider jest now. But I'm thinkin' right serious on somethin' that'll take a bunch of dang good hombres tuh put over. An' any slick-ear kid that kin tame this gang of sidewinders, like yuh 'pear tuh have done, is worth tyin' up with. Do yuh want ter hang around a few days, till I kin git my job ready tuh pull off?"

"Sure thing," said the Kid, concealing the delight he felt at such a successful outcome of his trip to the Checkerboard.

Given a little more luck during the next few days, and he would secure the evidence to confirm the idea which had sprung into his mind concerning the manner in which Courtney, the tenderfoot owner of the Open-book, had been robbed.

"Thet's good!" Denning nodded his shaggy head with satisfaction.

The securing of such an all-around top-hand fighter as the Kid had just shown himself to be, had quickly calmed his temper. He turned to face the four hombres standing in crestfallen silence beside him.

"Now yuh man-eatin' lobos kin hop up on the roof an' git yore guns. Yo're lucky yuh ain't buzzard meat by now. An' don't try no more funny business on this kid, lessn yuh want ter tangle with me."

The delight the Kid had felt over the situation mostly oozed out of him at the boss range's next words, however.

"Yonder comes Red Jenks back from town," said Denning, pointing a blunt, thick forefinger at a horseman loping across the sage flat from the southeast. "Red's a reg'lar old he-gossip. He'll know everything that's happened in Vaca City fer the last year."

A chill came over the young range dick that it took all his will power to shake off. He felt a powerful hunch that trouble was heading directly for him in the person of the Checkerboard waddy called "Red" Jenks.

In spite of the secrecy which he had kept over his movements while in Vaca City, there was always the chance of a leak of information somewhere. He had sent and received telegrams. And he had visited the Open-book Ranch and had had a sharp set-to with its owner.

There were plenty of witnesses and listeners to it. Possibly an Open-book waddy had already ridden in to Vaca City, which was about midway between the Open-book and the Checkerboard ranches, and told of his visit.

But there was no use worrying over the matter. Maybe that half-drunkin' hombre weaving in his saddle and whooping loudly as he neared the ranch house, had not stumbled onto anything that would betray the Kid to this pack of two-legged wolves that he had dropped in on.

With a show of unconcern which

he was far from feeling, the Kid watered Speed at the trough, stripped off his riding gear, and turned him into a corral a short distance from the house.

When the young range dick returned to the house, after a few minutes, he saw that the Checkerboard waddies were once more in possession of their six-guns. But it was evident that they dared not disobey the order of their domineering boss, for they expressed their evident hatred for the Kid only in glowering looks and low-muttered words.

Soon the drunken hombre, Red Jenks, spurred his much-abused bronc up to the corral and turned it in with a kick in the ribs. Then he came lurching up to the house.

It was a critical moment for the Kid. He stood watching, cool and alert for any trouble that might come.

But Jenks seemed mostly interested in a bottle of liquor which he passed around, and in telling of the rip-roaring spree which he had been on while in Vaca City to have an aching tooth pulled. Several times, however, he blurted out stray bits of range news that made the Kid's veins tingle while he waited with keen-edged nerves for mention of the Open-book affair.

The bottle was quickly emptied, however, and Red Jenks flung himself down in the shade for a sobering nap. Relieved of his tension, the Kid, who never touched hard liquor, sat around and smoked and whistled. Nobody paid any attention to him, except with sour glances. Even Denning, whom the Kid had hoped would loosen up and tell something of the new crooked scheme that he was hatching, was morose and silent.

Altogether, it was an uneasy two hours which the Kid passed while

waiting for the evening meal. He couldn't help thinking of Red Jenks. The fellow would be sober by mealtime—sober and ugly-tempered, and likely to remember things that had not come readily to his mind, while it was clouded with booze.

Then would come the show-down, if ever.

IV.

When the cook—who was a grizzled ranny with a crippled leg—called "Grub pile!" the Kid filed into the cookroom along with the hard-bitten hombres whom he had subdued that afternoon. He was surprised, and not a little dismayed, to find that the custom of laying aside six-guns at mealtime, which prevailed on honest ranches, was followed at the Checkerboard.

Every man hung his gun on a hook near the door when he entered. It was up to the Kid to follow suit.

Unarmed, the young range dick took a seat at a rough board table beside Denning. He noted, with growing nervousness, that Red Jenks took a seat opposite him.

The man was bleary-eyed and sullen, but he was reasonably sober. He gave the Kid an unfriendly stare mixed with some curiosity, but the latter was relieved to see that there was no recognition. At least, the hombre hadn't seen the Kid in town and learned who he was.

For many minutes, the work of wolfing down great quantities of beefsteak, biscuits, and beans went on. It kept the lame cook busy hopping around the table refilling dishes and pouring out scalding-hot black coffee. But after a while, the men grunted their satisfaction and leaned back to roll cigarettes.

The Kid smoked a quirly in silence. From force of habit, he began to whistle low notes of the mel-

ancholy "Cowboy's Lament," which had been his favorite tune since he was a boy nighthawk down in the Cuesta Range country.

Ever on the alert when in dangerous company, the Kid quickly noted a reaction to that tune from the sobering Jenks across the table. The red-headed hombre narrowed his bloodshot eyes and gazed at the Kid, with a puzzled expression.

Too late, the Kid stopped his tuneful whistling and dragged easily on his quirly. But something had clicked in Red Jenks's dull brain.

"Allus whistlin' thet durn hoodoo tune, 'The Cowboy's Lament!'" Jenks muttered the words half to himself, as if repeating something, parrotlike, that he had heard before.

"I got yuh!" suddenly exclaimed Jenks, jumping to his feet in excitement. "Yo're the Whistlin' Kid—cow dick!"

Instantly the cookroom was in an uproar. Chairs were kicked out of the way as the gang leaped to their feet. Shouts and oaths filled the air. But above all other sounds rose the bull-like bellow of Denning:

"How d'yuh know thet, Red?"

"I overheard a couple of half-drunk Open-book waddies talkin' about the Whistlin' Kid in the Red Dogie Bar," Jenks shouted in reply. "They said he was a hawk-faced slick-ear who was allus whistlin' thet graveyard lament. Said Courtney wouldn't have nothin' tuh do with him, an' he hit the trail back ter Vaca City. This here's him!"

The Kid was on his feet, dark eyes gleaming, every sense alert for the faintest shadow of a lucky break that might come his way. He was unarmed, but so were his enemies. But they were between him and the bunch of six-guns hanging on the wall. For a moment, it looked as if the Kid had played out his hand.

Then the gang did a most natural but stupid thing. Instead of rushing the Kid off his feet, they turned with one accord and leaped for their guns. Doubtless the blow they had seen the young range dick land on the burly foreman's jaw that afternoon, decided them on this safe-and-sure move.

It was the Kid's chance! There was an open window near the end of the table where he stood. Only Denning stood in his way.

The Kid leaped forward. He saw the huge hairy arms of the Checkerboard boss open to grab him. But, with the speed of a wild cat, the Kid whirled aside, tripping the clumsy Denning with an outthrust booted foot.

Even as the Checkerboard rannies were grabbing for their guns, hindering one another in their eagerness, the Kid scrambled through the window.

The sun was setting. Its golden rays slanted across the sage flats, making of the Kid a perfect moving target for his enemies. But he hadn't far to go. He headed for the corral.

Doubtless that move fooled the gang that came rushing out of the cookroom door. They thought he was going for his horse, and knew that he hadn't a chance of escape that way. Before he could mount a horse, even bareback, and get out of the corral, they would be upon him with blazing guns.

The Kid heard Denning's roared command to take him alive. But it gave him no hope of safety, if he were captured. It could only mean that the cunning cowman had some scheme for disposing of the Kid without danger of the crime's being detected later.

But the Kid had no intention of trying to get Speed out of the cor-

ral. His saddle hung on the top rail of the fence. In a saddle pocket was the Colt .45 that the Kid always carried there.

With a scrambling leap, the Kid cleared the fence, taking the saddle with him as he landed on the inside of the corral. In a flash of action, he had the six-gun out and was crouching behind the fence poles.

The fence was scant protection, but it helped. Before the onrushing crooks realized what had happened, the Kid's Colt was hurling hot lead.

Scar, the big foreman, was in the lead, and got his dose first. He went down and lay kicking in the dust.

Lippy came next. The range was perfect for the fighting Kid. As the gang cut loose with a blast of screaming bullets that thudded and ripped into the cottonwood fence poles around him, the Kid fired a slug that caught the harelipped desperado solidly in the chest. With a couching grunt, Lippy dropped within a few feet of the foreman.

Such deadly gunfire was too much for the nerves of the remaining hombres. They scattered and ran for shelter.

Only Denning kept on coming. He must have sensed that his game was up, unless he could wipe out this deadly young cow dick who was cutting his gang to pieces.

Brang-g! The squat cowman's .45 roared and flamed.

Thick shoulders hunched, he came steadily onward. His black-whiskered face showed the bestial ferocity of a wounded grizzly. And he was a dead shot.

A bullet burned its crimson welt across the Kid's left cheek. Another ripped through a loose fold of his blue flannel shirt at the waist. Splinters from a fence pole showered in the Kid's face.

Wham! Bang! Twice the Kid's .45 rocketed pale flame, but so close together were the shots, that they sounded like one report.

"Got him!" muttered the Kid grimly.

Denning was down! The Kid swiftly cleared the corral fence and made for the fallen cowman, reloading his Colt as he ran forward.

Stooping over Denning, the Kid made a hasty examination of his wounds.

"Both them slugs tagged you, Denning," said the Kid. "But you got the constitution of a bear. If I can get you down to Vaca City purty pronto, you'd ought ter pull through. But you got to keep them three hombres thet went into hidin', from slingin' any more lead at me."

"They won't shoot no more, the dirty yaller dogs!" groaned Denning. "Git me loaded on a bronc, quick!"

The Kid took off his own blue neckerchief and began binding up a shoulder wound on the cowman.

"'Pears like yo're mighty anxious to live, fer a hombre thet's goin' to spend the best part of his life behind bars," he remarked dryly.

"Shucks! Yuh ain't got no real court evidence agin' me, yuh snoopin' spy," muttered Denning. "What do yuh think yuh got on me?"

"Plenty," said the Kid. "Listen clost, and I'll tell you in a few words."

After hearing what the young cow dick had to say, Denning nodded.

"I don't know how yuh figgered it out, but yuh got the right idea," admitted the sorely wounded range crook. "An' I been thinkin' I was safe."

"Waal, you can cut some time off your jail sentence by sayin' thet in court," remarked the Kid. "Anyways, I done found out thet you only sent them New Yorkers the money

fer *one* thousand head of cows, while the tenderfoot, Courtney, paid you fer *two* thousand. You're 'tween the Old Nick and the deep blue sea, Denning."

"Aw, I'll confess tuh pullin' off the bunko game on Courtney," growled Denning.

Two days had passed since the desperate gun fight at the Checkerboard spread, when the Kid once more rode the curving trail around the lone butt at the Open-book Ranch headquarters.

This time, there was no polo game in progress. But the flashily dressed Courtney, haughty as ever, stepped out on the shady porch of the ranch house as the Kid reined up his big buckskin.

"Well, I never expected to set eyes on you again," cuttingly remarked the tall blond tenderfoot. "What brings you back here?"

"I told you I aimed to play out my hand, didn't I?" retorted the Kid coldly. "Waal, I have!"

"I don't see my missing cows anywhere," sneered Courtney.

"I didn't find any," said the Kid.

"I didn't expect an inexperienced, common cowhand like you appear to be to find my stolen stock," bitterly complained the dudish owner of the Open-book.

As if dismissing the matter from his mind, he took a silver case from the pocket of his striped flannel sport coat, extracted a gold-tipped cigarette, and airily lighted it.

"Mebbe it'll interest you to know why I didn't find any rustled cows," went on the Kid, pulling the "makings" from a pocket of his dusty shirt and deftly rolling a quirly "There never was any!"

"You must be crazy!" Courtney snapped impatiently.

"Mebbe. But I ain't locoed

enough to let any range crook sell me the same cows twice," retorted the Kid.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Denning kept you up here in a nice shady spot beside the trail to count the cows he was sellin' you, while his rannies hazed them same critters round this butte, and let you count 'em again," explained the Kid.

"Great guns!" Courtney gasped, as the full meaning of the bunko scheme, which had been worked on him, sunk in. "Then there never were but one thousand cattle on this ranch?"

"Keno! You get the idea perfectly," said the Kid. "And seein' that the hombre who outsmarted you is tryin' to recover his health, so's he can enjoy free room and board at the State's expense fer a few years, mebbe you can spare time enough from your polo games to go see a lawyer about gettin' your money back out of the Checkerboard outfit."

"Why—why—er—thank you so much," stammered Mr. Courtney. "Won't you alight and have luncheon with me?"

"Much 'bliged," said the Kid, who had already neck-reined the buckskin back toward the trail and was whistling the doleful "Cowboy's Lament." "But me an' Speed has got orders to mosey along to the next county and start workin' on a *real* rustlin' case."

Mebbe the Kid didn't figger that as a *real* rustlin' case, an' he may 'a' been right, too; but that doleful tune o' hisn purty nigh turned out ter be his own funeral march an' no mistake. Sometimes the simplest cases are engineered by the toughest hombres. But tough as they come, they're no match fer the young range dick. He'l prove that ag'in in his next story, which same'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly pronto.



A New Deal For Dodge

By Nelse Anderson

Author of "Gun-smoke Jones," etc.

WITH a wide, happy grin, Don Newell watched the line of cottonwood trees enlarging on the horizon. Only one more creek to cross, one more day of slow, dusty trailing, and then—Dodge City!

Twisting sidewise in his saddle, as his wiry, silver-gray pony traveled slowly along, the young trail boss let his glance wander back over the line of weary, plodding cattle behind him.

There were twenty-five hundred steers in that Double X herd, winding snakelike across the gray buffalo grass—twenty-five hundred, minus the few that had died along the long route from western Texas and some others that Don had given to the Indians in the Strip to keep them satisfied.

That showing would have pleased any trail boss. The first cattle to reach Dodge City in the annual race

of herds from the Southwest would bring the highest prices. And Don Newell knew that he was at least twenty-four hours ahead of his nearest rival.

Not bad for a fellow of twenty, who looked even younger because of his short, slender build.

Waving a friendly greeting to one of the nearer Double X riders, Don clucked to his cayuse and rode on at a more rapid pace. He had to find a place to cross the creek.

Thinking chiefly of his own good fortune, he was among the cottonwoods when four men suddenly came into view, spurring up the steep bank out of the creek bed. Don instantly reined up his horse.

His blue eyes popped, puzzled. His lean bronzed face registered his surprise. Without hesitation, the strangers ranged themselves in front of him, blocking his path.

He stared wonderingly from one to the other. All were hard, mean-looking hombres, with their fingers almost clutching the handles of their six-guns. The leader—a massive, black-bearded man—spurred closer to Don, so that he towered above him.

The waddy caught the reek of cheap whisky. About all that he could see of the other's features, between the beard and the floppy brim of a battered black hat, were a hawkish nose and a pair of slitted smoke-gray eyes.

The leader looked as cruel and treacherous as a rattlesnake, thought the cowboy.

"Are yuh the boss o' thet herd comin' yander?" demanded the man gruffly.

"Why—yes." Don frowned, baffled as to what the strangers could want.

"I thought so." The big hombre laughed jeeringly. "One o' my men rid inter Dodge yistiddy with the news a big outfit was comin' with a kid as boss. Yore brand's the Double X, ain't it?"

The drover crimsoned beneath his tan. He might be young, but he didn't like the sneering way in which the other called him a kid.

"What interest is it of yours what the brand is?" he snapped back fearlessly.

The bearded man's deep gray eyes narrowed still more.

"I used ter know Colonel Nate Madden, the rancher yo're workin' fer, down in Texas," he snarled.

He did not offer further explanation. And Don held his tongue, still wondering.

"I reckon yuh know," went on the other presently, "that yuh got ter pay a tax of five dollars a head, when yuh bring yore critters across Buffalo Crick hyar."

"Huh?" The Texas cowboy gave such a start that the trail dust flew from his faded clothing and rusty leather chaps.

"I said five dollars a head." The big hombre leered. "If yuh want ter git ter Dodge, fork over!"

Don Newell's jaw tightened. His right elbow crooked away from his body, as his fingers suddenly spread over the mouth of his holster.

Five dollars a head on twenty-five hundred cattle? Why, that was over twelve thousand dollars. The trail boss wouldn't have a thousandth of that sum until he sold the herd.

Furthermore, he was reasonably sure that the four men before him had no authority to impose any sort of tax. Dodge City welcomed trail herds, didn't try to drive them away.

"Do yuh own the crick?" The Texan grinned. "I won't pay a penny fer crossin' my herd hyar."

"Yuh won't, huh?" growled the leader of the quartet. "How about it, boys?" He leered at his followers.

"Make him kick through, Bat," said one—a tall, sallow bean pole of a man, with a black patch over his left eye.

"Don't worry none, Slats. He'll pay. If he ain't got the dinero, we'll take a cut o' the beef." The bearded hombre laughed. "Mebbe yuh don't know who I am," he rasped at Don.

"No, I'm afraid I ain't never had the pleasure o' meetin' yuh," retorted the waddy, in a calm voice.

"Waal, yuh know me now. I'm Bat Durbin, the boss o' Dodge," snarled the bully. "I—"

"Yo'd better git back to Dodge, if yo're the boss," Don cut him off. "Don't figger yuh kin run anything over on me by tryin' to collect without authority."

The trail boss should have been ready for what happened then. But he did not expect "Bat" Durbin to try anything more, when once his bluff had been called. He did not know the desperate caliber of the man.

"Authority?" Bat Durbin said in a mocking tone.

His hand, blurred by the quickness with which it moved, dropped the few inches to his holster and leaped up, gripping his .45.

"How's this fer authority?" Bat sneered, drawing back the hammer of the gun with his thumb. "I reckon yo'll agree now ter pay me the tax, won't yuh?"

The young drover paled, aghast at the prospect. Inwardly he was angry at himself for letting the bully get the drop on him so easily.

Don Newell was not afraid to face any man's draw in a fair duel. But he had not figured this meeting to be as serious as it had turned out.

"Go ahead an' start cuttin' the herd, 'fore it gits ter the crick," Bat growled to his men. "I'll help yuh as quick as I take keer o' this kid."

"What yuh goin' ter do with him?" inquired the skinny, sallow hombre, as he and the other two started away to meet the herd.

The leader shrugged. "What kin I do, if he won't agree ter pay an' keep his mouth shut? I'll have ter kill him, so he can't squawk, when we take our cut o' cattle, anyway," he replied.

"Slats" Grant and his companions snickered. Don knew that he had never been nearer to death than he was at that moment. Although he knew he did not have a chance, he decided to grab for his six-gun and go down fighting, at any rate.

Bat was thumbing the hammer of his .45. His eyes were as gray as lead slugs.

Suddenly the clatter of horse hoofs sounded behind the trail boss. A voice yelled his name:

"Hey, Don! Are yuh round hyar? Wait fer me! I want to ask yuh somethin'."

The newcomer was not visible to the Double X leader. But he recognized the hoarse nasal tones as belonging to his cook, old Bill Jones.

What was he doing there? What did he want with the boss?

Don's impulse was to cry a warning to the cook. The trio, who had been starting off toward the cattle, stopped within a few feet, reaching for their guns. If Bill came up, he very likely would be killed along with Don.

The latter changed his mind swiftly, as he saw Bat's glance shift away from him for an instant. The Texan took a desperate chance—the only one he knew he would have.

His hand dropped like lightning to his holster and jerked up, filled.

"What the—" Bat Durbin saw the last of the movement, as he turned back toward the boss.

Crash! The roar of Don's six-gun drowned out the last of the bully's words.

With a scream of mingled pain and terror, the bearded hombre let his exploding Colt drop to the ground. His smoky-gray eyes widened as he stared at his shattered fingers, across the backs of which ran the crimson path of the Texan's bullet.

Don still would have been in danger from the rest of the gang, had not the lanky Double X cook galloped into view at that second, waving a heavy, muzzle-loading shotgun and shouting:

"Hold yore ground, boss! I'll help yuh show them coyotes somethin'."

Many gunmen, who faced six-gun fire unflinchingly, were deathly

afraid of a big-bore, heavily charged shotgun in the hands of an enemy.

"Come on!" yelled the bearded bully to the others.

And as quickly as they had appeared, the four tough hombres wheeled their horses and raced down the bank into the creek.

Don Newell, suddenly atremble after the danger was past, did not attempt to stop the fugitives. As they fled through the shallow water of the stream, out of range, the leader turned in his saddle and belowed:

"I'll git even with yuh, kid!"

II.

Glaring at the four men across the creek, Bill Jones dragged his rangy yellow cayuse to a sliding stop beside Don Newell.

"Yuh low-down skunks! Come back an' fight!" yelled the cook, shaking his shotgun at them.

The young boss laughed. Bill Jones, he knew, was about as dangerous as a horned toad. He looked bad enough, but that was all.

Bill, the product of an earlier generation, was tall, lean, and wrinkled. A week-old stubble of gray beard covered the lower part of his leathery face. But when he pushed back his battered brown sombrero, his head was seen to be as bald as a *malpais* butte.

Of course, the shotgun in his hands might have been considered a deadly weapon. But he couldn't shoot straight enough to hit the wall of a barn if he was inside it, Don knew.

"Let the coyotes go," advised the waddy, jabbing his six-gun into his holster. "Fer my part, I'm plumb thankful yuh arrived when yuh did, old-timer. An' I allow we'll have plenty o' trouble yet with them hombres, without invitin' it."

"Yeah?" Bill grunted hopefully. "Say, boss, did yuh recognize the eyes of the feller with the beard?"

The drover's own eyes popped in mild astonishment.

"Recognize 'em? Why, no. I never saw Bat Durbin before," he replied with conviction.

The cook fished a plug of tobacco from the pocket of his blue shirt, bit off a healthy hunk, and chewed in thoughtful silence for a few moments.

"I couldn't be mistook," he declared finally. "I'd know them narre gray eyes if I seen 'em a hundred years from now. Do yuh recollect Smoke Ewart, Don?"

The cowboy pushed back his dust-hued gray Stetson and ran his fingers through his wavy brown hair, in an effort to prod his memory.

"Seems like I do remember havin' heard the name," he admitted. "Wasn't he the hombre Colonel Madden chased out of our part o' the country fer rustlin'?"

"Yeah." Bill nodded. "An' he murdered a couple o' ranchers. He would 'a' been hung, if he hadn't stole the fastest hoss in thet part o' Texas an' escaped 'fore the posse got to his hidin' place."

"All thet happened when I was jest about four years old." Don grinned. "So what has Smoke Ewart got to do with Bat Durbin?"

"They're the same man," came the cook's reply.

"They're—what?" The trail boss gasped in amazement. "If I didn't know different, I'd swear yuh were drunk."

"Waal, I ain't. An' I ain't mistook, neither," growled the cook. "Bat Durbin is Smoke Ewart, an' a *malo* hombre, let me tell yuh."

Don was greatly upset by the declaration. But he tried to conceal his worry.

"What were yuh lookin' fer me fer, when yuh party nigh busted into the row?" he asked.

"I—er—er—" Bill coughed nervously. "I wanted to ask if yuh keered if I rode inter Dodge a little bit ahead of the herd an' looked up some old friends of mine."

The drover nodded. It was on the tip of his tongue to give the faithful employee permission to go on ahead. For the short remaining distance, the Double X crew could get along without the services of a regular cook.

But Bill surprised Don.

"I done changed my mind." The veteran clutched his shotgun meaningly. "Yo'll need every hand yuh got on guard to-night, young feller. An' I kin ride a watch, even if I ain't a reg'lar puncher."

The seriousness of the old man startled the boss. He had not planned on doubling the guard that night, but he immediately decided to do so.

Whether or not there was any truth in Bill's assertion that Bat Durbin was in reality Smoke Ewart, it might be best to play safe.

Don decided that he could lead the herd across the creek at that point as safely as at any other. Consequently, he sent the cook back to tell the cowboys to come on with the cattle.

The cottonwood-lined stream was full of treacherous quicksands. But the young boss had faced that problem too many times on the long trail from Texas to let it worry him now.

The few steers that stepped stupidly into the traps off the path Don selected through the shallow water, were dragged out promptly by ropes about their long horns. By sundown, the entire herd was on the Dodge City side of the stream. The crew wanted to go on that night.

"No," the boss told them. "Bed down a little ways from the crick. Half of yuh ride herd until midnight, when I an' the rest of the boys will take over."

It was characteristic of Don that he chose the early-morning hours for his own watch, figuring that was the time any trouble was bound to start, if it started at all. To be truthful, the waddy doubted the seriousness of the danger.

"How 'bout me? Which watch yuh want me in? I'm ridin' to-night, yuh know," put in Bill Jones.

The trail boss grinned good-naturedly.

"Yuh better help the boys till midnight," he replied, thinking that was the trick when the cook would be most safe.

Bill was satisfied and went to the wagon, where he began preparing supper. While he worked, he sang an old trail song and kept his shotgun close by his side.

"Come an' git it, 'fore I throw it out!" rang out the call to feed shortly after.

Don and the rest of the hungry crew needed no second summons. Seizing tin plates and cups, they rushed to the wagon. The next few minutes were undisturbed except by the munching of welcome morsels.

By the time the meal was over, twilight was falling. The men who were to ride till midnight, went to their horses. Old Bill, leaving his pots and pans unwashed for the first time in his career as cook, grabbed his shotgun and raced after them.

With darkness, a feeling of peace and security settled over the camp. Stretched on his blanket, staring at the bright stars popping out above him, Don Newell was lulled.

Off to the right, the weary trail herd milled patiently. And a little nearer, the cavvy could be heard

grazing. Far away, a coyote howled in the shadows. And another of its breed answered it across the creek.

Confident that nothing could happen yet, at any rate, the young boss closed his eyes, determined to catch all the sleep he could, before midnight dragged him from his blanket to stand guard.

How long he had been slumbering, Don did not know. But it seemed to him that he had hardly closed his eyes, when the roar of a six-gun awakened him.

Bolting upright, the tall cowboy grabbed his .45 from beneath the corner of his blanket and listened intently for a second.

Crash! Another pistol shot shattered the stillness of the night.

Almost instantly, it was followed by another sound, a hundred times more terrifying to the Texan's ears. Starting as a dull clatter of hoofs, the new sound mounted quickly to a steady rumble—the roaring thunder of a big herd in flight.

More shots rang out, as the Double X cowboys fought to halt the stampede. The heavy *boom* of Bill Jones's shotgun reached Don's ears.

"Stampede! Everybody up an' out!" yelled the boss, leaping to his feet and racing toward his horse, which he fortunately had left saddled when he turned in.

Without waiting for the rest of the second watch, who were springing from their beds and grabbing for their guns, Don vaulted into his stirrups and grasped his reins. His keen senses told him that the steers were running toward the creek.

If they reached the stream and plunged blindly into the quicksands in the darkness, many of them would be lost.

The trail boss ground his teeth together. After guiding the cattle safely all the way from Texas, he

could not lose them a few miles from the destination.

Spurring his pony, he turned it toward the creek, in a desperate race to head the steers. He could not see the herd in the darkness, but had to judge its direction by sound alone.

Wisely, he left most of the guidance to his well-trained cow horse. The survivor of many a stampede, the cayuse knew what was expected of it quite as well as its master.

The thundering herd was closer than Don had imagined it to be. Otherwise, he might have waited for some of the Double X punchers to help him. In spite of the noise of hoofs and horns, he could hear the yells of the waddies and the roar of six-guns.

The men who had been on guard were trying to circle around to the front of the herd. The boss could see the flashes of their .45s, as they seemed to be battling not the cattle, but some human enemies who returned their fire.

The cowboys who had been asleep, were minutes slower in getting to their horses than Don had been. He realized that it was up to him alone to stop the steers before they plunged into the treacherous quicksands.

He could not judge how much distance he had to accomplish the task. His cayuse was racing now directly in front of the cattle—so near that the drover could hear their labored breathing.

The hoofbeats swelled in his ears like the steady roll of many drums. Horns brushed against his chapped legs.

A shudder ran along his spine. An unexpected stumble by his faithful horse, and—

But it was no time to think about death under the pounding hoofs or upon the sharp horns. Gripping his

.45 in fingers of steel, Don squeezed the trigger.

Crash! The orange flame from the muzzle of the gun revealed the steers, startlingly near.

A shaggy, giant red critter, with a six-foot spread of deadly horns, was leading the herd.

The cowboy concentrated his attack upon that animal. He knew if he could turn it, that the rest of the cattle probably would follow.

But the red beast, running madly and blindly, was going to be far from an easy one to swerve.

"Keep goin', old boy!" Don yelled to his cayuse.

Crash-crash-crash! Shot after shot roared from the mouth of the waddy's .45.

He was shooting across the red steer's staring eyes as close as he dared. But the critter barely blinked at the gun flashes.

Wham! There went next to his last bullet.

Still the cattle came on, like a mighty machine of destruction, grinding everything beneath their hoofs.

The Texan gripped his six-gun desperately, almost hopelessly. He had one bullet left in his .45. And by the old code of the frontier, handed down by the Indian fighters, he should save the shot for a final emergency.

"I'll take the chance," he grunted through set teeth.

Crash! The six-gun gave its final roar.

In the spurt of flame, Don could see the red steer shake its head, as if the shot were the first that it had really noticed. Then, so gradually that the cowboy hardly was aware of the break, the herd was swinging off toward the left, at a right angle to its previous path.

Don Newell did not actually real-
WW-4C

ize that he was safe until his panting horse stopped beneath the cottonwoods along the creek. Then the cowboy knew that he had won.

"Whew! Thet was close." He was trembling a little, as he swung open the loading gate of his six-gun and started to punch in new shells. "The herd is safe. The fool steers'll run theirselves out, an' git a few pounds thinner, but that won't be much loss. I shore am thankful that—"

His words stopped suddenly, as his ears seemed to start from his head.

Out of the night, from the direction in which the cattle had turned, came a shrill, terror-stricken scream—the voice of a man overtaken by quick, dreaded death. As abruptly as it started, the cry stopped, broken off on its highest wailing note.

Don Newell suddenly felt cold. His heart seemed to form a lump in his throat.

The drover knew the meaning of that distant scream. Some poor hombre had fallen beneath the trampling hoofs of the steers.

Was it a Double X rider?

III.

They found old Bill Jones lying in a shallow ditch, with his broken shotgun near him, and his horse, its right foreleg broken in a gopher hole, trampled to death a little farther away.

When daylight came, they buried the faithful cook down by the cottonwoods, with a simple pine slab for a grave marker. With a red-hot running iron, Don Newell burned into the board these words:

**WILLIAM JONES
THE COOK
AS GAME AS ANY COWBOY**

Then, grimly and silently, they rounded up the scattered herd, and went on to Dodge City.

It was no secret among the cowboys that a bunch of two-legged coyotes had stampeded the cattle. And it would have gone hard with the stampeders if the Double X crew had had any inkling of their identities. Don heard many threats that told him what would happen, if the waddies discovered the enemies who had struck in the darkness.

"We'd tear Dodge City to bits to git the skunks," one of the punchers growled, expressing the feeling of all.

The trail boss held his tongue. He did not want the crew stampeding into trouble in the railhead town. And he did not think any of the cowboys had seen his and poor old Bill's meeting with the gang at the creek the afternoon before.

"If it was Bat Durbin that started the cattle runnin', I kin 'tend to him an' his hull outfit o' sidewinders by myself," Don muttered, with a grim narrowing of his eyes. "But, first, I got to git the deadwood on them varmints, since it was too dark to recognize 'em last night."

All the way to town, the Texan rode in moody silence, trying to figure out a way to trap the men who had stampeded the herd and who were practically guilty of murdering Bill Jones. Don wanted to bring the enemies to justice personally, but he wanted to be sure that he was after the right hombres before he acted. And there was just the possibility of doubt that Bat and his men had been the attackers.

Thought, however, did not show the trail boss the way to get his foes for a long time. Not, in fact, until after he had reached Dodge City and sold the cattle.

That was an easy task, since the Double X herd was the first of the

many that would reach the railroad from Texas that season, and a score of eager buyers were on hand. Don disposed of his critters to a representative of an Eastern packing firm, and, leaving the Double X cowboys to load the steers into railroad cars, he was stowing the big roll of bills he had received inside his shirt, when the thought struck him:

"If Bat Durbin had been so keen to strike at the Double X through its herd, wouldn't he attack again, knowing that the trail boss had the big sum of money in his possession?"

Don did not doubt that his sale of the cattle was known all over town. It was not unlikely, even, that enemy eyes had watched the young Texan stuff the cash inside his shirt.

"I hope so." He grinned mirthlessly.

Another twilight was falling, when the trail boss started uptown alone along the narrow, noisy street leading from the loading pens. Although the evening was still young, Dodge City was living up to its reputation for wildness.

Yellow lamplight gleamed from saloon doorways as hundreds of drunken teamsters, laborers, and track layers pushed their way in and out. Here and there, the light illuminated the leathery features of buffalo hunters, their long Sharps rifles over their shoulders. An occasional Indian was to be seen. And gunmen swaggered along the wooden sidewalks in droves, pushing every one else aside.

It was a street where anything could happen—where the roar of a .45 would be quickly drowned out by the tinny noise of the pianos in the saloons.

Don Newell expected an attack. He was baiting one, in fact—not a bullet in his back, naturally, but

something that would reveal his enemies.

He was almost disappointed when he reached the end of the street without incident. Alert for danger, he crossed over and started down along the other side of the street.

The crowd was thicker there, and the cowboy found it difficult to walk. For a moment, he was trapped motionless in the swarm in front of the Trail Dust Saloon. And in that brief time, it happened—but not in the way that he had expected.

Although the West bred deadly gunmen and crooks of many kinds, the cowardly, sneaking pickpocket was practically unknown. Any one less attuned to danger than the Texan, probably would not have felt the slim, trained fingers dart inside his shirt and touch the big roll of bills stuffed there.

Don Newell felt the tug of the cloth, however, as well as the light touch of the thief's fingers upon his chest.

In an instant, the robber would have obtained the money and been in full flight through the shielding crowd. But the cowboy moved, with the same blurring speed with which he generally reached for his .45.

He did not grab for the six-gun holstered on his hip that time, though. Instead, with both hands, he caught the wrist of the pickpocket in both his hands. A quick wrench tore the grasping fingers out of his shirt, and Don whirled to face his enemy.

The yellow light from the window of the Trail Dust Saloon revealed the thin, sallow features and the patch over the eye of the hombre who had been with Bat Durbin at the creek the day before. His face grew even paler as the Texan released his thin wrist suddenly and reached for a six-gun.

"Yuh snake!" Don jabbed the hard steel muzzle of his weapon into the other's midriff.

"D-d-don't—don't—don't shoot," croaked Slats Grant fearfully, backing into a more deeply shadowed spot beside the saloon doorway.

"Don't worry." The tall cowboy pressed his .45 harder against the other. "I wouldn't waste lead on a sidewinder like yuh—unless my thumb jest happened off the hammer."

The cowardly pickpocket heaved a sigh of heartfelt relief.

"But my thumb's liable to slip any minute, if yuh don't spill the low-down on thet rotten yaller boss o' yores pronto," added the Texan warningly.

"Bat Durbin!" Slats exclaimed. "He's in the Trail Dust Saloon right now, waitin' fer me ter bring the money in."

"So! Yuh did plot to rob me." Don laughed grimly. "An' I reckon yuh were one o' the coyotes thet stampeded the Double X herd last night, when old Bill Jones was killed."

The thief did not reply.

The Texan gave a wicked jab with his six-gun. "I got a notion to sali—"

"Don't! Don't kill me!" Slats screamed. "I never had nothin' ter do with thet stampede. It was Bat an' the other boys done thet. I stayed in town."

Don believed the cowardly fellow and started to put his gun back into his holster. The pickpocket evidently mistook the movement of the weapon as a dangerous one, however.

"Don't yuh think I'm tellin' yuh the truth?" he whimpered. "Honest ter gosh, I never helped stampede them cattle. The hull thing was Bat's idea. He said he wanted ter

git even with the Double X outfit fer some old trouble down in Texas."

"I believe yuh." The trail boss gave the squealer a quick shove into the street. "Even though I 'low yuh need killin', I don't figger yo're wuth the lead fer the job. Git out o' Dodge an' stay out, if yuh don't want ter decorate a cottonwood tree!"

"I'll go! Yuh won't never see me again," cried Slats, darting away immediately.

Don Newell watched him for a little way, then turned and stepped quickly through the doorway of the Trail Dust Saloon. No longer was there any doubt in his mind that Bat Durbin was responsible for the death of old Bill Jones.

IV.

A few feet inside the barroom, the Texan stopped to stare around.

The Trail Dust was the largest and wildest in Dodge City. Even at that early hour, there were at least a hundred and fifty men in the barnlike building.

Most of them loitered in front of the long bar, drinking and talking. A good many patronized the gambling tables at the rear of the room, betting feverishly on cards and dice.

Close to the front door, a thin, pale-cheeked ranny was pounding a piano, while half a dozen whisky tenors, gin baritones, and beer bassos grouped around, discordantly trying to follow the melody.

If Don Newell could have chosen, he would not have selected such a place for his reckoning with the crooks. But he did not feel that the choice was his.

He saw Bat Durbin hunched over a table by the back wall. At the table with the bearded bully, were

a sleek, fishy-eyed, black-frocked gambler and three younger men, who, the trail boss knew, were probably members of Bat's gang.

There was little doubt that they were gunmen, and there might be a score like them scattered among the crowd.

But Don did not hesitate. With the picture of Bill Jones's battered and trampled body rising in his mind, he strode back toward the table where his chief enemy was sitting.

Bat did not notice the drover until the latter was quite close. Then an expression of surprise blazed in the big crook's smoky eyes for an instant. His right hand, which had been fumbling with some playing cards in front of him, disappeared beneath the table.

The Texan knew that the bully had gone for his gun, probably was holding it in his lap, covering him. Don could not draw against that. He had to trick his enemy in some way.

Bat's surprised expression changed to a sneer. He leaned toward the gambler beside him and whispered something in his ear.

The dealer nodded and grinned wolfishly at the trail boss. The latter guessed then what the game was.

Bat, understanding that Slats Grant had failed in picking the money out of Don's shirt, had tipped off the gambler to draw the drover into the game, if he could, and rook him out of the big sum.

The Texan's lips pressed into a thin line. His eyes narrowed.

"Howdy, kid. Want ter set in the game?" invited the dealer, in a smooth, oily voice.

Don looked blankly at the five men at the table. There was no chair for him.

Bat growled something through

his beard. One of the rannies got up and moved away, yielding his seat.

"Waal, I don't mind if I do set in a little while." With his eyes and ears taking in every detail, but his face a mask of complete innocence, the trail boss moved into the vacated chair.

As he sat down, he pulled from his shirt the big pile of bills that the pickpocket had failed to get.

Bat Durkin ran his tongue over his bearded lips greedily. The two gunmen beside Don leaned forward in their chairs eagerly. And even the gambler's eyes came alive with fresh interest.

"What's the game?" asked the Texan, apparently unsuspicious.

"Name yore choice," replied the dealer, with a wink at Bat.

Don peeled off a few bills, pushed back his dust-covered hat and scratched his fingers through his wavy brown hair.

"Make it stud poker," he growled.

He knew as much about that game as he did any other—which was practically nothing. He had always been able to find more interesting ways to get rid of his wages than over the gambling tables.

But he felt that he was justified in what he was doing now. The game was for higher stakes than even Bat Durbin realized.

Betting without knowing what he was doing, Don let himself lose in a couple of hands. The bearded leader won them.

The loser knew that he was being rooked. But that suited him perfectly.

Meanwhile, his companions at the table were becoming more interested in the game. The hand that Bat had lowered to his gun reappeared above the table, to finger the cards.

The other gunmen leaned for-

ward, gripping the edge of the table, dividing their greedy glances between the large pile of money in front of their victim and the pasteboards flying from the dealer's nimble fingers.

The first cards of another hand were on the boards. Don had a king showing, but it was topped by an ace in front of the bearded crook.

"I bet a hundred dollars," growled the gang leader, tossing out a bill.

The other players immediately backed out. But, without bothering to look at his hole card, Don Newell shouted:

"I call an' raise yuh!"

The tone of his voice alone was enough to warn any one that he was not making any ordinary bet. And Bat Durkin caught its meaning.

"What the——" Grabbing for his six-gun, he started up from his chair.

"Yuh crook! Yuh killed my cook, an' bullets is trumps in this game!" cried the Texan, swinging the muzzle of his .45 above the table.

The two gunmen, who had been sitting beside him, sprang quickly around the table to their leader's side, reaching for the weapons in their holsters.

The gambler, evidently lacking a taste for gun play, leaped up and dived toward the crowd at the front of the room.

That was one less enemy that Don Newell had to worry about, perhaps. But, looking at just the three gunmen across the table from him, he realized that he might have miscalculated the play slightly.

There he was, facing three closely bunched guns, which would crash in a split second.

Bat's trigger finger was tightening. His yellow teeth gleamed like the fangs of a wolf.

The .45s of the other outlaws were

just clearing the tops of their holsters.

His right hand gripping his six-gun, Don Newell suddenly rose to the limit of his height. His left hand darted toward the pile of money in front of him. Sweeping it up, he hurled it through the air, straight at the snarling faces of his enemies.

Smack! The coins and bills showered into their eyes.

For an instant, bullets could not have startled them as much. Automatically, they jerked back.

Crash! Wham! Bat Durbin squeezed the trigger of his .45 in surprise.

Don grunted as the bullet burned through the flesh covering his ribs on the left side. Three inches farther to the right, and it would have been a different story. The Texan could thank his quick action in hurling the money for disturbing the gunman's aim at his heart.

With a bellow of rage, Bat jerked the muzzle of his .45 closer to his target.

Crash! Wham! The gun in the outlaw's hand and that in the fingers of Don Newell jerked almost simultaneously.

But the Texan's shot in reality was a fraction of a second quicker. As Bat's weapon exploded, sending its bullet plowing harmlessly into the ceiling, Bat suddenly stiffened up, with an amazed expression sweeping over his dark, piggish eyes.

"I'll git—" A snarling threat died on his bearded lips, as he pitched forward across the table, with a bullet in his heart.

Wham! The Texan's gun roared again, and the weapon flew from the hand of one of the gunmen, who was staring wide-eyed at his fallen leader.

Don whirled the smoking muzzle of his .45 around toward the other gunman.

Abruptly, seeing the fate of his pals, the remaining bandit decided to let his weapon drop from his hand. It clattered to the floor.

"Don't shoot!" screamed the gunman, his face gray with terror.

"It was Bat put me up ter cheatin' yuh," called the gambler, from the crowd.

Don Newell gave a short, jeering laugh. He felt that justice had been done in the death of Bat Durbin. He did not want to take any more lives.

There was still danger from any of the bandits who might be in the front of the saloon, however. Sweeping the muzzle of his .45 around in a circle, the trail boss sprang upon a chair so that he could watch better. And then—

Boot heels clattered across the plank sidewalk outside. The swinging green doors of the saloon fanned furiously.

With guns drawn and faces grim, the Double X crew stormed into the barroom.

Don Newell holstered his .45, leaped down from the chair, and picked up the money that had fallen on the floor.

Justice was satisfied, and the Double X cattle money was safe. Elbowing their way through the crowd, the Texas cowboys gathered around their boss.

"Come on, boys," he said. "If yuh got them cattle loaded, we'll fork our cayuses an' head fer home pronto. I reckon the rest o' the herds that trail up hyar this season will git a new an' plumb square deal in Dodge."





Señor Red Mask In Ghost Canyon

By Guy L. Maynard

Author of "Señor Red Mask and the Wolves of the Border," etc.

CHAPTER I.

NOBODY'S SERVANT.

JAUTAILY smoking a ready-made cigarette, Mark Denton rode down the dusty main street of Rio Vista. Handsome in a coarse way, Denton was well pleased with himself—and showed it.

He was constantly posing. His bearing was haughty, as if he disdained to notice the common folks who passed up and down the straggling street of the little cow town.

"Reg'lar travelin' fashion plate, ain't he?" remarked a bow-legged waddy to the group lounging around the front door of a pool hall.

"What kin yuh expect from a jasper thet sits in a office all day, figgerin' out plans fer takin' gold out o' the inside of a mountain?" asked another waddy pityingly.

"Thet pore, bang-tailed bronc Denton is ridin' is so 'shamed of him thet he cain't hold up his head," loudly added a third cowpoke.

The superintendent of the Gold Hill Mines tried to appear as if he had not heard these cutting remarks. For Denton wasn't a fighting man—not unless he believed that the odds were strongly in his favor. But his face flushed, and he gnawed savagely at the red mustache which curled tightly at the corners of his

thin lips. In his eyes, of a peculiar slate-blue color, glowed a flame of hatred.

The waddies were hardly to be blamed for what they said, at that. For although Denton was in one of the toughest and wildest sections of the border range country, he was rigged out after the fashion of a city man out for a canter in some Eastern park.

He wore English riding breeches and boots. His only bit of Western gear was a gray Stetson such as many mining men wear, low of crown, and with a stiff, straight-edge brim. Even his saddle was the regulation park saddle of pancake design.

The dudish mining man was in very ill humor by the time he reached the Cholla Bar and Hotel, which was Rio Vista's principal place of refreshment.

"Hey, *mozo!* Lead my horse around to the stable and see that he has a feed of oats!" ordered Denton, as he alighted at the hitch rail.

A dark-skinned youth, leaning lazily against a casement window of the thick-walled adobe building, continued to plunk on his guitar. If he heard the order, he gave no sign. He was dressed in the cheap garments of a low-class Mexican peon. But from his huge palm-fiber sombrero to the sole-leather sandals on his brown feet, he was clean.

"You heard me call you, hombre!" snapped Denton angrily.

"I hear you call a *mozo*—servant," retorted the youth, smiling so that his white teeth showed in strong contrast to his dark skin and the tiny dark mustache that adorned his firm lip. "I am nobody's servant; therefore, I no answer."

"Who are you, then? Why don't you go down to the Mex *cantinas*, where you belong?"

"I am El Muchacho—as you say in Engleesh, the 'Keed.' I am here because the Americanos like the music I play."

To show that he considered the argument closed, "El Muchacho" promptly started plunking a lively tune on his somewhat battered guitar. A close observer might have noticed, however, that his dark eyes gleamed a warning against further molestation by the overbearing Denton.

The latter apparently decided that further words, with a lowly peon, were beneath his dignity. Tying his horse, he stamped into the barroom.

"Howdy, Mr. Denton!" said the bartender, trying to twist his red moonface into an expression of welcome that he plainly did not feel. "What'll it be fer *yuh*?"

"Some of your best bourbon," said the mining man peevishly.

In moody silence, he drank the liquor set before him.

"If *yuh* was aimin' tuh stay overnight, I'll send a *mozo* out tuh tend tuh *yore hoss*," offered the bartender.

"All right. Do that." Denton nodded shortly. "I told that Mex outside there to take care of him, and he refused."

"Yeah, he would," the bartender explained. "Yuh see, he ain't exactly a *mozo*. Drops around here right frequent an' entertains the boys with that guitar of hisn. Shore kin make music on it, too."

"But the fact is, nobody ever sees him work," he went on. "He's been hangin' around Rio Vista fer several weeks, and ain't told a soul who he is nor where he come from, neither."

"Like as not he's a thief. Ought to be run out of the country," said Denton.

"Thet ain't the way the waddies

thet come in offn the range tuh enjoy theirselves feel about it. They listen tuh him rattle off them Mex tunes by the hour."

"Well, I'll have another drink and then go down to the post office and get my mail," Denton abruptly ended the conversation.

But as he leisurely poured another drink of the Cholla's best brand of wet goods, he heard some words that seemed to interest him greatly.

Two cowmen had drifted in for a sociable drink. They stood at some distance down the long bar from the dapper Gold Hill Mines superintendent. But their voices were loud, tuned to the bawling of cows and the thunder of pounding hoofs.

"What yuh say we hoist one tuh Señor Red Mask?" suggested a big, rudy-faced cowman whose heavy mane of red hair and long mustaches were shot through with gray.

"Yuh couldn't mention nothin' thet would suit me better, Jim," responded the squat, bow-legged man whose alkali-dusted clothes gave evidence of a long ride that day. "That young caballero has shore mopped up a bunch of bandits since he started ridin' the trouble trail in Verde Valley."

"Waal, here's to him! An' I hope he gits the boss rustler, El Lobo, the next time thet murderin' skunk crosses the Rio Grande," said the big cowman, lifting his glass.

Denton's thin lips tightened, but otherwise he gave no indication that the easy talk he had overheard affected him. He knew the two cowmen by reputation.

The big, bluff-spoken one was Jim Corson, owner of the Slash C Ranch, in Verde Valley. His companion was Andy Gilson, a cowman from the upper end of the valley. Both were very active members of the vigilantes—a law-and-order organi-

zation under the leadership of former sheriff, Bill Jackson.

Although it was the purpose of the vigilantes to wipe out outlaw gangs led by the notorious half-breed, "El Lobo del Rio"—the "River Wolf"—it was actually a mysterious masked rider known as "Señor Red Mask" who had put the *bandidos* and rustlers out of business.

"El Lobo will be crossing the river sooner than these dumb cowmen think," Denton told himself confidently. "And if that masked hombre butts in on our business, he'll find himself bait for the buzzards."

The mining man started for the door, ready now to secure his mail. His eyes were constantly on the alert. He seemed to be on the lookout for some one whom he had expected to meet.

The thrumming of a guitar came faintly through the heated air of late afternoon. The sound brought a scowl to Denton's brow.

CHAPTER II.

A FIGHTING PEON.

EL MUCHACHO had moved from in front of the barroom. The main entrance to the hotel section of the Cholla was but a few yards downstream.

Its lobby was a favorite gathering place for the wives and daughters of cowmen, in for a day of shopping and recreation. Dances and other social events were held there from time to time.

He paused in the shade of a wooden awning that extended over the sidewalk. Hardly had he begun playing a lilting air of old Mexico, when a girl appeared in the doorway.

Pretty Joan Corson, heiress to the Slash C Ranch, made a very attractive picture, framed in the wide,

arched entrance to the whitewashed adobe building. Her trim, girlish figure was becomingly garbed in a practical riding costume which consisted chiefly of a blue flannel blouse, open at the throat, and a divided skirt of tan corduroy.

Her high-heeled, tan riding boots carried tiny silver spurs. Set well back on her head was a wide-brimmed gray Stetson which only partially covered her wealth of golden hair.

Swiftly the Muchacho's sinewy brown fingers swept the strings of the opening strains of "La Paloma." His tenor voice, rich and vibrant, yet pitched in low tones, took up the words of the sad melody in Spanish:

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

"Thank you," said the girl, as El Muchacho paused a moment. "You remember my favorite tune, I see. And no one could play and sing it half as well as you."

"*Muchísimas gracias, señorita—* very many thanks, miss!" responded the young musician, bowing politely.

The Muchacho was on the point of continuing his playing, when a grating voice at his shoulder broke in:

"Why, how are you, Joan? Haven't seen you since the last dance at the Cholla."

It was Denton. With his usual insolence and nerve increased by the fiery liquor he had drunk, he smirked familiarly at the girl in the doorway.

"I have never given you the privilege of calling me by my given name, Mr. Denton," Joan answered coldly.

Her face was flushed, and her blue eyes gave the mining man a look that would have sent a less thick-

skinned person into embarrassed retirement.

"Aw, come, now; don't try to pull that uppish stuff on me," Denton said, with a sneer. "I'm——"

"And don't you ever dare to speak to me again!" Joan interrupted indignantly.

What the foppish mine manager intended to say next will never be known. For as he opened his mouth, he was suddenly seized by hands that gripped his arm like a steel trap.

The next instant, he went reeling off the sidewalk into the dusty street, propelled by a violent shove from El Muchacho.

"Why, you dirty peon!" roared Denton in fury. "I'll——"

But instead of finishing his threat, the mining man went into action. He was a powerfully built fellow in the full prime of his strength and agility. Mouthing oaths, he sprang forward on the sidewalk. Without an instant's hesitation, Denton hurled himself at the waiting Muchacho.

The latter was prepared. He had quickly leaned his guitar against the door jamb. Little knots of tensed muscles stood out on his lean brown jaws. His dark eyes gleamed with battle light.

Denton started a full swing of his right fist from the hip as he came in. Had the blow landed, it would have spelled the finish of the young musician, beyond a doubt.

But as the swishing fish flashed straight at his jaw, El Muchacho side-stepped, ducked, and countered with a jabbing right of his own. It landed with an ugly, cutting sound of rocky knuckles ripping through flesh to the bone.

Denton was both amazed and hurt. He staggered back, reaching for his face. His hand came away

dripping crimson from a two-inch cut on his cheek bone.

As the mine official glanced from his gory hand to the brown-skinned youth who faced him unflinchingly, he saw red in more than one sense of the word.

With a shouted oath, he leaped in again. Swinging vicious rights and lefts, he sought frantically to land a finishing blow.

The Muchacho was outweighed by the bulkier, more powerful man, but he made up for his handicap by a speed that was nothing short of amazing.

Flashing in and out, he side-stepped, dodged, and blocked Denton's flailing fists. And continually he was snapping in his own damaging punches. The mining man's coarsely handsome face showed the terrific punishment he was taking.

To make matters worse for Denton, who was not only vain of his personal appearance, but held an exaggerated opinion of his own importance in the border country, a small crowd had gathered to observe the fight. One sidelong glance at the grinning waddies and townspeople that hemmed him in made Denton aware that his reputation, as well as his face, was rapidly being ruined.

Such a savage fury surged over the miner that the very force of his onslaught seemed about to overwhelm his lighter opponent. He succeeded in landing one blow on the fighting Muchacho's jaw that staggered him a moment.

Quick to see his advantage, Denton leaped in like a wolf to the kill.

Then suddenly out of the welter of flying fists, one punch caught the attention of the watching crowd. It was the Muchacho's right, starting below his hip and darting upward like the strike of a rattler. All the

superb strength of the young musician was packed in that wallop.

It landed flush on Denton's smooth-shaven chin. The mine manager's hands dropped. His head snapped backward, as if it were flying off his broad shoulders. Then his knees buckled, and he sagged to the sidewalk, completely out.

"My good gosh! What a punch!" exclaimed a waddy, looking admiringly at the Muchacho.

"I never would 'a' believed thet young peon had so much spunk," said a cowman.

The crowd edged in closer, now that the fight was over. Denton lay like a log, where he had fallen. And the fact that no one offered to assist him spoke volumes for their lack of friendliness toward the mining man.

"Somebody better get a bucket of water and throw it on thees hombre," suggested El Muchacho.

"What started the ruckus?" a newcomer in the crowd asked.

As no spectators had been present when the first blow was struck, there was no answer to this question until the Muchacho volunteered to satisfy the curiosity of the throng about him.

"Thees man, Denton—he ees call me ver' bad names," explained the young musician.

"I reckon he'll be right careful how he talks to yuh from now on," chuckled a waddy in the crowd.

"Yuh better watch him clost, next time yuh cross his trail," advised the town barber, who had run out of his near-by shop, with an open razor in his hand, followed by a customer whose face was hidden behind a mask of lather. "He'll be gunnin' fer yuh."

"*Gracias, amigos.* I weel be ver' careful," said the Muchacho, starting for the doorway of the hotel to recover his guitar.

He wanted to get away before any more questions were asked. It was for the purpose of shielding Joan Corson, to keep her name from being dragged into any connection with a street brawl, that he had refrained from mentioning Denton's insulting remarks to the girl.

The brown-skinned youth was stooping to pick up his beloved instrument, when a low-toned voice just inside the wide archway caused him to glance up quickly.

"I want to thank you for taking my part against that contemptible brute," said Joan Corson earnestly. "You gave him just what he's been needing for a long time. But please don't let my father hear of it. He has a hot temper, and I'm afraid he wouldn't hesitate to shoot Denton on sight."

"I beg you weel not worry, señorita," replied the Muchacho, smiling and bowing courteously. "I weel say notheeng. And there ees no thanks due me. What I did was a pleasure."

"And you will be careful not to—to—" Joan paused in blushing confusion, as she realized how warmly she was about to express her anxiety over the safety of the gallant Muchacho.

"To turn my back on the Señor Denton," smilingly finished the Muchacho.

"Do you know, you remind me more of my old friend, Tom Goodwin, every time I see you," said Joan impulsively. "I hope—I mean I wish you were he."

There was a strangely yearning expression on the Muchacho's brown face as he said:

"Quién sabe? Maybe thees young Tomas Goodween weel come back to hees old home again, some day."

"I'll be glad when he does. Only it would be a sad home-coming for

Tom. You know, some terrible things have happened since he left home, a couple of years ago, to seek adventure on the northern ranges. El Lobo del Rio raided the Bar G Ranch, a few months ago, and killed Tom's father and rustled all his cattle."

"I have heard of eet." The Muchacho's voice had suddenly become husky. "Eet ees too bad the young Tomas could not have been here to fight for hees padre and home."

"Sheriff Jackson tried to locate Tom right after the raid, but his letters were never answered," Joan said sadly.

"Perhaps the Señor Red Mask ees taking hees place, and weel get revenge on El Lobo," suggested the Muchacho.

"There is something awfully strange and mysterious about the masked rider." Joan's face brightened as she spoke. She gazed intently at the youth before her. "You know, I wonder sometimes if——"

Suddenly interrupting herself to murmur a low "Good-by," the girl shrank back into the lobby of the hotel.

El Muchacho carelessly slung his guitar across his shoulders by a light strap and turned to see big Jim Corson coming toward the door.

It wasn't the first time the rough-spoken owner of the Slash C spread had broken up a conversation between his daughter and the youthful musician. Corson was well known for his ill feeling toward all Mexicans. It was only to avoid an open clash between her father and the Muchacho that Joan Corson had retired from the scene before the burly cowman had caught sight of her and El Muchacho.

Humming a verse of his favorite song, "La Paloma," El Muchacho walked slowly down the street.

CHAPTER III.

SECRET PLANS.

THE night life of the Cantina del Diablo was in full swing as Mark Denton shouldered his way through the swinging doors. It was a low dive in the Mexican section of Rio Vista; the hang-out of *ladrones*—thieves—and other riffraff of the border country.

The scraping of fiddles and the *thump-thump* of a drum made music of a sort for the dancers, at the same time floating out through the open windows to entertain the peons and their families who inhabited the near-by *jacales*—miserable huts of mud and arrow weed.

Denton was in an ugly mood that evening. The punishment he had taken from El Muchacho had ruined his appearance, as well as causing him considerable suffering in body and mind. One eye was blackened and swollen nearly shut. His nose was red and disfigured. Every movement of his jaw caused pain.

The natty clothes of the mine superintendent were soiled with a half dried mixture of street dust and the water, which had been sluiced on him to revive him after the fight.

With his one good eye glancing along the bar which extended the full length of the *cantina*, Denton failed to see an iron-barred cage which rested on stout wooden supports just inside the entrance to the place.

A spitting snarl, followed by the thud of a clawed paw against the bars of the cage not a foot from his head, caused Denton to leap aside in sudden fright. To make matters worse, he nearly bowled over a leather-clad vaquero who was hurrying to claim a dance with a dusky señorita. It took a quick and profuse apology from Denton to square

himself with the hombre, who was going for a knife.

"Cuidado, señor! El tigre es vicioso!" Be careful, the cougar is vicious!" said a warning voice.

Denton whirled, to face the proprietor of the *cantina*—a paunchy Mexican known as "Miguel Gordo"—"Fat Mike." The latter had turned away from the bar and hastened over to protect the American from both man and beast. He recognized Denton and hoped to separate him from a goodly sum of money, before he got out of the *cantina*.

"Ugh! Why do you keep a brute like that here?" asked the mining man, shuddering at sight of the wicked beast that stood lashing its tail in rage and glaring through the bars at him.

"He ees my *mascota*, señor. He breengs the good luck to my establishment," explained Miguel Gordo apologetically.

"Why, he'd kill a man quicker than you could bat an eye," said Denton.

The *cantina* proprietor shrugged his fat shoulders and seemed anxious to change the subject. It wasn't the first time a frightened customer had complained at the ferocity of the great cat.

But Miguel Gordo was superstitious. He firmly believed that the *cantina* would suffer a loss of business if his mascot, the cougar, were to be put out of the way.

"Will not the señor favor me by taking a leetle drink of *aguardiente*?" suggested Miguel. "Eet ees ver' good for the nerves."

"All right. I'll drink with you," Denton accepted. "But I'm here looking for an hombre by the name of Martinez—Carlos Martinez."

"Ah, si. Carlos ees een the gambling room. He ees ver' fond of the monte game."

"Well, let's have that shot of booze. Then you take me to see Martinez. I've got important business with him."

After downing a glass of the fiery Mexican brandy, Denton followed his fat guide across the barroom and down a dimly lighted corridor.

Pausing in front of the door to a large inner room, the *cantina* proprietor motioned with a pudgy brown hand for Denton to enter.

There were several gambling tables in the room. They were filled with an ill-sorted lot of players, mostly Mexicans—tough hombres, all of them, by their appearance.

It was a scar-faced half-breed who rose from a chair at a monte table and came forward at sight of Denton. He was gaudy in a purple shirt, a many-colored *serape* across his shoulders, a green sash round his waist. His leather pants were decorated down the seams with Indian beadwork.

Denton was somehow reminded of the caged cougar as he watched Martinez slink toward him. He couldn't help thinking that between the two there was little choice as to which was the more dangerous. But that was all the better for the mincing man's purpose.

"Let's go over to that corner table where we can be alone, and talk business," Denton said brusquely.

There was much to be done, and he had no time to waste in formalities.

Seated at a small table, with a bottle of tequila, which a *mozo* hurriedly brought, between them, Denton and Carlos began a low-voiced conference.

"How is El Lobo del Rio fixed for handling a big deal?" asked Denton.

"*Bien*—well," whispered Carlos in sibilant Spanish. "I come from the

Posada de los Ladrones—the Inn of Thieves—in old Mexico yesterday. There El Lobo, the *jefe grande*—big chief—was gathering new hombres about him in place of those who were killed in the last raid across the border. He is ready."

"Can you take word to him of a matter which will put much money in his pockets?"

"*Sí, señor.* My caballo is resting in the corral. I will ride swiftly through the night," said the half-breed eagerly.

"Then you will tell him that a heavy shipment of gold goes from the mines to-morrow by stagecoach. Let him be on hand with his gang to hold up the stage and loot the express strong box."

"And afterward—what of dividing the gold?"

"Tell him to return to Mexico by way of Ghost Canyon, hiding the gold there until I can meet him to divide it with him."

"The vigilantes will ride on our trail. It will take many hombres to protect the gold from their guns," observed Carlos thoughtfully.

"Bah! Who cares for that bunch of old women?" There was scorn in Denton's hoarse voice as he spoke and reached for the tequila bottle. "I'll throw them off the trail."

"*Es verdad*—it is true," said the half-breed, "that the vigilantes have been outwitted many times by the cunning El Lobo. But there is one who has never failed to upset the best-laid plans of the River Wolf; who has killed and captured his *bandidos* and broken up his gangs and kil—"

"You mean *Señor Red Mask?*" Denton broke in.

"*Si,*" said Carlos fearfully.

"Well, you don't need to worry about that infernal meddler this time," boasted Denton. "I'll take

care of him, if he butts in on my game."

"Then I will ride across the Rio Grande, before the dawn breaks," said the half-breed, pouring himself a liberal drink of liquor.

"There is one thing more before we finish," remarked Mark Denton. "Lean close, and I will tell you of a job I want done this very night—something which will be to your liking, if I don't misjudge you, and for which I will pay you well."

For the next few minutes, the two plotters whispered together. Denton did most of the talking, while Carlos listened, with an evil grin twisting his thin, cruel lips.

"*Bueno!* I weel do it," agreed the half-breed, as Denton finished.

There was a clink of gold coins changing hands, a final drink to the success of their secret scheme, and the two partners in crime parted for the night.

CHAPTER IV.

A CLOSE CALL FOR EL MUCHACHO.

WHILE Rio Vista slept under the silvery sheen of a full moon, at an early hour of the morning, three stealthy figures crept through a shadowed alley.

Stopping at a heavily barred gate in the rear wall of the Cantina del Diablo, one of the *serape*-clad hombres rapped softly three times. It was evidently a recognized signal, for soon a sleepy-eyed peon threw back the bars and opened the gate.

Then four pairs of sandaled feet slipped noiselessly across the wide patio, their owners keeping close to the shadows of several chinaberry trees. Entering the front part of the rambling adobe building, the night prowlers soon found themselves in the dark and deserted bar-room.

As the four hombres paused just

inside a doorway, a deep, throaty growl came to their ears. Twin points of yellow light glowed fiercely in the darkness. It made the intruders' scalps prickle, sent cold chills racing up and down their spines.

"You go first to the cage, Pedro, that the evil beast may recognize you as his keeper," whispered the voice of Carlos Martinez.

"*Ai*, he will know me," answered one of the hombres, advancing across the room. "I have brought him a small piece of his favorite food, liver of a calf."

In a few moments, a loud purring announced to the waiting hombres that the ferocious cougar had been calmed down by the *mozo* whose duty it was to feed and attend the animal daily. They in turn crept forward beside the cage.

"There is no time to lose," said the ugly half-breed, Martinez, who seemed to be in charge of the invaders of the *cantina*. "Let us carry the cage outside, pronto."

Without further words, each of the four hombres took his post at a corner of the cage. Lifting it off its supports, they bore the heavy burden of barred cage and crouching cougar out of the barroom. Crossing the patio, they were soon outside the walls.

"Now, amigos," mumbled Carlos Martinez to his companions, "we will carry Miguel Gordo's little pet down to the *fonda*—lodging house—where sleeps that music-making *hijo del diablo*—son of the evil one—called 'El Muchacho'!"

"What a surprise for that hombre!" remarked a squat peon, with a mocking leer on his pock-marked face.

"He will think it is *el diablo* himself, come to pay him a visit," chortled another hombre.

"But what of Miguel Gordo when he finds out that his mascot has been stolen?" timidly inquired a lean, hungry-looking *mozo*. "It is well known that he counts largely on the luck that beast brings him."

"A *peste* on that fat carrion of a tequila seller!" said Carlos Martinez scornfully. "But I am not a fool to leave clews behind me which might make trouble."

"After we have carried out the agreement I made with Señor Denton, to loose this beast in El Muchacho's room, we will return the empty cage to its place in the *cantina*. Thus will it appear that the cougar escaped in the night and prowled his way into the sleeping room of the music maker."

With the matter thus arranged, the four hired murderers—for that was what their diabolical scheme amounted to—carried the cage through a rear entrance to the small *fonda*.

A few people quartered in the place seemed to be sleeping soundly. There was no alarm raised as the intruders made their way silently along a narrow, brick-paved corridor which led past the doors of the bedrooms.

"It is here that the Muchacho sleeps," whispered Carlos Martinez, who had cunningly appeared at the *fonda* earlier in the night to locate the room, under pretense of seeking quarters for himself.

Depositing their burden squarely in front of the wide door of the room, the *hombres* made ready to climax their fiendish night's work.

Carlos Martinez tried the latch of the door. It opened easily, as he had expected. It was not the custom of the country to lock doors either by day or night.

Steathily, inch by inch, the door was pushed back. The interior of

the small room was dimly revealed by the moonlight that streamed through an open window. All outer windows in Mexican houses are heavily barred. This one was no exception. Martinez, the murderous half-breed, wore an evil grin on his cruel face as he noted the sleeping figure on a rawhide cot in a far corner of the room.

The great cat in the cage was softly padding back and forth. Its eyes gleamed wickedly.

Cautiously, Martinez lifted the gate in the end of the cage. It opened into the room of the still-sleeping Muchacho.

A tawny shape slunk through the opening.

"*Vamonos, hombres!*" snapped out Martinez, jerking shut the door of the room.

Quickly, the four men grabbed the empty cage and hurried away down the corridor.

El Muchacho awoke with a start as the door slammed. It was the first sound that the sneaking *hombres* had made. He was instantly on the alert. Tossing off his blanket, he leaped lightly to his feet.

And the sight that met his startled gaze almost made him think that he was the victim of some frightful nightmare.

"A cougar!" exclaimed the Muchacho, recognizing the great tawny beast that crouched in the middle of the floor.

Its long tail was lashing from side to side. A shaft of silvery light from the lowering moon came through a barred window and was reflected in the glowing yellow eyes of the mad brute. Its rasping snarl of rage sent a cold chill down the spine of the brown-skinned youth who was known in Rio Vista as a poor peon musician.

El Muchacho stood motionless for a moment. But he was thinking fast. He realized that he could not reach the door. The cougar barred the way. He had no gun, or his plight would not have been so desperate.

Every second increased the killing fury of the snarling, growling beast he faced. The Muchacho could see it creeping forward—slowly, not more than an inch at a time, with its blazing eyes fixed on him, its intended prey. At any moment, it might leap.

Knowing that the slightest movement on his part would start the death struggle between him and the cougar, El Muchacho decided on a daring course of action.

His only weapon was the keen-bladed knife of finest Spanish steel which he always carried. But for comfort in sleeping, he had removed the *cuchillo* and its leather sheath from its usual place of concealment between his shoulders. It was under the coarse pillow of straw at the head of his bed, several feet from his hand.

Holding the cougar's gaze with his own gleaming dark eyes, El Muchacho tensed for the move he was about to make. He saw the big cat flatten itself, tensing its own mighty muscles for the death leap. Then, with a piercing screech of fury, the tawny form hurtled through the air!

But lightning-swift as it was, El Muchacho was ready. His right hand moved a few inches. It snatched the blanket from his bed and swished it forward to meet the open-mouthed killer in mid-air.

Snarling and clawing at the entangling cover, the cougar came to the floor.

This was the moment of respite for which the Muchacho had played. He made the most of it. Whirling

in his tracks, he leaned for an instant over his bed.

When he straightened, the keen Spanish blade was in his right hand. Its bright steel glistened in the moonlight.

Now the snarling cat had clawed aside the blanket and was coming in for the kill. It was only a few feet from the waiting Muchacho. Its fangs were bared for a murderous slash at his throat. He could feel its hot breath in his face.

Then El Muchacho moved. Like a flash of light, he sidestepped. In the same instant, his hand darted upward. There was a glint of moonlight on his knife.

Straight home to the cougar's heart went the *cuchillo*. With an ear-splitting screech of agony, the beast dropped to the floor. It writhed for a few seconds and then lay still.

"My good gosh!" gasped the Muchacho. "That was about the closest call I ever had."

For a long moment, he stood wiping his dripping red blade on the torn blanket and looking down at the great cat stretched lifeless on the floor.

"It was the slamming of the door that woke me up," reflected the Muchacho. "That means the cougar didn't prowl in here by itself. So I reckon Mark Denton must 'a' had a hand in the deal."

The fight had lasted only a matter of seconds. But the awful screams of Miguel Gordo's mascot had aroused the household. The Muchacho could hear frightened voices and scurrying footsteps.

Going to the door, he opened it wide. For the next few minutes, he was kept busy telling about the death struggle to a group of awed peons and members of the fonda keeper's family.

He did not mention the fact of the cougar's having been brought there with murderous intent, however. With a grim clenching of his jaws, he determined to bide his time till he could have a reckoning with the mine manager.

CHAPTER V.

RAID OF THE RIVER WOLF.

A HEAVY stagecoach, drawn by six sweating horses, clattered down the winding canyon trail from the Gold Hill Mines.

"Ready, men!" growled a gruff voice from the cover of a clump of piñons. "There comes the gold that will buy us many a day and night of gaming and drinking in the Posada de los Ladrones across the Rio Grande."

It was El Lobo del Rio—the River Wolf—who spoke. The burly, black-mustached terror of the border country leaned out of the saddle of his powerful roan stallion and glanced from hombre to hombre of his band.

Six there were, besides himself—every one a cutthroat, expert in the evil profession of banditry. And foremost among them, next to the chief, was the half-breed, Carlos Martinez.

Satisfied that every bandit's gun was ready for action, El Lobo sat watching the trail through a concealing fringe of piñon boughs. The point he had selected for the holdup of the stage was in a bend of the trail, where boulders and débris washed down by a mountain stream made travel slow and difficult.

Closer came the stage, swaying and jolting over the rough road. It was in plain view of the border outlaws now. Only one man, besides the grizzled driver, was to be seen on the coach. It was the guard, armed with a sawed-off shotgun.

Mark Denton had seen to it that no extra guards were employed, although the heavy shipment of gold bullion would have justified putting on a half dozen well-armed men.

"Hands up!" suddenly shouted El Lobo, as the lumbering stage came abreast of the hidden bandits.

Instead of obeying the order, the gray-mustached driver lashed his horses. At the same time, the guard rashly pointed his gun toward the piñons and fired a charge of buckshot at the still invisible outlaws. The result was disastrous—but not to the bandits.

"Fire, hombres!" snarled El Lobo, angered by a chance shot that grazed a cheek of his liquor-bloated face.

The big half-breed leader of the thieves dug spurs into his stallion's flanks, as he gave the order to shoot down the two men on the stage.

Out of the cover of the piñons swept the outlaw gang.

Crash! Bang! Six-guns blazed.

A deadly hail of lead tumbled the fighting guard from his high perch beside the driver. He was lifeless, riddled with slugs, before his body struck the ground.

It was evident that the driver was hit, too. He slumped in his seat, slipping finally to the boot, where he lay motionless.

Out of control, the stage team galloped wildly down the rocky trail. But the horses of the border bandits were faster. Under the huge-roweled Chihuahua spurs, they raced after the treasure-laden coach. Rapidly they closed in till the rough hands of their riders could grasp the reins of the frightened team.

Brought to a sudden halt, the stage was at the mercy of a bandits. They swarmed around it. The grizzled, weather-beaten old driver was apparently dead. There was no one to offer resistance.

El Lobo handled the situation in masterly fashion. Long experience had taught him how to hold up a stage properly. He quickly detailed two hombres to hold the lead horses of the team. Another pair dismounted and clambered up on the stage to unload the strong box containing the bars of gold.

Within a few minutes of the time that the coach first came to a halt, it had been looted, and the bandits were preparing to depart. The stage team was tied to trees beside the trail. Driver and guard still lay where they had fallen.

"The box is too heavy for one horse to pack," said Carlos Martinez, looking inquiringly at the exultant El Lobo.

"Break it open, fool!" snapped the bandit leader.

Without waiting for his slower-witted hombres to act, El Lobo leaned from his saddle.

Bro-o-om! roared the .45 that he snatched from its holster.

The heavy lock on the strong box was smashed by the terrific impact of the close-range slug. A bandit hastily threw open the lid of the iron chest.

"*Ai, mira—look!*" cried the River Wolf, his beady black eyes glittering with greed.

The leather-clad outlaws crowded round the chest, feasting their eyes on its treasure of pure gold.

"Let each man fill his saddle pockets with the bars," ordered El Lobo.

In a very few moments, the loot had been equally distributed among the bandits.

"*'Sta bueno—it is good!*" said El Lobo, as the last of the golden ingots were deposited in his own stout leather saddle pockets.

"Let's go! We will fool Señor Red Mask this time!"

With laughter and jest over the

success of their raid, the outlaws spurred their horses down the trail. They were headed south to the border. There was a long ride ahead of them. They must take to the chaparral and keep under cover as much as possible.

Gringo waddies from the cattle ranches of Verde Valley would be riding the range. And it was no part of El Lobo's plans to spread an alarm that would bring a swarm of cowmen down upon his gang.

"With the coming of darkness, we shall be safely in Ghost Canyon," announced the bandit chief. "Where we shall await the appearance of Señor Denton."

"Why wait for him?" cunningly suggested Carlos Martinez, who rode beside the leader. "Why not continue on our way to Mexico and have all the gold for ourselves?"

"Fool!" exclaimed El Lobo impatiently. "Would you kill the goose from which we get the golden eggs? There will be many more yellow bars to come down the trail from the mines."

The other raiders voiced approval of their leader's wisdom in handling the matter of double-crossing Denton. So Carlos Martinez discreetly kept out of further argument.

But the wily cutthroat's suggestion had started a train of thought in his own mind. If his companions would not join in a plan to cut the mine manager out of his share of the loot, why should not he, Carlos Martinez, outwit them all and make way with the whole treasure for himself?

CHAPTER VI.

WORK FOR SENOR RED MASK.

RIO VISTA, the little border town which nestled in a bend of the Rio Grande, basked sleepily in the hot sun of late afternoon.

El Muchacho was strumming a lazy tune on his guitar, in the wide, shaded doorway of the Cholla Bar. He paused as the thudding of horses' hoofs came faintly to his ears from the far upper end of the street.

"Old Dave is kind o' late to-day," the young musician told himself, noting at the same time the position of the westering sun.

Then suddenly the Muchacho slung his guitar across his broad shoulders by its strap. He stepped quickly forward to the edge of the dusty street.

Something was wrong. Grizzled old Dave Shattuck, the driver of the Gold Hill stage, was slumped down in his seat. He seemed to have difficulty handling the reins.

El Muchacho leaped to the heads of the lead horses as they swung up to the Cholla. Men came running out of the barroom. Kindly hands reached up to the half-fainting old man on the driver's seat of the stage. They lifted him down gently and carried him to the shade of the wooden awning.

"Somebody bring him a drink!" called a cowman who supported the stricken driver's shoulders.

A moment later, a fat bartender bustled out, with a glass of liquor. It quickly revived Shattuck.

"Tell us what happened, Dave," anxiously inquired a lanky, stern-faced man with long gray mustaches of the cowhorn variety. It was ex-Sheriff Bill Jackson, who had resigned his office in order to lead the vigilantes of the Verde Valley range against El Lobo.

"A holdup—El Lobo—killed Tim Connors, the guard!" gasped the driver. He rested a moment, then added: "I ain't hurt much—only creased on the head an' a bullet through my left arm. I'm jest weak from—"

"What did them bandits git?" Jackson interrupted.

"The hull month's clean-up of the Gold Hill Mines!" declared old Dave Shattuck.

"A couple of yuh boys help Dave down tuh Doc Hardy's office," said Jackson, in a tone of authority. "An' the rest of yuh fork yore broncs. We got tuh hit the trail pronto after them skunks."

In the confusion and haste of getting their horses from various hitch racks and stables, no one noticed the sudden disappearance of El Muchacho.

The brown-skinned youth had waited only long enough to hear the stage driver's few words. Then he quickly made his way to a corral in the rear of the little *fonda*, or Mexican boarding house, which he called home when in Rio Vista.

A few minutes later, he was dashing down a side street on the back of a fleet-footed buckskin pony.

Eager for revenge, a dozen vigilantes rode northwestward at a rapid pace. They were headed for the scene of the holdup, there to pick up the trail of the outlaw band.

There were several routes by which the bandits could return to their lair below the border. It was necessary that the vigilantes take the right one in pursuit. But unless El Lobo and his men rode slowly, secure in the belief that there would be no immediate pursuit, it seemed hopeless for the American cowmen to overtake them.

On their way up Verde Valley, the vigilantes halted long enough to build a fire on a rise. A smoke signal had been used to call members of the vigilantes into action during former raids of El Lobo. It produced results now. As they sped on their way, the vigilantes were joined

by several cowmen from the nearby ranches, among them, big Jim Corson, owner of the Slash C spread.

The law-and-order riders were not long in reaching the mouth of the canyon through which the bandits had passed after the holdup. And the trail of the murderous gang was plain.

"The way they was headed, it looks like they aim tuh cross the border by way of Ghost Canyon," said Bill Jackson, looking shrewdly at the fresh tracks in the chaparral.

"They got a big start on us, Bill," remarked Jim Corson impatiently. "Le's be on our way."

"Hold on a minute, boys!" called a cowman who happened to glance back up the canyon. "Here comes thet dude of a Denton. We ought ter tell him what's happened."

The dapper mine manager apparently caught sight of the vigilantes at the same time, for he spurred his horse down the trail to overtake them.

"What's happened, gentlemen? Another herd of cows rustled?" asked Denton, with mock sympathy, as he reined up beside the grim group of riders.

"The stage was held up, an' the minin' company's gold was rustled this here time," answered Jackson sternly. "An' thet ain't the worst of it. The guard was killed an' old Dave Shattuck plugged twice!"

"You don't mean it!" cried Denton. "Why, that is terrible! The loss of all that gold is a serious thing for the company."

"Yeah, an' what about the loss tuh the widder of thet murdered guard?" coldly inquired the ex-sheriff.

"Oh, of course, that is worst of all, Mr. Jackson," hastily rejoined Mark Denton. "We must avenge his death by all means. I shall be only

too glad to accompany you. I was on my way to Rincon to send some telegrams regarding mine supplies, but that can wait."

"We ain't needin' no more help," said Jackson, eying with disdain the city-park riding outfit that Denton wore. "But I reckon yuh got a right tuh jine us if yuh want ter, seein' as yo're int'rested in thet gold El Lobo carried off."

"Indeed, I am interested in the whole affair. I intend to do everything I can to catch the bandits," answered the mining man, with such apparent sincerity that Jackson—shrewd old peace officer though he was—was completely deceived.

"Oh, thet's all right," the ex-sheriff muttered apologetically. "Come along, then."

As he rode, Denton congratulated himself on the ease with which he had got into the good graces of the vigilantes, most of whom, he was well aware, had always heartily despised him.

"Now if I can throw these old codgers off the trail and then slip into Ghost Canyon and get my share of the gold from El Lobo, it will be a fine day's work," reflected Denton.

A splendid black stallion champed its silver-mouthed bit impatiently.

"Jest a minute, Thunder," said his rider, curbing the mettlesome animal with a sinewy brown hand. "We got to size things up, before we cut loose."

It was a youthful caballero who spoke. A mysterious red-masked rider, dressed in the black-velvet *charro* costume of old Mexico.

From the peak of his massive black sombrero to the jingling silver spurs on his black-kid boots, his garments were richly decorated with silver filigree and conchos.

A red-white-and-green *serape* was flung across his broad shoulders. A scarlet-silk sash encircled his slim waist, concealing all but the gleaming white-pearl handles of a pair of Colt .45s.

The black stallion's saddle and bridle were hand-carved in beautiful designs and were heavily inlaid with gold and silver.

"Yonder is the smoke signal," observed Señor Red Mask aloud—for it was none other than the famous masked rider of the vengeance trail who had now appeared on the scene. "That means the vigilantes are gettin' ready to hit the trail. But they've needed help before. Maybe I can help them out again."

Easing up on the restraining bridle reins, Señor Red Mask allowed the stallion to strike a long, slithering lope that covered ground amazingly fast. The young caballero was still going over the situation in his mind. It wasn't the first time he had pitted his wits and fighting ability against the cunning and ruthlessness of the River Wolf.

"There ain't no sign of dust," reflected Señor Red Mask, whose keen dark eyes had scanned the wide stretch of valley between Rattlesnake Mountains on the north and the bad lands which bordered the Rio Grande. "Which goes to show that El Lobo has already crossed the flats and gone into the *malpais*. And if he is in the rough country, then it's a cinch he'll hit the Rio by way of Ghost Canyon."

This shrewd reasoning meant much to the success of the masked caballero's plans. It would save him a lot of time by not having to find the trail of the bandits. He could take a shorter, direct route to the point where he believed El Lobo intended to cross the border.

"We've got to catch that mur-

derin' wolf and his pack before they cross the Rio, Thunder," muttered Señor Red Mask into the flicking ears of his mount.

Bending low over the black stallion's arched neck, the caballero rolled his silver spurs on the speeding animal's flanks.

For many minutes, the gallant black raced across the chaparral-covered valley.

And while he rode, Señor Red Mask sang in a clear tenor the song he loved best—"La Paloma":

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

It was an old, unused trail that the brown-skinned young caballero was following. It led up the slope of a low knoll. As he topped the rise, Señor Red Mask pulled the black stallion to a stop.

There were the ruins of several burned ranch buildings around him. It was all that was left of what had once been one of the most prosperous cattle spreads in Verde Valley—the Bar G Ranch.

"El Lobo did his work well," muttered the masked youth, as he lifted the immense sombrero that covered his curly dark hair. "But he and I will settle that score yet."

For a long moment, the caballero sat with uncovered head, looking toward two lowly mounds that showed among a clump of cottonwoods. One grave was fresh—that of the murdered owner of the Bar G, old Tom Goodwin. The other was weathered by the years—old Tom's wife, who had died when young Tom was a little child.

The dark eyes that looked out through holes in the red silk half mask were moist, as the youthful rider replaced his silver-trimmed sombrero.

Touching the stallion lightly with

his tinkling silver spurs, Señor Red Mask sent the splendid animal bounding down the easy slope of the knoll.

For the next half hour, the mysterious horseman rode at a fast lope through the sage and mesquite of the valley range. Purple shadows were replacing the lingering yellow rays of the setting sun when he entered the *malpais* or bad lands, through which the Rio Grande flowed before coming to open flats and cottonwood bosques.

CHAPTER VII. GHOST CANYON.

GHOST CANYON—El Cañon de los Espectros—bore an evil reputation in the border country. It had been the scene of many grisly murders.

Officers of the law had ridden through it—and had never ridden back again. It had afforded safe retreat to many a hard-pressed outlaw striving for a haven in Mexico.

When its upper reaches were bathed in the pale light of a full moon, and its depths were buried under a pall of sinister shadow, Ghost Canyon was a place shunned by the superstitious and fear-ridden country people.

And this was one of the reasons why El Lobo and his gang had used the canyon in making their get-away after raids across the border. There was little danger of interference either from officers or from their victims.

Deep in a secret nook of the somber gorge, within a stone's throw of the point where it opened upon the bank of the Rio Grande, El Lobo and his gang awaited the arrival of the scheming mine manager, Mark Denton. The place was so well screened from the trail by great

jagged rocks that a small camp fire had been built.

The bandits sat around the fire, broiling slices of venison cut from a buck which had been shot just as they were entering the canyon.

It was evident from their low-voiced talk that the bars of gold had been removed from their saddlebags to a cache among the rocks.

"Finish with your food and go watch the back trail, Juan!" gruffly ordered El Lobo from his seat on a slab of rock. "It is already late for the arrival of the gringo, Denton."

"*Bien, I go!*" responded a pock-marked Mexican sulkily.

He withdrew the twig of green mesquite upon which was spitted a piece of searing venison and stood up to go. But it was apparent from the hombre's manner that he had no liking for a post that took him away from the company of his fellow bandits.

Fearsome were the tales he had heard of the ghosts which haunted this canyon. But still greater was his fear of incurring the wrath of the fierce-tempered bandit chief.

Inwardly swearing at his luck, the hombre slipped out of the small circle of firelight and went past the resting horses to his post.

Denton was not long in making his appearance in Ghost Canyon.

When the dusk of early evening had settled over the range, the hard-riding vigilantes were threading the maze of arroyos which gashed the *malpais*. In vain had the mine manager sought to turn them from their purpose of scouring Ghost Canyon for the fugitive bandits.

The most he had been able to accomplish was to persuade the determined cowmen to search certain side canyons first. This slowed them down. At the same time, it gave

the wily Denton the opportunity he needed for parting company with the vigilantes and riding to meet El Lobo.

Saying that he was going to look through a narrow winding arroyo, Denton had slipped away to Ghost Canyon. He had chuckled to think how ex-Sheriff Jackson and his men would believe him lost, would probably delay still longer in a search for him.

Riding slowly now, watching and listening closely for some sign of the bandit gang, Denton was hailed by Juan, the lookout. A few minutes later, he rode up to the camp fire.

"*Hola, amigo!*" saluted El Lobo in guarded tones. "Do you care so little for gold that you are in no hurry to claim your share of it?"

"Those blasted vigilantes delayed me," swore Denton angrily.

"Then the ranchers of Verde Valley are on our trail?" quickly demanded El Lobo.

"I'll say they are," said Denton. "If I hadn't been able to talk them into searching some side canyons first, they would be here now."

"Then we must divide the gold at once. Come! It is hidden among the rocks."

Seizing a burning brand from the camp fire, El Lobo strode swiftly down a twisting lane between the giant boulders.

Denton was close on the heels of the bandit leader. There was not a minute to lose, if he were to get his share of the loot and make his getaway safely before the vigilantes reached the scene.

"It is a shame that this gringo coyote can ride away with even an ounce of the gold which we have taken," snarled Carlos Martinez, looking after the retreating pair in greedy disappointment.

So far, the murderous half-breed had been unable to figure out any scheme for adding his companion's share of the gold to his own portion.

Señor Red Mask rode warily through the shadowed depths of Ghost Canyon. His muscles were taut, ready for instant violent action. The tingling of the veins in his hands, the prickling of his scalp, warned him that danger hung over him like a keen-edged blade that might descend any moment—bringing death.

The great black stallion he rode also seemed uneasy, as if it were afraid of things unseen in the darkness. The awful scream of a cougar, like the wail of a woman in terrible agony, sent him shying to the edge of the rocky trail.

The young caballero quieted his mount and rode on in the inky blackness of the night. The white, ghostly moon which shed its light across the rim rocks of the gorge would soon be high enough to spray its silvery beams over the canyon floor; to make a target of the lone rider who braved the terrors of the Cañon de los Espectros. Señor Red Mask was glad of the darkness that concealed his movements.

But the ringing clatter of the black stallion's steel-shod hoofs on the rocks made the caballero wince in his saddle. It was certain that a listening foe would hear that telltale sound.

Furthermore, Señor Red Mask was having difficulty keeping his bearings. He had ridden through the canyon before. He knew every foot of it. But in this pitch darkness, it was hard to distinguish landmarks.

Then the canyon floor narrowed till it was only a few feet across.

Great jagged fragments of rock, fallen from the the cliffs above, almost choked it.

"What a place for dry-gulchin' a man!" muttered Señor Red Mask under his breath.

"*Quién es?*" The sharp challenge rent the silence of night like a gunshot. "Who ees eet? Speak up queeck, hombre!"

Señor Red Mask slipped silently from his saddle. As he landed on the ground, he touched the stallion in the flank. The well-trained animal leaped forward in the darkness. Señor Red Mask knew that it would stop within sound of the whistle which would bring it bounding back to its master. It was a ruse to deceive his foes which the caballero had practiced before.

From a narrow ledge only a few feet above the floor of the canyon, an orange flame suddenly lanced the darkness.

Señor Red Mask drew a .45 from its holster under his sash and fired once at the flash of the gun. He heard the thud of a body as it dropped from its perch on the rock ledge. From down the canyon came the steady clatter of the stallion's hoofs. Señor Red Mask ran forward.

Then men shouted, back among the rocks. A shot was fired at random. Lurid Spanish oaths and shouted questions were echoed by the beetling cliffs.

The young caballero halted to remove the jingling silver spurs from his boots, then crept on down the winding trail. Something moved out from behind a huge boulder. Señor Red Mask stopped in his tracks, crouched, with a six-gun ready.

"He got away! Yonder he goes on his horse!" shouted a voice in rough border Spanish, as the dim

bulk of a man looked suddenly above Señor Red Mask.

The caballero straightened to his feet and lashed out with the long, blued-steel barrel of his .45. With a surprised grunt, the big hombre sagged limply to the ground.

Without waiting to examine his fallen enemy, Señor Red Mask stepped quickly over the unconscious body and crept noiselessly on toward the spot from which the shouts and oaths were coming. The inky blackness covered his movements.

Halting among the rocks, he listened. No longer could he hear the pounding of the stallion's hoofs. He knew the faithful animal must have stopped, a short distance below the spot where he now lay in hiding.

"Whoever it was, he got clean away!" growled a heavy voice barely a yard from the listening caballero.

"Who do yuh reckon it was?" asked another—an American by its accent.

"If I was to guess, I'd say it was nobody else but Señor Red Mask!" answered the heavy-voiced hombre.

"Then El Lobo had better be getting back from dividing the gold," put in the snarling tones of Carlos Martinez. "It's no time for fooling when that caballero rides our trail."

"I hear the big chief coming now," said the first speaker. "He is roaring with anger. And the gringo, Denton, is chattering like a magpie. I think it is best that I run back up the trail and see if Juan is still at his post. He may have seen that hombre on the *caballo* close enough to recognize him."

Señor Red Mask huddled close to a rock. Things had suddenly taken a bad turn for him. He could not move without being heard by those hombres who had come up to within

arm's reach of him. And in order to get back on the trail, that heavy-voiced bandit would brush against his crouching body.

He was coming now! Señor Red Mask jerked upright.

Bro-o-om! His pearl-handled Colt roared.

With a gasping oath, the bandit hurled himself at Señor Red Mask. He was firing as he lurched forward. But his bullets went wild in the darkness. His senses left him as he clutched at the young caballero, missed his hold, and fell.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAD MAN'S BRAND AGAIN.

IT seemed to Señor Red Mask as if a great lantern had suddenly been lighted. One moment, Ghost Canyon had been as dark as a tomb. The next, it was drenched in a white radiance that made objects stand out in bold relief against the background of black-lava cliffs. The full moon had topped the rim rock.

"If it could only have held off a minute longer!" muttered Señor Red Mask.

But he was in for it now. Men were yelling and running among the rocks. They would be on him full force in a moment.

"Yonder he is! It's Red Mask! Kill him!" shouted a voice hoarse with fury.

It was El Lobo. The burly half-breed bandit chief ran forward, with a gun blazing in each hand.

Beside him was Denton, his face pale with fear.

"All this shooting will bring the vigilantes!" he cried, as he ran toward his horse.

But before the cowardly mine manager could reach his mount, Señor Red Mask went into action.

The caballero's guns rocketed

streaks of orange flame. A bullet caught Denton in full stride, and the murderous plotter pitched headlong to the rocky floor of the canyon.

Whirling in his tracks, Señor Red Mask dropped the American bandit, who was closing in on him from the side.

The air seemed alive with humming and whistling things. Lead plumped dully against rocks, or glanced and went screeching off at uncertain angles.

Señor Red Mask felt something like the plucking of invisible fingers at his sleeve, brushing the wide brim of his massive sombrero. He knew that sudden death was very near.

Dropping to one knee, the caballero whipped a quick shot at the charging El Lobo. It must have caught him in the shoulder. For the bandit leader spun half around, then lunged toward his horse.

"He's makin' his get-away!" gritted Señor Red Mask, leaping to his feet as he saw El Lobo pull himself into the saddle.

Running down the trail, Señor Red Mask gave a shrill whistle. A nicker answered him, as the black stallion came loping to meet him.

From among the huge boulders, a roan horse suddenly raced into the trail. El Lobo spurred savagely. If only he could reach the river before the avenging caballero overtook him!

"Catch him, Thunder!" called out Señor Red Mask, landing in his saddle with a flying leap.

The big black needed no urging. The breeding of both Arab thoroughbred and wild mustang was his. A race or a fight brought out his indomitable spirit. Like a flitting shadow, he sped through the white moonlight.

With all his start, El Lobo real-

ized how slight was his chance of escape. For the canyon trail did not lead directly to the crossing of the Rio Grande. Instead, it turned on the brink of a clifflike cut bank and angled for some distance along the high bank of the river before coming down to the muddy water's edge.

The fleeing bandit would be slowed down on that perilous pathway. He would be in easy range of his pursuer's six-guns before the latter in turn would be forced to slacken speed.

"I've got that dang back-shooting skunk this time!" muttered Señor Red Mask grimly.

But a second later, he knew better. Watching his sworn enemy with eyes that gleamed through the slits in his red silk mask, the caballero was astonished and chagrined to see the desperate fugitive spur straight for the brink of the cut bank.

The roan horse never faltered in its stride. Out over the sullen current of the Rio it bounded. Then down like a plummet, to land with a mighty splash in the water.

When Señor Red Mask drew rein on the rim of the high bank, he made out a dim figure struggling in midstream.

"Looks like the River Wolf has slipped through my fingers again," the caballero reluctantly admitted to himself.

Wheeling the black stallion, Señor Red Mask raced back up the trail. There was still work to do. The loot of the mine was hidden back there somewhere among the rocks. From what he had seen during the battle, he believed there must be two or three more members of El Lobo's gang left to make way with it.

He neck-reined his mount out of

the trail when he reached the scene of the recent fight. Three dark forms lay sprawled on the ground. Two of them were moaning. But, strangely, there was no sign of the remaining bandits.

"Maybe they're hidin' out round here, waitin' to plug me," Señor Red Mask told himself.

He swung down out of the saddle. Silently he darted here and there among the big boulders.

Penetrating farther into the maze of winding runways, he heard a sound as if some heavy object dropped on the rocky floor of the canyon. Creeping toward the noise, he came out in a small open space that was lighted by the ghostly radiance of the moon.

"Reach high, hombre!" snapped Señor Red Mask.

A high-hatted, leather-clad hombre whirled in surprise. Something that he had been carrying dropped with a thud.

"You—Señor Red Mask!" gasped Carlos Martinez.

He saw that the masked caballero held no menacing six-gun in his hand. Treacherous to the last, he moved as though to raise his hands. But with a darting, sidelong motion, he jerked at the .45 holstered on his thigh.

Br-o-om! As if by some moon magic, a flashing Colt had leaped into the outstretched hand of Señor Red Mask.

With his own gun still unfired, Carlos Martinez, the border cut-throat, buckled at the knees. A death tremor rattled his spurs as he sprawled at full length on the rocks. Another lost soul had joined the ranks of the ghosts of Ghost Canyon.

"I'll be dog-goned if that hombre wasn't tryin' to cache all that gold in a hole in the canyon wall," Señor

Red Mask muttered, as he glanced over the scene.

In a pocket of earth beside a boulder, a tiny clump of sage had found room for stunted growth.

The caballero plucked two twigs of the fragrant plant. Bending over the body of Carlos Martinez, he placed them across on the bandit's chest. It was the "bad man's brand"—the mark of Señor Red Mask.

Concealed in the shadow of a great rock, the masked rider awaited the approach of the vigilantes. From snatches of talk which he caught, he understood that they had heard the echoing shots of the gun battle. Also, that they had evidently cut off the escape of the two remaining bandits.

"Couldn't 'a' been nobody else but Señor Red Mask," ex-Sheriff Jackson was saying, as he reined up his horse in the midst of the wounded hombres who were vainly trying to crawl to their tethered horses.

"An' would yuh look who's here!" suddenly bellowed big Jim Corson. He pointed to Mark Denton, who seemed to be more sorely wounded than the others, as he spoke.

"I reckon the old he-wolf, El

Lobo, got away as usual," growled another cowman, glancing around with evident disappointment. "But if we could find that stolen gold, it would help a lot. Tim Connor's widder would git a share of it as a reward."

"Go back through the boulders and find a dead bandit," called a voice from the shadows. "There you'll find the gold—what Mark Denton hasn't got in those saddle-bags he dropped when the fight started."

"Fer gosh sake!" exclaimed grizzled Bill Jackson. "It's Señor Red Mask himself. Come here, amigo, an' let's shake yore hand!"

But already the black stallion's steel-shod hoofs were ringing on the canyon trail. Through the white moonlight, a song floated back to the grim listeners in Ghost Canyon.

It was the clear voice of Señor Red Mask singing "La Paloma":

"I am the wandering dove that seeks
The sad nest where I was born."

Once ag'in that red-masked caballero has saved the Verde Valley vigilantes a plumb tough job, by managin' ter git there first. Thet's because he travels alone. He'll be ridin' ag'in on the trail of El Lobo Del Rio in an early issue of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly. Watch out fer him!





Show-down On Lightning Flat

A "Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger" Story

By Lee Harrington

Author of "The Closed Canyon," etc.

THE sharp report of a rifle echoed from wall to high rock wall of Poker Canyon. A bullet punctured the wide-brimmed Stetson of Jim Hazel, forest ranger, and thudded into a dead tree which he could have reached by extending a hand.

Reining his horse off the trail, Jim Hazel sought shelter behind a huge shoulder of granite. Then he slipped out of his saddle. Rifle in hand, he crept around the rock and stood listening.

The unseen marksman did not

fire again. The roar of Poker Creek rushing over its rocky bed was the only sound that broke the silence.

It was evening in the Thunder Bird Range, and darkness was fast filling the canyon. All that day, Jim Hazel had been trying to pick up the trail of an outlaw who was known as the "Thunder Bird."

After having been captured by the young forest ranger, tried and condemned to death for having committed murder, the famous desperado had managed to escape the guards who were taking him to

prison. Then he had returned to his old haunts in the Thunder Bird Range.

Bold to the point of foolhardiness, the Thunder Bird had visited the ranger station during the absence of Jim Hazel. Pinned to the table by a hunting knife, he had left the following note for the ranger to read.

JIM HAZEL: The only thing I am afraid of is a silver bullet.

THE THUNDER BIRD.

Jim Hazel had then immediately stepped to the telephone and called up his old friend, Bill Tigor, eldest of three mountaineer brothers who dwelt in a cabin at Gunsight Lake. The Tigor boys had promised to let the young ranger know, if they discovered the trail of the outlaw, upon whose head there was a standing reward of five thousand dollars.

Gunsight Lake was only a few miles from where Jim Hazel stood. After waiting until it had become too dark for the lurking marksman to see the sights of his rifle, the ranger mounted his horse. With his rifle lying across his saddle in front of him, he rode slowly up Poker Canyon. He drew rein in front of the Tigor boys' cabin just as the rising moon was silvering the surface of Gunsight Lake.

A tall, hook-nosed mountaineer appeared in the doorway of the cabin as Jim Hazel leaped from the saddle.

"Howdy, Jimmy!" he drawled. "Yo're jest in time for supper, as the heron remarked when it swallered the frog."

"Hello, Bill!" returned the ranger, smiling. "I came darn near not gettin' here at all. The Thunder Bird took a shot at me as I was riding through Poker Canyon."

Bill Tigor picked up the reins of Jim Hazel's horse as, with his sad-

le over his shoulder, the ranger stepped toward the cabin.

"I wouldn't be too shore it was the Thunder Bird, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "He's a bad hombre an' a killer, but I never knowed that outlaw to dry-gulch an enemy."

Bill Tigor led Jim Hazel's horse away to pasture, and the ranger entered the cabin, where Curt and young Gabe were eating supper.

"Hello, boys!" said Jim Hazel, as he threw down his saddle. "What's the good news at Gunsight Lake?"

Young Gabe Tigor—tall, lean and leathery-faced—rose and set another place at the table.

"Thar ain't no news worth mentioning, Jimmy," he said, "unless it is that some coyote tried to dry-gulch me this mornin'." The mountaineer exhibited a bullet graze on the side of his neck. "Danged near plugged me, too," he grumbled.

"Did you see who shot at you?" asked Jim Hazel.

"If I'd seen him, his dry-gulchin' days would be over," said young Gabe, who was one of the best shots in the Thunder Bird Range.

Crack! A sharp report stopped the laugh which had followed Gabe's words.

A star-shaped hole appeared in the little four-paned window, and shattered glass tinkled to the floor.

Crack! Drilled by a bullet, the coffeepot lurched drunkenly.

Out of a hole in its side, hot coffee spouted into Bill Tigor's plate of beans.

Crack! Bill, who had returned from the pasture, ducked suddenly as the wind of a bullet fanned an end of his mustache.

Then Jim Hazel slapped a hand over the top of the lamp chimney, and the cabin was plunged into darkness.

Crouched beneath the level of the

window sill, the ranger and the three mountaineers waited, with hands gripping the butts of their drawn six-guns. Then out of the silence came the voice of Bill Tigor:

"I ain't felt so nervous, Jimmy, since I played kissin' in the dark."

Jim Hazel rose to his feet, crossed the cabin, opened the door and stepped outside. In the shadow cast by the wall, he stood listening.

No sound broke the moonlit silence. The pine needles were motionless in the windless night. Mysterious and still, the mountains guarded their secret.

Jim Hazel returned inside the cabin, to find that the Tigor boys had nailed a couple of boards over the shattered window. The ranger closed the door, and Bill Tigor lighted the lamp, which had fortunately escaped the bullets of the sniper. With the window boarded up, the door closed, and the spaces between the logs of the walls tightly chinked, not a ray of light could be seen from outside.

Bill Tigor picked up the bullet-riddled coffeepot and regarded it sadly. Then he poured some water into a kettle and set it on the stove.

"Yuh might bring us back a new coffeepot if yuh go to Thunderbolt, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "This one has played its last tune, as the feller remarked when he busted the drum."

"I don't expect to be in Thunderbolt for some time," explained Jim Hazel. "I'm going to try to track down the Thunder Bird."

"I'm hyar to tell you that it wasn't the Thunder Bird who done the shooting," insisted Bill Tigor. "I've an idea it was a feller who called himself Red McGonigle. He happened to call hyar the other day when we was weighing our spring clean-up of gold."

"Do you mean to say that you haven't yet taken your gold dust to town?" asked Jim Hazel.

"We ain't had time," explained Curt Tigor. "After workin' all spring, we sort o' needed a rest. We've been fishin' and layin' around generally, waitin' until yuh happened along."

Bill lounged across the cabin. From beneath the fir boughs which answered for a mattress to his bunk, he took three bulging buckskin sacks. He dropped them into a leather pouch attached to Jim Hazel's saddle.

"Thar's a matter of two hundred ounces of dust in them pokes, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "I reckon it will be safer in the ranger station than it will hyar."

"With that sniper loose in the hills, it doesn't look as though there would be much chance of the gold reaching the ranger station," pointed out Jim Hazel. "You'd better bury it in a hole in the floor, or put it some place where it will be safe."

Young Gabe ceased cleaning his six-gun and flashed a black-eyed glance at the forest ranger.

"Nobody ain't goin' to hold yuh up and take the gold away from yuh before yuh reach Thunder River," said the youngest mountaineer. "Bill and Curt and me will be watchin' yore trail."

Jim Hazel glanced at his bullet-drilled hat, at the punctured coffee-pot on the table, at the graze on the side of young Gabe's neck, and at three bullet holes in the log walls.

"Long-distance shootin' with a high-power rifle, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor. "That sniper was firing at the light in the window. I'll bet a dollar to a plugged nickel he was three hundred yards away."

"He shore was," agreed Curt. "I could tell it by the sound."

Believing that the Tigor boys were allowing their imaginations to get the better of their judgment, Jim Hazel smiled. Seeing the smile, Bill Tigor rose to his feet. Drawing his hunting knife, he crossed the cabin and dug a bullet out of the wall. He handed it to Jim Hazel, with a triumphant grin.

"That bullet only penetrated the log about three inches, Jimmy," drawled the mountaineer. "Yeah, our dry-gulchin' friend was several hundred yards away."

"I don't understand what could have been the object of the sniper in shooting at a lighted window from such a distance," said Jim Hazel. "If it was Red McGonigle who was after your gold, why didn't he steal it while you were away from the cabin?"

"One of us has always stayed home since we brought the gold hyar," explained Bill Tigor. "The dry-gulcher probably figured himself to be a better shot than he is. He thought he could kill us without takin' onnecessary risks."

For an hour, the four friends talked the matter over from every angle, but they could find no answer to the puzzle. Before they went to bed, Jim Hazel had agreed to take the gold to town and ship it by stage to a bank in the State capital.

"Yuh don't need to worry about bein' shot from ambush, Jimmy," said Bill Tigor. "Thar ain't no dry-gulcher in the hills that can get yuh, with the three of us watchin' the trail."

II.

The night passed without incident. At dawn, Jim Hazel rode away, with the gold in his saddlebags. The Tigor boys disappeared into the woods, and the ranger saw them no more. Evening found Jim Hazel

and the gold safe at the Thunder River ranger station.

Jim Hazel unsaddled his horse, hobbled the animal and turned it loose to graze on Lightning Flat. Carrying his saddle, the ranger strode up to his cabin, pushed open the door and stepped inside.

He took the three pokes of gold from the saddlebags and laid them on a shelf above his bunk; then he kindled a fire in the stove.

As the flames roared up the stove-pipe, Jim Hazel glanced around his cabin. Apparently everything was as he had left it. Just why he felt uneasy, he could not have explained; but a sixth sense seemed to warn him that somebody had been in the cabin. He felt much as a rabbit might if, upon returning home after an absence, it caught the scent of a weasel.

Jim Hazel stepped to the door and glanced in every direction. The sun was sinking below the high wall of Thunder River Canyon, and the ranger's horse was slowly moving away from the cabin, as it grazed on the grasses of Lightning Flat. A movement in the woodpile caught Jim Hazel's eye, and he grinned as a striped chipmunk disappeared with a flirt of its tail.

The steady roar of the white rapids was the only sound. Apparently no danger lurked near. But Jim Hazel could not shake off his uneasiness as he stepped back into the cabin and closed the door.

Jim Hazel did not believe that "Red" McGonigle had done the useless shooting. For he knew the man. McGonigle had been working a placer-mining claim all that spring about ten miles from Gunsight Lake. Jim Hazel believed that the Thunder Bird had been responsible for the sniping, but for what reason the ranger could not even guess.

Puzzling over the matter, Jim Hazel turned toward the table, with the intention of getting his supper. Then suddenly he grew rigid in every muscle, and anger gleamed in his blue eyes.

On the table lay a scrap of paper, upon which were scrawled a few words which Jim Hazel read aloud.

"**JIM HAZEL:** It was me who done the shootin'. I jest wanted to show yuh that I'm a match for all four of yuh. Watch yore step, Jimmy. I know you've got the Tigor boys' gold."

"**THE THUNDER BIRD.**"

Angered by the bravado of the outlaw, Jim Hazel tore the note into shreds. Then he crossed the cabin, took the three pokes of gold off the shelf and buried them in the bottom of a fifty-pound sack of beans.

It was evident that the Thunder Bird had evaded the Tigor boys and arrived at the ranger station ahead of Jim Hazel. But the ranger did not believe that the outlaw was bold enough to try to rob him that night. It seemed more likely to Jim Hazel that the Thunder Bird would try to hold him up the next day as he rode down the river trail.

Jim Hazel usually removed his belt and six-gun when at home, but now he examined his weapon to assure himself that it was fully loaded. Then, with his lips set in a grim line, he began to cook his supper.

Standing at the stove, he was turning some bacon in a frying pan, when suddenly he paused, fork in hand, as he heard a slight noise outside the cabin. Instantly Jim Hazel laid the fork in the pan. His right hand swept his six-gun from its holster, and he stood waiting, as he heard footsteps approaching the cabin.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of the footsteps, and Jim Hazel

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pressed the hammer of his six-gun back until it lay at full cock. The ranger's blue eyes were blazing with suppressed excitement, as he stood with his six-gun covering the door.

It opened so suddenly that Jim Hazel almost squeezed the trigger before he could stop himself. Then his gun hand dropped to his side, and a gasp of horror escaped his lips, as he realized that he had almost shot down his best friend.

Standing in the doorway, with a rifle in the crook of his left arm, was Bill Tigor.

"I came mighty near shooting you, Bill," said Jim Hazel. With the sweat of fear standing in big drops on his forehead, he sank into a chair and stared at the mountaineer. "You'll never be nearer death than you were when you opened that door. I thought you were the Thunder Bird."

Bill Tigor frowned as he realized his narrow escape from death. Then his teeth showed in a wolfish grin beneath his drooping mustache.

"Forget it, Jimmy," he drawled. "But don't never do it no more, as the dog remarked when the boy stepped on its tail."

While they were eating supper, Jim Hazel told Bill Tigor about the second note from the Thunder Bird.

"I'm glad you came, Bill," admitted the ranger. "To have to wait alone for a desperado like the Thunder Bird is none too pleasant a job."

"I jest had to come, Jimmy," said the mountaineer, as he set down his empty coffeecup. "I had to bring over something I forgot to give yuh while yuh was at Gunsight Lake."

Bill Tigor fumbled in the pocket of his shirt, withdrew his fingers and laid on the table an object at which Jim Hazel stared, with a puzzled frown.

Lying on the table, gleaming with

a soft white sheen in the lamplight, was a silver bullet!

Hardly believing his own eyesight, Jim Hazel picked up the unusual object and examined it curiously. It was a little out of shape, but as nearly like a bullet as the mountaineer had been able to make it. The silver bullet was set in a .45 caliber brass cartridge, such as Jim Hazel used in his six-gun.

"Where did you get a silver bullet?" asked the ranger. "I never saw one before in my life."

Bill Tigor grinned sheepishly and fingered an end of his drooping black mustache. Picking up the silver bullet, he turned it over and over between his fingers.

"I made it when I was a young feller," he confessed. "I thought that maybe, some time, I'd meet up with one of them mountain things that man ain't meant to see. My gran'pap said a silver bullet was the only thing with which yuh can kill one of 'em. Curt and young Gabe, they both of 'em pack silver bullets. After yuh telephoned me about the Thunder Bird being scairt of a silver bullet, I knowed that he ain't human. No, Jimmy, the Thunder Bird is one of them mountain things that man ain't meant to see."

Jim Hazel wanted to laugh, but somehow the laugh gave way to a slight shudder. He found himself remembering old tales of wizards and ogres which only a silver bullet could kill.

Was it possible that Bill Tigor was right about the Thunder Bird? Jim Hazel's common sense told him it was not possible. Yet how did it happen that the Thunder Bird had always managed to escape the hangman's rope?

"Yuh'll take it along, won't yuh, Jimmy?" There was a pleading note in the mountaineer's voice

which Jim Hazel had never heard before. "Take it along, and yuh'll put an end to the Thunder Bird, Jimmy."

Jim Hazel picked up the bullet, slipped his six-gun out of its holster and removed a cartridge. He inserted the silver bullet into the empty chamber of the cylinder, and found that it fitted perfectly.

Bill Tigor grinned as the young ranger slipped the six-gun back into its holster. But his grin faded, and both men leaped to their feet, as a loud knock came at the cabin door.

Standing with drawn six-guns in their hands, the ranger and the tall mountaineer watched the door open. Into the cabin stepped a huge, bearded man, carrying a pack on his back and a rifle in his hand. His belt sagged under the weight of two holstered six-guns and a bone-handled hunting knife in a leather sheath.

"Howdy, ranger!" he rumbled. "What's the chance to stay overnight?"

"Hello, Red!" said Jim Hazel, while Bill Tigor regarded the stranger with narrowed eyes. "Sure, you are welcome to stay. Going outside?"

Red McGonigle, six feet four inches in height, swung his pack from his shoulders to the floor, leaned his rifle against the wall, and looked from Jim Hazel to Bill Tigor.

"Yuh can bet yore life I'm getting out of these blasted hills," he said. "I've been shot at three times from ambush in the last week. Day after to-morrow, I'm taking my clean-up of gold out on the stage to the city."

"Gold? How much have yuh got, Red?" asked Bill Tigor.

A rumble of laughter issued from the giant prospector's throat, as he

glanced at his pack lying on the floor.

"Eighty pounds of gold dust, more or less," he growled in a deep bass. "Close to sixteen thousand dollars."

Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor glanced at each other with surprise, which the mountaineer expressed in a few words:

"Eighty pounds of gold dust, Red! It jest goes to show how mistook a feller can be in his feller man. Curt, young Gabe, and I sort o' suspected the other day that yuh was figurin' on stealing our little dab of gold."

When Red McGonigle had eaten and was seated beside the stove, Jim Hazel told him about the Thunder Bird. He showed the giant the silver bullet.

To the forest ranger's surprise, Red McGonigle showed no disposition to laugh. From beneath red-thatched brows, he examined the silver bullet, turning it over and over in his great hands.

"Every man is entitled to his own belief," he rumbled, as he handed the silver bullet back to Jim Hazel, who slipped it back into his six-gun. "Pussonally, I put my faith in soft lead hot from the barrel of a Colt six-gun."

Rising to his feet, Red McGonigle opened his pack. Proud of having struck it rich, he took out a dozen pokes of gold dust and exhibited them to Jim Hazel and Bill Tigor.

"I'm going to a big city to have the time of my life," said the giant. "I'm never coming back to the hills."

Intent upon examining the gold, not one of the three men saw a hideous face pressed, for a moment, against the windowpane. Not one of them heard the shuffling footsteps of a dwarflike figure that

shambled across Lightning Flat to where a horse was hitched among the pines.

III.

Jim Hazel and Red McGonigle left the ranger station shortly after dawn. The ranger was mounted on his blue roan saddle horse, and the big prospector rode an animal lent to him by Jim Hazel.

They reached the old mining camp of Thunderbolt that night. After putting up their horses at the livery stable, they made themselves comfortable at "Cheerful Johnny's" hotel.

The following morning, Jim Hazel delivered the Tigor boys' gold to the stage driver and took a receipt for it. Standing on the porch of the hotel, the ranger watched the six-horse stage roll away in a cloud of dust.

Towering above the short figure of the old stage driver on the high seat, Red McGonigle waved a hand to Jim Hazel and bellowed a farewell.

Thundering down the single street of the old mining camp, the six horses galloped out onto Poverty Flat. Here the white ribbon of road was flanked at each side by mounds of gravel—relics of Thunderbolt's boom days.

Noon came, and the stage driver drew the team down to a walk as it began to climb the stiff grade which climbs over the Thunderbolt summit to the relay station on Diamond Creek, where the horses were changed.

Slower and slower the almost-blown team hauled the heavy stage wagon up the mountain until they reached the summit. There the old driver let the sweating horses pause to breathe before beginning the descent. Soon the team reached Dead

Man's Flat, which is bracketed between Big Thunderbolt and Little Thunderbolt summits.

The team was almost across Dead Man's Flat, almost around the last curve, when suddenly the heavy report of a .45 Colt echoed from hill to hill.

Red McGonigle pitched sidewise from the high seat into the road, shot through the right shoulder. Rolling over, he was reaching for a six-gun with his left hand, when into the road stepped a powerfully built dwarf. In each hand he held a large-caliber six-gun. With one, he covered the stage driver; the other he leveled at Red McGonigle's head.

"Behave yoreselves, and yuh won't get hurt," he rasped. "I want that gold!"

"The Thunder Bird!" exclaimed the stage driver, who more than once had been held up by the desperado.

"Shove on yore brake, Sandy, and wind them lines around the brake standard," ordered the outlaw. "Yuh, McGonigle, toss them guns out of reach. One false move, and I'll fill yuh full of lead."

When the stage driver had lashed Red McGonigle with his back to a wheel, the Thunder Bird did the same to the old man. Then he stepped back and glared at his captives.

"Yuh can stay hyar until the incoming stage finds yuh to-morrow," said the desperado. "Give that forest ranger my love, and tell him to make himself a silver bullet."

Turning away, the outlaw entered the timber at the side of the road. He returned in a few minutes with a saddle horse and a pack animal. Upon the pack horse, he loaded the gold belonging to the Tigor boys and Red McGonigle.

Climbing into his saddle, the

Thunder Bird rode away, with a harsh laugh and a wave of the hand.

For an hour, nothing was heard but the forceful language of the two bound men. When he felt pretty well assured that the bandit was gone, the old stage driver told McGonigle to slip his hands through the ropes which tied him to a spoke.

"When I tied you up, that murderin' coyote didn't see what I was doin'," explained the old man. "Get a move on you, old-timer! We'll put Jim Hazel on the Thunder Bird's track."

When Red McGonigle was safely inside the stage, the old driver lost no time in reaching the relay station. From there, he telephoned the sheriff at Thunderbolt, asking him to relay the news to Jim Hazel at the Thunder River ranger station.

Unfortunately, Jim Hazel was at that time halfway between Thunderbolt and his cabin. The news of the holdup was received by Bill Tigor, who had decided to do a little fishing while he waited Jim Hazel's return.

"I knew it," muttered Bill Tigor as he hung up the receiver of the telephone. "That thar Thunder Bird ain't human. I shore hope that Jimmy gets a chance to try out that silver bullet."

The sun was sinking below the high walls of Thunder River Canyon when Jim Hazel rode up to the ranger station. After looking after his horse, he entered the cabin, where he found a note from Bill Tigor, which told about the holdup. The note also explained that the mountaineer had gone to try to pick up the tracks of the outlaw.

Bill Tigor had left word that he would telephone if he found the Thunder Bird's trail.

There was nothing Jim Hazel could do that night, for it was fast

growing dark, so he ate his supper. He had little hope of receiving a telephone call before morning.

Meanwhile, the Thunder Bird, who believed Jim Hazel still to be in Thunderbolt, had decided to make himself comfortable at the ranger station overnight, before heading across the mountains with his loot. But first, the bandit undertook to make sure that there was nobody at the ranger station, so he called up over a forest telephone a few miles from Jim Hazel's cabin.

The ringing of the telephone roused Jim Hazel from where he was dozing in his bunk. Not at all sure that he had not been dreaming, he lay listening a moment. The telephone rang again, and he leaped from his bunk. Just as he took down the receiver he heard a click at the other end of the line.

Disappointed at being too late to catch the call, which he believed had come from Bill Tigor, the young ranger opened the door and stepped outside. He stood a few moments in the moonlight, getting a breath of fresh air, then returned to the cabin and seated himself beside the stove.

He had fallen into another doze, when suddenly he sat up straight in his chair, with every sense alert. He thought he had heard the whinny of a horse.

Jim Hazel jumped up and buckled on his belt with its holstered six-gun. He knew well enough that his horse would not have whinnied unless it had caught the scent of another horse.

Jim Hazel blew out the light and slipped outside the cabin. Crossing Lightning Flat, he sat down on a fallen log which lay in a patch of shadow. Ears strained to catch the slightest sound, he sat listening; then suddenly he rose and made his

way to where his saddle horse was grazing.

Jim Hazel swiftly removed the hobbles from the animal's feet. Then he twisted a hand in the horse's flowing mane and led it away, deep into the moonlit woods. Taking a silk handkerchief from his neck, the ranger attached it to the hobbles. With the makeshift halter, he tied the animal to a sapling.

As Jim Hazel completed his job, he plainly heard the sounds made by two horses walking over the hard surface of the well-worn Thunder River trail.

Jim Hazel quietly made his way back through the timber until he reached the edge of Lightning Flat. A hundred yards from where the ranger stood he could see his cabin plainly in the moonlight.

Presently the two horses came in sight around the last bend in the Thunder River trail. One was a loaded pack animal, and behind it was a saddle horse with a rider.

Even in the moonlight, Jim Hazel recognized the squat shape of the dwarflike figure hunched over in the saddle. A thrill of excitement coursed up the young ranger's spine as he realized that the rider by night was the Thunder Bird.

The dreaded outlaw was out of his saddle and had entered the cabin before Jim Hazel could make up his mind what to do. A light flashed up in the cabin window a moment later; then the Thunder Bird returned to his horses.

Jim Hazel was fully a hundred yards from the desperado, but Lightning Flat was flooded with moonlight which made it almost as bright as day. For the ranger to have walked out into the moonlight would have been courting almost certain death. He knew that the best thing for him to do was to wait

until the desperado had reentered the cabin.

Standing in shadow, Jim Hazel watched the outlaw unload his pack animal and carry a heavy pack into the cabin. Then the desperado unsaddled his two horses. Jim Hazel heard the clink of steel links, as the Thunder Bird hobbled his animals. Apparently the outlaw felt quite sure that he would not be disturbed that night.

The horses began to move slowly across the moonlit flat toward Jim Hazel. Standing just outside the cabin, the Thunder Bird watched the animals a moment, then he stepped inside and closed the door.

Springing into action, Jim Hazel crossed Lightning Flat on the run. He was halfway to the cabin, when the outlaw's horses saw him. Throwing up their heads, the startled animals snorted with fear. The links connecting the hobbles banged against each other as the two horses whirled and fled.

Jim Hazel was within fifty feet of the cabin when the door opened. Too late to avoid being seen, the ranger threw himself flat on the ground. Whipping his six-guns from their holsters, the Thunder Bird sent two bullets thudding into the ground within a foot of Jim Hazel's head.

Raising himself upon one elbow, Jim Hazel answered shot with shot. A six-gun dropped from the Thunder Bird's hand, as a bullet shattered his left arm.

Howling like a fiend, the desperado charged toward the ranger, flame and lead streaking from his other six-gun as he ran. A bullet raked Jim Hazel's ribs; another one ripped a sleeve of his mackinaw from elbow to shoulder; a third passed between his head and his hat, and he felt the burn of hot lead.

By that time, the outlaw was within a few yards of Jim Hazel. Ranger and desperado glared at each other over the barrels of their leveled six-guns. Then both weapons spoke at once.

Shot through the chest, the Thunder Bird spun around on one heel, with his six-gun flying from his hand. Backward he staggered, tripped, fell, and rolled over. His huge fingers clawed the ground a moment; then he quivered and lay still.

The Thunder Bird opened his eyes to find himself lying in one of Jim Hazel's bunks. The ranger was bending over him.

"Drink this," said Jim Hazel, holding a glass of water to the wounded outlaw's lips. "Sorry I had to shoot you, but it was a case of you or me."

"I ain't done for yet," gasped the desperado. "Nothing but a silver bullet can kill me. I'm the seventh son of a seventh son."

As the last word dropped haltingly from his lips, the Thunder Bird groaned and relapsed into unconsciousness.

Jim Hazel stood looking at him a moment; then, with a queer expression on his face, the ranger broke open the cylinder of his six-gun and ejected the six cartridges.

Five of the cartridges had been fired and were empty. But the sixth still held the silver bullet.

O' course that may be nothin' to thet silver-bullet story, but, still, we'd feel a hull lot easier, if Jim Hazel had plugged the Thunder Bird with the one Bill Tigor gave him. As it is, the dwarf outlaw is still above ground—and that means that Jim still has plenty o' trouble ahead of him. Watch out fer his next story. It'll be in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.



Outlaw Lead

By Lee Bond

Author of "Dead Man's Guns," etc.

CHAPTER I.

A PLUMB PEACEABLE HOMBRE.

THE last red rays of a setting sun threw into sharp relief the somberness of the stranger's attire as he loped into Hondo's one dusty, wheel-rutted street.

Many eyes watched that strange rider as he cantered along, some of them furtive, some merely curious. Now the stranger swung his mount in at a sagging hitch rack, slid easily from the saddle. The sun's rays struck full into his face, showing level gray eyes, a straight, thin nose, wide, firm lips, and a blunt, fighting chin.

But it was the stranger's clothing that drew more attention than anything else about him. Jet-black,

those clothes. Wide-brimmed Stetson, silk shirt, crisscrossed cartridge belts, chaps and boots—all black. Only the ivory butts of a pair of long .45s that rode in black, hand-tooled holsters, and the dull glint of brass cartridges in the crisscrossed belts, lent color to the man's clothing.

Even the long-barreled, deep-chested horse that the stranger had just tied to the hitch rack was coal-black. Men who had been hurrying toward the little two-story hotel for supper slowed down, looking the stranger over carefully. They saw at once that he was a cool, capable-looking sort, medium-sized, but mighty well knit. And those two guns slung down low—

Was this ranny some gun slick,

come in to join the Harmon-Benge range war? For which side would he be? For Rufe Harmon and sheep, or Abe Benge and cattle?

The majority of those who eyed the stranger secretly hoped that if he was here to ride gun for somebody, it would be for Harmon, the sheep owner. True, most of the country around Hondo was rich grass and water country—a place for cattle and horses. But to the south there were ugly, rocky hills, fit for only one thing—sheep.

Into those hills big, red-headed, smiling Rufe Harmon had brought his sheep. And down upon Rufe Harmon, bold, cold-eyed, thin-lipped Abe Benge had swooped, killing drovers and sheep, destroying camps and leaving a red path in the wake of the cold-eyed hombres who rode his 3 B horses.

But Rufe Harmon had emptied two saddles and sent three of Benge's gun slingers to bed with "rifle fever." That had been a week ago, and Hondo folks were breathlessly awaiting developments.

As the wealthiest and most powerful cattleman in the country, Abe Benge would hardly forget what had happened out in the sheepman's domain. In fact, Benge had already done a heap of talking about how he'd wipe that sheepman out—run him and his danged woollies plumb out of the State. And Abe Benge was hiring gunnies almost every day.

So was this waddy in the black togs a new 3 B hand? He was young, almost boyish-looking as he stood looking levelly at those who gazed at him. But "Billy the Kid" had been young and boyish-looking, too. You never could tell—

"Waal, where in heck is the fun'rel? Look at all the mournin' duds!"

There was a nervous rattling of

many booted feet, then the hard-packed dirt sidewalk was cleared of men. Only the black-clad stranger stood there now, facing a gaunt, hook-nosed, slit-eyed hombre who had just stepped from the swing doors of the Ace Saloon.

"Trigger" Rouse, the hook-nosed gent who had spouted off about the stranger's clothes, was one of Abe Benge's saltiest gun slingers, and Hondo men were giving him plenty of room. Trigger was just drunk enough to be ornery, was spoiling for a fight. Now he swaggered forward, a leer on his ugly face.

"I said where was the fun'rel?" he snarled. "An' when ol' Trigger Rouse asts questions, he aims tuh be answered. Speak up, blast yuh, or I'll——"

"Or what?" the stranger asked softly.

Hondo citizens took to the street, well out of line of possible bullets. But they were suddenly on their toes, watching and listening intently. Did the stranger know what he was up against? Did he realize that he was facing one of the most ruthless killers who ever dragged iron from oiled leather? Could the black-clad young waddy hold his own, match draws with Trigger Rouse?

"Anyway," a man muttered to his neighbor, "the stranger ain't a 3 B skunk. That's somethin' to be thankful for. If we could only keep that Rouse coyote from killin' him, we——"

"Say," Trigger Rouse was howling, purposely working himself into a rage, "who in heck are yuh? Ef yuh think yuh kin give me any o' yore sass——"

"Me? I'm Cal Starr, hombre. An' I'm not sassin' anybody that I know of. What's eatin' yuh, anyway?"

The waddy who had just called himself Cal Starr was unruffled, cool.

But he was alert, slightly narrowed gray eyes watching every movement of the man before him.

Cal Starr had been down too many trails, seen entirely too many tough hombres, to misread the brand of that gangly Rouse gent. That Rouse was bent on starting a fight was only too evident.

"Why are yuh huntin' trouble, fella?" Cal Starr asked flatly. "Why can't folks like yuh let a peaceable man alone? I'm not wantin' trouble—never do. But—"

"Yaller, are yuh?" Trigger Rouse growled. "Tryin' ter beg off, huh?"

"Beg off?" Cal smiled mirthlessly. "No, I'm not tryin' to beg off. Only, I wish yuh'd trot along an' leave me be."

"Yo're scairt!" Rouse gloated. "Yes, sir, shakin' in yore boots. I'm goin' tuh burn yore ears with slugs jest tuh hear yuh yell fer mercy."

As Trigger Rouse talked he dropped into a crouch, grimy hands hooking toward the black butts of twin guns. His lips lifted in a half leer, half snarl, and into his evil eyes leaped ugly lights. This kid would be an easy mark—probably yell and beg like a whipped cur.

"Lay off, fella! I mean it!" Cal Starr said softly—too softly. "I'm a peaceable hombre—don't want trouble. Savvy?"

The huddled men in the street looked at one another, disgust creeping into their eyes. Here this black-garbed Cal Starr was almost begging, and they had judged him a fighting man—a gunman.

Well, it just proved that you could never judge a man by appearances. Two guns, a cool, level eye, a blunt, fighting chin—and the courage of a rabbit.

"More sass, huh?" Trigger Rouse yelled. "Waal, hyar's yore needin's, blast yuh!"

Trigger Rouse's hands swooped down. Up snaked those black guns, spiked hammers rolling back under deft thumbs. That draw was fast—bafflingly fast. Trigger Rouse grinned, tilted his guns.

Wham! Br-rang! A screech of pain lifted above the roar of .45s.

The knot of men in the street surged forward, staring almost wildly. They rubbed their eyes, then stared again, for there stood Trigger Rouse, howling oaths and slinging a pair of bullet-gashed hands. Before Rouse, smiling mirthlessly, stood Cal Starr, a big smoking six-gun in each brown hand.

"I could 'a' killed yuh an' not been bothered by the law," Cal Starr said quietly. "But that ain't my way, fella. I'm a plumb peaceable hombre if folks'll only let me be. Now high-tail it, an' for gosh sakes, don't come pesterin' me no more."

CHAPTER II.

A PROPOSITION.

THERE was a creak of boots behind Cal Starr. He stiffened, started to whirl. But the round, hard snout of a gun was already pressing his spine.

"Reach, feller!" came a nervous voice. "Reach, or I'll shoot!"

Cal Starr grunted something under his breath, slid his guns into leather, and lifted his hands. Something in that almost shrill, nervous voice warned him to be careful. An overexcited hombre with a cocked gun in his trembling hand could be bad medicine.

"Now turn aroun' here an' let me see yore face, feller."

Cal turned and chuckled. Before him stood a frowzy, pale-eyed little hombre who was making a noble attempt at scowling furiously and appearing important.

But something about the fellow's moon-shaped face, stringy brown hair and round, light-blue eyes just wouldn't let him look important. He had a town marshal's star on his vest, and a cocked six-gun in one pudgy hand. But still he failed to impress Cal Starr as being particularly important.

"Stranger, eh?" the rotund little marshal snapped. "So you think you kin come intuh my town an' start cuttin' monkeyshines, do you? I was watchin' when you tried to murder Mr. Rouse, an'—"

"Aw, go hunt a hole an' crawl in it, Ed Briscoe," one of the towns-men flung at the marshal. "Here's over a dozen o' us here to swear that this Starr waddy *had* to shoot them guns out o' Rouse's hands."

"It's a frame-up, Briscoe," Trigger Rouse whined. "I wa'n't doin' nothin' when this gunman jumped me. Yuh better arrest him or Abe Benge will bust this town wide open. Yuh know he tol' yuh ter pick up all strangers an'—"

"Look here, Rouse," the marshal snapped, "don't start tellin' me what to do. An' get this! I'm takin' orders from nobody—Abe Benge included. Now—"

Into the far end of the street galloped a close-packed group of riders. They were a heavily armed, slit-eyed bunch who rode with the swaggering air of those who are used to having things their way.

"Abe Benge an' his 3 B crew!" some one croaked, and Hondo citizens seemed suddenly to remember pressing engagements elsewhere.

As the riders—eight in all—charged up and halted, there were only Trigger Rouse, Marshal Briscoe and Cal Starr left on the sidewalk. The marshal fidgeted uneasily, casting nervous glances about as the eight men dismounted.

From the group stepped a tall, bony-faced individual who had a pair of bright-green eyes and a mouth that resembled a thin, red knife scar. Those cold green eyes squinted, narrowed, and the slit mouth moved.

"What's this?"

"Dunna yet, Mr. Benge," Marshal Briscoe gulped. "This stranger——"

"That danged stranger jumped me when I wa'n't lookin', boss," Trigger Rouse blurted. "But I'll settle his hash ef yuh says th' word. I'll——"

"Yo're a liar, Rouse," Abe Benge said flatly. "I see both yore guns layin' in the dirt, an' a gash acrost each o' yore hands. Yuh was draggin' yore irons when a couple slugs made yuh drop 'em."

Abe Benge removed his wide white Stetson, ran a none-too-clean handkerchief over an egg-shaped head that was as bald as a billiard ball. Cal Starr had said nothing—and missed nothing. He felt a sudden loathing for this hairless, green-eyed, evil-faced Benge hombre. And the bunch of slit-eyed gun wolves at his heels were plainly a pack of tough hombres who would prove plenty salty in a gun ruckus.

Just why, he did not know, but Cal felt his temper start simmering. He deliberately lowered his hands, shifted to a position where he could see all the 3 B bunch, including the now sullen and glowering Trigger Rouse.

"Here!" Marshal Briscoe clipped. "You stand hitched, younker. Try to escape an'——"

"If yuh want to sling me into the cooler, get at it, Mr. Marshal," Cal snapped. "I smell skunk plumb strong right now."

Snarled oaths came from the 3 B riders. Hands streaked down, slapping gun grips. But before a single six-gun could be drawn from leather,

those slit-eyed gun hawks were staring into a pair of gun snouts that weaved slowly from side to side.

"Forget yore irons, gents," Cal Starr said thinly. "I'm peaceable, but—"

Marshal Ed Briscoe yipped excitedly and lunged forward, cocked six-gun outthrust. But before the officer's gun snout could center on him, Cal Starr's left-hand Colt whipped down.

There was a dull smack as the shiny barrel struck flesh, and Marshal Briscoe squaled in pain. Now he hopped wildly about, clutching a wrist that was numb and bruised. His six-gun lay forgotten on the dirt sidewalk.

"That's enough o' this foolishness," Abe Benge spoke sharply. "Yuh men beat it. Marshal, get yore gun an' go mind yore own affairs. I want a private word with this stranger."

The 3 B punchers moved swiftly, faded into the gathering dusk. The little marshal swore a blue streak and started to argue, but a sharp word from Abe Benge sent him grumbling off down the street.

Cal Starr holstered his guns, eyed the repulsive 3 B owner narrowly.

"An' that private word, Benge? Spit it out fast, hombre. I'm listenin'."

Abe Benge grinned wolfishly, and his green eyes seemed almost gleaming in the dusk.

"Come on inside the saloon, feller," he invited. "I'll buy the drinks afore we palaver. What do yuh call yoreself, stranger?"

"Name's Cal Starr. An' thanks jest the same, but I don't care for booze. Whatever yuh want to say, I reckon this place is good as any. Nobody about, so shoot."

Abe Benge was used to having men jump at his every order. Now

his merciless eyes glazed, his hollow-cheeked face flushed, and that slit of a mouth drew into a snarl. But he controlled his rage, swore raspingly under his breath, and glanced up and down the deserted street.

"All right, youker," he croaked. "Have it yore way. All I want ter know is, do yuh want a job? I seen yuh draw a minute ago, so I'm offerin' yuh a hundred a month an' cartridges."

"Yeah?" Cal Starr drawled. "An' how many men do I have to plug a month to hold said job?"

Again Abe Benge flushed, but he pretended to chuckle at the same time.

"It's a sheep-an'-cattle war," he grunted, "me representin' cattle, since I owns most o' the land an' cattle here'bouts. But a skunk name o' Rufe Harmon is tryin' ter run his woollies over my range. So I'm hirin' gun hands—an' payin' good."

Before Cal could reply, the rattle of wheels and pound of hoofs arrested his attention. He half turned, glancing toward a rickety buckboard that came bounding down the rutty street behind a pair of foam-flecked roan ponies.

In the seat of the swaying vehicle sat a large, ruddy-faced man, powerful red hands wrapped in the lines. The big man's hat was gone, and a shock of gray-streaked red hair stood stiffly up on his big head.

Cal saw grim, straight lips, a blocky, weather-seamed face, and a pair of wide-set blue eyes that flashed angrily. Then the driver of the buckboard glanced toward Cal, swore raspingly, and started yanking his horses to a halt.

"Rufe Harmon, dang him!" Abe Benge snarled. "An' here's where I finishes——"

Cal Starr whirled, eyes narrowing.

"Nothin' doin'," he grated. "This big hombre ain't packin' iron."

"I see he ain't!" Benge raved. "That's why—"

Rufe Harmon stepped up onto the sidewalk, face working with anger. He glared at Cal, then turned blazing eyes on the evil-looking 3 B owner.

"Benge," the big sheepman boomed, "I been wantin' to meet up with yuh. I want to warn yuh fair, feller, that I'm pluggin' every two-legged skunk that comes onto my place. That last raid yuh pulled was—"

"Listen, yuh sheep-lovin' coyote!" Benge snarled thinly. "I ain't takin' yore sass none a-tall. This puncher hyar kin bear witness yuh jumped me. So I'm pluggin'—"

Abe Benge's skinny, talonlike hands dived down, smacked against notched gun butts, and started streaking up almost in the same motion. But just before those deadly guns could clear leather, something cold and round pressed Abe Benge's neck just below one ear.

"Drag that hardware," came Cal Starr's cold voice, "an' I'll blow yore head clean offn yore shoulders!"

CHAPTER III. "COYOTE TRICK."

ABE BENGE'S evil features paled, and his skinny hands released those guns as if they were hot. He rolled his glinting eyes to one side and shuddered as he got a close-up view of the cocked six-gun that pressed against his neck.

"Yuh—yuh dirty double-crosser!" he panted. "I thought yuh was a cowman, not a—a dirty—"

"Dry up!" Cal Starr snapped harshly. "I tol' yuh this man wa'n't heeled. Still—"

"Still he aimed to plug me," Rufe

Harmon interrupted. "Cowboy, I dunno who yuh are, but I shore thank—"

"Save yore breath," Cal clipped. "Mebbe Benge would be justified in pluggin' yuh—if what he says is true. I don't like sheep, an' I don't like a sheepman who'll spoil good cow range with his dirty woollies. So—"

"Benge has been lyin', as usual," big Rufe Harmon growled, face redder than ever. "I'm spoilin' nobody's range, stranger, 'cause I keep my woollies on my own land—barren stuff that ain't fit for cattle. But this skunk here—"

Up the street only a few paces, a saloon's swing doors crashed open, and the slit-eyed men who had ridden into town with Abe Benge swarmed out onto the walk, snatching guns as they came.

"Yow-ee-eee!" one man whooped. "Thar's thet sheep-scented coyote what calls hisself Harmon. Gun 'im, boys, an' the boss'll have ter fork over that five hundred he promised or—"

A gun crashed, then another and another. But instead of facing a defenseless, unarmed man, those slit-eyed gunmen found themselves face to face with the young waddy in somber black—a hard-faced, cold-eyed cowpoke who slithered toward them, a flaming six-gun in each brown hand. And when Cal Starr unlimbered his guns, he meant business.

His first two slugs knocked one 3 B tough spinning and made another yell shrilly. Abe Benge's gunnies milled, swore angrily, and stampeded back through the saloon doors, forgetful of their cowardly purpose in starting the fight.

One, a bit braver than the others, turned for a final shot—and got a broken leg for his pains. Splinters

flying from door facings and the groaning swing doors warned the rest to make a bee line for the farthest wall.

"I still think," Cal Starr growled at the three white-faced, groaning toughs that he had wounded, "that shootin' down a man—even a sheepman who ain't packin' iron—is plumb onethical. What do *yuh* three boobs think?"

The three gunmen turned pale faces toward the dark-garbed young puncher, and groaned weak oaths. But they made no attempt to reach their still smoking guns.

Face still a cold mask, Cal turned and walked back to where Abe Benge stood glaring helplessly at him. Abe Benge had been powerless to aid his hirelings, for big Rufe Harmon had reached out, seized the 3 B owner's scrawny neck in one mighty hand, and shut down.

"Move a muscle," Harmon had snarled, "an' I'll break yore danged neck for *yuh*!"

So Abe Benge stood shivering and mouthing oaths when Cal Starr confronted him again.

Rufe Harmon released the cattleman and stepped back.

"Perty shootin', young fella," he rumbled. "Only, *yuh* should 'a' killed them hydrophobia cats off. If I'd had a gun—"

Cal Starr holstered his own weapons, reached out and unfastened Abe Benge's crisscrossed belts. Benge yelled an oath and leaped back, but he was too late. Cal already had his belts and holstered guns.

"Yuh gimme them things back!" Benge yelled. "I'll—"

"Here, Harmon," Cal drawled, passing over the captured guns and belts. "Take these an' see if they'll fit. An' *yuh* might see if them guns will shoot straight, too."

Rufe Harmon's big face split into a grin as he shucked the notched guns from their holsters.

"Hey!" Abe Benge yelped in fear. "D-don't—"

Without finishing, the 3 B owner wheeled and plunged down the dirt sidewalk, yelling at every jump. Rufe Harmon grinned more broadly than ever, whipped up the two notched guns, and started thumbing the hammers swiftly.

Clods of dirt bounced from the hard-packed walk at Abe Benge's heels—bullet-blasted clods that sprayed over his boots as he pounded wildly for healthier climes.

Just as Benge dived into the Ace Saloon, a slug lifted high enough to scorch his off hip pocket, causing him to squall like a cornered bobcat. The swing doors banged protestingly as he vanished from sight, still yelling wildly.

"For a sheepman, Harmon," Cal Starr observed dryly, "*yuh* ain't a bad shot. Fact is, *yuh* handle guns more like a hoss-an'-rope man than a woolly owner. An' I see *yuh* wear cow boots."

"Uh-huh," Rufe Harmon chuckled, "I figgered *yuh*'d be noticin' sech things. Fact is, young feller, I run cattle all my life, ontill a cousin o' mine died an' left me five thousand stinkin' sheep ter git rid of."

"Then," Cal asked sharply, "*yuh* ain't really tryin' to be ornery? Yuh ain't grabbin' range an'—"

"I hate sheep!" Harmon growled. "But I've got five thousand, an' I'm goin' ter range 'em ontill the market's right before I sell 'em. Then I'll buy me a good cattle ranch."

"If *yuh* ain't botherin' nobody," Cal asked pointedly, "why in heck is Abe Benge so hot at *yuh*?"

"He's hot under the collar 'cause he's afraid I'll close him out," Harmon growled. "When I first hit this

country, six months back, Abe was havin' some financial troubles. He came ter me, an' I loaned him five thousand, takin' his 3 B as security. Now—”

“Now,” Cal Starr finished, “he's tryin' to drum up an excuse fer killin' yuh so's he won't have to pay that five thousand back.”

Rufe Harmon tossed Abe Benge's notched guns to the dirt walk, then kicked the heavy shell belts after them. He brushed his big red hands as if they were dirty, then made a wry face.

“Benge'll git me,” he said quietly. “I quit wearin' guns; thought he'd not try downin' a unarmed man. But yuh seen how he acted. If it hadn't 'a' been fer you, I'd be buzzard bait right now.”

“When does this here note o' Benge's come due?” Cal asked.

“Day after to-morrer,” Harmon replied. “If he'd act decent, I'd be glad ter extend his time. But seems like—”

Plopp! A bullet striking flesh.

Rufe Harmon's voice died in a choked gasp. The big fellow sagged, then sank limply to the dirt walk. From the Ace Saloon came the muffled bark of a six-gun; a thin wisp of bluish smoke drifted lazily over the swing doors.

“Coyote trick!” Cal Starr snarled, and whirled toward the saloon, with both guns crashing red tongues of fire into the gloom of dusk.

A harsh laugh answered his shots, then the hammers of his guns fell on spent shells.

CHAPTER IV.

RAID!

IT was well after midnight when a weary little doctor finally straightened out Rufe Harmon's two shattered ribs and fished a flattened .45

slug from the torn flesh. And it was broad daylight when Cal Starr drove the roan ponies into Harmon's main camp and lifted the silently suffering sheepman from the buckboard seat and carried him to a clean cot inside the big tent.

“It—was—tough goin', Cal,” Harmon gasped. “But we're here at last. Seemed more like fifty miles than six or eight.”

Cal gave the wounded man a long pull at a flask of red liquor, then proceeded to undress him. He was just pulling a blanket over Harmon when a horse pounded into the yard before the tent and booted feet hit the ground with a dull thud.

Before Cal could reach the tent flap, it was ripped aside, and into the room stepped a short, bow-legged hombre in batwing chaps and broad Stetson. The newcomer's weather-toughened face stiffened as he eyed Cal, and his calloused hands started inching toward a pair of black-butted .45s that rode his thighs in thonged-down holsters. The fellow's drooping, reddish-brown mustache seemed to bristle, and into his cold blue eyes leaped angry lights.

“Say, feller,” he began, “who—”

“Cal, this yere is my foreman, Sam Fox,” Rufe Harmon called weakly. “Sam, shake with the fastest gun hand yuh or me ever seen, Cal Starr.”

“Huh!” Sam grunted. “He don't look dry enough ahind the ears ter be sech tall mustard with lead chuckers. Still—glad ter meet yuh, kid.”

Cal smiled good-humoredly at Sam's blustery manner as they gripped hands briefly.

“Now, Rufe,” Fox snorted, “what in heck yuh been doin' all night? An' why're yuh in bed, lookin' peeked? Been on a jag, I'll bet.”

"Yeah," Cal drawled, "he's been on a spree, Sam. Only, it was a hot-lead spree."

Rufe Harmon told what had happened in Hondo, putting so much stress on Cal's part in the gun ruckus that that young waddy colored in embarrassment as Sam gawked in amazement.

"Yuh—yuh beat Trigger Rouse?" Sam gulped. "Yuh——"

"Sam," Rufe Harmon interrupted, "yuh better get out an' start roundin' up all the flocks. Drift 'em into Turkey Basin."

"I already done that," Sam grunted. "Some o' the herders spotted riders skulkin' round right after yuh left yestiddy, so I called in the whole stinkin' caboodle an' shoved 'em intuh th' basin."

"For a dyed-in-th'-wool cow nuss" Harmon smiled weakly—"yuh make a plumb good sheep-herder, Sam. First thing I know yuh'll be sellin' yore hoss an' buyin' a dog."

"Huh!" Sam snorted. "Ef yuh wa'n't already crippled, I'd——"

The muffled sound of gunfire filtered through the tent walls. Sam Fox stopped in mid-sentence, head cocked to one side. Then a shrill yell floated in, with the steady pound of exploding guns.

"Raid!" Rufe Harmon cried weakly. "Them skunks——"

"Come on, Sam!" Cal Starr snapped grimly. "Shake a leg, cowpoke. Sheep or no sheep, we can't let 'em be slaughtered by them 3 B rannies."

Cal had led his big black horse out behind the buckboard. Now he raced forward, flipped the rope loose, and sprang into the saddle. Sam Fox was already up and spurring away.

But Cal's black overtook Sam's little buckskin easily. Side by side, they thundered out across a little

mesa, the sound of gunfire drawing them forward. Sam reined into a well-used trail, then halted abruptly.

"They're already down in the basin, Cal," he growled, "so we'll have ter git busy pronto. I'll take this end. Yuh circle off ter them twin mounds yonder."

"How many ways in or out o' this basin?" Cal asked quickly.

"Two," Sam snapped. "This one here an' the one down by them mounds. Ef we hurry——"

Cal spurred his black forward. He halted on the very rim of the shallow though straight-walled basin, keen eyes searching the level floor. There were four mounted men down there, charging back and forth through bleating, frantic sheep.

Over against one cliff Cal could see six or eight Mexican herders, crouched in terror under the threatening guns of a fifth invader, who sat his horse in front of them.

"Stop gawkin' an' git movin' if yuh aim ter lend a hand," Sam snarled, reining in beside Cal. "I'm goin' down——"

"Wait!" the younger puncher interrupted. "Here's what we'll do. Now listen close."

Sam fidgeted nervously at first, then became all attention as Cal talked swiftly. Then they were both spurring their horses away, one on each rim.

Sam chose a spot where he could effectively guard the trail that pitched steeply up from the basin, and halted in a nest of boulders. He shoved his horse out of sight, then dragged a carbine from its saddle scabbard, fished shells from a saddle pocket, and ran back to his post.

"Now," he grinned, "ef that kid'll only hurry."

Cal raced along the opposite rim until he was below the raiders, then

drew his own carbine and dismounted. Now he crept to the rim, flattened out on his stomach, and shoved his Winchester forward.

Those four hombres were playing havoc with Rufe Harmon's sheep down in the basin. Cal's eyes blazed as he raked back the hammer of his carbine and drew a careful bead. That hombre on the paint——

Cra-ack! Cal's Winchester spat fire and smoke.

The man on the paint pony suddenly quit leather, yelling wildly to his companions. The other three stopped their sheep slaughtering long enough to glance toward the rim. And as they looked, a Winchester barked down at them, its screaming slug taking a greasy Stetson from a tousled black head.

"Uh-huh!" Cal grunted. "Mr. Trigger Rouse. I figgered it would be, seein' as how that particular hombre had a bandage around each fist. Now——"

Trigger Rouse screamed an oath, whirled his horse, and started up the basin toward the trail leading up to the mesa.

"Leave them spics an' come on!" he howled at the tough who guarded the herders. "We've got ter fog it. No tellin'——"

Trigger Rouse and the other three mounted men started fogging it as fast as horseflesh could carry them. But just where the trail started up, things went decidedly wrong.

From a nest of boulders up above came the spiteful bark of a .30-30 carbine, and Trigger Rouse's mount dropped dead in its tracks. The other three horses squealed and reared, callous hands yanking them around.

"Wait!" Rouse bawled. "My hoss is on my laig. Gimme a hand!"

Trigger had not stopped to assist the hombre who had been shot

from the paint horse, and his three badly scared companions were not stopping to help him now. To the whole tough crew it had suddenly occurred that they were trapped here in this shallow basin. Trapped like rats unless——

"Make fer the other trail down yonder, men," one of the three who still sat saddles yelled. "Head fer the——"

The fellow broke off with an oath as a rifle bullet zoomed waspishly past his face.

"Sky them paws, scum!" Cal Starr yelled from the rim. "Try runnin' an' yuh'll get hot-lead tickets to a place a heap hotter'n Yuma."

Sam Fox yelled an order in Spanish, and the frightened herders suddenly leaped forward, grabbing up weapons that they had been forced to drop. With angry yells, they spread out, grimly blocking the path of the three mounted raiders. Two of the Mexicans lined guns on the man who had been jumped from the pinto's back and made him march up to his now thoroughly cowed companions.

"Now, hombres," Cal Starr yelled down, "we'll maybe have a little neck-stretchin' bee."

CHAPTER V.

SHEEPSKIN.

FIVE badly scared toughs stood backed against a red cliff, facing Sam Fox and Cal Starr. Of the five, Trigger Rouse was by far the most craven. His piggish black eyes rolled wildly, and he repeatedly licked at fever-hot lips.

"W-what yuh aimin' ter do with us?" he croaked hoarsely. "Shorely yuh wouldn't——"

The Mexicans had gone muttering back to their blattting charges, swearing heartfelt oaths as they

viewed the score of crippled and dead sheep. Three of them made hasty examinations of the woolly animals that were only crippled, ending the sufferings of those that could not be saved.

Cal Starr watched the herders, and into his eyes crept hard glints as he turned back to face the five toughs responsible for Rufe Harmon's losses.

"What'll we do with yuh?" he grated. "I reckon yuh can't guess, eh?"

Trigger Rouse shuddered, and his four companions groaned.

"No trees handy," Sam Fox spoke up. "But we've got our hosses handy, Cal. Yuh snap a rope on some feller's feet an' I'll loop his neck. Then we kin sort o' spur our broncs in diff'rent directions. That's the way the boys out on the Kansas plains handle sech skunks as these."

"L-listen, y-yuh two," Trigger Rouse gasped. "W-we'll pay fer them danged woollies. Don't—"

"Perty slick, yuh varmints," Sam growled at them. "I see yuh rode livery-stable hosses, so's ef one got kilt, yore danged boss's 3 B wouldn't be showin'. But it's the long trail fer yuh five tough hombres. Git yore hoss, Cal, an'—"

"Livery-stable hosses, eh?" Cal interrupted. "Now wait, Sam. I'm gettin' me an idea. Call some o' them Mexicans back an' have 'em close-herd these wallopers."

Sam shot a swift look at Cal, snorted through his mustache, and did as bidden. When four brown-faced, hot-eyed guards stood before the 3 B toughs with leveled guns, Cal drew Sam aside. They talked earnestly for a few moments, then Sam whooped joyously.

"Dang!" he yelled. "Yuh shore kin use thet noodle, Cal. Gosh! What a sight thet'll be. An' I'd

shore like ter see Abe Benge's face when—"

They moved on down the basin a few rods, stopping beside a big ram that had been slain. With one accord they dived hands into pockets, fished out keen-bladed stock knives, and set about skinning the still warm animal. When they had the woolly hide removed, they very solemnly picked it up by ear and leg, carrying it between them.

"W-what yuh jaspers up to?" Trigger Rouse asked suspiciously as the two stony-faced punchers approached. "Thet hide ain't goin' tuh scare nobody."

"Feller name o' Jason took a lot o' trouble to go lookin' for some golden fleece onct," Cal drawled. "O' course, this here ain't no golden fleece, an' bein' the pelt of a plumb old he-sheep, it stinks wuss'n a skunk. Still—"

"What in tarnation yuh talkin' 'bout?" Trigger Rouse howled. "Yuh better— Hey! What's goin' on hyar?"

Sam and the Mexican herders had suddenly stepped forward, seizing the four rascals beside Rouse. Now those four were marched a few paces to one side and left sitting on the ground, staring up into the guns of the Mexicans.

Sam came back, leading one of the horses that the 3 B raiders had rented from the barn in Hondo. Sam trailed the pony's reins, lifted a lariat from the saddle, and stepped behind Trigger Rouse.

"What the—" Rouse began. "Let go! Ouch!"

His arms had been yanked behind him and tied securely by the now grinning Sam.

"All right, Mr. Hard-case," Cal snapped. "Climb aboard this here hoss. An' rattle them hocks plenty fast."

Swearing wildly, Trigger Rouse stumbled over to the horse and felt himself lifted to the saddle. He glared and fumed, then went white as chalk as his feet were tied beneath the pony's belly.

"I see it now," he croaked. "Yo're goin' tuh scare this hoss with that sheep hide. I'll be dragged ter death in some breshy draw. P-please d-don't—"

Sam reached up with keen-bladed knife, ripping Rouse's shirt and undershirt from throat to belt in a single slash. Despite the tough's wild pleas, Sam yanked and slashed until Trigger Rouse was bare from the waist up.

"I'll die o' sun blisters!" he wailed. "Ef thorns don't kill me, I'll be sunburnt ter death. Yuh two better be——"

"Shucks, now!" Cal Starr cut in. "Yuh don't think we'd be so mean as to let the sun at yore pore hide, do yuh? Shucks, no! Here, *this* will do the work fine."

Plop! Trigger Rouse swore one gurgling oath, then sat spitting and staring in amazement.

But only for a moment did surprise hold him. With a squeal like a razorback sow in hot ashes, he went into a fit of squirming, swearing and shuddering. For about his chest and shoulders clung that smelly ram's hide, fresh side down.

Cal Starr had slit a gash down the back of the pelt, and through that cut Trigger Rouse's head now protruded, the pelt forming a perfect cloak over his writhing shoulders.

"I'll—I'll slit yore gullets fer this!" he panted. "I'll——"

"Yuh'll be busy with flies—an' mebbe a few buzzards, too." Sam Fox cackled. "An' when folks in Hondo sees yuh a-comin' down the street——"

"Slip off the hoss's bridle," Cal

Starr chuckled. "Can't yuh see how worried Jason is to get home with his fleece? Gosh, I'll bet Abe Benge will be tickled to see him."

Trigger Rouse's ugly, somewhat smeared face went pasty-white as he realized the full meaning of this stunt. His red-rimmed eyes protruded, and he raked a tongue over foam-flecked lips.

Riding into Hondo, bound to a horse, and wearing a fresh sheep pelt for a coat! And that horse would head straight for Hondo and the livery barn, too.

"Tell yore low-down boss that I've got a sheepskin for him, too, if he ever shows his ugly mug out here," Cal gritted, sobering suddenly. "An' yuh kin also tell him that he'll be able to check four names offn his pay roll, said four bein' them skunk friends o' yores over yonder."

Sam ripped the bridle from the pony's head, slapping it sharply along the rump with the reins. The horse snorted, took one look at the smelly load it was carrying, and started doing a job of bucking that would have looked good to any rodeo judge.

"Ride 'im good, Trigger!" Sam whooped. "Ride 'im high, wide, an' straight up! Whoopee! Pile 'im off, little hoss!"

Slup! Plop! Plop! The green sheep hide slopped and flapped as the horse bucked and bowed in mad circles.

Trigger Rouse screeched oaths, coughed as his mouth filled with kinky sheep wool. Then he moaned in alarm as the horse reared.

But Trigger could not be thrown, and the pony soon realized it. With a snort of disdain, it glanced once more at that queer-looking and very smelly rider, then hit a fast lop up the trail.

"I'd give my best John B. tuh see

what happens when that coyote gits hauled down Hondo's main street," Sam Fox laughed.

"Better look to your guns, amigo," Cal Starr said crisply. "Abe Benge'll not swaller that insult easylike. He'll come out here a-foggin', or I miss my guess. An' we'll have to be ready."

"What about these other four wallopers?" Fox asked. "What in heck can we do with them?"

"They're goin' to be sheep-herders—an' *like* it!" Cal snapped, and turned toward the four in question.

CHAPTER VI.

BEARDING THE LION.

ABE BENGE paced restlessly up and down the sawdust-covered floor inside the Ace Saloon, muttering and mumbling unpleasant words.

His green eyes were bloodshot, savage as a rabid wolf's as he glanced toward the tin clock on the back bar. Half a dozen of Benge's gun hands were grouped at the farthest end of the bar, talking in hushed tones and casting nervous glances toward their fuming boss.

"Them fools has hubbed some sort of trouble, I'll bet," Benge snarled suddenly. "It's past ten o'clock, an' they should 'a' been back hyar hours ago. Ef Trigger has pulled some boner—"

Abe Benge had dispatched Trigger Rouse and the four others on this little sheep-shooting errand an hour before daylight that morning. And now it was after ten o'clock—and no sign of the five rakes yet.

So Abe Benge was pacing up and down the floor like a caged bobcat—and just about as short-tempered. He turned to the bar frequently, gulping down great drafts of fiery whisky as if it were water.

He was in the very act of taking

a drink when a shout from outside arrested his attention. There came the pound of hoofs, but Abe Benge's trained ears told him instantly that there was only one horse out there.

He snarled an oath, finished his drink, and resumed his restless pacing. He heard more shouts from somewhere outside, then a lot of yells and loud laughter.

"Some fool gittin' piled offn a hoss, I reckon," Benge rasped. "An' a bunch o' jack donkeys a-laffin'. I hopes they busts their danged jaws."

But the laughter and shouting grew in volume until the whole town seemed to vibrate. The six tough-looking 3 B gunnies eased away from the end of the bar and started forward, but Abe Benge blocked their path, talonlike hands clamped to gun butts.

"Git back thar!" he bawled. "Whatever them fools is laffin' at is none o' yore business. Ef Rouse an' them other fatheads ain't back in five more minutes we're ridin' ter look—"

The swing doors crashed open, and a runty, buck-toothed, red-headed little tough charged into the room, evil face split in a wide grin.

"Say, boss," the runt cackled at Abe Benge, "yuh orter come out an' see what some absent-minded buzzard has dropped in the street. It shore looks like ol' Trigger, but it—"

"Looky hyar, Runt Sawyer," Abe Benge hissed. "Are yuh tryin' ter be funny? Fer two cents I'd—"

"Runt" Sawyer paled until the large freckles on his lined face stood out prominently. He took two hasty steps backward, glancing about wildly, fear in his watery blue eyes.

"Honest, boss," Runt gulped. "I ain't foolin'. Trigger is out thar, an' what a sight he is! Tied ter his hoss, an' wearin' a—"

Abe Benge lunged for the green doors, his bunch of toughs following at his heels. He kicked the swinging doors savagely, leaped out onto the dirt sidewalk—and stopped as if suddenly petrified.

A score of mirth-choked townsmen suddenly grew silent and slunk hastily away. And there, sitting helplessly for all to see, was Trigger Rouse, still astride his bridleless horse, and still cloaked in that smelly ram's hide.

Trigger's rage-blackened face worked savagely as he flung oaths after the fleeing townsmen. But when he happened to turn and see his evil boss, Trigger's face paled, reddened, then paled again.

"C-come an' git me down from hyar," he choked. "Let me git my hands on a gun an' I'll go back—"

Abe Benge strode to the side of the horse, unsheathed a bowie knife that he carried in a boot top, and deftly slashed the ropes that held Trigger's legs. The gangly tough rolled from the saddle, eyes beginning to roll in fear. Abe Benge freed his wrists, then stepped back while Rouse shed his unwholesome cloak.

"Now, yuh whey-brained, bunglin' fool!" Abe Benge snarled. "Start tellin' what happened. An' ef yuh lie jist once, I'll blow yore insides all over this street."

Trigger shivered, clawed at the crimson mess on his chest, and began backing away.

"They—they jumped us when we wa'n't lookin'," he whined. "They got—"

"How many jumped yuh? An' who was it?"

"M-must 'a' been a dozen or more," Trigger croaked. "They was—"

"Where's the four nitwits I sent with yuh?" Benge again interrupted. "What happened ter them?"

"They're daid by now!" Rouse gulped. "Them hombres thet got us—"

Smack! Trigger Rouse howled an oath, then measured his length in the dirt. He crawled to his feet, tenderly feeling his jaw where Abe Benge's skinny fist had landed.

"Now," Benge gritted, "stop lyin'! Yuh an' the four I sent with yuh let thet slick-eared kid, Cal Starr, an' Sam Fox best yuh. Now, ain't thet right?"

"Y-yes!" Trigger Rouse gulped. "But soon as I gits me a shirt an' a gun—"

Abe Benge lunged forward, ready to wallop Trigger Rouse again. But before the furious 3 B owner could swing that blow, a sarcastic voice halted him in his tracks.

"Go ahead, beat his brains out if he's got any," the voice called. "The sooner yuh 3 B skunks kill each other, the better off we'll be."

Abe Benge and his crew whirled, to see withered old Hank Peters, owner of the hardware store, glaring at them from the store doorway.

"Listen, yuh danged ol' mummy," Abe Benge howled. "Swaller them insults or I'll—"

"Ye'll stand hitched, Mr. Ring-tailed Polecat," Hank flared. "Six-eight o' the boys is in doorways an' winders, lookin' at you an' yore passel o' varmin over rifle sights. Make a funny move an' the hull bunch o' ye will git yore needin's."

Abe Benge and his gun slingers glanced about, swearing savagely as they saw certain doorways and windows bristling with unwavering rifle barrels. The 3 B men let go their guns, and moved hastily apart. Abe Benge's glittering eyes flashed to that crumpled sheep hide, then centered on Trigger Rouse.

"See, yuh brainless coyote?" he snarled. "By traipsin' in hyar in

sich a mess yuh'll make us all the laughin' stock o' the country. An' I reckon even a fool like yuh kin see that these Hondo yaps ain't skeered of us no more."

"I—I couldn't he'p it, boss!" Trigger moaned. "But I'll square accounts with Cal Starr, blast him!"

"Shet. yore face an' come on!" Benge snapped. "Walk easy ter yore broncs yonder, then we'll slope. Rouse, yuh kin ride double with one o' the rest."

"Listen, boss," Trigger Rouse growled, "git some dynamite afore we leaves town. I kin show yuh how ter kill every sheep Rufe Harmon owns. An' we'll also git—"

"Close that trap!" Benge snarled. "Open yore mug once more an' I'll close it permanent. Yuh dirty—"

Z-z-zipt Plop! Abe Benge jumped wildly as a Winchester bullet kicked dirt over his feet.

By the time his heels were again on the ground the air was literally alive with howling lead, and the spiteful crack of Winchesters grew into a steady roar.

"High-tail it!" came a shrill whoop. "Rattle yore hocks, 3 B, or we'll commence ter shoot closer. Clear out, scum!"

Evil features black with rage, Abe Benge led his hard-eyed crew in a wild scramble for a hitch rack where their horses pranced nervously.

"Harmon an' his woolies comes first," the 3 B owner raged as he hit leather. "But after we've finished that chore, we'll bust this measly town wide open."

CHAPTER VII.

TOO LATE?

THE sun was less than an hour high when Cal Starr reined his lathered black to a stop and sat looking somewhat ruefully out over

a great drove of milling, uneasy sheep. Now Sam Fox came loping out of that gray dust cloud, to halt beside Cal and gulp fresh air.

"Whew!" Sam snorted. "The dust them stinkin' critters kin kick up! Fer two cents I'd butcher th' lot of 'em myself. Dog-gone sich—"

"We've got 'em safe, anyway," Cal grunted. "Leastwise, I hope Benge an' his mob ain't wise to the fact that we moved these sheep. Now, Sam, we got to hustle. Soon as it's dark, them 3 B snakes will come rampagin', I'mbettin'."

Sam Fox was all set to argue, but Cal wheeled his horse and loped into the dust cloud before a word could be spoken. Sam followed, grumbling and grunting, muttering some very pet and private notions about sheep.

But when Cal halted beside a group of dusty, bleary-eyed herd-ers, Sam Fox forgot his pet grievances and began grinning. For four of those herd-ers were none other than the four gun-swift 3 B punchers who had been captured earlier in the day.

They had been closely guarded by two grinning Mexicans all through the grilling drive from Turkey Basin—guarded and forced to herd sheep. Now one of the Mexican guards looked up at Cal Starr with a white-toothed grin and a sly wink.

"Eet ees what you call too bad, Señor Starr," the Mexican chuckled, "that four so good sheep-herders mus' now die. These gringos, they mak' ver' good sheep-herders, I theenk, eef they did not die so soon."

"Wh-what's th' idea?" one of the four 3 B rascals gulped. "What does this Mex mean, Starr? Shorely yuh fellers wouldn't plug us—"

"Oh, no," Cal snorted. "We wouldn't plug yuh a-tall."

"O' course not," and Sam Fox

grinned wickedly. "We wouldn't plug yuh four vinegaroons! Thet'd be wastin' bullets. But we kin hang yuh without much cost."

The four hard-case jaspers gulped, then began begging wildly.

"Let us live, fellers," one of them croaked, "an' we'll tell all we knows on Abe Benge. Yuh kin have him arrested an' we'll be witnesses agin' him. Please—"

"Uh-huh." Cal nodded. "Yuh'll say that *now*. But when it came t' a show-down, yuh'd stick to Benge. Nope—"

"We wouldn't stick ter him," a squatly, slit-eyed 3 B hombre rasped. "He's done us dirt, held out on us when we swiped cattle fer him an' should 'a' had a split. Give us a chanct an'—"

Cal Starr's eyes held a triumphant look as he turned to Sam Fox. But when once again he faced the thoroughly frightened 3 B men his face was as cold as ever.

"All right," he clipped. "I'll give yuh four skunks a chance—jest one. I'll leave yuh here in camp with Harmon's sheep-herders to-night. Tell these Mexicans all yuh've got to tell. They kin repeat it to me an' Sam in the mornin'. If yuh tell the *truth*, an' plenty of it, mebbe yuh'll not do a hemp prance."

The four sore-footed, worn-out 3 B gunmen all started protesting at once, casting frightened glances toward the grinning, heavily armed Mexicans. But Cal Starr wheeled his mount and plunged away, Sam Fox right at his heels.

Cal had planned the whole thing out just that way, even instructing the Mexicans to act as if they would enjoy killing off the four Benge men.

"Say," Sam Fox chuckled as he reined in beside Cal, "yuh shore figgered right, amigo. Them four back-shooters is scared stiffer'n pokers.

An' them Mex herders is actin' up fine, too."

"Yeah," Cal frowned, "that four will do plenty blabbin', all right, an' mebbe say things that'll cause Abe Benge a heap o' trouble. But what we've got to do now is get set to receive a bunch o' plumb unwelcome callers to-night."

The sheep had been moved over several miles of rocky hills, and were now securely hidden in a little canyon where the Mexican herders could keep watchful eyes on them. But Rufe Harmon was at his camp, helpless to defend himself, and that worried Cal Starr as he and Sam loped steadily over hills and through draws.

Cal meant to get Harmon out of the way, take him to some safe place for the night. Abe Benge would not hesitate to murder the helpless sheepman, and Cal knew it. So he shoved his black horse harder and harder toward Harmon's camp as the sun sank behind the western rim.

"What's all the rush, Cal?" Sam Fox yelled from behind. "I reckon we've got plenty time. I—"

Sam's voice was suddenly lifted into a wild shout. He and Cal had just topped a long ridge that dropped sharply down toward the camp. Now they sat as men carved from stone, staring in momentary disbelief.

Down there Rufe Harmon's camp was a mass of bright flame and black smoke. Wagons, tents, and even brush clumps were blazing brightly, sending up streamers of sparks and smoke into the air. And all about the scene, dwarfed by distance, horsemen dodged frantically about, waving bright torches as they rode.

Shrill yells lifted up with the smoke, lifted up to where the two stunned punchers sat their horses on the barren ridge.

"Too late!" Sam Fox groaned. "They've kilt the boss an' set fire ter the hull camp. I wish ter gosh we'd——"

"Ride!" Cal Starr snarled, tearing at the guns in his holsters. "Ram in yore hooks, Sam, an' we'll mebbe tally off a few skunks afore they're wise t' our presence."

CHAPTER VIII.

DYNAMITE!

THERE, at the foot of the ridge, the shadows were darker. Black-clad Cal Starr and his black mount were but shadows among shadows as they hurtled forward.

Sam Fox, riding somewhat behind, was more noticeable, since he wore lighter-colored clothes and rode a lighter-colored horse. But Sam proved his knowledge of such affairs by raking a nearly white Stetson from his head and tossing it to the ground. That hat would have made a good target in the gathering dusk.

"Come on, hoss!" Sam urged. "Ef yuh don't git a move on we'll miss out complete."

He broke off, dropped tied reins over his racing mount's neck, and yanked both guns. Up ahead, Cal Starr had already dashed into the flickering glow of firelight—charged in with a spitting Colt in each hand.

Abe Benge's toughs glanced wildly toward Cal, yanked their plunging mounts around, and tried to hit for the Hondo trail. But Abe Benge blocked their passage, evil face a horrible mask in the red fire glaw, a cocked six-gun in each hand.

"Back, yuh yaller quitters!" he roared at his hirelings. "Git back there an' fight! They're on'y two o' them, an' ten of us. Git back!"

"Look out!" Trigger Rouse yelled suddenly. "Hyar comes thet crazy coyote. I'll settle him!"

Cal Starr was coming at a fast pace, lying low over his black's flying mane. But just as the 3 B toughs whipped up cocked guns, Cal rolled sidewise from the saddle, hit the ground in a bunch, and bounded to his feet. He fell into a crouch, guns jutting forward, lips back in an angry snarl.

"Reach, yuh coyotes!" he barked. "Sky them paws or——"

Cal did not finish. Trigger Rouse, snarling oaths through hate-twisted lips, rammed home his spurs and shot forward, thumbing a six-gun as he came. Cal smiled coldly as a bullet snicked past his face, grunted as one scorched his crooked left elbow.

Then his own guns were hurling back a flaming, roaring reply. And Cal, with both feet on solid ground, was not missing.

Trigger Rouse suddenly rocked back in the saddle, screamed a gurgling oath, and crashed to the ground as his horse swerved sharply to miss trampling Cal Starr. Trigger Rouse's lanky body bounced to a stop, almost touching the dusty toes of Cal's black boots.

But Cal's attention had been diverted for a moment as he swapped lead with Trigger Rouse. Now Abe Benge and the rest of his slit-eyed crew crashed forward, shooting as they came.

From the tail of his eye Cal saw Sam Fox ride into the firelight, a thundering six-gun in each horny hand. Then Cal's full attention was given to those nine riders who bore down upon him in an avalanche of powder flame, hoarse yells, and pounding hoofs.

If he stood pat he would be mowed down by some of the lead that screamed about him or trampled by spur-maddened horses. Yet there seemed little else to do, for how could he escape? To his right

was the main tent, now an inferno of flame and smoke. To his left—shadows.

"If I could reach them shadows," he rasped. "I'd have a chance. But I—"

Cal's guns ran steady streams of powder blaze in the flickering fire-light. One of the leading 3 B toughs threw up his hands, swayed, then flopped under grinding hoofs. Another swayed, grabbed his saddle horn, and began coughing.

"Gun 'em, pard!" Sam Fox whooped. "Singe their ornery souls aplenty. I'm a-backin' yore hand complete!"

Wham! Bra-ang! Cal Starr's guns flamed in unison. His slitted eyes glinted like polished agates there in the weird red glow of the firelight.

Those last two shots went low and dropped a big roan gelding that was in the lead almost atop Cal. And in the next flashing instant Cal Starr saw the break he needed.

The roan, instead of folding and dropping forward, reared on its hind legs. Then, as if to escape the hurt it had received, the horse spun around, lashing out madly with flinty front feet a moment before it sank quivering to the ground.

The riders behind the roan were forced to yank their mounts to a stop and dodge those flailing hoofs. And in that moment, when Abe Benge and his cutthroats were busy, Cal Starr leaped swiftly away, vanishing into the shadows before a gun could be lifted. Sam Fox quit his saddle and followed Cal, swearing because his guns had gone empty.

"Mine're empty, too," Cal panted after a moment. "But here's a bunch o' boulders that'll give us some shelter. Reload!"

Loading gates swung open, empty brass shells rattled hollowly on the stony earth as two powder-grimed

cowpokes worked frantically over hot guns.

"They must 'a' beefed Harmon, then set the tent afire over him," Cal snarled. "Now we'll see how good we are at collectin' skunk scalps."

Abe Benge and his gunmen got untangled and started spurring into the shadows where Cal and Sam had vanished. But the 3 B toughs met a swarm of leaden hornets, and saw the winking of four very hot, red eyes.

"Charge 'em!" one tough yowled recklessly. "No two hairpins kin best us 3 B rannies. Charge—"

But that tough was charging down the Long Trail before his words were fully spoken. And a mate right next to him doubled over the saddle horn, groaning feebly as he clamped both hands to a rather large, paunchy stomach.

"Surround 'em!" Abe Benge yelled wildly. "Start ridin' circles like Injuns."

But there were only five of the toughs left to hear that order. And two of them were already sick from wounds, although they managed to sit their saddles.

"W-we better high-tail it, boss," a hard-faced old cutthroat gulped as the 3 B rascals spurred out of the danger zone. "Only four o' us, countin' you, what's able ter fight. An' them two punchers—"

"Shet up, blast yuh!" Abe Benge snarled. "We'll ride like we was leavin' hyar. Then—"

As the six horses pounded away, Sam Fox jumped to his feet, intent on getting his own mount and giving immediate chase. But Cal Starr grabbed the older puncher, dragging him down.

"Steady!" Cal hissed. "Where are yore ears, Sam? Them hosses stopped less'n a hundred yards

away. Reload, hombre—an' watch sharp!"

Again loading gates clicked open, and again spent brass shells tinkled among the rocks. Then Cal Starr crouched there in the darkness, smiling grimly as he heard a bush scrape rough clothing off to his left.

A spur tinkled ever so faintly from another point. Then something landed a few feet in front of Cal—landed with a dull, muffled sound that made him instantly suspicious.

He leaned forward, straining to see through the dark. To his ears came a low, hissing sound; then he saw a tiny streamer of sparks there among the rocks.

"Run, Sam!" Cal gasped, leaping to his feet. "We're settin' on a passel o' dynamite! This way!"

From somewhere out in the dark came an exultant yell. Then the earth shook as a mighty roar boomed hollowly from ridge to ridge, from canyon to canyon.

CHAPTER IX.

CAL STARR RIDES ON.

IT was well after midnight when

Abe Benge and his five followers reined to a halt before the Ace Saloon and slid to the ground. The two wounded toughs staggered away into the night, heading for the doctor's. But Benge and the others made a bee line for the bar, glaring savagely at the few late customers.

"Waal, boss"—one of the gunmen beside the 3 B owner grinned evilly over full glasses—"hyar's ter the good job we done."

They drained their glasses, then tilted bottles and refilled them.

"I'm safe now," Abe Benge muttered. "Rufe Harmon is burned ter ashes, an' them two scrappin' punchers is blowed ter bits. I've got the

steers I bought with that five thousand I borrowed offn Harmon, an' I don't have ter pay it."

"Say, boss," a henchman interrupted, "wonder where Harmon's woolies was. I reckon yuh'll want us ter hunt 'em up an' kill 'em, come daylight."

"Nah!" Abe Benge leered. "We'll kill them Mex herders, shore. But we'll take them sheep an' sell 'em. Then——"

The swing doors crashed open violently, and a lanky, hard-faced, tow-head staggered into the open, clutching a crimson-smeared left shoulder with a bony right hand.

"Whitey!" Abe Benge snarled. "What in the——"

"The herd was raided, boss," the crippled Whitey gasped. "A couple fellers jumped me an' Monk, an' stamped the herd intuh the hills. Monk high-tailed it, an' I got winged."

"My herd rustled!" Abe Benge squalled. "All the prime beef I had, rustled!"

"That's the funny part of it," Whitey groaned, gulping a big drink of raw liquor. "Them fools that stamped the herd w'a'nt on the rustle a-tall. I seen 'em high-tail it yonderly soon as they had them steers a-runnin' good."

"So-o-o!" Abe Benge mused, and suddenly the black rage left his cruel face. He turned back to the bar, calmly lifted a drink, and stood chuckling evilly. He had been holding those steers in readiness, intending to sell them and pay off Rufe Harmon.

But now, he told himself gloatingly, Rufe Harmon was out of the way. What if some of Harmon's friends had stamped the steers, scattering them into the hills? What if it would take weeks to get them ready for market again?

"Some danged crooks figgered ter make me lose my spread ter Harmon," Benge muttered darkly. "But they're too danged late. Harmon an' his pet gun slingers, Cal Starr an' Sam Fox, is done fer, an' I'm boss o' the hull country. Now—"

He poured himself a stiff drink, downed it at a gulp, and stood grinning wolfishly at his sour-faced hirings.

"Whitey," he snapped after a moment, "go see the sawbones, then hit fer the ranch an' rout out every man there. The rest of us will look the town over careful, roundin' up all the friends we've got."

"Say, boss," one of the toughs leered, "yuh ain't aimin' ter put on a leetle party, be yuh?"

"Party is right!" Abe Benge hissed. "These Hondo yaps got fresh this mornin', singed some o' our pards with hot lead. Now I'm goin' ter show 'em who's boss. We'll hang every danged one that we ketches—every one that was shootin' at our heels ter-day. We'll take a drink, then—"

Abe Benge lifted a glass in his bony right hand, and that evil smile split his hard features. But suddenly that glass in his right hand exploded into many fragments, and raw liquor splashed into his seamed face.

Even as the roar of a heavy six-gun filled the room, Abe Benge whirled, swearing. Then he stood as a man petrified, jaws hanging in honest amazement.

For up the floor strode an all-too-familiar figure—a lithe cowboy dressed in black.

"Cal Starr!" Abe Benge gulped. "H-how—"

"An' Sam Fox!" another gulped. "Boss, w-we must 'a' slung that dynamite the wrong place. We—"

"Well, scum," came Cal Starr's

rasping voice, "do yuh lay 'em down an' quit, or—"

Cal left his sentence unfinished, thereby adding to the cold challenge. Sam Fox sidled in from the back door, halting where he could watch the barkeep as well as the 3 B toughs.

"I—I thought yuh two—" Abe Benge began uncertainly.

"Yeah! Yuh thought we was blowed to pieces," Cal clipped. "But we got to some rocks in time to save our skins. Also, Mr. Skunk, yuh didn't hit Rufe Harmon on the head quiet hard enough. He rolled under the tent wall an' made the brush, 'stead o' burnin' alive like yuh meant."

Abe Benge staggered back as if he had been struck a blow. Then his ugly face twisted, went black with sudden rage.

"I see it all now," he snarled thinly. "Harmon is alive, so yuh an' Fox stampeded my steers, knowin' I can't pay off that note. Yuh double—"

"Ain't it awful, Cal," Sam drawled, "how some fellers gits accused o' doin' things? O' course, accusin' ain't provin'."

"Sam an' me figger on sort o' close-herdin' yuh 3 B skunks until the sheriff gets here," Cal grated. "If yuh've got—"

Hoofs pounded dully from somewhere outside. Cal Starr turned his head ever so slightly, and Abe Benge's hands made a lightning stab for gun butts.

"Cal!" Sam Fox yelled. "Look out—"

Four guns crashed almost together. Empty glasses along the bar jumped noisily, then another gun cracked, and a man squalled painfully.

Cal Starr reeled slightly, caught himself, and shook his head like a

prize fighter who has just stopped a hard punch with his jaw. Crimson trickled slowly down his left temple, making an ugly rivulet along his lean cheek.

But Cal Starr's eyes still held that cold fire as he stood watching Abe Benge topple slowly, then become suddenly limp and lifeless on the dirty saloon floor. Behind the bar the barkeep was swearing most fluently and wrapping a dirty bar rag about a bullet-torn ear.

Sam Fox had caught Mr. Barkeep trying to snatch an 8-gauge sawed-off from beneath the mahogany. And Sam's bullet had ripped through Mr. Barkeep's ear as a matter of warning.

"Anybody else?" Cal Starr grated. "Any more o' yuh salty 3 B jaspers aimin' to grab iron?"

Without a word, the 3 B cut-throats lifted their hands, showing very plainly that they did not care to cross guns with the man who had just dropped their evil boss. The barroom was suddenly so quiet that the pounds of hoofs somewhere down the street sounded plainly.

"Listen, Sam," Cal Starr snapped. "There'll be a sheriff an' his posse in here pronto. Keep yore guns lined on these snakes."

He took a threatening step forward, jamming both gun snouts into the quivering middle of the wounded Whitey.

"You, blond feller," Cal rasped, "are goin' to do some talkin' when the sheriff gets inside. Tell him all yuh know—or a bullet *might* come driftin' in that back door yonder."

Cal spun on spiked boot heels, then strode swiftly down the room. Sam Fox started to ask a question just as Cal slid through the back door and into the night.

But the swing doors up front crashed open, and four dusty, level-

eyed men strode into the room with drawn guns. The leader—a lank, rawboned man with fiery red hair and beard—stopped short, staring. On his vest was the glinting silver star of a county sheriff.

"Yeah," the red-whiskered sheriff boomed, "we're on the right trail; no doubt o' that. Dog-gone the slippery cuss!"

"I dunno what trail yo're talkin' 'bout, sheriff," Sam Fox cut in. "But right now yuh better start handcuffin' these sidewinders. Thet tall Whitey feller will tell yuh why."

Whitey licked his lips, glanced nervously toward the back door, and began talking. The brawny sheriff and his three level-eyed deputies listened intently while Whitey did a perfectly good job of talking himself and the rest of the 3 B jaspers into jail.

"I been aimin' ter come over hyar an' put a jerk line on Abe Benge," the sheriff growled when Whitey had finished. "But looks like Cal Starr done beat me to it. Handcuff them wallopers, men!"

The three deputies stepped forward, carrying out their chief's orders. The 3 B punchers were soon shackled, then herded into a far corner.

"Say, sheriff," Sam Fox demanded, "I'm plumb ate up by curiosity. How'n heck did yuh know that Cal Starr—"

"Huh!" the big officer snorted, reaching for a bottle on the bar. "Me an' my men has chased the critter plumb from Tucson ter here."

"He's—an outlaw?" Sam gulped. "Shorely yuh must be—"

"There's five hundred dollars on his scalp, dead or alive," the sheriff growled. "He killed—"

"Whoever says Cal Starr's a crook ain't nothin' but a bald-faced liar!" Sam said explosively. "He's done

this country a big favor by cleanin' up this passel o' 3 B varmints, an' whoever sez diff'rent——"

"That"—the big sheriff smiled behind his beard—"is th' way I feel—*unofficial*. Cal plugged a range hawg an' a couple tough gunnies down

Tucson way, which was doin' the country a favor. But *official*, I've got ter arrest him, if I see him."

"Whew!" Sam grinned. "I can hardly wait ter tell the boss that it was outlaw lead that saved his bacon."



SCISSORS

THE MOST FAMOUS TREE IN TEXAS

THERE is an enormous oak tree in Texas, on the banks of Yegua Creek in Lee County, the most historic and the most famous tree in all the State.

It stands now as bold and serene as it did long before Texas was a republic, long before the Old Washington Road to Bastrop and San Antonio was even a trail. Old Evergreen was a welcome landmark to the few travelers that crossed the frontier of Texas.

When Sam Houston, on Sunday morning, March 6, 1816, left Old Washington as commander of his army of three privates, he passed within a short distance of Old Evergreen. By this time the old tree had given its name to a neighborhood that was a well-known center in Houston's time.

Old Evergreen seemed to act as a magnet to every individual who had ever lived within sight of it.

The Evergreeners were natural wanderers, cow-punchers most of them, bad men others, but all adventurers. No matter how far they went, or what kind of lives they led, the influence of the Evergreen neighborhood was with them. In their hearts there was always a longing for another glimpse of the old tree.

Bill Longley came to Evergreen with his parents, when he was two years old, and grew up under the shade of the famous oak. Bill was a

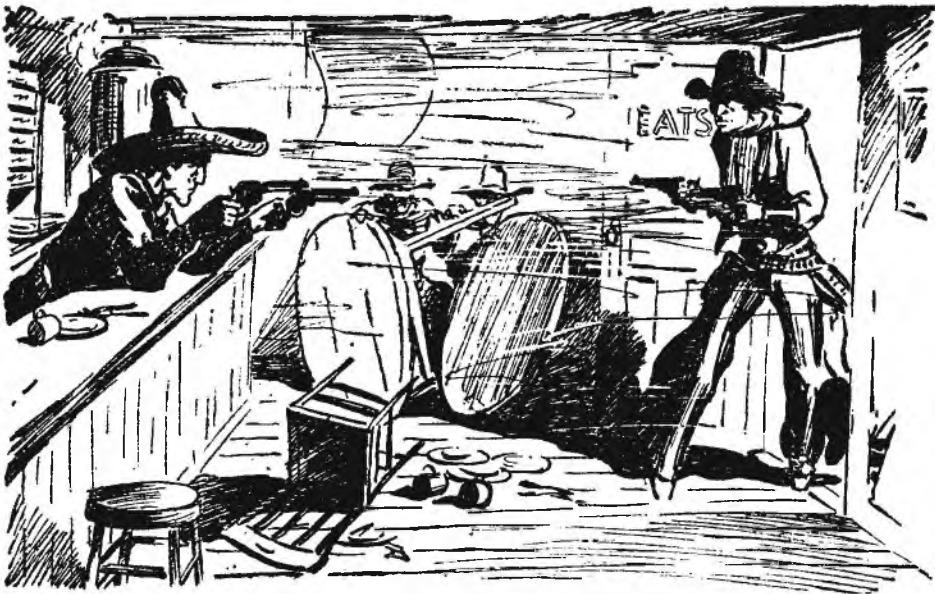
wanderer, but he always had to come back to Evergreen. He was dodging sheriffs, from the time he was sixteen years old until he was hanged at Giddings eleven years later. But in between his killings he would always show up at Evergreen.

There were certain unforgettable incidents that the old-timers of Evergreen never failed to recall when they met. Among these were, the day that Bill Longley shot up the circus; the day that Bill galloped down the Camino Real and put five bullets in one tree as he passed; the day that Bill, using two six-guns, emptied twelve bullets inside a six-inch circle across the road; the day that some horse thieves were hanged in the grove of live oaks, of which Old Evergreen is the king.

Bill Longley had many friends in the Evergreen neighborhood. Some of them had been schoolmates of his, and during the noon hour had played games with him under the old oak.

As Bill grew up, his skill with a gun aroused their admiration, and many an ambitious boy tried to equal his draw or his aim. But most of them failed in their attempts, for Bill was a born gunman.

By the time he left school he had a horse and a six-gun, and he knew how to make the best use of both. The big boys envied him, and to the little fellows he was a hero.



The Red-hot Ranny's Round-up

A "Shootin' Fool" Story

By Houston Irvine

Author of

"The Deputy's New Holsters," etc.

WITHOUT even so much as a grimace, the swarthy, thick-set hombre gulped down the two-ounce drink of fiery forty-rod and slammed the empty glass on the bar.

"Have one on the house, stranger!" Mark Preston, the ruddy-faced owner of the Maverick Saloon, pushed the bottle across the counter none too graciously.

"*Gracias.*" The customer helped himself to the amber fluid and lifted his brimming glass. He hesitated before drinking that time, however.

"I'm Caliente Perkins, the original Red-hot Ranny from Del Rio," he introduced himself.

"Er—er—pleased to meet yuh," grunted the saloon owner fearfully, recognizing the name as that of one of Texas's most notorious gunmen.

The half dozen other customers in front of the long bar blinked in astonishment—not at the revelation of the stranger's name, but at the way he could consume liquor. Hard drinkers all of them, they could not begin to pour down the cheap, raw whisky as the visitor had been doing for half an hour.

"Caliente" Perkins had been swallowing one drink after another—probably a dozen in all—with hardly a pause. Yet as he tossed off the house's treat and swaggered toward the swinging doors, he did not show the effects of the liquor in his gait or manner.

Caliente Perkins was one ranny

who was just about as tough as he pretended to be. As he put it, he was red-hot, and he liked everything in life that way.

The whisky, that would have floored the average man, did not rob him of his caution for an instant. He knew that the Cotulla sheriff's office probably had received word of his most recent killing over on the Rio Grande. And he was not taking any chances of capture and a noose around his neck.

The jail was right across the dusty main street from the Maverick Saloon.

The gunman's black eyes beaded in a sneer of contempt for the building and the law that it represented, as he stepped into the street.

"I'd like ter see any o' these sleepy officers try ter catch me," he growled derisively to his own black cayuse, standing with reins dragging a few feet from the entrance of the bar-room.

Hooking his thumbs over his cartridge belt, just above the notched black handles of his low-slung .45s, Caliente looked cautiously in both directions. There was no sign of danger, hardly a person in sight at that early-morning hour. But something else caught and held the outlaw's attention.

It was the weather-beaten, sand-scoured sign of the Chuck Wagon—Cotulla's leading restaurant—up the street a block or so.

Caliente became quickly conscious of one effect of his whisky, at least. The liquor helped to make him ravenously hungry. He licked his wide, thin lips and gave a yellow-toothed grin.

"Guess I'll put on the feed bag," he grunted. "Somehow, I kind o' like this hyar town."

He did not like it so well that he did not imagine he might want to

get out in a hurry, however. Swag-gering to his horse, he picked up its reins and led it to the door of the eating house. With a final reassuring glance in both directions, he left the critter standing, and stamped into the restaurant as if he might have owned it.

A couple of waddies, on stools in front of the Chuck Wagon's horse-shoe-shaped counter, gazed at the newcomer idly as he entered, then went on eating their breakfasts. A short, roly-poly fellow in a white cook's coat smiled pleasantly.

"Breakfast. An' make it snappy," growled Caliente, easing himself onto a stool near the door and scowling under the pulled-down brim of his worn Stetson.

"Ham and eggs?" asked the restaurant owner.

"No!" The gunman glared.

"Flapjacks?" suggested the proprietor.

"No! Dang yuh! Don't try ter tell me what I want," snarled the outlaw, suggestively patting the handles of his notched six-guns.

"Er—er—er—" The other gaped fearfully.

"I want some chili," Caliente named the hot Mexican dish of chopped beef, brown beans, and red pepper.

"For breakfast?" The owner of the Chuck Wagon blinked. "This early in the mornin', chili is liable to upset yuh. It's—"

The outlaw half rose from his seat and whipped his .45s from his holsters. Resting their deadly black barrels on the edge of the counter, he stared at the restaurant man.

"Are yuh tryin' ter tell me what I want ter eat?" he demanded. "I'm the Red-hot Ranny. An' I like my food an' liquor burnin'."

"Yeah." The restaurant owner trembled.

"Give me chili. An' see that it has plenty o' pepper in it," ordered Caliente.

The proprietor nodded willingly and walked toward the rear, where his heated cookstove sat, covered with pots, pans, and skillets of assorted sizes.

The Red-hot Ranny slid his guns back in his holsters, sat down again and leered about the room and at the two waddies who were finishing their breakfasts.

The cook was only a few moments in serving Caliente's order. All he had to do was throw together some already cooked frijoles, hamburger, and pepper. He brought the mess, sizzling hot, in a big bowl and set it on the counter before the customer. He also put out a large can of chili pepper, with the apology:

"I don't know whether I got it hot enough fer yuh. Yuh kin add some more pepper, if I didn't."

"Nothin' is ever hot enough fer me," retorted the gunman, grabbing a spoon off the counter.

He plunged the implement into the red pepper for a heaping load, which he scattered over the mixture of beans and meat. Then, with apparent relish, he began shoveling into his mouth the mess that would have made the average hombre gasp for water.

II.

Lucius Carey pushed his plate away from him, with the uneaten portion of two eggs upon it.

Somehow, watching the stranger robbed the "Shootin' Fool" of his own perfectly healthy appetite.

The young deputy sheriff liked a dish of chili occasionally. But he felt that there was a time and a place for it, like everything else, and that was not for breakfast.

Not that Lucius would try to keep

anybody from eating the peppery food if he wanted it. The officer did not go around looking for trouble and horning into other folks' business.

He was a tall, gangly, awkward-looking youth, who might have been wearing the colors of some college instead of a vivid-green silk shirt, with a nickeled star pinned to its pocket.

His wide, observant eyes were bright blue, and his smooth cheeks were the pink, untannable kind that might be expected to go with his cornsilk yellow hair. His mouth, chin, nose, and forehead were strong and well proportioned, however, and his shoulders broad and husky.

With a natural liking for gaudy hues, he wore a scarlet neckerchief to contrast with his green shirt. His nearly new ammunition belt and holsters were of light-yellow cowhide, but his flaring batwing chaps and high-heeled boots were polished a few shades darker.

Throwing a coin on the counter in payment for his uncompleted meal, he picked up his big white Mexican sombrero from the neighboring stool, stood up, stretched and turned toward the door to depart.

The Shootin' Fool did not recall Caliente Perkins's pictures on any reward posters in the sheriff's office, if he had ever seen them. Consequently, the only thing of which the deputy suspected the stranger was bad taste in his choice of breakfast food.

The gunman's own guilty conscience must have made him see danger in the officer that did not exist at that time, however.

For the first time, Caliente got a view of the deputy's shining star, as the young man strode toward the door.

Lucius was startled by a look of

fear that blazed instantly in the stranger's eyes. The hombre's swarthy features twisted in a snarl of hatred.

Spinning around on his stool, Caliente leaped to his feet, facing the deputy, between him and the exit.

"What the——" The Shootin' Fool's blue eyes popped.

Not expecting such a move, he was totally unprepared for the other's draw.

With lightning swiftness, the gunman's hands darted to the holsters on his hips and leaped up, leveling his .45s murderously at Lucius.

"Huh?" There was nothing that the latter could do but grab for the ceiling.

The conviction suddenly dawned upon him that the stranger must be an outlaw, in desperate fear of capture. And Caliente's words gave weight to the opinion.

"Dang huh! Yuh won't never take me alive," growled the crook. "I'm the Red-hot Ranny from Del Rio, an'——"

The Shootin' Fool did not hear the conclusion of the speech, did not greatly worry whether Caliente Perkins was red-hot or icy-cold at that moment. The deputy's only anxiety concerned the murderous muzzles of his enemy's twin six-guns.

Every muscle and nerve in his body grew tense, as he saw the gunman's fingers tightening upon the triggers of his weapons.

Crash-crash! Two explosions rocked the walls of the small restaurant.

But Lucius Carey already was leaping aside when the flames darted from the muzzles of the six-guns. Hurling himself onto the eating counter, he barely felt the bullets tug at the silk folds of his shirt.

Splintering the wood, they hurtled into the wall back by the stove.

Before Caliente could whirl the muzzles of his guns about for another shot, the deputy rolled across the top of the horseshoe counter and dropped to the floor.

Spud! A leaden slug bored through the flimsy pine boards that formed the wall of the counter, six inches from his head.

He rolled and slid rapidly a few feet along the horseshoe, as more bullets began to tear through, searching for him.

"I'll git huh!" bellowed the outlaw, whom the Shootin' Fool, for the time, could not see.

Lucius's way was not to hide and let a foe shoot at him. As soon as he recovered his breath and some of his own startled wits, the young officer grabbed for the handles of his .45s.

His jaw pushed out grimly. His lips pressed into a thin crimson line, and his blue eyes narrowed.

Although he did not know the meaning of fear as many other men know it, his cheeks were paler than usual because of the tenseness of his nerves.

If he needed any spur to action, he got it in the form of a bullet that came ripping through the counter, to burn a path painfully across his left ribs. Not far from his heart, that one!

Caliente might not be able to see his target, but that would not prevent the possibility of any of his wildly fired shots killing the deputy.

With a yell, the Shootin' Fool suddenly bolted erect, jerking back the hammers of his guns as he leveled them across the top of the counter. For an instant, he held his fire, looking for his enemy.

Lucius's abrupt rise evidently surprised the outlaw. For a second, his .45s were silent, too. Apparently he decided that an officer who would

not duck or run was too dangerous an opponent.

With an angry yell, he headed for the doorway. As he went, he emptied his guns, however.

Crash! The first of those bullets missed Lucius by inches, to bury itself in the rear wall.

Zip! The second knocked splinters off the surface of the counter in front of the deputy.

The latter's own .45s started blazing then. But Caliente was dodging too rapidly for a direct hit.

A scream of pain came from the outlaw, however. He dropped the gun in his left hand, and his arm hung limp, with crimson wetting his sleeve.

The crook was almost to the door then. Another leap backward would carry him into the street.

Realizing that there was no chance of the hombre's giving up, even though he was wounded, the Shootin' Fool was taking careful aim to stop him, when—

Wham! Caliente Perkins's remaining weapon gave a final, defiant burst.

A red, sticky substance spread quickly over the deputy's face, dripped from his gaping jaw, wet his neckerchief and shirt.

"Ugh!" He blinked his blue eyes, trying to see through the liquid haze.

For a moment, he wondered if the fleeing outlaw's last bullet had struck him, if it was his own crimson life fluid that he saw and felt. Then he realized what had happened.

Caliente's shot had not struck Lucius at all, but had crashed into the half-emptied bowl of chili on the counter, shattered it and hurled most of the contents over the surprised officer.

The red on the Shootin' Fool's
WW—SC

face was only the broth of the frijoles and meat, colored by the chili pepper that Caliente had used so liberally.

A crimson flush of another sort spread rapidly over the deputy's features, clear to the tips of his ears, as he understood what had occurred. In his moment of inaction, after the flood of food had struck him, the gunman had made good his escape, springing backward through the doorway and racing to his cayuse.

The furious clatter of the horse's hoofs now reached the Shootin' Fool.

With a violent shake of his head, to clear away a little more of the soft mess that almost blinded him, the young deputy vaulted over the stools and dashed out of the Chuck Wagon. He already was too late to catch Caliente Perkins, however.

Spurring madly and yelling at his cayuse, the "Red-hot Ranny" was tearing down the street, already beyond shooting range. The deputy watched sadly, until he saw the outlaw plunge into the great prickly-pear thicket that walled the town.

"Haw-haw-haw!" A loud laugh from across the street increased Lucius Carey's confusion.

Turning angrily, he saw a number of men, attracted by the shooting and the sound of the gunman's flight, eying him.

He bit his lips. There were a lot of hombres always ready to jeer at the Shootin' Fool whenever he made a mistake or had a bit of tough luck.

"I'll show 'em!" grunted the deputy.

With less calmness inwardly than he appeared to have outwardly, he reloaded his six-guns and jabbed them into his yellow holsters. Dragging a large blue bandanna from his hip pocket, he then wiped off the remains of the chili as best he could.

He was unable to clean the red spots off his shirt with a dry rag.

Oh, well, he would have to ride with a dirty shirt, then. He wasn't going to take time to run to his room at the Texas House and change, while Caliente Perkins fled farther and farther into the chaparral.

Defiantly glaring at the snickering spectators, Lucius Carey strode toward the livery stable where he boarded his horse.

III.

Ordinarily, the Shootin' Fool would have told Sheriff Alcorn and the veteran deputy, Hank Rogers, where he was going. But he did not feel that he had the time to spare for a conference that morning.

As it was, Caliente Perkins had a long start. And in the great prickly-pear thicket, that might mean a lot.

Lucius caught his horse—a sleepy brown critter named Molasses—out of the livery-stable corral and saddled it with frantic haste.

"I've got to catch that chili-eating coyote," he growled, yanking the cinch tight with a violence that made the cayuse jump.

Gathering his reins in his left hand, the deputy sprang onto the animal's back and kicked his boot toes into his stirrups. A sharp jab with his spurs against Molasses's flanks sent the pony bolting through the door of the barn in surprise.

Stooping low over the pommel of his saddle to prevent his brains from being knocked out by the top of the doorway, the Shootin' Fool saw that most of the townsmen had followed him down the street to watch his departure. Those who jeered at him did not worry the young officer so much then, however, as did his friends.

From the direction of the jail, he saw Sheriff Alcorn and Hank Rogers running. The former was a middle-aged, medium-sized hombre, with a broad, kindly face, and his hatless head as bald and shiny as a cue ball. The other was a lanky, weather-beaten waddy with a drooping black mustache, the ends of which whipped in the breeze.

Lucius tried to ignore his fellow officers, not wanting his chase delayed by having to explain anything to them.

Sheriff Alcorn was not one you could put anything over on, though, even an honest act such as the deputy had in mind. Stopping directly in the path of the racing Molasses, the sheriff waved for the Shootin' Fool to stop.

"Hey! Whar yuh goin'?" he shouted.

Hank was halting a few feet to the left of Alcorn. The veteran fished a thick plug of tobacco out of his pocket and was lifting it toward his mouth to bite off a chew.

Lucius did not want to stop, nor did he intend to. Spurring Molasses deeply again, he bore straight toward the sheriff, expecting the latter to leap out of the way.

The young deputy should have known Alcorn better.

"Blast yuh!" the sheriff bellowed, but did not budge an inch. "Stop! I want to know what's goin' on round hyar."

"Stop, Looshis!" Hank repeated his superior's demand.

The Shootin' Fool could see the grinning townsmen out of the corners of his blue eyes. Did his friends expect him to halt and meet their jeers?

Although he knew that such disobedience might well cost him his star, Lucius became more determined to go on.

"I'll catch that gunman, or else"—his jaw tightened—"he'll get me!"

The wrathful glare in Sheriff Alcorn's gray eyes changed abruptly to an expression of intense surprise, almost fear, as he saw that Molasses was not being checked in the least by his rider. A few more leaps by the cayuse, and it would knock the sheriff down, perhaps trample him to death.

Too startled to move, Alcorn's bronzed face paled.

"Looshis!" An amazed scream burst from Hank Rogers, as he, too, must have imagined that his chief was doomed.

The Shootin' Fool let them think whatever they pleased. But when Molasses was almost on top of the sheriff, the rider jerked the critter swiftly aside, passing between the two older officers.

In another moment, the deputy was clear in the street, spurring furiously, leaving friends and jeerers alike gaping in astonishment.

Lucius Carey knew that he had burned his bridges behind him. He had to get Caliente Perkins now, or his job as a deputy would not be worth two cents.

Without looking back, he rode doggedly to the thicket where he had seen the gunman disappear.

Fortunately, Caliente had been in too much of a hurry to get away to take the time to conceal his tracks, as he might have done. The Shootin' Fool picked up the trail of the fleeing horse ahead in a few minutes.

With the hoofmarks etched deeply into the soft sand, the deputy could read the sign as rapidly as his own cayuse could travel. He fed Molasses the steel and kept him running.

Following cattle trails, he wound in and out through the chaparral,

his route sometimes almost doubling back upon itself. Broad flat joints of prickly pear, like pincushions with the points of the pins sticking out instead of in, slapped at Lucius. Thorn-studded boughs of mesquite tore at his face.

In a little while, his prized white shirt was slashed to ribbons. A sombrero was knocked off. His thousand scratches smarted in his smooth skin.

But still he rode recklessly, desperately.

He had traveled for perhaps two hours, when he finally realized that he could not catch Caliente on Molasses. The marks of the outlaw's horse's hoofs in the sand showed that the fugitive was not sparing his animal or himself a bit more than the deputy was.

And, all other things being equal, it was plain that the Shootin' Fool was beaten in the race.

Molasses was a good and faithful critter—the kind that could always be depended upon to get you there if you gave it enough time. But it had never taken any prizes for speed.

"Dog-gone!" Lucius suddenly decided that he might have made a mistake in leaving Cotulla so recklessly. "What am I going to do now? I wouldn't dare face Sheriff Alcorn without bringing in the gunman. And he'll be clear across the county line, where I'm not supposed to chase him, in a little while."

It was certainly no use racing on over the trail of the faster cayuse. Somewhat angry at Molasses for his lack of speed, the deputy jerked him toward the south more sharply than ordinarily he would have done.

Face to face with failure, the Shootin' Fool wanted a little while to think over plans. The fact of defeat did not interfere with his being hungry, and he decided to kill

two birds with one stone—go down to a Mexican cabin that he knew of on the bank of the Nueces River, and study out his plans for the future as he traveled.

There was no hope in his mind that he would ever catch Caliente Perkins. His spirits sank lower and lower, as he wound slowly and thoughtfully through the thicket.

Reaching the river, he turned dismally along it and rode down to the clearing for which he was looking.

The place belonged to a Mexican named José Peralta, whom Lucius had befriended in an official way on more than one occasion. The deputy had no doubt that he would be welcome for one meal or as many as he wanted, but he was a little nauseated at the thought of the hot and greasy Mexican food that he probably would get.

He had had almost enough chili for one day's diet.

The home of his friend was about the same as that of any other poor Mexican in the prickly-pear country. The walls of the two-room cabin in the center of the weedy clearing were of yellowish-gray adobe, the roof of tree branches, with a layer of earth.

The single window on the approach side of the shack and the door were decorated by long strings of red peppers.

The Shootin' Fool made a wry face. But having had his breakfast interrupted by the stranger in the Chuck Wagon, he felt that he had to eat something in order to keep going.

It was strange, he thought, that there was no sign of life around the house. José and his wife had several children, as well as a number of dogs, two burros, and a goat.

The deputy's puzzlement was slightly relieved when he saw the three last-named animals amble out

of the thicket to browse on sparse grass in the clearing.

"I reckon the Mex and his wife hitched up the burros and took the kids to town," grunted Lucius. "In which case, I suppose the dogs would trail along."

Custom gave the Shootin' Fool the right to help himself to the food he needed in a friend's house, even though the owner was away. Therefore, it was just as well that the Peraltas were not at home. Lucius could cook himself a meal that would be tastier to him than the hot mixtures of the Mexicans.

He did not trouble to ride around the cabin, since he had no suspicions there. And Molasses evidently was too tired and sleepy to give a sign that there was another cayuse in the clearing.

Leaving his horse, with its reins dragging, a few feet from the building, the deputy swung out of his saddle and strode to the door. Grasping its latch, he pushed it open. A stride carried him into the dim interior of the shack.

Coming out of the glaring sunlight, his eyes required several seconds to adjust themselves. Only the barest outlines of the larger pieces of furniture were visible, and—

The Shootin' Fool uttered a startled gasp, as a large black shadow seemingly reared off the floor toward him.

He clutched at the handles of his six-guns. But as he did so, something hard jabbed into the pit of his stomach.

"Throw 'em up!" snarled a voice that he recognized. "I 'lowed yo'd foller me, yuh danged fool! I laid fer yuh, figgerin' yuh wouldn't have brains enough not ter come right in hyar after me."

"Huh?" Lucius Carey's fingers tightened about his gun butts.

Click! The hammer of the weapon in the other man's hand snapped back. The muzzle pressed harder into the deputy's midriff.

"Throw 'em up, I said!" barked the enemy. "I got *yuh*."

Slowly, as if he were letting go of his last hold upon life, the Shootin' Fool drew his empty hands away from his six-guns and lifted them toward the ceiling.

The outlaw jerked the .45s out of the deputy's holsters and tossed them across the room into a corner, where they would be difficult to reach.

IV.

Lucius Carey was neatly caught, and he knew it. His dismay at being trapped so simply was equaled only by his dread of what he expected must come.

He had no doubt that Caliente Perkins intended to kill him. Otherwise, the outlaw would not have waited there in the cabin for him to come along.

The deputy's eyes, now adjusted to the shadows, swept to his six-guns in the corner. At the moment of his capture, there had been nothing he could do but surrender the weapons. If he could surprise Caliente and get the guns in his hands again, it might be a different story.

The crook did not need to be a mind reader to know what Lucius was thinking. No doubt, any other man in the same situation as the deputy would have had similar thoughts of escape.

But Caliente only laughed sneeringly and kept the muzzle of his .45 trained on his prisoner.

"*Git busy!*" commanded the gunman gruffly.

"*Busy?*" The Shootin' Fool's blue eyes widened. "What do you mean? Get busy doing what?"

Caliente nodded toward the second door of the room, which, the deputy knew, opened into the tiny kitchen.

"Stir tergether a mess o' chuck," growled the outlaw. "I'm purty nigh starved."

Lucius Carey started to shake his head. Although he could prepare a meal for himself if the necessity arose, he was too proud to be forced to cook for anybody else.

"Oh, *yuh won't, huh?*" Caliente jabbed his gun into the prisoner's midriff again. "I'll show *yuh* whether *yuh will or not*. My thumb's mighty unsteady on the hammer o' my .45, an'—"

The deputy began backing toward the kitchen door. After all, why should he get shot before he had to?

He might have to pocket his pride for a while to cook for the outlaw. But in the end, the chance for escape might present itself.

Trying to keep his hope from revealing itself in his tense face, he went into the kitchen and looked around. The gunman stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame and thumbing the hammer of his murderous .45.

The furnishings of the kitchen were few. There were a small, flat-topped stove, a table and one chair and a box of wood.

A covered pot was standing on top of the stove. The Shootin' Fool lifted its cover and looked in.

"Here's some meat and frijoles already cooked," he announced.

"*Bueno.*" Caliente smacked his lips with gusto. "Git the fire goin' under it, an' it'll do."

Vainly racking his brain for some plan of escape, Lucius obeyed, kindling a blaze in the stove and opening the drafts. In a little while, the meat and beans were warmed sufficiently—for most people. But

they were not hot enough for the gunman.

"Look around fer some chili pepper," he ordered, when the deputy started to lift the pot of food onto the table. "Nobody ever gits nothin' hot enough fer the Red-hot Ranny," added Caliente complainingly.

Lucius did not have to search far for the seasoning that the outlaw desired. A big canful of the ground red pepper stood on a shelf above the stove.

As he took it down, a hopeful idea struck the officer. If he could hurl the contents of the can into Caliente's eyes, the gunman would be blinded, in a far worse plight than the Shootin' Fool had been in when the mixture of chili spattered over him in the Cotulla restaurant.

His hopes were quickly dashed, however, as Caliente must have sensed his plan.

"Don't try thet trick," snarled the outlaw. "I'm wise ter fellers like yuh. Put the pepper in the pot, an' nowhar else."

Lucius Carey turned back toward the stove, to hide the disappointment in his blue eyes. If he could not blind his enemy with the pepper, perhaps—

He deliberately turned the can upside down and dumped its entire contents into the kettle. Was hope completely gone, after all?

A faint smile played upon the Shootin' Fool's smooth, untanned face, as he turned to set the pot on the table, taking a spoon off the shelf and putting it down, too.

Caliente Perkins swaggered from the doorway, kicked the chair up to the table and sat down heavily. He did not holster his gun, however, but laid it on the edge of the table, within easy reach of his hand, as he picked up the spoon.

"Yuh know"—he leered at the deputy as he thrust the implement into the crudely made chili like a shovel—"yuh ain't such a bad feller, after all. If I didn't know it was my duty ter perfect my neck, I'd sort o' hate ter kill yuh."

"You're really going to do that?" Lucius sighed.

"Uh-huh. As quick as I git through eatin'." The gunman lifted the spoon, heaping full, toward his open mouth.

The Shootin' Fool tensed himself, ready for action.

Ummm! His little pig eyes gleaming greedily, Caliente scooped the chili into his mouth.

For an instant, nothing happened. The chili fiend began to chew—slowly, expectantly.

Suddenly, then, what Lucius Carey expected occurred. Despite the gunman's taste for hot food, he could not stand the amount of pepper that the deputy had dumped into that pot of beans and meat.

With a spluttering, choking oath, Caliente abruptly bolted upright from his chair. Tears sprang into his black eyes. Both hands clutched violently at his mouth and throat, as if to tear out something that was tormenting him there.

"Wh-what the—what the—" he gasped, in a rasping, pain-racked voice.

The Shootin' Fool grinned unsympathetically.

"Water! Water! Quick! I'm burnin' up!" screamed the outlaw, staring wildly at the deputy.

For the time being, Caliente Perkins forgot everything else in his own fiery torment. His gun was there on the table, but his hands were too busy tearing at his burning throat to pick it up.

Lucius Carey sprang forward and seized the weapon. Grinning, he

motioned with the barrel toward the corner of the kitchen.

"There's water—in that bucket," he said.

Grunting greedily, the gunman whirled toward the spot. Grabbing up the pail that the deputy had pointed out, he raised it to his mouth and sucked deeply at the water. In his haste, much of the water trickled down over his chin and onto his shirt.

Finally his frantic gulping seemed to soothe the torture in his throat. Hatred of the officer shone again in his piggish eyes. He half lowered the bucket, holding it as if he were

going to hurl it at the Shootin' Fool's head.

Lucius Carey laughed. He was not going to be caught again.

"Drop it!" He stepped forward and jabbed the muzzle of the six-gun into Caliente Perkins's ribs. "Now, Mr. Red-hot Ranny, we're going to hot-foot it to town."

The Shootin' Fool sometimes takes queer ways ter get his man. But the main thing is that he does have a knack o' gittin' 'em. When them six-guns o' his fail him, he finds other ways—an' it ain't all luck, neither. But he'll have ter count on them smoke poles, an' some luck, too, in the next thrillin' story about him. Watch fer it pronto in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



SAN JACINTO BATTLE FLAG FOUND

ON April 21, 1836, the Battle of San Jacinto was fought, and won the freedom of Texas from Mexico. General Santa Anna, who commanded the Mexican forces, was very much puffed up with his victories at the Alamo and Goliad. He believed the Texans were conquered for good, and would not dare oppose him again, but he did not know of what stuff Texans were made.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, General Sam Houston ordered the charge and sounded the war cry, "Remember the Alamo!" It passed from rank to rank, and rose on the air as if from one throat.

The Mexicans heard it, and it chilled their hearts.

At that moment a rider dashed up on a horse covered with mud and foam, swinging an ax over his head.

Galloping along the Texas lines, he shouted:

"I have cut down Vince's bridge! Now fight for your lives and remember the Alamo!"

Both armies had crossed Vince's

bridge on their downward march, and it was the only passway by land at that season of the year. Houston had ordered it cut down so that the enemy would have no way of escape. His own men, too, would have no way of retreat if necessary.

They would fight harder, knowing that they must conquer or die. They conquered and captured the Mexican general. A treaty of peace was made, and Texas was lost forever to the Republic of Mexico.

The flag that was carried before Sam Houston's Texas troops on that memorable day, was believed to have been lost. But some time ago it was found to be in the possession of the daughter of John G. Moore, who carried the flag throughout the battle, although he was only twelve years old.

The flag is a narrow strip of silk bearing three stars. It has one bullet hole in it, but is well preserved. The boy who carried it to victory became an Indian fighter, and later was a prosperous cattleman.

A Friendly Cottonwood

IN the days when Indian raids were not uncommon in the region of the San Gabriel River, a young woman and her two small children had a dramatic escape from a roving band of savages.

John McLennan had gone there with his wife, Peggy, and their children, in company with several other families.

Nothing unusual happened for some time. Then one day, while the men were absent, a band of Indians swooped down on the McLennan home. They seized Peggy and bound her with a bridle rein, but the children were so small that the redskins did not trouble to tie them up. They crouched close to their mother, and were too badly frightened even to cry.

The McLennans had been such a short time in their new home that they had not unpacked all their effects. The raiding Indians began pillaging and destroying. They broke the chairs and threw them outside. They smashed the one table, pulled the few treasured pictures from home down from the walls, and threw them after the chairs. They broke open boxes and scattered the contents.

Then they came across something that made them pause. Yelling and whooping with delight, they drew from a box a bottle of whisky. They pried the lid off and found several more bottles, and a quantity of strong medicines. These things had been brought from Florida in case of sickness, and the boxes had not been opened.

The Indians forgot Peggy and her children as soon as they were in possession of the whisky and the medicines. They guzzled the whole lot,

and after a short spell of dancing, yelling, capering, and wild antics, they were overcome, and one by one they began dropping off into drunken sleep.

As soon as Peggy heard their snores and saw that the last one to drop was insensible, she wriggled out of her bonds, and taking a child with each hand, crept silently from the cabin. She waded across the river and walked along until she came to an immense cottonwood surrounded by a luxuriant growth of tall, coarse weeds.

Pushing one child ahead of her, and with the other clinging tightly to her back, the young woman climbed into the branches of the tree. In its friendly shade she was completely hidden, while the children were so terrified they did not even whimper.

When the men returned and found the camp abandoned and the things thrown around, they were sure that the young woman and her children had been taken captives. The neighbors gathered together in a rescue party and set out to find the captives dead or alive.

They passed under the cottonwood, but she was so crazed by fright that she did not know them, and thought they were the Indians she had escaped from. She shrieked with terror, and that told them her hiding place. They begged her to come down, but she refused, and at last her husband and a neighbor climbed up and brought her and the children down.

As soon as she touched the ground, she ran, and had to be caught and secured before she could realize that they were her friends and her own people.



Gun Time

By Philip F. Deere

Author of "Spite Ranch," etc.

THE deputy marshal of the roaring town of Rio Hondo, ripped off the final wrapping from the battered package that had arrived on the noon mail stage, and then suddenly he seemed to freeze.

Disbelief, horror, and grief, mingled in a swift cloud that erased the look of tolerant good humor from his face, and his stringy body stiffened rigidly. Slowly, reluctantly, Pat Wadsworth delved among the contents of the opened box.

He found a watch, a wallet, a gun and belt, a few trinkets and—most ominous of all—a saddle. He recognized them only too well.

An envelope bearing his name was wedged in a flap. Pat opened it and read. He read it again, slower this

time, his face going bleak, and his eyes slitting down.

"Did yuh ever know King Flagler, Axel?" he finally asked, after a long moment of thought.

Axel Arter, the marshal, who was busy looking over his own consignment of mail at his desk, glanced at him in surprise.

"Yep, I know the King," he said.

"What're his earmarks?"

"King Flagler? Why, once yuh see him yuh'll know him without bein' told," the marshal declared. "He's one of the fastest guns on the border. Why, ol' King has rubbed out more bad men than—"

"I know his rep," Pat interrupted. "I mean, how can I identify him?"

"King's not a big man, though he

ain't little either. He must be past forty now, an' I ain't seen him for five years. But he's short-coupled—like a brick—an' hard, boy. Yes, sir, he's right hard, both in appearance an' action. Got a face that never smiles, a thin nose, a mouth no wider than the edge of a knife, an' eyes that make yuh feel like yo're lookin' down gun barrels. But King's a square jigger. He never hunts trouble."

"Yeah!" Pat said bitterly.

Then he stripped his shield from his gray shirt, and tossed it on the marshal's desk.

"I'm resignin', Axel," he said. "I'm slopin'—south."

Axel's mouth gaped. His eyes wandered to the effects on Pat's desk, and his face hardened.

"Yore brother?" he asked incredulously. "Art? He's——"

"Dead," Pat said in a monotone, as he began stripping his gear from hooks and nails above his bunk in an adjoining room.

"But—but, yuh can't," Axel began helplessly. "Yo're—yo're not thinkin' of tryin' tuh fetch King Flagler, are yuh?"

The grim youth did not answer as he thonged his blanket roll and tied the burlap sack that was his war bag. He buckled on his gun belt and held out a strong brown hand.

"You're not needin' me any more, Axel," he said. "The town is eatin' out o' your hand. You can handle Rio Hondo without the help of another gun-slinger now. Keep Art's stuff until you hear."

Axel ached with the desire to argue, as Pat rigged his strawberry roan. But he knew it was useless, and held his peace. He had seen Pat set his jaw like that in times gone by. So he waved an arm as his former deputy disappeared into

the willows at the creek ford, and then returned listlessly to his desk.

"King Flagler," he muttered, "an' Pat Wadsworth! Chain lightnin' an' greased thunderbolts. The two fastest gunmen I ever saw. An' Pat's aimin' on sallivatin' the King or I miss my guess. I wish I could stop it. Heck! I wish I could see the fight."

On the trail, Pat went over for the third time, the message that had uprooted him from Rio Hondo. It read:

PAT WADSWORTH: Here are your brother's effects. Enchantment was too small for both of us. And it's too small for anybody who wears Wadsworth for a name. So steer clear of Enchantment.

SHERIFF KING FLAGLER.

"So he's sheriff of Enchantment County," Pat mused. "That gives him an edge. Enchantment! They say it's a salty town an' a saltier county. Well, hoss, we'll be there in a week."

"Shore looks like the community wouldn't be startled much by a killin' or two," Pat muttered, as he rode into Enchantment.

It was evening of a hot day, and the dust of the Arizona desert lay on horse and rider like gunpowder. The sorrel was gaunted and dried out, weary of leg, and saddle sore, for a week of fast traveling lay behind it.

This was new country to Pat, and he stared curiously at the squat dobe structures, the color of which was the same as the parched plains upon which they stood.

"A gun-totin' town, an' suspicious of strangers," he murmured, as he put up his horse at a corral.

The impression of brooding restraint, and cold hostility impressed itself deeper on the tall visitor, as he

stowed away a square meal at a tamale shack.

"Too many heeled hombres, an' too few women on the sidewalks," he decided, strolling up and down the dirt walks as darkness began to settle down.

He passed the jail and stared curiously in. It was deserted, although a kerosene lamp glowed from a wall.

He became aware then that three idlers were following him at a distance, and he was careful not to linger in any unlighted places.

"I reckon I'll be asked to give an account o' myself right soon," he thought. "There's some sort of a ruckus on the brew here in Enchantment."

A guitar twanged mellowly from a *cantina* across the way, but its gloomy, low interior, and hard-looking patrons were not inviting; so Pat headed for a bigger and better-lighted saloon, which a sign proclaimed to be "The Silver Spur Café."

"At least, it's light enough in here tuh see who's doin' the shootin'," he chuckled, as he entered and leaned against the bar.

A minute later, the three men who had been following him, sauntered in. A glance in the mirror told Pat that they were appraising him. He watched them as they moved to the bar, one on either side, and one standing behind him.

Pat cocked an eye at the one to his right, a solid-shouldered individual, stubbly of cheek, hard of eye, and packing two guns.

"I'd be pleased if you hombres would stand away an' give me drinkin' room," he observed mildly. "Or, maybe yo're plannin' on presentin' me with the keys to the town."

"I'm Duke Sloman," the two-gun hombre said with heavy emphasis, after a moment of surprise. Pat's

calm assurance had startled him. "What's yore handle?"

"Oh, yo're takin' the census," Pat said in mock surprise, turning to face them, resting his elbows on the bar.

Sloman swallowed, his eyes beginning to glitter balefully.

"Listen, hombre," he rumbled. "I'm speakin' for Martin Jade. I'm askin' what yore name is. It ain't Wadsworth, I reckon."

"You're not meanin' Pat Wadsworth of Rio Hondo?" Pat countered. "Now that's surprisin'—"

"I didn't really *think* you was Pat Wadsworth, yuh fresh young fool," Sloman growled, dropping all pretense of restraint. "There's nothin' open on this range for dude punchers. Savvy? I'll give yuh till mornin' tuh bust the breeze."

"An' what if I'm still here?" Pat asked quietly.

Sloman patted his gun as his only answer, although he was swelling with rage. Few men dared to defy him here in Enchantment.

"There's no use waitin' until mornin'," Pat continued. "I'm informin' yuh that I plan tuh stay here quite a while."

Sloman did not believe that he had heard aright. This flashily dressed, almost dandified young rider, smooth-cheeked, lazy of manner, had seemed as harmless as velvet. But the velvet covered hard steel, and the three became tense as they sensed that fact.

"Why you—" The sentence was never finished.

It was smashed back in Sloman's throat, together with a few teeth, by the impact of a hard fist.

Pat had known from the first that with the odds three to one against him, his only chance lay in carrying the fight to the enemy, instead of waiting for them to come to him.

And he had sent his fist into Sloman's face with every ounce of power he could muster.

II.

Sloman crashed on his back, his head thudding. As his victim fell, Pat whirled. One of the two other gunmen—a small, catlike fellow, pock-marked, and twisted of lip—had snapped back a pace for fighting room, and was going for his gun. The little man was fast. But in this match he did not even clear his weapon.

Crash! A bullet smashed him back onto a poker table.

A faint haze of powder smoke hung before Pat, and there in his hand was a smoking gun, although no one in the saloon had seen him draw.

"Steady," Pat flashed, for the third man's hand had dropped to his gun.

The gunman, slow of action and wit, stopped his draw, his face going yellow.

Feet scuffed, and there was an ominous growl, as some of the patrons arose.

"Hold it, all of you!" Pat said, backing toward the front of the bar, his gun describing an arc. "Take root! I'm shootin' at the first wink of an eye. Better elevate yore paws."

"Yuh'll never get out o' this town alive," Sloman muttered thickly, as he rose to his knees. "Yo're foolin' with Martin Jade, yuh dizzy maverick! An' I'll kill yuh myself, the next time I see yuh."

"I'm not aimin' on leavin' town," Pat said evenly. "I got business tuh transact here. An' tell King Flagler that he'd better come in person, if he wants me fetched."

Sloman's eyes widened slowly. He

seemed about to speak. But he was interrupted.

A figure stepped through the bat-wing doors and halted, sizing up the situation. A star gleamed on his vest.

"I'm King Flagler," the new arrival calmly addressed Pat, who darted a quick glance at him, and then slowly, easily returned his gun to its holster. "What was that remark yuh made, young man? An' hand over yore gun. Yo're under arrest."

"I'm keepin' my gun," Pat said softly.

So this was "King" Flagler. Yes, Axel Arter had told the truth. Nobody could make a mistake in identifying the King. Pat had never seen a face so devoid of emotion and yet so alive with character. Its seamed, sharp features were as rugged as those of a granite peak.

There were deeply etched creases about Flagler's thin mouth that told of bitter, dangerous years. And Flagler had lived a life of danger. A gunman he was—the greatest of them all, some said, and few had ever denied it.

That he was still alive as he approached the half-century mark was evidence that Flagler was no ordinary man. Careers such as his are usually cut short.

But, as Pat studied the sheriff, he sensed that beneath that calm surface were taut nerves and the alertness of a man who awaits sudden, violent action. And curiously, Pat realized that Flagler was watching Sloman and the others, rather than Pat himself.

"Better fork over yore hardware, mister," Flagler continued without looking directly at him. "Or I'll have tuh take it from yuh. Yuh'll get a square deal. On the face of it I'd say yuh did this in self-defense,

I'll let yuh know later whether yuh'll have to stand trial."

"Stay out of this, Flagler," Sloman growled. "This jasper just murdered Sandblast. We pay off our own debts, savvy? You'll save yoreself a hatful of trouble by hidin' in yore office."

"What's yore name, feller?" Flagler addressed Pat. "Where yuh from, what are yuh doin' here, an' if yuh expect tuh live, unwrap yoreself from yore gun belt."

"My name is Wadsworth, Pat Wadsworth," Pat said clearly, making no move to give up his gun. "Ever hear of me? I came here to kill you, Flagler."

The room had been silent, except for the labored breathing of men, but even that suddenly stopped, and the place seemed to become a soundless vacuum. Men ceased to edge toward their guns. Even Sloman became rigid, the fury dying from his face.

Pat Wadsworth! That name went spinning through every mind as their eyes swung from one figure to another.

Flagler turned slowly and faced Pat. The three-sided aspect of the situation had disappeared, resolving into a man to man proposition. For seconds they studied each other, measuring, appraising, and calculating.

"I've heard of yuh," King Flagler finally said softly. "Yuh helped Axel Arter clean up Rio Hondo. I reckon we've all heard of yuh, Wadsworth. Yo're right immediate on the trigger, they say. So yuh aim tuh kill me, eh? Well, here I am."

Men coiled themselves for a leap to safety. None of them, not even Sloman, wanted any of this red meat now. Pat Wadsworth! King Flagler! Giants on the verge of a clash!

"I'll give yuh first reach," Pat grated, his hands at his sides, his eyes never wavering.

"Why are yuh thristin' tuh bring me down?" Flagler asked. And as he went on a weary note crept into his voice. "I reckon yo're after a bigger reputation, eh, Wadsworth? Everybody in the West knows what yuh did at Rio Hondo. An' now yuh want tuh take in more territory."

"You can't rattle me, by prodin'," Pat said. "You know why I'm here. I'm the second Wadsworth to visit this country. The other one, my brother, stayed here. I may stay here too, but I'll have permanent company."

He saw genuine surprise flicker in Flagler's face and then give way to an expression hard to analyze. It was as if the sheriff was turning some new thought over in his mind, and Pat realized that Flagler was no longer watching him rigidly. He could have drawn then and made the kill with ease. But he did not reach.

"Jade is payin' yuh plenty, eh, son?" Flagler muttered.

Pat framed a hot denial, puzzled by the accusation, but the chop of hoofs and the thud of boots stopped him.

A newcomer burst through the doors, and halted.

"So it's true," the arrival said, after a pause. "I heard that one of my riders had been killed here, Flagler. Did you do it?"

"Naw, this here ranny did it, Mr. Jade," Sloman whined, indicating Pat. "This is Pat Wadsworth."

Pat realized that this was the mysterious Martin Jade in person. Jade exuded prosperity, wealth, and power. His garb was tailored and of expensive tweed, adorned with a diamond watch chain, and silver spurs.

But his face was wedge-shaped, with pointed chin and beady eyes set close together over a flattened nose. It was not a face that Pat liked.

"We'll take care of this, Flagler," Jade said, with a jerk of his thumb toward the door. "Mosey."

"Still tryin' tuh make me knuckle down, eh, Jade," Flagler said with a curl of his lip. "I'm sheriff of this county, elected tuh enforce the law as I see it. I'm doin' my duty in this case, an' I won't tolerate any interference."

"You're a dirty ingrate," Jade stormed, his temples veined with fury. "I elected you, and instead of working with me, you're trying to run this county for your own benefit. I made you sheriff, and I can see to it that you have to vacate the office."

"Meanin' that you'll rub me out," Flagler snapped. "Why don't yuh wear a gun, Jade. Yo're fast on the draw. I've heard it said that yo're as fast as anybody. Is it because your nerve isn't so good? I was drafted for this office of sheriff, an' I made no promises to you or anybody else. My only pledge is tuh enforce the law. Get this straight: This is Enchantment County, not Martin Jade county, an' if I live, I'll see that it's run for the benefit of all the people—not for a sneakin' range grabber an' his crew of hired killers."

"I'll put on my gun soon enough," Jade spat.

Pat noticed that Jade had his right hand hooked into the front of his coat, as though to support the arm, and he wondered if the arm was injured.

"If yuh keep that promise, I'll shore be obliged," Flagler said significantly.

"What are you going to do with Wadsworth?" Martin Jade de-

manded, changing a subject that was gnawing away his prestige.

"Turn him loose after I get him out of this nest," Flagler declared. "He says he plugged Sandblast in self-defense. Knowin' the crew that draws their pay from you, I believe him. He allows he come here tuh kill me. That's his privilege—if he can do it. I made a mistake in hintin' that you had hired him, an' I'm apologizin' tuh him for *that*, but nothin' else."

Jade eagerly leaped at this chance to force an issue.

"You're *not* turning him free," he howled. "He either stands trial for murder, or I'll take the law in my own hands."

"You'd pack the jury, an' buy the judge, Jade," Flagler said contemptuously. "I'm releasin' him, for lack of evidence."

"We'll lynch him to-night an' run you out of town," Jade promised.

"Well, I'm glad you've come out in the open," Flagler said, backing toward the door. "Come on, Wadsworth."

At the forward end of the bar, a green baze curtain, hung over a row of shelves, niched in the wall, swayed slightly, and Pat's eyes caught the movement. His hand flipped to his gun.

Boom! Boom! The blare of Pat's .45 was echoed by a flash of flame through the curtain.

King Flagler's hat twisted on his head. From behind the curtain came a choking, strangling gasp.

"Shag it," Pat cried, for the group in the room was teetering on the brink of braving the fire of the two gun experts.

Flagler leaped back through the swinging doors with Pat in his wake, and they ducked aside as a sleet of lead poured through the thin panels in search of them. Crouching low,

they raced around the building and headed for the jail.

"Thanks," Flagler said as they entered the cell room by the rear door, and made their way to the office.

"I reckon they'll be comin' inside of fifteen minutes," Flagler observed as he swung a brace of double-barreled shotguns down from a gunrack. "Yuh better be ridin', Wadsworth. You've still got time, an' in the dark yuh ought tuh be able tuh slip away. There's a black horse in the jail corral I'll loan yuh—unless yo're still of a mind tuh gun me."

"I'm up a tree," Pat admitted. "Axel told me you were a square dealer, an' there's been lots of things in the last few minutes tuh prove it. Do me a favor, an' let me see yore signature."

Flagler looked at him narrowly.

"Is this a scheme tuh hang up my gun hand?" he asked with an attempt at a smile. "But, I'll humor yuh. I take it that yo're hangin' the killin' of a brother on me. I've rubbed out a few, but all of 'em was throwin' down on me first. If I got your brother, he must have been travelin' under another name."

While he was talking, Flagler scribbled his name on a scrap of paper. Pat took it, produced his wallet and extracted the note that had come to him at Rio Hondo. There was not the least resemblance in the handwriting. Then Pat produced a yellowed photo from the wallet and passed it over to Flagler.

"There's a pitcher of Art Wadsworth—my brother," he said.

"Great guns!" Flagler exclaimed. Then he hesitated and said reluctantly, "I hate tuh tell yuh, but he's dead, an' buried in Boot Hill. He was found murdered on the trail south of town about three weeks ago, an' not a thing in his duds tuh

identify him. I gave him a decent burial, for he was a clean-cut chap."

Pat swallowed hard. "Who killed him?" he asked after a moment.

III.

Men's voices were resounding in the street, and the pound of booted feet could be heard, but Flagler turned to his desk, opened a drawer and handed over a small, battered piece of lead to Pat.

"That was what killed him," he said.

"A derringer bullet!" Pat gritted. "Probably killed by somebody he was talkin' to on the trail, or somebody he trusted."

"What made yuh think I killed him?" Flagler inquired.

Pat handed over the note, and Flagler studied it with lowering eyes.

"I don't savvy," he finally said. "I think I do," Pat snapped.

They could say no more, for the surge of hurrying feet had arrived at the jail. With a glance at each other, they picked up the shotguns, and stepped onto the little stoop in front of the door.

Pat was amazed by the size of the mob that Martin Jade headed.

There must have been twenty-five—a dozen or so obviously town idlers who were ready to follow any leader. The remainder were cold-eyed gunmen, who only followed a leader who paid them well.

A kerosene lamp on a pole, lighted the scene dimly.

"The inside edge of the sidewalk is the deadline, Jade," Flagler called. "This man is still in the custody of the law, an' I'm not turnin' him over to you an' yore lynchers."

"Then we'll take him," Jade said, but there was an uneasy note in his voice.

Colt six-guns they might have

chanced, but shotguns were something that no mob has any stomach for.

"Come on, then," Flagler challenged. "I'm waitin'."

A man tried to slink from the rear. Flagler's gun rose.

"Stay where yuh are," he warned. "Keep tuhgether. If yuh try tuh scatter, I'll open up."

"This is a show-down, then," Jade shouted, white with rage. "You're through, Flagler. This community doesn't intend to stand by and let you release killers just because they belong to your murderous profession. Hand him over, or sign your death warrant."

"Yuh been anxious tuh have me killed ever since I was elected," Flagler said. "Yuh thought I'd wink at yore gunmen, an' their business, but I didn't. I've put two of 'em in the pen, an' the rest are losin' their nerve, even though you've raised their pay. Yo're no longer able tuh run out little ranchers an' grab their water rights, rustle their stock, an' laugh at the law. Here's your chance tuh get back intuh the money, Jade. But remember, that the first charge I fire will rip right through you."

"Listen, men," Jade said hoarsely to his followers. "I refuse to sacrifice your lives, even though I know that you're willing to follow me in the interests of justice. But I can no longer brook the double-dealing of this gunman. You all hear me, don't you? I'm telling King Flagler to be out of Enchantment by noon to-morrow. If he doesn't go, I'll kill him, right here in this street."

"That's the way tuh talk," Flagler approved. "I'll be here at noon, as usual, Jade."

Then Flagler whispered to Pat from the corner of his mouth.

"Back intuh the office, an' plant

yoreself at a window. I'm makin' a deputy of yuh."

Pat gave a swift backward stride, and appeared with his shotgun at a window, which was recessed far in the thick dobe wall.

Jade and his crowd had begun to stir, but now they paused uncertainly. Flagler backed into the doorway, where he was sheltered from any chance of flanking gunshots.

"Wait a minute," he barked. "I'm arrestin' all of you gun slingers—all except Jade. Don't make any false moves. Come up here one by one an' unload yore hardware. I'm filin' peace warrants against all of yuh. After noon, tuh-morrow, I may withdraw 'em."

An angry growl ran through the crowd. Jade began swearing.

"You first, Whitey," King Flagler shouted, indicating a bow-legged gunman on the fringe of the front line. "Make it lively."

Whitey hesitated, his hand creeping toward his gun.

Bang! Flagler had drawn and fired his .45 in one blurred motion. Whitey leaped, and howled, a hand rising to an ear.

"I'll not nick an ear with the next one," Flagler warned, both hands again on the shotgun. "Come on, Whitey."

Whitey stumbled up the steps, swearing, and Flagler disarmed him. The remainder of the crowd took a second look at the bores of the shotguns, and then one by one, as Flagler called their names, they came reluctantly into the office to submit to arrest.

Finally, with fifteen prisoners, Flagler slammed the door.

"The rest of you tinhorns can pull yore freight," he called contemptuously. "Jade, I'll see yuh at noon tuh-morrow."

Flagler looked at his scowling prisoners. He had all of the really dangerous gunmen in the group—except one.

"Where is Duke Sloman?" he asked. But they did not answer.

Pat helped him jail them. They filled the cells to capacity.

"That reduces the odds against yuh," Pat congratulated the sheriff as they returned to the office. "Slick work."

"But we didn't get Duke Sloman," Flagler said moodily. "He wasn't in the mob. I reckon he's still nursin' that smash on the jaw that you handed him."

"What's wrong with Jade's right arm?" Pat inquired. "He kept it hooked across the front of his coat, like it might have been hurt. He never straightened it out."

Flagler looked at him searchingly. "What's your hunch?"

"Oh, nothing," Pat parried. "I was wondering why a man with a useless wing would want to go up against you in a gun fight."

Pat was inspecting some of the effects taken by Flagler from the gunmen's pockets. Nearly every little heap included a check on the Enchantment bank, signed by Martin Jade.

"He must have paid 'em a bonus tuh-night," Flagler commented, as he moved to his bunk in the little quarters adjoining the office, and began removing his boots. "Let's turn in."

Pat, his back to the sheriff, pulled a scrap of paper from his wallet and compared the handwriting on it with Jade's signature. Then he replaced the papers.

"I'll stand watch for a few hours," he offered.

"All right," Flagler agreed. "But there's not enough gun power roaming around loose tuh worry us."

WW-9C

It was an hour before his deep breathing told Pat that the sheriff was asleep. Pat knew why the sheriff had tossed restlessly for so long. He was expecting treachery. Martin Jade was cunning and tricky as an opponent in any duel. And then Duke Sloman was a factor to be counted on.

Pat snuffed out a cigarette and stood up. A big clock above the sheriff's desk was clacking off the seconds. Pat removed his boots and silently mounted the desk. He opened the clock's glass face, and with a quick twirl of the hands, set the timepiece back an hour.

Then he glided to the sheriff's scattered clothing, delved in a vest pocket, found a big silver watch, and that too, he tampered with. After which he rolled up in a blanket on the floor and slept.

IV.

A rumble of disgust awakened him. The sun was streaming in the windows, and Sheriff Flagler, in his socks, stood in the office, his watch in hand, staring up at the clock.

"Dang it, I woke up an hour early," he complained. "Might as well stay up now. I'll go over tuh the beanery an' order breakfast for that pack in the cells."

"I'll do it," Pat said. "You better go back there an' look 'em over."

Pat congratulated himself upon entering the restaurant, for as he had suspected, there was a clock there. He conferred with the proprietor, and when he left, after ordering meals for the prisoners, the clock had been set back an hour.

He performed a similar mission at a jewelry store adjoining the restaurant, after some argument with the proprietor, who was proud of the timepiece in the window of his es-

tablishment. But he succeeded. It seemed that the business men of Enchantment, at least, were on the side of the law.

Later on, as he and the sheriff were lugging loaded trays to the jail, he grinned, for Flagler took pains to inspect the clocks in the restaurant and jewelry stores. After that, he seemed convinced that his instinctive sense of time had gone awry.

The morning wore on with Pat smoking silently in the jail office, and Flagler sitting moodily at his desk, chewing a cigar.

Enchantment had been a quiet, almost deserted town in appearance all morning. What few citizens did appear, did not linger on the sidewalks.

Occasional racket arose from the rear cell room, where the prisoners voiced massed protest at their arrest. But Flagler ignored it.

The slow hours wheeled by. Finally Pat aroused from a long reverie. The hands of the office clock pointed to five minutes of eleven o'clock. The hot rays of the sun were beating straight down. Not a sign of life was to be seen now in the straggling street. Enchantment had withdrawn to the shelter of its dobe walls.

"I reckon somebody sent me that message with your name forged to it in the hope that I'd come down here an' rub you out," he said, as he hitched his gun to a better position. "They figured that'd be easier—an' safer—than doin' it personally."

"I figger it the same way," Flagler nodded, with another glance at the clock. "Dang it, but this has been a long mornin'."

"I'll take a little stroll," Pat said, sauntering out the front door. "I'll be back pronto."

Flagler watched him go without interest. He was only hoping that

the next hour would speed faster than the others.

He remained there at his desk, his head sunken in moody thought, his hand occasionally tapping his six-gun. His mind was on Duke Sloman. Sloman would be in on this play, somewhere, somehow.

Suddenly he stiffened in his chair as if he had scented danger. He had become aware of a new tense vibrancy in the air—a brooding, chilling silence. Even the cell room had quieted. It was as if men were waiting—and straining their ears for something. Then—

Bong! The faint note of a bell tinkled through the hot mid-day heat.

It was the clock in the Silver Spur Saloon down the way, which struck one deep note at noon and at midnight.

The hour when somebody was to die had struck!

With a bound, Flagler was at the door, incredulous, startled, puzzled, as he glanced back at the office clock, which stood at eleven o'clock.

His eyes turned to the street, and he crouched, a grunt of amazement on his lips.

In the center of the dusty road, a hundred yards away, a tall, lithe figure — Pat Wadsworth — paced along, his back to Flagler.

Farther on, emerging from the shadow of a livery door, came another figure. Martin Jade!

Flagler's lips curled, for even at that distance he could see that Jade wore no holster. Jade's right arm was crooked across his breast, and he stood there, staring at Wadsworth uncertainly.

"Jade, I'm here tuh arrest yuh for the murder of my brother—or tuh kill yuh!"

Pat's words rang clearly to Flagler and to all others who were

watching from the security of doors and windows.

Pat's eyes were glued on Jade's right arm. They were only fifty feet apart now. Pat's gun still reposed in its holster, his right arm hanging straight down at his side.

He sensed that Jade's eyes had flickered slightly upward.

Bang! Boom! Two closely spaced gun reports shattered the silence. One came from somewhere behind Pat, and the other from above and to his left.

Pat did not move his eyes from Jade. He knew that a bullet had whined above his head and smashed a window to his right.

And he had an impression of a body plunging from the roof of the Silver Spur, whose door was to his left. A thud as the body struck the sidewalk came to him.

He saw Jade's face contort. Then Jade's right arm straightened in a flash. And Pat drew with one blurred snap of his hand.

The deep report of his .45 rolled from the dove fronts. The tongue of yellow flame seemed to flicker across the space between himself and Jade.

In the same heartbeat, Jade's right hand spurted a heavy, booming blast of flame and powder haze. A screaming slug flicked Pat's shoulder in its passage.

Then Jade, clutching at his chest, went backward on his heels, toppling like a falling tree—dead before he hit the ground.

Pat glanced toward the sidewalk in front of the Silver Spur. Duke Sloman's huddled form lay there.

"Sloman was bearin' down on yuh from the roof of the Spur, so I plugged him," King Flagler explained, as he arrived at Pat's side.

"Thanks," Pat said. "I'm apologizin' for hornin' in on yore play, but I had first claim on Jade. He had a derringer up his sleeve. That's why he carried his right arm that way—so the gun wouldn't fall out. I reckon we'll find that it's the same derringer that killed my brother. An' Jade's handwritin' matched up with the note he wrote tuh me, signin' yore name."

"Well, I'd have enjoyed doin' it," Flagler admitted, a rare smile lighting his face. "But any gent what can make time stand still has got me beat. Shake!"



THEY ARE ALL WORKING IN ROCHESTER

THERE isn't any unemployment in Rochester, New York, now. There was, but there isn't now.

Rochester waged a private war on depression. Trade was almost at a standstill. Men were idle. Machines were idle. The timid were hanging onto their spare money.

Then Rochester got busy and organized. They decided the way to wipe out the army of the unemployed was to put men to work. They found jobs for the white-collar men and the men in overalls. They

found roofs to reshingle, steps to repair, windows to glaze, walls to paint, cellars to clean out, plumbing to mend, and hundreds of odd jobs.

A goal was set up—two million dollars' worth of jobs. In the end, not two, but six million dollars' worth of work had been found. Unemployment came to an end.

Every town can be another Rochester.

If there's no local war on depression campaign in your community, start one now.

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.

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.

ALL ready for the singin' bee, folks? Waal, move around thar. Git intuh a circle, so the singin' will be nice an' loud. Thet's right. Now I'll be tunin' my ol' violin while I talk. It seems sort o' ornery tuh-day.

I reckon yuh all know, what I'm goin' tuh talk about, too. Yeah, yuh guessed right the fust time—rules an' hist'ry.

I'm still gettin' piles o' letters askin' me tuh send out copies o' songs ter individual readers, an' I swear tuh goodness I'm gettin' plumb tired of it. *I don't send out songs!* I ain't got the time tuh do more than try tuh find an' publish in the magazine the songs yuh-all want!

Read the directions above, folks, an' follow 'em. It'll save me a lot o' time, 'cause yuh see, I can't let a letter go by unanswered, even when I can only say "No."

As for hist'ry, I reckon yuh know what I mean thar, too. I'd like tuh feel thet yo're all gettin' more than just songs o' the West. I want yuh tuh git a feelin' o' the real West from its beginnin' through tuh-day, see?

Whenever yuh find a song thet yuh want tuh send in tuh the Corral, try tuh find out somethin' about it, too. Or at least tell me whar yuh got it, so thet I can look it up an' mebbe find out somethin' for yuh. O' course, it's true thet a good

many songs just sort o' sprung up,
an' tell thar own stories; an' the hist'-ry o' thar makin' is lost. But let's
try tuh git all we can, anyhow.

Thar! I've had my say, an' I
ain't nigh so much on the prod as I
sound; so let's git tuh work an' sing
a couple.

Hyar's one thet gives yuh an idea
o' the struggles o' trail-makers in
the earlier days:

SIOUX INDIANS

I'll sing you a song, though it may be a
sad one,
Of trials and troubles and where they first
begun;
I left my dear kindred, my friends, and my
home,
Across the wild deserts and mountains to
roam.

I crossed the Missouri and joined a large
train
Which bore us over mountain and valley
and plain;
And often of evenings out hunting we'd go
To shoot the fleet antelope and wild buffalo.

We heard of Sioux Indians all out on the
plains
A-killing poor drivers and burning their
trains—
A-killing poor drivers with arrows and bow,
When captured by Indians no mercy they
show.

We traveled three weeks till we came to the
Platte
And pitched out our tents at the end of
the flat,
We spread down our blankets on the green
grassy ground,
While our horses and mules were grazing
around.

While taking refreshment we heard a low
yell,
The whoop of Sioux Indians coming up
from the dell;
We sprang to our rifles with a flash in each
eye,
"Boys," says our brave leader, "we'll fight
till we die."

They made a bold dash and came near to
our train
And the arrows fell around us like hail and
like rain,

But with our long rifles we fed them cold
lead
Till many a brave warrior around us lay
dead.

We shot their bold chief at the head of his
band.
He died like a warrior with a gun in his
hand.
When they saw their bold chief lying dead
in his gore,
They whooped and they yelled and we saw
them no more.

With our small band—there were just
twenty-four—
And the Sioux Indians there were five hun-
dred or more—
We fought them with courage; we spoke
not a word,
Till the end of the battle was all that was
heard.

We hitched up our horses and we started
our train;
Three more bloody battles this trip on the
plain;
And in our last battle threc of our brave
boys fell,
And we left them to rest in a green, shady
dell.

Cowboys sure love thar hosses.
Hyar's a little pome on thet subject:

A COWBOY'S PRIZE

Never was no gal like Mollie
In creation, I don't think!
Hotter'n a hot tamale:
Han'some ain't the word to fit her—
She's a beauty head to heel—
Lightnin'-built git-up-an'-gitter,
An' as true as polished steel.

Case o' love at first sight, I reckon—
On my part, you understand—
An' I swore she'd soon be packin'
This same ol' cow-puncher's brand.
Went into the game an' won her,
From all rivals yanked the prize;
Cut her from the bunch an' run her
Off before their jealous eyes.

Now she's mine. There ain't a prouder
Rider on the ranges, see?
Mortal couldn't yawp no louder
Crackin' up her worth than me.
From the crupper to the snaffle
She's a thoroughbred, that mare,
That I won at Johnson's raffle
At the T Ranch on the Bear.

An' hyar's one more song for yuh. The Range Boss published it a long time ago, but it's one o' the best Western songs, an' I know yuh'll be glad tuh have it ag'in:

RIDING UP THE ROCKY TRAIL FROM TOWN

We're the children of the open and we hate the haunts of men,
But we had to ride to town to get the mail,
And we're riding home at daybreak 'cause the air is cooler then,
All 'cept one of us that stopped behind at jail.
Shorty's nose won't bear paradin', Bill's off-eye is darkly fadin',
All our toilets show a touch of disarray,
For we found that city life is a constant round of strife
And we ain't the breed for shyin' from a fray.

CHORUS:

Chant your war whoop, pardners dear, while the east turns pale with fear,
And the chaparral is tremblin' all around,
For we're wicked to the marrer, we're a midnight dream of terror
When we're ridin' up the rocky trail from town.

We acquired our hasty temper from our friend, the centipede.
From the rattlesnakes, we learned to guard our rights,
And we gathered some fightin' pointers from the famous broncho steed,
And the bobcat teached us repartee that bites.
So when some high-collared herrin' jeered the outfit I was wearin',

'Twasn't long until we got where talkin' ends,
And he ate his ill-bred chat with a sauce of derby hat,
While my merry pardners entertained his friends.

CHORUS:

Sing 'er out, my buckaroos! Let the desert hear the news!
Tell the stars the way we rubbed the haughty down,
We're the fiercest wolves a-prowlin', and it's just our night for howlin',
When we're ridin' up the rocky trail from town.

Since the days that Lot and Abram split the Jordan in halves,
Just to fix it so their punchers wouldn't fight,
Since old Jacob skinned his dad-in-law for six years' crops of calves,
Then hit the trail for Canaan in the night.
There has been the taste for battle 'mong the men that follow cattle
And the love of doin' things that's wild and strange,
And the warmth of Leban's words, when he missed his speckled herds,
Still is useful in the lingo of the range.

CHORUS:

Sing 'er out, my bold coyotes, leather fists and leather throats,
For we bear the brand of Ishmael like a crown,
We're the sons of desolation, we're the outlaws of creation.
Yow! A-ridin' up the rocky trail from town.

Thar, I reckon yuh've got a right han'some batch with these hyar!
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.

T HAR'S so many letters wantin' tuh be published that I not only have tuh start right in with 'em without takin' time for a chat with yuh, folks; but I've got tuh condense each letter as much as I can tuh make room, so I'm apologizin' now for any changes I make in yore letters.

JOB INFO

These folks are lookin' for it, an' I hope they'll get it.

DEAR SAM: There's no work here in Florida, and I was wondering if you could find me a job on some ranch, doing inside work. I am seventeen, and would love to hear from some girls out West who have lived on ranches and know all about them.

LOUISE JOHNSON, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of seventeen, and I would like to hear from Pals in Texas, New Mexico, and Nevada; but promise to answer all letters. I know I would like ranch life. How are working conditions out there? It must be lots of fun to work and sleep in the open. I'd like to be a cowboy myself and live a clean and happy life.

CHESTER ZMALA, OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I wonder if I could get a job out West. I'm a young widow of twenty-nine years, and have two darling little girls. I want Pen Pals from all over the world, and will exchange snaps. Hope some of them can help me get work.

MRS. EVA BRADFORD,
OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Would you please put me in touch with some cowboy Pen Pals? I've always wanted to go West, and if I could obtain a job on a ranch or some other place, I'd go now. I'm twenty years old and fond of outdoor sports. Write soon, for I'm working hard in a mine, and would like to get out of it.

RUDOLPH HARVAT, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm eighteen years old, and I would like to get a job on a cattle ranch. I am a pretty good rider and not afraid of hard work. I'd like a job in New Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Montana, or Colorado.

GUNNAR RYD, OF SOUTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a single, white, young man of twenty, strong and healthy, and out of a job. I've always wanted to work on a ranch or in a lumber camp in the West. I wonder if you or the Pen Pals know of work I might get.

RICHARD FEGLY, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of eighteen and would like to get acquainted with some Pen Pals of that age or older. I'm planning on going out West this coming fall, and would sure like to have a place where I can find a job. I'm especially interested in Colorado and in hearing from any ranch girls.

EMMA KOCH, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: Please see if any of your Pen Pals need a cook. I'm the best cook this side of the Rockies. That covers a big territory, I know, but I think I could live up to it.

MISS G. E. T., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young boy of fifteen and would like to know all about

the West. I want to get in touch with some ranchers or cowboys who would tell me about getting a job.

BERNARD TURNER, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen and am hunting for a job in Missouri or Arkansas, picking berries. I have a friend of the same age who wants one, too, and I wish some one who knows where we could get work would write to us. I'll answer all letters.

BIL ROBERTSON, OF KANSAS.

HUNTIN' WESTERN PALS

A big bunch, but I hope they'll all be satisfied.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young man, twenty-four years old, and I have lived in the oil fields all my life. I can give any info wanted on the subject. I would like to have Pen Pals from the West.

O. V. PARKER, OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: We're a couple of boys who are always playing cowboy. We'd like to have some Western Pen Pals, especially cowboys. Write to me.

KAYO MELKOSKY, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a soldier and will be through my time soon and am going out West, and I would like some Pen Pals. I'm a good rider and can shoot well, also. I'm twenty-one years old and good with horses and cattle. I'll answer all letters.

PRIVATE GEORGE BENNAY, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I am a boy of twelve, and I would like to have some cowboy Pen Pals. I'll answer every letter. I want to learn about the West from some one who lives there.

ANDREW VERREGO, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR PEN PALS: Please write. I'm eighteen, and will gladly exchange news and snaps of the big city for some real Western news.

MARGARET FLANNERY, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from Texas, Arizona, Montana, and Nevada. I am sixteen years old, and will answer all letters promptly.

FRANK MARCHITTO, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I'd like some Pen Pals from anywhere out West. I love all outdoor sports and everything about the West. I

am sixteen years old, and want to hear from girls my age.

ESTHER BROSS, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eleven and would like some Pen Pals from the West, especially those who live on ranches or in cow towns. My hobbies are horses and art. FRED LUNEL, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I am sixteen years old, and would like some Pen Pals—especially cowgirls in Arizona, Texas, Wyoming, and Montana. Will exchange snaps, post cards, et cetera. Am full of pep, and love outdoor sports.

HILDA HAND, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen and can ride fairly well, and my shooting isn't so poor. I'd like to rope some Pen Pals from Arizona, Colorado, and anywhere else in the West.

HORACE LAMB, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from the West. I am twelve years old. I hope I get a ranch Pal.

CHARLES HARLAND, OF IDAHO.

DEAR SAM: I've been looking for some cowboy Pen Pals, some who will trade busted guns, Indian relics—beadwork, pottery, arrowheads, snake skins and rattles—et cetera, for stamps, souvenirs, and magazines. WILLIAM SHEELE, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eighteen and would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere, especially Arizona, Colorado, or Oklahoma. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

HARRY NIEMOK, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'd like friends to write to me from the Western States. I am a boy of sixteen and would like to have Pen Pals around my age.

CECIL SMITH, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy, eight years old, and I would like to hear from some Western Pen Pals. I can ride a horse, throw a rope, and shoot any kind of rifle or pistol. I'll answer all letters.

G. C. LEFLER, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I would like to get some information about Texas Rangers. I take great interest in them, and would like to hear from any one who has info.

TONY SMALEK, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of twelve, and am anxious to have some Pen Pals. Please try to help me get some in Texas or Colorado.

BILLY WATKINS, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of eleven, and would like some Pen Pals from Texas. I'll answer all letters and exchange snaps.

CHARLES TROTTER, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I would like to write to Pals from Texas and Oklahoma. I am twelve years old, and hope I'll get letters soon.

SAMUEL RAE, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am sixteen, and crave lots of friends, especially out West. I intend going there very soon. I'd like to hear all about the real West.

WALTER JURZ, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twelve, and I would like to have a Pen Pal from a ranch in Texas or Arizona.

EDNA HABERLAND, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of twelve, and would like to have some Pen Pals in the wild West. I'd like to exchange some arrowheads and things like that for souvenirs of the East. RICHARD JONES, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of ten and am looking for some Pen Pals. I like outdoor sports, especially fishing, swimming, and horseback riding. I would like to have some info of the Western States, so please get me some Pen Pals.

CALVIN MARTIN, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I wish you would send me a bunch of Pen Pals from Montana. I am a girl, thirteen years old, and I will give a gold-edged guarantee to answer all letters.

CARROLL WEIGAND, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from Colorado. I am eleven years old, and will swap books, magazines, stamps, et cetera. I promise to answer all letters. WILBUR GREENAMYER, OF OHIO.

HOWDY, SAM: I want a few roping Pen Pals. I am fourteen years old, but age doesn't matter. It's the letters that count. I used to live out in Arizona and Texas. I especially want to hear from the West, but will be glad to get letters from all over the country.

ALMA RATZHA, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Recently I went all over the West, and I don't know of a place I

like better. But if I had had any friends out there, it sure would have been great. So I'd like to start making them now, for I am going out there again some time. I am twenty-one years old.

HAROLD SCHOONOVER, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen, and I would like to have some Pen Pals. I'll answer all letters I receive, and will be glad to exchange photos with any one.

JABE BIRCHFIELD, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals who could give me some Western info. I will answer all letters received from Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, Texas, or any other Western State. I am sixteen.

TOM KEATON, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: We are two Florida girls and would like to have some Pen Pals. I, Ora Hammond, am fourteen years old, and I, Elnora Clark, am sixteen. We are fond of all kinds of indoor and outdoor sports. We would be glad to hear from all over the world, but would be especially interested in hearing from Colorado and Texas.

ORA HAMMOND AND
ELNORA CLARK, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am very much interested in cowboys. I am fifteen years old, and I would be very happy if I could have some cowboy Pen Pals.

CHARLES MOORE, OF OKLAHOMA.

DEAR SAM: I'm nineteen years old and live in a mining camp. I want some Pen Pals from a ranch in Texas or Arizona. Also, I'd like to buy some cowboy articles in Mexico. TONY CAMARGA, OF UTAH.

DEAR MR. WILLS: I am a boy of fourteen and would like some Pen Pals. I am used to horses and cows, because I used to herd cows on horseback. I would like to hear from the ranching West.

JACK RANDITT, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals pronto, from Texas especially, or any Western State. I am a boy of thirteen, and can ride, rope, and shoot.

LASSITER, OF INDIANA.

DEAR SAM: I'm seventeen and my brother is fifteen. We want some Pen Pals from out West—some real cowboys who know their stuff. We also want to hear from those who like to trap and hunt.

Please send snaps, if you have them handy, folks. EDWARD AND LOUIS BRASHER,
OF ALABAMA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of fourteen and would like to join your Pen Pals. I would like to have some from the West. I like to ride horseback very much.

RICHEY BLANTON, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fifteen who can ride horses, dance, and swim. I would like to hear from people in Arizona, Texas, Wyoming, and Nevada, especially. I'll exchange snaps.

BILLIE, OF WASHINGTON.

DEAR SAM: I'd be plumb grateful if you would put me in touch with an hombre from South Dakota or thereabouts. I am thirteen years old, and my favorite sport is swimming.

RUSSELL MORGAN, OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and am much interested in what I've read of the West. I would like very much to have some Pen Pals from Texas, Arizona, Montana, and Colorado.

GENEVA McWILLIAMS, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from a real cowboy, who would tell me about his work and his fun.

PERCY PAYNE, OF CANADA.

DEAR SAM: Am a young man of nineteen and would like to know more about the West, as I may go there some day. Hope I have many Pen Pals.

ROY FULLER, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I would like some Pen Pals from the West, especially Texas. I am twenty years old and work on a farm. I'd like to get lots of friendly letters.

J. EDWIN MALEY, OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I want to have a real cowgirl Pen Pal to write to. I mean a cowgirl from the golden West. But I promise to answer all letters from any one, and any State, and from foreign countries. I'm a girl of eighteen, and my favorite sports are dancing and swimming.

CLEARITA KILBONE, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young girl of thirteen and would like to have some Western Pen Pals. I would exchange snaps with any one who wants to. I love outdoor

sports. Hope I get plenty of letters from cowgirls.

LORRAINE SUNNY, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a young girl of eighteen and would like to have Pen Pals from Montana, Utah, and Texas. I am interested in horseback riding and also love dancing and outdoor sports.

RUTH NICKALS, OF MASSACHUSETTS

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen and am most interested in cowboy life. I would like to hear from some Pen Pals, and to exchange songs and snaps with some cowpokes.

HEADLEY H. SULT, JR., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals out West. I am a youth of nineteen and am French. I hope some day I'll be able to see the real West and ride. I'll be glad to hear from Westerners, especially from Montana.

ROLAND DION, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen and would like to get in touch with some cowboys. HERMAN WILLIAMS, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm twelve years old and would like to have a Pen Pal, especially from Arizona.

BOB KAMINSKY, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I'm a fellow of sixteen and do a great deal of wrestling and tumbling for exercise. I go in for all sports. I wish some Pen Pals of my age would write to me from Montana or California and any other Western States. Will answer all letters.

CHARLES HENRICKS, OF INDIANA.

HI THAR, SAM: Come on, you lonesome cowpokes, and write to me. I'll answer all letters. Come on, you split-eared, long-horned critters, and write!

CLAUDE COOPER, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some cowboy Pen Pals from Colorado, Wyoming, or Nebraska who would tell me all about ranch life. I'd also like to have some cowboy songs and ballads.

HERSCHEL KNIGHT, OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of sixteen, and I love all outdoor life and would like to hear from boys out West in Texas, Colorado, and Nevada.

HORACE CANNON, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of nineteen, and I want to hear from boys out West. Come on, cowboys, and write me, and be sure to hurry.

GEORGE DUNCAN, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals from the West or North write to me. I've traveled a lot and will gladly exchange snaps with any one. I am eighteen years old.

JOSEPH ROSE, OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of thirteen, and I long for a good many ranch Pals. I'm wanting info about riding and roping. So long, waddies, until I hear from you.

RUSSELL GILMER, OF ALABAMA.

SONG LOVERS

Int'rested in collectin' songs? Then connect with these hyar folks.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fifteen and very anxious to have some Pen Pals. I like outdoor sports very much. Any one who would like to have some cowboy songs, write to me. I know quite a lot of them.

SYLVIA PUTRICH, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm in the army and am twenty years old. I would like to hear from some cowboys who know some good old Western songs. I'll be glad to tell them about this place. Have been here two years. I hope to live in the West when I reutrn.

HONOLULU AL, OF HAWAII.

DEAR SAM: Please help me. I would like to hear from girls between the ages of thirteen and twenty. I know quite a few cowboy songs, and will exchange snaps and songs. I promise to answer all letters sent me. FRANCES BENEDICT, OF UTAH.

DEAR SAM: My girl friend and I are fourteen, and we both are learning to play the guitar. We'd like to get hold of lots of Western songs.

WANDA AND MABY, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of fourteen, and I live in a small town. I know lots of different songs, and I'd like to exchange some of them for cowboy songs. So come on, cowgirls.

DOLLIE BLOUNT, OF GEORGIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to have some Pen Pals, especially from California. I live

out West and have traveled in lots of interesting places. I'm fond of outdoor sports and of music. Would like to exchange some cowboy songs. I'm twenty-two years old. Would like to hear from girls eighteen to twenty-five.

IRENE LASEY, OF COLORADO.

OTHER REQUESTS

An' still more are waitin' for Pals!

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and live on a farm and love the outdoors. I'd like Pen Pals from all over the world, married or single.

ANN HALL, OF NEW JERSEY.

DEAR SAM: I'm thirteen years old and like outdoor sports. I promise to answer all the letters I receive. I want to hear from any fellows all over the world.

MAHLON TORPY, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: I want Pen Pals from the four corners of the world, especially the East and foreign countries.

EDNA, OF NORTH DAKOTA.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of sixteen and live on the outskirts of a small town. I'd like lots of Pen Pals. D. H., OF MAINE.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen and live on a farm. I love books and the city. I want Pals from all over.

HELMER JOHNSON, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I have lived in the country and know a little about horses, but the only thing I'm interested in is to have Pen Pals. I'd like to hear from girls between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.

SHIRLEY PADGET, OF IOWA.

DEAR FRIEND SAM: I am a girl of eighteen, and I would like to hear from some Pen Pals all over the United States.

LORENE CANNON, OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I'm fifteen years old and would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere. GERARD MORISSETTE,

OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of twenty and like all kinds of sports, but don't have much time for them, as I work all day in an office. I would like to hear from people from anywhere, as I love to receive letters. RUTH FROM MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I live on a farm and am twelve years old. I would like to have some Pen Pals, especially boys out West. I have a great time here. Hope somebody writes.

DAVID THORNTON,
OF MASSACHUSETTS.

DEAR SAM: I am fifteen years old and love to write and receive letters, so please write to me, Pen Pals. I am interested in everything you could possibly think of, so write soon, girls.

BILLIE WELLER, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I'm fourteen years old, and I'm interested in all sports, especially dancing and swimming. I would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere.

DOROTHY DEER, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to hear from some Pen Pals from everywhere. I have been in every State in the Union and have worked on the range for four years. I'm a sailor now.

S. O. PRESTON, JR., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Tell the boys to write to me, please. I'd like to have lots of Pen Pals. JOSEPH DZIATKOWICZ, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of thirteen, and I'm not really lonesome, but would like to have loads of Pen Pals from everywhere. M. J. K., OF NEW YORK.

DEAR SAM: I'm a boy of seventeen and would like to have plenty of Pen Pals. I like to fish and play baseball.

EDWARD KOLTZ, OF MICHIGAN.

DEAR PEN PALS: I am nine years old. I have a horse, but she is too stubborn. I would be glad if some of you would write to me. ARTHUR BEINHORN, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I'm a girl of eleven and would like to have some Pen Pals from everywhere. BETTY COMBS, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I'm a fellow of seventeen and am interested in stamp and coin collecting, rifle shooting, sports, correspondence, and the wide open spaces. Will guarantee to answer all letters, no matter where they come from or the age of the writer. O. K.? Let's go.

JOHNNY O'LEARY, OF NEW YORK.

An' that's all for tuh-day. So long, an' good luck!

The Wranglers Corner



All letters intended for The Wranglers Corner should be addressed to The Range Boss, Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WAAL, gents, here we are ag'in," we says, at this week's meetin' o' the bunch in the Wranglers Corner. "How're yuh all?"

"Jest fine, Boss," chorus the waddies—all except one.

Thet one is young Pete Prentiss, the Whistlin' Kid. He jest nods his dark head an' keeps right on whistlin' the sad notes o' "The Cowboy's Lament." Ter hear him, yuh'd think thet the Kid was plenty mournful.

But we know better. Usually, when the Kid feels best, he whistles the mournfulest. We grins at him an' starts lookin' aroun' ter see who's here.

Right across from us are the four hombres from Circle J—Billy West, Buck Foster, Joe Scott, and the ranch's Chinese cook, Sing Lo. We watches 'em fer a minute, sort of expectin' ter hear Buck an' Joe git inter an argument over somethin', but both of 'em seem ter be plumb peaceable ter-night.

Settin' next ter the Circle J outfit is young Jim Hazel, the Thunder Bird forest ranger. He's brought his three pards, the Tigor brothers, with him ter-night. They shore are three real mountaineers—an' look it.

Last, but not least by a long shot, we sees the Shootin' Fool, Lucius Carey, hisself in person. He's the young deputy sheriff from down Cottulla way. An' it's a wonder we didn't see him first.

For the Shootin' Fool's shirt is bright orange and his bandanna is a light blue. His big leather chaps are polished till they shine like his boots, an' the same goes fer his two big gun holsters.

"It shore beats all, gents," we says, "the way things work out. Here it's the first week we've had any letters about our new pards, Hungry an' Rusty, an' them two rannies ain't here."

"How do the readin' hombres like them two, Boss?" asks Joe Scott. "Do they think they're O. K.?"

"Jest wait till yuh hear a few o' the letters, Joe," we says. "Reckon we'll have ter read 'em ter-night, whether the Rangers are here or not. There ain't hardly been a letter in the bag this week, thet didn't have somethin' ter say about 'em."

We turns ter the mail sack an' starts lookin' fer a good letter ter begin things with. Here's the one we finally picks:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading the 3W for more than a year now, and I think it is about time that you got my opinion of it. Here it is:

It's swell.

I wish that Buck Foster would just smash that Joe Scott in the nose once, and let him know that sometimes a horned toad is a whole lot better than a red-headed wood-pecker.

First choice in my list of favorites are your two new recruits, Hungry Hawkins and Rusty Bolivar, the two cow-punch Rangers.

Then come Buck Foster, Johnny Forty-five, Sonny Tabor, and the Ranny Kid.

If this isn't printed, I'll know that your Wranglers Corner is just a lot of hooey.

Denver, Colorado. ROY MORRIS.

P. S. Put Hungry and Rusty in every week if possible. R. M.

"Help me, Hannah!" growls Buck Foster. "Thet hombre has got savvy. Yuh kin tell him thet I aim ter do jest what he says, one o' these days. I—"

"Yah!" says the redhead. "Yuh an' how many others, I'd like ter know? Any time yuh feel like punchin' my nose in, come right ahead. I'll be waitin' fer yuh, an' what I'll do ter thet ugly-lookin' do-funny on yore face will be—"

"Am thet so!" roars the veteran. "I'll be a horned toad, if—"

"Here, yuh two!" snaps Billy West. "We didn't come here ter listen ter yuh argue an' scrap. Lay off, fer a while. Give the Boss a chance ter read some letters."

We grins at Billy an' picks up another letter. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: Why don't you put in another story, soon, about Silver Carroll? Everybody wants one, don't they?

Hungry and Rusty are the berries! Put some more stories about them in W. W. W. pronto.

So Buck and Joe had a fight about Buck's old bear-skin vest, did they? Well, if I was Buck, I'd get me a new vest right away. I'm not worried about their fighting, though. They are real pards, underneath all the noise.

Rusty sure ought to give Hungry a pat on the back. If it hadn't been for Hungry, Rusty would have been buzzard meat long before now.

Tell all the rest of the waddies "hello" for me. Yours truly, EVERETT DARRELL.

Davenport, Iowa.

Then we draws out this letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to the Corner. I hope you can find room to print it sometime soon.

My favorite characters are Rusty Bolivar, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, the Ranny Kid, the Whistlin' Kid, Johnny Forty-five, and the Circle J outfit. Sing Lo sure comes in handy sometimes.

Why don't you put Ruth Dawe and Anne Benson in the Circle J stories now and then—and give them real cowgirl parts to play.

Put in more stories about Johnny Forty-five, Silver Carroll, the Black Ace, and Bud Jones of Texas. I thought those stories were very good.

I think that Sonny Tabor ought not to be an outlaw. He's such a square-shooter. Can't somebody get him a pardon and a job as a deputy sheriff or something?

Don't forget to print this in the Corner.
A CowGIRL.

Red Rock, Oklahoma.

P. S. Tell Rusty not to sleep so much.

"I don't imagine that Sonny would object very much, if some one would get him a pardon," chuckles Jim Hazel.

"Well, maybe he'll git one some day," we says. "The Ranny Kid got one, yuh know, an' he was wanted almost as much as Sonny is. Yuh never kin tell."

"I'm glad that I never had to chase him," says Lucius Carey. "I sure don't know what I'd do, if he came down my way."

We laughs. We knows jest what Looshis would do. If it was his duty, he'd chase Sonny jest as hard as if he wa'n't his friend.

An' here's the letter we reads next:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a reader of the W. W. W., and I think it is the best magazine going. Keep up the good work.

My favorites are Buck Foster and his saddle pard, and that other hot-shooter, the Red Wolf. "The Red Wolf's Trail Ends" was one *real* story.

Some other hombres whom I like are Johnny Forty-five, Sonny Tabor, and Lum Yates. But why not let Lum tote a pair of six-guns for a change? It would give his stories the pep they need.

Put the Whistlin' Kid in a long story soon, and put lots of action in it.

"Six-guns In Blue Mist Basin" was a very good story.

Yours till Buck Foster does a little work around the ranch.

FRED CAMP.

Austell, Georgia.

Here's another one, right out o' the ol' mail sack:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We are sending this letter to see if the Wranglers Corner is a fake or not. We have been reading the 3W for over a year and think it is the best one on the stands.

We hear so much of the Black Ace that we would like to read a story about him sometime. How about it?

Isn't it about time that the Circle J waddies went back home? If there are any rustlers in Montana, there won't be any Circle J Ranch left for all those cattle they have been buying.

Let's have some more stories about the Red Wolf, too. They were great.

The Ranny Kid was the bravest man in the whole 3W outfit. Tell Buck Foster we said so, too.

Hungry and Rusty went over big with us. They're all right and make a swell pair. Keep them coming.

Tell Johnny Forty-five to leave George Krumm behind, the next time he goes out on a job. Krumm is almost as yellow as Lum Yates and Zeke Olroyd. Which is saying something.

Print this letter, Range Boss, or we won't believe there is a Wranglers Corner.

JOE AND ART CAPPE.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

An' here's another:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: We have been reading W. W. W. for nearly two years, but this is our first letter to you. Hope you find room to print it.

We think your magazine is great, and that all the stories are good, except those of Jim Hazel. They would be all right if there was more action in them.

Our favorites are Kid Wolf, Sonny Tabor, Johnny Forty-five, the Ranny Kid, Circle J, and Lum Yates. Why don't you use more Kid Wolf stories? They are the best.

We don't see why Sonny Tabor and the Ranny Kid don't get together. If they were both pardoned, they would make a great pair of deputies.

It would be a bad thing for the sheriffs, if Johnny Forty-five would become an outlaw. But we don't reckon he will. He's too square a shooter.

The hombres who say that Lum Yates is yellow, ought to be put in Lum's place for a little while. They wouldn't last two minutes.

Circle J would be a lot better, if they would get rid of that mangy, cowardly, slow-shootin', sheep-herdin' Buck Foster, and his good-for-nothin', tissue-paper vest which doesn't do any more good than his six-gun, which never does any good at all.

All of the other waddies are fine.

Yours truly,
TWO SONORA WILD CATS.

Sonora, Ohio.

After hearin' thet, Buck Foster is fit ter be tied. He's so mad thet he can't hardly talk, fer a minute. His brown eyes pop, his mustache stands straight out from his face, an' he glares around him like he's lookin' fer battle.

Everybody's got sense enough ter keep still, howsomever—even the redhead. So finally Buck has ter quiet down an' content hisself with grumblin' an' growlin'.

Chucklin' so we kin hardly read, we starts in on the next letter, hopin' it'll have somethin' better ter say fer Buck. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: This is my first letter to you. But if it is printed, you are sure going to hear a lot more from me.

My favorites are Sonny Tabor, Kid

Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, the Black Ace, and Circle J.

Circle J would not be half so good, however, if it wasn't for Buck Foster. He is the smartest and the quickest on the draw and the straightest shooter of any hombre north, south, east, west, or any other direction from the Rio Grande. He can out-smart Joe and Sing Lo without half trying. Tell him I said so.

I like the Ranny Kid, the Whistlin' Kid, and Smoky Langdon. And say, whatever happened to Ted Marsh of the Mounted? I have missed him for the past three years or so, and couldn't keep quiet about him any longer.

Why not have some more outlaw stories—outlaws like Sonny Tabor and the Oklahoma Kid, who was in Lee Bond's story "Thet Ugly Little Hombre"? And why not have a real killer in the magazine—a killer with a few good traits in him?

Don't forget to remind Buck that he is a smart hombre, and that he's way ahead of Joe or the chink.

Well, Boss, I guess it's so long till I write again. Yours till Buck beats Sing Lo at poker.

RAY BECKER.
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

P. S. I hope Buck's vest doesn't bust. If it does, it'll be my fault for praising him so much. So long.

R. B.

We looks at Buck. He is preenin' his mustache an' lookin' like he jest shot Devil Tripp. In a few minutes, we sees, he'll git started. So we adjourns the meetin' pronto, it bein' already late fer some o' the waddies ter be headin' ter home.

"So long until next week, gents," we says. THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

Gun-brand Ranch

Novelette

By WILLIAM A. TODD

A young waddy inherits a taste for gun play from his father—an' he shore gits his fill of it, afore his long justice trail comes to an end.

Sonny Tabor and the Red Reata

Novelette

By WARD M. STEVENS

The young wanted hombre tries ter git hisself a job punchin' cows, but horns right inter a crooked range-hog's game, an' needs his guns ter git loose ag'in.

Pards on the Owl-hoot Trail

Novelette

By CLEVE ENDICOTT

Circle J goes on the dodge ter git the deadwood on a plumb slick rustler. When they tangle, lead starts flyin' thick an' fast.

Also stories of Hungry and Rusty, by Samuel H. Nickels; Jim Hazel, Forest Ranger, by Lee Harrington; Shorty Masters, by Allan R. Bosworth—and other characters.

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*Prostate

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Of course, we can't publish all those names here—not one-tenth of them could we put on this page. But we can, and we will—send you the book which showed them the facts about prostate weakness, and the facts about Thermalaid, as this easy, drugless gland stimulation is called.

Mail the coupon today for your copy of "Why Many Men Are Old At 40," the volume which has showed 100,000 men over forty how to attack this painful and murderous gland failure. It presents the facts and the symptoms—clearly and intelligently,

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