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JULY 27

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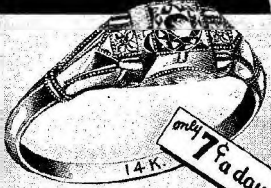
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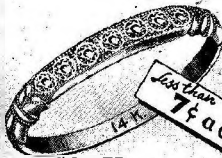


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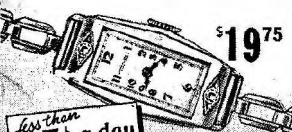
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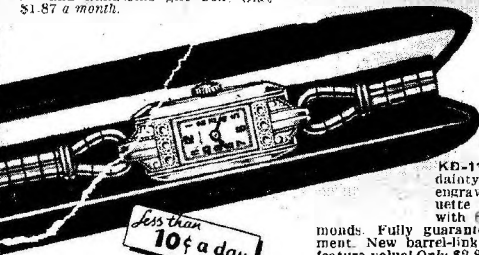
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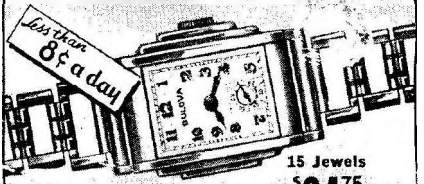
KD-3 ... A most beautiful and popular, square prong engagement ring of 14K Solid White Gold set with a certified genuine blue-white center diamond of unusual brilliance and 2 matched fiery diamonds on each side. An extraordinary JUBILEE VALUE at only \$29.75. \$2.87 a month.



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Cover Picture—Scene from
 "The Son Of Storm King" . . . Painted by Rudolph Belarski

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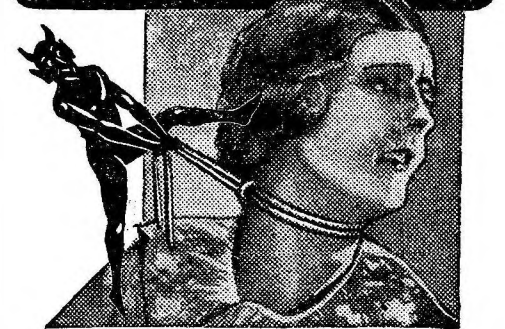
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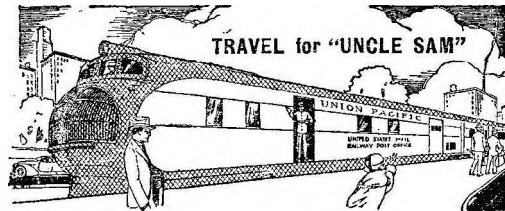
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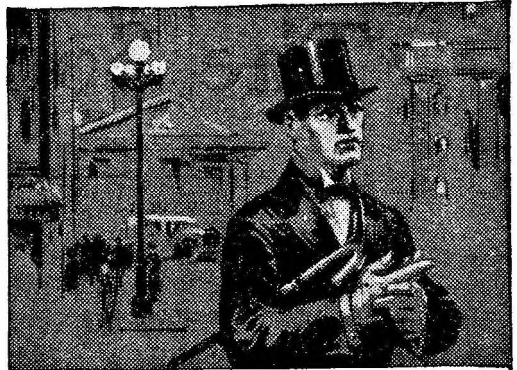
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The Son Of Storm

By Galen C. Colin

Author of "Storm King's Last Ride," etc.

CHAPTER I.

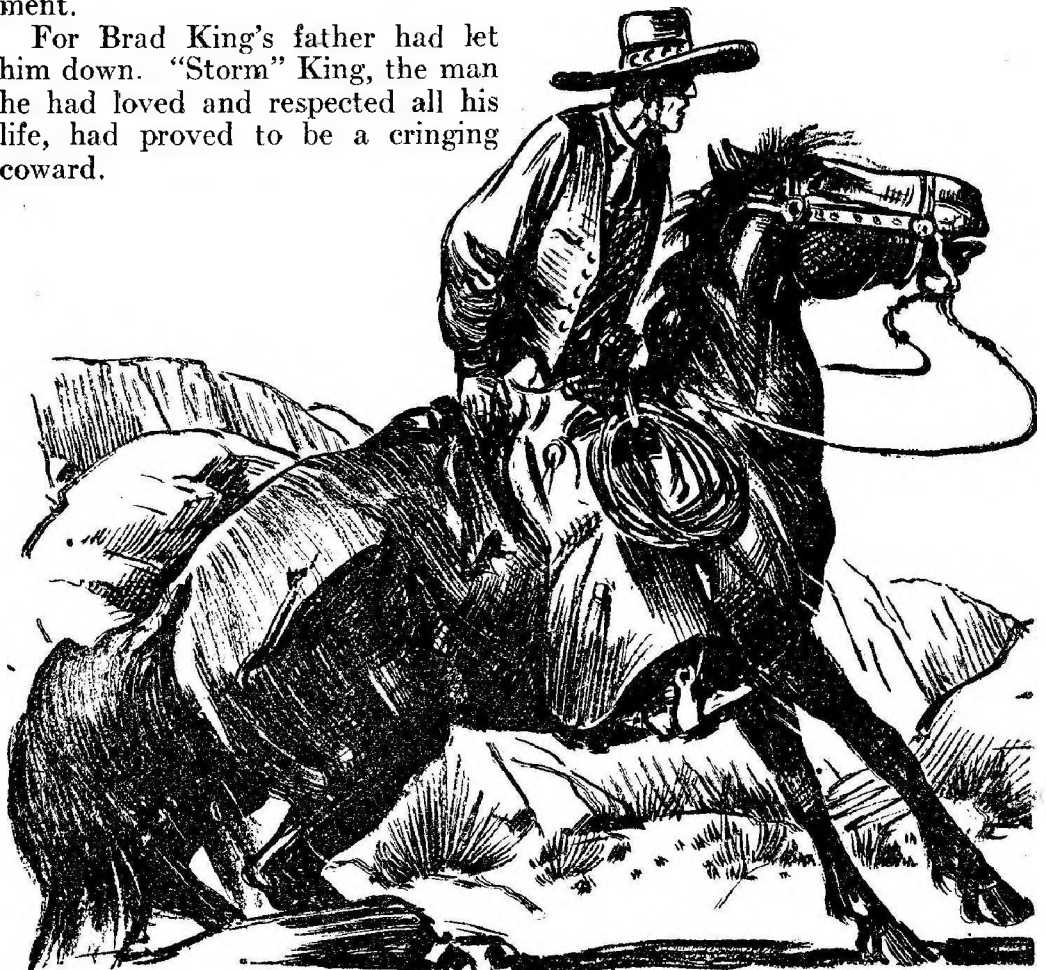
RANGE CROOKS.

AS Brad King prodded his black horse away from the Flying M headquarters, he paid no attention to his direction. He only knew that he wanted to get out of sight of the place that had been his home for all of his nineteen years—that he wanted to be alone with his bitter shame and disappointment.

For Brad King's father had let him down. "Storm" King, the man he had loved and respected all his life, had proved to be a cringing coward.

That knowledge cut deep. It etched lines in his square-cut, bronzed face that aged it far beyond his years.

The horse carried him straight across the valley range of the Flying M and Chain Lightning spreads and into the edge of the foothills beyond. And it came to a stop in the shade of an overhanging ledge before Brad realized where he was. A



King

mirthless, twisted smile played across his features.

"Yuh brought me here, Cloudy, where we've come so often, didn't yuh? Where we can see the whole range. But I don't want to see it now, Cloudy."

Still, his stormy blue eyes, with the glint of pain in them, roved across the broad, green valley. They held upon a cluster of moving specks on the other side.

"The boys ain't wastin' no time in roundin' up the range," he muttered bitterly. "Ain't been three hours since dad gave the orders."

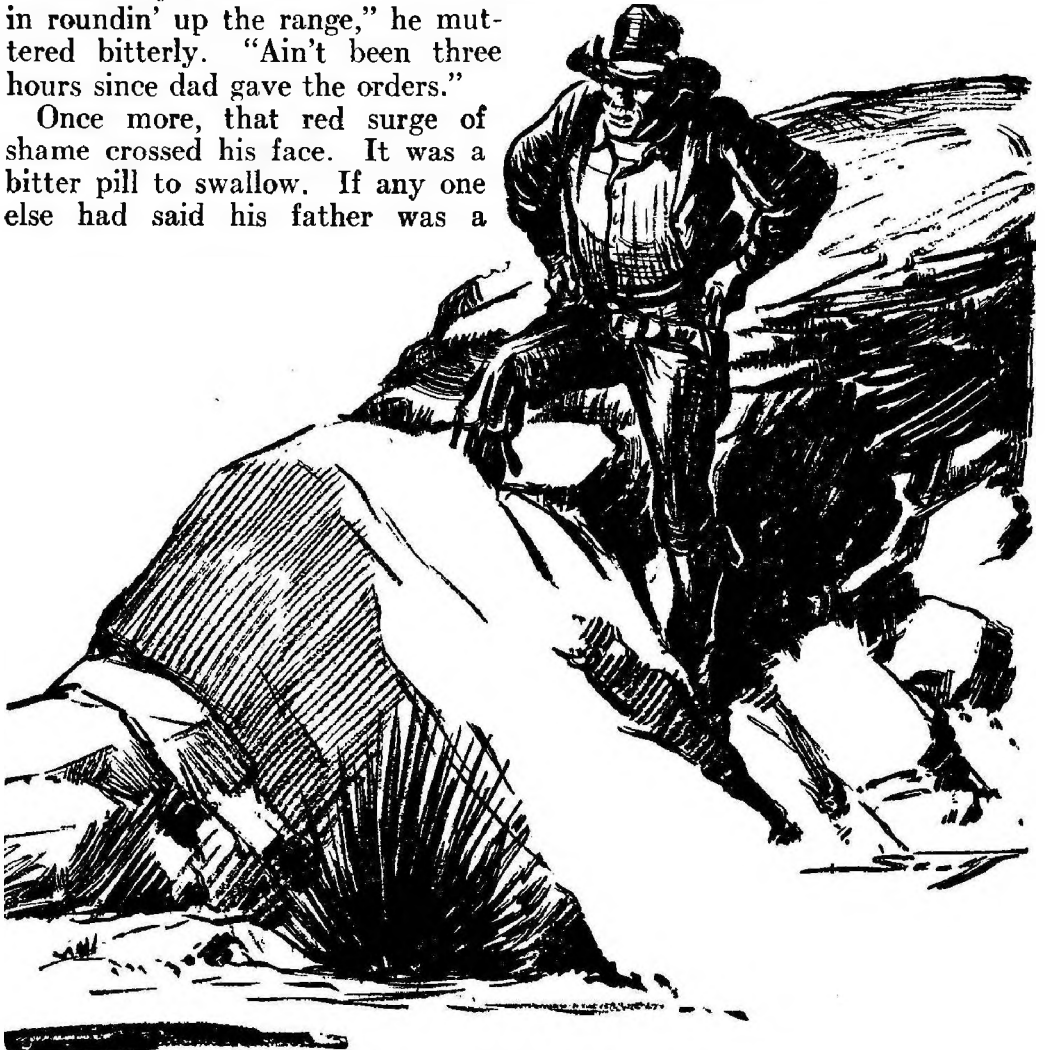
Once more, that red surge of shame crossed his face. It was a bitter pill to swallow. If any one else had said his father was a

coward, it would have been a signal for crashing fists. But it was true; there could be no argument about that, Brad told himself.

"Yaller! Plumb yaller to the core! Scared of the San Fernando Syndicate! Lettin' a pack of mangy coyotes bluff him!"

He straightened his broad shoulders, a look of sudden resolution on his face. He swung his leg down from where it had been curled around the saddle horn. His booted foot felt for the stirrup.

"I won't stand for it! I'll not duck an' run like a scared dogie. Ifn he thinks I will, he's got another think a-comin'. I'll——"



"Yuh'll do what, hombre?"

Brad King started, and his eyes went wide for an instant. He whirled in his saddle, one hand on the horn, and the other on the cantle. That voice, with the hint of scornful mirth in it, had come down from the ledge, squarely above him. His gaze darted upward.

Only a face was visible, for the hombre lay flat on his stomach on the rock. It was a face that Brad King had never seen before, but one that he hated at first glance. A broad face, with a twisted nose, and covered with a reddish stubble. The wide gash of a mouth was grinning wickedly, and the piggish little eyes danced with evil mirth.

"Yuh was sayin' yuh'd——" the scornful voice inquired.

Brad King's tight-pressed lips did not utter a word. His stormy blue eyes stared straight at that leering face. He did not feel the slightest tremor of fear. For this hombre, no matter who he was, could not add to the trouble and bitterness that already weighed so heavily on the young puncher's shoulders.

For a moment, those glittering eyes returned Brad's stare. Then the man heaved himself to a sitting position, swung his legs over the ledge, and let himself down.

As he stood in front of Brad, his wide, squat body reminded the puncher of a gorilla, and the huge head, set deep between the shoulders, added to the comparison.

Twin six-guns swung at the hombre's thighs, and his hairy hands hovered over them.

"Better unload from thet broom-tail, sonny," he said. "I'm honin' to visit with yuh fer a spell. I won't bite, unless yuh get proddy."

Red wrath surged through Brad's veins. That kind of talk was carrying things too far right now.

"Who are yuh, anyhow, to be orderin' me aroun'?" Brad asked. "What right yuh got on the Flyin' M range? Yuh'd better be dustin' pronto!"

"Now, sonny, don't got to gettin' proddy, or I'll have to spank yuh," the man leered. "Jest unload, an' back up to thet boulder. It'll be somethin' to lean against."

As the gorilla's hands settled on his gun butts in a broad hint, Brad knew he was licked. Even his searing anger did not rob him of that much sense.

He knew that, unarmed, he faced a man who would shoot, and laugh as the bullet found its mark. In a lithe, unhurried movement, Brad swung from his saddle.

"Now thet's showin' good judgment," the man grunted.

Then, for a moment, the hombre's glittering eyes swept over Brad. They took in the wide-shouldered, slim-hipped body, the bronzed, square-jawed face, the stormy blue eyes. Then his gaze dropped to Brad's waist, free of gun belt or holster. He chuckled wickedly.

"What d'yuh want? Get to the point pronto," Brad rasped.

"Take it easy, sonny," the hombre drawled. "Ain't no hurry. I've been waitin' for yuh quite a spell. Watched yuh ridin' acrost the valley. Knowed yuh come to this here ledge often, an' figured yuh was headin' this way to-day. Gussed right, huh?"

It flashed through Brad's mind that the hombre was playing for time. But for the moment, he could not understand why. Then the gorilla spoke again:

"Yuh look like the ol' coyote, Storm King hisself. Reckon yuh are like him, too. Scared to lug a smoke pole fer fear it'll go off an' hurt yuh,

or thet some one'll bend it around yore neck."

A deeper flush swept Brad's features. That was a touchy subject. His hands clenched into tight fists, for the squat hombre had spoken the truth—or so Brad believed now.

Every one on the range knew that Storm King never wore a six-gun, and that he would not even let Brad handle one.

A few had snickered at it in the past, until Brad's fists had stopped it. If Brad had wondered at his father's actions before, it had never worried him.

Storm King must have had good reasons for riding unarmed. But that was past now—and that was why the man's words cut so deeply.

"Yo're a blasted liar!" Brad flared, taking a half step toward the man. "Mebbe dad is a coward, but I'm not scared of yuh or any one else!"

The hombre's hands dropped just a little toward his gun butts, and Brad said: "Ifn yuh didn't have a gun onto yuh, I'd——"

Again the man chuckled wickedly. He waddled slowly toward the young puncher, halting only six feet in front of him.

"Thet's twice I've heerd yuh brag about doin' somethin', but yuh ain't never said what it is," he said

Brad King fought to control his wrath. His voice was low and tense. "What d'yuh want, hombre? Talk fast! I ain't enjoyin' yore comp'ny none."

The man shot a swift glance back over his shoulder toward the spot where the trail bent around a shoulder of rock. Once more, Brad sensed that the man was playing for time.

Then the hombre's eyes were upon him again. The leering grin fired his anger to blistering heat.

"I've been lookin' fer yuh—kind o' waitin' around up here—ever since

we heerd thet Storm King was roundin' up the Flyin' M an' Chain Lightnin' range. An' yuh want to get shed of me so sudden," the man said.

"Ain't been more than three hours since dad gave the order for the round-up. Yuh ain't had such a long wait, even if yuh knowed it that very minute. What business is it of yores, anyhow?" Brad asked.

"Ol' Storm King decided on it two-three days ago. Three-four other hombres knew about it, includin' me." Again the man shot a glance back along the trail.

Brad's eyes narrowed. It was all mixed up, but he was beginning to get a glimmer of light. "I hear yore blabbin', but I don't savvy yore meanin'. Talk plain!"

"Never mind, sonny. Yuh will. Fact is, me an' a couple of friends thet'll be along pronto was figurin' on invitin' yuh to take a little trip with us into the hills. Sort of a visit, yuh know, until we can talk to Storm King."

Suddenly Brad King understood. And with that understanding, his rage changed to calm, deadly hatred.

"The San Fernando Syndicate, huh? Yo're workin' for the syndicate," he said. "Yuh couldn't buy the Chain Lightnin' an' Flyin' M range, so yo're kidnapin' me—with the ransom a clear title to them spreads. Is thet it?"

The man still grinned. "Yuh got a good head onto yuh, sonny. We was willin' to buy, but we knowed ol' hard-headed Storm King had decided against it, when we l'arned he was plannin' to round up the range. This here was the next best bet."

That knowledge swept aside Brad King's last reserve. His stormy eyes, curtained by narrowed lids, were as dangerous as a cougar's. He slowly bent his right leg at the knee. His

foot braced itself against the rock at his back. His whipcord muscles tensed like steel springs.

"Yuh might bluff dad, but yuh can't work it on me!" he cried. "Tell Monte Drago an' his murderin' outfit thet yuh couldn't get yore dirty claws onto Storm King's son!"

His right leg straightened with a snap. His body shot forward, head bent low. He hurtled at the squat hombre like a hundred-and-eighty-pound battering-ram.

Wham! The man's six-gun belowed.

But Brad King had twisted his lithe body a split second ahead of the bullet. It zipped past, and whined shrilly off as it glanced from the rock behind.

The puncher's head crashed into the squat gorilla's middle with such force that his neck felt unjointed.

But the ruffian bent double, a hoarse grunt of agony on his lips. The six-gun flew from his hand, to clatter in the rocks a dozen feet away.

Brad's long arms swept out. One circled the hombre's legs and clamped tight. The other crooked around the short neck.

Then the young puncher's broad back snapped straight, as he lifted the writhing body across his shoulders. He spun like a top, whirling a half dozen times. Then his back bowed and jerked straight again, hurling the ruffian from him.

The thud of the fall was like that of a rope-thrown steer. A grunt died in a gurgle on the man's lips. He gasped once hoarsely as his legs twitched. For a scant two seconds, Brad King stood wide-legged, breathing fast.

The bitter look was gone from his eyes now, and his lips were not thinpressed. Instead, they smiled with the joy of battle. Then he leaped

toward the gun, wedged between the rocks.

"Bring on yore two friends!" he yelled. "Bring 'em on! I'll show yuh whether I'm scared of a six-gun or not!"

He snatched up the gun. A single glance told him it was broken beyond repair. He cast it far from him, and whirled back toward the writhing hombre on the ground.

The man had another six-gun. He'd get that!

But already the ruffian was beginning to recover, and he was wriggling swiftly away. Then Brad King stopped short. The clatter of racing hoofs reached him from beyond the shoulder of rock down the trail.

"Them other two hombres!" Brad exclaimed.

He whirled on his heel and leaped toward his horse. He vaulted into the saddle, snatching up the reins with one swift movement.

He shot a lightning glance back over his shoulder. The squat hombre was disappearing behind a boulder, and the other two would be heaving into sight in another second.

His gaze darted ahead. Twenty yards away, a steep slope led to the trail up on the ledge. He touched the black with his rowels. The animal shot into swift stride. Then two riders swept around the shoulder of rock.

"Kick dust, Cloudy!" Brad King breathed. "Yuh an' me are goin' places pronto!"

The rangy bay was jackknifing up the slope when the first bullet zipped past Brad's ears. The young puncher laughed mirthlessly. A clean miss. They'd have to do better than that. Then horse and rider topped the crest of the ridge and disappeared down the other side.

For an hour, the chase kept up,

but the two pursuers steadily lost distance. For that rangy black was the fastest horse on the range. At last the young puncher shook them completely, and now he turned his horse's head northwest.

A half hour later, he slowed down where the trail forked, one branch heading into the valley toward the Flying M. The horse turned to take that fork, but Brad neckreined it back.

"We ain't headin' home, Cloudy—not yet!" he said. "Got business in San Fernando. Important business."

CHAPTER II.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST.

WHILE Brad King was having his grim encounter out in the hills, San Fernando sweltered in the breathless heat. There had been a strange bustling activity that morning, but it had quieted down.

Now there was only one man in sight along the whole dusty street. It was Sheriff Phil Weight, who sat in his chair on the narrow porch of his little office. And even the big-bodied, grizzled old officer scarcely moved. Apparently he was dozing, but between the narrowed lids, his ice-blue eyes swept the high country to the west.

Straight ahead, a full ten miles, he could see the cloud-crowned San Juan range. A slight turn to the left would bring Fernando Peak into view, and the deep, dark slash that was Fernando Pass.

From his appearance, no one could guess the worried thoughts that kept Phil Weight from really dozing. For eighteen years, he had been hoping that something exciting would happen in San Fernando. Now that it looked due, he was not at all sure he wanted it.

The last breath-taking event on

this range had ended when Storm King cleaned up "Hawk" Dumbrell's outfit, over eighteen years before. Strange that the shadow of deadly danger should hover over the same yellow-haired, stormy-eyed rancher and his son.

Phil Weight had sensed it a month before, when Monte Drago, owner of the Silver Concho, had organized the San Fernando Syndicate, and had begun to acquire all the open grazing land and water on the range. But the sheriff had not connected it with Storm King, until he saw the deepening lines of worry on the rancher's face.

He tried to make himself believe that trouble was still far away, until Teresa King, Storm's still slender and lovely wife, had taken the stage to the railroad for an extended visit in the East. And right at a season when she could be least spared.

And now, this very morning, "Black" Hooper and "Deacon" Factor, Monte Drago's right-hand men, had ridden at top speed into San Fernando. They had disappeared into the Silver Concho, stayed for an hour, and left as fast as they came.

"Cookin' up some devilment, I'd bet my best six-gun!" the old officer had grunted. "But they ain't made no move outside the law—yet."

After Hooper and Deacon Factor prodded out of town, Phil Weight moved his big chair out onto the porch, and he had not left it for longer than a minute since. He was not sure just what he expected, but there was a feeling that a show-down was due.

It was no more than an hour past noon when the tiny black speck on the southwest trail caught the sheriff's attention. Still motionless, he watched it grow into a rider, prodding his horse at top speed.

Weight recognized the rider by the way he sat his saddle, by the wide shoulders, by the shock of corn-colored hair.

"Storm King's whelp!" he muttered, shaking his head. The grim lines at the corners of his mouth deepened. "Too bad Storm King couldn't raise a son like himself. Looks for all the world like his dad, too. But soft—soft as mutton taller."

The object of Phil Weight's bitter description cantered past the scattered shacks at the edge of town, and swept into the dusty street between the two rows of paintless buildings. With stormy eyes straight ahead, square chin lifted high, he raced straight past the sheriff's office.

Weight had got to his feet at Brad's approach, and now he stood at the edge of the porch to watch him pass. "Blast his hide! He rode on without so much as lookin' my way. Funny twist to his face, too. More than ever like his dad, when Storm was on Hawk Dumbrell's trail," the sheriff growled.

The sheriff's eyes followed the square-shouldered rider, as he drew to a halt in front of the Prospector's Home Store and swung from his saddle. Then the old officer saw a slim, snaky man appear for an instant at the Silver Concho door.

Phil Weight's teeth set with a click. He twitched his gun belt around on his hips, and made for the sidewalk.

Halfway to the store, he stopped. His eyes held upon a squat, heavy-bodied man who pulled a lathered horse to a stop at the side of the Silver Concho and lurched into the building.

"Something I don't savvy," he grunted.

He jerked his hat brim farther

down to shield his eyes against the fierce sun. With shuffling, solid steps, he plowed across the street and entered the Prospector's Home.

For a moment, he blinked in the gloom. Then his gaze stopped upon Brad King's broad back. He listened, his eyes narrowing.

"Pair o' six-guns an' a filled belt, Hawkins!" Brad called out to the storekeeper. "The fastest, smoothest-workin' smoke-poles yuh've got!"

Phil Weight strode heavily to the young cowpoke's side. He dropped his hand upon Brad's shoulder, and his voice was low and even.

"What yuh figurin' on doin' with them guns, son? They won't be much use to a waddy thet ain't ever——"

Brad King whirled to the old sheriff. His stormy blue eyes fairly blazed into the officer's calm, unblinking ones.

"Thet's my business, Phil Weight. A blind sheriff is worse than a cow thief. An' a yaller——"

Phil Weight's heavy face tightened into grim lines. His right hand half dropped to his holstered thigh—but stopped. He shook his shaggy head as if to clear eyes that did not see straight and ears that did not hear right. He said:

"Whew, son! Yo're plenty proddy. But I'm plumb in the dark. S'pose yuh pay for them shootin' irons, an' come with me to my office. I'm honin' to talk with yuh."

"No time to waste on words, Weight. Thet time has passed," Brad replied.

"Lots of time can be saved by words, if they're rightly used. I'm lookin' for yuh at my office—an' I'm thinkin' yuh'll come," the sheriff said.

He turned on his heel and strode out of the store. Back on the narrow porch, he slumped into the big

chair again. He half rose as Brad came out of the store and made for his horse.

But he settled down again, for the young puncher led the animal down the street. He was apparently dozing when Brad stopped at the hitch rail.

He did open one eye slowly. "Come inside, son! It's right hot out here."

Inside the little office, Phil Weight settled into a chair in front of the rickety desk, and gestured the blond rider to another across from his. He said:

"As yuh was sayin', a blind sheriff an' a yaller——"

"I meant every word of it!" Brad rasped. "I'm sick of sheriffs thet won't turn a hand to catch an outfit of rustlers an' bushwhackers—jest as I'm sick of ranchers thet'll let themselves be robbed blind without puttin' up a scrap."

"Suppose yuh explain what yo're drivin' at."

"Talkin' won't do no good, Weight! Yuh know the San Fernando Syndicate. Yuh know what Monte Drago an' his outfit are tryin' to do. But do yuh raise a hand to stop 'em?"

"I know, son—an' I've been watchin' 'em. But there's no law against a bunch of hombres buildin' up a big spread."

"Not if they do it honest," the young puncher rasped. "But yuh know dang well they're tryin' to force dad to sell the Flyin' M an' Chain Lightnin' spreads for a tenth of what they're worth."

"Yuh don't mean force, son. He don't have to sell unless he takes a notion," answered Phil Weight evenly.

The blond waddy banged the table with his clenched fist. "No! He don't have to sell—ifn he wants to

fight! He can set an' be robbed blind by an outfit of thievin' lobos thet call themselves the San Fernando Syndicate!"

The old officer straightened in his chair. "Say thet again, slow, son."

"Yuh know what I mean. Three months ago, the Chain Lightnin' lost a hundred head of grass-fat steers. A month later, some coyote pizened the Lonesome Valley water hole, an' killed a hundred more. A week ago, the Flyin' M calf crop was cut in half by them night riders."

"I know, Brad. An' I've been tryin' to get 'em. But thet ain't the Syndicate."

"It ain't, huh?" There was scorn in the blond cowpoke's voice. "Then why does Monte Drago happen past after each raid an' ask dad ifn he's ready to sell yet?"

"He does thet, huh? An' Storm King—what does he do?"

Brad's mouth twisted. "I'm nigh ashamed to say it, Weight. It plumb sets me afire!"

The old officer's eyes widened. "Storm King never done nothin' for any one to be ashamed of. I'd stake my life on thet."

"Listen! When he sent mother east, I figured he was gettin' ready to fight back, at last. But this very mornin', he give orders to round up the range. Aims to sell off all the stock, an' foller her east until the storm blows over."

"An' yuh think he's——"

Brad's face reddened, and his eyes turned aside. "It—it looks like dad's yaller, Weight."

The sheriff's lower lip thrust out and covered his upper one. A troubled look was in his eyes. For a long minute, he was silent. Then the words came slowly:

"It may hurt to tell yuh, son, but

I've got to do it. Yore dad's layin' down on yore account. He ain't yaller, but he raised yuh without no knowledge of six-guns an' powder smoke. Now he's reapin' the harvest of bringin' up a soft son."

"He don't need to think——"

Brad burst out.

Phil Weight lifted his hand. "Did yore dad ever speak of the days afore yuh was born? Did he, fer instance, ever talk of how he got thet name—Storm? Did he ever mention Hawk Dumbrell?"

"Never told me nothin' of the old days. Never heard of thet Hawk Dumbrell buckaroo."

"Nope. Guess yuh didn't, or yuh'd never have accused Storm King of bein' yaller. Listen, son! Yuh're old enough to hear some history."

"Right now is what I'm interested in. Let the past take care of itself."

There was a far-away look in the old sheriff's eyes, and a slight smile on his grim lips. "In a storm he was born—an' in a storm, his mammy was murdered by a pack of lobos. An' in a storm, he wiped out thet debt. Thet's how he come by his name."

For a moment, Phil Weight paused, and his eyes strayed to the front window. His lids narrowed a little as he saw a squat rider—the same hombre who had pulled up close to the Silver Concho a little before—prod his lathered horse down the street. Then he looked at Brad King again.

"Seven killers, there was, an' he tracked 'em down an' planted every last one of 'em under the rocks of the San Juans. When he was through, he married yore maw. Hung up his gun belt an' holsters."

"Then——"

"'Lowed he was through with the smoke trail. Swore, when yuh was born, thet he'd raise his son in the ways of peace. He kept his word, an' sp'iled a good man in the raisin'. But he ain't yaller. Not Storm King!"

The young cow-puncher hardly breathed as the old sheriff talked. Two or three times, he pressed Phil Weight for further details, until he had the whole grim story. Then he spoke, and his voice held a deeper, more vibrant tone than before:

"So thet's it, huh? Thet's why dad never let me carry a six-gun—why he always preached thet the gun trail was the trail of death an' destruction. An' I've been thinkin' he was yaller!"

The old sheriff nodded. "I've told yuh straight, Brad. An' I hope Storm King forgives me. I argued against it. So did yore grandpap, Jack Merton. Reckon Storm King wishes he had listened, now."

The blond puncher broke in on Phil Weight's words. There was a flicker like blue flame in his eyes, and his lips parted in a faint smile.

"Grandpap did more'n argue, Weight. Yuh think yo're fast with yore guns. Let's see yuh draw!"

The old sheriff blinked. Then he lifted his bulk out of his chair. "Only Storm King, on the whole range, can shade me, son. Look!"

His hand streaked for his holster. His curling fingers snatched the six-gun from the leather. It swept up.

Brad King stood with folded arms until Phil Weight's fingers touched the gun butt. Then he moved—a move deceptively smooth and sure.

The sheriff's mouth dropped open. For before his gun was above his belt, he was staring into the yawning muzzle of Brad's new six-guns.

"Burn my chaps!" the old officer breathed. "Greased lightnin'! I—I don't believe it—yet! Where—when——"

A twisted smile played across Brad's face. "Yo're the first man since my grandpap died who ever saw a gun in my hand. It was him thet taught me. Trained me by the hour, an' I've been practicin' every day since, with an ol' busted gun."

"A plumb good teacher, feller! An' if I was in yore boots, I'd keep it up."

Brad's eyes looked his question.

The sheriff shook his head. "Nothin' thet I can step in on—yet. But I feel it comin'." His eyes narrowed. "Deacon Factor an' Black Hooper was in San Fernando this mornin'. Thet new gorilla feller of Drago's rode in, while yuh was in the store, too. Looked like he'd been proddin' mighty fast. Plumb mean-lookin'. He didn't stay long—high-tailed it back the way he'd come."

"New gorilla hombre!" Something clicked in Brad King's brain. "I've got to be goin', Weight. No time to lose."

"What's up, son? Yuh know thet hombre? What's he been doin'?"

Brad shook his head. "Now thet I know dad ain't yaller, we'll make out!"

"Ifn yuh ketch 'em at any law-breakin', son, remember——"

"There'll be smoke talk!" Brad finished grimly.

The sheriff watched the straight-backed blond puncher swing into his saddle and head southwest. He grinned and nodded his shaggy old head.

"Storm King's whelp! I'd never have thought it! I'd shore admire to see thet ol' he wolf's face when he sees thet young hombre's draw!"

CHAPTER III.

DEATH AT THE FLYIN' M.

BRAD KING pushed the black at top speed toward the Flying M. It lay a good fifteen miles to the southwest. And as he rode, his pulse kept time to the beat of hoofs.

The old sheriff's story of Storm King's past filled him with excitement. His respect for his father was unshakable now. But behind it all was the knowledge that another fight, just as bitter, lay ahead.

He was fairly certain before that it was a syndicate rider who had held him up in the hills. But now he knew. The same hombre who had ridden into San Fernando with word of the affair for Monte Drago. And now that man was heading back.

When his horse began to breathe heavily, Brad pulled it to a slower gait. But his excitement grew as he swept through the gash between the thick-studded trees and headed up the last slope from the crest of which the Flying M would be visible.

A dozen yards from the top, he pulled to a sudden stop. Ears less sharp would not have caught the sound.

It was the faint crack of a rifle—the dying echo of a shrill scream, far down in the valley beyond the ridge. Even then he was not certain, until a second report swiftly followed the first.

His teeth clicked. He leaned forward in his saddle as he gathered up the reins in his left hand. His right hovered over the shiny new holster on his hip, for he knew the meaning of those sounds. Things had come to a head with startling suddenness.

His star-roweled spurs raked the black's ribs. The animal shot forward like a startled antelope. The blond rider gave the horse its head.

They topped the ridge with a rush.

Brad's eyes narrowed as they swept down the slope where the Flying M buildings should be visible. Instead, only a great billowing column of red-shot smoke met his gaze.

"Fired the buildin's! The murderin', thievin' polecats! Raided the Flyin' M!"

The trail dropped down a short, abrupt slope and bent around a huge shoulder of rock. Brad took it at top speed. Then he pulled the horse to a sliding stop. From this spot, the raging fire was plainly visible. Hardly more than two hundred yards away, hungry flames wrapped themselves around the shoulders of the rambling two-story log house and licked at the other buildings.

The roof had already caved. A shower of sparks shot upward. Just a hundred yards beyond, flames were gnawing at the long, low horse shed. Still farther, two ricks of hay were going up in smoke.

Brad King's eyes held upon the flaming furnace for only a split second. Then his gaze darted on to the prone figure between him and the fire, and to the other staggering form out there between the shed and the house.

"Dad!" he gasped.

He urged his black forward at racing speed. When the horse snorted and side-stepped from the heat of the fire, he hurled himself from the saddle.

With his arm over his face, he sped to the sprawled form. The twisted body lay only fifty feet from the burning house, and the heat was searing.

He reached the body. He stooped and lifted it as easily as if it had been a sack of flour. He whirled and

raced back, drawing a deep breath as he reached the edge of the circle of heat.

He shrugged the body from his shoulder and laid it tenderly upon the ground. Slowly, almost fearfully, he turned it over. He bent low, brushing smoke tears from his eyes.

"It ain't dad! It's—it's Tom Humphreys! Dead!"

Now he straightened, his eyes upon the round black hole in the dead man's forehead. His gaze dropped to the worn-handled six-gun still clutched in the stiffening fingers.

"Downed! Face forward, an' pullin' trigger! Only the foreman, but killed protectin' the Flyin' M! Killed by a pack of lobos thet'll pay—plenty!"

Then he whirled swiftly. The staggering form, out there in the smoke between the horse shed and the house—he had seen it only dimly. It might be Storm King.

With giant strides, Brad King sped toward the weaving figure. As he neared, the breath hissed from his throat. For now he saw plainly.

"Faith! Faith Humphreys! If they've hurt her, I'll——"

The slender girl seemed to stare at him without seeing him. Her lips moved, but Brad could not hear the words above the crackling of the flames. He reached her swiftly, and his arm circled her as she staggered.

"Faith! Faith, gal! What's happened?"

Faith Humphreys's dark eyes went wide. Her lips moved again. The single word reached the young puncher's ears, "Brad!"

Then she slumped forward in his arms. It was as if she had held

grimly to consciousness until he came, but could hold out no longer.

The young waddy held her tightly. He looked around with bewildered eyes. He had seen men knocked out, but this was his first experience with a fainting woman.

He lifted her and took a single step toward the blazing house. Then his gaze swept to his horse and the sprawling figure beside it. His father had been almost forgotten in the swift rush of events.

But now Brad King's brain steadied. He swept the ruins with a swift glance. Nothing else living was in his vision.

He shook his head, his teeth clenched grimly. "Tom Humphreys dead! Faith mighty nigh gone! An' dad—ifn he was in the house—Blast them murderin' syndicate polecats! They'll pay plenty high!"

He drew a long breath. Responsibility such as he had never known bore down upon him. But there was nothing he could do about the fire. It was past all control. Nor could he bring the dead foreman back to life.

With long strides, he made for his horse. "The line rider's shack!" he muttered. "Safe place for Faith. Nobody'll think of lookin' there. When she wakes up, I'm takin' the gun trail!"

He lifted the girl to the saddle and swung up behind. He held her tightly with his right arm, as his left hand gathered up the reins. He touched his black with roweled heels.

CHAPTER IV.

SKULKER IN THE BRUSH.

AS Brad King, with Faith Humphreys in his arms, headed for the line rider's shack, he had no idea of the glittering eyes watching him

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from a clump of brush up the slope. It did not enter his mind but what the syndicate outfit had all headed for the high country.

And they had done that very thing, after they shot down Tom Humphreys and took Storm King prisoner. With the Flying M building blazing fiercely behind them, they had made straight for the little valley, a dozen miles away, across the jagged camel-back ridge.

But they had hardly topped the first slope when the pound of hoofs brought them to a sudden stop. "Fanner" Grinnell, riding at the head of the column, snapped his six-gun from its holster.

Motionless but alert, he watched the gap where the unknown rider would appear. But when a squat, gorilla man on a lathered horse burst into view, Grinnell holstered his gun with a snort.

"Sam Cass! Alone! Must have rubbed out that young pup."

The ugly hombre pulled his leg-weary horse to a sliding stop in front of Grinnell. "Thet King whelp out-smarted me," he said. "Dang nigh busted my head. He got away, an' rode to San Fernando. I left the other two hombres huntin' fer him. Reckon they're still at it. The yaller-haired kid beat me to San Fernando by ten-fifteen minutes. Made fer the sheriff's office, while I circled, an' slipped into town. Monte Drago figures he's hollerin' fer help from Sheriff Weight. Says fer yuh to watch plenty close. We've got to have him, too."

A twisted grin split Fanner Grinnell's evil face. "So thet's what the fuss is about, huh? An' what could ol' Phil Weight an' thet cowardly young pup do? We'll get him!"

Sam Cass shook his head. "All I'm tellin' yuh is Drago's orders.

He says to hold Deacon Factor an' Black Hooper at the cabin until yuh see what happens."

"Too late fer thet," Fanner said. "Already headed fer their place acrost the divide. Don't need 'em, nohow." Then his eyes narrowed. "Yuh let Brad King slip yuh! Yuh can stay at the Flyin' M an' watch. Hole up, an' if thet young skunk an' Phil Weight show up, ride like blazes an' let me know."

And Sam Cass had no more than gained the protection of a clump of juniper when Brad whirled down into the valley. He watched the young puncher, his face a twisted mask of evil.

Keeping to the brakes and thickets, he followed Brad and the unconscious girl. He saw the young waddy dismount at the line rider's shack. Then he whirled his horse and roweled it back along the trail.

Three hours of hard riding over ridges, through coulees, and across boulder-strewn slope brought Sam Cass to the log cabin that clung to the slope of the hidden valley. And when Fanner Grinnell heard the news, he grinned wickedly.

He whirled and shot a glance at the bunk where Storm King lay. The stricken look on the rancher's face told all too plainly that he caught the meaning of the words.

"Yuh hear thet, yuh blasted cow nurse?" Grinnell barked. "Yore baby boy an' thet gal are holed up. Figure they're plenty hid. But we're headin' thet way. Let thet sink it, whilst yuh're layin' here!"

"Yo're a dirty coward—too yaller for a coyote to run with, Grinnell!" Storm King's voice was low and even. "Yo're scared of me, but yuh jump a younker that ain't never handled a six-gun!"

Fanner Grinnell grinned wickedly.

"Not scared of yuh, hombre jest smart. But we ain't hurtin' yore little feller now. Only invitin' him up here to keep yuh comp'ny. As fer the gal, we ain't aimin' on harm-in' her. We don't fight women."

Then Fanner Grinnell turned on his heel. "Yuh, Clinker, stay here an' ride herd on this hombre. Brandon, head fer San Fernando. Tell Monte Drago what happened. He'll want to be here when we get back. The rest of yuh fork yore broom-tails. We're ridin'!"

But even as the outlaw outfit was heading for the line rider's shack, Faith Humphreys awoke. Her uncertain gaze swept around the room. She saw the flickering flame of the smoky oil lamp, and her eyes caught the crude slab table. Her gaze slowly moved down to her feet. She lay on a bunk. That much she knew.

But now she drew a sharp breath and tried to sit up. For her eyes rested upon a man's back, there in a chair at the foot of the bunk.

"Who—what——" she began.

The man whirled. Her startled exclamation changed to a sigh of relief.

"Brad! It's you!" she cried.

The blond waddy leaped to his feet and was beside her in an instant. He knelt beside the bunk.

"Gosh, Faith! Yuh shore had me scared. I was afeard yuh'd never wake up. But yo're safe now. In the line rider's shack, down by the creek."

"But—but dad! And Storm King! And the Flying M house! Tell me I dreamed it, Brad! Tell me I did!"

The puncher's eyes were bleak, and his face stony. "Yuh didn't dream it. The buildings are gone—burned to ashes! An' yore dad—he's—he's——"

"Dead! Then I didn't dream it, Brad! And Storm King is hurt! The killers have taken him away!"

Tears welled up in her brown eyes, and her lips trembled. Brad King soothed her for a moment. Then he asked a question:

"Dad is wounded—a prisoner? Did yuh know the raiders, Faith?"

She shook her head. "I didn't recognize them. It all happened so quickly."

"Never mind. I know 'em. An' I'm takin' their trail pronto!"

"Who are they, Brad? What does it mean?"

"The San Fernando Syndicate, Faith."

"What's that?"

"Nothin' for pretty gals to worry about. Jest a pack of lobos that need wipin' out."

Faith's eyes went wide with fear. "You can't fight them, Brad! You'll be killed—just like dad!"

The blond cowpoke shook his head. "I'm sorry about Tom Humphreys, Faith. He didn't have nothin' but his loyalty an' cold nerve to keep him in the fight. But me—I'm fightin' for the Chain Lightnin' an' Flyin' M spreads. For the range—an' for Storm King!"

"Dad—dad died swiftly. He didn't suffer. I saw him go down, his guns blazing." Faith held her voice steady with an effort. "But Storm King is hurt, maybe dying!"

Brad King's teeth clenched. He had been thinking the same thing, though he tried to put it from him.

He rose and strode to the window. For a moment, he gazed out into the darkness. Then he turned to the bunk again.

"There's grub an' plenty of water here. An' it's safe from the syndicate killers. Well hid in the trees. Jest the place for yuh to hole up,

until I find dad—an' have it out with them skunks!"

"You can't go, Brad! You're not a gun fighter. You've never handled a gun. They'll kill you before——"

A grim smile played for a moment across the bronzed, square-cut face. "That's what I hope Monte Drago an' his lobos think."

Faith Humphreys's eyes were filled with fear, but her chin came up. "I know it's no use trying to hold you, Brad. When you go, I want you to know I'll not be afraid, and that I'll be thinking of you—always!"

"Good gal!" Brad said, a lump in his throat.

He rose and drew his six-guns from their holsters. He examined them swiftly, then thrust them back. He lifted his wide J. B. from the table. Then he stood in front of Faith once more.

"I'll be back by dark to-morrer, or send word. Keep close inside the shack, an' don't worry no more than yuh can help."

He strode to the door, stood, for a moment, framed in the darkness, then was gone.

CHAPTER V.

TRICKY TRADIN'.

WHEN Brad King left the line rider's shack, he had no fixed plan for finding the rustlers' hide-out. But he felt that it should not be hard to pick up the trail of the men who had killed old Tom Humphreys and captured his father.

He made straight for the ruins of the Flying M. That was the logical place to pick up their tracks, and he wanted to be ready at the first streak of dawn.

It was well past midnight when he dropped down into the valley.

The fire had burned itself out, but the embers still glowed red.

He circled the clearing, his eyes and ears alert for any sound or movement. But the valley seemed deserted. He watched patiently for half an hour. Then he slid from his saddle and cat-footed into the clearing itself. Like a ghostly shadow, he stole toward the dying embers.

Tom Humphreys's body still lay where he had left it. Brad's face was granite-hard as he stooped and lifted all that was left of his old friend. He carried the body to the shelter of a huge granite boulder, fifty yards from the ruins.

He laid it down carefully, and covered it with brush, weighted down with rocks. Then he straightened, his eyes narrow and his face grim.

"Yuh was too loyal for yore own good, Tom Humphreys. But they'll pay—every one of 'em!"

He whirled and made for his horse. He slowly circled the clearing again. Even in the starlight, he felt that he might find some trace that would mark the starting point. Every minute saved now would count, when dawn came.

Then he found it—the very spot where Sam Cass had hidden while watching him. The beaten grass where the man crouched for a half hour was plain evidence to Brad's trained eyes.

He straightened and glanced around. The first pink streaks of dawn light painted the eastern sky.

In the gradually growing light, the tracks left by Sam Cass were not hard to follow—prints cut deep in the earth, broken leaves and boughs, misplaced rocks and gravel.

Hardly looking up, the puncher followed the trail for a full three miles. It kept to the crest of a ridge, and headed southwest.

But the meaning of that direction did not strike him, until he topped a steep slope and looked down into a tree-choked valley. The sight of the half-hidden slab shack brought him erect with a jerk. The breath hissed from his lips.

"The line rider's shack!"

He forgot the trail he was following—forgot everything except that Faith Humphreys was down there, and that the trail of one of the killers led down to the shack. He jammed his rowels home, and the black hurtled down the slope. Brad King's hand streaked to his new holster as he swept into the little clearing.

He pulled his horse to a sliding stop and threw himself from the saddle. Two long strides took him to the narrow porch.

He glanced swiftly around, and drew a relieved breath. There was no one in sight. Not much time to lose, though. Likely that single skulker was riding for help.

He kicked the door open, his hands clutching the butts of his six-guns.

"Faith! Faith! Where are yuh?" he shouted.

There was no answer. His gaze swept the shadowy room. Not a sound or a movement reached him.

He leaped inside and raced to the bunk. It was empty. He whirled to the table. The oil lamp was still burning, although the oil was almost gone.

Then his eyes dropped to a piece of brown wrapping paper, weighted down with a baking-powder can. There seemed to be crude scribbling on the paper.

He snatched it up and held it close to the dimming light. He slowly spelled out the scrawled words:

Yung King:

Yur gal is visitin at our hideout. We cum fer yuh but yuh was gone. We mite be

willin to swap her fer yuh. If yuh feel lik makin the swap, jes cum to the notch of the camulbak rige 12 miles southwest. Lite a fire there, an squat by it til we cum fer yuh. If yuh dont—

Brad King crushed the note in his hand. The whole thing was plain to him now.

"Blasted fool!" he rasped. "Might have knowed it! They was watchin' all the time!"

He slumped into a chair beside the table, muttering bitter words beneath his breath. His mind was in a turmoil. But he slowly regained control of himself. He tried to think his way out of this hole.

But only one solution seemed possible—the one suggested in the note. He'd have to make the swap, just as the killer had outlined it.

He couldn't trust the syndicate men to keep their part of the bargain, but that could not be helped. He blamed himself for getting Faith into this, and he'd have to do the best he could to get her out.

"The notch in the camel-back ridge! Twelve miles southwest!" He knew the country—knew the very spot.

He rose and strode outside into the growing light. He swung into his saddle and neck-reined his horse southwest. His teeth were tight-clenched and his face grim.

During the whole twelve miles of canyons, ridges, and valleys, he did not catch sight of a living person. And for that very reason, his anger swelled to seething heat.

"Blast their murderin' hides! They know I'll do anything to save Faith. And worst of all, I ain't none too sure they'll let her go, even then."

But his mind was fully made up as he prodded his black up the twisting trail to the camel-back notch. He

swung from his saddle and ground-anchored his horse in the shelter of a huge boulder. Then he strode into the little clearing, squarely in the notch.

His narrowed eyes swept the tree-studded valley below. A faint trail led down the slope and disappeared among the thick spruce. As far as his eyes could reach, there was no sign of human habitation.

He gathered an arm load of dry brush and heaped it in the clearing. He touched a match to it, and a thin column of blue smoke spiraled upward.

Brad King squatted upon the ground and laid his six-guns beside him. He'd made a bargain—and he'd stick to it. The syndicate killers would take their prisoner without firing a shot. For ten minutes, he squatted, motionless.

Then the beat of hoofs drummed in his ears. His face was bleak and drawn.

It was the end. The killers were coming.

CHAPTER VI.

KILLERS' LAIR.

BUT things had not happened exactly according to plans with the syndicate outfit. The raid on the line rider's shack would have been more to Fanner Grinnell's liking if he had captured Brad King instead of Faith Humphreys. He felt a little prickle of fear, even as the outfit prodded swiftly back into the hills with their prisoner.

Even Faith noticed it, and much of her fear disappeared. Her chin was high when Fanner Grinnell pulled to a halt at the hide-out. He swung from his horse and loosed the ropes that bound her wrists.

"Yo're safe here, sister," he grunted. "But mind, there ain't a

chance of gettin' away. It's fifteen miles to the nearest spread." Then he turned to his men. "Leave the broncs saddled, hombres! We'll be usin' 'em afore many hours. Yuh, Kagey, stay out here an' keep yore eyes skinned on that camel-back ridge. The minute yuh see smoke, come a-runnin'!"

Faith Humphreys walked between Fanner Grinnell and Sam Cass. She held her head high, and her lips were thin-pressed. The outlaw leader opened the door and gestured her inside. Her eyes swept the gloomy interior. Then they stopped upon a figure that was stretched upon a bunk.

"Storm King!" She raced to the bunk and looked down upon the man.

A thin smile greeted her. "The lyn' skunks! They said they didn't fight women, that they wouldn't harm yuh!"

"We didn't touch her, blast yore hide! I told yuh we don't fight women!" Grinnell's voice took on a leering tone. "Yore baby boy hid out. We're jest usin' this gal for bait. Fact is, we've done set the trap. Brad King'll be ridin' up the ridge afore many hours."

Faith whirled, her eyes blazing. "What do you mean? You promised you wouldn't harm him."

An oily smile was Grinnell's answer. "I said the promise was easy to make, but I didn't make it. But he ain't harmed—yet. I jest left him a note, sayin' we'd make a swap—yore freedom for his. An' he'll make the deal."

"You—you mean he's coming here?"

The outlaw nodded. "A fair swap, I'd say."

"You can't do it! You can keep me prisoner. You can even kill me.

But you can't play that kind of a trick on Brad King!"

"Speakin' off-hand, I'd say yuh ain't got much to do with it," Fanner Grinnell grunted. "His smoke'll be showin' up soon. An' thet'll mean he's waitin' for us to come after him."

Then Fanner Grinnell turned away and strode heavily to the crude table in the corner. He slumped in a chair and began to shuffle a greasy pack of cards. His men found places at the table, and he began to deal.

There were tears, half of fright and half of anger, in Faith Humphreys's eyes, as she turned to Storm King. "You heard? They're bringing Brad here! We've got to do something!"

Storm King nodded. "Mighty deep hole, Faith. I'm crippled—a bullet hole through my leg. But I'm startin' a private war the minute Brad shows up!"

"But we can't let him come here. There must be some way."

Faith clenched her hands until the nails bit into her palms. She turned and stepped to the little window. For a moment, she looked at the clearing and the trail that led up to the ridge. Then she whirled back to Storm King and cried:

"Give me just a minute. Then do something—anything—to attract their attention."

"What yuh aimin' on doin', Faith? Yuh ain't——"

"No time to argue! Do what I say!"

She whirled on her heel and strode back to the window. Again her eyes swept the clearing. No one in sight, except Kagey, out there beside the saddled horses. He slouched lazily upon a stump, his gaze steadily away from the cabin and toward the ridge a mile or more away.

Faith turned and glanced swiftly around the room. The five outlaws were intent upon their game.

She glanced toward the door. It was fifteen feet from the table. She edged toward it. Then she nodded a desperate signal to Storm King. For a moment, she feared he was not going to obey. Then a grim expression swept over his face.

His voice was sharp and hard. "Yuh blasted polecats! I've stood all I'm goin' to. Yuh ain't goin' to drag thet unarmed boy into this hole. Get set, yuh carrion, for I'm comin'!"

He forced himself to sit erect. The agony of his wound twisted his face into a snarl.

Fanner Grinnell crashed his chair back. His evil face was startled, as he whirled. Then he leaped toward the rancher.

"Lay down, blast yore locoed hide! Yo're plumb crazy. Ifn we didn't need yuh alive, yuh'd stop a slug pronto."

Those were the last words Faith Humphreys heard. During that swift moment of excitement, she opened the door and leaped outside. A single glance told her that Kagey had not heard the outburst, for he still slouched on the stump.

She raced for the ground-anchored horses, choosing a long-barreled bay. She leaped into the saddle, snatching up the reins.

She raked the animal with her heels, yelling at the others. The bay uncoiled in a startled bound. The rest of the horses threw up their heads and dashed wildly away.

She urged the bay into the trail, bending low in the saddle, as a six-gun barked sharply behind her. The bullet buzzed close to her ear. Then a harsh voice called loudly from the cabin.

"Yuh, Kagey, don't shoot! It's thet gal! Grab yore bronc an' run her down!"

Faith shot a lightning glance over her shoulder. Fanner Grinnell, Sam Cass, and the others were crowding from the doorway. Kagey raced for the horses, now halted a good fifty yards away. She had a fair start, she told herself, as she urged the bay to still greater speed.

CHAPTER VII.

KILLERS AT BAY.

UP in the notch of the camel-back ridge, Brad King crouched tensely beside the little fire. His ears were strained to catch every hoof-beat.

The horse that made the sound was running at top speed.

Brad's bleak eyes narrowed. That wouldn't be one of the killers. No reason for them to prod so swiftly.

He leaped to his feet, snatching up his six-guns. He raced for the cover where his horse was hidden. There he crouched behind the rock, his eyes on the trail where it broke from the dense thicket.

A long-barreled bay horse burst from the trees. A slender form leaned close to the horn.

Brad was breathless and tense. That rider wasn't one of the killers. There was something familiar about the slender form. Then the rider straightened to shoot a glance back down the trail.

A sharp breath hissed from Brad's throat. "Faith!"

He whirled and swung into his saddle, raking his black with his rowels. The horse leaped from cover, squarely into the middle of the trail. Brad dragged it to a sliding halt. And then it was that Faith Humphreys caught her first glimpse of him.

"Brad! Run! Don't wait! They're coming!"

A grim smile flicked across the young puncher's face. "Keep goin', Faith! Don't stop until yuh reach thet little creek thet crosses the trail. Head upstream until yo're out of sight. Wait there for me!"

"Six of them, Brad! They'll kill you!" Her voice was desperate as she raced past.

"Do like I say, Faith!"

She looked back at him, despair on her face. Once more, Brad smiled mirthlessly. Then he whirled his horse and urged it back to the cover of the boulder.

The rattle of hoofs from down the trail reached him now. He snatched his six-guns from their holsters.

A single rider burst from the thicket. Brad King recognized the type—a brutal killer, but not too smart. Just the kind of hombre Monte Drago would hire. The rider covered fifty yards into the clear trail before the second man appeared.

As the first man neared Brad's hiding place, all six of the outlaw outfit were strung along the trail. The young puncher touched his horse sharply. It leaped from behind the boulder and stopped right in the path of the outlaw. Brad saw the hombre's face go white and his loose-lipped mouth drop open.

As the killer jerked sharply upon the reins, bringing his horse to a stiff-legged stop, Brad did not move. A smile played for an instant across his square face. He shouted:

"Yuh've come far enough! Drag yore smoke-poles! I'm givin' yuh an even break!"

But instead of streaking for his guns, Kagey whirled his horse and jammed his rowels deep. He leaned

low over the saddle horn as he raced in a zigzag path back down the trail.

Brad's gun swung up, but he did not shoot. He couldn't back-shoot even such an hombre as this one.

Terror-stricken, Kagey dashed straight through the stragglng outlaws who filled the trail. Horses snorted and reared.

Grinnell and Sam Cass swore wickedly. These two had recognized Brad King, but it had happened so swiftly that they did not grasp the meaning for a minute.

Fanner Grinnell was the first to recover his wits. His right hand darted for his six-gun as he swung low to the left. He barked a sharp order:

"Thet King whelp! Luggin' a smoke-pole! But he can't use it. Circle him! Get him—alive! Don't mind the gun. It's jest a bluff!"

The killers scattered. Sam Cass plunged his horse into a juniper thicket. The others raced for boulders and brush that bordered the trail.

But Fanner Grinnell headed straight up toward Brad King. His lips twisted into an evil snarl as he called to the young puncher:

"Drop thet gun, yuh yaller pup! Drop it, afore it goes off an' hurts yuh!"

Brad's eyes darted to each side. He caught moving riders in the brush, edging nearer. The leader was still too far away for accuracy, but he swung his gun up.

It barked! A lucky shot, for Grinnell's hat jerked as if fingers had twitched it.

The ruffian snapped erect in his saddle. A startled look spread over his face. His lips opened, but no words came. Then he jerked his horse savagely aside and jammed the rowels deep. The animal plunged into the brush.

Brad's voice was mocking. "Six to one—an' yuh hunt cover! Back-shootin' Fanner Grinnell an' his side-kick, Sam Cass! Scared to shoot it out!"

The taunts gave Brad a little satisfaction, but he knew that was all he would gain at this meeting. With the killers approaching under cover, the odds were too strong against him.

He whirled his horse and took the trail that Faith Humphreys had followed. The black stretched its legs in a ground-covering run that the outlaws could not hope to match.

For a little way, the sound of horses thrashing in the brush reached his ears. Then it faded. But Brad did not slacken his pace until he reached the little creek that crossed the trail. He pulled to a halt there and listened intently for a full minute.

Not a sound of pursuit reached him. He neck-reined his black to the left and followed the bed of the stream.

Fifty yards beyond the first bend, he found Faith waiting for him. Her swift look of concern changed to relief.

"You're—you're all right, Brad? They didn't shoot you?"

"Never touched a hair, Faith. Seems like they didn't want to shoot it out. Reckon they're follerin', though. Likely keepin' to the brush an' makin' slow time."

"I heard shots, and I was afraid," the girl breathed.

Brad laughed softly. "Yep, but it's all right now. But tell me, how did yuh happen to be ridin' up the trail? How did yuh get away from Grinnell an' Cass?"

She told her story swiftly, and the smile faded from Brad's face as he listened.

"Then they'll take it out on dad, unless I can stop 'em. But they'll keep to my trail until they're shore they've lost me. Mebbe by thet time——" His teeth set grimly.

"What are you planning, Brad?" Faith's dark eyes were wide and troubled.

"Ridin' to the hide-out. Snakin' dad out. Them killers won't be lookin' for me. They still think I'm yaller an' can't handle a six-gun."

"But you're not a gun fighter. They'll kill you, sure!"

A mirthless smile played, for an instant, across Brad's square face. "Thet's what the sheriff thought, an' dad, an' the syndicate hombres. Mebbe I'm lucky."

He straightened in his saddle and gathered up his reins. "Yuh wait here until dusk, Faith. Then head for the Crazy K, Davy McDonald's spread, across the divide. I'll snake dad out, an' we'll be on yore trail pronto!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DEATH RIDES THE STORM.

BRAD kept well to the cover of the tangled hills as he circled wide and headed for the syndicate hide-out. Twice he slipped from his saddle and held his horse's nostrils as the sound of a rider in the brush reached him. But not once did he catch sight of one of the killers.

With Indian caution, he edged past the head of the little valley. Taking advantage of every cover, he drifted like a shadow down the abrupt slope toward the huddle of log shacks.

He was so intent upon the syndicate headquarters that he did not notice the rising wind. He hardly glanced at the black clouds swirling around San Fernando Peak.

Brad King and the mountain

storm swept down upon the killers' lair, neck and neck. And Monte Drago, riding out from San Fernando, was no more than a quarter of a mile behind. Brad came from the northeast, and the storm rolled down from exactly the opposite direction.

Between the blond rider and the storm, the syndicate outfit raced for shelter. And behind, Monte Drago prodded his roan wickedly to outrun the storm. His eyes were on the trees that twisted and writhed under the growing wind, and on the black, lightning-shot clouds that boiled down the slope.

The grim young puncher saw the riders as they thundered down the valley floor, and he caught sight of the single horseman, gaining upon the others. He was a half mile up the slope beyond when he caught sight of them. Then the first sullen rumble of thunder shook the hills. Brad's eyes swept up toward the towering peak.

He raked his black with star-roweled heels. No danger from the killer pack now. Nor from Monte Drago, racing at their heels. The storm claimed their attention.

The plunging black horse slipped and stumbled down the rocky slope. It twisted and turned like a cat to avoid the boulders and swaying trees.

As the first drops of rain fell, the black's hoofs thudded on the valley floor. Brad clenched his teeth. Lucky he had reached this level going before the storm struck in earnest.

He could see the water coming down in almost solid sheets, up the opposite slope. When it reached him, it would be blinding.

He urged his horse toward the log shacks. He'd find some place to hole

up. The killers would make for the main cabin, and they wouldn't venture out as long as the storm lashed the trees.

The black seemed to sense the danger of the storm, too. It stretched out into a dead run. It swept around bends in the trail, down through shallow draws and across tiny clearings.

Then the wind and rain struck. Tiny pellets of wind-whipped water beat Brad's face like bits of steel. Lightning played around the tops of the trees. Thunder crashed at split-second intervals. Fifty yards to the right, a great pine split with a deafening crash as the lightning flashed from tip to root.

Brad bent low over his saddle horn and dug his rowels deeper. The horse leaped ahead, its hoofs striking sparks from the rocky trail. It raced around a bend and into a clearing.

Straight ahead, no more than fifty yards, the black shadows of the cluster of cabins loomed. Then the clouds rolled down in a blanket, blotting them out.

But an instant before, the dripping puncher caught the flicker of light in one of the shacks. "They made it! Safe an' dry—an' laughin' to think of Faith an' me out in this storm!"

He circled the shacks through the dense cloud. His horse stopped, its nose squarely against a blank log wall.

Brad slipped from his saddle. Slogging heavily through the mud, he rounded a corner of the building. His breath came sharply as he found a closed door.

"Hoss barn!" he said. "Ol' Cloudy knowed jest where to head!"

He whirled and raced back to the animal. He led it back and into the

gloomy shelter of the long, low shed. Inside, with the rain beating in torrents on the slab roof, he shook his head to free his eyes and face of the water.

"Some storm! Bet dad is grittin' his teeth. Storms an' Storm King seem to understand each other. He'll be knowin' things are about to happen."

Now he swiftly examined the interior of the shed. Seven saddled and bridled horses huddled at the mangers. One of them was a rangy roan, and Brad knew that Monte Drago, as well as the other six, had reached shelter. His face hardened.

"Drago's here! The leader of the syndicate pack! So much the better—when the show-down comes!"

He made his way back to his own horse. With his heavy saddle rope, he fastened Cloudy tightly to the back manger.

"I won't be leavin' in a hurry, feller," he muttered. "But ifn I'm lucky—an' some of them make a run for it—they won't wait to untie yuh."

He strode to the door of the shed. Although it was still a half hour to sundown, the thick clouds made it as dark as night.

The wind still whooped down the slope, and the rain still came down in torrents. But the cloud had lifted enough for Brad to mark the square of orange light.

His stormy eyes narrowed to the thinnest slits. His mouth was a straight gash across his square face. His hands hovered over the butts of his still shiny new six-guns. He slipped from the door and raced for the lighted shack.

The shriek of the wind and the rattle of loose slabs on the walls of the shack drowned the sound of feet upon the narrow stoop at the back

door, smothered the click of the latch, and dulled the creak of the kitchen door as it swung open wide enough to admit Brad King's body.

A breath of warm air struck his face, and his eyes turned to the cast-iron stove in which a fire glowed. For an instant, he stood silent and motionless just inside the door. Then the rumble of voices came to him from beyond the door that led into the main room.

On tiptoe, he made for it. With his ear against the thin slabs, he listened. His muscles tightened, and his hands cuddled the butts of his six-guns. For he caught Monte Drago's close-clipped words, and knew they were addressed at Storm King:

"Yuh heerd what Grinnell says, yuh ol' lobo? Thet yaller whelp of yores run like a scared dogie. An' thet gal got free, along with him. They've holed up somewhere, an' yuh know the place. The gal talked with yuh afore she made the break. Yo're tellin' us what she said!"

For a minute, there was dead silence, and Brad King tensed, there in the gloomy kitchen. Then Storm King's even voice reached him:

"I'm tellin' yuh nothin', Monte Drago! Brad is nothin' but a younker who's never packed a smoke-pole. But me, I'll take it without a grunt."

"Oh, yuh'll talk, right enough!" Monte Drago laughed wickedly. "Reckon a little Injun persuasion'll loosen yore tongue. Kagey, bring in a red-hot poker from the kitchen! We'll see how it works."

The sound of booted feet on the floor reached Brad. He side-stepped and flattened against the wall.

The door opened, and an oblong of orange light painted the floor. Brad got a split-second glance at the main

room, but the door closed before he could make out much.

Kagey's shuffling figure made for the glowing stove.

Brad whirled noiselessly. Two long strides on tiptoe carried him to the man who was holding the iron poker, thrust into the red coals.

Brad's right six-gun swung in his hand. He raised it high—then crashed it down.

The long, heavy barrel struck Kagey's skull with a dull thud. A stifled groan came from the killer's lips as he slumped.

Brad caught him swiftly and laid him silently on the floor. He hesitated an instant before he whirled to the door. He kicked it wide.

He leaped through, a six-gun in each hand. Water still dripped from his face. His deep-set eyes blazed like blue fire. His square face was grim. He stood in the opening, legs spread wide and shoulders hunched forward. His elbows crooked as he clutched his six-gun butts at his hips.

In that tense instant, his gaze swept the room. Sam Cass and three others were seated at the heavy table in the center, their eyes on Monte Drago and Fanner Grinnell at the bunk. They did not look around, until Brad King's knife-edged voice broke the silence:

"Reach for the rafters, yuh lobos!"

Three chairs crashed back as the men at the table leaped to their feet—all but Sam Cass. He slumped still lower in his chair, as if he hoped the heavy table would protect him. Grinnell and Monte Drago jerked erect and whirled.

A startled exclamation burst from the man on the bunk. His stormy eyes, already excited by the howl of the wind and rain, lighted up. A grim smile played across his pain-twisted lips.

"Get 'em high, Monte Drago! An' yuh, Grinnell! Yo're all through. Hog-tied an' branded for the law! The San Fernando Syndicate is done!" Brad shouted.

Fanner Grinnell's hand streaked for his holster as he threw his body sidewise. A spurt of flame—a sharp report—the thud of a bullet into solid flesh! Grinnell spun on his heels like a dying top, then collapsed on the floor.

"Good work, son!" The words came evenly from Storm King's lips.

Monte Drago swore wickedly, to hide his growing fear of this hard-eyed young hombre.

Sam Cass, there at the table, trembled, deathly fear in his pig-gish eyes.

Brad crouched low, his eyes blazing, and a snarl on his lips. His guns swung at his sides.

Brad's eyes swept from Monte Drago to Cass and back. Grinnell was down. Three others, hired gunmen, cowered in a corner. Only two men faced him. If one of them would just make a move a split second ahead of the other!

"Drag irons, yuh yaller skunks!" he taunted. "Fill yore hands an' face the music!"

Sam Cass broke under the strain. A wordless, animal growl came from his slack lips. His right gun snapped out as he crashed his chair backward. Brad's hand swept up with dazzling speed. His smoke-pole barked sullenly.

A tiny wisp of gray smoke curled up from the muzzle. Cass's growl died in a gurgling shriek. He crumpled to the floor like an empty grain sack.

But during those tense seconds, Monte Drago's brain was working swiftly. It was not his idea to face those deadly guns. Let Sam Cass

and Fanner Grinnell do it, if they wanted to. He backed slowly toward the window. Apparently he knew that Brad King would not back-shoot him.

He kept his hands well away from his holsters. Now the window was right behind him. A leering grin spread across his face. He rasped:

"Yuh win the first round, hombre. But I'll be seein' yuh—with Black Hooper an' Deacon Factor at my back. So long!"

He whirled, to dive through the window.

But while he was backing, Storm King had gathered his one good leg beneath him. He forced himself up on the bunk, and his hand groped for the pair of spurs hanging on a wooden peg.

As Monte Drago turned for his dive, Storm King hurled those heavy, sharp-roweled spurs across the room. They caught the killer squarely at the back of his right knee. The leg crumpled under him as the point of a rowel bit into the flesh.

He dived, but could not make it on a single leg. He crashed back in a heap upon the floor, but was on his feet in an instant. His thin face was twisted into a snarling mask of fury. Oaths bubbled from his lips.

"Yuh blasted back-shootin', yaller-haired coyote pup! I'll drill yuh center!" he yelled.

His hands streaked for his holsters. All of his cunning was gone. His twisted brain could think of nothing but throwing hot lead into the young hombre who he thought had shot his knee from behind.

Brad King waited until Monte Drago's guns were free of their holsters. Storm King watched, breathless and wide-eyed.

Then Brad's right gun swung up

with lightning speed. Both weapons barked as one. The bullet from Drago's gun plowed the ceiling, for Brad's had been the faintest breath ahead.

Monte Drago straightened stiffly erect. His thin mouth sagged open, and a wild look swept into his eyes. He slowly teetered on his toes. Then he plunged forward, his evil face plowing the slab floor.

Brad whirled to the three men, still cowering against the wall. He strode to them and snatched the guns from their holsters, skidding them across the room to the bunk upon which Storm King sat. Then he turned to face his father.

Storm King's face was white and drawn, but there was a burning light in his eyes. His voice was low and filled with awe as he spoke:

"Fast! Fast as lightnin'! Three dead, an' four prisoners! I can hardly believe it, son! Who taught yuh thet draw? Where did yuh learn——"

"Grandpap Merton 'lowed every man should be able to drag irons. But he never told me about Hawk Dumbrell. Yuh let me think yuh was yaller, dad."

Storm King drew a long breath. "I thought I was doin' right in bringin' yuh up on the peace trail, son. Thank goodness, Jack Merton knowed better!"

A smile broke across Brad's face. Then it changed to a look of concern. "Yuh hurt bad, dad? They didn't do nothin' more to yuh?"

Storm King shook his head. "Yuh busted in jest in time. But Faith—she got plumb away?"

Brad nodded. "Well on her way to the Crazy K, over acrost the divide. Didn't think it was safe to try for San Fernando." Then he turned slowly to the dead men on

the floor. "Reckon it'll mean a trip to bring her back, as soon as we can get the dead polecats buried, an' the live ones to Phil Weight's jail. The minute yuh feel like ridin', we'll be on our way."

Storm King smiled happily. "I'm ready right now, son. A little shaky,

but I can fork a hoss. Let's get started. I'm honin' to tell ol' Phil Weight what a gun-slingin' son I've got. An' thet he won't have to worry no more about the rustler outfit thet's been runnin' him ragged. An' thet the San Fernando Syndicate is plumb wiped out."



DUMBELL

A SURPRISE VISIT FROM INDIANS

NEARLY a hundred years ago, when Colonel Hermon Aiken was a young man, he took up farming about ten miles from Houston, Texas. One morning, he started out early to get some fresh meat, leaving his wife and baby daughter in the camp which was their home, for the house was not yet built.

He had been out about two hours without having any luck. He didn't want to give up the hunt right away, but suddenly he heard voices in the direction of his camp.

He crept silently to find out who was there, and, to his surprise, he saw about thirty Comanche warriors and four squaws, all taking orders from a big powerful chief.

Some were loading their pack horses with pots, kettles, tin pans, and other utensils.

Two squaws were standing in front of Aiken's wife, evidently trying to get her child from her without killing it. But the brave woman was standing her ground with a big heavy stick in her hand, and was quite ready to strike down any one who came near enough.

In an instant, Aiken raised his rifle to his shoulder and drew a bead upon the chief before he was discovered. Then he called out in Spanish, and ordered the raiders to unpack the goods and get out.

There was some hesitation, but he told them he would kill the big chief at the first hostile move.

At that, the chief gave orders to unpack the goods. They threw them on the ground, mounted their horses, the chief waiting until the last, when all galloped off.

P A B S T B L U E R I B B O N

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The Whistlin' Kid Plays The Game

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid Cleans House," etc.

THERE was trouble in Herra-dura County. Just what it was all about, the "Whistlin' Kid" did not know, as yet. He had come there to find out. There was rustling in it, somewhere, and there might be some other form of robbery.

Word had been sent to the Cattlemen's Association by one of its members—who did not want his name mentioned, or the fact that he had sent such a letter—that there was trouble on the Diamond X Connected outfit.

"Old Man Harvey" Lyman had died and left the property in trust.

Young Lyman, the only Harvey Lyman now living, would not come into his inheritance until he was twenty-one, two years from now.

The Kid stood where he could watch young Lyman. The youngster was good-looking, slim, reckless—and drunk. It was not hard for the Kid, ace range detective of the C. A., to guess why his father had made his will that way.

Lyman was laughing too much, spending too freely. But the Kid was of the opinion that, left to himself, he would not have been drinking too heavily. He was with companions who led him on, sponged on

him and flattered him, let him toss his money on the bar and did not even make a pretense of holding up their end.

A man came through the swinging doors with a bow-legged cowboy, evidently looking for somebody.

"That's Everett, foreman o' the Diamond X," the Kid heard some one say. "Roundin' up young Lyman, likely. You'll see fireworks."

The newcomer pressed through the crowd. He was a man with a long nose and a hatchet-face. The Kid figured him as one who knew his business, but would not take pains to be pleasant about it.

He put a hand on Lyman's shoulder.

"We're startin' back, Harvey," he said. "You've had enough to drink. Git goin'!"

It was not, the Kid thought, the best way to handle a high-spirited youngster in the midst of those he thinks are friends, who have, at least, been his guests.

"I'll go when I'm good an' ready," retorted Lyman. "No one's goin' to tell *me* when I start for my own ranch. You ain't my nurse, Everett, or my boss either, though you sure act like it."

Everett turned to the bartender.

"I'm runnin' the Diamond X. I'm not payin' for anything he chalks up. Git that straight. I don't git any kick out o' seein' you around the ranch, drunk or sober, Harvey. Stay in town an' sleep in the gutter with the pigs, if you want to."

He turned and pushed his way out. The bow-legged cowboy tried to talk to Lyman, helped another man to hold him as he tried to break free.

"I'll beat that long-nosed coyote to a pulp!" cried Lyman.

"He might beat you to it, with a hawleg," said a puncher standing near by.

Lyman twisted his head to see the speaker, whose voice had been sneering.

"Two can sling hot lead as well as one," he said thickly. "One of these days, when we're both totin' artillery, I'll sew him up an' down the middle. I'll stitch him plenty."

The Kid had noticed that not many of the men were toting six-guns. It was not usual for them to do so when they were shipping from corrals. The weapons were not needed as tools. Wise owners and foremen thought them better kept out of saloons, and gave orders.

The Kid was packing his own Colt .45, but he was a stranger who had apparently drifted into Herradura looking for a job.

So were perhaps a half dozen others. It seemed to the Kid, that the man who had talked about Everett using a hogleg had been deliberately trying to provoke young Lyman, and that those who had been so friendly over the free drinks, were now laughing at him, instead of with him, as they had been.

There did not seem to be any Diamond X men present. The bow-legged cowboy had left. Everett had not given orders to anybody but Lyman.

The Kid had a hunch there was trouble brewing. Lyman ordered another round. The bartender hesitated, looked at his boss, who was also back of the bar. The latter shook his head slightly. Lyman caught the gesture.

"My credit ain't good no more? Is that what you mean? I own the Diamond X, don't I?"

"Since when?" jeered the man who had already spoken. "You don't own the spread till you're

twenty-one, an' dry behind the ears. Everet tells you where to head in."

Lyman glared at the other, one of the few wearing a six-gun. But he swung back to the bar.

"Do I git those drinks, or don't I?" he demanded threateningly.

The Kid's hunch was working. He thought he detected some sort of tie-up between the man who was ragging Lyman, and those who had been drinking with the young heir of the Diamond X. Something like a signal passed between them. Nothing that could be described or sworn to. As if they were spurring Lyman on to something desperate.

The Kid got it. He left the wall, and sauntered between the tables, stopping close beside one, as Lyman called the owner of the place "a cheap, tight-hided skunk," and made a pass at the bartender before he started to climb over the bar.

There was some confusion. Lyman was pulled back, hustled so that he stepped back, raging, swinging his fists. Somebody pushed him. He backed into the man who had jeered him, stepped on his foot.

The Kid thought that the other could have got out of the way easily enough. Instead he jolted Lyman in the ribs and, as Lyman whirled, slapped his face.

"Git out of this corral, you clumsy maverick! Git out, before you're thrown out."

Now the Kid knew what was coming. He could almost guess why.

Hurt and humiliated, hot with the liquor he had drunk, Lyman called the man who had slapped him a name that is an unforgivable insult, when the one who speaks it does not smile.

The man's hand shot to his holster, closed about the butt of his six-gun, started a swift, murderous draw.

The Kid picked up an empty beer bottle from the table and deftly tapped the gunman on his right elbow. It was not a hard blow, but it was delivered at exactly the right spot. It paralyzed the nerves where the three arm bones meet, numbing the lower arm clear to the fingertips.

The six-gun, just clear of the holster, fell to the floor. The man howled with rage and pain. Behind him, the group closed about Lyman. Those around the Kid, who had seen his action, stood clear.

The Kid sat on the edge of the table, alone, a stranger without a friend in the place, a man all of them believed was already branded by death.

He was whistling, a little louder this time, watching the gunman who stood rubbing his arm, watching those back of him.

Everybody there knew the opening lines of "The Cowboy's Lament." The words rose in their minds, significant and sinister:

Beat the drum slowly, an' play the fife
lowly,
Play the dead march as you carry me
along.

The gunman's eyes were slits. They were as deadly as the eyes of an angry rattler, fixed on the Kid, almost unbelievably.

"Did you do that, *muchacho?*" he asked, in a voice cold as the drip of ice. "You heard what he called me. Jest what's *your* special idea in horn-in' in?"

"I heard what he said, an' what you said," replied the Kid. "I saw what he did, an' what you did. Looked to me the last thing you did was one-sided. Likewise ornery, an' plumb yeller. He's too drunk to see straight, an' he ain't got a gun. You have, an' you draw it hasty. I figured I'd sort of even matters."

The other stooped and picked up his gun. His arm was only tingling now. His narrowed eyes glittered with the desire to kill. "Killer" was stamped on his face. His open sneer was threat and insult, in one. Men all stood away from him. Even Lyman let himself be pushed aside.

Two or three were fairly close. They had been in the group drinking with Lyman, and they all had six-guns, their thumbs were hooked in their belts.

There were a good many there who knew the name and reputation of the man who had drawn so swiftly. He was a gambler and a gunman. There were notches on the butt of his hogleg. Each notch meant a life, and there were those who whispered that "Keno" Bly had been hired to take them.

The Kid did not know that, but he knew what kind of man stood sneering at him, with cold eyes and murder in his heart.

Keno Bly let his hogleg slide down softly into the holster, which was slick with use and grease.

"You got a gun," he said meaningly.

The Kid stopped whistling.

"Like to look at it?" he asked lightly, and with a smile.

Keno Bly saw that the Kid's hand moved, but he saw nothing of the motion itself. It was quicker than the flashing dive of a kingfisher into water and out again. It was a blur, that ended when Keno's own six-gun was still well within its holster.

Keno had put all he knew into that draw of his—hate and the desire to wipe out of men's memories the fact that a kid had sent his weapon to the floor with a tap from a beer bottle. Also, he had seen a dancing light in the Kid's eyes that looked like mockery. But he never completed that draw. For a .45 was

in the hand of the Kid, as steady as if held in a vise. It pointed at a spot just above the belt buckle of Keno Bly.

For once, he felt his belly squirming, even as he almost felt the fierce shock, the fiery path of the slug through to his spine. A few, fine beads of cold sweat stood out on his forehead.

Keno Bly knew he was standing on the brink of a grave—his own grave. And the Kid was whistling again, softly and clearly.

He set the muzzle of his six-gun against Keno's chest, then moved it a little lower, with a laugh.

The nerve-centers of Bly's solar plexus were jumping and twitching like Mexican beans.

"You act sort of nervous," said the Kid. "I wouldn't want you to shoot yourself in the leg."

He drew the gunman's weapon clear, kept his own in place, while he broke open the loading gate of Keno's butt-notched Colt and spilled the cartridges to the sawdust.

Then he turned to Lyman.

"How about you an' me takin' a li'le pasear together, Lyman?" he said. "I wouldn't wonder but what both of us might be healthier outside."

II.

The Kid grinned as he spoke. He knew that he had won the respect of the majority, that Keno Bly and his pals were like so many snakes with their fangs drawn. They might strike later, but not now.

He had saved Lyman's life. The danger had sobered the youth up. He could not refuse the Kid's invitation.

Most of all, he had made that invitation seem something born of the moment. Nobody dreamed that the Kid was there to find out what was

wrong on the Diamond X, owned under a trust fund, but still owned, by young Harvey Lyman.

"I'll ride with *you*, any time you ask," said Lyman.

He knew how close he had been to death, how daring had been this stranger who was not much older than himself. He was more than grateful. He felt drawn to the Kid with bonds of friendship and esteem.

They walked out together. The Kid let them all see his back until he reached the door. Then turned to let Lyman go through first. But, as he had walked the length of the saloon, he had watched them in the long mirror behind the bar. He did not trust any one too much.

None of them had moved. Keno Bly had not moved. His empty six-gun had been thrust back into its holster by the Kid, but Keno had made no motion to refill the cylinder, pick up cartridges from the floor, or take new ones from his belt.

"You got him licked," said Lyman. He wanted to say more than that, but did not know just how to say it.

"You can lick a mule," replied the Kid, "but it don't do much good, 'cept to make up the mule's mind to kick you to hash, first chance it gits. Where's your hoss?"

There was still light enough in the sky for Lyman to admire the Kid's buckskin, Speed. He rode a claybank himself, a likely animal.

"Which way was you thinkin' of goin'?" asked Lyman.

"Thought you might ask me to the Diamond X."

"You might not be welcome. You heard what they said. I don't own the outfit, not for two years."

"Everett don't, either. He'll have to give you an accountin' then. He might not be too pleased to hear I stopped that gunman from pluggin'

you, but I don't think he'll admit it. I bring you home, safe an' moderately sober. You tell what happened. You might even ask Everett to give me a job. Right out in meetin', with the rest in hearin'. How do you stand with 'em?"

"All right with some. Some of 'em are Everett's suckers. I reckon I'm my own sucker, way I acted ter-night—way I've *been* actin'. I don't savvy who you are, or why you horned in, but you ain't no run-o'-the-ranch waddy. You sort of hinted Everett might not die of grief if he heard I stopped a bullet."

"It was just a hint, Lyman."

"I'm takin' it. Everett knows that, two years from now, the first thing I'll do is fire him. How many drinks did you have ter-night?"

"Same as usual—none."

"Me, I'm through with it, too. I've said that before but *this time*, I mean it. I could do it easy if you were stickin' around."

"I'll be around a little while," said the Kid.

"I don't know who you are, but you saved my life. And I'm sure grateful. That was a put-up job ter-night. I was too full to recognize thet hombre at first. He meant to kill me, all right. It was fixed fer me to step back on his foot."

"Who is he?" asked the Kid. "Yuh know him?"

"They call him Keno Bly. Come here from Montana, couple months back. Don't seem to do anything but play cards. He ain't too good on a hoss, but he sure can shoot."

"I've heard the name," said the Kid, "but I've never met up with the gent before. My handle is Prentiss, Pete Prentiss. My bunkies call me 'Kid.'"

"Mind if I called you thet?"

"I'd admire you to," answered the range dick, and meant it.

There was good stuff in Harvey Lyman, as there had been in his father before him, and in his grandfather, famous old frontiersman and Indian fighter.

Things had been stacking up badly for the heir of the Diamond X. He was sitting in a game surrounded by bad companions—a game where the cards were being dealt from the bottom of the deck, unless the Kid was much mistaken.

It was his job to see young Lyman got a fair deal and won the game, even if the Kid had to play it for him.

The cook shack was dark when they reached Herradura Creek and looked from the high bank across the fast running water at the buildings of the Diamond X.

Supper was over, the riders were in the bunk house, where the windows glowed brightly. Lyman pointed out the ranch house. It stood on a knoll, overlooking the corals and barns.

There were lights on the ground floor of the substantial-looking house. The whole place had a prosperous air about it.

"Chow's over," said Lyman, "but I eat in the ranch house, an' sleep there, where I was born. Everett lives there too. He's the man the trust company appointed to run the spread till I come of age. Ching will rustle us some grub."

They rode the trail down the bluff to the ford in the creek and went splashing through.

"It was Everett," said Lyman, "who tried to git me to leave, said he wouldn't be responsible fer the drinks I bought. He's always tryin' to belittle me thet way."

"You usin' many riders?" asked the Kid.

"Ten. An' me. I draw rider's pay. Six of the boys were with dad. Everett brought in four punchers from Montana when he came, besides his own foreman an' straw boss. He fired some who was here then, to make room for his lot. Sam Rogers used to be foreman, but Everett reduced him. Now he gives Sam all the wire and post-hole jobs."

Keno Bly was supposed to come from Montana, the Kid remembered. He wondered if Everett had anything to do with Keno's arrival.

And he was curious to know why Sam Rogers had stood for being demoted. Most men would have drawn their pay and quit.

Lyman supplied the answer to the unspoken question as they entered the lane that led between the corals.

"You see," he said, "Sam promised the Old Man he'd stick with me till I took over the outfit. The other five Everett didn't fire all swear by Sam. Where he stays they stick."

"Ranch payin' good?" asked the Kid.

Lyman snorted. "I don't git to see the statements Everett sends East, or the tally books, neither. Sam says we'll count short again, come round-up, like we did last year. Everett claimed the natural increase was low and thet a lot of primes got rustled. I reckon they did, at thet. But the spread should pay. Allus has, up to now. Grass is good, there ain't been no droughts or Texas fever."

At the end of the lane they were close to the bunk house. They could hear laughing and talking.

"Sounds plumb friendly," said the Kid.

"Jest about as friendly as rattlers an' prairie-dogs. They live together, but it ain't from choice. The boys bunk separate sides, an' they've

got two separate tables fer cards or readin'. Here's the night corral."

They unsaddled, put their rigging on a rack, turned in the buckskin and the claybank, saw them watered. There was hay spread on the ground.

"We can grain 'em later," Lyman suggested, and led the way to the ranch house, up the steps of the porch to the front door, which he opened without ceremony.

It was a big room, an open staircase leading from it to a gallery and the upper story. There was a fireplace with logs smoldering there. Herradura was five thousand feet up and the nights were cool.

The Kid noticed Indian rugs, heavy furniture, skins, and trophies of antlers. Two men sat in front the fire in armchairs, upholstered in leather. They sprawled comfortably, a table between them, a bottle and glasses on the table. Any signs of a meal had been cleared away.

One of the men was Everett, the other a heavy man, with his whiskers so thick it seemed as if he had thrust his red face through a bush. He had a club nose and the small, close-set eyes of a pig.

Everett stared at Lyman with a frown.

"You act like you wasn't expectin' me," said Lyman. "I wouldn't *be* here, if it wasn't fer this gent. Meet Pete Prentiss, Everett. You, too, Gilmore."

"I suppose you got into a row after I left," said Everett sourly, giving the Kid the slightest of nods. Gilmore did not move, except to spit a stream of tobacco juice at the backlog. "I imagined you would."

"And I reckon you was so worried about me you couldn't eat no supper," retorted Lyman. It was plain there was no love lost between the

two. "Thet Keno lizard from Montana went gunnin' fer me. Prentiss beat him to it. You should have seen it, Everett; you claim to admire quick gun play."

Everett poured himself another drink, pushed the bottle to Gilmore. He watched the Kid, who stood quietly whistling under his breath.

"I ain't seen you round," said Everett finally. "You ridin' fer any Herradura outfit?"

"No, he ain't," put in Lyman. "He was figurin' he might git him a job with us, over round-up, anyways."

Everett shook his head. "I was jest agreein' with the foreman here we'd have to lay off two or three men. You wouldn't want to work fer nothin', I reckon," he added with a grin that held no humor.

"I might," drawled the Kid, "if I was otherwise interested."

"We're both of us interested right now in grub," said Lyman. "I invited Pete to stay the night."

"There ain't a bunk to spare," replied Everett flatly.

"He's sharin' my room," said Lyman. "Let's see what Ching can rustle. We won't disturb you, Mr. Everett," he added with mock consideration. "We'll eat in the kitchen."

The Kid noticed the door that evidently led to the kitchen—a closely fitting swing-door without a handle—move slightly backward to position. Something, or somebody, had been keeping it open a crack, listening.

Gilmore spat into the fire again as Lyman and the Kid passed through. Everett sat gazing into the hearth like a man who has drawn to a straight flush and caught a bobtail.

III.

A plump Chinaman in spotless white duck clothes and apron, a pig-tail coiled on top of his bald pate, stood with his back to them at a big table in the center of the big kitchen. Pans and pots swung from the low beam above it. Knives and cleavers were slotted in a rack beside a sink and washboard.

He was chanting to himself in shrill snatches of song, the words and music—if it could be called music—evidently Chinese.

"How's for some chow, Ching?" asked Lyman. "Meet my bunky, Prentiss. He saved my life to-night."

Ching spun about, looked at the Kid with shrewd, almond-shaped eyes. Ching was quite a character, the Kid decided.

"How do, Mistuh Plentiss! Evelett, he speakee he no think you come home fo' chow, boss. Can do. Velly good venison stew, hot bissiki, apple pie, coffee. Catchee light away."

"Fine," said Lyman. "An' lots of it."

Ching laid two places at the table, got busy warming up the stew and biscuits, making fresh coffee.

"Ching's cooked for this spread fer twenty years," Lyman said. "Thet right, Ching?"

"Twenty-one, boss."

That accounted to the Kid for Ching calling Lyman "boss." He evidently did not recognize Everett in that capacity.

"Everett tell *you* he didn't think I was comin' home?" asked Lyman.

Ching gave Lyman a wink, laid his finger to one side of his nose in a most un-Oriental gesture.

"He tellee Gilmo'. You sabe Ching velly culious, boss. I listen plenty time. Evelett, he dlink

plenty with Gilmo'. Talkee too much. Talkee so muchee Ching listen at do'."

"What did you hear?"

Ching set a steaming dish of savory stew in front of them. "I thinkee Evelett no wantchee you come home. No time, mebbe. He say along Gilmo', one man called Keno come to-night. Gilmo' askee why? Evelett say less a man sabe, less he talkee. Gilmo' no likee that too muchee. That jus' befo' you come."

He had no more to say. He seemed like a man who had spoken his piece and turned dumb. He served them until they had finished eating. Then they went outside.

The porch ran all round the ranch house. Posts supported a second-floor veranda.

"There's an outside stair," said Lyman. "We don't have to go in an' kiss Everett good night. Let's grain the broncs."

They walked over toward one of the barns. The moon had risen, and there were great patches of light and shadow.

"I don't hardly think Keno'll come now," said Lyman.

The Kid was not so sure. It seemed certain now that Everett had something to do with Keno's coming from Montana. If he had been hired to do away with Lyman, he would have come out to the ranch to collect his pay, and then would likely have hit the ridges for Montana—or Mexico, which was closer.

The motive for Everett's wanting to get rid of young Lyman was not quite plain as yet to the range dick. That was part of the sort of puzzles he was paid to answer, and he believed he would find the answer to this one.

But even if Keno had failed, he would still want money. He was

not the kind to work for nothing, whether he failed or made good. If Everett had hired him for murder—for what actually amounted to murder, though it might be called a bar-room brawl—then Keno had a hold on Everett. He might want to try again. He might merely want to make a report, get all the dinero he could, and light out.

But the Kid was beginning to see very plainly why the member of the Cattlemen's Association had written in, also why he might not like to get mixed up with the "trouble" on the Diamond X.

On their way to the barn they passed a breaking corral with heavy cedar rails that had been squared off to let helpers get quickly out of the way after the blindfold was off a mean broncho.

Suddenly the Kid grasped Lyman's arm.

He had seen something, lurking, moving cautiously in the shadow cast by the ell of the big barn. The action seemed suspicious. There had been one attempt on Lyman's life that night. There might be another—this time by somebody besides Keno Bly.

"What's the idea?" asked Lyman in a whisper, sensing something wrong.

The mysterious figure moved again.

The Kid shoved Lyman away from him, shifting his own position, as he set his left hand on one of the cedar rails for purchase.

Lyman, off balance, stumbled to the Kid's right, as something came slithering and whistling through the dark. It sped like a silver streak into the moonlight. There was a twang, like the snap of a guitar string.

An arrow buried its steel, barbed

head in the wood. It hit between the Kid's arm and body, just below his armpit. If he had not moved to save Lyman, the arrow would have pierced his heart. The shaft quivered, from the force that had been behind it.

The Kid's hand dropped to his gun, like the stab of a loon's beak. But it stayed there. A shot would rouse the ranch. It might touch off plans the Kid felt were in the making, that might solve the mystery of the Diamond X.

The use of the arrow was strange. But an arrow was noiseless. Part of those sinister plans, the Kid's hunch warned him of, might include not stirring up Sam Rogers and the five who were faithful to him. Not at any rate until the plans were ripe.

The Kid let himself drop to his knees, slide to the ground, as if he had been mortally wounded. He clipped the arrow to his side, broke it off with his weight as he went down.

He heard the slight sounds of a door closing carefully. A sliding door, that ran on a track, with overhead wheels, and a groove.

The Bowman had gone into the big barn, sure he had scored.

Lyman had regained his balance. The sudden push had prevented him from seeing what had happened. He bent over the Kid.

"What's wrong? You ain't hurt, are you?"

"Not so fur. I think I fooled him. I reckon it was meant for me, after all. He thinks he got me. With an arrow. We'd best beat it to your room. Is your gun there?"

"Sure is. Ain't you goin' after him? Before he gits away?"

"No," said the Kid decisively. "You let me handle this, Lyman. I'll explain why, later."

They kept in the shadows, mov-

ing fast, gained the porch close by the kitchen. Ching was still working there. They saw his shadow on the blind.

They reached the veranda by the outside stair, got into Lyman's room through an unlocked window. The Kid tossed the broken arrow on the bed.

"Everett bring any Indians with him from Montana?" he asked.

"There's one claims he's Mexican, but they call him 'Pima Joe.' I've seen him shoot jacks on the jump with his bow. Why would he shoot at you?"

"I horned in. They want me out of the way. Likely Everett figures me too handy with my Colt. And I've a strong hunch they mean to put you out of the way, before mornin'."

Lyman stared at the Kid, fingering the arrow. He shook his head.

"I don't see what Everett gains killin' me off," he said. "He ain't a relative. Might be actin' for one of my cousins. They'd be next in line, but they all live in Chicago. Of course, the ranch is worth money."

"I work for the Cattlemen's Association, Lyman," said the Kid.

"By thunder! You said you was called Kid. You ain't the Whistlin' Kid, are you?"

"I'm the hombre. Where did you hear o' me?"

"Heard Sam Rogers talkin', one time. Sam said a mouthful. You go ahead an' give the orders."

"You've suspected Everett might not be straight, haven't you? Ever talk about it?"

"No, but I wrote the trust company after the spring round-up. Sam put me up to it. I told 'em I thought it might be a good idea to check Everett up a bit, because the spread has allus paid till he took hold."

The Kid let out a soft whistle.

"That's the cat out of the bag," he said. "They've likely wrote him they're sendin' some one out. He'll be headin' fer a clean-up, an' he'd like to git even with you. What a skunk like him *calls* even."

Ching was singing his high-pitched song below them, clearing up, rattling plates and pans.

He might be holding things up a bit, the Kid thought. Everett might think Lyman was holed-up, bide his time to finish him. Pima Joe might have lit out without reporting, after he thought he had killed the Kid. Everett would expect Lyman to face him about the shooting of Prentiss, figure that Lyman was cowed.

The Kid did not like guessing. He preferred action that brought results.

They had left the window slightly open and were sitting on either side of it, in the dark. The Kid heard the distant gallop of a horse.

That should be Keno Bly.

There were five men, and Sam Rogers, in the bunk house, who would line up with Lyman and the Kid; if they could get to them. The lights were still on there. Gilmore might have gone back.

The galloping horse came closer. The rider was not giving the horse its full stride. Keno was not a good rider.

"I'm goin' to crawl out to the gallery at the head of the stairs to the big room," said the Kid. "You can rearguard me, back my play, if things break. But don't do anything till they do. And don't crowd me. I'm used to playin' Indian."

IV.

He snaked along the passage, gained the gallery. Everett was alone before the fire. The Kid saw

him take a drink that left the bottle empty.

The horseman arrived, walked up the steps, across the porch. Everett got up and opened the door, let the man in, closed the door behind him. He did not welcome Keno Bly cordially.

"Made a mess of it, didn't you?"

"I was interfered with," Keno tried to explain. "I——"

"I know all about it. The hombre thet made a sucker out of you showed up here, with Lyman. I'm havin' him attended to."

"You're clearin' out ter-night?"

"Sure am. I've milked this outfit all I can, short of drivin' off the herd. Thanks to young Lyman, they're sendin' auditors from the East. When they arrive, I'll be gone. They'll find young Lyman an' his quick-draw pal. I'm huntin' rustlers, see? They killed Lyman. Mebbe his pal was one of 'em. Let 'em figure it out. Those two won't be talkin' any."

"How erbout the old-time foreman, an' the ones thet play along with him."

Everett laughed.

"Those six hombres are dead to the world. They brought some whisky back from town. So did Gilmore. Same brand. He doped his, an' swapped bottles. He tells me Sam Rogers an' his bunkies started drinkin' right after supper."

"You sure think of things, Everett. Leavin' 'em here?"

Everett walked over to a side-board, took out another bottle, knocked the neck off against the fire-place, and poured a big swig of liquor for Keno and himself. His face was evil with satisfied cunning.

"We're drivin' all the primes," he said. "We've had 'em spotted fer two days, close to wire. It's forty hours to the border. We ought to

git thet much start. We'll take those six jaspers along, pack 'em, like carcasses of deer. We may turn 'em loose at the line on foot. Or I may leave 'em there," he ended, with a stroke of his fire-finger across his throat."

"You talk 'we,'" said Keno. "Where do I come in?"

"I'm goin' to give you ernother chance, Keno. The boys should be saddlin' now. They'll come here for orders. But first you wipe out young Lyman, an' you draw down all I promised you."

Keno's face was wolfish. He downed another drink, helping himself.

"I'd ruther it was the young cuss who spoiled my play this evenin'. I'll fix Lyman, but I sure would like to have had a chance at thet slick galoot."

"Here's where you git it, hombre!" said the Kid's clear voice. "It's Prentiss talkin', Everett. Prentiss of the C. A. Pima Joe missed me. You better toss in your hand."

The open stairs had a wide hand-rail. The kid slid down it, six-gun in hand.

Both men shot at him as he slid, to land lightly on the floor as he reached the end post.

One of them missed the swiftly moving target. That was Everett.

It was Keno's bullet that snagged one of the Kid's ribs.

There came the crash of heavy six-guns.

Powder smoke filled the room. Jets of flame leaped from gun muzzles in vicious darts of death.

There were two against one.

Then the fight changed to a double duel, as Lyman came charging into the thick of it, leaping down the stairs, firing at every jump.

He did not last long. Keno Bly had turned the small table, in front

the fireplace, on its edge. He knelt behind it, firing carefully.

Lyman slumped on the bottom step, leaned against the wall with a broken thigh-bone.

The Kid had a nicked shoulder now, but it was his left.

He was counting his shots. The men would be coming with Gilmore from the bunk house any second. They must have heard the firing, even if they were not ready to report.

He doubted if he would get any time to reload. He had to make each slug count—and he did.

He sent a bullet right through the table top, and heard Keno grunt, jumped out of position by the shock.

His head showed for a second. The gambling killer tried to dodge, but the Kid's next slug tore through his skull.

Keno had played his last crooked card—and lost the game.

But the Kid had not won it—yet.

Everett had dropped back into one of the big chairs, with his right shoulder smashed. He was trying to shift his gun to his left hand.

There was a great racket at the back door. The Kid heard Ching yelling.

The Kid reached Everett while the superintendent fumbled with the trigger. The shot that killed Keno had emptied the range dick's gun. He crashed his gun barrel down, and Everett forgot all his plans, all his worries.

His scalp was torn open, and a flap of flesh hung over his crafty

face, pale beneath the scarlet mask that swiftly flowed over it.

The Kid grabbed his gun, and kicked back the swinging door to the kitchen, charging to Ching's relief. There were three shots still left in Everett's weapon.

The Kid need not have worried about Ching. He was in time to finish the game, but Ching had made a good start.

Two men lay on the floor. One of them squirmed like an almost dead fish. The other was beyond moving. That was Pima Joe.

"Hi yo!" Ching was shouting in his battle cry. "What fo' you tly come along my kitchen? I show you how Chinese pilate fight."

The rack was almost empty of its armory of sharp knives and cleavers. Gilmore stood holding a right wrist, through which a blade had been flung. He swore as he tried in vain to stop the red flow that spurted from it.

Another man cowered, trying to hold on to the remnant of an ear.

Ching saw the Kid, and greeted him.

"Hi yo! You gottee gun? Plenty good. Now I shuttee door. We catch 'em all."

Chalk up another one fer the Whistlin' Kid. Ching was a great help, all right, but we figure that the range dick could 'a' got the situation in hand all alone if he'd had ter. Skunks like Everett ain't got no chance agin' the Kid when he gits goin'. Watch fer another story about him. Yuh'll find it in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly soon.

Rustlers' Terror

RUSTLING became so bad in Arizona that the stockmen finally imported a gunman named Ed Johnson, who was appointed deputy sheriff. He acted as a stock detective and in a short time his name became so feared among the rustlers that they either reformed or fled for other parts.

Ed's last killing in northern Arizona was a mystery man known only as "Peg-leg." This man had one leg doubled up at the knee and wore a stump. Hence his name.

Peg-leg lived in the pine woods near Bellemont, which at that time was just a railroad siding with a signpost, about eight miles west of Flagstaff.

In appearance and actions he looked like a wild man. His long hair was unkempt, his beard was matted, and his clothing was ragged. He shunned his fellow men, and whenever he did happen to meet up with a drifting cowboy or hunter he was surly and sullen and answered their questions briefly.

This curious creature lived in a cave in the lonely wilderness north of Bellemont, and during all the years that he was there, he was never known to go to any town. He obtained his food by robbing camps, and at times would sneak into a ranch and help himself to whatever he could find that was eatable.

Sometimes he would take an article of old clothing, but he never stole anything of value. He was looked upon as something of a lunatic, and was a little feared as such, so folks

left him alone. No one begrudged him the food he stole and would have given it to him willingly if he had asked for it.

But with the passing of the years, times changed, and so did the people. Campers and nesters became numerous in the vicinity. They were not as soft-hearted as the cowboys, and they made complaints to the authorities at Flagstaff.

One day, Ed Johnson was sent by the sheriff to bring the hermit in. By this time, Ed had cleared the country of rustlers—almost—and he set out to bring Peg-leg to civilization.

After a long search, he found him at a ranch house where he was prowling for food in the owner's absence.

Johnson surprised the man and seized him. To his surprise Peg-leg put up a desperate fight. The fear of the law put the strength of a lion into his weak body, and he fought like a maniac.

In the struggle, he drew his six-gun and was about to fire, when Ed Johnson drew his own weapon and ended the fight. For Ed Johnson never had to shoot twice.

Nothing was ever found that would throw any light on the identity of the hermit, either in his clothing or in the little cave that had been his home for years.

Whatever was his secret, or his reason for leading such a strange life, he carried it with him to an unmarked grave in the cemetery at Flagstaff.



Six-gun Interest

By George C. Henderson

Author of "A Proper Hangin'," etc.

SWIRLING clouds of powdery alkali dust sifted through the open windows of the jolting Bowie Gulch stage. The foam-flecked six-horse team whirled it along the rocky road.

Inside the swaying coach, tall, lean, hawk-faced Bob Hullum eyed the thin-lipped hombre who occupied the seat across from him. He had seen that hulking jasper before. But where?

Bob Hullum slipped one sun-blackened hand inside his faded blue shirt and felt the cowhide money belt that encircled his slender waist. There was five thousand dollars in that belt—dinero with which to restock his father's Double Arrow Ranch.

The big yellow wheels of the stagecoach clattered and rattled. Bob saw the paunchy, slate-eyed jasper across from him bounce heavily in the seat every time the flying coach hit a bump.

Bob tilted his dusty Stetson back from his high tanned forehead.

He noted the stranger's well-oiled Colts that were thonged down to his wool trousers, the legs of which were shoved into the tops of brush-scuffed boots. His greasy shirt was open at the neck, exposing a bristly chest. The jasper was earmarked a killer.

Bob tried to place the man's familiar face. Suddenly it dawned on him who the hombre was. In Lariat cow town he had been pointed out

as Jake Shoder, a member of the notorious "Smoke" Dulcert's bandit crew.

Edging around slightly in the seat, Bob Hullum twisted his body to one side so as to give him a free sweep at his low-slung Colt. Bob and Shoder were the only passengers on the Bowie Gulch stage.

Bob could hear the stage driver bawling at the six-horse team and hear the crack of the blacksnake whip as it snapped over the backs of the sweaty mustangs.

Bob cautiously loosened his big Colt in its holster and kept his calloused right hand close to the cedar butt. Had Dulcert found out that he carried the five thousand and sent Shoder along to trail him? Were the rest of the gang waiting at some convenient spot to stick up the stage?

Jake Shoder had not said one word since the two of them had got on the stage at Lariat cow town. Shoder kept his lumpy nose buried in a week-old newspaper.

The rocketing stagecoach was entering the Devil's Dunes, a desolate country of sand hills, ocotillo, and rattlesnakes. This would be the best place for a holdup.

One thought was uppermost in Bob Hullum's mind. He had to get rid of the money, hide it. If Dulcert got hold of this dinero, it would ruin Bob's father. The elder Hullum was banking on the five thousand to put his ranch back on a paying basis.

Watching Shoder out of granite-colored gray eyes, Bob Hullum suddenly saw a hiding place for the money. On the floor of the coach there was a big canteen, left by the stage company for the convenience of the passengers.

Bob had tasted the lukewarm water only a few minutes before.

There was only one good gulp left in the canteen.

Bob would be more than glad to shoot it out with Shoder. But Smoke Dulcert and his killers might appear at any minute. The safety of the five thousand dollars was Bob's first consideration. He had borrowed the money from the bank in Lariat not more than two hours before.

The boiling Western sun seared the countryside with furnacelike heat. Sand hills, giant boulders, clumps of mesquite and sage flashed past the open stagecoach windows.

Bob Hullum picked up the big canteen, unscrewed the cap, and placed it to his lips. A trickle of warm, alkaline water flowed down his throat, nearly gagging him. Tipping the container straight up, he drained it.

Bob saw that Shoder still had his face buried in the paper. The rannihan slipped a hand inside his shirt, fumbled with the strap on the money belt, and hastily drew out the five one-thousand-dollar bills.

Shoder rustled the newspaper.

Bob quickly glanced up, palming the money in his left hand, his right caressing his gun butt. He saw Shoder's slate eyes rest on him for a minute. Then the outlaw squirmed in the seat for a more comfortable position, turned the paper over, and commenced to read again.

With an apparently indifferent manner, Bob picked up the canteen lid with his left hand, passed the money through the opening, and screwed on the top.

Leaning over, he started to put the canteen back on the floor of the racing stagecoach.

Jake Shoder's harsh, grating voice made him jerk upright, nerves tensed for trouble.

"Give me a drink o' that *agua*," growled the bandit, laying aside the paper. He stretched out a fat, hairy hand toward the canteen.

Bob Hullum's gray eyes slitted. He quickly cast a glance out of both of the stagecoach windows. The speeding coach was entering a high-walled sandstone canyon. He could hear the strain of harness as the coach slowed on a steep hill. If trouble was going to come, this was where it would happen.

"Ain't no more water," replied the young cowboy, shaking the battered canteen. "I just downed the last of it."

Jake Shoder pressed his squat body against the back of the seat. Both of his long, spiderlike arms hung loosely at his sides, hands crooked above gun grips.

"Drunk all the water, eh?" he snarled, showing a row of blackened, broken teeth. "Give me that canteen, anyhow. I want to see fer myself. I think yo're lyin'."

Reaching out suddenly, Jake tried to snatch the canteen from the buckaroo's hands.

Bob dropped the metal container to the floor and seized Shoder's wrist in a steely grip. Shoder yelped.

"I don't hanker to be called a liar!" Bob rapped out.

As the words left his mouth, he yanked hard.

Shoder's body suddenly left the seat. The big-nosed gunman tried to grab his left-hand gun. His head cracked against the top of the stagecoach. The crown of the dirty Stetson that was pulled low over his hate-blazing eyes was crushed in.

"Let me go!" yelled Shoder. "Ow-w-w!"

His words ended in a gasp. Bob suddenly released Jake's fat wrist and sank a knotted fist into his mid-

riff. Jake was slammed hard against the seat.

Suddenly brake shoes screeched on iron-tired wheels. The lurching stagecoach jerked to a halt.

Through a cloud of alkali dust, Bob Hullum had a glimpse of riders on either side of the stalled coach. He could hear the driver yelling. A gun cracked.

The driver's voice broke off. Bob saw the fellow plunge from the high seat to the dusty road, a bullet in his head.

Only split seconds had elapsed since that first warning of danger. Bob Hullum's six-gun cleared leather.

The stage door was yanked open. A tall, skinny jasper, holding a Winchester, snarled for Bob to come out.

The cowboy's answer was a hastily triggered shot. Bob saw the fellow drop the rifle and clap a hand to a bullet-nicked shoulder.

Recovered from the smashing blow in the stomach, Jake Shoder ripped Colts from holsters.

"I got him, Smoke!" he yelled.

Wheeling around, Bob tried to level on Jake. Hands seized the rannihan's boots, throwing him off balance.

Wham! His hogleg exploded, but the bullet splintered through the side of the coach.

Bob turned. A bearded jasper, standing on the ground, was reaching through the coach door. His bony hands were gripping Bob's ankles.

The cowboy tried to wrench loose. Jake Shoder clouted him from behind.

Lights burst in Bob's brain. The coach seemed to turn upside down. He tried desperately to right himself. Then all grew dark.

II.

The wild, tuneless air of a song sung in Spanish was the first sound that registered on Bob Hullum's foggy brain. The cowboy opened his eyes. The blazing sunlight sent stabbing knives of pain through his head.

The rannihan tried to lift himself up. There was no feeling in his hands. They were bound tightly behind him.

His first thought was of the five thousand. Had Smoke Dulcert found the money? Where was the canteen?

Looking wildly around, Bob Hullum spotted the stagecoach. The outlaws had evidently cut the six-horse team loose and rolled the coach down the hill. The stage lay in a little gully, a mass of twisted metal and splintered wood. The dead driver's body lay in the brush by the road.

Hot rage filled the buckaroo at thought of the stage driver's cold murder. Bob Hullum glanced around. White and half-breed killers circled him, some hunkered down like cats watching a helpless mouse.

He could see towering sandstone walls rising toward the brassy sky on all sides. His gun was gone, but he had his cartridge belt.

Again Bob heard the song. A tall Mexican, with a bell-brimmed sombrero pulled low over his swarthy forehead, stood at the edge of the group. His singsong voice rose louder and louder. He sang in Spanish:

"I'm the best drinker beneath the sun.
I drink more tequila than any one——"

"José!" roared a runty, skeleton-faced hombre in a rasping voice.

"I'm sick o' that song. This hombre's comin' to."

The Mex broke off singing abruptly.

Twisting around, Bob looked into the half-pint jasper's face. Bob knew it was Smoke Dulcert himself, the most ruthless killer in the Simaroon range country. There was no mistaking those pinkish eyes, topped by sparse, corn-silky brows.

Dulcert's hat was off, revealing a sweat-glistening hairless dome. His clothes were dirty and torn. But the big six-guns strapped to his legs showed special care.

Bob felt Dulcert's sharp-pointed boot toe gouge his ribs. The cowboy winced with the pain. His gray eyes bored into the killer's pink ones. Dulcert's thin mouth curled in a snarl.

"Ready ter talk?" he growled.

"Shore, I'll talk," snapped Bob Hullum. "I know yo're Smoke Dulcert. Yuh go around shootin' down helpless stage drivers. Yuh got a name fer bein' tough. I ain't scairt of yuh. Give me a Colt, an' I'll match irons with yuh!"

Dulcert's eyes narrowed. A low growl issued from his throat as he snaked twin six-guns from their holsters.

Hunkering down, he pressed the cold muzzles against Bob Hullum's head. The young buckaroo felt the deadly metal and heard the *click-click* as Dulcert cocked the weapons.

A thousand thoughts crowded into his brain. Smoke was merciless enough to squeeze trigger and send two hot slugs ripping into his brain. But Bob had to stall some way. The five thousand dollars that would save his father's Double Arrow Ranch was in that canteen in the wrecked stagecoach.

He knew the bandits hadn't found the money. Otherwise, they

would have killed him pronto. He had to stall Dulcert. Bob knew if he was shot down now, the money would never reach his father.

"Hey, take them Colts away!" he said finally. "Let me know what's on yore mind."

"You know——" began Dulcert, withdrawing the six-guns from Bob's head.

"We'd better git this hombre to the hide-out," put in hulking, slate-eyed Jake Shoder. "We're on the main road here. Might run into trouble. We kin make him talk there."

Smoke Dulcert whirled on his partner. His pink eyes blazed angrily.

"I give orders here!" he snarled. "Remember that!" Then, as if in deep thought, he rubbed his pointed chin. "Mebbe we'd better fog fer the hide-out. Don't want to bump into the law."

Saddle gear squeaked. Bit chains rattled as the killers mounted. Jake Shoder and the Mex called José lifted Bob into the hull of an iron-gray bronc.

A lariat was uncoiled. The noose was flipped over Bob's head, drawn chokingly tight. Grabbing up the other end, Shoder mounted and spurred away, leading Bob behind.

The trail led across the burning, heat-blinding desert. Far to the right, Bob could make out the swooping black scavengers of Devil's Dunes—buzzards. The birds were probably circling over the carcass of a steer or coyote.

"Mebbe they'll be feedin' on my bones afore long," mused the cowboy.

They rode for two miles. None of the outlaws talked. Only the muffled crunch of horses' hoofs in sand and the occasional nicker of a bronc broke the silence.

They entered a lava-cap wilderness. Keeping on the hard-rock trail for a mile, they swerved right and dismounted in front of an old adobe house. Cottonwoods formed a little grove around a gurgling spring. Behind the house, there was a rude pole corral, bound at the joints with rawhide thongs.

Bob felt himself pulled from the saddle. One bandit tended to the horses. The rest herded Bob Hullum inside.

The interior was dim. For a moment, Bob could hardly see. He made out a smoke-blackened fireplace in one corner. An old table, some rawhide-bottomed chairs, and a pile of mesquite roots were the only objects in the one-room place. There was a heavy-beamed ceiling overhead. His hands were untied.

Every muscle in Bob Hullum's body ached. He saw Jake Shoder and Dulcert talking together in low tones. Shoder kept pointing at the cowboy. Finally the hulking outlaw walked over, picked up the trailing lariat rope, and tossed it over a rafter.

At a sharp command, three of the bandits seized the rope and pulled it. Bob felt the noose clamp around his neck.

Smoke Dulcert threw back his head and chortled.

"Not so much this time, fellers." He grinned. "Don't stretch his neck. Mebbe he'll talk now. Where'd yuh hide that money?"

Bob stood as straight as an arrow in the center of that gang of quick-trigger killers. His face was as expressionless as sandstone. Only his gray eyes burned with a cool, deadly light.

"What money?" he finally answered.

"Want to play, eh?" chuckled Dulcert. "I was goin' to run off

some of yore old man's hosses. Happened to be listenin' at a winder when he told yuh to go to Lariat an' git the five-thousand-dollar loan. Figured five thousand was better'n hossflesh, so I've been follerin' yuh ever since. We know yuh got the dinero at the bank. When yuh was knocked out, we searched yuh. The money's gone. What did yuh do with it?"

Bob calmly eyed the killer boss, but refused to answer. He knew he was in a tight place. His brain was working like lightning, trying to find some way out of this. He had to escape, go to the wrecked stagecoach, and get the money out of the canteen.

Again the three outlaws yanked on the rope. The hemp bit into Bob Hullum's muscled neck.

He felt himself jerked upward. His toes left the ground. Black spots appeared before his eyes. A roar, like that of a giant waterfall, sounded in his ears. His wind was choked off. He felt smothered.

The lariat slackened. Bob felt his feet touch the hard-packed dirt floor. His brain reeled crazily. He felt dizzy, but did not fall. Dulcert's voice sounded far away.

"Tell me where yuh hid the dinero," Smoke was saying. "Then I'll turn yuh loose."

"Put a slug in my head, yuh mean," retorted Bob weakly.

Once more, he was yanked upward. The reata strained and groaned.

Bob's tongue popped out. The roaring in his ears was louder this time. Then he was dropped to the ground again.

This time, he sank weakly to his knees. His face was red, his gray eyes bloodshot. But he did not talk.

As if in a dream, he saw the leer- ing faces of the bandits. It would

not do to let Dulcert know he was weak. Bob struggled to his feet, reeled drunkenly, and sprawled face down.

"That feller's all man," said Jake Shoder.

"A stubborn fool," put in Smoke Dulcert. "Come on!" he growled. "Where's that money? I'm leavin' yuh hangin' this time. Out with it!"

A wild, desperate plan was taking form in Bob's brain. It was one slim chance, but he had to take it. He knew Dulcert meant what he said and would finish him with the rope next time.

Struggling to his knees, Bob picked up a stick that lay on the floor, and commenced to scratch on the hard-packed ground.

"Talk! Don't draw!" rapped out Smoke.

Bob shook his head and pointed at his rope-burned throat.

"Talk's been choked out of him," said Jake Shoder, with a chuckle. For some reason, Shoder was enjoy- ing this.

Bob made a circle and labeled it "Lariat." Then he drew a square. After it, he put "Stage Depot." With several wavering lines, he made what resembled a tree.

"I get it," said Shoder, with ap- parent enthusiasm. "The dinero's hid in that big oak next to the stage depot. I remember seein' a big hol- low in the trunk. He got wise I was follerin' him, an' ditched the money there."

Bob thought that Shoder was showing unusual eagerness in falling for the trick. Jake argued with the dubious Smoke Dulcert. Bob had told no lie. He only scratched the map on the hard ground. The killers were drawing their own con- clusions.

The bandits were in high spirits with thoughts of spending their share of the five thousand. José burst into his Spanish song.

"I'm the best drinker beneath the sun.
I drink more tequila than any one."

Smoke Dulcert barked an order. Bob's throat was rope-burned. The noose was slipped off his neck and fastened around his hands. Then the lariat was drawn back over the rafter and tied, so that the cowboy's arms were suspended over his head. Dulcert turned to him.

"I'll take a chance," he snarled. "If that dinero ain't there, I'll make coyote bait out o' yuh." He turned to his crew. "José, you an' Pedro guard this hombre. An' stay out o' the tequila. Come on!"

Standing there in the center of the floor, with his numbed arms suspended overhead, Bob Hullum saw Jake Shoder shove his squatty body forward. There was a cunning light in Jake's slate eyes. Jake chuckled silently and stepped across the threshold.

Then the bandits were gone out of the door. Bob heard the creak of saddle leather as they mounted and rode away.

III.

For long minutes, Bob Hullum asked himself a question over and over. Why had Jake Shoder acted so strange? Jake had something up his sleeve and Bob had an idea it didn't concern Smoke Dulcert or the rest of the gang.

Bob's eyes traveled upward. He could see the cruel noose biting into his wrists so hard that it puffed out the flesh. His gaze followed the hemp up over the thick rafter, down the other end of the room, where it was tied to a plank that projected

from the wall. No chance of escape that way.

The rope was drawn so tight that his feet barely touched the ground. The muscles in his arms began to throb. His head reeled from the torture.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw José and Pedro, the two Mexican guards, squat on the floor. Pedro pulled a bottle of tequila from the long shelf by the window. José got cards, and they commenced to play monte and drink.

Bob had to escape from here some way. His dad was counting on him to bring that five thousand dollars home. If the dinero was lost or stolen, the Double Arrow faced ruin. Then his dad's fifteen years of back-breaking toil would go for nothing.

A feeling of desperation seized him. His thoughts traveled back to that canteen and the wrecked stage-coach. He had to free himself. But how?

Night was falling. Long shadows cut across the rocky ground outside. It grew dark. José lighted a lamp. The flickering yellow rays lighted up the old adobe with a ghostly glow.

Only the riffing of the cards and the occasional gurgle as one of the Mexes took a drink broke the stillness. Now and then, Bob could hear their horses stomping the ground outside. He hoped the broncs were saddled.

José broke into song. His tuneless voice rambled on as he sang one verse after another, always ending them with:

"I'm the best drinker beneath the sun.
I drink more tequila than any one."

Suddenly an idea struck Bob. He had to work fast. It would be a good hour before the bandits returned.

José continued to sing. In spite

of his aching body, Bob managed to force a grin to his features as he recalled a drinking trick he had once seen.

"So yo're the best drinker beneath the sun, eh?" he chuckled. "You guzzle tequila like an old woman. Why don't yuh take a big drink?"

José glanced up. His beady eyes narrowed.

"Don't talk," he snarled. "Or I cut your t'roat."

Bob saw the Mexes continue to play monte. It seemed hopeless to try to escape. But Bob Hullum was made of pioneer stuff. He would not give up.

José still sang snatches of his song in Spanish.

"I'd quit singin' that," said Bob suddenly. "You ain't got no claim to bein' the best tequila drinker."

"Who says no?" rasped José, with an oath. "I dreenk more tequila than any hombre north of thee Rio Grande."

Throwing back his head, Bob guffawed derisively.

"I seen a jasper in El Paso who could tip up a tequila bottle an' guzzle until I counted ten. He was a man. Pedro kin stand more'n you."

Pedro laid down the deck of cards and watched Bob through narrowed eyes. The scar that ran from his ear to his chin showed livid in the yellow lamplight.

"You try be ver' smart," he sneered. "You wan' José get drunk. You wan' me get drunk——"

"Bah!" snorted José. "How you be afraid of hombre who ees tied up? He say you dreenk more than me. You say he wan' get José drunk." The Mex snapped his fingers. "That ees impossible. The hombre weel be dead before mañana. Let us have sport."

"That's the idea," said Bob Hul-

lum through lips that were clenched in pain. "Yore pard don't seem to think yuh kin hold much. Let's see if yuh kin live up to yore title of the best tequila drinker north of the Rio Grande. I'll count to ten."

José chortled confidently, picked up the bottle, and placed it to his lips. Bob counted. Through slitted gray eyes, the cowboy watched the swarthy hombre. He could see José's Adam's apple slide up and down his throat each time he gulped.

At the count of eight, José put down the bottle and gasped for breath. His eyes were watery.

"Didn't make it, did yuh?" jeered Bob. "I'll bet Pedro is laughin' up his sleeve at yuh."

Pedro's knife-scarred face twisted into a snarl of rage as he glared at Bob Hullum and started to get to his feet. José shoved him back down and held out the tequila bottle.

"You laugh, eh?" he growled. "You dreenk! Pronto! Make fool of José! Count, gringo!"

Bob Hullum felt the hair rise on his scalp at the word "gringo." But he couldn't afford to get offended. His plan might work yet. His life depended on it.

The young cowboy saw Pedro take the bottle and tip it up. Bob counted. He got only as far as the number "six." Pedro pulled the bottle from his lips and sucked cool air into his fiery mouth.

José yanked the flask from Pedro's hands.

"I make ten thees time," he said confidently.

Again Bob counted. José got to the count of nine before he quit. Bob had purposely tried to rile up José, knowing that he was stronger than Pedro. Bob could see that Pedro took José's orders.

José forced the bottle into Pedro's

hands. Pedro tried to refuse, but a quick move by José toward his six-gun made the scar-faced Mex obey.

Four times, José tried to get to the count of ten. Four times, he forced Pedro to drink with him. Bob watched them closely for signs of drunkenness. While the Mexicans drank, Bob stood on his tiptoes so as to take the strain from his wrists. He slowly worked his fingers to restore partial circulation to his cramped limbs.

Suddenly Bob saw Pedro sway back and forth, grope wildly for some support, and fall backward, as limp as a coil of rope. His heavy breathing and loud snores told the cowboy he had passed out.

José looked at his drunken pard for a moment, then turned wild eyes on Bob Hullum.

"You make Pedro drunk," he snarled. "We catch trouble from Smoke. I thenk I better keel you!"

This was the chance Bob had been waiting for. He had to deal with only one man now. The light in the adobe house was bad. Maybe he would have an opportunity to escape, after all.

He couldn't repress the cold chill that raced up his spine as he saw José fumble a long-bladed fighting knife from his belt. José advanced at a staggy walk, pearly teeth bared in a sneer, lamplight glinting on the naked knife blade.

He came closer and closer. Bob's feet were untied. The cowboy braced himself. He saw José's arm flash back.

Like a suddenly released spring, Bob threw his entire weight on his wrists and lashed out with his booted feet. The knife blade tore through his shirt, flashed across his ribs. At the same instant, the ran-nihan's feet caught José in the stomach.

The knife flew from his grip. The Mex staggered backward. His body slammed into the adobe wall with a sickening thud. Then he plopped to the ground beside his drunken pard.

Bob knew José was knocked out. But any second, he might come to.

The cowboy leaped quickly into the air. His fingers just missed the rafter.

He tried again. This time, he made it. Gripping the wooden beam, he pulled himself up, swung a leg over the timber and straddled it.

With his body weight off his wrists, it was an easy matter to slip off the noose. José was groaning and tossing. Bob dropped to the ground.

Suddenly the drum of many hoofs split the night stillness. Bob knew it was Smoke Dulcert and his crew returning.

But one thing neither Bob Hullum nor Smoke Dulcert was aware of. Jake Shoder had disappeared.

Angered at not finding the money, the killers had lit out for their adobe at a gallop. Shoder had managed to drop behind and give them the slip.

Now they swirled up the trail from Lariat, not a quarter of a mile from the adobe house.

Seizing José's Colt, Bob jammed it into his belt and ran out of the door. Two horses stood by the corral. They were saddled. Untying the reins, he mounted and spurred away toward the Bowie Gulch road.

A gun flamed. A bullet screamed overhead. The bandits had seen him escape in the bright moonlight. They quickly swerved their broncs and gave chase.

But their horses were fagged, while Bob's mount was fresh. There

was a Winchester in a saddle scabbard.

The distance between pursued and pursuers widened. There was a grim, stern set to his big mouth, as Bob Hullum spur-raked his cayuse toward that wrecked stagecoach and the five thousand dollars.

IV.

Yellow moonlight revealed the smashed wheels and splintered body of the Bowie Gulch stage, lying in the ravine. Jake Shoder halted his foam-flecked midnight bronc beside the wreckage and glanced cautiously around.

No one had visited the stage, he was sure. Probably even now a posse was leaving Bowie Gulch to see what had delayed the coach.

Dismounting, Shoder waddled across the ground on his short, stumpy legs. For several minutes, he pawed through the wreckage.

At last, he found what he sought—a battered canteen. Jake unscrewed the cap. Inserting two fingers, he tipped the container upside down and fished the dinero from the opening. His eyes lighted greedily.

“Five one-thousand-dollar bills!” he gasped, holding the currency in his fat hand. “Lucky I seen that feller hide it in here. When Smoke an’ his jaspers wake up, I’ll be in Mexico. I should split this dinero with them. I’ll——”

Jake Shoder suddenly whirled, shoving the bills into his pants pocket. His guns snaked from their holsters as the sound of flying hoofs reached his ears.

Racing up the steep bank, Jake led his bronc and reached the road. He quickly hid with his mount in a cottonwood grove. He clapped a hand over the mustang’s nose just as a horseman flashed into view through

a narrow pass. In the moonlight, Jake recognized the tall, lean figure of Bob Hullum astride a galloping cayuse. Bob halted.

A look of surprise crossed Shoder’s wide face. How had Hullum escaped? But he should worry. He had the cowboy’s money.

Shoder raised his weapons and drew a bead on the buckaroo’s broad back. Then Jake lowered his guns. More horsemen were galloping up the pass. From the direction of the hoofbeats, he judged that Smoke Dulcert was hot on the cowboy’s tail.

Up there at the entrance to the pass, Bob Hullum drew a rifle from a saddle scabbard and dismounted. The waddy climbed up on one of the huge granite boulders that lined the entrance to the gorge.

Bob heard a sound behind him. Whirling around, he shot a quick glance down the dusty road. He could see the wrecked stagecoach in the gully beyond. But he didn’t see the crouching figure of Jake Shoder in the cottonwood grove.

Realizing he wouldn’t have time to get his money and escape, Bob decided to stand off Smoke and his gun hawks at this point. He wondered if the money was still there.

Four horsemen swept around a bend in the pass. Bob could see the wizened, runty figure of Smoke Dulcert in the lead. The bobbing, big-hatted riders drew closer with each jump of their racing broncs.

Taking quick aim, Bob triggered a .30-30 slug over the killers’ heads. The horsemen drew rein. Hoarse shouts filled the night air. Lances of fire licked out from six-gun muzzles. Bullets thudded into the rocks all around.

“Mow him down!” Smoke was shouting. “Come on!”

The bandits spurred their tired horses forward.

Bob threw the Winchester to his shoulder, caught a man's body in the sights, and squeezed trigger.

Crack! A spurt of fire licked out.

Through slitted gray eyes, the cowboy saw the hombre throw up his arms and plunge to the ground.

Gun blasts echoed and reëchoed in the narrow gorge.

Levering shells into his hot, smoking long gun, Bob Hullum laid the stock against his cheek and fired. Another killer toppled from the saddle, hit the dirt, and rolled over and over.

Bob straightened up. His booted feet slipped on the granite rock. Grabbing wildly for support, he pawed at the slick surface, then shot downward.

With a bone-crunching thud, he hit the ground. Lights burst in his brain. Yells of triumph sounded from Smoke Dulcert and his one remaining killer—a black-bearded jasper. They had seen him fall.

Bob got dazedly to his knees. His head reeled. The rifle had fallen several feet away. Hoofs pounded the rocky ground. The cowboy shook his head to clear the cobwebs from his brain.

He saw the two horsemen whirl around a shoulder of rock. Throwing himself to one side, he pawed out his six-gun. The weapon was cocked as it cleared leather.

His snapshot caught "Black-beard" in the forehead. Crimson poured over his face. The bandit weaved drunkenly in the saddle, then rolled off the rump of his frightened bronc and lit in a clump of mesquite.

Smoke Dulcert charged on, his skeleton face twisted in a snarl, both guns spitting orange flame.

Bullets cut through Bob's clothes

as the killer boss tried to ride him down. Rolling to one side, Bob narrowly missed being pounded to a pulp by the flailing hoofs of Dulcert's racing mustang.

One of Smoke's bullets caught him along the left side. Another tore leather from his chaps.

Bob whirled over on his back. Dulcert sped by, checked his bronc and started back, intent on the kill.

The cowboy carefully took aim and squeezed trigger. He saw Dulcert's body jerk as the slug slammed into his chest. But the outlaw continued to come on. Again Bob triggered. The gun clicked empty.

Just when he felt he was spending his last moment on earth, Bob Hullum saw Dulcert lean forward on the saddle horn. The speeding horse dashed past. Smoke bounced two or three times, then spilled head-first to the ground like a roll of canvas.

Without waiting to see if all the bandits were dead, Bob got weakly to his feet and stumbled toward the Bowie Gulch stage, where it lay on its side. Warm fluid ran down his side as he reloaded his gun and holstered it.

Only one thought was uppermost in the cowboy's brain. He had to see if that five thousand was still safe in the canteen. Had his mind been clearer, he would have seen the figure that moved behind the cottonwoods to his right.

He raced down the slope. He reached the wrecked coach. A groan escaped his lips as he saw the lidless canteen lying in the dust. He knew without looking that the money was gone. He had failed his old dad! The Double Arrow faced ruin!

"Grab fer the stars!" rapped out a harsh, grating voice.

Bob's veins turned to ice water. He wheeled slowly. Up on the bank

he saw the squat, hulking figure of Jake Shoder outlined in the moonlight. He could see the big Colts that were gripped in his fat hands.

"If yo're lookin' fer the dinero, save yore time," chortled Jake. "I got it. Thanks fer killin' my pards. Saved me the trouble."

Bob watched desperately for some chance to make a break. Shoder had his dad's money. He had to get it some way.

"How'd yuh know about the money?" asked Bob, stalling for time.

"I seen yuh put it there," gloated Shoder. "I slipped away from Smoke fust chance I got, an'—"

Jake's words ended in a snarl.

Bob suddenly threw himself flat against the bank, ripping his six-gun from its holster as he did so.

Wham! Zam! Jake's weapons spurted flame.

Something smashed into the cowboy's ribs, half spinning him around. Weak and dizzy, he brought his hog-leg waist-high and squeezed trigger.

The slug caught Shoder in the

throat. The outlaw gurgled, fired twice into the ground at his feet, then plunged end over end down the bank.

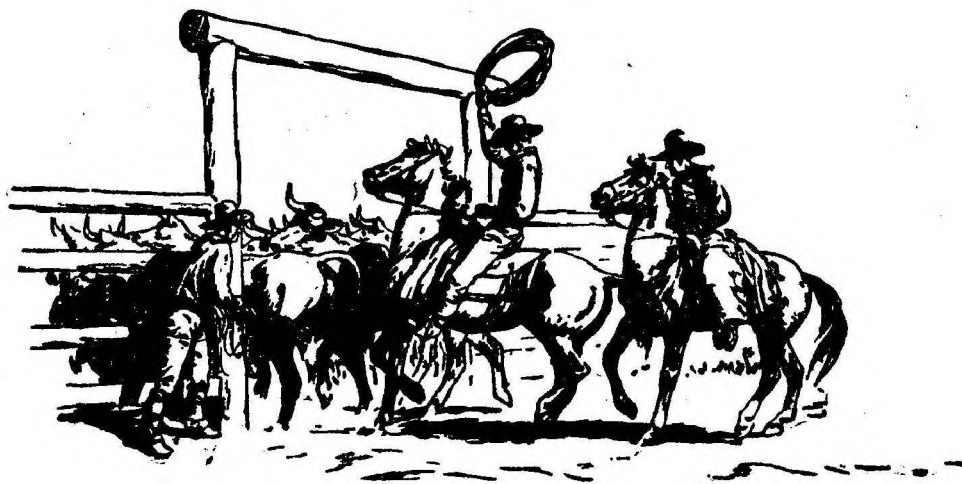
When Bob reached him, he was dead. Just before he passed out, Bob Hullum fumbled the five one-thousand-dollar bills from Shoder's pocket.

Smoke still curled from the cowboy's Colt muzzle when a hard-riding posse from Bowie Gulch found him stretched out beside the wrecked Concord. The riders had been sent to see what had made the stagecoach late.

One of the horsemen put a canteen to Bob's lips. The cowboy opened his eyes. A grin crinkled up his big mouth when he learned that Smoke Dulcert and two more of the outlaws were still alive and would do their cottonwood jig.

The cowboy opened his clenched fist and looked at the five one-thousand-dollar bills, rolled into a little ball.

"When I borrowed this dinero, I never figured I'd be payin' the interest with six-gun slugs," he said.





Bugles in the Beartraps

A "Silver Jack Steele" Novelette

By William F. Bragg

Author of "Grizzly Bait," etc.

CHAPTER I.

GUNS AT WORK.

WHEN "Silver Jack" Steele spurred his gaunt horse out of the fire burn on the flank of Grizzly Pass, he had seen no white man's face for ten days. His sole companion in the wild high country of the Beartrap Mountains had been old Iron Bear, chief of Indian police on the northern Teton Reservation. Now at sight of a canvas-topped wagon being hauled up the pass by four mules, Steele

checked his pony and waited for Iron Bear to ride alongside.

"That pass road," Steele declared, "is never used except when the river is high, an' wagons can't make the ford below ol' Fort Gunlock. So what are them mules doin' up here?"

Iron Bear, a tall brave with hair braids white as snow dangling from under his dusty slouch hat, answered the young special officer's question with a grunt. When the chief couldn't answer a question, he didn't waste time on words.

He used his eyes, his ears, and the

keen brain that had been trained by a lifetime spent on the war trails and in the lonely Wyoming mountains. When he *had* the answer, he made reply.

The wagon came on slowly, half hidden in a yellow cloud of dust. It reached a point three hundred yards below the two horsemen. Steele, his gray eyes narrowed and intent under the brim of his hat, had watched its progress closely.

He saw three riders come into sight around a turn in the road. They were jogging along twenty yards behind the wagon to escape its dust. The flash of the noon sun picked out bits of glittering metal on bridles and saddles.

"Cow-punchers," Steele drawled, "don't wear sich fancy trappin's. Not up in these hills. I wonder who——"

Now Iron Bear spoke. "No cow-boys," he said. "Them hoss sojers—yellow legs."

Steele laughed and swung his tall, rangy frame around in the saddle. With open admiration, he surveyed the aged redskin from the tip of his faded hat, adorned with a single hawk's feather, to the soles of his beaded moccasins.

"Yo're over sixty years old, chief," he declared, "but yore eyes are sharper right now than mine. An' I cast my fust vote jest a year ago. How do yuh do it, chief?"

There being no answer to this, Iron Bear grunted again. But Steele was laughing. He had a great respect for this firm-faced warrior who had once led his tribe on the war trail against the mighty Sioux nation.

They had been together ten days in the wild country, hunting the secret camping places of killers and thieves. And Jack had learned to wait for the old Indian's infrequent

talk that so often cleared up trail tangles.

"One thing," Jack said, "them soldiers will have rations. We've run out o' coffee. We'll jest canter down an' see if we can borrow some."

But as their horses quit the slope and turned into the rutty road not a hundred yards in advance of the wagon, one of the troopers galloped ahead, flung up his right hand, and uttered a sharp command:

"Halt!"

Jack checked his pony. Iron Bear followed suit. Both were amazed at the soldier's apparently hostile action. Then Iron Bear said softly, his black eyes mere beads of bright light under his frowning brows:

"They cock guns. Want to shoot!"

Steele now saw that the two remaining riders had jumped their mounts away from the road. They had whipped cavalry carbines into the ready position.

"Stand where you are," shouted the trooper who had commanded the halt.

He touched spurs to his sorrel, trotted up the road. He reined in not five paces from Jack and the chief.

He was a brown-faced young fellow with the chevrons of a corporal on his dusty blue shirt and narrow yellow stripes along the seams of his riding breeches indicating the same rank. He stared at Steele with alert blue eyes. Then a grin broke over his square-jawed face.

"Silver Jack," he said, and laughed in relief.

"Corporal Tip Grogan," answered Jack. "An' what are you doin' away up here in the Beartraps? Last time I saw you was over with yore troop at ol' Fort Gunlock."

"The same to ye, bedad!" said Corporal "Tip." "What are yez do-

in' up here in this benighted wilderness?"

"Right now, I'm hopin' I kin borrow a can of coffee."

"I thought when I see yuh break cover that yuh might be a bold bandit out to borrow a slug of soldiers' pay."

"Pay?" Jack gasped. "What do yuh mean—pay?"

Corporal Grogan grinned. "Our troop," he explained, "was sent out on active sarvice six weeks ago to patrol these mountains. And also to furnish breakin' details fer the quartermaster officer what's buyin' up ponies for remounts. Uncle Sam, bein' always thoughtful of his brave byes in blue, figured mebbe we'd be likin' our pay. I was sent with this ambulance and half my squad to meet the paymaster at the railroad and escort him back to Gunlock. An' here we be."

"But yo're away off the reg'lar road," said Jack. "This Grizzly Pass trail ain't been used by wagons for a year. It's never used except when the river's high, an' yuh can't cross below the fort."

As Jack and the corporal talked, the ambulance driver shook up his mules. The clumsy vehicle, with "U. S. A." painted in black letters on its weather-beaten canvas sides, halted just behind the cavalryman. An erect figure stepped down the rear steps, turned with a jingle of spurs and flash of brass buttons, and then called out sternly:

"Corporal Grogan! What is the meaning of this halt?"

Grogan winked at Steele, whispered under his breath.

"That's the reason we are 'way up here in the mountains. His Nibs, Major Furlong of the paymaster corps." Then the corporal swung his horse around, saluted smartly, and said to the officer. "This man has

stopped us to request the loan of some coffee, sir."

Major Furlong strutted past the mules. He was a long-nosed old fellow with sharp, dark eyes under grizzled brows and a flaring mustache with twisted points above his firm, thin mouth.

He had come fifty miles across dusty trails, but he looked as if he had stepped out of a bandbox. His boots glittered. There was not a speck of dust on his well-cut uniform, not a blemish on his gold hat cord or shoulder straps.

"It's strange," said the major, staring suspiciously at Jack and his redskin friend, "that you should stop this particular party to borrow coffee. I warn you that I am in charge of Federal funds. I have been informed that these hills are overrun with redskinned thieves from the reservation led by young Sharp Nose. For all I know——"

Steele's gray eyes flashed. "Major," he answered sharply, "you are new to this country. If some of the officers from Corporal Grogan's troop were here, they would introduce me as a special State officer, detailed to run down those so-called red bandits. They would also make you acquainted with my friend here"—he gestured toward old Iron Bear—"who is the father of Sharp Nose. And also, chief of Indian police on the Northern Teton Reservation."

"You mean to say that this man is attempting to run down and capture his own son?" Major Furlong asked sharply.

"I mean just that. The charge has been made that young Sharp Nose and five of his friends have jumped the reservation an' taken up a life of murder and robbery. Iron Bear declares his son is no killer or robber. After riding with him

for ten days and cutting many strange trails, I'm about half convinced that the chief tells the truth."

The major shrugged. "You may be right," he declared. "However, that is not part of my duty." He turned to the corporal. "Issue this stranger, three days' rations of coffee. Then proceed with the march."

But as the major turned briskly and walked back toward the ambulance, Jack Steele called to him:

"You may proceed with yore march, major. But you won't git much further up Grizzly Pass with four mules and that ambulance."

The major turned in his tracks. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"That this road is almost impassable for wagons. It's never used except durin' high-water season."

"That," said the major, "is just why we are using it. I have been informed that the Beartrap River is in flood at the Fort Gunlock crossing. A man met me at the railroad and kindly offered his services as guide. I accepted them."

"A hombre offered to guide you up this trail?" Jack gasped.

Major Furlong frowned. "You seem surprised," he said. He walked over to the ambulance, shouted. "Mr. Shang. A man is here who has questioned your word that the river is flooded."

Steele heard an angry oath from within the ambulance. Then a lean, rawboned man emerged. He wore a buckskin shirt, faded tiger-stripe California riding pants stuffed into cowhide boots. He packed two six-guns slung from his home-made rawhide cartridge belt.

Coarse yellow hair rolled to his greasy collar from under a broad black hat that was adorned with a silver bullion band.

This man, known to Steele and

all other dwellers on the Beartrap ranges, as "Wild Hoss" Shang, a mountaineer owner of cattle and ponies, stalked up to where the major waited. He ran a pair of slanting eyes of washed-out blue over Steele and the old Indian, twisted his thin lips into a sneer, raised a huge paw of a hand, and stroked the slim blond mustache beneath his crooked nose.

"Major," drawled Wild Hoss, "yo're new in this country. Take my word fer it. Don't believe half what yuh see an' nothin' yo're told."

Jack's eyes flashed, but he held his temper.

"Shang," he asked bluntly, "why are you guidin' this pay wagon up Grizzly Pass? You know—same as me—that wagons ain't used it fer months."

Shang grinned. "Not that it's any of yore business," he rasped, "but I'm doin' the army a favor."

"Fust time I ever heard of you doin' anybody a favor."

"Don't git disrespectful, young feller. Some folks in Wyomin' may be scairt of yuh because yo're fast with yore guns, an' once bluffed out a hoss thief what had shot away part of yore scalp with a shotgun. But Wild Hoss Shang ain't scairt of yuh none. Nor yore dang, buzzard-faced Injun pard who's son has turned outlaw an' murderer."

Iron Bear spoke for the first time, between his teeth, and with keen black eyes boring into those of Wild Hoss Shang.

"You lie!" said the chief. "You lie!"

Wild Hoss ripped out a mighty oath, twisted his lithe body half around thus presenting a narrow target. His right hand streaked across his front in a cross-arm draw. A big six-gun jumped from leather. Shang

aimed it at the Indian who had spoken in defense of his son.

So sudden had come this clash between Shang and Iron Bear that all in the party, from Major Furlong to Corporal Grogan and his mates, were taken off guard.

Jack Steele chucked his spurs into his horse. The pony came awake with a mighty lunge that carried it straight toward Shang. Major Furlong, standing in frozen-faced amazement, was hit a glancing blow by the cayuse's right front shoulder, knocked ten feet into the sagebrush.

As Shang's gun bellowed, Steele's pony knocked the gunman down. The bullet buzzed past Jack's head.

Iron Bear, gallantly attempting to free his rifle from its scabbard, but like most Indians, not so fast on the draw as a white man, raised a war whoop.

But Steele, after knocking down Shang and saving the chief's life, had swung his mount on the space of a thin dime.

"Don't fire!" he barked at the chief. "Put up yore gun!"

Crawling from the sagebrush, with hat jammed down over his eyes, Major Furlong bawled.

"Corporal Grogan! Clear the road!"

Grogan grunted angrily but he was forced to obey the order.

"I hate to do this," he said to Jack in so low a tone that the major couldn't hear. "But the ould one wears shoulder straps. And I'm nothin' but a jawbone corpril. So, Mr. Steele, if you'll be after quittin' the road——"

Steele, backing his horse toward the side of Iron Bear who had now lined his rifle on Wild Hoss Shang, laughed and replied:

"We'll save you enforcin' that order, Grogan. We didn't figure to

ride this road. We was jest cuttin' across it."

"I wish," the corporal whispered, riding up alongside Jack, "that you was stayin' with us."

"Why?"

"Because in that ambulance we got a strong box. It holds over twenty thousand dollars in gold an' currency to pay off soldiers and buy remount hosses for Uncle Sam. And with all these thieves in the hills—whether they be red or white—I don't like this trailin' up Grizzly Pass."

Major Furlong, his fine feathers much ruffled, strode up, followed by Shang. Jack Steele had drawn a six-gun. He sat his saddle with the Colt held down but ready for a quick flip if Shang should make another hostile move.

"One of my men," the major rapped out, "will loan you the coffee you desire. Then you will take your red friend and get off this road."

Steele answered tartly: "This is a State road—a public highway. But I have no intention of quarreling with you. I only warn you again that this road is impassable to wagons."

"Dang you!" Shang roared. "They can't cross the ford below Fort Gunlock. The river's flooded. That's why I met 'em an' guided 'em this way. Yo're makin' me out a fool and a liar."

"Draw in yore horns," Steele told him, "or I'll turn my Injun loose on you! He might make bridle tassels out o' that mustache of yores."

"How long since you was around the fort?" Shang persisted.

"Ten days," said Jack.

Shang turned to the major. "I left there not over four days ago. I seen the river since he did. It's in flood."

The major snarled to Grogan: "Break out a can of coffee."

Steele laughed and turned his horse out of the road. "Keep yore coffee," he said. "I reckon mountain water will do me fer another couple of days."

Angry through and through, Jack spurred up the west flank of the pass. Iron Bear kept pace, whipping his horse along with his quirt.

"That major," stormed Jack, "hits a bad country with a boxful of money, takes the word of a man like Wild Hoss Shang on dangerous roads, won't listen to his own corpril jest because he's proud as a peacock and has probably been told that Shang is a man of money and influence. If some of Grogan's troop officers were here, they'd shore explain to His Nibs that Wild Hoss has a bad reputation. But they ain't here. They're 'way across the mountains, twenty miles or so."

Iron Bear, who had never spoken since he had called Wild Hoss a liar, now said to Jack:

"White man lie again. River not flooded."

"How do you figure that? We ain't seen the Beartrap River fer ten days. Wild Hoss had us there."

Iron Bear wet his trigger finger, held it up against the wind blowing down from snow-capped peaks.

"River low ten sleeps ago," he explained. "Cold wind blow all time. You feel?"

Steele could indeed feel the sharpness of the breeze that blew across vast fields of frozen ice and snow up above timberline.

"No flood except when sun turn hot," finished Iron Bear. "White man lie. He lie all time. Snake tongue."

Steele checked his horse sharply. They were now a quarter mile up the west slope of Grizzly Pass. From

his position, he could look down on the wagon and its outriders crawling up the rocky road. Then the Federal party turned a point in the trail and went out of sight into a little narrow-walled canyon.

"Iron Bear," Jack said slowly, "you never talk unless you know what yo're talkin' about. It sounds reasonable that there wouldn't be no flood with cool weather in the mountains. So why is Wild Hoss pretendin' this pay wagon has to go up Grizzly Pass?"

The answer came in a sudden distant rattle of gunfire. Echoes cracked back from the rims of Grizzly Pass. Steele swung his horse, rolled his spurs.

"That's it!" he shouted. "It's a frame-up. They're holdin' up Major Furlong an' his boxful of coin!"

CHAPTER II.

TIP GROGAN RIDES.

IT'S one thing to stop a detail of regular cavalrymen, another to make them quit. Steele saw that as he piled off his panting pony on the shelf of the canyon wall that loomed above the pitched battle in Grizzly Pass.

It was as if Jack sat in a front-row seat watching an exciting show.

The ambulance, with its precious load of soldiers' pay, had crawled around a V-shaped turn in the narrow canyon. Outlaws, hidden on the slope across from Jack, had opened fire.

But the soldier driver had not lost his nerve. He had swung his snorting mules off the road and behind a pile of broken granite rocks that offered some cover from bullets. Disdaining the crackling rifles of the robbers, the driver sat in his place, booted foot on the set brake, firm hands on the reins.

"Even that major, fer all his snap-piness, has got his nerve," whispered Jack.

For he saw that Major Furlong had promptly rolled out the rear end of the ambulance, flipped down behind a rock, and opened up with an army carbine.

"Shang's still in the ambulance. But he's also whangin' away," Jack decided. For he heard the heavy roar of a .45 Colt revolver where the ambulance was planted.

In racing down the mountain slope to aid the troopers, Jack had outdistanced Iron Bear who was not so spry as in the years when he had fought the Sioux.

Now the old Indian crashed out of the quaking asp thicket behind Steele, flung the single rein of his war bridle around a convenient sapling to anchor his pony. Then, gripping his black-powder Winchester, he slid into cover beside Jack, who was crouching behind a large boulder.

"Tough luck fer the army," Jack rasped, as he pumped a shell into his .30-30. "Looks like they're about due to lose their month's pay."

Iron Bear answered with his usual grunt. Then——

Wham! His old gun exploded so near Steele's ear that Jack was deafened.

"Look out!" he shouted. "Save yore bullets!"

Iron Bear said between his teeth. "Yellow leg hoss sojer need help. *Heap bad!*"

Through rising powder smoke, Steele saw that which the alert gaze of the old chief had instantly picked up. Corporal Tip Grogan, true to army traditions, was risking his life to save a bunky.

One of the troopers had been knocked off his horse at the first blaze of gunfire. His mount had

stampeded. The man in blue lay stretched out on the ground. The ambulance had gone on, turned the corner.

Corporal Grogan and the remaining trooper had ridden alongside the lead team until the driver had regained control. Then, noting that one of his men was missing, Corporal Grogan had turned his mount and galloped down the back trail.

Outlaws on the eastern rim marked his ride down the trail. Their guns sent echoes rattling the length of Grizzly Pass. But Corporal Tip, low over the outstretched neck of his speeding horse, rode to save a friend.

His heedless bravery hurried the bullets of the outlaws. Many of their slugs dug up gravel ahead of his horse. Others clipped the mount's rear trail.

Iron Bear bought in with his black-powder cannon. And within a split second, Jack Steele's .30-30 had added to the roar.

This sudden fire from the western canyon wall rattled the bandits. They had not counted on the troopers getting aid from this quarter. Some turned their rifles on the rock that sheltered Steele and Iron Bear. A lucky slug bit into the granite, then glanced away with a metallic sound.

Jack Steele laughed and ducked. He raked off his hat. The sun gleamed down on the single lock of silvery white in his brown hair.

That had given him his nickname. Once he had dared a bad man's shotgun to make an arrest. A charge of buckshot, at close quarters, had inflicted a bad scalp wound. But Jack had rushed in and put his cuffs on the outlaw before passing out.

Later, the hair had grown back, as white as the saddle mark on a range horse.

"Mebbe," Jack whooped, "we'll save the pay wagon fer the soldiers. An' Tip to boot. Them gents across the canyon are shore pore shots fer white men."

As he said that, Steele could have cut out his tongue. It recalled to him that half the white men in the Beartraps believed Iron Bear's son and five friends were behind all the robbery and killing that had gone on for the past two months.

Not a half hour ago, the old chief had dared the fire of a noted gunman to defend his missing boy. Now Steele unconsciously voiced the universal belief, held by white frontiersmen, that Indians are poor rifle shots.

"I didn't mean jest that," he apologized awkwardly.

Iron Bear, flat on his stomach, and with gun stock pressed tightly against his leathery cheek, answered with his usual grunt. He followed it up with another blasting roar from his ancient musket that made the echoes ring.

While Corporal Tip was making his wild ride down the canyon, the fire from Steele and Iron Bear saved him. The range wasn't over three hundred yards, as the crow flies, across the narrow canyon. The outlaws were forced to keep their heads down. So Corporal Tip finally spurred his pony into the small basin where lay his wounded mate.

From their higher position, Jack and Iron Bear could see every move made by Tip, but due to the turn in the canyon wall, the soldier was hidden from Major Furlong and the men around the stalled ambulance.

Tip reined in his snorting mount, flung a booted leg over the horn, and slid to the ground. To make his ride he had shoved his carbine back into its boot. To hold his horse, while he picked up his friend,

he had twisted the bridle reins around the crook of his left arm. He was in a clumsy position for defense.

Steele instantly saw that. He noted the puffs of dust arising too closely to Tip for comfort. The outlaws were centering their fire on the corporal.

Steele's skill lay mainly in the handling of six-guns. But here was work for a Winchester. He raised up on his knees, thus exposing his head to bullets from across the gorge. He raced his lever like lightning. Hot and empty shells flew from the breech as he ran out a magazine load.

Iron Bear, not so expert at handling white men's fighting tools, joined in the fusillade. Bullets traced along the opposite wall. Gravel flew from boulders.

There were answering shots that sent soft-nosed slugs whining past the heads of the young special officer and the old Indian. But this reckless volley, for the time, saved Corporal Tip as he struggled to raise his comrade's body and fling it across his saddle.

Steele couldn't stand inaction. His horse was tied just behind him in the clump of quaking asp trees alongside Iron Bear's mount. Jack whirled on the warrior.

"I'm goin' down thar," he shouted. "Tip needs help."

Iron Bear's face looked as if it was carved from hard brown wood. The lines were deep from his hawk nose to his straight, grim mouth. Only his beady, glittering eyes showed his intense concentration on this fight for a good man's life.

Without removing his keen gaze from that dangerous opposite wall, Iron Bear laid his left hand on Steele's shoulder. The fingers that once had knotted around the haft

of a war club, bit like talons into Jack's flesh.

"Wait," grunted Iron Bear. "You go now, sojer die. Look!"

With his gun barrel he pointed across the canyon. Steele looked and saw the merest movement on the crest. It was like the red flash of a battle flag.

He turned toward the Indian, understood what was in the old man's mind. Iron Bear, like most of his race, had always delighted in gaudy colors. His particular vanity was the use of brilliant turkey-red calico for hunting shirts.

Iron Bear wore such a shirt to-day. Steele, who knew the chief's son, was aware that young Sharp Nose had also inherited his father's taste for turkey-red calico.

That flash of red on the opposite ridge denoted the slow crawl of a rifleman into position where he could shoot down Corporal Tip Grogan. Chief Iron Bear knew well that only a sure bullet could now halt that death shot.

"You shoot!" growled Iron Bear.

Not a muscle in his face moved. He had defended his son, fought for him, but if his son was across the ridge, seeking to kill the corporal, then his own father had sentenced him to just death.

"You shoot!" Iron Bear said again. "You better than me."

That was all. There was no argument. Steele marked where the wearer of the red shirt had finally come to a halt behind a rock that loomed over the spot where Grogan was laboring with the limp body of his mate.

"Chief!" Steele cried, "that may be yore boy!"

Iron Bear grunted. "Not him," he said. "But me wrong—all right. You shoot!"

Steele tucked his rifle stock firmly

against his curved right shoulder. Even then the front sight wavered, and he shook his head impatiently to clear his eyes of battle grime and haze.

"You hustle!" growled Iron Bear. "He beat yore shot, mebbe so."

Tip Grogan was standing up. He had his friend in his arms. He moved toward his nervous pony. The man in the red shirt lay quiet as a wolf on the meat trail. But Steele knew that a rifle barrel was lined on the blue figure of Corporal Tip Grogan.

Wham! Jack's Winchester roared.

A figure in a gaudy red shirt popped up from behind the rock. At Steele's distance, it looked like a jumping jack. The hostile rifleman stood wavering a moment as his knees buckled under him. Then he fell awkwardly, and lay hanging downward from a ledge while his rifle went clattering down the rocks to the valley.

Even as the man in the red shirt died, Tip Grogan flopped his friend across his saddle. He leaped up behind, turned his mount in a short circle, thundered back up the canyon.

"He's makin' it!" Steele shouted.

He was up, and ready to rush back to his horse. Then he heard Iron Bear growl:

"Mules stampepe."

So intent had Jack been on defending Tip Grogan that he hadn't watched the fight around the ambulance. He looked toward where Major Furlong and the other cavalryman were fighting off the outlaws.

The mules had broken away. Out of control, they were galloping up the Grizzly Pass road. The wheels of the ambulance bounced and slid as the heavy vehicle hit high centers or protruding rocks.

Wild Hoss Shang had leaped clear

of the wagon as the mules broke away. He was beside Major Furlong, emptying his six-guns at the cliffs that were lined with outlaws. At least, it appeared that way to Steele in the hurried glance he gave as he rushed for his horse.

Another instant, and he was in his saddle, riding along the slope, hoping that he might head off the mules.

The opposite crest was also lined with a half dozen horsemen. Their ponies were proceeding at full gallop. The sun flashed from feathers, from long black braids of hair, from fluttering hunting shirts.

"Injuns!" roared out Wild Hoss Shang. "I knew it all the time!"

CHAPTER III.

MOCCASIN TRACKS.

ODDS were heavy against Silver Jack in his race toward the ambulance. This western slope was steep. In many places he was forced to swing his pony uphill to ride around the rim of the canyon.

The speeding outlaws had chosen their own ground and had level going. They were well mounted. As they matched their speed against that of the young special officer, some in the rear swung around in their saddles and began dropping bullets in front of his horse.

Grimly, Steele ducked his head, sank his spurs all the deeper, rode to aid the stampeding ambulance. A lone man—a man from the troop of Corporal Tip—was trapped in the wagon.

The party in the pass were not inactive. Gunfire crackled and drummed down there. There sounded the sharp crack of army carbines, the deep-toned roar of Shang's Colt six-gun, the occasional boom of Iron Bear's old musket.

But a rise in the road hid the ambulance from Major Furlong and the rest. However, from his level, Jack saw the stampede. And he groaned at the tragic finish. Three hundred yards up the rocky trail, a mule in the lead team went down in the traces.

"Hit by a bullet," snapped Steele, and tried to uncork another notch of speed from his panting pony.

The remaining lead animal fell over the dragging body of its mate. The wheelers reared back. The wagon tongue arose in the air, bent into a bow, then the tough hickory snapped with a crack like a rifle shot.

The ambulance turned in a clumsy half circle as wheels jammed under the body. Three mules were bawling, kicking their harness to ribbons.

Steele rode like the wind. He struck a narrow cow trail that meandered down the steep slope. He swung his pony into it, rode recklessly, and high in the saddle with spurs ready for a quick jab if his pony should stumble and fall.

But he could see that the bandits held the advantage. They were cutting down a broad gap in the rims of the eastern slope where a portion of the wall had broken away and started an avalanche, years before.

While four raced to surround the ambulance, two halted, flung up their rifles, and began a steady fire to kill Steele or his horse. But for the steepness of the trail he rode, and the zigzagging motion of his mount, the hot fire would have cut Steele from leather.

He wasn't thinking of that. It was his job to step—or ride—boldly into the heart of a lawless fight such as now raged in Grizzly Pass.

But the odds were against him. Four bandits jumped their ponies

across the narrow gulch to the side of the ambulance just as the wagon turned over. One held the bridles while three dismounted.

A knife blade flashed as a bandit slashed at harness to free a frightened mule. Two others rushed around to the rear of the ambulance which lay on its side.

Wham-wham! The two riflemen, firing on Steele, redoubled their efforts to drop him.

He felt his horse flinch, saw a red crease appear suddenly on the animal's right shoulder. He felt the quiver of the laboring animal from bullet shock, knew that its strength had been cut down.

Steele reined in, slid to the ground, raked out his six-guns. He went roaring afoot down the last pitch of the slope. The bandits around the ambulance weren't two hundred yards away. Their mates on the crest shouted shrill warnings as Steele made his charge.

Then rifles smoked again. Bullets beat the earth of the trail. Slugs glanced off the rocks.

Jack dropped to one knee, flung up his right-hand gun.

Bang! The man holding the reins of three snorting ponies lurched in his saddle.

Then he straightened up. But Jack knew that a lucky bullet had paid back for the wound received by his horse.

The three bandits on the ground, completing their job, emerged from the tangle of ripped canvas and shattered wood that had once been an ambulance. Two carried a small box between them.

As Jack leaped up to resume his charge, the three reached their horses. One jerked open a leather sack that had held mail for the soldiers of Grogan's troop. The small box, that contained twenty thou-

sand dollars in soldiers' pay, was dumped into this stout leather carrier. It was swung over the back of the wheel mule that had been cut loose.

One rider seized the mule's headstall. The remaining three bandits dropped behind. One turned with gun centering on Steele. Two lashed the mule into a gallop with shot-loaded quirts.

As Steele dropped into the road, the robbers were quartering up the eastern slope. He emptied his right gun, flipped up his left. His eyes gleamed as he marked the lurch of another horseman.

Then loud gunfire broke out down the road. Hoofs drummed on the earth. Here came Corporal Grogan and his squad mate, riding to aid Steele. And down the western slope came Chief Iron Bear.

But they were too late. If Steele's horse hadn't been stopped, he might have cut off the retreat of the men with the strong box. But afoot, he could not match speed against that of a horse.

The four bandits—two undoubtedly carrying bits of lead from Steele's guns—reached the canyon rim, darted out of sight. All Jack saw was the fleeting vision of red hunting shirts, of black braids floating in the wind, of the sun gleaming on the dull metal of smoking guns.

Major Furlong came up, all panting, and white with rage over the loss of his money box. It was plain to Steele, as he listened, that Major Furlong was death on duty.

He had been detailed to deliver twenty thousand dollars to Fort Gunlock and there pay off soldiers and buy remount horses. Rude bandits had interrupted his duty. The major's wrath turned on the first object that met his gaze. This hap-

pened to be the unlucky Corporal Tip Grogan.

"Corporal!" the major rasped. "You are largely to blame for all this."

Corporal Tip's ruddy face paled. But he sat straight in his saddle, taking it as a soldier should.

"My orders," the major continued, "were for you to guard this ambulance. At a critical moment, you turned tail and ran."

Corporal Tip's eyes blazed. "Sor," he began, "I——"

"Silence!" the major thundered. "When I prefer court-martial charges against you for disobedience, must I also add disrespect to your superior officer?"

Angry because a robbery, and possibly murder, had been carried out under his very gaze, Silver Jack Steele interrupted. He strode between the major and the silent corporal.

"You are new to this range, Major Furlong," he snapped. "If you bring charges against Tip Grogan, I will testify in his behalf that you, through your ignorance, brought about this robbery."

"What do you mean?"

"I warned you that this road was impassable. But you trusted to this man Shang, this man of bad reputation among those who know him."

Wild Hoss stepped up to Steele, eyes flashing with rage. He flipped his right hand down on the buckhorn haft of his bowie knife.

"You intimatin'," he shouted, "that I led this major an' his ambulance into a trap?"

"I ain't intimatin' nothin'. But I'm positive that you lied about the river bein' in flood, so you could persuade this major who knew nothing about this country to come up Grizzly Pass. The ambulance run into a nest of outlaws. That's all I

know. But I'll tell yuh, Shang"—and Steele narrowed his eyes and stepped nearer the rawboned mountaineer—"if I can prove with legal evidence what I *believe* to be true, I'll take you out o' these mountains, either nailed up in a box or with steel cuffs on your murderin' fists."

"Why, you lyin' young pup!" Shang began.

Steele struck from the hip. His fist crunched against the bristly point of Shang's chin. The mountaineer rocked back on his heels. He half cleared his bowie, hoping to rake upward and slash Jack from buckle to collar.

Jack hit with his left. Shang dropped with a grunt. He lay sprawled in the road.

"Now," Jack told the amazed major, "while he's sleepin' that off, we'll circle around an' hunt fer sign. Fergit about court-martial an' sich, major, until we git back yore gold. I see you goin' into action like a nervy man an' a soldier to-day. Come down to earth. Give Corporal Tip credit for what he is—a man brave enough to risk his life to save his friend."

The major wasn't accustomed to lectures from dusty young men in slick overalls, cowhide boots, and dusty slouch hats. But he had just seen Jack knock down a man with two clean punches. A second look at the special officer's lean, grim face convinced Major Furlong that he had better keep silent until Shang came back to life.

Tip Grogan went back to fetch his wounded mate. The other soldier dismounted to aid Jack. Chief Iron Bear was already busy around the overturned ambulance. Major Furlong unstrapped a canteen and dripped cold water over Shang's frowzy head.

"I'm sartain," whispered the sol-

dier to Jack, "that the driver was killed. That's why he lost control of his mules. But for a bullet, he would have sat there all day an' held the lines."

"It was strange the way they stampeded," Jack agreed. "But I couldn't see just what caused it. I was too high above the valley."

"Nor could I," the soldier admitted, "although I was at the heads of the leaders. I was so blessed busy pumpin' lead at them blitherin' outlaws. Fust thing you know the mules had jumped out an' was goin' headlong up the road."

There were tracks made by the bandits around the wreckage. But Steele and the soldier, anxious to ascertain the fate of the driver, scrambled down to where Iron Bear was investigating the inside of the ambulance.

As they arrived, the chief grunted, and gave a mighty heave. He drew forth the limp body of the driver. He laid the man out on the ground.

The soldier whispered with shaking voice. "One of my best friends, Private Jack Allen. We enlisted together down at ol' Fort Laramie. Just a kid too. But he could drive mules. An' now"—the trooper burst into rage—"a gang of dirty Injuns have killed him."

Steele understood the soldier's rage. But he shook his head and laid a gentle hand on the man's shoulder.

"Don't talk too fast about Injuns," he advised. "Remember that an Injun did his best to-day to save yore friend. An' yore pay. But for him, I would never have turned back."

"But you could see them in their hunting shirts an' with their hair floatin' in the wind."

"Did you see 'em close up?"

"Naw," the soldier admitted.

Steele knelt and examined the driver. He smiled up at the boy's anxious friend as he felt a feeble heart beat.

"He's not dead," he whispered. "Fetch some water—quick."

Iron Bear, after rescuing the driver from the ambulance, had started a restless circling for sign. As Steele and the soldier worked over Private Allen, the chief stooped and closely examined clear prints in the soft dust where the bandits had dismounted.

Meanwhile Major Furlong had restored Shang to his senses. Tip Grogan had also returned with his wounded mate draped over his horse.

Shang shook his groggy head. He saw the old Indian stooping over the tracks. He staggered over, seized Iron Bear by the scalp lock, jerked him to his feet. He drew back one fist to drive it into Iron Bear's grim face.

Iron Bear was old, but as lithe as a mountain lion. True, he didn't understand the white man style of fighting with fists. But he could twist and squirm and bring a scalping knife into action in fast order.

As Shang's hamlike fist shot toward his jaw, Iron Bear swerved aside. The blow cut his lean cheek, but the chief broke away from Shang's tight grip.

At the same instant, he jerked his knife from its beaded holster, uttered a hair-tingling war whoop, and leaped forward to sink the blade just above Shang's short ribs.

Tip Grogan, at the start of Shang's attack, had slid off his horse. He had raced in to save the old Indian. Now he was forced to save the life of a man he hated.

It was Tip's stout fist that slapped down Iron Bear's knife, his

steadying voice that broke the Indian's attack.

"Stiddy!" the corporal shouted. "Aisy it is, chafe. Shore an' you'd hate tuh git hanged fer murder!"

An Indian will die bravely in battle. But the bravest warrior fears the hangman's rope. It is their belief that such death is dishonorable, that a warrior so disgraced can never reach the happy hunting grounds. Iron Bear flinched, drew away from Shang.

Then Steele reached the scene. For a moment, there was a clamor of loud and angry voices with Shang and the major doing most of the talking.

"Can yuh blame me, major?" Shang protested. "I jumped this Injun because thar's clear evidence that his killer son led this raid."

"Evidence?" Steele cut in. "Whar's the evidence?"

Shang pointed to tracks in the dust. His face, swollen from Steele's punches, broke into a gloating smile.

"Thar!" he declared. "Plain as the nose on yore face. Them bandits was wearin' Injun moccasins. An' we all saw that they was dressed in calicer huntin' shirts, an' their hair was long and black."

Steele stared down at the tracks in the dust. He had trained himself as an officer to take stock in evidence, to support all his suspicions and hunches with proof. Here was proof that would stand in court. The bandits *had* worn moccasins.

Iron Bear grunted. Then he spoke: "More snake tracks!"

Shang growled angrily to Steele: "Still trustin' in yore Injun friends, hey?"

Then Jack recalled the bandit he had tumbled over with a bullet to save Grogan's life.

"That'll settle all arguments," he said. "I'll go back an' git the body."

But Grogan said: "I looked when I went back to git my bunky jest now. They've taken away that feller in the red shirt."

Steele groaned. All the evidence pointed out young Sharp Nose and his friends as the red raiders. It was Shang's moment of triumph. He had regained Major Furlong's confidence.

"But fer yore trust in these dang Injuns," he told Jack, "we wouldn't have been stopped by outlaws. This ol' chief has been foolin' you fer ten days. Why, I'll bet he's in on the deal."

Steele was staring down at the moccasin tracks. Something appeared strange about the marks. But just at this moment, Jack couldn't discover why. Old Iron Bear could tell him. He turned to call the chief.

Wham! The roar of a Colt deafened him.

He jerked his own six-gun, rammed the barrel against Shang's stomach. For he saw that Shang had snapped the cap.

"You boxhead!" Shang roared. "I'm tryin' to git me an Injun!"

Major Furlong ordered excitedly. "Corporal Grogan! Drop that Indian with your carbine."

With unbelieving eyes, Steele saw old Iron Bear just disappearing at a gallop over the eastern crest. While the argument had raged, the chief had quietly slipped away, mounted his pony, and quit Grizzly Pass on the run. Even as Tip Grogan snapped up his rifle, Iron Bear dropped out of sight.

"An' now," Shang roared to the men around him. "Will you believe me or Jack Steele? Will yuh take the word of a white man or an Injun lover?"

They stared at Steele. And even Corporal Tip Grogan was silent.

CHAPTER IV.

AT BAY.

JACK wasn't the sort to talk in his own defense. The flight of Iron Bear had amazed him, even caused him to doubt his belief that Indians were not responsible for murder and robbery in the Beartraps.

Then he reflected that but for Iron Bear he would not have returned so swiftly to aid the army party. And but for Iron Bear, Corporal Tip would doubtless be lying dead down the pass with a bullet through his blue coat.

Steele backed a pace, for if Shang pushed this argument, gun play would certainly follow. Steele needed plenty of arm room to bring his artillery into action. Thus he faced them—the leering mountaineer, the peppery major, the two silent troopers.

"Shang," Jack said, and a cold light flashed in his eyes like the swift glitter of a bowie blade, "I don't know why Chief Iron Bear jumped the gun on us. But I'm bettin' here an' now that whatever it was, he had a dang good reason. I'm so sartin of it that I'll even bet every load in my right-hand gun. An' what do yuh think of that?"

Thus was the lie hurled into Shang's beefy face. And Steele stood ready to back up his defense of his red friend with his guns. Shang considered his chances. Steele stood waiting.

Shang weaved his head, looking out the corners of his ugly eyes. He couldn't expect much help from Major Furlong. The officer was nervy enough, but not swift with a six-gun. Corporal Tip and his mate hadn't spoken, but they showed no signs of joining the attack on Steele.

"Draw iron or chaw bacon!" Steele rasped.

Shang glanced at the famous six-guns that had gained Steele a reputation. His huge right paw drifted uncertainly toward his own holstered weapon.

Steele's hands were poised above his pet cannons. He waited.

A cold little breeze blew down from the peaks. Shang licked his lips. He grunted angrily, but although he was calling on all his nerve to drive his hand the few inches that separated it from a gun, the spirit was weak.

Wild Hoss Shang caved in. He stepped back and as he did so, he raised his gun mitt to show that he would not fight.

"Kid stuff!" he growled. "Grown-up men has other things tuh do than fight over dirty Injuns. We got tuh trail these dang bandits." He leered at Steele. "But this ain't over," he went on. "When I got more time—an' the army don't need my help—I'll shore shoot it out with you. An' I'll fill yore hide so full of holes it'll take the coroner three hours tuh make an inventory."

Major Furlong, seeing that the fight was postponed, now put in his word.

"My duty," he snapped, "is to deliver that money to Fort Gunlock. We must immediately pursue."

Steele looked around the forlorn party. He laughed.

"What'll we pursue on?" he asked.

Corporal Tip and his unwounded mate were well mounted. But their heavy cavalry horses would prove clumsy among the rocks, if they quit the trail. There remained two mules of the ambulance string. And Steele's pony, stiff from the flesh wound on its shoulder.

"Also," Steele remarked, "we got two wounded men, major."

"My duty——" the major began again.

Steele interrupted. "Duty or no duty, wounded men come fust above gold an' dollar bills. An' I reckon even the army would tell me I'm correct."

He considered the situation, walked over to the ambulance. While he stood there staring down at the mule that had been killed by the bandits, Tip Grogan came up. He heard the corporal whisper:

"Jack, I couldn't say nothin' jest now while His Nibs was listenin'. But me an' my bunky are for yuh. We'll stay for the big show."

That cheered up Steele. He turned with a grin.

"Tip," he said, "that major shows traces of nerve. But he's a hound fer duty an' new to this country. If we have any luck in Grizzly Pass, mebbe we can turn him into a sensible soldier like the other officers of yore troop."

"Here's hopin'," Tip said fervently.

"We can patch up this busted tongue," Jack said. "Hook on the two mules. Put them wounded boys, the major, an' Shang in the ambulance. Us others will ride. We'll go as fur up Grizzly Pass as we can. Then one of you can ride down the east slope to Fort Gunlock an' git help."

Shang and the major, coming up, heard Steele's decision.

"We're not asking your help," snapped Furlong. "I intend to send Corporal Grogan and his man up that east slope. They can pick up the bandits' trail, follow, and if possible overtake them and regain the money."

Tip was a brave soldier, but here was an impossible order. The bandits, mounted on light mountain ponies, could never be overtaken. And if that were possible, what

could two soldiers do against at least a half dozen men?

Unexpectedly, Shang approved Steele's plan. That puzzled Jack. But he had come to the point where he must play a waiting game. In addition to that strange appearance of the moccasin tracks, he had also encountered other clues about the ambulance. But now was not the time to voice them. Except to Tip, whom he could trust.

"Yeah, major," Shang was explaining heartily, "Grizzly Pass is a purty good road. We can cross the mountains. An' then it's a down trail tuh the fort."

"But what about the bandits and the money?"

Steele interrupted: "I'm ordered by my chief in Cheyenne to corral them bandits," he said. "I'll not quit ridin' until they're hog tied, an' you have yore lunch hooks on that soldiers' pay."

"I repeat," snapped Furlong, "that I don't need yore help."

"I'm not offerin' it. This is Territorial jurisdiction an' whether you like it or not, I got to stay on the job."

So they mended the ambulance tongue with baling wire from the jockey box, hooked up the two mules, and then laid the two wounded soldiers out on a nest of government blankets.

The man rescued by Tip, had been shot through the right shoulder. The driver of the ambulance had not suffered from a bullet. That was what had struck Steele as strange.

As the little party went toiling up the pass, Steele swung his limping pony alongside Corporal Tip. They were riding as advance guards. The third trooper was bringing up the rear. Major Furlong was seated in-

side the ambulance. Shang was driving the mules.

Jack glanced back. The ambulance wasn't thirty feet behind his horse, but the screech of iron wagon tires on slippery rocks kept all but Tip from hearing his voice.

"Grogan," he asked, "did you notice that Private Allen, the ambulance driver, was knocked out by a rap on the head?"

Tip frowned. "No," he confessed. "I didn't look at him close."

"Well he was," Jack went on. "Now how do yuh explain that? He was sittin' in his seat, firm as rock, while that fight was goin' on. Then, suddenlike, the mules stampeded."

Tip shoved back his campaign hat, scratched his auburn hair. "Gits me," he confessed. Then he grinned. "But, after all, I'm nothin' but a jawbone corpril. If yuh want real intelligence, go back an' ask the major how come."

Steele grinned. "He'd probably tell me that one of the bandits cracked Allen over the head after they killed a mule an' stopped the stampede. But——"

"Yeah."

Steele's eyes narrowed. "I figure," he rasped, "that Allen was knocked cold so them mules *would* stampede. You git me?"

"Who'd do that?"

"Who do yuh think?"

The grin froze on Tip's face. His eyes flashed. He started to swing in his saddle with gun hand flashing toward his belt. Steele's sharp command stopped him.

"Don't make a move! If we hope to corral this gang, foller every play I make. Tip, we're ridin' in danger."

Nor did Jack explain further to the quick-tempered Tip that he had finally reasoned out the strange appearance of the moccasin tracks.

Talk wouldn't help. He must somehow get in touch with the bandits, prove before Major Furlong's eyes that this crime hadn't been committed by Indians.

"An' by the time I do that," Jack muttered, "that major will be plumb educated."

As they rode along, Tip explained why the major had placed such confidence in Shang. It appeared that Shang had been selling horses to the remount officers at Fort Gunlock. He had appeared at the railroad station, bearing letters of recommendation.

"Not being a range rider," Tip confessed, "I didn't know much about him. But I'd heard of his tough reputation. I tried tuh warn the major. An' I got cut off at the hocks. An' here we be."

Here they were indeed. With a roll of government money missing, two soldiers wounded, a tough trail ahead, and all the evidence pointing to young Sharp Nose and his red friends as the robbers. Iron Bear had departed, and only Steele was left to follow the blind trail.

The trail narrowed as it neared the crest where the scrubby high-country timber cloaked the granite-studded hills. It wound through rough canyons, across long stretches of glassy slide rock that made the mules pant as they fought for footing.

Shang had uncoiled his whip, and against all government regulations, was pouring leather into the jug-heads.

"But he's a civilian," Corporal Tip said in vast disgust. "The major can't stop him."

"It'll wear out the poppers on a couple whips," said Steele, "to make them mules haul that ambulance over the main divide."

Then Jack checked his horse.

Ahead loomed a narrow pass with low rims just above the trail. There was considerable jack-pine cover. Shadows along the bases of the rocks were black as ink.

What had halted Steele was the chatter of an aroused jaybird. He knew that these gray-feathered birds are the guards of the wilderness.

Shang, crowding up behind with the ambulance, shouted impatiently. "What yuh waitin' fer? Lead out!"

Steele turned to Tip. "Way that bird is chatterin', must be somethin' cached in that timber above the trail."

"Well," Tip asked, "what will we do?"

"I'll circle above the pass. Look that timber over. See what's excitin' that jaybird. You tell Shang to hold his mules until I make sure the coast is clear."

As Steele turned his horse up the steep pitch that would lead to the pine grove, Shang whipped up his mules despite Tip's protests. The corporal was crowded into the pass. Steele heard the commotion: The loud shouts of Shang, the crack of his long whip. He half swung his horse, intending to ride to the corporal's aid.

Wham! From the pines, a gun roared.

One of the mules bawled, dropped flat in the traces.

Shang was standing up on the seat. The remaining mule cut around in a circle, climbed over its mate's kicking body. The ambulance overturned. The pass was blocked.

The soldier, who rode as rear-guard, coming up on the run, was forced to spur his horse up the steep slope adjoining the trail. Another gun roared. His horse dropped.

Caught on the crumbling side of a

hill, Steele drew his guns. It appeared that the finish fight had come. But not a man had appeared from the pines.

Then Steele heard Corporal Tip's yell—a shout that was choked off. He swung around toward the corporal, saw that a man concealed in the rim just above the soldier had neatly snared Tip around the neck with a rawhide lariat. Tip was being hoisted from his saddle, strangled.

Yet valiantly he sought to bring a gun into action. The man who held the other end of the rope leaped up: His savage shout rang above the bark of guns, the crashing of wood where the mule was kicking in front of the ambulance.

Steele lined his right gun on the roper. He saw long black braids fluttering in the wind, a red calico hunting shirt.

Bang! The roper jumped a foot off the ground.

The rope dropped from his limp hands. Tip's neck was saved. For in another second, the frightened horse would have jumped from beneath the trooper, leaving him to dangle at the end of the rawhide.

In turning to save his friend, Steele exposed himself. Horsemen—a half dozen, and all in feathers and calico—broke from the pines. They rushed Steele. He met them with roaring guns.

He saw one rider plunge off the side of his wild-eyed pony. He felt something like the kick of a mule against his ribs and knew a slug had raked his body.

But grimly he dug in his spurs, sought to meet the hostile charge with a similar rush. But the enemy was coming downhill. Jack had an uphill trail—and a wounded pony.

They closed in on him. A painted rider on a pinto horse clubbed a

Winchester carbine, smashed at Steele's head. The special officer rolled back in his saddle. The rifle stock hit his steel saddle horn, broke off at the butt.

At a foot's range, Steele put a bullet into the rider who had failed to crack his skull like an egg.

He was ringed by shouting horse-men. They dared not use their guns for fear they would kill their saddle mates. They closed on Steele like a pack of howling wolves. He had knocked off one, but five remained.

Clawing hands seized his legs, tried to jerk him off his lunging horse. A man struck out with the steel barrel of his Colt six-gun. Jack saw the flash of the blow, sought to dodge it. But the blow went home in glancing fashion, just above his left ear.

The world turned black before his eyes. A million shooting stars exploded. Steele's last recollection, as they dragged him off his horse, was the eyes of the man he had just stopped with a .45 slug.

This man's face had been painted in red and black. Long black braids had dangled from under a beaded head band. He had looked like a lean, gaunt Teton warrior.

But the eyes that had glared so fiercely, then glazed in death as Steele's bullet struck home, had been blue!

That was Jack Steele's last conscious thought. He had beefed a blue-eyed Indian. And whoever heard of a blue-eyed Indian?

CHAPTER V.

BANDITS' DEN.

WHEN Steele next opened his eyes, he blinked dazedly at the glare of a lantern in his eyes. A man was standing above him. Cold water was dripping over his head.

"About time," the man grunted, "that you was wakin' up. Big do-in's ahead, Steele."

Jack struggled up. He discovered, as his senses cleared, that he was seated inside a long, low room with log walls, and furnished with rough stools, a center table built of pine slabs, and double-decker bunks.

Jack's head felt as big as a barrel. He sought to raise his hands to rub away the ache. Then he discovered that his wrists were tied behind his back.

The man who stood above him holding the lantern laughed scornfully. "Yo're hog tied, Steele!" he jeered. "We got yuh jest whar we want yuh."

Steele looked up. The man wore the long black braids and red shirt of a Teton warrior. But he spoke good English. And like the Indian Steele had killed during the ambush attack, the eyes that gleamed in the painted face were blue.

"You got a couple of our fellers to-day," the false Indian continued. "That's why we laid fer you. Time we finish with yuh, Steele—you an' yore pals—you'll shore wish you had never seen the Beartrap Mountains."

Then the lantern bearer padded over to the table in his buckskin moccasins and planted the lantern. Now Steele sized up this room of log walls.

He was seated on the edge of a bunk. Across from him, he saw the yellow chevrons of Corporal Tip as the soldier bent over his two wounded friends who had been laid out. Tip's legs were tied up but his arms were free so that he could give first aid.

Major Furlong, tied up like a calf for branding, was seated next to Tip. And near him was the remaining trooper of Tip's squad.

"Gosh!" Steele groaned. "They shore did trick us. An' I'm tuh blame fer not jumpin' Shang when I discovered that ambulance driver was hit in the head."

For Jack had decided that Shang, fighting from inside the ambulance, had reached up at a critical moment, cracked the driver on the head, knocked him senseless, and so released the nervous mules. Stamping straight ahead toward the bandits, they had carried away the government money box. Shang had slipped out the rear of the ambulance as the runaway started.

"But how could I prove anything agin' Shang then?" Jack consoled himself. "There was jest my belief that he was tied up with the gang. If Major Furlong had been more of a frontier officer, one look at them moccasin tracks would have convinced him that Injuns wasn't wearin' them."

The strange appearance of the moccasin tracks had finally come to Steele. Indians, in walking, point their toes straight ahead, even walk a trifle pigeon-toed. White men point their toes outward.

"But Furlong had lost trust in me," Jack mused. "He wouldn't have believed me. I had tuh play the game, hopin' to git the money back and prove before his eyes that Sharp Nose and his friends wasn't to blame. An' now"—he shook his sore head—"I reckon Shang is shore laughin' at me."

But then his amazement returned. Had he been wrong about Shang! For down near the door at the end of the long room, a hulking figure was tied to a rough chair. No mistaking that tangled mop of hair, those spreading shoulders. There sat Wild Hoss Shang, a prisoner like the rest!

"I'm danged," growled Jack.

"This thing has got me all tangled up in my rope. Fust me an' the chief suspect Shang an' a white gang. I figure by keepin' on eye on Shang I can clear things up. An' thar he sits in as big a pickle as me."

Major Furlong, seeing that Steele had regained his wits, now rasped: "If I get out of this alive, I'll certainly turn in a report on you to your superiors. I blame you for this mess."

"Me?"

"Didn't you suggest trailing up the pass? We ran into that ambush. I'm half inclined to believe that you were in on the plot. You and that old Indian."

Wild Hoss heard and laughed. "That's right, major," he rumbled.

Steele ripped out angrily: "Major Furlong, if you had listened to that old Indian chief earlier in the day, you would never have been stopped."

"Whar's yore old Injun now?" Shang asked. "I see all these young warriors around. I'll bet he's not fur away."

Steele laughed. "If you'll look closer, Shang, you'll notice these so-called Injuns have blue eyes. It's not hard to make wigs out o' coarse black hair from the stuffin' of a buckboard seat."

Major Furlong almost rolled out of his chair. "You mean," he snapped, "that these painted men are really white men in disguise."

"Yeah," said Steele.

"I'm not convinced."

"That's yore worry. What difference does it make, anyway? They got us all and the money. I don't figure any of us will walk out of this cabin alive."

"They would kill us?"

The major's nerve was failing, here in this gloomy cabin with his

troopers tied up and painted bandits guarding the doors. With a gun in his hand, the major would fight with the best of them. But to sit here hog tied, and then perhaps get knocked in the head, that was no way for a wearer of army blue to pass out.

But before he could protest further, one of the bandits untied Shang from his chair. He shoved him toward the doorway. Then he came over and freed Steele's legs so he could walk.

"Where are you taking these men?" the major shouted.

The Indian, marching Steele toward the doorway, merely grunted. But Shang called out:

"I reckon it's good-by, major. I tried tuh fight fer you. But these red varmints trapped me. If we never see each other ag'in—an' they should turn yuh loose—why, say a good word fer pore ol' Wild Hoss Shang."

The major fought against his ropes. "You can't kill these men!" he raged. "I won't allow it."

The Indian opened the door, shoved Shang and Steele through the opening. Then he turned and grinned evilly at the unstrung major before he followed his captives. The major groaned, pleaded wildly. The slam of the heavy door cut him short.

Major Furlong of the paymaster corps was indeed receiving education.

This second room was the kitchen of the cabin. Red embers glowed in a rough stone fireplace at one end. Cartridge belts and boxes of ammunition littered the table. There were a half dozen men here, all dressed like Indians. Shang and Steele were marched to the center of the room.

Then the guard stepped up swiftly

to the mountaineer, whipped out a knife, and cut the ropes off Shang's wrists. Another man knelt and untied the length of lariat that trailed from Shang's ankles.

Rubbing his wrists, Shang turned on Steele. And he grinned at Steele's amazement, even winked his right eye with rather a jovial gesture.

"Yo're purty keen, Steele," he declared. "I figured yuh had me dead to rights when you figured that ambulance driver was hit over the head. It was jest a case then of matchin' my brains agin' yores."

"I was right, then!" Jack exclaimed. "You *are* the big chief of these bandits—these white skunks who wear Injun moccasins."

Shang laughed. "Shore. I had this play figured out fer weeks. An' right quick I call fer a show-down. It's near daylight, Steele. You're up at the top of the Beartrap Mountains. My men are gittin' ready now to ride down, jump that bunch of hosses at Fort Gunlock, run 'em into the hills whar the soldiers will never find 'em. Then we'll have the money *an'* the ponies."

He pointed then to an iron-bound box on the table. It was the major's store of government funds.

Steele narrowed his eyes. "But, Shang," he pointed out, "Uncle Sam will never quit lookin' fer yuh."

Shang laughed, pounded himself on the chest. "I'm smart," he chuckled. "What do yuh reckon I posed as prisoner fer? Jest to make that fool major believe I was innocent as a spring lamb. I figure tuh turn him loose so he can git back to the soldiers an' tell 'em what a hero I was. An' what a fool this Silver Jack Steele turned out tuh be."

"Hero you was?" said Jack.

Shang quit laughing. "I'm ridin' in a jiffy," he rasped. "I'm leavin'

a couple men here to guard you an' the money. They got orders to let that major escape. But the rest of yuh—that corpril an' his pals—you'll all go up in smoke. At daylight, my men will set fire to this cabin. An' Major Furlong will believe ferever more that I roasted along with you-all. So Uncle Sam will never hunt fer me."

He turned to his men. "Throw him in the lean-to with his varmint friends."

As they flung Steele through a door that led from the kitchen, Shang laughed again. "Tough luck, Steele!" he jeered. "But yuh can't win all the time."

In the lean-to which was built for use as a saddle shed, one of the guards pushed Steele down roughly. The special officer, clumsy because his hands were tied, fell beside a sprawled figure. The guard hung a lantern on a hook beside the door, sat down on a stool, rested his rifle across his knees.

"Take a little breathin' spell," he told Jack, "along with yore red-Injun pals. For in about a half hour, it'll be daylight. An' then you'll all git yore lungs filled with smoke when we tech off this shack."

Steele squirmed around, looked into a lean, hatchet-face. No mistaking this man. Here lay young Sharp Nose, son of the chief. And stretched out on dirty straw on the floor were the others of the Indian's friends.

"We tied up this way fer days," grunted Sharp Nose. "We go out on hunt. This big man—Shang—him an' his gang sneak up, catch us. Steal our shirts, our moccasins. Put us here. What for?"

Steele groaned. "So they kin lay all the blame for murder and robbery in the Beartraps on you. An'

it looks like Shang will make it stick."

"Where my father?"

Steele couldn't answer that. Iron Bear hadn't told him. But with watchful eyes on the guard, he warned Sharp Nose that this cabin would be set afire at daybreak. And that the night was about over.

"We burn then," said Sharp Nose. "All tied up."

Shang had triumphed, according to his own words, because he had used his wits. If Steele hoped to escape alive, and rescue his friends, red and white, then it was time for him to resort to the same methods.

The guard sat lazily on his stool. Believing his prisoners had no chance to escape, he wasn't so watchful as he might have been. So Jack decided. Then the young officer looked about the room hoping to spot something that would aid in removing the ropes from his wrists.

But there wasn't so much as a nail protruding from the wall. Cautiously, he sought to loosen the ropes on his wrists. They were knotted by experts. But he could move his fingers.

"Sharp Nose," he whispered, "roll over on yore side. I'll do the same. We'll lay back to back. I kin move my fingers. You can move yore's. Mebbe we can untie these knots fer each other. It's our only chance. But don't make a move that'll git that guard suspicious."

They lay back to back, apparently asleep. Once or twice, the guard glanced toward them. But each time, they halted their tiresome job of attempting to loosen tight knots.

Their fingers were stiff from lack of circulation. They could not see the ropes. But they worked on, patiently, although their hearts were hammering against their ribs, and to

Steele it seemed that time slipped past with terrific speed.

Then Sharp Nose whispered softly. "Me think yore hands loose. You pull."

Steele tugged cautiously. The fingers of the redskin, skilled in manipulating tools for the tanning of deerskin and the shaping of arrows, had succeeded where Steele's clumsier touch had failed. Jack's wrists were free.

But the guard sat across the room. There was clear space of a half dozen paces. The man's cocked rifle rested across his knees.

"One move," Steele whispered, "an' he'll kill me. But I got to git my hands on him."

At the end of the lean-to was a small window. It began turning a dull gray. Steele knew that day-break had come. The guard roused up. He yawned, stood up on his moccasins.

With his right toe, he scraped up a heap of straw, piled it against the log wall. Then he poised the lantern above it.

"So long, Steele!" he jeered. "Here's the final show-down fer you an' yore leetle red pals. I'll jest smash this lantern into this straw. This shack ought ter blaze up like a bonfire dang quick."

Steele called out. "I'm packin' a good gold watch. I ain't askin' much except that you'll take it off me an' send it down to Cheyenne. My boss will see that my family gits it to remember me by."

The guard grinned. He strode over, carrying his rifle in his left hand, lantern in his right. He stooped above Jack, fumbled at the pocket in Steele's cowhide vest.

"Watch?" he chuckled. "Waal, I'll shore save that. Dang yore family! I kin use a watch right handy."

His voice choked off. Steele's hands had shot up, closed around the guard's lean throat. He dropped his lantern and rifle, tried to break away from Steele's strangling grip.

The young officer, knowing that his only hope lay in clinging like a bulldog, grimly maintained his hold.

Young Sharp Nose, excited, began yelping like a wolf on the trail.

"Shut up!" Steele gasped. "Thar's another guard in the kitchen. Stay quiet until I git this feller's gun."

Then, up on his boots, Steele choked down the guard, flung him to the floor, hog tied him with the ropes that had been so lately wound around his wrists.

Panting, he bent to free young Sharp Nose. The door from the kitchen opened. The second guard stood outlined there. He called out impatiently. "Jim, set that fire. Let's be goin'. It's daybreak."

For the moment, he believed that Steele was his mate. Then he marked the silvery gleam in Jack's hair outlined by the lantern's glare.

With an oath, he raked out a six-gun, fired.

But Steele had whipped up the rifle, swung half around.

Wham! The .30-30 slug knocked down the second guard.

Steele leaped up, raced over. This bandit, in his Indian rigging, would never move again.

Out in the main building, Steele heard Tip Grogan's wild yell.

"I'm comin', Tip!" he shouted.

"Me, too!" Sharp Nose called..

"You bet!" said Jack.

He plucked a knife from the fallen guard's belt sheath. He freed Sharp Nose, handed him the bowie, bade him cut the ropes off his friends.

Then Steele raced into the kitchen. The money box stood there. Steele laughed. He would release the soldiers, guide them out

into the hills, pilot them down to Fort Gunlock.

Shang might steal a herd of horses. But the great part of his careful plot had collapsed.

"From now on," Jack said, "Uncle Sam will be on his trail."

As he stooped to pick up the strong box, hoofs drummed outside the cabin. He heard the roaring war whoop of Shang. The grin froze on his face.

"They are comin' back," he gasped.

CHAPTER VI.

HEAP WAR TALK!

SHARP NOSE had also heard the whoops of Shang. The young Indian leaped into the kitchen. His black eyes gleamed like polished bits of agate. He flourished his knife. A lithe young warrior followed him.

"Not time to cut 'em all loose!" said Sharp Nose. "We got to fight."

There were men in the bunk room: Tip and the major. They needed help.

"Git in thar!" Jack rapped out. "Cut away their ropes. I'll hold off Shang and his gang."

As Sharp Nose hurried through the bunk-room door, Steele rushed to a window alongside the door that led outside. He smashed away the glass with his rifle barrel.

The return of Shang puzzled him. The gang had gone down to steal horses. But here they were, coming up the east flank of the Beartraps on the high run.

The red light of day gleamed on the eastern peaks. Steele saw the big bandit chief tearing across the cleared ground in front of the cabin.

His feathered followers galloped at his heels on lathered ponies. Then far down in the dark canyons, a riot of gunfire broke out. Steele

heard Shang shout as the horses raced up to the shack.

"Inside! Git the money. Touch fire to the shack."

A couple of men tumbled off their horses. They, of course, didn't know that Jack Steele was crouching behind the center table now with rifle lined on the door.

While Shang waited impatiently, the two crashed open the door. They leaped into the room. They saw Steele there behind the table. With his rifle planted alongside a box that held twenty thousand dollars in soldiers' pay.

"Shang!" one man shouted. "He's loose!"

Wham! The roar of Jack's rifle cut short that yell.

The painted bandit collapsed in the doorway. His mate turned on his heel, leaped wildly out of range.

But the door was open. Shang, astounded at such resistance, boldly spurred his horse to the entrance. Steele's rifle roared. The pony went down in a heap. But Shang, light on his feet for a big man, sprang clear.

As he landed on his haunches like a great cat, he chopped down with a six-gun. And Steele, throwing another shell into his Winchester, saw that Shang was attempting to kill him with his own pet six-gun.

Steele fired. But Shang's fast bullet beat the rifle. The slug ripped along the top of the table, slapped against the strong box, threw fine splinters into Steele's eyes. He was half blinded. He pulled his trigger. But his bullet missed Shang.

The bandit leaped up to rush into the kitchen. For all his faults, Shang had nerve. But Steele blinked his eyes, darted up from behind the table to meet the charge. A bandit seized Shang's shoulder,

jerked him back to safety as Steele let fly with another bullet.

"Surround the place!" Shang's man shouted. "They can't git out."

"Set it on fire!" another yelled.

"But Steele's free!" Shang roared.

"An' they got the money!"

"Dang the money! Let's touch off this place an' ride!"

This amazed Jack. He could not understand why all these bandits, with the exception of Shang, were displaying fear.

"I want that money!" Wild Hoss barked. "If you hounds show some nerve, we'll git it. An' Steele in the bargain. Half of yuh git ready to rush the kitchen. Others go around an' bust into the bunk room."

Steele stood alone in the kitchen, guarding Uncle Sam's money. He wasn't sure how many bullets remained in the rifle. There wasn't time to hunt for spare ammunition.

"I'll guard that door," he vowed, "until they stomp me down."

He wondered why Sharp Nose was so long in the bunk room. Then he reflected that even if the young Indian succeeded in freeing Tip and the major, the soldiers would have no weapons. He heard the crash of wood, decided that the bandits had split, and were launching their attack on the rear door.

"Hope Tip and the major are free," he grunted.

But he dared not turn his head. He stood on guard. Then Shang and his followers launched a vicious attack. While men rushed the doorway, others thrust their guns through the broken window and rained hot lead in Steele's direction.

Jack's Winchester barked. A bandit went down. But the others came on, roaring like fiends. He raced his rifle lever, groaned at the dull click that denoted the gun was empty.

He clubbed it then, leaped forward to meet the attack. The center table crashed over. Men bent and pawed for the money box.

Steele cracked down with his rifle, knocked another bandit spinning against the wall. They howled around him, forced him to the wall.

Dimly he saw the leering face of Shang. He struck at it. But Shang, a wise leader, was not in the front of the fighting wave.

Steele had reached the big fireplace. He put his back against the stone. At bay, he fought them back. His head was spinning, his eyes half blinded from the splinters thrown into them by Shang's gunfire. But so long as he could stay on his feet, he would fight.

As he stood now, he faced toward the entrance into the bunk room. That door opened suddenly. Tip Grogan lurched into the room. He bore Major Furlong in his arms. At his side was young Sharp Nose, slashing with the bowie knife at bandits who crowded after. Then men leaped between the Indian and the corporal. Steele heard Shang's shout.

"Git that yaller leg! An' that major!"

But Grogan dropped the major to the floor. He stood above him. He picked up a rough stool. With that he fought against the men who rushed him at Shang's roar.

The fight swirled madly in the kitchen. There were men on the floor with cracked skulls. Blue powder smoke coiled up. A rifle stock snapped down. Tip Grogan was knocked off his feet. He fell. Sharp Nose tried to cut a path toward him.

"Jack!" the corporal groaned.

Then Steele became a demon of destruction. He shortened his grip

on his battered rifle. He advanced, even though men clawed and struck at him.

He began clearing a way to the corporal and the major. The war whoop of Sharp Nose rang above the din until the Indian was tackled from behind by bandits and thrown down.

Then—ringing clear—Steele heard a sound that was alien to the Bear-trap Mountains—cavalry bugles shrilling the charge, the shouts of troopers.

"My bunkies comin'," groaned Tip Grogan, and he fell across the body of Major Furlong.

Steele was the only man on his feet remaining to battle Shang and his men. He had reached Tip Grogan. He planted himself there, rifle swinging in swift circles until the stock broke off.

The bugles broke into a harsher, nearer braying. Now could be heard the drumming of hoofs like kettle-drums rolling. A bandit shouted:

"I'm quittin'! Here comes the yaller legs!"

Panic overtook Shang's gang. They leaped away from Steele, rushed to the door. Their sole hope now was to escape the blue-clad troopers.

But Shang shouted: "Don't fer-git the money!"

He was the last man to quit the room. He bent to pick up the box. Steele leaped on him like a wild cat. They went down in a wild struggle. One bandit, nervier than the rest, came back to aid his chief.

He bent to drive a knife between Steele's shoulder blades. A gun roared from the doorway. The bandit flopped like a neck-wrung chicken.

Old Iron Bear, painted for war,

WW-6B

leaped into the room with smoking gun gripped in his hands. Behind strode a hard-bitten cavalry officer with flashing saber held ready for action.

Jack Steele sat astride Wild Hoss Shang. He rode the swearing outlaw as if Shang was a broncho fresh off the range.

Outside, troopers were cutting off fugitives as the bandits scurried toward their horses or sought cover in the brush.

Steele crooked his arm under Shang's throat. He choked off the outlaw's oaths, jerked him up right, flung him down at the feet of Tip Grogan's troop commander.

"That's yore prisoner, captain," he panted. "An' here's the pay for yore soldiers." Silver Jack grinned through his battle grime. "I reckon they earned it. Never have I heard such fine music as the sound of them bugles in the Beartraps."

They had soused Tip Grogan, the major, and young Sharp Nose with cold water, gone into the bunk room and freed the troopers there. A party invaded the lean-to, released the remainder of Sharp Nose's hunting party.

It was evident to Steele then that Major Furlong had become thoroughly educated. For he saw the major stagger toward him with outstretched hand.

"Steele," the major said, and it was a hard-wrung confession from this proud man, "I was wrong on you and the corporal. I want you both to know that. And also that my report on this fight will give credit to you."

"Save some for Iron Bear," said Steele. "He slipped away, found some trail he knew, and brought the soldiers here in the nick of time."

"Why didn't he tell us?" the major pondered.

Iron Bear grunted. It appeared, at first, as if he wouldn't explain. The rescue had been accomplished. Why talk about it? Then he said, gleaming eyes on the major:

"You all talk. No chance for Iron Bear. Talk-talk-talk! Heap

talk. If Iron Bear stop to talk, mebbe Shang kill um. Iron Bear git on pony. He ride pretty fast. All night across mountains. When he find hoss soldiers, then he talk. You bet. He talk pretty fast. Heap fast. When he git through, they play bugles. Ride heap fast. Git here. That's all."

HE-DOWN BELOW

FLOOD WATERS OF TEXAS

SOME of our readers may think that the description of a cloudburst in George C. Henderson's story, "Six-gun Boomerang," in the June 1 Wild West Weekly, was exaggerated. But events that have happened quite lately in Texas prove that these sudden floods are not fairy tales.

Two boys were marooned about three miles east of a bridge at Burkburnett. The water was lapping over the bridge, and the boys were afraid to venture on it, besides which they would have had to swim to reach it, as the ground on which they were standing sloped from the river.

Chief of Police William Garland, with three other persons, set out to rescue the boys in an automobile. They started to cross the bridge and were nearly at the other end of it, when it collapsed and the machine dropped through with a noise that was heard above the roaring waters.

It was carried away in a flash. When it was found, several days later, it was nine miles from the scene of the tragedy. All four bodies of the victims were recovered in different places, miles apart.

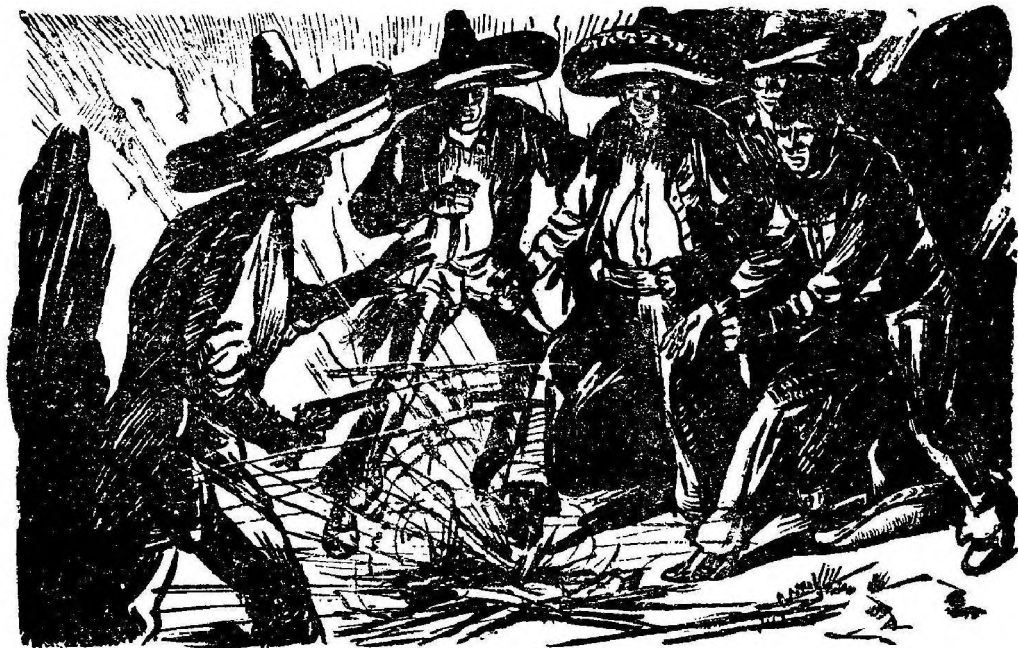
In the meantime, the boys, who had kept their heads, watched out for floating timber. A tree came

whirling near them. They grabbed at the branches and got aboard. It was seen from the opposite shore that they were riding down the flood at a rushing pace, and it was feared that they would be engulfed. But after floating for some miles the tree bumped into land, and the boys scrambled ashore, unhurt.

The night before this happened, a cattleman, returning to his ranch in a buckboard, got stuck fast on a sand bar in a dry arroyo. The crossing was near his home, and he could not get the wheels free without help, so he decided to leave the rig where it was until morning. The night was clear with no signs of impending trouble. He unhitched the horse and led it home.

The cloudburst came during the night, and the cattleman hastened to the creek to get his rig. It was not there. The next day it was seen many miles from where it belonged, and when the waters receded it was recovered, but somewhat battered.

Eighteen people were killed by that cloudburst. Homes, live stock, bridges, and highways had been destroyed. Dry creeks had become raging torrents. Cow hands went out in force to drive the herds to safety. Otherwise the losses would have been much greater.



The Bandit's Debt

A "Bud Jones Of Texas" Story

By J. Allan Dunn

Author of "The Ragged Ranger," etc.

BUD" JONES set his horse to the edge of the bluff, and the big roan troop horse went over it without hesitation. Forelegs braced, squatting on its powerful hindquarters, the bronc slid down to the river in a cloud of dust.

Through the dust, the Ranger could see the young boy who had wandered out to the end of the sand spit, standing paralyzed with terror at sight of the monster that was hauling itself up out of the deep pool.

Other children were running, screaming, for the shore, shouting for their parents with shrill cries of "*El aligador!*" ("The alligator.")

The great water dragon moved with surprising speed. Its gleaming scales dripped water as it swung toward its prey.

The Rio Grande was very low. There had been no rain for weeks. Shoals and sandbars were uncovered, quicksands exposed. Only here and there the channel ran deep. In other places it was little better than a trickle. There were many slowly drying-up puddles, and a few deep holes.

The alligator had been caught in one of these by the drought. From the top of the cliff, the young Ranger had noticed the children at play, seen something stirring, swirling in

the water, vaguely at first, because of the reddish, muddy water.

The fishermen's boats were hauled out on the river beach. The drought had spoiled the fishing. The little village of Torada was dozing in its noon siesta. Only the children had stayed out-of-doors, seeing how close they could get to the Mexican side.

The big lizard had its blunt head, that was nearly all jaws, set with terrible teeth, turned away from the eastern shore. It did not notice Bud. Under horny plates, its evil, hungry eyes saw nothing but the boy.

Pepper, the roan, had never refused obedience. He had ridden through a prairie fire, swum torrents, leaped gaps, and raced along wild mountain trails, where a misstep meant death for himself and his rider.

He did not falter now, though every instinct revolted against this hideous brute, foul to look at, and foul to smell. A sweep of its horny tail could break the roan's legs, like a man snapping twigs.

It meant to scoop the boy into the water in that fashion. Then it would bear off its stunned, and half-dead prey—drowning it, staining the water a deeper red—down to some hole beneath the surface, to be devoured later, when the flesh had become rotten enough to suit the reptile's taste.

It was all of twelve feet in length, the biggest Bud had ever seen. Alligators were common enough toward the mouth of the Rio Grande, and in the *Laguna de la Madre*, but not so often seen as high up the river as Torada.

But here it was, horrible, and deadly.

As Bud pricked Pepper with his spurs, and the roan reached the sand spit, the monster raised itself still

more, so that all its hideous body was clear of the sand. It actually ran, in ungainly but rapid style, toward where the Mexican boy stood mute and motionless, escape cut off by land, his eyes staring in terror, bulging from their sockets.

Bud, and the roan, had descended the bluff like a landslide. He had been given no chance to get his carbine from its saddle sheath beneath his thigh.

He had his .45, but he wondered whether the slugs were big enough, the charge heavy enough, to kill the cold-blooded beast in time. He had his bowie knife at his left hip. It would be of little use against this armored creature.

The alligator now seemed to sense that something was interfering with its intent. It opened its jaws, showing its forty teeth. It uttered a coughing bellow, leaving deep tracks in the sand, as it scuffled swiftly along.

Pepper, his hide wet with the sweat of the fear he conquered in his love of, and belief in, his master, sent the sand flying like spray as he galloped along the spit at full gallop.

Bud had cleared his lasso from the saddle ring, his six-gun was in his left hand. He could shoot as well with one hand as the other.

Now there was more motion in the pool. A cruel head showed on the surface, just the end of the snout, and the eyes, above water. The mate of the *aligador* on the spit was drifting, ready to come with a rush if it took the notion.

The boy came out of his paralysis. He found his voice in a wild scream of despair. Then hope showed in his eyes at sight of the Ranger charging to the rescue.

The boy backed to the verge of the channel that eddied about the end of the sand spit. The alligator in the

water paddled closer. The one on land gathered itself for the final rush.

Bud's six-gun barked. The bullet struck the reptile at the back of its skull, flattening against the thick, horny hide and the heavy cranial bone.

It did not penetrate, but the monster was stung. It lifted its head, and in that moment, the Ranger made his throw. The loop settled over the snout, tightened, close to the short forelegs.

The roan stood, with its feet planted in the sand, as the enormous reptile, puzzled, then maddened, lunged forward.

It was the first time that an alligator had ever been roped on the Rio Grande, if anywhere.

It forgot the boy, for the moment. It swerved toward the water, seeking to escape, rearing upward, falling sidewise, almost on its spine, as Bud spoke to the roan, and Pepper backed, keeping the rawhide taut.

It struggled as it lay there, sprawling, and temporarily helpless, clawing at air and sand, flailing with long sweeps of its saw-edged tail.

Bud shouted for the boy to run past it, so that he could lift him up to the saddle. Roping a 'gator was a good deal like having a bear by the tail. The brute was not as unwieldy as it looked.

It got to its feet while the boy stood still, afraid of the thrashing tail. Again it bellowed, this time with rage, standing as erect as it could.

Its mate made up its mind that help was wanted. It answered the call, commenced to scull rapidly for the spit.

Bud flung a slug at it, just as Pepper plunged. The brute on the sand had made up its mind to charge the horse. The Ranger's lead struck

the snout of the swimming reptile. It must have hit a sensitive spot, jarred the brute, big as it was. It stopped coming on, sank out of sight.

The Ranger kneed the roan, gave it one spur. Pepper whirled on his hindlegs, and leaped into full stride.

The loop tightened back of the jaws, about what the alligator had for a neck. as the roan's speed out-matched its own.

Bud shouted back at the boy to follow. He called to Pepper, but he did not have to urge the roan to do its best with the raging dragon at its heels.

For an instant, the pace of the alligator seemed to match that of the horse.

The children had roused their elders. Men and women were running out of the gap between the bluffs, where the fishing village had been built. They shouted and screamed. One or two carried guns, others had oars, and pike poles.

Bud hoped they would not try to shoot. He knew they were all Mexies, and would not come too close. One woman had fainted, held up by two others. She, he thought, might be the mother of the boy.

He did not have much time to think of anything but handling the alligator, not sure yet whether he had caught the brute, or it had caught him. Pepper could haul logs in for firewood, but this log was alive, it could add maddened, and vicious, strength to its weight.

The roan lunged, the rope of rawhide tightened. It was taut over Bud's thigh, threatening to cut through buckskin pants and his hard muscles. It hummed like a bowstring as the alligator braked with webbed feet, and roared coughing protest.

Pepper swerved slightly, and Bud

swung his leg free. The roan dug its hind feet into the sand, for leverage. The mighty muscles of its flanks, the plate muscles of its shoulders, flexed. The powerful hindquarters gathered all their strength, and the roan surged forward.

The alligator, struggling and bewildered, was flopped again upon its side. The rawhide lasso was dallied about the horn. The double-fire cinches of the saddle held. Slowly but surely Pepper dragged the helpless reptile over the spit.

The water was left behind. They neared the beach. Bud called out to the men to get the boy. He could not tell if the youngster had obeyed him or not. He warned them not to shoot. It was his job. He had started it, and he meant to finish it.

Pepper stuck to it, though the going was tougher as they hit the slope of the shore, hauling the monster past the wondering Mexies.

The woman who had fainted had revived. Bud could hear shouts of joy back of him. The boy was safe in his mother's arms.

The Ranger could not see this. He did not turn in his saddle. But he had to chuckle as he actually heard "Vivas!" Cheers that must be meant for him. It was the first time he had ever known a Mexican to cheer for a Ranger.

Now, as he rode, he got his carbine free, and jacked a shell into the chamber. He checked Pepper, and threw off his dallies. The alligator was twenty-odd feet back of him, on its back, far from water.

It had experienced all the trouble it wanted. Its sluggish brain had only the one reaction. To get away, to get into the river again. It knew no fear, but it knew when it was licked.

Bud slid from his saddle, dropped to one knee, and fired three shots at

close range. He had no use for alligators at any time, and this one had tried to kill a human being.

Also, Bud wanted his lasso back. It was trailing from the reptile as it clumsily got to its legs and into action. It was a good *reata*, and now it had a record attached to it.

The three slugs tore through the scaly hide of the 'gator, but they did not seem to slow it up.

A fourth one did the trick. The monster did not show fight, and Bud went after it, stood close beside it as it fled. That slug crashed into the skull, destroyed the nervous motors. The big reptile stretched out full length, its tail quivering. Then it lay still.

II.

The people crowded about the Ranger and the dead 'gator with cries of admiration for Bud's deed.

The women stayed on the outside of the mob, fearful of the ugly brute, alive or dead. But the mother broke through, dragging her boy by the hand, calling upon the saints to bless Bud, breaking into a torrent of Spanish, which Bud understood very well indeed, though he was not as yet prepared to let the inhabitants of Torada know that he spoke their language as well as they did.

He knew that, when the excitement wore off, he would be no longer a hero in their eyes, but a Texas Ranger, which, to most of them, if not all, meant an enemy.

The mother might continue to remember him in her prayers. The boy might be grateful, though he was still too dazed by his experience to thank his rescuer, as his mother wished him to.

There were offers of wine, of food, of lodging. But Bud put them off with a grin. He did not drink, to begin with. He knew that a Span-

iard will always say that "the house is yours," without meaning more than a polite phrase that makes him feel he is a gentleman.

He did not mind being friendly with these people of Torada, but the time for that had not yet come.

He mounted with his recoiled lasso, the saddle gun again in its scabbard, and rode off, back to the bluffs, though not by the way he had come down. Even Pepper could not accomplish that.

Bud had never meant to thrust himself upon the notice of Torada so suddenly. He had expected to survey the village and the general lay of the land before he showed himself. But the danger of the boy had changed his plans.

Torada had the same sort of reputation as all the villages between El Paso and Laredo. They were all allied with smugglers, and with the outlaws who had taken refuge in the chaparral, the mesquite, and bosque jungles along the Rio Grande. There were five thousand of these criminals listed in the famous "Book" of the Rangers, as fugitives from justice.

Among them were murderers, rustlers, highwaymen, bandits who stuck up banks, stages, trains, and sometimes raided the small American settlements, or a frontier farm.

Whenever they made a haul they were sure to spend it in one of the villages, the Rio Grande close at hand for a quick get-away, though few of them cared to go into Mexico, save as a final resort.

The Mexicans in the river hamlets took their money for liquor, gambling, and other amusements, and protected them from the law.

Back on the bluff again, Bud looked toward the river. The Mexicans had skinned the alligator.

They would use its musky flesh for catfish bait.

He could see no motion in the pool where the second alligator had submerged, after he hit it.

Lacking rains, the Rio Grande was a sadly shrunken stream. There were plenty of places where, if one dodged the quicksands, it could be crossed in a hop-skip-and-a-jump. It was still the border between the United States and Mexico, but it was not much of a barrier.

The conditions were ideal for smuggling. Bud had little doubt that they were being taken advantage of.

But it was not smuggling that had brought Bud to Torada.

It was the news that the bandit chief, known as "Solapado," was making Torada his headquarters, mainly because he had fallen for the charms of Luisa Tarrego, daughter of Diego Tarrego, the *posadero*, or innkeeper, of the one *posada*, or hotel, that Torada boasted.

It was not much of an inn, to look at, but plenty of dinero changed hands there. Tarrego knew his smugglers, and his outlaws. He was wealthy, and his daughter was beautiful. She would inherit his money, if he had any when he died.

The real name of Solapado was unknown. Solapado meant "the crafty, or artful one." It was a name well chosen. But Tarrego was not far behind. He might welcome Solapado as a son-in-law. It was quite likely that he was using his daughter as a lure for the bandit to visit Torada, spend his money there.

That might be a dangerous game, if Solapado once suspected it. He was not merely cunning. He was cruel, and he had a band as villainous as himself.

He was daring, and he had pulled off several successful raids. He was

making a name for himself, attracting more and more followers. He had to be squelched.

The commander of Company F, Captain Halstead, a grizzled but tough old-timer, had given Bud the job, with a warning:

"Don't get too enterprisin' with that initiative of yours, Bud. You may be able to lick your weight in wild cats, but you're always liable to get clawed. I can't afford any troopers on the sick list, particularly the way things are now."

Halstead was really proud of his corporal, the youngest one in the Rangers. Bud *had* been clawed a bit. He had scars from lead and steel, and so had Pepper. But they tallied the score he had piled up against the outlaws. Bud's wits, his experience and his fighting powers, had brought him through.

Solapado's love of money, of showing off, of wearing fine clothes, had blunted his cunning a trifle. He had made the mistake of taxing the small-fry Mexicans. Sometimes, it was just supplies for his band, more often it was money. Protection money, Solapado called it, and he levied upon them as if he was their ruler, instead of a bandit.

He bore down too hard. And presently the news leaked through to Ranger headquarters, that Solapado used Torada for a hang-out, and was smitten with the charms of the daughter of Diego Tarrego.

It was said that he had a rival in Carl Stockman, whose sister had married the chief stockholder and owner of the Almaden mine. He had been given the job of auditor and assistant manager.

Stockman seemed to find it dull at the mine. There was no harm in his riding to Torada, having supper at the *posada*, buying a drink or two, playing a little faro.

But it was foolish. No gringo was truly welcome at the inn. It was more than foolish of Stockman to think that Luisa Tarrego cared for any Americano. She let him tell her how beautiful she was, and buy her presents. But the people of Torada looked for an explosion when Solapado found out about it.

Solapado knew all about it. And nothing happened. Diego Tarrego seemed to approve of both the suitors. Solapado even became friendly with Stockman. They drank together, and Solapado was far more used to the tequila and aguardiente than Stockman. They played cards with each other, and called each other *amigo*.

Wise Captain Halstead considered these rumors. There were a few far-sighted Mexicans who realized that the Rangers would look out for the rights of *all* American citizens, whether they were Mexicans, or Indians, Negroes, or Chinamen.

Halstead talked with these, never very long at a time. He put those bits of talk together.

"This Solapado is up to something, Bud," he told the young Ranger, before he started him off on his solo detail. "He's slippery as an eel. He's goin' to be hard to locate, and the worst of it is he ain't 'wanted.' He ain't down in the 'Book.' We've got to catch him red-handed. We've got to grab him in somethin' before he gets his hands red, the murderin' pirate."

Bud said nothing. He had long ago found that a listener may not always hear good things about himself, but always learns more about other things, in the long run, than those who do the talking. This worked, even with Captain Halstead.

The Ranger troop commander

tugged thoughtfully at his long Texas mustache.

"I've got a hunch," he said. "It's cinnabar, that they make quick-silver—mercury—from. Solapado's plannin' some sort of play. He's usin' Stockman. Tarrego's in it, and so is that daughter of his. Don't you fall for her, corporal."

Bud laughed aloud, and Halstead grinned. Rangers had no time to play around with girls, even to think of them. A Ranger's wife, or his sweetheart, would find little sleep or happiness thinking of him, out on the danger trail.

"I was talkin' with Williams, the superintendent," Halstead went on. "Price of mercury's been way down. They ain't been shippin', an' they've put off pay day. Outside of part-time wages, they ain't paid off for nigh on to three months."

Bud nodded. He knew that much. Also that many of the peons had been grumbling at the deferred pay.

"They shipped the clean-up to the railroad last week," said Halstead. "They can draw on the Hawkville bank, soon's the bank gets word of final delivery to the buyers. Williams aims to pay off in full on Thursday. Friday is a fiesta, for Torada's patron saint."

This was Monday, when Halstead talked with Bud.

"This Solapado hombre wouldn't monkey with the mercury. Too much trouble to handle, too hard to sell. But he *might* like to take a chance at the dinero. So, I'm goin' to have another talk with Williams, and this is what I'm goin' to suggest to him."

Before Bud saluted and left his captain, to make preparations for his trip to Torada, he had made a few suggestions himself. Halstead had approved of them.

Now, he was wondering whether Solapado was in Torada at present.

Even if his siesta had been disturbed, he probably would not have bothered about the fate of a *muchacho*. He might have been interested in the fight with the alligator, but his sympathies would have been all on the side of the reptile, and against the Ranger.

But if he had designs on that fat pay roll, he would be sure to arrive soon, with at least some of his men.

On the other hand, Solapado might learn that a Ranger had been to Torada.

"It might put ideas into his head that we was still around, and nosey, Pepper," Bud said to the roan.

They had halted atop the bluff beside a small, cold spring. The roan had cracked corn, Bud had Ranger-made jerky for a cold supper.

Pepper nudged at him.

"You an' me, old-timer, we got to be *solapado*, too," Bud muttered. "Sort of fade out the picture. I reckon I'll have to leave you out of it altogether, *compadre*, but I'll sure leave you somewheres handy."

III.

"So you see, my frien'," said Solapado to Stockman, "you 'ave been mos' unwise. You owe me much money, you owe the good Señor Tarrego money, for food, for wine, an' for what you lose at faro."

"I'll pay up when I get paid," cried Stockman. "I'll pay some Friday."

He had drunk too much. But he knew that things had gone wrong. It was as if he had suddenly come out of the warm sun into the shadows, cold and sinister.

The beautiful Luisa had forgotten he existed. The genial *posadero* had become an exacting creditor. So had this man who had seemed anxious for his friendship.

The room was slowly filling up with Mexicans. They stood at the bar, they sat at tables, and they leered at Stockman where he sat with their leader. There was complete understanding among them, and they were whispering about the gringo.

Solapado shook his head. "You owe much, señor. Too much. You cannot pay. Eef eet was know' 'ow much you owe, you might lose your good job at the mine."

There was a lot of truth in that. Stockman had juggled his accounts, and this smiling Mexican, with nothing of mirth in his eyes, had guessed it.

Stockman tried to bluff.

"You trying to threaten me?" he demanded. "Go as far as you like. What are you going to do about it? I don't even know your name."

The bandit chuckled. His slitted eyes were evil, his manner insolent and assured.

"I will tell you, señor. I am Solapado. Per'aps you 'ave 'eard of me. They say I steal, that I cut throats. But you choose me for frien', señor. And eet ees much better for you to 'ave me as frien' than enemy, señor."

Stockman gulped. He shivered and felt sick and weak as he looked at the grinning Mexican. He might not get out of the place alive. Solapado drew a dirty forefinger slowly across his throat. He seemed to read Stockman's craven mind.

He shoved a bottle of tequila at the auditor, who took a long drink, the sweat cold on his forehead.

"The reever, eet ees low, señor," the bandit went on. "Never 'ave I seen eet so low. To-day there 'as been keel an *aligador*. Where there ees one, there weel be more. An' there are queeksands. Eef one fell een——"

Stockman was like a lamb among

wolves, but shrewd enough to know Solapado, Luisa, and Tarrego had not fooled with him without purpose.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Now Solapado really smiled. "I want to know, señor, jus' 'ow the pay roll comes to the mine. I 'ave spies, señor—peons who work for you. I know that the Ranger captain veesits your Señor Williams, twice. Eet ees een my mind that per'aps they theenk Solapado might like to count that dinero. Per'aps they make some special plan to guard eet? No?"

"Suppose I could tell you," said Stockman hoarsely.

"Ah, then you are indeed my true frien', señor. We weel forget all you owe, to me, to Tarrego. The so beautiful Luisa weel smile on you. They weel not fin' out you 'ave rob the mine."

"All right. The stage will not bring the money, though there will be guards to make it look that way. A Ranger brings it. He speaks Spanish well, and he will be disguised as a woodchopper. The logs on his burros will be hollowed out."

"Ah, that ees very clever! Si! There was a Rangero here to-day. Per'aps you know?"

"I've told you all I know, you devil!" said Stockman, pouring out more tequila. "How do I know you'll play fair with me?"

Solapado shrugged his shoulders beneath his gayly striped serape. He took a sip of the tequila.

"Quién sabe, señor? You must 'ave trust een me."

Stockman would sooner have trusted a rattlesnake.

Bud Jones, mounted on a mangy mule, urged the two tired burros through the pass. It was dusk. It had been arranged for him to drift into Almaden after dark. The stage

was far ahead. Bud had come by mountain trails.

He looked like anything but a Ranger. His clothes were rags, his straw sombrero frayed, his shoes were only worn strips of leather tied to his feet. He had his six-gun stowed beneath the rags, but his main strength, and the safety of the pay roll, depended upon his disguise.

It was a good plan, and it looked as if it was going through. But Bud had a nasty hunch that things might not be going as smoothly as it appeared.

Once through the pass, his way led through a forest where big oaks were draped with Spanish moss, shutting out light by day—a gloomy spot indeed by night.

The burros hit the ridge, quickened their pace as the trail dipped down. Suddenly they halted, huddled together. It was not in fright.

Bud called to them in Spanish, talking good *muletero* slang. But his hunch was fairly shouting now. He felt for his six-gun as something fell down from the boughs overhead, infolding both him and the mule.

It was the same thing that, stretched across the dark path, had stopped the burros. A net of soft but stout rope, much like the nets used for slinging cargoes aboard ship.

The mule kicked and plunged. Bud was caught like a fish in the meshes. The black forest seemed alive with men, hauling on the ropes while one gave orders, and half a dozen torches flared up.

"Señor Rangero, I hear you speak Spanish. This is Solapado. It was nice of you to bring all this good dinero to where I wait for it."

The bandit's laughter echoed mockingly. But Bud was powerless. They knew he had the money. They would find it. Halstead's ruse had

failed. There had been treachery somewhere.

They closed in upon him, twenty hands against his two. They dragged him from the mule and searched him. One man, who seemed a sort of lieutenant to the chief, took his six-gun.

Then they set him on the mule once more, wrists tied behind him, ankles fastened under the belly of the beast. They led on down the trail, the burros among them. Then they opened up a steep path, masked by bushes, and headed by a short cut for the river.

Bud glimpsed the lights of Torada. Then they disappeared in the gap as the trail twisted. They forged through thick chaparral and came to a cave in the limestone. Here a lone bandit tended a fire inside the cavern. Pitch-pine torches were set in crevices.

There were bales and boxes. It was, Bud fancied, a smugglers' den, used by Solapado for the occasion.

Bud acted dumb and stupid, but he knew the game was up when he saw them unload the burros, split the logs with axes, and take out the closely packed bills, the rolls of coin, stuffed so they would not chink.

"Now, Rangero," said the bandit chief, "you know why they call me Solapado. It is because I am much smarter than any gringo—even than a Rangero who rides a roan horse and ropes alligators. Now we have roped you instead."

The man who had taken Bud's gun, thrust it in his belt, gave a start. He came and stood back of where Bud, still bound, sat on a box close to the wall of the cave.

"I am a great one to make friends," the bandit went on. "One of my friends, Señor Stockman, told me where I should find the money. It was very good of him, but he did not seem happy about it, the last

time I saw him. Señor Tarrego and his charming daughter made a fool of that gringo, Rangero, even as I have made a fool of you and your captain."

"All right," said Bud, in the same language. "You win. You've got the money, and you've got me. Get on with it."

He set himself to meet his fate. It would not, he thought, be an easy one. There was more than mere triumph in Solapado's eyes. There was hate of all gringos, a mad rage against all Rangeros.

IV.

At a nod from Solapado, some of his men left, going down the trail toward Torada and the river. They did not take any of the money with them, but they drove off the burros.

"This Señor Stockman," said Solapado, "annoyed me. Also, he had annoyed the beautiful Luisa, to whom I shall be wed. With this money we shall have a glorious honeymoon in Mexico. But Señor Stockman drank too much and abused me. He said that I—Solapado—was a trickster. One of my men did not like this. I understand that they cut his throat and threw him into a quicksand. He had robbed the mine. He deserved his fate."

Solapado began to count the stolen money, and get some of it aside. His men would get small shares, Bud thought.

"But you, Rangero," Solapado went on, "you are a brave man. I have made up my mind to give you a more distinguished death. Die you must, since you are sworn to capture me, to see me hanged. I have sworn that all Americanos who cross my path shall die."

Bud had not expected anything

else, but it was hard to have to go out without the chance of a struggle. If they hoped he would beg for mercy they were mistaken.

"Your horse I shall take good care of," said the bandit. "I know where you have left it. I shall take it across the river with me. You roped an alligator with that horse, to save a child. That was a foolish thing to do—to risk so good a horse for a brat. They tell me there is another 'gator in the river. So I shall have you tossed into that pool, Rangero—as you are—and give the 'gator his revenge."

Squatting on his heels, his evil face crimson in the light of the fire and the torches, Solapado roared with hideous, fiendish laughter that echoed in the cave. He rocked with his mirth, insane with his hatred.

"Padilla, I leave you to see that this is carried out," he ordered. "See he does not escape, that his bonds are loosed a little, so that he may try to swim."

The man, Padilla, stooped to examine the thongs that held the Ranger. Chuckling, Solapado went on counting.

"Señor," whispered Padilla, "it was my *muchacho* you saved. Solapado did not know, he would not care. Your horse is at the top of the bluff, above this cave. I am placing your gun here, in the shadow. And now I set you free. I, Padilla, and Maria, my wifie, we pay the debt for that *muchacho*, that Solapado called a brat."

Bud felt the thongs loosen, cut through by a sharp knife as the Mex pretended to examine them.

He sat still, locating the six-gun exactly, while Padilla sauntered toward the mouth of the cave. He had paid his debt, but it would cost him dear when Solapado found out, unless——

The bandit chief rose, yawning. He had stuffed the paper money into a sack, tied the mouth of it. The coin was in a leather bag. This he tossed into the air, grinned as it jingled.

"We shall drink your health, Rangero," he jeered. "I fear it will not last very long."

Again he pitched up the bag of coin—and stiffened, amazed, as a jet of flame came from the Ranger's gun. The bullet struck the bag of coin with a dull thud.

"Hands up, Solapado," Bud said. "You hang, after all, unless you force me to kill you now."

He glanced toward the mouth of the cave. Padilla had got away. There were five bandits beside the leader. All of them seemed momentarily turned to stone at sight of their prisoner, now on his feet, in action.

"Padilla!" roared Solapado. "He set you free, gave you back your gun."

"In exchange for his boy I saved from the *aligador*. You think too little of the life of a child, Solapado, or of the love of a father and mother. Padilla has paid his debt. Hands up, all of you!"

They stood snarling, like trapped wolves, their eyes like the eyes of wolves, reflecting the fire.

Suddenly, Solapado kicked at the burning logs, scattering them, sending red-hot embers at Bud. They fell upon him, searing his flesh, burning his rags. One struck his cheek, narrowly missing an eye.

The bandit leader shouted, and the others hurled pine torches at the Ranger before they closed in on him, their long knives drawn.

Solapado led them. He had a *cuchillo* in each hand. He slung one with an underhand motion at Bud, distracted by the torches, dodging,

only to feel the steel strike through the fat of his thigh, to see it stick there, sense the hot, crimson flow that streamed from his leg.

He fired again, and saw Solapado sway. He wanted to disable him. Quick death was too good for this cutthroat robber who flung men to quicksands and alligators, and rated the life of a child about equal to that of a dog.

Then Bud charged the rest. They broke before him, like cowardly cougars, slashing before they leaped aside.

He had no shots to waste. And he wanted to get to the mouth of the cave and hold it. The scattered fire and still burning torches made them better targets than he was.

They had cut him, but the only serious wound was the one in the thigh. Bud wrenched out the *cuchillo* and flung it at one of the bandits, who was sneaking round through shadows to attack him.

Rangers practiced throwing their bowie knives in camp. Bud had the knack of it. Solapado's blade was well balanced for this work. It turned over once, and the point sank into the bandit's throat. He dropped like a wet cloth, gasping out his life.

Solapado was coming forward, holding his right shoulder with his left hand, his fingers stained red. His bulk loomed large in front of what was left of the fire.

"Señor Rangero," he said, "you win! I surrender. Only, if I could get my hands about the throat of that traitor, Padilla——"

"No traitor to his own," said Bud.

He was suspicious of this move. He looked for Solapado's second knife, and could not see it.

He searched the slowly darkening cavern to count the five bandits,

place them. One he had just downed. There should be four more.

There were only *three*. Solapado advanced.

"That's far enough," Bud cried. "Get over there, Solapado, sit on that bale."

Solapado moved. He leaped aside, revealing the man who had crept up behind him, hidden. He slid a knife into Solapado's reaching hand and came lunging at the Ranger, head down, one arm bent for protection, thrusting his own blade as he sprang, while Solapado came in from the other side.

A steel edge scraped the bone of the Ranger's lower jaw. It barely missed his jugular vein, as Bud side-stepped, swung his six-gun, muzzle foremost.

He clipped the bandit, and the man shot stumbling over the trail, over the edge of the cliff, hurtling down a hundred feet to the stony bed of the creek.

Bud kicked Solapado with his wounded leg. He had to use the sound one to stand upon. He had lost his flapping sandal, and his bare toes stung, as if he had broken them, when they struck Solapado's wrist and sent his knife spinning.

Solapado closed in, calling to his men. His empty hands clawed at Bud to hold him, while his followers knifed him. Bud set the barrel of

his six-gun into the bandit's hip, pulled the trigger.

Solapado flopped, rolling in agony. It was a wound from which he would probably never recover, but which was not mortal. It would not interfere with the successful hanging of the "Crafty One."

Bud faced the rest. Three of them. But they were no longer keen to face the issue. Their chief was done. The Ranger had won. They prayed to be allowed to surrender.

Under Bud's six-gun, they tied each other up. Bud saw the last one secured, and then stanching the wound in his own thigh that was threatening to sap too much of his strength.

There came the sound of horses' hoofs upon the trail. Bud swung about. He had some shots left.

"It is Padilla, señor. I bring your horse. I think perhaps you may need some help. But surely your horse."

"You'll make a good American, yet, Padilla. I see you have a horse of your own. We'll deliver the money, and send back for these ladrones."

"I was one of them, señor."

"We'll forget that, Padilla. You've paid up, squared up. More than that, fetching my horse."

"That, Señor Rangero," said Padilla, "was just the interest."



A Hunter Of Indians

A SETTLER named Jeff Turner had made a home for his wife and three children on a creek that drained into the Guadalupe River.

One morning, he went out early to hunt for fresh meat, as this had to be provided entirely by his gun. But game was scarce that day, and he was absent longer than usual. The sun was setting when he returned.

The children did not run to meet him as they always did, and his wife was not at the door to greet him as usual. The place seemed strangely quiet, and Jeff approached his log cabin with fear and dread in his heart, for Indians were plentiful in that section.

The door was open. With horror he saw the bodies of his young wife and the three little ones, sprawled on the floor—hacked to death.

As he stood over them, Jeff Turner raised his right hand and swore that he would kill every Indian he could; that henceforth he would hunt them down like wild animals, and would show them no mercy.

From that day, he became a rabid hunter of Indians. He soon learned the tricks of the red men and could shoot an arrow with the best of them. He was a dead shot with a rifle or a six-gun, and became expert with a knife. He made camp on the Chicolete River, in Lavaca County, and often went as far west as the Rio Grande on the trail of Indians.

One night, "Big-foot" Wallace and eight companions had camped on the western bank of the Lavaca River. No watch was posted, as the place was quiet and the campers felt safe. In the morning, how-

ever, they awoke to find all their horses gone, although they had not heard a sound in the night.

They went to the Zumwalt settlement on foot. Here they were given horses and were joined by four settlers. As they passed near Turner's camp he spoke with them, and on hearing that they were trailing Indian horse thieves he immediately offered to go with them.

Before starting, he showed them forty-three scalps that were hanging in his camp, and said that he wanted to get at least a hundred before leaving this world. He gave a full account of his reasons for having become an Indian hunter, and Big-foot knew that he would be a good ally.

Turner could pick up a trail and follow it as well and as quickly as any redskin and, with his assistance, the camp of the Indian thieves was soon found. A surprise attack was made and the horses were recovered. In the fight, Turner added four scalps to his collection.

For a few years after this, he showed up occasionally at the Zumwalt settlement, where he bought provisions and ammunition, and always had several new scalps.

After a while, he came no more, and was never seen again by any one who knew him. It was supposed that he had fallen a victim to the Indians whom he hunted.

Whether he ever secured the hundred scalps he wanted, no one knew, but he must have been very near the mark, and may even have passed it, judging from the number of ghastly trophies he brought in.

His shanty was burned down by Indians, but the body of Jeff Turner was never found.



The Phantom's Forty-fives

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "Foes of the Phantom," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ROAD AGENTS.

NOTHING moved on the landscape except the shimmer of heat waves as the stagecoach jounced down the rocky Deathville-Stirrup City road. There was nothing to indicate that ten bandits lay in wait among the rocks overlooking the road, their beady eyes sizing up the stagecoach guards. Ten trigger fingers itched to start gunning at the victim each outlaw had selected.

A rich gold shipment accounted for the heavy escort of armed riders

which accompanied the rickety Concord on its trip out of the Kiona Mountains. For the first time in twenty years, a stage was coming from the ghost town of Deathville, heavily laden with newly mined gold.

The outlaws grinned evilly as they took in the details. When the coach reached the sharp bend in the road where flanking cliffs would force them to slow down, the attack would start.

Two armed riders trotted in advance of the team. A pair of horsemen rode on either side of the

rocking Concord, rifles ready. A Wells-Fargo man with a shotgun was on the seat beside the driver. And the ambushers knew that inside the stagecoach was no less a lawman than Sheriff Lew Barry himself.

The remaining member of the stage's convoy was the only one who caused the ambushed killers any worry. That one was the colorfully dressed young cowboy who brought up the rear.

He was "Bearcat" Barry, son of the sheriff. On his chest was a shiny nickel-plated star which told the world that young Barry was a deputy sheriff.

"So the Desert Phantom is ridin' with this gold shipment!" each bandit was thinking nervously. "I hope we kin cut him down, afore he gets a chance tuh tangle with us."

Bearcat Barry had earned the nickname of the "Desert Phantom" nearly two years before, when riding a justice trail that earned him a reputation which filled border crooks with dread.

He had ridden that trail as a lone wolf, his only partner being the famous blue roan on which he was mounted this morning. An unbeatable combination, Bearcat Barry and Blue Blazes—not forgetting the Phantom's six-guns.

Blue Blazes had the build of a race horse and the endurance of a work horse. Every cowpoke in Arizona would have pawned his soul to possess the mount Bearcat Barry had trained from a colt.

But if Blue Blazes made a picturesque sight against the wild background of red rock and cactus, the Desert Phantom was even more striking in his appearance.

He wore a pearl-gray Stetson with a rattlesnake band, vivid green shirt under a beaded Indian vest, flaring batwing chaps decorated with con-

chas made of Mexican dollars, and spur-mounted kangaroo boots. But the most curious features of his garb were his shiny, glasslike holsters.

They were of molded steerhorn, transparent as celluloid, and fitted the long-barreled .45s within as the skin fits a banana. And it was those cedar-butteted Colts, shiny from use and famous for their deadly accuracy in the hands of the Phantom, that caused the ambushed bandit gang a tremor of uneasiness.

"Fanner" Wilson, leader of the band which was about to hold up the gold shipment, cocked his six-gun to give the signal for attack. The Concord was slowing down as it approached the narrow, bank-walled cut. But even as his finger tightened on the trigger, Fanner relaxed.

The Desert Phantom had suddenly dismounted from Blue Blazes, in the shadow of a mesquite chaparral back up the road! The young rider was lifting the saddle skirts, to busy himself with a loose latigo strap.

"All the better! We kin attack when the stage gits around the bend, an' the Phantom's guns won't throw their chips in the pot!" muttered the bandit chief. "We kin settle him afterwards."

Brakes squealed as the stage rattled and bounced its way into the gap, out of sight of the Desert Phantom. Hidden among the rocks, the bandits awaited the signal, worried at Wilson's delay.

Brrang! Fanner made even his signal shot count.

Before the deafening report of the Colt had reached the ears of the guards, the shotgun guard in the driver's boot was knocked off the stage by a streaking bullet.

Brrang! Bang! Bang-bang-bang!
The discharge of guns was like a

broadside from a firing squad, every man shooting at once. Swift, merciless slaughter.

The two forward guards slumped dead in their saddles, riddled with bullets before they could turn their horses to inquire into the sound of Wilson's signal.

Not dreaming that any one knew of the secret gold shipment, the four guards who lolled in their saddles alongside the Concord did not have time even to cock their Winchesters. A blistering hail of lead rained down from both sides of the road, dumping them from their horses.

The driver lay sprawled in the stage boot, six-gun half drawn, lines still wrapped about his wrists.

Less than three seconds had elapsed since the signal. Echoes were still stunning the lizards among the desert rocks. But eight men had been snuffed into eternity in the bat of an eyelash.

A wild whoop of triumph went up from the ambushed outlaws. But they shouted a moment too soon.

Sunlight flashed off a six-gun barrel poked out through the curtains of the stagecoach door. The gun roared, and a desperado was knocked kicking among the boulders.

"It's the sheriff! We didn't git him inside the coach!"

The rearing team was frenzied by the gunfire on all sides. Rearing and pitching in the harness, they dragged the heavy Concord back into the ruts and headed down the steep mountain grade in a panic.

Back around the bend, the gunfire had startled the Desert Phantom just as he was tightening his saddle girth. In an instant, the young deputy sheriff was vaulting aboard, his hands blurring for the blue .45s in their glassy holsters.

The Phantom was too quick-witted to commit sure suicide by

riding madly into the outlaw trap and be mowed down with slugs.

Instead, he wheeled Blue Blazes and spurred back up the mountain road in a funneling cloud of yellow dust.

It might have seemed like a cowardly act, to turn tail and flee from the sound of battle. But the outlaws who triggered their rifles at the fast-disappearing cowboy were quick to understand the cunning in the young deputy's tactics.

Out of the gun range, the deputy reined to the right, thundered up a short cut bank, and then doubled back down the mountain in a wide circle, coming like an avenging demon on the wings of a gale, straight for the scene of the holdup.

The clever back-tracking had now put the Desert Phantom at a higher elevation than the outlaws themselves. From where he rode, threading Blue Blazes through the boulders and cactus growth, Bearcat Barry could see the assembled bandits below, clambering down out of the rocks.

"Gosh, them rats are leavin' their holes!" gasped the deputy, jerking his white Stetson harder on his head. "That must mean they murdered every single guard afore they could defend——"

It seemed impossible that such a heavily armed escort could have been wiped out in a twinkling. But aside from that single burst of thunderous gunfire, there had been no further shooting. Nothing to indicate that the guards were putting up a battle.

The Phantom was already veering Blue Blazes into the shelter of some boulders. He was planning to jerk his .30-30 Winchester out of its leather boot and take some pot shots at the outlaw band from his elevated position.

But before he could do so, the Desert Phantom caught sight of the stagecoach, dwindling in the distance down the mountain road in the direction of Catclaw Desert. In the same glance, the young lawman saw that the bandits were showing no signs of excitement whatever, aside from waiting for him to get within range.

"They—they couldn't have had time tuh loot the stage of its gold! That must mean——"

Then, in a flash, the terrible truth came to the Phantom. The stagecoach was running away behind a team crazed with terror. Certain destruction awaited it on the treacherous curves below—and inside that coach was the Phantom's father!

Blue Blazes leaped under the rowels. Riding at an angle to keep out of the gunfire of the bandits, the Desert Phantom streaked down the slope with a speed that brought alarm to the hearts of the crooks watching Blue Blazes's suicidal flight.

Leaping small gulches like a rabbit, skidding down steep pitches of shale on his haunches, crashing through cactus hedges, clattering at breakneck speed along rocky ledges.

Blue Blazes was living up to his reputation for being the fastest horse in Arizona.

"If the stage hits Jackknife Bend at that speed, it'll go right smack over the cliff!" grated the Phantom through clenched teeth. "An' if dad should be alive yet, he's doomed."

Taking a short cut to head off the careening stagecoach, the Phantom spurred down a cut bank into the road just as the Concord roared past, rocking under a cloud of dust behind a team which snorted its terror, rolled its eyes with insane fear.

Leaning out of the window, wav-

ing frantically for help, was Sheriff Lew Barry!

The Phantom snarled a prayer into the wind and roweled Blue Blazes to his last ounce of speed. Slowly, sick with suspense, the Phantom fought his way to the rear wheels of the stagecoach. The Concord was pitching wildly, threatening to turn over—and Jackknife Bend was only a few yards away now.

Sheriff Barry was climbing out of the stage window, clinging to the sides for support. If he tried to jump to the ground his brains would be dashed out on the rock road——

And then a yell of horror burst from the Phantom's lungs as he galloped wildly alongside the Concord. For the team was plunging out of the road and over the cliff brink of the fatal Jackknife Bend!

CHAPTER II.

CANDIDATE FOR SHERIFF.

SHERIFF LEW BARRY shut his eyes and leaped from the rumbling coach, risking all on the strength of his son's arms.

In a final spurt of power, Blue Blazes sprinted up to where the Phantom could lean out and seize his father's hurtling body in an iron-muscled embrace.

Then the blue roan, carrying double, swerved sharply to the left to keep from going over the edge of the cliff which bordered Jackknife Bend. Overbalanced by his father's weight, the Desert Phantom tumbled from the saddle and both men went sprawling into the dust, the air knocked from their lungs.

The Phantom was stunned by the awful tragedy that was unfolding at the same instant. Out into dizzy space the six-horse span of the Stir-

rup City stagecoach catapulted, unable to take the hairpin turn of the road at their terrific pace.

Their blind, reckless dash down the mountain was too much to break. The stagecoach followed the bellowing team, front wheels crashing over the rim rock. Then the whole coach appeared to bound into the air and pitch downward, as the weight of the falling team jerked it into the abyss.

The Desert Phantom staggered to his feet and lurched to the edge of the cliff. What he saw tied his stomach into a knot.

The six snorting horses were twisting in their harness as they fell. The stagecoach was slowly turning, its four wheels still spinning like tops as it swooped down toward the broken rocks hundreds of feet below.

Then the horses struck the earth. A squashy crunch snuffed out their six lives in an instant. The stagecoach crashed on top of them. And the concussion of the three-hundred-foot plunge over the cliff seemed to explode the old vehicle.

Doors went sailing into the air. The driver's seat bounced twenty feet off its springs. Two wheels banged away from the axles to go racing off down the mountain, before bursting into a showering gust of spokes. The wagon tongue was a flying spear.

Back to the ears of the Desert Phantom wafted the awful crunch of the horses landing, then the splintering of the stagecoach into toothpick wood. Far below, a wheel on the junk heap that had been a stagecoach was winking its spokes in the sunlight as it turned more and more slowly.

And through the whirling dust which was settling over the wreck-

age, the Phantom caught a dull gleam of yellow—spilled gold!

"Don't seem possible they got us wiped out so quick!" rasped the Phantom. "But we kin go back an' help avenge——"

The deputy ceased speaking, as he saw that his father had not stirred a muscle since the two had taken their flying spill off Blue Blazes. He lay motionless as a scarecrow in the dust.

Bearcat Barry's heart was hitting the root of his tongue as he jumped across the road and laid an ear on his father's chest. But the sheriff's heart was throbbing stoutly.

"Jest got knocked out by the fall, I reckon," panted the Phantom in relief. "Lucky he skinned out o' that coach the instant he did or there'd——"

An angry pounding of hoofs reached the Phantom's ears. Leaping to his feet, the cowboy turned and peered back up the road. Hammering down the mountain slope came seven mounted crooks, guns glittering in the sun!

Bearcat Barry hesitated a long second. Then he whistled for Blue Blazes, and as the horse came trotting up, the young waddy lifted his father's unconscious form to the saddle, put a boot-toe in the stirrup and swung aboard behind the cante, so as to support the sheriff's sagging figure.

"I'm shore honin' tuh tangle lead with you polecats!" bit out the Phantom as he twisted to regard the oncoming bandits. "But I ain't foolish. I knows when tuh drop out o' the bettin'. With dad disabled an' no place tuh hide ourselves, I reckon we'll jest be fadin'. Hop fast, Blue!"

For the thousandth time in his twenty-two years, Bearcat Barry was thankful for the superhorse he

possessed. For a few anxious moments, it appeared that the pursuing outlaws might get within gun range, and mow them down. But Blue Blazes had his second wind now, and was accustoming his stride to the burden of a double load.

Soon the young waddy felt the surge of power in his mount's pace, and the gap between bandits and fugitives began to lengthen rapidly. Finally, as the foot of the mountains gave way to the level bad lands of Catclaw Desert, the outlaws gave up the chase.

"I hate tuh leave that stagecoach up thar with enough gold in it tuh ransom a king," the Phantom groaned. "But it's a cinch I couldn't buck no army like that one, single-handed."

The speed of their retreat was creating a breeze, and soon the sheriff began to show signs of reviving. The Phantom, convinced that the outlaws had abandoned the chase, reined up in the shade of a mesquite tree and stretched his father on the sand.

A swallow or two from the Phantom's canteen, and Sheriff Barry let his eyelids flicker open.

"That was a— a danged close shave!" panted the old lawman, sitting up weakly as Bearcat mopped his brow. "Sorry I went out on yuh, but when we tumbles off the hoss jest after I'd jumped from the coach, I reckon I hit my noggin on a rock."

The sheriff winced as he tried to move. His skin went ashen, and sweat-beads dewed his face.

"Blazes! I reckon I'm hurt worse'n I figured, son. Feels like I broke a wing in that flop we took."

An examination of the sheriff's left arm proved his words. Both bones had been fractured three inches above the wrist.

"No wonder yuh fainted, dad!"

sympathized his son. "Wait until I git some mesquite sticks an' set that for yuh."

Using his red neckerchief and such splints as he could pick up from the sparse desert foliage about, the Desert Phantom skillfully rendered temporary first aid. While he worked, he described the crash of the stagecoach and the race which Blue Blazes had won.

"This busted arm puts the jinx on my plan tuh go back an' defend that gold," finished the deputy. "I reckon as how we'll jest have tuh let them bandits lick up their gravy."

The old sheriff bristled at this, protesting hotly that their duty as lawmen, intrusted with the job of guarding the Deathville gold shipment back to the bank in Stirrup City, demanded that they ride back and fight the bandits to the death.

But the shock of the broken bones, coupled with the sapping desert heat, kept the old tinstar from making good his intentions. When Blue Blazes got under way again, it was with a half-fainting sheriff drooped in the saddle, and the Phantom walking ahead.

Two hours later, the ramshackle buildings of the frontier settlement of Stirrup City, seat of Concha County, came into view around the shoulder of Sunset Bluff.

As Bearcat Barry led Blue Blazes into the outskirts of the desert town, both he and his father noted the many placards in bright red ink which had been nailed to every fence post and building during the past six weeks:

Elect Utah Colliver as next sheriff of Concha County! Arizona is too lawless for old-fashioned law enforcement. Vote for Colliver and put a stop to outlawry!

The grizzled old sheriff eyed the posters with contempt.

"I reckon my so-called old-fashioned ideas has kept law an' order durin' twenty years o' wildness that Concha County'll never see the likes of ag'in," blazed Lew Barry. "Colliver had a danged sight better stick tuh his bank-teller job an' leave the outlaws fer me tuh handle."

The Desert Phantom merely grinned. Election day in Concha County was only two days off now, and his father was candidate to succeed himself as sheriff. With the most enviable lawman's record in Arizona, there was little doubt that the opposing candidate, "Utah" Colliver, would stand no chance at the polls.

"Say, Bearcat!" muttered the sheriff suddenly, as the Desert Phantom tied Blue Blazes to a hitch rack in front of the Stockman's Bank building. "I jest thought o' somethin'. I wonder if our comin' back tuh town with nothin' tuh show fer the Deathville gold shipment except eight dead men an' a busted arm, might lose me a heap of votes day after ter-morrow?"

The Phantom took his father's good arm and led him in the direction of the Stirrup City doctor's office.

"Fergit the election, dad. Yo're a cinch," consoled the deputy. "Jest now, we got tuh git yore busted arm patched up."

But like a stubborn old war horse, Lew Barry broke free and turned in at the steps of the Stockman's Bank.

"My arm kin go hang, until I've told the cashier o' the Stockman's Bank that we won't be depositin' any gold!" boomed the sheriff, entering the bank with Bearcat at his heels. "Might as well bust the bad news pronto. All I'm wantin' tuh know is, who tipped off them robbers that the stage was carryin' gold?"

As the two entered the bank lobby, they met the gaze of Utah Colliver, standing behind the gilded bars of the teller's cage. Since the two Barrys trailed their spurs straight for the cashier's office, they did not observe the look of terror which drained Colliver's face of its color.

Colliver's ratlike features went clammy with sweat, as he watched Lew Barry and the Phantom disappear into the cashier's office. He swabbed his forehead with a hand that shook visibly.

"My gosh, I figured both o' them was full o' lead by now!"

Ten minutes later, when the two lawmen came back into the bank lobby with the sober-faced bank president behind them, Colliver had just barely regained his composure again.

"—er—would you mind stepping over here a moment, Mr. Barry?" stammered Utah Colliver, as the sheriff passed his cage. "Your county pay check for sheriff's salary is ready for deposit. Would you mind indorsing the check an' these receipts?"

The old lawman took a pen from Colliver's fingers, indorsed the payroll check, and then scrawled his signature, one after the other, on the bottom of each of the three sheets of paper which the bank teller held out on the marble slab under his grille.

"Reckon yo're hopin' as how this'll be the last sheriff's salary check I'll be depositin', eh, Utah?" gibed Lew Barry good-naturedly, as he stuck his own receipt in a shirt pocket. "Waal, day after ter-morrow the ballots will tell the tale. Mebbe the voters won't be so agreeable tuh my 'old-fashioned ideas o' law enforcement,' when they hears about how I let the Deathville gold

shipment slip through my claws this mornin'."

It was Mert Kimzey, the white-haired old banker of Stirrup City and president of the Stockman's Bank, who clapped a friendly hand on the sheriff's shoulder and reassured him heartily:

"Nonsense, Lew! On account o' Colliver here bein' one o' my men, I can't take sides in this sheriff's election, but I don't reckon the voters o' Concha County will let this gold robbery influence 'em none. Not when eight guards was slaughtered defendin' the shipment, they won't."

The banker followed the sheriff and his son to the front door. Utah Colliver, his thin, pale face twisting in a smirk, watched the two Barrys depart. Then he glanced down at the papers which he had just had the sheriff sign.

One was the bank's deposit slip. The second he had given to Barry as his receipt. And the third paper bearing Lew Barry's signature was a blank sheet, and had been under the other two, with only the space for the name visible.

"Mebbe the voters won't let this gold robbery affect their ballotin', sheriff," muttered Utah Colliver under his breath. "But you ruined yore chance o' winnin' when yuh scribbled yore John Henry on this slip o' paper. You ain't got no more chance o' beatin' me now than a caterpillar has under a boot hill!"

CHAPTER III.

PLANTED EVIDENCE.

FANNER WILSON blew smoke from his .45s and clambered down out of the rocks, to where the robbery had been staged.

Seven of his men were riding in pursuit of the runaway stagecoach,

bent on the job of shooting the sheriff inside it, as well as finishing off the Desert Phantom.

"Reckon we polished off this job in good shape," guffawed the outlaw, swatting dust from his batwing chaps. "Killin' off eight guards in five seconds is plumb good gun play."

A scowling Mexican gunman, fresh from the job of making sure that the sheriff's bullet had slain their comrade up in the rocks, slid down the cut bank and approached his leader.

"Ees lucky we have a spy een Stockman's Bank, no?" he chuckled, hitching up his cartridge belts. "Señor Colliver weel be very happee when he hear——"

The gringo cut him off. "That gold ain't in our mitts yit, Esteban!" Fanner growled. "Cain't tell but what the sheriff will git the lines o' that team an' ride plumb tuh Stirrup City—what with the Desert Phantom a-backin' his play."

The two outlaws moved here and there among the dead men who dotted the road. They revealed their mongrel stripe when they rummaged through the corpses to relieve the dead of what money their pockets might contain.

This plundering was over by the time the rest of the gang returned, horses heaving and soaked with foam.

"Desert Phantom an' the sheriff escaped intuh Catclaw Desert. Couldn't ketch that blue roan if yuh was an eagle," reported the spokesman for the seven. "An' the coach went over the cliff whar the road switches backwards at Jackknife Bend."

Wilson's eyes narrowed. This was good news.

"The gold is at the bottom o' the cliff, then!" cried the outlaw, strid-

ing for the split in the rocks where his horse was hidden. "I don't reckon as how there'll be much o' the Concord left, after fallin' three hunderd feet. But yuh cain't wreck gold nuggets!"

Excited by greed, the outlaws headed off across the broken bad lands, heading for a canyon which they could follow to the bottom of the Kiona cliffs.

An hour later, they sighted the smashed stagecoach. It was hardly recognizable, so complete had been the destruction of its parts. The team resembled a heap of carcasses after a drought, on top of which had been spilled a load of firewood.

Fanner was the first to spot the glittering yellow gold which was spilled like corn meal over the crimson-spattered ribs of a mangled horse. Up in the tangled wreckage was the split leather saddlebag which had contained the treasure.

For the next few minutes, Wilson and his pards toiled like bees, in spite of the boiling heat of the sun. They cleared away the wreckage, coming upon three other bags of gold which had not been damaged by the fall.

Meanwhile, the Mexican, Esteban, was engaged at the job of sweeping up the spilled gold dust, carefully brushing the precious yellow grains off the horse's coat into his sombrero.

"I reckon that's all the gold, an' it's plenty fer one haul!" panted Wilson at length, removing his Stetson and swabbing his face with a damp sleeve. "Come on, let's git over in the shade o' the cliffs thar an' divide the swag. *Andale!*"

The bandits had come prepared. In Esteban's saddlebags was a pair of assayer's scales, consisting of two pans, a set of weights and a brass fulcrum bar.

Hooking the scales to an arm of a cactus stalk, the outlaws proceeded with the job of dividing their booty into ten equal parts by weight. The tenth heap was not for their dead comrade, but for an absent member of their gang—a very important link in their organization. Some one had tipped them off that gold was ready to be stolen.

"Listen, amigos!" spoke up Esteban. "Thees tenth pile of gold ees for the white-collar, Utah Colliver. For why we let heem have thees dinero? Deed Señor Colliver reesk hees hide to bullets? *Caramba*, he deed not!"

The other outlaws regarded one another furtively.

"The Mex is right, Fanner!" spoke up one of them. "How come we divvy up good gold dust with a double-crossin' spy who didn't do nothin' but turn traitor tuh his boss an' tip us off that gold was comin' from Deathville tuh his bank? 'Tain't fair."

The Mexican sensing the feeling of the gang, reached out to put Colliver's share on the pan of the gold scales. But a heavy hand clamped his wrist with a viselike grip. Looking up, Esteban flinched under the sultry gaze of Fanner Wilson.

"Take yore dew-claws offn that dinero!" gritted the big outlaw venomously. "Can't you danged jug-heads git it through yore skulls that it comes in blamed handy tuh have a pard in the Stockman's Bank? We ain't goin' tuh double-cross a pard."

One of the outlaws grunted as he rolled his own gold dust into a bandanna.

"That's high an' mighty talk, comin' from the same jasper that knifed a old lady in the back over tuh Nogales, last year," gibed the bandit. "How come? Yuh reformin', Fanner?"

Wilson purpled with rage, but he controlled himself.

"I ain't gittin' soft, Benson. An' it ain't because I likes the way Colliver is cut out o' the leather, fer I think he's a rat. But jest the same, he's a good citizen in Stirrup City, an' he's in a position tuh know when there'll be other gold shipments fer us tuh git. What's more, if he's lucky he might be the next sheriff o' Concha County. So we ain't lettin' him down fer a few measly ounces o' gold dust."

The other outlaws were silent as Wilson, taking his share of the loot as well as Colliver's, walked over to his horse and mounted.

"Now, vamose, the lot of yuh!" barked out Wilson, gathering up his reins. "The sheriff'll be bringing back a posse tuh comb these hills, so the farther away yuh gits, the better."

"How do we know yuh ain't goin' tuh keep Colliver's dust?"

"That's my business, Sasnett. It happens that I'm headin' fer Stirrup City right this minute—tuh deliver Utah's share."

Nor was Wilson lying to his henchmen. Straight across the blistering frying pan that was Catclaw Desert he made his way, heading in the direction of Stirrup City.

Halfway there, he paused to water his mount at Grinning Skull spring. The skull-shaped pool was furred with dwarf willows and cottonwood scrub, and was the only water hole between the Kiona foothills and Stirrup City.

"Ain't healthy fer me tuh be ridin' around Concha County with gold on me," Wilson told himself, fanning a steaming face with his sombrero brim. "They'll be shore tuh search an' question every pilgrim they see in these parts. An' if I got caught with the goods, I don't

reckon they'd believe me if I told 'em I was a prospector, fresh from a lucky strike."

Hiding a small fortune in gold dust was no easy trick. To bury it under an ocotillo cactus bush and hope to come back and get it later would be folly. All ocotillo looks the same.

Making a dune with rocks, or placing it in line with known landmarks was equally foolish. Winds whipped Catclaw Desert every month of the year, and dunes changed overnight, sometimes.

"Reckon this Grinnin' Skull pool is as good a bet as any," concluded the outlaw. "It ain't likely tuh dry up, an' I'll always know it's hyar."

Accordingly, the stage robber splashed his way out into the little pool, gouged a hole in the sandy bottom, and hid the saddlebags containing his and Colliver's gold dust under a foot of water. When he had scraped the sand back over the cache, he waded back to the sandy bank, grinning with satisfaction.

The mud-soiled water cleared. Looking at the floor of the crystal pool, there was no sign to hint that a priceless treasure lay buried there. A foot of water and a few inches of sand formed an effective, never-to-be-guessed hiding place.

"An' now I'll be dustin' along tuh Stirrup an' report tuh our spy," Wilson told his horse. "I hope Utah gits elected sheriff ter-morrow. It'd be a big help tuh us that's ridin' the owl-hoot trails. But there ain't much chance."

When Fanner Wilson loped into Stirrup City that afternoon, he was met by suspicious-eyed, gun-hung citizens, who questioned him closely. From them, he learned that the young Desert Phantom had organized a posse and had headed back to the Kionas, bent on getting to the

wrecked stagecoach and, if possible, picking up the trail of the outlaw gang.

But Wilson's story of being a saddle tramp heading for Albuquerque could not be shaken or disproved.

After stabling his horse, Wilson went to the Square Deal Hotel and engaged a cheap room, as previously arranged between himself and Utah Colliver.

He had hardly stretched himself out on the bed to rest when a knock came at the door, and he got up to admit the shifty-eyed bank clerk.

"Yeah, we nabbed the swag, an' the gang scattered like quail," reported Fanner, in a low voice. "Calm yoreself, Utah."

"You got my share o' the stuff with yuh?"

"I ain't loco. It's hid out by Grinnin' Skull pool. I'll camp out thar an' you can come out some night an' git yore share."

Colliver peered anxiously about. His sharp-featured face was twitching nervously. His whisper came like a serpent's hiss:

"Listen, Fanner. You done this job *bueno*. Mebbe we kin work ter-gether on another one, if I picks up any dope at the bank ag'in. But jest now, Stirrup City's too hot fer you tuh roost in. The Desert Phantom is on yore trail, remember. He's dynamite."

Wilson nodded and commenced building a cigarette.

"I want you tuh vamose tuh-night, Fanner. Leave suddenlike. Without payin' yore bill, savvy? So's it'll attract attention. Because I got a scheme that's goin' tuh make me sheriff o' Concha County. Then we'll have our own way around hyar."

The bad man's shaggy brows arched with curiosity as he saw the

bank teller take the paper bearing Lew Barry's signature out of his pocket. Going to the dresser, Colliver printed several words on the sheet in lead pencil, then handed it to Wilson.

"I'll meet yuh ter-morrow night at Grinnin' Skull pool an' git my cut o' the haul," instructed the ratlike banker. "You skip the hotel to-night. Leave that paper, all crumpled up, in a drawer somewhere, Fanner. I'll do the rest."

Wilson scanned the sheet, then looked up with a grin.

"O. K., Utah. To-morrow night at the water hole. But say, I got tuh hand it to yuh. You got more brains than I figured yuh had. Why, this'll ruin Sheriff Barry fer life!"

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT COLLIVER WROTE.

THE Desert Phantom returned to Stirrup City the following afternoon, bringing with him a jaded posse that plainly showed the results of a fruitless and grueling quest.

"Them stagecoach robbers scattered far an' wide, dad," reported Bearcat as he strode into the sheriff's office and shook hands with his father. "The gold was gone, all right—as we knew it would be. But we got one clew out o' our trip."

The grizzled old sheriff, his arm bound with white bandages and hanging in a black silk sling, sat up and peered at his son quizzically.

"A clew, hey?" he asked. "Spill yore yarn, son."

The Desert Phantom seated himself with a weary sigh.

"One o' them robbers didn't skip the country," was the Phantom's interesting statement. "He lit out across Catclaw Desert after leavin' the wrecked stagecoach, an' went

straight tuh Grinnin' Skull water hole."

"Any clews at the spring?"

"Plenty o' boot tracks in the mud around the pool, an' then we made the interestin' discovery. His hoss's tracks led straight tuh Stirrup City. We traced 'em right tuh the main stem."

The sheriff's jaw fell open.

"Then that means," gasped Lew Barry, "that whoever tipped off them crooks about the gold was in the robbery, too, and is livin' right hyar in our midst, Bearcat!"

The lawman's eyes were blue sparks under their bushy brows. He fingered his six-gun butt nervously with a gnarled hand, his tanned brow wrinkled with thought.

"I figured it was a good clew tuh work on, dad. Listen—who knew about that gold comin' down from Deathville? Besides the boys at the Stockman's Bank?"

The sheriff pondered. "Well, there was the nine families who owned the Deathville mines the gold come from," Lew Barry stated. "But it don't make sense that any o' them would tip off a ten-man bandit outfit tuh steal their own dinero."

Further conversation was cut off by the noisy arrival of Nick Spengle, owner of the Square Deal Hotel. The innkeeper was panting heavily, his green eyes bright with excitement.

"Sheriff, a danged dead beat skipped out last night without settlin' his room rent!" cackled Spengle. "What's more, there's fifty bucks missin' from the desk, an' the night clerk thinks mebbe this jasper got it when he dozed off last night!"

The sheriff frowned impatiently at this trivial interruption. He was scheming how to catch gold robbers, and here came along a half-pint

squabble about a fly-by-nighter jumping his hotel bill.

"What was the hombre's name? Whar'd he register from? Did he take his baggage? What did he look like?"

Spengle had the information on the tip of his tongue.

"Husky jigger, signed his name Fanner Wilson. Claims he was from Albuquerque. An' when we went intuh his room tuh sweep jest now, we found out he'd skipped. Didn't know it before."

The Desert Phantom's eye met his father's in a glance which made the old man's veins tingle.

"This might have somethin' tuh do with them tracks we was talkin' about jest now, dad," suggested the Phantom, rising. "Let's take a *pasear* over tuh Nick's an' give Wilson's room a look-over fer any clews he might 'a' left behind him."

Accordingly, the sheriff and his son, accompanied by the chattering hotel manager, made their way down the street and into the lobby of the ramshackle hotel. A crowd of townsmen were in the place, commenting in loud tones on this latest incident in a frontier town where anything was news.

"Mind if we go upstairs with yuh, sheriff?" The question came from Utah Colliver, who lived in the Square Deal himself.

"Not a-tall, Utah. Watch me close, an' yuh'll see how an old-fashioned sheriff goes about the job o' sleuthin'."

Tramping upstairs with the mob trailing behind, the sheriff made a sketchy inspection of the room, hoping to find some clew as to the vanished hombre's destination or real name. They were about to give up the search as fruitless, when the Desert Phantom happened to turn over Wilson's bed pillow.

"Hyar's a piece o' paper, dad!" announced the deputy, picking up a crumpled white sheet. "Might be a letter or somethin'."

The citizens who had jammed the little room crowded about the Phantom hopefully, as he unfolded the paper. Utah Colliver's beady little eyes were as bright as polished gun sights as he watched the young waddy turn the paper right side up and commence reading.

Bearcat Barry's eyes suddenly widened. The color went from his wind-bitten face to leave a yellow pallor. Little muscles twitched around the corner of his mouth, and he looked up quickly at his father.

"What does it say, son?" asked the sheriff, easing his broken arm into a more comfortable position in its sling. "Yo're gulpin' like it was yore own death warrant, or somethin'."

The Phantom coughed, tried to grin, and then stuffed the paper into a crescent-shaped pocket of his shirt.

"Aw, it's—'tain't nothin', dad," returned the young deputy. "I reckon Wilson didn't leave no——"

Utah Colliver shot out a skinny hand and snatched the paper from the Phantom's pocket.

"Somethin' queer hyar, men!" clipped the little banker, unfolding the sheet. "He's tryin' tuh hide somethin'."

The others peered over the rat-faced banker's shoulder. And the Desert Phantom, gaze nailed to his father's puzzled face, felt a distinct chill come over the room as the townspeople read the scribbled words:

WILSON: Get boys together pronto. Stage leaving Deathville Monday a. m. with big gold shipment. You know what to do.

LEWIS BARRY.

"You—you didn't write that, dad!" bellowed the Phantom, leaping to his father's side. "Tell 'em it was jest a blasted forgery by this Wilson skunk!"

The jam of men looked sharply at the old sheriff in their midst. Open suspicion smoldered in their eyes, as Lew Barry took the note and read it. When the sheriff looked up, it was Bearcat whom he addressed.

"I'm afraid that's my real signature, son. Nobody could copy my brand, the way I scrawl. But I didn't write them printed words."

It was Bank Teller Utah Colliver, the sheriff's rival in the sheriff's-office election, who broke the tense silence.

"The whole town's been wonderin' jest who tipped off that outlaw gang yesterday," snarled Colliver, flinging back his coat and drawing a pearl-butted six-gun. "Now I know why you rid inside o' that stage-coach. It was so yuh could pass the gold tuh yore bandit cronies."

Sheriff Barry and the Desert Phantom both opened their mouths to shout out an angry denial, but they found themselves looking into the grim muzzle of Colliver's gun.

"Yeah, we know yore excuse that yore own bronc was killed up in the mountains by them kidnapers who nabbed the Phantom last week," the bank clerk gritted out. "Barry, we got yuh dead tuh rights. By yore own admission, it's yore signature on this paper. Men, I demand that Lew Barry be put in jail pendin' trial fer bein' an accomplice in the Deathville stagecoach robbery!"

Loud shouts of approval went up. Rough hands jerked both guns from Lew Barry's holsters. The men jumped back in alarm as the Desert Phantom's smile defied them to touch his weapons.

"Let 'em clap yuh behind the bars—it'll cool 'em down, dad," advised the Phantom in a low voice. "Don't worry, I'll prove yo're the victim of a frame-up in a jiffy."

And so it was that Sheriff Lew Barry found himself a prisoner in his own jail, with private citizens on guard outside with the cell keys in their possession.

The sheriff knew that his reputation would clear him of suspicion eventually. But he also knew that such a scandal, true or false, coming on the eve of election would mean his certain defeat.

Utah Colliver was sure to be the next sheriff of Concha County. And, in the sheriff's opinion, Colliver was little better than a coyote.

CHAPTER V.

THE PHANTOM'S HUNCH.

THE news of Lew Barry's supposed connection with the stage robbery spread like wildfire. By means of the strange underground process whereby gossip travels in a frontier section, every voter in Concha County had learned by nightfall that their favorite candidate for sheriff was accused of being a spy for outlaws.

Most of the substantial citizens of Concha County scoffed openly at the idea of Barry's guilt. Frame-ups were common in the border country. Their friend was the innocent victim of some such scheme.

But the Desert Phantom, moving among the crowds of the town, could see that the discovery of the telltale note was going to influence the election in Utah Colliver's favor. There were enough strangers and riffraff in Concha County who would be swayed by evil gossip, to swing the election against the old lawman.

The fact that Lew Barry had admitted that the signature attached to the letter was genuine, was the blackest proof against him. Yet his code of honesty did not permit his telling even a white lie in his own behalf.

"If I clear dad before the polls open," young Bearcat told himself anxiously, "I'll shore have tuh rattle my hocks to-night."

Stirrup City's main street was filling up with cow ponies and buck-board wagons by sunset, as scores of citizens drove to town from neighboring ranchos for the usual election-eve fiesta.

A dance was going full blast, by dark, in the Green Snake Saloon. Cowboys, miners, Indians, and Mexicans thronged the little town. And on every mouth was discussion regarding the sensational discovery that Lew Barry, their trusted sheriff, was in league with dry-gulching crooks.

Shortly after dusk, the Phantom presented himself at the jail and demanded a visit with his father. The guards placed outside the door were two saloon swamper's. Both lifted their rifles threateningly, gloating over their new authority.

A smile of contempt curled the Phantom's lips. Calmly, he stepped up to the nearest guard, jerked the Winchester from his startled grasp, and rocked the swamper's head on his shoulders like a punching bag with a back-handed slap.

The second guard bawled an oath, whereupon the young deputy seized that hombre by a shoulder, propelled him in a bee line toward the door, and sent him pitching head-first to the board sidewalk with a well-aimed kick in the seat of the pants.

Turning, the Phantom regarded the remaining guard.

"Open up, scum!" he ordered wearily. "I'm in a hurry."

With surprising speed, the other swamper admitted the Phantom. Bearcat took the precaution of carrying the jail keys with him, as he walked inside to where his father was eating supper in a cell.

"Listen, dad," began the young deputy, "back in my noggin somewhere is a recollection o' you signin' some papers. I can't remember just where. But I got a hunch mebber you accidentally tacked yore signature somewhere yuh shouldn't. Try an' think."

The old sheriff stirred his coffee and racked his brains. Suddenly he looked up, eyes wide.

"Why, at the bank yestiddy! I remember signin' three slips at Colliver's winder. Usually it's only two, by jingoes! But my cracked arm was hurtin' so bad I didn't notice at the time."

The Desert Phantom nodded his head wisely and turned to go.

"I see the whole thing now, dad," cried the deputy exultantly. "Colliver's out tuh git yuh—fer political reasons. This is what he stooped to, tuh win yore job. See yuh *muy pronto*, dad."

Bearcat swung out of the jail, tossing the key ring on the sheriff's desk. He paused at the threshold to tender the sullen saloon swampers a bit of advice:

"Don't fergit," he reminded them in tones that ironed off the defiance on their faces, "that I'm a duly appointed law officer around hyar, an' if yuh git fresh ag'in I'll toss both o' yuh guttersnipes intuh the cooler tuh think it over in."

From that moment forward, the Phantom became Utah Colliver's self-appointed bodyguard. He found the pale-faced candidate for sheriff moving from saloon to saloon, rub-

bing elbows with the riffraff, buying them drinks and otherwise electioneering in his own cause. He was not aware that he was being shadowed by the dogged young deputy, Bearcat Barry.

A little before midnight, the Phantom watched Colliver slip from the rear of a dance hall and go to the stable in the rear of the Square Deal Hotel. A few moments later, Colliver rode out, keeping to the shadows, and headed out across the desert in the direction of the Kiona Mountain bad lands.

"Jest as I thought," chuckled the Phantom, running across the street to where he had Blue Blazes waiting for action at a hitch rack. "Things is goin' tuh start poppin' any time now."

Before riding out of town on Colliver's trail, Bearcat galloped down a side street and reined up in front of the home of Mert Kimzey, president of the Stockman's Bank. He went inside and, a few moments later, returned with the banker at his side. Kimzey was buckling a pair of gun belts under his frock coat.

"Shore I'm glad yuh come by fer me tuh go with yuh, Bearcat!" declared Kimzey, as he threw a saddle on his own horse. "I bet yore suspicions is correct about Colliver. I never did like the rat-faced jigger personally, but he come from a bank in Tucson and had a good bunch o' references, an' we needed an experienced bookkeeper an' teller here at the Stockman's Bank."

The cantering hoofs of their two mounts soon left Stirrup City behind, with its noisy revel and election-eve carousing gradually dimming in the distance.

A full moon rode the cloud-fleeced sky, so that they had no difficulty in picking up the tracks of Utah

Colliver's pony, leading off into the cactus-forested desert wastes.

"I cain't think o' no good reason why Utah should be ridin' out intuh Catclaw at this time o' night," the Phantom commented briefly. "It's certain there's no voters out this direction. Why, it's bad lands from hyar tuh the Kionas."

"Except fer the water hole at Grinnin' Skull," put in the banker, his low voice hardly carrying above the slog of hoofs in the dunes and the creaking of saddle leather.

Grinning Skull water hole! Like a flash, the Phantom remembered the bandit tracks he had traced from the wrecked stage to Grinning Skull pool, then on to Stirrup City.

For the space of an hour, the two men rode alone with their thoughts. Aside from the faint moan of the night wind through the cactus about them, no sound disturbed the silence of the desert moonlight.

It would have been a beautiful ride, had the very air not been freighted with suspense. Neither rider had any doubt but that they were following a double-crosser. Crooked work was happening in Catclaw Desert to-night. They might have to back their own play with flaming guns, before daylight came again.

In the distance, the white peaks of the Kionas were silver-etched against the black night sky. The moon added glamour to the giant saguaro, the spiny yucca, and the Spanish bayonet. Mesquite trees were black shadows, promising ambush peril.

And always ahead of them wound, the shadow-filled craters in the white sand, marking the hoofprints of Colliver's horse.

"Makin' fer Grinnin' Skull water hole, all right!" commented the Phantom. "Mebbe he's meetin' the

robber gang, Kimzey. I hope so. But yuh better look tuh yore six-guns."

Both men unholstered their Colts and saw to the loads and cylinder mechanisms. The Phantom loosened his Winchester .30-30 in its saddle boot, easing the stock into position for instant readiness. Both men knew show-down was not far off.

They slowed their horses to a walk, careful to make as little noise as possible. Again and again they stopped, scanning the desert ahead, listening, tense. If Utah Colliver suspected that his departure from Stirrup City had been noted, he might double back and come up on their rear.

Crack! A rifle shot exploded the night to bits.

A bullet whined out of somewhere with a spiteful *pinning*. Blue Blazes reared and snorted, scenting battle.

"Off yore hoss an' behind them rocks, Mert!" yelled the Phantom, spurring hard to the north. Moonlight glinted on his transparent holsters, their guns in the rider's hands.

Brrumm! Out of a chaparral ahead came an ear-stunning rattle of gunfire. Bullets clipped twigs from the mesquites.

The Desert Phantom gained the shelter of a heap of granite boulders and slid from the saddle. Edging forward, he held his six-guns alert for a shot at the hidden dry-gulcher.

But Mert Kimzey, the banker, was not used to gun play. In a pinch, with bullets screaming about his face, his nerve snapped.

With a screech of panic, the banker wheeled his horse and spurred hard in retreat.

Then the Desert Phantom saw a tall, lanky figure leap from ambush. Holding a six-gun in one hand, the outlaw was fanning the hammer

with the heel of his other hand. Fanner Wilson got his nickname from his ability to kill with gun fanning.

Bang - bang - bang - bang - bang - bang! The fanner emptied his Colt chambers in a burst that rattled into one exploding report.

And the bullets, like a charge of buckshot, could not help but hit.

With a choking scream, the banker from Stirrup City threw up his arms and wobbled in the saddle. At the same instant, the horse tumbled dead to the sand, flinging Mert Kimzey free of the stirrups.

The banker's corpse hit the sand, rolled heavily, and was still. Two bullets had pierced his lungs, another his brain.

The Desert Phantom's .45 roared out, but too late. The dry-gulcher had ducked to shelter even as his gun flashes ceased their rapid winking in the darkness.

"Stick 'em up, Phantom!"

The icy command came at Bearcat Barry's very ear! With arms lifting, the deputy saw a sombreroed shadow cast by the moon drop across the smooth face of the rock where he had crouched.

Then a rifle barrel prodded him in the short ribs. He dropped both guns and held his arms higher. Turning slowly, he gasped.

He was looking into the triumphant face of Utah Colliver.

CHAPTER VI.

IN OUTLAW CLUTCHES.

COLLIVER kicked the Phantom's .45s to a safe distance, then called out to his companion in ambush that the coast was clear.

A moment later Fanner Wilson strode up through the moonlight, loading his hot six-guns.

"Waal, a fine haul!" guffawed the

outlaw, holstering his .45s. "None other than the Desert Phantom in person!"

The young deputy felt Colliver rummaging in a pocket of his chocolate-colored chaps. A moment later, there was a jangle of metal, and the traitorous banker dangled the deputy's handcuffs in the moonlight.

"I'm goin' tuh lock yuh up in yore own bracelets, Bearcat!" snarled Colliver, jabbing his prisoner in the ribs with his gun barrel. "Lower yore paws an' put 'em wrist tuh wrist."

There was nothing else to do. The Phantom knew that Utah Colliver would put a bullet through his spine at the slightest false move. It looked like finish.

"Thar!" chuckled Colliver, when the manacles snapped over the Phantom's wrists. "I've wanted tuh put you in yore place fer a long time, Bearcat. What good does yore reputation fer bein' Arizona's fastest gunman do yuh now, huh?"

Blue Blazes came up behind the Desert Phantom and nuzzled the back of his neck reassuringly. The young cowboy deputy inhaled deeply, and struggled to keep the sweat from bursting out on his face.

"Now that yuh got me, what d'yuh want?" snarled Bearcat, peering first at Colliver, and then at Fanner Wilson. "'Cause when you two skunks has finished talkin', I'm honin' tuh tell yuh yore bellies is as yellow as a Chinaman's."

But the two outlaws were in no mood for talk. Wilson picked up the Phantom's .45s, and then grabbed their prisoner by the elbow and marched him along the sand dunes to the spot where he had been ambushed. Colliver was behind them, gun ready.

"Fanner thought mebbe somebody would trail me tuh-night,"

commented Colliver. "Lucky he holed up an' warned me that two jaspers was smellin' my tracks. It gave me a chance tuh hide in them rocks afore yuh come in sight."

The Phantom groaned inwardly, calling himself a fool. But he was in outlaw clutches now, and his own guns were resting in the waistband of Fanner Wilson's chaps.

Behind the chaparral were Wilson's horse and that ridden by Colliver from Stirrup City. The two mounted, forcing the Phantom to walk ahead of them. Blue Blazes plodded along beside his master, faithful to the last emergency.

"Why don't yuh kill me an' git it over with?" demanded the Phantom, after they had traveled a hundred yards. "How come——"

Colliver snorted disdainfully. "I ain't takin' no risk o' havin' a murder pinned on me, Bearcat. How do I know other folks didn't see me light a shuck out o' Stirrup City to-night? If we killed yuh an' buried yuh, the wind might uncover yuh an' then there'd be nasty questions asked. No, I got other plans fer cookin' yore stew, busky."

They covered another half mile before the Phantom spoke again.

"An' jest what are yore plans, Colliver? Bein's as I'm the victim, I reckon yuh kin let me in on 'em."

"I'm turnin' yuh over tuh my amigo, Wilson!" returned Colliver. "He'll take yuh out tuh some out-of-the-way spot an' finish yuh off where yore carcass won't ever be found. Me, I got tuh git back tuh Stirrup City afore my absence is noticed, or I'd stay tuh watch the fire-works. After all, I'm the big attraction in Stirrup City to-night, bein's as how I'm goin' tuh be elected sheriff o' Concha County, ter-morrow!"

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The Phantom smiled bitterly as he realized how complete Colliver's victory was, in more ways than one. The trickery by which he had obtained Lew Barry's signature would make him victor in the election. He would likewise profit from the loot of the stagecoach, no doubt.

And the way he had turned the tables on the Phantom, as well as killing off his employer, Mert Kimzey of the Stockman's Bank—— Yes, Colliver had raked in the pot, no mistake.

"Hyar we are at Grinnin' Skull pool, Fanner!" spoke up Colliver, as they neared the *bosque* of green foliage marking the water hole. "I'll git my share o' the gold, an' then be hittin' fer Stirrup City ag'in."

The Phantom flushed with chagrin as he saw Wilson wade knee-deep into the spring, rummage about in the sandy bottom, and return with two dripping bags full of killer's loot.

The day before, the Phantom and his posse had drunk at this same spring. They little dreamed that within inches of their lips was a fifth of the Deathville stagecoach plunder!

Colliver packed his booty into saddlebags. The entire scheme was glass-clear to the Phantom, now. There was no further doubt that Colliver had been the spy who had tipped off the outlaws.

This was the pay-off, right before his eyes. And when Utah became sheriff, border outlawry would feather its nest right in Concha County.

The bank teller climbed back into his saddle, and flung a hateful, farewell taunt at the Desert Phantom.

"This time ter-morrow night, I'll have a sheriff's star pinned on my briskit, son!" he guffawed. "An' you'll be drawin' the coyotes by

night an' the buzzards by day, when Fanner is through with yuh. He tells me he's been itchin' tuh dab his brand on yore hide fer a plumb long time. Now's his chance!"

With a curt adios to his henchman, Utah Colliver galloped off into the night, bound for Stirrup City. The Phantom was alone and handcuffed to Fanner Wilson, the outlaw who was sworn to kill him before the night was many hours older.

"Fork yore bronc, Phantom," ordered Wilson gruffly. "An' don't try tuh bolt. Because if yuh do, I'll put a slug intuh the hoss first. An' from what I hear, you love that cayuse like a brother."

Without answering, the Phantom mounted his horse. Fanner ordered him to ride toward the mountains, and the death march began.

It twisted for miles across the wind-swept desert. Then it reached the highlands, in the direction of Deathville.

There was not the slightest chance for escape. The Phantom's guns were gone, even to the rifle in his saddle scabbard. His hands were cuffed with steel bracelets. And behind him rode a sullen-eyed killer, the brains back of the stage robbery which had cost the lives of eight guards, murdered without a chance to surrender.

Dawn was painting the sky red when the two horsemen came to the gorge of the Rio Torcido. Far below, buried in the awful chasm between the rimming cliffs, could be heard the faint burble of the river, dashing along over its rocky bed.

"An' now comes the time fer my revenge, Desert Phantom!" chuckled the outlaw. "You've been a thorn in the side of every long rider on the border. Since yore dad made yuh a deputy sheriff, yo're more

dangerous than ever. Waal, I'm endin' that, now!"

Wilson was dismounting. The Phantom shuddered. What grim fate awaited him? Was he to be shot and left for buzzard bait in this wild, forsaken corner of nowhere?

"I'd like tuh have yore Blue Blazes hoss, but he won't let nobody but you ride 'im, I hear," the outlaw went on. "But I *will* let yuh make me a present o' them steerhorn holsters, Phantom. Every outlaw in Arizona wants tuh wear the Phantom's .45s, I reckon. An' hyar it falls tuh my lot tuh be the one tuh sport yore artillery!"

With obvious pride, the crook took off his own cartridge belts and strapped the Phantom's about his waist. The big, glasslike holsters gleamed in the moonlight.

"What in blazes are you figurin' on doin' with me?" roared the Phantom, his patience cracking. "Yuh got me helpless—me an' my hoss. What are yuh goin' tuh do next?"

Wilson put the Phantom's .45s into the transparent holsters, and grinned evilly.

"Colliver an' me is honin' tuh jest make you disappear, Phantom," explained the outlaw. "We don't want no suspicion of murder tuh rest on me or him either, fer I intends tuh live in Stirrup City after Utah gits elected sheriff."

Wilson pointed toward the brink of the Rio Torcido's yawning gorge.

"I'm givin' yuh a merciful death, Deputy Desert Phantom," the outlaw went on. "There's solid rocks below. I'm goin' tuh blindfold yore nag, an' then whip 'im hard. He'll gallop over the edge—an' then I don't reckon the world will ever know what happened tuh the famous partnership o' Blue Blazes an' Bearcat!"

CHAPTER VII.

BLUE BLAZES LEAPS.

THE Desert Phantom recoiled in horror as he saw the crook untie the bandanna which he wore about his throat, and fasten the blue cloth over Blue Blazes's eyes. When finished, the bandanna was held to the bridle straps and formed an effective blindfold.

Doomed men often find their brains crystal-clear in their last seconds of life. Some review the past events of many years in the agonizing interval before the gallows trap is sprung. And Bearcat Barry, faced with destruction, likewise found his thoughts under perfect control.

Suddenly a grin relaxed the taut muscles of the Phantom's countenance—a grin which was masked from Wilson's sight by the shadow of his Stetson brim.

"Wilson an' Colliver laid their plans well," the Phantom was saying to himself. "They led Kimzey an' me intuh a neat trap. But there was one little flaw in their work. They overlooked one important thing. It's funny I been so long thinking of it."

Bearcat remembered that Utah Colliver, in snapping the steel bracelets on his prisoner's wrists, had forgotten that the deputy carried keys to those handcuffs!

The Phantom lowered his arms to where he could feel through the leather of his chaps to the watch pocket of the overalls beneath. Yes, the precious little key was still there!

"If I can jest git that key—get my hands free o' these irons—" The Phantom wondered what chance he would have against Wilson, even if he did get his hands loose. "Any-

how," he thought, "it's worth chancin'."

Fanner broke a twig from a mesquite tree near by, and came forward, brandishing the whip.

"O. K., Phantom!" taunted the outlaw. "I'm goin' tuh larrup yore broomtail, an' he's blindfolded. He'll gallop right over that cliff yander."

The Phantom trembled as he saw the bandit come forward, whip raised to switch his horse and himself into eternity.

"Wait! Wait a second, hombre!" cried out the prisoner, fighting desperately for time. "You don't mind if I—if I take a squint over that cliff first, do yuh? I'd sort o' like tuh see what I'm goin' tuh jump into."

Wilson's evil face split in a crooked-toothed grin. It would bring added torment to the Phantom's spirit, if he looked over the edge. It was a sight to make his own flesh crawl.

"Shore, have a look!" he chuckled. Then he added warningly, "But don't try tuh cheat me out o' my fun by jumpin' over. I promise yuh—if you tries that, I'll let yore Blue Blazes hoss die with a bullet in his belly. You know what that means. You wouldn't want yore hoss tuh suffer fer days, mebbe."

But the Desert Phantom had no intention of committing suicide. He only wanted a chance to worm his fingers under the waistband of his chaps and get to that tiny steel key in his overalls pocket without Fanner Wilson's seeing him.

Bearcat dismounted and walked to the rim rock. He felt his head swim as he looked down through the gulf of space. The Rio Torcido was a thread of mercury, down there. It was a hundred feet to those cruel rocks.

But Fanner, alert for treachery, stayed at the Phantom's very elbow. Bearcat's scheme failed. The outlaw would not give him even a second's opportunity to turn his back and reach into the overalls pocket for the key.

But as the Phantom drew his eyes away from the terrifying gorge below, he suddenly saw something which drove all thought of handcuff keys from his brain.

"Why, I've been in this part o' Rio Torcido canyon!" the lightning thought sped through Bearcat Barry's mind. "Jest around that bend up yonder is Rainbow Trout Pool, where me an' dad used tuh fish! It's deeper'n all git-out."

Fanner noted the surge of life and hope which came over the Desert Phantom, as he turned and almost hurried to get back into Blue Blazes's saddle. It puzzled the outlaw, until he decided that his prisoner, resigned to a certain fate, was in a hurry to get the plunge over with.

Blue Blazes was standing fifty yards from the brink of the chasm. He was nervous, pawing the rocks with his forehoofs and pitching his head, trying to throw off the blindfold rag.

"Quiet, Blue!" whispered the Phantom, mounting. "An' pay attention tuh my signals, as yuh never have before."

Wilson was coming up, his eyes gleaming in triumph and hate. He raised the mesquite stick and brought it down with a sharp whack on Blue Blazes's rump.

"So long, Phantom! This is yore finish!"

The horse leaped forward in a startled lunge and bolted at top speed straight for the brink of the cliff!

But the Phantom, leaning forward

over the pommel, thrust out his braceleted hands and slapped Blue Blazes gently on the left side of the mane.

Instantly, the highly intelligent and expertly trained horse swerved to the left, when a dozen more steps would have pitched them both over the dizzy edge of nothingness.

A yell of rage burst from Fanner Wilson, as he saw Blue Blazes racing wildly along the rim of the canyon, guided expertly by his master's deft signals.

The outlaw jerked out his Colt .45s, leveled them to shoot Bearcat from the saddle. Then he relaxed, and a sneer of disdain replaced the hot flush of rage on his face.

"Lot o' good runnin' is goin' tuh do yuh!" snarled the outlaw, holstering both guns and running for his horse. "I'll crowd you an' yore salty bronc plumb over that rim rock, so he'p me!"

A flying leap carried Fanner into the saddle. As he spurred in pursuit of Blue Blazes, the outlaw saw that the blindfold was slowing up the roan's famous gait. Again and again, the animal stumbled over small rocks.

Wilson's horse split the breeze with speeding hoofs. The outlaw was swinging wide to prevent a possible dash by Blue Blazes into the desert. Then Fanner closed in, carrying out a plan.

Only a hundred yards ahead, the Rio Torcido's canyon turned at right angles. Slowly but certainly, Wilson was heading Blue Blazes off, forcing him toward that blind corner where he would either have to stop or plunge over the cliff rim.

The Desert Phantom's hands were busy after the handcuff key, as he saw the trap approaching.

He knew that Blue Blazes, blindfolded, could not hope to outrun

Wilson's mount. But the Phantom also knew that if he could make Blue Blazes reach the cliff at the right-angle bend, he would have a deep mountain pool to dive into, and not a rock-floored pit!

The cliff edge was only ten feet away when the Phantom's fingers clawed the precious handcuff key from his overalls pocket. But there was no time to use it. Fanner was thundering in close behind, bent on forcing the blue roan over the rim rock.

"Over we go, Blue Blazes—an' good luck!"

The Phantom lifted his arms and jabbed the little key into his mouth, just as Blue Blazes, galloping blind, raced at full speed over the edge!

Down into empty space the thrashing hoofs dropped. Above them, Fanner Wilson was sliding his own cayuse to a halt on the rim of the canyon, yelling with fiendish triumph.

Whish! Down, down, down! Down through sickening space dropped man and horse.

Rainbow Trout Pool came slanting up to meet them at terrific speed. Wind whistled past the Phantom's ears, fluttered Blue Blazes's mane.

The horse, slowly overturning in the air, pitched the Phantom off the saddle. Then, like a pair of bullets whizzing through the air, they hit the icy water.

Splash! Twin fountains of spray burst upward like smoke from exploding bombs, a dozen feet apart.

The Desert Phantom, manacled arms cleaving the water and breaking the shock of his dive, knifed under the surface like a beaver.

The pool was deep and inky black. Propelled by the terrific impact of his plunge through space, the Phantom's body curved out of

its vertical dive, flattened to speed along the smooth rock bottom of the water basin like a darting fish, and then came upward to break the surface of the pool at the opposite edge of the canyon.

The Phantom shook the water from his hair and eyes. He looked about to see Blue Blazes coming to the top near by in a smother of foam. The blindfold had ripped off his bridle.

Blue Blazes snorted water out of his lungs. Sighting his master's head bobbing on the ripples a few feet away, Blue Blazes struck out in a fast swim in the Phantom's direction.

An overhang in the cliff prevented Fanner Wilson from seeing Blue Blazes as he joined his master, even if he had chosen to look. Soon the pair were climbing out on a pebbly bank to gasp breath back into their lungs again.

The Phantom felt as if he had dropped out of the sky into a brick-pile. Every muscle in his body ached from the jolting smash into the water. But no bones were broken, and a quick examination of Blue Blazes showed that the sturdy roan was in top-notch condition.

"There's a side canyon where we can get out o' here, soon as we feel like it, Blue!" said the Phantom, after he had wrung water out of his sopping hair. "We still got a date with that skunk up on the rim rock, by golly."

Bearcat held the handcuffs key between his teeth, and lifted his wrists to the level of his mouth. It was a simple matter to unlock the handcuffs, and a moment later they were back in his chaps pocket.

"I've been a deputy sheriff fer nearly a month now," the young cowboy told Blue Blazes humorously, "an' so far I ain't put my

bracelets on nobody. I reckon Fanner Wilson will do as good as anybody, fer a starter! Let's git goin', Blue."

CHAPTER VIII.

ELECTION DAY.

A SHORT ride along the river bank brought the Desert Phantom to a side canyon which would lead him to the upper level of the bad lands once more.

Blue Blazes had no more than arrived on the desert than a dancing spark of red light caught their gaze, off across the desolate bad lands.

"A camp fire," grunted Bearcat Barry. "Which means that Wilson's cookin' breakfast. Waal, I reckon I better go on foot tuh his camp, Blue Blazes."

The Phantom, realizing that he was unarmed, exercised extreme caution as he approached Fanner's camp.

Hiding behind boulders and brush, dodging from chaparral to quartz outcrop, the young deputy halted his stalking when he was within twenty feet of the outlaw. There he hid himself behind a huge gypsum boulder.

Wilson, sidewise to the Phantom, was cooking bacon and coffee over a fire he had fueled with mesquite chunks, sagebrush, and cow chips. To the Phantom's disgust, the space surrounding the camp fire was open sand. It would be impossible to approach any nearer. And with Wilson heavily armed, it would be sheer suicide to attempt a dash into the open.

The outlaw was inspecting the Phantom's steerhorn holsters, admiring their transparent, gun-powder-clouded shape. He slid the Phantom's cedar-butted guns into the holsters again and again, his face beaming with pride.

"Jest think," he commented out loud, "I'm the long rider that is goin' tuh be able tuh show off the Desert Phantom's .45s!"

Then the Desert Phantom employed an old Yaqui ruse. Picking up a stone the size of his fist, he hurled it through the air over Wilson's camp, and made it rattle into a dead agave bush across the open space.

Startled, the outlaw bounced up from his squatting position, both guns drawn. He was facing the direction where the agave flowers were shaking, putting his back to the Phantom.

The Phantom armed himself with an egg-sized rock, and slipped quietly out of hiding. Holding his breath, the deputy stole across the sand to where Fanner was standing, tense and grim.

Brrang! To be on the safe side, Wilson triggered a bullet into the twitching bush.

And then the crook's ear caught the faint pad of the Phantom's boots in the sand. He whirled to find the deputy sheriff only five feet away!

Young Barry had hoped to leap upon the outlaw's back before he was discovered. But now he found the amazed outlaw staring at him like a crazy man, both hands filled with guns.

Fanner Wilson had seen the Phantom and his horse plunge over a hundred-foot cliff. He was positive that the deputy was a mangled mass of meat and bones, down in the Rio Torcido's gorge. So now, seeing Bearcat's ghost stalking him across the sand, for a moment the outlaw's trigger fingers were paralyzed with surprise.

It gave Bearcat the split second of time he needed. Back went his arm, and when it shot out the egg-

shaped stone hummed through the air.

Too late, Fanner Wilson recovered from his daze. With a sickening thud the rock smashed the evil-faced bandit squarely between the eyes.

Wilson buckled and collapsed in his tracks, limp as a sawdust-filled dummy. Before he hit the ground the Phantom was upon him, fists poised to hammer him into unconsciousness.

"But it ain't necessary," laughed the Phantom, his nervous tension at an end. "He's out cold, an' it's just as well."

The Phantom unbuckled his gun belts from Wilson and strapped the transparent steerhorn holsters once more to his thighs. The reassuring bulk of his Colts made him feel like a new man. But there was still lots to be done.

First, he handcuffed the unconscious Wilson with the same manacles which had left the bruised rings on his own wrists. Then he put his fingers between his lips and whistled a shrill signal to Blue Blazes.

By the time his horse had galloped up, Bearcat had refreshed his tired body with the outlaw's coffee and bacon. Then he kicked sand over the camp fire, saddled up Fanner's horse which stood hobbled near by, and was ready to go.

He loaded Wilson's limp form into the saddle and tied it there with the outlaw's own lariat. The bag containing the Deathville gold he transferred to his own saddlebags. Then he called Blue Blazes to his side and mounted.

They headed for Stirrup City.

The courthouse clock indicated ten minutes to eight when Stirrup City's thronged streets first sighted

Deputy Desert Phantom loping into town astride his famous blue roan.

Alongside Bearcat's stirrup was another horse, on which was slumped a bulky hombre whose crimson-streaked face was drenched with a canteen of water to hasten his revival.

Wilson tensed with horror as the milling throngs of cowmen and miners swaggered out to meet the arrival of the popular young deputy sheriff. But the Phantom did not rein up until he arrived at the door of the sheriff's office and jail.

"Folks, it's ten minutes afore the votin' booths open an' you all start castin' yore ballots in the Concha County election," called out the Desert Phantom, still astride Blue Blazes above the tossing sea of sombreroed heads. "Yesterday, some things happened that put my dad, Sheriff Lew Barry, in a plumb bad light. But this hombre, hyar, has some words tuh speak that'll go considerable toward clearin' up the situation, I reckon."

The Phantom turned to Fanner Wilson, who was trembling in his saddle. The crowd clamored for explanations. The Phantom lifted a green-sleeved arm to silence them.

"Gents o' Concha County, let me introduce Fanner Wilson, the ram-rod o' the bandit gang that held up the Deathville stage on Monday!" yelled Bearcat Barry. "Wilson, say yore piece. The better it sounds, the more chance you got o' gittin' life imprisonment instead o' the rope, when yore case comes tuh jury."

Clearing his throat, the outlaw spoke in a voice which carried to the outermost edge of the throng, in the tense silence.

"That note signed by the sheriff was a frame-up," he blurted

hoarsely. "Barry didn't have nothin' tuh do with that stage robbery. The one that forged that there note was——"

Bearcat Barry, taut as wire with suspense as he waited for the outlaw to name Utah Colliver as the treacherous spy in the employ of the bandit gang, was caught off guard by what happened next.

Suddenly Wilson pitched forward in his saddle, half falling out of the stirrups. But it was not a faint.

Instead, the outlaw's handcuffed arms shot down and his fingers clamped upon the big butt of a six-gun in the belt of a Mexican onlooker who was pressed close against his saddle skirts.

Fast as a striking rattlesnake, Wilson came up with the gun gripped in both hands. As he swung the barrel over the stunned crowd and aimed it toward the Phantom, he screamed in a voice high-pitched with hate:

"I ain't got a chance tuh beat the rope, but I'm takin' you along with me, Phantom!"

In the flicker of an eyelid, the Phantom saw death coming in the big .44 swinging in his direction. And then the citizens of Concha County were treated to the miracle of the Desert Phantom's lightning-swift draw.

The deputy's right hand was a blur as it stabbed to one glasslike holster. Magically a gun leaped upward. Then there was a crash of sound and a lick of orange flame seared the Desert Phantom's saddle pommel.

Wilson stiffened. A little river of crimson bubbled from a hole over his heart. His eyes burned with an unspeakable hate as he stared at the Phantom through swimming gun smoke.

Then a choked cry rattled in his

throat, and he sagged in the saddle to pitch forward, the unfired six-gun dropping from nerveless fingers. With a thump, Fanner Wilson spilled to the ground under his horse.

It was no fake fall, this time. Fanner was dead.

Confusion broke loose in front of the Concha County jail. The Phantom's blue roan was jostled by the crowd which surged into the jail. They returned, a moment later, with Sheriff Lew Barry perched on their shoulders.

"Three cheers fer the saltiest sheriff in Arizona!" rang out the mob cry. "We'll parade Lew down tuh the votin' place an' elect him sheriff o' Concha County, plumb unanimous!"

Gay voices called out for the Desert Phantom to join the merry triumphal march to the polls, with his father riding the shoulders of his friends, looking tired, but very happy.

But the Desert Phantom shook his head. His mouth was a tight slit as he spurred Blue Blazes out of the crowd. For he still had important work to do.

In self-defense, he had been forced to kill Fanner Wilson before the bandit had publicly testified to the guilt of Utah Colliver, his father's opponent in the contest for sheriff.

Lew Barry was assured of election, now.

But the Desert Phantom would not cast his own ballot until he had brought the double-crossing Utah Colliver to justice.

Reckon as how that Colliver snake is due fer one hefty surprise when the Desert Phantom walks in on him. The blasted crook will prob'ly turn as yaller as the gold he stole. Watch fer the next story about the Phantom in next week's Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly.



Ridin' Reckless

By Claude Rister

Author of "The Deputy From Buffalo Butte," etc.

A MAD clattering of hoofs, wild yells, the popping of a six-gun, and "Reckless Dan" Davey came tearing into Sweet Wells. Not that the kid was on a rampage. It was simply his way of having a good time, of expressing his wild spirits.

Apparently the kid's mount was enjoying the reckless fun quite as much as was the rider. The wiry buckskin pony seemed actually to be grinning as it drummed along, eyes distended, nostrils aflare, mane and tail flying. Gravel spurted from beneath its pounding hoofs like buckshot as it hammered down the street.

People dashed to doors. Heads were poked from windows. There

were grins, laughs, friendly calls and handwaving. Some one whooped: "Here comes Reckless Dan Davey! Now the town will wake up and have a good time!"

Old Sheriff Braz Hankins was dozing in his little office, worn old boots crossed on his battered desk, when the excitement broke out. Pete Newsom, his chunky deputy, was sitting in the doorway, whittling mincingly at a pine splinter.

Pete bobbed up and snapped his knife shut. Braz's eyes popped wide open. His feet thudded to the floor. Within an instant his long, bowed legs were reaching for the doorway.

"Dang that pesky kid!" he growled, for he had seen the rider

through an open window. "I don't know what I'm gonna do with that young un!"

He thrust his deputy aside and went running creakily down the street, thin gray locks and long mustache blowing, bald pate shining.

"Stop it! Stop in the name of the law!" he yelled in a slightly cracked voice, but the oncoming rider paid no heed.

"Yip, yip, ye-e-e!" Again Reckless Dan's shrill cry, then: *Pow!* There was a sleeting of glass from an incased lamp over the door of Morenga's saloon.

"Ye-e-e!" *Pow!* A window of a vacant store splashed to fragments right behind the running sheriff. Old Braz muttered an epithet and kept pounding.

With hand still upheld authoritatively, he ran out into the middle of the street. Grinning like a young devil, Reckless Dan came driving straight at him. The sheriff swore luridly, and leaped aside just in time. Maliciously, Dan leaned out and tickled the bald pate as he streaked past.

Like a wild Comanche on a spree, the young scalawag rode the length of the town; then wheeled and came tearing back, still whooping and throwing lead.

"Dog-blast you, kid, this time I'm gonna run you in, shore as shootin'! I've had enough of yore reckless ridin'!"

But again the yipping horseman dashed straight at the old officer. This time the sheriff made a grab for a rein. His bony hand seized it, but the force of the pony's drive flung him violently to the ground. The heavy pull on the rein whirled the buckskin around, however.

Instantly, Reckless Dan Davey's manner changed. He sprang down and to Braz, who was slowly picking

himself up out of the dust. Dan grabbed one of the long arms. His voice was full of kindly concern as he said: "Gosh, Uncle Braz, I'm sorry!"

"Sorry, nothin!" Then the old-timer went into a violent tirade, cussing Dan for every kind of a scalawag, ending up by saying: "Dang you, kid, I ought to knock yore head off, then take what's left of you and throw it in jail!"

The deep contrition on Dan's face was genuine. He loved the old sheriff almost as a father.

"Honest, Uncle Braz, I didn't go to throw you down. I was just a-cuttin' up, and——"

"Cuttin' up! I oughta cut *you* up!"

"That's right, Uncle Braz, and if you think I ought to be jugged, why come on, let's go."

Braz's brown eyes were fiery for a moment, and then they softened. A bony hand fell upon the kid's shoulder.

"You know I don't want to do that, son. But dagnabbit, Dan, you've got to quit ridin' wild! When yore paw died he asked me to sorter look out after you, to make something of you, and by nanny I'm gonna do it! From now on you're tonin' down. Do you hear?"

Dan laughed, patted the bony shoulder. "Shore, Uncle Braz, shore!" He had made that promise a dozen times before, but never with a thought of keeping it. He went to his pony, swung up, and headed for the hitch rack in front of Morenga's saloon. Braz was shaking his gray head worriedly as he turned toward his office.

"Hi, Tony," greeted Reckless, as he pushed through the batwing doors of the saloon.

The Mexican behind the bar smiled and bobbed his curly head.

His white teeth flashed beneath his twisted mustache. Tony Morenga did not mind the broken lamp, for the simple reason he knew that Dan would pay for it; moreover, the kid spent a goodly portion of his wages there each month.

Dan headed for the bar, spur chains dragging, an unconscious swagger in his gait. A pair of bone-handled guns rocked at his hips. Two guns seemed natural to that swashbuckling young cowpoke.

Dan Davey was a rather short but well-built man. His hair was corn-colored. His blue eyes were narrow, but full of good-natured twinkle. His eyebrows were high, and deeply arched in an expression of constant humorous inquiry. He had a snub nose, and habitually he wore a grin on his round face. Whenever that grin came off, he was either contrite, or dangerous.

"Belly up, fellows," he invited with a wave of an arm. "Let's take on some poison."

There was an eager, good-natured rush for the bar. Dan looked over the place and saw that there was one man who had not responded to his invitation. This fellow sat hunched over a table in a far corner of the room. His head was down, so that his wide hat completely hid his face. His right hand was idly turning a glass which rested on the table top.

"Hey, fella," he said; "step up!"

Slowly the man raised his head. Dan found himself looking at a swart, sinister visage. Strands of straight black hair protruded from under the wide Stetson. The eyes were black and glittery. A scar so deep that it adhered right to the bone ran across a side of his face. Over the cruel mouth rested a fierce, black mustache, the ends of which winged out stiffly.

"I heard you the first time, smart Alec," the man growled. "If I'd wanted to step up I'd have done so, wouldn't I?"

Reckless Dan's grin vanished, and little spots of red burned through the tan on his cheek bones. He had not meant for his tone to sound arbitrary. In fact, he had taken it for granted that the man was some one of his many acquaintances. In a hurt voice which yet was a little barbed, the cowboy said: "Well, you don't need to get on a high horse."

"Careful!" Tony Morenga whispered, as he filled the waddy's glass. "That ees Mexico Jack Canade, a veree, veree bad hombre."

"I don't give a whoop who he is," retorted the offended cowboy, as he turned back to the bar.

The words reached the ears of the man in the far corner. His chair scraped. There were footsteps, and Dan turned to see the fellow coming straight toward him, eyes fixed and glittery. A sudden hush fell upon the little group.

"Mexico Jack" walked right up to Dan Davey and for a moment stood looking into the cowboy's face. Then he said:

"Think you're pretty tough, don't you, kid? Running around with two guns at your hips, and shooting out window lights. Huh! Somebody ought to buy you a slingshot."

Again faint red spots burned on Reckless Dan's cheeks. The humorous twinkle was gone from his eyes. "Get along, fella," he said quietly. "I ain't looking for trouble."

The other laughed sneeringly: "I can easy understand that."

Reckless Dan Davey took a tighter twist on his temper. He eyed the swart man keenly. Was he drunk, or was he just spoiling for a fight? Apparently he was sober

enough, but some men can talk rationally, walk a straight line, or shoot a bull's-eye while the brain is fired with liquor. Such men, if they happen to be bad ones, are as deadly as blind rattlers, while drinking. Dan clamped his jaws tightly and turned once more to the bar.

The other seized him and spun him around.

"So you don't give a whoop who I am, eh? Well, before I leave I'm going to show you that you can't pass slurring remarks about Mexico Jack Canade and get away with it." He reached out and gave the kid's nose a vicious twist.

So far, the cowboy had done an unusually good job of holding his temper, but now it exploded. Even as the dirty hand fell away from his smarting nose his right fist flew out.

Smack! It landed on Mexico Jack's mouth, staggering him. The fellow jerked himself to a halt ten feet from Dan.

The sinister face was hatefully twisted now, and blood was seeping from its corners. The eyes were smoking pools of venom. And yet, surprisingly, behind the expression of seething ferocity there was a gleam of triumph.

"I'll kill you for that, kid," the man swore in a voice that was thick with passion. "Dig!"

Dan dug. There was a blasting report. He spun around, mouth open, eyes closed; then he fell hard, his six-shooter whacking sharply against the floor. In the heat of anger he had forgotten that he had not reloaded his guns after emptying them on the street.

Mexico Jack, knowing that the half dozen other men in the room were the young waddy's friends, warned savagely: "Don't one of you move a muscle, or I'll drill

you!" Crouched, he was swiftly backing toward the door, gun menacing. Before they could recover from the shock sufficiently to act, even had they dared to make a move, the fellow was gone. There was a clattering of hoofs, and when some of the men ran out onto the board walk, they saw the gunman riding hard toward Mexico.

II.

Reckless Dan Davey had sustained a desperate wound. For three full weeks he rode the black stallion of Fate along the very ragged brink of Death's awful precipice; then slowly he veered toward the light of health. A less courageous and physically fit man would have died, the doctor declared.

The kid was "laid up" on a bed in the doctor's little hospital. Sheriff Braz Hankins was with him much of the time. When Dan became able to talk he said to his old friend: "That fella was a vinegarroon, Uncle Braz. Why, he started the ruckus over nothin a-tall! I'd think he was out to get me deliberate, if it wasn't he was a perfect stranger to me."

Braz was sitting by the kid's bedside, long legs crossed. He looked vacantly away through a window and fingered his drooping mustaché. There was a strange light in his faded-brown eyes; a peculiar expression on his thin, leathery face.

"Uncle Braz," said Dan, eyeing him keenly, "you ain't holding out anything on me, are you?"

"Shucks, no, son! What makes you say that?"

"Well, I've noticed that when I get to talking about Mexico Jack and the shooting, your face takes on a sort of queer look."

"It's just because I'm thinking

how nigh the skunk come to killin' you, boy."

"I'll get him, soon as I'm able to ride."

"'Twon't do you no good to go lookin' for him," the sheriff advised. "Snakes like Mexico Jack Canade hit the long trail for other parts when they've done a dirty trick like the one he pulled on you, and they never come back."

"Shucks, I've an idea that rattler is holed up in Escondo right now. That Mex town's a regular haven for such fellas as him."

"Nope, he ain't in Escondo," Braz declared positively. "I've had a spy sneak over there a dozen times, but Mexico Jack ain't never been seen in the place."

Reckless Dan Davey noted, however, that again there was a strained, elusive expression on Braz Hankins's leathery face—and he wondered.

It was another three weeks before the doctor discharged the patient. Before letting Dan go, the gaunt, gray-haired old man said to him:

"Kid, there's something which I hate to have to tell you." He hesitated, shook his head regretfully; then went on:

"There's no use my going into professional terms, since you wouldn't understand, but the situation is this: Mexico Jack's bullet nearly cut a certain artery near your heart. Right now there's a spot on that artery which is thinner than tissue. It swells with each throb of your heart. The slightest excitement, and"—he snapped his fingers—"you're through."

Dan stared at him in shocked silence. "It means, kid," the doctor went on slowly, "that you must cut out your wildness. Remember, the slightest excitement, and you're a dead man."

"Bu—but, doc, I was going after Mexico Jack! Don't you think——"

The doctor was swinging his gray head in positive negation. Dan's face went gray and hard, his blue eyes misty. Dazedly he stumbled out of the office and wandered aimlessly up the street.

Later in the day he was seated facing his old friend, Braz Hankins, in the sheriff's little office.

"It's too bad," sighed Braz. "I was talkin' to the doc, and he told me the same thing he told you. Says yore hurt ain't permanent, though. That in a healthy young feller like you, such an injury will mend in two—three years if you keep quiet."

He leaned closer and said earnestly: "Dan, I wish you'd leave them two guns with me. They're a temptation to you to cut up, and you simply mustn't engage in any kind of excitement. You can have 'em back any time you ask for 'em."

The young puncher was reluctant to part with the two bone-handled Colts, even temporarily, but Braz kept urging, and finally the kid handed them over.

III.

The weeks which followed were gloomy ones for Dan Davey. Bitterly he called himself a cripple. He couldn't even do the hard ranch work he once had done.

His boss solicitously gave him the easiest jobs about the ranch, and this irked the kid, made him feel his physical incapacity all the more. His enemies sneered at him openly, knowing that he dared not fight. His friends pitied him, treated him as if he were an invalid. It was maddening!

Several times he thought of hitting the trail for other parts, but when he reflected calmly he told

himself that it would do no good. No matter where he went, he would soon be spotted as a cowboy who never carried a gun, and who dared not fight. If he told why, he would be pitied again, or held in contempt. If he did not, then people would think him yellow.

Dan Davey became taciturn, grim, morose. What a change from the grinning, reckless, happy-go-lucky waddy who had been the leader of cowboy fun in Sweet Wells!

Not once had he forgotten his vow to hunt down Mexico Jack Canade. He was simply biding the long months until it was safe for him to reclaim his guns and take up the trail.

Then capricious Fate took a hand in the affairs of his life.

One morning as the skinny old cashier of the Cattlemen's Bank sat on a high stool, dreamily lamenting the lack of business at the particular moment, he suddenly was startled to find three masked men entering the bank with guns in their hands. The bandits made a quick job of robbing the place; then they backed out, ran to their horses, ground-hitched in the rear of the building, and went clattering away.

The cashier ran onto the street, yelling an alarm. Old Braz Hankins and Deputy Pete Newsom came piling out of their little office. By this time the bandits had got onto the street, and were tearing along like mad, leaning low in their saddles. Braz and Pete opened fire. The bandits fired back. A bullet ripped into the sheriff's breast and he went down face forward in the dust. Friends picked him up and carried him to his office. Pete quickly organized a posse and took up pursuit of the outlaws.

Dan Davey was doing barn re-

pairs at the KT Ranch when the messenger came with the news. Immediately he saddled his buckskin and rode to Sweet Wells as fast as the pony could carry him.

There was a sorrowful group milling in front of the sheriff's office. Those sad-faced men looked at him mutely as he alighted and strode for the door. Braz Hankins was a well-liked man.

Old Braz's lanky form was stretched out on a cot. The gray-haired doctor was in attendance. The door had been closed against all others. Braz was conscious. Dan noted that the old-timer's chest rattled at each breath.

Braz smiled faintly as Dan came to his side. Whisperingly the sheriff told of the holdup.

"Any idea who the scoundrels were?" the kid asked, his eyes misty.

Old Braz gazed at him steadily for a moment, then looked away. Again the kid saw in the faded-brown eyes and on the lean, seamed face, the strange expression which he had noticed there several times before. Slowly Braz shook his head.

"You're lying, Uncle Braz! What is it you're holding out on me? In his excitement Dan laid a hand on a bony shoulder and shook the man slightly; then slowly he straightened up. His face was gray and rigid. Dan knew that Braz Hankins was dead

Again he stumbled blindly out through a door. Again he wandered aimlessly along the street. His heart was torn with grief and hate—grief for his old friend, hate for the gang which had slain him.

But this time, despite his poignant feelings, Dan Davey's brain was working swiftly, cunningly. He felt for a certainty that one of the bandit trio was Mexico Jack Canade,

but that for some mysterious reason Braz was shielding the fellow. The kid conceived a scheme to find out for sure.

He sought out Pete Newsom, the chunky deputy. "That's another score I've got to settle with Mexico Jack," he told Pete. "Uncle Braz said he was one of the three killers."

Pete studied him silently for a moment, but the kid allowed no flicker of falsehood to show on his round face.

"So he told you, huh?" said Pete.

Dan nodded.

"Yeah, one of 'em was Mexico Jack, all right. It would take more than a bandanner mask to keep me and old Braz from recognizing that snake. Braz asked me not to tell you."

"Why, Pete?"

"He was afraid you'd go after Mexico Jack, and you know that heart of yours."

Dan nodded. He then told about the strange expression he had seen on Braz's face so many times. "What does it mean, Pete?" he asked.

The deputy hesitated, looked down at the ground while he nudged a small stone with the toe of one of his boots; then he looked up.

"Well, I reckon I might as well tell you," said Pete, "since you know the other. It was your dad who gave Mexico that scar on the face, when they got into a shootin' scrape down El Centro way some years ago. Mexico swore revenge. He'd considered himself some punkins with the gals, and he figured the scar spoiled his looks. Braz was always pretty certain it was Mexico who dry-gulched your dad. He kept the information from you, because he didn't want you to tangle with the gunner."

"Umph! Now I see why the snake was so quick to strike in Tony Morenga's place that day. The old poison is still in his heart, and he wanted to wipe out the son of Arch Davey."

Again Pete nodded.

A few minutes later Dan Davey strode briskly into the sheriff's office. For just a moment he stood, hat off, looking at the still form on the cot; then he went to the battered desk, pulled open a deep drawer, and took out his two belts and guns.

"What're you going to do?" the doctor asked uneasily.

"Go over into Mexico and kill me a certain snake." The kid's face was grim as he buckled on the belts.

"But your heart! Remember it ain't——"

"I've forgotten it!"

"The excitement will get you."

"I don't care a hoot, so long as I get Mexico Jack Canade!"

He stamped out of the office, and a moment later was riding away toward that outlaw roost known as Escondo.

"Pore kid!" murmured a young cowpoke, as the yet milling crowd watched Dan Davey go. "His heart won't stand it. It's his last ride."

The gray-haired doctor who, still protesting, had followed the Reckless Kid to the steps, turned, closed the door; went thoughtfully back to the still form that lay on the cot.

IV.

Dan Davey's heart was full of bitterness and gloom as he rode through the early darkness. What had he done that Fate should deal so harshly with him? To be sure he had been reckless and wild, but all in fun. He had never willfully done any one a wrong. And now

here he was bereaved, and riding to his doom. Yeah, Fate shore was cruel.

There was deep sadness in his heart; not only for his slain friend, but because of the certain death ahead. Dan Davey was young. Life was sweet to him. It wouldn't be so bad, he reflected, if he were gunned out in a fight with Mexico Jack Canade, so long as he got his man before he passed; but to die of heart rupture—

He looked up at the stars. They seemed to regard him soberly. His eyes turned to the moon. He fancied that its mottled face was sad. He grinned, a ghost of his old grin, and said huskily: "Many a night have I slept under you, my old friends, but to-night you're looking at this cowpoke for the last time."

Then he touched the spurs to his buckskin and went down the little slope toward the sprinkling of lights which marked the location of that nest of evil-doing, Escondo.

The street was dark, save for occasional streaks of illumination. These he avoided as he rode along. Now and then a cur yapped at him, then slunk away. Dim forms moved lazily on the street. Somewhere a voice sang pensively, and a guitar strummed in accompaniment. The warm, still night air smelled strongly of Mexican food.

As he gained the main part of town, Dan became more alert and cautious. The forms on the street were more numerous, more brisk in movement now. Some staggered. *Cantinas* belched sounds of drunken revelry.

Dan hitched the buckskin pony to a mesquite sprout in a vacant lot between two adobe buildings. He adjusted his heavy cartridge belts, made sure that his guns slid easily in their holsters; then with a "Good-

by, hoss," to his buckskin, he moved out to the edge of the street.

Dan pulled his Stetson very low and kept his face averted, so that those whom he passed would not know whether he was gringo or Mex. From *cantina* to *cantina* he went, studying their interiors through windows, all of which were open that summer night.

Dive after dive he inspected, and finally came to the one owned by Rudolpho Martinez, boss of the outlaw town. It was here that Mexico Jack Canade was most likely to be found, if he were in Escondo.

As he looked through a window of the dive, it took Dan but a moment to spot Martinez. Clad in a dirty green, braided costume, and red sash, the chesty Mexican was strutting among his patrons; smiling, chatting, twirling his mustache. His oiled curls glinted under the lights. Bandit, revolutionist, anything that was bad was Rudolpho Martinez, and yet, strangely enough, it was said he had come of good family.

Mexico Jack Canade was nowhere in sight. Dan began to think that perhaps, after all, he had been mistaken in his supposition that the renegade was hanging out in the outlaw town. Then the twin front doors winged open, and in strode Mexico Jack with two companions. So suddenly had it happened that it left Dan startled and tingling. If only he had been at the front! He could have had it out with them on the street! But such had not been the case, and so now—what to do?

The *cantina* was crowded. Every man in the place was a tough hombre; he could bet on that. If he went in and gunned out Mexico Jack, he would never escape from the place alive. But suddenly his old recklessness came back with a

sweep. What was the difference? The doc had said he would die, anyway. It would be better to pass out in there fighting the whole outlaw pack, than to die of heart rupture.

Dan Davey wheeled and started for the front of the *cantina*.

His hat was still pulled low as he entered. The long room was smoke-hazy, smelly of debauchery and crime. Mexico Jack Canade and his two pals had belied the bar. Before them were glasses, and a partly emptied bottle. From under the brim of his hat Dan shot just one keen look about the place, saw that no one was paying him any particular attention; then he started toward the three men.

Evidently Mexico Jack Canade—human wolf that he was—had cultivated the habit of eternal vigilance. Gazing into the mirror the fellow quickly spotted Dan, despite the low-pulled hat. From a corner of his mouth he hissed something to his two pals; then spun around, right hand driving for his gun. Instantly, Dan jerked to a stop and crouched; flipped both his Colts free. The next instant six-shooters were thundering.

Dan had been ready, and so he shot first. One second Mexico Jack's scarred, swarthy face was satanic with evil and hate; the next it was tense, stunned, mouth gaping. A bullet had cut away a wing of the stiff mustache and drilled a hole through the upper lip. Another had chugged into his belly. He pitched forward, his face hitting the floor with a crashing thud.

The other two outlaws had wheeled with their leader. Dan jerked his Colts to cover. He fired at the same instant they did. He felt an impact on the left shoulder. It rocked him back on his heels. One gun dropped to the floor.

The foremost of the men before him also had dropped his gun. Now the fellow was clawing wildly at a red-gushing throat. He keeled sideways, spoiling his partner's second shot. The wilting body struck the bar, slid down, and flopped heavily onto the floor.

Again guns blasted. Two bullets almost lifted the top of the third bandit's skull. But he, too, had got in another shot. Dan felt a numbing shock, saw flickering lights; then realized that he was on the floor. He clung to a thin thread of his senses, urged himself to get up and fight to the last cartridge.

He was only half conscious when he got to his feet and stood swaying, legs wide, gun wobbly. His eyes were glazed. There was a bullet hole in the crown of his hat. Blood was seeping through it, and from under the band and streaking his face. He heard oaths, snarls, threats; realized that the outlaw mob was on its feet, drawing guns and knives. He thumbed back the hammer of his Colt.

Then above the angry hubbub sounded a sharp, commanding voice, calling a halt to hostilities. A man came shoving through the crowd and confronted him. Dazedly, he recognized Rudolpho Martinez. The chesty Mexican leveled black eyes at him and demanded an explanation of what had happened.

The cowboy heard some one explaining, and discovered that it was himself. He was only half conscious of what he was saying.

When he had finished, there again were snarls, oaths, threats; a concerted movement; but again Martinez stopped it.

"Silence! One so brave shall not be killed in my place!" He turned to Dan Davey: "I have need of

such as you. You will hire to me your guns, no?"

Dan shook his head, ran a hand numbly over his face.

"I belong on the other side, Martinez; besides, I wouldn't be no good to you nohow. I'm a walking dead man." He told of the heart ailment; said that the very moment his life blood might be leaking from the old internal wound.

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk!*" clucked Martinez. "Eet ees the shame for one so *valiente* to die soch a manner! These life she ees ver' fonny." He shrugged.

The next moment he stiffened, gestured grandly, said in a pompous manner: "Eet ees you may go now, vaquero. Return to your frands and die among them. Eet ees said that Rudolpho Martinez he ees the worst hombre in all north Mexico, but now maybe you say to your frands eet ees not so."

Suddenly scowling fiercely, he added: "But eef you do not make the die, vaquero, keep out of Escondo. Again you kom here and I cut out the heart. Sabe?"

Dan grinned. "Yeah, I savvy, Martinez, and thanks." Arm dangling, wiping at the bloody cheek, he turned and made for the door.

As he rode back toward Sweet Wells, Dan Davey kept wondering about his heart. Had the old in-

ternal wound healed sufficiently that he had withstood the shock back there, or had it sprung a leak? Anxious to find out, he kept his buckskin pony moving at a fast clip.

An hour later he was back in Sweet Wells. A light was burning in the doctor's office, and so he rode straight there.

The physician expressed anxiety when he saw that the kid was wounded.

"Sit down and let me take care of you."

"Better see about the heart first, doc. If she's gone there ain't no use foolin' with the other." Briefly he told what had happened.

The doctor smiled thinly.

"I've a confession to make, Dan. I'm sure Braz wouldn't mind now. There wasn't anything wrong with your insides. Old Braz persuaded me to help him tell that fib, because he wanted you to settle down, and further, because he felt certain that if you went out after Mexico Jack Canade you'd be killed."

Dan stared at the gaunt, kindly old doctor for a moment in blank surprise; then a grin overspread his round face.

"Gosh!" he breathed in immeasurable relief. "Now I can go ahead and live!"



The Scout Knew Sign

THE Seminole Indian scouts were held in high esteem by army officers, Rangers, and others who had to take a chance on being killed by hostile redskins every time they went forth to scout the country, to follow up a raiding band, or merely to change their quarters. Danger was always lurking near, and constant vigilance was their only safeguard.

One of the most alert and dependable of these Seminole scouts was "Picayune John," who was given his title on account of his fussiness over small matters.

One time, he was guiding a detachment of soldiers on a campaign against a combined group of Comanches and Lipans, but the soldiers were unable to overtake the tribesmen, who had had a good start and were hiding their trail.

Picayune went a little ahead on the lookout for fresh sign, and the troops became impatient with him, believing that the enemy was far away and that there was no hurry.

They made camp one night, and the usual precautions were taken as to guards and outposts, but no special detail was stationed beyond the camp.

This did not suit John, so he decided to sleep outside the camp boundaries.

At midnight, he gave a rousing alarm. In an instant, every man was on his feet. Dark shadows by hundreds were seen.

The outposts fired into them, and it was soon learned that the shadows were cast by the camp fire flickering through the rosin weed.

Poor Picayune John was laughed to scorn by the troopers, but he swore that he had seen a warrior slinking toward the camp. In the morning he showed the officers what

he said was Indian sign and stated that several must have been near the camp. But no one took it seriously.

The next day, John gave directions as to the route of march, and went on alone on a scouting expedition.

When he returned to the detachment after dark, he declared that, though he had seen no Indians, he had found sign, and was sure they would be attacked by a large force about dawn.

Again they laughed at him, but his persistence caused a stronger guard to be placed around the camp.

Just before dawn, John aroused the commanding officer with the words, "They come!"

He had hardly uttered the warning when the outposts rushed in saying that the command was surrounded by Indians.

This information was confirmed by a scattered volley of rifle fire, and the battle was on. Camp fires were quickly covered, and the defense was kept up until daylight.

At sunrise, the Indians retreated, with the troops in hot pursuit, and what might have been a horrible massacre was turned into a successful defense and the hurried retreat of the enemy.

The troops followed for some distance, and their guns did some good work. A number of riderless ponies were seen following the galloping Indians as they scurried away.

From being the laughingstock of the command, Picayune John became the hero of the hour. Not one trooper was killed in this engagement, and every man felt that he owed his life to the red-skinned scout who had given the alarm just in time.



Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is offered in order to preserve the old cowboy songs and frontier ballads that have come down to us by word of mouth from our grandfathers. It is also intended to help you folks who enjoy collecting Western songs.

If you want to find the words to some cowboy song, write and tell us about it. We'll do our best to find it for you and publish it in the magazine. If you know any of the old songs, send them to us for publication, giving as much of their history as you can.

We do not send out copies of songs to individual readers. All we can do is tell you in what issue of Wild West Weekly you will find the one you want.

Send all communications, with your name and address printed clearly, to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

I DON'T know how you folks feel about it, but I'm gettin' more of a kick out of this hyar department than when I first began it, by a long shot. An' I'll tell yuh why: If yuh'll look back an' realize that the ol' Corral has been goin' on for nigh on tuh four years, yuh'll see that thar's been a mighty big number of different songs published in it.

Waal, I didn't know all those

songs tuh begin with. I've found 'em by lookin' for 'em, in order tuh have something good for you readers each week. And some of 'em, *you* have sent in. Every time I happen on a new song now, I git a real thrill. I hope you all are gettin' as much from the Corral as I am, folks!

Tuh-day, I going to start yuh off with a fine poem about a hoss. Last year, we got a number of good

songs from C. J. Finger. Mebbe yuh remember 'em: "The Old Black Horse," "Quantrell" and "The Milk-white Steed."

Waal, Mr. Finger says as how he got this one from a cowboy named Jack Anthony, who had been wherever sheep or cattle roamed, workin' with 'em in Texas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Alberta, Australia, and South Africa.

Jack told Mr. Finger plenty of tales of these countries, among 'em the legend of the famous white steed of the prairies which no man had been able to catch, though hundreds had tried. He sang this song about it:

THE WHITE STEED OF THE PRAIRIES*

Mount, mount for the chase! Let your lassos be strong,
 Forget not sharp spur nor tough buffalo thong;
 For the quarry ye seek hath oft baffled, I ween,
 Steeds swift as your own, backed by riders as keen.

Fleet steed of the prairie, in vain men prepare
 For thy neck arched in beauty, the treacherous snare;
 Thou wilt toss thy proud head and with nostrils stretched wide
 Defy them again as thou oft hath defied.

Trained steeds of the course, urged by rowel and rein
 Have cracked their strong thews in the pursuit in vain
 While a bowshot in front, without straining a limb
 The wild horse careered as 'twere pastime to him.

Ye may know him at once, though a herd be in sight,
 As he moves o'er the plain like a creature of light,
 His mane streaming forth from his beautiful form
 Like a drift from a wave that has burst in the storm.

* Reprinted by kind permission of C. J. Finger from his book, "Frontier Ballads," published by Doubleday Doran & Co., New York.

Not the team of the sun, as in fable portrayed,
 Through the firmament rushing in glory arrayed,
 Could match in wild majesty of beauty and speed,
 That tireless, magnificent, snowy-white steed.

Much gold for his guerdon, promotion and fame,
 Wait the hunter who captures that fleet-footed game;
 Let them bid for his freedom; unbridled, unshod,
 He will roam till he dies through these pastures of God.

Thet isn't exactly a rollickin' cowboy song, folks, but it's a right heroic poem, an' I know yuh'll want tuh have it in yore collection in honor of man's best friend.

Legends of hosses thet can't be caught are sure popular out West, along with tales of broncs thet beat all cowboy ridin'.

Waal now, try a song sent in by Lena Crawford, of Colorado, some time ago. I haven't any history or music for it, but hyar are the words, anyway:

COWBOY'S FAREWELL TO MONTANA

A cowboy laid out on the prairie,
 He said it was all off for him.
 He had two full quarts of good whisky
 And nearly a full quart of gin.
 His saddle he used for a pillow,
 His blanket he used for a bed,
 And when he awoke from his slumber,
 These words to himself he said:

"Good-by to all you dry-landers,
 You're driving me from my home.
 You have homesteaded all this country
 Where the slick-eared mavericks did roam.
 No more will we be able to rustle
 As in the good old days now gone by."
 Then he took a big drink
 From his bottle of good old '99 rye.

"All my life I have lived in a saddle,
 All I know is to rope an old cow,
 I never could work on a sheep ranch,
 And I'm damned if I'll follow a plow!

There is no other work I can handle,
 There's no other life I'd enjoy,
 Away from my hoss and my saddle,
 A wild, roving, woolly cowboy.

"So here is good luck to the dry-landers,
 You've homesteaded this country at last,
 And I hope you'll succeed in the future,
 As the cowboys have done in the past."

An' we'll call it a day with a song
 sent in by Gordon Strunk, of New
 York. I can't quite make out
 whether he wrote it hisself or not,
 but it's a good cowboy song, an'
 that's the main thing, I reckon, as
 far as you an' me are concerned.

LONE-DRIFTIN' RIDERS

If you'll gather round me, I'll sing you a
 song
 Of a lone-driftin' rider just rollin' along.
 His spurs they are set, and he's driftin' on
 high;
 He'll quit punchin' cattle when his time
 comes to die.

You ask me, fair lady, who was that passin'
 by—
 It's a lone-driftin' rider just rollin' on high.
 They call him "Red" Conklin, he's named
 that for short,
 And at drinkin' rye whisky he's good for a
 quart.

He married Dolores from old Mexico
 And turned to try farmin', but the crops
 wouldn't grow.
 He rode off one evenin' and left Dolores
 flat,
 And said "I'm a cowboy, I've had enough
 of that."

There's young "Skeeter Bill," who is known
 far and wide;
 He courted poor Sally to make her his
 bride.
 But the call of the trail herds rang sweet
 in his ears;
 So he rode off that spring and left Sally in
 tears.

There's Tom Ward and Murphy, two darn
 good cowhands
 Who rode into Elko from Ely lands.
 They stopped at Ma Simmons and prom-
 ised to pay
 For board and night's lodgin's, but left at
 break of day.

So, girls, all come and listen and don't ask
 me why,
 Beware of cowboys that go driftin' by.
 They'll love you and caress you, they'd win
 you somehow;
 Then ride off and leave you if ever you cry.

Let this be a warnin' to you far and wide,
 Never fall for the cowboy who throws the
 rawhide.

Just think of them kindly when you see
 them pass by—
 They're the lone-driftin' cowboys just roll-
 in' on high.

Waal, waal, looks like we got
 room for one more song anyhow.
 Hyar's a short one for yuh:

THE DAD-BLAMED BOSS

Oh, the boss, he says, "Dick,
 Kin yuh ride a pitchin' hoss?"
 "I kin ride the critter slick,"
 I tells the dad-blamed boss.

Chorus:

Coma-ti-yi-waddy,
 Inky-eye-eye-a-a-a,
 Coma-ti-yi-waddy-inky-eye!

Now, there's old Moss Tate,
 The old Spur boss.
 He'd rather ride a navvy
 Than a hundred-dollar hoss.

Chorus:

We round up the cattle
 And cut out all the steers;
 We brand all the calves
 And put the Spur mark on their ears.

Chorus:

I'll get me a new slioker
 An' some Coffeyville boots,
 Get a quart o' good red liquor,
 An' quit this ol' galoot

Chorus:

Oh, I'll shake this job to-morrow,
 Pack my soogans on a hoss,
 An' pull my freight for Texas
 Where there ain't no dad-blamed boss.

We've had that there one afore, I
 reckon, but it's still a plumb good
 one. An' it's a good one ter wind
 up with fer this week. So long.



Western Pen Pals

Conducted by SAM WILLS--Postmaster

If you would like to correspond with any of the folks whose letters are printed in this department, send your letters to them to

Sam Wills, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly,
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.,

and he will forward them promptly. Be sure to print the name of the Pen Pal you choose, and also be sure to state in what issue of Wild West Weekly you found his or her name. Letters are exchanged only between boys and boys, and between girls and girls.

WAAL, folks, as we are in the midst o' the vacation period, it is about time for me tuh express the wish that each one o' yuh'll enjoy it tuh the fullest extent.

I suppose that quite a few o' yuh'll be travelin' an' maybe look up some o' the frien's yuh made through the Pen Pal department. That surely would be the crowning

success o' my efforts tuh create frien'ships far an' wide, an' I'd appreciate yore tellin' me about it by letter.

I'd also be glad tuh hear from any Pen Pal who has some unusual experience tuh relate. So, while yo're enjoyin' yoreselves, don't fergot yore ole frien', Sam.

Now read this week's letters:

O' SPECIAL INTEREST

Collectors o' stamps, songs, an' sech sure are lucky tuh have the W. W. W. as a medium by which they can get acquainted with each other fer the purpose o' tradin'. I reckon all these letters will be promptly answered, fer all the other letters yuh'll find here tell o' some-thin' out o' the ordinary which invites quick response.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a girl of seventeen, a lover of all sports, but primarily interested in collecting stamps, postmarks, and Western songs and poems. I am very anxious to get some Pen Pals, and I would especially like to hear from girls around my own age in Western States and in the Hawaiian Islands. Get busy, Pen Pals, and sling some ink in my direction. I will gladly answer all letters and also exchange snapshots.

MISS EDITH, OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: Now that the "Prosperity Club" has died a natural death in our part of the universe, and I have no more chain letters to write, I would like to have some real friends with whom to correspond. I have written to some of your lonely Pen Pals, but did not receive answers. I am now trying to have others write to me, and I assure every one from the outset that a prompt answer will be forthcoming. I am a young fellow of twenty-two, which fact, however, should not deter younger or older boys from getting in touch with me, because all are welcome. My hobby is collecting pictures of interesting scenes and objects, and it would be fine if other boys so interested would become my Pen Pals.

BILL REEGER, OF CALIFORNIA.

DEAR SAM: I have heard so much about your wonderful department from friends who have used it to make contacts all over the world; that I am anxious to join the Pen Pals, and I hope that you will be good enough to publish my request. I am a girl of fourteen whose interest centers in the West and who, for that reason, desires anxiously to obtain a few true-blue Pen Pals out there. I would especially like to hear from girls in Montana, Wyoming, and Texas who can tell me all about the life on ranches, roping and riding, which, I imagine, are part of the daily chores of cowgirls. My hobby is collecting songs and pictures of

the West, and I hope that my future Pen Pals will assist me in that direction. I promise to answer all letters and will also exchange snapshots.

BLUE-EYED JEAN, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a boy, eighteen years old, in search of Pen Pals. If there is any one, no matter in what part of the world, who has gone through unusual experiences, I hope he will communicate with me. I have had quite a few of them myself, which you may understand when I tell you that I have traveled from Nome, Alaska, to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—horseback riding, hitch-hiking, and finally working my way on a merchant marine vessel. I have worked on ranches and in filling stations, and I am now attending a military academy where I also obtained an airplane pilot's license, which may interest some readers. I am able to give information on anything pertaining to aviation.

KEN DAVIS, OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I am a young fellow of seventeen. I have become interested in the Pen Pal idea, and I hope you can induce some of your friends to correspond with me. My special desire is to secure a Pen Pal in Cambridge, Massachusetts. If he should be interested in electrical engineering, as I am, I certainly would welcome him.

DICK B., OF FLORIDA.

DEAR SAM: I am a cowboy who suffered a little bad luck some time ago which has resulted in my having been in a hospital, under a doctor's care for a considerable time. I don't know at this writing exactly when I shall be able to work and ride again, and during this enforced idleness, I would like very much to correspond with some of your Pen Pals. If any one is interested in hearing what a twenty-six-year-old cowboy has to say, let him write; he may be sure of a prompt reply.

HAROLD L., OF MONTANA.

DEAR SAM: I have been reading your magazine for some time now, and I am especially interested in the Pen Pal department. Being a rather lonesome young cowgirl, I would love to have Pen Pals, and I hope you can find some for me. I would be especially glad to hear from some one in North Dakota, in which State I lived formerly. Here's hoping that this plea will be answered soon.

MERLE R., OF MONTANA.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I am a young man of twenty-three. My reason for writing to you is the hope that through the Pen Pal column I will secure some friends in any part of the world. I am interested in horse-back riding and would like to try my hand at ranching, hence I would enjoy hearing from any one so occupied who has information and advice to give. Note, however, that I shall gladly answer all letters I receive, no matter whether or not they come from ranchers.

C. CULVER, OF NEW ZEALAND.

LONESOME FOLKS

It's no fun tuh feel lonesome an' forsaken. No wonder lonely folks come to the Pen Pals for help. I hope that thar'll be some cheerin' letters on thar way in record time.

DEAR SAM: I am a young married woman, very lonesome. I want you to tell some of your Pen Pals to write to me. You see, I am from the West, and I am homesick for it, wishing all the time to be back there. Whoever writes may be sure that I will do my best to give satisfaction. Before I married my name was "Lemon," but I am not as sour as the name implies. Rather, the contrary as those who write can easily find out for themselves.

MRS. F., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am just a little boy of eight, and I am very lonesome. I hope you will ask some of the boys of my age or older to write to me and cheer me up. I am fond of sports like every healthy boy, but I have few friends around here to play with.

CHARLES BURKE, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome boy of fifteen. Please tell some of the cow-punchers in the West to write to me. Letters from them would surely drive away the blues, and I would be glad to have what information they might give, because I desire very much to become a cowboy.

PETE F., OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a very lonesome chap, and I feel that in coming to you, my troubles will be over, because I believe you will get some of the Pen Pals to write to me. I enjoy reading magazines with stories about the West, and also like the movies. But neither of these seem to satisfy me enough to overcome that lonesome feeling,

Perhaps some cheering letters from Pen Pals will do the trick, and I hope to get many of them right along, all of which will be promptly answered.

C. C., OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a lonesome boy, fourteen years of age. In writing to you, I hope that you will get some boys from eleven to sixteen to write to me. Since I am greatly interested in the West, I would be especially happy if boys from Texas, Arizona, and California would answer this plea. What I am most interested in is to make Pen Pals—friends who would remain true and not drop off after a few letters have been exchanged.

JAMES MURPHY, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

WANTIN' WESTERNERS

Hyar's a chance for true daughters an' sons o' the West tuh do a little boostin' fer their country. I reckon there'll be plenty o' response to these hyar letters, because all Westerners should be interested in givin' out firsthand information tuh the tenderfeet who ask for it.

DEAR SAM: Noticing in the W. W. W. that you arrange for friendships among people, I come to you with a request that you try and find Pen Pals for me. As I intend to go West in the near future, I am especially interested in finding Pen Pals there, so that I can get information on conditions and possibly make some friends before I set out. Please do your best to have boys around eighteen years old, which is my own age, write to me. I promise to answer all letters.

BYRL E., OF ILLINOIS.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of thirteen. My dear wish is to live in the West, but I know that is impossible now, although I figure on going out there when I am older. Meantime, please get some Pen Pals for me in Western States. Boys living on farms and ranches are especially invited to write to me, and I promise to answer all letters.

J. B. MORGAN, OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I am a married woman, twenty-two years old. I am interested in the West, its carefree life, its wonderful scenery, and songs. So I come to you with the plea that you get some Pen Pals for me out West. Girls of my age or older, single

or married, are invited to write, especially some who live in Texas, Montana, and Wyoming. I promise to answer all letters and shall send a picture to the first ten who respond to this request.

TRUE-BLUE, OF KENTUCKY.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of seventeen. My hobby is hiking through the woods around here and, in general, living an outdoor life. That is why, perhaps, I am so interested in the West, because I imagine that girls out there hardly know the inside of a house. Anyhow, I would like to learn more about the West and the people there. So I am asking you to get me in touch with a few girls out West, of my own age or older. I would also be glad to receive some photos of ranches or other scenery in Western States.

AGNES, OF MINNESOTA.

DEAR SAM: I have been a reader of the W. W. W. for a long time, and I hope to continue as such for a long spell more. My daughter received the picture of Sonny Tabor, and it sure is fine! I am hoping to get one of the Circle J pardes for myself. But that is something else. What I want to ask you is to get me in touch with some Western Pen Pals, old or young. Each letter will be answered.

MRS. EVELYN E., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of fifteen. Please have some boys in Western States write to me. Being interested in ranching, I would especially like to hear from fellows who live on ranches, and who can give information about them. Texas and New Mexico are the States in which I am most interested, and I hope to hear from there. Will gladly exchange snaps and promise to answer all letters.

MIKE D., OF ARKANSAS.

DEAR SAM: Please try to make space for this letter in an early issue of the W. W. W. I am a boy of fourteen, but look older on account of being a six-footer. I am greatly interested in the West, and I would like to get some Pen Pals out there, especially in Texas, Nevada, and Arizona.

C. WILLIAMS, OF WISCONSIN.

DEAR SAM: If there are any true-blue Western girls who want a willing Pen Pal, one who loves the West and wishes to get more information about it, tell them to get in touch with me. I am a girl of fifteen and only too anxious to make friends with real Western girls.

RITA M., OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, only twelve years old, but I hope my age will not prevent me from getting Pen Pals. I would especially like to hear from boys living in the West, but if you cannot find any there, others will do. Anyhow, I promise to answer all letters as soon as received.

ROBERT S., OF LOUISIANA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of sixteen. I saw in the W. W. W. that you provide Pen Pals, and I hope you will help me out, too, especially with some fellows in the West. I am greatly interested in all things Western, being a lover of outdoor life and for that reason, desire more intimate information about that part of our country.

FRANK POWERS, OF NEW HAMPSHIRE.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl in my teens, and I am coming to you with a plea that you try to secure some Pen Pals for me. I invite all girls from fifteen to eighteen years old to write to me, especially girls who live on ranches out West and those in foreign countries, such as Spain, France, and Mexico. You may be sure that I will be only too glad to answer every letter I get.

PEE-WEE, OF NEW YORK.

OTHER LETTERS

Of general character. Writers are merely asking for Pen Pals without attachin' any conditions a-tall. So no matter whar yuh live or how old yuh are, yo're heartily invited tuh answer these pleas, an' I'm sure yuh'll not be disappointed.

DEAR SAM: We are brother and sister, anxious to join the Pen Pals. My brother, Charles, is eight years old, and I am thirteen. Please get some of your Pen Pals to write to us, no matter who they are.

LENA AND CHARLES, OF TEXAS.

DEAR SAM: I am writing to you in order to get some Pen Pals. I am a boy of thirteen, interested in all outdoor sports, especially hiking and swimming. I hope my mail box will be filled to overflowing soon.

W. T. MERCER, OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: Will you please try to get some Pen Pals for me? I am a girl of seventeen, fond of dancing and sports. I would like Pen Pals for the sake of the pleasure I

get out of writing. I do not especially care where you find the Pen Pals or how old they are. I will answer all letters and exchange snaps.

ROSA LEE T., OF MISSOURI.

DEAR SAM: I wish you would do me a favor and print this request in your department. I am looking for Pen Pals of any age and from anywhere in the wide world. I, myself, am a man in the late fifties. No matter who writes, I shall do my best to answer promptly.

EDWARD GEISER, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl of fifteen, interested in everything that is worth while. I would like Pen Pals among girls of any age, from any part of the world. I promise a speedy reply to every one.

LORAL, OF WEST VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get some Pen Pals around my own age, which is thirteen. I am interested in sports, and, of course, would like to get in touch with girls who have the same inclination. But I am not particular as to where they live. Every one will be answered.

MARIA, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: Here is the plea of a fifteen-year-old girl who desires Pen Pals to correspond with. I like sports and collect stamps as a hobby, but as far as my Pen Pals are concerned, I make no condition at all. They may be old or young and live in this or foreign countries.

SKEETS, OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve. I would like to get some Pen Pals of about my own age, especially in some Western States. I am very much interested in the Western part of our country and the life of cowboys, hence I hope that a few cowboys will answer this plea. Will gladly return what info I get by telling about my own State.

WARREN PHILLIPS, OF VIRGINIA.

DEAR SAM: Just a few lines to let you know that I am very anxious to find some Pen Pals in the West, preferably in the State of Montana. I am a boy of fifteen.

RAYBURN GARDNER, OF MISSISSIPPI.

DEAR SAM: I am a girl, eighteen years of age. I am a steady reader of the W. W. W., and although I enjoy the stories a lot, the back of the book seems to hold

even greater attraction for me. It is the Pen Pal section which interests me most, and I desire greatly to see my own request printed there. Will you do it? I wish to get Pen Pals anywhere in the world. Age is immaterial. I have traveled quite a bit and think that I can write interestingly about it.

GLENNA, OF IOWA.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve, very much interested in ranch life and cowboys. Some day, I hope to be a cowboy, myself, and in the meantime I would like to get as much information about them as I can get. It is for that reason that I hope you will be able to fix up a contact for me with real cowboys or boys who live on ranches.

JOHN GEORGE, OF CONNECTICUT.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy of twelve. I would like to find some Pen Pals in Arizona, Nevada, Montana, and Wyoming--which States I expect to visit in not too distant a future. Naturally I would feel safer to have friends where I am going. Will gladly exchange snapshots.

JOHN MCP., OF NORTH CAROLINA.

DEAR SAM: I would like to get Pen Pals from all over the world. I am a girl, fourteen years old, fond of all kinds of sports and eager for correspondents.

MARY JANE M., OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM: I am a boy, fourteen years old. I would like to get boys of my own age in the West to become my Pen Pals, because I am interested in their way of living and want to know all about it. I am fond of sports of all kinds, horseback riding especially. Will exchange snaps.

ROBERT MARSH, OF OHIO.

DEAR SAM WILLS: I wonder whether you will sustain my S O S for Pen Pals. I am a girl of fifteen, anxious to hear from all parts of the world. Age is of no consequence. I enjoy your W. W. W., and I feel that you will do your best for me in the way of Pen Pals.

ANNE MUNSON, OF MISSOURI.

Thar yuh are! New frien'ships brought tuh yuh on a platter, as it were. All yuh need tuh do is to make yore selections and get busy writin'. Good luck tuh yuh an' so long till next week.

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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.

"Hi yuh, Jack!" we shouts, as we comes inter the Corner fer this week's meetin', luggin' the mail sack. "How's everythin' up Wyomin' way?"

The tall young special officer grins an' pushes back his hat so we kin see the streak o' white hair that gives him his name o' Silver Jack Steele. He winks at the Whistlin' Kid an' drawls:

"Waal, Boss, if yuh look close, yuh'll see that this here white top-knot o' mine is about twice as big as 'twas. An' if it hadn't been fer my pard, ol' Iron Bear, I wouldn't be here, a-tall."

Bud Jones hoists hisself out of his chair an' steps up close ter Jack. Bendin' over, he squints his eyes at the 'foresaid silver top-knot. Then he grunts an' goes back an' sets down.

"He's loco, Boss," says the

Ranger. "He ain't got no more white hairs than he ever had. He's runnin' a whizzer on us."

We chuckles, havin' already figured that out fer ourself without even lookin'. It'd take more than that ruckus up in the Beartraps ter put gray hairs in young Steele's head. In fact, it took two shotgun barrels full o' buckshot ter put that one white streak in it.

Silver Jack chuckles. "'Tain't no use tryin' ter bluff yuh gents," he says. "Yuh know, Boss, I tried ter git ol' Iron Bear ter come around fer the meetin' ter-night, but heck! He couldn't be bothered. Yuh'd 'a' liked the ol' cuss, too, I'm thinkin'."

"Too bad he wouldn't come," we says. "What'd he say when yuh asked him?"

"'Ugh! Iron Bear no savvy paper thet talk. Talk! Heap talk. All the time heap talk. That all

paleface do. Talk. Iron Bear keep mouth shut. Get heap wise.'” Jack laughs as he quotes the ol' Injun.

“Thet Injun has plenty savvy, at that,” says the Whistlin' Kid. “Mebbe the rest of us will, too, if we keep comin' ter the Corner. All we do, mostly, is listen. We——”

“Waal,” we butts in, fer after all, we is the Boss, “'twould never do fer yuh-all ter git too plumb wise. So we reckon that we'll take a rest ter-night an' let yuh hombres do the readin'. We'll listen.”

“Figurin' on gittin' wise yoreself, Boss?” draws Bud Jones.

We heaves a book at him, an' then hands him the first letter ter read. Here it is:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I am a constant reader of W. W. W., and I think it is the best magazine on the news stands. I have been reading it ever since I saw my first copy which contained the story “Sonny Tabor's Losing Hand.” I certainly did like it.

“The Killer Of Big Smoky Basin” and “Gun Lightnin',” were the stories I liked best, outside of the stories about the regular waddies of the spread.

Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Circle J, and Johnny Forty-five are my favorites. However, I like the others, too.

Say, Boss, how about starting a 3W club? You could print coupons for us to save. When we have saved the right number, we could send them in and get a badge to wear. Let's hear what the other readin' hombres have to say about this idea.

I liked the pictures you gave away. It was a good idea. You ought to have pictures of the rest of the outfit, too.

Put in more humorous stories and leave the romance out. If you don't, your readers will think you are goofy and quit readin' the 3W.

Please put the Circle J pards in every week. Those who don't like Billy, Buck, Joe, and Sing Lo are loco, and you shouldn't pay any attention to what they say.

Yours till Buck Foster throws his vest away,
SONNY TABOR, III.

Marshall, Texas.

“Now, there's a new idea,” says the Whistlin' Kid. “What d'yuh

think o' thet 3W club business, Boss?”

“We don't think—yet—Kid,” we answers. “We'll wait till we see what the mail brings in from the readin' hombres. If they take to it hot an' heavy—waal, yuh never kin tell. Nobody's ever accused us o' not aimin' ter please. Now, Kid, we reckon yuh better take the next one, Hope it don't knock you!”

Here's what the Kid reads:

DEAR BOSS AND GANG: Dog-gone it, I had somethin' special to tell you hombres, but, yuh know, I've just plumb forgot what it was.

Now let me see—— Oh, yes! It's about what that hombre, J. H. Noland, said about Circle J.

Buck Foster likes to scrap, so why doesn't he buckle on his ol' six-gun and waltz down there to Cooper, Texas, and fill Señor Noland so full of lead that he'll never be able to write another letter.

On second thought, I might go down there myself and 'tend to him.

Then there's that letter that Annie Stone wrote about Cougar Fang. You know, Boss, I just wouldn't print letters like those from Noland and Annie Stone. Such people are loco.

Now I've got something to say to the readin' hombres who don't want any gals in 3W. Why not?—I wants to know. They don't have to be love stories, even if there is a girl in them.

There's nothing I hate more than to read letters from readers of 3W who are complaining about something. Some wants this or that character dropped, some don't like this or that. They're the kind who's never satisfied for two minutes at a time.

Take me, f'rinstance—I like all the 3W waddies and haven't a kick to make.

Boss, I hope you give away pictures of the rest of the outfit. I especially want a portrait of the Bar U twins. I want to see if I can tell 'em apart.

Well, I guess I'd better sign off now. Yours till Jerry Carter looks my way,

SPITFIRE OF TEXAS.

“Gosh!” we exclaims. “What kind of a Corner would this be if we didn't print letters from readin' hombres who have some kicks ter make? In a couple o' months—or

weeks—we'd be plumb snowed under with letters from folks complainin' thet we're scared o' printin' anythin' thet knocks us. No, we'll jest keep right on the way we allus been—every letter thet's interestin', boostin' or kickin', has got a chance ter see print. An' thet's whatever."

Jack Steele reads the next one, and this is it:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for such a long time now that it's become a regular habit with me. Like everybody else, I have my favorites among your waddies. Here's how the members of your spread rate with me:

Circle J, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Johnny Forty-five, Bud Jones, Hungry and Rusty. I also liked Jim Hazel, the forest ranger, but he seems to have disappeared for good.

Circle J is still the best of them all. The only trouble with the stories now is that Sing Lo never has anything to do in them. He ought to be like he used to be—always playing some kind of magic trick to get the best of the enemies. Buck Foster, I think, is the best man on Circle J.

The stories about Maverick Tom Terry, of the 77, were swell. I had a hunch, all the time, that Tom's father, Jim Terry, would come back. But I never thought he'd turn out to be old Manuel. I hope you don't drop him, now that the series is finished. Couldn't he become a regular member of the spread?

"Skulls In Wrist Canyon" was swell. Let's have more stories about Tommy Rockford.

My favorite cover artist is Tom Lovell. After him come J. W. Scott and R. G. Harris.

The poem, "The Vengeance Of Silver Sim," by Arthur L. Rafter, was swell. I memorized the whole thing. Let's have more of them.

Bullwhip Adams and the Whistlin' Kid aren't so good. Leave them out more often and substitute the Bar U twins. Vincente the Yaqui is absolutely no good. I can't understand why so many reading hombres kept asking for him to be brought back. Cougar Fang was a wash-out, too.

Well, that's all for this time. So long and good luck.

BOB LEMAN.

Eureka, Illinois.

Now it's the Whistlin' Kid's turn

ag'in, an' here's the letter the range dick reads:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for about five years, and I think it the best magazine on the stands. I have tried a lot of the others, too.

Please bring back some of the old characters such as the Red Wolf, the Black Acc, Blondy of Twin Bells, Flash Moran, and the Trouble Triplets. They were all swell.

My present favorites rate as follows: 1. The Silver Kid, Maverick Tom Terry, Sonny Tabor, Kid Wolf, Freckles Malone, Silver Jack Steele.

2. Bullwhip Adams, Risky McKee, Circle J, Señor Red Mask, Johnny Forty-five, the Oklahoma Kid.

3. Cougar Fang, Billy the Kid, the Whistlin' Kid, Jimmy Quick the Bar U twins.

4. Vincente the Yaqui, Bud Jones, Apache and Wagonwheel.

5. Shorty Masters, Calamity Boggs, Tex Carnochen, Hungry and Rusty, the Shoot-in' Fool.

The best stories I have ever read are: "Risky McKee Crosses A Deadline," by William A. Todd; "Flame of the Border," by Guy L. Maynard; "Red Brand's Law," by Paul S. Powers; "Sonny Tabor's Trail To Sonora," by Ward M. Stevens; "The Legion Of Wanted Men," by Paul S. Powers; and "Kid Wolf and the Musical Gunman," by Ward M. Stevens.

I think the idea of putting the Wranglers Corner on the radio is great. Boy, I would love to hear Buck Foster and Joe arguing!

Yours till Sonny Tabor quits 3W,

EARL SCOTT.

Alexander City, Alabama.

After some fishin' around in the sack, we finally draws out this here one which we hands ter Bud Jones. Bud don't like the idea none, jedgin' from the look on his face. But he made thet crack about us tryin' ter git wise by listenin', an' so help us Hannah, he's goin' ter read—an' like it!

Here's the letter:

DEAR RANGE BOSS: I have been reading 3W for over two years, and it is the best Western magazine I've ever found. It's way ahead of all the others.

I don't agree with the reading hombres who ask you to put girls in your magazines. I wouldn't object to them if they were real, nervy cowgirls who wouldn't fall

in love with the hero and faint in his arms when lead starts flying. However, they're all like that—in stories.

Everybody around here kids me, saying I'm crazy about the West. I sure am. What of it? I want to find some real *men*. My idea of a real man is somebody like Billy West, Kid Wolf, the Whistlin' Kid, or Tom and Jerry Carter. And, of course, Buck Foster.

You can tell all your waddies, Boss, that here is one gal who is going to marry a cowpoke or a C. A. detective—or die single. So long!

MARGIE M. OF TEXAS.

"Let's see that letter, Bud," we says, as the Ranger finishes readin'.

"What fer?" he asks. "There ain't no more to it."

"Yuh shore?" we asks.

He gits kind o' red in the face, then let's us have the letter. We looks it over an' discovers jest what we figures: Where that gal names

the 3W waddies she thinks is real men, she includes Bud Jones. But seein' that Bud hisself is readin' it, he skips his own name. We jest say this ter keep the record clear. Don't want Margie accusin' us o' cheatin' on her.

"Thar's yore chance, Bud," we says, laughin'. "Thar's——"

We ducks. Bud picks up the book we throws at him earlier in the meetin' an' chucks it at us. If fair whistles as it misses our ear.

"Reckon that's all we got time fer this week, gents," we says. "Meetin's adjourned."

The hombres pile on their brones an' high-tail it. We locks up till next week, when another bunch o' 3W rannies will come driftin' fer a meetin' with THE RANGE BOSS.

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

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Novelette

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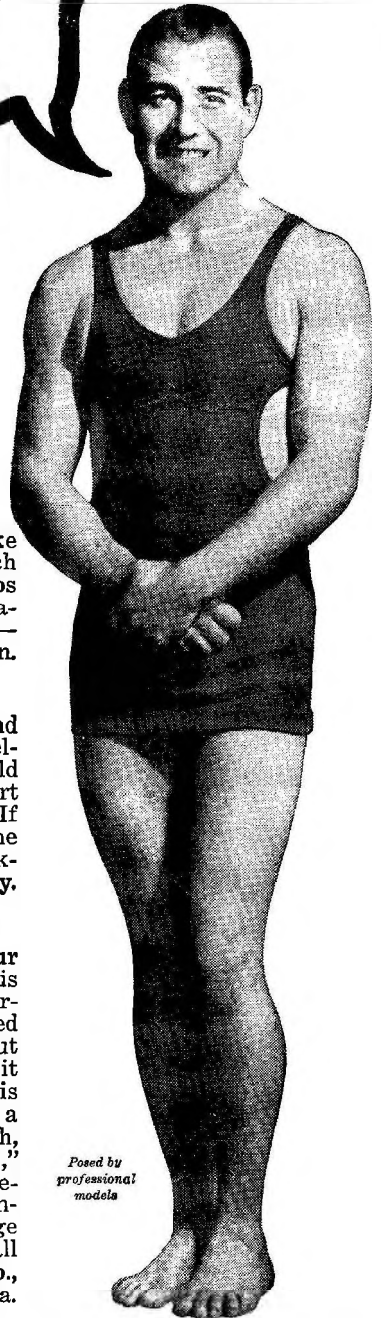
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